



N. C. Wyeth's Gift for a Friend

N.C. Wyeth (1882–1945) was an American painter and the patriarch of the talented Wyeth family, including artists Andrew Wyeth and Jamie Wyeth. Although he is most well-known for his illustrations in magazines and books, N.C. Wyeth longed to be considered for his painting (1). According to one biography, N.C. Wyeth “fell into illustrating after the success of his *Treasure Island* commissions. Despite his urge to give up illustration and concentrate on painting, he was not going to do that because he had a family to support” (2).



Figure 1. N.C. Wyeth, *The Heron*, ca. 1936–37, oil on linen canvas, 47 x 37 in., Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum, Museum purchase with funds provided by the Nancy Woodson Spire Foundation

Wyeth's painting *The Heron* (Figure 1) depicts the tall bird standing in a horizontal pool of water and contains an inscription on the upper left-hand corner reading “To Carolin [sic] Chandler June 1942” (Figure 2). Caroline Chandler Murray was a family friend that lived near the Wyeths and a photograph from an unknown photographer of *The Heron* alongside other wedding gifts is included in the curatorial file for the painting.

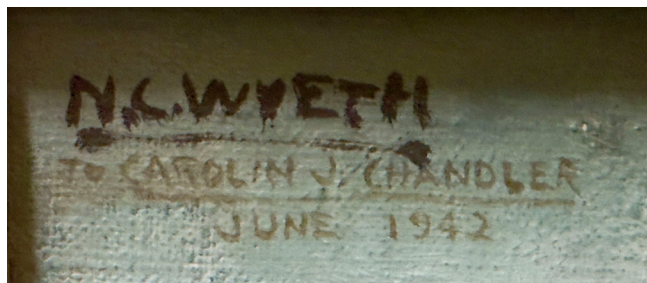


Figure 2. Magnified image of the upper left corner of the painting reading “To Carolin [sic] Chandler June 1942”

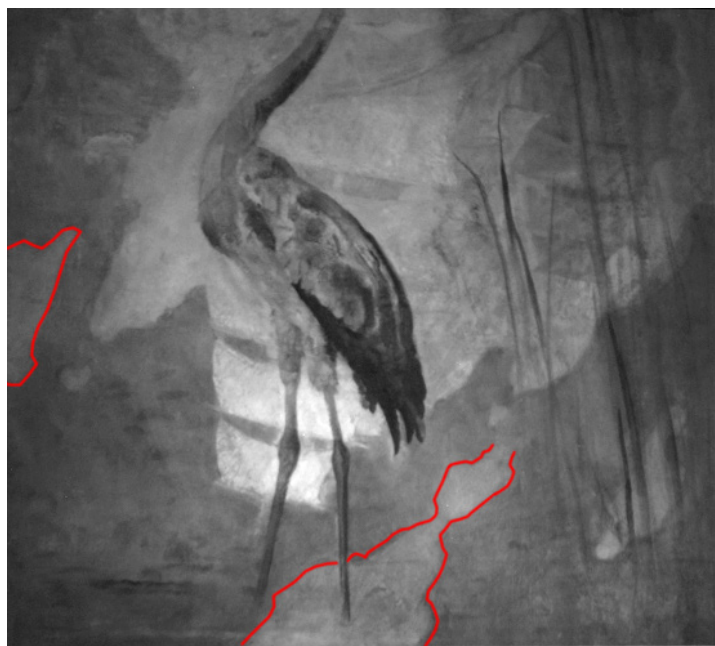


Figure 3. 1450 nm wavelength image of the lower part of the painting. The oblique puddle and another hidden shape are outlined in red for clarity.



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Scanning the painting with the RevealScan™-M system in the near infrared and visible range shows compositional elements that are either not visible or barely visible on the painting's surface. For example, looking at the 1450 nm wavelength image in the lower part of the painting (Figure 3) reveals a curved form extending from the heron's feet off in the distance that does not appear in the final painting. It is possible that the artist originally placed the bird standing in an oblique water puddle—an earlier compositional choice later painted out to include a less defined aquatic foreground and marsh grasses. The image further shows swirling clouds behind the heron that contain edges that correspond with the cloud formations in the painting. There is an area of some difference on the far-left edge of the canvas, possibly indicating another mid-process compositional change by the artist.



Figure 4. Combination of the 1550nm wavelength image and the 3rd IR component of the top part of the painting. A dark tree-like shape is present in the upper right corner of the image that is not visible on the painting. This combination of images also removes the heron's head from the painting. The crack/tear that is slightly visible in the painting becomes very clear in this image, starting from the right edge of the painting and continuing to the heron's neck.

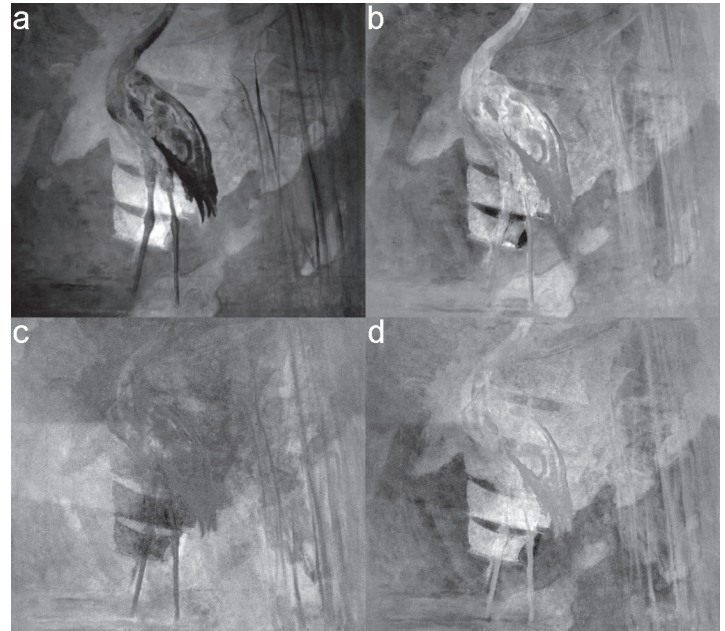


Figure 5. Reduction/removal of the outer visible image: a. 1450 nm wavelength image of the lower part of the painting b. Combination of the 1550nm wavelength image and the total visible image removed much of the left leg of the heron c. Combination of the 3rd IR component and the total visible image removes the back of the heron and the right side of the neck d. Combination of the 1450nm wavelength image and 3rd IR component removes the middle of the heron and some of the neck.

Using RevealScan™ Analysis software, select foreground elements can be removed to better visualize the underpainting. Once the images are loaded, principal components (PCA) are automatically generated. They can be combined with any of the other wavelength images to enhance or remove certain features. For instance, when combining the 1550 nm image with the 3rd infrared component, a tree not visible in the finished painting appears in the upper right corner of Figure 4, and the head of the heron is removed. The processing in Figure 4 also enhances the visibility of a crack in the paint or tear in the canvas that could be useful for future restoration work.



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Occasionally, a feature from the surface painting cannot be removed all at once, as is the case with the heron in Figure 3. The entry for this painting in N.C. Wyeth's catalogue raisonné mentions that the canvas is likely reworked from an earlier composition, noting brushstrokes that do not fit with the final composition (3). Conservation work completed after the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum acquired the painting revealed a reddish-brown paint layer beneath large areas of the canvas, suggesting the presence of an unfinished or prior composition (4).

Imaging was able to newly reveal two areas of the painting that have a series of nearly parallel trapezoids, one behind the heron and the other behind the grass. Figure 5 shows the various attempts using different wavelength images and PCA imaging to remove the top image of the heron to better visualize the underpainting. Manipulating the images, shapes that were once difficult to identify become easier to interpret as the heron in the foreground is de-emphasized.

For example, if we rotate the image shown in Figure 5d 180° as shown in Figure 6a, the trapezoidal shapes seem to suggest the sails of two ships—one larger ship halfway under the heron and possibly a second ship in the lower left of Figure 6a. The identification of these trapezoids as ships is even more likely when comparing them to Wyeth's other works throughout his career including an untitled headpiece from *All the Brothers Were Valiant* (ca. 1919) (Figure 6b), *The Clippers* (1924) serving as a reference for a Bank of America mural in Boston (Figure 6c), and the reference for the dust jacket for *The Bounty Trilogy* (1940) (Figure 6d). The sails in all three works share a similar trapezoidal shape and number as the ships in the underpainting.

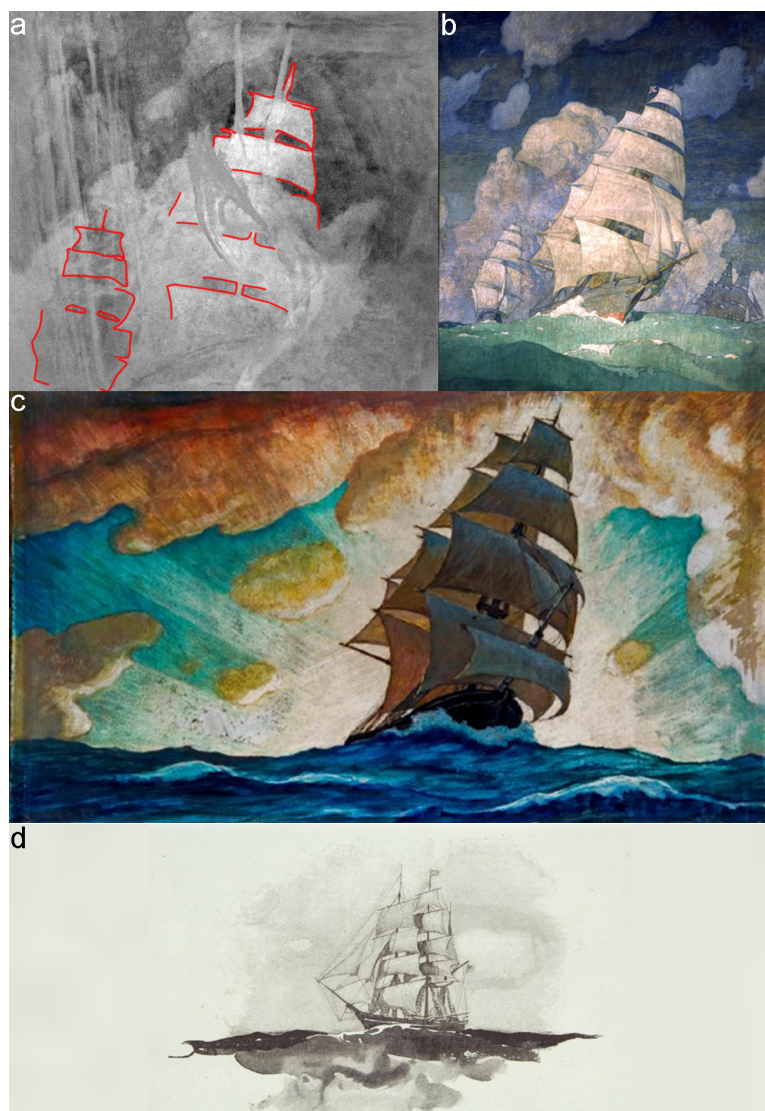


Figure 6. Selected works from N.C. Wyeth throughout his career showing sails with a very similar shape to the ones underneath *The Heron*: a. The same image in Figure 4d rotated 180° with the ships outlined in red for clarity. b. N.C. Wyeth, *The Clippers*, 1924, oil on canvas, 174 1/2 × 132 1/2 in. Bank of America, Merrill Lynch Collection. Photo Credit: Michael Gould c. *The Bounty Trilogy*, dust jacket illustration, 1940, oil on hardboard, 10 3/8 × 11 3/4 in. Private Collection. Photo Credit: Sandy Agrafiotis d. *All the Brothers Were Valiant*, (Untitled Headpiece), ca. 1919. Reproduced from Brandywine River Museum library, tear sheet. Photo Credit: Rick Echelmeyer.



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The appearance of the ships underneath *The Heron* makes sense with what is known about the painting, namely that it was reworked into a new painting as a gift for a friend in 1936–37. The ships are especially interesting as N.C. Wyeth frequently drew ships in a similar way throughout his career, as shown by the three different ships in Figures 6b–6d, which all demonstrate a consistent shape that is distinctly similar to the one underneath *The Heron*. Furthermore, N.C. Wyeth was particularly given to perfectionism throughout his career, making it more likely he would abandon a painting that failed to meet his own rigorous standards (1). Given the stylistic similarities with the sails in his other works, it seems highly possible that the original painting was intended as the basis for a nautical illustration akin to those seen on the dust jacket of *The Bounty Trilogy* or the reference painting for *The Clippers* mural. However, the tree revealed in the upper right corner and the extended stream do not seem to fit with the underpainting of the ships. It is possible these features were part of an earlier iteration of *The Heron* that was abandoned in favor of the final composition. The RevealScan™-M captured new and interesting details about N. C. Wyeth's *The Heron* the presence of which was suggested in earlier reports, but now made visually apparent.

References:

1. David Michaelis, *N.C. Wyeth: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998).
2. Jessica May and Christine B. Podmaniczky, eds., *N.C. Wyeth: New Perspectives* (Chadds Ford, PA: Brandywine River Museum of Art; Portland, ME, Portland Museum of Art in association with Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2019).
3. Brandywine Museum of Art, "The Heron, Online Collections: N.C. Wyeth Catalogue Raisonné," accessed February 1, 2025, <https://collections.brandywine.org/objects/10045/the-heron?ctx=2c1d8f0a-0a6b-4503-afcc-f623444c3508&idx=0>.
4. Joan Corman, Conservation report, MACC, 1/23/2013.