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| **Lewis, Wyndham** |
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| Wyndham Lewis is best known as the leader of Vorticism, due largely to his First World War paintings and for portraits he produced during the 1920s and 1930s. As well as editing the Vorticist magazine, *Blast*, he wrote forty books, including the novels, *Tarr* (1918) and *The Apes of God* (1930), both satirical depictions of the art-worlds of Paris and London. |
| Wyndham Lewis is best known as the leader of Vorticism, due largely to his First World War paintings and for portraits he produced during the 1920s and 1930s. As well as editing the Vorticist magazine, *Blast*, he wrote forty books, including the novels, *Tarr* (1918) and *The Apes of God* (1930), both satirical depictions of the art-worlds of Paris and London. He wrote extensively on art and its cultural function in such books as *The Caliph’s Design: Architects! Where is your Vortex?* (1919) and *Time and Western Man* (1927). Until around 1922, Lewis was considered by many to be the most advanced artist working in Britain.  Lewis attended the Slade School of Art but was expelled on account of his disruptive behaviour; his main artistic training and intellectual formation he attributed to his time as a student in Paris and other European cities including Munich and Madrid. He was a member of the Camden Town Group through his friendship with Spencer Gore, but his primitive and satirical drawings were not to the taste of other members. Roger Fry and Clive Bell admired the cubo-futurist decorations completed for the Cave of the Golden Calf nightclub, including the three-metre square *Kermesse* (now lost).    *Study for Kermesse* (1912) Pen and ink, watercolour and gouache (35 x 35.1) Yale Center for British Art  The painting celebrated Nietszchean Dionysianism and Bergsonian creative energy, but Lewis also used cubist techniques to depict figures whose energies failed them (*Sunset among the Michelangelos*; 1912, Victoria and Albert Museum).    *Sunset among the Michelangelos* (1912) Pen and ink, gouache (32.5 x 48). Victoria and Albert Museum  He exhibited at the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition (1912) and joined Roger Fry’s Omega Workshop, but walked out with three other artists when he suspected Fry of cheating him out of a commission. He headed the rival Rebel Arts Centre and became associated with Futurism until the foundation of Vorticism in June 1914. *Blast* featured the Vorticist manifesto and reproductions of the group’s works. Lewis’s geometrical abstractions introduced forms that would later become familiar in the Russian avant-garde.    *Portrait of an Englishwoman* (1913) Pen and ink, pencil and watercolour. 56 x 38. The Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticutt (Edna Gallup Sumner and Mary Gallup Sumner collection)  Vorticism was disrupted by the Great War, where Lewis served in the artillery. He participated in the Third Battle of Ypres in 1917 but shortly afterwards became an official war artist. His painting, *A Battery Shelled*, adapts the mechanomorphic vocabulary of Vorticism to the figurative purpose required by the authorities.    *A Battery Shelled* (1919). Oil on canvas (182.7 x 317.7), Imperial War Museum  Figuration became predominant in Lewis’s work after the war, though he continued practising forms of abstraction, and always aspired to be more than a naturalist—in 1939 he described himself as a “super-naturalist,” distinguishing himself from the influential “super-realism” (surrealism) of the time.  In a 1919 pamphlet highly critical of Bloomsbury formalism and the French classical revival (*The Caliph’s Design: Architects! Where is your Vortex?*) Lewis called for a reshaping of the built environment using the formal discoveries of Vorticist abstractions. He became the spokesman for “Group X,” a group of ten painters (including ex-Vorticists) dissatisfied with Bloomsbury domination of the London Group, but after only one exhibition the group dissolved. Disenchanted with groups, Lewis held a one-man show, “Tyros and Portraits” at the Leicester Galleries (1921). “Tyros” were satirical creations, “children of a new epoch” thrown into the post-War world armed with little but the “British Grin.” The large number of drawings in the show reflected Lewis’s predilection to work on paper, and demonstrated his mastery of the energetic “whiplash” linear technique. Abstractions produced in 1921–22 were among the most advanced in Europe, produced for a projected exhibition in Paris that was never held.  Figure Composition.jpg  *Figures* (1921) Pencil, pen and ink, watercolour, gouache (50.4 x 35.4), Cleveland Museum of Art, Leonard C. Hanna, Jr., Fund.  In the 1930s Lewis returned to concentrated painting after ten years devoted mainly to writing, in addition to his editing duties at magazine *The Enemy*. His Leicester Galleries 1937 “Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings” featured super-naturalist paintings treating history, social satire, invalids, and clinics (Lewis had undergone several major operations), as well as ghostly presences in the afterlife. He began a series of portraits, the most impressive of which were of his wife and of fellow-modernists T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.    *Ezra Pound* (1939). Oil on canvas (76 x 102), Tate Gallery  These works led Basil Taylor, in a *Spectator* obituary, to describe Lewis as “our greatest portraitist for 150 years”—a more measured judgement than Sickert’s, who claimed he was “the greatest portraitist of this or any other time.”  Lewis was an outspoken writer on the appeasement of Hitler in the 1930s; as War broke out again in 1939 he left for North America, where he was to spend six difficult years. The main achievements of this period were a series of watercolours produced in Toronto in 1941 on themes of bathing, the imagination, and cosmic creation. But his sight was deteriorating as result of a tumour, and this seriously compromised his abilities as an artist after his return to England in 1945. As art critic of *The Listener*, he championed Robert Colquhoun, Francis Bacon, and the generation of neo-Romantics who were coming to the fore in Britain. His 1939 book, *Wyndham Lewis the Artist: From Blast to Burlington House* may be read as a sort of manifesto for them. In 1951 he announced his blindness. The major retrospective, *Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism* (1956, Tate Gallery) was held shortly before his death. |
| Further reading:  Edwards, Paul. *Wyndham Lewis: Art and War*. London: Wyndham Lewis Memorial Trust in association with Lund Humphries, 1992.  ——. *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer*. London: Yale University Press, 2000.  ——, with Richard Humphreys. *Wyndham Lewis Portraits* (Exhibition catalogue.) London: National Portrait Gallery, 2008.  Juan March Foundation, *Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957).* (Exhibition catalogue.) Madid: Fundación Juan March, 2010.  Klein, Jackie (ed.). *The Bone beneath the Pulp: Drawings by Wyndham Lewis.* (Exhibition catalogue.) London: Courtauld Gallery, 2004.  Mastin, Catherine, Robert Stacey and Thomas Dilworth. *“The Talented Intruder”: Wyndham Lewis in Canada, 1939–1945.* (Exhibition catalogue.) Windsor, Ontario: The Art Gallery of Windsor, 1992.  Michel, Walter. *Wyndham Lewis: Paintings and Drawings.* London: Thames and Hudson, 1971.  Normand, Tom. *Wyndham Lewis the Artist: Holding the Mirror up to Politics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. |