

# **ABSTRACT FLASH: UNSEEN ANDREW WYETH**

Andrew Wyeth (1917-2009) once said, “My struggle is to preserve that abstract flash – like something you caught out of the corner of your eye.” He also called himself an abstract artist, a provocative claim from a painter who is best known for realism. Through a remarkable body of works on paper never before exhibited, this exhibition explores what abstraction meant to Andrew Wyeth and the role it played in his art making. From this material, a new understanding of an iconic artist emerges: an American original who was actively engaged

with new currents in the art world, used a startlingly free and fierce method when it suited his goals, and for whom a visionary transformation of an observed subject into pure form and gesture was a fundamental aspect of his practice. The studies offer a rare glimpse into Wyeth's creative process and clarify the re-making of observed realities that is at work also in his tempera paintings, such as those in the last section of the gallery.

*Abstract Flash* is an exhibition in two parts. Assembled here is the first, featuring all Pennsylvania work; a second part focused on his Maine abstractions will be on view at the Farnsworth Art Museum (Rockland,

Maine) in summer 2024. All artworks in both exhibitions are from the Andrew & Betsy Wyeth Collection of the Wyeth Foundation for American Art, the support of which has made possible these exhibitions and the accompanying catalogue.

*Untitled*, 1948

Watercolor on paper



*Untitled*, undated

Watercolor and pencil on paper



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*Untitled*, 1955

Watercolor on paper



*Untitled*, 1956

Watercolor on paper



*Untitled*, 1956

Watercolor on paper



*Untitled*, 1960

Watercolor on paper



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*Untitled*, 1961

Watercolor on paper



*Untitled*, 1946

Watercolor on paper



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*Untitled*, 1965

Watercolor on paper



*Untitled, 1953*

Watercolor on paper



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*Untitled, 1967*

Watercolor on paper



*Untitled*, 1965

Watercolor on paper



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*Untitled*, 1953

Watercolor on paper



*Untitled*, 1958

Watercolor on paper



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*Untitled*, 1961

Watercolor on paper



*Untitled*, 1968

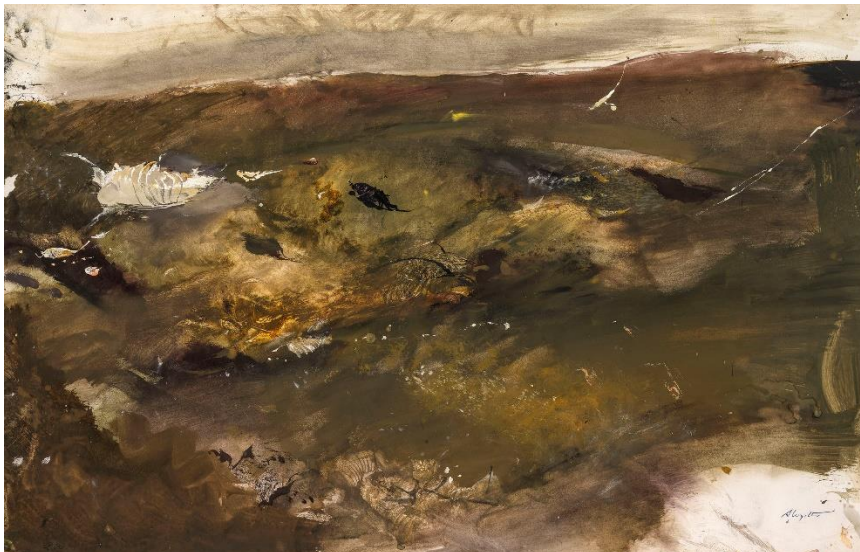
Watercolor on paper



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*Untitled*, 1956

Watercolor on paper



*Untitled*, 1956

Watercolor on paper



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*Untitled*, 1951

Watercolor on paper



*Untitled*, 1986

Watercolor on paper



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*Untitled*, 1985

Watercolor on paper



*Untitled*, 1962

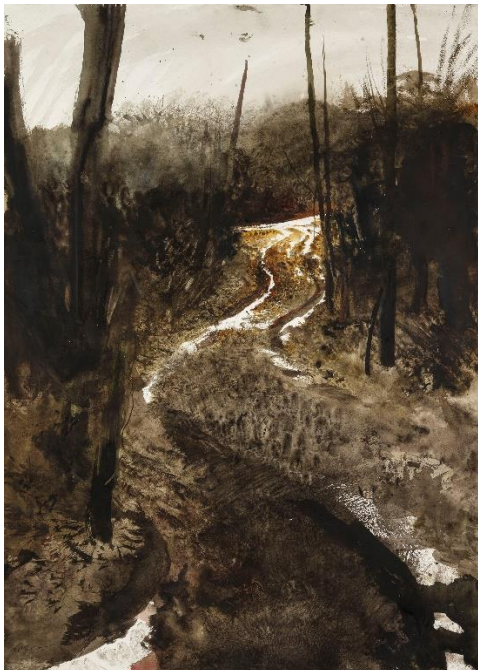
Watercolor on paper



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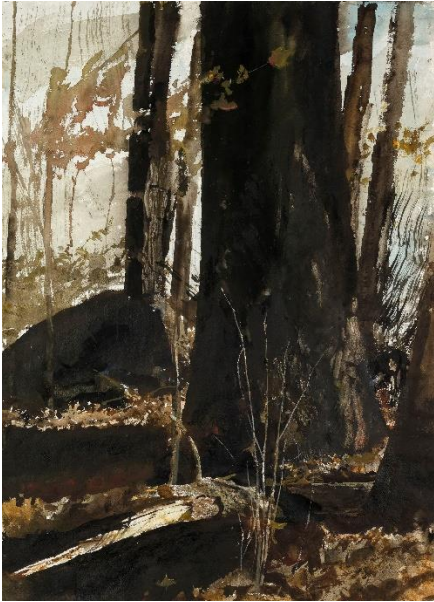
*Untitled*, 1982

Watercolor on paper



*Untitled*, 1986

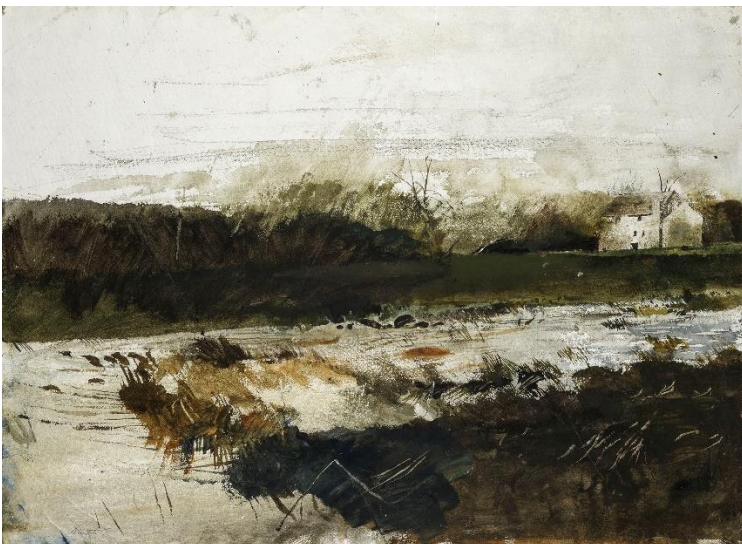
Watercolor on paper



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*Untitled*, 1961

Watercolor on paper



*Untitled*, 1958

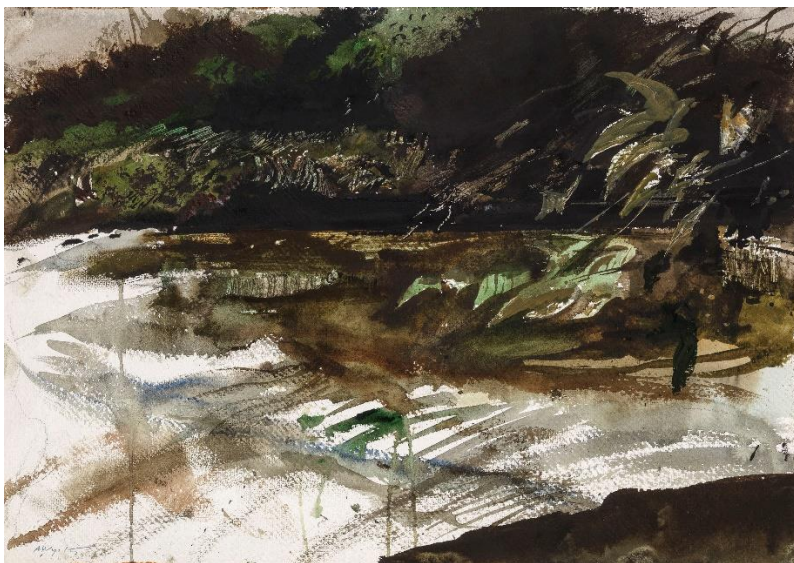
Watercolor on paper



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*Untitled*, 1958

Watercolor on paper



*Untitled, 1986*

Watercolor on paper



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*Ice Pool Study, 1969*

Watercolor on paper



*Blue Ice Study, 1994*

Watercolor on paper



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*Untitled, 1967*

Watercolor on paper



*Untitled*, 1961

Watercolor on paper



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*Untitled*, 1992

Watercolor on paper



*Untitled, 1962*

Watercolor on paper



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*Untitled, 1986*

Watercolor on paper



*Untitled*, 1960

Watercolor and pencil on paper



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*Untitled*, 1978

Watercolor on paper



## **CASE STUDY: AN ABSTRACT METHOD**

Most of the works on view in this exhibition were never titled by Betsy James Wyeth, the artist's wife and creative partner. This indicates that they were not recognized as distinct stages in the process of making a known and named artwork that Andrew had deemed finished. As such, Wyeth's abstractions are self-sufficient statements responding to the inspiration around him without constraint of genre, style, or marketability.

The case of the sheet identified in Betsy Wyeth's cataloguing system as B1836 clarifies the extent to which all of Wyeth's

abstractions captured primal, urgent ideas to which the artist returned time and again. In B1836, we see his immediate response to the forms of ice blocks on the Brandywine Creek in an especially cold winter. Wyeth carried the idea expressed here in the back of his mind for twenty-six years before bringing the scene to life again. With the addition of two surreal hands resting on the ice, this composition would become the egg tempera *Breakup*.

## **CASE #1**

Letter and petition from Edward Hopper to Andrew Wyeth, March 24, 1960. Collection of the Wyeth Foundation for American Art

Draft letter in Betsy James Wyeth's handwriting from Andrew Wyeth to Edward Hopper, circa March 1960. Collection of the Wyeth Foundation for American Art

The archival materials in this case help in understanding the artist's complex relationship with contemporary abstract painters. In response to the famous realist artist Edward Hopper's letter requesting his

signature opposing the drift of the Whitney Museum of American Art toward “non-objective art,” Andrew and Betsy Wyeth collaborated on a diplomatic reply in which they declined to add their voices to the protest and posed the questions, “Could it be that realism has become paunchy from centuries of easy living?”

## **CASE #2**

Transcript of an interview with Andrew Wyeth  
by Victoria Woodhull, October 2008. © The  
Kenneth Noland Foundation

Kenneth Noland and Andrew Wyeth in front  
of Noland's *Mysteries: Night + Day* (2003) ©  
The Kenneth Noland Foundation

Andrew Wyeth's copy of *Franz Kline* by Harry  
F. Gaugh (New York: Abbeville Press, 1994)  
Brandywine Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs.  
Andrew Wyeth, 2010. AWS2010.878

Wyeth's copy of this book on the artist Franz Kline is evidence of his admiration for these gestural action paintings, which Wyeth proclaimed many times. Likewise, the interview shows Wyeth was one of the first people to give professional approval to the color field artist Kenneth Noland when he accepted him into a 1955 invitational exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., of which he was juror. Speaking of the exhibition as a whole, Wyeth found the "realistic work was terrible, but the abstract work was more interesting, the best work there."