

Raising funds for a larger-than-life a large statue of Sir Kyffin Williams at his local gallery

by Our Correspondent, Western Mail | [Jun 1 2012](#)

Sir Kyffin Williams was one of Wales' finest painters. Now a plan is under way to fund a larger-than-life statue of him at Oriel Ynys Mon on Anglesey. Jenny White speaks to sculptor David Williams-Ellis about the project

ONE of Wales' greatest ever landscape artists, Sir Kyffin Williams was a national treasure. With his old fashioned tweeds, his hats and his luxuriant moustache he looked every inch the artist.

He loved to get out amid the scenery of North Wales, so even in old age he worked outdoors as often as he could. His paintings captured the majesty and drama of the Welsh landscape in big, buttery sweeps of oil paint, applied with a palette knife in a style that was instantly recognisable. A member of the Royal Academy, his work was keenly collected and for many years his exhibitions were preceded by long queues of eager buyers, who camped overnight for a chance to purchase his work. A great raconteur, Kyffin (as he was affectionately known) was always outspoken about modern art and could be relied upon to spin a good yarn.



Sculptor David Williams-Ellis first met him as a boy growing up in Porthmadog. Kyffin was a good friend of the family and made a lasting impression on the young Williams-

Ellis.

“I remember this tremendous character – he was a larger than life figure,” he recalls. “He had a great friend called Sandy Livingstone-Learmouth who was known as The Captain. They were like a duo – they told stories together and, as a 12-year-old, I was gripped by these two characters.”

It was not until he was in his twenties that Williams-Ellis got to know Kyffin’s work.

“I remember the tales that went with the work – every picture had a story. He had such enduring enthusiasm for life and for stories. I remember the twinkle he had in his eye – he was always being slightly naughty with the stories; as the twinkle got greater you wondered about the origins of the tales and how authentic they were!”

Later still, Kyffin sat for Williams-Ellis, who sculpted a bust that is now in the Royal Cambrian Academy in Conwy.

“That was when I really got to know him. When you’re working with someone really closely and you see them day in, day out, you see their highs and lows, you pick up their idiosyncrasies and you get to be very knowledgeable about them. When people sit for you they start treating you like a close family member, like an analyst. They start opening up to you – that’s the most lovely thing about doing portraiture.”

Williams-Ellis got to know Kyffin over several weeks working at his studio.

“I visited his studio two or three days in a row for about four weeks and I had an amazing time with him entertaining me and making me laugh. He was vivacious, and outspoken in the best way – he had very strong views on painting and sculpture, which were not dissimilar to my views. I just adored him and his work.”

Now Williams-Ellis is drawing on that experience to create a lasting memorial to Kyffin in the form of a larger-than-life size statue to be sited at Oriel Ynys Mon, which houses a permanent Kyffin Williams exhibition. The bronze statue, depicting Kyffin at work



outdoors, will cost £85,000 and will be funded by the sale of 25 maquettes, which are being sold for £4,500 at galleries throughout Wales, including by the Albany Gallery in Cardiff, Rowles Fine Art in Welshpool, Oriel Plas Glyn y Weddw near Pwllheli, Fountain Fine Art in Llandeilo, and Oriel Ynys Mon itself.

“The idea came about in discussion with Mary Yapp of the Albany Gallery, who was Kyffin’s agent in Wales and is one of the foremost dealers in Welsh contemporary art,” says Williams-Ellis.

“Mary said there should be something to celebrate Kyffin and I went away and did a series of small sculptures until I was happy I had one that I was pleased with.”

Despite his familiarity with Kyffin, the task of sculpting him from memory posed a challenge.

“With sculpture you need things to work three dimensionally – it has to work well as a sculpture and as a portrait. It took a few attempts to achieve both; when you’re working posthumously you have to work from video and photograph and memory – you’ve got two dimensional images and you need to make it three dimensional and give it life without having photorealist detail, which never looks good in sculpture and painting; you need to get a bit of looseness and excitement.”

As well as drawing on memory, films and photographs, Williams-Ellis found a novel way to work from ‘life.’

“I got somebody to stand in for the composition of the pose, dressed in similar clothes to what Kyffin would have worn. I chose a pose that I felt worked sculpturally and that I felt people would recognise as Kyffin. It was also important to make it work sculpturally because in the long term there won’t be many people around who know how he sat and how he drew.”

It was also a priority to make the sculpture lively and interesting.

“There’s an awful lot of statuary which is really dull – you see rather ordinary standing formal sculptures all round the world, and I wanted to get a bit of informality into it. I had to show him as an artist so I chose a pose that worked with his sketchbook, with his bag, sitting down as though he was drawing a landscape – which, of course, is what he’s famous for. The essence of Kyffin is his landscapes.”

The resulting maquettes make beautiful pieces in their own right but also give a flavour of what the final, large-scale bronze will look like. A lifelong sculptor with classical leanings, Williams-Ellis is well placed to undertake this important work.

As a young man he started his professional training as an apprentice in Florence and Carrara before attending the Sir John Cass School of Art in the early 1980s.

Based in Porthmadog and Penrith, Cumbria, he has made portraits of numerous public figures and has work in collections all over the world. Kyffin, however, is a subject especially close to his heart.

“He’s Wales’ greatest painter of the 20th and 21st centuries if not one of the greatest painters in Wales’ history. He was a great exponent of the visual arts in Wales and he deserves to be celebrated,” he says.

With every maquette that is purchased, Williams-Ellis gets a step closer to funding the creation of the full-size statue, and Oriel Ynys Mon edges closer to having a magnificent, lasting memorial to a truly remarkable painter.

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