

Wyndham Lewis (1882 – 1957)
at the Fundación Juan March
(Madrid, February 5th – May 16th 2010)

Michael Durman

The most comprehensive exhibition ever held of the art of Wyndham Lewis opened earlier this year. It wasn't to be found at Tate Britain, or even at one of the more enterprising regional galleries, but at the privately endowed Fundación Juan March in Madrid. The organizers claimed it to be the 'most complete display of his work since *Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism*, the retrospective at the Tate Gallery, London, in 1956'.¹ This was an exhibition that had been eagerly anticipated by Lewis enthusiasts, but which the British art establishment had seemed unable to support. Yet it was appropriate that a major retrospective of his work should have been held in the city where Lewis found early inspiration, and in a country to which his imagination often returned. Despite the significance of the event, and positive interest in the Spanish press, only one decent review appeared in a major British newspaper, by Tom Lubbock of *The Independent*. It is a deeply depressing indictment of our cultural life that, despite this landmark exhibition being co-curated by two British scholars, with a formidable catalogue published in Spanish and English ('a complete presentation, for the broader public, of Lewis and his work'), it did not transfer, even in part, to a gallery in the United Kingdom. Yet, if only for logistical reasons, it is unlikely that another major solo exhibition of Lewis's work will take place for many years to come.

Madrid is quite a different city from when Lewis first visited it as a young man in order to study the art of Francisco Goya in the Museo del Prado. Like other capital cities across the world it has been transformed through a cultural renaissance that has resulted in the provision of some spectacular exhibition spaces. The Prado, of course, possesses rich historical collections assembled over many centuries of Hapsburg rule, but there are newer world-class collections of modern art in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza and Museo Reina Sofia. To walk

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through the packed galleries of the Reina Sofia simply underlines the extraordinary popularity of contemporary visual art, with visitors standing five or six deep before Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), a painting once described by Lewis as 'a big, highly intellectual poster, uninteresting in colour, and having no relation to the political event that was supposed to have provoked it' (*WLA* 352). Luckily, there is no record of what he thought about Salvador Dalí's *The Great Masturbator* (1929), possibly the second most popular painting in the museum.

It was quieter at the Fundación March, in Salamanca, although it has been reported that around five hundred people attended on each day of the exhibition. For many of these visitors, it must have been an extraordinary introduction to the power and range of Lewis's work. The galleries of the Fundación are located to the north of the city's golden triangle, in a white, modernist building, set down amongst substantial nineteenth-century town houses. The Fundación is an extremely wealthy private organization, funded from the estate of the Spanish financier, businessman, and profiteer, Juan March Ordinas. It owns the Museu Fundación Juan March, in Palma de Mallorca, which houses a permanent collection of Spanish art from the heroic years of modernism, and the Museo de Arte Abstracto Español, in Cuenca, where it holds a large collection of Spanish abstraction. Juan March was an enthusiastic supporter and friend of General Franco. In 1961, *Time* magazine reported that 'the shadowy figure of Juan March has floated across the face of Europe for more than half a century, bringing public officials low, underwriting dictators, helping to finance two world wars (on both sides), and buying himself virtual immunity from the law'.² Exonerated from history by its impressive investment in contemporary culture, the Fundación now contributes generously 'to the progress and dissemination of knowledge and, within that, to the study of man and society'.³ Since it opened in 1955, the Fundación has acquired a reputation for presenting the work of modern Spanish artists, alongside some of the greatest figures of the twentieth century. It also has a commendable track record of introducing British artists to the Spanish public, including Francis Bacon (1978), Ben Nicholson (1987), and David Hockney (1992).

The curators of the exhibition began from the simple, but contested, proposition that Wyndham Lewis was 'a major figure in the history of modern art, literature and culture, whose pictorial work warrants – as one of his definitions of "beauty" reads – "an immense predilection"'. The exhibition was intended, above all, to 'interrupt the

thundering silence that has surrounded and still surrounds one of the most vigorous pictorial and literary bodies of work of the first half of the twentieth century'.⁴ Manuel Fontán del Junco, Director of Exhibitions at the Fundación, explains in his introduction, 'Wyndham Lewis: As Unknown as the Future', that the artist 'poses a challenge to the usual way we organise our memory of art and historicise art, ideas and culture'. He suggests that Lewis's work should 'be considered as something that comes to us from the future and obliges us to understand the realities of modern art and culture beyond the classifying categories currently in use'.⁵ This argument originates, of course, in the penultimate section of Lewis's 'Essay on the Objective of Plastic Art in our Time' (1922), where he maintains that the greatest artistic and intellectual inventions come to us from the future as much as the past: 'The future possesses its history as well as the past [...] All living art is the history of the future. The greatest artists, men of science and political thinkers come to us from the future – from the opposite direction to the past' (*WLA* 214).

Fontán del Junco then argues that Lewis's art 'anticipates contemporary artistic, social, political and cultural reality [...] rarely glimpsed at the time', and he believes that Lewis's relative obscurity today is a consequence of this vision, since like all visionaries, he was ahead of his time.⁶ A formidable list of Lewis's insights is given, including his perception of the entropic character of modern art; his spatial and non-temporal understanding of reality; his analysis of the corruptions of totalitarianism, democracy, and the cult of the child; the dialectic between the new in art and in fashion; his theory of laughter; his diatribes against modern philosophy; his opinions on the relation between art and war and art and politics, and on art in a mechanized and globalized world. 'How is it possible', Fontán del Junco asks, 'that Lewis could remain almost completely unknown by the majority of the public?' His answer is that 'the main reason that Wyndham Lewis does not form part of the traditional canon to an extent proportional to his unquestionable importance – and the point from which this exhibition departs – is perhaps that he embodied avant-garde logic so radically that one is hard pressed to find parallels with other artists'. Lewis, he suggests, took 'the logic of the modern avant-garde' to its conclusion by 'simultaneously maintaining the dual status of avant-garde and anti-avant-garde artist, without synthesizing it, leaving it open to contradiction'.⁷

Whether this statement means anything more substantial than that

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at different stages in his career, Lewis chose to employ both abstract and figurative forms of expression, is open to debate. Fontán del Junco draws a rather half-hearted parallel between Lewis's art and that of the 'less popularised' Russian artists, Kazimir Malevitch or Pavel Filonov.⁸ Despite this slightly bizarre comparison, as the fundamental rationale behind the installation of this exhibition, this opened the way for a markedly different interpretation of Lewis's art. Madrid confirmed that, far from being an artist whose later work declined in significance and artistic quality, Lewis's practice throughout his career was much more coherent than has previously been held. In short, *Wyndham Lewis (1882 - 1957)* was a confident exhibition, where it was possible, perhaps for the first time since his death, to appreciate Lewis's complex achievements within an international context, without the parochial caveats that would have emerged had this show been mounted in a London gallery.

Although few of Lewis's major books have yet been translated into Spanish, the Madrid exhibition forms part of a new interest in Lewis's work that, for well over a decade, has brought together academics from Spain and the United Kingdom. The Wyndham Lewis website (www.unirioja.es/wyndhamlewis) has the University of La Rioja as joint partner, along with two English universities, and is supported by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Technology. The same university is also a partner in the website devoted to Lewis's articles published in *The Listener* (www.unirioja.es/listenerartcriticism). There have been significant contributions from Spanish academics to conferences and seminars, both in Spain and in the United Kingdom. *BLAST 1* (1914) was translated into Spanish by Yolanda Morató, for the Madrid exhibition, and a bilingual edition of *Timon of Athens* (1914), with Lewis's illustrations restored, was also issued. Spanish scholars wrote two of the excellent catalogue essays.

That Lewis found Spanish art and culture sympathetic is well documented. He is known to have travelled to Spain at least five times, sometimes for quite lengthy periods. He first visited in 1902, with the painter Spencer Gore, when together they looked at Goya's work in the Prado, and would also have seen paintings by El Greco, Velasquez, Zurbaran, and other masters of the Spanish school. Lewis subsequently lived away from England for a further six years, mainly in Paris, but also in Holland (where he studied the paintings of Franz Hals) and in Germany, working intermittently at his painting and writing, whilst absorbing European art, literature, and philosophy. More than anything, these years provided Lewis with a necessary distance from the coteries

of the London art world, and gave him a critical perspective onto the broader currents of modernist art and culture.

In his interesting catalogue essay 'Wyndham Lewis and Spain: Anarchism, Cliché, Image', Alan Munton explores some of the ways in which Lewis both read and misread the culture and politics of Spain. Many of Lewis's pictures have titles that refer to Spanish themes, such as the early study *Figure (Spanish Woman)* (1912), or the later paintings *Betrothal of the Matador* (1933) and *The Surrender of Barcelona* (1936-37). A number of his short stories are set in Spain, notably *A Spanish Household* and *A Soldier of Humour*, written respectively in 1910 and 1911 (but published later). Part of the action of his novel *The Revenge for Love* (1937) takes place in Spain, in the months just preceding the Civil War. It was no surprise, therefore, that one of the first pictures in the Madrid exhibition was the 1905 portrait of Lewis by Augustus John. This painting is reminiscent of the dramatic work that Lewis had studied in the Prado. John depicts his friend as if he were a character in a rather second-rate operatic production (even his badly cut hair looks like a wig). By contrast, the exhibition contained two of Lewis's menacing self-portraits, painted only six years later, demonstrating in their strongly marked abstract planes just how far he had developed as an artist during his European years.

Lewis, of course, absorbed much more than just art and culture during these early travels in Spain. On his first visit, only just out of his teens, and away from the influence of his redoubtable mother, he relished the freedom of a young man cut loose from parental responsibility. Lewis later described these years as his time of 'cryptic immaturity' (RA 126). Alan Munton points out with considerable understatement that for Lewis 'sexuality and Spain are mixed up in significant ways'. He was to contract gonorrhoea on his second visit, in 1908. Lewis was to suffer from various secondary illnesses for much of his later adult life. As Munton comments, not without irony: 'Even in old age, Lewis never forgot his earliest experiences in Spain.'⁹

The English co-curators of the Madrid exhibition were Paul Edwards, who published the standard critical monograph on Lewis's art and writing, in 2000, and Richard Humphreys, who wrote a short introduction to Lewis for the Tate Gallery, in 2004. They worked closely with Fontán del Junco and his colleague María Zozaya, from the Exhibitions Department at the Fundación. Alongside a generous selection of his paintings and drawings were cases of books, manifestos, and magazines; portraits and photographs of the artist; film clips and

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audio recordings (including Lewis giving a talk on the radio); and other supporting material. The catalogue contained six new critical essays, an illustrated chronology of the artist's life, listings of his exhibitions, an anthology of texts, by and about Lewis, and several useful bibliographies. Every picture exhibited is beautifully illustrated in the catalogue, which also contains a substantial number of works that were not lent to the exhibition. There is a wonderfully seductive triple page colour spread of the covers of Lewis's published books and magazines (in themselves a fascinating subject for academic study), as well as a short informative *prévis* of the contents and history of each of his books. The catalogue entries are expertly written, and provide a commentary on the relation between his visual art and his writing. Although the attempt to explain Lewis's ideas only partially succeeds, as it must, in an exhibition devoted primarily to his visual art, it is useful to have such well organized evidence of the intellectual fertility and formidable range of his interests as a writer, as we study his paintings and drawings. In effect, the catalogue is an authoritative and well-produced monograph on Lewis's art.

The exhibition's geography was subdivided into four parts, broadly corresponding to the historical events of Lewis's career: 'From Great London Vortex to the Western Front (1900-1919)', 'From Avantgardist to Enemy (1919-1929)', 'Between Metaphysics and History (1930-1939)', and 'Imagination Against the Void (1939-1951)'. Dividing his career into decades allowed the curators to install very different kinds of work together, but it also meant that overall thematic interpretation was made more difficult. The first three sections provided most interest, with the final section inevitably being the thinnest, although it contained a number of unusual, and often highly emotional pictures from Lewis's last years. Lewis lost his sight in 1951, and was unable to work much further at his visual art, down to his death in 1957. Whilst the exhibition's first two sections undoubtedly corresponded to the major historical ruptures in Lewis's life, the more philosophical and descriptive titles of the final sections only partially succeeded in providing a usable context within which to explore the extraordinary work hanging on the gallery walls.

Each section contained a beautifully installed and consistently high standard of work. Some key pictures were missing, and the curators relied quite heavily on availability from British public collections and the Wyndham Lewis Memorial Trust. Nearly forty works that were not to be seen in the exhibition were illustrated and analysed in the catalogue,

but the choice of exactly which works to include occasionally seemed a bit arbitrary. Clearly, any exhibition is the result of many compromises, not least over issues of transport and cost, but some absences matter rather more than others. For instance, neither the important pre-Vorticist *Portrait of an Englishwoman* (1913) nor the abstract gouache *Red Duet* (1914) was included in the exhibition. The former was illustrated in the catalogue, but not the latter. *New York* (1914) was not in the exhibition, but was illustrated in the catalogue. The rarely seen *A Canadian Gunpit* (1919), painted for the Canadian government, was not included (and not much missed). The absence of the monumental *Praxitella* (1920-21), possibly too frail to travel, was a much greater loss, since the Leeds picture represents the culmination of an important sequence of drawings and paintings of the artist's lover Iris Barry (many of which were included). Neither *Edwin Evans* (1922), or *Mrs Schiff* (1923-24), were included, the former surely the one work in which Lewis came closest to emulating the neo-classicism of both Cezanne and Picasso. The rather odd, but psychologically revealing double portrait drawing of *The Sitwell Brothers* (1927) was left out, as was the oil portrait of *Naomi Mitchison* (1939), although an earlier drawing of her was included. The second portrait of *T. S. Eliot* (1949) was absent, also the rather fine painting of *Julian Symons* (1949). A superb group of oils from the 1937 Leicester Galleries exhibition were included, but *The Departure of a Princess from Chaos* (1936-7), *The Mud Clinic* (1937), and *Inferno* (1937) were all missing, although the latter was illustrated. It would have greatly strengthened the final section, if an example of the rarely seen formal portraits that Lewis undertook during his self-imposed exile in the United States and in Canada (two of which were illustrated in the catalogue) had been included.

The choice from Lewis's early pictures that are still extant included the important drawing called *The Theatre Manager* (1909) and the astonishing *Woman Ascending a Stair* (1911), but omitted *The Celibate* (1909) and *Study for Kermesse* (1912), which gave a slightly curious reading of Lewis's achievement during these years (particularly if you failed to purchase the expensive catalogue). All the key themes of Lewis's early career, however, were featured, from the grotesque figures linked to the 'Wild Body' stories, the mock-pastoral studies satirizing the iconography of Matisse and the Fauves (and of Léger and the minor Cubists), to the ecstatic but controlled response to Futurism embodied in the portfolio *Timon of Athens* (1912-13). Several of Lewis's original watercolours, as well as the lithographic prints for the portfolio were present. His short,

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explosive dalliance with Roger Fry's Omega Workshops was represented by the acrobats and circus performers depicted on *Design for a Folding Screen* (1913).

Some tantalizing art historical questions remain unexplained. What did Lewis actually see and experience in Paris, or in Munich, both at that time major centres for the European artistic avant-garde, and how quickly did he respond to events in his own practice? Although there is little evidence of what he did, or whom he met, during these years, Lewis absorbed influences, in rapid succession, from Fauvism, Cubism, and Futurism, elements of which surface in his work at this time. It is generally thought that Roger Fry's 1910 and 1912 Post-Impressionist exhibitions introduced Matisse and Picasso to the London art world. But if the date on *The Celibate* is correct, Lewis came back from the continent in December 1908 having already internalized the essence of Fauvism, and with a good working knowledge of early Cubist technique that he was confident enough to employ, both in this drawing, and in subsequent work. What was the exact sequence to his development as an artist during this critical period? The Madrid exhibition didn't make this journey particularly clear, partly because too few of Lewis's early works still exist to allow for any certainty, but also because the artist himself appears to have travelled back and forward between styles, until his seismic encounter with the Italian Futurists, in London, in March 1912, led to the establishment of Vorticism. During the following years, however, he continued to produce a variety of figurative works, like *Circus* (1913-14), *Moonlight* (1914), and *Combat No. 3* (1914), alongside his more abstract, non-figurative pictures.

Lewis's Vorticism could be followed from the study of *The Courtesan* (1912) and the watercolour, rather erroneously called *The Vorticist* (1912), through to the privately owned wash drawing *Timon of Athens* (1913), *Composition – Later Drawing of Timon Series* (1913), and the paintings *Workshop* (1915) and *The Crowd* (1914-15), all borrowed from the Tate Gallery's collection. The gouache entitled *Planners (A Happy Day)*, from 1913, offers a fine demonstration of Lewis's consistent practice of holding two contrasting methods of working in balanced tension. The cruciform dynamic of the composition lies underneath what appears to be several abstract figures, creating a constant interplay between both ways of representation. Several sheets from the so-called *Vorticist Sketchbook*, perhaps the most radical and non-figurative designs that Lewis undertook, were also included. These were probably intended as preliminary studies for paintings that were lost, or destroyed

altogether, and provide comparative support for both *New York* and *Workshop*. Together with a small group of other works, some known only in photographs, they are all that remain of Lewis's Vorticist years. Both numbers of *BLAST* magazine were on show in the exhibition, and the Fundación also published a new Spanish translation of *BLAST 1*, by Yolando Morató. Maybe it would have been helpful to have included copies of other avant-garde magazines, particularly those edited by Apollinaire and Marinetti, to compare the handling of text and image, and to situate Lewis's graphic inventions into the wider European context.

Lewis served in the Royal Garrison Artillery at the Battle of Messine Ridge in June 1917. He was present later that year at the Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele). Recuperating in hospital behind the lines, he produced a number of satirical figure studies, of which *Gossips* (1917) is a brilliant example. It is drawn with an angular and quite brutal visual language that would lead to the drawings and paintings that he made as an official war artist. They included the monumental *A Battery Shelled* (1918-19), which was supported in the Madrid exhibition by several of the drawings Lewis first exhibited in the Goupil Gallery, in 1919. These demonstrate some of his most startling graphic inventions and provide an accurate, but reflective, record of the activities of soldiers at war. *A Battery Shelled* has never looked better than it did in this exhibition, its grey-green and ochre palette contrasted against the rich colour of the backcloth on which it was hung. The painting has sometimes seemed problematic when hung in the galleries of the Imperial War Museum, but, in these more sympathetic spaces, Lewis's contemplation of the brutal mechanics of modern warfare and its debilitating effects upon both the mind and body could be more easily read and interpreted. The effect of standing before this great painting was profoundly moving, as if the viewer were present alongside the soldiers depicted in the left section of the canvas, reflecting upon the actions taking place deeper inside the picture frame.

The second section of the exhibition opened with the *Fifteen Drawings* portfolio, published by the Ovid Press in 1919. Two other studies made from the nude female figure were also included. Lewis habitually drew from a small group of models, making numerous studies of each sitter. Some of these were present in Madrid (the London cab driver, Iris Barry, Ezra Pound), but not perhaps in sufficient numbers to allow comparisons to be made across each series; other groups were absent. There were none of the drawings of Madge Pulsford, for

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instance, with her blunt, almost brutal features that encouraged Lewis to aspire towards the monumentality of sculpture in his drawing. However, the two female life drawings that were included in the exhibition offered a wonderful demonstration of Lewis's abilities. These were the beautifully articulate chalk drawing called *Girl Reclining* (c. 1919) and the vigorous pencil and watercolour study of the *Crouching Woman* (c. 1919). More of these studies might have been included, for they are amongst Lewis's finest works, and they show how he redefined the parameters of this traditional genre. Unfortunately, the life drawings in the portfolio, although of interest, are not uniformly of the same high standard. Several of Lewis's studies from the clothed female figure were on view in Madrid, including the superb *Lady in a Windsor Chair* (1920) and *Woman with a Cigarette* (1920). Surely in this latter work, the model must be holding a piece of chalk, or a crayon, in her hand, and not a cigarette? Lewis produced many fine drawings of Ezra Pound, and the 1921 study of the poet seated in the studio armchair was an absolute corker.

Lewis had a fine eye when it came to selecting his models, a gift that stood him in good stead when working from more famous sitters. He was also an acute analyst of his own features, although there were fewer self-portraits than might have been expected. Comment has already been made on the two early self-portraits from 1911-12. The curators also selected two drawings first shown in exhibitions from the early twenties, which were intended to represent the artist to his public in very different ways. His powerful *Self-Portrait* (1920) was included in the 'Group X' exhibition held at the Mansard Gallery, London, in 1920, when Lewis still entertained hopes of resurrecting Vorticism. The hatching, strong tone, and flat colour are all powerfully suggestive of techniques deployed in wood-block printing. The ink and wash drawing *Self-Portrait with a Hat* (1932) conveys a kind of wariness, the artist directing his glance sideways, away from the viewer, a wry smile just emerging onto his lips. His self-portrait *Mr Wyndham Lewis as a Tyro* (1920-21) was first exhibited in *Tyros and Portraits*, at the Leicester Galleries, in 1921. In this extraordinary painting Lewis presents his features as if carved from wood, left eyebrow cocked, teeth bared, in something between a grin and a snarl. He deploys an almost flat, mustard-yellow background, influenced, perhaps, both by Van Gogh and the Japanese actor prints that had been collected by the Dutchman, and used so often in his art. There is a powerful geometry to this work, with strong diagonals rising in a leaping zigzag movement across the coloured background. One other self-portrait was included in the

exhibition, the slightly haunted drawing *Wyndham Lewis, Esq.* from *Thirty Personalities and a Self-Portrait* (1932).

Lewis's work from before the First World War is familiar territory from recent exhibitions, but the major revelation in Madrid came from his later work of the twenties, thirties, and in a more qualified way, from the forties. Away from gloomy regional galleries, or from the Tate's Thames-side basement, Lewis's paintings and watercolours of this period emerged as perhaps some of the strongest of his career. Although the rooms of the Fundación are not large, a generous allocation of space was given to each work, especially to the major oils that constitute his visual canon. Walls were painted variously in cooler or warmer shades of a neutral off-white, providing a background that invested colours with great clarity. Floor to ceiling mirrors, either by chance or intention, reflected work hung in other rooms, offering visitors simultaneous glimpses of formal concerns that engaged Lewis at different times in his career. They also gave a much greater sense of space to the galleries. The curators had decided not to install the work in simple typologies, contrasting abstract against figurative, or portrait against imaginary, but to display them in a way that allowed more subtle correspondences to emerge between pictures that had before seemed disparate in style and content. This was particularly relevant in the later twenties and thirties, as Lewis moved from intensive study of the figure, to imaginative abstraction, and to the great portraits of his writer colleagues. The exhibition showed that throughout his career Lewis worked in an abstract or figurative format, whenever it was appropriate, finding strength and artistic sustenance, as if one approach provided inspiration and invention for the other.

It was fascinating to follow the development of Lewis's figure drawing, from an early virtuoso performance, in *Moonlight* (1914), to the bathers in *Abstract Figure Study* (1921), with its highly stylized totemic figures, or the more enigmatic couple depicted in *Two Figures* (1927). The catalogue rightly suggests that these seem 'quasi-human figures in situations that reflect life on this planet but do not quite conform to it'.¹⁰ This graphic invention feeds through into watercolours, such as *Abstract Composition* (1921), and oil paintings, such as *Group of Three Veiled Figures* (1933) or the wonderful *Creation Myth* (1937). The curators had installed his more abstract compositions adjacent to life studies and portraits, offering a complex narrative of how Lewis worked in these decades. In short, Lewis was revealed as a more complex artist than was formerly held to be the case, with a wide range of styles at his

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command. He emerged from this exhibition, quite possibly, as a major European figure.

Because Lewis's books and magazines were shown alongside the visual art he was making at the time, it was possible to see how each discipline had formed part of his practice as a whole, and how each of these separate elements interacted. Positioned throughout the exhibition were paintings and photographs of the artist and his associates, as well as film of Lewis defending his great 1938 portrait of T. S. Eliot, rejected from the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition of that year. There was even an audio recording of Lewis reading one of his essays on the radio. Although his writing couldn't be fully brought to life, the curators went to considerable lengths to indicate the range, depth, and excitement of Lewis's ideas. The catalogue entries and essays offered the interested visitor additional routes into the books, something that allowed Lewis's ideas and opinions to be introduced.

If the earlier parts of this exhibition offered us a broadly familiar modernist narrative, in the later sections Lewis seemed, more often than not, an artist newly discovered. We always knew that he was an extraordinary draughtsman, capable of firecracker pieces, as well as works of great subtlety, but he also emerged as a sensitive watercolourist and as an oil painter gifted with a highly original approach to colour and composition.

As expected, the well-known, much discussed portraits of *Edith Sitwell* (1923-35), *T. S. Eliot* (1938), *Stephen Spender* (1938), and *Ezra Pound* (1939) almost upheld Sickert's hyperbolic statement that Lewis was 'the greatest portraitist of this or any other time'.¹¹ Three of these portraits could be seen in a magnificent enfilade, each painting isolated against the dark background. All four paintings were beautifully installed, with the portrait of Spender, in particular, making a tremendous impression. The cool sky-blue of the poet's open-neck shirt is echoed by the almost transparent colour of his eyes. Spender's head is superbly painted, the sensitive, but solid modelling of his forehead, cheeks, and nose, crowned by that magnificent crop of curls (Lewis was always particularly good at hair). It has been argued that Spender was the model for Dan Boleyn in *The Apes of God* (1930), but this painting betrays no unkind or satirical intent.

These highly wrought public portraits demand intense scrutiny from the viewer, given their famous subjects, and the considerable effort that Lewis expended in their production. Twentieth-century portrait painting can often seem very academic and time-bound, a fate that

befalls some of Lewis's own drawings from the portfolio *Thirty Personalities and a Self-Portrait* (1932). He seemed able to raise his game, however, whenever he painted a fellow writer, conferring upon each sitter an almost classical detachment. As Lewis wrote: 'A sort of immortality descends upon these objects. It is an immortality, which [...] they have to pay for with death, or at least with its coldness and immobility' (WLA 208). These magnificent portraits were supported by fine drawings of Ezra Pound, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Rebecca West, and Naomi Mitchison. A more generous allocation of Lewis's drawings of Edith Sitwell would have been very welcome, especially since the wonderfully strange and delicate study of her, made in 1923, owned by the National Portrait Gallery and illustrated in the catalogue, was not actually in the exhibition.

Despite his detached approach to family life, and in complete contrast to his more formal literary portraits, Lewis was revealed in this exhibition as an acutely sensitive artist of domestic intimacy. Included were several superb pictures of his wife, Froanna. Lewis charted her beautiful features across three decades, firstly as a young model, and then later as his wife, supporter, and companion. A delicately subtle pencil drawing of her, made in 1922, only two years after they first met (but nearly a decade before they married), called *Girl Seated (Gladys Anne Hoskyns)*, manages to be both distractingly tender, coolly objective, and very sexy. The catalogue mentions Ingres, and indeed this drawing has all the delicate lightness of tone, as well as the taut formal organization, which is so characteristic of the great French painter. Lewis was clearly fascinated by the heavy tumble of hair that frames her sharply etched and profiled face. *Girl Reading (Portrait of the Artist's Wife, Froanna)* is another fine drawing from 1926. Later portraits of Froanna were more personal, sometimes traumatic, as in *The Artist's Wife, Froanna* (1940), made during the early years of the war, when the couple were living a fraught existence from suitcases, in hotel rooms and small apartments in America and Canada. This drawing on cheap blue paper has something of the occult power of a great romantic artist like Fuseli. Froanna's delicately twisted fingers, in particular, are mesmerizing, against the formal counterpoint of the folds of her headscarf. *War News (Portrait of Froanna)*, from 1942, is another deeply personal study in alienation, boredom, and loss. The more conventional *Red Portrait (Froanna)*, from 1937, was included, but not (unfortunately) the Glasgow Museum's *Froanna (Portrait of the Artist's Wife)*, painted in the same year. This great portrait contains some exquisite passages, in the subtle beauty of her

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face, the delicate bow of her mouth, and long sensitive fingers. Froanna is wrapped up in her husband's warm, comfy, woollen dressing gown, with the curtains drawn against the afternoon light outside. The picture is suffused in rich, sensual reds (according to some commentators, Lewis was now unable to detect the colour red), heightened by the sharp intense blue edge to the lining of the gown, the tassel on the cord, and the lacey linen on which is placed a crisply drawn porcelain tea service. The picture has a serene, and maybe post-coital, glow that is a reminder of Lewis's earlier links to the Camden Town Group. Yet the composition of the painting is as tightly controlled as that of *Mr Wyndham Lewis as a Tyro*, with the direction of the sitter's hands accenting the diagonals.

Lewis's articulate grasp of pictorial design, as well as his application of a startlingly unusual colour range, could be seen in such works as *Seated Figure* (1921), *Portrait of the Artist as the Painter Raphael* (1921), which was not in the exhibition, or *A Reading of Ovid* (1920). He often employed mustard-yellow, pink, red, or blue in quite unexpected ways. The Madrid exhibition demonstrated that many of Lewis's paintings from the thirties, such as *Three Veiled Figures* (1933), or *Red Scene* (1933-36), might be successfully juxtaposed with work by Klee, Max Ernst, Joan Miró, or even Picasso. The realms of the imagination created for *The Tank in the Clinic* (1937), *Landscape with Northmen* (1936-37), or *Inferno* (1937), represent Lewis at the very top of his game, and a match for any Surrealist. During these years he may not have been able to paint as much as he would have liked, for illness, convalescence, and the constant need to earn a living took a heavy toll on his time and energies. The exhibition, however, triumphantly showed that what he did paint was of a consistently high quality.

Lewis was rarely diffuse or bombastic as a visual artist. His precise drawing generates shapes that are then integrated into the overall composition. There is little room for confusion in his art; nothing is hidden, obscured, or for show. His use of line, hatching, or modelling is clear and clean. Lewis had studied drawing at the Slade School with Henry Tonks, one of the great art school teachers of his generation (Lewis described him as a 'peculiar enthusiastic and school-boy like individual' [B2 80]), and it is this hard won discipline that provides him with a constant armature for work throughout his career. Almost all his known early works are drawings. His Vorticist compositions consist of precisely drawn shapes filled with flatly applied, non-associative colours. The underlying design is classical, as in the early Renaissance art that

Lewis so admired. A sense of what Renaissance theorists called *disegno* ('burying Euclid deep in the living flesh' [WLA 330]) pervades everything that he drew and painted. Lewis remarked in *BLAST 1* that Leonardo was a much greater artist than Rubens because he 'MADE NEW BEINGS, delicate and severe, with ambitious intention' (B1 132). A further consequence of his early study was the way in which the flesh and corporeality of the human body is reimagined differently in his visual art. Many of his graphic inventions are quite unforgettable, such as the pair of swaggering bulldogs accompanying the figures in the early watercolour *Figure Composition (Man and Woman with Bulldogs)* (1912), the group of three soldiers assaulted by gunfire in the drawing entitled *The Battery Shelled* (1918), or the group of spectators in *The Pole Jump* (1919-1922). A drawing that exemplifies this extraordinary ability, but which was not included in the exhibition, is the pen and ink study *A Shore Scene (Figures on a Beach)* (1920). A group of seven or eight bathers are located along a rising diagonal, but it is the invention of the girl asleep on her towel, in the foreground, that catches the attention.

Generating these complex, calligraphic forms requires intelligence and vision of a very high order. In *Woman in Blue* (1921), for instance, Iris Barry's body hovers in space. Tension is generated by the torsion of her body, as she leans forward, twisting her upper torso to the left. We follow a vertical movement through the curved back legs of the wooden chair, which changes direction to travel along the model's left arm and protruding neck (running, more or less, parallel with the seat of the chair), flows horizontally across her shoulders, before dropping down through her right upper arm. We then follow the horizontal towards her fingers lifting the page (and connecting with the blue shape of the window), across the top edge of the volume, then back down through the legs of the table. The sleeve that covers her extended right arm is depicted in a bravura pattern of rippling wave-like shapes that are supported by the larger forms of her waistcoat and dress. The horizontal line dividing the pages of the open book joins the upper edge of the second (impossibly positioned) volume lying on the table, which acts both as a counterweight to her body, and as an extension to the horizontal. It is worth remembering how the eye follows these complex forms back and forward through three-dimensional space. Lewis's drawing captures the stuff of fabric and flesh, but these shapes may be interpreted both as abstract patterns, richly satisfying on their own account, or as signifying the different textures of the model's flesh and clothes. This interplay between the abstract and the figurative is what

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generates such kinetic power, whilst the sensation conveyed through the play of line and shape is like counterpoint.

The most unexpected aspect of Lewis's work that emerged from this exhibition, and one already touched upon earlier, is his ability as a colourist. It has been a commonplace when talking about his art to point out that whilst he was a great draughtsman, Lewis often failed to reach consistent levels of excellence as a painter. It is true that he wasn't always successful in transferring the formal energies of his drawing to his larger oil paintings, although the inclusion of *Praxitella* would have given a different perspective to the exhibition, since Lewis achieves an awesome precision in this dramatic painting. In many of his oils, however, the pigment is flexibly handled, the colours both striking and unorthodox. The startling yellow background of *Mr Wyndham Lewis as a Tyro* (1920-21), for instance, is offset by his distinctive red collar, whilst the contrasting palette of colours of the rectangular and triangular forms representing hands in the portrait of *Edith Sitwell*, are completely original and unexpected.

Lewis often constructed his compositions from discrete, abstracted, but clearly figurative elements, as in the three designs intended for Olivia Shakespear's house, dated 1926, each called *Abstract Composition*. These are often described as 'totemic compositions', and indeed they do suggest that Lewis had studied North American Indian art quite closely. Sleeping figures, faces, heads, and other less descriptive shapes form part of larger wholes. There is an interesting parallel with the practice of the Italian artist, Archimboldo, who conjured faces from the combination of exotic vegetable forms. In one of these compositions, a crisply delineated penis juts forward at the base of the column, although if you look carefully, it also appears to be an inert figure wrapped in a kind of sleeping bag. Elsewhere heads and other body parts emerge from the design. There is such a strong sculptural quality about these drawings that it is almost possible to visualize them standing freely in three-dimensional space.

Insufficient research has been undertaken on Lewis's working methods and how he used his studios at different times during his career. Very little is known about his early working practice, when he lived on the continent, and then later in London, during the years immediately before the First World War. No large oil paintings exist prior to *Workshop* (although Augustus John apparently owned a painting that Lewis exhibited in the Second Camden Town Group exhibition of 1911, called *Port de Mer*). Did Lewis destroy all his other early paintings,

or was he unable to produce larger works because he had nowhere to make or store them? The lost *Kermesse* (1912) seems to have been an unusually ambitious and complex canvas, as indeed are *The Crowd* (1914) and *A Battery Shelled* (1919). Under what conditions were all these paintings produced? Did Lewis use preparatory drawings (as in the Vorticist sketchbook), or did he paint directly onto the canvas without any preparation? During the War, he lived in a flat in Fitzroy Street and then later he worked in a very small ‘garden studio (tin shack) built slap upon the earth’, at Adam and Eve Mews in Kensington. Under what circumstances were the pictures made for the 1937 Leicester Galleries exhibition? Lewis’s very last works often seem to have been made at the kitchen table, or on a tray held on his knees in the living room of a flat, or an hotel room. He was forced to improvise and adapt his technique to the varied requirements of his living space. It isn’t just that Lewis’s writing, or his illnesses, interrupted the smooth production of his visual art; he rarely had the physical space to produce full-scale paintings.

Despite the lack of hard information about his technique and methods, it was a central achievement of the Madrid exhibition to bring a startling clarity to each painting and then to integrate these individual revelations into his broader practice as an artist and writer. Lewis was such a protean figure, whose work proceeded in many different directions, and although these may vary in media, form or content, the exhibition was able to show that his art does possess consistency and overall quality. Whether the catalogue completely explains how these diverse formal strands in Lewis’s art were linked within the same artistic vision is uncertain. It was for the visitor to follow, from the evidence on the walls, what could not, perhaps, be wholly articulated in the catalogue.

By showing Lewis’s publications from each decade alongside his visual art, it was possible, however, to gain a much more complete understanding of just how formidable his workload often was at key stages in his career. During the late twenties, for instance, he wrote *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926), *The Lion and the Fox* (1927), *Time and Western Man* (1927), *The Wild Body* (1927), *The Childermass* (1928), together with a completely revised version of *Tarr* (1928). This extraordinary sequence of major texts was followed in the next decade by *Paleface: The Philosophy of the ‘Melting Pot’* (1929), *The Apes of God* (1930), *Hitler* (1931), *The Diabolical Principle and the Dithyrambic Spectator* (1931), *Doom of Youth* (1932), *Filibusters in Barbary* (1932), a revision of *Enemy of the Stars* (1932), *Snooty Baronet* (1932), *The Old Gang and the New Gang* (1933), *One-Way*

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Song (1933), *Men without Art* (1934), *Left Wings over Europe* (1936), *Count Your Dead: They are Alive!* (1937), *The Revenge for Love* (1937), *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937), *The Mysterious Mr Bull* (1938), *The Jews: Are they Human?* (1939), *Wyndham Lewis the Artist: From 'Blast' to Burlington House* (1939), and *The Hitler Cult* (1939). As well as this Herculean output, he also mostly wrote, and edited, three editions of *The Enemy* (1927-1929) as well as the pamphlet *Satire and Fiction* (1930).

Alongside this phenomenal level of literary production, which included a comprehensive array of quite different kinds of writing, he made the portfolio of drawings *Thirty Personalities*, shown at Lefevre Galleries in 1932, and worked on two other solo exhibitions, including *Paintings and Drawings by Wyndham Lewis*, at the Leicester Galleries, in 1937, and *New Paintings and Drawings by Wyndham Lewis*, at the Beaux Arts Gallery, in 1938. The portfolio of portraits is a rather odd enterprise that contains some fine individual works (including his self-portrait), but as a totality, perhaps, too many drawings are in the same register. Contrast, for instance, any of these rather constrained studies against the wonderfully lively pen and ink portrait of *Julian Symons* (1938).

The exhibitions from the later thirties, particularly at the Leicester Galleries, contained many of Lewis's most important and imaginative paintings, as successful as anything he made earlier in his career. An excellent selection from both was shown in Madrid, including *Group of Three Veiled Figures* (1933), *One of the Stations of the Dead* (1933), *Inca and the Birds* (1933), *Red Scene* (1936-37), *The Surrender of Barcelona* (1936-37), and *Creation Myth* (1937). *Inferno* (1937), also shown at the Leicester Galleries, was illustrated in the catalogue. This part of the exhibition was entitled 'Between Metaphysics and History', but the best of Lewis's paintings, such as *Inca and the Birds*, or *Creation Myth*, demonstrate his ability to describe in paint the profound mystery of these imaginary worlds, without appearing to be literary or sentimental. Demonstrating the essentially visual nature of these works was another achievement of the exhibition. The catalogue notes to *The Surrender of Barcelona* explain that this painting is based on William H. Prescott's account of the historical capture of that city, in 1472, by forces commanded by Ferdinand and Isabella. The composition, however, probably refers back to Lewis's memory of his initial encounter in the Prado with the great painting by Velasquez called *The Surrender of Breda* (c. 1635). The frieze of soldiers carrying spears, in the foreground of Lewis's painting, is similar to that deployed by the Spanish painter. Indeed, the pennant carried by one of

the soldiers on the far left of Lewis's painting seems to be a direct quotation from Velasquez.

The final years of Lewis's life, after he began to experience difficulty with his sight, before he fell blind in 1951, were inevitably much less productive. Lewis made some fine drawings during his years of self-imposed exile in Canada and the United States. These include portraits of Froanna, as well as more ambitious watercolours, such as *Lebensraum (The Battlefield)* of 1941, *Creation Myth No. 17* (1941), and the four drawings that make the *Small Crucifixion Series*, of the same year. He revisited the theme of bathers on a beach, a sequence that culminated in the oil painting *The Island* (1942). Missing from the exhibition were any of the commissioned portraits that Lewis painted at this time, although two were illustrated in the catalogue. It would have been interesting to see whether these matched the grandeur found in his earlier work. The portrait of *J. S. McLean* (1941), for instance, looks interesting, but little sense of the work's real quality can be gained from a catalogue illustration. Without any of these paintings, the final section of the exhibition inevitably looked thinner than it should have done.

So why was this excellent exhibition in Madrid and not at Tate Britain in London? There was a selection of Lewis's portraits at the National Portrait Gallery in 2009, which proved popular with the public, and was widely and respectfully reviewed, though not by all the critics. It was rumoured that the Tate Gallery was considering a solo show in 2010, but that never materialized, perhaps because of Madrid, but also because the Tate preferred to mount another exhibition of the Camden Town Group. Whenever they have been exhibited in public, Lewis's pictures have too often been shown in support of, or in contrast to, the work of others, as happened with the exhibition of Futurist art shown at the Centre Pompidou, and then at Tate Modern, in 2009. This rather ideologically driven approach to exhibition design may allow curators to demonstrate the wider correspondences across modernism, but it has not allowed the public to experience the wide range of Lewis's work. Perhaps his uniqueness has made curators in the United Kingdom nervous of attempting a major retrospective, fearing the critical opprobrium that would fall on such an undertaking. There will be another group show of Vorticism at the Tate Gallery in the summer of 2011. This exhibition will travel, as the Madrid solo show did not, from the Nasher Gallery at Duke University, in the United States. But this solo exhibition will not be repeated for some years to come.

It was instructive to visit Madrid following 'Van Doesburg and

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the International Avant Garde' at Tate Modern, earlier in the year. This was a typical Tate Gallery installation, presenting in numbing detail every last aspect of the work of the Dutch artist Theo van Doesburg (1883-1931), and his many collaborators. The exhibition presented him as a charismatic and pivotal figure in the avant-garde ('the coolest cat in 20th century art' according to the *Daily Telegraph*), who produced a corpus of internationally significant work.¹² Theo van Doesburg was an artist-provocateur, who operated across a wide range of media and genres, and who had a talent for organization, communication, and self-publicity. He was an early pioneer of abstract art (though later than Lewis); editor of *De Stijl* magazine (not as inventive as *BLAST*); at the Bauhaus (if only for a short period); knew the Dadaists and the Surrealists, and later the Constructivists; and was an influence on many British artists, including Ben Nicholson. Few individual pieces stand out (who remembers any of van Doesburg's paintings), and he never achieved the quality of Lewis's finest work. His writing for *De Stijl*, and elsewhere, when compared to Lewis's contributions to *BLAST*, *The Enemy*, *The Tyro*, or *The Listener*, fail to have a similar breadth of intellectual purpose and generosity. Indeed, much of what he wrote, and believed, was plain barmy. And yet, Van Doesburg was accorded a major exhibition at Tate Modern, as part of a process of canonization, whilst Wyndham Lewis, one of the most original British artists, is shown in a private gallery, in Madrid. The Fundación March has done an excellent and much needed job of work, but someone, somewhere, in the British art establishment, has quite possibly scrambled their priorities.

Tom Lubbock's review for *The Independent* (March 8th 2010) provides a clue to Lewis's marginal position amongst the British art establishment. Lubbock was the only British critic to write up the Madrid exhibition in a national newspaper, and he is generally seen as a critic who is sympathetic to Lewis's work. He argues in his review that had Lewis 'died in the trenches, he would have survived as Britain's greatest modernist', but then concludes that Lewis is 'not quite as 'great' an artist as some of us might have wished – but a rarer one'. What that actually means is not very clear, although it appears to have something to do with Lewis fusing 'low genres – caricature, cartoon, illustration, fantasy' in his work. Certainly, Lewis could be a brilliant illustrator, or inventor of vignettes. Lubbock believes, however, that 'Lewis's visual talents were sporadic [...] with outbursts of disparate brilliance'. He writes that 'Lewis chops and changes, from fiction to polemic to theory

to art'. Although he thinks that he was 'one of the English graphic masters', he also says that Lewis's work lacks continuity.¹³ In short, Lewis got out of practice some time during the twenties, and then failed to get his eye back in again.

It is always a puzzle why British critics have to view Lewis's practice in such a conventional way. Any visit to the annual Turner Prize will confirm that most contemporary artists cross genres, often deploying widely disparate materials, sometimes all at the same time. Few critics see this as any reason to cause trouble. Why is it not acceptable for Lewis to have used any creative style or format, depending on what he wished to say, and under what physical circumstances he was working at the time? As he pointed out in the catalogue to his 1949 exhibition at the Redfern Gallery, London: 'The presence of work so different in kind [...] is not to be explained chronologically'.¹⁴ Why is it not possible to embrace all the elements of his work as different parts of the one coherent artistic practice? The great success of the Madrid exhibition was that by showing the immense richness of Lewis's art across a wide range of practice it allowed the viewer to come to his or her own conclusions.

The market still demands that artists conform to an essential style that is easily recognizable, and saleable, and it might well be that the diversity of Lewis's work has been the main reason for his relative unpopularity. He isn't an easy artist to get a grip on, and it is necessary to look at his visual work, read his critical and imaginative writing, and pull the whole together. The awkward fact is that, like several important English artists (including William Blake), because so much of his production is text, it is difficult completely to understand Lewis, unless the books are read as well. Nevertheless, it is perfectly possible to look at these magnificent pictures without ever reading a word of Lewis's literary output, and the joy of this superb exhibition was that it provided such a sympathetic context.

This was an excellent and necessary exhibition that fulfilled many of the claims made in the catalogue introduction. The fact that few British critics bothered to visit is regrettable, and Lewis will continue, at least in the Anglo-Saxon world, to be seen as a politically compromised and difficult artist. Nevertheless, of the many achievements of this exhibition, the most important was to demonstrate, conclusively, that Lewis did not decline as an artist after the First World War, and that his overall achievement across four decades of the twentieth century is one of European significance and perspective. It will be salutary to recall this

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wonderful exhibition when Vorticism rolls into town next year.

Notes

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- ¹ 'Foreword', *Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957)* (Madrid: Fundación Juan March, 2010), 8.
- ² 'Business Abroad: Iberian Croesus', *Time* (April 14th 1961). See <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,872292,00.html>. Accessed 16th of November 2010.
- ³ Manuel Fontán del Junco, 'Wyndham Lewis: As Unknown as the Future', *Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957)*: 8-9, 9.
- ⁴ 'Foreword', *Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957)*, 8.
- ⁵ Fontán del Junco, 'Wyndham Lewis: As Unknown as the Future', 9.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ Alan Munton, 'Wyndham Lewis and Spain: Anarchism, Cliché, Image', *Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957)* (Madrid: Fundación Juan March, 2010): 76-85, 78 and 85.
- ¹⁰ *Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957)*, 204.
- ¹¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 33.
- ¹² 'Preview for 2010: exhibitions' (23rd December, 2009). See the *Daily Telegraph* online homepage: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/topics/preview-of-the-year/6873196/Preview-for-2010-exhibitions.html> (accessed on the 17th November 2010).
- ¹³ Tom Lubbock, 'Drawn together at last', *The Independent* (8th March 2010): 14-15.
- ¹⁴ Wyndham Lewis, 'Introduction' to *Exhibition of Paintings, Drawings and Watercolours of Wyndham Lewis* (Redfern Gallery, London, May 1949). Walter Michel, *Wyndham Lewis: Paintings and Drawings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 441.

Is it 'the 10th March' or '10th March' in formal, bookish English? Which one's correct? 1. It is celebrated on the 10th March. 2...
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