The New Criterion

Features December 2021

# Anglicizing the avant-garde

*by* *Benjamin Riley*

*On "Modern Times: British Prints, 1913–1939" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.*

In May 1926, the British General Council of the Trades Union Congress called a "general strike" to attempt to force the Conservative government, led by Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, to rectify poor wages and conditions for miners. For nine days, workers from bus drivers to policemen to printing-press operators refused to go to work, a situation that promised to suspend the gears of London life. The first day of the strike, Duff Cooper, then the member of Parliament for Oldham, noticed only that the size of his evening paper had shrunk. By the next day, things had worsened; at White's, the club on St James's Street, rumors spread. Winston Churchill, the chancellor of the exchequer, had been assassinated, some claimed. Cooper relates how, at White's, "there were some half dozen in full policemen's uniforms," and what a sight that must have been, with men more accustomed to riding crops than billy clubs fully kitted out as peacekeepers.

Chips Channon, not yet a member of Parliament, thought the strike might be "the beginning of a real revolt skilfully engineered by Moscow." A lifelong opponent of Bolshevism both real and perceived, Channon "joined up as a Special Constable," noting with pride his "baton and whistle"—he always did like a bit of dress-up. While his friends were driving buses, he drilled at Scotland Yard, still leaving time for "tea with Mary, Lady Curzon . . . and the Spanish Ambassadress and others. All trivial and jesting as usual, and the proletariat rattling at the gates."

A half-hour walk away from White's, at 33 Warwick Square in pleasingly scruffy Pimlico, Claude Flight (1881–1955) was teaching the new technique of linocut at the Grosvenor School of Modern Art, which had been founded the previous October by Iain Macnab (1890–1967), a wood engraver formerly associated with Heatherley's School of Fine Art, a traditional outfit. The Grosvenor was to be no such thing, having "neither entrance requirements nor fixed terms," as the Metropolitan Museum of Art curator Jennifer Farrell explains in an illuminating essay in the catalogue for the museum's new exhibition "Modern Times: British Prints, 1913–1939."[1]

*Sybil Andrews,* Concert Hall, *1929, Color linocut, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo: Courtesy Glenbow Museum.*

Linocut was representative of the values of the Grosvenor School itself—democratic and new, but not entirely divorced from tradition. The method is more or less the same as woodcut, but with the matrix not wood but linoleum, a synthetic flooring material invented only in 1860. Flight was the technique's greatest promoter in England, believing it had the power to beautify lower-class life. As he wrote in his 1927 book *Lino-Cuts: A Hand-Book of Linoleum-Cut Colour Printing*:

> Mass production in business is essential to our very existence. Living as we do in closely packed communities[,] mass production brings down the price of our goods to a reasonable and saleable rate.
>
> Pictures both in oil and water-colour can never be painted so as to be sold at a price which appeals to the pocket of the average man, pockets already taxed to such an extent by the State that the only relaxation he can afford is of the cheapest kind.
>
> Linoleum-cut colour prints could be sold, if only the interest in and the demand for them could be stimulated, at a price which is equivalent to that paid by the average man for his daily beer or his cinema ticket.

Flight even imagined a "lending library" of linocuts, so that the medium could be enjoyed by all. Here, then, was a third way for contemporary British life. Not the fearful noblesse oblige of Cooper and Channon, nor the deleterious organized-labor action taken by the strikers, but a recognition

that, with the right media, the average man could have a meaningful, stimulating life. As Flight put it:

> Given the right art education in the elementary schools . . . the average man will buy these colour prints, for he will realize that the satisfaction to be obtained from their possession has a greater lasting quality than that to be derived from the taste and exhilaration from the beer or the excitement and comfort from the cinema; knowing also that aesthetic pleasure surmounts creature comforts, and that the harmony, the intensity, and the vision which a good work of art affords would be his for the asking.

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If Flight's vision seems utopian, it was merely one artistic manifesto in an era overfull of them. In April 1909, the Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti published *The Futurist Manifesto* in English translation, declaring that "the splendor of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed" and that "Beauty exists only in struggle. There is no masterpiece that has not an aggressive character." Defiantly violent, Marinetti and his cadre declared they "want[ed] to glorify war—the only cure for the world." The resultant art established new styles that set the tone for much of the Teens, Twenties, and Thirties, with paintings lacking fixed perspective, forms with hard edges, and a glorification of new technologies, especially the automobile. Simultaneously, the English art establishment was getting in on the act. The critic Clive Bell, in his introduction to the catalogue for Roger Fry's 1912 "Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition," suggested that the terms of engagement with art had changed: "We have ceased to ask, 'What does this picture represent?' and ask instead, 'What does it make us feel?' " Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957), the *enfant terrible* of British art, the man Hemingway described as having "the eyes . . . of an unsuccessful rapist," refused to be left out. In June 1914 he published the first edition of *BLAST*, a journal dedicated to besmirching what Lewis viewed as self-satisfied Victorian Englishness and promoting his own movement, which Ezra Pound had dubbed "Vorticism." Among those to be blasted were the prim novelist John Galsworthy, the composer of empire Edward Elgar, and the traditionalist Slade professor Henry Tonks. To be blessed were James Joyce, the music-hall performer George Mozart, and Castor Oil. As part of the manifesto, Lewis asserted that "To believe that it is necessary or conducive to art, to 'Improve' life, for instance—make architecture, dress, ornament, in 'better taste,' is absurd."

This febrile atmosphere was interrupted by the cataclysm of the First World War, which is more or less where "Modern Times" begins. If the war seemed confirmation of the Futurist and Vorticist wishes, there was little time for manifestos in the mud. Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson's 1916 drypoint Returning to the Trenches, which appeared in the second issue of BLAST and is on display here, depicts a column of French soldiers rushing onward, their bodies overlapping so as to become a single unit. The motion is inexorably forward, but the troops' downcast faces, angular and hardened, suggest that valor is far from the picture. As Nevinson (1889–1946), who had served in France and as a medic in England, later commented, "It happened

that I was the first artist to paint war pictures without pageantry[,] without glory, and without the over-coloured heroic that had made up the tradition of all war paintings up to this time. I had done this unconsciously. No man saw pageantry in the trenches." Officially commissioned as a war artist in the summer of 1917, Nevinson arrived in Europe three weeks before the Battle of Passchendaele, where an estimated 300,000 British soldiers died in a mere three months. Whereas Returning to the Trenches focused on the human actors in the nascent war drama, That Cursèd Wood (1918) shows a bleak, dead forest, with spindly trees bereft of leaves standing behind a bomb-cratered foreground and nary a soldier in sight. Above, biplanes, those mechanical agents of destruction, circle, while birds—mere V-shaped flecks—fly closer to the ground. The drypoint's title is taken from Siegfried Sassoon's 1916 poem "At Carnoy":

Crouched among thistle-tufts I've watched the glow

Of a blurred orange sunset flare and fade;

And I'm content. Tomorrow we must go

To take some cursèd Wood . . . O world God made!

While *Returning to the Trenches* eschewed pageantry, it nonetheless expressed some amount of martial solidarity. Here, in this haunted landscape, the impression is merely one of ash.


*Edward Alexander* Wadsworth, Liverpool Shipping, *1918, Woodcut on Japanese paper, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo: Â© 2021 Artists Rights Society (ARS).*

The mechanization of the war effort was reflected in the art of Edward Alexander Wadsworth (1889–1949), who worked on the "dazzle ships" project, which sought to use artists' skills to camouflage British watercraft, thus making them less susceptible to sinking by U-boats. Wadsworth's early Vorticist work, characterized by striking abstract patterning, found use in the fight. *Liverpool Shipping*, a 1918 woodcut on cream paper, shows a massive ship with irregular patterns crossing its bow, patterns echoed by the well-defined black-and-white lines of the docks

around it. The vessel's hull recedes into the back of the composition, and it's impossible to tell where the ship ends and the city of Liverpool begins: camouflage in action. When Wadsworth turned to industrial subjects in 1919, his keen sense of pattern served him well. *Black Country*, showing d at all. Stylized fla lpture *Unique For* ustrial hell, the moder

*Edward Alexander* Wadsworth, Liverpool Shipping, *1918, Woodcut on Japanese paper, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo: © 2021 Artists Rights Society (ARS).*

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The Grosvenor School artists, despite a fascination with urban life, were not city chauvinists. Among the best work on view in this exhibition full of fascinating specimens has to do with the outdoor pursuits traditionally loved in green England. Most impressive of these is Power's *The Eight* (1930), which presents a shell of eight men rowing, their boat forming a diagonal that anchors the scene, their oars moving centrifugally towards the edges of the paper. Mostly by using various blocks of color, Power has distilled the scene to its essence, showing movement on the water, and the effectors of that movement, while leaving out all extraneous detail. A comparison of preparatory drawings for *The Eight* and the finished print show this impulse in action. The drawings are replete with individual details such as the rowers' arms and hats and the coxswain's megaphone, all clearly delineated. By the time of the finished print, the cox is omitted entirely. Andrews took a similar approach in her 1931 linocut *In Full Cry*. The traditional fox-hunting picture has been given the Grosvenor School treatment with color blocks moving the action forward. At left a blue-coated rider surmounts a hedge on a shadowy black horse, while to the right further riders grab hold of their unnaturally stretched steeds. Not a single hoof is yet on the ground, but we know that in seconds the sound will be deafening as the riders follow the off-paper hounds and quarry. The pared-down nature of linocut prints was deliberate; while nineteenth-century printing methods used dozens of blocks to produce multicolored images of painting-like complexity, Flight had suggested that the number of blocks be limited, which both constricted the palette and circumscribed the form linocuts could take—and made the medium more accessible to the beginning artist.

Modern forms of transport in London became an abiding concern for the Grosvenor School artists.

If Flight's vision of democratized art was a third way in 1920s politics, the Grosvenor School's insistence on treating disparate aspects of English life—both urban and rural, work and leisure—marks their methods as a way out of the dead ends of Futurism and Vorticism. Those two movements, for all their artistic innovations, were fundamentally removed from life on the ground, preferring to sneer at it from above. How far indeed is a poster advertising bus routes to Lord's Cricket Ground, collaboratively designed in 1934 by Andrews and Power, from Marinetti's pointed question: "Do you want to waste the best part of your strength in a useless admiration of the past, from which you will emerge exhausted, diminished, trampled on?"

The great avant-garde war artist Paul Nash (1889–1946) noted in 1932 that "whether it is possible to 'Go Modern' and still 'Be British' " is "a question vexing quite a few people to-day." The work on show at the Met answers quite tidily. Here is a modernism—consisting of deliberately new forms and media, and aimed at a mass audience—that recognizes and appreciates history. The Grosvenor School artists adapted the deracinated styles of the Futurists and Vorticists to the traditions of

England, with the result being an art for the people. The prints on show at the Met, collected and transferred to the museum by Leslie and the late Johanna Garfield, and elegantly presented in three rooms with ample space between pictures, confirm that the common sense of England, despite major upheaval in the interwar era, remained intact.

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1 "Modern Times: British Prints, 1913–1939" opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, on November 1, 2021, and remains on view through January 9, 2022.

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This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 40 Number 4 , on page 42

https://newcriterion.com/issues/2021/12/anglicizing-the-avant-garde-12294