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# greet

## BRANDYWINE VALLEY



### Wyeth's World

Wyeth Foundation Curator Will Coleman gains a new perspective on the legendary artist as he walks in his footsteps

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# Get the Picture

In December, Will L. Coleman became Director and Curator of the Wyeth Foundation. As a specialist in American art, he already had a passion for Wyeth, but being immersed in the world that inspired him offers insight into the man behind the paintings.

BY RESIDENT GEORGIA JACOBS  
PHOTOS BY NATE HECKENBERGER

When Betsy Wyeth died in the spring of 2020, she left behind a body of 7,000 carefully archived objects now known as the Andrew & Betsy Wyeth Collection and historic structures she’d restored. She wanted someone who would work as tirelessly as she did to bring their legacy to life. William L. Coleman is that man.

**GREET:** Tell us a little about yourself and how you first became interested in Andrew Wyeth and his wife Betsy. **WILL COLEMAN:** The remarkable creative partnership of Andrew and Betsy Wyeth was a gateway to a professional specialization in the art of the United States in general and landscape in particular via a lifetime of regular visits to the Brandywine and our regular partner institution, the Farnsworth Art Museum in Maine. Both these twin poles of the Wyeth legacy introduced me to an inspiring story of art rooted in place, a visionary process that was both grounded in a rich tradition and rigorously individual. An Andrew Wyeth painting was the focal point of my first exhibition as an undergraduate at Haverford College and the journey since has taken me across the country and abroad in pursuit of other artists of the inhabited landscape.

**Tell us a little bit about your new role as curator of the Wyeth Foundation, what it means to you and your and your team’s goals for 2023 and beyond.** It’s an incredible honor to be entrusted with this unique role; four months in, none of the rosy glow has worn off, and I feel only more grateful to be working with such thoughtful and creative colleagues every day. As Wyeth Foundation Curator and Director of the Andrew & Betsy Wyeth Study Center, I am based at the Brandywine but also oversee staff and collections in Maine, along with our research and outreach efforts far and wide. In addition to caring for and exhibiting the 7,000 objects in the Andrew & Betsy Wyeth Collection that is now under the management of the Brandywine Museum of Art, we are working on publishing the complete works of Andrew Wyeth, a heavy lift for so productive an artist, but thanks to the archival labors of Betsy James Wyeth before us, a manageable one.

**This is a homecoming of sorts for you. What is it like to be back in the area, living and working so closely in a place that Wyeth took as his inspiration?** Most of my childhood was in the South Jersey suburbs of Philadelphia, and college and later research appointments brought me back often. Because this artist was so deeply and consistently inspired by the people and places in a radius of just a few miles from the center of Chadds Ford, there’s an insight into his work and methods that can only come from living and working in this environment. We’ll try to share that insight with audiences far and wide.

**As an expert in the field, how would you describe Andrew Wyeth’s place in American art?** I see Andrew Wyeth as an American original, an essential creative story along a continuum that stretches back across thousands of years of artists taking inspiration from this land and shaping the environments around them for aesthetic ends. His rapturous general audience popularity and wide range of subject matter have, at times, caused critics and gatekeepers to underestimate his work, but the reputation battles of the past have died down and what remains is a vast and vibrant creative legacy containing multitudes.

**What about Betsy’s character made her go to such lengths to catalogue and preserve her husband’s work?** Betsy James Wyeth was a creative partner and an important artist in her own right, as I am newly convinced from getting steeped in the records. Her forward-looking archival methods, including a very early embrace of computer database software, has provided a unique depth of understanding of one creative process that is a major service to scholars, fellow artists, and art lovers. Those who knew her tell me of a powerful personality with strong convictions who made it her mission not only to preserve and present this artistic story accurately, but also to restore key buildings and landscapes that, in turn, served as inspiration for her husband. While there is a comparison to be made to the role Jo Hopper played in archiving Edward Hopper’s work, Betsy’s contribution was far more than managerial and archival, as we will tell in this and future exhibitions.



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**How is her estate plan an extension of the tireless work she did managing her husband’s career?**

Betsy in concert with the Wyeth Foundation for American Art devised a unique way to ensure that the important collection of Andrew Wyeth’s work she formed would be preserved intact under the highest standards of professional care, documented, and presented to the world in regular exhibitions. The creation of my position and the support of the full highly professional staff of the Brandywine of which we are a part creates a unified management structure for the former family office staff and collections long housed in Pennsylvania and Maine.

**Of the 7,000 works Besty Wyeth preserved, what are a few of the most important items that we’ll see in the future?**

The Andrew & Betsy Wyeth Collection includes everything from some of the artist’s best-loved works in the tempera medium like *Night Sleeper* and *Pentecost*, superlative examples of watercolor and its drybrush technique that became a particular trademark, through abstract and immediate preliminary studies. All these media are represented in our current exhibition, *Home Places*, and many surprises yet lay in store.

**In some ways, Chadds Ford is like a living/live exhibition. You pass by the homes of the Wyeths and hear stories from residents about their interactions**

**with them because they were such an integral part of the community. How did this impact future exhibitions at the Brandywine Museum here and the Farnsworth Museum in Maine?**

As a newcomer to Wyeth world, I often feel like everyone knew the Wyeths personally except me! It has been a privilege getting to talk with the former family staff, relatives, and board members of the Wyeth Foundation who have been able to provide important insight into the contributions Andrew & Betsy Wyeth made to the places they loved for decades. This has helped me to understand the choices and physical experiences that went into making these objects and has inspired numerous exhibition ideas percolating for the future.

**Andrew Wyeth is a kind of historian who preserved a view into rural life in our area. What fueled his fascination with old buildings and the local landscape? What did he want to accomplish in painting them?**

Wyeth made his life’s work getting beneath the surface of things to the layers they contain. The history of our region fascinated him, especially the Revolutionary War’s Battle of Brandywine, with which many of the houses he depicted had associations. But his gaze was not just backward-looking: he was a modern artist who found in these structures abstract geometries that captured his imagination, and he was fascinated by the unexpected proximity of evocative old buildings to modern transportation infrastructure.

**One of your tasks as curator is to put together a catalogue raisonné of Wyeth’s work. Tell us a little about that.**

This will be a multi-year effort, most likely starting with the temperas, and we can’t predict a precise completion date because of the unknowns of research and outreach it requires. For each object Andrew Wyeth made, we will document its ownership history, or provenance, include its published references, technical details, and historical notes. An advisory committee will weigh in and will help us to present an authoritative statement of the artistic achievement of Andrew Wyeth.

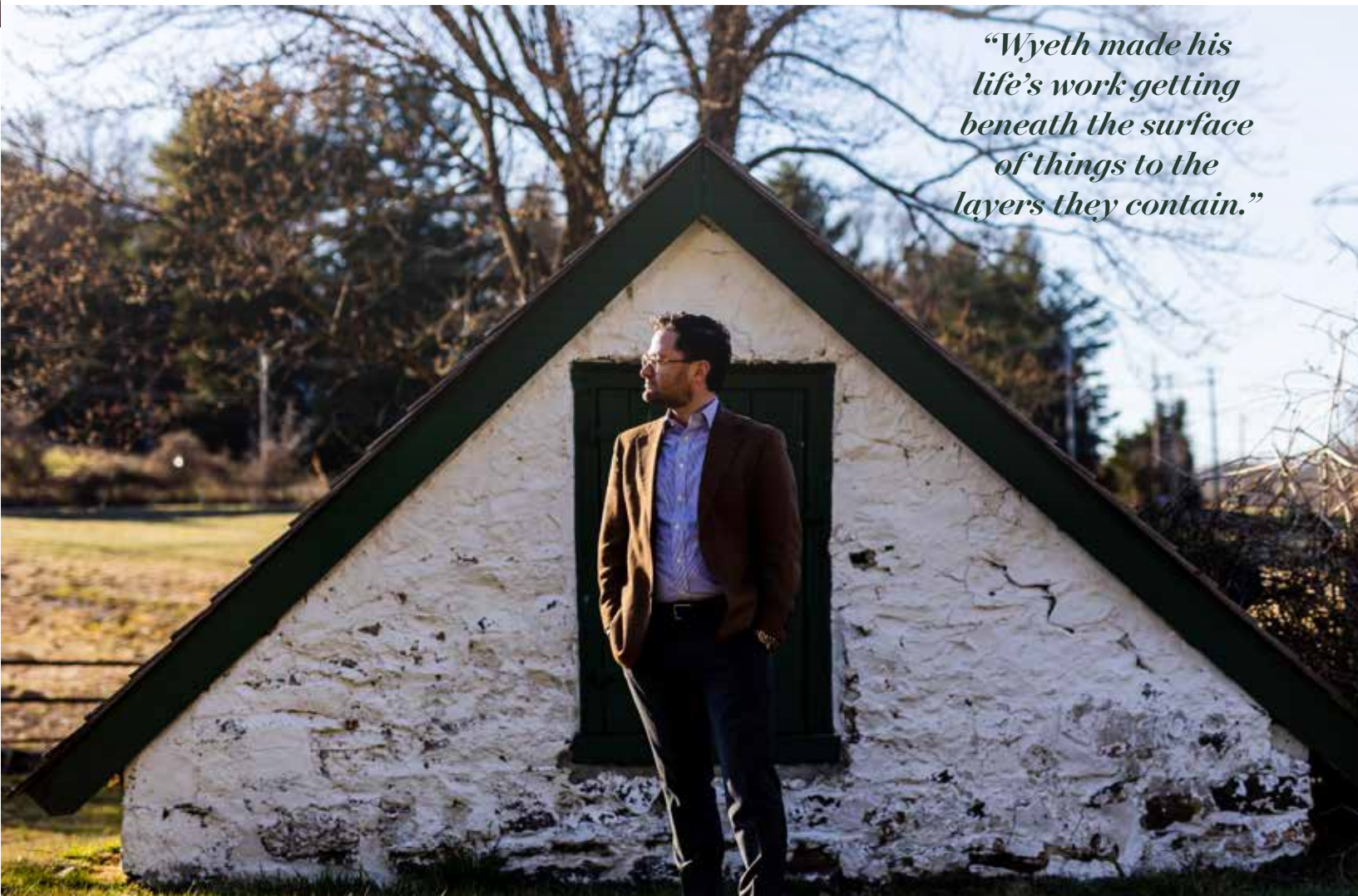
**Another major project is to digitize the collection. Tell us about that and what it will mean for researchers and enthusiasts.**

The Andrew & Betsy Wyeth Collection with its data and images will be migrated over the next year into the mainstream and versatile museum database software the Brandywine uses. This offers exciting possibilities to clarify to the general public and colleagues in the field what exactly is in this collection that has been a secret too well kept. Betsy James Wyeth’s own embrace of new media with an early proprietary database software for use by the family office shows how important this strategy has always been.



**What can viewers learn about Wyeth from his studies and sketches, many never before published?**

The early stages of idea generation that are documented in this collection show an artist who was anything but an anti-modernist. While he commonly worked in a broadly realist mode, he used an astonishing variety of techniques and approaches to achieve his desired ends and we are just learning how inspired he was by some abstract artists of the period. In short, the works that Betsy collected are a treasure trove like no other for an understanding of the creative process.



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**ANDREW WYETH: HOME PLACES**

**Photo by Dustin DeYoe**

*On exhibit through July 13 at the Brandywine River Museum of Art, Home Places is the first of many exhibitions Will and his team put together that draws from the Andrew & Betsy Wyeth Collection. It's comprised primarily of previously unexhibited works and shares new insights into an inspiring creative legacy. Will gives us the curator's tour.*

**Greet: Home Places is a crossroads of the Wyeth's life between Chadds Ford and Maine. How do these two places inform each other in this exhibition?**

**Will:** While this exhibition focuses entirely on Wyeth's lifelong journey with a small group of old houses around Chadds Ford, his parallel journey with Maine subjects like the Olson House of *Christina's World* fame is an important subtext. Another connection is the way Betsy shaped physical landscapes in both Pennsylvania and Maine while Andrew was representing them. We gesture to this briefly in this show but hope to do the fuller “Betsy's Buildings” project in the future.

**What are some of the buildings still standing that will appear in the show?**

Some of the most important include the Kuerner house, now owned by the Brandywine; Painter's Folly, now owned by Chadds Ford Township; and the Barns-Brinton and John Chads houses, both owned by the Chadds Ford Historical Society. I hope that visitors will think about the way the artist refracted, transformed, and abstractly evoked these structures, using the means necessary to achieve his goals.



Photo by Dustin DeYoe

**What are some of the highlights of Andrew Wyeth: Home Places?**

A crystallization of the themes of the show is the tempera 747, in which Betsy is shown from behind looking up at the family home they restored together. Another favorite is the astonishing watercolor *Brick House, Study for Tenant Farmer*, in which Wyeth presents one Chadds Ford house starkly against a white background, almost like a nude figure painting in the studio, painting it alternately loosely and minutely. It's a powerful thing.

**Anything you'd like to add?**

My dream is that visitors will come see *Andrew Wyeth: Home Places* multiple times and let these remarkable objects yield up their inspiration slowly, just as the buildings that are their focus did for Wyeth over decades of living in this landscape.