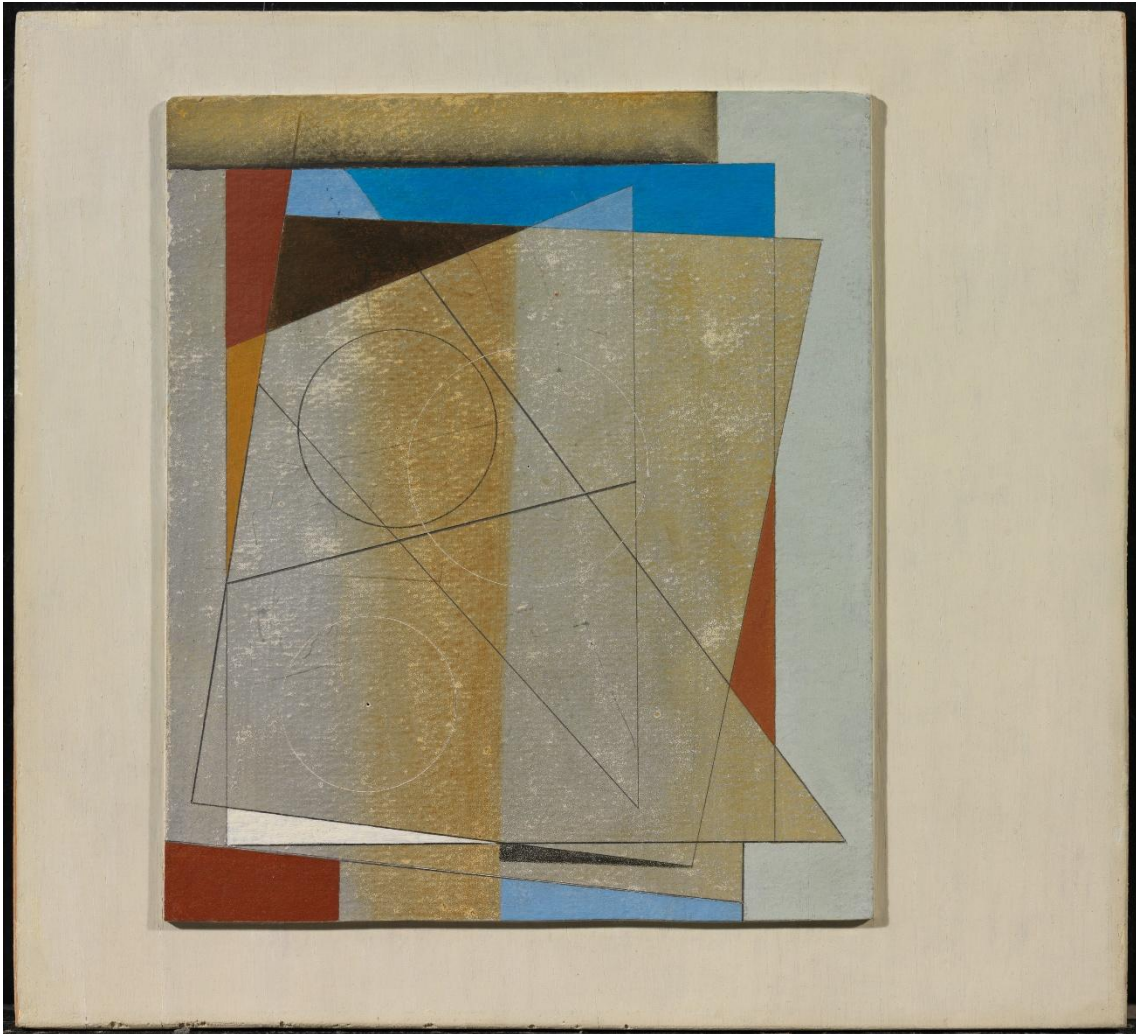


# RICHARD GREEN

BEN NICHOLSON  
Denham 1894 - 1982 London

Ref: CD 205

*1947 Feb 21 (painting)*



Signed and dated on the reverse: *Ben Nicholson / 1947 / Feb 21 /  
Nicholson / Chy an Kerris / Carbis Bay / Cornwall*  
Oil & pencil on board, on the artist's prepared panel:  
11 ¼ x 12 ¼ in / 28.6 x 31.1 cm  
Frame size: 13 x 14 in / 33 x 35.6 cm



Artworks are sold subject to our Terms and Conditions of Sale; copies are available upon request  
[www.richardgreen.com](http://www.richardgreen.com)

# RICHARD GREEN

FINE PAINTINGS • ESTABLISHED 1955

*Provenance:*

The Lefevre Gallery, London  
Saidenberg Gallery, New York  
Waddington Galleries, London [WGB 3354];  
Dr Vera Dalley Lederman, acquired from the above;  
Christie's London, 10<sup>th</sup> July 2013, lot 30;  
Richard Green, London;  
private collection, USA

*Exhibited:*

London, Lefevre Gallery, *Ben Nicholson: Drawings 1921-47, Paintings and Reliefs 1921-38, 1946-47*, May 1947, no.97

***In dealing with space, I like a series of flat planes which interchange their position in depth [...] – but always I hope in depth & never on the single plane of the surface. One does not live on a single plane & so there is no reality in a single plane in a p[ain]t[in]g***

[Letter to Patrick Heron, 9 February 1954]

In early March 1947 Ben Nicholson wrote to Winifred Nicholson, “I would like to have your opinion on my new work – it is v[ery] complex now in its structure & off the right angle.”<sup>1</sup> *1947 Feb 21 (painting)* is one of the works he had in mind. In May that year, the current painting was one of six dating from February 1947 included in Nicholson's major solo exhibition at the Lefevre Gallery, London. All contained a precise linearity – by which flat planes of colour are defined and intersect – and unlike his geometric reliefs and paintings of the previous decade, the diagonal line was now adopted as a dominant compositional element.

Nicholson's ‘off the right angle’ approach had first appeared in a number of small paintings in 1945, and in the years that followed became a distinct pursuit in his abstract works. Perhaps enthused by the potentiality of peacetime after six long years of war, these paintings reflected a new ambition by the artist in exploring the limits to which he could balance complexity and structural coherence in his painting. In *1947 Feb 21 (painting)*, the viewer is presented with distinct planes of flat colour and textured surface that appear to overlap. The relative spatial position of each however, remains elusive. This ambiguity is further evident in Nicholson's treatment of the three circles. Initially the larger white circle towards the centre of the composition appears to sit in front of the smaller dark grey circle, with the two intersecting lines also passing behind. In turn this has the effect of projecting the second white circle further forward. Yet on closer inspection this is counter to the actual physical positioning of the circles - the two white circles are incised into the layers of paint, whereas the darker circle has been drawn on the surface.

The process of incising and scraping away at a painting, to create both line and texture, was central to Nicholson's artistic practice throughout his career. Aligned with the notion of palimpsest – from the Greek *palimpsestos*, meaning “scraped again” – Nicholson would allow

---

<sup>1</sup> Letter from Ben Nicholson to Winifred Nicholson, 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1947.

# RICHARD GREEN

FINE PAINTINGS • ESTABLISHED 1955

traces of layers within a painting to remain partially visible, or be exposed through the removal of areas of paint. In *1947 Feb 21 (painting)* Nicholson chose to work on the rough, reverse side of the masonite board, to which he applied a ground layer of plaster preparation known as *Cifco*. This was then sanded to reveal some areas of the textured board, as well as being exposed through the paint by the incised lines of the two circles. This quality of palimpsest is further implied in *1947 Feb 21 (painting)* as we can see evidence of an earlier painting – a faint outline of playing cards and the handle of a mug – probably dating from 1945. Whereas this may have served an economic purpose at a time of material shortages, Nicholson found the process of working on an ‘unrealised’ painting an effective way to bring something of the previous ‘idea’ into a new work. As he would later explain to Adrian Stokes, “it is very interesting scaping an early ptg because the thoughts [...] which one had when making the ptg come back.”<sup>2</sup>

During the war years Nicholson had been acutely aware that the momentum of modern art in Britain was at risk of stalling, and in his art and writing he had been proactive in championing its contemporary relevance and potency. In his 1942 essay ‘Notes on Abstract Art’, he wrote,

*I think the recent liberation of the powerful forces of form and colour is an important event, and when critics announce or foretell the death of abstract art they show the same misunderstanding of the freedom of form and colour as the dictators do of the freedom of the individual.*<sup>3</sup>

Five years later in *1947 Feb 21 (painting)* this quality of liberation and freedom is deftly expressed through the coaction of shape, colour, and texture. As the viewer’s eye moves across the surface, led by the assured dark lines of graphite, these lines become edges, creating planes that simultaneously recede and project. At times, Nicholson would relate the compositional impact of his work to the ‘interplay of forces’ in a game of football, or a tennis match - it is interesting to note that a comparable painting was titled *painting (ball game) 1947 (February 12)* when first exhibited alongside the present work.<sup>4</sup> Whilst the diagonal lines in *1947 Feb 21 (painting)* clearly create the impression of dynamic motion, it is significant that this potential linear movement is carefully held in check by the overall spatial ambivalence of the composition. This is the ‘aliveness’ that Nicholson strove to get into his paintings, where equilibrium is achieved and felt intuitively.

**Dr Lee Beard, 2026**

---

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Ben Nicholson to Adrian Stokes, 28<sup>th</sup> March 1963. Tate Gallery Archive.

<sup>3</sup> Ben Nicholson, ‘Notes on Abstract Art’, *Horizon*, Vol. IV, No. 22, October 1941, p.273.

<sup>4</sup> This work, *painting (ball game) 1947 (February 12)*, was titled *fives, February 12-47* when included in Herbert Read, *Ben Nicholson. Paintings, Reliefs, Drawings*, Lund Humphries, London 1948, no.178.

Artworks are sold subject to our Terms and Conditions of Sale; copies are available upon request

[www.richardgreen.com](http://www.richardgreen.com)

# RICHARD GREEN

FINE PAINTINGS • ESTABLISHED 1955

## **BEN NICHOLSON OM**

Denham 1894 – 1982 London

Ben Nicholson was born in Denham, Buckinghamshire in 1894, the eldest of four children of artists Sir William Nicholson and his first wife Mabel Pryde. He spent his early education at Heddon Court, Hampstead and Gresham's School, Holt before studying at the Slade School of Fine Art in London from 1910–11, where he met and befriended Paul Nash. Following graduation, Nicholson spent time in France and Italy before living in Pasadena, California for health reasons between 1917–18. He was declared unfit for active service during the First World War due to his asthma. In 1920 Nicholson married the artist Winifred Roberts and they subsequently divided their time between London, Cumberland and Switzerland, often visiting Paris on the way. Having experienced Cubism first hand, he produced his first abstract paintings in 1924. That same year he held his first solo exhibition at the Twenty-One Gallery, London and was invited to become a member of the Seven and Five Society.

Accompanied by the artist Christopher Wood, Nicholson visited St Ives, Cornwall for the first time in August 1928, where they discovered the painter Alfred Wallis who would become an important influence on them both. In 1931 he met the sculptor Barbara Hepworth, and within a year began sharing a studio with her in Hampstead. Together they held a joint exhibition at Tooth's Gallery, London in 1932. Nicholson would go on to marry Hepworth after his divorce from Winifred Nicholson was finalised in 1938. From 1933 Nicholson became a member of Unit One and was invited, together with Hepworth, to join the group Abstraction-Création. He began making abstract reliefs in 1933 and a series of white painted reliefs the following year which would establish his international reputation. Winifred's move to Paris in 1932 with their children meant that Nicholson visited often, enabling him to establish links with other artists there, including Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso and Jean Arp. In 1934 he met Piet Mondrian and played an active role in his move to Hampstead in 1938. Nicholson co-edited the publication *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art* with the sculptor Naum Gabo and the architect Sir Leslie Martin in 1937.

In 1939 Nicholson and Hepworth relocated with the triplets (born in 1934) to Cornwall where he resumed painting landscapes and coloured abstract reliefs. His international reputation grew during the 1950s as a result of a series of large still lifes for which he received several important prizes. In 1954 he represented Britain at the Venice Biennale (alongside Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon) and was awarded the Ullisse prize. The following year the Tate Gallery held the first of two retrospectives of his work, the second being shown in 1969. In 1958 he moved to Switzerland with his third wife Felicitas Vogler (Hepworth and Nicholson having divorced in 1951) where he began to concentrate once more on abstract reliefs including a large wall relief made in 1964 for the Documenta III exhibition in Kassel, Germany. He was awarded the Order of Merit in 1968. Nicholson returned to England in 1971, living until 1974 in Cambridge and then in Hampstead where he remained until his death in 1982.

Artworks are sold subject to our Terms and Conditions of Sale; copies are available upon request

[www.richardgreen.com](http://www.richardgreen.com)