

MONDRIAN || NICHOLSON: IN PARALLEL
16 February to 20 May 2012

This exhibition tells the remarkable story of the creative relationship between Piet Mondrian, one of the most celebrated painters of the 20th century, and Ben Nicholson, one of this country's greatest modern artists. It has been conceived around The Courtauld's important Nicholson canvas, *1937 (painting)* (fig. 5), and will unite a group of major paintings and reliefs to explore the parallel artistic paths charted by the two artists during the 1930s. Their friendship culminated with Mondrian moving from Paris to London in 1938, at Nicholson's invitation, and the two working in neighbouring studios in Parkhill Road, Hampstead (figs. 1 & 3), when for a short period London was an international centre of modernist art. The works selected for the exhibition each have a particular historical significance. Paintings and reliefs that were shown together in exhibitions or included in avant-garde publications during the 1930s will be reunited (figs. 2, 6 & 7). Other works were originally bought by influential members of their circle in London, or were produced whilst the artists occupied neighbouring studios in Hampstead (fig. 9). In addition, a selection of archival material, including photographs and a group of Mondrian's and Nicholson's letters, will offer further insights into this fascinating relationship.

Nicholson first visited Mondrian in his Paris studio in the spring of 1934. Stepping into the purity and calm of its white-painted interior, from the hustle and bustle of the street, was an extraordinary experience. "His studio...was an astonishing room", Nicholson later recalled, "he'd stuck up on the walls different sized squares painted with primary red, blue and yellow... I remember after this first visit sitting at a café table on the edge of a pavement...for a very long time with an astonishing feeling of quiet and repose... The feeling in his studio must have been very like the feeling in one of those hermits' caves where lions used to go to have thorns taken out of their paws".

The visit marked the beginning of an enduring friendship and sparked an extraordinary creative relationship, lasting until Mondrian's death ten years later. When they met, Nicholson was a rising star of modern British art and Mondrian, twenty years his senior, was already recognised as a leading artist of his generation. Their friendship spanned a turbulent decade of 20th century history as Europe headed towards the Second World War. In the art world different movements vied for prominence on this fraught international stage with Surrealism becoming a powerful force. Against this backdrop, Mondrian and Nicholson pursued a refined form of abstraction with a restrained vocabulary of colours and geometric forms, offering an alternative modern vision for art. They believed in the potential of abstraction to attain the highest aesthetic and spiritual power, with the balance and harmony of their compositions offering an antidote to the violent discord of the modern world.

Nicholson was already exploring abstraction before he met Mondrian but he found powerful confirmation of his artistic convictions through the Dutchman's example. Over the following years Nicholson would produce some of his greatest works, including a major group of coloured abstracts (figs. 5 & 8) and his famous series of pure white reliefs (fig. 7). He hand-carved these reliefs from solid wooden panels, making planes of different depths to create shadow lines of varying thicknesses. At the same time, Mondrian was taking new directions in his painting, making greater use of expanses of white space in combination with small but intensive areas of vibrant colour (figs. 6 & 9). He also renewed the possibilities of his famous horizontal and vertical black lines, sometimes bringing them together as double lines, to enhance the dynamism of his compositions (fig. 4). The exhibition will be a unique opportunity to explore in detail the nature of their creative relationship. Theirs was not a story of master and follower. Mondrian opened up new aesthetic possibilities that Nicholson seized and made his own in highly original and imaginative ways, which the Dutchman admired greatly. Nicholson, in turn, offered Mondrian new artistic stimulation and considerable support, with a deep affinity developing between them during the course of their friendship.

The two artists contributed to several groundbreaking exhibitions and avant-garde publications in the 1930s, with their work often presented together. London was becoming an important battleground for modern art and, together with his first wife Winifred, Nicholson was instrumental in bringing Mondrian's work to England. Winifred was Mondrian's first English buyer when she purchased *Composition with Double Line and Yellow* in 1935 (fig. 4). They were instrumental in finding other patrons for Mondrian among their circle of friends and associates at a time when securing sales was increasingly difficult. Nicholson also helped arrange for Mondrian's work to be exhibited in England for the very first time, with three paintings being included in the seminal *Abstract and Concrete* exhibition, organised by Nicolette Gray in 1936. It toured a number of English cities, including London, where Mondrian and Nicholson's works were shown side by side (fig. 2). That year he invited Mondrian to contribute to the avant-garde publication, *Circle*, which Nicholson co-edited. *Circle*, published in 1937, aimed to unite an international modernist movement of artists, designers and architects with an ambitious agenda to revitalise modern civilisation. The publication opened with a sequence of Mondrian's paintings paired with a group of Nicholson's white reliefs.

In 1938, with war appearing imminent, Nicholson sent an invitation to Mondrian enabling him to leave Paris for London. Winifred accompanied him, recalling that on the train journey to Calais Mondrian became engrossed in the passing countryside. She initially took this to be a softening of the devout city-dweller's insistence on a geometric aesthetic. However, she soon realised he was actually transfixed by the telegraph poles when he murmured: "look how they pass, they pass, they pass, cutting the horizon here, and here, and here". Once in London Mondrian was welcomed into an international community of avant-garde artists and writers living close by in Hampstead, including Henry Moore, Naum Gabo, Herbert Read, John Cecil Stephenson and Nicholson's future wife, Barbara Hepworth, who also became a close friend. Nicholson found him a studio-cum-bed-sitting-room at 60 Parkhill Road, overlooking Nicholson's studio. Mondrian immediately set about transforming the room, having it whitewashed before adding patches of colour, as he had in Paris: "his wonderful squares of primary colours climbed up the walls", Hepworth remembered. He installed his few possessions, including his gramophone on which he played his beloved jazz records. Finally, he arranged his unfinished canvases, which he had brought from Paris and set up a trestle table that Nicholson had given him to paint on.

Initially, Mondrian was a little overwhelmed by the vast scale of London and the deep escalators of the underground scared him at first. But he quickly settled into London life and even became an avid reader of the *Evening Standard*. He professed to a friend that the size and character of London was actually having a liberating effect: "I've noticed that the change has had a good influence on my work... The artistic situation doesn't differ greatly here from that in Paris. But one is even more 'free' – London is big." He ventured into the city's nightlife and, having asked Peggy Guggenheim for jazz club recommendations, they went dancing together. Mondrian's contentment with his new life is expressed in lighthearted postcards he sent to his brother, Carel, in the Netherlands, several featuring one of Mondrian's favourite films, 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs'. In them, Mondrian casts himself as 'Sleepy' and his 'best friends', Nicholson, Hepworth and others, as the woodland creatures who came to his rescue. Mondrian lived in London for almost exactly two years. He was included in two further exhibitions during his time in the city and he worked on a number of major canvases. One of these was a large-scale composition that was bought by Peggy Guggenheim and will be included in this exhibition, alongside works that Nicholson was producing at this time in his neighbouring studio. The outbreak of war finally separated Mondrian and Nicholson who moved to New York and Cornwall respectively. Nicholson and Hepworth implored him to join them but a rural life was unimaginable to Mondrian. After settling in America, and with war underway in Europe, he wrote to Cecil Stephenson, "I do like New York but in London I was of course more at home. I always believe in the victory of Britain."

The two final works in the exhibition mark the culmination of Mondrian's and Nicholson's creative relationship (figs. 8 & 9). Although completed on different continents the paintings speak of the profound affinity that had developed between them as they worked, in parallel, over the previous decade.

FACT SHEET

- Exhibition title:** *Mondrian || Nicholson: In Parallel*
- Exhibition dates:** 16 February to 20 May 2012
- Curators:** Professor Christopher Green, The Courtauld Institute of Art, and Dr Barnaby Wright, Daniel Katz Curator of 20th Century Art, The Courtauld Gallery
- Lead sponsor:** ING
- Sponsors:** Abellio
Friends of The Courtauld
Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands
Hester Diamond
- Location:** The Courtauld Gallery, Somerset House, Strand, London WC2R 0RN
Tel. +44 (0)20 7848 2526, Fax. +44 (0)20 7848 2589
www.courtauld.ac.uk
- Opening hours:** Daily 10 am to 6 pm, last admission 5.30 pm
- Courtauld talks:** There will be a full event programme to accompany the exhibition including curators' talks, late-night gallery events, lunchtime talks and a study day.
- Admission:** Included in admission to permanent collection:
Adult: £6.00, concessions: £4.50
On-line booking www.courtauld.ac.uk/tickets
Free admission: Mondays 10 am to 2 pm except public holidays, at all times for under 18s, full-time UK students and unwaged.
- Catalogue:** The exhibition will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue, edited by Christopher Green and Barnaby Wright with further contributions by Sophie Bowness and Lee Beard. Published by Paul Holberton in association with The Courtauld Gallery, £25.00
ISBN 978 1 907372 247
- Related display:** *Lines crossed – grids and rhythms on paper*, from The Courtauld's collection, will examine the role of grids in drawings, with works from the Renaissance to the present day. A highlight will be the striking large drawing by Linda Karshan (b.1947), a recent gift to the Gallery.
- Access:** The Gallery is wheelchair accessible with a lift to all floors.
- Shop:** The Courtauld Gallery Shop is open daily during Gallery hours offering catalogues, art books and prints as well as gifts, such as ceramics, textiles and jewellery, inspired by the permanent collection and temporary exhibitions. Online shop: www.courtauldshop.com
Tel. +44 (0)20 7848 2579, info@courtauldshop.com
- Café:** The Courtauld Gallery Café is open daily from 10 am to 5.30 pm serving a selection of drinks, snacks and freshly prepared meals.
- How to get there:** The Courtauld Gallery is situated in the North Building of Somerset House, which has entrances from the Strand and the Victoria Embankment. Mainline trains to Charing Cross, Waterloo or Blackfriars; Underground stations Temple (District and Circle lines), Covent Garden (Piccadilly line) and Charing Cross (Northern, Bakerloo and Jubilee lines); buses 6, 9, 11, 13, 15, 23, 77a, 91 and 176 to Strand

For further information and images, please contact:

Sue Bond Public Relations

Tel. +44 (0)1359 271085, Fax. +44 (0)1359 271934

E-mail. info@suebond.co.uk, www.suebond.co.uk

24/11/2011