

Andrew Wyeth, Lobster #7*, 1940, Watercolor on paper, Wyeth Foundation for American Art Collection.*

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Wyeth’s reverent abandon

by Franklin Einspruch

On “Spectacular Freedom,” at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

In 1883, *The New York Times* related a story from decades earlier: Ingres, coffee in hand, approached Delacroix at a party and harangued him about the primacy of drawing over color. In his vehemence, he spilled the beverage on himself. (Delacroix was gracious about it, remarking after Ingres stormed out that “Talent is apt to be exclusive: narrowness is often the condition of its existence.”) On the occasion of “Spectacular Freedom: Andrew Wyeth and the Modern American Watercolor” at the Cleveland Museum of Art, I contend that the stylistic differences between Wyeth

and Jackson Pollock are roughly as wide as those between Ingres and Delacroix—evident, certainly, but not philosophically irreconcilable.[1] Ingres and Delacroix revived a sixteenth-century battle between *disegno* and *colorito* that has long been obviated. The time has come likewise to lay to rest the arguments about representation and abstraction that dominated discussion about art for much of the twentieth century and cling to contemporary thought like barnacles. “Spectacular Freedom” presents Wyeth as a master slinger of liquid paint, enacting a liberation narrative about American art. The similarities with Pollock may end there, but the roots intertwine.

Saying so contradicts a half century of modernist wisdom, I realize. But it should have been apparent that Wyeth and Pollock had more in common with one another than Nam June Paik had with either of them when video art emerged as a viable genre. Nevertheless, critical consensus that Wyeth was at once a failed modernist and a failed traditionalist began to harden in 1970, when Hilton Kramer, who went on to cofound this magazine, accused Wyeth along with Salvador Dalí of perpetrating a “visual charade in which the public—a public terrified of experiencing any emotion it has never experienced before—will recognize its own most cherished yearnings.” *The New Criterion*’s Executive Editor James Panero, noting in 2017 in these pages that such critics as Robert Hughes, Robert Storr, Peter Schjeldahl, Dave Hickey, and Michael Kimmelman had followed suit, offered his own judgment: “In his lack of authenticity and his chilly sentiment, Wyeth was decidedly unmodern.”



Andrew Wyeth, Storm Clouds*, 1938, Watercolor on paper, Wyeth Foundation for American Art Collection.*

I contribute to *The New Criterion* at James's pleasure, and I hope he'll forgive me for disagreeing. Just as he says, the temperas around which Wyeth's reputation is constructed have a performative aspect to them. Wyeth was not living in the subfusc wooden interiors depicted in so many of his images. His bucolic scenes were undoubtedly staged, and they waxed anachronistic. But I question whether his insistence on painting them disqualified him from modernity. Jean Giono was not quietly farming the Provençal landscape with hand tools when he wrote *The Song of the World*, published the same year, 1934, that Hitler made himself Führer. Giono famously growled, "The present time disgusts me, even to describe." It would have been a loss to the arts if contemporaneity and the urban subject had been permanently declared the defining features of modernism, as they had been for Baudelaire and Manet.

There are precedents for modernists plucking a moment from the timeline and preserving it as an idealized subject: Picasso's and de Chirico's neoclassicism, Marino Marini's Pomona series, almost any garden scene painted by a post-Impressionist in the midst of France's industrialization. It's not inaccurate to knock Wyeth's famed *Christina's World* for inauthenticity and chilliness, but a typical Puvis de Chavannes is as concocted and icy. (I adore Puvis anyway. The Cleveland Museum has an excellent one, *Summer*, from 1891.) Besides, John Wilmerding, in the catalogue for a Wyeth retrospective at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2006, wrote of the dry grasses in *Christina's World*, "That field is closer to Jackson Pollock than most people would like to admit."

The critical consensus on Wyeth, which the public ignored anyway, needs a vigorous shake. More key to the modernist project than style or subject is a certain attitude about materials, one that might be characterized as reverent abandon. Elaine de Kooning, in her meticulously reported "Andrew Wyeth Paints a Picture" (*ARTnews*, 1950)—something that only a painter could have written about another painter—observed that Wyeth's temperas were "completely different in style and method from the sweeping, almost abstract watercolors which he often makes in half an hour." The Wyeth of sweeping nigh abstractions emerges afresh in "Spectacular Freedom" thanks to Britany Salsbury, a curator of prints and drawings at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Salsbury initially protested to the Wyeth Foundation for American Art that she was a specialist in fin de siècle Parisian print portfolios, but that perspective was the very reason the foundation tapped her for what became "Spectacular Freedom." This is among the first museum exhibitions of Andrew Wyeth since the passing of the regime of Betsy Wyeth, his wife and in-house impresario, and an unprecedented exploration of the watercolors in the Wyeth Foundation holdings.

Betsy catalogued the watercolors either by title, usually assigned by her; as a "Study for" some other work; or with an alphanumeric code that indicated an unfinished or abandoned state. Salsbury's attention to this last class resulted in many watercolors' being framed and exhibited for the first time in Cleveland. For the most part, they are not B-sides. It's hard to determine why some of them were deemed not to make the cut. One untitled work from 1962 depicting an anchored dory in front of dogs on a distant hill has the stuff of an icon, with a faraway, cannily painted white canine meeting the

viewer's gaze while his friends play without heed.

The so-called studies, on the whole, are phenomenal. *Frog Hunters' Marsh, Study for Frog Hunters* (1941) evokes Shitao, the early Qing painter. Grass blades fly up out of the marsh in deft strokes; their shadows mark the sand with equal grace. Here and there, stems appear in the form of paper gouged with a knife or a brush handle.



Andrew Wyeth, Frog Hunters March, Study for Frog Hunters*, 1941, Watercolor on paper, Wyeth Foundation for American Art Collection.*

One believes that some of these might have been painted in a half hour, albeit by a gifted hand. They exude energy. *Winter, 1946 Study*, like most of the works in the show, uses a full sheet of paper. The initial moves upon it were profligate spills of raw umber. With forms of hedges and fenceposts pushed to near black, Wyeth attacked the darkness with a blunt point, leaving gestural cuts in the paint. One spots evidence of handprints and abrasions by sandpaper. This is what I mean by "reverent abandon." The artist clearly loves his materials. He just as clearly relishes their breaking points. Kramer and Hickey disdained what they called, each in his own idiom, the stercoraceousness of the Wyeth palette. But if one affords Wyeth's brown the same regard as Taiga's black (there's a great Taiga *Hanshan and Shide* from around 1745–76 up at the Cleveland Museum as well), it too can be seen to contain a fullness of hue.



Andrew Wyeth, Untitled*, 1940, Watercolor on paper, Wyeth Foundation for American Art Collection*

Betsy, so the history goes, characterized the palette of the early watercolors as "corny." They were, perhaps, a little too indebted to Homer, Hopper, and Sargent. Painting in winter solved the problem and prompted Wyeth to locate his own voice with respect to the medium. But he did not remain mired in French onion soup. In an untitled work from 1940 of a woman wearing a white sweater seated in a field, a stripe of alizarin crimson crosses a hilltop that could have come out of a Nolde. The exhibition also displays a striking arrangement of four lobster paintings from 1940 in which the creature, green, blue, and plum violet, floats in a riot of colors and inky darks splashed across each paper.

By way of context, “Spectacular Freedom” hangs the watercolors *Boy with Anchor* (by Winslow Homer, 1873) and *Lighthouse Village (also known as Cape Elizabeth)* (Edward Hopper, 1929), both from the Cleveland Museum’s holdings. It also features a lively John Marin watercolor, *West Point, Maine*, from 1914. I lingered over some curious details in the Marin, little shrubs with square leaves drawn in blue lines. Andrew’s father, the great illustrator N. C. Wyeth, was attracted to such maneuvers, and for a time made an attempt at a fine-art style that would have recalled Marguerite Zorach if it had succeeded. Andrew instinctively avoided them; “Talent is apt to be exclusive.” But the watercolors, and even the few temperas on display in “Spectacular Freedom,” evince consciousness of the abstract basis of the picture while serving the needs of figuration. That criticisms of his work solidified into dogma around 1970, when the bloom was fading from the rose of high modernism, indicates that some of the attendant anxieties concerned not the work itself, but its public reception. (Peter Schjeldahl wrote of Wyeth’s Helga pictures in 1989, “They are exotic to me in their own way—because they are so beloved by so many of my fellow Americans, with whom I empathize in many things but not this.”)

“Spectacular Freedom” offers a chance to set aside this history and follow along with a painter as he sits in the open air and puts his heart on the paper. That would form a just foundation for evaluating the rest of his work, whatever we might conclude.

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1. “Spectacular Freedom: Andrew Wyeth and the Modern American Watercolor” opened at the Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio, on September 20, 2026, and remains on view through January 18, 2027. ↩

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