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Editing Virginia Woolf and the Arts: Virginia Woolf and the Royal Academy

Professor Maggie Humm

By the turn of the twentieth century there were over thirty women art critics writing for London journals with some, for example, Alice Meynell, earning over £400 a year. Press Day at the Royal Academy, for the annual summer exhibition, accommodated women critics by changing viewing times to safer daylight hours. Also by 1914, government ministries organizing World War One, began to appoint women war artists. It is surprising, therefore, that in Virginia Woolf's review of the Royal Academy 1919 summer exhibition, "The Royal Academy," she should obscure the contribution of women artists as well as the significant date of the exhibition which was the first since the end of the war (*E3*). Since 2008 is the 90th anniversary of the armistice, it is an appropriate moment to look at Woolf's response to that "war" exhibition. Woolf's "The Royal Academy," together with the 1919 exhibition itself, raises gender and political issues in a crucial case study of ambiguities in Woolf's writings as well as in our contemporary critical difficulties with "modernism" itself.

In 1919, Roger Fry was also emphatically attacking "subject pictures" (Fry 71). As prolific as Woolf, Fry's several reviews in that year for the *Athenaeum* included "Art and Science" in which Fry specifically denigrated "the ordinary historical pictures of our annual shows" (Fry 71). But Fry had exhibited non-abstract, figurative war images in his solo exhibition at the Alpine Club Gallery in 1915. *German General Staff*, a large-scale 6 x 5 feet work, was seen as "patriotic," and Fry submitted the painting to the Ministry of Information in a failed attempt to be appointed as a World War One official artist (Collins 293).

Woolf's dislike of the Royal Academy precedes the 1919 exhibition. In 1903, Woolf attacked the Academy's Annual Soiree, by associating its art with those of the rich attendees, men with "a surprising number of decorations" (*PA* 176). Importantly for my argument, she associates the Academy with death and mausoleums. The building is "a kind of catacomb, damp" (*PA* 177). In Woolf's later short story "A Society," Helen is deputed, by the other women of the society, to assess men's achievements at the Royal Academy. On her return, Helen's account engenders hostile taunts of "sentimental" and "gibberish" (*CSF* 127). In "Genius: R. B. Haydon,"

her affectionate tribute to the painter, Woolf suggests that Haydon's attempt to meet the Academy's commercial priorities by learning "to toss off pictures of Napoleon musing, at the rate of one in two hours and a half" directly led to his decline (*M* 192). In "The Private View of the Royal Academy," she similarly deplores historical and mimetic paintings (*E3* 405). Woolf's satirical subversion of establishment values is a consistent theme throughout her life, from the Dreadnought Hoax of 1910, to refusing the award of a Companion of Honour in 1935.

However, in 1924, she happily made commercial use of the Royal Academy's mailing lists to publicize a Hogarth Press book *Living Painters - Duncan Grant*. By 1930 Woolf was delighted to be asked "to lecture on Art at the Royal Academy" on Zoffany's paintings (*L4* 142). Although there was no exhibition of Zoffany by the Academy that year, Woolf may have admired Zoffany's famed conversational pieces, particularly *Sondes Children* with its depiction of children's cricket - the favourite game at Talland House, St. Ivesⁱ. And 'Walter Sickert', as Diane Gillespie acutely notes, is "a culminating piece of formal art criticism" (Gillespie 8). Yet the 1919 review betrays artistic uncertainty.

In her 1919 manuscript and letters to Vanessa, Woolf is less condemnatory. The manuscriptⁱⁱ has full notes of the title, date and painter of *Landing of the 1st Canadian Division at St. Nazaire, February 1915* suggesting she may have wished to analyse the painting in more detail; and she wrote to Vanessa that the Academy "is a very amusing and spirited place. I get an immense deal of pleasure from working out the pictures" (*L2* 377). The disparity between the published attack and Woolf's private pleasure is instructive. Her refusal to publish anything other than a somewhat reductive construction of the Academy as an outmoded art institution may stem from Woolf's need to commit to Bloomsbury's avant-gardismⁱⁱⁱ.

Again in the manuscript notes on *Cocaine* by Alfred Priest, Woolf describes the painting as "very good"^{iv} and wrote to Vanessa "I think Cocaine is one of the best" (*L2* 378). *Cocaine* was a "problem picture," always a very popular feature of the Royal Academy summer exhibition, and widely reproduced. Pamela Fletcher, in *Narrating Modernity*, presents a convincing case for revising art history's conventional dismissal of such works. Fletcher argues that, although "problem pictures" involved figurative narratives, they did focus questions of gender, sexuality and identity in modernity (Fletcher 7). Rather than characterizing the representational

quality of “problem pictures” as “non modernist,” instead pictures like *Cocaine* “initiated wide-ranging cultural conversations” about gender representation (Fletcher 7).

In the ‘Private View of the Royal Academy, Woolf presents *Cocaine* as a moral story in which a woman gazes at two photographs, the first of a presumed baby and another of the man she “might have married...unless it is her father” (E3 91). Woolf matches her fictional character with risqué fictional spectators. “The little group of gazers begin to boast that they have known sadder cases themselves. Friends of theirs took cocaine. ‘I myself as a boy for a joke” (*ibid*). Woolf’s use of dramatized quotation creates an air of reality, yet the narrator’s alienation, from spectators and subject, is a constructed fiction. *Cocaine* does not depict photographs but two indecipherable wall paintings. What Woolf downplays is a more serious treatment of the exhibition’s aims and historical moment, coming the year after the armistice, as well as the exhibition’s inclusion of significant and well-known women artists.

Woolf does mention the war in conclusion, in her account of spectator reaction to John Singer Sargent’s *Gassed*, a painting depicting soldiers blinded by mustard gas. Woolf describes spectators over-reacting to the painting “the great rooms rang like a parrot-house with the intolerable vociferations of gaudy and brainless birds” (E 3 93). Sargent was patriotic about his adopted home and returned his German honours. It was Lloyd George the Prime Minister who had invited Sargent to be a war artist, “if you will undertake this task you will be doing a work of great and lasting service to the nation” (Mount 291). Also in 1925, in a letter to *The Nation*, Sargent publicly disassociated himself from Fry’s 1910 Post-Impressionist Exhibition (Mount 258).

Yet Woolf’s exaggerated satire is misplaced and inaccurate. Sargent’s desire to focus on the suffering of soldiers, not on their heroism, rather than deterring spectators, earned Sargent public respect and *Gassed* was praised as “Picture of the Year.” To seek experimental and avant-garde painting scarcely a year after the war is disingenuous. Richard Cork points out that “advanced modernist abstraction soon proved an inadequate starting-point for developing a viable approach to the conflict” (Cork 8). While the hanging of *Gassed* was certainly inappropriate, placed, according to the archive catalogue, between No. 118 *Chrysanthemums* and No. 121 *The*

Smithy, nevertheless *Gassed* was not painted for the summer exhibition but rather requested by the Academy, from the Imperial War Museum, in order to display war horrors.

Sargent painted *Gassed* from his first-hand experiences and sketches made while travelling in France with fellow artist Henry Tonks in July 1918, and witnessing gassed soldiers on the Arras-Doullens Road when “wheeling his barrow of canvases and sketches about behind the lines” (Mount 293). Sargent, a close friend of Woolf’s friend Ethel Smyth, chose his title *Gassed* precisely because it was un-heroic. “very prosaic and matter of fact” (Mount 299). The canvas emphasizes the loss and suffering of soldiers contrasted with a background football match depicting physically well-bodied young men. By creating a spatial relation between gassed and active men, Sargent recuperates the abject. The entire foreground is filled with severely wounded men forcing spectator engagement with the horrors of war. The liminal space between the active and inactive men problematizes the self/other relation. It is also a very legible painting drawing on traditional painting codes from classical friezes. But the overwhelming physicality of the painting (Sargent was the only World War One painter to paint a twenty-foot canvas) reclaims the un-representability of the abject and posits mourning in a public space as an alternative to war’s aggression.

Although the Royal Academy displayed Edward Burne-Jones’s massive 24 foot *Arthur in Avalon* in 1916 to glorify the war dead, it also welcomed anti-heroic works depicting the horrors of war. For example, also in 1916, the Academy accepted Charles Sims’s *Clio and the Children* although the painting portrayed a blood-stained parchment representing the death of Sims’s eldest son at the Front. And, in 1923, the Academy’s display of William Orpen’s disturbing picture *To the Unknown British Soldier in France*, depicting the futility of war, was voted “Picture of the Year.” The summer exhibition was a “war” exhibition in other ways. Woolf omits to mention the customary display, in each summer exhibition, of architectural drawings. In 1919, many drawings were of reconstructions planned for a more optimistic Britain. To obscure, as Woolf does, this post-war witnessing of traumatic events, and attempted reconstruction, devalues the exhibition in favour of an inappropriate elitist response.

A more unexpected lacunae is Woolf’s lack of attention to women artists, who were major contributors to the 1919 summer exhibition, including the vivid painting

No. 157 *Women's Canteen at a Munitions Factory* by Flora Lion. In 1914 Lion turned from the society portraiture for which she was renowned, to paint a war-time scene with details of worker's tools, akin to Woolf's use of objects in her fiction. Lion creates a mediated image, not a romanticization of war, a large oil painting dramatically portraying war work, accurate technology and women's very active roles. Lion's war paintings share that wide-ranging European artistic enthusiasm for technological endeavours. For example, the Vorticists entitled *Blast* in 1914 to celebrate blast furnaces in Britain's industrial north. Unlike the Vorticists, Lion never breaks the art frame, but nor does she over-idealize industrial products to erase the human figure and therefore gender. To me, Lion makes a critical representation of women's new, major, modern experience that is, the factory. By 1918 there were over one million women working in munitions factories. The painting also draws in the viewer into modernity by refusing spectator distance.

Lion painted this particular factory, the Phoenix Works, Leeds, because she already knew its Head and, in her commitment to depicting women workers, travelled north in advance of the necessary permits. The Imperial War Museum Archive contains many moving letters revealing her battles with bureaucracy, particularly with the Ministry of Munitions, housed at one time, rather splendidly, in the Grand Hotel, Northumberland Avenue, London. Although by this date a noted portrait painter, and 37 when war broke out, Lion was forced to state that she "considered herself very fortunate" in being permitted to paint the works and even offered her painting to the Ministry for "one hundred and fifty guineas," almost half the price of £300 routinely paid to male war artists^v.

The Ministry refused to purchase her paintings and, by 1927, Flora had to donate *Women's Canteen at a Munitions Factory* to the Imperial War Museum. Even then, the letters record, the Museum "could not promise to exhibit [the painting] at once and that in common with other paintings it would have to take its turn" and remain in Lion's frame "until we can afford to buy another one"^{vi}. The Museum's final misogynist gesture, in response to Lion's husband's request for permission to send photographs of the painting to the press, was to request that Flora's copyright be transferred to the Crown. Sadly Flora agreed. What this protracted archival correspondence reveals is the Imperial War Museum's misogyny; how, in opposition, the Royal Academy welcomes both women artists and art critical of the war; and therefore how odd that Woolf overlooks this enthusiasm.

It is surprising that Woolf ignores women artists and anti-war art, given her pacifism and support for women workers throughout her life. A year later, in "Pictures and Portraits," she was castigating the National Portrait Gallery for lacking a portrait of Harriet Taylor Mill, and in *Three Guineas* she describes women's war-time actions, praising the Mayoress of Woolwich for refusing "to darn a sock to help a war," a brave act given that Woolwich at that time contained over 12,000 workers employed in armament factories (*E3* 163; *TG* 177). In World War One Woolf, of course, experienced personal trauma. In her diary she noted the alarming possibility of food riots and strikes at Woolwich, "& the guards have notice to march there at any moment, & fire on the people," and German air raids, "16 German aeroplanes have just passed over Richmond [...] we went and sat in the cellar" (*L2* 185). Woolf was writing letters of exemption on behalf of Duncan Grant and suffered the anxiety of Leonard's two conscription call-ups. In addition, she experienced a nervous breakdown, the death of Cecil, and the injury and post-war trauma of Philip, Leonard's brothers; as well as the deaths of Rupert Brooke and other friends.

Karen Levenback, in *Virginia Woolf and the Great War*, argues convincingly that to assess Woolf's writings or her life without a sense of her experience of the Great War would be totally incomplete, and Mark Hussey points out that "all Woolf's work is deeply concerned with war" (Hussey 3). Woolf's careful mapping of the gendered dimensions of war in her non-fiction and fiction is powerful. So Woolf's inability, in her 1919 review, to acknowledge *artistic* representations of gender and politics is therefore all the more surprising. Lion's painting does detail, with sophisticated technical expertise, a new space of modernity and one consciously depicting gender and work that carries inevitable political import. Rather than promoting establishment values, it could be argued that the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition of 1919 offered a therapeutic aesthetic, for an audience still traumatized by modernity's aggression, - a war which had killed 950,000 of the eight million mobilized (Levenback 67). Rather than glorifying war, the exhibition included memorable art, contributing to a general feeling that there might be a national artistic renaissance, stimulated by the Academy itself with another exhibition in 1919 *The Nation's War Paintings*, of younger, radical artists which received much critical praise.

Woolf's unconscious prohibition against celebrating the 1919 exhibition

suggests un-integrated experience in a deeper sense. War deaths, including World War One deaths, are often narrated indirectly in her fiction, for example, in *To the Lighthouse*. Nigel Nicolson notes that World War One rarely registers in her letters because “she thought the war an inevitable outcome of male chauvinism” (L2 xvii), And Woolf wondered “how this preposterous masculine fiction [the war] keeps going a day longer” (L2 76). In “The War From the Street,” she argued that historians’ versions of war “never will be written from our point of view,” and felt disconnected, in a more psychic sense, having a “profound” conviction “that nothing is ever to touch you” (E3 4). I have no space here to examine what I see as Woolf’s sense of the abject. But it is important to note that other writers, for example, Vera Brittain, unlike Woolf, *celebrated* 1919: “1919...it appeared to an exhausted world as divine mortality, the spring of life after the winter of death” (Brittain 46). Brittain experienced the death of her lover, her brother and the horrors of nursing but resolved, very positively, “to read History at Oxford instead of English...in a desire to understand how the whole calamity had happened,” although, post-war, she “could not even recollect the trivial procedure for getting books out of the library” (Brittain 471 and 477).

Conclusion

Rather than devaluing the Academy, as Woolf does, we need to acknowledge a wider aesthetic continuum, coming at that historic moment. Flora Lion’s *Women’s Canteen at a Munitions Works* has disappeared from art history (although I intend to recuperate Flora). But Lion’s work, and, indeed, the Royal Academy, should not be dismissed solely as establishment. Perhaps as Sir Kenneth Clarke, Bloomsbury patron, said about Tolstoy’s *What is Art?* a book in the Woolfs’ library, the counter question should be what isn’t?

¹ See *The Changing Face of Childhood: British Children’s Portraits and Their Influence in Europe*. London: Dulwich Picture Gallery. 2007, 105; and Humm 2006.

ii Monk’s House Papers B2. University of Sussex.

In addition, of course, as Diane Gillespie suggests, from Virginia’s attachment to Vanessa
iv Monk’s House Papers B2.

v Flora Lion File 255/6, Imperial War Museum Archive, London.

vi *ibid.*

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