



# Gertrude Abercrombie's Mysterious World

"Her landscapes and portraits read like journeys through the winding corridors of her mind."

**THOMAS BUSCIGLIO-RITTER**, Abert Family Associate Curator of American Art, takes us into the mysterious world of American painter Gertrude Abercrombie.

COVER Tree, Table, and Cat, 1937. Oil on canvas. 40 x 30 in. Private Collection, Illinois. Photo: Michael Tropea ABOVE Search for Rest (Nile River), 1951. Oil on Masonite. 24 x 36 in. Collection of Sandra and Bram Dijkstra

(L-R) Levitation, 1967. Oil on Masonite. 8 x 10 in. Private Collection, Illinois. Photo: Michael Tropea Tree at Aledo, 1938. Oil on canvas. 35 5/8 x 23 ¾ in. Elmhurst University Art Collection, Elmhurst, Illinois Demolition Doors, 1964. Oil on Masonite. 20 x 24 in. Illinois State Museum; Purchase







# The Milwaukee Art Museum is the only Midwestern venue to present *Gertrude Abercrombie: The Whole World Is a Mystery*, the first nationally touring retrospective of her career.

A critical yet under-recognized figure of the 20th-century Chicago art scene, Gertrude Abercrombie (1909–1977) was a woman of paradoxes. She remained in Chicago for most of her life, yet her art was connected to international movements such as Surrealism. Though sometimes regarded as a recluse, her circle of friends included queer painters and Black jazz musicians, among them Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker. Her paintings offered a way to question her hopes and fears, while also engaging with major issues of her time, from racial discrimination to urban renewal. Amusing and mysterious—often both at the same time—her images conveyed what she described as the "simple things that are a little strange." Over the years, she developed a rich symbolic vocabulary, making a distinctive contribution to American art history.

Abercrombie's life and art were deeply rooted in the Midwest. Aledo, Illinois—where she spent part of her childhood—became the backdrop for many early works, characterized by a palette of blues, grays, and greens. Some paintings reflect her interest in rural architecture, while others evoke the pastoral landscape of the region, often centered on a solitary figure. This connection to her childhood is most evident in *Tree at Aledo* (1938). Although based on a photograph of an actual tree in town, the painting isolates it from its surroundings, encapsulating both the identity of Aledo and perhaps that of the artist.

After she moved into her own apartment in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood in 1935, Abercrombie's career flourished. Over the next two decades, she produced hundreds of paintings, many at miniature scale. Her compositions emphasized themes of love and struggle, and reflected her interest in exploring her identity. Referred to affectionately as "Queen Gertrude" by her friends, she added this royal persona to her compositions. Amid this period of commercial success, she wrote to her closest friend, the Milwaukee artist Karl Priebe: "I'm painting like crazy again."

Throughout her career, Abercrombie returned to earlier subjects and incorporated personal memory into her paintings, reflecting on the passage of time. She blurred the boundaries between physical and imagined spaces, contemplating themes of decay and rebirth. Her landscapes and portraits read like journeys through the winding corridors of her mind, populated with recurring symbols—crooked trees, sofas, tents, staircases, doors, pyramids, and animals such as owls, cats, lions, and giraffes. As she observed, "the whole world is a mystery," a statement that speaks to the opportunity of liberation and self-discovery she found through art making.

Gertrude Abercrombie: The Whole World Is a Mystery is co-organized by Carnegie Museum of Art and Colby College Museum of Art, and is curated by Eric Crosby, Henry J. Heinz II Director, Carnegie Museum of Art, and Vice President, Carnegie Museums, and Sarah Humphreville, Lunder Curator of American Art, Colby College Museum of Art, with Cynthia Stucki, curatorial assistant, Carnegie Museum of Art.



### Gertrude Abercrombie: The Whole World Is a Mystery

March 27-July 19, 2026 Baker/Rowland Galleries

Learn more about the exhibition and related programs at mam.org/whole-world

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### John Wilde

Karl Priebe, Gertrude Abercrombie, Dudley Huppler, Marshall Glasier, Sylvia Fein, a Friend, Arnold Dadian and Myself, 1966. Milwaukee Art Museum, Gift of the Gertrude Abercrombie Trust. Photo by P. Richard Eells © John Wilde

# Art, Friendship, and Magical Realism



Complementing Gertrude
Abercrombie: The Whole World
Is a Mystery and highlighting
the Milwaukee Art Museum's
collection of Wisconsin
art, Gertrude & Friends: The
Wisconsin Magic Realists
examines the work of the
Wisconsin Magic Realists in
the mid-20th century.

**THOMAS BUSCIGLIO-RITTER,** the exhibition curator, introduces us to the Wisconsin artists in this special rotation.

Associated with broader currents of Magic Realism across the United States, the Wisconsin group blended fantastical elements into otherwise realistic settings to challenge viewers' perceptions of the world.

Complementing Gertrude Abercrombie: The Whole World Is a Mystery and showcasing the Milwaukee Art Museum's collection of Wisconsin art, Gertrude & Friends: The Wisconsin Magic Realists highlights a singular group of mid-20th century artists from the state.

Milwaukee painters John Wilde and Karl J. Priebe developed a surreal approach to painting in the 1940s. Unconvinced by the idealized rural paintings of Regionalist artists, notably John Steuart Curry, they associated with broader currents of Magic Realism and Surrealism across the United States. The Wisconsin group blended fantastical elements into otherwise realistic settings to challenge viewers' perceptions of the world.

Several artists soon joined Wilde and Priebe in this approach, including Marshall Glasier and Gertrude Abercrombie. Moving among the art circles of Madison, Milwaukee, and Chicago, they formed friendships and creative partnerships.

The Magic Realists often portrayed themselves and one another in a playful, unassuming manner. Wilde's 1966 group portrait of core members embodies their signature eccentricity, with elaborate outfits, a checked floor motif, and the enigmatic presence of an unnamed nude figure. Abercrombie purchased the painting from Wilde in 1967 and remarked, "I am not going to hang it; I am going to hold it on my lap all the time."

Although seemingly lighthearted on the surface, members of the group also addressed the impact of American consumer culture and the artificiality of the built environment. Discarded objects appear throughout Priebe's landscapes like relics of a careless society. Commentary on commodification also appears in the work

of painters loosely associated with the group, including Santos Zingale and Aaron Bohrod. Zingale, for instance, depicted modern city life with humor, questioning contemporary desires for inexpensive, mass-produced goods.

The paintings in *Gertrude & Friends: The Wisconsin Magic Realists* reveal the spirited blend of intellect, humor, and imagination that defined this circle of Wisconsin artists—proof that even the everyday can feel a little extraordinary.

This exhibition is drawn from the Layton Art Collection at the Milwaukee Art Museum and the Museum's collection.

Gertrude & Friends: The Wisconsin Magic Realists is a Layton Art Collection Focus Exhibition. The steward of the collection that Frederick Layton started, one of Milwaukee's founding public art collections, the Layton Art Collection, Inc., is prout to partner with the Milwaukee Art Museum

### Gertrude & Friends: The Wisconsin Magic Realists December 12, 2025–July, 2026

Learn more about the exhibition and related programs at mam.org/gertrude-and-friends



Thank you for the incredibly warm welcome I've received since joining the Museum in September. Although I've had the pleasure of meeting many of you already, I'm delighted to introduce myself more fully through this, my first Director's letter to Members. meeting many of you already, I'm delighted to

The theme of this issue—there's always something new—couldn't be more fitting. Along with the many exciting things happening at the Museum this season, I, too, am new! And what a joy it is to step into this role at a moment when the Museum is brimming with creativity, energy, and possibility.

Every day brings another discovery that deepens my admiration for this city and this extraordinary institution. From the warmth of the people I've met, to the way the morning light fills the Quadracci Pavilion, I can already feel the creative pulse that makes Milwaukee such a special place to call home.

As I look to the future, my approach is simple: to make the Museum a place where everyone feels both welcome and inspired. I hope your visits feel like returning to a favorite book—something you can open again and again to refresh your mind and recharge your spirit. I also believe the Museum should serve as a vital force within Milwaukee's civic life, connecting artists, educators, businesses, and neighbors in meaningful ways.

To me, the Museum is a kind of cabinet of wonders—a place where we learn from real objects and from each other, and where art builds empathy and sparks imagination. Above all, I want us to continue celebrating artists and the creative spirit that keeps this Museum vibrant and alive.

You'll see that spirit reflected throughout this issue, which highlights the many ways art invites us to see the world anew: the dreamlike paintings of Gertrude Abercrombie: The Whole World Is a Mystery, the reimagined Haitian gallery that amplifies community voices, and the refreshed Modern Wing, opening this spring, that offers fresh context for beloved works of modern art.

I'm deeply grateful to join a community that believes in the power of art to connect, inspire, and transform. Thank you for your membership, your curiosity, and the energy you bring to this place.

I look forward to seeing you in the galleries soon—because there's always something new waiting for you here.

Kim Sajet

Donna and Donald Baumgartner Director Milwaukee Art Museum



## New to MAM: Kiki with Leopard in My Studio



**MARGARET ANDERA**, senior curator of contemporary art, guides us through a closer look at one of the newest additions to the Museum's collection.

Jonas Wood's paintings, drawings, and prints are filled with recurring motifs—basketballs, ceramics, plants, and patterned textiles—that appear throughout his still lifes, portraits, and interior scenes. Drawn from his daily life and surroundings, these familiar objects form the foundation of his distinctive style. Known for bold color, flattened space, and intricate layering, Wood transforms the ordinary into compositions that are visually striking and emotionally resonant. In this painting of his young son seated on a couch in the artist's studio, personal subject matter is combined with a vivid play of form and pattern, creating a scene that feels both intimate and carefully constructed.

Wood's process often begins with collages assembled from drawings, family photographs, and found images, which he cuts apart and reconfigures to plan larger canvases. This approach allows him to experiment with scale, perspective, and rhythm, giving his work its characteristic mix of flatness and depth. The resulting compositions feel familiar yet fresh, animated by layered patterns and unexpected juxtapositions that draw viewers into his world.

Although deeply rooted in personal memory and daily experience, Wood also engages with the history of painting. He has cited Alex Katz, whose work is well represented in MAM's collection, as an important influence. Like Katz, Wood distills figures and spaces into bold, simplified forms while capturing both immediacy and lasting resonance. Yet his imagery remains unmistakably his own, transforming everyday rhythms into complex and enduring compositions.

Kiki with Leopard in My Studio has been promised to the Milwaukee Art Museum by Christine Symchych and James McNulty, whose generosity has greatly advanced the Museum's exhibitions and acquisitions. Additional recent and promised gifts can be seen in Looking Forward: New Gifts of Art, on view through February 15.

Exhibitions in the Herzfeld Center for Photography and Media Arts are sponsored by the Herzfeld Foundation.

### Jonas Wood

Kiki with Leopard in My Studio, 2020. Promised gift of Christine A. Symchych and James P. McNulty, PG2021.3

## Celebrating 50 Years of Teen Originality and Talent

AMY KIRSCHKE, Barbara Brown Lee Chief Learning & Engagement Officer, reflects on 50 years of student talent that has graced the Museum's walls through the Scholastic Art Awards.

For 50 years, the Milwaukee Art Museum has celebrated the bold vision, the Scholastic Art Awards: Wisconsin Exhibition. This annual statewide competition for middle and high school students both delights and provokes, as emerging artists compel us to consider the world through their eyes.

Each year, teens from over 120 Wisconsin schools submit more than 2,500 artworks to be adjudicated by 30 members of Milwaukee's arts community solely on artistic merit.

Generations of award-winners Out of these submissions, have gained confidence in seeing themselves as artists (in a museum exhibition!) and been inspired to pursue art careers. Milwaukee Art Museum this year.

over 350 works are included in the exhibition Scholastic Art Awards: Wisconsin Exhibition, which celebrates 50 years at the

More than 15,000 student artworks have been exhibited through the annual exhibition since it first came to the Museum in 1976. Generations of award-winners have gained confidence in seeing themselves as artists (in a museum exhibition!) and been inspired to pursue art careers. Today, we know many of these past winners as artists, designers, art educators, museum professionals, and community creatives. This long-standing program has in turn fostered a generous mentoring culture, made all the more essential with cuts to art education and funding. Artists not only create but support other young Scholastic entrants by becoming art teachers who help submit their students' work entries or judges who spend hours deliberating and advocating for student works.

Perhaps the greatest gift of the Scholastic exhibition is that it encourages all of us to embrace the transformative power of art. To be reminded, by yet another generation of extraordinary young artists, how art can uniquely inspire us to consider different perspectives and imagine new possibilities.

2026 Scholastic Art Awards: Wisconsin Exhibition January 31-March 15, 2026

Schroeder Galleria

Plan your visit to applaud student artworks at

**SPONSORS:** The Heller Foundation and Mary Ellen Heller in memory of Avis Heller. Peter and Debra Johnson.





# Inspire, Create, Repeat: The Kohl's Art Studio Lifecycle

Plan your visit and continue creating at mam.org/studio.

Go behind the scenes with **SIRI STENSBERG**, associate educator of youth and family programs, and learn how a new Kohl's Art Studio project comes to life each month.

Every weekend in the Kohl's Art Studio, we welcome art makers of all ages to get creative with an art-making project that changes monthly. The studio turns visitors into artists themselves and highlights the Museum's collection as a source of inspiration for all ages. Let's go behind the scenes as I walk you through the steps of building each unique activity!







After choosing an artwork, I conduct research to learn more about it. I ask a curator for their help and expertise if I'm struggling to find information.





• The monthly project arrives in the Kohl's Art Studio after weeks of planning, testing, and preparing.



l start experimenting and testing out project ideas.
I try all kinds of special materials, such as crayons that write on a glass for a stained-glass project.



Join us during new hours every Friday-Sunday, 10 a.m.- 4 p.m., to get creative with four special projects this season!

My fellow department

matter your age.

members test out the project.

They find ways to make it

even better! This includes

adaptations for the littlest artists and moments of choice to customize the project no

### **January: Winter Windows**

Design your own window inspired by American prairie-style stained glass.

### February: Symbolic Drawings

Create your own symbols and make a visionary drawing inspired by Lois Mailou Jones's *Ascent of Ethiopia*.

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March: Secret Keys

Design a unique key inspired by handwrought keys from the 17th and 18th centuries.

### **April: Hidden Insects**

Build an insect inspired by surprising creatures in European still life paintings.



# Discover What's New and Write a Haiku!

Embark on an adventure through the Museum to discover what's new! Cut out and fold this handy pocket-sized zine to guide your next visit through new art on view. Follow each step to create a haiku poem about what you discover.

What is a zine? A small handmade book that is easy to share! What is a haiku? A haiku is a short poem with three lines. The lines follow a syllable pattern of 5, 7, and 5.



The design galleries



# The Refreshed Modern Wing Reopens This Spring

Rediscover the Museum's celebrated collection of 20th-century art in a renewed installation that traces defining movements and artists of modernism, from German Expressionism and postwar abstraction to the bold color and form of O'Keeffe, Münter, and Hepworth.

Opening March 15, these reinstalled galleries on Level 2 invite you to explore fresh context, new juxtapositions, and expanded stories about modernist artists and movements.

Georgia O'Keeffe

GR of Mrs. New york Studies MIST 7.22 Associated a publish State State States States State, Study States States States Spotter States, New York, March 14-13, 2072

Short They Double and comment is no writer, they defined the analysis and a significant to assume the same provinces and analysis and a significant to the same provinces and analysis and a significant to the same and the analysis and a significant to the same and the analysis and a significant to the same analysis and the same analysis and the same analysis and the local point of the base of the same and the same and analysis and the same analysis and the data of the same analysis and the same and the data of the same analysis and the same and the data of the same analysis and the same and the data of the same analysis and the same and the data of the same analysis and the data of the same analysis and the same analysis and the same and the data of the same analysis and the sa

Photo by Front Room Studios



### **Member Extras**

Members enjoy different benefits based on their level of membership. Upgrade your membership at any time for access to additional exclusive events. Visit mam.org/membership or contact the membership team at 414-224-3284, Monday-Friday, 9 a.m.-5 p.m.

### Member Mingle + Expert Series: Philanthropy and the Arts Ecosystem Thurs, Jan 15, 5-7:15 p.m.

OPEN TO ALL MEMBERS

Enjoy a drink from the cash bar (complimentary for Art Advocate level Members and above) before the Expert Series at 6:15 p.m. in Lubar Auditorium.

RSVP AT MAM.ORG/RESERVATIONS OR 414-224-3284.

### 2026 Exhibition Preview Luncheon

Tues, Feb 17, 11 a.m.

OPEN TO BENEFACTOR LEVEL MEMBERS AND ABOVE

Join us for a special luncheon with Dr. Kim Sajet, Donna and Donald Baumgartner Director, and the Museum's curators.

RSVP BY FEBRUARY 3 AT RSVP@MAM.ORG OR 414-224-3259.

### Coffee with the Director

Thurs, March 5, 2-3 p.m. | Fri, March 6, 10-11 a.m.

OPEN TO BENEFACTOR LEVEL MEMBERS AND ABOVE

Meet Dr. Kim Sajet, Donna and Donald Baumgartner Director, and learn more about her vision for the Museum's exciting next chapter.

RSVP BY FEBRUARY 19 AT RSVP@MAM.ORG OR 414-224-3259.

### President's Circle Preview Celebration: Gertrude Abercrombie

Wed, March 25, 5:30-8:30 p.m.

OPEN TO PARTNER LEVEL MEMBERS AND ABOVE

Join us for a festive evening among friends with cocktails, artful bites, and live music as we celebrate the first nationally touring retrospective of Gertrude Abercrombie's enigmatic paintings.

RSVP BY MARCH 11 AT RSVP@MAM.ORG OR 414-224-3259.

### Member Preview Day + Celebration: Gertrude Abercrombie

Thurs, March 26, 10 a.m. - 8 p.m.

**OPEN TO ALL MEMBERS** 

Enjoy early access to the exhibition, then join us for live music and a cash bar in Windhover Hall before a special 6:15 p.m. talk by Thomas Busciglio-Ritter, Abert Family Associate Curator of American Art.

RSVP AT MAM.ORG/RESERVATIONS OR 414-224-3284.

### Learn more at mam.org/for-members



### **Artist Talks**

Discover the stories behind the art as emerging, mid-career, and established artists open up about their unique experiences and practices. Explore the motivations driving their self-expression and delve into the techniques and media that bring their visions to life.



### Karen Gunderson Thurs, Feb 5, 6:15-7:15 p.m.

Join Wisconsin-born, New York-based contemporary painter Karen Gunderson as she speaks about her practice and her work on view in Looking Forward: New Gifts of Art.

#### SPONSORED BY

Milwaukee Art Museum's Contemporary Art Society



### Willie Cole Thurs, Feb 26, 6:15-7:15 p.m.

Hear from the sculptor, printmaker, designer, perceptual engineer, and visual artist Willie Cole as he discusses how he transforms everyday found objects into powerful works of art, drawing inspiration from traditional African imagery and cultural references.

### SPONSORED BY

Milwaukee Art Museum's African American Art Alliance



Photo by Front Room Studios



## REINTRODUCING THE HAITIAN COLLECTION

**KANTARA SOUFFRANT**, senior director of community dialogue and adult programs, celebrates new perspectives in the Haitian art gallery that shine a new light on the artworks.

To step into the Haitian art collection is to step into warmth and majesty. There are wonders on the walls: the vibrant colors, the animated bodies, the depth of spirit. The sense of community, tradition, and storytelling are captured in sculptures and paintings. The master artists of the Haitian collection know how to move you, to capture your attention. From Hector Hyppolite, whose stories in life and on the canvas capture a love of spirit, to Philomé Obin whose attention to detail and history were paramount, and metal sculptor, Georges Liautaud, who makes iron flow like water, the Haitian gallery transports you.

This year, the gallery feels more alive than ever. New audio guides, fresh family exploration cards, and a series of short videos now invite you to see the Haitian collection through new eyes. The Museum spearheaded this project to make your experience in the galleries even more meaningful. To create this new content, the Museum partnered with Haitian scholars, local community members, and artists to uncover the stories that matter the most to our audiences. Together, we listened to what visitors were curious about: the interplay of Vodou and Christianity, the gallery's connection to the wider African diaspora, the materials and styles the artists used, and the history woven into each piece.



The result is a gallery experience that feels refreshed, exciting, and rooted in voices with deep knowledge of Haitian culture. Scholars Dr. Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Dr. LeGrace Benson and artist Babette Wainwright remind us that these works are as vibrant and relevant today as when Richard and Erna Flagg first gifted them to Milwaukee in the 1990s. If it's been a while since you last visited the Haitian art collection, now is the perfect time to return. Come ready to explore with your headphones, pick up an activity with your family, or dive into a new video that reveals the layers of meaning behind a single work of art.

The Haitian art collection acts as both a window into another culture and a mirror reflecting your own connections to identity and spirituality. We invite you to experience the wonder of the Haitian art collection anew.

Watch the video trailer for a preview of what you can experience in the galleries.



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new t-shirt celebrating the Haitian art collection



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