

The Magic of John Wilde

The art of John Wilde engages the senses and the mind. Exquisitely wrought, the work has a timeless quality. In subjects that range from still lifes to narrative scenes, using unexpected juxtapositions of figures and settings, Wilde guides the viewer through the landscape of his fertile imagination. Drawing on long-standing artistic traditions, from European Renaissance painting to nineteenth-century American art to twentieth-century modern movements, Wilde's work has been described as belonging to magic realism, an artistic style that was prevalent in European and American art from the 1920s to the 1940s and beyond. The familiar is subverted; the artist himself is at times represented as the magician in the guise of a harlequin, as in the painting *Muss es Sein? Es Muss Sein!* Wilde presents the viewer with dreamscapes that mine the imagination.

The exhibition spans the artist's career, from the early 1940s to the 1990s. One early work, a 1945 pencil drawing called *The Blind Lead the Blind*, reveals the artist's troubled reflections on the role of the individual in war. Wilde was drafted and served in the United States during WWII. Although he didn't see combat, the psychological effects of conscription and military service were profound and he documented this period prolifically and graphically in a sketchbook as well as in finished works of art.

Throughout his career Wilde draws on his wartime output for visual formulations that express the overarching themes of his art: love, death, sexuality, self-reflection, murder, and decay. A later painting, the iconic canvas *With Friends*, serves as a collection of the artist's previous work and reminiscences.

A Milwaukee native, John Wilde (1919–2006) became seriously involved with art in high school. He attended the UW–Madison from 1938 to 1942, where he majored in art. After serving in WWII, he returned to the UW and obtained a master's degree in art and art history, with a thesis on the French Surrealist Max Ernst. He began teaching art in 1948 at the UW and concluded his career there in 1982 as emeritus professor.