

Ben Nicholson

The Spatial and Stylistic Development
of his Painting.

Anne McCarthy

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By: ANNE McCARTHY
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INTRODUCTION

Ben Nicholson, was born near Uxbridge on April 10th, 1894. His father, Sir William Nicholson was a painter of still-lives and landscapes, which were extremely refined in terms of composition, colour and tone. His mother was also an artist and the granddaughter of the Earl of Carlisle who was a pre-Raphaelite painter and a patron of art. Mabel Micholson's brother James Pryde, worked with her husband in the poster partnership which signed itself J & W Beggarstaff or the 'Beggarstaff Brothers'. The two brothers-in-law designed some of the finest prints and posters that had been seen in England up to that time.

Ben Nicholson grew up in a sophisticated artist setting. His father was something of a dandy, always dressed in the latest fashions. The house was constantly visited by artists and intellectuals, to such an extent that his mother, as Nicholson recalled "distressed by high flown talk would find herself wanting to scrub the kitchen table." (1) Because his mother's background was Scottish and firmly rooted in common sense, she was a stabilizing influence in the heady circle of family and friends which included people such as Constance Collier, Max Beerbohm, and Marie Tempest.

In this setting it was supposed that Ben would naturally become an artist. All the conditions seemed favourable. Nicholson was not academic, but was naturally dexterous, and had the ability to master games and crafts with ease. He was also ambitious and purposeful and did not have parental opposition to contend with. He grew up in an atmosphere where certain things were taken for granted, which other artists had to learn the hard way. For example, his mother taught him one of the fundamental lessons of space at an early age. She showed him, that by placing two different colours of the same tone side by side that it created an impression of depth in a picture. His parents both favoured an artistic career for their son, and apart from teaching him from their own experiences, were prepared to support him financially, so he would have no need to make a living outside of painting. These presumptions about his future almost had the reverse effect and Nicholson toyed with the idea of becoming a writer. However, his fundamental aptitude was strong enough to persuade him to go to art college.

Nicholson attended Slade School in London for little more than a year 1910 - 1911. He made short and infrequent visits to classes during that time. Nicholson recalled how he spent as much time playing billiards at the nearby Gower Hotel as at his studies, "Although I was not conscious of it at the time, I think that

the billiard-balls, so cleanly geometrical in form, so ringingly clear in colour, against the matt-green blaze, must have appealed to my aesthetic sense in contrast to the fustiness of the classrooms at the 'Slade'". (2)

At Slade, Nicholson became friendly with Paul Nash who noticed his lack of conformity, especially in the life-drawing class, where Nicholson drew small dark figures in heavy pencil, like manikins and bearing no resemblance to the model, on enormous sheets of paper. In the cast room he made his own use of the 'antique', interpreting the casts in hard profile drawings similar to those suggested by primitive Italian portraits. On canvas his first work (fig. 1) STRIPED JUG (1911) cost him much time and effort. Nicholson inherited his father's feelings for the still-life theme, and this painting was delicately stubborn. Nicholson was impatient with Slade, perhaps because the academic setting seemed too much like joining the family business and upholding tradition.

After leaving Slade, he spent much time between 1912 and 1918 abroad, mainly for health reasons. He produced very little work during that time. He visited Tours to paint and learn French; he succeeded in the latter but only painted one candlestick. He went to Milan, learnt Italian, but yet again, produced only one still-life. He visited Madera and Pasadena, producing one still-life in each place. He returned to England in June 1918, on the death of his mother. Nicholson felt his way tentatively over a period of years towards an attitude in which he tried to find an equivalent for familiar experience rather than representing aspects of this experience. His sense of perfection led him to destroy examples of his earlier works, and few survive from the period before 1920.

He had reacted so strongly against his family's artistic involvement that it had seemed he might not become a painter at all. Although he produced few completed works before 1920, he had begun to realize the significance of some of the modern paintings he had seen. This helped him to break away from the family tradition of painting, or as he put it "to bust up the sophistication all around me". (3) In London he slowly discovered Cézanne and his attention was attracted to Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism, which compelled his admiring curiosity. The energy and aggression of Vorticism seemed to provide something he needed, because it offered an alternative to the sophisticated means, with which he was unsuccessfully trying to become a painter. Although Vorticism had little direct influence on Nicholson, it was at least an example to him in that it was a contrast to the art of his heritage (through which he could not express himself).

Soon after his return to England, Nicholson met Winifred Dacre, a painter of

considerable talent. They were married in 1920 and it was then that Nicholson fully committed himself to painting. In Winifred's company, he was relaxed, and the tenseness which had inhibited him artistically and prevented him from painting or making any valid statement disappeared. A period of productive experimentation followed. Nicholson had finally found in painting, the artistic means to give effect to his independence.

1. TOM CROSS, PAINTING THE WARMTH OF THE SUN; ST. IVES ARTISTS 1934 - 1975, Page 23.
2. JOHN ROTHENSTEIN, MODERN ENGLISH PAINTERS, VOL II, NASH TO BAWDEN, Page 185.
3. TOM CROSS, op. cit, Page 22.



(fig. 1) STRIPED JUG (1911)

CHAPTER 1

Cubist Influences; 7 + 5 Society.

Nicholson's visits to Paris throughout the 1920's were of great significance to his work, because through them he became acquainted with Modern European Art. In 1912, when he was 27 years old, a particularly memorable event took place for him: "I remember suddenly coming on a Cubist Picasso at the end of a small upstairs room at Paul Rosenberg's gallery. It must have been a 1915 painting - it was what seemed to me then completely abstract. And in the centre there was an absolutely miraculous green - very deep, very potent and absolutely real. In fact none of the actual events in one's life have been more real than that, and it still remains a standard by which I judge any reality in my own work....". (1) Nicholson also saw works by Matisse, Braque, African Sculpture and the Italian primitives in the Louvre.

The experience of Picasso and other contemporary artists in Paris acted as a cathartic agent on Nicholson's energy. He and Winifred, spent three successive winters at Castagnola, on the Italian border of Switzerland, working consistently and at times producing three or four pictures a week. It was a time of fast and furious experiment, and the couple often painted outdoors in the snow.

Nicholson's landscapes of the early 20's, under the impact of the Ticinese light, acquired Cézannesque characteristics of form and colour. In his painting (fig. 2) CORTIVALLO, LUGANO (1921), there are motifs treated in a similar manner to Cézanne; in the treatment of the mountains on the left and the cluster of well-defined buildings in an enclosed space. This painting marks the beginning of Nicholson's departure from his past (not only from the Edwardian elegance of immediate family circle, but from the aggressive modernism of the vorticists.) For the first time, Nicholson was trying to respond to a quality of light with paint and colour. His wife Winifred encouraged him as she had previously visited the east and had been impressed by Oriental light and colour (present in Indian miniatures and used by Van Gogh, Gauguin and Matisse). CORTIVALLO, LUGANO also owes something to the freshness of light in early Fresco paintings, again demonstrating Nicholson's admiration for the Italian primitives. In a scrap book, put together in 1922 Nicholson's loyalties were illustrated by the work of Giotto, Uccello, Cézanne, the Douanier, Matisse, Derain, Braque and Picasso. However, he was searching for a personal means of expression and definition for his own visual experiences.

Certain characteristics of his later work were beginning to emerge in



(fig. 2) CORTIVALLO, LUGANO (1921)

CORTIVALLO, LUGANO. Each element in the painting has its own identity but is necessary to the whole, and belongs in the overall harmony of the image. There is no deception or effort to disguise the fact that paint is paint and line is line. Nicholson's ability to create space in a painting with a line drawn on its surface is also evident, and his use of pure white, characteristically placed beside a strong colour, is employed to deepen the painting's space.

Nicholson spent four years experimenting under the stimuli which the visits to Paris provided. Winifred Nicholson described this time as "years of inspiration - fizzing like a soda water bottle". She also described the atmosphere of hope and idealism which followed the 'great' war when it was believed that tyranny and poverty were things of the past and the future promised an expansion of thought. Her account reflects this hopeful spirit and enthusiasm, "We lived in white houses with new large windows, we ate simple foods - the fruits of the earth. We wore sandals and ran barefoot along the boulevards. We talked in cafés of the new vision, the new scale of music, the new architecture - unnecessary things were to be done away with and all was to be functional. How young we were!" Of meetings of artists in Paris she wrote: "Great giants of innovation - our contemporaries. We could go on a bus on which Picasso was also travelling and see him, his eyes like black raisins, leap off into the traffic, disappearing with the movements of a panther. We could go to the large empty church where Corbusier had his architects working on the balcony. We could go to the Trois Quartier shop outside the Madeleine and buy steel chairs by the Bauhaus, tablecloths from the Basque country and glass and chinaware, all with the simple modern lines that we had begun to worship, a salvation from all the chaos of civilization". She mentions visits to Brancusi's studio. "Almost everyone one met was expressing genius, inventiveness, dedication to that vision and sharing it with their friends" (2)

This was a remarkable apprenticeship for both the Nicholsons, and was pursued with great energy. Ben Nicholson profitted immensely, especially from first-hand knowledge of the work of Braque and Picasso. He slowly and patiently considered the premises of Cubism. This intensive search and his experiments resulted in a succession of still-lives, which conform in their subjects to the contemporary school of Paris: jugs, bottles, plates reposing on kitchen tables. They are also treated in a similar degree of abstraction as those in the French paintings.

One early painting which shows Nicholson's understanding of Cubist principles is TROUT (1924). The still-life of this painting is interpreted in terms of forms which are reduced to rectangles and colours saturated with light. These

elements are arranged in the pictorial space between the surface of the canvas the surface of the depicted table (which is flat and seen from above is typical Cubist fashion). The jug which appeared in STRIPED JUG (1911) is also present in TROUT but as a totally flattened entity, the stripes at the top left of the painting being all that remain of the original rounded object. All reference to natural objects is suppressed in favour of a subtly balanced pattern of superimposed colour planes. This work shows Nicholson's analytical approach to his subject-matter, and his desire to reduce, simplify and discard inessential incidents (which is an abiding characteristic of his style). This painting is also evidence of the artist's efforts to identify himself with the challenges of modern painting which Europe has presented.

TROUT shows an understanding of Cubism far beyond any to that date in England, where art was not as advanced in Europe and general reaction to new innovations was mostly negative. The non-figurative work of the Vorticists and Bloomsbury painters remained virtually unknown and invisible after the war, and there was no recent tradition of such work in Britain as there was abroad. Communication with Paris still relied on the 'old' masters of the modern movement. The Tate Gallery had refused a gift of a Cézanne in 1921, and in the same year two large paintings by Mondrian went unnoticed at the White Chapel Gallery. The 1920's in Britain were not conducive to fostering youthful or imaginative talent.

Against this background the 7 + 5 Society was established in 1920. It was a group originally consisting of seven painters and five sculptors, who worked in a figurative and lyrical style. Its first exhibition in 1920, had eighteen participating artists (Ivon Hitchens being the most memorable name of the involved group). Seven of the original members left after this first exhibition. The lack of definite policies resulted in the first four years of the society being a time of tepid commitment to Modernism. In 1924, the future course of the society was set when Ben Nicholson joined. At the society's fifth exhibition he exhibited STRIPED JUG, BERTHA and ABSTRACTION, NOVEMBER. P. G. Konody, writing in the Daily Mail, described the second painting as "a dadaistic futility... a picture that consists merely of superimposed squares of flat tints and looks uncommonly like a sample sheet of paripan wall paints". (3)

In 1926, Nicholson was elected chairman of the 7 + 5 Society and he pursued policies broadly in line with the changes in his own work. He led a successful effort to purge the society of watercolourists and portrait painters. He also introduced a number of new members, mostly friends who shared his views about the importance of the abstraction. These included Christopher Wood and Cedric Morris

who were elected in 1926 as members, with Nicholson's support. During the following years the society exhibited paintings, drawings, sculpture and pottery by a group of talented young artists. The main characteristics of the group work were: a direct and generous application of paint; a strong use of pattern; spatial interpretations using flattened forms. In handling and structural patterning the work was similar to that of the Fauves, but with less intense colours. The hot reds and strong greens typical of Fauvist colour rarely appeared and in their stead were the earth colours such as ochres, soft warm greens and fragmented whites which were descriptive of the English light and landscape.

From the early 1930's the society became a platform for British abstraction. There was a preoccupation with surface textures, with colour and form and generally with non-representation which led to a type of austere but assured abstraction. In 1934 Nicholson proposed that the name of the society be changed to "Seven and Five Abstract Group", but this was not agreed. However the rules were revised to make the society a forum for non-representatives only: "The exhibition is to be non-representational. The hanging committee are only empowered to select non-representational work. The exact definition of 'Non-representational' is left to the discretion of the committee... but as a general guiding principle a work will be excluded if it possesses any element dictated only by Natural appearances". (4)

H. S. Ede, who contributed a foreward to the group's seventh exhibition at the Beaux Arts in 1927, had anticipated this development when he wrote: "We are still slaves to the insulting habit of comparing the depicted object with the object depicted - not allowing the picture to stand on it's own merits. This is an age of surface values, an age which gives glory to the right thing done at the right moment; it isn't concerned with the past or the future, it has no past, present or future - it is a state of being. Painting is not now for eternity, it is the expression of the moment and each moment will bring it's own expression... The line of the Seven and Five is, I think, to break quite clearly from the representational in it's photographic sense, though not like the Cubists to abandon known shapes. It is to use everyday objects, but with such a swing and flow that they become living things, they fall into rhythm in the same way that music does, but their vitality comes through colour and form instead of sound and time". (5)

However, the ruling that the work to be exhibited was to be non-representational polarized the membership of the society. Many members resigned or were voted off, and the society declined. In it's last exhibition in 1935, only the work of eight artists was shown, including Winifred Dacre, Ivon Hitchens, Henry Moore, Ben Nicholson, John Piper and Barbara Hepworth. This was also the first completely

abstract exhibition of art ever held in England. It was largely due to Nicholson's influence that the society's transition from an objective to an abstract association took place.

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1. JOHN SUMMERSON, PENGUIN MODERN PAINTERS: BEN NICHOLSON, cites a letter from Nicholson, Jan. 3, 1944, Page 7.
 2. TOM CROSS, PAINTING THE WARMTH OF THE SUN; ST. IVES ARTISTS, 1934 - 1975, Page 25.
 3. DENNIS FARR, THE OXFORD HISTORY OF ENGLISH ART, Page 245.
 4. TOM CROSS, op. cit, Page 44.
 5. DENNIS FARR, op. cit, Page 246.

CHAPTER 2

Links With Primitives And Alfred Wallis.

In the late 1920's, Nicholson's interest in landscape was aroused by the hills and farms of his wife's family home in Bankshead, Cumberland. The paintings of the Cumbrian landscape which emerged were romantic, with a warm intimacy and were made from sketches of groups of oaks and pines, of contoured hills and farm buildings. They are understated and the colour is of a limited range, rubbed on to a warm ground. (fig. 4) WALTON WOOD COTTAGE No 1, painted in early 1928 is an example of these landscapes. Once again, Nicholson's reaction to the softness and sophistication of Edwardian art is based in the tougher formal qualities of earlier primitive art. There is an absence of superficial detail in this painting which makes it seem almost childlike and naive, but this is deceptive since the composition is quite sophisticated. The suggestion of 'real' perspective is suppressed and flattened by the rectangular field in the centre of the picture. The tree in the centre of the painting divides the space into four planes; right and left and in front and behind (which deepens the space). The pictorial space is also divided diagonally by the tree at the extreme right hand side and the cluster of trees behind the farmhouse. See also (fig. 3).

In August 1928, Nicholson visited Cornwall with his wife, at the invitation of friends and stayed at a cottage in Pill Creek. He visited St. Ives with his friend Christopher Wood and wrote afterwards: "... this was an exciting day, for not only was it the first time I saw St. Ives, but on the way back from Porthmeor Beach we passed an open door in Back Road West and through it saw some paintings of ships and houses on odd pieces of cardboard nailed up all over the wall, with particularly large nails through the smallest ones. We knocked on the door and inside found Wallis, and the paintings we got from him then were the first he had made". (1)

Wallis decided to paint at the age of eighty-eight. His paintings were mainly of ships, coasts and harbours, not drawn from life, but from memory or imagination. Wallis usually worked on odd pieces of cardboard using left-over paint from boats, or whatever he could find. Nicholson recognized in Wallis' works, poetic qualities which came from an economy of statement. His paintings of boats floating on the sea took their rhythm, texture and colour from the irregular shapes of roughly-cut cardboard which he used as canvas. These works were not only accurate impressions of Wallis' reality, but were objects in their own right. Nicholson wrote of Wallis, "Using the materials nearest to hand is the motive and method of the first creative artist. Certainly his vision is a remarkable thing,



(fig. 3) CUMBRIAN LANDSCAPE (1928)



(fig. 4) WALTON WOOD COTTAGE, NO. 1 (1928)

with an intensity and depth of experience which makes it more than childlike." (2) Wallis's work confirmed Nicholson's tendency towards simplification, non-perspectival space and a very physical exploration of the shape and texture of the support on which he was painting. Nicholson's own Cumbrian landscapes had already a child-like magic and arbitrariness of scale that helps to explain why he should have greeted the work of Alfred Wallis with such sympathetic enthusiasm.

The town of St. Ives itself, was recognized as an artist's colony and was the home of a number of respected traditional painters and many semi-professional and amateur artists who enjoyed its relaxed, protected environment. Painting in St. Ives between the wars was conservative and completely divorced from the innovations and discoveries which had changed art in the capitals of Europe. The Nicholsons stayed in St. Ives that summer with Kit Wood, returning to London in the autumn.

About this time, Nicholson seemed, to some extent, to resolve his problem with landscape. Unlike still-life, it was difficult to reduce to a simplistic design or divide into a spatial statement, without losing or destroying the landscape's character. However, in his paintings of "Pill Creek", Cornwall (late 1928), which were probably done from memory, (like the work of Wallis), he maintains a balance between representation and design. In (fig. 5) PILL CREEK (1928), the texture and painted surface become part of the character of the scene portrayed. The canvas itself seems to have been weathered by the Cornish environment, the winds and the sea. The undercoat is freely applied in rhythmical brush strokes which reflect a coastal atmosphere. The surface is layered and textured and scratched to expose the ground underneath. In this way Nicholson again demonstrates his ability to use white as a spatial device: the white area 'behind' the boat on the right-hand side of the painting and the lines scratched out in the trees on the top left-hand corner give luminosity and depth to the painting. The use of white tones near the immediate foreground emphasize this effect. Nicholson succeeded in capturing the atmosphere of a landscape, not only through a physical description of the subject, but through the actual process of painting. The work itself has its own physical look which directly expresses the original experience which led to its making.

In (fig. 6) PILL CREEK MOONLIGHT (1928/29) there is a similar approach to painting although it is notable that Nicholson did not 'fill' the rectangular pictorial space. The area of tree, sea and land (on the left) is truncated, which gives the effect of floating, of freedom as if everything might suddenly spill out of the canvas. Because of this more of the original surface is visible. The



(fig. 5) PILL CREEK (1928)



(fig. 6) PILL CREEK MOONLIGHT (1928/29)

colours used are those of Cornwall. Nicholson had previously written about Wallis: "He used very few colours, and one associates with him some lovely dark browns, shiny blacks, fierce greys, strange whites, and a particularly pungent Cornish green. Since his approach was so childlike one might have supposed that this severe selection of a few colours was purely unconscious, but I remember one day he was complaining that he was short of some colours, and when I asked him which, he said he needed rock-colour and sand-colour, and I got these for him in the yacht - paint he was using. Kit Wood remarked that it might easily spoil his work to give him new colours when so much of it's point depended on the use of a few, but it seemed to me that since he had asked for them he must be ready to deal with them. Next day he made a new painting, using, of course, rock-colour for anything but rock and sand-colour for anything but sand, and keeping to his usual small number of colours: and as I went out, having admired the colour of the painting (we had, of course, not spoken to him about the number of colours he used), he said 'You don't want to use too many colours.'" (3)

Wallis's influence on Nicholson's work was not the superficial naivety it is generally thought to be. Wallis reaffirmed Nicholson's interest in landscape as a subject which could be treated in terms other than traditional, romantic representation and perspective. Through Wallis's work, Nicholson saw the possibility of capturing the feeling of landscape by creating it's equivalent in paint. He was mostly impressed by the way Wallis used to incorporate the incidental shape of the cardboard and it's colour and make them precise elements in his paintings. Wallis's main contribution to Nicholson's artistic development, was that through watching him work Nicholson became less self-conscious and freer in his approach to a painting but at the same time remaining truthfull and precise about his expression of a given experience. In the resulting Cornish landscapes, the sophisticated understanding of Cubist picture arrangement is somewhat disguised, but given new freedom by the assumed roughness of the naive painter.

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1. DAVID LEVIE, ST. IVES 1939 - 1964: TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF PAINTING, SCULPTURE AND POTTERY, Page 21.
 2. *ibid.*
 3. *ibid.*, Page 22.

CHAPTER 3

Early 30's; Connections With Europe; First Relief.

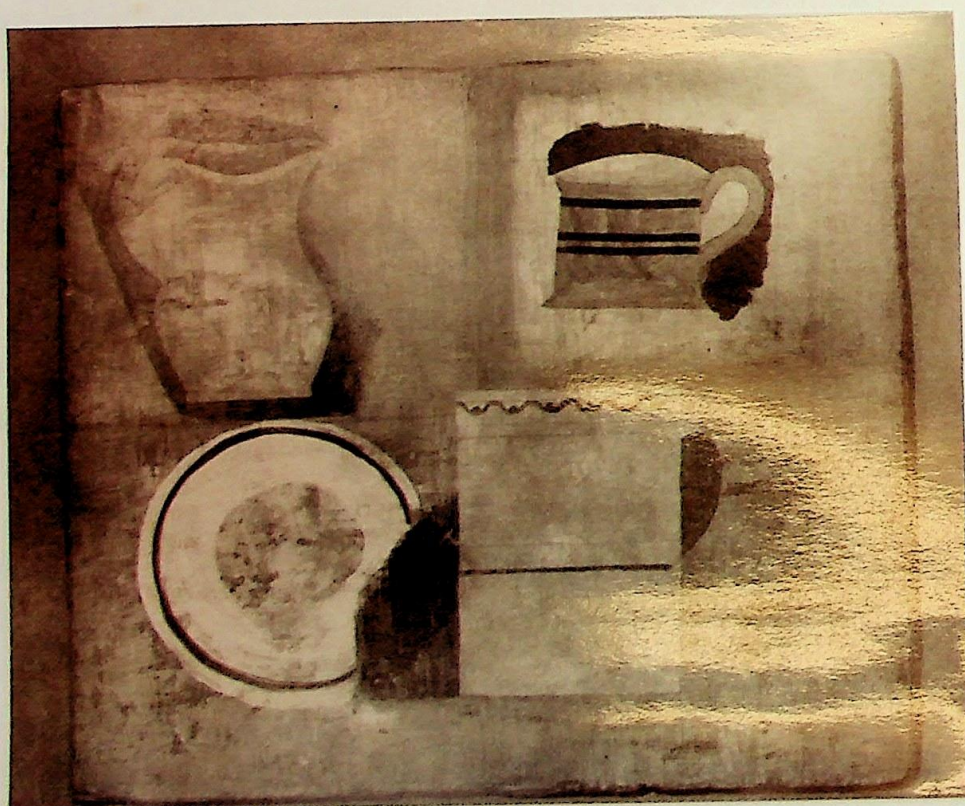
In Nicholson's semi-abstract still-life of the mid-20's to early 30's, his pursuit of the abstract idea is evident. He worked towards abandoning 'real' perspective with its narrative connotations and lessened his dependancy on actual events. He worked increasingly with painterly space using the pure relationships of forms and colours. When a comparison is made of (fig. 7) APPLES (1927) and (fig. 8) JUG AND MUGS (1930) this progression of idea is evident. In the earlier painting Nicholson experimented with light and the definition of objects through negative surrounding space, in a way similar to Cézanne in his later watercolours. While both paintings are concerned with pictorial space and the objects contained within it, in the later painting STILL LIFE WITH JUG AND MUGS the objects are presented more frontally. The surfaces are established by straight-edged planes and space is again evoked by shading 'behind' an object (echoing his use of white in other paintings).

In May of 1931, Nicholson had a shared exhibition with Kit Wood in Paris and in that year also he had an exhibition at the Bloomsbury Gallery in London. Barbara Hepworth visited the latter exhibition and had been very impressed by Nicholson's work. In the summer of 1931, Nicholson and Hepworth met again at a party in Happisburgh on the Norfolk Coast (at which Henry and Irene Moore were also guests). During this work-holiday, the group painted, drew and carved in preparation for a joint exhibition at the Tooth's Gallery in London. Barbara Hepworth recalled "We were free and totally and individually dedicated. They were hard times but so happy". (1) By 1932 Nicholson and Hepworth had formed a close friendship and at Easter they travelled together to France where they met Braque, Brancusi, and Arp. The visit was particularly memorable for Barbara when she saw in Brancusi's studio primitive forms expressed in abstraction "All in a state of perfection and purposed and loving execution". (2)

In the summer of 1932, they visited France again and stayed at Dieppe where Braque was living. An important painting was made on this trip - (fig. 9) AU CHAT BOTTE (1932), which is one of Nicholson's most sophisticated Cubist works. His dependance on particularized fact is less pronounced than previously, although it is still evident. The still life is disclosed through what appears to be a café window, its name and location being identified by floating letters on the picture's surface. The two-dimensional letters seem to have more substance than the three-dimensional objects behind, which are defined with fragile lines. The features of the face on the left are barely discernible and disappear into



(fig. 7) APPLES (1927)



(fig. 8) JUG AND MUGS (1930)

the paintings surface. Nicholson wrote of this painting in relation to his definition of the pictorial space: "About space-construction: I can explain one aspect of this by an early painting I made of a shop-window in Dieppe though, at the time, this was not made with any conscious idea of space but merely using the shop-window as a theme on which to base an imaginative idea. The name of the shop was 'Au Chatt Botté', - and this set a train of thought going connected with the fairy tales of my childhood and, being in French, and my French being a little mysterious, the words themselves had also an abstract quality - but what was important was that this name was printed in very lovely red lettering on the glass window - giving one plane - and in this window were reflections of what was behind me as I looked in - giving a second plane - while through the window objects on a table were performing a kind of ballet and forming the 'eye' or life-point of the painting - giving a third plane. These three planes and all their subsidiary planes were interchangeable so that you could not tell which was real and which unreal, what was reflected, and this created, as I see now, some kind of imaginative space or an imaginative world in which one could live." (3)

Nicholson was excited about this process of defining forms in an ambiguous space so that the painting appears to 'shift' visually. During the same French trip he was delighted by the recent work of Miró, which he described as "the first free painting that I saw and it made a deep impression - as I remember it, a lovely rough circular white cloud on a deep blue background, with an electric blue line somewhere." (4) More important however, was Hepworth's and Nicholson's meeting with Mondrian. The austerity and purity of Mondrian's work played an important part in their development towards total abstraction.

This meeting made a vivid impression on Nicholson which he recorded in a letter to John Summerson: "His studio... was an astonishing room: very high and narrow - with a thin partition between it and a dancing school and with a window on the third floor looking down on to thousands of railway lines emerging from and converging into the Gare Montparnasse. He'd lived there for 25 years and except during the war had scarcely been outside Paris - he'd stuck up on the walls different sized rectangular pieces of board painted a primary red, blue and yellow and white and neutral gray - they'd been built up during those 25 years. The paintings were entirely new to me and I did not understand them on this first visit (and indeed only partially understood them on my second visit a year later). They were merely, for me, part of the lovely feeling generated by his thought in the room. I remember after this first visit sitting at a café table on the edge of a pavement almost touching all the traffic going in and out of the Gare Montparnasse, and sitting there for a very long time with an astonishing feeling of



(fig. 9) AU CHAT BOTTÉ (1932)



(fig. 10) ST. RÉMY, PROVENCE (1933)

quiet and repose - the thing I remember most was the feeling of light in his room and the pauses and silences during and after he'd been talking. The feeling in his studio must have been not unlike the feeling in one of those hermit's caves where lions used to to to have thorns taken out of their paws." (5)

The changes in Nicholson's work in the early thirties owed much to his close acquaintance with the School of Paris which had given new forms and confidence to his work. He reduced his use of colour; black and brown became more important. He continued to use his method of scratching the painting's surface to economically reveal an image in several figure paintings. These references to the female nude or to a head seen in profile were probably a reflection of his new relationship with Barbara Hepworth. One particular painting commemorates a trip to Provence with her in 1932 - (fig. 10) *St. RÉMY, PROVENCE* (1933). Nicholson's work was moving towards what he described as freedom: "Freedom from appearances, or even references to the traditional paraphernalia of the artistic world." (6)

There are many reasons for Ben Nicholson's rapid development between 1930 and 1934. When Nicholson had visited Paris in the 1920's, he was responding to art which was new to him, but which in a historical context, was already ten years old. In the 1930's, when he revisited Paris, he had developed in his own way towards the same end as the continental painters, who were also at that time involved in investigation beyond Cubism. For that reason, Nicholson returned on equal terms with the Europeans, and found himself at home with the common direction of Modern Art. In England, where his art had little or no history, he was isolated, but in Europe he found sympathetic encouragement. Artists like Calder, Arp, Miró and especially Mondrian, reaffirmed his ideas and direction.

Nicholson had also become a member of two artistic groups, one in Europe and one in England, which helped to keep him abreast of new developments. In 1933, Nicholson and Hepworth were encouraged by Héliou to join the Association Abstraction-Création which had been set up in Paris in 1931. The association's aim was to promote non-objective art by organizing communal exhibitions. The initial committee included Arp, Gleizes, Héliou, Herbin, Kupka and Vantongerloo. The membership was open to artists of all nationalities and at one stage had 400 members. It supported work of diverse origins from Constructivism to Neo-Plasticism and from Lyrical Abstraction to Expressionism and included Gabo, Pevsner, Mondrian, Van Doesburg, Lissitzky, Kandinsky and Baumeister in its ranks. Although the association embraced a diversity of styles and personalities, all its members were abstract artists who shared a common attitude to art. The Neo-Plasticists emerged as the strongest single element in the group and because of

this the association revealed a general trend towards Constructivist and Concrete art forms with formal factors taking precedence over lyrical considerations. The association produced five annual cahiers under the title "Abstraction-Création, Art non-figuratif", which represented participating artists. They also held regular exhibitions until 1939.

This association offered moral support to contributing artists and furthered the breakthrough of Modern Art. Both Nicholson and Hepworth were part of a 'permanent' exhibition which opened at 44 Ave de Nagram in Paris in December 1933. The association was also important since abstract art was the subject of political suppression and the principle of abstraction came to be linked with freedom of thought and action. It benefitted Nicholson through the contacts and friendships he made within the group, which also led to several European artists coming to England as refugees from Hitler in the mid to late 1930's.

In England itself, there was also an attempt to provide artists with a sense of support and friendship. All aspects of modern art were under continuous attack and scepticism, and in an effort to counteract this negative atmosphere a group of artists and architects were united under the name "UNIT ONE". Under the joint leadership of Paul Nash and Ben Nicholson, this association was formed in 1931 and encompassed a wide variety of trends, ranging from Surrealism to Constructivism. The need for a common front against public indifference did not dictate rigid uniformity. Nash announced the formation of UNIT ONE in a letter to The Times in June 1933: "The peculiar distinction of UNIT ONE is that it is not composed of, let us say, three individuals and eight imitators, but of 11 individuals. And yet, there is still a quality of mind, of spirit perhaps, which unites the work of these artists ... UNIT ONE may be said to stand for the expression of a truly contemporary spirit, for that thing which is recognized as peculiarly of today in painting, sculpture and architecture." (7) Herbert Read, the group's spokesman explained that the name was chosen because "though as persons, each artist is a UNIT, in the social structure they must, to the extent of their common interests, be one." (8) However idealistic this seemed on paper, in reality the group was split between those with abstract interests and those with literary and surrealist tendencies. The group held together long enough to hold an exhibition in April 1934 at the Mayer Gallery in London which subsequently toured six Municipal Galleries. They also succeeded in acquiring publicity (although not all favourable) which was one of their main aims. Between 1933 and 1935, Nicholson and Nash, (each representing an idealistic faction within the group) had developed further away from each other. This caused UNIT ONE's disintegration

soon after the opening of the London exhibition.

A book entitled UNIT ONE, edited by Herbert Read, helped to promote the idealistic combination of art and design as "a hard defence, a compact wall against the tide behind which development can proceed and experiment continue." (9) The book was intended as the first of an annual series, which contained essays by members of the group, reproductions of their work and photographs of their studios. As the group had disbanded only two years after it's birth, the book UNIT ONE remained the only documentation of it's existence (along with the exhibition catalogue).

Although UNIT ONE did not provide a totally sympathetic attitude towards Nicholson's idea, against the background of fundamental differences of intent, he was forced to define his own stance and direction, to justify his beliefs. In his statement for the UNIT ONE book, he confronted materialistic science and quoted Eddington "... not only the laws of nature, but space and time, and the material universe itself, are constructions of the human mind... to an altogether unexpected extent the universe we live in is the creations of our minds. The nature of it is outside scientific investigation. If we are to know anything about that nature it must be through something like religious experience." he continued "As I see it, painting and religious experience are the same thing and what we are all searching for is the understanding and realisation of infinity - an idea which is complete, with no beginning, no end, and therefore giving to all things for all time." (10)

Nicholson's implication that the artistic and religious experience are linked echoes Mondrian's beliefs. The reason that Mondrian had such a profound effect on Nicholson was because he represented abstraction in it's most extreme and logical form. Mondrian was an intellectual who testified to his artistic faith by painting. Nicholson was more of an instinctive painter working towards the same end as Mondrian but through an inner compulsion. He achieved this goal through an instinctive process whereas Mondrian succeeded on a more cerebral basis. "I have difficulty in reading Mondrian because I much prefer the direct impact I get from his painting. I have not read more than a few sentences from Kandinsky." (11)

As a result of all this activity at home and especially abroad, Nicholson began to explore the space in painting in an entirely new manner. Instead of inscribing the surface, he began to carve into it and produced his first carved relief in December 1933. His move towards the relief was not totally surprising, although collage would have been the more obvious progression. In his later

Cubist still-lives he was using elements, which were for other artists steps towards collage - lettering, faces and layering of objects. Synthetic Cubism had developed from the desire to actually manipulate these elements, which used in conjunction with painted motifs would lead to a more 'real' Cubist space. Nicholson had chosen another way and had been working towards it for some time before the first carved relief.

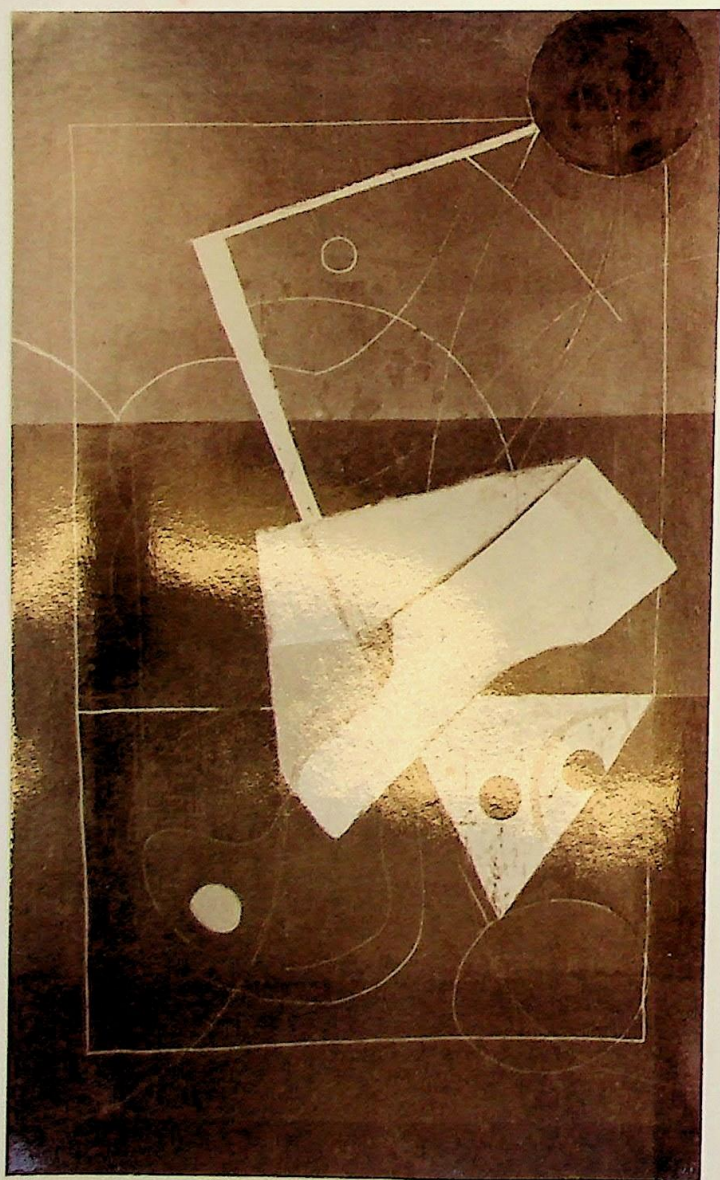
He experiments with Cubism led him to dealing with a painting as a shallow space in which planes were defined. His search for the equivalent of an experience or object had led him to see painting itself as an experience. In the thirties he began to view the resulting work of art as an object: "In a recent HORIZON there was a description of how Klee brought the warp and woof of a canvas to life; in much the same way Wallis did this for an old piece of cardboard: he would cut out the top and bottom of an old cardboard box, and sometimes the four sides: into irregular shapes, using each shape as the key to the movement in a painting, and using the colour and texture of the board as the key to it's colour and texture. When the painting was completed, what remained of the original board, a brown, a grey, a white or a green board, sometimes in the sea, or perhaps in a field or a light-house, would be deeply experienced as the remainder of the painting." (12) In much the same way, Nicholson began selecting pieces of board from a carpenter which he then prepared with a special plaster and incised with a pointer tool. (fig. 11) GUITAR (1933) was made in this way. The resulting 'painting' is not just a painting, but an object in it's own right and can be manipulated in a similar way to the original object, in this case, a guitar.

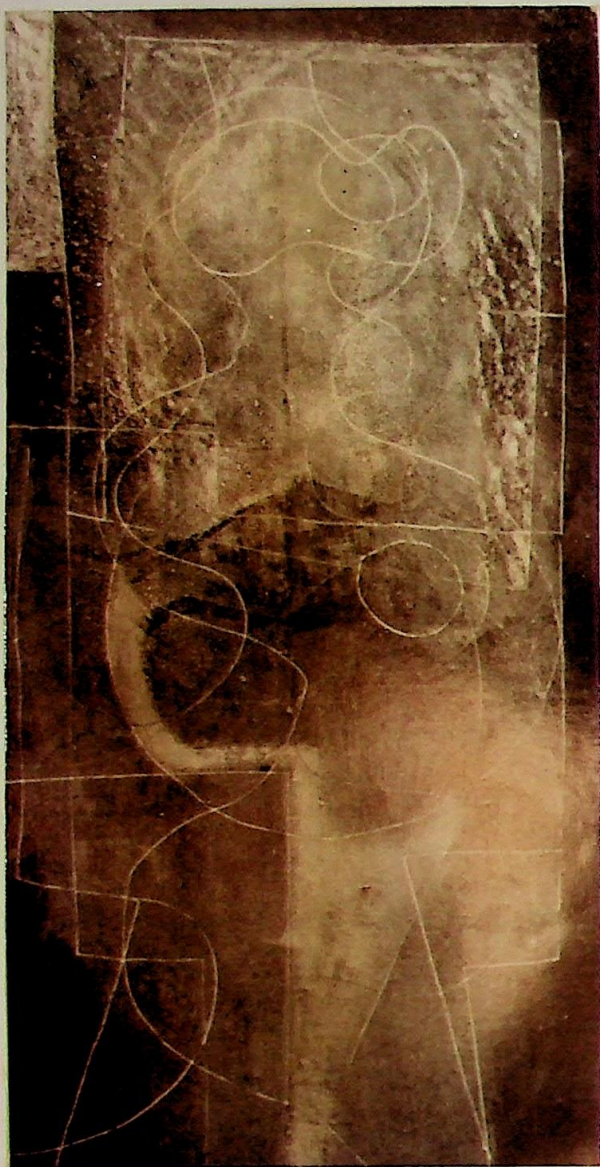
In another painting of 1933 - (fig. 12) MILK AND PLAIN CHOCOLATE, Nicholson attempted to break up the Cubist pictorial space. He used less 'blocked' forms, based more in the world of imagination than that of observed facts. In this painting Nicholson's admiration for Arp, Calder and Miró is evident. His understanding of free, non-perspectival space in Miró's painting advanced his move away from the limitations of Cubism. This painting and (fig. 13) COMPOSITION IN BLACK AND WHITE (also 1933) are larger than Nicholson's previous paintings and so, allowed him to use his whole arm movement in drawing and painting. In this way he became more physically involved with the picture surface, carving the lines through the covering of surface paint into the layer of gesso beneath. Nicholson, therefore, was not only involved in the physical properties of the painting as a means of expression, but in his own physical process of creating. Using his own physical participation brought greater unself-consciousness to the work. This process also anticipated the major developments in painting during the following twenty years, particularly those of the Abstract Expressionists in America.



(fig. 11) GUITAR (1933)

(fig. 12) MILK AND PLAIN
CHOCOLATE (1933)





(fig. 13) COMPOSITION IN BLACK
AND WHITE (1933)



(fig. 14) FIRST RELIEF
(Dec. 1933)

Mr. Adrian Stokes, reviewing Nicholson's exhibition at the Lefevre Gallery in 1933, revealed the essential nature of the artist's activity: "Mr. Nicholson's canvases and panels serve him in the role of the carver's block. Just as the carver consults the stone for the reinforcement of his idea, so Mr. Nicholson has started to paint when he prepares his canvases.... Mr. Nicholson can express the liveliest preceptions in terms of correspondence between two circles, so intense is his power to elucidate the plane on which they lie. Rhythm is not presented in the guise of objects, but with finality transformed into space: similarly a stone incorporates in it's very texture the movements of lapsed centuries as a simple thing," (13) He also anticipated Nicholson's move towards actually carving the picture surface.

The change in Nicholson's work, from the investigation of painterly space to the interplay of forms in relief carving, owes much to the ideas of abstraction which he had encountered in Europe, especially through contact with Mondrian. However, there were other influences close at hand. In his relationship with Barbara Hepworth, he had the example of an abstract sculptor of the most uncompromising kind, instead of the lyrical, feminine painting of Winifred Dacre. Because Hepworth was a sculptor, he also had ready access to the tools of her trade, which would have encouraged him in his move towards carving. He also had a sustained interest in architecture. His brother Christopher Nicholson was a distinguished architect as was Leslie Martin who was a life-long friend of Nicholson's. He also had contact with many of the progressive architects in Europe at that time.

The first (fig. 14) PAINTED RELIEF (December 1933), was an independent object, without reliance on the world of observed fact. As Nicholson became more involved with the process of painting his work became more abstract. It was by accident that Nicholson actually started carving into the surface of the painting but it was towards that process that he had been heading (i.e. his techniques of scraping or inscribing the surface which are also means of removal). While he was incising the surface of a panel, a chip fell out and this tempted him to remove more of the surface. In this way, forms became more than suggested in space, they became real entities in real space. This relief had that same quality that Nicholson had admired in Wallis's work; it was object, freed from the limitations of a flat, framed picture.

1. TOM CROSS, PAINTING THE WARMTH OF THE SUN, ST. IVES ARTISTS, 1939 - 1975

Page 40.

2. *ibid.*
3. DENNIS FARR, THE OXFORD HISTORY OF ENGLISH ART, Page 289.
4. JOHN SUMMERSON, PENGUIN MODERN PAINTERS: BEN NICHOLSON, Page 11.
5. *ibid.* Page 13
6. TOM CROSS, *op. cit.*, Page 42.
7. DENNIS FARR, *op. cit.*, Page 275.
8. *ibid.* Page 275.
9. TOM CROSS, *op. cit.*, Page 47.
10. CHARLES HARRISON, BEN NICHOLSON, Page 21.
11. JOHN ROTHENSTEIN, MODERN ENGLISH PAINTERS, VOL II, NASH TO BAWDEN, Page 190.
12. CHARLES HARRISON, *op. cit.*, Page 25.
13. NORBERT LYNTON, NICHOLSON, THE WADDINGTON GALLERIES, Page 3.

CHAPTER 4

London Before The War; Circle; Arrival Of Refugee Artists From Europe.

In 1934, Nicholson and Hepworth were married. Since 1931, after many years spent away from London, Nicholson had worked in a block of studios called the Mall Studios, which were built in the gardens of large houses in Parkhill Road, near Haverstock Hill. He shared a studio with Barbara Hepworth for some time, and later they had adjacent studios. There were other artists living in this area; Henry Moore had been there since 1929, Cecil Stevenson lived in number 6 and Paul Nash was nearby in Eldon Grove. Later in the 30's this group expanded with the arrival of European artists, and Hampstead became an artistic centre until the beginning of the second world war.

Herbert Read moved into No. 3 Mall Studios in 1933. With his close geographical proximity to these artists, he gained an understanding of their work, defining their philosophical attitudes and attracting public attention to them. He described the atmosphere of that community in his article 'A nest of Gentle Artists': "For five years I lived in friendly and intimate association with this group of artists, visiting their studios almost daily, watching the progress of their work. At the back of the studios were small gardens, and in mine I built a wooden hut, about six by four feet, and there, during the first summer, I wrote THE GREEN CHILD. It was the happiest period of my life. I remember when we had just moved into the studio and freshly decorated it, woodwork pale blue, walls white, Ben Nicholson came in to see the result. "Wait a minute," he said, and retired, coming back a few minutes later with a round cork tablemat which he had painted scarlet. He seized a ladder and nailed the scarlet disc high on the white wall. The whole place was transformed by this accent of colour, perfectly placed."

(1) Read helped to spread the wide variety of ideas of the artists and writers loosely associated around Parkhill Road. He also became the foremost defender of modern art in Britain and promoted the work of Nicholson, Hepworth, Moore and others in a series of articles in publications such as ART NOW (1933), ART & INDUSTRY (1934), and ART & SOCIETY (1936).

However, the efforts of this group of artists were mainly overlooked or criticized, so that they depended on their own initiative and the understanding of a small number of colleagues and friends like H. S. Ede, Margaret Gardiner, Geoffrey Grigson, Adrian Stokes, Leslie Martin and John Summerson. This was not a 'movement' with an agreed objective or programme, but an association of friends whose understanding of experimental art forms, brought them together.

The first months of 1934 were extremely productive for Nicholson. During the time between December 1933 and March 1934, he progressed from the first painted reliefs to the first white reliefs. He carved on any available material, usually large boards and sometimes the mahogany leaves of old dining tables bought on the Portobello Road. In carving the surface of a board, Nicholson was working in a manner close to sculpture, by uncovering an image or experience embedded in the material, and uncovering it by means of pronounced physical action. Even his most apparently constructed reliefs of 1934/35 had to be laboriously cut and scraped out of solid boards, rather than put together out of several layers of plywood. The finished reliefs were painted white so that the preceeding process (whether the work was carved or constructed) is not evident. Their method of derivation is important philosophically, especially since the process of making art was an integral part in Nicholson's attitude towards his work. Michelangelo maintained he understood 'sculptural' to be that which is achieved by means of taking away, and that which is achieved by means of laying on was 'painting'. Nicholson's own statements reflect his sympathy with the process of sculpture: "I've always liked the idea of a sculptor who sits for 10 or 15 years carving a single object on the edge of a primeval forest, not to send to 'Documenta' at Kassel but because he has a passion to make this object, this living thing." (2)

However 'sculptural' his approach to his work has been, it seems paradoxical that Nicholson is primarily a painter. His concerns have not been the differentiation between negative interval and positive volume (space and mass) but, from his earliest works, the determination of colour planes in relation to others in a pictorial space. These planar relationships were very real to him and he learned to express any feeling through their manipulation: "If you take a large ultramarine blue and a small cadmium red square and place them on a cool white surface along with a pencilled circle you can create a most exciting tension between these two forces, and if at any time this tension becomes too exciting, you can easily, by the smallest mark made by a compass in its centre, transfix the circle like any butterfly." (3) Nicholson's move towards carving came from his need to create not just a picture, but an object. His arrival at the relief was an extension and development of his experimentation with planar pictorial space. Through carving he not only defined these planes but made them physically real and alive. In this way, Nicholson arrived at extreme abstraction, slowly and through an instinctive feeling for the correctness of his ideas.

Nicholson's earliest white reliefs usually took the form of an interplay between circles and overlapping rectangles. The motifs were geometrically simple but the resulting objects have an undeniable reality. The positioning of overlaid

surface, separating the carved planes, gives real depth to the reliefs. Despite their uncompromising purity of form and economy of statement the reliefs had an almost poetic harmony. There was never any effort to disguise the fact that they were man-made, with gouge marks left intact but un-obtrusive, which softened the works geometry without destroying it. Nicholson sometimes used a ruler and compass to sketch out a plan of the reliefs, but most of the decisions about the placement and depth of the planes and the scale of the involved elements were made during the process of carving. This preserved an instinctive approach to the work. In this way Nicholson responded to, and interacted with the object in an unself-conscious manner, relying on intuition and considerable manual skill to achieve his image.

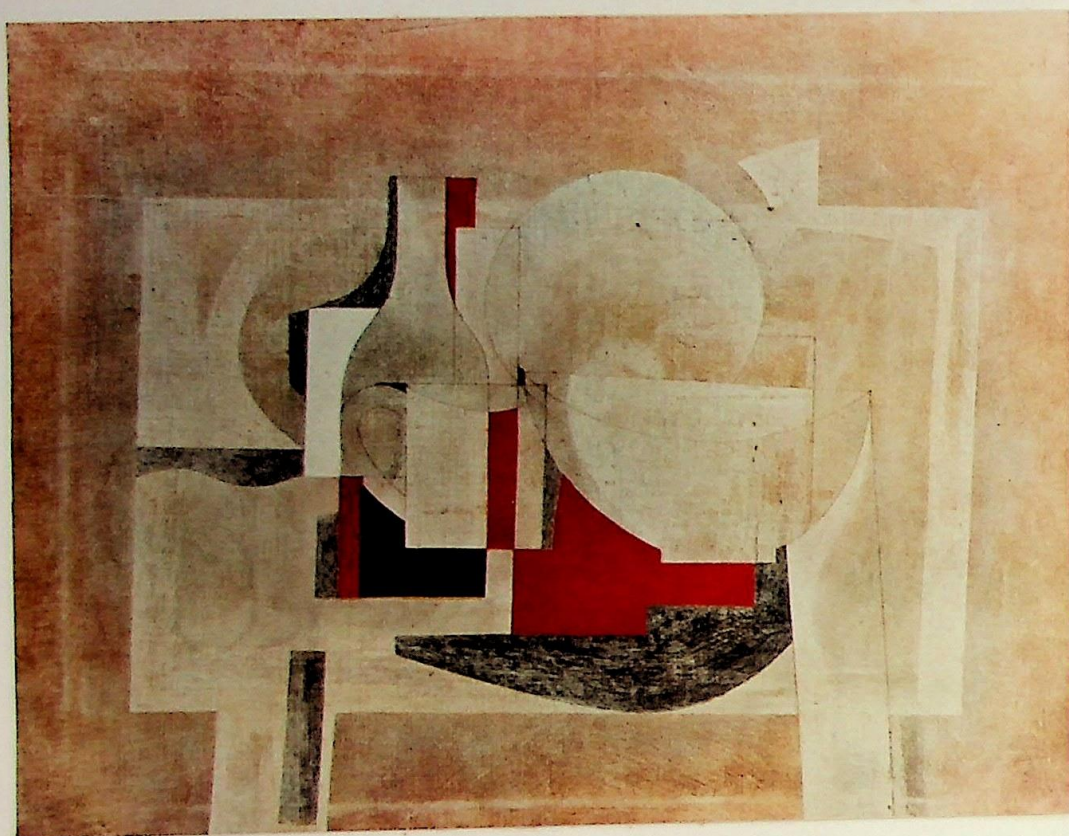
Nicholson always retained the right to work figuratively or otherwise. This was not because of flippancy but because his ideas and motifs overlapped. He did not abandon still-life themes or reduce his range of expression, even when his work was most formally abstract. His approach to both types of work is identical; the concerns involved and execution of which are so similar that they become inseparable. Whether it was the illusion of objects in a shallow pictorial space, or the actual construction of pure circles and rectangles in a shallow relief, the images are revealed through a similar process and idea. There is such a remarkable unity of purpose in Nicholson's reliefs and other paintings of the mid-thirties that the distinction between abstract and representational elements becomes irrelevant. All the work is concerned with the creation and definition of space; with Nicholson's distinctive use of light, either in the illumination of exposed white areas in the paintings, or the soft grey shadows in the white reliefs. The tonal subtleties achieved by the fall of light on the white reliefs (essential to their impact) encouraged Nicholson to develop rectilinear paintings which became prominent in the mid-thirties. His rectilinear paintings are characterized by a restricted number of elements and colour range. Although these paintings show his degree of admiration for Mondrian's ideas Nicholson still retained his own identity and source. They reflect the arrangement of shapes used in his reliefs and the use of colour as an abstract element, independent of a naturalistic source. They are also a continuation of the still-life there although highly formalized. In these geometric paintings, even when only vertical and horizontal shapes are used, there is a poetic quality in the arrangement of elements quite different to Mondrians although both artists use harmonious formal structures.

Nicholson's still-lives of the mid-thirties are important, not only because they were developments of spatial investigation but because many of them were

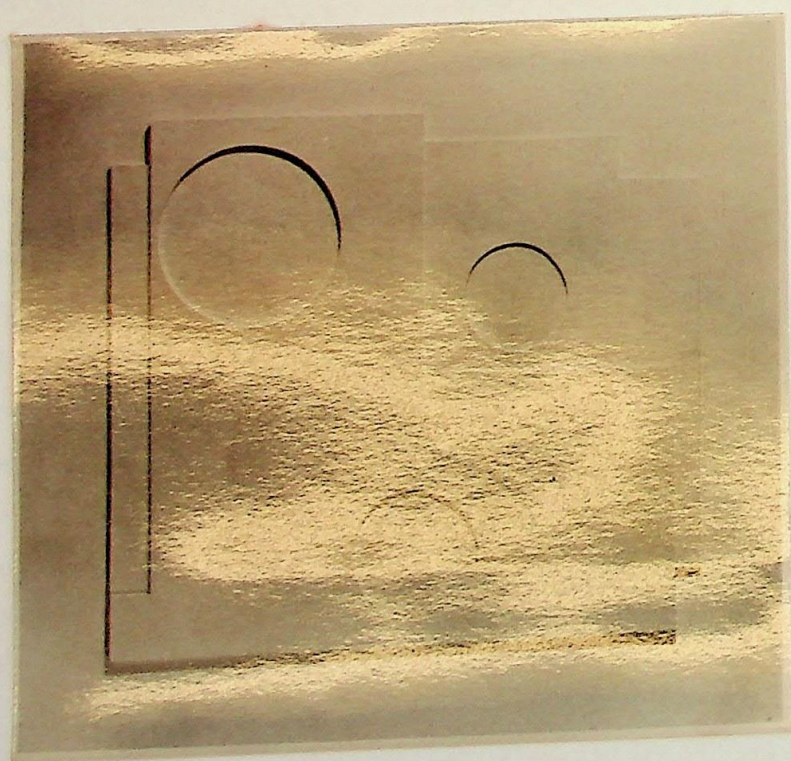
older paintings which he reworked. In this way, he not only developed an idea but a physical object. These paintings are double-dated, stating the time of the original paintings completion and the time it was reapproached with new knowledge. Nicholson laboriously scraped the surface of the old canvas, with a razor blade until only the ghost of the initial image remained. He used the abstract shapes which remained from the process of abrasion as a starting point for the new painting, building an image on the surface which had been affected by time and his own labour. He used the older painting as an object to create a new object. Not only did this process lessen his reliance on the initial observed facts, but created a new painting which was more than a traditional still-life, it was an object with it's own life. (fig. 15)

By 1935 both Nicholson and Hepworth had reached a degree of abstraction that remained in their work. They had also become leaders among a small group of artists, architects and designers who reacted favourable towards the modernistic ideas which came from continental cities. However, they were somewhat isolated because of their absolute dedication to abstract principles, especially in their attempts to convert the 7 + 5 Society to total abstraction. UNIT ONE was still viable, at least to the public, and their exhibition was touring the Municipal Galleries in England. Their continued contact with the Abstraction-Création association gave them support and encouragement, and they worked hard to create in London an equivalent of the Modern Movement in Europe.

Hitler's growing political power made life intolerable for many European artists involved with the international movement. London became a reception centre for the politically oppressed and those with dissenting cultural views to the third Reich. The Bauhaus was closed by the Nazi government in 1933 and Walter Gropius who had directed the School since 1919, came to London in 1934. Naum Gabo, who had already met Nicholson through Abstraction-Création, arrived in 1935, as did Marcel Breuer and Lazlo-Maholy-Nagy. They all lived in the same area around Hampstead and London became the centre of the European movement, which with the arrival of Mondrian, realized the Nicholsons' dreams of bringing together a truly international circle of artists, architects and designers in Britain. There followed a short-lived period of optimism: "Suddenly England seemed alive and rich - the centre of an international movement in architecture and art. We all seemed to be carried on the crest of this robust and inspiring wave of imaginative and creative energy. We were not at that time prepared to admit that it was a movement in flight. But because of the dangers of totalitarianism and impending war, all of us worked the harder to lay strong foundations for the future through an understanding of the true relationship between architecting painting and



(fig. 15) STILL-LIFE (1929 - 35)



(fig. 16) WHITE RELIEF. QUAI D'AUTEIL (1935)

sculpture." (4)

The meetings, discussions and exhibitions of that time were of great importance, and there were two publications which helped to clarify the work and ideas of contemporary artists. AXIS, was conceived as a forum for the avant-garde. The first issue appeared in January 1935, intended as: A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY ABSTRACT PAINTING AND SCULPTURE. AXIS ran for eight numbers. Initially it sought to define abstraction, its meaning and purpose. It also set British art in an international context by illustrating works by Miró, Mondrian, Picasso, Kandinsky, Gonzalez, Arp, Giacometti and Calder alongside works by Moore, Hepworth, Nash, Nicholson, Piper and Richards. It also sponsored an important exhibition ABSTRACT and CONCRETE in February 1936. However, the quarterly issues became half-yearly and the approach to contemporary art broadened resulting in less emphasis on constructive abstraction. The magazine performed a valuable service for British art during its short existence.

The other publication was more important from Nicholson's point of view, since he was personally involved in its realization. In 1936 Nicholson had attended the opening of the international surrealist exhibition in London. Afterwards he, Hepworth and Gabo discussed ways of promoting and clarifying different views of constructivist art. These small beginnings led eventually to the publication of CIRCLE in 1937. Its subtitle - "AN INTERNATIONAL SURVEY ON CONSTRUCTIVE ART" - identifies its allegiances. The work began in 1936 and in bringing together the views of English and European avant-garde artists and architects, it sought to be cosmopolitan and comprehensive. It included contributions from painters, sculptors, writers and architects, who were considered to be of a progressive outlook regardless of their individual specialisms. It was not intended as a manifesto and had no agreed social or political platform. It excluded realism and surrealism, proposing Constructive Art as an internationally significant development which affected all the plastic arts.

CIRCLE took two years to assemble. Its joint editors were Naum Gabo, Ben Nicholson and the architect Leslie Martin. When it was finally published it included eighty-two contributions on subjects ranging from biotechnics (Karel Honzík) to choreography (Leonide Massine). Each participant defined their own position in a written statement or visual presentation. The contributors included Arp, Braque, Brancusi, Picasso, Duchamp, Mondrian, Lissitzky, Kandinsky, Piper, Calder, Moore, Tatlin, Corbusier, Gropius and Mendelsohn. It was an impressive publication. Nicholson again defined his own position and his contribution included his ideas on the form of reality possible through abstraction: "It must

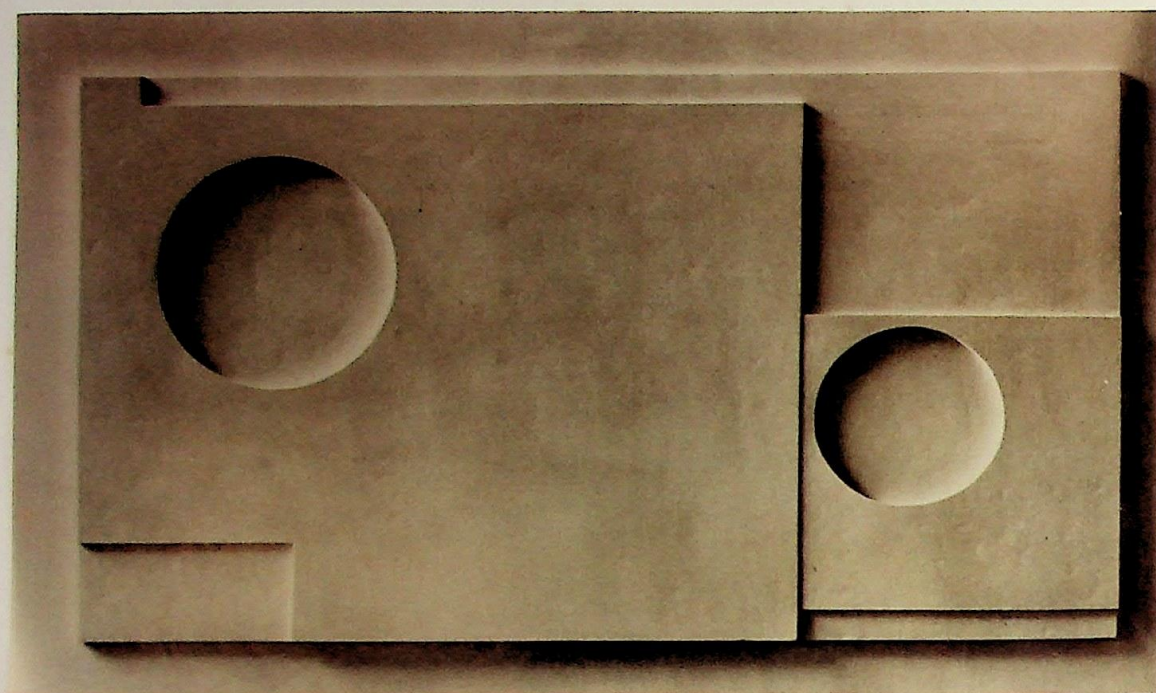
be understood that a good idea is exactly as good as it can be universally applied, that no idea can have a universal application which is not solved in its own terms and if any extraneous elements are introduced the application ceases to be universal. 'Realism' has been abandoned in the search for reality: the 'principle objective' of abstract art is precisely this reality." (5) For those who participated in CIRCLE, it was a time of great idealism, when they believed that their art could play an active role in shaping a new future. This period of hope in the arts was reflected in Nicholson's development during that time. His work (especially his reliefs of the late 1930's) became more architectural as a result of contacts he made through CIRCLE.

In 1935, Nicholson's efforts to create independent art objects became more pronounced. This is apparent in (fig. 16) WHITE RELIEF. QUAI D'AUTEIL (1935). The image is not contained within a rectangle on one plane. The edge of the relief is fragmented, directly echoing the shapes of included elements. Not only does each part have it's own identity within the whole, but defines the limitations of the pictorial space - the edge. This edge also gives the impression of the work continuing into infinity because it is not confined in the traditional narrative context of the rectangle. In later reliefs, in spite of their smaller scale, Nicholson conveys a greater sense of space and distance. The elements in these reliefs seem less crowded and restrained by the rectangular frame than previously.

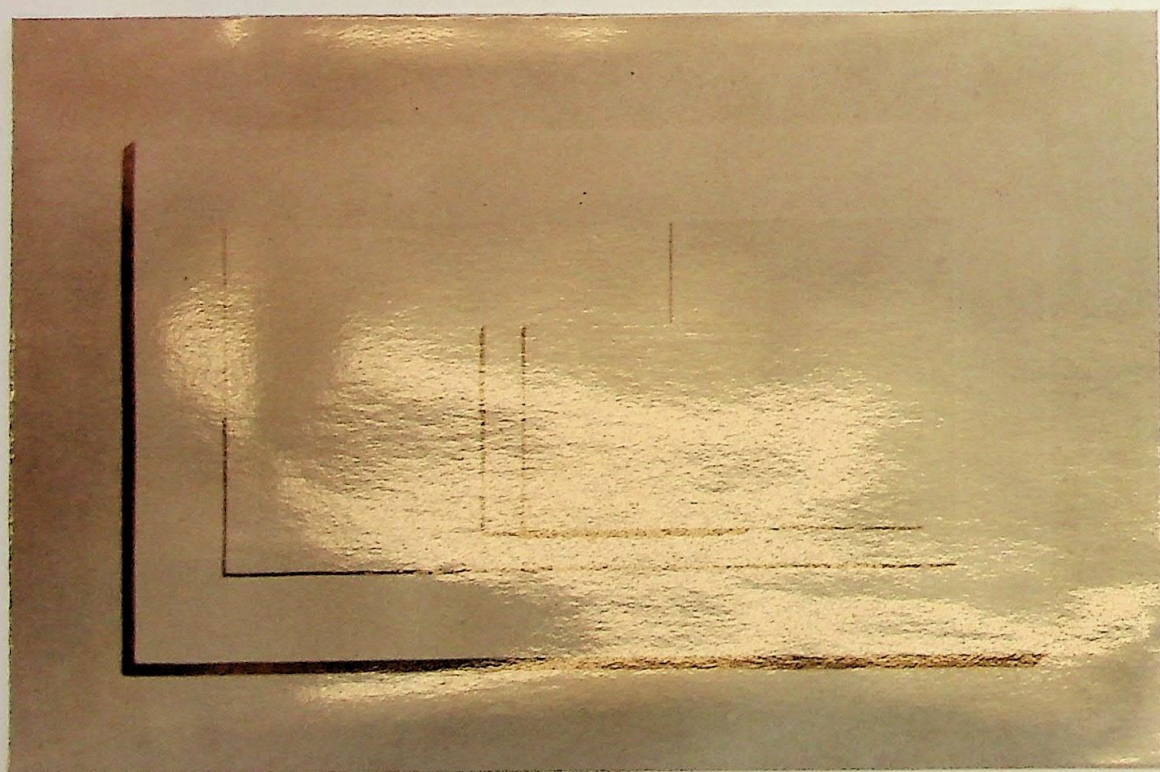
This progression is apparent when (fig. 17) WHITE RELIEF (1934) is compared with (fig. 18) WHITE RELIEF PROJECT (1938).

From 1938 onwards, circles appearing in the reliefs were often drawn with a pencil, or engraved lightly with a pointed tool rather than carved. This emphasized the circles placing and provided a contrast to carved elements by making the carved shapes seem softer (as they relied on shadow, not line for their existence). This process, used in WHITE RELIEF (1938), opened up a new range of concerns and sensations which Nicholson explored in the 1940's. Using line on the carved surface of the relief helped unite abstraction and drawing which became a feature in later work. (fig. 19)

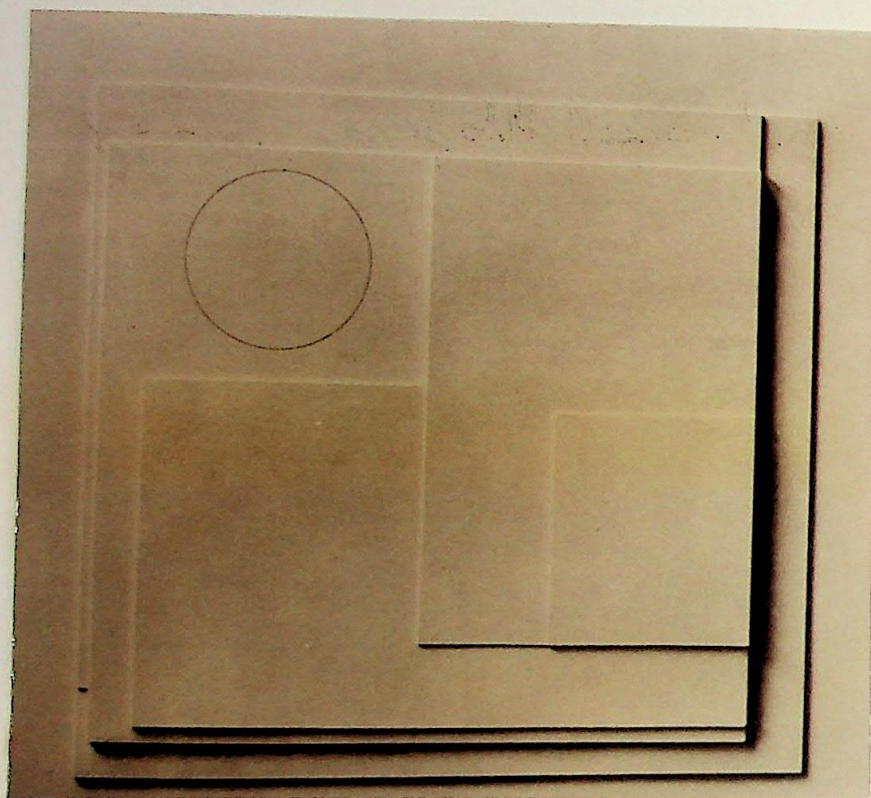
The optimism and energy experienced during the late thirties was brought to an abrupt halt with the beginning of the second world war. The foreboding atmosphere which eventually ruined these dreams of synthesis in the arts, was the subject of Herbert Read's introduction to the exhibition 'Living Art In England' (which was dominated by surrealist work): "The triumph of Facism has everywhere carried along with it the exultant forces of philistinism, so that over more than



(fig. 17) WHITE RELIEF (1934)



(fig. 18) WHITE RELIEF PROJECT (1938)



(fig. 19) WHITE RELIEF (1938)

half of Europe, art, in any vital sense, can no longer be said to exist... even in those countries which are still professedly democratic, a wave of indifference has swept the art world." (6)

In August 1939, a week before war was declared, Nicholson, Hepworth and their five-year-old triplets left for Cornwall, away from the threat of bombardment in London. The last person they visited before leaving London was Mondrian. They begged him to go with them, but he was essentially a city-dweller and refused to leave. Mondrian had been a particular source of encouragement to English artists, especially Nicholson and Hepworth, since he was a living example of the abstractionists' creed: "Mondrian showed us how completely possible it was to find a personal equation, through courage and exceptional faith in life itself, and for the artist's intrinsic right to assume entire responsibility for the development of his own art. No artists in our time have had such a powerful and silent influence as Mondrian and Brancusi." (7)

With the arrival of war, and the movement of major European artists to America, Nicholson and Hepworth were again isolated by their position in a remote part of England, a country again divorced from mainstream artistic development.

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1. TOM CROSS, PAINTING THE WARMTH OF THE SUN, ST. IVES ARTISTS, 1939 - 1975
Page 44.
 2. NORBERT LYNTON, NICHOLSON, THE WADDINGTON GALLERIES, Page 7.
 3. CHARLES HARRISON, BEN NICHOLSON Page 21.
 4. TOM CROSS, op. cit, Page 48.
 5. CHARLES HARRISON, op. cit, Page 30.
 6. TOM CROSS, op. cit, Page 48.
 7. *ibid.*

CHAPTER 5

St. Ives

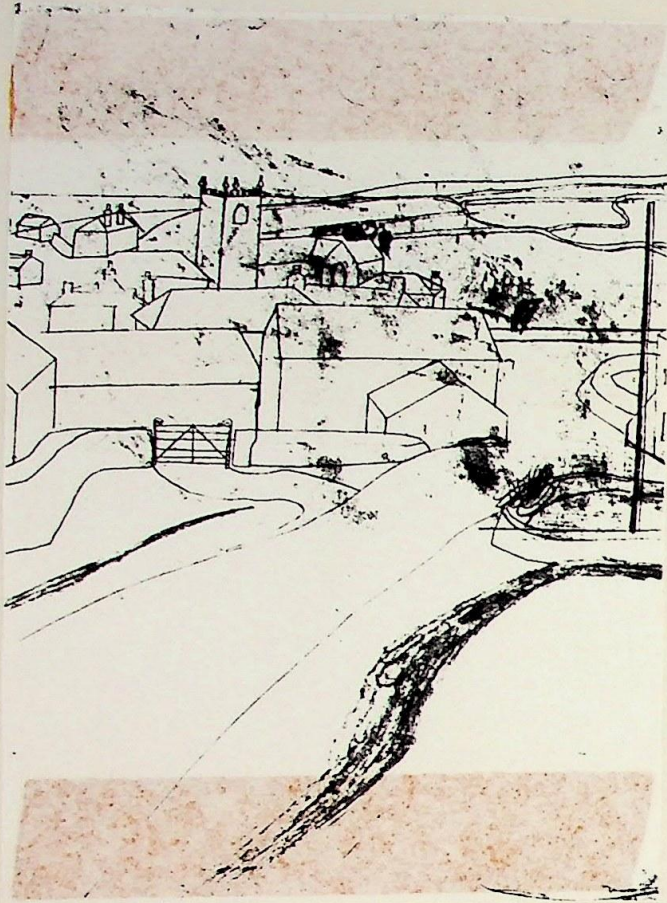
When the Nicholson's went to Cornwall in 1939, they stayed with Adrian Stokes. He was a friend from the Hampstead days who had supported their work. He had written enthusiastically about them since the early 1930's. There was a close friendship between the Nicholsons and the Stokes and they lived together for about four months. Naum Gabo and his wife Miriam also stayed with the Stokes for some time, having come to Cornwall at the Nicholson's suggestion.

The artistic climate in England was mild and there was a return to narrative art with Romantic revivalists and early realists thriving on insular nationalism that rejected foreign concerns. The internationalism of the thirties disappeared into an increasingly conservative art. Gabo was the only remaining connection with the important association before the war, and only a tiny group of artists remained devoted to non-figurative art.

For Ben Nicholson, the early war years were neither highly productive or adventurous. As he worked under drastically reformed conditions, his work seemed to abandon its previous objectives, but it also developed in unexpected ways. In the work of this time, there is a sense of Nicholson rediscovering his visual world, directly responding to his environment, which was no longer urban. The Cornish landscape became an essential ingredient in his painting. He returned to drawing, which had not played a central role during the years of abstraction. These changes illustrate his self-sufficiency and openness to change with his physical environment; his ability to find in a new environment, subjects which he could use to investigate his artistic concerns. As it was also a time of extreme financial hardship, Nicholson was obliged to produce saleable work, which in view of the artistic climate, was preferably figurative.

This was how Nicholson actually embarked on drawings of landscape, calling them "pot boilers" because he thought they would sell. (1) However, drawing in landscape in remote places, Nicholson found a personal concern in the formal interrelationships between the rugged landscape and man-made geometrical buildings. This is the subject of (fig. 20) ZENNOR (1941), where the soft curve of the hill-top is out by a church tower and a telegraph pole. In paintings like this, perspective is sacrificed to planar geometry, which often produces taut divisions of space, tightly compressed.

Nicholson also worked with still-life, using objects close at hand in his



(fig. 20) ZENNOR (1941)



(fig. 21) MOUSE HOLE (1947)

studio. His collection of jugs, bottles and mugs were also subjects in these paintings. He began mixing elements of still-life and landscape together, with the still-life objects in the foreground and landscape (often seen through a window), behind. This was another direction for Nicholson, and many of the paintings were unresolved and purely experimental. He continued with his reliefs, but they became coloured and although small in scale, still retained their classic formality.

Nicholson kept the two attitudes to work separate during the war years: refining form and defining order with precision in the world of abstract geometry or resolving the more hap-hazard relationships of the seen world, particularly in landscape. These two attitudes inevitably overlapped and expressed a need to synthesize visual stimuli with aesthetic harmony. Although he was removed from the group-activity of the pre-war years he was anxious to clarify his position as an abstract artist and put his thoughts into "NOTES ON ABSTRACT ART," in an effort to reconcile the two seemingly contradictory aspects of his work at that time.

NOTES ON ABSTRACT ART, contains an important insight into Nicholson's way of thinking and attitudes towards art: "A great deal of painting and sculpture today is concerned with the imitation of life, with the imitation of a man, a tree or a flower instead of using colour and form to create its equivalent; no one will ask what a tree is supposed to represent and yet, with the most innocent expression in the world, they will ask what a painting or sculpture or a construction in space is supposed to represent. This equivalent must be conceived within terms of the medium, it must be pure painting and sculptural expression, since the introduction of anything extraneous means that the conception is adulterated and therefore that it can no longer have a complete application to other forms of life.

One of the main differences between a representational and an abstract painting is that the former can transport you to Greece by a representation of blue skies, and seas, olive trees and marble columns, but in order that you may take part in this you will have to concentrate on the painting, whereas the abstract version by its free use of form and colours will be able to give you the actual quality of Greece itself, and this will become a part of the light and space and life in the room - there is no need to concentrate, it becomes a part of living... I think that so far from being a limited expression, understood by a few, abstract art is a powerful, unlimited and universal language. Within the means of abstract expression are intense possibilities and it is a language with

me in monthly instalments of £1, it will be ok by me." (4). Economic circumstances also dictated the scale of the work produced, and in 1948 most of Nicholson's paintings were small, on paper or hardboard. They were based on textured surfaces which were built up in layers of thin pigment applied with broad brushes, or wiped on with rags soaked in turpentine. This surface was then scraped with razor blades to form a ground, which was painted and drawn on with pencil or inscribed with a tool, so that the colour and texture were set to work on several planes at once.

Post-war Britain brought new support for the visual arts and an increased popular interest. Towards the end of the war the British Council which had acquired persuasive promotional stalls with wartime information services, began to mount a series of exhibitions in England and to take the work of British artists abroad. As Europe became safe, a regular programme of exhibitions was held in its capitals. In Britain, several important exhibitions displayed contemporary work by Europeans: in the Victoria & Albert Museum, December 1945 an exhibition included work by Picasso and Matisse, while the Tate exhibited work by Braque and Roualt.

It was after the war that Nicholson and Hepworth found any real audience in Britain. Their work had been humanized during the years in Cornwall and included many direct references to landscape. However, they had kept faith with the ideas of the '30's and the attempt to unite all forms of art towards a better future. Therefore, after the war, they were seen to offer a message of optimism and their aspirations were in keeping with the national spirit of rebuilding and reconstruction.

This atmosphere was reflected in the Festival of Britain, held in 1951. The Art's Council's contribution was '60 paintings for 51', and commissions were offered to sixty artists. The work was to be large and 60 x 45 inches was the smallest size stipulated. For this festival, Nicholson produced the largest abstract painting he had yet attempted; a curved panel for the (fig. 22) REGATTA RESTAURANT. It was divided into three rectangles with a precise rectilinear construction cutting across the panels. The contrast between the curved panels and the linear structure drawn on its surface, gave the work tension without destroying its formal balance.

The public reaction, especially to the more abstract paintings of '60 paintings for 51' was mostly critical and Nicholson again defended modern art: "People to whom this freedom in painting and sculpture is now asked, 'But what is it supposed to represent?' The answer to that is very much the same one might give

a power peculiar to itself. But the kind of painting which I find exciting is not necessarily representational or non-representational, but it is both musical and architectural, where the architectural construction is used to express a 'musical' relationship between form, tone and colour and whether this visual, 'musical' relationship is slightly more or slightly less abstract is for me beside the point." (2)

For Nicholson, abstract art was an active force in everyday life, it's reality was undeniable. His proposal that abstract art should have been on the list of England's war aims was not based in esoteric supposition but in the understanding of abstract art's real permeation in society: "About 'abstract' art: I have not yet seen it pointed out that this liberation of form and colour is closely linked with all the other liberations one hears about. I think it ought, perhaps, to come into one of our lists of war-aims. After all, every movement of human life is affected by form and colour, everything we see, touch, think and feel is linked up with it, so that when an artist can use these elements freely and creationally, it can be a tremendously potent influence on our lives. The power, for instance, to create space (not 'literary' space but actual space) is surely invaluable. I think too, that so far from 'abstract' art being the withdrawal of the artist from reality (into an 'ivory tower') it has brought art once again into common everyday life - there is evidence of this in its contemporary architecture, aeroplanes, cars, refrigerators, typography, publicity, electric torches, lipstick holders, etc. But like all the more profound religious, poetic, scientific, musical or artistic ideas its deepest meaning is only understood by a few and the process seems to be that these interpret it to a few more who pass it on to the rest of the world who unconsciously incorporate it in their lives. A Raphael is not a painting in the National Gallery - it is an active force in our lives." (3)

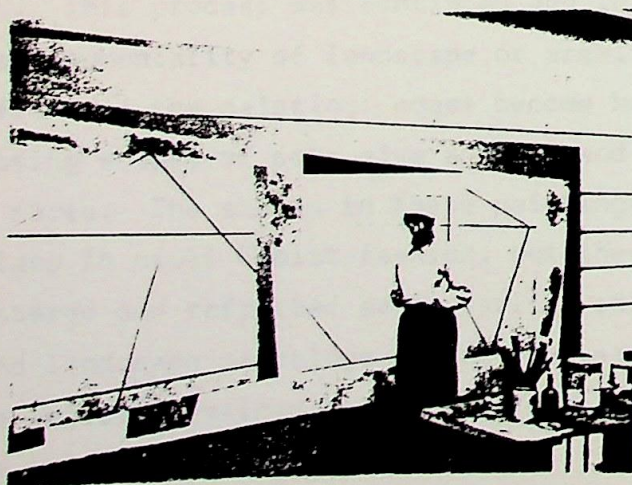
The period of wartime in St. Ives was for Nicholson and Hepworth one of reflection and consolidation. Nicholson retained the right to preserve the duality between working from observation or in complete abstraction. By 1947 he had reached a compromise solution in which he combined particularized information from observation with elements of complete abstraction. In (fig. 21) MOUSE HOLE (1947) this mixture is evident, where the abstracted still-life objects are contrasted with the expanse of sailboats, hills and rural houses. The two parts of the composition are unified by shared colours.

In view of increasing financial difficulty paintings were sold cheaply and Patrick Heron recalls Nicholson selling "one of his best hard edge abstractions to my friend Fello Atkinson, for £15 and (Ben) wrote: if you would like to pay

if asked what a flower is supposed to represent. Each flower exists in its own right - it does not represent anything but itself." (5)

After the war, Nicholson experienced a new lease of energy and new confidence and assurance appeared in his work. This came from two sources: his awareness of a wider audience that the few friends and collectors who had supported him in wartime isolation; the respect and admiration he was receiving in St. Ives from a group of younger artists for whom he provided example and encouragement (in much the same way as Mondrian had been a source of encouragement for him). He was also receiving international recognition with shows at the Dularcher Gallery in New York and he won the first prize at the 39th Carnegie international in Pittsburg 1952 for his painting POISONOUS YELLOW (1949).

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1. DAVID LEWIS, ST. IVES 1939 - 64: TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF PAINTING, SCULPTURE AND POTTERY, Page 22.
 2. ANDREW BRIGHTON & LYNDA MORRIS (EDITORS), TOWARDS ANOTHER PICTURE: AN ANTHOLOGY OF ARTISTS' WRITINGS, Page 163
 3. *ibid.* Page 230, 231.
 4. DAVID LEWIS, *op. cit.*, Page 30.
 5. TOM CROSS, PAINTING THE WARMTH OF THE SUN: ST. IVES ARTISTS 1934 - 1975, cites a letter by Nicholson to editor of DAILY MAIL, Aug. 7. 1951, Page 92.



(fig. 22) NICHOLSON IN FRONT OF PANEL FOR
REGATTA RESTAURANT (1951)

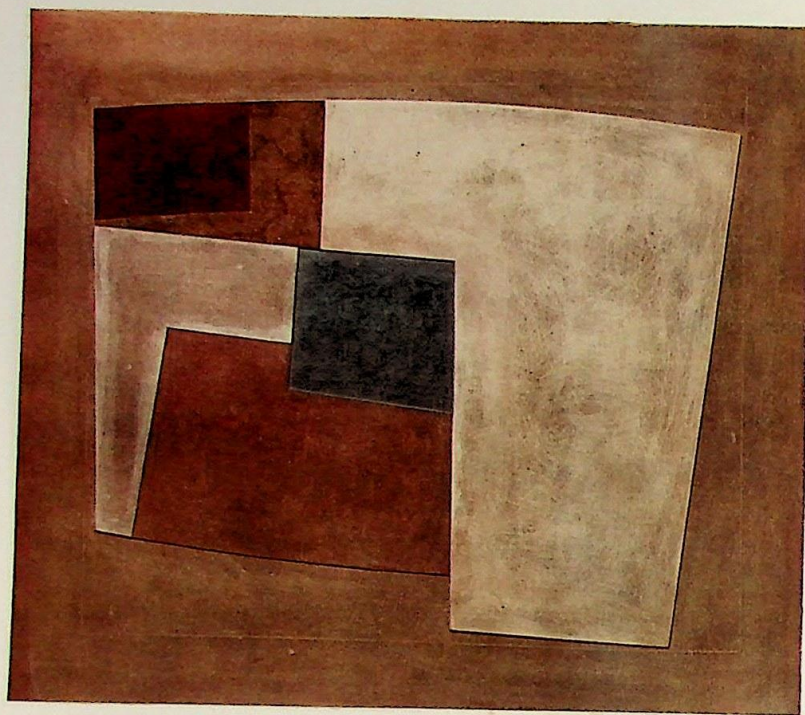
CONCLUSION

By 1950, Nicholson had arrived at all the artistic characteristics which remained in his work. That is not to say that he stopped developing since his work has always been part of a step-by-step process of redefining familiar themes, in landscape, still-life and in the world of elementary geometrical forms where he moved with the freedom to which he aspired. His work after 1950 was involved to a greater extent with reappraisal and synthesis than formerly.

In the mid to late '50's, Nicholson produced a series of work which combined his still-life and landscape themes of the '40's, with the reliefs of the '30's. These reliefs sometimes took on stone-like qualities and forms, which identified them with the textures and structures of the known world. These reliefs also had 'natural' colours which related directly to landscape. In later reliefs he used colour to accentuate the 'realness' of the work, (although independent of natural sources), which imbued it with the feeling of landscape (similar to the feeling of architecture associated with the reliefs of the late '30's): (fig. 23) CARNAC (RED AND BROWN) (1966).

In 1957 Nicholson married Dr. Felicitas Vogler (his marriage to Barbara Hepworth dissolved in 1955), and he returned to Ticino where he had spent many winters with his first wife, Winifred Dacre. He began a series of paintings on paper, using a light oil wash of colour and drawing over it. The colour-wash established the desired effect of light, which gave these drawings a geographical context (because the light varied from country to country) and feeling: (fig. 24) SIENA CATHEDRAL (1956). This process was continued and in the '70's, Nicholson's still-lives assume the monumentality of landscape or architecture, by the object's placement within the frame of the painting: edges become horizons, handles become arches and black enclosing shapes of pots give a force and grandeur similar to that of hills or rock faces. The shapes in these paintings, such as (fig. 25) MOON JUG (1973), overlap in usual Cubist fashion, but they are placed in an open space rather than clustered and refracted as in earlier still-lives. In his combined still-life and landscape paintings during the years at St. Ives, architectural and still-life objects remained separate to some extent, but in the '70's the two finally became indivisible.

As he reconciled aspects of landscape and still-life in his paintings, in Nicholson's reliefs of the '70's his paintings and reliefs converge: with the shallow space of the painting being expressed by the actual depth of the reliefs.



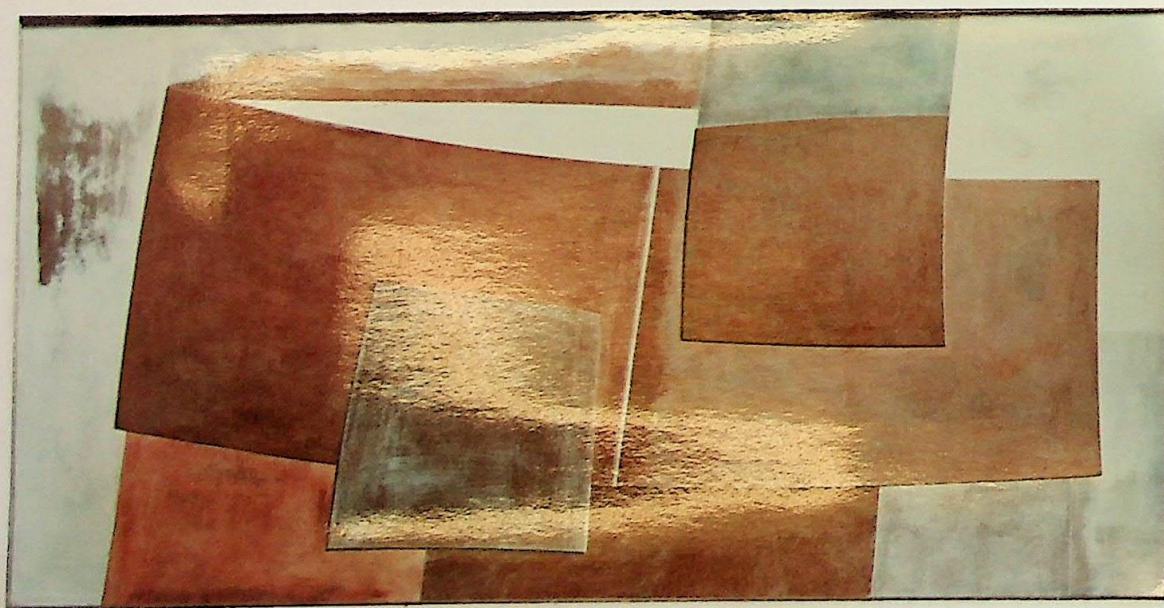
(fig. 23) CARNAC (RED & BROWN) (1966)



(fig. 24) SIENA CATHEDRAL (1956)



(fig. 25) MOON JUG (1978)



(fig. 26) ROCK LANDSCAPE (1976)

The experience of life, the experience of working and the experience of painting come together to produce not only an independent object with it's own terms of existence, but with it's own atmosphere and feeling. This is because the artist responded to the colour of the board, which could be changed by texturing, rubbing and painting. Nicholson was again approaching his material, like Wallis and the work formed through the interaction of idea, object and hand. Nicholson also used patches of white to enliven his compositions (a device used since the still-lives of the 1920's), present in (fig. 26) ROCK LANDSCAPE and (fig. 27) NIGHT BLUE.

Nicholson's strength as an artist lies not only in his considerable technical ability, but in his progressive analysis of his subjects, which he never ceased re-examining, re-defining or re-living. He worked steadily and acquired great intimacy and fluency with his materials, so that the process of his art-making became intuitive. For an artist with such hesitant beginnings, who developed strong beliefs about the inherent reality of what he was making, and the power of art to actively affect life, he never became didactic or dogmatic in his approach. His motifs and ideas always overlapped and he moved back and forth between figurative and abstract elements, always receptive to new experiences, always keeping his options open. He maintained that any form of dogma was harmful. However, he pursued a particular line of thought consistently within several forms of expression.

Nicholson always had difficulty explaining his paintings and rarely gave interviews. When he did talk about his work it was usually in analogies with references to architecture, music, landscape, and particularly the rhythm and balance of ball games (which reflected his use of wandering line, used for descriptive purposes or for it's own sake). He refused to be pinned down about the media he was using or how he arrived at a particular arrangement. Because he was involved in an instinctive visual process, the resulting image could not be explained in any medium apart from it's own and finally the work must stand in it's own right and within it's own visual terms.

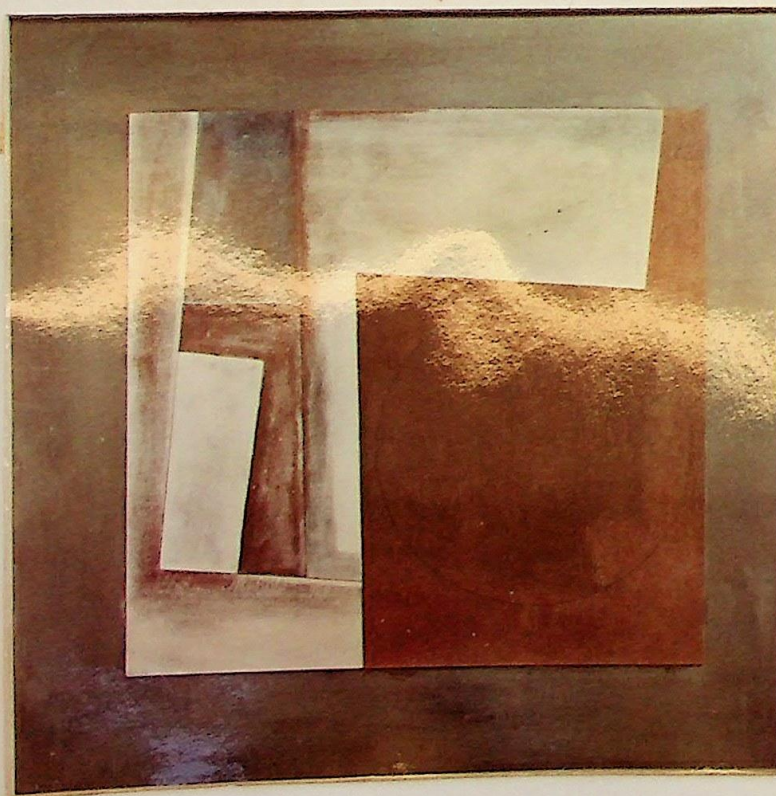
Nicholson expressed this intuitive process as the experience of painting: "A different painting, a different sculpture are different experiences, just as walking in a field or over a mountain are different experiences, and it is only at the point which a painting becomes an actual experience in the artist's life, more or less profound and more or less capable of application according to the artist's capacity to live, that it is capable of becoming a part also of the lives of other people, and that it can take it's place in the structure of the world,

in everyday life." (1)

Until the end of his life, Nicholson painted enthusiastically "having all that he has learnt at his disposal, with his weaknesses left behind, his certainties at a maximum, his illusions at a minimum, his senses continuing open for present innovation and future development." (2) He had returned to London in 1972 after a four year stay in Switzerland. There was a retrospective exhibition in the Tate in 1969, and a touring exhibition in America - "Ben Nicholson: Fifty years of his art" in 1978 - 79. He died on February 6th, 1982 at his home in Hampstead.

"One was wanting to get right back to the beginning and then take one step forward at a time on a firm basis and a painting for me if it's anything is a living thing and should achieve a form of life more real than life itself." (3)

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1. JOHN SUMMERSON, PENGUIN MODERN PAINTERS; BEN NICHOLSON Page 11.
 2. JOHN ROTHENSTEIN, MODERN ENGLISH PAINTERS, VOL II, NASH TO BAWDEN, quotes GEOFFREY GRIGSON, Page 202.
 3. CHARLES HARRISON, NICHOLSON, Cites a letter from Nicholson, Nov. 1960. Page 28.



(fig. 27) NIGHT BLUE (1976)

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