

**OF MARSHMALLOWS, FAMILIES AND ADULT SUCCESS:
THE CASE OF JAMIE WYETH AND HIS FAMILY**

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In what follows, I will be offering some new reflections on my long-standing interest in the development of childhood graphic skills in the juvenile work of world-class artists. I have extensively studied the childhood work of Klee, Toulouse Lautrec and Picasso (Pariser, 1985, 1993, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2014). All three of these artists left behind significant collections of drawings and paintings from early childhood to adolescence. This sort of archival material is of special interest to art educators and psychologists as it is a tantalizing record of the birth of the skills and interests of visual artists who had a huge influence on the development of Modern art. More recently, I have been looking at an equally rich archive of juvenile work from the hands of three generations of a recognized and influential family of American artists – the Wyeths. This material is of special interest as the Wyeths nurtured their artistic talent through home schooling.

Housed in the Rockland Art Museum, Maine the Wyeth Family archive holds several thousand juvenile drawings and paintings by Andrew Wyeth and his son Jamie. What is of special interest to art educators is that there was a three-generation long tradition of art teaching within the family. N.C. Wyeth (Michaelis, 1998) was a highly successful book illustrator of children's classics- such books as, *Treasure Island*, *The Last of the Mohicans* and many others. He was his son Andrew's mentor and teacher. Andrew Wyeth (Knutson, 2005) is now considered an accomplished and influential American Realist artist, and he in turn, tutored his son Jamie Wyeth. Jamie (Davis, 2014) continues the Wyeth artistic tradition and is recognized as an important American artist in his own right. In addition to learning graphic skills from his father, Jamie also studied with his aunt Carolyn. The results of two generations of home studio teaching are preserved in the Rockland Museum archives and provide an important dimension to the question that has long animated my research: Is there anything special/unique about the graphic development of children whom we

know, with the benefit of hindsight, were destined to become recognized and important artists? What is so special about the Wyeth archive is that, in addition to preserving a detailed record of the graphic development of two generations of Wyeths – we can also infer the impact of the tutoring and teaching that father passed on to son.

Setting the framework for answering my question. The systems approach to creativity.

Ever since I broached the topic of juvenile artistic development, (Pariser, 1995) and its relation to adult artistic performance I have used Csikszentmihalyi's model (1988) for understanding the emergence of creative individuals. This social psychologist was the first to suggest that in order to understand the emergence of significantly creative individuals, researchers would need to look beyond the extraordinary individual him/herself, and incorporate two other types of contextual information: first, the nature of the discipline to which the significant individual contributed – i.e.: printmaking, sculpture, surgery, astrophysics and second, the social organizations that trained, encouraged, and judged the creative work(s) produced by that individual. In his model Csikszentmihalyi refers to the discipline as the Domain and he refers to the social organizations that support and judge the creative activity as the Field. Thus in the visual arts, there are many Domains – i.e.: sculpture, printmaking, installation, etc. and the Field consists of teachers, galleries, art dealers, art critics, curators, museum directors and patrons. Up to now, my research has primarily focused on individual artists themselves- especially those who, like the three that I chose initially have left behind a significant collection of juvenile artwork. What the Wyeth archive provides is a microcosm in which all three key elements of Csikszentmihalyi's model are present- and all pretty much under the same roof. That is, thanks to the preservation of the juvenile material from Andrew and Jamie Wyeth, we have an excellent record of individual graphic development, and in addition, traces of the kinds of teaching and apprenticeship that they followed. That is, with the Wyeth archives we now have the opportunity to observe not only how these two artists developed their mastery of their chosen artistic Domain, but also the impact of

the Field itself, as represented by the family of-artist-teachers over three generations. The possibility of examining the working of the Field in this context is promising because the study of the juvenile works of the artists themselves on its own has proven to be unhelpful in terms of answering the question “Is there anything special about the juvenile artistic works of significant artists – such as Klee, Lautrec, Picasso?” The answer to this question is “No.” I will elaborate on this further. In effect, this question presupposes the existence of what one might call a “marshmallow test”. That is, a test which if applied to very young visual artists will reliably predict their adult success. Such a test does exist for predicting educational success and life skills.

Marshmallow Test?

The Marshmallow test (Mischel, 2014; Mischel, Shoda and Rodriguez, 1989; Shoda, Mischel & Peake, 1990) is a remarkably simple test with amazing predictive power. It was initially developed by the social psychologist Walter Mischel in the 1960’s as a way of examining children’s capacity to postpone gratification. The experimental set-up was to put young children of varying ages in a situation where they could indulge their temptation to devour a snack immediately or by postponing their initial impulse, receive more goodies after fifteen minutes of abstinence. The child would be placed in pleasant age – appropriate surroundings, and then given some variant of the following task. On a table in front of the child would be a few small cookies or marshmallows. The experimenter – who was trusted by the child-, would tell the child that if he/she did not touch any of the cookies/marshmallows for some time, they would get to eat those sweets and an additional number as well. The experimenter left the child alone in the room, and the videotape started to roll. Mischel was interested in developmental differences in self-control among children (it was expected that older children would do better at the task) and he was also interested in the sorts of strategies that children used in order to distract themselves from temptation while running out the clock. (Some children kicked the table, others sang, or played with the toys left in the room, others “cheated” – by opening the Oreo cookies, licking out the filling and then carefully putting the halves back together!) The initial results confirmed that in general, older children had more

strategies for controlling temptation than younger children. The truly remarkable aspects of this experiment emerged three decades later (Mischel and Peake, 1990; Mischel, 2014) when Mischel became curious to know what had become of the children that he had tested. The results were quite startling. It turned out that in a statistically significant number of cases, those children who had passed the “marshmallow test” had also done very well on the Scholastic Aptitude Tests and had avoided the perils of middle-aged weight gain! That is, their Body Mass indices were more favorable than the BMI’s of those who, as children had not “passed” the test. In other words, children’s successful performance on the “marshmallow test” was highly correlated with some conventional indicators of their success as young adults. It would be nice if an equally predictive test for adult artistic success were available. But none is currently available.

No indicators of adult artistic success?

The fact is that the information I have gleaned from artists’ juvenile work provides no suggestion of indicators of adult artistic success. There is nothing special or unique about the graphic development of children destined to become great artists. I will indicate two key reasons for making this claim. I maintain that the evidence I have gathered from looking at the juvenile work of the three artists that I initially studied, and from an examination of the Wyeth archive, reveals nothing in the juvenile records of all five artists that is uniquely different from the graphic- developmental records of children who were not bound for artistic glory. Just like those children who did not become recognized artists, the five artists passed through the same sequence of graphic/representational stages in the same order. All experimented with culturally appropriated genres and themes, as did their less glorious peers. There may have been differences in the tempo of development, but there was nothing truly anomalous or distinctive about what these juvenile artists produced. Not only are the developmental paths of juvenile artists and others quite similar, but also we were able to demonstrate that it is difficult to distinguish between the juvenile drawings of Klee or Picasso and drawings of the same subjects made by other moderately able children of the same age. We (Rostan, Pariser, and Gruber, 2002) put this to an empirical test and found that,

when we controlled for subject matter, the juvenile drawings of Klee, Lautrec and Picasso were indistinguishable from those made by contemporary gifted children. So this is one element in my claim that one cannot tell from looking at a child's graphic art whether or not they will become a significant artist. The second element on which my claim is based is that the world of adult art is notoriously fickle. Standards and expectations shift rapidly as a function of social and economic forces, and yesterday's standards are quickly displaced by trendier notions- thus, where mastery of graphic skills and academic rendering may have been the bedrock on which some successful 19th century artists built their careers and reputations – Ingres, Gericault, Lautrec, etc. – today, the world of High Art is eclectic and “old modernists” like Josef Beuys, or “new modernists” like Ai Wei do not rely on classical academic rendering skills (either Western or Eastern) for their work. Thus it seems doubtful that the childhood drawings of either of these important artists would have given us much of an idea of their adult Oeuvre.

How did the Wyeths benefit from studio training?

Thus, because I have found, A) no evidence of any unique or anomalous graphic features in the work of children destined to become significant artists, and B) because the art world itself shifts its standards and expectations quickly and radically – I claim that it is pretty nigh impossible to predict which child artist will become a significant adult artist. But even though we may not be able to tell which of our students is “bound for glory”-nevertheless, a well-taught studio course-is one from which all students will benefit. The immediate benefits of a studio education, which all of the Wyeth children received at the hands of their family members, are best identified by Hetland, Winner, Veneema and Sheridan, (2007). The authors identify eight “Studio Habits of Mind” (p.6). According to these researchers these are the habits of mind that a competent studio teacher imparts to his/her students: 1) The development of craft; 2) Learning to engage and persist in pursuing a problem; 3) The capacity to imagine and envision; 4) Learning the skilled use of a medium to express ideas and feelings; 5) Observation-close looking; 6) Reflection – questioning, explaining and evaluating one's own and other's work; 7) Stretching and

Exploring-learning to go beyond one's comfort zone; 8) Becoming acquainted with the Domain and the field. Thus, when N.C. Wyeth took his son Andrew into his studio at age 15 and invited him to help him with commercial book illustrations, and when Carolyn Wyeth, gave Jamie Wyeth a year of intensive academic art training, and when Andrew worked as a peer with his son, offering him critiques and suggestions- the family was functioning as a surrogate for the Art Field.

The generations differentiate themselves

What is instructive from a psychological perspective is the way in which each son made it his business to differentiate his work from that of his father. Thus, Andrew Wyeth's signature explorations of egg tempera, his somber palette, are a far cry from the intense color and movement of N.C. Wyeth's dramatic illustrations. Jamie, in turn differentiated his work from that of Andrew by emulating the color and panache (though not the subjects) of his imposing grandfather – A man he never met, but whose studio he frequented as a child. As Jamie recalled in a recent (Wyeth and Komanecky, 2013) interview, N.C. Wyeth's studio was filled with the dramatic canvasses that were the basis for the famous book illustrations that helped N.C. to earn a handsome living. These canvases were quite substantial in size-even though their ultimate fate was to be reproduced as small highly colored plates. The young Jamie found his grandfather's studio irresistible, and he was inspired to draw what he saw there. In my examination of the archive I found clear evidence of Jamie's early fascination with his grandfather's work. Around age six Jamie made a series of drawings on small sheets of yellow paper – (no larger than 4" X 4"). Most seem to be studies of the props and paintings he may have noted in his grandfather's studio. Some are costume studies; others deal with artifacts-swords, and boots. One in particular is clearly a copy of a well-known N.C. Wyeth illustration. Jamie's sketch is a marvel of economy and shows the power that one sometimes finds in the work of very young children, who are still working with a very limited graphic vocabulary. Jamie's pencil sketch shows a man with a large (pirate?) hat in the foreground, stick upraised, in the background a partially cropped house. The scene is at night. To indicate this Jamie has included

several stars and the moon. This drawing is clearly based on one of his grandfather's illustrations for *Treasure Island*. The illustration shows the blind pirate Pew, waving his stick and searching for his comrades outside the Admiral Benbow Inn. There is no doubt that the six years old Jamie made a careful study of his grandfather's work. In an interview given by Jamie (Wyeth and Komanecky, 2013) he noted that as a child he was totally hooked on his grandfather's highly dramatic and colorful illustrations- A taste that became deeply embedded. Jamie stated that by contrast, his father's studio (which he would also visit) was a spare, stark space with little to interest him – and his father's work, focusing as it did on a meticulous depiction of everyday objects and well-used interiors, rendered in muted tones could not hold a candle to N.C.'s Technicolor scenes of swashbuckling adventure.

The Family as Field: Academic training

In addition to his grandfather's seductive legacy, Jamie had two art teachers – his father and his aunt Carolyn. After sixth grade, Jamie was home-schooled as his father had been before him. At around 12 years of age, Jamie began to take academic drawing lessons from his aunt Carolyn – Jamie had to accurately render the canonical solids – cubes, rhombi, spheres etc. In his 2013 interview Jamie notes that these exercises were tedious and demanding, but he fully recognizes their usefulness in moving him towards precocious mastery of the drawing medium. Andrew Wyeth offered Jamie critiques of finished work, but did not set him problems or challenge him with set topics. According to Jamie their relationship was more one of equals, rather than master and apprentice. This situation was very different from the one that had prevailed between Andrew and his own father N.C. For Andrew served an arduous apprenticeship to N.C. learning the art of illustration. Once Andrew had demonstrated a high degree of drawing mastery, N.C. invited Andrew to start contributing illustrations himself for the books that N.C. was illustrating. This was N.C.'s way of ensuring that Andrew would be able to earn a living. In respect to mastering academic drawing skills, all three Wyeths followed the same tradition as Klee, Lautrec and Picasso. All three of these artists “paid their dues” mastering academic drawing techniques. By 18 years of age, Jamie was

an accomplished painter whose portraits were already represented in collections. Like Lautrec, Jamie Wyeth's eye for the comic and absurd, is in evidence from an early age. Likewise, his interest – and perhaps identification with animals is also a feature, which Jamie shares with the youthful Lautrec-and a great number of children. One of Jamie's first and very successful canvasses was a monumental painting of a pig. Much later, Jamie put together a set of paintings based on the Seven Deadly Sins where raucous seagulls act out key moral failings.

Conclusion for art teachers

Thus, to date, we have no “marshmallow test” that predicts eventual success as a great artist (Mischel *et al.*, 1989; Shoda *et al.*, 1990). Nevertheless, thanks to the material available in the Wyeth archive we can still make a strong argument for studio art teaching as a valuable activity – NOT because one assists in the development of future great artists, but because as Hetland *et al.* (2007) illustrate, studio activity encourages mental skills that are vitally important in all areas of academic and practical activity. In fact their distinctive styles and their diverse thematic explorations, the sheer persistence of Andrew and Jamie Wyeth nicely illustrate the benefits that each son derived from their studio training. I speculate that, the studio educations that Andrew and Jamie received, must have imparted some or all of the studio habits of mind identified by Hetland *et al.* (2007). And these served the two artists well, when their own work was so out of step with much that was going on in the contemporary art world. Their studio habits, their discipline, craftsmanship, reflective capacities and willingness to take risks (the risk of being unfashionable) helped them to define their own stylistic and thematic choices, and gave them the necessary skills and endurance to reach levels of great success. The Wyeth family “experiment” nicely illustrates the way in which artistic talent, and drive nurtured by teaching and social support can lead to exceptional artistic performance. It nicely illustrates the need to understand noteworthy creativity as the product of a highly skilled/talented individual working in a setting that supports his/her work – i.e. the importance of the Field. In the case of the Wyeths, the family is practically synonymous with the Field. The family provided training, critical

responses and support both material and emotional. And this may explain another facet of the Wyeth success story. Andrew Wyeth's work was for a long period of time, sneered at by the pundits of high culture. Without the backing of his family and his staunchest admirer and critic, his wife Betsy, Andrew might well have been discouraged and defeated. His persistence was a function of his tight knit family, his rigorous training and his own ego strength. The same resilience can be observed with Jamie – whose noteworthy works are a species of American Realism cross-fertilized with the Surreal. These works were produced at a time when the world of High Art was busily engaged with more arcane subject matter and equally arcane media and materials. Yet, the fact that his work might not seem fashionable was of little consequence to Jamie—who, like his father marched to the beat of his own drummer.

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