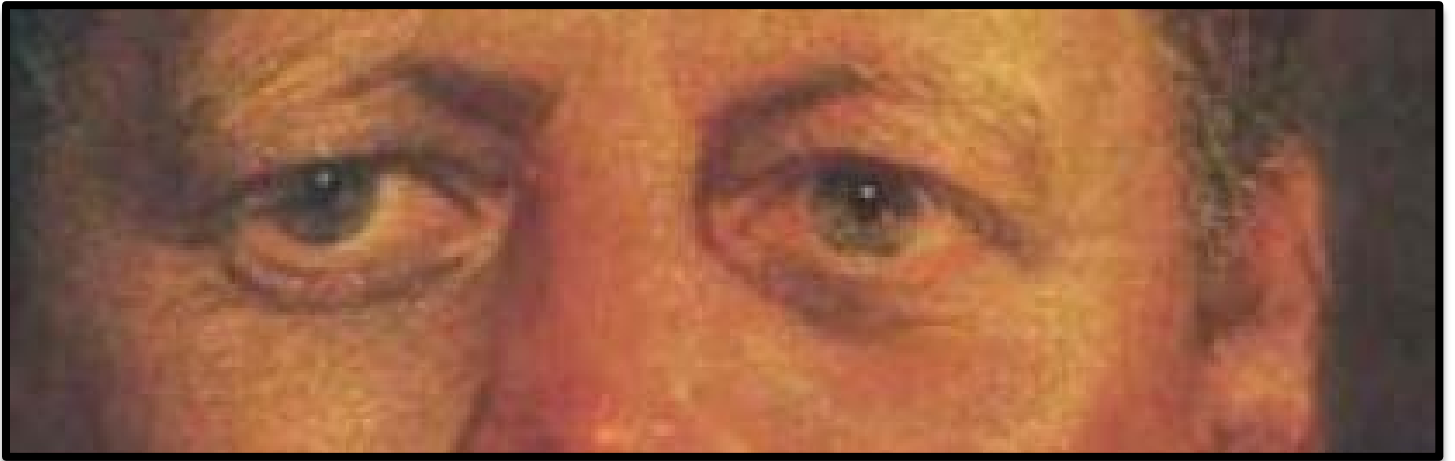


SUMMONED FROM A DREAM : JAMIE WYETH'S "KENNEDY PORTRAIT"



The *UNOFFICIAL* OFFICIAL PRESIDENTIAL PORTRAIT
of **JFK**



A Note

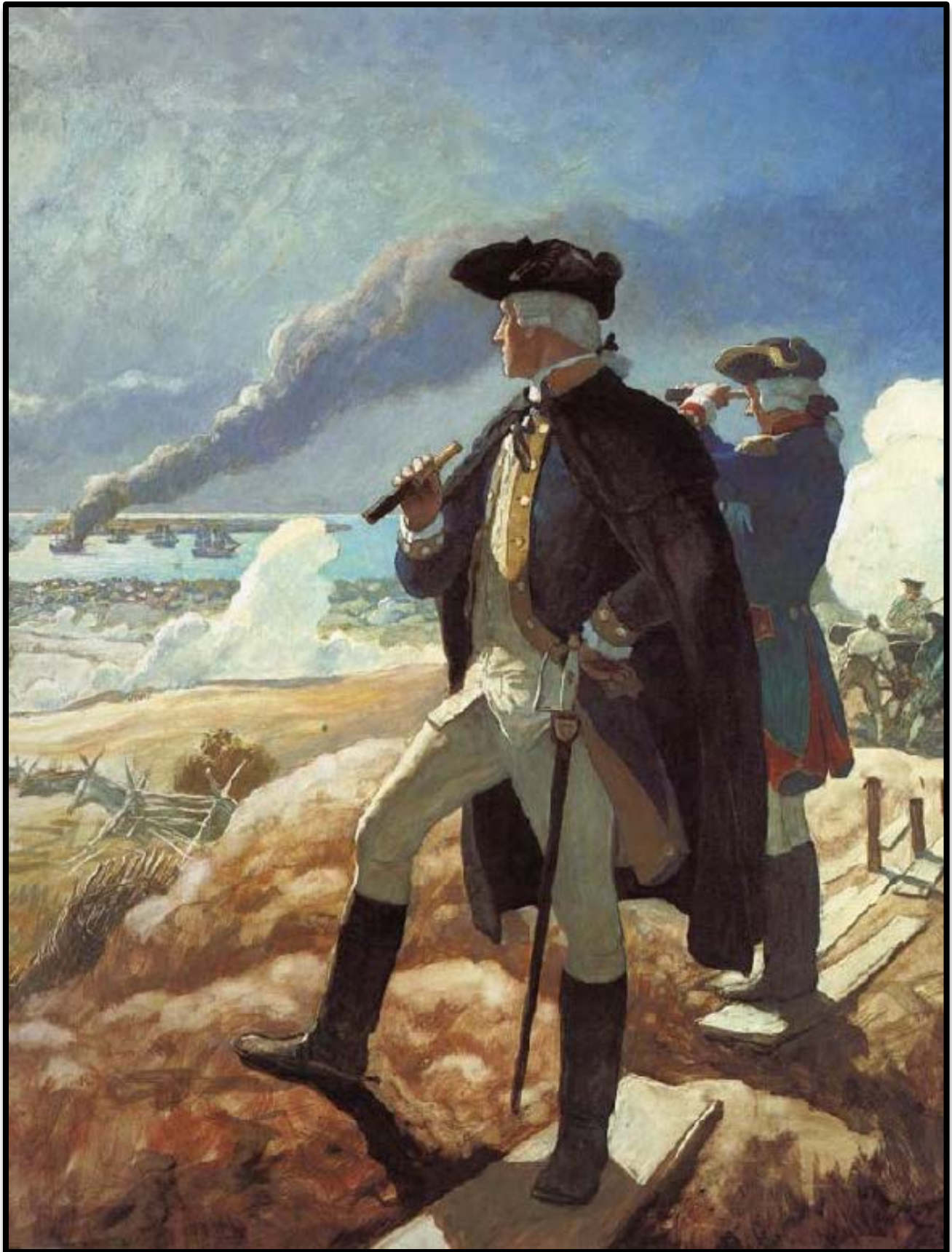


Roch Steinbach

SO.... by "Wyeths" -- plural -- I'm referring to the entire well-known line of painters, of three generations, beginning with **Newell Convers Wyeth**, the "patriarch" of Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania -- one of America's greatest artist-illustrators, who -- among other works -- is well-known for his illustrations of James Fenimore Cooper's **DEERSLAYER** and R. L. Stevenson's **TREASURE ISLAND** to name just a couple of literary milestones that were re-issued by **Charles Scribners & Sons** publishers, in the 1910's-1920's. Wyeth's work was closely identified with that of his teacher **Howard Pyle**, and tagged "*The Brandywine School*" -- for its origination in the valley of the Brandywine River, in Pennsylvania. It's recognizable for its heightened, often romanticized realism, dramatic lighting and lush color, and its effectiveness in portraying human action. Like this one:



Or this historical treatment of *George Washington at Yorktown*, from Wyeth's "Making of America" series:



After N.C. Wyeth's death, his son, **Andrew Wyeth**, gained recognition for stark realism in landscape, usually of scenes in the region of the Brandywine Valley and around Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, from which Howard Pyle and N.C. Wyeth had drawn so much inspiration. Andrew depicted this landscape generally in winter -- when, Wyeth stated, you could better study the "bone structure" of the land. Andrew Wyeth's work often references this Pennsylvania landscape and its uniquely American cultural heritage directly, but often with a deep and distinctly self-referential cultural twist: as in his "breakout" 1951 painting, *The Trodden Weed*, in which the artist has depicted himself, wearing the boots of **Howard Pyle**, his father's teacher in art, and mentor:



In how many historical paintings by **Howard Pyle**, had these boots appeared as costuming? Whose boots had they been, before they were Pyle's? In donning them, and then painting this oblique self-portrait, what was Andrew Wyeth, artist and citizen, saying about his calling?



Redcoats, by Howard Pyle

Like *The Trodden Weed*, many of Andrew Wyeth's paintings often seem to be study of core cultural allusions, apprehended in memory, intuited in the mind, but not readily visible. A vision of what is not sensibly there -- of a distinctly American and even a *Revolutionary* heritage, unseen: perhaps dormant in winter, but invariably present. Many art critics, and Wyeth himself, have connected this sense of the silent and the absent, to the tragic death of his father.

In the 1940's, but especially beginning in the 50's and on into 60's and on into the 70's, Wyeth managed to create a national reputation hewing to realist, representational & regionalist art, in an era when all commercially "successful" artists -- as you know -- were abandoned to minimalism, abstraction, and various deviant 'schools" that could be reach their paragon with the likes of Warhol. Andrew Wyeth's work is not celebratory, or lush, except in its sense of an absolute devotion to the simple, authentic and humanized local farming landscapes, and to exacting portraiture of ordinary farming folk in the valley, often raised to the level of the high art, by the subtlest references. Such as the classic "*Evening at Kuerners*" – shown here:



Andrew Wyeth and the Kennedys

It is probable -- it would be almost a certainty -- that the Kennedys were raised on and around N. C. Wyeth's art and illustrations, through their publication on numerous magazine covers, calendars, and in books: especially in the **Scribner's & Sons** series, which would have been essential to any children's library. Likewise, they later apparently tracked the young Andrew Wyeth's work closely. It would not have been possible to live the cultured life of a traditional New England family, during the '50's for instance, and not have known of Andrew Wyeth's work -- extraordinary landscapes -- and sought to collect one or two. You could bet money that Jack and Jackie Kennedy owned a few original *Andrew Wyeths*.

So, once Kennedy was elected, he -- and probably Jackie -- would have considered it an imperative to recognize Wyeth, and thus the **Presidential Freedom Award** was bestowed on Andrew, in 1963: Andrew Wyeth thus became the first artist to receive the Award, the country's highest civilian award. I think this regard for and recognition of Wyeth, should be seen *in pari materia* with Kennedy's soliciting the poet **Robert Frost** to deliver his poem, *The Gift Outright*, at his Inaugural, as discussed by **Lonnie Wolfe** in his recent article *Power and Poetry*, on the unanimity of mind, between New England's poetic sage, and the political firebrand he had, in part, inspired ...

Jamie Wyeth is Andrew's son, and the third generation of this family to become an extraordinary American painter. Jamie Wyeth's portrait of John F. Kennedy is without parallel, in my opinion – certainly among this stodgy genre of “official portraits,” but also among American portraiture generally. It is rich, lush, big, human, and yet intimate and visionary. Perhaps you can see, in the painting, Kennedy's own regard for art, and for artistic vision -- which he reflected back on the Wyeth family, by honoring Jamie's father, Andrew, with the **Presidential Medal of Freedom**: Jamie, in his own turn, is -- by this portrait -- expressing gratitude to Kennedy, and showering honor upon Kennedy's memory, not just for what he accomplished for the nation, but in another dimension, also suggesting how much Kennedy's support meant to the family, personally. It is Kennedy's soul ... lost in contemplation of a New England landscape ... or of a moon landing.



My personal opinion is, that in the silhouette line of the jutting left shoulder, and the head merging with the black background at the right, Wyeth is almost suggesting Kennedy as an addition to Mount Rushmore.

I've known of Wyeth's posthumous portrait of President Kennedy since I was a teenager -- but always supposed it was a spontaneous tribute by Wyeth -- undertaken on his own initiative -- to honor a great President who had recognized his father's talent, etc. A little internet searching nowadays discloses that this was incorrect. He was acting on requests from "people close to the Kennedys" -- who quite probably had been contacted by Jackie Kennedy -- E.g. despite the approach by go-betweens, **it was a direct commission**, which involved access to Jackie Kennedy in a number of interviews, etc:

"He was also persuaded by people close to the Kennedys to undertake a posthumous portrait of President John F. Kennedy. He familiarized himself with Kennedy's appearance through photographs, motion picture footage, and talks with people who knew him, including several discussions at Hyannisport, Massachusetts, with the President's widow. To get a sense of the living President, he made numerous sketches of his brothers, Robert and Edward Kennedy."

This “persuasion” was certainly initiated by Jacquelyn Kennedy herself.

So Jamie Wyeth's studio must contain *a few score pencil sketches of young Teddy and Robert Kennedy*, and numerous watercolor & tempera studies of President Kennedy, like this one, below, noted as hanging in the Kennedy Library ↓ (...for which Wyeth was again commissioned to execute the ↓ commemorative poster...)



... all done preparatory to attacking the actual canvas which resulted in this American masterpiece. Along with this there should be notes of his interviews with Jackie Kennedy, discussing what it was she most admired in JFK and thus what she wanted to see expressed or evoked in a portrait. One conclusion is, *that Jamie Wyeth should be putting this all together into a book, and / or a traveling museum exhibition.* Perhaps for the upcoming 50th anniversary of the painting

Jackie Kennedy's Memorial to JFK

Until Jamie Wyeth's sketches and notes preparatory to the *Kennedy Portrait* are made public, it's not really possible to know to what degree Jacquelyn Kennedy herself may have suggested to the younger Wyeth -- during his interviews with her -- precisely how she might have wished JFK to be portrayed. Obviously though, this portrait has to be seen as Jackie Kennedy's vision of her Jack ... like the program for JFK's funeral, it was executed more or less under her direction, as the proper tribute, and shrine of his memory, etc. We can only guess, probably, that the "Jack" she knew so well was, in his unguarded moments, an inveterate dreamer, and might at any time, even during an evening's table-talk, "drift off" as if caught in some vision, or as if running out the mechanism of some ratiocination – from which *only a few gentle repetitions of his name* would bring him back to the moment – as if *summoned from a dream*.

Where is the original hanging?

The original must still be in the Kennedy's private collection.

This painting shows the JFK that the family remembers.

It is the *unofficial* official presidential portrait.

