

PEMBROKESHIRE, MYSTICAL LAND OF ART

Everyone knows that between the wars English artists flocked to Cornwall, but their wartime and post war devotion to Pembrokeshire remains on the whole a well-kept secret. Both places were, and to a

lesser extent still are, steeped in Celtic mysticism, but Cornwall's association with Arthurian legend has been, ever since the Middle Ages, diluted by international elaboration and reinterpretation, while The Mabinogion has remained very much the property of Wales, and particularly of Dyfed.

Artistic interest in Pembrokeshire really started around the beginning of the 19th century, perhaps because of Napoleon's abortive attempt to invade Fishguard, with the engravings of Charles Norris, but

its heyday came after Cornwall had become so expensive that English artists' migration westward began to look instead towards the extremities of South Wales. The first two significant arrivals were Graham

Sutherland and John Piper. In the 1960s I remember Piper saying to me 'I don't know where Graham found all those twisted roots that so shaped his style. I never saw anything like that'. I suggested it might have something to do with their respective locations, Piper in the North, near Penally Hills, and Sutherland in the South, to draw inspiration from Bosherton Lillyponds.

During the war others came West, notably John Craxton, mostly at the behest of art patron Peter Watson who had a rural retreat in Pembrokeshire, where he entertained so many artists eager to escape the Blitz. While the obvious subject matter of most artists was the Pembrokeshire landscape, this was,

after all, the era of the so-called Neo-Romantics, so that for all of them equally important was what lay beyond the scene: the history and romance of the standing stones, the psychological closeness of roots literal as well as mystical to the *Matter of Wales*.

And is this mystical tradition still flourishing? Well not so intensely as it was. But something so deeply embedded in the nature of the land could not disappear completely, and recently it has come to a new flowering, I suspect somehow connected with the immense revival of the Welsh language and the

promotion of the principality to autonomy. Prominent in the art of this quiet revolution is Rose Rose. She is very conscious of The Mabinogion and its body of legend, offering a key to the inner life of the country.

Superficially her work is quite abstract. But look deeper, and you find you are gazing into the soul of Wales.

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