

**A Gift to the Courtauld:
Wyndham Lewis's *Ivor Back***

Paul Edwards

Thanks to Judith Hooper, this drawing, produced for the 'Thirty Personalities' exhibition at the Lefevre Galleries in October 1932 and reproduced photolithographically in the Portfolio *Thirty Personalities and a Self-Portrait* (Harmsworth 1932), has been generously donated to the Courtauld Gallery. It was owned by the sitter and was inherited by his son. It is a particularly welcome acquisition, as it is the only work from this distinctive series in the collections of the Gallery and the Wyndham Lewis Memorial Trust. Ivor Gordon Back (1879-1951) was Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons, and a brief online professional biography can be found at <http://livesonline.rcseng.ac.uk/biogs/E003789b.htm>. There he is called a 'connoisseur of art and literature', and he was, adds Judith Hooper, a great friend of William Orpen and Gerald Kelly. Lewis called Kelly a 'fine artist' (*CHC* 359), and it may have been through him that the contact with the sitter was made (Orpen had died in 1931).

Hugh Gordon Porteus recalled that producing the thirty drawings in two months was particularly taxing for Lewis, who had done little drawing from life since the early 1920s. There is no evidence of this in the present work, however; though Lewis may have taken a hint from William Orpen's oil portrait of Back, which had been 'picture of the year' at the 1924 Royal Academy exhibition. (It is now in the collection of the Royal College of Surgeons, donated by Rosina Back in 2012). This also depicted the sitter equipped for action, with his red surgical gloves and flesh-coloured face contrasting with the white surgical gown and white curtains behind. The contrast has a quite different effect in Lewis's modernist drawing from that in Orpen's painting, however: here is a drawing that is partly 'about' its own construction out of the white paper void, with the delicate but typically Lewisian lines that comprise the gown creating an almost ghostly effect. But Lewis also achieved a distinctly human representation of what he called 'the powerful and

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humorous countenance of the famous surgeon, Ivor Back, who sits like a rock’.

Porteus also thought that the portfolio prints of the drawings looked better than the originals. Maybe this is true of some (many are still untraced), but certainly not of this one, and the coloured wash on gloves and head add a dimension that in comparison leaves the print looking a little flat.

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