

WYETH CHRISTINA'S WORLD





Andrew Wyeth (American, 1917–2009). *Christina's World*. 1948. Tempera on panel, 32¼ x 47¾" (81.9 x 121.3 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. PURCHASE, 1949

WHEN ASKED BY A JOURNALIST IN 1977 TO NAME THE MOST UNDERRATED AND overrated artists in the history of art, the art historian Robert Rosenblum chose to submit one name for both categories: Andrew Wyeth.¹ Wyeth, an American realist painter whose life and career spanned the better part of the twentieth century, produced in 1948 one of the most iconic paintings in American art, a desolate Maine landscape with a single figure called *Christina's World*. This painting, acquired by The Museum of Modern Art in 1949, would become one of the most recognizable images in the history of American art, along with James Abbott McNeill Whistler's *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1 (Portrait of The Artist's Mother)* (1871; FIG. 1), better known as *Whistler's Mother*, and Grant Wood's *American Gothic* (1930; FIG. 2), a painting of a dour Midwestern farm couple in front of their homestead. *Christina's World* has been so widely reproduced that it has become a part of American popular culture, and it has also ignited heated arguments—about America's self-image, cultural parochialism, and taste—that added a measure of controversy to Wyeth's career, up to his death in 2009. Although controversies surrounding the role of Wyeth's work in American postwar art have shaped his artistic legacy, the popularity of the painting endures.



FIG. 1. James Abbott McNeill Whistler (American, 1834–1903). *Arrangement in Gray and Black No. 1 (The Artist's Mother)*. 1871. Oil on canvas, 56¹³/₁₆ x 64" (144.3 x 162.5 cm). MUSÉE D'ORSAY, PARIS



FIG. 2. Grant Wood (American, 1891–1942). *American Gothic*. 1930. Oil on beaver board, 30³/₄ x 25³/₄" (78 x 65.3 cm). THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO. FRIENDS OF AMERICAN ART COLLECTION



FIG. 3. Andrew Wyeth (American, 1917–2009). *Christina's World* (detail). 1948. See pp. 2–3

Christina's World is a modest-sized genre scene, painted in high detail with egg tempera on board. Set in the stark, barren landscape of coastal Maine, it depicts a young woman seen from behind, wearing a pink dress and lying in a mown field. Although she reclines gracefully, her upper torso, propped on her arms, is strangely alert; her silhouette is tense, almost frozen, giving the impression that she is fixed to the ground [FIG. 3]. Stock-still she stares, perhaps with longing, perhaps with fear, at a distant farmhouse and a group of outbuildings, ancient and grayed to harmonize with the dry grass and overcast sky. The scene is familiar, even picturesque, but it is also mysterious: Who is this young woman, vulnerable but also somehow indomitable? What is she staring at, or waiting for? And why is she lying in a field?



FIG. 4. Andrew Wyeth (American, 1917–2009). *Groundhog Day*. 1959. Tempera on panel, 31 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 32 $\frac{1}{8}$ " (79.7 x 81.6 cm). PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART. GIFT OF HENRY F. DU PONT AND MRS. JOHN WINTERSTEEN

The painting was acquired by The Museum of Modern Art in 1949 for \$1,800—a princely sum at the time—from the Macbeth Gallery on Fifty-seventh Street in New York City. Wyeth had exhibited his work there for almost a decade, and from his first solo exhibition, in 1937, he had attracted attention and achieved a good deal of financial success. The purchase of *Christina's World*, however, marked the beginning of a vertiginous rise in Wyeth's career. After its acquisition

by the Museum, Wyeth was regularly featured in mainstream large-circulation magazines, such as *Time* and *Life*, during the 1950s and '60s and was hailed by these publications as America's most popular artist.² In 1959 his *Groundhog Day* (1959; FIG. 4) was purchased by the Philadelphia Museum of Art for thirty-five thousand dollars, the highest price ever paid by a museum for the work of a living American artist. In 1963 a midcareer retrospective of Wyeth's work at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, in Buffalo, New York, attracted nearly 250,000 visitors—roughly half the population of the city. *Christina's World*, the show's centerpiece, provoked outpourings of emotion usually reserved for screen idols. One fan, from South Bend, Indiana, wrote plaintively to the museum, "I would so much like to see Mr. Wyeth's work. The two reproductions I saw in the paper have shaken me tremendously. I have even priced the railroad fare to your city but I'm afraid I can't make it. I have nine children, and little time and money to spare."³

Thanks in part to the sale of postcard and poster reproductions, *Christina's World* became so familiar that by the early 1960s it was also widely parodied, the lone figure gazing longingly at a distant goal cheerfully co-opted to sell everything from pale ale to air conditioners [FIGS. 5 AND 6]. A small industry sprang up around its subject, Anna Christina Olson, and her home, the farm in South Cushing, Maine, shown in the painting: after her death, in 1968, the house and

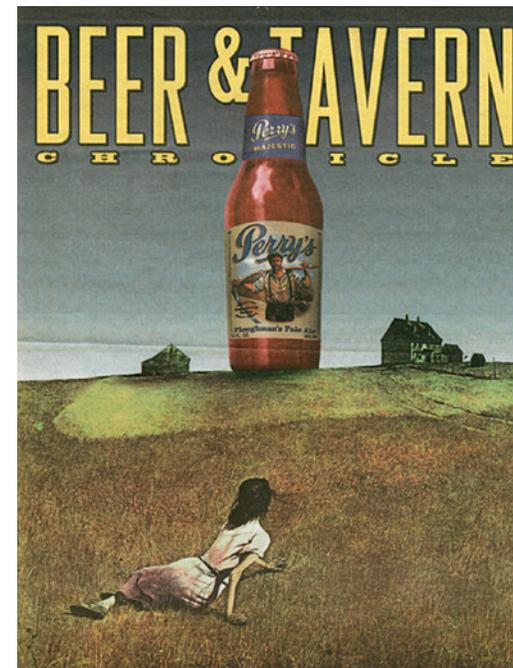


FIG. 5. Cover of *Beer & Tavern Chronicle*, April 1997

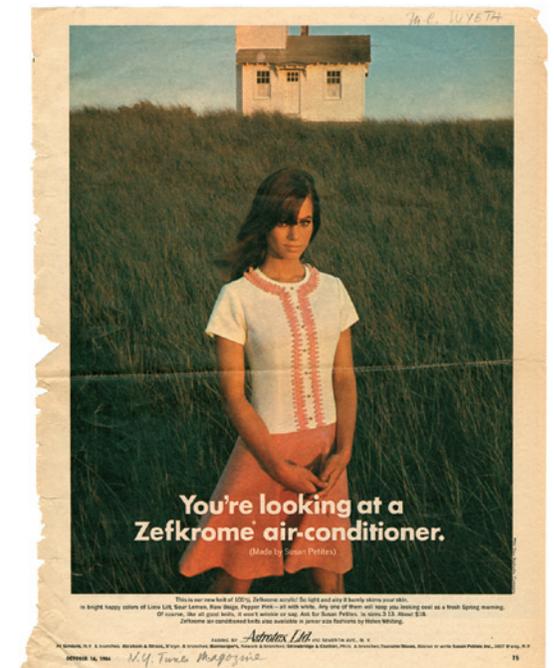


FIG. 6. Advertisement from *New York Times Magazine*, October 16, 1966

part of the property were purchased by a collector of Wyeth's work and restored with the intent of creating a Wyeth museum. The Olson House opened to the public in 1971 and was immediately swamped by Wyeth admirers who tramped across the property and plunked themselves down on the lawn Christina-style for a photograph against the famous backdrop. The site attracted so many visitors that the residents of South Cushing strongly protested, and the museum was closed barely a year after it opened. The Olson House reopened in 2000 under the aegis of the Farnsworth Art Museum, in Rockland, Maine, and is now on the National Register of Historic Places.

Wyeth first met Anna Christina Olson and her brother Alvaro in 1939, when she was forty-six years old. He was introduced by Betsy James, the woman who was to become his wife and whose family home was close to the Olson farm. *Christina's World* is the second of four tempera paintings of Christina that Wyeth completed from the time he met the Olsons until the siblings' deaths [FIG. 7]. He also made numerous drawings and watercolors of brother [FIG. 8], sister, and house during his fifty years of friendship with the family.

A notable element of Wyeth's practice over his long career was his concentration on an extremely circumscribed number of subjects. In seventy years he painted the landscape, objects, and inhabitants of only two locations, never straying from his own neighborhoods: Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, the village of his birth, and the area around the coastal village of South Cushing, where he had spent summers since early childhood. In the same way, Wyeth narrowed his focus to topics within these two geographical parameters, making lifelong subjects of families with whom he cultivated lasting relationships. The Olsons and the Kuerners, a German immigrant family in Chadds Ford, and the homes they inhabited and the farms they tended [FIG. 9], became Wyeth's most frequent inspiration over his and their lifetimes. Wyeth became a fixture in those households (and several others), setting up studios in spare bedrooms and coming and going as he pleased, so that he became a fly-on-the-wall observer and recorder of the families' daily rituals. He painted Christina Olson and Karl Kuerner numerous times and became a close confidant of both [FIGS. 10–12]. A connoisseur of real-life entertainment before the advent of reality television, Wyeth made himself privy to his subjects' most private moments; in one painting he depicted two of his Chadds Ford friends sleeping, having come upon them very early one morning as he crept through their house [FIG. 13].



FIG. 7. Andrew Wyeth (American, 1917–2009). *Christina Olson*. 1947. Tempera on panel, 33 x 25" (83.8 x 63.5 cm). CURTIS GALLERIES, MINNEAPOLIS