

Posing for Wyeth Modeling for the artist is no mere brush with greatness.

He may all but move in - and the experience is always memorable.

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In 1989, Andrew Wyeth finished painting a wry inside joke - a tribute, of sorts, to all the models he had loved before. Snow Hill includes Helga Testorf, the artist's most famous subject, but not looking downcast and distant, as he'd painted her in the past.

In this one, Testorf kicks up her heels as she frolics round a maypole in the snow. Her dance partners are fellow Chadds Ford residents who appear repeatedly in Wyeth's work, often with a signature trait. Among them, there's Karl Kuerner, his World War II overcoat flying behind him, and Bill Loper, with a hook for an arm. That's how his models would react if told of his impending death, quipped Wyeth, who turns 89, tomorrow, four days before retrospectives of his work close at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and two other area museums.

"I raised hell with them mentally and emotionally," Wyeth once told his biographer. "They wish I were dead so they wouldn't have to pose anymore."

Proud and bemused, and occasionally melancholy, Wyeth's people, those ordinary-folk models, never forget their time with the artist.

For weeks, it's one-on-one as Wyeth winnows ideas in sketch after sketch while they hold their poses in all kinds of weather. Then comes painting, an even more painstaking process, during which the relationship intensifies as Wyeth engages his subjects in conversation until they, too, feel part of the process.

"There you are, in this extraordinary flood of attention, conversing with this brilliant, talented artist," said

Joyce Stoner, an art conservator and close friend of the Wyeth family. "You spend each day with him. You go to lunch. He shows you his latest paintings."

Then one day, Stoner said, "he stops calling you." The letdown can feel like a failed romance. Some fall into what Stoner calls "post-posing depression."

Senna Moore, 40, met Wyeth in the late '90s, when he spotted her at a dinner party "passing the hors d'oeuvres," the artist says.

Moore, a West Chester resident, whose oak-colored skin Wyeth says reminded him of a tree nymph, has been the subject of more than a dozen paintings.

Like all of his models, Moore learned on the job. It wasn't easy. Wyeth works slowly, and from life in the actual setting.

For *The Privy* (1997), the muscular Moore had to pose as if making a mad sprint naked across a field, her arms and legs splayed in a way unlikely to flatter even a supermodel. Her running in place, or standing nude in the hollow of a split tree on Wyeth's Brandywine estate, have also yielded *The Omen* (1997) and *Dryad* (2000).

Yet Moore says she has never been uneasy around Wyeth.

"I felt relaxed," she said recently. "He's very down-to-earth and has a great sense of humor."

Helen Sipala, 71, had it easier posing for *Marriage* (1993), in which she and her husband, George, are seen asleep in bed. The piece demanded dawn light and took four months, but they could doze and take turns with the artist.

Wyeth has made himself a fixture in the Sipalas' 17-room Italianate home in Chadds Ford.

"For a while, it was big time in the widow's walk," Helen Sipala said, giving a tour that included the kitchen chair where Wyeth sits when he comes for a morning visit.

She estimates that Wyeth has come to call, and paint, at least three times a week for 15 years. (After all these years, the house is now up for sale.) While they are not the first to give him the run of a property - "I just prowl around people's houses, when they let me, of course," Wyeth once told a reporter - his relationship with the couple is unusually close, Wyeth family members say.

He leaves notes signed "Robin Hood," or "the man on the roof," a reference to the spring he worked on *Widow's Walk*, a 1990 painting in the Philadelphia retrospective that had him taking his easel through a window each day to paint on a back roof.

Because she views him as "a friend first," Sipala is not awed by the man *Newsweek* has called "the all-American loner."

She lets him move furniture and has never questioned his directives, including one to find a nun's habit. (She did, but the painting's headpiece, with its starched wings, looked nothing like what inspired it - a towel she had wrapped around her wet hair.)

"He just works and works until he feels like stopping," she said. "He has no concept of time, and no concept of where the paint is going."

In the bedroom, Sipala pointed out where that paint did go - on the carpet, on a bedside table, even on the phone cord.

Wyeth's models speak of the artist's intensity, his "don't tell, don't look" policy, his demand for secrecy that causes some to make excuses to bosses for being late, or even to quit jobs. There's also a melodramatic streak, they say, apparent in his painting of a woman, bald and white as a death mask, after chemotherapy.

A model's payment is often personal, such the gas credit card one requested, or the gift of clothes worn while posing, or, most frequently, a high-quality copy of the work in which he or she appears.

Sometimes, after lengthy sessions, Wyeth paints his subject out of the picture. But if that is disappointing, it pales compared with the feelings of loss many have when Wyeth moves on.

It happened to Jimmy Lynch, whom Wyeth described as an "appealing vagabond," captured in works including *The Swinger* (1969) and *Man and the Moon* (1990). When Wyeth was finished, said Lynch, who now lives in Virginia, it was like being left hanging, "with the wind howling."

Even the curly haired calf in *Young Bull* (1966) and *Dentzel*, the draft horse of *Fenced In* (2001), felt abandoned.

After posing, the animals followed Wyeth for days, says Karl J. Kuerner 3d, grandson of Karl and Anna Kuerner, whose Chadds Ford farm is the subject of nearly a thousand Wyeth images.

Kuerner, also an artist, posed only once, in his 20s. He suspects it was to complete the family cycle. Or maybe it was his '70s sideburns that attracted the painter - one never knows, he said.

Wyeth meets his models in Chadds Ford or Maine, the only places he has ever lived. He either runs into them - once at the funeral of another model - or they come to him, some seeking work, some mysteriously, as Wyeth likes to imagine.

There was a native American named Nogeeshik, for instance, who arrived one winter night, far from his Canadian home, seeking a donation for his tribe.

"It was unbelievable, with this long hair and the snow drifting down," Wyeth told *The Inquirer* recently.

"He's drawn to people who have had some sort of loss, if not a tragic life," said Victoria Wyeth, the painter's grandchild and a lecturer on his works.

Another man, Willard Snowden, came knocking on Wyeth's studio door in the late '50s and lived there for more than a decade, drinking and regaling the artist with stories, according to Victoria Wyeth.

Snowden's portrait, *Monologue* (1965), captures those years of talking. And *Willard's Coat* (1968) documents his abrupt departure, hastened by a skeleton Wyeth decided to store in his studio.

Allan Messersmith, a local recluse, first appeared in the 1956 Roasted Chestnuts as a stalklike figure by the side of a dirt road. He has recently reemerged in Wyeth's work after a decades-long absence.

Many of Wyeth's models don't get a second act. Moore, who works at a labor training firm in Exton, is an exception. She remains a favorite for evoking what Victoria Wyeth calls the "emotionally charged" experience.

The Sipalas are no longer Wyeth regulars, but they are still very much connected to him. Their home is full of Wyeth prints and sketches, gifts from the artist. Photos of him are displayed prominently, as are thick albums filled with pictures, some documenting pranks they've played on Wyeth - mannequins in the Marriage bed among them

"If he gets excited about something, he'll want to paint it," Helen Sipala said, recalling their introduction, when she looked out the window and saw a man in her yard. It was Wyeth, sketching a poolside sculpture.

"Maybe he was excited about our friendship," Sipala said, speculating on how the family has come to have a resident artist. "He liked us and it was, 'How do I pursue this? Well, I'll paint you.' "

Contact suburban staffer Catherine Quillman at 610-701-7629 or cquillman@phillynews.com.

An Andrew Wyeth Triptych

"Andrew Wyeth: Memory and Magic" continues through Sunday at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 26th Street and the Parkway. The exhibition is open from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. today through Thursday, 11 a.m. to 8:45 p.m. Friday, and 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

Admission is by special ticket for \$20 general, \$17 for seniors and students with ID, and \$10 for visitors ages 5 to 12. Tickets can be purchased at the museum, by phone at 215-235-7469, or on the museum Web site. A fee of \$3 per ticket (\$2.50 for members) is added to phone and Web orders. Information: 215-763-8100, 215-684-7500 or www.philamuseum.org.

"Andrew Wyeth: Master Drawings" continues at the Brandywine River Museum, Route 1, Chadds Ford, through Sunday. The museum is open daily from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Admission is \$8 general, \$5 for seniors and students. Information: 610-388-2700 or www.brandywinemuseum.org.

"Early Works by Andrew Wyeth" continues at the Delaware Art Museum, 2301 Kentmere Parkway, Wilmington, through Sunday. The museum is open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays, to 8 p.m. Wednesdays, and from noon to 4 p.m. Sundays. Admission is \$10 general, \$8 for seniors, and \$5 for college students with ID. Information: 302-571-9590 or www.delart.org.