

*Up From The Woods,
Carolyn Wyeth*

ARTS

The “Other” Wyeths

*You knew N. C., Andrew, and Jamie,
but have you met Carolyn, Ann, Anna B., and Henriette?*

BY DANIEL KANY

PAT NIXON’S portrait found its place on a White House wall with hardly a whisper. Her long-seasoned humility was on full view outside the Diplomatic Reception Room across from Betty Ford’s portrait.

We see the former first lady wearing a simple yet dignified light blue dress, sitting in a three-quarter pose. Besides her fashionably period-thought-practical coiffure, she is wearing a three-strand pearl necklace. Her posture is relaxed—possibly a bit fatigued—and her gaze is direct. It’s a listening pose.

The background is indistinct, adorned only by a plant with a single hibiscus, the pistil of which fires back across the otherwise vertically stroked image to form a dynamic circuit. The subject might at first appear still and posing, but she quickly becomes energized through the swirling heartbeat of the painting’s visual rhythm.

The painter of this work was one of America’s leading portraitists, who was also asked to paint President Nixon’s official portrait but refused, ultimately, because the disgraced statesman, reeling from his resignation during the **Watergate scandal** four years earlier, wouldn’t sit for

the painting. The artist was the eldest of N. C. Wyeth’s five children—not Andrew, who was ten years her junior, but **Henriette Wyeth Hurd** (1907-1997).

Henriette was hardly a capricious choice. Her portrait of her brother, Andrew, had graced the cover of *TIME* magazine in December 1963; and President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Man of the Year cover in January 1965, painted by Henriette and her husband, Peter Hurd (1904-1984), was *TIME*’s first collaborative cover portrait. At one point, Andrew said his eldest sister was the most talented of the Wyeth children—a vast compliment considering the extent to which he and his sisters Ann and Carolyn were accomplished.

Their father, N. C. Wyeth (1882-1945), is widely held to be one of America’s great illustrators. I believe, however, that he was also one of America’s greatest painters—in terms of storytelling, draftsman-ship, stroke, and color. It might be easy to write off his style as out of date, but his work ethic, skill, and eye will undoubt-

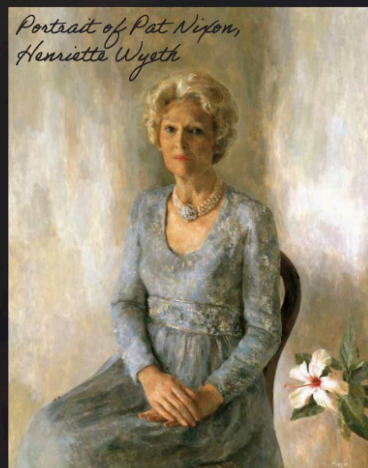
edly stand as a benchmark in the history of American art. N. C. was also the consummate pedagogue who emphasized hard work and attention to drawing.

Two of N. C.’s daughters married his two most promising students. Henriette married Peter Hurd, an artist of note who introduced the family to the tempera painting so notable in works such as Andrew’s *Christina’s World*.

Ann (1915-2005)—a composer and pianist as well as a watercolorist—married John McCoy (1910-1989). Ann’s musical compositions were often inspired by works of art, including a number of her father’s paintings.

Carolyn (1909-1994) had her own career as a painter, which included teaching and mentoring her nieces, **Anna B. McCoy** (b. 1940) and **Maude Robin McCoy** (b. 1944) of Spruce Head (Ann’s daughters), as well as her superstar nephew, Jamie Wyeth (b. 1946), Andrew’s son and one of only two painters taken into Andy Warhol’s studio to live and work, along with Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988).

The Wyeths are seen



as a northeast crew, since the Massachusetts-born N. C. went to study and teach in Pennsylvania, where he created the family's presence in Chadds Ford, which would come to alternate with Maine, where Rockland has become the base of this artistic dynasty.

Currently the Farnsworth Art Museum is the go-to place to see the work of N. C. and Andrew Wyeth. It is also where viewers can take in the work of the currently active Wyeth artists.

IFIRST SAW Anna B. McCoy's work at Dowling Walsh Gallery about ten years ago. I was struck by her mastery not only of the brush, but of classical modes (including "tronies": recognizable tropes such as a smoker, a crone, a reveler, etc.). I didn't know about or

see the Wyeth connection until much later, by which point I had come to see her brushwork as unsurpassed. In a seemingly simple still life, an onion sits with a largely cropped knife. The flaking skin of the onion struck me as one of the best pas-

sages of painting I had ever seen (and my favorites include Van Dyck and Sargent). In her hands, a tomato, a bowl, or an apple will come across as almost comfortably exact, yet the closer look reveals brushwork that is succinct, confident, precise, calm, and meditative, yet ineffably luxurious. When you see one of her works in person, do not be surprised to find yourself merely inches away, completely caught up in the feathery flow of her brush, which doesn't produce rhythms, but passages that are limpidly peaceful and poetically profound.

When it comes to N. C.'s legacy, Anna B. is the real McCoy. In fact, I have her right here on the phone:

Who is your favorite of the Wyeth women painters?

Of all the painters in the family, I find Henriette the most extraordinary. All artists are uneven, of course, but she had a sense of whimsy. She had an imagination. To me, her

work has a sadness. It's so moving. It can make me weep. I like to keep my personal knowledge of them away and just look at the paintings. What a worker! Yet her brush is so free and graceful that it never looks like that. She could take that—and me—to unexpected places. Her work is amazing, just amazing! Jamie agrees with me.

Do you think of "uneven" as positive or negative—or something else?

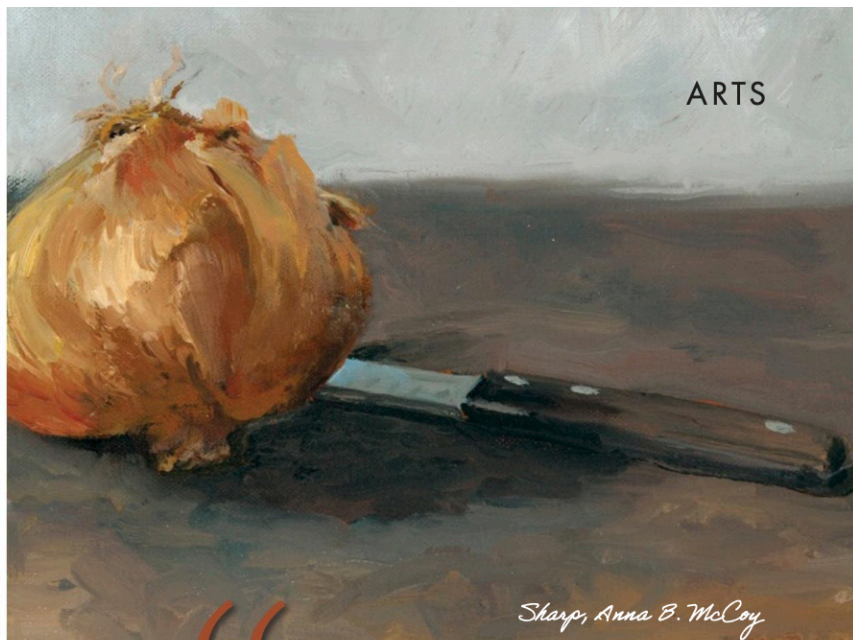
If you don't fail, you're not going to learn. When I say Henriette's work was "unevenish," that's not a bad thing. Some [works] bounce out and some not quite so. Somebody else might do it the exact opposite way. I don't like preconceived ideas. I prefer paintings that unfold through the process—that's how you find new visual ideas. When their works aren't uneven, it means people aren't experimenting.

Do you have favorite brushes, favorite tools?

I will never be so sure of my tools that I would forget them entirely. I want them to do what I am putting on the canvas or linen or whatever. If you don't know your tools, they can interrupt your process. I was given some handmade sable brushes from Paris that I particularly like, and I was given my father's old brushes and watercolors. I think we all have favorite brushes.

Your work seems to follow passages more than technical strategy. How do you get "into" a painting?

There are so many passages and places in a



Sharp, Anna B. McCoy

“I guess I like to leave the party at the top of the party.”

—Anna B.

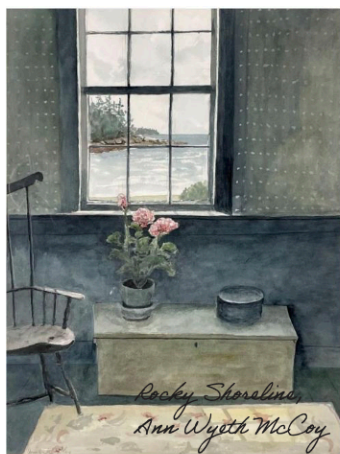
painting where I think, “How did I do that?” I was talking to my mom one day about this, and my uncle Andy was great about this. He said he'd be there in five minutes—and he was. It was encouraging. He and I would talk about things. He said, “It's so important—what you leave out.” I'd ask my mom, “How did you do this?” “Oh,” she'd say, “I did that without looking.” That's the place you want to go, but you can't go on purpose. It's where I want to go. You can't articulate it. It's an amazing place. What's the plan? I have no clue. Yet I count on this in life. I don't want to clutter my mind. I want to be free. When I work, I listen to classical music. Even Beethoven or the Spanish composers.

How do you conclude or finish a painting?

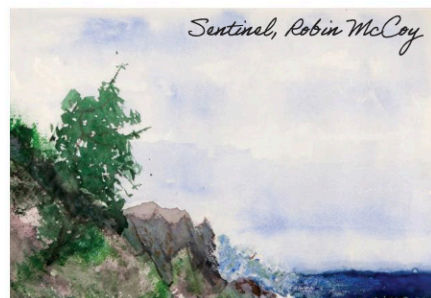
I always stop before I think I'm finished. I don't work with a sense of the finished product. I guess I like to leave the party at the top of the party. I don't know what the end is going to look like—ever—before I stop. I want to leave magic there. I want to leave something for the viewer.

I was blown away by *Vessel* (see p. 15). Tell us about it.

Vessel—I loved doing it. It feels like so many things, like the smell of memory, the feel of memory. I was five when my grandfather was killed; he smelled like sweet tobacco. You smell that apple. You pick that pistol up; it has the smell of its own history. I love antiques. I smell everything when I buy it. It's the same



Rocky Shoreline, Anna B. McCoy



Sentinel, Robin McCoy

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thing. Painting things, you have to go after that part of them. To hell if it looks like them. I love people talking when they pose.

My uncle Andy was very encouraging, even though he was a tough critic. We were talking about one of my portraits—a three-quarter pose—and there was this ear. I was excited about that ear. He said, “It doesn’t have to be the focus, but it’s so important since it holds the sound of the wind, the sound of Beethoven.” He was wonderful. *Vessel* has this sense of experience: touch, sight, smell, taste, sound—the five senses. All the different things that glass can do, or the skin of an apple. *Vessel*, for me, achieves this. It has the feel of memory, of history, of something that has long been a witness to a place in the light of a window.

Daniel Kany is an art historian and writer from Maine who currently lives and works in Saudi Arabia. ■

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