

Helga on Paper Opens New Adelson • NYC

2006 Exhibition Brings Legendary Images to Leading Gallery

Philip Alvare

In an inaugural exhibition at its new gallery at 19 East 82nd Street, Adelson Gallery mounted a show titled *Andrew Wyeth, Helga on Paper*, which was open to the public last November and December.

The handsome turn-of-the-century townhouse, half a block from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is currently filled with approximately 60 of the nearly 240 works of art known as *The Helga Pictures* that set chins wagging in the art world when they first appeared on the scene in 1985, and Andrew Wyeth's secret relationship with then unknown model Helga Testorf was unveiled.

At the time Warren Adelson, President of Adelson Galleries was working for Coe Kerr Galleries. Coe Kerr had been president of M. Knoedler & Co., the distinguished American art gallery formed in 1846 in NYC. Considered by many to be *the* blue-chip gallery, by the mid 1960s Knoedler's position in the art world had receded and Coe Kerr Galleries was formed. Kerr brought Andrew Wyeth with him when he formed his new gallery.

In the hard bound catalogue produced for the show, *Andrew Wyeth Helga on Paper*, Warren Adelson recounts how in 1985, still with Coe Kerr, they had gotten a call from Betsy Wyeth who asked them to come to Chadd's Ford, Pennsylvania, to appraise some pictures. Apparently it was a collection of paintings that had been "put away by Andy" and she wanted to know what their market value was.

Once in Chadd's Ford, Adelson encountered the Helga Collection remembering it "...as one of those indelible moments." Scattered about the second floor of a mill building were more than 200 pieces including, "works in frames leaning against the wall and on easels, but most were piled on tables unframed." There were a few tempera paintings, many drybrushes and, "scores of delicious watercolors, so fresh they seemed just painted." They did come up with a dollar valuation for the collection in 1985, which appreciated considerably when Andrews sold it to the Japanese collector in 1990 for an estimated \$40-50M. However, their hopes of bringing some or all of the collection back to the New York gallery were not realized when all 240 works were purchased by the art collector Leonard E.B. Andrews.

An Intact Collection

In an article entitled "The Helga Pictures: A Cavalcade of Wyeth's Technical Virtuosity," New York City Tribune, July 4, 1989, art critic Jason Edward Kaufman describes how the collector Leonard E.B. Andrews visited the Wyeth estate in Chadd's Ford, Pennsylvania in 1986. After visiting the mill building filled with an array of paintings whose only human subject was a woman named Helga, he decided to buy all 240 paintings and sketches on the spot.

When queried why he decided to snatch up so many Wyeths at one fell swoop, Mr. Andrews explained, "I bought them to keep them together to show the American people," because he considered the "Helga Collection a national treasure."

Andrews wasted no time contacting Paul Gottlieb, president of Harry N. Abrams Publishers, who suggested a museum exhibition, for which



"In The Orchard," 1985.



"In The Orchard," 1981.



"The First Drawing," 1971.

Abrams would produce the accompanying catalogue. Gottlieb put Andrews in touch with Director J. Carter Brown, and John Wilmerding, then deputy director of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, who swiftly organized an exhibition titled, *Andrew Wyeth: The Helga Pictures*.

The ensuing flood of media reports, (most of which focused on Wyeth and Helga's supposed intimacy) and the six city American tour that started with the National Gallery, in May of 1987, marked the successful completion of Mr. Andrews intentions to "show the American people."

A few years later he sold the entire lot to a collector in Japan.

The 'Helga Sensation'

The catalogue contains an essay and interview excerpts with Wyeth by former Metropolitan Museum of Art Chairman Thomas Hoving, titled *The Horse's Mouth*. In addition to discussions regarding specific works, influences and approach, Wyeth recounts events around what became known as "The Helga Sensation" with cover stories in Time, Newsweek and Art & Auction. Wyeth's friend, Hollywood producer Joe Levine, whom Wyeth characterizes as, "...a master at thumping up publicity, called and said, 'I thought I was a pro but you've made me look like a chump.'"

Hoving recounts that in 1971 Karl Kuerner, whose family and farm had been a constant subject for Wyeth, was ailing, and Wyeth had to find a new model.

Wyeth recalls, "I met Helga at Karl and Anna Kuerner's where I've painted for years. Karl's health was fading and whenever one of my subjects begins to go I find a younger subject. It's like spring following winter..."

One day in 1971 I met Helga at the Kuerners'... I was entranced the instant I saw her... God, I thought, I have to have her as my next model! The difference between me and a lot of painters is that I have to have a personal contact with my models. I don't mean a sexual love; I mean a real love. Many artists tell me they don't even recall the names of their models. I have to fall in love with mine - hell, I do much the same with a tree or dog..."

The result of Wyeth's 14-year relationship with Helga, which he chose to keep secret from his wife and the rest of the world, was finally exposed in 1986 and still remains somewhat enigmatic.

In 1990, Adelson left Coe Kerr Gallery to form Adelson Gallery, but continued his friendship with Coe Kerr's agent for Andrew Wyeth, Frank Fowler. After very little communication regarding Wyeth or Helga, the two men reconnected in the fall of 2005. The paintings had returned to the American market and they were given the opportunity to exhibit them in New York. That's when they contacted Thomas Hoving, former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art from 1967-77, whose decade there included a noteworthy exhibition titled, *The Two Worlds of Andrew Wyeth: Kuerners and Olsons*. Hoving agreed to write the essay and publish excerpts from his interviews with Wyeth for the current Adelson catalogue.

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"Pageboy," 1979.

The Exhibition

The 60 or so works of paper that were on exhibition at Adelson included a few dry-brush paintings (where most of the moisture is squeezed out of the brush so only a small amount of paint is left and layer upon layer of brush strokes are woven together), and tempera (a dry pigment mixed with egg yolk and water) paintings, and the lion's share balance of work in drawings and watercolors.

Adelson explains his aesthetic and curatorial approach to the exhibition of works on paper as follows: "Seeing the drawings and watercolors together presents a

unique opportunity for the public. It is as though you were standing by the artist and observing his process. The subtlety of the drawings and the nuance and deftness of touch of the watercolor technique is an aesthetic experience that can only be realized in person. Andrew Wyeth stands as one of the great draughtsmen and painters of the modern era, and we are thrilled to be able to present these extraordinary works to a New York City audience for the first time."

Indeed, Wyeth's work has been compared to Flemish masters and characterized as painting in the manner of Bellini, Lotto, Durer and Holbein. It's an anachronistic jolt to see Wyeth's painting, *Christina's World*, considered by many to be a masterpiece, alongside Braque, Mondrian and Picasso at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. He's a painter for the people, much in the same way Robert Frost was a poet for the people, with a broad popular appeal that's easily appreciated, if for no other reason than its keen representational likenesses and technical skill.

People aren't necessarily what Wyeth seems to be interested in, however, as the vast majority of his work reveals human beings as somehow subsidiary elements in dun colored landscapes where fallow meadows and dilapidated barns reign supreme. The Helga pictures do not stray far from this approach. The eponymous model's rather dour and expressionless features are often overshadowed, nearly vanishing within the mass of a tree trunk, or mesh of meadows and orchards. One possible exception to this affectless pall is possibly the technically superb tempera painting on panel titled: *Sheepskin* c.1973, that depicts Helga sitting on a stool, wearing a sheepskin coat, hands clasped on her lap as she gazes toward an indeterminate space out of frame, lower right. The psychological mood evoked is either emotionally enigmatic, or inaccessible.

Real feelings, though, seem to arise from some of the watercolors, whose painterly and often expressionistic aspects vibrate. The exhibited works on paper seem uncharacteristic of Wyeth and will disappoint some who love his work because it is predictably realistic. We see gestural passion and an intense use of watercolor applied with opaque intentionality. It is as if Wyeth allowed himself not to be *himself* in these stunning, often stark – in the case of the frontal nudes – works on paper, which must be regarded as important, and possibly as good as any argument on why we consider Wyeth a great artist and not merely an illustrator.

Adelson Gallery is located at 19 East 82nd Street in Manhattan.

For more information, call (413) 439-6800.

www.adelsongalleries.com