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CAUSEY Paul Nash Writings on Art

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Paul Nash

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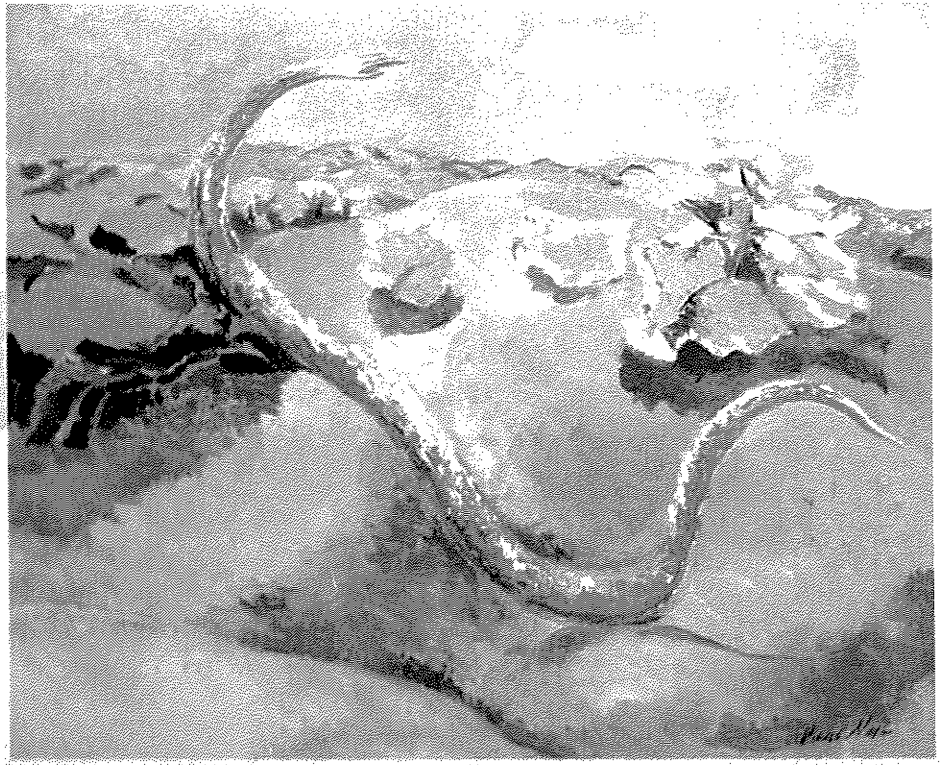

The following artists compose the Unit: Architects—Wells Coates, Colin Lucas; Sculptors—Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth; Painters—Edward Wadsworth, Ben Nicholson, Paul Nash, Frances Hodgkins, Edward Burra, John Bigge and John Armstrong. [See Plate 11, which illustrated the original article.]

UNIT ONE

[*The Observer* art critic, Jan Gordon, reviewed the Unit One exhibition at the Mayor Gallery unflatteringly on 15 April 1934. Nash protested on 22 April and Gordon replied beneath Nash's letter. Nash's riposte appeared on 29 April alongside a letter, supportive of Unit One, from Douglas Cooper, its secretary.]

Letter to *The Observer*, 22 April 1934 (74)

Sir,—In his somewhat cursory review of the first exhibition of the newly formed group of architects, painters and sculptors known as Unit One, your art critic has made a statement which I am convinced should be refuted before its inaccuracy does permanent harm. 'The painter of to-day,' he asserts, 'has two main directions: either he sticks to representation . . . or he turns to decorative expression. But the painter who deserts representation is usually forced to become an abstract decorator, decorating a vacuum. That is to say, he is painting a picture to fit a room which is non-existent. In this way his art does tend to drift away from life, for not only is he divorced from the association of visible life, but he is also divorced from the needs of useful life.'

Apart from the totally inadequate estimate of the range of modern æsthetic expression which the first sentences imply, the conception of abstract art, described as abstract decorating, is entirely misleading, both in its reference to life and use. How often must the disconcerting truth be re-affirmed that the artist is capable of creating life, without obvious references to 'the association of visible life'? He does not 'drift away from life' because he ceases to depict recognisable objects. An abstract picture has its own life according to its own laws of interrelation in forms and colours, and Mr Gordon should know better than to describe a serious form of art which has been developed throughout the world with increasing variety of idiom and deepening spiritual significance for the last twenty-five years as the practice of a 'decorator decorating a vacuum'. But it us equally true to say that, far from being 'divorced from the needs of useful life', it is an integral part of its very appearance. To say, indeed, that 'such pictures are painted to fit a room that is non-existent' is a blind denial of fact. Let anyone examine the Ideal Home Exhibition after a visit to the Mayor Gallery, and fail to perceive the relationship between the *true* contemporary interior and the paintings exhibited by the members of Unit One. *These pictures are for those walls. . . .*

CONTRIBUTION TO *UNIT ONE*

Edited by Herbert Read. Cassell, 1934, pp. 79–81 (77)

In these days it is unusual to give much importance to nationality in art. The universal character of the School of Paris discourages a method of classification which might tend to complicate without clarifying. The centre of the modern movement in art, for the last twenty years, has been the capital of France; does it matter that the pivot of that centre is a Spaniard? On the other hand, can we ignore altogether the nationality of a work of art? Apart from the character of its æsthetic features, it has qualities of race which, if not very distinctive in its early history, must inevitably tell as it takes its place in the past. Also, once its authorship becomes obscured, place and time are its chief distinguishing marks. The argument is, however, that country and period have importance not merely as aids to classification, but rather as influences in the actual creation of a painting or a sculpture. If we accept the suggestion put forward by Mr. Herbert Read in his latest treatise,[1] namely, that 'the artist's handwriting, not merely his idiosyncrasies, but the whole being of the man expressed in the act' is the unique property of a work of art, surely we must admit the value of environment. However strongly a work of art may appear stamped by personal genius, it owes something to the power of time and place. It is on the plane of this thesis I should like to raise a slight structure of speculation. To what extent has contemporary art in England a national character? Have we ever expressed, in the medium of the visual arts, a spirit as distinctive as that which inhabits our literature or even our music? Certainly we may claim something of our own in architecture—of the past. There are sufficient monuments to show an æsthetic purpose—instinctive or intellectual, which has built uniquely. Can we find in our short history of painting and of sculpture, qualities so peculiar as to identify their subjects beyond doubt, and, if so, do these qualities persist to-day?

The first of these questions may seem easy to answer. Without very much hesitation, the mental eye will contemplate the portraits of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries beyond which it will envisage the national treasures of

[1] *Art Now* (Faber and Faber, 1933).

the English Landscape school. But this is a somewhat deceptive vision. Many of these charming pictures owe their English flavour mainly to the character of their subject. Portraits of the landed gentry ensconced in unmistakable Adam libraries or leaning upon the timber of their parks are, in a sense, inevitably national. In the same way, the painted meadows of East Bergholt or the landscape of the Norfolk Broads are inseparable from our conception of the English School. But these pictures do not possess, necessarily, intrinsic English qualities. They have an air of being English in a quite natural way, but it requires a keener penetration to discover the essential spirit which seems to identify them with the English genius. A research of that kind has never, I believe, been seriously undertaken; for the simple reason that, in the plastic arts, an English genius has never been allowed. That it does exist—a distinctive element, traceable through the whole history of our expression—becomes obvious upon any study of the subject beyond surface appearances. It would be ridiculous to claim for it a very powerful personality or a profound influence; that is not its character. It has never possessed the force which created a Shakespeare, or even some of the lesser figures of our literature, nor has it such sureness or spontaneity in expressing itself, except through occasional erratic channels. But, in essence, it is the same native spring.

I make this claim without apology. So many apologies have been made for English art. So many false impressions have been made abroad by stupid semi-official organisation, that to describe a man as an English artist would seem to be almost a contradiction in terms. On the other hand, we have suffered much embarrassing nonsense of the kind which refers to British artists as 'second to none'. Happily, recent developments are changing all that. The international character of modern art, by destroying the false values of nationalism, opens the way for a purely academic approach to the question of national idiosyncrasy, and, in proportion as art becomes more abstract, so the nuances of national or racial distinction become more subtle and, consequently, more interesting to trace. Let us take, for example, the form of abstract painting known in France as 'non-figuratif', an art which does not admit of any representational features. The chief practitioner of this kind of abstraction in England is Edward Wadsworth. Now, it may be possible to suggest certain influences which have passed over Wadsworth, but it is impossible to deny that the pictures he makes, according to whatever idiom he employs, are his own and do not look like those of anyone else. Set them in the company of French and Italian pictures of the same genre, and they maintain their individuality, particularly in regard to their colour. It may be argued that this is only a proof that Wadsworth has an original kind of mind, a contention I would not wish to dispute, but it is the mind of a particular man, an Englishman, a northerner, actually a Yorkshireman—a composition of elements utterly different from those which make up the mind of a Frenchman or a Spaniard or a man who was born in Siena. Undoubtedly, where the argument becomes difficult to pursue on paper, without the lesson of concrete examples, is in identifying and describing the peculiar qualities of this, or any work which separate it from other work of the kind and associate it convincingly with the English expression. Such a task is certainly outside the scope of this essay which, as I have already hinted, is no more than a provocation for research. It may be possible, however, to indicate a direction of approach.

English art has always shown particular tendencies which recur throughout its history. A pronounced linear method in design, no doubt traceable to sources in Celtic ornament, or to a predilection for the Gothic idiom. A peculiar bright delicacy in choice of colours—somewhat cold but radiant and sharp in key. A concentration, too, in the practice of portraiture; as though everything must be a likeness rather than an equivalent; not only eligible persons and parts of the countryside, but the very dew, the light, the wind as it passed. Blake, even, made a portrait of the ghost of a flea. . . .

But such characterisation will not help to explain what I have in mind. There seems to exist, behind the frank expressions of portrait and scene, an imprisoned spirit: yet this spirit is the source, the motive power which animates this art. These pictures are the vehicles of this spirit but, somehow, they are inadequate, being only echoes and reflections of familiar images (in portrait and scene). If I were asked to describe this spirit I would say it is of the land; *genius loci* is indeed almost its conception. If its expression could be designated I would say it is almost entirely lyrical. Further, I dare not go: except to recount history and to state my faith. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, William Blake, then, and often now, called a madman, perceived among many things the hidden significance of the land he always called Albion. For him, Albion possessed great spiritual personality and he constantly inveighed against Nature, the appearance of which he mistrusted as a false reality. At the same time, his work was immensely influenced by the country he lived in. His poetry literally came out of England. Blake's life was spent in seeking to discover symbols for what his 'inward' eye perceived, but which alas, his hand could seldom express. Turner, again, sought to break through the deceptive mirage which he could depict with such ease, to a reality more real, in his imagination. In the same way, we, today, must find new symbols to express our reaction to environment. In some cases this will take the form of an abstract art, in others we may look for some different nature of imaginative research. But in whatever form, it will be a subjective art.

For myself, my sympathies are too clearly exposed by this essay to need further explanation. Last summer, I walked in a field near Avebury where two rough monoliths stand up, sixteen feet high, miraculously patterned with black and orange lichen, remnants of the avenue of stones which led to the Great Circle. A mile away, a green pyramid casts a gigantic shadow. In the hedge, at hand, the white trumpet of a convolvulus turns from its spiral stem, following the sun. In my art I would solve such an equation. [See Plate 12, which was not reproduced in the original article.]

FOR, BUT NOT WITH

Axis, January 1935, pp. 24–6 (78)

The following essay needs a few words of introduction. It originated in a letter to the editor of *Axis*, where I expressed a doubt that a painter not wholly devoted to producing abstract pictures, could be eligible for inclusion in a magazine which, as I thought, expressed so particularly the non-figurative creed. It appeared, however, I was mistaken in my estimate; our ranges coincided. But there still remained some debatable space; scarcely no man's land—a more aerial hiatus, such as an air-pocket, perhaps. In any case a void of some sort, which I have been left to explore.

Before I venture upon any criticism of purely abstract art, I should prefer to state that I am almost entirely in sympathy with its purpose and aesthetic. If I am unable to submit to the exigence of a completely non-representational idiom, it is for what I will call 'personal' reasons. It was the personal aspect which the editor of *Axis* seemed to think might interest her readers; but since I feel that matters of personal bias are often looked at askance, I shall approach my objective obliquely. Fortunately I am old enough to remember when abstract art began to be spoken of as a passing fashion. This was soon after its inception, a few years before the war. In England, since the end of the war, our more vocal art critics have steadily discouraged the belief that there is any future for abstract art. Indeed, it is usually stated as a cold fact, that abstract art is dead. I have seen it printed in respectable journals, and offered as useful information to guide the unwary, that abstract painting has long been abandoned on the continent and that any attempt to do over again in England what had proved no more than a freakish experiment is not only futile, but perverse. Some of us know the story of the august personage who visited a famous art school, but before entering, enquired with great seriousness, 'Professor T, I trust you have no cubists here'; and upon being assured there were none—'I am glad,' he added, 'Cubism is Bolshevism.' This confused view is shared by a number of prominent people in England to this day: they are convinced that the practice and encouragement of abstract painting and sculpture is somehow subversive of discipline and order. Apart from the slightly amusing irony that an art which so deeply imposes order and discipline on the imagination, should become a sort of formal symbol for a conception of chaos, what are the facts, actually, concerning abstract art?

It has been practised now, in various forms all over the world, for twenty-five years. Its adherents, far from falling off, have gradually increased. In this country, the younger generation of artists regards it as a natural form of expression, and, I am told, that at the public schools, it is the only form of art which has any appeal for boys interested in aesthetics. How are we to account for this state of things, so much at variance with a popular conception?

For myself, I can only say that an explanation given by Herbert Read in his discussion of Mechanic Sensibility, chimes so perfectly with my own understanding, that I can offer nothing better than a quotation of his words. 'The obvious ground for the appeal of mechanical form,' he says, 'is the presence in our daily life of so many machines; of so many objects expressing in their lines and volumes a certain functional perfection, to which we cannot deny the name of beauty. . . . But there is probably a profounder reason for the appearance of a mechanical or geometric sensibility in modern art and that reason is the reason underlying all recurrent phases of geometric art in history.'[1] He then gives Worringer's theory expressed in his book, *Form in Gothic*, that the artist's will in primitive man 'did not arise from the enjoyment of direct sensuous perception of the object; instead he created precisely in order to subdue the torment of perception, in order to obtain fixed conceptual images in the place of casual *perceptual* images . . . it was the product of a direct impulse of self-preservation, not the unrestrained luxury product of a humanity delivered from all elemental world fears.' Read finds a parallel between the primitive artist's state and that of the modern artist. He asks, 'Is our outer world, in its state of political, economic and spiritual chaos, one which man can face with "universal piety," sensuous satisfaction, spiritual aplomb? Is it not rather a world from which the sensitive soul, be he painter or poet, will flee to some spiritual refuge, some sense of stability? And is he not likely, in that tendency, to desert the perceptual basis of the empirical art of the immediate preceding epoch, in favour of a fixed conceptual basis?'

I am wholly in sympathy with such a theory, although it can be made to cover a wider field than that occupied by a *pure* abstract art. It explains, however, the spiritual need for such an art. But there is another reason why, from a practical standpoint, a purely abstract art may be prevalent in the future. This is put forward in Herbert Read's latest book, *Art and Industry* (Faber and Faber). In the course of his admirably reasoned case for an industrial art, Mr. Read suggests that 'virtually a new plastic art, developed out of cubism, is very valuable as a "pure" art controlling the development of formal art in general which will occupy, in the future, a relationship to industrial design very similar to the relationship pure mathematics bear to the practical sciences.' Here, I think, we have an idea immensely stimulating to young minds; and one which, as it is understood and put into practice, will go far towards reconciling the baffled or suspicious public to the meaning of abstract art.

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[1] *Art Now* (Faber and Faber).

In this short summary I have tried to review the claims which a purely abstract art has upon the sympathies of every intelligent person. I now wish to show, as succinctly, why I as an artist, am unable to practise such an art except as an occasional means of expression. To begin with, I will turn in my tracks to the quotation I made from Herbert Read's comments on Worringer's theory of fixed conceptual images. Referring again to geometrical art in general, he admits that it is possible to regard it as an art of despair, 'an art merely of escape from the complexity and confusion of modern life.' Whether this is just or not, or whether it matters or not, the art of escape is not the prerogative of the practitioners of a purely geometrical art. What we all do more or less, as Jean Hélion says, is a piece of world, an isolated object. I find my piece of world cannot be expressed within the restrictions of a non-figurative idiom; not by reason of its expanse, so much as by reason of its character. I have known this from the afternoon in Paris ten years ago when I listened with awe to Albert Gleizes' eloquent spate of aesthetic and philosophic theory, to the last time I turned the pages of *Abstraction-Création*, and marvelled at the beauty of their immaculate monotony. Apart from the world of 'pure' invention free from association with recognisable objects, I have no doubt, that the infinite variations of nature may be resolved with an equally incalculable number of complete abstractions. Yet I find I still need partially organic features to make my fixed conceptual image. I discern among natural phenomena a thousand forms which might, with advantage, be dissolved in the crucible of abstract transfiguration; but the hard cold stone, the rasping grass, the intricate architecture of trees and waves, or the brittle sculpture of a dead leaf—I cannot translate altogether beyond their own image, without suffering in spirit. My aim in symbolical representation *and* abstraction, although governed by a purpose with a formal ideal in view, seeks always to give life to a conception within the formal shell. But when I am at liberty to change my mood, and can turn to the geometrical planning of a textile or other form of industrial design, I fancy that I gain something in the release from all representational problems; and it is during these occasional periods, that I find non-figurative painting a pure, unhindered joy. [See Plate 13, which illustrated the original article.]

ART AND INDUSTRY: THE ROYAL ACADEMY EXHIBITION

['Art and Industry' was the Royal Academy's winter exhibition, opened by the Prince of Wales on 4 January 1935. It was the subject of a *Times* leader and, from the beginning, received a generally poor press on the grounds that it was too traditional, the products were too expensive, and it did not tackle the problems of art and industry that had been brought up in the Gorell Report of 1932. Correspondence started on 8 January. Frank Pick, a leader in the employment of experimental artists as designers through his directorship of the London Passenger Transport Board, wrote on 9 January a letter whose tone is not well represented by Nash. The letter did not endorse the exhibition but supported its motives of improving relations between artists and industry and attempted a conciliatory position in a way Nash's reply did not. Nash wrote his reply as President of the Society of Industrial Artists, while Pick was President of the much larger and longer established Design and Industry Association. *The Times* of 21 March reported the establishment of a committee of interested parties to take the issue of the artist in industry further. Pick was a member, Nash was not.]

Letter to *The Times*, 18 February 1935 (79)

Mr Frank Pick's letter on the Royal Academy exhibition of Art in Industry, published in *The Times* for February 9, although expressing some admirable sentiments, contained a few very misleading statements.

No exhibition of recent years has been so pitilessly raked by criticism. Yet no educated visitor to Burlington House can deny that it is deserved. But that criticism does not arise from a cold, aesthetical disapproval. It springs from the heat of sincere indignation and bitter disappointment. Artists, manufacturers, and other authorities throughout the country know that the RA exhibition is largely a misrepresentation, a kind of treachery. . . .

For this state of things Mr Pick tells us we have to thank 'the artist's approach to industry'—calculated to give to industrial objects 'a grace and beauty they often sadly need'. This, indeed, is the unkindest cut of all; but, fortunately, like other of Mr Pick's statements, it bears little relation to reality. The facts are that the artists of Great Britain, by whom are meant in this connexion not fancy picture-makers or decorators or society architects, but practical designers of experience or obvious potentiality, were never considered as an essential unit to be used in the building up of the exhibition. They were never approached, even, as the manufacturers were approached, two years ago when preparations began. Had they been intelligently chosen then to combine with manufacturers—a true alliance of art and industry—for the production of common practical things instead of expensive flummery; had they been given, also, a full share in the organization and display, or an adequate voice in the selection committees, the travesty at Burlington House could never have appeared.

BEN NICHOLSON'S CARVED RELIEFS*

Architectural Review, October 1935, pp. 142–3 (81)

In accepting an invitation to write upon the work of Ben Nicholson I had in mind an advantage I may be said to possess over other critics, that of having known Nicholson as a student when we were together at the Slade; in fact, I have a clear recollection of one of his earliest statements which seems to have a bearing on the point of view of this article.

The Slade Life Class, for the most part astride donkey easels, had been absorbed for some time producing their own or the Professor's view of the male model—mostly passable imitations of the natural form—when I was shocked to notice that Ben Nicholson was not conforming to the general attitude. Upon a large sheet of paper, on a drawing board of Imperial size set upon a painting easel, he had drawn in heavy pencil a small dark figure, a sort of manikin, bearing no resemblance whatever to the model. It was, of course, simply his personal equivalent for the model, characteristically presented and, I need hardly add, not the kind of equivalent approved of.

Looking across the space of time between that early drawing and his present work, I am able to trace the development of a significant tendency. Nicholson, more than most of his English contemporaries, has persisted in giving equivalents for what he sees, rather than any form of naturalism or 'representation'. He is opposed to likeness. There was a brief period when he concerned himself with a kind of portraiture, but I do not believe his sitters cared enough for their equivalents. A more interesting phase, and a better illustration for my argument, occurred when Nicholson painted compositions of jugs. Now, the essence of a jug—you might say—is its capacity, therefore its roundness; particularly at a time when Cézanne reproductions and the Third Dimension were so vividly in the minds of young English painters. But these influences did not seem to touch Nicholson at all. He painted all his jugs flat. Not that he was unable to appreciate the virtue of a round jug but because, against the ellipse of its rim, he preferred to oppose a flat plane. We see many similar flattenings of jugs, *compotiers* and what not in the paintings of Juan Gris and Braque.

To the uninitiated, however, this doctrine of equivalents must have seemed perverse. To them who asked for bread he appeared to offer something very much like a stone. Even at the time when he was presenting quite credible fish, they suspected it could only be in response to a demand for serpents. Nevertheless, it was with a certain disappointment—for, in time, people get used to anything, even a paradox—that the patient spectator saw Nicholson converted from his symbolism of equivalents, lately grown increasingly abstract in form, to the complete abstraction of non-figurative art. Here there seemed not so much as a reference, nothing even equivalent; the picture, if not self-evident was, as it were, utterly self-contained. To my mind, this was the most logical and satisfying step Nicholson had yet made, but it proved to be only a prelude to a far more comprehensive renouncement and the final betrayal of the innocent spectator's trust. Nicholson, considered by the general public as at least an extremely skilful painter, with a very rare colour sense and an almost magical manipulation of patina, abruptly exchanged the medium of oils and canvas for a method of shallow relief carving upon synthetic board the only colouring of which was an even coating of unrelieved white. It was, so far as our spectator could judge, Nicholson's ultimate and most unfair equivalent. So far as his art is concerned, it should be regarded as the discovery of something like a new world.

This expression 'world' now often used rather naïvely by abstractionists to explain their own compositions, obviously means something to Nicholson, and may be used justly by him. If Paul Klee can get so much out of going for a walk with a line, Ben Nicholson clearly has a lot of 'fun' digging with his chisel. You must understand that these reliefs are excavated, not built up. Sometimes they are cut out of synthetic board, sometimes out of wood. They are then attached to a backboard and framed and glazed. The frames are simple flat copings which are usually painted in an off-white tone of pink-grey, blue-white or lavender-grey. Both frame and glass are very important adjuncts to the presentation of the relief. The process of cutting away is a very delicate one. A fraction of thickness one way or the other makes an incalculable difference. A slight thrust too deep necessitates the lowering of the whole plane, and that which promised the vastness of a landscape in the moon diminishes perhaps to the sad equivalent of Finsbury Circus. But Nicholson is a sure worker as well as a very fast one. Nor does he nod over his seemingly monotonous task. Apparently, his process gives him all of the sculptor's mental and physical stimulus and satisfaction. After all, if you can both make a world and live in it, that should be enough. . . .

Nicholson gauges his progress and, in fact, the progress of the whole movement of abstract art in terms of liberation, expressed most often in qualities of light. 'I find,' he says, 'I judge paintings by the quality of light given off . . . in my own work, it is my only way of judging its achievement or progress.' I do not think that needs explanation, except to add that 'light' here is meant to convey more than just luminosity. Yet on that score alone these reliefs hold enormous advantage over the painted canvas of illusory planes, although it is very interesting to watch the development of Nicholson's paintings, which he continues to make, alongside the carved reliefs. This naturally brings us to the question of their actual use. It has often been asked 'What can be done with these reliefs?' Personally, I find no difficulty in placing such objects in the scheme of things. Surely they are pre-eminently suitable as architectural features in the contemporary room, placed there as pictures or sunk into the wall. Their still design, yet capable of subtle change under the influence of light, their severe lines and simple forms, all sympathize with, and at the same time heighten, the character of the modern theme. We need not claim for them that every one is a masterpiece; in an affair of such delicate nicety of direction and depth, the difference between something and nothing is an ace. The wastes of the desert or the Arctic floes are either worlds of infinite enchantment or they are wastes. Herein lies the adventure of this art. But I believe few people, looking at these reproductions alone, will hesitate to acknowledge that this artist knows what he is about and is contributing something valuable to our understanding of beauty.

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* An exhibition of recent work by Ben Nicholson opened at the Lefevre Galleries on September 26.

DORSET SHELL GUIDE

Architectural Press [1936], pp. 9–17 (83)

When we speak of the face of the earth, the face of the waters, quoting that ancient imaginative expression, we probably refer to an extent or expanse of space rather than the suggestion of a featured mask. But in describing some comparatively small localised area of land and sea, it is perhaps possible to think of it in a more literal sense as, in fact, something like a countenance. At least, I have sought to conceive such an actual symbol in this description of the county of Dorset. As I see it, there appears a gigantic face composed of massive and unusual features; at once harsh and tender, alarming yet kind, seeming susceptible to moods but, in secret, overcast by a noble melancholy—or, simply, the burden of its extraordinary inheritance. Indeed, the past is always evident in that face. And it is not always the farthest past which is most assertive. There are certain places, at certain times, where the record of some drama can start into life as a scar glows with sudden memory. Such places, at such times, are inseparable from the deeds associated with them: the wreckings of the Chesil Bank, the vile robberies of Cranborne Chase, the murder at Corfe, or the sadism of the Bloody Assize. But the face of Dorset is not long distorted by such memories. On a

sunny day the delightful vagaries of the Chase are enchanting to watch under the changing lights. The Bank, lapped by a blue sea, fringed by tamarisk, and harbouring a thousand swans, is only a pleasant dream, as you lie on Abbotsbury Hill. Nor can you think of Jeffreys while you eat crumpets in his lodging at Dorchester. Corfe, alone, is implacable. No mood of nature or human intrusion can affect that terrific personality. It dominates the county like a calvary, a symbol never less than its history.

There is another 'haunt' behind the features of Dorset which has no sinister origin, although, in one instance, we may find it natural to associate with that melancholy which for many of us is characteristic of this part of England. This may be called the literary haunt, and is peculiar, probably, to the county. No other region that I can recall has become so closely identified with the work of a writer as this part of Wessex has with the novels and poems of Hardy. You cannot cross the Great Heath without remembering, if you have read the book, that poignant tale, *The Return of the Native*, perhaps the finest of all Hardy's novels; certainly the one containing his most vivid description of a piece of Dorset country. On another page, a fairly full quotation of this has been included by way of illustrating a physical feature which neither drawing nor photograph succeeded in rendering so well. Two fainter haunts are those of the poetry of Barnes, a rather forgotten music outside of the land of its origin, and the delicate memory of Jane Austen's association with the farthest point of Dorset, Lyme Regis. Actually, William Barnes and Thomas Hardy can be said to be two voices typifying Dorset, for, as they, individually, are sad or bitter, and placid or sweet, this land is made up of such elements, and is never all one or all the other, in place or season.

But all these impressions are intangible stuff compared with Dorset's records of more distant time. These, indeed, have left indelible marks in her countenance, which is scarred and furrowed from end to end. And here it will be convenient to abandon our metaphor, partly because it is becoming exhausted, partly for considerations of scale. No one who has looked on Maiden Castle can be expected to tolerate its comparison to the furrows on however vast a brow. An analogy may be apt enough for general characterisation, but it may yet fall apart against a deliberate translation of detail. Let us therefore side-step from imagery to fact.

I have already hinted at the character of the landscape of Dorset, a landscape of bold and varied features. It may be divided roughly into three sections—the chalk downs and rocky formations of Purbeck and Portland; the vales of the west and north-west made by the clay; and, thirdly, the heathlands of the south-east where the sands lie.

The chalk uplands deriving from the region of Salisbury enter Dorset south-east of Shaftesbury, where the county is still strongly imitative of Wiltshire, and from there almost traverse the county, throwing out, in their course, a succession of creative force; nothing here perhaps, of the first flight, has ever been achieved within the scope of the plastic arts; but it is time that the cloud of false witness was rolled away to make space for an intelligent illumination of the very distinct features of our true countenance.

In applying the term architectural to the various objects illustrated here it must be understood in its widest appeal. Clear manifestation of plan and direction are essentials, but the architectonic quality is variously interpreted.

The headpiece which introduces this essay has been included by request of the editor of this English number of THE ARCHITECTURAL RECORD. It was thought that some suggestion of the character of this part of the English countryside should be given as a background for speculation to readers unacquainted with our landscape. Between the gate and Silbury Hill are undulating grass meadows, at the moment ripe for the hay-makers, and so, constantly moving like water as the surface is broken by the shadows of passing clouds, the shafts of the sun or an occasional breeze. You will see how fantastic, how almost *Surreal* this landscape appears with its unprepared approach to the abrupt intrusion of a hill of such vast proportions. Yet we have seen such an effect before; the desert sands run almost as level to the foot of the Pyramids. . . .

Although it is not possible to give any impression of the ruins of Avebury which could do justice to their design, the groups of trilithons at Stonehenge leave no doubt of the original composition. Here is a simple and mighty conception precisely realized. A religious monument without parallel. Look down, next, upon the plan of Maidun, most formidable and perfect example of hill architecture. These separate precepts seem to me the symbols of our formal heritage. From their influence flowed out the inspiration of the early sculptors, the makers of the Saxon fonts and crosses. Of this breed is the marble knight of Dorchester Abbey, in Berkshire. Centuries later we find it in the best work of William Blake, on those too rare occasions when he escaped from the Gothic obsession. A hill, a tower, a teapot—the echo rings true throughout. Simple and large in aspect, the affinity becomes easy to trace, whether we compare Earls Barton with Stonehenge, or Carlton House Terrace or the Admiralty Stores at Portsmouth. Yet, when we come to examine the painting by Gainsborough we find another link. Both in Gainsborough's enchanting landscape and Nash's façade we find a subtle exercise of aerial perspective; each an architectural exploit of great distinction in different terms. Gainsborough's painting and the water colors of Cotman and Girtin seem to me admirable examples of a form of poetic expression peculiar to the English genius. But this is not the quality I wish to insist upon here. The portrait group and the sarcophagus are both very intelligently designed but the latter, together with Girtin's river scene, should be examined for their unique technical power. Here, again, is architecture, a truly *architectural* use of water-color painting; at which both Cotman and Girtin excelled beyond any artists of any period.

To complete the series a drawing worthy of our tradition was soon discovered once we had firmly turned our back on the 'artists' of that dubious period (1880). Any excursions into our own times seemed too dangerous—even to begin. But it is obvious that with the complete decline of Impressionism and the exposure of the Pre-Raphaelite myth, English art has begun to grow into a healthy shape again. In twenty years we may be able to look back or even around with renewed confidence. [Plates 27–28 show parts of the original article.]

THE LIFE OF THE INANIMATE OBJECT

Country Life, 1 May 1937, pp. 496–7 (92)

The idea of giving life to inanimate objects is as old as almost any record of fable. It has varied in conception throughout very different histories; fairy lore, mythology, and the Bible. The sudden assumption of life and speech, in the human sense, by inanimate things is a commonplace in fairy tales, and occurs quite naturally also in most mythologies. But it is the endowment of natural objects, organic but not human, with active powers or personal influences, which is the concern of this essay; and, for precedent, we need look no farther than the Psalms of David. Here, as everyone knows, floods clap their hands, hills leap and break into song. A most undeniable personal agency is accorded to the land and waters in the 114th Psalm: 'The sea saw it and fled . . . the mountains skipped like rams and the little hills like lambs.' It may be argued that the expression of such improbable activities is no more than poetic licence; but, of course, its significance cannot be limited in any such degree.

The life and art of primitive peoples are deeply inspired by the idea of the power of 'inanimate' things. In the beginning of Herbert Read's *Art and Society* (Heinemann) occurs a passage which explains the particular attitude I have now in mind. 'Tylor, who first elaborated the theory (of Animism) was inclined to assume that, for the primitive, all objects of a sacred character, animate as well as inanimate, were inhabited by a spirit, but Dr. Marett has suggested a separate category to which he has given the name *animatism*, denoting a class of objects which we should regard as inanimate but which the savage regards as animate. In such cases, it is not a question of a particular stone being the house of the spirit *the stone itself has its spirit, it is alive.*'

Here, therefore, is an immense background for research and speculation upon the mystery and mysticism of the 'living inanimate.' Mystical speculation is beyond the proper reach of this slight essay but mystery—or at least the sense of mystery—can hardly be kept out.

I have a distinct recollection of a story I was once told of the small daughter of an eminent scientist who was offered the last bun or biscuit at a tea party with that conventional and rather inane remark from her hostess: 'Do not be afraid of the last one.' To which the scientist's child replied: 'How could I possibly be afraid of an inanimate object?' But, although it is natural or, perhaps, inevitable that scientists and their children should find it impossible to be frightened by inanimate objects, that only explains the scientists. Poets are otherwise. They know better. Wordsworth, who wandered the mountains and woods so often, and of all English poets gained the most intimate knowledge of everyday, natural phenomena, Wordsworth was certainly afraid of inanimate objects.

Hugh Sykes Davies, in his acute discussion 'Surrealism at this Time and Place,' which is contributed to *Surrealism*, recently published—*Surrealism*, edited by Herbert Read (Faber and Faber)—gives an extract from Wordsworth's early poems, part of which I will quote here. It describes a strange voyage upon the lake, 'an act of stealth and troubled pleasure.' The poet fixed his view

> Upon the summit of a craggy ridge
> The horizon's utmost boundary: far above
> Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.
> . . .
> When, from behind that craggy steep till then
> The horizon's utmost bound, a huge peak, black and huge,
> As if with voluntary power instinct
> Upreared its head. I struck and struck again,
> And growing still in stature the grim shape
> Towered up between me and the stars, and still,
> For so it seemed, with purpose of its own
> And measured motion like a living thing,
> Strode after me.

Sykes Davies points out that 'From this infantile memory, and many others like it, Wordsworth built up a mythology which has been of the very greatest importance in English culture. In its general outlines it conforms with the fundamental mythology of the human race; it is the systematic animation of the inanimate which attributes life and feeling to non-human nature.'

And so we come to our own time with the disturbing manifestations of surrealism which have made a considerable impression even upon the unreceptive British public. And of all forms of expression, perhaps the most unusual and the most imaginatively exciting has been the Object; and of that species again, perhaps the most interesting, because the most accessible for everyone, the variety known as 'l'objet trouvée' or, as we have translated it, the found object.

The found object ordinarily considered, is any object we may discover *for ourselves*, and, for the purpose of this discussion, I am treating only of natural phenomena. The object, therefore, will belong to one of the three kingdoms: animal, vegetable, or mineral. Now it will be obvious to the least observant that numbers of forms in Nature have apparently accidental resemblances to human or animal features. Such oddities seem to me only interesting in a quaint way, and are popularly, and quite rightly, mostly attributed to the Devil.

To attain personal distinction, an object must show in its lineaments a veritable personality of its own. It may be a stone which looks like a bloodhound, as the Avebury megalith here; but it must not have only and amusingly a canine look: it must be a *thing* which is an embodiment and most surely possesses power.

But the surrealist has a deeper thought about the found object: first, that by finding you create it; second, that it has always been yours, living, as I understand, in the unconscious until the accident of your perception gives it birth. Personally, I find this idea probable and poetic, but I foresee difficulties in its practical application. My own use of the object pictorially and in making groups or interpreting natural objects is inevitably imaginative. But I do not allow the prompting of the unconscious to lead me beyond a point of defensive control, in support of certain æsthetic convictions. It is a matter of give and take—or, rather, of take and give.

One thing is clear, however, in my experience. The more the object is studied from the point of view of its animation the more incalculable it becomes in its variations; the more subtle, also, becomes the problem of assembling and associating different objects in order to create that true irrational poise which is the solution of the personal equation.

The drawing reproduced here and some of the objects form part of an exhibition at present being held at the Redfern Gallery. The design called 'The Nest of the Wild Stones' is, perhaps, a good example of the pictorial application of the theory of the life of inanimate objects. [See Plates 29 and 32, which illustrated the original article.]

A NEW POETRY

News Chronicle, 7 June 1937, p. 10 (93)

At this time a year ago a small group of English artists, painters, poets and sculptors were organising one of the most remarkable exhibitions that London has ever seen. It took place at the New Burlington Galleries, appropriately enough, behind the back of the Royal Academy during a heat wave; and it had an average attendance of a thousand people a day. Its title was Surrealism and it comprised the exhibits of fifteen separate nations in paintings, sculptures, drawings, 'collages', photographs and objects.

Ever since the discovery that pictorially, for me at least, the forms of natural objects and the features of landscape were sufficient without the intrusion of human beings, or even animals, I have pursued a diverse research in land and by the sea, interpreting the phenomena of Nature without ever missing men or women from the scene.

Gradually, however, the landscape, as a scene, ceased to be absorbing. Some drama of beings, after all, seemed to be necessary. A few attempts to escape into the refuge of abstract design proved me unsuited. But at this point I began to discover the significance of the so-called inanimate object. Henceforth Nature became endowed for me with new life. The landscape, too, seemed now possessed of a different animation. To contemplate the personal beauty of stone and leaf, bark and shell, and to exalt them to be the principals of imaginary happenings, became a new interest. To imagine instead of to interpret . . .

The drawings in this exhibition date back to 1911. The most recent are the beginning of another experiment.

THE NEST OF THE WILD STONES

The Painter's Object, edited by Myfanwy Evans. Gerald Howe, 1937, pp. 38–42 (95)

I found my first nest of wild stones on looking closely into a drawing I had made of some bleached objects on the Swanage Downs. It lay just below the level of my consciousness, slightly out of focus. But there was no mistaking its lineaments a moment later when I moved the dry thoughts to one side.

I do not think that ideas which come to us from wherever they come should be submitted to analysis, except where there is every reason for, or every reason against supposing that by peeling off the bark we can get at the bite, the bite is better than the bark which is worse than the bite. Or, like stripping a woman to discover the woman underneath.

But if I broke all the shells of all my wild stones I should find that precious yolk which is like precious stones, the black core of the flint.

If stones are eggs they birds are, too. Not even grosbeaks always, or comic birds like toucans, but partridges and landrails much more, and little pretty quails. Larks, even. All birds of the furrow and the down. Sculptors knock birds out of stones. By the time they have done with them they are neither birds nor stones. Except Brancusi's. But the stone birds of the field are always both. They do not insist. Perhaps, when they are lying on the ground they are stones, and when they stand up they are birds, but, thank God, they never look like stone birds.

Sometimes one may find a pair almost side by side. Inseparable complements, in true relation. Yet, lying there in the grass never finding each other until I found them that afternoon on the Sussex Downs, during an attempt to remember whether Edward James lived at East or West Dean. That problem was not then solved, but so soon as my stones came into my hands their equation was solved and they were united for ever. And directly Edward James saw the picture of these two he wished to acquire it. But it is only at this moment I have recalled that these stones came from the downs of West, or was it East Dean?

So life runs on, not cut and dried like some horrible tobacco the Padre smokes, or locked away in an abstract like a fly in amber. But flowing backwards and forwards and throughout; a complex maze of associations which keep the mind guessing, and imagination hovering like that gay summer monster which suggests a nightmare trinity, the elephant-hawkmoth with his inveterate tongue.

Let us kill two birds with one stone. One the egg, one the bird. They are not dead but sleeping; imprisoned in the stone like those truffles in aspic I once bought in the Nice market under Matisse's window. But Matisse keeps all his birds in a great cage, canaries mostly. He seemed to dote upon them, but he never puts them into his pictures, so far as I know. There is a difference between real and surreal birds, of course. But, somewhere in between must come my stepmother's canary which has a forked tail like a Kite or Puttock. I have had the honour of drawing this bird now for perhaps fifteen years. When last I drew him I noticed he had got into the sky. His cage depended from a cirrus cloud. Below, a dark sun suffused the upper air with a roseate film. The cage seemed rather to fly than to be hanging there. With its criss-cross slender bars and perches it looked like a Kite. And then, the other day, I heard the bird had gone blind. Poor bird, he cannot see the sun. It does not matter now, I suppose, that he is in the sky. How is he different now from the imprisoned birds within the stones; they are not dead but sleeping; he is not dead but he is blind. Snarers put out the eyes of birds to make them sing. Bullfinches, goldfinches and larks. I found a stone upon the Downs like a blind lark. A thing choking with song that dared not fly but seemed to strain upwards always. I will make an ivory hand I have fling the stone into the sky where it may sing until it dies and falls down into the furrow.

People say, why do you paint these things? Why are you not content with *things as they are*; applying to them *painting as understood?* All Nature *as it is* seems better so than any imitation of it; than an impression of it, or a post-impression, after all. But we may take the elements of Nature and make what we choose, without reference to existing law and order, or even painting 'as understood'. That seems worth doing, and in result often looks less like a second helping of the English Sunday Dinner than does our heritage of the English Tradition—as understood.

I have taken the elements that go to make my nest of wild stones: earth, air, and hard, cold stone. But of the nest itself, what is there to tell? My first looked like a sheet of squared paper with a torn edge, stretched across a barren field. The next an earthen basin in the hills. But when the authors of *Axis* and I flushed a covey of wild stones on East or West Ilsley Down I found a stone nest bearing the imprint of its only egg. It was a rare find. But some months later I inherited a small Victorian library more closely stocked with books I do not want to read than I had imagined possible—save here and there a treasure. One such bore the title *Homes Without Hands.* I make a present of it, suitably translated, to Giacometti—with all homage, *Les habitations faites sans mains.* It is a book, illustrated at the height of the engraver's skill, about the nests of animals. The Mole, the Weasel, the Polar Bear, the dreadful Aard Vark and the Mallangong. The Puffin, the Mutton Bird, the Bee Eater, the Gribble and its kin, the Purple Grackle and the Robber Crab. The Piddock and the Shipworm, the Scorpion and the Bird Spider. The Eucera and the Scolia, the Philanthus and the Bembex. The Ant-lion and the terrifying Termites. Nests of a dreadful beauty; under the earth; beneath the sea. Pensile nests, nests which change the face of landscapes. Parasitic nests—the plight of the poor Puss Moth, and the horrid evidence of galls . . .

A new world was unfolding. Without hands I began to build. I forgot my nest of wild stones. [See Plates 31 and 32, which illustrated the original essay.]

UNSEEN LANDSCAPES

Country Life, 21 May 1938, pp. 526–7 (96)

The landscapes I have in mind are not part of the unseen world in a psychic sense, nor are they part of the Unconscious. They belong to the world that lies, visibly, about us. They are unseen merely because they are not perceived; only in that way can they be regarded as 'invisible'.

I think they are worth describing because, although each is peculiar, all are types. To discover, for instance, the landscape of bleached objects is to open up endless possibilities of fresh adventure in that direction. Once a sensitive nose is on to a scent of that kind, the hunt is up.

But, you may protest, who in the world wants to bother their sight or understanding about a bleached object? That, however, is an entirely different matter. All these things under consideration here—stones, bones, empty fields, demolished houses, and back gardens—all these have their trivial feature, as it were their *blind* side; but, also, they have another character, and this is neither moral nor sentimental nor literary, but rather something strange and—for want of a better word, which may not exist—poetical.

Let me begin by trying to explain the most recent place of this kind I have found: the landscape of the White Horse.

The White Horse is, I believe, by far the earliest hill drawing we have in England. It is a piece of design, also, in another category from the rest of the great chalk figures, for it has the lineaments of a work of art. The horse, which is more of a dragon than a horse, is cut on the top of the down's crest, so that it is only seen completely from the air or, at a long view, from the surrounding country. Seen on its own hill it becomes an affair of violent foreshortenings or tapering perspectives more or less indecipherable.

But, it was precisely this aspect of the Horse design that I found so significant. Once the rather futile game of 'picking out' the White Horse is abandoned, the documentary importance of the site fades, and the *landscape* asserts itself with all the force of its triumphant fusion of natural and artificial design. You then perceive a landscape of terrific animation whose bleak character and stark expression accord perfectly with its lonely situation on the summit of the bare downs.

To pursue the theme of lonely places. There seems to me no stranger spot than the surroundings of certain 'follies'. The drawing reproduced here represents Bond's Folly, which stands on the hills above Creech Grange, near Wareham in Dorset. It is a true folly in that it emphasises, in every feature, its absolute uselessness. Imagine, on the heights above Egdon Heath, a wan architectural exercise vaguely reminiscent of the Marble Arch. The stranger who passes on the adjacent road conceives it to be the gateway through which a private drive passes over the hills down into the woods and plantations of the Grange. But no road flows beneath the solid, castellated arch. Immediately beyond the crown of the hill the ground descends steeply into a dense coppice of oaks. All around the Folly the grass grows in coarse tufts among the close turf. The bracken is flattened by the wind, the rabbits tunnel endlessly in the undergrowth of brambles and furze. It is a lost place, eternally put out of countenance by an inexplicable intrusion upon its wild privacy.

Two other landscapes are fortuitous affairs of a conventionally sinister complexion. One is the room of a partly demolished house, where the front wall has been pulled down, so that now the sun and moon traverse the floor and walls as in a wood, and the dilapidated uprights and broken sections of doorframes, obscured by shadows or mutilated by shafts of light, take on the semblance of tree forms: the sentinels, perhaps, of a forest land.

The second is, entirely, a landscape of chance. The summer excavations at Maiden Castle had disclosed many skeletons of the defenders of the hill fortress buried where they fell in their last fight against the Roman armies. So much, at least, I gathered from one of the party of diggers. I was not particularly interested in the archæological significance of the discovery. But the scene in its dramatic elements had, indeed, an awful beauty. The sun beat down on the glinting white bones which were disposed in elegant clusters and sprays of blanched sprigs and