

# WALES MADE VISIBLE.

## VISUAL ART IN WALES (IN BRIEF)

**“Wales is a process. Wales is an artifact which the Welsh produce. The Welsh make and remake Wales day by day, year by year, generation by generation, if they want to”**

According to the above quote by the late esteemed historian Professor Gwyn Alf Williams, Wales is as much an ‘idea’, an ‘imagined community’ as it is a geographic or political entity. It is, in sense, a creative act to bring it into being and to maintain its existence. Wales according to this analysis is itself an artwork.

In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and in common with a great many small nations and regions of Europe, Wales sought to create an image of itself as a unique and individual entity. Institutions such a University of Wales, a National Library and a National Museum were founded to emphasize this sense of identity. However, despite the donation to the nation of a fine collection of French art purchased by Gwendolyn and Margaret Davies, two daughters of a wealthy industrialist, no National Gallery of Art was built to house the produce of Wales’ painters and sculptors. (It should be noted that since the 1990’s the situation has gradually been addressed, with a much larger proportion of the National Museum in Cardiff being turned over to newly refurbished galleries displaying art, including more Welsh art alongside the European collection).

For many years, there had been a clichéd view of Wales as a nation full of poet’s and singers, and there is a modicum of truth in that assertion. These two disciplines did not require expensive training at London or Paris Academies, nor expensive materials and equipment in order to make the work. Neither were wealthy patrons needed to pay the artist a living wage through commissions. As for poetry, ‘Cymraeg’, the indigenous language of Wales, is the living remnant of the ancient language of Britain, spoken widely across the British Isles having survived and enriched itself with the Latin of five centuries of Roman occupation, and before the arrival of English around the 6<sup>th</sup> century. This Celtic language lends itself well to poetry (and to the singing of hymns) and has an ancient tradition of poetic form that seems to embody the soul of the people. It was believed therefore,

that visual iconography was of less importance, a belief made stronger by the iconoclasm of the religious non-conformist movement that took hold in Wales in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Wales is a small country, with a population of fewer than three million even today; it is dwarfed by the sheer numbers of people in most of China's big cities. I am very aware of this having been fortunate to visit and exhibit in Chongqing in 2010. There were no large urban conurbations in Wales comparable to Dublin in Ireland, or Glasgow and Edinburgh in Scotland, and therefore few opportunities to study art within Wales and few metropolitan collectors of art. Those who could afford to dedicate their lives to the pursuit of art were forced to study and work outside Wales, and conform to the mores of (generally) a London based art market.

There has been a colonialist and indeed racist assumption amongst predominantly English art historians that suggested that the inhabitants of Wales have no inherent talent for the visual arts. This particular prejudice is persistent, and I would argue, is a 'default' position that is a nagging hangover of centuries of 'colonialist' attitudes, not only directed at the Welsh, but also perpetuated by the Welsh themselves in many instances, exacerbated by the attitudes of institutions such as the 'National' Museum of Wales and its 'dropped in' directors over the years. Historians disagree on whether Wales could correctly be described as a colony of England, but a case can certainly be made for a 'colonized mindset', where these assumptions of inferiority (manifested in many ways, but particularly in the visual arts) have over centuries had considerable impact. The success of Welsh artists like Richard Wilson (1713/14 – 1782) spoken of as the father of 'English' landscape painting, and Thomas Jones (1742 – 1803) in a previous era should signal the erroneousness of these assumptions, but since their careers were necessarily spent in exile from Wales, they were often classed as 'English' artists. This short essay seeks to redress that perception of inferiority, and is written at a time when the visual arts community in Wales is particularly confident and resurgent.

As I aim to prove, Wales is as capable of producing excellent visual artists as it is of producing poets and musicians, merely that the opportunities and market (and finance) for art in Wales was small or non-existent in the past, or that 'quality' in art was mostly judged by museum curatorial standards that were set elsewhere. A great shift in perception was caused by the body of 'post-colonial' art historical

writing undertaken by Peter Lord that has re-addressed this issue over the last twenty five years or so, focusing on what he has termed the 'aesthetics of relevance' in his comprehensive study of the visual culture of Wales<sup>i</sup>. This approach eschews the 'high art' notion of that which is important in order to focus on the art that is relevant to the culture and society of Wales itself. Inspired by the attention given to artisan painters in the USA, Lord has brought Welsh 'folk art' and indigenous or 'genius loci' design and production of artifacts into the narrative. Lord's writing falls into that category of 'post colonial' challenges to the previous canon of history, an approach that shares a common thread in late twentieth century thought, often linked to the post-Modern, by writers such as the American Thomas McEvilley, and of examinations of cultural hegemony such as 'Orientalism' by Palestinian theorist and critic, Edward Said. Lord identified artists in Wales previously overlooked by the London-centric Museum curatorial tradition. Coining the phrase 'Absence of proof is no proof of absence', he boldly went out to find 'proof of presence'. He discovered 'Folk' or artisan artists such as Hugh Hughes (1790 - 1863) and William Roos (1808 - 1878) who portrayed figures of importance within Wales, such as the great preachers of the non-conformist revivals. Such artists have now been accepted into the 'canon' of Welsh art due to their cultural relevance rather than their reputation or success in the London art world. Lord reveals also the history of a remarkable group of artists led by Clarence Whaite who established themselves as a colony in Bettws-y-Coed between 1844 and 1914.

Thomas Jones is an interesting artist who not only produced art that was of its time in the London art world; landscapes of the grand tour in Italy and of the romantic view of Wales itself, (one also exemplified by Turner's paintings made on a tour of Wales) but also his explorations of certain strands of particularly Welsh subject matter. An example of which, 'The Last Bard' is in the National Museum collection. The painting depicts a Druidic bard throwing himself off a cliff to avoid capture by the English monarch Edward 1. Over a century later, and in common with Ireland and Scotland, artists and writers in Wales in the early twentieth century honed in on the fashion for 'Celticism' exemplified by the work of painter Christopher Williams (1873 - 1934) who adapted mythological themes from Welsh literature to herald a new dawn of national consciousness.

But what of the impact of the great movement of European Modernism on Art in Wales? Interestingly, in 1908, the year Picasso painted the revolutionary 'Les Demoiselles D'Avignon', 'Salem' was painted by Curnew Vosper (1866 - 1942) an image that perpetuates the iconography of The Welsh national costume as perceived (created) by Lady Llanover in the nineteenth century. 'Salem' depicts an elderly woman, Sian Owen, entering her unadorned rural non-conformist chapel, dressed in a high black hat and colourful Paisley shawl. Prints of this painting were freely distributed with a brand of soap powder, thus it became a ubiquitous image on the walls of thousands of Welsh homes. Through photography the depiction of the 'Welsh lady' became a recurrent motif in the postcard imagery attached to Wales. Note that there is no equivalent image of male costume.

But it is to landscape that we return to see the influence of European trends in Modernist (certainly Post-Impressionist) art in the early twentieth century. Arguably, JD Innes (1887 - 1914) from Llanelli influenced his much better known Tenby born friend Augustus John (1878 - 1961) in their experimental forays into 'plein air' paintings of the wild landscapes of north Wales. John was a draughtsman of brilliance, an heir of Rembrandt and the Renaissance, but whose personality and celebrity eclipsed his talent. Often featured in newspaper stories and gossip, he affected a bohemian lifestyle, dressing and living like a Romany gypsy at times. He had many illegitimate children with his models, a circumstance that meant he was forced into producing society portraiture to earn an income to support these many dependants. His relationship to, and influence within an outwardly straight-laced Wales was complex and ambivalent, as was that of his friend and fellow bohemian, the poet Dylan Thomas. The paintings that he and Innes (who died young of tuberculosis) produced in the Arenig mountain region of Bala, north Wales before the first world war, were avant-garde in comparison to the usual British landscapes of the time, and were influenced by French post-impressionism. John was hampered by his academic training however, and failed to make the leap into the new forms introduced by twentieth century Modernism. He foresaw that one day his reputation would be eclipsed by that of his sister Gwen John (1876 - 1939), a painter of sensitive introspection, who was briefly a model, lover and muse to the French sculptor Rodin but who, as predicted, went on to garner a reputation that has superseded that of her flamboyant brother.

There has been a continuous tradition of romantic landscape painting in Wales, by visiting artists such as Graham Sutherland (1903-1980), who visited the country and became enchanted by its beauty. Wales' greatest exponent of the landscape however was Sir Kyffin Williams (1918 – 2006), who produced a short hand image of Wales with his palette knife rendition of the dark brooding mountains of Snowdonia. A commercial phenomenon, collected both in Wales and in London, ubiquitous and now much copied by younger artists who are market oriented, Kyffin, despite his limitations is the best-known painter that Wales has produced. Peter Prendergast (1946 – 2007) took the landscape tradition forward, producing colourful, wildly expressionistic paintings, particularly of the quarries left by the slate industry of north Wales. Contemporary artists like Brendan Burns amongst others maintain the abstraction of landscape that was introduced by Sutherland, and like him, focusing his attention on the coast of Pembrokeshire, the furthest extremity of Wales' western promontory. Burns takes the micro view, transforming sketchbook studies of rock pools along the shoreline into large-scale abstract paintings.

But there was also a very different landscape in Wales; that of coal-mining, iron and steel production and heavy industry. The dominating industrialization of the south Wales valleys through the nineteenth century and until the 1970's led to a different response by painters such as Evan Walters (1893 – 1951) of Swansea and Vincent Evans (1894 - 1976) of Ystalyfera. The latter had been a coal miner for ten years before becoming an artist. The close communities of Wales' industrial valleys attracted artists such as the Polish émigré Josef Herman (1911 – 2000) who arrived in the mining village of Ystradgynlais in 1944, staying for eleven years. Herman's depiction of the lives of the miners and the landscape of the narrow valleys became internationally known and has had an impact on consequent depictions of the coalmining landscape and community by Welsh artists such as George Chapman (1908 – 1993) and Swansea born Valerie Ganz (b1936).

In total contrast, a strand of narrative lyricism features strongly in the art of Wales, evidenced in the mythic and poetic works of David Jones (1895 – 1974) and of Ceri Richards (1903 – 1971). Jones was London born, but of Welsh heritage, and his acute awareness of his roots became his inspiration, through his identification with Welsh

myth and history. He created a poetic (he was also a highly regarded poet) vision that is quite unique in British art, and also inspired younger artists to see the worth of their own culture, particularly the tradition of poetry and legend in Wales' ancient history. He lived for a time at Capel-y-Ffin, a colony set up by sculptor typographer and engraver Eric Gill. Jones devised typography of his own, producing many paintings that consisted of words that bring to mind medieval illuminated manuscripts.

Ceri Richards was born in Dunvant near Swansea but lived and worked mainly in London where he garnered an international reputation, winning a prize at the Venice Biennale in 1962. His flowing line, his bold use of colour, texture and composition aligned him very much to the European tradition, somewhere between Matisse and Picasso, a refreshing cosmopolitan voice in British art of the 40's and 50's. He became a great interpreter of the poetry of Dylan Thomas, capturing the essence of 'The Force that through the green fuse drives the flower'. As a teacher of art he inspired and supported many of Wales' future artists of consequence, ones who returned to Wales after studies in London to create thriving educational and exhibiting careers in Wales of the 1960's and 70's. By this time, more young artists felt they could return to Wales after sojourns of study in London or abroad and consequently, more commercial galleries sprang up to exhibit their work, and an Arts Council for Wales instigated policies that were to make life as an artist in Wales slightly more sustainable through government funding. Artists groups such as the 56 Group Wales and The Welsh Group were formed to promote the work of Welsh artists.

Many artists came to Wales from the 1960's onwards, seeking more tranquil ways of life, and established careers that are influenced in one way or another by their location. The sculptor David Nash established his studio in a disused chapel in Blaenau Ffestiniog, and is celebrated for his environmentalist timber sculpture throughout the world. Shani Rhys James came from Australia to live and work in her father's native land, gaining a considerable reputation for her figurative expressionist paintings. Sue Williams, who like many others, came to study at the highly regarded Cardiff School of Art and stayed on in Cardiff, dealt with issues of female identity and sexuality in the rapidly changing world of gender and society. She was nominated for the prestigious £40,000 Artes Mundi Prize that Wales has hosted bi-annually since 2002. The prize, founded by artist

William Wilkins, “identifies, recognises and supports contemporary visual artists who engage with the human condition, social reality and lived experience and is best known for its biennial international Exhibition and Prize which takes place in Cardiff”.

International trends in art made inroads through the art school system that was growing in Wales (art schools had been set up in Cardiff, Newport, Swansea and Carmarthen). By the 1960's it could be argued that American abstraction became rather overly influential, and it is at this point that Peter Lord decides to end his alternative history of art in Wales, believing that a Welsh specificity or uniqueness had been lost through the influence of the Art School system. However, it could be argued that international trends, particularly the impact of post-Modernism, were encouraging a reappraisal of visual culture which would be beneficial, driven by the politicization of art and society and the growing awareness in Wales of its subaltern position. In different parts of the Western world there was an awakening of resistance, protest and radicalization. The anti-(Vietnam) war movement, Feminism, Racial equality, civil rights and post colonialism in many previously European dominated areas of the world had repercussions also in Wales.

At the beginning of the 1960's two events proved to be wake up calls for Welsh culture and identity. Playwright and academic Saunders Lewis gave a radio lecture called “Tynged yr Iaith” (Fate of the Language) that warned of the imminent demise of the Welsh language unless urgent action was taken. This speech galvanized a campaign for legal status, Welsh road signage, (many Welsh place names had been superseded by their English equivalents) education in the Welsh language and Welsh language television programming. The flooding of the north Wales village and valley of Capel Celyn to create the Tryweryn reservoir to provide water for Liverpool in England in 1960 (despite protest) marked a turning point in Welsh politics, and a climate of protest and cultural awakening took place. Artists in Wales embraced this message of protest and resistance, some more overtly than others. In a book that I compiled in 1999, called ‘Certain Welsh Artists’,<sup>ii</sup> I proposed the notion of a ‘Custodial Aesthetics’, that is, an art that sees its role as remembrancer of identity and culture, not art purely for art's sake. Amongst those first to take up this position deliberately and in response to Tryweryn were the Beca group, with founders, brothers Paul and Peter Davies, and Ivor Davies (no relation), later joined by Tim Davies, Pete Telfer

and myself. The group carried out guerrilla art tactics, using collaborative work and performance, land art and installation as a means to get politics to the forefront of art. Ivor Davies continues to be a force in Welsh art, bringing his early avant-garde activities in the 1960's with the Destruction in Art movement, into the field of Welsh identity and politics. Others followed. David Garner, from the former coal-mining town of Blackwood, began to create powerful didactic installations dealing with the decline of the traditional industries, and of the drowning of Tryweryn, and went on to make art that dealt with political issues worldwide. More recently, André Stitt, the Belfast born performance artist and now Professor at Cardiff School of Art joined the ranks of those who have engaged with the subject matter, by creating a film made by divers in the murky depths of the lake. More traditional, and harking back to a 'Celtic' art form, the sculptor John Meirion Morris has created a maquette for a phoenix like monument that many would like to see erected on the banks of the silent reservoir. Tim Davies, a conceptual artist who represented Wales at the Venice Biennale in 2011 created an evocative installation work, 'Capel Celyn' that serves as a very different memorial.

Mary Lloyd Jones, a veteran painter who produces vibrant abstracted landscapes, (aboriginal song-lines in effect), deals with history and culture embedded in the layers of the landscape, and, as many Welsh speaking artists – uses words of poetry in Welsh as a means of perpetuating the language's use. My own work is also concerned with this matter, being an attempt to represent the redolent and tenuous landscape of Welsh language poetry, the bared soul of Wales, in a visual language of drawing that attempts to depict the inspiration, the defiance, the erasures, the fragile and palimpsest nature of this ancient language of core identity. Of a younger generation, Peter Finnemore, engages with issues of identity and produces photographs and short films of idiosyncratic wit. Carwyn Evans who's cardboard bird boxes correspond to the number of holiday homes that were to be built in Ceredigion in west Wales, comments on the problems of rural exodus of young Welsh speakers to the cities. Whole villages are turned into retirement homes for predominantly English incomers or are left empty most of the year to be used as holiday homes in the brief summer months. Each village that succumbs to this blight sees the diminishing of Welsh language and culture in its traditional, rural heartland. This year, 2013, Wales' representative artist at the Venice Biennale is Bedwyr Williams.



Williams is a multi disciplinary artist who is succeeding to forge an international career with his idiosyncratic mix of 'stand-up' performance/comedy and installation/film and photography, whilst choosing to remain living and working in Wales. His inspiration is very much to do with his own 'take' on identity.

Of course, it's impossible to touch on the whole gamut of artists operating in Wales in an article of this length. At the moment, there are more artists working in Wales than at any previous time, a fact no doubt true about most places. Gauging that which is important in contemporary practice is not an exact science, and all that can be done is to highlight certain things that I perceive as being of value and that have specificity to Wales, and that are also confirmed by other factors. The presence of Wales 'solo' at the Venice Biennale for example, when not indulging in the curatorial weakness of choosing already well known 'names' whose attachment to Wales is tenuous to say the least, proves that many of those I have mentioned have been duly noted by the ever more confident art establishment within Wales (Peter Finnemore, Tim Davies, Bedwyr Williams) and that many more of the artists mentioned have been recipients of the Gold Medal at Wales' foremost annual open competition at The National Eisteddfod of Wales.

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<sup>i</sup> Lord, Peter. 'The Aesthetics of Relevance' Ed Meic Stephens, Gomer Press, Llandysul, Wales. 1992.

Lord, Peter. "The Visual Culture of Wales" Series. University of Wales Press, Cardiff. 1998-2003.

<sup>ii</sup> Bala, I 'Certain Welsh Artists, Custodial Aesthetics in Contemporary Art in Wales' Seren, Bridgend 1999.