

Photography in the Arts

Art in Wales: Exploring the influence of the language, landscape and culture

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Abstract

Wales has a rich history in art, Welsh culture and landscape is seen and/or used in many different art mediums and used for many different purposes including political and representation. This thesis aim is to discuss and argue about Welsh culture, language and landscape in art and to view how Welsh art has developed over time. The motivation behind this thesis and research is that, though Wales has an enormous influence in art and for many arts schools in Wales, Welsh art is not often the main subject of study and should be focused on more. Another motivation for this thesis is that there are many influential Welsh artists and many of those artists are not given the attention they and their work deserves.

The research in this thesis is important for Welsh art and Welsh artists as it is important to understand the influence Wales as in art and the historical context of Welsh art. Some of the people researched for this thesis include Kyffin Williams, Bernard Mitchell and Valeriane Leblond. Some of the topics that will be discussed in this thesis include Welsh landscape in different mediums of art, representation of the Welsh language in art and Welsh artists and their influence.

Introduction

Throughout history Wales has become its own form of art, combining language, culture, landscape and tradition to create unique art including music, painting and poetry. Many talented and famous artists have emerged from the country, however many arts that comes from the country have had 'Welshness' removed or pushed to the side. This thesis will discuss the 'Welshness' in art where others might not notice it.

Landscape is an important for of art that is utilised by many artists across different mediums. Why way artists represent is subjective to the audience however it is important to understand who the artist is and how it relates to their practice.

Culture identity and landscape are closely connected and are often seen together in art, one artist that will be discussed in this thesis is Kyffin Williams, who's Welsh identity connects directly to his practice. Williams is one of the most well-known Welsh artists. Welsh artists have an important role in the development of Welsh art, obviously by creating the artwork but also by influencing the audience to engage with the work and learn and lead them onto other art within Wales. Who are these influential artists and why are these specific artists are important for Welsh art?

This thesis will bring forward and discuss the culture and history of Welsh art and discuss the 'Welshness' in art that may have been overlooked. This thesis will look Welsh identity in art and how Welsh culture can be viewed in Welsh artists practices.

Landscapes in Welsh Art

Before discussing the importance of Welsh landscape, it is important to understand landscape itself. Landscape is a form of art in itself and should be treated as such. Landscape have been intertwined with art for humans entire existence and has developed with the different mediums of art. Early



Figure 1, LLangorse Afterglow

cave drawings could possibly be considered the earliest example of landscape in art that we know of. Landscape art has developed and changed over time, developing with culture, technology and climate. Landscape art can ne seen across different mediums and can be used in many different contexts.

There are many distinct forms of landscapes that exist in art for example urban landscape and cityscape. Each landscape have their own way of telling a different story. As Wells discusses *"Landscape results from human intervention to shape or transform natural phenomena, of which we are simultaneously a part"* (Wells, 2011, p. 1). This idea that landscape is made by people intervening can be seen metaphorically and physically with the Welsh landscape. Humans have physically changed the Welsh landscapes by intervening and replacing the landscape with cityscapes, and metaphorically by documenting specific shapes of the Welsh landscape and connecting to stories.

It is thanks to humans that the idea of landscape exists. Andrews (1999, p. 3) states *"a landscape may never achieve representation in a painting or photograph; none the less, something significant has happened when land can be perceived as 'landscape'."* From this quotation it can be said that landscape is a manmade concept that can never be fully represented in art, therefore humans themselves made it impossible to achieve a true landscape in art. But many artists do create art about landscape that eventually become the main representation for a countries landscape. For example, Kyffin Williams and Aled Rhys Hughes create are that represents the Welsh landscape.

The Welsh landscape has a very rare shape, combining the hills and mountains with the sea and mile long beaches. The landscape was created by glaciers and rivers running down creating the valleys, something no human can recreate.

The landscape has a natural beauty that is almost impossible to replicate, which many artists try to do.

To be specific the Welsh landscape has recently become very influential in cinematography. For example, Welsh landscape can be seen in Dr Who Where they filmed in Margam Country Park (Margam Country Park). The Welsh landscape has also been popular with poets and painters alike. The way artists utilize the Welsh landscape has developed and adapted with technology, artists like

Dylan Thomas who famously used the Welsh landscape in written word and is known used by more contemporary modern artists in digital photography and cinematography that did not exist in earlier years.

Welsh Identity Seen in Art

There are many different definitions of culture and identity but what is obvious through all of them is that it is a shared experience between a group of people.

*“Culture is the shared characteristics of a group of people, Which Encompass ,
place of birth, religion, language, cuisine, social behaviors, art, literature, and
music.”*

(National Geographic Society)

Before discussion Welsh identity in art, it is important to understand what Welsh identity is. Welsh people are often described as Cymro or Cymraes which are very powerful and meaningful words many proud Welsh people would use these words to describe themselves even when speaking English. Many would agree that to be Welsh you do not necessarily need to be born in the country. Anyone who immersive themselves in the culture or learn the language or simple appreciate the community that comes with being Welsh. For example, Valérieane Leblond, who will be discussed in further detail later on in the thesis is an illustrator is originally from France but can be viewed as a Welsh artist.

A large portion of Welsh culture derives from tradition and that many Welsh things were made illegal or suppressed by English colonization. Because Welsh culture was suppressed by English culture, it most likely did the opposite and made Welsh culture stronger in the long run and making Welsh culture more important as it represents fighting back and taking control. The representation of fighting back and taking back control of the country can be seen throughout Welsh art. Welsh culture is closely connected to the countries history and it is almost impossible to discuss one without mentioning the other at least a little bit.

Welsh identity and culture has been intertwined with art for centuries for example the traditional Welsh love spoon. People in Wales have been making love spoons for a long time, dating back to the 17th century and were carved so the spoons would still be useable for daily uses but also be aesthetically pleasing however over time love spoons have become more for aesthetic (Angel Woodcraft). This suggests that art has been involved with Welsh traditions for a long period of time,



2017 © Angel Woodcraft

Figure 2. *Y Ddraig Two Hearts Protected Welsh
Love Spoon - 60A*

meaning art is an important characteristic of Welsh culture.

A big aspect of cultural identity is landscape as Wells said, "*Landscape is a social product; particular landscapes tell us something about cultural history and attitudes*" (Wells, 2011, p. 1). Landscape shape how people view their culture and the history of their culture, and we see this with Wales.

Photography has been used to document Welsh coal mining which is an important part of Wales historical culture and social culture in Wales. There have been many exhibitions that focus on the history of Welsh coal mining.

One of the strongest mediums in Welsh art is music, many famous singers, writers and composers have emerged from Wales. One of the most famous songs to come from Wales is calon lan which was composed by Danial James and could possibly viewed as a second national anthem. This song is in Welsh yet people who do not speak Welsh know the words and how to sing the song. This one song has become an important part of Welsh social culture as it is sung in football and rugby games.

Landscape, representation of culture – flora and fauna, social experiences or traditions, marie Lloyd, occupations (e.g., mining, agriculture), descriptive language - poetry

Welsh artists

Kyffin Williams

A small evolution of Welsh art can be viewed over the many years of Kyffin Williams time practicing art. Kyffin Williams or John Williams as some may know him (Skidmore, 2011, p. 1) is a Welsh artist that most other Welsh artists have heard, though he is not as well-known outside of the United Kingdom or even Wales. (maybe reference about not being in exhibition on wales outside of wales.) Williams spent many years as a practicing artist, only passing away in 2006. Williams is mostly known for his oil paintings of the Welsh landscape and many also know him for his portraits. Either way, he is primarily known as a Welsh artist. Many saw him as a painter who painted and created his work in Welsh even though there is no trace of spoken or written language in his work, with a biography of his life being titled *The Man who Painted in Welsh* (Skidmore, 2011, p.14). This may be **down to** his style is unique to Wales and to him. And how did he achieve such greatness if the odds were stacked



Figure 3. *Coast at St. Davids*

against him from the beginning?

A majority of Williams' paintings have a timeless feeling to them meaning that if the audience was not given the date that they were painted you audience could believe that the painting was painted in the 50s or 90s. Williams uses blocky shapes and neutral colours to reimagine the Welsh landscape on a canvas as seen in *figure 3*. Without knowing it is almost possible to identify that the landscape seen in most of his paintings are Welsh Landscapes.

Williams' Welsh cultural identity is an important aspect to consider whilst denoting his paintings, because his 'Welshness' is seen within his paintings. However it has not always been easy for Williams to display or be involved with his Welsh identity. During his early life Williams' mother made it difficult for him to speak the Welsh language which has left a negative mark on him, however he still learned the language to the best he can and also has pride in the language (Skidmore, 2011, p.79). This alone is one of the reasons why Williams has such a strong hold on Welsh art even after his passing.

Many saw Williams practice as a force to be reckoned with however many did not enjoy any of his work. Members of the Welsh art community were reported to have described Williams as "the

greatest single threat to Welsh art Kyffin Williams RA” (Skidmore, 2011, p.14). During his earlier years practicing artist he considered trouble to Welsh art, but now after many years he is considered to be one of the most successful Welsh artists whose practice is influenced by Wales.



Figure 4. *Self-Portrait*

Some may believe that the Welsh landscape is what made Williams a great artist instead of an average artist, but also that the Welsh landscape gave more to him *“Ynysfor gave Kyffin not only his artist’s eye: it gave him a family.”* (Skidmore, 2011, p. 20)

“Kyffin Williams is quoted as saying that he derived his greatest inspiration from the ‘seam of melancholy which is within most Welshmen, a melancholy that derives from the dark hills, the heavy clouds and the enveloping sea mists’”

(Charnock, 2005, p.43)

The painting in *Figure 3* is by Williams and is called *Hill Farmers*, it is possible to say that this painting



Figure 5. *Hill Farmers*

embodies the *“seam of melancholy”* and *“melancholy that derives from the dark hills”* as mentioned in the quotation above. It could be said that this painting is influenced by melancholy that is unique to the Welsh landscape. It is obvious that the painting in *Figures 3 and 5* were both painted by Kyffin Williams, the same colour palette and the same *“seam of melancholy”* that is unique to Williams and Wales. Williams has a distinctive technique of using the dark and gloomy weather and the “dark hill” to create a breath-taking landscape painting that represents the Welsh mountains as true to the original as possible as he could. The blocky shapes and dark and neutral colours can be seen within both paintings. *Figure 4* is an early self-portrait by Williams, and he used watercolour on paper

instead oil on canvas and it makes it look like a totally different style, displaying his ability to adapt to different style of painting.

After his passing in 2006 a large amount of his paintings were donated to the National Library of Wales (reference) suggesting that he wanted his work to maintain being accessible to the people of Wales and to keep his work in the country.

As mentioned in the title of Skidmore's book Williams has a RA (Skidmore, 2011). Does this mean that he had more popularity across the United Kingdom than what we see or are his biographies written with a bit of bias towards the Welsh side of Williams? Williams was awarded an OBE in 1982 for the arts, was given a knighthood by Queen Elizabeth II and was also put on the new Year's 2000 honours list six years before his passing (Thackery Gallery). Was he awarded these achievements because of his contribution to Welsh art or his work being awarded because it is viewed as British art? From the research gathered it could be considered that the majority of his international audience view Williams as a British artist rather than a Welsh artist, however in Wales and possibly some other countries in the United Kingdom view him as a Welsh artist.

Aled Rhys Hughes

Aled Rhys Hughes is a Welsh photographer who focuses on landscapes as seen on his website (Hughes). Hughes' website (Hughes) is bilingual, in English and Welsh. Hughes' photographs have less of a timeless feeling to them compared to Williams landscapes. His photographs of landscape seem more modern as many of the photographs contain present day things. (Problem with image)

Peter Finnemore

Peter Finnemore is another fascinating Welsh artist. Welsh culture is seen throughout Finnemore's work whether it is intentional or not. As seen on his website, the Welsh landscape is seen in many of his photographs and Welsh words used for project titles for example one of his projects on his website is called "*Gwendraeth House*" (Finnemore). Like many other Welsh artists, Finnemore is fluent in Welsh and has delivered lectures in Welsh as a guest lecturer at Swansea College of Art for the photography department. By the information gathered about Finnemore, it could be believed that he surrounds himself with Welsh culture and uses it to create distinctive pieces of art.

Valérieane Leblond

Valérieane Leblond is an artist and illustrator from France who moved to Wales around 15 years ago and during that time learned how to speak Welsh fluently (Leblond, 2019). It is obvious that Leblond has passion for the Welsh language because her website is in French, English and Welsh (Leblond, 2019). This is something that is out of the ordinary even for a lot of Welsh artists to have a Welsh version of their website. Many Websites that were used for research were only in English and only a

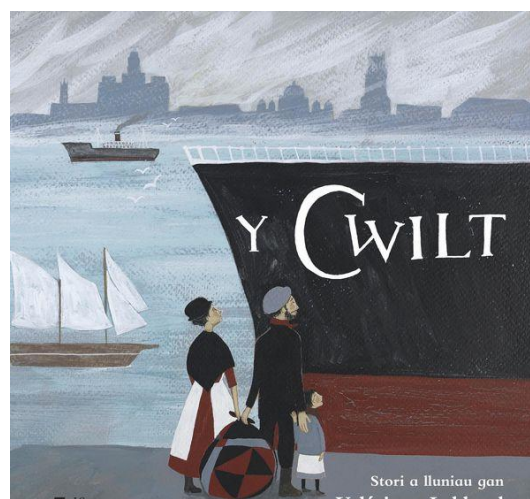


Figure 6. *y Cwilt*

Handful were bilingual, and none were only in Welsh.

As Leblond originally comes from France, could she be considered a Welsh artist? It is possible to perceive Leblond as a Welsh artist because of the amount of time she has spent living in Wales and the fact that a major aspect of her work is the Welsh landscape and Welsh culture. The book seen in *figure 6* (reference) has been published in English and Welsh and was published by a company in Wales that is known for producing books in the Welsh language. Leblond embodies the definition of what a Welsh artist is, providing that being a Welsh artist is more of a state of mind and about the practice rather than just where you were born. As mentioned in a previous quotation there are “*shared characteristics*” (National Geographic Society) between Leblond and other Welsh artists, for example both Leblond and Williams use the Welsh landscape in their practice. Leblond also lives in Wales, speaks Welsh and her practice is influenced by Wales and Welsh culture. From an outsider perspective who did not know she originated from France most would consider Leblond as a Welsh artist without considering any other option. From the information gathered, it is possible to identify Leblond as a Welsh artist practicing Welsh art.

Bernard Mitchell

Bernard Mitchell is one of the most well-known Welsh photographers that has lived in the past one-hundred years. Mitchell is mostly known for his portraits of Welsh artists in their work environments, for example he photographed Kyffin Williams surrounded by his paintings as seen in *Figure 7*.

Mitchell mostly used film for his photographs but recently started using digital for some of his photographs. His work is important for Welsh art as it connects dozens of Welsh artists from all around the country and across different mediums.

Mitchell (2021) has a huge archive on his website which includes photos of artists such as previously mentioned Kyffin Williams, Danial Jones and Christine Kinsey.



Figure 7. Sir Kyffin Williams

Mitchell is glad and excited to talk about his life as a practicing photographer. Mitchell is extremely supportive of young emerging artists by giving some a chance to be photographed for his website or simply by supporting their practice (Mitchell, 2021). The author of this thesis was lucky enough to have a discussion with Mitchell himself and learned so much about him and his practice. Mitchell himself is a huge supporter of the Welsh arts that a large portion of his bookshelf is dedicated to Welsh art and artists. Mitchell is important for Welsh art because he is connected to Welsh artists from the 1960s all the way to current day, collecting an extensive archive of portraits of Welsh artists over a long period of time. Mitchell has created a sort of timeline of Welsh artists, and it is possible to see the development of Welsh artist from the photographs changing from being taken on

film to being photographed digitally, and the more recent photographs of artists are more established artists at a younger age compared to many of his earlier photographs.

Cinematography

In recent years Wales has appeared more and more in film and TV. Dr Who has filmed on location in Wales, the show has used the landscape of Margam Country park for many scenes over the years (Margam Country Park). But why the Welsh Landscape? Is it because the Welsh landscape cannot be distinguishable from other Landscapes?

It could be considered that the Welsh landscape is used often in cinematography not for the characteristic mountains and valleys, but for the wide-open field that create a landscape that unidentifiable from other countries?

The show Hinterland also known as y Gwyllt is a very unique show as there is a version that is all in English and another which is in Welsh and English depending on who is speaking and is not dubbed over.

Hinterland uses the large open space that comes with the fields up in Aberystwyth to create a Nordic noir genre. The Welsh landscape plays an important role in the show as it is used to set the main plots. The landscape is what connects every episode to each other.

Eternal beauty is a film directed by the Welsh director Craig Roberts. This film used more city and urban landscapes compared to Hinterland. The landscape is used to make it look like the 80s to 90s. this film as many famous actors but they are all English for example Billy Piper, Sally Hawkins, and David Thewlis, but why would a Welsh director use a mostly English cast for a film based in Wales?

Conclusion

From the researched gathered it is possible to say that cultural identity and landscape are connected, and this close bond can be seen in Welsh culture and landscape. Welsh artists like Kyffin Williams have used this connection between culture and landscape to their advantage to create extraordinary pieces of art that are a strong representation of Wales. The Welsh landscape itself is the roots for many artists, where they grow their practice from but without the Welsh landscape the art will fall apart. Welsh art almost always falls back to landscape.

Welsh art and culture is more than where you are born and more about how you engage with the country and the culture and how it is represented in art is what is important. The country itself has had a huge impact on art which does not have enough recognition and deserves more attention from Welsh art schools.

Anyone can create Welsh art and be a Welsh artist as proven by Leblond and her practice.