

Lobster Legs

Sometimes all that we have of great works of art are written accounts. For example, paintings by Apelles, the most renowned of all ancient Greek artists, are known only through literary descriptions. Even in the modern age an apparently great work of art can both be lost physically and yet live on, even in changed and somewhat attenuated form, in our imaginations through summary descriptions and references.

No one knows, however, what Wyndham Lewis's painting *Kermesse* of 1912 looks like. There are no photographs of it; and if there were preliminary drawings, none have survived. The nearest we have to a direct visual record is a tiny drypoint print – it is the size of a cigarette box – made by Horace Brodzky in 1917. It shows a person standing in front of Lewis's huge canvas in a New York gallery. If we were to judge the painting by this, we would believe that *Kermesse* may have had a central figure, or part of one, but was otherwise a whirl of seemingly unconnected curving lines.

Luckily, however, some related works, chiefly small watercolours and even smaller printed designs, have survived. From these we know that Wyndham Lewis had adopted a way of painting that combined elements of continental avant-garde styles. From cubism Lewis borrowed the hatched planes and the carved, wedge-like volumes uniting figure and background, found in Picasso's early cubist works. From futurism he took the theme of the dynamism of modern life, a sometimes violent and dehumanising energy expressed in machine-like images and arcing 'lines of force' linking the figure or object with the background. In the early 1910s, years in which Lewis was just coming to maturity as a painter, his style combined figurative elements rendered often in crudely simplified or geometricised shapes with a surrounding abstract patterning of jagged shapes and modulations of light and dark that might or might not refer to the scene depicted.

To visualise the now lost *Kermesse* and to imagine what impact this nearly three metre square canvas had on contemporaries, we need to look to contemporary written accounts. Perhaps the most helpful starting point is the very last account we have of the work, the succinct description given in an auction catalogue of 1927. Here it was described tersely as a 'cubistic rendering of three festive figures, the central figure in rich yellow, the others in varying shades of red and purple'. How the cataloguer knew that the figures were 'festive' is uncertain, but a surviving related watercolour called *Kermesse* shows a central couple locked in an embrace with figures either side holding glasses.

Accounts by those who saw Lewis's canvas in 1912 and 1913 are more subjective than this studiously neutral description in the auction catalogue. Opinion was divided,

it seems, as to whether *Kermesse* was an important expression of modernist art or simply mystifying. Writing in the *Nation* in June 1912, leading critic Roger Fry spoke of the piece's abstract design: its 'quantities and volumes have decisive relations to one another: long before one has begun to inquire what it represents, one has the impression of some plastic reality brought about by deliberately intentional colour oppositions. When we begin to look more closely, we find indeed that the rhythm of these elementary geometric forms is based upon the rhythm of the human figure. The rhythm is not merely agreeable and harmonious, but definitely evocative of a Dionysiac mood.'

Others had fun at the painting's expense. A critic wrote in the *Observer* in October 1913, 'the dancers, it is true, look like some gigantic fantastic insects descended upon earth from some other planet'. The *Times* critic agreed: 'Mr Wyndham Lewis's "*Kermesse*" is an impressive design and looks as if it were an illustration to some new romance by Mr. Wells about forms of life on another planet.' The critic of the *New Age* chose a marine rather than extra-terrestrial theme for his analogies, and, usefully, he provided some details about the imagery. Twice he went to see *Kermesse* at the *Post-Impressionist and Futurist Exhibition* held at the Doré Gallery in London, he wrote, and each time he could only discern 'boiled lobster-legs'.

For a third time I returned to the Doré Gallery. This time I took good care to be accompanied by an expert, Aureliano Beruete. He also saw nothing in the 'Kermesse' but the lobster-legs. But after some time Beruete said that perhaps at the centre of the picture there might be two figures kissing one another on the mouth. On the left a crustaceous shape, offering wine to another headless crustacean, which sat on something perhaps meant to be a chair. On the right another crustacean pouring out a jet of wine into his own crustaceous face. These shapes we could not see except by an effort of creative imagination. Once this effort relaxed – return of the lobster-legs.

But there was no doubt that many in the art world thought it an important work. The painter Augustus John declared himself 'greatly impressed' by the 'energy and grandeur of the conception'; and Walter Sickert later remembered it simply as 'magnificent'. The critic Frank Rutter recalled the painting as 'a whirling design of slightly cubist forms expressed in terms of cool but striking colour contrasts', adding, 'Here for the first time London saw by an English artist a painting altogether in sympathy with the later developments in Paris.'

Lewis himself clearly valued it. He seized whatever opportunities came his way to exhibit it in 1912–13, and, in 1916, when enlisted in the army, he wrote to his friend, the American poet Ezra Pound, calling *Kermesse* an 'important picture'. In the same letter, however, he revealed that he was still unhappy with it: 'even for a Wall painting it is too uncouth and its unfinished state would not recommend it to the very discriminating'. There is some evidence that he had already reworked the composition by 1913, possibly enriching the colours; his concern in 1916 to go on improving the work can perhaps be taken as a token of his faith in its importance as much as a desire to remedy its perceived failings.

What then was the significance of what Lewis felt was still a rather rough and ready, and even unfinished, canvas? Ultimately, it hinges on the very real possibility that it was the first thorough-going response to advanced continental trends, achieved on an unforgettable, mural-like scale by one of England's boldest and most talented painters.

It is important to remember that English art was then dominated by realism, whether expressed in the painterly impressions of Augustus John, the drab realities of modern urban life in Walter Sickert's works or the colourful canvases of a Spencer Gore or Harold Gilman. Post-impressionism had only recently been introduced, with dramatic effect on English artistic life, largely through an exhibition organised by Roger Fry in November 1910, and cubism was little known. Lewis, however, was a regular traveller to Paris and was familiar with the latest trends there, including cubism, and it is suspected he may well have known something, too, of the Italian futurists who were based in the French capital. The futurist leader Marinetti gave a lecture in London in 1910, and returned to introduce an exhibition of futurist art in March 1912. This exhibition kick-started a new form of cubo-futurist art in Britain that led eventually to Lewis forming the Rebel Art Centre in 1914 and shortly thereafter to the short lived but famous vorticist movement.

Futurism was also an element in the context and meaning of *Kermesse*. Later, Lewis was irritated by the arrogance of Marinetti and critical of the idea of amorphous flux that lay behind futurist understanding of the energies of modern life. But, initially, he felt galvanised by the sheer bravura and at times brutish force behind the new vision of the future. His images of hard-edged, dehumanised figures grimacing, staring at and variously confronting each other in the *Kermesse* watercolour, for example, expressed a response to the futurists' exaltation of 'movements of aggression, feverish sleeplessness, the double march, the perilous leap, the slap and the blow with the fist ... militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of the anarchists, the beautiful ideas which kill, and contempt for woman.'

But, in marked contrast to the futurists' urban bias, the masculine energies that Lewis sought to express in *Kermesse* were decidedly and distinctively those of pre-modern life. *Kermesse* was originally a Flemish word meaning a village fair or festival; and in a famous painting hung in the Louvre Rubens had depicted a kermesse around 1630–5, with scenes of drunken revelry and bawdy behaviour. In 1908 Lewis had travelled around Brittany, then very much a traditional and underdeveloped region of France, and had observed Breton festivals at first hand; some of the works on paper relating to *Kermesse* show people in what could have been distinctive Breton hats. More than this, dance – long a favourite theme of artists from the 1880s to the First World War – was very much in the air at the time, often in the form of imports every bit as foreign and exotic as cubism or futurism. Art historian Lisa Tickner writes:

Between about 1910 and 1914 there was an explosion of interest in all forms of dance – vernacular, theatrical and social. Folk dances were energetically collected, photographed and revived. Theatrical and ballet conventions were comprehensively overturned by Isadora

Duncan and the Ballets Russes. On the dance floor, the previously daring ‘do you reverse?’ paled into insignificance beside the risqué new dances like the tango, the two-step and the Brazilian mazique.

She goes on to suggest that Lewis’s works of this period somehow convey something both of Brittany and of the flamenco dances associated with Spain, which Lewis had also visited.

Dance was also key to the intended purpose of *Kermesse*. Lewis was commissioned to produce this large mural like decoration, along with a whole range of designs for printed material such as programmes and letter-heads, for a new theatre cabaret club in London. Established in a basement in a quiet road off Regent Street, The Cave of the Golden Calf was intended to be a free-thinking, high-spirited club for artists and writers, and was decorated by leading young artists including not only Lewis but also Spencer Gore, Charles Ginner and Jacob Epstein. According to its prospectus, issued in April 1912, the club promised to embrace ‘on the one hand such art as we owe to the genius of the people, the dance, folk lore – on the other offering free development to the youngest and best of our contemporaries and – “Futurists”.’ One month later, the club’s statement of ‘Aims and Programme’ read:

*We want a place given up to gaiety, to a gaiety stimulating thought, rather than crushing it.
We want a gaiety that does not have to count with midnight.
We want surroundings, which after the reality of daily life, reveal the reality of the unreal ...
We do not want to Continentalise, we only want to do away, to some degree, with the distinction that the word ‘Continental’ implies, and with the necessity of crossing the Channel to laugh freely, and to sit up after nursery hours.*

Displayed in the entrance stairwell, Lewis’s *Kermesse* signalled to visitors that the club would be a site of avant-garde experimentation and unbridled fun. However, it was no sooner hung for the opening of the club than Lewis unhung it to show it in a series of art exhibitions; and thus *Kermesse* began its transformation from wall decoration, displayed within the confines of a night club, to an easel painting, to be seen within art galleries and reviewed by critics as a work of art.

As has been seen, *Kermesse* attracted a fair share of praise as well as the predictable obloquy. It was not bought until 1916 when John Quinn, a major American collector, paid a much needed £70 for it and included it in an exhibition of vorticist work he organised in New York in 1917. Quinn died in 1924 and his collection was auctioned in 1927. *Kermesse* was bought at the sale by an old friend of Lewis, Captain Richard Wyndham, for a song. Wyndham was a wealthy Anglo-Irish peer and amateur painter, who had bought Lewis’s work in the past and had even supported him with a stipend. Despite this, he found himself – or thought he found himself – viciously satirised by Lewis in *The Apes of God* 1930, a novel that ridiculed the wealthy patrons, critics, socialites and dilettantes who followed and aped true artistic genius. Richard Wyndham was characterised as the vacuous ‘Dick Whittingdon’, ‘the authentic Ape, the world’s prized Ape’.

Wyndham Lewis 1882–1957

Kermesse 1912

Distemper on canvas

266.7 x 271.8 cm

He was not only too old as he regretfully decided but far too clumsy and not very clever (as well as bald and rheumatic) to become an Oxford-voiced Fairy-prince. So Dick Whittingdon cast around for some recognised vice that might compensate for this social handicap. The pornographic literature of the camp and barracks (and for Dick the horizon of Letters was more or less that) suggested a solution. So he is a noted flagellant. Whip in hand, Dick Whittingdon faces the world.

There was no going back after such hurtful words and relations were severed. Wyndham lost little time in getting rid of two paintings by Lewis, including, it is thought, *Kermesse*. Rather than selling the works in the art market where their fate would have been more assured, he placed a small classified advertisement in *The Times* in June 1930, selling the works in terms simply of their size.

The insult to Lewis was duly noted and reported in the *Daily Express* in September 1930. Seizing the opportunity for paying Wyndham back, Lewis was quoted in the article as denying having based any of the characters in *Apes of God* on Wyndham or anyone else. 'I don't think there is anything in the book in the least resembling Captain Richard Wyndham. Is it possible that he has chosen a figure in the book as being himself? If so, it is all imagination on his part.' The denial was not convincing. In the flyer he had printed that same month to draw attention to the case (and to add topical spice to his pamphlet *Satire & Fiction*), Lewis had no intention of mending bridges: he described the wealthy Wyndham as suffering, like all members of his class, from chronic childishness, and poured scorn on his pretensions to be a painter.

No one knows what happened to *Kermesse*. Was it sold, or put into storage? Or did Wyndham, stung by Lewis's invective, decide to destroy the work himself? In any case, there has been no trace since of *Kermesse*, a painting that was perhaps the earliest and boldest statement of pre-war avant-gardism by one of England's most brilliant – if also combative and unpredictable – modern artists.

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