Marguerite Wildenhain was one of a group of European potters who fled the Nazi occupation during World War II and emigrated to the United States. Bauhaus-trained, she settled in northern California and helped to establish what was to become the artist colony and school called Pond Farm. The colony flourished for a few years but could not survive the death of one of the founders and conflicts among the artists. By 1960 Wildenhain was the only one remaining. She continued to live and work at Pond Farm and also continued to offer the intense summer sessions until her retirement in 1980. Wildenhain was known as a strict and demanding teacher who required commitment to the art and dedication to perfecting the techniques of ceramics, not wavering in her beliefs even as her methods and approach to pottery waned in popularity with the rise of contemporary ceramics. Marguerite Wildenhain died at Pond Farm in 1985 at age 88. The grounds and buildings of Pond Farm are now part of the California State Parks System.

**ARTIST’S STATEMENT – MARGUERITE WILDENHAIN**

“America has roots too, but it has many and they come from all over the world, from all races of the earth, from all classes of society – that is its grand uniqueness, this growing together of thousand parts. A country like America cannot have just one expression, it forcibly must have as many forms of expression as total life has…Our tradition is the free choice of each man.

…if we want the crafts to remain alive and perhaps even to grow roots again in our civilization, give them freedom, education, good creative experimenting. Like the tree that will grow, man needs to find the earth open for growth, and not find from the very beginning his mind, his work, his life studded with restricted areas and tabus all around him.

Let us use the hands for what they were meant to be: the tools of a creative man, not just the repetitive instrument of unimaginative procedures…As in Life, the main thing in art is the divine spark. To nip it in the student is to kill it in the man.”


**RESUME – MARGUERITE WILDENHAIN**

1896  
Born, Marguerite Friedlander, Lyon, France

1914  
School of Fine & Applied Arts, Berlin, Germany

1919-1926  
Bauhaus Foundation program, Weimar, Germany

1922  
Apprenticeship with Gerhard Marcks
1926  Head of ceramics program, Halle-Saale School of Fine and Applied Arts, Halle-Saale, Germany
       Designer, Royal Berlin porcelain factory

1930  Marries potter Frans Wildenhain

1933-1940  Wildenhains establish a pottery studio in Putten, Holland

1940  Marguerite Wildenhain emigrates to United States

1940-1942  Teaches briefly at Oakland School of Arts and Crafts, the Appalachian Institute of Arts and Crafts, and Black Mountain College

1942  Settles permanently at Pond Farm, near Guerneville, CA and establishes an art colony and school with Jane and Gordon Herr

1945  Becomes U.S. citizen

1947  Frans Wildenhain emigrates to United States

1949  Pond Farm summer school begins

1950  Wildenhains separate; divorce in 1952

1952  Art colony begins to disband; Marguerite Wildenhain remains living and working at Pond Farm and teaching summer school

1963  Agreement with State Parks to acquire Pond Farm; Wildenhain is permitted to remain for life

1980  Final summer school and firing at Pond Farm

1985  Death, Pond Farm in California

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*BIOGRAPHY – MARGUERITE WILDENHAIN*

Marguerite Wildenhain, née Friedlander, was born in Lyon, France, the daughter of a German silk merchant and an English mother. She and her siblings received a classic European education which included art, music, and foreign language. The family moved to Germany when she was in her teens, and following her graduation from secondary school, she entered the Hochschule fur Angewandte Kunst in Berlin studying sculpture. She later moved to Rudolfstadt where she worked in a porcelain factory designing decorative ware. It was there that “…one day I happened to run into the workshops where the model makers were throwing…on the potter's wheel. I was simply hypnotized, and in that second I decided that that was what I was going to do…”1 During a visit to Weimar she saw an announcement of the formation of the Bauhaus school under Walter Gropius and she immediately enrolled. Wildenhain remained at the school
for about five years, working with sculptor Gerhard Marcks and potter Max Krehan. Among the students was Frans Wildenhain whom she would marry in 1930.

Wildenhain left the school in 1926, now a Master Potter, and accepted a position as head of the Ceramics Department at the Municipal School of Fine and Applied Arts in Halle-Saale. There she continued to espouse the Bauhaus ideals of quality wares that were able to be mass-produced. In addition to her work at the school, she also developed models for dinnerware for Royal Berlin.

Because of her Jewish ancestry, Marguerite, like many others, was forced to leave her teaching position when the Nazi party came to power in 1933. She and Frans left Germany and moved to Putte, Holland, where they established a pottery studio. They named the studio “Het Kruikje,” Little Jug, and Wildenhain would use the symbol of the little jug to mark her wares in future years. She continued to design dinnerware and tea sets for production, and one of her designs was awarded a second place at the 1937 Art Exposition in Paris. During this time the Wildenhains were introduced to Gordon and Jane Herr who lived in San Francisco, were devoted to ceramics, and wanted to establish an artists’ colony in the Bay Area. The Wildenhains initially were not interested, but when Germany invaded Poland in 1939 and the invasion of Holland was imminent, they reconsidered. Marguerite, as a French citizen, was allowed to emigrate in 1940 but her husband, a non-Jewish German citizen was forced to remain and very soon was drafted into the German army.

Marguerite Wildenhain arrived in New York, and over the next two years she moved around in the United States looking for a permanent position. She taught for a time at the Oakland School of Arts and Crafts, the Appalachian Institute of Arts and Crafts, and Black Mountain College. By 1942 she was in northern California where the Herrs had bought a large ranch near Guerneville. Wildenhain moved to the property, renamed Pond Farm, and for the next several years lived in a tent while helping to transform the old ranch to a pottery studio and colony for artists. She saw in the Herrs’ experiment a chance to return to the artistic principles she had learned at the Bauhaus. During this time she became a U.S. citizen and was able to sponsor the emigration of her husband. He arrived in 1947 and by the late 1940’s the colony was finished and other artists arrived.

The Pond Farm school offered its first class in 1949 but its existence was short-lived. Over the next few years the colony was disrupted by the death of Jane Herr, the break up of the Wildenhains’ marriage, and conflicts between the artists living there. One by one the artists left until only Marguerite Wildenhain remained in 1960. She, however, was determined to continue to live and work at Pond Farm which she did. In addition, she continued to offer the summer sessions until her retirement in 1980. Her teaching remained true to her beliefs, that is basic techniques that result in making good pottery. She insisted that her students be craftsmen, that they have total commitment to their art. She designed wheels based on those she had used at the Bauhaus and was a firm and exacting teacher. Over the years her students became close to her and to each other and many have continued to work in ceramics. Besides her teaching at Pond Farm, Wildenhain worked as a guest artist and gave workshops throughout the United States. As always, her message was excellent technical training as well as drawing, sculpting, and classical education. In addition she was the author of several books including The Invisible Core, Pottery: Form and Expression, and That We Look and See.
With the revolution in ceramic art ushered in by Peter Voulkos and the California artists, Wildenhain’s traditional approach became less popular. Some of the artists were critical of her style and methods, and she was equally critical of them, writing “…pottery, cut open, rolled up, smashed and deformed…hailed by our jurors as masterpieces of ingenuity and talent…though new, this will not save them from being ‘old stuff’ tomorrow.” But Wildenhain’s work also evolved. Her original dream to be a sculptor reappeared, first as images drawn on her pieces and then as tiles that were primarily canvases for her drawings. Later these became more three-dimensional and in time she was sculpting figures, returning to her beginnings.

Over the course of her career Wildenhain’s work was shown in a number of exhibitions and also sold commercially in department stores in San Francisco and Chicago. Following her retirement from teaching in 1980, Wildenhain remained at Pond Farm until her death in 1985 at age 88. Under an agreement with the State of California, the grounds and buildings were preserved and transferred to the state after her death. They are now a part of the Austin Creek Recreation Area in the California State Park system.

2. Ibid.

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