



ROBERT SIMON FINE ART

Charlotte Major Wylie

(London 1828 – 1909 Aberystwith, Wales)

The Veiled King Death

Tempera and gesso, with silver and gold leaf, bone, pearl, agate and colored stone inlays,
on a circular wood panel
20 inches diameter (50.8 cm)

set within a richly ornamented frame designed and fabricated by the artist
31 ¼ x 31 ¼ inches (79.4 x 79.4 cm)



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Provenance: The artist; likely bequeathed to her sister:

Dorothy Major Ridley Newmarch (†1922), Caterham, Surrey, England

Christie's, London, 5 June 1984, lot 170

Exhibited: Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, New Gallery, London, 1893, no. 457.

Literature: *Catalogue of the Fourth Exhibition*, Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, London, 1893, p. 75, cat. no. 457.

"The Arts and Crafts Exhibition, London-II," *The American Architect and Building News*, vol. XLII, no. 938, 1893, p. 136.

"The Arts and Crafts Exhibition," *The Times*, 2 October 1893, p. 5.

This magnificent example of an Arts and Crafts mixed-media painting was made by Charlotte Major Wylie, an artist so overlooked that almost every one of the few biographical details cited in standard reference works has proven inaccurate. Her life dates are here accurately given for the first time, and her married name properly spelled (with one "I"). While she has regularly been cited as the wife of the painter Charles William Wylie (1853–1923), her actual husband, Charles John Wylie (1823–1900), was less glamorously a grain dealer and insurance underwriter for Lloyds. Conversely, an Alma-Tadema portrait said to depict Charlotte in fact depicts Marion Wylie, wife of the painter just mentioned.¹

Charlotte's father was a successful merchant with some prominent art-world acquaintances, including the collector Constantine Ionides, the writer and illustrator George du Maurier, J. M. W. Whistler, and Whistler's close friend, the painter and etcher Matthew White Ridley, who would marry Charlotte's sister Dorothy in 1882.² Although we know nothing of her education, Charlotte's closest artistic mentor as an adult was G. F. Watts, with whom she occasionally collaborated. A brief mention of her in Mary Seton Watts's biography of her husband hints as well at a frustrating youth.

"Mrs. Wylie had a considerable knowledge of the methods employed by the old masters, and possessed a fine artistic gift that, unfortunately, her parents had not allowed her to cultivate; otherwise she would certainly have made her mark. Her married life did not leave her much opportunity for study, but a copy she made for Signor [Watts] of a portion of Titian's "Bacchus and Ariadne," he liked to keep constantly before his eyes; and Sir Frederick Burton, who, as Director of the National Gallery, had seen so many fail in their attempts to copy the picture, was amazed when he first saw this copy and considered that she had entirely mastered the quality of Titian's colour. Signor liked to have her advice, and often sought her help for the preparation of canvases; and she sometimes laid in work for him in monochrome."³

Her friendship with Watts lasted over many years. In the mid-1870s, when he was forced to leave his studio at Little Holland House, “Charlotte Wylie acted as manager of artworks, paymaster and keyholder at the final transition period ... while in the ruins of his old home she preserved some twenty frescoes of the Pattle sisters, so symbolic of Watts and their salon.”⁴

As far as can be determined, the first painting Charlotte publicly exhibited was *Bertie: Study of a Child*, included in the summer exhibition of the Grosvenor Gallery in 1878, when the artist was forty-nine years of age. Thereafter she exhibited her paintings annually at the Grosvenor Gallery until 1886, the date of *A Wanderer in the Elysian Fields*, now in the Richard H. Driehaus Museum, Chicago (Fig. 1). It reveals an artist of consummate skill, perhaps indebted to Watts in subject and composition, but with a more vivid Pre-Raphaelite palette and a distinct style. An undated watercolor by her recently on the British art market, *The Ballad of Sir David Graemen*, reflects the contemporary taste for obscure literary themes (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1. Charlotte Major Wylie,
A Wanderer in the Elysian Fields, 1886,
Driehaus Museum, Chicago.



Fig. 2. Charlotte Major Wylie,
The Ballad of Sir David Graeme,
watercolor, Art Market, England, 2018.

However, the artist’s most distinctive work was not in traditional oils or watercolor, but in three-dimensional painting, in textured relief works employing colored

gesso and other media. Her technical expertise in this genre was recognized by Watts, whose wife wrote that Charlotte Wylie “often came to discuss grounds, recipes, and methods of the old masters; sometimes to spar over social and political questions, upon which they differed profoundly.”⁵ We do not know the nature of their political arguments, but do have one record of their artistic discussions: a recipe for gesso ground that Charlotte had translated for Watts from Cennino Cennini’s *Libro dell’Arte*, an artistic manual for gold-ground painting written in the early 15th century.⁶

Charlotte Wylie’s use of textured surfaces, relief elements, and embedded objects in her paintings seems to have been inspired by her study of Renaissance paintings, particularly the work of Carlo Crivelli, at the National Gallery. She wrote of the history of these embellishments, as well as the techniques she employed for creating gesso surfaces, in an article “Some Account of Gesso Duro,” published in the periodical *The Queen* in 1889.⁷

Charlotte’s unique paintings in and on gesso were featured at the exhibitions organized by the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, founded by Walter Crane in 1887.⁸ Her first contribution was to the Society’s inaugural exhibition at the New Gallery in London in 1888: *Twilight*, catalogued as a “panel in gesso duro.”⁹ In the Second Exhibition the following year, Mrs. C. Wylie (as she was so designated in the catalogue) exhibited two works: *Dawn*, described as “fibrous gesso on wood,” and *Night*, a “decorative panel.” For the Third Exhibition in 1890, she submitted *The Snake Charmer* “in jewelled gesso and stained wood ground.” After a hiatus of three years, the Arts and Crafts Exhibitions resumed in 1893 under their new President, William Morris. Charlotte Wylie’s exhibit was the present work, *The Veiled King Death*, in “tempera and gesso.”¹⁰

The subject and attributes of the painting appears to be of the artist’s invention, without a specific literary source. The ashen, somewhat androgynous king representing death peers out at the viewer through a veil held in place by the elaborate jeweled crown seated on his head, sculpted in raised “gesso duro” (Fig. 3). A scalloped halo in richly articulated gilt gesso is seen behind him, placed in front of the blue-grey feathers of his angelic wings, which are subtly modeled in low relief. In his right hand he holds a silver-tipped spear, while his left rests atop an elaborately bound book poised atop a clock-face on a table. The clasp of the book is open, the elaborate cover decorated with raised gold ornamentation around bone inlays, while the spine is decorated with four fictive panels. The topmost shows a dove hovering above the title “Liber Aeternitatis” [the Book of Eternity]; beneath that is a depiction of the Crucifixion; then the Resurrection; and finally a peacock, the traditional symbol of rebirth and immortality. These are all expressively modeled in gesso, highlighted with fine black lines. The gilt background punctuated by round depressions evokes the celestial sky of Italian gold-ground paintings. Throughout the work tempera colors and gilding are integrated with the gesso medium to create effects both illusionistic and decorative.

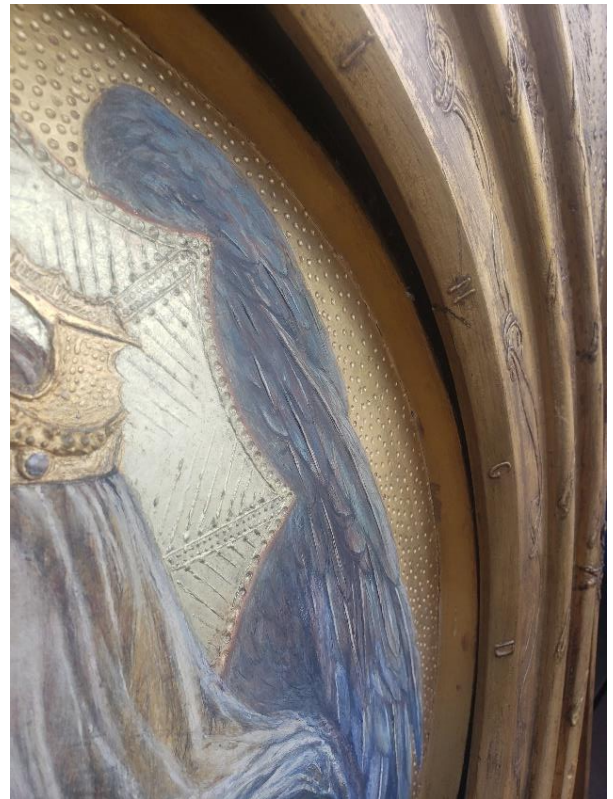
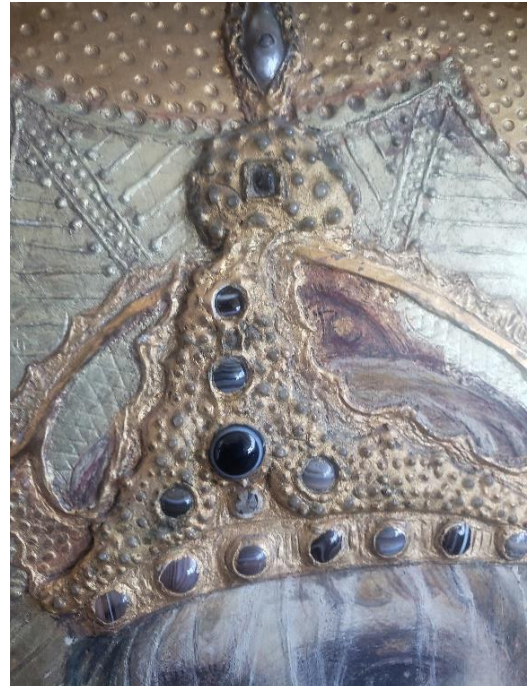


Fig. 3. Details of the present work.

The frame, designed and fabricated by the artist, is richly decorated with designs in low relief (Fig. 4). In the corners menacing crows, a common symbol of death and the afterlife, surround a tubular ring depicting a snake biting its tail, an ancient emblem of eternity. Within lies a concentric relief band with alternating dragonflies and flowers (possibly poppies), both associated with change, transformation, and rebirth; then another snake-biting ring oriented in the opposite direction. A further flat band follows, this one decorated with a pattern of swirling knotted cords, of a type usually called sailor's knots, signifying eternal and unbroken love. Finally, an angled inner frame surrounds the painting, with raised lettering spelling out work's title along the edge. If the highly personal iconography of this work, both painting and frame, remains abstruse, its fundamental concerns may be said to be the mystery of life, the inevitability of death, and the hope for eternal life.



Fig. 4. Details of the frame of the present work.

Charlotte and Charles John Wylie formed a substantial collection of books, prints, and paintings pertaining to the theatre at their home at 3 Earl's Terrace in Kensington, a Georgian Terrace house close to Holland Park. After her husband's death in 1900, Charlotte moved to a house at 151 Church Street (now Old Church Street), Chelsea, selling the library ("The Wylie Dramatic Library") at Sotheby's and their collection of theatrical portraits at Christie's, while donating several of the more significant works to the National Portrait Gallery.¹¹ She later lived part-time in Wales, where she died in 1909.

After her death Charlotte's sister Dorothy Major Ridley and her second husband John Newmarch donated a large stained-glass window in her memory at St. John's Church, Caterham Valley, Surrey (Fig. 5). It is the work of the stained-glass artist Horace Wilkinson (1866–1957) and was installed in 1911 on the south side of the nave. The three principal panes are based on Charlotte's designs, which were likely in the possession of her sister at the time.¹² The central panel is a vertical elaboration of *The Veiled King Death*, thus inscribed beneath (Fig. 6). The right pane, titled "A Wanderer in the Garden of God," is clearly based on Charlotte's painting *A Wanderer in the Elysian Fields* (Fig. 2). The third window, inscribed "Lost in Hades," is based on an a lost work by the artist. The inscription on the sundial pedestal in the central panel (Fig. 7) featuring the design for our painting reads "SCIS HORAS NESCI HORAM" (Thou knowest the hours, thou knowest not the hour). This motto frequently appears on sundials, and though not present in our painting, may give further insight into the underlying theme of the painting: the transience of life and the unpredictability and inevitability of death. The window is dedicated and inscribed "In Memory of the Life and Artistic Work of Charlotte Wylie, Widow of C J Wylie Eldest Daughter of C J Major and Sister of Mrs Albert Leaf and Mrs John Newmarch Died 24th Dec^r 1909."¹³



Fig. 5. Horace Wilkinson, Memorial Stained Glass Window to Charlotte Major Wylie, St. John's, Caterham Valley.



Fig. 6. Detail of the depiction of the *Veiled King Death* on the stained glass window.



Fig. 7. Detail of the sundial.

¹ Sold at Christie's, London, 10 June 1998, lot 28. The catalogue entry references Charlotte Wylie's career as an artist.

² For Ridley, see: Valerie Gatty, "Matthew White Ridley: Painter-Etcher," *Apollo*, vol. CXIV, no. 234 (August 1981), pp. 118-120.

³ M. S. Watts, *George Frederic Watts; The Annals of an Artist's Life*, London, 1912, vol. 1, p. 291.

⁴ Veronica Franklyn Gould, *G. F. Watts: The Last Great Victorian*, New Haven-London, 2004, p. 124. The process of saving the frescoes by Charlotte is described by Emilia Barrington: Mrs. Russell Barrington, *G. F. Watts, Reminiscences*, London, 1905, pp 99-100. See also: Caroline Dakers, *The Holland Park Circle: Artists and Victorian Society*, New Haven-London, 1999, p. 154.

⁵ Watts, *op. cit.*, II, p. 98.

⁶ In an unpublished notebook of Watts, for which see: Julia Dudkiewicz and Carol Willoughby, "A Long-Lost Painting by G F Watts Rediscovered and Identified: Meeting of Samson and Delilah," *The British Art Journal*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2010), p. 105.

⁷ Mrs. C. Wylie, "Some Account of Gesso Duro," *The Queen*, 7 December 1889, p. 802 and 28 December 1889, p. 937. *The Queen: The Ladies Newspaper and Court Chronicle* later became *Harpers & Queen*, then *Harper's Bazaar*. On the use of gesso as a pictorial medium, see: Janice Helland, "'Designful Beauty': sensuality, tea, and gesso," in *Craft, Space, and Interior Design, 1855-2005*, eds. Sandra Alfoldy and Janice Helland, Aldershot-Burlington, 2008, especially pp. 51-53.

⁸ For a succinct accounting of the history and significance of the Society, see: Imogen Hart, "On the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society," *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*, ed. Dino Franco Felluga. Extension of *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*. Web. [Accessed December 2022].

⁹ *Twilight*, together with another work, *The God of Love*, were exhibited as well at the World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893. See: *Official Catalogue of the World's Columbian Exposition*, Chicago, 1893, p. 15, cat no. 121. The works are listed under the headings "Great Britain / Woman's Work" in Department M (Ethnology, Archaeology, Progress of Labor and Invention). The works are described as "gesso duro" in *Royal Commission for the Chicago Exhibition, 1893. Official Catalogue of the British Section*, London, 1893, p. 418.

¹⁰ *Arts & Crafts Exhibition Society: Catalogue of the Fourth Exhibition*, London, The New Gallery, 1893, p. 57, cat. no. 457.

¹¹ The theatrical portraits were sold at Christie's, London, 7 February 1910. Among the works gifted to the National Portrait Gallery were Sir Godfrey Kneller's portrait of the actor Anthony Leigh (NPG1280) and George Clint's portrait of the comedian Joseph Shepherd Munden (NPG1283).

¹² Charlotte's sister Dorothy was the recipient of all her property (including "pictures") according to her will dated 7 February 1910.

¹³ Mrs. Albert Leaf was born Rose Major, the younger sister of Charlotte. Mrs. John Newmarch was Dorothy Hester Ridley, Charlotte's sister and the widow of Matthew White Ridley, who had died in 1888. She and her husband were residents of Caterham and donated the window. See Margaret Duck, *The Parish Church of St. John the Evangelist, Caterham Valley, Surrey; The Stained Glass* (Brandeston 2010), p. 3. We are grateful to Revd Father Jerry Garton CA, Vicar of St. John's the Evangelist, Caterham Valley, for his generous assistance and for kindly supplying the photographs of the window.