

KS1 & KS2

Display In Focus

Alfred Wallis

This pack is designed to complement the **Notes for Teachers** that accompany this exhibition at Tate St Ives.

We have selected one work from this show to enable you to focus in on some key themes relating to this specific work, with ideas for how to extend learning back in the classroom.



Alfred Wallis
Wreck of the Alba circa 1938-9
© Tate

Some facts

Alfred Wallis mostly made paintings about his memories but he almost certainly saw the shipwreck of the *Alba* on Porthmeor Beach and painted this dramatic scene.

On 31 January 1938 the 3,700-ton Panamanian steamer *Alba*, loaded with a cargo of coal, ran aground in stormy weather en route from Barry in South Wales to Civitavecchia in Italy. In a gripping sequence of events the St Ives lifeboat was launched and the *Alba*'s Hungarian crew of twenty-three was safely evacuated. Yet as the lifeboat came round the bow of the wreck a huge wave crashed into the craft, capsizing it and tossing it onto the Island, a stretch of land jutting into the sea. It was only thanks to the effort of 'hundreds of St Ives people [who] scrambled over dangerous rocks to help the men' (*Western Morning News*, 3 February 1928) that the lifeboat crew and all but five men from the *Alba* were saved.

For *Wreck of the Alba* Alfred Wallis chose a long rectangular plywood panel probably originating from the lid of a box or shipping container. Choosing not to modify the board he incorporated its original format into the painting, even leaving nails and holes intact. Working at his cottage with the panel propped on a table, Wallis chose his colours from pre-mixed household or ship's paints, avoiding artists' oils which he once informed a neighbour were not 'the *real* paint' but 'muck' (quoted in Edwin Mullins, *Alfred Wallis: Cornish Primitive*, London 1994, p.12).

Some of Wallis' effects may have been accidental, like the drips and pools of paint caused by the slant of the board which echo the crest of the waves, or the flakes of nicotine, possibly a spillage of tobacco, which give the beach an authentic gravelly texture. Yet elsewhere, in his brushwork for example, Wallis's technique was highly sophisticated. Using smooth undulating lines for the waves which lash over the boat's hull, he also employed stippled short strokes, flicking up the brush to leave trails of hair that imitate the spray of the surf. Wallis also skilfully played with perspective, using a number of viewpoints to fully explore the drama of the wreck. Godrevy lighthouse, for example, appears at the right though not actually visible from Porthmeor Beach.

The shipwreck is still vividly remembered in St Ives, for while the *Alba* was dismantled soon after the wreck by the Cornish Marine Salvage Company, at low tides the upper parts of the boilers resurface even today. (Tate Online 2009)

Ideas for discussion

- What do you see? Invite responses without needing to know anything about the work.
- The story behind the work (outlined above) – what happened?
- Does the work look finished?
- What is it painted on?
- What sounds would be in the painting?
- What shapes and textures are in the painting?
- Colours – do you see these colours in the stormy sea? How many colours did Wallis use in this painting?
- Where are the people?
- Viewpoint – where would you be you standing to see this? (If you visit at low tide the wreck may be visible near the Island)

question and make thoughtful observations about starting points and select ideas to use in their work (QCA 2009)

Starting points

The Alba story could be the inspiration for a cross curricular project:

Make observational drawings of the wreck at low tide

Literacy: descriptive keywords, poems, (possibly haiku), imaginative writing about being in a shipwreck or being a rescuer.

Geography work: Weather, storms, seasons, coastal environments

Rescue services; local and national services, reporting rescues in news articles

Shipping, transport, sustainability and the fishing industry can be explored with local/national and global references: Welsh goods in a Panamanian ship wrecked on a Cornish beach.

Drama and role play: The personal story of Wallis and the achievements of a simple man, a fisherman, a scrap merchant, an ice cream seller, who had adventures on the sea and became a famous artist. You could include a walk to see Wallis' grave in Barnoon cemetery.

compare ideas, methods and approaches in their own and others' work and say what they think and feel about themTo listen, understand and respond appropriately to others, pupils should be taught to: b. ask relevant questions to clarify, extend and follow up ideas e. respond to others appropriately, taking into account what they say (English link)(QCA 2009)

Quick and simple practical ideas

In the gallery

Back to back – stand back-to-back and one person describes the work with the other drawing from their description of the painting

Observation - Make drawings of the different types of boats

Role Play - Imagine being a fisherman or sailor and write a ship's log

Creative Writing - Make up a story about the journeys and adventures of the boats – fold an A4 sheet into a book and write and illustrate the story

Counting how many sails are there in the paintings? How many boats have red/brown sails? How many have bowsprits?

record from experience and imagination, to select and record from first-hand observation and to explore ideas for different purposes (QCA 2009)

Links to other rooms

Wallis used recycled materials to paint on; where else in the gallery can you find recycled materials and objects?

Where can you find a sculpture that looks like an Alfred Wallis sea?

Extended projects

Boat model. Use card, wood, textiles and recycled materials to make a fishing fleet. PVA will waterproof them enough to float.

investigate and combine visual and tactile qualities of materials and processes and to match these qualities to the purpose of the work (QCA 2009)

Recycled paintings. Like Wallis, collect old bits of card and wood and recycle old paints to create new paintings. Adapt the subject of the painting to the shape of the found object rather than cutting it to a square or rectangular format.

Relief prints. Use foam board to make simple relief prints from observation drawings.

apply their experience of materials and processes, including drawing, developing their control of tools and techniques (QCA 2009)

Large group canvases. In groups of four use observation drawings to create a group composition about Wallis and St Ives. Paint these, in acrylics, flat on a desk so they can be worked on from all sides with unusual perspectives and viewpoints, like Wallis.

visual and tactile elements, including colour, pattern and texture, line and tone, shape, form and space, and how these elements can be combined and organised for different purposes(QCA 209)

Installation. Create an installation that combines drawing, painting and models with investigations about coastal environments, rescue services and fishing, both locally and globally. This could involve the whole class in a cross curricular display.

collect visual and other information [for example, images, materials] to help them develop their ideas, including using a sketchbook..... use a variety of methods and approaches to communicate observations, ideas and feelings, and to design and make images and artefacts.(QCA 2009)

Newspaper Report. Investigate newspapers of the time and write and illustrate a report about the Alba. Use computers to produce the layout. St Ives museum (01736 796005) and the St Ives Archive Study Centre (01736 796408 www.stivetrust.co.uk) are excellent centres for contextual research.

Drama Write and perform a play about the Alba. Music and dance can certainly be included. Use ICT to make posters, tickets and invitations.

ICT opportunity Use digital and video cameras to record observations both written and spoken. (English link). Record works-in-progress to document progression and stages of development. Make a sound recording to accompany artworks. Listen to artists speaking about their art works (www.tate.org.uk/tateshots and www.stivetrust.co.uk)

Pupils could develop their own class art gallery on the school website. (ICT link)(QCA 2009)

Breadth of Study

5. During the key stage, pupils should be taught the Knowledge, skills and understanding through:

- 1. exploring a range of starting points for practical work [for example, themselves, their experiences, images, stories, drama, music, natural and made objects and environments]*
- 2. working on their own, and collaborating with others, on projects in two and three dimensions and on different scales*
- 3. using a range of materials and processes, including ICT [for example, painting, collage, print making, digital media, textiles, sculpture]*

Investigating art, craft and design in the locality and in a variety of genres, styles and traditions [for example, in original and reproduction form, during visits to museums, galleries and sites, on the internet].(QCA 2009)