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In Pennsylvania, Exploring Wyeth's World

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Andrew Wyeth's studio in Chadds Ford, PA.

For nearly 60 years the artist Andrew Wyeth spent every fall and winter in Chadds Ford, Pa., among the hills where colors changed from tawny to russet, and — in the dead of winter — to a sharp, brittle white. Here, in the place where he was born, his fascination with the landscapes and the people never flagged.

“Winter 1946,” at the North Carolina Museum of Art, depicts Kuerner Hill, which was the source of many of the artist’s most imaginative works.

The artist in 1964 in Chadds Ford.

The house in which the artist grew up — a red brick building that his father, the illustrator N. C. Wyeth, built for the family in 1911 — is down the road from Andrew

Wyeth's own prim, white clapboard and stucco house and studio, which the Brandywine River Museum opened to the public last summer. And just over the hill, perhaps a 20-minute walk down private back roads, is the farmhouse that belonged to Karl and Anna Kuerner, where Andrew Wyeth painted some of his greatest works.

The trio of buildings (N. C. Wyeth's home, Andrew's studio and the Kuerner farm) underscore the compact realm in which the artist moved. After Andrew married, he and his wife, Betsy, divided their time between Cushing, Me. — where they spent summers and where Betsy's family had property — and Chadds Ford. Both were small American towns that, for the artist, represented worlds big enough to inspire a life's work.

"I feel limited if I travel," he once told Thomas Hoving, then the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "I feel freer in surroundings that I don't have to be conscious of. I'll say that I love the object, or I love the hill. But that hill sets me free. I could wander over countless hills. But this one hill becomes thousands of hills to me."

Chadds Ford, which is smaller than nine square miles, provided the inspiration and privacy Wyeth needed. Most of his life, he worked seven days a week, leaving his home at 8:30 a.m. and returning at 5:30 p.m. He even worked on Christmas afternoons. Once, when he was 23 years old and his young wife wanted to extend their honeymoon, the groom refused, arguing that he had to get back to his work. For "French Twist," his 1967 portrait of Betsy, Wyeth produced more than 20 studies, evidence of the intense energy he put into his work.

To give a sense of how the painter worked in his studio, conservators have placed a carton of real eggs beside Wyeth's easel. (Artists mix egg yolks with pigments and water to create tempera paint.) A mirror that offered Wyeth a different perspective on his work is on the wall behind the easel. When he was in the studio, classical music played: Bach, Mozart and Rachmaninoff were among his favorites.

But the studio reveals only a part of Andrew Wyeth's life in Chadds Ford.

Wyeth's father, N. C. — known for his 1911 dramatic drawings for "Treasure Island" — was a devoted patriarch who sought to infuse his children with a love of literature and the arts.

"It was a reading family," said Christine Podmaniczky, associate curator for N. C. Wyeth's Collections at the Brandywine River Museum. The family bookshelves held Jane Austen's Letters, Thomas Mann's "Buddenbrooks" and other classics. The children and their friends frequently dressed in costumes from their father's prop collection and impersonated heroes like Robin Hood. At Christmas, N. C. played Old Kriss, stomping across the roof and yelling at the reindeer. No surprise that Andrew became a painter as did two of his sisters. A third sister, Ann, was a composer of some note and his brother, Nathaniel, became a mechanical engineer and inventor.

Andrew Wyeth's own sprawling living room reflects the painter's myriad interests. Here sits his collection of nearly 1,000 toy soldiers, military helmets and masks for fencing (a favorite family sport). The adjacent library is loaded with books on painters from

Albrecht Dürer to Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins. A human skeleton, which Wyeth kept for modeling, is propped nearby. Wyeth's shelves also held books on movies, including "MGM: Where the Lion Roars" and "Great Hollywood Movies," along with old 16-millimeter prints of Wyeth's favorites, "The Big Parade" and "Wings," which he often screened for family and friends.

When it came to his work, Wyeth was very private — a proclivity that is underscored by a sign tacked to the front door: "I do not sign autographs." Even with his family, he could be secretive. He rarely told anyone, including his wife, where he was going when he left his house in the morning to paint.

His palette was the countryside along the Brandywine: the sky, the grass, the animals, the houses and the people that he had known since childhood.

Among the places that came to fascinate Wyeth was the nearby Kuerner farm, which sits perched on a rise that overlooks a pond. Across the pond is Kuerner Hill, a gently sloping mass that was the source of many of the artist's most imaginative works. A white weather-beaten three-story building where a Norwegian pine nearly drapes itself over the front entrance, the farm has been open to the public since 2004. The pair of stone posts that stand at the entrance, and which appear in various works by Wyeth, are the same posts that marked the entrance to the farm when Karl Kuerner was alive (he died in 1979).

The simplicity of the house reflects the utilitarian demands that farming made on the family. "It is the home of a farmer who had a hard life," Ms. Podmaniczky said. Indeed Karl Kuerner, a German immigrant, was never completely accepted in Chadds Ford, according to a biography of Wyeth by Richard Meryman. He had been a gunner for the Germans in World War I, and his wife was a mercurial woman. And yet Andrew Wyeth, who was very young when he met the Kuerners, felt a great bond with them. They, in turn, allowed him to roam freely about their property.

Today from the front hall at the farm one can still look out at Kuerner Hill. In the melancholy painting "Winter 1946," a young man descends the hill, which is infused with shades of brown. Just next to the house is the barn where Wyeth painted "Spring Fed," a 1967 work that he considered one of his best. In the painting, water runs from a spigot into a stone trough, and a glistening metal bucket waits to be filled. Through the window of the kitchen, which is still dominated by a plain dining table, one can catch the same winter light and see the vista of tired grass that appears in the 1959 tempera "Groundhog's Day."

Yet the Kuerners did more than let Andrew Wyeth use their home as a studio. They also kept his secrets.

It was at the Kuerners' in 1971 that Andrew first saw Helga Testorf, who cared for Karl as he grew older. She was an earthy woman in her early 30s, a German immigrant who began posing for Wyeth regularly: indoors, outdoors, dressed and nude.

Over 15 years — until 1985 — the artist created 240 works of Helga, which were often painted on the third floor of the farmhouse. So secretive was Wyeth that even in 1975, when he had already done many portraits of her, his wife did not know about them. Wyeth stored many of his paintings of Helga at the Kuerners'. If friends did know about the paintings, no one told Betsy. In a book that Betsy Wyeth compiled in 1976, "Wyeth at Kuerners," not a single image of Helga was included.

The existence of the paintings was finally revealed in 1986 when Wyeth sold the Helga works to Leonard Anderson, a wealthy publisher, for \$6 million. The news created a sensation across the country.

But the nature of the relationship between Helga Testorf and the artist remains something of a mystery. Was she simply Wyeth's model or was the relationship more personal? Ms. Testorf, who lives in Chadds Ford, did not return a phone call. After the pictures were sold and the secret was out, Wyeth's life and his work in Pennsylvania continued.

When one wanders around Chadds Ford today, one might think Andrew Wyeth led a very circumscribed life. Yet it offered all the inspiration he needed. There, in that tiny realm, he moved through myriad worlds — worlds that were big enough and artistically ample enough to satisfy him.

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