

Christina's World
By Henry Holland

In David McCullough's book *Truman* there is a recounting of the events that occurred in 1948 during the election campaign between Harry Truman and Thomas Dewey. One paragraph in the biography reads, "It was the year, too, of *Christina's World*, a haunting portrait by Andrew Wyeth of a crippled woman and a forsaken house on a bleak New England hill...that would become one of the most popular paintings ever done by an American."



The original painting is displayed in the New York Museum of Modern Art. Many prints of *Christina's World* hang in living rooms around the country. There was a time when the print could be obtained with S&H green stamps. Because of the times, one would assume that any "crippled woman" would have been crippled by polio. Polio had become the greatcrippler of children and some adults since the great polio epidemic of 1916. What inspired Wyeth to paint this image of a disabled woman, alone in a field, apparently looking at her home? Was Christina posing for this painting or was she doing something very ordinary for her? Did Christina have polio? As polio survivors, do we identify with her dilemma? Do we wonder about what is missing? If she had polio and cannot walk, where are her braces, crutches or even her wheelchair? Why is she alone in this state of helplessness? Her arms, forearms and legs seem so thin. We cannot see her face. Is she frightened, scared, crying, screaming for help or just determined? Is she a young woman or even middle aged? Is she even a real person or just an artist's creation? Like any good painting, each of us will see and feel various perceptions from this painting.

Christina Olson was a real person. She was born May 3, 1893 and died January 27, 1968. Except for the last two months of her life, she lived her entire life in the house on the hill in the painting. She lived there with her parents until they died and then lived there with her younger brother Al until they both had to finally leave the family home in November 1967 because of health reasons. The house is located on a hill at Hathorn Point on the coast of Maine at Cushing. Today, the house is preserved as a tourist attraction. Maybe some of our readers have visited the Olson Home.

At age three, Christina was already walking with an odd gait and had difficulty with balance. Her mother wondered if there had been some unknown injury, illness, or undetected birth defect. She encouraged Christina to practice walking straight on the seams of the linoleum on the floor. A few years later, her father took her on a six-hour buggy ride to see a doctor in Rockland, Maine. However, Christina stomped and protested and the doctor was never consulted.

She progressed through school and was able to walk the mile and a half to school despite her stumbling gait. The school only had eight grades. Christina was persuaded to attend an additional year because her teacher noted that she was intelligent and curious. The teacher hoped that Christina might become a teacher herself. Because of her mother's failing health, Christina took over managing the sixteen room family home at age thirteen. She excelled in homemaking skills and was an excellent seamstress. She also was the master of many nautical skills. Still, at age thirteen, her unnatural, stumbling gait was very evident.

Perhaps, the happiest years of her life were between ages 19 and 24. Many families spent summers in the area and in 1912 Christina met and fell in love with a young man who attended Harvard. They exchanged many letters during the winters and spent time together during the summers. In 1917, this young man stopped writing. He had met another young woman and married. In one of his letters to Christina, he had written "She can row a boat, climb a tree, harness a horse, and drive a carriage. She outshines me in everything here at Cushing." The young man was a scholar, and Christina was able to communicate intellectually with him.

Christina's disability progressed as she got older. In her twenties, she began to fall often. Her mother made her kneepads to wear under her long dresses. She would not tolerate anyone referring to her as crippled. She would state that she was just lame and could do most everything that anyone else could do. In 1918 (age 25) she enjoyed a trip to Boston. At age twenty-six, she could walk no more than three steps without grabbing an object, her hands were weakening, and she was experiencing exhaustion after ordinary tasks.

After avoiding doctors all her life, she consented to a medical evaluation and was admitted to Boston City Hospital in March 1919 for an evaluation. The doctors were not able to diagnose her condition and told her to keep doing what she was doing. A team of five doctors, including a specialist saw her. Some form of "electrical" treatment was considered, but not done. She was advised to spend as much time outdoors as possible. Christina was relieved, as she had finally done what her parents had wanted for years. Doctors had examined her.

Christina continued to be a master at dressmaking and was a wonderful aunt to her brothers' children. By 1946 (age 53), she was no longer able to stand, had stopped trying to walk, and resorted to crawling. She resisted the use of a wheelchair despite the fact that her own father had begun using a wheelchair as early as 1922. She had a dear friend who lived in a house eight hundred feet away. She could crawl this distance in less than an hour, but would arrive quite fatigued.

Betsy James, who grew up as a friend of the Olson family, married Andrew Wyeth. Wyeth became a familiar person around the Olson farm and many of his

paintings involve Olson farm sites. In 1948 Wyeth sketched Christina as she crawled down the hill to visit her parent's graves. The dress she wears in the painting is one she made and wore a few years earlier at her nephew's wedding. Christina was amused by the fame of the painting. After Christina's death, Betsy Wyeth stated, "She was a great friend who never asked for or expected anything and gave unconditionally."

Christina Olson's disability is unknown. Staff at the museum in Farnsworth, Maine simply state that Christina's disability is unknown, but that she probably had some type of degenerative disorder. Apparently she did not have polio, but this is not known for certain. There is no history of a febrile illness resulting in muscle weakness. Currently at the Farnsworth Museum, there is an exhibit of photographs pertaining to the Olson House. Commentary about the photographs includes the following:

"Concerning the 1918 photograph of Christina and her mother, she had made the trip to Boston earlier that year to consult doctors on her increasing disability. She was told that the best cure for her condition was a quiet life in the country. Christina was stricken with what is believed to have been polio as a child."

The description of her symptoms is somewhat suggestive of Charcot-Marie-Tooth Disease, which is a hereditary disorder that involves a bilateral weakness in the muscles of the lower legs. Friedreich's Ataxia is another possibility. Her disorder may have been a mild form of cerebral palsy. Polio still remains a possible explanation. Christina's decline as she grew older is also suggestive of Post-Polio Syndrome, but the same decline might also occur with other neuromuscular disorders.

Whatever the disorder, Christina's adjustment and denial of her disability are similar to that of many polio children who have grown to adulthood. Her bright mind, her unwillingness to accept help from others, her dislike of assistive devices, and her determination to be normal is very much like the resolve exemplified by polio survivors. In your lifetime since polio, how do you see your world? In my mind, if I could call out to Christina in the painting, I imagine her turning her head and responding with a smile.

References:

McCullough, David. *Truman*, Simon and Schuster, New York, New York, 1992, page 621.

Brooks, Jean Olson and Dalfonso, Deborah. *Christina Olson, Her World Beyond the Canvas*. Down East Books. Camden, Maine, 1998.

Information from Susan Snead, member of the staff at the Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, Maine.

Farnsworth Art Museum web site: www.farnsworthmuseum.org