

art exchange

Jim Ede: In his own words

“It wasn’t until I was nearly thirty that the Nicholsons opened a door into the world of contemporary art and I rushed headlong into the arms of Picasso, Brancusi and Braque.

Ben Nicholson shared this rapture, and I saw in his work a simple continuity from them into the everyday world of the twenties and thirties. There was no longer a break. Oddly enough, I turned out to be one of Ben Nicholson’s very few admirers at that time, and after he had tried to sell a painting for a year or so he would tell me that I could have it for the price of the canvas and frame, usually one to three pounds. I could not always manage it, for my salary was under £250 a year; not much to maintain a family in London.

Winfred Nicholson taught me much about the fusing of art and daily living, and Ben Nicholson that traffic in Piccadilly had the rhythm of a ballet and a game of tennis the perfection of an old master. Life with them at once seemed lively, satisfying and special.

Then came Kit Wood. From Kit I learnt a clarity of perspective in regard to contemporary painters, a direct enjoyment, direct and easy, which became a touchstone in the world of what has often been called naïve painting.

I think it was in 1926 I first began to get paintings from Alfred Wallis. They would come by post, perhaps sixty at a time, and the price fixed at one, two or three shillings according to size. In looking back it is odd to remember how few people even wanted one as a gift, their children could do so much better. I never met but he wrote me many interesting letters and I was grateful for the unsophisticated beauty of his work.

In that same year I first heard of Henri Gaudier-Brzeska. A great quantity of his work was dumped in my office at the Tate: it happened to be the Board Room and the only place with a large table. It was ten years after Gaudier’s death and all this work had been sent to many art experts for their opinion, and London dealers had been asked to buy. It had become the property of the Treasury and the enlightened Solicitor General though that the nation should acquire it, but no, not even as a gift. In the end I got a friend to buy three works for the Tate and three for the Contemporary Arts Society, and the rest, for a song, I bought. Since then it had seemed my task to get Gaudier established in the rightful position he would have achieved had he lived into the present time.

It was in 1954 that I found myself first dreaming of the idea of somehow creating a living place where works of art could be enjoyed, inherent to the domestic setting, where young people could be at home unhampered by the greater austerity of the museum or public art gallery and where informality might infuse an underlying formality. I wanted, in a modest way, to use the inspiration I had had from beautiful interiors, houses of leisured elegance, and to combine it with the joy I had felt in individual works seen in museums and with the all embracing delight I had experienced in nature, in stones, in flowers, in people.

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I was recommended by the President of the Cambridge Preservation Society the use of four tiny condemned slum dwellings. So Kettle's Yard began. This was in 1957. By keeping 'open house' every afternoon something was developed which in 1966 was accepted by the University, whose intention it is to continue this activity in its present form.

Kettle's Yard is in no way meant to be an art gallery or museum, nor is it simply a collection of works of art reflecting my taste, or the taste of a given period. Perhaps from it other ventures of this sort may spring. There should be a Kettle's Yard in every university."

Jim Ede

A Way of Life, 1984