

From Henry's Desk.....Christina's World

Twelve years ago I wrote an article entitled "Christina's World." The article was about Christina Olson who was the young woman in the painting by Andrew Wyeth. A print of the painting is below. Several weeks ago, Dr. Mike Grizzard, a specialist in infectious diseases, called me on the phone. He informed me that Christina's World would be on the cover of an upcoming issue of *Clinical Infectious Diseases*. This medical journal is the main journal for infectious disease specialists. Dr. Grizzard and his wife Mary are responsible for selecting the cover of each issue. Mary Grizzard has a doctorate in art history. They used portions of my article which was originally published in the *Deja View* in 2000. The article does not appear to be on the web site of the Central Virginia Post Polio Support Group, but readers can get a copy of the 2000 article by e-mailing me at henry4fdr@aol.com. The explanation of the cover of the journal is copied below the picture.



On the cover: "Christina's World" by Andrew Wyeth (American, 1917-2009). Tempura on gessoed panel. 1948. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. Art Resource, NY. Reproduced with permission.

In recounting the events of 1948 in his book, *Truman*, author David McCullough wrote, "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." Following the polio epidemic of 1916 in which over 27,000 contracted the disease and 6000 died, most assumed that any "crippled person" would have been affected by the disease, yet her condition remains an enigma.

Christina Olson was a real person, born in 1893, who lived for 75 years in the house on the hill. At age three, her parents noted that she was already walking with an unusual gait and had difficulty with her balance; however, despite this, throughout her school years, she was able to walk the mile and a half to school. In her third decade, she began to lose strength in her legs and often fell. In March of 1919, at age 26, she was admitted to Boston City Hospital for evaluation. No diagnosis was reached. By age 53, she was no longer able to stand, having earlier resorted to crawling, the action depicted in the painting.

For thirty years, Andrew Wyeth used one of the upstairs rooms in the Olson farmhouse as a studio. In 1948 he sketched Christina as she crawled down the hill to visit her parent's graves. Although Christina was the inspiration for the iconic painting, the model was actually Wyeth's wife, Betsy, who posed for the painting, but Wyeth depicted the figure as he imagined Christina would have looked in her youth.

The true etiology of her disability remains unknown. The description of her symptoms is suggestive of Charcot-Marie-Tooth Disease or perhaps Friedreich's Ataxia or even a mild form of cerebral palsy. Polio remains a possibility; as Christina grew older, symptoms resembling those of Post-Polio Syndrome appeared, but such might also occur with other neuromuscular disorders.

Christina Olson died in 1969, never realizing that her world had become so renowned.

The preceding was drawn primarily from an article published in the Central Virginia Post-Polio Support Group newsletter, *The Deja View*, April/May 2000 by Dr. Henry Holland.

On July 1, 2011, the weather-beaten farmhouse featured in the backdrop of the painting was designated a national landmark. The Olson House, located on Hathorne Point in Cushing, Maine, is owned by the Farnsworth Art Museum in Rockland, ME. Henry Holland, MD, Richmond, VA, Guest Contributor (Mary & Michael Grizzard, Cover Art Editors)