

# Willie Anne Wright

Artist & Alchemist

October 21, 2023–April 28, 2024

**VMFA**

VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

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**Willie at Ruth's Farm, August 16,**  
1984  
Silver dye bleach print

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.329

## INTRODUCTION

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For more than sixty years, artist Willie Anne Wright has created alluring, witty, and provocative pictures that merge past with present, coaxing hidden narratives from the surfaces of reality. Born in Richmond in 1924, Wright studied psychology and art at William & Mary. In 1946, she married John “Jack” Wright, with whom she raised three children, all while taking art classes at night. In 1960, she entered the MFA program at Richmond Professional Institute (now Virginia Commonwealth University), where she met and was mentored by its founder, Theresa Pollak.

Wright quickly forged a distinctive style that merged a contemporary Pop Art sensibility with canny references to a longer history of art. Her paintings reveal a fascination with changing roles of women and new forms of media, like television. She exhibited work all over Virginia, notably in a 1967 solo show at

## INTRODUCTION

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VMFA's Robinson House, and as part of a major survey of American painting at VMFA in 1970.

In 1972, Wright took a photography class and learned how to make a pinhole camera. This simple box with a tiny hole and sheet of photographic paper or film changed her life as an artist. Over the next five decades, she produced a revelatory body of photographs, from imaginative self-portraits and witty still lifes to studies of Civil War reenactors, somber landscapes, and complex photograms invoking Victorian culture. *Willie Anne Wright: Artist and Alchemist* is the first museum exhibition to celebrate the full sweep of this artist's remarkable career.

## EARLY PHOTOGRAPHS AND COLOR WORK

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Wright first encountered pinhole photography in 1972. With no lens and no viewfinder, a pinhole camera requires patience and intuition to operate—exposure times are long and there is no way to see what the picture will look like ahead of time. What drew Wright to this process was its ability to connect her to the past. She had studied the work of nineteenth-century photographers, and many of her early works reveal these influences, including some self-portraits and still lifes made in tribute to specific artists.

In 1976, Wright began experimenting with color photography, using the silver dye bleach process. She placed sheets of Cibachrome (a relatively new color material) directly into her camera, composed the view, and made an exposure. The resulting photographs—unique objects made without a negative—merge the dreamy focus and

## EARLY PHOTOGRAPHS AND COLOR WORK

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stretched-out space of pinhole photography with the contemporary look of bold, rich color. As Wright's facility with this material progressed, she began expanding the scale of her work, making lush and expansive 16x20 inch prints in a bespoke camera.



## **One Night at Jimmy's We Saw the Supremes on Color Television,**

1967

Liquitex on canvas

This joyful work captures the novelty of color TV, Motown music, and the cultural impact of Diana Ross and the Supremes, the glamorous Black superstars whose frequent performances on the mainstream *Ed Sullivan Show* during the height of the civil rights movement crossed the color line. This painting is one of three works by Wright selected for the 1967 Virginia Artist Biennial at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, where it won the museum's purchase award.

General Endowment Fund, 67.15.4



## **House with Tree, Williamsburg,**

1942

Oil on canvas

When Wright enrolled at William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, in 1941, she majored in psychology. She also audited art classes and studied with Thomas Thorne, a highly regarded teacher and painter. Produced when she was still an undergraduate student, this painting affirms Wright's early affinity for vivid color and bold line as well as her admiration for the modern masters, especially Cézanne, Matisse, Van Gogh, and Rouault.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.240





## **Green Supremes, 1969**

Acrylic on canvas

Wright was captivated by the cultural and technological shifts of the 1960s. “We’re living in an exciting period—a period of change,” she noted in 1967. “Value patterns are changing and to me it’s fascinating.” Wright included references to television in many of her works from this period. She was also inspired by snapshots that her husband Jack made of television sets, noting in a 1967 interview that “so much of our visual information is second hand, fed into our receptors from the TV, newspaper and magazines, that these images are valid as a subject for art.”

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.246



## **Homage to Y. A.,** ca. 1971

Oil on canvas

This monochromatic painting honors Y. A. Tittle, a Pro Football Hall of Fame quarterback who had retired in 1965 after leading the New York Giants to NFL championship games three years running. Wright's inventive multipanel structure organizes the canvas into different narrative moments that invoke newspaper and television imagery as well as diagrams of football plays. Television had recently transformed football into a mass spectator sport; in 1966, Tittle published a booklet titled *How to Watch Football on TV*.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.245



**To O. G. Rejlander and Diana Ross,**  
1967

Acrylic on canvas

In 1967, Wright started making paintings inspired by a 19th-century photograph, *Ariadne*, by Oscar Gustave Rejlander. *Ariadne* appears here both as a life-size reclining model and in smaller form as a photograph. Graphite squares covering this section of the canvas refer to a painting technique for translating a small sketch or photograph into a larger composition. On the right side of the canvas, Diana Ross is rendered in abstract black-and-white forms. This area of the canvas is covered by finely drawn, horizontal marks that conjure television lines. The painting brings together Wright's interests in older and newer forms of media and icons of feminine beauty.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.242



*Ariadne*, 1857, Oscar Gustaf Rejlander (Swedish, 1813–1875), Albumen print, 8  $\frac{1}{16}$  x 6  $\frac{1}{8}$  in. National Gallery of Art, Paul Mellon Fund, 2007.29.38 Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington



## **Venus and Morning Glories, ca. 1969**

Acrylic on canvas

On a trip to Europe in 1967, Wright became fascinated with the *Medici Venus*, a famous Hellenistic marble sculpture depicting the ancient Greek goddess of love. Wright produced a series of paintings that feature an up-to-date Venus, here doubled and placed against a decorative background of flowers.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.243



*The Medici Venus*. 1st century BCE, marble, height, without the base: 60 1/4 in. Uffizi, Florence, Italy. Photo credit: Scala/Ministero per i Beni e le Attività culturali / Art Resource, NY





## **For Heraclitus, 1971**

Silk screen on canvas

*I had been painting as if I were silk screening and then decided to learn silk screening itself.*

In the late 1960s, Wright began to explore printmaking by creating abstract silk screens from photographs of waves, clouds, and other phenomena. Her sources included surfing magazines, newspapers, advertisements, and snapshots by her husband, Jack, then the family shutterbug. Rendered in thick florescent swaths of paint, the pulsing patterns evoke soundwaves, transmissions, and other vibrational phenomena. The title of this work refers to the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who proposed that reality is a constant state of flux.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.244



## Hand with Fig and Hand with Fig #2,

1978

Acrylic on canvas

Although Wright directed most of her creative energies after 1972 toward photography, she continued to paint throughout her career and often used her own photographs as source material and inspiration for her canvases. This pair of paintings showing hands delicately holding figs recalls some of the photographs of figs Wright made a few years earlier in her garden.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.247.1–.2



*Figs*, mid-1970s, Willie Anne Wright (American, born 1924), silver dye bleach print, 9 <sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 7 <sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Foundation, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2022.269



**Standing in the Colonnade**, ca. 1974  
Gelatin silver print

Willie Anne Wright Artist Archives (VA-02). Gift of Willie Anne Wright. Margaret R. and Robert M. Freeman Library, VMFA Archives, VA02.04.02.008





## **Ann, Maymont, 1974**

Gelatin silver print

This photograph is part of a series Wright made of young women posing in the gardens and ornate interiors of Maymont Mansion, at the spectacular estate in Richmond. Wright, who was initially drawn to pinhole photography because it connected her more directly with the past, looked to the example of 19th-century photographers like Lady Clementina Hawarden. Wright also toned her prints with sepia to give them the appearance of 19th-century photographs. In 1974, she exhibited these prints in an exhibition held at Maymont's Dooley Mansion.

Willie Anne Wright Artist Archives (VA-02). Gift of Willie Anne Wright. Margaret R. and Robert M. Freeman Library, VMFA Archives, VA02.04.02.009



*5 Princes Gardens*, c. 1862–1863, Lady Clementina Hawarden (English, 1822–1865), Albumen print, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Given by Lady Clementina Tottenham 457-230-1968  
Photo Credit: V&A Images, London / Art Resource, NY



**The Arbor, 1972**  
Gelatin silver print

Wright was enamored with 19th-century British art and photography. She mounted several of her photographs, including this one, onto wallpapers designed by William Morris (1834–1896), a designer, artist, writer, and leader of the British Arts and Crafts movement. Wright even wrapped one of her pinhole cameras in the same Morris print paper used as the mount for this work.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.248



**Margaret at the Window: Summer  
'72, 1972**  
Gelatin silver print

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.249





**Maymont—Flowering Tree, 1981**  
Silver dye bleach print

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.285



## **Maymont—The Italian Garden, 1980**

Silver dye bleach print

Until the late 1960s, most serious art photographers made black-and-white prints. Color photography was more closely associated with commercial work. This changed in the 1970s when many photographic artists, including Wright, began exploring color. Wright was probably the first artist to use silver dye bleach (Cibachrome) materials directly in her camera to produce a direct positive (a term that refers to making a print directly in the camera without a negative). Because the silver dye bleach process was designed to make prints by exposing slides or transparencies in a darkroom, Wright experimented with exposure times and filters to adjust for the difference between sunlight and the tungsten or artificial light used in a darkroom.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.286



## **Gourd Sequence #2, #4, #5, #8,**

1976–77

Silver dye bleach prints

In July 1976, Wright photographed a pile of gourds in her garden. Over the next year, she made nine more prints, tracing the gradual transformation from ripe fruit to rotting carcasses, to snow covered mound, to delicate shells surrounded by new flowers. While this sequence explores the concept of the *memento mori* (an image or symbol that acts as a reminder of death), it also shows how Wright mined her surroundings for inspiration and experimentation.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment 2022.275;  
2022.277; 2022.278; 2022.281



## **Self Portrait (Artist with a Gourd),**

1978

Silver dye bleach print

In the mid-1970s, Wright began to experiment with color photography by placing sheets of a relatively new color print material, Cibachrome, directly into her camera and making an exposure. This material is composed of multiple layers of light-sensitive silver salts and color dyes on a polyester base. After an exposure is made, the print is developed first with traditional black-and-white developers and then bleached to remove dyes in a way that will produce a positive color image. The silver dye bleach process gets its name from this treatment; it is also known as the dye destruction process. Introduced as Cibachrome in 1963 and later rebranded as Ilfochrome, this material was discontinued in 2011.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.284





## **Fruits and Flowers—Homage to Roger Fenton, 1983**

Silver dye bleach print

Wright's interest in 19th-century photography inspired a series of photographic homages that played with the link between past and present. In this work, Wright tucked a reproduction of an 1860 still life by Roger Fenton into the middle of her own lush, vibrantly colored composition, spilling over with ripe tomatoes, split-open pumpkins, gourds and a pineapple. A contemporary writer described Wright's photographs as "simultaneously old master still lifes, hilarious take offs on old master still lifes, tender tributes to the history of art, and slick modern photographs . . . they have the chiaroscuro of the 16th century, the weird perspective of El Greco and the pearly tones of 20th century dye-in-plastic."

Gift of Willie Anne Wright in memory of Etta Bethel,  
2012.51



## **Homage to Julia Margaret Cameron,**

ca. 1976–8

Silver dye bleach print

Wright, who was fascinated with 19th-century British photography, photographed herself in the guise of pioneering photographer Julia Margaret Cameron while holding a portrait of Cameron. Wright then rephotographed this self-portrait at an angle to produce a second, reversed self-portrait. She then carefully cut around and collaged the first print onto the second, creating a complex visual game of mirroring and doubling. Wright saw herself as a modern version of Cameron, who was renowned for her close-up, soft-focus portraits of women and children.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.315

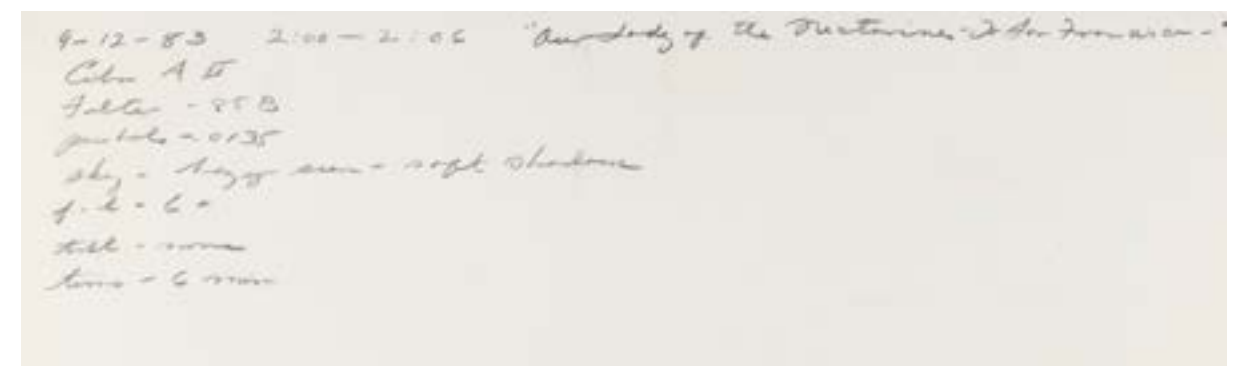
## Our Lady of the Nectarines for San Francisco #3, 1980

Silver dye bleach print



An avid experimenter, Wright frequently recorded exposure notes on the back of her photographs. Here, she noted the date, time, length of exposure, type of paper, size of pinhole, focal length (the distance between the pinhole and the back of the camera where the paper is), camera tilt (to control perspective), the filter used, and the atmospheric conditions (“hazy sun—soft shadows”).

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.324



*Our Lady of the Nectarines for San Francisco #3* (reverse, detail)



## **Memories of Anne and Evelyn— Backyard #3, 1982**

Silver dye bleach print

While many of Wright's still lifes reveal her irreverent and quirky sense of humor, this photograph is infused with deeper personal meaning. In 1982, Wright's mother, Anne, and aunt Evelyn were killed in a car accident. Wright honored them in a series of poignant still life constructions that attest to their closeness (Evelyn, who never married, lived with the Wright family and helped raise Willie Anne).

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.328



**Still Life with Richard's Road, 1981**  
Silver dye bleach print

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.326





## **Mari Smoking, 1978**

Platinum print

In the 1970s, Wright explored different printing processes, including platinum prints. Since platinum printing paper was no longer commercially available, Wright produced her own by brushing the light-sensitive chemicals (a mixture of iron and platinum salts) directly onto the paper. Unless the artist uses a coated paper stock, the image in a platinum print is embedded into the fibers of the paper, which gives it a matte and feathery appearance.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.262



**Marsha, the Parasol #2**, ca. 1974

Gelatin silver print

When Wright first started exploring pinhole photography, she made both paper and film negatives in her camera. Paper negatives, a process that dates to the earliest years of photography, tend to produce soft, ethereal prints. Film negatives, including the one used to make this photograph, generally yield crisper, more detailed images.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.254



## **The Ritual Mask**, ca. 1978

Gelatin silver print

Wright explored the characteristics of the pinhole camera, including the distortion of space and pooling of light at the center of an otherwise dark visual field, in a series she called *Effigies*. This included surreal photographs of dolls, pillows with human faces, scarecrows, sculptural masks, and here, an uncanny portrait of a woman with what seem to be pantyhose over her face.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.250



- 1. Willie Anne and Gus, ca. 1972**  
Gelatin silver print

VA02.04.02.010

- 2. Jack, ca. 1975**  
Gelatin silver print

VA02.04.02.012

- 3. Hank's Calla Lilies, 1987**  
Ink on paper

VA02.03.05.005

- 4. Two Girls Near St. Mary's, 2003**  
Pencil on paper

VA02.03.05.006

All objects are courtesy of the Willie Anne Wright Artist Archives (VA-02). Gift of Willie Anne Wright, Margaret R. and Robert M. Freeman Library, VMFA Archives.



- 5. Maymont Park and Other Fantasies (Susan Eskey, Ann Savedge, Willie Anne Wright, Marg Lee Allen, Marsha Polier), 1975**  
Gelatin silver print

VA02.04.02.013

- 6. Jane H. Ware, 1972**  
Gelatin silver print

This portrait of classmate Jane Ware was the first pinhole photograph Wright made.

VA02.04.2.001

- 7. Exhibition Brochure, 1973**

VA02.01.0.262

All objects are courtesy of the Willie Anne Wright Artist Archives (VA-02). Gift of Willie Anne Wright, Margaret R. and Robert M. Freeman Library, VMFA Archives.



## POOLS, WATER, AND WOMEN

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In the early 1980s, Wright began photographing pools, beaches, and amusement parks. These modern sites of leisure allowed her to take advantage of brilliant sunlight and capture subjects at rest. While swimming pools created unusual geometries and effects, including reflective surfaces and rippling, drifting water, beaches offered interesting configurations of bodies. Sometimes the extended exposures captured moving figures as ghosts, infusing these pictures with a sense of mystery. Wright also photographed beaches and amusement parks in fall and winter. Her poignant pictures orchestrate light and space to convey the immensity of the ocean and the loneliness of these temporarily abandoned sites.

In 1987, Wright was asked to make a portrait of a pregnant woman who wanted to pose nude on the banks of the James River. This

## POOLS, WATER, AND WOMEN

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launched a new series of sensitive portraits that focused on pregnancy as a liminal state before the arrival of children. Wright's pictures probe the conflicting emotions—tension, apprehension, and fear, as well as contentment and joy—that pregnancy can produce. Her introspective pictures are built upon decades of astute observations of and reflections upon women and their experiences.



## **Aggie Swims, 1980s**

Silver dye bleach print

Although Wright primarily made photographs with a pinhole camera, she occasionally used a faster and sharper 35mm camera with a lens to capture subjects in movement. This print, made from a 35mm slide transparency, is part of a series of swimmers interacting with a piece of fabric. Wright noted that this subject allowed her to explore “transparency versus depth, with the body as the communicating link between surface and abyss.”

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.310



## **Before Lucca #2, 1987**

Silver dye bleach print

In 1987, a pregnant woman asked Wright to photograph her. Wright posed the subject along the James River, half immersed in water and reclining on a tree branch. This initial photo shoot eventually led to the photographer's extended series on pregnant women. While many women photographers who worked from home while tending to children explored motherhood as an artistic subject, Wright was more interested in pregnancy itself as a liminal and psychologically complex state, one that precedes and anticipates the inevitable rupture and remaking of identity that follows the birth of a child.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.409





**Before Leah and Audrey, 1988**  
Silver dye bleach print

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.411

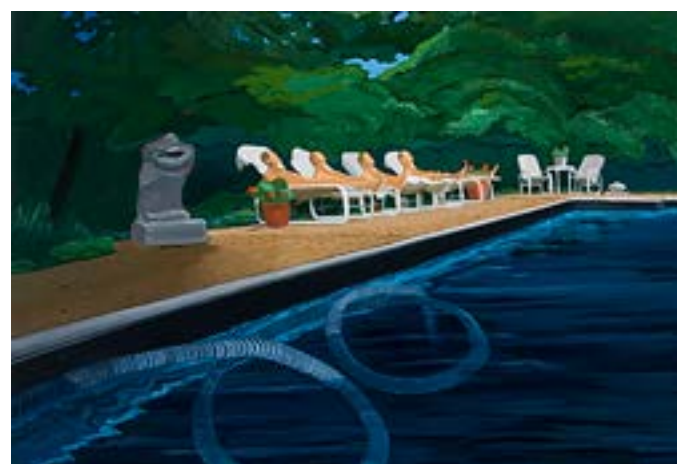


## **Pool and Hose, 1983**

Silver dye bleach Print

The exaggerated perspective, along with the four-minute exposure required to make this print, transformed a lazily drifting pool hose into a ghostly sea monster. Wright also represented this subject in a painting, though the hose appears far less ominous. Wright made this photograph at the home of Jack Blanton, an art collector who served as vice president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond and curator of its art collection.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.311



*Across the Pool, 1986, Willie Anne Wright (American, born 1924), acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 in., collection of the Longwood Center for the Visual Arts, Gift of Willie Anne Wright in honor of Jack Blanton, 2007.21.1, Image courtesy Longwood Center for the Visual Arts*





**Erica's Pool—Susan and Nicole, 1984**  
Silver dye bleach print

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, w



**Parrot Towel—Jack, Ruth, Hank—  
Virginia Beach, 1981**

Silver dye bleach print

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.295



**Anne S at Jack B's Pool (Back), 1984**

Silver dye bleach print

Starting around 1981, Wright began photographing backyard pools, often with figures splayed out along or floating inside the watery rectangles and ellipses. While the pinhole camera's optics exaggerated the geometries of these spaces, the brilliant light and colors infused the compositions with a limpid clarity. In this series, Wright pushed her long-standing interests in the representations and experiences of women into new territory.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.302



**Virginia Beach, Cavalier Pool #2,  
Louise, Marsha, Ruth, 1981**  
Silver dye bleach print

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.304



**Jack, Marsha, Melissa at  
Virginia Beach, 1980**

Silver dye bleach print

Wright's wide-angle and extended exposure captures different experiences in time: her husband, Jack, unmoving and engrossed in a book; the ghostly outlines of women who momentarily contemplate the water before moving on; and the milky, foamy streak formed by endlessly rolling waves. The most enduring figure in the picture is the one printed on the Matisse towel, though her human double runs a close second.

Kathleen Boone Samuels Memorial Fund, 2016.600





## **Municipal Pier, 1981**

Silver dye bleach print

The backward welcome sign in this picture is an artifact of camera reversal—prints made directly in a camera without a negative will appear laterally reversed. In this case, it also functions metaphorically to suggest the experience of dislocation and disorientation that the (temporarily) abandoned amusement park produced.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.290



**Atlantic City—Amusement Pier, 1981**  
Silver dye bleach print

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.296



**Louise Looks at the Ocean—Virginia Beach, 1981**

Silver dye bleach print

Wright photographed beaches, amusement parks, and other sites of leisure at times of peak visitation in high summer, but also returned during fall and winter to make pictures about space, light, and loneliness. Here, the barren boardwalk without end and the darkening of the afternoon sun convey a palpable sense of longing.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.293

## CIVIL WAR REDUX

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In 1987, Wright stumbled upon a Civil War reenactment in Richmond's Capitol Square. Fascinated by the spectacle, she documented it with her pinhole camera. "Even for someone not sympathetic with the Lost Cause," she explained, "being part of a grand-scale walk-in intersection of the past and present was an overwhelming experience." Over the next nineteen years, Wright attended forty-four reenactments on battlefields throughout the South. She depicted both Confederate and Union troops and was especially interested in the role of women and African American reenactors in these theaters of war.

The Civil War was the first major conflict to be thoroughly documented in photographs. Although nineteenth-century cameras were not fast enough to capture battles, nearly every other aspect of the war was photographed, including portraits, scenes of

## CIVIL WAR REDUX

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camp life, views of cannons, and moving (sometimes staged) views of death. Wright, who studied Civil War photography, found herself capturing reenactments of many of the same scenes. Yet she was equally fascinated with visible anachronisms, such as a Dodge truck parked at camp, because they revealed how reenactments, like photography, fused past and present.





**Gettysburg: Confederate Infantry,**  
1988  
Gelatin silver print

Gift of Willie Anne Wright in memory of Jack Wright,  
2015.260.11

## Chancellorsville, George A. Custer,

1988

Gelatin silver print

Wright was fascinated with the story of George Armstrong Custer, a showy and controversial figure who, at the age of 23, commanded the Union Army's Michigan Calvary Brigade and later died (along with nearly all his troops) in the 1876 Battle of Little Bighorn, giving rise to the myth of "Custer's Last Stand." Photographing the reenactor playing Custer from a low angle, Wright perfectly captures the general's fabled confidence as he leans casually against a tailgate that prominently reads Dodge and bears a US ARMY license plate, reminding us that this Custer is very much a product of the late 20th century.

Rudolph G. Seeley Fund, 91.56



**Sergeant Green, Massachusetts  
54th Volunteer Infantry, Richmond,  
1990**  
Gelatin silver print



*When I photograph  
reenactment activities, neither  
documentation of an event nor  
duplication of the photograph  
of an era is my aim.*

Although Wright was keenly aware of the historical examples of Civil War photography, she did not try to recreate its imagery. Her portrait of Sergeant Green, a reenactor who participated as part of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment—one of the first Black regiments to serve in the Civil War—is more spontaneous and direct than a typical Civil War portrait, which would have been carefully posed.

Gift of Willie Anne Wright, 91.34



**The Crater: Euchre Game on a  
Confederate Flag, Union Camp, 1989**  
Gelatin silver print

Gift of Willie Anne Wright in memory of Jack Wright,  
2015.260.12

**Leg Amputation, Richmond, 1988**  
Gelatin silver print

Wright was fascinated by the ways that Civil War reenactors sought to capture history with as much detail and authenticity as possible, even going so far as to recreate horrific amputations with realistic prosthetics. Wright also understood that photography—an art of simulacra—was the perfect medium to capture these reenactments, thus commingling past and present.

Gift of Willie Anne Wright in memory of Jack Wright,  
2015.260.17







**Gettysburg, 1988**  
Gelatin silver print

Gift of Willie Anne Wright, 91.33

## SOUTHLAND

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While documenting Civil War reconstructions, Wright began photographing graves, historical sites, and markers she encountered on her travels. This culminated in her first extended landscape series, *Southland*. Made in Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North and South Carolina, and Virginia during the 1990s, *Southland* conjures what Wright described as “evidence of lives lived and ways of life vanished.”

When referring to this series, Wright frequently invoked William Faulkner’s well-known quote: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” Wright’s photographs of abandoned homes and derelict structures seem to visualize Faulkner’s concept of the persistence of history. The pinhole camera’s peculiar optics—blurred edges, stretched space, uneven light—also add to the feeling of psychic dislocation. In one group of

## SOUTHLAND

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photographs, Wright spun up the literary and gothic associations by including a ghostly apparition—a woman in white who figures as an allegory of loss.



**Pitt Co., North Carolina: Vine  
Covered Barn—Rural Demolition,**

1990s

Gelatin silver print

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.404



**Richmond, Virginia, Ruins of a  
Building— Urban Demolition, 1990s**  
Gelatin silver print

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.403



**Ruins of Windsor, Near Port Gibson,  
Mississippi, 1993**

Gelatin silver print

This photograph depicts the ruins of Windsor mansion in Mississippi. Built between 1859 and 1861 and destroyed by fire in 1890, it was located on a 2,600-acre cotton plantation where approximately 500 enslaved people labored. Wright's vertiginous view looking upward at an agitated sky seems to channel this dramatic and painful past.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.400





**Slave Cabin, Near Charleston, South  
Carolina, 1997**  
Gelatin silver print

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.401



## **Fort Pulaski, Georgia, 1995**

Gelatin silver print

While traveling across the South photographing Civil War reconstructions, Wright began to document battlefields, historic markers, graveyards, and other sites that commemorated historical events. She was interested in the ways that landscapes both revealed and concealed signs of the past. Looking at this ethereal and quiet view of Fort Pulaski, a Confederate stronghold that was breached by Union forces during the early years of the Civil War, it is hard to imagine the devastation and violence wrought by the war. However, the American flag flying at the apex of the fort serves as a pointed reminder of the conflict, as well as its ultimate resolution.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.346



**Hanover County, Virginia:  
Abandoned House, Interior, 1997**  
Gelatin silver print

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.386



**Hanover County, Virginia:  
Abandoned House, Exterior, 1997**  
Gelatin silver print

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.385

**King William County, Virginia:  
Woman in White by an Abandoned  
House, 1998**

Gelatin silver print



Wright's *Southland* photographs culminated in a series devoted to the spectral figure of a woman in white who appears in or near a crumbling home. With their decaying settings, psychologically troubled characters, and sense of melancholy and unease, these photographs explore the key themes within the genre of Southern gothic literature. They also relate to the work of American photographer Clarence John Laughlin, who photographed antebellum ruins in the 1940s and 1950s, frequently using techniques like double exposure and introducing ghostly figures to create a sense of the uncanny. Wright admired Laughlin's work, which was exhibited at VMFA in 1986.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.390



## CHANNELING THE PAST

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Starting around 2000, Wright began to explore the photogram process, one of the earliest forms of photography. Made by placing objects directly onto light-sensitive papers and exposing them to light, photograms capture the physical trace of an object. Wright incorporated a wide array of Victorian-era items—like nineteenth-century photographic portraits, pressed flowers, and bits of antique lace—into her photograms. She was especially interested in vintage clothing and created ghostly evocations of christening gowns, gloves, and baby bonnets to forge connections between photography, memory, and the passage of time.

In 2006, Wright was given a *Brugmansia* (angel's-trumpet) plant, which she named Bobo. Wright began to use Bobo's stems and pendulous blossoms in photograms. She experimented with printing these

## CHANNELING THE PAST

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directly in sunlight, a process that yielded deep pink and rich violet tones. She also incorporated the plant into her series *Channeling the Tarot*, which was based on Pamela Colman Smith's illustrations for a tarot deck. Wright created her own version of the tarot by combining parts of Smith's original illustrations with *Brugmansia* blossoms to express the divinatory meaning of each card. Wright was keenly aware of the *Brugmansia* plant's reputation as a hallucinogen used in different cultures to communicate with the spirit world. For Wright, the flower's revelatory capacity mirrored her concept of photography as a form of alchemy that conjures the past into the present.



**Marlene's Brugmansia #2, 2006**  
Gelatin silver print

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.465



## **Judgement**, 2016

Gelatin silver print

Wright's Tarot series was inspired by the unconventional life and work of Pamela Colman Smith, a Jamaican-born writer, editor, folklorist, illustrator, painter, and occultist who launched a literary magazine in New York and showed her paintings at leading galleries. In 1909, Smith collaborated with British poet and mystic Arthur Edward Waite on designs for a 78-card tarot deck that was originally published by William Rider & Son. It was reintroduced in 1970 and soon became the most popular tarot deck in the world. Wright, who created her series after the deck's 22 Major Arcana cards, was struck by the fact that the *Brugmansia* plant's colloquial name—angel's-trumpet—lent itself so well to Smith's design for the card of Judgement: an angel blowing a trumpet.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.483



*Pamela Colman Smith, 2018, Willie Anne Wright (American, born 1924), gelatin silver print, 13 <sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 10 <sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2022.467*





**The Tower**, 2016  
Gelatin silver print

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.480



**The Star**, 2015  
Gelatin silver print

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.481



## The Hanged Man, 2016

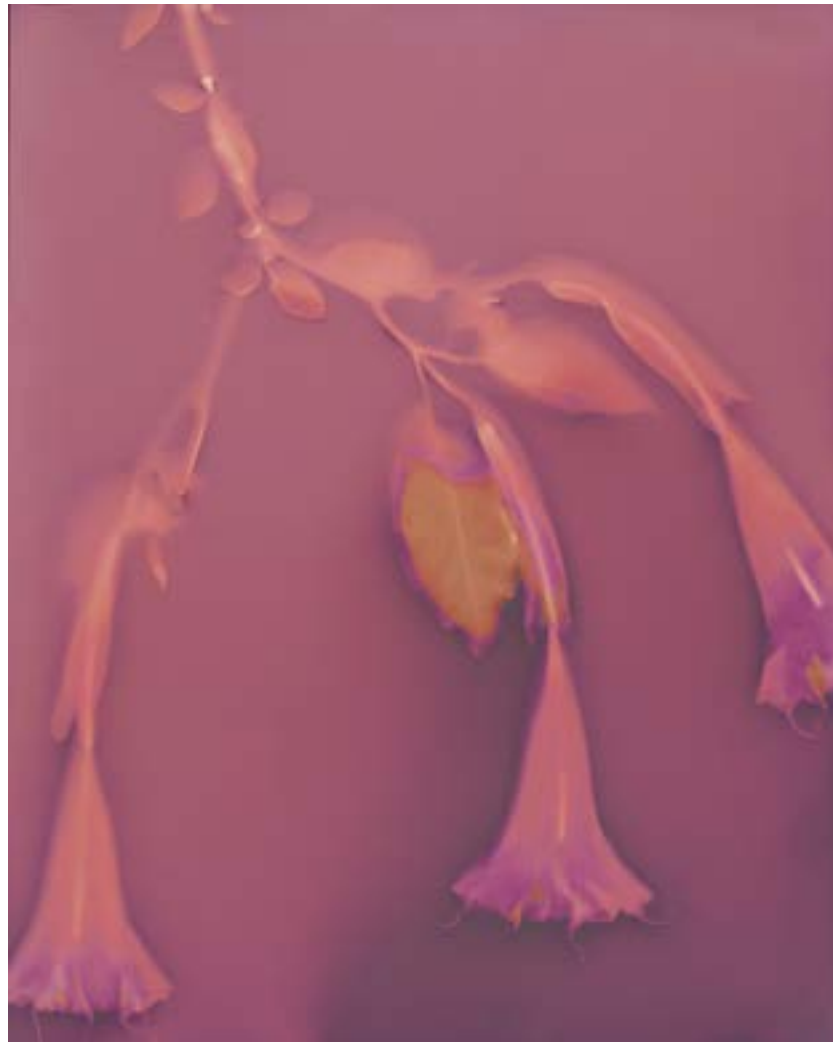
Gelatin silver print

In her Tarot series, Wright carefully arranged *Brugmansia* flowers and other decorative motifs to express the divinatory meaning of each card. Here, long, thin slivers of dried blossoms echo the dangling figure from Smith's deck. Despite its surface association with death, in the tarot the Hanged Man is understood as a channel or conduit "between the Universe and the Divine."

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.478



*The Hanged Man XII*, The Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot Deck, Pamela Colman Smith (British, 1878–1951) and Dr. Arthur Edward Waite (British, 1857–1942), Published by William Rider and Son of London, 1909



**Branch with Brugs, 2013**  
Gelatin silver print

Aldine S. Hartman Endowment Fund, 2014.238



**Sisters (Negative)**, 2013  
Gelatin silver print

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.447





**Brugs on a Branch, 2014**  
Gelatin silver print

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.462





**Brugs and Leaves, New Season, 2014**  
Gelatin silver print

To make her *Brugmansia* photographs, Wright arranged the blossoms, stems, and leaves of the plant on top of light-sensitive photographic papers and printed them in the sun for an extended exposure—in this case an hour. Working directly with sunlight produced remarkably rich tones, ranging from pink and purple to orange and green. These solar photographs, also known as lumen prints, reveal the delicate venation patterns of flowers and leaves. Some betray traces of their making as the flowers oozed liquid under the hot sun, creating bubbles and streaks.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.457



## **A Season of Vexation, 2013**

Gelatin silver print

A 19th-century cabinet card inspired Wright to make this collage (the original is in the case nearby). Wright was intrigued by the baleful look on this woman's face, as well as by the fact that she sported a different hairstyle than her compatriots. Wright's title, *A Season of Vexation*, underscores the subject's irritation, a demeanor at odds with both the poufy leg-of-mutton sleeves she wears and the clamorous flowers that surround her.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.445



**Three Ladies and their Shades, 2004**  
Gelatin silver print

A photogram is a cameraless image made by placing objects directly onto a sensitized sheet of paper and exposing it to light. The paper darkens in proportion to the amount of light received. In order to make this work, Wright scanned 19th-century photographs to make both negative and positive transparencies. She placed these onto the sensitized paper at staggered intervals in order to create the impression of the women accompanied by their ghosts.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.444



**Pressed Flowers, 2004**  
Gelatin silver print

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.451





## **Twins We Were (Negative), 2004**

Gelatin silver print

Wright, who attributes her long-standing interest in twin imagery to her zodiac sign (Gemini), here plays with the possibilities of doubling inherent to photography. While a photogram reproduces the image laid on top of it in negative-positive reverse, the resulting photogram can then be used to produce a second, inverted image: its reversed twin.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.448



**Not Forgotten, Coffin Point, St  
Helena's Island SC: Young Man with  
High Collar, 2005**

Gelatin silver print



Wright was fascinated with the common Victorian uses of photography to commemorate the death of a loved one, as well as the fad for spirit photography, a genre of carefully crafted images that purported to capture the soul of the departed.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.456



## **Gracie with Dress, 2005**

Gelatin silver print

In this work, Wright layered different registers of photography to evoke a sense of the supernatural. She originally photographed a tomb sculpture in Savannah's Bonaventure Cemetery that commemorates Gracie Watson, a child who died in 1889 at age six and was reputed to haunt nearby Pulaski Square. Wright placed the original negative of the tomb sculpture, an antique child's dress, and a single dried flower onto photosensitive paper and exposed it to light to create ghostly outlines that make it seem as if the child's spirit is flying away.

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.436



## **The Treasured Dresses, 2000**

Gelatin silver print

For Wright, photography is not just a way of preserving the past, but also reanimating it. In the early 2000s, she began photographing antique garments in new configurations that invoke the lives of their original wearers: “I capture the aura of the departed by using a pinhole camera to photograph the garments left behind. These intimate possessions, which enveloped the living body, are used to create tableaux that recall the activities of former lives.”

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.422



**Three Christening Gowns, 2003**  
Gelatin silver print

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.433





**Caroline, Kate and Friends Consult  
the Tarot, 2001**

Gelatin silver print

Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2022.428



- 1. Collar**, ca. 1910s  
Lace with jeweled embellishments  
L.2023.17.6
- 2. Arthur Edward Waite**, designer  
English, 1857–1942  
**Pamela Colman Smith**,  
illustrator  
English, 1878–1951  
**Rider-Waite Tarot Cards**, designed  
1909, printed later, with leather box  
L2023.17.3
- 3. Child's Dress**, early 20th century  
Cotton  
L2023.17.5

Unless otherwise noted, all objects are from the collection of Willie Anne Wright.



**4. Wright's William Morris Pinhole Camera, 1970s**

Cardboard, wallpaper, black tape

Willie Anne Wright Artist Archives (VA-02). Gift of Willie Anne Wright, Margaret R. and Robert M. Freeman Library, VMFA Archives, VA02.05.1.001



**5. Walter Washington Foster Studio**

Richmond, Virginia, active

1870s–1930s

**Portrait of Five Women, ca. 1890s**

Albumen print

L2023.17.1

Unless otherwise noted, all objects are from the collection of Willie Anne Wright.