

## Jewish Artists in Wales: Josef Herman

### INFORMATION SHEET AND ACTIVITIES FOR LEARNERS

#### 1. Information about Josef Herman and his connection to Wales

##### Who was Josef Herman?

Josef Herman (1911–2000) was a realist artist who was known for his sketches and paintings of working people. He was born in Warsaw, Poland, in 1911. He was one of several Jewish artists who fled Eastern Europe to escape Nazi persecution. In 1938, he became a refugee and travelled to Britain. In 1942, he discovered that his entire family had been murdered in the Holocaust.

##### What is his connection to Wales?

In 1944, Herman came to Ystradgynlais in the Swansea Valley. His visit was initially for a holiday, but he ended up staying for eleven years. He was quoted as saying, “I stayed here because I found all I required. I arrived here a stranger for a fortnight; the fortnight became 11 years.” He became an important part of the local community where he was fondly nicknamed ‘Joe Bach’. Herman was inspired by the strong sense of community in the town and the people of Ystradgynlais, particularly the miners, appeared in his artworks.

#### 2. Examples of Josef Herman’s work



[Miners Singing](#) by Josef Herman (1911-2000).

©The artist's estate/Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales.



*[Two Miners](#) by Josef Herman (1911-2000).*

©The artist's estate/Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales.

### 3. Activities

#### ACTIVITY 1

a) Read the information about Josef Herman and his connection to Wales and watch a video produced the TATE: [Josef Herman, Sketches of Wales | Animating the Archives](#).

#### Oral History transcript:

Ceri Thomas – Trustee, Josef Herman Art Foundation Cymru.

David Herman – son.

Carole Hopkin – a 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.*

**b)** Consider and discuss as a class:

- Who was Josef Herman? Have you heard about him and his work before?
- What are your initial thoughts about his work?
- What impact did Ystradgynlais have on Josef Herman?
- Why do you think the miners in Ystradgynlais were so important to Josef Herman?
- How can art help develop a sense of community?
- Why is artistic expression, which was often not allowed under the Nazi regime, so important?

## ACTIVITY 2

**a)** Look at two of Josef Herman’s paintings: ['Miners Singing'](#) and ['Two Miners'](#).

**b)** Consider and discuss in small groups the following questions:

- How would you describe Josef Herman’s **style**?

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- Who are the **subjects** of Herman’s work and how are they portrayed?

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**c)** Note down your answers and communicate the main discussion points to the whole class. Incorporate the following **keywords** in your descriptions: Composition, medium, colour, shape, form, texture, and tone.

## ACTIVITY 3

**a)** Identify an individual or group of people from your community whom you 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, or a nurse.

**b) Consider:**

- What is it about that individual or group that you would particularly like to capture, e.g., their friendliness, their hard-working attitude, their passion, or their skill?
- What colours, shapes, textures, tones, etc. would you use to achieve this?

**c) Create a drawing or a painting of your chosen subject(s), using Josef Herman's examples as a style reference.**

**ACTIVITY 4**

Reflect on the artwork created by discussing, in pairs or small groups, the following questions:

- What has influenced their choice of subject (individual or group of individuals) and technique (colours, shapes, textures, and tones)?
- What do you wish to convey with your artwork?