

I must be getting dafter than ever because actually finding my way to the Art in Wales Gallery within the lofty caverns of the National Gallery of Wales took an embarrassingly long time. It tempted me to mutter in the style of Disgusted from Timișoara, 'So this is how they treat their national patrimony'. Once there, however, it was like finding buried treasure. The current show is *An Art-Accustomed Eye: John Gibbs and art appreciation in Wales 1945-1996*. A group of around 50 paintings, sculptures, drawings and prints beautifully if modestly represents the achievement of this Methodist educational psychologist and his wife who used their inherited wealth to bring modern art to a wider audience in a country where modernism was still largely regarded as a dirty word. In the 1940s John (a registered conscientious objector) and Sheila Gibbs were among the first people in Wales to start collecting progressive art. Buying at first for themselves, during the next 50 years they purchased scores of two- and three-dimensional images for the Methodist projects which they established in Penarth. These were eventually circulated on a semi-permanent basis to schools, churches and colleges around the UK. The couple also gave substantial donations to the Contemporary Art Society for Wales and the National Museum of Wales. From the 1950s they began to buy contemporary, innovative Welsh art. George Chapman, Michael Edmonds, Eric Malthouse, Shani Rhys James, Ernest Zobole and Jonah Jones all received their serious support.

John and Sheila Gibbs come across in Peter Wakelin's essays as great but self-effacing altruists with strongly individual and unabashedly Christian tastes. In these increasingly polarised times (Bible bashers versus loose-living liberals), this is surprising, challenging and extremely rewarding. In this exhibition, the images are small-ish except for a magnificently garish picture called *The Collector* by Shani Rhys James. They include Paul Nash's Surrealist *Swan Song*; David Jones's *Pleasure Steamer*; Christopher Wood's *The Rug Seller, Treboul*; Norman Adams's *Bird of Paradise Flowers and Crucifixion*, a delightfully wonky drawing of a piano player by Ceri Richards and many more surprises, playful and deep. Strong, dark religious images spring out from the walls, making sense as art, and get to the heart of the matter. This show is worth getting lost for.

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