

Abstract Wyeth

The Brandywine Museum unveils examples of the most spontaneous, free work ever produced by an artist largely celebrated for his realism

Through February 18, 2024

Brandywine Museum of Art

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The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection of the Wyeth Foundation for American Art is a treasure trove of work that will reveal more of Wyeth's thought processes and working methods for years to come. Managed by the Brandywine Museum in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, the collection has recently revealed his life-long excursions into abstraction.

Thirty-seven abstract watercolors from the 7,000-work collection are in the exhibition *Abstract Flash: Unseen Andrew Wyeth* at the Brandywine through February 18. The exhibition will be shown at the Farnsworth Museum in Rockland, Maine, beginning in the summer of this year.

Known for his minutely detailed naturalistic egg tempera paintings and drybrush watercolors, Wyeth often painted more freely in watercolor. He said, "With watercolor, you can pick up the atmosphere, the temperature, the sound of snow shifting through the trees or over the ice of a small pond or against a windowpane. Watercolor perfectly expresses the free side of my nature... The brain must not interfere. You're painting so constantly that your brain disappears, and your subconscious goes into your fingers and it just flows."

His abstract watercolors were produced when he was also painting his more familiar egg tempera



Andrew Wyeth (1917-2009), *Untitled*, 1951, watercolor on paper. Collection of the Wyeth Foundation for American Art, B0265. © 2023 Wyeth Foundation for American Art/Artists Rights Society (ARS) New York.



Andrew Wyeth (1917-2009), *Untitled*, 1961, watercolor on paper. Collection of the Wyeth Foundation for American Art, B0920. © 2023 Wyeth Foundation for American Art/Artists Rights Society (ARS) New York.



Left: Andrew Wyeth (1917-2009), *Untitled, 1948*, watercolor on paper. Collection of the Wyeth Foundation for American Art, B0198. © 2023 Wyeth Foundation for American Art/Artists Rights Society (ARS) New York.

Below: Andrew Wyeth (1917-2009), *Ice Pool Study, 1969*, watercolor on paper. Collection of the Wyeth Foundation for American Art, B1837. © 2023 Wyeth Foundation for American Art/Artists Rights Society (ARS) New York.

paintings. *Untitled, 1948*, a painting of geometrically abstract branches above a stream was painted the same year as iconic *Christina's World*.

He echoed, in his thoughts, Magritte's painting of a pipe, *The Treachery of Images*, below which was painted "Ceci n'est pas une pipe," recognizing that a painting is already an abstraction, not the actual subject. Wyeth wrote, "I think you have to use your eyes as well as your emotion, and one without the other just doesn't work." These abstract watercolors capture his emotional response to a scene with a raw immediacy.

The exhibition's curator, Karen Baumgartner, associate collection manager in the Wyeth Study Center at the Brandywine, says, "These works represent some of the most spontaneous and free work that Andrew Wyeth ever produced. If his temperas are the most formal expression of an idea, his studies show the artist thinking, and feeling, on paper." She notes that the exhibition's title comes from Wyeth, who wrote, "My struggle is to preserve that abstract flash—like something you caught out of the corner of your eye, but in the



picture you can look at it directly."

William L. Coleman, the Brandywine's Wyeth Foundation Curator and Director of the Wyeth Study Center notes, "The Andrew Wyeth we see in the works in *Abstract Flash* was fascinated, not threatened, by challenging new ideas coming out of the New York art world in his lifetime."

These gestural paintings reflect the concepts of abstract expressionism

while remaining rooted in keen observation.

Wyeth wrote, "I love to study the many things that grow below the corn stalks and bring them back to the studio to study the color. If one could only catch that true color of nature—the very thought of it drives me mad." Paintings such as *Untitled, 1951*, and *Untitled, 1961*, capture the subtleties of the colors below the cornstalks. ■

WE ASK LEADING MUSEUM CURATORS ABOUT WHAT'S GOING ON IN THEIR WORLD



WILLIAM L. COLEMAN

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What event (gallery show, museum exhibit, etc.) in the next few months are you looking forward to, and why?

I can't wait to see the Art Institute of Chicago's *Georgia O'Keeffe: "My New Yorks"* opening in June. The response of painters to architecture has been a particular focus of mine since grad school days, most recently manifesting in our 2023 exhibition *Andrew Wyeth: Home Places*, so a show dedicated to this aspect of the practice of a key fellow traveler of Wyeth, whose work resonates with his in so many ways, will be a must-see. The co-curators, Sarah Kelly Oehler and Annelise Madsen, are always inspiring colleagues and I'm sure they'll have many new insights to share.

What are you reading?

Philip Conkling's *Islands in Time: A Natural and Human History of the Islands of Maine*. The author, one of the co-founders of the Island Institute, gives a vivid perspective on the various forces that have shaped the thousands of islands in the Maine archipelago. Because this landscape is a lifelong love of mine and its deep and continuing tradition of creative response was my gateway to art history, it's invigorating to go beneath the surface and to see it anew through Conkling's eyes.

Interesting exhibit, gallery opening or work of art you've seen recently.

I'm always on the lookout for interesting voices who find new possibilities in realm

of landscape, and was thrilled to find not one but two with solo exhibitions at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art in Rockland, just across the street from our Wyeth Study Center on the campus of the Farnsworth Art Museum. Jeane Cohen's sumptuous, painterly evocations of an unpeopled firescape feel urgent and essential. Alison Hildreth's topographic abstractions overwhelm and immerse a viewer in the infinite complexity of land itself.

What are you researching at the moment?

I'm deep in the topic of Andrew Wyeth's decades-long response to the Kuerner Farm in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, the focus of a 2025 exhibition co-organized with Reynolda House Museum of American Art (Winston-Salem, NC). This place and the people who lived and worked there became the source of some of Wyeth's most important creations in the media of egg tempera and watercolor with which he is most associated. We're working hard to get beyond the mythology and received wisdom about this fascinating creative chapter to understand why and how this remarkable practice took shape.

What is your dream exhibit to curate? Or see someone else curate?

It'd be a dream to dive into the musical life of the Wyeth family of artists. Beethoven, Bach and Sibelius are the most frequently cited musical fascinations of N.C. and Andrew Wyeth both. Andrew's sister Ann Wyeth McCoy was a composer who wrote some works in relation to her brother's paintings. I have done some writing on Sibelius and on the representation of paintings in music in a previous life, so the connection is irresistible. The goal would be to commission one or more great contemporary composers to write new works in relation to the Wyeths. We'll make it happen someday!