



HISTORY MADE PERSONAL

Wyeth Portrait of Chris Sanderson

By Gene Pisasale



The Brandywine Valley has become associated over the years with many famous artists, most notably Howard Pyle and N.C. Wyeth. Wyeth was later to become his best known student. When N.C. Wyeth set up his studio in Chadds Ford after the turn of the 20th century, he gained recognition for illustrating many popular novels, including “Treasure Island” and “Robinson Crusoe”. Wyeth’s home was not far from Washington’s Headquarters within what is now known as Brandywine Battlefield Park. Chris Sanderson and his mother lived in that house from 1906-1922 and became good friends with the Wyeth family.

Chris and his mother posed for many portraits by Wyeth and members of his family. N.C. Wyeth’s gifted son Andrew painted a large portrait of Chris in 1937, welcoming him and his mother back to Chadds Ford after they’d moved away from the area. Andrew invited Chris and his mother Hanna over to his home for dinner on April 30, 1937 to view the portrait. Hanna later wrote that the painting was “so absolutely perfect that my astonishment knew no bounds...”

The painting shows Chris (around the age of 55) standing dapperly in a brown suit, holding a map of Chester County in the foreground, green rolling hills in the distance. Bucolic countryside wrapped around isolated houses, a woman in Colonial-period garb working in the fields, is overshadowed in the upper right hand corner by dark storm clouds, rain beginning to drench the area. This may have been subtle symbolism by the artist, as storm clouds were gathering over Europe, Hitler having invaded the Rhineland in 1936. Standing before the painting, the viewer is drawn both to Chris’s finger- which is pointing to the map of Chester County- and his eyes, piercing the scene, which seem to be telling us “Pay attention... important things happened here... The young Marquis de Lafayette fought alongside George Washington’s troops at the Battle of the Brandywine, the largest land battle in North America up until the Civil War... Artists have painted our beautiful countryside, which holds many treasures for you to find... Come and enjoy what we know here... You will learn much about our heritage and find a sense of history... your history...”

The portrait of Chris Sanderson by Andrew Wyeth is just one of many paintings within the museum by members of the Wyeth family, Peter Hurd, John McCoy and others who knew and loved Chris. Their work-portraits, landscapes and still lifes- is a testament not only to the beauty of this region, but also to the inner beauty of this man, who preserved these and other priceless artifacts for all to see.

The Christian C. Sanderson Museum - A Man's Life, A Nation's History. An eclectic array of art, military memorabilia, presidential artifacts, local history and collectibles. History like you've never seen it before! Open March through November, Saturday and Sunday, 12pm to 4pm. Visit us at 1755 Creek Road (old Route 100), Chadds Ford, just north of Route 1, or at www.sandersonmuseum.org. Also open by appointment, call 610-388-6545. For information on the author of this article, visit www.GenePisasale.com.