

10 September 2020

## Alfred Wallis Rediscovered

24 October 2020 –  
3 January 2021

Kettle's Yard is delighted to announce 'Alfred Wallis Rediscovered', an exhibition of paintings and drawings by self-taught British artist and mariner Alfred Wallis (1855–1942). The exhibition will include over 60 rarely shown paintings and drawings from the Kettle's Yard Reserve Collection and three important sketchbooks which were made in the last year of the artist's life and have not been exhibited in a public gallery for over fifty years. The exhibition celebrates Wallis' practice as an artist from around 1925, when he is thought to have started painting, to his death in the Madron Institute in 1942. Despite the challenge of few of the works being dated, Wallis' letters, the sketchbooks, and the evidence of the paintings themselves, suggest an artist increasingly reflecting on his own artistic development. As well as the gallery exhibition, visitors will also be able to explore the many Alfred Wallis paintings on permanent display in the Kettle's Yard House.

Though born and brought up in Devonport, near Plymouth, Alfred Wallis lived his adult life in Cornwall, working on deep-sea fishing boats and as a marine scrap merchant. He had no formal artistic training and turned to painting in his seventies after the death of his wife. He turned to art and its positive creative potential as a means of escaping his own feelings of isolation and loneliness - conditions that may feel relevant to many of us in these challenging times. His drawings and paintings capture the immediacy of his experiences of the sea, depicting fishing vessels and local Cornish landscapes in an expressive style. Wallis worked mostly from memory, playing with proportions and perspective and painting on scraps of board with a reduced colour palette. He wanted to capture a direct experience of life through his paintings – the ferocity of the sea and its motion, or the oppressive power of towering woodland trees. Whilst some works feature recurring signature motifs, such as ships at harbour, others portray real-life events. *The Wreck of the Alba* (c.1938–40) depicts the running aground of a 3,700-ton Panamanian steamer, which Wallis witnessed.



Alfred Wallis, *Brigantine sailing past green fields*, n.d., 418 x 488 mm, oil on card. Courtesy of Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge



Alfred Wallis, *Ship with seven men, net and gull*, n.d., 187 x 279 mm, oil on card. Courtesy of Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge

'Discovered' in 1928 by artists Ben Nicholson and Christopher Wood, Wallis occupies a pre-eminent position in the history of British art as an untrained artist. He is a key figure for understanding the turn towards a more direct, authentic approach to painting made by Wood, Nicholson and others. Wood said of his work, 'I'm more and more influenced by Alfred Wallis – not a bad master though; he and Picasso both mix their colours on box lids!' Nicholson added that 'I don't think good Wallis is representational, it is simply REAL?'. The exhibition will particularly explore Wallis' style and choice of subject as he approached death, by examining three sketchbooks made in the last year of his life when he was institutionalised due to illness in the Madron Institute, a workhouse in St Ives. The sketchbooks will be displayed in vitrines but also digitised in order to enable visitors to view all of the pages through film.

At the Madron Institute, Wallis was only able to continue to make art through the intervention of his friends Ben Nicholson and the art critic Adrian Stokes, who supplied him with materials. Away from his home, he was removed from his marine ship paints and the off-cuts of cardboard and wood, as well as household items such as jugs and trays that he would often use. Many of Wallis's work are difficult to date, but the sketchbooks were produced in the last year of his life. They are filled with individual works mainly executed in pencil, crayon and with some paintings. The sketches are not preparatory studies for larger works, but self-contained works in their own right and feature many of the recognisable subjects and scenes to which Wallis repeatedly returned throughout his lifetime. Wallis signed his name on many of them, suggesting by this time that he had an increased awareness of himself as a professional artist. The books also contain religious subjects which perhaps point to the artist's awareness of his own mortality.

In addition, the exhibition will include a number of lively letters sent from Alfred Wallis to Jim Ede, the creator of Kettle's Yard and one of Wallis' principal patrons. Ede regularly bought work by Wallis and was instrumental in cementing his reputation after his death. Though they never met, the two men corresponded regularly between 1929 and 1938, building a close epistolary friendship, and during those years Ede amassed over 120 paintings. As a result, Kettle's Yard has the most substantial institutional holding of work by Wallis anywhere in the world. Ede said of Wallis in 1945: 'Wallis was an innocent painter, with a living rather than an intellectual experience, a power of direct perception [...] Each painting was to him a re-living, a re-presenting, achieved unconsciously in regard to the act of painting, but vividly conscious in its factual awareness'.



Alfred Wallis, *Shipwreck 1 - The Wreck of the Alba*, 1938-40, 265 x 335 mm, oil on card. Courtesy of Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge



Alfred Wallis, *Three grey-sailed ships*, n.d., 330 x 225 mm, oil on card. Courtesy of Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge

## Notes to Editors

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time to visit.

## About Kettle's Yard

Kettle's Yard is one of Britain's best galleries – a beautiful and unique house with a distinctive modern art collection, and a gallery exhibiting modern and contemporary art. Supporting this is an established learning and community engagement programme, archive, and programme of chamber concerts. In February 2018, Kettle's Yard reopened after a two-year development by architect Jamie Fobert. The new Kettle's Yard includes major new exhibition galleries, generous education spaces, a café and new welcome areas. Kettle's Yard's mission is to contribute to society by inspiring and engaging audiences through art, learning and research of the highest quality. We believe that great art should not be the privilege of the few, but for everyone. Our values reflect Kettle's Yard's creator Jim Ede's support for artists and belief in art's power to make us look again and change how we act in the world.

[www.kettlesyard.co.uk](http://www.kettlesyard.co.uk)