

BACKGROUND READING FOR PRESENTERS

Andrew Wyeth (July 12, 1917 – January 16, 2009) – *Christina's World*

A painter of landscape and figure subjects in Pennsylvania and Maine, Andrew Wyeth became one of the best-known American painters of the 20th century. His style is both realistic and abstract, and he works primarily in tempera and watercolor, often using the drybrush technique.

He is the son of Newell Convers and Carolyn Bockius Wyeth of Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, and was home-schooled because of delicate health. His art instruction came from his famous-illustrator father, who preached the tying of painting to life--to mood and to essences and to capturing the subtleties of changing light and shadows.

Andrew Wyeth maintained a style strongly oriented towards Realism when Abstract Expressionism was all-prevalent. Adhering to his own path, he was snubbed by many prominent art critics. However, his paintings have elements of abstraction in that the work derives from his strong feelings about his subjects, which often appear in unusual positions, juxtapositions, and with features highlighted for emotional effect. His work usually suggests rural quiet, isolation, and somber mood and is devoid of modern-day objects such as automobiles.

In 1937, Wyeth's first one-man show of watercolors depicting scenes around Port Clyde, Maine, sold out at the Macbeth Gallery in New York. In Maine, Andrew first spent his summers in Port Clyde with his family, but after his marriage to Betsy James in 1940, he and his wife went regularly to Cushing.

Christina Olson of Cushing, at the end of Hathorn Point, was his most famous model, but over the years, Wyeth formed close friendships with - and painted - several other Maine neighbors. His closest friend, Walt Anderson, gradually ages before the eyes of viewers in numerous Wyeth drawings and paintings that show life's changes from the youthful *Young Swede* (1939) to the older man in *Adrift*(1982).

The Olson House, where Christina and her brother lived, is now owned and maintained by the Farnsworth Museum, where Wyeth had his first major exhibition in 1951 and where the Andrew Wyeth Gallery is now a permanent exhibition place for his paintings. In 1964, the directors of the Farnsworth Museum paid \$65,000 for Wyeth's painting *Her Room*, the highest price ever paid by a museum for the work of a living artist. The Olson House is the first property ever named to the National Register of Historic Places for being recognized as the site of a painting, *Christina's World*, one of the most recognized paintings in American art.

Wyeth has received many official honors. In 1963, he was the subject of a cover story for *Time* magazine and, thanks to President John F. Kennedy, he became the first visual artist to be nominated for the Presidential Medal of Freedom. In 1990, Wyeth received the Congressional Gold Medal, the first artist to have that honor.

One's art goes as far and as deep as one's love goes." -Andrew Wyeth

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Andrew Wyeth – Christina’s World

About “Christina’s World”

The woman in the painting is **Anna Christina Olson** (3 May 1893 – 27 January 1968). Although polio has been her standard diagnosis, more likely she was afflicted with Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease. Wyeth was inspired to create the painting when he saw her crawling across a field while he was watching from a window in the house. Wyeth had a summer home in the area and was on friendly terms with Olson, using her and her younger brother as the subjects of paintings from 1940 to 1968. Although Olson was the inspiration and subject of the painting, she was not the primary model — Wyeth's wife Betsy posed as the torso of the painting. Olson was 55 at the time Wyeth created the work

1. Discuss the content of the picture. Bear in mind that the girl in the painting is lame. How could the title, “Christina’s World” contribute to the meaning of the painting? Is this painting done in a realistic manner? Explain
2. What is the mood of this painting? Does the mood of the painting have any effect on your mood? Does the color used in the painting have an effect on the mood? How?
3. Describe soft and harsh colors. Would you say these are soft or harsh colors? Where is the light source coming from?
4. Define “texture.” What are some of the textures in this scene? Does the artist contrast textures here? How?
5. An element of design in a painting is the arrangement of things in the work. Where does the viewer stand when looking into this painting? Does your gaze travel up, down, into deep space, shallow space? What devices does the artist use to lead your eyes around the painting?
6. Compare sizes of the figure in the foreground and buildings. Which is larger in the painting? Which is larger in real life? Why the difference?
7. Is this a busy picture or a tranquil one? Explain
8. Look at Christina. What kinds of lines are created by the way the figure is placed in the composition? Does the way her body is placed lead your eyes upward on a diagonal to the house? To the barn? What if she had been lying flat in the grass? Could your eyes have traveled through the painting as easily? Note the contrast in the lines of her wind-blown hair and the field grass.

SUGGESTED EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

Andrew Wyeth – Christina's World

1. Moody Portraits

Materials: paper: pencils, colored pencils

Wyeth used the same model repeatedly in some paintings. He also showed tone and mood in his paintings so that people understood what people in the paintings felt. Have students draw themselves in four different paintings. In each painting, instruct students to show themselves in a different setting, feeling a different way. For example, at the beach they might feel relaxed but painted in a dark forest, feel frightened.

2. Personal Landscape

Materials: paper, pencils, watercolors

Have students think about a favorite outdoor spot at home or at school. Ask students to decide on one or two objects that make the spot special to them. Instruct them to sketch a light drawing of the landscape. Students use size or color to emphasize the favorite objects that make the landscape special. Provide students with watercolor paints for painting the landscape.

3. Blow-up picture

Materials: paper, pencils, media to color, if desired

Give each student a square piece of paper. Have them poke or cut a small hole in it. Using it as a peephole, have them place the square over one eye and look around the room. Look until they have found something that interests them. They should then reproduce what they see on a large sheet of paper.