

MURIEL AND BASSETT WILSON – THE MUSE MUST BE PROTECTED

Early in May 1972, in the national obituary columns, appeared the name of Brigadier Bassett F. G. Wilson OBE. MC. Croix de Guerre, who had just died in London, aged 83. The paragraph following told of his service with the King's Royal Rifle Corps and the 4th American Corps in World War 1; of his service on Montgomery's staff and as Provost Marshal of the 21st Army Group in World War II; of his subsequent chairmanship of the RMP Association. Then, as an after-thought – artist who held exhibitions of paintings under name, Bassett.

When the Brigadier's widow, Muriel, died in October 1977, her obituary made no mention at all of the fact that she too, had been an artist. Yet in the 1930's Bassett and Muriel, to give them the names by which they chiefly signed their work at that time, had been accounted among the foremost of European painters.

Both were virtually self-taught. Bassett, after school at Rugby where he was an almost exact contemporary of Rupert Brooke, though not in the same house, went up to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he read Law. After graduation he had a short period as a very junior diplomat, then joined a flourishing law practice in London, before becoming a soldier in 1914 at the outbreak of War.

Severely wounded in France, he was advised by the M.O. to take up sketching in convalescence, as a way of improving the impaired co-ordination between eye and hand. He found he had a natural aptitude for drawing and painting, which he put to such good use when he returned to active service that he was able, in 1917, to mount an exhibition of Drawings and Watercolours of the Western Front at Walker's Galleries in Bond Street. As a serving officer he could not exhibit under his own name; and therefore chose the nom de pinceau Basfi du Bleu (significantly French, one may think, in the light of his later artistic development).

Muriel, one of the three children of Sir Francis Samuelson, 3rd Baronet, and his Canadian wife, Fanny Isabel Merritt Wright, had the usual upbringing of a girl of her time and place in Society. She too was found to have an aptitude for painting, chiefly watercolour landscapes and flower pieces. Her first recorded exhibition was a joint one with Bassett, again at Walker's Galleries, in 1921. No press cuttings survive, but it would seem to have been a success, since each had at least one watercolour reproduced in art magazines – Muriel's Violets in Bowl in "Drawing and Design", Bassett's Red Roofs and Poppies in "Colour".

In the 1920's both consolidated their position as good traditional English painters, with submissions to a group show at the Goupil Gallery in 1925 (where their fellow exhibitors included future R.A.'s Cosmo Clark and Vivian Pitchforth); Bassett in 1927 with a one-man show at the Fine Art Society in Bond Street of Watercolours of Italy, Spain and London which earned him the good opinion of the critics ("An amateur artist of exceptional talent, he can give points to many fulltime professional painters"); Muriel in 1929 by inclusion in Lord Duveen's British Artists' Exhibition at the Walker Gallery, Liverpool, and with a major show at Alex. Reid and Lefevre in London, which elicited high praise in the Sunday Times from the critic and historian of the Modern Movement, RH Wilenski, and from which a flower piece was bought by the Contemporary Art Society and presented to Leicester City Art Gallery, where it remains in the permanent collection.

This then was their situation at the end of the decade. Muriel, a Society painter of professional standard, was gaining renown for her decorative flower pieces. Bassett, a successful lawyer, was a Sunday and holiday painter, specialising in landscape watercolours and drawings. They lived in a fine small Town house in Knightsbridge, carrying on an easy and agreeable existence with their only son, Paul. Yet encouraged by

good reviews – the praises of such as Wilenski, PG Konody of the Observer, Rom Landau of the Frankfurter Zeitung, the connoisseur/collector Dr. GC Williamson – and most of all by an overwhelming and passionate love of painting, they relinquished all these seeming advantages, sent Paul to boarding-school, and removed to Paris.

Their arrival at 23, rue Campagne-Première in Montparnasse marks their transition from above-average amateurs to superb professionals of the then unequalled Ecole de Paris. Not, of course that the change took place overnight. But the new environment resulted in an immediate lifting and liberation of the spirit. I know from my own experience, twenty years later, of the difference between London and Paris for a practitioner of the arts.

A guest at a dinner party in London, introduced as a writer, a musician, a painter, invariably faces the question, often enunciated, always implied – “Yes, but what do you really do for a living?” *In Paris – the Muse must be protected*. This was said to the present writer not by some great patron of the arts, but by the keeper of a now defunct flea-bitten rooming house in the rue Monsieur-le-Prince as he transferred me, at no extra charge, from a noisy uncomfortable room on the street to the best his establishment could offer, an inner courtyard room with a window overlooking the minute garden.

Even more so was the Muse respected and protected in the Paris of the 1930's. And quickly the Wilsons made friends with their fellows in the Quarter – with André Lhote, in whose studio both worked from time to time; with the author Henri Heraut; with the photographer Marris Vaux; and with Man Ray, under whose guidance Muriel became an expert creative photographer.

Naturally in such an environment, and able all day and every day to draw and paint uninterruptedly, their work flourished. In Spring 1930 they crossed to the USA for exhibitions at Knoedler's in New York and Chicago, in the catalogue foreword to which RH Wilensky advises collectors “buy them now, and be accounted men of foresight when the Wilson become more famous in a few years' time.”

In 1934 began the long sequence of exhibitions which were to give body to that prediction. In January at the Reid and Lefevre Gallery in London; in March at the Darlington Municipal Art Gallery, where their “modern” work caused uproar, and from which a Bassett watercolour of the Dordogne in the old style was bought for the town's permanent collection where it is still to be seen. In May both exhibited in the Salon des Tuileries in Paris, where Bassett was compared favourably with Jacques Villon by the French critic of the Gazette des Beaux Arts; in June at the Galerie Gerbo in Paris, where Bassett's Stacked Chairs, of which there is a later version in the present exhibition, was selected for particular mention in Sud; in July in a group show of English and American artists in Paris at L'Association Florence Blumenthal; in November with the Rhyma Group at Helsingfors in Finland.

The two Wilsons and Lhote were invited to represent the best and most modern in European art by a large group of Finnish artists. Matti Waren, secretary of the group, wrote after the show: “We are sure that your beautiful pictures, which you have so kindly sent to us to make our exhibition a great event in our art life, will have a stimulating effect on our painting ... The work of a pioneer is not a grateful one, if you consider the economical result, but its significance cannot be overestimated.”

In the following year an even more important invitation was extended to Bassett and Muriel. A committee of French artists organised the first Salon du Temps Présent, the avowed aim of which was “to wage war on the revival of academicism”. The Wilsons were the only English artists invited to submit work for consideration

by the all-French artist jury. Both had work selected by that jury for exhibition alongside Dufy, Friesz, Miro, Bores, Kisling, Delaunay and Matisse. Their acceptance as full members of the School of Paris was complete.

In the following two years (1936/7) they were again both selected for the 2nd and 3rd Salons du Temps Présent (the latter being mounted in Durand-Ruel's famous gallery). They showed also at the Paris Salons d'Art Mural and des Indépendants; at the Office of Spanish Tourism, and at the Galerie Katia Granoff. It was at this time that Bassett began the systematic use of collage, initially as a means of working out his compositions, but developing it into a full-blown medium as shown in Salzburg and Passage Interdit, collages in the present exhibition, and much later (in the '60's) often incorporating some of Muriel's photographic prints of the 1930's.

Muriel for her part, joined on each of his school holidays by Paul, became enraptured by the celebrated Paris circuses, where she made photographs which she used as aide-memoires for the creation of such paintings as the masterly Cirque d'Hiver I and II in the present show. Each long vacation too, Paul himself, showing some aptitude for drawing and painting, joined his parents in a journey to some hitherto unexplored part of Europe – Italy, the Adriatic Coast, Yugoslavia, Turkey, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and once, Russia (the chief outcome of which was Bassett's massive Allegorical Ikon, not in the present show).

The 1939 war put an end to all this activity. Bassett, though two days beyond his 51st birthday, and unlike some of his Paris-based compatriots who took the first boat-train out of France to America, and were not seen again on this side of the Atlantic until 1946, joined the British Expeditionary Force in his old rank of Captain. Muriel at first organized refugee reception in France, and after Dunkirk, worked with the Motor Transport Corps in England. Paul joined the army, in the fullness of time becoming a Commando Captain.

World War II brought much misery to many, and to the Wilsons perhaps more than their share. Almost all their paintings of 1938 and 1939, conserved in their Paris studio, were looted or destroyed in the Occupation. In the last days of the war in Europe Paul Bassett-Wilson MC, leading No.3 Troop of the 9th Commando, was killed in Italy.

For a decade and more the grieving Muriel painted not at all. Late in 1946 Bassett accepted an invitation to mount a large retrospective at the Left Bank Galerie du Back, from which the Musée national d'art moderne in Paris bought one of his Chair series – the Chairs in the Luxembourg Gardens. Again, Wilenski wrote the catalogue introduction, and concluded of Bassett what might with equal reason apply to Muriel – “If Bassett's English Muse, afraid of seeming dry and Puritan and stay-at-home, occasionally dons gold and scarlet, emerald and russet skirts, peacock bodices, mantillas and high combs to challenge her adventurous sisters of the Ecole de Paris, we must not reproach her for conduct unbecoming an English lady, but rather applaud her enterprise and courage.”

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London Art Critic, International Herald Tribune