

Room to Breathe

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1950 (*still life*)

Ben Nicholson 1894 – 1982

oil and pencil on canvas

Still life paintings are one of the principal subjects of Western art. Arrangements of man-made objects, food or flowers have been depicted by artists for centuries. They are sometimes a celebration of material pleasures and wealth, sometimes used as a *memento-mori* – a lesson in the fragile nature or transience of life. They were often laden with symbolism, with specific fruits or flowers offering a variety of religious or mythical symbols. You can see examples of these in our collection of Dutch 17th century paintings in the next gallery.

In modern times artists used the still life in a more neutral way, as a tool to experiment. This very large-scale painting is created using oil and pencil on canvas. The artist, Ben Nicholson, was influenced by early 20th century art movements emerging in Europe, such as Cubism, which saw a move away from realistic representation to a different style of painting, depicting scenes in a fragmented and abstracted way.

Nicholson often experimented with geometric shapes and colour to create abstract compositions. This still life is made up of overlapping shapes and sharply drawn outlines in pale tones. The perspective that the artist uses has the effect of making the cups, plates and goblets on a square tabletop appear to float, rather than sit on a solid surface.

Ben Nicholson was a founding member of the St. Ives group of painters, a community of artists that grew around the seaside town from the 1930s. The group explored the connections between nature and abstraction, inspired by the shapes, forms and natural colours of the Cornish coast. For this painting Nicholson uses muted, colours such as ochre, pale browns and greys that work in harmony.

Contemporary Art Society & private subscribers 1951.463



Still Life 1918

Edward Hartley Mooney 1878 – 1938

Oil on canvas

Mooney has chosen to depict an everyday, domestic still life composition. On the face of it the scene suggests someone taking a break from whatever they were doing, with sewing materials set aside as they take a cup of tea. This was painted as the world was about to be plunged into the First World War, in this respect the discarded domestic objects and emerging shadow could be seen as symbolic of what was to come. Traditional still life paintings made use of flowers to symbolise life and faith, so perhaps Mooney has included the vase of flowers as a similar device.

Unlike very traditional still life paintings, which were often saturated with rich, intense colours, Mooney has made good use of cool tones and light, to capture what appears to be a scene at dusk, with shadows created by the passing light. The colours all work in harmony: the crockery and tablecloth are all various shades of white and light grey; the pale green, elliptical vase holding an arrangement of dusky pink flowers, casts a purple shadow on the sand-coloured wall behind. Hung on the wall are two paintings, which appear to be landscapes painted in similar colours.

Mooney painted landscapes, still life and portraits. He attended the Manchester School of Art and was a friend of the artist and teacher Adolphe Valette, who taught Lowry, and whose paintings you can see in the next room. Valette painted Mooney's portrait in 1916. The two artists' still life work was very close in style, drawing on their interest in Impressionism.

Purchase 1920.5



Flowers in a vase 1934-36
Ivon Hitchens 1893 – 1979
Oil on board

The perspective in this semi-abstract painting is unusual. The composition is made up of a series of loosely painted boxes and shapes using a muted colour palette. The vase of bright spring flowers, small square table and grey floorboards all appear to be viewed from a strange angle, as Hitchens avoids creating the illusion of a three-dimensional scene.

Hitchens, like many artists of the 1920s and 1930s, used still life as a way of experimenting with the forms of European modernism. At this time many artists sought to break from the past and develop a new language for art following the atrocities of the First World War. There was a move away from representation to a more direct style of painting, often with flattened surfaces, less naturalistic colours, loose brushstrokes, and broken forms.

