

‘An Art of Our Own’: State Patronage of the Visual Arts in Wales, 1945-1967

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The formation of the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) in 1945 marked the introduction of official state patronage for the arts in Britain. But while research has focused on ACGB's contribution to English cultural life, little has been written about its influence throughout the rest of Great Britain. This paper addresses this gap by examining ACGB's Welsh Committee's contribution to the visual arts in post-war Wales. It argues the Welsh Committee not only helped develop greater 'knowledge, practice and interest' in contemporary Welsh art, but also strengthened Welsh national identity, thereby illustrating the 'plurinational' character of British cultural policy.

Key words: Arts Council; cultural policy; visual arts; national identity; Wales

The end of the Second World War marked a new dawn for the arts in Britain.¹ Despite the background of austerity, new opera, ballet and theatre companies were founded, the number of professional artists and musicians increased, and the public were given more opportunity to see plays, exhibitions and concerts. Among the cultural landmarks of the immediate post-war period were the establishment of Covent Garden Opera (1946), the inaugural Edinburgh International Festival (1947), the Festival of Britain (1951), and the creation of the National Theatre (1963). Not all these activities had mass appeal, and some like Strong question the quality of the work produced.² Yet the expansion of arts provision after the war has proven to be one of the most important developments in the history of British cultural life.

The driving force behind this development was the introduction of state patronage for the arts. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the British government had consistently opposed spending public money on the arts, believing that like the economy, this was an area best left to the free market.³ Although it gradually accepted financial responsibility for museums and galleries, living artists remained dependent on

private patronage.⁴ Many feared that state patronage would stifle innovation and creative freedom. Yet the Second World War transformed these attitudes. In 1940, the Treasury agreed to fund a new organisation to support the contemporary arts in Britain. Setup following a special conference between the Board of Education and the Pilgrim Trust, the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) aimed to boost wartime morale by sponsoring local arts groups facing financial difficulties because of the war and by organising its own nationwide programme of plays, concerts and exhibitions.⁵ According to Hewison, this ‘mark[ed] the beginning of the modern period in official British cultural policy’.⁶

By the end of the war, CEMA had evolved into a major funding body for the arts, and in June 1945 Churchill’s caretaker administration announced it was to become a permanent organisation, known as the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB), under the chairmanship of the economist John Maynard Keynes.⁷ The following year ACGB received its Royal Charter, which defined its objective as ‘developing greater knowledge, understanding and practice of the fine arts exclusively, and in particular to increase accessibility to the arts throughout the Realm’.⁸ Combining both the democratic aspiration of making the arts available to all with an aristocratic understanding of what defined ‘the fine arts exclusively’ – opera, theatre, ballet, classical music, painting and sculpture were eligible for funding, but not amateur arts or popular activities like film or photography – this typified the new post-war political consensus between the left and the right.⁹ The Council itself was appointed by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in consultation with the Minister for Education and the Secretary of State for Scotland, though operated at ‘arm’s-length’ from the government to avoid political interference with the arts. In 1945/46, ACGB’s Treasury grant was £235,000 (£6m in 2005), and after ten years this had grown to £820,000 (£14m in 2005).¹⁰

The establishment of ACGB was a landmark in British cultural life. Yet while there have been several studies on its contribution to the arts in England, little research has been done on its influence throughout the rest of Great Britain.¹¹ ACGB has been portrayed as a ‘national organisation that reflected the knowledge and outlook of the southern [English] metropolitan elite’, but this is not entirely true.¹² As part of its 1946 Royal Charter, separate Welsh and Scottish Committees were given powers to ‘advise and assist’ ACGB on its work in Wales and Scotland respectively.¹³ These became the Welsh and Scottish Arts Councils in 1967, yet remained subcommittees of ACGB until 1994, when the organisation was split into independent arts councils for England, Scotland and Wales. This paper examines the contribution of ACGB’s Welsh Committee to the arts in Wales by focusing on one of its priority areas – the visual arts. Drawing on archival material, annual reports, exhibition

catalogues, and newspapers and journals from the period, it argues that the Welsh Committee played a key role in developing this area of Welsh cultural life.

This paper also aims to address the critical question of ACGB's role in relation to national identity in post-war Britain. According to Hewison, ACGB was one of several state-funded cultural institutions which put 'flesh on the bones' of British national identity, thereby helping mobilise the post-war political consensus.¹⁴ As Weight explains:

By subsidising and publicising British culture, the state could awaken the latent sensibilities of the people. Armed with those sensibilities, Britons would be able to appreciate what in 1940 Lord Reith had called 'the value and reality of cultural roots'. The result, reformers hoped, would be a nation of mature, patriotic citizens, a social unity never before achieved in peacetime and a renewed sense of purpose in a dramatically changed world.¹⁵

Yet once again there has been little analysis of how this issue played out in the rest of Great Britain. This paper therefore seeks to address this gap by determining whether the Welsh Committee also tried to promote British national unity or whether it fostered a separate sense of Welsh culture and identity through its patronage of the visual arts. It therefore seeks to address the call for more research on Wales since 1945 beyond the political sphere, and in particular the relationship between Welshness and Britishness.¹⁶

'The Special Genius of the Welsh'

ACGB's decision to form a separate Welsh Committee was, for the 1940s, a rare example of cultural devolution. While Welsh culture had achieved some recognition from the British state with the establishment of such national institutions as the University of Wales (1893), the Welsh Department of Education (1907), the National Museum of Wales (1907), and the National Library of Wales (1907), autonomy in cultural matters still had to be fought for. When the BBC formed in 1927, for example, Wales was originally attached to the west of England to form the 'West Region'. It was only after vigorous protest, organised by the League of Nations Union, Welsh MPs and the University of Wales, that the corporation agreed to establish a 'Welsh Region' in 1936.¹⁷ On the other hand, the Second World War brought about a growing recognition of Welsh culture and identity in an effort to acknowledge Wales's contribution to the overall British war effort. The BBC, for example, introduced a Welsh news service and extended its Welsh language programming.¹⁸ The new Labour government continued this process after the war with the formation of Welsh boards

for health, gas, and planning, although in other areas, notably coal, Wales was divided and even merged with parts of England.

Within ACGB, Keynes originally resisted calls to establish separate Welsh and Scottish Committees. After pressure from the Secretary of State for Scotland, Tom Johnston, the Chairman eventually agreed to give CEMA's existing Scottish Advisory Committee official recognition in ACGB's Royal Charter.¹⁹ Yet it is less clear why the same deal applied to Wales, which had no equivalent minister to press its case. It may have been due to the persuasion of influential Welshmen at Westminster, such as Ben Bowen Thomas, Permanent Secretary to the Welsh Department of the Ministry of Education, or Dr Thomas Jones, one of CEMA's founder members. Whatever the cause, Keynes soon yielded to demands to form a separate Welsh Committee in line with Scotland and noted in his BBC radio lecture *The Arts Council: Policy and Hopes* (1945): 'We have great hopes of our new Welsh Committee and of the stimulus it will give to the special genius of the Welsh'.²⁰

The Welsh Committee was originally appointed by ACGB as an 'advisory committee', but following Scotland's example, it eventually gained full autonomy over its own budget (which was calculated on a per capita basis) in 1953.²¹ As Lord Goodman pointed out to the Commons Estimates Committee while Chairman of ACGB in the late-1960s:

[The Welsh Committee] is an autonomous body with its own grant. At the beginning of the year they arrive with their mules and camels, we count out their ingots, they put them in their bags and off they go over the hills with their money. They spend their money and we spend ours.²²

However, there was little appetite amongst the Welsh for going further in demanding an independent Arts Council of Wales. Despite the emergence of Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru (the Welsh National Party) in 1925, the vast majority of people in Wales defined their Welshness firmly within a British context. Those appointed to the Welsh Committee reflected this consensus. The first Chairman of the Welsh Committee, for example, was the former Conservative minister Lord Harlech, while other members were largely drawn from existing public institutions in Wales. There were some exceptions, but their impact was limited. For example, Saunders Lewis, a playwright and former leader of Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru, who was imprisoned in the 1930s for attacking a RAF bombing school at Pen-y-bent, served on the Welsh Committee during the mid-1950s. Yet Lewis's attempt to pursue a more nationalist policy for the arts in Wales – and in particular to establish a Welsh National Theatre – was thwarted by Professor Gwyn Jones, the Deputy Chairman of the Welsh Committee, described by one colleague as 'a left-winger with little spoken Welsh'.²³

The autonomy enjoyed by the Welsh Committee allowed Wales to pursue its own objectives within the terms of the Royal Charter. This led to a degree of divergence within British cultural policy. In England, for example, ACGB placed emphasis on the Charter's first objective – 'developing the fine arts exclusively' – over its second – 'to increase accessibility to the arts' – by concentrating resources on metropolitan institutions like Covent Garden Opera. As the 1955/56 *Annual Report* explained: 'In the long debate between 'Raise' and 'Spread' the decision has been adopted to put standards first. Widespread diffusion is liable to produce the dry-rot of mediocrity. High values in the arts can only be maintained on a restricted scale'.²⁴ The Welsh Committee, by contrast, tried to balance artistic standards against access. While it spent almost half its budget on the metropolitan-styled Welsh National Opera Company, it also organised its own programme of concerts, plays and exhibitions through the policy of 'direct provision'.

Direct provision had been widely practised during CEMA's early days, but was soon phased out after ACGB redefined its role as a grant-giving organisation. Keynes particularly frowned on the policy, because it allowed administrators rather than artists to determine cultural trends.²⁵ However, the Welsh Committee viewed direct provision as a way of solving the 'indigenous problems' facing the arts in Wales. As the 1952/53 *Annual Report* explained:

The arts in Wales are lop-sided. There is an abundance of interest in music but relatively little in painting. There is a strong native tradition of drama, but virtually no professional theatre. Communications are sketchy outside the main centres of population, and there is a general shortage of housing accommodation for the display of the arts. In Wales, again, there is an ancient minority culture to be cherished and developed: drama and literature must be nourished in Welsh as well as English.²⁶

Direct provision also had strong roots in Wales. During the 1930s Depression, for example, organisations like the Workers' Education Association (WEA) and the British Institute of Adult Education (BIAE) played a highly active role in the south Wales valleys, organising lectures, exhibitions and craft workshops to combat idleness and depression amongst the unemployed.²⁷ Furthermore, the policy chimed with the egalitarian ethos associated with distinctly 'Welsh' cultural activities like the eisteddfod folk festivals or male voice choirs. This gave it far more legitimacy in Wales than anywhere else in Great Britain.

'A Living Tradition of Art'

One of the Welsh Committee's main priority areas was the visual arts. While it spent more on music and drama, it was here the organisation was most involved in direct provision. The decision to prioritise the visual arts stemmed from the widely held belief that Wales had no visual tradition of its own. As the Welsh Committee's Art Director, David Bell, who was responsible for the direct provision of activities for the visual arts, wrote in *The Welsh Anvil* in 1951: 'There never has been in Wales any tradition of the fine arts'.²⁸ Although Bell conceded that Wales had produced some talented painters like Richard Wilson or Augustus John, 'their art had been developed in another soil and has enriched a foreign tradition'.²⁹ Wilson, for example, was known as the 'father' of English landscape painting.

The standard explanation for Wales's lack of a visual tradition was the belief that the Welsh, as descendants of the ancient Celts, were a spiritual people whose 'natural' talents lay in oral traditions like music and poetry, rather than the making or the appreciation of material objects like paintings and sculptures.³⁰ Bell, however, refused to accept this racial stereotype, and concluded the problem must be due to material constraint. 'Painting', he argued, 'only flourishes in an urban civilisation, when it is supported by wealth and the kind of social background which wealth brings'.³¹ Wales had simply been too poor to sustain much artistic activity in the past – only with the introduction of state patronage did it have the proper means to create what he called 'a living tradition of art'.³²

Bell was wrong to assume Wales had no visual tradition. As research over the last two decades by Lord and other 'new' art historians has shown, Wales has a long history of image-making.³³ Bell simply overlooked this tradition, because the work was made by lesser-known artisan painters and craftspeople who did not conform to the Western high art canon.³⁴ However, it is certainly true that, compared to other artforms, the visual arts lacked the institutional support around which a coherent Welsh art world could develop. Although Wales was home to several public galleries, including the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff, the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery in Swansea and the Gregynog Gallery at the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth, these rarely showed exhibitions by contemporary Welsh artists.³⁵ The annual National Eisteddfod, meanwhile, provided only a temporary space for Arts and Crafts.

There had been several past attempts to establish a Welsh art world. In 1881, the Royal Cambrian Academy of Art was founded in Llandudno Junction by a group of English landscape painters from the Betws-y-Coed artists' colony, and in 1890 the South Wales Art Society was established in Cardiff to promote the visual arts in south Wales.³⁶ Yet neither organisation achieved much impact outside its locality. A significant breakthrough came with the formation of the Contemporary Art Society for Wales in 1937. But despite its initial

dynamism the Society stopped producing exhibitions after the war and decided instead to concentrate on purchasing work for museums, galleries and public buildings in Wales.³⁷ On top of this, there was little discussion of Welsh painting and sculpture in books, newspapers or journals, while the number teaching or studying art at college was small.³⁸ Many professional Welsh artists therefore chose to develop their careers outside Wales.

Bell's strategy for developing the visual arts in Wales centred on organising a programme of touring exhibitions. However, until this was up and running in 1946, the Welsh Committee was forced to rely on exhibitions from ACGB, prompting protests that Wales would be 'flooded' by English art. The nationalist Walter Dowding, for example, warned in the journal *Wales* (1946): 'Too much dependence on the Arts Council of Great Britain – formed, be it ever remembered, for the propaganda of English, not British, culture – can be deadly'.³⁹ The artist Cedric Morris likewise complained in a radio debate in February 1947:

The English point of view has been forced on Wales – that is why there is no art in the country.... One thing is certain – with all its merits, we in Wales don't want to rely on the Arts Council of Great Britain. Leadership for Wales in matters of Art can never come from Belgrave Square.⁴⁰

By 1950, though, the Welsh Committee had organised eight of its own exhibitions, including *A Tour through Wales* (1947), *Welsh Landscape in British Art* (1947), *Paintings by Contemporary Welsh Artists* (1949) and *Pictures from the National Eisteddfod* (1950). This allayed any further concerns about Wales being dominated by metropolitan England.

As well as organising exhibitions, Bell encouraged other public institutions, private companies and individuals to support Welsh artists. In 1948, he helped establish the South Wales Group, which staged annual exhibitions of work by professional and amateur artists, and in 1950 he organised the first in a new series of exhibitions called *Painting for Welsh Schools*, with the support of the Society for Education in Art (SEA). This encouraged local educational authorities to buy paintings for schools and training colleges. Bell hoped these activities would create 'a market for pictures in Wales' and therefore allow artists to stay and make a living in Wales.⁴¹ He also hoped to make art part of everyday life and not something restricted to museums and galleries. 'Until we in Wales think of painting in that way, as something integrated into our homes, we shall never have a living tradition of art', he wrote in the foreword to the catalogue of the South Wales Group's first exhibition.⁴² The Welsh Committee set an example by establishing its own Welsh Collection in 1951. By 1957 it had accumulated over 100 paintings and sculptures by Welsh artists.⁴³

Bell's role in organising the Welsh Committee's exhibition programme allowed him considerable influence over the direction of the visual arts in Wales. Amongst the artists he championed were émigré-artists like Josef Herman and Heinz Koppel, who had fled to Wales from Nazi-occupied Europe during the Second World War. In 1948, Bell visited Herman's home in the mining village of Ystradgynlais in the Swansea Valley, and was struck at the way the Warsaw-born artist found artistic inspiration in his immediate surroundings:

There was a scene of desolation as complete as anything the world can show; there was nothing of the beauty of rural Wales. Yet Herman was brimful of the delight of an artist.... The lesson that evening for me is that beauty has many facets and the artist in Wales has not only found the beauty which is for all to see, but found it at just the moment at which we have turned our eyes away.⁴⁴

Bell wanted indigenous Welsh artists to follow Herman's example in producing expressionistic work which captured the 'many facets of beauty' within their own local environment. In a sense, this was nothing new – Evan Walters and Archie Rhys Griffith had been depicting the Swansea Valley since before the Great War.⁴⁵ Yet Herman was held in far higher regard than this earlier generation of Welsh industrial painters because of what Bell called his 'profound knowledge of the great contemporary masters of European painting'.⁴⁶

In 1948, Bell organised a touring exhibition of Herman's work, and in 1951 he invited the artist to represent Wales at the Festival of Britain exhibition *Sixty Paintings for '51*. Yet while Herman's depiction of the Welsh miner as a universal symbol of the dignity and humanity of labour won him acclaim with metropolitan audiences, the Welsh public – far more attune to the realities of industrial society – was less enthusiastic.⁴⁷ One letter to a local newspaper described his work as 'ugly, debased, undefined and degenerate', while another complained: 'the pictures are ghastly travesties of the present day miner and his womenfolk'.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, Herman did become popular with many artists in Wales. George Fairly and Will Roberts regularly visited the artist's studio in Ystradgynlais, an experience which taught Roberts in particular 'an awful lot about art of the Continent'.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, Charles Burton, Bill Austin and Ernest Zobole visited Herman's contemporary, Heinz Koppel, at the Dowlais educational settlement near Merthyr Tydfil.⁵⁰ Bell praised these young art students in *The Welsh Anvil* for 'trying to express their regard for their own background and environment', and concluded that 'what we are witnessing in Wales is the first stirrings of a new and vital interest in the fine arts, which will one day grow into a tradition of painting'.⁵¹

‘The Life, Spirit and Character of Wales’

Bell’s ambition to create a ‘tradition of painting’ based on a regard for the artist’s ‘own background and environment’ began to gain wider currency in the early-1950s. In 1951, the Welsh Committee received a proposal from the artist and schools inspector Evan Charlton and James Powell, Principal of the Cardiff School of Art, to organise an exhibition on the lines of the Festival of Britain’s *Sixty Paintings for ‘51*. Charlton and Powell not only wanted to provide practical assistance to artists in Wales. They also shared Bell’s vision of ‘developing an Art of our own’ and called on the Welsh Committee ‘as patron to assert a patron’s privilege and impose some kind of theme for the competition’ in order to provide ‘a broad direction to the painters’.⁵² They went on to stipulate this broad direction in more detail: ‘it would not be out of place for the [Welsh Committee] to give its encouragement to a movement already started, in which artists express their reactions to the life, people and spirit of Wales’.⁵³

The Welsh Committee accepted Charlton and Powell’s proposal and preparations began to organise an open exhibition of contemporary Welsh painting and sculpture to coincide with the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953. However, Bell was prevented from seeing the project through to fruition due to illness. Unable to travel around Wales, he moved to the more sedentary post as Curator at the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery. Nevertheless, Bell continued to exercise influence over the direction of contemporary Welsh art after he was invited by his successor, John Petts, to select the Welsh open exhibition with the assistance of two English painters: John Piper and Carel Weight.

The *Open Exhibition of Contemporary Welsh Painting and Sculpture* – or ‘Welsh Open’ for short – opened at the National Museum of Wales in October 1953. Featuring over 100 works by some of the country’s leading artists – including Kyffin Williams, Ernest Zobole, Charles Burton, John Ewlyn, Heinz Koppel, Cedric Morris, David Tinker and Brenda Chamberlain – it was the biggest exhibition of contemporary Welsh art to date. In accordance with its stated aim ‘to stimulate a wider interest in the works of our contemporary painters and sculptors... and to find a market for them by encouraging industrial and public bodies in Wales to become patrons’, the exhibition was ‘open to all Welsh artists and all artists living and working in Wales’.⁵⁴ However, as Powell and Charlton had originally intended, the Welsh Committee also used the opportunity to manufacture for Wales ‘an Art of its own’ by instructing the judges to prioritise works ‘expressing some aspect of Welsh life and character’.⁵⁵ As a result, many of the images selected featured well-known

symbols of Welsh identity, as Petts observed in a speech for the exhibition's opening ceremony: 'There are paintings of our mountains and valleys and of our rocky coast, pictures of mining folk, farmers, cockle women and their donkeys, hill sheep gathered into pens of slate, paintings of remote villages in the North as well as the industrial hotch potch of the South'.⁵⁶

The range of scenery on show at the *Welsh Open* – and particularly the contrasting views of industrial and rural Wales – suggested that Wales was perhaps too diverse to form a coherent national tradition of art. Although there was broad consensus that Wales formed part of Britain, there was little agreement about precisely what Wales itself meant. As the Sir Alfred Zimmern famously noted in his inaugural lecture at University College Wales, Aberystwyth, in 1921: 'Wales today is not a unity', but three 'different types and different traditions' – rural 'Welsh Wales', industrial 'American Wales', and upper-class 'English Wales' – each of which were 'moving in different directions'.⁵⁷ However, in the catalogue which accompanied the exhibition, Bell and his fellow judges overlooked these divisions, to suggest that much of the work bore the imprint of a common national character:

A feeling is conveyed in many of the pictures of love and compassion for humanity and a consciousness of the relation of men and women to nature, buildings, and everyday life in Wales. This concern with environment seems to auger well for the future of a Welsh School of Painting.⁵⁸

Some expressed doubts at these comments. *The Western Mail*, for example, observed: 'The strongly individual portrayal of Welsh life and scene actually challenges the accepted idea of an indigenous school of painting'.⁵⁹ Yet the suggestion that artists from different parts of Wales held a common 'love and compassion for humanity and a consciousness of the relations of men and women to nature, buildings and everyday life' was a powerful one because it linked Welsh art with established ideas of Welsh identity, particularly the notion of *brogarwch* (love of one's immediate environment) in Welsh language poetry. As Saunders Lewis wrote in the catalogue to the touring exhibition *30 Welsh Painters of Today*, which featured a selection of work from the *Welsh Open*, 'The Wales of the twentieth century is spiritually richer because there has come to us this honest *poetry* of the painters brush'.⁶⁰

The Welsh Committee had been told by ACGB that funding large open exhibitions should be 'a drop in the bucket and a very occasional drop'.⁶¹ Yet the warm reception received by the *Welsh Open* – which included £631 in sales (£14,374 in 2005) and an invitation to show a selection of the work at ACGB's headquarters in London – together with the fact Wales had by 1953 achieved full autonomy from ACGB, persuaded the Welsh

Committee to make the exhibition an annual event. A 2nd *Welsh Open* was therefore organised at the National Museum of Wales in February 1955, before touring to the Newport Museum and Art Gallery in March. Petts described the *Welsh Open* series as ‘a meeting place, in the true sense a community centre, for artists in Wales and all those (an increasing number) who follow their achievement with interest and growing respect’.⁶² Artist and broadcaster Mervyn Levy, meanwhile, urged ‘Anyone who missed this sparkling exhibition at Cardiff, [to] take the next suitable train or bus to Newport, or they can walk, or run – but they must if it’s at all possible, or if they possess the merest interest in painting and sculpture’.⁶³

‘Between Two Movements’

By the mid-1950s, the Welsh Committee was showing 22 exhibitions (including 13 exhibitions from England) in Wales per year. The majority were held in Glamorgan (21) and Monmouth (7), although there were also tours to less populated rural areas such as Montgomery (12), Cardigan (3), Merioneth (7), Caernarfon (1), Carmarthen (1) and Denbigh (1).⁶⁴ The exhibition programme itself combined work by Welsh, British and international artists. Yet the event which attracted most attention was the annual *Welsh Open*. An indicator of just how important this event had become in the Welsh cultural calendar can be seen in the guests it attracted. John Rothenstein, Director of Tate Britain, opened the exhibition in 1956, while Aneurin Bevan, the hero of Welsh Labour, did the honours in 1959, using the occasion to urge local authorities to spend more on cultural amenities.⁶⁵

Throughout the 1950s, the *Welsh Opens* continued to be dominated by images of everyday Welsh life. The discourse which surrounded the exhibition, meanwhile, did much to frame this imagery around the idea that the Welsh were a ‘poetic’ people with a deep emotional attachment to their local environment (despite the fact many of the Welsh ‘environmentalist’ painters took their inspiration not from Welsh poets, but émigré-artists like Herman and Koppel). The 1955 exhibition catalogue, for example, claimed Welsh artists were ‘Sensitively aware of the dramatic possibilities and aura of places’, while the 1956 catalogue suggested ‘The brilliance and vitality of the Welsh poetic genius are frequently present’.⁶⁶

However, there was also a growing sense that the *Welsh Opens* were failing to keep pace with international aesthetic trends. In New York, avant-garde artists like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko had already moved away from the representation of people, places and objects towards producing purely abstract images.⁶⁷ The American art critic Clement

Greenberg called this part of Modernism's logic of development.⁶⁸ Once British audiences got their first taste of the new Abstract Expressionism with the exhibition *Modern Art in the United States* at the Tate Gallery in January 1956, the Welsh Committee faced growing calls to support more progressive art within its exhibition programme.

These feelings were particularly strong among teaching staff at Wales's newly expanded art schools, many of whom had been recruited from outside the country, and thus had little or no connection with the Welsh environment. As David Tinker, who came from London to teach at Cardiff School of Art, later recalled: 'Only a minimum of space was given to an artist who was aware of the rising tide of "abstract" art in New York and Paris'.⁶⁹ In 1956, Tinker, his colleague Eric Malthouse and the architect Michael Edmonds formed the '56 Group to promote the cause of progressive art in Wales. They quickly recruited ten like-minded artists from across Wales, yet faced resistance from the Welsh arts establishment. After David Bell refused a request to show their work at the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, the group's inaugural exhibition had to be held across the border at the City Art Gallery in Worcester.⁷⁰ At the National Museum of Wales, Lord Raglan, the Museum's President, derided an exhibition by the '56 Group as 'the atrocities over there', and two of the artworks were damaged, possibly due to vandalism.⁷¹ Although the Welsh Committee agreed to pay the '56 Group a small annual grant, it made no attempt to organise an exhibition by the group until 1960. Metropolitan art critics, however, praised the new commitment to progressive art in Wales. *The Times*, for example, congratulated 'the authorities of the National Museum on giving South Wales this appealing taste of avant-garde contemporary art'.⁷²

Although the Welsh Committee was initially slow to respond to new aesthetic trends, it eventually started to invite more progressive artists like Ceri Richards and Alan Bowness to judge the *Welsh Open* series. Consequently, by the early-1960s, about one third of the work on show was abstract. One critic described Welsh visual culture as 'caught between two movements'.⁷³ Yet as the decade progressed, it became clear Wales was following the international trend towards abstraction. As the catalogue for the 1963 *Welsh Open* recorded: 'Welsh artists have... been increasingly influenced by world-wide artistic experimentation. Many of the pictures in the present exhibition are abstract; most show the international spirit that has widened the frontiers of painting and sculpture'.⁷⁴

This new commitment to international art was underpinned by a broader shift in cultural policy. Having succeeded in making the arts more accessible to the public, the Welsh Committee began during the early-1960s to place more emphasis on raising artistic standards to international levels. The new strategy, which brought Wales in step with

ACGB's own commitment to standards over diffusion, was pushed through by Dr J. Roger Webster, who replaced Myra Owen, an arts administrator since the early days of CEMA, as the Welsh Committee's new Director for Wales in 1961. A former lecturer, Webster made his mark early with a series of appointments that, according to one colleague, 'suited the needs of the progressive art policies which he was determined to pursue'.⁷⁵ New directors for music and drama were appointed within a year, though the Art Director, Tom Cross, remained in his post, having already demonstrated a commitment to progressive art since his appointment two years earlier with exhibitions of work by the '56 Group and Ceri Richards.

Webster had already signalled his preference for international aesthetics a few years before joining the Welsh Committee. In *The Welsh Anvil* in 1958, he attacked Bell's idea of a 'living tradition of art' based on the representation of the Welsh environment as 'ludicrous':

How can a tradition be created overnight as some wish fulfilment? As far as Welsh art is concerned it is apparently sufficient merely to paint pictures of Wales: of mountains and miners, particularly miners coming and going to pit, chapel or club.... This is a surely a very superficial way to "create a tradition".⁷⁶

Webster called on Welsh artists to abandon their commitment to the Welsh local environment by focusing instead on the 'form and colour that the quality of his [sic] work will ultimately depend on', and concluded his article with a quote by Jackson Pollock attacking nationalist art: 'The idea of an isolated American painting seems absurd to me just as the idea of creating a purely American mathematics or physics would seem absurd'.⁷⁷

There were also commercial factors behind the shift to towards international art. Exhibitions like the *Welsh Opens* partly aimed to develop a market for contemporary Welsh art by encouraging industry and public bodies to buy work by Welsh artists. However, while this had achieved some success, the character of Welsh industry and public life was changing.⁷⁸ Old heavy industries like coal-mining were being replaced by new industries like the manufacture of cars, electronics and household goods. Government had meanwhile embarked on an ambitious programme of modernisation, with the construction of the M4 motorway, Cwmbran Newtown, and new steel plants at Port Talbot and Llanwern. In order to appeal to these potential clients, the Welsh Committee felt the need to invoke the spirit of the 'new' Wales through encouraging work which embodied a greater sense of modernity, internationalism and progress than the traditional Welsh image of hills, mines and chapels.

This new strategy first became apparent at the 6th *Welsh Open* in March 1960. Tom Cross had decided to organise the exhibition on the theme 'Industrial Wales' on the advice of Kenneth Davies, who joined the Welsh Committee in 1955 as one of the first members to come from the world of business and industry. A member of the Industrial Association of Wales and Monmouthshire, Davies had managed to persuade several new Welsh businesses – including De Havilland Aircraft Company, Monsanto Chemicals, British Nylon Spinners, Standard Telephones and Cables, and Cambrian Airways – to provide sponsorship for the exhibition and allow artists to visit their plants and factories to select subjects for painting. The aim was to 'establish a direct link between the practising artists of Wales and the great industrial organisations which are potentially the patrons of today'.⁷⁹

The *Industrial Wales* exhibition presented a new vision of Welsh industry. Gone was the image of smoky factories and cavernous mines associated with the Victorian and Edwardian era, and in its place appeared the clean lines and abstract forms of the modern manufacturing process. As Tom Cross underlined in a BBC radio broadcast: 'There is a notable increase in the number of abstract paintings on show, this may be in part due to the influence of modern American painting, but even in the most abstract of work there is an effort to grasp the shapes and forms of mechanical processes and to integrate them into a work of art'.⁸⁰ The Art Director concluded by suggesting this might form of the basis of a new relationship between Welsh art and industry: 'Artists are already seeing in industrial techniques and processes a point of departure for their work and commercial and industrial organisations are realising that the artist may play an important role in the intricate design of industry'.⁸¹

'Not a Welsh Exhibition at All'

By the mid-1960s international aesthetic trends had come to dominate the visual culture of Wales. Abstract images not only overwhelmed exhibitions like the *Welsh Opens* series. They also featured strongly in Wales's commercial galleries as well. In July 1965, the Howard Roberts Gallery in Cardiff staged the exhibition *Trends and Trendsetters*, which included work by Welsh modernists like Ceri Richards and Merlyn Evans, alongside the new generation of English Pop artists, such as Peter Blake and Derek Boshier.⁸² Even the more conservative National Eisteddfod staged a special exhibition of work by the '56 Group in August 1965. The Welsh avant-garde who had once faced a battle to get their work shown in Wales now found themselves part of the Welsh arts establishment. In 1965, the Welsh Committee established a new Art Subcommittee to give practising artists a greater say over

art policy. Amongst the artists appointed were Arthur Giardelli, Chairman of the '56 Group, and Tom Hudson, who as Director of Studies at Cardiff School of Art was responsible for introducing one of the most radical art teaching programmes anywhere in Britain.⁸³

The trend for progressive abstract art reached its peak with the Welsh Committee exhibition *Structure* in June 1966. Billed as 'the first exhibition exclusively for sculpture and construction', the exhibition, which was organised by the Welsh Committee's radical new Art Director, Peter Jones, aimed to put Wales on the map.⁸⁴ Although part of the *Welsh Open* series, it was the first open exhibition to invite non-Welsh artists from outside Wales. This was part of Roger Webster's long-standing ambition to 'organise an open exhibition in Wales where the work of Welsh artists could be seen side by side with that of other artists in Britain'.⁸⁵

Structure 1966 featured over 80 exhibits, representing the latest trends in British sculpture. Some appeared at the National Museum of Wales, while others were placed in the grounds of nearby Cardiff Castle. The prize for the best exhibit went to London-based sculptor Roland Piche for his five foot-high glass-fibre and steel work entitled *Deposition*. However, despite the Welsh Committee's best efforts to 'create an exhibition which will bring considerable prestige to Cardiff and Wales,' metropolitan critics were largely unimpressed with the results. 'Scarcely any of our better known sculptors bothered to send [their work]', wrote *The Guardian*.⁸⁶ 'Sending sculpture across the country is quite a business, and Cardiff is not exactly a major focus of cultural interest from their point of view'. *The Times* likewise wrote: 'The work... comes as something of an anti-climax. Many outstanding artists in this field are not represented and the overall standard of work is uneven'.⁸⁷

Despite these criticisms, *Structure 1966* was a key symbol of the new progressive cultural policy which began to emerge in government circles from the mid-1960s onwards. In 1964, Labour had returned to government for the first time since the early-1950s with the promise of modernising Britain through the 'white heat' of science and technology, and in 1965 it published the first ever white paper on the arts.⁸⁸ *Policy for the Arts: The First Steps* (1965) not only aimed to increase arts funding outside London, but also make Britain 'a gayer and more cultivated country' by creating a more liberal climate for the arts to flourish.⁸⁹ The new Arts Minister, Jenny Lee, signalled her approval of the Welsh Committee's own moves in this direction by opening *Structure 1966* (just as her late husband, Aneurin Bevan, had done with the 6th *Welsh Open* in 1959).

But while the Welsh arts establishment had come to enthusiastically embrace progressive art by the mid-1960s, the public remained more sceptical. After visiting the 11th

Welsh Open in 1964, columnist Jill Forewood wrote in the *South Wales Evening Post*: ‘there’s only one test for me to apply to exhibits: could I look at them every day? The answer as far as the sculptures go, it was enough to see them once’.⁹⁰ A similar view was expressed in a letter to the *Express and Times Gazette* after the 12th *Welsh Open* in 1965:

In common with many other visitors I was completely bewildered by the Arts Council for Wales Exhibition at the National Eisteddfod. A collection of large canvases painted with no relation to form or beauty: crude attempts at “with it” sculpture: amateurish attempts at metal work and panel beating.... Meanwhile, let all of us who appreciate beautiful work beautifully done protest at being called upon as tax payers, to subsidise the Arts Council in the encouragement of banal rubbish.⁹¹

Responses to *Structure 1966* were equally critical. One letter called the artists ‘misguided meddlers in metal’ and denounced the Welsh Committee for ‘wasting public money’.⁹² Another wrote: ‘These modern monstrosities are the products of a twisted imagination’.⁹³

There is further evidence to suggest that abstract art was unpopular with audiences in Wales. A visitors’ survey conducted during an exhibition by the ’56 Group at the National Museum in 1969 uncovered ‘much ill-considered prejudice and downright hostility to “modern art”’, although it did also find ‘a much greater tolerance and willingness to see the scope of the problems tackled by the artists’ among the 15 to 30 age group.⁹⁴ Only 10 per cent of the respondents were ‘professional’ workers, suggesting social class and education may help to explain these attitudes.⁹⁵ Yet even Wales’s more informed art collectors showed little interest in abstract art. According to Wakelin, the collections of Judge Bruce Griffith, Derek Williams and Phyllis Brown ‘seldom extended beyond the Modernism of the mid-century to the contemporary movements of the years that followed such as Abstract Expressionism, Op Art or Conceptual Art’.⁹⁶ Only one major collector, John Gibbs, showed any real interest in the Welsh avant-garde, acquiring work by his friends in the ’56 Group.⁹⁷ Yet even his collection still largely consisted of Neo-Romantic landscapes of the 1940s.

Although hostility to modern art was not specific to Wales (there was plenty of scepticism from conservative art critics and the public towards abstract art in England), such criticisms were often bound-up with broader concerns that Welsh art was losing touch with what were seen as traditional symbols of Welshness. In relation to the 12th *Welsh Open*, which opened on St. David’s Day in 1965, the *Western Mail*, for example, observed: ‘the exhibition has no possible association with things Welsh in subject’.⁹⁸ *The Guardian* likewise sensed: ‘This will certainly be a controversial exhibition as far as Wales is

concerned... Dewi Sant will no doubt have been affronted in the eyes of some.... [W]hat is on view is characteristic of much in West End galleries and has no particular Welsh flavour'.⁹⁹ *The Times*, meanwhile, said of the 14th *Welsh Open*: 'There is not one Welsh landscape; not a wisp of Celtic twilight – that particular genre seems to have been ruthlessly pushed out. In fact, the purest might complain that this is not a Welsh exhibition at all'.¹⁰⁰

These comments chimed with deeper anxieties about the threat posed by modernity to traditional Welsh culture. Post-war government planning and the spread of new technologies like cars and televisions had certainly helped to revitalise Wales in the 1950s and 1960s. However, as Humphreys notes, 'For a growing number of nationalist writers and intellectuals, the nature and pace of change, and the affluence which was created as a consequence of that change, did not represent a better future... but instead it entailed the destruction of a set of values and way of life which were distinctly Welsh'.¹⁰¹ The Welsh Committee may have regarded exhibitions of abstract art as the symbol of a 'new' Wales, but to some they also represented the dominance of Anglo-American values over Welsh culture and identity.

In response to the growing criticisms levied towards the *Welsh Opens*, the Welsh Committee began to re-examine its exhibition policy. In 1967, Gordon Redfern wrote a memo to his colleagues on the Art Subcommittee to complain about the *Welsh Open* series:

Such exhibitions are considered – often rightly, in my view – by the majority to be esoteric, intellectual and incomprehensible.... Although the work of furthering the avant-garde of any age is extremely important, I also feel that we should be spending some of the taxpayers' money, ... to try to explain the relationship between art and life and to vitalise the creative process through the interaction and reaction of people, products and producers.¹⁰²

In response, the Art Subcommittee decided to abandon the *Welsh Open* series in favour of a new series on 'Art and Society' which looked at the visual arts within a social context. Intended to appeal to more people by emphasising the social rather than the aesthetic meaning of art, this became the Welsh Committee's most popular exhibition series ever.¹⁰³

The decision to reprioritise access over standards came at a time of broader changes for the Welsh Committee. In 1966, Aneurin Thomas replaced Roger Webster as the Director for Wales, and the following year the Welsh Committee was renamed the Welsh Arts Council. Although this had no practical effect on the amount of autonomy Wales already enjoyed, Thomas seized the opportunity to distinguish the new Welsh Arts Council from ACGB's

policy of prioritising standards over access. As he wrote in the Welsh Arts Council's 1972/73 *Annual Report*: 'To leave 'Spread' to the broadcasting services and the amateur movement and 'Raise' to subsidised preforming companies is, and probably was two decades ago, too convenient a solution. It is wholly inappropriate to Wales'.¹⁰⁴

The Welsh Arts Council continued to pursue a more populist exhibition policy throughout the 1970s. Although it still provided support for some avant-garde artists, this was largely confined to small solo shows in its new Oriel gallery in Cardiff. One notable exception was the controversial exhibition *How the Past Perishes, How the Future Becomes* at the 1977 Wrexham National Eisteddfod, which featured contributions by international performance artists, such as Josef Beuys, Mario Mertz and Brian O'Doherty.¹⁰⁵

In the early-1980s, the Welsh Arts Council stopped its exhibitions programme altogether.¹⁰⁶ Having organised 236 exhibitions since 1946, it decided to redirect funds towards developing a network of galleries across Wales which could coordinate their own exhibition programme. It also stopped buying work for its Welsh Collection, which now held over 1,500 objects. The Welsh Arts Council argued that it was not its place to determine what kind of art should be seen in Wales – an argument first made by John Maynard Keynes in the 1940s. Yet in the long run the decision to abandon the policy of direct provision and devolve responsibility for organising exhibitions to individual galleries only diffused what had become the central focus of the Welsh art world, creating a much more fragmented situation by the end of the millennium.

Conclusion

Wales has a long history of image-making. Yet the 1950s and 1960s were a particularly vibrant period for the visual arts in Wales, with the emergence of a new Welsh art world. As this paper has attempted to show, the driving force behind this development was the introduction of state patronage for the arts and the establishment of ACGB's Welsh Committee in particular. The Welsh Committee created new opportunities for artists to exhibit and sell their work, making it possible for many to develop their career in Wales, rather than move to London or the Continent as was often the case in the past. Its flagship *Welsh Open* series helped launch the careers of some of Wales's best known artists of the post-war period, including Kyffin Williams, Ernest Zobole, Charles Burton, John Elwyn and Brenda Chamberlain. These exhibitions also generated new public interest in contemporary Welsh art, as demonstrated by the strong sales to public institutions, private companies and individual collectors, not to mention the widespread coverage the series received in both the

Welsh and London-based press. The longer term impact of this series is further evident in the fact that many of the pictures first exhibited during the *Welsh Open* series continue to be on permanent display in museums, galleries and public buildings in Wales. Others have become widely known through books, magazines, websites and television programmes.

The Welsh Committee not only helped to develop a 'greater knowledge, interest and practice' of the visual arts in Wales. As with education, sport and the media, it also reinforced Welsh identity at a time when the recognition of Wales in public life was sometimes resented and still needed to be fought for. The majority of its exhibitions were on Welsh themes, and many explicitly encouraged artists to depict scenes of Welsh life. The early *Welsh Opens*, for example, sought to identify a school or tradition of Welsh art based on the representation of the Welsh environment. This not only valorised familiar national symbols, such as hills, coal-mines and chapels, but also reflected for many critics the 'poetic' national character of the Welsh and their 'innate love' for their local surroundings. Even the more abstract art which came to the fore during the 1960s was meant to invoke the idea of a 'new Wales' associated with modernity and progress, even though some viewed this as a sign the nation losing its sense of identity.

Thus, although ACGB set out to promote British national unity, the Welsh were nevertheless allowed to express their own sense of culture and identity. Despite nationalist fears, ACGB never tried to impose English metropolitan cultural values onto Wales. It was an early example of what Keating's calls 'plurinational democracy', in which both the Welsh and the Scottish had considerable autonomy over their own internal affairs.¹⁰⁷

Nevertheless, while the Welsh Committee took the opportunity to strengthen Welsh national identity, it typically framed that identity within a British context. The *1st Welsh Open*, for example, was designed to coincide with the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. Major events like *Structure 1966*, meanwhile, aimed to illustrate what the Welsh Committee called Wales's 'special contribution to the cultural well-being of Great Britain'.¹⁰⁸ For in terms of its guiding principles, the Welsh Committee broadly conformed to the same the post-war political consensus which united the rest of British society from the 1940s until the 1970s. Like the majority of people in Wales, it saw itself as both Welsh and British, proud not only of its Welshness, but contributing also to a more diverse sense of Britishness.

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² Strong, *Spirit of Britain*, 644.

³ Gray, *Politics of the Arts*, 36-40.

⁴ Minihan, *Nationalization of Culture*.

⁵ Leventhal, 'CEMA and State Sponsorship', 289-317.

⁶ Hewison, *Culture and Consensus*, xv.

⁷ ACGB was only responsible for the arts in Great Britain rather than the United Kingdom as a whole. Northern Ireland established its own Arts Council in 1962.

⁸ Royal Charter cited in White, *Arts Council*, 294.

⁹ Strong, *Spirit of Britain*, 642.

¹⁰ Calculated using accounts in *ACGB Annual Reports 1945-1967*.

¹¹ See Hewison, *Culture and Consensus*; Sinclair, *Arts and Culture*; White, *Arts Council*; Witt, *Artist Unknown*. One exception to this trend is Galloway and Jones, 'Scottish Dimension of British Arts Governance'.

¹² Weight, *Patriots*, 187.

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¹⁵ White, *Patriots*, 92.

¹⁶ Johnes, 'Wales, History and Britishness', 602-10.

¹⁷ Davies, *The BBC in Wales*, 51-5

¹⁸ White, *Patriots*, 53.

¹⁹ Galloway and Jones, 'Scottish Dimension of British Arts Governance', 26.

²⁰ Keynes, 'Arts Council', 31.

²¹ Wales received about 4.5 percent of ACGB's grant-in-aid, slightly more per capita than Scotland and England.

²² House of Commons Parliamentary Papers. *Eighth Report from the Estimates Committee, together with minutes of evidence taken before Subcommittee B on 1st of April and following days, Appendix and Index* (1967-1968 Grants for the arts), col. 3576.

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- ²⁷ Lord, *Industrial Society*, 224-225.
- ²⁸ Bell, 'Contemporary Welsh Painting', 17.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Lord, *Aesthetics of Relevance*, 18-21.
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- ³² Bell, *South Wales Group*, n.p.
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- ⁹³ *Ibid.*
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