

Reading 'Little Gidding' at the close of the day (another regular Festival feature) was the actor George Blagden, familiar to viewers of BBC 2's 'Versailles' as King Louis XIV. It was a clear and professional reading from the porch of Ferrar's restored church, overlooking his tomb. This was a reading which might even have been described as 'secular': a tentative, even ambivalent ending to a day which had been strong in its religious focus.

John Caperon



George Blagden reading 'Little Gidding' and the Reverend Richard Coles in interview

Acceptance, rejection, readmission: T. S. Eliot portrait forms part of a special exhibition at the Royal Academy

In what many admirers might consider an instance of 'poetic justice', Wyndham Lewis's (in)famous portrait of T. S. Eliot was included in a special exhibition coinciding with the 250th Summer Exhibition of the revamped Royal Academy of Arts in London. The portrait's appearance in *The Great Spectacle: 250 Years of the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition* came eight decades after its rejection by the Selection Committee (for the 1938 Summer Exhibition) which sparked Augustus John's resignation from the Academy in protest and a media frenzy fed by pronouncements from the self-styled rebel Lewis himself.

The absorbing T. S. Eliot portrait, set in a broad, gold frame, easily lived up to the 'great spectacle' billing, both in the context of the wider exhibition and, in so far as it was possible to view it in isolation, as a singular masterpiece. The portrait's side panel served to place the rejection controversy in a far larger numbers context, and this was complemented by the portrait clearly being one important work among many important works on display. Created 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 near the portrait contained Augustus John's handwritten letter to Academy president, William Llewellyn, dated April 23, 1938, tendering his resignation with "many personal regrets" following "the crowning ineptitude of the rejection of Wyndham Lewis' picture."

Eliot expressed his approval of the portrait, and its possible role in shaping his legacy, in a letter to Lewis dated April 21, 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." He also made clear his "feeling of relief" at the rejection, and affirmed his position in solidarity with 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."

Visitors to the *Great Spectacle*, which ran concurrently with the 250th *Summer Exhibition* until 19 August, found the portrait strategically positioned alongside John Singer Sargent's of Eliot's literary antecedent and fellow transplanted American, Henry James. The latter portrait was slashed by suffragette Mary Wood in 1914 – an incident which, as the side panel stated, "caused a ruckus and was widely reported in the press." The juxtaposition certainly encouraged, then, a drawing of parallels; and visitors found more to ponder in relation to Eliot elsewhere, such as R. B. Kitaj's "The Killer-Critic Assassinated by His Widower, Even" in which Eliot's dictum of an "escape from personality", famously expressed in his critical essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), is inverted and appropriated.

The exhibition was aided by a companion book which expands on the rejection "sensation", on pages 123 to 125, under the heading "ACCEPTANCE, REJECTION, READMISSION". It sets up a dichotomy between Lewis (backed by Augustus John) and Winston Churchill, with the portrait reproduced on p. 124 directly opposite Churchill's "Winter Sunshine, Chartwell" on p. 125, which also formed part of the exhibition. The Eliot portrait was on loan from the Durban Art Gallery, South Africa. Director, Dr Mduduzi Xakaza, said it was "heartening to know that it has now regained its significance not only in its country of origin but perhaps at a global level." He added: "The Durban Art Gallery is absolutely honoured to have been given this opportunity of having its important heritage asset showcased among pieces by great masters of the world. We also feel honoured to share the piece with the citizens of the UK, where the work was masterfully produced."

Dr Sarah Victoria Turner, one of the co-curators, said: "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. We are very grateful to the Durban Art Gallery that they have loaned this important work in their collection to us."

Dr Jaron Murphy, Southampton Solent University

(The 2018 edition of *The Journal of the T. S. Eliot Society* features Dr Murphy's essay on the portrait in relation to Eliot's legacy: <http://s699163057.websitehome.co.uk/the-journal-of-the-ts-eliot-society-uk>)

1. W. K. Rose (ed.), *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis* (London: Methuen, 1963), 251
2. T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood and Major Early Essays* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1998), 33
3. 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), 123