

ART AND LIFE 1920 – 1931

This exhibition examines the artistic partnership between Ben Nicholson and Winifred Nicholson in the 1920s and their friendship and collaboration with Christopher Wood, Alfred Wallis and William Staite Murray. Inspired by each other the Nicholsons experimented furiously and often painted the same subject, one interested in colour, the other more interested in form. Winifred wrote of her time with Ben: “All artists are unique and can only unite as complementaries not as similarities.”

LUGANO AND LONDON

After their marriage in 1920 the Nicholsons spent the next three winters in Lugano, Switzerland, stopping off in Paris on the way there and back. They were particularly attracted by the Cubist works of Picasso and in Lugano they absorbed the lessons of Paris.

They experimented and painted intensely, often outside and in the snow, gradually finding their own individual styles. It was in Lugano that Winifred Nicholson first painted flowers on a window sill with a view behind, as in *Polyanthus and Cineraria*; this became her favourite subject which she varied and evolved throughout the rest of her painting life. For Ben Nicholson, the process of development was more measured, but eventually took him as far as the world of reliefs and refined abstracts.

Back in London in 1923, the Nicholsons held their first joint exhibition and Ben Nicholson made his first abstract painting *1924 (first abstract painting, Chelsea)*. Intriguingly, it has a similar colour scheme to one of Winifred Nicholson's flower pieces painted at the same time *King's Road, Chelsea*. Ben gradually refined his still life paintings, reducing them to their barest elements, but it was to be another ten years before he returned to complete abstraction.

CUMBERLAND

Throughout the 1920s the Nicholsons moved around England, painting in London (both Chelsea and Dulwich), Dymchurch in Kent, Sutton Veny in Wiltshire, Feock and St. Ives in Cornwall; but it was Cumberland that was their base. In 1923 they purchased Bankshead, a farmhouse on Hadrian's Wall in North East Cumberland, and began to explore the surrounding landscape together, often painting the distant rolling fells. Winifred wrote, "I have always lived in Cumberland – the call of the curlew is my call, the tremble of the harebell is my tremble in life, the blue mist of lonely fells is my mystery, and the silver gleam when the sun does come out is my pathway."

In 1926 the Nicholsons met Christopher Wood in London. Their friendship blossomed in the spring of 1928 when Wood visited the Nicholsons in Cumberland. Wood painted and drew outside with Ben Nicholson, the two playing a game of reducing their drawings as much as possible. While Wood was in Cumberland, Ben painted *1928 (Walton Wood cottage no.1)*, which shows his growing interest in primitive art intermixed with a local landscape. Wood described his visit: "I am on the verge of the real thing after what I saw and learned in Bankshead."

Concurrently, the reputation and popularity of potter William Staite Murray grew steadily throughout the 1920s and in 1925 he was appointed Head of Ceramics at the Royal College of Art. He viewed his work as a fundamental abstract art lying between painting and sculpture. Inspired by the Chinese Sung dynasty pots that had begun to appear in London, his works are emotionally expressive with imaginative titles. Such detail appealed to the Nicholsons, with whom he was friends and exhibited widely.

CORNWALL: FEOCK AND ST. IVES

In the summer of 1928, the Nicholsons holidayed at Pill Creek, Feock in Cornwall, which Winifred Nicholson described as “a sleeping beauty’s countryside of southern foliage, sheltered creeks and wide expanse of water.” The Nicholsons were joined by Christopher Wood, and he by his mistress and muse Frosca Munster. Wood’s *Pill Creek, Feock, Cornwall*, Winifred Nicholson’s *Summer*, and Ben Nicholson’s *1928 (Pill Creek)* were all inspired by this trip.

While at Feock, Ben Nicholson and Wood made a day trip to St. Ives where they met the marine painter Alfred Wallis, and not long after the whole party moved to St. Ives. Wallis was entirely self-taught and depicted scenes from his memory, schooners in which he had crossed the Atlantic, or mackerel luggers he had worked on, and images of St. Ives Bay and Mount’s Bay, using old ships or household paint on shaped pieces of card.

Each of the three painters responded to Wallis in their own way, but he was most significant for Ben Nicholson who saw these paintings as experiences more real than life itself, and stated that “one finds only the influences one is looking for.” Attracted by the intrinsic nature of Wallis’s art, Nicholson responded by making works of deceptive simplicity such as *c. 1930 (Cornish port)*.

Ben Nicholson distributed pictures by Alfred Wallis amongst his friends and sent a Wallis painting to William Staite Murray, noting that it reminded him of one of Murray’s pots. We can only speculate as to the exact link, as it is not known which picture Ben sent. Winifred gives some insight into this exchange, for she wrote of one of Murray’s pots as having “the elemental depth of the sea”.

DIVERGING PATHS

The Nicholsons and Wood shared no more trips after 1928. Wood continued to make painting trips away from Paris, notably to Tréboul, Brittany in 1929 and 1930, where he painted *Le Phare*, a work in which the influence of Wallis is most evident. Addicted to opium and struggling financially, he committed suicide at Salisbury station in August 1930 at the age of 29.

Alfred Wallis and Ben Nicholson remained in contact, visiting each other when they could and exchanging letters. Ben also sent Wallis money and materials, receiving parcels of paintings by post in return. When Wallis's work was exhibited in London it was met with mixed responses and it was left to Ben to champion him amongst his artistic friends.

Ben Nicholson also remained an enthusiast of William Staite Murray's work. Upon seeing Murray's solo exhibition at the Lefevre Gallery in London in 1931 he wrote "one big brown pot is one of the finest things I have ever seen." *Persian Garden* was exhibited in this exhibition, and is widely seen as one of Murray's masterpieces, it is possible that this was the pot referred to by Nicholson. By the late 1920s Murray had a higher reputation than the Nicholsons, and was arguably as good a potter as Bernard Leach. Staite Murray travelled to Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia) in July 1939 and the outbreak of World War Two influenced his decision to remain there until his death in 1962. He never potted again.

By the early 1930s, the Nicholsons' marriage came under strain and they began to separate, although Ben stayed in close contact and visited regularly. By 1932, Winifred had settled in Paris and while staying with her there Ben made his first relief. Later Ben wrote to Winifred "I do connect the 'circle' idea as coming a great deal from your constructive thought and all the new ideas you have found since then."