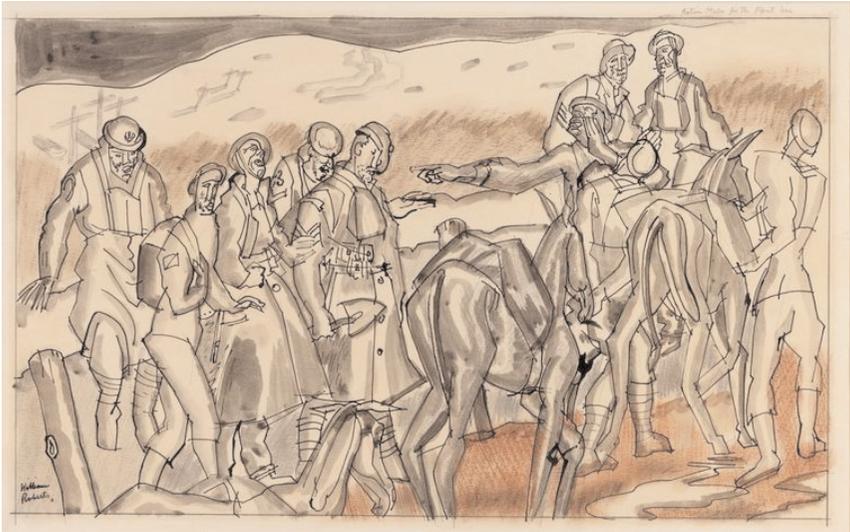

WILLIAM ROBERTS SOCIETY

Newsletter, January 2015



Pack Mules c.1918 (© IWM ART 1165). Inscribed 'Ration Mules for the Front Line', this, along with *Grooming Horses* c.1916, is one of two works by WR included in the exhibition 'The Horse at War: 1914–1918' at The Lightbox, Woking, until 1 March. Richard Slocombe of the Imperial War Museum will discuss WR's war art in the WRS annual lecture on 11 April – see page 1 for details.

**Annual lecture and a.g.m. ... WR in Oxford ... WR in Cambridge ...
WR, modernism and dance ... Farewells**

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: mail@radavenport.co.uk), Michael Mitzman (copyright),

Ruth Artmonsky, Anne Goodchild, Agi Katz

www.williamrobertssociety.co.uk

January 2015

ANNUAL LECTURE AND A.G.M.

The final WRS a.g.m. and annual lecture will take place at the Art Workers' Guild at 6 Queen Square, London WC1N 3AT, on 11 April. Our speaker, after a brief a.g.m. at 2.30, will be Richard Slocombe, senior curator at the Imperial War Museum, who organised the exhibition 'Truth and Memory: British Art of the First World War', which continues at the IWM until 8 March. His subject will be 'William Roberts and the Art of the First World War', looking particularly at the impact of the war on the work of the artists concerned. Admission £4, inc. refreshments; nearest tubes Holborn and Russell Square.



Red Cross Dressing Station, Advanced Post
1918

WR IN OXFORD

WR's pencil study for *The Park Bench* 1933 (aka *Group of People Sitting on a Bench*) – see page 2 – will be included in

the exhibition 'Great British Drawings' at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Including over 100 works from the museum's collection, many of them being shown in public for the first time, the exhibition will run from 26 March to 31 August.



Pencil study for *The Park Bench* 1933

WR IN CAMBRIDGE

Three early works by WR – *The Toe Dancer* (1914) and *Two-step I* and *II* (1915) are among the works to be included in the exhibition ‘Gaudier-Brzeska: New Rhythms. Art, Dance and Movement in London 1911–1915’ at Kettle’s Yard Gallery in Cambridge from 17 March to 21 June. This exhibition marks the centenary of the death (aged 23) in the First World War of the French-born London-based sculptor and draughtsman Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and is the first to explore his engagement with dance and movement alongside work by his contemporaries David Bomberg, Jacob Epstein, William Roberts, Auguste Rodin, Helen Saunders and others who also engaged with the subject of dance.

WR, MODERNISM AND DANCE

by David Cleall

Members who went on our visit to the Victoria & Albert Museum’s prints and drawings study room in March 2013 enjoyed seeing William Roberts’s *The Toe Dancer* 1914, and now this extraordinary drawing is to be exhibited at Kettle’s Yard, Cambridge, with two of Roberts’s Vorticist studies for *Two-step* 1915, in the forthcoming exhibition ‘Gaudier-Brzeska: New Rhythms. Art, Dance and Movement in London 1911–1915’ (see above). This serves as a reminder that, like many of his fellow modernists, Roberts was not immune from the excitement about dance that swept the capital in the years before the First World War.



The Toe Dancer 1914

‘Wild, bizarre, naive, barbaric, entrancing, beautiful’, as Peter Brooker described them in *Bohemia in London*, his book on the social scene of early modernism, Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes came to London for the first time in 1911 and returned on several occasions before

the war. This period also saw Roger Fry’s ‘Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition’, which in 1912 brought to the Grafton Galleries Henri Matisse’s *Dance I*. The *Times* critic of 1912 felt that ‘[Matisse] is not interested in his dancers as women. He is interested in

the rhythm which they make together.'

It is quite possible that Roberts saw the Ballets Russes in 1913, during his last year at the Slade. Ezra Pound's poem 'Les Millwains' describes a 'turbulent and undisciplined host of art students' from the Slade attending a performance by the Ballets Russes in London in March of that year. Although the poem specifically mentions a performance of Michel Fokine's ballet *Cléopâtre*, it is most likely that the students' excitement related to the other work on the bill that evening – *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, with Vaslav Nijinsky, who choreographed the piece, in the principal role. Both ballets were designed by Léon Bakst.

Roberts's best friend from the Slade, David Bomberg, was friendly with the Russian Ballet dancer Maria Wajda, and had other dancer friends from the East End. He took inspiration from the Ballets Russes for an artist's book of six richly coloured lithographs, *Russian Ballet*, published in 1919 but based on pre-war sketches.

After leaving the Slade, Bomberg and Roberts were for a brief period both members of an artists' commune in Primrose Hill, at the house of the Scottish solicitor-turned-hunger-marcher Stewart Gray. It was here that Bomberg met Alice Mayes, a dancer with Kosslov's Ballet Company, who had been invited to the house to demonstrate 'Russian Dance Steps'. Bomberg and Mayes would marry in 1916. And it was at a party at this house in Ormonde Terrace that Roberts was inspired to create his extraordinary *The Toe Dancer*.

Unlike Bomberg's, Roberts's dance subjects take their inspiration from popular dance forms. The turkey trot, the bunny hug and 'shaking the shimmy' had a sensuality and a raw sexuality that shocked the middle-classes as much as Fry's post-Impressionists had rattled the popular press. In 1912 the Cave of the Golden Calf, a basement nightclub off Regent Street, had been opened by Madame Strindberg, a former wife of the Swedish playwright – 'a small plump pale-complexioned brunette, with a forceful manner', according to Roberts. With decorations by Wyndham Lewis, Spencer Gore and Eric Gill, this exemplified the exciting contemporary collision between popular dance, ragtime jazz and the visual arts. The description 'ragtime' seems to have embraced a wide range of musical forms beyond jazz, including tango, apache and veil dances. Isadora Duncan, who was associated with this scene, was renowned for the sensuality of her dance performances, and her daring, flimsy costumes probably inspired Nina Hammett, artist, model and 'Queen of Bohemia', who was not averse to dancing naked.

This atmosphere seems to have been paralleled somewhat in the Ormonde Terrace party of *The Toe Dancer*. The focus of the picture is an eccentric dance performance from Stewart Gray's wife, who is performing semi-naked and appears to be morphing into Vorticist abstraction, as does a male dancer in the background. *The Toe Dancer* would be exhibited by Roberts in the second exhibition of the London Group, in March 1915.



Two-step I 1915

The forthcoming Gaudier-Brzeska exhibition at Kettle's Yard will also show WR's two studies for *Two-step* from 1915. These highly abstract studies are Roberts at his most Vorticist. The two-step, which pre-dated ragtime, was a more lively form of the waltz, but, while popular with a younger generation, it did not elicit the wild abandon associated with the Golden Calf. However, from these studies, Roberts's painting would appear to be uncompromising. *Two-step* was exhibited in the Doré Galleries' 'Vorticist Exhibition' in June 1915 – a show that included Gaudier-Brzeska's sculpture *Dancer*, which provides one of

the focuses of the Kettle's Yard show. Unfortunately the present whereabouts of Roberts's painting is unknown.

To get an idea of a fully developed Roberts dance-related work of the time we can look at *The Dancers*. In April 1914 a study for this work was reproduced in the magazine *The New Age*, where the critic T. E. Hulme dissuaded viewers from trying to unpick the details of the work too assiduously: 'This drawing contains four figures. I could point out the position of these figures in more detail, but I think such detailed indication misleading ... The interest of the drawing itself depends on the forms it

contains. The fact that such forms were suggested by human figures is of no importance.' This comment, which is surprisingly similar to the *Times* critic's account of Matisse's *Dance I* quoted above, would later be contested by Roberts.

Wyndham Lewis published a reproduction of the final version of *The Dancers* in the first issue of *Blast* magazine, in June 1914, and while the quality of the reproduction is poor it does provide us with a record of a fully realised Roberts Vorticist oil painting. Richard Cork in 1974 commented that it was 'an incredibly precocious achievement for a young artist of 18 years of age'. This painting was probably the picture exhibited as *The Dance* in the Whitechapel Gallery's exhibition 'Twentieth Century Art – A Review of Modern Movements' in the summer of 1914, after which no definite record of it exists.

After Roberts had been withdrawn from military service in 1918 and completed two war-artist commissions, he turned again to dance as a suitable modernist subject. Following a lively drawing *Dance with Tambourines*, a pencil study for *The Dancers* does not prepare us for the impact of the finished work – see the back cover – a large panel painted as part of a triptych to be hung outside the upstairs 'Vorticist Saloon' (decorated by Wyndham Lewis) of the Hôtel de la Tour Eiffel in Fitzrovia. While the scale, the graphic qualities and the bold colour contrasts might be expected to communicate a vibrancy appropriate to dance, there is something mournful and disturbing in the highly stylised couples



The Dancers – the study published in *The New Age* in April 1914



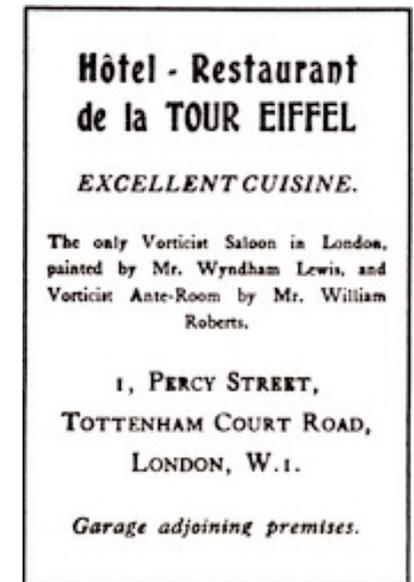
The Dancers – the oil as reproduced in *Blast* in June 1914



Dance with Tambourines 1918

shuffling rather claustrophobically around the dance floor.

If a legacy of Roberts's war experiences can be detected in this panel, a further dance subject, from 1923, is a much more upbeat rendering of a similar scene. *The Dance Club* (or *The Jazz Party*), owned by Leeds City Art Gallery since 1928, is a lively, angular highly coloured work that places at its centre an exuberant individual who has broken away from the dancing couples and with hands raised above his head has surrendered to the music. *The Dance Club* is a popular, often-reproduced work, as it so much stands for the twenties as the 'Jazz Age'. In 1985 Richard Cork interviewed Sarah Roberts, who said that her husband liked to dance and 'was a good dancer'. While I can't imagine him



An advertisement in *The Tyro*, 1922



The Dance Club 1923

taking centre stage in wild abandon, I would like to think that he and Sarah had themselves enjoyed a two-step at a modest venue such as this club.

FAREWELLS

As the last newsletter was being printed we were sorry to hear of the death, aged 97, of one of the William Roberts Society's founders, Diana Gurney. Diana, a neighbour and firm friend of Sarah and John Roberts, had been a pupil of Mark Gertler and taught for many years at St

Martin's School of Art. She was active in many local conservation societies, but, as her friend Dick Bird put it, 'Diana treasured her neighbourhood, without realising she was one of its principal treasures.' For her obituary published in the *Camden New Journal*, see <http://tinyurl.com/cnjdianag>.

We were also sorry to hear of the death during the summer of WRS member Frank Orford. Frank, a psychotherapist, was was also a supportive neighbour and friend of the Robertses, and we send our condolences to his widow, Eileen.

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The Dancers 1919 – one of three large panels painted to be hung as a triptych outside the Vorticist dining room of the Hôtel de la Tour Eiffel in Fitzrovia. David Cleall writes about Roberts, modernism and dance on pages 2–8.