

Marie Wilson

**Interview by Susan Moulton
with Commentary by Susan Foley**

Susan Moulton, professor of art at Sonoma State University, and her students Susan Foley and Kendra Gross met with Marie Wilson and her husband in their home in Oakland, California. Susan Moulton has also visited their homes in Paris, Athens and Madouri, Greece. Marie Wilson is a distinguished older woman whose life and artistic production place her at the epicenter of twentieth-century modernism. Like many women, her significant contributions have been largely overlooked by the mainstream, but her complex artistic work and magnificent personal example have inspired many during the past sixty years of her professional career.

(Throughout the article, Marie's words are italicized and Susan Foley's commentary is in roman type.)



In her life, as in her art, Marie Wilson's drive to explore has led her from rural California to the Surrealist circle of artists and poets in Paris, to family life in Greece, and eventually back to Oakland, California where she resides for part of each year. Her life and art encapsulate the themes and concerns of the past century.

I was born in 1922 in a very romantic little gorge, a short distance from a town called Cedarville (in Modoc County, California) and raised in a small pioneer-type house. My grandfather was a minister in the church, and my English grandmother was a very refined parson's wife. He had a wonderful collection of Indian artifacts.

Marie credits this for her lifelong fascination with Native American imagery.

The only time I saw my biological father alive, he was passing by in a car. The second time I saw him was at his funeral. I must have been about twelve years old when he died at age forty-two. I remember passing by him at the funeral and seeing a very handsome man. I didn't see any photograph of him until I was sixty-five years old. Last year, someone sent me a few more

Winter 2000

photos, and I also got to see a picture of the paternal grandmother I never knew.

I was about six years old when my mother married my stepfather—the head of a cattle company—whose last name was Wilson.

They lived a life full of cowboys and horses and ranch animals, and Marie still vividly remembers how her stepfather drove wild horses through town and over the mountains to the Nevada plains, where they would be rounded up for the rodeos.

Painting

I think I was born an artist. As long as I can remember, I had a pencil and colors in my hand. I had saved a lot of the early things I made. The house had a gabled roof, and I hid them in a little area in the attic where nobody ever went; but when I went back years later they were

gone. So I never got to see the things that I made with such love as a young child.

I left Cedarville to go to Sacramento Community College and of course I majored in art. Then I won a scholarship to Mills College, which I attended from 1942 to 1944, and graduated with a B.A. in Fine Arts.

After college, I didn't want to go home. I went to Los Angeles, where my grandfather's sister lived, and got a job in a factory—a war factory, where we made guns. I broke records there and everywhere I worked. A beautiful old woman doctor at Mills had said that if I didn't slow down they would take me out of there in a box. I have never slowed down. I drove myself for years, and I still do.

In 1945 I won a teaching fellowship at Mills. I stayed one year and then went to the University of California at Berkeley.



Kingdom of Concrete, Greek period

I got my Master of Arts degree in 1948, then taught at Sacramento High for two years. After that I went to the Oakland Museum and taught regional scholarship students.

My art training had been conventional up until that point. Then I met Jean Varda, who became my mentor and a great presence in my life. In my generation everybody knew him. Varda was an adventurer, an expatriate Greek who had worked in Paris in a studio with artists such as Braque and Miro. The modern artists were breaking up the forms and the symmetry, but they never really knew how to teach. They would just show us paintings and say, "Do it like this." Having lived in Europe, Varda had the background to teach me the language of modern painting. When I came back in 1968 as a re-entry student at the junior college, I saw that professors there had reduced modern art to certain laws of construction.

I went to Europe in 1952. I thought I was going to Paris for six months and wound up staying in Europe for seventeen years. I had met the artist Wolfgang Paalen at a party on Varda's houseboat in Sausalito. I followed Paalen to

Paris, where he took me to meet André Breton. We went to many parties where there were people like Giacometti, Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, Jean Arp and other well-known surrealist artists. In such distinguished company, I felt like a greenhorn from rural California.

The Surrealists were intellectuals much older than Marie, and she wasn't yet fluent in French. Despite the fact that she was well-educated and that they were all very gracious to her, she remembers "groping for self-worth in a man's world." I was a "femme-enfant," she remembers—insecure yet embraceable because "I was young and beautiful and well-dressed." In fact, Marie's initial experience was similar to that of many women who came to Surrealism. Generally in the dawn of their artistic careers, many were introduced through personal involvement with a male member of the movement, and then drawn in by Surrealism's reliance on what could be described as feminine creativity, intuition and the expression of a deeply personal reality. While she arrived too late to be recognized as one of the movement's prominent stars, Marie was at its nucleus during her time in Paris, as a result of her very close and enduring friendship with Breton and his wife Alisa.

That summer, Marie and Paalen stayed with the Bretons at their home in the thirteenth century village of Saint Cirque La Popie, visiting ancient castles, studying birds and butterflies, collecting stones and playing Surrealist games to stimulate the imagination.

André Breton had a wonderful personality. He had a magical magnificence about him. Breton would always read his poetry to us. He had a wonderful sort of passion and dedication.

Breton became something of a father figure to Marie that summer, encouraging her to paint and introducing her to the work of other Surrealists. They shared an interest in the "psychopathological art" of the mentally ill,



Vessel, American period

which Breton regarded as truly authentic because it was motivated only by the patient's need to express his or her inner world. Closely related to such "asylum art" was the work of the "medium painters," who painted in a trance-like state in response to an inner voice. Breton owned many such works, and Marie was most captivated by the symmetrical work of two painters in particular.

Interior Symmetry

In Paris, I was introduced to the symmetry of Joseph Crépin and Augustin Lesage. Their work opened up a vision for me, and within a year or two my work became completely symmetrical. Symmetry was not at all popular among modern artists. I remember a friend saying to me, "You are not going to repeat this same thing on the other side?" At first I thought of symmetry as a weakness, but I found out that not everybody has this. When I look at an empty canvas, I go to the center automatically. Usually I start a little above center, and draw a dot or maybe a little shadow there—something. Then I put another bit to the right and to the left, and then above and then below. It's like a cross. I work like that, as if I were making lace. I invent it as I go. I am not starting with an idea. I don't know where or what I am going to do when I begin a drawing or a painting. As the drawing or painting develops, something of modern art weaves itself into what I am doing.

Amidst the dreamlike chaos of the myriad forms that populate Marie's works, an underlying symmetrical framework maintains a heraldic sense of order, much like the order that underlies the randomness of nature. It creates a stability that comforts in the face of the unexpected. Whether suggestive of insects or animals, gargoyles or Mayan masks, all forms align along a totemic central axis like chakras along the spinal column of the composition.

Do you know the stories of Crépin or Lesage? Crépin claims he heard a voice that told him that if he painted so many paintings, the war would be over. When he got to that number, the war was over. Lesage was a coal miner. He was in the mines and heard a voice that said, "You are going to be a painter." He didn't think much about it. Time

went on, and the voice told him to go to a certain place and get certain art materials. Then it told him to get a large canvas. He felt so very embarrassed to have such a big canvas that he went home through the back alleys. Wonderful, extraordinary images came to him that became big birds or people.

Living in Paris

I was very self-conscious in Paris. In America we don't kiss and shake hands so much. There was a little restaurant in Paris where the sixteen Surrealists who lived there would congregate. Every time I went there for a meal, they would each shake my hand—sixteen handshakes. I had to greet them this way, and when I finished my meal I had to shake the same hands another sixteen times. I used to get very tense. I had no experience of this relaxed graciousness where you could kiss people on the cheeks and shake hands like that.

Paalen knew a man named Kirk who wrote a book on magic, and we stayed at his place. Underneath the first landing was a kitchen with an elevator for taking food up. Up on the first floor we had our meals and social life. On another mezzanine were the bedroom and the bath; on the very top was Kirk's big studio. We lived there for some time, and finally Paalen traveled back to Mexico.

Picasso

Before leaving, Paalen had given me a letter of introduction to go see Picasso because they had been friends. Like everybody else, I admired Picasso and wanted to meet him. He received me very nicely, and let me work in his studio. I felt a little inhibited his presence and sometimes took the things I was working on back to my hotel room so he wouldn't see them. I could work there very easily, but when I brought them back to his studio I felt shy. He liked what I did, and paid for sending them back to me in Paris.

I lived ten years in Paris altogether. After I was there for a year or two, Varda took me to a big party with some of his fellow Greek artists and writers, and Nanos Valaoritis (now Marie's husband) happened to be there. When Picasso invited me back to his studio to work again, Nanos didn't want me to go, so I stayed in Paris.

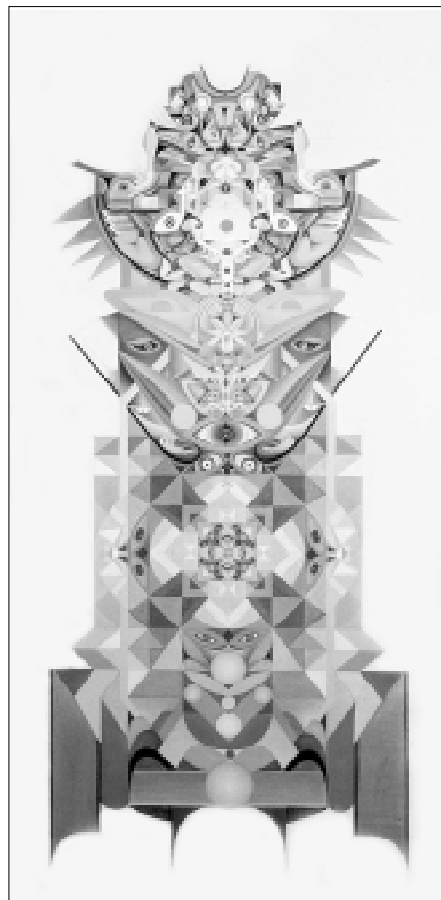


Ceiling of the Celestial Tower, Greek period

Mature Work

During the time between Paalen's departure and her introduction to Nanos, Marie's work had been exhibited with that of the other Surrealists at the Salon de Mai and in Breton's Paris gallery, A L'Etoile Scelle. Breton had also included reproductions of her work in issues of his *Surrealist Review* from time to time, yet she was still living a meager existence on the eighty dollars per month she received from the rental of her house in Oakland. The paintings "Table of Divination," "Owl Spirit," "Palace of the Setting Sun" and "The Rise of the Celestial Monkey" were among the notable works shown in 1955 when she had her one-woman exhibition at Breton's gallery. That summer, on her first visit to Greece with Nanos, she created a series of six lithographs that were published as the book *Terre de Diamant* ("Land of the Diamond") with text by Nanos. By now employing automatism exclusively (a process of accessing the unconscious without regard to logic or meaning) and working completely symmetrically, the lithographs were "done with an affinity to the cosmic sacred."

It's very nerve-racking, because of the intensity of concentration. I never erase or change anything, even in my pencil drawings. My work is like charting out an unknown territory.



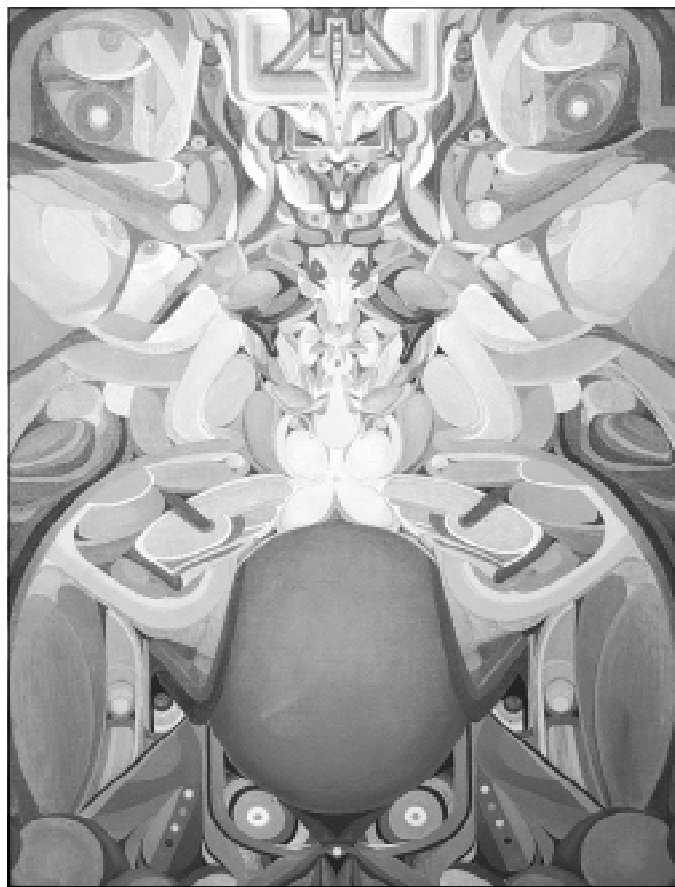
Untitled (work in progress), American period

Later, drawings produced in this manner were published as illustrations and frontispieces for volumes of Nanos' poetry as well as that of Andreas Ambirikos, Manda Aravantinou, Octavio Paz and Philip Lemantias.

Marriage and Motherhood

Nanos and Marie lived together for six years, eventually marrying. They have been together now for over forty years.

Six months pregnant with our first child Katerina, I went with Nanos to Greece. Nanos is



Pillar of the Central Void, Greek period

from a very comfortable family. They own a very nice apartment in Athens and a marvelous big island. He had an aunt with a beautiful place in Spetsus, an island forty-five minutes away. We stayed there for about a year, and then we got our own place.

In the next six years they had two more children (Zoe and Dino) and, with the help of hired domestics, Marie was able to paint regularly despite the demands of motherhood. "Kingdom of Concrete," "Pillar of the Void" (cover) and "Ceiling of the Celestial Tower" were among the significant works produced during this period. Throughout the 1960s her work was shown at galleries in Paris and Venice. Then in 1967 a fascist dictatorship seized control in Greece. Nanos was offered a teaching position at San Francisco State University, and they returned to live in Marie's Oakland home.

Return to America

Back in the United States, it was difficult for Marie to find time for her art, and the space in the house was taken over by young children. Like many women with children, there was no room for her to call her own.

I would set up my easel here and there, and would come back and find it on the floor. "Who knocked that over?" I remember my son running around the fireplace with a skateboard.

Although it was wonderful to have this place in America, it

was not my ideal. My ideal was a structure on top of a hill. I want to see the sun coming up through one door and going down through the other. I see my bed there, and where my shoes are, and where my clothes are. I am ritualistic in nature. It's really been hard for me to work in space that's not symmetrical. I want to live symmetrically.

In 1974, Marie had a show at Gallery Art Things in Berkeley. Shortly thereafter, she renewed her teaching credential so that she could work as a substitute teacher and enrolled in ceramics classes at the local community college. These allowed her to have a life outside the home. "Ceramics class was like having a studio and free instruction whenever I wanted it." Inspired by her newfound freedom, she decorated her vessels with the same intriguing imagery that she poured out in her paintings.

After we lived seven years in the United States, the dictatorship in Greece ended (1974). We stayed in the Bay Area one more year, and then went back to Paris for two years while Nanos was on sabbatical. After the sabbatical, the family returned to the Bay Area. Eventually, we visited our island of Madouri for the first time since the dictatorship.

The family then began spending summers in Greece. In 1983, Marie participated in a Surrealist show in Ohio, and the following year Lawrence Ferlinghetti invited her to have a one-person show at City Lights Books in San Francisco. While finding space to paint in Oakland is still a problem, Marie has continued with her ceramic work there through the years, reserving painting for the summers spent on Madouri. For a while she even found an old church on the tiny island where she could paint in solitude.

I laid the chairs out where I would sit. I laid the paints out in a cross. I had something on the floor where I could lie down when I wanted to rest. Everything was oriented like a cross, and it was wonderful. It was the most natural thing to do. I was terrified all the time that a priest or somebody would stop me, but nobody ever did.

Now that the church

is being restored. Marie is without a painting studio, but she has plans to rearrange the Oakland house to accommodate her need for private space.

Devotion to the Unknown

I used to do exercises where I would look at the horizon at night. I would go up, up, up and then come back. I would go to the horizon and then down into the Earth—down, down, down. It was a serious meditation, and it was also spontaneous. I never shared it with anybody, but I think this may have stimulated my imagination.

I don't worry about the forms. You might see forms like eyes, but you won't know if it's a face that's facing you or a profile. This is almost like a face of a woman here, and then it goes up and becomes a bird and a crown. I was brought up with animals. This looks like horns coming out of an animal. This piece has got a face here, something like a torso, a pelvis and legs. There is something like an energy, a sexual energy that comes here and opens up. Sometimes it orbits, and sometimes it floats on a sea into nothingness.

For me, the thing is not to care where the images come from but to be devoted—to have a devotion for the path, for the unexplored, for the unknown. ∞



Young Marie Wilson, Surrealist Painter All photos provided



Photo by Jerri-Jo Idarius

Renewal

*In perfect stillness of after-rain
the forest silently restores itself
And I, sitting
amidst the peace of moss and stone
thirstily drink the certainty of all I sense.*

*The calm
making light of
the heaviness I carried here
nurtures
eases
envelopes me
matching tone for tone
the quiet of my inner being
until I am one with
all that surrounds me
each leaf
each tree
each mat of moss
the earth
and I
become one
renewed in unison.*

*Marcella Ries, Ukiah
from I'll See You Through*

Wheel in her Hand

*her chants
are for the morning star,
a spray of dreams
hanging on a crescent moon

she cards her words,
spins visions,
and sews them to her like stars
in a peculiar passion

oceans lie within,
coalesced with the sky—
bright threads of abandonment

fire and filament
dance upon
the waters, embroidering
their depths*

Alethea Eason, Clearlake Oaks

Artists, writers and poets mentioned in the Marie Wilson interview. Introduction by Susan Foley and biographical notes by Jerri-Jo Idarius

The Surrealist Movement

began in Paris in the 1920s, born out of Dadaism, out of social disillusion in Europe following World War I, and out of the popularity of Freudian psycho-analytic theory. Primarily a literary movement in the beginning, its founding father was André Breton, who issued his *First Surrealist Manifesto* in 1924. Basically a search for a higher reality through the tapping of the subconscious, repressed desire and the imagery of dreams, Surrealism sought to free the psyche from its enslavement to logic and to aesthetic and moral concerns. Painters officially came to the Surrealist Movement in 1925 when Pablo Picasso, André Masson, Marcel Duchamp, Paul Klee, Max Ernst and Giorgio de Chirico and others exhibited together at a Paris gallery.

Jean Varda was a well-known artist who lived on a houseboat in Sausalito during the "Bohemian period" of the 1950s. One of his art designs is displayed in a glass mosaic at the Union City BART Station. A tribute to Varda also exists in the form of a 16 x 20-foot mosaic tile mural at the site of the Sausalito Art Festival's "Artist Gallery." The mosaic was raised in 1988 through the efforts of Friends of the Festival, the Sausalito Chamber of Commerce and the Sausalito Rotary Club.

Austrian-born **Wolfgang Paalen** (1905–1959) began his career under the influence of Impressionism. By 1935 he was affiliated with the Surrealists in Paris. In 1939, at the invitation of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, he emigrated to Mexico and organized the International Exposition of Surrealism with André Breton. After nearly a decade in Mexico City, he moved to the San Francisco Bay Area. For three years he traveled between California, Mexico, and New York, returning to Paris

in 1951, and then moving back to Mexico in 1953, where he remained until his death.

André Breton (1896–1966) was a French poet, critic, and a leader of the Surrealist movement. His *Manifestos of Surrealism* (1924, 1930, 1942) are the most important theoretical statements of the movement.

Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), Spanish painter and sculptor, was an originator, with Georges Braque, of Cubism, and probably the most famous and prolific painter of the twentieth century, creating more than 20,000 works of art during his lifetime.

The French painter **Georges Braque** (1882–1963) was another major painter of the twentieth century. His partnership with Picasso from 1908–1914 generated Cubism in Paris.

Max Ernst (1891–1976), German painter-poet, was a member of the Dada movement and a founder of Surrealism. In 1925, he showed his work at the First Surrealist Painting Exhibition in Paris.

Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) French-American Dadaist/Surrealist/Cubist. He is particularly well known for his theory that art exists as "idea," and for his series of "ready-mades" based on everyday or "found" objects. He proposed that an object is art if an artist says it is. His Dadaist ideas led to Pop Art in the late 1950s and 1960s, and later Conceptual Art.

Jean Arp (1887–1966), German-French sculptor, painter and poet, was a dominant figure within Dada, Surrealism and abstract art. He is known best for his reliefs and sculptures. Although he was identified with other Parisian artists who believed in abstract forms, he never formally broke with the Surrealists.

Joan Miró (1893–1983) was a Spanish painter who

moved to Paris in the 1920s and joined the Surrealist Movement. In 1929 he introduced Salvador Dali to the Surrealists.

Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966) participated in the Surrealist Movement from 1930 to 1935. Primarily known for his sculpture, he also produced drawings and paintings. His dramatically elongated, emaciated bronze figures are often associated with Existentialism, possibly due to his close friendship with French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre.

Augustin Lesage (1876–1954), a miner in the Pas-de-Calais, heard voices ordering him to paint when he was thirty-five years old. He made drawings of a mediumistic nature. His first picture took him two years to complete (1912–13). He claimed, "I never knew what the picture would be like, no matter what stage I was at. A picture is made detail by detail without my ever having a mental view of what was coming. My guides told me: 'Don't try to know what you are doing.' I give myself up to their influence. I draw the figures they impose on me."

Joseph Crépin (1875–1948) began painting at age sixty-three. In 1939, Crépin (friend and disciple of Lesage) heard voices telling him that he would have to finish 300 paintings before WWII would end. He obeyed and started painting. He finished his 300th work on May 7, 1945.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti was an original member of the Beat Generation, a group of poets and writers in North Beach in San Francisco, in the 1950s. With Peter Martin he began a magazine called *City Lights* and in 1953 they opened the City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco. ~