



# HAWTHORNE

## Fine Art

### **MARY MOTZ WILLS (1875-1961)**

Mary Motz Wills, a prolific watercolorist recognized for her paintings of wildflowers, was born in Wytheville, Virginia on June 6, 1875 to Mr. and Mrs. Charles Motz. Shortly after her birth, the family moved to Waco, Texas, where the artist and her younger sister, Elsie, spent their formative years. Their parents must have nurtured an artistic sensibility in their daughters, as while Wills would grow to be an established painter of floral still lifes, Elsie Motz Lowdon (1883-1960) would earn national acclaim for her painted miniatures.

Wills attended the Art Students League in New York, where she studied with the renowned American Impressionists William Merritt Chase (1849-1916), John Henry Twachtman (1853-1902) and Frank Vincent DuMond (1865-1951). She is also thought to have studied at the Pennsylvania School of Industrial Arts, as well as art schools in Boston and Philadelphia.

After completing her formal artistic training, she married Col. Will Dunbar Wills, an officer in the United States Army, and accompanied him on all of his subsequent tours of Central and South America. Here, as an amateur botanist, Wills was captivated by the beauty of the exotic wildflowers, which she began to paint in watercolor. Upon their return to the United States, Col. Wills suffered an early death in Maryland in 1925. Widowed, Wills moved to Georgia, which she would later claim as her adopted state because of her extended visits with Amelie (Col. Will's cousin) and W. Eugene Harrington in Atlanta, even after her move to Abilene, Texas, where she spent the remainder of her life.

While in Texas, Wills continued to paint the local flora, focusing on the wildflowers scattered throughout the Texas landscape. Though her oil paintings showcased an impressionistic freedom reflecting her training, her wildflower watercolors developed an increasingly documentary and scientific quality, as she painted with precise attention to detail. She began exhibiting with the Southern States Art League and the Texas Fine Arts Association, where her work piqued the interest of Texas botanist, Ellen Dorothy Schulz Quillin of the Witte Museum, who recognized the significance of Wills' work. In 1935, Quillin arranged an exhibition of Wills' paintings at the Witte Museum with the annual flower show, and the institution



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again organized a display of her floral works in the Big Bend area in 1943, and a subsequent show at the Witte in 1955. Additionally, Wills' floral portraits were exhibited at the Montgomery Museum in Georgia; the Texas Centennial Exposition in Dallas where three hundred of her works were displayed; the Mint Museum in Charlotte, North Carolina, the American Museum of Natural History in New York, as well as various regional exhibitions. Though Wills was a prominent garden club lecturer and had painted hundreds of wildflowers native to Georgia, Wills is perhaps best remembered for her 257 paintings published in *Roadside Flowers of Texas*, published in 1961 shortly before her death.<sup>1</sup> The book was designed to help readers identify flowers in the local landscape, thus Wills' impeccably detailed watercolors served as fitting complements to the similarly meticulous text. One reviewer recounted: "The flowers of artist Mary Motz Wills, around which this book revolves, are so daintily lifelike, so exquisitely real, that the reader can almost smell them."<sup>2</sup>

Wills' wildflower paintings remain particularly significant to modern audiences because many of the subjects were endangered species, and some of them have now completely disappeared from the landscape.

Emory University's Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library holds the Mary Motz Wills collection, which includes 338 of her watercolor paintings of Georgia wildflowers. The Witte Museum has a large collection of her paintings of Texas flora, and Wills' work is prominently included in the book, *Art for History's Sake: The Texas Collection of the Witte Museum*.<sup>3</sup>

### Additional References:

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<sup>1</sup> Howard S. Irwin, *Roadside Flowers of Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1975).

<sup>2</sup> Bill Warren, "Texas Flowers All Year 'Round," *The Austin American* (Austin, Texas), April 16, 1961, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> Witte Memorial Museum and Cecilia Steinfeldt, *Art for History's Sake: The Texas Collection of the Witte Museum* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association for the Witte Museum of the San Antonio Museum Association, 1993).