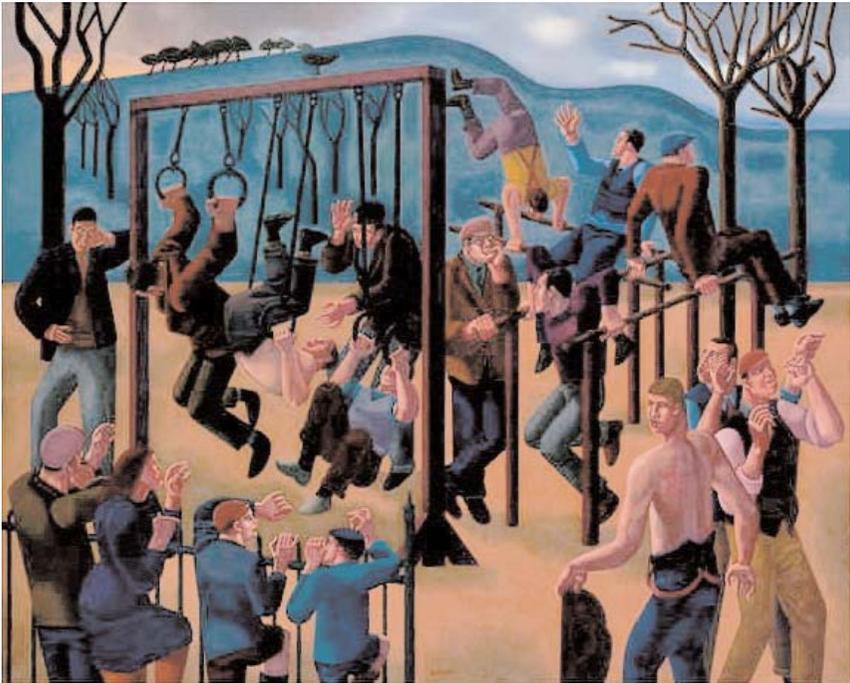

WILLIAM ROBERTS SOCIETY

Newsletter, May 2012



Primrose Hill c.1930, one of three works by WR in the Frank and Cheryl Cohen collection which are on show at Chatsworth until 10 June

**A William Roberts display at Tate Britain ... WR at Chatsworth ...
Auction news ... *Boxers* – a major 'lost' Vorticist work ... This is Roberts
This is Britain ... Website developments ... Walking with Sarah**

WILLIAM ROBERTS SOCIETY

registered charity no. 1090538

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May 2012

A WILLIAM ROBERTS DISPLAY AT TATE BRITAIN

On Saturday 2 June, our next event will be a visit to a new display of drawings and paintings by William Roberts at Tate Britain, meeting inside the Millbank entrance at 11.00 a.m.

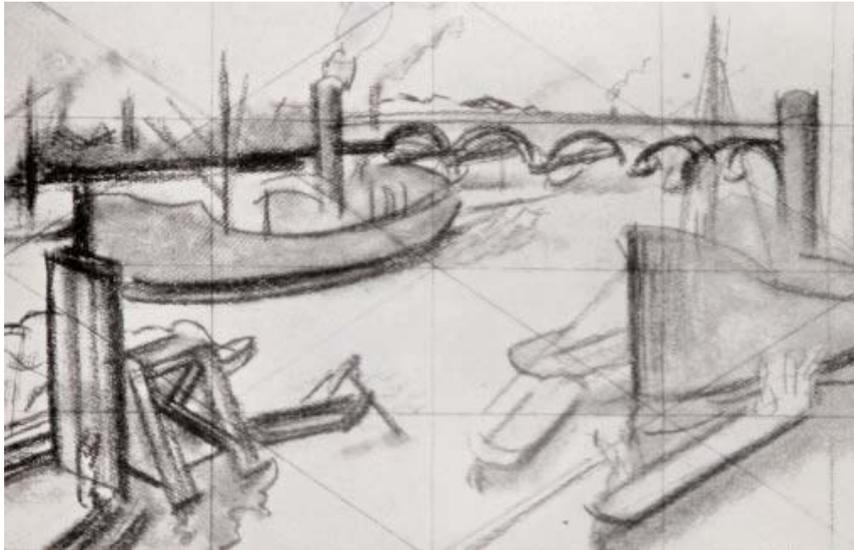
The display will largely be selected from the 117 works that were accepted in lieu of inheritance tax payable on the estate of Sarah Roberts and allocated to the Tate in 2007. It was the large quantity of high-quality drawings that the Robertses had still owned that was particularly exciting in these works, and the Tate's curator of modern British art, Emma Chambers, has especially focused on drawings from the 1920s – supplemented with oil paintings from the Tate's collection such as *The Cinema* (1920), *Port of London* (c.1922) and *Deposition from the Cross* (c.1926).

A belief in the importance of drawing was an attitude that William Roberts shared with his friend and fellow ex-

Slade student Bernard Meninsky. As visiting teachers at the Central School of Arts and Crafts, Roberts and Meninsky often jointly supervised the large life classes. While Roberts rarely articulated



Athletes Exercising in a Gymnasium 1920,
to be included in Tate Britain's William
Roberts display



Sketch for a River Painting c.1919, another work to be included in Tate Britain's William Roberts display

his aesthetic principles, Meninsky did publish a series of lectures for the Arts Council under the title *The Art of Drawing* (1948). He commented, 'Ingres felt a picture well drawn was already one painted ... art was about clarity of expression and the suppression of ambiguity.' The Tate display – which is due to open on 21 May and will run, with free admission, until March 2013 – will provide a great opportunity to observe the extent to which this is also true of Roberts's work.

WR AT CHATSWORTH

Three oils by WR – *The Masks* c.1932, which set an auction record for Roberts at Sotheby's sale of the Evill/Frost col-

lection in June 2011, *The Restaurant* 1929, which briefly held the auction record in the same sale, and *Primrose Hill* c.1930 (see the front cover) – are among the works from the Frank and Cheryl Cohen collection on show at Chatsworth House until 10 June.

Primrose Hill has not been seen in public since 1931, when *The Times* commented on how, in 'the most excellent painting of "Primrose Hill," more specifically the boys' gymnasium on that eminence, Mr. Roberts is working in colour. The mauves and purples, delightful in themselves, enter into the spirit of the spiral movement of the figures round the vertical system of the apparatus and railings. The formal movements and the colour progressions are at one, so that you think of the gen-

eral colour of the picture and not of its individual colours – though you cannot but admire the judgment with which the blue of the hill is summed up "sforzando" in the boy's figure at the bottom by the railings.'

AUCTION NEWS

On 10 May Sotheby's in Bond Street are selling four works by WR: *Boxers* 1914 (estimate £100,000–£150,000; see page 4), *The Chess Players* 1929–30 (oil on canvas; estimate £300,000–£500,000),

In the Straight c.1949 (watercolour and pencil; estimate £25,000–£30,000) and *Day Out on the River* 1978 (oil on canvas; estimate £40,000–£60,000).

The Chess Players (see page 5) was until recently in the collection of Newark Museum, New Jersey, which was given it by the Contemporary Art Society in 1940. When it was shown at the London Artists' Association in 1931, *The Times* commented, 'Good composer as he is, Mr. Roberts can also hold a picture together by the sheer force of its emotion as indicated by attitude and facial expression – the moment of tension in "The Chess Players," for example.' Notes by John Roberts mention his father – 'a dogged player' – playing chess with his Sri Lankan friend Paul de Zoysa 'into the small hours'. It is possible, therefore, that the players shown in the picture are members of the overseas-student community of which de Zoysa was a part.

On 23–24 May Christie's in King Street are selling *Masked Revels* 1953 (oil on canvas; estimate £200,000–£300,000), and *Parallel Bars* 1970 (watercolour; estimate £10,000–£15,000).

Both Sotheby's and Christie's will have the works they are selling on display for a few days before the sales.

At Bloomsbury Auctions on 26 January a pencil study for *Woman and Dog* 1939 from the Craigie Aitchison collection sold for a hammer price of £950.

At Christie's South Kensington on 22 March the pencil drawing *The Flying Dutchman* c.1915 was unsold (estimate £3,000–£5,000).



A detail from *Masked Revels* 1953, showing a figure reminiscent of WR's *The Revolt in the Desert* (see the January newsletter). The painting is to be sold by Christie's on 23 May.



In the Straight c.1949, to be sold by Sotheby's on 10 May

BOXERS – A MAJOR ‘LOST’ VORTICIST WORK

By David Cleall

In his later years William Roberts was understandably frustrated that it was difficult to substantiate the importance of his role in the avant-garde artistic scene of 1913–15 as all the major works from this period were lost. Of the four large abstract paintings that Roberts exhibited in the Doré Galleries' Vorticist Exhibition of 1915, *Overbacks* and *Jeu* appear to have been sold off in America in 1927 and their whereabouts are now unknown, as are those of *Two-step* and *Theatre*. Writing in 1969 he felt that

‘there was only my word as evidence that I had ever shown four large abstract paintings in the [Vorticist] Group’s’ first exhibition’. Two other abstract paintings that Roberts exhibited, also in 1915, *The Boatman* and *The Parting*, have likewise disappeared without a trace, never being exhibited again.

In the late 1960s, when some studies for the four Vorticist paintings surfaced at Sotheby's, Roberts was ‘much elated’ and published them in *8 Cubist Designs*. In the 1974 Hayward exhibition ‘Vorticism and Its Allies’ Richard Cork made a systematic attempt to reconstruct Roberts's role through the exhibition of all known drawings, watercolours and



The Chess Players 1929–30, to be sold by Sotheby's on 10 May

reproductions such as those in *Blast* magazine. However, it seemed that no ‘finished’ works of the Vorticist period existed.

With no change to this situation for the following thirty years, it is of great interest and excitement that at last a major Roberts Vorticist work has turned up. A few months ago Sotheby's became aware of the existence of a large finished drawing by Roberts, *Boxers*, dating from 1914 – see the back cover. It is a powerful work in an uncompromising abstract style. The drawing has not

been exhibited since the second London Group exhibition of 1915, and was never reproduced. Sotheby's will be selling it on 10 May.

The unusual presence of a printed notice of ‘KID LEWIS v. JIM BERRY AT THE PREMIERLAND’ stuck to the top right-hand corner clarifies that this abstract black-and-white ink drawing is derived from a boxing subject. The contest, on 14 March 1914, at that Whitechapel venue would have been a big draw for William Roberts, his friend David Bomberg and other East End

artists. ‘Kid’ Lewis (aka the Aldgate Sphinx) was then the British and European featherweight champion and was personally known to Bomberg through Bomberg’s boxer brother, Mo. A friend of Mo’s commented, ‘We knew Kid Lewis very well, he was the hero of the East End.’

It is not known whether the printed notice was attached to *Boxers* by the artist, the purchaser or a third party, but its position is in harmony with the overall design and the effect is to anchor the potentially abstract work to a specific event – the boxing contest – and the complex image becomes more readable, with suggestions of figures in combat, faces, boxing gloves and towels.

Boxing remained an important subject for Roberts in the years immediately after the First World War, but never again would it be treated with the degree of abstraction shown in this work.

THIS IS ROBERTS THIS IS BRITAIN

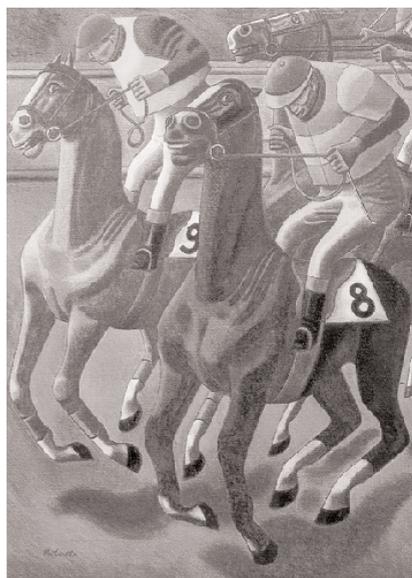
WR’s 1949 oil *Cantering to the Post* is one of three paintings (the others being by George Romney and Peter Blake) featured in a Tate Britain press advertisement with the slogan ‘This is Sport This is Britain’, spotted so far in the *Times Literary Supplement* and *The Guardian*’s weekly what’s-on guide. The same picture will feature in a Tate ‘Sport in Art’ calendar later this year.

Roberts produced a number of works on sporting themes – not only boxing and horse racing, but also football,

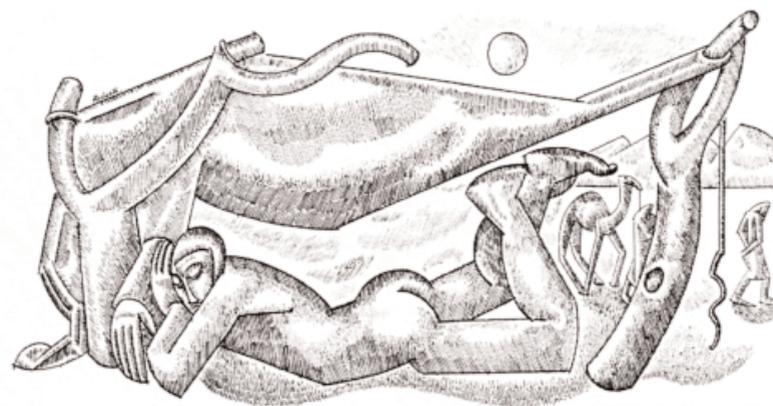
cycling, swimming, water polo, wrestling and badminton; however, the 1948 London Olympics does not seem to have inspired him in this respect.

WEBSITE DEVELOPMENTS

Further images continue to be added to the WRS website, and we are grateful to Janet Sedgwick for allowing us to use scans of WR’s illustrations in her late husband’s copy of the 1926 *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. A redesigned Imperial War Museum website has enabled us also to provide links to images of WR’s works as an official war artist – some of his finest pictures – which are not covered by our copyright licence from the Treasury Solicitor. And more works



A detail from *Cantering to the Post* 1949



Luxury 1925–6, a tailpiece drawing for T. E. Lawrence’s *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*: ‘So we halted and lay under trees till half-past two, each of us trying to make a solid, though shifting shadow for himself by means of a doubled blanket caught across the thorns of overhanging boughs’ (ch. 39) ... ‘even without the wind forbidding us there could have been no more luxury-halts under the shadow of blankets’ (ch. 42).

by WR have been added to the BBC’s ‘Your Paintings’ website mentioned in last September’s newsletter.

A mention in the Persephone Post blog (<http://tinyurl.com/ppwr14>) led in January to a flurry of visits to the YouTube video of the Robertses’ home in St Mark’s Crescent.

WALKING WITH SARAH

By Pauline Paucker

[For more than 20 years our chairman, Pauline Paucker, was a friend of William Roberts’s wife, Sarah, having met her through a local pressure group and been appointed her walking companion. Pauline is compiling a collection of anecdotes of Sarah, which we hope eventually to publish. Here is

her recollection of their first outing together.]

‘My friend Norah Meninsky and I are going out walking on Hampstead Heath. Would you like to join us? I’ll come round the corner to collect you and we’ll take the 24 up. Norah will meet us there.’

Norah, large and handsome, was, as I had guessed, the widow of Bernard Meninsky, his second wife. His first, Sarah told me later, had run off with a very good-looking chemist living opposite and had left him with two small boys to bring up. Norah, she said, had coped splendidly.

‘She was one of Cochran’s Young Ladies, in the chorus, though I wonder how, with those legs, don’t you?’ There seemed no answer to this.

As we walked from the bus across to the Heath, Sarah darted into one or two shops on the Green. Norah called across, ‘Sarah, come out of there, we are here to walk on the Heath. You have a butterfly mind.’ Norah, I later found out, believed herself to be intellectually superior to Sarah, who often played the fool to disguise her innate shrewdness. Moving swiftly towards Kenwood, Sarah then in her late sixties and still a brisk walker, they were exchanging anecdotes of the past, of friends of long ago. Sarah, feeling I was left out, turned to me and said, ‘You must excuse us. One of the pleasures of old age – and let me tell you there are very few – is finding out about people, rounding off their lives. You read an obituary or a biography and then you see why she played that dirty trick on you or why he disappeared so suddenly.’

Here she turned back to Norah, who was saying, ‘I’m not suggesting that she was always on the game, but after he left her there was certainly an episode.’ ‘Well, it would have been before she



The Reed-pipe, a 1971 portrait of Sarah Roberts

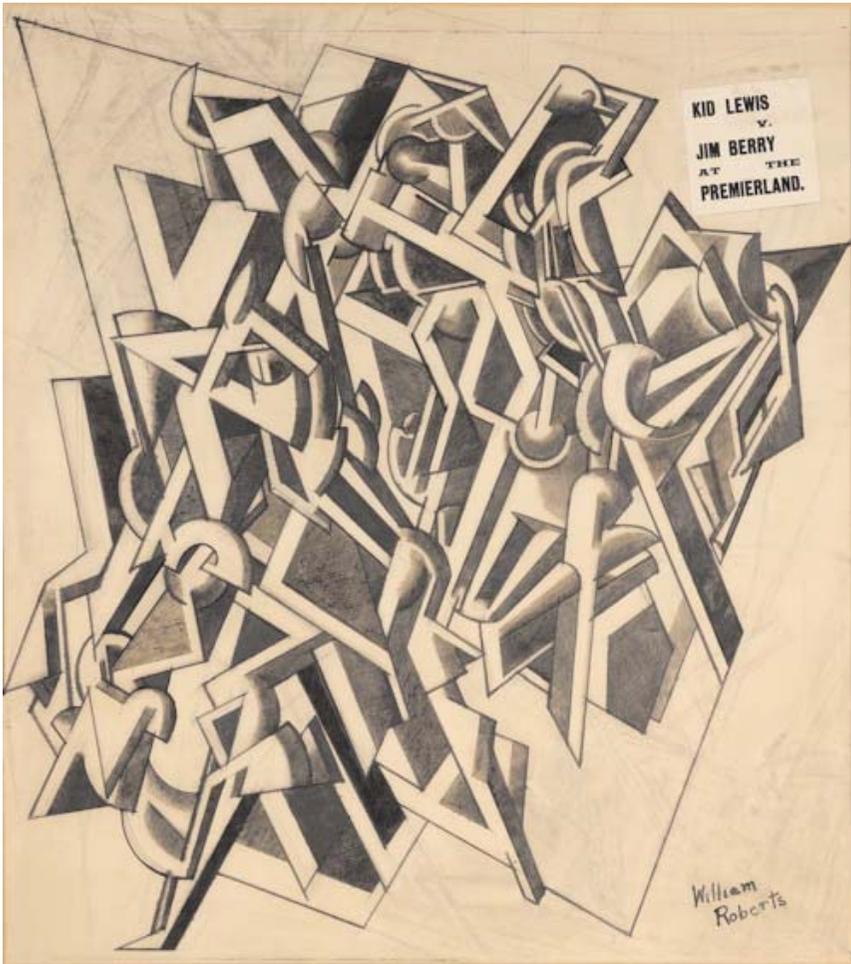
went to live with what’s-his-name and probably no more than an episode. Even so ...’ And on they went.

‘I know every path on the Heath,’ said Sarah, pointing out to someone the way.



At the Fair, Hampstead Heath 1951

All illustrations © the estate of John David Roberts
 Front cover photograph by courtesy of the Frank Cohen Collection
 Printed in Great Britain by Parchments of Oxford



Boxers 1914 – a major Vorticist work in pencil, pen and ink, and collage – which has not been exhibited for nearly a century. Sotheby's are auctioning it on 10 May, and David Cleall writes about it on page 4.