

# PRYDIE

THE LIFE & ART OF MABEL PRYDE NICHOLSON 1871~1918



20 July - 26 August 2024  
The Grange Gallery, Rottingdean BN2 7HA

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## LARGE PRINT GUIDE



## ROOM 2 – NORTH GALLERY



## **NORTH GALLERY**

**(clockwise from wall opposite the doorway)**

### **PANEL I**

1

Mabel Pryde Nicholson

William Nicholson in Regency Costume, circa 1911/12

Oil on canvas

*Private Collection*

### **PANEL II**

#### **SIR WILLIAM NEWZAM PRIOR NICHOLSON 1872 – 1949**

2

William was born and educated in Newark-on-Trent. In 1888, aged 16, he joined Hubert von Herkomer's art school in Bushey, where he met his future wife Mabel Pryde ('Prydie'), whom he would marry in 1893 and paint as Lady in Yellow

In 1908, William, Mabel and their four children, Ben, Tony, Nancy and Kit, were living in Mecklenburgh Square, London. At that time, William shared a studio with William Orpen, who portrayed the family in their dining room posing formally, but

- according to Nancy's reminiscence - as an elaborate joke with William solemnly sitting in profile in his spotted silk dressing gown.

William and Prydie discovered and fell in love with Rottingdean and in 1909, they bought the former vicarage, renaming it The Grange. They captured their idyllic life here with the children in paintings of the interior — with the chequerboard black and white tiles laid by William himself — and also the garden on the occasion of celebrations for the Coronation of George V.

Prydie had a studio built in the garden in 1912 but, soon after, the Rottingdean sojourn ended and William began to travel extensively - first to Paris and then, in December 1914, to India where he stayed for six months.

After the tragic deaths of Mabel and Tony in 1918, William married Edith Stuart-Wortley ('Edie') in 1919. In 1923, William and Edie moved with their daughter Liza to the Manor House in Sutton Veny, Wiltshire and numerous paintings of the house and surrounding countryside show that his love of landscape was undiminished. William and Edie separated in 1933 but never divorced.

On one of his frequent travels, William met and fell in love with the writer Marguerite Steen in Andalusia in May 1935, and by mid- June they were living together in Apple Tree Yard.

William's London studio since 1917. In the 1940s, William's output became less and less, and from around 1945 he was increasingly ill. After a forced departure from Apple Tree Yard, bombed during the war, he lived with Marguerite in a cottage in Blewbury, Berkshire. and it was there on 16 May 1949 that he died.

### **DISPLAY CAPTIONS:**

3

William Nicholson

The Windmill under repair, Rottingdean, 1923 (facsimile)

Oil on canvas

*Private Collection*

4

Sir William Nicholson

Solar Eclipse. 1912

Oil on canvas

*Private Collection*

5

William Nicholson

Cliffs at Rottingdean circa 1911 (facsimile)

Oil on canvas board

*Private Collection*

6

William Nicholson

Early Morning, White Ways, 1910 (facsimile)

Oil on canvas

*Private Collection*

7

The Nicholsons and unidentified friends observing the solar eclipse of April 17th 1912 from the garden of The Grange.

In a letter to Ben, then away in Madeira, William described the astronomical event and the painting he made of it. 'I expect you saw even less of the sun than we did yesterday. How strange the shadows looked eh?... Sun to be looked at only through smoked glass - brilliant green. Rather a good Down piece I did last night before last looking into eye of sun.'

An American guest the Nicholsons were expecting 'did not turn up' William added, as the titanic disaster (on April 15th , I suppose - made him fly to town for news; he had Fathers and things on board'.

In the press, the proximity in date of the two events prompted speculation that the events were inauspiciously related. Some referred to it as 'The Titanic Eclipse'.

### PANEL III

8

William Nicholson  
Zinnias and a Lustre Bowl, 1912  
Oil on canvas  
*Private Collection*

William made this painting in Mabel's studio. Reflected in the mirror is its round-headed window.

## PANEL IV

### **BENJAMIN LAUDER NICHOLSON 1894-1982**

9

Ben, who would become one of the leading painters of abstract art of the 20th century, was born at Denham, Buckinghamshire, on 10 April 1894, the eldest of William and Mabel's children.

He attended the Slade School of Fine Art for four terms between 1910 and 1911, alongside other future art-world stars such as Stanley Spencer, Paul Nash and Edward Wadsworth, but left to pursue his own course of study in France, Italy and Spain. Suffering from asthma, he was exempted from service in the First World War, travelling to New York in 1917 for a throat operation, then on to California. He returned in 1918 following his mother's death from Spanish Flu.

He was married three times - to the painter Winifred Roberts (1920-38, three children), to the sculptor Barbara Hepworth (1938-51, triplets born in 1934) and to the photographer Felicitas Vogler (1957-77).



His art in the 1930s was influenced by Hepworth and by meetings in Paris with Mondrian and Picasso, whose rectilinear and cubist styles contributed to his own unique constructions of geometric paintings and reliefs, Ben often reiterated the vital role his mother played in the evolution of his work - 'the urge to bust up the sophistication I felt around me,' as he described it. 'Mabel,' he wrote to art historian John Summerson in 1944, 'was formatical and completely uncompromising and had a scotch purpose and integrity which was the thing that meant most to me in that home life.'

In 1939, at the outbreak of the Second World War, he and Hepworth moved to St Ives with their three children. He lived there for 19 years, she for the rest of her life. By the 1950s, Ben was celebrated as one of the most important painters in Europe. He had a retrospective exhibition at the Tate in 1955 and won international prizes for painting - the Guggenheim Prize in 1956 and the Sao Paulo Art Biennial Prize in 1957. In 1968, he was awarded the Order of Merit by Queen Elizabeth II.

In his later years, he lived in Switzerland with his third wife and after they divorced, in Cambridge and Hampstead, where he died in 1982.

## DISPLAY CAPTIONS:

10

Ben Nicholson 1894-1982

Two squares and very green, 1971

Oil on carved board

*Courtesy of Piano Nobile, London*

11

Ben Nicholson

George and Rufus, circa 1939

Collage and gouache on board

*Pallant House Gallery, Chichester*

## PANEL V

12

Nancy Nicholson

Cover design for Vogue circa 1930s

Ink and gouache on card

*National Gallery of Scotland*

## PANEL VI

### **ANNIE MARY PRYDE NANCY NICHOLSON 1899 -1977**

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Nancy was born in 1899 in Woodstock, Oxfordshire. Aged 17, she met the poet Robert Graves while he was on leave from the front in 1916: they were married at St James's, Piccadilly in January 1918. After the war, when Graves took up his place at St John's College Oxford, they rented a cottage from the poet John Masefield on nearby Boar's Hill and set up a village shop there which ended in failure. On this and other occasions, the couple were helped financially by family and friends, including T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) and poet Siegfried Sassoon.

Nancy was a talented illustrator, and her early work included illustrations for *The Owl*, a short-lived magazine published by Graves and her father William, and book covers for an edition of Tolstoy's *A Prince of Outlaws* and *An Indian Day*, by Edward Thompson.

Nancy and Robert had four children; the two boys took the surname Graves, but the two girls were called Nicholson, in line with Nancy's strong feminist convictions. After a trip to Cairo in 1926, where Robert was teaching and conducting an affair with their friend the poet Laura Riding, they separated,

although did not divorce until 1949. Nancy subsequently brought up the children alone.

In the early 1930s, she lived for a time with the Irish poet Geoffrey Taylor on a houseboat in Hammersmith and, with him, set up the Poulk Press in Wiltshire. She worked with her brother Ben and his wife Barbara Hepworth on textile designs and later, with her sister-in-law E.Q. Nicholson. From the 1940s, she ran the business in Motcomb St, London, and her work was exhibited at the V&A in 1976, a year before her death in Salisbury.

#### **DISPLAY CAPTIONS:**

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Nancy Nicholson

Illustrations for *The Owl* various 1919-23

Ink and watercolour on paper, facsimiles

*Private collection*

After his demobilisation from the Army in 1918, Robert Graves worked with William Nicholson on a short-lived quarterly titled *The Owl*. Graves was literary editor, while Nicholson chose the illustrators - on occasion Nancy - and subsidised its publication.

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Nancy Nicholson

Illustration of a Tailor

Gouache on board

*Private collection*

16

Nancy Nicholson

Still Life circa 1924

Gouache on card

*Private collection*

## PANEL VII

### **CHRISTOPHER DAVID GEORGE 'KIT' NICHOLSON**

**1904 - 1948**

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Kit was born at Pilgrim's Lane, Hampstead, on 16 December 1904, the youngest of William and Mabel's four children. He was educated at Gresham's in Norfolk and then read architecture at St John's College, Cambridge. In 1926, he was awarded a scholarship to Princeton to further his study of architecture and then returned to teach at Cambridge in 1929-30, where one of his pupils was the architect, artist, Royal Academy President and writer Hugh Casson.

In 1931. Kit married Elsie Queen Myers, always known as E.Q., a talented designer and painter from a literary and artistic family, who later collaborated with Kit's sister Nancy in producing textiles; EQ and Kit would have three children.

From 1933, Kit had his own architectural practice on the Fulham Road, London. Notable commissions followed, including artist Augustus John's famous pink studio in Hampshire, designed in the International Modern style. He also worked with Casson on Monkton House at West Dean, Sussex, originally designed by his father's friend Edwin Lutyens for the eccentric Surrealist patron Edward James: it was subsequently described as 'the only complete Surrealist house ever created in Britain'

When the Second World War broke out, Kit joined the Fleet Air Arm and, in 1945, flew solo to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) - a journey that took him a month. His passion for flying tragically proved fatal: he died at the age of 43 in an accident at the World Gliding Championships in Switzerland, where he was part of the British team. In 1994, his complete archive was acquired by the Royal Institute of British Architects.

## DISPLAY CAPTIONS:

18

Preliminary design for a plywood armchair for Isokon  
furniture company

*RIBA Collections*

19

Studio for Augustus John  
Fryern Court, Fordingbridge, Hampshire

*RIBA Collections*

20

Kit Nicholson  
Self Portrait, circa 1924

Oil on board

*Pallant House Gallery, Chichester*

## PANEL VI

Facsimiles of pages from Mabel's diary

*Private Collection/image Clara Molden*

# FREESTANDING PANELS

## FRONT FACE

21

E Q Nicholson

Portrait of Kit Nicholson, circa 1943

Ink and gouache of paper

*Pallant House Gallery, Chichester*

22

Sir William Nicholson

Drawing of Kit Nicholson, circa 1915

Ink and watercolour on paper

*Private collection*

23

Winifred Nicholson

Portrait of Kit Nicholson circa 1928

Oil on canvas

*Pallant House Gallery, Chichester*



## SIDE FACE

### **JOHN ANTHONY 'TONY' NICHOLSON 1897-1918**

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Tony was born in April 1897, when William and Mabel were living at Elm Lodge, in Mitcham, Surrey. According to Williams biographer, Tony was a rosy, cheerful little boy, whom everybody loved and probably his father's favourite. A letter from Mabel to Ben in 1914 also describes his younger brother as the same dear old thing, so good natured and pleased with everything.

Tony followed Ben to Heddon Court School in East Barnet. then Gresham's in Norfolk. where he won a prize for gardening and showed flair as an actor. As the goatherd Audrey in their 1912 production of As You Like It he earned notices for the humour his accent brought to the role. An undated letter from Mabel also describes him and Nancy making 'a play out of Uncle Tom's Cabin...Nancy was simply splendid as Topsy and Tony as Miss Orphelia [sic].

However, Tony was destined for the army. In 1916 he entered RMA Woolwich, where he became a Sergeant, and in spring 1917 was gazetted 2nd Lieutenant in the Royal Field Artillery

and sent to France. Mabel wrote repeatedly to Ben in California of her worry. In November 1917: I'm afraid [Tony is in a fearfully dangerous place just now...waiting on the edge all the time. In March 1918:'Sick with anxiety about Tony who is in the midst of this horrible fighting [the major German offensive Operation Michael].'

In June 1918, Tony came home on last-minute leave from France, unknowingly nursing the deadly strain of 'Spanish Flu' that had been working its way through the trenches: three quarters of French and more than half of British troops had fallen ill. Mabel spent every moment with him and became unwell herself. According to Robert Graves, she so wanted to spend Tony's final hours of leave with him that when the doctor came...she took quantities of aspirin, reduced her temperature and pretended to be all right...Her chief solace, as she lay dying, was that Tony had got his leave prolonged on her account.'

Promoted to Lieutenant in September 1918, Tony died of wounds to his arm and leg in October - a month before the end of the War - while fighting in the Pas de Calais area, near Grévillers. His Battery Captain described him as the life and soul of the mess - the soldier who kept everyone around him cheerful when times were bad.

## **DISPLAY CAPTION:**

25

A View of the Shop from Chelsea

Drawing of Tony Nicholson in uniform

William Nicholson, c.1916

*Private collection*

## **REAR FACE**

## **WILLIAM & JAMES PRYDE**

26

In 1894, William joined forces with Mabel's brother, the artist James Ferrier Pryde, to produce a poster for the actor Edward Gordon Craig's performance of Hamlet. Using a technique of collaging cut-paper shapes or stencilling flat colour, they went on to produce images for advertising theatre productions and domestic products.

They signed their works 'Beggarstuffs' or 'J & W Beggarstaff'. William explained Pryde and I came across it one day in an old stable, on a sack of fodder. It is a good, hearty, old English name, and it appealed to us, so we adopted it immediately.' Though admired in artistic circles, the posters were too avant garde for the advertisers of the day, and not a financial success.

## WOODCUTS & ILLUSTRATIONS

27

During the second half of the 1890s, Nicholson concentrated on the production of woodcuts. In collaboration with the publisher William Heinemann (to whom he had been recommended by James McNeill Whistler) he began to produce his celebrated series of woodcuts, beginning in 1897 with *An Alphabet*, including a self-portrait as 'A was an Artist'.

### DISPLAY CAPTIONS:

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James Pryde

Portrait of Tony Nicholson, circa 1903

Gouache on paper

*Leeds Art Gallery*

29

Cinderella poster

for the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, London

Beggarstaffs, 1895

Lithograph (facsimile)

*Private Collection*

**Please return this guide**  
**before leaving the exhibition.**

Thank you.



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