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Dazzle: Disguise and disruption in war and art

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Dazzle: Disguise and disruption in war and art
by J. Taylor

The Pool of London Press, Oxford, 2016, £25
(hb)

128 pages, illustrations, bibliography, index

ISBN 9781910860144

The paradox of camouflage has been intrinsically linked to strategic maritime warfare for centuries. Seaborne concealment of ancient naval vessels was largely achieved by a clever choice of hull colour while also incorporating dyed sails. By the age of steam, making smoke was always an opportunistic screen to hide behind – until the wind changed. This eye-catching new book sees James Taylor introduce Norman Wilkinson, the creator of Dazzle: a two-toned camouflage paint scheme conceived to deceptively enhance or replace the obligatory battleship grey.

Dazzle's dramatic designs attempted to disguise the size, identity, course, and speed of a vessel by hiding its structural configuration – in plain sight. Taylor analyses every aspect of Wilkinson's life and work, while concurrently documenting the artist's achievements, along with those of his peers. The author investigates the requirement for camouflage of pre- and post-Second World War warships, merchant vessels, and passenger liners and offers his informed perspective on its relevance for use in a modern Royal Navy. Tremendous leaps forward in ship location technology are discussed, the merits of which would eventually see the art of Dazzle desist.

James Taylor, a one-time curator of paintings at the National Maritime Museum, is an established maritime art dealer, and an author and lecturer on maritime studies. Taylor's 2013 book *Your Country Needs You: The secret history of the propaganda poster* is likely to have been the author's inspiration when researching and writing *Dazzle*. When dissecting the elements of an effective propaganda poster, parallels can be drawn with those of a ship's Dazzle design. Taylor demonstrates the notion that a propaganda poster was a subliminal form of deception designed to tap into the psyche of the populace and demoralise the enemy or strengthen public opinion; whereas Dazzle was a visual extravaganza designed to deceive the

eye by clever use of a dramatic optical illusion – albeit on a vast scale. Very often, the same artist was commissioned to contribute to both mediums.

The author achieves the aim set out in his introduction by entwining the artist's personal and professional life into very readable story, while clearly defining how Wilkinson, and latterly his team of Dazzle officers, conceptualized hundreds of designs. The manifestation of Dazzle is chronologically documented through a well-conceived, written and illustrated timeline. Many of the 100 colour and black-and-white images featured are evocative of the British Cubism and Vorticism movements, which were in vogue for a short period at the turn of the century. When studied intently, several of the absorbing two-dimensional Dazzle designs transform into three-dimensional images with real movement. This style of painting and the posters from which it derives are fashionable today and are considered as contemporary art.

The passage of Norman Wilkinson's naval career is charted through both World Wars, a tenure which was clearly very inspirational to him and is often represented in his art, especially his *War at Sea* series. The author describes how Wilkinson surrounded himself with an eclectic mix of like-minded people deriving out of a variety of artistic genres. Taylor scoured articles, exhibition reviews, notices, newspaper features, magazines, and journals, along with biographies and personal reminiscences to reveal the identities of the Dazzle group. The relevance of knowing the genre of a specific artist is borne out in the avant-garde Dazzle designs to which they contributed. It is possible to identify the artistic persuasion of a designer by looking at the composition of a given Dazzle creation. Good cases in point are the stand-out geometrical fragmentation artworks created by the Vorticist Edward Alexander Wadsworth. The author explores how Wilkinson utilised the art movements of Cubism, Vorticism and Italian Futurism when incorporating these mediums into his Dazzle designs. He succinctly explains the influence these art forms had on the conception of Dazzle and what impact it had on modern art.

The narrative reads like a veritable who's who

of early twentieth-century high society. Name-dropping of period notoriety is a constant theme throughout, although this does not detract from the intent of the historical text. The author interjects with many anecdotes which enhance the piece by alluding to the pedigree of the artist. It could be argued that some of the more innocuous facts about Wilkinson need not have been published for the reader to gain a full appreciation of the man and his artwork. To some extent this is true, although the author's meticulous research did expose some very interesting facts which undoubtedly proved inspirational and fortuitous. The extent to which Taylor has researched the background of Norman Wilkinson is impressive. It is clear that Wilkinson was a very intriguing character and a prolific artist. The reader could be forgiven for thinking this book is the definitive work on the subject of Dazzle. It is not until one reads the bibliography that it becomes apparent just how much has already been written about Dazzle. An equal number of books are also referenced on the subject of camouflage.

The book zigzags from text to illustration and on to its conclusion by devoting a chapter to the return of Dazzle, or disruptive camouflage as it was known by 1941. Taylor skilfully navigates a course through the complex fluctuation in the colours of disruptive camouflage and explains why Dazzle ceased to be a viable form of naval camouflage by the dawn of World War Two. In the final chapter, 'Did Dazzle Really Work?', Taylor examines the effectiveness of the scheme – its advantages, disadvantages, and its eventual cost when comparable to that of ship losses.

The non-standard size and format of this book, when combined with the sleek avant-garde cover and fantastic illustrations, could see it being labelled a coffee-table read – which is no bad thing. Notwithstanding that, this book is a significant, well-researched contribution to the history of Dazzle and an essential reference on the art form.

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PLYMOUTH

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Viermastbark Kruzenshtern ex Padua: Eine deutsch-russische Dokumentation zur Technik- und Sozialgeschichte des Frachtseglers und Schulschiffs by T. Böttcher and C. Hieber
Bremerhaven Deutsches Schifffahrtsmuseum and Oceanum Verlag, Bremerhaven and Wiefelstede, 2016, €30.90 (hb)
325 pages, English summary, illustrations, bibliography
ISBN 9783869270777

The four-masted barque *Padua*, launched in 1926, was not only the last of the Laeisz 'Flying P-Liners', she was the last cargo-carrying square rigger to be built anywhere. *Padua* was the epitome of 'the industrial sailing ship', which is why her photograph, in her present incarnation as the sail training ship *Kruzenshtern*, was chosen to illustrate a recent *Mariners Mirror* article ('Technology and the Four-masted Commercial Sailing Ship, 1875–1950', vol. 98:4 (2012)).

Autumn 2016 saw the *Kruzenshtern* celebrate her ninetieth birthday, a real achievement given that there have been several occasions since 1945 when the breaker's yard beckoned. Her relatively brief life under the Laeisz house-flag is well documented, but Westerners know almost nothing about the period between her handover to the Soviet Union as war reparations in January 1946, and her first appearance in the International Tall Ships' Races in 1974. Actually, not much information is available to them about how she has been operated and maintained since then. By contrast, it seems that the Russians who sail in the ship today lack insight into her former life. This book aims to bridge that gap, and is a cooperative venture between academics at the Deutsches Schifffahrtsmuseum, Bremerhaven, the staff of the Baltic State Academy, Kaliningrad, and two captains of the *Kruzenshtern*, Mikhail Eremchenko and Mikhail Novikov.

Padua's time under the German flag is covered in a workmanlike manner, generally following the path set by Kurt Gerdau's 1978 book, *Padua: ein ruhmreiches Schiff*. One matter that is covered in much more detail is her partial dismasting in 1930, which was the result of a gear failure within the Jarvis bracewinch for the foremast. The photograph