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# WILLIAM ROBERTS SOCIETY

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**Newsletter, September 2012**



*The Garden of Eden* c.1926, which offended the local council when it was exhibited at Southport in 1928. See page 5 for details.

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# WILLIAM ROBERTS SOCIETY

registered charity no. 1090538

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September 2012

## ANNUAL LECTURE AND A.G.M.

This year's WRS lecture will be given by Simon Martin of Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, where exhibitions he has curated include the 2007 'William Roberts: England at Play' as well as the much-praised recent Edward Burra retrospective. His theme will be 'William Roberts and Classicism'. Roberts described himself as an English Cubist, but he could equally well be considered as a classicist, and Dr Martin will discuss him in relation to twentieth-century neo-classicism and artists such as Edward Burra, Mark Gertler and Stanley Spencer.

Hall-hire costs have risen enormously in recent years, so we are grateful to Michael Mitzman for arranging for the a.g.m. and lecture to take place at the offices of Mishcon de Reya, Summit House, 12 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4QD, near Holborn tube station, at 6.30 p.m. on Tuesday 13 November. Suggested donation £3–£5.

## NEW ROBERTS AUCTION RECORDS

At Sotheby's evening sale of modern and post-war British art on 10 May, WR's *The Chess Players* 1929–30 sold for £1,161,250 and *Boxers* 1914 for £229,250, more than twice the previous auction records for, respectively, an oil and a work on paper by the artist. On 11 May *In the Straight* c.1949 sold for £67,250 and *Day Out on the River* 1978 for £58,850, again at Sotheby's.

At Christie's on 23–24 May *Masked Revels* 1953 sold for £181,250 and *Parallel Bars* 1970 for £21,875.

## OTHER AUCTION NEWS

On 4 October, Christie's South Kensington's 'Posters with a Purpose: The London Transport Museum Sale' includes WR's 1951 'pair poster' *London's Fairs* (estimate £1,200–£1,800; see the back cover) and his 1953 bus-stop poster

*London's Zoos* (estimate £1,000–£1,500, with *Kew Gardens* 1951 by Brian Allderidge). WR's watercolour *Evening in Oban* c.1946 is among the works in the Bonhams sale of twentieth-century British and Irish art in Bond Street on 14 November (estimate £20,000–£30,000). And on the same date the Christie's sale of modern British and Irish art in King Street will include the oil *The Poor Family* 1923 (estimate £200,000–£300,000), a study for which is in the current William Roberts display at Tate Britain.

### THE CHESS PLAYERS: A CHEQUERED RESPONSE

The sale of WR's *The Chess Players* 1929–30 for £1,161,250, after a four-way bidding battle at Sotheby's on 10 May, was a striking vindication not only of Roberts but also of this painting, which had not always been well received.

In 1931 P. G. Konody in *The Observer* described it as 'a dramatic rendering of a whole phase of human life and nature' and praised Roberts's 'faculty of stating with unerring precision the essential character of certain aspects of humanity'. Then in 1934–5 the picture was one of 253 works of 'Contemporary British Art' which the Empire Art Loan Collections Society sent to tour New Zealand and Australia.

The tour began in Christchurch. The review in the Christchurch *Press* was polite, but comments in the paper's letters columns were less so, and *The Chess Players* was the main target of criticism.



The auction success of *The Chess Players* is featured on a poster produced for the Moscow office of Sotheby's: 'William Roberts *The Chess Players* Sold for £1,161,250 Estimate £300,000–500,000 Post-war British Art Auction in London 10–11 May 2012'

'Poker Ned', for example, described it as showing 'some men playing chess with glassy marbles stuck in their heads to represent their eyeballs', and claimed he had been advised to 'move back 15 feet and stand on my head [to] get the beauty of the picture'. He had really gone to the show, he said, 'to divert my mind from what Larwood was going to do next, but while there I was sorry I did not have Larwood with me practising bodyline bowling' (which was odd, as the controversially aggressive English bowler Harold Larwood had by then ended his Test career).



*The Poor Family* (aka *Unemployed*) 1923, to be sold by Christie's on 14 November

'Much Disappointed' complained of WR's 'decadent figures with small heads and monstrous hands', and saw in many of the pictures 'the modern worship of ugliness instead of beauty'. A. Wells Newton was baffled by 'the mentality of a man who depicts fellow human being as [Roberts] does ... Does this man hold a low view of his fellow creatures, or is this merely his joke against the critics?' For him, Roberts's work was 'not art, but rather ... a travesty of art, a stultification of and almost one might say a prostitution of art'. And there was more in the same vein.

It was left to W. Basil Honour of the modernist New Zealand Society of Artists to point out that 'Mr. Newton makes the obvious error of criticising pictures because he does not like them.

He does not like them because he does not understand them or know them. In front of a piece of intricate machinery he would remain mute. But before a work of art he expands himself. He assumes it should be something in the nature of a reproduction of his own vision of things, and is annoyed that artists are not so flattering.'

In Adelaide it was much the same story, with one of the writers to *The Advertiser* detecting 'the spirit of Bolshevism' in the works as a whole, and another declaring that 'pictures such as "The Chess Players," by William Roberts, appear to me as an affront to all that is lovely and beautiful in art.'

In Melbourne *The Argus's* reviewer commented that 'The player in the foreground with the diminutive cranium

appears to be innocent of the possible violence in the rolling blue eyes of his companions; the lady with the enormous deltoids looks a match for anyone with either dagger or pistol; and the lady with the luxuriant bosom looks completely “fed up” not only with her lay figure hands, which cannot turn the page, but with everything else.’ And so it went on.

In contrast, when the picture was shown in Wolverhampton in 1937, the *Express and Star* seemed quite restrained in its comment that it ‘irresistibly reminds one of a trio of American gangsters and their “molls”, with its ‘crude forms intentionally created by an artist who can also produce the vivid and handsome “Creole Woman”, in which anatomical knowledge is demonstrated to be complete’.

### ‘DRAWING OVER THE COLOUR LINE’

WR’s 1923 painting *The Creole* (as it is usually known), mentioned in that last review, is one of the works included in a project called ‘Drawing over the Colour Line: Geographies of Art and Cosmopolitan Politics in London 1919–1939’, based in the Equiano Centre of the Geography Department at University College London. The project is documenting the artistic world of 1920s and 1930s London in relation to black histories, exploring portraits of African and Asian sitters along with the artwork and experiences of artists of African or Asian background living in interwar London.

Hélène Yelin, the subject of Roberts’s



*The Creole* (aka *Portrait of a Negress* – Hélène Yelin) 1923

picture – and also of a sculpture by Jacob Epstein – is one of the sitters concerned, and it is hoped that *The Creole* will also be featured in a set of four postcards for distribution to highlight the black presence in London’s interwar art world.

### RHYS DAVIES PORTRAIT

Following a recent bequest, the Rhys Davies Trust has bought WR’s 1926 portrait of Davies from the successful bidder when it was auctioned by Christie’s South Kensington last year. It will probably eventually be donated to the National Library of Wales: four of WR’s five author portraits drawn for Charles Lahr’s *New Coterie* magazine will then be in national collections – *Liam O’Flaherty* is in the National Library of Ire-



WR’s pencil portrait of novelist and short-story writer Rhys Davies (1901–1978)

land, and *H. E. Bates* and *T. F. Powys* are in the National Portrait Gallery. The whereabouts of *A. E. Coppard* is unknown.

### A PASTING FOR ROBERTS?

Sarah and John Roberts allowed Elton John to commission a painting based on the naked bathers of WR’s *Parson’s Pleasure* for the wall of his swimming pool. A more modest equivalent is now available from a company called JW Walls, which is offering customised

wallpaper based on WR’s *The Playground* 1934–5 in the Tate collection. See <http://tinyurl.com/wrplayground> for a mock-up.

### ‘FALLEN HUMANITY’ OFFENDS COUNCIL

One of the works in Tate Britain’s current William Roberts display is a study for his painting *The Garden of Eden* (see the front cover). When the painting was shown in a London Artists’ Association exhibition in New Bond Street in June 1929 *The Times* described it as ‘touching in its observation of fallen humanity. The disapproving deer is a comment of genius.’ But the picture had earlier generated a rather different reaction.

In 1928, under the title *Adam and Eve*, it was part of an LAA exhibition that opened at the municipal art gallery in Southport on 14 January and on the same day was reviewed by the *Southport Visiter*. Three works by WR received particular praise; *Adam and Eve* was not mentioned.

On 20 January a mayoral reception was held in the municipal buildings, and refreshments were served in the art gallery. According to the *Southport Journal*, ‘throughout the evening small crowds of guests looked puzzled at some of the problem pictures, and the names given were entertaining if not illuminating’. Although, as the *Visiter* noted, the ‘regular patrons’ of the gallery seem to have had no objection to *Adam and Eve*, the chairman of the Libraries and Arts

Committee was subsequently asked to have it withdrawn from show, and at a committee meeting on the 23rd a majority agreed to this.

In London the *Evening News* and the *Evening Standard* reported this decision, and the *Manchester Guardian* commented that ‘how a town councillor can find any sensuousness, any fleshly school of painting in the art of William Roberts [“the least realistic of all our notable painters”] beats comprehension.’ Worried about Southport being seen as ‘a population of Mrs. Grundys’, the *Journal* thought that, especially ‘in these days when every daily newspaper gives us pictorial advertisements of big drapery stores that leave very little to the imagination’, it would have been ‘better to leave it to the public’s own judgment’ rather than withdraw the picture.

A speaker at a meeting of the Southport Trades Council and Labour Party thought the town was ‘made ridiculous’ by the council’s action and suggested that the Education Committee might like to have a ‘nice little heresy hunt’ if it found that the theory of evolution was being taught in local schools. But another speaker felt the Labour Party had ‘something better to do than fritter away its time making itself look ridiculous on such a piffling subject’, and that seemed to end the discussion.

On the 28th the *Visiter* carried a letter deploring ‘an unexampled bowing down to an outburst of excessive prudish “refanement”’ but suggesting that London galleries be contacted urgently to ‘see to it that all nude statuary may be fittingly draped, and all studies of the

“fleshly school of painting” may be veiled, so as not to offend the tender susceptibilities of our super-sensitive citizens’, some of whom might be visiting the capital on a rail excursion advertised for that very day. But that was apparently the only letter published for or against the council’s decision, and there things seemed to rest as far as Southport was concerned.

However, the catalogue of WR’s 1965 Arts Council retrospective states that *The Garden of Eden* was rejected from the Twenty-eighth Annual International Exhibition of Painting at the Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, in late 1929, ‘on the grounds that American taste was not yet ready for such pictures’ – it apparently did not even make it past the selection committee, for it does not appear in the exhibition’s catalogue. It is now in the Ingram Collection of Modern British Art, on a wall of Chris Ingram’s New York flat.

Tate Britain’s William Roberts display – consisting of some 40 works – continues until March. It can be previewed at <http://tinyurl.com/wrtate>.

### **SARAH: AN ANECDOTAL MEMOIR**

Pauline Paucker’s memoir of Sarah Roberts, previewed in the last newsletter, is now available. An illustrated 64-page A5 booklet entitled *Sarah: An Anecdotal Memoir*, it will be on sale at the a.g.m. on 13 November, or can be ordered by sending a cheque – made out to the William Roberts Society – for £5 (inc.



A detail from a study for *Rush Hour* 1971

UK p&p) to Marion Hutton, Lexden House, Tenby SA70 7BJ. Here is a further extract:

One sunny day, after we had crossed the park to Baker Street, a seemingly empty open-topped tourist bus pulled up at a nearby stop. Three unauthorised passengers on the top deck – three young boys who’d sneaked a ride – were being shouted at by the driver to get off. They

jumped down on to the metal roof of the bus shelter, the crash as they landed sounding like an explosion – and this was at a time of IRA activity in London.

The few women waiting in the shelter screamed in fright; the laughing boys bounded on to the pavement and ran, ducking and weaving among the people in the street.

Sarah, coming up, put out her left arm and grabbed one of them in a skilled move, swinging her other arm round to clout him on the head. He ran off yelling with indignation.

I was struck by Sarah’s rapid response to the fleeing boy – it looked like a drawing by Phil May for *Punch*: the snatch, the cuff, the boy ducking, his arm up to shield himself.

‘I’m not saying you did wrong, no,’ said a passing man, ‘but you could be had up for assault. Do you know that?’

Sarah ignored him and marched on to board the newly arrived 74 bus. The women who’d been so startled were already sitting there and telling the other passengers what had happened, pointing to Sarah with approval and miming her actions: ‘She grabbed one of them like this and biff! That lady there!’

Sarah ignored them and pointedly talked to me.

The rightness and vigour of her gestures can be seen in so many of Roberts’s paintings for which she had posed: pinning up a dress, beating a rug, scrubbing steps, washing a child.

‘I can’t come out today, I’m posing,’ she would say. It was obvious that it was not only for the usual portrait that she was the model: Roberts needed no other.

## WR IN TATE CALENDAR

WR's *Cantering to the Post* 1949 (see the May newsletter) is one of the works illustrated in the Tate's Sport in Art calendar for 2013, now available from the gallery for £9.99.

## WEBSITE DEVELOPMENTS

The number of WRs illustrated on the BBC's Your Paintings website has now increased to 38: see

<http://tinyurl.com/ypwroberts>.

In addition the 142 WRs in the Tate collection are now illustrated on the Tate website: see <http://tinyurl.com/tatewr>.

## WYNDHAM LEWIS CONFERENCE

'Wyndham Lewis: Networks, Dialogues, and Communities' is the title of a conference to be held at the University of London's Institute of English Studies from 30 November to 1 December. The conference will investigate the numer-

ous ways in which WR's sometime colleague and sparring partner Wyndham Lewis belonged to 'cultural networks of influence and inheritance'. For more information, contact [wyndhamlewis2012@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:wyndhamlewis2012@hotmail.co.uk)

## FAREWELLS

We were sorry to hear of the death in August of WRS member Colin Cooper. Colin was a friend of John and Sarah Roberts through their shared interest in the guitar. He edited *Classical Guitar* magazine, and in the obituary of Sarah that appeared there he wrote, 'No time spent with Sarah was ever wasted ... After a meeting with her, one felt more alive, more aware of the possibilities of life and art.' The same was true of Colin, and we send condolences to his wife, Maureen, and their family.

We were also sorry to hear recently of the death earlier in the year of Rosemary Evison. A former slide librarian at the National Portrait Gallery, she had been a regular and enthusiastic presence at WRS events.



The main illustration for WR's *London's Fairs* 'pair poster', designed to be hung alongside another poster (also with illustrations by WR) containing the blurb. An example of the pair is to be sold by Christie's South Kensington on 4 October.