time and weather conditions. The fact that Constable considered this studio working material and not art allowed him to imbue sketches with freedom and inventiveness. In order to catch changing effects he painted fast, sometimes on surfaces prepared with blue to facilitate fast working. When he needed to describe an effect he brushed as directly as possible, heedless of finish or convention, which imparted great energy to the sketches. This alla prima prestissimo manner became an aspiration for Impressionists and a creed for Expressionists; Constable came to be regarded – however anachronistically – as a proto-Modernist, dragooned by artists and critics into the role of a vanguardist.

A short text by Constable specialist Dr Evans of the V&A covers Constable's attitude to painting in the landscape and his changing views on the significance of sky and lighting for his practice. Paragraphs accompany illustrations and give extra information and observations about the paintings. No ground-breaking research is included, however the author handles the subject authoritatively. Although this is presented as an examination of an aspect of landscape painting, for the general reader this attractive volume forms a good general primer to Constable's aims and techniques.

Jonathan Benington with Brendan Rooney
Roderic O'Conor and the Moderns, Between Paris and Pont-Aven
National Gallery of Ireland 2018, pp112
ISBN 978-1-904288-70-1

Kenneth McConkey

In May 2006 there was great excitement in Christie's Irish sale because Roderic O'Conor's *An Old French Peasant* had resurfaced.[1] Known only from a precious, tiny illustration in the *Pall Mall Gazette 'Extra'* it had long been the subject of speculation. What did it really look like? How radical was it? Unusually for the artist, it was precisely datable. Painted at Grez-sur-Loing over the winter of 1890–1, how did it pave the way towards O'Conor's later Breton peasant studies that were begun little more than a year later? Its exhibition in London in the spring of 1891 was the only occasion – apart from once in 1927 – in which O'Conor showed at the New English Art Club. We can only speculate on the picture's impact on Philip Wilson Steer and Walter Sickert, but it did not go unnoticed.[2] Nevertheless, it must have been evident to O'Conor at the time that, while he was thinking of Vincent Van Gogh, they were talking of Degas and Monet.[3] As Jonathan Benington noted in the auction essay, O'Conor, as he returned to France that summer, left his top hat behind, and with it, the last vestiges of polite society. Thereafter, it was the bohemian life for him and contact with the English art scene was minimal.

O'Conor was the son of the High Sheriff of County Roscommon and, like George Moore, could always depend on his Irish rents. Unlike Lavery, a Belfast orphan, Yeats and Osborne, the sons of artists, and Orpen, who was from a Dublin middle-class professional background, O'Conor could never be corralled into obvious 'Irishness', even though his *Une Jeune Bretonne* 1903 (Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin) was one of the key exhibits in Lane's Guildhall Art Gallery exhibition of Irish Art in 1904. Ever the expatriate, he was, by that point, leaving Brittany for Paris, where, at Paul Gauguin's wake, his place was assured. It is at this Post-Impressionist table, graphically represented in Pierre Girieud's monster-piece *Homage to Gauguin,* 1906 – a Tahitian *Last Supper* with Gauguin in the role of Christ – that O'Conor finds a prominent seat.

This canvas, in part, provides the theme for *Roderic O'Conor and the Moderns*, the catalogue of the recent exhibition at the National Gallery of Ireland [see Exhibition Reviews]. The exhibition was selected by Benington and Brendan Rooney and had two essential purposes: to demonstrate the relationship between O'Conor and Van Gogh in the first instance and with Gauguin in the second. Along the way the close comradeship with the Swiss painter Cuno Amiet is examined in some depth, and other Pont-Aven and Le Pouldu associates such as Emile Bernard, Armand Séguin and Robert Bevan, are referred to. And in a broader scene-setting, the show took us from the Impressionist Grez phase to Cassis where O'Conor produced 'Fauve' landscapes of purple, viridian, orange and leaf green just before the Great War. The later inter-war career, uneven and unsettling, is wisely neglected in favour of that flowering between 1892 and 1896, when he produced some of his most influential works.

They begin with the *Still Life with Bottles,* (no. 27), its handling broadly similar to that of the NEAC picture, but without the scattered *pointilliste* dabs of pigment that survive in the background of the Grez figure-piece. The strokes that modelled the peasant's features swiftly became striations in the sequence of Breton head studies of boys and girls that were produced over the winter of 1892–3. Initially confused when form becomes space in the unresolved spring landscape painted at Pont-Aven (no. 12), they emerge with clarity in the joyous *Field of Corn, Pont-Aven,* 1892 (no. 13). These 'stripes' best seen in the *Yellow Landscape* (Tate) are conventionally regarded as echoes of the late work of Van Gogh, and the parallels are even clearer when we observe the rhythms that undulate through O'Conor's etchings. Benington is at pains to point out the occasions on which their author would have seen the work of Van Gogh and cites what must have been the posthumous display hastily arranged by Emile Bernard at Theo van Gogh's apartment in October 1890. The assimilation was slow and measured and, as the Ulster Museum picture demonstrates, never a simple pastiche.

Before the corn had ripened the 24-year-old Amiet arrived at Pont-Aven to join the throng which Rooney, quoting Paul Signac, reminds us, was often 'drunk and bawdy'. Within a short time he filtered out the 'dottists' and 'spottists', and was consorting with O'Conor. For him this was a 'clever, strong Irishman who painted in light unbroken colours'.[4] Amiet's quick visual intelligence is evident in *Breton Woman* (no. 29) where pale blue stripes stroke the form and curve around the face. The thinness here contrasts with his mentor's more robust handling. Yet the effect of having a bright young acolyte can only have boosted the Irish painter's confidence and his striped landscapes were to remain influential in Amiet's work, long after he had moved on.

The most striking canvas in this sequence is *The Glade* (no. 17), last seen in the Barbican Art Gallery O'Conor retrospective in 1985. This *sous bois* is a remarkable abstraction. Oriental in character, its viridian shadows streaked with vermilion flow down the woodland floor like a river in spate. What does this picture mean? It is tempting to reach for quotations from Paul Sérusier, to talk about *Sythétisme,* and the 'ABC of painting', but O'Conor is more unorthodox and inventive than the routine Gauguin followers. It was only when Gauguin returned for that ill-fated interlude between his first and second Tahitian trips that the Irish artist was briefly enthralled. In this regard it is instructive to compare *The Glade* with *l'Approche de Lezaven, Pont-Aven* (sold Sotheby's 10 May 2012) of two years later. Here is another, but very different *sous bois,* and one that actually looks like a more elaborate version of Sérusier's celebrated exercise in the *Bois d'Amour* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris). An ornate marquetry of textured shapes flattens the space of the picture, and the woodland path tilts up before us. A just comparison might be with Charles Hodge Mackie's Sérusier-inspired murals for Patrick Geddes in Edinburgh.[5]

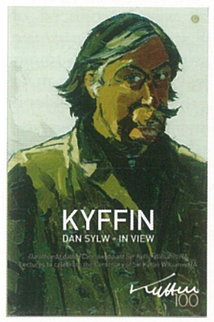
As with *pointillisme,* O'Conor would not be constrained for long. Leap forward another three or four years and you find vivid evocations of crashing seas against the red rocks at Le Pouldu, accompanied by the vague Symbolism of *Bather by the Sea* (no. 50) – one group unleashing his full expressive force, the other evoking a primeval Venus, but one that is oddly Vamp-like. The stage was set for O'Conor's permanent return to Paris, to the studio at 102 rue du Cherche-Midi, bringing with him his latest *bretonnes.* These, works now in the two leading Dublin collections, have the confidence that the NEAC picture anticipated, but it is one that emerges from a pact with Salon Naturalism.[6]

Of course, as the Dublin exhibition indicated, the story does not end there. O'Conor continued to exhibit internationally as a Secessionist, was elected Vice-President of the Salon d'Automne and returned to the London art scene briefly with pictures in Frank Rutter's Allied Artists Association at the Albert Hall in 1908. In the upper room of the *Chat Blanc,* the Paris drinking den on the *rue d'Odessa*, he was acquainted with a new set of young artists and writers. Arnold Bennett was impressed by his bookishness; to Clive Bell he was 'solitary', 'misanthropic', but 'conversant with the Latin masters'; while Somerset Maugham spitefully skewered his personality in a couple of novels. He was idolized by younger fry like Gerald Kelly, James Wilson Morrice and Joseph Milner Kite, and the old radicalism returned in the night terrors of *Boulevard Raspail,* (no. 61) and in the limpid Cassis canvases, but for Amiet, the memory of the clever Irishman, and his stripes, remained. As Benington eloquently argues in this catalogue, Maitre O'Conor was much more than the sum of his parts.

1 Sold Christie's 12 May 2006, lot 86; not included in the exhibition under review.
2 *The Evening Standard* (10 April 1891, p. 2) for instance, noted that, 'Mr R O'Connor [*sic*] paints most uncompromisingly … an old French peasant: battered and roughened as to surface, shrewd and reflective as to character'.
3 Sickert showed his *Café des Tribunaux, Dieppe* (Tate), and Steer, *Signorina Zozo in 'Dresdina'* (unlocated), in the New English in 1891, while at the end of the room in which the O'Conor was hung was George Henry and Edward Atkinson Hornel's *The Angel and the Shepherds* (Aberdeen Art Gallery).
4 Quoted by Denys Sutton, 'Introduction' in *Gauguin and the Pont-Aven Group,* 1966 (Arts Council), p15.
5 Pat Clark, *People, Places and Piazzas, The Life & Art of Charles H Mackie*, Bristol 2016, pp47–55.
6 This is more evident in the Hugh Lane Gallery's *Jeune Bretonne* 1903, than in the National Gallery of Ireland's *Bretonne* 1903–4 (no. 59).

Exhibition Reviews

1 *Portrait of TS Eliot* by Wyndham Lewis, 1938. Oil on canvas, 133.3 x 85.5 cm. Durban Art Gallery © The Wyndham Lewis Memorial Trust/Bridgeman Images



Sir Kyffin Williams Trust
Kyffin Dan Sylw – In View
Gwasg Gomer Cyf/Gomer Press 2018, pp185, £12.95
ISBN 978 1 78562 266 3

This is an elegant volume of informative and thoughtful essays, in English and in Welsh, to mark the centenary of the late Sir Kyffin Williams, one of Wales's most distinguished painters and draughtsmen. Each chapter is the text of a lecture given by an intriguing mix of contributors ranging from the art historian Peter Lord through a brace of archbishops to Jan Morris. Williams was uncompromising in his approach to portraits and landscapes, with the paint thickly but deftly laid on with a palette knife in an immediately recognizable manner, and his images of Snowdonia in particular are unforgettable. In their bleakness they have naturally suggested comparisons with the poetry of his slightly older contemporary RS Thomas (that bleak duffle-coated figure), and indeed here there is an amusing chapter about their relationship by the former Archbishop of Wales, Dr Barry Morgan. Williams drew a portrait of Thomas who told Dr Morgan, 'Look at it. It makes me look very miserable.' Wel, pwy fasai'n meddwl? **RS**

'The Great Spectacle:
250 Years of the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition'
Royal Academy of Arts, 12 June–19 August 2108

Jaron Murphy

Ezra Pound, who was the contemporary of Wyndham Lewis and of TS Eliot, declares in *ABC of Reading* (1934), 'Literature is news that STAYS news.' It is a quotable quote that effectively distinguishes 'Great literature', in Pound's conception, from ephemeral journalism.[1] Yet the potent role of art in bolstering the staying power of literary works, figures, and legacies in the public imagination – not least as, quite literally, news – is powerfully exemplified by Wyndham Lewis's portrait of TS Eliot (Pl 1), which was rejected by the Royal Academy's 1938 Summer Exhibition Selection Committee.

The rejection precipitated Augustus John's resignation from the Academy in protest and a media frenzy fuelled by scathing witticisms from Lewis as self-appointed rebel extraordinaire. Eliot's endorsement of the portrait, which he recognised as a potential boon to his legacy, is expressed in his letter to Lewis dated 21 April 1938: 'I learn from the Telegraph that your portrait of me has been rejected by the Academy… But so far as the sitter is able to judge, it seems to me a very good portrait, and one by which I am quite willing that posterity should know me, if it takes any interest in me at all.' Eliot also communicated his 'feeling of relief' at the

2 *Winter Sunshine, Chartwell* by Sir Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill, 1924–25.
Oil on millboard, 35.6 x 50.8 cm.
Chartwell, The Churchill Collection (National Trust)
© Churchill Heritage Ltd

3 TS Eliot viewing the portrait in Durban in 1954. Photo by Peter Upfold, with the kind permission of the Bessie Head Library, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

rejection and confirmed his ongoing support of Lewis: 'Had the portrait been accepted, I should have been pleased – that a portrait by you should have been accepted by the Academy would have been a good augury… But I am glad to think that a portrait of myself should *not* appear in the exhibition of the Royal Academy, and I certainly have no desire, now, that my portrait should be painted by any painter whose portrait of me would be accepted by the Royal Academy.' [2]

Eight decades later, the portrait continues to generate news headlines, most recently following its inclusion in 'The Great Spectacle', which ran concurrently with the '250th Summer Exhibition' until 19 August. Visitors attracted by the media attention would have found the (in)famous artwork – perched in a thick, gold frame beneath soft lighting duly accentuating the central image of Eliot – compellingly juxtaposed with John Singer Sargent's *Henry James* (1913), which invited a comparison between the two. Indeed, the James portrait also featured in the press as the result of its slashing by suffragette Mary Wood in 1914.

In all its absorbing complexity, the controversial Eliot portrait itself certainly measured up to expectations of a 'Great Spectacle', both within the context of the exhibition as a whole and as an individual masterpiece to be appreciated as the only work on display to have been excluded from the Summer Exhibition. Complemented by the striking visual impact of the portrait being one among many important works throughout the concatenation of rooms, the side panel accompanying the portrait served to place the rejection controversy against a much larger backdrop. Painted when Eliot 'was running the publishing company Faber & Faber', the portrait 'was one of the 11,221 works sent in that year to the Summer Exhibition and one of the 9,955 works to be rejected. A media storm ensued with the debates surrounding the Academy's relationship with modern art becoming the central issue, rather than the merits of the painting itself.' A display case a few steps away contained Augustus John's handwritten letter to the President of the Royal Academy, William Llewellyn, dated 23 April 1938, tendering his resignation after 'the crowning ineptitude of the rejection of Wyndham Lewis' picture', with 'many personal regrets'.

Visitors would have discovered more to contemplate in relation to the portrait elsewhere, such as, in the brightly-lit concluding space, RB Kitaj's *The Killer-Critic Assassinated by His Widower, Even* (1997) in which the authoritative Eliot notion, famously posited in his critical essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), of an 'escape from personality' was emphatically rejected, reversed, and ascribed to Kitaj. [3] Most notably, however, visitors would have encountered, en route to the Eliot portrait, Winston Churchill's *Winter Sunshine, Chartwell* (Pl 2). Although not in close physical proximity like the James portrait, it ultimately represented *the* counterpoint to be pondered by way of the exhibition's companion book, which elaborated upon the rejection 'sensation' on pp123–5 under the heading 'ACCEPTANCE, REJECTION, READMISSION'. [4]

As might have been expected, and as was the co-curators' prerogative, the piece painted the Royal Academy in a distinctly favourable light. The juxtaposition of the Eliot and James portraits was evidently informed, in part, by the view that the former was '[i]n many ways… fairly conventional', with Eliot also 'dressed soberly and smartly in a formal, dark, business-like suit': a 'quiet portrait of a serious man'.[5] Again, the controversy was situated squarely in the context of the sheer numbers of Summer Exhibition submissions in 1938 and historically. The rarity of controversy over a rejected rather than accepted portrait was highlighted; as was the key role of the press, with Lewis having 'used his talents as a wordsmith and agent provocateur to whip up a media storm' through various newspapers and the BBC.

The piece took care to emphasize that, in accordance with customary speedy procedure, the rationale behind the outright, unanimous rejection of the portrait was never actually recorded by the Selection Committee. Reiterating that 'the merits of the painting itself' became overshadowed in the media storm by 'debates surrounding the Academy's relationship with modern art', the piece understandably set up an opposition between the anti-Academy Lewis (backed by John's resignation) and pro-Academy amateur painter Churchill.[6] Indeed, the Eliot portrait was reproduced on p124, directly opposite Churchill's *Winter Sunshine, Chartwell* on p125. The latter featured in the Summer Exhibition in 1947, the year before Churchill 'was made Honorary Academician Extraordinary, the only such holder of this singular honour'. [7]

The ready comparison afforded did not exactly dispel Lewis's charge of an institutional predilection for 'last-century impressionism'[8]; and while it was not explicitly stated, part of the human and historical interest in the rumpus has stemmed, of course, from both Eliot and Churchill having been 'great men' in their own rights. Both were later awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature (in 1948 and 1953 respectively), honours not unrelated to the powerful impacts of their words in wartime. Nevertheless, the main thrust of the piece was that the furore did not, after all, deliver a 'mortal blow' to the Academy.

Au contraire: while Lewis viewed the Academy as already a 'corpse', it simply 'carried on' amid the controversy. 'The life blood that had pumped through it for 160 years continued to circulate,' the piece affirmed. Enter Churchill, whose speech at the 1938 Annual Banquet (broadcast live by the BBC) took place '[a]gainst the noisy hubbub of the Lewis scandal' and 'struck pointedly measured tones, even as it reused and redirected the rhetoric deployed by the fulminating artist'. Moreover, for Churchill, what he called the Academy's 'middle course between tradition and innovation' also in fact 'allowed a whole swathe of artists, not represented by galleries or dealers, to exhibit at the heart of the art establishment' – including, in due course, himself. The piece concluded with crediting the Academy for laying bare the artistic ferment: 'As well as works of art, the Summer Exhibition also put the relationships, and tensions, between the accepted and rejected, the amateur and the professional, the insiders and the outsiders, and the traditional and the modern, on very prominent display.'[9]

The virtue of the inclusion of the Eliot portrait in 'The Great Spectacle', then, was that it served as an ideal opportunity expressly to address the rejection controversy from a contemporary Academy perspective. In doing so, the exhibition underlined the enduring appeal and currency of art, too, in relation to literary – indeed, key cultural and historical – figures, their works, and legacies. As the media coverage of the inclusion demonstrated, it is not only great literature but also great art, and their interrelatedness, that stays news.

There was a downside: the 'Academy-centric' restriction of display elements and information to, primarily, the rejection controversy in 1938 meant that the portrait's complex and fascinating history post-rejection remained out of sight. Such narrowness of focus, it must be stressed, has also characterised previous exhibitions featuring the portrait; and therefore, while understandable, this continuing, deeply problematic approach is sorely in need of some constructive criticism.

While duly acknowledging the Durban Art Gallery in South Africa as the portrait's custodian, the exhibition did not actually mention the portrait's arriving there in late 1939. Moreover, it is a not insignificant fact that Eliot encountered the portrait at the municipal gallery in Durban in 1954 (Pl 3) – along with local press coverage. This was a time when apartheid was being rigorously entrenched, including reserving access to select public amenities and services (including the gallery) for 'whites only'. Eliot's encounter with the portrait – a news 'exclusive' in more ways than one, on account of his privileged 'white' status – is yet to be registered at an exhibition featuring the portrait, mirroring decades of scholarly neglect even as the portrait has been reproduced within and on the front covers of books and exhibition catalogues. There is no reason why a photo of Eliot admiring the portrait in Durban, long since published in *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis* (1963), could not be incorporated into future exhibitions, at the very least.

Moreover, in the context of the portrait having been on loan from the Durban gallery in a postcolonial, post-apartheid South Africa, a news headline such as that which appeared in *The Sunday Times* (10 June 2018, p16) – 'RA shows portrait of Eliot after 80 years in wasteland' – might at first appear a clever play on the title of Eliot's famous poem, and to be meant only in a figurative sense, but could also be interpreted, on reflection, and in a very real sense, as being ill-judged and, in 2018, in particularly bad taste. One can only suggest – and hope – that future exhibitions, and journalists covering them, try to address the imbalance. As Pound also asserted: 'Literature does not exist in a vacuum.'[10] Yet nor, too, does art – including in relation to literature.

Companion publication by Mark Hallett and Sarah Victoria Turner (with Jessica Feather), Royal Academy of Arts, London, ISBN 978–1–910350–70–6 £21.95

1 Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*, New York 2010, pp28–9.
2 WK Rose (ed), *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis*, London 1963, p251.
3 TS Eliot, *The Sacred Wood and Major Early Essays*, New York 1998, p33.
4 Mark Hallett and Sarah Victoria Turner (with Jessica Feather), *The Great Spectacle: 250 Years of the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition*, London, 2018, p123.
5 Ibid, pp123–4.
6 Ibid, p124.
7 Ibid, p125.
8 Ibid, p124.
9 Ibid, p125.
10 Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*, New York 2010, p32.

'Virginia Woolf: An exhibition inspired by her writings'
Tate St Ives, 10 February–29 April 2018
Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, 26 May–16 September 2018
The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, 2 October–9 December 2018

Helen Cobby

> 'If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills – then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory. It is of lying awake, in bed in the nursery at St Ives… hearing the waves breaking… and sending a splash of water over the beach… feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive.'

For Virginia Woolf, who wrote these words in her 1939 autobiographical essay *A Sketch of a Past*, St Ives was not only a childhood haven of happy holidays (she spent every summer at Talland House in St Ives until she was 13 years old), but a rich space of creative possibilities. It offered sensual experiences and alternative ways of being. Throughout her life, Woolf referred to her experiences of this Cornish town and even included prominent references to its Godrevy Lighthouse in her novel *To the Lighthouse*, 1927, considering it a 'central line down the middle of the book' that '[held] the design together' (*The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Volume III, 1923–1928*, ed Nigel Nicolson with Joanne Trautmann Banks, London 1977, p385). This painterly discussion of the lighthouse's formal properties helps to reveal Woolf's deep appreciation of the visual arts, which was encouraged by her sister Vanessa Bell (1879–1961).

Woolf's attachment to, and perhaps dependence upon, St Ives makes the new exhibition galleries at Tate St Ives an appropriate place to introduce this touring exhibition. It is also ideal owing to its distinctive approach to modern and contemporary art. As the foreword in the accompanying catalogue makes clear, it takes literature 'as a lens' through which to explore related works of art and herewe are introduced to the creations of over 80 woman artists mediated through the 'lens' of Woolf's life, her personal connections, and literary and proto-feminist ideas.

The year 2018 is also significant for this touring exhibition because it marks the 100th anniversary of the Representation of the People Act 1918, which gave some women the right to vote. Appropriately, the first work in the exhibition is Judy Chicago's study for Woolf's place at her monumental installation *The Dinner Party*, 1974–79. This mixed media print from ink, with photo and collage, describes Woolf as 'a flower of delicacy, a genius, a shaking leaf… a true female voice which, like a beacon, beckons us'. This phrase alludes to the slightly seductive behaviour of a lighthouse, establishing Woolf as a guide through the storms of patriarchy and as an enlightening force that can reveal new, empowering possibilities. In this way, she is boldly positioned as a truly feminist figure. The exhibition explores this stance and identity not only through Woolf's work but also through her actions, and, for instance, her strong ties to the women's suffrage movement in the UK are explored using letters from The Women's Library, London.

Both the exhibition wall texts and the catalogue explicitly insist that this is not an exhibition about Woolf *per se*. Instead, it 'acknowledges the influences of her ideas on subsequent generations of artists and writers' from 1850 to the present day. The date 1850 is somewhat confusing, since Woolf herself was not born until 1882. Nor are visitors given a reason for this start date; instead it seems that it is up to them to bring prior knowledge of the highly contested term 'modernism' and the general perception that it began gathering momentum at around 1850.

We can be certain, however, that Woolf and her ideas are fundamentally used as springboards to celebrate women artists' work and encourage connections between them, across both time and geography. This inclusive stance sees many international artists featured, including Canadian artist Tamara Henderson (b 1982) with her mixed-media sculpture *Night Passenger*, 2018; Agnes Martin (1912–2004); and