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HERITAGE MAGAZINE FOR THE

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Spring 2013 ■ $7.99 U.S.

Jamie Wyeth

MASTER PAINTER TALKS ABOUT FARM LIFE, HIS OBSESSIONS AND HANGING WITH WARHOL

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JAMIE WYETH

AMERICAN MASTER PAINTS WHAT HE SEES. AND THAT OFTEN INCLUDES OBJECTS FROM THE COLLECTION HE KEEPS ON HIS DELAWARE FARM

STORY BY SUZANNE GANNON ■ PHOTOGRAPHS BY SCOTT HEWITT

Early American copper weathervanes are part of Wyeth's collection.

NOT EVERY MODERN AMERICAN PAINTER can recall a day he spent with Andy Warhol on Manhattan's West Side relieving a merchant of his entire inventory of cat and dog taxidermy. But Jamie Wyeth can.

"In the '20s and '30s, stuffing your pet was all the rage," says the artist, recalling that many of the animals came with nameplates, one of them the Great Dane that belonged to legendary filmmaker Cecil B. DeMille. It wound up in Warhol's stash, not Wyeth's.

A variety of stuffed animals remain in Wyeth's collection today, many of them having starred at one point or another in one of his paintings. Fans and collectors of the artist are well aware of the creatures that dominate his work ravens, geese, gulls, chickens, pigs and dogs.

Visitors to the Delaware farm of this self-described "accumulator" see firsthand the other realms, both animate and inanimate, he explores through his collections: millstones embedded in his driveway· early American furniture; toys; lighthouse paraphernalia; art, including his own and that of a diverse array of painters and illustrators; sculptures of cows, horses and dogs; whimsical animal-themed trinkets; and miniatures.

"I like getting really tuned in to my obsessions," Wyeth says.

"Jamie is a compulsive and adventurous collector whose collections are so diverse that they're hard to categorize," says Henry Adams, professor of American art at Case Western University and author of the book *Andrew Wyeth: Master Drawings from the Artist's Collection*. "It's his way of exploring the world."

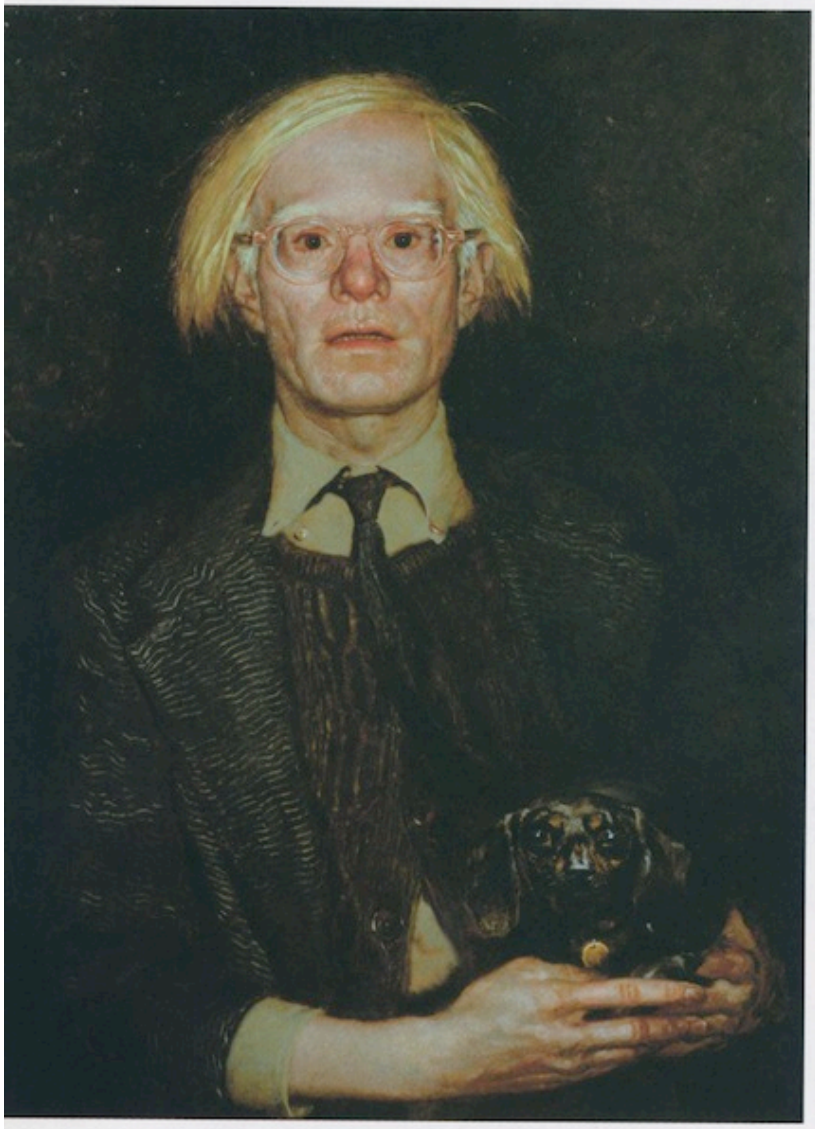
"His attraction to painting a truly diverse range of subjects might be seen as an extension of this same propensity as a collector," adds Marianne Berardi, Ph.D., senior painting expert and consignment director at Heritage Auctions. "Portraits of presidents, ballet dancers, pet pigs, seagulls he explores each one with a collector's passion and obsession."

Wyeth has a simpler view of his collection. "They can be manipulated," he explains, "if I want to paint a scene."

Items in the collection of Jamie Wyeth "can be manipulated if I want to paint a scene," explains the artist, holding a stuffed dog he purchased on a shopping trip with Andy Warhol.

THE WARHOL CONNECTION

The son of the late Andrew Wyeth, one of the foremost realists of the 20th century, and the grandson of the late N.C. Wyeth, whose work illuminated the pages of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Treasure Island,* Jamie Wyeth in the 1970s worked alongside Warhol at the Factory, the pop artist's New York City studio.



While his father, Andrew, avoided the New York art world, Jamie Wyeth became a fixture in Warhol's Factory, and he and Warhol exchanged portraits in 1976.

There he mingled with the luminous superstars who breezed through: Arnold Schwarzenegger, Salvador Dali, Paloma Picasso, among many others, and a famous drag queen whose skirt-lifting antics, he says, were not quite befitting of a monarch.

"Jamie threw himself into the contemporary art scene, the thing his father was avoiding," Adams says. "In his work there's an element of the extraordinary technique his dad had but he's also interested in a confrontation with his subject, which is the Warhol influence. His portrait of Warhol has the in-your-face quality of a billboard, which is the opposite of what his father did."

At the Factory, Wyeth painted Schwarzenegger, then at the height of his bodybuilding career, and Rudolf Nureyev.

> "Warhol was an appalling and fascinating creature. He showed me a world I'd never seen."

"He was like a panther in the house," Wyeth says of the dancer whom he invited down to the farm. "It was hard to be in the same room with someone who had that animal-like presence and be able to concentrate."

Nureyev flew into a rage upon seeing his portrait. Later, he bought the lithograph.

It was during this period that Wyeth and Warhol painted the portraits of one another that would be mounted with much celebrity and fanfare at New York's Coe Kerr Gallery, where Halston's lover Victor Hugo arrived carrying a human skeleton.

"Warhol was an appalling and fascinating creature," Wyeth says, adding that he was awed by Warhol's ability to work through the night. "He showed me a world I'd never seen."

A visit Warhol made to a Wyeth family Thanksgiving in Chadds Ford one year was chronicled in the diaries published by Warhol's assistant in 1989. And later, the famous cache of secret tape recordings Warhol made of his conversations with the unsuspecting subjects of gossip columns turned out to include at least one conversation with Wyeth.

Now in the sixth decade of a prolific career that began with a solo show in New York at the age of 20, Wyeth says of shouldering the mantel of one of the American art world's most enduring dynasties, "It's a pain in the ass to be compared. But there's motivation in being part of a movement where you and your family have been voices."

Nevertheless, he is reluctant to be categorized, even as a realist, because he finds such terms too restrictive.

Wyeth has an obsession with ravens, both because of the beauty of their glistening black feathers, and because they're among the most intelligent and resourceful of birds. *Ravens in Winter* is an oil on board completed in 1996.

WEATHERED BARNS, WINDING ROADS

On a crisp afternoon in mid-November, Jamie Wyeth is at home on a rolling 300-acre farm that stretches from the outskirts of Wilmington, Del. to Chadds Ford, Pa., his childhood home and the place where his grandfather and Howard Pyle originated the Brandywine School of illustration. With its weathered barns, winding roads and gentle hills cast in slanted light, the region remains associated with both the style and subject matter of the Wyeth family's work. He has lived here with his wife Phyllis, whose horse, Union Rags, won the Belmont Stakes in 2012, since they married in the late 1960s.

In his knickers and Amish vest, blue paint staining his cuticles, it's easy to imagine Wyeth striding through his fields hand-feeding his emus and chatting with the vulture he taught to fly (he wore a football helmet to protect his head when the bird landed).

"What speaks to me about this place is that I know it," he says. "I couldn't possibly paint in places haven't been."

Wyeth left school in the sixth grade a precedent set by his father Andrew, who was removed from school by his father N.C. due to frail health and spent his mornings being home-schooled and his afternoons with his aunt Carolyn Wyeth, also a gifted painter "Sports didn't interest me," he says. "I became very obsessed with painting and drawing all the time."

> "What speaks to me about this place is that I know it. I couldn't possibly paint in places I haven't been."

Soon he was working with his father in his studio. "It was a frank relationship," he says. In this shared studio, he painted *Draft Age*, the oil portrait that has become synonymous with the controversy of the Vietnam War.

At about the time of his first solo show at New York's Knoedler Gallery, he was asked to paint a posthumous portrait of President John F Kennedy. Having never seen the president in the flesh, Wyeth says he ultimately painted

In his series of "The Seven Deadly Sins," Wyeth used seagulls to symbolize the vices of mankind. "Everyone had painted seagulls as though they were white doves," Wyeth has said.

Hanging in Wyeth's home is a portrait of Andy Warhol from Wyeth's "A.W. Working on the Piss" series. "I've become a lot more discerning about what I let out to be seen," Wyeth says.

a portrait that was "rather odd." The piece won him not only Robert Kennedy's disapproval it was based on a photograph of the president as he was immersed in the Bay of Pigs crisis but also hate mail.

Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, however, said the painting bore the closest resemblance to her late husband of any she'd ever seen. Then it landed on the cover of *Look* magazine.

Being a presidential portraitist he painted President Jimmy Carter in 1977 — was not the only lofty validation the young painter received. While serving in the Delaware Air National Guard in the late '60s and early '70s, he was one of 70 artists asked by NASA and the National Gallery of Art to document the space probes as part of the "Eyewitness to Space" initiative. He was commissioned to design the White House holiday cards during the Reagan administration, and during the 1971 Christmas season, the U.S. Postal Service sold a partridge stamp he had illustrated.

These days, Wyeth, 66, spends much of his time on his farm, at his New York apartment, or on an island a mile off the coast of Maine that he prefers to reach by rowboat.

"We're bombarded with stimulation in this day and age," he says. "The island gives me focus nobody can drive up and say, 'Let's have lunch. "

That solitude enabled him a few years ago to focus on ravens, among many other preoccupations. Because they were not regular occupants of the island, he sought advice from an expert who said to find a dead cow. After phoning several local dairy farms, he got the tip-off that the bait was ready. He went ashore, picked up the 3,000-pound package, brought it back to the island, and put it in a field. The birds soon arrived. Their portraits later appeared in the exhibit "Gulls, Ravens, and a Vulture: The Ornithological Paintings of James Wyeth," which opened at the Farnsworth Art Museum in Rockland, Maine, in 2005.

These bronze hands were cast by a plastic surgeon who specializes in hands — using Wyeth's own hands for the cast.

The Wyeth Legacy

The motivation behind the works of Jamie, Andrew, and N.C. Wyeth delves "into realities that are more closely related to memory and imagination than anything in the natural world," according to the 1998 book *Wondrous Strange: The Wyeth Tradition*. The resulting intersection of illustration and fine art has made the Wyeths "America's first family of the art world."

Jamie Wyeth's *Portrait of John F. Kennedy*, 1967

Andrew Wyeth's *Christina's World*, 1948

AP Photo

N.C. Wyeth's *Old Pew*, 1911, from *Treasure Island*

Jamie Wyeth (b.1946) Earned national attention with his 1967 posthumous portrait of President John F. Kennedy. His striking "realist style" pieces can be found in the National Gallery of Art, the National Portrait Gallery, and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. He illustrates children's books, the latest being *Sammy in the Sky* (Candlewick, $16.99), about a hound dog and the little girl who loves him.

AP Photo

Andrew Wyeth (1917-2009) His oeuvre reflects the artist's ongoing love affair with everyday life – domestic, natural and architectural. "Found throughout Wyeth's work, these objects form patterns that illuminate core themes and reveal the artist wrestling with issues of memory, temporality, embodiment, and the metaphysical," notes the book *Andrew Wyeth: Memory & Magic*.

N.C. Wyeth, ca. 1920/unidentified photographer, Charles Scribner's Sons Art Reference Dept. records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

N.C. Wyeth (1882-1945) Pupil of artist Howard Pyle who created more than 3,000 paintings and illustrated more than 100 books of classic literature, including *Treasure Island*, *Robin Hood*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and *Robinson Crusoe*.

Wyeth's love of animals is captured in the various small sculptures he keeps in his Delaware home.

BOLD WITH A SENSE OF HUMOR

He immortalized his fixation with seagulls in the "The Seven Deadly Sins" after awaking one night with a realization of how terrifying the scavengers could be.

Until then, he says, "Everyone had painted seagulls as though they were white doves."

In the lushly detailed portraits entitled *Pride, Gluttony, Lust,* and *Sloth,* among others, critics have pointed out that the birds embody the frailties of mankind. The series was shown at New York's Adelson Galleries in 2008.

"A lot of his recent paintings have a slightly disturbing quality," says Adams, who adds that the birds are instructive about the most basic instincts of living creatures. "I give him credit for making paintings that are not conventionally pretty. He's quite bold with surfaces and subjects and he has a sense of humor In a way, he's dealing with a lot of the subjects that are subjects of traditional narrative painting but his paintings are very thought-provoking."

While his grandfather worked for the most part in oil and a palette of dense color, and his father in the muted tempera and watercolor that became his signature, Jamie Wyeth mixes things together oil, watercolor, cardboard, canvas, rag board, tarpaulin and paints more with his fingers than with brushes. Tempera, he says, is not "elastic enough" for moving paint around.

When not painting, Wyeth might be out and about looking for new items for his collection. He has dealers who know what he likes, but he also visits antique shops and occasionally attends auctions. In addition to creatures and miniatures, Wyeth collects art from artists as diverse as Edgar Degas, Howard Pyle, British illustrator Arthur Rackham and Rockwell Kent.

Wyeth calls himself the biggest collector of his own work. "I've become a lot more discerning about what I let out to be seen," he says.

Indeed, hanging on the walls of his home is a portrait of Andy Warhol from his "A.W. Working on the Piss" series from 2007. It is charcoal, gouache and watercolor on cardboard. Not far away is an oil study of President John F Kennedy dating to 1967.

Though Wyeth hesitates to discuss his process or his subject while in the throes of a new artistic phase, he says he is currently working on a series depicting unanticipated events that take place on the Maine coast where his father also did much of his painting.

"My dad was a very strange painter," he says. "His was an airless, microscopic world. So many miss that about his work. Mine isn't quite as airless or exacting, but it's a curious world."

With upcoming exhibitions in China, South Korea and beyond, and a retrospective scheduled for next year at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, Jamie Wyeth remains a treasure many would like to appreciate for a long time.

SUZANNE GANNON *has written for* The New York Times *and* The Wall Street Journal.