ON A COLD MARCH NIGHT IN 1935, the lights of the Hotel du Pont glittered above the dark treetops of Rodney Square in downtown Wilmington, Delaware. Erected on a hill overlooking Brandywine Creek, the hotel symbolized the prestige of the DuPont company, founded by French émigrés in the early days of the American nation as a gunpowder factory along that historic waterway. It had grown to be the largest explosives manufacturer in the country and, with an expansion into chemicals, was on its way to becoming extraordinarily powerful among corporations. Just weeks before, a DuPont chemist had discovered nylon—eventually helping the firm break the top ten of the first Fortune 500 list postwar, with revenues of $1.7 billion.

Civic-minded, the du Pont family had sought to give Delaware valuable amenities, from the beautiful theater built into the hotel to parks and libraries. Especially luxurious was the du Barry Room of the hotel, suitably French in its sumptuous decorations and ornate plaster ceiling. That room had seen many splendid society functions and august gatherings of engineers, bankers, and lawyers. But tonight, the crowd was different: these were the former students of the famous illustrator Howard Pyle, gathered to celebrate his memory twenty-four years after his premature death on a trip abroad at age fifty-eight.
Speeches were given in honor of this illustrious native son, glasses clinked amid the candlelight, and old friends reminisced about youthful summer days along the Brandywine with the Howard Pyle School of Art, back when President William McKinley was in the White House. To those who love American illustration, this crowd was filled with legendary figures, because the charismatic Pyle had singlehandedly reshaped the illustrator’s art and launched the careers of a whole generation of pupils, producing what we now call the golden age of this evocative craft before photography finally supplanted it. These illustrators considered themselves artists of high caliber, even if their approach seemed increasingly old-fashioned amid the innovations flowing in from Europe: in 1935, Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dalí were ascendant.

Among all the illustrious artists in the room that night, one was the undisputed master of them all, universally admired and emulated. All voices were hushed when N. C. Wyeth rose to speak. Pyle had changed N. C.’s life from the moment the younger man stepped off the train in Wilmington, a big-boned farm boy from Massachusetts with an uncanny gift for drawing. Pyle had offered N. C. praise and encouragement, watching as his pupil’s confidence grew during sessions in the city as well as during summer school at Chadds Ford, on the Brandywine in Pennsylvania, nine miles north. N. C. went on to marry a Wilmingtonian and settle down at bucolic Chadds Ford, where he would attain fame for painting the illustrations for *Treasure Island*, a worthy sequel to Pyle’s own masterpiece, *King Arthur*, likewise done at Chadds Ford.

A return to the artistic traditions of Howard Pyle would refute the “modernism that has swept the world,” N. C. declared to the crowd, condemning the avant-garde trend of “art as sensationalism.” Then everyone went across the street to the downtown library, a virtual shrine to Pyle: by 1923, former students and prominent citizens of Wilmington had arranged for the permanent exhibition of 267 of his works in special galleries, including a loving reassembly of his entire living room and its colorful murals. N. C. was closely involved and would remain on the board of the Wilmington Society of the Fine Arts when it opened the new Delaware Art Museum in 1938.
That cold March night marked a milestone for the famous school of illustration we call the Brandywine Tradition, founded by Howard Pyle and carried on by N. C. Wyeth and others: superb draftsmanship, sumptuous handling of oil paint, gripping storylines, and every detail rooted in extremely close visual observation—if not exhaustive historical research. But even as the artists looked back that night, recalling how far they had come, the occasion contained the seeds of the future. For sitting at his father's side in the du Barry Room was a seventeen-year-old boy with tousled blond hair: Andrew Wyeth.
Already a painter himself, studying with his father in the Chadds Ford studio, Andrew listened to the speakers who lauded Pyle so highly. “He opened our eyes to the drama of the commonplace,” one said—in what almost became Andrew’s lifelong personal manifesto. And then at the library, he studied once again the fabled paintings in the galleries he knew so well: when he was fifteen, his own artwork had appeared in public for the first time in these rooms where the Pyles were displayed (November 1932).

The Brandywine Tradition, so vigorous and admired, was about to go in a new direction in the hands of this talented young practitioner. For many of the artists that night, the crowning achievement among all the Pyle pictures was the desolate pirate scene Marooned (1909). A newspaperman noted with admiration its “effect of vast loneliness. In the midst of the large canvas is a single

**Icon of the Brandywine School.** Howard Pyle’s classic pirate picture Marooned (1909) at the Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington. Young Andrew Wyeth learned lessons from this picture’s sober simplicity.
figure crouched. Against the yellow sand his cloak of red is predominant.” Thirteen years later, Andrew Wyeth would paint a pink dress against a lonely yellow hillside and call it Christina’s World.¹

The Artists at Chadds Ford

I wrote this book because I believe that the art of the Brandywine painters cannot be understood apart from the real places they depicted and drew inspiration from, with three hundred years of cultural heritage behind them. Those places are centered on Chadds Ford, where Pyle’s school met in a series of historic colonial buildings. N. C. lived at “the Ford,” painted there, raised his family of five children, three of whom became artists—to the American public in the middle of the twentieth century, the Wyeths were about the most famous artistic clan the nation had produced since the Peales. N. C.’s tragic death in an automobile accident at Chadds Ford in 1945 made national headlines; Andrew’s rise to great fame almost immediately followed. As is legendary, he made Chadds Ford his own by depicting it again and again during an artistic career that extended into our own times.

Today, Chadds Ford Township (population 3,640) is a leafy, upscale commuter suburb, proud of having preserved 1,660 acres of land from development pressures that ceaselessly grow in the greater Philadelphia outskirts. But for most of its long history, going back to Quaker settlement in the 1680s, it was a village of just a few hundred near the edge of Brandywine “crik,” known for the major road that crossed the river here (originally at John Chads’s ford) as well as a series of productive mills. All around were farms. Except for occasional rampaging floods, this was an exceedingly quiet rural locale where cowbells tinkled in the meadows and sycamore leaves drifted down to the steadily gliding river. Today, the pace has quickened.

Surprisingly, a guidebook has never been written for what has long been called “Wyeth Country,” although the art of this revered family cannot be understood apart from its microregional context. (“Wyeth Country” has been standard nomenclature since at least 1971, when a New York Times article popularized the term.) The six
Rural crossroads.
Village of Chadds Ford, 1934, looking north up Creek Road from Brittingham’s garage in an ink rendering by N. C. Wyeth’s son-in-law, John McCoy. (Photo courtesy of the Christian C. Sanderson Museum, Chadds Ford, PA © 2020.)
tours in this book take you throughout modern Chadds Ford, some by foot and some by automobile—use caution on these busy roads, which unfortunately preclude taking the tours by bicycle. Please note: some of the places that I point out from the road are privately owned, with no public access. At times, the settings seem little-changed from the nineteenth century, but more often, the differences are striking. To a degree that might have been unimaginable to N. C., agriculture has sputtered out, wooded thickets have reclaimed the fields, and developments have proliferated: the mere 400 local housing units in 1970 had swelled to 1,300 by 1990. Even some trails that Andrew Wyeth walked in the 1980s are now indistinguishable amid torrid growths of invasive shrubs. “Back then, you’d see hot-air balloons land in the fields on a Saturday, and everybody would have champagne,” one local recalls. “Today the feel of ‘country’ is really gone.” Much more would have been lost, except that the Brandywine Conservancy was founded in 1967 by friends of the Wyeths and has preserved more than sixty-three thousand acres up and down the valley, even as it partners with the Brandywine River Museum of Art, home to the premier collection of Wyeth paintings.  

In this book, I mention scores of artworks by the Wyeths, indicating exactly where each was drawn or painted. To stand in the footsteps of the painters can reveal much about their processes and intentions; indeed, one can play detective with Andrew Wyeth, that notoriously furtive artist who wouldn’t tell his wife, Betsy, where he went each day and sought to keep even his lunch engagements secret from her (the complexities of their married life are extensively documented in his 1996 authorized biography by LIFE magazine reporter Richard Meryman). Again and again, one notices how accurately the Wyeths depicted what they saw, with one notable exception: Andrew’s work habitually omits intrusions of modernity, from automobiles to tractors to the hideous electric towers that marched across Kuerner Farm in the 1950s (in Pennsylvania Landscape of 1942, the concrete U.S. 1 is replaced with the Brandywine!). He loved the land, but he is certainly not an accurate chronicler of contemporary agricultural practices; such was never his intent, and he admitted, ironically, that he didn’t partic-
ularly like farming. When depicting a building, he allowed himself to omit certain windows for artistic effect. But in general, as this book demonstrates, he is almost uncannily beholden to what he called the “literal truth.” Not that his work is unimaginative; but it features imagination, as Pyle decreed, that springs from a basis of fact. Pyle “told his students to go to life to discover truth”—so Andrew Wyeth summarized the wisdom of his master.3

I have tried to paint a vivid picture of Andrew Wyeth at work, whenever possible giving fresh anecdotes from interviews I conducted—my attempt to peek around the edges of the imposing authorized biography to see him, in Boswell’s words, as he really was, without “panegyrick, which must be all praise.” Many locals were generous in helping me, even if sometimes hesitant to talk about the artist. This is old habit, born of intense loyalty to a beloved local hero. More than thirty years ago, the nation was transfixed by the Helga pictures, a secret cache of more than two hundred

Peripatetic painter. Uphill from his parents’ Homestead, Andrew Wyeth surveys his beloved Chadds Ford landscape, about the same time that he chose this same location for the 1957 watercolor Above the Orchard. (Photo courtesy of the Christian C. Sanderson Museum, Chadds Ford, PA © 2020.)
paintings and drawings that Wyeth had done of an attractive female neighbor, often posing her nude. When reporters swarmed the village, seeking salacious details, longtime residents patiently explained that they had never heard of Helga Testorf or even Andrew Wyeth. Stung by countless critics, the artist himself grew adept at evasion: he denied one author’s well-meaning interview request for thirty-five years, and I have heard of admirers who secured a coveted invitation to his home at Brinton’s Mill, only to watch in astonishment as the great man, hearing them coming, darted out the back door and went scurrying across a cornfield.

Even a decade after he died, the researcher may encounter headwinds in Chadds Ford: this work of scholarship was approaching publication when I was forbidden by the Wyeth Office, after they read my draft, to reproduce any of his artwork whatsoever. This requires the reader to look online, where nearly all the pictures I mention can be readily found. Also online, every N. C. Wyeth painting can be looked up in the artist’s catalogue raisonné at the Brandywine River Museum of Art website, an invaluable resource. No such publicly available catalogue yet exists for Andrew Wyeth, and I have only mentioned paintings of his that happen to have been published. This is just a sample of his prodigious total; he painted locally from the time of the Herbert Hoover administration to that of George W. Bush.

It has puzzled some observers that an artist of his caliber didn’t focus his energies on “major works” instead of innumerable landscape watercolors. In his lifetime, he produced an estimated 250 major temperas but tens of thousands of watercolors and drawings—the exact number is incalculable. “You’re wasting your time in watercolor,” a friend warned him. “It’s a light medium.” But Wyeth kept on with his daily exploration of the details of nature, much like his father’s idol Henry David Thoreau, born a century to the day before he was. It is to the historian’s benefit: he created an exceedingly full visual record of twentieth-century Chadds Ford, that richly historic place that continues inexorably to grow and change.