



Sally Wild | The Creative Life

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I've always been drawing.





Sally Wild has lived in the north of Scotland for nearly seven decades and her drawings, prints and textiles reflect the beauty, wonder and whimsy of her northern surroundings. Ducks, hens, sheep, people, plants, rabbits, boats and birds populate her work as she makes and remakes stories and scenes from the world around her.

Sally's work is rich in layers of making. From the colourful sketchbooks, which she cuts and stitches herself; the traditional rugs, woven from rags and scraps; to the chiselled woodblocks and linocuts from which she prints. Her careful hands are shaping and forming every stage of the artistic process.

This understanding of how things are made suffuses Sally's work with kindness for other craftspeople - especially the generations of women, crofters, shepherds and fisherfolk who leave their marks on the landscape and in the home.

Sally Wild is an extraordinary illustrator, etcher, printer and textile artist. Her drawings transform the ordinary into things of beauty, and when she shares through them how she sees the world, Sally gives us all some much-needed happiness and love.



CHILDHOOD

I was born in 1941 and for as long as I can remember I’ve always been drawing.

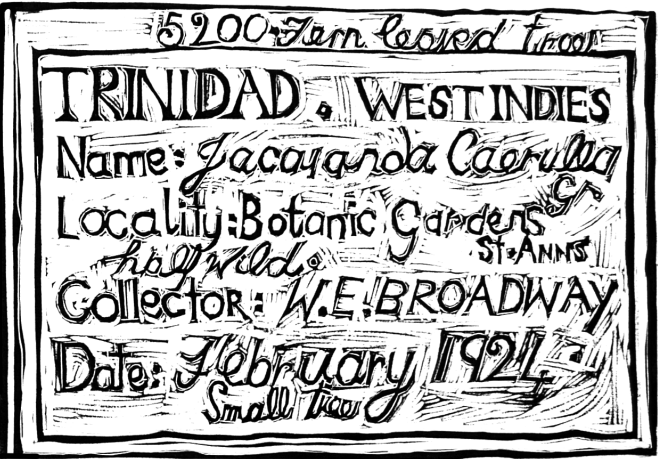
My father was in the Navy and my childhood was very itinerant. We lived in many different places from Wester Ross to the West Indies, before settling in Wick, Caithness. I was an only child and my creativity – especially drawing – was my stable place and my friend. I could always go there when I wanted.

My mother loved plants and knew the names of all the wildflowers, while my father was very interested in birds. I think the flowers, animals and colours of all the places I lived as a child have helped shape the way I see the world.



**Right:** Me with my first sheep, Daisy Bell, when we were living in the naval base at Mellon Charles, circa 1949.

**Left:** In Trinidad with Zilla the parrot.







## EDINBURGH

I was hopeless at school and when I left my parents sent me to Edinburgh to train as a typist. But I was hopeless at that too. The letters seemed to jump around and it wasn't until many years later that I realised why.

I joined an evening class run by Derek Clark at the Edinburgh College of Art and absolutely loved it. Derek saw something in my work and persuaded me to leave the typing school and take an art degree.

I was at Edinburgh College of Art during a most exciting time. The landscape artist, Sir William Gillies, had just been made principal, and head of illustration was Harry More Gordon, a wonderful teacher, painter and illustrator. He introduced me to artists I hadn't encountered before like Eric Ravilious, Randolph Caldicott and Audrey Beardsley.



**Left:** View from one of the classroom windows of Edinburgh College of Art, looking over to the Castle. Stone lithograph, circa 1962.

**Right:** We were sent to London in the Swinging Sixties to draw in the V&A. This was in the museum's extensive hat collection.



I shared a flat with two other girls for 10 shillings a week. It had open fires, but we couldn't afford coal and it was bitterly cold. There was no bathroom. We used to take our laundry to the Infirmary Street baths (now the Dovecot Studio) and enjoy a hot bath there afterwards.

Edinburgh had been a very poor and gloomy place in the years after the war, and in the early 1960s it still looked drab and worn out. Women weren't allowed in pubs and dances were very subdued. An eightsome reel in Wick was a mad hoolie with lots of shrieking - in Edinburgh everyone took very small steps and frowned if you made a noise. But things were changing fast, especially at the Art College. You couldn't go anywhere without hearing 'A Hard Day's Night'.



**Right:** Two of my art school colleagues drawn in the style of the times.







**Far left:** Life drawing class.

**Left:** Edinburgh houses.



There were highlights – the luxury of Italian coffee from Valvona and Crolla on Leith Walk and the wonderful old-fashioned grocer on Queensferry Street, where an enormous ginger cat kept guard on the sacks of flour.

At Art College we were taught how to draw academically and how to keep a sketch book. Drawing was very important. It was seen as the starting point for painting, illustration and print making. I began to make prints using wood engraving and lino cuts. I was fascinated by the marks that the tools made on the wood, how the pressure of the press embossed the paper, and the simplicity of black ink on thick white paper.

We learned how to look at the world around us in a new way. I remember being on a bus crawling up the Mound one day, seeing road workers through the window and thinking how all the men were using their hands and tools so skilfully.





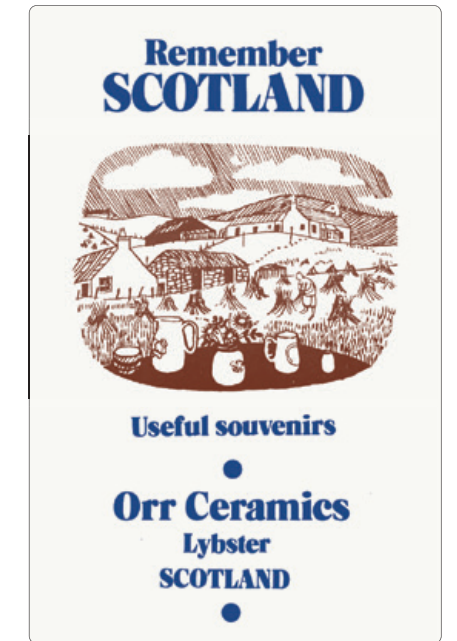
## LYBSTER, CAITHNESS

I returned to Caithness and married Charlie Orr, who had been in the year above me at Art College. He was working as a designer for Caithness Glass, but he wanted to open a pottery in Lybster. We set up home in a crofting area and Charlie made pots, while I looked after our young family and helped with decorating pottery. We were the only incomers in a very tight community and people were exceptionally kind to us – they would often pop by with a fish or neeps.

I read John Seymour's book on self-sufficiency. Soon we were keeping chickens and goats, growing our own vegetables, and making cheese. We collected berries for bottling and made the most of what we had. A farmer gave me a blackface ewe and her lamb, and then someone else offered me grazing, so I went to the Dunbeath sale and bought six more ewe lambs. In those days you could take your fleeces to the Brora Woollen Mill and get wonderful knitting yarn back. I was always knitting and making clothes for the children, which they hated – 'Why are we the only ones with home-made clothes?'

**Left:** My parents' house in Wick, circa 1962.

**Right:** A postcard and transfer from Lybster Pottery.







**Above / Right:** Sketches of landscape and family in the Lybster years.





I painted when I could, mainly watercolours and mixed media. I drew what I saw, the Caithness landscape or scenes with the children in them, and charged £2 for a commission. When the Queen Mother bought one of my paintings for the Castle of Mey I charged her £12, which was a lot!

The northern aspect, the northern light, and the way shadows make unusual shapes on the land, have always interested me. I used to like painting scenes through a window, but now I just love raw landscapes. I'm fascinated by the landscapes in Caithness and Shetland. The marks made by people working and living on the land – the walls, crofts, fields, fences and woods – set against the huge seas and skies, excite me.

There are such wonderful colours in Caithness and so much space. The light touches the land in a very special way. It can turn plain grass into fields of gold against a black sky. If you leave Caithness after being there for any time, your world feels claustrophobic, as if the edges are coming in at you.



At the annual art show held at Thurso by the Society of Caithness Artists, the Queen Mother purchased two drawings by a Wick artist, Miss Sally Woolcombe (above), daughter of Cdr. J. L. Woolcombe, Inspector of Coastguards (Northern Division), and Mrs Woolcombe, Thurso Road, Wick.

Miss Woolcombe has just qualified in graphic design at Edinburgh College of Art. She has won a scholarship and will continue her studies for another year. In the picture below, the Queen Mother is viewing Miss Woolcombe's drawings.

**Above:** Extract from the John O'Groat Journal.

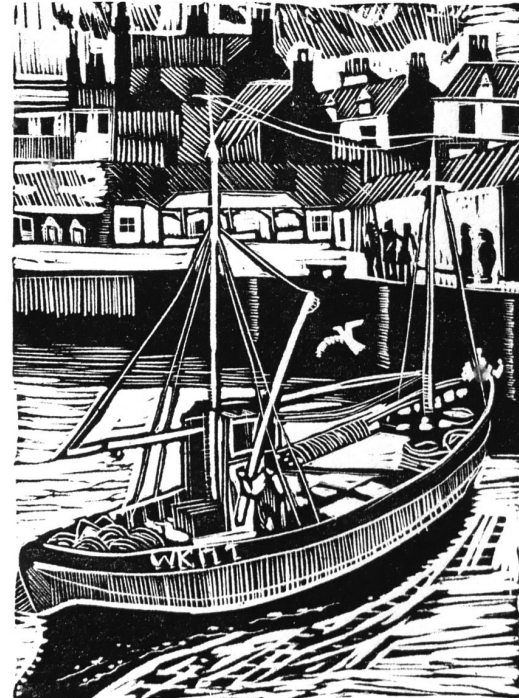
**Right:** God's Own, a typical Lybster scene. Wood engraving.





## SUTHERLAND

Lybster Pottery initially did very well, but the 1970s recession made our life increasingly difficult. Visitors stopped travelling north and no one bought our pots. Eventually the business collapsed, taking our home with it, and we moved to Fife where Charlie had found a job. During all this I continued painting and exhibiting work in Edinburgh galleries and the Royal Scottish Academy shows.



**Right:** Two Caithness lino cuts – WK 177, a Wick fishing boat famous for the size of its catches, and the local rabbit show.





My parents were now living in Golspie in Sutherland and, when my father died suddenly, I decided to return north with the children. I got a job at Seaforth House, the care home in the village, and worked there until I retired twenty years later.

Seaforth was a very inspiring place to work. In the 1980s residents came from all over the Highlands. Many had been through two world wars and had lost husbands and sons, but they never complained about anything. They were lovely people, self-reliant and often very feisty!

They had been brought up on crofts without electricity and I had a huge admiration for their approach to life. One wonderful lady told me her family had shopped just twice a year – her father was a shepherd in Cannich and every six months they took the pony and trap to Beauly for provisions.

Several ladies in their 90s were still making rag rugs in the traditional way and they showed me how to do it. Rag rugs have been made and used in Highland homes for hundreds of years. A new rug might be put in a bedroom to keep your toes warm while getting dressed, then moved to the kitchen, and then to the scullery or the back door, before ending life on the compost. Nothing was wasted. They started as rags and ended as rags.

**Right:** Rag rugs, left to right: fish, lizards, more fish and boat registrations. Pupils at Wick's Hillhead primary school brought in the numbers of their family boats and we wove them into a traditional rug.







Through making rag rugs I got very interested in textiles. In the 1990s, I met and married Peter Wild and moved to Dornoch, where I began keeping sheep again and spinning with my own wool.

**Left:** Lino cut of Dornoch, looking from the lower links where I keep my sheep.

**Above:** Painting of me in my sheep field, inspired by Victoria Crowe's wonderful *Sheep, Shepherdess and Harbour Craig*.





# CREATIVE COMPANIONSHIP & COMMUNITY

Being with Peter meant that we had more time for creative projects, both for ourselves and in the community. I worked with some hugely inspiring community groups in Caithness and Sutherland, running creative workshops for different groups of people. I began to illustrate books and interpretation panels, including panels for Historylinks museum in Dornoch and for the Wick regeneration project in Caithness.

**Far right:** Community projects clockwise from top – Art Attack montage celebrating 400 years of golf in Dornoch; felt-making with Lairg primary school pupils in 2006; weaving rugs with Wick’s Hillhead primary school in 2006; and a wall hanging made with Hunters tweed for Migdale hospital by women associated with Seaforth House.

**Right:** Reimagining the past for the Historylinks panels in Dornoch was great fun and took me into all sorts of vernacular building research.

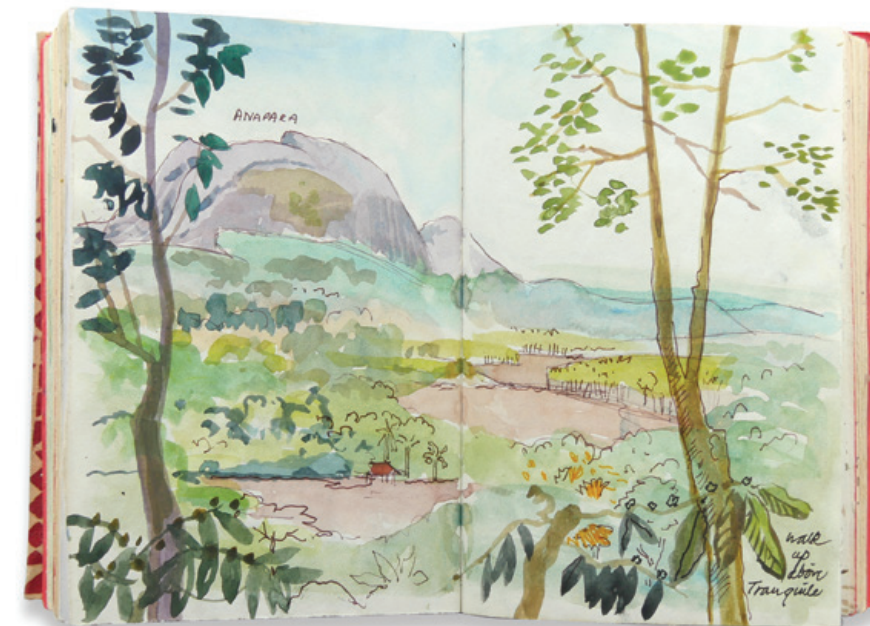






At the same time, I was continually printing and painting for myself. Peter and I made journeys to Australia, India and Jordan, as well as to places within the UK. Whenever we go away from home, we take our sketch books with us and draw together. It's the primary purpose of our visit. We sketch all day and finish off the drawings at night. Turner did the same and that's why his sketchbooks are so amazing, because every sketch is resolved.

For each trip we make a new book from scratch, using thick and thin papers and different colours and bindings. We find something visually exciting in every place we go, whether it's the light, the landscape, the colours or the crafts.



**Far left:** Graffiti in Anstruther, Fife. Watercolour.

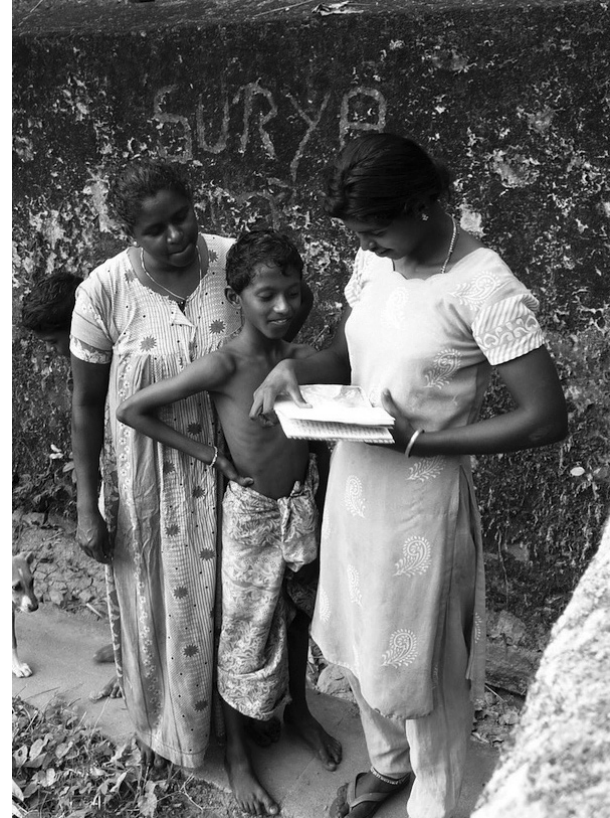
**Left:** Mount Anapara, Kerala, India. Watercolour sketch.





**Above:** Resting camel in Petra, Jordan. Watercolour sketch.

**Right:** Everyone wants to know what I'm drawing! Some of the friends I met on my travels in India and Jordan.







**Left:** Sketchbook scenes from Victoria, Australia.  
**Above:** Goat Island, Kerala.





#### WITH THANKS

To Sheila Kennard and Sue Jane Taylor, for pushing me into this exhibition and making it happen, and to Ian Westacott and Highland Print Studios for their beautiful printing. To Mungo Orr for the catalogue and poster design, and Alison Munro for the text. To Dornoch and District Community Association for the hall, Ashley Rose for her display panels and Magnus Orr for his help with the preview. And to Peter Wild for his photography, perseverance and patience.

“Her sketchbooks are full  
of happiness – and so is Sally”

Ian Westacott, artist.



# Sally Wild | The Creative Life

Dornoch artist Sally Wild reflects the beauty, wonder and whimsy of her northern surroundings in her drawings, prints and textile work.

This catalogue was produced as part of an exhibition held in Dornoch Social Club, 17-25th June, 2023.  
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