**Wadsworth, Edward Alexander (1889-1949)**

Edward Wadsworth played an important role alongside Wyndham Lewis in the avant-garde – though short-lived – Vorticist movement in 1913-14. He continued to work in the abstracted, geometric style associated with the movement throughout the First World War, though very little work of this period remains other than his woodcuts. After returning to England from active service in 1917, Wadsworth worked on the camouflage of shipping, known as ‘dazzle painting’, and produced a large canvas entitled *Dazzle Ships in Drydock at Liverpool* (1919). The 1920s saw Wadsworth turn to the theme for which he is best known: the precise and realistic harbour scenes and maritime still lifes, largely painted in tempera. This highly individual style was often dubbed ‘surrealist’ though Wadsworth did not encourage this association. His compositions became progressively more abstract in the early 1930s and, in 1933, Wadsworth joined the English abstract group ‘Unit One’; however, the following year he abruptly returned to his familiar marine paintings. Large-scale commissions included paintings for the smoke rooms of the Cunard ship *Queen Mary* and, during the 1939-45 war, he produced advertising images for ICI. After 1945 his work tended once again towards the abstract, though always maintaining a link with earlier natural motifs and geometric forms.

Edward Wadsworth was born at Highfield, Cleckheaton, Yorkshire in 1889. His father was the head of a prominent textile family, while his mother died shortly after his birth. In 1906 he was sent to Munich to study engineering, and there attended the Knirr Art School where he learnt techniques including the woodcut. Against the wishes of his father, he enrolled at the Bradford School of Art on his return, winning a scholarship to the Slade where he studied from 1908-1912. Here he won prizes for landscape and figure painting, and met the influential artist and critic Roger Fry, subsequently producing designs at the latter’s Omega Workshops. Initially, Wadsworth was influenced by Post-Impressionism and showed work in Fry’s Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition in 1912. In October 1913, however, Wadsworth joined Wyndham Lewis, Frederick Etchells and Cuthbert Hamilton in breaking away from the Omega Workshops and, in early 1914, joined the Rebel Art Centre, where the Vorticist movement was born.

Vorticism, like Futurism, celebrated the violence and energy of the machine-age, synthesised with the stillness and geometry of Cubist compositions. Four of Wadsworth’s boldly abstract woodcuts were published in the Vorticist journal, *Blast* No.1, in June 1914. During the First World War, Wadsworth served as an intelligence officer with the RNVR in the Mediterranean, until invalided out in 1917, after which he oversaw the painting of ‘dazzle’ camouflage on ships in Liverpool and Bristol. There was a clear affinity between the optical distortions of the camouflage and Vorticist abstraction, and ‘dazzle’ designs appear in several woodcuts produced at this time. He was also commissioned by the Canadian War Memorial committee to produce a large canvas, *Dazzle Ship in Drydock at Liverpool* (1919) which marks an important turning point in Wadsworth’s career, combining abstract geometric shapes with a realist maritime subject. In 1920 Wadsworth exhibited some drawings of the Black Country at the Leicester Galleries and with Group X at the Mansard Gallery, which hailed a return to landscape subjects, in line with the more general Europe-wide *rappel à l’ordre,* a conservative reaction against the pre-war avant-garde. This tendency fully emerged with Wadsworth’s harbour scenes, a theme that came to dominate his oeuvre throughout the twenties. His style became less cubistic and more akin to a neo-classical realism; yet there is a surreal quality to the works which have the eerie stillness of a theatrical backdrop – sometimes even framed by a draped curtain as in *Quayside* (1925) – and are entirely empty of human figures. It was at this time that Wadsworth adopted the medium of tempera, which resulted in carefully planned and meticulously executed compositions, smooth surfaces and brilliant colours. From the harbour scenes there developed a new genre of marine still life paintings from c.1926, which owe much to the influence of Giorgio de Chirico’s surreal set-pieces. The stark clarity and ambiguous relationship between the objects, as in *Regalia* (1928), give them a mysterious and monumental quality.

By the end of the 1920s Wadsworth’s output became increasingly abstract and, in 1932, he began work on the *Dux et Comes* series, depicting embryo-like forms floating against a flat background. He joined ‘Unit One’, and was also associated with ‘Abstraction-Création’ (founded in 1931), but soon reverted to his former realist style in commissions such as the *Queen Mary* smoke room pictures and a tempera panel for de la Warr pavilion café. Barred from the coast during the Second World War due to his German connections, he moved to Buxton, joined the Home Guard and worked on advertising imagery for ICI. A return to the South Coast after the war stimulated another move towards abstraction, before Wadsworth died in a London nursing home following a short illness in 1949. He had married violinist Fanny Eveleigh in 1912.

**References and further reading**

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**Images**:

1. ‘Dazzle Ships in Drydock at Liverpool’ (1919), oil on canvas, 304.8 x 243.8cm, Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada (<http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=5487> ) – there is an online order form for images, or contact: [reproductions@gallery.ca](mailto:reproductions@gallery.ca)
2. ‘Regalia’ (1928), tempera and oil paint on canvas on board, 76.3 x 91.7cm, London: Tate (<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/wadsworth-regalia-t03398> ) - for image reproduction go to [www.tate-images.com](http://www.tate-images.com)