

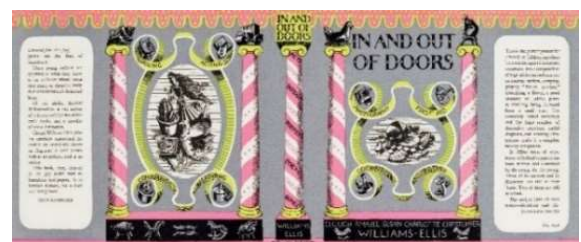
I was like a stick of celery left out of water, long and white and weak

This is how 12-year-old Susan Williams-Ellis described how she felt after the summer of 1930. The misery of a protracted illness and a long spell in hospital in a foreign hospital was a transformative time for her. Physically weakened, but psychologically resolved, she reflected on an illustration of two angels: *'I was in raptures by their sweet faces, soft hair and graceful poses and the slant of the two mandolins opposite each other in, to me, almost magical perspective. This finally decided me to be an artist when I grew up ... I was totally committed to my future career. Rather late I thought, as my younger sister had decided on biology by the time she was eight or nine. Anyway, we neither of us wavered for a moment.'*



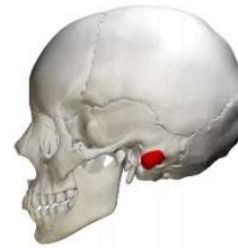
**A selection of Susan Williams-Ellis's work has been selected to go on display as part of Plas Brondanw's *Transformation* theme. This is the first time some of these works have been publicly displayed.**

Above: A surreal painting by Susan, probably done when she was 15-16.  
Right: The book 'In and Out of Doors' was a family endeavour. Susan designed the cover whilst she was still in her teens.



## In her own words:

Susan Williams-Ellis's account of her hospitalization in Austria, c.1930



Showing the mastoid process (Public domain / Wikimedia Commons. Generated by DBCLS, Japan)

*“Aged 12. My first time abroad ... We drove over mountain passes to stay with my parent’s friends, Amathy [Améthé, née Smeaton] and Leo Von Zeplin [Zeppelin] in Wernberg Castle near Villach & Klagenfurt in Austria. There I learned to swim in a weedy horse pond with the aid of a big very rotten log... After three days I began to have terrible earache and was given hot compresses of herbs, and someone brought me a lovely black and orange salamander from the woods to cheer me up but I was in too much pain to take notice of anything. So, after another three days, Leo took me and my mother to hospital in Klagenfurt over unmade roads, in a tiny red open racing car which was agony!*

*I was in hospital for two months and had three operations for mastoid, the first two were apparently piercing the drum and did no good. I used to bang my head against an iron bed head on the other side to try to distract the pain but no good. The last operation was with hammer and chisel to remove the infected mastoid bone. The anaesthetics were terrible, no pre-med injection, just a pad of Ether held over your mouth and nose unrelentingly, and I knew they were just killing me and no cries for mercy had any effect. At last in desperation I said or cried out “I’ll give you Grettle if you stop!”. She was my dog and I felt terrible to have said it as I loved her more than anything on earth – far more!*

*All this time though, I didn’t realise anything much. My father was in the same hospital with pneumonia and very very ill and delirious. My mother and Richard Hughes had to nurse us both as there were few, and more or less, untrained nurses in the hospital. My father was so bad that apparently the doctor told my mother that she should not hope for him to recover! It seems some papers in England published an obituary saying that he had died in Australia!*

*Luckily, we both slowly recovered but were incredibly weak. I was given two books of German photographs, one of Animals and another on country scenes. They were very good (far ahead of England in photography) but I was so weak I could only look at one page each day. Later someone lent me an English book called Knights of Art (by two ladies I think). It had one colour illustration of a copy in water colour by one of them, of two young angels (at the foot of the Virgin’s throne I think), both playing mandolins? In spite of being a copy and reproduction in colour, very poor in those days, I was in raptures by their sweet faces, soft hair and graceful poses and the slant of the two mandolins opposite each other in, to me, almost magical perspective. This finally decided me to be an artist when I grew up (Alas, I little knew how small the demand for altar pieces and frescos would be!)*

*We got home, my mother having slowly driven us stage by stage through the lovely towns and mountains of Austria and enchanting Lindover Stadt on the Bodensee. I could just about walk unsteadily but never again could learn to run. Not too surprising when I found from the new school uniform that I had been measured for before leaving, had been grown out of by 6” in a bit more than two months! **I was like a stick of celery left out of water, long and white and weak.***

*However, I was totally committed to my future career. Rather late I thought, as my younger sister had decided on biology by the time she was eight or nine. Anyway, we neither of us wavered for a moment.’*

## An underwater world

From an early age, Susan was drawn to the sea.



She devised an ingenious method of sketching underwater, which she continued to use throughout her life. These artworks relate to a book 'The Complete Mermaid', which never came to fruition.

## Transformative tales and cats that are snails

Susan described this picture: 'Anancee [sic] and the Crocodiles: The crocodiles discovering that Anancee has betrayed them and eaten their eggs.'



According to African folklore, Anansi was a mischievous spider. This picture probably dates to the early 1940s. The address label on the back states 'Plas Brondanw', where Susan lived prior to marrying Euan in 1945.

These drawings by Susan show the transformation of a girl into a mouse, or vice versa. The family's nickname for Susan's mother, Amabel, was 'Mouse' which may have had something to do with it.



Susan and her sister Char were deeply fond of each other. Dr Charlotte Wallace's area of expertise was snails; Susan was cat-mad. Who knows what was in Susan's mind when she designed and created 'Snail cat'? Or perhaps the juxtaposition of a cat encased in a snail's shell it is a metaphor for old age ...

# Portmeirion Village

Susan was delighted when her father, Clough Williams-Ellis, asked her and her husband Euan to become more involved in the running of Portmeirion Village in the mid-1950s.

She designed textiles to furnish the hotel, souvenirs for the shops – including re-designing her father’s Mermaid emblem – and even a range of clothes named ‘The Portmeirion Look’. Some of her designs have people’s names associated with them – for a fashion show, perhaps?

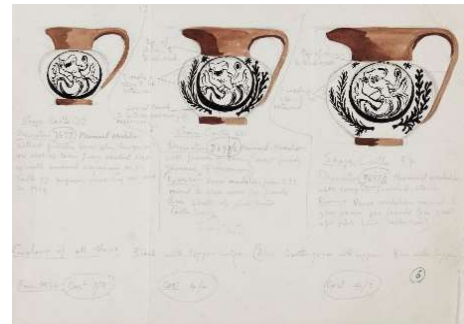


Photo taken prior to conservation



‘Decoration expresses personal taste’ reflects Susan’s vision about how mass-production could make well-designed goods available to everyone.