

Contemporary Wisconsin Watercolor at RAM



RAM has a long history, dating back to the early 1940s, of collecting watercolors by Wisconsin artists. This focus was inaugurated in 1943 with nearly 50 paintings on paper by contemporary artists working in the Wisconsin Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), during the Great Depression. However, the museum made an even greater commitment to this medium with the establishment of its annual **Watercolor Wisconsin** competition in 1966. The exhibition was organized by the museum, working with the Junior League of Racine, as the first show held in the new education wing at RAM's Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts campus. This show was the museum's response to the intense interest in watercolor among Wisconsin artists and the public. From 1966 to the present, RAM has enhanced its collection through purchase awards and gifts from donors, constructing a documentation of how state artists have approached this medium for over 50 years. Adding contemporary works to the WPA-era pieces creates a record of multiple generations of Wisconsin artists and their investigations into painting on paper.

(above)

Lee Weiss

Autumn Ridge, 1966

Watercolor

30 x 40 inches

Racine Art Museum, C.W. DeWitt
and W.H. Keland Purchase Award
from *Watercolor Wisconsin '66*

(below)

Ann E. Miotke

Red Branch, 2010

Watercolor

19 3/16 x 23 1/8 inches

Racine Art Museum, George and Betty Ren
Frederiksen Memorial Purchase Award
from *Watercolor Wisconsin 2010*



In recent years, these acquisitions have been augmented by gifts of multiple paintings coming from the trusts and estates of some of Wisconsin's longstanding and well-respected artists. Their gifts of anywhere from 10 to over 100 pieces have established study collections at RAM that document bodies of work over numerous decades. Some of these gifts create career surveys that frequently span from the WPA and World War II

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decades through the end of the twentieth century. These combined efforts have resulted in a collection that captures a wide range of approaches to painting. It also demonstrates the communication of ideas among artists through multiple generations of collegial exchanges and the influence of teachers and students upon each other's work over time.

Watercolor has traditionally been known as a portable medium, making it ideal for painting outdoors. Before the development of photography, early explorers often took painters on their trips to record the flora and fauna encountered in their travels. Cultured European travelers would make a record of historic sites and architectural wonders. The medium was a perfect fit—as colors mixed easily, dried quickly, and a paint set took up little space in luggage. Watercolor can easily describe both details and broad areas of form. Today, even in our most populated areas in Wisconsin, you are never far from state and national forests which provide sources of study and inspiration for artists.¹



In addition, Wisconsin's ready access to water—the huge expanse of Lake Michigan and the many lakes throughout the state—provides it with an atmosphere similar to that found on the East and West seacoasts of the U.S. There are certain conditions of light and weather that occur only where sky and water meet. These effects change with the seasons as mists, fogs, snowstorms, and the varied hues of blue and green of sky and water, showcased in a constantly changing panorama of light, have been particularly well-captured by watercolor. The aqueous nature of the paint easily adapts to accurately describing subtle atmospheric conditions that cannot be similarly depicted in other painting or drawing media.²

Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, new materials became widely available to artists. Casein and acrylic—originally developed for canvas paintings—began to be used for works on paper. Ink, long associated with drawings and Asian brush paintings, surfaced in watercolor competitions. Artists began to combine media, adding dry drawing materials—such as pastel, crayon, and graphite—into combinations with water-based paint. The field has consistently challenged how we define a watercolor as new media—such as color pencils that work in both dry and wet formats—are discovered by artists.

Over the past 30 years, RAM's response to this explosion in experimentation has been to embrace it. Instead of insisting that all entries be created solely in the watercolor medium, the museum has consistently expanded eligibility criteria. A successful entry must include some amount of water-based art media—watercolor, acrylic, gouache, casein, or ink—that can be combined

with any drawing or printmaking materials. The work can be two-dimensional or three-dimensional, but it must be on a paper surface. In this way, RAM hopes to capture a thorough vision of what kinds of paintings



(above right)
Jean Crane
Endangered Garden II, 2005
Watercolor
17 x 25 inches
Racine Art Museum, Rufin and Mary Ann
Naczinski Memorial Purchase Award
from *Watercolor Wisconsin 2005*

(left)
Nancy Ekholm Burkert
At Rest on the Expressway, 1966
Watercolor
14 1/8 x 18 3/8 inches
Racine Art Museum,
Museum Purchase Award
from *Watercolor Wisconsin '67*



Wisconsin artists are creating each year, using paper instead of canvas as a surface. The appeal of these works stems from their more intimate scale and the opportunity to experiment with the many effects these art-making materials provide. By acquiring pieces on a regular basis throughout the decades, RAM has established a detailed documentation of the way artists' concepts have developed during the past 70 or more years, capturing a snapshot of the entire field in this state. Its exhibitions, collections, and related education programs have made RAM a center for water media painting in the Midwest.

Surveying the museum's watercolor holdings reveals similarities and differences in subject matter, the influence of key Wisconsin artists, an emphasis on craftsmanship, and a willingness to experiment with the medium. While the 1930s and early 1940s were dominated by two schools—**Social Realism**, which dealt with issues facing the people living through the Great Depression, and **American Regionalism**, which featured representational images of the outdoors—some of these same interests repeat in later decades. Wisconsin's immediate access to large rural areas makes the landscape a perennial favorite. Contemporary watercolors made in the late twentieth century often include portraits and figurative works that have social commentary on the way we live today. The approaches to these subjects may change over time, but the interest in many of the topics in the history of art—landscape, figure, and still life—has remained. Artists employed by the WPA, including **Max Fernekes**, **Emily Groom**, **Ruth Grotenrath**, **Richard Lewandowski**, **Schomer Lichtner**, and **Santos Zingale**, went on to teach in colleges and universities and to have careers in the region as full-time artists. Both of these occupations enabled them to significantly influence younger generations.

Thanks to museum and gallery exhibitions and the advocacy of college and university art departments in Milwaukee and Madison, by the late 1960s when the competition began, movements such as **Abstract Expressionism** and **Pop Art** had migrated into Wisconsin. Each subsequent development in contemporary art can be found in the work of multiple generations of painters who have come of age here. At the same time, Wisconsin's watercolor field does have some aspects that set it apart. The main element is a great respect for craftsmanship and the mastery of technical expertise.

The Madison and Milwaukee campuses of the University of Wisconsin were home to two professors whose influence can be seen to this day. **John Wilde's** unparalleled expertise as a draftsman inspired students and influenced his contemporaries alike. His point of view can be found in closely examined studies of nature, finely detailed renderings, and an interest in a particular kind of northwoods surrealism. At UW-Milwaukee, **Laurence Rath sack** was respected for his minimalist watercolors

(above left)
Joel Jaecks
Red Camaro Near Mr. Soukup's House, 1981
 Watercolor
 28 x 40 inches
 Racine Art Museum,
 SC Johnson Purchase Award
 from *Watercolor Wisconsin '81*

(right)
Christel-Anthony Tcholke
*Could it be a Miami Beach
 Abstract Expressionist?, 1985*
 Watercolor and acrylic
 30 x 40 inches
 Racine Art Museum,
 Special Papers, Inc. Purchase Award
 from *Watercolor Wisconsin '85*



depicting abstractions based on foggy landscape images built up of successive monochromatic watercolor washes.

Watercolor was frequently treated as a tangential subject in other art departments, but students could specifically study this technique with him. At the same time, artists working in their own studios made contributions by devising new technical processes.

Lee Weiss became nationally known for her experiments in painting on both sides of the paper to establish interesting textures and for removing wet washes with a dry brush.

While many of the artists in RAM's watercolor collection have established respected careers working solely in this medium, the flexibility of the entry rules encouraged painters to occasionally create works on paper in order to participate. These artists responded to pieces produced by colleagues steeped in watercolor media while sometimes bringing something new to working on paper that had not been seen before. Two other influential University of Wisconsin professors, **Warrington Colescott** at Madison and **John N. Colt** at Milwaukee, are examples of people who helped form bridges between these two communities of painters. Colescott is internationally known for his satirical graphics that skewer everything from politics to the way we live today. Since the early 1980s, he has produced large-scale paintings in water-based media of the same kinds of subject matter. Colt became nationally known for his abstract compositions based on observations of nature, created on unprimed canvas with large washes of acrylic and detailed pastel and ink drawing marks. He frequently made pieces for RAM's competition that combined wet and dry media.



RAM continues to add to its documentation of Wisconsin painters by making acquisitions from each **Watercolor Wisconsin** competition and through gifts from collectors. By concentrating less on the specific materials used and more on the overall concepts behind their works, the museum is establishing a historic record of the many concerns and different viewpoints



these artists have. This creates an ongoing conversation in the galleries between artists working during the same time period and across multiple generations. It also forms a record for the future of what interests and challenges us today as seen by the artists who live and work throughout this region.

Bruce W. Pepich
Executive Director and Curator of Collections

Endnotes

1. Bruce W. Pepich, *Watercolor Wisconsin: Celebrating 25 Years*, Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts, Racine, Wisconsin, 1991.
2. Ibid.

(above left)
Richard Berns
Nina Nebraska, 2008
Watercolor, acrylic, and pencil
21 x 29 1/2 inches
Racine Art Museum, George and Betty Ren
Frederiksen Memorial Purchase Award
from *Watercolor Wisconsin* 2008
Photography throughout by Jon Bolton

(above right)
Harold E. Hansen
Beekeeper, Jardin du Luxembourg, 2012
Watercolor
11 7/8 x 18 7/8
Racine Art Museum, George and Betty Ren
Frederiksen Memorial Purchase Award
from *Watercolor Wisconsin* 2012