

LEVY, MERVYN MONTAGUE (1914-1996), writer and broadcaster on the visual arts

Name: Mervyn Montague Levy

Date of birth: 1914

Date of death: 1996

Gender: Male

Occupation: writer and broadcaster on the visual arts

Area of activity: Art and Architecture; Literature and Writing

Author: Peter Lord

Mervyn Levy was born in Swansea on 11 February 1914 of Jewish heritage, one of the three children of Louis Levy and Have Levy (née Rubenstein). He grew up in comfortable circumstances among the talented Swansea generation that included Alfred Janes, [Daniel Jones](#) and [Dylan Thomas](#). In the early 1930s, they would frequent the Kardomah Café, together with [Vernon Watkins](#), Charles Fisher and others. Levy attended the Swansea School of Art under its influential Principal, William Grant Murray, before progressing to the Royal College of Art in London in 1932. He shared a flat in Chelsea with [Thomas](#) and Janes, and later also with the painter William Scott. The group adopted a Bohemian life style emulating that of [Augustus John](#), whom Levy regarded as their 'lode star'. At the Royal College he excelled as a draughtsman, winning the Sir Herbert Read Prize for Drawing in 1935. His drawings of [Dylan Thomas](#) would contribute to the formation of the public image of the poet.

On leaving the Royal College and entering 'the hideous jungle of the real world', Levy took various jobs to sustain himself before the Second World War intervened, and he went to Sandhurst. He emerged in 1941, commissioned in the Royal Army Education Corps, and spent the war years teaching. Subsequently he obtained posts in adult education in both Bristol and London. Levy's engagement in this work set him in the mainstream post-war ethos of democratisation in the arts, led by the Arts Councils, but in the 1950s he emerged as a pioneering figure by presenting the series '*Painting for Housewives*' on BBC television. He reinforced this work with publications about art written for the general reader - *Painter's Progress* (1954), *Painting for All* (1958) - and for children, *Painting with Sunshine* (1955). During this period of British celebrity he did not lose contact with his own country, contributing articles on exhibitions and individual artists to the magazine *Wales*, edited by Keidrych Rhys, among them a notoriously devastating review of [David Bell](#)'s book, *The Artist in Wales* (1957).

In 1962 Levy became features editor of *The Studio* magazine, a position he held for four years and through which he came to know and to write about many distinguished European artists, including Salvador Dali. He developed a particular interest in the work of L. S. Lowry, on whom he published three monographs, including *The Paintings of L.S. Lowry: oils and watercolours* (1975). Levy's writing consistently revealed an interest in the psychology of artists, coloured by Freudian ideas about sexuality (*The Moons of Paradise: some reflections on the appearance of the female breast in art*, 1962). In *Liberty Style, The Classic Years, 1798-1910* (1986), he argued that continental Art Nouveau had been transformed by English sexual inhibition in the work of Liberty & Co. In 1982 he published a short memoir, *Reflections in a Broken Mirror*.

Levy was of striking appearance. He was unusually short, but handsome. Urbane in manner, he was a celebrated raconteur with a taste for fantasy, entertaining visitors at the Chelsea Arts Club, many of whom came to him in later years for his anecdotes about [Dylan Thomas](#). He married three times and had a daughter and two sons, one of whom is the documentary film maker Ceri Levy. He died in London on 14 April 1996.

Author

Peter Lord

Sources

Mervyn Levy, 'No Time Like the Present (I take my stand)', *Wales*, December, 1958, 70

Mervyn Levy, *Reflections in a Broken Mirror* (1982)

Peter Lord, recorded interview with Mervyn Levy in Welsh Visual Culture Research Project Deposit, National Screen and Sound Archive of Wales, NLW

Ceri Levy, 'Obituary: Mervyn Levy', *The Independent*, 17 May 1996

Peter Lord, *Relationships with Pictures: an Oblique Autobiography* (2013), pp. 166-76

Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Mervyn Levy](#)

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