

The illustrations in *The Art of Wyndham Lewis*,<sup>1</sup> a survey published toward the end of the artist's life by Faber and Faber, the publisher of his literary work (as well as much of the major Modernist writing produced in England), reveal few exactly like *Figures*<sup>2</sup> (Figure 1), which was selected by Evan Turner for the Museum in 1985. Lewis's earlier "imaginative compositions" (particularly his Vorticist work), paintings and drawings of World War I, and portraits predominate. It was only in 1971, when Walter Michel's monograph appeared, that the true range of Lewis's artistic work became generally known.<sup>3</sup> An exhibition at the Manchester City Art Gallery in 1980 also brought many facets of his production into balance,<sup>4</sup> and two exhibitions at the Anthony D'Offay Gallery in London in 1983 and 1984 not only probed deeper into his less-generally understood activities, but disseminated examples in public and private collections.<sup>5</sup>

There is a striking contrast between the complexity of his output as we know it today and Faber's 1951 view. Typically, its introduction is accompanied by color reproductions of Lewis's self-portrait of 1921, the *Portrait of the Artist as the Painter Raphael* (Michel P 29), and the 1949 oil portrait of his friend, T. S. Eliot (Michel P 124), creating the impression of Lewis as a visual appendage of literary Modernism. While the Faber book is thorough and omits few, if any, of his major achievements, it perpetuates the simplified mid-century understanding of the Modernist movement.

*Figures* was painted in 1921, the same year as his famous *Portrait of the Artist as the Painter Raphael*, but its style and message are totally different. Executed with a combination of India ink, bodycolor, and watercolor, over a graphite underdrawing on a "toothy" wove paper, the image may at first glance be read as an abstraction. The title, however, and the obvious ladder instruct the viewer to interpret the forms as human figures. In a space defined by a floor and a wall (also occupied by what are probably two chairs, one pink and one blue) are three figures. One of them, clearly male, is drawn mostly with nervous hatchings of India ink, supplemented in places by buff and gray wash. That the other is a woman is suggested by the curved gynecoid shape at its center and by the greater range of color: blue, crimson, terra-cotta, tan, and pale green.

The male figure appears constricted into a flattened cylinder of sharply edged, angular patterns—a minimal phallus in a business suit—while the female figure has apparently climbed up the ladder onto his back. The female figure's domination is expressed not only by her relative position, but by her aggressive headgear (which we must understand both as apparel and as mental action) and in the fierce form of the shapes that connote her eye and mouth (which is downturned in displeasure and marked by the steely, beveled edge of her lower lip and jaw). Clinging directly onto her back is a child,

so denoted by the inchoate form of its skull and vertebrae. The wide-open, perfectly circular eye socket contrasts with the firmly directed semicircle of the woman's eye and the man's featureless face.

The woman's headgear communicates the topic of their conversation. A pear-shaped echo of her torso is penetrated by a tower-like, phallic form. Above a drill-like extension of her spine is the direct result of the coition, an ovoid shape either cut into by, or ingesting, a sharp red diamond. Below it a foetus-like form points to the figure of the child, which clings tightly to the curvilinear female shape, both as if it were the mother's body and its own embryo. This imagery is consistent with other works of the same period, notably the more explicit *Tyro Madonna* (Michel 493) of the same year. In this context *Figures* might well be considered a *Holy Family*.

The cigarette-like male below teeters dizzily on his ankles, while his tiny, neatly laced shoes remain firmly planted on the ground. His strength lies in his density and rigidity. The zigzag over his torso simultaneously suggests structural reinforcement and the pattern of a Harlequin costume. Lewis may well have associated the image with traditional moralistic subjects, like *Phyllis Riding on the Back of Aristotle* or *The Penance of St. John Chrysostom*. So much can be read from the image itself.

In *Figures* Lewis expressed his feelings about current events in his life. He had always had ambivalent feelings about women. Although sexually strongly attracted to them, and boasting of many, some financially advantageous conquests, he felt that "surrender to a woman was a sort of suicide for the artist..."<sup>6</sup> His war experience matured him to the extent that he could tolerate an extended relationship with a woman. He met Iris Barry, an aspiring poetess, through Ezra Pound in 1916.<sup>7</sup> She was known for her striking dress and aggressive conversation. When she became pregnant by Lewis in 1918, she apparently lived in his flat, but was unacknowledged and usually told to retire to the kitchen when guests arrived.

If Lewis detested women except for sex, his abhorrence of children was deeply ingrained. He wrote:

*the reproductive act, the swallowing and evacuating process (self-preservation) are degrading, we look fools when we are at it.... In his imagination, he reduced the entire company to creatures of this kind. A small dark wriggling monster. Then he knew that there was a piscine phase to the foetus.... The sharp-sighted are apt to be granted this fundamental vision of the human, in the moments immediately succeeding procreation—the female adoration of the just-born abortion, striking a spark.<sup>8</sup>*

Throughout his life he never acknowledged or supported any of the children he had by his mistresses and refused to have children by his wife. The Cleveland drawing expresses just these thoughts.

Iris Barry bore his second child in 1921. When she returned to the flat from the hospital, Lewis had locked her out, because he was having sex with Nancy Cunard, with whom he had been having an affair since the previous year. When they finished, Iris and the newborn were allowed to enter. Barry and Lewis separated in April of that year.

At the same time Lewis opened an exhibition at the Leicester Galleries in London, *Tyros and Portraits*, showing two aspects of his work. One was done "directly in contact with nature," but the rest was satire: "grotesque scenes of a family or race of beings that will serve to synthesise the main comic ideas that attack me at the moment." These tyros, as he called them, he defined by common usage: "an elementary person; an elemental, in short. Usually known in journalism as the Veriest Tyro. [All the Tyros we introduce you to are the Veriest Tyros.]"<sup>9</sup>

In the catalogue's foreword he wrote:

*Unnecessary as it would appear to point out that these Tyros are not meant to be beautiful, that they are, of course, forbidding and harsh, there will, no doubt, be found people who will make this discovery with an exclamation of reproach.... There are no abstract designs in this exhibition.... The principal point of dispute is, I think, the question of subject-matter in a picture; the legitimacy of consciously conveying information to the onlooker other than that of the direct plastic message....*

*My standpoint is that it is only a graceful dilettantism that desires to convert painting into a parlour game, a very intellectual dressmaker's hobby, or a wayward and slightly hysterical chess. Again, abstraction, or plastic music, is justified and at its best when its divorce from natural form or environment is complete, as in Kandinsky's expressionism, or in the experiments of the 1914 Vorticists, rather than when its basis is still the French Impressionist dogma of the intimate scene.... Twenty years ago, "art for art's sake" was the slogan of the ancestor of this type of individual. Our present great movement must be an emancipation towards a complete human expression; but it is always liable in England to degenerate into a cultivated and snobbish game.*

*My Tyros may help frighten away this local bogey....*<sup>10</sup>

Figure 1. *Figures*. Pen and India ink, bodycolor and watercolor over graphite, 50.2 x 35.4 cm. Percy Wyndham Lewis, British (born Nova Scotia), 1882-1957. Leonard C. Hanna, Jr., Fund. CMA 85.12



Lewis also published the first issue of *The Tyro*, an eight-page magazine “of the arts of painting, sculpture and design,” with three examples of these Swiftian Harlequin figures. If he expected to launch a new artistic movement, he was mistaken. Only one more issue appeared.

Neither *Figures* nor the closely related *Tyro Madonna* was included in that exhibition.<sup>11</sup> Both reflect a more complex level of expression than the strident tyros, clearly intended as the public face of his work at the time and embodied in his hideously grinning *Mr. Wyndham Lewis as a Tyro* (Michel P 27). Though *Figures* retains the mordant wit of the tyros and some of their visual language, it is more abstract and shows the elegant, complex design of his *Abstract Composition* (Michel 441) of 1921. While the tyros communicate by screaming, these other works use more urbane discourse. The roots in his personal experience deny it the objectivity of his tyros and align it with sexually charged works like *Tyro Madonna* and *The King and Queen in Bed* (Michel 399: 1920)

Lewis’s versatility made him somewhat like a writer who expresses himself in multiple languages and genres. His creative volatility makes it almost impossible to comprehend his work in a coherent system of categories. Both his choice of an avenue of self-promotion in 1921, when he made *Figures*, and his beatification by Faber thirty years later conceal much of the complexity and variety of his oeuvre.

1. Charles Handley-Read, ed., *The Art of Wyndham Lewis* (London, 1951).
2. CMA 85.12 *Figures*, pen and India ink, bodycolor and watercolor over graphite, 50.2 x 35.4 cm. Percy Wyndham Lewis, British (born Nova Scotia), 1882-1957. Leonard C. Hanna, Jr., Fund. Provenance: Hugh Gordon Porteous; Anthony D'Offay Gallery, London. Exhibitions: London, September 12-October 12, 1984: *Wyndham Lewis, 1882-1957, The Twenties*, Anthony D'Offay Gallery; London, June 25-October 11, 1992: *Wyndham Lewis, Art and War*, Imperial War Museum, pp. 42, 137, no. 50, pl. 50. Publication: Walter Michel, *Wyndham Lewis: Paintings and Drawings* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1971), p. 376, no. 457, P. 79.
3. Michel, 1971.
4. Jane Farrington, *Wyndham Lewis*, exh. cat. (London, 1980).
5. *Wyndham Lewis, 1882-1957, Drawings and Watercolors 1910-1920* (1983) and London, 1984.
6. J. Meyers, *The Enemy* (London, 1981), p. 89.
7. See *ibid.*, pp. 88-93, for a detailed account of the affair.
8. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 89.
9. This and the rest of Lewis's foreword are reprinted in *ibid.*, appendix 1, pp. 437 f.
10. Wyndham continues: *These immense novices brandish their appetites in their faces, lay bare their teeth in a valedictory, inviting, or merely substantial laugh. A laugh, like a sneeze, exposes the real individual with an unexpectedness that is perhaps a little unreal. This sunny commotion of the face, at the gate of the organism, brings to the surface all the burrowing and interior broods which the individual may harbour. Understanding this so well, people hatch all their villainies in this seductive glow. Some of these Tyros are trying to furnish you with a moment of almost Mediterranean sultriness, in order, in this region of engaging warmth, to obtain some advantage over you.*  
*But most of them are, by the skill of the artist, seen basking, themselves, in the sunshine of their own abominable nature.* (*Ibid.*)
11. It seems most likely that he executed the works before the end of his relationship with Iris Barry.