

Alfred Wallis Ships and Boats

7 April – 8 July 2012

Kettle's Yard Teachers' Support Notes

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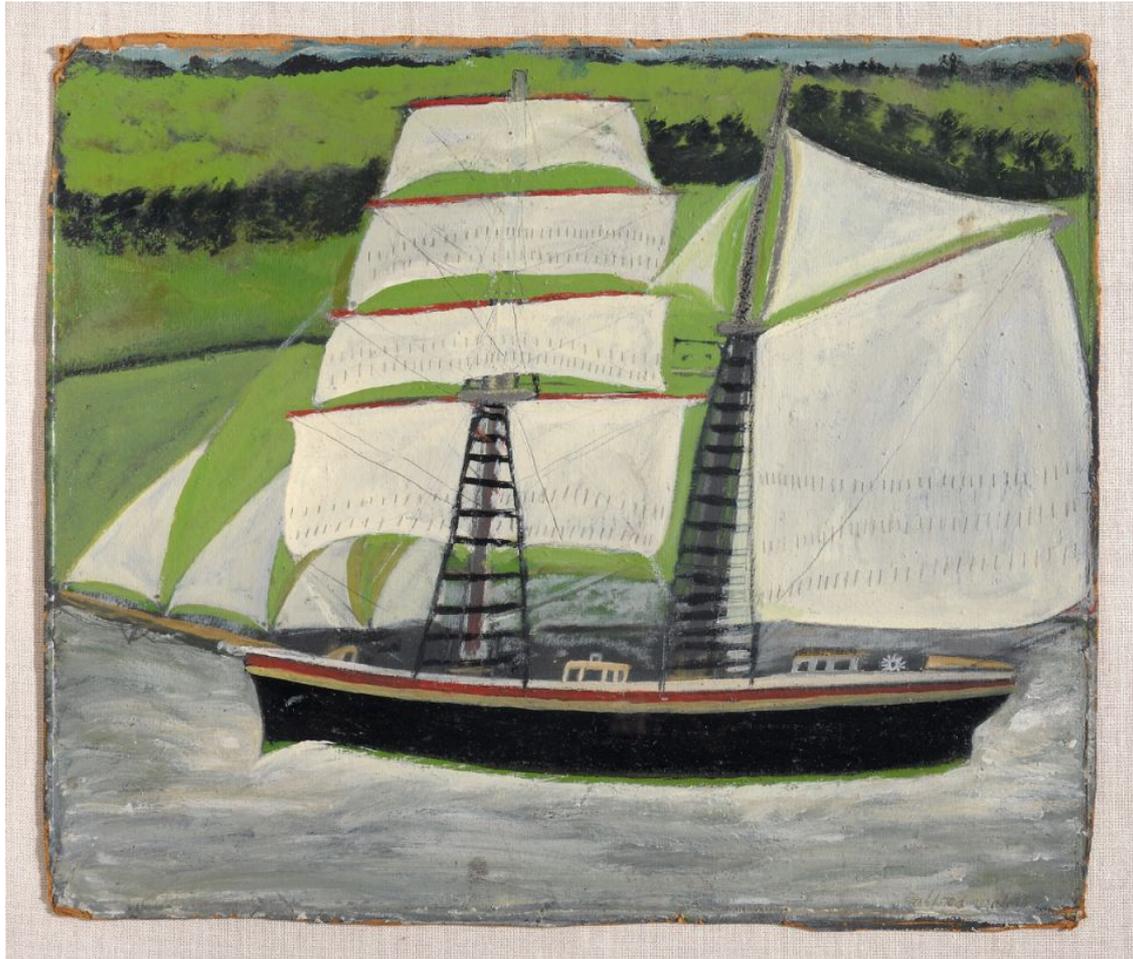
The gallery is open Tuesday – Sunday, 11.30am-5pm
The house is open Tuesday – Sunday 1.30-4.30pm

We can arrange group visits to the gallery either outside or during opening hours. All house visits must be outside opening hours.

Contact details

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Teachers' Support Notes compiled with support from Sophie Johnson



Wallis, *Brigantine sailing past green fields*, n.d.

“Today, Wallis is justly prized for his vigorous, highly simplified and robustly original vision, and Kettle’s Yard in Cambridge has mounted an illuminating survey of his work. The location proves ideal: Jim Ede, who formed the collection in Kettle’s Yard, became a patron of Wallis during the 1930s and acquired many of his finest works. Some of the letters Wallis wrote to Ede are included in this show, and their quirky grammar is a delight to read.”

Richard Cork, *The Financial Times*, April 11 2012

About The Display

Alfred Wallis (1855 – 1942) is one of the most original and inspiring British artists of the 20th Century. Kettle's Yard owns nearly 100 works by Alfred Wallis and this display, shown in our reduced gallery space, is a great opportunity to see 40 of Wallis' remarkable paintings, some of which have rarely been shown. This is the first opportunity for over 20 years to see all these works together at Kettle's Yard.



Promoted by the artist Ben Nicholson amongst others, Wallis' paintings are often valued for their influence on the development of British art at a key moment, and they are powerfully expressive in a way that is both deeply personal and enduring. What shines out is Wallis' exceptional natural talent. His paintings are of what he knew, remembered and imagined and they speak simply about how we relate to the world around us.

The display is a selection of about forty paintings of what Wallis knew best: ships and boats. From three masted brigantines and sailing boats to lug boats and motor vessels, Wallis paints these vessels against a constantly changing sea with great technical insight. Some paintings have been moved from the part of Kettle's Yard House which will close due to building work, others are usually in store and rarely seen. Many other Alfred Wallis paintings can still be seen in the parts of the House which remain open.

Biographical Notes

Wallis was born in Devon in 1855. In the 1870s he had been a 'mariner, merchant service' crossing the Atlantic and later working in the smaller fishing boats closer to shore before becoming a scrap-metal merchant in St. Ives. In 1922, and with no art training, Wallis took up painting 'for company' after the death of his wife.

Wallis had little money and mainly painted on found bits of card and discarded packaging. Using household and ship paint from the supply stores in St. Ives, Wallis painted ships and boats, seascapes and the villages of Cornwall in a limited supply of colours. Wallis painted 6 days a week, producing hundreds of works.

Wallis was approached by Ben Nicholson and Christopher Wood in 1928 when the two London artists were visiting St. Ives. They championed his work back in London and included him in the Seven & Five Society's exhibition in 1929.



Towards the end of his life, Wallis became increasingly isolated. He died in Madron Poorhouse in 1942.

Painting from Memory

*“what i do mosley is
what use To Bee out of
my own memery what we
may never see again”*

Wallis, *Letter to Jim Ede*,
April 6 1936



Wallis, *Three Masted Ship near Lighthouse*, 1928-30

Wallis painted most of his work from memory. From many years as a mariner and fisherman, Wallis built up a deep and intimate knowledge of his subject matter; ships and boats. Viewing a group of his works together, as with this display, you can see his passion for the subject and the detail and atmosphere he is capable of depicting. His ships and boats often painted with an extraordinary amount of technical detail which would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for a person without prior knowledge to illustrate.

His work is an expression of his emotional ties to a disappearing way of life. Using his memory as the source for his paintings was a way for Wallis to hold on to an age that was fast disappearing, or rather redeveloping. Wallis had witnessed an important era of sailing when ships, at the height of design and construction, were becoming outmatched in an increasingly modern and mechanical world.

Wallis disapproved of the growing modernisation of ships and boats and was greatly concerned about how the great sailing vessels of his time were being slowly replaced with motorised vessels powered by steam.

His attachment to the ships of his lifetime can be felt in his work and his writings:

“each boat of that fleet had a soul, a beautiful soul shaped like a fish”.

While Wallis’ paintings depict vessels of great magnificence, there is also a sense of melancholic remembrance.

Activity

Observe an object, one of Wallis’ paintings if you’re in the gallery, for 2 minutes. Try and note the details of the object, its outline, its colours and then take the object away and draw it from memory. If you forget any details use your imagination.

Go back to the object and examine the differences.

What objects do you know so well you could draw them from memory?

Modernism and Naïve Art

mod·ern·ism/

1. Modern character or quality of thought, expression, or technique.
2. A style or movement in the arts that aims to break with classical and traditional forms.

Naïve art

A classification of art that is often characterised by child-like simplicity in its subject matter and technique



Wallis, *Land, Fish and Motor Vessel*, 1932-37

“i never see any Thing i send you now it is what i have seen Before i am self taught so you cannot make me like Thouse That he Been Taught Both in School and paint i have had To learn my self”

Wallis, *Letter to Jim Ede*,
November 4 1936

Wallis has been connected with both modernist and naïve art. Wallis had no formal art training and he broke from the conventions of painting on canvas - his limited palette and distorted perspective set his work apart in the 1920s.

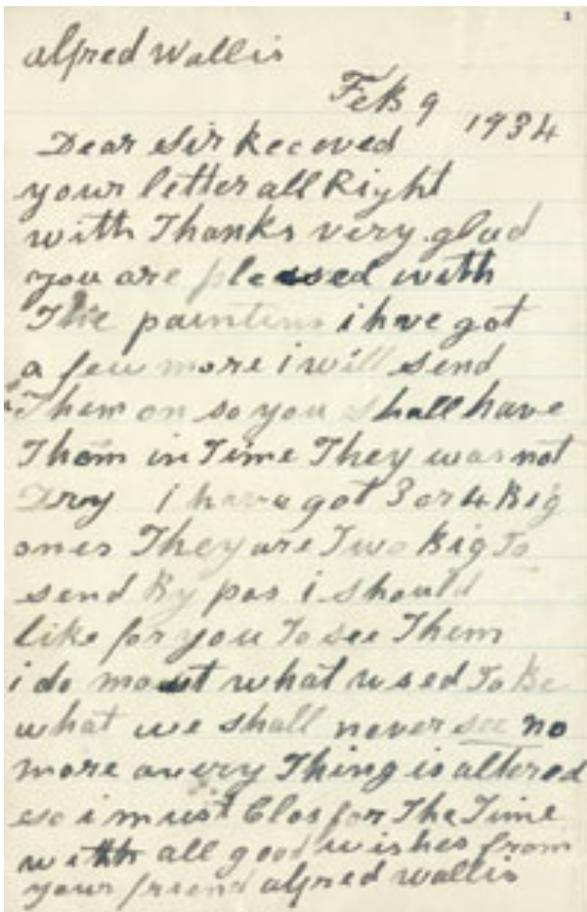
Manipulating the world around him, Wallis often gave value to the objects in his paintings by playing with their size and scale. In his work, *Land, Fish and Motor Vessel* he painted the fish as the same size as the ships, and in the other paintings the steamboats are significantly smaller than the sail boats. In other works, foreground and background appear to merge into one.

Although the paint is roughly applied, Wallis would often include a lot of detail, of the villages he painted as well as the boats, to the extent that his paintings have a map-like quality to them.

Activity

Finding your favourite view of Kettle’s Yard House, or your home, make a drawing out of scale, where you enlarge or foreground your favourite items, shrinking others. In this way you can direct the world around you so it full of your favourite things!

Relationship with Jim Ede



Alfred Wallis
Feb 9 1934
Dear Sir received
your letter all Right
with Thanks very glad
you are pleased with
The paintings i have got
a few more i will send
Them on so you shall have
Them in Time They was not
very i have got 3 or 4 Big
ones They are Two Big to
send by pas i should
like for you to see Them
i do not what used to be
what we shall never see no
more an very Thing is altered
so i must close for The Time
with all good wishes from
your friend Alfred Wallis

“Mr Ede
i have opened the parcle
and I found it all Right with Thank
and also glad you are
pleased with The
paintins which in
you well from your
your friend alfred wallis”

Wallis, Letter to Ede, July 24 1936

Jim Ede, the founder of Kettle's Yard, was introduced to the work of Alfred Wallis by his friend Ben Nicholson in the late 1920s. Although Ede and Wallis never met, Ede became an ardent collector of Wallis's work and the two corresponded regularly for many years.

Ede promoted Wallis's work in London by hanging paintings in his office at the Tate, as well as selling and giving away works as gifts. In his letters to Ede, Wallis discusses his business ideas and prospects and it is likely that Wallis saw Ede as an agent for his work.

Wallis only had a few years of formal schooling and had an innocent and distinctive use of language and spelling. His unusual syntax echoes his distinctive individuality. In his letters to Jim, Wallis makes great and continuous efforts to explain what his paintings are about and makes a number of references to how he paints from memory. Some of these letters can be viewed in the display and others are available to browse in the Kettle's Yard library.

Spotlight on History – The Wreck of the Alba

Unlike most Wallis paintings, created from memory of events in the past, the Wreck of the Alba was an event that he is rumoured to have witnessed. On January 31, 1938, a cargo ship ran into the rocks near the shore en route from Wales to Italy.



St Ives locals sent out a crew to save them but it was capsized in the storm. Some men from the freighter ship were killed, but the St Ives rescuers were all

saved thanks to the hundreds of St Ives residents who came to the aid of the stricken vessel.



This incident deeply affected Wallis and he made a number of paintings in response. There is a frenzy in his paintings depicting the harrowing scene.

Wallis, *Shipwreck 1- The Wreck of the Alba*, 1938-40

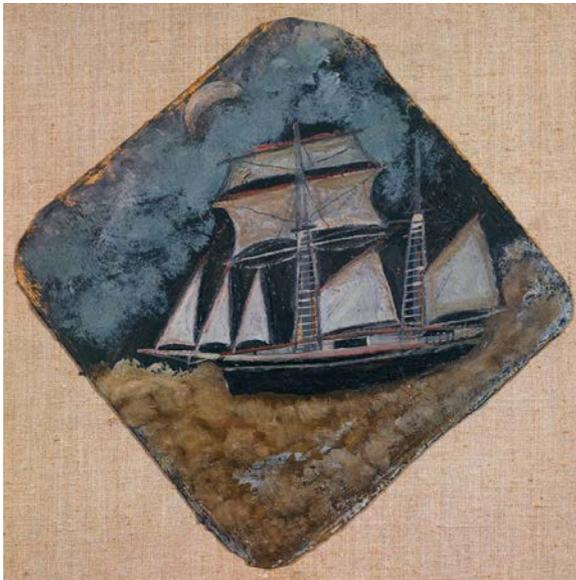
Activity

Make a 'critical response' about a real event that occurred in your home town or village where the community came together. This could involve charity fundraisers, fairs, protests and even a national event like the Royal Wedding.

This could be a short story, a drawing or painting - whatever you feel would best represent the event.

Glossary of Ships and Boats

Three Masted Square Topsail Schooner



Three Masted Sailing Ship



Brigantine



Further Reading and Web links

Matthew Gale, '*Alfred Wallis- St Ives Artists*', (Tate Publishing, 2001)

Robert Jones, '*Alfred Wallis: Artist and Mariner*', (Halsgrove Revised Ed, 2001)

Richard Cork, '*Alfred Wallis: Ships and Boats*', (Financial Times Article, 2012)

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/3be37b5e-82f6-11e1-929f-00144feab49a.html#axzz1t8ex5Jvw>

Kettles Yard Alfred Wallis

<http://www.kettlesyard.co.uk/exhibitions/2012/wallis/index.php>

Tate Alfred Wallis Biography

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/alfred-wallis-577>

The Bookroom Art Press, Alfred Wallis Biography

<http://www.bookroomartpress.co.uk/biographies/27.html>

Alfred Wallis Resources

<http://www.andyblair.co.uk/alfredwallis/>