



ANNIE FERAY MUTRIE (1826-1893)

A Wild Bank with Azaleas and Violets

1887

Oil on paper laid onto canvas
11 x 8 in. (28 x 20 cm)

Signed and dated 'A. Mutrie 1887' lower left

PROVENANCE

Christopher Wood Gallery, Motcomb Street, London;
Barbara Barrett, London, acquired from the above c. late 1970s;
Private collection, by descent from the above;
Olympia Auctions, London, 10 June 2026, lot 14;
Philip Mould & Company, London, acquired from the above.

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Annie Feray Mutrie was long underrepresented in twentieth-century accounts of Victorian painting, however, her reputation is now being reassessed, prompting renewed interest in her work.[1] This richly coloured still-life shows Mutrie turning her attention from arranged blooms that defined contemporary flower painting to wildflowers observed directly from nature.

Born in Ardwick, near Manchester, she trained with her sister Martha Darley Mutrie at the Manchester School of Design and later under George Wallis, before the sisters moved to London in the 1850s. Both women built successful professional careers, exhibiting at the Royal Academy and other major London and regional venues. Their work attracted admiration from artists, collectors and critics, and by the 1860s they were widely regarded as leading practitioners of flower painting in Britain.

This still life, signed and dated 1887, belongs to Mutrie's later career, when she was increasingly accustomed to setting wild flora within its natural ecological context. It shows a compact group of white azalea-like flowers growing in a shaded woodland setting, accompanied by violets, grasses, moss and small leaves. The composition is small in scale but highly concentrated in effect, with the paper support allowing for a smoothness of finish seldom possible with canvas. Mutrie places the pale flowers at the centre, so their open petals catch the light against the darker greens and browns of the bank behind them. Around this central group, she builds up a dense natural setting, with slender blades of grass crossing the surface, small blue and purple flowers appearing among the foliage, and tangled stems and moss spreading across the ground.

Mutrie's reputation rested on the refinement and seriousness she brought to flower painting, a genre

often treated as decorative but which she approached with considerable botanical precision and ambition. Contemporary critics admired the delicacy of her colour and the accuracy of her observation. John Ruskin, the most influential British art critic of the period, praised her continuously throughout her career, highlighting her "lovely, pure, and yet unobtrusive colour - perfectly tender, and yet luscious" and the "richness of petal texture that seems absolutely scented." [2] His only reservation was that she might move further from arranged compositions towards "flowers growing naturally. Why not a roadside bank of violets?" [3] The present painting appears to take that advice quite literally, setting violets among moss, grasses and woodland growth, and transforming Ruskin's suggestion into a carefully observed study of wild flora in situ.

Between them, the Mutrie sisters' works were later sought by collectors and artists including Julius Sichel, Thomas Creswick, and Sir Harry James Veitch, the celebrated horticulturist who was instrumental in establishing the Chelsea Flower Show.

[1] Tate Britain's recent catalogue *Now You See Us: Women Artists in Britain 1520–1920* included Mutrie among the artists whose achievements have been obscured or overlooked in traditional art-historical narratives.

[2] John Ruskin, (1855) *Notes on Some of the Principal Pictures Exhibited in the Rooms of the Royal Academy: 1855*. London: Smith, Elder & Co., p. 7.

[3] Ibid, p. 54.