

Wyndham LEWIS (Amherst, Nova Scotia 1882 - London 1957)

Portrait of a Seated Woman

Pencil on paper.

Signed and dated Wyndham Lewis 1921 iat the lower right.

575 x 388 mm. (22 5/8 x 15 1/4 in.) [sheet]

In the first major monograph on the artist, published in 1951, Charles Handley-Read described Wyndham Lewis's technical approach to drawing: 'It is perfectly obvious that with pen in hand, and with a clean sheet of paper before him, Wyndham Lewis can settle down to enjoy himself. Neither invention nor technique ever seem to fail…it is possible to imagine the artist's procedure at the drawing-desk. There are no sketches: if a drawing goes wrong it will be done again, or the faulty area will be cut out, the paper replaced, and the passage re-drawn…Watching the artist, we see him draw, first of all, the important horizontal and vertical lines which give a firm basis to the structure of the design…We notice that the artist's whole arm is a perfectly trained instrument, the weight of the arm resting on the last joint of the little finger. The finger acts as a kind of ball-bearing runner when the long straight lines are being drawn, and as a pivot or compass-point for the curves…suddenly we realize that with the addition of the heavier shading the essentials of the drawing are there before us...In Wyndham Lewis's drawings the characteristics proper to pen, ink and paper are not lost but exploited. His shapely lines and calligraphic marquetry are the work of a virtuoso in this medium.'

The present sheet - once identified as a portrait of the poet and critic Edith Sitwell but more likely to be

the artist's future wife Gladys Anne Hoskyns, known as 'Froanna', whom he met in 1918 and married in 1930 - is one of a distinctive group of portrait line drawings in pencil or black chalk executed in the early 1920s. Among closely comparable pencil drawings by Lewis of the same date is a study of a seated woman – quite possibly the same sitter as seen in the present sheet - which appeared at auction in London in 1988. Another drawing of the same approximate date, and perhaps of the same model, is known from an old black and white photograph inscribed by the artist simply as 'Seated Figure'.

As Handley-Read has noted, 'perhaps the most distinctive feature of Wyndham Lewis's portraits is [a] startlingly vivid, alive, actual quality – a feature quite unrelated, of course, to the matter of likeness. The intensity he bestows seems to transform a portrait into a presence…And yet, paradoxically it might seem, the presence or personality of these portraits is distant and remote…The portraits have…a classical, or a neo-classical air – like the work of Ingres – where the subject, having gained attention, remains entirely self-sufficient, as it were entirely indifferent to the advances of a spectator.'

Several years later, Lewis utilized a similar pose in a three-quarter length portrait of a Pensive Woman of 1937, again likely depicting Froanna Lewis, which is today in the collection of the Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery in Carlisle.

Literature:

Walter Michel, Wyndham Lewis: Paintings and Drawings, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1971, p.378, no.472 (as Portrait of a Lady, not illustrated: 'The subject, seated, is seen in a frontal, almost full-length view. Her right hand rests on her knee, the left is held up to her chin.').

Artist description:

One of the most significant figures of the avant-garde in Britain in the first half of the 20th century, Percy Wyndham Lewis was unusual among his contemporaries in that he was highly regarded as both a writer and an artist. As he noted in one autobiographical account, 'I am a novelist, painter, sculptor, philosopher, draughtsman, critic, politician, journalist, essayist, pamphleteer, all rolled into one, like one of those portmanteau-men of the Italian Renaissance.' A student at the Slade School of Art in London between 1898 and 1901, Lewis spent the next seven years in Europe, mainly in Paris but also studying in Madrid, Haarlem and Munich. Returning to England in 1908, he exhibited from 1911 onwards with the artists of the Camden Town Group and at the Allied Artists' Association, and was also included in Roger Fry's Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition at the Grafton Galleries in 1912. Lewis joined Fry's Omega Workshops in 1913, but by the following year had left to establish the Rebel Art Centre and the magazine Blast, which first appeared in June 1914 and became the manifesto of the short-lived movement known as Vorticism. Lewis was one of the leaders of the Vorticist movement – a group which also included the much younger artists Edward Wadsworth and William Roberts - and was the author of most of the theoretical writings associated with the group. While Vorticism flourished for only a brief period, Lewis continued to work as an artist during and after his military service in the First World War.

Around a thousand drawings and a hundred paintings by Lewis are known. Immensely gifted as both artist and writer, for most of his career he worked as both concurrently, although by the early 1920s it was his writing that began to take up much of his creative energy. As he recalled in later years, 'From 1924 onwards writing became so much of a major interest that that I have tended to work at my painting or drawing in prolonged bursts, rather than fit them into the intervals of the planning or writing of books. Writing and picture-making are not activities, I have found, which mix very well, unless one becomes the servant of the other as was the case with Blake, or with Rossetti.' Nevertheless, he produced a significant group of paintings and drawings throughout the 1930s, much of which was shown in one-man exhibitions at various galleries in London. Lewis spent the years of the Second World War in America and Canada, but within a few years of his return to London in 1945 had begun to lose his sight and largely stopped painting, becoming completely blind by 1951.

Wyndham Lewis's output as a draughtsman was of considerable importance in his oeuvre. Apart from publishing three separate portfolios of his drawings - in 1913, 1919 and 1932 - Lewis frequently used his drawings to illustrate the numerous books, pamphlets and articles he produced. He included significant numbers of drawings in his gallery exhibitions, and in his submissions to such group shows as Roger Fry's Second Post-Impressionist exhibition of 1912 and the first Vorticist group exhibition in 1915. Furthermore, as one recent scholar has noted, at times 'drawing functioned, in a sense, as painting for Lewis...The drawings stand as substitutes for paintings when means, materials or the creative will was not there, or at times when Lewis was so taken up with his written work, as in much of the 1920s and '30s, that more significant production would have been unfeasible.'