Pallant House Gallery

PRESS RELEASE

Alfred Wallis: An Artists' Artist
21 November 2026 – 2 May 2027



Alfred Wallis, *Porthleven*, circa 1928, Oil and pencil on card, Private collection

'He didn't know how much we all learnt from him. He had a magical sense of reality, colour, and tone, which he did so simply and so truthfully, and which inspired us all.'
- Barbara Hepworth

Pallant House Gallery is delighted to present *Alfred Wallis: An Artists' Artist*, an exhibition that explores the extraordinary impact of fisherman-turned-painter Alfred Wallis (1855-1942) on the development of Modern British art.

Curated by James Scott, the exhibition will present works by one of the most intriguing and best-loved figures of British art alongside works by some of the most recognisable names in Modern British art. Born in Devon in 1855, Wallis spent most of his lifetime in Cornwall, first working as a fisherman, and then as a rag-and-bone man and marine storekeeper. Aged 70,

he started painting, creating bold depictions of his former life as a fisherman and mariner in Cornwall. With no formal artistic training, Wallis worked independently from any art circle or movement. When Ben Nicholson and Christopher Wood came across him in St Ives in the late 1920s, they were immediately captivated by what they saw.

Wallis's works were admired and collected by many of the most significant figures in Modern British art, including Wilhelmina Barns-Graham, Barbara Hepworth, Peter Lanyon, Margaret Mellis, Ben and Winifred Nicholson, Adrian Stokes, John Wells, Christopher Wood and many others. *Alfred Wallis: An Artists' Artist* will showcase paintings by Wallis once owned by these artists set alongside examples of contemporary works by them. A highlight will be the painting *Boats at Quayside* (n.d.) with the lower half of the canvas attributed to Wallis and the upper to Wood, revealing their close friendship and a shared vision. The exhibition will explore why so many artists were compelled to acquire Wallis's paintings and will demonstrate his lasting influence on modernist approaches to perspective, form, colour, and composition, while also affirming how his work remained ultimately inimitable.

Through his subsequent friendships with artists like Ben Nicholson, who acquired many of Wallis's paintings and introduced his work to collectors and influential artworld figures in London, Wallis became known for the originality of his artistic vision, with abstract qualities which modern artists recognised as having affinities with their own. His paintings are marked by their radical simplification of form, flattened perspective and limited colour palette. Throughout his work, Wallis remained devoted to the subjects he knew best: the harbours, fishing vessels, seascapes and coastal views of St Ives and the surrounding Cornish coastline, seen in works such as *Boats Off St Ives* (n.d.) and *The Schooner the Beata, Penzance, Mount's Bay and Newlyn Harbour* (n.d.). His intriguingly free approach to perspective presents scenes as though viewed from above, compressing distant landmarks and objects into a single composition, transforming ships into silhouetted forms on the sea, and manipulating scale to evoke the experience of memory rather than direct observation.

Following the death of his beloved wife, Susan, Alfred Wallis turned to painting as a means of overcoming loneliness. He painted primarily on found materials, using discarded pieces of board, packaging, and household items. From this intensely personal beginning emerged a body of work that saw his small cottage in St Ives become filled with extraordinary creations, produced not for exhibition or monetary gain but out of artistic conviction and catharsis.

Simon Martin, Director of Pallant House Gallery said: 'Alfred Wallis showed British artists that to be modern and authentic, they did not need to emulate the latest avant-garde developments in Paris: for a retired Cornish fisherman painting from memory on scraps of cardboard could quite independently arrive at entirely fresh and unique visual ideas. This was a lesson that was to profoundly inform the development of British abstraction.'

The exhibition is curated by James Scott, an orthopaedic surgeon whose work on the value of the arts in healthcare settings is internationally recognised. He was the Founding Chairman of the Arts Project at the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital in London when it

opened in 1993, which has been responsible for placing more than 1,500 works of art in the hospital. Scott described this work in *The Healing Arts* (Unicorn Publishing, 2019). He has written *The Sculpture of Kenneth Armitage* (Lund Humphries, 2016) and *The Women who Shaped Modern Art in Britain* (Unicorn Publishing, 2021).

Alongside *Alfred Wallis: An Artists' Artist*, Pallant House Gallery will present *Barbara Hepworth and Greece*, an exhibition exploring how the sites, colours, and light of Greece inspired a renewal in Hepworth's practice at the height of her international acclaim. *Howl*, a site-specific commission by Ro Robertson will also open in the Gallery's historic staircase in early October, uniting mural and suspended sculpture. Together, these three artists share a profound connection with St Ives, Cornwall, with its surrounding landscapes and coastlines a constant source of inspiration. Ro Robertson's current Porthmeor studio there is just steps away from the former homes of both Wallis and Hepworth.

***Alfred Wallis: An Artists' Artist* runs from 21 November 2026 to 2 May 2027 and is accompanied by an illustrated publication of the same title, published by Pallant House Gallery (November 2026) and distributed by Yale University Press. The exhibition will subsequently be shown at Penlee House Gallery and Museum, Penzance from 15 May to 9 October 2027.**

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NOTES TO EDITORS

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Accompanying Publication
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About Pallant House Gallery
Pallant House Gallery in Chichester is a leading UK museum that stimulates new ways of thinking about British art from 1900 to now. As well as an original and critically-acclaimed exhibition programme and a public programme with inclusion at its heart, the Gallery houses one of the best collections of Modern British art in the country - all within the distinctive setting of an 18th century townhouse and a 21st century gallery.
pallant.org.uk

Visiting the Gallery

Ticketing
Visitors are encouraged to pre-book tickets, which include full access to the house and seasonal exhibition programme. Please visit pallant.org.uk to book tickets.

Opening Hours

Tuesday – Saturday: 10am–5pm
Sunday/Bank Holidays: 10am–4pm
Monday: Closed

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