

# Ben Nicholson: From the Studio

Throughout his career, Ben Nicholson (1894–1982) transformed everyday homewares into extraordinary experiments in abstract art. Nicholson's studio was filled with objects that inspired him. From patterned mochoware jugs and mugs to glass bottles and goblets, these ordinary personal possessions were a source of endless inspiration to the artist.

Still life was at the heart of Nicholson's artistic practice. Taking the arrangement of a group of studio objects as a starting point, he began to experiment with form and colour. This exhibition brings together for the first time Nicholson's paintings, reliefs, prints and drawings alongside his rarely seen studio objects. It traces how the artist's style developed, from his early traditional tabletop still-life paintings to his later abstract works.

Featuring works from public and private collections including Arts Council Collection, British Council, The Pier Arts Centre, Stromness, National Galleries of Scotland and Tate, it also includes over 50 studio objects from private collections that are on public display for the first time.

The exhibition is curated by Louise Weller, Head of Exhibitions and Dr Lee Beard, co-editor of the Ben Nicholson Catalogue Raisonné. It is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue.

# Ben Nicholson: From the Studio

Ben Nicholson (1894 – 1982) was born into an artistic family. His mother, Mabel Pryde was a painter whose clarity of vision Nicholson greatly admired. His father, William Nicholson, was an established painter of society portraits, landscape and still-life paintings. Although Nicholson regarded the still life-theme as an 'inheritance' he strove to break with his father's Edwardian style of painting. 'I owe a lot to my father,' he once said, 'especially to his poetic idea and to his still-life theme. In my work, this theme did not originally come from cubism, as some people think, but from my father – not only from what he made as a painter, but from the very beautiful striped and spotted jugs and mugs and goblets, and octagonal and hexagonal glass objects he collected. Having those things in the house was an unforgettable early experience for me'.

Accumulated over time, Nicholson gathered together his own collection of striped and patterned jugs, cut-glass goblets and later, scissors and spanners. From Nicholson's early paintings to his late etchings and drawings, the simple arrangement of a jar and goblet, the curved line of a jug, or the handle of a mug provided a vital starting point for a lifetime of innovation and poetic expression.

## **Studio of Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth**

### **No. 7 The Mall, Hampstead**

1933

The De Laszlo Collection of Paul Laib Negatives Courtauld Institute of Art

Nicholson was keenly aware of the spatial and poetic possibilities in the arrangement of objects, whether within a still-life painting, a carved relief or in his studio. In 1932, Nicholson began to live with the sculptor, Barbara Hepworth, and share her studio in Hampstead. Through the careful display of paintings, sculptures and prints, alongside their collection of studio objects, they created a highly personalised environment, which was also the setting for a joint exhibition in late 1934.

### **1937 (Rufus and the Christmas Tree)**

Oil on board with paper collage

On Loan from a Private Collection

Nicholson playfully combines various elements that can be found in many of his other paintings such as his favourite mochoware jug at the top of the Christmas tree, an Alfred Wallis-style fishing boat, a linear still-life painting arranged on a characteristically simple rectangular table. Through the window, a coastal landscape, reminiscent of St Ives, can be viewed, which is paired with an abstract composition, on the other side of the tree. Inscribed on the back of the painting, in the artist's distinctive handwriting, is a note stating 'illustration to children's story'. In the late 1930s and 1940s, Nicholson produced a series of drawings and paintings that were destined for a children's book *George and Rufus* which was never realised.

# Villa Capriccio and Bankshead

For Ben Nicholson, the 1920s were a decade of artistic experimentation and development. Following a brief period of study in 1910 at the Slade School of Art in London, Nicholson painted in a highly representational style that was reminiscent of his father, the painter William Nicholson. Hardly any of Ben Nicholson's works survive from this period, which he later referred to as 'slick' and 'Vermeer'.

In 1920, Nicholson met and married the artist Winifred Roberts. Together, they established a life that they felt was authentic and modern. Between 1920 and 1922 they spent part of the year living at Villa Capriccio in Switzerland, painting the mountainous landscape and still life paintings. Nicholson was encouraged by Winifred's understanding of colour as an independent form of expression in her paintings distinct from its traditional role in describing an object. During this period, Nicholson turned to the simple everyday objects he had in his home and interpreted their forms and patterns in varying degrees of representation and abstraction. Nicholson sought to understand the basics of painting and the use of form, colour and line to paint the inner life of things, rather than their outward and material appearance.

### **1914 (the striped jug)**

Oil on canvas

University of Leeds Art Collection

The jug in this painting [on display nearby] features in several works Nicholson produced throughout his life. Its form and distinctive pattern are expressed in differing styles, from naturalistic depiction through to greater abstraction. This early work demonstrates Nicholson's clarity of observation and engagement with surface texture. This was something that had preoccupied his father, the artist William Nicholson.

### **Ben Nicholson, Cumbria**

c.1920s

Purchased by the Tate Archive from Ben Nicholson's executors in 1987.

In 1924, Ben and his first wife, the painter Winifred Nicholson moved into Bankshead, a little farmhouse on Hadrian's Wall in Cumberland. They were visited by friends and fellow artists, including Paul and Margaret Nash, Ivon Hitchens and Christopher Wood, who described it as 'the painter's life'.

### **Staffordshire Mochaware Jug with Banded Decoration**

Mid 19th century

On Loan from a Private Collection

This jug remained in Nicholson's possession throughout his life. It inspired one of Nicholson's earliest paintings, *1914 (the striped jug)* [on display nearby]. A decade later, the jug's distinctive pattern became an integral element in *1924 (painting-trout)*, one of Nicholson's early ventures into abstraction [on display nearby].

### **1922 (bread)**

Oil on canvas

Tate: Purchased from funds provided  
by the Patrons of British Art 2003

Nicholson painted this picture at Villa Capriccio in Castagnola, Switzerland. Ben and Winifred lived here during the autumn and winter months between 1920 and 1923. Together, they strove for a simple, modern life, breaking free of Victorian and Edwardian traditions. They painted the walls of their villa white, threw out anything overly decorative and committed themselves to a life of painting.

### **1924 (painting–trout)**

Oil on canvas

On Loan from a Private Collection

The collector who bought the work from the artist in 1929 considered it to be 'purely abstract'. However, stripes in the top left corner are derived from a striped jug Nicholson had in his studio [on display nearby]. At this time, Nicholson was beginning to be interested in abstract art. In a letter dated 1923, Nicholson wrote, 'The more I think & see of ptg the more the abstract stuff interests me to the exclusion of all else.'

### **1925 (still life with jug, mugs, cup and goblet)**

Oil and pencil on canvas

On Loan from a Private Collection

The complex arrangement of still-life studio objects, includes pattern mochwaware mugs, a spotted teacup, black jug, vase and goblet. It is presented on a tabletop that, whilst still distinguishable, has been reduced to a suggestion of space. In contrast, the textured surface of the painted canvas support takes on a greater sense of physical presence and materiality. The use of pencil in this work gives form to the objects and introduces an element of pattern. It is an aspect of Nicholson's work that continues in various ways throughout the rest of his career.

### **1925 (jar and goblet)**

Oil on composition board

Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge

When Jim Ede, a friend and collector of Nicholson's work, first saw this painting, he thought the subject was friendship. He later wrote: 'What came to my mind was the togetherness of these two objects, and their separateness: the effect of one line on another, the flow from one to the other...The thought had conveyed itself to me, the objects were a means to an end'.

### **pomegranate**

1929

Oil and gesso on canvas

On Loan from a Private Collection

This painting features an English earthenware loaf dish with white and brown slips with combed decoration.

### **1929 (fireworks)**

Oil on board

Pier Arts Centre, Stromness

This still life is one of a small group of firework paintings Nicholson painted in November 1929. The bright colours and simple forms contribute to the sense of playfulness in the image. Nicholson had been trying to create works that he felt were equivalent to actual experiences. He

was encouraged by his meeting with fisherman-painter Alfred Wallis in 1928, whose paintings of Cornish seascapes on scraps of cardboard resonated with his own thinking.

### **1928 (striped jug and flowers)**

Oil on canvas

On Loan from a Private Collection

The still life with flowers motif was rare in Nicholson's work of the 1920s, especially in comparison to the paintings of the same period by Winifred Nicholson. Their son, Jake Nicholson, pointed out that in his father's paintings of flowers, 'the jug is always more important than the flowers'. This jug [on display nearby] was a familiar object in Nicholson's studio, while the flowers were transient elements that brought pleasure and enlivened the picture.

### **1926 (still life L.L.)**

Oil on canvas

The Ingram Collection of Modern British Art

This painting belonged to the leading potter of the period, William Staite Murray, a member of the modernist craft movement. He championed the claim for pottery as an art that was modern and abstract. In 1927, Murray was elected to the Seven & Five Society, having been proposed by Nicholson and seconded by Ivon Hitchens. During the late 1920s, Murray exhibited his work alongside Nicholson, Winifred Nicholson and Christopher Wood. Nicholson's interest in pottery was part of a broader cultural attitude in Modern British art as many artists looked back to folk art and handmade traditions. Nicholson wrote to Murray, 'such a lovely show of yours - really it is very very fine progress you have made and that big thrown pot is one of the finest things I have ever seen'.

# No. 7 The Mall, Hampstead

The 1930s were a defining decade for Nicholson both personally and artistically. In 1931, following the beginning of a relationship with Barbara Hepworth, Nicholson left his wife Winifred and his family and relocated to London and soon moved into Hepworth's studio at No. 7 The Mall, Hampstead. Nicholson and Hepworth married in 1938. Nicholson was gradually becoming recognised as a prominent young artist, swiftly assuming a leading role in the modernist movement in England and was part of a close-knit group of painters, sculptors and architects who were promoting a new type of abstract art in Britain. On frequent visits to Paris during the 1930s, Nicholson made valuable contacts with European artists. He visited the studios of Jean Arp, Constantin Brâncuși and Piet Mondrian, and met Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Alexander Calder, Joan Miró and Alberto Giacometti.

Nicholson continued to pursue his idea of the still life, flattening out forms, reducing the illusion of perspective and highlighting the material quality of the canvas or board. However, these paintings still allowed for the inclusion of recognisable subject matter. By the end of 1933, this changed when Nicholson carved his first abstract relief in wood, which led to the first all-white relief soon after.



### **1930–31 (charbon)**

Pencil and oil on canvas

On Loan from a Private Collection

In this painting, Nicholson distils the lessons he has been exploring throughout the previous decade. There is still a suggestion of a tabletop, and the reduced forms of a plate and jug are placed within a shallow pictorial space. Nicholson's use of playing cards alludes to his interest in Picasso and Braque's cubist still life paintings as well as referring to the work of fellow artist Christopher Wood, who included them in one of his last paintings *Le Phare*, 1929. Translated as 'The Lighthouse', it makes a veiled reference to Godrevy lighthouse in St Ives, where, in the previous year, Wood and Nicholson had first met Alfred Wallis.

### **1932 (bocque)**

Oil on board

Arts Council Collection

Southbank Centre, London

The word in the painting is probably *Bocquet* - the last letter obscured by the cup - which was the brand name of mustard made in Yvetot, Normandy. Nicholson painted it on his return from Dieppe, where he had walked past the shopfronts and noticed the interplay between the glass shop window, the reflections and the objects within the shop. These multiple different but interconnected planes served to develop an imaginative world in which, as Nicholson recalled, 'one could live'.

### **1933 (piquet)**

Gouache and gesso on board

Wakefield Permanent Art Collection

(The Hepworth Wakefield)

At Easter 1933, Nicholson and Hepworth travelled from Paris to Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, for a short holiday. The combination of two fish served up on a dish, and the word *piquet*, which refers to a popular French card game for two players, alludes to their enjoyment of café life. Like several other works painted in 1933, Nicholson also employs the contrast between a dark background and the white lines created by scoring into the paint to reveal the white gesso underneath.

### **1932 (talc de coty)**

Oil on board

Pier Arts Centre, Stromness

The depiction of two cups and a distinctive French cosmetic bottle 'Talc de Coty', suggests an intimate still life, rather than one arranged in the studio or inspired by a café. Nicholson made this painting in 1932, early on in his relationship with Hepworth after they holidayed in Dieppe.

### **1933 (musical instruments)**

Oil on canvas

Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge

A still-life painting can be read as a portrait, with the objects selected revealing an emotional aspect of a sitter or artist, beyond representational likeness. In this ambitious painting, the quasi-figurative form of the interconnected guitars suggests a double portrait and a sensitive reflection on Nicholson's new relationship with Hepworth. The simplification of geometric planes to construct a sense of pictorial space within the painting anticipates Nicholson's move towards non-representational painting and reliefs during the 1930s.

### **1932 (guitar)**

Oil and pencil on gesso-prepared board

On Loan from a Private Collection

The guitar was a central theme for the French cubist artist Georges Braque, who Nicholson greatly admired. Just as Braque liked to surround himself with musical instruments in his studio, so too, Nicholson and Hepworth kept this guitar, among many other objects, in their Hampstead studio.

### **1933 (six circles)**

Oil on carved board

On Loan from a Private Collection

This work is one of Nicholson's early reliefs, which he created during a stay in Paris to visit Winifred and their children. Nicholson recalled that his first relief came about by exploring the accidental loss of gesso from a prepared canvas when two lines he had incised into the paint caused a piece to come away. Nicholson carved this relief on a board he had brought from England, which he had purchased from a carpenter in Hampstead. Nicholson's openness to exploring direct carving can be attributed to his knowledge of Hepworth's pierced and abstract sculptures of this period and his being surrounded by her tools in their shared studio.

### **1936 (white relief)**

Oil on pencil on carved board

On Loan from a Private Collection (2015)

By February 1934, Nicholson had begun to make his white reliefs. These works, which defined Nicholson's position as a leading modernist artist, were generally greeted with incomprehension by the critics. However, Paul Nash wrote that '[t]he white reliefs should be regarded as the discovery of a new world'. Despite the increasing precision of the forms, Nicholson stated that the works were not mathematical constructions but arrived at through feeling and intuition, a poetic response to the subtle relationship between material and form.

**Ben Nicholson, Hampstead**

c.1935

Photographer: Humphrey Spender

Courtesy of National Portrait Gallery

**Studio Object from Ben Nicholson's Collection**

On loan from a Private Collection

**1934 (five circles)**

Woodcut on paper

On Loan from a Private Collection (2013)

# Chy-an-Kerris

## Carbis Bay, Cornwall

By the end of the 1930s, Nicholson and Hepworth were the leading figures in British modernism: a movement defined by a sense of urban internationalism and an abstract visual language. Shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, the Nicholson's and their triplets (born in 1934) left London for Carbis Bay, Cornwall at the invitation of a friend, the critic Adrian Stokes. Nicholson was to stay in Cornwall for the next twenty years. Hepworth lived and worked there until she died in 1975.

In December 1939, the Nicholsons moved to their own house called Dunluce. The cramped conditions restricted both Nicholson and Hepworth's ability to work, and they moved again in September 1942 to a place called Chy-an-Kerris, on the far side of Carbis Bay. Nicholson did not abandon his commitment to the modernist abstract work that had defined the 1930s, and he continued to create abstract and abstracted works. Cornwall's clear-light and captivating landscape found its way into Nicholson's thinking during this period and entered into his still life work, creating what he called his still life-landscapes.

### **1934 (still life)**

Oil on canvas

On Loan from a Private Collection (2015)

Alongside producing purely abstract work, Nicholson incorporated figurative elements into his paintings, creating a hybrid style of figuration and abstraction. Although this painting suggests a still life on a tabletop, Nicholson's use of blocks of colour rejects any sense of depth, apart from the imaginary one created by colour contrast and the suggestion of overlapping planes.

Nicholson visited the Parisian studio of abstract artist Piet Mondrian in the early 1930s. Through his interest in Mondrian's work, he was encouraged to think about the balance of colour within a painting to create space. However, Nicholson's use of geometric shapes was not, as with Mondrian's, constrained by a grid; instead, it had a rhythmic and harmonious balance.

### **1940-42 (two forms)**

Oil on canvas mounted on board

Southampton City Art Gallery

By reducing his choice of forms to use in his abstract carved reliefs and paintings, Nicholson expanded his investigation into the effect of colour contrast. These dynamic works create space both within the image and have a spatial impact on their immediate surroundings. Between 1940 and 1942, Nicholson made nine different versions of this composition in various colour combinations and sizes. While each one is a variation on a theme, they remain individual works that elicit a different response from the viewer. Even in a purely abstract work such as this painting, when seen within the broader context of Nicholson's work, the two vertical rectangular forms allude to a still-life group presented on an underlying horizontal rectangular tabletop. This interest had preoccupied Nicholson since the 1920s.

### **1932-40 (still life)**

Oil and pencil on canvas

Pier Arts Centre, Stromness

Nicholson frequently reworked old paintings. By scraping them back to create a textured surface, they acted as found pieces of material whose past marks and often irregular shape would inform the composition and mood of the new work. Within this still-life painting, Nicholson creates a complex design that combines his earlier cubist-inspired arrangement of flattened objects set against a double tabletop, introducing a landscape through the allusion of distant hills and the use of pale green and stony colours.

**1946 (still life–cerulean)**

Oil on canvas over board

Kearley Bequest, through Art Fund (1989)

During the late 1940s, Nicholson produced a series of still-life paintings in which he pursued the idea of the reduction of forms and compressed pictorial space. The interplay of different areas is created by including a notional curtain on the left-hand side. By framing the group of objects, Nicholson creates a division between inside and outside, one space and another. The still life objects are clearly defined in flat planes of bold colours, typical of the range of colours Nicholson favoured in the early post-war years, set against a stony grey or earthy brown support.

**1946 (still life)**

Oil on canvas

406 x 508 mm

Arts Council Collection

Southbank Centre, London

**22 July 1947 (still life–Odyssey 1)**

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the British Council Collection

Nicholson often placed his still life objects within an ambiguous space. In this work, the bottle, mug and cup forms are depicted from a frontal perspective, while the oval tabletop is tilted upright, presenting the viewer with a contrasting aerial perspective. The tabletop and still life group appear to be freed from the conventional interior setting, with the suggestion of a landscape indicated by the faint line of hills on the horizon. This combining of still life and landscape was referred to by Nicholson as his 'still life-landscapes'.

**November 11–47 (Mousehole)**

Oil on canvas on mounted wood

Courtesy of the British Council Collection

Within this work, Nicholson has established several contrasting elements. The still-life group of objects is depicted in a flattened cubist style, set against a more naturalistic rendition of the picturesque harbour of Mousehole in Cornwall. In terms of space, the still-life group is positioned in the foreground to suggest a window sill separate from the distant landscape scene, although they are unified by colour and texture.

### **1945 (Carbis Bay, Cornwall)**

Oil on card

The Radev Collection

By the 1940s, Nicholson could draw upon a rich vocabulary of reduced lines and overlapping forms to create his still-life paintings. Later, a critic described how Nicholson, painting and drawing the world around him in wartime, 'needed to go no further than his own house to make the point that bottle-form and chimneystack-form were interchangeable. And for that matter, he had in his own studio the basic repertory of forms which had served him since 1911'.

### **1945 (still life with 3 mugs)**

Oil and pencil on board

On Loan from a Private Collection

Nicholson was interested in how the irregular shape of the card or board of Alfred Wallis's paintings informed the composition and internal rhythm of the image. The vertical orientation of the board brings a sense of playfulness to this work. It suggests Nicholson's delight in a repeat pattern, which also found expression in textile designs Nicholson made in the 1930s and 1940s. The shape and pattern of the mugs were inspired by Nicholson's collection of mugs and cups that populated his studio [on display nearby].

### **1948 (still life)**

Oil and pencil on board

Leicester Museums & Galleries

In this still-life painting, Nicholson plays with the sense of scale and perspective. The group of objects occupy most of the canvas, with a distant landscape suggested by an undulating line running along the top of the painting. The jug, with its distinctive cat's-eye design, became one of Nicholson's favourite still life objects [on display nearby], appearing in several paintings from the 1930s onwards.

### **June 16 – 47 (still life)**

Oil and pencil on board

On Loan from a Private Collection

Nicholson painted this still-life picture at Chy-an-Kerris, his home in Carbis Bay. The composition illustrates Nicholson's fascination with the relationship between the spatial properties of line, colour and texture. It includes a familiar collection of still life objects, including his mochaware jug with cat's-eye design, a striped mug and a distinctively shaped goblet [on display nearby].

**Ben Nicholson in St Ives**

1940s

Photographer: Mark Kauffman

Purchased by the Tate Archive from Ben Nicholson's executors in 1987

**Studio objects from Ben Nicholson's collection**

On loan from a Private Collection



# No. 5 Porthmeor Studios, St Ives

The 1950s saw a series of changes in Nicholson's life. In 1949, after his relationship with Hepworth began to break down (they divorced in 1951), Nicholson moved to No. 5 Porthmeor Studios. The studio had skylights but no windows offering a sea view, which suited Nicholson's working method. The move enabled him to work on a larger scale than previously possible. Nicholson wrote: 'I can keep three or four large ptgs going at once and stride up and down instead of staying glued to a table.' A few years later, in 1955, Nicholson moved from Carbis Bay to a house called Trezion on Salubrious Place in St Ives, which he named Goonhilly, where he lived until 1958.

During this period, Nicholson developed his complex linear configurations, often in large-scale formats, and he established his reputation as a leading British artist. In 1951, Nicholson was commissioned to paint a mural for the Riverside Restaurant as part of the Festival of Britain. He was awarded numerous international awards for painting in the following years, including the Guggenheim International Painting Prize. In June 1954, Nicholson represented Britain at the Venice Biennale, alongside Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud.

### **June 2 – 52 (winter green)**

Oil and pencil on board

On Loan from a Private Collection

Courtesy of J & J Rawlin Ltd

The distinctive quality of the Cornish landscape resonated deeply with Nicholson. Shortly after arriving in Cornwall, Nicholson wrote: 'This winter landscape is unbelievably beautiful – so serious & immensely exciting – the most lovely browns, & winter greens - & somewhere about always the dark blue sea, even when you can't see it you can feel its presence'. He also acknowledged the relationship between his approach to his landscape paintings and his abstract reliefs, noting, 'In peacetime I could make some nice landscape ptgs here – though some of the abstract ptd reliefs have been very Cornish in colour & feeling & are really landscape I suppose'.

### **Sept 8–54 (Torcello)**

Oil and pencil on canvas

Tate: Bequeathed by Miss E.M. Hodgkins 1977

Nicholson spent June 1954 in Venice. He had been selected, alongside Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud, to represent Britain in that year's Biennale. Rather than a direct observation of Torcello, the tiny island across the Lagoon from Venice, this work expresses the remembered experience. Nicholson painted the work in St Ives after his return from Italy. A careful tension is established between the still-life group and the abstracted background. The cluster of forms, which can still be recognised, is set in contrast to the overlapping forms that alludes to a tabletop and an outside setting.

### **1950 March (still life – Castagnola)**

Oil and pencil on canvas on board

University of Hertfordshire Art Collection

Nicholson produced a series of large-scale still-life paintings during the 1950s, using the arrangement of objects on a tabletop to examine further the relationship between form, colour, tone, and the painted surface's materiality. Nicholson's still-life paintings often exist in a time of their own, both of the moment and informed by a sense of memory. Nicholson used titles that alluded to places either visited in the past or, in some cases, not yet known. In this work, Castagnola refers to the area in Switzerland where Nicholson and his first wife, Winifred, had lived nearly thirty years before.

### **May 1955 (green chisel)**

Oil and pencil on canvas

Courtesy of Piano Nobile

Robert Travers (Works of Art) Ltd

# Casa alla Rocca, Switzerland

In March 1958, Nicholson and his third wife, the photographer Felicitas Vogler, left St Ives and moved to Switzerland. They had met and married in 1957. In a way, Nicholson was returning to where he had started his artistic journey. In a letter to Winifred, he describes finding Castagnola greatly altered from when they had lived there together in the early 1920s. Still, he described his new home in ecstatic terms: 'We've found a white walled, two roomed little house with a long balcony overlooking the lake, rather high up near Ronco village [...] it is so beautiful that one can hardly believe it - & the landscape contains lots of work in it for me'.

Working at first with his friend, the architect Leslie Martin, and subsequently a Swiss architect, Nicholson commissioned a new house, Casa alla Rocca, to be built high above Lake Maggiore. From the terrace, Nicholson reflected on the grandeur and beauty of the mountain landscape, writing: 'the landscape is superb,...the bare trees seen against a translucent lake, the hard rounded forms of the snow topped mountains, and perhaps with a late evening moon rising beyond in a pale cerulean sky is entirely magical with the kind of poetry which I would like to find in my painting'.

**1962 (still life)**

Oil and pencil on board

Cornwall Council Schools Art Collection

Nicholson was a skilled draughtsman. The graceful confidence of the line in his drawings are rooted in decades of thought and practice. Nicholson reflected that 'those line drawings of mine are made with great ease and after years of experience I know the signs of when I can make them and when I can't! It's not the drawing that is difficult but finding and recognizing the mood. When in this mood one knows well that something will come'.

**two and a half goblets, 1967**

Etching on paper

National Galleries of Scotland. Purchased 1983

Nicholson had explored printmaking at various moments in his career, but his most sustained commitment to the medium was between 1965 and 1969. Working with a Swiss artist-printer, Francois Lafranca, Nicholson engraved more than a hundred plates. Nicholson did not regard himself as an etcher but rather saw them as drawings on copper. Lafranca would prepare the plates for Nicholson to engrave back at his studio, before returning them to Lafranca for printing.

**two goblets and a mug in a landscape, 1967**

Etching on paper

The George and Ann Dannatt Gift (2011)

Nicholson enjoyed etching as it combined the freely drawn pencil line with a desire to carve into a material, an important element of his working process throughout his career. Nicholson wrote: 'Etchings...are irresistible to do because of the bite of the hard point & the golden glitter that happens on the dark-as-night plate. It is like cutting, which a pen or pencil is not'.

**still life with grey, 1967**

Etching and aquatint on paper

On Loan from Dominic Guerrini Fine Art

**June 1961 (green goblet and blue square)**

Oil and pencil on board

National Galleries of Scotland. Purchased 1962

Nicholson moved to Switzerland in 1958. The light and brightness of his works of this period is often associated with the magnificent natural setting of his new home and the colours are undoubtedly related to the landscape with their earth browns and faded greens. Nicholson wrote 'I hold the idea that paintings do not stop as paintings but their ideas project into actual life'.

### **1967 (an almost green circle)**

Oil on board

National Galleries of Scotland.

Bequeathed by Felicitas Vogler 2007

In the carved abstract reliefs that once again became a central part of Nicholson's work from the 1960s, the influence of the landscape and sense of place can be discerned. In a letter to Adrian Stokes dated 1963, Nicholson noted: 'I like the relief as a means of expression as it gives me so simply the structure that I must have & then one can pursue one's idea on this basic building rather like a tree in spring grows its leaves'.

### **Kos (project for a free-standing relief wall)**

1965

Oil on carved board

On Loan from a Private Collection (2018)

Throughout the 1960s, Nicholson produced a series of carved reliefs to which he applied the label 'project for a free-standing relief wall'. Nicholson would only see one realisation of this concept on an architectural scale, with the construction of a concrete relief wall at Documenta III, Kassel, in 1964.

### **1974 (moonrise)**

Oil on carved board

On Loan from a Private Collection (2018)

In September 1974, Nicholson moved into a new house and studio space at 2B Pilgrim's Lane, Hampstead. After a hiatus of over three years Nicholson once again had the space to work on his carved reliefs. Despite returning to England, the title of this work suggests Nicholson was drawing upon a memory of the winter moonrise over Lake Maggiore. Nicholson had responded deeply to the formal qualities of the Swiss landscape, noting the clarity of light, the forms of the mountains and the 'late evening moon rising beyond in a pale, cerulean sky'.

# 2B Pilgrim's Lane

## Hampstead

In 1971, Nicholson returned to England. After a couple of years living near Cambridge, Nicholson moved into a house in Pilgrim's Lane, Hampstead, which he occupied until his death eight years later. The house had belonged to the sculptor Robert Adams, who had added a large studio around a courtyard garden with bedrooms above. The layout was reminiscent of the nearby No. 7 The Mall studio that Nicholson had shared with Hepworth over forty years earlier.

During the 1970s, Nicholson focused on drawings, which he called his 'paintings on paper'. While in Cambridge, Nicholson had met and become friends with the artist Angela Verren Taunt, with whom he undertook several drawing expeditions over the subsequent decade. He also returned to the familiar still-life objects that continued to populate the shelves of his studio. The writer Christopher Neve described Nicholson's use of the line 'as incisive and athletic as ever, unwinding into graceful intersections and hairbreadth near-collisions, but the slivers and locking-pieces of colour are often sharper, more acid than before, and the changes of scale more ambiguous'.

Throughout his sixty-year career, Nicholson pursued a singular idea; to create a work of art that was 'alive'. As Nicholson reflected, 'that, after all, is not a bad qualification for a work of art'.

### **1972 (stoppered vase and goblet)**

Oil wash with pen and ink on paper  
On Loan from Jenna Burlingham Fine Art

Nicholson's glassware collection, decanters and bottles [on display nearby] provided him with an infinite combination of forms and lines. They were the starting point for Nicholson's transformation of these objects into formal and poetic ideas. As a critic noted: 'those stoppered decanters, or instance, are interchangeability made visible'.

### **green jug, May 1978**

Gouache, wash and ink on card  
The Ingram Collection of Modern British Art

In the late 1970s, Nicholson returned to the familiar forms of jugs, mugs and goblets to create a series of over 60 works that were displayed in an exhibition entitled 'recent paintings on paper'. In the opening text of the catalogue, Christopher Neve reflects on Nicholson's lifetime commitment to these still life objects that remained at the core of his work. Neve wrote: 'In his London studio he has continued to experiment with permutations of the objects he has accumulated. They have moved about with him. They are integral parts of Nicholson's language and background'.

### **fluted vase**

1981  
Black ink and oil wash on paper on the artist's prepared board  
On Loan from a Private Collection

### **black and brown**

1981  
Oil, ink and wash on paper  
On Loan from Contemporary Six

In 1978, Nicholson held the first of three solo exhibitions at Waddington Galleries, London. The second exhibition followed in 1980 and the third, held posthumously in March 1982. Nicholson focused on the familiar still life objects that had been part of his vocabulary since his student days, His line found a new expression, described as 'incisive and athletic as ever, unwinding into graceful intersections and hair-breadth near-collisions'.

### **c.1974 (small red diamond)**

Oil, watercolour and pencil on paper laid on the artist's prepared board  
On Loan from a Private Collection

Nicholson was inspired by a set of spanners that he acquired in the early 1970s. After calling a plumber to mend a leaky water pipe at his studio, Nicholson was so taken with the much-used and cared-for tools that he offered to buy the plumber a new set in exchange. The plumber agreed, and the tools became part of Nicholson's collection of studio objects [on display

nearby]. They inspired almost 40 oil wash drawings, each with a different feeling and variety of forms.