

Valley of Vision

An exhibition of the art of the South Wales mining valleys at Wolfson College, Cambridge

Opening lecture by the Rt Hon. Kim Howells

Friday 20 January 2017

in the Lee Hall

When Professor Edwards invited me to open this exhibition, I assumed that it would require preparing a few sentences emphasising the remoteness of Cambridge from the Valleys, genuflecting towards the munificence of Wolfson College, pointing at a couple of pictures and enjoying a free glass of wine.

Then, about a week ago, he told me I wasn't going to get away with it *that* easily.

I was expected to give a talk, he informed me, about the subject of this exhibition – the art of the South Wales Valleys. I could tell, from the tone of his email, that he assumed this would be no great task, since I'd made a couple of television films on the subject. What he didn't know was the truth about my huge deficiencies as an archivist.

I searched fruitlessly for days for the research notes and scripts I'd helped to prepare for the films. I found a lot of other things I'd misplaced over the years but little of any relevance whatsoever to this talk.

Now, there are academics, artists and curators in this room – people like Dr Ceri Thomas from the University of South Wales – who are real experts on this subject. They know much more than I ever will about the extraordinary men and women who drew, painted and sculpted the people and the terrain of the Valleys. So, what I am going to do is give you a brief overview of the world that they inhabited and the works they created, some fine examples of which are here for us to see.

I'll begin with some statistics. By a very rough estimate, using the latest Census numbers, the population of what is loosely termed the Valleys is just over a million. Geographically, the area comprises, more or less, the geological footprint of the South Wales coalfield.

There are often no clear physical or economic divisions between the southern fringes of the coalfield and the three principal coastal cities – Cardiff, Swansea and Newport which, between them, have a combined population of over 700,000.

A clearer demarcation existed until comparatively recently between the areas on either side of the stretch of the M4 between Cardiff and Bridgend. To the north of the motorway were opencast sites and mining villages; to the south, the Vale of Glamorgan – a rural area, parts of which became colonized by some of the wealthier inhabitants of the coalfield and Cardiff from the turn of the Twentieth Century onwards.

The northern limits of the Valleys are much clearer. From Ammanford in the west to Brynmawr and Blaenavon in the east, the coal seams outcrop, hard against a band of limestone that separate them from the old red sandstone of the Brecon Beacons and the Black Mountains.

North of the outcrop, sheep graze.

To the east of the coalfield are the gentler, rolling hills and lush meadows of rural Monmouthshire where there were no coal mines but, by the First World War, plenty of coal-owners, ensconced in lavishly rebuilt and refurbished country houses.

Now, I mention these colonising coal-owners and their associated industrialists for a simple reason. There must be a market for art if artists are to survive as serious, practicing artists. Either that or artists are forced to be part-timers and/or (if they're lucky) subsidised out of the public purse. We all know about the creative triumphs of the public purse solution, of course. If we choose to, we can view it every year at the exhibition of the works shortlisted by Sir Nicholas Serota and his ilk for the Turner Prize.

There wasn't a great deal of public-purse-subsidising of artists going on when a significant number of South Wales mine owners and coal-shippers grew richer than Croesus. Nor was there a sudden migration of these people out of the Valleys and, when they *did* move, they didn't all de-camp to rural Monmouthshire. Sir D R Llewellyn, for example, by the time he owned a staggering one-seventh of South Wales' coal output in 1920 (circa 7.7mt – about the same output of the entire coalfield in the late 1970s), moved from Aberdare to a grand house in the Vale of Glamorgan that had been built a few years earlier in the Arts and Crafts style. (The Court, St Fagans) By his commission, the gardens were redesigned by Edward Lutyens' collaborator, Gertrude Jekyll, the leading garden designer of the period.

Another Aberdare boy, D A Thomas, the first Viscount Rhondda, bought Llanwern House, east of Newport, and later acquired the neighbouring Pencoed Estate – including a castle and a village – to become the largest landowner in Monmouthshire after Lord Tredegar, head of the Morgan family who seem to have owned most of south Monmouthshire since the fifteenth century.

In the mid-1920s, Henry Seymour Berry, Lord Buckland, moved from Merthyr to Bwlch, near Crickhowell in Breconshire at the time when he and his Merthyr-born relatives – Lords Camrose and Kelmsley – were expanding their vast industrial, shipping and newspaper interests. Henry, who loathed trade unions, donated a pile of cash to build an extension to Merthyr hospital where they named a ward after him.

I recall my mother telling me, relishing the irony, 'Fancy that, you being a big union man, that's where you were born, the Seymour Berry Ward, Merthyr Hospital.'

I've mentioned some of these names to remind everyone of the vast wealth that was being generated by the miners of South Wales and their families over a long period. No doubt, some of those names considered it proper and desirable to acquire works of art, as some of the iron-owners had done before them. None of them, however, compared as art collectors or patrons with the descendants of the founder of the Ocean Coal Company which by 1885 was operating mines in the Rhondda, Ogmore, Garw and Clydach valleys.

In the first decades of the Twentieth Century, just seventy miles north of Merthyr Tydfil, two sisters were instructing their agents in Paris to buy paintings by Corot, Millet, Renoir, Cezanne, Van Gough, Pissarro, Sisley and Monet.

The sisters were Gwendoline and Margaret Davies, the granddaughters of David Davies who had amassed a great fortune, building railways in mid-Wales and sinking pits and constructing docks in South Wales. The wealth generated by his Ocean Coal Company and inherited by Gwendoline and Margaret, allowed the creation of one of the world's finest collections of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art.

Until 1951, the bulk of that collection was housed in Gregynog Hall, one of the Davies sisters' grand houses in Mid-Wales. The Gregynog estate, at its largest, was 18,000 acres and, with the encouragement of the sisters, young artists, craftspeople, architects and musicians journeyed there

to enjoy the many treasures it contained. Among them, in 1923, was a twenty-one years old student from the Swansea School of Art, Ceri Richards.

Richards was born and raised in the mining village of Dunvant, about five miles north-west of Swansea, the son of a tinplate worker who was active in his local church, wrote poetry in Welsh and English and conducted a first-rate choir. Like a number of his contemporaries from that part of the coalfield, Ceri Richards was taken under the wing of William Grant Murray, the director of the Swansea School of Art. In 1924 – the year after he'd seen the great collection at Gregynog, he enrolled at the Royal College of Art in London, at the beginning of a hugely distinguished career as Britain's leading surrealist artist.

Richards, along with Augustus John (who, most emphatically, could never be described as being an artist from the South Wales coalfield – despite the fact that Tenby had coalmines close by), were the most prominent and influential of Welsh artists for a considerable part of the Twentieth Century.

The Davies sisters bequeathed their collection in two parts to the National Museum in Cardiff in 1953 and 1961. It was an enormously valuable gift to Wales, doubly-so to our artists and students.

I grew up just north of Aberdare and attended Mountain Ash Grammar School where an exceptional art teacher, Owen Jones, encouraged my schoolmates and me to visit and study that collection as often as possible.

Possibly because he taught in Mountain Ash, rather than Eton or Harrow, he used to remind us that, were it not for the fact that our grandfathers and great grandfathers had toiled in the mines owned by industrialists like David Davies, creating these great accumulations of wealth, there would have been no bequest and no museum.

My friends and I didn't need much encouragement. As a sixteen years-old in 1963, I'd hitch-hike the 24 miles south to Cardiff from my home in Penywaun. Once there, I'd head for one of the jazz record shops, like Spillers' in the Morgan Arcade, where – if I'd managed to save enough – I'd buy the latest LP of Miles Davis, John Coltrane or Charles Mingus.

The artwork on the front of these LP sleeves and the text on the back was a source of inspiration and debate to my friends and me. The designs might be abstract paintings – usually by American Expressionists - or colour-tinged, moody photographs of the musicians or of some sophisticated New York beauty; sometimes they would spell out the title of the disc in startlingly modern lettering, reminding young minds like ours that there was a world beyond *Times New Roman* and a world beyond South Wales.

Clutching my precious LP and its liberating artwork, I'd walk to the great range of steps rising to the portico entrance of the National Museum, set (as it remains to this day) amidst the Edwardian splendour of what Nicholas Pevsner described as the finest civic centre in the British Isles.

Inside the bronze doors, past the uniformed attendants, stood William Goscombe John's statue, *The Drummer Boy* and, beyond it, a larger than life-size bronze version of Rodin's *The Kiss* – a work I always lingered next to a lot longer than I should have, due entirely to the extremely limited supply in Aberdare in those days of sensuous sculpture of naked females.

The Kiss had been acquired by Gwendoline Davies in Paris in 1913 and exhibited in Cardiff in the same year. Reportedly, it took the breath away from people who saw it then and it has rarely failed to do so since. Gracing the walls, close to *The Drummer* and *The Kiss* were Frank Brangwyn's massive paintings of British forces in the First World War. The works had been commissioned by the House of

Lords but, by the time their Lordships came to view them, they appear to have gone off the idea of being confronted every day with images that recalled the slaughter of that War to End All Wars; which is why Brangwyn's works ended up in the National Museum.

All of this visual wealth was available even before one stepped into the galleries containing the Davies Sisters' bequest and the Museum's superb permanent collection.

My experience in the place was shared, of course, by tens of thousands of others and I dwell on it to emphasise that the Valleys were not some outsized cultural backwater, dominated by an endless refrain of male-voice choirs, eisteddfodau, druids in white wellies, harps and hymn-singing.

To understand the nature of the Valleys and the creativity it generated, it must be remembered that South Wales, by the First World War, was an international trading centre – one of the hubs of world capitalism.

In 1922, eighteen foreign governments, including the United States and Russia, had consuls registered in Cardiff's Bute Street and Mountstuart Square. With that international trade came cultural influences from across the world.

If the National Museum in Cardiff was one conduit for those influences, there were many others. In Swansea, the Glynn Vivian gallery – set up just before the First World War – was an endowment to the town (now a city) by a son of the hugely wealthy owners of the Vivian copper-smelting business. Swansea in the 19th Century was known as Copperopolis and fortunes were made in that industry long before the town became a major exporter of coal and steel.

From its opening – and from the opening of the Swansea School of Art on the opposite side of Alexandra Road - the Glynn Vivian proved to be a boon to aspiring and practicing artists, many of whom were drawn from the valleys of the western coalfield.

My mother, a Maesteg girl exiled by marriage to Aberdare, didn't approve of Cardiff and carted my two brothers and me by bus – or in the cab of the lorry my father drove – to Swansea whenever the opportunity arose. She would herd her complaining offspring around the market before walking us into the Glynn Vivian and whispering to us that, while the gallery had nothing as pretty as Renoir's stunning *Blue Lady - La Parisienne*, (one of the Davies sisters' glorious acquisitions) it had paintings of real people and places: mines, copper-works, docks, railways and those who worked them and those who made fortunes from them.

It was in the Glynn Vivian and in Cardiff's National Museum and in other, local collections, that kids like me learned that art did not have to have as its subject matter Classical or Biblical references, British military victories, nor even the demand from the powerful and wealthy for portraiture or depictions of their mansions and estates - fascinating though such works often are.

The Glynn Vivian, for example, owns three wonderful portraits painted by Evan Walters during the desperate years of economic depression at the turn of the 1920s and '30s. Evans was from the mining village of Llangyfelach, just four miles north of Swansea. The portraits, of friends of his who worked in the mines, are as insightful and powerful as any portraits painted anywhere in Europe during those years. His early years as an artist, by the way, were helped considerably by the patronage of another member of a prominent copper-smelting/shipping family, Winifred Coombe Tennant.

During the 1920s, (having returned to Wales from a spell working as a camouflage-designer for the American war effort) his patron helped him to secure portrait commissions from a number

prominent figures of the time, including Ramsay Macdonald, Lloyd George and Lord Balfour. He had become a well-known portrait painter in a field where he wasn't short of competition.

An extremely successful portraitist, Christopher Williams, was born in 1873 - nine years before Evan Walters - in the mining town of Maesteg, fifteen miles east of Swansea. Before the First World War, Williams had become the favourite painter of David Lloyd George, whom he painted three times. In 1911, Williams had been commissioned by King George V to paint the Investiture of Edward, Prince of Wales, at Caernarvon Castle and, over the next couple of decades, he painted more knights of the realm than you could point a stick at, as well as wonderful landscapes in Wales, Europe and North Africa.

His most famous painting had been commissioned by Lloyd George to commemorate the first engagement in the Great War of the Welsh 38th Division. Williams painted the *Welsh Charge at Mametz Wood*, an astonishingly dramatic and bloody rendition of hand to hand fighting in the Somme Offensive of July 1916. Very pleased with it, Lloyd George had the huge canvas hung in the sitting room at No.10 Downing Street.

Like Christopher Williams, Evan Walters was much in demand as a portraitist in the 1920s, which makes the three portraits he painted of his friends around 1929-1931 all the more interesting. He wouldn't have earned money from them as commissions. I sense that he painted them because he felt that it was necessary to paint the people he'd grown up with in the coalfield as it was to paint the celebrities of the day.

They were by no means the first paintings of working people or of the pits, blast furnaces and rolling mills where they worked. The Crawshay family owned extensive iron and tinplate works, iron mines, tramways and coalmines in South Wales. Hugely wealthy, William Crawshay II in 1824 commissioned the architect Robert Lugor to design and build Cyfarthfa Castle as a residence overlooking his iron-works to the north of Merthyr Tydfil. Nowadays, the Castle houses a fascinating museum which has an extraordinary collection of small watercolours, commissioned by Crawshay in the 1820s and painted by Merthyr-born artist, Penry Williams. They depict the visual drama of what were then huge new iron furnaces and rolling mills, owned by the Crawshays and worked by men and women who had migrated to the town in the late-18th and early 19th centuries, mainly from rural Wales and the English West Country.

Like many wealthy families in the 19th Century, the Crawshays could afford to commission portraits. We know what the family members looked like – or, at least, how flattering portraitists believed they *preferred* to look like. We know infinitely less about those employed at the ironworks in Merthyr or anywhere else in Britain. Commercial photography was still some way off. The National Museum in Cardiff, however, has 16 small pictures, probably painted in the late 1830s, of workers at Francis Crawshay's Hirwaun Ironworks and Treforest Tinplate Works.

Beth McIntyre, one of the National Museum's archivists, described Francis Crawshay as a 'reluctant industrialist who maintained unusually close personal relationships with his employees.' It was he who commissioned these rare and beautiful images. They are real portraits, carefully observed, full of humanity, the faces of named people: Rees Davies, *Mechanic*, Hirwaun; Llewellyn Jenkins, *Foreman Carpenter*, Hirwaun; William James, *Roller*, Treforest; David Davies, *Cinder Filler*, Hirwaun; Thomas Francis, *Quarryman*, Treforest...

They were painted four decades after the young JMW Turner and Julius Caesar Ibbetson had carried their paints by foot and cart to the Neath and Taff Valleys, drawn there by reports of romantic landscapes and new, fiery industries that turned night into day.

Their presence in South Wales owed something, also, to the North Wales-born artist, Richard Wilson, who influenced both Turner and Constable and is known as the *father* of British landscape painting. Because of Wilson's work, Wales had become something of an exotic destination for artists by the late 18th Century. The presence of new industries and burgeoning private wealth added to the attraction.

Landscape painting in the Valleys and in the rest of Wales has continued without interruption. In 2017 it is in rude health. Two weeks ago, I attended the opening of an exhibition of new Welsh landscapes at the Kooywood Gallery in Cardiff where there was plenty of evidence that artists continue to draw inspiration from the juxtaposition of hills, mountains, towns and industry that make the Valleys so special.

Among the examples of this tradition included in this exhibition is George Chapman's *Passing Storm*. It depicts converging rows of miners' cottages and truncated trees. They lead our eyes to a colliery chimney and winding gear silhouetted against a green ridge burdened with pyramids of coal waste. The sky is stormy – half dark, half luminous – the kind of sky all of us who live in the Valleys know very well. It is a sky whose colour and mood is shaped and changed by our proximity to the Bristol Channel and the turbulent eastern Atlantic.

Five years ago, I was lucky enough to film the fine landscape artist, Joan Baker, painting in her late eighties in the house in which she was born in Cardiff. She explained to me how the sea and the changing light had influenced every serious artist who had attempted to paint southern Wales.

She knew George Chapman's work well. He was a Londoner who came to painting via the advertising industry and he was 45 years old, searching for subject matter, when he first visited the Valleys in 1953. As Ceri Thomas has written, it was this landscape, so different from those Chapman had known previously, that provided him with the material that would make him a painter.

Had he asked those who had lived long enough to remember, he would have discovered that the Valleys in 1953 differed little visually from the Valleys in 1923 when the pits of South Wales employed 250,000 men, producing 54 million tons of coal.

By 1953, the industry had shed 150,000 jobs and the production had been halved but so many of the colliery buildings remained along with the pit headframes with their spinning sheaves, the railways and their soaring viaducts, chimneys, aerial ropeways, coke-ovens, foundries and tramways. The rivers were filthy and the coal-tips on the hillsides continued to grow.

Things *were* changing, of course. Pockets of new industry had been lured by government incentives into Valleys that had suffered horribly from unemployment and the diseases of poverty during the inter-war years. By 1960 in Aberdare they were making televisions; in Merthyr, washing machines; in Ystradgynlais, clocks; in Rhondda, textiles and women's clothing; in Pontypool, they were spinning nylon on a huge scale.

Even before Chapman made his first visit, Treforest, close to Pontypridd, and Fforest-fach, close to Swansea, had become the locations for two of Britain's first 'Industrial Estates,' designed to facilitate the growth of alternative employment in areas of acute deprivation. Indeed, so grim had been the outlook for the central valleys of the coalfield before the Second World War that at least one very prominent Whitehall civil servant had suggested that the government might consider constructing a massive dam just south of Pontypridd. The valleys of the Taff, Rhondda and Cynon would be flooded, presumably *after* the residents had been moved out, to create a huge reservoir that would provide water and power to the more prosperous bits of South Wales.

In the 1960s the changes accelerated, yet it was the coal industry that came into most people's minds whenever South Wales was mentioned in the press or on radio or television. It wasn't surprising. In 1960, 45 men died in the explosion at Six Bells Colliery, Abertillery; in 1962, nine died at the Tower Colliery, Aberdare; in 1965, thirty-one men perished at the Cambrian Colliery in Rhondda and, a year later, in October 1966, the world looked on aghast at the tragedy at Aberfan when the No.7 tip slid off Mynydd Merthyr and took the lives of 116 children and 28 adults.

(That tragedy, by the way, continues as a subject for exploration by contemporary artists like David Garner who works in a studio in the lower stretch of the Ebbw Valley.)

From the 1930s to the 1990s this combination of blood on the coal, men toiling in the darkness, proletarian communities and left-of-centre politics combined with extraordinarily photogenic valleys to attract artists, writers, photographers and film-makers.

It was almost certainly the politics that had attracted two Jewish artists fleeing from Nazi persecution in the 1930s. One of them, Heinz Koppel, German-born, found refuge in the steel-producing community of Dowlais, above Merthyr. The other, Polish-born Josef Herman, settled in Ystradgynlais, in the upper reaches of the Swansea Valley. Both men proved to be important influences on South Wales artists.

Herman became celebrated for his portraits of Welsh miners. He claimed that he was inspired as he watched men silhouetted against the sun, returning home from the pit in Ystradgynlais. He lived in the village for eleven years and was given permission by the Coal Board to sketch men at work underground. His fame grew after he painted a huge mural of miners for the Festival of Britain in 1951. These sculptural figures, influenced by African carvings, remain some of the best-known images of the Valleys.

I remember seeing them for the first time at the Glynn Vivian, wondering what impact they must have had on painters he met in South Wales. The miners he depicts, invariably, are solid and strong, painted simply, with minimum detail. The faces he gives them are reminiscent of those painted by Picasso, during his African period in the first decade of the Twentieth Century.

His friend and collaborator during his years in Ystradgynlais was Will Roberts, a very fine painter who lived in Neath. Both men explored Twentieth Century expressionism and both drew inspiration from each other's works and from the people and landscape they encountered in the Valleys. Roberts, like so many of his contemporaries, had studied at Swansea School of Art under William Grant Murray, a talented painter in his own right.

Roberts, who was a founder member of the 56 Group of Welsh artists, was a landscape painter of the first rank. Indeed, in 1962 the art historian Sir Kenneth Clark judged him to be the winner of the prestigious Byng-Stamper prize for landscape painting for a work entitled, *Farm at Cimla*.

Heinz Koppel didn't achieve the widespread fame that came to Josef Herman but he was at least as influential in Wales. He helped to usher-in the idea of the Valleys – as one writer has put it - as an *imaginative dreamscape*, taken up and developed by painters like Ernest Zobole whose work, *Rhondda street with moon and stars*, is included in this exhibition.

Ceri Thomas has described for us how, in the early 1950s, Zobole met Heinz Koppel, a meeting that contributed towards Zobole '*progressively dismantling the conventions of linear perspective which were already strained by the physical experience of his mountainous Rhondda Valley, crammed to the brim with coal tips, strewn with terraced housing and tilting roads, and punctuated by riverside*

railway lines and yet more buildings competing for space along the length and up the sides of the valley floor.'

Zobole was one of a generation of artists, born in the Valleys in the late 1920s and early '30s who began painting in styles that were markedly different from those Welsh artists, like Archie Rhys Griffiths and Vincent Evans who had reached their creative maturity during the grim years of inter-war economic depression.

Some of the new generation, like the distinguished sculptor Robert Thomas (Ceri Thomas's father) and the painter Charles Burton, travelled in the post-war years from the Rhondda each day to study at Cardiff School of Art. I was lucky enough to meet other artists of that generation, like Gwyn Evans from Tonypany, who described the great passion and determination among these young men and women to paint and sculpt in Valley communities, despite the lack of galleries and wealthy patrons in the coalfield itself.

There were young female painters like Cardiff-born Esther Grainger who found their inspiration in the landscape and people of the Valleys. Nan Youngman, an English artist and teacher, set up a scheme to show art in Welsh schools and painted a series of moody streetscapes. Her school scheme supplemented the determination by a generation of progressive and enlightened education administrators in Glamorgan County Council who wanted to ensure that children in the years following the Second World War were exposed to arts, crafts and good design.

The primary school I attended in Penywaun, as one of the school's first intake of pupils, had been built at the same time as the brand-new, well-designed council houses our parents were allocated as the estate expanded after 1952. At the rear of the narrow stage in the school hall was a simple, but elegant and skilfully-executed scene, scored into the finely screed wall. In that distinctive *Festival of Britain* style, it portrayed a doe and her fawn peering out from leafy cover. For me, it was not only a visual delight of a kind I didn't encounter anywhere else, it was also a model to work towards: after all, someone had created it; why shouldn't I aspire to do the same thing? Moreover, it was an artistic flourish included *despite* the financial austerity and rationing that prevailed at the time.

Aberdare in the early 1950s, like other Valleys' towns, had its share of fine buildings – most of which were churches, chapels, town halls and schools. The town's public park – an inheritance laid out by our Edwardian predecessors - had its statues, a boating lake, an impressive Gorsedd circle, huge redwoods and a remarkable wrought-iron fountain decorated with floral motifs. Beyond those gems, our Valleys had war memorials, some of them executed by the leading sculptors of the 1920s.

I don't recall my friends and I feeling a sense of cultural deprivation, growing up in the Aberdare Valley. There were cinemas from Hirwaun in the north to Abercynon in the south and, in the centre of Aberdare, a superb public library where it was possible to order the latest, glossy art magazines and academic volumes on painters past and present. I recall, in particular, being dazzled by one thick, expensive volume on the American Abstract Expressionists containing fold-out, coloured reproductions of the work of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Mark Rothko.

Even more wonderful was the fact that the library stocked the Sunday Times. From February, 1962 onwards, that newspaper came with a separate *Colour Section* full of images of the new art movements: Pop, Minimalism, Op-Art and the incredibly glamorous people creating and buying the stuff.

One of those glamorous artists was (and continues to be) Denys Short whose fine painting – exhibited here - of an industrial site, close to Pontypridd, is one of many insightful, muscular works

that he did from the 1950s on. He also taught at what was, in the 1960s, one of Britain's most glamorous art colleges – Hornsey, in north London. He didn't have it all brilliantly, however, because one of his tasks at that esteemed establishment was to try and teach me – one of a bunch of self-proclaimed cultural revolutionaries, charging around in 1968, denouncing art as *bourgeois individualism*...

In the 'Sixties, South Wales continued to boast of three schools of art – all of which had good reputations: Cardiff, Newport and Swansea – and there were other fine schools not too distant, at Cheltenham, Corsham and Bristol. Only a couple of hours up the line, the Royal College of Art beckoned from Kensington.

This was the milieu that generated two more of our exhibitors, Chris Griffin and David Carpanini. Chris, who grew up in Maesycwmmmer and David, who hails from the head of the Afan Valley know the communities they grew up in intimately and they reflect that knowledge in very different ways.

Chris Griffin's work celebrates that special light I spoke of earlier – the way that hillsides and the streets that cling to them are transmuted so rapidly into extraordinary hues and tones so that even the most daring combinations of colours seem still to reflect with such accuracy his stretch of the Rhymney Valley.

Along with images of the people he grew up with, David Carpanini's focus, like Griffin's, includes the dramatic mood-changes in light generated by the topography of a winding, deep valley that opens to the sea at Aberafon. His superb draughtsmanship and eye for detail – often executed in watercolour and pencil – convey a sense of people observing the changes to a world they have helped to create, almost like members of an audience who find themselves suddenly on the stage, puzzled, wondering why they are no longer in the stalls.

Both Griffin and Carpanini, with their ability to reflect on canvas and paper so accurately the subjects of their observations, remind me of Vincent Evans and Jack Crabtree, two more painters represented here. The Evans painting – of miners re-setting a coal tram which has become derailed in an underground tunnel – is full of closely-observed detail. As a working miner from the age of 13 to 23, he would have seen, first-hand, struggles such as the one depicted in this painting. Like Griffin and Carpanini and so many other Valleys' artists, Vincent Evans knew and cherished the subjects of his paintings.

I have no doubt that when Jack Crabtree, after the 1974 miners' strike, was commissioned by the Coal Board to produce a series of works designed to show the co-operation, professionalism and teamwork vital to running a colliery, he looked at Vincent Evans' paintings and drawings and deduced that he needed, in his own style, to convey what he saw as accurately and honestly as Evans had. I think he succeeded with great panache.

Although there are no paintings by him at this exhibition, it is important to mention Kevin Sinnot who is painting as prolifically as ever in his studio in Pontycymer in the Garw Valley. In terms of sales, the most successful of contemporary Valleys' painters, Sinnot is a contemporary of Griffin and Carpanini. He studied at Cardiff School of Art and at the Royal College and has produced, over the past couple of decades, paintings that capture, like no-one else's, the vigour and lust for life that Valleys' communities have expressed so often, despite adversity. Like the Valleys, his paintings brim over with life.

At first glance, Sinnot's work appears as the very antithesis of Nicholas Evans' paintings, the last of the artists featured in this exhibition. This would be to misjudge both artists, however.

Nicholas Evans loved and admired the people around him in Aberdare, every bit as much as Kevin Sinnot loves and admires the people of the Garw. Both painters reflect in very different ways the condition of the humanity they observed around them. If Sinnot's figures are full of energy, humour and passion, Evans' express the sorrow he felt at what he perceived to be generations of bright young lives doomed to be darkened and blighted by the pit, its dangers and its diseases.

The great joy of art is that Evans and Sinnot and so many of the other artists I've mentioned in this talk have been able to express their perceptions of the Valleys and their feelings and observations of its people, industry and landscapes in so many different ways. Theirs is a language of infinite variety.

I shall finish, now, though there are many fine artists I have not had time to mention – people like Ken Elias, Glyn Jones, John Selway, Robert Alwyn Hughes, Sue Roberts, Anthony Evans, Martyn Jones, Valerie Ganz and many, many others. Nor have I had time to talk about the few galleries that have done sterling work in showing and representing these artists over the years: galleries like Martin Tinney, Kooywood and Albany in Cardiff; Y Galeri in Caerphilly and the redoubtable Attic in Swansea.

But, as I've no doubt, you've sensed: this is turning into a kind of Acknowledgement Page. So, I'll shut up and thank you for listening.

Kim Howells

Pontypridd, January 2017