NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

FINE ART PAINTING

THE 'HELGA' AFFAIR

Its Impact on American Art

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF PLATES

INTRODUCTION

The thesis deals with the artist, Andrew Wyeth, and his series of paintings known as the 'Helga Pictures'. When the series of paintings was discovered in 1986 it caused a storm of controversy which highlighted some of the most important factors affecting art in American society today. The following chapters examine these factors one by one; the artist, the public, the mass media and the art world.

The first chapter looks at the artist, Andrew Wyeth, his background and his influences and most importantly at his work and the inspiration behind the 'Helga' series. The second chapter deals with the public. It looks at the various elements of Wyeth's work which appeal to the American public, gaining him a large and faithful following, The third chapter deals with the role of the mass media in relationship to the 'Helga Pictures'. The fourth chapter examines Wyeth's strained relationship with the art world, which the 'Helga' affair highlighted, and why he elicits such contempt. The conclusion summarises the points raised in the previous chapters, looking at the particular anomalies that surround Wyeth and what they mean to the role of the artist and art in contemporary American society.

‘THE ARTIST’

CHAPTER 1

Few contemporary artists have caused more controversy and widely varied responses than the artist, Andrew Wyeth. The Helga affair has, more than any other event in the artist's career, highlighted these differences of opinion. On one hand there are those who see his work as honest and revealing depictions of the "true American bucolic scene" and others who look upon his paintings as sickeningly popular, embarrassingly clichéd and totally divorced from the present century.

But these differing opinions have never affected Andrew Wyeth. Wyeth in essence has always painted for himself. From the start, free and undisciplined, he either resented opinion or ignored it. He has never been influenced by popular art trends of the time, always following his own vision instead.

His meteoric rise to fame in the 1950's and 60's came when other artists of his generation, such as William De Kooning and Jackson Pollock were making headlines as the new abstract painters of the so-called 'New York School'. Next to their wall-sized canvases of flowing colour and flamboyant stroke, Wyeth's carefully rendered tempera panels of rural landscapes and figures looked curiously innocent. They seemed out of touch with other art and current trends. Wyeth himself remarked on this anomaly, "in the art world today, I'm so conservative I'm radical. Most painters don't care for me. I'm strange to them. Actually I don't consider myself an artist in the usual sense. Talking art bores me." (Meryman, 1973, p45). Consequently Wyeth is looked upon as a kind of Neanderthal. An artist working in the realm of realism in a world most critics and painters felt could only be expressed in abstract idioms. As the New York artist Larry Rivers put it, "He's like someone who writes marvellous sonnets, but I don't read sonnets much." (Corn, 1973, p96). Artists tend to see him as an immense talent, but essentially as an outsider.

Although Wyeth's work seemed at odds with that of the pacesetters, his reputation was growing steadily in other quarters. His paintings were being increasingly sought by a group of wealthy patrons, including Dr. Hammer, President of Occidental Petroleum and John Wilmerdings, Deputy Director of the National

Gallery in Washington. He was also quickly gaining vast public attention and appreciation. His exhibitions in Buffalo, Philadelphia, Baltimore, New York, Chicago and Boston during the 1960's registered record-breaking attendance numbers.

This popularity was highlighted in 1963 when he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President John F. Kennedy.

In order to gain an understanding of this complex and controversial artist's place in 20th century art, it is necessary to place his work within the artistic and intellectual currents which formed him.

The earliest and the most important artistic influence on his career was his father, Newell Convers Wyeth (Pl.1). He was a very enigmatic and enthusiastic character who set himself the task of awakening his children's emotional, visual and auditory senses to nature. He took them on his long walks tramping around the hills of Chaddsford, Pennsylvania, where they lived, "noting nature's most obscure colours and barely perceptible smells and noises" (Corn,1973, p122). N.C. Wyeth's appreciation and love of nature and the surrounding countryside was one of his most important legacies to his son. For the presence of nature is one of the most significant aspects in Wyeth's work. Today he walks his territories, even more than his father did, keeping himself open and alert to new impressions and the memory of old ones.

N.C. Wyeth was also a capable artist in his own right and a well known illustrator. His illustrations for Scribner's editions of children's classics are perhaps his most renowned work. N.C. Wyeth occasionally took on young artists and trained them in his own studio. Consequently when Wyeth's own ability for drawing and painting was discovered, his father began to train him also. Wyeth was a teenager when he started work in the studio under his father and he began a rigorous and regular term of study.

(Pl.1)

N.C. stressed identification with the model, what might be called "method painting". He firmly believed, like those exponents of method acting, "that man can only paint that which he knows even more than intimately, he has got to live around it, in it and be a part of it." (Corn,1973, p126). N.C. also believed that great American art would come only from artists who entrenched themselves against the fashionable styles of the moment and painted instead out of a profound identification with their own land and people. He was disdainful of artists who moved to the cities to be part of an "art scene" or who travelled abroad rather than "seeping themselves in their own locale". (Corn,1973, p127).

But N.C. Wyeth wasn't the only artist to hold this view. At this time a new generation of artists were part of a nation-wide impulse which focused on portraying American place and people. This meant that painters, photographers, poets, novelists and musicians began an intimate study of their own country. This movement was called regionalism and it grew out of the heightened national consciousness of the inter-war years and the great depression. Andrew Wyeth was part of this generation growing up between the wars. His earliest years were coloured by reminiscences of the horrors and heroism of the First World War. He was a teenager during the Great Depression and just as he reached adulthood and maturity, the whole world was swept into another tragic war. This bare chronology suggests that his was a generation "brought up on the milk of harsh human realities". (Corn,1973, p.99).

Developing as an artist at this time meant coming of age in a time of bleakness and instability. Consequently it is no surprise that artists of this particular generation tended to turn inward and be introspective in their expression. They began to examine their national identity and history, studying provincial society and beliefs. Their work was a celebration of the rural community for they believed it was here that the true image of America flourished untainted by progress. This art centred on the belief that the particulars and intricacies of any man's life, no matter how drab and how ordinary could be creatively transformed into valid artistic statements and in turn represent wider truths. As William Carlos William stated "ourselves made worthy in our anonymity". (Corn,1973, p102). Regionalist artists

included Sherwood Anderson in Winesbourg, Ohio who shaped his small-town experiences into a parable of human desires and follies. Grant Wood memorialised the faces of his Iowa neighbours as archetypal images of provinciality. Burchfield, Hopper and later Wyeth, took the ordinary houses of rural America and created haunting and poignant symbols of man's isolation and loneliness. In photography, Margaret Bourke-White, Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange trained their cameras upon some of the nameless and forgotten faces of poor Americans and created images full of dignity and the warmth of all humankind. (Pl.2).

The great problem for Wyeth and other regionalist artists was that those who wanted to paint what they saw and transfer it into contemporary art of lasting experience could find no modern idiom which would fulfill their needs. Modernism of the previous decades had rejected most forms of visual realism since the 1880's. So artists tended to look back in time to the old masters as stylistic sources. Wyeth was influenced a lot by the work of the pre-Raphelites which he saw in the collection of the Winterthur Museum as a boy. Especially appealing to Wyeth was their sense of clarity and design, of attention to texture and above all to line. He also greatly admired the work of Durer, Rembrandt and Winslow Homer. These artists "consistently hit through the common place at familiar scenes and lifted them into extraordinary experiences - emotional and intellectual". (Hoving,1973, p62).

He was influenced by Homer's watercolours stating "Winslow Homer in his watercolours is America's most sensitive painter - such warmth of feeling for his country". (Richardson, 1973, p81). Wyeth used watercolours, finding them congenial, and developed his skill until he achieved extraordinary virtuosity in the medium. This led him onto the method of painting for which he is now famous, dry brush. He has a strong sense of identification with Durer whom he considers to be the first master and exemplar of drybrush painting. N.C. Wyeth gave Andrew a set of facsimiles of Durer engravings as a young boy and Durer's famous drawings of the 'Young Hare' and 'Piece of Turf' have remained sharp in Wyeth's consciousness. They both inspired Wyeth's own drybrush drawings of 'Grasses' (1941).

(Pl. 2)

The early renaissance realist technique of tempera was revived also at this time and became a favoured media of the period. It was used by Thomas Benton, Reginald Marsh, Charles Sheeler and both N.C. and Andrew Wyeth. Tempera appealed to Wyeth because of its dryness of surface, its suitability for recreating his subject in smallbrush detail and because it gave a sense of permanence to his imagery. As Wyeth states "There's something incredibly lasting about the material like an Egyptian mummy." (Richardson, 1973, p45). Composed of a mixture of dry pigment with distilled water and egg yolk, tempera allowed Wyeth achieve his desired effects through layering and crosshatching in a variety of ways. "Tempera is in a sense, like building, really building in great layers the way the earth itself was built". (Hoving, 1987, p119). Tempera has lots of associations with the earth. Besides the notion of endurance, the colours of tempera echo the colours of Wyeth's surrounding countryside. "I think the real reason tempera fascinated me was that I loved the quality of the colours: the earth colours, the terra verde, the ochres, the reds." (Hoving, 1987, p119). The warm reds and browns of tempera are extremely evident in the 'Helga' pictures, where their earthy quality is especially strong in "Braids", (Pl.3) "Letting Her Hear Down", "Sheepskin" and "Farm Road" (Pl.4). Wyeth has been criticised a lot for the colours he uses ; his work being described as "colourless" and "mud-like". But in true Wyeth style he has ignored these criticisms and continues to use the same palette, insisting "The colour I use is so much like the country I live in. Winter is that colour here in Pennsylvania". (Hoving, 1987, p119). His first temperas during the early 1940s represent his first major period as an artist.

Although Wyeth's techniques and subject matter were regionalist in character, there was always something deeper and more complex at work in his painting than just the mere recording of rural experiences and provincial images. Thomas Benton, dean of regionalist painting, recognised this difference in Wyeth's work which he said was "unusual because of poetic charm with which he is able to endow it, or which he causes it to evoke". (Corn, 1973, p116). This change in Wyeth's work coincided with his father's sudden and tragic death in a car accident in 1945. It was an event which profoundly affected Wyeth. He found he was experiencing the kind of bottomless emotion N.C. had always told him was a

(Pl.3)

(Pl. 4)

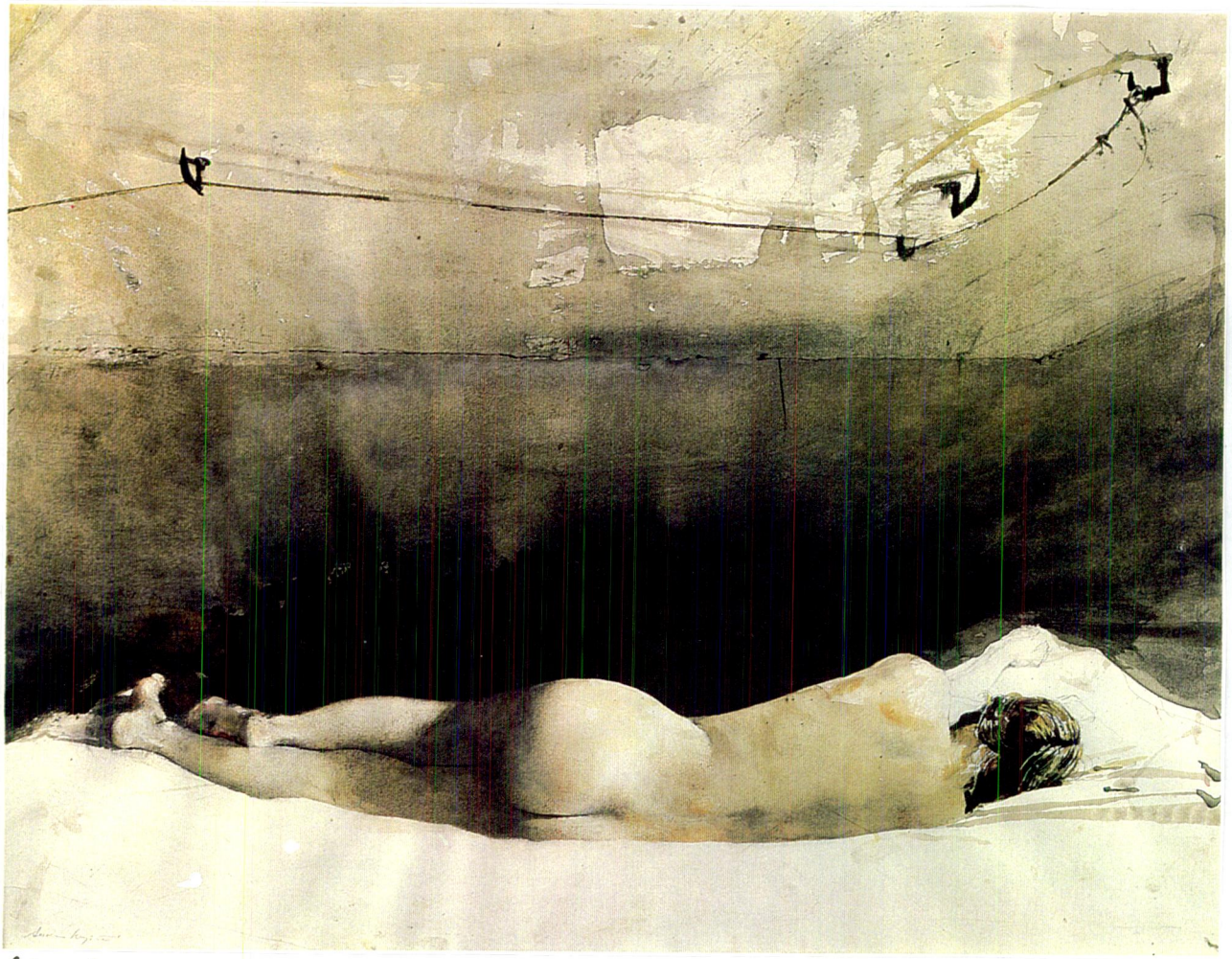
necessary foundation for the making of great painting. Now Wyeth felt he knew why he had to paint and what he wanted to express. "For the first time in my life," he said, "I was painting with real reason to do it." (Corn, 1973, p143). His work changed. He began interjecting it with certain psychological tensions and nuances. His painting demanded more observation and meditation to see through the surface sentiment to the darker complexities that lay hidden or disguised. Wyeth recognising rural life's habitual cruelties, began to deal with such perennial country matters as superstition, casual brutality and necessary executions. His extremely sharp observation of rural characters enabled him to examine the horrors as well as the humour in country quirkiness.

In order to evoke these disquieting and sombre themes, Wyeth set about creating an air of unease and tension in his compositions. He did this by using various techniques of abstraction and a clever manipulation of imagery. His most obvious technique of abstraction is spatial flattening. It differed from the spatial flattening employed by the abstract expressionists because that development tended towards a suppression of parts in deference to a picture's all over unity. Wyeth developed the technique to meet his own specific expressive needs. In Wyeth's paintings selected objects or figures fight against the flattening tendency and rupture the picture plane. In doing so they weaken the unity of the depicted world. This shifting of reality levels suggest the presence of invisible entities. 'Farm Road' (Pl.4) in the 'Helga' series is a good example of this technique and is a striking and strong abstract composition. Wyeth also manipulates his angle of view to create an abstract quality.

Sometimes he paints as though towering high over the landscape from various aerial viewpoints as in his earlier work 'Soaring' 1950. Other times to achieve close up shots of the earth and the flora and fauna he paints as though lying on the ground. Such views in his work continually displace and disorientate the spectator, never giving a firm horizon or ground line and often leaving unresolved ambiguities. Although it does suggest movement, and country life is full of the rhythms of walking, of perspectives changing slowly with approach and withdrawal of sudden details switched into the distance with a glance.

The cropping of key framing elements is also a frequent device, whereby creating strong geometric lines and planes Wyeth abstracts his compositions. There are many examples of this in the 'Helga' series where Helga is repeatedly set against geometric lines, and the planes of walls. The obvious examples are 'Barracoon' (Pl.5), 'Drawn Shade', 'Day Dream', 'Easter Sunday', 'Letting Her Hair Down', 'Overflow', 'In the Doorway', 'Peasant Dress' and 'White Dress'. Wyeth also experiments with light. In the 'Helga' series there are several paintings where the light falls across different planes and surfaces and creates abstract experiences. Good examples are 'Sun Shield', 'Lovers', 'In the Doorway' and 'Nightshadow'. Also, he sometimes creates 'moods of light' rather than painting the accurate and perceived light of "Plein Air" painting. This unnatural quality of light which exists in 'Farm Road' (Pl. 4) and 'Day Dream' (from the 'Helga' series) creates an eerie energy. These different techniques of abstraction make what appears at first to be an insistently naturalistic world reveal itself as something other.

Wyeth rarely lets us glimpse the multitude of private associations any single painting holds for him, letting them simply suffuse his pictures with a general flavour. Sometimes, the titles give clues to a painting's meaning but generally they are oblique and elusive. A more satisfactory method of deduction is learning to recognise the artists interesting range of imagery. Grasses, metal, stone, wood, glass and fabric are recurring leitmotives in Wyeth's work. Never will he pamper our tactile senses with softness and fluff. Rather they are assaulted by the shiny coldness of cement walls, brass buttons and metal buckles. Scratchy fibres like wool, canvas and fur are also frequent images. In the 'Helga' series there is a striking number of images with an overriding attention to hair and fur as shown in 'Page Boy. Although Helga's skin appears soft and smooth, in contrast her hair seems coarse and strong like rope as in 'Braids'. These continuities represent the harsh realities and tough character of country life. There is also a lot of imagery signifying time and its passage. Metaphors of time gone by appear in the cracks in walls, peeling wallpaper, well worn clothes, battered pails, carts and wagons. His paintings also unnaturally distort the seasons, avoiding summer and spring in favour of winter and fall. This reinforces the sombre mood of his paintings.



(Pl.5)

Wyeth probably feels that the foliage of spring and summer cloaks too luxuriantly the inevitable sequence of decay and death. He says of winter "You can feel the bone structure in the landscape - the loneliness of it - the dead feeling." (Corn,1973, p156).

His pictures make us tense as we continually come across images of things hanging, ropes, hooks, harnesses, hangers, fabric and dead animals. Rafters or ropes uncomfortably stretch themselves across paintings as in 'Barracoon'. (Pl.5). The shadowy glimpses behind open doors, cupboards and windows also create an air of unease and questioning and touch on those things at the front of dream and memory. Good examples are 'Overflow', 'Lovers' and 'Peasant Dress'.

What is evident from examining all these pictorial manoeuvres is that Wyeth intends for the meaning of things to lie hidden and to be caught unawares, "my struggle is to preserve that abstract flash like something you caught out of the corner of your eye".(Meryman,1973, p56).

Having looked at the background to Wyeth's technique and style it is important now to examine the innovation and the background to the 'Helga' series.

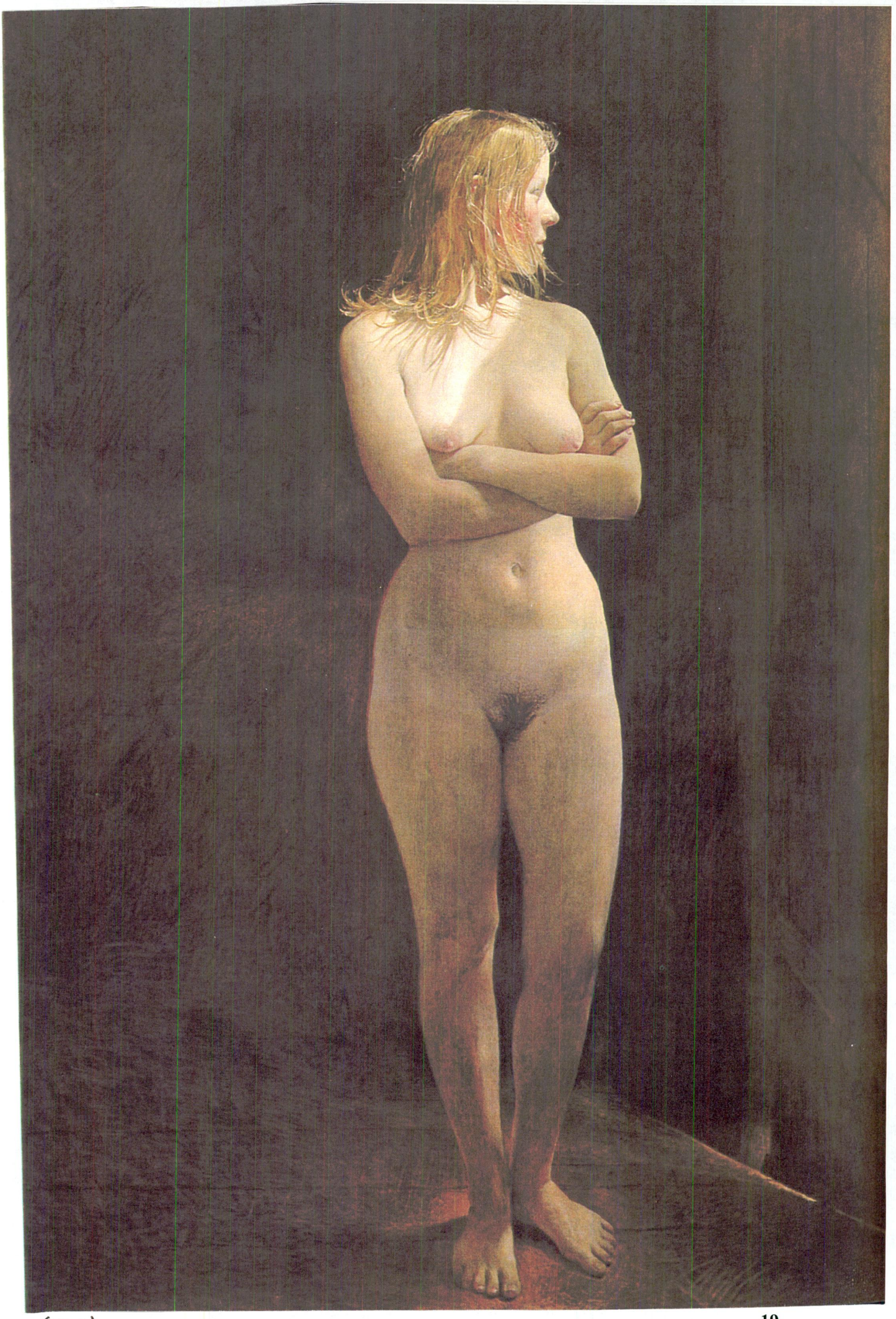
Although Wyeth's reputation often makes him out to be a portraitist of the American common man, to his mind nothing could be less true. He doesn't consider himself a reporter of likeness and for this reason rarely accepts a portrait commission. Those he paints sit by invitation.

Wyeth paints individuals to examine broader issues such as the universal realities of the human character. Some models he chooses because they remind him of romantic heroes of his youth. Others he paints out of love or admiration and some because of their particular situation or background. Others like, Siri and Helga, attract him because of deep personal associations. Both Siri and Helga represent the unplanned discovery of something young and fresh and different on the very day or moment when a favourite model was dying or had just died. It was just after the death of Christina Olson (a close friend who had modelled for him many

times over the years and was the subject of one of Wyeth's most famous paintings 'Christina's World'), that he happened to drive past the neighbouring house of the Finn, George Erickson and called to mind Erickson's young daughter Siri. To Wyeth she represented rebirth out of death and he began a series of paintings of her in the 1960's. (Pl.6). She also represented the first major nude study of his career which would mark a new direction for the artist. Wyeth wanted to break free of the rigidity he was feeling with repeated landscape temperas. The human form gave Wyeth new pictorial flexibility and stirred currents of spontaneity and imagination.

As with Siri, Wyeth met Helga at the passing of another favourite model and friend, Karl Kuener. Helga was nursing him at his home and to Wyeth she represented "The symbol of life out of ashes". Wyeth describes, "Here was something bursting forth, like Spring coming through the ground. An invigorating, zestful, powerful phenomenon." (Hoving,1987, p122). He was also attracted to Helga by those striking Northern features which had appealed to him in several other sitters such as Karl and Anna Kuener, George and Siri Erickson. Her sturdy features and sober demeanour, reflective of her Northern European background, match the sombre browns and enduring contours, which Wyeth loves so much, in the terrain of his homeland Pennsylvania.

Wyeth worked from Helga for over a 15 year period. He completed 246 works altogether. They are mostly on paper including 5 temperas, 12 highly finished drybrush paintings, 65 watercolours and 164 pencil sketches and drawings. Helga was 38 when Wyeth began to draw her and 53 when he brought the series to an end. The length of time Wyeth spent observing and working from Helga underlines the intensity of looking that Wyeth gives to all his subjects. He often becomes so absorbed during an intense period of painting that he begins to talk and act like his subject. Such close attention to one model over so long a period of time is what makes the 'Helga' series such a remarkable and unique effort in the history of American art.



(Pl. 6)

But what was the driving force behind such an ambitious artistic project ? Looking back in art history there are many examples of artists producing their most impressive work during the period of late adulthood. Wyeth was 53 starting the 'Helga' series and 68 finishing it. Like Michelangelo, Picasso, Rembrandt, Turner and Cézanne, Wyeth showed a powerful burst of artistic energy late in life in the 'Helga' series. Kenneth Clarke believed that this occurs because :

> 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 also immediately become a spiritual experience (with all the pain that involves it provides a kind of nourishment.) (Clarke, 1981, p175.

In this perspective Helga seen as a life source emerges as a natural subject for Wyeth's later work.

Helga represents a life source in another way also. During the fifteen year period that Wyeth worked on the 'Helga' series he experienced several ailments, including a hip operation and some serious respiratory problems. These could not but be reminders to Wyeth of the frailty of life and of his advancement into late adulthood. Consequently, it is not surprising that he should turn towards the vitality and healthy potency of Helga.

‘THE PUBLIC’

CHAPTER 2

The success of the 'Helga' series in 1986 in America established Wyeth as an artist hero. Every aspect of his life was celebrated and the crowds that came to see the 'Helga' series as it toured all the major galleries verify Wyeth's rapport with the American public. Brian O'Doherty said of Wyeth : "Wyeth communicates with his audience, numbered in millions, with an ease and fluency that amounts to a kind of genius". (O'Doherty, 1974, p287). But how has he created this enthusiasm in his audience and what are the traits in Wyeth's work that make him so appealing to the general American public ?

Before looking closely at Wyeth's work and in particular the 'Helga' paintings, it is interesting to look at the points raised by a recent survey carried out in the States, the results of which were pictorially displayed in a controversial exhibition entitled "The People's Choice : The Polling of America" (1995). It addressed some very interesting questions on the subject of painting and its reception by the American public. It was carried out by two satirical émigré artists, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, from Russia. Their idea was to conduct the first national opinion poll on artistic taste in America. The pair hired the market survey company, Marilla and Kiley who carried out a scientifically valid sampling of one thousand Americans. It was suggested that the poll made a mockery of American taste and the art world, but as Melamid pointed out "There is a truth in every joke". (Weingrod, 1995, p15). Therefore, it is interesting to examine the results of the poll and discover the elements preferred by the public. (Pl.7) The majority of Americans polled (88%) preferred outdoor scenes involving people and animals. Those polled also preferred realism to any other painting style, which leads on to the other belief stated in the poll and with which 77% agreed, "That art should be relaxing to look at not all jumbled up and confusing". (Weingrod, 1995, p16).

Although the viability of such a poll is questionable, it is interesting to note that some of the above characteristics do appear in the work of Andrew Wyeth and may go some of the way to explaining the American public's affinity to his work. Let us therefore examine some of those concurring characteristics and themes. Firstly, Wyeth's work depicts the three types of popular subject matter mentioned above,

(Pl.7)

landscape, people and animals. All being aspects of nature. Nature, as was stated in the last chapter, is a very important theme in Wyeth's work. His paintings of rural landscape and the frontier constantly celebrate the powerful force of nature. A living force, shaping and creating the moods which infiltrate his work.

In the 'Helga' series, the presence of nature is in all of the works and the series is as much a portrait of a landscape as of a figure. Helga, herself seems to embody nature. She is an earthy creature, and is often depicted set closely into the surrounding landscape. A good example of this is 'Farm Road' (Pl.4) where the rusty browns and autumnal golds of Helga's hair and clothes echo the warm colours of the landscape. Helga's poses are all affected by nature as they change in natural evolution, moving indoors and out according to the conditions of weather and light, invoking the infinite cycles of growth and regeneration. The series of paintings also show, gradually, the effect of nature on Helga as the work records fifteen years of her life and we watch her body undergo the process of ageing. From the lithe, slim and youthful figure in 'Black Velvet' to the more mature rounded figure in 'Lovers'. John Wilmerding said of the 'Helga' paintings, "in nineteenth century terms these are Wyeth's 'Four Seasons' and 'Voyage of Life'". (Wilmerding, 1987, p11).

This is an apt description, for in Wyeth's tightly controlled landscapes, nature is seen to be both classical and orderly and it identifies with the nineteenth century idea of nature as a spiritual and moral force. This view of nature gives his work the imprint of social order. Consequently his audience tends to come from the ever increasing conservative communities throughout America. They appreciate his paintings of an orderly and rural lifestyle promising a return to traditional American values and a rural mode of life for which they are striving. When they look at Wyeth's work they are rehearsing the values by which they wish to live their lives. Hence Wyeth's individual works of art become icons for a way of life and by sharing their beliefs he is able to fulfil a communal need for reassurance and hope. Consequently, Wyeth has gained a large and faithful following who have a nostalgic desire for simpler times in rural America.

The roots of this trend towards provincialism can be traced back to the 1920's and to the art movement, Regionalism, which was discussed in the last chapter. This movement reflected the views of many conservatives at the time whose main aim was to turn away from the corruption of urban life and celebrate the homespun virtues of the frontier and the rural landscape.

They were wary of progress and set about fiercely conserving the values that they felt gave meaning to a stable rural existence. This trend continued after the Second World War and into the fifties, when it had many supporters such as the American critic, John Crowe Ransom. His aim and the aim of many conservatives was to take a stand on behalf of a rural society which they believed to embody admirable social values and excellent forms of economic organisation. A society that valued art and the aesthetic life. But also a society that threatened to be wantonly destroyed by an industrial culture that showed no respect for the spiritual or aesthetic. Ransom felt that there were many qualities embodied in agrarian communities that must be preserved, such as the social temper that was "humble, religious and conservative" and an appreciation of "the infinite individualism of nature" (Brookeman, 1984, p33). He believed also that "all labour should be effective without being arduous; and with that general proviso the best labour is the one which provides the best field for the exercise of sensibility - it is clearly some form of pastoral or agrarian labour". (Brookeman, 1984, p33). He praised pastoral life as the highest form of civilisation. He believed that city dwellers did not have the same respect for nature as their country counterparts and thought that modern industrial urban man needed to "hold himself back from an unthinking belligerence against nature". (Brookeman, 1984, p34). The role of art in recovering a more metaphysical view of nature was crucial in Ramsom's programme. The arts, he said, should promote "The romantic attitude to nature..... in which we regard the endless mysterious fullness of this object". (Brookeman, 1984, p34).

Intentionally or unintentionally, Wyeth's work has adopted this "romantic attitude to nature" by "avoiding the subjects - tractors, reapers, binders, milk machines" (O'Doherty, 1974, p298) and filtering out cars, motorways, concrete high-rises,

telephone poles and power lines",(Guthrie, 1987,p22). His paintings give an untainted and idealistic view of nature. This has gained him the support of conservative audiences but it has also brought him harsh criticism from critics such as Derek Gutherie who wrote :

> Cloying sentimentality, illusory realism and a total denial of modern hubris and technology are the defining principles of Wyeth's art, as indeed they were for the official art of Third Reich. (Guthrie, 197,p21).

Ransom's views that rural traditional values should influence urban society was a stance widely supported by conservatives in the fifties. It was a period of great change and to conservative thinkers government activism was fostering an unhealthy dependence upon the state that was sapping the initiative and enterprise from American citizens. This shift in emphasis from the individual to the state led conservatives to sense an ominous similarity between the United States of America and the Soviet Union. Traditional rural values on the otherhand supported the individual and placed importance on personal liberty. Therefore, conservatives felt it was necessary to uphold these values and ideals in order to preserve their historic and national identity and keep themselves sufficiently Americanised. This way they would be able to defend their country against 'Dangerous Outsiders'. This led to attitudes such as "McCarthyism" and a fever of anti-communism.

But support for conservatism dropped off in the sixties with the youth revolt and the counter-culture. This new generation of Americans rejected the traditional values and work ethic of their parents. However, American society did not undergo a mutation of values and beliefs fatal enough to change society altogether. In fact, the country's traditional values stood firmly in place and as time moved on the conservative Judeo-Christian moral values of the majority of the population were more tightly held as "middle America braced itself against the media induced fear of rampant divorce, reckless 'abortion on demand', raging epidemics of communicable disease following the loosening of sexual mores, and repulsive inter-racial marriages." (Issel, 1985, p206).

In the late seventies support for pro-family groups like Phyllis Schaafly's 'Eagle Forum' and Rev. Jerry Falwell's 'Moral Majority' proved that cultural conservatism remained a potent force. This renewal of popularity led to the defeat of more than a dozen Liberal Democratic Senators and representatives in 1978 and 1980 elections, culminating in Ronald Reagan's comfortable presidential victory in the same year. As a result the 1980's showed organised conservatism "challenging liberalism on every major front and ending the liberal monopoly of the agenda setting process". (Issel, 1985, p208). Conservatives believed that the values and beliefs of counter-culture adherents (feminists, political radicals and sexual libertarians) had become all to pervasive in the nation's largest metropolitan areas and conservative groups across the country campaigned in the hope of combating this situation. Therefore, it is interesting to note that Wyeth, who had kept the 'Helga' paintings a secret for fifteen years, should have decided to reveal them to the public in the mid-eighties, at a time when conservatism was thriving and popular again.

It is not only his use of nature and ruralism as themes that give his art a traditional and conservative appeal, his choice of model and the way in which he portrays her also helps to create work deeply rooted in the past. In the press, the 'Helga' pictures were presented as "The fruit of Wyeth's autumnal passion". (Guthrie, 1987, p22). This is a time honoured tradition where artists in their old age, from Reubens and Rembrandt to Picasso and Mattisse, have renewed their joy in life and art by choosing some lovely young woman as their muse and model, thus linking Wyeth with tradition and the past. Another link with tradition is the fact that many of the paintings depict Helga in the nude, and in the history of art nude painting has a time honoured and venerable place.

This traditional link is maintained where Wyeth transforms Helga through various disguises into different symbolic roles from the past. In 'Crown of Flowers' (Pl.8) she reminds us of the myths of Spring and Flora, of Venus and the Graces and she becomes a personification of historical allegories. Here again are links with art history, for we are reminded of Botticelli's nudes and Rembrandt's paintings of his

(Pl. 8)

wife and later his mistress as emblems of nature. In 'Black Velvet' there are obvious links with Manet's 'Olympia'.

Helga symbolises family tradition as well as various aspects of art tradition, as the story behind the painting of 'Crown of Flowers' explains. Wyeth describes how Helga walked indoors one day wearing a floral wreath and explained that it was traditionally worn by German brides. 'Braids' (Pl.3) and 'Peasant Dress' allude to her family's German history and solid Northern character.

Helga also symbolises the traditional image of woman and woman's role. Wyeth's depiction of her with nature, in paintings such as 'Overflow' and 'Crown of Flowers' ; are a reminder of woman's fertility and link her to nature's capacity for growth and rebirth. She is a re-assuring and benevolent mother figure, this is accentuated by Wyeth's use of rich warm colours such as those used in 'Braids' (Pl.3). Helga's poses range from detached and reserved to a ripe and inviting sexuality. But it is never a threatening or sordid sexuality. This would appeal to Wyeth's conservative audience who would find this reassuring, especially in a society faced with the perceived threat of an ever growing gay population and the threat of Aids.

But it is not just Wyeth's choice of themes and subject matter that his audience can identify with. His realist style also connects him to them. Going back to the poll at the beginning of this chapter, it verified realism as the most popular style of painting for Americans. It gained an overwhelming 77% support. Most people questioned believed that "Art should be relaxing to look at, not jumbled and confusing." (Weingrod, 1995, p16). It is obvious from this that realism allows Wyeth's work to be more widely accessible whereas the mystery of modernist styles tends to make many people defensive. Consequently, realism is a more accepted art form in America. Its success "evolves out of a basic puritanism and mistrust of hedonism which has been the core of so much American artistic sensibility." (Hunter, 1973, p120). On the otherhand, modern art is dynamic and placeless, " a state of mind knowing no borders". (O'Doherty, 1972, p.289). It sets out deliberately to do away with stability and tends to describe the break-up of order. This immediately alienates it from Wyeth's followers whose beliefs are firmly rooted in the solidity and comfort of a traditional rural lifestyle.

'THE MASS MEDIA'

CHAPTER 3

When the Pennsylvanian collector, Leonard Andrews, announced his acquisition of 240 'Helga' works in August 1986, (Pl.9) media coverage was intense and massive. The 'storm of controversy' consisted of numerous national television newscasts, a huge amount of press coverage - including the cover of 'Time' and 'Newsweek' (Pl. 11), a barrage of memorabilia in the form of posters, postcards, calendars etc. and lucrative publishing deals. It also served to give Wyeth a high media profile and confirm him, as one journalist described, a "favourite of populist culture" (Guthrie, 1987, p21). Helga was also transformed by the massive media coverage. Her image, staring out from magazine stands countrywide meant that she too became a public persona, instantly recognisable, acquiring the formidable status of a popular American icon.

The media coverage in America surrounding the 'Helga' series was unprecedented for an art topic. It is an unusual event because the fine art world and the world of the mass media have always regarded each other with suspicion and maintained a distance. Only during the era of 'pop' art has it openly acknowledged the power of the mass media. Then it was accepted because it was under the guise of fine art. The fine art world which falls into the domain of high culture generally prefers to remain separate and untainted by the low cultural domain of the mass media.

For many centuries up until the mid-nineteenth century, architecture, painting and sculpture were the three principal visual arts. They flourished because they were promoted and received substantial patronage from the aristocracy. But changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution and the development of an urban consumer society meant that conditions improved dramatically for the working classes. Greatly improved living and working conditions and wages meant a better way of life with more free time for leisure and entertainment. The growth of the mass media took off reaching a situation today where western culture is dominated not by the fine arts but by the mass media.

This has irrevocably altered the social context in which fine artists operate. The mass media reproduce dominant ideology and are consequently a conservative or counter revolutionary force. This encourages passivity and apathy. Although

Leonard E. B. Andrews shows off three works from his Wyeth collection.

(Pl. 9)

there are some exceptions, the culture associated with the mass media tends to be of low quality, bland, escapist, standardised, stereotyped and conformist. Because of these characteristics much of what the mass media offers is offensive to artists. Most artists base their work on rejecting the values of the majority and the commercial engines supporting them. Consequently, high culture, the fine arts, is normally conceived as the antithesis of mass culture and has therefore acquired the term 'Minority Culture'.

It is in this respect that Wyeth has become an ambiguity. Instead of shunning the media attention he has gained, Wyeth appears to reside comfortably in his superstar role and to embrace the mass media. Therefore, he arouses in the 'genuine' artists a contempt that seems obligatory. The artist-hero is expected to be so troubled by his success that he reinforces his myth by rejecting it, therefore, "raging, as it were, against the bars in that zoo to which American society generally relegates its cultural activities." (O'Doherty, 1974, p.280). But Wyeth shows no signs of anger or frustration and no signs of contempt towards the mass media. Rather, there are many aspects of the 'Helga' controversy which would suggest a deliberate decision to encourage media participation. Many people believe that Wyeth had cleverly devised to use the mass media for his own ends in order to advance his career, increase his popularity and make money. It could on the otherhand also be argued that Wyeth was simply a victim of the mass media and was used by them to create a story that was fortuitously timed for journalism's slow season. As Leonard Andrews, the buyer of the 'Helga' series, later said, "It was a light news week. If somebody had gotten shot during that week it probably wouldn't have gotten all that play".(Walker, 1986, p21). But it did receive a huge amount of media attention. What will now be examined is the role of the media and whether Wyeth was manipulated or the manipulator.

In 1975 Wyeth released a batch of nude paintings of another mystery female, a young Finnish girl, Siri Erickson, who was already mentioned in Chapter 1. Like the 'Helga' pictures, Wyeth withheld them from the public for a number of years. His reason being that Siri was only fourteen when he began painting her in 1967.

He decided not to release them until she was twenty-one. They caused a little of the same stir as the 'Helga' series would later.

Like the 'Siri' paintings, the 'Helga' series are a group of striking nudes that gain an air of mysteriousness from having been withheld for a time from the public eye. It is possible that Wyeth registered the stir that the 'Siri' paintings has caused and deliberately used it as a tactic in the release of the 'Helga' pictures as a way of luring the media.

A key figure in introducing 'Helga' to the media was Leonard Andrews. (Pl.9). Andrews was a publisher and as "Time" magazine reported, was already a friend of the Wyeths, having dined with them on several previous occasions. If Wyeth intended to use the media, Andrews was an obvious choice for he was already a personal acquaintance and as a publisher would have some knowledge of the mass media. Wyeth contacted him and he drove out to Chaddsford to see the series at the Wyeth's home. Andrews has dramatically described his first encounter with the 'Helga' pictures for the benefit of the press numerous times since that visit. He eloquently recalls his initial reaction:

> 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.(Andrews, 1987, p9).

A treasure indeed. Andrews must have immediately realised the full potential of the 'secret' stash, for after spending only two hours with the collection, Andrews agreed to pay a multi-million dollar sum for all of the pictures and their copyrights. Asked about a reported $6 million price, Andrews replied "I wish I had paid $6 million for it". (Walker, 1986, p21). But ownership of the drawings and paintings as well as their copyrights made Andrews the most immediate beneficiary of the hoopla. Andrews took full advantage of this and his profits from the sale of 'Helga' merchandise and books ran well into the millions. In fact, he left his publishing business to devote his full time to managing the 'Helga' collection.

In order to ensure that there would be a big enough market for the assorted 'Helga' paraphernalia, Andrews must have known that the participation of the press was compulsory. As one writer pointed out :

> Don't underestimate the power of newspaper publicity in merchandising new book titles. The hoopla surrounding the discovery of Andrew Wyeth's 'Helga' paintings indicated that what was ultimately for sale was not paintings for only a few million dollars but books for many more millions. (Schjeldahl, 1986, p13).

Andrews knew that the story behind his new acquisition was hot enough to lure the press and create sensational headlines that would capture public interest.

The first publication to report on the discovery was the glossy art magazine 'Art and Antiques'. Wyeth approached them and they sent out their journalist, Jeffrey Schaire. He wrote the article that marked the first mention of the 'Helga' series in the media and which finally led to the explosion of controversy in the press months later in September 1986. 'Art and Antiques' found their headquarters bombarded by television crews and reporters eager to get an interview with the magazine which first broke the story. ' Time' magazine devoted a special section of their 'Helga' article to 'Art and Antiques' entitled rather unsubtly, "The Making of a Scoop", (Corliss, 1986, p46) (Pl.12). The fact that 'Art and Antiques' should receive publicity on the back of Wyeth's 'Helga' pictures shows the insatiable appetite of the media. It also created the bizarre situation of journalists clamouring to interview journalists.

National magazines and newspapers quickly followed with articles all equipped with appropriate sensationalising headlines such as 'Andrew Wyeth's Secret Paintings', 'America's Living Mona Lisa', 'Secret Obsession' and 'Wyeth's Stunning Secret', (Pls. 10 and 11). Intriguingly enough none of the national publications that ran with the story used their staff art critic for the job, instead feature writers were used, who "pumped it with the requisite molasses" (Schjeldahl, 1986, p11). Generally the reports described a 'discovery' of a large 'secret' cache of Andrew Wyeth paintings, all of a woman named Helga Testorf, which were said to be unknown even to the artist's wife. The stories hinted at an illicit relationship between Wyeth and Helga causing a lurid glow to be shed on the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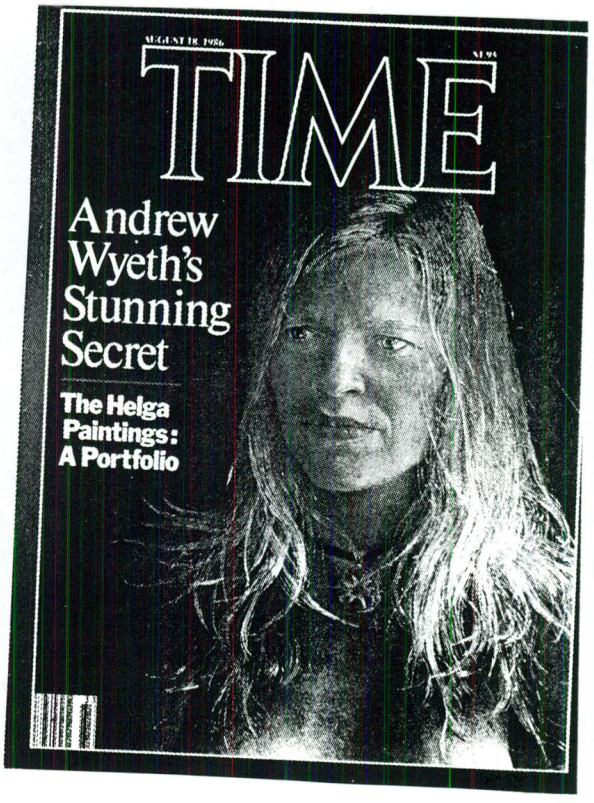
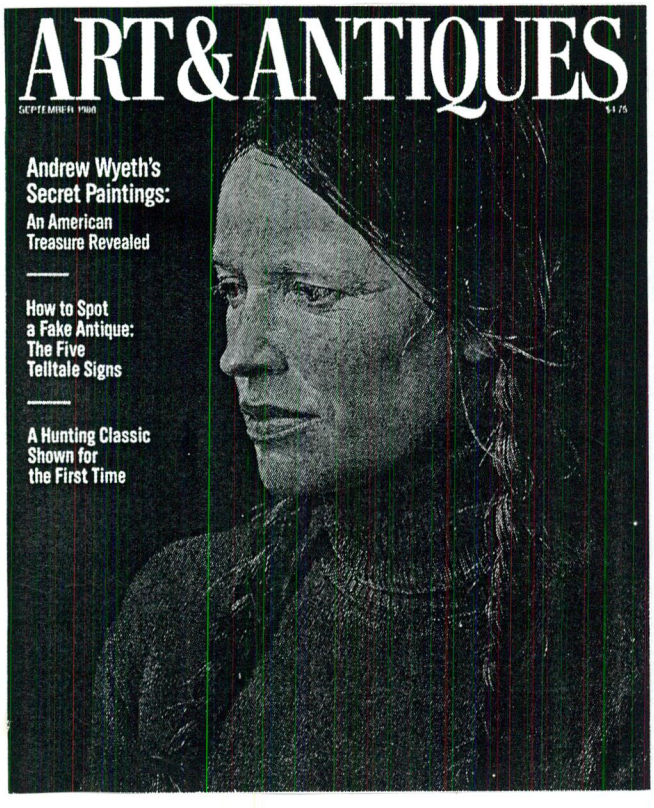
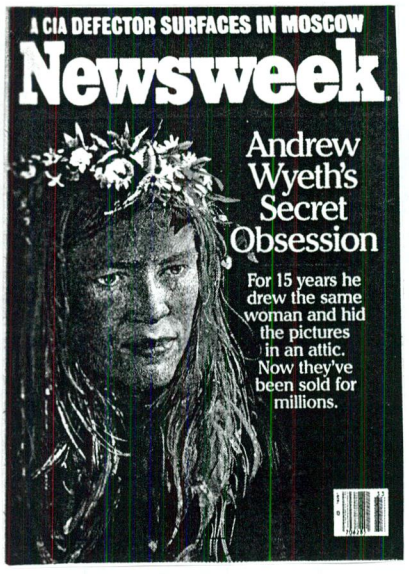
OUR READERS SPEAK OUT (pp. 36-7)
HISPANIC ART HOMOGENIZED?
'DIALOGUE' MAGAZINE IN ART PRESS REVIEW
INSIDE: WASHINGTON, D.C. ARTIST PAGES
HELGA-MANIA!

(Pl.10)

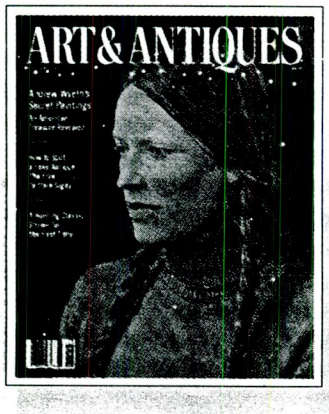

TIME
Andrew Wyeth's Stunning Secret
The Helga Paintings: A Portfolio


ART & ANTIQUES
Andrew Wyeth's Secret Paintings: An American Treasure Revealed
How to Spot a Fake Antique: The Five Telltale Signs
A Hunting Classic Shown for the First Time


A CIA DEFECTOR SURFACES IN MOSCOW
Newsweek
Andrew Wyeth's Secret Obsession
For 15 years he drew the same woman and hid the pictures in an attic. Now they've been sold for millions.

(Pl. 11)

The Making of a Scoop



Like most reporters who have snared a tough interview, Jeffrey Schaire came armed and ready for his one-on-one session with Andrew Wyeth. He had boned up on the artist's work and even recalled verses from Emily Dickinson in an effort to prod his reclusive subject. But nothing could have prepared the journalist for Wyeth's startling disclosure. Midway through the 90-minute interview, after a moment of thought, Wyeth said matter-of-factly, "There's a whole vast amount of my work no one knows about. Not even my wife."

That quiet revelation—quoted in the September 1985 issue of *Art & Antiques* magazine—triggered a chain of events that led to last week's shellburst of interest in the artist's secret Helga collection. As the art community focused its attention on Wyeth and his mystery model, the spotlight was shared by the magazine that first got on to the story. TV crews and reporters swarmed over its modest, fifth-floor headquarters on Manhattan's lower Fifth Avenue. The rush of phone calls was so overwhelming at one point that the lights on the switchboard simply conked out.

What Schaire proudly describes as the "little magazine that could" was born in 1978, but took its current form in 1984, after it was purchased by Texas Publisher Wick Allison. He set out to create an art magazine that would appeal not just to art insiders but to the general public as well. With its glossy new look, *Art & Antiques* has seen its circulation jump from 23,000 to 98,000. Still, seat-of-the-pants remains the typical mode of operation. The bare-bones staff of 27 routinely works a seven-day week, and sometimes even dresses up in period costume to pose for photo layouts.

With well-known contributors like William F. Buckley and Joyce Carol Oates, *Art & Antiques* has gained a reputation for provocative reporting. One article last year raised questions (still unresolved) about the authenticity of the Antioch chalice, purchased by New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and purported to have been used by Jesus at the Last Supper. A few months ago, a man speaking broken English wandered into the magazine's offices. He turned out to be carrying slides smuggled out of the Soviet Union showing works from the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts never before seen in the West.

Landing the Wyeth interview was "pure dumb luck," says Schaire, 32, the magazine's energetic executive editor, whose first art job was driving a forklift for the Metropolitan Museum's gift-shop warehouse. He requested the interview by letter in November 1984 (enclosing a copy of the magazine with a cover story on, coincidentally, "Winslow Homer's Mystery Woman"). Six months later a Wyeth intermediary replied that the publicity-shy artist would agree to talk.

Wyeth's disclosure, tucked unobtrusively into the fourth paragraph of the magazine's story, created hardly a ripple. It was exactly a year, and the September 1986 issue of *Art & Antiques,* before the import of Wyeth's remarks became strikingly clear. The closing of the circle came last April, when Schaire was visiting Pennsylvania for another story and met with Peter Ralston, a photographer and friend of the Wyeths'. Ralston told him to get in the car, he had a "surprise" to show him. An hour later, Schaire was poring over the 240 works that are now the talk of the art world. ***—By Richard Zoglin. Reported by John Moody/New York***

KACHATURIAN—OPTIC

Publisher Allison and Editor Schaire: "pure dumb luck"

(Pl. 12)

paintings. Media attention and speculation centred on this 'hoary' subplot rather than on the works of art themselves and the media openly debated whether Wyeth was faithful or philandering - "Why did he keep the collection hidden from his wife ? Why did he wait so long to release it ?" The issue for the popular press was not the art work but as one journalist put it, "That a married man can spend fifteen years undressing another man's wife and resist the temptation to sleep with her". (Muschamp, 1986, p3) Wyeth's decision to try to protect the privacy of 'Helga' added to the suspicions.

It is predictable that the media, in particular the popular press, should follow this line of approach to the 'Helga' series. They want a juicy story that will interest the public. To have based their investigations on the art world and its execution would have appealed only to the 'Minority Culture' of art enthusiasts. A story with a sex scandal would have a much more universal appeal and the fact that most of the pieces in the collection depicted Helga in the nude inevitably led the story in this particular direction. As Kenneth Clarke, expert on the nude in art, pointed out :

> It is necessary to labour the obvious and say that no nude, however abstract, should fail to arouse in the spectator some vestige of erotic feeling .... one of the difficulties of the nude as a subject for art is that these instincts cannot lie hidden.

What was surprising, however, was that the Wyeths, who it would be presumed would play down the sex scandal story, did not. Instead they played up to the media by further fuelling suspicions. The focus was on Wyeth's business manager wife Betsy. Because it was upon her word that she knew nothing of Helga that the whole 'mystery' rested. She, in fact, seemed to have set in train the sexual innuendoes that became so focal in the controversy with her use of the word 'love' in an interview with the magazine 'Art and Antiques'. It reports that when asked what the works were about and why her husband had kept them a secret she took a long pensive pause and replied, "love". 'Time' magazine approached a close friend of the Wyeths for his interpretation of Betsy's use of the word "love" (Corliss, 1986, p48). He judiciously interpreted many meanings, " It means his love of creating and being an artist. It means love of theatre and drama which have always been a part of his life." He does not believe that Wyeth was having an affair.

"Oh yes, Betsy knew that using the word 'love' would make the wags wag. They both have a marvellous way of teasing". Therefore, it is possible that Betsy's public hint of an affair can be construed as part of the strategy to woo media attention. As Andrews pointed out months later after the media attention died down, "Wyeth was very fortunate to have a model for fifteen years .... and his wife certainly knew he was using the model. Everybody out there in Chaddsford knew she was posing for him." (Walker, 1986, p21). This contradicts all Betsy's earlier statements that she knew nothing. Also it was later revealed that Helga had been employed for many years as housekeeper and cook by Wyeth' sister, Carolyn, who lives in Chaddsford. (She frankly described any hints at a Helga / Wyeth affair as "a bunch of crap") (Schjeldahl, 1986,p13).

The story had successfully hit the newspapers and television and captured the imagination of the public. It was now time for the other trappings of mass media attention to unfold. The exhibition titled 'Andrew Wyeth: The Helga Pictures' had a prestigious opening at The National Gallery of Art in Washington and continued an extensive tour of seven other major galleries across America. Wyeth's exhibition was an integral part of the media package surrounding the 'Helga' pictures. The exhibition identified with the growing trend for mammoth blockbuster exhibitions which are becoming more and more the norm. They show a convergence between the arts and the media with a huge commercial input in the form of sponsorship and promotion. Consequently, entertainment and the box office tend to be the main priorities of the organisers of these cultural extravaganza.

In the 'Helga' exhibition the media intervention was present in various ways such as in the instructional videotape which was narrated, as one satirical art critic put it, "By no less a personage than the renowned art expert Charlton Heston." (Agee, 1988, p49). The choice of Heston for narrator by the art world would be puzzling. But he would be an obvious choice to any public relations person because of his stardom and media value.

The rest of the media package included the book of the series/exhibition and other merchandise such as postcards, calendars, gift cards, posters etc. The painting 'Braids' (Pl.3) from the series existed in more than 100 million impressions within a couple of months of the story hitting the press, making it in America, like Andy Warhol's 'Soup Can', a contender for one of the most recognisable artistic images of the day. Brian O'Doherty has termed Wyeth a maker of "Master Images". This may explain why Wyeth's work so successfully makes the crossover from the world of fine art into the realm of the mass media. The mass media are mainly concerned with style and image and this is precisely where Wyeth's talent shines brightest. Master images are created because they derive their strength from recognising shared values which become the artist's medium to inflect and influence. Wyeth's flare for depicting popular beliefs was described in the last chapter and proves how, like advertising, his art has become a brokerage of shared values.

Reproduction also brings us closer to a definition of the master image. The image takes such precedence over its manner of presentation that reproduction is a clarification rather than an impediement. As Peter Schjeldahl said "Reproduction doesn't represent Wyeth's art so much as complete it." Brian O'Doherty reiterates this statement in his description of a previous and very popular Wyeth work : "Christina's World' works just as well in a postcard, so well in fact that the original is a bit of a disappointment." (O'Doherty, 1974, p309).

This tendency in Wyeth's work to translate so well into reproduction was probably what Leonard Andrews was banking on and what persuaded him to buy the series in the first place. Although he was full of gushing praise to the press over Wyeth's work. His subsequent sale, four years later, to an unidentified buyer (reported in 'Art in America' issue dated January 1990) would suggest that he bought the pictures purely for their monetary potential. Was their monetary potential also a factor for Wyeth, leading him to deliberately court the press? Many locals in the area believe it was a deliberate scam. "This whole thing could be a ploy", said Karl J. Kuerner III whose grandparents Wyeth regularly sketched. Another called it the "best stunt I've ever seen." (Corliss,1986,p48).

But there is no concrete evidence to prove that Wyeth schemed and planned the 'Helga' controversy and the subsequent intervention of the mass media. There are a number of factors in Wyeth's background to suggest that he may actually have been an innocent victim of the media. Firstly, Wyeth has never received any formal art education and training and this lack of contact with the fine art world may have left him without any of the usual prejudices normally associated with the it towards the mass media. Another factor behind his acceptance of the mass media can be attributed to his father who he loved and respected deeply. His father, N.C. Wyeth, was a well known illustration artist and consequently his work's main outlet would have been through the mass media in the form of books and magazines. There are no immediate and incontrovertible answers but the story's hold on the American popular imagination proved that Wyeth is still the one artist whose style and personality can tantalise the American public, " Through cunning or coincidences Wyeth is a singular mixture:old master and master showman." (Corliss,1986,p46).

'THE ART WORLD'

CHAPTER 4

The touring exhibition of Wyeth's 'Helga' series, which was briefly mentioned in the last chapter, was a very prestigious event. The tour took in some of the most important and famous art museums in the country. It was a very intensive and extensive tour attracting enormous crowds at every venue. The exhibition opened in the National Gallery of Art in Washington and later travelled to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. It was then on view in the Los Angelos County Museum of Art and from there it travelled to the Fire Arts Museum of San Francisco and on then to the Detroit Institute of Art. Eventually, the exhibition also travelled abroad.

The inauguration of the exhibition took place in the National Gallery of Art in Washington. This was an immense honour for Wyeth in two ways. Firstly, the National Gallery of Art, Washington, is regarded as an important and venerable institution. Over the last three decades it has gained much respect on the American art scene for the many fine exhibitions it has held. The second mark of honour bestowed on Wyeth was that the museum allowed him to hold a solo exhibition. This was an extraordinary and startling event in that since the museum was founded in the nineteen-thirties by Andrew Mellon, an unwritten law has existed whereby no major show could be held by a living artist. Although not written in the bye-laws, it was understood to be museum policy. Before Wyeth, the National Gallery had never given a major show to a living artist. This meant that Wyeth had been honoured by the National Gallery above Matisse or Picasso, above Miro, Chagall or Henry Moore, above Willian de Kooning, Jasper Johns, Richard Diebenkorn or Georgia O'Keeffe.

But this awesome mark of respect for Wyeth did not reflect the feelings of the art world, in general, towards him. In fact, the National Gallery received a vast amount of criticism for their decision. Derek Guthrie of the 'The New Art Examiner' described it as "distasteful" (Guthrie,1987,p20) and Peter Schjeldahl of 'Art in America' dismissed the National Gallery's director, J. Carter Brown as a "career crowd pleaser" (Schjeldahl,1986,p11). While William C. Agree of 'The New Criterion' stated :

> The horrifying spectacle of the Wyeth affair - in which prestigious American institutions lent their space, and their reputations, to showing the famous 'Helga' pictures - cast an ominous shadow over everything to do with American Art. One ended the season with a sense of doubt about the state of our museums and the direction they are taking. (Agee, 1988,p47).

At first these statements may appear too harsh, prompted, perhaps, by envy and bitterness at Wyeth's success. But a closer look at the position of museums in the art world shows how they have an important role in influencing and constructing the story of art. Consequently, the decision to show Wyeth's work as a solo exhibition should be taken very seriously for it can be argued that museums are the central focus for all the different sections of the art world. Museums are profoundly important locations for placing values on objects such as painting and sculpture. Artists yearn to have their work exhibited because there is much prestige attached to having work placed in the major international art museums. 'Museum Quality' is a common phrase used by dealers to emphasise the importance of a piece. Once work is shown within the museum system, it instantly becomes respectable.

But this was not always the case in American museums. In the first half of the nineteenth century, painting and sculpture were not elevated above other forms of culture. As Neil Harris describes,

> Paintings and sculptures stood along-side mummies, mastodon bones and stuffed animals. American museums were not, in the Antebellum period, segregated temples of the fine arts, but repositories of information and collections of strange and doubtful data. (Levine,1988.p146)

Many museum curators employed various entertainment tactics to lure in the public. Along with the regular exhibits there were learned lectures, sensational scientific demonstrations and enticing performances of music and drama. Consequently, museums were viewed by the public as a spectacle and a source of entertainment.

This began to change in the latter half of the nineteenth century and American museums moved from the "electic to the exclusive and specific." (Levine, 1988,p146) The interference and influence of various interested religious parties meant that the fine arts began to take on a new role. According to Lawrence E. Levine, a number of ministers ranging from Episcopalian to Methodist began to assert that religion needed art if it was to continue to attract followers in the future. The office of art was seen as second only to that of religion (Levine,1988,p150). This meant that works of art were now to be viewed for aesthetic and spiritual elevation rather than having mere entertainment as a goal.

These attitudes became embodied in museums across America. They began to place emphasis on acquiring original works of art. Their various collections of photographs, casts, and 'curiosities' were relegated to storage and museums dedicated their galleries to what in 1912 the Boston Museum of Fine Art's director called "higher things". (Levine, 1988,p152). This sanctifying of the fine arts became a cultural fact and it has shaped twentieth century cultural attitudes and practices. Although the power of religion declined, that of art increased.

Over the last decade the museum as a temple seems once again to be reverting back to the museum as mass spectacle. Pleasure rather than education is becoming the presiding principle. Newly constructed American museums such as the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art and Architecture (known as Mass Moca) resemble huge pleasure domes. Commercially based exhibitions threaten to destroy the sanctuary in which the fine arts have resided and been preserved and protected for nearly a century, presenting art as part of the entertainment business.

It is in this regard that art critics lashed out at the various museums which held Wyeth's 'Helga' series. The publicity surrounding the show, the claims that the 'Helga' pictures were a secret, the hints of an affair between artist and model, the colossal sums of money spent to buy the collection and the publishing ventures connected with it ultimately turned the 'Helga' exhibition into a media spectacle, infuriating all serious art critics in the process. In their eyes the reputation of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and the other museums that held the

exhibition were smeared by the whole controversy. Herbert Muschamp stated that Wyeth's 'Helga' exhibition portrayed the art world as "a sinister zone governed by commercialism and critical obfuscation, a place where works of art are not permitted to be enjoyed on their intrinsic merits." (Muschamp,1986,p2).

But expert opinion has never counted for much in Wyeth's reputation and the 'Helga' exhibition was a huge success with an enormous turn out for the museums' box office. This popularity has alienated Wyeth further from the art world. As Brian O'Doherty pointed out "his stardom has cannibalised his art to a degree unprecedented by any other artist with pretensions to seriousness." (O'Doherty,1974,p280). Wyeth's popularity has in the eyes of the art world removed his art, from the category of 'high culture' and relegated it to the category of 'popular' or 'mass' culture. Wyeth is a victim of the strict hierarchical categories culture has been carved into.

Once Wyeth's work began to be perceived as belonging outside the realm of high culture, many art critics believed his work unworthy of serious critical analysis. To them Wyeth's work belongs in the company of other popular favourites such as Norman Rockwell and Leroy Neiman. The critic, Derek Guthrie, makes this comparison when he enquires sarcastically in reaction to the National Gallery's decision to exhibit Wyeth's 'Helga' pictures, "are we then to look forward to exhibitions of Norman Rockwell ?" (Guthrie, 1987,p21). This may explain why Wyeth's work is attacked with a violence far beyond the usual etiquette of critical disagreement. To embrace success is to risk intellectual respectability.

Many aspects of his painting have also made him an outsider. Art critics feel that he is a self taught artist who has cut himself off from any extensive contact with art and art theory of the present day and, consequently, has no education in ideas and no ability to handle them. Rather than stylistically evolving, his work remains static. But this resistance to change in Wyeth's work is not accidental, instead it echoes the resistance to change in the rural community where he lives and draws inspiration for his work. His art has become a vehicle for rehearsing settled rural values. These values are what attract Wyeth's large conservative audience but

they provoke hostility from the aesthetically sophisticated audience of art critics. They cannot accept this rural view of conservatism, morality and nature attitudes which hark back to nineteenth century ideals.

To the contemporary art critic Wyeth's work is full of cliché and sentiment. As Kuh stated "like kindly little sermons at the village church the artist's contrived compositions shine with moral rectitude." (Ward,1989,p62). Consequently, over the years Wyeth has entered into a sort of "aesthetic ideological warfare" (Hoving,1987,p118) with art critics. So entrenched has this view become that John Russel, the senior art critic of the 'New York Times' once stated in a letter to Wyeth that he felt uncomfortable corresponding with him as he was "on the opposite side".(Hoving,1987,p118).

A truce in this war looks very unlikely as reference was already made in the first chapter to Wyeth's dismissal of criticism. Therefore, it looks like Wyeth will remain a 'nettlesome anachronism' to the art establishment and a beloved icon of American museum-goers.

CONCLUSION

The 'Helga' controversy has exposed some of the problems and factors affecting art in America today. Firstly, there is the complex role of the artist, where he finds in contemporary art practice that he plays two roles; the role of an artist and the role of a popular personality.

First and foremost Wyeth is a successful painter. His work is familiar to millions of Americans. Such familiarity with his work has meant that Wyeth has become an icon in American culture.(Pl.13). As Brian O'Doherty pointed out "Reproductions have saturated our tolerance but not the market". (O'Doherty,1974,p281).

But the amazing amount of media interest and public response generated by the discovery of the 'Helga' series indicates that Wyeth's appeal goes far beyond the mere appreciation of his art. Over the years, Wyeth has transcended his work, becoming a type of artist hero. He has become a part of the current universal obsession of worshipping 'the artist'. Today the cult of 'the artist' has become a major feature in the history of art. A huge art tourism has built up around the most famous artists. There are shrines to individual artists sometimes in the form of museums such as the Picasso museums in Barcelona and Paris. The inn at Auvers, where Van Gogh killed himself, is another example.

In America this pursuit of transforming artists into superstars of mythical proportions is done with particular enthusiasm. "We worship artists with a fervour that was once reserved for saints". (Buck,1991,p9). Wyeth has become a part of this phenomena. He is hailed as the 'People's Painter' and is seen as the hero of 'Agrarian America'. He is romanticised and portrayed as "an unassuming man of the soil". His appeal is further strengthened by his refusal to compromise with the demands of the intellectuals and the tastemakers. By his passionate commitment to an essentially private vision he has been transformed into a modern version of Jean Jacques Rousseau's noble savage myth ; the myth of the pure soul untainted by association with civilisation and its enervating sophistication.It is in this context that this phenomenon can be damaging because it can turn complex and intelligent artists into grotesque caricatures.


PEANUTS
IT'S FOR YOU.. IT LOOKS LIKE A BILL
" STATEMENT...PSYCHIATRIC HELP:..FOUR SESSIONS.... TWENTY CENTS..NO DISCOUNTS ...DR. LUCY VAN PELT... "
WHERE IN THE WORLD AM I GOING TO GET TWENTY CENTS?
I REFUSE TO SELL MY ANDREW WYETH !
11-25
SCHULZ

(Pl. 13)

Andrew Wyeth's press has been kind but is still guilty of producing a caricature that highly distorts the artist and is partly to blame for the incorrect assumptions which have sprung up about him. Such grand scale popularisation has tended in the past to encourage an image of Wyeth as an artist living in cluttered old country houses among the battered pails and frayed curtains he so often paints. He is often seen simply as a painter of picturesque country scenes and provincial characters. The deeper more meaningful level in his work has tended to get lost and ignored in the glamorisation of his personality.

In particular, the 'Helga' controversy shows clearly how public curiosity and media enthusiasm had distorted the work and identity of this artist. It was Helga's role and the hint of an illicit affair which created the intrigue that led to the extraordinary publicity surrounding the collection. This subplot took away from proper appreciation of the work and as 'Time' magazine observed, the sensationalism of the 'Helga' tale cast "a lurid glow that was not in the paintings." By concentrating on the sleazier aspects Wyeth's sensitive and compelling studies of Helga were degraded.

Andrew's purchase of the 'Helga' pictures also caused a lot of media attention. As Louisa Buck pointed out "the price of art attracts more public attention than any other commodity - except perhaps oil."(Buck,1991,p53). So when one adds the subplot of the colossal sums of money handed over for the collection to the claims that the 'Helga' pictures were a secret, along with the hints of an affair between artists and model, one comes up with, as one journalist pointed out, "all the trappings of a made-for-television movie. We might call it 'Museum', and bill it, as a sequel to 'Airport' and 'Hotel', for it has all the requisite ingredients of power, greed, intrigue, sex, ambition and money." (Agee,1988,p49).

The art world is just as capable of distortion as the mass media. to most critics Wyeth represents a modern primitive, untravelled and unschooled, who might as well have painted in the 1890's as in the 1990's. His work is regarded as simple and banal. Wyeth's heightened sensitivity to life's ambiguities and darker realities has been generally ignored.

To contemporary art critics Wyeth's work lacks "the corroding ironies, the scathing assaults on untested convictions, the playfulness and deviousness of mind we have come to expect in modern art - these are not here - not here at all". (O'Doherty,1974,p290). This is true for to judge Wyeth in terms of progress, change, invention and self-consciousness is to look for an artist who is isn't there. But neither is his work backwards or old fashioned. Rather it is an insightful and inquisitive study of country life, a constant dialogue with the objects, people and the landscape which make up the rural community in which he lives. The 'Helga' pictures are a testimony to this. Looking at Helga, nude and clothed, indoors and out depicts how nature and country life, the passage of time and the changing of the seasons affects the human form and its relationship with the landscape. This is what makes Wyeth the only genuine rural artist in contemporary art; indeed in history there are very few.

His work re-aquaints us with the familiar. In the 'Helga' series, Helga appears in many familiar roles. For example, in 'Crown of Flowers' she is reminiscent of the myths of Spring and Flora, of Venus and the graces and Eve in the garden of Eden. This is why his work is so close to the cliché which indeed often claims it. It is his talent for creating remarkable and haunting images that makes his work outstanding. Indeed, the pursuit of a great image rather than a great painting is a theme of regional American art. Such art derives its strength from recognising shared values which become the artist's medium to inflect and influence. Wyeth has without doubt invented a number of great images such as 'Christina's World', 'Wind from the Sea' and 'Distant Thunder'. In the 'Helga' series 'Lovers', 'Braids' and 'Crown of Flowers' spring to mind as superb master images. These images remain imprinted on the mind because the familiarity of their content registers with the viewer.

This ideology implicit in Wyeth's work is what provokes such hostility from the art establishment. Most critics regard Wyeth as a popular artist belonging outside the realm of high culture. As Clement Greenberg, (who incidentally likes his work) stated :

> Its not that his art is without real merits, or that he doesn't outsell almost all avant-garde painters in this country; yet he simply can not be made to count; no one responsible would dream of sending art like his abroad to represent this country at the Venice Biennale or the Sao Paulo Bienal. Artistic prestige - public prestige - lies elsewhere nowadays. (Greenberg,1993,p261).

This sort of art world elitism is what led art critics to hit out at the museums who housed the 'Helga' Exhibition, "When will our museums learn that their ceaseless pursuit of the box office at any cost is hopelessly shortsighted ? It only subverts their efforts to make the museum something special." (Agee,1988,p49).

But it is possible that art world elitism is just as regressive. The 'Helga' affair demonstrates how little intervention the American public really has in determining artistic quality. Maybe it is this imbalance that National Gallery director, J. Carter-Brown, was attempting to address when he said in defence of his decision to mount the 'Helga' show, that he was giving the American people "a chance to decide for themselves about Wyeth." this was manifest by the large numbers who turned out to see the exhibition.

Wyeth's popularity with the American public has gone from strength to strength. On October 24, 1990, four years after the Helga controversy, President Bush awarded Wyeth the Congressional Gold Medal at a White House ceremony, making Wyeth the first artist to receive this honour. Shunned by the art world and a hero to the public, Wyeth occupies an unusual place in American society showing that success in America demands more tenacity and resilience than failure.

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