

Things of Nature and the Nature of Things

John Wilde in the McClain Collection

John Wilde (1919-2006) was a University of Wisconsin art professor whose surrealistic style brought a flourish to an exacting technique. He became one of the most important twentieth-century artists from Wisconsin and was among the most notable artists in the Magic Realist school of painting, garnering attention far beyond this state. A Milwaukee native, Wilde earned a master's degree at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, focusing on Max Ernst in his thesis. He began teaching art in 1948 at the UW, finishing his career there in 1982 as emeritus professor, though he continued his rigorous routine of painting and exhibiting new works until his last months.

Wilde's gift for drawing and painting diverged from the style of regional artists such as John Steuart Curry and evolved into an aesthetic characterized by beguiling, intensely detailed images. He was particularly adept at mixing motifs taken from the natural world in which he lived with images generated by the subconscious. In Wilde's art, the fantastic becomes entirely plausible as the magic of close observation of the natural world and superior craftsmanship that informs all of his work overwhelms the viewer. Added to a mix of surrealistic and existentialist themes is the orderly display of flora and fauna found in Wisconsin landscapes—these are the primary components of a typical Wilde.

The paintings, drawings, and books in this exhibition have come to Chazen Museum of Art thanks to the generosity of William H. McClain. Bill McClain, as he prefers to be known, has taught Bacteriology at the University of Wisconsin since 1974. His research interests also include genetics and molecular biology. In 1990 he was appointed Halvorson Professor of Bacteriology. In 1994, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, an honorary society for accomplished leaders in the arts and sciences. We thank him for his thoughtful and generous consideration of our museum.