

Literature, Art, and a Media Frenzy: Rejected T.S. Eliot Portrait Features in Spectacular Royal Academy Exhibition

By Dr Jaron Murphy, Southampton Solent University

Wyndham Lewis's controversial portrait of T.S. Eliot has been included in *The Great Spectacle: 250 Years of the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition*, which is running concurrently with the *250th Summer Exhibition* until 19 August.

Now recognized as one of the most superb British portraits of the 20th century, it is the only artwork on display to have been excluded from the annual Summer Exhibition. The outright, unanimous rejection of the masterpiece by the Selection Committee in 1938 triggered Augustus John's protest resignation from the Academy and a media frenzy fomented by the sharp-tongued and deliberately provocative Lewis. The portrait was subsequently acquired by the Durban Art Gallery in South Africa, in December 1939.

Visitors to the exhibition will find John's handwritten resignation letter in a display case, just a few steps from the absorbing portrait itself, which is set in an imposing gold frame and accompanied by a brief explanatory panel. There are other artworks in the exhibition to be contemplated in relation to the portrait – but the process of discovery is best left to you, the reader, armed with the likewise entitled exhibition companion book.¹

Dr Sarah Victoria Turner, Deputy Director for Research at the Paul Mellon Centre and one of the exhibition co-curators and co-authors, was able to shed some more light on the portrait's treatment in the context of the Academy double bill; and Dr Mduduzi Xakaza, Director of the Durban Art Gallery, also kindly answered questions about the portrait in relation to the exhibition and, in particular, its port city home for the past eight decades:

¹ See Mark Hallett and Sarah Victoria Turner (with Jessica Feather), *The Great Spectacle: 250 Years of the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2018).

Q&A WITH

DR SARAH VICTORIA TURNER

How would you sum up the importance of the Royal Academy Summer/Great Spectacle exhibitions?

The Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition is the longest running exhibition of contemporary art in the world. The Great Spectacle exhibition is a chance to explore the long and varied history of this open-submission, juried exhibition that has taken place every year since 1769. It's been wonderful to research and arrange the exhibition as part of all the "RA250" activities. 2018 is a moment for reflection and celebration at the RA.

How would you sum up the experience of being a co-curator in this instance?

Working as co-curators has been a particularly rich and rewarding experience. Mark Hallett's research expertise lies more with 18th- and early 19th-century British art, whereas I specialize in 20th-century British art. So, we've brought together our interests to curate this exhibition and learnt a lot from each other. We've also had to stretch ourselves to research the 250 years of the Summer Exhibition and have read a lot of catalogues and press reviews in the process, as well as talk to the people who have been involved in the more recent Summer Exhibitions. The Royal Academy's Archive and Library are a treasure trove and we spent a lot of time using those collections. It's been a wonderful experience to work with the incredible team at the Royal Academy, especially Per Rumberg and Anna Testar who have been the RA curators working with us on the Great Spectacle. I also have huge admiration for the team that manage the logistics and practical arrangements of the exhibition. There are so many things to arrange, such as international loans, specialist display cases and the lighting. It takes months of preparation.

As well as working on the exhibition, we've also written a book to accompany it and edited an online publication *The Royal Academy Summer Exhibition 1769-2018: A Chronicle* (www.chronicle250.com). As part of this, we have digitized every catalogue from 1769 to the present day, and have texts, data and images chronicling every year of the exhibition. It's been an incredible project

to be part of and see all the new information and research that has come to light as a result.

What are your favourite and least favourite exhibits?

It's difficult to have a favourite! All the exhibits were chosen to tell a particular story about the Summer Exhibition. It's a special moment when a lender agrees to loan a work. One of the highlights for me is Laura Knight's *Lamorna Birch and his Daughters* which she exhibited in 1934 which I think looks spectacular in the Large Weston Room. Two years later she would become only the third woman artist Royal Academician. The first two were the founding members, Angelica Kauffman and Mary Moser, who became RAs in 1768. It wasn't until Knight that a woman was elected. Her *Lamorna Birch* is a really bold, monumental painting of her friend and his children.

I don't have a "least favourite". All the works are in the exhibition for a reason.

Whose idea was it to include the T.S. Eliot portrait by Wyndham Lewis?

It was mine, but the final decision is taken by all the exhibitions team. We had to consider very practical things such as the painting's size, to more conceptual questions of how the work would fit in with the narrative of the Large Weston Room which looks at the Summer Exhibitions from 1900 to 1945.

What is the rationale behind and significance, in your view, of the T.S. Eliot portrait's inclusion – is this a kind of public 'redemption' for the portrait at the RA?

As an art historian of British modernism, I was keen to tell the story of the Summer Exhibition's sometimes difficult relationship with modern art and the fallout that could occur when an artwork was rejected from the Summer Exhibition. It is the only exhibit in the Great Spectacle that was rejected from the Summer Exhibition and we've also included Augustus John's resignation letter, which is in the Academy's Archive, in the showcase near to the portrait. It's important to put this episode of Lewis's rejection into perspective. Out of the 11,221 works to be submitted for the Selection Committee's consideration in 1938, it was one of 9,955 works to be rejected. We don't know very much about those other 9,954 works. It was the media storm that ensued with Lewis giving characteristically sharp-tongued interviews to the press that catapulted this into a major national news story. We don't see its inclusion as a kind of "redemption" – the reasons why the committee reject a painting are never recorded so we cannot ever fully know why a work is accepted or rejected. However, we think it's wonderful to see the portrait within the Royal

Academy's exhibition spaces and reflect on the histories of inclusion and exclusion that have always been a part of the exhibition's history.

The T.S. Eliot portrait is on loan from the Durban Art Gallery in South Africa. What is your view of Durban having been custodian of the portrait for decades, after the portrait's rejection by the Royal Academy? Was the inclusion of the portrait a logistical challenge, and is there any desire and chance, do you think, of a future UK bid to buy the portrait and bring it back to the UK permanently?

We are very grateful to the Durban Art Gallery that they have loaned this important work in their collection to us. We were lucky with timing – when we requested the painting it was in the UK at the Wyndham Lewis exhibition at the Imperial War Museum North in Manchester. Instead of making the journey all the way back to South Africa, the portrait was kept in the UK for our exhibition. We've not heard that Durban Art Gallery have any desire to sell the work, so now is a very good chance for the public in the UK to see the work as it probably will not be on display here again for quite a while.

A photo of T.S. Eliot's encounter with the portrait in South Africa appears in *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis*. Was this encounter considered as a possible detail/area of interest for the display?

The photo you mention would have been a fascinating addition. However, all the material in the showcases in the exhibition was taken from the Royal Academy's Archive. We also didn't have enough space for even one piece of archival material relating to each exhibit, so we had to make some careful choices. We decided to include Augustus John's resignation letter as this offers an important insight into the ripple effect one painting can have at the Academy.

Are you personally an admirer of the portrait – if so, or not, why?

Yes, absolutely. It's a remarkable portrait. I've noticed something different about it every time I've looked at it. There's such an intensity to Eliot's gaze. I am also fascinated by the background which is full of bizarre shapes. Lewis is probing Eliot's complex character here and, as a result, it's a portrait which is full of energy and feeling.

■ **For exhibition entry info, visit:**

<https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibition/the-great-spectacle>

Q&A WITH **DR MDUDUZI XAKAZA**

How would you sum up the importance of the T.S. Eliot portrait's inclusion in the Royal Academy's Great Spectacle exhibition?

In summary, the inclusion of this important portrait in the Royal Academy's Great Spectacle exhibition is reminiscent of a few instances when some *avant-garde* artists' creations would be embraced and recognised after periods of rejection by captains of the visual art industry, especially in Europe. I can quickly think of Vincent van Gogh and Gustave Courbet who were a bit ahead of their audiences. Like in the case of Van Gogh, it is heartening to know that the portrait is now receiving the recognition it deserves.

How would you describe the T.S. Eliot portrait's significance within the collection, and overall aims, of the Durban Art Gallery?

It is seen as one of those important international portraits against which one can perhaps do a benchmarking of some sort. Within the context that T.S. Eliot himself was a modernist poet, the portrait is a good example of British modernist art and is important even for educational purposes. One of the aims of the Durban Art Gallery is to run a portrait workshop and actually refer to examples of modernist tradition as a tribute.

The Durban Art Gallery has kindly loaned the T.S. Eliot portrait for the Royal Academy's Great Spectacle, as well as various other past exhibitions in the UK and elsewhere. Is it a major logistical challenge supporting exhibitions internationally in this way?

It is not too much of a major logistical challenge supporting international exhibitions mainly because art museum officials or curators usually start sending requests quite in advance, allowing us enough time to deal with all the necessary administrative steps such as insurance, customs requirements, etc. We have never had to do damage control since we have started supporting exhibitions internationally.

Will the portrait be featuring in another exhibition in the UK/abroad soon after the Royal Academy's Great Spectacle, or returning home to Durban for the foreseeable future?

It will definitely be returning home after the Royal Academy's Great Spectacle.

Are you personally an admirer of the portrait — if so, or not, why?

I am not a portrait artist myself but always admire and respect the portrait on the basis of its successful rendering, expressing a particular moment and the personality of the sitter. I really feel that the artist was able to search for something that perhaps lay under the surface at the time, not just restricting himself to capturing the likeness.

Following the portrait's rejection by the Royal Academy, and rehoming in Durban, there were suggestions the Tate should have snapped it up and expressed an interest in purchasing it from Durban. Is there any desire and chance of the Durban Art Gallery entertaining any offers, or putting the portrait up for sale, in future?

Given our current collection management policy as a public art museum, we are not even considering a possibility of putting the portrait up for sale in the future. Since we have had relations with the UK, the portrait is very precious as a part of our collection; it is a very significant piece, a heritage asset for our multicultural society.

A photo of T.S. Eliot's encounter with the portrait in Durban appears in *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis*. When last was the portrait on display in Durban – and is there any prospect of a future exhibition featuring the portrait, in Durban?

The portrait was in the exhibition *Art of the Ball*, a show curated by Jenny Stretton for the 2010 FIFA World Cup. Eliot was one of the 'spectators'. At this point in time we do not have any plans to show the work.

While crowds flock to exhibitions featuring the portrait in the UK, the portrait's existence, controversial history and ownership by the Durban Art Gallery are not widely known among Durbanites/South Africans of all backgrounds. Do you think the Durban Art Gallery deserves greater recognition at home, and abroad, for its role as custodian/lender of the

portrait for nearly eight decades, i.e. spanning the pre-apartheid, apartheid and post-apartheid eras?

Yes, I do think that a level of publicity that is generated by the portrait in the UK should be shared with Durbanites, and South Africans, through a collaboration with our Art Times magazine, a national publication. Nothing has been written about the impact of the portrait even in our national and local newspapers. Such publicity could even positively affect the current educational and monetary value of the portrait and encourage the local political and administrative leadership to support our art programmes. Visual art is still viewed as a luxury, or even a nuisance, in some circles here.

In 2018, what are the joys and challenges of being Director of the Durban Art Gallery?

The main joy is that I have ideas flowing in my mind about how else one can expand art programmes to include outlying areas of this city. Implementation of such ideas may soon happen after all the approval processes have been completed. Challenges include the difficulty of really persuading the public to fully embrace, nurture and support art. Since it took some time to build Rome, this process, too, will bear fruit in due course.

Any other comment/s you would like to make?

One would enjoy seeing more interaction between local and UK artists, particularly those in Leeds, which is our sister city. It would be nice to use the current exhibition as a tool to gain renewed momentum in revisiting the tradition of portraiture.

- **Read Dr Jaron Murphy's essay, entitled '*This Picture Caused a Rumpus*': Revisiting the T.S. Eliot Portrait's New Lease of Life at the Durban Art Gallery, South Africa, in *The Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies* 8 (2017).**