Furious, primordial things

VISUAL ARTS
The Vorticists
Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice

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Cubism and Futurism are bedrocks of the avant-garde, while Vorticism is considered an also-ran. The British response to those two movements was hampered by a late start (the group did not announce itself until 1914). The Vorticists also struggled to articulate their goals. “The Vortex is one of those miraculous primordial things that can only be defined in negatives,” wrote John Middleton Murray in a review of the group’s first and only British show in 1916.

Yet this show, the first Vorticism retrospective since an exhibition in Hanover in 1995-97, shows that the group did share an aesthetic. Grounded in a desire to express the industrial age and committed to abstraction, the works are characterised by the juxtaposition of angular, lightning-bolt shapes and, particularly in sculpture, a homage to primitive forms.

However, the concept of “the Vortex” was little more than a casual metaphor for the explosion of energy that set the modern era apart from its Edwardian forebearers. In this context, it was probably first pronounced by Ezra Pound in a letter of December 1913 when he used it to describe the city of London. By then, the American poet was part of a circle of British modernists that included the philosopher and critic T.E. Hulme and the Canadian-born writer and painter Wyndham Lewis.

Later, Pound and Lewis—once described by W.H. Auden as a “tubby old volkman”—would be tarnished by their anti-semitism and far-right sympathies. In prewar London, however, the pair’s didacticism was tempered by innocence; they were two angry, clever young men determined to conjure up art to rival the avant-garde revolutions of Europe. Around them gathered artists including David Bomberg, Frederick Etchells, Edward Wadsworth, Charles Nevinson, Jacob Epstein, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and William Roberts. Like Lewis, his own work studied at the Slade School of Art.

At first Lewis—the undisputed ring-leader of the group—worked with Fry, the critic and painter who introduced the French post-impressionists to the British scene and who was the mastermind of the Blériot Group. But in 1916 Lewis broke with Fry, scoring his idealisation of “prettiness.” Picasso, meanwhile, he condemned as a “dressmaker.”

Influenced by the anti-positivist philosophies of Nietzsche and Henri Bergson, Lewis desired an art that was less ascetic, purer and more mechanical. On show here, a 1912 series of illustrations for an edition of Tennyson’s Idylls shows how he abandoned pictorial depth for a flat arrangement of forms that collide like mismatched jigsaw puzzles.

For a while it seemed Futurism might claim the group’s allegiance. But when its leader Marinetti described Lewis’s band as the English branch of his movement, Lewis was furious. In the summer of 1914, he

retrieved Pound’s concept and published the Vorticist manifesto in the first issue of the magazine Blast— a copy of which is on show here, signed by himself, Wadsworth, Pound, Helen Saunders, Lawrence Atkinson, Jessica Dismorr and the young French sculptor Gaudier-Brzeska. It was the first time the group declared an identity of their own.

The manifesto offered no concrete artistic guidelines but the works themselves share distinct characteristics. Two key oil paintings by Lewis—“The Crowd” 1914-16 and “Workshop” 1914-15—exhibit collations of architectural planes, spiky shapes and awkward, zigzagging trajectories. When distilled into works on paper by, among others, Atkinson, Saunders, Etchells and Dorothy Shakespear, Pound’s words turn into graphics, wide anti-symmetrical arrangements—often in vivid colours—simmer with exploratory intensity.

The criticism frequently levelled at Vorticists’ images, with their mirror-flat planes and fierce contours, is that they are nearer to graphic design than art. Certainly, the stars here are sculptures by Jacob Epstein—never officially a Vorticist but aligned with the movement—and Gaudier-Brzeska, who would die in the trenches at the age of 23. Encouraged by Pound, the young French sculptor abandoned the classical tradition in favour of non-western forms and techniques. Rather than taking measurements from a plaster cast, Gaudier-Brzeska carved directly into the material. Though little more than a mottled chunk of green marble with a rugged triangle for a tail and a carved eye for an eye, “Duck” (1914) pulses with profound, archaic power. In “Crouching Fawn” (1913) he conjures up the animal’s benign childlike out of rough-hewn bath stone. His “Red Stone” (“Dunce”) is below.

In June 1915, the Vorticists had their only UK show at London’s Doré Galleries—Léger was here—and the public appetite for art that appeared to celebrate the bellicose new world. “Perhaps if the Jocks could be induced to take to art, instead of disturbing the peace of Europe, they would paint so and enjoy it,” wrote Times critic Arthur Clutton-Brock.

The movement’s swansong occurred in the US, at the artist-run Penguin Club in 1917. The show included fine examples of Lewis’s early oeuvre, including the watercolour sketch “Kernesse” (1915), which was a preliminary design for a larger, now lost painting. Showing three figures trapped in a tight web of arc-like shapes, it demonstrates, in Quinn’s words, “abounding vitality and power”.

Given Lewis’s theoretical commitment to abstraction, it is ironic that the best work here concerns on human figures—a quality borne out by subsequent success as a portraitist. By far the finest abstractionist among the Vorticists was Wadsworth. Steeped in rationalism and Kandinsky and trained in mechanical drawing, he had the technical wherewithal to allow an inner geometry to shine through his apparent miscellaneities of shapes. (A zigzag-like assembly of monochrome blocks, his 1914 woodcut “Yorkshire Village” evokes a minimalist riff on Cézanne’s views of Monte Sainte-Victoire.)

The New York show was greeted with disappointment. “Tendencies that had meteoric vogue some years ago,” wrote one reviewer, “are in win enduring favour because [they belong] to mechanical or oriental design rather than art.”

This retrospective confirms that, Wadsworth notwithstanding, much Vorticist work was a grab-bag of graphic forms. Yet, displayed as they are here, with nuance and judgment, their visions find favour nonetheless.

“The Vorticists: Rebel Artists in London and New York, 1914-1918, until May 15