



**A COMMENTARY ON WOMEN CREATING SPACES  
IN WELSH VISUAL CULTURE**

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**Abstract**

Women's histories provide a vivid and perhaps drastic example of the reconstitution of history through the opening up of a new and different space of knowledge. The field is not simply expanded by the intrusion of hitherto excluded knowledge. Its borders are interfered with; its ontological status is problematized, reorganised and redefined (Peim, 2005, pp. 30-31).

This commentary questions the neglect of women artists in the major surveys of Welsh visual culture (Lord, 1998, 2000). To explain the exclusion of women it is necessary to look closely at Welsh society and its gender roles, and to understand that in contrast to the surveys, Welsh women have always found a space to design, and create their own visual culture as an alternative to the dominant culture's arts and crafts. While hidden and undervalued by the mainstream, the visual tradition of the 19th and 20th century is one that many contemporary Welsh women artists draw upon for inspiration and confirmation of a trajectory of Welsh women's roles as visual artists. This commentary explores Welsh women's creative spaces, their lives, and their visual culture traditions with a focus on four Welsh artists: Laura Ashley, Mary Lloyd Jones, Claudia Williams, and Shani Rhys James.

**Versions of Welsh Culture**

Throughout history, England has sought to control and exploit Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Wales has seen herself as a colonised country, denied free expression of her language and culture by her oppressor. Like other indigenous cultures, Welsh culture persists through an oral tradition, which in this case, is often identified with the musical tradition of bards, writers, singers, and musicians. However, Peter Lord, a leading authority on the visual arts in Wales, rejects this narrow view. In *Imagining the Nation* (2000) he has collected bountiful evidence of painting, sculpture, drawing, photography, cinema, and some printmaking and illustration that contributes to a sense of Welsh national identity and visual tradition. These art forms are those that Lord uses to define Welsh visual culture. He adds that through research, critical writing, and patronage of the fine arts there is a substantial tradition on which Welsh artists can build today.

However, women are barely accounted for in Lord's scholarship on the subject and except for an illustration of an embroidered sampler by Mary Parry, women's traditional forms of creative expression are ignored. This piece is included, not for its value as a cultural artifact, but as an example of the use of a particular type of symbolism to which the author was referring (Lord, 2000, p. 246). In the earlier publication, *The Visual Culture of Wales: Industrial Wales*, Lord briefly makes reference to "things made in the home ... craft objects such as quilts made for domestic use" and, while he admits quilting was an "important part of creative as well as of practical life in industrial communities," he refers to a male tailor, James Williams of Wrexham, as the creator of "the most notable example" (1998, p. 109). He mainly excludes activities that have provided creative opportunities for women over the centuries.

Lord perpetuates mainstream views that have excluded or marginalised women's creative work because of differences resulting from different life experiences, the constraints imposed by society, and the media and genre adopted by women artists (Collet, 2005). Is it possible for women, inquires art sociologist Janet Woolf (1989), "to write (or paint) from their own experience, no longer mediated by the culture and point of view of men?" (p. 2). There is ample evidence to argue that Welsh women have found both private and public spaces in which to design and

create, drawing on women's visual traditions. In this commentary, I introduce the lives and art of four contemporary Welsh artists—Laura Ashley (b.1925), Mary Lloyd Jones (b. 1934), Claudia Williams (b. 1933), and Shani Rhys James (b. 1953)—to shed light on a sample of these creative spaces. To assist in this process it is useful to look at the structure of Welsh society and the gendered divides within it as these social constraints have had a major impact on women's art, craft, and design practices.

### **Traditional Gender Roles and Employment in Wales**

Gender roles have always been well defined in Wales (Aaron, Rees, Betts, & Vincentelli, 1994; Beddoe, 2003; White & Williams, 1998). This, in part, has been due to limited employment opportunities for both men and women since the early nineteenth century. Major male occupations were in farming, quarrying and mining, and in manufacturing resulting from mining and agriculture. Women's roles were predominantly confined to domestic duties in their own homes or as paid servants in the homes of the wealthy. Spinsters and widows struggled with often dirty and heavy work whether at the pit head sorting and bagging coal in the south or in any of the many small woollen mills across the north west. Alternatively single women could earn a living through sewing and married women or widows could take boarders into their homes, as housing in the fast expanding industrial south was limited.

Factors influencing the type of available employment included gender, education, marital status, geographic location, and socio-economic status. The fortunes of the working class followed the boom and bust cycles of mining, the impact of war on families, and the strikes in the mines and factories. Women were economically dependent upon their husbands, as labour and work were male dominated (Beddoe, 2003). A few professional women emerged in the early twentieth century who had managed to continue their education and to qualify as teachers and nurses. However, opportunities for work outside the home were limited and, except for a few outlets such as the *Merched y Wawr* (i.e., *Daughters of the Dawn*, a national organisation for women in Wales) and the church

or chapel which provided carefully prescribed roles for women in public life, women's lives in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century were confined to the domestic spheres. Women first petitioned for the vote in 1866, but they had to wait until 1918 for a limited suffrage for women over thirty years old. Despite the Sex Discrimination Removal Act of 1919, marriage continued to be prohibited for women teachers. From the late 19th century a number of women's organizations formed to support women's rights including the *Association for Promoting the Education of Girls in Wales*, the *South Wales Temperance Union*, and the *North Wales Social and Political Union*. Increasingly, women joined in strike action with men and took up positions in unions and political parties. Eventually in 1928, all women gained the vote and many employment opportunities opened up for women during World War II (CWM, n.d., n.p.).

Within the home, women relied on their skills in needlework learnt in school or at their mam's knee. Thus the glory box, or hope chest, was filled and the needs of their families and future families could be met. Samplers were sewn by young girls and, unlike the more utilitarian embroideries and sewing produced in adult life, the sampler survived because it was for display rather than use. Today we can look at these samplers as "texts" that document the social mores of a period, the assigned roles of women, and the gendering of education and religious discourses. One example is Amelia Willmsher's sampler completed in 1847. Along with the execution of the alphabet, this seven year old had stitched a Biblical verse suitable for the edification of a small child. Another example, a sampler by Mary Lowcock, made in 1815, includes a verse suitable for a young woman's moral guidance. Girls spent as much as half a school day at their sewing because the regular stitching and restitching of these verses was believed to have a profound moral influence upon them (Payne, 1939). As the Welsh language was forbidden in schools, such repetitive activities were seen to reinforce the learning of English. Samplers stitched in the Welsh language are comparatively rare (Payne, 1939).

### Welsh Women Artists' Visual Cultural Sources

The fiber arts were important creative activities, but because of their domestic and utilitarian nature it was not usual for them to be viewed publicly or for many to survive the wear and tear of family life. Of those that survive, quilts are particularly interesting because they can provide insights into women's creative output and the symbolic place of fiber arts in the homes and lives of women, and insights into women's roles as homemakers and paid domestic workers. Spinning, knitting, and weaving often cross the boundary between home and paid work, although in Wales, weaving, regarded as one of the more skilled jobs in the mill, was traditionally a male occupation.

Moira Vincentelli (1994) draws our attention to the symbolic importance that the textile crafts can have in the lives of women. She quotes from Kate Roberts' (1946) short story, *The Quilt*, in which Ffebi Williams and her husband are facing bankruptcy and the sale of their business. Ffebi wraps herself in a quilt, a quilt she purchases at a fair despite their poverty:

A quilt that made you catch your breath; that brought every woman there to finger it and look longingly at it as she walked away. A quilt of thick white welsh flannel, with wavy stripes, green and blue, yellow and red ... She wanted to buy it, and the more she thought of her poverty, the greater grew her desire (Vincentelli, 1994, p. 230, citing Roberts, 1946, p. 52).

For Ffebi, the quilt was desirable because it symbolised the security of the home and family life that she was losing with the sale of their grocery store. Welsh quilters sewed traditional patterns into their work: hearts for wedding quilts, spirals for longevity, oak leaves to symbolize Wales. Jen Jones (1997) writes that there is a strong link between the designs of Welsh and Amish quilts. The strong colours and geometric designs now associated with Amish quilts are believed to have been introduced to Pennsylvania by families emigrating from Welsh mining valleys. These spectacular quilts embody powerful aesthetic and creative expression within a permissible activity.

The Welsh Rural Industries Board revived quilt making as a cottage industry in 1928 to offset the poverty caused by unemployment and the Depression. With better-paid and more varied industrial work during the second world war, the project was abandoned and many women gained financial independence for the first time. Today there is recognition of the importance of quilts as a part of Welsh history and tradition and younger women often seek old quilts to preserve and enjoy them (Jones, 1997). (See Figure 1.)



Figure 1. This red and white strippy quilt with extraordinary stitch work was made by May Thomas. It won the prize for best quilt in Llanelli 1901. Jen Jones purchased it from descendants of May Thomas who still live in Llanelli. Reproduced with the permission of Jen Jones.

### Women's Visual Culture Collections

Objects collected by women often have symbolic or personal meaning and how they organise their domestic space to display the objects they have collected establishes social meanings (Vincentelli, 1994), and is a type of cultural production. In Wales throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the collection of china and its display on the Welsh dresser is seen as a “site for female creativity” and such displays have become “signifiers of aspects of Welsh female identity” (Vincentelli, 2000, ¶ 1 in abstract). The curation of the objects, as a means of cultural production and display, has been unrecognised in the past by scholars of Welsh folkways and visual culture. Vincentelli has brought new light to the study of the Welsh dresser by seeing it as an installation upon which social and cultural meanings are constructed. The curation of the objects on the dresser is a particularly feminine “space” that has not been acknowledged prior to Vincentelli’s (1994) research. This turns the focus away from the crafts of the artisan to the social construction of knowledge. Peim (2005) uses the term a “new and different space of knowledge” (pp. 30-31) to describe this practice. Welsh pottery and china such as *Swansea Cottage*, *Llanelli*, and *Nantgarw*, is associated with the feminine and the domestic. Vincentelli (1994) writes that collections of china arranged on the Welsh dresser should be recognised as “central to any concept of Welsh visual culture and tradition” (p. 240). The Welsh dresser not only serves to store and display objects but also “as a focus for the establishment of social meanings associated with gender, domestic well-being and national identity” (p. 229).

These displays served to perpetuate family histories, to affirm women’s roles in the family and in the home, and to reinforce memories of people and events. They contribute to a woman’s sense of pride in her domestic and social accomplishments. A dresser is desirable to a newly married woman because it signifies status and social aspiration, and by its very appellation, the Welsh dresser, signifies Welshness.

The Welsh dresser is often used to showcase china. In the early 20th century at *Llanelli Pottery*, the artist, Sarah Jane Roberts, painted colourful rural designs on china of which the cockerel pattern was particularly collectable. Along with souvenir china and lusterware, these

inexpensive ceramics could be purchased readily at fairs and were often given to women by family members or bought by women as a memento or keepsake. For Peter Lord (1998) these ceramics were vulgar and commonplace and unworthy of a place in Welsh visual culture. This is underlined by his use of the terms “cheap” and “popular,” and his observation that such pottery was “another important expression of working-class taste and well-being at home” (p. 110). (See Figure 2.)



Figure 2. A contemporary Welsh dresser. Photo permission courtesy of B. Williams.

## 20th Century Welsh Women Artists

The lack of an acknowledged tradition of women's visual culture continues to be debilitating for women attempting to make careers as artists in Wales and elsewhere. There is an extensive body of feminist writing that draws attention to this lack of acknowledgement and how it has disadvantaged women who aspired to be artists (Ambrus, 1992; Collet, 2005; Ewington, 1995; Greer, 1979; Lerner, 1993; Parker & Pollock, 1981). Gerder Lerner (1993) describes women's lack of history and their "systematic educational disadvantaging" as an aspect of their oppression (p. 280). Talented women did achieve, but their struggle was ignored, thus leading to the "discontinuity in the story of women's intellectual effort" (Lerner, 1993, p. 280). As Lerner (1993) so eloquently writes: "Endlessly generation after generation of Penelopes reweave the unraveled fabric only to unravel it again" (p. 275).

After World War II, women were reluctant to return to unpaid work and despite a lack of female role models, some women progressed to art schools and colleges. The four artists—Laura Ashley, Mary Lloyd Jones, Claudia Williams, and Shani Rhys James discussed below—received some recognition in Wales but were largely ignored beyond its borders. For many contemporary Welsh women artists, the neglect and derogation of their visual cultural traditions continue to impact their careers.

### *Laura Ashley*

For inspiration, some women artists, like Laura Ashley, drew on threads of the textile and domestic traditions that they had encountered in their lives. Ashley, who created designs for soft furnishings and founded a chain of interior decorating stores, has referred to the scraps of fabric in old Welsh patchwork quilts as sources for her designs. She started her business by silk-screening fabrics on the table in her kitchen. She collected old Welsh quilts for inspiration and after her death her company commissioned contemporary quilt makers to make quilts using Ashley's fabrics. An exhibition of the old and the new quilts, *Inspiration*, was

shown in Llanidloes in 2003. The publicity pamphlet stated that "[t]his will complete the cycle of old quilts used as a design source for fabric and these fabrics then inspiring new quilts" (Minerva Arts Centre, 2003, n.p.). Unfortunately, the story of her achievements as an artist and business entrepreneur has been eclipsed by the corporate marketing of the business that she founded.

### *Mary Lloyd Jones*

The painter, Mary Lloyd Jones (1994) in her autobiographical piece, *Between Two Worlds*, writes of the difficulties of being Welsh, a woman, and rural.

The specific difficulties that all women face in breaking into any profession have been extensively documented and it is well known that the world of fine arts is one of the most male-dominated fields. Combining motherhood with ambitions to be an artist in a culture which did not appear to value the work required a supportive partner and a stubborn streak. (1994, p. 274)

Her discovery that "a Welsh visual tradition lay in women's textile arts" was significant for her sense of identity as a Welsh woman artist (Lloyd Jones, 1994, p. 275).

Discovering my great grandmother's splendid log cabin quilt gave me the foundation and background on which to develop my own language, safe in the knowledge that my work was linked with that of previous generations. (Lloyd Jones, 1994, p. 275)

Her childhood memories of rag rugs and later learning about quilters' personal meanings in the intricate stitchery of their work influenced her own personal language and techniques. She collected traditional textile articles including old quilts and woven carthenni (bed covers) and talked with members of the *Merched y Wawr* "as I felt that by our looking together at the Welsh textile tradition I could use these artifacts as an

introduction to a visual language” (Lloyd Jones, 1994, p. 275).

The Welsh rural landscape and culture is a rich source for Mary Lloyd Jones’ work. As her ancestors were aboriginal inhabitants of the British Isles, she sees her relationship with place as being of the same nature as that of other aboriginal peoples. She uses the Welsh word “hiraeth,” an untranslatable term, to describe the relationship and the longing of the Welsh for their birthplace (1994, p. 278). However, she remains concerned that colonisation and exploitation have led to Welsh cultural disempowerment and that, outside Wales, Welsh art gets little critical attention.

### *Claudia Williams*

A different story is that of Claudia Williams. After art school, Williams married painter, Gwilym Pritchard and settled in North Wales. She managed a large family and with the support of her husband was able to persevere with her painting. Within a short time she was exhibiting and gaining critical recognition working within the figurative tradition still popular in Wales in the post-war years (Meyrick, 2000). Williams’ teacher in the life studio was sculptor Bernard Meadows, a student of Henry Moore. In her paintings of mothers and children, the figures have a sculptural quality and are powerful images of domestic life. As a child she practised exercises from Marion Richardson’s (1935) *Writing and Writing Patterns*, and her work reflects her early interest in the surface quality of objects. Meyrick (2000) writes that the patterning evident in her work is “the result of her love of weaving and textiles” (p. 38). Within her domestic interiors, the clutter of family life, patterns of wallpaper, soft furnishings, and knitted, and woven fabrics complement the simple geometry of the furniture and solidity of the human figures. Through gesture and presence, these powerful female images personify motherhood (see Figure 3).

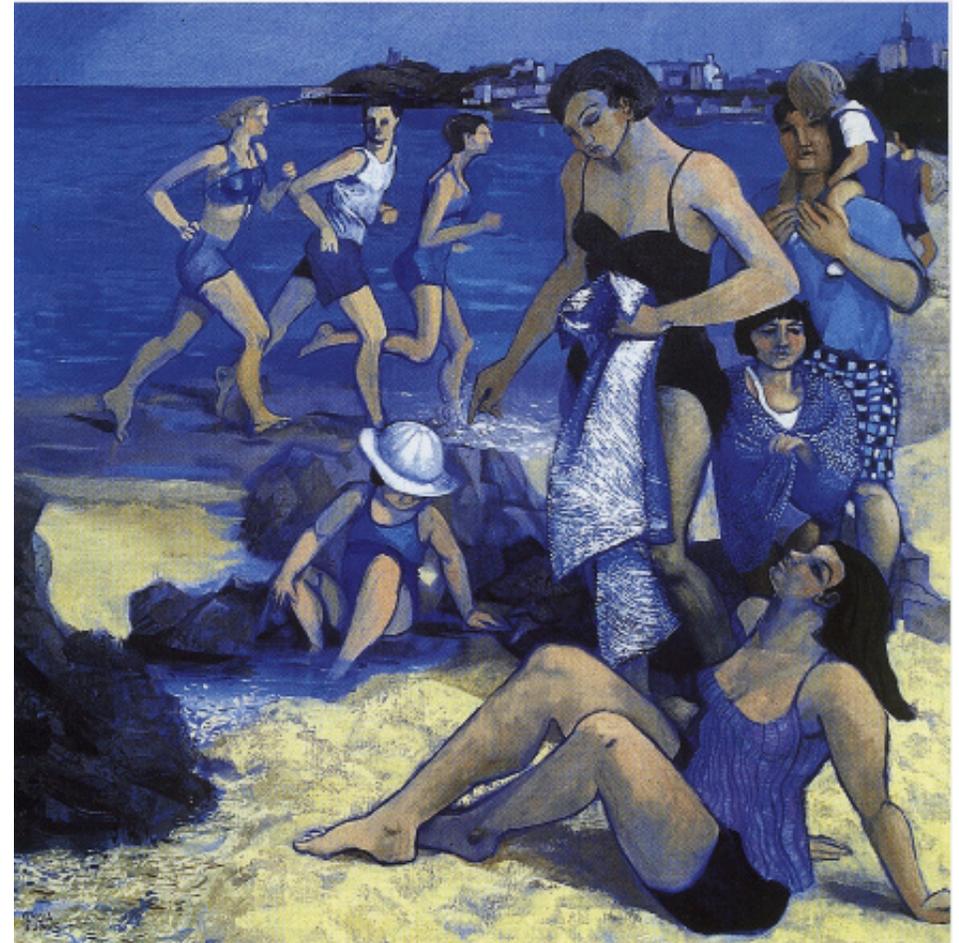


Figure 3. Claudia Williams, *Bathers and Joggers at Tenby*, 1999, oil on canvas 150 x 150 cm. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

Claudia Williams left Wales seeking wider recognition in France. She felt that remaining in Wales would limit her opportunities for recognition beyond Welsh borders. This concern was expressed in a letter to me from the artist: “There are very few writers on art in Wales, especially writers on women’s art” (C. Williams, personal communication, October 10, 2003).

*Shani Rhys James*

Another painter gaining increasing recognition in Wales is Shani Rhys James. Her studies at Saint Martins School of Art in London in the mid-1970s were constraining because she believed her tutors interfered with her development as an artist. “They were often incredibly unaware of what I was interested in, and seldom gave me any credit for feeling very strongly about what I did” (Lucie-Smith, 1994, n.p.). She was criticised for her insistence upon figuration, particularly self-portraiture. Her work continues to be autobiographical but she cautions against it being taken too literally. Rather it is a narrative, “fictions based on reality” with Rhys James as the protagonist (Lucie-Smith, 1994, n.p.). Family relationships, her sons, and the domestic setting in general, are all subjects of her narratives. She pays particular attention to still life elements: the vase, the flowers and the kitchen table, perhaps echoing arrangements on the Welsh dresser (see Figure 2).

Her return to Wales was initially to provide a rural upbringing for her children, but Rhys James, with her Welsh heritage, found it a “conducive place to work” (in Price, 2003, p. 12). With the move and the acquisition of a studio, her work changed. As Lucie-Smith (1994) writes:

Painting is no longer a purely domestic activity—very much of the earlier works make a point of this by being set in the kitchen. Making art has thus been equated with domestic occupations, like cooking and washing up. Now art has its own space, and the artist takes on a subtly different identity when she enters this space (n.p.).

Her more recent work focuses on “tablescapes” of the studio paraphernalia. One is tempted to speculate whether this transition is a personal response to her changing family role with her sons now grown up and her increasing recognition and identity as an artist.

**Conclusion**

In this commentary, I have provided a brief history of Welsh visual culture in which I focused on the life and work of four Welsh women artists who draw on their Welsh heritage as well as their domestic and private lives for inspiration and material for their artwork. They have achieved recognition in Wales and to some extent, in the larger world of art. They draw on visual traditions that have been largely ignored by the mainstream patriarchal overviews of Welsh visual culture. Traditional Welsh women’s work provides a source of strength, identity, and empowerment for these four artists.

Ewington (1995) argued, “cultural discourses are still deeply masculinist and that gender remains a crucial factor in assigning value to the work of artists” (p. 109). Despite the successes achieved by these women, they still express concern that their work is not adequately acknowledged across Britain or internationally. However, this neglect is gradually being addressed, and Welsh women’s visual culture is becoming central to research by many women in the arts in Wales. A recent study of Welsh women potters (McDemott, Vincentelli, & Venus, 2006) examined the motivations of women ceramic artists. Funding has been provided by the Arts Council of Wales (2007) to Anne Price Owen to research and publish information on Welsh women artists. The Arts Council of Wales supported a conference called *Making Good—Women Artists and Makers in Wales* in September 2007, to provide a forum for women artists in Wales to discuss issues of concern. Projects such as these will play an important role in “the reconstitution of history” (Piem, 2005, p. 30). Increasingly women artists are being represented in electronic online resources such as those provided by the National Library of Wales (2008) for the *Welsh National Grid for Learning*. A recent recognition of women artists in Wales is Hugh Adams’ (2003) book, *Imaging Wales*. Nearly one-third of the artists featured by Adams are women. He admits that: “there are more senior artists with international reputations ... that I’ve simply had to leave out for reasons of space” (Adams, n.d., n.p.).

As Welsh women have overcome the traditional gendered patterns of work and economic disadvantage over the last century, they have

established themselves as contributors to Welsh visual culture. Their contributions have moved confidently from the hidden-stream of traditional home focused crafts to mainstream arts and crafts. The extent to which Welsh women artists have been able to reorganise and redefine visual culture in Wales is yet to be ascertained. The current generation of Welsh women scholars of art and art history are exploring these spaces and contributing to this new knowledge.

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