

The Two Muriel Wilsons

An Artistic Confusion

Muriel Wilson, 1892–1974 (née Wilson)

Muriel Wilson, 1893–1977 (née Samuelson)

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A brief account arising out of research into the lives and work of two 20th century artists who each bore the same name of Muriel Wilson, who both painted and exhibited at the same time, and who have subsequently become consistently entangled and confused in published media and consequently, on occasions, in the sale room. This work aims to unravel some of the confusion that is perpetuated between the two artists.

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Introduction and acknowledgements

The research for this work commenced after it had become abundantly clear that there was continual replication in published media of the information that had become thoroughly entwined concerning these two identically named and contemporary painters. The confusion evidently began to arise at quite an early date – and almost certainly during their lifetimes. It related then, and still relates now, principally to the dates quoted for the two artists, to later attributions of their works, and to their exhibiting history. This means that virtually every published reference to either artist is likely to contain at least some erroneous facts.

In order to attempt to re-apply the correct details relevant to each artist in turn, it became necessary to investigate the available published information relating to the two artists in question, and to analyse the validity of that information. This might appear on the face of it to be a relatively simple task, since one artist painted throughout her life following predominantly traditional English training, while the other moved into and became fully absorbed by Parisian modernism. However, a deeply-entrenched set of incorrectly attributed facts and details has consistently and thoroughly muddied the waters for both, and so somewhat deeper research into the two artists became an evident necessity.

It was the older of the two artists (by just 18 months) who was the original subject of research for a publication about the life, work and associates of the Victorian Scottish painter, George Wilson (1848-1890) – a late but dedicated follower of Pre-Raphaelite principles.¹ It was originally intended that that publication should include a chapter about the artist descendants of Wilson and of his colleagues, principally those of John Butler Yeats (1839-1922) and John Trivett Nettleship (1841-1902). Muriel Wilson (1892-1974) was one of two close relatives of George Wilson's (the other being his niece, Rachel Cassels Brown (née Wilson) 1875-1953) who both became professional artists in their own right. Muriel was George Wilson's first cousin once removed, and pursued her professional life as a painter in oil and watercolour and also as an etcher. She lived in a variety of west London addresses throughout her life, and remained unmarried.

Muriel (née) Wilson

The elder sons of the Wilson family from which MW descended had been farmers and factors (managing land agents for large aristocratic estates) for centuries on the north Banffshire lands that border the Moray Firth in the north-west Highlands of Scotland, and more latterly around Huntly in central Aberdeenshire. It was in these two adjoining Highland regions that George Wilson, MW's cousin from the previous generation, painted so many of his exquisite watercolour landscapes for which he became justly renowned. But generally the younger sons (and indeed the daughters) within this family tended equally to make good headway in their lives, either in the professions or in the world of commerce, and it was as distinguished doctors practising together in partnership in Huntly that MW's grandfather and his eldest son John made their names.

So it was likewise in commerce that MW's father, Robert Wilson, a younger son of that senior doctor, also made his name. After attending Kings' College in Aberdeen, he joined a firm of 'Advocates and Chartered Accountants' in Aberdeen for three years before emigrating to Chicago in 1879 to join the giant meat-packing and trading company of Armour & Co. Robert Wilson rose rapidly within Armour, eventually to direct all of the firm's export business from 1883 to 1898.

In August 1885 in Chicago, he married Clara Jane Valentine, also of recent Scottish émigré descent, and it was in that city that MW was born on 21st January 1892 (just two years after the death of her cousin George Wilson) as the fourth child in the family. No more is presently known of MW's early life in Chicago; but this is unlikely to be significant since in 1898, when she was just six years old, her father was posted back to London, complete with his wife and three surviving children, in order to establish the British branch of Armour & Co. Ltd. He remained as Managing Director of that firm until his early retirement through ill-health in 1910.

Both MW and her elder sister, Helen, were educated in England at Dulwich High School, following which they attended an establishment known as 'Madame Mottu's' in Teddington (possibly a 'finishing' school or a music school). Having developed a particular interest in art, MW went on alone from Madame Mottu's to the Crystal Palace

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and very curious to surmise how Andrew Cassels Brown could possibly have been misinformed about these facts, or could even simply have been confused along with everyone else as to which Muriel Wilson was which, they must remain open to the considerable conjecture.

Nonetheless, this misquotation equally cannot have contributed in any effective way to the area of general confusion that has arisen between the two artists, since the Wilson Family History was a private publication in only close family circulation. However, at the same time, it would appear from that quite brief account that MW was certainly enjoying a reasonable degree of success at that time. Conversely, it has regrettably been difficult to glean a great deal of subsequent information after a further 50 intervening years and a rapidly decreasing Wilson family to consult.

Nevertheless, the archive exhibition records of the various societies and galleries are available to consult, as well as previous research works such as Johnson and Greutzner's *Dictionary of British Artists, 1880-1940*.⁴ From these sources, a certain amount can be gleaned and analysed, with care, as may be seen below in the section



Roses by Muriel Wilson, 1953. Oil on canvas,
12 in x 14 in (305 mm x 355 mm). Private collection

Muriel Gertrude Wilson (née Samuelson)

It has already been stated that the two Muriel Wilsons painted at exactly the same time – both with some success, but ultimately in very different styles – although as has already been suggested, their floral paintings from quite different periods can sometimes appear to show some entirely coincidental similarity of style.

The main differentiating factor in relation to the confusion over their names is that MGW in fact only became Muriel Wilson by marriage. She was born Muriel Gertrude Samuelson in Saltburn-by-the-Sea in North Yorkshire on 24th June 1893, some 18 months after her namesake.⁶ She was the youngest of the three daughters of Sir Francis Samuelson, 3rd Baronet of Bodicote, and his Canadian-born wife, Fanny (née Wright) of St. John, New Brunswick. MGW was also thereby sister to the 4th Baronet, who similarly bore his father's name of Francis, and who became a highly regarded motor racing driver – believed to be the only driver to have raced competitively at the highest level both before the First World War and then right the way through until after the Second.

Little has been discovered of MGW's early life, but her upbringing would undoubtedly have been typical for a young lady of her 'class' and status in late Victorian and Edwardian England. Where MW's lineage was descended from Scottish landed farming and various professions, MGW's was founded in generations of the British ironfounding and mining industries. Her grandfather, the 1st Baronet, had established Sir B. Samuelson and Co. Ltd, with wide-ranging industrial interests around Middlesbrough in North Yorkshire, including several collieries and the Newport Ironworks, and then eventually developed the Britannia Works in Banbury, Oxfordshire, where he eventually settled.

However, MGW's own father appears to have remained in the general area surrounding Middlesbrough, although the family seems to have moved around somewhat. It is not known where MGW first met her future husband, Bassett Fitzgerald Wilson (1888-1972), but the Wilson family had for a long time been large landowners and lords of the manor of Cliffe Hall to the west of Darlington, where they had made their

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Peonies by Muriel Gertrude Wilson,
Possibly ca. 1920-1928. Oil on canvas.
24½ in x 20 in (616 x 508 mm). Private collection

pieces throughout the 1920s.

However, towards the end of the decade, they must already have been migrating towards a freer modernism, as MGW's work had already, by then, drawn the particular attention of R.H. Wilenski, the highly regarded Sunday Times Art Critic and historian of the Modernist Movement. Wilenski formed a collection of a number of MGW's works at this time, reproductions of which lie in the Witt Library, including landscapes, floral works, and fruit still life pieces.

Then suddenly in 1929, the Wilsons took the crucial decision to abandon their comfortable lifestyle in Knightsbridge and, packing their nine-year-old son Paul off to boarding school, they moved to Paris. There they took up lodgings in Montparnasse, the Mecca for Parisian artists and intellectuals. They moved into No. 23 in the rue Campagne-Première, an area which had become the habitat of such artists as Pablo Picasso, Modigliani, Joan Miró, and Kandinsky.

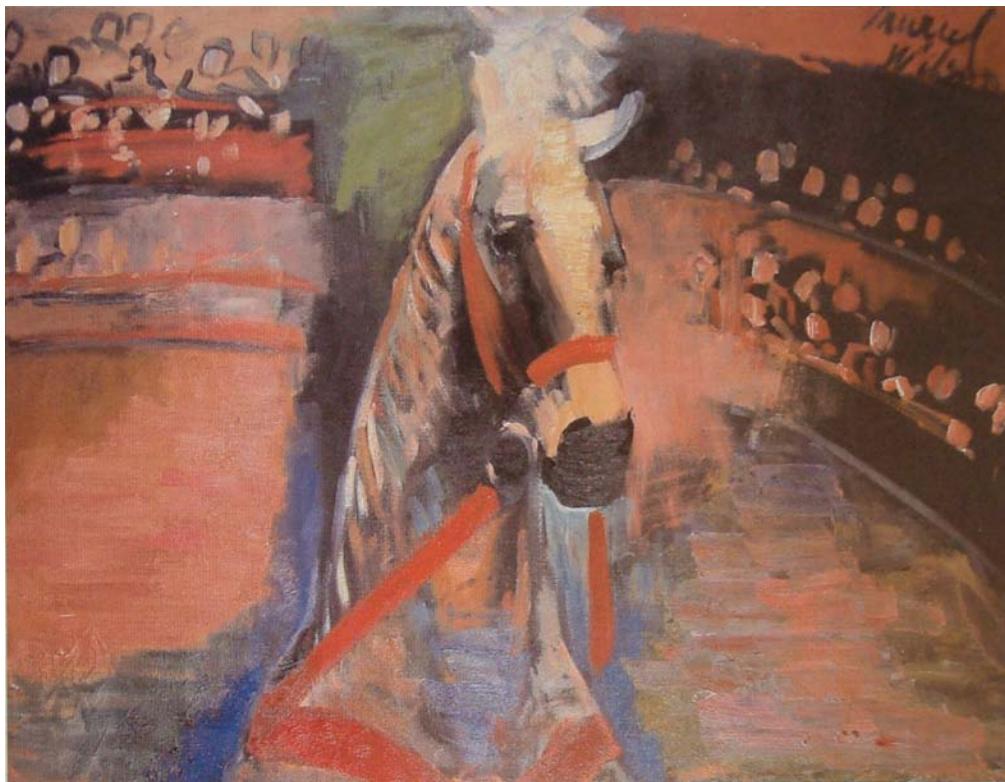
to that of her husband, neither one of them ever undertook any formal training and both remained largely self-taught.

MGW, at this time, mainly painted landscapes in watercolour and floral pieces in oil. Although Bassett Wilson maintained his working life in practice as a successful lawyer after the First World War, he still continued to paint much more than purely recreationally and the two artists held their first joint exhibition at the Walker's Galleries in Bond Street in 1921, and continued to exhibit their essentially traditional English

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to the British exhibitions mentioned elsewhere in this account. The peak of this escalating exhibiting schedule came in 1934, when they showed works in no less than seven major venues: four in Paris, plus two in England and once in Finland.

During the latter years of the 1930s, their acceptance among the principal modernists of Paris became paramount – and total – and they concentrated their efforts on their adopted ‘home’ soil. Nonetheless, they still managed to fit in wide-ranging travel throughout Europe. It was also at this time that MGW became entranced, as did so many artists from time to time over the years, with the life of the circus – and it is from this period that so many of her finest works, depicting the glamour that surrounded that life, emanated.



Cirque d'Hiver II, by Muriel Gertrude Wilson, Oil on canvas, ca. 1934-37.
Size not known. Exhibited: Patrick Seale Gallery, 1981.
Present whereabouts not known.

But then disaster struck with the outbreak of the Second World War. Although over 51, Bassett immediately joined the British Expeditionary Force and MGW helped to organise refugee reception in Paris. At the same time, their only son Paul also joined up, quickly transferring to the Commandos, where he fought in a number of

Clarification of some conflicting references

Nevertheless, the greatest – and somewhat more complex – problem that appears to have perpetuated the confusion between the two artists is the identification as to which of the two Muriel Wilsons exhibited where and when. According to Johnson and Greutzner's *Dictionary of British Artists, 1880-1940*, rather inevitably in view of their virtually identical dates, just one 'Muriel Wilson' with a 'London address' is recorded as having exhibited between 1923 and 1932. The record shows just one entry each at the Royal Glasgow Institute of Fine Art (RGI), the Royal Scottish Academy, and the Lefevre Gallery; whilst three paintings were exhibited at the Goupil Gallery, four at the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool, and five at the Society of Women Artists (SWA). Although it must immediately be commented that Johnson and Greutzner's Dictionary is an enormously expansive and valuable tome, it does contain a number of quite natural inconsistencies due to its inevitable reliance upon what has simply been recorded previously by others in various catalogues and publications. It is certain, therefore, that there is a degree of confusion that has been generated via this entry alone – and equally certainly perpetuated thereafter. In the case of the two Muriel Wilsons then, some analysis of the record is essential at the outset.

As referred to above, and as may be seen below, there is a specific record of MGW's (and Bassett Wilson's) exhibiting history within the précis biography that accompanied the 1981 Patrick Seale Gallery exhibition of their work. This demonstrates some frequency in the various Paris Salons after both she and her husband became highly respected within the French Modernist movement, but it also identifies occasions in the UK at the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool, Walker's Galleries in Bond Street, London, the Goupil Gallery, and the Lefevre Gallery, amongst one or two others. This record therefore enables us to recognize, with reasonable certainty, which of the Dictionary's entries relate to MGW.

Similarly, the remaining entries that refer to the RGI, the Royal Scottish Academy, and the Society of Women Artists also almost certainly appear to relate to MW – and this may indeed at least explain one of Andrew Cassels Brown's inaccuracies in his Wilson Family History, perhaps by way of simply misquoting the 'Royal Institute' for the RGI. Reference back to all the original sources has been made wherever possible and, whilst not always 100% conclusive, these do seem to endorse this analysis – albeit with a couple of further curious confusions or exceptions in relation to the SWA.

So; the single RGI entry, in fact in 1928, entitled '*Sunflowers and Butterflies*' was in the prints and drawings section, and by date, subject and medium is certainly most likely to be an etching appropriate only to MW. This applies equally to the single 1930 Royal Scottish Academy entry, again in the drawings and prints section, entitled '*St Jean: pied-de-port*'. The RGI entry was submitted c/o St George's Gallery, 32a George Street, London W1, while the RSA entry was from 20 Courtfield Gardens, London SW5.

In conclusion

It may be stated then that MGW, at least, enjoyed some real renown during the early to middle years of her lifetime. Certainly, she was exhibiting at the most prestigious galleries in Paris and elsewhere, and amongst the most heralded names in the Modernist movement. To a lesser extent, her namesake and George Wilson's cousin, MW, enjoyed a rather more traditional and perhaps at the same time a somewhat less glamorous level of success throughout her own professional life, which was spent almost entirely in London – apart from some evident painting tours to Scotland and France. Although she exhibited widely and over a lengthy period, this was mainly within the far more traditional and 'closeted' circles of the London galleries. But regrettably, we have so little available in evidence from her oeuvre that it is almost impossible to compare and demonstrate what she did in fact achieve.

Maybe, with greater clarification of the real dividing lines between the two artists – and hopefully this present account may facilitate that to some extent – then their recognition will change with time and via the better attention of others. However it will take the unearthing of significantly more of MW's undoubtedly talented work to be able assess in retrospect the true value of her work in relation to that of her namesake, MGW. Then, maybe, the qualities and works of these two equally gifted, but predominantly different artists who just happened to share the same name and time in history, will come to be recognised and appreciated once again.

The author is aware of the limitations of this work in the absence of much data and conclusive evidence – particularly in relation to the life and work of MW. He will therefore be very pleased to receive any corrections or additional information that might lead to the possibility of an improved subsequent edition, which will inevitably be of greater value.