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# **WILLIAM ROBERTS SOCIETY**

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**Newsletter, April 2015**



*Susanna and the Elders* c.1926 (detail) – a painting exhibited in WR's 1965 retrospective – discussed on pages 7–12 – but not since then

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World War ... The 1965 Roberts retrospective ... WR on display ...**

**Tom Devonshire Jones**

# **WILLIAM ROBERTS SOCIETY**

registered charity no. 1090538

Committee: Pauline Paucker (chairman), Marion Hutton (secretary: Lexden House, Tenby SA70 7BJ; 01834 843295; [info@williamrobertssociety.co.uk](mailto:info@williamrobertssociety.co.uk)), Arnold Paucker (treasurer), David Cleall (archivist), Bob Davenport (newsletter and website: [mail@radavenport.co.uk](mailto:mail@radavenport.co.uk)), Michael Mitzman (copyright), Ruth Artmonsky, Anne Goodchild, Agi Katz  
[www.williamrobertssociety.co.uk](http://www.williamrobertssociety.co.uk)

April 2015

## **WRS FAREWELL BEANO**

The a.g.m. on 11 April ratified the committee's decision, announced in a letter with last October's newsletter, that the society should be wound up. We thank members and friends for their valuable support over the years; now we look forward to raising a final glass together. Please come to a closing-down beano – a gathering to celebrate the society's achievements and the friendships forged – on Saturday 6 June from 2.30 to 5.00 p.m. at the Art Workers' Guild, 6 Queen Square, London WC1N 3AT. There will be a short presentation. Canapés and drinks will be served. RSVP Marion Hutton via the contact details above.

## **THE WILLIAM ROBERTS SOCIETY, 1998–2015**

by Pauline Paucker

Our society, founded in 1998, is now winding itself up. Some of us who were

not so young when we elected our committee are now rather old (Diana Gurney, one of our trustees and a founder member, died recently aged 97), and we all, younger and old, feel that we have achieved most of our original aims – bar the house museum, so much wished for by Sarah and John Roberts.

We initiated the the application for the blue plaque on the Robertses' house; we have visited nearly all the holdings of Roberts's work within hitting distance of London; we have led Roberts walks in Fitzrovia and Primrose Hill; we have held a series of excellent yearly public lectures with distinguished speakers; and we were active in dissuading the Treasury Solicitor from selling the works collected in the house at public auction. (These have since been given or promised to the nation.)

Marion Hutton began the series of lively regular newsletters; Bob Davenport set up an informative website; David Cleall compiled a catalogue raisonné; we have administered the

copyright of both Roberts and his brother-in-law, Jacob Kramer; prices for Roberts's work have risen – and so have charges for affordable venues – it seems time to close down.

Roberts's son, John, having died intestate, Diana and I were told by Michael Mitzman, lawyer for the Robertses at solicitors Mishcon de Reya, to act as 'friends of the family', sorting out personal property in the house. The many paintings displayed or stacked there were our first concern. Diana immediately rang Nicholas Serota, who agreed to store them in the Tate depot, where they remained for many years unseen by the public, though we have been allowed to have access on more than one occasion.

It was at a meeting with Michael Mitzman, who was to become our faithful support and adviser, that Marion brightly suggested that we should set up an appreciation society. We then approached friends of Sarah and John, found relatives of Roberts, approached owners of Roberts paintings and admirers of his work, and a group of us met in the basement of Agi Katz's Boundary Road Gallery to found the William Roberts Society one evening in September 1998.

We agreed then to contact English Heritage, who showed interest in the idea of a house museum, as did the National Trust; but nothing came of it, and 14 St Mark's Crescent was eventually sold. We then concentrated on promoting our artist.

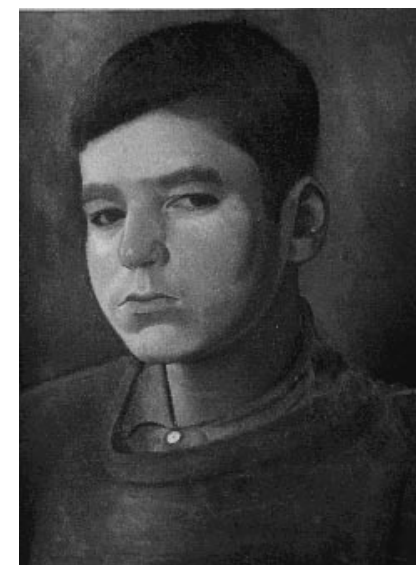
Before the sale I had taken many photographs of the interior; the paintings



(Above) *Self-portrait in a Blue Shirt* c.1955–6 and (right) *Sarah in a Gold Lamé Hat* c.1932 and *John* c.1932 – three of the works currently being held in the Tate depot

had gone but the highly individual furnishings were still in place, and a professional photographer also made a set of photographs for English Heritage so that some record remains of how the family lived and worked. David's video of the house with my voice-over has been available on YouTube since March 2011.

We provided the information required for the blue plaque, the unveiling of which by Alan Bennett in October 2003 attracted a large crowd. It now sits together with two more plaques: commemorating the poet Arthur Hugh Clough and the historian A. J. P. Taylor, a one-time neighbour of the Robertses, who wrote in praise of Roberts's memoir *4.5 Howitzer Gunner*.



Our inaugural a.g.m. and public lecture was held in the Conway Hall, when the late Andrew Causey was the first of those who spoke to us on different aspects of Roberts's work – the full list is below. We have had different venues: the National Portrait Gallery for some years, the Art Workers' Guild, Toynbee Hall, even the Swedenborg Society's hall and Mishcon de Reya's handsome premises.

Andrew Gibbon Williams came to us for help with his excellent biography, *William Roberts: An English Cubist*, which we launched with a party at Mishcon de Reya's.

We were closely involved with the setting up of the Roberts/Kramer exhibition 'The Tortoise and the Hare' at Leeds University and the Ben Uri Gallery in 2003, and it was exciting to visit Pallant House in Chichester for the

Roberts exhibition 'England at Play', curated by Simon Martin, in March 2007. A visit to Cambridge to see the work held by the Fitzwilliam and the Roberts pictures bequeathed to King's College by Maynard Keynes was unforgettable, and Woking's Lightbox gallery too held surprises: it houses a fine collection of Roberts's work.

We have had visits to the print rooms of the V&A, the British Museum and Tate Britain, visited the Imperial War Museum when Roberts's work was on show, made contact with owners of paintings as far away as Sri Lanka, and walked the Regent's Canal in pouring rain to fix the sites of Roberts's canal paintings. One of our final acts has been the purchase of one of Roberts's rare etchings, presented to the British Museum in the name of the society



*Apple Pickers* 1936 – one of the works seen in the WRS visit to Cambridge in April 2011

Our members have been enthusiastic and supportive throughout, and we owe them much. We hope to see as many as possible at our goodbye party in June, also celebrating the birthday of our artist, William Roberts.

William Roberts lecturers: David Buckman (2010), Andrew Causey (1999),

Elizabeth Cayzer (2002), David Cleall (2008 and 2013), Richard Cork (2007), Mark Glazebrook (2005), Frederick Gore (2000), David Boyd Haycock (2011), Andrew Heard (2004), Tom Lubbock (2009), James Malpas (2001), Simon Martin (2012), Richard Slocombe (2015), Timothy Wilcox (2006), Andrew Gibbon Williams (2003).



*Bathers* c.1925, the etching presented to the British Museum in the name of the William Roberts Society

## A WR FOR THE BM

At a committee meeting last November it was decided to use some of the society's remaining funds to purchase a work by Roberts for presentation to a public collection in the society's name. The work eventually chosen was *Bathers*, one of the nine etchings that WR created and printed in very small numbers c.1925. It has been donated to the British Museum, which has two of the other etchings and a study for a third, and where anyone can visit the print room to see it without appointment (but with identification).

## A NEW WR WEBSITE

With the society coming to an end and its copyright licence from the Treasury Solicitor about to expire, the William Roberts Society website has been taken down. But David Cleall and Bob Davenport have obtained permission for a Roberts website of their own, and this is now online at

<http://englishcubist.co.uk>

They also intend to send out occasional emails with news about Roberts; if you would like to receive these, please email 'Subscribe' to

[mail@englishcubist.co.uk](mailto:mail@englishcubist.co.uk)



## WILLIAM ROBERTS AND THE ART OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The last of the William Roberts Society's annual lectures was given on 11 April by Richard Slocombe, senior art curator at the Imperial War Museum, who spoke on William Roberts and the art of the First World War, looking at how Roberts and his modernist fellow artists responded to the war and also at the reaction to the art that resulted.

Dr Slocombe described how a pre-war critical attitude to the modernist aesthetic of Roberts and his fellow Vorticists as 'an unhealthy, foreign (i.e. German) affliction' intensified as the war began, only to soften as the scale of the loss of young lives became apparent – for modernism was something practised by the young. And when in March 1916 (the month before Roberts was called up) C. R. W. Nevinson's painting of a machine-gun post, *La Mitrailleuse*, was exhibited in London, presenting, with the authority of someone who had served at the front, a vision of humanity bent to the will of a machine, critics had to concede that the colours and harsh angularity of forms previously found disagreeable were now qualities that gave powerful expression to a subject that demanded new forms of representation.

When, after two years as a gunner in the Royal Field Artillery, Roberts was seconded to undertake a commission for the Canadian War Memorials

Fund, he was warned that 'Cubist' work was unacceptable, but in the resulting *The First German Gas Attack at Ypres* (see the October 2014 newsletter) he managed an adroit balancing act between this constraint and artistic expression. His subsequent commission from the British War Memorials Committee (BWMC) required him to hand over to the state all the work he created in a particular period, and the collection of works now in the Imperial War Museum not only details his experience of and attitudes to the war, but also documents a transition to a stylised figuration with a strong satirical element. In *The Gas Chamber*, for example, gas masks transform soldiers into clumsy, robotic figures rendered almost blind and helpless by the equipment intended to protect them, and *Signallers* shows scant sign of team spirit among those supposed to be working together.

The view that war debased those who took part in it, reducing man to an animal or even a mechanical status, found expression in Wyndham Lewis's *A Battery Shelled* (1919), commissioned by the BWMC, where the gunners under fire in the background appear dehumanised, insect-like, scuttling for cover impelled by a primitive instinct for survival. Dr Slocombe saw a similar point of view in WR's *Tommies Filling Their Water Bottles with Rain from a Shell Hole* (1918), in which soldiers scramble for water from a dirty puddle.

Particularly interesting was the account of the fate of the BWMC



*Signallers* 1918 (© IWM (Art.IWM ART 1167))

commissions in the post-war years. Plans for a hall of remembrance to house them were abandoned, and in January 1919 the paintings were given to the Imperial War Museum. The committee had aimed to represent British artistic plurality and resist domination by the Royal Academy, with pictures being based on personal experience rather than reimagining episodes from the war. When exhibited at the RA late in 1919, however, the modernist works of Lewis and Roberts were denounced as Bolshevism in art, and the press outcry prompted questions in Parliament about state expenditure on such things. The IWM consequently distanced itself from these pictures, and in 1921 they were among 48 works

(also including pictures by Stanley Spencer, John Nash and Henry Lamb) given on long-term loan to the not particularly enthusiastic Tate Gallery, effectively decontextualising them as war art – although it seems that they were hardly shown at all in the inter-war period before they eventually returned to the IWM in its new home in Lambeth.

## THE 1965 ROBERTS RETROSPECTIVE

by David Cleall

Almost 50 years ago, in the winter of 1965, the Tate Gallery and the Arts Council staged a major William Roberts retrospective exhibition. Norman Reid

had recently succeeded Sir John Rothenstein as director of the Tate, and in an early staff reorganisation Ronald Alley became keeper of the modern collection. Alley had been with the Tate for a number of years, and this promotion enabled him to more effectively continue his work in revitalising the modern collection.

William Roberts was now 70. In 1961 he had been given an award by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation ‘in recognition of his artistic achievement and his outstanding service to British painting’, and his earlier election as an Associate of the Royal Academy had led to various duties on the RA council. However, he was known mainly through the large-scale works exhibited each year at the RA Summer Exhibition, and the extraordinary range of his work had not been recognised. Now a major retrospective was planned, and Ronald Alley would curate it.

Alley had championed Roberts in his role as purchase adviser to the Cecil Higgins Art Gallery in the late 1950s, and it is likely that a number of recent Tate Gallery Roberts acquisitions – *The Diners*, *Athletes Exercising in a Gymnasium* and *The Vorticists at the Restaurant de la Tour Eiffel* – were also the result of his support. Roberts couldn’t have been served by a better curator than Alley, who was passionately enthusiastic about modern art and had close friendships with many internationally recognised artists, including Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Francis Bacon. He also had a reputation for the thoroughness and accuracy of his research – completing a

catalogue raisonné of Bacon’s work in 1964. Most important to an effective working relationship with the Robertses was Alley’s unpretentious and self-effacing manner.

Alley set to work tracking down the key pieces in Roberts’s output. The two major private collections of the artist’s work cooperated with him – Ernest Cooper lent 15 oil paintings and 18 drawings, while Honor Frost, the executor of the late Wilfrid Evill (who had died in 1963), lent 7 oil paintings and 7 drawings. Other private collectors lent a further 45 pictures, including such rarely seen and important works as *Dock Gates*, *The Garden of Eden*, *Christ Driving the Money Changers from the Temple* and *Susanna and the Elders*, and 68 works came from national collections (including the Tate). Most excitingly of all, Alley brought the huge Canadian War Memorials commission *The First German Gas Attack at Ypres* across from Canada, *The Chess Players* from New Jersey, and *Interval Before Round Ten* from Australia. The Robertses lent 33 works, including a 1909 *Study of the Artist’s Father, Brother and Sister*, portraits of Sarah, and self-portraits including the recent self-mocking *Self-portrait With Knotted Handkerchief* (1964) – an indication that Roberts didn’t want to be seen as taking himself too seriously. A grand total of 222 items (212 plus 10 life studies) were exhibited at the Tate Gallery from 20 November, with a slightly smaller exhibition moving on to the Laing Gallery in Newcastle in January 1966 and finally to the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester.



*Trafalgar Square 1926* – a painting exhibited in the 1965 retrospective but never since

Ronald Alley contributed a concise introductory essay to a detailed, well-illustrated catalogue. Roberts’s cover illustration – a pen-and-ink drawing printed on lemon-yellow card – showed him looking back over three phases in his life: first the Slade, then his war experiences, and finally Roberts the ARA.

It is difficult to imagine that Roberts would not have been very satisfied with the show, although we have no record of his response other than that he was pleased by the space allocated and the resulting uncramped hang. Nor is the

public response documented – though Edward Burra went in November and declared himself ‘fascinated by the William Roberts exhibition at the Tate’.

The art critics varied in their responses, though many of them provided detailed and thoughtful analyses of Roberts’s work and some were very welcoming of an opportunity to re-evaluate the artist.

Andrew Forge in the *New Statesman* (26 November 1965) declared that ‘The William Roberts exhibition which Ronald Alley has arranged for the Arts Council at the Tate is a real event. It

confirms that Roberts is one of the most unfairly neglected artists of our time. It also shows him to be a more complex and disturbing artist than we had ever imagined.'

David Thompson in *The Spectator* (26 November 1965) wrote:

It's a highly stylised art, but exceedingly lively, and as it's done with unflattering precision both on a very large and a very small scale, it adds up to something pretty impressive ... He has a marvellous eye for telling and curious detail, a keen observer's interest in gesture and expression ... This is one of those overdue and eminently worthwhile retrospectives that make one ashamed one didn't know more about an artist before ... [T]his exhibition makes nonsense of Lewis's claim to have been the be-all and end-all of Vorticism.

T. G. Rosenthal in *The Listener* (2 December 1965) noted that

above all, Roberts has a remarkable organizational ability in that he can crowd a canvas or a drawing, such as *Camel March* of 1923 ... with a multitude of people without ever losing the sense of form or space. William Roberts is no path-finding genius, but he is very much an artist to be respected and an essential chapter in the history of twentieth-century English painting.

*The Times* (20 November 1965) struck a more negative note: 'currents of

opinion in England have alternated between welcoming his work and forgetting it entirely ... Mr. Roberts is really a modernist in style but not in spirit.' However, the critic singled out the smaller, earlier pictures for praise – works such as *Rustic Scene* – and commented, '[In] the earlier, adventurously coloured bicycle picture "Les Routiers" he has captured vitality in the forms themselves, not merely reflected in the faces.'

Frederick Laws in *The Guardian* (24 November 1965) noted, 'He is one of the few English artists to have seen the possibilities of Cubism early and to have sought to domesticate it ... He has persisted in the service of an individual vision without fashionable approval or popular success.' Again the early work was favoured, as being 'of great power and inventiveness'.

Frank Whitford in the *Arts Review* (11 December 1965) discussed at length what he saw as the shortcomings of an artist who had hardly allowed his work to change over the years; however, he concluded by noting that 'paradoxically these paintings which are so stylised, often forced and mannered in the extreme, are nevertheless frequently memorable and extremely stimulating and exciting. How is it that paintings with such obvious and glaring faults deeply affect the imagination?' Whitford answered this question with reference to *The Gutter*, where 'each gesture, each inflection of the hand and tilt of the body fits in with its neighbour like a piece of turned and polished steel fits into a machine. It is the completeness and utter



*The Playground*, the left-hand section of *The Gutter* 1934–5

lucidity of Roberts' formal sense which give his work its convincing claim on our attention.'

Terence Mullaly in the *Daily Telegraph* (6 December 1965) enthusiastically commented that 'Thanks to the Arts Council it can now be asserted that in our own time only Stanley Spencer deserves as high a place in this company ["that very English tradition of highly individual and eccentric painters"] as William Roberts.' Mullaly particularly praised the 'savage, yet restrained power' of the First World War paintings, but also added that 'What is now clear is

that there is a gentle and more reflective side to his work. [That] is to be seen in his portraits.'

Keith Roberts in the *Burlington Magazine* (January 1966) stood alone in launching quite a personal attack on Roberts: 'The whole affair has been organized and catalogued by Ronald Alley with a zeal and scholarly precision worthy of a better artist. For when all is said and done ... Roberts is a minor figure.' As the review continues it seems that Roberts's satirical depiction of the Bloomsbury set has particularly rattled the reviewer:



That a supposedly modernist *avant-garde* artist should attack kindred spirits may seem ironic; that is until one begins to appreciate how superficial Roberts's own 'modernism' really is. His jibes at the Bloomsbury Group are not only tiresome but unjustified since his own position is actually very close to that of Bell and Grant. His art represents a characteristically English dilution, along narrative lines, of an essentially formal concept stemming from Europe.

In other circumstances this might have led to a Roberts pamphlet, but in the context of what appears to have been a very successful exhibition Roberts seems to have let this pass, and within a few months he must have felt vindicated by being elected a full Academician at the RA.

## WR ON DISPLAY

*The Creole* (aka *Portrait of a Negress – Hélène Yelin*) 1923 – see the September 2012 newsletter – is on loan to Tate Britain from the Potteries Museum as part of the display 'Spaces of Black Modernism: London 1919–39' until 4 October.

*The Seaside* c.1965–6 is part of the exhibition 'One Day, Something Hap-

pens: Paintings of People' (from the Arts Council Collection) at Leeds Art Gallery till 4 May, then touring to Nottingham Castle, 20 June–6 September; Highlanes, Drogheda, 17 October 2015–7 February 2016; The Atkinson, Southport, 20 February–22 May 2016; Towner, Eastbourne, 15 October 2016–8 January 2017.

The pencil study for *The Park Bench* 1933 continues in the exhibition 'Great British Drawings' at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, until 31 August, and *The Toe Dancer* 1914 and *Two-step I and II* 1915 continue in the exhibition 'Gaudier-Brzeska: New Rhythms. Art, Dance and Movement in London 1911–1915' at Kettle's Yard Gallery, Cambridge, until 21 June.

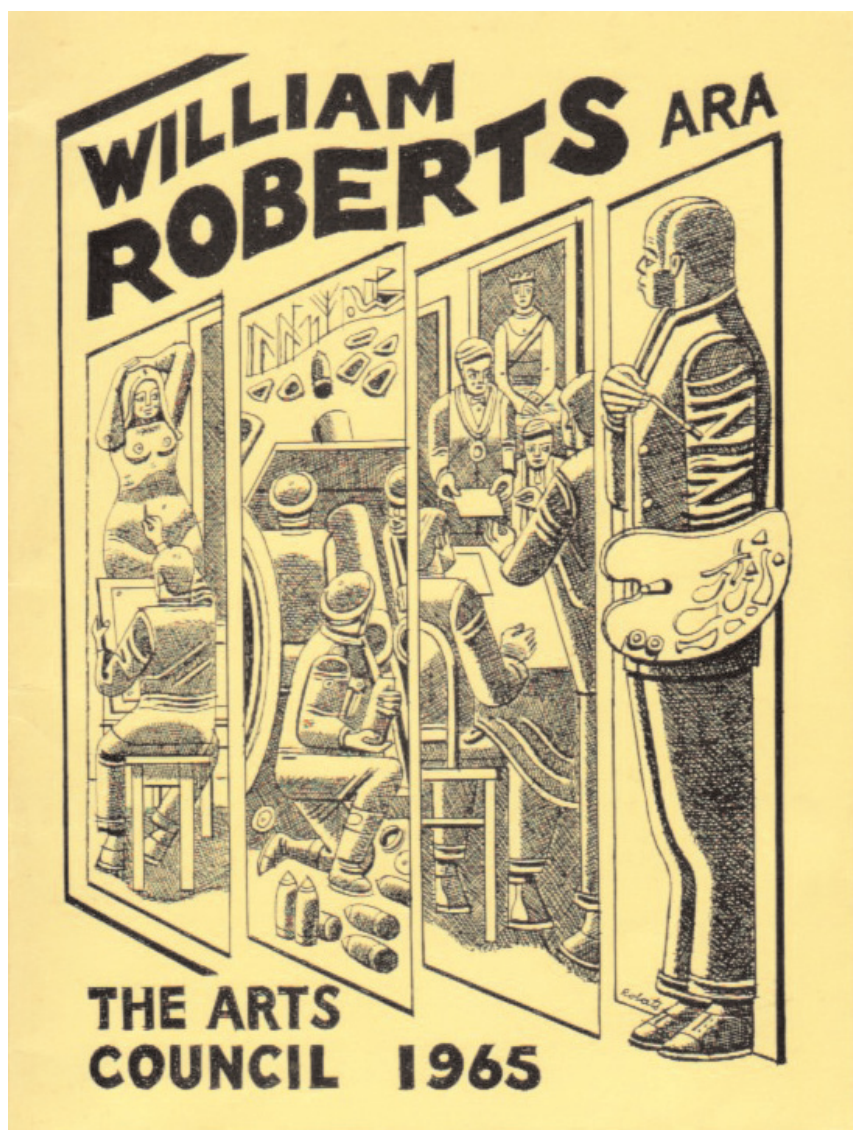
## TOM DEVONSHIRE JONES

We were sorry to hear of the death in February of WRS member the Revd Tom Devonshire Jones, aged 80. Described in his *Daily Telegraph* obituary as having been 'the leading national figure in promoting closer collaboration between religion and the visual arts', from 1981 to 2000 he was the vicar of the Robertses' local church, for which he borrowed WR's *The Crucifixion* c.1922 from the Methodist Art Collection.

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The cover of WR's 1965 retrospective, showing him as a student at the Slade, as a gunner during the First World War, and as an Associate of the Royal Academy