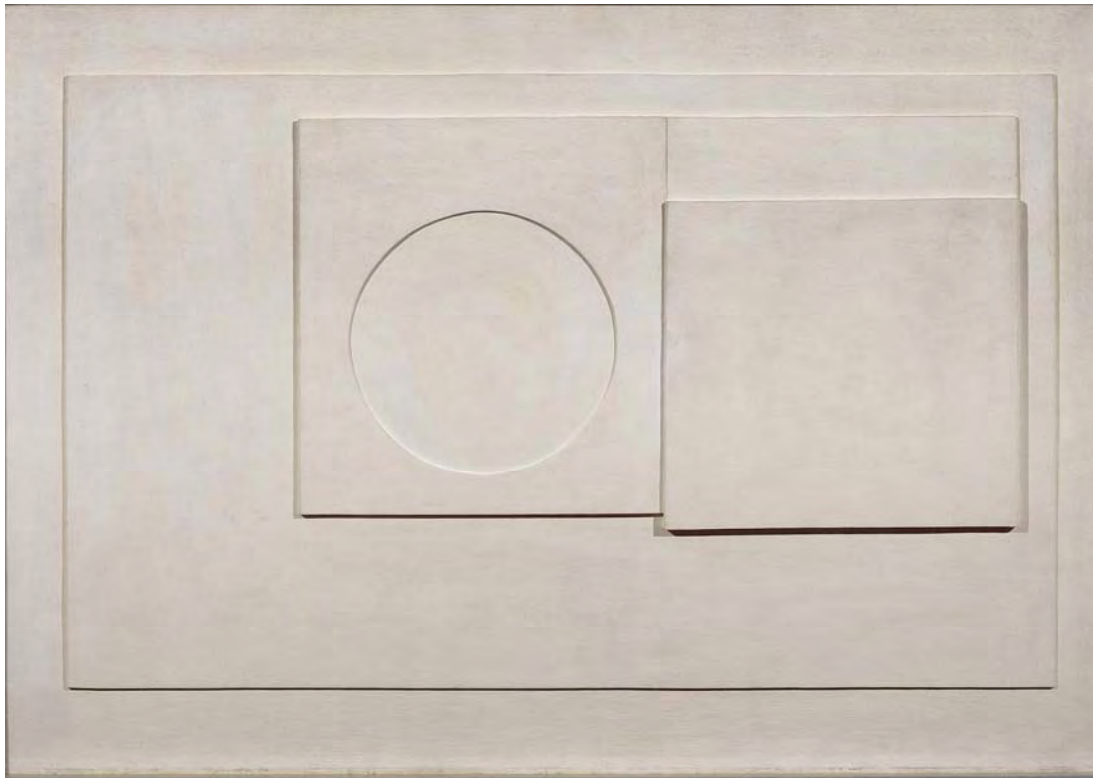


A Continuous Line Ben Nicholson in England

11 October 2008 – 4 January 2009

Teachers' Notes



1935 (white relief), oil on carved and built up wood, 54.5x80cm, British Council. © Angela Verren Taunt 2008. All rights reserved, DACS

An exhibition curated by Chris Stephens, Head of Displays, Tate Britain.
A collaboration between Tate St Ives, Abbott Hall, Kendel and the De La Warr Pavilion.

Introduction

British artist Ben Nicholson (1894-1982) is best known as a leading figure of the Modern Movement in Britain in the 1930s. His abstract paintings and reliefs secured his reputation alongside such international collaborators as Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) and Naum Gabo (1890-1977).

This exhibition looks at Nicholson's work from the beginning of his mature career in the early 1920s through to 1958. In contrast to previous exhibitions, it pays special attention to his non-abstract work of the 1920s, 1940s and 1950s. These have often been seen as counter to his modernist ambitions but alternatively, they offer a different idea of what 'modern' painting can be. His landscapes, made in the wake of the First World War, and his varied work during the Second World War, might be seen as modern in more subtle ways than his more notorious white reliefs and other abstract works.

Importantly, in an age of political and social turmoil his art proposed a new way of thinking about the world. Part of that was a re-engagement with nature and tradition. This can be seen in his landscapes and in the gently worked textures of his pictures' surfaces that stand for a tradition of craftwork.

Ben Nicholson and the De La Warr Pavilion

The De La Warr Pavilion was a product of the international modern movement of which Nicholson was a pioneer.

The dialogue between the Pavilion's architecture and Nicholson's work is both direct and subtle. Most obviously, his white reliefs are reduced to the same simple geometrical shapes that inform the Pavilion's architectural style – they could be simplified maps of the Pavilion.

However, a connection to the surrounding environment is also important for both Nicholson and the Pavilion itself. They do not represent Modernism in isolation, but rather as part of and influenced by, their particular contexts.

Encountering Nicholson's work within the context of the Pavilion provides an excellent route for students to engage with this key figure in British art, and to understand how modernism developed and was expressed across different art forms.

This will be the most comprehensive exhibition of Ben Nicholson's work in the last 15 years. After the showing at the Pavilion, the exhibition continues to Tate St Ives.

For information on arranging a visit to the De La Warr Pavilion see our website, www.dlwp.com/education/schools

Guide to rooms in the gallery:

Room 1

In the early 1920s, Ben Nicholson abandoned the dark realism he had inherited from his father, the successful Edwardian painter William Nicholson. Instead, he experimented with cruder, less polished forms of representation. From landscape and still-life subjects he abstracted formal compositions until, in 1924, he made a few totally non-representational paintings. In fact, even these derived from still-life arrangements.

Room 2

1920s

In 1923 Nicholson and his first wife, Winifred, acquired a house in Cumberland. The landscape there became a major preoccupation. In 1928 he achieved a faux-naïve style which was validated that summer when, in St Ives in Cornwall, he encountered the self-taught, amateur painter Alfred Wallis.

For several years paintings of the northern border country and its white-painted farms were interspersed with Cornish sea views. In the latter, Wallis-like ships take the place of the horses that occupy the former. Just as Wallis's paintings were seen as evidence of an innocent and authentic vision, so these simple landscapes might stand for a yearning for a lost rustic simplicity.

Room 3

1930s

The 1930s were the high point of international Modernism, a movement that believed in the integration of arts and science for a better society and political internationalism. Nicholson was seen as the leading exponent of Modernism in Britain. The movement was also very affected by the rise of fascism in Europe. As early as 1934 leading Modernist figures began to flee from Hitler's Germany, including the architect of the De La Warr Pavilion, Erich Mendelsohn.

Nicholson's work changed dramatically after 1931 when he met the sculptor Barbara Hepworth whom he would later marry. He celebrated their relationship in a series of paintings.

The year 1933 was one of particularly rapid development for Nicholson. The idea of the painting as a three-dimensional object was increasingly important and the year culminated in his first carved reliefs. Nicholson's major breakthrough came in 1934 with his white reliefs, from which all colour was banished. He continued to produce these alongside severely abstract paintings until the end of the 1930s. The whiteness stood for modernity and new ideas of spirituality. The reliefs' textured surfaces, meanwhile, continued to invoke a rural tradition of hand-made practices.

Room 4

Wartime

The outbreak of the Second World War must have brought a huge sense of disappointment and failure for those artists committed to the Modernist cause, defined as it was by its opposition to Nazism.

Many leading Modernists, such as Marcel Breuer and Walter Gropius, fled originally to England but did not stay. Most went to the USA where a distinctly American style of Modernism developed.

In September 1939, Nicholson and his family left London for Cornwall. He immediately returned to landscape subjects and to memories of his visit to St Ives in 1928. But Nicholson and Hepworth still kept the Modernist flame alive. Nicholson continued to make uncompromisingly abstract paintings. Indeed, he began to produce numerous versions, in different sizes, of the same composition. The apparent impersonality of these was countered by the gently worked surfaces of the painted reliefs that he made from 1941. These often incorporated colours from his natural environment. Towards the end of the war, from 1943, abstract and representational aspects and the continued attention to the picture's surface quality came together in pictures of still-lives on window sills.

Room 5

Postwar

After the Second World War, Nicholson's art was dominated by still-life paintings. Sometimes the subject was set against a landscape. The fragmented, abstracted forms are drawn and painted over subtly worked, textured grounds. To create these grounds Nicholson would repeatedly apply and rub off paint, revealing a variety of layers of colour. Continuing his life-long fascination with surface texture, these grounds were compared to the wind and sea worn rocks of Cornwall. He compared the laborious scraping that produced them to his mother's scrubbing of the kitchen table.

Once he left Britain for Switzerland, Nicholson abandoned subject matter for a return to reliefs. His scraped surfaces continued however.

Drawings

Nicholson's drawing style changed little between the 1920s and early 1950s. Most of the drawings are of landscape. He used a strong, continuous line and a minimum of shading. Highly simplified compositions are punctuated with closely-observed, often whimsical details. The dominant line unites these foreground incidents with the background so that the space seems to be flattened out. In this way the drawings themselves provide a continuous line running through periods of apparently quite different work.

Ideas and Activities

Below are some suggestions for approaches and activities to use when visiting the exhibition. They can be adapted to suit the age and ability of your group.

Please note that pencils only are allowed in the gallery.

First Responses

- Divide the group between the different rooms.
- Write down the words that first come into your head when you look at the works.
- Compare the different responses in each room.

Tone & Texture 1

- Select one work and look really closely at the colours and textures.
- Write down a list of words to describe them.
- How do the different tones and textures affect the mood and feeling of the work?

Tone & Texture 2

- Chose a colour and see how it is used in different works.
- How does the use of tone and texture vary?
- How does this affect the mood and feeling of the works?

Portrait of the Pavilion

- Find three or four works that you feel relate to the Pavilion – *they can't all be white reliefs!*
- Explain your choices.

Be the Curator

KS1/2

- Choose five works to make your own 'mini exhibition'.
- Why have you chosen them?

KS3/4

- Find five works in chronological order that you think show a development in Nicholson's work.
- Explain your choices, focusing on particular areas of development, e.g. theme, subject, colour, materials, etc.

View from a Window

- Ben Nicholson's work often shows the view from a window.
- Draw or paint a view out of a window that means something to you.
- It can be a window at home, at school, at the Pavilion, in the car window, or even out of your imagination – be inventive.

COMPETITION

- You can submit your work to our View from a Window competition, with the chance to win a selection of art materials.
- We will also show a selection of entries on our website.
- Submission should be no bigger than A4 and can be submitted up to Friday 19 December.
- Send to Natalie Trimby, Education Coordinator, De La Warr Pavilion, Marina, Bexhill on Sea, TN40 1DP.
- I'm afraid we are unable to return any entries.



Ben Nicholson, 11 November 1947 (Mousehole),
Oil and pencil on canvas, 46.5x58.5cm, British Council.
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