

ANDREW WYETH

WOODCHOPPER



Schoelkopf

Andrew Wyeth *Woodchopper*

Patricia Junker

In 1940, with the war in Europe preventing the mounting of the regular International Exhibition of Paintings at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Institute, an impressive committee of more than a hundred American museum and art gallery directors, representatives from coast to coast, came together to build in its place a comprehensive survey of the country's finest painters. Some of the greatest paintings from the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century past were shown, presented as prelude to the select group of contemporary American paintings that was, ultimately, the *raison d'être* for the exhibition. The esteemed group of advisors to the show identified twenty-three-year-old Andrew Wyeth for inclusion, and they chose to represent him with his tempera *Woodchopper*. *Woodchopper*, a departure for the artist who was already well known as a watercolor prodigy, hung with paintings by Edward Hopper, Georgia O'Keeffe, Charles Sheeler, John Marin, Reginald Marsh, Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, and others in a large field that would, the organizers believed, show a high level of originality and craftsmanship, and a healthy knowledge of but distance from Europe, all qualities that they saw as a throughline in enduring American art.¹



Andrew Wyeth,
Woodchopper, 1940.
Egg tempera on panel,
32 5/8 x 38 inches
(82.9 x 96.5 cm)

The entry in the exhibition catalogue acknowledged that *Woodchopper* signaled a new direction for Wyeth in both medium of choice and in subject matter. The young artist from Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, the youngest of the talented Wyeth clan based there, had established himself as a Maine artist, a watercolor master of “landscapes and marines in the ‘down East’ country,” the entry reads.² In fact, he had at this early stage in his career rarely exhibited Chadds Ford subjects, which *Woodchopper* is. Maine views dominated his watercolors and established his reputation as the successor to Winslow Homer.

Painting between the coast of Maine, where the Wyeths summered, and Chadds Ford, where they lived, Wyeth came to see that the Brandywine Valley required a medium quite unlike transparent watercolor, one that would serve a place bound to the earth, a landscape of autumn and winter hues, of broad, well-trodden hills, of scarred fields, and of weathered fieldstone houses. Another essential aspect of Chadds Ford was its people—family, friends, community—subjects that had not yet presented themselves in Maine. They cried out in Wyeth’s mind to be fully delineated. He must have wanted to push his art toward a monumentality, too, that could fully accommodate this historic and varied farmscape; even his favorite large watercolor sheets could not allow that—not at this moment, before he developed his highly finished drybrush technique. But relishing his first efforts in the medium of egg tempera, which Wyeth began to use in earnest in 1937–38, he enthusiastically employed it in the service of the muted tones and coarse textures of Chadds Ford; and with tempera Wyeth began to work at a new, large scale.

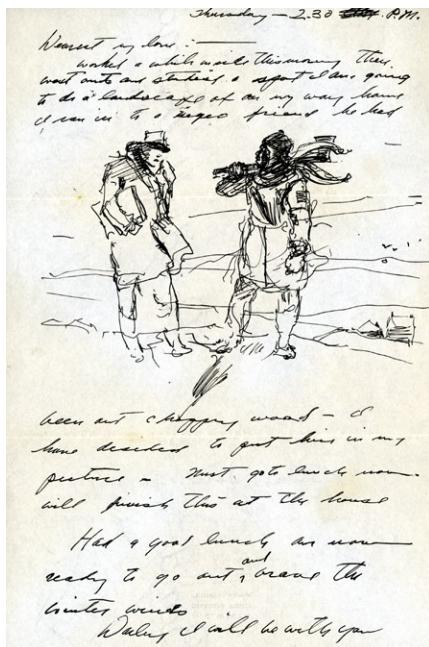
Approaching his home as a painter in search of subjects, Wyeth established a favorite walk along a high ridge above the valley, a walk that took him up to the windswept hilltop home of his friend, chicken farmer Adam Johnson, down Bulloch Road past the simple lodgings of the last of the remaining African-American neighbors, and then finally, at the bottom of the hill, to the octagonal fieldstone schoolhouse that had been their church—Mother Archie’s Church, the congregants called it. Wyeth’s earliest temperas chart this path and introduce people and places that would reappear in Wyeth’s art ever after (figs. 1 and 2).³

Adam Johnson became a close friend of young Andrew Wyeth. His hog and chicken farm was an inviting world unto itself, his coop and pens marvels of ingenuity, constructed of the flotsam that Johnson found here and there and his gatherings from others’ discards. He grew hay for feed and gathered it into large stacks that stood nearly the size of his house. He mowed grass and chopped wood for hire. Johnson regularly worked for his neighbor, N.C. Wyeth.⁴



Fig. 1
Andrew Wyeth, *Road Cut*, 1940. Egg tempera on panel, 15 5/8 x 34 1/4 inches (39.7 x 87 cm). Private collection

Fig. 2
Andrew Wyeth, *Fall at Archies*, 1937. Egg tempera on panel, 32 x 40 inches (81.3 x 101.6 cm). Wyeth Foundation for American Art Collection P0002

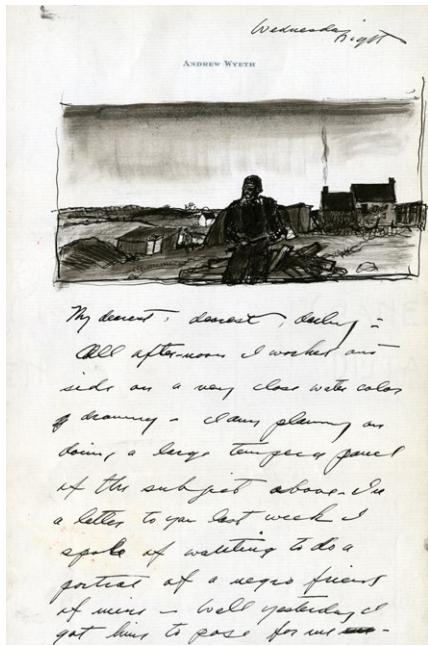


Andrew Wyeth began studies for this painting on a cold, blustery late January afternoon in 1940. He wrote that day to his beloved Betsy James in East Aurora, New York—they would marry later that year—telling her that having come upon Johnson chopping wood that morning, he had decided to put him in a picture, one based on the sketches he was making along his route. Wyeth would need to “brave the winter winds” to draw Johnson on the spot, he told Betsy; in the kind of illustrated letter he often sent to her, Wyeth showed the shivering artist and his would-be woodchopper model (figs. 3 and 4).⁵ A week later he was working outside at the Johnson farm on an elaborate watercolor panorama, for which his kindly friend was patiently posing; he wrote to Betsy again on February 1, “I am planning on doing a large tempera panel of the subject above,” and included an unhesitating ink sketch of a fully developed scene centered on Johnson, the woodchopper, the picture being clear in his mind and already developing on paper as a watercolor pre-study (fig. 5 and 6).⁶

Wyeth’s letters to Betsy reveal how elaborate and painstaking was the process of egg tempera in this, Wyeth’s early phase with the medium. His notes inscribed on the back of this panel show that he was still refining his preferred mixture of egg yolk, water, and alcohol, making for a tedious setup. But even before Wyeth prepared his paint tray and his finely-sanded gessoed support, the actual process of developing his composition required days or weeks of pre-planning. Tempera painting is studio work, but Wyeth, insistent that his paintings carry the accuracy of close observation, used his fully-elaborated watercolor painted on the spot as a template

Fig. 3
Andrew Wyeth, *Letter to Betsy James*, January 25, 1940. Ink on paper, $10\frac{1}{2} \times 7\frac{1}{4}$ inches (26.7 x 18.4 cm). Wyeth Foundation for American Art Collection

Fig. 4
Andrew Wyeth, *Woodchopper Study*, 1940. Egg tempera on panel, $24 \times 14\frac{1}{8}$ inches (61 x 35.9 cm). Private collection



that could be scaled up later, as the under drawing on the large gessoed panel. Wyeth made sure to note on the back of this panel that the scene was "from life."

Such was their close friendship that Wyeth gave this painting to Adam Johnson at the close of the Carnegie exhibition.⁷ He continued to paint his friend over the next twenty years, and Johnson gained fame as an "Andrew Wyeth model."⁸ When Johnson died in 1978, Wyeth was a pallbearer at his funeral.



PATRICIA JUNKER Ann M. Barwick Curator of American Art Emerita, Seattle Art Museum

Patricia Junker established the American art department at the Seattle Art Museum in 2004, serving as the endowed curator for fourteen years. Previously she was Curator of Paintings and Sculpture at the Amon Carter Museum and Associate Curator of American Paintings at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. She has authored award-winning publications: "Childe Hassam, Marsden Hartley and the Spirit of 1916," received the Smithsonian's Frost Prize; *Winslow Homer in the 1890s: Prout's Neck Observed* won the Henry Allan Moe Prize for scholarship. Her most recent scholarship has centered on Andrew Wyeth: in 2018 she organized *Andrew Wyeth: In Retrospect*; and she earlier published "Andrew Wyeth: Rebel" in the anthology, *Rethinking Andrew Wyeth*. Other major publications are: *Modernism in the Pacific Northwest*; *Edward Hopper's Women*; Albert Bierstadt's "Puget Sound on the Pacific Coast"; *Winslow Homer, Artist and Angler*. She has co-authored American art collection catalogues for the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; the Amon Carter Museum; and the Smith College Museum of Art. Junker frequently collaborates with Schoelkopf Gallery, notably in championing the work of the Wyeth family, a partnership that has proven invaluable in advancing scholarship and exhibitions in American art. Most recent exhibitions include *Enter Andrew Wyeth* in 2024 and *Jamie Wyeth: Portraits of Andy Warhol and Rudolph Nureyev* in 2025.

Fig. 5

Andrew Wyeth, Letter to Betsy James, January 31, 1940. Ink on paper, 10 1/2 x 7 1/4 inches (26.7 x 18.4 cm). Wyeth Foundation for American Art Collection

Fig. 6

Andrew Wyeth, Woodchopper Study, 1940. Watercolor on paper, 22 1/2 x 30 1/4 inches (57.2 x 76.8 cm). Wyeth Foundation for American Art P0081r

Endnotes

1. Pittsburgh, Carnegie Institute, Department of Fine Arts, "Survey of American Painting, October 24–December 15, 1940.
2. *Survey of American Painting* (Pittsburgh: Department of Fine Arts, Carnegie Institute, 1940), no. 332. *Woodchopper* was not the first tempera that Wyeth had exhibited; he sent a Maine portrait, *Charlie Ervine*, to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts for its annual survey exhibition in 1938; and in 1939 he sent to the same venue a Chadds Ford tempera portrait, *Black Hunter*.
3. The walk is well described by Richard Meryman, first in his early Wyeth monograph, done in collaboration with Betsy Wyeth: *Andrew Wyeth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968), pp. 3–5, 21–23, and 37–39; and in his *Andrew Wyeth: A Secret Life* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1996), pp. 187–190. Wyeth himself described the path of his walk in a letter to his in-laws, John and Bess James, in 1941; quoted in Meryman, *A Secret Life*, p. 187.
4. Accounts of Adam Johnson are extensive; see Meryman, *A Secret Life*, pp. 187–191; and see especially the chapter on "Adam," in Gene Logsdon, *Wyeth People: A Portrait of Andrew Wyeth as Seen by His Friends and Neighbors* (1969; reprint Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1988), pp. 53–63. Both authors give fulsome descriptions of this painting.
5. Wyeth to Betsy James, January 25, 1940, illustrated in Betsy James Wyeth, ed., *Andrew Wyeth: Close Friends* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, in association with Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson), p. 48.
6. Illustrated *Ibid.*, p. 50.
7. See Meryman, *A Secret Life*, p. 187–190; and Logsdon, pp. 57–58.
8. Johnson obituary, "Adam Johnson, 79; Andrew Wyeth Model," *Asbury Park (New Jersey) Press*, May 20, 1978, p. 13. The obituary was distributed nationally by the Associated Press. In the poignant retrospective painting that is Wyeth's late panel, *Snow Hill*, 1989, Adam Johnson appears as one of the group of the artist's beloved, iconic Chadds Ford models who dance around a winter fête pole, and Johnson's pig house is shown in exquisite miniature in the landscape below, at far right. *Snow Hill* is in the Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection.

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