The Giant by N. C. Wyeth (1882 – 1945) has hung in the dining room of Westtown School since 1923, a memorial from members of the Westtown Class of 1910 to their deceased classmate, William Clothier Engle (1891 – 1916). Commissioned by the class, the painting pays tribute to an artistic young man lost in the prime of his life.

William Engle entered Westtown in September 1908 at the age of 15 from his home in Newark, New Jersey. Classmate Marian Thatcher wrote later of Engle that he was a well-liked student with "high ideals, a keen sense of humor and was gifted with his pen and paint brushes" (Thatcher 56). William Ellis Coale, Westtown Class of 1911, wrote of his friend Bill Engle, "...between classes he was always out with brush and palette, painting about the countryside near the school and opened the eyes of many of us to the rare beauty surrounding us" (Coale 11).

During the first years after his graduation from Westtown in 1910, Bill Engle studied art both at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and with N. C. Wyeth, living for a time in Chadds Ford while he studied with Wyeth. In an effort to combat tuberculosis, Engle spent part of the summer of 1916 in West Branch, Iowa, on the family farm of Westtown classmate Walter Coppock. There Engle painted three landscapes that also now hang at Westtown School. Illness forced Engle back to New Jersey where he died on November 24, 1916 – his 25th birthday.

The Giant reflects William Engle's great love of the sea, born of the summers he spent in Beach Haven, New Jersey. (The Wyeth family also made summer visits to Beach Haven.)
George Whitney, Westtown's director of fine arts — and friend and colleague of N. C. Wyeth — said in 1932, "Mr. Wyeth knew of Engle's love of children and their happy frolics; he knew of Engle's love for the sea, and so the 'Giant' was created, a picture in which one sees the imagination of the child taking shape in the great cloud built form of the Giant" (Whitney 1). William Ellis Coale confirmed the connection between Engle, Wyeth, and the painting's theme in 1946 when he wrote, "Bill had always meant to execute a scene like this of children by the sea, looking up into the clouds. But his early death precluded this, so that his old friend and master created this fitting memorial, and thus fulfilled the pupil's dream" (Coale 11).

The children in the scene are N. C. Wyeth's five children, with William Engle represented by the young man in the white hat. Wyeth had moved his family from Chadds Ford back to his hometown of Needham, Massachusetts for a time, and it was there he painted — and first exhibited — *The Giant* before its presentation to Westtown on Alumni Day in June 1923. The painting was exhibited again during the fall and winter of 1923-24 before its return to Westtown School in March 1924. Wyeth seemed pleased with the memorial to his student, writing to his mother in December 1923, "The exhibition opened Monday night (Howard Pyle Memorial, by his pupils) and I can say without any question that 'The Giant' was the canvas of interest. We had a big crowd there, the picture was given the place of honor and created quite a sensation" (*The Wyeths: The Letters* 697).

Works Consulted


Woodbury, Ethel Coppock. Personal interview. Fall 1999.