





Keeping It Real

The Brandywine tradition of representational painting continues to flourish—and diversify.

By Roger Morris
Photos by Jim Graham

It all began with Charles Willson Peale, who was born on Maryland's Kent Island in 1741 and became a devoted son of Philadelphia and the American Revolution. After failing at saddle making and other trades, Peale discovered he could paint especially realistic portraits. He studied in England under Benjamin West and was later one of the founders of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1805. Known simply as the Academy or PAFA, the school taught generations of artists, most of whom became representational painters. Many of them practiced their profession in the nearby Pennsylvania countryside, where rural surroundings provided a surfeit of inspiration and subject matter.

Centreville artist
Linda Harris
Reynolds focuses on
capturing character
and personality in
her paintings.



“I think people expect for me to do something a little different. Otherwise, they’d just have a photograph taken.” —*Linda Harris Reynolds*



Another branch of realism caught hold about a century later—this time in Delaware, where Wilmington-born Howard Pyle started his own art school in 1900 to teach painters realism, a style fueled by the growing demand for mostly heroic, full-color illustrations for adventure books and the thriving magazine trade. Pyle attracted a number of talented students to his school, among them Frank Schoonover, Allen Tupper True and Thornton Oakley. He instructed them all at his studio and on extended field trips to Chadds Ford.

Particularly notable was a somewhat eccentric recruit from Massachusetts. N.C. Wyeth excelled at illustration and subsequently taught his own children to paint, including three talented daughters, Henriette, Carolyn and Ann, and one of his two sons, Andrew, who would become the most famous and successful of all the painters who worked and lived along Brandywine Creek. Andrew's son, Jamie—still quite active at 78—is the last member of the three-generation Wyeth dynasty.

Earlier this year, PAFA suddenly announced it would graduate its final class of students in 2025, becoming solely a museum after 220 years of teaching. With no dominant art school and no titular leader, what will become of the Brandywine tradition of rural realism?





“I’m a pretty classical painter— right in the middle of realism with no exaggerated style.”

—*Peter Sculthorpe*

Peter Sculthorpe is perhaps the best-known Brandywine Valley realist painting today.

Well, if you define realism as representational art, plenty of artists are still doing that around here. "There is a spectrum locally of [representational] styles between ultra-real to the very vague," says painter Alice Dustin, who's represented by Wilmington's Carspecken-Scott Gallery. "My paintings are halfway in between."

In fact, the argument can be made that there is a new, revitalized realism blossoming in the Brandywine region—one that exercises the full palette of possibilities, going beyond the solely photographic quality the term "realism" invokes. Just as important, there is still a demand for this work among collectors and the general public. "A strong market exists for regional representationalism, whether in a tight realism or with looser brushwork," says Rebecca Moore, director of Wilmington's Somerville Manning Gallery, which represents a variety of artists, including Wyeths past and present. "It waned a bit in the early 2010s, moving to more abstract works. But over the last few years, we've

noticed an uptick in collectors' interest in realism and representationalism again."

Perhaps the most realistic and best-known is Peter Sculthorpe, whose studio is along the Brandywine at Rockland. Now in his 70s, he has not slowed down, either on his bike (now electric) or with his painting. "I'm working on two large paintings now, and I'm anticipating a new exhibit in November 2025," he says.

Though his style and attention to detail is sometimes compared to Andrew Wyeth, Sculthorpe tends to be less somber in color and tone and certainly less self-referential. "I'm a pretty classical painter—right in the middle of realism with no exaggerated style," he says. "I like to think of my style as being very readable and pretty basic."

Sculthorpe believes most people are more comfortable looking at paintings that are relatable to them in some way. "And the art world is always very slow to change," he notes.

As far as his manner of working goes, "I just get





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into a routine—blindfolded to the job, getting into a sequence of events,” he says. “My studio is just down the hall from the bedroom. I’ll stop by and think that I’ll spend a couple of minutes. Three or four hours later, I’m still painting.”

In some ways, the styles of Sculthorpe and Tim Barr are similar. “I would say N.C. and his

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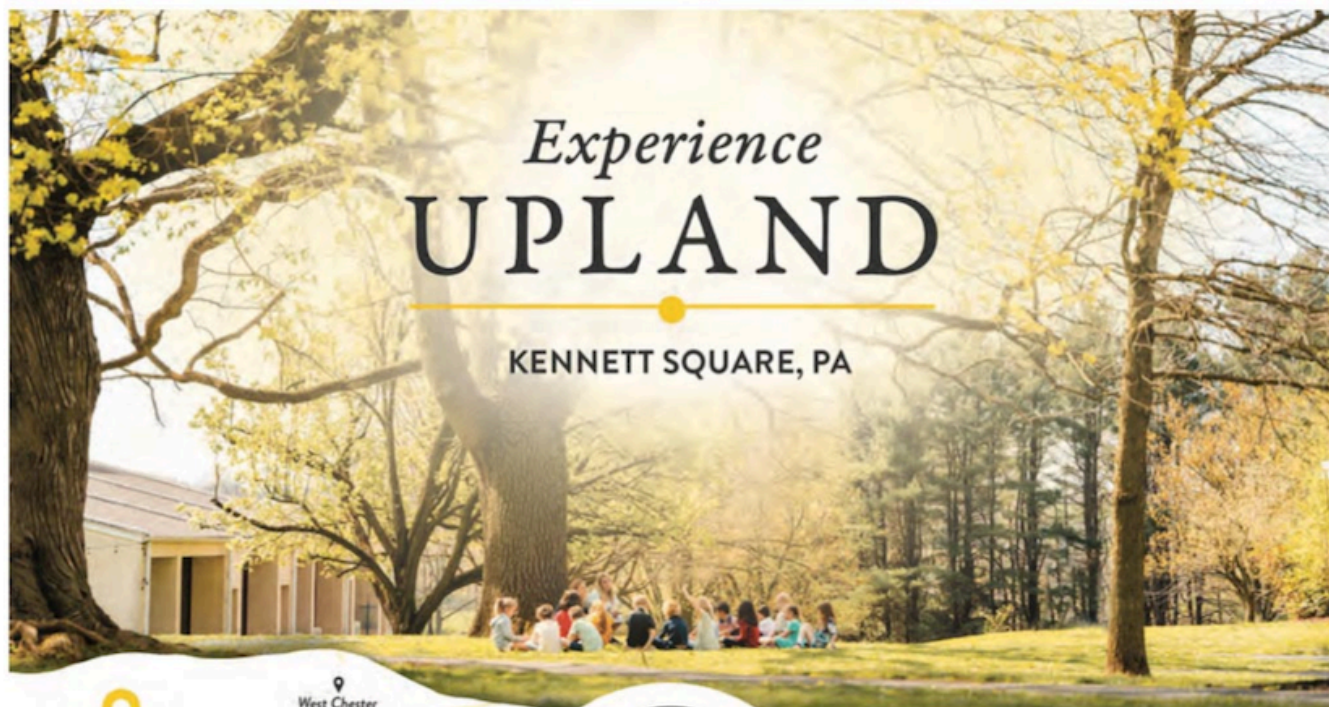
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son Andrew were the biggest influences on my style of art," says Barr, who lives in the countryside in Reading. "I sort of combine the two in technique, brushwork, sense of composition and imagery, along with a healthy dose of superrealism I picked up from Rackstraw Downes in the 1970s and '80s."

For Barr, a Canon EOS 5D Mark II camera serves as his travelling sketch pad, capturing thousands of images of trees, mountains, fields, crops, old farmhouses and outbuildings—whatever catches his eye. He first searches for an anchor image, then for another and another, assembling a composite to make a comprehensive whole of a beautiful landscape, existing only in aggregate. "I compose on the computer," he says. "I'll have an idea for a final painting, and I'll piece together the various elements from the photos I've collected."

Many painters will employ a photo as a starting point, then mentally Photoshop that image. The technique intrigues Linda Harris Reynolds, a portrait artist who moved into the historic Howard Pyle studio in Wilmington two years ago after



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many years in Centreville. "I think trying to capture the character and personality of the person is most important," she says. "I began with supersoft realism but gradually evolved into doing more brushwork than I once did. I rarely have someone sit for a painting, as I prefer instead to take a series of photos to work from."

Most times, Reynolds will also do detailed charcoal sketches—works of art in themselves—before putting brush to canvas. She regularly changes details—not of the subjects, but the settings or backgrounds. "I think people expect for me to do something a little different," she says. "Otherwise they would just have a photograph taken."

No one has ever accused Centreville-based Jon Redmond of being too photographic in his paintings—though his PAFA training would certainly allow him to do so if he desired. "I like to push the boundaries of realism," he says of his style. "I consider myself a painter of observation. My best paintings combine realism and the abstract capabilities of paint."

Redmond is known for painting in a small format, often captured en plein air by cycling into the rural countryside. Intrigued by how light falls on particular subjects, he certainly isn't afraid of color.

To illustrate his style, Redmond references a recent painting of a lead cow in front of other cattle in a milking barn. "She's very detailed, and the rest of the cows behind her look natural," he says. "Cover her up, and you might even have difficulty telling that the rest of the painting is of cows in a barn. My backgrounds—or things off to the side—may be more impressionistic, but those are the things in real life you only see out of the corner of your eye."

If Redmond is focused on what we see out of the corners of our eyes, Sarah McRae Morton is intrigued with what we imagine in the corners of our minds. In her hands, a painting of a horse might suddenly go from detailed realism to dreamlike haziness. "I draw inspiration from this landscape and history as much as the setting of my upbringing," Morton says.

It's interesting to note that Morton, Sculthorpe, Redmond and Reynolds—all PAFA alums—draw inspiration and subject matter from the rural tradition of the Brandywine region, yet their interpretations of realism vary greatly. "I'm often reminded of something said by William Faulkner: 'The past is never dead. It is not even past,'" Morton says.

It's also worth pointing out that one of the region's most respected local artists, Robert C. Jackson, didn't attend PAFA and seldom paints rural landscapes. He prefers realistic still-life depictions of balloon characters, drink cartons and books. "Without question, I'd be in the realism camp or at least real-ish," says the Kennett Square artist, who can often be found at Talula's Table enjoying his morning coffee. "What I paint appears real to the viewer, though I'm quick to embrace a pop of sensibility or a touch of humor, bend the truth, and work very conceptually. Hopefully, it comes across that I'm just being myself."

Which is about as "real" as it gets. **TH**

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