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Drawn from Life

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Drawn from Life

Illustrator Patricia J. Wynne '67 captures both the fine details and essence of her subjects.



Wynne at her home studio. She describes her “perfect day” as a Sunday in her studio, creating art. “Drawing is relaxing. It’s the thing I love to do the most.”

**Artwork by PATRICIA J. WYNNE '67
Story by CELESTE HUTTES**

Whether fueling a flight of fancy or capturing, in captivating detail, the creatures that share our planet, the art of Patricia J. Wynne informs, illuminates and inspires.

Not bad for a woman who doesn’t consider herself a natural-born artist.

“I don’t believe you’re born with it. It’s work,” says Wynne, who graduated from Wesleyan with an art degree in 1967 and has enjoyed a thriving career in New York City for almost four decades. “I believe art is a matter of endeavor.”

Her own artistic journey began while growing up on a farm near Chicago, in what is now Burr Ridge. “I always knew from a very early age that I wanted to be an artist,” she says. “It never occurred to me that I would do anything else. I have always drawn ... forever.”

In a career spanning nearly 50 years, Wynne has created countless pieces of art that speak to scholars and schoolchildren alike. She has illustrated more than 170 books for children and adults, and her work regularly appears in national publications such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Food and Wine*, *Cricket* and *Scientific American*.

Along the way, Wynne has won accolades from Parenting magazine, the John Burroughs Association and the National Science Teachers Association. In 2008 she received the Theodore Seuss Geisel Award for her illustrations in *Hello, Bumblebee Bat*, authored by Darrin Lunde. The award, named for the famed “Dr. Seuss,” is given annually to the author and illustrator of the best book for beginning readers.

In 2010, a retrospective of her work — *Trophies: 45 Years in the Hunt* — ran at the Mehu Gallery in Manhattan. For the exhibit’s catalog, Helen Jackson Zakin, emeritus chair of State University of New York at Oswego’s art department, described what distinguishes Wynne’s work.

“Patricia’s imagination, her ability to translate complex ideas into pictures and her unceasing drive to learn as much as possible about that which she depicts are the qualities that are central to her drawing, sculpture and prints,” wrote Zakin.

Those qualities flourished when she arrived on the Illinois Wesleyan campus as, in her words, “a completely naïve country girl.”

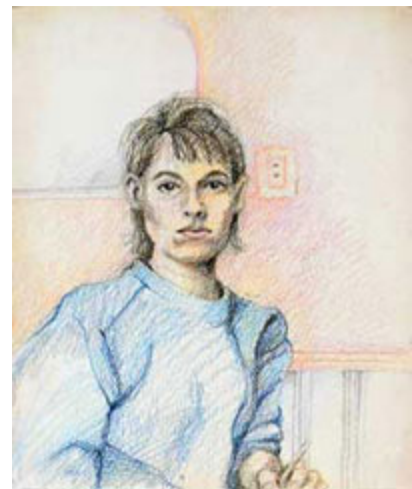
At Wesleyan, she came into her own as part of a circle of art majors where “everybody knew everybody.” The cozy atmosphere offered a welcome change from the large Chicago high school she felt lost in a sea of students.

“Wesleyan was the first place I could just be me,” Wynne says. “I had a wonderful time at Wesleyan. I loved my professors.”

The budding artist relished the wide diversity offered in her art classes, from woodcuts and lithographs to silk-screening and sculpting. “We studied lots of different mediums; we weren’t allowed to specialize,” says Wynne. “The University gave me a wonderful view of what’s available in the arts. I really got it all at Wesleyan.”

Wynne completed a rare self-portrait during her years at Illinois Wesleyan. While home for the holidays recovering from final exams, she suddenly realized she’d forgotten to get a Christmas present for her mother. The gift was born in the living room, as she sat in front of a mirror. “I was such a serious kid,” she says now, gazing at the crayon sketch. “I was there [at Wesleyan] to learn to be an artist. Nothing else mattered. I can see in this self-portrait how hard I was trying to be the best I could be.”

One lesson from her time at IWU she *didn’t* take to heart came from a printmaking instructor who advised his students never to marry another artist. She was persuaded otherwise when she met Maceo Mitchell while studying printmaking at the University of Iowa in the 1960s. Today they share a spacious apartment overlooking Central Park, complete with his and her private studios.



**Self -portrait as a student
(1965)**

Their 42-year marriage has supported a loving, competitive spirit between two successful artists. As Wynne informed her husband early on, “I want you to succeed tremendously, but I want to do better.” And the feeling is mutual.

“It’s never been a problem — it’s such fun,” says Wynne. “We understand each other; it’s an advantage. We can be quite honest with each other.”

Both went into teaching after earning their master’s degrees. It was while Wynne taught printmaking and drawing at the University of Windsor, Ontario, that she first advertised as a freelance scientific illustrator with a “tight hand,” a “good pen-and-inker.” Once settled in New York City, Wynne looked for natural history (“rats and bats”) jobs with books, newspapers and magazines.

Living in the Big Apple required some adjustments for the self-described country girl. On the farm where she grew up, she helped take care of the animals. “When I first came to New York, I was depressed not to have those chores in the morning,” Wynne says. Her mood improved after she accumulated a menagerie — which now includes six finches, five turtles, two cats, six lizards and more than 60 fish — to care for at the start of her day.

Wynne’s lifelong affinity for animals shines in her work. From the lowliest insect to the mightiest mammal, she is known for almost uncanny accuracy in her depictions of the natural world. Her rare skill makes her sought-after among biologists seeking to convey complex information. As one satisfied scientist said about one of her illustrations, “The figure conveys more of the story than I could get across with a tray full of data.”

To achieve a striking realism in portraying everything from the Arctic food chain to rhino evolution, Wynne draws from films, books, the Internet and her own memory. Ideally, she is able to study live specimens. At Chicago’s Shedd Aquarium, she recently spent several days sketching beluga whales, and this winter she will return to Bloomington to draw the wallaroos at Miller Park Zoo for a children’s book.

“I know nothing about science, but I’m always curious,” says Wynne. When she is unsure how to draw something, she has access to some of the best minds in science, including Nobel Prize winners with whom she has worked during her 25-year relationship with *Scientific American*. (Wynne also maintains an office part-time at the American Museum of Natural History, where she provides illustrations for peer-reviewed scientific articles.)

The laser-like precision of Wynne’s hand is somehow matched by an ability to infuse her work with an ineffable spirit.

“There is always a kind of animism to my work,” says Wynne. “For me, artistically, they have souls; they are endowed with a spirit beyond the zoological. I see life as having deeper meaning — that matters to me.”

Wynne is also inspired by history. In fact, she was so taken with a course at Wesleyan on ancient Egypt that she nearly abandoned art for archaeology.

When she finds herself “stuck” on a piece, she will often research the subject’s history or mythology to help bring it to life.



For *Kitsune*, Wynne used themes from Japanese legend.

Such was the case with *Kitsune*, a tiny fox Wynne created for a miniature show. Feeling it was missing something, Wynne found the spark she was seeking in an online search about the mythology of the fox. She began working with imagery from Japanese legend, where the fox is guardian of the rice and sprouts nine tails that blaze light (think “fox fire”) when it turns 100 years old. These elements, she says, allowed her to “finish it with a twist.”

Just as she seamlessly fuses physical realism with spiritual essence, Wynne is a master at blending the business of art with her own artistic self-expression — sometimes quite literally. For example, in *The Maneater’s Dream* and *Remembering Wyoming*, Wynne deftly builds fine art around previously completed commercial jobs. She is also not squeamish about selling the fruits of her creative labor. Her advice to young artists: “Find what satisfies your aesthetic *and* pays the rent. Make something that reflects you and not just the job.”

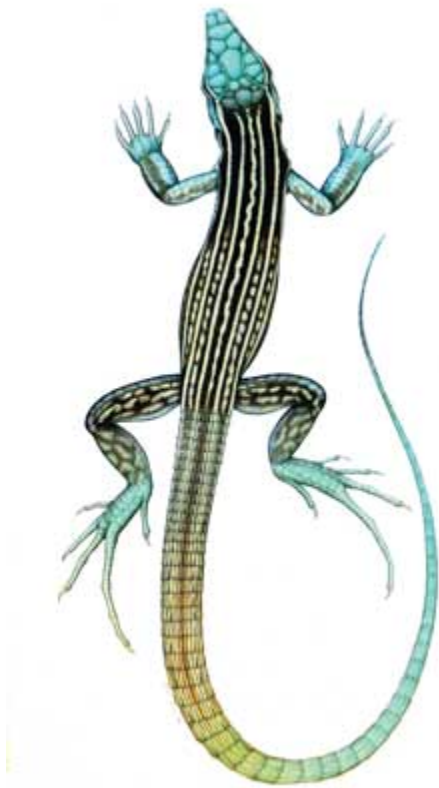
“When I start a piece, it becomes very personal to me,” says Wynne, who sometimes expresses this connection by depicting herself in her fine-art pieces. “I don’t do it for vanity. Sometimes I think I belong in there. It allows me to participate in the art at more than one level. It’s me looking at the art from the inside.”

Among thousands of her creations born over the years, Wynne does not have a single favorite. As a ruthless editor of her own work, she says, “If I didn’t like them, I would destroy them. If it’s intact, I probably love it.”

“I say to my drawings, ‘Now go out there and do what you can.’ That’s the job of art — to communicate with other people. It has to speak to somebody. If it doesn’t, it’s failed.”

Seldom failing to find their voice, Wynne’s pieces usually speak the language of enchantment.

As she says, “When a piece finds someone that falls in love with it ... it’s a kind of magic.”



15.5" | 1982

Gertrude | Colored pencil on video paper | 9.5" x

This lovely little lizard is one of many commercial jobs Wynne completed in her 25-year relationship with *Scientific American*. She spent time sketching live specimens of the lizard at the American Museum of Natural History and ended up bringing two of this fascinating species home to stay. “Their species is made up solely of females,” says Wynne. “They reproduce by cloning.” Even more rare than the lizard is the paper used for this sketch, “made by a man who handmade paper in his garage.” Unfortunately, he didn’t write down the recipe for the paper, and after he died, Wynne searched in vain for more. “This is the one drawing I will not sell,” says Wynne. “I love it on all levels — it’s as good as I can do.”



The Maneater's Dream | Ink and watercolor

| 8" x 11" | 2002

This work incorporates a commercial job for the Bronx Zoo in the foreground. In the background, Wynne portrays a teacher–friend’s close encounter with a tiger in Thailand. As the teacher gazed at the cat — which had just been confined for eating a human being — it suddenly lunged at him from behind the bars of her cage. With a keen ability to view the scene from the animal’s perspective, Wynne notes that the tiger has a baby. “In her mind, she was being a good mother. There’s something very poignant and very scary about it.”



Crane Dance | Colored pencil | 37" x 40" | 2007

After a trip to Nebraska to witness the migration of the sandhill crane, Wynne “came back thinking they are the most wonderful animals in the world.” As luck would have it, a freelance-writer friend was working on a piece about the crane for *Scientific American*, and invited Wynne to illustrate the article — an easy assignment for the already inspired artist. “They are so majestic, so amazing.”



Rivers | Pen and ink | 8" x 4" | 1996

“The whole idea of flow” is behind *Rivers*, a drawing Wynne gave to her lifelong best friend for her 65th birthday. Using panels cut from two drawings commissioned by Science Times, the work explores the river in its literal sense, as well as the idea of DNA, blood and family as a river. At left, the artist shares a panel with a female pharaoh, honoring the river of writing and thought. Her father, a pilot, is represented in the plane in the upper left corner, while her ponytailed best friend makes a cameo, too. “I was very pleased with it,” says Wynne. No doubt the recipient of this one-of-a-kind gift was pleased as well.



"Sperm Whale in Deluge" 3/10 Peter Wynne 2010

Sperm Whale in Deluge Etching | 6" x 9" | 2010

Wynne is mystified as to why this particular etching seems to have a hypnotic effect on people from all walks of life. It began as a project for a refresher course she took when she decided to re-enter the world of printmaking. "The instructor said to take the plate and just sketch something." The limited-edition print sold in less than a year. "It just speaks to people," says Wynne, though it no longer speaks to her. "I'm a little tired of it. I need to put it away and pull it out again when I can be surprised by it."



Three Tigers | Colored pencil, pastel, white chalk and charcoal | 18" x 24" | 2004

Fittingly, Wynne completed this work in the midst of what she calls her “tiger season,” a period where she completed dozens of pieces featuring tigers. “I fell madly in love with tigers — I was just totally inspired by them.” The middle cat was inspired by a Korean painting, while the top is based on an actual museum specimen. Completing the trio is the self-described “Tiger Queen” herself.