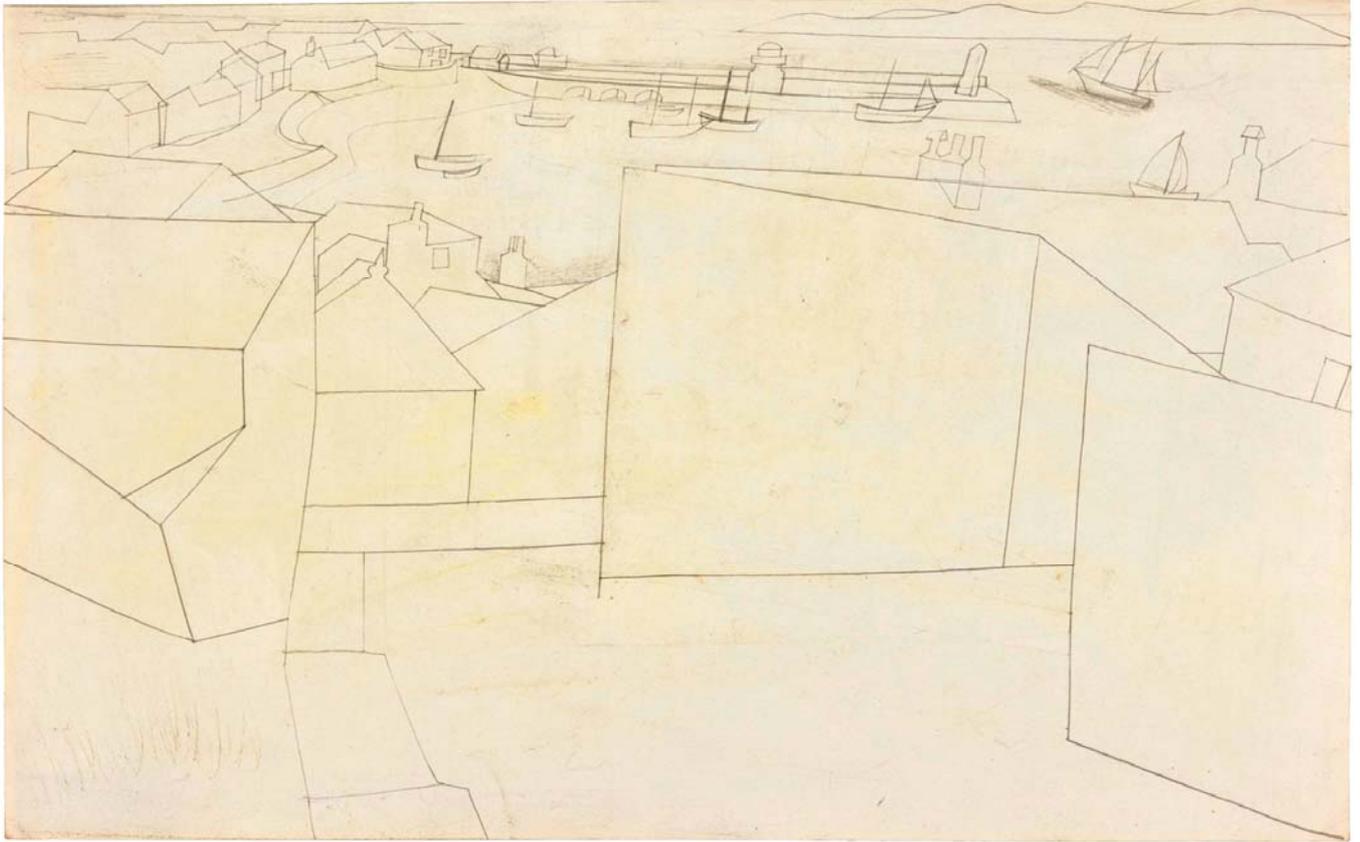


LE CLAIRE

SEIT 1982

KUNST



BEN NICHOLSON

1894 Denham, Bucks. - London 1982

August 27, 1954 (View of St Ives)

Oil wash and pencil on paper, in the artist's frame, executed on August 27, 1954.

Signed, titled and dated on back of paper: *NICHOLSON / St Ives / aug 27 - 54*.

320 x 500 mm

PROVENANCE: Phillips London, 15.11.1991, lot 83 – Marlborough Graphics, London – Private collection, United Kingdom (1994 acquired from the above)

In August 1928 Ben Nicholson made his first visit to St Ives on the Atlantic coast of Cornwall. With only a few hours at his disposal on this day trip, he recorded as many impressions as he could in a small sketch book. One of these drawings [fig. 1] (now in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford)¹ gives a partial view of the harbour, pinched between the high walls and chimneys of the crooked houses lining a steep, narrow street. The minimal lines of the architecture, though they fill most of the page, fall away to disclose the much more detailed and boldly drawn sailing boats in the harbour. Though not drawn from exactly the same spot as the *View of St Ives* made twenty-six years later, the format, the contrast, the idea are the same.

In August 1939 Nicholson, with his wife Barbara Hepworth and their four-year-old triplets went to stay with Adrian Stokes and Margaret Mellis at Carbis Bay on the southern outskirts of St Ives. When war was declared that September they decided to remain in Cornwall and soon settled in a house nearby. St Ives was to remain Nicholson's base for almost twenty years until he moved to Switzerland in March 1958, and the view of the harbour over a foreground of rooftops was a theme he returned to again and again in paintings and drawings of the 1940s and early 50s.² [Figs. 2 and 3]

In April 1955 Nicholson moved into a house whose terrace looked on to the very motif that had inspired him for so many years. As he wrote to Herbert Read at the time: "It's an absurd place, almost as if one had made it and its surroundings oneself – v. romantic and with a whole series of different levels from which one sees between rooftops the Atlantic, the Island, St Ives Bay, Godrevy & finally, from the topmost 'lookout' level, slap down into the harbour itself...Even its address is strange – Trezion, Salubrious Place."³ [Fig. 4]

¹ See Peter Khoroché, *Ben Nicholson – drawings and painted reliefs*, Lund Humphries, 2002, plate 11.

² Particularly close to the present drawing are three versions of *St Ives rooftops* made in 1940. See *Ben Nicholson – paintings, reliefs, drawings*, intro. Herbert Read, Lund Humphries, 1948, plates 103, 111 and 125. Also *Ben Nicholson – drawings, paintings and reliefs 1911-1968*, intro. John Russell, Thames & Hudson, 1969, plate 50 whose caption should read *October 19 1951 (St Ives rooftops – salubrious)* (private coll.) and Khoroché, *op. cit.*, plate 57, *1951 (rooftops, St Ives)* (Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pa.).

³ Photos of the view from Trezion are reproduced in John Russell, *op. cit.*, plate 259 and *St Ives 1939-64*, exhib. cat., Tate Gallery, 1985, p. 37.

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August 27 1954 (view of St Ives) presents us with a stark contrast between the near-abstract shapes of the blank walls and rooftops in the foreground, taking up three quarters of the picture space, and the detailed 'nursery realism' of the harbour below, with its tightly packed quayside buildings, its boats, pier and lighthouse, fading away to low hills in the distance. The further into the drawing one's eye goes, the more it recognizes. The toy-town treatment of the harbour area is characteristic also of Nicholson's Cornish landscapes of 1939-46 and has its origin in the illustrations to a projected but never published children's book, based on stories he told his children about the adventures of two horses, George and Rufus, occasionally joined by a stag, Johnny. The faux naïf had always appealed to Nicholson's sophisticated-childish temperament and provided one means of expressing his poetic realism.

Finally, a word about the oil wash. From the late 1940s Nicholson liked to apply a thin wash of oil paint to a part of each sheet of paper on which he intended to draw. He would select from his sheaf of prepared sheets one that seemed suitable for his chosen subject: the colour wash was something to which he would have to accommodate his drawing and so would provide a starting-off point for it as well as giving the finished work more body and personality than would a plain white background.

Peter Khoroché
September 2018

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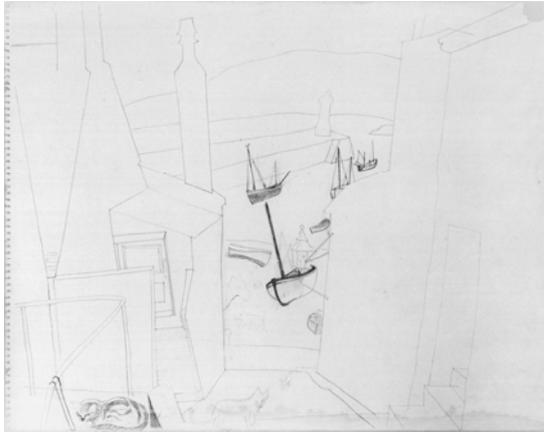


Fig. 1: *August 1928 (St Ives)*,
pencil on paper, 33.0 x 42.0 cm.
Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

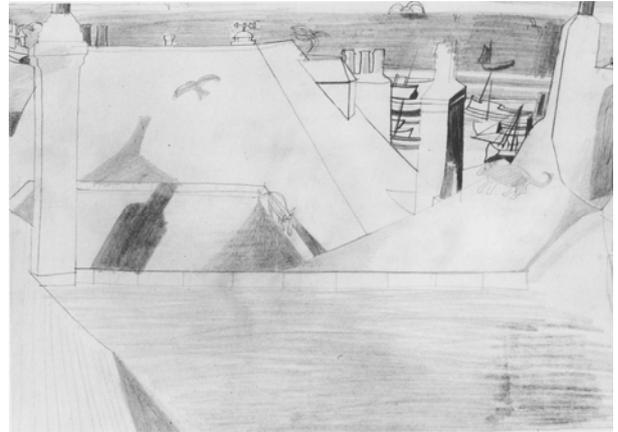


Fig. 3: *1951 (Rooftops, St Ives)*,
oil wash and pencil on paper, 27,5 x 37,5 cm.
Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pa.

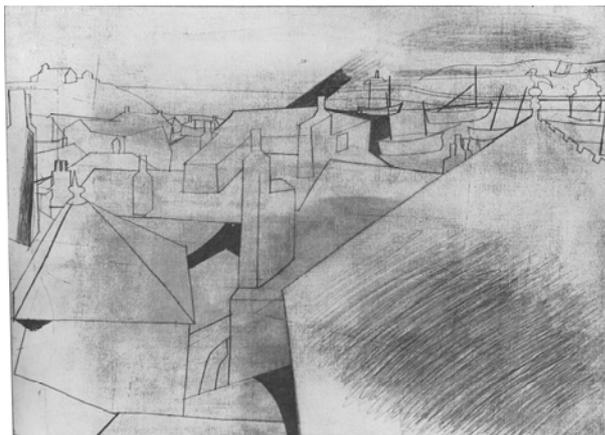


Fig. 2: *October 19, 1951 (St Ives rooftops – salubrious)*
oil and pencil on canvas, 50.8 x 58.4 cm.
Private collection



Fig. 4: *Ben Nicholson in St Ives, c.1955*,
photograph.
Tate Gallery Archive