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The art collection of John Waterloo Wilson (1815-1883)

By Marijne Boland on 23 June 2025

The British-Belgian cotton manufacturer John Waterloo Wilson (1815-1883) brought together an impressive collection of seventeenth-century and contemporary art. Wilson is no unknown collector and manufacturer. Through his connections in the Paris art world, his name appears frequently in auctions and correspondence. In Haarlem, the Wilsonsplein is named after his family, while in Brussels a street was named after him. Nevertheless, little is known about the fate of his collection. In an ongoing project, initiated by a descendant of Wilson, Wilson's art collection is being reconstructed with the help of auction catalogues (1874 and 1881), an exhibition catalogue (1873) and Wilson's stock book (1876-1881). This reconstruction offers valuable insights into his collecting practices and artistic preferences, and is being made accessible through RKD Research.



Attributed to Heinrich Siebert I, *Portrait of John Waterloo Wilson (1815-1883)*, ca. 1840, pastel, private collection

John Waterloo Wilson

John Waterloo Wilson (<https://rkd.nl/artists/434290>) (1815-1883) was born in Brussels in 1815 into a wealthy British family.¹ (#footnote1_DXIGFy7xjORE6T-JjFKUjtEAM3jsel640BQsQJYQkss_eslpZOT6kLn7) After his father's textile factory burned down during the Belgian Revolution of 1830, the family moved from Brussels to Haarlem, where his father opened a new cotton factory. After completing his studies in London and Manchester, Wilson joined the company and took on part of its management. In the years that followed, father and son further expanded their fortune by investing in the Dutch railway system. Additionally, in 1856 Wilson bought 400 hectares of land in the newly reclaimed Haarlemmermeer to lease out, further increasing his capital.

On 14 March 1839, Wilson married Wilhelmina Christina van Valkenburg (1814-1844), the daughter of the former mayor of Haarlem.² (#footnote2_txgaa9hGgdxNrvlgawRWkDXyGn3E8ZU-NqyfrTyHVjo_aQfkPg87xYZT) They had three children who reached adulthood. After the birth of his fourth child in 1844, Wilhelmina died; twelve weeks later, his newborn daughter also passed away. Wilson never remarried. Following the death of Wilhelmina Christina van Valkenburg, her brother, Johan Frederick Theodoor van Valkenburg, was appointed co-guardian of the children alongside Wilson. Whether this arrangement served any purpose other than supervision is unknown.

In 1853, Wilson officially took over his father's bleaching and printing business in Haarlem. The company was doing well, largely due to the central role played by cotton exports to the Dutch East Indies. From the 1860s onwards, Wilson was challenged with rising wages, an outdated factory and health problems, which he likely contracted during his travels through Europe and the Middle East. A lingering conflict with the municipality of Haarlem over the discharge of wastewater into the city canals further contributed to his decision to shut down the business in 1872.³ (#footnote3_JkZCMsBP9ynSp-aGbyhg9FzOJKG3NT3edfahG5Xf7mw_jTy3RKGLipcj) The factory was largely demolished, and the site was left in a state of disrepair. Although the city council argued that this meant the leasehold had expired, Wilson refused to give up his rights. The case was only settled in 1879, when Wilson and the municipality reached a compromise. As reconciliation, Wilson donated the painting *Kenau Simons Hasselaer op de wallen van Haarlem* (<http://collectie.franshalsmuseum.nl/?query=search=objectid=13876&showtype=record>) to the city, and the municipality renamed the Raamplein to Wilsonsplein. After closing the factory, Wilson left the Netherlands and settled in Paris, where he devoted himself entirely to collecting art.⁴ (#footnote4_FWgkKk9dhHy9IIIub9XhPAUS51JPSCf7b-txd-8oWI_trGQK0XjBxGd)



1 / 3: Jean-François Millet, The Angelus, 1857-1859, oil on canvas, Paris, Mu



The art collection

During his years in Paris, Wilson assembled an impressive art collection of around five hundred paintings. Between 1872 and 1881, he bought and sold art through auctions and advisors, lent paintings for exhibitions, and donated artworks to institutions including the Louvre and the municipality of Brussels.⁵

(#footnote5_UN1MwlqxQM1WBtpb7FnTESmOy637CLsfyhRc9u8M3E_aPk6M4CXioDK) In 1878, he played an important role in founding the Brussels City Museum, to which he donated 27 paintings and bequeathed a sum of money for future acquisitions.

The four sources that document Wilson's collection provide a clear picture of what he collected.⁶ (#footnote6_y4IMZYAdYbflSgeNoXoi5qyjdum7XpE9J8lj2eZyVQ_hx2lViOMHoe9) His collection consisted of seventeenth-century and then-contemporary paintings from various national schools, including Dutch, French, Flemish, English and Italian. The exhibition catalogue, auction catalogues and the stock book show that seventeenth-century Northern Netherlandish and nineteenth-century French art, particularly works from the Barbizon School, were the most prominent.

Various art dealers and experts played an important role in the formation of Wilson's collection. The Belgian dealer Léon Gauchez (<https://rkd.nl/artists/361658>) (1825-1907) was a key figure in this: acting as an advisor and intermediary, he regularly purchased paintings on Wilson's behalf. Gauchez often appears in sources under different pseudonyms, such as Henri Perrier and Léon Mancino, which makes him something of a mysterious character.⁷

(#footnote7_oxYYwBnzCGvAfIC7FMD37LqJroGnkPKPEPJxuuUqj8_hd4t9gaf9nc8) The dealer Étienne le Roy (1808-1878) and art expert Alexis Joseph Fèbvre (<https://rkd.nl/artists/458117>) (1810-1881) also advised Wilson. Gauchez and Fèbvre were, among other things, responsible for appraising Wilson's collection and compiling the stock book. In Paris, Wilson also had contact with Paul Durand-Ruel (<https://rkd.nl/artists/351561>) (1831-1922), who managed the auction of his collection in 1874 and to whom he lent several works for a retrospective exhibition dedicated to the Barbizon School.⁸ (#footnote8_8RcR0jm-QgoQxuQFPIYPj-f-V8HkGqp6ikoFABE9VM_klVMlo9bp6lP)

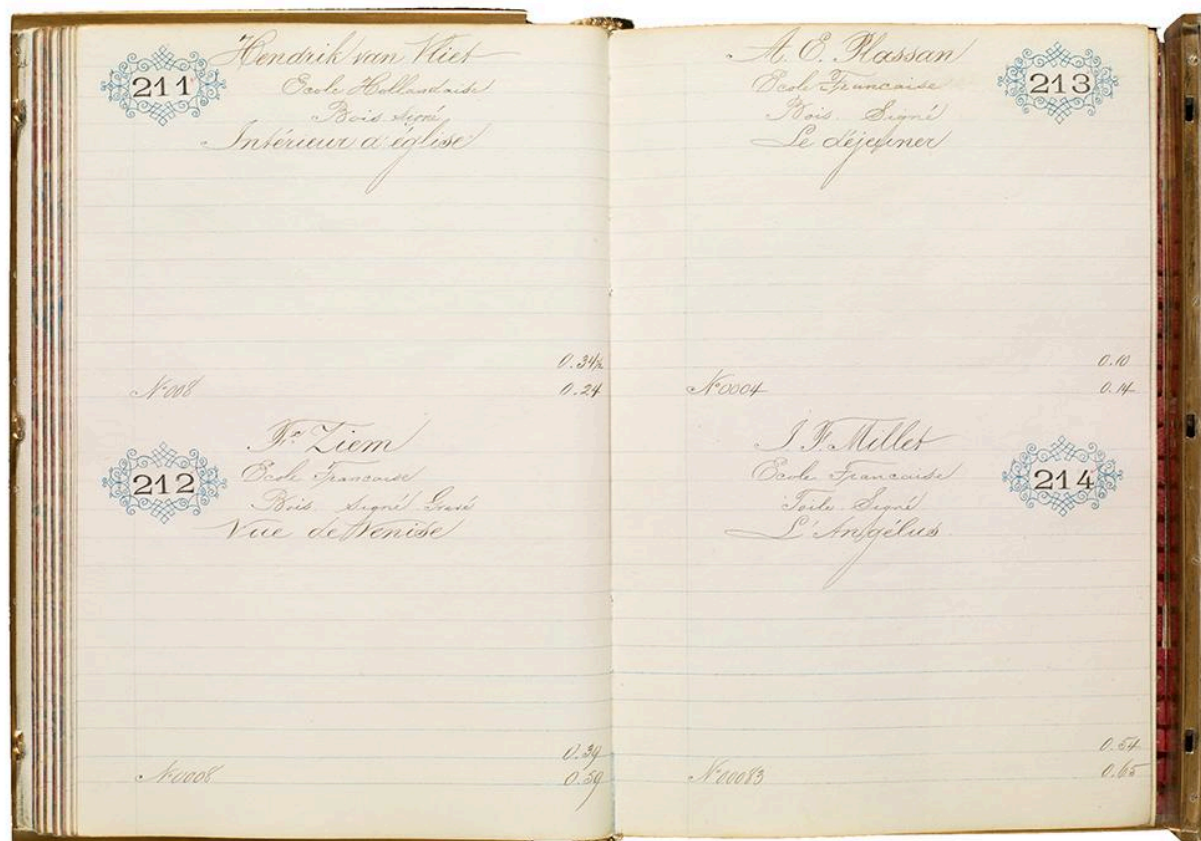
The auction and the loan of works for exhibitions must have given Wilson's collection some notoriety in the Paris art world. Especially the 1873 Brussels exhibition he organized, which featured only works from his own collection, brought him wider attention. The provenance of an artwork could – and this is still the case – significantly

influence its market value, especially if it was once owned by a prominent collector or exhibited in a major museum. In this regard, it is relevant that the “Collection Wilson” is regularly mentioned in auction catalogues, suggesting that he and his collection enjoyed a certain level of fame.

A striking example is Jean-François Millet's *The Angelus* (<https://rkd.nl/images/267308>). Wilson bought *The Angelus* for 38,000 francs and later sold it for 160,000 francs, illustrating the growing appreciation of Millet's work. After being in Wilson's possession, the painting passed through several prominent collections, including those of Eugène Secretan and Alfred Chauchard. Chauchard eventually donated *The Angelus* to the Louvre. Today, the painting is part of the collection of the Musée d'Orsay (<https://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr/oeuvres/langelus-345>).

Wilson's motivations for collecting art remain unclear, though evidence suggests he may have viewed it as a form of investment. As a factory owner and investor, he was strategic with his money, and art offered opportunities to expand his wealth. In a short period of time, he purchased many paintings through advisors who knew which works were likely to increase in value over time. Increasing the collection's visibility through exhibitions and auctions would likely have served to elevate both its reputation and market value. It is therefore probably no coincidence that he organised an auction a year after his collection was exhibited in 1873. The image of Wilson's art collection as an investment is reinforced by the amount of money he earned from the sale of paintings. The purchase and sale prices of many works are documented, and in most instances, the sale price exceeds the original purchase price, as illustrated in the example above.

The increase in value of paintings in Wilson's collection is also clearly visible in the *Portrait of Pieter van den Broecke (1585-1640)* (<https://rkd.nl/images/148984>) by Frans Hals from 1633. According to Wilson's stock book, the work was valued at 40,000 francs at the time, while in 1881 it was sold to Eugène Secrétan for 78,100 francs. Another clear example is *Landscape with cattle and figures near a pond* (<https://rkd.nl/images/343401>), *with cattle and figures near a pond* by Constant Troyon. Wilson bought this work in 1873 for 19,200 francs and sold it a year later for 26,000 francs. In 1876, he bought it back for 17,000 francs, only to sell it again in 1881 for 31,500 francs. He thus profited twice from the same painting. The substantial profits Wilson made on these sales seem to confirm his strategic approach to collecting. Nevertheless, personal interest in art may well have influenced his choices.



Page from John Waterloo Wilson's stock book, circa 1876–1881. Number 214 refers to The Angelus by Jean-François Millet. [Collection Getty Research Institute](#). Photo: Getty Research Institute.

The provenance research

Prints of the artworks included in both the exhibition and auction catalogues play a crucial role in reconstructing John Waterloo Wilson's art collection. Titles of artworks can change over time, and when a piece is traded internationally—especially outside France—it can be challenging to verify its identity. However, the catalogues generally lack prints of the included artworks, which means we must rely primarily on the artwork's dimensions and the accompanying descriptions. When a catalogue of the artist's oeuvre is available, this is also consulted. Many of the auction catalogues in the RKD collection are annotated, allowing us to determine how much was paid for a work and by whom it was purchased.

For research into John Waterloo Wilson's art collection, his stock book is also of great importance. In addition to recording the painting's dimensions, title and artistic school, all entries in the stock book include an inventory number and another, rather mysterious number. Ingrid Goddeeris discovered that these last numbers correspond to the purchase price of the respective artwork, but are written down mirrored.⁹

(#footnote9_oxYYwBnzCGvAfC7FMD37LqJroGnkPKPEPJxuuUqj8_fLIq54fDNI6Y) This

information makes it possible to assess the differences between purchase and sale prices. Notably, Wilson organised his collection in a manner reminiscent of a gallery: he

refers to 'ma galerie' in the stock book, and the collection is systematically arranged. Although he is generally described in the literature as an art collector, the stock book suggests that he may have had ambitions to become an art dealer.

Fate of the collection

In 1881, Wilson sold his collection "pour cause de départ", after which the works were scattered around the world.¹⁰

(#footnote10_25jAgANuYcwgl4D01Zz1mfYx8qHHs4mBFjXTG8MhpU_fpJltgXFyOgd) Shortly

before this, he was appointed an officer in the National Order of the Legion of Honour (l'Ordre National de la Légion d'Honneur) by the French state, in recognition of his dedication to the arts.¹¹

(#footnote11_2A1r3dNOvLrGL4tXrHYavpm8bRI73WWXn9vTTJG4DU_kFZQ9L00kGky) Wilson

likely left Paris due to his declining health, although it remains unclear why he chose to sell his collection rather than bequeath it to his children. John Waterloo Wilson died two years later, in 1883, in Neuilly-sur-Seine. A significant part of his collection found its way to leading museums such as the Louvre and the Musée d'Orsay in Paris and The National Gallery in London, a testament to the high quality of the artworks Wilson collected.

Auteur



Marijne Boland

Marijne Boland studied history at Utrecht University and completed a master's degree in Museum Studies at the University of Amsterdam. Over the past year, she has been researching the art collector John Waterloo Wilson and has catalogued his art collection in the RKD database.

- 1 His biographical details are taken from: B. Dudok van Heel, "De Familie Van John Waterloo Wilson", *Cahiers Bruxellois/Brusselse Cahiers* 48 (2016), pp. 25-39; I. Goddeeris, "La Contribution de Léon Gauchez Dans la Constitution, Valorisation et Diffusion de la Collection de Tableaux de John Waterloo Wilson", *ibidem*, pp. 41-81; M. Vrebos, "John Waterloo Wilson en het Brusselse Stadsmuseum", *ibidem*, pp. 105-133; A. Watson, "An Englishman in Paris. John Waterloo Wilson's Remarkable Collection of French Nineteenth-Century Art", *ibidem*, pp. 83-104; D.E.W. Wilbrenninck, "John Waterloo Wilson (1815-1883)", *ibidem*, pp. 5-24; P.L. Durand-Ruel and F. Durand-Ruel, *Paul Durand-Ruel. Memoirs of the First Impressionist Art Dealer (1831-1922)*, Paris 2014.
- 2 Dudok van Heel 2016 (see note 1).
- 3 W.T. Kroese, 'Haarlem, textielstad in de negentiende eeuw' (Haarlem, textile city in the nineteenth century), *Textielhistorische Bijdragen* 20 (1979), pp. 53-91, p. 82.
- 4 Goddeeris 2016 (see note 1), p. 44.
- 5 Watson 2016 (see note 1).
- 6 The catalogues of the two auctions of Wilson's collection from 1874 and 1881 are available in various versions and with annotations at the RKD. The exhibition catalogue: *Collection de M. John W. Wilson, exposée dans la galerie du Cercle artistique et littéraire de Bruxelles au profit des pauvres de cette ville*, Brussels 1873. The stock book concerns the collection of John Waterloo Wilson from the period 1876 to 1881. Of the 370 works described, the first 291 were already in Wilson's possession when this inventory was drawn up. This source is accessible via the Getty Research Institute.
- 7 Goddeeris 2016 (see note 1).
- 8 Durand-Ruel and Durand-Ruel 2014 (see note 1), p. 145.
- 9 Goddeeris 2016 (see note 1).
- 10 *Sale Paris (George Petit), 14–16 March 1881; Catalogue de tableaux de premier ordre anciens et modernes composant la galerie de M. John W. Wilson.*
- 11 Watson 2016 (see note 1), p. 102.