



## Full Circle

By Warren Adelson

I joined Coe Kerr Gallery in February 1974. The gallery was housed in a 19th century brownstone at 49 East 82nd Street. The founder, E. Coe Kerr, Jr., had died unexpectedly a year earlier, and his partner, Fred Woolworth, needed a "picture guy." I was recommended by a mutual friend, Jack Tanzer. I met Fred, we hit it off, and I was there. Coe Kerr had been the President of M. Knoedler & Co., the distinguished American art gallery. The gallery had been founded in 1846 in New York by Michael Knoedler, and Coe Kerr was a distant descendant by marriage of the founder. Knoedler had become the premier gallery in New York by the early twentieth century, but by the mid-1960s, Knoedler's position in the art world had diminished. It was not the powerhouse it had been in its salad years in post-war New York. The great clients were dying off and the legendary Chairman, Roland Balay, was less active. Coe left Knoedler in 1968. He and Fred had been at lunch at "21 Club," and they had decided to form this new company. Fred suggested he had the financing and Coe was the art expert. It's likely that Peter Kriendler, the amiable owner at "21," had a vote that day. He was an old friend of both men, and Pete was never shy to speak his mind. By 1969 Coe Kerr Gallery was a going concern, and within it was the preeminent artist that Coe had brought along from Knoedler, Andrew Wyeth.

It was 1985, and Fred told me that he had gotten a call from Betsy Wyeth. For over a dozen years I had been involved in Fred's dealings with Andy and Betsy Wyeth. She asked us to come to Chadds Ford and appraise some pictures. She told Fred that it was a collection of paintings that had been put away by Andy, and she wanted a value on them. We drove to their home in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, with our art handler, Tony Gargiulo, an old pro that Coe had brought with him from Knoedler. We arrived at the Wyeth home, and Betsy directed us to climb the stairs at the Mill, the 18th-century stone building adjacent to their home. Scattered about the second floor was what we later called the Helga collection. Some works were in frames leaning against the walls and on easels, but most of them were piled on tables unframed. We counted over 200

pieces. It was one of those indelible moments for me and certainly for Fred; it seared into memory. I remember stacks of drawings, the likes of which I had never seen. There were a few gorgeous tempera paintings and many drybrushes unlike anything I knew. *Refuge* was propped against the wall. *Black Velvet* was on an easel. I had trouble taking my eyes from *Lovers*, looking at the use of drybrush in disbelief. There were scores of delicious watercolors, so fresh they seemed just painted. I remember that I took lots of notes and lots of photographs. We said very little, and we left Pennsylvania dazed. I don't recall the drive home. Over the next weeks I worked with Fred to evaluate these paintings and drawings, and it was daunting. Though we knew the value of Wyeth's work, artworks like this hadn't been for sale: his drawings were not on the market and we had never seen drybrushes like these. We did come up with a dollar total. It was all we talked about, how to get the Helga collection and exhibit it on 82nd Street. It was not to be. They were purchased by a collector, Leonard Andrews, for an amount above our evaluation.

Then there was all the press about the paintings and the relationship between the artist and the model. On the newsstands were the unique same-week covers of *Time* magazine and *Newsweek* featuring Helga. Then there was the extraordinary exhibition at the National Gallery in Washington, DC. A few years later the collection was sold to a mysterious buyer overseas. There was more press. Then they were gone.

All the while I had known Frank Fowler, the agent for Andrew Wyeth. When I decided to leave Coe Kerr Gallery in 1990 to form Adelson Galleries at the Mark Hotel on 77th Street, my friendship with Frank continued, though we had fewer dealings with the works of Andrew Wyeth. In the fall of 2005 Frank and I reconnected and it was about Helga. The paintings had returned to the American market, and we were given the chance to exhibit them in New York in the following year. The concept was thrilling. The collection that I thought was gone forever had come back. We felt there would be no person more qualified to introduce these paintings in New York than Thomas Hoving, whose decade (1967-77) as Director of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York was marked by singular triumphs and brilliant exhibitions, none more noteworthy than *The Two Worlds of Andrew Wyeth: Kuerners and Olsons*, which had been an overwhelming success at the Metropolitan for the artist, the Director, and the public. Frank and I

discussed our show with Tom, and he volunteered to write the essay herein and publish excerpts from his protracted interviews with Andrew Wyeth about specific works of art. Tom's acumen provides us with a unique window into the artist and the Helga paintings.

Within the past twenty years, selections from the Helga collection have been exhibited in well over a dozen American museums. These extraordinary works of art have never been shown in New York City, and we are thrilled to be able to amend this situation. It has been our choice to focus solely on the works on paper. Andrew Wyeth's draughtsmanship may be his least heralded virtue, and I feel it may be his greatest. This show allows us to look over the artist's shoulder as he observed this special model. The drawings and watercolors provide a feeling for Wyeth's process over a fifteen year period, and seeing them together create a unique sense of his sequence as an artist. The drybrushes included in the show offer a crescendo that becomes all the more profound in the context of seeing the other works on paper.

I would like to acknowledge and thank the people that made this exceptional event possible. They include Andrew Wyeth, Betsy Wyeth, Thomas Hoving, Frank Fowler, Fred Woolworth, Frolic Weymouth, Jim Duff, Mary Landa, Coe Kerr, Jack Tanzer, Jan Adelson, Steven Comen, Michael Simches, and all my colleagues at Adelson Galleries. It is with special pleasure that Adelson Galleries exhibit these remarkable works of art by Andrew Wyeth for the inauguration of our new gallery at 19 East 82nd Street in New York. I feel we have come full circle.

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