
WILLIAM ROBERTS SOCIETY

Newsletter, January 2013



He Knew Degas 1938, a satire on the artist Walter Sickert, shown painting in bed while his third wife, Thérèse Lessore, cuts photographs out of newspapers for him to work from. Matthew Sturgis discusses Roberts and Sickert on page 2.

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WILLIAM ROBERTS SOCIETY

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A VISIT TO THE V&A

The next WRS event will be a visit to the Victoria & Albert Museum prints and drawings study room on Friday 22 March to see ten to fifteen works by William Roberts in the V&A collection. The earliest is from WR's schooldays, and there is also a study for a mural project from his time at the Slade.

The Toe Dancer dates from the year after Roberts left the Slade, when he was living in a house rented by Alexander Stewart Gray, whom his *Times* obituary described as 'the original "hunger march" leader in this country'. Gray (1862–1937) was a Scottish solicitor who in 1908 led a march of unemployed men from the north of England and later fasted near Windsor Castle to draw attention to their plight. In 1914 he rented 8 Ormonde Terrace, by Primrose Hill, where he accommodated young painters and sculptors, including WR. Roberts's drawing shows Gray's wife dancing at a party, with a remarkable



Back View of a Woman Carrying a Sheaf of Corn c.1908, drawn when WR was about thirteen and described in the catalogue of his 1965 retrospective as 'like a detail from an early sixteenth-century painting by some artist such as Andrea del Sarto'.

blend of straightforward representation and Vorticist abstraction.

Two First World War drawings depict German prisoners and soldiers hanging camouflage screens. *Taking the Oath* 1920 is one of the few pictures by Roberts with overt political content, but its significance is obscure. It appears to show people being sworn into the 'Black and Tans', the paramilitary force specially recruited (from unemployed veterans among others) to suppress rebellion against British rule in Ireland.

A study for *He Knew Degas* 1938 is discussed by Matthew Sturgis below.

We will meet inside the V&A's main entrance in Cromwell Road at 2.15, and must go into the study room in groups of no more than ten. Other things to look at inside the museum while waiting will include a free display entitled 'Music Hall: Sickert and the Three Graces'.

ROBERTS AND SICKERT

by Matthew Sturgis

[Among the works we shall see in our visit to the V&A is a pencil study for *He Knew Degas* 1938, showing the painter Walter Sickert (1860–1942) working in bed while his wife cuts photographs out of newspapers – see the front cover. In the 1920s and '30s Sickert controversially based a number of pictures on newspaper photographs. We asked Sickert's biographer Matthew Sturgis for his reaction to Roberts's picture.]

Walter Sickert held a unique position in the British art world during the first



A detail from *The Toe Dancer* 1914, in the V&A collection. The bearded figure tilting his head is Alexander Stewart Gray.

decades of the twentieth century. And it was a position that he enjoyed. He was both a mage and a maverick. He was a forward-looking radical steeped in the traditions of the past. The son of a painter (who had trained in Rome, and in Paris under Thomas Couture), he

himself had been a pupil of Alphonse Legros, a disciple of (and studio assistant to) Whistler, a privileged friend of Degas (from whom he had learned much about the techniques of Ingres and Corot and other early French masters). This accumulated knowledge gave him an abiding sense of connection and continuity. He was bound, as he put it, by a 'golden thread' to the line of the old masters – and he felt it was his duty to pass on his knowledge, to extend the tradition, to maintain the golden thread.

When Sickert returned to London in 1905, at the age of 45, after some six years of self-imposed exile in France, he made it his mission to revitalise British painting. He was shocked to find the native tradition so moribund: so limited in its aims, so 'polite' in both its subjects and its treatment – and so expensive that it could be bought only by plutocrats and aristocrats (or, more properly, their culturally ambitious but culturally ignorant wives). For the next 35 years he sought alternative approaches to picture-making and picture selling, and he encouraged others to do the same. He wrote extensively in the press, and he either formed or supported a succession of exhibiting societies: the Fitzroy Street Group, the Camden Town Group, the Allied Artists Association, the London Group. And in almost all these ventures he harked back to the lessons he had learned – via Degas – from the example of the Impressionists.

His personal contacts with William Roberts were slight. They were both members of the London Group. But Sickert, the older man by 35 years,

recognised in Roberts a true fellow artist, a man with an independent vision and a total dedication to his craft. He lost few opportunities to praise and encourage him. In May 1925, writing in the *Morning Post*, he described how 'If I make my fortune I shall have a Roberts drawing-room' (to go with a dining-room 'hung with Jack Yeats'). In a letter to the *Sunday Times* on 20 May 1928 Sickert remarked, 'Pupilage has nothing whatever to do with seniority. I should like to take finishing lessons from Roberts.' Roberts cannot but have been thrilled and impressed by these endorsements.

If he remained grateful to Sickert for his kind words, he seems to have become increasingly bemused by Sickert's own artistic practice. Beginning in the early 1920s Sickert abandoned his use of drawings as the preliminary stage for his paintings, and began to use photographs (either taken by himself or cut out from the newspapers).

For Roberts – as for many artists and critics and members of the public – this seemed a sort of betrayal of artistic integrity. It was cheating! Sickert was unapologetic. He relished black-and-white photographs not because they spared him the trouble of drawing a motif, but because they contained so much tonal information. 'Tone' – the gradations of light and shade – was what most fascinated Sickert as a painter.

A press photo provided him with a complete tonal account of any scene. He would then use it as the basis for a tonal underpainting – or *camaieu* – done in shades of, say, pink and green. The

naturalistic colours could then be laid over the top of the tonal underpainting. This, he had learned – from his own father, from Degas, and others – had been the method of the old masters, and it was a method that he was thrilled to experiment with during the latter part of his career, in the late 1920s and 1930s.

He made striking images of – among other subjects – the Plaza Tiller Girls, Amelia Earhart’s arrival in England, Lord Beaverbrook and Edward VIII.

While others might be disparaging about the use of photography, Sickert – at this stage of his career – was unapologetic. It helped, perhaps, that he knew that Degas had used photographic sources for some of his pictures, though this was never his stated defence of the practice.

In early 1938 a photograph appeared – in both the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Sketch* – showing the 78-year-old Sickert and his much-younger third wife, Thérèse Lessore, in the artist’s studio at St Peter’s Thanet, surrounded by a sea of newspaper cuttings. It was very probably this striking image that inspired Roberts’s fanciful picture of the elderly Sickert sitting up in bed, painting, while his wife cuts photographs out of the newspapers that surround the bed.

The title of the painting, *He Knew Degas*, seems to carry a hint of reproach: here is a great artist, joined by a golden thread to the giants of Impressionism, who has abandoned his high calling to copy images snipped out of the *Daily Mirror*. But of course it also carries an allusion – perhaps unintentional – to the fact that Degas himself

used photographic sources for some of his works – and like all great artists realised that anything was permissible in the quest to create great art.

AUCTION NEWS

At Christie’s South Kensington on 4 October WR’s ‘pair poster’ *London’s Fairs* sold for £1,750 and the poster *London’s Zoos* (with another work) for £625. At Sotheby’s on 14 November *Checkmate*, a watercolour study for *The*



This watercolour was sold by Christie’s South Kensington on 14 December as *French Peasants* c.1930, although when it was previously sold by Bonhams Chelsea in 1996 it was entitled *Skittle Alley* and *French Peasants*, in the same sale, was a quite different work. The Bonhams titles and sizes correspond to those given when both works were exhibited by Anthony d’Offay in 1969.

Chess Players 1929–30, sold for £94,850. At Bonhams on the same day *Evening in Oban* c.1946 was unsold (estimate £20,000–£30,000), as was *The Poor Family* c.1921–3 (estimate £200,000–£300,000) at Christie’s King Street on 12 December. On 13 December Christie’s sold *Mahomet’s Ride* c.1967 (see the back cover) for £73,250, and on the 14th Christie’s South Kensington sold *Skittle Alley* c.1927 for £7,500.

‘OBSERVING THE MASSES: WILLIAM ROBERTS AND CLASSICISM’

A report by David Cleall

The 2012 a.g.m. took place on 13 November in the very comfortable premises of Mishcon de Reya at Red Lion Square, and we are most grateful to Michael Mitzman for making this possible. Wine was provided by a generous WRS member, and the evening was well attended. After Pauline Paucker, our chair, had dispatched the formal requirements of the a.g.m., the annual William Roberts Society lecture was given by Simon Martin of Pallant House Gallery, Chichester. The title was ‘Observing the Masses: William Roberts and Classicism’.

Simon started by exploring a term used by William Roberts to counter the familiar claim that he was a ‘Vorticist’ – Roberts preferred to see himself as an ‘English Cubist’, and to illustrate this Simon used the recently discovered work *The Boxers* (see last May’s

newsletter) to show the ‘jarring angularities’ that we may associate with this most challenging of modernist movements. However, even at his most abstract, Roberts’s work was still rooted in representation, and following the First World War, like many other European modernists, he moved towards a kind of classicism. For the next 50 years Roberts adhered to this ‘modern classicism’ so consistently as to make his ‘English Cubism’ seem just ‘a phase’.

Roberts’s Slade background had placed a strong emphasis on drawing from plaster casts of great classical and Renaissance sculpture. The Slade Sketch Club frequently set subjects from classical and biblical sources, and principles of picture composition were drawn from ideas of the golden section. Roberts was to return to these principles and this subject matter in the mid-1920s in paintings such as *The Judgement of Paris*, *Christ Expelling the Money Changers from the Temple*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Susannah and the Elders*.

In this context Simon made reference to David Peters Corbett’s term ‘adaptive modernism’ to describe the way that a number of British artists in the 1920s found ‘profitable elements’ in cubism while also placing their work within the context of a classical tradition. Picasso and Leger were seen here as ‘fellow travellers’ in works such as *The Source* (Picasso, 1921) and *Reclining Woman* (Leger, 1922).

Simon then proceeded to look at the classicism in a wide range of less obvious contemporary Roberts subjects.

Here striking, and sometimes humorous, juxtapositions were explored, such as *The Schoolboy* (Roberts, 1930) and Botticelli's *Portrait of a Young Man*, and *The Family* (Roberts, 1935) and Titian's *Rest on the Flight to Egypt*. The treatment of the riders in *In the Straight* (Roberts, c.1949 – again see the May newsletter), Simon felt, had less in common with Alfred Munnings – the celebrated contemporary racehorse painter – than with the Parthenon frieze. Roberts's portrait of T. E. Lawrence had some qualities of a Holbein *Erasmus*.

Bringing a wide-ranging and stimulating lecture to a hilarious end, Simon invited us to consider Roberts's *Rush Hour* 1971 as a battle scene, with a miniskirted shopper fallen from the bus and abandoned on the road reminiscent of a river god from the Parthenon and perhaps even being presented as a modern-day *Dying Gaul* – one of the most celebrated sculptures to have survived from antiquity.



(Top) A fallen shopper from WR's *Rush Hour* 1971; (centre) a sculpture of a river god from the Parthenon (© Trustees of the British Museum); (bottom) the sculpture *The Dying Gaul*, as depicted in an eighteenth-century engraving by Andrea Rossi (© Victoria & Albert Museum)

MASTER OF MONEY

WR's 1932 double portrait of John Maynard Keynes and his wife, Lydia Lopokova – now in the National Portrait Gallery – made a brief appearance during the first programme, devoted to Keynes, in the BBC's 'Masters of Money' TV series in September.

In addition to his distinction as an economist, in 1925 Keynes was one of the founders of the London Artists' Association, which aimed to provide financial assistance to chosen artists,

among whom, from 1927, was Roberts. Keynes regarded Roberts as a painter whose work 'will really live'. As his essay 'Dealers and Galleries' makes clear, Roberts was rather more equivocal about the LAA and Keynes's patronage. ('If you give an artist money, he won't work,' Keynes once told him.)



A Talk about Buddha 1930 probably shows a social gathering with A. P. de Zoysa and his wife (see page 8), who met through a shared interest in Buddhism.

During a preliminary discussion about the portrait, WR was startled when, having got something in his eye, Lopokova offered to lick it out for him. And he recalled that 'On a wintry Spring day, during one of the sittings, Keynes looked through the window at the sleet falling outside in Gordon Square; then briskly rubbing his hands together, remarked gleefully "This will nip the young green shoots." I got the impression that he foresaw a rise in the price of corn per bushel.'

WR AT TATE BRITAIN

The William Roberts display at Tate Britain continues until 10 March. And many of Roberts's peers from the Slade

are now well represented in the rehanging of the collection which is under way pending the expected completion of Tate Britain's building project in May: Nevinson with four works, Gertler with two, Spencer with two, and there are also major works on display by Bomberg and Wyndham Lewis. A postcard of WR's *The Art Gallery* 1973 is on sale in the Tate shop.

ROBERTS IN ITALY

WR's early-sixties group portrait *The Vorticists at the Restaurant de la Tour Eiffel, Spring 1915* was included in the exhibition 'Another Time: Between the Decadent Movement and Modern Style', which has just closed at the

Museo di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto in northern Italy. Embracing Bloomsbury, Vorticism and the Sitwells, with works ‘almost wholly unknown outside the UK’, it aimed ‘to make the public aware of a world never hitherto considered by the history of art and in part lost today, in which the links between artists are often surprising’.

A. P. DE ZOYSA

Kumari Jayawardena has sent us a copy of her recently published biography of her father, *A. P. de Zoysa: Combative Social Democrat and Buddhist Reformer in 20th Century Sri Lanka* (Sanjiva Books, Colombo, Sri Lanka): see <http://tinyurl.com/apdzbio>. ‘AP’ (1890–1968) and his English wife, née Eleanor Hutton, became friends of the Robertses when he was a student in London in the late 1920s, and kept in touch after his return to Sri Lanka. As described in our March 2009 newsletter, WR painted portraits of both AP and Kumari, and the biography – which reproduces five works by Roberts – provides an insight into WR’s cosmopolitan social circle in the interwar years as well as a compelling account of its subject, of whom someone who knew him

said, ‘His identifying trait or distinctive quality was his gentleness of manner, demeanour and speech, coupled with the passion and fearless iconoclasm of his reforming zeal. He was a placid, temperate Buddhist scholar; mild and soft-spoken by nature, but steadfast, tenacious, resolute, persistent in seeking political and social justice. He was never afraid of being the lone voice or the odd one out – it just would not have occurred to him that it mattered.’

‘YOUR PAINTINGS’

The BBC’s Your Paintings website now shows 70 paintings by WR in UK public collections: see

<http://tinyurl.com/ypwroberts>.

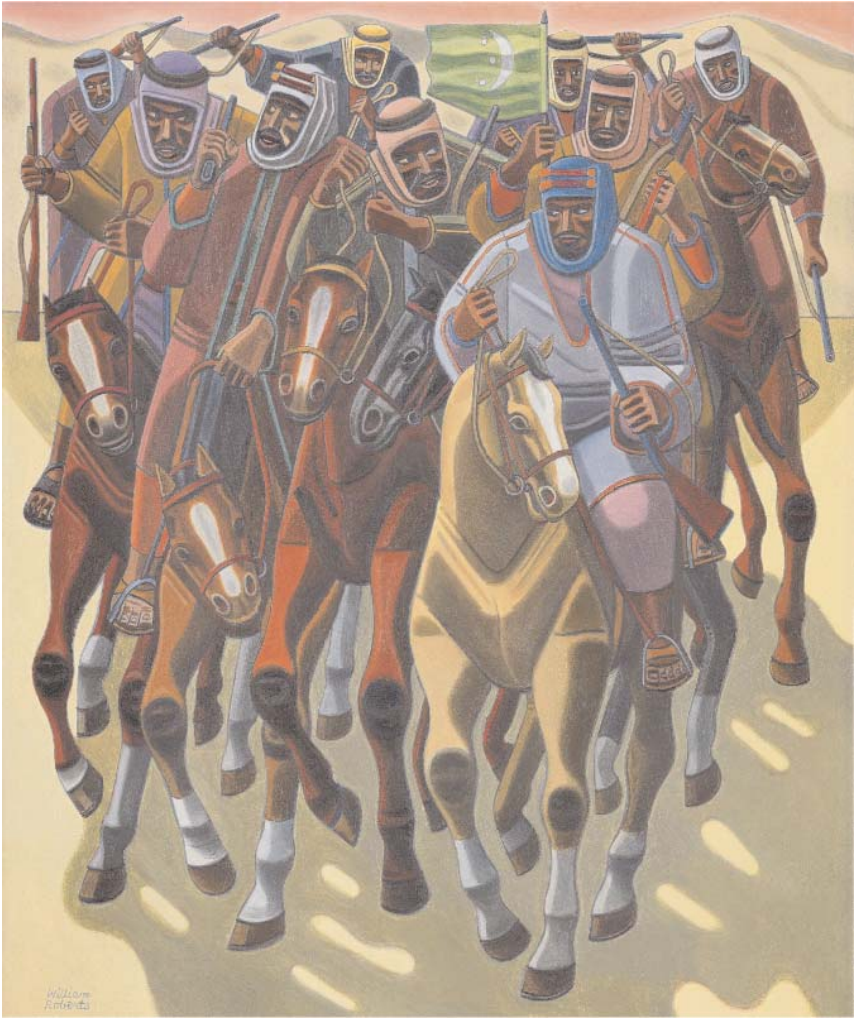
We are hoping that the works owned by King’s College, Cambridge, are still to come.

FAREWELL

We were sorry to hear of the death in September of WRS member Tony McMahon, after a long illness. He and his partner, Enid Fox, were friends of Sarah and John Roberts and often entertained them to meals. We send Enid our condolences.

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Mahomet's Ride c.1967 was sold at Christie's on 13 December for £73,250. The flag being carried appears to be that used by the Kingdom of Egypt in 1923–52, suggesting that the subject matter is not related to the Arab Revolt of 1916–18, the involvement of T. E. Lawrence in which is depicted in *Revolt in the Desert* 1952 (see the January 2012 newsletter) and which was the subject of Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, for which Roberts supplied illustrations in the 1920s. So exactly what is being depicted? Suggestions welcome.