

**YALE
UNIVERSITY
ART
GALLERY**

**PRESS
RELEASE**

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**RECKONING WITH “THE INCIDENT”:
JOHN WILSON’S STUDIES FOR A LYNCHING MURAL**

Traveling exhibition brings together nearly all of Wilson’s known preparatory works for his Mexico City mural from 1952

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

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

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

January 17, 2020–May 10, 2020
Yale University Art Gallery

September 7, 2018, New Haven, Conn.—In 1952, while studying at La Esmeralda, the national school of art in Mexico City, African American artist John Wilson (1922–2015) painted *The Incident*, a powerful fresco mural of a lynching. Executed on an exterior wall at street level and featuring twice-life-size figures, the mural was intended 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.



John Wilson, *Compositional study for *The Incident**, 1952. Opaque and transparent watercolor, ink, and graphite, squared for transfer. Yale University Art Gallery, Janet and Simeon Braguin Fund. © Estate of John Wilson

Though the mural itself is no longer extant, *Reckoning with “The Incident”: John Wilson’s Studies for a Lynching Mural* brings together nearly all of the known preparatory sketches and painted studies for the fresco, as well as related drawings and prints.

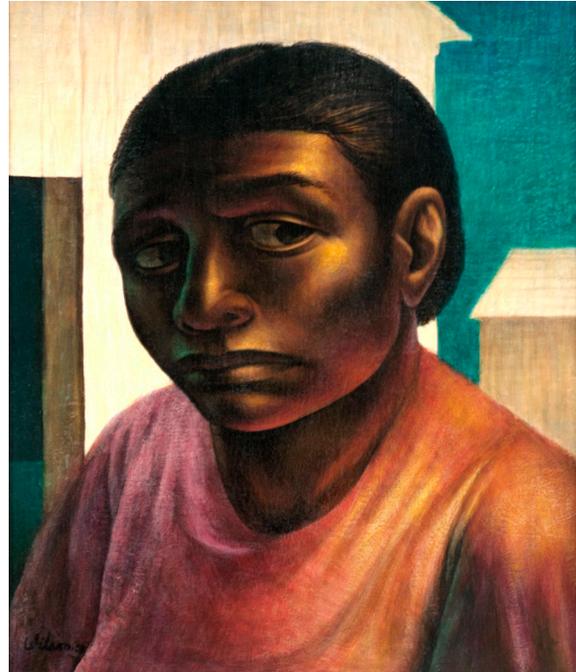
As a young man, Wilson was drawn to the work of Mexican muralists Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and Siquieros and their commitment to create art with a socially conscious message. A grant from the John Hay Whitney Foundation allowed him to travel to Mexico, where he studied from 1950 through 1956. He later commented in an interview, “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."

A centerpiece of the exhibition is a complete compositional study of *The Incident* in gouache from 1952. Gridded to facilitate transfer to a mural scale and thus likely the final study made before Wilson's realization of his fresco, the gouache, and a similar version in grisaille, confirm that *The Incident* was conceived as a two-part composition. To the left and slightly foregrounded is an implied interior space occupied by a seated mother clutching her child, her back turned to the horrific scene taking place outside, and a standing father figure holding a shotgun; 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. Of his choice of lynching as the subject matter for his Mexican mural, Wilson said that while he knew that he was not going to "change America," it was an attempt to "exorcise" the feelings he had carried with him since seeing photographs of lynchings as a child. The son of immigrants from British Guiana (now Guyana), Wilson grew up in Roxbury, Massachusetts, and never witnessed a lynching firsthand. But his father, a social activist and a member of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) founded by African American nationalist leader Marcus Garvey, was an avid reader of progressive black newspapers such as the

Amsterdam News, which documented racial crimes throughout the United States. Wilson reflected in a 2004 interview: "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."

Wilson explored the intersection of art and politics throughout his career, always with an eye toward issues of social justice. His most visible work is a three-foot-tall bust of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., which has been on view in the Capitol Rotunda in Washington, D.C., since its 1986 installation. *Reckoning with "The Incident": John Wilson's Studies for a Lynching Mural* dovetails with the recent 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 4,000 African Americans from 12 Southern states who were lynched between



John Wilson, *Negro Woman*, study for *The Incident*, 1952. Oil on Masonite. Clark Atlanta University Art Collection, Atlanta Annuals. © Estate of John Wilson. Courtesy of Clark Atlanta University Art Collection

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John Wilson, Study for *The Incident*, 1952. Charcoal and crayon. Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College Art Collection, Iowa, Estate of Clinton A. Rehling, class of 1939, by exchange. © Estate of John Wilson. Courtesy Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College Art Collection

1877 and 1950. Expanding upon the national conversation that is focused in Montgomery, and with support from the Isabel B. Wilson Memorial Fund, the exhibition debuts at the Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College, Iowa, on January 25, 2019. It then travels to the David C. Driskell Center, University of Maryland, College Park, and the Clark Atlanta University Art Museum before its presentation at the Yale University Art Gallery in early 2020.

Of the 23 works on view, more than half are from the Grinnell College collection at the Faulconer Gallery, and a major Wilson painting from 1952 that is a study for the mother figure in the mural is on loan from Clark Atlanta. The rest of the objects are drawn from the Gallery's collection and private lenders. The Gallery has actively collected John Wilson's work since 2000, when the extraordinary opportunity arose to acquire the compositional gouache study for *The Incident*. Several recent acquisitions related to the mural led Pamela Franks, Senior Deputy Director

and the Seymour H. Knox, Jr., Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, and Elisabeth Hodermarsky, Acting Head and the Sutphin Family Senior Associate Curator of Prints and Drawings, to see the makings of an exhibition. Knowing of the Faulconer's holdings and the Clark Atlanta painting, and with the opening of the Legacy Museum then on the horizon, Franks and Hodermarsky decided to partner with the Faulconer Gallery, the Clark Atlanta University Art Museum, and the David C. Driskell Center to organize this timely traveling exhibition, honoring the legacy of an important American artist and his commitment to social justice.

"Though no longer extant, John Wilson's mural on the subject of a racial-terror lynching survives today in these numerous, beautifully articulated, and deeply emotive preparatory studies that attest to the transformative power of Wilson's art," states Hodermarsky. "Ranging from details in chalk of hands, feet, guns, and ropes to compositional cartoons in gouache, Wilson's forcefully rendered studies help us contemplate the legacy of lynching and its indelible stain on America's collective psyche."

Stephanie Wiles, the Henry J. Heinz II Director, notes that, "Since 2008 the Gallery has enthusiastically explored opportunities for college and university museums to share collections and develop interdisciplinary programs that spark important conversations about art and its role in our lives." Wiles continues, "Highlighting drawings, prints, and painted studies of John Wilson's now-lost mural on the subject of a lynching, this exhibition provides an unparalleled opportunity to present the artist's compelling contributions and unique visual response to racial violence and injustice to audiences across America."

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Exhibition Credits

Exhibition organized by Pamela Franks, Senior Deputy Director and the Seymour H. Knox, Jr., Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, and Elisabeth Hodermarsky, Acting Head and the Sutphin Family Senior Associate Curator of Prints and Drawings. Made possible by the Isabel B. Wilson Memorial Fund.

Yale University Art Gallery

The Yale University Art Gallery, the oldest college art museum in the United States, was founded in 1832 when the patriot-artist John Trumbull gave more than 100 of his paintings to Yale College. Since then its collections have grown to more than 200,000 objects ranging in date from ancient times to the present.

General Information

The Yale University Art Gallery is located at 1111 Chapel Street, New Haven, Connecticut. Museum hours: Tuesday–Friday, 10 am–5 pm; Thursday until 8 pm (September–June); and Saturday–Sunday, 11 am–5 pm. The Gallery is closed Mondays and major holidays. Free and open to the public. For general information, please call 203.432.0600 or visit the website at artgallery.yale.edu.

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