GRIFFITHS, ARCHIBALD REES [yn ddiweddarach RHYS] (1902 - 1971), painter

Name: Archibald Rees Griffiths
Date of birth: 1902
Date of death: 1971
Spouse: Edith Annie Rose Griffiths (née Tabony)
Spouse: Winifred May Griffiths (née Jones)
Child: Rhys Adrian Griffiths
Child: Diana Griffiths
Parent: Sarah Jane Griffiths (née Evans)
Parent: William Henry Griffiths
Gender: Male
Occupation: painter
Area of activity: Art and Architecture
Author: Peter Lord

Archie Griffiths was born at Aberdare on 12 January 1902, one of the five children of William Henry and Sarah Jane Griffiths. The family, which was Welsh-speaking, soon moved to Gorseinon, where the father found work as a collier. On leaving school, Archie Griffiths was employed for two years in the tinplate industry and then joined his father at the Mountain Colliery. According to his own account, finding himself idle during a stoppage, Griffiths amused himself by taking up painting. From 1919 he studied at evening classes and then full time at the Swansea School of Art under William Grant Murray. By 1922 he had developed sufficiently to submit an oil portrait, The Gorseinon Schoolgirl, to a competition at the National Eisteddfod at Ammanford, where it was awarded the first prize by Christopher Williams. Recommended by William Goscombe John, he obtained a Glamorgan County Scholarship to study at the Royal College of Art between 1924-6, at which time he was painted by Ceri Richards, who was one year his junior. Griffiths' lost diploma piece, Preaching in the Mines, was much praised and it is clear that William Rothenstein, Principal of the Royal College, held him in high regard. He narrowly failed to win the Prix de Rome, but was awarded a travelling scholarship which took him to Paris, Venice, and to the British School in Rome in 1927. Before leaving, Griffiths married Winifred May Jones (known as 'Bobby'), a seventeen year-old model at the Royal College, by whom he would have two children, Diana and Rhys Adrian.

The development of Griffiths' career had been reported from the outset by John Davies Williams, editor of the Cambria Daily Leader , who also commissioned drawings for publication in the newspaper. Additional support in Swansea was forthcoming from William Grant Murray and from Winifred Coombe Tennant, who invited him to work at her home. Grant Murray gave him his first one-person exhibition at the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery in November 1928, which was greeted locally with critical acclaim. Alongside drawings and etchings, Griffiths showed portraits and mining subject pictures, including Miners Returning from Work, which was bought by Coombe Tennant.

After his marriage, Griffiths lived in London, where his financial situation rapidly deteriorated, and he drank heavily. He was helped by his friend, the writer Geraint Goodwin, whose portrait he painted and who acquired perhaps Griffiths' most important surviving work, On the Coal Tips, painted c.1930. The evidence of exhibition catalogues indicates that at some time between 1928 and 1932 Griffiths travelled in Flanders.

Griffiths' fortunes revived briefly in 1932, when, with the help of Rothenstein and Dr Thomas Jones, he was awarded some commissions and an exhibition at the Young Wales Association in Mecklenburg Square, London. Probably as a part of attempts to promote him among the London Welsh community, he adopted the Welsh form of his name, Rhys Griffiths. The exhibition, which was hung with the assistance of Evan Walters, attracted favourable press comment and buyers. Among the works shown was a sombre second interpretation of the subject of Colliers Returning from Work, and Testing a Collier's Lamp. Both pictures manifested the biblical resonance which was a characteristic sub-text in the painter's work.

After the exhibition, Griffiths' personal life went once more into decline. His work was last reviewed at a Swansea mixed exhibition in 1935. His marriage broke down and he went to stay for a time with Geraint Goodwin at Dagnall, Buckinghamshire, but left suddenly, apparently without his work, most of which was subsequently lost. Shortly after the war he broke contact with his parents and siblings. He divorced and subsequently married Edith Annie Rose Griffiths, with whom he lived in the 1960s at Herne Bay in Kent. He undertook some graphic work and made simple landscape paintings during these years, but his only notable commission was for a series of Stations of the Cross at St Martin's Church, Haverfordwest.

Archie Griffiths died in hospital in London on 2 April 1971, largely forgotten as a painter, despite his important contribution to the artistic response to the traumatic experience of Welsh mining communities between the two world wars.

Griffiths' son, Rhys Adrian (1928-1990), would make a successful career as a dramatist, especially in radio.

Author

Peter Lord

Sources

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Geraint Goodwin, 'An Artist of Vision - The Work of Rhys Griffiths', in *The Welsh Outlook*, XIX, no.3 (1932), 78-80

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Privately held MS sources and interviews

press reports in the *Cambria Daily Leader*, 1922-1935

NLW Archives: Winifred Coombe Tennant Papers

Glynn Vivian Art Gallery archives

Further reading

Archie Rhys Griffiths (1902-1971), Imaging the Bible in Wales website

Educating us about artist Archie, Wales Online, 30 March 2013

Wikipedia Article: Rhys Adrian

Additional Links

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