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The Courtauld News

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The mystery of Atlantic City

Helen Saunders' secret painting

Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957) was one of the most important British avant-garde artists of the interwar period and founder of the Vorticist group, active between 1914 and 1917. His painting *Praxitella* (c. 1921) depicts Iris Barry, his lover and muse at the time, and is one of his most celebrated paintings.

Praxitella came into the conservation studio at The Courtauld for the Painting Pairs project in 2019. This project connects History of Art students and Conservation students for interdisciplinary research, taking advantage of both the technical and art historical resources at The Courtauld.

Art historians had previously suspected that there was another painting underneath *Praxitella*. During the Painting Pairs project, x-ray analysis made it possible to visualise a Vorticist composition beneath *Praxitella* for the first time. However, further research revealed that the painting underneath is not by Lewis, as was first suspected, but by his female Vorticist colleague Helen Saunders.

The rediscovery was possible because a reprinted version of an ink drawing by Saunders titled *Atlantic City* had been published in the Vorticist magazine *Blast* in 1915. The composition of the ink drawing showed strong similarities to the Vorticist composition visible in the x-ray of *Praxitella*. A digital overlay of the reprinted version and the x-ray showed that the compositions line up almost exactly, helping to confirm that the painting underneath *Praxitella* is in fact *Atlantic City*.



The original oil painting *Atlantic City* was exhibited at the first Vorticist show at the Doré Gallery in London in June 1915, where it is recorded in the exhibition catalogue. Like all other Vorticist oil paintings by Saunders, it was thought to be lost. The rediscovery is therefore of pivotal importance for the understanding of Helen Saunders' contribution to the Vorticist group, as it is the only known Vorticist painting of hers that still exists today, even if overpainted. Through analysis of small samples taken from the painting, it was also possible to suggest the pigments used by Saunders. Reconstruction of the painting shows that Saunders can be differentiated from her male Vorticist colleagues through her use of brighter colours and more contrasting forms. This rediscovery and reconstruction are crucial for the understanding of female Vorticist artists, who have long been overshadowed by their male peers.

The culmination of this research project, including the final colour reconstruction of Saunders' Vorticist work, will be exhibited for the first time together with *Praxitella* in a small, focused exhibition in The Courtauld Gallery's project space in October 2022 to parallel the exhibition *Helen Saunders: Modernist Rebel* (13 October – January 2023).



Above (from left): Helen Saunders, *Atlantic City*, c.1915, reproduced in *Blast* II, pg. 57; Wyndham Lewis, *Praxitella*, c.1921. Image © Leeds Art Gallery, Leeds; X-ray of *Praxitella*; X-ray and *Atlantic City* overlay



Rebecca Chipkin and Helen Kohn
Rebecca Chipkin (Postgraduate Diploma, Conservation of Easel Paintings 2021) is currently a Fulbright-American Friends of the Mauritshuis Fellow in paintings conservation. Helen Kohn (MA 2020) is currently working as a Research Assistant at the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister in Dresden and is completing a PhD on Correggio at the Goethe University in Frankfurt.