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Art: Andrew Wyeth's Stunning Secret

By Richard Corliss

Andrew and Betsy Wyeth are the picture of relaxed domesticity as they welcome a visitor to the lighthouse they call home on Southern Island, a 22-acre retreat off the coast of Maine. Tanned and fit, with the kind of face the Romans used to impress on coins, Wyeth, 69, wears a beige sailor's sweater and beige twill pants; his silver-blond hair is closely cropped, like any good sea captain's. Wyeth has been out painting this morning, as he has done every morning for 50 years. "I'm like a prostitute," he says, laughing. "I'm never off duty." As he chats with TIME's Cathy Booth in the living room, Betsy, 64, bustles about merrily nearby, rattling the dishes and deflecting phone calls intended for her husband. When the two pose for pictures, they ham it up with gusto. He kneels to propose marriage, and she says, "Here we are, a couple of old survivors."

They are indeed: 46 years together as husband and wife. "I was a cradle snatcher," he notes gleefully of the woman he met when she was 17. The commitment they display toward each other is wholly intertwined in their shared devotion to his work -- the spare, meticulous, compassionate vision that has made Wyeth both a beloved icon to American museumgoers and a nettlesome anachronism to the art establishment. So the Wyeths are girded to ride out, with grace and tweaking good humor, the storm of publicity that broke around them last week, created by a score of press releases sent out to advertise a scoop in Art & Antiques magazine.

It was some scoop. For 15 years, from 1970 to 1985, Wyeth had labored in secret on an enormous collection of works: 246 in all, including sketches, studies, drawings, 32 watercolors, twelve drybrush paintings and five temperas. Not even his wife was aware of the magnitude of the undertaking. Moreover, almost all of them were of a middle-aged German whom Wyeth identified only as Helga and who lived near the Wyeths' winter home in Chadds Ford, Pa. Artist and model met in various places over the years, and the resulting works, many of them nudes, are streaked with an intensity both clinical and erotic. Here was the hidden treasure of a major artist -- the most hallowed member of America's reigning art dynasty -- displaying new vigor late in his career.

But the secrets piled on top of secrets lent a lurid glow that was not in the paintings. And the Wyeths, inadvertently or intentionally, added to the titillation. His decision to try to protect the privacy of Helga made the suspicious more so. And Art & Antiques reports that when Betsy Wyeth was asked what the works were about and why her husband had kept them secret, she took a long, pensive pause and replied,

"Love." Did Betsy mean that the artist, known for his continuing and intimate relationships with the subjects of his paintings, was having an affair with his model? Or could it be that Betsy's public hint of that affair was part of an elaborate strategy to woo media attention and thus inflate both the price of the works and the value of Wyeth's middlebrow eminence? There were no immediate, incontrovertible answers, but the story's hold on the popular imagination proved that Wyeth is still the one artist whose style and personality can tantalize America. Through cunning or coincidence, Wyeth is a singular mixture: old master and master showman.

In 1948, Christina's World -- Wyeth's landscape of a farmhouse, a hill and the tortured girlish figure at the hill's base -- became an indelible part of postwar America's visual vocabulary and made the 31-year-old son of Illustrator N.C. Wyeth a star. As it happens, Christina Olson, Wyeth's neighbor in Cushing, Me., was no girl (she was 55 at the time), no delicate sylph. She did not even pose for her most famous painting; the figure's torso is Betsy's. But the work was honest in its essentials, and it established Wyeth's world as a place of physical grandeur and psychic pain. No wonder Betsy compares her husband to Ingmar Bergman. The American painter and the Swedish filmmaker are both stern visionaries whose art is based not on effusion but on reduction -- experience purified, like the flayed skin of a penitent. Both document man's spiritual solitude. Both listen for the eloquence in things left unsaid, the static electricity in gestures repressed. In their work you notice the flint first; you have to get closer to feel the fire.

Christina's World also helped publicize Wyeth's obsessive fidelity to the people he painted. As the artist put it last week, "The more I'm with an object -- whether it's a model or a piece of the country -- the more I begin to see what I've been blind to. You start to get what's beneath it. You see deeper within it." He used Christina and her younger brother Alvaro as subjects from 1940 to 1968; Anna and Karl Kuerner, Wyeth's neighbors in Chadds Ford, from 1948 to 1979; teenage Siri Erickson, another Cushing resident, from 1967 to 1972. The paintings of her were also withheld, until she turned 21, and their release in 1975 caused a little of the same stir that the Helgas have. Siri, now 32 and the mother of two girls, recalls no embarrassment or awe about posing nude for Wyeth when she was 13. "He would get totally involved in his work. It was as if you were a tree," she says. "He's a normal, everyday person. He does paint good, but he's just Andy."

A man of studied reclusiveness, Wyeth once described himself as "a secretive bastard." He destroys much of his work or paints over the temperas. "Sometimes," he says, "there are four or five pictures under the painting." He claims he has even placed some watercolors in metal tubes and buried them. "I think of Captain Kidd's buried treasure. They may find it and they may not." But Wyeth had never buried a treasure so rich, or for so long, as the Helga booty. According to one source, the artist would roll a Helga picture inside some other work, then transport it to a climate-controlled vault at the Brandywine River Museum in Chadds Ford; only he had the key. Somehow he managed to keep model and wife completely apart. Though Helga is employed as a cook and housekeeper by Wyeth's sister Carolyn, who also has homes in Chadds Ford and Maine, Betsy says she never visits her sister-in-law. Says Betsy of Helga: "I never met her, ever."

In May 1985, Wyeth finally referred to the cache in an interview with Art & Antiques (see box). That summer Betsy met her husband at the airport in Rockland, Me., and as their eggplant-colored Stutz Blackhawk negotiated the trip homeward, Wyeth told her his story. "I remember the dip in the road," Betsy says. "He said, 'Darling, I have something to tell you. I've given an interview to an interesting man from Art & Antiques. I mentioned some paintings that no one knows about. And that's not fair to you.' And he told me he had been doing a series. All I really remember is that dip in the road." Both deny that he was motivated by any sudden fear of death, as some early accounts had it. Nor, says Betsy, was she completely shocked by the news. "He's a very secret person. He doesn't pry in my life and I don't pry in his. And it's worth it. Look at the paintings. Oh God! The paintings are remarkable. I almost dropped dead because of the quality of the work and how many there were."

During the 15 years, he had been finishing and selling other paintings at his usual rate of two or three temperas a year. He had even allowed hints of the Helga collection. Various friends now believe they saw one or another of the paintings. In 1980 The Knapsack was used on a poster to promote a French exhibition of Wyeths. Three of the Helgas were sold in recent years to various collectors, and he gave Lovers to Betsy in 1982, though she did not realize it was part of such a vast collection.

Soon after revealing the existence of the whole group to his wife, who is his undisputed business manager, he gave her two more as presents. They decided to try quietly to find a buyer who would keep the remaining 240 works together. They found him nearby. Leonard E.B. Andrews, a Dallas-born publisher of 19 newsletters, including the National Bankruptcy Report and the Swine Flu Claim & Litigation Reporter, had a house in Newtown Square, Pa., had occasionally had dinner with the Wyeths, and already owned six of his works. After spending two hours with the collection, Andrews agreed to pay a multimillion-dollar sum for all of them and their copyrights. Not previously known as a major collector, he plans to lend the Helgas to museums and, as if she were the Rambo of art troves, he is even talking of marketing images of her on posters and calendars. (Told of this plan, Betsy mutters, "I hope not.") Andrews rapturously describes his acquisition as a "national treasure. Wyeth will go down -- I hope he stays up a long time -- but history will remember him as the incredibly finest artist to come out of America in the 20th century."

Whatever posterity's verdict, Andrews is not alone in his enthusiasm. "I couldn't believe it, they were so powerful and beautiful," waxes J. Carter Brown, director of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, who next May is planning to mount the first Helga exhibition. "You are looking over the shoulder of a great master at work." Thomas Hoving, editor in chief of Connoisseur magazine and the leading impresario of fine-art hyperbole, proclaims that the group is "unique in art history -- to suddenly have before you this monumental body of great American painting. It's a mighty poke, a sharp stick between the eyes of those who dismiss Wyeth as nostalgic. It's his weapon, his dissent. He's shouting, 'No one will ever write me out of history.' "

But there is nothing like unanimity in the assessments of Wyeth's stature as a modern American artist. Theodore Stebbins, curator of paintings at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, puts Wyeth "in a category all by himself. Being what he is brings up debate on what art is: realism vs. abstraction. He is a beautiful

draftsman, a brilliant watercolorist, a very fine painter. In his field, Wyeth is an outstanding figure." Many critics in the Manhattan art scene, however, find him stubbornly irrelevant. "Wyeth's philosophy is Poor Richard's Almanack," sniffs Henry Geldzahler, former curator of 20th century art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "His skies have no vapor trails, his people wear no wristwatches. He is the Williamsburg of American painting -- charming, especially when seen from a helicopter."

And, of course, the art world is buzzing with speculation about what is not on the canvas. Friends openly debate whether Wyeth is philandering or faithful. Why did he keep the collection hidden from his wife? And why did he wait so long to release it? Says Artist George Segal: "There's an anguish any artist has between wanting to keep private and wanting to show. It's internal warfare. Showing new paintings is like dropping your pants in public."

But now for a moment ignore the tattle, forget the blurbs and look at the pictures. The hubbub of controversy is stilled in the silence that these disquieting portraits demand. Imputations of Wyeth's motives are lost in the dark nexus where passion meets craft. Speculation on the course of his relationship with Helga turns to fascination with the development of graphic ideas and emotions in studies for final works. In the first sketch for Overflow, Helga is a thin, pretty, sleeping girl; the suggestive lines idealize her. And yet she breathes with youth and possibility. When the series is fleshed out, weight and age attach themselves to her, and by the time Wyeth commits the image to paint she looks calcified, statuesque, a squaw totem placed on its side. But no: there is a hint of life and movement. Helga's hip has curled out of its confining sheet, perhaps in response to the sound of the cascade outside her window that gives the work its title. Following the gestation from sketch to drybrush is like flipping through a family album of Atget X rays.

In Lovers, all the movement is in nature. Sunlight and a breeze rush in through the window; a leaf has just sailed past the sill and stops for a moment to have its picture taken. Helga is perched on a stool, her body erect, her fingers splayed under her haunches, her head averted toward her shadow on the wall, or toward an unseen lover. The work's title teases meaning out of enigma. Who are the lovers? Helga and the unseen figure? The model and her shadow? The artist and his model?

Every artist undresses his subject, whether human or still life. It is his business to find essences in surfaces, and what more attractive and challenging surface than the skin around a soul? No proof of cupidity there. This, at least, was the feeling of Wyeth's fiercely protective neighbors in Chadds Ford as they were besieged by reporters last week. The locals understand the artist-model relationship, and they figure they know Andy Wyeth. So dismissive are they of any charge of infidelity that they are willing to entertain -- and be entertained by -- the possibility of a Wyeth scam. "This whole thing could be a ploy," said Karl J. Kuerner III, who lives on top of Kuerner Hill, where Wyeth frequently sketched his grandparents. An employee at the Brandywine called it the "best stunt I've ever seen."

Despite the professions of ignorance by most of Helga's neighbors, reporters eventually found her house across the road from the Kuerners', learned that her name is Helga Testorf, that she is now 54 and that she is married with four children and two grandchildren. (A daughter, Carmen, figures in a few works in the

Helga series.) Her teenage son has been guarding the property and turning away reporters, and the tension weighing on him was visible. He was near tears as he said he wanted to protect his mother from being hurt. Told she was the subject for a famous artist's work, he said, "It doesn't do me any good, does it?" Helga, a fugitive from her sudden notoriety, was not to be seen. Carolyn Wyeth describes this quiet, almost reclusive woman as extremely upset by the tumult but flattered by the paintings: "She thinks they're wonderful." The neighbors' sympathy for her, though, is no match for their affection for Andy Wyeth. What he did for love, they say, is paint.

One art professional who knows both Wyeths finds multiple meanings in Betsy's use of the word: "It means his love of creating and being an artist. It means his self-esteem and his need to break new ground. It means the love of theater and drama, which has always been a part of his life. It does not mean that he was having an affair with Helga. Oh, yes, Betsy knew that using ; the word love would make the wags wag. They both have a marvelous way of teasing. But if he were having an affair, she would be the last one to go public about it. She would be protective of herself. And he would not want it to be presumed that he was having an affair with any of his models. When he finds a model relationship that fires up creative energy, he finds that very very exciting. And that's all that happened with Helga."

Back on Southern Island, Wyeth has turned away most requests for interviews, but did meet with TIME's Booth last Thursday. He declines to discuss Helga or her paintings, but he wants to clarify Betsy's use of the word love in relation to them. "People are going to think, particularly with this group of paintings, that it's a sexual love. It's not. We think of love only as two human beings in love. But it isn't in love. It's love. It's love toward an object. It can be a love toward those shells," he says, pointing nearby. "It's a love of warmth, of finding something precious. It's like a wonderful animal, a dog that will come up and sit in your lap and you pet its head. This is something we've lost. A lot of people will take my wife's statement wrong, but I think it's very beautiful and real."

The week's turmoil has punctured the couple's routine, such as it is. "There are no rules in my work," he says. "I don't really have studios. I wander around -- around people's attics, out in fields, in cellars, any place I find that excites me. I dream a lot. I do more painting when I'm not painting. It's in the subconscious. I begin to see an emotion building up in my mind before I ever put it down on the panel. Sometimes when there is great tension, or lots taking place, I may get an idea or an emotion, and it hits me strong. It can be a tree, or the tone of a shadow of clouds on the ground, or light on the side of a hill, or light on a white surface. Sometimes I do my best work after the models have gone away, purely from memory. And that's what makes me laugh when critics say I'm photographic. I'm not photographic at all. Nothing against the camera, but it doesn't work with me."

An artist is part camera, of course: he is the seer, adjusting technical and emotional focus to find a unique approach to the thing seen. Equally, he is reluctant to open the aperture on objects of his inspiration. In two hours, Wyeth has not mentioned Helga's name, referring to her only once as the "young lady." About the Helga series he will say only, "I feel -- not * all -- but there are a number of paintings in there that are as penetrating as anything I've ever done." Asked if he thinks it comprises his best work, Wyeth stares out

toward Penobscot Bay and replies, "I won't say it's my best work, but its intensity . . . well, I don't think I can answer that."

Betsy's laugh precedes her as she joins her husband. The last phone call was from their son Jamie, the third generation of Wyeth artists. "There must be some awful things said about us," she mock-confides to Wyeth. Andrew's mood clears instantly, and he nods toward their inquisitive guest: "She asked me all about our sex life." And what did you say? Betsy wants to know. "Twice weakly," he winks in reply. "Do you know how to spell it?"

They stand outside in the haze, on the balding knoll where their house rests. The trees list permanently to the north, made arthritic by the wind. Figures in a Wyeth landscape -- except for the yardarm, with flourishing skull and crossbones, that towers wickedly behind the house. In a moment the artist is off on another ramble, toward a new attic or field or relationship or controversy. More than likely, he will wander back to Betsy. She calls Wyeth "you old pirate"; he must know she is the anchor.

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