

Edward Wadsworth and the Art of Dazzle Painting

Robert Hewison



Edward Wadsworth, *Dazzle-ships in Drydock at Liverpool* 1919. Oil on canvas, 304.8 x 243.8 mm. © Estate of Edward Wadsworth. All rights reserved, DACS 2015. Photo courtesy National Art Gallery of Canada.

The First World War was a tragedy for millions. It redrew maps, and provoked revolutions. It also drove social change, notably in the role of women. It hastened technological innovation, with the development of flight and radio communications. It changed culture, as the optimism of early twentieth-century modernism gave way to a deeper pessimism.

It is one of the War's many ironies that a group of avant-garde artists and writers who wanted to

celebrate what their leader called the 'vivid and violent ideas' of modernism should be destroyed by the very forces that their work tried to express. When the Vorticists launched their manifesto *Blast* in July 1914, they did not know that an even bigger explosion would blow their movement away when war was declared only a month later.

Yet one of them, the painter Edward Wadsworth, managed to save something from the wreck, so that at least one great work of art came out of the cataclysm. Born in 1889, Wadsworth was the son of a wealthy Yorkshire textile manufacturer. In 1906, in order to prepare him to take over the business, his father sent him to Munich to study German and engineering draughtsmanship. Wadsworth also attended the Knirr Art School, where he studied drawing and painting, and also, importantly, woodcutting and printing. He decided to become an artist rather than an industrialist, and in 1909 he became a student at the Slade School of Art in London.

1909 was a key year in the development of modernism. While he was studying, Wadsworth was thrown into the whirlpool of new movements: British post-impressionism, French Cubism, Italian Futurism, German Expressionism, all of which challenged conventional ideas of art and representation. He also became a close friend of the man who was determined to create a distinctly British avant-garde, Wyndham Lewis.

Lewis was part Canadian, had studied in Paris, and was a novelist as well as a painter. He saw himself as a leader, and in 1914 he set out to create a movement that was not Cubism, that was not Futurism, and certainly wasn't Bloomsbury post-Impressionism. He set up what he called The Rebel Art Centre, the first floor of a house in Great Ormond Street, a place where the group he was forming could display their paintings and hold discussions. Out of the Rebel Art Centre came *Blast*.

This was the manifesto of what Lewis had decided to call Vorticism. The term 'vortex' had been used by the equally avant-garde poet Ezra Pound in 1913, and it sums up the rush of ideas, events and innovations – especially technological – associated with the start of the twentieth century. Pound wrote: 'The image is not an idea, it is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perform, call a VORTEX, from which and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing.'

To express the energies of Vorticism, new visual forms had to be created, and Wadsworth, Lewis and the rest of the half dozen members of the group were reaching for a complete form of abstraction, as for instance in a piece by Wadsworth simply called *Abstract Composition*, from 1915.



Edward Wadsworth, *Abstract Composition* 1915. Gouache, ink and graphite on paper, 41.9 x 34.3 cm, Tate. © Estate of Edward Wadsworth. All rights reserved, DACS 2015. Photo © Tate Photography

In August 1914 the Vorticists and everybody else were swept away into the far greater vortex of the First World War. The Rebel Art Centre closed, the artists dispersed, most volunteered for the armed forces, and much of their work from this time has been lost. There was only one exhibition of Vorticist art ever held in London, in June 1915. The second, and last, edition of *Blast* appeared as a 'war number' in July 1915. By

this time, one of the sculptors in the group, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, had already been killed serving in the French army on the Western Front.

In 1915, Wadsworth joined the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve, and after initial training on a gun battery in Paddington, in June 1916, now a Sub-lieutenant, he sailed for the Eastern Mediterranean. He served as an Intelligence Officer on Lemnos, an island forty miles from the Dardanelles, the scene of the disastrous Gallipoli campaign. Art was more or less out of the question on active service, but Wadsworth was able to prepare a number of woodcut designs that were cut and printed on his return to England. It seems entirely plausible that while on Lemnos Wadsworth met another artist turned naval officer: Norman Wilkinson.

Wilkinson was not a modernist. He had started life as a black and white draughtsman for the *Daily Graphic* and *The Illustrated London News*, specialising in nautical subjects, and he established a reputation as a marine painter. On his return from the Dardanelles he was given command of a motor launch patrolling the submarine-infested waters of the English Channel. At this time Germany was trying to starve Britain into submission, and Wilkinson realised that the naval transports – then painted black – made ideal targets against the skyline, as seen through the water-level periscope of a submarine.

A ship cannot hide, but it might be possible to confuse the hunter by painting the ship in such a way as to make it hard to tell what kind of ship it was, and difficult to calculate the speed and angle of its course. Because both ship and submarine were moving in relation to each other, the submarine commander had to calculate the angle of deflection so that torpedo and target would collide. Wilkinson realised that the answer was not to try to make the ship invisible, but to create an optical distortion of the shape of the vessel by breaking up its profile with stripes and curves painted in blues, greens, greys, pinks and purples.

And so the art of dazzle painting was born.

This was not the first time that attempts had been made to camouflage ships, but thanks to Wilkinson's connections, the Admiralty took up the idea, and from 1917 onwards designs were prepared in London, and then sent to the ports, where naval officers supervised the actual painting. Among them was Wadsworth, who worked first in Bristol, and then Liverpool. He did not design dazzle schemes himself, but the parallels between the enormous abstract shapes that he was responsible for creating and the mechanical forms that had contributed to Vorticism must have inspired him. He produced a series of nine woodcuts of dazzle-painted ships, all of which matched the visual dynamic of dazzle painting with the stimulating contrast of black and white, density and void, achieved by bold designs cut 'on the plank' of the wood, so as to be able to achieve a satisfying largeness of scale.

One of these designs, *Liverpool Shipping*, became the basis for a much larger work, *Dazzleships in Dry Dock at Liverpool*, which is Wadsworth's masterpiece, and his memorial to Vorticism. It was indeed created as a public war memorial. At the end of 1917, the Canadian War Memorials Fund commissioned a series of paintings to commemorate the Canadian contribution to the war effort. Some of these commissions went to former Vorticists – Wyndham Lewis, Frederick Etchells, William Roberts, David Bomberg – but there was a price to pay. The members of the Memorial Committee were not going to put up with anything too modernist. The official invitations to both Bomberg and Roberts specifically said: 'Cubist work is inadmissible.'

So these former rebel artists were forced to compromise their Vorticist vision through concessions to naturalism. Wadsworth, however, was able to continue to explore the language of Vorticism. Liverpool was one of the home ports for the Atlantic convoys, so he had a suitable subject, and the canvas would be on an impressive scale – the painting is nearly 3 metres high and over 2 metres wide. The four painters at the bottom of the canvas are indeed rendered more naturalistically than in the woodcut version, but at the same time he has added two pairs of much more stylised figures to the right and left in the middle distance. He has also suppressed puffs of smoke coming from the ship on the right, while adding smoke to two factory chimneys at the top.

But these changes are as nothing to the elaboration of the dazzle design on the ship, whose bows thrust so impressively towards us. The pattern clearly differs from the stark simplicity of the woodcut, or the actual designs on ships. Isolated from the rest of the composition, these bows, whose dynamic diagonals and inverted 'L' shapes recall Wadsworth's works from 1915 such as *Abstract Composition*, are a Vorticist invention. It was a final throw, before the post-war period forced Wadsworth and his fellow artists to reconsider their art and, as far as was possible, to reconstruct their lives.

Vorticism was killed by the violence unleashed by war, but it still represents an important moment in the history of modernism, and Wadsworth's transformation of dazzle painting into art represents a rare synthesis between the destruction of war and the creativity of culture. He continued to paint ships and the sea, and the machine aesthetic of Vorticism continued to be a part of his maritime painting. Shipping, ports and ships' chandlery were to remain a constant source of visual interest to Wadsworth, through another World War, until his death in 1949.

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