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# WILLIAM ROBERTS SOCIETY

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**Newsletter, May 2013**



*The Artist and His Wife* 1942–3, to be sold by Sotheby's on 12 July – see page 2

**A visit to Bedford ... Auction news ... Poster boy ... Roberts in China ... Roberts around the UK ... A hundred years on ... 'A Crisis of Brilliance' at Dulwich ... Who knew? ... Design error ... Sarah memoir ... A Soho walk ... Treasurer required**

# WILLIAM ROBERTS SOCIETY

registered charity no. 1090538

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May 2013

## A VISIT TO BEDFORD

The next William Roberts Society event will be a visit to The Higgins Bedford (the former Cecil Higgins Art Gallery and Bedford Museum, Castle Lane, Bedford MK40 3XD) on 24 July to see the three WR works on paper in store there – *The Battering Ram* 1919, a study for *At the Hippodrome* 1920, and *Boat Pond* 1956 – and the displays in the newly refurbished galleries, including Pre-Raphaelite works on paper, Edward Bawden linocuts after Aesop's fables, and a survey of 500 years of design.

Return train tickets between London St Pancras and Bedford cost from £16 if booked well in advance, or considerably more on the day. The journey takes about 40 minutes, and the gallery is about 700 m from Bedford station. We will assemble in the lobby outside the gallery's café for a short introductory talk about the collection at 2.15 and then view the WRs, after which we will be free to explore the displays.



*A Fantastic Ballet* 1920, sold by Cheffins Fine Art, Cambridge, on 2 May for £64,168

## AUCTION NEWS

On 11 July Christie's are selling WR's *The Birth of Venus* 1954 (estimate

£80,000–£120,000 – see page 3) and *At the Fair* 1951 (estimate £25,000–£35,000)

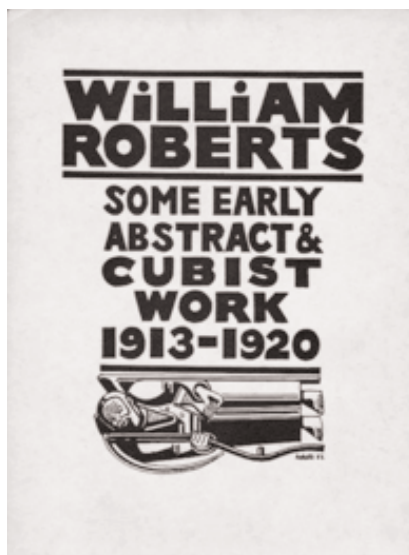
On 12 July Sotheby's are selling a watercolour study for the 1952 version of *Trafalgar Square* (estimate £18,000–£25,000) and the 1942–3 double portrait *The Artist and His Wife* (estimate £20,000–£30,000 – see the front cover).

On 19 March Bonhams sold a collection of letters by mainly British artists which was at one time owned and at least partly assembled by Kyril Bonfiglioli, author of the Charlie Mortdecai novels, during his career as an art dealer in Oxford. The sale included three letters by William Roberts written in November 1919 to Arnold Bennett about works that he was sending at the suggestion of Sacheverell Sitwell. Bennett bought a drawing for £5 – equivalent to about £220 today. As WR said he was sending non-war drawings, it was presumably not *The Leave Train* 1916, the only work by WR in Sotheby's sale of Bennett's contemporary drawings in July 1931, so what it was and where it is now are unknown.

At Pierre Bergé & Associés, Paris, on 25 February *The Party* 1971 was unsold (estimate €40,000–€60,000). It has since been acquired for The Ingram Collection of Modern British Art at The Lightbox, Woking.

At Bonhams Edinburgh on 17 April *Evening in Oban* c.1946 was unsold (estimate £15,000–£20,000).

On 2 May *A Fantastic Ballet* 1920 (see page 1) was sold by Cheffins Fine Art in Cambridge for £64,168 – about three times the upper estimate.



The cover of *Some Early Abstract and Cubist Work 1913–1920*, with an image of Father Time and lettering by Roberts – see below

### POSTER BOY

We have belatedly come across an appreciative article on WR in an unlikely context: the ozTypewriter blog, from the Australian Typewriter Museum, Canberra (see <http://tinyurl.com/barlock>). It stems from WR's mention, in his *Early Years*, of his pre-Slade job at Sir Joseph Causton's design studio, where he 'was able to practise a little lettering, or copy a showcard. One of these ... was an advertisement for typewriters. It showed a figure of Father Time, complete with scythe and hour-glass, standing behind a typewriter; the card bore the caption: "Time flies; so does the Bar-Lock in the



*The Birth of Venus* 1954, to be sold by Christie's on 11 July – see page 1

hands of the operator." That particular ad has not been found, but the blog illustrates similar ones, and WR would return to the Father Time motif in the decoration for the cover of his *Some Early Abstract and Cubist Work* (1957).

### ROBERTS IN CHINA

WR's 1929 painting *Bath-night*, from the Bolton Museum and Art Gallery collection, is one of 80 works from 18 collections in the north-west which are included in an exhibition called 'Toward Modernity: Three Centuries of British Art', which is currently on tour in China. It has already been shown in Beijing,

Shenyang and Nanchang, and is at present at Guangdong Museum of Art in Guangzhou, after which it will travel to Zhengzhou and Changsha. At the start of the tour it was estimated that around 4 million Chinese people would visit the exhibition in total. In 30 days in Beijing it drew 26,000 visitors, and in Shenyang it achieved the museum's highest ever visitor figure for a winter season.

The painting – see page 4 – is being shown in the 'Observing the Scene' section of the exhibition.

John Roberts was born in 1919, and at the time of this picture would have been about ten years old, which suggests that there could be an autobiographical element here. The family were struggling financially during the 1920s and '30s, and lived in a succession of small rented flats. While this scene is not necessarily a literal depiction of John being bathed by his mother, Sarah, with William Roberts reading the newspaper, it is nevertheless probably drawn fairly directly from the Robertses' domestic experience. Sarah and John would serve as models for William Roberts throughout his life, sometimes quite directly. However, Roberts also created characters in his paintings that are more generalised types – built upon observed gestures, postures, facial expressions and clothes while not being actual portraits – and this is probably the case with this work.

This is not the first work by Roberts to be seen in China: probably the most travelled of his pictures is the 1936 watercolour *Folk Dance*, in the British Council collection, which has been included



*Bath-night 1929*, currently on tour in China

in exhibitions in Algeria, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, China, Czechoslovakia, Fiji, Finland, France, Germany, Gibraltar, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Japan, Korea, Lebanon, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Spain, Ukraine and the USA.

## ROBERTS AROUND THE UK

The WR display at Tate Britain ended in March, but works by Roberts are on show at various galleries in the UK.

*The Return of Ulysses* 1913 (see page 5) is on show at the Castle Museum, Nottingham. At the Herbert Art Gallery in Coventry, *Shell Burst* 1919 is part of

the exhibition 'Caught in the Crossfire: Artistic Responses to Conflict, Peace and Reconciliation', which runs until 7 July. *The Cinema* 1920 is on show at Tate Britain. At Leeds Art Gallery *The Dance Club* 1923 is part of a display entitled 'Memory, Loss and Trauma: The First World War and its Aftermath', and also a Yorkshire's Favourite Paintings selection. At Swindon Art Gallery and Museum a study for *Bank Holiday in the Park* 1923 will be on display until the end of the summer.

*The Crucifixion* c.1922 will be among works from the Methodist Church Collection of Modern Christian Art on show at Peterborough Cathedral on 8–29 June, and *Christ Driving the Money Changers from the Temple* 1925 is on display at the Ferens Art Gallery, Hull.

*The Happy Family* 1924 is on show at the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum, Bournemouth. *The Paddock* 1928 is on show at Bradford Art Gallery.

*Dressmakers* c.1931 is on show at the Victoria Art Gallery, Bath. *The Tea Room* 1937–8 will be on show when the refurbished Atkinson gallery in Southport opens on 8 September. The 1951 'pair poster' *London's Fairs* (see the September 2012 newsletter) is part of the exhibition 'Poster Art 150 – London Underground's Greatest Designs' at the London Transport Museum, Covent Garden, until 27 October. *The Common Market* 1963 is on show at the Harris Museum and Art Gallery in Preston.

This information was supplied by the galleries in early April, but it would probably be worth checking before making a special trip to any of them. The WRS website lists other works by Roberts in public collections, and these can usually be viewed by appointment.

## A HUNDRED YEARS ON

by David Cleall

A hundred years ago this summer, around the time of his eighteenth birthday, William Roberts left the Slade School of Art, where he had been studying since 1910 and had recently won the Melvill Nettleship Prize for figure composition, and began his career as an artist. The emphasis on draughtsmanship that was characteristic of the Slade 'method' would be evident in all his subsequent work, and some of the self-belief required to be an artist must surely have

been formed from his interaction with the particularly brilliant cohort of students who were his contemporaries.

Roberts felt most at home in the company of the group of East End Jewish students often referred to as the 'Whitechapel Boys', especially David Bomberg and Bernard Meninsky. Extraordinarily talented – and outspoken – they shared Roberts's working-class background and saw themselves as outsiders in relation to the London art scene. They were four or five years older than Roberts. Bomberg had recently returned from Paris, where he had met Picasso, Derain and Modigliani. Meninsky had studied in Paris in 1911 and travelled to Florence in May 1913. It is therefore not surprising that Roberts himself made a short trip to France and Italy in the summer of 1913. For this socially awkward teenager it was quite an adventure.

Upon returning to London, Roberts had two strokes of good luck. First, an actor friend let him move rent-free into his small room in Cumberland Market, near Regent's Park, while he was on tour. Second, he was taken on by Roger Fry's Omega Workshops to paint designs on 'paper knives, lampshades, table tops and silk scarves', for which he was paid 30 shillings for three mornings a week – being free to develop his own work for the rest of the time.

Roberts's earliest known oil composition, *The Return of Ulysses* (see the back cover), was probably painted at this period, and this small but confident painting provides important insights into Roberts's artistic practice before Vorticism.

*The Return of Ulysses* has some similarities to David Bomberg's work. Roberts and Bomberg, in the tradition of the Slade Sketch Club, often looked to biblical and classical sources for the subjects of their paintings and 'The Return of Ulysses' was also tackled by Bomberg around this time; but his tightly cropped composition is quite different from Roberts's and was not developed as a major work. Roberts's painting depicts the moment from the account in Homer's *Odyssey* when Odysseus (or Ulysses in the Latin form) returns home in disguise ten years after the end of the Trojan War and finds his wife beset by unruly suitors (whom eventually he kills). Stylistically Roberts's work has strong similarities with Bomberg's *Vision of Ezekiel*, completed in 1912 (see <http://tinyurl.com/cx6wemp>). In both works, simplified geometrical representations of human figures in action are organised around a strong diagonal, and the high-angle viewpoint flattens perspective to create a dense design

While Roberts's final work is challengingly abstract, the existence of two studies – a pencil drawing and a watercolour – make it very informative about his creative process at the time. The pencil drawing (page 7) is detailed in a way that would underpin a naturalistic representation; however, Roberts goes on to simplify this design into geometric forms. The watercolour study (see the back cover) shows an experimental Roberts initially choosing attractive colourful elements contrasted effectively with a black background. For the oil painting, however, Roberts completely

rethinks his palette, and subdued 'dusty' Mediterranean pinks, oranges and browns now create discordant and unexpected colour combinations reminiscent of the colour effects explored by Bomberg in *Vision of Ezekiel*. The final result is a much more startling, adventurous work.

*The Return of Ulysses* was chosen by the New English Art Club for exhibition in late 1913. (The selection panel included Roberts's former teacher Henry Tonks, though he abhorred 'cubism'.) Reviewing the exhibition, on 7 December *The Observer* noted that 'a mild and inoffensive attempt at cubism has gained access in the shape of Mr. William Roberts's amusing "Ulysses".' Although this and another comment in *The Times* were more patronising than encouraging, and the painting remained unsold for at least ten years, William Roberts – 'an English cubist' – had arrived. The collector and patron of the arts Edward Marsh later bought *The Return of Ulysses* for the Contemporary Art Society and it was presented to Nottingham Castle Art Gallery, where it is currently on display in an exhibition of twentieth-century paintings from the gallery's collection.

### **'A CRISIS OF BRILLIANCE' AT DULWICH**

David Boyd Haycock, who gave the 2011 William Roberts lecture on WR and his Slade contemporaries, has curated an exhibition at Dulwich Art Gallery (Gallery Rd, London SE21 7AD) based



WR's pencil study for *The Return of Ulysses*, in the Tate collection. The disguised Odysseus/Ulysses is seated in the foreground with his son kneeling in front of him, while the background shows 'men dragging the women servants about the house in an unseemly way, wine drawn recklessly, and bread wasted all to no purpose' (*Odyssey* 16.108–11, trans. Samuel Butler, 1900).

on his book *A Crisis of Brilliance*. The exhibition will run from 12 June to 22 September and will feature over 70 works by C. R. W. Nevinson, Stanley Spencer, Mark Gertler, Dora Carrington, David Bomberg and Paul Nash – who were students together at the Slade between 1908 and 1912 and formed part of what Slade professor Henry Tonks described as the school's last 'crisis of brilliance' – exploring their development and culminating with a selection of their paintings made during and after the Great War of 1914–18.

### **WHO KNEW?**

'William Patrick Roberts was a leading exponent of which artistic movement, launched in 1914, whose original members also included Edward Wadsworth and Wyndham Lewis?' students from New College Oxford were asked during a quarter-final of TV quiz show *University Challenge* broadcast on 18 March. 'Art nouveau?' was the tentative answer. We need to work harder! (New College nevertheless won the heat, but eventually lost their semi-final.)

## DESIGN ERROR

A copy of the London Health Centre's 1945 *A Simple Guide to Healthy Food* bought online a few months ago arrived with an anonymous cover design instead of the expected drawing by WR used on later printings, and has made us question the dates we give in our catalogue raisonné for the designs that WR produced for LHC owner Ernest Cooper. We believe that WR produced drawings for *A Simple Guide to Healthy Food*; *Salads for All Seasons*; *Bread: The Whole-Wheat Way to Health*; *Good Food for Growing Children*; *Towards Better Health* and *Some Recipes* (the last possibly not an LHC publication), but are now not sure in which of the various editions his designs appeared. If any reader has information about this – or can supply images of WR's *Salads for All Seasons* and *Some Recipes* covers – we would be most grateful. Please contact David Cleall at [catalogue@williamrobertssociety.co.uk](mailto:catalogue@williamrobertssociety.co.uk)

## SARAH MEMOIR

We have only a few copies left of Pauline Paucker's *Sarah: An Anecdotal*

*Memoir* – £5 each, inc. p&p, to Marion Hutton, Lexden House, Tenby SA70 7BJ.

## A SOHO WALK

The 'Drawing over the Colour Line' project at the Equiano Centre at University College London (see the September 2012 newsletter) has produced a guide for a walk around Soho, with WR's *The Creole* (aka *Portrait of a Negress – Hélène Yelin*) 1923 on the front and an extract from his 'The "Twenties"' memoir inside. A copy is enclosed.

## TREASURER REQUIRED

Arno Paucker, who has been our treasurer since the society was founded, is now 92 and feels he should stand down this year. We thank him for all he has done, and would be very pleased to hear from anyone who might be interested in taking on this not too onerous position: please contact Marion Hutton at Lexden House, Tenby SA70 7BJ.

Meanwhile, our thanks to everyone who responded to our request for subscriptions with the January newsletter.

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We have been unable to locate the owner of the copyright of *The Birth of Venus*. All other illustrations are © the estate of John David Roberts.



The watercolour study (*above*) and the final version of *The Return of Ulysses*, Roberts's earliest known composition in oils, completed 100 years ago and discussed by David Cleall on page 5

