

VICARI, ANDREW (1932 - 2016), painter

Name: Andrew Vicari
Date of birth: 1932
Date of death: 2016
Parent: Italia Vaccari (née Bertani)
Parent: Vittorio Vaccari
Gender: Male
Occupation: painter
Area of activity: Art and Architecture
Author: Ceri Thomas

Andrew Vicari was born Andrea Antonio Giovanni Vaccari on 20 April 1932, one of five children Italian immigrants from the city of Parma, Vittorio ('Victor') Vaccari, a tobacconist and confectioner, and his wife Italia (née Bertani). His place of birth is usually given as Port Talbot but in reality he was born in Neath, where his parents ran an Italian café-restaurant, a back room of which also served as a place to exhibit his paintings and those of others from the locality such as Will Roberts (1907-2000).

He attended Neath Grammar School and, showing an early aptitude for art, decided to study painting at Swansea School of Art. One of his student contemporaries and friends there was the artist and art lecturer George Little (1927-2017). In 1950, he contributed a painting 'in pastel colours, figures in a sort of fairground' to a student exhibition at the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, Swansea, which Little and fellow art student Archie Williams (1922-1993) had organised. At that time, he was still using his original surname of Vaccari.

He was a stocky, dark haired, impulsive man, prone to exaggeration and obfuscation. He attended the Slade School of Art and, whilst in London, the story goes that he had direct and close contact with Francis Bacon, William Coldstream, **Augustus John** and Lucian Freud. Certainly when he was included in a group show at the Redfern Gallery in 1956, the critic (and Bacon's subsequent biographer) David Sylvester did write that 'at his best ... he somehow produces images of remarkable vibrant quality, rich in poetry. They are pictures of mad fiestas, recalling "The Burial of the Sardine" with their movement and their banners, and pictures of men and women lazing in rich green fields.' Vicari described his painting as 'Romantic realism'. It also had elements of expressionism which linked him to the likes of the English painter John Bratby (1928-1992) whose work was classed as part of 'kitchen sink' realism, a term coined by Sylvester in 1954.

It appears that Vicari spent some time in Italy before returning to London to begin his living as a painter, and a portrait painter in particular. One of his paintings was 'Aneurin Bevan' (c. 1958) which was gifted to the National Library of Wales by the English pianist, band leader and impresario Jack Hylton (1892-1965) in 1961, the year in which Hylton financed a solo show for the Welsh painter near Leicester Square. In 1960, he painted a 'Last Supper' with the former Wales rugby captain Clem Thomas as Jesus, and **Stanley Baker**, Richard Harris and Harry Secombe as Thomas, Judas and Matthew.

In the summer of 1963, he appeared in a short film piece titled '*Andrew Vicari - The Artist at Work*' made by Television Wales and the West. He is shown in front of a large, freely and very rapidly painted mural he titled 'Cyclorama in Wales' which he was in the middle of working on, but what is perhaps most striking is the **Richard Burton** demeanour and style of voice which he had cultivated. By this time he had changed his surname to Vicari. In October of the same year he was given a solo exhibition at University College Cardiff which caught the eye of **Brynmor Anthony**, chair of the Contemporary Art Society for Wales, and the society bought 'Whitsun Procession at Aberdulais' from the show. Another indication of his rising profile in Wales was the donation by BP of his painting 'BP Baglan Bay at Night' (c. 1963) to Amgueddfa Cymru-Museum Wales.

However, his big break came in the mid 1970s when he was appointed as the official painter to the Saudi Arabian government and executed sixty large oil paintings on the epic theme of 'The Triumph of the Bedouin'. In the 1980s, he depicted events in the life of King Faisal. During these years, he became fabulously wealthy and shaved six years off his real age, thereafter claiming to have been born in 1938. He acquired a property in Paris, a penthouse in the Palais Héraclès in Monte Carlo, rented a villa in Cannes once owned by Picasso and had a large studio in Nice. He painted members of the Rainier royal family and went on to produce a series of over two hundred paintings depicting the liberation of Kuwait in the First Gulf War. John Berger, the Marxist art critic, stated that 'Vicari is of sociological interest as an analysis of where career promotion can get you, but certainly not of artistic interest ... I'm not sure that in any other period but the one we are in could a guy have achieved what he has, that money, doing what he does with all those clichés'.

Vicari can be seen as a major Welsh export but he was also a victim of his own success. On the one hand, he often referred to himself praisingly as 'king of painters and painter of kings', a description attributed to Pierre Galante, editor of Paris Match and husband of Olivia de Havilland. On the other, he was damned by The Guardian's art critic Adrian Searle: 'Vicari is not a bad painter, not even the worst painter I have ever encountered. He is just supremely mediocre.' Appreciated primarily in the Middle East and Monaco rather than in England and Wales, he was not well known at home in later years despite occasional media-catching appearances. For example, in 2002, when he had a solo exhibition at the Albany Gallery in Cardiff, he dashed off a good luck painting for the apparently jinxed changing room of the national rugby team in the Wales Millennium Stadium.

He asserted that he was briefly married but his cultivated, public image was that of the rich playboy and bachelor painter. In his final two years, he came full circle by returning to his native south Wales and to his modest financial beginnings. In 2006, his fortune had been valued at over £90 million yet only eight years later he was declared bankrupt. Andrew Vicari died in Morriston Hospital, Swansea, on 3 October 2016.

Author

Ceri Thomas

Sources

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Andrew Vicari, interview with Scott Athorne, 4 August 2002

Peter W Jones and Isabel Hitchman (eds.), *Post-War to Post-Modern* (Llandysul 2015), p. 723

David Buckman, *Artists in Britain since 1945* (Bristol 2006), pp. 1624-5

Further reading

Wikipedia Article: **Andrew Vicari**

Works

'Andrew Vicari, 1938-2016', ArtUK

Sound and Film

'Andrew Vicari - The Artist At Work, ITV Cymru/Wales Archive @ NLW, YouTube

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