

---

# WILLIAM ROBERTS SOCIETY

---

**Newsletter, September 2011**



*Newspapers* (1926), which sold for £169,250 in Sotheby's auction of the Evill/Frost collection on 15 June.

A.G.M. and lecture ... New auction record ... More WRs in the NPG ...  
A new WR exhibition in Woking ... *The Toe Dancer* visits Rotterdam ...  
The Tate website ... WR as life coach ... 'Your Paintings' ... WR and  
Edward Burra ... 'The Vorticists' at Tate Britain ... WR in Cambridge ...

# 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: radavenport@waitrose.com), Michael Mitzman (copyright), Ruth Artmonsky, Anne Goodchild, Agi Katz  
www.williamrobertssociety.co.uk

September 2011

## A.G.M. AND ANNUAL LECTURE

This year's WRS annual lecture will take place at the Art Workers Guild, 6 Queen Square, London WC1N 3AT on Saturday 22 October at 3.00, following a brief a.g.m. at 2.45 (please note the changed times). The speaker will be David Boyd Haycock, author of the acclaimed book *A Crisis of Brilliance*, whose theme will be 'A Crisis of Brilliance: William Roberts and his Slade School Contemporaries, 1910–1919'.

In his lecture, Dr Haycock will explore Roberts's time at the Slade and look at the factors that had by then helped make the school the foremost art institution in England, why it attracted such an exciting array of young students, how these young contemporaries influenced one another, and how they were influenced by the exciting movements in the British art scene at that time, from post-Impressionism to Futurism and Vorticism. He will end by looking at

Roberts's war service, and the art that came out of it.

Admission will be £4 for William Roberts Society members and students, and £6 for others.

## A NEW ROBERTS AUCTION RECORD

The auction record for a work by William Roberts doubled in a couple of hours when his painting *The Masks* (c.1932) sold for £457,250 in the first part of Sotheby's sale of the Evill/Frost collection on 15–16 June. Two years ago a record was set when *Brass Balls* (1922) was auctioned for \$368,000 (then about £228,000) in Israel – a price which was also exceeded by two other works in the Evill/Frost sale: *The Restaurant* (1929, £373,250) and *Dogs of the Beni Hillal* (1925, £409,250).

The other works by Roberts in the sale all exceeded their upper estimates – some by several hundred per cent. See

the news page of the WRS website for details.

Given their resentment at the profits made when his patron Ernest Cooper sold works that he had bought from WR, the Robertses would probably have had mixed feelings about this. John Roberts was once shown an extract from Georges Jeannot's *Memories of Degas* about an auction of works belonging to Degas's friend Henri Rouart:

Degas stayed in a distant room. Suddenly a reporter rushes in:

'Monsieur Degas! Do you know how much your painting of *Two Dancers at the Bar with a Watering Can* has just been sold for?'

'No.'

'Four hundred and seventy-five thousand francs!'

'Oh! That is a good price,' Degas said.

'What! You are not disgusted that this painting won't ever bring you more than the 500 francs you were paid for it?'

'No, sir. I am like the racehorse who wins the Grand Prix, I am satisfied with my ration of oats.'

John was not amused.

### MORE WRs IN THE NPG

Earlier, on 23 March, Christie's South Kensington sold three portrait drawings by Roberts which first appeared as frontispieces to issues of the magazine *New Coterie* in 1926–7. The portrait of

T. F. Powys sold for £1,750, that of H. E. Bates for £2,875 and that of Rhys Davies for £3,000 – all well above estimate – and the Bates and Powys portraits are now in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery.

### A WILLIAM ROBERTS EXHIBITION IN WOKING

Two of the works by WR in the Evill/Frost sale – *Artist and Wife* (1940) and *The Recorder Player* [John Roberts] (1935–6) – were bought by Chris Ingram, most of whose collection of works by Roberts, held at The Lightbox in Woking, we saw at a private viewing in October last year. There will now be a public exhibition of the expanded collection from 24 September to 18 December.

Woking is less than half an hour from London Waterloo, and The Lightbox ([www.thelightbox.org.uk](http://www.thelightbox.org.uk)) is in Chobham Road in the town centre; admission is free. The gallery is closed on Mondays, and would-be visitors are asked to phone 01483 737837 on the day of an intended visit to check that the room containing the Robertses will be open.

### THE TOE DANCER VISITS ROTTERDAM

WR's *The Toe Dancer*, from the V&A collection, is to be shown in the exhibition 'Sir Stanley Spencer: Between Heaven and Earth' at the Kunsthall, Rotterdam, from 17 September to 15 January, as one of 20 works by

Spencer's English contemporaries. The picture dates from 1914, and shows a scene in a sort of artists' squat where, according to Jacob Epstein, 'there was a life class at which I sometimes drew, and sometimes the artists, among others Roberts and Bomberg, a mysterious Indian artist, and some models, would have parties ... The mysterious Indian died, it is said, of eating a herring which he had kept too long in a drawer.'



*Woman Bathing Child* (1939), a watercolour from the Evill/Frost collection, sold on 16 June for £30,000

### WR ON THE TATE WEBSITE

We were pleased to see that images of 30 of the works on paper that the Tate acquired from the estate of John Roberts in 2007 have now appeared on the Tate website (see pages 5 and 6), with the promise of more to follow.

Many of these works have been given titles taken from the police inventory hastily compiled when all the pictures in 14 St Mark's Crescent were taken to the Tate for safekeeping after John Roberts was found dead; but in most cases David Cleall has been able to link the works to the titles under which they were exhibited during WR's lifetime, or by Sarah and John Roberts after his death, and he has sent the Tate his findings.

### WR AS LIFE COACH

One of the WRs newly illustrated on the Tate website is a satire on art-school teaching exhibited in 1949 as *The Life Master*. So when a contact made at the Tate's 'Repositioning Vorticism' symposium (see page 6) invited David Cleall to visit a private art collection it was interesting that this included ten life studies made by Roberts for demonstration purposes on the edge of a student's drawings in the life class at the Central School of Art, London, in 1929–30. These small drawings – now all on the WRS website – are notable not only for their technical accomplishment but also for the sense of the sitter's personality conveyed in a number of them, and one of them is shown on page 4, right.

One of Roberts's students at this time was the New Zealand printmaker H. C. Cameron, and we have recently had a request to reproduce WR's cover for *New Coterie* no. 3 (1926) in the first study of her work, whose author, Dr Gail Ross, says that WR seems to have been Cameron's main influence.

Roberts taught at the Central School between 1925 and 1960. In the early 1950s a colleague there was Mervyn Peake, and a recent exhibition of Peake's work at the Chris Beetles Gallery (www.chrisbeetles.com) included a

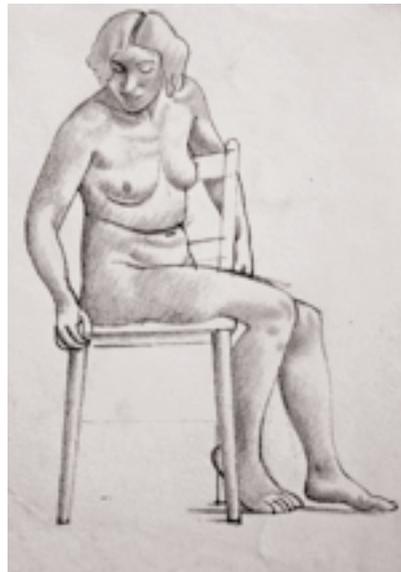
drawing of Roberts (below, left) made by Peake while they were both on duty in the life class.

### 'YOUR PAINTINGS'

Eighteen works by WR are among the first 63,000 pictures made available by the BBC 'Your Paintings' project, which, in association with the Public Catalogue Foundation, aims to put online all oil paintings in UK public collections.



Mervyn Peake's pencil-and-pastel drawing of William Roberts, made in the life class of the Central School of Art in the early 1950s and recently on show at the Chris Beetles Gallery (reproduced by courtesy of the Chris Beetles Gallery and the Mervyn Peake Estate)



'The drawings of the nude figure by Mr. William Roberts are interesting as showing that the tubular convention of this artist is not due to incapacity to draw the forms of nature' – *The Times*, 26 November 1926, reviewing an exhibition at the Savile Gallery



One of the works newly illustrated on the Tate website: a previously unknown study for the 1928 painting *The Tea Garden* (aka *Park Café*)

Among the Roberts works already on the project's website – another 50 or so are still to be uploaded – is a portrait called *The Dentist* (1925). This is perhaps an instance of the Roberts family settling bills with paintings: when John Roberts was dropped and seriously injured at the age of four, the surgeon, named Milne, who operated on him was paid with a picture which we believe to have been *Portrait of Sarah, the Artist's Wife* (aka *La Femme Tragique*), c.1921 (sold by Bonhams in 2007 and now hanging in the restaurant of the Old Parsonage hotel, Oxford); and in a letter of November 1987 John Roberts wrote,

'I am in the process of settling our dentist's account, i.e. with pictures.'

### WR AND EDWARD BURRA

From 22 October to 19 February, Pallant House Gallery in Chichester is mounting the first major Edward Burra exhibition for over 25 years, curated by Simon Martin. Although it is not known if they ever met, Burra was a great admirer of WR's work, especially after seeing his one-man show in 1923, and WR's influence is discussed in Simon's monograph that will accompany the exhibition.

## 'THE VORTICISTS' AT TATE BRITAIN

A report by David Cleall

Tate Britain's recent exhibition 'The Vorticists: Manifesto for a Modern World', curated by Mark Antliff and Vivien Greene and previously seen in America and Venice, focused on the Vorticist exhibitions held in London (1915) and at the Penguin Club, New York (1917), the publication of the two editions of *Blast* (1914 and 1915), and the photographs of Alvin Langdon Coburn. A group of WRS members went to see it on 5 July.

As well as presenting spectacular set pieces such as a reconstruction of Epstein's *Rock Drill* against a puce back wall, and Gaudier-Brzeska's *Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound*, the curators had unearthed some previously unknown Vorticist works such as three watercolours by Helen Saunders and a group of recently discovered photographs by Coburn of Lewis, Wadsworth and Epstein in their studios in 1916–17. The display of original documents such as a Gaudier-Brzeska sketchbook and his letters from the front, Wyndham Lewis's 'Round Robin letter' denouncing the Omega Workshops, and other Vorticist memorabilia gave the exhibition weight.

The contents had been slightly expanded at Tate Britain, and it was very pleasing to see Roberts's study for *The Return of Ulysses* being exhibited alongside Bomberg and Nevinson in the context of the avant-garde in London in 1913.



*The Broken Vortex* – the back-cover illustration for WR's *Cometism and Vorticism* (Vortex Pamphlet No. 2, 1956) – another of the works that recently appeared on the Tate website

Among the interesting articles published in the exhibition catalogue, Vivien Greene gave a well-researched account of the New York exhibition and Robert Hewison provided a detailed insight into the design, typography and production of *Blast*.

Earlier, a conference organised by the Tate, 'Repositioning Vorticism', brought together established experts in the field such as Richard Cork and Paul Edwards with the exhibition's curators. A full day of lectures (some of them now on the Tate Channel website) explored topics such as Whistler's influence on Ezra Pound's writings on Vorticism, the anti-colonialism of Gaudier-Brzeska's primitivist aesthetics, the contradictory aspects of T. E. Hulme's championing of Vorticism while being somewhat at odds with its practice, and the influence of the artist Max Weber on the London art world of 1913.

While the speakers had moved on from the position taken by Wyndham Lewis in 1956, when he stated that 'Vorticism was, in fact, what I, personally, did and said at a certain period,' there was still some controversy around the role of the women Vorticists in relation to the dominance of Lewis. This issue had been effectively raised in Brigid Peppin's article 'Women that a Movement Forgot' in *Tate etc.* (no. 22), where she used as her starting point WR's painting *The Vorticists at the Restaurant de la Tour Eiffel* (1961–2) – a work that was hung to good effect just outside the exhibition.

The newspaper coverage was disappointingly unenthusiastic – even where reviewers such as Craig Raine in *The Guardian* (28 May) highlighted the meagre representation of Roberts's work in the exhibition given his particular 'talent'. But in the June *Art Monthly* Christopher Townsend's article 'Into the Vortex' provided one of the most original re-evaluations of Vorticism and celebrated Roberts's success in overcoming his financial and social disadvantages and becoming one 'of the great artists of the First World War'.

## WILLIAM ROBERTS IN CAMBRIDGE

A report by John Duffin

On 19 April, thanks to arrangements made by David Cleall, members of the society visited Cambridge to view rarely seen works by WR in permanent collections in the city. At the Fitzwilliam

Museum we saw watercolours and drawings, and at King's College mainly oils on canvas. Overall, the range and vitality of the works left me feeling that I had been to a small but powerful Roberts retrospective.

The Fitzwilliam showed us classic works on paper by Roberts from the 1910s through to the early 1930s, all drawn with that assured line that created not only shape and pattern but also volume and weight. For me the highlights here were *French Sailors on the Deck of a Ship* and *Street Acrobats*, the former showing Roberts's beautiful light washes of watercolour, creating a solid and unified pattern of activity and colour, and the latter using a thicker, more controlled watercolour mix, almost like gouache, to create more stylised figures with a palpable presence that gave this monumental work on paper almost the feel of an oil painting. Other highlights were a beautiful pencil self-portrait head and a lovely relaxed red-chalk drawing of Maynard Keynes and Lydia Lopokova.

A short walk through sunshine and architecture later we arrived at King's College, where we were given incredible access to the private chambers. In the provost's office we viewed a superb pencil study of Lydia Lopokova, a more worked and considered drawing than the red-chalk sketch we had seen in the Fitzwilliam.

A long ascent up several flights of stairs took us to *Labourers*, a large oil on canvas of workers with spades and tools. This was a marvellous example of Roberts's early 1930s output, incredibly

bold and dynamic – Russian constructivism via Camden Town!

The key location was yet to come: a don's room that contained several marvellous oil paintings, including three hanging on the walls which each had the same 1930s finish. *Spanish Beggars*, *Shuttlecock* and *Apple Pickers* were classic Roberts: all had multiple figures and great design and colour balance, and in each of them the paint had been carefully blended by small sable brushes to achieve a smooth, glowing surface. These oils had clearly all had working drawings made beforehand, for in Roberts's best work you could not move any part of the composition without destroying the balance of the whole. The colours are now 80 years old, but looked fresh and vigorous – to my mind confirming Roberts as a proto British pop artist some 30 years before Blake and Hockney.

We also saw a pencil study for *Les Routiers* and an oil portrait of John Roberts as a boy.

To me, these works epitomised Roberts's technique and approach. He was firstly a draughtsman and designer: he drew out pencil compositions, and once satisfied with them he created a colour wash drawing/watercolour, which would then be squared for transfer to a canvas. By the time he put down the first stroke of oil paint he had done so much research and development on the image

that the resulting picture was assured and boldly created.

The sun shone on Cambridge that day, and on the WRS. We had an afternoon of viewing work by Roberts at the very top of his game.

## FAREWELLS

At the end of May we were very sad to hear of the sudden death in France of WRS member Susan Langlands. A former landscape architect, Susan, with her husband, Iain, attended as many WRS events as they could manage – most recently our Cambridge visit. We send our condolences to Iain and the rest of their family.

The William Roberts Society was founded thirteen years ago at a meeting in Agi Katz's well-known Boundary Gallery. We are sorry to learn that end-of-lease problems mean she is now having to close. The gallery specialised in the modern British school – particularly the work of Jewish artists, among them Jacob Kramer, the brother-in-law of William Roberts – and in contemporary figurative art. Agi will continue to deal via the internet ([www.judaicart.com](http://www.judaicart.com) and [www.boundarygallery.com](http://www.boundarygallery.com)) and at art fairs. With galleries in Cork Street concerned for their future, it is possible that the concentration of art dealers there may disappear too.



Above: *The Resurrection* (1912) – a drawing by WR on a Slade School Sketch Club set subject. ‘A Crisis of Brilliance: William Roberts and his Slade School Contemporaries, 1910–1919’ is the title of this year’s WRS annual lecture, to be given by David Boyd Haycock on 22 October. See inside for full details.

Below: A pencil study for *The Judgement of Paris* (1933), to be auctioned by Sotheby’s on 16 November.

