

JONES, EZZELINA GWENHWYFAR (1921 - 2012), artist and sculptor

Name: Ezzelina Gwenhwyfar Jones
Date of birth: 1921
Date of death: 2012
Spouse: Elias Llewelyn Jones
Child: Elizabeth Mary Jones
Child: Huw Jones
Parent: Godfrey Hugh Beddoe Williams
Parent: Elizabeth Mary Williams (née Williams)
Gender: Female
Occupation: artist and sculptor
Area of activity: Art and Architecture
Author: Donald Treharne

Ezzelina Jones was born in Pontarddulais on 28 June 1921, the second of the three children of Godfrey Hugh Beddoe Williams, a doubler in the Clayton Tin Works, and his wife Elizabeth Mary Williams. She had two sisters, Elizabeth Jane (Betty) and Rita. In the early years Ezzelina was known in the family as Gwen or Gwenhwyfar. It appears that she was given the unusual name of Ezzelina in memory of Ezzelina Samuel, the daughter of one of Gwen's father's co-workers, who tragically died at the age of 24 in 1919.

Gwen and her sisters had a secure and happy childhood and the family were an integral part of the vitality that was the hallmark of village life at the time. When Gwen was eight this happiness was cruelly shattered by the death of her mother, an experience which was to influence her throughout her life.

At the age of fourteen she left school in Pontarddulais and for a period worked in a shop in Mumbles before going to friends of the family in London. When the Second World War was imminent she returned to Wales. She married Elias Llewelyn Jones from the neighbouring village of Hendy and in 1940 when Gwen was nineteen their daughter Elizabeth Mary (Bet) was born. Elias served in the RAF during the war as a Flight Sergeant in North Africa. When he returned home after the war he secured a post as a clerk in one of the tinworks in Pontarddulais. At the time the locality was a cauldron of industrial activity with its seven tinworks and many coal mines in the district. Gwen remembers being taken at the age of three by her mother with a bowl of 'cawl' for her father's dinner in the Clayton tinworks. There she saw the blazing furnace, the steam and felt the oppressive heat. 'The drama of the scene has stayed with me ever since', she later recalled. Her experiences in the essentially Welsh society around her and the insistent industrial presence were seeping into her subconscious, and these two elements would surface later in her creative work.

When Elias secured a promotion at the tinworks he was transferred to the new Tostre works and the family moved away from Pontarddulais to Llanelli. There, when Gwen was 33 their son Huw was born and Gwen spent the following 12 years caring for her family. Yet within her was the gnawing need to create. She started to experiment with wood carving and joined an evening class on the subject. Her imagination was fired when she realised that she had the ability to create an object of beauty from wood. Her first work was an abstract carving of simplicity but full of mystery in its clean lines. Later she joined an evening art class and using oils as her medium she exhibited her paintings in local art shows. This was followed by years of self-education and joining the art class of the local college. There the Principal noticed her working and suggested that with her skills it would be better to work in three dimensions: 'in the round' was the phrase he used. He gave her a piece of clay to 'try her hand' at sculpture, and it was this clay that led to the release of the creativity hidden within her.

In this period in her life there was an event that would cause her much pain and regret later. She had successfully exhibited her paintings and they were well received, but during a period of emotional turmoil she was to destroy almost all of them and concentrated on sculpture. It was at this time that Gwen started using the name Ezzelina. The Gwen of the past became the Ezzelina who would express her creative ability through the medium of sculpture. Her daughter Beti thought that although painting had given her mother pleasure it was sculpture that 'tapped the very depth of her being'. She researched her new field diligently and took a temporary job for six months in order to finance the purchase of her first kiln. She enrolled on a course in the Extra-mural Department of Swansea University and took tuition and advice from the Art College but declined the offer of a place on a degree course for mature students. Ezzelina was intent on cutting her own furrow in the creative world.

The garage at the side of the house was converted into a studio where her son Huw installed the new kiln. Ezzelina was yearning for the chance to develop the numerous ideas with which she was consumed. She had lived through much of the twentieth century and was anxious to capture its spirit and essence in her creative work, particularly its Welsh aspect. Her creativity took both an abstract and figurative form; in figurative terms she succeeded through her sculpture in personifying a way of life that was disappearing. In Pontarddulais by the 1950s the myriad tinworks had disappeared; the tinworkers which Ezzelina saw with her mother were no longer there but they are immortalised in her sculptures. That which the little girl saw in the Clayton Tinworks is crystallized in her sculpture of a tinworker with a towel around his neck to absorb the sweat caused by the relentless heat from the mills, a thick leather apron and stout boots to protect his body and feet from damage from the incandescent metal plates being rolled by the mills.

By the middle of the 1970s the sculptor was becoming recognized, receiving invitations to exhibit her work which was also accepted by the Art Societies of Swansea and Llanelli. In 1977 she was awarded the Emlyn Roberts Award by the Llanelli Art Society. 1978 provided an opportunity to stage an exhibition in Haverfordwest that was particularly well received by the press.

The 1980s was a period when her career was flourishing with a one person exhibition in the Norwegian Church in Swansea and the Arts Centre at Llantarnam Manor, a joint exhibition with Seren Bell in Oriel Ceri Richards Swansea and an appearance with the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists. The highlight of the decade was the appearance of the bronze head of a collier. Commissioned by the Welsh Miners Museum in Afan Argoed Park in the Afan Valley and cast in a London foundry it was presented to the Museum in 1983. As the decade marched on Ezzelina produced many more sculptures in bronze but was also experimenting with various other styles and media. She was also establishing connections that enabled her to show her work in Manchester in the Henry Donn Gallery and in Bristol in the Patricia Wells Gallery.

The 1990s was a busy period for Ezzelina. 1994 saw an exhibition in Cyfarthfa Castle in Merthyr, significantly entitled: 'My Wales - Fy Nghymru i'. The words were also the title of an exhibition in Saint David's Hall, Cardiff in 1995 and they embody what the sculptor tried to do in her creative idiom. She wanted to create images of the characters and circumstances that existed in her Wales. She wanted to immortalise the history and the people of a country that was changing rapidly and so much being lost. Towards the end of her life she told one newspaper reporter, 'I have recorded in art that which I saw and assimilated of the culture and industry of Wales over a period of ten decades.'

In 1995 also she met the journalist Gwyn Griffiths at her exhibition in the Rhondda Heritage Park and they discussed the history of the Breton onion sellers - the Johnnie Onions or Sioni Winwns. Ezzelina remembered one of them very well, her name was Marie le Goff who had a stall in the market at Llanelli every year selling onions whilst her son-in-law would go around the neighbouring countryside on his bicycle selling them. She remembered speaking in Welsh to Marie le Goff who always wore an overcoat and hat and was surrounded by her onions in the market. Ezzelina made a bronze statue of her and Gwyn Griffiths arranged for it to be shown in the Johnnie Onion Museum in Roscoff, Brittany.

Her last one-person exhibition was held in the Glynn Vivian Museum, Swansea in 1996 and for it she chose the title 'Yesterday and Today'. The occasion provided an opportunity to show the variety of her work that had been over the years a melange of the figurative and historical together with creations of an abstract nature. In the art world at the end of the twentieth century interest in figurative and historical art was waning; Ezzelina, now in her eighties, was aware of this but faced the future with confidence. In her studio she had been experimenting with new ideas and producing sculpture and bowls of an abstract nature. This late period of innovation was cruelly terminated by a disease that eventually extinguished the creative flame within her.

Ezzelina Jones died on 7 November 2012 and her ashes are buried in Rhydgoch Cemetery, Pontarddulais.

Author

Donald Treharne

Sources

Peter W. Jones and Isabel Hitchman, *Post-War to Post-Modern: A Dictionary of Artists in Wales* (Llandysul 2015)
Beti and Huw Jones, 'A Synopsis of the life and work of Ezzelina Jones' (unpublished document)
Family documents and information

Additional Links

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