

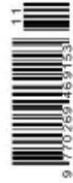
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POETIC VISION

ON THE EVE OF TWO MAJOR EXHIBITIONS OF **DAVID JONES'S** WATERCOLOURS, **JAMES RUSSELL** CELEBRATES THE ARTIST-POET'S UNIQUE TAKE ON THE MEDIUM

David Jones was that rare thing: an artist-poet who was equally skilled in both disciplines, producing paintings filled with poetic rhythms and verse rich in visual imagery. To literary people, such as his friend and publisher TS Eliot, he was one of the most important poets to emerge from The Great War; his full-length verse drama *In Parenthesis* was a modernist classic. But he was a visual artist first and foremost – a watercolourist whose work is quite unlike anyone else's.

Born in Brockley, Kent in 1895, the youngest of three children, Jones enjoyed a happy and stable childhood. His father, a Welsh non-conformist, worked as a printer on the *Christian Herald*, and instilled in him a deep sense of

connection to Welsh history and culture. From his mother, who had been raised in bustling Rotherhithe, he inherited a love of the sea and ships, and a talent for drawing. Both parents believed strongly in the value of culture and encouraged their artistic son despite their fears for his financial future; so precocious was he that by the age of 14 he was enrolled at the Camberwell School of Art.

Then came the Great War – his 'parenthesis'. From 1915 to 1918 Jones served on the Western Front as an infantry soldier, refusing to put in for a commission because he loved the camaraderie of the ranks, and surviving notably bloody battles – the Somme, Ypres and Passchendaele. The full effects of this experience would emerge only slowly. >

ABOVE David Jones, *The Table Top*, 1928, watercolour and pencil on paper, 45.4x57.8cm



GIORGIO DE CHIRICO, "Landscape with Trees and Buildings" (1911). Oil on canvas. The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL. © The Art Institute of Chicago. All rights reserved.

More immediately, friendship with a Catholic chaplain set him on the road to conversion. By 1922 he was living with the artist Eric Gill and his family in the East Sussex village of Ditchling, 13 years his senior, Gill was, like Jones, a Roman Catholic and a believer in the union of art, life and religion.

Although Jones served a kind of apprenticeship in Gill's printmaking workshop, he took his cues as a painter from other sources. Early on he began tinting his drawings with watercolour and, by the late 1920s, he had become a master of this difficult medium. In this he was not alone. The cross-hatching in his early work suggests the influence of Paul Nash, a passionate advocate of the medium who inspired Eric Ravillous and Edward Bawden.

Jones's breakthrough as a painter occurred, appropriately enough, in the land of his fathers. In 1924, Gill abandoned Ditchling and dragged his family and a menagerie of animals to a disused monastery in Capel-y-Ffin, Wales, in a valley dominated by the towering peak of Y Twmpa.

As an admirer of Samuel Palmer, Jones understood the significance of place, and Capel became to him what Shoreham was to Palmer: the inspiration for a dazzling creative burst. In paintings like *Capel-y-Ffin*, he adopted a simplified style reminiscent of Paul Cézanne or John Nash, introducing motifs that were personally significant. Trees are a constant feature of his work, with stumps and felled branches perhaps reminding us of his experiences on the Western Front, while the hut or shrine is a frequent visitor.

One of the qualities that made Jones so different from his contemporaries was his lifelong fascination with Welsh and Arthurian myth and legend, an interest cultivated in childhood. The wild ponies grazing around Capel were, to his vivid historical imagination, perhaps related to the horses released in Wales by Arthur's knights.

Other striking features of *Capel-y-Ffin* are the sinuous lines, a constant of Jones's work through the early part of his career, and the palette, which is unusually strong for him but, in common with much of his work of the 1920s, lacking in greens. Indeed, this scene looks more like the south of France than it does Wales, reflecting a preference for landscape stripped to bare essentials that he shared with his innovative contemporaries.

There are clear parallels with Ben Nicholson in his 1928 painting *Table Top*, from the skewed perspective to the wiry lines and the lack of concern for three-dimensional form. The palette once again is generally subdued, but there is a restless energy in his portrayal of the foliage; a feverish quality that would increasingly come to define his work as his mental condition deteriorated in the 1930s. Although never a naturalistic painter, he had in those years at Capel controlled the exuberance of his technique so that it enhances our experience of the places he depicted. Thereafter he moved quite quickly away from traditional representation into a visionary world. In his increasing disregard for solid forms he grew closer in spirit to Nicholson's first wife Winifred, who, as a Christian Scientist, saw reality as a great illusion.

In retrospect, 1928 was something of a watershed year for David Jones the painter. In April he travelled with the Gills to the foothills of the French Pyrenees, journeying via Paris and Chartres. In the south of France his palette brightened considerably and he painted landscapes with a

lyrical freedom, allowing the influence of André Derain and Henri Matisse to come to the fore. A visit to Lourdes proved disappointing in the spiritual sense, the place so overwhelmed with knick-knackery that he likened it to Woolworths, but as an artist he nevertheless responded with a painting entitled simply *Lourdes*. It is an unusual work. While the surrounding landscape is painted with Jones's habitual freedom, the gothic architecture of the Upper Basilica is drawn in precise detail.

Perhaps the aim was to offer this careful drawing as a manifestation of spiritual intensity, but the exaggerated arches and spires instead suggest an antique illustration of some fabled city.

On his return to Britain, David Jones began work on his epic Great War poem, *In Parenthesis*, while continuing to paint with increasing freedom – or, perhaps, under increasing pressure to experiment. In the late 1920s there was a widespread feeling that British artists were being left behind by their colleagues in mainland Europe, and one can sense from 1929 onwards that Jones was pushing himself harder and harder. He had always painted portraits and continued to do so, capturing a likeness of Eric Gill in



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“SOME ARTISTS FIND A FORMULA AND STICK WITH IT, BUT NOT SO DAVID JONES... HE WAS ONE OF THE GREAT INNOVATORS OF 20TH-CENTURY PAINTING”

ABOVE David Jones, *The Artist's Worktable*, 1929, watercolour and pencil on paper, 62.3x50.2cm
OPPOSITE PAGE David Jones, *Capel-y-Ffin*, 1926-'27, watercolour on paper, 55x37cm



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS' SOCIETY OF BRISTOL AND THE ARTISTS' SOCIETY OF BRISTOL

flowing lines and rubbed smudges of pigment. Increasingly, however, his sitters were becoming insubstantial, ghostly forms in rooms that threatened to fade into nothingness.

Apparently less able (or willing) to work outside, he took one of Matisse's favourite types of composition, the landscape viewed through a window, and took it in a new direction, dissolving walls and window frames so that interior and exterior blend into one and a vase of flowers seems almost to float on the waves beyond the window. Abandoning pencil and the wiry line work that had held earlier paintings together, he adopted loose, broken strokes, smudges and scribbles. His compositions became increasingly challenging, with every inch of the paper filled with forms that are reduced to outlines and dabs or blotches of colour. Whether this technique was deliberate or a symptom of mental disturbance is difficult to say. In 1932 Jones suffered a severe breakdown, and, referring to it in later life, he wrote, "I was conscious for some long time before it came that I was straining every nerve to do something more than I had power to do."

He recovered gradually, and with the successful publication of *In Parenthesis* in 1937 returned to painting. Like his poetry, the works he produced during World War Two require time and effort to unravel, so dense are they with incident and allusion. Often combining Arthurian legend, his own experiences of the previous war and his

unfulfilled love for Gill's daughter Petra, the paintings reward the patient viewer with poetic rhythms and passages of delicate beauty.

David Jones lived until 1974, devoting most of his creative energy in the latter part of his life to writing, while pausing to paint memorable watercolours of trees and chaises. While his painting style continued to contrast loose brushwork with delicate drawing, he also produced a lengthy series of painted panels decorated with beautiful Latin text that resemble medieval manuscript pages. Even towards the end of his life, he was bringing the deep past into the present to create something beautiful and new. Some artists find a formula and stick with it, but not so David Jones. His choice of watercolour as a medium means that his work must be carefully stored and displayed only rarely, but we should not equate visibility with stature. Jones was one of the great innovators of 20th-century British painting, an inspiration to younger artists of his time and, in his melting architecture and smudge-filled air, a precursor of the Neo-Romantics.

David Jones: Vision and Memory runs from 24 October to 21 February 2016 at Pallant House Gallery, Chichester. *The Animals of David Jones* runs from 24 October to 6 March 2016 at Ditchling Museum of Art and Craft, Sussex. James Russell's next book, *The Lost Watercolours of Edward Bawden*, will be published by The Mainstone Press. www.themainstonepress.com

ABOVE David Jones, *Lourdes*, 1928, watercolour on paper, 48x61cm