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Andrew Wyeth Like You've Never Seen Him Before

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Andrew Wyeth, 'Untitled,' 1939. Watercolor on paper, 21 3/4 x 29 3/4 in. Collection of the Wyeth ...
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One of America's most beloved 20th century artists comes into new focus—or, maybe, surprisingly goes out of focus—as a result of “[Abstract Flash:](#)

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[Unseen Andrew Wyeth](#),” an exhibition of never before displayed abstract watercolors on view at the Farnsworth Art Museum in Rockland, ME through September 8, 2024. The Farnsworth presentation is drawn exclusively from the nearly 7,000-object Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection from the Wyeth Foundation for American Art, now managed by the Brandywine Museum of Art in Chadd’s Ford, PA.

“Abstract Flash” debuted at Brandywine, with each presentation centering on Wyeth’s abstract watercolors produced either in Chadds Ford, where Wyeth lived, or on mid-coast Maine where he spent his summers.

Andrew Wyeth, watercolors, Chadds Ford and Maine, nothing revolutionary there, but the nature of the works on display, well, that’s another matter.

“The abstract watercolors that are the focus of ‘Abstract Flash: Unseen Andrew Wyeth’ have come as a revelation to me and to many,” William L. Coleman, Wyeth Foundation Curator and Director of [the Andrew & Betsy Wyeth Study Center](#) at the Brandywine Museum of Art, told Forbes.com.

When [Betsy James Wyeth](#) (1921–2020), Andrew Wyeth’s wife, passed at the age of 98, her estate plan created a unique structure taking effect in 2022. She stipulated that a definitive group of Wyeth’s temperas, watercolors, drawings, and archives owned by the Wyeth Foundation for American Art would be managed by the Brandywine Museum of Art in perpetuity. She further wanted them shared with the public in exhibitions, as well as in regularly changing displays at the two museums with deepest ties to the Wyeth family, Brandywine and the Farnsworth.

Even in death, Betsy Wyeth was astutely guiding her husband’s career as she had done in life.

Among the trove of new material were abstract watercolors, hundreds of them, produced throughout his career from the 1930s to post-2000. This



wasn't a phase, this was a practice. Untitled. Unseen. Unknown outside of the artist's immediate circle.

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They challenge, if not obliterate, nearly a century of Wyeth's (1917–2009) categorization as a realist painter—brilliant, if out of step with cutting edge 20th century Modern art trends in America centering abstraction.

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“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,” Coleman said.

Either/Or, Not Both/And



Andrew Wyeth, 'Fog and the White Dory Study,' 1941. Watercolor on paper, 17 7/8 x 22 in. Collection ...
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Andrew Wyeth once said, “My struggle is to preserve that abstract flash, like something you caught out of the corner of your eye.”

He frequently referred to himself as an abstract artist. He was known to praise Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Hans Hoffman, and especially Franz Kline, a book of whose Wyeth kept in his studio until his death.

But the art world didn't want to hear it. In the 20th century, institutions, scholars, and collectors demanded categorization and labeled Wyeth a realist; “Abstract Flash” represents the first exhibition to focus on Wyeth's interest in the abstract art of his contemporaries and the roots of his own practice in abstract methods.

It all seems a little silly now, a wall separating realism from abstraction. That's very much the way it was in the 20th. Camps.

“The fact that Wyeth found painting realistically useful when so many others had turned away from this mode has made it easy for scholars and art lovers alike to imagine a line of demarcation between the supposedly fully modern art of urban abstract artists and the supposedly traditional or conservative art of Andrew Wyeth. The resolutely rural nature of his practice is a fundamental problem for a version of our shared cultural history that is written primarily from the perspective of New York City,” Coleman explained. Rural being synonymous with the *pas*se and parochial in the viewpoint of Manhattanites. “However much we are fascinated by Wyeth’s work, even some of his most devoted admirers fall into the trap of placing him on a pedestal as an opponent of the urban abstract painters beloved by the critics of his lifetime.”

Anything urban being synonymous with the progressive, the modern, the *avant-garde* to those same cultural glitterati. Wyeth and his work weren’t urban, but that didn’t make him a hayseed.

Blame it on the era.

“For many urban critics and tastemakers of the mid-20th century, the only legitimate artistic response to the horrors of the nuclear age was abstraction. Artists who continued to paint realistically could be misunderstood as purveyors of comfort food disconnected from the needs of the present,” Coleman continued. “This cause felt urgent to some, and the critical rejection it meant for Wyeth for a period of years must have been painful after enjoying early acclaim from the temples of culture.”

Wyeth’s admiration for abstraction would go so far as to even seeing him dissent with arguably America’s greatest realist painter, Edward Hopper.

Andrew Wyeth vs. Edward Hopper



Andrew Wyeth, 'Untitled,' 1950. Watercolor on paper, 21 ½ x 29 3/8 in. Collection of the Wyeth ... [+] © 2023 WYETH FOUNDATION FOR AMERICAN ART/ARTISTS RIGHT SOCIETY (ARS)

In addition to Wyeth’s striking abstract watercolors, “Abstract Flash” displays rare archival documents showing his encounters with abstract expressionism and geometric abstraction, and a remarkable exchange of letters with Hopper, a giant—the giant?—of American realism. In 1960, Hopper spearheaded an effort opposing the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York’s—the preeminent museum of American art—increasing embrace of abstraction.

Hopper asked Wyeth to join him and other realistic painters in signing a letter addressing their concerns to the museum.

“This is one of my favorite parts of the exhibition. Edward Hopper, who was old enough to be Wyeth’s father, is commonly seen as a fellow traveler in realism with Wyeth, and one could be forgiven for thinking they’d have a similar perspective on abstraction,” Coleman said. “On the contrary, when Hopper requested a signature for a petition opposing the drift of the

Whitney towards abstraction, Wyeth respectfully declined, saying, ‘Could it be that realism has become paunchy from centuries of easy living?’”

Ouch.

In addition to being dismissed for the rural emphasis of his artwork, Wyeth was perceived as much older than he actually was—old fashioned—because of his realism. To paint realistically was to belong to a previous generation. The generation of his father, famed illustrator N.C. Wyeth (1882-1945). Andrew, however, in fact, was five years younger than Jackson Pollock. He didn’t die until 2009.

“The Wyeth we encounter in ‘Abstract Flash,’ both through the artworks and the insights of the research we share, is fully an artist of his time, fascinated by the work of the abstract expressionist Franz Kline in particular, giving important early support to the geometric abstractionist Kenneth Noland, and departing starkly from the oppositional stance certain realist artists took in relation to abstraction,” Coleman said. “This Wyeth is not born in the wrong century, as the cliché would have it, but staking out an alternate modernism all his own.”

Abstraction on his own terms. Not pure abstraction. The Pennsylvania pictures are muddy, earthy, gloaming, Wyeth-y; the Maine paintings are equally of him and coastal, maritime, boats.

Observational abstraction perhaps.

“That abstract flash.”

“These abstract studies are where Wyeth’s process begins, capturing an urgent idea in its raw geometry and coloration,” Coleman said. “We know how deeply the artist valued them from the instances in which we can trace these powerful ideas through to a work that his wife gave a title and made available for sale, but it would be a mistake to think that their importance

ends there. These are intimate glimpses of a unique eye at work that reveal unexpected connections to the contemporary abstract artists of his lifetime.”

Wyeth 24/7



Andrew Wyeth, 'Untitled,' 1947. Watercolor on paper, 21 3/8 x 29 1/2 in. Collection of the Wyeth ... [+] © 2023 WYETH FOUNDATION FOR AMERICAN ART/ARTISTS RIGHT SOCIETY (ARS)

Year-round, the Brandywine Museum of Art has a remarkable collection of American art, most notably the three generations of Wyeth family artists whose work is always on view: N.C., Andrew, and Andrew's son, Jamie (b. 1946). Like his father and grandfather, Jamie Wyeth splits his time between the Brandywine River Valley of Pennsylvania and Delaware and the mid-coast of Maine.

[Brandywine has exhibitions related to Andrew and Jamie presently.](#)

In addition, the Museum owns and makes open to the public seasonally three sites—all National Historic Landmarks—integral to their careers: the

N. C. Wyeth House and Studio; the Andrew Wyeth Studio (in part of which Jamie Wyeth had his first studio); and the Kuerner Farm.

The Farnsworth is nearly as devoted to the family with a [Wyeth Center of its own](#), open seasonally, early July through the summer.

Even New York is getting in on the act. Schoelkopf Gallery in Tribeca presents “[Enter Andrew Wyeth](#)” June 28, 2024. On view are 25 works from 1939, the year he met Betsy, through 1994. Watercolors for sale of Pennsylvania, Maine, portraits, logs, barns, sailboats—as Wyeth as it gets—even a little abstraction here and there.

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