



*“Andy was so much fun, laughing, joking and at the same time he could reach down into the very depths of your soul and see what you were about...”*



## BEHIND THE SCENES: MAIDENHAIR

By Andrea L. Curtis, Education Program Manager, Farnsworth Art Museum  
Contributor: Jean Lawrence, President, Waldoborough Historical Society

The haunting expression of the sole figure seated in a wood-grained box pew has long captivated visitors to the Farnsworth Art Museum. Shoulders angled, eyes parted, and a crown of delicate flowers upon her head, the subject of *Maidenhair*, (1974) by Andrew Wyeth evokes a rich visual story. Her articulated strands of blonde hair, reminiscent of the wheaten grass of *Turkey Pond* (1944) hang youthfully next to her drawn and ashen face. Who is she? What is she doing alone in this place? Has someone just left through the slightly parted door, or perhaps someone is about to enter?

This summer, as I planned a storytelling and creative writing unit, Wyeth's painting activated my imagination. I was pleased to learn that the setting for this mesmerizing work, the *Old German Meeting House* in Waldoboro, Maine, was not only a mere 17 miles from the museum, but also open for visitors during the summer months.

Set upon a hill near the Medomak River, the old

church is elevated above the arched cemetery entrance. Greeting me beneath the church doorway was Jean Lawrence, the secretary of the *Ladies Auxiliary of the German Protestant Society*, who now volunteers each summer to "tell the stories" of the "Old German Church," as it is now called.

The church includes historical gems such as a "Mayflower barrel" and gravestones of early-American veterans. Built in 1772, the silence of the reverent space is interrupted only by the occasional creak as one walks on the centuries old wood. With no electricity, natural light beams through the antique windowpanes, possibly a feature that attracted Wyeth to this location.

As I positioned myself in the front pew, I imagined how the fair maiden would have sat. I noticed a wine-glass pulpit towering above (a majestic detail excluded from our vantage point in Wyeth's painting) and the bare walls hold only three portraits of prominent parishio-

ABOVE: Andrew Wyeth, *Maidenhair*, 1974, tempera on panel.

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection ©2018 Andrew Wyeth/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

OPPOSITE: Students explore the Old German Meeting house through a sketching activity.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Inspired by *Maidenhair's* composition, a student poses in the front pew; Jean Lawrence, President of the Waldoborough Historical Society; Students study the "Mayflower" barrel during a sketching lesson; Educators train with Andrea Curtis in preparation for Arts in Education student visits. OPPOSITE PAGE: Museum docents visit the museum and the church to help prepare for their school visit.

ners, including a rare photograph of a Revolutionary War veteran, Conrad Heyer.

As a former teacher, Lawrence is extraordinarily knowledgeable about the church and the painting of *Maidenhair*. In partnership with the staff at the museum's Wyeth Study Center, Lawrence and I quickly began to collaborate on lessons for the participants of the Arts in Education program.

In the fall of 2018, over 231 students and 14 teachers from schools in Waldoboro, Rockland, Hope, Appleton, Lincolnville, and Cushing, Maine visited the Farnsworth galleries to study *Maidenhair* and collaboratively create stories to accompany the work of art. Following their museum visit, we traveled to the church for a private tour, where students learned not only the history of the early German settlement, but also the story of the young girl sitting in the pew.

Students gasped as they discovered that the young woman, Elaine Benner, was once one of Lawrence's students and that Elaine (now Elaine Hyler) still writes letters to her to this day. When they ask if she was a bride, Lawrence chuckles warmly, and tells them her version of the story.

In a letter written to Lawrence, Hyler describes meeting Andrew Wyeth. The year was 1974 and as a young 17-year-old she was riding her bicycle on her way back

from a lawn-mowing job. Hyler recalls, "Andy, as I call him, drove by me, in his Stutz Bearcat," a popular car among celebrities such as Elvis Presley.

Days after the chance encounter Hyler recalls, "Andy showed up in front of the house. With everyone peeking out the house window, Andy opened the door of his Stutz for me to get in. First time anyone opened a door for me, I hardly knew how to act."

When asked about Wyeth's process, she states that she "...sat for Andy in the church for about a month, but also a number of days in his studio in Cushing." Hyler relays that she never wore a crown of flowers upon her head; rather it was painted on afterward (In another Wyeth work of the same year, we see model Helga Testorf wearing a similar crown).

"The beautifully intricate blouse I have on in the painting [belonged to] Andy... He said it was a special family piece." Hyler remembers warmly, "Andy was so much fun, laughing, joking and at the same time he could reach down into the very depths of your soul and see what you were about... We had great fun, and he sometimes on the way home would stop and buy a gallon of ice cream, or some fresh corn to take back to mamma and the kids."

Upon hearing her story, our students shared their own interpretations of the young woman. Some thought she

## SUPPORT FARNSWORTH EDUCATION

The Arts in Education program is a multi-visit, arts-integrated, expeditionary experience that connects curricular learning standards to the arts through inquiry-based projects. Students and classroom teachers partner with museum educators, professional artists, and community members to study their local area and develop final art works for an exhibition in school, in community locations and finally at the museum in a large art exhibition, with interactives, and related audio and video programs created by students that connect to the works of art on view. This program is offered to schools in Maine free of charge by the Farnsworth Art Museum.

Visit [www.farnsworthartsineducation.org](http://www.farnsworthartsineducation.org) or contact Vas Prabhu, Director of Education at [vprabhu@farnsworthmuseum.org](mailto:vprabhu@farnsworthmuseum.org) or 207) 390-6005 for more information on how to support education at the Farnsworth.

was a bride contemplating her wedding and others saw her as a child that had recently lost a loved-one. Regardless, Lawrence replied, it's important that, "we each bring our own interpretation" to the work of art.

What do you think? Visit the Farnsworth's Arts in Education website to add your story.

To learn more about the Arts in Education program and view student artwork visit [www.farnsworthartsineducation.org](http://www.farnsworthartsineducation.org). Learn more about the Old German Meeting House at <http://www.oldgermanmeeting-house.com>.

### RESOURCES:

Koscs, J. (2014, December 09) Ask the man who owns one... or eight: Jim Milliken and his Stuz Collection. Hagerty. Retrieved from <https://www.hagerty.com/articles-videos/articles/2014/12/09/stutz-collection>

Wyeth Study Center: <https://www.farnsworthmuseum.org/visit/campus/wyeth-study-center/>

Letters by Elaine Benner Hyler to Jean Lawrence 2018

