

The death in January 2009 of Andrew Wyeth—artist of the well-known painting “Christina’s World”—has focused renewed attention on Andrew’s father, N.C. Wyeth. In 1929 N. C. accepted a commission to illustrate George Herbert Palmer’s translation of the *Odyssey*. The *Odyssey* commission allowed Wyeth to engage his fullest imaginative powers: he was unfettered, in a sense, by facts. In this, he joins the ranks of artists who have found in Homer’s fantastic *Odyssey* an easel for their most fantastic impulses. After an exhibit in Wilmington in 1930, Wyeth declared that his *Odyssey* paintings were his finest in 25 years as an illustrator—but a popular and even scholarly penchant for pigeonholing Wyeth as an artist of the American West has resulted in the almost complete neglect of his work on Homer.

In the *Odyssey* illustrations, Wyeth is at leisure to be both playful and incredibly learned; his illustrations tap into tropes of canonical European art while innovating some startlingly “American” re-imaginings of the *Odyssey* narrative. His “Sirens,” with Odysseus bound to a mast in the traditional pose of St. Sebastian (such as Liberale da Verona’s of 1491), subtly underscores the Christianizing or mystical elements of Odysseus’ temptation, while “Odysseus and Calypso” overtly alludes to Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* from the same period. A flashback to Odysseus’ boar hunt features a muscled kouros-type, classically proportioned and classically posed, while “The Slaughter of the Suitors” boasts a colonnaded *mise en scene*, featuring, in miniature, a “classical” scene of slaughter. But while Wyeth obviously knows his European—even Greek—classics, it’s his Deco-inflected, “modernizing” takes on the *Odyssey* that reveal the poem as a site of continuing artistic experimentation. Wyeth’s “Mourning Penelope,” for instance, features a Deco-inspired background of crisscrossing planes of light: the panel is illuminated, it appears, by the central, glowing, and even romantic figure of Penelope herself. An Expressionist fantasia on Polyphemus pointedly ignores the episode’s most famous narrative moment—the blinding of the Cyclops—and focuses instead on the monster’s literally volcanic wrath: landscape, mountain, and *monstrum* merge into one formidable force of nature. Lastly, Wyeth’s envisioning of Proteus seems expressly to avoid comparison with previous artistic engagements with the *Odyssey*: Wyeth picks a relatively obscure episode, and creates from it his strangest illustration: a ghoulish gray-green landscape with a fiend straight out of Lovecraft (or early American horror films).

Obviously, Wyeth’s illustrations of e.g. *The Deerslayer* and *Treasure Island* will remain canonical, in part because of their meticulous recreation of both material data and the narrative details. Homer’s fantastic world, however, offered Wyeth a chance to illustrate in a more whimsical vein, both tying to the *Odyssey* to established patterns of European iconography while gesturing towards contemporary developments in American art.