

# **EVERY LEAF & TWIG: ANDREW WYETH'S BOTANICAL IMAGINATION**

In the lore of the Wyeth family, the birth of Andrew Wyeth (1917-2009) 100 years to the day after influential nature writer Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) meant the two men shared a common spirit. Just as Thoreau celebrated the often-overlooked rhythms of “every leaf and twig” in his 1854 book *Walden: or, Life in the Woods*, Wyeth developed a painting practice grounded in time spent alone outdoors, steeping himself in the two distinct ecosystems that defined his life: the Brandywine Valley and mid-coast Maine.

The exhibition focuses on an underrecognized aspect of Wyeth's place-based practice: his intimate and evocative depictions of individual specimens of plant life in a remarkable group of watercolors, most of which have never been exhibited. His portraits of plants are poetic reimaginings rather than scientific illustrations, and through these works, Wyeth engaged the history and extended practice of botanical art, drawing on key inspirations like Albrecht Dürer. The unique perspective of the Brandywine Museum of Art, as one half of an organization that includes the natural lands preservation work of the Brandywine Conservancy, has shaped our understanding

of Wyeth as an artist uncommonly sensitive to the fragile systems we inhabit. The insights these powerful works offer are timely, as rapidly changing growing conditions are impacting the natural subjects that inspired him.

This installation, consisting entirely of Wyeth's Pennsylvania work, complements an earlier linked presentation of his Maine botanical work at the Farnsworth Art Museum in Rockland, Maine. The exhibition's catalogue bridges the Pennsylvania and Maine contexts for Wyeth's output on this subject. All works on view are by Andrew Wyeth and are drawn from the Andrew & Betsy Wyeth Collection of the Wyeth

Foundation for American Art, the support of which has made possible this exhibition and its catalogue.

## **ART AND A CHANGING BRANDYWINE VALLEY**

The subjects that Andrew Wyeth responded to in his visionary botanical watercolors are already changing due to human impact on the Brandywine Valley ecosystem during and since his lifetime. Works like *Along the Brandywine Stream* take on quite another resonance when viewed through the lens of the catastrophic flooding in September 2021. Hurricane Ida's record

precipitation met with a Brandywine-Christina Watershed that development pressures had made less capable of absorbing and redirecting sudden downpours, despite efforts by the Brandywine Conservancy and regional partners that have collectively preserved more than 30% of the watershed. The placid stream kissing the trunk of a tree in his artwork rose no fewer than twenty-one feet, with impacts that are still being felt in the surrounding area. Wyeth's work on these walls reflects his comprehension of the delicate system of relationships in the natural world to which he was uncommonly sensitive, a model of perception that will be essential to

preserving these subjects for many years to come.

The Brandywine Conservancy & Museum of Art was founded in 1967 to preserve the remarkable artistic legacy of the region and to protect its natural resources and beauty. The Conservancy has now preserved more than 70,000 acres of land and is leading the Brandywine Flood Study in partnership with a regional consortium of water resources organizations in order to more fully understand the causes of the 2021 flood and attempt to mitigate future such events, which are expected to be ever more frequent. *Every Leaf & Twig* was developed through conversations between Museum and

Conservancy staff and brings to bear the perspectives of both halves of this unique organization, for which art and conservation are inextricably linked.

*Along the Brandywine Stream, Study for  
Summer Freshet*

1942

Watercolor on paper





A superlative example of Wyeth's early botanical work, *Along the Brandywine Stream* shows the infinite variety of texture and pattern he found in plant life, in this case a buttonwood, or sycamore, tree on the edge of the Brandywine Creek. Conservancy staff note that this species is especially resilient in floodplains and is frequently used in riparian restoration efforts.

*Secret*

2008

Watercolor on paper



*Secret* is a prime example of the connections between Wyeth's work and that of fifteenth-century German artist Albrecht Dürer. His *Large Piece of Turf*, which Wyeth named as a work he particularly admired, is foundational to the making of a work like *Secret*; both revel in the subtly shifting colors and forms that one can find in so ordinary a subject as wild grasses. The Wyeths' personal library, now part of the research collection of the Brandywine's new Andrew & Betsy Wyeth Study Center, includes many volumes on Dürer's work that show the evidence of frequent reading.

*Low Limb – First Version*

1956

Watercolor on paper



Wyeth found this subject, a beech tree, a short walk from his studio on the property that had belonged to his father, N.C. Wyeth.

This site is now owned by the Brandywine Museum of Art and open to the public.

Colleagues in the Brandywine Conservancy note that beech trees are one of the only species in this region that hold their leaves through the winter, known as marcescence.

This would have made them especially compelling subjects for Wyeth's brush in the cold months of the year.

*Untitled*

2000

Watercolor on paper



This never before exhibited late work is a classic example of Wyeth's visionary botanical practice. By zooming in rather than out, this artist best known for sweeping, psychologically complex temperas depicts a transporting composition of color, light, and line that verges on abstraction. While accurate identification of the underlying plant matter was hardly the point for Wyeth, Conservancy staff speculate he was referencing an American sweet gum tree with a honeysuckle vine running through its leaves.

*Apples on a Bough, Study for Before Picking*

1942

Drybrush watercolor on paper





*Blackberry Branch, Study for Blackberry  
Picker*

1943

Drybrush watercolor on paper



*Tulip Pods*

1973

Watercolor on paper



Using the forms of a tulip tree near his father's studio, Wyeth evokes a dark, mysterious scene with bone-like structures. Conservancy staff observe that this species' abundant seed production, relative resistance to deer and introduced pests, and toleration of warmer climates mean that without intervention, the tulip tree will become more dominant in our woodlands in the coming years while species diversity will decrease.

*Road Cut Study*

1940

Pencil on paper



*Blackberry Picker Study*

1943

Watercolor and ink on paper



*Buttonwood Leaf*

1981

Drybrush watercolor on paper



*Untitled*

1937

Watercolor and ink on paper



This early depiction of mistletoe on a live oak tree was made on a trip to South Carolina, a rare example of a Wyeth work beyond the regions of Pennsylvania and Maine.

Conservancy staff observe that the holiday romance associations of mistletoe are a bit odd considering that the plant is a hemiparasite, robbing its host tree of nutrients.



*Buttonwood Study for The Hunter*

1943

Drybrush watercolor on paper



Wyeth later recalled of this work that he had scaled the tree, the same one featured in the tempera *Pennsylvania Landscape* on view at the end of this gallery, to paint its top and – startled when a siren sounded – nearly fell off. The tree's bark and leaves inspired an immersive reflection on pattern and texture.

*Osage Hedge, Study for Roasted Chestnuts*

1956

Watercolor on paper



*Untitled*

1962

Watercolor on paper



*Skunk Cabbage – Fourth Version*

1953

Watercolor on paper



Many of the Wyeth's botanical works from the colder half of the year that he spent in Pennsylvania respond to the plants that maintained their interesting summer forms into the winter or were among the earliest to bloom in the spring. Skunk cabbage, which earned its name from a unique scent meant to attract pollinators, is an example of the latter. Conservancy staff note that this plant's distinctive process of thermogenesis, which allows it to melt surrounding snow and return early in the spring, is becoming less important to survival, as snowfall has decreased in our region.

*Jack-in-the-Pulpit*

1943

Watercolor on paper



*Untitled*

1957

Watercolor on paper





*After Picking*

1942

Drybrush watercolor on paper



*Before Picking*

1942

Drybrush watercolor on paper



*Untitled*

1978

Watercolor on paper



*Untitled*

1953

Ink on paper



*Winter Corn Study*

1948

Watercolor on paper



# *Corn Stalks, Study for Winter Corn Fields*

1942

Ink and pencil on paper



The stark, skeletal forms of cornstalks still standing late in the season spoke powerfully to Wyeth across dozens of artworks spanning the full range of media he practiced. On this sheet, he has written, "The sound of the corn in the wind and warm lights from the setting sun all add to this wonderful feeling I am getting – this drawing means nothing outwardly but it is the beginning of a painting I have always wanted to do – Tonight is Oct 30, 1942." This confident, economical drawing clarifies how Wyeth's botanical process often began: not with minute study of particulars but with an instinctive emotional and compositional response.

*Frog Hunters Study*

1941

Watercolor on paper





Wyeth found in the reeds of a marsh not far from his studio a compelling subject where water and land merge. Conservancy staff are working to preserve such wetlands along the Brandywine Creek, which provide an important habitat, filter pollutants, and mitigate flooding by capturing and slowly releasing stormwater.

*Skunk Cabbage – Fifth Version*

1953

Watercolor on paper



*Giant Jack Study*

1968

Watercolor on paper

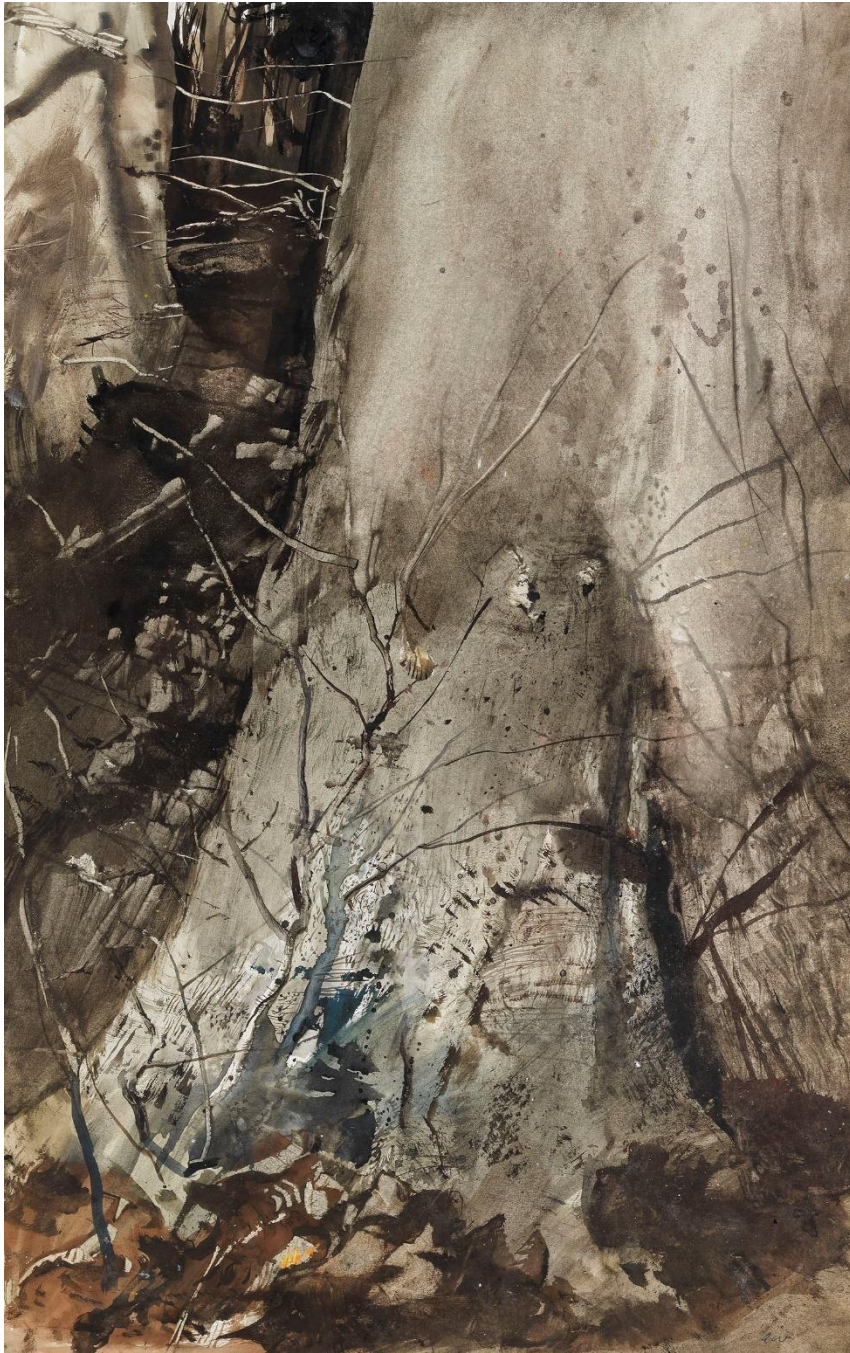


Wyeth painted the exotic form of the Jack-in-the-pulpit dozens of times. This is one of the few plants that can change its sex from one year to the next. A plant will become female and put more energy into developing seeds when there are enough resources available in its habitat, usually resulting in a larger plant with an extra set of three leaflets, seen here. Conservancy staff note that in their fieldwork, a female Jack-in-the-pulpit often indicates a healthy understory habitat.

*Corner of the Woods Study*

1954

Watercolor on paper



*Dryad Study*

2000

Watercolor on paper



*Dried Thistles, Study for Snow Fields*

1945

Pencil on paper



*Pumpkin Vine Study*

1943

Pencil on paper





*Hawk Tree Study*

1973

Pencil on paper



*Lily Pads – Second Version*

1954

Watercolor on paper



*Long Limb Study*

1998

Watercolor on paper



## CASE

Wyeth carried various art tools while walking the fields of Chadds Ford to capture the fragile dramas of plant life. This specific palette holds the watercolor pigments he used in the process of making *Secret*, on view in this gallery. His illustrated correspondence gives additional insight into the evocative potential he found in ordinary plant life. The inspiration Wyeth took from the work of the naturalist Henry David Thoreau was fundamental to his relationship with his plant subjects. The artist may well have thumbed through this family copy of *Walden*, one of a number that remain in the

inventory of the painting studio of his father,  
N.C. Wyeth.

Wyeth's palette used while painting *Secret*  
2008



*Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, first edition

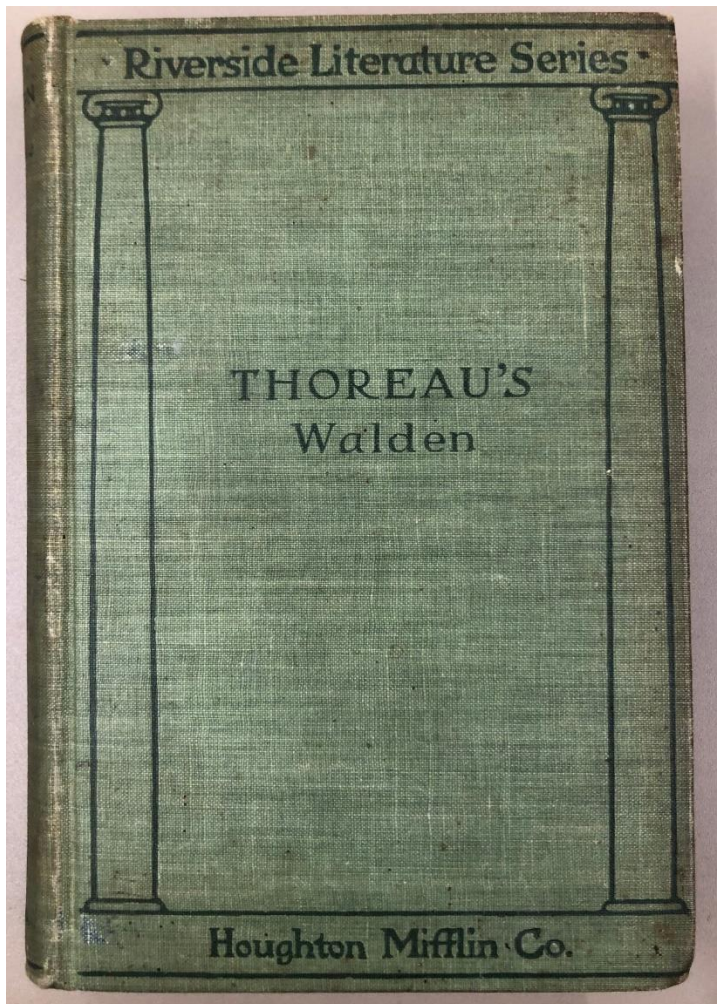
1854/this edition 1910

By Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)

Published by Houghton Mifflin Company,

Boston

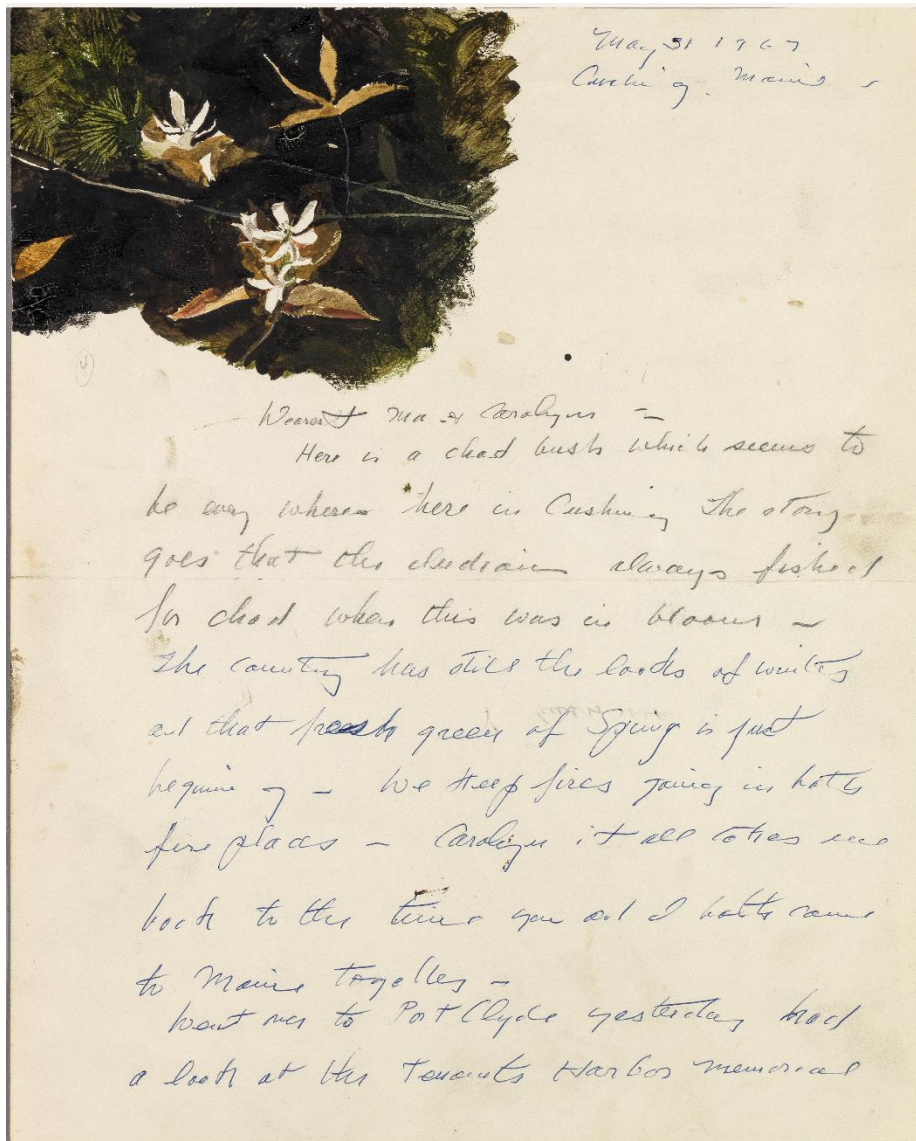
N.C. Wyeth Studio Collection



*Letter from Andrew Wyeth to his mother and  
sister*

1967

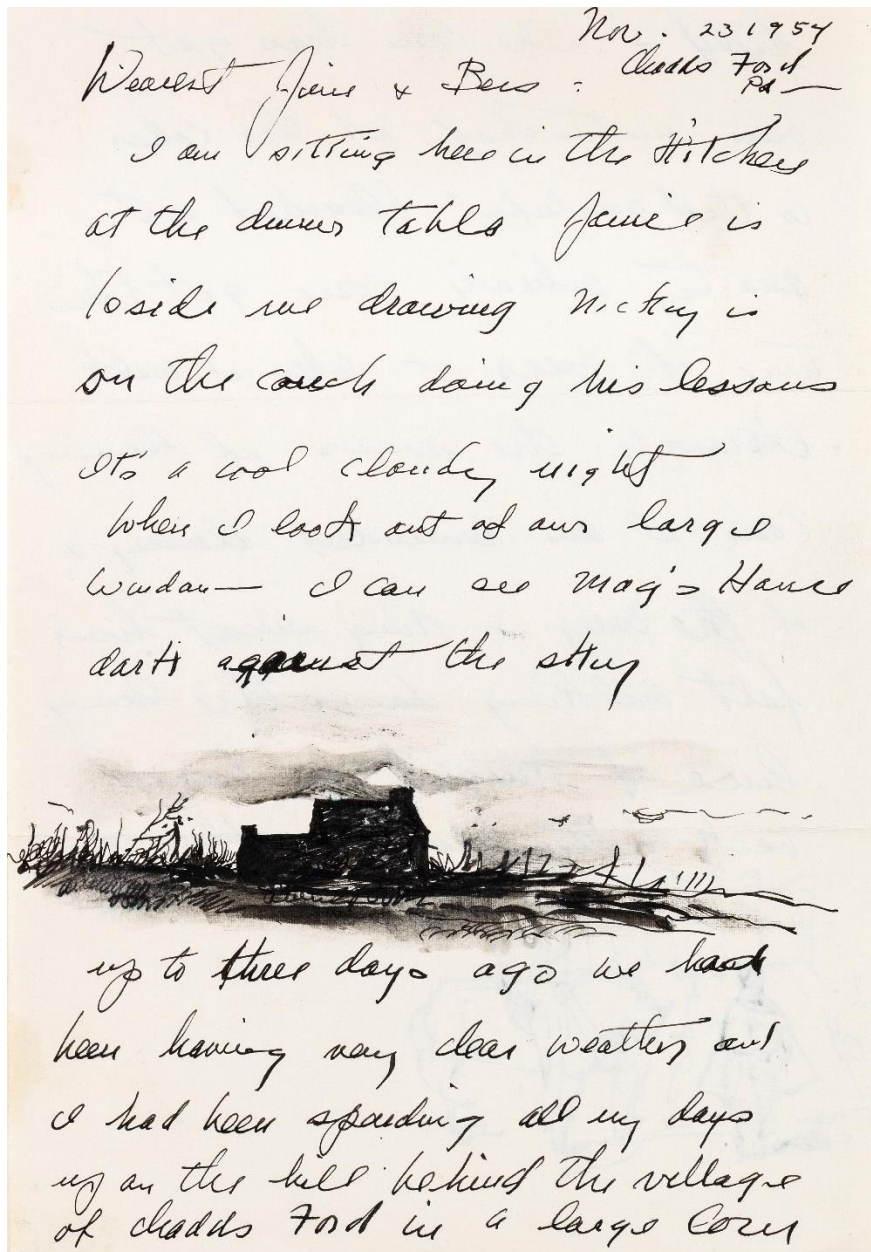
Watercolor and ink on paper



# Letter to Merle and Elizabeth James

1954

Ink and watercolor on paper





This richly illustrated letter was an important inspiration for this exhibition. It bridges the twin ecosystems that shaped Wyeth's work, having been sent from Chadds Ford to his in-laws in Maine not long after Andrew and Betsy Wyeth returned south for the winter. The delicate botanical studies that dot the letter and the passionate language within show the infinite possibility Wyeth found in so ordinary a subject as dry cornstalks blowing in the breeze. What makes this document especially significant is the overt expression of his visionary approach to botanical art, in this case taking flight from mere corn to knights on horseback.