

Jewish artists in Wales: case study, Josef Herman

Teachers' Notes

In this lesson, students explore the Jewish refugee artist Josef Herman, who lived in Ystradgynlais in the Swansea valley for eleven years, from 1944-1954. Students are invited to explore Herman's artwork and create pieces of their own in his style. This lesson can be used as a stand-alone lesson or be incorporated into a GCSE Art artist study scheme of work.

Further sources of information on Josef Herman can be found here:

<http://josefhermanfoundation.org>

Curriculum links

Key Stage 4

Art and design, History

Lesson Plan

LEARNING AIMS

- To develop an understanding of Josef Herman's artistic style and how this might relate to his experiences.
- To explore how a sense of place and community can influence artistic works.
- To be able to explore a stimulus with creativity and experiment with new techniques.

EQUIPMENT REQUIRED

- Copies of student worksheet (1 per student).
- Transcript of the TATE video: Josef Herman, Sketches of Wales | Animating the Archives (see link for the video below).¹
- Printed / projected images in **colour**:
 - a) [Miners Singing by Josef Herman](#).²
 - b) [Two Miners by Josef Herman](#).³
- Art materials (e.g., paper, paints, pencils etc.).

STARTER

To introduce the work of Josef Herman, watch the TATE video: [Josef Herman, Sketches of Wales | Animating the Archives](#).

Have the students heard of Herman before? Ask for their initial responses to his work.

DEVELOPMENT

Read through the student handout and share the images of Josef Herman's works.

In small groups discuss the following questions:

- a) How would you describe Josef Herman's **style**?
- b) Who are the **subjects** of Herman's work and how are they portrayed?

Feedback to the whole class and ask the students to note down their answers on the handout. Encourage the use of the **key words**: composition, medium, colour, shape, form, texture and tone in their descriptions.

¹ We added the video clip's transcript, which you may choose to share with your students if you think it would be helpful. The transcript is in English and Welsh whilst the clip is in English only.

² Josef Herman, *Miners Singing*, oil on board, plaster ground, Amgueddfa Cymru — National Museum Wales <<https://museum.wales/collections/online/object/f10742b6-625a-3491-91d1-67d7d8537523/Miners-singing/>> [accessed 17 February 2022].

³ Josef Herman, *Two Miners*, lithograph on paper, Amgueddfa Cymru — National Museum Wales <<https://museum.wales/collections/online/object/14658b5b-9d50-3b4f-8005-cf038c18fbfd/Two-Miners/?index=10>> [accessed 25 February 2022].

MAIN

Ask the group to identify an individual or group of people from their own community that they could paint or draw in Herman's style e.g., a shop owner, a rugby player, a farmer, a football team, a Mountain Rescue member, a nurse...

Ask the group to consider what it is about that individual or group that they would particularly like to capture, e.g., their friendliness, their hard-working attitude, their passion, their skill, etc., and to decide how they might select colours, shapes, texture, tones, etc. in order to achieve this.

They can then begin sketching some ideas, perhaps using photographs as starting points and referring back to Josef Herman's examples for reference. These pieces could be developed over several lessons if time allows.

PLENARY

Ask the group to reflect on the pieces they have created and their responses to Josef Herman's art by asking the following questions:

- Why do you think the miners in Ystradgynlais were so important to Josef Herman? (Prompt them to think about the community he came from in Poland and his experience as a Jewish refugee)
- How can art help develop a sense of community?
- Why is artistic expression (something which was often not allowed under the Nazi regime) so important?

Transcript

Video: [Josef Herman, Sketches of Wales | Animating the Archives](#)

Ceri Thomas – Trustee, Josef Herman Art Foundation Cymru.

David Herman – son.

Carole Hopkin – family friend.

Betty Rae Watkins – Trustee, Josef Herman Art Foundation Cymru.

Ceri Thomas: Josef Herman was born in 1911 in Warsaw, Poland, to a Jewish family.

David Herman: My father left Poland in the late 1930s, 1938. His mother saw him off at the railway station and said, 'never come back', meaning it was just too dangerous already in Poland then. He went via Belgium and France. He managed to come to Britain in 1940 during the Second World War, so he is primarily to be thought of as a Jewish refugee artist.

Ceri Thomas: Sadly, in 1942 he gets that fateful letter from the Red Cross saying that all his family have been exterminated in the concentration camps, so he becomes a survivor artist.

David Herman: In 1944, in the summer of 1944, my father came to Wales for the first time. It made an enormous impact on him. It was a moment that he wrote about on a number of occasions and in his memoirs *Related Twilights* he wrote about this visit to the mining village, Ystradgynlais, in South, South Wales.

'Under the bridge, out of a cold shadow, trickled a pool of water which got thinner and thinner as it ran on amidst the dry stones and glittering pebbles. Then unexpectedly, as though from nowhere, a group of miners stepped onto the bridge. For a split second, their heads appeared against the full body of the sun. The whole image was not unlike an icon depicting the saints with their halos. This image of the miners on the bridge against that glowing sky mystified me for years with its mixture of sadness and grandeur and it became the source of my work.'

You get the image of the Byzantine icon, you get the mixture of the grandeur and the sadness, which is really at the centre of his art for the rest of his life from that moment on. It's this sense of the grandeur of the working man as in a whole socialist political tradition going back for 100 years, but it's also the sadness of this hard, relentless working life.

Ceri Thomas: The motif of the father as cobbler, a man who used his hands in this dignified way to make things, obviously imprinted itself significantly on the young Josef and really that was his leitmotif for the rest of his life really, was the dignity of manual labour, particularly of the male but not exclusively, but once he comes to Wales, that manifests itself almost magically for him as the South Wales coal miner.

I think the impact of Ystradgynlais on Josef Herman was, was probably the greatest one in his whole career and he lived to almost 90.

David Herman: He had grown up in a very close-knit community, a working-class and very poor community in Poland.

Carole Hopkin: And there was real poverty in Ystradgynlais at that time. You know, it was '30s, '40s, all the way up through the '50s, there was a lot of dire poverty, which my mother remembers; children coming to school without having had breakfast and, you know, coming in summer clothes where they had no winter clothes, and there was a lot of deprivation, but people were...it was a community.

Betty Rae Watkins: The people were very politically aware, lots of miners that were communists and socialists and members of the Labour Party, so it was a very strong political bias in the area and he, he shared that with the people of the, of the village.

Ceri Thomas: The story goes that within a week or two of arriving, he had a nickname. He was 'Joe Bach' which in Welsh is lovely because 'Bach' doesn't just mean 'Small Josef' because he was, you know, physically short, but it also means 'Dear'.

David Herman: He felt at home immediately and for a refugee, feeling at home, finding a new home is a tremendous thing in their life.

Betty Rae Watkins: He wanted to absorb everything in the village from early in the morning to late at night.

David Herman: He would be up at four in the morning, every morning, sketching then painting, and the miners on their way to the mines, they would walk past his studio, they would see the light on and they knew that he was a hard-working artist and he had a tremendous rapport with these men, which he found enormously emotional and moving.

Ceri Thomas: You know, there was an affinity when he came to Ystradgynlais: They were essentially a manual labour town, a village, essentially based on coal, but again were desperately interested in, in culture.

Betty Rae Watkins: There were lots of people who, who were interested in him because he could bring something to them because they were creative people and they had this urge to create, so they bonded as an interest, an interest in culture and he brought the European dimension to them.

Ceri Thomas: One of the kind of key buildings in Ystradgynlais is the building I'm sat in now which is the Miners' Welfare Hall, and it was only ten years old then. It was built in 1934. Now, across South Wales there were Miners' Welfare Halls and these were built out of the pennies from the wages of the miners given every week and they were essentially self-improvement, cultural community centres, so at the hub of Ystradgynlais, you had this amazing place which would debate current politics, philosophy, the miners were self-read. They'd have a library, they were exceptional. There was this aspirational quality that was here and which he had.

Carole Hopkin: When we talked about Ystradgynlais, as he pronounced it, in the studio, yes, his eyes would always fill up with tears and he was, he was still here, really. He carried Ystradgynlais with him, even though he left.

David Herman: For an artist who is, for whom work is his life to find a new subject matter and to find a new set of colours and techniques that really work for him as an artist, to find a new voice as an artist, to do that, is always going to make that, the time and place where you achieve that tremendously important and it remained important to him all his life.