Subject: Impressionist and Modern Art Galleries, National Museum Cardiff [exhibition review]

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A caterpillar. That was the first thing I noticed on entering National Museum Cardiff’s newly refurbished Impressionist and Modern Art galleries. A bizarre sight on a freezing cold winter’s day, but it looked quite at home crawling beneath *Cycle of Nature* (1944) by the Welsh painter, Ceri Richards. This vision of metamorphosis was inspired by Dylan Thomas’ poem *The force that through the green fuse drives the flower*. It was as if the ‘crooked worm’ mentioned at the end of that poem had come to life on the wooden floor of the gallery.

*Cycle of Nature* hangs among a selection of Surrealist works from the 1930s. This is one of the themes that have been used to organise the collection. Works are arranged by artistic movement, period or nationality. British art is also divided up according to genres like portraits, landscapes and interiors.

This clear arrangement makes it easy to navigate the collection. It also makes conducting guided tours much simpler. This was something I learnt from Eleri Wyn Evans, who was leading a primary school group around the galleries at the time of my visit.

Watching her captivated audience reminded me why art matters. The children were encouraged to let their imaginations loose. What does Ceri Richards’ *Cycle of Nature* mean? Well, the children were told, you can decide because we don’t know all the answers.

**Collectors and bequests**

We also don’t know all the questions. The rehang shows how the collection is being continually reinterpreted. A constant theme, though, is the importance of key collectors. None more so that the Davies sisters, Gwendoline and Margaret. It is largely thanks to them that the museum has such a spectacular collection of British and European modern art.

A recess at the far end of the central gallery focuses on these unmarried grand-daughters of one of Wales’ richest industrialists. A selection of documents and artefacts charts their charity work, philanthropy and cultural activities. We learn, for example, that they founded the Gregynog Press in 1922 in order to ‘help cultivate a love of beautiful things in the people of Wales’ – a sentiment that could be equally applied to the art collection that they so generously bequeathed to Wales and its national museum.

A timeline along the wall lists their principal acquisitions and the prices paid, starting in 1908 when Turner’s *The Storm* was bought for £5,775 and ending with *Brown Harbour* by Terry Frost, which was acquired for £250 just two years before Margaret’s death in 1963.

It is unusual to see price tags in an art museum, even if the estimated value of the paintings today is not given. There is a risk that their immense financial worth might attract avaricious attention given the rise of financially motivated disposal in public museums.

But the reason why our museum collections should not be cherry-picked in this way is apparent in the rotunda next door. This is built around *Flowers, Lily Pad, Pictures and Labels* (1994), a large-scale mosaic by Patrick Caulfield, commissioned and paid for by the Derek Williams Trust. Caulfield was inspired by the three paintings of waterlilies by Monet that Gwendoline Davies donated to the museum. This indicates how the Davies’ bequest has generated more ‘beautiful things’: Wales’s national art collection may have come together in a piecemeal fashion, but it is very much an organic whole that is so much more than simply the sum of its parts.

**Clever arrangements**

Encircling Caulfield’s mosaic are sculptures by the Welsh artist Goscombe John. Works by other sculptors are dotted around the galleries. They look magnificent alongside the paintings. The best combination is Monet’s *San Giorgio Maggiore by Twilight* (1908) hanging between two bronze sculptures by Degas. This grouping features in a gallery devoted to French Impressionists. The fact that its walls are painted a vivid blue sets Monet’s orange sunset ablaze.

The colour scheme for this room is established by the stunning blue dress of Renoir’s *La Parisienne* (1874). Bought by Gwendoline Davies for the princely sum of £5,000, it rightly takes pride of place at the centre of the main wall. She stares across at Augustus John’s full-length portrait of his wife *Dorelia McNeill in the Garden at Alderney Manor* (1911) hanging on the far wall of another gallery. Through this imaginative arrangement the museum’s curators cleverly demonstrate the dialogue between French and British art without resorting to lengthy explanations. Instead the art is displayed as an ‘aesthetic hang’ with text panels kept to a minimum. That said, however, there is a touchscreen device tucked away in the corner of the gallery devoted to ‘British art around 1900’. This compares two iconic artists: Gwen John and her brother Augustus. Differences in technique, material and subject matter are clearly explained next to clusters of works by the two siblings.

Complementing the ‘permanent’ hang is a temporary exhibition gallery. Its purpose is to showcase individual Welsh artists. This will play an important role in bolstering the Welsh-ness of the display. That the balance between Welsh and non-Welsh artists has been a bone of contention right from the inception of the museum comes across very clearly in Rhiannon Mason’s informative and accessible book *Museums, Nations, Identities: Wales and its National Museums* (2007).

**A promising future**

National Museum Cardiff’s refurbished Impressionist and Modern Art galleries bring its wonderful art collection to life. It will appeal to art connoisseurs and children alike. With the latter in mind, it would be good to see more resources for younger visitors. Hopefully it will soon have its own activity book similar to that for the ‘historical art’ collection in the adjacent galleries.

The collection’s potential is destined to increase once the museum’s contemporary art galleries reopen in the summer of 2011. This will come one year after the inauguration of the excellent Clore Discovery Centre on the ground floor. Such initiatives will help ensure that young people remain lifelong visitors to the museum – and go on to bring their own children in the future. Ceri Richards’ *Cycle of Life* will then take on added significance.

Even though that caterpillar I spotted on my arrival was carefully rescued by a gallery invigilator, I very much doubt whether it survived Cardiff’s bitterly cold winter to metamorphose into a beautiful butterfly. I am pleased to report that the vibrant, colourful National Museum Cardiff is, on the other hand, maturing nicely.

**Project data**

**Cost** £100,000

**Main funders** Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales, Wolfson Foundation, Henry Moore Foundation

**Lighting** in house

**CDM consultancy** Davies Langdon

**Graphics** Ten4 Design

**Refurbishment** Rok

**Vinyls** Easycolourpint

**Plinths** D4 kt