

Andrew Wyeth

THE CONTROVERSY OVER THE LATE ARTIST'S CAREER IS STILL VERY MUCH ALIVE.



Andrew Wyeth, *Sheepskin*, 1973, tempera on panel, from the *Helga* series.

NEW YORK—In 1986 *Art & Antiques* executive editor Jeffrey Schaire asked Andrew Wyeth's wife, Betsy, why her husband had depicted an attractive female neighbor, naked and clothed, in more than 240 paintings and drawings—a sprawling and mostly secret oeuvre, 15 years in the making. She replied slowly with a provocative one-word answer: Love.

Her comment and the larger story of Wyeth's *Helga* series burst onto the national scene as the result of Schaire's article (*Art & Antiques*, September 1986), which generated a firestorm of publicity—and a great deal of criticism of the artist. Most of the news media assumed, as did Schaire, that Wyeth had indulged in a long and secret dalliance with his model, Helga Testorf. But many art-world commentators soon became convinced that Wyeth and his wife had cooked up the rumor of an affair as a clever marketing ploy.

In the wake of Wyeth's death on Jan. 16 at the age of 91, this incident has once again become a topic of debate—not so much for the questions it raises about Wyeth's extramarital peccadilloes but rather for what it might suggest about his character as an artist. Was Wyeth really, as popular legend would have it, the painterly equivalent of Robert Frost, a brooding rustic who found profundity

in the often-bleak surroundings of Chadds Ford, Pa., and Cushing, Maine, who carried forth the authentic American traditions of his father, the renowned illustrator N. C. Wyeth? Or was he a shrewd Yankee trader who fleeced the city folk, time and again, exploiting their simplistic assumptions about rural life and the artist's role in capturing it?

Many critics take great pride in hating Wyeth. They perceive in his work little more than sentimentality, anecdote and pictorial conjuring tricks. In 1987, when the National Gallery of Art opted to show the *Helga* series in its entirety, Henry Geldzahler, the former curator of 20th-century art at the Metropolitan Museum, reacted with unbridled

aside, there is a power to Wyeth's pictures that cannot be wholly discounted.

In subsequent comments, Betsy stated that her use of the word "love" had been misunderstood. She had meant to imply a love of form, a love of beauty, an entirely different kind of love from what people had assumed. But looking at the *Helga* series today, some 20 years later, one senses—in the sumptuous curves with which Wyeth captures his model's ample hips and breasts, in the meticulous exactitude with which his hard-edged tempera technique records the most intimate details of her anatomy—at the very least, the sort of wistful longing that a married, middle-aged man might reasonably feel

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contempt. "In a world that has Ellsworth Kelly, Jasper Johns and Willem de Kooning," Geldzahler fulminated, "you don't give Andrew Wyeth a one-man show."

But is Wyeth's art actually as meretricious as all that? No one who has seen his most famous image, the inevitable *Christina's World*, can ever quite forget the crippled girl in the pink dress who pulls herself through a field of weeds, yearning for home. Modernist prejudices

in the presence of a beautiful and much younger woman.

It would come as no great surprise if that longing ultimately went unfulfilled. At its best, Wyeth's art was never about telling stories so much as suggesting their possibility—an impressive feat that his work will undoubtedly continue to perform long after all of its present-day detractors and defenders have departed this earth.

—JONATHAN LOPEZ