The Notebooks of John Wilde

By Buzz Spector

History has bequeathed us many artists’ journals. These dialogues with the private self have provided us with crucial reflections about the inner nature of individual artists and their works; in addition they offer testimony about the times during which these journals were kept. The "voice" of the journal ranges from the philosophical expansiveness of Leonardo’s great Notebooks—crammed with arcane speculations about virtually the entirety of Renaissance art and science—to the meticulous brevity of Pontormo, interspersing notations about his daily meals with progress reports about his work on the frescoes for the choir of San Lorenzo: "Wednesday the torso and at night I had no supper/Thursday the arm and at night I had an omelet."

Some artists’ journals have the force and poetry of great literature; Eugène Delacroix and Paul Gauguin come immediately to mind, with Edward Weston’s or Ann Truitt’s Daybooks serving as more recent examples. Jennifer Bartlett published passages from her journal in a little magazine in 1977. Six years later this same material became a chapter in her novel History of the Universe, with only the names changed for the work of fiction. The form of the journal has even become the work of art itself, as in some among the many volumes of Dieter Roth’s Collected Works.

For the most part, though, the pages of a journal—at least during the time of its compilation—are a place for the journal-keeper to ruminate about his or her own moods, tastes, and scruples. As such, the journal becomes the site for both fervent convictions and excoriating doubts. It sheds a specifically inner light on an artist’s work, revealing systems of meaning and feeling through a unique psychological filter.

John Wilde taught painting and drawing at the University of Wisconsin for thirty-six years, before retiring as Professor of Art in 1982. He has kept a journal intermittently for almost fifty years. Recently, excerpts from Wilde’s journal were published, along with reproductions of a number of his paintings, in a slim volume entitled What His Mother’s Son Hath Wrought, by the Perishable Press, in Mount Horeb, Wisconsin. The selection of notes included here offers evidence of a remarkable steadfastness, both in the making of art and in principled living. Wilde’s lyrically figurative painting isn’t fashionable, but it is excellent. The eloquence of his images is matched by the clarity of thought and feeling that comes from the undated passages of his journal. In his way of seeing life, Wilde has offered us the means to a reading of his art.

Excerpts from the Notebooks of John Wilde

Today was the first full day in the studio. I worked further toward completing a painting begun (can you believe it?) last December and also did the drawing for the first “new” painting. There is enough certainly to do. Time will be the necessary fund. I have no concern about the work—it is good work—it is satisfactory professional work. I know not many can do it. I know I draw—not by intent or desire but by instinct or by nature, unknowingly—very beautifully. I have no concern here—this ability, if I continue to work, will out. It may take ten years—50 years—a hundred—but my vision (literally, I guess, as I have no overt message) will be known. Oh, there is a little audience now who like my things, as has been said, for the wrong reasons. However, though there needs be an audience, it needs no particular size or composition. I am somewhat pleased that apparently the right people, the fashionable collectors, do not know my work—it can only be a virtue. Also gratified that I am embarrassing to most of the critics—I do not fit into their mould.

Heard from F. O. today and just as I rather thought he offered me $975.00 for the 6 pictures rather than accepting the $1100.00 figure I had asked. As I have no desire to keep those paintings with me—I have no greater pleasure than seeing them in others’ hands—I’ll probably accept his offer, although I might, somewhat quixotically, ask $1000.00. It is I suppose very sad to sell any of those things for such low sums—but then paintings, perhaps as good or better, have been sold for as little or for less.

I continue outside of art. I know what is “going on” but only intuitively, for I have little contact with it. I know, in fact, that 94%, more or less, of the art current is nonsense—it is one of those laws that some feel don’t exist (laws, I mean), which are absolute. Equally I am certain that what will happen today, if anything happens, will happen in isolation—not especially in the hinterland but in isolation no matter where it is found. I feel that living here is an overt manifestation of my opinion on this score. I have no opinion as to the merit of this particular environment: it is essentially as shabby and stupid as any—no better—no worse. It just be-speaks my opinion of an art supposedly become, by some miracle, international or universal. This nonsense is no less so than it has always been. Art comes from lonely men, cooking in their own juices, but physically able and driven to state their madness.

A fine day. Very cool last night and this early morning (min of 49°), but an almost clear sky allowed a brilliant sun to soon warm things. However, it remained cool in my studio and it was not until I could sit in the sun after lunch that the blood warmed—or so it seemed. Unfortunately the Cucumber picture was not dry enough this morning (because of the cool) to continue working on, so I spent day putting some last touches on the Mushrooms painting and doing some under painting on the Picnic picture which I had actually not planned to begin until after the mid-summer vacation. It went along well and excitingly, as the paintings always do in the very beginning—and in the very end or culmination. In my style (or method I guess one should say) there is a long interim period under painting, over painting, glazing, modelling form, etc., when nothing really seems to happen after long dogged work it suddenly seems to come. I frankly admit that this interim period can sometimes seem too long, too tedious—but it must be gone through, like all of the involved and complex activity before love, which, too, can seem rather long when in reality one wishes only to get at it. But, of course, necessary, for unless this “approach,” this interim exists, it, love or art, is never culminated. It can’t be profusely gotten otherwise.

A sometimes disturbing characteristic of the art of gardening is the extreme difficulty of arriving at anything individual. Yet that very difficulty may make it most worthwhile. Though creative individuality may seem more available in the painter, particularly in our time, there are, in fact, deep similarities between the arts of garden and painting.
Both areas resist idiosyncrasy, sham, oddness and are receptive of long evolution, love and devotion. This awareness is all that counts in either instance, but who under the sun will know it today, and there is no assurance of a return to truth. When I am 50 years old my young trees and shrubs will be more mature and more visible, as perhaps my work will be, and it will be possible to take a long view and to see things more lucidly or more happily clouded. The summer grows older and as it does it takes on that familiar, sad beauty. At the moment it is at the edge of the time of goldenrod, asters and sunflowers, perhaps a little early this year as a result of drought. Now, this evening, the crickets who under the sun will know it today, and other night singers are in full cry and more visible, as perhaps my work is all but done; where thou- many reputations, given a modicum of ability and sometimes none at all. I occasionally (but infre-

I hold that most of contemporary art is misled by the ascendency of science and, particularly, its technology. It seems to have been forgotten that whatever science achieves is completely irrelevant to art. The total mystical fabric of the "new" in art is a lie. The truth of art was discovered when the first artist made the first work of art—it hasn't changed since, it never can and it never will. It can only be sought and re-discovered by individuals of succeeding generations, generation after generation. But it is all the same and what appears to be change or new is only an apperception resulting from the ascendency of the moment. If it is believed that new science necessi-
tates "new" art, it is only a recognition that art is no more and that art-truth was something of a different time. This is the greatest hypocrisy in the guise of the modern, of bravery, of courage and foresight.

That which is acclaimed new in art is soon widely disseminated, and as widely taken up as new in the hinterland and bravely defended until, so soon, a whole class of students, at some mid-western university will shout their "avant garde," pushed on by their professor. The result is an insignificant mass hysteria, a delusion held with the avidity of a psychosis. To rediscover the old art-truth is as inevitable as it is impossible, that is to say, it is found in spite of and because of self, or it is not found at all. It cannot be made to happen. It happens because of intense selfless work, through time, skepticism, love, awe and single-
mindedness, if at all.

I worked today though the light was very bad. I was forced to change plans, for I had intended to do the final "skin" of the nude in the Potato picture—but it was far too dark for this, so I spent most of the day working on a small painting on canvas begun in 1951 and abandoned since. It is of a nude in sky with 2 running dogs and a shore bird in an undefined landscape. I think I have brought it around, so to speak, by establish-
ing a great simplicity. This going back to a picture begun eleven years ago may seem strange but it is apparent how I feel in these matters. I say that any change in a man's style or attitude which is superficially apparent in any less time than 10 years is a false one or if not a false (dishonest) one it is an indication of a very unsure person—hardly worth listening to. I do not say there is not change; there is change indeed from picture to picture even. But it is even less rapid than the change, hour by hour, in the cabbage plant growing in the gar-
den; slight, absolutely organic, integral; perceptible only to the most discerning eye. But as the change in the cabbage plant is quite apparent after 10 days— the change in my work is quite apparent in 10 years. But, perhaps most impor-
tant, after the 10 days the cabbage plant, though changed, is still a cab-
bage—as my painting after 10 years, though changed, is still my painting. Some will say that my analogy of cab-
bage plants and painting is a symptom-
atically stupid one and I say if I paint as well as the cabbage grows all is well and good.

"Fame Is Proof That People Are Gu-
lible."

Several solicitations in the mail today beckon me to advertise my forthcoming
New York exhibition and this once again brings to mind the problem of the
relationship of success and merit to fame. I have received these sorts of
letters before from various advertising media and public relations firms, and I
have always ignored them. I ignore them not because I have any deep faith that
merit will out; on the contrary, I know there is little relationship between merit
and fame, and I know that public relations people are responsible for a great
many reputations, given a modicum of ability and sometimes none at all. Images can be and are being made.

No, while I cannot disclaim interest in
publicity, I do disdain it, for I have a
propensity to treasure my private self and
turn instinctively away from any
opportunity, gratuitous or solicited, for
aggrandizement. Yet, I am disturbed,
for I am acutely aware of the close
relationship of reputation and "immor-
tality." But I have such deep distrust for
the vehicles of making reputations that
I cannot help but act negatively. I know
there is no absolute relationship between merit and reputation and that the great
ability is sometimes of small repute and
vice versa. Still I am aware that merit is
never totally ignored and where it exists
there will always be some response, a
select audience, a "happy few" and this
is the response to my work which inter-
ests, and perhaps sustains, me.

Well, Time magazine has listed me as
one of the one hundred and two out-
standing artists in America. All I can
wonder about is why 102? If it had been
just an even hundred would I have been
one of the two left out? Of course it is all
nonsense. There might be 319 painters
better than any of those listed, who are
simply unknown, not having been
catched in the wash of publicity. Cer-
tainly if my publicity was as good (or as
ample) of some big names I'd be a
hundred times better. We sometimes
even momentarily forget the effect of
public relations. The worst crap will
eventually take on a certain substance,
or at least lustre, to even somewhat
intelligent people. I don't know if there
are even two best painters in this
country today and I even doubt
myself—except at least I know how to
draw. Well, it makes little difference. I
do it because I like to do it—like making
love and I know somehow I'm good at it.
How good I can't tell—who can?—but
maybe better than I think. Time is of the
essence and I trust I have some to go,
N. W. Praise be to things—the club to
ideas!

Several fine days, but today a bitterly
cold N.E. wind with a spattering of rain
and sleet—good to retard growth just a
bit and put them in proper timing for the
season. Some of the loveliest spring
ehemerals already past their prime of
bloom: the hepaticas, the bloodroot, the
dutchman's britches. The rue anemone
is just coming into its best and they are
in many ways the finest of all the spring
woodland blooms.

On last evening we visited a favorite
large woodlot just nearby and dug, for
stealing, more nodding trillium, blue
coholes, doli's eyes, maiden hair ferns,
ramps, bottle brush grass and a name-
less violet. As I grow older (46 now) I do
less violet. As I grow older (46 now) I do

bound. It seems a strange irony that as
one advances toward death, it some-
times seems further away. I am now
forward looking and optimistic, and I
tremble a little in being so. Yet my
vision is essentially black when I con-
some other place—in a gallery, in a frame, varnished, titled and priced. After all this has happened the work has been detached from myself; it then has become an object, a public thing. While still in the studio, in progress or finished, the work is a private thing, very much a part of me. I wish people would flock to see my work in galleries, but I wish they—everyone—would leave me in my studio, and my studio itself, alone.

Sunday is usually a sort of nothing day—although I did paint about 3 hours this afternoon. Then I spent several hours in the sun and in that time I pulled crab grass from the lawn and found this a highly rewarding (in no real sense) and amusing process. There is or has been few pursuits more meaningful and therefore therapeutic. I believe I pulled perhaps 300 individual grass plants out of a probable population of 10,000 in my lawn. But with each plant extracted there was a tiny sense of accomplishment. This accomplishment not because of ridding the lawn of a bad thing but essentially because of a job well done. Hence about 300 jobs well done actually. But not always was the job well done for occasionally the plant would break off and leave the roots still in the ground in which case it would undoubtedly grow again. The growing again however was not the crucial issue—that being simply the fact that when the plant was pulled it should come out roots and all. If it doesn’t do so it means the operation was not successfully accomplished. I noted that the “crown” of the individual plant afforded an excellent grip and if that could be properly grasped and then pulled usually the job was well accomplished—but sometimes that crown was almost buried in the ground and could not be really satisfactorily grasped and if such was the case the job was most often not completely satisfactory—and some times several efforts had to be made to finally extract the total plant—or it was necessary after some effort to move on to the next plant, which was less satisfactory still, for it left one with a sense of a job not well done, to which one had not put one’s full self—a certain sense of shirking duty. Well, at any rate, a fine pursuit which I can recommend to almost anyone but especially to kings and dukes, and premiers and presidents—also generals.

Read a good statement today by K. A. Porter concerning the young writer: (I paraphrase) the young writer today does not like to write, but to have written. The same thing might be said, to an extent, of the young painter: most of them like to have painted—how many will have the determination, the will to put in the long and tedious, lonesome hours?

I note often that when there is a panel discussion (in actuality or over the radio) which concerns itself with any of the arts there is a distinct tendency (even when the participants are of considerable stature) for the discussion to become a little bit silly and “funny.” On the other hand when there is a similar discussion, say, on the Berlin situation, (even though the participants are the greatest asses) there is a tendency toward profundity and seriousness. Upon consideration this seems to express perhaps a basic truth: that the discussion of the arts progresses rapidly toward essentials, toward basic human realities, toward an uneasy awareness of death and man’s futility and that a certain silliness (when such considerations are exposed and aired publicly), a certain foolishness, is the inevitable result. It is somewhat similar to the giggle which will be heard, or the inane remark, under the strain of tragic circumstances (death and man’s futility). Hence the discussion of, say, again, the Berlin situation is so far from human reality, so false, so arbitrary, so artificial, that it is absolutely without strain and the participants have no need, no compulsion, to relieve themselves by the manifestation of human weakness. In fact, in such a discussion, should anyone giggle (or should one giggle during the speech of a political candidate) the whole structure of the pseudo-event might well topple, so flimsy is it essentially. But, knowing of the lack of substance of most such discussions or speeches or events (on politics, ethics, etc.), certain defense mechanisms have been built in: the gigler would be considered a nut and ejected from the meeting or forum. The idea here is to deter the second giggler—for should the second giggler giggle all would giggle and assuredly all would topple, for the whole pseudostructure is so flimsy that even the built in defenses could only tolerate one assault.

This business of doing a series of drawings, then redoing the whole series, integrated, onto a prepared panel, then doing the long series of underpaintings, glazes, in-painting—destroying any vestiges of the original drawing; all this, is an anti-effect against all of the spirit of the “Art” of this time.

But that is what I am here for, to make a demonstration against, and Lordy knows whether or not it will all be worth something when I am done. If it is, I win all (that is, all to be won, which isn’t very much) and if it isn’t, I lose all (which, in proper perspective, isn’t very much either). Chances are the $8000.00 I invest in the next eight months work will go down the drain...but my attitude toward these things is closely akin to my aesthetic one: it is not the thing to do—to have that money and to use it all just for living and doing work which need not be done—especially work which is as anti-current as the work I do. But other than the joy of working, it is the prime reason I enjoy doing it.

Believe me, I do not do what I do according to a preconceived plan. I do it simply because I do it and later, as now, put down some reasons. I am amazed at the willingness, or need, of most to look to facts, data, information, etc., before they are willing to form an opinion or make a decision. If, indeed, they truly believe that the accumulation of supporting data is needed to form a “right” decision they are fools—and, contrarily, if they believe it is necessary to disguise or inhibit intuitive judgement they are fools—and, again, as long as I am, to base all of my opinions and hence actions on intuition or feeling.

Good Lord! 6 hours painting a columbine! Perhaps only A. Dürer has done that before. Well, the tiny painting is pretty well finished (Tribute to the Columbine) and we shall see what.

There is no question of proper inspiration, for each one of these growing objects I am so completely in love with, so devoted to, so awestruck by, that my whole person can be absorbed in their documentation. Then if they end up being art, well and good—if not, well at least I have worshipped.

The mushroom still-life was marvelous, for the group of fruits, set up yesterday pert and fresh, were literally, by this afternoon, degenerated into only a bare shadow of their former selves—some were little more than a trail of dust giving the outline of their former or optimal shape. But what a manifestation of the ever present fleetingness of any thing! One day solid, substantial, volume—another day only residue.

I dread having to travel to Milwaukee tomorrow—not only because of the inherent dangers of such a trip and the tedium of the hours there—but also because of increasing difficulties of leaving my “home.” That I have a deep attachment here is without question of course, but beyond that I begin to see less and less reason for going anywhere. The only thing is to get to New York occasionally. Just to be there, yearly or semi-yearly—not for any reason: just to go. To go in a sense from nowhere to...
Museum News

Painting in Renaissance Siena: 1420–1500

“In any modern catalog of paintings,” according to John Pope-Hennessy, “special importance must attach to accurate description of physical condition.” Unfortunately, and ironically since both the exhibition and its catalogue were dedicated to him, Painting in Renaissance Siena: 1420–1500, which opened at The Metropolitan Museum of Art on December 20, 1988, suffers from a lack of just such descriptions. For paintings whose state of preservation has already divulged a readily available museum catalogue, a reasonably fully documented discussion of condition is included. But for the majority of the rest, particularly those from private collections, the reader is left in the dark as to what is repainting and what is not. If this is because lenders refused to provide information about the state of their pictures, the authors should have explained that this crucial knowledge had been withheld.

It is not only technical information that has been neglected, however; in some cases, even earlier published observations pertinent to the paintings’ conditions are omitted. For example, the main panel of the Pizzicaioli altarpiece, with which the series of panels depicting the legend of Saint Catherine (cat. no. 38) are believed to have been associated, was described by Gaetano Milanesi more than a century ago as “molto guasta,” badly damaged. Milanesi is cited in the catalogue’s discussion of the painting, but his statement about its poor state of preservation is not reported. Had this observation been noted in the catalogue, the reader might have wondered about the seemingly good condition of some of the panels exhibited that are claimed to be from the same altarpiece.

A more striking instance of the catalogue’s apparently purposeful failure to present published information concerning the bad state of certain pictures is found in the discussion of the predella from the so-called Compagnia degli artisti altarpiece from Montepulciano, also attributed to Giovanni di Paolo. More than one hundred years ago, Francesco Brogi saw these panels in situ and described them as in mediocre or bad condition. In one of them, the Attempted Martyrdom of John the Evangelist (cat. no. 36 b), presently in the collection of Lino Pasquali, Florence, some figures’ heads were described as “deturpate,” or ruined. Brogi’s titles and measurements for the entire series are cited—even transcribed and translated—but his comments concerning condition are deleted. The description of the Attempted Martyrdom panel’s physical condition is reduced to noting that the painting’s surface is of “tempera and gold” and its panel has a “horizontal grain.”

For the Princeton University Dome- nico di Bartolo Madonna and Child Enthroned (cat. no. 41), the reader is told that the famous restorer and forger Icilio Ioni “may have restored” this work. This is a very serious issue that should have been carefully explored. Ioni restorations were often extensive repaintings of ruined works of art, and it does not inspire confidence in the viewer and reader to discover that the organizers of the exhibition were apparently unable or unwilling to determine whether or not this was the case for the painting. Even more disturbing, the catalogue compares the Madonna with Domenico’s altarpiece in Perugia, characterizing the former as vastly superior. Without determining just what is original in both works, how can such a judgment be made?

Larger and more important issues are raised by the catalogue’s apparent lack of candor concerning the condition of some of the paintings exhibited. Can museums really afford to reveal the true states of conservation of old paintings that appear to be well preserved? Even if museums leave it up to the viewer to figure out whether or not a painting is really a restoration, how can scholars make attributions, datings, and critical judgments based on what amounts to subtle and deceptive blends of original paint and subsequent repaintings? John Canaday observed some time ago that such a blend represents a “combination of truth and falsehood that misled so many generations of students (including mine) for so long,” or, even worse, “a wild distortion of the truth we think we are dealing with.”

In his review in The Burlington Magazine, William Hood characterizes the Siena exhibition catalogue as “one of the most important contributions to the scholarship of Quattrocento painting” of recent times. Among other things, he praises the entries in the catalogue for being “exhaustive.” Is this really true? If he is referring to bibliography entries, the authors themselves characterize them as “selective.” As an indication of just how selective these entries are, an...