

The Courtauld

Helen Saunders and the modern city

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Helen Saunders (1885–1963), *Vorticist composition with figures, black and white*, c. 1915 The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust)



Helen Saunders (1885–1963), *Vorticist composition, yellow and green (formerly 'Gulliver in Lilliput')*, c. 1915 The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust)

Introduction:

In the years just before and following World War I (1914–18) countries all around the world developed their own modern art movements. A new generation of artists responded to radical changes in how people lived and the role of technology, which the war showed could be both helpful and destructive. They were keen to break with the past and create vibrant visions of the future. Art from this time is often described as abstract: – artists were not concerned about making their artworks look realistic, but rather using shapes, colours and forms that captured the excitement of modern life.

Helen Saunders was at the heart of Vorticism, one of Britain's most daring, if short-lived, modern art groups. Formed in London in 1914 and led by artist and writer Wyndham Lewis, the group wanted to capture the action and chaos of the modern city. A vortex is like a whirlwind or tornado! The group published their own magazine called 'Blast', which suggests an explosion and blowing away the competition. Saunders's abstract images of the city were key to getting the group's message across.

Capturing the energy of the city:

Saunders's Vorticist paintings are not supposed to show a particular place or idea, but cleverly bring to mind associations with architecture, stories and human experiences. She used bold colour combinations that had rarely been seen in art before and created a sense of energy with overlapping and interlocking shapes. She sometimes cut out extra shapes and glued them to her works on paper, such as the circle at the centre of *Vorticist composition with figures, black and white*.

Look closely at the artworks on the previous page:

- In each case, which part is your eye drawn to?
- Can you see any forms that look like people? What might they be doing in each case?
- What do the other shapes make you think of?
- Which work feels more dramatic / surprising – the black and white or the colourful artwork?

Activity: Create a Vorticist cityscape



Materials:

1 sheet of white A4 paper
Sheets of A4 coloured paper or recycled scraps
HB pencil
Coloured pencils (optional)
Scissors
Glue stick



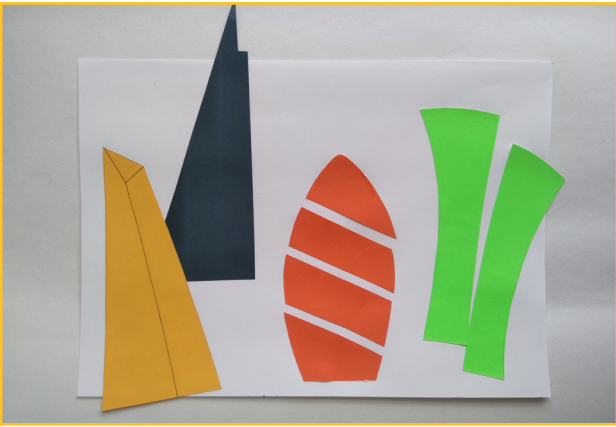
Step 1:

Start by selecting an eye-catching combination of coloured papers. Roughly sketch the outlines of your favourite modern buildings and/or invent your own. Then cut these out.



Step 2:

Use the remaining scraps of paper to make shapes that suggest explosive energy. Saunders used forms with tight angles and sharp points. Zig-zags, triangles, parallel lines, and geometric shapes repeated at different sizes work well.



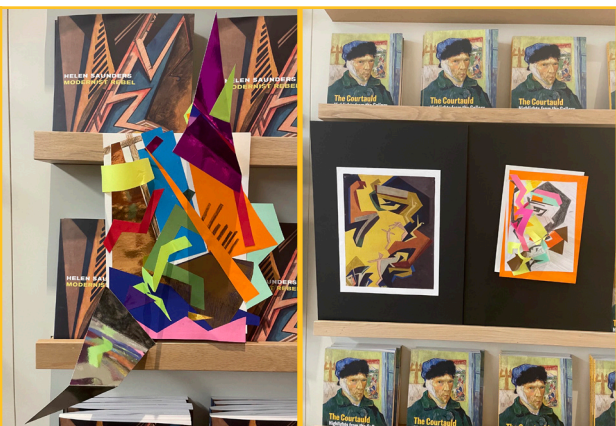
Step 3:

Now it is time to assemble your city collage. Arrange your building shapes on a sheet of white or coloured A4 paper. You do not have to keep to the boundaries of the paper. You could also try deconstructing your buildings (cutting them up into smaller shapes).



Step 4:

Stick the buildings down and start adding the abstract pieces that will make your artwork feel full of movement and excitement. You can also add shapes and shading using a pencil.



Activity variations:

Take your collage into 3D. Combine card and recycled materials to add even more texture. Use a sketch of a Helen Saunders artwork as the basis for your collage.

Further resources:

Vorticist Composition with Figures, Black and White - The Courtauld

A Modern Masterpiece Uncovered: Wyndham Lewis, Helen Saunders and Praxitella - The Courtauld

<https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/architecture/modern-architecture>