

# The Many Worlds of Jack Wise

By Gary Sim

Numerous writers have struggled over the years to describe the art of Jack Wise. I first got to know his art in the 1960s, when he was drawing widely-published posters for music festivals in Vancouver. Many years later I viewed his retrospective exhibition *The Karma of the Dragon* at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria in 1999. Walking past one of his large “energy” paintings, I stopped to look at it straight on for a moment. The result was astounding ... I literally felt a blast of energy - I couldn't take my eyes off the painting - I felt like a moth drawn irresistibly to a bright light. I finally turned my head to break the trance, and stumbled along to the next painting wondering "what just happened ... ?"

Jack Marlowe Wise was born April 27 1938 in Centerville, Iowa, which seems fitting given his later love of circular mandalas. Throughout his life and art training, he gravitated towards the mystic and ancient art, one that he commented on in a letter to a friend:

*Hope you've gotten into the mandala – I feel its one of the best 3 things I've done to date – Snellgrove says: if indeed one can but grasp the intention of the Mandala, one has understood the whole theory of Tibetan Buddhist practice.*

Educated in New Orleans, Washington University, and Florida State University, Wise lived in Mexico from 1956 until 1963 when he came to Canada. He received a Canada Council Senior Fellowship grant in 1969, and traveled to India to study with Tibetan artists who had fled there to escape the Chinese occupation of their country.

Wise took the art of the mandala to a level unequalled by other western artists. Incredibly intricate drawings and paintings contain a blend of ancient and new world symbols, mythology, creatures, and scenes. The painting *Rainbow Mandala* exemplifies this perfectly: animals, constellations, and signs of the zodiac dance around bucolic scenes of Texada Island and the Inland Sea, framed by symbols of the I-Ching, the elements, mystic creatures from our imagined or remembered past, and the colours and fire of the universe. Another important element in Wise's art is the concept of *white writing*, where the artist frees his mind of conscious thought and allows the unconscious mind to take over - to create images drawn in an undirected, free-flowing stream, seen in many of the artworks in this exhibition.

The legacy of Jack Wise is a stunning array of artistic output, produced over a lifetime of dedicated, educated, and intelligent hard work. Looking closely at his artwork will take you on a personal visit to some of his many worlds, but look out for the energy vortex!

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## References:

1. Original handwritten letter to Don MacLeod dated November 1967 (collection of the author)
2. Original handwritten letter to Don MacLeod dated January 9 1975 (collection of the author)
3. x
4. Jack Wise: A Decade of Work exhibition catalogue.
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6. Jack Wise: Paintings (Commonwealth Gallery, London England)
7. Karma of the Dragon: The Art of Jack Wise (AGGV )
8. Arts Canada (June 1970 issue)