

Failed Seriousness and a Subject Worth Fighting For: Representing Sir Gawain

Presentation for: The Interdisciplinary Seminar on Medievalism

At the Institute of Historical Research at the University of London School of Advanced Study

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Representing Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Website & Research Hub

Illustrations form an established visual language.
Fine art responses extend themes.



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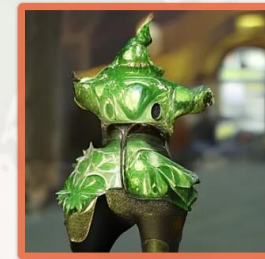
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Roxana Halls



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Screen shots from the website Representing Sir Gawain and the Green Knight 2024.

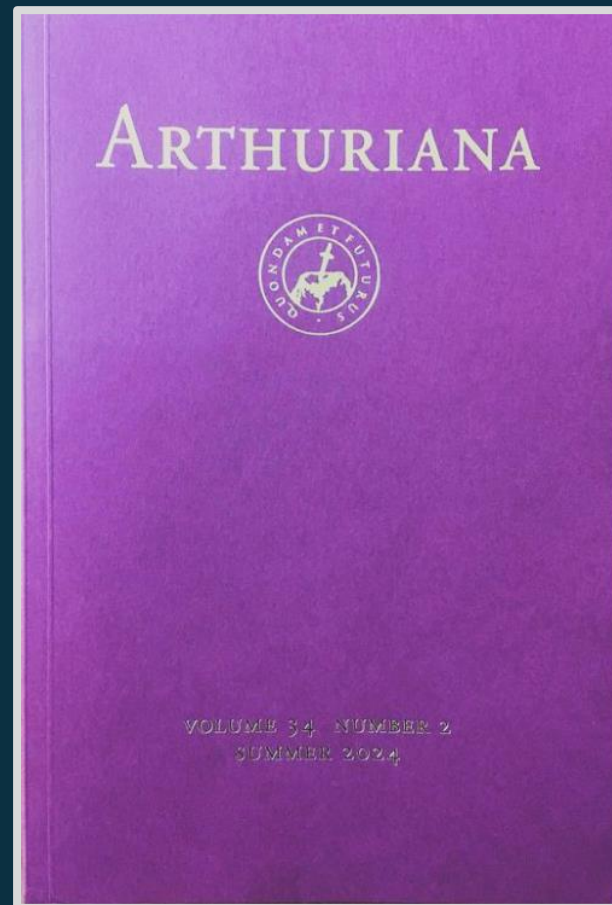
Recent Publications Related to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*



Eden, M., 2023. **The Reproachful Head of the Green Knight: Exploring the eerie, liminality, deep time and duration in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'**. *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance*, 16(1), pp.55-80.



Reproachful Head of the Green Knight (2020).



Representing Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is also a publication that charts what I have called the established visual language and seeks to address the privation of attention from fine artists, extending the 'fifth text' with commissioned works.



Eden, M. (2024) **Representing: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight**. *Arthuriana*, 34(2), pp.16-61.

Contents

1. Positionality/Relevance

15 min read to establish a link to the contemporary.

2. Developing an Apt Visual Register?

Discussion of semi-abstraction, Vorticism and tension with naturalistic registers.

3. World Building: extending the visual language

Background figures and visualising power dynamics.

4. Developing Gawain: Interiority and Surface

Developing themes, oneiric subject matter/nightmarish reversals.

5. (New Painting) Responding to the Invitation

Discussion of a new painting in response to the invitation from Interdisciplinary Seminar on Medievalism (University of London).

Positionality/Relevance



Green Knight's Head (Point of no Return)
(2024) Oil on board.

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Developing an Apt Visual Register



- Drawing on Vorticism and Wyndham Lewis's Aesthetic Register to Visualise Dehumanisation



Praxitella (c.1921) by Wyndham Lewis.



Initial experiments (2018).

Lewis informs his aesthetic in relation to late medieval ideas of shallow and hierarchical space (see Johnson, 2014; 2016).



The Crowd (1914–1915) by Wyndham Lewis.

As a template to devise his aesthetic and inform his ‘eye’, Lewis drew on the shallow, hierarchical space in medieval painting. We see this confirmed by Johnson (2014) who has made a detailed study of Lewis’s plans for *The Crowd* (1915), linking this to a painting by the 14th-century Italian master Duccio di Bouninsegna, *Christ and the Woman of Samaria at the Well* (1310-11) and to Uccello’s – *The Battle of San Romano* (c. 1435–1460).

These formed important components of Lewis’s approach (Johnson, 2014:51). Lewis proclaims, ‘the philosophy of the eye’ poet’s ‘shallow space’ (2014:22). Johnson goes on to state that ‘people [are] reduced to objects, activity [is] expressed as objectified shapes’ (23) and he sees Lewis as an exponent of a similar tendency in modernism generally. Johnson conceives this as deployed visually, reinforcing Lewis’s attack on Bergsonian concepts of time and replacing his flux with stability (87).

- Drawing on the Gawain poet’s anticipation of the complex modern subject to respond to Lewis’s repudiation of that subject drawing on a regressive reading of medieval culture.

The Time Agon

The term is used in relation to Lewis in,
Quema (1999:35-52)
Jameson (1979:41:43:60:61:98).



Lewis refers disparagingly to
Heraclitus and aligns himself
with Parmenides.



Lewis

- * Looking back at an imagined pre-capitalist golden age.
- * Repudiating the bourgeois subject.

Pearl Poet

*Anticipating the emergence of the bourgeois subject.

- The poem Itself is considered the product of a 'complex' mind that emphasizes internal psychology, considered experimental, ahead of its time and anticipatory of a new kind of audience (Loganbill, 1972:125-6).



Gawain at Court (2019), oil on canvas.

- **Drawing on Vorticism and Wyndham Lewis's Aesthetic Register to Visualise Dehumanisation**

Internal and external Hardening

‘But such abstraction also showed the impress of a new militarised age of machinery: “We preferred something more metallic and resistant than the pneumatic surface of the cuticle. We preferred a helmet to a head of hair”’ (Lewis in Perry, 2025).

Resistance to Temporality in Nature

“If you can put man into some geometrical shape which lifts him out of the transience of the organic, the matter is different.” It is not just formal abstraction alone that you want .. but enough trace of the original world to show what abstraction has conquered’ (Lewis in Perry, 2025).



World Building: extending the visual language





Dagonet (2018), oil on canvas.



The Lady (2018), oil on canvas.



Guinevere with Photocopier (2019), oil on canvas.

These works represent my attempt to paint what Lewis wanted as tragedy rather than triumph, his madness was to think you can make dehumanization work for you.

- Semi-abstraction to introduce tension between human form and space/ideology.
- Vorticist line, form, and diagonal composition to define costume and hierarchal concepts of space.

The intension is to explore the violence that status does to a human being.



Sir Morian (2019) oil on canvas.



The Hard Hand (2018), oil on canvas.

From External Space to Internal Spaces

World building and fleshing out imagined backgrounds helped to establish a wholistic aesthetic response.

Knights become mechanistic powerful but absurd like the great names dumbfounded by the Green Knight 'their idealized vitality dwindles to the equivalent of a still life' (Woods 2002: 210).

These figures foreground the more human Gawain, there absurdity is clear in contrast and when central to the composition.



Developing Gawain: Interiority and Surface





Gawain Sleeping in Armour (2020) large metal construction.



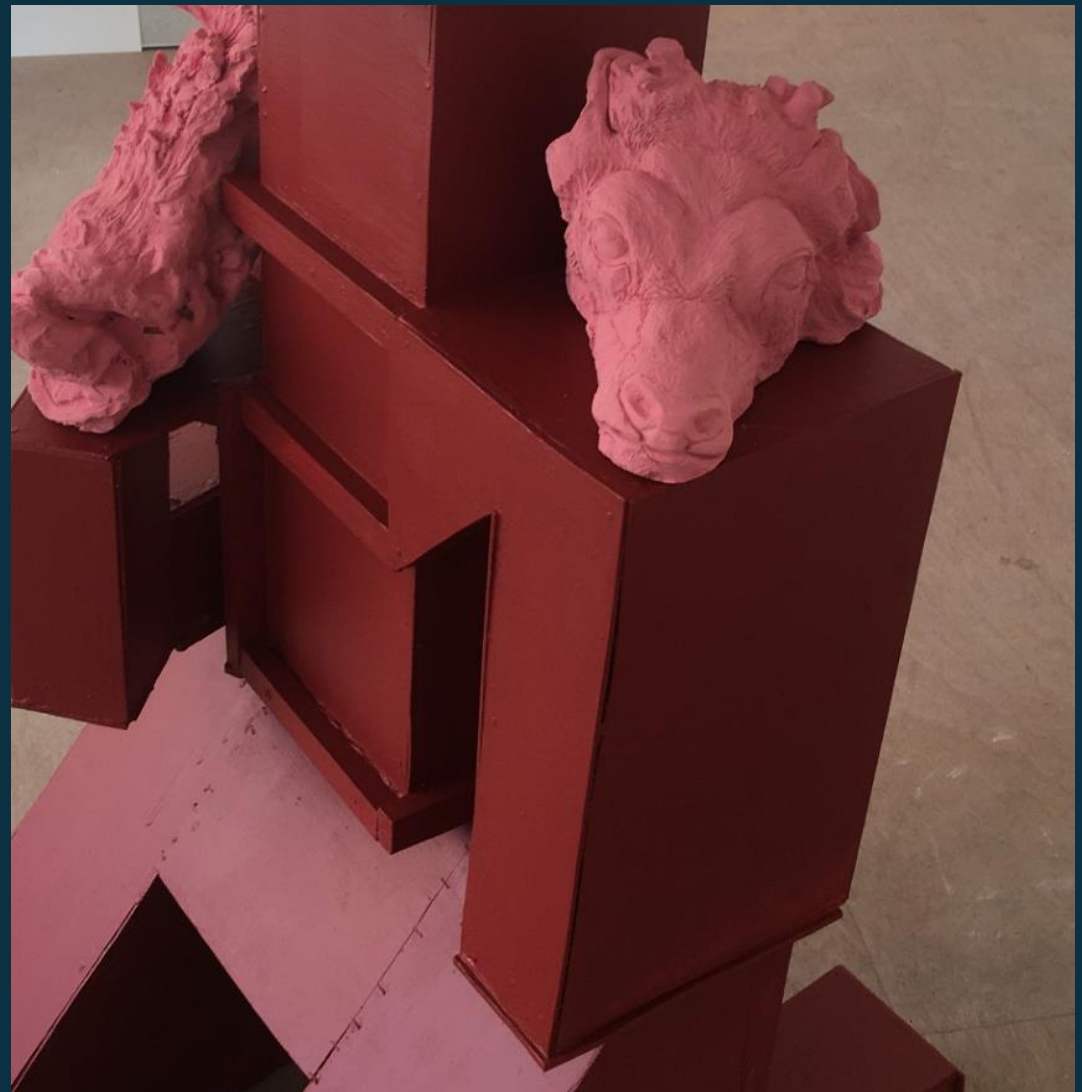
Green Chapel (2021) oil on canvas.



Tyro Knight (2020) painted wooden construction.



Deflector (2021) painted metre rulers and wood panel construction.



Way marker (2020) painted wooden construction and ceramic sculpture.



Attendants dressing and armouring Gawain (2021) oil on canvas.



Temporal Landscape I (2020) oil on canvas.



Temporal Landscape II (2020) oil on canvas.



The slime of life clings to Sir Gawain (2021) oil on canvas.



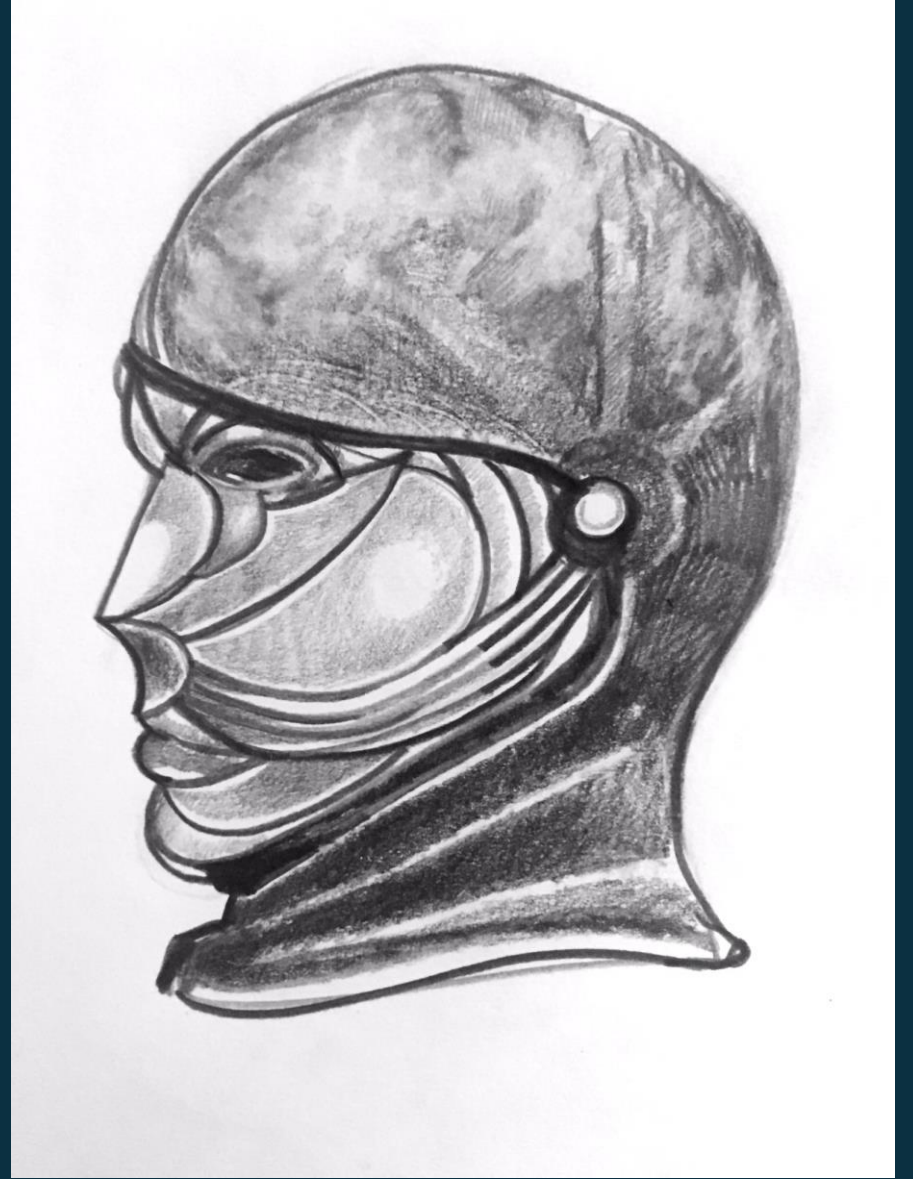
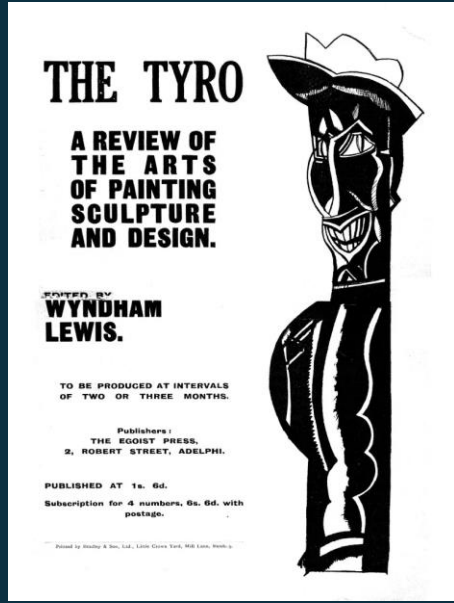
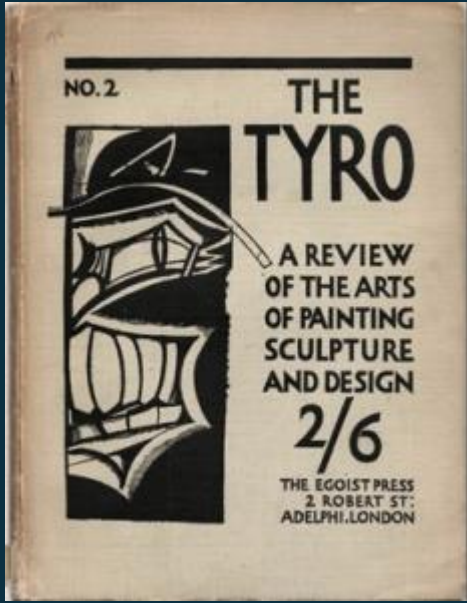
New Painting: Responding to the Invitation from the Interdisciplinary Seminar on Medievalism





The image of the knight carrying his 'great helm' offered inspiration for a composition that played up the idea of Gawain's armour as a physical as well as a symbolic burden.

'Rectangular stone, with a bas-relief carved image of Colaccio Beccadelli on a caparisoned horse, in profile armed with a club (in his right hand) and a sword, dressed in chain mail, greaves and knee-guards, with a large helmet on his shoulders. Frame carved with Gothic letters' (see *Lapide Tombale di Bettino da Bologna (SEC XIV) Lapide Tombale 1341*, 2010).



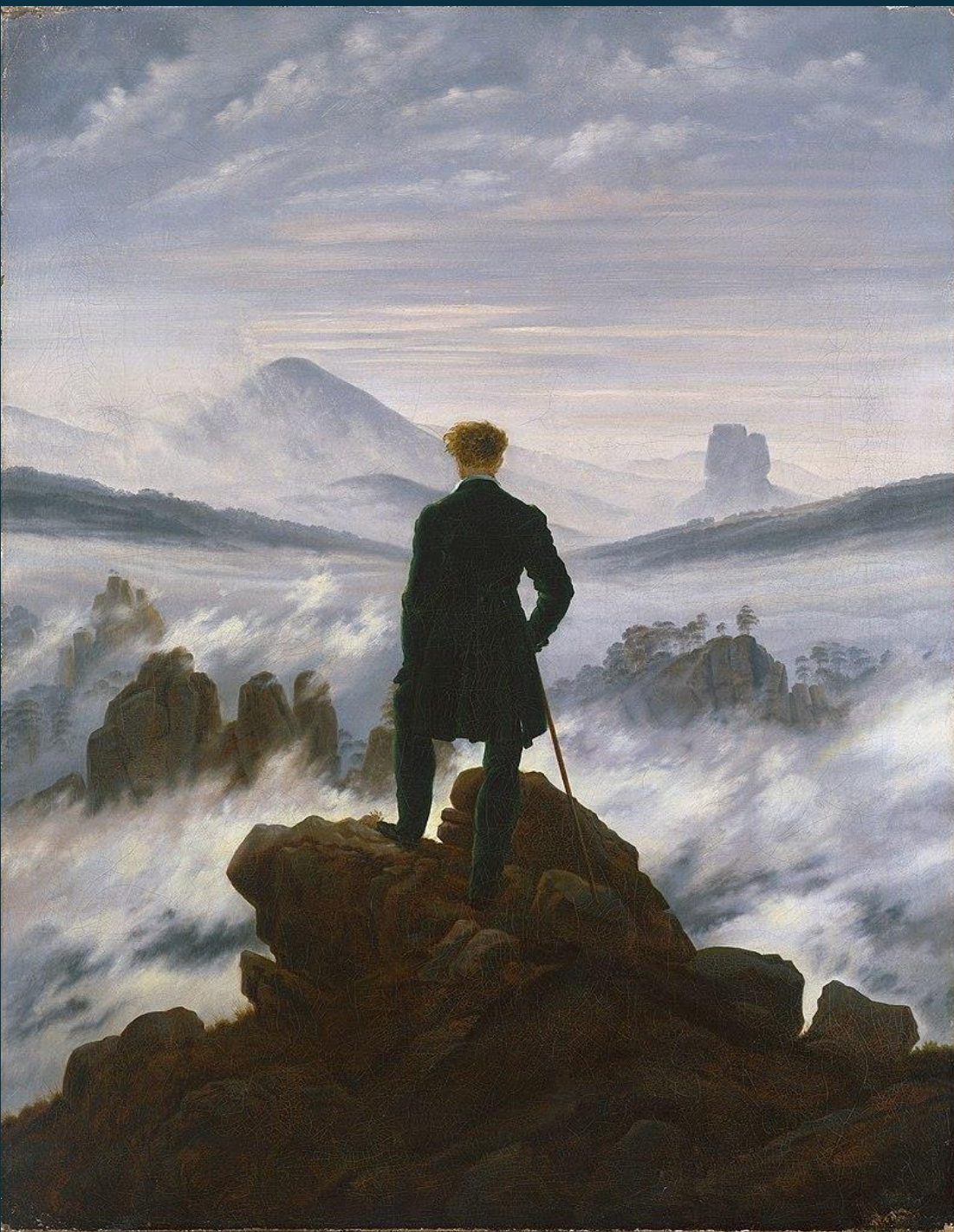
Examples of Lewis's Tyro images (1922).

Tyros are surfaces, biomechanical, armoured and aggressive.

‘The word “tyro,” indeed, derives etymologically from the Medieval Latin tiro, which means a “beginning soldier” or “recruit”’ (Klein, 2004).

Gawain helmet design (2025).

'The wearer of armor assumes the qualities of the metal...that are reflected in their behavior, and all of these are paralleled by equivalent modifications in the consciousness of the observer' (Sanborn 1927:9).



The concept of the Rückenfigur (German: Rear-facing figure or literally back-figure) a trope or strategy of composition appeals

‘The idea of a scene that appears as perceived by a human suggests a profound degree of subjectivity in the discernment of the view, whose “reality” appears secondary to the way it is perceived by the Rückenfigur, suggesting at the same time the primacy of the individual perception of the spectator. It is almost as if there were a narrator whose impression of reality is being presented as the only one. The example of the Rückenfigur is especially suggestive because it evokes two different subjectivities: that of the painter, who interprets reality subjectively as any artist does; and that of the figure depicted, whose point of view of the image we are given, with the implications that this has for the perception of the human viewer looking at the picture’ (Pérez-Carbonell, 2013.:82).

Left: *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, painting by Caspar David Friedrich (1818).



Gawain, Between Two Deaths (2025), oil on canvas.

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