
WILLIAM ROBERTS SOCIETY

Newsletter, January 2012



The Horseman – or are they all men? – a 1920 watercolour to be included in Tate Britain's forthcoming William Roberts display

A visit to the British Museum ... and to Tate Britain ... WR in Wakefield and Rotterdam ... *Darkness visible* ... Auction news ... The 2011 WRS annual lecture ... *The Revolt in the Desert* ... WR and T. E. Lawrence

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), Arnold Paucker (treasurer), David Cleall (archivist), Bob Davenport (newsletter and website: radavenport@waitrose.com), Michael Mitzman (copyright), Ruth Artmonsky, Anne Goodchild, Agi Katz
www.williamrobertssociety.co.uk

January 2012

A VISIT TO THE BM

Our first event of 2012 will be a visit, on Friday 30 March, to see the 12 works by William Roberts held in the British Museum print room. These range from an intimate 1911 *Portrait of the Artist's Brother* and a c.1925 self-portrait etching to the poignant *Red Cross Dressing Station, Advanced Post* (1918) and the large and dramatic *Soldiers Putting Up Wagon-lines* (1919).

We will meet at 2.15 just inside room 90 of the museum. Only ten of us will be allowed in the print room at a time, but there is a free exhibition of German Romantic prints and drawings in room 90, and of course lots to see elsewhere in the building.

A VISIT TO TATE BRITAIN

We now have more information about the forthcoming display of works by William Roberts at Tate Britain.

As well as works from the estate of John Roberts which were accepted by H.M. Government in lieu of inheritance tax and allocated to the Tate in 2007, the exhibition will also include earlier Tate acquisitions.

It will begin with early work including Slade-period figure compositions, followed by Vorticist subjects including works reproduced in *Blast*.

The most substantial part of the display will focus on the 1920s, where the Tate's holdings are strongest, and will be arranged thematically, showing paintings of urban life and religious subjects – such as *The Cinema* (1920), *The Port of London* (c.1922), and *Deposition from the Cross* (c.1926) – alongside compositional drawings exploring similar subjects.

The final section will focus on later work from the 1940s to the 1970s, and will include a section on Roberts's art-world satires and pamphlets, including his engagement with Vorticist history in the 1950s, when in a series of polemical

pamphlets he challenged Wyndham Lewis's version of events.

The exhibition will now start a little later than expected, on 21 May 2012, but will run until 10 March 2013, and is likely to contain about two dozen works; admission will be free.

We will visit the display on Saturday 2 June, meeting inside the Millbank entrance of the Tate at 11.00.

WR IN WAKEFIELD AND ROTTERDAM

Anne Goodchild reports that the Hepworth Wakefield, which opened last May, currently has two Roberts drawings on display: *Germans in Constantinople* (1916) and *Pigeon Fanciers* (1928). They will be on show until the beginning of March.

In December we learned that the exhibition 'Sir Stanley Spencer: Between Heaven and Earth', which closed this month at the Kunsthal, Rotterdam, included not just WR's *The Toe Dancer* (1914), as reported in the last newsletter, but also the self-portrait *Boy Wearing a Blue Scarf* (c.1908–10), the oil *The Return of Ulysses* (c.1913), *Deposition from the Cross* (c.1926) and *The Flower Arrangement* (1944) among the works on display by Spencer's contemporaries.

As far as we are aware, only one work by WR had previously been shown in the Netherlands: *The Errand Boys* (1939), in a bicycle-themed exhibition at Rotterdam's Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in 1977.



Outclassed (c.1925), a study for an etching, in the British Museum

DARKNESS VISIBLE

We have been contacted by Dr Brian O'Conchubhair of the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, who is preparing a bilingual edition of a play by Liam O'Flaherty, whose portrait by WR is in the National Library of Ireland. In March 1926 the play was produced in Irish, as *Dorchadas*, at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin. An English translation was published in Charles Lahr's *New Coterie* magazine as *Darkness*, and, to establish performance copyright in this, O'Flaherty asked Lahr to arrange for a reading of the play, or even just the first act. Apparently this reading took place at WR's Chalk Farm studio on 27 April 1926, and this story of Irish country folk

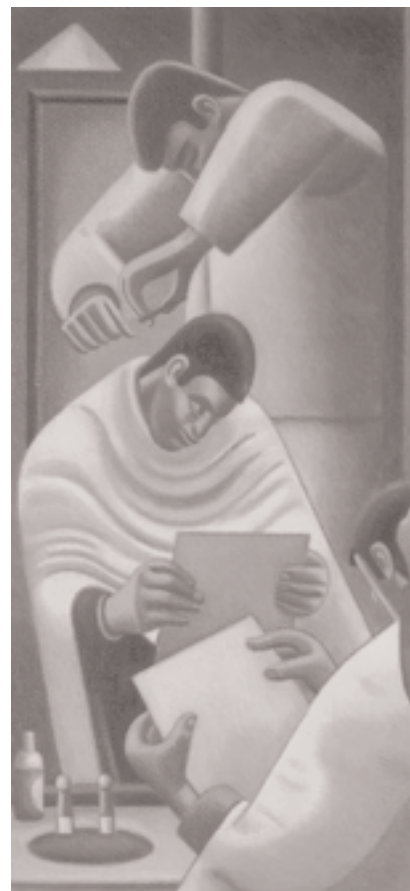
was delivered by an international cast comprising R. Dornan, K. S. Bhat, Marthe Goldberg, Rhys Davies (another Roberts portrait subject – see the March and September newsletters) and – as Bridget ('Oc-oc-ochon, my little Margaret ... Pearl of my heart, you have gone from me') – Sarah Roberts. It

sounds like an odd occasion, and it is a pity that WR seems not to have included it among his depictions of domestic entertainments.

AUCTION NEWS

The high prices fetched by WR's work at auctions earlier in the year continued at Sotheby's sale of modern and post-war British art on 15–16 November, when the oil *The Barber's Shop* (c.1946) sold for £127,250 and *The Boxing Match* (c.1925–7?) for £217,250. Two works on paper being sold on behalf of the Dartington Trust went for £19,375 (*Bath-night* (1939)) and £18,750 (*The Judgement of Paris* (1933)).

On 25 October, in an interiors sale at Christie's South Kensington, a pencil *Portrait of a Man Wearing a Monocle* sold for £2,125. This picture was previously unknown to us, and we are grateful for having the sitter identified as Major E. O. Kay, the sometime chairman and joint managing director of the catalogue company Kay & Co., and a collector who also commissioned his portrait from Stanley Spencer.

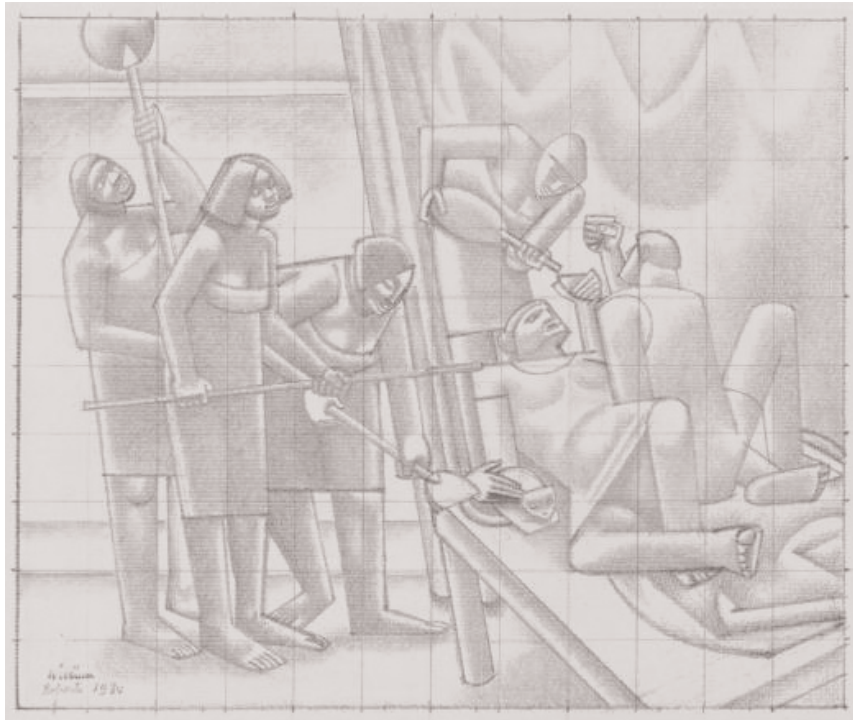


Six-finger exercise? A detail from *The Barber's Shop* (c.1946), an oil sold at Sotheby's on 15 November for £127,250.

THE 2011 WRS ANNUAL LECTURE

A report by David Cleall

On 22 October, David Boyd Haycock delivered the WRS annual lecture at the Art Workers Guild in Queen Square. His lecture, 'A Crisis of Brilliance:



A study for *Anthony and Cleopatra* (1930), to be shown in Tate Britain's William Roberts display from 21 May

William Roberts and His Slade Contemporaries 1910–1919', drew upon the extensive research he carried out for his acclaimed book *A Crisis of Brilliance* (2009). The title refers to a comment made by Henry Tonks, Professor of Drawing at the Slade School of Art. William Roberts and his peers – Richard Nevinson, Mark Gertler, Stanley Spencer, Paul Nash and Dora Carrington – were part of what Tonks described as the school's second and last 'crisis of brilliance'. The first, ten years earlier, had involved Augustus

John and Wyndham Lewis, their 'crisis' being the question of how to respond to their talent and find their own voice as an artist amid a chaos of ideas. The expression has further poignancy when applied to Roberts's contemporaries, who left the Slade as post-Impressionism came to London and within a couple of years were to be shaped by their experiences in the Great War.

Using as a starting point the group photograph taken at the Slade picnic in 1912, David Boyd Haycock provided an introduction to some of the most suc-

cessful and gifted of these artists. In each case well-chosen works were shown, and there was an emphasis on the artists' interconnectedness. Haycock characterised Tonks's approach at the Slade as being 'Draw! Draw! Draw!' and themes set by the Slade Sketch Club stimulated important early work from Spencer and Roberts. Within and beyond the Slade, the influence of French artists such as the symbolist Puvis de Chavannes as well as the post-Impressionists was considered.

The second half of the lecture illustrated the war art that was produced by this group during or immediately after the war years. Roberts was spectacularly represented with a reproduction of the large oil painting *The First German Gas Attack at Ypres* (commissioned by the Canadian War Records Office in 1918) and the watercolour drawing *Tommies Filling Their Water Bottles with Rain from a Shell Hole* – a powerfully expressive work whose roots clearly lay in the Slade's life-drawing class.

THE REVOLT IN THE DESERT

By Tim Craven

[We invited Tim Craven, Lead Curatorial Officer in the Arts and Heritage department of Southampton City Council, to write about one of the works by WR in his care, and are grateful for the following piece.]

Southampton City Art Gallery purchased William Roberts's *The Revolt in the Desert* (shown on the back cover)



Ernest Cooper, Esq., painted by William Roberts c.1949

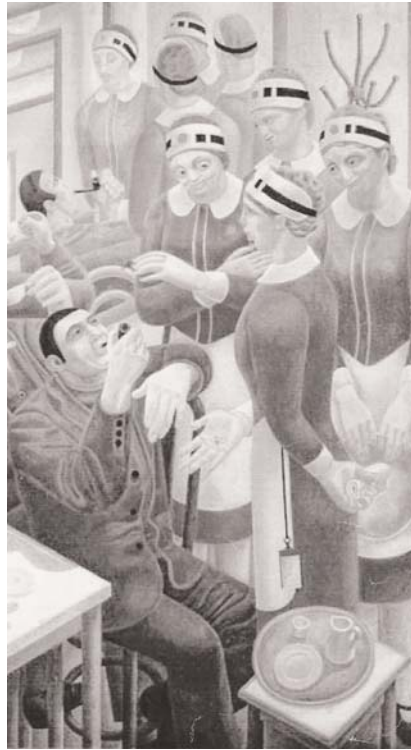
through the F. W. Smith Bequest Fund in 1958, for £750. The previous owner was Roberts's friend and patron Ernest Cooper, of Lindfield, Sussex. Roberts's watercolour *The Travelling Cradle* was acquired at the same time through the same means, though from the Leicester Galleries.

A 1995 letter from Cooper (aged 85) to the gallery states that he bought *The Revolt in the Desert* from the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition in 1952 for £250, and that John Rothenstein borrowed it to show at the Tate Gallery for a whole year. He wrote that Maurice Palmer, Southampton's curator from 1950 to 1970, had kindly housed about 24 of Roberts's works that Cooper owned but no longer had the space to display when he moved to London. With the proceeds of the Southampton

sale ('You could do a lot with £500 in those days'), Cooper and his first wife, Sadie, took Roberts and his wife, Sarah, on a trip to Greece, having just seen a memorable performance of Berlioz's *The Trojans* at Covent Garden together: 'I had the wild idea that "Bobby" would do a painting to match it. In the event his chief wish in Athens was to find a substitute for the Joe Lyons Corner Houses which were our favourite meeting places.'

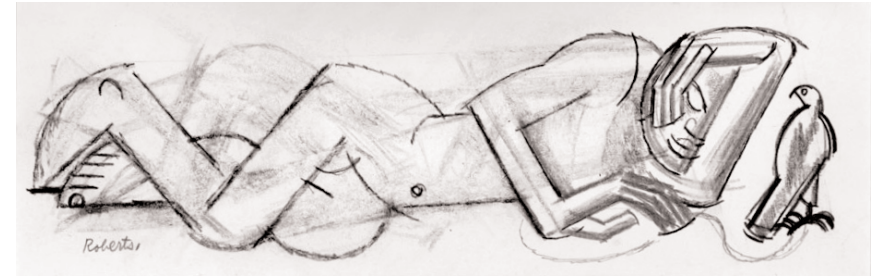
T. E. Lawrence – the subject of *The Revolt in the Desert* – had admired Roberts's work and invited him along with other artists, including fellow Vorticist Edward Wadsworth, to illustrate his epic account of his role in the Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire during the First World War, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, published by subscription in 1926. Robert's *Camel March* was composed with the help of photographs lent to him by Lawrence to help with the details. Lawrence was delighted with the results: 'It's a trifle ... but the technique of dress, shapes of camels, seats of riders etc. are as right as if you had worked them up on the spot. I'm afraid that means that you have exhausted yourself in continual study of those photographs. However I'm enormously grateful.'

The legend of 'Lawrence of Arabia' began to grow when details of his exploits became known after the war, and in August 1922 Lawrence astonished friends and critics alike by joining the Royal Air Force at the lowliest rank and under an assumed name to escape press harassment. The struggles of a less



A detail from *The Tea Room* (1938-9), WR's depiction of a 'Joe Lyons' tea-shop

than fit, over-age Aircraftman John Hume Ross to cope with the rigours of the RAF's training camp at Uxbridge gave him the subject for his second book, *The Mint*. It is so full of parade-ground, blasphemous language that it was not printed in an unexpurgated edition until the 1970s. In 1922 Roberts painted a strong but sympathetic portrait (now in the Ashmolean Museum) of Lawrence posing as Ross in his new RAF uniform. The portrait suggests that Roberts liked and respected Lawrence without regard to his reputation.



A red-chalk-and-pencil study for the tailpiece *Off Duty* in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Eng 1653 (36))

Lawrence was to die in a motorcycle accident in 1935, but *The Revolt in the Desert* clearly shows that Roberts's deep admiration for him persisted, as this magnificent tribute was not painted until 1952. Lawrence – his identity made clear by his gold dagger and blue eyes – is depicted at bottom right, accompanied by a party of Bedouin tribesmen, some on foot and others mounted on camels.

This extraordinary work is often on display at Southampton City Art Gallery, and is much loved by regular visitors.

*

In his pamphlet *Early Years*, written in September 1977 and published posthumously in 1982, William Roberts summarised his relations with T. E. Lawrence as follows: 'In 1920 Colin Gill, who had been a fellow-student at the Slade, sent me a note saying "Colonel Lawrence is seeking artists to make portrait drawings for a book he is producing; get in touch with him." I wrote to Lawrence and as a result I contributed several portrait drawings to

"Seven Pillars of Wisdom", besides a painting of Lawrence in his Royal Air Force uniform. He sat for this portrait in a room I was using at Coleherne Terrace, Earl's Court ... He lent me during several Summers his small woodman's cottage at Clouds Hill in Dorset.'

Lawrence was delighted by the *Seven Pillars* portraits – for example describing that of Sir Henry McMahon as 'absolutely splendid: the strength of it, and the life: it feels as though at any moment there might be a crash in the paper and the thing start out', and that of Captain Robin Buxton as 'astonishing ... A wonderful drawing' – and Roberts went on to produce other illustrations for the book, notably *Camel March*, mentioned on page 6, and 29 tailpiece drawings.

Several of the tailpiece drawings are now in the Houghton Library at Harvard University, along with studies for them and others that were eventually not used, and some of the studies offer a fairly rare chance to see Roberts's very early ideas for a picture, before the familiar stage of a meticulous pencil study squared up for development as a

watercolour and in some cases as an oil too.

The room in Earl's Court in which the portrait of Lawrence was painted was rented from the wood-engraver William McCance, copies of whose correspondence with WR about a bounced cheque for the rent are in the Tate archive.

Also in the Tate archive is a curious note by Roberts's son, John:

My father had a proof copy of 'Seven Pillars' with the annotations of Lawrence, who passed it to him by sections, as finished with so that he could design tailpieces. Later WR had a note from the Foreign Office about it, and he went down and waited in a corridor with it. Someone came out and examined it, but said it was of little value. Sarah took it to [book dealer Bertram] Rota, who gave her £20. 'We had to have the money.' But WR was not trying to sell it to the FO.

The FO's interest in the proofs may have been just bibliographic, but it is known that there was some official unease about Lawrence after he denounced what he saw as Britain's eventual betrayal of the Arab cause.

Lawrence knew that the Robertses had no money, and was kind enough to offer Clouds Hill to them for summer holidays. He would look in from time to



William and John Roberts at Clouds Hill in the early 1930s

time to see how they were getting on. They were probably too polite to complain about the sanitation, which consisted of a bucket, the contents of which the guest was expected to dispose of around the four acres that went with the property. Another note by John in the Tate archive states, 'Our last stay took many weeks of a fine summer ... WR dug a latrine, army fashion, up the hill among the rhododendrons. I have wondered since whether L. approved.'

Printed in Great Britain by Parchments of Oxford

We have been unable to locate the owner of the copyright of *Ernest Cooper, Esq.* All other illustrations are © the estate of John David Roberts



The Revolt in the Desert, William Roberts's 1952 depiction of T. E. Lawrence, is discussed by Tim Craven on page 5.