EDWARD WADSWORTH (British, 1889-1949)
Study for Vespertino

Pencil
Executed c.1937
LITERATURE: Edward Wadsworth: Complete Painting & Drawings (Jonathan Black), No 345

345. Vespertino, 1937
tempera, 53.3 x 38.1 cm
Lost in France during WWII [WA188]
• exhibited Tooth & Sons, April-May 1938 (12)
The present pencil drawing is a detailed study which appears almost exactly the same in size and composition. Study for Vespertino draws on the artist's own collection of marine objects to create a typically surreal image, the rope hanging down from the letterbox displaying an air of weightlessness and illusion. This is typical of a still-life of this period.

Sheet height 51.5 cm, 20 ¼ in. Length 37.5 cm., 14 ¾ in
In an English, pine, rope-twist, part gesso washed & gilted frame
Frame Height 67 cm., 2 ft., ½ in., Length 53 cm., 1 ft., 9 in.

£15,000

Another tempera The Beached Margin of the same year, also has the collection of disparate nautical objects suspended together, and the disconcerting play with perspective and distance.

The Beached Margin, 1937 (Tate Collection)

The same compositional device also occurs in both - that of the tall sky, with a low sea horizon and slightly mounded beach below it, giving a feeling of thrust. The collection of marine artefacts was a long standing subject for Wadsworth, an earlier example being Regalia, 1928.
Richard Cork says of a fourth of these still-lifes: ‘The English Channel seems calm enough, but after a while the stillness begins to ache with expectancy’. This sense of taut energy is very present in Study for Vespertino, and relates to Wadsworth’s sense of the need for ‘guts or vivacity or intoxication’ and ‘strength’ in art.

At the lower left of Study for Vespertino is a figure probably of the Greek god of the sea and of fishermen, Glaucus, a mortal who ate magic herbs and was turned into a god in half human, half fish form. This reference reflects Wadsworth’s sense of the status of mariners and their paraphernalia - here in Study for Vespertino he imbues the everyday objects depicted with a sense of significance and mystery; and in Regalia the composition is reminiscent of a classical trophy, and the title itself makes explicit the reference to a sceptre, orb and chain.

In the 1930s Wadsworth was living with his family at Dairy Farm (later Dairy House), Maresfield, Sussex. His studio there remained the disciplined centre of his professional life, as well as being the setting for a wide circle of friends, including Paul Nash, Arthur Bliss, Henry Moore and Dick Wyndham.

Neville Wallis, in his Observer review of the 1951 Wadsworth Memorial exhibition at the Tate wrote of these depictions of grouped objects:

Wadsworth’s fragments, in their power to liberate the imagination are rather akin to poetry: the poetry... of an independent and strangely gifted artist.

In the absence of the finished tempera work, Study for Vespertino stands as an important work in the history of Wadsworth’s art.
EDWARD WADSWORTH (1889-1949)

Wadsworth played a leading role in the early-20th century revival of tempera painting, alongside Giorgio de Chirico and Gino Severini; was a key member of the major British avant-garde art movement of Vorticism (currently being explored in The Vorticists at Tate Britain) and his powerful and compelling contribution to pictorial abstraction won the admiration of such giants of European artistic modernism as Fernand Léger, Max Ernst, Theo van Doesburg and Wassily Kandinsky – most of whom were introduced to Wadsworth by Rosenberg in Paris during the late 1920s.

Edward Wadsworth was born in Yorkshire. Soon after he left school Wadsworth joined the Vorticist movement centred around the poet Ezra Pound which had been created by the painter and writer Wyndham Lewis. In relation to painting, Vorticism and its publication Blast, brought together the modern trends in English painting of the time. These were close to cubism and Futurism with an affinity with the form of machines but without feeling the need to glorify them as the futurists did.

Wadsworth studied engineering in Munich from 1906 to 1907 and, like many other Vorticists, Wadsworth’s interest in the machine showed itself at an early age. He studied art at the Knirr School in Munich in his spare time, before attending Bradford School of Art; he then studied through a scholarship at the Slade School of Art (1908–12) in London.

His early paintings show a growing interest in industrial subjects. Under the impact of the Post-Impressionists, he turned for a while to portraiture, beach scenes and still-lifes. His work was included in the final month of the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition held at the Grafton Galleries in 1912, and in the summer of the same year he joined the Omega Workshops, although his alliance with Roger Fry was short-lived. Wadsworth's new friendship with Wyndham Lewis led to an abrupt departure from Omega in October, when several of his works were included in Frank Rutter's Post-Impressionist and Futurist exhibitions at the Doré Gallery in London. His painting L'Omnibus (c. 1913) announced his involvement with motorized themes that clearly derived from Futurism.

Wadsworth was a member of the committee that organized a dinner in honour of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, leading light of the Futurists, at the Florence Restaurant, London, in 1913, but he shared Lewis’s growing reservations about the Italian movement. Although paintings of c. 1913 like Radiation (1913–14) and March (1913–14) show his interest in machine-age subjects, Wadsworth was also fascinated by Vasily Kandinsky's writings and published a translation of them in the first issue of Blast. By that time he had become one of Lewis’s associates, joining the activities at the Rebel Art Centre and reproducing several of his works in Blast. They include Cape of Good Hope (1914), which uses an aerial viewpoint to present an austere yet dynamic vision of dockland with moored ships. In 1914 he contributed to the English edition of Kandinsky’s Concerning the Spiritual in Art and in the same year joined the London Group followed by the Ten Group and the New English Art Club in 1921.
Wadsworth served in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve from 1915-1917, where he discovered a passion for the sea and ships which would persist throughout his life. In 1933 he made two large decorative panels for the Queen Mary and others for the De La Warr pavilion in Bexhill and the Canadian War Museum. In depicting ships and their element he was able to combine his painting with precise, ‘machinist’ technique resembling that of industrial drawing. After the war he published a collection of copper drawings entitled The Sailing Ships and Barges of the Western Mediterranean & Adriatic. Although he made paintings of harbour views or the bridges of ships, reminiscent of cubism and the machinist imagery of Leger, he mainly composed still lifes of shipping objects, on grounds of sea, sky or harbour in juxtapositions reminiscent of the collages of the surrealists and de Chirico.

Since so many of his paintings of the Vorticist period have been lost, woodcuts provide a valuable insight into his approach; in his extended series he often looks down on northern industrial centres from far above. This dizzying new perspective enabled him to organize his forms in a remarkably abstract way, even though he retained reference to factory chimneys, railway lines and striped fields.

Wadsworth contributed to the Vorticist Exhibition of June 1915 at the Doré Gallery and reproduced more work in the second issue of Blast. Ezra Pound contrasted Wadsworth’s work with Lewis’s, arguing that they stood for ‘turbulent energy: repose. Anger: placidity and so on’, but Wadsworth was the painter most closely allied to him in the Vorticist period. Their relationship did not continue for long after the war.
Wadsworth’s vast painting of Dazzle-ships in Drydock at Liverpool heralded his return to a more representational way of seeing. Industrial subjects formed the focus of his dramatic Black Country series, which he exhibited in a one-man show at the Leicester Galleries and published as a collection with an introduction by Arnold Bennett in the same year (London, 1920).

Maritime themes were his principal subjects in the following period. They led him, at first, in the direction of a more straightforward naturalism, exemplified at its most limpid and structurally compact in The Cattewater, Plymouth Sound (1923). A strain of Surrealist unease and expectancy gradually entered Wadsworth’s work, most notably in mysterious still-life compositions like Regalia (1928; London, Tate). He corresponded with Giorgio de Chirico about their shared interest in reviving the tempera medium, although his increasingly meticulous attitude towards technique did not prevent him from taking interest in avant-garde developments during the 1930s.

Wadsworth travelled widely and contributed to the Parisian journal Abstraction-Création. He also became a founder-member of Unit one, a group dedicated to promoting the spirit of renewal in British art between the wars. He was selected for the Venice Biennale in 1940 and became an ARA in 1943.

Wadsworth’s reputation is based firstly on his pioneering early work as a member of the radical Vorticists, followed by his advanced abstract paintings of 1930–33; secondly on his Black Country drawings (1919–20); and thirdly on his distinctive tempera paintings of 1922–9 and 1934–44. These evoke the light and ambience of the sea, while tending to exclude large expanses of the sea itself.
Paintings in Museums and Public Art Galleries: UK

- British Council
- National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh
- Brighton & Hove Museums, England
- Imperial War Museum, London
- Museum of London, UK
- Southward Art Collection
- Tate, London
- Tyne & Wear Museums, England
- University College London Art Collections, England
- Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, UK
- UCL Art Museum

Paintings in Museums and Public Art Galleries: Worldwide:

- Art Institute of Chicago
- Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City
- Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio
- Harvard University Art Museums, Massachusetts
- Indiana University Art Museum,
- National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
- Beaverbrook Art Gallery, New Brunswick
- Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid

Further reading:

- Exhibition catalogue, Camden Arts Centre, 1990
- Memorial Exhibition Catalogue, Tate Gallery, 1951