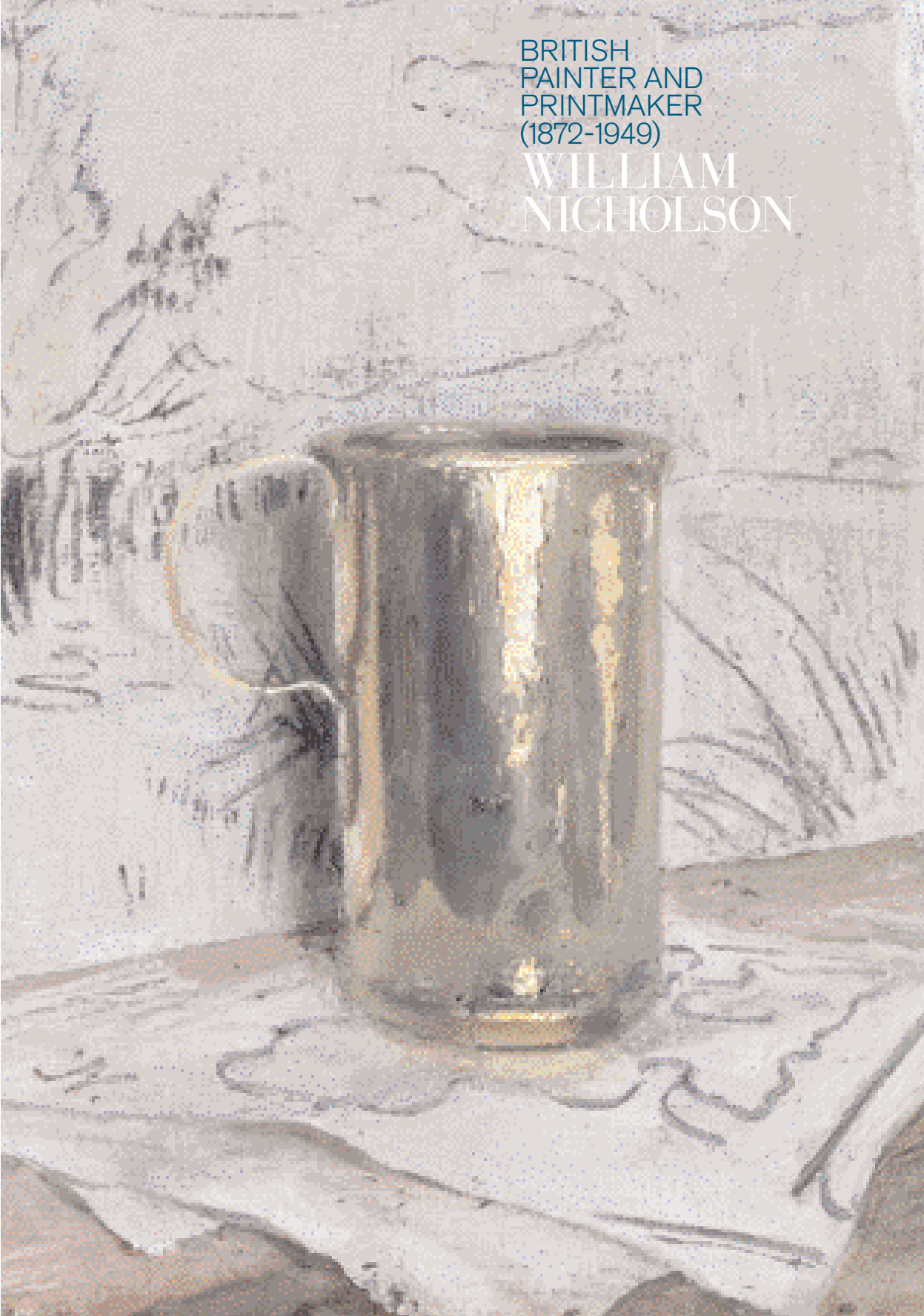


BRITISH
PAINTER AND
PRINTMAKER
(1872-1949)

WILLIAM
NICHOLSON



An Introduction to the Exhibition for Teachers and Students

NICHOLSON

William

BRITISH PAINTER AND PRINTMAKER (1872-1949)

Sackler Galleries
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Cover

The Gold Jug, 1937 (detail)
Oil on panel
40.5 × 33 cm
Lent by Her Majesty the Queen

'He paints his pictures dressed in spotless white ducks and socks with shiny – ever so shiny – patent leather shoes, and if you come to think of it, you cannot imagine anyone painting William Nicholson's pictures in anything but spotless white ducks and shiny, ever so shiny patent leather shoes. Think of tweed trousers, blue blouse, and brown shoes. Impossible!' S.K.N. (Stanley Kennedy North), *Contemporary British Artists*, 1923

INTRODUCTION

The actor and stage designer Edward Gordon Craig (1872–1966) likened the arrival on the London art scene of his friend William Nicholson (1872–1949) to the sudden appearance of 'a young raven among a flock of dowdy pigeons'. The remark referred to the mid-1890s when Nicholson, as one half of the Beggarstaff Brothers, was best known for his innovative work on posters and later for his witty, charming and often bold woodcuts. In some surveys of English art those achievements are all that are mentioned, as though William Nicholson must be best known for his image of Queen Victoria celebrating her Golden Jubilee as a dumpy old lady out for a walk with her dog. This was despite the fact that from 1900 until he stopped painting in the early 1940s he produced nearly 900 paintings – still lifes, landscapes and portraits – many of a rare and distinctive quality.

Seen as a conservative painter whose style had not developed much further than Manet, Whistler and Corot, his reputation has further suffered through being the father of one of Britain's first abstract artists, Ben Nicholson (1894–1982). Critics charting the influence of modernism on British art have cast William as the kind of artist his son would need to react against, a representative of Edwardian values, all surface and no depth, detached from the modern world and unresponsive to the art that was being produced around him.

His painting *The Lowestoft Bowl*, 1911 (**cat. 14**) has been hanging in the first room of the Still Life section at Tate Modern. Surrounded by Morandi, Bonnard, Cézanne and others, it hangs as a representative of 'Realism', and almost, for the casual viewer, as an example of what we should not be looking at. And as that viewer progresses through the kaleidoscope of twentieth-century art that is Tate Modern, it is unlikely that they will remember Nicholson's dark and rather forbidding picture. In fact, the painting demands and rewards closer observation, partly for the pleasure we will get, but also to repay the artist for the fidelity and delicacy with which he has rendered his subject.

This exhibition of William Nicholson's work is the first major one in London since his retrospective exhibition in 1942, at the age of 70, in the war-time National Gallery emptied of its old masters. It offers us the opportunity to explore a subtle and often enigmatic painter, whose own pleasure in the possibilities of paint are expressed with such fine judgement, and who managed to find his own individual way to represent what he saw.

EARLY YEARS

William Nicholson was born into a prosperous Nottinghamshire family. His father ran an ironworks specialising in agricultural machinery. In 1880, when William was eight, his father was elected a Conservative Member of Parliament and a year later the son was sent to St Magnus Grammar School in Newark as a boarder. In 1926 William could still confess that 'My life at school was such hell that it is still my pet nightmare'. The nightmare was relieved by the intervention of the drawing master, William Cubley, who encouraged Nicholson and gave him private lessons at his own home from the age of twelve. William was clearly an eager pupil. His father's rebuke, 'I thought you had been told that if you must draw on Sunday, it must be Sunday things' was met with a witty response: 'It's the brush and comb I do my hair with before I go to church'.

'Do draw a lot of little things with the sincerity of which only you and Dürer are capable.'

'Now if you are to be a great painter you must be able to draw anything and everything. So surely your course is clear enough.

Draw, draw, only draw.'

William Nicholson, letters to his son Ben, 1914

Perhaps his subject matter shows an early interest in the simple objects that would later fill his still lifes.

It was Cubley who recommended that William leave school at sixteen and in 1888 he went to Sir Hubert von Herkomer's art school in Bushey, Hertfordshire. Herkomer (1849–1914), a German who had settled in England in 1870, was a man of many talents, known for his portraits and his social realist paintings, such as his Royal Academy Diploma work of 1891, *On Strike*. He liked to stage dramas, often with elaborate lighting, and with the students participating, and later went on to direct silent films from his own studio in Bushey. However, his sense of humour may have been limited, for when William posed a model with a black umbrella open behind her, he was accused of perpetrating 'a piece of Whistlerian impudence'. William left in the spring of 1891, before he was dismissed.

In October of the same year he went to Paris to study life drawing at the Académie Julian, only recently the home of founder members of the Nabi group, excited by the influence of Gauguin. For William, the Louvre was to prove more fertile ground, and he developed an interest in seventeenth-century Spanish painting, making a copy of a Velásquez *Infanta*.

The Académie was crowded with students, many from abroad, and the teaching was sporadic. William was probably too young and inexperienced to absorb the competing artistic influences of a very radical period in French art, and after a few months he returned to Newark to live with his parents and work in his own studio (see cat. 2, *The Dandelion Field*).

THE BEGGARSTAFF BROTHERS

In April 1893, William Nicholson secretly married Mabel Pryde, who had been a fellow student at Herkomer's Art School, and the couple moved to Denham, not far from London. Mabel's elder brother James, also a painter, persuaded William to join him in a partnership to produce posters for the increasingly lucrative advertising market. Their first effort in 1894 was commissioned by the actor Edward Gordon Craig, a friend of James. Gordon Craig was appearing as Hamlet in a touring production of the play. Wanting to make their work immediate and easily visible from a distance or from passing vehicles, the pair decided to use silhouette, and simplified shape and colour. They worked on the poster by cutting out black-and-white paper and pasting it onto a brown background to form their image of Hamlet contemplating Yorick's skull. The producer was surprised by the lack of colour, but paid them. Nicholson stencilled the design onto brown paper for copies to appear around the country.

Using the pseudonym J. and W. Beggarstaff, they submitted speculative designs under the title 'Nobody's ...' ('nobody' representing the potential manufacturer's name) to a poster exhibition held at the Westminster Aquarium in October 1894. Although no manufacturer took up their ideas for advertising candles, pianos or 'washing blue', the poster of Hamlet made a great impression.

Cat. 69 The actor-manager Henry Irving was a friend of the Pryde parents, and the Beggarstoffs submitted this design, the second of three versions, to Irving to publicise the theatrical adaptation of the masterpiece *Don Quixote* by Miguel

Cat. 69

J. and W. Beggarstaff (James Pryde and William Nicholson), *Don Quixote* (design for a poster), 1895
Collage, black and brown paper pasted on white
193 × 196 cm
Victoria and Albert Museum, London



de Cervantes (1547–1616). This epic story tells of an aged gentleman whose mind had become unbalanced by his devotion to tales of knightly chivalry and who feels bound to roam the world on his decrepit horse in search of adventure. In fact the play only dealt with the famous episode in which Don Quixote tilts at windmills, imagining them to be giants threatening the land. It formed part of a triple bill.

Using black and a couple of browns, the artists cut out the required shapes from coloured paper, as in the Hamlet poster, and pasted them onto a white background. The effect is flat with a sense of perspective achieved through the relative size of windmill, horse and rider. For the first time they used shadow on the face to suggest three-dimensional form and the same role is played by the highlights on the Don's shield and armour. The economy of means employed to create the horse is particularly dramatic in its impact.

Irving paid the 'brothers' for the poster but it was never used, possibly because its relative simplicity did not reflect the elaborate nature of Irving's productions, and it advertised only one part of the triple bill. It is interesting to note that the poster for the current production at the Lyceum, *The Lion King*, pays a sort of homage to the Beggarstoffs with its dramatic, cut out lion's head in black on an orange-yellow background.

How does the use of colour illustrate this particular episode of *Don Quixote*?

Do you feel the lettering is integrated into the poster?

'To dinner with Nicholson and his wife – a fiery disciple of Velasquez and Whistler – both undeniable masters but bad to take as masters.'

Edward Gordon Craig

"One of us gets an idea", said Pryde, "we talk it over, the other suggests an addition, the matter is reconsidered, perhaps shelved away for months."

Interview in *the Idler* magazine, January 1896

NICHOLSON'S WOODCUTS

Although the Beggarstaffs did a poster for Rowntree's Cocoa and for a Drury Lane production of Cinderella, the commercial possibilities of the partnership were never properly realised – which is not surprising considering that one of the most successful advertisements of the period had used Sir John Millais's (1829–1896) popular painting *Bubbles* to advertise Pears soap.

Nicholson decided to try his hand at woodcuts. Although he knew and admired the poster work of Toulouse-Lautrec and Bonnard, which was also shown at the Westminster Aquarium, his inspiration came from the simplified woodcuts in early nineteenth-century English pamphlets of popular tales or ballads sold by travelling salesmen. Deciding to enter the commemorative market, he produced a woodcut of the Prince of Wales's Derby winner Persimmon. Shown at the Fine Art Society in 1896, it attracted the attention of James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), whose reputation in London had been re-established by a retrospective exhibition of his *Nocturnes* and marine paintings at the Goupil Gallery in 1892. Whistler recommended the artist's work to his friend the publisher William Heinemann and Nicholson was commissioned to do a book cover with a racing theme, *Mr Blake of Newmarket* (cat. 78). The publishing firm had only been going for six years and was eager for new projects and William proposed a children's alphabet, submitting two sample designs.

Cat. 70 This is a rare self-portrait of Nicholson, posing as a pavement artist. His somewhat contorted position helps to emphasise the triangular structure, which reflects the letter A. At his feet is a design for the letter P and at the right, radically cut off, is D. Nicholson plays with the idea of white and black as positive and negative images, alternating the colours in their roles as foreground and background elements. In so doing he takes considerable liberties with the forms, since the dramatic black shadows that advance up the folds of the trousers covering his thigh leave his backside only partially delineated, and we have to guess where the black of the shadows merges with the black of the background.

Nicholson looks out to the left in a somewhat depressed manner, and this pavement artist's appeal to passers by was carried on into the design of *B for Beggar*, a portrait of James Pryde leaning on his staff.

Identify instances where black or white play foreground or background roles.

Do you think this print reflected Nicholson's current view of the status of an artist?

Why do you think that he uses the past tense in the title of the work?

Even before *An Alphabet* was published, Heinemann commissioned their next project, *An Almanac of Twelve Sports*. While working on the *Almanac*, Nicholson produced his famous woodcut of Queen Victoria (cat. 71), which was turned down by Heinemann and published by W.E. Henley in his monthly magazine, the *New Review*. Further portrait studies followed, including one

'This art of leaving out is proof of the perfect acquaintance with the art of putting in. Mr Nicholson states the few essential facts, and makes all else accessory.'

James McNeill Whistler



Cat. 70

A was an Artist from
An Alphabet
(Edition de Luxe), 1898
1 of 26 hand-coloured
woodcuts
24 × 19.5 cm
Private collection, courtesy
of The Fine Art Society Plc

of Whistler in September 1897 in which Nicholson paid homage to the master's own portraits of male figures.

Nicholson's next project for Heinemann, *London Types*, was published in November 1898 and, in order to clear debts incurred with the publisher, Nicholson added five more portraits to the *New Review* studies to produce *Twelve Portraits*. Critics saw Nicholson as a defender of English art against foreign influences introduced by artists like Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898). But by 1900, despite a trip to New York to work for Harper's magazine and the winning of a Gold Medal at the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris for *Twelve Portraits*, Nicholson was tiring of both the physical effort and low financial rewards of his woodcuts. He had three children to support and a career as a painter had to be attempted.

WHAT KIND OF PAINTER?

Nicholson had already come under the influence of Whistler who, for the last twenty years, had represented an alternative viewpoint to the retrogressive influence of the Royal Academy, which still emphasised the 'significant subject', treated with a highly polished, conservative technique. Whistler put poetry

above representation. Often completing a painting in a single sitting, he would simplify and subordinate detail to his aims of achieving unity of tone, colour and design.

For an artist like Nicholson, the development of an art free of the restrictions of Victorian taste had to come about either through an engagement with modern French art or through a creative reinterpretation of the art of the past. Whistler himself had many contacts with French artists, but another source of influence for Nicholson might have come through the New English Art Club, founded in 1886 with the aim of 'obtaining fuller recognition for the work of English Artists who had studied in France'. Philip Wilson Steer (1860–1942) came closest of all the members of that body to true Impressionism with his sunlit beach scenes. A more formidable member was Walter Sickert (1860–1942), once a pupil of Whistler's, who became a close friend of Edgar Degas (1834–1917). Sickert was impressed by the French artist's involvement with modern Parisian life and with the painstaking way he developed his paintings. Until 1898, when Sickert moved to Dieppe, he would paint the popular entertainments of modern London, and in doing so he moved far beyond his original teacher, Whistler, whose art he would come to criticise as too simplified.

But Nicholson seems to have been unimpressed by Impressionism or its English developments. His debt to Whistler can be seen in an early portrait of Max Beerbohm (cat. 5), and later in his landscapes. We can presume that Nicholson would have known R.A.M. Stevenson's book on Velázquez, published in 1895, and would have responded, as Sanford Schwartz points out, to Stevenson's 'forceful and poetic declaration that a painter's eye in itself, that is, a sheerly optical awareness of the world, was sufficient to create a great body of work.'

Faced with the need to earn a living, many artists of this period had either to supplement their income by teaching or respond to the enormous demand and potentially lucrative commissions for portraits. Nicholson was no exception. Much of his early work was to be portraiture, especially of children, but increasingly he was able to devote time to still lifes and landscapes.

STILL LIFE

The still-life tradition that William Nicholson inherited emanates from the French school of Chardin (1699–1779) through the mediation of Manet (1832–1883), rather than from seventeenth-century Dutch paintings with their allegorical significance implying the transience of earthly things and the inevitability of death. Nicholson's concerns are more to do with how we might see objects and understand them in painterly terms, and in doing so he explores light and the importance of shadows, the degree of reflectivity of the objects he paints, and the distortions and tricks of reflections.

Cat. 14 In this rich and rather sombre painting, a Lowestoft ceramic bowl sits inside a large dish, possibly of polished wood, or of earthenware with a rich brown glaze. Behind the bowl are three tulips and a single petal rests on the front edge of the dish. The light comes from the top left and we sense its illumination through the delicate gradation of the brown of the dish, which is lighter to the right.

There is a sense of harmony in the way in which the light and the dark



Cat. 14
The Lowestoft Bowl, 1911
Oil on canvas
48 × 61 cm
Tate. Presented by the
Contemporary Art Society,
1917

shapes play off against one another. Nicholson explores the highlights and the reflective nature of his objects. The main highlight in the white interior of the bowl is shown by a streak of impasto white. Another highlight catches the front rim of the dish and is reflected in the middle of the bowl. Highlights on the orange tulips are reflected, with delicate orange dabs, on the left-hand side of the bowl and on the brown of the dish.

Does the highlight from the front of the dish that is reflected in the middle of the bowl appear anywhere else?

The tulip stalk to the right of the bowl casts a shadow on the white tablecloth. Does it cast a shadow on the brown dish?

What form does the tulip petal at the front echo?

LANDSCAPE

On holidays in Dieppe from 1903, Nicholson had painted street scenes and harbour views. In England he painted the occasional landscape, and a few based on the countryside near Littlehampton in 1906. Landscape was to become a major part of his output following the acquisition of a summer retreat at Rottingdean on the South Downs in 1909. Here he was to produce a large number of landscapes, either of the gently rolling hills of the South Downs or of the cliffs and sea. Generally he would simplify the dominant shapes, with the



Cat. 17
Sunset, 1912
 Oil on canvas
 53 × 58 cm
 Private collection

smooth application of paint avoiding any sense of texture. Although these paintings are frequently small in themselves, the landscapes they represent have a sense of immensity through the use of tiny figures or animals that have their place in the environment, but are somehow dwarfed by it.

Cat. 17 In a letter to Ben, dated 25 April 1912, William sketched a quick drawing of this painting, with the remarks, 'Rather a good Down Piece I did night before last looking into eye of sun. Sun to be looked at only through smoked glass.' Against the grass he wrote, 'brilliant green'.

The sun is setting behind a gently sloping hill: already the concave indentations in front of the ridge are in shadow. It is a transient moment and we sense the shadows advancing towards the cows and horse that graze in the distance. In the foreground a fence blocks our entry into the scene and separates us from what we see. On the pole of the fence is a small bird delicately flecked with pink.

How does the size of the bird compare with the horse and cows? And what does this tell us about the space?

In his letter he called the grass 'brilliant green'. How has he actually painted it?

Nicholson rarely talked about his work, but in 1934 he wrote a letter to the editor of *The Artist*, a magazine for amateur painters, about his painting *Judd's Farm*, 1912 (**cat.20**). In it he mentions how the horizon 'divides the panel into nearly equal parts; an odd place to find it but the pattern manages to adjust it alright. The colours few but inevitable.' He goes on to discuss the use of tone, the means by which the intensity of a colour is affected by the strength of light or shadow that falls across it. Citing the three tones of grass/sea/sky, he draws a little diagram to show that the half tone is far from the middle and towards the black. 'This applies to the light end as well as the dark, and, I think makes for distinction in any painting. Simplification in tone is a secret of great value, and the difference between colour and tone is of equal importance. The knowledge of both of these subjects adds enormously to sight enjoyment. Have you noticed how subconsciously grateful one feels to the masters for their simplification of line, tone and colour?'



Cat. 20
Judd's Farm, 1912
 Oil on panel
 33 × 41 cm
 Towner Art Gallery,
 Eastbourne

THE PORTRAITS

Over Nicholson's career as an artist, portraits make up almost a third of his overall production, and certainly took up a major proportion of his working life. His son Ben later described the effort involved in his father's portrait work and the release he felt when able to paint still lifes and landscapes in a more spontaneous fashion. He was averse to psychological analysis and his portraits do not interrogate his sitters. He was happiest with subjects he either knew or with whom he could sympathise, rather than those demanding the presentation of self or the recording of status.

Cat. 32 This portrait of the noted garden designer Gertrude Jekyll was commissioned by her business partner, the architect Edwin Lutyens. Miss Jekyll herself had been against the idea 'on the grounds that unsightly objects had better not be painted', but came round to the painting once it was finished. She insisted that Nicholson work in the evening when she was tired and needed to rest, and the painter used a single portable lamp placed between himself and the sitter.

The canvas is a fairly coarse weave and is under-painted with a deep red. Both these elements are used with great effect in the modelling of the face. The sitter's reticence allowed Nicholson to adopt a three-quarter view, with unusual prominence given to the hands, so that we sense the relation between the eyes and the hands, between the contemplative and the practical. The unity of the painting, with its rich and varied blacks, is maintained by the delicate curves which reflect the roundness of the sitter's face: the curve of the white cloth against the chair, the curve of her shoulder against the white cloth, the flow of the cardigan under the cheek down to the hands which themselves mirror the curve of the forehead.

Looking at the black of the sitter's cardigan and of her skirt, how has the artist differentiated the various forms and textures and densities of the black?

Might the practical tools of gardening (the hands), and the designing ones (the eyes), apply to another profession?

To amuse himself in the daytime Nicholson produced *Miss Jekyll's Gardening Boots* (cat. 33). Was this an opportunity for the still life to distil the essence of a personality?

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

By the start of the First World War, Nicholson was well established in the eyes of conservative critics as one of England's leading painters, able to stand aside from the various groupings that preoccupied other artists at the time. Whether it was Sickert and the Camden Town group exploring a drab townscape and low-life subjects, the painters of Bloomsbury influenced by Roger Fry's exhibitions in 1910 and 1912 of French Post-Impressionist art, the Fauves and early Cubism, or the more avant-garde Vorticists headed by Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957), Nicholson steadfastly maintained his own independence. When declining to be a member of the Royal Academy in 1926 he stated, 'The idea of a label of any sort takes away from me all desire to paint.'



Cat. 32
Miss Gertrude Jekyll, 1920
Oil on canvas
76.5 × 77.5 cm
National Portrait Gallery,
London

'Black is the most essential of colours, it finds its glorification, its life shall I say, in the deeper springs of nature.'

Odilon Redon in an article shown to Nicholson by Edward Gordon Craig



Cat. 27
Ballroom in an Air Raid,
 1918
 Oil on canvas
 64 × 74 cm
 Private collection

Nicholson started the war with a somewhat fruitless expedition to India to paint the Viceroy. Neither man was happy with the result, although Nicholson did a fine portrait of the Viceroy's orderly. Although professionally frustrating, the trip to India released Nicholson from the marital tensions that had arisen since taking his model and studio assistant Marie Laquelle as his mistress in 1910 (see *Marie*, cat. 11).

Although not a painter of modern life, a number of works relating to the war suggest the artist's connection to the anxieties of the time. The very large *Canadian Headquarters Staff* (cat. 26), with its group of officers theatrically posed against a backdrop-photograph of the bombed-out Cloth Hall at Ypres, undercuts any sense of the glamour of war.

Cat. 27 Nicholson had painted a number of interiors in which he could explore lighting effects and the atmosphere of a large space. In February 1918 he wrote to his son Ben, then in California for his health, about sheltering from air-raids in the larger London hotels. 'The last raid we took old Mrs Carie down to the Ballroom of the Piccadilly Hotel, and as there was lots of time I made notes for a picture which is really good I think.' In a later letter he describes the Ritz as being full of 'taxi drivers, babies and fat sleepy women, with a sprinkling of the idle rich.' The rather nonchalant tone of the letters seems to belie the dramatic intensity of this painting, which in its quiet enigmatic way conveys some of the effects of war on the civilian population.

We are immediately struck by the emptiness of the space, a room being used for other purposes. The ceiling bears down in a claustrophobic manner and at the back we sense that the space opens out to hold the chandeliers whose reflections appear like exploding bombs in the mirror above the entrance. The rolled-up red carpet runs like a scar through the painting and the black clothes suggest loss and mourning. The bent figure seated on the carpet attempts to comfort a fractious child and in front of her, a sleeping infant is covered with what looks like a white shroud.

In the right-hand foreground there is a hat, a bottle and a glass. Who might they belong to?

Do you agree with the interpretation of the painting? Is it too literary and symbolic, the red carpet being simply a red carpet, not, as another writer has suggested 'a rivulet of blood'? Or can we sense that merely by being there and painting what he saw Nicholson unconsciously expressed the atmosphere of the war?

Nicholson was to suffer the loss of his first wife Mabel, affectionately known as Prydie, who died of Spanish Flu in July 1918. Three months later his second son Tony died of wounds in France. It is not surprising that in his painting *Armistice Night* (cat. 28), the ominous presence of the guns, with figures hanging from the barrels, overpowers the sense of celebration. The blacks, browns and greys of the painting are suggestive of the mud of the trenches, with just a hint of red in the flags, while overhead, fireworks mimic exploding shells.

Ben had returned from California on his mother's death. He had always regarded her as the stronger, more intelligent parent and his feeling of estrangement from his father was exacerbated by William's second marriage,



Cat. 38
The Silver Casket, 1919
Oil on canvas
32.5 × 40.5 cm
Private collection

less than a year and a half after his mother's death, to the recently widowed Edith Stuart-Wortley, a woman to whom Ben himself had felt attracted. Mabel Nicholson had resumed painting after their fourth child went to school in 1909 and a retrospective exhibition of her work, organised by Ben, was held in 1920.

Cat. 38 Nicholson's still lifes of this period take on a new authority, less formal in their arrangement, bolder in colour and with a greater sense of the space outside the picture. Here, Nicholson has placed a silver casket right in the middle of the canvas. In front is a pair of blue gloves and a black bead necklace. A similar necklace of red beads hangs over the edge of the table at the front of the picture in a precarious fashion. There seems to be more of the necklace out of the picture than in, and we might wonder why it doesn't slip away. The light catches only the lid of the casket and the projecting bottom rim, leaving the curve of its surface to reflect the objects on the table so that gloves and necklaces appear like crumpled manifestations of themselves, sucked into the casket.

How has the artist lit the silver casket to achieve his aims?

What is also reflected in the casket?

How do you respond to the distortion of gloves and necklace in the reflection?

It is tempting to find some symbolic meaning when looking at a picture like *The Silver Casket* or *The Glass Bowl*, 1919 (cat. 40), a mournful study in black, white and greys, which again features an empty pair of gloves and uses an object and its shadow to suggest presence and absence. But as Merlin James writes in his catalogue essay, 'The feeling that the objects are meaningful – have associations or "sentimental value" – is powerful. All the more so for the fact that we can never really know of what, or for whom, they may have been significant... Yet we are not finally invited to read the paintings as the personal confession, or expression, of William himself.'

THE POST-WAR YEARS

Nicholson's second wife Edie was a wealthy woman in her own right, and in 1923 her father bought the couple a house at Sutton Veny in Wiltshire. The countryside, with its similarities to the South Downs, inspired a renewed interest in landscape (cat. 47). His still lifes were more frequently of flowers, often painted with a lighter palette (cat. 39). Nicholson revived his graphic work, collaborating with other authors, but also writing and illustrating two children's books of his own.

As his son Ben moved towards abstraction there was an increased sense of tension between the two men, and William was to write in 1927, 'My dear, it doesn't matter to me a pinch if you think – or the reverse – I am old fashioned. I look on fashion as a garment which keeps on changing and leaves the body much the same in all the ages, hence my distrust of your judgement in following the paths of they who worship the crippled jug. In fifty years time or before, this must date your work pretty badly I think.'

Although he was to describe his marriage to Edie as '12 or so of my



Cat. 52

Plaza de Toros, Malaga,
1935
Oil on plywood
65 × 78 cm
Tate. Presented by
Miss H. Stocks, 1989

happiest years', they began to drift apart after the death of their second child, only a month old, in 1927. By 1933 they had separated, just before Nicholson was to make his first journey to Spain. Here the intensity of light and colour was to revivify his landscape painting, animating the brushstrokes with a new sense of freedom. It was on his third visit that he met the romantic novelist Marguerite Steen, who was to become his companion for the rest of his life.

Cat. 52 Marguerite Steen describes Nicholson disappearing up the hill in the evening to where he was making sketches for the Malaga Bull Ring. 'The colour', he pointed out, 'is all in the shadows.' The final painting was done in his studio in London.

Nicholson takes a high-angled view, looking down into the centre of the bull-ring, while the surrounding port and harbour buildings stream away into the distance. As he told readers of *The Artist*, 'You merely get your lights and darks right, and the buildings look after themselves.' Lower down, some spectators gather on the rocks to watch the bullfight and the tiny speck of matador and bull give the scene its sense of immensity. But the way in which the bull-ring occupies our attention, its central position in the composition, makes us feel we might be looking at a still life.

How do the shadows in the foreground match those of the bull-ring and its surround?

Do you feel the aerial viewpoint creates an unusual sense of vastness in the composition? How does Nicholson usually confine his subject matter?

Cat. 62 During the late 1930s Nicholson painted a number of still lifes of metal containers, of different degrees of reflectivity, posed in a more casual manner, strewn across some crumpled tissue, resting on newspaper, or in this case placed on top of some of the artist's sketches. Behind the jug is a primed canvas with brief indications for a landscape – a line of trees, some reeds, a hill in the distance. *The Gold Jug* is painted on panel, but Nicholson paints in the weave of the canvas of the sketch behind. The intensity of the golden highlight streaking down the jug glows with a particular brilliance, in contrast to the lack of colour in the rest of the painting. The way in which the shadow of the jug blends into the sketch on the 'canvas' is particularly masterly.

The jug itself reflects nothing we can recognise but seems to present a mysterious 'landscape' of its own. The signature to the work takes the form of a monogram N on the sketch on which the jug rests, as though Nicholson was asserting his presence in the work. For Sanford Schwartz *The Gold Jug* 'becomes, in effect, a portrait of a regal entity in a glade', but perhaps we might also sense the artist inhabiting one of his landscapes.

We see the jug from an angle, and the bottom of the canvas forms a slight diagonal. How does this and the other lines in the picture create a sense of tension? Imagine the painting if it had been seen from straight on, as *The Silver Casket* was.



Cat. 62
The Gold Jug, 1937
Oil on panel
40.5 × 33 cm
Lent by Her Majesty
the Queen

**The black shadow of the jug relates to the actual marks on the canvas.
Notice the conceit of the sketched marks on the 'canvas' looking the
same as the mark on the board of the painted shadow.**

Unable to travel to Spain because of the Civil War, Nicholson and Steen travelled to other parts of Europe and in 1939, at the end of an extended stay in La Rochelle, Nicholson suffered a stroke. He didn't move for three weeks, and although his recovery eventually seemed complete, problems with his hand-to-eye co-ordination led him to give up painting by the time of his National Gallery retrospective in 1942.

CONCLUSION

Despite their differences, Ben Nicholson was aware that his father's still lifes had had a profound influence on his own early work. In 1953, when preparations were made for a *catalogue raisonné* of William Nicholson's paintings, Ben wrote to Marguerite Steen outlining his views on the basis on which his father's reputation would stand. Downplaying the character studies and portraits as being merely 'local' in their interest, he felt that the still lifes and the 'poetic' landscapes were 'in my opinion universal, and it is this universality which endures and it is this which makes him a finer painter than any other British painter of his generation, except perhaps Sickert.' Ben's sense of 'universality' was of course conditioned by his position as an abstract artist avoiding representational associations in favour of a purer formalism. Lillian Browse, the author of the catalogue, would find evidence of 'abstraction' in some of William's later still lifes and wished he had achieved this earlier. From our point of view the need to push Nicholson into the modernist tradition seems less compelling, and this exhibition will help us understand the tension he created between representation and simplification in dealing with the problems faced by a real painter.

'He said many interesting things about the problems of real painters: the reduction of accessories to a minimum – the constant simplification of all redundance – the concentration on the real subject – the choice of subject: a picture isn't a real thing – it's an illusion, a grouped thing.'

A.C. Benson, whose portrait Nicholson painted in 1924