

## **George Wyllie RSA**

### **RSA Obituary by Jan Patience RSA**

#### **Transcribed from the 2013 RSA Annual Exhibition Catalogue**

At the humanist service to celebrate George Wyllie's long, happy and productive life in Greenock last May, his family made their way towards his coffin with flowers. But, instead of a floral tribute, one family member - his artist grandson Calvin - offered a large metal arrow, its shaft swathed in red rope.

The arrow was George's Shaman's Arrow, made for one of his last major exhibitions, the Cosmic Voyage, at Glasgow's Collins Gallery in 2005.

Carefully, Calvin laid the arrow on his grandfather's coffin; a symbolic gesture aimed at setting the Shaman off on a final Cosmic Voyage.

Even in death, George Ralston Wyllie was never one to follow the crowd.

Best known as the artist who gave the world monumental social sculptures such as the *Straw Locomotive* (1987) and the *Paper Boat* (1989-96), Wyllie was the elder son of Andy and Harriet Wyllie. The couple were living in Shettleston, Glasgow, when young Ralston 9he started calling himself George in his 40s0 was born on the last day of 1921.

It was, he would claim many years later, 'a good year'. A younger brother, Banks, completed the family unit and the Wyllies moved to the Craigton area of the city.

Encouraged by their mother, who had artistic leanings, Wyllie and his brother were taught how to play the ukulele, how to draw and paint and how to dance.

Music and art was always in the background. When it came to finding a job in 1937, on the strength of his drawings of model aeroplanes and cranes, he was offered a job in the crane building department of Sir William Arrol & Co.

His father, a rate fixer for a machine tool in an engineering company on the Clyde, told him not to accept it on the grounds it was 'airy' and he would be vulnerable should another economic slump occur.

His first job was designing man holes in the Post office engineering department. Every weekend though, he played his double-bass with a local band and penned jaunty ditties which he sent to the leading stars of the Scottish variety scene.

He escaped the safe job by joining the Royal Navy. He went to war in 1942 and, during a spell of leave, he met his wife Daphne at a dance in Gosport. Their lifelong romance lasted until her death in 2004.

A month after Hiroshima was decimated in August 1945, Wyllie walked among the charred ruins of the city with his shipmates from HMS Argonaut. It sparked a lifelong concern for environmental issues. His subsequent friendship many years later with German conceptual artists Joseph Beuys, co-founder of the German Green Party, cemented his approach to creating all his art.

When Wyllie was de-mobbed in 1946, he sat his civil service exam and became a Customs and Excise officer in Greenock. A promotion saw him moved to Northern Ireland, where he worked on the land boundary patrol across the border.

The Wyllie family, which by 1954, consisted of daughters Louise and Elaine, returned to Scotland and set up house in Gourrock.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Willie played double bass with his band, *Clubmen with Pauline*, around pubs and clubs in the area. In 1965, he decided it was 'time for art', which had always been 'an extra thing' in his life.

He often joked that being accepted by the Glasgow School of Arts jazz band was the closest thing he got to an art training, but despite the constant thread of anarchic and surreal humour in his work, Wyllie was deadly serious about finding his metier.

As part of an *Artists' Lives* series recorded by the British Library between 2003 and 2004, Wyllie recalled: "the Russians used to have 10 year plans, and I thought, I'll make a 10 object plan.

"I will make 10 objects to see what happens, and I'll not worry about what they look like.

"I wanted complete emptiness. I wanted to see what came out of the void in my mind, to break away from instructions, to do things that were latent in my mind, resulting from observations, feelings and so on.

They were always a little bit literal actually; I made a dancing lamp post and a mortgaged home climbing up the wall.

They were crusty kind of objects and the ten of them without exception, were successful.

I went right through the ten and ended up with a crucifix which was accepted by the Royal Scottish Academy. It was purchased, and ended up in a church in Barrow-in-Furness."

This acceptance by the 'establishment' in 1967 gave Wyllie the confidence to consider himself a 'real' artist. He left the customs service in 1979, at the age of 58, and entered into a four-decade long career as an artist and sculptor. The question mark entered into his personal lexicon because, he said, 'it was too important to be left to the end'.

In the 1980s, through the late Barbara Grigor, a champion of many Scottish artists, Wyllie met the American kinetic artist, George Rickey, who invited him to work with him in America. He later described his experience as a 'great art release'. He was also hugely influenced by Joseph Beuys, after meeting him through Edinburgh gallery owner, Richard Demarco.

Wyllie's award-winning play about the inequities of the banking system, *A Day Down a Goldmine*, was produced several times throughout the 1980s. The two-handed play featured Wyllie as a character called *His Assistant* (Goldbunnet), alongside acclaimed actors such as Russell Hunter and Bill Paterson.

In 1987, he attracted international attention with his *Straw Locomotive*, which hung from the Finnieston crane in Glasgow before being burned in nearby Springburn in a Viking Style funeral.

Two years later, the *Paper Boat* was seen by millions as it sailed around the world from Glasgow to New York and back to Scotland. It even made it onto the front page of the Wall Street Journal when it berthed at the World Financial Centre in New York in 1990. Wyllie had even added a raft of moral quotations from Adam Smith specifically for its US trip. It was finally broken up at a shipbreaker's yard in Fife, in 1996, but in true Wyllie fashion, it was recycled - as a tern - which ended up at Stornoway Airport.

As First Minister Alex Salmond said when he opened the extraordinary George Wyllie retrospective at Glasgow's Mitchell Library last November, "I think - believe - that few artists have actually ever touched such a canvas of people as George Wyllie did."

The Shaman may have gone on his last Cosmic journey, arrow in hand, wing-ed boots on feet and Cosmic bunnet on head, but I would hazard a guess that you have not heard the last of George Ralston Wyllie.