

# Floyd Wilson Biography

By Mark Humpal

Floyd Wilson was born on March 20, 1888, in St. Peter, Minnesota, the second youngest of nine children born to Peter and Karen Marya Wilson. The Wilsons owned a two-hundred-acre farm and assigned specific chores to each of their children. Beginning at age five, Floyd's chores spanned riding horses to herding cows. With scarce time available to pursue his budding talent in drawing, he left home at age fifteen to live in Minneapolis with his aunt, Julia King. In 1905, he commenced formal art studies at the Minneapolis School of Fine Arts (MSFA), primarily under Robert Koehler and Gustav von Schlegell. A year later he was living on his own, supporting himself through a variety of jobs including driving an ambulance, tending bars, and waiting tables as he continued to pursue his art studies. During the 1906-1907 session he won the art school's Hinkle Scholarship. A Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts Bulletin from 1907 featured two of his drawings: a portrait and a landscape and went on to note:

“From the first he showed decided originality, which found more satisfactory expression in his composition and sketches than in the more severe demands of drawing from the cast and life. Young Wilson possesses the true artistic temperament, which allows no difficulties to cool his ardor and trust to ultimate success by hard work.”

Later in 1907, Wilson entered two paintings in the Minnesota State Art Society annual exhibition (in the student competition), “Illustration and Study of a Boy.” In the same exhibit the following year, he entered another painting, “Still Life.”

In the autumn of 1908, Wilson joined other Minneapolis art school students, including Carl Walters and Karl Koch, in pursuit of further training in New York. They enrolled at the Henri School of Art (formerly William Merritt Chase's New York School of Art) under Robert Henri and John Sloan. Wilson found his goals in art reinforced by Henri, who believed rigid academic training was secondary to encouraging individual artistic expression. By early 1909, Wilson ventured to Paris to study at Academie Colarossi. Shortly after his arrival, his money was stolen, and he found himself stranded in desperate financial straits in an unfamiliar foreign country. Unable to continue training in Paris, he prevailed on family in Minnesota to provide funds for passage back to America in April of 1909. He arrived in St. John, New Brunswick and from there contacted his friend Carl Walters in New York. Walters had mentioned he was interested in traveling north along the New England coast to Maine on a sketching trip and Wilson joined him there. Walters returned to New York City after a stop in Boston. Wilson, however, settled briefly in Portland, Maine, and secured employment at a bakery, reporting for work at 5 a.m., a schedule which left him ample time to paint in the afternoon.

Details of Wilson's travels and art activities are unclear from this point in 1909 until his migration, with Walters, to the west coast. For an indeterminate length of time during this interlude, both Wilson and Walters returned to Minneapolis where they shared studio

space. Exhibition records in 1910 for the MSFA indicate both artists showed work in Minneapolis. Wilson exhibited "Peaks Island," a Maine subject, during this time. The two artists rode the rails west and are known to have visited Victoria, B.C., and San Francisco. Walters attempted to secure a teaching position in Victoria but was unsuccessful. By late summer of 1912, Wilson, along with Walters, now with wife Helen, arrived in Portland, Oregon. Wilson and Walters together painted urban scenes, circus scenes, and views of activities along Portland's waterfront on the Willamette River. A search for more varied action subjects took Wilson to eastern Oregon to the Pendleton Round-Up, where he sketched the colorful rodeo contests. By 1913 Wilson began to exhibit his small post-impressionist oil paintings in Portland and received acclaim for his prominent level of achievement. Along with Carl Walters and Ellen Ravenscroft, he showed a small collection of works at the Neahkahn Tavern in Manzanita, including "Bathers at the Beach," done recently at the Oregon coast. He entered five oils in the Society of Oregon Artists show in 1913, garnering the attention of CES Wood, who was in his own right an accomplished artist who painted with Childe Hassam in 1904 and 1908, as well as being the foremost arbiter of artistic taste in Portland. In a letter to Wilson in November of 1913, in which he enclosed payment for one of Wilson's small oils, Wood wrote:

My dear Wilson, Find enclosed \$25. For your very charming little sketch of The Horse Trader – If I were rich – I'd get a lot of these little panels and group them as the decoration for a small room...

He exhibited work for the following two years at the Portland Art Museum. During April of 1915 he showed eight oils and eight pastels in a critically acclaimed two-man exhibition with Carl Walters. Included was "Horse Traders," recently sold to Wood. In January of 1915, he was notified that his pastel "Chinatown" was accepted for exhibit in the Fine Arts building at San Francisco's Panama Pacific International Exposition. Wilson was only one of two Oregon artists – the other being his friend Harry Wentz -- to hold this distinction. Additionally, he exhibited work in the Oregon Art Room at PPIE. He showed three pastels at the Artists of the Pacific Northwest exhibition held under the auspices of the Seattle Fine Arts Society in early October of 1915. A Seattle newspaper review stated:

Mr. Wilson has 3 strong pastels, all of which are decorative and worthy of serious attention. His "Crossing the Bridge" makes excellent use of the picturesque street material which abounds in Portland.

By autumn of 1915 Wilson traveled to San Francisco to visit the exposition and ended up residing there for about a year. During this time, he contributed six cover illustrations (cartoons) to Alexander Berkman's *The Blast*, an anarchist and labor union newspaper. Berkman, a close associate, and one-time lover of Emma Goldman earlier spent fourteen years in prison for his attempted assassination of wealthy businessman Henry Clay Frick. Wilson's bold and powerful drawings, printed from March to July of 1916, elicited praise

from readers as well as from Berkman, the newspaper's editor. In a July 15, 1916, letter to Wilson, Berkman wrote:

Now, as to cartoons, I want to tell you, Floyd, our readers appreciate your work. I get many letters praising it. The other day I had a letter from a girl in the East about it, an artist girl who used to live in Portland. I forget her name. I'll look it up. Oh, yes, now I got it; it is Louise Bryant (Provincetown, Mass.) She thinks your work splendid. And she is right.

In August of 1916, Wilson ventured southward to Los Angeles, where he contacted friend and fellow Henri student John Christopher Smith. Smith's brightly colored early impressionist works confirm a stylistic affinity the two men had for each other's work. Wilson joined Smith in his decorating business, living in Los Angeles until he received word from Minnesota that his mother was gravely ill. He returned to the family farm in St. Peter where his mother died within a week of his arrival. He decided to stay to work on the farm, finding time to paint. Wilson is known to have exhibited work during 1917 in Minneapolis. He resided in St. Peter until he joined the army (as a conscientious objector) in mid-1918 to serve in World War 1. The armistice was signed in early November of 1918 while Wilson rode a steamer to France with other new recruits. Notwithstanding the conclusion of hostilities, the new troops were stationed in Brest, France, where Wilson was put to work in logistics, which often entailed many days wading in deep mud in rainy weather. He fell ill during this time from the second – and most deadly -- wave of the influenza pandemic. He managed to survive but sustained lasting physical problems secondary to his illness and upon return to the farm in St. Peter, found himself lacking the stamina to do the demanding work required of him. Consequently, the Veteran's Administration provided vocational rehabilitation in the form of training as a silversmith at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, where he studied under Carl Hamann. Arriving in New York in March of 1920, Wilson rented a room in Greenwich Village and soon found himself once more in the company of other artists including Carl and Helen Walters, Larry (W.L.) Barnes, Harry Gottlieb, and Arnold and Lucille Blanch. He re-established contact by mail with Portland artist Dorothy Gilbert, and the two kindled their friendship from five years earlier in Portland into a romance culminating in marriage in early 1921. Never wanting to settle permanently in New York City, Wilson, along with Gottlieb and the Blanches, investigated the possibility of moving to Hervey White's Maverick art colony in Woodstock. Gottlieb, the Blanches, and the Walters along with others, formed the nucleus of the Maverick artist's colony in the early 1920s. Wilson visited the Woodstock area as early as 1921, as evidenced by the entry of his painting, "The Maverick Festival," which, along with another oil entitled "Apple Trees," he sent to Oregon to be shown at the Portland Art Museum in October of that year. While the Wilsons did move to the Maverick to live in one of White's rustic cabins, they did so only seasonally and continued to maintain residence at their Patchin Place apartment in Greenwich Village. The Wilsons, never planning to reside permanently in New York City, moved permanently to the Woodstock area in 1924. By autumn of 1925, now with daughter Mary in tow, they bought a farm in Zena, just east of Woodstock, where Floyd continued to paint, work as a metal craftsman, and raise farm animals. By the late 1920s, the Wilsons established a summer camp for children on their

farm, an endeavor which lasted until the year of Floyd's death in 1945. Wilson continued to enjoy the company of his fellow artists at the Maverick, and sometimes shared fees for models with the Maverick artists. However, he refrained from any extensive promotion of his work, though he did exhibit at times until the late 1930s. His wife Dorothy explained this attitude:

It was Floyd's idea to have the farm, as he wanted to make a living and paint, and hated the idea of competing and getting ahead and cultivating the important people. He felt unable to talk about art, for one thing.

After the Wilsons' establishment of residence in the Woodstock area, he exhibited recent metalwork creations in a craft exhibition held at the Woodstock Art Gallery in mid-1924. Notice and review of the show appeared in Woodstock's art colony magazine, *The Hue and Cry*:

Three pieces of excellent silver work, two bowls and a creamer, executed by Floyd Wilson also deserved to be mentioned. We regret that Mr. Wilson is not a member of the Woodstock Colony, though we hope he will be identified with us before the fall exhibit is held.

From the time of his arrival in Woodstock, and shortly before while living in New York City, Wilson's artistic style underwent a dramatic transformation. The bright palette, choppy brushwork, and heavy impasto of his work from the 1910s gave way to a flatter, modernist approach widely favored by many of the Maverick artists, who drew influences from the emerging trends in modernism that took hold in the wake of the Armory Show in 1913. Gone was Wilson's bright, saturated color, replaced by an earthier, verdant palette. His subject matter changed as well, from the Ashcan school urban subjects to rural landscapes of the local environment, though he often managed to work in evidence of human existence in the form of homes and buildings in his compositions. His work in pastel followed a similar evolution in style. Whereas his earlier pastels are notable for their fresh, broken lines, his later work in this medium is notable for a distinct flatness in the picture plane along with as solid, unbroken planes of color, elements found in Japanese woodblock prints which influenced many American artists around this time. Wilson's lifelong love of animals, however, found continuous expression in his pastels, whether they were the animals on his own farm, horses at auction, or circus animals. He also maintained an interest in portraiture and was accomplished in this vein throughout his career.

Wilson continued to send work for exhibit periodically and is known to have had shows at various galleries in Woodstock and galleries such as Dudensing, Marie Sterner, Marie Harriman, and Kraushaar in New York City. He exhibited a pastel, "Circus Parade" in the 1929-1930 Exhibition of Paintings by Contemporary American Artists, a show that originated in Portland and traveled to Los Angeles, Seattle, San Diego, Phoenix, and Denver. His last known formal exhibit of work was at the short lived Sawkill Gallery in Woodstock in 1936.

Wilson was hospitalized on March 13, 1945, at Middletown State Hospital, diagnosed with manic depression, manic type. Events precipitating his hospitalization are sketchy and there were no previous admissions for mental illness known. He died in the hospital infirmary early in the morning of March 31, 1945, at age fifty-six. The cause of death listed on his death certificate is “Manic-Depressive Psychosis, Manic Type, with exhaustion.” Curiously, no physical ailments were entered on his death certificate. His wife, Dorothy Gilbert Wilson lived to be ninety-eight years old and continued to paint and exhibit into her nineties.

Floyd Wilson’s complete output of fine art was minimal, mostly due to his reluctance to promote his work coupled with the demands of running a farm and summer camp. Nevertheless, the high quality of his work is notable throughout his career. His dramatic shift away from bold post-Impressionist works of his early phase to the expressionist landscapes and portraits of his time in Woodstock reveal an artist who was open to experimentation, but uncompromising is his desire to explore subjects he felt most enthusiastic about.

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