



A Free Course on the History of Western Art

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44-01 VORTICISM

DR. LAURENCE SHAFÉ

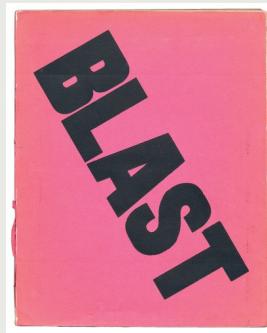
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- This is Section 44 on Vorticism a British art movement of the early twentieth century partly inspired by Cubism and Filippo Marinetti's Italian Futurist movement. Marinetti published a manifesto in 1908 which rejected the past and celebrated speed, machinery, violence, youth, and industry.
- This image was produced by Artlist when asked to produce an image representing Vorticism. I wasn't sure whether to include it but I think it captures the essence of Vorticism and the feelings of the artists just prior to the First World War.

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Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957),
Workshop, circa 1914-1915, 76.5 x 61 cm, Tate Britain

Slide 1

Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957), *Workshop*, circa 1914-1915, 76.5 x 61 cm, Tate Britain

- Let us start at the beginning.
- Vorticism **exploded** onto the British art scene in June 1914. Just one month before World War One began.
- (CLICK) **Wyndham Lewis** launched the movement's manifesto in a shocking pink magazine called **BLAST**. The movement's name came **from poet Ezra Pound**, who described a vortex as the silent centre of a whirlpool where all energy concentrates. British art had never seen anything quite like it. (CLICK)
- The Vorticists **rejected traditional landscapes and nudes**. They wanted art that captured the **machine age**. Bold colours. Sharp angles. Industrial subjects. Lewis led the pack. He signed the manifesto alongside ten others including Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (pronounced "AHN-ree go-dye-ay BZhess-ka"), Edward Wadsworth, William Roberts, and two women, Helen Saunders and Jessica Dismorr. The movement combined **Cubism's fragmented forms** with **Futurism's celebration of speed**. But Lewis insisted Vorticism was different. More intellectual. More English.
- The **Rebel Art Centre** in Great Ormond Street became their headquarters. Lewis had **stormed out** of Roger Fry's Omega Workshops after a row over a commission. The split was bitter. The **only Vorticist exhibition** opened at the Doré Gallery in June 1915. Forty-nine works. Seven core artists. The *Daily*

Mirror's critic made fun of the works and suggested the **painters must have been wounded in combat** to explain the images. The show failed. War destroyed everything. Gaudier-Brzeska died at the front in 1915, aged just twenty-three.

- This painting represents Vorticism's **foundation moment**.

NOTES

The Daily Mirror critic noted that many of the artists had enlisted in the Army and wrote: "**It is evident that in combat somebody has been badly knocked about**". This comment was a sarcastic way to suggest that only someone who had suffered physical trauma in the war could produce such unconventional art, highlighting the public's shock and misunderstanding of the Vorticist style at the time.

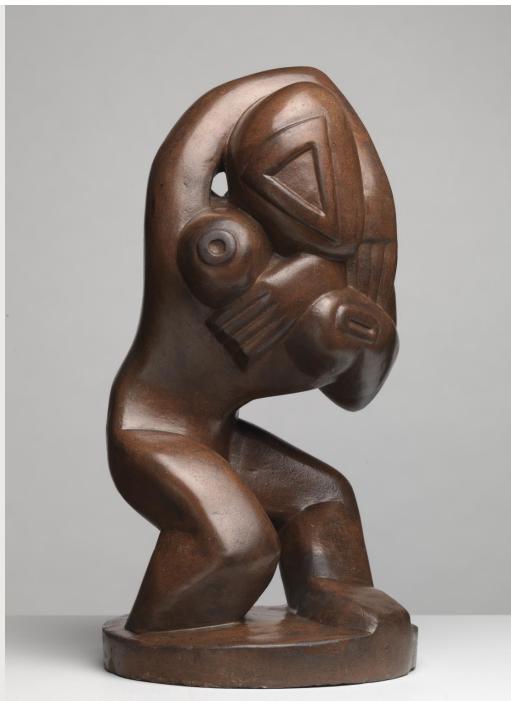
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Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (1891-1915), *Red Stone Dancer*, 1913-1914, 43 x 23 x 23 cm, Tate Britain

Slide 2

Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (1891-1915), *Red Stone Dancer*, 1913-1914, 43 x 23 x 23 cm, Tate Britain

- This sculpture captures **pure energy frozen in stone** by Henri Gaudier-Brzeska ("AHN-ree go-dye-ay BZhess-ka").
- (CLICK) The dancer's triangular face strips away individuality. The body twists. Arms rise overhead. Legs brace for movement. It is carved from red Mansfield stone, it shows Gaudier-Brzeska moving beyond his **teacher Rodin** into complete abstraction. (CLICK)
- Gaudier-Brzeska had **no formal artistic training**. He was **born near Orléans** and **moved to London** in 1911 with his partner Sophie Brzeska, adding her surname to his own. They **lived in poverty**. He was nineteen when he decided to become an artist. For three and a half years he produced thousands of drawings and over a hundred sculptures.
- London was mad for dance. **Diaghilev's Ballets Russes** had arrived in 1911. The **tango was considered dangerously sexual**. Apache dancing from Paris referenced the violence between pimps and prostitutes. The term Apache was coined by French journalists based on a misguided view of the North American tribe. He studied African and Oceanic sculpture at the British Museum. The influence shows in this work's **simplified forms and raw power**.
- He carved this between autumn 1913 and January 1914. The poet **Ezra Pound** called it nearly **a thesis on pure form**. It became Gaudier-Brzeska's **most**

celebrated sculpture. David Bomberg visited the studio late in 1913 and never forgot seeing it. Art historians now consider it **his finest achievement** and a **masterpiece of Vorticist sculpture**.

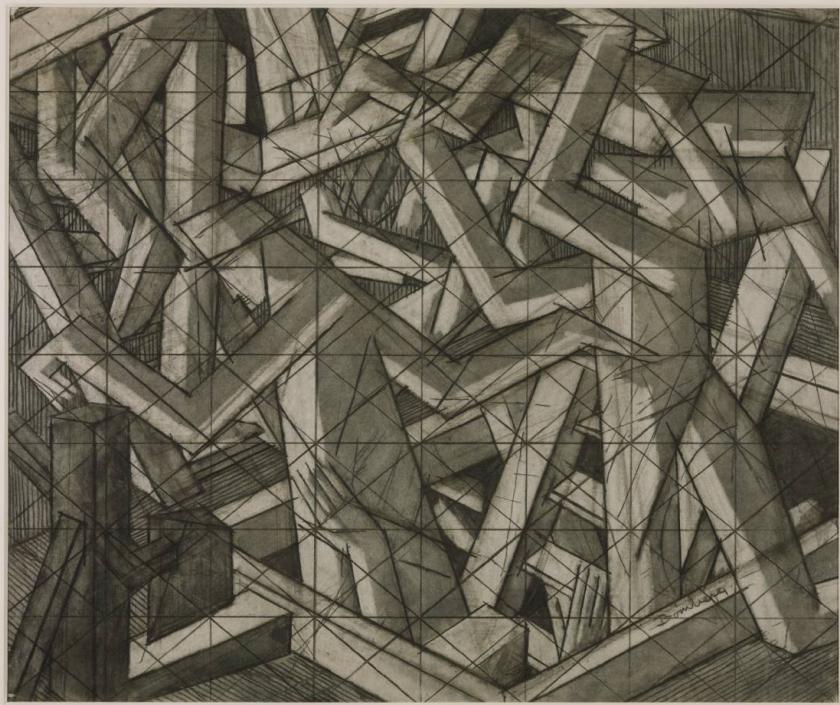
- In September 1914, Gaudier-Brzeska enlisted in the French army. He was killed by a **German bullet through the forehead** leading a cavalry charge at Neuville St Vaast on 5 June 1915. He was twenty-three.

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David Bomberg
(1890-1957), *In the Hold*, circa
1913-1914,
196.5 x 231 cm,
Tate Britain

Slide 3

David Bomberg (1890-1957), *In the Hold*, circa 1913-1914, 196.5 x 231 cm, Tate Britain

- David Bomberg reduces dock workers to **geometric shards**. The canvas explodes with colour. Yellow. Red. Blue. White. Black. Sharp triangles and rhomboids interlock. The **human figures have shattered into fragments**. You can barely discern the original forms.
- Bomberg was born to **Polish-Jewish immigrants in Birmingham**. His family moved to Whitechapel in London's East End. He studied at the **Slade School** from 1911 to 1913 with Mark Gertler, Stanley Spencer and C.R.W. Nevinson. The Slade teachers **expelled him** in 1913. Too audacious. Too radical. Too modern.
- He visited Paris in 1913 and met **Picasso, Derain and Modigliani**. The trip transformed his work. Back in London, **he refused to join the Vorticists officially**. Lewis invited him to contribute to BLAST. Bomberg declined. He exhibited with them but kept his distance. He insisted art must evolve, not condemn the past wholesale.
- **The painting depicts labourers in a ship's hold.**
- (CLICK) You can see the figures more in his drawing. A person is climbing up a ladder. If I switch between the two you can see how he **simplified the form**. He described his process as searching for intenser expression. Where he used naturalistic form, he stripped away all irrelevant matter. He lived in a steel city

where decoration happened accidentally. His object was the construction of pure form.

- Vorticism celebrated machines and industrialisation but Bomberg used abstraction to show how **industry dehumanises us**.

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David Bomberg
(1890-1957), *The Mud Bath*, 1914,
152.4 x 224.2 cm,
Tate Britain

Slide 4

David Bomberg (1890-1957), *The Mud Bath*, 1914, 152.4 x 224.2 cm, Tate Britain

- White and blue geometric figures. A rectangular bath of shocking red. Mustard brown surrounds them. **The bathers' arms wave upward.** The scene pulses with Bacchanalian energy. Bomberg painted this masterpiece when he was **twenty-three**.
- The setting is **Schewzik's Russian Vapour Baths** at 86a Brick Lane in Whitechapel. The local **Jewish population** used these baths for **cleanliness** and religious observance. The mikveh ritual bath held spiritual significance and Bomberg knew the place intimately. He lived nearby in a tenement off Alie Street.
- His solo exhibition opened at the Chenil Gallery in Chelsea in July 1914 and this painting was hung on an outside wall for better lighting and space. A critic reported **it was rained upon, baked by the sun and garlanded with flags**. Passers-by made no comment because they didn't recognise it as a picture. Bomberg recalled that horses pulling the number 29 bus would shy away when they turned the corner.
- Roger Fry attended. So did the Vorticists and other members of British bohemia. T.E. Hulme wrote positive reviews. Some critics sneeringly called Bomberg the **Jewish Vorticist**. There was a lot of antisemitism at the time. The exhibition attracted international attention from experimental artists but didn't sell.

- Bomberg wrote in the catalogue foreword about abandoning naturalism and tradition completely.

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Jacob Epstein (1880-1959),
Rock Drill, 1913-1915
(reconstruction 1974), 215 x
142 x 121 cm, Birmingham
Museum and Art Gallery

Slide 5

Jacob Epstein (1880-1959), *Rock Drill*, 1913-1915 (reconstruction 1974), 215 x 142 x 121 cm, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

- A **plaster robot** straddles an actual pneumatic drill. The figure looks menacing. Inside its ribcage sits a tiny foetus. The sculpture **terrified visitors** to Epstein's cold garage studio in Lamb's Conduit Street. When he threw back the tarpaulin cover, people gasped.
- **Epstein was American-born.** He moved to Europe in **1902** and took **British citizenship in 1911**. He **never signed the Vorticist Manifesto** but exhibited with them. The sculpture represents Vorticism's most radical moment. The combination of carved plaster and ready-made industrial object predates Duchamp's famous Bicycle Wheel.
- Epstein **bought the drill second-hand.** He later recalled his **short-lived love of machinery**. He mounted his machine-like robot on top, carrying its progeny protectively inside itself. Here was the armed sinister figure of today and tomorrow. **No humanity.** Only the **terrible Frankenstein's monster** we have made ourselves into.
- The sculpture was exhibited at the London Group show in 1915. **Nobody wanted to buy it.** Epstein's friend T.E. Hulme was planning to write a book about his work. Hulme was blown up by a German shell in September 1917. The manuscript disappeared from his effects and was never recovered.
- After the exhibition, Epstein dismantled the original. **He sold the drill.** He **cut**

off the figure's legs and arms and cast the truncated torso in bronze. I
will show it again at the end. The transformation marked his turning away
from the machine age. War had destroyed his faith. The reconstruction you
see here was made in 1974.

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Helen Saunders (1885-1963),
Abstract Multicoloured Design,
circa 1915, gouache, watercolour
and graphite on paper 35.9 x 25.7
cm, Tate Britain

Slide 6

Helen Saunders (1885-1963), *Abstract Multicoloured Design*, c. 1915, gouache, watercolour and graphite on paper 35.9 x 25.7 cm, Tate Britain

- Sharp diagonal lines cut across the paper. Triangles and trapezoids overlap. Colour explodes. The composition has no recognisable subject. It is pure geometric abstraction although you might image it is a head looking to the right and below it a hand holding a pencil.
- **Helen Saunders signed the Vorticist manifesto** and became one of the movement's **most radical voices**.
- She was born in Bedford Park, **Ealing**. At eighteen she enrolled with **Rosa Waugh Hobhouse (1882-1971)**, who recognised her talent and pushed her toward the **Slade School where she had trained**. Saunders attended three days a week in 1907. Later she studied at the Central School of Arts and Crafts for technical training.
- By 1912 her work had become **recognisably Post-Impressionist**. She exhibited at Vanessa Bell's Friday Club and the Twentieth Century Art exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1914 included her work. She was one of the first British artists working in a **non-figurative style**.
- Saunders signed the manifesto in BLAST but **deliberately misspelt** her surname as H. Sanders to avoid embarrassing her conventional family. The second issue of BLAST was distributed from her flat in Chelsea. She contributed drawings and poetry. Curator Chris Stephens noted her paintings have **strong diagonal**

dimensions but also an **uncoiling movement** like a flower opening.

- Tragically, **no oil paintings by Saunders survive**. Her sister reportedly used one Vorticist oil to cover her larder floor. It wore to destruction. Fewer than two hundred of her works are currently known. She died of accidental coal gas poisoning in Holborn on 1 January 1963. This watercolour was donated by her sister to the Tate the same year in her memory.

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Slide 7

Helen Saunders (1885-1963), *Atlantic City*, circa 1915 (discovered 2022 beneath Wyndham Lewis's *Praxitella*), original size unknown, Leeds Art Gallery

- This work was lost for over a century. Two Courtauld students found it **in 2022 using X-ray analysis**. (CLICK) It was hidden **beneath this painting, Wyndham Lewis's 1921 portrait *Praxitella***. The discovery was described as flabbergasting.(CLICK)
- The painting shows a **fragmented modern metropolis**. Abstract geometric forms suggest **skyscrapers** and urban architecture. Black. White. Sharp angles. The composition appeared in the second issue of BLAST as a line drawing. It was exhibited at the **1915 Vorticist Exhibition at the Doré Gallery**.
- Saunders became **extremely close friends with Lewis**. They collaborated on mural decorations for the Café de la Tour Eiffel in late 1915. **The murals were later destroyed**. After the war, **Lewis turned his back on her**. She found that hard to bear. The friendship ended badly.
- **Lewis was short of money** and materials after the war and it appears he reused Saunders canvas for his portrait of **Iris Barry, his then partner** who became a pioneering film critic and co-founded the film archive at New York's MoMA.
- The obliteration may have been calculated. Artists don't paint over each other's work unthinkingly. I could just be personal spite but it now symbolises how women Vorticists, in fact women artist, were written out of history. The Courtauld now displays the **X-ray reconstruction** alongside Lewis's portrait. The

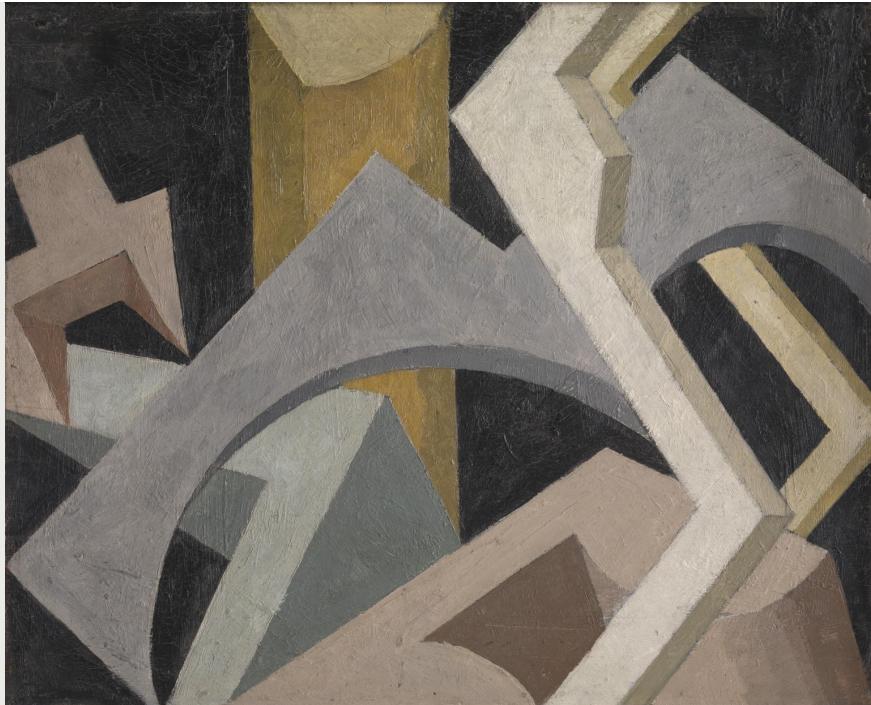
discovery gives hope that other hidden Vorticist paintings await finding, perhaps in someone's attic. Not mine unfortunately.

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Jessica Dismorr (1885-1939), *Abstract Composition*, circa 1915, 41.3 x 50.8 cm, Tate Britain

Slide 8

Jessica Dismorr (1885-1939), *Abstract Composition*, circa 1915, 41.3 x 50.8 cm, Tate Britain

- Quasi-architectural forms float in space. The composition suggests weightlessness. Pink. Gray. Brown. Black. The geometric shapes overlap and recede. This is **one of only two surviving Vorticist paintings by Dismorr**. Everything else was destroyed or lost.
- Dismorr was born in Gravesend, Kent. Her father John Stewart Dismorr was a **wealthy businessman** with property in South Africa, Canada and Australia. She was the fourth of five daughters. The Dismorr girls were encouraged to study. **Money wasn't an issue**.
- She enrolled at the **Slade** in 1903. She travelled to study at **Max Bohm's school in Étaples** and the **Académie de la Palette** in Paris. By 1912 she was exhibiting with the Rhythm group. **She signed the Vorticist manifesto** in 1914. She contributed poetry and drawings to both issues of BLAST.
- **Four works she showed at the 1915 Vorticist exhibition are now lost**. The original of *The Engine*, reproduced in BLAST, has vanished. She exhibited again with the Vorticists in New York in January 1917 at the Penguin Club. Collector John Quinn displayed several of her works in New York in December 1916.
- During World War One, Dismorr served as a **nurse in France**. Then she worked as a **linguistic field officer** with the American Friends Service Committee. After the war she had a **nervous breakdown in 1920 probably post traumatic stress**

following her service as a nurse. Doctors **advised her not to paint.** Lewis suspected her modern style was causing concern with the doctors.

- **Legend claims she stripped naked in Oxford Street in 1919.** The story may be apocryphal. On 29 August 1939, five days before Britain declared war on Germany, **Dismorr died by suicide by hanging** her marginalisation by the art world and the imminent threat of another world war are often cited as triggers.

NOTES

- The story of her stripping naked originated with Kate Lechmere, a fellow artist, who claimed Dismorr performed this act to demonstrate her total devotion to the Vorticist leader Wyndham Lewis.
- Dismorr had a history of mental health struggles, including a severe nervous breakdown in 1920 following her service as a nurse in World War I. Her marginalisation by the male-dominated art business did not help and the imminent threat of World War II is often cited as a major trigger for her distress in late August 1939.

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Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957), *The Crowd*, 1914-1915, 200.7 x 153.7 cm, Tate Britain

Slide 9

Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957), *The Crowd*, 1914-1915, 200.7 x 153.7 cm, Tate Britain

- Tiny red figures congregate in a geometric cityscape. Factories. Office blocks. The architecture reduces to basic schematic forms. Two groups carry different flags (top centre and bottom left), perhaps representing warring political parties. Lewis originally titled this **Revolution**.
- **Lewis founded Vorticism after quarrelling with Roger Fry over a commission.** Fry ran the Omega Workshops. Lewis believed Fry had misappropriated wall decorations for the **Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition**. He **walked out** with several other artists and started the **Rebel Art Centre** at 38 Great Ormond Street. The Centre operated for only four months but gave birth to Vorticism.
- He was born **Percy Wyndham Lewis** in Nova Scotia. **His mother was American. His father English.** He studied at the **Slade School** from 1898 to 1901, then spent time in Paris absorbing European modernism. He was known for **his arrogance and abrasive personality**. He **quarrelled with almost everyone**. He described himself as a novelist, painter, sculptor, philosopher, draughtsman, critic, politician, journalist, essayist and pamphleteer.
- He wrote the Vorticist manifesto. It blasted France, England, humour and the entire Victorian period. It blessed England for its ships, steep factory walls and its achievement as an industrial island machine. Designer El Lissitzky later cited it as a **major forerunner of 1920s graphic design**.

- This painting shows Lewis's vision of **urban crowds as a mechanical mass**. The dehumanised workers fill every space, pushing against one another. It represents modern life as overwhelming and impersonal.

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Edward Wadsworth (1889-1949),
Dazzle-ships in Drydock at Liverpool, 1919, 304.8 x 243.8 cm,
National Gallery of Canada

Slide 10

Edward Wadsworth (1889-1949), *Dazzle-ships in Drydock at Liverpool*, 1919, 304.8 x 243.8 cm, National Gallery of Canada

- A ship towers in drydock. Bold geometric patterns cover its hull. Black. White. Red. Grey. **The dazzle camouflage is intended to confuse.** Tiny painters work below. The rigging and dock structure echo the ship's angular designs. This is **Wadsworth's masterpiece** and his monument to Vorticism.
- Dazzle camouflage was **invented to confuse enemy submarines**. Complex intersecting shapes made it **difficult to judge a ship's range**, speed and direction. Unlike traditional camouflage, dazzle wasn't meant to conceal. It was meant to **bewilder**. **Norman Wilkinson, an established marine painter, developed the system.** Wadsworth supervised the actual painting of ships, first in Bristol, then Liverpool, from 1917 onwards. By the end of the war over 4,000 British merchant ships and hundreds of naval vessels were dazzled and it significantly reduced the success rate of U-boat attacks because the bow and stern could not be made out and so the direction and speed became much harder to estimate.
- Wadsworth was born in Cleckheaton, West Yorkshire. **His mother died** of puerperal sepsis nine days after his birth. His father found it difficult to relate to the baby. He was sent to study engineering in Munich in 1906. He learned German. More importantly, he studied art at the Knirr School. He returned wanting to be an artist. His father was appalled but he attended **Bradford**

School of Art then won a scholarship to the **Slade in 1909**. He signed the Vorticist manifesto. His work appeared in both issues of BLAST. When war broke out, he was initially a despatch rider and intelligence officer. Then Wilkinson requested his demobilisation for the dazzle project.

- The Canadian War Memorials Fund commissioned this painting toward the end of the war. Other Vorticists received similar commissions. David Bomberg and William Roberts were told specifically that Cubist work was inadmissible. Wadsworth was able to continue exploring Vorticist language. The painting was exhibited in London, New York, Toronto and Montreal in 1919.

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Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957), *A Battery Shelled*, 1919, 182.9 x 317.5 cm, Imperial War Museum

Slide 11

Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957), *A Battery Shelled*, 1919, 182.9 x 317.5 cm, Imperial War Museum

- This was painted in 1919. **The war destroyed Vorticism's machine-age optimism.** Lewis served in the Royal Garrison Artillery. He **became an officer** in March 1916, serving in direct contact with destructive weaponry. After the Third Battle of Ypres, he was **appointed an official war artist** for the British government.
- This painting draws on his **experience at Ypres**. Orange explosions light the sky. Soldiers operate artillery. The scene retains geometric forms but they're **no longer celebratory**. The mechanical has become **horrific**. The painting marks Lewis's turning point. He could no longer embrace the machine with Vorticist enthusiasm.
- Lewis exhibited his war drawings in a show called **Guns in 1918**. He attempted to revive Vorticism after the war with **Group X in 1920**. The attempt failed. **Britain's return to order** rejected avant-garde excess. The terrible experiences of war made machine worship impossible.
- He continued **writing and painting for decades**. In 1931, Lewis published **Hitler**, the first pro-Hitler book written in English. In it, he portrayed the Nazi leader as a "man of peace" and a bulwark against communism.. He became a **controversial figure**. He had talent. George Orwell described him as having enough talent to set up dozens of ordinary writers but he thrived on making

enemies. T.S. Eliot described him as a “malicious, thwarted and dangerous man”. In 1939, he denounced Hitler and antisemitism but the damage to his reputation was permanent.

- His later career brought continued disputes. In 1956, the Tate held an exhibition called Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism. It angered William Roberts, who published Vortex Pamphlets accusing Lewis of claiming sole credit. The controversy revealed how thoroughly **Lewis dominated the movement's memory.**

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William Roberts (1895-1980), *The Vorticists at the Restaurant de la Tour Eiffel: Spring 1915*, 1961-1962, 182.9 x 213.4 cm, Tate Britain

Slide 12

William Roberts (1895-1980), *The Vorticists at the Restaurant de la Tour Eiffel: Spring 1915*, 1961-1962, 182.9 x 213.4 cm, Tate Britain

- This painting by William Roberts was made **nearly fifty years after the event** it depicts. William Roberts painted it at age sixty-six as a **nostalgic recollection**. It shows the Vorticists gathered at their favourite restaurant to **celebrate BLAST's publication**.
- **Six men** sit at the table. From left: **Cuthbert Hamilton, Ezra Pound, William Roberts himself, Wyndham Lewis, Frederick Etchells and Edward Wadsworth**. Etchells holds a copy of BLAST. In the doorway stand the two women members, **Jessica Dismorr and Helen Saunders**. To the right are the waiter Joe and the proprietor Rudolph Stulik.
- **The Tour Eiffel** restaurant at 1 Percy Street was a favourite of the **Poets' Club**. It became central to literary circles around Augustus John, Wyndham Lewis and Nancy Cunard. Roberts wrote in 1957 that French cuisine and Vorticism were indissolubly linked. Lewis kept ringed serviettes at both the Tour Eiffel and the Etoile. He liked good food and fine wine.
- The painting **isn't historically accurate**. BLAST was actually launched with a meal at the Dieudonné Restaurant in St James's in July 1914. Roberts was creating an imaginative evocation. Art historian Richard Cork called it an imaginative evocation rather than an historically accurate record.
- The composition reveals the **gender dynamics**. **Seven males dominate** the

foreground. The women stand behind, Dismorr clutches her purse in the doorway, the furthest away. Another key female member of the group was Kate Lechmere (1887-1976). She was the primary financial backer of the group and provided all the funds for the Rebel Art Centre. She argued with Lewis and withdrew her financial support. She famously and dismissively described Dismorr and Saunders as two "**little lapdogs who wanted to be Lewis's slaves and do everything for him.**"

- Roberts painted this after his **1956 quarrel with the Tate**. He was furious that their exhibition Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism **made other artists seem subservient to Lewis**. This painting was his attempt to build bridges.

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William Roberts (1895-1980), *The First German Gas Attack at Ypres*, 1918, 304.8 x 365.8 cm, National Gallery of Canada

Slide 13

William Roberts (1895-1980), *The First German Gas Attack at Ypres*, 1918, 304.8 x 365.8 cm, National Gallery of Canada

- During the First World War Roberts served as a gunner in the Royal Artillery on the **Western Front**. In 1918 he was loaned to the Canadian War Records Office as an **official war artist**. This commission depicts the **first German gas attack** at Ypres in April 1915.
- **Soldiers stumble through poisonous clouds.** Their tubular bodies retain Roberts's Cubist style but the subject is pure horror. The geometric forms **no longer celebrate the machine age**. They document **mechanised slaughter**. The painting measures over three and a half metres wide.
- Roberts was born in **Hackney**, east London. His father was a carpenter. He won a **scholarship to the Slade** in 1910, studying alongside Bomberg, Nevinson and Stanley Spencer. He worked briefly at Roger Fry's Omega Workshops for ten shillings a time. The money enabled him to create challenging Cubist paintings.
- **He signed the Vorticist Manifesto.** His work appeared in both issues of BLAST. He preferred the description Cubist for his work from this period. Two large oil paintings he exhibited in New York in 1917 were subsequently lost. His radical style is evidenced by *The Toe Dancer* and the recently rediscovered *Boxers*, both exhibited with the London Group in 1915.
- He met **Sarah Kramer in 1915** through her brother Jacob Kramer. Roberts wrote to her from the front. After the war they moved to Fitzrovia. They **married**

in 1922. Sarah would be **his model and muse for sixty years**. Roberts had one son, John David Roberts, who became a poet and guitar scholar.

- This painting marks Roberts's **shift from pure abstraction toward figuration**. War destroyed his faith in geometric forms as celebration.

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David Bomberg (1890-1957),
Sappers at Work: A Canadian Tunnelling Company, Hill 60, St Eloi, 1918-1919, 304.8 x 243.8 cm,
National Gallery of Canada

Slide 14

David Bomberg (1890-1957), *Sappers at Work: A Canadian Tunnelling Company, Hill 60, St Eloi, 1918-1919*, 304.8 x 243.8 cm, National Gallery of Canada

- Bomberg's first version of this painting was rejected. The Canadian War Memorials Fund called it a **futurist abortion**. They demanded something **more representational**. **Bomberg was furious** but complied. The final version shows tunnelling soldiers with simplified forms.
- He had enlisted in the **Royal Engineers in 1915**. Financial pressure drove the decision. He **served on the Western Front** as a sapper, a specialised combat engineer. His brother died in the trenches. His friend **Isaac Rosenberg was killed**. T.E. **Hulme**, who had championed his work, was **blown up** by a shell. The mechanised slaughter destroyed Bomberg's faith in the machine age.
- The painting **depicts dangerous underground work**. Soldiers **dig tunnels beneath** enemy positions. The figures retain geometric simplification but they're recognisably human. Monumental solidity replaces abstract fragmentation. The scale of the painting is enormous, over three metres high.
- Bomberg produced an extended sequence of wash drawings during the war. They show a different vision. Greater organic humanity appears. Rounded forms replace mechanical geometry. The change was profound and permanent. War had shattered his belligerent involvement with modern urban dynamism.
- After demobilisation in 1919, he had a **one-man show of ink-wash drawings** at the Adelphi Gallery. Herbert Read reviewed it favourably. But Bomberg's pre-

war masterpieces *The Mud Bath* and *In the Hold* were **forgotten in storage**. They weren't shown at the 1958 Arts Council memorial exhibition.

- Bomberg **spent his last year writing letters justifying his art's direction and purpose**. He never sent them. **He died in 1957**. His reputation declined catastrophically after the war. Only in recent decades has his importance been recognised.

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Jacob Epstein (1880-1959), *Torso in Metal from Rock Drill*, 1913-1916 (cast 1962), 70.5 x 58.4 x 44.5 cm, Tate Britain

Slide 15

Jacob Epstein (1880-1959), *Torso in Metal from Rock Drill*, 1913-1916 (cast 1962), 70.5 x 58.4 x 44.5 cm, Tate Britain

- This truncated bronze **represents Vorticism's death**. After exhibiting the full Rock Drill in 1915, Epstein dismantled it. He sold the pneumatic drill. He destroyed the legs. He cut off the arms. He cast only this torso in bronze.
- The figure appears **defenceless. Melancholic**. Evocative of **wounded soldiers** returning from the trenches. The foetus inside the ribcage has vanished. What remained was this violated, abbreviated form. Epstein exhibited it in 1916 after turning his back on his experimental pre-war days.
- The transformation marked a crucial **turning point in Epstein's career**. It signalled the end of his engagement with the machine age. War made celebration of mechanical power impossible. The horrific casualties, the industrial slaughter, the senseless destruction changed everything. **Artists couldn't continue worshipping technology** that killed millions.
- Epstein later wrote about the sculpture in the context of the **Second World War**. His description was bitter. No humanity, only the **terrible Frankenstein's monster we have made ourselves into**. The prophetic figure became a warning rather than a triumph.
- **Vorticism lasted barely a year as an active movement**. BLAST published only two issues. The single Vorticist exhibition in 1915 was largely ignored. Gaudier-Brzeska died that same year. **War scattered the artists**. Many were mobilised.

Lewis attempted revival with Group X in 1920. **It failed.** The moment had passed.

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44-01 VORTICISM

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Jacob Epstein,
*Torso in Metal from
Rock Drill*, 1913-16,
Tate Britain

- Yet Vorticism's influence endured. It represented British art's first sustained engagement with European abstraction. It pioneered bold graphic design. It challenged Victorian sentimentality. For one brief explosive moment, British artists stood at modernism's vanguard.
- This truncated torso stands as Vorticism's epitaph, a statement of what could have been. After World War I there was what was called a "return to order", a return to the representational art of the past.
- That brings me to the end of this talk, thank you for your interest, time and attention and I look forward to recording the next talk in my overview of Western Art.

