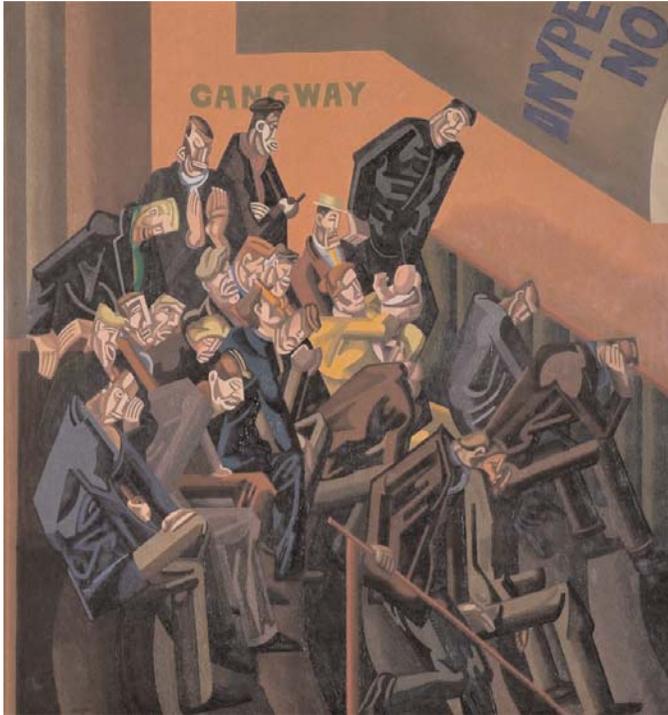

WILLIAM ROBERTS SOCIETY

Newsletter, September 2013



At the Hippodrome 1920, to be included in the exhibition “‘Uproar!’: The First 50 Years of the London Group’ at the Ben Uri Gallery from the end of October – see page 4

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WILLIAM ROBERTS SOCIETY

registered charity no. 1090538

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September 2013

ANNUAL LECTURE AND A.G.M.

This year's William Roberts Society lecture will be given by our archivist, David Cleall, whose subject will be 'William Roberts in the "Atomic Age": Publicity, Patronage and Paranoia'.

In the 1950s William Roberts took on the art establishment, and in some ways it could be said that he won. With his friend and patron Ernest Cooper, Roberts saw advertising and self-promotion as essential in post-war Britain. In his talk, David Cleall will explore how Roberts's artistic practice was shaped by patronage, publicity and the need to reclaim his artistic reputation in the era that he referred to as the "Atomic Age".

We are again 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 29 October. Suggested donation £3-£5.



The frontispiece of WR's *A Press View at the Tate Gallery* (1956), the third of his Vortex Pamphlets, showing Wyndham Lewis and Sir John Rothenstein gleefully observing journalists lapping up their presentation of Vorticism – 'Wyndham Lewis, aided by Sir John Rothenstein, The Arts Council, and some Partners, Buddies and Pals of the Press, is making a bid to establish himself as the sole originator of abstract painting in England,' complained Roberts.

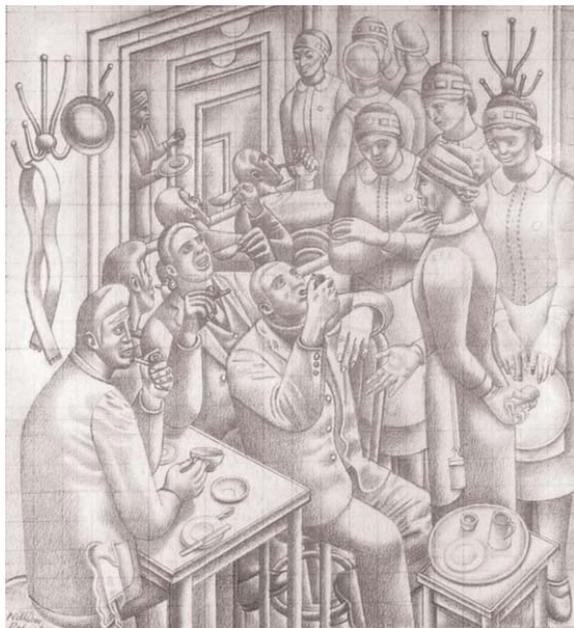
LOVE AMONG THE TEA-CUPS

On 7 September the refurbished Atkinson gallery in Southport opened with an exhibition (running until April) entitled 'Love Stories: Romance, Obsession and Heartbreak', exploring, 'the universal experience of love and loss in five stages: flirtation and courtship; the choice; marriage; obsession and betrayal; settled love'. Among the works in the 'flirtation' section is WR's *The Tea Room* 1937–8.

Roberts's image shows a scene in one of the J. Lyons & Co. tea-shops, with customers chatting to waitresses – known as 'Nippies' – in their distinctive

uniforms. These inexpensive tea-shops were enormously popular in the first half of the twentieth century. When, in 1958, Ernest Cooper and his first wife, Sadie, took William and Sarah Roberts on a trip to Greece, Cooper found that WR's 'chief wish in Athens was to find a substitute for the Joe Lyons Corner Houses which were our favourite meeting places' (though Roberts and Sarah had first met in the Tottenham Court Road branch of the rival ABC – Aerated Bread Company – tea-shop chain).

'Joe Lyons' was in decline when Roberts reproduced one of the studies for this picture in his *Paintings 1917–58* in 1960, which may explain why there and when exhibited by Anthony d'Offay



The Good Old Days 1937–8, a pencil study for *The Tea Room*

in 1969 the studies were nostalgically entitled *The Good Old Days*.

Even in the late 1960s William Roberts still frequented J. Lyons's establishments: a pencil sketch, *The Joke* 1969, was drawn on the back of a bill from Lyons's The Restful Tray, Marble Arch – 'one of William Roberts's customary outings of an evening' according to John Roberts's catalogue notes for an exhibition at the Gillian Jason Gallery in March–April 1986.

Given his attachment to the J. Lyons chain, it is a pity that Roberts was not one of the artists who were invited to produce lithographs to decorate the walls of its premises. Three series of prints were produced between 1946 and 1955 – they were also offered for sale cheaply to the public – and these are the subject of the exhibition 'The Lyons Teashops Lithographs: Art in a Time of Austerity' at the Towner gallery, Eastbourne, until 22 September.

Ending on the same day is the exhibition 'A Crisis of Brilliance' at Dulwich Art Gallery, featuring some of WR's Slade contemporaries as mentioned in the last newsletter.

BULLFIGHT AT CHICHESTER

WR's 1928 drawing *Bullfight* will be on display throughout October at Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, and will be the subject of an 'Artwork of the Month' talk and workshop there on Wednesday 30 October.

As far as is known, WR had not visited Spain before he made this drawing,

although it is possible that he attended a bullfight during a trip to southern France in the 1920s. But in one of his notebooks John Roberts looked back on a later visit to Spain, probably in 1933:

Through Jacob [Kramer, Roberts's brother-in-law], we knew Agustín de Irizar, lecturer in Spanish at Leeds. He offered us the use of his brother's flat in Alicante, for 2 or 3 weeks.

We set off, but at Victoria found the fare was £5 more than expected; so we went home, eating in the taxi the chicken sandwiches meant for the journey.



The Bullfight 1928

I lay on my bed that afternoon with a copy of the Arabian nights trying to forget the grim rain pouring down. The rain that decided us, and the next day we set off again; and in a hotel in Madrid we sat on our luggage in the early morning and wondered whether to take the next train back. We persevered to Alicante, where the sun and the beach and the siestas made the journey worthwhile; flat out in the heat, with Tauschnitz to read.

We ate at the restaurant opposite, changing the meat dishes for fried eggs [...]

A bullfight. As the fighters moved around the ring, suddenly a handsome cape is flung up and lands squarely on the barrier in front of us. A tribute to Sarah [Roberts], that perhaps WR didn't care for. We left before the bullfight was half over.

A result of that journey: the 'Spanish Family' a picture now in Leeds.

WILLIAM ROBERTS AND THE LONDON GROUP

by David Cleall

WR's *At the Hippodrome* 1920 (see the front cover) is one of the works to be included in an exhibition at the Ben Uri Gallery that marks the centenary of the London Group. "'Uproar!': The First 50 Years of the London Group' takes its name from the 'uproar' that followed Mark Gertler's exhibition of *The Creation of Eve* at the Group's second show, in 1915, and will display 50 works by 50 artists to reflect the Group's first 50 years.

The London Group emerged out of the Camden Town Group and the Allied Artists Association, and in its early years it was a radical exhibiting group where a diverse group of 'advanced' artists could bypass the conservative selection policy of establishment bodies such as the Royal Academy.

William Roberts left the Slade in the summer of 1913, and exhibited at the New English Art Club later that year. He was elected to the London Group in 1914, and showed three radical 'abstract' works – *The Toe Dancer*, *The Boatman* and *The Boxers* – in the Group's second exhibition, in March 1915, by which time he had already begun to make his mark as an 'advanced' artist in exhibitions at the Whitechapel Gallery and Wyndham Lewis's Rebel Art Centre. Although Roberts was only nineteen years old, his work was known to the art critic of *The Times*, who, reviewing the London Group exhibition under the headline 'Junkerism in Art' on 10 March, declared that

Messrs. Lewis, Wadsworth and Roberts are more rigid than ever. Their pictures are not pictures so much as theories illustrated in paint. In fact, in our desire to relate them to something in the actual world, we can only call them Prussian in their spirit. These painters seem to execute a kind of goose-step, where other artists are content to walk more or less naturally. Perhaps if the Junkers could be induced to take to art, instead of disturbing the peace of Europe, they

would paint so and enjoy it. But we do not feel that those gentlemen enjoy it. They are not Prussian enough for their theories of art. They seem to have set their teeth firmly, and done their worst in a kind of aesthetic asceticism which prevents them from taking an interest in anything actual or concrete whatever. This asceticism seems now to have gone about as far as it possibly can, and we only wonder what they will do next in the way of renunciation.

Three months later Lewis, Wadsworth and Roberts were exhibiting under the banner of Vorticism.

With the defection of Lewis and Wadsworth from the London Group and the disruption caused by the First World War and its aftermath, it wasn't until 1922 that Roberts again exhibited with the London Group. His style was still strikingly modernist, but was now directed towards paintings of more recognisable, mainly urban, subjects. In May, *Novices* and *The Last 'Bus* were shown at the Sixteenth London Group Exhibition. Then, in October, two large oil paintings, *Dock Gates* and *The Gods* (aka *At the Hippodrome*), were shown at the Seventeenth London Group Exhibition. It is this latter work (borrowed from the New Walk Art Gallery, Leicester) that has been selected for the current Ben Uri exhibition. (A wonderful pencil study for it was recently enjoyed by WRS members at the Higgins gallery, Bedford.)

On one level *At the Hippodrome* can be seen as a companion piece to



The Cinema 1920, currently on display at Tate Britain

Roberts's *The Cinema*, and to David Bomberg's *Ghetto Theatre* (see <http://tinyurl.com/ghthdb>) – the latter also to be shown at the Ben Uri Gallery – both also painted in c.1920. Connections can also be made with Walter Sickert's series of music-hall works from a couple of decades earlier. Part of the artistic attraction of the music hall for Sickert seems to have been the combination of a dimly lit audience, the baroque decoration of the theatre, and often foreshortened or unusually framed views of the audience or performers. By contrast, Roberts eschews both lighting and perspective effects and presents us with a stark, fully lit auditorium. 'The Gods' – the inexpensive wooden benches situated almost in the roof of a theatre – seems also to refer ironically to the dejected and downcast individuals in the audience. Unemployment in Britain had



The London Group Gives a Reception 1948-9

begun to rise, and the Hippodrome may have been a cheap haven for the unemployed and perhaps homeless, who show little interest in the entertainment on offer. In this respect *At the Hippodrome* shares the social concern of *The Poor Family* 1921-3 and *Figures in the Park* 1924 and their use of distortion and mask-like imagery for expressive effect.

William Roberts's experience in 1914 of being co-opted as one of Wyndham Lewis's 'rebel artists' led to a later suspicion of joining any groups; however, the London Group, with its acceptance of all styles and aesthetic directions, was an ideal platform for him. He continued to exhibit with the Group in the later 1920s, and occasionally in the 1930s and '40s. In 1948-9 he created an affectionate

watercolour, *The London Group Gives a Reception* (see above), a study for which is in the Tate collection.

The Ben Uri Gallery, at 108A Boundary Rd, London NW8 0RH, is open from Sunday to Friday – please check for the times – and the exhibition runs from 31 October until 2 March.

AUCTION NEWS

At Sotheby's on 12 July a watercolour study for the 1952 version of *Trafalgar Square* sold for £37,500 and the 1942-3 double portrait *The Artist and His Wife* sold for £35,000. On 10 July *The Birth of Venus* made £85,875 at Christie's, where on the following day *At the Fair* 1951 was unsold (estimate £25,000-£35,000).

ROBERT ADAMS: A BRITISH GUIANESE WRESTLER, ACTOR, SINGER AND LAW STUDENT IN 1930s LONDON

by Gemma Romain

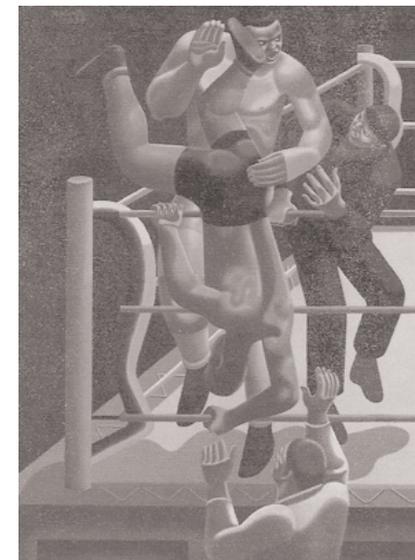
[Last September's newsletter mentioned that WR's 1923 portrait *The Creole* is one of the works included in a project called 'Drawing over the Colour Line: Geographies of Art and Cosmopolitan Politics in London 1919-1939', based in the Equiano Centre at University College London. Here Gemma Romain, a research associate in the project, summarises her findings about another of Roberts's subjects.]

As part of our project 'Drawing over the Colour Line', we have been drawn to William Roberts's paintings which depict ethnically diverse models and London scenes. Of particular interest is *Sam Rabin versus Black Eagle* (1934), a portrayal of a wrestling match between Rabin and Wilfred Robert Adams, known in his wrestling career as the Black Eagle. Robert Adams, as he was known, was a fascinating person whose life history in London traverses many of the political, social and cultural themes we have been exploring in the project.

Adams was born in 1902 in Georgetown, British Guiana. After studying in Georgetown, he won a government scholarship to Mico College in Jamaica. There he studied geometry, geography, science and vocal music for three years, and afterwards worked in education, becoming a headteacher in a number of schools. A 1934 *Sunday Graphic* and

News article said he was known in British Guiana at this time as an international footballer and a singer of spirituals.

He decided to travel to London to study both law and music, eventually deciding to focus on law and become a barrister. In 1938, when he was interviewed for the Jamaican newspaper *The Daily Gleaner*, he lived in a 'lovely cottage at Shepperton-on-Thames'. However, when he first arrived in England, in 1931, he found it difficult to pay for his studies and turned to wrestling in order to make ends meet. In 1934, at a time when he was still wrestling, he told the *Sunday Graphic*, 'Every fight I have means four guineas in my pocket and a further step towards my goal,' which he described as 'to be a judge'. He was



Sam Rabin versus Black Eagle 1934

extremely successful as a wrestler, and would become heavyweight champion of the British Empire. The *Sunday Graphic* reported that ‘wrestling enthusiasts all over the country know the Black Eagle. He is guaranteed to pack any hall.’ It was at one of these fights that Roberts saw Adams’s wrestling match with Rabin which he portrayed in his 1934 painting.

Before and alongside his career as the Black Eagle, Adams also worked as an actor – something he had done as an amateur in British Guiana. This led to a successful London career in theatre and film during the interwar and post-war periods. He began acting a few months after his arrival in England, appearing in *Chu Chin Chow*, and from 1934 he appeared in many films, including the 1936 *Song of Freedom*, starring Paul Robeson. He also became the first black actor on British television, and appeared in several productions (all broadcast live), including Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* in 1938. In *The Daily Gleaner* that year, M. Gwen Edwards stated that ‘undoubtedly the outstanding British Negro stage and film actor in England is Robert Adams.’ One fascinating role was that of the Haitian revolutionary leader Jean-Jacques Dessalines in Trinidadian writer and activist C. L. R. James’s 1936 play *Toussaint L’Ouver-ture*. The formerly lost script of this play has been rediscovered by historian

Christian Høgsbjerg and extracts will be performed this October for the first time since 1936 as part of the conference ‘The Black Jacobins Revisited’ in Liverpool.

Adams founded the Negro Arts Theatre in 1944, and he continued to act after the war. In the late 1940s he performed in the West Indies, and in 1949 he directed and performed in Jamaica’s Ward Theatre in a production of *The Emperor Jones*, sponsored by the British Council. Before this he saw his legal dream realised when he qualified as a barrister in September 1948.

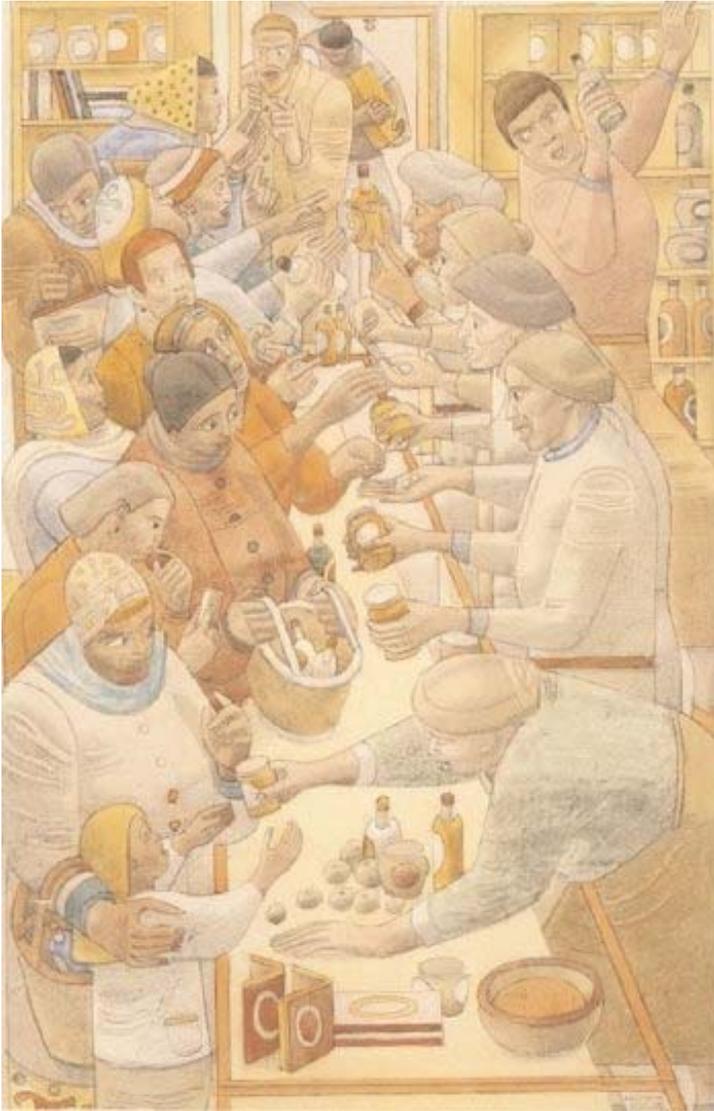
In 1931 he had been a founder member of the London-based League of Coloured Peoples, which worked in inter-racial relations around the UK and carried out a great deal of work campaigning against racism within housing and employment.

He eventually returned permanently to British Guiana, where he worked again in education and in the government information department. He died in 1965.

Based on work of the ‘Drawing Over the Colour Line’ project, Gemma Romain has co-curated with Caroline Bressey an exhibition exploring the history of the black presence in Bloomsbury between 1918 and 1948. ‘Black Bloomsbury’ will run at the art museum at University College London, Gower Street, WC1E 6BT, from 23 September to 13 December.

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



Across the Counter c.1958, showing good business being done in one of the health-food shops of William Roberts's patron Ernest Cooper. Cooper's patronage will be one of the subjects discussed by David Cleall in this year's William Roberts Society lecture, on 'William Roberts in the "Atomic Age": Publicity, Patronage and Paranoia' – see page 1.