

FAME 2006 Artist- Andrew Wyeth

Introduction

Do you remember what time of day was being illustrated by the music you just listened to? (*Sunrise.*) We're going to talk about light for a moment. What is the light like at sunrise? Do the colors look the same at sunrise as they do at noon? (*No. The colors are brighter at noon and more subdued at sunrise.*)

Light and shadow change the look of colors, too. (*Point out children who are wearing light or dark colors.*) Look at the colors the kids are wearing. We're going to create shadows by turning off the lights. (*Turn off lights.*) What happens to the colors? (*They are grayer and softer.*)

Transparent, Translucent and Opaque

Light can also look different when it shows **through** things. We have three different words to describe the way light shows through things: transparent, translucent, and opaque. (*Shine flashlight through visual with words and materials.*) Which one lets the most light through? Which one the least? Can you point to some things in this room that are transparent? (*Windows, clock face, eyeglasses.*) How about translucent? (*There may not be much; look for frosted glass, fabrics, etc.*) How about opaque? (*If you want, you can hand out pieces of saran wrap, aluminum foil, etc. so the kids can look through and see for themselves.*) Does the translucent material let you see through it or does it only let the light go through? What do you think it would look like to try to see the world through something that is translucent? (*Blurry or unclear.*)

Chambered Nautilus

The painting that we are going to look at today uses light and translucence in interesting ways. (*Show light/shadow poster.*) The painting is called, "Chambered Nautilus" by Andrew Wyeth (*Pronounced Wy-eth. Show painting.*) Wyeth loves to paint light and contrast it with shadow, and he uses a lot of white in his work. Can you find some things in the painting that are transparent? (*The window.*) How about translucent? (*The bed curtains and the light in the nautilus shell.*)

The use of light in a painting can help set the mood. Notice how much white is used in this painting and how many things are highlighted? What do you see highlighted? (*The woman's face and hands, her hair, the canopy curtains, the glowing shell.*) Wyeth created the effects of light by using lots of white paint, and he created the effects of translucence by using many coats of thinned paint layered on. What kind of feeling do you get from this room? (*Possible answers: peaceful, lonely, empty, cold.*)

Now let's talk about the subject of the painting. It is obviously a woman in bed. Are there any clues as to how long she's been in bed, how much time she spends there and why she is there? (*Help them notice the basket filled with books and paper, designed to help her pass the hours; the lap robe; the passive, longing figure of the woman.*) The woman in the painting is actually Wyeth's mother-in-law, who was confined to bed most

of the time. Have any of you ever had to spend a long period of time in bed—several days or several weeks? How did you feel about it? How would you feel if you knew you would have to spend most of your life in bed? Are there any clues as to how the woman feels about being bedridden? (*She seems resigned, but not really happy; she seems to be looking for something outside the window, even though we can't see what that is.*)

As I mentioned, the painting is called, “Chambered Nautilus.” Do any of you know what a chambered nautilus is? (*A type of shell--- hold up shell for them to see.*) The nautilus is a sea creature that lives in a shell that’s shaped like a horn when it’s small. As the nautilus grows, the shell grows too. When one chamber of the shell gets to be too small, the nautilus moves forward in the shell and builds a wall behind it, shutting off that part of the shell. The average nautilus has thirty chambers. The shell in the picture is a chambered nautilus and that’s how the painting got its name.

(*For older students.*) The chambered nautilus is also a symbol that reveals something about the woman in the painting. A symbol is an object or image that shows something or tells part of a story about something else. In what ways is the woman in the picture like the shell in the painting? (*Guide them toward answers as needed: she is walled off from the outside world; in other words, she is “chambered” too. The sea creature closes off its past; she has been shut up and isolated from her past, too. She longs for life outside her chamber.*)

The combination of the way she is highlighted, the way the translucence of the window keeps us from seeing clearly out the window, and the symbol of the chambered nautilus all show us the woman’s feelings of isolation from the rest of the world.

Andrew Wyeth Biography

Andrew Wyeth is different from most artists and composers we study in FAME--- he is still alive! He is 88 years old! Another interesting thing about him is that he is the middle of three generations of famous artists—his father was N.C. Wyeth, a famous book illustrator and his son, Jamie, is also an artist.

Andrew Wyeth was born in 1917 in Pennsylvania and moved to Maine with his family when he was three. He was the youngest of five children, all of whom were raised by their father to be very creative. Andrew was sick a lot when he was young so he was home schooled by his father. N.C. Wyeth encouraged all his children to go out and explore nature, and then come home and do their lessons about what they had seen.

The only art lessons Andrew ever had were from his father when he was very young. But that was enough. The time he spent with his father made Andrew very close to him and they shared a bond of love for art, creativity, painting and nature. By the time he was 12, Andrew was illustrating children’s books. He exhibited water colors at the Art Alliance in Philadelphia at the age of 19, and he had his first one-man show at age 20. All the tickets to that show sold out in one day, he was already so famous at age 20!

A few years later, Wyeth married Betsy James. They have two children, Nicholas, who is an art dealer, and Jamie, who is a famous artist in his own right, making three generations of famous Wyeth artists.

Andrew and Betsy are very private people. She provides privacy for him and acts as a buffer from the outside world, which frees him to be creative. Wyeth only paints when he is alone; he considers it an invasion of privacy for anyone to watch him work.

His days are spent in a fairly regular pattern—he wanders about outside observing nature and making sketches and sometimes watercolors. Then he returns to his studio to do his painting using Tempra paint mixed with egg. This gives his paintings a shiny look, while still keeping a sense of texture and earth tones. He sometimes uses ground up bits of earth or other mediums mixed in with his paint to create a very natural feel.

His paintings are of places that are familiar to him, and they have a strong sense of Maine in summer, with the type of scenery and light that he sees around him. The people in his paintings are familiar to him, too. His most famous paintings are of a friend, Christina Olsen, and her brother. He painted a whole series of paintings featuring the brother and sister from 1939 until they died in 1969. He painted another series of portraits of a friend of his from 1938 until 1982 and those who see the paintings get to see him age as the years pass. In 1986, a series of 240 previously unknown paintings of a woman named Helga were revealed. They were all of a neighbor of Wyeth's, and the "Helga paintings" are considered his best work.

In 1990, Wyeth was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal, the first artist to ever be given the honor. Today, he lives with his wife, Betsy, in Maine, where the Wyeth Center opened in 1998. Maine was chosen as the site for the center in part because Wyeth once said that his paintings, "simply look better in Maine; it involves something as simple as the slant of light across the landscape."