

Exhibition at St Barbe Museum and Art Gallery, Lymington, summer 2018

DAZZLE: Disguise and Disruption in War and Art

16 June – 23 September 2018

Dazzle painting, also known as Dazzle camouflage, was invented in April 1917 by the marine artist Norman Wilkinson, and used by both the Royal Navy for a limited period and the merchant navy throughout the war. Irregular colour patterns were painted on to the sides and superstructure of British and Allied ships to confuse German U-boats, in the hope that they would miss their target, hit a less vulnerable part of the vessel and allow it to escape, or simply abandon their attack. By the end of the First World War thousands of merchant ships and hundreds of naval vessels had been ‘Dazzled’, in what constituted the world’s largest public art and design display.

With Wilkinson’s first-hand assistance the scheme was expanded to other countries, notably the United States, and this prompted one US reporter to suggest that the American fleet looked like, ‘a flock of sea-going Easter Eggs.’

This ground-breaking exhibition of art and design is divided into four sections. The first section summarises Norman Wilkinson’s remarkable and varied artistic career. The second section addresses his Dazzle concept, and the day-to-day work of the Dazzle department that included making, painting and testing Dazzle ship models and producing Dazzle plans. The department comprised many male and female workers, under the direction of Wilkinson, and was headquartered at the Royal Academy Schools, part of London’s Royal Academy of Arts.

The exhibition’s third section reveals for the first time the diverse range of artists who were recruited to serve in London, and at selected British ports, to supervise the Dazzle painting of ships. These artists were of different ages, backgrounds, interests and reputations. Together, they specialised in almost every artistic genre. Included in this group are: the equine and sporting artist Charles Johnson ‘Snaffles’ Payne; the landscape and coastal painter Charles William Wyllie; the marine artists Julius Olsson and Montague Dawson (who lived in Milford on Sea, Hampshire); the interior, still life, and portrait painter Leonard Campbell Taylor; and the Vorticist Edward Wadsworth.

The fourth section features various artists who were drawn to the subject of Dazzle for personal, promotional and propaganda reasons, and these include: John Everett, James Kay, Frank H. Mason, (who also served in Wilkinson’s team), Charles Pears and Kenneth Denton Shoesmith.

The exhibition concludes by posing questions related to the success of Dazzle in wartime, and points to where visitors can discover more about the enduring influence of Norman Wilkinson’s scheme in relation to art, design, and fashion.

The St Barbe curatorial team is indebted to many individuals for their generous assistance in the creation of this exhibition. Particular thanks are given to Professor Roy R. Behrens, Professor of Art and Distinguished Scholar at the University of Northern Iowa; Ed Yardley for his assistance with Frank H. Mason and Camilla Wilkinson, granddaughter of Norman Wilkinson and the Wilkinson Estate.