

The Art of Ellis Wilson



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" From the tobacco fields of western Kentucky to the streets of Harlem, from the Gullah Islands off the South Carolina and Georgia coasts to the all-black republic of Haiti, painter Ellis Wilson (1899-1977) examined the scope and depth of black culture. One of

Kentucky's most significant African American artists, Wilson graduated from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1923. He spent five more years in the city before moving to New York, where he lived for the rest of his life. Aside from his participation in the WPA's Federal Arts Project and a Guggenheim Fellowship, he was never able to support himself fully by painting. Yet his work has long been praised for its boldness and individuality. Black workers were a favorite subject: field hands, factory workers, loggers, fishermen, and more. Of his 1940s series of black factory employees, Wilson stated, ""That was the first time I had ever seen my people working in industry, so I painted them."" Over time his documentary style gave way to one that emphasized shape and color over pure representation. Despite exhibitions in New York and elsewhere, Wilson considered a small show at the public library in his hometown of Mayfield in 1947 to be ""one of the high points"" of his life. This catalog accompanies the first major retrospective of Wilson's paintings.

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