

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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Art School and subsequently the Central School of Arts and Crafts in Holborn. She had by then become resolved to pursue the life of a professional artist and from then on for the rest of her life she made her home base the Chelsea area of London. She painted in both oils and watercolours, but also had a particular interest in drypoint etching.² Interestingly, MW's somewhat older cousin Rachel also specialised in etching and lithography, although she was trained in a somewhat earlier genre much influenced by the Glasgow School and consequently produced work that was always finely detailed. MW, in contrast, developed a much more open and freer style, making use of light and shadow to great effect. Unfortunately though, the now extreme scarcity of her work makes greater detailed criticism and comment almost impossible.

MW had two older brothers, the first of whom, another Robert, died in Chicago in his first year, while the second, Alister, also died unmarried at the young age of 24 while working in Glasgow. With Alister's death, the male line of this branch of the Wilson family ended. And since MW herself did not marry, the only future descent lay with her one elder sister, Helen. Helen was married in 1919 to Gordon Hope Robinson, the son of the founder of *Fairplay Shipping Journal*, the shipping industry magazine that Gordon eventually also owned and edited and with which his wife similarly became briefly involved later in her life.

The family settled in East Allington, Devon, where Helen Robinson produced two daughters, the youngest of whom died in an accident when just four years old. Helen's surviving elder daughter Margaret married in 1944, and in turn had two daughters of her own. This line then, although apparently now inaccessible, is believed to be the only remaining family descent within which any remaining oeuvre of MW's might well have descended. Nevertheless, examples of her work did indeed exist within the wider branches of the Wilson family well into the second half of the 19th Century; but unfortunately, with the generally depleting generations of the Wilson family as a whole, these works also no longer now appear to be traceable.

MW exhibited her work across a fairly broad period, as will be seen below. Within the Wilson Family History, entitled *The Wilsons; A Banffshire Family of Factors* and published in 1936,³ there is one very doubtful (despite being first-hand) reference to this, which states that MW exhibited at the Paris Salon and the Royal Institute of Painters in Watercolours (RI) galleries in Piccadilly. The author of the History (in fact, Dr. Andrew Cassels Brown – her cousin Rachel's husband) was a most pedantic man and compiled his History from first-hand family sources, so it is quite surprising that in respect of both of these exhibition references almost certainly neither is correct. Indeed, although MW was a most proficient watercolourist, The Royal Institute has no record of any exhibits at all by any Muriel Wilson. Similarly, it is difficult to acquaint MW's life and work with her ever having been likely to exhibit at the Paris Salons (although this is certainly not so for her namesake, MGW, as may be seen below). So, although it is both difficult

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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

Muriel Gertrude Wilson (née Samuelson)

money largely from the Wool Trade. Cliffe Hall is not a great distance from one of the addresses associated with the Samuelson family at Sockburn Hall, south of Darlington where indeed MGW's brother had been born.⁷

Bassett Wilson had been educated at Rugby and Trinity College Cambridge, where he read Law. After graduating, he briefly entered the Diplomatic Service, before joining a busy London law firm. However, he remained in this only for couple of years, since he promptly joined-up with the army at the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. The photograph of MGW reproduced here may indicate that she nursed during WWI and so this might have been an alternative as to where the two met.

Regardless of when and where they had met, on 24th April 1915, in the second year of the War, MGW was married to Bassett Wilson, and five years later, in the early months of 1920, she produced their only son, whom they named Paul Francis Bassett. Paul's father went on (as had a number of generations of his family before him) to become a highly-decorated soldier – Brigadier, OBE, MC, Croix de Guerre. He was severely wounded in the early days of the war, and was encouraged by his M.O. to take up therapeutic painting to help improve his eye to hand coordination – but then found that he not only enjoyed the occupation, but also had a good natural talent for it.

Following his severe wounding and the consequent recommended art therapy, he found he could continue successfully with his new-found talent even after he had returned to active service. He managed to produce sufficient work to enable him mount his first exhibition of drawings and watercolours in 1917 at Walker's Galleries in Bond Street, under the curious, but (for a serving officer at that time) essential pseudonym of *'Basfi du Bleu'*.

Whether or not it was due to her husband's advised therapy that MGW was stimulated to take up painting as well, it does appear that she did indeed commence at around that same time. And although she too quickly demonstrated a similar aptitude



Muriel Gertrude Wilson (née Samuelson), 1893-1977, from a photograph (undated) in private collection. MGW would appear to be around 25 in the photo and is possibly wearing the uniform of a volunteer nurse, although the initials UFF are not identified. This may just indicate that she nursed in the First World War and that this might be, alternatively, where she met her husband.

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

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

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.

Muriel Gertrude Wilson (née Samuelson)

Thus, they joined the only very small trickle of British painters who dared to cross the channel to find out what was going on the other side, but who ultimately by and large only flirted with what they found. Amongst only a very few others, one of the earliest (who was friendly with Degas and his colleagues, and who did work in France for many years) had been Walter Sickert.

Later, in the early 1920s there were also others such as Wyndham Lewis, David Bomberg, Jacob Epstein and Ben Nicholson who visited France somewhat more briefly and dabbled to varying degrees among the developments around abstraction, cubism, and surrealism. But probably the closest in aspiration to the Wilsons was Christopher Wood, who again spent much time in Paris and Brittany during the decade before his premature death in 1930. Wood had studied composition under André Lhote who was widely regarded at the time as the best teacher of composition in Paris, and although Wood mixed (as indeed had many of the others) with Picasso and other developmental artists, he never quite fully absorbed modernism, and just a few of his last paintings showed something of a flirtation with surrealism.

The two Wilsons, however, were entirely different. Once ensconced in Paris, their work changed direction quickly and fundamentally as they both became deeply absorbed into the Paris Modernist School, to the extent that they were considered at the time to be among the finest artists in the genre. They became friendly with, and fully integrated into, the modernist circle and, as with Christopher Wood, they were similarly befriended in particular by the cubist André Lhote, in whose studio they both worked from time to time. But they also worked with Man Ray, who taught MGW to become a skilled photographer. Perhaps it was with the encouragement of Man Ray that in 1930 they both went to the USA to exhibit jointly at the Knoedler Galleries in New York and Chicago. Chicago was, of course, where her namesake, MW, had been born, and there is a distinct possibility that MGW's later association with that city contributed to the perpetuated confusion over the two artists' dates and places of birth.

Subsequently, from 1933 onwards, both MGW and her husband exhibited regularly in the prestigious modernist exhibitions in the Paris Salons; but perhaps their most important invitation was to be as the only English *'invités'* to exhibit at the *Salon du Temps Présent* in 1935. The *Temps Présent* was organised by a group of French artists whose avowed aim was to 'wage war on the revival of academism', and from 1935 to 1937, the Wilsons exhibited alongside painters like Matisse, Dufy, Kisling, the Delaunays and Miro.

In June 1981, the renowned Art Critic, Max Wykes-Joyce, wrote a now essential précis biography of the two artists in the catalogue for a retrospective exhibition entitled *'Bassett and Muriel Wilson'*, held at the Patrick Seale Gallery in London.⁸ In this now rare publication, he listed a comprehensive calendar of the Wilsons' principle exhibitions between 1917 and 1946. That list identified and confirmed that they had exhibited broadly, and particularly in France and occasionally in America, in addition

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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.