

KYFFIN WILLIAMS, PRCA 1992-2006

Kyffin Williams became President of the Royal Cambrian Academy for the second time in September 1992. He was 74 and still at the height of his powers not only as a senior painter but as a man whose vision and engaging personality charmed those who met him, energised an artistic community and gave that community a unifying purpose.

At the beginning of his second term, he benignly but firmly oversaw the RCA's move out of Conwy's antiquated Plas Mawr and into the neighbouring, former Seion Chapel once it had been completely transformed into a brand new exhibiting space.

A decade on he wrote:

"There we mount important exhibitions in order to bring pleasure to the people of Wales, for it is the public we consider. At the same time we are well aware that excellence is something that we must always bear in mind as well as tradition, for we are not concerned with the modern idea that originality is all important. Consequently the Royal Cambrian Academy Gallery is a happy place, something that is unusual in the contemporary world of art".

All this was achieved through a team effort and it was no mean feat. In the first two or three months of opening, the Vice President Keith Andrew reported that the new gallery had over 4000 visitors. An active Friends of the RCA Group was in place (having been established a year before Kyffin's resumption at the helm) and its first female curator, Vicky Macdonald, was appointed a year or so after the start of his new Presidency.

Kyffin and the RCA Council's ambition for the Cambrian also included expanding the number of members from 60 to 100 and to opening up the membership to artists in the south. This saw the likes of Ivor Davies, a future President, elected. It also meant negotiations with the Welsh Group which had begun life as the South Wales Group and had remained a largely southern force. Unfortunately, no combining of the two artist groups resulted, perhaps in part because the focus of Kyffin's only slightly younger counterpart David Tinker was upon the modern and experimental rather than tradition and the landscape. In 1999, the newly knighted Sir Kyffin expressed his hope that one day the RCA would represent the whole of Wales.

The geography of Wales has always been physically, psychologically and culturally significant. The north-west of the country is characterised by spectacularly rugged mountains which, more easily accessed from the east, inspired English Victorian artists such as RCA pioneer Henry Clarence Whaite to travel there and paint them. Those same mountains, and to a lesser extent the distinctive coastline, have been a staple for Kyffin. In his works, the crags of Snowdonia are often silhouetted against the sky or, in the case of the coastal strip, the fleeting sunlight more often than not bounces away from the viewer on the north Wales shoreline. Meanwhile, in the arguably more tamed and cosmopolitan south-east Wales of Ivor Davies and David Tinker the Bristol Channel acts as a mirror reflecting sunlight onto the land, something which captivated the French Impressionist Alfred Sisley at the end of the nineteenth century.

Alongside Kyffin's passionate commitment as President well into his eighties was his ongoing achievement as a painter of the land, the sea and the people of his beloved north Wales. During his latter years, some of his prolific output was recorded in books published by Gomer such as 'Portraits' (1996), 'The Land and the Sea' (1998) and 'Drawings' (2001). Posthumously there have been books by others on him and his striking art: the biography 'Obsessed' in 2012 and, marking the centenary of his birth, the monograph 'Kyffin Williams: The Light and the Dark' in 2018.

Although he had to contend with periodic bouts of melancholy and loneliness as well as chronic illness, he was a good-humoured man and a very entertaining raconteur — and he proactively encouraged emerging artists. By the time of his death in 2006, he had left his positive mark on not just the Royal Cambrian in Conwy, and the future of Oriel Ynys Mon in his native Llangefni, but on the visual culture of post-war Wales as a whole.