

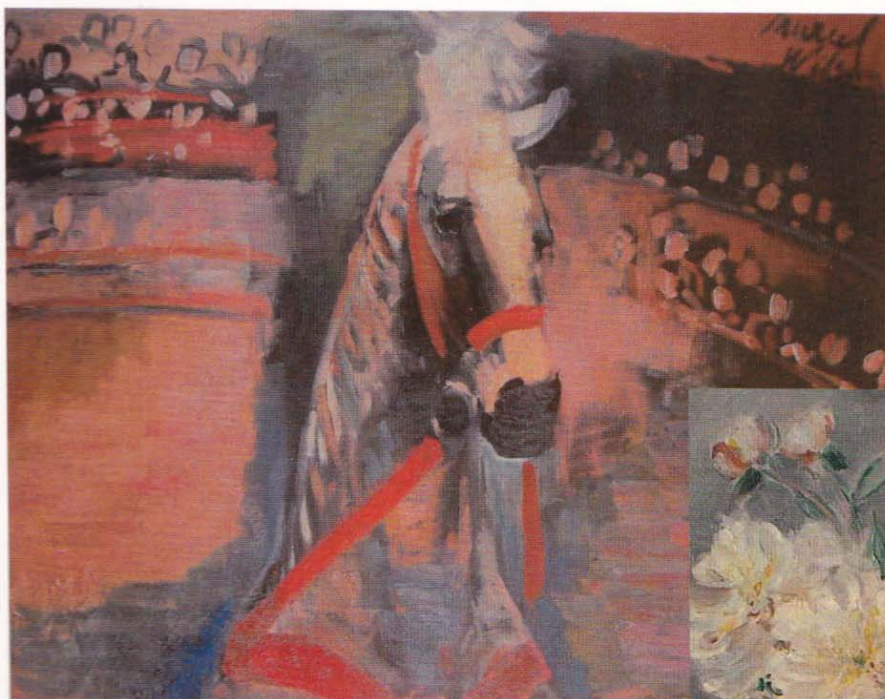
# The Two Muriel Wilsons

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## *An Artistic Confusion*

Muriel Wilson, 1892–1974 (née Wilson)

Muriel Wilson, 1893–1977 (née Samuelson)



*Muriel Wilson (1893-1977)*



Robin J H Fanshawe

These are extracts from Robin Fanshawe's excellent and fascinating study of the two artists named Muriel Wilson, who were roughly contemporary with each other.

The full booklet can be obtained through Amazon at:

[https://www.amazon.co.uk/Two-Muriel-Wilsons-Artistic-Confusion/dp/0955662613/ref=tmm\\_pap\\_swatch\\_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=1487440977&sr=8-1](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Two-Muriel-Wilsons-Artistic-Confusion/dp/0955662613/ref=tmm_pap_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=1487440977&sr=8-1)

**It is well worth the read!**





### **Muriel Gertrude Wilson (née Samuelson)**

**I**t 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 24<sup>th</sup> June 1893, some 18 months after her namesake.<sup>6</sup> She was the youngest of the three daughters of Sir Francis Samuelson, 3<sup>rd</sup> Baronet of Bodicote, and his Canadian-born wife, Fanny (née Wright) of St. John, New Brunswick. MGW was also thereby sister to the 4<sup>th</sup> 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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



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.<sup>7</sup>

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 24<sup>th</sup> 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.



## The Two Muriel Wilsons



*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.

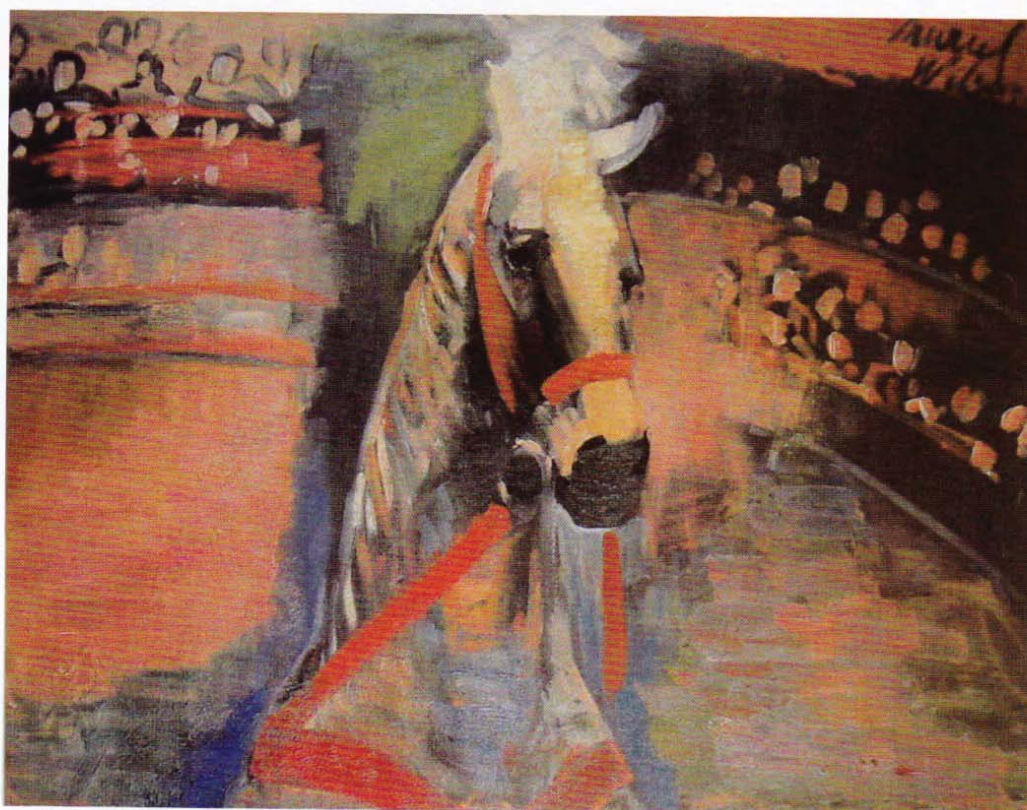
In June 1981, the renowned Art Critic, Max Wykes-Joyce, wrote a now essential précis biography of the two artists in the catalogue for a retrospective exhibition entitled '*Bassett and Muriel Wilson*', held at the Patrick Seale Gallery in London.<sup>8</sup> In this now rare publication, he listed a 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



## The Two Muriel Wilsons

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



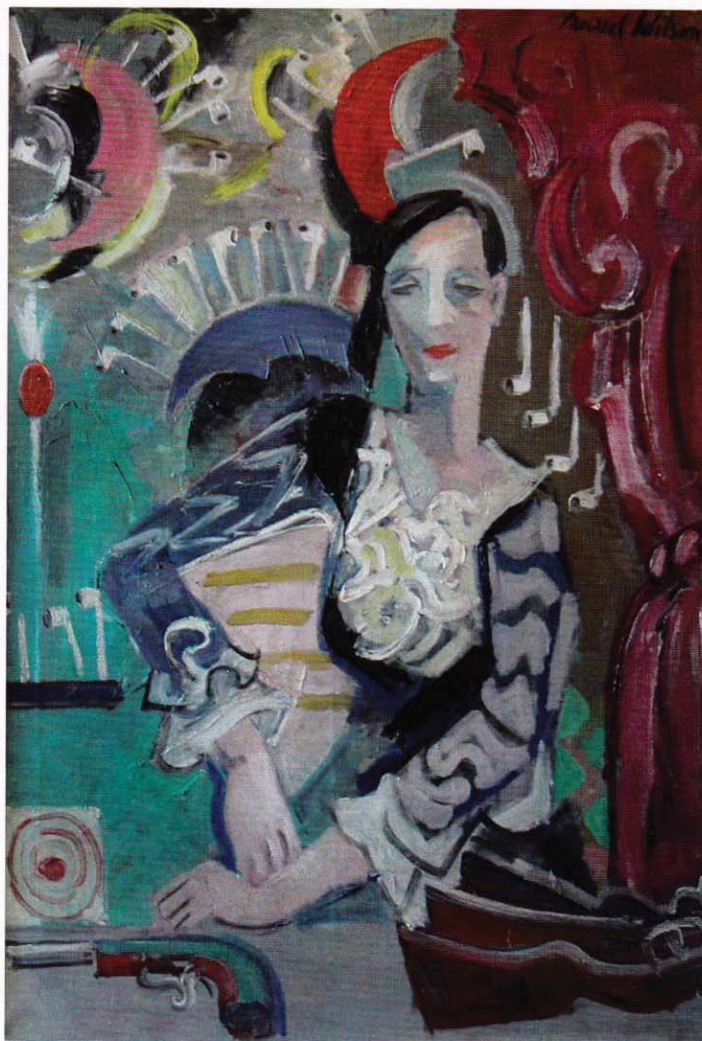
Muriel Gertrude Wilson (née Samuelson)

distinguished raids and operations, including the renowned St. Nazaire raid, and eventually rose to the rank of captain.

Following Dunkirk, MGW moved back to England and joined the Motor Transport Corps; but during the German Nazi occupation of Paris, and following Hitler's pronouncement that 'Modernism' was banned, both Bassett and MGW suffered badly when their studio was sacked and most of their paintings from 1938 and 1939 were either looted or destroyed. It could only have been of some small recompense for Bassett Wilson to be among the first soldiers to re-enter Paris, leading to the eventual liberation of the city.

The outcome of the German occupation throughout Europe, and in Paris in particular, was effectively to end a century of French predominance in the world of art. The Wilsons' Parisian friends had been scattered around France and Europe, and so while Modernism certainly moved forward once again after 1945, in the USA as well as elsewhere, the Wilsons had by then relocated back to London. Meanwhile though, the final bitter straw, and their worst possible nightmare, was to learn that their son Paul had been killed fighting in a commando operation in Italy during the very last days of the war. He was still scarcely 25 years old and had won the Military Cross in a previous Italian commando operation the year before.<sup>9</sup>

Following this news, his distraught and grieving mother completely gave up painting for the best part of a decade and even found the loss so great that she could



*Shooting Gallery* by Muriel Gertrude Wilson,  
Oil on canvas. 48 in x 36 in (1219 mm x 914 mm).  
Courtesy of the Papillon Gallery, Los Angeles, USA



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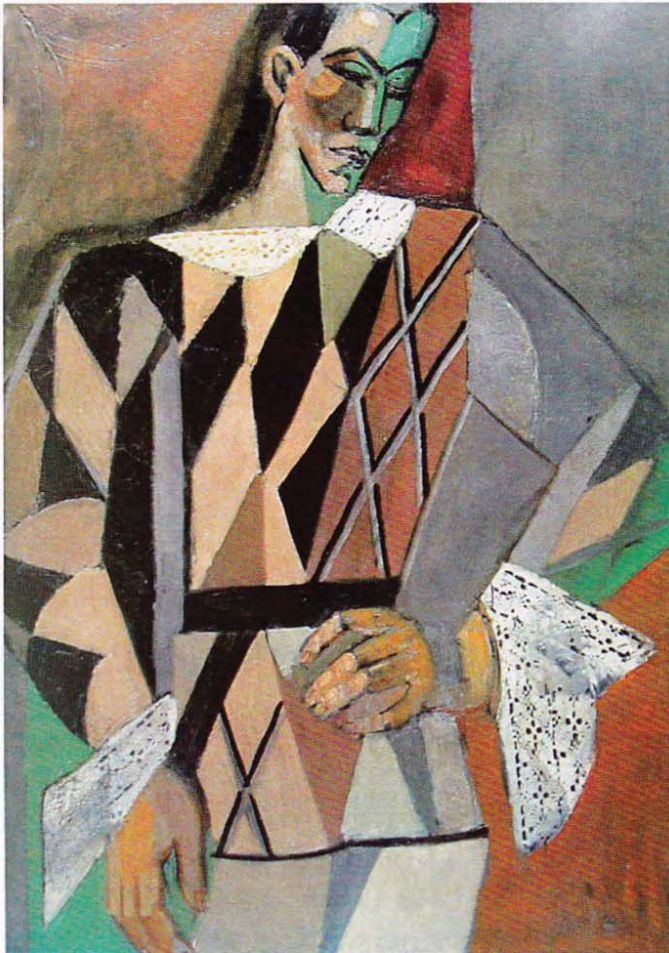
hardly bear to accommodate the younger children of her wider family.<sup>10</sup> But latterly she took up her brushes once more, and both MGW and Bassett Wilson carried on painting right through to the early 1970s, with regular trips to Spain for important subject matter. It is valuable in respect of these latter years that Bassett Wilson dated many of his paintings, since MGW appears seldom to have done so, and therefore positioning her work chronologically is not at all easy.

Following the upheaval of the war and their move back to England away from their previous colleagues and influences in Paris, their earlier reputations and undoubted successes never really reignited and progressed as they should have – despite the continued endorsement of R.H. Wilenski. No doubt the death of their son Paul had deflated a great deal of their avant-garde enthusiasm. But nevertheless, both painters continued to develop their individual modernist styles to the end. It is therefore most

unreasonable that both artists are – and equally as with MGW's namesake, MW – largely forgotten these days.

The veracity of this latter comment is epitomised by the fact that when Bassett Wilson died in May 1972, his obituary referred only obliquely to his having sometime painted and exhibited. But even more extraordinarily, when MGW died five years later on 17<sup>th</sup> November 1977, there was no mention made whatsoever that she had once been a greatly heralded artist

The final chapter in their account closed in February 1986, when at the behest of a descendant family that apparently had neither understanding nor appreciation of their



*Arlequin*, by Muriel Gertrude Wilson, ca. 1934-35.  
Oil on canvas. 46 in x 32 in (1168 mm x 813 mm).  
Exhibited: Salon des Tuileries, 1935;  
'Gothick Dream' exhibition (Westbourne Grove), 1986.  
Present whereabouts not known.



Muriel Gertrude Wilson (née Samuelson)

work,<sup>11</sup> Christies in London held a sale of both her husband's and her remaining works – some 95 works by Bassett Wilson and just 28 by MGW. Although this sale has been described as their 'studio sale' – and many of the items were certainly dated from the 1950s and 60s – others were works believed to be personal favourites of the artists, and which they had probably retained for themselves – such as MGW's *Arlequin* (q.v.).

Shortly after the Christies sale, there was just one last very small retrospective public exhibition of the Wilsons' joint works arranged by Leslie Harcourt's *Gothick Dream Fine Art* at the Westbourne Grove Gallery in London, which commenced on 22nd May 1986 for a month. There were only 12 exhibits shown – six from each artist – in what must have been a very spontaneous exhibition, since it included two or three works (viz. *Arlequin*) that had only very recently been purchased from the Christies sale held just three months earlier.



## **In conclusion**

**I**t 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.



## Appendix

<u>Muriel Wilson (1892-1974)</u>	<u>Muriel Gertrude Wilson (1893-1977)</u>
<b>Known or presumed Exhibitions</b>	<b>Known or presumed Exhibitions</b>
<b>1924 – 1955</b>	<b>1921 – 1937</b>
	<b>1981 and 1986 (retrospective)</b>
<u>The Society of Women Artists</u>	
(from: 11, St. Mary Abbott's Place, London, W8)	1921 Walker's Galleries, London
1924 <i>Cockatoos</i>	1923 The Society of Women Artists (probable)
<i>Marietta</i>	1925 Goupil Gallery, London
1925 <i>A Decoration</i>	1929 Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool
<i>View of Forres from Findhorn –</i> (drypoint)	Reid & Lefèvre Gallery, London
	1930 Knoedler Galleries, New York
	Knoedler Galleries, Chicago
<u>The Royal Glasgow Institute of Fine Art</u>	1933 Salon d'Automne, Paris
(c/o St George's Gallery, 32a George Street, London, W1)	1934 Reid & Lefèvre, London
1928 <i>Sunflowers and Butterflies</i>	Borough Art Gallery, Darlington
	Salon des Tuileries, Paris
	Galerie Gerbo, Paris
<u>The Royal Scottish Academy</u>	L'Association Blumenthal, Paris
(from: 20 Courtfield Gardens, London, SW5)	Salon d'Automne, Paris
1930 <i>St Jean: pied-de-port</i> No. 721 £3.	Group Rhyma, Helsingfors (Helsinki)
	1935 Galerie Charpentier, Paris
<u>The Society of Women Artists</u>	Salon des Tuileries, Paris
(from: 59 Cadogan Street, London, SW3)	Salon de l'Art Mural, Paris
1934 <i>Shepherd Market Mayfair</i>	1936 Salon des Indépendants, Paris
<i>Evening on the Deveron</i>	Salon du Temps Présent, Paris
(from: 105 Cheyne Walk, London, SW10)	Spanish Office of Tourism, Paris
1948 <i>Windsor Castle – aquatint</i>	1937 Galerie Katia Granoff, Paris
<i>River Spey at Fochabers –</i> watercolour	Galerie Durand-Ruel, Paris
(no address listed)	1963 Madden Galleries, London
1952 <i>Roses in a Green Vase – oil</i>	1981 Patrick Seale Gallery, London
(from: 17 Walton Place, London, SW3)	1986 Westbourne Grove Gallery, London
1955 <i>London Garden – oil</i>	

# The Two Muriel Wilsons

## *An Artistic Confusion*

Muriel Wilson, 1892–1974 (née Wilson)

Muriel Wilson, 1893–1977 (née Samuelson)

A brief account that aims to unravel some of the confusion that surrounds the lives and work of two 20th century artists, who both bore the name of Muriel Wilson, and who both painted and exhibited at exactly the same time.

These close similarities have led to the two artists becoming perpetually confused, and their data greatly muddled in published media as well as in the sale room.

***Muriel Wilson (1892-1974)***



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