

ART APPRECIATION GROUP – Report by Tony Seward

Continuing our tour of the so-called 'Celtic fringe' (how Anglo-centric can you get!), we turned our attention to the history of Welsh art. This has been well served by a comprehensive and engaging BBC series, fronted by Huw Stephens.

For convenience, 'Welsh' art is defined very broadly as: art located in Wales; art commissioned by Welsh patrons, produced by non-Welsh artists living in Wales or depicting Welsh subjects; and, post-1700, art by native Welsh artists.

The series is in three hour-long episodes. The first begins with an impressive passage burial chamber on Anglesey, dating from around 3000 BC. It features mysterious zigzag and circle patterns carved into the rock, possibly expressing belief in an eternal cycle of birth, death and rebirth. We then move on to the Bronze Age, and the stunning 3000-year-old Mold Cape, finely wrought in pure gold.



The Mold Gold Cape, c.1900-1600 BC (British Museum)

Found near Wrexham, it is now in The British Museum and was one of Neil MacGregor's choices for his groundbreaking *History of the World in 100 Objects*. It is powerful evidence of the sophistication of the society which produced it. After some discussion of the mysterious Celtic 'triskele', still widely used as a symbol of Welsh identity, we entered more familiar territory with the dawn of Christianity and all that followed from its beginnings in Wales.



Triskele: Iron Age bronze plaque, c.200 BC-50 CE, (Amgueddfa Cymru/Museum Wales)

By its very nature, the new religion was a unifying force, so it is difficult to identify much that was unique to Wales in its artistic expression. We were however treated to the splendid illuminated

manuscript known as the St Chad's Gospel, now in Lichfield Cathedral, an array of Celtic crosses, and a majestic carving, made from a single oak trunk, of the patriarch Jesse with the tree of his descendants sprouting from his side.

The later medieval period was marked by the emergence of wealthy patrons with the means to commission work from the leading masters of the time. One of these was Sir John Donne (not to be confused with the later poet) whose lovely triptych by Hans Memling features a striking portrait of himself as donor.

The Donne Triptych, (detail), c.1478, (National Gallery, London)



After him came the powerful Herbert family, Dukes of Pembroke based at Powys Castle, who were courtiers, poets and major patrons of the arts.

The programme ended with a brief taster for Episode Two, whose starting point will be the emergence of a distinctive Welsh school of art after 1700.