

# NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

FOURTH STREET AT CONSTITUTION AVENUE NW WASHINGTON DC 20565 • 737-4215/842-6353

CONTACT: Randall Kremer  
Dena Crosson  
(202) 842-6353

\*\* FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## WYETH'S HELGA PICTURES ON VIEW AT NATIONAL GALLERY

Title: American Drawings and Watercolors of the 20th Century:  
Andrew Wyeth, the Helga Pictures

WASHINGTON - Andrew Wyeth's "Helga Pictures" will be presented at the National Gallery of Art, May 24 - Sept. 27, 1987, as part of the series American Drawings and Watercolors of the 20th Century. The exhibition consists of approximately 125 drawings and watercolors depicting the artist's neighbor, Helga Testorf, in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. The whole suite of some 240 images was executed during the years from 1971 to 1985 and was acquired by Leonard E.B. Andrews in 1986. This exhibition is made possible by The Du Pont Company, as will be the concomitant show, American Drawings and Watercolors of the 20th Century: Selections from the Whitney Museum of American Art.

"We are greatly looking forward to this exhibition," said J. Carter Brown, director of the National Gallery. "This extraordinary body of work demonstrates Wyeth's process of concentration on a single subject, allowing viewers to trace the development of various themes within the suite."

(more)

The suite consists of groups of about 30 different interrelated poses. Helga is shown standing and walking, as in the series In the Orchard, as well as nude and clothed, posed against architectural elements such as doors and windows, asleep and awake at different seasons and times of day.

"Such close attention by a painter to one model over so long a period of time is a remarkable, if not singular, circumstance in the history of American art," writes John Wilmerding, deputy director of the National Gallery of Art and curator of the exhibition. "This show marks the first time the artist has permitted into public view a large suite of sequential drawings related to a single work."

Some of the most impressive works in the series are the temperas and drybrush watercolors. Tempera is a time-honored technique that gives a dense and detailed effect, as may be seen in such works as Braids, Sheepskin and Farm Road. Drybrush is a watercolor technique that allows the artist to create great depth and complexity of both color and surface within the painting. Crown of Flowers, Cape Coat and Refuge are highly finished drybrush watercolors that demonstrate Wyeth's virtuosity as a draftsman.

The full-color catalogue, which includes an essay by John Wilmerding, is published by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., and is a Main Selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club<sup>r</sup> for July, 1987. This is the first art book ever to be chosen as a Main Selection of the Club.

After leaving the National Gallery, Andrew Wyeth: the Helga Pictures will travel to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Oct. 28, 1987 - Jan. 3, 1988), The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (Jan. 31 - Apr. 10, 1988), the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Apr. 28 - July 10, 1988), the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (Aug. 13 - Oct. 16, 1988), and the Detroit Institute of Arts (Nov. 13, 1988 - Jan. 22, 1989).

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## PARTIAL CHECKLIST

### AMERICAN DRAWINGS AND WATERCOLORS OF THE 20TH CENTURY ANDREW WYETH, THE HELGA PICTURES

May 24 - September 27, 1987

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

- ° - color transparency available
- \* - black and white photograph available

<u>Catalog number</u>	<u>Drawing</u>
1	<u>Pencil Drawing of Helga's Head</u> , 1971, pencil credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
2°	<u>Letting Her Hair Down</u> , 1972, tempera credit: (c) 1986 Leonard E.B. Andrews
6	<u>Letting Her Hair Down</u> , 1972, pencil credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
7	<u>Letting Her Hair Down</u> , 1972, pencil credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
9*	<u>Letting Her Hair Down</u> , 1972, pencil credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
10°*	<u>Helga in Peasant Dress</u> , 1972, watercolor and pencil credit: (c) 1986 Leonard E.B. Andrews
12	<u>Helga in Peasant Dress</u> , 1972, pencil credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
14	<u>Helga in Peasant Dress</u> , 1972, pencil credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews

- 15                    Helga in the Orchard, 1973, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 16                    Helga in the Orchard, 1973, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 18                    Helga in the Orchard, 1973, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 19°\*                  Helga in the Orchard, 1973, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 20                    Helga in the Orchard, 1974, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 21                    Helga in the Orchard, 1974, watercolor and pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 22°\*                  Helga in the Orchard, 1974, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1986 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 23                    Helga in the Orchard, 1980, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 24                    Helga in the Orchard, 1980, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 25                    Helga in the Orchard, 1979, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 26                    Helga in the Orchard, 1977, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 28                    Helga in the Orchard, 1973, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 29                    Helga in the Orchard, 1982, watercolor and pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 30                    Helga in the Orchard, 1982, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 31°\*                  Helga in the Orchard, 1985, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 36                    Helga's Daughter, 1973, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1986 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 37                    Helga's Daughter, 1972, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1986 Leonard E.B. Andrews

- 46°\*                    Black Velvet, 1972, dry brush  
credit: (c) 1986 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 47\*                    Black Velvet, 1972, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 48                    Black Velvet, 1972, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 49\*                    Black Velvet, 1978, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 50                    Black Velvet, 1972, watercolor and pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 51                    Black Velvet, 1972, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 52°\*                    Sheepskin, 1973, tempera  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 53\*°                    Sheepskin, 1972, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 55                    Helga Seated by a Tree, 1982, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 57                    Helga Seated by a Tree, 1982, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 58                    Helga Seated by a Tree, 1973, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 59                    Helga Seated by a Tree, 1973, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1986 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 60°\*                    The Prussian, 1973, drybrush  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 61°\*                    Crown of Flowers, 1974, drybrush  
credit: (c) 1986 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 62                    Pencil Drawing of Helga's Head, 1979, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 63\*                    Pencil Drawing of Helga's Head, 1973, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 64                    Pencil Drawing of Helga's Head, 1971, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews

- 67 Pencil Drawing of Helga's Head, 1973, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 69 Her Head, 1973, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 70 Helga - Nude, 1980, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 71 Helga - Nude, 1973, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 78 Helga - Nude, 1976, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 79° Helga - Nude, 1978, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 86° Helga - Nude, 1981, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 87 Easter Sunday (study), 1975, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 88\* Easter Sunday (study), 1975, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 89\* Easter Sunday (study), 1975, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 90° Easter Sunday (study), 1975, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1986 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 96 Helga Asleep, 1974, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 99 Helga Asleep, 1975, watercolor and pencil  
credit: (c) 1986 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 100 Helga Asleep, 1975, watercolor and pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 105\* Helga Asleep, 1975, pencil  
credit: (c) 1986 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 106 Asleep, 1975, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews

- 110                    Helga Asleep, 1981, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 112                    Helga Asleep, 1978, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 113                    Helga Asleep, 1978, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 114                    Helga Asleep, 1976, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1986 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 116                    Helga Asleep, 1976, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 122                    Helga Asleep, 1979, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 126°\*                 Barracoon (study), 1976 drybrush and watercolor  
credit: (c) 1986 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 128                    Barracoon (study), 1972, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 129\*                   Barracoon (study), 1976 pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 130°                   On Her Knees, 1977, drybrush  
credit: (c) 1986 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 132                    On Her Knees, 1977, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 134\*                   On Her Knees, 1977, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 135                    On Her Knees, 1977, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 136°                   On Her Knees, 1977, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 137                    On Her Knees, 1977, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews



- 140°\*                    Drawn Shade, 1977, drybrush  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 143                      Drawn Shade, 1977, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 144                      Drawn Shade, 1977, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 145°\*                    Overflow, 1978, drybrush  
credit: (c) 1986 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 146                      Overflow, 1978, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 147\*                     Overflow, 1978, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 148\*                     Overflow, 1978, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 149                      Overflow, 1976, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 150                      Overflow, 1976, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 151                      Overflow, 1978, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 156                      Overflow, 1978, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 158                      Overflow, 1978, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 159                      Overflow, 1978, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 162                      Overflow, 1978, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 164                      Overflow, 1978, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 165°\*                    Farm Road, 1979, tempera  
credit: (c) 1986 Leonard E.B. Andrews

- 166\*                    Helga Walking in Her Cape Coat, 1979, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 167\*                    Helga Walking in Her Cape Coat, 1982, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 169                     Helga Walking in Her Cape Coat, 1979, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 170°                    Loden Coat (study), 1978, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 173°\*                   Braids, 1979, tempera  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 174\*                    Braids, 1979, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 175                     Braids, 1979, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 176\*                    Braids, 1979, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 177\*                    Braids, 1979, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 182\*                    Night Shadow (study), 1979, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 183                     Night Shadow (study), 1973, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 184                     Helga with Nell, 1979, watercolor and pencil  
credit: (c) 1986 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 188                     Helga with Nell, 1979, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 189°\*                   Pageboy, 1980, drybrush  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 191                     Pageboy, 1980, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 193                     Pageboy, 1980, watercolor and pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews

- 197                    Helga from the Back, 1981, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 198°                   Helga in the Doorway, 1981, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 201                    Knapsack (study), 1980, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 202                    Knapsack (study), 1980, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 203                    Knapsack (study), 1980, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 209                    Day Dream, 1975, watercolor and pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 212                    Lovers, 1981, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 213\*                   Lovers (study), 1981, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 215°                   Sunshield, 1982, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 218                    Sunshield, 1982, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 219                    Camp Fire (study), 1982, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 222°\*                  Camp Fire (study), 1982, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 223°                   Cape Coat, 1982, drybrush  
credit: (c) 1986 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 224                    Cape Coat, 1982, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 226°\*                  Cape Coat, 1982, pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews

- 227                    Cape Coat, 1982, watercolor and pencil  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 230°                   Refuge, 1985, drybrush  
credit: (c) 1986 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 231                    Untitled, 1979, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 232                    White Dress, 1980, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews
- 235                    Untitled, 1973, watercolor  
credit: (c) 1987 Leonard E.B. Andrews

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# National Gallery of Art

*Washington, D.C.*

## ANDREW NEWELL WYETH

### CHRONOLOGY

- 1917 Born July 12 in home of his parents, Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania.
- 1923-29 Educated at home by tutors.
- 1929 N. C. Wyeth, Andrew's father and a distinguished illustrator, took twelve-year-old Andrew into his studio as an apprentice.
- 1937 Successful at his first one-man exhibition in New York at age 20.
- 1939 Married Betsy James.  
Met Christina Olson through his wife Betsy.
- 1943 Participated in a group show at Museum of Modern Art, New York, entitled American Realists and Magic Realists.
- 1945 N. C. Wyeth and Andrew's two-year-old nephew were killed when their car was struck by a train near Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania.
- 1948 Painted Christina's World using Christina Olson as his model; acquired by the Museum of Modern Art.
- 1948-79 During this thirty-year period, Anna and Karl Kuerner served as models for Wyeth.
- 1950 Participated in group American painting show in London.  
Struck by severe respiratory illness.  
Change in style becoming apparent in these years: bright, spontaneous water-colors of rural scenes give way to a more symbolic and intense series of visual essays.
- 1955 Received honorary doctorate from Harvard.
- 1963 Received the Medal of Freedom.
- 1966 By this time, one of the most honored painters in America. A member of the National Academy and winner of the Merit Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.
- 1968 Christina Olson, subject of more than 200 drawings and paintings, died in New York on January 28 at age 74.

(more)

- 1970 First solo exhibition ever held in White House.  
Exhibition at Metropolitan Museum of Art, March 8 - June 26.  
Exhibition at Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, July 17 - Sept. 6.  
Wyeth first met his neighbor, Helga Testorf, in Chadds Ford.
- 1970-85 During fifteen-year period, paints and draws Helga Testorf more than 200 times.
- 1971 Exhibition at Museum of Modern Art, New York, June 16 - Oct. 15.
- 1976 Two Worlds of Andrew Wyeth: Kuerners and Olsons exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- 1986 Leonard E. B. Andrews acquired 240 "Helga" pictures.

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# A NATIONAL TREASURE

LEONARD E. B. ANDREWS

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In his text here, John Wilmerding, deputy director and former curator of American art at the National Gallery of Art, discusses the place of Andrew Wyeth's Helga pictures in the history of European and American art and in the artist's own previous work. I consider his views those of an objective, learned scholar and observer, and I know his colleagues do also.

However, it has been a revelation to me to see certain critics come out against the artist and the Helga series before they have even seen the pictures. Likewise, it has been interesting to see those who appreciate the work of this great American artist say uniformly and enthusiastically: "Let's see the work, let the work speak for itself."

The collection itself is, to my mind, a major extension – indeed another dimension – of Andrew Wyeth's achievement. While "art speaks for itself," as the saying goes, this work speaks volumes for Wyeth's world-class artistic execution, balance, and talent.

Wyeth obviously demonstrates his superb touch with the brush in the Helga series. Yet this technical skill is accompanied by a distinguished subtlety, a sensitivity, a grace, a respect, and a purity that rank him with the great masters of the past. I personally feel he is so far ahead of any other living artist that it is hard to name the second best.

But then, I am certainly no art critic. True, I have collected for several years. I owned, along with the works of other artists, six Wyeths – a tempera, two drybrushes, and three watercolor drawings – before I bought the Helga Collection, but my total collection was a minor one until now.

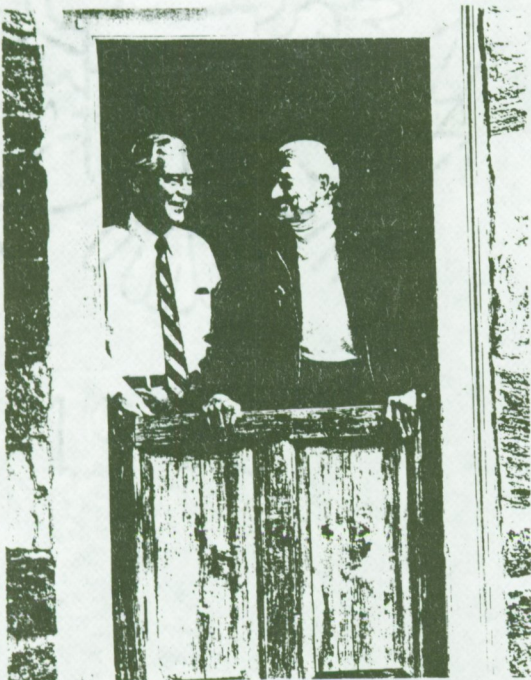
When I learned Betsy and Andy wanted me to see a "large private collection," I was interested, of course, but I had no details and no concept of what I was about to see. Because of my prior purchases, I had met the Wyeths, but I did not know them well at all. I assumed that *they* assumed I was a serious collector and that the invitation was strictly a collector's opportunity to see something no one else had seen.

In Chadds Ford, the Wyeths live in a complex of three eighteenth-century fieldstone buildings along the banks of the Brandywine River, not far from where the English troops were billeted during the Revolutionary War. The Americans were at Valley Forge, only twenty miles away, and the area was of strategic importance during the famous Battle of the Brandywine. The complex contains a house, an apartment/studio, and a gristmill.

The gristmill, which Andy has carefully and authentically restored to working order, consists of three floors. The "works" of the mill – a massive set of grinding stones and a very large waterwheel that turns them – occupies the first floor. The second floor is reached by climbing a suspended stairway and pushing up through a sturdy barrier door in the ceiling. The third floor, reached by another stairway, contains an office, filing, and storage area. The building is about 110 feet long by 50 feet wide.

I first heard of the collection on a Wednesday evening and drove out to see it the next Saturday, March 15, 1986, with Kathleen Jamieson, the interior decorator who had told me about it and had encouraged me to buy Wyeths before.

While it all may sound a little dramatic in the retelling, it was at the time just another visit to the Wyeth complex on a beautiful Pennsylvania morning. Andy came out to the car to greet us and told us to go over to the gristmill and have a look. He and Betsy stayed in the house in order that I might study the collection completely



Leonard E. B. Andrews  
and Andrew Wyeth

unaffected by their presence. I walked over to the mill and went up the stairway by myself and pushed the barrier door up and open, and there, on the second floor, was the Helga Collection. I was absolutely awestruck.

Sixty-seven framed paintings and drawings were hanging or leaning at random against the walls and posts. The four temperas were on one wall along with several drybrush and watercolor works. The other walls were filled with watercolor, drybrush, and pencil drawings. On two tables were stacks of unframed, matted drawings – preliminary sketches, studies, and finished works in pencil, watercolor, and mixed media. The room was very quiet and well-lighted and, as I walked slowly around, I almost couldn't believe what a rare artistic genius I was seeing and that I actually had the opportunity of owning the collection! My immediate impression at the time continues to be my firm belief today: The Helga Collection is a national treasure.

I spent two hours looking at the collection and trying to absorb what I was seeing. Just the idea of having a private look at the unseen personal collection of a major international artist, 240 drawings and paintings of one subject, executed and stored over a fifteen-year period, was mighty heavy for this simple collector.

There is something quieting about seeing such an astounding body of work in such circumstances. Maybe, when you see the full collection, you will feel as I did then, somewhat at a loss for words; my thoughts raced from picture to picture, trying to pick out highlights, only to find myself faced with such an abundance of them that I was almost mute.

I finally raised the door and went down the stairs and across the drive to the Wyeths' home. Andy came out and I shook his hand and said, "Mr. Wyeth, congratulations, you have created a national treasure, and I want to protect it and show it to the American people. I want the collection." Betsy came out then and I repeated to her what I had just told her husband.

They invited Kathleen and me into the house for a glass of wine. We sat around an eighteenth-century Pennsylvania Dutch dinner table and talked about the collection, its impact on the public, its personal importance to Andy, and the fact that Betsy had not known the extent of the work until Andy told her earlier that year. She knew, of course, that he had been painting models for all those years, but she was totally unaware there were so many pictures of Helga alone. (Since Andy works with various models during a year and regularly sells several



pictures a year, the number of Wyeths of other subjects was not significantly diminished during that time.) In the living room Betsy showed me the three superb Helga paintings Andy had given her – *Lovers*, *Night Shadow*, and *Autumn*.

I have been asked many times what I was told about Helga when I bought the collection. The truth is, I never asked about her. I consider the relationship between any model and artist to be a professional one of their own making and important to the finished work of art, and I respect that. Helga is a German woman with a proud and close family who worked on the nearby farm of Karl Kuerner, himself one of Wyeth's most famous subjects.

It was clear as we talked that one of Andy's main interests was that the Helga Collection be shown to the public in a respectful and dignified manner. Of course, there is no better place in America than the National Gallery of Art to begin a public exhibition of such a precious national asset. It is a tribute to J. Carter Brown, the director, to John Wilmerding, and to the splendid professional staff at the National Gallery that they immediately recognized the importance of this new body of Wyeth's work and eagerly set about making plans for exhibiting it.

I had to go out of town the next day and did not get back until the following Sunday night, March 23. Two days later we had agreed to the terms of the purchase, which included my buying the Helga Collection, including full copyrights, and Betsy's leaving her three Helga paintings to the Leonard E. B. Andrews Foundation. The Foundation sponsors the National Arts Program, an annual national free art forum founded in 1985 to encourage the development of indigenous artistic talent in America. The exhibited works are professionally judged, and scholarships for continuing education and cash prizes are awarded participating artists.

It took a few days for the legal papers to be drawn up, and on Tuesday, April 1, Andy and I signed them on the same dining room table in their home. Betsy brought out a bottle of champagne, and the three of us congratulated each other and, sipping champagne with our excitement, gave a toast on April Fool's Day to the art world and all those who have opinions, of whatever kind, about Andrew Wyeth.

# FOREWORD

J. CARTER BROWN

*Director, National Gallery of Art, Washington*

*Andrew Wyeth: The Helga Pictures* brings to public view for the first time a significant new body of work by one of America's best-known painters and, moreover, represents a fascinating look at the working methods of an artist in a fresh phase of his career. The Helga group actually adds up to a whole that is more than the sum of its parts: viewing the pictures, we begin to feel — as the artist must have during the fifteen years of their making — a sense of growing power and richness of imagery.

Wyeth, of course, has been the subject of several major exhibitions presented in the last few decades. Important surveys were organized in 1966 by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and in 1970 by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. In addition, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco mounted a broad-ranging selection in 1973, as did The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1976; both museums published catalogues that have extensive personal interviews with Wyeth himself and stand as enormously useful sources of firsthand information.

The National Gallery is delighted to inaugurate this new show of Wyeth material, different from its predecessors in its very circumscribed focus, and yet, we believe, impressively substantial in its own way. After being shown at the Gallery, it will travel to a handful of other sites in the United States and eventually will be shown abroad. We are especially pleased that we can hold this exhibition in tandem with a large selection of twentieth-century American master drawings and watercolors, on loan at the same time from the Whitney Museum of American Art. Thus, during this period the public will have an unparalleled opportunity to enjoy this great celebration of modern American draftsmanship in both breadth and depth. In yet a further felicity of timing, our audience will be able to benefit from an exhibition of works by three generations of Wyeths — N. C., Andrew, and Jamie — to be shown over the same summer just a few blocks away at our sister institution in Washington, the Corcoran Gallery of Art, and also traveling elsewhere thereafter.

This book is a handsome visual record of an unusual creative achievement. I am pleased that its author is the National Gallery's deputy director, John Wilmerding, still a scholar in his spare moments, who has written the sympathetic and probing essay included here. We are all grateful to Paul Gottlieb, president of Abrams, for initially calling our attention to this group of pictures; to the collector and owner, Leonard Andrews, for his great generosity in making them available for an extended loan tour; and to Andrew and Betsy Wyeth, respectively the creator and loving caretaker of this artistic outpouring.

The National Gallery has on view in its permanent collections one of Wyeth's most beautiful temperas, *Snow Flurries*, and possesses as well a few exemplary watercolors by him. In 1984 we had a preview of one Helga work when *Day Dream* was exhibited among the American paintings from the Armand Hammer Collection, in conjunction with President Reagan's second inauguration. With the Helga pictures we welcome the chance to explore again a set of fascinating documents in the odyssey of the American artistic achievement.

Text Set:

22/22 Sabon with 3 pt letterspacing, T2

10/12 Sabon with 2 pt letterspacing, T2

10/18, 10/14 Sabon w/italic and Old Style Figures, T2

Bands on (4,4,9,1,3

Galley 1

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 (212) 354-3733



C-A9076  
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# ANDREW WYETH'S *HELGA SUITE*

JOHN WILMERDING

Familiar as the art of Andrew Wyeth is to many, and deeply rooted as it is in the American tradition, his pictures in the so-called Helga series possess a fresh power that is startling. On a superficial level the press and public have already found them sensational,<sup>1</sup> but on reflection, at first hand, these pictures do convey a cumulative visual and technical force, long present in Wyeth's art but seldom revealed with such coherence and impact. They are fascinating on a number of related levels: for their place in the longer continuities of western, American, and modern art; for their connections to the Brandywine tradition and the history of the Wyeth family in American painting; and for their illumination of Andrew Wyeth's personal style, artistic preoccupations, and working process.

Because of both their number and subject the pictures are indeed best described as a suite, in its various evocations of meaning. They are a distinct series, with overlapping subdivisions and internal sequences; they suggest a sense of closure and privacy, mostly domestic and often set within rooms; and they evolve in lyrical rhythms in the manner of music. The subject of virtually the entire group is Helga Testorf, a neighbor of the Wyeths in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania (a few sheets are devoted to her daughter, Carmen). The collection was executed over a fifteen-year period, from 1971 to 1985; Helga was thirty-eight when Wyeth began to draw her and fifty-three when he brought the series to an end. Such close attention by a painter to one model over so long a period of time is a remarkable, if not singular, circumstance in the history of American art. As such, it affords us an opportunity to see intertwined images of biological change and artistic growth.

The collection when acquired by Leonard Andrews consisted of 240 works, mostly on paper, including 4 temperas, 9 highly finished drybrush paintings, 63 watercolors, and 164 pencil sketches and drawings. Three other paintings in the series, *Day Dream*, *Loden Coat*, and *Knapsack* had been sold earlier into other collections.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the artist's wife, Betsy Wyeth, who retained possession of three major drybrush works of Helga (*Autumn*, *Lovers*, and *Night Shadow*), donated them to the Leonard E. B. Andrews Foundation. Altogether, the works in the series reveal an artistic focus notable for its control and complexity, its capturing of surface texture and emotional depth.

While Wyeth has always worked in a process of private concentration, producing an extensive sequence of studies for a single image, this group is worthy of attention in its own right. This is the first time the artist has permitted into public view a large suite of sequential drawings related to a single work. Moreover, almost all are more than documentary working studies; they have a polish, refinement, even grandeur, a compelling strength and beauty quite their own.

Making up the whole are at least thirty different interrelated poses, ranging from only a single study in a few instances, through others involving a handful of sketches, to a few consisting of more than a dozen works. For the series of images showing Helga asleep there is the dramatic accumulation of no less than thirty-five drawings and watercolors investigating various poses. As we look at Helga depicted nude and clothed, indoors and out, asleep and awake, in different seasons and times of day, we are led to think of those venerable cycles in earlier European and American art. In nineteenth-century terms these are Wyeth's Four Seasons and Voyage of Life.

Indeed, such associations suggest that there are several approaches to the *Helga Suite* which might prove helpful to enriching our sense of context for these works, approaches through the European and American traditions which offer us precedents and counterpoints for both the conventions and the inventions in Wyeth's art. Though largely introduced to the disciplines of art in his father's studio and thereafter cultivating his natural talents, Andrew Wyeth has always been observant of other art as he has seen it. Similarly, he has pursued a career for the most part circumscribed by two areas of local geography, the Brandywine valley of Pennsylvania and the coastal farmland of Cushing, Maine, where he divides his year. Such travel as he has done in recent decades has been more for pleasure than art. Nonetheless, his recorded conversations and interviews make clear he is a painter informed about past art where it is of interest and relevance to him, whether among the old masters or his American artistic predecessors.

By the same token, he knows which artists are stylistically distant from him, Renoir or Velázquez for example, because their color and painterliness seem to Wyeth distinctively European in sensibility.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the spirit and technique of his art are consciously grounded in the classical masters of the early Renaissance in Italy and in the north. Especially appealing to Wyeth is their sense of clarity and design, of attention to texture and above all to line. Noting particularly compositional contrasts and reflections, he has said, "I was so much taken by . . . the works of the Renaissance master Piero della Francesca," which he first saw as a youth in reproductions.<sup>4</sup> But even more Wyeth was to find inspiration in the combined delicacy and strength of line he saw exemplified in the drybrush watercolors of Dürer on the one hand and in the meticulous paintings of Botticelli on the other.

"Above all, I admired the graphic work of the northern Renaissance genius Albrecht Dürer."<sup>5</sup> N. C. Wyeth had given his son a set of facsimiles of Dürer engravings, and both their subject and execution struck the younger Wyeth profoundly. One feels his strong sense of self-identification with the early German draftsman, who for Wyeth is the first master and exemplar of drybrush painting. Specific images have remained sharp in Wyeth's consciousness: Dürer's famous drawing of the *Young Hare* and *The Large Piece of Turf* ("To me, it is his greatest work"<sup>6</sup>), both in the Albertina Collection, Vienna, the latter directly inspiring Wyeth's own drybrush drawing of *Grasses*, 1941. Wyeth's admiration extends equally to Dürer's rendering of textures and to humble creatures themselves, emotionally as well as quite literally down-to-earth. We should note how much Helga is an earthy creature, often set closely into the surrounding terrain. Elsewhere, Wyeth remarked on Dürer's imaginative process in the engraving of the *Knight, Death, and the Devil*, whereby "the mundane, observed, became the romantic,"<sup>7</sup> a process as much at work in Helga observed and transformed.

Some of the finest works in the Helga series are the drybrush watercolors. In contrast to the traditional handling of watercolor, which is fluid, spontaneous, and suggestive, the drybrush technique requires squeezing much of the moisture out of the bristles to achieve more body and richness of detail. "Drybrush is layer upon layer. It is what I would call a definite weaving process. You weave the layers of drybrush over and within the broad washes of watercolor."<sup>8</sup> The allusion to weaving is of course equally appropriate to the animal hairs of a painter's brush, the fibers of grasses and weeds, and the growing strands of human hair. Helga's hair is not surprisingly the principal focus of attention in many of these paintings, most notably *Cape Coat*, *Drawn Shade*, *On Her Knees*, *Overflow*, *Pageboy*, *Crown of Flowers*, *The Prussian*, and *Refuge*. These painstakingly wrought passages suggest her sensuous animal nature, organic and tender as Dürer's *Hare*. We can imagine Wyeth's emotional intensity no less than he imagined Dürer's to be: "Oh, how I can feel his wonderful fingers wringing out the moisture of that brush, drying it out, wringing it out to get that half-dry, half-lingering dampness to build up, to weave the surface of that little creature's coat."<sup>9</sup> No wonder he could also claim, "I work in drybrush when my emotion gets deep enough into a subject."<sup>10</sup>

If one early touchstone for Wyeth was Dürer, the other was Botticelli, who could also offer thematic and stylistic precedents. As a modern practitioner in the medium of tempera, Wyeth is unsurpassed. In taking up this old-master technique, he would naturally cast an eye to the examples of the Renaissance. Botticelli's art commanded attention for its particular technical character. Wyeth noted, "When you study the early men, like Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, you will note that although it is done on canvas, it is very beautifully woven together. I've tried painting tempera on canvas, but I didn't like it. . . . I didn't like the give of the canvas. It bothered me."<sup>11</sup> What he has sought in his paintings is a sense of permanence, captured both by the distillation of imagery and by the hardness of medium. Composed of a mixture of dry pigment with distilled water and egg yolk, tempera quickly hardens and, when applied to wood panel, perfectly suits the artist's wish to achieve an image as solid in feeling as in form. "There's something incredibly lasting about the material, like an Egyptian mummy," Wyeth feels. "Tempera is, in a sense, like building, really building in great layers the way the earth itself was built."<sup>12</sup>

For Wyeth tempera has multiple associations with the earth, and as in most of his work the Helga series is as much a portrait of a landscape as of a figure. Besides the notion of endurance, the colors of tempera and of his countryside are the same for Wyeth, and both generate a sense of meditative isolation. As he recounted, "I think the real reason tempera fascinated me was that I loved the quality of the colors: the earth colors, the terra verde, the ochers, the reds. . . . I really like tempera because it has a cocoon-like feeling of gray lostness — almost a lonely feeling."<sup>13</sup> Warm red-browns dominate many of his temperas, and the evocation of earthiness is especially strong in such Helga paintings as *Braids*, *Letting Her Hair Down*, *Sheepskin*, and *Farm Road*.

The early Renaissance and Botticelli provided not just a stylistic starting point for Wyeth, but an imagery of figures with elevated attributes and meanings. When we look at the eloquent and tender *Crown of Flowers*, do we not think of its painter dreaming back through the memory of art to the *Birth of Venus*, c. 1482, and even more to the *Primavera*, c. 1478 (both Uffizi Gallery, Florence)? While no doubt neither consciously referring to Botticelli's nudes nor bearing their mythological or philosophical carriage, Helga has the suggestive aura of a personification, if not a goddess, of nature. She is also an embodiment of love, and while other depictions in the series remain closer to the immediate observations of portraiture, here with her floral crown she recalls the myths of spring and Flora, of Venus and the graces, even Eve out of Dürer's garden. There is an allegorical power, if not program, present; in Wyeth's terms it is making the mundane into the romantic.

The various poses and features that Wyeth depicts in his views of Helga are a way of exploring different moods and aspects of personality. But recording the details of physiognomy for Wyeth is just a part of observing the ordinary, and in the accumulated number of renderings we sense more than portraiture at work here. While the repeated aspects of Helga's face and torso make clear an accuracy of likeness, there is apparent in works like *Crown of Flowers* the embodiment of deeper moods and associations. In fact, through his career-long scrutiny of individuals Wyeth has rarely undertaken a traditional posed portrait: "I don't think I'm really a portrait painter, because I only use a head to express something more. . . . If it's an outdoor person, I feel that his countenance reflects the skies he walks under: the clouds have reflected on his face for his whole life and I try to get that quality into the portrait. . . . It's like painting the sky. To me, a sky and a landscape are together. One reflects the other. They both merge."<sup>14</sup>

*Crown of Flowers* is perhaps the most suggestive work in the series of a personification approaching allegory. There is a rich tradition for this in the history of art, with other obvious examples being Rembrandt's paintings of his wife and later his mistress posing as emblems of nature, first *Saskia as Flora* (1634, Hermitage, Leningrad; and 1635, National Gallery, London), then *Hendrickje as Flora* (c. 1654, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). Even within the type Rembrandt probes a broad range of emotional expression, for example, the beauty of human and natural fecundity, intimate personal affection, almost lustful physical sensuality, and delicate spiritual lyricism. Each woman's floral wreath links her to nature's capacity for growth and rebirth. In this vernal guise Helga is an especially touching figure of regeneration in Wyeth's often otherwise autumnal landscapes.

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The nude as a repeated subject for painters is of course an enduring one in western art. Whether posed by an anonymous model, mistress, or wife, the figure could serve variously as a study of form, a celebration of love, or an emblem of the artist's studio and thus by extension a meditation on the nature of art. For example, one thinks of the imagery of Helga alternatively nude and clothed and the variants of her reclining poses as descending from the Goya majas and, in the sequence of *Black Velvet*, Manet's *Olympia*, 1863 (Musée d'Orsay, Paris). We know that the purposes and motivations in each circumstance were different, that Manet, for instance, was concerned on one level at least with the sociology of the prostitute in nineteenth-century Paris and on another with the processes of seeing brightly lit forms flattened out in strong frontal lighting. Yet we cannot help but read the black velvet ribbon around Olympia's and Helga's necks as emphasizing their nakedness. As the only article of clothing each wears, it calls attention to their available or vulnerable sexuality, as the case may be. By such means the nude becomes a vehicle for considering ideas of real versus ideal form, physical versus pure love. No doubt in many sheets Helga's torso, seen frontally and from behind, is a sustained study of anatomy. But certainly in the summary watercolors and temperas, as the precedents of art help explain, she expresses "something more."

Whatever the degree of Wyeth's conscious response to this larger tradition, he also remains an avowedly native artist of his own time. As a painter in the American tradition he has embraced its central currents of realism as a style and landscape as a subject; as an expression of the twentieth century, his art bears its own witness to our age's sense of anxiety, introspection, and isolation. Certainly, his impulses toward self-reliance and native inspiration place Wyeth in line with earlier American artists like Charles Willson Peale and William Sidney Mount, who preferred to return or stay near home to practice their craft. The close scrutiny of nature, self, and America puts him as well in the company of Henry David Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, and Robert Frost. Like the leaves of Walden, the white rooms at Amherst, and the stone fences of New Hampshire, the grasses on Kuerner's hill and the spare walls of his own granary offer Wyeth ample lines and surfaces for endless reverie and stimulation. With the sloping contours of the one and the plain right angles of the other he literally builds his compositions in the way, he says metaphorically, "the earth itself was built."

Besides this shared contemplation of the commonplace and the close-at-hand, Wyeth's vision also aims for the concentration of poetry and the journal entry. Although his paintings occasionally include figures in motion or engaged in some activity, these are not narrative or dramatic works. His landscapes tend to be confined places of calm, and the individuals he paints within them rest alone and stilled in meditation. Consider Helga's poses, for instance, in *Barracoon*, *Black Velvet*, *Campfire*, *Night Shadow*, *Overflow*, *Sun Shield*, *Asleep*, *Walking in Her Cape Coat*, and *Farm Road*. These range from pure sleep to daydreaming to introspection, and through this imagery of thought Wyeth leads us to consider more than the temporal: "I do have this feeling that time passes — a yearning to hold something — which might strike people as sad. . . . I think the right word is not 'melancholy,' but 'thoughtful.' I do an awful lot of thinking and dreaming about things in the past and the future — the timelessness of the rocks and the hills — all the people who have existed there."<sup>15</sup>

In a similar way Emily Dickinson extends her observation of the immediate to the universal: "The grass so little has to do, — / A sphere of simple green. . . ." It holds "the sunshine in its lap,"

And even when it dies, to pass  
In odors so divine,  
As lowly spices gone to sleep  
Or amulets of pine.

And then to dwell in sovereign barns,  
And dream the days away, —<sup>16</sup>

For both Dickinson and Wyeth the individual is not just placed in a landscape but fused with it. The artist achieves such a union by an abstraction of design whereby the local terrain is generalized and by a comparable abstraction of thought embodied in the human stance and gaze. This fusion is characteristic of Wyeth's style and explains why the Helga pictures are so elusive to categorize and define.

As a whole, the *Helga Suite* is a rich amalgam of several primary types of subject long treated in the development of American art — the portrait, nude model, landscape, and genre. Generally speaking, portraiture was the first American art, and it served fundamental national needs in two critical ways: it was practical and it was democratic. During the first centuries of discovery and settlement of the New World, the painting of portraits fulfilled the useful purpose of recording likenesses for posterity, in primacy over pure aesthetic expression. For a culture historically interested in the pragmatic and down-to-earth, the palpable and here and now, the technical and technological, portraiture (like our early architecture and furniture) could be at once pleasing and serviceable. But painting the human face and figure also celebrated the individual within a democracy, and by extension singular deeds or achievements. The portrait could record equally the humble and the anonymous with the mighty, the wealthy, and the heroic. Indeed, there is an argument that America's early history as a colony, nation, and republic is a history of individual aspirations, declarations, and acts. Certainly, our first great history painting might be described as portraiture in action and emerged out of a portrait tradition largely founded by Benjamin West and John Singleton Copley.

It is not surprising, then, to realize that thereafter the depiction of the human face and figure has been a continuing calling and achievement of so many major American artists, from Gilbert Stuart and Thomas Sully in the early nineteenth century, through Thomas Eakins, James McNeill Whistler, and John Singer Sargent in the second half of the century, to George Bellows, Walker Evans, and Andy Warhol in our own. It is a distinctively native note that American portraitists have made their subjects comfortable, relaxed, informal, and casual. We admire the combination of technical accuracy and individual attention. *Helga* belongs in this tradition, on one level as pure physiognomic and anatomical portraiture.

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Galley 4

But Helga unclothed also belongs, as we have seen, in that venerable lineage of the artist's model, which in European art extends back to the antique but which has had periodic interest as well for American painters working in the academic mode. Sketching the nude from casts of ideal sculpture and from live models has of course been a standard practice in the training of artists. For American artists study of the nude refined their abilities to render volume, texture, and organic relationships accurately, while inherited precedents from Europe provided the means for imbuing the figure with elevated associations, such as occasional allegorical or mythological attributes. The first major American painting in this category is John Vanderlyn's *Ariadne Asleep on the Island of Naxos*, 1814 (Pennsylvania Academy, Philadelphia). The pose goes back to many masters, including Titian and Giorgione, and reflects Vanderlyn's early study in Paris, where he looked at the old masters in the Louvre and responded to the rising currents of neoclassical taste under the leadership of David and Ingres. Whatever the mythology and idealism in which Vanderlyn has clothed Ariadne, he has also alluded to the pristine virginity of the New World, suggested by the distant clear-lit sky and the bright, delicate flowers growing in the foreground. It is in this same garden, metaphorically updated, that Ariadne's descendant Helga reclines.

During the same period other contemporaries of Vanderlyn sketched the nude model, often in quite relaxed and natural poses. Among the most noteworthy were John Trumbull and Washington Allston, whose polished drawings were generally executed abroad in the spirit and style of their European contemporaries. As such, these nude studies possess a joining of exacting observation and execution with a capacity for noble sentiment, which again continues in the various guises of Helga. By the middle of the nineteenth century American artistic interest in the nude centered around the production of idealized marble sculptures depicting mythological figures and personifications. Painters at this time primarily turned instead to interpretations of the national landscape, although their attention returned in the latter part of the century to studio subjects and to current styles they found practiced abroad. Many of those who went to Europe for training or travel rediscovered the traditional salon concern with the study of the nude model.

For some, like George Fuller, Albert Ryder, and John La Farge, the nude tended to be an imaginary creation, often carrying literary associations. For others, like William Merritt Chase and Childe Hassam, the figure like the landscape was a shimmering surface reflecting nuances of texture, color, and light. Yet others used the depiction of a figure, whether clothed or unclothed, as a meditation on purity of form (Thomas Dewing) or as an exercise in realism (Frank Duveneck), that is, in rendering solidly modeled volumes and unidealized likenesses. This latter current carried directly into the twentieth century, most notably in the work of George Bellows and Edward Hopper.<sup>17</sup> Their straightforward observation and unembellished recording of the physical world seemed well suited to the energies of a new age. Hopper, in particular, isolated his models under a glare of light and within strong, plain designs which emphasize at once their palpability and their aloneness in the real world. However different their painting techniques, it is not surprising that Wyeth should have declared: "I admire Edward Hopper more than any painter living today."<sup>18</sup>

Wyeth's art may also be seen in the broad context of American landscape and genre painting, especially where they blend and the figure is placed as a counterpoint within the setting. For discussion here we may consider landscape as both an outdoor and indoor space, each as used by Wyeth offering different lines and surfaces to structure a composition. His genre elements also vary from the norm in that he is rarely interested in illustrating a story; his subjects do not pictorialize narrative or literary content, and consequently his figures are seldom engaged in obvious or intense physical activity. At the same time Wyeth does paint individuals to examine their larger humanity and their mortality. In these concerns, in the geographical terrains he does depict, and in his choices of media he embraces the worlds of his two towering predecessors in American art, Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins.

With the former Wyeth shares Maine, with the latter Pennsylvania. With both he shares a mastery of drawing, watercolor, and painting, and further with Homer he shares an art grounded in, but eventually growing beyond, illustration. He has expressed his admiration for both artists, though with occasional reservations, more so regarding Eakins: "A lot of people say I've brought realism back - they try to tie me up with Eakins and Winslow Homer. To my mind, they are mistaken. I honestly consider myself an abstractionist."<sup>19</sup> By this last he means us to see his concerns with essential design and form and with meaning and feeling beyond surface reality. Although Eakins painted and spent most of his life in the meadows of the Delaware valley not far from Wyeth's Brandywine fields, Wyeth is equivocal about any artistic inheritance. "I appreciate Eakins, but he wasn't an influence. . . . Eakins trained in the studio of the French academic painter Gérôme"<sup>20</sup> - a stylistic distancing in Wyeth's point of view. Nonetheless he acknowledges the great power of Eakins's realism in transcending the mere accuracy of facile recording. In an interview Wyeth recounted, "You've got to watch that the technique isn't all you see. Once Mrs. Eakins came into her husband's studio and said, 'Oh, Tom, that hand is beautifully painted. I've never seen you do one better.' Eakins took a palette knife and scraped it right off the canvas. 'That's not what I wanted,' he said, 'I wanted you to feel the hand.'"<sup>21</sup>

Wyeth's sympathy for Homer is perhaps more instinctive, a response to both the feeling and technique of Homer's art. "I loved the works of Winslow Homer, his watercolors, which I studied intently so I could assimilate his various watercolor techniques. . . . Watercolor perfectly expresses the free side of my nature."<sup>22</sup> "Winslow Homer in his watercolors is America's most sensitive painter - such warmth of feeling for his country."<sup>23</sup> Watercolor permits not just great breadth of expression, but a directness and intimacy that can convey unexpected power and emotion. But Wyeth's appreciation for Homer derives from more than observation of execution and method. Comparison of major themes in the work of each suggests other shared similarities of approach.

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Galley 5

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Homer, of course, was trained as a magazine illustrator; Wyeth inherited the same tradition from his father, N. C. Wyeth, and his father's teacher, Howard Pyle. Homer and Andrew Wyeth perfected their draftsmanship to a level of ability that enabled them to execute a full range of drawings, from preparatory sketches to finely finished works in their own right. For both the watercolor might serve as a plein-air variant of a more controlled painting on canvas or panel. In addition, there are numerous thematic and compositional parallels, whether consciously drawn by the artist or not, that are worth noting. Especially in Homer's pictures of the 1870s there are the repeated images of figures seated in meadows or crossing pastures, quietly gazing at the horizon or preoccupied with some detail at hand. They are caught up in the reveries of youth and later in the more wistful, adult reflections of self-awareness. Still a young man himself, in his mid-thirties, Homer painted such familiar scenes as *The Nooning*, c. 1872 (Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford), and *Boys in a Pasture*, 1874 (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston); is it no surprise that Wyeth at age thirty-five should recapitulate the scene in *Faraway*, 1952 (private collection)? There are also the abstracted later landscapes by each artist to contrast: Homer's *North-easter*, 1895 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), and Wyeth's *Snow Flurries*, 1953 (National Gallery of Art, Washington). Finally, there are the similar compositional devices of juxtaposing forms in the foreground and in extreme depth, as the full moon looms nearby in Homer's *Kissing the Moon*, 1904 (Addison Gallery, Andover, Massachusetts), and in Wyeth's *Moon Madness*, 1984 (private collection), both bold designs from the artists' mature imaginations.

More specifically relevant to the Helga series are Homer's sequences of the later 1870s depicting young women indoors and out. *Blackboard*, 1877 (Ganz Collection, Los Angeles), is one of several devoted to schoolroom interiors where the abstract geometry of the walls and space frame the central figure; this form provides visual structure for the painting and comments perfectly on the very idea of education as intellectual order, control, and clarity. Wyeth, too, repeatedly sets his figures against the geometric lines and planes of a wall, doorway, window, or porch. The obvious examples here are *Barracoon*, *Drawn Shade*, *Day Dream*, *Easter Sunday*, *Letting Her Hair Down*, *Overflow*, *In the Doorway*, *Peasant Dress*, and *White Dress*. For the most part these are images about thought, and the dark closures of rooms appropriately suggest a sense of privacy and the mind inward-turning.

Homer pursued, as has Wyeth, a parallel group of works showing women resting or pausing in fields and woodlands, *Weary*, 1878 (Terra Museum, Chicago), being a characteristic example. While some of these include small groups of girls, usually in peasant dress, by the end of the seventies Homer was concentrating on the single figure, reading a book, picking a flower, or simply absorbed in the suspended moment. With their pastoral mood, bright coloring, and freshness of handling these watercolors intimate youthful promise and growth, as much in nature as in the figure. That union of individual and surrounding landscape is likewise to be found in such views of Helga as *Campfire*, *Cape Coat*, *Knapsack*, *In the Orchard*, *Seated by a Tree*, *Walking in Her Cape Coat*, *Farm Road*, and *Refuge*.

If Homer provides a central reference for Wyeth's rendering of Helga clothed, it is Eakins to whom we must look for a counterpoint to the more sexual side of Helga nude, the human form literally stripped to its revealed, unprotected, undisguised, truthful essentials. Unlike Homer and Wyeth, Eakins received formal academic training as a young man, first at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia and then in the later 1860s under Gérôme and others in Paris. From these early years date a number of strong charcoal drawings by Eakins of nudes posing in the studio. The subjects are anonymous and ordinary, and his renderings are direct and unblemished. There is little interest in beautification, refinement, or idealization, only the concern for depicting the actual realities of weight and mass and shape, the facts of flesh and bone. That honesty of observation and execution is but one element extending into the later realism of Andrew Wyeth.

Eakins also devoted much of his subsequent career to the production of portraiture. Although he undertook a large number of commissions, his greatest works were usually measured by the degree to which he transcended the initial bounds of recording mere physiognomy. In these he managed to reveal the substantial realities of the human character, the burdens of endurance, the toll on flesh and spirit of what was possible and what was not. This admiration for sturdiness of character is another aspect which passes down into Wyeth's best subjects. Eakins, too, often posed his figures against the simple walls of his house and studio; he completed portraits of his wife, Susan, periodically in his career; and he painted several related pictures of the nude model in the studio. While these precedents again are relevant to the Helga series, the number, continuity, and duration of Wyeth's group are significantly different.

Eakins's paintings of the nude are in part comments on the artistic process of seeing and recording truthfully, regardless of the critical consequences. His own direct sketching after a live model was in some cases consciously transposed into surrogate historical images of his Philadelphia predecessor, the sculptor William Rush. Eakins did three major canvases devoted to the subject of *William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill River* or *William Rush and His Model* (1877, Philadelphia Museum; 1908, Brooklyn Museum; and 1908, Honolulu Academy of Arts), as well as a number of preparatory studies and variants. Unlike Wyeth he turned his attention to the theme at two key, widely separated moments in his life, in his early maturity and at his career's end. While the subject generally was an expression of Eakins's tribute to artistic integrity and accomplishment, and particularly to the creative traditions in his own city, it is also evident that he identified with the sculptor he was depicting, as in more than one work Rush seems to bear the features and carriage of Eakins himself. Eakins was sensitive to the vagaries of critical reaction and shifting reputation, and his paintings about the intimate concentration and the aesthetic chemistry of the studio were not least deeply felt meditations about his own life and aspirations as an artist.<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, his self-projection into the Rush image is notably stronger in the late works and, even more pertinent to the Helga pictures, the later model is older, like the artist himself.

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Galley 6

By comparison, Wyeth does not physically place himself within the depicted space of his model, though we surely feel the intensity of his looking and thinking. What is palpable is the implied bond between the artist and his subject as it becomes art. Wyeth follows Eakins in the unsentimentality and directness of sexuality and in the seeing of an individual as an embodiment of larger truths. Wyeth's studio is not consciously described: it is more generally the rooms of his house and the surrounding landscape in which the figure stands and with which he or she becomes identified. Above all, it is the goal of making technique serve not just what one sees, but feels.

Within this broadly drawn American tradition Wyeth's art needs to be seen as part of the more circumscribed continuum of an artistic family, directly traceable back through Andrew's father, Newell Converse Wyeth, to his teacher, the illustrator Howard Pyle, and to the nineteenth-century artist George de Forest Brush, much admired by Pyle, N. C., and Andrew. Brush was very much an academic painter, having trained at the National Academy of Design in New York in the early 1870s, then studied with Gérôme in Paris, and later himself teaching at the Art Students League. From his long admiration for the old masters of the Italian Renaissance he painted the numerous mother and child compositions for which he is most widely known. But it is his more imaginative earlier work with its striking qualities of mood and finish that we might well understand as appealing to the Wyeths. In addition, during his early years as a professional artist Brush sought to enhance his income by doing illustrations for magazines, an artistic tradition actively continued by the Wyeth family.

With the Helga material in the mind's eye, especially the pearly surfaces and sinuous lines, we can find curious but applicable parallels in Brush's magical series of Indian pictures from his early maturity. These paintings suggest echoes in the Helga works because of Brush's highly polished textures and crisp, expressive contours as well as the usually reflective stance of his figures.<sup>25</sup> Brush first traveled to the American West with his brother in 1881 and over the next decade painted a sequence of Indian pictures showing the native in various hunting postures. The several in which the Indian is closely juxtaposed with a large bird (a swan, heron, or flamingo) are unusually intriguing for their subliminal sexuality.

Brush's Indian is always well-proportioned, his skin gleaming and musculature tense. All the more compelling, then, is the bird at his side, strikingly large — almost human in size — and colorful — either brilliant white or shocking pink. The first conveys a sense of purity, the second passion. Of course, the distinctively long neck of both the swan and flamingo carries phallic associations and, who knows whether intentionally or subconsciously, Brush paints this form extended in various positions. In two works, *The Indian Hunter*, 1890 (Ganz Collection, Los Angeles), and *The Indian and the Lily*, 1887 (private collection), the bird hangs over the Indian's back, its neck falling limply almost to the ground. By contrast, in two others, *Out of the Silence*, c. 1886 (Gilcrease Institute, Tulsa, Oklahoma), and *The Silence Broken*, 1886 (private collection), the bird's neck is outstretched rigid in flight. In a final one, *The Headdress Maker*, 1890 (Peters Collection, Santa Fe, New Mexico), the Indian is seated with the dead pink flamingo stretched out from his crotch across his legs, the long neck reaching out across the floor in front of him. Although these are male nudes in comparison to Wyeth's female, one cannot help but feel the passage of both technical and sensual elements from one artist to the other.

Howard Pyle's connection to the Wyeth artistic lineage is more direct, as he spent much of his career in the Delaware-Pennsylvania area. From a mixture of self-trained motivation and some formal study Pyle became an accomplished and popular illustrator of history and fiction. Pyle taught art classes on and off around the Philadelphia area, and N. C. Wyeth emerged as his acknowledged best pupil. N. C. in turn initiated his son's early training, setting up still-life arrangements for him to draw and teaching him the basic disciplines of draftsmanship, composition, and above all close observation. From these exemplars Andrew Wyeth also gained a fascination with history and a sense of things existing in place and time. "You see, a lot of my pictures . . . come from dreaming of my past experience."<sup>26</sup> Close scrutiny of something thus led to capturing its essential features but also its relationship to a setting: "I was seeking the realness, the real feeling of the subject, all the texture around it, everything involved with it, even the atmosphere of the very day in which the object happened to exist."<sup>27</sup>

The work of Pyle and the senior Wyeth, with which Andrew grew up, demonstrated the imaginative and mythic capacities of art. While they were foremost concerned with narrative illustration, their strongly graphic style offered the example of powerful expressive form, through silhouetting and contrast, and the command of line as an agent of suggestive texture and modeling. Because their subjects generally accompanied stories of action or fictional heroes of the past, their imagery of necessity was filled with lively motion of form and design. They selected critical moments to highlight, key conversations between central characters or dramatic activities of flight, pursuit, and confrontation. Such animation of moving figures and storytelling rarely appears in Andrew Wyeth's earliest work under his father's influence, an exception being his tempera of *Winter*, 1946 (North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh). It showed a young boy running down a hill, the one beyond which Wyeth's father had been killed in an automobile accident the year before. Not only did the painting inherit his father's stylistic character, it was the son's first major work to crystallize the process of identifying a figure with its place. "It was me, at a loss — that hand drifting in the air was my free soul, groping. . . . The hill finally became a portrait of him."<sup>28</sup> The loneliness and emptiness of this hillside thus came to express the artist-son's deepest feelings of isolation combined with the recognition that this looming mass of landscape was the embodiment of his father's permanent memory.

We need only turn to key illustrations by Pyle, such as his *Decorative Title Page and Initial T*, a *Harper's Magazine* cover illustration of December 1909 for a story called "The Salem Wolf," or his running figures of a wolf and victim in a painting entitled *Once It Chased Dr. Wilkinson into the Very Town Itself*, an incident in the same story, to see his essential style. These figures are antecedents of Helga, more stilled in poses of rest or slightest motion, standing by a tree or crossing the grass. By similar means of graphic contrast and shapely silhouetting N. C. Wyeth often set single figures against a background, sometimes tilting up his angle of view or lowering a horizon to enhance the visual drama. His oil of *Winter*, 1909 (private collection), was appropriately painted for a story in *Scribner's Magazine* called "The Moods."<sup>29</sup> Here were the aesthetic basics which passed into Andrew Wyeth's own art; after a full career and decades later these same essentials govern both the outlines and the spirit of the Helga compositions. Now her sturdy features and sober demeanor, reflective of her northern European background, match the somber browns and enduring contours of this Pennsylvania terrain. Alternatively, the moments of caressing light and bright color, the strong grass greens and single garland of flowers, speak to those infinite cycles of growth and regeneration, whether by seed in the earth or in human flesh.



Lastly, appreciation of the *Helga Suite* requires consideration of Andrew Wyeth's own personal style, for coming in the late maturity of his life, it bears an internal vision of his own making. Helga may in fact be related to the context of his work in the immediately preceding years and, however contained a cycle in its own right, to the context of other figures – animal and human, male and female – painted almost in counterpoint contemporaneously. First of all, the subject of the nude was not a new one for Wyeth with the Helga series, nor was Helga the only nude model he painted in this period. In the late 1960s with *The Virgin* Wyeth began a sequence of half a dozen temperas of Siri Erickson, the daughter of a Maine neighbor of Finnish descent. Characteristically, having just completed a final painting of Anna Christina Olson, the focus of many powerful pictures in preceding decades, Wyeth was in search of something new when he made a visit to the Erickson farm.<sup>30</sup> Meeting Siri, he found in her those striking northern features which had appealed to him in several other sitters, most notably Karl and Anna Kuerner and George Erickson. Siri, then fifteen, also had a sexual innocence and unself-consciousness which allowed her to pose, and the artist to paint, with a certain detachment.

Where Siri metaphorically provided an artistic rejuvenation after Christina Olson's death, so Helga Testorf provided a parallel continuity and return to human potency after the final illness of Karl Kuerner. The former pair belonged to Wyeth's Maine experience; the latter were part of his life in Pennsylvania. Kuerner and his wife and their surrounding farmland were the inspiration for nearly four hundred drawings, watercolors, and temperas, with the last painting being *Spring*, 1978, showing the ghostly figure of Kuerner reclining in a field.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the methodological pattern was set for the Helga series to follow, in which the artist would intensely examine all aspects of a subject, finding each shift in viewpoint or proximity to yield another association or idea. Also a German immigrant, Helga had come to help nurse the ailing Kuerner, and it was in that house with all its secluded and accumulated sentiments that, "building in great layers," Wyeth now saw new life and began his studies of her. The work would continue in the house and in the fields near Kuerner's farmland. The Testorf family lived on another neighboring farm, and so the emotional continuities of landscape and personality were assured.

Many of the formal aspects of the Helga pictures clearly relate to familiar devices of design and viewpoint employed in previous Wyeth works. The figure seated on a porch, next to a window or in a doorway, standing against a sloping hillside, or walking through the grass exists in the Wyeth repertory in such memorable pictures as *Anna Kuerner*, 1971, *Christina Olson*, 1947, *Garret Room*, 1962, *Chambered Nautilus*, 1956, *Adam*, 1963, *Roasted Chestnuts*, 1956, and *Up in the Studio*, 1965. The head-and-shoulders close-ups of Helga seen frontally, in profile, and three-quarter views, have similar connections to *Nogeeshik*, 1972, *Grape Wine*, 1966, and *Lynch*, 1970. But Wyeth extends his moving stance full circle with *Farm Road*, where Helga is seen from behind, private and silent. The paradox many historians have cited between realism and abstraction remains strong in the Helga images, as Wyeth stresses focus, major contours, pure textures, expressive brushwork, and a distilled sense of design. Wyeth's interest is not in photographic but intensified reality. The underlying abstraction of his compositions is partially the exertion of aesthetic power over routine observation, but it is also an aspect of seeking an original concentration of thought: "My struggle is to preserve that abstract flash – like something you caught out of the corner of your eye. . . . I've got to get that momentary off-balance quality in the very base of the thing."<sup>32</sup>

Among the most characteristic aspects of Wyeth's strongest compositions are his devices of contrasting near and distant forms, the cropping of key framing elements, and the manipulation of his angle of view. Other observers have astutely called attention to the formal parallels of close-up and aerial viewpoints in his work and that of several twentieth-century contemporaries, such as Edward Hopper, Charles Burchfield, Grant Wood, Edward Weston, Charles Sheeler, and Georgia O'Keeffe.<sup>33</sup> The intense concentration on a single object, often close to the ground or a nearby wall, and the tilting up or down of the horizon line are frequent devices of expressive design to be found underlying realist and regionalist art of the thirties and forties. Already a familiar visual vocabulary in Wyeth's art, such compositional motifs continue in the Helga works, for example, the extreme close-up in *Sun Shield*, the high, angled horizon in *Farm Road*, or the abstracted landscape pattern in *Walking in Her Cape Coat*. With its broad quilt of dark leaves this last recalls the dense and mysterious tempera *Thin Ice* of 1969 (Nagaoka Contemporary Art Museum, Japan).

Deriving both from his personal style of realism and from the demanding nature of his media, Wyeth's textures have been particularly compelling, even sensuous, in effect. His frequent wish to fuse figure and landscape is often achieved by a similarity of stroke and surface applied alternatively to field grasses, animal fur, and human skin and hair. This distantly traces back to his early admiration for Dürer, but one also feels a certain subliminal association of vibrant human life with an earthy animal nature. As noted earlier, in the Helga series alone there are a striking number of images with an overriding attention to hair and fur, whether Helga is undressed, her nakedness enhanced by the different contours of falling locks, or whether she is dressed, clothed in various animal skins.

Besides Siri Erickson and Helga Testorf, Wyeth painted a number of other nudes during this period. We already know of the artist's sentiments about the genesis of some of these. After Christina Olson's death, he has said that turning to Siri "was almost as if it symbolized a rebirth of something fresh out of death."<sup>34</sup> But to a larger degree this markedly new and intense subject coming late in the artist's maturity suggests an effort to reclaim that sexuality associated with earlier stages of human growth and to transpose the powerful idea of regeneration onto a higher mythic plane. Siri, for example, was "like finding a young doe in the woods. . . . Here was something bursting forth, like spring coming through the ground. In a way this was not a figure, but more a burst of life."<sup>35</sup> Thus began a sequence of nude studies which might be viewed as an examination of sexual self-awareness, from puberty and virginity to the mature capacity for procreativity.

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Galley 8

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Wyeth seemed to have been concerned with both the idea and the fact of coming of age, for he held on in secret to the early paintings of Siri until she was of legal adult age. In other nudes of the period he further explored the consciousness of youthful sexuality, some female, as in *Beauty Mark*, 1984, some male, as in *Undercover*, 1970, and *The Clearing*, 1979. In tandem with the Helga nudes they show not just observation of the different genders but a broader look at nuances of sexual expression. Indeed, at moments he seems to record both a specific physical presence as well as something more universalized. It is curious but significant that occasionally aspects of the males appear feminine, as in the long blond hair of Eric Standard, the young man in *The Clearing*, and the shoulder-length hair of the Indian *Nogeeshik*, while Helga in *Pageboy* and *Sheepskin* appears rather masculine. Further in the Helga series she ranges in expression from the reserved and detached to a ripe and inviting sexuality. Following Siri, she represents a later adult stage of human awareness. All told, this spectrum of near androgyny and periods of sexual growth reveals an artistic aspiration to probe the subtle range of our basic humanity.

That an artistic compulsion and ambition of such seriousness should come to a man entering late adulthood ought not to be surprising. Sociologists defining the major stages of human development can provide us with a context of general characteristics perhaps useful here. If Helga was middle-aged during the undertaking of this suite, the artist was fifty-three when he began and sixty-eight when he completed it. During this period he experienced several ailments, underwent a hip operation, and had some serious respiratory problems — all stark reminders of one's mortal tenure. As one moves into the period of late adulthood, generally perceived to begin during the early and mid-sixties, one becomes increasingly conscious of transition and change. These may be obvious biological changes or psychological and social ones only subliminally felt. This is a period in life when one faces the paradox of both deterioration and fulfillment. On the one hand we experience physical decline and impairments, and we note the quickened pace of debilitation and death among friends and relatives; on the other hand the pattern of our life's work is established and recognized. We push to assess our achievement and perhaps to lay claim for some mark of immortality.<sup>36</sup> We probe for some self-appraisal, the artist specifically for a new level of seriousness and richness of meaning.

Looking toward old age summons concerns of vulnerability, illness, and ending. As a result, sociologists remind us, we look dually to sustain youthfulness in some form and to think in terms of seasonal passage.<sup>37</sup> Without reading the artist's mind precisely, we cannot be surprised by Wyeth's turn to an imagery of healthful potency and to the sequential moments of day and year in his painting of Helga. By extension from Wyeth's recollections of his previous series devoted to Christina Olson and Siri Erickson, we can see that Helga further embodied for him the forces of regeneration and continuity. "In the various portraits of Christina there were remarkable changes. In some cases you might never know it was the same person. But behind everything, there was always that strange relationship we had, one of perfect naturalness, excellent communication without too many words."<sup>38</sup> While the flesh may not be a stay against time, Wyeth's subjects allow him the release of vibrant and sustaining creative energies.

Many historians have noted the great intellectual and artistic productivity of men in late adulthood, for example, Picasso, Yeats, Verdi, Frank Lloyd Wright, Freud, Jung, Michelangelo, and Tolstoy.<sup>39</sup> To this we might obviously add Titian, Rembrandt, and in American art Winslow Homer. In a characteristically thoughtful essay Kenneth Clark cites his short list of Michelangelo, Titian, Rembrandt, Donatello, Turner, and Cézanne as artists who "have produced their most impressive work in the last ten or fifteen years of fairly long lives."<sup>40</sup> What Clark goes on to argue provocatively is that this creativity of later age is an apparent pattern possible in artists but not so much in writers. The key is that "the painter is dealing with something outside himself, and is positively drawing strength from what he sees. The act of painting is a physical act, and retains some element of physical satisfaction. . . . A visual experience is vitalising. Although it may almost immediately become a spiritual experience (with all the pain which that involves), it provides a kind of nourishment."<sup>41</sup> In this perspective, Helga seen as a life force emerges as a natural subject for Wyeth's later (if by no means last) work.

Some artists in late career turn toward abstraction and a detachment from realism, as did Turner, Cézanne, and Monet; some to the serene brilliance of color, as with Renoir and Matisse; others to patently sexual imagery, as with Picasso; and yet others to a sense of tragedy or brooding darkness, as did Titian, Rembrandt, and Goya. "The increased vitality of an aged hand is hard to explain. Does it mean that a long assimilation of life has so filled the painter with a sense of natural energy that it communicates itself involuntarily through his touch?" asks Clark. He goes on to quote the aging Japanese painter Hokusai, who wrote: "Everything I do, be it a dot or a line, will be alive."<sup>42</sup> Summarizing the elements he finds in the late work of great artists, Clark cites a sense of isolation and rage against human folly, a feeling of pessimism and resignation, a mistrust of reason echoed by a trust in instinct, and finally an impatience with artistic conventions. None of these tendencies necessarily applies to Wyeth's Helga pictures precisely, though we do find the hints of isolation, reliance on instinct, and naturalism tempered by the power of both abstraction and imagination. However time will assess the Helga work in the development of Wyeth's later career, the undertaking does suggest a shift of artistic gears or, in the artist's terms, a liberation and new spontaneity.<sup>43</sup>

What did prompt Wyeth to take up the nude as a subject so unexpectedly and intensively around 1969? As we have seen, it was not just the sustained attention to Helga Testorf, but just previously to the young Siri Erickson and thereafter to other models in Maine and Pennsylvania. Johnny Lynch was in his teens when he sat for *Undercover*, 1970; the seventeen-year-old Eric Standard posed for a watercolor and the tempera *The Clearing* in 1979; and Ann Call was about forty when Wyeth painted *Beauty Mark* in 1984. The span of these and others parallels exactly the Helga series, which clearly gave a new direction and momentum to his career in this period. (These were not the first nude subjects he had ever painted: Wyeth drew Betsy shortly after they were married and at least one other figure relatively early in his career.) But for the artist, at the height of a long career, there was a danger of submitting to pictorial cliché, now so widely imitated by others. On a superficial level he wanted to break out of the image of "wagon wheels" and more importantly the rigidity he was feeling with repeated landscape temperas.

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Galley 9

Like Christina as a model before her, Helga was relaxed and patient. Her poses changed in a natural evolution, moving indoors and out according to conditions of weather and light. She never complained about the snow, wind, or cold, even when the painter felt the chill and damp himself. (He remembered as a youth when his father set up a model in a fixed pose for him to draw, he found it confining and frequently discovered something fresher when the figure was relaxing or moving in an off-moment.) Now the human form gave Wyeth new pictorial flexibility and stirred currents of spontaneity and imagination. Although Helga's respective poses mostly evolved in an organic sequence, they were as often related to the larger fabric of Wyeth's work. For example, poses of Siri reclining and standing in a doorway were prototypes for corresponding treatments of Helga; one watercolor of Eric and another of Siri, *Black Water*, showing each reclining on a beach, anticipated a similar pose assumed in *Asleep* (no. 114); and Helga's presence in *Crown of Flowers* led to a drawing from memory Wyeth did after he had left for Maine that year and then to a tempera, *Maidenhair*, of another girl adorned with a floral wreath set in a country church interior. Perhaps most startling of all was the evolution of the drawing series entitled *Barracoon*, which led to a drybrush watercolor and later to a variant in tempera called *Day Dream*, but also to an entirely imaginary tempera (private collection) now showing a black woman posed in place of Helga.

Wyeth says that three different people posed for *Barracoon* by the time the series was complete; while it initially and largely showed Helga, it ultimately metamorphosed into quite separate imaginative resolutions. The title did not come until the end, when the artist showed his wife the tempera and, a lover of language herself, Betsy immediately came up with the term. A mid-nineteenth-century word, it referred to a barracks enclosure or room for confining slaves and convicts. The idea matched the composition, and thus the play of mind took off from the play of hand. Frequently, indeed, Wyeth has titled his own pictures if a strong phrase strikes him at an image's completion. But the spontaneity of circumstances may equally lead to a title arrived at collaboratively. Another instance is *Lovers*, where the mysterious shadow at the left of the finished drybrush suggested to Betsy Wyeth an unseen but imminent presence.

Throughout the Helga works one encounters minor grace notes of a similar character, where the freshness of thought or touch has produced a novel effect. In one drawing (no. 70) of Helga standing nude she appears partly drawn over an adjacent wiggled military figure. This turns out to have been a brief reverie on Lord Nelson standing on the deck of his vessel and contemplating an unseen love. Another very free watercolor (no. 71) of Helga asleep on the grass bears bold strokes of dark wash crisscrossing her upper torso, as well as broad abstract pools of paint around her, these again in an impulsive effort to break free from the confines of techniques long familiar to the artist. Then there are the single leaves in the final image of *Lovers*, seemingly quirky touches in the stilled interior. Yet while she was posing a leaf did flutter in through the window; Helga turned momentarily and caught it in midair, adding to the whole a welcome accent of fancy. For that matter, a single leaf or flower might occasion an entire conception, as in the beautiful watercolor *Walking in Her Cape Coat*. One day Helga walked in the Kuerner house with a single leaf caught in her hair. This prompted a brief pencil study on the spot, but soon evolved into the striking free-form tapestry of autumn foliage, with Helga's head almost lost in the corner of the watercolor. Likewise, *Crown of Flowers*, one of the most eloquent and grand creations of the Helga series, arose from the unexpected moment. On a spring day she simply walked indoors wearing the floral bouquet, explaining this was traditionally worn by German brides. Wyeth intentionally darkened the background and subdued the lustrous facial and hair tones to accentuate the bright blossoms, made by leaving the white of the paper untouched.

Finally, there remains consideration of the basic internal chronology, the organic growth, of the Helga pictures, with their hesitations and recapitulations, their rhythms and marker moments. As the writer begins with words and turns them into sentences, the artist begins with a mark he turns into a line and then into form. Wyeth's first depiction of Helga was a modest profile drawing in 1971 (no. 1). Other drawings of her full face and torso followed, leading to the first major tempera, *Letting Her Hair Down*, in 1972. (Interestingly, this composition is virtually a mirror image of the Indian *Nogeeshik*, painted the same year.) Closely related were seated studies of her, *Peasant Dress*, with Helga now turning in a three-quarter view. Early on in this first year or so of work Wyeth also undertook a sequence of multiple studies of Helga standing and walking outside, *In the Orchard*. Now seen full-length, she stood beside a large tree or in an open meadow, or walked away across the grass, an old apple tree to the side. Presumably executed over the changing seasons, this combination of drawings and watercolors shows her dressed in an overcoat (and winter hat in one), trees bare in some, autumnally brown or lush green with leaves in others. The hillside and tree limbs serve as organic equivalents of architectural framing devices. Two drawings in particular (nos. 33 and 23) give subconscious hints of sexual associations: one is a study of Helga's hand holding an apple from the nearby tree, both a simple fact of the location and a suggestion of Eve; the other shows her leaning on the spreading tree limb, with its rising trunk looking startlingly like legs spreading from a torso and its crotch marked by notably stronger lines. These juxtapositions of the standing and seated figure in a landscape, sometimes seen from behind, would reappear in other groupings (*Seated by a Tree*, *Knapsack*, *Campfire*, *Cape Coat*, and *Autumn*) painted over the fifteen-year period.

Also in the early seventies Wyeth asked Helga's daughter, Carmen, to pose in the same meadow. She sat for several watercolors, but proved to be a restless model, and Wyeth must have soon felt her a diversionary subject, for he did not continue. He did, however, fill a sketchbook with focused studies of Helga's face and eyes seen from different angles. By 1972 he had begun the first careful sketches of her reclining asleep nude. Interested at first in the way her hair sinuously fell around her neck, Wyeth turned to the Manet-like device of a black ribbon to accentuate the contours of flesh. Trying various turns of the head, angles of the torso, and placement of the hair, he resulted in the starkly restful pose of *Black Velvet*. A major counterpoint came the next year with the large vertical tempera *Sheepskin*, with Helga now clothed and her face framed by freely falling hair and the bulky fur collar of her coat. Completing this early phase of the series were a few further watercolors of Helga outdoors, *Seated by a Tree*.

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Galley 10

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One of the major works dating from 1973 is *The Prussian*, a large and powerful drybrush painting, which of course crystallizes an idea Wyeth returned to six years later in the centerpiece tempera of *Braids*. Here he alludes to her family's German history and stolid northern character. The face is framed in rich darkness, with the play of highlighted lines, her hair partly braided, partly loose, and the big polished buttons extending down her front. The second button is turned to catch a riveting metallic reflection, an echo of the edelweiss pendant around her neck in *Letting Her Hair Down*. There followed the next year an equally important drybrush, *Crown of Flowers*, also primarily a head study, now serene and fanciful. On a slight cursory drawing (page ) Wyeth hastily sketched the notion of a German bride Helga had suggested. The hint of a bridal veil covers her head, while to the side, the sheet turned upside down, are the outlines of a small building with the artist's notation, "Bavarian church." The finished watercolor thus evolved into a tender balance between the earthly and the spiritual.

Over the next couple of years, in sketchpads and watercolors, Wyeth continued to make miscellaneous studies of Helga's head and torso, though among them were the germs of sitting and sleeping formats he brought to fruition in 1975 and 1976 with *Easter Sunday*, *Asleep*, and *Barracoon*. The first of these returns to Helga seen three-quarters from behind (a pose in which he also painted Anna Kuerner), seated in her earth-green cape coat. The architecture of a porch replaces the earlier apple tree as a contrasting element, but the spacious rectangle framing the landscape beyond also relates to the window motif Wyeth took up at the same time in the many images of Helga sleeping. In fact, there is an intensive series of several dozen pencil drawings of her reclining, eyes closed or partly open in phases of rest or reverie, on her back and stomach, facing and turning away from the viewer. These culminate in the delicate paintings named *Barracoon*, made mysterious by her facing away from us, confined physically by the enclosure of the room yet freed by the travel of private dreams.

Maintaining an apparent rhythm of pictorial advance and return, during 1977 Wyeth took up a new pose with *On Her Knees* and modified an earlier one with *Draun Shade*. In one drawing (no. 139) he sketches her as if framed by the familiar window, her head intersecting the horizon, but then turns in the rest of the sequence to exploring the contrasts of her firm flesh with the softness of sheets and mattress and of the surfaces of cream white with surrounding dark. (So fascinated was Wyeth with this pose that he painted at least three other pictures, depicting a different female figure — *Heat Lightning*, *Winfields*, and *Surf* — in 1977 and 1978.) By contrast, *Draun Shade* gives us the figure again turned to the window. The early drawings include references both to the dark ribbon of *Black Velvet* and the edelweiss pendant of *Letting Her Hair Down*, though the final drybrush eliminates these details and darkens the closure by the pulled windowshade.

Wyeth's artistic vocabulary for the series was now fully established, allowing him suppleness and expansiveness. He could thus turn to what would be two key works of the *Helga Suite*, *Overflow* and *Farm Road*, one involving a series of preliminary conceptualizations, the other virtually a singular statement. With the studies for *Overflow* it is as if we are watching Helga silently breathe and turn in her sleep, her arms languidly shifting to positions of rest. (Wyeth pursued a fascinating variant in *Night Sleeper* of the same period.) Formally, Wyeth explores his concern for the ways her dark braids accent her neck and especially how the rectangular geometry of the window behind contrasts with or complements her flowing form below. (In one drawing, no. 158, we note the ominous ceiling hooks so familiar from Wyeth's previous portraits of Karl Kuerner in the same rooms.) Making notes to himself for the color he is about to add in watercolor and drybrush versions, he wrote on the sheet of one: "rich gold of hair . . . face catches more light." As the series proceeds to its culmination, the window gradually moves across the composition from left to right, becoming in the final image an imaginary view. No longer just the factual mullions and glimpse to Kuerner's hill, it evolves into an opening set above, and thereby extending, Helga's dreaming head. Echoing the flow of sheets and hair, the distant waterfall now evokes an exquisite flux of imagination, purity, and abundance.

The first tempera since the early period of the *Helga* series, *Farm Road* literally solidified in brown and hard pigment the window view of Kuerner's hillside. Wyeth began painting Helga's head and shoulders in a pose derived from images in *In the Orchard* and *Seated by a Tree*, then went on to add the high sloping field to create the strong abstract composition. Almost the same view of her head, asymmetrically placed at the lower right, anchors the design of *Walking in Her Cape Coat*, from the same time. Much as a footnote, *Loden Coat* extended the view to the full-length figure. At what was to turn out as the midpoint of the *Helga* series, now into its seventh year, Wyeth's creative energies were clearly at a high plateau of productivity. In 1979 he turned once again to do a work in tempera, perhaps the keystone achievement of the group, the simple yet profound distillation named *Braids*. The preliminary drawings reveal a conventional enough beginning: frontal, profile, and seated views. But with each increasing clarification and reduction, every contour, color, texture, and highlight gained in quiet strength to achieve an Eakins-like image of full human awareness. Neither melancholy nor triumphant, this three-quarter face displays both a technical mastery of form and a penetrating inner sense of acceptance and honesty.

Not surprisingly, there followed the continuing rhythms of experiment, recollection, and resolution in sequences that varied in their degrees of successful completion. *Night Shadow*, for example, returned to the figure of Helga stretched out asleep and, in the preliminary studies, gave evidence of certain awkwardnesses and uncertainties. But in the decisive gesture of moving in close to the face, so successful elsewhere, Wyeth achieved a dramatic image of mottled light and shadow in the final drybrush. It was to be a counterpoint to a similar image of broken sunlight on Helga's face three years later in *Sun Shield*. *With Nell*, by contrast, finds her awake and musing as she relaxes with the Wyeth's dog by her side. It is a sequence with a certain sly whimsy, as the artist plays with the two pairs of observant eyes.

A decade after he had begun, in 1980, Wyeth did another striking head-and-shoulders portrait of Helga, *Pageboy*, which emerged after a few relatively unresolved and conventional studies. It took its title from the shape of her hair tucked inside her dark coat collar, giving her yet another shift in image and character. Over the next five years, the last third of the *Helga* period, Wyeth's pace of attention and production began to slacken as other subjects came to compete for time and interest. During the early eighties some works did not satisfy him, though he still achieved touches of great felicity. The groups known as *From the Back* and *In the Doorway* attempted respectively to treat Helga from behind, in a pose now nude where she had formerly stood clothed, and to view her facing in and out in a white frame doorway. Wyeth had long been interested in depicting models standing or seated in doorways, Christina Olson being a memorable example, and like a window this opening engaged his fascination with the play between interior and exterior space. These *Helga* watercolors, like so many throughout the series, specifically concentrated on the angles and planes of falling light. But somehow, the proportions and relationships of formal elements "went nowhere," as the artist said, curiously as they had not worked either in a similar portrait of Siri.<sup>44</sup>

From the same period, *Knapsack* saw Helga seated again in the woods in watercolors less original in their composition but intense in their washes of blue, brown, and green. Likewise, the studies for *Day Dream* returned to drawings of Helga asleep. Two of the watercolors attempt new compositional formats, never quite solved: one (no. 208) sees Helga foreshortened from the end of her bed, the other (no. 209) lying across the bottom of a vertical sheet of paper. Oddly compressed and cropped, it seemed to frustrate the artist's attempt to clarify space and surface design. One solution was a watercolor, *Black Caps*, of a different figure reclining out of doors among leaves and flowers. Another was a full-scale tempera using the pose of *Barracoon* now turned outward to the viewer (no. 206). Delicate in its veiled fabric and flowing light, it nonetheless appears to be more of a déjà vu than a new reverie at this point. Possibly sensing this, the artist did find fresh expression in two compelling images, *Lovers* and *Sun Shield*. With both he pushed just enough toward new elements of a pose or effects of light to invigorate and deepen the final effect.

Other works of the period draw inspiration from earlier precedents. *Campfire* and *Cape Coat* belong to a language of outdoor poses Wyeth had used periodically throughout the series. Other miscellaneous examples saw him pressing variant possibilities for one or more designs. In passing, one should note among the numerous incidental sketches two sheets bearing the pale drawings of a seated skeleton, named "Dr. Syn" (page 000). In accordance with the long tradition of academic study and draftsmanship Wyeth has kept a skeleton for periodic sketching, occasionally making one the subject of a major picture. The pose here, partly related to ones Helga assumes in a few instances, assists the artist in seeing the essentials of organic structure, while the title puns on the mortality of the flesh.<sup>45</sup> No matter when it was actually drawn, Wyeth faced his own brushes with the body's deterioration in this period. During 1983 he produced no works with Helga, partly because of an operation and its recuperation. At the same time, Helga was leading to other important subjects, some of them temperas often taking a number of months to execute. Indeed, Betsy Wyeth, who has been his wife for nearly half a century and serves as collegial registrar of his output, estimates that the Helga series varied between ten and twenty-five percent of the artist's production per year over the period in question.<sup>46</sup>

The final work in the *Helga Suite* was *Refuge*, painted in 1985. A large drybrush watercolor, it possesses all the technical finesse and grandeur of design of its finest predecessors. Not quite an image of tragic resignation, it is one of reserve and privacy. Just as the first profile in 1971 was open and upright, this one looks downward and inward. The broad blue washes appearing in earlier watercolors are now reduced to a concentrated touch of color under her chin. Helga is not only wrapped in her overcoat, she takes refuge behind and under a tree. She appears withdrawn in this final season of silence and cold. During the preceding year Wyeth had painted *Beauty Mark*, another female nude, whose model possesses a profile like John Singer Sargent's *Madame X*. He was also able to turn his major energies again to painting visually bold landscapes in tempera, as exemplified by the near surreal abstraction of *Moon Madness*. A dark, poignant finality emanates from *Refuge*. He had painted Helga enough. The series now amounted to a significant body of work in itself and, in the context of what preceded and accompanied it, suggested a productivity of a high order. It was over. New work was under way.

## Text Set:

22/22 Sabon with 3 pt letterspacing, T2

10/12 Sabon with 2 pt letterspacing, T2

10/18, 10/14 Sabon w/italic and Old Style Figures, T2

Bands on 4,4,9,1,3

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1. When the Pennsylvania collector Leonard Andrews announced his acquisition of 240 Helga works in August 1986, press coverage was intense and massive, a story in itself. The art and the artist triggered a full range of opinions. At one extreme Hilton Kramer said, "He's just an illustrator. Wyeth's paintings have nothing to do with serious artistic expression." Quoted in Cathleen McGuigan, "The Wyeth Debate: A Great Artist or Mere Illustrator?" *Newsweek* (August 18, 1986), 52. "The reason people are so ga-ga over his paintings is they offer a picture of [a] nostalgic, bucolic, sentimental past that never existed." Quoted in Gregory Katz and Julia Lawlor, "Everybody's Talking about Secret Model," *USA TODAY* (August 7, 1986), 2A. At the other extreme Thomas Hoving said that Wyeth was "one of America's most distinguished painters, the great observer. . . . He is the most misunderstood painter in America in the last 30 years." *Ibid.* And also that "they're probably the best things [Mr. Wyeth] has ever done. They are definitely unmistakably Wyeth but not typical in that they're the best." Quoted in the *Baltimore Sun* (August 7, 1986), 6C.
2. Respectively owned by The Armand Hammer Foundation, Los Angeles; Arthur Magill, Greenville, South Carolina; and Tomas Payan, Miami.
3. Wyeth has talked of Eakins being "more Spanish . . . more Velázquez . . . than American." Quoted in *Two Worlds of Andrew Wyeth* (exhibition catalogue, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1976), 17. On another occasion he admitted "my things aren't high key in color or joyous or Renoiresque or Frenchy—which is what a lot of people want today—the visual cocktail." Quoted in Richard Meryman, "Andrew Wyeth: An Interview," in Wanda M. Corn, *The Art of Andrew Wyeth* (exhibition catalogue, The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1973), 60.
4. Quoted in *Two Worlds*, 17.
5. *Two Worlds*, 17.
6. *Two Worlds*, 17.
7. *Two Worlds*, 17.
8. *Two Worlds*, 33.
9. *Two Worlds*, 17.
10. *Two Worlds*, 33.
11. *Two Worlds*, 35.
12. *Two Worlds*, 34.
13. *Two Worlds*, 34.
14. *Two Worlds*, 39.
15. Quoted in *The Art of Andrew Wyeth*, 60.
16. *Poems by Emily Dickinson* (Boston, 1942), 97.
17. For a thorough survey and discussion of the history of this subject see William H. Gerdts, *The Great American Nude, A History in Art* (New York, 1974).
18. *Art of Andrew Wyeth*, 74.
19. *Art of Andrew Wyeth*, 45.
20. *Two Worlds*, 17.
21. *Art of Andrew Wyeth*, 66.
22. *Two Worlds*, 15-16, 33.
23. Letter to the author, March 22, 1986, after Wyeth had seen the exhibition *Winslow Homer Watercolors* at the National Gallery of Art.
24. The fullest and most sensitive discussion of the Rush series is to be found in Elizabeth Johns, *Thomas Eakins, The Heroism of Modern Life* (Princeton, 1983), chapter four: "William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill River," 82-114.
25. See *George de Forest Brush, 1855-1941, Master of the American Renaissance* (exhibition catalogue, Berry-Hill Galleries, New York, 1985), introduction by Bruce W. Chambers, 9.
26. *Art of Andrew Wyeth*, 47.
27. *Two Worlds*, 10.
28. *Art of Andrew Wyeth*, 58.
29. For a representative survey of the Pyle-N. C. Wyeth legacy, see *The Brandywine Heritage* (exhibition catalogue, The Brandywine River Museum, Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, 1971).
30. The artist discusses this chronology in *Two Worlds*, 171-76.
31. The work up to 1976 is surveyed in Betsy James Wyeth, *Wyeth at Kuerners* (Boston, 1976).
32. *Art of Andrew Wyeth*, 56.
33. See the extensive discussion and comparisons drawn by Wanda Corn in *The Art of Andrew Wyeth*, 93-162.
34. *Two Worlds*, 172.
35. *Two Worlds*, 175, 176.
36. See the formulation and elaboration of these ideas in Daniel J. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (New York, 1978), 18-37.
37. See Levinson, *Seasons*, 6, 35.
38. *Two Worlds*, 129.
39. Levinson, *Seasons*, 37.
40. Kenneth Clark, "The Artist Grows Old," in *Moments of Vision & Other Essays* (New York, 1981), 163.
41. Clark, "The Artist Grows Old," 175.
42. Clark, "The Artist Grows Old," 172-73.
43. Conversation with the artist, October 14, 1986.
44. Conversation with the artist, October 14, 1986.
45. Dr. Syn was a famous English pirate, a fact that adds another overlay of meaning to the title.
46. Conversation with Andrew and Betsy Wyeth, October 14, 1986. I am indebted to them for these discussions, and as well to Helen Cooper, Robert Bowen, Dodge Thompson, Margaret Donovan, and Mary Adam Landa.

Text Set:  
8.5/11 Sabon with Italic and Oldstyle Figure, Track 2  
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The Du Pont Company has been a corporate patron of the arts since 1937 when it began building a permanent collection of paintings by artists in the area near Wilmington, Delaware, where the company was founded and where it makes its corporate headquarters. The collection includes 17 works by three generations of Wyeths, who have lived and worked in the Brandywine Valley area since early in the century. Also represented in the collection are such pioneers of the Brandywine tradition as Howard Pyle and Frank Earle Schoonover.

Because of these historic ties, Du Pont is proud to help make possible the Andrew Wyeth "Helga Pictures" exhibition at the National Gallery of Art. It is fitting that the company participate in this national celebration of one of America's greatest living artists, who is also a neighbor and a friend.

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