

Alfred Wallis, *A Brig Close to Shore* (c.1928)

This article considers how ‘childlike’ paintings by the fisherman-turned-artist Alfred Wallis can be understood in relation to wider developments in modern British art.

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Collection: Wolverhampton Art Gallery

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Famed for his paintings of the sea, the Cornish artist Alfred Wallis (1855–1942) rose to prominence within the art world of inter-war Britain (1919–39), where he achieved a level of recognition at odds with the simplistic art he created. Painted on discarded wood and cardboard, Wallis’s works adorned the walls of the art elite, with Tate Director Jim Ede and art critic Herbert Read being counted among his many famous devotees.¹ Yet today, it has become more common to consider Wallis as an ‘outsider’ or ‘primitive’ artist rather than one working within the complex spheres of the modern art world. His ‘childlike’ approach and unorthodox artistic biography have led to the romanticisation of Wallis’s art, presenting his tale as one of innate artistic talent.² This article considers how a focus on Wallis’s biography has perpetuated our understanding of his paintings in this idealised manner, and will explore how this has affected the status of Wallis’s art within art history. Countering traditional isolating approaches to Wallis’s paintings, this article will suggest that his work *A Brig Close to Shore* (undated, c.1928, fig.1), owned by Wolverhampton Art Gallery, connects to key developments within inter-war modernist art practice. It explores how accounts by Wallis’s contemporaries, including the artists Ben Nicholson (1894–1982) and Christopher Wood (1901–30), have impacted on the display of Wallis’s work in galleries today.

Wallis was born in Plymouth, Devon on 8 August 1855.³ Little is known about his early life, and records on his biography begin in 1876 when he found work as a ‘sailor’ and married the widow Susan Ward (who was 23 years his senior).⁴ Having taken on responsibility for Susan’s five children, Wallis’s work as a sailor appears to have come to an end in 1879. At this point Wallis registered as a labourer, moving to the Cornish town of St Ives in 1885, where he opened a marine store and worked odd jobs around the town.⁵ It wasn’t until the death of his wife in 1922 that Wallis took up painting, by which time he was 67 years old. Wallis has described this decision as being ‘for company’ and local residents recall seeing him during this time, working on an easel around the town.⁶ While the adoption of painting may appear to be a remarkable hobby for a man like Wallis, this decision was not as surprising as it initially appears. The town of St Ives was already a major art colony by the end of the nineteenth century, and it is likely that Wallis was inspired by artists like

Algernon Talmage (1871–1939) who owned studios and sold paintings along the road from Wallis's house.⁷

While 1922 marks the start of Wallis's creative endeavours, his status as an artist did not emerge until 1928, when he was 'discovered' by the artists Nicholson and Wood. During a holiday in St Ives, Nicholson and Wood were enamoured by the simple style and appearance of Wallis's works and bought a number of his paintings which Nicholson later (inaccurately) described as 'the first he [Wallis] made.'⁸ On their return to London, the artists recalled their discovery of Wallis to their fellow artists and writers, encouraging others to purchase his paintings, and even showing his works at an exhibition of the influential Seven and Five Society (1919–35).⁹ This led to artists such as Barbara Hepworth (1903–75), Patrick Heron (1920–99) and Henry Moore (1898–1986) purchasing paintings by Wallis, while major collections, such as the Tate in London, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York also acquired his works.¹⁰ Today twenty-five British museums and galleries own at least one painting by Wallis, with many of these owning multiple examples of his works. Such patronage is particularly significant given that, until this 'discovery' in 1928, Wallis was trading rather than selling his paintings; giving them as payment to neighbours who helped him after the death of his wife.¹¹ In fact, Wallis gave away so many works during his early years as an artist that his neighbours began to use them as fire-wood, demonstrating the dichotomy between local, national, and even international responses to his art.¹²

Purchased in 1992 (with the assistance of the Victoria and Albert Museum Purchase Grant Fund), the Wolverhampton painting demonstrates the legacy of this appeal almost forty years after Wallis's death. A typical example of Wallis's painting, this work features the artist's characteristic use of uneven brushstrokes and heavily applied boat-paint, which saturate the cardboard base. Just five colours (dark brown, light brown, cream, green and blue) are used to depict the scene shown in this painting, which features a ship coming to land on a deserted shore. As with all of Wallis's works, the painting lacks depth or complexity, and detail is reserved only for the ship's ropes, which cross over one another in an intricate pattern. It is fairly small, just 24.2 x 28 cm, and is painted on the back of a railway advert which has been cut down by Wallis, giving the work an uneven appearance when viewed at close proximity. The painting's date is likely to be close to the date on this advert (1928). This is supported by information on its previous owner the artist John Aldridge (1905–83), who exhibited alongside Nicholson in the Seven and Five Society. It therefore seems almost certain that Aldridge's purchase of Wallis's art was led by Nicholson's discovery of the artist, linking the ownership of this painting by Wolverhampton Art Gallery to Nicholson's personal promotion of Wallis's work.¹³

It was Wallis's simplistic style which made his art appeal to Nicholson and Wood, who described his paintings as examples of 'primitive' art. Originally referring to non-western artists, by the 1920s the term 'primitive' was being applied to any artist who worked outside

of artistic institutions and who ignored the traditional rules associated with fine art. Primitive artists were praised as presenting truthful and honest imagery in their works, using shapes and colours to represent their ideas.¹⁴ Wallis's distortion of perspective in his paintings has been viewed as a quintessential example of this 'primitive' style.¹⁵ Rejecting the use of linear perspective Wallis enlarged or minimised objects in his art according to his own priorities, with an object's size corresponding to its importance within a scene. This can be seen in the focus on the ship within the Wolverhampton painting, which appears to lie on top of the layers of paint representing the shore, sea, and sky. This approach is even more obvious in other works, such as *St Ives* (Tate, 1928) in which Wallis has altered or even omitted topographic details in order to focus viewers' attention on his own home.¹⁶

Knowledge of Wallis's biography has been used to strengthen this 'primitive' understanding of his work, with artists, critics, and writers drawing connections between his paintings and his experiences at sea.¹⁷ However, as outlined at the start of this article, Wallis's career was not dominated by his time as a fisherman. At most, Wallis spent just 9 of his 87 years as a sailor, with some members of his family questioning whether he went to sea at all.¹⁸ Regardless of its accuracy, supporters of Wallis's work capitalised on his unusual biography to substantiate their conceptualisation of his work as 'primitive'. In doing so they were able to connect Wallis, and thereby themselves, to popular movements within the modern art world, connecting British modernism to artistic developments in continental Europe. Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) had already championed 'primitive' artist Henri Rousseau (1844–1910) in the earlier part of the twentieth century, emphasising his lowly beginnings as *le Douanier* (the customs officer).¹⁹ The influence of Wallis's supporters on subsequent writing on the artist has served to entrench his 'primitive' status into Wallis's biography, making the existence of his paintings inseparable from his experiences as a sailor. Today, Wallis's art is rarely considered outside of the 'primitive' framework created upon his discovery, and this is reflected in gallery labels which identify him as a retired seaman who 'took up' painting to record his memories.²⁰

There is, however, another way of considering Wallis's art, connecting the formal qualities of his paintings to developments taking place within modernist practice. British painting of the inter-war period was undertaking something of a volte-face in terms of subject matter and style, rejecting the pre-war interest in the machine in favour of a focus on landscape and still life.²¹ Advocated by Nicholson and Wood, as well as others such as Paul Nash (1889–1946), this change of approach used modern ideas of abstraction, line, and flatness to re-work traditional artistic subject matter.²² Wallis's flattened depictions of coastal scenes with their distorted use of perspective must have appealed to the artists championing these ideas, who saw their own efforts expressed in his work. The 'discovery' of Wallis may even have inspired these experiments further, with Wood acknowledging 'more & more influence de Wallis' within his art by October 1928.²³ The Wolverhampton painting certainly shares considerable similarities with Wood's A Fishing Boat in Dieppe

Harbour (Tate, 1929), as both use simplified shapes and colours to depict a coastal scene without the traditional rules of perspective and depth.

A similar analysis can be considered in relation to Wallis's use of 'few colours' within his work, a feature remarked upon by Nicholson.²⁴ Seen in the five colours used in the Wolverhampton painting, this selective colour palette bears considerable similarity to modernist works of the period, in which colours were being simplified. Recognised most notably in the use of primary colours in the work of Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), an associate of Nicholson, this move can be identified in the work of a number of British modernists who were themselves fans of Wallis's works. This included both paintings, such as Peter Lanyon's *Cadmium with Violet, Scarlet, Emerald, Lemon and Venetian: 1969* (1969), and sculpture, for example Hepworth's *Pelagos* (1946). Interestingly, it would appear that Nicholson himself recognised these similarities within his own work, using similar language to describe Wallis's painting to that of his own practice. Nicholson recalled how Wallis used 'rock colour for anything but rock and sand colour for anything but sand' in his painting, a quote which almost mirrors Nicholson's claim two years earlier that abstraction stemmed from the use of 'bottle colour for plate, plate colour for table.'²⁵

In further evidence of Wallis's connections to the modern art world, the influential critic Herbert Read also related Wallis's art to other contemporary artworks. Read featured a reproduction of a work by Wallis's in his book *Art Now* (1948), indicating a connection between Wallis's painting and artistic developments of the twentieth century.²⁶ This inclusion alongside artists such as Henri Matisse (1869–1954) and Paul Klee (1879–1940) undermines contemporary rhetoric on Wallis, in which he is presented as a primitive painter working separately from the wider art world.²⁷ Instead this opens up alternative ways to approach Wallis's paintings, and emphasises early understandings of their relationship to modern art.

Although it remains unclear whether the similarities between Wallis's work and the developments within modernism were intended, it seems undeniable that considering Wallis's painting solely as personal outpouring of his life is an insufficient approach. Wallis certainly acknowledged the market potential of the works he created ('in lan [land] towns is The Best for sellin ships'), and this implies that he believed their value to surpass that of personal enjoyment.²⁸ The Wolverhampton painting therefore offers us the opportunity to reconsider ideas surrounding Wallis's art and to reposition him within wider art historiography. While the unusual and intriguing nature of Wallis's biography certainly cannot be denied, its predominance within research needs to be reconsidered so as to separate the artist from his work. Indeed, Wallis's attainment of artistic success provides insight into the world of modern art during the inter-war period, revealing both the art which was valued, and the individuals who had the power to define it.

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Images

Fig.1 Alfred Wallis, *A Brig Close to Shore* (c.1928), oil on cardboard, 24.2 x 28cm
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- ¹ Unknown Author, 'Collection History', *Kettle's Yard: University of Cambridge*, <http://www.kettlesyard.co.uk/collection/history/>, accessed February 2017.
- ² Ben Nicholson, 'Alfred Wallis – II,' *Horizon* 7.37 (January 1943), pp.50–3.
- ³ Peter Barnes, *Alfred Wallis and his family: Fact and Fiction* (St Ives, 1997).
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Nicholson (1943), p.53; 'Tape Recordings of Dr Roger Slack', (c.1950), transcript, Carbis Bay Archive.
- ⁷ Michael Bird, 'Real and True: the Innocence and Experience of Alfred Wallis', in Elizabeth Fisher and Andrew Nairne (eds), *Alfred Wallis: Ships and Boats* (Cambridge, 2012), p.16.
- ⁸ Nicholson (1943), p.50.
- ⁹ Ibid, p.51.
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- ¹¹ Various accounts, 'Slack Tapes'.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Nicholson, (1943), p.51.
- ¹⁴ Susan Hillier, *The Myth of Primitivism: Perspectives on Art* (London, 1991), pp.11–12.
- ¹⁵ Sven Berlin, 'Alfred Wallis – I', *Horizon*, 7:37 (January 1943), pp.41–9.
- ¹⁶ Edwin Mullins, *Alfred Wallis*, (London, 1967) pp.47–8.
- ¹⁷ See for example: Berlin (1943); Nicholson (1943); Mullins (1967).
- ¹⁸ Barnes (1997).
- ¹⁹ Götz Adriani, *Henri Rousseau* (New Haven, 2001) p.30.
- ²⁰ Unknown Author, 'Display Caption, Two-Masted Ship', *Tate Britain*, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/wallis-two-masted-ship-t01967>, accessed July 2018.
- ²¹ Charles Harrison, *English Art and Modernism 1900–39* (London, 1981) p.194.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Matthew Gale, *Alfred Wallis* (London, 1998), p.85.
- ²⁴ Nicholson (1943), p.50.
- ²⁵ Ben Nicholson, 'Notes on "Abstract" Art', *Horizon*, Typescript, 1937–48, Tate Archive, TGA 8717/3/1/7.
- ²⁶ Herbert Read, *Art Now: An Introduction to the Theory of Modern Painting and Sculpture* (London, 1948).
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Letter from Alfred Wallis to Ben Nicholson, 6 June 1933, Tate Gallery Archive, TGA 8717/1/2/5255-5270.