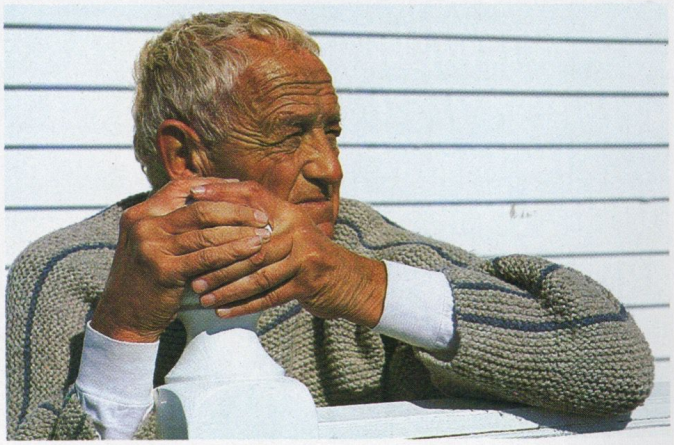




Betsy and Andrew Wyeth in Maine

A Sea Change for Their Island Lighthouse

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER RALSTON

To Betsy and Andrew Wyeth, the sea speaks a robust and splendid language for which they have a passionate affinity. It has inspired Mrs. Wyeth to restore a former lighthouse as a summer home on their Maine island and provided her husband with subject matter for some fifty paintings. BELOW: The Lantern Room, right, no longer sweeps its warning light across the water as it did for seventy-six years, but "when the moon is full," says Betsy Wyeth, "people coming up the path can see eight moons reflected in the windows." OPPOSITE: Foul-weather gear is always at hand beside the kitchen door. A brass whale serves as a door knocker. "We don't encourage people to drop in," Mrs. Wyeth comments, "so a sudden knock at the door can be unnerving!" Her collection of wooden buckets on the loft ladder was started twenty-five years ago with one labeled "Good Girl."







PRIVATE COLLECTION © 1985 ANDREW WYETH

OPPOSITE: In Andrew Wyeth's 1984 tempera *Boarding Party,* published here for the first time, a ship's mast and billowing sails loom outside a lighthouse window, evoking images of a boarding party of pirates. The actual room depicted in the painting is shown on the next page.

BELOW: Walls of the Watch Room are of brick plastered over, since fire was a constant danger when oil was used for the light. An American naval jacket from the War of 1812 is by the door. The whaleboat model on the worktable is complete with harpoons, oars, buckets and rope. In a glass case on the sea chest, left, is an American naval hat, circa 1800. Cast-iron stairway leads to the light tower.

RIGHT: A John Haley Bellamy carving of an eagle, in the upstairs hall, bears the Spanish-American War motto, a rallying cry after the sinking of the *Maine*, February 15, 1898.



THE FAIRY BOOKS ARE FULL of the fanciful, fearful creatures who know how to turn lead into gold, and children are encouraged to dwell on the inevitable turpitude of the alchemist with those unnatural powers. Didn't King Midas, whose touch turned everything into gold, almost end up dying of starvation—because (nice point) after all, he could not eat the food that, in his very mouth, turned into gold?

It is probably true that this century has seen the advent of alchemy. Picasso, sitting at a boîte on the Left Bank, could, if he had wished to do so, commandeer a pad and pencil and, with a few strokes, come up with a drawing which, passed along nonchalantly to his broker, would have had Picasso end up owning the whole bar, and who knows, maybe even the surrounding city block.

There is one such in America. His name is Andrew Wyeth. He ruins forever the myth that only greedy men dispose of such magical powers. Although a canvas (in fact, he uses panels) worth only a few dollars before he



puts his hands on it is worth a few hundred thousand dollars after he has played with (read: agonized over) it for a little while, he lives in overwhelming wholesomeness, and her name is Betsy Wyeth. He married her when he was twenty-two, she seventeen, and that was forty-six years ago. They do not tire of each other, because they do not tire each other, and just one expression of what they do with their energy is the lighthouse at Southern Island.

Characteristics (that is the word the Light Lists use to describe the object that keeps pilots from running their ships into the rocks):

1 Rev. ev. 30s (red)
Miles 13
Height of light above the sea 66
On the southwest side of the entrance
Northeast side of Southern Island
44 degrees 57.6 N, 69 degrees 11.1 W
Tower: white.
Shines over an arc of 149 degrees, from N 69 degrees eastward to South 38 degrees West

That was the technical description of the light on the main dwelling, a hundred yards from the shoreline. Closer to the water there was the bell tower. The bell was caused to sound insistently whenever there was fog.

In 1933 the Southern Island light was discontinued. That was before the age of electronic navigation aids, which so greatly relieve the pilot of dependence on lights and bells. But whoever makes such decisions ("Eliminate Light #3402") evidently calculated that closing up that particular facility was a modest contribution Maine could make to Depression economics. Accordingly, the resident keeper was retired or transferred, and the four and a half acres surrounding the building and the tower were sold.

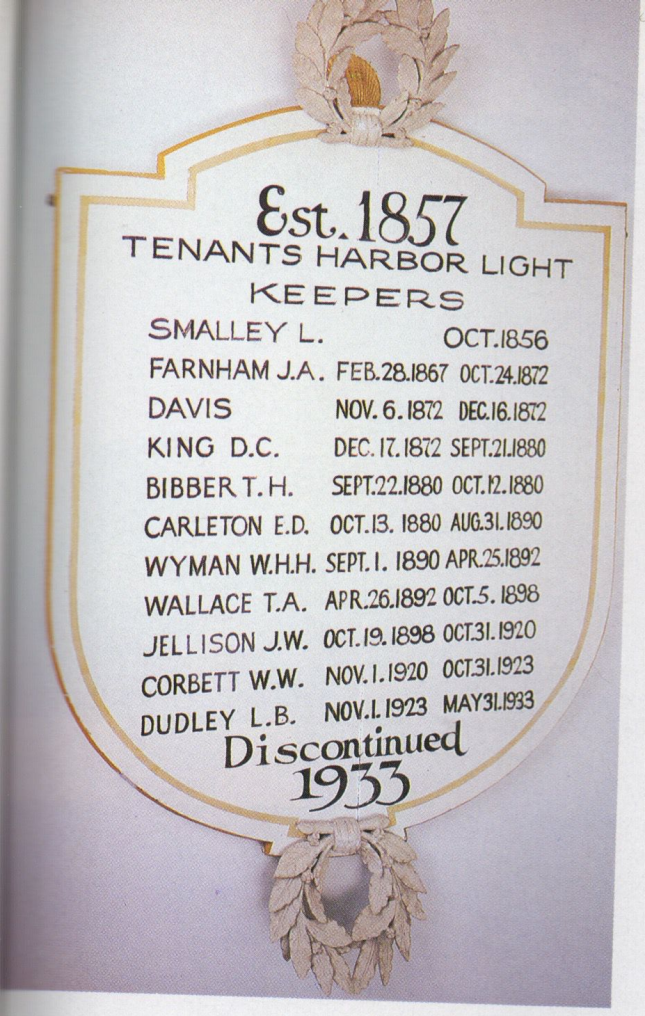
For a few years thereafter, informality reigned—until that day in 1978 when Betsy Wyeth, whose eyes had rested fondly, then longingly, then covetously on the acreage and the little island surrounding it, decided it would be hers, and his. And so they acquired it. Now they regularly leave their principal summer home in nearby Cushing in order to weekend there; indeed, they go to their lighthouse

OPPOSITE: Andrew Wyeth calls his painting above the fireplace in the main room a self-portrait, but his wife, for whom he painted it as her sixtieth birthday present, has named it *Dr. Syn*, after a pirate-turned-vicar portrayed by George Arliss in a 1938 film. Never exhibited, the painting is taken ashore every winter for safekeeping. The naval jacket is the same one shown in the Watch Room. BELOW: The dining area served as the model for Andrew Wyeth's *Boarding Party*. Distinctive bell candlesticks are among Betsy Wyeth's collection on the corner table.











ABOVE RIGHT: "Visitors coming up from the landing are first puzzled, then enchanted, by the sight of a woman in the Lantern Room," says Betsy Wyeth. "Mrs. Muir," as she named the hollow lead figure found in an antiques shop, "fits into the space that once held the lighthouse lamp as if she had been made for it." It is in the Lantern Room that Betsy Wyeth's famous Sun-Kissed Wild Strawberry Jam is "cooked" by the sun. ABOVE LEFT: The Keeper's List, found in one of the outbuildings under a pile of hay, has been embellished with carved wood laurel wreaths that once were wall brackets. OPPOSITE: An Italian wooden figure of a man in tattered clothing, a birthday gift from Betsy Wyeth to her husband, stands in a bedroom window over a sea chest.

whenever they feel like going there, because, once there, they are surrounded by the sea and by nothing and nobody else, unless they feel like entertaining.

Paradoxically, at Southern Island the social impulse is most pronounced. There, in candlelight, they receive their guests, and it is said that laughter dominates those evenings: that and the running sea that surrounds them. When time comes to close the evening there is no dearth of plausible reasons to close it: The fog may be coming in; the little motorboat can't be delayed any longer, for the operator of it must get home. And so they all walk, or ride in the Jeep, the quarter-mile to the little dock, and the Wyeths go back to their quite extraordinary house.

Extraordinary not because it is unconventional. "Will your autobiography be conventional?" the young interviewer for the *Paris Review* asked Evelyn Waugh, who sat back in his bed with a magnum of champagne. "*Very* conventional!" Waugh growled. The Wyeths aren't *that* way, but when they took over the lighthouse, aesthetic austerity was in the saddle. Imagine a musician buying a house without, anywhere visible, a piano, a violin, a radio, a phonograph. Actually, one can imagine *exactly* that. Okay, go on to imagine Erasmus in a lakeside cottage without books. Well, Thoreau did exactly that.

And now imagine an artist, for whom colors are the bread of spiritual and commercial life, in etiolated surroundings. Well, there are exactly two pictures in the lighthouse; one is a Grand Guignol painting by Andrew, a birthday present for Betsy. A self-portrait, he calls it—without any flesh on. Yes, he even did an X-ray study of his skull to make sure he got it exactly right. Wearing an old navy jacket, and peering out to sea: the dutiful rear admiral who starved on duty, looking out for the pirates. That's one of the pictures in the house; the other is a small oil painting of battling pirates, by Howard Pyle.

Oh, there are three beautiful Bellamy carvings, one a gold eagle, exquisitely crafted. And there are red cushions, and scrubbed blue floors, and the kitchen pottery and utensils are color-frisky. But the understated idea is plain: *Si monumentum requiris, circumspice.* If you wish to see a

Betsy Wyeth's eyes had rested fondly, then longingly, then covetously on the acreage and the island surrounding it.

monument in praise of color at this geographical point on earth—why, look about you!

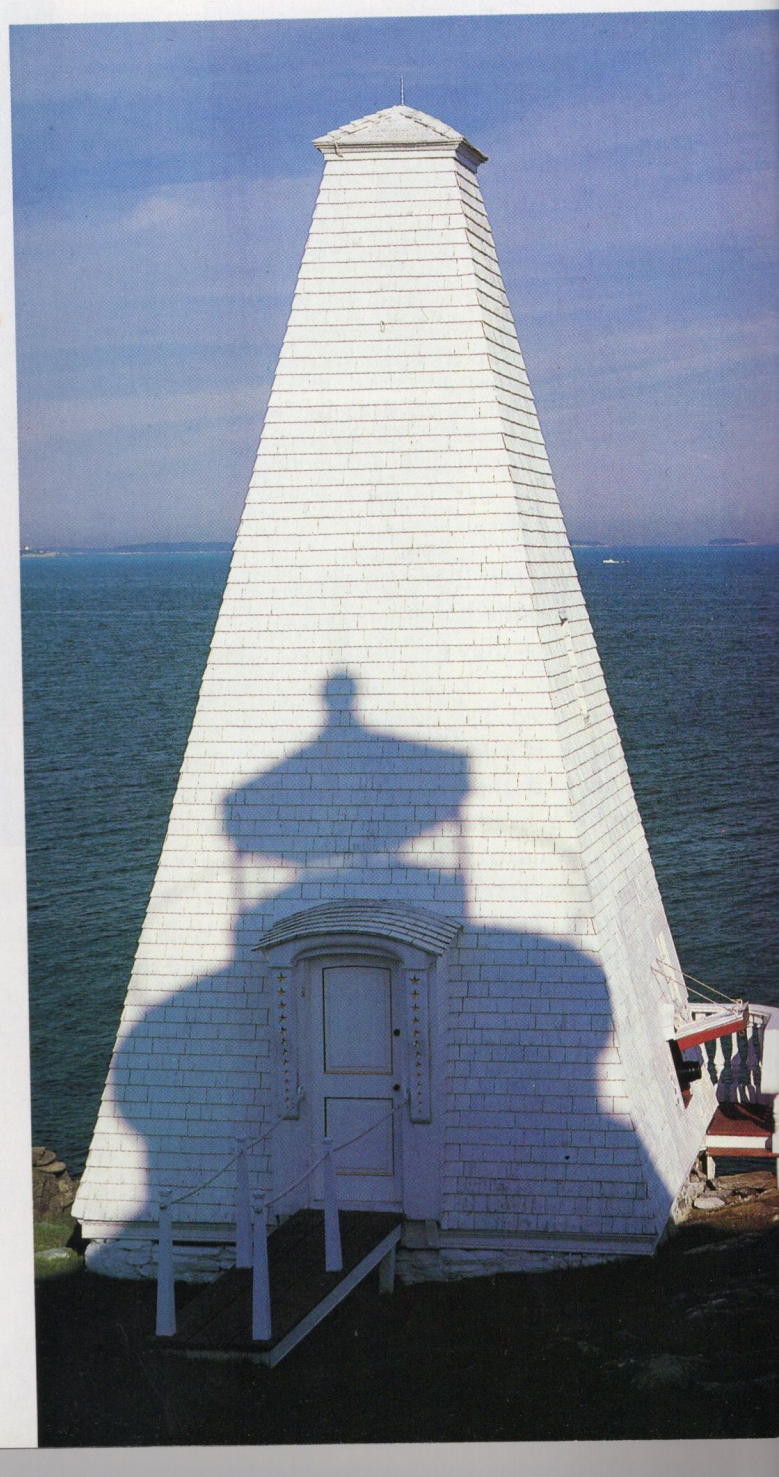
Far away (fourteen miles, and visible on clear days) on the horizon, southeast, is Monhegan Island. There the Wyeths' hugely talented son Jamie lives, and paints his wondrously detailed canvases. Your eyes, moving counterclockwise, detect Metinic Island five miles offshore; and then, easing northward, you view the grand sweep, the great entrance to Penobscot Bay. There isn't much else you could hope for in a seaside promontory.

Is the lighthouse point so windswept that natural growth is stultified? No, indeed!—Betsy is instantly reassuring. Left alone, the island would sprout spruce trees chokingly in a few years. It needs to be cleared constantly. But there are certain inclinations the island does discourage, among them any idea of lingering on into winter. Because, you see, the pipes one day will suddenly freeze, and that—Betsy smiles—is a definitive act of nature against which there are few effective defenses.

And then, too, the ground is not made for sinking in handy septic systems. Even electricity was a problem. The Wyeths had to bring in a cable, and that was a job that taxed all the resources of the formidable, resourceful woman who runs her husband's art world and their three homes, knits, supervises catalogues, and is the author of a book for children. It took ages, was most awfully expensive, and every year the cable needs pruning, among other reasons to remove the great squids that are attracted to it. But on the other hand, the frogmen who attend to these chores come up with the best scallops in the Atlantic!

Do they have a telephone in the lighthouse? A conventional telephone line brought in from the mainland was simply too much, so they use a dish, with a transponder, connected with their telephone in Cushing, and get instant service. There is the problem of how to call their principal house on the mainland, which has the same number. That required extracting from the phone company its darkest





ABOVE RIGHT: "The sea is everywhere," says Betsy Wyeth, and nowhere is its presence stronger than in the bell tower. History buff Andrew Wyeth designed the shipshape room, a scaled-down version of Lord Nelson's quarters on the *Victory*. The cannon's muzzle is thrust through the partially open gunport. Snugly stowed on ceiling racks are the cannoneer's equipment for loading and cleaning. RIGHT: The bell tower, thirty feet high, is shaped to withstand the force of the North Atlantic gales. Andrew Wyeth designed the hand-carved balustrade.



"I love everything about this house," Betsy Wyeth observes. "Just walking into it refreshes me. It's like being on a ship—the brass polished, everything swept clean." She sums it up with complete felicity: "I love all the patterns of our life here."

secret, namely what are the three magical digits one can dial in order to cause one's own telephone number to ring. Betsy Wyeth laughs, a hint of self-effacement there: It took her probably five minutes to get that secret. It would have taken Andrew—quiet spoken, reticent—months and months to wheedle it out of the authorities. They savor such triumphs as others savor the Nobel Prize.

But since so much of his work is associated with the sea, and specifically with this site, where is his studio?

Well, it is—somewhere. Mysteries aren't made of exactly where it is. The managing editor of the *Christian Science Monitor*, seated in his great mahogany office in Boston in the thirties, was asked (legend has it) by the young job applicant freshly graduated from college whether the editor minded if he lit a cigarette? "No," the editor said. "Of course, no one ever has." One doubts anyone would ask Andrew Wyeth where he goes to paint. Could it be that even Betsy doesn't know? Again, one wouldn't ask; in fact, such is the informal yet utterly secure atmosphere at Southern Island that one suppresses even natural curiosity. *Don't ask*, Rule Number One. *Don't wonder about it*, Corollary Rule Number Two.

King Midas was relieved of his curse by bathing in the Pactolus River. Which is why it turned to gold. Betsy and Andrew Wyeth's island in Maine is surrounded by gold: the water, the air and the sky. And there is no surprise whatever in this. It's as it should be, about the old lighthouse, pulsating now not with 1 Rev. ev. 30s (red), but with human energy, humor, genius and the Wyeths' devotion to each other and to their surroundings. □