

## Resource Notes – for teachers and group leaders

**Art and Life** is an exhibition of paintings and pottery produced between 1920 and 1931 by artists Ben Nicholson, Winifred Nicholson, Christopher Wood, Alfred Wallis and William Staite Murray. All the artists knew each other personally, exhibited or worked together and shared similar values in terms of making art. Jim Ede, creator of Kettle's Yard, was a friend and a supporter of these artists, who played a central role in shaping his taste and approach to life. Their artwork makes up a key part of the Kettle's Yard permanent collection.

**Art and Life** shows British painting during a period of change, when representational painting was replaced by a more gestural, 'felt' abstraction. Painting was no longer about producing a technically accomplished representation of the real world, but about expressing 'lived' experience, through colour, form and movement.

The process of making art came to be about the spiritual as well as the visual; about vitality, experience and intuition and re-connecting the person with life through art.

### The Artists

Winifred and Ben Nicholson grew up in an environment that gave them access to artists, artworks and intellectual society. Although working closely together, Winifred and Ben's paintings were quite different. Winifred's emphasis was strongly on colour and light whereas Ben focused more on line, muted colours and abstract, simple forms.

Christopher Wood met the Nicholsons in 1926 and became a close friend, living with them for periods of time in Cumbria and St Ives, Cornwall. Wood had a very poetic and strong visual imagination, with a keen and observant eye for colour and an energetic painting style. Wood committed suicide in 1930.

Born in the 1850s, Alfred Wallis was a mariner all his working life and didn't meet the Nicholsons and Christopher Wood until he was in his seventies. Self-taught as a painter, Wallis took up painting as a hobby and 'for company' when his wife died. His simple images were considered to be a direct expression of his knowledge of the sea; something which more 'trained' artists found hard to attain.

Seeing pottery as both painting and sculpture, William Staite Murray pushed the boundaries of 'the pot' from being a functional object towards a sculptural form. Murray was influenced by early Chinese pottery and Japanese painting for their abstract form and colour. As a Buddhist, the spirituality of art was particularly significant to Murray as he believed each pot to be a manifestation of the emotions and life-force that created it.



Winifred Nicholson, *Autumn Flowers on a Mantlepiece*, 1932. Oil on wood panel, 76 x 60cm. Private Collection © Trustees of Winifred Nicholson

## Theme One: Friendship and Everyday Lives



Ben Nicholson, *Cumberland Farm*, 1930. Oil on canvas, Brighton and Hove Museums Angela Verren-Taunt 2013. All rights reserved, DACS. Belonged to Christopher Wood

The title of the exhibition, **Art and Life**, links art with everyday human experience. Friendship is a theme which runs throughout the exhibition as this group of artists tried to find new ways of painting through spending time together, socialising, sharing interests and critiquing each other's work. Making art wasn't seen as separate from who they were, or their other interests and influences.



Christopher Wood, *Cumberland Landscape (Northrigg Hill)*, 1928. Oil on board, 51 x 60.5cm © Kettle's Yard

Jim's home in Hampstead was a regular meeting point for artists, including the Nicholsons, Staite Murray and Wood. Jim's idea of an 'open house' gave artists, writers and musicians the opportunity to meet like-minded individuals. Jim referred to himself as a 'friend of artists'.

Winifred Nicholson, Ben Nicholson and Christopher Wood often painted or drew together in the landscape. As a game, they would challenge each other to reduce a scene to its simplest forms. To the left are two paintings of the same view, one painted by Nicholson, one by Wood.

- **Questions to ask**

- How did artists see the same view differently?
  - What do you think interested each artist?

- **Things to think about**

- Do you prefer making art alone or with others? Why do you think this is?
  - What brings you and your friends together?
  - How are you different? What values do you share?

- **Activity to try**

- Ask student to draw the same subject or view with a friend. Give them choices as to the materials they may use, size for their artwork or if they want to focus on a particular aspect of the scene.

How do the two artworks compare? Did pupils focus on different things? What interested them? What do they like about each of their artworks, even though they may be very different?

## Theme Two: Place and Landscape

Landscape is an important subject amongst this group of painters, and provided opportunities for capturing light, movement and the lived experience of a particular place.

In Alfred Wallis' **Four Luggers and a Lighthouse**, the boats set out on a stormy night, cutting through the rough surface of the ocean. The contrasting colours, the rhythm of the shapes and rough, painterly surface add a sense of dynamism and energy to the scene.

In Ben Nicholson's painting **Pill Creek**, the sweep of a brushmark takes our eyes through the trees to the still boat in the top right corner. The painted, layered surface has a rich texture as if it has been weathered by the Cornish winds. Moonlight can be seen through the trees and reflected in the water.



Alfred Wallis, *Four Luggers and a Lighthouse* c.1928. Oil on card, 16.5 x 26cm. Private Collection/ on loan from mima, Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art



Ben Nicholson, *(Pill Creek)* 1928. Oil and pencil on canvas, 49.5 x 61cm. © Angela Verren Taunt 2013. All rights reserved DACS

- **Questions to ask**

- What can you see in the two paintings?
- Describe the weather in these paintings.
- How has it been painted?
- How would you describe the surface?
- How is dark and light used in the paintings?
- What is happening around you? What story does each painting tell?

- **Things to think about**

How can paintings represent something we 'feel' rather than what we 'see'? Alfred Wallis painted the sea because he knew and understood the sea as a mariner. How does experiencing a place in different ways and through different senses affect how you paint it?

- **Suggested Activity**

Collect words associated with the two paintings and in response to the questions above. Create a poem or short story inspired by these words and which makes the landscape come alive.

Think about people who work or play outdoors, i.e. a fishermen, farmers, runners or cyclists. How is their perspective or experience of the landscape different to ours? Try to experience, and then represent, the landscape from their point of view.

## Theme Three: Abstraction

The artists in **Art and Life** moved away from representational, technically 'accurate' depiction of objects towards simple form, shape, colour and line. They were interested in the qualities of the materials they were using and wanted an artwork to show the process from which it was made. Mark-making and the representation of simple forms were an attempt to capture movement, rhythm and the 'essence' of a subject. All of this led the way to a radical type of abstract art, underpinned by a belief in art and life being connected to a spiritual and intuitive experience.

Jim championed this new way of working by collecting these artists' work, as well as writing about them for a national and international audience.

**Looking at...** *Plate, cup and jug*, 1930, by Ben Nicholson



Ben Nicholson, 1930 (*plate, cup and jug*). Oil and pencil on board, 20 x 45cm. © Angela Verren Taunt 2013. All rights reserved, DACS

Although this painting is of familiar domestic objects, the focus is on shape, pattern and colour. The 3-dimensional forms of the jug, cup and plate are flattened, reducing the objects to abstract shapes.

The shadow of the jug is the only indication of it being 3-dimensional. The colours are earthy and warm. Some areas are painted in translucent, diluted colour, others are opaque.

There is a variety in tone and texture. Pencil marks and brush strokes are clearly visible. Materials are used for their own qualities, not just as a means of representing an illusion of the real world.

- **Questions to ask**

- What objects can you see in the painting?

- What colours and shapes can you see?

- What materials have been used?

- What different marks and patterns are there?

- How do you imagine Nicholson made them?

- When looking at the still life arrangement, what do you think the artist chose to leave out?

- **Things to think about**

- Do you think we still expect art to 'accurately represent' the visual world as opposed to art being about materials, experience and the process of making?

- **Suggested Activity**

- Paint a Still Life or Interior focusing on pattern. Make the objects or space disappear so you are just left with colour and pattern.

## Theme Four: Colour & Light

Winifred Nicholson mainly painted Still Lifes and Landscapes; subjects which enabled her to examine and explore the subtleties of colour and light. She was interested in the sensations and the emotional resonance that colour and light can create.

An appreciation of light was central to Jim's thinking about Kettle's Yard. In different weather, at different times of day and during different seasons, light transforms the rooms in the House, creating shadows and fleeting visual links between artworks and objects.

**Looking at...** *Polyanthus and Cineraria*, 1921,  
by Winifred Nicholson,

- **Questions to ask**

What colours can you see?

How does each colour vary? (Use precise adjectives such as pale mauve to describe the colour).

What shapes and patterns do the colours make?

Which colours are flat and heavy and which ones are light or textured?

- **Things to think about**

Do artists who use different media, such as photography or film, explore light and colour in different ways to a painter?

Is some media more suited to exploring light and colour than other media?

- **Suggested Activity**

Encourage students to look closely at the colour detail of flowers by using a magnifying glass or taking close-up photographs. Using watercolour, acrylic or oils, mix the individual colours and paint them as squares or 'swatches' of colour on a grid.

The swatches of colour can be cut up and reconfigured to make an abstract colour pattern. Is there still a sense of light or a suggestion of 'flowers' within this abstract pattern?



Winifred Nicholson, *Polyanthus and Cineraria*, 1921, oil on canvas 51 x 59cm, private family collection

**Looking at...***Schooner and Icebergs*, 1928, by Alfred Wallis



Alfred Wallis, *Schooner and Icebergs*, 1928. Oil on card, 33 x 69cm, shaped.  
Private Collection Photo © Mathew Hollow Photography

Wallis painted on pieces of old card, on boxes and jars and on bits of wood. These were close at hand and part of his environment. Parts of the surface of these materials were sometimes left unpainted, so original colours, imperfections and words became part of the painting.

Wallis was self-taught as an artist and, as an experienced mariner, painted subject matter related to his everyday life. He painted what he knew: ships, the sea and the coastline near St Ives. He experienced terrible gales and storms and these very real memories are expressed vividly in this painting, through shape and colour. Kettle's Yard owns over 100 works by Wallis. The Nicholsons introduced Jim to Wallis' work in 1928 and Jim started to collect his work, receiving his paintings and letters in the post.

- **Questions to ask**

- Why is the painting this shape?

- What colours can you see?

- Do you think these are the colours Wallis actually saw?

- How would you describe the surface of the painting?

- What would it have felt like to be on one of the ships?

- Describe the weather, the movement and atmosphere.

- **Things to think about**

- Should artists be trained to draw or paint something accurately?

- How important is technical skill in being a 'good' artist?

- What can artworks say about the artists' broader life and experience?

- **Suggested Activity**

- Use bits of old card or found material as a surface for a painting or drawing. How does the surface become part of the final image and artwork? Does the choice of surface, or object, directly influence what the image or final artwork becomes?

**Looking at...** *The Bather*, 1930, by William Staite Murray



William Staite Murray, *The Bather*, 1930.  
Stoneware jar. H. 70.8cm, D. 14.7cm © York  
Museums Trust (York Art Gallery).

The shape and title of the pot suggests a human form. The decoration of bands of iron-rust red on cream are reminiscent of a long striped bathing costume. It is abstract in that it suggests a figure without arms, legs or head or other 'representational' features.

○ **Questions to ask**

How would you describe the shape of the pot?  
What does the shape remind you of?  
What patterns and colours are painted on its surface?

Do you think the irregularities of colour and marks add or detract from the quality of the pot? Why do you think it is called *The Bather*?

What does the pot remind you of? Can you think of an alternative title?

○ **Things to think about**

Why do you think it is unusual for craft objects to be given titles?

Do you think there is a connection between an object's 'usefulness' and its artistic value?

○ **Suggested Activity**

Ask individual pupils to think of, and get into, different poses. Other pupils draw the outline of the pose. Pupils modify the 'body' outline into a design for a pot, making sure it has a bottom and can stand. Other features can be added, such as handles, to make it into a functional object. Pupils design a surface pattern for their pot.

Does the pot still look like a figure? What title does it suggest?

**The Bather** by William Staite Murray can be used to apply measuring skills. In designing their own striped pot, pupils consider how many evenly-spaced stripes are needed to decorate a pot of a given height. Younger pupils can explore repeating patterns as part of their design.

## Cross-curricular Opportunities



Alfred Wallis, *White Houses -Hales Down, near St Ives*, c1930. Oil and pencil on card, 14.9 x 23.2cm. Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge. Belonged to Ben Nicholson



Ben Nicholson, 1921 – circa 1923 (Cortivallo, Lugano). Oil on canvas, 43 x 60cm. Tate London 2013 © Tate London Angela Verren-Taunt 2013. All rights reserved, DACS

## Geography (Key Stage 1 upwards)

Use Landscape paintings in the exhibition to identify geographical features. How is the geography of each location different?

Pupils use paintings as a reference for making maps. Conversely, maps can be used to imagine and create painted landscapes.

## Literacy (Key Stage 2 upwards) Speaking and Listening

Sharing ideas and voicing opinions on all of the artworks highlighted in this resource will develop speaking and listening skills. Additional activities include:

Work in groups to brainstorm questions to ask the artist about a particular painting or artwork. Questions are swapped with another group. Each group discusses and answers the questions given to them as if they were the artist.

'Hotseat' being one of the artists in the exhibition; some pupils prepare questions while others respond 'in character'.

Organise a formal debate on some of the issues in the exhibition highlighted in 'Things to think about' sections.



## **Writing**

Use the paintings to generate new vocabulary. What words or descriptions do they inspire?

What stories do the different paintings tell? Make poems or short stories which include a scene from one of the paintings appearing at the beginning, middle or end of the stories.

Write a 'Tourist Visitor Guide' for one of the places represented, using the paintings as inspiration.

Write a letter or diary from one of the artists describing a day in their life. Pupils may wish to include a particular painting or scene in their writing.

## **History (Key Stage 3 upwards)**

Both Ben Nicholson and Christopher Wood couldn't fight in the First World War for health reasons. Look at other artists who created art in response to the First World War, such as Christopher Nevison and Paul Nash. Compare their paintings to those by artists in **Art and Life** who were working at the same time.

## **Citizenship (Key Stage 3 upwards)**

Consider the value of friendship groups and having a shared 'endeavour'. The Nicholsons had a very different background and life experience to Alfred Wallis. William Staite Murray's Buddhist beliefs influenced his art and life choices. Despite their different backgrounds and beliefs, all the artists shared friendships and a respect for each other's work and values.

Think about how we are similar or different to our friends? What do we have in common and how are we different? Pupils consider how being friends with people from different backgrounds, or with different life experiences, can influence their own personal values.

## **How to book a group visit**

The Learning team at Kettle's Yard aims to respond to the needs of teachers, tutors and those working with people outside formal education. The House and gallery programme of modern and contemporary exhibitions are excellent environments to support people's natural curiosity to explore, engage and learn. Experiencing works of art in such a unique setting provides a fascinating springboard for discussion, creativity and developing knowledge and skills.

We also work with practicing artists to offer workshops that combine creative thinking and discussion with practical activity, taking inspiration from works in the permanent collection and temporary exhibitions. Practical workshops provide the opportunity for pupils to explore artist techniques, experimenting with new processes and materials.

### **When can I bring a School Group in?**

HOUSE: we work with schools outside opening hours: all day Mondays and between 9.30-12pm Tuesday - Friday

GALLERY: we are able to work with groups during opening hours. Groups often visit in the morning, between 9.30am-12pm.

### **How many pupils can I bring?**

The maximum group size is 30 pupils, whereby 15 would be in the house and 15 would be in the gallery, then swap. Our Learning Studio can only accommodate 15 pupils at a time so if you wanted a practical workshop, we could work with one class of 30 (half doing a practical activity while the other half were looking at the house/gallery and then swap).

### **What does it cost?**

It is free of charge for British resident school groups to visit the house or gallery, have an introductory talk, explore the space and/or sketch. Practical workshops prices start from £100 for a 2 hour session.

For summer schools, language students, international exchange programmes etc, we charge £4 per pupil/student and £30 for an introductory talk.

Please contact [education@kettlesyard.cam.ac.uk](mailto:education@kettlesyard.cam.ac.uk) or call 01223 748100 for more information.