At first glance, this is a simple picture. There are several items perfectly aligned in a straight line: a box filled with blueberries; an empty cup; a woman sleeping in a field, her head covered by a floppy hat that covers her face; and a dog. There are random daisies peeking through the blades of grass. Only when we read the title of the piece, *Distant Thunder*, do we look more carefully.

This work was painted in 1961 by Andrew Wyeth (1917-2009), an American painter who occupied the middle of a three-generation artistic dynasty. His father, NC Wyeth (1882-1945), was a brilliant illustrator of stories and magazines. His son, Jamie Wyeth (1946-), is a renowned painter. Andrew Wyeth lived his entire life in two rural places: Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania and Port Clyde and Cushing, Maine. His work reflected the people and places he loved.

Some of Wyeth's works are world-famous and instantly recognizable (eg, *Christina's World*, *Maga's Daughter*). They have graced the covers of books and magazines, and when on exhibit, they draw huge crowds. The images often evoke another time, usually in a rural place; when people are included, there is usually a sense of mystery: Who are they? Most of his portraits are of people he knew.

Once we learn the title is *Distant Thunder*, we look more carefully. We look at the sky. We see the woman (Wyeth's wife, Betsy—they were married 69 years) apparently soundly asleep. We look carefully at the dog, an agitated, worried frown on its face; the dog is alert. It has been aroused by the sound of the distant thunder. The woman was not apparently awakened by the distant noise. Were her senses not as acute as the dog's? Or, was she deeply asleep in stage N3—the arousal threshold high? Or, was her brain processing the noise information and dismissed it as unimportant? Had we been recording her EEG, would we have seen a K-complex, followed by a rapid return to N2 sleep? This painting challenges us to think about arousal and how the brain processes sensory information during sleep. Wyeth's work is spare. There is nothing in the image that wasn't put there on purpose. The distant thunder did not awaken Betsy.

Wyeth's career was not without criticism, controversy and mysterious elements. At the height of his career, he created works that were considered by critics as "too realistic," at a time when abstract expressionist artists (eg, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning) were the rage. Ten years after painting *Distant Thunder*, he began a secret 15-year relationship with a model, Helga Testorf, his neighbor in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. He produced 45 paintings (many erotic) and 200 drawings that were kept hidden. The nature of this relationship was unclear, but until his death he remained with Betsy, who continued to be his muse, his collaborator, his manager, and frequently the subject of his works. She, of course, is the sleeping woman in *Distant Thunder*. 
Declaration of conflicts of interest

The author has declared that he has no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Additional Readings