RECKONING WITH
JOHN WILSON’S STUDIES FOR A LYNCHING MURAL
“THE INCIDENT”
In 1952, while studying at La Esmeralda, the national school of art in Mexico City, American artist John Wilson (1922–2015) created *The Incident*, a powerful fresco mural of a racial-terror lynching. Painted on an exterior wall at street level and featuring twice-life-size figures, the mural was meant to be temporary, but its commanding composition and skillful depiction prompted renowned Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros—who was then the head of Mexico’s Department for the Protection and Restoration of Murals—to advocate that it be preserved.\(^1\) Though the mural is no longer extant, *Reckoning with “The Incident”: John Wilson’s Studies for a Lynching Mural* draws together nearly all of the known preparatory sketches and painted studies for the fresco, as well as related drawings and prints, to explore Wilson’s personal reckoning with the long and horrific history of racial-terror lynching in America.

It was for a course on mural painting at La Esmeralda, taught by Mexican painter-printmaker Ignacio (Nacho) Aguirre, that Wilson carefully planned and realized *The Incident*. The students taking the course were given the opportunity to design and paint their own frescoes; each mural was then overpainted to provide a blank slate for the next student’s project. The sheer number of preparatory studies that Wilson made—in chalk, crayon, graphite, gouache, and oil—and then retained for many years attests to the importance of this experience for him and the effect of the subject matter on his development as an artist. In the decades that followed his time in Mexico (1950–56), Wilson would return to certain motifs within the mural and to themes surrounding the history of race and social justice in America. Time and time again, Wilson would speak of the significance of his Mexico experience, and specifically of the creation of this mural, as both foundational and transformative.

Wilson was born in Roxbury, Massachusetts, and began to draw and paint at a young age. His parents were raised in British Guiana (now Guyana) and had immigrated to America several years before Wilson was born. Wilson’s father was a social activist and a member of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) founded by African American nationalist leader Marcus Garvey, and he subscribed to progressive black newspapers such as the *Amsterdam News*, the *Chicago Defender*, and the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Wilson would later recall that it was through these newspapers that he first became fully aware of lynchings in America. Articles on the subject frequently appeared in the papers and occasionally also included photographs; these few photos of lynchings that the young Wilson encountered had such an impact that it seemed to him that they appeared in “practically every other issue.”\(^2\)
Wilson graduated with highest honors from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in 1945 and received a B.S. in Education from Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts, in 1947. Following his graduation from Tufts, he was awarded the prestigious James William Paige Traveling Fellowship and went to Paris to study under the French painter and sculptor Fernand Léger. Mexico, however, was the destination he found most compelling. Wilson was drawn to the work of the Mexican muralists—particularly José Clemente Orozco—because it conveyed to him a real compassion for human suffering. Inspired by the muralists’ commitment to produce art with socially conscious content, Wilson would later comment: “The aim of the Mexican muralist movement was to be spokespeople for the common man. They wanted to create works of art expressing the reality of the forgotten ones, revealing their history, their celebrations and struggles. . . . [Mural painting] is a public thing because it’s available to masses of people. And so, through Mexican art I began to experience a sense of how to depict my reality.” In 1950 Wilson was awarded the John Hay Whitney Fellowship, which made it possible for him to travel to Mexico for study. He was joined by his new bride, Julia Kowitch, and together they established a community among other black American artists who resided and trained there, including Elizabeth Catlett. During the next six years, Wilson worked and studied at a variety of institutions in Mexico City in addition to La Esmeralda, such as the renowned print collective Taller de Gráfica Popular and the Escuela de las Artes del Libro.

Of his choice of subject matter for his Mexican mural, Wilson said that while he knew that he was not going to “change America,” portraying a racial-terror lynching on a mural scale was a way to “exorcise” the feelings he had carried with him since seeing photographs of lynchings as a child. Moreover, Wilson found that his experience in Mexico afforded him a new perspective on the role of race in America: “It’s an almost universal happening where one group turns on another group. After all, during the Second World War, the ‘niggers’ of the world were Jews and Hitler identified them by forcing them to wear armbands with yellow stars. In America you don’t need a yellow star for blacks. There are universal ways to dehumanize the outsider by race, caste, class, religion, or sex, whether it be in America, Asia, Russia, or Africa.”

Gridded to facilitate transfer to a mural scale and thus likely the final study made before Wilson’s realization of his fresco, a color gouache (no. 1) confirms that *The Incident* was conceived as a two-part composition, as does a similar version in grisaille (no. 2). To the left and slightly foregrounded is an implied interior space occupied by a seated mother embracing her child, her back turned to the scene taking place outside; a father figure
stands over her and clutches a shotgun, his face tensely concentrated on the action. To the right is an implied exterior space seen obliquely through a window, with a group of Ku Klux Klansmen in full regalia cutting down a hanged black man from a tree while a wooden cross burns in the background.

A preparatory painting of the lynched figure in oil on board (no. 3) functions as both a study for the mural and a powerful composition in its own right. The limp body of the lynched man dominates the center of the scene. His disproportionately large right hand rests on his left knee, the splayed fingers echoing the tattered hem of his pants; below, his grotesquely swollen left foot lies akimbo on the ground. A photograph of the completed mural reveals that the figures lowering the body are hooded Klansmen, but in this cropped oil study their identity is only implied by the white hands of the two white-robed figures holding a noose and a whip.

Like the oil panel, the preparatory mural study in Conté crayon, Julie (no. 4), functions on two levels: it is both a sensitively drawn portrait of the artist’s wife in a moment of quiet introspection and an arresting study for the head of the father figure in the finished mural. As a standalone image, it does not convey the sense of rage that is so effectively communicated in the final composition. And yet it is clearly a preparatory sketch, through which Wilson worked out the uplighting and positioning of the father’s head.

The commanding, half-scale oil study of the head of the mother (no. 5), as well as an oil painting and two lithographic versions of the mother and child figures (nos. 6–8), make up an interesting grouping within the exhibition. The lithographs—one made in 1952 concurrent with the mural, and the other in 1956, four years after the mural’s completion—are indicative of Wilson’s continued preoccupation with the subject. While the compositions are the same, the two lithographs are distinguished from one another both by their scale and by subtle differences in the expressions of the mother and child. In the larger lithograph from 1952, the mother appears deeply anxious, her brow sharply furrowed, eyes cast back over her shoulder; in the one from 1956, her face is slightly softer, her brow slightly less creased. As a result, she seems wearier and more contemplative, but less anxious. In addition to these depictions, numerous chalk and crayon studies picturing isolated details from the mural (nos. 9–20) reveal how Wilson almost obsessively grappled with nearly every aspect of the overall composition, with the deep understanding that each detail and gesture—the turn of a leg, the tight grip of a hand around the barrel of a gun, the lowering of the lifeless figure—held tremendous importance and power.

The title that Wilson gave his mural was clearly significant to the artist. The phrase “The Incident” suggests the gravity of the situation at hand and yet remains
open-ended—inclusive of the murdered man and the violent act of lynching by the Klansmen as well as of the reactions of the family in the foreground. The title does not direct the gaze toward a particular figure or action as the main subject but instead references the entire scene, asking the viewer to observe the significance of each detail. Wilson would return to this title during his time in Mexico, using it for a later lithograph from 1955—two states of which are on view in the exhibition—depicting a woman crouching over a man who lies supine on the ground (nos. 21–22).

Inspired by the political and social activism of the Mexican muralists and haunted by images of lynchings he had seen in newspapers as a child, Wilson revisited the subject of *The Incident* over the course of his life as a way to grapple with racial violence, past and present. The works on view in this exhibition encourage contemporary viewers to do the same.

1. *The Incident* did apparently remain in situ for a period of time, but it was eventually destroyed or overpainted—although the date of this is undocumented.


3. The James William Paige Traveling Fellowship from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, supported travel to Europe, but not to Mexico.


5. The John Hay Whitney Fellowship supported the Wilsons’ move to Mexico in 1950; Julia Wilson’s subsequent appointment as an English teacher at Mexico City College allowed the family to remain in Mexico until 1956. Their first child, Rebecca, was born in Mexico in 1953.


Documentary photograph of The Incident, Mexico City, 1952. Gelatin silver print, 8 x 10 in. (20.3 x 25.4 cm)
1
Compositional study for *The Incident*, 1952
Opaque and transparent watercolor, ink, and graphite, squared for transfer, 17 × 21¼ in. (43.2 × 54 cm)
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Janet and Simeon Braguin Fund
2000.81.1
Compositional study for *The Incident*, 1952
Opaque and transparent watercolor and charcoal,
18 × 21 in. (45.7 × 53.4 cm)
Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College Art Collection,
Iowa, Estate of Clinton A. Rehling, class of 1939,
by exchange
3

*Lynched Figure, study for The Incident*, ca. 1952
Oil on board, 37 ¼ × 27 ¼ in. (94.6 × 69.2 cm)
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn.,
Katharine Ordway Fund
2017.130.1
Julie, study for The Incident, 1952
Conté crayon, 20 1/2 × 16 3/4 in. (52 × 42.6 cm)
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn.,
Everett V. Meeks, B.A. 1901, Fund
2017.130.2
5  
*Negro Woman*, study for *The Incident*, 1952  
Oil on Masonite, 21 1/2 x 18 in. (54.6 x 45.7 cm)  
Clark Atlanta University Art Collection,  
Atlanta Annuals

6  
*Mother and Child*, study for *The Incident*,  
begun mid-1950s, dated 1965  
Oil on board, 36 1/2 x 31 1/2 in. (92.7 x 80 cm)  
Lent by Patti and Jonathan Kraft
7  
*Mother and Child*, study for *The Incident*, 1952  
Lithograph, 21 ⅜ x 17 ⅞ in. (54.3 x 45.4 cm)  
Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College Art Collection, Iowa, Marie-Louise and Samuel R. Rosenthal Fund

8  
*Mother and Child*, study for *The Incident*, 1956  
Lithograph, 14 x 11⅞ in. (35.5 x 30.2 cm)  
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., Everett V. Meeks, B.A. 1901, Fund 2018.42.1
9  
Study for *The Incident*, 1952  
Crayon and charcoal, 17 × 18 ½ in. (43.2 × 47 cm)  
Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College Art Collection, Iowa, Estate of Clinton A. Rehling, class of 1939, by exchange

10  
Study for *The Incident*, 1952  
India ink, crayon, watercolor, and charcoal, 24 × 19 in. (61 × 48.3 cm)  
Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College Art Collection, Iowa, Estate of Clinton A. Rehling, class of 1939, by exchange
11  
Study for *The Incident*, 1952  
Crayon, 18 ½ × 15 in. (47 × 38.1 cm)  
Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College Art Collection, Iowa, Estate of Clinton A. Rehling, class of 1939, by exchange

12  
Study for *The Incident*, 1952  
Crayon, 20 ½ × 16 in. (52.1 × 40.7 cm)  
Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College Art Collection, Iowa, Estate of Clinton A. Rehling, class of 1939, by exchange
Study for *The Incident*, 1952
Crayon, India ink, watercolor, and charcoal,
23 ¼ × 18 ½ in. (59.1 × 47 cm)
Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College Art Collection,
Iowa, Estate of Clinton A. Rehling, class of 1939,
by exchange

Study for *The Incident*, 1952
Graphite, 23 ¼ × 18 ¾ in. (59.1 × 47.6 cm)
Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College Art Collection,
Iowa, Estate of Clinton A. Rehling, class of 1939,
by exchange
15 Study for *The Incident*, 1952
Charcoal and crayon, 22 3/4 × 17 1/2 in. (56.5 × 44.5 cm)
Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College Art Collection, Iowa, Estate of Clinton A. Rehling, class of 1939, by exchange

16 Study for *The Incident*, 1952
Crayon, 23 1/2 × 18 3/4 in. (59.7 × 47.6 cm)
Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College Art Collection, Iowa, Estate of Clinton A. Rehling, class of 1939, by exchange
17
Study for *The Incident*, 1952
Crayon and charcoal, 18 1/2 x 18 1/2 in. (47 x 47 cm)
Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College Art Collection,
Iowa, Estate of Clinton A. Rehling, class of 1939,
by exchange

18
Study for *The Incident*, 1952
Crayon and charcoal, 21 x 16 in. (53.3 x 40.6 cm)
Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College Art Collection,
Iowa, Estate of Clinton A. Rehling, class of 1939,
by exchange
19  
Study for The Incident, 1952  
Crayon and charcoal, 19 3/4 x 18 3/4 in.  
(50.2 x 47.6 cm)  
Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College Art Collection,  
Iowa, Estate of Clinton A. Rehling, class of 1939,  
by exchange  

20  
Study for The Incident, 1952  
Charcoal and crayon, 23 x 18 1/2 in. (58.4 x 47 cm)  
Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College Art Collection,  
Iowa, Estate of Clinton A. Rehling, class of 1939,  
by exchange
Incident, 1955
Lithograph, $8 \frac{3}{8} \times 14 \frac{13}{16}$ in. (21.3 × 37.7 cm)
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn.,
Everett V. Meeks, B.A. 1901, Fund
2018.60.1
Incident, 1955
Lithograph, 8 3/8 x 14 11/16 in. (21.2 x 37.3 cm)
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn.,
Everett V. Meeks, B.A. 1901, Fund
2018.60.2
The Trial, 1951
Lithograph, 19 1/2 × 13 in. (49.5 × 33 cm)
Martha Richardson Fine Art, Boston
Documentary photograph of John Wilson with *The Incident*, Mexico City, 1952. Gelatin silver print, 8 × 10 in. (20.3 × 25.4 cm)
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Organized by the Yale University Art Gallery, this exhibition further sparks conversations prompted by the national dialogue surrounding the 2018 opening of the Equal Justice Initiative’s Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice, in Montgomery, Alabama—national monuments of unprecedented importance that honor and memorialize over four thousand African Americans from twelve Southern states who were lynched between 1877 and 1950.

**Faulconer Gallery**
Grinnell College, Iowa
January 25–April 7, 2019

**David C. Driskell Center**
University of Maryland, College Park
June 3–August 9, 2019

**Clark Atlanta University Art Museum**
October 6–December 6, 2019

**Yale University Art Gallery**
New Haven, Conn.
January 17–May 10, 2020

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