

ANDREW WYETH AT KUERNER FARM: THE EYE OF THE EARTH

Chadds Ford's Kuerner Farm was an abiding source of inspiration to the artist Andrew Wyeth (1917 – 2009) across six decades and nearly one thousand works of art. The landscape, buildings, and people of this humble agricultural site a short walk from his studio solidified some of the most significant aspects of his practice.

Foremost among these was a realization of the ability to conjure the full range of human experience through outwardly limited materials, including a severely restricted color palette and geographic

range. Through the layers of this simple place, Wyeth articulated an alternate mode of modern American art beyond the city in which realism and abstraction coexisted and were put to visionary new ends.

This exhibition is the first to focus entirely on this key creative environment and is inspired by the twenty-fifth anniversary of the gift of Kuerner Farm from the Kuerner family to the Brandywine Museum of Art which has stewarded it as a key historic site in American Art.

This exhibition has been co-organized by the Brandywine Museum of Art and the

Reynolda House Museum of American Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in association with the Wyeth Foundation for American Art. All the works in this exhibition are by Andrew Wyeth.

BEGINNINGS

Andrew Wyeth's earliest depictions of Kuerner Farm date to 1933, when the teenaged artist was in training with his father, artist-illustrator N.C. Wyeth (1882–1945). The early work reflects his beginnings in oil painting, and also his rapid embrace of the painting methods with which he would become strongly

associated for the rest of his career: watercolor and tempera. In addition to still life and figure drawing, painting outdoors at nearby sites like Kuerner Farm was an important part of his education. Because of the unique upbringing Andrew Wyeth received, surrounded by illustrations of the Revolutionary War and the historic military props his father used in painting them, the connections of the historic farm with the Battle of Brandywine spurred his imagination. This association merged with that of World War I, in which resident Karl Kuerner had fought. As the artist said, "The abstract, almost military quality of

that farm originally appealed to me and still does.”

Haying at Kuerners, 1934

Watercolor on paper

Wyeth Foundation for American Art
Collection, B0017



Through his early depictions of Kuerner
Farm, Wyeth found his way to watercolor—

along with tempera—one of the two mediums that would define his career. This is one of his earliest experiments with watercolor, and he subsequently would use it for everything from preliminary studies to powerful finished statements like *Wolf Moon*, on view elsewhere in this gallery. Three years after completing this drawing, an exhibition of his watercolors at New York's Macbeth Gallery launched his reputation as both a natural successor to the likes of Winslow Homer and, at twenty years old, the next major American artist.

Chestnut Tree, 1933

Oil on canvas

Anonymous Gift, 2017, 2017.5



This is a rare example of a Wyeth painting in oil, a practice limited to his earliest student days. It shows the farm from the top of the steep, short hill across the road, (now known as Kuerner Hill), including the monumental bank barn—a distinctive type common in this region—and the tall, square farmhouse at the heart of the property.

This 1814 structure in durable but frugal stuccoed fieldstone is characteristic of the houses of Chadds Ford's Euro-American settlers who were predominantly Quaker, a denomination that fascinated the artist.

Black Hunter, 1938

Egg tempera on panel

Wyeth Foundation for American Art
Collection, B0004



In this view to the north from Kuerner Hill, the gaze of Andrew Wyeth's childhood friend David Lawrence confronts the viewer directly. Lawrence was a member of Lydia "Mother" Archie's AME Church, the octagonal building shown over Lawrence's shoulder and another frequent Wyeth subject. This is one of the artist's earliest works using egg tempera, an ancient painting technique in which crushed mineral colors are mixed with egg yolk and distilled water that produces a luminous surface effect.

Woodshed, 1944

Egg tempera on panel

Bequest of C. Porter Schutt, 1995, 95.10



This painting marks a kind of ending to Wyeth's early career at Kuerner Farm. Through his sustained encounter with this site, he developed a restricted color palette and a highly original eye for composition, both of which are evident here, that would define his mature output.

End of Winter, Study for Winter, 1946,
1946

Watercolor on paper

Dickinson College Fine Arts Collection, Gift
of Mildred Sawyer, The Trout Gallery at
Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA, 1972.2.1



Of this bleak yet powerful watercolor, Andrew Wyeth noted it was the “First thing I did after Pa’s death.” His father’s car was struck by a train near Kuerner Farm on October 19, 1945. For Wyeth, the farm took on an association as a place where the presence of death was close to the surface. This would become one of the defining concerns of his work.

Karl, 1948

Egg tempera on panel

Albuquerque Museum, Gift of Hope Aldrich,
PC2023.29.1



This portrait in a third-floor room of the Kuerner farmhouse has an unsettling, quiet power. Not unlike David Lawrence in Black Hunter nearby, Karl Kuerner takes us in with an appraising eye beneath iron hooks for drying sausages. In the artist's imagination, stories of Kuerner's past as a machine gunner in World War I's Battle of Verdun combined with the ordinary brutalities of hunting and slaughtering livestock, resulting in a portrayal of subtle menace.

Chimney Smoke, 1957

Watercolor on paper

Private Collection



This roofline view of the Kuerner farmhouse revels in surface textures and patterns. Some passages are thick and heavy, inscribed with the handle of the brush, while others allow the white of the paper to show through.

The titles of all the works on view were conferred by the artist's wife, Betsy Wyeth, which was just one facet of their complex creative partnership. The fact that watercolor was given a formal title without the word "study" means that the Wyeths judged it as a finished work despite its improvised, abstracted nature.

Rope and Chains, Study for Brown Swiss,
1957

Pencil on paper

Wyeth Foundation for American Art
Collection, B0857



In Wyeth's ongoing confrontation of mortality at Kuerner Farm after the loss of his father nearby, this apparatus for hanging slaughtered pigs or deer became in his hands another marker of the presence of death in life. The artist commonly worked in watercolor from the earliest stages of a new composition; this drawing is a relatively rare glimpse of his process in pencil.

The Porch, 1970

Watercolor on paper

Private Collection



This work has never been publicly exhibited before.

Evening at Kuerners, 1970

Drybrush watercolor on paper

Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Nicholas Wyeth



At first appearing to be a straightforward record of the Kuerner farmhouse from the west, *Evening at Kuerners* reveals some fundamental components of Wyeth's

practice. In capturing a fleeting mood with a severely limited range of tones, he selectively edited the view and infused it with subtle foreboding. Wyeth has omitted all that is superfluous to presenting the house not merely as seen but as felt, including the removal of three windows and wiring from the north façade. It is documented that the artist's friend and model Karl Kuerner was suffering from cancer in the illuminated room; *Evening at Kuerners* began as a reflection on that imminent loss.

Spring Fed Study, 1967

Watercolor on paper

Wyeth Foundation for American Art
Collection, B1601



To this day, inside the barn at Kuerner Farm, a continuous stream of spring water flows through a trough. Wyeth was inspired by that sound, the relative cold of the space, and the window framing a view of the hill across the road, resulting in one of his major Kuerner works. This study marks the moment he realized the final composition.

THE PEOPLE OF THE PLACE

Karl (1898–1979) and Anna Faulhaber Kuerner (1899–1997) met in their native Baden-Württemberg, Germany not long after the former's return from service in World War I. Karl immigrated to the US in 1923; Anna and their first child, Louise, joined him in 1925. Soon thereafter, they relocated from Philadelphia to a rented property then known as Ring Farm, which they bought in 1943. Subsistence farming and bartering were standard practice for years to follow. There was the struggle of a life not far from the edge but also music and the sounds of five children in this lively

family home, which became an informal hub for the regional German community. Wyeth's depictions reimagined both the house and the people in stark simplicity some distance from the reality.

When Karl was diagnosed with cancer in 1970, the young Prussian Helga Testorf (1939–) , who had immigrated to the U.S. in 1959, came to tend the garden and, eventually, to serve as his nurse. She appears here in the first image Wyeth made of her. This would commence a multiyear creative outpouring of some 300 paintings and drawings of Testorf, many of which were made at Kuerner Farm.

The Kuerners, 1971

Drybrush watercolor on paper

Wyeth Foundation for American Art
Collection



This double portrait emphasizes the distance between Karl and Anna Kuerner, presenting them almost as silhouettes against a wall from which the décor and wallpaper present in the original space have been removed by the artist. The drybrush technique squeezes most moisture from the brush before painting, allowing extremely fine lines as in the case of this technical tour de force.

The German, 1975

Watercolor on paper

Wyeth Foundation for American Art
Collection



The artist asked Karl Kuerner to pose in the uniform he had worn as a machine gunner in the German army during World War I from a fascination with that conflict that can be traced to his father's illustrations as well as to the 1925 film *The Big Parade*, to which Andrew Wyeth was devoted. In one playful interview about this work that shouldn't be taken as gospel, Wyeth claimed that on finding the watercolor unsatisfactory at first he splashed black ink across the top of the sheet and the longer drips became tree trunks. The helmet has remained in the Kuerner family's possession and is on view nearby.

First Drawing, 1971

Pencil on paper

Estate of Frank E. Fowler



Loden Coat, 1978

Watercolor on paper

Collection of Lorinda P. de Roulet

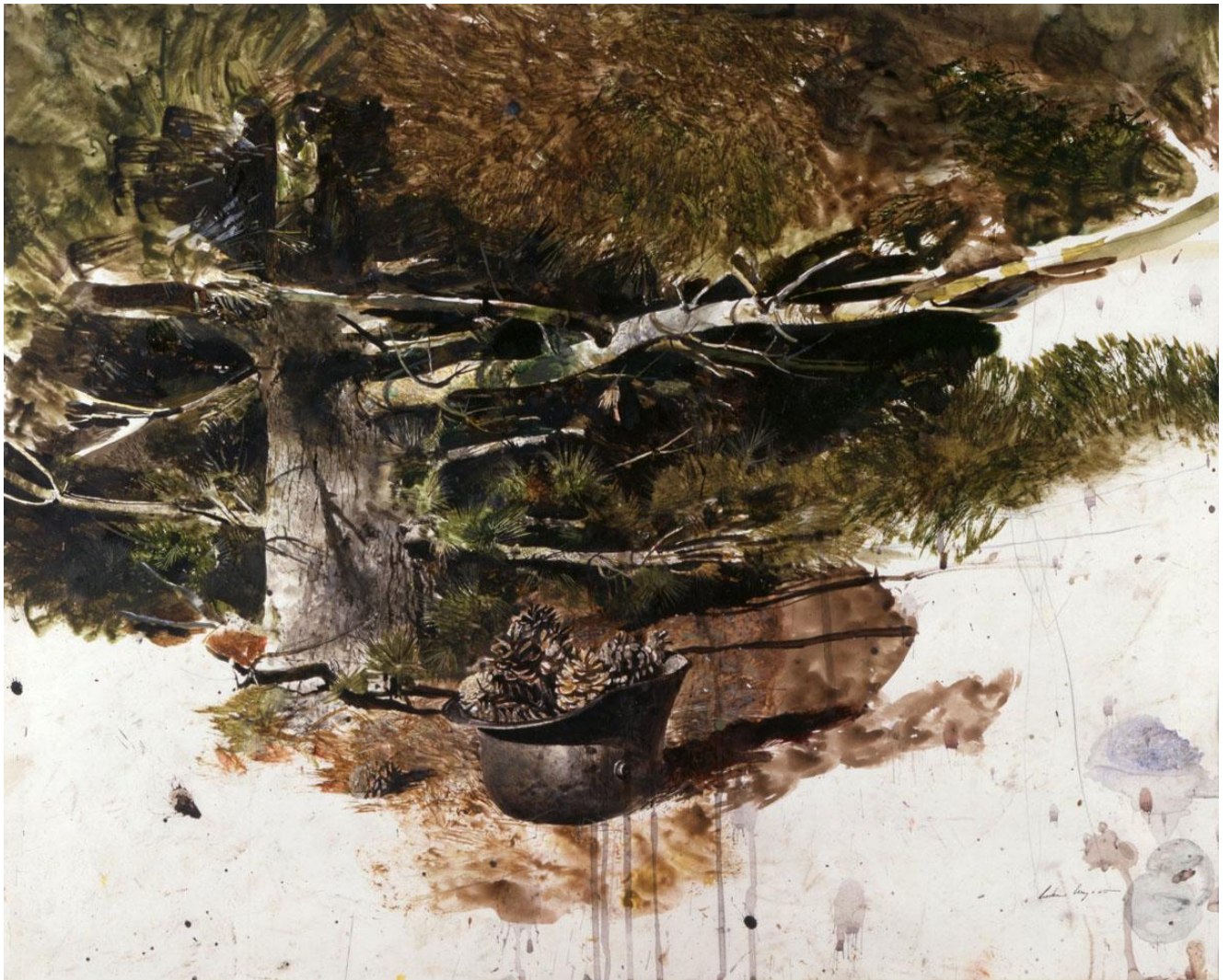


Andrew Wyeth found Helga Testorf's Prussian background exotic and mysterious, one of the factors that contributed to his many depictions of this key model. This rarely exhibited image of Testorf asserts that heritage in its focus on her traditional cape coat of dense loden wool and places her at the heart of the Kuerner Farm landscape.

Steel Helmet, Study for Pine Baron, 1976

Watercolor on paper

Wyeth Foundation for American Art
Collection, B2254



Anna Kuerner Study, 1971

Pencil on paper

Wyeth Foundation for American Art
Collection, B1817



*This work has never been publicly exhibited
before.*

Night Cap, 1978

Watercolor on paper

Wyeth Foundation for American Art
Collection



Anna Kuerner was an elusive subject for Wyeth. While Karl Kuerner did agree to pose for the artist more than once, in Wyeth's recollection Anna seemed always to be in motion. Accordingly, this sensitive portrayal in a quiet moment takes on added significance. She is said to have kept her head wrapped at all times to reduce the pain of the chronic headaches she suffered for years.

Home Comfort, 1976

Watercolor on paper

Wyeth Foundation for American Art
Collection, B2430



Anna Climbing the Stairs, 1975

Watercolor on paper

Wyeth Foundation for American Art
Collection, B2244



Farm Pond, Study for Brown Swiss, 1957

Watercolor on paper

Reynolda House Museum of American Art,
Winston-Salem, NC, Gift of Barbara B.

Millhouse



With the most minimal gestures, Wyeth evokes the austere farmhouse overlooking the nearby pond. He eliminated the windows and depicted only the top story, so the building appears like a battlement. The artist said this small body of water was “the eye of the earth looking up, reflecting everything in creation.”

Wild Dog, Study for Groundhog Day, 1959

Watercolor on paper

The Phyllis and Jamie Wyeth Collection



First Snow, Study for Groundhog Day, 1959

Drybrush watercolor on paper

Delaware Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs.

William E. Phelps, 1964



The kitchen window and the log that would become the focus of Groundhog Day are visible in this watercolor showing the farmhouse from the south.

Groundhog Day Study, 1959

Watercolor on pencil on paper

Wyeth Foundation for American Art
Collection, B0904



These studies for Groundhog Day show the artist starting from a kaleidoscopic approach, capturing many angles of a developing composition. He then gradually reduced, refined, and edited an observed subject into an austere and enigmatic finished product.

Groundhog Day, 1959

Egg tempera on panel

Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of Henry
F. du Pont and Mrs. John Wintersteen,
1959, 1959-102-1



Wyeth's representational paintings seem simply to document what the artist saw. This mature tempera clarifies the extent to which he was really a maker of created composites: constructed, modified, and added to as inspiration dictated. With subtly altered proportions and reduced visual information, this suggestive composition can be understood as a portrait of Karl Kuerner. The menacing knife without an accompanying fork, the jagged toothlike log, and the barbed wire and chain contribute to a sense that all is not right with this scene.

Roof Ladder, 1979

Watercolor on paper

Wyeth Foundation for American Art
Collection, B2472



This rarely seen watercolor depicts the Kuerner springhouse. These common features of the historical farmlands of Pennsylvania protect a water source and create a naturally cooled space for refrigeration.

This work has never been publicly exhibited before.

Young Bull Study, 1960

Watercolor on paper

Wyeth Foundation for American Art
Collection, B2645



Karl Kuerner brought out this bull to be painted at Andrew Wyeth's request for a rare depiction of the animals that populated the farm. The alignment of the creature's back with the wall makes it seem a part of the structure and geometry of a place that was, in Andrew Wyeth's imagination, characterized by hard-edged simplicity.

Snow Fence, 1980

Watercolor on paper

Courtesy of Karl Novak, Charleston, South
Carolina



Night Light at Kuerners, 1960

Watercolor on paper

Wyeth Foundation for American Art
Collection, B0950



Wyeth's watercolor practice ranged from minutely painted compositions in the mode he referred to as "drybrush" like *The Kuerners* to improvisatory, abstracted works like this one. In numerous instances, these energetic and spontaneous sketches on site developed into highly refined works years later. In this case, it is documented that the seed of *Evening at Kuerners*, on view elsewhere in this exhibition, was planted here ten years earlier.

Wolf Moon, 1975

Watercolor on paper

Wyeth Foundation for American Art
Collection



This large-format watercolor renders a moonlit January scene that is almost grayscale, and dramatically compresses the space between house and hill. The white of the paper shows through as snow, and the lit window in the woodshed implies action there; the artist recalled being inspired by hearing the echo of Anna Kuerner chopping wood in the early morning

Dusk, 1978

Watercolor on paper

Purchased by the Greenville County

Museum of Art with funds from the 2012

Museum Antiques Show, sponsored by TD
Bank



Andrew Wyeth once said of Kuerner Farm, "I often thought I would like to paint the house transparently and look into each room as if it were a series of thin membranes like the insides of a human being." We get a sense of this idea—of the artist's all-seeing gaze—in *Dusk*, which shows the illuminated downstairs sick room where Karl Kuerner lay dying.

Free Rein, 1994

Drybrush watercolor on paper

Greenville County Museum of Art, Gift of
Mary Burnet M. Johnston, Kate Simpson,
and Lee Watson



Fenced In, 2001

Watercolor on paper

Purchased by the Greenville County

Museum of Art with funds from the 2003

Museum Antiques Show, cosponsored by

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Haymow, 1988

Watercolor on paper

Wyeth Foundation for American Art
Collection



Disk Harrow, 1996

Watercolor on paper

Courtesy of Jim and Jocelyn Stewart



Spillway – First Version, 1970

Watercolor on paper

Wyeth Foundation for American Art
Collection, B1544



This work has never been publicly exhibited before.

Stump, 1995

Watercolor on paper

Private Collection



This work has never been publicly exhibited before.

Barnyard, 1991

Watercolor on paper

Private Collection



This work has never been publicly exhibited before.

Spring Study, 1978

Watercolor on paper

Wyeth Foundation for American Art
Collection, B2406

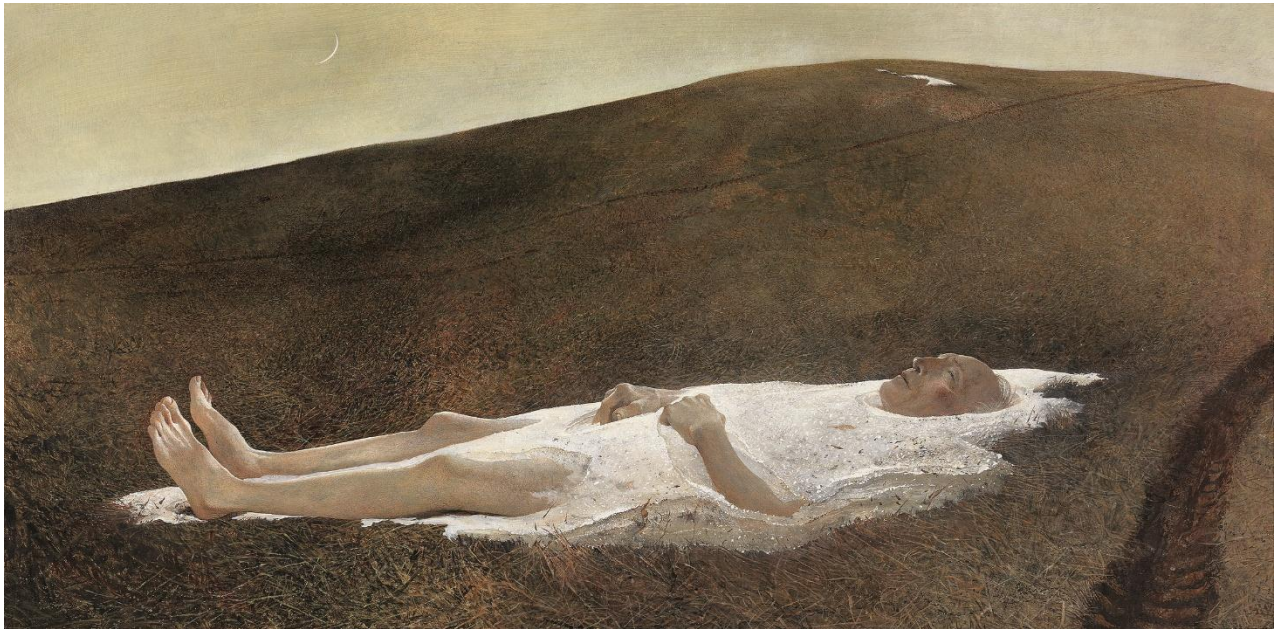


Spring, 1978

Egg tempera on panel

Gift of George A. Weymouth and his son in
memory of Mr. and Mrs. George T.

Weymouth, 1987.87.13



In this shocking, surreal image of Karl Kuerner, Wyeth imagines him transported from the bed in which he lay dying from cancer in the period to the iconic slope of Kuerner Hill. Just as the late winter snow will melt back into the hill, so, we understand, will Karl himself.

Funeral Group (Kuerner's Hill I), c. 1991

Watercolor on paper

The Phyllis and Jamie Wyeth Collection



This bold watercolor is part of a series in which the artist envisions his own funeral. The dark mass in the foreground reveals itself to be his imagined grave at the foot of Kuerner Hill when compared with others in the group, some of which even show him in a coffin. This is the culmination of his reflection on the presence of death in life that Kuerner Farm inspired.

Spring on Kuerners Hill, 1984

Watercolor on paper

Purchased by the Greenville County

Museum of Art with funds from the 2012

Museum Antiques Show, sponsored by TD
Bank



The steep, short hill across from the Kuerner house looms over the site. With thick, wet-on-wet pooling strokes, the artist evokes the thawing landscape of early spring. His extended interest in the place extended to the botanical life of the farm, evidenced by the close-up depiction of skunk cabbage in the foreground.

VISIONARY REALISM

Andrew Wyeth is widely known for his precisely painted temperas, so he is often celebrated as a gifted technician who was skilled in representing observed realities. While the inadequacy of this common perception reveals itself in subtle ways throughout this exhibition—with a growing array of elisions, deletions, and simplifications as the artist thought with this site for a lifetime—the works in this final section make abundantly clear their own constructed nature. In a mode we might call visionary realism, Wyeth's technical gifts are applied to imagined

composites that verge on the supernatural. These fanciful creations encourage us to read other of his paintings against the grain of their seeming faithfulness to life.

Cornflowers, 1986

Watercolor on paper

Wyeth Foundation for American Art
Collection



One of the final images of Anna Kuerner that Andrew Wyeth made, *Cornflowers* shows her hard at work at 87 years old, her ghostly, translucent presence seemingly becoming another spirit of Kuerner Farm.

Snow Hill, 1989

Egg tempera on panel

Wyeth Foundation for American Art
Collection



Snow Hill is both fantasy and memorial: an impossible view from an ideal Kuerner Hill combining the key places and people of Chadds Ford that had occupied Andrew Wyeth for the previous 55 years. Depicted to the left are the railroad tracks where his father, N.C. Wyeth, was killed, and the Kuerner farmhouse and barn are unmistakable. Notably, Karl (in his World War I uniform) holds Anna's hand, with Helga Testorf (in her loden coat) at right among other models.

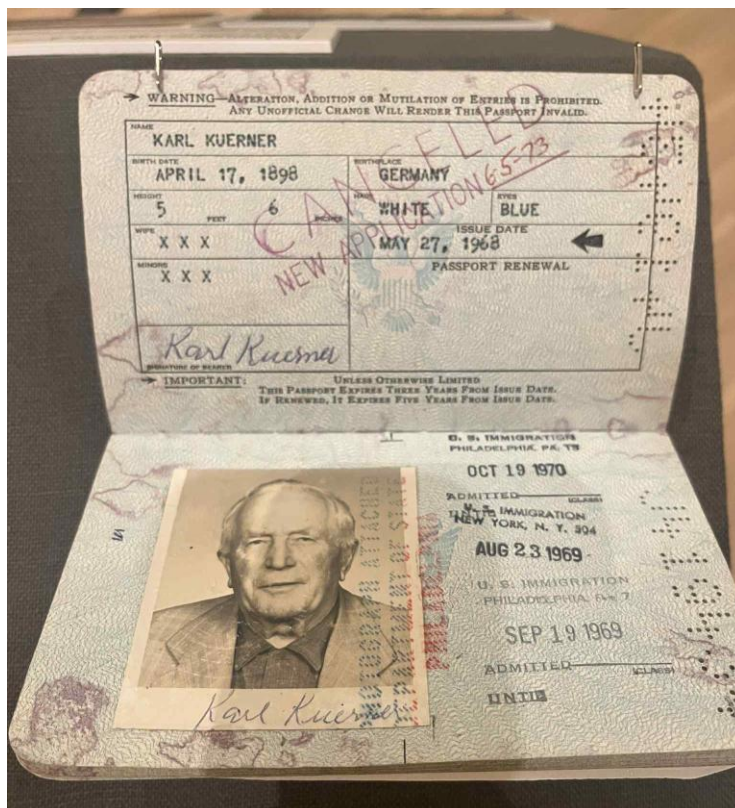
CASE

Karl Kuerner's United States passport,
issued 1968

Kuerner Family Collection, Walter &
Leonore Annenberg Research Center

Brandywine Museum of Art

Gift of Kuerner Family, 2022



Karl Kuerner's Model 1916 Stahlhelm, c.
1916

Steel

Private Collection



Left

Photography unknown, Anna, Karl Jr.,
Louise and Karl Sr., c. 1928

Private Collection



Right

Photographer unknown, A gathering at Kuerner Farm, with Anna in front holding Karl Jr. and Louise to her left, c. 1930

Private Collection

