

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 1 – WEST GALLERY

WEST GALLERY

(clockwise from the doorway)

PANEL I

EARLY LIFE

1

Mabel Scott Lauder Pryde was born in Edinburgh in February 1871, the youngest child of Dr David Pryde - headmaster of a prestigious girls school in Edinburgh - and his wife Barbara, who came from generations of distinguished painters and engravers.

The Prydes were ardent fans of the theatre. Mabel's father was a great friend of the actors Henry Irving and Ellen Terry and often took Mabel and her siblings - Isabella, Janet (known as Nettie), Jimmy (the noted artist James Ferrier Pryde), Fanny and Dora - to the Lyceum. Mabel's paintings later drew on the tense atmosphere and smoky chiaroscuro of an auditorium, and many also feature costumes.

Aged 17, Mabel went to the then world famous Bushey Art School in Hertfordshire, run by the German-born Royal Academician Hubert von Herkomer. Mabel was his youngest girl pupil. Perhaps because of that, or because she once drove a flock of geese into the studio, she came to the attention of the youngest male student - William Nicholson. According to his biographer, Marguerite Steen, Mabel was gifted, outclassing all the rest put together.

In 1891, William departed for Paris and a stint at the Académie Julian; however his and Mabel's alliance continued to flourish, and on April 25th 1893, they ran away to be married without their parents' knowledge, honeymooning at Primrose Hill Farm, Ruislip. With an allowance from William's father, the newlyweds began married life in Denham, Buckinghamshire.

The Nicholsons would have four children in all: Ben in 1894 (it is said that he narrowly missed being born in the theatre stalls, when she could not be dissuaded from attending a performance of Pinero's *The Second Mrs Tanqueray*); Anthony or Tony, in 1897; Annie, always 'Nancy, in 1899; and Christopher, or Kit' in 1904.

DISPLAY CAPTIONS:

2

Dr David Pryde and his wife Barbara (centre) with two of their daughters and an unidentified friend, 1890s

From a scrapbook compiled by Barbara Pryde

With kind permission of Bushey Museum & Art Gallery on loan from the collection of Nicholas Gibbs

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Students at Herkomer's art school, Bushey, circa 1888

(Probably Mabel with her back to us, on the left)

From a scrapbook compiled by Barbara Pryde

With kind permission of Bushey Museum and Art Gallery, on loan from the collection of Nicholas Gibbs

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Mabel at Bushey, circa 1888

From a scrapbook compiled by Barbara Pryde

With kind permission of Bushey Museum & Art Gallery on loan from the collection of Nicholas Gibbs

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Sir William Nicholson
Primrose Hill Farm
Imitation woodcut (ink on paper)
Private collection

In April 1893, Mabel and William eloped to Ruislip, near London, where William had put up the banns while living at this cottage - Primrose Hill Farm. They honeymooned here too, with a breakfast of tea and plum cake, before returning to London, where William left Mabel walking up and down the street in a state of high agitation while he went in to break the news to her parents.

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William Nicholson
Portrait of Mabel Nicholson, 1897
Pencil and watercolour on card
Scottish National Gallery

The style is reminiscent of Toulouse-Lautrec, whose posters William had seen recently in Paris and greatly admired. The striped canopies behind Mabel suggest a beachfront - likely one of the resorts near Rottingdean, where they took

lodgings between August & September 1897, for William to make a woodcut of Rudyard Kipling. According to Marguerite Steen, Kipling took a fancy to Mabel and often came to tell stories in the evenings.

PANEL II

7

William Nicholson

'Lady in Yellow' (Mabel Nicholson), 1893

Oil on canvas

Private Collection, courtesy of Daniel Katz gallery

Painted the year of their marriage, this is less a portrait than a picture on a theme, following Whistler's 'Symphony in White' series.

PANEL III

8

Mabel Pryde Nicholson

The Harlequin, circa 1910

Oil on canvas

Tate

Mabel's paintings often drew on a sense of the theatre as a magical place, and the smoky chiaroscuro of an auditorium. Many also feature costumes, at least three of which are spangle-skinned Harlequins.

PANEL IV

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Mabel Pryde Nicholson

Harlequin with Chair (Nancy), circa 1908

Oil on canvas

Scottish National Gallery

10

Mabel Pryde Nicholson

Harlequin Asleep, circa 1910

Oil on canvas

Private Collection, courtesy of Patrick Bourne & Co.

PANEL V

DENHAM, WOODSTOCK AND BLOOMSBURY

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Denham was a heady time. First Jimmy Pryde, then the actor Edward Gordon Craig moved in, a set-up that proved as vitalising as it was unconventional. William and Jimmy Pryde were soon at work on the radical stencil and cut-paper posters they produced between 1894 and 1899 as the 'Beggarstaff brothers.

In 1898, with Tony almost one and Mabel heavily pregnant with Nancy, the Nicholsons moved to Woodstock in Oxfordshire. Geoffrey Chaucer's House, opposite the gates of Blenheim Palace, had once belonged to William's mother, Annie Prior. He soon signed a contract with publisher Willam Heinemann

who would significantly shape his career. Architect Edwin Lutyens and essayist Max Beerbohm joined the Nicholsons* fast-growing circle of bohemian friends.

In all this time, Mabel did not paint. In Marguerite Steen's opinion, excessive feeling for the children was the reason - As each child appeared she idolised it more than the last. To be separated from them, if only for a day, made her miserable - though in fact a form of artistic paralysis seems also to come into play.

In 1903, 1905 and 1907, the Nicholsons summered in the fashionable French resort of Dieppe with friends. The town was swarming with artists, including the French painter Jacques-Emile Blanche, Walter Sickert and members of the future Camden Town Group, who joined the Nicholsons at the Café de Tribunaux and the Hotel Lefèvre. It's possible that the town's atmosphere had a part to play in Mabel's artistic renaissance: certainly, at some point between her second and third visits, she finally dusted off her palette.

In 1906, Willam and Mabel moved to a sophisticated house in Mecklenburgh Square, Bloomsbury, then a hotbed of new radical thought. Half a mile from their door, the nascent Bloomsbury Group were meeting, while Mecklenburgh Square itself was home to various Suffragist organisations. Nancy, then 8 or 9, is said to have chalked Votes for Women above the maid's kitchen sink.

Mabel returned to the easel around 1905, when Kit was about a year old. In common with many women artists, she painted what was most easily at hand - her young children and the interiors of her homes. Her aptitude was ready and waiting even after the long hiatus.

DISPLAY CAPTIONS:

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Mabel holding Kit

Hampstead, circa 1904 from Mabel's album

Private Collection/image Clara Molden

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Mabel holding Kit

Rustington, circa 1905 from Mabel's album

Private Collection/image Clara Molden

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Kit on the beach with Mabel in the background from Mabel's album

Private Collection/image Clara Molden

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(left to right)

Ben, Reggie Turner, Tony and Nancy Dieppe, 1905, from
Mabel's album

Private Collection/image Clara Molden

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Ben, Cosmos Gordon-Lennox, William, Max Beerbohm and
a group of unidentified friends, Dieppe 1903, Mabel's album

Private Collection/image Clara Molden

17

Ben, Tony, Nancy, Kit William Nicholson, Max Beerbohm,
Constance Collier and unidentified friends, Dieppe, 1905
from Mabel's album

Private Collection/image Clara Molden

PANEL VI

18

Mabel Pryde Nicholson

Ben Nicholson, circa 1910-14

Oil on canvas

National Portrait Gallery

PANEL VII

19

Mabel Pryde Nicholson

Sneu-Ki or The Pekinese

Oil on canvas

Pallant House Gallery, Chichester

PANEL VIII

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Mabel Pryde Nicholson

Study of a Child (Kit Reading), circa 1910

Oil on canvas

National Galleries of Scotland

PANEL IX

21

Mabel Pryde Nicholson
Family Group, circa 1911
Oil paint on canvas
Tate

Tony, Nancy, Kit and the family nanny are pictured in 'conversation piece' style beneath a ship's model of Pandora, the Royal Naval frigate that tracked down the Bounty mutineers at Tahiti in 1790. William bought the model in an Edinburgh curio-shop in the mid 1900s and it came with the family from house to house.

The painting was admired in Mabel's posthumous exhibition for its fresh poetic spirit' and 'harmonious blend of naturalistic and romantic feeling, with its touch of quaintness in the big toy ship towering aloft.'

Tate generously agreed to loan Family Group by Mabel Pryde for this exhibition which celebrates her life and legacy.

Unfortunately, it has not been possible to display this painting for logistical reasons. It was too large to negotiate the stairs! We have therefore made a facsimile to hang in its place.

PANEL X

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Mabel once told Ben that ' a lot of art talk from our visitors... made her want to go downstairs and scrub the kitchen table.' He explained that That was more extraordinary than it sounds today ...the kitchen (at the Bloomsbury house) was a real Edwardian affair, with servants who had to be got out of the way! The image made a deep impression on him: more than once he told biographers that it had inspired his reliefs - scrubbing being, as he said: ' close to marking something rather than painting something... not unlike... one of my textured still lifes?'

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Ben Nicholson

Five Circles, 1934 (facsimile)

Woodcut on paper

Private collection

William Orpen

A Bloomsbury Family, 1907 (facsimile)

Oil on Canvas

National Galleries of Scotland

In the foreground, William presides over four sweetly startled and watchful children. Mabel, fashionable in a fur stole, feathered hat and necktie, stands at the rear. Ben once referred to her 'usual, sphinx-like look' and here it is.

PANEL XI

LIFE AT THE GRANGE

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In 1909, William and Mabel bought The Grange, a Georgian vicarage on the Sussex coast. 'It is on the Downs and 5 minutes from the sea,' Mabel wrote excitedly to Ben. 't has got a tennis court... a small billiard table and plenty of room so I think you will love it'.

Ben's friend, the artist renowned artist Paul Nash, who came to stay in 1911, remembered 'highly polished painted walls, stiff calendered chintzes, gay pink and greys. At every meal we ate blancmange with bright-coloured jam, in keeping with the brightness of the rooms.'

Whatever magic Rottingdean worked on William (the still lifes and landscapes he painted here are now deemed his best work) it did the same for Mabel. She positively ignited, 'painting suddenly...with an ease and certainty hair-raising to William,' wrote Marguerite Steen.

When Mabel's children sat for her, she insisted on paying them a fee. As subjects go, she was fortunate: 'I am so glad you like the Nicholson troupe,' wrote Max Beerbohm to the artist William Rothenstein: 'They are somehow more like a troupe than a family.'

Portrait commissions required William to be in London three or four days a week, and in 1909, he leased a studio with living accommodation in Chelsea. The arrangement secured him not just the quiet he needed to work, but a mistress. Marie Laquelle remained devoted to him for more than 30 years.

DISPLAY CAPTIONS:

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Mabel & William at the studio door,
Rottingdean, circa 1912
Private Collection

With her earnings from the sale of Kit in The Glass with Nancy and Sammy (exhibited 1912 untraced) Mabel commissioned from Lutyens a Thatched studio in the rear garden of The Grange. She and William shared the space (its large north facing window is recognisable in some of his paintings, including Zinnias in the adjoining room). Ben later observed that 'the studio was so much better than the one father worked in that he quickly cornered it on the plea of urgency in earning money.'

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Kit in the garden of The Grange Rottingdean with the ship's model of the naval frigate HMS PANDORA

From Mabel's album

Private Collection/image Clara Molden

PANEL XII

28

Mabel Pryde Nicholson
The Grange, Rottingdean, 1911
Oil on canvas
National Galleries of Scotland

Painted here at The Grange, this double portrait of Nancy and Kit in a receding interior draws on Mabel's familiarity with stage sets. The view through half open doors, of figures absorbed in their own activities rather than interacting, perhaps also puts us in mind of Vilhelm Hammershoi, whose paintings were shown in London in 1907. Visible behind Nancy on the wall is the set of prints by the Regency artist Richard Dighton that William hung in almost every house the family occupied

- they also feature in William Orpen's portrait of the Nicholsons shown nearby.

Downstairs, you can stand in the spot where Mabel painted this picture.

PANEL XIII

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Mabel Pryde Nicholson

The Red Jersey (Kit), circa 1912

Oil on canvas

Aberdeen Art Gallery

PANEL XIV

30

Mabel Pryde Nicholson

Portuguese Girl, 1913

Oil on Canvas

Pallant House Gallery, Chichester

In 1913, Mabel travelled with Ben, Kit and the family nanny to Madeira, where they hoped the climate would alleviate Ben's asthma. The group of portraits she painted there were later exhibited at both the Goupil Gallery and International Society.

PANEL XV

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Mabel Pryde Nicholson

Ernesto, or The Portuguese Boy 1913

Oil on Canvas

Pallant House Gallery, Chichester

PANEL XVI

PAINTING CAREER, THE LONDON ART WORLD

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Mabel exhibited with the New English Art Club for the first time in 1910. Set up in direct opposition to the Royal Academy, John Singer Sargent, Walter Sickert and Max Beerbohm were fellow members. The following year, she also showed at the annual 'Salon' of the Goupil Gallery, with the National Portrait Society and the International Society, a forum for independents whose first presidents were James Abbott McNeill Whistler and Auguste Rodin.

In the years leading up to the Great War, the London art world was crammed with these informal, insurgent and increasingly rival groupings. A ferment such as I have since never felt in this country prevailed,' recalled Osbert Sitwell. 'We possessed again artists of a kind new to us, in whose work showed the national qualities, and who were not merely the imitators of Paris goods.'

Perhaps 1912 was Mabel's year: she held a solo show at the Chenil Gallery in Chelsea, and made enough from the sale of a single painting - Kit in the Glass with Nancy and Sammy (untraced) - to commission from Edwin Lutyens a thatched wooden studio in The Grange's rear garden. According to Ben, his father 'quickly annexed it on the plea of urgency in earning money. Certainly, its large north-facing window is recognisable in some of William's paintings.

DISPLAY CAPTIONS:

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Mabel's Palette

Private Collection

PANEL XVII

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Mabel Pryde Nicholson

Kit, circa 1908

Private Collection

PANEL XVIII

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Mabel Pryde Nicholson

Ben in the Feather Bonnet, circa 1908

Oil on canvas

Pallant House Gallery, Chichester

PANEL XIX

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Mabel Pryde Nicholson

Nancy with a Rabbit, c1910

Oil on canvas

Private Collection, courtesy of Patrick Bourne & Co.

PANEL XX

Mabel Pryde Nicholson

The Lost Paintings

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These photographs are from an album made by Ben in 1920 to record his mother's oeuvre. The paintings featured on this panel remain untraced. The original album is in the glass case in this room.

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Goupil Gallery catalogue for
Mabel Nicholson Exhibition, 1920 (facsimile)
Victoria and Albert Museum, London

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Possibly 'the Pink Dress, exhibited 1915

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Kit in the Glass with Nancy and Sammy showing Mabel in
the mirror, exhibited 1912

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Nancy in a Tartan Frock, exhibited 1911, 1920

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Possibly 'Columbine, exhibited 1911

43

Kit on the Platform, circa 1915

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Possibly A Woman of Madeira, exhibited 1913

PANEL XXI

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Mabel Pryde Nicholson

Kit as a Pirate, 1910

Oil on canvas

Private Collection

PANEL XXII

WAR, DEATH & LEGACY

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In 1914, William accepted an invitation to travel to India with Lutyens for six months, where his friend had arranged for him to paint the Viceroy, Lord Hardinge. The Grange was sold, and Mabel leased a house by the sea at Harlech.

The poet Robert Graves's family lived nearby. It was here that he first caught sight of

17-year-old Nancy, about to leave for a party in a bandit costume. The meeting led eventually to their engagement. 'I liked all the family,' Graves wrote in his memoir *Goodbye to All That*, 'particularly her mother.. a beautiful, wayward Scotch-melancholy person.'

Meanwhile, the Great War was raging. Ben's asthma made him exempt from conscription. but Tony was called up and joined the Royal Field Artillery. In April 1917, he was sent to the front in France.

References to Mabel's work vanish from her letters around this time. To Ben, she wrote frequently of fear. The last letter he received from her is dated May 31st, 1918. In June, Tony came home on last-minute leave unknowingly nursing the deadly 'Spanish flu' that had been working its way through the trenches. Mabel spent every moment with him and became ill herself. She died in London on July 13th. Three months later, Tony would die of gunshot wounds in France.

In 1920, Ben and Nancy staged a memorial exhibition comprising 28 of Mabel's paintings at the Goupil Gallery, for which Graves wrote the catalogue note. After this final blaze, however, Mabel faded from view, becoming little more than a footnote in the stories of various Great Men. All their lives, Ben, Nancy and Kit fought to rescue and defend her.

All three would become artists, too: Kit a modernist architect, Nancy a fabric designer and illustrator and Ben, the great pioneer of British abstract art.

In the adjoining room, you will find a display about Mabel's children and their work, and a painting William made in her studio.

DISPLAY CAPTIONS:

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Photo of Mabel on the steps of Llys Beach

(Little Court) Harlech, circa 1916

Photo taken by Ben Nicholson

Private Collection

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The poet Robert Graves, Nancy, Tony, Mabel and William in
the garden at Maesyneuadd, near Harlech, 1918

From Mabel's album

Private Collection / image Clara Molden

Please return this guide
before leaving the exhibition.

Thank you.



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