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# WILLIAM ROBERTS SOCIETY

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**Newsletter, January 2014**



*Old Marston Ferry* 1944, a watercolour from William Roberts's wartime period in Oxfordshire, is one of the works we will see on our visit to Tate Britain on 5 April – see page 1.

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Cinema* ... An English Cubist in Europe**

# WILLIAM ROBERTS SOCIETY

registered charity no. 1090538

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January 2014

## A VISIT TO TATE BRITAIN

The next William Roberts Society event will be a visit to the Tate Britain prints and drawings study room on Saturday 5 April to see about twenty works on paper by Roberts not included in the 2012–13 Tate WR display.

We will assemble inside the Millbank entrance to the Tate's Clore wing at 11.15. As we are limited to two groups of not more than twelve, please tell Marion Hutton (contact details above) if you want to come.

## 'WILLIAM ROBERTS IN THE "ATOMIC AGE"'

The 2013 a.g.m. took place on 29 October in the very comfortable premises of Mishcon de Reya at Red Lion Square, and we are again most grateful to Michael Mitzman for making this possible, and to the generous WRS member, who provided refreshments for a well-

attended event. After Pauline Paucker, our chair, had dispatched the formal requirements of the a.g.m., the annual William Roberts Society lecture was given by David Cleall, whose subject



A study for *Shuttlecock* c.1934 – one of the works we will see on our visit to Tate Britain on 5 April

was ‘William Roberts in the “Atomic Age”: Publicity, Patronage and Paranoia’.

The 1950s, said David, was a period when WR came to realise that he needed actively to promote his work in order to achieve financial security and to defend his place in British art history. In the late 1940s the Robertses were struggling to get by on occasional sales and WR’s day a week teaching life drawing. A nomination for election to the Royal Academy came to nothing, but Roberts nevertheless recognised the RA summer show as a useful sales opportunity and submitted small-scale work, which was accepted.

David saw the publicity given to Stanley Spencer’s return to the RA in 1950, with large-scale work, as prompting WR to strive to make a greater impact there – first (using a large canvas supplied for a Festival of Britain project) with 1951’s *The Temptation of St Anthony*, which, *The Times* said, dominated its room. Other substantial works followed, and became a recognisable part of RA summer shows; but, as David noted, their size made them unlikely to appeal to private buyers.

Fortunately Roberts had found a patron in the health-food entrepreneur Ernest Cooper. Cooper bought *St Anthony* at the RA, and was subsequently to buy other Robertses shown there – albeit at substantial discounts when they had failed to find other buyers.

Cooper also commissioned illustrations for the publications of his London Health Centre, and David showed the interrelationship between these drawings, those produced for a Leicester Galleries show, and the RA canvases.

When, in 1956, the Tate’s exhibition ‘Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism’ relegated WR to the ranks of ‘other Vorticists’, his experience with Cooper’s publications, David suggested, may have played a part in Roberts deciding to defend his role in the Vorticist movement in the first of what became a series of ‘Vortex Pamphlets’. A later pamphlet was aimed at the Tate’s director, John Rothenstein, for the misleading account of Roberts in the second volume of his *Modern English Painters*. Unfamiliar Tate archive material illustrated the reaction to WR’s complaints.

A successful Leicester Galleries show in early 1958 was followed by the news that Roberts had at last been elected to the RA. He decided to mark the honour with a large picture on a royal theme: *Trooping the Colour*. At the same time he was preparing a publication that would illustrate all periods of his work and note that – in ‘this Atomic Age’ – ‘today more than ever, an artist needs the support of a continuous barrage of advertisement’. Despite the attention that *Trooping the Colour* received, it too failed to sell and Cooper again stepped in, paying just one-sixth of the asking price. But at this stage, David suggested, drawing an informative and stimulating talk to an end, Cooper probably felt that his work as a patron was done, and after a final commission, of a change-of-address card for his business, he neither commissioned nor bought any further work by Roberts.

This summary does scant justice to David’s material, but an expanded version of his lecture will be available in



A detail from *The Critic Intervenes* c.1948 (top), which uses the same tight hatching as in illustrations for the London Health

Centre such as the tailpiece for *A Simple Guide to Healthy Food* (middle), which in turn shares a detail with *The Temptation of St Anthony* 1950–51 (bottom)

February as a 52-page illustrated WRS pamphlet, price £4.50 (inc. p&ep), from Marion Hutton (contact details on page 1).

## AUCTION NEWS

A number of works by WR were announced for auction after the last newsletter went to press.

At Sworders, Stansted, on 16 October a watercolour self-portrait from c.1970 sold for £3,224, a first state of the self-portrait etching from c.1925 for £1,550, and the cover artwork for *Some Early Abstract and Cubist Work* 1957 (see last May’s newsletter) also for £1,550.

At Christie’s on 20 November the oil *The Bowling Alley* 1927 (see the back cover) sold for £242,500 and a red-chalk study for *The Cockneys* c.1919 made £43,750.

At Holloway’s, Banbury, on 10 December *Fred* 1920–23, a portrait of WR’s dealer’s nephew Frederick Knewstub (see the June 2010 newsletter), sold for £6,200.

At Sotheby’s on 10–11 December *The Wimpy Bar* 1975 sold for £56,250 and *Collecting Birds Eggs* 1968 for £16,250.

## CONTINUING ‘UPROAR!’

As mentioned in the last newsletter, WR’s *At the Hippodrome* 1920 is one of the 50 works included in the exhibition “‘Uproar!’: The First 50 Years of the London Group’ at the Ben Uri Gallery. Reviewing the exhibition in *Country*

*Life* on 27 November, Peyton Skipwith declared that ‘a visit to the Ben Uri is a must for everyone interested in the development of 20th-century British Art, especially the advanced movements of the interwar years.’ The gallery, at 108A Boundary Rd, London NW8 0RH, is open from Sunday to Friday – please check for the times – and the exhibition runs until 2 March. Admission is free.

### KEVIN BROWNLOW ON THE CINEMA

[WR’s 1920 painting *The Cinema* is currently on show at Tate Britain. We asked the silent-film historian Kevin Brownlow for his thoughts on the film being shown in the picture, and are very grateful for the following comments.]

The only reference that comes to mind for the image on the screen is a William S. Hart western c.1916. However, the painting is so stylised that, although I’ve seen most of the extant Hart films, none of them springs to mind. To be over-literal, the screen is too large, the people are too close (and the people at the side aren’t going to see very much) and the preoccupied usher looks as if he’s joined the American prison service. (That would be useful to deal with unruly crowds.) The pianist, half concealed, isn’t looking at the screen and would have difficulty if she tried. But Hart wore that kind of hat, although he is usually the one with the two revolvers. The image on the screen seems to combine a hold-up and a love scene. Fascinating!



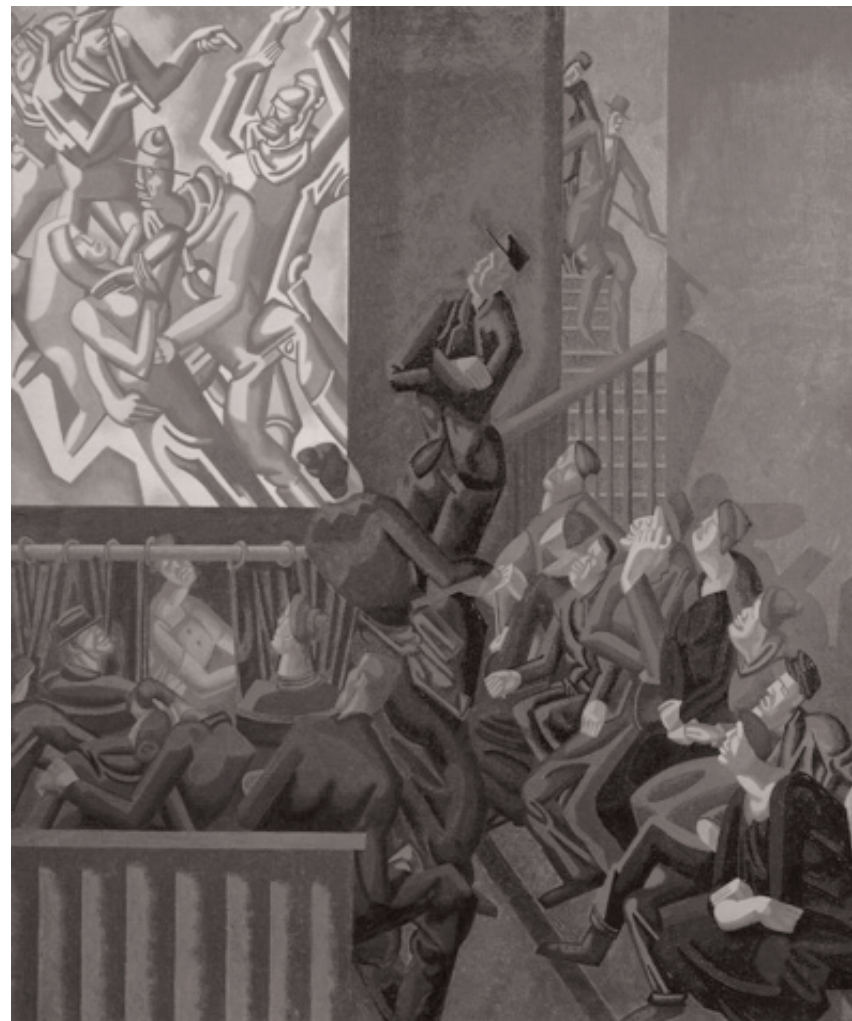
The artist’s model? Silent-film star William S. Hart (1864–1946) in around 1920

The earliest interior of a film show I have seen is a Sickert of a music hall, with a film running between the acts. This one captures the intimacy and eagerness of the early cinema with its working-class audience, and yet more customers are joining an already overcrowded auditorium. Note that, although there seems to be a lady selling something, no one is eating or drinking, as would be the case today!

### AN ENGLISH CUBIST IN EUROPE

by David Cleall

While William Roberts is rightly characterised as a quintessentially English artist, the recent sale at Christie’s of *The*



*The Cinema* 1920

*Bowling Alley* 1927 – ‘inspired by a visit to Germany’ according to the catalogue of the 1965 WR retrospective – prompted me to reflect on the European influence on his work and the stimulus that travel abroad provided with regard to subject matter.

Roberts’s time at the Slade coincided with the sensational Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition of 1912, which broadly speaking introduced the London art world to Bonnard, Cézanne, Derain, Matisse and Picasso. Writing in 1957 Roberts explained that he ‘became an

abstract painter under the influence of the French cubists; this influence was further strengthened by a stay in France and Italy during the summer of 1913.' His experience of active service in northern France was powerfully explored in his war subjects of 1918–19, and as he moved to non-war subjects he obtained an unusual commission from Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell. Following a visit to Modigliani's studio in Paris, they had decided to put on an exhibition of French art in London, and Roberts was to design a poster promoting the event. The exhibition included work by Picasso, Modigliani, Léger, Derain and Dufy, and Roberts's poster design is in an uncompromising 'cubist' style. However, in this immediate post-war world there was little appetite for 'abstract' art and, just as Picasso and Derain's work of the time can be regarded as a 'return to order', so Roberts was to turn to recognisable scenes of everyday life – albeit in an original visual style that drew upon cubism, Vorticism and expressionism.

His seeking-out and emphasising of geometric forms through the simplification and exaggeration of especially cylindrical shapes has led to his figures being described as 'tubular' or 'tubist' – a term originally coined as a derogatory reference to Fernand Léger's idiosyncratic version of cubism.

The French influence on Roberts's visual style was coupled with a positive outlook towards European culture. Initially this was experienced through the immigrant community of the East End and his wife's Russian Jewish background; later it was through the restaur-



*French Peasants c.1928*

ants and shops of Fitzrovia and the bohemian lifestyle of artists in the London of the twenties.

Holidays for the Robertses were presumably uncomfortable affairs, as they were always on a shoestring budget and dependent on the goodwill of friends for accommodation. Photographs of William and Sarah Roberts in Paris may have been associated with a honeymoon in the early twenties. In the later twenties they certainly took a holiday in La Ciotat near Cassis in the South of France. Cassis had attracted artists such as Matisse and Derain, and in the twenties



*The Rhine Boat 1927–8*

it was to become associated with a number of British artists, including the Bloomsbury set and the 'Scottish Colourists'. Edward Wadsworth, a fellow Vorticist and purchaser of Roberts's large painting *Dock Gates*, visited the area in 1921 and 1924. Roberts's holiday in the South of France, probably in 1927, provided the material for at least three works: *Loading Ballast*, *Bullfight* and *French Peasants*.

*Loading Ballast* (aka *The Mazepa*) is an attractive large watercolour that invites comparison with Wadsworth's calm French marine scenes of this time

such as *La Rochelle* (1924). *Bullfight* exists as two studies, and the date on the Pallant House watercolour (1928; see the last newsletter) makes it likely that it depicts a French rather than a Spanish bullfight. *French Peasants* exists as a watercolour study and as a large oil painting (also known as *The Labourers*) now hanging in the library of King's College, Cambridge. It is a striking vertical composition of male and female workers in a field, and the availability of such subject matter to Roberts, as a passer-by, led to Spanish and Italian variants being produced in the thirties (*Spanish*

*Peasants*) and in the sixties (*Italian Peasants*).

Around the time of the Cassis holiday Roberts also travelled to Germany in a party led by the bookseller and publisher Charles Lahr and including the writers H. E. Bates and Rhys Davies. The group sailed from Gravesend to Rotterdam, and then travelled via Cologne and Mannheim to Lahr's birthplace in Wendelsheim. This trip was extraordinarily productive for Roberts, as the three works it inspired – *The Prodigal Sets Out*, *The Rhine Boat* and *The Bowling Alley* – are among his best. *The Rhine Boat* (in the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art at Edinburgh) is a humorous portrayal of tourists in a 'tubist' style. *The Bowling Alley* perfectly captures the non-verbal communication and psychological interplay in a working men's bar.

In the early thirties the Roberts family was offered the use for two or three weeks of the flat in Alicante of the brother of their friend Agustín de Irizar, lecturer in Spanish at Leeds University. They initially aborted their trip when, arriving at Victoria station, they found the fare was £5 more than expected, but the next day the London rain persuaded them to go after all. *The Family* (aka *The Peasants*) and *Spanish Beggars* date from this holiday, while *Spanish Rhythm*, a depiction of a Spanish folk dance, was painted a few years later. It is not known whether the wonderful 1931

painting of cyclists *Les Routiers* (Ulster Museum, Belfast) was inspired by a direct encounter by Roberts with the Tour de France, but it seems to depict a distinctly European approach to what might otherwise have been an English activity.

In their later years William and Sarah continued to visit the Mediterranean countries – Italy and Greece being two destinations documented – but it was Spain for which they had a particular fondness. They sometimes accompanied their son, John, when he attended guitar courses there, and bought a troublesome donkey cottage in Bédar in Andalusia. When Roberts's friend and patron Ernest Cooper retired in the late sixties he bought a property in Spain, and the Robertses stayed there on more than one occasion. As late as 1976 – when Roberts was 81 – he visited Etretat on the Normandy coast. The cliffs there had been an attraction for many artists, including Gustave Courbet and Claude Monet, and two of the famous natural arches are alluded to in the background to Roberts's painting *Boule Players at Etretat*. However, as the title suggests, Roberts was particularly drawn to that most French leisure pursuit – boules. A fascinating comparison in both style and subject matter can be drawn between *The Bowling Alley* of 1927 and the *Boule Players* completed almost fifty years later.

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We have been unable to locate the owner of the copyright of the photograph on page 4. All other illustrations are © the estate of John David Roberts.



*The Bowling Alley* 1927, 'inspired by a visit to Germany' and sold by Christie's on 20 November – see pages 3 and 5.