

The Modernist Landscape of Waves and Wars in Britain: A Comparison Between Vorticist Works and Korin's Screens

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Introduction

Recently, several research projects are proceeding focusing on the acceptance of Japanese art in England with a central focus on the 1910s Japan-British Exhibition at Shepherd's Bush [1]. In particular, *Ukiyo-e* by the Japanese painters Katsushika Hokusai, Utagawa Hiroshige, and Utamaro has not only attracted great and long-lasting attention in Europe, but it was also an important motive for *Japonism* art in the late 19th Century. Bold and asymmetrical compositions or brilliant colours on gold backgrounds are widely known as features of *Japonism* (*nihon shumi*) in European countries, through linkage with decorative elements such as French Impressionist paintings or Art Nouveau design. In addition, we know that it is easy to identify the influence of *Japonism* in British modern art and design through the work of J. A. M. Whistler or E. W. Godwin. However, very few studies have referred to the fact that English avant-garde art in the early 20th Century accepted Japanese art, which was introduced in the same period with tremendous curiosity [2]. Furthermore, the uniqueness of English avant-garde art has almost never been defined, and the movement has been considered in alignment with Futurism on the subject of cities, machines, and war. In this paper, through a comparison of landscape representation between Vorticist art and Japanese paintings, I try to clarify the design of Japanese art that fascinated English avant-gardists. Vorticism, including the work of Wyndham Lewis (1888-1957) and C. R. W. Nevinson (1889-1946), which is considered to have been the only avant-garde art movement in England, was inspired by the great Japanese designer Ogata Korin (1658-1716, mid-Edo period).

1. The characteristics of British art and Modernism

'Modernism', which has been associated with a certain stream of paintings since Clement Greenberg used it strategically in his art criticism, has been recognised in the art world as a historical movement essentially confined to Europe and the United States. However, recent studies on British Modern art [3] have pointed out that 'African style', 'Japanese aesthetics', and 'Indian influence' can be found in abstract sculpture of the early 20th Century [4]. The emerging importance of influences from non-Western cultural spheres is not only in terms of style classification, but also formalism.

It is characteristic of Western Modernist paintings that they break away with narrative and imitation of nature and let viewers into the painting itself, and it is worth noting that design consists of colours and forms. Therefore, it seems only natural that decorative forms specific to

Japanese art, such as flat colouring and asymmetric compositions, should have been welcomed into Western Modernist art. For example, Ukiyo-e prints made by Hiroshige or Hokusai would have been loved by European people across the seas, displacing or exaggerating the main motif. They use forms that we cannot imagine in the traditional methods or observational approaches of Western art, which try to shift directly from three-dimensional space into the two-dimensional plane using anatomy and perspective. On the other hand, some works made by Sotatsu and Korin are appreciated for their subtle colour arrangement and draw an attention to the usage of colouring (No-sai) or staining techniques (tarashikomi); otherwise, such works tend to be mentioned as decorative patterns. This attention to colour arrangement in Modern art arising in the same period suggests that Western paintings have traditionally been centred around drawing.

As well as (or more than) in the case of Japanese Ukiyo-e, we can find many wonderful works that use appealing lines rather than colours in British paintings. Thinking back through history, it is the line that is brilliant in Pre-Raphaelite works or those of William Blake that are favoured in Britain. The art historian Quentin Bell discussed ‘hard-edge’ as a trait of Pre-Raphaelite art in his book *Victorian Artists*, comparing the situation of Modernist paintings that appear to converge with a colour plane – called ‘painterly’, originating from the German *malerisch* – in the mid-20th Century in the United States.

According to Bell, the word ‘slosh’ was a term of condemnation in Pre-Raphaelite slang. Bell wanted to rightly define ‘slosh’, writing that ‘slosh, as far as I can gather, was *malerisch* gone mouldy [...] Slosh was the method of Victorian painters like W. E. Frost, who worked with a big thick brush loaded with bitumen’ [5]. ‘Slosh was the brilliant splash dashed into the dark wet ground to simulate the light in an eye or the sparkle of a wave [plate 1]’. Meanwhile, Bell described the Pre-Raphaelite approach ‘hard-edge’, a kind of realistic attitude. He considers ‘hard-edge’ style to be ‘anti-slosh’; one might find that this tradition still persists in the work of British Modern painters such as Stanley Spencer and Lucien Freud who studied at Slade School [6].

If Bell’s analysis is correct, why did British Modernist painting accept colour-oriented Japanese design? Previous studies suggest that their adoration for Japanese aesthetic consciousness as represented by ‘Yūgen (subtle and profound)’ or ‘Wabi-sabi’ could be associated with empty space, dry brush strokes, and bold composition, but the connections go even further than these techniques. It is hard to imagine that British avant-garde artists borrowed from Tawaraya Sotatsu’s or Korin’s designs just for fun. They did not simply replace the old (Japanese design) with the new (novel design). In the next chapter, British avant-gardism will be investigated in terms of formative ideas in order to elicit the inevitability of the acceptance of Korin’s design.

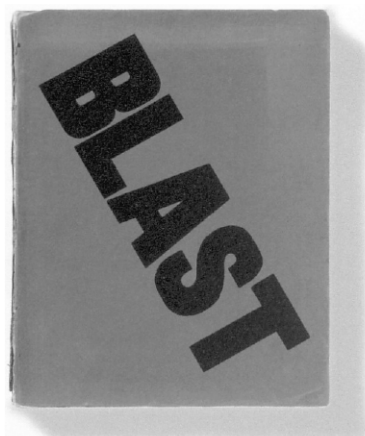


[Plate 1] W. E. Frost, *The Sea Cave*, c. 1851, 40.5 x 47.5cm, Russell-Cotes Art Gallery & Museum, Bournemouth

2. Vorticist avant-gardism from the aspect of form

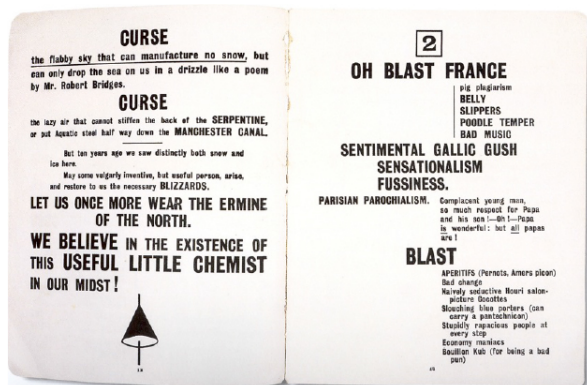
Generally, it is thought that British Modernist art began in 1914 with the outbreak of WWI, and thus, it is assumed that researchers in this field should deal with the relationship between war and art through war paintings. Vorticism, which was a specifically British avant-garde art movement, was born in London in 1914. This movement, named by the poet Ezra Pound and Rebel Art Centre artists like Wyndham Lewis, Edward Wadsworth (1889-1949), and Henri Gordiner-Brzeska (1891-1915), was known for its radical discourse and experimental works in the actual sense of the word 'Rebel'. Vorticists were fighting battles in various ways.

The name of the Vorticist Journal *Blast* originated from the loud noises of bombing, and included the slang 'Damn!', meaning to distaste or to scorch [7]. In the first issue of *Blast*, published in 1914, Lewis expressed his stance, that 'to make the rich of the community shed their education skin, to destroy politeness standardisation and academic, that is civilised, vision, is the task we have set ourselves' [8]. *Blast* declared a break with tradition and a break with the impressions of contemporary domestic art, including paintings placed on the wall of Burlington House, which was the hub of the Royal Academy of Arts (in Neoclassical style), or the paintings of the emerging contemporary art group 'New English Art Club' (in Impressionist style). As for the cover design of the journal, the letters **BLAST** cross the cover diagonally with huge gothic typeface against fluorescent pink [plate 2]. There is equal spacing in both the large and small sizes of the typeface, which have the look of a disorderly arrangement at first glance.

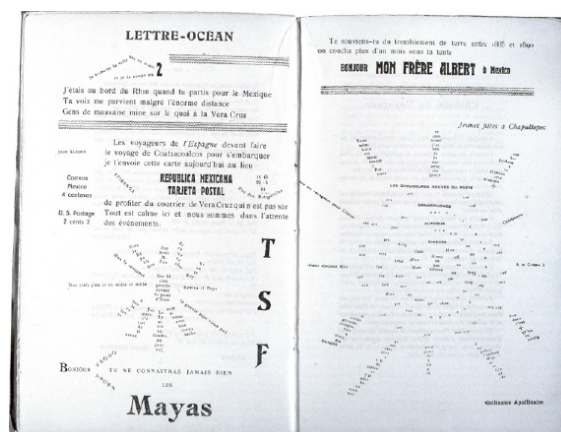


[Plate 2] *Blast* no.1, 1914, cover

Most poems and prose in the journal have a headline in gothic typeface, as if signalling the start of a battle. Bold and sans serif fonts are displayed in the text, which show an aggressive attitude [plate 3]. We can find some similarities between such design and 'Les mots en liberté futuristes' by F. T. Marinetti [plate 4]. Indeed, both have various letter widths all over the pages, but Lewis's design is more readable than



[Plate 3] *Blast* no.1, pp.12-3



[Plate 4] Filippo Marinetti, *Les Mots en Liberté Futuristes*, Edizioni Futuriste di Poesia, Milan, 1919

Futurist design, and manifested certain regularities.

In *Blast* no.1, Lewis strictly wrote that machinery is ‘the greatest Earth-medium: incidentally it sweeps away the doctrines of a narrow and pedantic Realism at one stroke’ [9]. He also attempted to set Vorticism apart from Futurism, which still exhibited a blind faith in machinery, by writing ‘I will point out, to begin with, in the following notes, the way in which the English VORTICISTS differ from the French, German or Italian painters of kindred groups’ [10].

As a Vorticist, Lewis attempted to change art by promoting changes in the consciousness of art. He did not intend to improve daily life by intervening in politics: this is the crucial difference between Vorticism and Futurism. Lewis did not completely accept Marinetti’s romantic admiration of machines since the machines that substituted for human skill would produce a world in which human beings should subjugate themselves to those machines. The theme he had pursued since the late 1910s was ‘Dehumanization’. For example, this word appeared in his essay ‘The New Egos’ in *Blast* in 1914.

The human form still runs, like a wave, through the texture or body of existence, and therefore of art. But just as the old form of egotism is no longer fit for such conditions as now prevail, so the isolated human figure of most ancient Art is an anachronism. THE ACTUAL HUMAN BODY BECOMES OF LESS IMPORTANCE EVERY DAY. [...] All clean, clear cut emotions depend on the element of strangeness, and surprise and primitive detachment. Dehumanization is the chief diagnostic of the Modern World. One feels the immanence of some REALITY more than any former human beings can have felt it [11].

It is thought that Vorticist design appears similar to Futurist design because Lewis chose imagery such as modern factories, bridges, and military equipment, ingeniously criticizing Futurism’s blind faith in speed and automobiles.

Furthermore, Vorticism was different from the current aspects of domestic Modernism. In the Omega Workshops that Vorticists were involved in at the founding of Vorticism, artists aimed at the fusion of modernity and tradition, adapting Post-Impressionistic design into furniture or furnishings in daily life. They attempted to prevail over all aspects of society. Meanwhile, Lewis and his associates rejected the need for Omega artists who wanted to enhance beauty in everyday life as aestheticist and feeble. For him, building, designing, and decorating in good taste were absurd.

In this way, representations of modernity such as machinery were the subject of worship as well as criticism. Furthermore, the idea of ‘dehumanization’ and ‘new egos’ associated with communication in our society at the present time were visualised through the metaphor of a wave.

3. The Influence from Korin’s screen ‘Matsushima’

Lewis hardly painted any landscapes; it is not too much to say that *A Battery Shelled* [plate 5] is the only landscape painting he made featuring England. As Edwards mentioned, the design of this work might be inspired by Korin’s screen *Waves at Matsushima*. The motif of a wave plays an important role in this theme, and then we have to consider the wave in connection with

the literary metaphor we discussed in the previous chapter. Here, I will investigate the formative relationship between Japanese art and British avant-garde art, following three versions of screens bearing the name 'Matsushima' and their provenance, which would have an impact not only on Wyndham Lewis, but also on other Vorticists.

The version of Korin's 'Matsushima' that British people saw for the first time was well-known as part of the Iwasaki collection. This version was offered on loan by Koyata Iwasaki, who was the fourth-generation family head of Mitsubishi Zaibatsu (financial group), so that it could be displayed in the Japan-British exhibition of 1910 [12]. The designer Charles Ricketts, who visited the exhibition site, stated that:

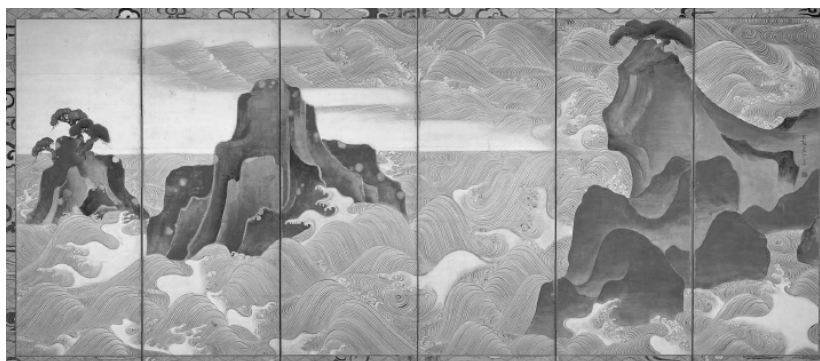
Some of his works would give a better impression of the general trend of his painting than the two exhibited here. His figure pieces are, I admit, strange to European eyes; with them I am not concerned. The two great screens at the White City show [The Japan-British Exhibition] him in a phase where he out-Korins Korin. A grey sea bent into fantastic waves moves silently beneath great golden drifts of cloud with an uncanny force, as if controlled by the spell of some Eastern Prospero [13].

The above-mentioned 'Matsushima' is no longer extant, but it would be considered an imitation of Sotatsu made by Korin, which was displayed under the title of *Scene of Matsushima* in the exhibition [14]. Unfortunately, we cannot confirm that Vorticists visited the Japan-British exhibition in 1910. However, it is highly likely that they would have come into contact with other versions of 'Matsushima'.

Another version of the 'Matsushima' screen was shown in a 1908 book written by Laurence Binyon, who was a keeper in the British Museum at the time [plate 6][15]. This is the most famous version of Korin's screen 'Matsushima' at present, and it came to be in the possession of the Freer Gallery of Art owing to Arnold Fenollosa in 1913. Another version is *The Wave-beaten Rock* [plate 7],



[Plate 5] Wyndham Lewis, *A Battery Shelled*, 1919, oil on canvas, 182.8 x 317.5cm, Imperial War Museum, London. By permission, the Wyndham Lewis Memorial Trust (a registered charity)



[Plate 6] Ogata Korin, *Waves at Matsushima*, Edo period, 18th Century, Six-panel folding screen; ink, color and gold on paper, 150.18 x 367.79cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

which appeared in the *Guide to an Exhibition of Japanese and Chinese Paintings (1914)*, known as a masterpiece of the Morrison Collection in the British Museum [16]. This painting is now recognised as having been made by Korin's workshop or the Rimpa School, but it was thought to be an authentic work by Korin when it was exhibited at the British Museum. For example, W. B. Yeats heaped praise on the work in the introduction of *Certain Noble Plays of Japan*, translated into English by Ezra Pound in 1916: 'one half remembers a thousand Japanese paintings, or whichever comes first into the memory. That screen painted by Korin, let us say, shown lately at the British Museum, where the same form is echoing in wave and in cloud and in rock' [17].

Yeats's experience was shared by Pound as well as Vorticist Painters. In fact, Sotatsu, Koetsu, and Korin were put under 'Bless' in a list of proper names in *Blast* no.2 [18]. Moreover, Pound quoted an important passage in Binyon's *The Flight of the Dragon* (1913): 'You may say that the waves of Korin's famous screen are not like real waves: but they move, they have force and volume' [19]. It is safe to assume that Vorticists who had contact with Yeats and Binyon were familiar with the two 'Matsushima' – at least through plates in the book.

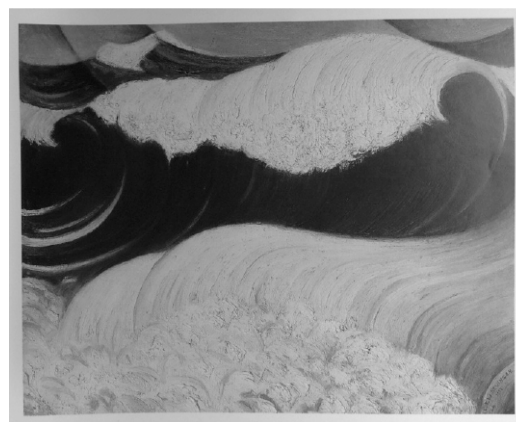
Two images of waves by C. R. W. Nevinson which were presented at the exhibitions of the London Group and Friday Club in May 1917 convince us that he saw Korin's works up close [plates 8, 9]; they represented breakers, that is to say the crest of a wave, and he created them using the same motif with a different medium. Art critic Frank Rutter made a comment on the painting of waves shown at the Friday Club as follows: 'Mr. Nevinson's fine lithograph of *Breakers* [plate 9] is the most memorable of all, with a grandeur of design that recalls a Korin' [20].



[Plate 7] School of/style of Ogata Korin, *The Wave-beaten Rock*, Edo period, 18th Century, a 2-fold screen painting; paper, 146.4 x 131.4cm, The British Museum, London



[Plate 8] C. R. W. Nevinson, *The Wave (Breakers)*, 1917, lithograph; printed in blue on paper, 34.8 x 42.8cm, The British Museum, London



[Plate 9] C. R. W. Nevinson, *The Wave (The Blue Wave)*, 1917, oil on canvas, 50.8 x 76.2cm, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Fund, New Haven

With respect to the two versions of Nevinson's *Waves*, he made the oil painting version in advance and then used examples from this version to make a lithograph [21]. Therefore, the later design reversed the former (original) design. Both works remind us of 'Matsushima' at the Morrisson Collection [plate 8] because of their deep blue. Comparing the two, the oil painting would give a dull impression more than the lithograph since the crest of a wave in the design was collapsed by the medium property of oil paint. This demonstrates that a major element in Matsushima's design was not colour, but line. On the other hand, Wyndham Lewis's *A Battery Shelled* is an oil painting that drew upon his war experience. We can find some impact from Korin's design here, as Paul Edwards pointed out:

Korin's convention of representing the striations of the rocks that project from the sea is clearly echoed in the ridged furrows of churned up mud in Lewis's painting. Where Korin insinuates a shared rhythmical energy shaping the forms of wave, cloud and rock in his scene, Lewis's conventions assert continuity among tree-stumps, clothing, corrugated iron and the billowing smoke of destruction [22].

However, Edwards is not emphasising the similarity between the two works, but their differences. *A Battery Shelled* has an impact as a picture of all motifs combined. In *Waves at Matsushima*, the form of each motif functions as a single pattern, while each part is iteratively put together. Generally in Japan, seasonal scenes epitomised by typical natural objects have reproduced many formats for artistic expression, which are circulated around the public evoking shareable attitudes. On one hand, this circulation tends to rapidly reduce the expression into cliché. However, for people living in the same culture, representations of nature in Japanese abstract design have begun to function not as simple ornaments but as signals evoking particular emotions. Sotatsu's screen gives origin to Korin's 'Matsushima', which was called 'Araiso (a rough shoreline)' at that time, depicting the Suminoe Osaka area. 'Araiso pattern' evokes the imagery of the summer season in Japan.

4. Wyndham Lewis's Line: 'The Bone beneath the Pulp'

Coming back to the point of Vorticist design in the 1910s, it seems to me that rather than expressing signals to evoke particular emotions, Lewis wanted to express the strength of the vertical line extend upward, as in the erected rocks in the design of *Waves at Matsushima*.

The main characteristic of their expression is the simplification of shapes often referred to as being architectural or sculptural, and solid lines. These works, with their architectural framework piling up repetitively, differ widely from the direction of other forms of Modernism, which intended to introduce time into the picture plane, or to seek painterliness. As Lewis said later, Vorticist abstraction included 'the pictorial architectonics at the bottom of picture-making' [23].

Next, looking carefully at the ridged furrows of churned up mud in the central part of *A Battery Shelled*, pencilled lines by Lewis come into sight. They seem to be more enlarged in the finished work than he planned. The implication of the fact is that Lewis adopted Korin's design

of *Waves at Matsushima* as the architectural framework rather than as a representation of something else. The main element of structure is never a plane on the surface. Consequently, Lewis emphasised the importance of drawing in his 1930s article ‘The Role of Line in Art’. He wrote that ‘drawing is the probity of art’ [24] and that ‘[his] central theme is, of course, that of drawing (with burin, pen, brush, or pencil) as a department of art existing in its own right. The fine draughtsman, is it is more difficult upon a piece of white paper, your means of expression reduced to a few lines’ [25]. He accepted the medium of etching or copperplate engraving as a kind of drawing and thought that drawing had an effect that was difficult to achieve through oil painting. The word ‘draughtsman’ is closely associated with architectural drafting, as previously mentioned; further, it includes the man who makes a drawing as a great line artist. According to Lewis, drawing is both an element and a medium that could convey an artist’s tension to viewers and clearly display the artist’s mind, differing from oil painting, which becomes blurred through being overlaid many times. While the expert spectator is deceived with the mass of oil paint on a canvas, a line exposes the painter’s mind and skill. It follows that a line is nothing less than ‘the bone beneath the pulp’ for Lewis [26].

Lewis rejected Impressionist engagement in the late 19th Century with seeking the transient effects of nature, because he found that the Impressionists produced nothing that was in any sense progress. This is because ‘what Lewis called for was for artists to take control of nature’ [27], and he ‘discipline[d] it, and legislate[d] for it’ [28].

The true reason why Lewis hardly included natural landscapes in his work is apparent in his view of nature. He started from accurate drawing or the imitation of nature in art school, and for him, lines were more than instruments for representing nature, but the result of improvisation and intuition. He wrote that ‘Korin found in the symmetrical gushing of water, in waves like huge vegetable insects, traced and worked finely, on a golden p^âte, his business’ [29]. By contrast, *A Battery Shelled* shows traces that Lewis emphasised furrows of churned up mud apart from Korin’s arrangement of rocks and waves, yet he finished quickly.

Conclusion

In this paper, we examined how and why Japanese paintings with features that were perceived as flat and decorative, and Korin’s designs in particular, were accepted by British avant-garde artists. It is interesting to note that Lewis and Nevinson were not fascinated by *Japonism* or Japanese patterns, but by the masterly lines combining architectural design and decorative lines seen in Korin’s screens. For these reasons, Korin’s design was accepted by British Modernists who believed that drawing was the quintessence of design. Therefore, further studies should continue to address Lewis’s idea ‘The Bone beneath the Pulp’, referring to Chinese ideas such as ‘Spirit Resonance (kiin-seidou)’ or ‘Bone Method (koppou-youhitsu)’ in ‘The Six principles of Chinese Painting’ established by Xie He, which Lewis learned about in Laurence Binyon’s book.

Notes

- [1] Rupert Richard Arrowsmith, *Modernism and Museum: Asian, African, and Pacific Art and The London Avant-Garde*, Oxford University Press, 2010, Supervised and introduced by Matsumura Masaie, *The Japan-British Exhibition of 1910: A Collection of Official Guidebooks and Miscellaneous Publications*, Kyoto: Eureka Press, 2011, *Reconsidering early modern Yamato-e : perspectives from Japan, the UK, and the USA*, BRÜCKE, 2013.
- [2] Professor Paul Edwards's article on Wyndham Lewis is greatly important as a very rare previous study, which confers benefits to this paper. See Edwards, 'Dark swarming insect: Lewis and Nature' in *Ritsumeikan studies in language and culture*, Vol. 26-3, 2014, pp.25-42.
- [3] See Anne Middleton Wagner, *Mother Stone: The Vitality of Modern British Sculpture*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005; Richard Cork, *Jacob Epstein*, London: Tate Gallery, 1999.
- [4] Rupert Richard Arrowsmith, *Modernism and The Museum*, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp.1-3.
- [5] Quentin Bell, *Victorian Artists*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967, p.30.
- [6] *Ibid.*, p.32 & 39.
- [7] I learned about the origin of the name 'Blast' from Professor Edwards, and that the avant-gardism of Vorticism symbolised by 'Blast' fascinated the musicians Bryan Ferry and David Bowie. They conveyed Vorticist avant-gardism as 'cool' to the British punk rock generation who rebelled against the system.
- [8] Long Live the Vortex! *Blast*, no.1, 1914, p7.
- [9] *Blast*, no.1, 1914, p.39.
- [10] *Blast*, no.2, 1915, p.38.
- [11] Wyndham Lewis, 'The Improvement of Life', *Blast*, Vol.1, p.146.
- [12] This exhibition was held at Shepherd's Bush in London from May 14 to October 29 1910.
- [13] Charles Ricketts, *Pages on Art*, London: Constable and Company, 1913, pp.181-182
- [14] *The Japan-British Exhibition of 1910: A Collection of Official Guidebooks and Miscellaneous Publications*, Kyoto: Eureka Press, 2011, p.12
- [15] Laurence Binyon, *Painting in the far East: an introduction to the history of pictorial art in Asia especially China and Japan*, London: Edward Arnold, 1908, p.206
- [16] p.13, No.32, A favourite motive of the master, and also of Sotatsu. A more elaborate screen of the same subject is in the Boston Museum.
- [17] An introduction with W. B. Yeats of *Certain Noble Plays of Japan*, April 1916. See the URL: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/8094/8094-h/8094-h.htm> (Checked November 25th 2017)
- [18] *Blast*, No.2, 1915, p.95
- [19] *Blast*, No.2 p.86; Laurence Binyon, *The Flight of the Dragon*, 1911, p.27
- [20] *Sunday Times*, April 1917
- [21] David Boyd Haycock, *Exhibition Catalogue of a Crisis of Brilliance*, 2013, p.139
- [22] The version of Korin's 'Matsushimazu' that Lewis and other Vorticists adopted is disputable. Professor Edwards suggests that they might have viewed *Waves at Matsushima* in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, which is almost the same size as *A Battery Shelled*, in which Lewis adopted the landscape-oriented picture plane. See Edwards, *ibid.*, 2015, p.29. On the other hand, focusing on the erected rocks in Korin's design, Lewis's painting might be inspired by *Matsushima* in the British Museum.
- [23] As seen in Lewis's collage works or Wadsworth's woodcuts, Vorticism represented the modern industrial world differently from that of Futurist artists. As Etchells notes, in Wadsworth's works, 'an interesting simplification of planes, the closely knitted composition of roofs and chimney stacks seems to me a complete abstract of a modern industrial town'. See Frederic Etchells, 'Note for the

- Exhibition of Original Woodcuts and Drawings by Edward Wadsworth', *Avant-Garde British Printmaking 1914-1960*, London, British Museum, 1990, p.31.
- [24] Wyndham Lewis, *The Role of Line in Art*, privately edition by Paul Edwards, Cambridge, p. 2 (I received the text from Prof. Edwards on the September 1st 2017).
- [25] Lewis, *ibid.*, p.5.
- [26] Lewis, *ibid.*, p.4.
- [27] Jacky Klein, 'Things of A Minor King? Wyndham Lewis and The Art of Drawing' *The Bone Beneath Pulp: Drawings by Wyndham Lewis*, London: Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery, 2004, p.31.
- [28] Lewis, *ibid.*, p. 7.
- [29] Edwards, *ibid.*, p.41.

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