

In the Spotlight

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 30, 2021

LIVING HISTORY



by Gene
Pisasale

Three generations of Wyeths focus on our heritage

By Gene Pisasale
Contributing Writer

So much has been written about the Brandywine School of artists over the years, but little of it has focused specifically on the historical themes in paintings created by N.C., Andrew and Jamie Wyeth.

The Brandywine School was started by renowned illustrator Howard Pyle, whose students included N.C. Wyeth, Frank Schoonover, Maxfield Parrish, Harvey Dunn, Stanley Arthurs and many others who subsequently gained recognition in the art world. These men covered a wide array of subjects in their work as both illustrators and mainstream artists. By focusing on the historical themes—as portrayed by the Wyeths—we can gain a much richer understanding of epic events and personalities who shaped the course of our nation's history.

N.C. Wyeth was born in Needham, Mass. on Oct. 22, 1882. Chester County was president and America was enjoying what would be called the "Golden Age of Illustration." Its premiere advocate -- Wilmington native Howard Pyle -- submitted his work to *Scribner's Monthly* and *Harper's Weekly* and was on his way to becoming the nation's most popular illustrator.

By 1894, Pyle was asked to teach at the Drexel Institute of Art, Science and Industry (now Drexel University) and after a six-year stint there, decided to start his own school. In 1902, he took on several students, including 20-year-old N.C. Wyeth, and their connection would change the art world forever.

It quickly became apparent that Wyeth was the most gifted of Pyle's students. Pyle instilled in him the necessity of thoroughly understanding one's subject and layering it with emotion in order to draw out the feelings inherent in

a scene or a person. This training bore fruit quickly, as Wyeth's painting of a bucking bronco for *The Saturday Evening Post* made the front cover of the Feb. 21, 1903 edition of the popular magazine. Wyeth learned much from Pyle, portraying numerous episodes from history in his work.

One of N.C. Wyeth's masterpieces is "In a Dream I Meet General Washington" (1930). Its inspiration was literally an accident. According to the Brandywine River Museum's archives, while he was installing a mural for the First Mechanics National Bank of Trenton depicting George Washington's passing through that city, Wyeth almost fell off the scaffolding to the hard marble floor 30 feet below. The shock of a potentially fatal accident played out to him in a dream which haunted Wyeth until he committed the details to canvas. In the dream, Wyeth was present at the Battle of the Brandywine and spoke with General Washington as he was riding his horse to fight the enemy. In the painting, you see American and British troops marching across the landscape in Chadds Ford, not far from Wyeth's studio. His artistry makes history "come alive" as Washington narrates. Wyeth captures the moment brilliantly: the breathtakingly vivid crimson, and the blue and gold colors grabbing the viewer's attention as a turning point for America unfolds before your eyes. Describing the painting, Wyeth wrote to his brother, "This is the painting that I am certain excels anything done to date."

Another episode in history is portrayed masterfully by Wyeth in "The War Letter" (1944). Originally painted in 1932 and titled "Spring 1918," the scene depicts Wyeth's parents, his mother reading a letter with her husband standing



'In A Dream I Meet General Washington' by N.C. Wyeth

Photos courtesy Brandywine River Museum of Art

nearby, a small fire burning, twisted trees hanging over her. The image is quite moving, providing an understanding of concerns many parents have had over the fate of their sons and daughters in the military. (Two of the Wyeths' sons did serve in World War I.) This re-done scene fast-forwards a generation to World War II, when millions of people nervously awaited "news from the front lines."

It is among the most striking and eerily gripping of Wyeth's paintings, completed only about a year before his death. Wyeth's "Pennsylvania Landscape" (1942) is outstanding, the historic Chester County countryside brimming with Autumnal hues surrounding a beautiful sycamore tree, a centuries-old rustic farm and spring house completing the scene.



'The War Letter' by N.C. Wyeth

A love of history must have been in the Wyeth DNA. Andrew Wyeth painted "Portrait of Chris

Sanderson," the "village historian" of Chadds Ford for many years. Sanderson lived near the Wyeths and was friends with the family. This painting shows Sanderson pensively looking toward the viewer, pointing to a map of Chester County, seemingly saying "Pay attention. Important events occurred here." Three signers of the Declaration of Independence lived in Chester County. Local paper mills provided the material on which it was printed.

Jamie Wyeth conveys his sense of history in his superb "Portrait of President John F. Kennedy" (1967). He had become friends with the Kennedy family and created the painting after John F. Kennedy's death. It is considered one of the best renderings of JFK. The President is seen in a moment of reflection, apparently pondering an important issue, uncertainty in his eyes.

All of these paintings

capture a moment in time, fragments of our heritage which deserve attention. Through the artistry of N.C., Andrew and Jamie, we come to better understand epic events and participants in American history in a way not possible through reading books or visiting historic sites. Due to their skills, we are granted new perspectives, a fuller understanding not possible before—and we are all much richer for the experience.

Gene Pisasale is an historian and author based in Kennett Square. He has written ten books and focuses his work on Chester County and the mid-Atlantic region. His latest book is "Forgotten Founding Fathers: Pennsylvania and Delaware in the American Revolution." His books are available through www.Amazon.com and also his website at www.GenePisasale.com. He can be reached via e-mail at Gene@GenePisasale.com.



'Pennsylvania Landscape' by N.C. Wyeth