

## Josef Herman's *Miners* Mural panels 1951 Gwenllian Beynon



**Fig 1 Image of Herman (1951) *Miners***

I first saw the Josef Herman festival of Britain mural called *Miners* (1950-51) in 2017 in the then newly refurbished Glynn Vivian Art Gallery. It was displayed in ambient lighting that allowed the miners to glow from the dark painting filling the gallery space, this way of exhibiting the painting evoked a feeling of almost being able to step into the painting to join the larger-than-life miners resting above ground after their hard labour in the mines.



**Fig. 2 Image of Pupils at  
Glynn Vivian Gallery**

The focus of the painting is on five crouching miners and one standing, the light flickers on some faces and glimpses of colour flash from their clothing the 'mauve scarf and the way they wear it' (Herman 1975 p. 03), the hands of the miners are enlarged implying hard labour and one can almost imagine their dryness, cracks, scars and the engrained dirt of the coal miner's labour. As a child brought up in a south Wales coal mining town, I remember the freshly showered coalminers after a day's labour still having the remains of coal on their faces, clothes and hands, their eyes often looked as if they wore make up with the blackness of the coal outlining their eyes and black scarring from cuts filled with coal adorned their hands and faces. Though Herman doesn't give us this information directly there is an implication, an 'expressionist vision' (Wakelin 2018) of these in the painting, Herman like my childhood observations, knew of these men's labour he says, "the miner is the man of Ystradgynlais...and is the walking monument to labour" (Herman 1975 p102). The miners here appear to be resting after hard labour, the friendship of the miners is evident in this mural, Herman (1975 p.103) later presents from his diary observations of the miners, they 'listen with heavy concentration and share feelings and laughter and tears". Intriguingly Herman painted one miner in each panel, and I wonder if this was for ease of working as well as of course for ease of transportation, I'm sure Herman would have documented this in one of his many journals or letters.

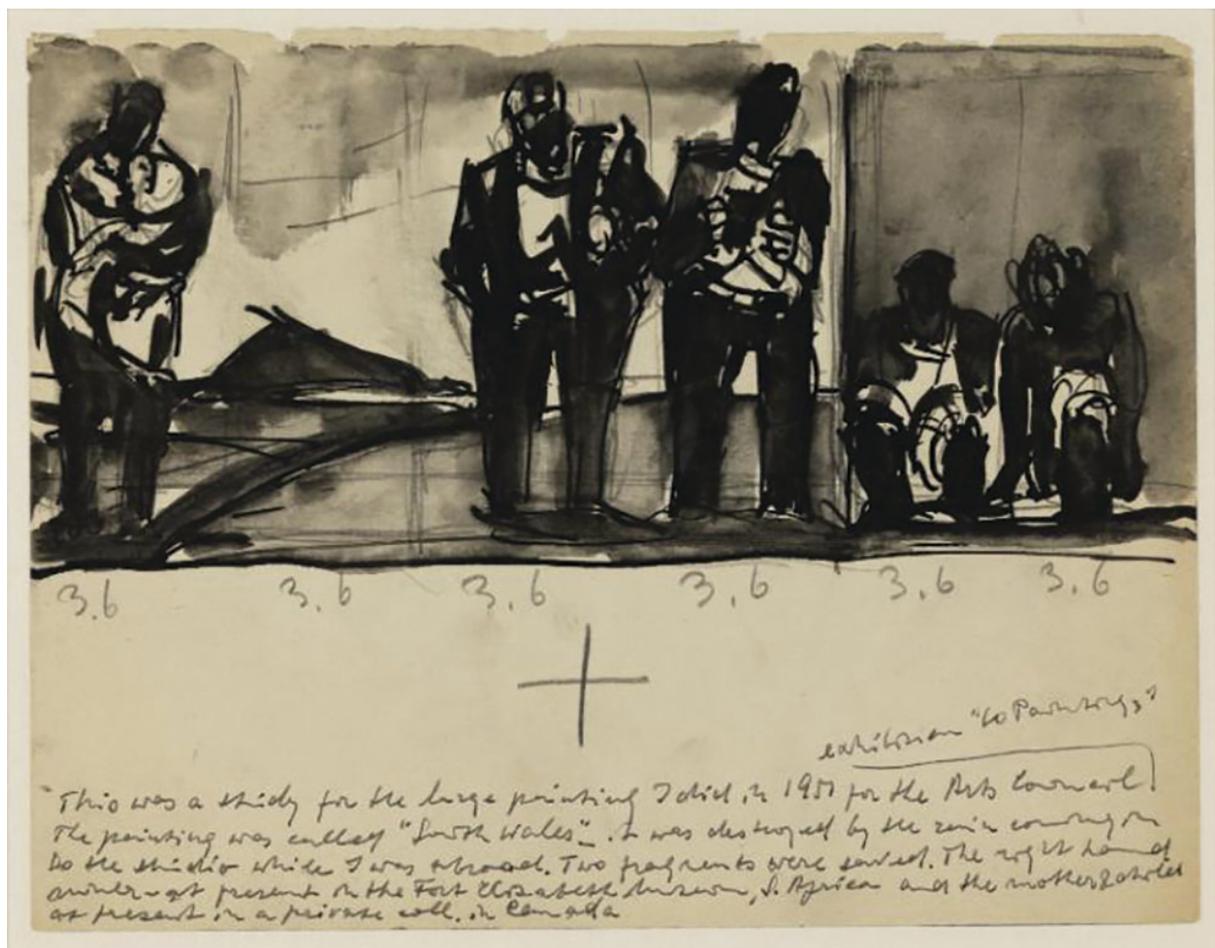
Herman said of this work "I think it is one of my key pictures and the most important one I did in Wales." (Glynn Vivian archive nd.). The *Miners* painting is now held in the Glynn Vivian's permanent collection.

The *Miners* mural was commissioned by the Arts Council for the Minerals of the Island Pavilion at the festival of Britain that was held in the summer of 1951, six years after the end of the Second World War, and according to the V&A (nd.) 'the Festival provided light-relief to 8.5 million people who visited the main Festival site on London's South Bank'.



**Fig 3** Herman, J. (1950). 'Study for South Wales 1951 (1950) Tate Collection & Page of Notes for the 1951 Mural for the Festival of Britain.'

Herman was also commissioned by the Arts Council to paint a second painting for the Festival of Britain this was called *South Wales* this was also a very large oil painting on board measuring 61½ inches x 142½ inches (156 x 360cm) In the photograph attributed to Llew E Morgan, we see Herman working in his studio in Ystradgynlais, behind him are many paintings and on the easel is the *South Wales* painting as well as a smaller study for this painting on the floor. This painting was worked on in the same period as the *Miners* mural and the two crouching miners on the right of the painting are painted in a very similar manner to the two central miners in the *Miners* mural, forming a direct connection, in my opinion, of the two paintings. The *South Wales* Painting was exhibited at the Festival of Britain's exhibition *60 Paintings for '51*. (Fulltable.com. 2021) according to Philip James in the foreword to the catalogue 'the paintings will be exhibited in London and the Provinces' Herman's *South Wales* Painting was probably exhibited at the "Roland, Browse and Delblanco, [sic] London, exhibition with William Nicholson" (Flowers Gallery nd.).



**Fig 4.** Herman, (c.1951) *Study for 'South Wales'* (Notes from a Welsh Diary)

Interestingly in relation to the *South Wales* painting Herman has written on a preparatory drawing *Study for South Wales (Notes from a Welsh Diary)* (c.1951) now in the Tate Archive (nd.)

This was a study for the large painting I did in 1951 for the Arts Council Exhibition '60 Paintings'. The painting was called 'South Wales'. It was destroyed by the rain coming into the studio while I was abroad. Two fragments were saved. The right hand Miner, at present in the Port Elizabeth Museum, S.Africa and the 'Mother and Child' at present in a private coll[ection] in Canada.



**Fig 5** Herman in the studio attributed to Llew E Morgan (c.1950-51)

David Bell who in 1951 became curator of the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, was a friend and mentor to Herman. Whilst Assistant Director of the Welsh Committee of the Arts Council (Biography.wales. 2021) Bell visited Herman at his studio in Ystradgynlais during the autumn of 1950 while he was painting the panels and offered his advice on the piece. David Bell, who championed the artist through his role at the Arts Council for Wales helped Herman to gain recognition, giving him opportunities to exhibit including these paintings at the Festival of Britain (JHAFc- 1. 2021).

The *Miners* mural was exhibited several times in the years following the Festival of Britain until it found a permanent home at the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery. Herman engaged with Swansea College of Art for the preparation of the boards with hessian and gesso for Mural 'for this laborious undertaking decided to engage the help of several willing students from Swansea School of Art' (Herman, N. 1996 p.104), in 1992 Herman was awarded a 'Silver Medal in Cardiff for Services to Arts' (British Museum nd.) the Mural had been stored in a "dismantled state in the Swansea School of Art" and before being brought out and put "on view in Cardiff students

from Swansea School of Art had performed a splendid job of cleaning and minor restoration. After four decades, it showed no sign of wear and tear” (Herman N. 1996 p.105) Herman was delighted by this and proudly met and with the students who had prepared the Mural for this exhibition. The event of the presentation of the Silver Medal in Cardiff was a lavish affair and ‘Friends and admirers came together from all corners of Wales. Miners from Ystradgynlais had travelled up to meet Joe-bach’ (Herman N. 1996) (As he was affectionately called). This event is evidence of Herman’s continued importance as an artist in Wales and to Ystradgynlais long after he had left in 1955.

The Josef Herman Art Foundation Cymru based in Ystradgynlais have recently produced an app, a booklet, and a trail in Ystradgynlais with a focus on the areas that were important to Herman’s life and art and that were used by the prolific artist in many hundreds of sketches and numerous paintings when he lived there and after he left till his death in 2000. The project launched this summer, and the story of the Festival of Britain painting is included in this heritage trail.

To close this article, I’ll include a short introduction to Josef Herman. He was born in Poland in 1911 and is recognised for his paintings of the Welsh miners from the Swansea Valley. Herman left Poland in 1938 and his mother told him at the train station, as he left ‘never come back’, she evidently had some pre second world war insight. Herman never returned to Poland and tragically lost all his family in the ghettos of Poland, news of which he received via the Red Cross whilst living in Glasgow between 1940 and 1944.

In 1944 Herman arrived in Ystradgynlais with his first wife Catriona MacLeod for a short holiday as he wanted to explore the life of a working community, Herman said: “I stayed here because I found all I required. I arrived here a stranger for a fortnight; the fortnight became 11 years.” He became a big part of the local community where he was fondly nicknamed ‘Joe Bach’ (JHAFC- 2. 2021).

In the 1940s Catriona and Herman built a studio and home called ‘Catria’ in what had previously been a pop factory and it was in this studio that Herman painted the *Miners* and the *South Wales* paintings. (JHAFC- 1. 2021)

The Herman Foundation was established in 2002 and has a collection of Josef Herman original drawings, paintings and prints many (JHAFC- 2. 2021) and was supported by Nini Herman (Herman’s second wife) until her death and Herman’s family and estate. I have worked with the Herman Foundation as an artist and now as a trustee and it was great to take a group of school pupils to see and respond creatively to the *Miners* panels mural at the Glynn Vivian in 2017.

May 2021 marked 70 years from when the painting was displayed for the first time at the Festival of Britain. And probably in a non-pandemic world the Josef Herman Art Foundation Cymru would have organised a commemorative public event to mark this occasion.

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## Image Refs

**Fig. 1** Herman, J. (1951) *Miners*. [Oil on board] Glynn Vivian Art Gallery Collection. Used by permission of © The estate of Josef Herman.

**Fig. 2** Beynon, G. (2017) *School pupils in Gallery Josef Herman School Project 2017*. Peersonal Collection.

**Fig 3** Herman, J. (1950). 'Study for South Wales 1951 (1950) Tate Collection & Page of Notes for the 1951 Mural for the Festival of Britain.' From Herman J.(1988) *Notes*

*from a Welsh Diary* London: Free Association Books (Page 32 A & B) Used by permission of © The estate of Josef Herman.

**Fig 4.** Herman, J. (c.1951) *Study for 'South Wales' (Notes from a Welsh Diary)* [online] Available at

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/archive/items/tga-835-106/herman-study-for-south-wales-notes-from-a-welsh-diary> (Accessed July 2021) Used by permission of © The estate of Josef Herman.

**Fig. 5** attributed to Llew E Morgan (c.1950-51) *Herman in the studio*. Private Collection. Used by permission of ©Llew E. Morgan Estate