

**THE CREATIVE SPIRIT OF
EVELYN DAWSON WYNN**

WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY
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ABOUT THE COLLECTION

In 1995, Washington and Lee University received more than 75 paintings by Evelyn Dawson Wynn (1909-1990), a gift from her husband, composer Larry Wynn, a member of the Washington and Lee Class of 1934.

Among her many talents, Wynn was a noted dancer and fashion designer when she took up abstract painting in the early 1960s. While she busied herself writing her name into the history of other art forms, Wynn never took the time to exhibit her work during her life. Many of the paintings in the collection at Washington and Lee are being shown in public for the first time.

The paintings of Evelyn Dawson Wynn will be on permanent display in the James Graham Leyburn Library and can be found elsewhere on the Washington and Lee campus, including Washington Hall.



THE MIND AND HEART OF EVELYN DAWSON WYNN

Evelyn Dawson Wynn was a prodigious creator, and an American original. For someone who was self-taught as a designer, as she was in her other artistic endeavors, Wynn's multiple talents—painting, designing, dancing, writing—all seemed to blend and complement each other.

Her dancing was a revelation of improvisation that could not abide the restrictions of traditional ballet. In her early 20s she joined the leading modern dance group of its day, the Denishawn Dancers, and within a year was rehearsing the entire company for its concerts as the lead dancer under Ruth St. Denis. For a while she carried on two careers at the same time, designing by day and dancing by night. Her women's fashion designs—first for a sportswear house on Seventh Avenue, then under the name Suzy Perette—not only had an original, youthful touch, they also revealed a flowing action that could come only from the heart of a dancer.

Her highly personal writings—poetry, musings, philosophies, and four novels (including the trilogy *Once Upon a World*, *The Earthians*, and *White Clowns and Painted Horses*)—plumb the mind's inner workings and address such themes as man's abuse of nature and the calamities that ensue. But it is perhaps her paintings that best herald her grasp of the inner soul. At age 54, again with no formal training, Wynn actively picked up the brush, and the last quarter-century of her life was mainly devoted to her paintings—acrylic works on Plexiglas and canvas. She called them "Inscapes," for she painted not what she could see with her eyes, but what she conceived in her mind and heart.

Washington and Lee University is honored to share the "Inscapes" of Evelyn Dawson Wynn with a public audience for the first time. While she was content to create in the shadows of anonymity during her lifetime, she leaves behind a body of work that speaks for itself.



INSCAPES: INSPIRATIONS THAT CAME FROM WITHIN

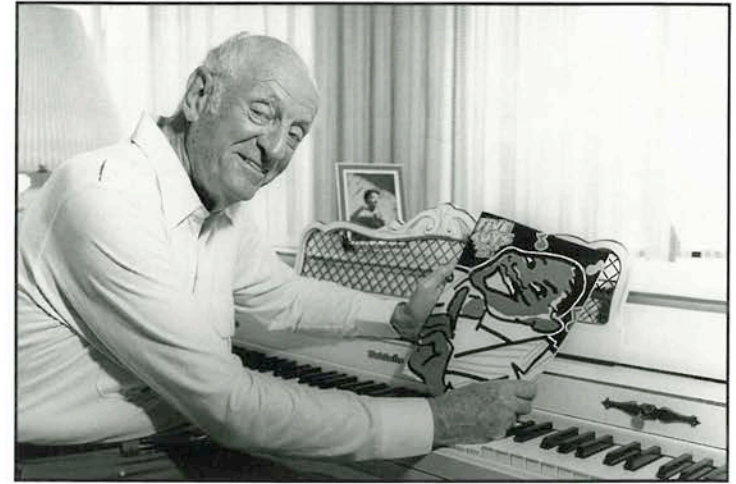
Evelyn Dawson Wynn lived to create. The moment she finished a project, she went on to the next one. So it should come as no surprise that, after she retired from the fashion world at age 54, another world beckoned.

From 1963 until her death in 1990, Wynn created more than 100 finished paintings with roots that trace to the Abstract Expressionist tradition that grew out of American art in the 1950s. Working with a palette of colors associated closely with nature, she called her paintings “Inscapes,” because they weren’t something that her eye saw, but came from instinct. “She painted flowers, but they weren’t flowers that you saw in the fields,” recalls her husband, Larry Wynn ’34. “Her inspirations all came from within.”

Like the works of the well-known Abstract Expressionists including Jackson Pollock, Wynn’s paintings hew to the notion of over-all composition, with no single focus to the work (unlike, say the Cubist movement). And, as is characteristic of so much art in the latter half of the 20th Century, most of her paintings are big—and the resulting work, either on canvas or transparent Plexiglas, is a kind of environment that encompasses the viewer.

Her experiments with color and light and modern materials frequently fuse together to illuminate a vast field of energy and a feeling of infinite boundaries, while her attention to detail suggests a very close look at some ecological system: an image as intimate as leaves floating in a brook, or a macrosystem as vast as the Milky Way.

“Her paintings evoke nature, and they’re very beautiful,” says Pamela H. Simpson, Ernest Williams II Professor of Art at Washington and Lee, “But rather than giving us an image of nature we get a feeling for nature, which is really part of the power of abstraction.”



WHEN EVELYN DAWSON MET LARRY WYNN

Larry Wynn was born Lester Litwin in Brooklyn, New York, the son of a street-car conductor and a garment worker. In 1928, he took a job as a page on Wall Street, and worked on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. Following the Crash of ’29, a stockbroker named Thomas R. Cox urged Wynn to get a college degree and even agreed to pay for his education. After three years at William and Mary, he transferred to W&L, graduating in 1934 with a B.A. in business administration.

Wynn worked various jobs and played semi-professional basketball and softball before he got a job writing songs and singing for a live radio show. He sang with Dinah Shore and played gigs with the well-known Palmer Brothers as Larry Wynn and the Wynners. But it was a session with Billie Holliday (she recorded one of his songs, “I’m All For You”) that inspired his biggest hit.

In 1940, band leader and saxophonist Louis Jordan recorded “Five Guys Named Moe,” and the song was popular for a number of years, fading into oblivion until producer Cameron Mackintosh (*Phantom of the Opera*, *Les Misérables*, *Cats*) borrowed the title for a musical. *Five Guys Named Moe* bowed on Broadway in April 1992 and was nominated for two Tony Awards, including Best Musical. The show ran for more than a year in New York and continues to play to audiences worldwide.

In the decades in between, Wynn enjoyed a successful career as a salesman in radio and television. He met Evelyn Dawson on a blind date in 1959 and knew right away that they would marry: “She’s the kind of person who electrified a room.” The couple were wed six months later. “Creativity characterized her life,” Wynn recalls fondly. “She never watched a TV program without a drawing board on her knees.” The Wynns spent 31 years together until her death in 1990.

Still going strong at age 86, Wynn writes a weekly column for *The Bergen News* and is composing songs for a new musical. He lives in Cliffside Park, New Jersey.



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