

AXIS AND AUTHENTIC ABSTRACTION IN 1930s ENGLAND

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis questions the canon that has presented English modern art in the 1930s as non-figurative abstraction, represented by those English artists gathered under the collective constructivist ideals of *Circle*. It seeks to establish that before its publication, the abstract art review *Axis* (1935-37) provided the discursive space in which its English artists and writers evolved a belief that non-figurative abstraction was irreconcilable with English cultural attitudes towards artistic expression. This thesis refutes criticisms of regression and compromise levelled at *Axis*'s regard for history and popular culture, and seeks to establish that the resistance of its cohort to the idealist programme of non-figurative abstraction signified their conviction that it was the only means of developing an authentic English modern art practice.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis originated in a preoccupation with the apparent bifurcation in 1930s English modern painting marked by a division of loyalties between non-figurative abstraction and abstracted figuration. I identified the key painters as Ben Nicholson for his tenacity to an austere, geometrical abstraction, represented by the canon of British art history as the paradigm modernist; Paul Nash for his formative and persistent apologia, and his independently modern metaphysical compositions, often discussed as a form of surreal romanticism; and John Piper for his apparent recapitulation from strict non-figurative abstraction alongside Nicholson, to abstracted figuration, forming the basis of what has become referred to as a form of so-called 'Neo-Romanticism'. The presence of Nicholson in the canon, centring as it invariably has on a purely abstract idiom, is sometimes supplemented by Nash as a representative of the abstracted figurative painters. But Nash's independence did not truly engage him in the heart of the problem between the two positions.

However, the central issue appeared to arise between Nicholson and Nash initially, as the latitude which legitimated English modern artists' claim to being 'modern', which profiled discrepancies in its definition. It seemed to be articulated by the varying criteria for, and implications of, abstract art. Because of its focus on abstract art, I anticipated that the review *Axis*, published between early 1935 and late 1937 and edited by Piper's partner Myfanwy Evans, might reveal critical factors concerning the impact and significance of abstract art.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it might also indicate reasons for Piper's development away from non-figurative abstraction, when Nicholson remained resolutely in his position. That *Axis*'s remit as 'A Quarterly Review of Contemporary "Abstract" Painting & Sculpture' seemed transformed by its last issue, no longer appearing to engage with abstract art, indicated the separation of Nicholson and Piper

as complete. This was further apparent in the publication of Evans's anthology entitled *The Painter's Object*, just before her last *Axis* issue. In its different character, that issue appeared to be diametrically opposed in both content and philosophy to the geometric non-figurative (by then named 'Constructive') survey *Circle*, published only weeks earlier, of which Nicholson was one of the editors.<sup>2</sup> It seemed more than likely that *Axis* therefore witnessed developments which effected this separation.

The centrality of abstract art in the art historical canon of Modern English art, which owes a significant debt to Charles Harrison, has perpetuated the configuration promoted by *Circle*, with Nicholson leading the English painters who were preoccupied with non-figurative abstraction.<sup>3</sup> I concurred with Harrison's later claim that 'The Modern Movement' and 'Modernism' were 'mutually implicated but not synonymous concepts', but rejected his perception of the achievement of *Axis*.<sup>4</sup> Given the distinction between its first and last issues, I wanted to explore its content for the presence in abstract art of the subjective dimension that aids and governs visual expression, and which is suppressed in non-figuration. Looking at subsequent work by Nicholson, I suspected that abstract painting was fraught with tensions of subjectivity which involved that of the individual against the group or collective, and cultural specificity, against an internationalist universality. This suspicion was provoked by the direction that Piper's work took after his non-figurative abstract years, and the construction of the history of modern English art that claimed he 'defected' from abstraction to produce a 'gentrified' British art.<sup>5</sup>

Such claims were symptomatic of the need to further 'reconsider the history of English art as a part of the history of modern art as a whole, and examine its typical

preoccupations and problems as features of that history', which work has been continuing over the past two decades.<sup>6</sup> The key to understanding the significance of modern art in England during the 1930s was therefore to attend imaginatively to the notion of 'modern' as a condition that its artists lived, rather than defining categorical criteria. Although this thesis does not primarily engage with the discourse of 'Modernism', it demonstrates its continuing necessity.

*Axis's* remit as a review of the discursive field of modern 'abstract' expression within a strong cultural tradition would have necessitated a broad approach. Frances Spalding suggested that the abstract artists viewed the effect of its 'waver[ing]' editorial policy as a 'treachery'.<sup>7</sup> That this view has been adopted in the canon of English modern art, has perpetuated the misrepresentation of *Axis's* evidently intelligent enquiry.<sup>8</sup> It is long overdue that *Axis's* other, largely unrepresented, and more authorial voice, should be heard in the cause of illuminating England's modern art practices. *Axis's* unprecedented engagement with continental abstraction directly, and through the experiences and perceptions of its English contributors, signified that its discursive approach was not for nothing.<sup>9</sup> The final outcome of its researches had after all, established the strong modern English tradition of romantic abstraction, which suggested that the exploratory nature of *Axis's* policy was precisely its strength.<sup>10</sup> It was important therefore to explore *Axis's* findings as the only English review seriously involved with the evolution of abstract art *as it was happening*, to try to discover whether its outcome was, rather than being viewed as a mere recapitulation to a less radical position, a conclusive statement for abstract art in England. It seemed likely that the detachment and radicalism of continental attitudes were irreconcilable with the English cultural ethos, but that rather than being based on a regressive, 'nostalgic'

attitude *Axis*'s intellectual enquiry was irresolute in its concentration on the nature of communicating the contemporary (modern) condition.

David Peters Corbett's examination of art produced in 1920s England under the condition of modernity proved to be closest in its approach to my own.<sup>11</sup> By focussing on the condition rather than the category, tensions could be foregrounded between the implicit subjectivity of experience in tension with an aesthetic dogma, which was what seemed to lie at the heart of the dissonance between Nicholson and Piper. Unlike Harrison, Corbett did not employ evaluative criteria, and interrogated the complexity of cultural texture for the artist's experience and that of his critics and public, as the conditions of art production. Given his recognition of the 'evasive formulations' to which modernity was subjected in the 1920s, it seemed reasonable to imagine that the growing internationalist influence by the early 1930s with its greater permeation of English culture, would have encouraged a more integrated, more positive expression of modernity.<sup>12</sup> However, this situation appeared to compound for the vast majority of English artists, the tension of new loyalties and priorities competing with those of their strong cultural tradition. This was my interest concerning *Axis*'s witness of the years of that critical decade.

One aspect of *Axis* which has been overlooked is the fact and effect of its rural base. I felt sure that this also played a significant part in its natural parochialism as a positive and legitimate intervention in the perpetuated concept of modernist expression as urban and metropolitan. Tom Steele's volume on the Leeds Arts Club, even though it attended to the provinces rather than rural districts, asserted the dependence of 'metropolitan culture' upon the energetic contribution emanating from the regions and



colonies.<sup>13</sup> The theoretical context he employed illuminated several possibilities for staking out the ground for this thesis. His agreement with Tim Clark's view of the 'real' avant-garde, namely that 'innovation is precisely of those who bypassed, ignored or rejected it', and that an '*achieved distance*' was crucial for innovation, was helpful in considering both Nash's position and more generally that of *Axis*.<sup>14</sup> Steele also cited Griselda Pollock's and Fred Orton's argument for avant-gardists as including the adoption of interventionist strategies by which they could be differentiated *from* normal conventions whilst being implicated *in* them.<sup>15</sup> It illuminated the positions of the entire *Axis* cohort in their pro-tradition attitudes, validating my personal conviction supporting Steele's assertion that the 'effect' of abstract art 'was intrinsic to the renewal of the national culture' and that this was 'one function of an avant-garde'.<sup>16</sup> It was not my intention to argue either way for *Axis*'s avant-garde posture, but it was likely that its outcome was precisely the renewal of national culture by intervention. Finally Steele's citation of Raymond William's essay on Bloomsbury further supported the proposition of a progressive, classed, modernity.<sup>17</sup> It resonated with the role Piper and the *Axis* cohort played during and after the second World War.

This thesis does not engage in a critical discourse *per se* on significant recent publications concerning *Axis* and Piper. Its central focus is the aims and aspirations that emerge in *Axis*. However, Alan Powers's essay entitled 'The Reluctant Romantics: *Axis* Magazine 1935-37' and Sam Smiles's essay on historicism and English culture from 1920-50, both in the same volume, provided further significant context.<sup>18</sup> Frances Spalding's and David Fraser Jenkins' catalogue to the exhibition of Piper's work in the 1930s, marking Piper's birth centenary, was a useful addition to the relevant sources.<sup>19</sup> With Jenkins's earlier catalogue on Piper's work in the 1940s, and Harrison's essay

mentioned above, this constellation of publications indicated that the subject of Piper and *Axis* had surfaced as long overdue for examination.<sup>20</sup> I had anticipated this need in 1997 in the forming of the broader thesis subject, when secondary material about *Axis* and Piper accounted for very little indeed. The subsequent findings in this area, having appeared in print before the conclusion of this thesis, have often echoed my own, and so this study now appears somewhat outdated.<sup>21</sup>

Powers's essay aimed to distinguish the romantic attitude implicit in *Axis* as a separate development from the Neo-Romanticism of the 1940s. He too contested Harrison's 'wholly negative' perception of *Axis*'s 'regression', as well as his 'paradigm of an absolute opposition between England and Europe', which entirely drowned out the subtlety of *Axis*'s significance.<sup>22</sup> Other observations reflected my own, amongst which the most generally relevant, was his recognition of 'the context in which modern artists necessarily had to operate in England', and (connected to Clark's, and Pollock's and Orton's positions on avant-garde strategies) that '*Axis* magazine...stood apart both from the exclusive wing of the Abstractionists and from the opposing Surrealists', and most importantly, that the *Axis* cohort 'were establishing their position from inductive first principles'.<sup>23</sup>

Primary sources have been all but absent regarding *Axis* papers. Early in the research stage, my contacts with Myfanwy Piper were ended with her unexpected death. In time, more material became available to me by kind permission of the family after the probate period, but at that time it was not catalogued or formally organised. However, as with Piper's existing archives, no substantial papers existed concerning *Axis* or anything much else from the 1930s. During this time Tate Gallery Archives moved its

premises which meant a certain amount of inaccessibility at times when I was able to be in London.

Although the central focus of the thesis is upon *Axis*, the body of the enquiry ranges from 1930 to 1946, which therefore includes the second World War. It is important to establish however, that it does not discuss the war work of those it otherwise features, and refers only briefly to this period, for the sake of illuminating particular arguments.

Chapter one aims to establish the texture of the modern art debate in the five years prior to the appearance of *Axis*. It concentrates on two prominent apologists, Paul Nash and Herbert Read, who were to become *Axis* contributors, and whose involvement in Unit One overlapped its first issue.<sup>24</sup> Nash's articles in current affairs journals explaining the concepts and values of modern art, are explored against the anti-modernist sentiments expressed in articles and editorials of the *Studio*, revealing that the perceived key to the problem stemmed from its international base and its anti-naturalistic appearance. To indicate the misconceptions about modern art, Read's explanation of contemporary artistic activity is introduced by an overview of *Art Now* for its classificatory approach revealing his intellectually ambiguous position.<sup>25</sup> Focussing upon the Unit One project, Nash's and Read's ambitions for it are compared and found to be fundamentally different. Their separation is argued as located in Read's desire for an internationalist coherence, and Nash's for an English absorption of good international practice; further, Read's vision of its conversion to a Bauhaus-type system for the use of abstract art in modern design, is argued as closely aligned with priorities expressed in *Art and Industry*, whereas Nash's preoccupation is indicated to be with art's precedence over design.<sup>26</sup> The demise of Unit One is argued to be partly

due to Read's influence upon its members over the primacy of an internationalist rather than an English focus, and partly to the departure of Nicholson and Hepworth, under their uncompromising commitment to the geometrical abstract art of the international group Abstraction Création.<sup>27</sup> Thus the texture of the broader debate finally sharpens towards 'abstract' art, which has replaced the problem of 'modern' art.

Chapter two inserts *Axis* into this debate by establishing the position of its key instigator, Jean Hélion, a founder of Abstraction Création, as already distant from that group's dogmatic adherence to rigid geometrical abstraction by the time he meets *Axis*'s prospective editor Myfanwy Evans. It therefore aims to represent *Axis* from the start as distanced from this dogma and concerned with a broader church of abstract art. Hélion is presented as a committed abstract painter, gradually evolving a more 'organic' form of abstraction by retaining pictorial languages of recession and movement. His more liberal vision of *Axis* and his emphasis on the need for it to be 'english' (sic) are revealed in order to dispel assumptions in art historical literature that he advocated *Axis*'s adoption of Abstraction Création's dogma, and by association, that *Axis* 'failed' or betrayed its initial project.<sup>28</sup> In the absence of any substantial papers concerning *Axis*, this information lays the ground for a survey of the contents of issues one to seven, which seeks to discover whether, and if so, it represented a position on abstract art.

To this end, the first issue is searched for thematics, initially presented in Evans's editorial, addressing varying definitions of the term 'abstract'.<sup>29</sup> Issues two to seven are surveyed by attending to the voices of Evans, poet and writer Geoffrey Grigson, John Piper and Paul Nash (referred hitherto as the *Axis* 'cohort') for their congruence

with those thematics, which are identified as a conviction about the validity of 'biomorphic abstraction', in its continuation of abstract art's relation to 'nature' and therefore 'life', in opposition to what was viewed as a moribund art of geometric forms. This area is explored further for its subjective implications governing their belief in painting as the ordered vehicle of emotion, achieved through a complex individual process. In order to reveal the extent of their distance from conforming to an idiom of a collective ideal, it is argued and demonstrated that they believed these priorities formed the means to understanding painting's authentic aims and its inherently varied expression. The chapter concludes by explaining their overriding motivation as the progression of art through transforming work with the tradition, and briefly examines its originating romantic English values in Piper's and Grigson's article 'England's Climate'.<sup>30</sup>

Chapter three concentrates upon the *Axis* cohort's arguments that firmly establish biomorphic abstraction within the continuum of the painterly tradition and by that token, as expressive of a continual present. It represents the characteristics of this position as the unselfconscious response to the physical world, encapsulated in Piper's notion of the 'fullness of present life', the recourse to historic examples as the means to progress, and the centrality of individualism in English cultural expression.<sup>31</sup> To sharpen these findings the context of Nicholson's approach and response to his work is outlined, and Hélicon's abstract position between the rigidity of Abstraction Création and the pictorial values of his own tradition, is explored and maintained as continuing to be influential in *Axis*'s focus upon biomorphic abstraction. This chapter argues that Evans's scholarly approach to critical activity, in which she habitually studied the originating sources, further confirmed *Axis*'s concern with illuminating the motivating

concepts of the term ‘abstract’ rather than attending largely to the status of its radical appearance. In this way, it reveals the growing antipathy in *Axis* towards group pressures and self-conscious posturing, as forcefully expressed in Piper’s letter to Nicholson resulting from the Abstract Concrete exhibition in the summer of 1936.<sup>32</sup> A disaffection between geometric abstractionists and biomorphic abstractionists is further argued through their implications (recalling the Unit One *dénouement*) which divided loyalties between cultural specificity evoked by biomorphic references to ‘life’, as represented by Piper, and international geometric universalism as represented by Nicholson. The chapter therefore demonstrates that by the end of 1936 a rift had been established across the field of abstract art in England.

After treating *Axis* 1 as the foundation of broader-based thematic investigations as in chapter one, issues two to seven reveal further evidence of those thematics. However, an intensification of artistic and conceptual developments from late 1936 (after *Axis* 7), means that a slight complication occurs in addressing the sources chronologically. To organise them under the thematics they contain (as for *Axis* issues one to seven) does not however, adequately unfold the scenario of developments at this critical time, that is, towards and at the close of *Axis* and just prior to the outbreak of war. For this reason it is necessary to proceed in a less linear fashion after chapter three. The development builds from the ‘external’ work of its cohort (prior to *Axis* 8, the last issue) as occurring alongside *Circle* – the first consolidated group publication of constructivist art and design in England, as the constituents of chapter four; then to Evans’s anthology *The Painter’s Object* appearing after *Circle*, as chapter five; then to *Axis* 8 of ‘early winter’ 1937, as chapter six; and finally to other, subsequent ‘external’ works by its cohort from 1938 to 1946, accompanied by the concluding section, as

chapter seven. It is intended that the layering of developments, rather than detracting from the coherence of my argument, illuminates the rationality of *Axis*'s direction and final issue.

Chapter four therefore examines work external to *Axis* of its cohort, to illustrate further their values and priorities expressed by the identified thematics. It develops the argument that the process of abstracting in the normal activity of painting became for Piper the rationale by which his exploration of abstract painting could exist alongside the continuing development of his interests in other forms of art related activity. Confirmation of this rationale is revealed in his Constable article, which introduces to the thesis the central factor of Piper's predilection for topographical subjects which he shared with Nash, and which cemented their friendship.<sup>33</sup> Nash's continued involvement with aspects of Surrealism is revealed in his publications and paintings, and Piper's celebration of Nash's surrealist inspired landscapes is argued as indicating their common attitude of expressing modernity from historical experience.

The introduction of *Circle* is explored for its diametric opposition to the values and beliefs of the *Axis* cohort, which were well established by *Circle*'s inception. Despite its apparently strong coherence as a bastion against any form of figuration or empiricism, its content is examined to reveal a strong diversity of interpretations of the constructivist ideal. Comparisons are employed to illuminate those beliefs of the *Axis* cohort about the concept of 'abstract', against those of the *Circle* cohort. Gabo's and Mondrian's positions are explored for the esoteric nature of their founding principles, which form the background for an examination of the English *Circle* contributors' positions. Mondrian's use of paint is argued as a suppression of the inherent character

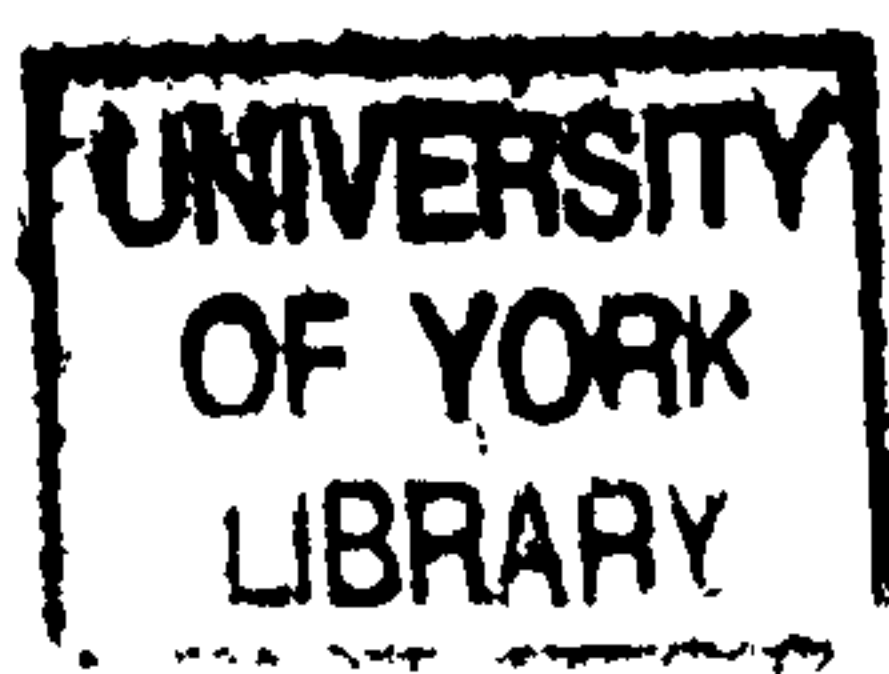
of his medium, and Nicholson's and Hepworth's positions are proposed as compromised by their strict adherence to the constructivist ideal because of its requisite suppression of an English aestheticist 'taste' and its craft tradition of 'truth to materials'. Read's position is revealed as building upon his earlier attitudes to geometrical abstraction in *Art Now* and *Art and Industry*. J. M. Richards's essay, in its recognition of the significant role of cultural specificity in evolving a universal, but 'culturally valid' language, is argued as an unequivocal representation of Piper's priorities, and as undermining any claim that he was constructivist by nature. Finally, Moore's short contribution is revealed to be a resounding counterblast to his own contribution to Evans's anthology *The Painter's Object*. This chapter concludes that whereas *Circle* proved to be lacking in true coherence despite its visual idioms, *Axis* proved to be truly coherent at its core, despite its inclusive abstract field.

Chapter five aims to demonstrate that the consolidated themes of *Axis* are revealed this time as congruent with *The Painter's Object*, effectively indicating a discernible trajectory. For example, observance of the tradition, abstraction as the means rather than the end, and art's conscious and unconscious activity, all feature prominently in an examination of Evans's and Piper's essays, in order strongly to argue the intellectual bases of their positions. It addresses the issue of abstract art's 'morality' by examining Evans's conviction that authentic cultural expression existed within biomorphic abstract art, and by her explicit account of its achievement and effect. It argues that her commentary reveals a clarity of appreciation remarkable in a non-practitioner, and that further, her life with Piper provided the insight right through the span of *Axis*, into the misconceptions that masked the serious business of the modern painter, and the misrepresentations of the realities of an artist's life, thus making her voice as an



apologist unique. Piper's essay is argued as a reminder that abstraction had arisen because of the 'object' (subject matter), and is argued as a further affirmation of abstraction situated in the painting tradition, and as a demonstration of his concern with painting rather than idealism. Piper's undertaking as a painter is exposed as the work of 'recording' contemporary thinking rather than taking a strategic position concerning it. His descriptions of two metaphorical 'objects' that preoccupy him in his painting, implying abstract and surreal qualities respectively, are argued as an effective declaration of his belief that painting should be understood as a form of representation. Brief commentaries on his painting support the argument that his artistic development reflected the development of thinking of the *Axis* cohort in the face of non-figurative abstraction, and also reflected connections between his interests outside *Axis*. These connections are argued as a further grounding of his abstract forms in 'life', and in the world of 'objects'. The chapter concludes with a brief context of other significant content in *The Painter's Object* to indicate its concern with a full range of aims and practices, including surrealist work, and excluding constructivist work.

Chapter six examines the key content of *Axis* 8, the last issue, in order to argue that although apparently vastly different from issue one, the motivating values and beliefs of its cohort about abstract painting and sculpture had not changed, and were instead foregrounded. By attending to the contributions of Evans, Piper and Walsh, this chapter argues that they now collectively set out to *demonstrate* rather than to imply the intrinsic role of abstracting as the basis of all processes of representation. The orchestrated change is argued as deliberate and focussed. For example, Piper's 'Prehistory from the Air', is demonstrated as uniting the individual's sensual and physical experience (of a place) with his system of marks by which he represented it,



and this activity as being located within the universal framework of the artistic act.

Further, it is argued that in his article, Piper's inclusion of historical and contemporary illustrations indicated his intention that the reader accept (biomorphic) abstract art as having the same integrity as naturalistic representation. In this way, this chapter submits that Piper effectively collapsed 'abstract' into art, into 'life'.

This chapter also aims to establish the extent to which *Axis 8* interfaced with popular culture through the topicality of its material. For example, through Piper's and Nash's interest in topography, the connection between aerial views and maps (both of which were illustrated in the article) are proposed to have been inspired at least partly by the recent publication of such subjects in the *Listener* in particular. Similarly, it argues that Piper's compilation of the *Oxon Shell Guide* was a significant contribution to popular culture.<sup>34</sup> Evans's article on Nash is explored for its complex references to his individual expression, his poetic sensibility, the presence of history in the land, and his ambiguity of vision, all in the context of English landscape and English expression. This coalescence of history, archaeology, and English landscape is featured as proof of their mutual interests, confirmed by Grigson's preoccupation with the same.

Kenneth Walsh's article is the only other feature in *Axis 8* selected to demonstrate the deliberate nature of the united front in this issue. The metaphors in Walsh's discussion of Shakespeare's *King Lear* are analysed for their close connection to artistic developments both in Lear's time, and in modern times. They are argued as signifying the universal problems of the artist, such as the relation of the individual to the collective, the relation of the object to its background, the loss of faith (both religious and artistic), and the quest for the 'truth' of both. This article is also represented as

demonstrating an interface with broader culture, by proposing that it drew inspiration from a recently published similar article on Lear in the *TLS*.<sup>35</sup> Finally, other context in this issue is presented as the first *Axis* focus on political subjects, with a review of Nazi art and of so-called ‘Degenerate’ art currently in Munich, and of the dangers of moving from cultural difference to nationalistic assertion, in the International Exhibition national exhibits in Paris.<sup>36</sup> *Axis* is represented as resolutely removed from the esoteric and idealised world of the Constructivists in its demystification of abstract art, and its representation of artistic activity as imbricated with wider popular interests and current affairs.

Chapter seven explores the key works of the *Axis* cohort after the final issue, in order to argue that the percipient values and priorities at the instigation of *Axis*, maintained and strengthened during its span, continued to articulate their attitude towards contemporary art practice. Those priorities are finally established in this chapter, to have a modernising effect upon a romantic attitude, a progressive transformation of inherited traditional values, and a predilection for culturally specific subjects, at this time in England being particularly topography or landscape. It confirms the *Axis* cohort’s embracing of such subject matter as the basis of their romantic positions, and the ‘romantic’ as being grounded in Piper’s publication *British Romantic Art* and Grigson’s *The Romantics*.<sup>37</sup> It demonstrates how Piper integrated his recent experiences of (biomorphic) abstract painting and collage, and his continuing exploration of new and traditional media, with his work in particular locations. Evans’s part in this attitude is argued as a capitalisation of sentiments expressed generally in *The Painter’s Object*, being demonstrated in the first and only issue of a journal which concentrated on subjects in art and architecture which ‘affect(ed)’ the ‘vision of

English artists and writers', denoting the unifying criteria as (an English) cultural sensibility.<sup>38</sup>

The chapter concludes by proposing the role of *Axis* as demonstrating the realistic outcome of modernising processes at work in the progressive English art *milieu*, and arguing that the subtlety of its central significance at the site of abstract art's intersection with English modern art, has been persistently overlooked by English modern art history. This is achieved by a concluding critique of the commentaries of Harrison, Powers, and other art historians. The final context for confirming the position of *Axis* in English modern art history is argued through indicating in some significant ways, an analogy of the position of the *Axis* cohort with that of the Pre-Raphaelites. This is discussed briefly in the context of an article by Dianne Sachko Macleod , part of which proposed that the interventionist activity of the Pre-Raphaelites was the very mark of their progressiveness, situating themselves as they did, as radical traditionalists within the field of 19c painting.<sup>39</sup>

**NOTES**

## INTRODUCTION

<sup>1</sup> M. Evans, *Axis. A Quarterly Review of Contemporary "Abstract" Painting & Sculpture*, 1-8 (London, 1935-37).

<sup>2</sup> M. Evans, *The Painter's Object* (London, 1937); J. L. Martin, Ben Nicholson (sic), N. Gabo (eds.), *Circle. International Survey of Constructive Art* (London, 1937).

<sup>3</sup> For example, C. Harrison, *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939* (London & Bloomington, Indiana 1981); and his work with the Open University.

<sup>4</sup> C. Harrison, 'Critical Theories and the Practice of Art' in S. Compton (ed.), *British Art in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The Modern Movement*, exh. cat., (London, Royal Academy of Arts, & Munich, 1987), p.56; C. Harrison, 'England's Climate' in B. Allen (ed.), *Towards a Modern Art World* (London & New Haven, 1995), 207-225.

<sup>5</sup> C. Harrison, 'England's Climate', pp. 218, 220.

<sup>6</sup> C. Harrison, *English Art and Modernism*, Open University Block XII (Milton Keynes, 1983), p.7.

<sup>7</sup> F. Spalding, *British Art Since 1900* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London 1996), p.127.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Harrison's claim that Piper 'defected'. C. Harrison, 'England's Climate' in B. Allen (ed.), *Towards a Modern Art World* (London & New Haven, 1995), p.218,

<sup>9</sup> There was much to be considered. Modern practice in England had largely centred on the abstracted figuration emanating from the promotion of French Post Impressionism by Roger Fry and Clive Bell since Fry's two exhibitions *Manet and the Post Impressionists* of 1910, and the *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition* of 1912, which had also embraced the primitive and naïve. Continental abstraction had emerged from Cubism and later group programmes such as De Stijl, Cercle et Carré, Suprematism, or from independent artists such as Kandinsky, Klee, Brancusi.

<sup>10</sup> Notions of 'classic' and 'romantic' modern art had emerged since Fry's announcement of the 'markedly Classic spirit' of the work of the French Post Impressionists. T. E. Hulme's essay 'Romanticism and Classicism', written in late 1911 or early 1912 effectively countered this claim and was adopted for its useful attributions of 'classic' qualities in the nascent Vorticist movement. R. Fry, 'The French Group' in *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition*, exh. cat., (London, Grafton Galleries, 1912), p.28; T. E. Hulme, 'Romanticism and Classicism' in H. Read (ed.), *Speculations. Essays on Humanism and The Philosophy of Art* (London & New York, 1924), 113-40. My view on *Axis*'s exploratory nature concurs with that of Alan Powers as 'the defining characteristic of its intelligence'. A. Powers, 'The Reluctant Romantics: *Axis Magazine 1935-37*' in D. Peters Corbett, Y. Holt, and F. Russell (eds.), *The Geographies of Englishness. Landscape and the National Past 1880-1940* (New Haven & London, 2002), p.257.

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- <sup>11</sup> D. Peters Corbett, *The Modernity of English Art 1914-30* (Manchester & New York, 1997).
- <sup>12</sup> Corbett, *The Modernity*, pp. 10-11.
- <sup>13</sup> T. Steele, *Alfred Orage and the Leeds Arts Club 1893-1923* (Aldershot & Brookfield, Vermont, 1990).
- <sup>14</sup> Steele, *Alfred Orage*, p.14.
- <sup>15</sup> Steele, *Alfred Orage*, p.14.
- <sup>16</sup> Steele, *Alfred Orage*, p.15.
- <sup>17</sup> Steele, *Alfred Orage*, p.17.
- <sup>18</sup> See Powers, 'The Reluctant Romantics', note 10. Also S. Smiles, 'Equivalent for the Megaliths: Prehistory and English Culture, 1920-50' in Corbett, Holt and Russell (eds.), *The Geographies*, pp.199-223.
- <sup>19</sup> D. Fraser Jenkins and F. Spalding, *John Piper in the 1930s. Abstraction on the Beach*, exh. cat., (London, Dulwich Picture Gallery, 2003).
- <sup>20</sup> D. Fraser Jenkins, *John Piper. The Forties*, exh. cat., (London, Imperial War Museum, 2000).
- <sup>21</sup> Other than C. Harrison, 'England's Climate', see note 4, there were for example R. Ingrams and J. Piper, *Piper's Places. John Piper in England & Wales* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London, 1986); D. Fraser Jenkins, *John Piper*, exh. cat., (London, The Tate Gallery, 1983); O. Levinson, *'Quality and Experiment': the Prints of John Piper. A catalogue Raisonne 1923-91*, (London, 1996); J. Osborne, *John Piper and Stained Glass* (Stroud, 1997); A. West, *John Piper* (London, 1979); M. Yorke, *The Spirit of Place. Nine Neo-Romantic artists and their times* (sic) (London, 1988), pp.70-105, with numerous small exhibition catalogues.
- <sup>22</sup> Powers, 'The Reluctant Romantics', pp. 249, 267.
- <sup>23</sup> Powers, 'The Reluctant Romantics', pp.249.
- <sup>24</sup> The title of its publication was *Unit 1*. I have therefore distinguished between the book and the group by employing Unit One for the group.
- <sup>25</sup> H. Read, *Art Now. An Introduction to the Theory of Modern Painting and Sculpture* (London, 1933).
- <sup>26</sup> H. Read, *Art and Industry. The Principles of Industrial Design* (London, 1934).

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<sup>27</sup> The title of its journal was *Abstraction-Création*. I have therefore distinguished between the journal and the group by employing Abstraction Création for the group.

<sup>28</sup> Although in her later memoir Evans herself referred to the agreement that the journal should be ‘comparable to *Abstraction-Création*’, it was clearly never the case except for their shared engagement with abstract art. M. Evans, ‘Back in the Thirties’, *Art & Literature*, 7 (Winter, 1965), p.140. See Spalding, *British Art*, p.127; Harrison, *English Art*, pp. 275, 277; Harrison, ‘England’s Climate’, p.220; Powers, ‘The Reluctant Romantics’, p.261.

<sup>29</sup> M. Evans, ‘Dead or Alive’, *Axis* 1 (January 1935), 3-4.

<sup>30</sup> G. Grigson and J. Piper, ‘England’s Climate’, *Axis* 7 (Autumn 1936), 5-9.

<sup>31</sup> Grigson and Piper, ‘England’s’, p.5.

<sup>32</sup> 5 May 1936. TGA 8717.1.2.3403.

<sup>33</sup> J. Piper, ‘Died April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1837: John Constable’, *Architectural Review* (April 1937), 149-50.

<sup>34</sup> J. Piper, *Oxon* (London, 1938).

<sup>35</sup> G. B. Harrison, ‘The Background to “King Lear”. A Time of Troubles and Portents’, *TLS* (28 December 1935), p.896.

<sup>36</sup> H. Taylor, ‘The Paris Exhibition’, and R. Medley, ‘Hitler’s Art in Munich’, *Axis* 8 (early Winter 1937).

<sup>37</sup> J. Piper, *British Romantic Artists* (London, 1942); G. Grigson, *The Romantics* (London, 1942).

<sup>38</sup> M. Piper (ed.), *The Pavilion. A Contemporary Collection of British Art & Architecture* (London, 1946).

<sup>39</sup> D. Sachko Macleod, ‘The Dialectics of Modernism and English Art’, *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 35 No.1 (January, 1995), 1-13.



## CHAPTER I

### PROBLEMS WITH 'MODERN' ART 1930-35

*Axis* appeared in the middle of January 1935 in response to the need that a group of artists and writers felt for a serious exposition of contemporary abstract painting and sculpture. In order to understand the nature of this need, chapter one explores the contemporary art debate in the popular and the art press, between 1930 and 1935.

Against the established tradition of contentious art debate in the press, artists were struggling to evolve valid modern statements in a climate overwhelmingly weighted by distrust, suspicion and disdain on the part of often poorly appraised critics and public.<sup>1</sup> It is necessary to outline the problematics associated with modern art which characterised the condition fuelling the need for *Axis*. *Studio*, probably the most widely distributed art journal, reflected the groundswell of opinion in a significant series of articles in 1932, which are examined for their influence on the perception of modern art.<sup>2</sup>

Key figures connected with *Axis* who were involved in publicising modern art in these formative years require examination as established voices at its inception. These were Paul Nash, the painter whose arguments in *The Times* and *The Weekend Review* of 1931 to 1933, formed the most lucid commentary on contemporary art from the position of the artist, and Herbert Read, the theorist whose publication *Art Now* in 1933 constituted the most analytical English attempt to categorise and theorise the varied range of modern art at that time.<sup>3</sup> Their writings between 1932 and 1934 were the earliest attempts to communicate and comment upon the values and priorities associated with the fast-moving field of modern art practices, as they were evolving. Significantly for *Axis*, the years 1933 and 1934 demonstrated in the nature of those practices a sharp transformation in the development of abstraction.

In order to foreground the specific tensions confronting modern artists at the time of the planning of *Axis*, Nash's formation of the Unit One group in 1933 needs examination, together with his collaboration with Read over its publicisation and development during 1934 and early 1935. In particular, by outlining individual struggles with the implications of a purely abstract art, in *Unit 1* essays by Nash, Nicholson, Hepworth, Moore and Wadsworth, attitudes are distinguished between Nash and the others, subsequently to be manifested in the first issue of *Axis*.<sup>4</sup> These distinctions need comparison with intimations in *Art Now*, and more markedly, as outcomes from the impact of the Paris-based international group la Société Abstraction Création, of which Nicholson, Hepworth and Wadsworth were members.<sup>5</sup> Dedicated as it was to non-figurative art, the role of its journal *Abstraction-Création* in the conception of *Axis*, needs particular examination.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, a brief view of Nicholson's transformation of priorities of the exhibiting group the 7&5 by 1934, is useful to establish its influence on artists and public.<sup>7</sup> In addition, an exploration of the implications for its secretary John Piper in implementing a pure abstract policy, is important to locate Nicholson's and Piper's positions on abstract art that year. This is particularly significant for the initiating motives of *Axis*, since I argue that Piper's own artistic developments govern its direction.

The aim of this chapter therefore, is to reveal the process of negotiating the concepts of modern art in early 1930s England as highly problematic in its perceived anti-traditionalism, its non-figurative appearance, and as such, its alienation from English experience and sensibility. Further, it aims to establish that

the seeds of a marked divergence of beliefs and commitments that existed around the implications of abstract art, had already germinated by the time of the apparently cohesive decision in 1934 to launch *Axis*.

English art's relation to what was perceived as 'modern' art had had a troubled history since the beginning of the second decade of the century with the Bloomsbury based 'modern' challenged by the radical abstraction of the Vorticists.<sup>8</sup> Articles and publications from the early 1930s, reveal the same arguments and precepts as still prevailing. They ranged around what was understood as 'modern' and its implication of an 'abstract' visual aesthetic, and the political and cultural associations attached to certain kinds of 'abstract' imagery.<sup>9</sup>

The Picasso retrospective exhibition held at Reid and Lefèvre galleries in June 1931, generated an article in *Studio* from critic, writer and painter William Gaunt, which characterised a conservative response to its internationalist status and the perceived degeneracy of skills associated with modern painting in its abstraction of forms.<sup>10</sup> Despite his long established status as an innovator, Picasso's influence amongst the younger generation of English artists was still strongly manifest. Myfanwy Evans recalled his dominant influence throughout the 1930s,<sup>11</sup> and Nicholson's work in the earlier years of the decade was reminiscent of Picasso's paintings.<sup>12</sup>

Responding to Picasso's 'Letter on art' in *Studio* a year earlier, Gaunt explored Picasso's 'enormous' but 'malign' influence on painting.<sup>13</sup> Denouncing him as obsolete, an 'historical event', he declared even the word "modern" to have a 'period flavour'.<sup>14</sup> This demonstrated little change in attitude since before the war,

towards abstract naturalistic representation, the apparent lack of ““correct”” skills, and the concomitant distancing of the practitioners from their public, which he viewed as their ‘scornful aloofness’.<sup>15</sup>

The insistence upon a resemblance to ‘nature’, as typified by Gaunt’s attitude, masked the reality of painting as a holistic activity rather than merely a mystical apparition. Picasso’s cubist analytical painting had demonstrated in its very idiom the process of abstracting from the object since 1910, and as Gaunt acknowledged ‘pushed painting “in itself” so far that, driven to the extremity of abstraction, it has turned into something else’.<sup>16</sup> This is a particularly significant claim for the changing significance of painting, and Picasso’s definition of a picture as ‘an experience’ bears this out. His ‘experience’ meant painting ‘what I have found, not what I sought’, inferring subjective vision and intuitive organisation, and not predetermined objectives.<sup>17</sup> ‘Intentions’ he stated, ‘have no effect on the result... “One proves one’s love by acts not words”’.<sup>18</sup> ‘For me, a picture is never an end, an aim’.<sup>19</sup> The act of painting was exploratory, an end in itself and not a means, and his advancement of its essentially revelatory nature was inspirational for many of his modern successors, not least those who were to become the *Axis* cohort.

The resulting abstracted appearance of the painting demanded therefore a more actively committed premise on the part of the contemplator. This disruption of the accepted contract between artist and public meant for Gaunt that Picasso was not a professional at his craft, and worse still, that he had severed the French painting tradition of the study of nature.<sup>20</sup> Clearly Gaunt’s argument represented the cause of naturalistic representation, and was not an exploratory argument within the concept of representation itself.

This is an important point regarding modern art's relation to tradition, and as such it signifies the position that *Studio* was sympathetic to, and therefore is highly pertinent to the initiating conditions for *Axis*. Picasso had never rejected his artistic inheritance. He had no qualms about plundering it for his needs and its achievements nourished his imagination and practice. He saw his work as part of that tradition, firmly asserting that:

Nature and art are two perfectly dissimilar phenomena.

Art gives us the possibility of expressing our conception and our intelligence of what nature never gives in an absolute form. From the primitives, whose art was very far removed from nature, down to such artists as David, Ingres, and even Bougereau, all painters who represented nature understood very well that art is always art and never nature. From the point of view of art, neither abstract form nor concrete form exists: there is only its more or less conventionalised interpretation.<sup>21</sup>

It was a matter of degree, or emphasis of one or other interpretative tendency, but always based upon material existence, motivated by, yet autonomous from, the world of objects. Aware as he was of work by painters such as Mondrian and Kandinsky, Picasso rejected the esotericism of their work:

The idea of "research" led some of our painters to abstraction. That was, perhaps, one of the greatest mistakes of modern art. The spirit of "research" poisoned all those who, not understanding the positive side of modern art, tried to paint the invisible – which cannot be expressed in art.<sup>22</sup>

Painting the *visible* lay at the root of Picasso's work, not the *concept* of that vision: 'at the source of all painting one will always find a vision, subjectively organised, or an illumination inspired', 'I attach no importance to the subject, but I am all for the object. Respect the object'.<sup>23</sup> The 'vision, subjectively organised' was *perceptual*, 'paint[ing] the invisible' was *conceptual*. Gaunt apparently viewed the subjective explorations of Picasso's exhibited work as his 'restless flitting from one

thing to another', and his early artistic development as 'a process of renunciation of the warm, intricate, individual world of reality'.<sup>24</sup> In his concentration on the essentials of form and colour, Picasso was accused by Gaunt of being an 'Unprimitive Primitive', a 'déraciné'(sic).<sup>25</sup> It is fair to suggest that in *Studio* Gaunt represented a majority opinion in the art *milieu* at that time concerning the significance of this shift of priorities in the new painting.

Two factors arise in considering the 'individual world of reality' which Gaunt accused Picasso of renouncing, namely the cultural moment, and formative experience. Both have profound implications for *Axis*'s achievements. In the context of the two articles discussed, they need closer attention to establish their significance in art discourse at the beginning of the 1930s.

Gaunt's primary consideration in judging Picasso's painting was his individual cultural placing, his background and their implications for the validity of his work. Early in his article Gaunt described Picasso as representing 'firstly the internationalized character of his period, in his own international training and character' and his life in Paris as amongst the 'polyglot throng of artists attracted from every part of the world by the prestige of the world's art centre'.<sup>26</sup> Thus disabused of any assumptions about the *positive* values of the international artist, readers were instructed that being 'international' was a degeneration of indigenous character, that being 'denationalized' was to lack national characteristics. Picasso's example was employed to inculcate the sense that for an artist to move away from his originating culture to embrace a variety of cultural influences, was for him to be 'without fixity', 'the product of several different forces converging within a given

period of time'. Rather than enriching Picasso's particularity, Gaunt saw this as excluding it.<sup>27</sup>

Gaunt's association of being 'progressive' with being international and not national, (also used to describe Picasso's Parisian friends as 'the advanced and motley community'), betrayed his perception that progress and change meant eschewing historical values.<sup>28</sup> This was profoundly felt as a tension at that time in England.<sup>29</sup> But such a perception was far from that fact for many artists, and Picasso's primary consideration was being absorbed in the moment, and in doing so capitalising on developments in history, bringing them into a contemporary meaning. References to history regularly appeared in his subject matter.

Certain problems emerge therefore concerning modern art in England. Firstly, its unconventional appearance; secondly, the perception of its association with other cultures; and thirdly, its misinterpretation and thus misrepresentation by commentators. These problems were also the subject of correspondence columns in the national press, as well as of essays in the art press. It was Paul Nash who undertook to illuminate the position of the modern artist.

Following Gaunt's *Studio* article, Nash published an article that year in *Week-end Review*, entitled 'Nature, Life and Art'.<sup>30</sup> In it Nash expressed the need to examine 'the spirit animating our national expression', setting out a cogent argument on the nature of this 'lyric thing', which he saw as producing the 'great poetic qualities' of the best English artists in history.<sup>31</sup>

In his exposition of the relationship between 'Nature', 'Life' and 'Art', Nash's observation that 'matters of art' were habitually being considered as 'international',



implied that English contemporary art, because of its perceived inherent ‘poetic qualities’, was non-conformist to international interests and therefore not perceived as a legitimately modern expression.<sup>32</sup> It was instead a subjective art of abstracted figuration grounded in response to the physical world. Nash exposed a critical set of common and popular assumptions in order to explain how the clash of perspectives – that of accepted opinion (established academic circles and conservative moderns) and of the progressive anti-academics – was implicit in those words ‘Nature’, ‘Life’ and ‘Art’, employed commonly but conceived very differently. Accordingly, continuous development of their expression demanded innovation of visual language, and was exemplified as historical in the work of progressives like Constable and Cézanne. Nash’s point was that the very traditions of art were formed in this way. His implication, important to establish at this early stage of the thesis, was the conviction that modern art and thereby *English* modern art, was part of a continuum.

Nash described the expression of English artists as ‘interpretive’.<sup>33</sup> By this he implied a form of naturalistic representation, most typically manifest in the English landscape painting exemplified by Constable. ‘Nature’ was thus the living world, and particularly the ‘English countryside’.<sup>34</sup> The problem lay in the idea of ‘Nature’ as a constant. Being “faithful to Nature” was a ‘nonsense’ since Constable’s and Cézanne’s “Nature” was “faithful” to their respective perceptions of it.<sup>35</sup> Constable’s Nature was more believable to the public merely because of its accordance with surface appearance. ‘But’, he continued with great perspicacity,

visual experience is only a part of Life...The eye is merely the channel or medium of perception, not the perception entire. The picture’s appeal is not only to the sense of sight but to *the whole experience stored in our being*. This experience is divided into two states, conscious and unconscious. It is doubtful if any artist

contributes anything which does not contain at least a part of general experience...<sup>36</sup> (my italics)

Nash's overriding argument was that the painter never intended in his painting to 'obviously refer either to "Nature" or to "Life" as generally appreciated.'<sup>37</sup> It was always his own experience of it articulated in language. Finally, he referred to art which was more abstract '...English artists to-day, may feel a need to create something for themselves which is neither imitative nor interpretative of what is generally seen; that the inevitable reaction from the insecurity and muddle in which they live is a determination to construct...an ordered, independent life'.<sup>38</sup> This was an unmistakable reference to the strict, geometric abstraction of Abstraction Création.

The insights in this article make an extraordinarily articulate account of an artist's understanding of the problems encountered in the English modern art *milieu* at that time, and constitute a prophetic testament to the new attitude towards painting. It was formative in its pronouncements, yet these revelations were largely absent in other contemporary commentaries on modern English art. Everything essential was there – the painter's 'whole experience' both 'conscious and unconscious' in the painting as the outcome of his experience and process. The subjectivity of the artist formed his perception and its expression, and was encapsulated in the whole process.

Furthermore, tentative though he sounded, Nash understood that the individual artist was both formed by and 'contributes' to his culture.<sup>39</sup> This is highly significant for his aspirations for the development of English modern art and its relation to so-called 'international' modern art. For whilst he acknowledged the contribution Cézanne made, he saw its acceptance as being *into* the traditions of English

achievements, and not *out of* their cultural context.<sup>40</sup> This process represented the ‘conscious and the unconscious’ experience to which he referred, namely the integration of a mode of perception into existing knowledges and experiences. However, he also subscribed to the alternative, rather more mystical idea, that artists were ‘unique’ and ‘capable of experience beyond reach of other men’, ascribing to their pictures the status of ‘discoveries’ whose revelations could be added to the body of experience of the ‘world at large’.<sup>41</sup> In connection with *Axis*, these two attitudes publicly pronounced in 1931, indicated the beginnings of differing perspectives. These were that art emanating from the reflection upon human experience was a particular, individual expression evoking the universal; and art emanating from aspirations for an ideal, *suppressed* individuality in the cause of the universal, and the collective.

Despite this revealing article, subsequent articles and letters in both the art press and the national press continued to appear either uninformed or obtuse about the new attitude as explained by Nash. English landscape painting had after all been explained as a series of differing perceptions interpreted by individual artists, which framed current, apparently iconoclastic developments, within the formation of a tradition. If the general public were not persuaded by this argument, it was to be hoped that at least the artistic community would be more familiar with expanding the tradition. Moving therefore from the context of this article in a current affairs journal to that of the art press, we need now to attend to the perceptions of the more established art *milieu*, whose central concern was the implication of modern art for that tradition.

In a retrospective editorial on *Studio*'s fortieth anniversary, its editor C. G. Holme perceived as negative the current 'prevailing clash of ideas' caused by the intervention of WW1, and in this context he asserted the objectives of the journal:

It has the difficult task of discriminating, of tempering violence or zeal with moderation. It has recognised that the twentieth century development in the arts is twofold – consisting first of those which are of direct and practical use to the community and of those which are either experimental or useless. To the former, emerging from handicraft with industrial design, it has given every support, for they emerge directly from the principle on which "The Studio" was founded.

With the fine arts the situation is somewhat different. There has been a tendency in painter and sculptor to become divorced from natural contact with life. "The Studio", while encouraging industrial art and such manifestations of fine art as have something real to say, has steadfastly refused to become the slave of current fads or clichés. It has encouraged the production of works of genuine beauty and interest, while pointing out the dangers of a "modernism" that loses all contact with life.<sup>42</sup>

"Modern" art's dissociation from life therefore, leaving nothing 'real to say', validated by inference, the integrity only of naturalistic art. Holme was thus instrumental in maintaining the *status quo* of an underlying prejudice in *Studio* towards the more analytical explorations of representation. Nevertheless, he set out to address the problems he perceived with modern art in a series of editorials the following Spring.

Between February and June 1932, under the general title 'What is Wrong with Modern Painting', he identified 'Internationalism', 'The Pernicious Influence of Words', 'The Superiority Complex', 'False Economics', and 'Evolution'.<sup>43</sup> His opening statement that 'to-day... all is not well with painting' declared the aim of these editorials to indicate 'defects or possible defects' in order to promote a 'healthier and saner' direction for art.<sup>44</sup>

Like Gaunt, Holme asserted that modern painting suffered from international influence. The younger generation were losing their 'native flavour' by converging from all countries upon Paris, producing art which was nevertheless 'not French' but the result of an 'agglomeration of races'.<sup>45</sup> The result was loss of individuality and indigenous craft. Holme also diagnosed that 'denationalisation' had 'nearly killed' the French painting tradition.<sup>46</sup> His solution was to instruct painters to 'stop at home', 'shun the society of other painters', 'study life for a change', and concentrate upon a 'thorough-going nationalism' which would produce healthy painting: 'Britain is looking for British pictures, of British people, of British landscape'.<sup>47</sup> The nature of the painterly process should remain a visual representation of life, and not an abstraction from it.

However, he acknowledged that Cézanne's process denoted a much deeper and fuller activity, recommending his 'discipline rather than his pictures' as the model for a modern art.<sup>48</sup> This last statement is of particular significance concerning the views of the *Axis* cohort: fashionable idioms were merely ends and not means.

Nash had contributed to the nationalist/internationalist debate in his 'Nature, Life and Art' article, and reiterating Picasso's view about the distinction between 'Nature' and 'Art' he continued:

We have now just reached a point of development when matters of art, at least, are considered international. Almost at the same moment we find ourselves involved in a crisis which drives us in upon ourselves and accentuates our insularity. The whole country, at this moment, is plastered with aggressive bills commanding us to "Buy British", and although one can scarcely imagine this is intended to extend to pictures, it suggests a danger ahead. May we not be required next to "Paint British"? and, if so, what exactly would that mean?

Without probing any subtleties, I think it would mean that henceforth our artists should be "True to Life" – meaning human

environment, and “Faithful to Nature” – meaning the English countryside, because Life and Nature are things which every Briton thinks he understands, and when a critic refers either to Life or Nature his readers feel sure they know what he is talking about, and so does the critic. But Art is different. No one is sure what is meant by Art. Art is international, one might almost say Continental; in any case it is not peculiarly British, so that is enough.<sup>49</sup>

The problem was that ‘Nature’ was perceived as the ‘English countryside’, but ‘Art’ was perceived as ‘international’. It was not ‘peculiarly British’, because its subjective qualities militated against its validity as international modern art. The qualities arising from his question of ‘what exactly “Paint[ing] British” would mean’ reflected his own efforts at that time to resolve his individual *and* modern impulse under the gaze of a critical public. But he did not see a conditioning ‘spirit’ as separate from the facts of the conditions themselves; that is, he was sensitive to the political and economic climate that impinged upon the natural tendencies of artists to respond to a changing cultural condition.

When, the following February, *Studio* published the first of its five editorials, Nash was disturbed to be implicated in the tone of the comments, and responded with ““Going Modern” and “Being British”” in *Week-end Review* that March, stating that his suggestion to “Paint British” was not ‘quite... serious’ and ‘served chiefly to prise open an argument.’<sup>50</sup> Reminding *Studio* of its responsibilities as the vehicle for modern British art, he criticised its title for the series ‘What is Wrong with Modern Painting?’

This is a somewhat disingenuous title, for it is quite evident that the real question being asked is “What is Wrong with British Painting?” I would say at once that the *Studio*, as it professes, is plainly making a sincere attempt to “place the finger on the truth of the matter”, nor perhaps, is it intentionally parochial; only, between the lines we can descry the anxious litany – *from all foreign influences, abstractions and the School of Paris, good Lord deliver us.*<sup>51</sup>

He saw the apparent self-consciousness of those practitioners in the arts who attempted to “Go Modern” and still “Be British” as a symptom of the struggle over loyalties which to the ‘true artist...pursuing his own course, all [this] seems ridiculous enough.’<sup>52</sup> Added to their self-consciousness was the publicisation of theories and analyses of their activity, with the use of ‘art jargon’ which Nash thought achieved nothing but a disservice to them and their work. Citing an example from *Studio*’s recent editorial ‘The Pernicious Influence of Words’, he discussed the ambiguity underlying the term ‘abstraction’. A brief insight into this editorial demonstrates the power of articles and reviews in the dissemination of art in inter-war Britain.

As with the first editorial, ‘The Pernicious Influence of Words’ admonished the modernists, condemning the ‘modern theory’ of the critic, with its theoretical language – a ‘frightening mystery’ – as alienating artist from public.<sup>53</sup> The critic was responsible for effectively intimidating the artist attempting to ‘live up to philosophical conceptions laid down for him’.<sup>54</sup> Clearly Holme thought modern artists were painting critical concepts instead of nature, and not adhering to the ‘painter’s proper business’, which should have been ‘with the warm breathing world of flesh and blood and growing things.’<sup>55</sup> The concept ‘Nature’ was very much ‘Mother Nature’ rather than the material world *per se*.

Although Nash concurred in principle with the detrimental effect of over-theorising modern art, he took exception to the definition of the ‘proper business’ of the painter, describing it as reactionary, and typical of public opinion in the press.<sup>56</sup> The problem of this attitude was the misconception of ‘abstraction’, which in

*Studio*, Holme defined as ‘composition or technique’, but which Nash the practitioner knew to be misconceived.<sup>57</sup> Although in his article he did not clarify what ‘abstraction’ meant, it becomes evident from his other articles that it was firmly connected with the holistic process of the conscious and unconscious process of abstracting, with appearance as its *outcome*. In his own examination of the term ‘abstraction’, Holme’s aligning of Cézanne’s use of geometry with that of the Egyptians, merely demonstrated the kind of misconception of which he himself accused critics.<sup>58</sup> This would not have gone unnoticed by Nash.

By this time, the obscurity surrounding what was ‘modern’ and even what was ‘abstraction’ was engendering debate with gathering momentum.<sup>59</sup> Rather than being restricted to the refining of discrete definitions, this debate was all the more energised by the larger significances attached to them. Besides the problems of internationalism and the effect of theorising and dogmatising, *Studio* identified the alienation of the artist from the public, the concepts of the ‘professional’ and the ‘amateur’ artist in the current era, and the commodification of art for particular markets.<sup>60</sup> But this approach to discussing modern art was ill matched with the driving inner realities of the artists themselves. No serious attention seems to have been paid to Nash’s illumination of the modern approach to ‘Nature, Life and Art’ the previous year. The loss of faith on the part of the public in the artistic process as they knew it, and the scarcity of further lucid commentary on the nature of the new attitude, would therefore have exacerbated a growing antipathy.

The political implications of particular art manifestations also strengthened the attachment to naturalistic appearance, and this also obfuscated the genuine values of



modern art. In a sequel to the five editorials, Holme had taken issue with Nash's accusation of 'reaction', posing the dilemma:

The partisans of the "modern movement" shout "reactionary" at those who do not agree with them. The partisans of what is known as "tradition" in the same way hurl the word "revolutionary" at the modernist... But what if one feels that this is not the atmosphere in which art can reach its happiest expression?<sup>61</sup>

There seemed no chance of criticism existing without accusations of its being viewed as 'diehard' or 'Bolshevist', associations well established by the time *Axis* appeared.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, Holme proudly embraced the accusation of arguing that art should be more directly associated with 'life' and perform a popular function, and of opposing 'art for art's sake', 'the anaemic Bloomsbury theory'.<sup>63</sup>

Art's association with 'life' therefore signified an emphasis upon naturalistic representation only moderately abstracted. The most progressive developments had been represented since the late 1920s largely by the 7&5 Society, particularly by those members Ben and Winifred Nicholson, Frances Hodgkins, Ivon Hitchens and David Jones; and retrospective attention to the work of Christopher Wood was also a strong influence.<sup>64</sup> But despite the mildness of this abstraction, the critical factor for Holme and *Studio*, representing as they did a powerful lobby against the 'mischievous prejudice' of modern painting, was the development of a visual aesthetic increasingly further away from naturalistic representation, and apparently unskilled.<sup>65</sup> By 1932, Nicholson as the most progressive 7&5 Society member, was painting layered syntheses of cubist-inspired still lifes (Pl. 1).

There was even less support to be found in the national press. Under the title 'Nature and Art', the *Times* correspondence column refereed by its art critic Charles Marriott, revealed as central concerns those elucidated by *Studio* the previous year,

namely the representation of nature, the influence of art writing, and the threat to the art tradition. The first two were questioned in the context of the British tradition.<sup>66</sup> One correspondent stated:

The period of eulogized decadent art we are going through is thanks mainly to these writers. Yet all the time fine, serious British art is being produced – art full of a knowledge of past tradition and taking its inspiration from nature, yet all the time advancing upon new logical lines and not going back to the ignorance of the primitives.<sup>67</sup>

Genuinely motivated artists with sound skills and insights were perceived as being overlooked in favour of those producing ‘eulogized decadent’ art. These latter artists were represented as the weak underlings, led astray by prescriptive terminology representing theorised precepts. There was clearly no faith in either the more radical artists, or the more intellectual writers.

The integrity of the artistic project was persistently questioned, ‘serious British art’ being about nature, knowledge of tradition, and skills. However, ‘new logical lines’ did imply the *degree* to which art might be about ‘representation’ of nature, and by inference the variability of ‘representation’, and even ‘nature’ for that matter, all of which had been the subject of Nash’s earlier articles. As with *Studio*’s argument the previous year, the progressive critics and theorists were seen as unequivocally responsible for the lack of interest and support in ‘art influenced by nature’.<sup>68</sup>

Nash’s response attempted to explain the stronger abstract element in painting:

Contemporary expression in painting.... is by no means concerned with an interpretative art based comfortably upon a “fondness” for Nature. That is not to say, however, that it ignores Nature. It is acutely observant of all phenomena, but with a constructive eye, that imagination may build. Often, it is true, the eye is turned inwards in contemplation...[But] many other artists throughout time have tried the experiment with quite different results.

Your Art Critic is right again in his attempt to define the new type of professional artist and his relation to contemporary life. Because of the architectonic quality of his art its expression naturally carries him beyond the limits of easel painting. As a designer pre-eminently he is equipped for new problems, and many of these belong to the province of the industrial world – now gradually opening under his hand. In fact the development which your Art Critic has noticed, is, I venture to believe, the sign of a vital movement beginning in English art.<sup>69</sup>

The repeated reference to the interpretative attitude is more elaborated here. There was no tension between interpreting and designing ‘Nature’, because ‘contemporary life’ required a *synthesis*. Further – and this is of particular significance for Nash’s interests at this time, he saw these two skills as ‘the sign of a vital movement beginning in English art’.<sup>70</sup>

Nash’s sense of the historical continuity in the fundamentals of art practice should not be underestimated. It was a matter of *degrees* of interpretation and expression, but grounded in enduring principles, and it is clear enough in these letters that there *was* a concurrence of those beliefs, indicating that as painters they were both concerned with the business of representation itself, even if its outcome indicated differing emphases. Despite his predilection for the poetic, even the mystical, in his imagery, Nash’s approach was grounded in the tradition of painting. Those shared beliefs consisted of the skills of construction (Reynolds-Stephens’s ‘new logical lines’, and Nash’s ‘constructive eye’), the adherence to the principles of nature (Reynolds-Stephens’s ‘Taking... inspiration from nature’, and Nash’s ‘acutely observant of all phenomena’) and the basis of past experience in tradition (Reynolds-Stephens’s ‘art full of a knowledge of past tradition’ and Nash’s ‘Many...artists throughout time have tried the experiment’).

But to whatever degree the change was manifested, there was always the tension caused by the insecurity of a sense of disinheritance and associated disloyalty to past achievement. For Nash, progress meant excavating below the superficial levels of stylistic appearance, to connect with art's precepts; and for the detractors of modern art, it meant a crisis of academic painterly values and moral beliefs about beauty. It is disingenuous therefore to argue that being 'modern' meant being unequivocally and painlessly progressive, as if the inertia of long established patterns was somehow absent. The notion of 'modern' therefore should be viewed as inseparable from a certain disinheritance and an accompanying tug of loyalties.<sup>71</sup> Its reality, lived to a pitch in inter-war England, was particularly dramatised at its extremes.

The negativity of the *Studio* editorials had in Nash's view obscured the positive aspects of modern painting, despite its more circumspect and occasionally supportive articles.<sup>72</sup> Its antipathy towards what it called "higher criticism" doubtless referred not only to Nash's writings but to a number of publications emerging from the late 1920s and early 1930s which addressed the theoretical implications of contemporary art practices.<sup>73</sup> The most prominent were R. H. Wilenski's *The Modern Movement in Art* and *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture*.<sup>74</sup> Nash found Wilenski's writing overly scientific and pedantic, but acknowledged the importance of its association of the past and contemporary representation, albeit in academically structured arguments.<sup>75</sup> Also, Herbert Read's *Art Now. An Introduction to the Theory of Modern Painting and Sculpture*, which provided a theoretical explanation of a series of categorised contemporary art practices, was appreciated by Nash as an important profile for modern art.<sup>76</sup> The term 'modern' seldom appeared in book titles at this time (which is significant considering the

interest revealed in articles and correspondence discussed above) and suggests evasion of its problematic definition and implications. It is particularly significant for the conception of *Axis* since it also avoided use of the term in its own title, favouring ‘contemporary’.

Although in ‘Nature, Life and Art’ Nash did not refer to ‘modern’, the terms in which he explained the complex nature of producing art of his time were commensurate with his arguments the following year under titles which had boldly challenged the problems of defining ‘modern’ art. “‘Going Modern’ and ‘Being British’” had mocked *Studio*’s representation of ‘the struggle’ of British artists in “‘Going Modern’”, namely that it was ‘beset’ by those ‘evils’ which ‘supposedly bewildered public and...artist’ alike.<sup>77</sup> ‘Supposedly’, because the dissemination of ‘so-called modern expression’ by critics was too often obscure, contradictory, or misleading. Nash’s view was that ‘The public are tired of being told they have no wits, that modern art is beyond them, and that their leg is still being pulled.’<sup>78</sup> This was the motivation behind his illuminating articles.

Clearly there was a distinction to be elucidated between being contemporary and being ‘modern’ as an artist. To this end, his article ‘The Meaning of “Modern”’ in *Week-end Review* appeared the following July.<sup>79</sup> Having identified one source of the artist’s dilemma (namely the term ‘modern’ itself), he had by now discerned two kinds of ‘modern’ art, which meant that applying the term ‘modern’ to ‘art’, ‘imposes the greatest strain upon capable meaning’. He continued to explain that

Modern art should mean simply the art of to-day – indeed, there is a new school of talk which has attempted to substitute the word contemporary for the word modern. But this will not do. There is modern art *and* modern art. An expression I heard recently – “plumb modern” – gives, perhaps, the sense of distinction. In this connexion the unpleasant extremity known as “ultra-modern”

comes to mind, but it is a term seldom used outside the pages of *Punch*, and not very well understood even there. “Modernistic”, a cheap adjective, dragged in to do devil for its more dignified senior, is almost exclusively for tradesmen’s patter or the coarser pens of journalism. Yet “modern” must still mean “of to-day”, “of our own time”; the difficulty arises in our general incapacity to recognise what *is* of our own time and our tendency to confuse it with something left over from yesterday.<sup>80</sup>

In one sense therefore, ‘modern’, along with the wholesale adoption and adaptations of the term, imbued that art with a self-conscious modishness. In the other sense – ‘...and modern art’ suggested the true meaning for him, namely whole process of abstracting as implied in his article ‘Nature, Life and Art’. It was an art which encapsulated in its very conception a modern sensibility about formal qualities serving as the vehicle of emotion and meaning. The confusion between the two caused misconceptions about artists’ aims, since the ‘layman’ was being ‘prevent[ed]...from appreciating so much contemporary work’.<sup>81</sup> I want to reiterate therefore that Nash believed that to be authentically ‘modern’ was to embrace the unconscious processes which underlay the conscious organisation of form, and to seek inspiration from external sources (‘Nature’) motivated in this way.<sup>82</sup>

Other sources of inspiration available to him and his contemporaries were more scientifically orientated, for example anthropological studies of archaeological findings, and insights into the natural world by means of more sophisticated technologies in microphysics and microphotography.<sup>83</sup> The interest from the progressive artistic community was indicated when the key publication featuring photographed plant forms, Karl Blossfeldt’s *Art Forms in Nature*, was employed to demonstrate the implicitness of abstract form in nature.<sup>84</sup> Reviewing a second edition of this work, Nash had asserted that such photographs ‘not only support the statements of many so-called “perverse” sculptors and painters, but run parallel to

and, to a great degree, inform the course of modern art.’<sup>85</sup> For example, he had included in ‘The Meaning of “Modern”’ an exposition of Wilenski’s arguments from his publications cited above, acknowledging his contribution as

a clear idea of that philosophy underlying the modern effort which, once understood, should sweep away the popular difficulties which prevent the layman from appreciating so much contemporary work. In short...the imprint of a key which seems either lost or generally mislaid, the key to the meaning of the word modern, as applied to art.<sup>86</sup>

The problematic here recalls Nash’s two ‘modern’ meanings, namely the ‘popular difficulties’ as opposed to a ‘philosophy’. He saw Wilenski as pinpointing the ‘key’ to the problem, in his inference that originally, primitive peoples fashioned the kind of abstracted and symbolic artifacts and images which had so attracted and inspired earlier modern artists such as Matisse and Picasso, and which for many people had lost their originating meaning yet retained an aura of associated power. However, Nash implied there were *some* people who were still able to apprehend *something* of that meaning. I propose that ‘Modern’ was for him implicitly to do with contacting those more intuitive or unconscious forces which were part of ‘Life’, and that as with the original primitive forms, they were concerned with the symbolic and not the merely representational use of form. ‘Modern’ in its authentic sense thus related the appearance of the work with a complex internalisation of the initial response to the subject. It becomes clear, at least on this point, why Nash felt that to refer to the recent art of his day as ‘contemporary’ would ‘not quite do’.<sup>87</sup>

He asserted this defining dimension of modern art by citing further passages from Wilenski’s *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture*, and tracing the lineage of his argument from Bell’s ‘significant form’, an earlier concept defining the ‘modern’.<sup>88</sup> Wilenski’s exploration of the use of symbolic form in ancient, oriental, and

primitive cultures, would have had a receptive audience in the intellectual mould of artists such as Nash, who found Bell's description of 'significant form' 'still intelligible'.<sup>89</sup> However, Wilenski's reading of abstracted form opposed Bell's. *The Modern Movement in Art* was by way of being a critique of Bell's aestheticist position, promulgating a psychological rather than a formalist approach to form, identifying Nash as the 'leading, because the most subtle, artist of the modern movement in this country'.<sup>90</sup> By the time Nash wrote his articles therefore, he had been publicly acclaimed as 'leading' and 'modern'. In his continued support of the basic premises of Bell's idea of 'significant form', he attempted to reconcile his position in a statement acknowledging the two writers' roles in the cause of disseminating modern art:

Modern art, as I understand it, and as I interpret this critic [Wilenski] as understanding it, is an attempt to recapture meaning itself. In other words, to create something which shall *have* meaning. Clive Bell's phrase "significant form" was intended to express this idea, and in spite of a good deal of buffeting, his description seems to me still intelligible. We wish to make forms to-day which have meaning *as forms*.<sup>91</sup>

By adopting Wilenski's argument that the original religious meanings underlying Egyptian sculpture for example, although no longer known to the viewer, were in some way recoverable in contemplating their form, Nash further asserted how meaning could be 'within the object', emphasising that critical tension by italicising the statement: "but the meaning *of the form by means of which* the Egyptian sculptors set out to kill the Fear of Death and to instill the Fear of Pharaoh, is a meaning that remains."<sup>92</sup> A residue or resonance in a form known to be ritually used could carry something of its meaning.<sup>93</sup> But Nash did not pursue further the problem of Bell's purely 'aesthetic emotion', given to be a kind of formal beauty whose meaning was internal to itself; instead, he conflated it with Wilenski's forms whose purpose was to 'recapture meaning' originally associated externally. Nash



likened the potency of religious artifacts to modern art, stating ‘It is in this conception that the modern sculptor’s or painter’s philosophy lies in regard to the relation between art, nature and life’.<sup>94</sup>

This dichotomy indicates where divergence occurred, critical for the position the *Axis* cohort was to occupy in their investigation of the field of “‘abstract” painting and sculpture’. For forms that could refer to something other than their source, could still bear associative meaning instigated by the configuration of the originating subject or scenario, but forms that ‘could have meaning *as forms*’ suggested dissociation from the appearance of the originating subject, indeed, even originating entirely from the *imagination* and not necessarily from a subject at all. Associative meaning would be conveyed by symbolic form, as with an art of *abstracted* naturalistic or organic form, whereas self-referential meaning, needing no externally symbolic configuration, would denote an art of geometrical non-figurative abstract form. Yet even this rigorous abstract form could, if recent microscopic imagery was to be believed, be argued as being close to nature.

Nash was grappling with these ideas in his own work. From the late 1920s to 1934 he was exploring an architectonic form in naturalistic representation which stripped away superfluities and found pure form in subjects from life (Pl.2).<sup>95</sup> He subscribed to Wilenski’s argument on Blossfeldt’s work on plant forms, citing his statement: “‘even the most drastically non-representational work of art, if produced by an artist who, consciously or unconsciously, apprehends the formal character of natural structures, may be ‘true to nature’ in this larger sense of the symbolisation of natural form”’.<sup>96</sup> This empirical approach literally based on ‘truth to nature’, was

aligned more closely with Nash's own artistic sensibility. Because of its greater subjective dimension, it was also an approach with which Read could identify.<sup>97</sup>

Despite his recognised role as the 'leading...modern' artist in England, and Wilenski's prominence as a critic of the 'Modern Movement', these key questions had remained largely unaddressed: Was form meaningful in and of itself, or through its residual associations with its originating purpose or source? Could it be universal, or only particular? The only certainty was the virtually synonymous relation of 'modern' with some form of 'abstraction', although unlike the pre First World War situation, abstract art in 1932 England was significantly not geometrical non-figurative abstraction. However, non-figurative abstraction was existent on the continent and, as we have seen, notably consolidated in Paris (as Holme had also observed) around the Abstraction Création group.<sup>98</sup>

At this politically tense time, the public was being regularly exposed to historical constructions of the English cultural identity, which inspired forms of abstraction in the modern English art *milieu*. Publications, articles and exhibitions on early carving, medieval wall painting, stained glass and early manuscripts revealed an abstracted naturalistic representation.<sup>99</sup> One direct contemporary manifestation had been the naïve painting of Alfred Wallis, 'discovered' by Nicholson and Wood in 1929 and brought to London for exhibition with the 7&5 group that year (Pl.3).<sup>100</sup>

As mentioned, Wood's death in 1930 had resulted in a higher profile for the kind of naïve painting he practised (Pl.4). His subjects were largely conventional except for the last works, which were metaphysical compositions. His close friendship with the Nicholsons had given rise to their free and fluid treatment of landscapes and still

lives in the late 1920s (Pl.5) which continued into the early 1930s to complement those of Hodgkins and Hitchens, together with the more ethereal abstracted watercolour subjects of David Jones. This form of abstracted naturalistic representation was therefore common currency amongst the more progressive painters, but unpopular in the conservative art circles because of its unskilled appearance. By 1932 Ben Nicholson's paintings had evolved into still lifes with incorporated motifs highly evocative of Picasso's and Braque's synthetic cubist phase, and he worked on this more rigorous and geometrical form of abstraction throughout most of 1933. Modern art in England was therefore resolved in abstracted form largely derived from 'Nature', until late 1933.<sup>101</sup>

As chair of the 7&5, Ben Nicholson was particularly ambitious, since joining the international abstract group Abstraction Création, to manoeuvre the 7&5 towards a radicalism which aspired to an analogous group ethic for abstract art.<sup>102</sup> A significant shift therefore occurred in the membership of the 7&5 around 1932, where some of the old cohort dropped away following Wood's death, and a newer influx arrived.<sup>103</sup> But before anything was consolidated, Nash, not a 7&5 member himself, invited Nicholson to join a new formation.

On 12 June 1933 Nash announced in *The Times* the launch of a group called Unit One.<sup>104</sup> Its members consisted of architects, painters and sculptors, being respectively Wells Coates and Colin Lucas, Edward Wadsworth, Ben Nicholson, Paul Nash, Tristram Hillier, Edward Burra, John Bigge, and John Armstrong, and Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth. Nash declared they were less concerned with a group identity than with 'defending their (individual) beliefs.'<sup>105</sup> The uniting factor was therefore a 'quality of mind' rather than an idiom or uniform attitude to

process or subject, and the group's aim was to represent 'the expression of a truly contemporary spirit, for that thing which is recognised as peculiarly *of to-day* in painting, sculpture and architecture.'<sup>106</sup> Nash had been inspired by an exhibition he had been involved in staging, entitled *Recent Tendencies in British Painting*, where the motivating ideas were 'separated from the main trend of contemporary English art. For the first time, and at once, it was clear that, however diverse in their ways and means, the majority of these artists were somehow allied in purpose.'<sup>107</sup> He drew an analogy of the present situation for artists with that of the Pre-Raphaelites and their search for 'a new outlook and a new technique' for English art.<sup>108</sup> Unit One was to be publicised by a travelling exhibition beginning in May the following year and ending in April 1935, and Read was approached to write the introduction to the catalogue.<sup>109</sup>

Read's calibre as an apologist for modern art was unmatched in England at this time. His involvement in its discursive field needs briefly examining to establish his heading of the Unit One project, and to profile him as, along with Nash, one of the two most prominent contemporary art activists who both contributed to the inaugural issue of *Axis*.

Initially a literary critic, Read was by 1933 becoming increasingly interested in the psychological drive towards artistic and literary expression. His work with ceramics at the Victoria and Albert Museum had broadened his enquiry into the nature of creative expression.<sup>110</sup> Vacating his professorial chair of art history in Edinburgh in 1933, he returned to London where he lived amongst the growing artistic and literary community in Hampstead, assuming the editorship of *Burlington Magazine* under Fry's recommendation, and publishing *Art Now* that

October.<sup>111</sup> This first English attempt to introduce the ‘theory’ of modern painting and sculpture, doubtless represented the very ‘pernicious influence’ denounced by *Studio* the previous year.

On the dust jacket, *Art Now* presented itself as ‘an explanation, if not a justification...for every type of contemporary artistic activity’; and in his preface Read had described his critical position as ‘universal – that is to say philosophical or scientific’ ultimately, but constituted through ‘instinctive preferences.’<sup>112</sup> This demonstrated the characteristically dialectical method of his critiques and theories, but also predicted his tendency towards ambiguity and even contradiction. Further, his awareness of the political implications of modern art was indicated in the claim that his theories ‘involve[ed] a complete denial of the cultural identity of the modern movement in art and the communist or bolshevist movement in politics’ reminding that the ‘good’ artist was ‘very rarely interested in anything but his art.’<sup>113</sup> Recollecting that the ‘great artists’ affecting the course of modern art were ‘singularly devoid of ideologies’ and followed their sensibilities, he viewed the prejudice against modern art as due to the public’s ‘narrow range’ of values.<sup>114</sup> His identification of two kinds of modern art, namely ‘abstract’ and ‘subjective’, implied the impossibility of a subjective form of abstract art. Yet even ‘abstract’ art was for him about ‘sensibility’, which he proposed as being ‘geometric as well as organic’.<sup>115</sup> Tracing the ‘Theoretical Conception of Art’ through the ‘Break-up of the Academic Tradition’ as based in philosophical and scientific argument, he allocated the categories of Symbolism, German Realism, Cubism, Abstraction, and finally Surrealism, this last being a form of ‘Subjective Idealism’ which had made ‘a complete break with all the accepted traditions of artistic expression.’<sup>116</sup> The book’s geometric modernist design testified to the nature of its rational approach,

and readers encountered whole sections devoted to a broad international range of works, albeit for the most part undiscussed or unREFERRED to in the text. There was no indication as to how they were to 'fit neatly into...categories.'<sup>117</sup>

But however dispassionately theoretical this analytical publication of contemporary art might have seemed to some, the importance of *Art Now* cannot be overemphasised. The tendency amongst publications on modern art was barely to move beyond Matisse and Picasso, and to feature Post Impressionism prominently. Furthermore, unlike Nash's articles, *Art Now* was not directed at a broad public, but for the artistic intelligentsia, and as such no doubt provided further evidence of the 'superiority complex' so criticised by *Studio*.<sup>118</sup> Its influence amongst aspiring English modern artists was demonstrable not least amongst those of Unit One.

Nash's unifying vision for Unit One was that it expressed the 'truly contemporary spirit' rather than any dogmatic idiom.<sup>119</sup> But Read's apparent concern about the consequent lack of coherence in the work of its members signified a distinctly different set of priorities. He did not therefore wholeheartedly embrace the rationale and aspirations for the group announced in Nash's *Times* letter, when he reproduced it in his introduction to Unit One publication the following year. Even in its first pages, their perspectives concerning the genus of an English modern art were discernibly at odds. Their dissonance was marked in Read's clarifications of Nash's founding precepts published in his letter, intimating the divided loyalties which were increasingly to dog the project, and which, together with Nash's prolonged absence due to poor health, led eventually to its demise.<sup>120</sup>

It is important in setting *Axis* into its appropriate context, namely that of the most progressively motivated individuals in the English art community which it aimed to represent and serve, to explore and consolidate the views of some Unit One members about a desired 'modern' art, and how they related it to being English. For as well as Nash, Read was also to contribute to *Axis*, bringing to it their particularised perspectives and loyalties fresh from the Unit One experience. This was to enrich the debate amongst the *Axis* cohort, partly because of their relative seniority but mostly because at the time of *Axis*'s inception, they were still negotiating a resolution for the Unit.<sup>121</sup> But however it was to resolve, they had been responsible for publicising the only garnered manifestation of English modern art and design. In itself their presence signified incomparable experience and *gravitas*.

Furthermore, Read's growing friendship and close proximity to Nicholson and Hepworth was a persuasive factor in his pro-internationalist stance by 1933.<sup>122</sup> By the time *Art Now* appeared, Read was already preparing his next volume *Art and Industry*, which explored the possibilities of liaisons of (abstract) artists with industrial designers.<sup>123</sup> Nicholson and Hepworth did not readily subscribe to this ambition, although the Bauhaus aesthetic reflected their abstract commitment.

Read quoted Nash's *Times* letter in full in his introduction, in which Nash declared the aim of the Unit to achieve a similar 'wall against the tide' of the 'Nature cult', as the Pre-Raphaelites had, through addressing the 'lack of structural purpose', English art's 'one crippling weakness.'<sup>124</sup> He identified the two central concerns of this aim: 'Design... considered as a structural pursuit', and 'imagination, explored apart from literature or metaphysics', which were elaborated the *Listener*:

First, the pursuit of form; the expression of structural purpose in search of beauty in formal interaction and relations apart from representation. This is typified by abstract art. Second, the pursuit of the soul, the attempt to trace the “psyche” in its devious flight, a psychological research on the part of the artists parallel to the experiments of the great analysts. This is represented by the movement known as Surrealisme... not only are these sources the two which offer seemingly endless exploration; but they give to English artists the essential opportunities for expanding the strength of a national art.<sup>125</sup>

He subscribed to the essential dialectic of artistic expression, and by inferring the ‘essential’ nature of this dialectic to ‘English artists’, indicated the problem for those artists, of modern art being customarily perceived as international. As a theorist and not a practitioner of art, Read had closely studied English sensibility through his interest in romantic art and poetry, and as a theorist, he therefore saw the interrelationship of the imagination with practice itself as a neater, classifiable series of explanations.<sup>126</sup> His approach to *Unit One* was more pragmatic than Nash’s, and he subscribed seemingly unproblematically to an international modernism of broader influences and cultural characteristics.

Therefore, if for Nash, ‘modern’ English art emanated primarily from its own historic and cultural base, the same could not be argued for Read. For whilst Read recognised that Unit One ‘appear[ed]... to have more importance than any event that has happened in the history of English art for very many years’, he implied in the content and expression of his introduction that modern English art was unequivocally international in its historic and cultural base – a ‘considerable tradition’ – and he predicted the course it would take:

In architecture, and in sculpture, as well as in painting, a new awareness of the real purpose or function of the arts has been slowly evolved during the last fifty years, and this consciousness is international in its extent. Whatever happens in England will be part of what is happening in Europe and America generally, and though there is still room for local differentiations (most



obviously in architecture owing to different climatic conditions) yet such differentiations will take place within a coherent movement of world-wide scope.<sup>127</sup>

Read typically saw no problem in reconciling 'local differentiations' with the characteristics of 'a coherent movement'. But Nash had made no reference in his *Times* letter to a manifestation of, or an intention to make an English *contribution to*, an international movement, in his formation of Unit One. Rather, he indicated that an English art sharing characteristics with art of other countries might be generally regarded as inferior because of its *lack of uniqueness*, and explained: 'The kind of art practised by the individuals of Unit One is no doubt traceable to origins; its counterpart is to be found in many other countries today; that, however, is no reason for under-estimating its value.'<sup>128</sup>

This supposition reflected the current climate exemplified in the series of *Studio* articles and correspondence columns. Compared to Read therefore, this virtual aside was all Nash offered in connecting the work of Unit One with other (international) art, clearly locating it generically within its English culture and seeking to redress an imbalance of too much 'reverence for Nature as such' and too little 'structural purpose', from an English perspective.<sup>129</sup> Read's introduction on the other hand subtly adopted the group's publication for his own internationalist agenda, fundamentally at odds with Nash's.<sup>130</sup> However, Nash by no means rejected international influence, either historically or contemporarily, acknowledging its essential contribution to English art.<sup>131</sup>

Read's distance from Nash was further revealed in some of his references to Nash's letter, suggesting that Nash's characterisation of the group's aims (design,

imagination) 'might seem a little too narrow' to include Burra's uncompromisingly metaphysical Surrealism.<sup>132</sup> His general tone was cautionary, his position less than wholehearted. He saw the membership of eleven as 'an arbitrary number', and his underlying reservation surfaced in admonitory remarks on the group's need for 'discipline' in the focus of their aims 'to prevent [them] degenerating into a happy and oblivious family', betraying Read's antipathy towards an indigenous identity for modern art in England.<sup>133</sup> To Nash's 'classic example' of past English anti-academism (namely the Pre-Raphaelites), Read conceded 'a possible parallel', and Nash's location of them within the context of a progressive historical English art practice (namely developing new techniques for new subject matter for a new and needy market) was countered by Read's placing them into the context of 'vastly more important' French developments.<sup>134</sup> He failed to appreciate that their attitudes were so progressive that Baudelaire himself had praised them and English 'commonplace' painting, with a 'lyrical tone' compared to the 'humiliating admissions' he felt obliged to make concerning the French painters.<sup>135</sup> Read however referred to them as the 'unfortunate and misguided association of Victorian artists', and insisted on the primary identification of Unit One with a 'consciousness...international in its extent.'<sup>136</sup> His intent on the 'pursuit of' (an international) 'form', militated against the 'pursuit of the soul'.

For both individuals therefore, the problem was broadly about the relationship of English modern art to that of the continent. Read concurred in principle with Nash's 'two most powerful expressions of the modern spirit' but prevaricated over their synthesis in the singular work, because his loyalty to Nicholson (associated with 'form'), and his aspirations for the established liaison of abstract artists with industrial designers in a Bauhaus-type institution, effectively separated them.<sup>137</sup>

This was further demonstrated in his identifying Burra as indicative of the need for a Surrealist category, which distinguished the dominance of Surrealist qualities in his work (associated with 'soul'), from those synthesised in the work of Nash. I suggest that Nash himself believed that such qualities permeated all English expression to varying degrees, and by implication that their absence in geometrical non-figurative painting confirmed the incompatibility of that abstract process as alien to his cultural inheritance.

Loyalties during the short lived Unit One project had surfaced as a marked antipathy between the subjectivity of Surrealist art as individual expression, and the refinement of abstract art as an ideological instrument. This situation had existed in France for some years.<sup>138</sup> Public access to Surrealist art in England was only through occasional, small exhibitions. It was disseminated through the French journal *Minotaure*, which began the same year as Unit One, enjoying an immediate audience in England, and occasional features in *Cahiers d'Art*.<sup>139</sup> Surrealism's literary basis attracted both Nash and Read, yet although both were later to become involved in its dissemination in England, Read's agenda in 1934 was to sanction abstract art, through steering the direction of Unit One.

Whereas in his introduction to the publication, Read saw Unit One as heralding 'a new tradition', he evidently nurtured a strong desire for a parallel development of 'new academies' which would implement its 'organization and formulation'.<sup>140</sup> He later confirmed his aspirations for 'the real future of the Unit [as] a functional one' which could 'operate as a practical unit in the industrial system' and 'be prepared to undertake the designing of a building in every detail'.<sup>141</sup> This proposition was about institutional dissemination and had little if anything to do with the internal

consolidation of a new English art and design identity for an already practising cohort, which Nash saw as the Unit's ultimate goal.<sup>142</sup> Its diverse range of practices, both abstract and surrealist would, Nash believed, 'give to English artists the essential opportunities for expanding the strength of a national art', and it would be achieved through exemplary work under the liberal beliefs of the group.<sup>143</sup>

Read's concern on the other hand, appears to have been for the establishment of the *means to disseminate* the 'new tradition' and establish it as the foundation for international art in the twentieth century.<sup>144</sup>

His aspirations were manifested in his unrealised plans to instigate a Bauhaus-type establishment in Edinburgh while he was there, prompted by his connections with modern German aesthetic discourse and its contemporary art scene.<sup>145</sup> By 1933 Goebbels' Ministry of Propaganda for Popular Enlightenment had assumed total control of the arts in Germany, and the Berlin Bauhaus had just been closed.<sup>146</sup> The consequent influx of political émigrés from the Bauhaus (as well as other radical artists, designers, writers and poets) to Hampstead from 1934, introduced a fresh range of considerations about a 'new tradition' in art and design and its effective dissemination.<sup>147</sup> Therefore, Read's development of thinking about a way forward for Unit One in 1934 was much more about the Bauhaus model of opportunity to disseminate progressive ideals and his desire to instigate something along those international lines in England than it ever was to forge an *English* modern movement. Also fuelling this preoccupation was that during 1933 he had been writing *Art and Industry* and was highly attuned to the potentialities of an art that could inspire and guide industrial design.<sup>148</sup> The Artist's Unit, as he proposed calling the defunct Unit One, was his attempt to establish in England, an educational centre to equal the Bauhaus. Nor was it completely unassociated in

Read's mind from a political ideology, which was to become more apparent by the following year.

Each member of Unit One contributed an essay, and responded to a questionnaire composed by Read. Nash's essay focussed on English art as particular to its historical culture. The previous year he had discussed the characteristics of pictorial subject matter in English art history as a means to highlighting the problem of modern English art, namely that English artists' habitual fidelity to 'Nature' had until recently, demanded little or no imaginative interpretation.<sup>149</sup> But he observed that the gradual departure from detailed naturalistic representation of the 'great English landscape school', marked a romantic rather than a classic tendency.<sup>150</sup> Atmosphere rather than form was, in Nash's view, the predominating tendency which animated English artists. It was both a consciously intended approach and an unconscious conditioning of that intention.

Nash's *Unit 1* essay therefore built upon his conviction that the qualities of a nation's character emerged in its art from the artists' subliminal and sensual experience of their place, and a visual aesthetic evolved historically by them in its expression.<sup>151</sup> The questions he proposed referred to the relationship between national and individual character.<sup>152</sup> In order to form them he reviewed his argument with *Studio* the previous year, asking 'Can we ignore altogether the nationality of a work of art?', 'To what extent has contemporary art in England a national character?'.<sup>153</sup> A work of art had 'qualities of race' and 'chief distinguishing marks' of 'place and time', and he raised the proposition not only of the national or cultural persona of the artist imbued in the artwork, but proposed

further the very physicality of his world as contributive to that *persona*, and thus implicit in the work.<sup>154</sup> Quoting Read from *Art Now* he argued:

If “the artist’s handwriting, not merely his idiosyncrasies, but the whole being of the man expressed in the act”...is the unique property of a work of art, surely we must admit the value of environment. However strongly a work of art may appear stamped by personal genius, it owes something to the power of time and place.<sup>155</sup>

The English landscape school was imbued with the same ‘essential spirit’ as English literature, which he referred to as the ‘English genius’.<sup>156</sup> Yet despite derogatory references to the ‘provincial’ nature of English art by critics and artists, Nash embraced it as an unequivocally *positive* quality, continuing ‘I make this claim without apology’:

So many apologies have been made for English art. So many false impressions have been made abroad by stupid semi-official organisation, that, to describe a man as an English artist would seem almost a contradiction in terms. On the other hand, we have suffered much embarrassing nonsense of the kind which refers to British artists as “second to none”. Happily, recent developments are changing all that. The international character of modern art, by destroying the false values of nationalism, opens the way for a purely academic approach to the question of national idiosyncrasy, and, in proportion as art becomes more abstract, so the nuances of national or racial distinction become more subtle and, consequently, more interesting to trace.<sup>157</sup>

The idiosyncratic particularity of the English character was in his view therefore reconcilable with internationality. The ‘essential spirit’ of national character was not, as popularly assumed, to be found in stereotypical or chauvinistic subject matter, but in the subtle qualities of interpretation and execution, even of abstracted form. Referring to the abstract painting of *Abstraction Création*, whose chief practitioner in England was in his view Wadsworth, Nash found the character of his purely abstract compositions to be English, especially their colour, defined in general as ‘A peculiar bright delicacy ...

somewhat cold but radiant and sharp in key'.<sup>158</sup> Other characteristics of English art were 'A pronounced linear method in design' and the tendency towards 'a likeness rather than an equivalent' but enriched with deeper more subtle truth, an 'imprisoned spirit'.<sup>159</sup> Significantly for Nash, this 'spirit' was particularly 'of the land', and he employed the poetic concept *genius loci* as virtually analogous with this spirit.<sup>160</sup> But, he explained, whatever the nature of the response to 'environment', whether figurative or non-figurative, it would be 'a subjective art'.<sup>161</sup> He saw no contradiction in 'a subjective art' which could also embrace 'an abstract art', and in his own art he claimed he 'would solve such an equation'.<sup>162</sup> His synthesis of abstract (geometrical) form with naturalistic representation, was by now resolving in surreal objects in landscape settings (Pl.6). As a concluding statement it was the most confident assertion that an artist could make.

Nash evidently believed that the unconscious aspect of English art was the dimension where the 'soul' could reside (in this context, the *English* soul), and not in the 'conscious' choice of subject matter redolent of patriotism. This is a critical point to emphasise. Being 'English' was not a matter of prejudice on Nash's part, or insular vision, or superiority, but a matter of experience or inculcation in the unconscious ('the whole experience stored in our being').<sup>163</sup> It was *this* dimension from which genuine character emanated, and for him the art associated with 'life' was the only means of expressing this character. Nash's dissociation from an objective and non-figurative geometric abstract art was overruled in the case of Wadsworth probably because of his biomorphic forms and because his regard for the painting tradition as a source for contemporary direction informed the character of his work. His motives, albeit distantly, were drawn from 'life'. Even Read had

only reconciled himself to geometric abstraction by validating it in relation to design or architecture, thence by associating it with 'life'.

Nicholson's short contribution to *Unit 1* mortally opposed Nash's, declaring his search for 'the understanding and realisation of infinity – an idea which is complete, with no beginning, no end, and therefore giving to all things for all time'.<sup>164</sup> The abstract nature of such assertions evaded further qualification or association with any empirical precepts. The only reference to a motivation was his belief that painting and religious experience were 'the same thing', characterised by the 'quality of true vision.'<sup>165</sup> He was at this time working on purely geometric reliefs in white, a bold esotericism emergent from his period of quasi-synthetic cubist images.

Hepworth's essay reflected her contribution to *Abstraction-Création* in 1932, in which she exemplified *Studio*'s objections to the 'superiority' of modern artists and their distance from ordinary life.<sup>166</sup> She had referred to her peer group as 'a small number of "initiates" who..., having finally "understood", [we]re working as true "architects of the universe"', discussing painting in terms of the "'vast and neutral"' transcending thought 'above the ages'.<sup>167</sup> Here there was no desire, as with Wadsworth, to utilise in some form the offerings of the past, but rather to take 'a fresh leap over the centuries' in order to "'create"' and "'continue"'.<sup>168</sup> She had confirmed that the art she and Nicholson were creating was to be not 'a materialist, utilitarian and contemptibly futile art – but much to the contrary, [an art of] forms issuing from scientific data and from spiritual conjectures'.<sup>169</sup> In this way, she believed 'truth and justice' could evolve, and that therefore the only reality was in



‘ideas’, believing that modern art’s relation to life was accessible through philosophical and scientific principles.<sup>170</sup>

Therefore the effect within Unit One of this small cohort from Abstraction Création was abrasive to say the least. Hepworth’s desire to ‘project’ her emotional responses to landscape and community ‘in sculpture...stone shape and no other shape’ would appear to have sat comfortably with Nash’s appreciation of the natural characteristics of the physical world, yet ‘to make exactly the right relation of masses, a living thing in stone’ was achievable for her only when completely removed from those inspirational experiences.<sup>171</sup> To desire to carve was ‘not enough’, there had to be ‘a positive living and moving towards an ideal’.<sup>172</sup>

Whereas Nash had proposed for Unit One a unifying ‘quality of mind’, a liberation of attitude, a curiosity and an intelligent articulation of thought and material (which Hepworth certainly possessed), she asserted the further demand that ‘the quality of thought...must be abstract – an impersonal vision.’<sup>173</sup> The ‘ideal’, the ‘impersonal vision’ struck at the heart of Nash’s beliefs and was so uncompromising that it devastated any delicate equilibrium which he was aiming for with the Unit.

Hardly suprisingly therefore, along with the fundamental difference in motives, what Hepworth must have seen as the ‘utilitarian and contemptibly futile’ ambitions of Nash for Unit One prompted her and Nicholson to leave the group in 1934, effectively precipitating its dissolution through the consequent surfacing of divided loyalties.<sup>174</sup> Negotiations between Nash, Read, Moore, and Wells Coates about its re-formation extended into the Spring of 1935, after *Axis* had appeared. Even misgivings about Hepworth’s possible inclusion in the new configuration were

symptomatic of a pronounced and growing fracture in the founding principles of the 'modern movement' in English art.<sup>175</sup>

Nash's own position concerning non-figurative art was, as mentioned, to elicit essential structure through the study of natural form, retaining the originating source of the structure. The concluding sentences of his *Unit 1* essay were prophetic for the course *Axis* was to take in its enquiry into abstract art. Describing in his essay an ancient English landmark whose forms were at once part of yet alien to the idea of 'Nature', Nash exemplified the dialectical nature of ancient history and modern experience, naturalistic representation and abstract form, in his proposition:

Last summer, I walked in a field near Avebury where two rough monoliths stand up, sixteen feet high, miraculously patterned with black and orange lichen, remnants of the avenue of stones which led to the Great Circle. A mile away, a green pyramid casts a gigantic shadow. In the hedge, at hand, the white trumpet of a convulvulus turns from its spiral stem, following the sun. In my art I would solve such an equation.<sup>176</sup>

Resonances of his interest in Blossfeldt's analysis of plant forms were traceable in the larger world in his synthesis of naturalistic and abstract form which evoked a 'truth' of 'life' and 'nature'. Although in some respects Nash and Read had concurred, for example on the powerful dialectics motivating art, for Read the poetic or lyrical character of English expression, whilst he acknowledged and embraced it, was emphatically not in accord with an international 'modern movement', which he also embraced. For Nash, he saw no reason why it should be nor even considered it desirable.

Read's questionnaire barely masked his own aspirations. For example, on the issue of an international modern movement he posed the *non sequitur*: 'Do you believe that art in England must develop on national lines or do you think that the art of the

future will be completely international?’<sup>177</sup> The tension between the terms ‘in England’ and ‘national’, and ‘of the future’ and ‘international’ suggested his view that art ‘in England’ could not have ‘international’ status. The responses, other than Nash’s own discussed above, were scanty and varied, with Bigge recognising a ‘present oscillation in favour of a narrow Nationalism [which wa]s probably only incidental to the larger movement of Internationalism’.<sup>178</sup> He saw the international character of contemporary art as a ‘revolutionary sentiment.’<sup>179</sup> Hillier considered an English nationalist art ‘vastly improbable in view of...the growing cosmopolitanism of...life, whilst the purist tendencies of contemporary painting and sculpture tend to enhance the Internationalism of the arts in alienating them from the local associations’.<sup>180</sup> Wadsworth was aligned with Nash in his advocacy for ‘design’ in an English art ‘determined at all costs to glorify prettiness’, and for a concentration upon the ‘spiritual’.<sup>181</sup> His perception of English art – ‘provincial, ineffectual’ – was that it could contribute a ‘more universal point of view’ in western painting, reminding the reader that ‘the production of healthy works of energetic thought and feeling has not ceased in this country’.<sup>182</sup>

In general these responses demonstrated the strong influence of Read’s philosophical beliefs, particularly disseminated in *Art Now*, and also the growing influence of idealist theories of an art for the future, underpinning the formal concerns of Abstraction Création. Except for Nash, the general assumption remained that to succeed as a modern artist required a full commitment to international developments. Yet alongside the pressures of Nicholson and Hepworth for non-figurative abstract art, internationalism was equally represented by Surrealist art in England, with Hillier as well as Burra working in this area.<sup>183</sup>

The presence of the surreal influence in Unit One also clinched the retreat of Nicholson and Hepworth.

What began therefore as Nash's aspiration for English artists to gather in the cause of evolving individual syntheses of 'formal' 'structural purpose' 'apart from representation', with 'pursuit of the soul', inspired by 'a psychological research', was shattered under the pressure of two conflicting art manifestations from the continent which vied for dominance in extreme forms of expression.<sup>184</sup> Equally as destructive, the underlying conflict of interests between Read and Nash became more marked, and was complicated by Nash's prolonged absence from London which dissipated his enthusiasm irrevocably.

By the autumn of 1934 when Nicholson and Hepworth left Unit One, it was clear that from amongst the progressive artistic *milieu* in England, there was an emergent radical cohort, whose conviction was that to be at the cutting edge of international modern expression required not merely a *form* of abstraction, but a strictly non-figurative abstraction. Moreover, their opinion was that not to conform to this purity of abstract expression was to be retarded as a truly modern artist. It was from the grinding surface of these convictions about the meanings and significances of abstract art, and therefore what *constituted* an abstract art, that the idea for *Axis* was formed.

**NOTES**

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PROBLEMS WITH 'MODERN' ART 1930-35

- <sup>1</sup> The series of exchanges over the Whistler v. Ruskin trial in 1878 exemplifies the historical role of the press in contentious art debate. In her analysis of the case Linda Merrill observed that 'The popular press is as inappropriate a place for transmitting aesthetic theory as the courtroom is for expounding it'. L. Merrill, *A Pot of Paint. Aesthetics on Trial in 'Whistler v. Ruskin'* (Washington & London, 1992), p.2.
- <sup>2</sup> Under the collective title 'What is Wrong with Modern Painting?', 'Internationalism', *Studio*, CIII (February 1932), 63-64; 'The Pernicious Influence of Words', *Studio*, CIII (March 1932), 164-65; 'The Superiority Complex', *Studio*, CIII (April 1932), 183-84; 'False Economics', *Studio*, CIII (May 1932), 247-48; 'Evolution', *Studio*, CIII (June 1932), 324-25; 'Progress in Modern Painting', *Studio*, CIV (July 1932), 32-33.
- <sup>3</sup> Letter to the editor under the column entitled 'Nature and Art', *Times* (19 May 1933), 10; *Week-end Review* (5 December 1931), 715-16; (12 March 1932), 322-23; (16 July 1932), 75-76; H. Read, *Art Now. An Introduction to the Theory of Modern Painting and Sculpture* (London, 1933).
- <sup>4</sup> H. Read (ed.), *Unit 1. The Modern Movement in English Architecture Painting and Sculpture*, exh. cat., (London, 1934).
- <sup>5</sup> Formed in 1931 in Paris from members of the international groups Cercle et Carré and Art Concret, represented by Arp and Van Doesburg respectively. Both groups had been vehemently opposed to surreal art and committed to non-figurative art. Arp was closer to Surrealism in the biomorphic nature of his form only insofar as it evoked association and provoked emotional response, whereas Van Doesburg embraced the concept that non-figurative art referred only to its inherent qualities of form and material characteristic. The journal *Abstraction-Création* was published the same year, and the enterprise lasted until 1936, its committee consisting of Arp, Gleizes, Héliou, Herbin, Kupka, Tutundjian, Valmier and Vantongerloo. Héliou was initially editor. G. Fabre (intro.) *Abstraction Création (sic) 1931-1936*, exh.cat., (Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1978).
- <sup>6</sup> J. Héliou (ed.), *Abstraction-Création* (Paris, 1932-36).
- <sup>7</sup> An exhibiting society formed in 1919, consisting initially of seven painters and five sculptors. Both Ben and Winifred Nicholson had been its central protagonists since 1926. For its first manifesto and a table of members and exhibitions, see C. Harrison, *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939* (London & Indiana, 1981), pp.164-65, 345-47.
- <sup>8</sup> This argument often ranged around modern art's characterisation of the contested values of the 'romantic' and the 'classic'. For example see R. Fry, 'The French Group' in *The Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition*, exh. cat., (London, 1912), pp.28-29; T. E. Hulme, 'Romanticism and Classicism' in H. Read (ed.), *Speculations. Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, (London, 1924), 113-40, written between 1911 and 1912, and given as a lecture in 1912 (A. Robinson, *Poetry, Painting and Ideas, 1885-1914* (London & Basingstoke, 1985), p.128). For an exchange on realism versus abstraction see C. Ginner, 'Neo-

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Realism', *New Age*, XIV No.9 (1 January 1914) 271-72; T. E. Hulme, 'A Preface Note and Neo-Realism', *New Age*, XIV No.15 (12 February 1914) 467-68.

- <sup>9</sup> J. G. Robertson, 'The Reconciliation of Classic and Romantic' in *Modern Humanities Research Association*, No.8 (1925), 3-22; H. Read, 'Psycho-analysis and Criticism' in *Reason and Romanticism* (London, 1926) pp.102-06; P. Wyndham Lewis, 'Classic and Romantic' in *Men Without Art* (London, 1934), pp.153-63.
- <sup>10</sup> Undated. Messrs. Alexander Reid and Lefèvre gallery, May/June, 1931. W. Gaunt, 'Picasso and the Cul-de-sac of Modern Painting', *Studio*, CI (June 1931), 408-15.
- <sup>11</sup> M. Evans, 'Back in the Thirties', *Art and Literature*, 7 (Winter 1965), p.144.
- <sup>12</sup> Nicholson's still lifes particularly demonstrate this from the 1920s. See Lewison's account of this influence in J. Lewison, *Ben Nicholson*, exh. cat., (London, Tate Gallery, 1993), pp.27-28.
- <sup>13</sup> P. Picasso, 'Picasso a letter on art', (sic) *Studio*, XCIX (June 1930), 383-85 (trans.) editor, *Formes* (February 1930), original in *Ogoniok* (1926); Gaunt, 'Picasso', p.412.
- <sup>14</sup> Gaunt, 'Picasso', p.410.
- <sup>15</sup> Gaunt, 'Picasso', p.412.
- <sup>16</sup> Gaunt, 'Picasso and the Cul-de-sac of Modern Painting', p.412.
- <sup>17</sup> Picasso, 'Picasso a letter', pp.384, 384.
- <sup>18</sup> Picasso, 'Picasso a letter', p.384.
- <sup>19</sup> Picasso, 'Picasso a letter', p.384.
- <sup>20</sup> Gaunt, 'Picasso', pp.410, 410.
- <sup>21</sup> Picasso, 'Picasso a letter', p.385.
- <sup>22</sup> Picasso, 'Picasso a letter', p.384.
- <sup>23</sup> Picasso, 'Picasso a letter', p.383.
- <sup>24</sup> Gaunt, 'Picasso', pp.410, 410.
- <sup>25</sup> Gaunt, 'Picasso', p.410.
- <sup>26</sup> Gaunt, 'Picasso', pp.410, 410.
- <sup>27</sup> Gaunt, 'Picasso', pp.410, 410.
- <sup>28</sup> Gaunt, 'Picasso', p.410.

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- <sup>29</sup> For example manifested in a programme of radio talks under the collective title 'The Changing World', broadcast in the winter of 1931-32. See editorial 'Taking Stock of Ourselves', *Listener*, X (5 July 1933), p.8. In art see D. S. MacColl, 'The Flight From the Picture', *Listener*, XIII (27 March 1935), 523-25, responding to the series of articles by E. Newton under the collective title 'The Artist and his Public', *Listener* (January-March 1935). In architecture see E. Newton and R. Blomfield, 'This Modernismus', *Listener*, XIII (27 February 1935), 371-73, responding to R. Blomfield, *Modernismus* (London, 1934).
- <sup>30</sup> P. Nash, 'Nature, Life and Art', *Week-end Review* (5 December 1931), 715-16. This triad, or any two of its themes, as exemplified in Picasso's commentary, had become the *leitmotif* in contemporary art debates, probably since Fry's essay 'Art and Life', 1917.
- <sup>31</sup> Nash, 'Nature', p.715. At this time the use of 'English' and 'British' appear to be arbitrary.
- <sup>32</sup> Nash, 'Nature', pp.715, 716.
- <sup>33</sup> Nash, 'Nature', p.716.
- <sup>34</sup> Nash, 'Nature', p.715.
- <sup>35</sup> Nash, 'Nature', p.716.
- <sup>36</sup> Nash, 'Nature', p.716.
- <sup>37</sup> Nash, 'Nature', p.716.
- <sup>38</sup> Nash, 'Nature', p.716.
- <sup>39</sup> Nash, 'Nature', p.716.
- <sup>40</sup> Nash, 'Nature', p.716.
- <sup>41</sup> Nash, 'Nature', p.716.
- <sup>42</sup> C. G. Holme, 'Art History in the Making. The Pioneer Work of "The Studio" – for Forty Years the World's Art Magazine', *Studio*, CV (April 1933), 207-10; pp.208, 210.
- <sup>43</sup> See note 2.
- <sup>44</sup> Holme, 'Internationalism', p.63.
- <sup>45</sup> Holme, 'Internationalism', p.63.
- <sup>46</sup> Holme, 'Internationalism', p.63.
- <sup>47</sup> Holme, 'Internationalism', p.64.



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- <sup>48</sup> Holme, 'Internationalism', p.64.
- <sup>49</sup> Nash, 'Nature', p.715.
- <sup>50</sup> P. Nash, "'Going Modern" and "Being British"', *Week-end Review* (12 March 1932), p.322.
- <sup>51</sup> Nash, "'Going Modern"', p.322.
- <sup>52</sup> Nash, "'Going Modern"', p.322.
- <sup>53</sup> Holme, 'The Pernicious', p.164.
- <sup>54</sup> Holme, 'The Pernicious', p.165.
- <sup>55</sup> Holme, 'The Pernicious', p.165.
- <sup>56</sup> Nash, "'Going Modern"', p.323.
- <sup>57</sup> Nash, "'Going Modern"', p.323; Holme, 'The Pernicious', p.165.
- <sup>58</sup> Holme, 'The Pernicious', p.165.
- <sup>59</sup> P. Nash, 'Abstract Art', *Listener*, (17 August 1932) 242; and in the space of a few weeks, interviews with Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson (during their joint exhibition at Messrs. Tooth's Galleries in December), 'The Aim of the Modern Artist', *Studio CIV* (December, 1932), pp.332-33; W. Gaunt, 'Paul Nash. The Man and his Work', *Studio CIV* (December, 1932), pp.350-53; culminating in G. Saiko, 'The Tragic Position of Abstract Art', *Studio CV* (January, 1933), pp. 43-49.
- <sup>60</sup> See note 2.
- <sup>61</sup> C. G. Holme, 'Progress in Modern Painting', *Studio, CIV* (July 1932), p.32.
- <sup>62</sup> Holme, 'Progress', p.32.
- <sup>63</sup> Holme, 'Progress', p.33.
- <sup>64</sup> Wood had died in 1930. Retrospective exhibitions appeared at The Wertheim Gallery, London, February 1931; The Lefèvre Gallery, London, April 1932; The Lefèvre Gallery, London, February 1934. *Christopher Wood. Exhibition of Complete Works*, exh. cat., (The New Burlington Galleries, 1938) back cover. Also there were tributes such as T. W. Earp, 'the work of Christopher Wood' (sic), *Studio, CII* (December 1931), 383-387. Wood was close friends with the Nicholsons in the later 1920s and their shared enthusiasm for 'primitive' painting was strengthened by their meeting with the retired mariner Alfred Wallis in St. Ives, whose naive work they admired and brought to London. For an account of other influences of 'primitive' painting on Ben Nicholson at this time see Lewison, *Ben Nicholson*, pp.33-35.
- <sup>65</sup> Holme, 'Progress', p.33.

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- <sup>66</sup> This was Picasso's own dialectic. Picasso, 'A letter', p.385.
- <sup>67</sup> Under the correspondence heading 'Nature and Art', letter, W. Reynolds-Stephens, *Times* (15 May 1933), p.10.
- <sup>68</sup> Reynolds-Stephens, *Times*, p.10.
- <sup>69</sup> Letter, P. Nash, *Times* (19 May 1933), p.10.
- <sup>70</sup> Nash, *Times*, p.10.
- <sup>71</sup> For an exploration of this condition see D. Peters Corbett, *The Modernity of English Art* (Manchester & New York, 1997), pp.152-91.
- <sup>72</sup> *Studio* clearly raised the profile of argument about modern and abstract art.
- <sup>73</sup> Holme, 'The Pernicious', p.164.
- <sup>74</sup> R. H. Wilenski, *The Modern Movement in Art* (London, 1927); *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture* (London, 1932).
- <sup>75</sup> P. Nash, 'The Meaning of "Modern"', *Week-end Review* (16 July 1932), p.75.
- <sup>76</sup> H. Read, *Art Now. An Introduction to the Theory of Modern Painting and Sculpture* (London, 1933).
- <sup>77</sup> Nash, "Going Modern", p.323.
- <sup>78</sup> Nash, "Going Modern", p.323.
- <sup>79</sup> See note 75.
- <sup>80</sup> Nash, 'The Meaning', p.75.
- <sup>81</sup> Nash, 'The Meaning', p.76.
- <sup>82</sup> This synthesis was observed by fellow painter John Armstrong in his article 'The Present Tendency of Paul Nash', *Apollo* (November 1932), cited in A. Causey, *Paul Nash* (Oxford, 1980), pp.219, 339n.10.
- <sup>83</sup> For example, these interests were manifested in Nash's project of illustrating interpreting Thomas Browne's poems *Urne Burialle* and *The Garden of Cyrus*, published as one volume late in 1932. J. Carter (ed.), *Urne Burialle and The Garden of Cyrus* (London, 1932). This required visual interpretations combining mystical concepts and geometry in nature.
- <sup>84</sup> Professor K. Blossfeldt, *Art Forms in Nature* (1929) juxtaposed photographs of microscopic plant forms with art forms, demonstrating the 'logic' of natural structure. Wilenski employed his images to differentiate between an art of superficial 'truth' of appearance and a fundamental 'truth to nature'. Wilenski, *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture*, pp. 158-59 and plates 15, 16a and 17b.

- <sup>85</sup> P. Nash, 'Photography and Modern Art', *Listener*, VIII (1932), pp.130-31. For this information, and that of Nash's interest and enthusiasm for the photographic work of L. Moholy-Nagy, also for the proposition that Nash's ownership of d'Arcy Wentworth Thompson's *On Growth and Form* (1917) was influenced by Read's enthusiasm for its 'enormous(ly) exten(sion of) the analogy between art and nature', (H. Read, *The Contrary Experience, Autobiographies*, (1963), p.345), see A. Causey, *Paul Nash's photographs* (sic). *Document and Image*, exh.cat., (London, The Tate Gallery, 1973), pp.13-15, 18, n.12.(*Axis* itself advertised a later edition of Blossfeldt's popular publication, *Axis* 4 (Winter 1935), p.32).
- <sup>86</sup> Nash, 'The Meaning', p.76.
- <sup>87</sup> Nash, 'The Meaning', p.75.
- <sup>88</sup> C. Bell, 'The Aesthetic Hypothesis', *Art* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., London, 1961), 19-46.
- <sup>89</sup> Nash, 'The Meaning', p.76.
- <sup>90</sup> Wilenski, *The Modern Movement*, p.146. See Causey, *Paul Nash*, pp.143-44, for an examination of Nash in relation to Wilenski's critique of Bell.
- <sup>91</sup> Nash, 'The Meaning', p.76.
- <sup>92</sup> Nash, 'The Meaning', p.76; Wilenski, cited in Nash, 'The Meaning', p.76.
- <sup>93</sup> The potency of residual association was about this time being considered by Marxist philosopher Walter Benjamin as the connection of the 'aura' of the 'work of art' with its basis in ritual. Whilst later in exile he asserted in a formal address that 'We know that the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual – first the magical, then the religious kind', and explained the implications of the increasing transformation of the idea of 'ritual' since the Renaissance, to an increasingly secular one, or 'l'art pour l'art'. The release of art from ritual altogether (by photography) allowed for contingent meaning. See W. Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', given as a lecture to The Institute for the Study of Fascism, Paris, 1935, and published in the Frankfort Institute journal *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, V No.1 (New York, 1936), abridged in C. Harrison and P. Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory 1900-1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Oxford & Cambridge, 1995), 512-20; pp.513-14.
- <sup>94</sup> Nash, 'The Meaning', p.76.
- <sup>95</sup> Causey explores further Nash's attempt to orientate his work within the more radical forms of abstract painting in Causey, *Paul Nash*, pp.238-43.
- <sup>96</sup> R. H. Wilenski, *The Meaning of Modern Art*, pp.158-59; cited in Nash, 'The Meaning', p.76.
- <sup>97</sup> A. Causey, *Paul Nash's photographs* (sic), p.15.
- <sup>98</sup> See note 5.

<sup>99</sup> For an analysis of the cultural field around 1933-34 see A. Causey, 'English Art and "The National Character", 1933-34' in D. Peters Corbett, Y. Holt and F. Russell (eds.), *The Geographies of Englishness. Landscape and the National Past 1880-1940* (New Haven & London, 2002), 275-302.

<sup>100</sup> M. Gale, *Alfred Wallis* (London, 1988), p.28.

<sup>101</sup> For example in the January *Studio* of 1933 Saiko's article (see note 59) featured no non-figurative imagery, discussing its contradictions and tendencies and concluding with the recognition that 'the present condition represents a stage in new paths of formation which has scarcely been begun'(p.48). His illustrations employed a range of images from medieval manuscript illuminations, Roman wall painting and mosaics, Egyptian painting and paintings by Léger, Herbin and Picasso.

<sup>102</sup> Other English artists who were members of Abstraction Création were Edward Wadsworth from 1931, and Barbara Hepworth who joined with Nicholson in 1932.

<sup>103</sup> For a table of members see note 7.

<sup>104</sup> P. Nash, 'Unit One', *Times* (12 June, 1933). This appeared as a letter in the correspondence page, and as such continued the conversation he had engaged in under the title 'Nature and Art'. It was reproduced verbatim in Read (ed.), *Unit 1* (see note 4), pp.10-11, from which my references are taken.

<sup>105</sup> Nash, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.10.

<sup>106</sup> Nash, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.10.

<sup>107</sup> P. Nash, 'Unit One', *Listener* (5 July, 1933), p.14.

<sup>108</sup> Nash, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.10.

<sup>109</sup> The introduction was an expanded version of Read's article 'Unit One', *Architectural Review* (October 1933), 125-27.

<sup>110</sup> From 1922 to 1931 Read was a curator in the Department of Ceramics at the Victoria and Albert Museum, specialising in domestic glass, stained glass and pottery.

<sup>111</sup> From 1931 to 1933 Read was Professor of Fine Art at Edinburgh University; see note 3.

<sup>112</sup> Dust jacket, front inside flap. Second impression 1934; Read, *Art Now*, p.11.

<sup>113</sup> Read, *Art Now*, p.13.

<sup>114</sup> Read, *Art Now*, pp.14, 15.

<sup>115</sup> Read, *Art Now*, p.112.

- <sup>116</sup> Read, *Art Now*, pp.27, 121, 8.
- <sup>117</sup> Its modern dust jacket, designed by E. McKnight Kauffer with striking black, blue and white graphics, was in itself eye-catching. The inside text was sanserif, and the sheer number of illustrations was unmatched, 129 in all; Read, *Art Now*, p.140.
- <sup>118</sup> C. Holme, *Studio*, CIII (April 1932), p.183.
- <sup>119</sup> Nash, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.10
- <sup>120</sup> Nash was in Dorset with only occasional visits from autumn due to his worsening asthma condition, and to execute his researches for the *Shell Guide to Dorset* (London, 1935) which its series editor, John Betjeman had commissioned from him in 1934. Causey claims publication as 1936 (*Paul Nash* p.269), but Betjeman confirms on 14 January 1935 that Nash's script was due at the printer's within a few days. Letter to Jack Beddington, director of Shell, Candida Lycett Green (ed. and intro.), *John Betjeman Letters Volume One: 1926 to 1951*, (London, Auckland, Melbourne, Singapore and Toronto, 1994), p.148.
- <sup>121</sup> See letters TGA 9120.85-141 for developments in the demise of Unit One.
- <sup>122</sup> Read moved into the studio next door to Nicholson and Hepworth upon his return to London, after initially staying in Moore's studio, all in the Mall, Hampstead. H. Read, 'A Nest of Gentle Artists', *Apollo* NS LXXVI (September 1962), 536-40, reproduced in J. Reichardt, *Art in Britain 1930-40 centred around Axis, Circle, Unit One*, exh. cat., (London, Marlborough Galleries, 1965), 5-8; also in B. Read and D. Thistlewood (eds.), *Herbert Read. A British Vision of World Art*, exh. cat., (Leeds, City Art Galleries and Henry Moore Foundation, & London, 1993), 59-63.
- <sup>123</sup> H. Read, *Art and Industry* (London, 1934).
- <sup>124</sup> Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, pp.10-11. Read's introduction was largely based upon his article in the *Architectural Review* the previous year: H. Read, 'Unit One', *Architectural Review* (October 1933), 125-28; Nash, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.11
- <sup>125</sup> Nash, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.11; P. Nash, 'Unit One', *Listener* (5 July 1933), pp.14, 16.
- <sup>126</sup> Read had published, amongst innumerable articles and other volumes, *Reason and Romanticism* (London, 1926); *English Prose Style* (London & New York, 1928); *Phases of English Poetry* (London, 1928); *Wordsworth* (London, 1930); *Form in Modern Poetry* (London, 1932).
- <sup>127</sup> Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, pp.13, 13; pp.13-14.
- <sup>128</sup> Nash, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.11.
- <sup>129</sup> Nash, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.11.

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- <sup>130</sup> Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.13.
- <sup>131</sup> Nash acknowledged the contribution of Cézanne, Cubism and Surrealism and was at this time influenced by Giorgio de Chirico's metaphysical vision.
- <sup>132</sup> Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.12.
- <sup>133</sup> Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, pp.12; 13.
- <sup>134</sup> Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, pp.12, 13. Grigson commented that Nash was 'right and wrong' in linking Unit One with the Pre-Raphaelites: 'right because it should be as important, wrong because it belittles the members of Unit One, which stands for a more valuable type of art'. G. Grigson, 'Unit One, Herbert Read, and the Mayor Gallery', *Bookman* (October 1933), p.31.
- <sup>135</sup> See C. Baudelaire, 'The Exposition Universelle, 1855' in J. Mayne (trans.& ed.), *Art in Paris 1845-62. Salons and Other Exhibitions Reviewed by Charles Baudelaire* (London, 1965) pp.128, 144-46. This was drawn to my attention in D. Sachko MacLeod, 'The Dialectics of Modernism and English Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 35 (January 1995), 1-14.
- <sup>136</sup> Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.13.
- <sup>137</sup> Nash, 'Unit One', *Listener*, p.16.
- <sup>138</sup> The formation in Paris of the group Cercle et Carré in 1929, resulted in the journal *Cercle et Carré* consisting of three issues in 1930 (March, April, June). Instigated by poet and writer Michel Seuphor and paint dealer Joachim Torrès-Garcia, it united artists of numerous but related tendencies including Neo-Plasticism, de Stijl, geometric abstraction, Constructivism, in a reaction to the monopolisation of the Parisian avant garde by the Surrealists. It disseminated an unprecedented formal austerity in Paris, its international membership ending the French (Parisian) domination of radical art. Embracing painting, sculpture, architecture and design, it asserted the need to *construct* at a time of 'disorientation' and 'disorder'. J. Torrès-Garcia, 'Vouloir Construire', *Cercle et Carré*, 1 (15 Mars 1930), (unpaginated), in H. Juin (pref.), *Cercle et Carré 1930* (Cahors, 1994). [Reproduction anastaltique de *Cercle et Carré*, Jean-Michèl Place, (Paris, 1977)].
- <sup>139</sup> Begun in 1933; begun in 1925. In his memoirs Grigson recalled the uniqueness of Zwemmer's bookshop for its stocking of *Cahiers d'Art*, and its involvement in launching *Minotaure*. G. Grigson, 'Zwemmer's', in *Recollections. Mainly of Writers & Artists* (London, 1984), pp.39-40. The English Surrealist journal, the *London Bulletin*, the publication of the London Gallery, did not appear until 1938.
- <sup>140</sup> Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.13.
- <sup>141</sup> Read, letter to Nash, 23 November 1934, TGA 9120.96.
- <sup>142</sup> P. Nash, letter to Wells Coates (28 November 1934), TGA 9120.96. Lewison also argues that 'Nash's idea' for Unit One, 'influenced by Herbert Read...was to create an equivalent of the Bauhaus'. Lewison, *Ben Nicholson*, p.47. Although

Nash conceived Unit One to represent the contemporary spirit in 'painting, sculpture and architecture', he had not envisaged an industrial design liaison with art in the way that Read had, and although in subsequent months he was to view it as a 'sound' idea, it was far more ambitious than he thought realistic, encroaching as it necessarily would, upon 'our own main jobs', TGA 9120.96. Given that his concept of Unit One unproblematically integrated painting and sculpture with architecture (the traditional Academic form), this suggests that he viewed industrial design as generically distinct and thus problematic. I suggest that behind this reticence Nash was really concerned with Unit One's promotion of a fine art aesthetic of which he was part, but that where this happened to be a 'purely abstract art', with which he could not reconcile himself, he saw it 'acting as an inspiration for industrial design generally.' TGA 9120.112.

<sup>143</sup> Nash, 'Unit One', *Listener*, p.16.

<sup>144</sup> This was further demonstrated in his proposition of 'The Artist's Unit' around May/June 1935 for consideration at a meeting on 4 July 1935.

<sup>145</sup> D. Thistlewood, 'Herbert Read's Paradigm: A British Vision of Modernism' in Read and Thistlewood (eds.), *Herbert Read*. p.82, n.26; Read had dedicated *Art Now* that year to his German friend the art collector Max Sauerlandt 'in admiration of his knowledge of the art of all ages and in recognition of his devotion to the cause of modern art'. For an explanation of Read's response to German modern art developments at this time see A. Causey, 'Herbert Read and the North European Tradition 1921-33', in Read and Thistlewood (eds.), *Herbert Read*, pp.48-52.

<sup>146</sup> For useful commentaries on this situation see J. H. Ulbricht, 'The Bauhaus and the Weimar Republic – Struggles for Political and Cultural Hegemony', and P. Betts, 'The Bauhaus and National Socialism – a Dark Chapter of Modernism', in J. Fiedler and P. Feierabend (eds.), *Bauhaus* (Cologne, 2000), 26-33; 34-41.

<sup>147</sup> Read and Thistlewood (eds.), *Herbert Read*, p.60.

<sup>148</sup> H. Read, *Art and Industry* (London, 1934). This year the Council for Art and Industry was founded, emerging from the Committee for Art and Industry, appointed by Lord Gorell in 1931; Nash had also debated the relationship between art and industry, and published an article resulting from the Gorell Report on behalf of the Board of Trade Committee on Art and Education some two years earlier. For developments in this area from 1931-34, see F. MacCarthy, *A History of British Design 1830-1970* (London, Boston, Sydney, 1979), pp.57-61. His priority was that 'the manufacturer should learn from the artist before he employs him' and that if the artist was to be 'useful' it would most probably be 'upon his own terms.' P. Nash, 'The Artist and Industry', *Week-end Review* (24 September 1932), p.343. Read's idea however, prioritised orientating art education towards working with the machine: 'We can reform our system of art education until it becomes related to machine production.' One of the aims of the Artist's Unit was 'To organise exhibitions of modern machine art.' See H. Read, 'The Artist's Unit', TGA 9120.143.

<sup>149</sup> P. Nash, 'The Pictorial Subject', *Listener* (17 February 1932), 227.

<sup>150</sup> Nash, 'The Pictorial', p.227.

<sup>151</sup> *Unit 1* was the title of the publication, as distinguished from Unit One, the name of the group.

<sup>152</sup> This was the subject of radio broadcasts. For a discussion of the BBC's series of talks entitled 'The National Character' and the *Listener's* features on them, and of a comprehensive context of this preoccupation, see A. Causey, 'English Art and "The National Character", 1933-34', in Corbett, Holt and Russell (eds.), *The Geographies of Englishness*, 275-302.

<sup>153</sup> See note 50; Nash in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.79.

<sup>154</sup> Nash, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.79.

<sup>155</sup> Nash, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.79

<sup>156</sup> Nash, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.79.

<sup>157</sup> Wadsworth had criticised so-called 'English' art in his essay. Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.99; Nash, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.80.

<sup>158</sup> Nash, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.80.

<sup>159</sup> Nash, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, pp.80, 80, 80.

<sup>160</sup> Nash, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, pp.80, 80. This term, established in 18<sup>th</sup> century English aesthetic discourse, was instigated as the criterion for the appropriate design of the landscape garden, in which the placing and design of structures and features should never override the design of 'Nature'. In *An Epistle to Lord Burlington* (1731), Alexander Pope bid him, in his consideration of making a garden, to 'Consult the *Genius* of the *Place* in all,/ That tells the Waters or to rise, or fall,/ Or helps th' ambitious Hill the Heav'ns to scale,/ Or scoops in circling Theatres the Vale,/ Calls in the Country, catches opening Glades,/ Joins willing Woods, and varies Shades from Shades,/ Now breaks, or now directs, th' intending Lines;/ *Paints* as you plant, and as you work, *Designs*.' J. Dixon Hunt and P. Willis, *The Genius of the Place. The English Landscape Garden 1620-1820* (London, 1975), p.212. Nash would certainly have been aware of the provenance of this concept.

<sup>161</sup> Nash, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.81.

<sup>162</sup> Nash, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.81.

<sup>163</sup> See page 42.

<sup>164</sup> B. Nicholson, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.89.

<sup>165</sup> Nicholson, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.89. Nicholson took the analogy from the scientist Eddington, and was a committed Christian Scientist. The philosophy permeated his life and work at this time.

<sup>166</sup> B. Hepworth, in J. Héliion (ed.), *Abstraction-Création*, 2 (1932), p.6.



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- <sup>167</sup> Hepworth, in Héliion (ed.), *Abstraction-Création*, p.6. She attributed “vast and neutral” to Bach (‘Jean-Sebastien’), music being ‘by definition’ ‘abstract art’.
- <sup>168</sup> Hepworth, in Héliion (ed.), *Abstraction-Création*, p.6. Bach’s terms.
- <sup>169</sup> Hepworth, in Héliion (ed.), *Abstraction-Création*, p.6.
- <sup>170</sup> Hepworth, in Héliion (ed.), *Abstraction-Création*, p.6.
- <sup>171</sup> B. Hepworth, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, pp.19, 19. The strong resonance in some of Hepworth’s essay, with Adrian Stokes’s writing in *Stones of Rimini* (1934), in preparation at that time, (and for which Nicholson’s painting was to decorate the dustjacket), is no coincidence, as Stokes worked with Hepworth on her Unit 1 essay. S. J. Checkland, *Ben Nicholson. The Vicious Circles of his Life and Art* (London, 2000), p.129, n.5.
- <sup>172</sup> Hepworth, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.20.
- <sup>173</sup> Hepworth, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.20.
- <sup>174</sup> This was most likely to have been due to the perception that ‘pure abstract art’ would be ‘an inspiration for industrial design generally’ (see note 176, TGA 9120.112), which would have represented it precisely as the ‘materialist, utilitarian and contemptibly futile art’ that Hepworth and Nicholson were striving against.
- <sup>175</sup> Letter from H. Read to P. Nash, 28.11.34, TGA.9120.96.
- <sup>176</sup> Nash, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.81.
- <sup>177</sup> Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.15.
- <sup>178</sup> J. Bigge, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.50.
- <sup>179</sup> Bigge, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.50.
- <sup>180</sup> T. Hillier, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.70.
- <sup>181</sup> E. Wadsworth, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.99.
- <sup>182</sup> Wadsworth, in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, pp.99, 99.
- <sup>183</sup> Wadsworth’s work also retained a Surrealist tendency. Before his membership of Abstraction Création he had been influenced by a surreal synthesis of still life and landscape, and he continued to paint this subject matter alongside his non-figurative abstraction.
- <sup>184</sup> P. Nash, ‘Unit One’, *Listener*, p.16.

**CHAPTER II**

***AXIS CONTINUING THE TRADITION***

This chapter explores how the effects of diverging perceptions of abstract art which finally became outlined in Unit One were manifested in the first issue of *Axis* and reinforced by the end of *Axis* 6 (Summer 1936). This is achieved by examining the implications for the progressive art *milieu* in England, of Abstraction Création's strict non-figuration, and its instigation of concerns in the key *Axis* protagonists Evans, Piper, Grigson and Nash. Their views are subsequently explored within the fuller context of their writings and artwork, and of contributions by others to *Axis*. Finally, this chapter seeks to establish that by autumn 1936 a demonstrable trajectory indicated the concept of biomorphic abstraction as the authentic human communication of contemporary experience, most significantly emerging from the fundamental artistic process long constituted within English cultural history.

By the autumn of 1934 what was 'wrong' with 'modern' art for the moderate and conservative art *milieu*, had mutated into what was 'wrong' with 'abstract' art even for some of its progressive members. Further, the definition of 'abstract' was by no means commonly agreed. From its modern English roots of abstracted naturalistic representation celebrated by Fry and Bell, it had emerged as the extremity of an entirely non-figurative international expression as propounded by Abstraction Création, and in England, particularly by its members Nicholson and Hepworth.<sup>1</sup> That Spring there had also been an exhibition, entitled Objective Abstractions, of a different genre of progressive painters, in which gesture of substance on surface celebrated the nature of the painterly process, in some paintings without subject matter at all.<sup>2</sup> Evans was impressed with its manifestation of a 'different conscience.' She recalled

They rejected conceptual abstraction and also the formal abstraction, the straight development from Cubism, in which the object vanished (or lurked) by way of analysis. Their paintings were a kind of homage to the physical richness of paint, in which

the remnants of the object gleamed like a precious stone or marble in a matrix.<sup>3</sup>

Before examining the content of *Axis* it is important to explore the more immediate context from which it emerged. A new Oxford English graduate and part-time tutor, Evans had probably met Piper for the first time on an artist's weekend holiday organised by Ivon Hitchens for whom she had modelled during the summer of 1934. Piper, a reluctant and ultimately failed law student, had recently turned full-time painter, and had published articles or reviews on art since 1931.<sup>4</sup> Evans's presence reflected her involvement in contemporary art developments, and her recent review of a publication on 'fine art'.<sup>5</sup> No records exist of the deliberations of this group, but abstract art would undoubtedly have been the main subject for discussion, and Evans, having already planned to visit Paris, was encouraged to meet painters suggested by Nicholson, amongst whom were those non-figurative painters involved with Abstraction Création, namely Héliou, Mondrian, Hans Arp and Sophie Tauber Arp, Brancusi and Giacometti.<sup>6</sup>

She was impressed by their commitment to abstract painting, and persuaded by Héliou to initiate a journal in England on abstract art.<sup>7</sup> Despite initial misgivings she agreed, the proposal being discussed with Nicholson, art collector Michael Sadler, Grigson, and Read, with Piper appointed as art editor and 'co-producer'.<sup>8</sup> It was an urgent matter, once the decision had been made, given its swift breaking upon the art scene after Evans's discussions with Héliou in Paris.<sup>9</sup>

The private relationship between Evans and Piper over the project also quickly developed, the literary professional applying her skills of insight and articulation to contemporary art issues, and becoming immersed in that world on the inside. She

developed an impressive discernment during the autumn of 1934, recognising the complexity of implications generated by the precipitous events discussed in chapter one. Through her conversations with ‘a great many artists and writers on art’ she later acknowledged that ‘Between 1933 and 1935 a great many things happened very fast’.<sup>10</sup> It was Evans’s Paris visit however, that sealed her ‘participan[cy]’ in this world, and cemented her collaboration with Piper.<sup>11</sup> His knowledge of the contemporary scene and his intellectual astuteness provided an informed, critical context for her editorial decisions. The status of this collaboration has not been sufficiently acknowledged as the grounding of a *particular* condition for *Axis*.

In English modern art history, *Axis* has been viewed as abandoning its role of representing abstract art, and as failing to maintain an ideological coherence aligned with Abstraction Création or with its journal *Abstraction-Création*.<sup>12</sup> This is a gross misconception of its originating conditions and aims. A critical factor in the conception of *Axis* was Héliion’s departure earlier in 1934 from Abstraction Création before Evans met him that autumn.<sup>13</sup> It is critical because his views were changing from those tenets encapsulated in the journal, yet his influence upon her is wrongly assumed as an advocacy of Abstraction Création values and priorities.<sup>14</sup> It is also critical because, as the most impressive figure in Evans’s view, what he represented was to be signal for her approach to *Axis*. It is important to understand what Héliion was considering at the time they met in order to form a sense of their discussions and illuminate her conceptual frame for the journal. Given that *Axis*’s subtitle claimed itself to be a *review* of contemporary ‘abstract’ painting and sculpture, Evans intended its discursive purpose, her advised use of the term ‘abstract’ indicating its circumspection.

In August 1934 therefore, Evans found Héliou already in the process of a fundamental reassessment and reconstruction of his own ambition for abstract painting. What concerned him was that the strictly non-figurative abstraction promoted by Abstraction Création oppressed his need to evolve a language for moving ‘du simple au complexe’.<sup>15</sup> That year had been a time of intense struggle to construct anew from the basic geometry of pure abstract painting, and Evans’s visit benefited from his recent discoveries. His researches had revealed that his only solution was abstract form developed from a relation with life. In his journal that February he had described the near impossibility of progressing away from the systematic neutrality of Mondrian’s bars, and his decision to convert them into ‘éléments réagissants’.<sup>16</sup> He attributed the impetus for this to his bodily intuition that the organic element provided the obvious counterpoint to the bars, in the guise of ‘un “organisme”, un être, un être circulant, balançant, complexe, une cellule’.<sup>17</sup> In this way, he realised, ‘Aussitôt je suis revenu à la forme. Il a fallu transformer les barres en éléments réagissants’.<sup>18</sup> He had been seeking, within abstract compositions of ‘Les barres souples, les rectangles souples, les formes allongées, courbes, accélérées, modulées’, to define space rather than defining tension, as had the bars of Mondrian, yet also to resist space, and to react *with* it.<sup>19</sup> Defining space implied the rendering of three dimensions – that experienced not only in vision but also in bodily sensation. The ‘cellule’ was the picture itself, growing through its ‘force intérieure’ whilst being controlled externally.<sup>20</sup>

By March he admitted that the abstract painting that had occupied him over the recent years had not fulfilled his hopes, and that therefore he had not been authentic in his expression. He had tried to persuade others as well as himself that abstract art ‘contenait un devenir en soi’, thinking himself sincere, but he now realised he was

only trying to justify himself.<sup>21</sup> Abstract art, he acknowledged, was no more fulfilling than the figurative work he had been doing formerly. In the light of this confession he saw clearly that his predictions for abstract painting (made to Jakovski amongst others) were being realised, namely that ‘les jours de la grande période abstraite étaient comptés. D’ores et déjà je sais que je vais l’abandonner’ (Pl.7).<sup>22</sup>

It was at this stage in his development that he reverted to the term ‘concret’, revising his written announcement that he knew he would abandon abstract art: ‘Je ne veux pas l’abandonner. Je veux la développer jusqu’au concret. Un concret chargé d’esprit comme la pile est chargée d’électricité, en puissance. Un concret générateur d’abstrait.’<sup>23</sup> The term ‘concret’ was associated with a pictorial physicality beyond merely that of paint on canvas, achieved through configuring tonally graduated forms (Pl.8). Héliion resolved to himself: ‘Je vais conduire mon abstraction le plus près possible de la structure de la vie, jusqu’à lui devenir asymptote, et alors il faudra faire un petit saut, devenir tangent, et retrouver la libre inspiration et le chemin de la pleine compréhension des autres.’(Pl.9)<sup>24</sup>

Héliion’s position was therefore highly significant for understanding Evans’s thinking at the time of initiating *Axis*. As Abstraction Création was already international, it is fair to argue that Héliion’s encouragement of Evans to start a journal in England was not in the cause of spreading its non-figurative dogma as such. More significantly, having already become disillusioned with its restrictive imperatives, and searching, by the time he met her, for another way out of the *impasse*, he may well have felt that, through *Axis*, a more organic abstract art might emerge in England. It is also reasonable to argue that the seeds of Evans’s own reservations about rigidly non-figurative abstract painting exposed in *Axis* 1 had

been sown at the meeting with Héliion in its preparatory period. 'Abstract' was after all, a relatively new subject for her.<sup>25</sup> I am not suggesting that Héliion merely imposed his views upon her, but that they triggered in her a latent sympathy for a more subjective abstract painting, characteristic of the literary mind. She had been enthused by the intensity of the working process, drawn into its entirety, and 'conquered' by Héliion's ability verbally and actively to bring his 'pictures' to 'life'.<sup>26</sup> She recalled:

It was not really a question of whether I preferred these abstract works...but of an upsurge of belief in the actual activity of painting then. Its comparative beauty, its lasting power, its worth, were questions that did not arise. This was the way it was being done. What mattered was the capacity to be in it at the moment of existence.

All the artists that I visited that summer had the same quality of private, active intensity in the midst of an indifferent world.<sup>27</sup>

Evans's natural enthusiasm prompted Héliion to follow up her visit with a letter to Nicholson advising an approach for the journal. This indicates two significant factors, namely that although she was to be editor, Nicholson was a prominent participant in its conceptualisation, and that Héliion was not advocating an English *version of Abstraction-Création*:

I hope this is not going to be anything for the praise or defence of surrealism, though the limits of it should be understood among you all. If you take people such as Nash who is somewhat in a surrealist line, how can you be very neat about it? As Nash is interesting my view of such a magazine would be this, it should start with the best English artists, when they are not compromising, but should keep a strong majority of pure abstracts. My experience of such things is that a magazine soon perishes when just devoted to a small group, and also perishes when a small group does not keep direction of it. Something to avoid would be to give too much importance to already over-advertised people such as Picasso or Miró or Braque, and to resemble Cahiers d'Art. It should be *english* [sic] alive, based on the strongest english [sic] movement that you represent, but encouraging decent, interesting attempts around it. Do you have writers just interested in purely abstract art? Probably no, and this is enough to make a whole abstract review impossible actually, besides the means of production, but it would be essential that one



man perfectly convinced on the abstract side, would *each time* write to sustain that movement strongly.<sup>28</sup>

Evans confirmed to Héliou that she would not ‘praise’ Surrealism in *Axis*.<sup>29</sup>

This exchange illuminates the antipathy for Surrealism which Nicholson and Hepworth had registered in their withdrawal from Unit One that year, and its congruence with attitudes of Héliou and Abstraction Création.

Also, Nicholson’s and Hepworth’s rejection of Unit One and Nash in particular, meant that Nash’s inclusion in Evans’s journal would be problematic for both of them. By Autumn 1934, the effects of a strictly non-figurative presence upon the developments of the 7&5 and the disruptive elements in Unit One, meant that Evans was faced with a far more complex undertaking in reviewing ‘abstract’ contemporary art than Nash had experienced when exploring the notion of ‘modern’ art some two years earlier.

It was into this climate that in January 1935 *Axis* announced itself as *A Quarterly Review of Contemporary “Abstract” Painting & Sculpture*.<sup>30</sup> It was not a manifesto, and its broad scope of possibilities and probabilities of ‘abstract’ work reflected its role as a review. Its title neither claimed to focus upon ‘modern’ painting and sculpture, nor implied anything concerning internationalism, England or Britain. Further, whereas Nash had felt that ‘contemporary’ ‘would not do’, its editor evidently felt that ‘modern’ would not do either, substituting ‘contemporary’ in her title, and enclosing the term ‘abstract’ in inverted commas.<sup>31</sup>

In appearance, compared to *Studio*, *Axis* was modern (Pls.10, 11). The cover design closely resembled the typographical work of Jan Tschichold, *Axis* contributor and

recent Bauhaus tutor, adding the status of international design to the initial impact of the journal (Pl.12).<sup>32</sup> The internal style, after the changes from sanserif to serif, and also to double columns, was conventional but the illustrations and layout often worked on deeper, more symbolic levels.<sup>33</sup> Most illustrations were black and white with the few colour ones being crafted by Piper (Pl.13).<sup>34</sup>

Although it was Héliou who persuaded Evans that she could undertake *Axis*, there was no rider that it should *imitate Abstraction-Création*. The differences between them visually signify distinctly different attitudes, even though they both drew upon Tschichold's innovations. *Abstraction-Création* was more radical in its layout, being rigorously arranged in text blocks, with modestly sized images situated to the top and bottom corners, and large white areas between them and the text (Pls.14, 15). The illustrations, without details, appeared as disembodied plates, or decorative rectangles, amongst the tonality of text blocks, with little sense of them as reproductions of actual paintings or sculptures as discrete objects. Artists were also accorded no details (a prime example of Gaunt's observation of the 'denationalized' condition).<sup>35</sup> The first *Axis* appeared in bold sanserif font, the first *Abstraction-Création* employing some sanserif, but whereas the former observed conventional punctuation, the latter banished capitals and spaced punctuation the same as words. (Pl.15).

The overall effect was strikingly consistent, strictly aligned and blocked, making an unequivocal statement of its abstract sympathies. To blur the viewing eye was to make an abstract 'painting' of every page. As a journal of communication therefore, it was *itself* a model of abstraction. It was even abstract in its impersonal presentation of the individual contributors, in its negation of any individualism of

expression, and in its rigid conventions of layout. The different ambitions for *Abstraction-Création* and *Axis* were thus symbolised in their own presentation styles, even before their contents were scrutinised. The tone of *Abstraction-Création* was of insistent pronouncements and assertions, and that of *Axis*, more discursive and exploratory, being drawn from a broader field of enquiry.

The concept of an axis was a superbly apt metaphor for the purpose of the journal, and more significantly, for developments around abstract art. A field of activity rotating around a centre has constant connection with it but can fluctuate in its scope. The inherent risk of increasing the scope could stretch it so far from the centre that it loses its connection. It could not have been more appropriate for the extreme divergence of abstract developments at this time. Although *Axis* has been invariably compared or associated with *Abstraction-Création*, Evans asserted that ‘abstract’ defied dogmatic positions or categories.<sup>36</sup> Since the subject of *Axis* fluctuated in its scope, her editorial policy necessarily mirrored this character.<sup>37</sup> In order to map the ground of opinion in *Axis* about definitions of ‘abstract’, I focus primarily upon the contributions of its cohort, before turning to their activities outside the review.

Describing ‘abstract’ in *Axis* 1 as ‘inadequate and misleading’, Evans viewed it as a ‘general’ term for contemporary non-naturalistic, non-wholly-surrealist, non-wholly-decorative painting and sculpture.<sup>38</sup> It only suggested ‘certain limits’, and was ‘confused with many things.’<sup>39</sup> Her editorial title ‘Dead or Alive’, intimated the precariousness and inherent dangers of ‘abstract’ art. References to ‘abstraction’ implied the act of abstracting, with the focus on ‘method’ or ‘process’, and under subtitled categories Evans revealed the assumptions that had so

misrepresented the *meanings embedded in the process*.<sup>40</sup> This first editorial set out some fundamental beliefs which were firmly established in the subsequent issues, and it is therefore important to attend to its content.

In 'Abstraction and Simplification' Evans referred to the distinction between painting and photography in the rendering of the 'object', connecting surrealist painting with photographic realism, which subjugated the fundamental precepts of the painterly process.<sup>41</sup> Surrealists were

producing garrulous and inquisitive pictures from a fictional subconscious, which like bad poetry, say too much and leave no room for self-expansion. With all its apparent scope and new ground for exploration the subconscious mind is a more limited subject for painting than a blank wall.<sup>42</sup>

Surrealism she implied, was not concerned with painting. In contrast to their highly rendered detail, she indicated that the 'minute differences' observed in the analysis of form and structure in the 'abstract method' signified the abstract painter's sensitivity to the effect of formal relations, the very vehicle of a painting's *raison d'être*.<sup>43</sup> Accusations that abstract painting was 'too simple' were delusions about what painting was as a contemporary activity.<sup>44</sup> This apparently 'extreme simplification' was actually 'exaggerated subtlety...an essential part of any stage.'<sup>45</sup> Evans believed that this 'method' was precisely that, and needed to be employed in the regeneration of painting: 'Mondrian's work is analysis perfected: not an end, but a means in itself: not to be imitated but isolated.'<sup>46</sup> Analysis was 'the end and the beginning: the lowest point in the graph.'<sup>47</sup>

Héliou's move to 'organic' abstraction discussed above, featured as a significant development to Evans, his work exemplifying painting's role as an expression of life:

The shapes of things and the shapes between things become a vocabulary, slow to expand but gradually multiplying and growing flexible, till a new complexity of expression is reached. This process can be seen clearly in the work of Héliou. He aims at the complexity of nature without the object. Immense intersections and fine subtleties of forms without bastard memories, but no less expressive of experience.<sup>48</sup>

Under 'Abstraction and Generalisation' Evans commented that abstraction was 'justified' in the case of a particular individual's need, but not in that of an imitation of (for example) Picasso, which would produce the 'worst kind of generalisation'.<sup>49</sup> The fact that abstraction was currently occupying a whole community of artists rather than an isolated individual, was a matter of 'sociology and the history of painting.'<sup>50</sup> By this she meant that the superficiality of imitation had no motivating spirit, whereas the coagulation of individual needs arose out of the contemporary condition *and* the tradition of painting. This again is indicative of her position on abstraction at the beginning of her *Axis* editorship. In 'Abstraction and Machinery', she asserted that 'new things come under the same laws of change as old ones,' dispelling the assumption that painting modern (mechanical) subject matter would itself constitute a modern painting.<sup>51</sup> New means were necessary for new ends, and to depict realistically instead of expressing abstractly was in the modern world to miss the point of painting altogether. 'Abstraction and Progress' referred to the ideals of a future modern world (as championed in the crusade of Nicholson and Hepworth). Abstraction was not an 'unwavering journey towards a catastrophic perfection not yet reached or understood by man'.<sup>52</sup> In reality it was unpredictable and idiosyncratic, and in order to progress, painting needed to express the moment symbolically, exploiting the character of its medium and its processes through the sensibility of the artist. This had been the enduring struggle of artists,

as Evans implied: 'The one insistence is that the tradition should be kept actively alive'.<sup>53</sup> She elaborated:

To paint objects like Cézanne, like Chardin, like any of the great masters, is to foster the tradition of painting, but deny it expansion and so kill it. Surrealism denies painting altogether. In the technical and emotional exploration of shapes left by the analysed object, there is real growth and life.<sup>54</sup>

From the introductory editorial it is clear that she saw abstract art as continuing the tradition, and those who were building up from the 'lowest point' of the analysed object in both a 'technical and emotional' process of discovery, were producing a 'complexity of expression' of 'experience'.<sup>55</sup> The suggestion was that this process was the axis around which the history of representation turned.

Working within the tradition of painting did not mean following academic, aesthetic categories of beauty, nor academic painterly techniques. It meant finding analogies for the pattern of enduring 'technical and emotional' innovations from past explorations, appropriate to the contemporary condition. For Evans and Piper the 'modern' tradition constructed by the early 1930s was instigated by Cézanne through abstracted representation based on enquiries into perception and expression, and by Picasso and Braque through further analyses of form in space.<sup>56</sup> To 'progress' necessitated dissent from the *status quo*, being innovatory, yet still firmly within the painterly tradition of enquiry, as Nash had recognised of the Pre-Raphaelites.<sup>57</sup> To be 'modern' and progressive *within* the painterly tradition was not therefore a contradiction in the view of Evans, Nash and the *Axis* cohort.

I do not view Read as a member of this cohort, but given his inclusion in *Axis* 1 as the most prominent theorist and apologist for progressive art, it is appropriate briefly to compare his position on 'abstract' art with Evans's, in order to account for

his withdrawal from the review the following year (and also the better to profile Evans's position), before proceeding with the rest of the cohort. His article 'Our Terminology', reiterated his view in *Art Now* that abstract art was purely geometrical, and that art which referred in some abstracted way to 'natural objects' was cubist.<sup>58</sup> Concentrating specifically on 'cubism' and 'abstraction', he explained that Cézanne's 'simplifications' were further developed by Picasso's more 'aesthetic' 'geometrical distortions', and aligning the transmutation into 'abstract' with Plato's "abstract" or "absolute", he associated it with 'a surplus of intellectual values which exist in abstract painting'.<sup>59</sup>

Furthermore, his perception of Cézanne's and Picasso's objectives exemplified the very assumption criticised by Evans, that the abstract artist's 'elaborate observance of minute differences' was merely 'simplification'.<sup>60</sup> In this, Read was fundamentally at odds with Evans's idea of abstract art as 'expansion', exemplified as the 'building process after analysis'.<sup>61</sup> For example he opposed her inclusive 'variations of abstraction' which embraced both 'a suggestion of surrealism' and 'traces of the object'.<sup>62</sup> 'Certain phases' of Picasso, Arp, Miró and Ernst, whose forms were not 'natural' but which were also 'not an affair of geometry, of proportions, colours harmonies, etc.', Read defined as 'super-realism', where Evans had included them in a field of abstract painting with a 'suggestion of surrealism'.<sup>63</sup> Evidently Read did not acknowledge that in their absence of 'geometry', the abstracted configurations of those painters still emerged from formal considerations. It seems that 'formal' referred to 'geometrical'. He stated categorically that:

For practical criticism, the only distinction we need is between a geometrical art which retains some relation with the appearance of natural objects, and a geometrical art which is entirely contained within the relationships of forms, colours, lines and surfaces without any suggestion of natural objects.<sup>64</sup>

This demonstrated the relative distance of the critic from the artist's experience and aims in the process of abstracting. For all the attention Read had paid to the philosophy of aesthetics, theories of the psychology of perception, and psychoanalysis in *Art Now*, there seemed scant attention paid to their interrelation in the process of expressing.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, his attitude towards the 'abstract' 'artist' as 'designer' in *Art and Industry*, had ascribed to geometrical abstract artists a functional role in technical production, as if the process and aims of abstract art fitted seamlessly into the world of utility.<sup>66</sup> The tendency was to prioritise appearance over an understanding of the means of manifesting that appearance – namely the very act of art-making, itself a primarily emotional impulse, secondarily formalised.

Through Piper's work in 'pure abstraction', Evans daily witnessed painting as a reciprocal activity of senses, emotions and intellect. This informed her critical position as the intimate observer of the struggles of an artist, as well as of the judgements and assumptions of the outcome by critics and public. Conversely Read, as much a theorist as a critic, tended to theorise away the very dynamic by which art earned its name, namely the subjective dimension.

Read's presence may have lent weight, but his social and political perceptions of a limited interpretation of abstract art, signified for Evans further misrepresentation of abstract art's broader meanings and aims. Those priorities surfacing in his ambitions for the Unit One project were *implicit* in his contributions to *Axis*, but *explicit* in other writing. Having provided for the context of this thesis, Read's theoretical position concerning modern and abstract art to date, I want to emphasise that having distanced himself from the *Axis* cohort's priorities, he effectively



dissociated himself from *Axis*'s final achievements. Before proceeding with an examination of the thematics in *Axis 1*, it is therefore useful briefly to indicate in his *Axis* contributions and other commentaries at this time, his ambiguous position over the 'function' of abstract art.

Read's idea of abstract art's function for improving industrial design had effectively denied its autonomy and asserted its dependency upon architectural design, by the following year.<sup>67</sup> His review of Nicholson's 'recent work' in *Axis 2* suggested this, firmly locating it within a defining architectural analogy:

The nearest analogy is architecture: the façade...Facades divorced from function. Free facades – that is the briefest possible description of Ben Nicholson's new works. But sometimes they remind me most of the ground-plans of Egyptian temples; no longer vertical facades, but area designs, at once logical and sensitive.<sup>68</sup>

Read's 'description' allowed no *autonomous* qualities, he saw its character as a compliment to design: 'They need space and light...They are the best kind of painting to go with the new architecture...They are integral with light and precision, with economy and cleanliness – with all the virtues of modern sensibility'.<sup>69</sup> His pragmatic approach led to his perception of their aesthetic completion in terms of particular external contexts.

He viewed Héliion's painting similarly. In 'Jean Héliion' in *Axis 4*, he had acknowledged Héliion's departure from two-dimensionality for a 'three-dimensional world'.<sup>70</sup> Contemplating to where Héliion's work would next proceed, he reported that Héliion 'would ...welcome a way back to social integration, to a functional art of some kind.'<sup>71</sup> But there being no evidence in Héliion's journals to suggest that this 'function' would be anything but pictorial and painterly in their concern with painting 'la structure de la vie', with its functional outcome as 'la pleine

compréhension des autres', Read was vastly wide of the mark.<sup>72</sup> Function for Héliou's abstract art was not related to design, as Read had perceived of Nicholson's, but to pictorial communication.

Read's Marxist perception of progressive art and artists as the 'intellectual élite' exemplified *Studio*'s complaint of 'modern' art's 'superiority', but his preoccupation with this philosophy was due particularly to his recent essay entitled 'What is Revolutionary Art?' which marked in him a significant change.<sup>73</sup> For whereas his preface to *Art Now* two years before had referred to 'a monstrous illogicality which identified modernism in art with communism in politics', and had established firmly that his theories 'involve[d] a complete denial of the cultural identity of the modern movement in art and the communist or bolshevist movement in politics', his 'Revolutionary Art' essay constituted a distinct departure from this position.<sup>74</sup>

Explaining the significance of abstract art to the public, Read stated that 'most' abstract artists were 'more or less openly in sympathy with the Communist movement'.<sup>75</sup> Whilst this 'sympathy' may in reality have amounted to a broad liberalism, the public connection of abstract art and artists with Communism would have alarmed some practitioners whose politics were nowhere as extreme as Read inferred, and whose art he had anyway claimed to be 'ostensibly non-political'.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, since the Surrealists were self-proclaimed Communists, these two opposing camps would unsurprisingly have appeared extremely unwilling bedfellows.<sup>77</sup>

Recognising that the 'old conception of individuality' would 'not serve' for modern capitalist society, he argued that 'the relative ['intellectual'] freedom of the individual... can be justified within Marxian orthodoxy.'<sup>78</sup> Dialectical materialism's 'action and reaction' would dynamically relate individual and community: 'The mind must feel an opposition – must be tamped with hard realities if it is to have any blasting power.'<sup>79</sup> Surrealism's 'negative and destructive' tendency was placed beside abstract art's 'positive function', which kept 'inviolable...the universal qualities of art' until they were required in 'the new classless society'.<sup>80</sup> He believed that the relation of the individual artist to his (capitalist) society worked at a deeply psychological level, in the realms of a subconscious recognition of universal symbols.<sup>81</sup> Abstract art was therefore not propagandist as such, but subtly psychological. In this way, Read effectively connected non-figurative abstract art with the cause of a Communist ideal, apparently elucidating the idealist project of Nicholson and Hepworth as developing under the influence of Gabo and Moholy-Nagy.<sup>82</sup>

Political idealism was not the primary focus for Evans, nor for the contributors she used despite the growing presence of Bauhaus figures and Constructivist artists in London and Hampstead in particular.<sup>83</sup> The physical removal of *Axis* from the Hampstead scene from early 1935 when Evans and Piper rented a farmhouse in Oxfordshire was I suggest, a factor in its broader perspective on abstract art and further conviction of its basis in organic form. Notwithstanding their very regular visits to London, I think it likely that *Axis*'s metaphorical 'distance' further committed its focus to advancing the tradition of painting and sculpture.

In his last appearance in *Axis*, Read's introduction 'Abstract Art. A Note for the Uninitiated' addressed a broader audience, since *Axis 5* was also serving as the catalogue for the Abstract & Concrete exhibition of April 1936.<sup>84</sup> He argued the validity of a non-figurative, anti-naturalistic art, by comparing it with accepted abstract forms of music and architecture, linking abstract form with 'emotions', and in his examples ('an aura of antiquity', 'a primitive instinct'), demonstrating their basis in human intuitions.<sup>85</sup> He asserted that abstract art was not a 'revolutionary stunt', not a politician's 'movement', but 'emerged into consciousness' as a natural evolution.<sup>86</sup> It did not seek to dominate or be popular and, he reiterated, it could only 'hope to appeal to the Happy Few.'<sup>87</sup> To demonstrate his renewed, aestheticist position, he ended with Plato's views on harmony and the autonomous beauty of form.<sup>88</sup>

Read's apparent change of heart from the previous year now located abstract art in an autonomous aesthetic arena. Change was also evident in his epilogue to the new edition of *Art Now* which reviewed developments since 1933 and 'answer[ed] certain criticisms'.<sup>89</sup> These 'developments' signified the social and political contexts of international art, which were brought to bear on abstract and 'superreal' art with re-examined categories.<sup>90</sup> 'Superrealism' offered 'the possibility of a new mythology' he declared, and abstract art was readdressed as 'pure architectonics':

It is the intuitive exploration and plastic statement of possible constructive values, and as such is far removed, not only from the humanistic elements which an artist like Picasso cannot escape, but also from the decorative values which even its critics are sometimes willing to concede to it.<sup>91</sup>

This new perception was the result of a consolidated theoretical validation of geometrical non-figuration aided by the strictly non-figurative 7&5 exhibition in Autumn 1935, and the Abstract & Concrete exhibition of Summer 1936. The latter,

being an international show, brought Héliou to London, and significantly, the constructivist artists Gabo and Moholy Nagy, whose contribution to theoretical discussion profiled the social and political implications of geometric abstract art.<sup>92</sup> Under this sanction, Nicholson's and Hepworth's positions of evolving a constructive art as symbolic of the ideal future, were reiterated and manifestly 'internationalised'.<sup>93</sup> Also staged that summer in London was the International Surrealist Exhibition, with which Read was involved.<sup>94</sup> His simultaneous support for the extremities of progressive developments therefore necessitated reconsideration of some of his earlier perceptions and claims.<sup>95</sup>

As much as his involvement with Surrealism, Read's prophecy that abstract art would 'tend to separate off from the normal conception of painting and sculpture' accounts I suggest, for the separation of Read himself from *Axis*. Again, almost unwittingly he allocated abstract art to another sphere of existence.<sup>96</sup> Its separation from painting would be due to the logical possibilities of its expression in *other* media, 'perhaps because its energies will be absorbed by new developments in architecture and industrial design'.<sup>97</sup> Abstract art being invariably connected with 'design', meant that 'intuitive exploration' was removed from the working of the medium, being present only in the sense of design – of configuration of elements ('possible constructive values') – and only *part* of the 'complexity' of the process of human expression.<sup>98</sup> Read never resolved the paradox of a geometrical non-figurative art as emotional communication, which merely confirmed for the *Axis* cohort its *impasse* position for painting. Evans commented on his often contradictory position later, but confirmed his positive role in the *milieu* as supportive on all sides, which meant that 'he sometimes got himself into deep ideological water.'<sup>99</sup>

Nash considered his position in relation to *Axis*, in its remit as a review of ‘abstract’ art. In his article ‘Abstract Art’ as early as 1932, he had identified ‘three distinct schools of abstract painting – so called’.<sup>100</sup> They were firstly, the ““abstractions”” from ‘natural form’ of Braque, Picasso and Léger, secondly, the ‘abstract equivalent’ of ‘natural forms’ of Wadsworth, and thirdly, ‘purely abstract form without adventitious aid’, for which he offered no example.<sup>101</sup> All three he saw as ‘under the title of abstract painters’, explaining the rationale of the term as ““a separation”, a withdraw[ing] from the concrete’.<sup>102</sup> However, he argued further that only the last two could properly be termed ‘non-representational’ (or ‘non-figurative’) in their intention to separate from the concrete in order not to ‘re-present’ any aspect of it.<sup>103</sup> In contrast, he referred to the ‘conception of an *abstract* picture’ as represented by ‘an image which stands for the *attribute* of a thing’, considered as being apart from its ‘concrete appearance’ or ‘human reference’, indicating the necessary ‘mental process’ as ‘the essence of abstract art’.<sup>104</sup> (my italics)

It was in this context that his article in *Axis* 1 entitled ‘For, But Not With’, that Nash addressed Read’s propositions from *Art Now*.<sup>105</sup> Like Read, he believed that ‘a purely abstract art’ would, in its autonomy ““occupy, in the future, a relationship to industrial design very similar to the relationship pure mathematics bears to the practical sciences.””<sup>106</sup> I understand him to mean by this that in resembling mathematics, its independent logic was at the disposal of functional design. However, Nash disagreed with Read’s view that *only* geometric abstract art was driven by a psychological need to order the chaos of modern life (the analogy drawn by Read from Worringer’s *Form in Gothic*), arguing that the modern artist’s

response to the modern world was achieved by ‘a wider field than that occupied by a *pure* abstract art.’<sup>107</sup> Whether or not it *was* “an art merely of escape”, as Read had declared, Nash was provoked to retort that it was ‘not the prerogative of the practitioners of a purely geometrical art.’<sup>108</sup> Arbitrary though the apparent interchangeability of the term ‘purely geometrical’ with ‘pure abstract’ appears, it is at least clear that by 1935 ‘geometrical’ signified particular practitioners, and that in Nash’s opening sentences, ‘non-figurative’ was not the necessary definition of ‘abstract’ for Evans.<sup>109</sup> He aimed in his work to construct his own ‘piece of world’, as he commented of Hélicon, but whilst he believed that ‘the infinite variations of nature may be resolved with an equally calculable number of complete abstractions’, he still needed ‘partially organic features to make [his] fixed conceptual image’, without which he would ‘suffer[ing] in spirit’.<sup>110</sup> He aimed, through ‘symbolical representation and abstraction’, always to ‘give life to a conception within the formal shell.’<sup>111</sup>

It was not therefore to reduce or crystallise, but to evoke ‘other’, imagined, meaning through association. At this time Nash was working in symbolic figuration, with objects or platonic solids in figurative settings, generating poetic or surreal meaning (Pl.34). Effectively he was inverting Worringer’s idea of an ordering of chaos also to mean a re-ordering of *meaning* into something unexpected. To make poignant that meaning as *he* experienced it, namely a *subversion* of expectations, he needed to convey the particularity of his objects, something which the universality of a purely abstract idiom would forcibly deny. In this sense, I propose that Nash’s art was as abstract from its subject’s normative meaning, as non-figurative abstraction was from any subject matter, Nash’s meaning being formed in the realm of the individual’s imagination. It was this space which constituted the very site of the

process of abstracting. As briefly mentioned, it was this ‘mental process’ of conceiving, where ‘contemplation’ occurs, that Nash saw as ‘the essence of abstract art.’<sup>112</sup>

By approaching his article ‘obliquely’ he was implying that despite a certain admiration for the ‘immaculate monotony of *Abstraction-Création*’, he rejected the complete removal from the physical world implied by geometrical form.<sup>113</sup> If aspects of naturalistic representation gave ‘life’ to his painting, then in their absence, it was dead.<sup>114</sup> The implication for this form of abstract art was clear. However, by using pure abstract form for design purposes only, he acknowledged he could ‘gain something in the release from all representational problems’ and ‘find non-figurative painting a pure, unhindered joy’.<sup>115</sup> This article thus announced his dissociation from ‘abstract’ painting as *painting*, constituting his exit from *Axis*.<sup>116</sup>

Evans’s inclusive perception of ‘abstract’ was explored further by Piper’s *Axis* 1 review of Picasso’s Tate exhibition.<sup>117</sup> Where Héliion’s beliefs were influential for Evans, it was Wyndham Lewis’s beliefs expressed in *Men Without Art* published the previous year, that Piper drew from to support his priority for an abstract art of symbolic form.<sup>118</sup> Before turning to Piper’s review, it is important to outline Lewis’s formative observations about the current situation in order to suggest his invisible presence at this time.

We need to recall that Lewis and the Vorticists had adopted Hulme’s notion of ‘classic’ art.<sup>119</sup> In *Men Without Art* Lewis reiterated it as ‘a common consciousness’ found within ‘each individual representation of the age’, generally



resulting from ‘a relatively small society.’<sup>120</sup> Citing Brunetière’s definition of ‘classic’ art as a concept firmly linked with a “definite social function or purpose”, (so that by implication, ‘classic’ represented a “*moral*” position), he challenged the possibility that a whole nation could work artistically as a community.<sup>121</sup>

Nicholson’s and Hepworth’s aspirations are brought to mind. In recognising the romantic condition of the modern world, Lewis saw the classic as a form of resistance, whose manifestation constituted ‘merely *degrees* of the opposite tendency, at present labelled “romantic”’, and he declared that ‘in matters of art it could be said, “We are all romantics today”’.<sup>122</sup>

In his review of Picasso’s work, Piper cited Lewis’s metaphors of a “highly organised visual entity – a tiger” and a “dark red splash of paint upon a whitewashed wall” (classic and romantic respectively) as a means to argue their simultaneous presence in Picasso’s art, implying its authentic expression, stating that ‘a tiger as a visual entity may quite reasonably be considered as a red splash in perfect control.’<sup>123</sup> In the context of abstract art therefore, Piper saw the ‘romantic’ tendency as the initiating force, to be tempered by an eloquent rationalisation of form and language, whilst maintaining attachment to its originating source. Cézanne’s analysis of the physical world was not the route to a new form of classicism but the base from which to build a valid form of abstract art or ordered sensual and emotional experience:

With the extra complexity of life since about 1900 and red-splash promptings like negro sculpture and psycho-analysis, what other approach has been possible than through use and constant control of the red splash? It was the only way to marshal any elements of this complex, constantly implicated existence.<sup>124</sup>

By authenticating Picasso’s art as ‘the only way’ through both its ‘use’ and ‘control’ of a romantic expressiveness, Piper was thus validating an abstract art

which synthesised both tendencies. Mondrian's and Dali's positions represented the extremities.<sup>125</sup> Héliou and Nash were approaching a balanced synthesis from either pole. Piper's own work however, having been engaged with strictly abstract elements, employed in expressions of spatial experience in both actual and pictorial terms (Pl.16), was by now at its most abstract to date, exploring formal lessons intently. (Pl.17)<sup>126</sup> Yet clearly from his review, he did not subscribe even then, to an art which denied both 'life' or its painterly inheritance.

Geoffrey Grigson, founder of *New Verse* in 1933, was an enthusiastic critic of new developments in poetry, literature and art, a long-established friend of the Nicholsons and respectful admirer of the intellectual integrity of Wyndham Lewis.<sup>127</sup> He concurred with Evans, Nash and Piper over the sterility of geometric non-figurative art. In 'Comment on England' in *Axis* 1, he surveyed the prospects for English abstract art, arguing that a 'pure method' for abstract art would render art merely 'intellective'.<sup>128</sup> 'Purism, "abstraction-creation" [sic], if developed further' he stated, 'would mean the supersession of art by ideal death'.<sup>129</sup> To explore the basis for a successful synthesis of abstract and expressive form, he referred to Willhelm Wundt's theories on 'primitive' or tribal art, whose abstract forms were intuitive, and psychological.<sup>130</sup>

Wundt considered that the psychological content of abstract form constituted a fuller, human expression than had been apparent initially. Grigson posited that contemporary abstract art should also be similarly 'bodied out' by associative configurations so that it could 'answer to the ideological and emotional complexity of the needs of human beings with their enlarged knowledge of the widened country of self'.<sup>131</sup> He referred to this art, which attained the dialectical dynamic of the

'ideological and emotional' as 'biomorphic', positioned 'between 'matter and mind, matter and life.'<sup>132</sup> In his 1935 essay 'Painting and Sculpture' he had reiterated 'two kinds' of abstract art, 'half-abstract and organic... the art of life or spirit through life' and the 'properly abstract art or art of an ideal death.'<sup>133</sup>

Abstraction was the 'first floor to build upon', and Grigson saw Nicholson working dangerously close to this method, his painting resembling 'An image of infinity, ordered by saying "no" rather than "yes", which is without body enough to make the image perceptual. Admirable in technical qualities, in taste, in severe self-expurgation, but too much "art itself", floating and disinfected.'<sup>134</sup> Yet he admired Nicholson and his work, recognising its significance as comparable with the paintings of Lewis, Wood, and the sculpture of Moore, the latter being 'the only important English artist of this century.'<sup>135</sup> His letter to Nicholson, probably arising from a conversation to which Nicholson objected, reveals Grigson's astuteness and directness, and is worth a substantial quotation:

So far as I can see, people are all painting separately all the things someone ought to be painting in one picture; a kind of "School of X", A always doing bits of very pale sky, B always doing a couple of doors, C always doing grey walls etc. etc.; or its like always walking every day at exactly half-past two (or if you like, five minutes earlier each day, in which case you finally get back to night) down exactly the same path, though of course it alters a bit as you walk on it, gets straighter and more familiar, and neater, especially if you pull out the weeds every day, until it [sic] so hard that weeds cannot grow. But by this time, as I say, you're walking down the path in the dark, and you strike a match, and look at the label inside your coat, and find that your name's Mondrian. Now Lewis, however incompletely he may paint because he's been completely doing so many other things, will never have to strike that match; and you, it seems to me, may have to strike it. I like your pictures. I don't like Clive Bell's or is his name Grant. I like them for very good reasons, because they are painted well, and are pure, austere, without being priggish or sour or pompous or whimsical. But what they have'nt [sic] got (very few picture [sic] of now or the last twenty years have) is enough of all the qualities which once made great pictures. They just have enough of one or two of the qualities, so that they leave one

(me, any way)[sic] only a bit occupied and satisfied. If you say, go on, say what occupies or satisfies all of you, I cannot reply, because I am not sure that such paintings exist, one or two by Picasso, I suppose, by Klee (but then he is a minor master, even if he wasn't afraid of 'literature'), Miro [sic], Lewis, Erni perhaps..., Hélion. The chief thing is that there are many rooms in the house and you cannot shut down ten of them, put sheets over the furniture, and say I will just live in this very white tiled bathroom which has no steam because it hasn't even a bath or a basin or taps. Of course, it can be said, but out of devilry if I ever got into the bathroom I should probably cover the walls with Dali transfers and pages out of Minotaure.<sup>136</sup>

Although Grigson was interested in Surrealism, he called for a biomorphic form of abstract art that would satisfy the growing need for an art of 'rotundity' of purpose.<sup>137</sup> 'Biomorphic' was 'no bad term for the paintings of Miró, Hélion, Erni and others, to distinguish them from the modern geometric abstractions and from rigid surrealism.' The entire section devoted to Lewis was testimony of his friendship and influence.<sup>138</sup>

Stating, in 'Comment on England' that only Moore and Lewis had enough 'maturity' and 'control' to work 'actively between' the two tendencies, he saw them opposing 'mortally' 'the peevish pinched formalism...[of]...Roger Fry, Clive Bell and their minute protégés'.<sup>139</sup> Nash's work he found still retained a sense of Bloomsbury, a compromised visual abstraction, but it was Moore's work which received the accolade of successful biomorphic abstraction. It is useful to understand what Grigson understood it to represent:

Product of the multiform inventive artist, abstraction-surrealism nearly in control; of a constructor of images between the conscious and the unconscious and between what we perceive and what we project emotionally into the objects of our world; of the one English sculptor of large, imaginative power, of which he is almost master; the biomorphist producing viable work, with all the technique he requires.<sup>140</sup>

Moore succeeded where Nash failed. Both were working with the fullness of human experience – the conscious and the unconscious, but for Grigson, Moore was an English ‘biomorphist’, Nash a ‘pre-abstractivist’.<sup>141</sup> Grigson selected Héliou as the international artist to watch, the one who could see ‘as sharply as any painter the need for a new biomorphic complexity’, his work demonstrating that ‘painting and sculpture is gaining a new rotundity of purpose and achievement.’<sup>142</sup> Quoting him, Grigson confirmed Héliou’s thinking underlying his recent withdrawal from Abstraction Création: “‘There is a point where ethics, esthetic [sic], lyricism [sic], reason all meet and become one thing. That point, the picture’”.<sup>143</sup> This ‘rotundity’ involved organic visual language to which the sensate human responded.

Therefore, *Axis 1* established through its cohort the empirical nature of its philosophy for ‘abstract’ art, and demonstrated its necessary latitude of interpretation, protecting the integrity of individual expression. Read’s position by his last contribution in *Axis 5*, was to demonstrate his distance from this philosophy, and his often ambiguous position. To investigate further her belief in differing views of ‘abstract’ art, Evans’s independent comments later in 1935, prove to be revealing.

She brought to her essay ‘Abstract Art: Collecting the Fragments’, published in the November issue of the *Oxford Review*, experiences not only from *Axis*, but of deliberations over the controversial 7&5 exhibition the previous month, the outcome of which sharpened her thinking on abstraction.<sup>144</sup> The title itself suggested that abstract art stemmed from a variety of artistic intentions in history, which Evans concisely reiterated on the first page.<sup>145</sup> This priority of connecting a visual outcome to its motivations, appears to have become challenged in the

unifying visual aesthetic imposed upon the 7&5 for their recent exhibition. We need to recall that Piper, as secretary to Nicholson's chair of the group, had the task of informing members that only purely abstract art would be accepted for entry. No evidence has illuminated Piper's views on this, but since he implemented the necessary veto, it would be fair to assume his consent, even if with reservations.<sup>146</sup> His active role in imposing pure abstraction reflected his deep involvement with exploring the pictorial effects of the process of abstracting.<sup>147</sup> In the first half of 1934, before the Unit One *dénouement*, and before he knew Nash well, Piper would not have anticipated the outcome of Nicholson's intransigence.<sup>148</sup>

Evans noted in her essay that the 'immensely complex and even more disorganized world' produced accordingly complex motives and artistic outcomes, including in her examples Mondrian, Nicholson, Kandinsky, Miró, Héliou, Piper, and others, who all had 'different roots in the past, different things to express, different passions and apprehensions.'<sup>149</sup> Reiterating the sentiment of her *Axis 1* editorial, she continued 'The word *abstract* unites them too closely....It tries to deny them the right to growth and movement and to the expression of a continually changing life, by its vague, inapplicable, philosophical meanings.'<sup>150</sup> In *Axis 1*, the 'misleading' nature of the term had been not merely an inappropriate definition, but an '*inadequate*' one – an *insufficient* one – not full *enough*, and in this essay she elaborated upon its restriction of freedom, suppression of spontaneity and remoteness from reality.<sup>151</sup> (my italics) She saw Héliou's choice of the term 'Concrete'(sic) as more appropriate 'considering the passion of these artists for a rebuilding, and their discontent with further analysis.'<sup>152</sup>

Evans would have known that the united front presented at the 7&5 exhibition the previous month was achieved by rejecting the serious artistic projects of some of its members.<sup>153</sup> She would have been party to the wrangles over attaining that outcome, as communicated through Piper's experiences. This dissonance between public and private was masked by the whole public ambience of a unified abstract art. It would have represented to her the very *misrepresentation* of abstract art's individual process, as well as its variability.

This was evident in her explanation of the 'new complexity', of the varied 'organization' of 'straight lines, curves, simple shapes'.<sup>154</sup> This 'complexity' had 'an organic and spiritual force', and with this further assertion of her connection of art with 'life', I want to emphasise her commitment to the necessary biomorphic nature of its expression.<sup>155</sup> She continued:

Whether the path follows the known line of a nose, or the anonymous trajectory of a parabola is of no decisive importance in itself.'(Héliou) The practical difference is that the first is accepted as a legitimate activity, in touch with life as it is to-day, while the second is either taken as mere escapism or glorified as a moral advance towards pure form. People will not accept it as a parallel activity [...] to the making of a thirteenth-century stained-glass window, or a pre-Conquest English carving; produced just as much by the exigences [sic] and limitations of the time... The pure form idea is tempting, but breaks down as soon as you begin to examine the actual work. 'Logic and the analytic spirit can penetrate a work of art to a certain depth but never to the roots.(Léger.)<sup>156</sup>

Since the crux of the abstract problem at this point in 1935 was geometrical non-figurative abstraction versus biomorphic, I propose that the subtlety of Evans's inference in this passage was carefully deliberated. I suggest that she objected to the collective and idealist interpretations accorded to 'abstract' by Read, and by association Nicholson, and was irritated by *Axis's* presumed implication in their

motives. As a subsequent indication of Evans's thinking, her essay suggests that together with Héliion's influence, from the outset of *Axis* she harboured reservations about the authenticity of geometrical non-figuration both as an individual expression and as a painterly practice.

Therefore the outcome of *Axis 1* indicated in its cohort the predominant conviction that biomorphic abstract art was the only realistic way forward. Héliion's first contribution 'From Reduction to Growth', appearing in *Axis 2*, publicly demonstrated and elaborated his position as distinct from Abstraction Création.<sup>157</sup> He explained the intractable problem for the contemporary artist whose rigidly geometrical abstraction from nature detached him from his historical grounding, denying him 'a tradition well-established, that he enriched and transmitted'.<sup>158</sup> The result was that the 'most technically perfected' work currently being 'produced in the cul-de-sac position', was losing 'all its qualities of fight, its indications and possible progressions' and 'react[ing] against the freedom, or anarchy of other tendencies.'<sup>159</sup> It offered 'certitude, order, clarity, but also extreme limitation.'<sup>160</sup>

Like Evans, he admired and was indebted to the achievement of Mondrian, but referring to his work as his 'sign', he recognised also his 'limitation of conception' in the reduction of elements to a flattening of perspective, arguing

It is in looking for more reality in painting that perspective has been denounced as a sterile imitation of appearances, and abandoned. Renouncing its illusion, one adores the true, touchable surface and tries to flatten everything into it. This flattening is also produced by the will to show the elements completely, to leave nothing behind, nothing hidden, and this is a high preoccupation. But whatever the possibility of illusion of it, Raphael or Poussin used perspective as a way of establishing continuous relations between what is here, and what is far, what is big and what is small. It was *a scale of values*; and this has been overlooked.<sup>161</sup> [my italics]



I want to establish the significance of this argument as aligned with the problem of geometric abstraction, perceived by the *Axis* cohort as an incomplete expression. Héliou's forms were not, like most of Nash's, abstracted figuration, but without the 'scale of values', he felt the uniformity of the elements denied the organic 'sensation of time, that is to say, a sensation of space'.<sup>162</sup> Therefore, whilst asserting that abstract art was the 'most authentic' and the 'most progressive' and the 'strongest movement' of the day, he called for a 'confrontation of all terms, all degrees, of all positions, with permanent reference to all steps of the past and to our own steps; a slow process of assimilation, correction, and digestion'.<sup>163</sup> Finally and just as significantly, he stated 'There must be conceived a tradition including Raphael, as well as the Cubists and Mondrian...Here is the difference between what would be a sterile return, and what can be a definite progress'.<sup>164</sup> There could be no more unequivocal a statement than this for a commitment to the historical pedigree of the practice in the working of the present. Moreover, as with Evans in her rejection of dogma in favour of an organic progression, he declared 'The field of possibilities must be kept wide open', yet whilst removing imposed limitations, 'keeping an axis of progression.'<sup>165</sup>

To this end Héliou worked with groups of graduated abstract elements which interacted internally *and* externally evolving a field of interpretative potential, declaring 'It is the essential point of art to identify spirit and material through sight; to create a continuity: man-fact-world.'<sup>166</sup> 'Spirit and material' encompassed his philosophy of abstract art.<sup>167</sup> As a motivating force for instigating *Axis*, the largely unacknowledged nature of his influence of biomorphism must be recognised as *more* significant than Read's established theory of geometric abstraction, as a

criterion for assessing the role and achievement of *Axis*. Héliion's defining role in forming the concept of abstract art established its inseparability from the 'structure de la vie', the belief which defined the priorities of its cohort.

Evans concurred with Grigson over the 'organic' quality of Héliion's 'organic' forms as closer to the material world and emerging from the traditions of painting itself:

There is theoretical integrity in abstract painting to-day – upheld through a formal rigidity of design, one simple shape against another, one direction opposed to another and a deliberate accentuation of contrasts for their own sakes – which is not Héliion's way. Extreme flexibility of design and muffled contrasts get him nearer to the double and instantaneous action of expansion and tension that he is after. It would not be true to say that he gets at this through a study of such painters as Poussin, Rubens, Seurat, but that he finds in analysing their work a corroboration and a sanction.

Héliion says in one of his articles: "There are on the one hand, those who turn desperately around nature without daring to enter, and, on the other hand, those who, beyond the elementary cells, try to develop a language." And so Héliion tries to develop a classical language with contemporary elements.<sup>168</sup>

Evans, Piper, Grigson and Nash perceived the freedom of the artist as *negotiating* a language, and not as being drastically curtailed by dogmatic pronouncements and expectations. Her implication of 'theoretical integrity' suggests the impossibility of theory alone, in the resolution of pictorial matters through the fullness of practice. Such were the motives of Mondrian, and probably Nicholson, with his more subjectively organised forms, exhibiting 'simplicity for its own sake'.<sup>169</sup> Whereas Héliion's painting evoked space and time in its modulated forms, Mondrian's and Nicholson's were static.

Before continuing to explore concepts of biomorphic abstraction I need to reiterate the differing perceptions of the expression of 'life' in abstract art which defined the nature of biomorphism. We have seen how Héliou modulated his forms to evoke movement, space and by inference time, motivated by his concept of the picture as a 'cellule'.<sup>170</sup> In the case of Nicholson, who published no illuminating account of his working process by mid 1936, we have only Read's word for his 'mathematical and crystalline' 'aspects of reality', which he (Read) claimed consisted of a synthesis of organic and inorganic form.<sup>171</sup> That sense therefore, differed fundamentally from that of Héliou. It was in terms of organisms that Héliou perceived his paintings, but different again, it was a much broader sense of 'life' that biomorphic abstraction represented, in the view of the *Axis* cohort. For them, it meant abstracted form from daily life, from the experience or conditions of living, and not merely the scientific application (although it was implicit in 'living'). This broader view became more evident as *Axis* progressed, and its cohort's separation of abstraction from representation narrowed, but their sense of 'biomorphic' abstraction needed stating at this stage in the thesis.

Read had claimed Nicholson as 'something of a mystic', who expressed in his geometrical forms 'a reality underlying appearances' by being 'attuned' to the 'proportions and harmonies inherent in all natural phenomena, in the universe itself.'<sup>172</sup> As Mondrian's solution was generally admired but viewed as sterile by the *Axis* cohort so, I argue, Nicholson's was similarly regarded. Both were admired for their purity, not their painterly or pictorial qualities. The 'mystical' claim made by Read did not, I suggest, impress Evans. Her view was that art representing the 'opposite of Picasso's attitude' (here she must have had Nicholson's as well as Mondrian's in mind) – namely a 'lyrical' expression of 'the object' – 'preserve[d]

the 'remoteness' of the universe, 'the picture embrace[d] a preconceived God. Instead of representing a familiar thing in such a way that there is no limit to what it can mean, it represents an unfamiliar thing in a strictly limited way. The object is no longer the world-object of the cubists, it is a symbol.'<sup>173</sup> She observed that 'A square realised as an object' *could* be perceived as 'nothing but itself', but *not* as a 'symbol'.<sup>174</sup> It was 'a fine base to build on', and could be developed structurally to permit subtle, 'life'-signifying form, without direct reference, as an existent 'part of a very real world.'<sup>175</sup> Evans was thus committed to the progression of painting as a pictorial art, and not a form of conceptual art.

One of the most significant contributions in the entire run of *Axis* convincingly established a connection between biomorphic abstraction, human psychology, and the painting tradition, by tracing the authentic roots of Surrealism. In the unlikely title 'Surrealism and Abstraction – The Search for Subjective Form' in *Axis* 6, psychologists J. and M. Thwaites explored 'subjective form' as the basis of biomorphic abstraction drawn from what they argued as its own, somewhat forgotten, tradition.<sup>176</sup> Whereas Héliou's formal organicism was concerned with pictorial renderings of space as the experiential dimension of the physical world, the Thwaiteses were concerned with the empathy with form and gesture as an emotional expression.

They concentrated on that aspect of the European painting tradition in which the artist's relation to the object was exaggeratedly subjective. Citing El Greco, whose interest in the subjective rendering was 'at a remove' from the visual world, they described his painterly qualities as 'plastic equivalents for emotions, not for appearances.'<sup>177</sup> The exploration over time of these expressive elements (e.g.

‘rhythms and livid colours’) had, they argued, resulted in the art of abstract expression of which the first manifestation was Kandinsky.<sup>178</sup> They significantly named Kandinsky as the ‘father’ of Surrealism, because of the ‘psychic automatism’ of his early abstractions, in which he ‘evolved a rhythmic line a little analogous to Baroque.’<sup>179</sup> His development of this line rendered ‘volume without mass’ and free rhythm, unassociated with visual structure of the physical world.<sup>180</sup> Evans had been drawn to the emotional quality, and struck by the significance of Kandinsky’s pioneering abstraction, quoting at some length from ‘The Art of Spiritual Harmony’ in *Axis* 1, discussing him in *Axis* 2, and describing him in her ‘Abstract Art’ essay as ‘elemental and fiery’ (Pl.18).<sup>181</sup>

This interest in psychic *abstraction* was somewhat removed from the common perception of surrealism as being about subject matter with psychic *content*, a misconception for which the Thwaiteses viewed Breton himself and his ‘English admirers’ as ‘partly responsible’.<sup>182</sup> Breton had acknowledged that after centuries of art’s concentration upon the self or the “*super*” self, it now eagerly explored fully “les terres immenses et presque vierges du *soi*”.<sup>183</sup> This referred to the shift from the exploration of an imitative, naturalistic representation of the visual world, to that of the artist’s subjectivity in interpreting the visual world, in recent decades. But his repeated assertion that psychic automatism “n’a jamais constitué pour le *surréalisme* une fin en soi”, meant that ‘academicians’ and ‘illustrators’ like Chirico or Dali, because of their psychic content, were ‘overvalued’.<sup>184</sup> The highly wrought narrative realism employed by the Surrealists did not exploit the perceptions and crafts of painting or sculpture as *themselves* potent vehicles of emotion. Concurring with Evans, the Thwaiteses declared that this ‘den[ied] surrealism as plastic art. It ignore[d] a contribution to plastic form which began over twenty years ago’

(inferring Kandinsky's contribution), which continued the development of 'plastic equivalents for emotions.'<sup>185</sup> In essence, their argument was for the renewal of the craft of painting and the configuration of evocative form in abstract art.

Furthermore, they subscribed to the body of opinion regarding the primal nature of mark making, seeing Kandinsky's abstract line paintings (often inspired by prehistoric or children's drawings) as the first modern examples of '*subjective abstract form*'; and despite his later abandonment of this approach, declared its valuable contribution to visual language.<sup>186</sup> They further declared that a 'rhythm of line', in its 'suggestion of many images' (as in the work of Ernst), 'expresse[d] in itself the subjective *ambiguity* of form. This gives a plastic equivalent for emotional states, without losing their quality and intensity. It allows play to the form-creating power of the subconscious', and 'frees the associations of the eye and mind.'<sup>187</sup> It was this interpretative space where human individual meaning could blossom. By citing Wundt in *Axis 2*, Grigson had also recognised this power in the abstracted forms of primitive art, explaining that with biomorphic abstraction, 'we are placing ourselves somewhere behind the contradictions of matter and mind, where an identity ...may more primitively exist.'<sup>188</sup>

The Thwaiteses shared with Evans a concern over the Surrealists' plundering of history for their own interests. Their understanding of the psychological basis of biomorphic form needs clarification in this connection. They argued that the misappropriation of artists from the past as the Surrealist progenitors signified the Surrealist's loss of focus, and their distraction into narrative imagery, whose highly detailed naturalistic representation superseded its originally ambiguous biomorphic language, sometimes achieved through chance and automatism. They linked this

loss with the Surrealists' preoccupation with Freudian analysis, as had Evans, who deplored 'the same succession of dreary shocks' where 'the mind makes a beeline for its own preoccupations'.<sup>189</sup> Amongst the 'misconceptions' of Breton and his 'English admirers', the Thwaiteses acknowledged the failure to recognise that subjective form emerged in various manifestations as a gradual evolution. 'They deny evolution, simply picking out introvert artists of any period who have touched preconscious levels.'<sup>190</sup> Evans had been outraged by their disingenuity, Gascoyne's publication having alighted upon Blake as a precursor to Surrealism.<sup>191</sup> In her editorial to that *Axis* issue she remonstrated:

The surrealists claim all those in the past or living to-day who have any *passion*, as being surrealist in the particular manifestation of their passion, so that to-day surrealist is a catchword not only for any oddity but for any sign of intensity and guts in a work of art or piece of behaviour. This is a thing to fight against. It is one more label for the artist to contend with (given the pseudo-validity by its application to great figures of the past). It can be added to abnormality and genius and the sacred reproach of eccentricity. But there is a more important objection than this: it very often implies a complete misconception of the artist concerned. To call Blake surrealist in any part of his work invalidates his whole life and work (from his own point of view if from no one else's), it is about as near the mark as it would be to call Stendhal surrealist. The surrealists are explorers of the mind; the creative counterparts of Freud. Blake was a builder; the unknown forces of his mind were as much part of him as the blood in his body, and flowed as evenly. They were as controllable as the nerves of his fingers as they wrote. He used the weight of them. They were already canalized.<sup>192</sup>

Evans was therefore fiercely asserting the artist's right to have his work considered in the light of his motives and his time. There was 'very often' a 'complete misconception of the artist' in electing his work on the basis of its appearance alone, both in contemporary art, and in regarding historical art, which 'invalidate[d] his whole life and work'. Similarly, the Thwaiteses had exemplified El Greco for his process, not his subject matter *per se*.<sup>193</sup> They understood his 'passion' as

‘canalized’ in the way Evans was describing Blake’s whole practice, and therefore they all recognised as authentic, the direct human expression in ‘organic’ abstracted form executed in an expressive technique.

What emerged from *Axis* by issue six therefore, was a concept of biomorphic abstract art which concerned itself with form whose ambiguity or whose ambiguous disposition, defied fixed interpretation, yet required a particularity of appearance to aid the transmutation from the object of vision into the imagination of the viewing subject. This is the quintessential romantic characteristic. It was the ambiguous nature of biomorphic abstraction which earned its association with ‘life’, and its potential for proliferating meaning. Rather than a fixed, classic universality, its particularity, provoking an internalised reality, could only result in authentic expression. I am arguing that by *Axis* 6 the concept of biomorphic abstraction manifested to date, had been evident in the forms of Héliou and Piper, which were developing within the process of abstracting, towards further associative form and configuration.<sup>194</sup>

That Héliou and Piper were executing the most accomplished non-Surrealist biomorphic abstract paintings at this time, consolidating abstract art with ‘life’, has not been acknowledged for its particular contemporary significance, nor has the reciprocity of attitude between the two painters. The significance of their alignment in Evans’s double-billing of their work in *Axis* 4 testified to that recognition in 1935.<sup>195</sup> In order to sharpen my argument that *Axis* embraced biomorphic abstraction as the only realistic proposition, and to anticipate its achievement as the touchstone of progressive art in mid 1930s England, the attitudes of its cohort and their peers now need further scrutiny in specific areas.



**NOTES**

AXIS CONTINUING THE TRADITION

- <sup>1</sup> See Introduction, p.30 n.9; Chapter 1, pp.70-73.
- <sup>2</sup> 20 March to 14 April 1934, at the Zwemmer Gallery. Exhibitors were G. Bell, T. Carr, I. Hitchens, R. Moynihan, V. Pasmore, C. Richards, G. Tibble. The catalogue introduction was by N. Gray.
- <sup>3</sup> M. Piper, 'Back in the Thirties', *Art & Literature*, 7 (Winter 1965), p.143.
- <sup>4</sup> See bibliographies in D. Fraser Jenkins, *John Piper*, exh. cat., (London, Tate Gallery, 1983-84), p.140; O. Levinson, 'Quality and Experiment': *the Prints of John Piper* (London, 1996), p.176.
- <sup>5</sup> M. Evans, 'The Understanding of Art', *Architects' Journal* (23 August 1934), 268, being a review of H. S. Goodhart-Rendel, *Fine Art* (Oxford, 1934).
- <sup>6</sup> M. Piper, 'the Thirties', pp.139-40.
- <sup>7</sup> M. Piper, 'the Thirties', pp.139-40.
- <sup>8</sup> J. Piper, postcard to Ben Nicholson, 2 October 1934. TGA 8717.1.2.3402. Michael Sadler, Vice Chancellor of Leeds University in 1912 became a leading collector of international modern art by WW1, and a guiding light for the Leeds Arts Club. He and his son Michael Sadleir, were champions of Kandinsky (Sadleir translating *Uber Das Geistige* in 1914). Sadler assumed the mastership of University College, Oxford, in 1922, where he was still living during the 1930s. His Leeds period associated him for life with Read and Moore and a wide community of artists and writers. See T. Steele, *Alfred Orage and The Leeds Arts Club 1893-1923* (Aldershot & Vermont, 1990), pp.177-217; M. Paraskos, 'Herbert Read and Leeds' in B. Read and D. Thistlewood (eds.), *Herbert Read. A British Vision of World Art*, exh. cat., (Leeds, City Art Galleries & London, 1933), pp.25-33. Spalding stated that J. Piper had known Sadler's collection from the later 1920s. F. Spalding, 'John Piper in the 1930s: "Abstraction on the Beach"' in F. Spalding and D. Fraser Jenkins, *John Piper in the 1930s: "Abstraction on the Beach"*, exh. cat., (London, Dulwich Picture Gallery, 2003), p.41; M. Piper, 'the Thirties', p.141.
- <sup>9</sup> Letter from Piper to Evans, 5 September 1934. TGA. Cited in short form in Spalding, 'John Piper', p.24.
- <sup>10</sup> Evans, 'the Thirties', p.141.
- <sup>11</sup> Evans, 'the Thirties', p.141.
- <sup>12</sup> C. Harrison, *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939* (London & Bloomington, 1981), pp.275-77, 321; C. Harrison, 'England's Climate' in B. Allen (ed.), *Towards a Modern Art World* (London & New Haven, 1995), pp.218, 220; F. Spalding, *British Art Since 1900* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London, 1996), p.127; D. Masters, 'The Englishness of British Art. Arts and Society in Britain Since the Thirties', (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Open University, 1987), p.75; J. Lewison, *Ben Nicholson* (London,

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1933), p.43; A. Bowness (introduction), *British Art and the Modern Movement 1930-40*, exh. cat., (Cardiff, National Museum of Wales, 1962), p.9.

<sup>13</sup> D. Ottinger, 'Helion: the Art of Declaring' and M. Gale, 'Jean Héliion and British Art, 1933-37' in *Jean Héliion*, exh. cat., (Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, 2004), pp.18-20,37-38. For an example of the internal tensions over Herbin's intransigence see documents reproduced in G. Fabre (introduction), *abstraction creation 1931-36*, exh. cat., (Paris, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris & Munster, Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte Landschaftsverband Westfalen-Lippe, 1978), pp.53-59.

<sup>14</sup> See M. Gale, 'Jean Héliion', pp.38-39 for an account of Héliion's plans for several journals at this time and *Axis*'s character in this context.

<sup>15</sup> J. Héliion, journal entry, 15 February 1934 in A. Moeglin-Delcroix (annotation et presentation), *Héliion: Carnets. Journal d'un Peintre*, 1 (1929-1962), (Paris, 1992), p.49.

<sup>16</sup> Héliion, 15 February 1934 in Moeglin-Delcroix, *Héliion*, p.49.

<sup>17</sup> Héliion, 15 February 1934 in Moeglin-Delcroix, *Héliion*, p.49.

<sup>18</sup> Héliion, 15 February 1934 in Moeglin-Delcroix, *Héliion*, p.49.

<sup>19</sup> Héliion, 15 February 1934 in Moeglin-Delcroix, *Héliion*, p.49.

<sup>20</sup> Héliion, 15 February 1934 in Moeglin-Delcroix, *Héliion*, p.49.

<sup>21</sup> Héliion, 8 March 1934 in Moeglin-Delcroix, *Héliion*, p.50.

<sup>22</sup> Héliion, 8 March 1934 in Moeglin-Delcroix, *Héliion*, p.50.

<sup>23</sup> Héliion, 8 March 1934 in Moeglin-Delcroix, *Héliion*, p.50.

<sup>24</sup> Héliion, 8 March 1934 in Moeglin-Delcroix, *Héliion*, p.50.

<sup>25</sup> M. Piper, 'the Thirties', p.140.

<sup>26</sup> M. Piper, 'the Thirties', p.139.

<sup>27</sup> M. Piper, 'the Thirties', p.139.

<sup>28</sup> Letter from Héliion to Nicholson, 17 September 1934 cited in Lewison, *Ben Nicholson*, pp.43-44.

<sup>29</sup> Letter from Evans to Héliion, 1 October 1934 cited in Lewison, *Ben Nicholson*, p.34.

<sup>30</sup> Evans and Piper undertook the small distribution at first, *Axis 7* was then distributed by Stanley Nott, and *Axis 8* by Zwemmer's. Subscriptions were 10s. 0d. annually, 2s. 6d. per copy. Funding was from 'small donations' and subscriptions

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grew to 'two hundred or so' according to Evans, and 'thousands' according to Piper. M. Piper, 'the Thirties', pp.145-46; J. Piper in G. Power, R. Swift, E. Gunningham, 'John Piper', *Composition*, 2 (Spring 1979), unpaginated.

<sup>31</sup> See chapter 1, p.53. It is curious to note M. Piper (Evans) referred to *Axis* as 'a Quarterly Review of Contemporary *Non-figurative* Painting and Sculpture' in her short memoir. (my italics) M. Piper, 'the Thirties', p.141.

<sup>32</sup> Tschichold had evolved, with Herbert Bayer, the Bauhaus 'house style' of typography and graphic design. He had designed the typefaces and layout for the catalogue of the exhibition *These Antithese Synthese* (Luzerne, 1935), organised by Hans Erni, and shown in February and March, which Nicholson attended, exhibiting seven reliefs. Nicholson visited Tschichold in Basle in early March, and Tschichold contributed an article 'On Ben Nicholson's Reliefs' to *Axis* 2 (April 1935) 16-18. He advertised *Axis* 3 (July 1935) in the back of his publication *Typographische Gestaltung* (Basle, 1935) unpaginated, beneath an illustration of the same Nicholson relief as included in his *Axis* article cited above. *Axis* 3 in turn advertised his book, and *Axis* 5 carried a review of it by S. John Woods (p.28). Lewison, *Ben Nicholson*, pp.65-66, 242; Gale, 'Jean Helion', p.41; J. Gage, 'art and life' (sic) in J. Lewison (ed.), *Circle, constructive art in Britain 1934-40*, exh. cat., (Cambridge, 1982), pp.45, 70-71.

<sup>33</sup> See letter from Grigson to Nicholson referring to the need for double columns. TGA 8717.1.2.1422; for example: both geometric abstraction *and* surrealist abstraction in Ede's article about 'Modern Art' in *Axis* 1, pp.22-23; Calder's radical abstract mobile in a field at Fawley Bottom (Evans's and Piper's home) in *Axis* 3, p.19; Duchamp's *Le Roi et La Reine traversés par des nus en vitesse* (geometricised naturalistic representation), Poussin's *Eliezer et Rebecca* (naturalistic representation in geometric formation), and Seurat's *La Baignade* (abstracted naturalistic representation), all foundations for Hélicon's biomorphic abstraction in *Axis* 6, pp.9-17; historical perspectives on representation of sensual experience in eighteenth-century perspective and twentieth-century aerial views, in *Axis* 8, pp.8-9.

<sup>34</sup> See Piper's explanation of this process in Levinson, 'Quality', p.31.

<sup>35</sup> See chapter 1, p.39.

<sup>36</sup> M. Evans, 'Dead or Alive', *Axis* 1 (January 1935), p.3.

<sup>37</sup> Evans, 'Dead', p.4.

<sup>38</sup> Evans, 'Dead', p.3.

<sup>39</sup> Evans, 'Dead', p.3.

<sup>40</sup> Evans, 'Dead', p.3.

<sup>41</sup> Evans, 'Dead', pp.3, 4.

<sup>42</sup> Evans, 'Dead', p.3.

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- <sup>43</sup> Evans, 'Dead', p.3.
- <sup>44</sup> Evans, 'Dead', p.3.
- <sup>45</sup> Evans, 'Dead', p.3.
- <sup>46</sup> Evans, 'Dead', p.3.
- <sup>47</sup> Evans, 'Dead', p.3.
- <sup>48</sup> Evans, 'Dead', p.3.
- <sup>49</sup> Evans, 'Dead', p.3.
- <sup>50</sup> Evans, 'Dead', p.3.
- <sup>51</sup> Evans, 'Dead', p.4.
- <sup>52</sup> Evans, 'Dead', p.4.
- <sup>53</sup> Evans, 'Dead', p.4.
- <sup>54</sup> Evans, 'Dead', p.4.
- <sup>55</sup> Evans, 'Dead', pp.3, 4, 3.
- <sup>56</sup> J. Piper, 'Younger English Painters I', *Listener* (23 March 1933), pp. 450, 452; A. West, *John Piper* (London 1979) pp. 50-54, 74; Levinson, 'Quality', p.34 and n.; M. Evans, 'Abstract Art: Collecting the Fragments', *New Oxford Outlook*, 22 (November 1935), pp.259-61; M. Piper, 'the Thirties', pp. 144, 148.
- <sup>57</sup> See chapter 1, p.66.
- <sup>58</sup> H. Read, 'Our Terminology', *Axis* 1 (January 1935), pp.6-7.
- <sup>59</sup> Read, 'Terminology', p.7.
- <sup>60</sup> Evans, 'Dead', p.3.
- <sup>61</sup> Evans, 'Dead', p.4.
- <sup>62</sup> Evans, 'Dead', p.4.
- <sup>63</sup> Read, 'Terminology', p.8.
- <sup>64</sup> Read, 'Terminology', p.8.
- <sup>65</sup> Read had published widely in these areas, for example 'Psychoanalysis and the Critic', *Criterion*, III (1924), 214-30; (ed. and trans.), W. Worringer, *Form in Gothic* (London, 1927)); 'The Implications of Behaviourism', *Criterion*, VII (1928), 64-75; 'Aesthetics and the Science of Art', *TLS* (18 April 1929), xxi;

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'Ancient Art and Modern Sensibility', *Listener*, III (1930), 108; 'Psychoanalysis and art', 737; 'Form and Expression', 1026; 'Art and Religion', 1094-5; *The Meaning of Art* (London, 1931); 'Painting and Poetry', *Listener*, V (1931), 22; 'The Origins of Geometric Art, II: the Psychological Necessity', 831-32; 'An Essay in Aesthetics', 1002.

<sup>66</sup> Read, *Art and Industry* (London, 1934), pp.33-40.

<sup>67</sup> See chapter 1, pp.68-69.

<sup>68</sup> H. Read, 'Ben Nicholson's Recent Work', *Axis 2* (April 1935), p.16.

<sup>69</sup> Read, 'Ben Nicholson's', p.16.

<sup>70</sup> H. Read, 'Jean Hélion', *Axis 4* (November 1935), p.3.

<sup>71</sup> Read, 'Jean Hélion', p.3.

<sup>72</sup> See p.95 and n.

<sup>73</sup> H. Read, 'What is Revolutionary Art?' in B. Rea (ed.), *5 on Revolutionary Art* (London, 1935), 11-22.

<sup>74</sup> Read, *Art Now*, p.13.

<sup>75</sup> Read, 'What is', p.14.

<sup>76</sup> Read, 'What is', p.19.

<sup>77</sup> André Breton consolidated their position in his Second Manifesto published on 15 December 1929 as the final (12<sup>th</sup>) edition of *La Révolution Surréaliste*.

<sup>78</sup> Read, 'What is', p.18.

<sup>79</sup> Read, 'What is', p.18.

<sup>80</sup> Read, 'What is', p.21.

<sup>81</sup> Read, 'What is', p.21.

<sup>82</sup> Read concluded his essay emphatically: 'We want something tougher, something more intellectual and "difficult" than the 'tender-minded' idealism of the 'romanticists in our midst'. He concluded 'REVOLUTIONARY ART IS CONSTRUCTIVE, REVOLUTIONARY ART IS INTERNATIONAL, REVOLUTIONARY ART IS REVOLUTIONARY'. Read, 'What is', p.22; Constructivists Naum Gabo and Moholy Nagy came to London in 1935.

<sup>83</sup> For a description of Hampstead's artistic milieu and the arrival of émigrés see H. Read, 'A Nest of Gentle Artists', *Apollo*, LXXVI, 7 (September 1962), 536-38; J. Jackson, *Hampstead in the Thirties* (London, 1975).

<sup>84</sup> *Axis* 5 (Spring 1936), 3. The international Abstract & Concrete exhibition opened in Oxford on 15 February 1936, visiting Liverpool and London, finishing at Cambridge on 13 June, its London venue being the Lefèvre Galleries during April. It was organised by Nicolette Gray, daughter of poet, playwright and recently retired Keeper of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum, Laurence Binyon, and wife of his Assistant Keeper in the sub-department of Oriental Prints and Drawings, Basil Gray.

Nicolette Gray had unsurprisingly grown up with an easy familiarity with historic European and Oriental art (through her father's preoccupations with Chinese painting), and from her early teens became attracted to modern art, particularly through the collection of her friend and mentor Helen Sutherland. She began acquiring works by prominent modernists such as Paul Nash and Stanley Spencer, and at Oxford where she read History was on the committee of the Oxford Art Club, where she became acquainted with Evans, with whom she shared mutual schoolfriends.

Gray's enthusiasm for encouraging and disseminating modern art generated her patronage scheme whereby, as a result of exhibiting in her home from 1 February 1935, examples from contemporary artists, she connected them with potential clients for sales and commissions. At the time of the *Axis* negotiations, in the Autumn of 1934 she sent her open letter to the Principal of her old college publicising her scheme which had resulted from their 'conversation together'. ('An Open Letter to the Principal of Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, From Mrs. Basil Gray', December 1934. From the original in possession of the family.)

Evans's *Axis* was important to her for its 'beginnings' of a critical perspective on art 'as sensitive, as learned and as close to the artist as that of the Chinese'. She deplored the fragmentation of a holistic aesthetic knowledge, 'Our philosophers hate pictures, and our painters do not know the elements of philosophy, and they never meet one another. It is obviously dangerous that artists should become involved in aesthetic theory.' (N. Gray, 'At the Picture Galleries', *Life and Letters*, 6 (1935-36), p.756.) Her involvement with the International Chinese Exhibition at the Royal Academy's Burlington Galleries, had provoked this commentary, being also her father's last major project, upon which he had lectured and published vigorously throughout 1935.

Gray identified Nicholson's work particularly as having 'just that adjustment of intellectualism and exquisite emotional sensibility that is characteristically Chinese', referring to the 'abstract movement' as inclining towards 'a new academism'. Little wonder that she saw Grigson's comment upon the 'unconscious nihilists of extreme geometric abstraction' as the product of a 'pretentious and ill-written article', which sat uncomfortably amongst 'clear and useful writing' by Read Evans and Nash. (Gray, 'At the Picture', p.756.)

Evans, as Gray later observed, was 'very active (and helped me in my preparation of my Abstract and Concrete exhibition)'. They 'got on' but 'didn't agree', Gray recalling that 'what was in *Axis* was pretentious rubbish.' (unpublished papers in possession of the family.) Yet it was obvious, given the status of *Axis* as the only radical art review at the time, that it was highly appropriate for publicising Gray's exhibition. (For an account of the exhibition and its reception see F. Spalding, "A

true statement of a real thing', Nicolette Gray's promotion of modern art', *Typography papers*, 3 (1998), pp.108-11.) Gray and Evans may not have agreed on some things, but there were alignments of values such as the primacy of 'personal taste' and 'opinion' in critical activity and the conviction that the 'present distrust of modern art' was due to loss of the 'personal relationship' with the artist's aims. (Gray, 'An Open Letter', unpaginated.) Her vision for this exhibition was its demonstration that England was 'making a real contribution to an international art.' (N. Gray, foreword to *Abstract & Concrete. An international exhibition of abstract painting & sculpture to-day*, exh. cat., (April 1936), unpaginated.)

<sup>85</sup> Read, 'Abstract Art', p.3.

<sup>86</sup> Read, 'Abstract Art', p.3.

<sup>87</sup> Read, 'Abstract Art', p.3.

<sup>88</sup> Reiterating connections made in *Art Now*, pp.101-03 and his *Axis 1* article 'Our Terminology'. P.7.

<sup>89</sup> H. Read, *Art Now*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2<sup>nd</sup> imp., 1938), p.9.

<sup>90</sup> 'Superrealism' was Read's own term for his concept related to Surrealism, which evolved between the two editions of *Art Now*, most likely consolidated by his theoretical work resulting from the International Surrealist Exhibition in London in the summer of 1936. For an insight into Read's intellectual reasoning behind his changed concept and terminology, see D. Thistlewood, *Herbert Read: Formlessness and Form. An Introduction to his aesthetics* (London, 1984), pp.67-70. (Read seemed to have capitulated with a position reflecting that argued by Evans and the *Axis* cohort the previous year.)

<sup>91</sup> Read, *Art Now*, (1938), pp.150, 151.

<sup>92</sup> N. Gabo, 'Constructive Art', *Listener*, XVI (4 November 1936), p.846. Whereas the term 'concrete' in the exhibition title was commonly ascribed to Héliou's status as the group secretary and journal editor of the defunct Art Concret group from 1930, the introduction of the term 'constructive' seems ultimately unclear. Other than the Russian pedigree with its revolutionary association, a European, aestheticised concept was implicated in the collective ethos of *Abstraction Creation*. For example, in Gorin's article 'Vers un art sociale et collectif universel' of 1934, he referred to 'l'art, qui, aujourd'hui...a atteint la plastique pure, art collectif universel purement constructif, son développement logique mène directement à la réalisation de l'art essentiellement social...c'est dans cette manifestation que la nouvelle plastique pure atteindra toute la puissance constructive, elle atteindra là sa fin réelle qui est la création dans la vie même de l'esthétique universelle de l'art.' (*Abstraction-Création*, 5 (1936), p.11.) Finally, for Nicholson and Hepworth, this aestheticised form separated them from Gabo increasingly, as argued by Christopher Stephens. See C. Stephens, "'St. Ives' Artists and Landscape", (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Sussex, 1997), pp.160-61.

<sup>93</sup> As stated in the exhibition subtitle. See note 84.



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- <sup>94</sup> The first major Surrealist exhibition in Britain. Read, a committee member together with Moore and Nash amongst others, delivered his lecture, 'Art and the Unconscious' on 19 June, and read a paper on 23 June on 'the political position of Surrealism'. Artists' International Association (org.), *International Surrealist Bulletin* (September 1936), pp.2, 2-7.
- <sup>95</sup> See note 89.
- <sup>96</sup> Read, *Art Now* (1938), p.151.
- <sup>97</sup> Read, *Art Now* (1938), p.151.
- <sup>98</sup> Read, *Art Now* (1938), p.151; Evans, 'Dead', p.3.
- <sup>99</sup> M. Piper, interview with David Masters, 18 February 1993, in D. Masters, 'The Englishness of British Art. Arts and Society in Britain Since the Thirties', (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Open University, 1997), p.303.
- <sup>100</sup> P. Nash, 'Abstract Art', *Listener* (17 August 1932), p.242.
- <sup>101</sup> Nash, 'Abstract', p.242.
- <sup>102</sup> Nash, 'Abstract', p.242.
- <sup>103</sup> Nash, 'Abstract', p.242.
- <sup>104</sup> Nash, 'Abstract', p.242.
- <sup>105</sup> P. Nash, *Axis 1* (January 1935), 24-26.
- <sup>106</sup> Read, in Nash, 'For, But', p.25.
- <sup>107</sup> W. Worringer, (1<sup>st</sup> English trans., London, 1927); Nash, 'For, But', p.25.
- <sup>108</sup> Read, in Nash, 'For, But', p.26; Nash, 'For, But', p.26.
- <sup>109</sup> Nash, 'For, But', p.24.
- <sup>110</sup> Nash, 'For, But'. p.26.
- <sup>111</sup> Nash, 'For, But', p.26.
- <sup>112</sup> Nash, 'Abstract Art', p.242.
- <sup>113</sup> Nash, 'For, But', p.26.
- <sup>114</sup> Nash, 'For, But', p.26.
- <sup>115</sup> Nash, 'For, But', p.26.
- <sup>117</sup> J. Piper, 'Picasso at the Tate', *Axis 1* (January 1935), 27-28.

- <sup>118</sup> P. Wyndham Lewis (S. Cooney ed. & afterword), *Men Without Art* (Santa Rosa, 1987). [repr. from 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (London, 1934), New York, 1964.]
- <sup>119</sup> See Introduction, n.10.
- <sup>120</sup> Lewis, *Men*, p.154.
- <sup>121</sup> Lewis, *Men*, p.154. Quoted from art critic F. Brunetière, (1849-1906), *L'Art et la morale*, n.d.
- <sup>122</sup> Lewis, *Men*, p.157.
- <sup>123</sup> Piper, 'Picasso', pp.27-28.
- <sup>124</sup> Piper, 'Picasso', p.28.
- <sup>125</sup> Grigson acknowledged this in his *Axis 1* article 'Comment on England', p.8.
- <sup>126</sup> Piper had emerged from a period of naïve abstracted naturalism and collages inspired by those of Braque and Picasso, into a series of totally abstract reliefs in which he explored colour and tonal relationships and the assertion and subversion of 'real' space. In effect, what he was exploring in reduced three dimensions mirrored Hélicon's recent explorations of pictorial space.
- <sup>127</sup> That year Grigson elected Lewis one of the four most significant contributors to English modern art – namely Lewis, Ben Nicholson, Wood and Moore. G. Grigson, 'Painting and Sculpture To-Day' in G. Grigson (ed. and intro.), *The Arts To-Day* (London, 1935), pp.97-101. Years later he recalled that Lewis was 'wonderful to know, intellectually generous, more so than anyone I have ever met.' He was 'very sane, very serious, and modern' laying propositions down in front of you.' (...) 'For me Lewis was the accessible great man. Who else was I don't know.' G. Grigson, *The Contrary View. Glimpses of Fudge and Gold* (London, 1974), pp.231-232. Lewis was also accorded a chapter in G. Grigson, *Recollections. Mainly of Writers and Artists* (London, 1984), 12-20.
- <sup>128</sup> G. Grigson, 'Comment on England', *Axis 1* (January 1935), p.8.
- <sup>129</sup> Grigson, 'Comment', p.8.
- <sup>130</sup> Grigson, 'Comment', p.8. His reference was to W. Wundt.
- <sup>131</sup> Grigson, 'Comment', p.8. This required a synthesis of intellect and emotion. In 'Painting' he elaborated that 'All art exists in a tension between geometry and what affects the beholder as being organic or vital', using the same term 'bodied out', and citing Cézanne's successful resolution of 'geometric organic tension' and 'spiritual and sensual' experience, of present apperception and 'the timeless nature of existence.' pp. 73-74.
- <sup>132</sup> Grigson, 'Comment', p.8.

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- 133 Grigson, 'Painting', pp.75-76.
- 134 Grigson, 'Comment', p.10.
- 135 Grigson, 'Painting', pp. 97, 101.
- 136 Letter from Grigson to Nicholson (some time between January and July 1935), TGA 8717.1.2.1422.
- 137 Grigson's curiosity kept him in contact with Surrealist poetry. In later years he commented that *New Verse's* response to Surrealism was however motivated by 'being fashionable, not critical', and that his own Surrealist interests led him to historical art such as Hugo's drawings, and paintings by Arcimboldi and de Chirico amongst others. *New Verse* published David Gascoyne's Surreal poetry. Gascoyne, publishing regularly in the 'Art' column of *New English Weekly* since 1934, produced the first English publication on Surrealism: D. Gascoyne, *A Short Survey of Surrealism* (London, 1935). Grigson enjoyed Gascoyne's translation of Giacometti's *Poem in Seven Spaces*, but later recalled that 'Surrealism was better for painting. It didn't go very well into English, or with England of the Thirties.' Grigson, *Contrary View*, p.236.
- 138 Grigson, 'Painting', p.81.
- 139 Grigson, 'Comment', p.81.
- 140 Grigson, 'Comment', p.10.
- 141 Grigson, 'Comment', p.10.
- 142 Grigson, 'Comment', p.10.
- 143 Grigson, 'Comment', p.10.
- 144 For Evans, 'Abstract Art', see note 56.
- 145 Evans, 'Abstract Art', p.258.
- 146 Decades later, M. Piper recalled the reality of not having a 'group identity': 'Nobody did really. And this was one of the problems with 7&5 [sic]: because of the obstinacy of Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth who considered themselves to have a religion...and none of the rest of us had.' Masters, 'The Englishness', p.300; the proposed rules for the 7&5 abstract exhibition were sent out on 4 May 1934. TGA 849.14. The regular venue, Leicester Galleries, declared they were unable to provide two large rooms. I suggest it was more likely that they did not want large areas dedicated to abstract art. Letter from Leicester Galleries to John Piper. TGA 849.12 undated. However the previous 7&5 (partly abstract) exhibition held there that March, had attracted an unusually large audience. Postcard from John Piper to Ben Nicholson, stamped 9 April 1934. TGA 8717.1.2.3401.
- 147 Power, Swift and Gunningham, 'John Piper', unpaginated. Piper continued to work in abstracted figuration during this period.

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- <sup>148</sup> Two years later as acting chair of the 7&5, Piper expressed his desire to reverse the rule. Letter from John Piper to Winifred Nicholson, 30 July 1936, cited by Harrison, *English Art*, p.376, n.30.
- <sup>149</sup> Evans, 'Abstract Art', p.262.
- <sup>150</sup> Evans, 'Abstract Art', pp.262-63.
- <sup>151</sup> Evans, 'Dead', p.3.
- <sup>152</sup> Evans, 'Abstract Art', p.263.
- <sup>153</sup> For example, Frances Hodgkins' resignation. See comment in letter from John Piper to Frances Hodgkins in I. Buchanan, M. Dunn, E. Eastwood, *Frances Hodgkins. Paintings and Drawings* (London, 1995), p.83, n.73. An independent and successful painter (having a solo exhibition at the Lefèvre Galleries in February 1935), Hodgkins averred any association with a group style. Piper and Evans admired her work greatly.
- <sup>154</sup> Evans, 'Abstract Art', p.260.
- <sup>155</sup> Evans, 'Abstract Art', p.260.
- <sup>156</sup> Evans, 'Abstract Art', p.260.
- <sup>157</sup> J. Héliion, 'From Reduction to Growth', *Axis 2* (April 1935), 19-24.
- <sup>158</sup> Héliion, 'Reduction', p.19.
- <sup>159</sup> Héliion, 'Reduction', pp.19, 21.
- <sup>160</sup> Héliion, 'Reduction', p.21.
- <sup>161</sup> Héliion, 'Reduction', p.22.
- <sup>162</sup> Héliion, 'Reduction', p.23.
- <sup>163</sup> Héliion, 'Reduction', p.23.
- <sup>164</sup> Héliion, 'Reduction', p.23.
- <sup>165</sup> Héliion, 'Reduction', p.24.
- <sup>166</sup> Héliion, 'Reduction', p.22.
- <sup>167</sup> Héliion had explored this area the previous year. His concept 'growth' was represented by 'continuity', exemplified as an inseparable cycle of 'L'oeuvre-progression de termes multiples'. This philosophy was elucidated in his *Cahiers d'Art* article in which his *Axis* term 'growth' was referred to as 'la completion', the outcome of the continual reciprocity of opposites. Under this activity the painter's

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reduction of the material world to signs, organised in groups, achieved a rhythm which ran across the whole painting and through each individual "personnage". The ongoing reciprocity involved the painter who 'pense chaque terme, le produit, le charge, le combine'. This process, filling the mind of the painter, resulted in 'une identification de la vue et l'idée'. (Héliion's 'the essential point of art to identify spirit and material through sight'. 'Reduction', p.22.) J. Héliion, 'La Réalité dans la peinture', *Cahiers d'Art*, 9-10 (Paris, 1934), p.260.

<sup>168</sup> M. Evans, 'Héliion To-Day: A Personal Comment', *Axis* 4 (November 1935), pp.8-9.

<sup>169</sup> Evans, 'Abstract Art', p.261.

<sup>170</sup> See page 94.

<sup>171</sup> H. Read, 'Ben Nicholson and the Future of Painting', *Listener* (9 October 1935), p.605.

<sup>172</sup> Read, 'Ben Nicholson', p.605. The Nicholsons were Christian Scientists. It is argued that Ben Nicholson's attitude towards his work emerged from this philosophy, as exemplified in his *Unit 1* statement. Read (ed. and intro.), *Unit 1* (London, 1934), p.89. For a brief explanation of the connection see Lewison, *Ben Nicholson*, pp.26-27.

<sup>173</sup> M. Evans, 'Beginning with Picasso', *Axis* 2 (April 1935), p.3.

<sup>174</sup> Evans, 'Beginning', p.3.

<sup>175</sup> Evans, 'Beginning', p.3.

<sup>176</sup> 21-25.

<sup>177</sup> Thwaiteses, 'The Search', pp.21-22.

<sup>178</sup> Thwaiteses, 'The Search', p.22.

<sup>179</sup> Thwaiteses, 'The Search', p.22.

<sup>180</sup> Thwaiteses, 'The Search', p.22.

<sup>181</sup> Evans, 'Dead', p.4; M. Evans, 'Kandinsky's Vision', *Axis* 2 (April 1935), p.7; Evans, 'Abstract Art', p.261.

<sup>182</sup> Thwaiteses, 'The Search', p.22.

<sup>183</sup> Breton, cited in Thwaiteses, 'The Search', p.22 and n.

<sup>184</sup> Thwaiteses, 'The Search', p.22.

<sup>185</sup> Thwaiteses, 'The Search', p.22.

<sup>186</sup> Thwaiteses, 'The Search', p.23.

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<sup>187</sup> Thwaiteses, 'The Search', pp.23, 24.

<sup>188</sup> Grigson, 'Comment', p.8.

<sup>189</sup> The Thwaiteses infer this in their criticism that Breton and his 'English admirers' were 'too interested in subject-matter.' 'The Search', p.22; M. Evans, 'Order, order!', *Axis* 6 (Summer 1936), p.8.

<sup>190</sup> Thwaiteses, 'The Search', p.22.

<sup>191</sup> Gascoyne, *A Short Survey*, pp.104-05, 132-22.

<sup>192</sup> Evans, 'Order', p.8. The previous year Binyon had given a public lecture entitled 'The English Romantic Revival in Art and Poetry: a Reconsideration', subsequently published this year (London, 1936). Evans was greatly motivated by the lineage of the English romantic revival, and given her collaboration at this time with Gray over the Abstract & Concrete exhibition it is highly likely that she either attended the lecture or obtained the booklet, which included a focus on Blake amongst other artists, as a precursor not of the Surrealists, but of a generally percipient romanticism in the contemporary English perception. Binyon, 'The English', p.25.

<sup>193</sup> Thwaiteses, 'The Search', pp.21-22.

<sup>194</sup> There had been a concept of the romantic attitude as conciliatory towards the classic character, yet instigating and dominating the expression, recently propounded by the poet and close friend of Binyon, L. Abercrombie, in *Romanticism* (London, 1926), pp.14-15. Piper's commentary on Picasso's painting in *Axis* 1 demonstrated his tendency towards this attitude. See p.113.

<sup>195</sup> The only two painters featured in *Axis* 4 were Hélión and Piper. H. Read, 'Jean Hélión', 3-4; M. Evans, 'Hélión To-day: a personal comment', 4-9; H. Wescher, 'John Piper, 1935', 12-13; H. Gordon Porteus, 'Piper and Abstract Possibilities', 15-16.

### CHAPTER III

#### 'LIFE ENOUGH IN PAINTING'

From the outset of *Axis*, Evans and her cohort subscribed to Nash's identification of the 'true' modern attitude.<sup>1</sup> That Picasso, so central for the development of English modern painting, had emphatically claimed this attitude as his own, significantly framed the values and priorities of the *Axis* cohort firmly within the modern European tradition.<sup>2</sup> More particularly however, the complex issues surrounding non-figurative abstraction as a manifestation of modern painting, disrupted the relationship between 'modern' and 'tradition' for some of its practitioners, of whom Nicholson was the key protagonist, whilst consolidating it for others, some of whom were represented by Héliou and the *Axis* cohort.

This chapter identifies and explores those issues as *present* in *Axis*, namely the process of painting as an *authentic* act; the reciprocity between painting and the 'fullness of present life'; the problems of perceptions of non-figurative geometric abstraction both as decoration, and of Nicholson's particularly as a 'moral' aesthetic; the relationship between biomorphic abstraction and cultural specificity with particular reference to 'English'; and the perception of Piper's abstractions as 'English'. The aim here is to demonstrate the strength with which *Axis*, by issue 7, was identifying biomorphic abstraction as an inherent constituent of English painting history, and thereby its 'true' cultural expression.

Before proceeding I need to clarify my use of the term 'biomorphic' and its implications. I have continued its use in a much broader sense, using Héliou and Piper as representing attitudes towards painting which were of an abstract but pictorial organicism. Both were viewing their forms as 'objects' moving within the pictorial space. Piper did not however, intellectualise his paintings as autonomous



organic entities (Héliou's 'cellules'), but retained the association with the external world of 'objects'.

Where there was no gestural expression, no 'organic' (meaning curved or sinuous) linearity, no pictorial space, nor movement through actual space (as in the case of Calder's mobiles), such art was viewed by the *Axis* cohort, as 'dead', as we have seen.<sup>3</sup> The significant point about their use of the term 'biomorphic' was that whereas in the earlier issues of *Axis*, it referred to a 'life' in the painting, or the processing of form in pictorial language, it was then elided with the *feeling for life* in the execution of that process, that 'feeling' deriving from experiences of 'real' life, namely the effects of the material world. In other words, the emotional dimension became the critical factor. I propose therefore that 'biomorphic' in the scientific sense ('bio') was transmuted into their broader concept of painting from the 'fullness of present life', and my continued use of it embraces that concept.<sup>4</sup>

After *Axis* 1's adoption of a broad church of abstract art for review, as well as an examination of the concept of 'abstract' itself, *Axis* 2 effectively inserted a feature on Nicholson's work into the established modern European tradition, alongside features on Kandinsky, Klee and Héliou. Significantly however, evidence of a bifurcation in abstract loyalties had already emerged. In this issue both Read and Tschichold were highly complementary about Nicholson's reliefs.<sup>5</sup> Read's commentary on Nicholson's reliefs, as discussed, was of their comparison with the physical world, which made a stark but apposite comparison with Evans's, A. Jakovski's and W. Grohmann's preceding features on Kandinsky and Klee respectively, in which they discussed their biomorphic forms of abstract painting in terms of poetic and metaphoric allusion to emotional states.<sup>6</sup> This was, I argue, a

deliberate editorial move on Evans's part to publicise both types of abstract art, but more significantly, to highlight their distinct differences. Read's associations of Nicholson's reliefs with architecture demonstrated no such poetic perception of their qualities. As an article it was dry, brief and evasive about motives, even though six months later he referred to Nicholson's endeavour 'to create works which embod[ied] the 'underlying spirit' of his 'subjective conception of nature'.<sup>7</sup> Tschichold's article however, was a spirited argument establishing the intellectual status of Nicholson's work which, he instructed, required serious consideration 'for a long time'.<sup>8</sup> Its tone claimed a certain morality in Nicholson's discipline and rigour, and thereby in those viewers who understood it, other kinds of abstract art appealing merely to the senses and not to the intellect:

There are many people who maintain, for instance, that they understand Klee and yet don't bring a glimmer of understanding to bear on the real abstract painters. Perhaps these over-emphasise the pleasurable aspect of art. When they really have to come to grips with a work of art, they give up.<sup>9</sup>

Following Jakovski's florid commentary on Kandinsky and Grohmann's on Klee, Tschichold's insinuations seem clear enough. Again there is the insinuation of two kinds of 'abstract', except that the proposition was no longer merely for their difference, but for the 'real' (intellectual) and the *manqué*, Tschichold emphatically representing Nicholson's reliefs as 'real' abstract. By implication not-quite-real abstract, as in Picasso's work, was 'merely a means of pleasure'.<sup>10</sup> If as Tschichold argued, Nicholson, in moving from 'comparatively rich forms' to 'greater simplicity by diminishing the number of his formal elements', had 'heightened the expressiveness of his work', then the insinuation was that all other artists who had not succeeded in this ultimate transition were *de facto* unable to express 'logically', and therefore not really, because not able to be, 'real abstract painters'.<sup>11</sup> But it was

a *generic* difference that was being argued here, and not an evolutionary one, somewhat recalling Bell's argument about 'significant form' some twenty years earlier.<sup>12</sup> The tension is tangible in this article between the geometric non-figurative abstractionists and the biomorphists, with the latter being regarded as *not* truly abstract by the former.

Evans's own short commentary on 'Kandinsky's Vision' revealed her conviction in subjectively expressive abstract art, providing a telling counterpart to Tschichold's claims for a rational non-figurative abstraction. Opening with the claim that 'In sophisticated people vision is what the eye doesn't see', she proceeded to build the case for an internalised, emotionally charged vision – 'the mind...the inner eye...the heart' as the means to what the eyes see, namely an apperception of 'spiritual light'.<sup>13</sup> Kandinsky, she argued, gave the fullness of his experience expression in his work without rigid construction or impositions of logic. Her comments directly located the priorities of Read and Tschichold as opposed to her own:

But Kandinsky's eyes are his vision – he allows them their full physical and spiritual discernment, and puts no other senses, no habits of mind, conventions or intellectual judgments between them and a pure enjoyment of colour and line...

And when I look at Kandinsky's pictures I have to allow my eyes this licence too. There is nothing to comfort the spirit, as there is in some sanitary painting to-day; no good taste, it is not needed – good taste is what a compromise between soul, sense and habit produces; nothing to tickle the intellect, and allow it to coerce the eye into approval of *recherché* (sic) relations; and so I can only judge by the immediate reaction of my sight.<sup>14</sup>

'Sanitary painting', 'good taste', 'a compromise', 'coerc[ion]' into 'approval of *recherché* relations' – these barbed comments were undoubtedly directed at the work of Nicholson and his cohort, implied as those of 'good taste', who were

implicitly not 'sophisticated people'. Yet despite her conviction, Evans was at this stage in *Axis* remaining resolute in her inclusive reviewing of art recognised as 'abstract'. The very contents of this issue, with the generic distinctions between these two abstract philosophies, also demonstrated that the duality of Nicholson's as opposed to Kandinsky's and Klee's work and the character of their associated commentaries, represented classic and romantic attitudes to 'abstract' art.<sup>15</sup> This was I suggest, another of Evans's subtler articulations which revealed her personal position.

It might be argued therefore, that almost in the guise of a concluding synthesis of the two abstract (classic and romantic) attitudes, following the Kandinsky and Klee, and the Nicholson reviews, did Evans place Héliou's 'From Reduction to Growth' discussed in chapter two.<sup>16</sup> Abstract art he argued, was the outcome of 'an authentic development', which needed to 'keep[ing] an axis of progression'.<sup>17</sup> In apparent opposition to Nicholson, he declared 'against any tendency of definitive forms, of taboos of any sort...The field of possibilities must be kept wide open'.<sup>18</sup>

It is important to keep a sense of proportion to this internal tension of priorities. Where superficially, Héliou's and Nicholson's paintings and reliefs might have appeared to represent the same abstract propositions, we have seen how fundamentally differently they were thinking by this time. Héliou's newly developing organic language, *de facto* refused restriction, its scope for expressing 'life' being the subtle spatial quality of its forms and composition. Not for nothing had Evans declared that 'A hair's-breadth between two positions of a shape on a background made the difference between one picture and another.'<sup>19</sup>

When in 'Dead or Alive' Evans observed that the redundancy of imitation precipitated by the camera also meant the loss of 'a restraint which had kept painting within the scope of its own tradition', she had inferred that the consequent 'exhaustive analysis of shapes' which painting undertook, had masked in its apparent simplicity a complex process, whose result could only be an entirely personal expression.<sup>20</sup> As discussed, her insistence that 'the tradition be kept actively alive', was not an exhortation for a reiteration of earlier developments, but a continuation of 'the technical and emotional exploration of shapes left by the analysed object' through a building process.<sup>21</sup> This reinforced her perception that abstract painting was a further exploration of the 'object' (the material world), in pictorial terms, expressed individually.

She understood the role that the craft of painting played in this 'exhaustive analysis of shapes', celebrating in *Axis 3* Cézanne's 'interest in painting for its own sake', indicating in *L'enlèvement* (1867) that the two central figures 'are realised entirely pictorially; *the paint not the landscape*, is dark but brilliantly exciting. The two figures are vigorous with *a life in the picture*, not with a detached moral or literary life' (my italics).<sup>22</sup> It was not therefore the subjugation of paint to a closely detailed naturalism, but the homage to ordinary life in the rendering of paint that enthused her about his work. She continued

Cézanne the painter of apples...of the famous almost analytical portraits...of trees and mountains...is not important, but Cézanne the painter is. How and what he painted was an inevitable accident of birth and time...the one thing that is constant is an interest in painting for its own sake...The intensity with which Cézanne painted...kept the spirit alive by continual change, conviction and achievement. Each stage, each brush stroke even was an answer to his own spiritual necessity...and an answer to the pictorial needs of the time.<sup>23</sup>

For all the excitement and admiration she felt about the Paris studio visits, she knew that painting as a practice, and the motives driving that practice, constituted the symbiotic connection of an artist with his era, in both conscious and unconscious activity.<sup>24</sup> Drawn into the process in its entirety, she had been ‘conquered’ by Héliou’s ability verbally and actively to bring his ‘pictures’ to ‘life’.<sup>25</sup> She felt ‘an upsurge of belief in the actual activity of painting then... This was the way it was being done. What mattered was the capacity to be in it at the moment of existence.’<sup>26</sup>

Héliou’s emphasis on abstract painting’s relation to the tradition of representation lay in his by now habitual recourse to the developments by French painters in history.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, I suggest, the innovative approaches of Constable or Cézanne to evolving new languages representing their responses to ‘nature’, demonstrated to Evans how abstract painting was merely a continuation of the same activity. But whereas they had reached their solutions through a rounded process derived from direct engagement with ‘nature’ or ‘life’, Evans, who like Nash was aware of the contemporary tendency to adopt an abstract idiom, observed that there were ‘plenty of painters and critics who...ask for the result without the spiritual necessity that produced it’, referring to that drive as ‘actual living intensity’.<sup>28</sup> I am arguing that the absence of ‘spiritual necessity’ in some abstract painting suggested to her an inauthenticity that denied it as ‘good’ painting:

The only inevitable direction to-day seems to be towards abstract painting...But it happens to-day that non-representational painting is called abstract and that some of it is also abstract in this intense living way; but it is never clear whether abstract painting (meaning non-representational) is being used as a synonym for good painting or not.

It doesn’t matter if a good painter paints apples or squares, but he must move from a calculable achievement (Cézanne’s apples),

which dies if it is over-worked, to an incalculable and urgent possibility of achievement.<sup>29</sup>

To be 'abstract in this intense living way' was to be entirely isolated from 'life', whereas Cézanne's figures were 'vigorous' with a painted, pictorial 'life' and not a 'detached moral' or 'literary life'.<sup>30</sup> The 'life' experienced by the painter needed to be transformed into a life in the paint rather than merely in the narrative. What concerned her were the implications of a constricted craft of painting directed towards an idealised end, effecting its closure rather than its expansion of possibility. Her apparent confusion 'but it is never clear whether...or not' abstract painting was synonymous with 'good *painting*' (my italics), reflected her appreciation of the dilemma facing artists attempting to resolve a non-figurative abstract process with (good) painterly expression. It had after all, always been subjectively propelled and nourished by subject matter or 'object'. Could, and if so how could, a geometric non-figurative painter be also a *good painter*? She was evidently considering how geometric abstraction engaged with the craft of painting.

Her reference to painting which denoted a 'detached, moral' life was I suggest, aimed at Nicholson's austere abstraction and its self-denial, and at the absence of a painterly process. That autumn in her 'Abstract Art' essay, as if to correct Tschichold's inference of the intellectual status of Nicholson's work, she declared Nicholson's 'moral abstraction' as not exhibiting a 'rigid theory', but his 'pleasure in simplicity for its own sake and not because it illustrates a proposition'.<sup>31</sup>

Whereas she acknowledged the uniqueness of his reliefs as an approach within the non-figurative geometric limitation, she implied that limitation as being more concerned with personal taste than theoretical 'propositions', since its potential for 'more expansion', was only ('at least') 'within the limits of the temperament of the artist', its austerity being in her view an expression of innate good taste as an end in

itself.<sup>32</sup> Grigson had referred to the ‘admirable taste’ of Nicholson’s reliefs, and Héliou, in referring to the ‘cul-de-sac position’ currently sought by artists, described how, in making the ‘most technically perfected works’, the artist was manifesting ‘a certain representation of his own complexes and qualities’.<sup>33</sup>

This was a fair view, since Nicholson himself made no claims to ‘propositions’ in his work – though identifying with those who did – but he did have a ‘religion’ which guided his entire way of life and which was congruent with a utopian view of the world. In his *Unit 1* essay he had likened painting and ‘religious experience’ as ‘the same thing’.<sup>34</sup> His aesthetic philosophy partly stemmed from his Christian Scientist beliefs, and his white and orderly studio environment revealed his predilection for the study of modest objects of simple form.<sup>35</sup> For those who knew him well, his own reliefs and paintings emerged from a dedication to modest objects, reflecting the precision of simple design.(Pl.19)

Not only was the austerity of Nicholson’s work perceived by Evans and others as much as a part of his ‘taste’, as reflecting the quality of his ‘religion’, it tended also to be associated with a sense of moral virtue. Evans found the reliefs ‘sober and delicate, moral and charming’: a somewhat ambiguous comment suggesting a virtuous vacuity rather than an intellectual rigour, more than likely prompted by Nicholson’s messianic crusade.<sup>36</sup> She continued to refer to both his artistic and his life philosophy as a ‘religion’, a term whose ambiguity would not have been lost to those who felt Nicholson’s austerity to be rather devout.<sup>37</sup> Read’s observation that the reliefs were ‘integral...with all the *virtues* of modern sensibility’, whilst obviously a tribute to their accomplished contemporaneity, nevertheless suggested the ‘superiority’ of his aesthetic, both intellectual, moral and artistic.<sup>38</sup>



This ambivalence seems still to have been broadly felt. Both their cool subtlety and their reflection of the modern environment were perceived as attractive yet dangerous for art by the architect and newly appointed Assistant Editor of the *Architectural Review*, J. M. Richards, when he reviewed Nicholson's solo exhibition in *Axis 4*.<sup>39</sup> He had observed that (as Picasso had stated) the authentic practice of art was one of 'discovery' rather than working to predetermined criteria, by asserting that 'what [wa]s important [wa]s the exploration that [wa]s going on'.<sup>40</sup> He posited two arguments rapidly becoming major concerns for the non-figurative abstract artists. Concurring with Nash, Evans and Grigson's views, he warned of the tendency of abstract art to be misinterpreted as decoration, and reminded that it was the integrity of the practice that defined its aesthetic character.

Viewing Nicholson's collection of reliefs in their gallery surroundings, Richards perceived the impending 'danger' that 'threaten[ed]' abstract art generally but Nicholson's most imminently, as a result of the inability of the public to discern the distinction between the genuine outcome of a process as opposed to an adoption of style.<sup>41</sup> Once accounted for by the mystified public as architecturally inspired (suggesting 'an obvious comparison'), the reliefs would simply become 'relegated for ever' to the status of the cornice and mantelpiece – 'spots of decorative relief work.'<sup>42</sup> 'More insidious than mere abuse' Richards explained, this 'unfortunate' 'misinterpretation' 'beset[s] the whole of abstract art while in the process of establishing itself – [the danger of] its formal significance bec[oming] lost in its own decorative potentialities.'<sup>43</sup> He continued to remind the readers that 'The tension, concentration, personal vision....that distinguishes creation from pattern-making is so fundamental that the two are *different in kind*, not in degree of

achievement.’(my italics)<sup>44</sup> Once straying into purposes external to art therefore, the vitality of the work *as* art died. Nicholson’s reliefs therefore trod a fine line which Richards perceived as a risk to their status: ‘Ben Nicholson’s reliefs *have* an affinity with modern architecture; that is a test of their vitality...they are both manifestations of the same abstract aesthetic; but his reliefs are emphatically also carvings on their own account.’<sup>45</sup> There was good reason to expose this issue which dogged both abstract painting and sculpture as autonomous entities, namely that abstract art was being promoted, with the aid of *Studio*, as an accessory to modern furniture in the modern home.<sup>46</sup>

Richards was knowledgeable and eloquent about art practices, and concerned above all that art and architecture maintained their discrete identities through materials and processes as generic to their functions, referring to the ‘social responsibilities’ of the artist that ‘demand of him – responsibilities beyond the mere “self-expression” that flatters his own sensitivity’.<sup>47</sup> Nicholson’s individual ‘taste’ or ‘morality’ had set boundaries that he believed were formative criteria for abstract painting. Those who were committed to them worked towards an ideal ‘end’, even though by the end of 1935 there had been few attempts to elucidate the process.

The self-consciousness required to conform to a collective aim had become a big issue for Piper. By the time of *Axis 6* in the summer of 1936, the Abstract & Concrete exhibition had completed its rounds.<sup>48</sup> According to Lewison, Nicholson had become ‘disenchanted’ by this time with Héliou’s work ‘which had become too biomorphic and impure for his taste’.<sup>49</sup> Piper’s antipathy towards being represented by a strict ‘group’ as dictated by Nicholson, had grown to the point that he thought it necessary to put into writing his personal position on non-figurative geometric

abstract painting. His letter to Nicholson, written whilst the show was still travelling, reiterated his convictions. It is worth quoting at length.

There is nobody I'd rather be associated with than you (and Barbara, and Jackson) in any continent – but with you and Barbara and Jackson as individuals – as artists – and not as part of a movement. I persist in thinking this very important. I believe that movements are only *discovered* afterwards. That to force them at the time of their progress is to kill the artists in them. I like Chardin, Cézanne, Ben Nicholson. I dislike the French still-life school, the Post-Impressionists and the Abstract-concs [sic] as groups, as movements, as ideas, as rackets – as any sort of a collection. I think they are, as any of these, dull and deathly. At the same time, I see the importance of them as groups *afterwards*. I see that if other people hadn't worked with them, shown with them and argued with them they would not have got as clearly out into open country as they did. The Abstract-Conc [sic] show I regard as a purely commercial necessity in its present form. As in no way *ideal*. As a delightful show, because by far the best there has been in England in this century – that is to say, as a collection of the largest percentage of good works (about ½, according to me). But for it to be ideal it would have to be arranged *entirely* by you or me or Barbara or any one individual *with* an ideal about such work. Then it would be ideal for you, for me, for Barbara, or whoever arranged it, and a bit less ideal for everyone else. In the meantime it is not good enough to be taken for a standard – it merely lays each individual open to criticism on the general level of the show.....(the artists in a group show) must agree to show with one another and propose new exhibitors whose work they like on the ground of that alone (not because it fits in with a theory).<sup>50</sup>

The exhortation was for a healthy art, sharpened to the best achievement of each individual and tempered in the fire of free debate and mutual respect. In his review of Picasso's exhibition in the same issue, Piper did not shrink from his responsibility to express his honest opinion of his mentor, admitting his disappointment with Picasso's 'passion' which had 'become more than ever personal and incommunicable – and occasionally a little hectic...in some of the new paintings look[ing] like the product of habit rather than experience.'<sup>51</sup> 'To painters' he observed 'he is probably less important than he has ever been, as an influence.'<sup>52</sup>

His concern was about the lack of genuine exploration in much contemporary painting:

Nowadays we tend to invent the school before we produce the painting. Abstraction has its purist ideals, its rigorous non-figurative tenets: Surrealism has its manifestos. The works, instead of creating them are produced under the terms of them. The manifestos may get stretched and warped, but the artists are conscious of the rules, whether they play well or badly, whether they obey the rules or cheat.<sup>53</sup>

As if staking out the ground for Piper's argument, Evans reiterated in her editorial the two 'distinctions' she discerned from the beginning of *Axis*, between those interested in the art of painting (or sculpture) as opposed to painting and sculpture as a means to an end. This time she named names, again separating those abstract artists working towards 'ends' firstly as the new incomers Moholy-Nagy and Gabo, who were discovering new materials and processes.<sup>54</sup> (Pls.20, 21) Their work being in the nature of prototypes for large scale public statements in other materials, meant it did not in her view explore painting and sculpture as expressions within themselves. Secondly Mondrian, Nicholson, Hepworth, Domela and Erni were linked 'almost as one group – the "pure abstractionists"', in their shared 'sense of precision, light and clarity', towards a 'fixed goal' 'end'.<sup>55</sup> (Pls.22-26) Expressing her critical perception of their motives, and referring to the 'pure abstractionists' as a group since they chose to be regarded thus, she declared:

Theirs is a spiritual, not a material, demand – they do not want scope and apparatus, they want Utopia, an embodied faith. There is in their whole attitude to painting and sculpture a passionate belief in the power for good of pure abstract work. Pure colours, clear, brilliant contrasts or the delicate clarity of one pale line against another, the absence of human and earthly associations, all mean to them a positive step to perfection – perhaps a piece of perfection itself. Not towards a brave new world where applied science baffles the spirit, but towards a world of light where the idea of goodness, progress and perfection is given validity through a communal life of the abstinence that means true liberty. Each

step in painting or sculpture is not the solving of a personal problem, but one more piece of evidence in the new order.<sup>56</sup>

Again those virtuous ideals of 'goodness' and 'abstinence' as defining qualities for the 'pure abstractionists', the biomorphic abstractionists were implicitly associated with 'human and earthly associations', the 'baffle[d] spirit', '[im]perfection', the 'personal problem'.<sup>57</sup> It needs reiterating that whereas Evans was not questioning the sincerity of the *beliefs* of those artists in strict geometric abstraction as a 'good' for the future, she nevertheless found both them, and the belief of the Surrealists in canalising the 'unknown forces of the mind', narrow and unconcerned with the 'art of painting or...of sculpture'.<sup>58</sup> The many who were painting for neither of these 'religions', for example Picasso, Arp, Giacometti, Moore, Héliou, Hartung, Piper, Jackson and Holding she declared, 'reserve the right to alter according to their inclination and nature, and not according to a group-programme' manifested, she recalled years later, as 'the strict against the not so strict.'<sup>59</sup> (Pls.27, 28) Since she regarded painting or sculpture as the outcome of the individual organic working process and not the conforming to a group programme, I argue that she viewed both Nicholson and Hepworth as not engaged in authentic forms of practice, as defined by the tenets of their respective traditions.

By the summer of 1936 therefore, all that is necessary in order to discern that *Axis* was forming a direction, and further, that it signified its alignment with neither the surreal nor the Nicholson non-figurative 'group-programmes', was firmly in place. An important factor in the emerging trajectory was Evans's insistence on maintaining her right to individual choice in her editorial policy, rather than being pressurised by expectations; and I suggest that she felt her own editorial choices reflected her experience of the contemporary complexity of the situation. The essentially individual activity of producing an abstract art formed from and redolent

with 'life' appears, I suggest, to have been the analogy by which she executed her form of art criticism. In her article entitled 'Hélion to-day: A Personal Comment', she emphasised that the critique was hers alone, about Hélion at the present, and not an 'absolute criticism with an absolute interpretation'.<sup>60</sup> In order 'to distinguish between self-commitment and dogma', she claimed her right to her own perceptions:

It seems to me that in criticism to-day, something is needed which comes between dogmatic evaluation for all time and running commentary dictated by a mood. Criticism in which the price of effort is not permanence. And I should like to state dogmatically now that this is the principle aimed at in *Axis*.<sup>61</sup> [sic]

So two things are established here. Firstly that the integrity of individual expression should be perceived and understood for its own achievement in the light of its motivating interests, and not measured against group concensus or programmes. Evans's final cautionary note, that *Axis* addressed what was *current* interest and opinion for *those who contributed to it*, re-established that it had no prescribed attitude, agenda or loyalty, and that it concentrated on the priorities of the artists themselves in their practice of abstraction. It is reasonable to suppose that the need she felt to conclude with these statements might have arisen from unsatisfied expectations of the scope and tone of its contributions. Such expectations, it could be further supposed, were most likely to have been from those who subscribed strongly to strict non-figurative geometric abstract art, namely (at least) Nicholson and Hepworth.

Secondly by implication, Evans's view of her role as a critic was of its responsibility towards representing the aims and intentions of the artist through discussion of the rationale of the work and its manifesting processes, and not in

strategies (theoretical or otherwise) based upon the final outcome. Insofar as she was editor of *Axis*, she did not therefore, merely see herself as a watchdog for abstract painting and sculpture in England. There were no objective pronouncements to be made in her art review. Editing and writing was her *own* form of practice, the commissions and selections made reflected her experience and perspective of abstract art within her remit as a 'reviewer'.<sup>62</sup> *Axis*'s features on a range of manifestations testified to this conviction but her perception of the 'truth' and significance of biomorphic abstraction was of *as an artistic process evolved from the tradition of representation*, and as a scholar she instinctively moved straight to the primary sources – the work and its maker – for deriving an understanding. It was this procedure that revealed to her what were, in her opinion, authentic and inauthentic forms of practice.

As we have seen, it was the pictorial qualities in painting through which she sought associations with 'life'. She found Héliou's moving forms and use of colour 'sensitive[ness]' with the 'charm of landscape' yet not literally 'recall[ing] nature at all.'<sup>63</sup> Piper's 'planes or shutters which move behind or in front of one another infinitely...The relation is shifting not fixed' were evocative of a spatial ambiguity; the 'constant movement of light and dark', and the luminous colour she confirmed, were inspired by 'Early glass-painting'.<sup>64</sup> She found the 'pure form idea' seductive, but that it did not stand up to scrutiny, and that even Mondrian was 'unable to illustrate a theory of pure form' because his lines and colour 'exhibit[ed] a theory of life and painting at once'.<sup>65</sup> She quoted Léger to validate her view: 'Logic and the analytic spirit can penetrate a work of art to a certain depth but never to the roots.'<sup>66</sup>

Before leaving this area of the communication of 'life' in abstract form, I want to demonstrate the lengths to which Evans went to clarify to *Axis* readers an example of the painter's account of abstract painting, in her effort to banish misconceptions of its integrity. Of the artists who contributed to *Axis* it was Héliou whom she commissioned to elucidate his process. In his article 'Poussin, Seurat and Double Rhythm' he explained his view of the 'process of creation' as the dual activity of 'generative and receptive modelling of each form'.<sup>67</sup> He went through the process: 'Facing the surface all internal energies tended, the painter finds a form... Immediately born, the form has a personality...offers plastic suggestions and reacts on the conception of the painter...The created form becomes creative. What is built, builds back the conception. A continuity between man and his work is started. Then, equilibrium takes on another importance.'<sup>68</sup>

This 'other' importance to the term 'equilibrium' transcended the common meaning of equality or symmetry, and referred to the reciprocity of the mental idea and its expression. It was not a completion of a *visual* equality, but a *mental* equal, or 'other half', or potential to the painted 'term', the 'expectation' of a further move, a progression built on the anticipation of that possible 'other half'.<sup>69</sup> It was an acceleration. 'This new progression always goes faster and elsewhere than foreseen', he explained.<sup>70</sup> 'Each term is something added to the knowledge, instead of something expected.'<sup>71</sup> The spectator was in this way served 'a drink so rich that each swallow feeds a new part of him, delivers a new taste.'<sup>72</sup> 'Time exists in a picture', he stated, and however the viewing was ordered, there was 'acceleration, continuity, infinity', the means of potential growth, which was a logical outcome, as in 'nature':



The least figurative painter cannot go far without getting a permanent lesson from nature. The meaning of what we create is only expressed in that endless dictionary. This is the only constant, the only light clearing the significance of any picture. The chief point is to work within the meaning of nature instead of its appearance.<sup>73</sup>

Thus the activity mirrored nature's reciprocal responsiveness. Its mental dimension implied the spiritual outcome, and this defined the essence of Héliou's idea of 'equilibrium':

The top meaning of equilibrium is probably "thinking". Equilibrium identifies in permanently renewed ways, ethic, plastic, everything the painter is capable of. *The shape becomes thought.* [my italics] One cannot be parted from another. The eye-mind of the painter goes over it all...the painter faces it and sees this complex-self in it...Identity is reached between substance and thought. To work one is to work the other. The plastic error denounces the ethic error. Painting is a language.<sup>74</sup>

In this concept, conscious manipulation of the medium towards a determined end whether it were imitation of nature or execution of a premeditated design, merely subjugated the medium's inherent potential, by imposing the next move. However, the true reciprocity of act and thought enacted by Héliou, allowed the medium to speak and thought to materialise.

It was no mean achievement for a painter to offer such an explanation. Héliou's 'From Reduction to Growth' and 'Poussin, Seurat and Double Rhythm' together constituted, I propose, the most explicit commentaries of abstract painterly practice published at this time in England, and by which *Axis* could legitimately lay claim to pioneering that understanding in the public realm. In this sense its commitment to publicising and promoting contemporary "abstract" painting and sculpture' was still emphatically manifest by *Axis* 6, whether or not it was the kind of abstract painting that was subscribed to by Nicholson or his cohort.

I am proposing that in Piper's opinion, artistic self-consciousness was an attitude which produced inauthentic abstract painting and sculpture. In his previously quoted letter to Nicholson at the time of *Axis 6*, his strength of feeling and his comments over this posturing suggests to me that there had been conversations over Nicholson's aspiration or claim to be making or effecting 'history', which may well have arisen from the impact of the Abstract Concrete exhibition.<sup>75</sup> The fact that Piper put his feelings into writing indicated his need to register the seriousness of his opposition: 'I believe that movements are only *discovered* afterwards. That forcing them at the time of their progress is to kill the artists in them' he asserted, quoting Porteus "The movement *will come to be CONSIDERED*, I am certain, of great historic significance." I agree with that.' He continued:

That *is precisely* its significance (and it is a big one) – great historic significance. You can't encourage history while its [sic] going on. You can only recognise it when it becomes history. *At the time*, the artists in a group show, or rather their works, are the important thing. They must agree to show with one another kick one another out without sentiment when they want to and propose new exhibitors whose work they like, on the ground of that alone (not because it fits in with a theory). *That* is bound to make a movement that will be recognised as of GREAT HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE.<sup>76</sup>

The implication of Piper's exhortation that history could not be made in the present formed the basis for his and Grigson's co-authored article opening *Axis 7*. The difference between Nicholson's desire to make history '*at the time*', denied in its self-consciousness, the intensity of concentration on the business of painting. It was therefore, the unselfconsciousness characterising artistic expression in history which 'England's Climate' sought to establish as the enduring state of the artist in the execution of their discipline. More importantly, in their opinion it remained the only genuine attitude for contemporary practice. What motivated this intensity was a 'feeling for life'.<sup>77</sup> This was not solely the 'life' of Héliou's organic structures,

his painting ('cellule') although implicit, expressing the fundamental structure of life, but 'life' as lived in 1930s England.

Evans had referred to the 'living intensity' with which Cézanne painted, and the tendency of 'plenty' of contemporary painters and critics blindly to follow his idiom, ignoring the 'spiritual necessity' – the 'inevitable accident of birth and time' – which influenced 'how' and 'what' he painted.<sup>78</sup> In their constructed dialogue, Piper and Grigson similarly lamented the lack of 'a feeling for life' in abstract and surrealist painting, and by implication, the detachment of progressive painting at that time. The repetition of the same idiom was a lifeless act, but the repetition of an expression of a *feeling* for life was an act of vitality and renewal.

Citing English artists from history – Constable, Blake, Turner – Piper and Grigson claimed that the 'fullness, completeness: the abstract qualities of all good painting together with the symbolism (at least) of life itself' was something unattainable in abstract or surrealist painting.<sup>79</sup> This was no sudden realisation, having been present in *Axis* and other parallel writings from the first issue. It was therefore no intervention in discussions of abstract art. But at this stage it was being argued unequivocally with explicit references to the tradition of painting through particular historic artists, as the entire theme of an *Axis* feature, with accompanying illustrations by Constable, Wood, Fuseli and Palmer, and Piper's painting of medieval stained glass as its frontispiece.<sup>80</sup> (Pls.29, 30) As a visual statement as much as anything else, it appeared controversial. Moreover, Piper saw his responsibility to claim as his own the implications of this conviction. He continued:

Life grows out of a good sculptor's or painter's work. Read Constable's letters, or a poem of Blake's, or look at an early glass painting. Each "means" far more than itself alone. It "means" the life of the artist, – but beyond that, the life of his time. A Samuel

Palmer of a barn at Shoreham, or a hillside, “means” Palmer’s whole existence and surroundings, and it fixes the whole passion of his age.<sup>81</sup>

Palmer’s was a ‘tragic life’ under the ‘massive weight of a new age’, something analogous to their feelings about their contemporary condition, and Grigson declared that artists needed to look to their precursors for lifelines.<sup>82</sup> Palmer’s examples were Blake and Fuseli, from whom he inherited the traditions of ‘painting...literature...[and] European society’.<sup>83</sup> It was a full and rich knowledge which informed his perception of life, but in time the tradition became weaker, dissipating into ‘scraps’ remaining in only a few contemporary painters.<sup>84</sup>

The problem was that in viewing painting this ‘fullness’ was invariably forgotten as its constituting condition. The ‘whole experience stored in [our] being’ which manifested an expression, was removed from its discursive context, or remained unconsidered.<sup>85</sup> ‘So the truth about looking at pictures is this: after looking at them *as art*, we went and left the galleries, we relied on ourselves, we believed in an opposition of life to art’, Grigson declared.<sup>86</sup> The artist’s ‘pique’ about his predecessors, and ‘his terror of the National Gallery’, was in Piper’s view, because of this ‘fullness’.<sup>87</sup> He was not therefore referring solely to their painterly heritage, but to the resonance of the age that it encapsulated, and the contemporary denial of the ‘rotundity’ of experience in favour of an intellectualised motive.<sup>88</sup> The ‘urgent’ need for ‘An absorption in the tradition, without an escape into it’ meant drawing upon the full experience of contemporary life and neither a retreat to repetition or imitation, nor a detached obsession with the making of ‘*art*’, or of ‘*history*’.<sup>89</sup>

The fullness of the work therefore, permeated the entire process of painting, with Piper stating that painting was a 'gay medium' for those such as Turner or Girtin, compared with the contemporary form of expression:

Life need hardly enter the form then, for the form itself was rich with implications of it. It was still a buoyant life, though already partly weighted with the experience that tends to sink *our* expression in the form from the first, making it heavy and soggy, without wings or breath. Cotman, Wilson, Girtin, Turner – it is a sad list that can be made, from our point of view.<sup>90</sup>

Painting from life invested those forms with the emotional response of the artist to the subject. What Piper regretted was the suppression of spontaneous expression when abstracting from life. The necessary constriction of form, the suppression of the process of expressive gesture, the exclusive concentration on formal relations was, it is clear to see at this time (Autumn 1936), becoming untenable for him. The beginnings of introverted concern about success and failure, about public appreciation had, as he suggested, already beset those like Girtin, and he could see the contemporary situation as the 'sad' culmination of a century of such selfconsciousness.<sup>91</sup> 'But', he continued 'there is life in painting enough. Here and there, and increasingly, it is re-born from the material – paint and canvas, wood and stone – instead of being sunk in it to be lost.'<sup>92</sup> He maintained his faith in the medium and process as the means to direct expression of contemporary life. What constituted that life was largely an individual experience, but the age imbued it with a universalising character, as Grigson observed: 'Great art comes from great living; great living comes from our common humanity promising or filling out or still defining a high social shape to which each peculiar person can decently relate himself.'<sup>93</sup>

The relationship of the particular to the universal implicit in that statement, was the *leitmotif* of abstract art discourse. However it was interpreted and communicated, its success was dependent upon the unselfconscious absorption of the artist in his activity. In *Axis 6*, the painter S. J. Woods's aptly titled article 'Time to Forget Ourselves', had strongly asserted the necessity of these conditions in the endeavours of contemporary artists, intoning 'If an artist is not first a man his art will never be great.'<sup>94</sup> Like Piper he was critical of the selfconsciousness that was degenerating painting:

It is time we forgot Art and Abstract, time the 'movement' ceased and manifestos were burned, time we cut our beards, ceased to be artists and became men and painters. Art has chased out life and now life must come back if art is to remain... To-day there is a tendency among artists to forget the body and remember only the spirit.<sup>95</sup>

He reminded readers that the Greeks viewed man as body, mind and spirit, and that the latter two could not exist without the first. The fullness that Piper argued for could hardly be achieved if abstract art was entirely intellectual – artists were 'men' first and therefore sensate beings. 'I do want to see artists *live*, being susceptible to change, forgetting doctrines, and all the aesthetic chattels and restrictions which clutter abstract art in England at the moment' Woods remonstrated, 'Out of living comes a live art'.<sup>96</sup>

The significance of heading *Axis 7* with 'England's Climate' had been in establishing a firm frame of reference for future discussions of abstract art which maintained its close relation to its life and time. Its appearance consolidated positions referred to as the 'internecine war', finally erupting over the Abstract & Concrete exhibition that year. I suggest that Nicholson's withdrawal from the 7&5 in order to collaborate with Gabo, leaving Piper as acting chair, was the action that

shifted the topography of abstract art.<sup>97</sup> We need to remember that this event did not precipitate new concerns for the *Axis* cohort; on the contrary, most of the values expounded in 'England's Climate' were implicit in *Axis*'s first two issues, making this instead a consolidation of a trajectory. What was new, was direct illustration through examples in English art's history, and the frankness of arguing the current situation.

It is therefore unsurprising that Nicholson was at this time consolidating his own position with Gabo under the concept of 'constructive' art, and thus drawing away from his associations with the 7&5, with Piper and with Héliou.<sup>98</sup> Everything they believed in opposed his own beliefs. For example, the notion of the 'fullness' of life expressed in a painting; the 'decent process' of 'keeping painting alive'; painting authentically 'with' the 'unrest' of the soul; the contemporary need for the 'professional artist' skilled in his discipline; an artist's work "mean[ing]" the life of the artist [and]...the life of his time'; continuing the unselfconsciousness of the painterly process in the past; opposing the regarding of pictures only as '*art*' and opposed to 'life'; and the insistence that all expression could only be of present experience; and that 'great art comes from great living'.

The motivation for 'England's Climate' was thus a far cry from reviewing the work of abstract artists. Neither did its authors make claims for the Englishness of the values briefly listed above, which was implicit in the title. Like Nash, they were not invoking 'Being British', merely representing to their English audience their inherited tradition, thereby affording abstract painting its rightful place in its continuation. Years later, M. Piper recalled that 'we were not interested in being 'English' as such but simply our interpretation of 'modern art' may have had a twist

in it, just like anybody might who had a certain view or lived in a certain place.’<sup>99</sup>

Highly significantly however, the artists mentioned were continental biomorphic abstractionists – Picasso, Héliou, Miró. The subtext was that biomorphic abstraction in England could authentically be drawn from its own cultural tradition, as those continental artists drew from theirs, for example, by employing abstract form as a ‘structural purpose’, as Cotman had, or by prioritising an imaginative interpretation, as Blake had.<sup>100</sup> Most significantly of all, was that abstract form in the English artistic tradition had never been removed from ‘nature’ or ‘life’.

‘England’s Climate’ sought to demonstrate the imbrication of ‘nature’, ‘life’ and ‘art’. It was prefaced by the words of Blake, whose presence in *Axis* was exemplary of an English response to the loss of a spiritual centre in modern life.<sup>101</sup> Where K. Walsh had prominently cited Wordsworth’s verse as the opening of his article ‘Abstraction as Weapon’, so here, Blake’s words spoke the sentiment of its authors about England’s cultural spirit, threatened by values imposed by industrial capitalism.<sup>102</sup> The association of literary exemplars with the arts – poets and writers who shared ideas with visual or musical artists, was a romantic attitude based on imaginative constructions around the material world, often pejoratively viewed by modernists, but embraced regularly in *Axis* as constitutive of the English sensibility.

A brief diversion is necessary here to demonstrate the significance of ‘England’s Climate’ for Piper and Grigson. For whilst this article may well have consolidated values either implicitly or explicitly present in *Axis* hitherto as I have stated, I want to argue that it was finally precipitated by their rising current of feeling about the fundamentally romantic nature of the English literary tradition and its transposition into the visual tradition. This feeling was encapsulated in the entire sentiment of



Binyon's 'The English Romantic Revival in Art and Poetry: a Reconsideration'.<sup>103</sup>

It is useful to recall that Evans and Gray, Binyon's daughter, were working on the Abstract & Concrete exhibition at the end of 1935 and early in the year that 'England's Climate' was published, and that Gray had grown up nurtured by a knowledge of art through the interests of her father.<sup>104</sup> I suggest that aspects of Binyon's arguments in his lecture precipitated a compulsion in Grigson and Piper to register their feelings in 'England's Climate'.

Binyon's proposition, that 'there is a reason why at the present moment it may be of interest to reconsider the value of [the Romantic Revival's] achievement' was that he saw 'the advent of a new mode of sensibility, affecting the whole conception of what poetry essentially is'.<sup>105</sup> (According to his title, 'art' could supplant 'poetry'.) This new 'mode of sensibility' found fault with the work of the original romantics, for being 'not sufficiently concerned with actual life, inspired by vain nostalgias for an imaginary past or an impossible future.'<sup>106</sup> Binyon's perception of Blake would have had overwhelming resonances for those artists searching for the means to reconcile the contemporary world with a deeper, more spiritual experience of life. But it would have had particular poignancy for Evans Piper and Grigson, with their peer group's substitution of the contemporary world for 'vain nostalgias' for 'an impossible future'. Binyon explained that Blake's

real world is the world of vision. He does not offer a delectable substitute for reality, he proclaims the eternal reality of the spirit, only to be apprehended by the imagination. It is not an escape from reality, it is an escape to reality...It is no longer a question of rival schools of art, of the overthrow of eighteenth-century ideals of style and models of poetic diction. It is a conception of life and the universe, of the salvation of the soul.<sup>107</sup>

The modern world's pressures to conform, the dilemmas of choice and the selfconsciousness of the artist/poet are here exemplified in historic experience, comforting in their normality for subsequent generations. The pressures upon Evans and Piper of adopting partiality in favour of liberality, and having liberated themselves from the dogma of convention, further to conform to another type of dogma, were echoes of the experience of Blake, as they must have seen it.

Furthermore, the present condition of life for the artist/poet, as referred to by both Piper and Grigson (artist *and* poet respectively) in 'England's Climate', and by others in the back numbers of *Axis*, might as well have been paraphrased from Binyon's commentary:

It may appear strange that Blake, so often condemned for want of balance, should have contended that the evil in the world arose from one element in the Perfect Humanity usurping power over the others. What had happened in the eighteenth century [sic] was that Reason had usurped this power and dominated; and this he strove against. But in theory at any rate he would maintain that it would be equally an evil if emotion dominated. Perfection meant the accordance of the four-fold Powers in Man.

Now this is the character of the greatest works of art, which escape our labels and categories because their elements are in equilibrium.

We have seen how diverse in gift and in temper were these men of genius. They belonged to their age and shared, but in varying degrees, its peculiar sensibilities. The work they produced in response to the appeal of their own day is what has proved of least value. What to us is of value in the whole movement is the spirit of expansion, conquering new realms for human art.<sup>108</sup>

Notions expressed as central to the 'new sensibility' of abstraction appear here in the context of the English cultural tradition: Evans's bid for 'expansion', Grigson's and Héliou's call for 'equilibrium', Grigson's and Piper's appeal for a 'humanity' in the new art; and the need for an artist to be unselfconsciously 'of their own day', most notably mirroring Piper's letter to Nicholson the following year in the spirit of Binyon's statement that 'work' responding to the 'appeal' of the times 'proved of

least value'. In the light of these correlations I reiterate that this lecture constituted a significant marker for Piper in his attitudinal move away from the formal exercises of the 7&5 abstract period, along with his involvement in the Abstract & Concrete exhibition earlier in 1936.

For the *Axis* cohort, England's poetic and literary 'Climate' permeated its painting through history, manifested earlier in narratives whose visual elements became devices imbuing the subject with mood, and latterly in exploitation of the effects of those elements in increasingly abstract painting.<sup>109</sup> In 'England's' (1930s social and economic) 'Climate', Piper and Grigson had therefore appealed for the continuation of her cultural sensibility in contemporary painting. Grigson had declared 'You can flagstone pictures down on to the top of an abnormal unrest of the individual soul, or you can just paint *with* your unrest.'<sup>110</sup> *Axis* thus indicated its conviction that an authentic art and its society, had a symbiotic relationship.

Grigson's *Axis* articles were resolutely focussed on English artists, and the English character of their art. He had explained in his essay 'Painting and Sculpture Today' that 'living on an island' even though very near to Europe, was 'the cause of provincialism, or individuality, if that charge is offensive'.<sup>111</sup> He viewed this character as 'separate' even in the best of English artists, and therefore, he stated 'I have a reason for not mixing the artists of Europe and the artists of England.'<sup>112</sup> Praising them was often praising them for 'amateur qualities, for provincial quirks, for eccentricities which come from being tangent to the circle of Europe.'<sup>113</sup> Anticipating 'England's Climate', it was Blake, Turner, Constable and Cotman whom he identified as the painters whose work maintained its roots in the 'life of the old tradition', before the destructive effects of commercialism.<sup>114</sup>

More than this, the *Axis* cohort believed that the implicitness of the author's cultural specificity signified authentic expression. This was evident not only in its own focus upon English abstract art, but in examples of other-cultural art. In the context of its 'abstract' remit, *Axis* features on such art demonstrated its nourishment of contemporary biomorphic abstraction as historically appreciated by modern painters.<sup>115</sup>

As mentioned, Grigson's recognition that character resided at the most primitive level of communication, was evident in his citation of W. Wundt: "we are entering the forms of the mighty phenomena around us...or we are placing ourselves somewhere behind the contradictions of matter and mind, where an identity...may more primitively exist".<sup>116</sup> Not only was 'identity' that of the human being, the individual, the artist, but for Grigson, the artist in *England*; the 'primitive' existence of that identity being located in the subconscious basis of expression. This had formed his approach, as it did for 'Henry Moore and *Ourselves*'(my italics), as the English context for his discussion of Moore's work. His romantic attitude, 'nearer surrealism' than Mondrian, identified his working method as 'English': 'He goes to work (there he is the English artist) intuitively, feeling all kinds of life and matter and their relationship; but once he has made a discovery, he can make it an element, use it again, modify it or discard it.'<sup>117</sup>

Grigson's analogy of Moore's work with ethnic art was exemplified by two further features on the connection of ethnic and modern art. In the same *Axis* as 'England's Climate', anthropologists W. G. and M. Archer addressed ethnic art with specific relevance to abstract art, writing about the geometric painting of the house walls of

the Santhals in Bihar, India.<sup>118</sup> It was represented as a ‘natural’, innate need to decorate and order, using organic material and forming ‘part of a tribal stock, developed by family sensibilities and matured by repetition.’<sup>119</sup> Although their analogy with Nicholson’s reliefs and Mondrian’s painting was somewhat misguided in its references to their similar ‘style’, the intention was to make a connection between abstract art and a primal ‘need’ formed from a constituting condition.

But the contribution by the Surrealist Roland Penrose offered an antidote to non-figurative abstract art, which considered the same primal need as a psychic conditioning of art practice in biomorphic form. Attracted by the abstracted forms of ‘primitive’ masks, his subject exemplified the ‘possibility of achievement’ that Evans saw in abstract art practice, namely the intuitive, unconscious expression of everyday experience.<sup>120</sup> With the importance attached by the *Axis* cohort to the interrelationship of a culture with its art, so Penrose discussed north-western American art in terms of the natural expression of peoples under certain climatic and geographical conditions. That is, the very visual aesthetic was accounted for in this way. The ‘perpetual torture inflicted by the climate’, especially ‘the cold grey northern gale’ were argued as inspiring distortions of form – for example on Eskimo masks – ‘their mouths on one side of the face seem to take shelter from the wind’ or there was the description of the ‘whistling masks; or the streamlined simplicity of the ivory seabirds and seals carved by fishermen who knew the rhythm of the waves and shore; and the white, grey green and black tones of the ‘winter twilight’.<sup>121</sup> (Pl.31)

Penrose’s interpretation was a remarkably poetic intervention in the *Axis* discourse, as early as issue four. His own interest in these objects would undoubtedly have

been for their strongly surreal qualities – their physical strangeness and their psychological aura through their attachment to ritual use. But given Evans's objections to Surrealism as a movement, the nature of Penrose's focus was tempered. In its departure from the strangeness of psychoanalytical subject matter so dominant in surrealist art, it reasserted art as the expression of the universal nature of the relationship of man with his environment. Including art from ancient or ethnic cultures was a characteristic of other instrumental art journals such as *Cahiers d'Art*. But this article marked a departure which signified *Axis*'s conviction of the validity of subjective abstraction *before* the Thwaiteses' article, at a time of growing pressure from Nicholson for the contrary. It was an intimation that biomorphic abstraction emerged from unconscious levels of experience as well as from those of the physical world.

Piper's painting was also viewed as the outcome of an English sensibility. In the same *Axis*, an article 'John Piper, 1935', by art historian Herta Wescher contextualised his work in the "English' art...of experiment', placing it between that of Mondrian and Arp or Léger.<sup>122</sup> English art, she claimed, understood and sought to rebuild an abstract art which responded to Picasso and Kandinsky. This had been demonstrated by Evans and Piper. Wescher perceived that lack of attention to the potential in their (Picasso's and Kandinsky's) discoveries had led to 'so much hollow aesthetic pretension in Western Europe.'<sup>123</sup> She was aware that 'English artists are looking at all sorts of things on the continent' and moreover that 'They have not decided unanimously.'<sup>124</sup> This last comment testified to Evans's inclusive coverage of a broad range of abstract manifestations.

Wescher discerned Piper's exploratory process of abstracting as variable and articulate, ranging from his earlier beach collages to his present non-figurative constructions. He was a 'builder', an 'interpreter', yet his varied work exuded a unifying 'temperament'.<sup>125</sup> And it is the characterising of this temperament which Wescher the European discerned as 'English' in its 'gloom[y]' tonal qualities in the collages, and in his abstract compositions an 'alternating light and darkness' confirming the 'colours interpolated like windows' 'Among black, white and salt-grey.'<sup>126</sup> (Pl.32) In his abstract relief constructions of wood, metal and plastic, he worked an interplay of form, colour and texture. Wescher observed 'The contrasting of such possibilities brings out what is Piper's very own'.<sup>127</sup> (Pl.16) She predicted that through the variety of responses of the English artists to the (similarly varied) 'European art lesson', 'the sacrosanct geometrical forms will be licked into shape', to which the 'stubbornness of the means of expression will yield.'<sup>128</sup> Of note is the employment of materials which demand the expansion of process into lyrical expression. 'Paths of questions and perplexities' provided 'great possibilities' for Piper 'if, by means of materials, he makes processes speak and express, if material is overcome, by converting mere qualities into activities.'<sup>129</sup> She saw the redemption of non-figurative abstraction in a more expressive evolution of form, and that form to be evolved by English artists, particularly Piper. Their assimilation of continental models was being reconstructed in the English climate.

It had not been an easy proposition for Piper. Years later he recalled the incongruity of English artists being encouraged to paint from the sensibility and cultural experience of other non-English artists. '[Fry] never quite got round to saying that the only way an Englishman could get to be a serious painter was to go

to Nice and try to find a studio next door to Matisse, but he gave the impression of thinking so.’<sup>130</sup> The ‘Moorish screen’ and ‘outside the window, beyond the balustrade...the blue, blue, Mediterranean’ were nothing to do with Piper’s experience of English life, which was ‘going on from “the weekend” to the Rock Pool’.<sup>131</sup> ‘The pressure we were under’ he explained, ‘to make ourselves mental expatriates, put my back up, and turned me against that whole line of Bloomsbury-hedonist country. I felt that slipping off into a foreign pleasure world was just too easy a way out for an English painter to take’.<sup>132</sup> His comments referred largely to alien subject matter and an inappropriate palette, which bolstered the success of Impressionist paintings as popular pictures of ‘a perpetual celebration of the heyday of middle-class pleasures’.<sup>133</sup>

Revealingly he admitted that it established a vision of France as ‘the great good place, the only place civilised enough – cultured enough...to support a school of painting,’ which meant that all young artists gravitated to France and French modern art, particularly with Braque and Picasso as the central attractions.<sup>134</sup> The problem was the distinction, not discerned by many English painters, between being in Paris to learn from modern continental developments ‘for painting’s sake’, and being there ‘to take refuge from the quality of English middle-class life’, in other words, to be part of an artistic *milieu*.<sup>135</sup> Evans and Piper’s feelings about the centrality of their own place within the contemporary English cultural climate, as an ‘absorption in the tradition, without an escape into it’, were increasingly from 1936 onwards resolved in their sense of ‘English’ expression, namely the biomorphic form of abstract painting.<sup>136</sup>



To conclude this chapter I want briefly to cite the opinions of *Axis* contributors which demonstrate that Piper had already embarked on his self-imposed development of abstract painting, before his appeal for a 'fullness' in abstraction in 'England's Climate'. This is significant because *Axis* reflected the developing perspective of its art director, as much as of its editor. By the 7&5 abstract exhibition in Autumn 1935, viewers had been able to assess the achievements of individual artists within the strictures of abstraction. In the context of Nicholson's 'purity' and 'simplicity', Richards found Piper's paintings 'exceedingly rich', sometimes "“busy”", but with 'a fine assurance – a finality that can only be the result of a long process of concentration and digestion'.<sup>137</sup> Others recognised the thoroughness with which Piper explored abstraction. Walsh, referring to the limitations of 'Abstract Art' (sic) declared 'Piper swallows whole as much as he can take', and with 'Puritanical austerity of spirit' reduced art to find its 'worth'.<sup>138</sup>

Hugh Gordon Porteus perceived Piper's recent paintings as 'perfect of their kind', finding a 'quiet' pleasure in a comparatively 'complex' order.<sup>139</sup> His approach was to assess Piper's success in the "“abstract”" art 'game', identifying the rules he had set himself. His abstraction constituted 'a highly personal performance'.<sup>140</sup> Referring here to the apparent absence of the authorial hand in the work, Porteus like Wescher saw that it was not mere surface pattern. Piper's vertical forms evoked a physicality, a sensation: 'the coming and going of invisible forms through intangible doors.'<sup>141</sup> This configuration had its roots in the 1912 work of Metzinger and Gleizes, and of Gris two years later. Amongst this geometry, Porteus identified a tension set up by Piper's 'introduction of an arbitrary, non-geometrical, element, a "“crazy”" line.'(Pl.33) This denoted a subjective intervention, where 'intelligence and sensibility' entered his painting, 'perhaps more intelligence than Ben Nicholson

would permit to flow round his circles, which however wear their author's taste very prominently on the surface' he commented.<sup>142</sup>

The exploratory nature of this 'game' allowed each painter both to work systematically through formal exercises as well as working away from rigidity. The exercises were however 'not in themselves enough':

the job of the abstract painter, the composer of geometrical forms, should be to relax gradually the rigidity of his formal rules until his work admits, more and more, personal factors... Too many more valuable elements are deliberately excluded, in this strict art. The human mind... hungers after other satisfactions, before these ascetic productions.<sup>143</sup>

The need to find associative form in abstract non-figurative painting began with the painting process itself, with its inherent authorial emptiness. In working with geometrical form, the artist was 'pretending to an impersonality' which did not, and could not exist.<sup>144</sup> 'The gesture of the hand is therefore an element that should be admitted into the chemistry of painting' Porteus declared.<sup>145</sup> Piper 'attempts to escape from the mechanical trap' with a resulting 'beauty, purity... honesty', but his forms, 'still-too-purified', needed to 'explore the potentialities of linear rhythm, ... as Wyndham Lewis has done.'<sup>146</sup> This was a clear appeal for an abstracted, figurative idiom.

In fact Piper's vertical abstractions had a strong 'linear rhythm' of their own. His earlier "crazy" edges were sharp but wilful wanderings on a plane, whereas his wobbly dashes or spotted lines and painterly edges were spatially ambiguous. The broken lines were trajectories across space or tracks upon a plane, but from 1936 loosely brushed edges in concert with the precision of rigid edges were direct evocations of the *passage* of Cezanne and Cubism.(Pl.37) The brushwork asserted the surface, but also lent half-tonal value evoking spatiality. Porteus observed that

Piper had 'learned to utilise the discoveries of Nicholson and also...Hélion.'<sup>147</sup>

Whilst this was undoubtedly true, there were others he learned from – Calder, for example, and the constructions of Arp and Erni. (Pl.34) But it was still Picasso and Braque that he was much more deeply involved with. Their 1913-14 collages which alluded to shadowed edges, the planar contradictions of the *papier collé* which then moved into painted vocabulary, articulated forms in shallow space. (Pls.35, 36)

That year Piper executed *papiers collés* redolent of Picasso's synthetic cubism, as studies for paintings.(Pl.37) This personal interpretation of the programmatic abstraction established the previous year as the direction of the 7&5, was still non-figurative, but its spatial references and painterly marks were significant intimations of his interests. In the same way as Hélion had yearned to move into more fertile three-dimensional ground for his non-figurative abstraction, so Piper was subtly following suit. The difference between Nicholson's *actual* recessive planes and Piper's and Hélion's allusion to them constituted a distinctly retrograde move in Nicholson's view in its illusionistic qualities, maintaining painting as picture-making.

No written evidence can confirm an actual antipathy on Piper's part at this stage towards the non-figurative abstract 'religion' of Nicholson. But his direction, his choices and approach to his work indicate that the interests he nurtured were to do with painting and the expression of pictorial qualities. These were declared in 'England's Climate' as nourished by his experiences of the effect of luminosity on the opaqueness and transparency of stained glass. Wescher perceived his 'putting together of planes' as 'the wings which an impassioned stage-manager manipulates,

waving them backwards and forwards, alternating light and darkness, leaving here a gap, there a perspective, or introducing a salient.’<sup>148</sup> Evans referred to ‘planes or shutters’, and Porteus to ‘intangible doors’.<sup>149</sup> His painting functioned as an evocation of the physical world rather than symbolising the spirit of an idealised future world through pure form. Latterly, he referred to his study of ‘the way things recede or come forward and play interesting ideas created by the play of one object against another.’(sic)<sup>150</sup> It was ‘the only reason’ for working in non-figurative abstraction.<sup>151</sup>

By November 1936 therefore, there was discernible discord in the values of Nicholson and his cohort, and Evans and the *Axis* cohort. Whilst we need to attend to Evans’s retrospective statement that events had ‘to some extent, been over-interpreted’, it is nevertheless clear in the sources that the diverging priorities and values of their respective practices of abstract art were by then firmly established.<sup>152</sup> The importance of history and tradition for the *Axis* cohort defined an empirically based romantic attitude to contemporary abstract painting and sculpture, signifying the enormous potential for biomorphic abstraction to be further ‘bodied out’.<sup>153</sup> They believed that biomorphic abstract art testified to a ‘fullness of present *life*’ (my italics), through its author’s individual expression within his/her contemporary condition, guided by its cultural tradition.<sup>154</sup> Abstraction and representation were closing up in the thinking of this group, as Grigson declared in the concluding paragraph of ‘England’s Climate’: ‘our “past” is closing up, to allow the present to flush out again.’<sup>155</sup> One critical but silent statement alluded to their recognition of this ‘closing up’ of abstract art with art. Evans and Piper removed the inverted commas around ‘abstract’ in the subtitle of *Axis 7*. This move, together with the publicisation of deeply held personal convictions in ‘England’s Climate’, now

needs to be explored for its broader manifestations in the work of the *Axis* cohort and located in the context of their effect upon Nicholson's cohort.

**NOTES**

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'LIFE ENOUGH IN PAINTING'

- <sup>1</sup> See chapter 1, pp.53-54.
- <sup>2</sup> P. Picasso, 'A letter on art', (sic) *Studio*, XCIX (June 1930), 383-85 (trans.) editor, *Formes* (February 1930), original in *Ogoniok* (1926).
- <sup>3</sup> Implied in Evans's first editorial 'Dead or Alive', *Axis* 1 (January 1935), 3-4.
- <sup>4</sup> J. Piper in G. Grigson and J. Piper, 'England's Climate', *Axis* 7, p.5.
- <sup>5</sup> H. Read, 'Ben Nicholson's Recent Work', J. Tschichold, 'On Ben Nicholson's Reliefs', *Axis* 2 (April 1935), pp.15-16; 16-18.
- <sup>6</sup> See chapter 2, p.105; M. Evans, 'Kandinsky's Vision', A. Jakovski, 'Wassily Kandinsky', W. Grohmann, 'Klee at Berne', *Axis* 2 (April 1935), pp.7; 9-12;12-13. Critic Anatole Jakovski's publication of essays was advertised in *Axis* 4 (November 1935), p.31; Willi Grohmann was a Klee scholar, publishing *Paul Klee* (Paris, 1929), and *Handzeichnungen, 1921-1930* (Berlin, 1934).
- <sup>7</sup> H. Read, 'Ben Nicholson and the Future of Painting', *Listener* (9 October 1935), p.604.
- <sup>8</sup> Tschichold, 'On Ben', p.17.
- <sup>9</sup> Tschichold, 'On Ben', p.17.
- <sup>10</sup> Tschichold, 'On Ben', pp.17-18.
- <sup>11</sup> Tschichold, 'On Ben', p.18.
- <sup>12</sup> Namely that there were those who could, and those who couldn't appreciate 'significant form'. C. Bell, 'The Aesthetic Hypothesis' in *Art* (2<sup>nd</sup>. ed. London, Melbourne, Sydney, Auckland, Bombay, Toronto, Johannesburg, New York, 1961), pp.37-40.
- <sup>13</sup> Evans, 'Kandinsky's', p.7. Where Evans used Kandinsky's more geometrical forms from the 1920s and early 1930s, Jakovski's article was illustrated by Kandinsky's 1911-13 flowing forms.
- <sup>14</sup> Evans, 'Kandinsky's', p.7.
- <sup>15</sup> See Introduction, n.10.
- <sup>16</sup> Pages 31-33. J. Héliion, 'From Reduction to Growth', *Axis* 2 (April 1935), pp.19-24.
- <sup>17</sup> Héliion, 'Reduction', p.24.
- <sup>18</sup> Héliion, 'Reduction', pp.23-24.

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- <sup>19</sup> M. Evans, 'Dead or Alive', *Axis* 1 (January 1935), p.3.
- <sup>20</sup> Evans, 'Dead', p.4.
- <sup>21</sup> See chapter 2, pp.101-102; Evans, 'Dead', p.4.
- <sup>22</sup> M. Evans, 'A Review and a Comment', *Axis* 3 (July 1935), p.25.
- <sup>23</sup> Evans, 'A Review', p.25.
- <sup>24</sup> See chapter 1, pp.41-42; p. Nash, 'Nature, Life and Art', *Week-end Review* (5 December 1931), p.716.
- <sup>25</sup> M. Evans, 'Back in the Thirties', *Art & Literature*, 7 (Winter 1965), p.139.
- <sup>26</sup> Evans, 'the Thirties', p.139.
- <sup>27</sup> Héliion's article 'Poussin, Seurat and double rhythm' *Axis* 6 (Summer 1936), 9-17, had been written in 1934 (see above reference, p.9). Recalling this period years later he identified 1935 as the year he 'establish(ed) a dialogue between modern art and the Renaissance', his 'friends' wanting only 'to have a dialogue with the primitives.' J. Héliion in A. Moeglin-Delcroix (annotation et présentation), *Héliion: Carnets. Journal d'un Peintre*, 1 (1929-62), (Paris, 1992), p.92.
- <sup>28</sup> See chapter 1, pp.53-54; Evans, 'A Review', pp.25, 25.
- <sup>29</sup> Evans, 'A Review', p.25.
- <sup>30</sup> Evans, 'A Review', p.25.
- <sup>31</sup> M. Evans, 'Abstract Art', *New Oxford Outlook*, 22 (November 1935), p.261.
- <sup>32</sup> Evans, 'Abstract Art', p.261. The first paragraph of Nicholson's *Unit 1* essay reveals this delight in mere appearance. Nicholson, *Unit 1*, p.89.
- <sup>33</sup> G. Grigson, 'Comment on England', *Axis* 1 (January 1935), p.10; J. Héliion, 'From Reduction to Growth', *Axis* 2 (April 1935), p.21.
- <sup>34</sup> B. Nicholson, essay in *Unit 1* (London, 1934), p.89.
- <sup>35</sup> Nicholson shared his studio at this time with Barbara Hepworth. See comments on its contents in B. Hepworth's essay, *Unit 1* (London, 1934), pp.19-20; Grigson also recalled this predilection. G. Grigson, *Recollections. Mainly of Writers & Artists* (London, 1984), p.190.
- <sup>36</sup> Evans, 'Abstract Art', p.261.
- <sup>37</sup> M. Evans, 'Order, order!', *Axis* 6 (Summer 1936), p.8. Years later she still viewed Nicholson's attitude in this way. Interview with D. Masters, 'The Englishness of British Art' (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Open University, 1987), p.300.



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- <sup>38</sup> Read, 'Ben Nicholson's', p.16.
- <sup>39</sup> Richards was an acquaintance of Nash and of Nicholson. Nash had published the previous month in *Architectural Review* on Nicholson's reliefs. P. Nash, 'Ben Nicholson's Carved Reliefs', *Architectural Review* (October 1935), 141-43.
- <sup>40</sup> See Picasso, 'A letter', pp.384-85. J. Richards, 'Ben Nicholson at the Lefèvre: 7&5 at Zwemmer's', *Axis* 4 (November 1935), p.21.
- <sup>41</sup> Richards, 'Ben Nicholson', p.21.
- <sup>42</sup> Richards, 'Ben Nicholson', p.21.
- <sup>43</sup> Richards, 'Ben Nicholson', p.21.
- <sup>44</sup> Richards, 'Ben Nicholson', p.24.
- <sup>45</sup> Richards, 'Ben Nicholson', p.21.
- <sup>46</sup> For an account of this aspect of art consumption see J. Beckett, 'Circle: the theory and patronage of constructive art in the thirties' in J. Lewison (ed.), *Circle. Constructive art in Britain 1934-40*, exh.cat., (Cambridge, Kettles Yard Gallery, 1982), pp.12-14. For an account of the climate of the modern art market in general, leading up to *Axis*, see A. Stephenson, 'Strategies of Situation': British Modernism and the Slump c.1929-1934, *Oxford Art Journal* (14 February 1991), 30-51.
- <sup>47</sup> Richards, 'Ben Nicholson', p.24. Grigson had earlier observed that Nicholson 'has never really gone beyond himself.' G. Grigson, 'Painting & Sculpture To-Day' in G. Grigson (ed. and intro.), *The Arts To-Day* (London, 1935), p.104.
- <sup>48</sup> Beginning at Oxford in February, it visited Liverpool, Newcastle, Cambridge and London.
- <sup>49</sup> J. Lewison, *Ben Nicholson*, exh.cat., (London, Tate Gallery, 1993), p.44.
- <sup>50</sup> Letter from Piper to Nicholson, 5 May 1936, TGA 8717.1.2.3403.
- <sup>51</sup> J. Piper, 'Picasso Belongs Where?', *Axis* 6 (Summer 1936), p.31.
- <sup>52</sup> Piper, 'Picasso Belongs', p.31.
- <sup>53</sup> Piper, 'Picasso Belongs', p.31.
- <sup>54</sup> Evans, 'Order', p.5. They arrived in 1935, Gabo returning briefly, and eventually settling in 1936.
- <sup>55</sup> Evans, 'Order', p.5.
- <sup>56</sup> Evans, 'Order', p.5.

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- 57 Evans, 'Order', p.5.
- 58 Evans, 'Order', pp.8, 5.
- 59 Evans, 'Order', pp.5, 8; 'the Thirties', p.147.
- 60 *Axis* 4 (November 1935), p.9.
- 61 Evans, 'Héliion', p.9.
- 62 She begun her editorial task by declaring that 'There is nothing to be said about painting which is not utter nonsense except "I like this".' 'Dead', *Axis* 1 (January 1935), p.4.
- 63 Evans, 'Abstract Art', p.262.
- 64 Evans, 'Abstract Art', p.262.
- 65 Evans, 'Abstract Art', p.261.
- 66 Evans, 'Abstract Art', p.260.
- 67 *Axis* 6, (Summer 1936), p.16.
- 68 Héliion, 'Poussin', p.16.
- 69 Héliion, 'Poussin', p.16.
- 70 Héliion, 'Poussin', p.16.
- 71 Héliion, 'Poussin', p.16.
- 72 Héliion, 'Poussin', p.16.
- 73 Héliion, 'Poussin', p.17.
- 74 Héliion, 'Poussin', p.17.
- 75 Nicholson expressed this in a letter to H. S. Ede, 29 March 1936. Cited in S. J. Checkland, *Ben Nicholson: the Vicious Circle of his Life and Art* (London, 2000), p.152 and n.
- 76 Letter from Piper to Nicholson, see note 50.
- 77 G. Grigson and J. Piper, 'England's Climate', *Axis* 7 (Autumn 1936), p.5.
- 78 Evans, 'A Review', p.25.
- 79 Piper, 'England's', p.5.

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- <sup>80</sup> The illustrations were titled: *Brighton beach with Colliers* (Constable); *Leaving port* (Wood); *Drawing* (Fuseli); *Barn at Shoreham* (Palmer).
- <sup>81</sup> Piper, 'England's', p.6.
- <sup>82</sup> Grigson, 'England's', pp.9, 6.
- <sup>83</sup> Grigson, 'England's', p.6.
- <sup>84</sup> Grigson, 'England's', p.6.
- <sup>85</sup> P. Nash, 'Nature, Life and Art', *Week-end Review* (5 December 1931), p.716. See chapter 1, p.9.
- <sup>86</sup> Grigson, 'England's', p.6.
- <sup>87</sup> Piper, 'England's', p.5.
- <sup>88</sup> Grigson, 'Comment', p.10. See chapter 2, p.117.
- <sup>89</sup> Piper, 'England's', p.6.
- <sup>90</sup> Piper, 'England's', p.6.
- <sup>91</sup> Piper, 'England's', p.6.
- <sup>92</sup> Piper, 'England's', p.6.
- <sup>93</sup> Grigson, 'England's', p.9.
- <sup>94</sup> *Axis* 6, p.22. Woods was a young admirer of Piper's work in particular. For a brief description of his role at this time see D. Fraser Jenkins and F. Spalding, *John Piper in the 1930s. Abstraction on the Beach*, (London, 2003), pp.43-44.
- <sup>95</sup> Woods, 'Time', p.22.
- <sup>96</sup> Woods, 'Time', p.22.
- <sup>97</sup> Evans, 'the Thirties', p.147. Piper had written to Winifred Nicholson that he was 'for abolishing the non-figurative rule entirely – the only rule about *kind* [sic] of work should be "*bad* work excluded..." I should also like to invite Frances Hodgkins to rejoin.' Cited in Harrison, *English Art*, p.376, note 30.
- <sup>98</sup> According to Margaret Gardiner, discussions about a publication on the 'constructive trend' in art, manifested the following year as *Circle*, began in June 1936. Gabo's move to London that February was I suggest, the catalyst that turned Nicholson's attention to Constructivism. M. Gardiner, *Barbara Hepworth: a memoir* (London, 1994), p.46. The term 'constructive' was used by Héliou in 'La Réalité dans la peinture', *Cahiers d'art*, 9-10 (1934), p.353, and was originally associated with *Abstraction Création*. Piper recalled this particular connection in

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G. Power, R. Swift and E. Gunningham, 'John Piper', *Composition*, 2 (Spring 1979), unpaginated.

<sup>99</sup> Masters, 'The Englishness', pp.300-01.

<sup>100</sup> P. Nash, in H. Read (ed. & intro.), *Unit 1* (London 1934), p.11. English art's 'one crippling weakness'.

<sup>101</sup> 'Spirit, who lov'st Britannia's Isle/ Round which the Fiends of Commerce smile...', Grigson and Piper, 'England's', p.5.

<sup>102</sup> *Axis 5* (Spring 1936), 23-26.

<sup>103</sup> London, 1935. See chapter 2, p.127, n.192.

<sup>104</sup> According to Spalding she weekly visited exhibitions and museums with him. F. Spalding, "'A true statement of a real thing": Nicolette Gray's promotion of modern art', *Typography papers*, 3 (1998), p.104; Binyon had been instrumental in raising the awareness of Blake in a seminal work of 1925, amongst other publications. L. Binyon, *The Followers of William Blake. Edward Calvert, Samuel Palmer, George Richmond & their Circle* (London and New York, 1925). He wrote the catalogue and was involved in organising the Blake Centenary Exhibition, British Museum, 1927.

<sup>105</sup> Binyon, 'The English', p.7.

<sup>106</sup> Binyon, 'The English', p.7.

<sup>107</sup> Binyon, 'The English', p.25.

<sup>108</sup> Binyon, 'The English', pp.25-26.

<sup>109</sup> For example, Fry had identified 'the emotional elements of designs' as early as 1908. R. Fry, 'An Essay in Aesthetics' in *Vision and Design* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Oxford, 1981), pp.23-24.

<sup>110</sup> Grigson, 'England's', p.6.

<sup>111</sup> Grigson, 'Painting', p.95. Significantly, the two concepts appear synonymous.

<sup>112</sup> Grigson, 'Painting', p.95.

<sup>113</sup> Grigson, 'Painting', pp.95-96.

<sup>114</sup> Grigson, 'Painting', p.96.

<sup>115</sup> For example Post Impressionists, Fauvists, German Expressionists, Cubists, all drew inspiration from ethnic artifacts, as well as (in some cases) other forms of untutored expression.

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- <sup>116</sup> See chapter 2, p.126.
- <sup>117</sup> G. Grigson, 'Henry Moore and Ourselves', *Axis* 3 (July 1935), p.9. The general relationship between English modern art and the Arts and Crafts Movement is examined in S. Tillyard, *The Impact of Modernism. The Visual Arts in Edwardian England* (London and New York, 1988), most usefully for this context, chapter 2. More specific is C. Stephens's essay 'Ben Nicholson: Modernism, Craft and the English Vernacular' in D. Corbett, Y. Holt and F. Russell (eds.), *The Geographies of Englishness: Landscape and the National Past 1880-1940* (New Haven and London, 2002), 225-247.
- <sup>118</sup> Possibly Bihar because the earthquake there on 15 January 1934 would have drawn attention to its culture. Reported in the *Times* (12 December 1934), p.13.
- <sup>119</sup> 'Santhal Painting', *Axis* 7 (Autumn 1936), p.27.
- <sup>120</sup> Evans, 'A Review', p.25.
- <sup>121</sup> R. Penrose, 'Notes on the Ratton Exhibition of North Western American Art, Paris', *Axis* 4 (November 1935), pp.18-19.
- <sup>122</sup> Wescher's special interest was collage.
- <sup>123</sup> H. Wescher, 'John Piper', *Axis* 4 (November 1935), p13.
- <sup>124</sup> Wescher, 'John Piper', p.13.
- <sup>125</sup> Wescher, 'John Piper', p.12.
- <sup>126</sup> Wescher, 'John Piper', p.12.
- <sup>127</sup> Wescher, 'John Piper', p.13.
- <sup>128</sup> Wescher, 'John Piper', p.13.
- <sup>129</sup> Wescher, 'John Piper', pp.12-13.
- <sup>130</sup> Piper in A. West, *John Piper* (London, 1979), p.56.
- <sup>131</sup> Piper in West, *John Piper*, p.55.
- <sup>132</sup> Piper in West, *John Piper*, p.56.
- <sup>133</sup> Piper in West, *John Piper*, p.55.
- <sup>134</sup> Piper in West, *John Piper*, p.56.
- <sup>135</sup> Piper in West, *John Piper*, p.56.
- <sup>136</sup> Piper, 'England's', p.6.
- <sup>137</sup> Richards, 'Nicholson's', p.24.

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- <sup>138</sup> K. Walsh, 'Abstraction as Weapon', *Axis 5* (Spring 1936), p.25.
- <sup>139</sup> H. G. Porteus, 'Piper and Abstract Possibilities', *Axis 4* (November 1935), p.15. Porteus had published *Wyndham Lewis. A Discursive Exposition* (London, 1932) and *Background to Chinese Art* (London, 1935), the latter to coincide with the Royal Academy International Exhibition of Chinese Art from 28 November, 1935 to 7 March, 1936.
- <sup>140</sup> Porteus, 'Piper', p.15.
- <sup>141</sup> Porteus, 'Piper', p.15.
- <sup>142</sup> Porteus, 'Piper', p.15.
- <sup>143</sup> Porteus, 'Piper', p.15-16.
- <sup>144</sup> Porteus, 'Piper', p.16.
- <sup>145</sup> Porteus, 'Piper', p.16.
- <sup>146</sup> Porteus, 'Piper', p.16.
- <sup>147</sup> Porteus, 'Piper', p.15.
- <sup>148</sup> Wescher, 'John Piper', p.12.
- <sup>149</sup> Evans, 'Abstract Art', p.262; Porteus, 'Piper', p.15.
- <sup>150</sup> Power, Swift and Gunningham, 'John Piper', unpaginated.
- <sup>151</sup> Power, Swift and Gunningham, 'John Piper', unpaginated.
- <sup>152</sup> M. Piper, 'the Thirties', p.148.
- <sup>153</sup> Grigson, 'Comment', p.8.
- <sup>154</sup> Piper, 'England's', p.5.
- <sup>155</sup> Grigson, 'England's', p.9.

CHAPTER IV

*AXIS INTERESTS AND CIRCLE*

After the publication of *Axis 7* in Autumn 1936, there was almost a year's delay before *Axis 8*, in early Winter 1937. It is necessary now to attend to the activities of its cohort in the interim, and to the publication of *Circle* that June, in order respectively to contextualise the final issue, and for comparative purposes to explore in detail the differences between the two cohorts.

Firstly therefore, this chapter demonstrates the continuing priorities emerging from the corpus of *Axis*, as manifested in the subsequent work and publications of its cohort before *Axis 8*. It argues that contrary to an initial perception that *Axis* abandoned abstract art (since no substantial discussion of abstraction, and only two abstract images, appeared in the last issue), instead it further established the centrality of abstraction in the act of painting, implying that the preoccupation with abstract painting as the end rather than the means, was dislocated from the art of painting altogether.<sup>1</sup> The *Axis* cohort thus connected abstraction with their insistence on the subjective basis of the process of representation, indicated by their attitude to the relationship between 'art' and 'life', the elision of the two being implicit in their view that 'life' both *inhabited* and *inspired* painting, as expressed in 'England's Climate'.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, the major proportion of this chapter introduces a more substantial critical context for profiling the position of the *Axis* cohort, in the form of *Circle*, the constructivist survey published in June, to accompany their exhibition the following month.<sup>3</sup> Through examinations of key essays for their comparison with values and priorities central to *Axis*, this chapter aims conclusively to establish hitherto discerned differences between their cohorts, and further to demonstrate that a distinction between the English contributors to *Circle* and their continental peers is evident in their tacit alignment with the *Axis* position over tensions implicit in the notion of a culturally valid universal order.



In March 1937 Piper published in the typography journal *Signature*, a short article on 'Lithographs by Eric Ravilious of shop fronts', and in the July issue he reviewed *Modern Painters and Sculptors as Illustrators* (edited by Monroe Wheeler).<sup>4</sup> Neither the nature of the journal nor the subjects of its features would have been entertained as worthy of attention by the non-figurative abstract painters, and it was clear that he was resolutely resisting the group identity he had found so inappropriate, and communicated so unequivocally to Nicholson during the Abstract Concrete exhibition the previous summer.<sup>5</sup> His involvement the previous year in collaborating with Robert Wellington and Oliver Simon of Curwen Press, on a project entitled *Contemporary Lithographs*, with a view to producing autolithographs by the younger generation of artists at Curwen and Baynard Press, was likely to have provoked his *Signature* article. He had also embarked upon a series of fortnightly television programmes discussing paintings lent by London dealers, which continued into 1937.<sup>6</sup> In undertaking these activities, Piper had firmly committed himself to broadening his publicisation of abstract art as he viewed it (which was as Evans and *Axis* viewed it), in his endeavour to educate the general public and to dispel misconceptions about the aim of the artist, which alienated the public from modern art. These programmes also included the relation of modern art to pottery, architecture and stage design.<sup>7</sup> Significantly, he was placing art in the more popular context of these other activities.

His conviction in the value of historic development and its example as an illumination for contemporary progress, was nowhere more explicitly demonstrated than in his article published in the *Architectural Review* in April 1937, the centenary of Constable's death.<sup>8</sup> In 'England's Climate' he had advocated reading Constable's letters, explaining that

Constable's work had 'fullness, completeness: the abstract qualities of all good painting together with the symbolism ...of life itself'.<sup>9</sup> In his Constable article he referred to his 'singleness of purpose' which was the problem of 'reduc[ing] the tension between his two passions – for nature and for painting.'<sup>10</sup> Piper, I argue, was experiencing precisely the same 'singleness of purpose' and had been engaged with it even throughout his abstract painting. His admiration for Constable was partly for the painter's patient determination to engage with those passions as a *synthesis* in his painting, and partly for the nature of his achievement. 'Constable was well aware of the abstract quality in his art' Piper stated.<sup>11</sup> 'He developed it doggedly in opposition to the fashionable historical and, as he called them, "pantomime" effects of his day.'<sup>12</sup> The resonances in these statements of the abstract art *milieu* of the thirties must have appeared to Piper as striking. In a remarkable inversion probably of his own experiences, Piper described how Constable had been criticised for the abstract elements of his construction, underlying but not entirely concealed by, his naturalistic renderings, whilst remaining resolute in his approach to reality. 'My limited and abstract art is to be found under every hedge and in every lane, and therefore nobody thinks it worth picking up', Constable had written to his biographer.<sup>13</sup> Abstraction and particularity were for him, as for Piper, in no way irreconcilable.

Piper would also have been aware that 'Nature' for Constable was as implicated in the changes of modern life as it was in his own day. Both painters were motivated to 'record' the effect of this new awareness, and it was an empathy with Constable's achievement in this light, that I suggest Piper felt so keenly, in his explorations of Oxfordshire for a Shell Guide. He recognised that Constable's apprehension of his topographical subject matter, being both emotional and rational, produced qualities 'yet unlike nature and wholly pictorial'.<sup>14</sup> Here again, Piper's concern with painting was with its potentialities as a

pictorial medium in the process of representing, in as far as an innovative painter could push it, as he himself was perceived by others as exploring its 'possibilities' more insistently than his peers.<sup>15</sup> As to his identification with Constable's passion for 'nature' as well as painting, we need to turn for illumination, to Nash and his growing friendship with Piper at this time.

Along with Piper, Nash also published that year in the March issue of *Signature*, marking a significant synchronicity. In 'Surrealism and the Illustrated Book', Nash described what collage as a process lent to the surreal image in books citing Ernst as 'the master of the collage', and *La Femme 100 Têtes* as demonstrating his 'intense poetical imagination'.<sup>16</sup> Nash made it abundantly clear that 'there [wa]s an Art involved'(sic) in the strangeness of surrealist composition, that even the imagination or the subconscious required the stimulus of the external world in order to work.<sup>17</sup> 'Surrealist painters could not bring even the most apparently liberated of their creations to light were it not for the "visual remains" of external perception' he argued.<sup>18</sup> Art could not therefore merely be born in the imagination (and this by implication, included pure geometrical abstract art, with its ideological basis), it referred at its centre to something physical which elicited a response. Finally, the heart of the Surrealists' success relied not so much upon their subject matter as upon the degree of 'initiative' in employing it, that is, the 'Art involved'.<sup>19</sup> What this amounted to was the imaginative use of subject matter through a mediating technique, and Nash's view of their use of collage was that they had 'already carried [it] to a very fine Art indeed.'<sup>20</sup>

Nash claimed that 'Surrealism, in almost every form, is a native of Britain.'<sup>21</sup> He identified 'poetry in its widest sense and appeal' as the expression of Surrealist inspiration: 'The genius of Shakespeare, the vision of Blake, the imagination of Coleridge, the inspiration of

Carroll and Edward Lear' for example.<sup>22</sup> I suggest that his claim that Surrealist expression was a form of 'poetry', was referring to that dimension of 'reality' in which *all* artists operated, namely interpretation – the imaginative leap of meaning. His recognition that concerning poetic expression, 'We have a heritage second to no other country', cannot be overstated in its significance for the *Axis* cohort.<sup>23</sup> For it was the nature of this dimension in abstract painting – the way that biomorphic abstraction and its very execution could evoke – that had needed to be registered, and that instigated the Archers's article 'A Search for Subjective Form'.<sup>24</sup>

As the surreal nature of Nash's landscapes had been nourished by his experiences of researching and writing the Shell Guide to *Dorset* during 1934-35, so for Piper it was a similar commission which nourished his own topographical predilections.<sup>25</sup> His meeting with John Betjeman in 1936, which had resulted in a Shell Guide commission, had also provided the opportunity to use his skills and imagination towards a practical and influential end. Amongst acknowledgements in the preface of the *Oxon* Shell Guide when it appeared, were cited Betjeman, Nash, Richards and 'my wife' for her article on 'Deserted Places'. Here, *Axis* figures were closely connected by an interest in topography and its features, with Evans ('wife') contributing on the county's historic and romantic aura of long decayed and forgotten manorial estates. Most of the photographs and the few line drawings were by Piper, invariably employing framing devices for 'picturesque' effects, his interest in adapting this aesthetic being shared with Betjeman.<sup>26</sup> The historical element of architecture and vernacular building and their positioning in the landscape was prominent – something to which Piper in particular was sensitive – as well as the inclusion of ancient sites inherent in the formation of what was viewed as 'natural' landscape.<sup>27</sup>

The interest in ancient landscapes and their features had been an increasingly popular aspect of landscape and topographical study since the end of the war, and in the thirties, with the political construction of an English cultural identity, an increase in historical and archaeological activity was nourishing perceptions of the landscape.<sup>28</sup> This subject matter would have engaged the attention of both Piper and Nash, and Nash exhibited that April and May a collection of watercolours of ancient sites with unequivocally surreal and mystical overtones.<sup>29</sup> Piper's review entitled 'Recent Watercolours by Paul Nash' in *Design for Living*, discussed Nash's drawings and paintings of collections of natural stones, megalithic stones, and camps such as Maiden Castle, in terms of their qualities of 'fantasy', and through their 'persistent' and 'permanent form', and their 'vividness' of character.<sup>30</sup> In case this might have suggested to the reader a typical nineteenth century romantic rendering, Piper referred to the 'economy' of form and rendering in which Nash showed 'his contemporary spirit'.<sup>31</sup> Nash still maintained the same concern for naturalistic evocation yet abstracted representation that he had argued in *Axis 1*.

Piper began his review with a description of Stonehenge by the eighteenth-century antiquarian William Stukeley which he 'happened to have read recently', a reference to the preparation for his *Axis* article published later that year.<sup>32</sup> Their joint enthusiasm for such subjects resulted in shared books, painting subject matter, and photographic work at this time.<sup>33</sup> Neither was abstract art forgotten in this otherwise surreal climate. In writing of the discoveries by artists (in which he included Nash) of primitive and natural forms, in their 'urge' to find 'permanence' and 'something timeless', it was the same 'urge' Piper argued, that drove many others to the 'reassuringly permanent forms of geometry, and to the purely abstract symbol.'<sup>34</sup> The subtlety of 'discovering' as against being 'driven' towards 'reassur[ance]' speaks volumes here, suggesting Piper's perception of the escape or

retreat into the certainty of geometrical order, for ‘many other’ artists, rather than absorbing and articulating ‘the chaotic world of the present.’<sup>35</sup>

There are two significant considerations which arise from this revealing article published during the long pause in *Axis*. Firstly, that Piper recognised the potential for expressive communication evoking mood and atmosphere in Nash’s *particular* approach to surrealist painting (of *Stone Sea*: ‘what it represents is negligible. What it evokes is intense’<sup>36</sup>), and appreciated and enjoyed Nash’s interpretations. Secondly, in connection with this (and which was entirely in keeping with Piper’s and Evans’s *Axis* commentaries), Piper’s appreciation of Nash’s painting was for his evocative *pictorial resolutions* of his subject matter, involving biomorphic abstraction and a particular painterly handling. This is not to say that Piper expressed or even felt the subject matter to be fanciful – he was highly complementary about Nash’s insightful ‘vision’ – but his chief admiration was for Nash’s discipline and skill as a *painter* using a subjective form of abstraction in responding to particularly sited objects, and the auras of places. This tradition had been clearly argued in ‘England’s Climate’, as well as in his recent Constable article, and his own experiences on the Shell Guide revived his sensitivity to ‘place’. Nash was successfully achieving the true synthesis – both of ‘conscious and unconscious’ activity, and his passion for ‘nature and painting’.<sup>37</sup>

In the interim between *Axis 7* and *Axis 8* therefore, Piper and Nash were immersed in topographical subject matter: Piper with Shell Guide journeys, local history, the aesthetics of photographic imagery, and an intense engagement with the life and work of Constable, and Nash with further explorations of surrealist painting, and the surreal qualities to be evoked of particular places. Their working relationship and friendship was firmly

establishing the location of abstract and surreal elements within the now renewed English painting tradition, in so doing, defining the irrevocable difference between their trajectory and that of Nicholson and Hepworth. In June 1937, Nicholson and two colleagues edited a survey of constructivist essays and work entitled *Circle*.<sup>38</sup>

For the purpose of this thesis, *Circle*'s content constituted the first substantial statement of the mature position whose early form had driven Nicholson (and Hepworth) to remove themselves from Unit 1, the 7&5, and even from Héliion. Although it appeared so late in *Axis*'s span it deserves a fairly close analysis of specific content, relating directly to *Axis* priorities, in order finally to distinguish their philosophies.

*Circle* apparently demonstrated a potent and unifying commitment to a visual aesthetic as a symbol of a future world. However, underlying its promotion of that consistent style, far broader than *Abstraction-Création*, with sections on 'architecture' and 'art and life', was a diversity of beliefs.<sup>39</sup> Its editorial stated that 'the combined range of contributors represented here is a large one', so there was no delusion that contributors were necessarily aligned within the same faith.<sup>40</sup> But the following statement, whilst it announced the intention of the publication, also confirmed the attitude which Evans had found so destructive in the critics and public, namely the assumptions and judgements based on the work's appearance as the criterion for aligning its author's motives: 'Our aim is to gather here those forces which *seem* to us to be working in the same direction and for the same ideas' it stated (my italics). 'We have...tried to give this publication a certain direction by emphasising, not so much the personalities of the artists as their work, *and especially those works which appear to have* one common idea and one common spirit: the constructive trend in the art of our day.' (my italics)<sup>41</sup> (Pls.38, 39, 40) 'Appear[ing] to have' was clearly

the dominant criterion in the selection of the content, and accordingly, *Circle* was a galvanising effort to consolidate in England the ‘movement’ whose momentum had been well underway on the continent, but which in the opinion of at least one major critic, was already ‘in the decline’ in the areas of painting and sculpture. Worse still, biomorphic abstraction was viewed as ‘definitely in the ascendant’.<sup>42</sup>

The success with which *Circle* won credibility as a cohort was therefore due to the conformity of its style and the apparent congruity of beliefs and values. However, as evident in the above quotations from its editorial, in reality it constituted a diversity of individual motives, but with collectively theorised applications governed by a powerful socially orientated ideology. And it was the ideological basis for constructive art, which by its own declarations denied the ‘personal’ in favour of the collective, that placed it in direct opposition to the prominent *Axis* figures in 1937.

Yet this distance was not conclusive. The term ‘constructive’ requires a brief comment. In a later interview Piper, having been asked how aware he was of the ‘Constructivists’ replied ‘Very much so. You could say I was really a constructivist [sic]. We first saw the small format magazine called “Abstract Creation” [sic] in Paris through Hélion and we got contributions from them too.’<sup>43</sup> Thinking in terms of the ‘Constructivists’, had for Piper recalled the primary influence of Hélion as an initiating spirit for *Axis* (even though he had resigned from *Abstraction Création*), to the extent that even decades later, *Abstraction Création* and *not* the *Circle* cohort, had formed the basis of his answer to the question. *Circle* made no reference to the earlier association of constructive art with *Abstraction Création*, which along with its journal *Abstraction-Création* had closed the previous year. I am not arguing any disingenuity on the part of the *Circle* cohort, their intention to bring



together radical artists and designers who were ‘at the moment scattered, many of the individuals working on their own account and lacking any medium for the interchange of ideas’ was a genuine enough collaboration.<sup>44</sup> But I am arguing that to the *Axis* cohort their method – an overwhelming content of photographs headed up by some intellectual analyses of one or two practitioners, critics and scientists – did in the case of painting and sculpture, mask the reality of individual practice as the means of discovery, in favour of representing practice as the direct achievement of a ‘perfect’ outcome. That outcome had not engaged with the art *and craft* of painting as *representation*, but with the world of signs and utopias.

The effect of this orchestration misrepresented the actual activities of progressive artists, for despite its apparent unity, for English progressives, *Circle* represented merely a *particular* English *milieu*. But the collective visual aesthetic of its contents misrepresented Piper in particular, whose work having been exhibited in the Constructive Art exhibition, unbeknown to him also appeared in *Circle*.<sup>45</sup> Whilst there appears no indication of his thinking behind his inclusion in the exhibition, the claims made on his behalf in the opening essay regarding the priorities and values of ‘The Constructive Idea in Art’, were so wide of the mark, that his association with them through inclusion in *Circle* merely fuelled later accusations of betraying the cause of constructive art.<sup>46</sup> I have shown that at this time he was involved in nothing else but *non-constructivist* activity.<sup>47</sup> In the light of his letter to Nicholson during the Abstract & Concrete exhibition the previous summer, in which he emphatically rejected being associated with and thereby judged by the ‘ideal’ ‘standard’ which a group exhibition implied, it seems that appropriating his work for the causes of *Circle* was a somewhat cavalier move on Nicholson’s part.<sup>48</sup> Given the claims that the Constructivists were to publish in *Circle* the following year, as to the *significance* of this

'ideal' visual aesthetic, Piper's 1936 letter implied more about his understanding than was apparent. Most certainly, conversations about geometrical abstraction as an iconic art of a future society were happening in the Summer of 1936, with Gabo as the *agent provocateur*.<sup>49</sup> Possibly Piper's decision to exhibit two 'found objects' in the Surrealist Objects and Poems exhibition later that Autumn, was a statement of his independence.<sup>50</sup>

There are conflicting accounts of the time when the first plans for *Circle* were formed.<sup>51</sup> But as discussed above, by the end of 1936 this loose knit *milieu* had formed loyalties profiling the dissent over meanings of the 'real' and the 'ideal', and of the particular and the universal, which had precipitated a crystallisation of opposing convictions about abstract art's relation to life. This last, was for both the *Axis* and *Circle* cohorts, of ultimate concern to the moral undertaking of the artist and his role in the community. They both acknowledged that art, whilst individually conceived, was a constituting element of the cultural condition, as well as an articulator of social attitude. The section in *Circle* dedicated to 'art and life' demonstrated this belief, by focussing upon the broader aesthetic functions of art in industry and commerce: a fundamentally different proposition from the individual aesthetic solutions favoured by the *Axis* cohort arising from a sensibility responding to the particularity of the physical world. *Circle*'s apparent cohesiveness of painting, sculpture, architecture and design was intended to indicate commonality of values. Its purpose was pragmatic, as was art's purpose within it. For Evans and *Axis*, and Gabo and *Circle*, 'Art's relation to 'Life' was the pivot upon which the differing perceptions of the artist's role and art's function were balanced.

Of the English contributors to *Circle*, two had also contributed to *Axis*.<sup>52</sup> The most prominent of these in terms of status at that time was Read, who discussed 'The Faculty of

Abstraction' in the 'painting' section, elaborating on some arguments from *Art and Society* concerning the shift from art identified as the 'single concept' to art as the 'single phenomenon'.<sup>53</sup> Moore featured two paragraphs of explicit argument about non-representational sculpture and its relation to architecture, beginning 'I dislike the idea that contemporary art is an escape from life.'<sup>54</sup> Of other English contributors, Nicholson's contribution of four brief statements crystallised arguments elaborated by Gabo and Mondrian about painting and 'reality', and reiterated his connection between art and religion, but unlike Moore, he characteristically did not disclose his own beliefs about the meaning in its processes.<sup>55</sup> Hepworth's essay explained the qualities inherent in sculptural form as ideas, rather than physical attributes.<sup>56</sup> Finally, Richard's essay (the other *Axis* contributor), 'The Condition of Architecture and the Principle of Anonymity', aligned itself significantly with Evans's and Piper's beliefs and was therefore out of kilter with the constructivist ideology as propounded by Gabo.<sup>57</sup> The principal arguments about constructive art were presented by Gabo in the opening essay, and in the 'painting' section, Mondrian's 'Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art' developed themes which he had written about in seed form some twenty years previously.<sup>58</sup> As these last two items formed the philosophical base to the fine art element of *Circle* which is my main concern, they are examined first, in the context of concerns emanating from *Axis* by issue 7.

According to Gabo in his opening essay, 'The Constructive Idea in Art' represented a 'new concept of the world', a 'spiritual state', 'an ideology'.<sup>59</sup> It is important to recall that *Axis*'s view was manifestly not about an ideology. Constructivism's ideology was encapsulated in pure form, whose elements possessed 'forces of expression' 'rooted in human nature' and 'organically bound up with human emotions'.<sup>60</sup> Through the language of such 'absolute forms', this kind of abstract art performed its iconic role 'independent of any association

with the external aspects of the world' or of 'associative images'.<sup>61</sup> This is self-explanatory. But unlike the concerns of the *Axis* cohort to examine the *connection between* the apperception of the physical world, formal abstract elements, and expression, Gabo did not explain how their effect was 'self-conditioned'.<sup>62</sup> For Evans, Piper, Grigson and Nash, a form of 'association' was the *only* means to those 'human emotions'. The external world instigated the *birth* of the imagination, and biomorphism was the kind of abstraction in which the synthesis of intellect and the emotion was complete. Gabo saw any form of association as the historic obstacle to art's progress, subordinating 'Form' to 'Content'.

His phrases such as 'one reality – existence', 'the ultimate truth', 'an universal law', inverted the ethos of art as rooted in the material world, to an art rooted in the idea, and expressed through the perfection of form for its own sake.<sup>63</sup> This art was so esoteric in its independent existence from the physical world that it signified 'a concept of the world which could reveal a Content in a Form' (sic).<sup>64</sup> Whereas for Gabo and his cohort this 'Content' signified the 'ultimate truth', a 'universal law', it was irreconcilable for Evans and her cohort with the reality of the individual's painterly processes, where the individual was impelled by a 'fullness' of lived experience to articulate the medium. Although they all admired the 'lofty beauty' of pure abstraction, the unreality of its perfection had little or nothing to do with the reality of life in mid 1930s England.<sup>65</sup>

The 'one reality' ('existence') was, Gabo argued, influenced by the power of constructive art. But here he was not referring to a worldly, material existence, but to an existence willed by a 'state of mind', which under the power of 'Art', 'will be able only to construct, co-ordinate and perfect instead of to destroy, disintegrate and deteriorate'.<sup>66</sup> These latter references imply their roots in analytical Cubism, forms of primitive/naïve modernism, and

Surrealism. I suggest that in constructing a perfect 'existence' Gabo and *Circle* appeared to Evans to have denied the validity of other contemporary art and *de facto* the world upon which it drew, and in which it existed.<sup>67</sup> Further, I suggest that this denial became conclusive when the aim of Gabo's values sharpened towards the conclusion of his essay, where his rhetoric formed a strategic programme, referring to a *future* achievement of perfection:

The Constructive idea prefers that Art [sic] perform positive works which lead us towards the best. The measure of this perfection will not be so difficult to define when we realise that it does not lie outside us but is bound up in our desire and in our will to it. The creative human genius, which never errs and never mistakes, defines this measure. Since the beginning of Time [sic] man has been occupied with nothing else but the perfecting of his world.

To find the means for the accomplishment of this task the artist need not search in the external world of Nature [sic]; he is able to express his impulses in the language of those absolute forms which are in the substantial possession of his Art. This is the task which we constructive artists have set ourselves, which we are doing and which we hope will be continued by the future generation.<sup>68</sup>

The messianic tone with which art was argued as the means to 'perfect' society by transforming it into a form of utopia, emerging from the insecurities of recent years, required a resolute detachment from the very experiences characterising the conditions under which that art was evolved.<sup>69</sup> Despite the social conscience of artists on both 'sides' which was manifest in their common involvement in the AIA at this time, and as Evans described, in the forefront of everything they were doing, it is reasonable to consider that Gabo's strident and assertive call to order might for the *Axis* cohort have seemed uncomfortably dictatorial in the context of developments in German arts and social policies, that very year.<sup>70</sup> The striving of the Constructivists towards a 'perfecting of this world' would have struck an uncomfortable chord to many at that time.<sup>71</sup>

*Circle*'s belief that art could serve as a metaphor and instrument for social progress, that the creative act meant 'every material or spiritual work which is destined to stimulate or perfect the substance of material or spiritual life', most surely was for Evans and her cohort an utter delusion about art's very *raison d'être*.<sup>72</sup> Whereas for them, painting transformed an emotional response to the external world to a formal visual expression, Gabo had emphasised the inherent 'forces of expression' of the formal elements themselves. His paradoxical claim was that expressiveness was 'rooted in human nature' and 'organically bound up with human emotions', yet somehow dissociated from external stimuli, and he evaded discussing the transforming process of the emotions into visual elements. This highlighted the difference between the two philosophies characterised by biomorphic abstraction and geometrical abstraction.

Almost a generation older than Gabo, and similarly removed from the *Axis* cohort and the English *Circle* contributors, Mondrian had been painting his rigorous geometry as the outcome of a very different set of problems initially about the abstraction of natural form. It is important to recall that, in the framework of a mystical attitude much influenced by Blavatsky's theosophical writings (which he was reading around 1908), Mondrian had begun around 1913 to evolve the abstract configurations which transcended matter and symbolised the equilibrium of opposing forces, reconciled eventually in uncompromising formal elements.<sup>73</sup> Having *originated* in his responses to the physical world, those configurations had been maintained in his abstract work.

As he explained in his *Circle* essay 'Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art', the overriding problem in art was that of achieving a balance between 'the human duality' - the subjective

and the objective.<sup>74</sup> He argued that art representing those corresponding ‘tendencies’, namely figurative and non-figurative,

should be solved, in the realm of plastic art – technically, ...and not in the realm of thought. The work of art must be “produced”, “constructed”. One must create as objective as possible a representation of forms and relations. Such work can never be empty because the opposition of its constructive elements and its execution arouse emotion.<sup>75</sup>

The ‘technical’ construction was concerned with design, recalling Read’s reading of this kind of abstraction. Whereas non-figurative art he argued, could be more easily released from subjective domination, figurative art was more easily exploited. In the search for ‘universal beauty’, he claimed that the opposition of the two trends was ‘unreal’; it was ‘illogical’ that.... [they].... should be so hostile’.<sup>76</sup> So Evans had argued.<sup>77</sup> In both their cases the implication was one of relative relations, not so extreme as to deny either.

Mondrian reminded the reader of the ‘*fixed laws*’ ‘hidden in the reality which surrounds us’, which ‘*govern and point to the use of the constructive elements of the composition and of the inherent inter-relationships between them.*’<sup>78</sup> They were subsidiary however, to the ‘*fundamental law of equivalence which creates dynamic equilibrium and reveals the true content of reality.*’<sup>79</sup> Mondrian’s constructions, symbolising opposing forces in dynamic tension, continued therefore to be the motive driving his painting at this time.

The respect with which he was regarded by the *Axis* cohort was most likely to have been based on their understanding of the formative power of his innovations so much earlier. His inclusion in *Circle* confirmed his status, his painting at this time appearing as it did to be closer to constructive ideology than to its mystical/religious origin. Mondrian, other than Blake as being claimed by the Surrealists, was also likely to have been in Evans’s mind when she had accused groups of claiming artists for their cause, Mondrian suited both Abstraction Création and the Constructivists.

'Reality', and the constituting 'truths' of its 'forms' were for Evans, unequivocally grounded in the relationship with the material world as we have seen. That is, an individually discerned motive raised by the experience of 'reality' was acted upon by individual choice and transaction with a medium, that served as a vehicle for and stimulus to the emotions. From *Axis 1* Evans and Piper had maintained painting as *painting*, not merely an apparition of form and colour.<sup>80</sup> The primacy which they attached to the painterly process placed them at irredeemable odds with Mondrian and Nicholson. The 'plasticity' of form which Mondrian concentrated upon subordinated that process:

Execution and technique play an important part in the aim of establishing a more or less objective vision which the essence of the non-figurative work demands. The less obvious the artist's hand is the more objective will the work be. This fact leads to a preference for a more or less mechanical execution or to the employment of materials produced by industry. Hitherto, of course, these materials have been imperfect from the point of view of art. If these materials and their colours were more perfect and if a technique existed by which the artist could easily cut them up in order to compose his work as he conceives it, an art more real and more objective in relation to life than painting would arise.<sup>81</sup>

No declaration could be more clearly opposed to the concerns of the *Axis* cohort in their commitment to individual expression, in an abstract form of art, expanding the tradition of painting. Since Mondrian reflected on the 'mechanical' painting of the true constructivist statement (whilst acknowledging that 'execution is of the greatest importance...it is through this, in large part, that intuition manifests itself and creates the essence of the work'), it is reasonable to suggest that to Evans and Piper, painting as a *human* act had no part to play in communicating constructivist ideals.<sup>82</sup> Had Mondrian made those comments in relation to the execution of painting as the time-honoured craft of subjective expression, they would have concurred with the views of the *Axis* cohort. But he believed that the non-



figurative artist had been ‘made...into a living machine’ by the ‘progress of science, of technique, of machinery, of life as a whole’, which demanded of him ‘constant obedience to the laws of pure plastics’.<sup>83</sup> The sensibility of the artist would appear to have mutated into merely the agent for the ‘produc[tion]’ of art.<sup>84</sup>

When Piper had observed in ‘England’s Climate’ that ‘there is life in painting enough’, he would have had the negative influence of constructive art in mind.<sup>85</sup> Against its austerity of form and practice, Piper had called for the continuation of the ‘fullness’ of expression that had characterised English art of the past.<sup>86</sup> Explaining that ‘life grows out of a good sculptor’s or painter’s work’, which ““means” far more than itself alone’, he further underlined his recent argument with Nicholson about the nature of art’s historical significance: ‘Each [work] “means” the life of the artist, - but beyond that, the life of his time.’<sup>87</sup> Life in the work was both conscious and unconscious, and only genuinely so by intense engagement in the activity *as itself* in response to an initially external experience. Comparing the character of both medium and form used by Turner or Girtin, he concluded that *then*, ‘It was still a buoyant life, though already partly weighted with the experience that tends to sink *our* expression in the form from the first, making it heavy and soggy, without wings or breath’.<sup>88</sup> I am arguing that to Piper the effect of over-intellectualisation of an intuitively based act, together with self-conscious strategies on the part of artists, had denied painting its life.

Conversely, Mondrian’s words suggested that ‘Life’ was for the Constructivists an intellectualisation of the internalised experience. Despite the journey of his early work, primary colour and geometric non-figurative form had long been the only appropriate expression for the universal. In his book *The New Plastic in Painting* of 1917 he had stated

‘Art – although an end in itself, like religion – is the means through which we can know the universal’, and it was his turning from evoking nature *with* its internal forces to evoking those forces alone, which was for him the ‘reality’ that established his work as a symbol of an idea and no longer an object.<sup>89</sup> He continued:

For pure art then, the subject can never be an additional value, it is the line, the colour and their relations which must ‘bring into play the whole sensual and intellectual register of the inner life’..not the subject....

To love things in reality is to love them profoundly; it is to see them as a microcosmos in the macrocosmos. *Only in this way can one achieve a universal expression of reality.* Precisely on account of its profound love for things, non-figurative art does not aim at rendering them in their particular appearance.[my italics]<sup>90</sup>

So that compared to Piper’s and Nash’s insistence on the ‘object’ (subject matter) as the inspirational centre of their work, for the Constructivists, the ‘subject’ (subject matter) was the configuration of the formal elements *themselves* as symbolic of natural forces, even though for Mondrian the elements had emanated from a notional subject matter as distinct from Gabo’s elements.

Nicholson had however only recently dispensed with subject matter after associating with Abstraction Création from 1933, but the precision of his abstract geometry was sharpened after a visit to Mondrian in 1934.<sup>91</sup> As to the motivations behind his constructivist work, Nicholson was characteristically brief and proclamatory in his *Circle* contribution.

Drawing once again the analogy of painting with religious experience, as he had in his *Unit I* commentary, and as Mondrian had in his *Circle* essay, he implied the revelatory nature of the painting, suggesting that apprehending it as an ‘experience’ indicated the artist’s ‘capacity to live’, and thus the painting’s ‘place in the structure of the world, in everyday life’.<sup>92</sup> ‘Painting’ was therefore an object in itself (*a painting*), not a process of reciprocal discovery between painter, the physical world, and the medium.

What Nicholson implied was that the originating motivation for such a painting was in and of itself – the desire to ‘make a *painting*’ (my italics) – rather than (as for Piper) *to paint*, that is, to express the sensation of a thing by engagement with a medium. A painting for Nicholson originated with a concept, for Piper with a sensation. This is what appears at least, to have been the crux of the matter. ‘Realism’, Nicholson stated, ‘has been abandoned in the search for reality: the “principal objective” of abstract art is precisely this reality’.<sup>93</sup> Piper would have agreed, except that constructive painting’s only ‘reality’ was itself, Surrealist ‘reality’ was an inversion of the known ‘real’, and therefore a highly ambiguous concept, but biomorphic abstract art and Evans perspective on it, arose from its process of engaging with the realities of life in their broadest terms. Nicholson was not forthcoming on his understanding of a constructivist ‘reality’ (something upon which Gabo expended pages), or reflective of its implications for painting. What is clear however, is that Nicholson and the Constructivists perceived art as primarily a social signifier with a democratising function. This was again at odds with the belief of the *Axis* cohort that art was the means to make sense of the world, and it rendered false and anachronistic a collective, revolutionary purpose.

My point is that the *Axis* cohort were fully engaged in the business of communicating their conflicting and complex experiences of modern life, and that ‘life’ was an actual condition and not a hypothetical one (such as the attraction of an ideal vision of a new world – which they viewed as escapism), but was naturally an articulation in the present, about the present. That that was the work of the painter, but also of the viewer, Evans had emphatically asserted, about viewing a painting ‘as in present life’: ‘When I look at Miró’s work...I am bound irresistibly to the present. It is this moment of existence that I am experiencing

*here.*<sup>94</sup> It was therefore not the *Axis* cohort who were dwelling on a life elsewhere than the present, and it was not they whose expression abandoned grappling with the reality of life for iconic symbols. The conclusion to be drawn from this is that they were not ‘renegades’, since they embraced the practice of abstraction in English modern art.<sup>95</sup>

I have concentrated little on Hepworth and Moore since sculpture generates a different discourse.<sup>96</sup> However, Hepworth’s *Circle* essay revealed her position as a carver in a constructivist context as problematic on some levels, and where more generally applicable, it is revealing and useful to compare her attitude with that of the *Axis* cohort. In attempting to explain the constructivist philosophy with regard to carving, her explicitness about its constitutive beliefs and their encapsulation in sculpture tended to expose contradictions as well as clear assertions. In general she concurred with Gabo concerning the universality of human experience, and of ‘spiritual power’, of the idea of perfection.<sup>97</sup> She also expressed beliefs which superficially appeared to correspond with those of the *Axis* cohort, but they differed fundamentally. For example, she now acknowledged that ‘abstract’ was ‘most frequently used to express only the type of the outer form of a work of art’ (which Evans had argued in her introduction to *Axis 1*), although she declared that ‘contemporary sculpture and painting have become abstract in thought and concept’, which effectively excluded any non-constructivist abstract art.<sup>98</sup>

Hepworth also acknowledged the need for ‘balance’ in conscious and unconscious ‘life’ through which ‘ideas’ could emerge.<sup>99</sup> But the communication of that idea in material form differed from the beliefs of the *Axis* cohort which were ‘balanced’ through all aspects of artistic activity. For example, she believed that the conscious aspect meant ‘the capacity to relate the whole of our past experience to the present idea’, and the ‘unconscious intuition’

was the ‘sensitivity to the unfolding of the idea in substance, in relation to the very act of breathing’.<sup>100</sup> Both relating the past to the present, and the transforming material process, constituted conscious *and* unconscious activity for the *Axis* cohort. The knowledge of history was also an inherent (unconscious) conditioning, and the ‘unfolding of the idea in substance’, although intuitive, also involved conscious decision-making.<sup>101</sup>

Further, the ‘idea’ did not, for Hepworth, concern anything connected with life in the physical domain and, she emphatically stated, ‘actually *is* the giving of life and vitality to material’.<sup>102</sup> The suggestion was that ‘life’ could be ‘giv[en]’ without a transforming process. ‘Vitality is not a physical, organic attribute of sculpture – it is a spiritual inner life’ she asserted.<sup>103</sup> Her reference, always to ‘idea’ and not ‘sense or sensibility and idea’, maintained a silence about this critical transaction with the material, which endowed it with its inner ‘vitality’. Achieving tangible evidence in the sculpture would I argue, have seemed to Evans and her cohort to remain a mystery. Moreover, the ‘co-ordination between conception and realization’ had to be ‘perfect’ for a ‘vital’ work, even though, she conceded, the ‘contours do not limit a perfected idea’; yet furthermore she reiterated, ‘A plastic projection of thought can only live by its inner power and not by physical content’.<sup>104</sup> I suggest that for the *Axis* cohort, for whom the connection between inner potential and outer form was critical, all these statements might have seemed at best opaque, at worst, contradictory.

Although there was not the same tendency as with Gabo and Nicholson to evade connecting a making process with a final form (and its necessary evocation), Hepworth’s closest focus did not account for the carving process as *constructivist* which, since it was carving and not constructing, was all the more critical to elucidate. She claimed that the ‘discernment of

the reality of life' through 'form consciousness' (that is 'volume and mass, gravity, contour, thrusts and stresses of internal structure, space displacement and space volume') was achieved in sculpture by thought projection and not 'physical content'. This dislocated 'idea' or 'thought' or 'concept' from physical work, and effectively challenged material expression itself.<sup>105</sup>

I want to suggest therefore, that the difficulty of theorising constructivist carving or sculpture rather than constructions revealed the contingent nature of this philosophy, and thus the separation of Hepworth's work (and Moore's, for that matter) from Gabo's at a fundamental level.<sup>106</sup> Hepworth's essay revealed ambiguities concerning the inherent qualities of the medium as against a projection of those qualities into the medium by the artist. (Gabo's media radicalised sculpture in symbolising the future. It was less achievable in traditional media.) It is for this reason I suggest, that even though Nicholson was extremely reticent to elaborate on his pronouncements and didn't like theorising on art, he might have found it similarly problematic to elucidate a truly constructivist process of painting which accounted for the manifestation of its elements in the medium of paint. For despite Mondrian's election to Constructivism on the basis of his apparent suitability for the 'movement', the origination of his abstract painting was located in the early modern tradition of representation, the precision of his execution preceding European constructivist ideas.

My point is that Nicholson's solution of painting the surfaces of his reliefs did not engage with the painting process *as painting*, although his geometrically organised paintings, more closely related to Mondrian's in appearance, did so insofar as Mondrian's conformed to a

constructivist identity for painting. Whatever constructivist painting was at its point of execution, it set Nicholson in clear opposition to Piper's habitual exploration of the medium itself in his abstract painting, to 'keep the tradition (of representation) alive'.

These detailed arguments are necessary finally to compare the social implications of constructivist art with biomorphic abstract art. We have seen that with Héliou and Piper for example, biomorphism was able to convey individual human experience in a universalised idiom. Constructivist art, without associative form, could only perform its social function through the connection of thought with iconic form. Hepworth was committed to this function. The artist was striving to find 'a solution to human difficulties' by 'solving his own thought' 'in relation to his medium'.<sup>107</sup> The status of this approach to making does in fact recall that of prayer – an internalised, meditative state – which, when projected into the material, she and Nicholson believed could 'be the solution to life and to living.'<sup>108</sup> It is easy to see that Evans and her cohort would have regarded this attitude as naive if not utterly deluded as artists in 1937. As if in response to some insinuation or accusation, Hepworth declared 'This is no escapism, no ivory tower, no isolated pleasure in proportion and space – it is an unconscious manner of expressing our belief in a possible life.'<sup>109</sup> Their visual language (form and colour) was 'universal' and 'g[ave] the same universal freedom to everyone.'<sup>110</sup> There was much mention of 'freedom' – of ideas, of form, of freedom itself.

Facing the last page of Hepworth's essay was a full page of three photographs of Stonehenge. No comment upon these images appeared in the text, except the insertion into an incongruous reference to 'landscape': '[Contemporary constructive work]....is an absolute belief in man, in landscape and in the universal relationship of constructive

ideas.’<sup>111</sup> This insight into a subject matter or context which seeped into her otherwise strictly constructivist rhetoric indicated that despite her conceptual equation of art = man/universe, there was an insistent need for identification with the physical world.

The distance had grown between Read and the *Axis* cohort by this time. Grigson later recalled his personal ‘antipathy’ for Read, whilst Evans, Piper and Nash continued to be respectful of his intellect, and generous about his unilateral support and therefore often ambiguous position, but reserved about his insistent politicisation of abstract art.<sup>112</sup> Since Read remained the unilateral apologist he was earlier, it is useful only to examine aspects of his *Circle* essay which relate to the *Axis* position.

I want briefly to continue to address the two aspects of abstract art raised in earlier discussions of Read, and examined further by him in ‘The Faculty of Abstraction’, in order demonstrate his resolute distance from the interests of the *Axis* cohort.<sup>113</sup> I argue this to be significant for the exclusion of *Axis* from the majority of accounts of modern art in England at this time, since Read’s writings were formative in the construction of English Modernism. His understanding of abstract art’s social role, and his continuing ambiguous position over the role of subjectivity in abstract art, are the aspects under examination.

Read’s opening proposition was that the debate about abstract art had reached ‘deadlock’ due to the lack of adequate language by which to discuss it, and he advocated recourse to philosophical terms.<sup>114</sup> This perpetuated the kind of esotericism that Evans had identified as the cause of misunderstandings of the aims of modern artists. He had recalled his proposition from *Art and Society* that there needed to be an equivalent of the evolution of the symbol to replace the originating object, as achieved by the ‘primitive’ artist through



his intuitive ‘identification of thought and object, of concept and percept.’<sup>115</sup> The modern artist had instead to move *beyond* that symbol to find the means to communicate the scientific and philosophical ambience of the present day. It had meant moving away from representation as such, towards art as an iconic object. The painting became the symbol to represent an era of concepts. The idea was first, its concretisation second.

This then was Read’s explanation of how this iconic form of abstraction worked in the modern world, in its role in constructing an ideology and not a reality, and he continued: ‘The activity which modern art is engaged on, of translating concepts into plastic percepts (plastic objects which can be perceived), is determined by necessity – the necessity of our social evolution.’<sup>116</sup> The ‘ambience’ which this art had to communicate consisted, as he had argued three years earlier, of the most abstract principles of nature manifested in isolation from their source:

abstract art makes use of, or proceeds on the basis of, the abstract concepts of physics and dynamics, geometry and mathematics...such concepts are part of our mental ambience, and the artist is precisely the individual who can make this ambience actual. He can make it actual in detached and non-utilitarian works of art; or he can make it actual in architecture and the industrial arts.<sup>117</sup>

Like Nash, Piper and Grigson, Evans had recognised an integrity in non-figurative geometrical abstract art’s formalism ‘for its own sake’ but not its validity either in representing or to ‘nature’.<sup>118</sup> Piper had been painting abstract compositions which did indeed evoke an ambience, but far from the ‘mental ambience’ of ‘physics, dynamics, geometry and mathematics’, they emerged from the sensually and emotionally discerned ambience (from which a ‘mental ambience’ derived).<sup>119</sup> In this way his paintings remained attached to the pictorial tradition insofar as they were concerned with a notional ‘object’

(subject matter), and increasingly in the fleeting evocation of perspectival space and ambient light.

Although supportive of ‘abstract’ art, Read was concerned that in time, its resolute distance from reality meant that it ‘[would] lose[s] its vitality and decline[s]’, and in order to reconcile it with the vitality of modern life, he reclaimed it as an ordering of chaos, reuniting it in this way with the reality of a human emotional need to order concept into form.<sup>120</sup> He had come to realise that

Hegel was right. The incompatibility between art and intellect does exist; art cannot become conceptual, an affair of symbols, an activity conducted without relation to objects. Art is always a perceptual activity, an activity of the senses in relation to plastic materials.<sup>121</sup>

The term ‘materials’ was not primarily to do with matter, although matter was implicit. It was currency for the visual elements, the language, and so primarily to do with design or configuration.<sup>122</sup> Characteristically, Read was thus continuing to engage with an abstract notion of elements without attending to the human act of their manifestation, where, in keeping with Mondrian’s attitude, the character and status of the medium in making manifest was implicit and silent. Read’s only explanation of this act was that in order to move ‘beyond the concept’ the artist returned it to ‘visible and vital raiment’.<sup>123</sup> Yet if as he stated, the ‘abstract’ artist’s aim was to ‘construct a plastic object appealing immediately to the senses and in no way departing from the affective basis of art,’ neither he *nor* the ‘abstract’ artist was engaged with the *fullness* of the process through which an ‘emotional awareness’ of the ambience could be manifested.<sup>124</sup> To the *Axis* cohort this would have represented an incomplete process of painting, as well as of representing.

The most significant feature raising the specific concerns of the key contributors in *Axis* in the context of constructivist discourse was Richards's essay on 'The Condition of Architecture and the Principle of Anonymity'.<sup>125</sup> Although concerned with architecture, his argument represented an unmistakable analogy with the role of geometric abstract art as a social instrument. That the social significance of architecture and design was highly prominent in constructivist philosophy is clear in the proportion of *Circle* which it occupies, that is, roughly half the volume. Richards's essay strongly recalled interests of Piper about medieval carvings and stained glass, where individualism had been tempered by a commonality of belief, yet flourished within its rules.<sup>126</sup> In the field of architecture, Richards explained how individual expression could only become 'culturally valid' by being 'assimilated into a regional tradition'.<sup>127</sup> In this way, highly personal and possibly even revolutionary individual innovation, required the impersonal process of adaptation 'by means of progressive modifications of type forms' into a universal statement in order for it to be 'culturally valid', although significantly not international.<sup>128</sup> This position was aligned with the 'English' particularity of interest of the *Axis* cohort, and distinct from the spirit of universality of the constructivist cohort, within an (English) cultural context.

Richards achieved this by citing William Morris's vision of the cultural enrichment of individual work against the nineteenth-century impersonality of mechanised design and processes, and locating the missing 'vital link' in the recent degeneration of architectural design.<sup>129</sup> The thinking had been removed from the purpose he argued, the practitioner was not '*thinking architecturally*'.<sup>130</sup> This belief was analogous to Piper's and Evans's views that misguided abstract painters were working for purposes other than painting, that is, *not thinking pictorially*.(my italics) Furthermore, Héliou had confirmed "thinking" as the 'equilibrium' which renewed 'everything the painter is capable of' during the activity of

painting: 'The shape becomes thought' he had declared.<sup>131</sup> The selfconscious, aesthetically determined style, was therefore not evolved from exploring possibilities for solving problems. Richards stated that dedication to working *with* those problems produced a 'live universal language...' evolved from a '*unity* of purpose', and thus an 'echo or reflection of a unity of social and cultural purpose pervading the whole of life'.<sup>132</sup>

Therefore, he described a 'genuine folk art' evolving as an expression of 'genuine folk work' (namely the medieval tradition), as continuing into the eighteenth century with the distinction being 'a religious...an emotional ...one', the eighteenth-century impulse was 'a civic...a rational ...one'.<sup>133</sup> The success with which the eighteenth century assimilated the individual impulse of the (by then 'celebrity') architect into a rational architecture was 'proof of proper cultural adjustment', and this Richards stated, was the eighteenth-century's 'claim to vitality', namely the 'progressive modification of type forms' to 'cultural purpose'.<sup>134</sup> The 'true architects' of the nineteenth century (showing the 'same unity of purpose as the builders of the medieval cathedrals') were those whose versatility was suited to the civic and industrial expansion of their times (for example Telford, Brunel, Stephenson, Rennie, Paxton).<sup>135</sup> Their contribution was that they established a 'genuine tradition of design' of 'true cultural validity', modifying individual innovatory working methods to vernacular standards.<sup>136</sup> It was pursued popularly and 'anonymously', in the way that Piper had observed of the expertise of the 'early religious artists' whose works were 'at once full, and popular'.<sup>137</sup> But in this 'International Survey' which *Circle* represented, Richards's argument was asserting a place for *vernacular* solutions, *local* traditions, in *England*. The International Movement (although he did not argue this), by implication dismantled anything provincial or local. And this had been precisely Piper's view of the pressure upon young English artists to imitate French modern painting.

In addition, Richards's conviction about architecture so closely accorded with Piper's notion of a 'fullness' of 'life' inherent in good artistic practice, and the need for painters to think from a broadly representational and painterly attitude rather than designing for a particular 'end', that it demonstrated the intellectual dynamic of his friendship with Richards at this time to lie at the most fundamental level of artistic values. It becomes clear with this essay, that these two individuals were in such sympathy that *this* alignment was a stronger one than Richards's part in the cohesive appearance of *Circle* would appear otherwise to indicate. What Richards argued actually undermined his validity as a constructivist architect, through asserting his position to be aligned with the kind of 'Art'/'Life' relationship which Nash had so passionately argued some five years earlier.<sup>138</sup> It was the cultural implications of the terms 'Art' and 'Life' themselves which separated Richards from his continental colleagues, namely his striving for the continuity of localised traditional principles as the means to framework a modern contemporary English vernacular.

For without exception, those essays in *Circle* that were related to Richards's premises or their implications, were all from the English cohort. Even though their 'flagstones' were firmly down for the purposes of conforming to *Circle*'s constructive ideals, there is a palpable ethos which unites them, which is far more subjective in its motivating force than that of the continental contributors.<sup>139</sup> For example, Read's essay could not escape from the emotive, psychological aspect of symbolic form as the outcome of an 'activity of the senses'.<sup>140</sup> And for all her arguments on 'spiritual inner life', 'unconscious intuition' and 'this world of ideas', Hepworth nevertheless revealed that 'landscape' constituted one empirical blemish in her constructivist beliefs.<sup>141</sup> Most tellingly however, was the way in

which Moore's contribution for *Circle*, consisting only of two paragraphs, betrayed his roots to be much more subjectively based in his assertion that 'contemporary' art (*not* Constructive art) 'is not an escape from life' because it was not representational, and that sculpture could use 'organic rhythms' in 'dealing with the relationship of masses'.<sup>142</sup> Neither of these views, in the way that Moore meant them, sat happily with the Constructive Idea as propounded by Gabo.

Since by the summer of 1937, *Circle's* contributors had established the notion of an abstract painting as an object representing nothing but a concept, as against the *Axis* cohort's establishment of an abstract painting as a moment in the process of representing experience, it is clear that the separation between the two was finally manifest. The concept 're clothed in visible and vital raiment' suppressed almost entirely the 'meaning embedded in the process' of painting, which for the *Axis* cohort constituted the basis of historical progress and achievement, the labours of whose painters were viewed as contemporary indicators.<sup>143</sup> What needs to be considered next is that *Circle's* cohesive appearance and its impressive list of 'members' on the front cover, whilst making an unequivocally internationalist statement about an internationally evolved aesthetic, represented only a minor proportion of English art activity, that which was perceived by Evans as inauthentic. That autumn she introduced and edited a collection of essays written by practising artists, entitled *The Painter's Object*.

NOTES

AXIS INTERESTS AND CIRCLE

- <sup>1</sup> P. Nash, *Poised Objects*, n.d. (1932), p.13; J. Miró, *Painting*, n.d., p.9.
- <sup>2</sup> *Axis 7* (Autumn 1936), p.6.
- <sup>3</sup> J. L. Martin, Ben Nicholson, N. Gabo (eds.), *Circle. International Survey of Constructive Art* (repr., London, 1971). The exhibition entitled Constructive Art appeared at the London Gallery, in July 1937.
- <sup>4</sup> p.48; *Signature* (July 1937), 50-52.
- <sup>5</sup> See chapter 3, p.155.
- <sup>6</sup> See D. Fraser Jenkins, *John Piper*, exh.cat., (London, Tate Gallery, 1983), pp.42-43.
- <sup>7</sup> Jenkins, *John Piper*, pp.42-43.
- <sup>8</sup> J. Piper, 'Died April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1837: John Constable', *Architectural Review* (April 1937), 149-150.
- <sup>9</sup> Piper most likely was preparing his centenary article whilst writing 'England's Climate'. Piper and Grigson, 'England's Climate', *Axis 7* (Autumn 1936), pp.6, 5.
- <sup>10</sup> Piper, 'Constable', p.149.
- <sup>11</sup> Piper, 'Constable', p.150.
- <sup>12</sup> Piper, 'Constable', p.150.
- <sup>13</sup> Piper, 'Constable', p.150.
- <sup>14</sup> Piper. 'Constable', p.150.
- <sup>15</sup> For example, H. G. Porteus, 'Piper and Abstract Possibilities', and H. Wescher, 'John Piper', both in *Axis 4* (November 1935), 15-16; p.12, respectively; S. J. Woods, 'Time to Forget Ourselves', *Axis 6* (Summer 1936), pp.20-21.
- <sup>16</sup> pp.1-11, 6, 8.
- <sup>17</sup> Nash, 'Surrealism', p.4.
- <sup>18</sup> Nash, 'Surrealism', p.4.
- <sup>19</sup> Nash, 'Surrealism', p.4.
- <sup>20</sup> Nash, 'Surrealism', p.4.
- <sup>21</sup> Nash, 'Surrealism', p.3.



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- <sup>22</sup> Nash, 'Surrealism', p.3.
- <sup>23</sup> Nash, 'Surrealism', p.3.
- <sup>24</sup> See chapter 2, pp.124-128 for a discussion of this article.
- <sup>25</sup> He was commissioned by John Betjeman, editor of the Guides in April. Letter from Betjeman to Piper, 13 April 1937, in C. Lycett Green (intro. and ed.), *John Betjeman. Letters, 1: 1926-1951* (London, 1994), pp.169-70. The writing was almost complete by the October, and the Guide to *Oxon* was published early the following year: J. Piper, *Oxon* (London, 1938).
- <sup>26</sup> For example, pp.8-9, 33, 34, 38-39, 43. For a discussion of Betjeman's interest in, use, and adaptation of picturesque presentation in his post as assistant editor of the *Architectural Review* (just prior to meeting Piper), see my article 'Modernity and "English" Tradition. Betjeman at *The Architectural Review*', *Journal of Design History* 13, 3 (2000), pp.196-97, 202-03.
- <sup>27</sup> For example, pp.8-9, 22, 23, 27, 28, 33. See entry 'Rollright' for descriptions of the stones, and line drawings on opposite page, pp.30-31. Piper quoted the antiquarian Stukeley on the stones being "corroded like worm-eaten wood by the harsh jaws of time." He also commented significantly on 'an excellent cryptic, *abstract* carving (Romanesque) over a door in the church.' (my italics) p.31. Betjeman's own contributions to the Guides, *Cornwall Illustrated* (London, 1934), and *Devon* (London, 1935) had introduced this visual aesthetic as a means to suggest how to experience his very particularly chosen subject matter. See Hiscock, 'Modernity', pp.205-08.
- <sup>28</sup> For an exploration of this relationship see S. Smiles, 'Equivalents for the Megaliths: Prehistory and English Culture, 1920-50'; for a discussion of the political construction of national 'character' see A. Causey, 'English Art and "The National Character", 1933-34', both in D. Peters Corbett, Y. Holt and F. Russell (eds.), *Geographies of Englishness. Landscape and the National Past 1880-1940* (New Haven & London, 2002), 199-223; 275-81. For discussions of preservationism and the English countryside see D. Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London, 1998), pp.29-32, 62-86.
- <sup>29</sup> Watercolours, drawings, Collages, and Objects, at the Redfern Gallery, London, from April through May.
- <sup>30</sup> (May 1937), p.404.
- <sup>31</sup> Piper, 'Recent', p.404.
- <sup>32</sup> J. Piper, 'Prehistory from the Air', *Axis* 8 (early Winter 1937), 4-9. Nash owned a copy of Stukeley's *Abury. A Temple of the British Druids* (1743), which Piper probably borrowed.

<sup>33</sup> That June, Piper photographed Nash's 'objects', which most probably included his two 'surreal objects' illustrated in *Axis* 8 (pp.14, 15). Postcard from Piper to Nash, (9 June 1937), TGA 71-27/12; Piper's collage *Avebury, or Archaeological Wiltshire* was an example of the involvement with archaeological sites as landscape, that he and Nash shared, both painters had worked on Shell Guides, and both had strong predilections for coastal or maritime subjects.

<sup>34</sup> Piper, 'Recent', p.405.

<sup>35</sup> Piper, 'Recent', p.405.

<sup>36</sup> Piper, 'Recent', p.404.

<sup>37</sup> P. Nash, 'Nature, Life and Art', *Week-end Review* (5 December 1931), p.716; Piper, 'Constable', p.149.

<sup>38</sup> See note 3.

<sup>39</sup> Unlike notions of 'art and life' prevalent amongst the *Axis* cohort, this section in *Circle* related to broader social questions, for example 'Art Education and State', and to technical or technological developments, for example 'The New Typography' and 'A Note on Biotechnics'.

<sup>40</sup> Martin, Nicholson, Gabo (eds.), *Circle*, pp.v, vi.

<sup>41</sup> Martin, Nicholson, Gabo (eds.), *Circle*, p.vi. Plates 39 and 40, appearing together in a double page spread, exemplify the dissonance between concept, medium, and method in the unified constructivist theory.

<sup>42</sup> In his volume the previous year entitled *Cubism and Abstract Art*, the Director of New York's newly established Museum of Modern Art, Alfred Barr Jr., had concluded that:  
it seems fairly clear that the geometric tradition in abstract art, just illustrated by Nicholson's relief, is in the decline. Mondrian, the ascetic and steadfast champion of the rectangle, has been deserted by his most brilliant pupils, Hélicon and Domela, who have introduced in their recent work various impurities such as varied textures, irregularly curved lines and graded tones. Geometric forms are now the exception rather than the rule in Calder's mobiles. The non-geometric biomorphic forms of Arp and Miró and Moore are definitely in the ascendant. The formal tradition of Gauguin, Fauvism and Expressionism will probably dominate for some time to come the tradition of Cézanne and Cubism.

<sup>43</sup> Piper, in R. Swift, G. Power, E. Gunningham, 'John Piper', *Composition*, 2 (Spring 1979), unpaginated.

<sup>44</sup> Martin, Nicholson, Gabo (eds.), *Circle*, pp.v-vi.

<sup>45</sup> Pls.25, 26, in 'painting' section. See also n.47.

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- <sup>46</sup> N. Gabo, 'The Constructive Idea in Art', in Martin, Nicholson, Gabo (eds.), *Circle*, 1-10. Piper later recalled he was 'considered a frightful renegade and reactionary for years after.' Swift, Power, Gunningham, 'John Piper', *Composition*, 2 (Spring 1979), unpaginated; Evans confirmed this reaction in an interview with D. Masters, in 'The Englishness of British Art. Arts and Society in Britain Since the Thirties', (unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Open Univ., 1987), p.302.
- <sup>47</sup> M. Piper responded to the question asking why Piper's work was included in *Circle*: 'They didn't tell us, we didn't know'. Conversation with the author, January 1998.
- <sup>48</sup> Piper to Nicholson, 5 May 1936, TGA 8717.1.2.3403.
- <sup>49</sup> See note 51 below.
- <sup>50</sup> *Chesil Beach Engine, Double Fugue*.
- <sup>51</sup> See C. Harrison, *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939* (London & Bloomington, 1981), p.377, note 53. The decision to publish was possibly clinched by the appearance of *Axis 7* in the autumn of 1936 headed by 'England's Climate', after a protracted period of increasing concern.
- <sup>52</sup> Read and Richards.
- <sup>53</sup> Read, 'Abstraction', p.64.
- <sup>54</sup> H. Moore, 'Quotations', Martin, Nicholson, Gabo (eds.), *Circle* (1937), p118.
- <sup>55</sup> B. Nicholson, 'Quotations', Martin, Nicholson, Gabo (eds.), *Circle* (1937), p.75.
- <sup>56</sup> B. Hepworth, 'Sculpture', Martin, Nicholson, Gabo (eds.), *Circle* (1937), 113-16.
- <sup>57</sup> Richards, 'The Condition', 184-89.
- <sup>58</sup> Mondrian, 'Plastic', 41-56. See also pp.209-10.
- <sup>59</sup> Gabo, 'Constructive', p.6.
- <sup>60</sup> Gabo, 'Constructive', p.7.
- <sup>61</sup> Gabo, 'Constructive', pp.10, 7, 7.
- <sup>62</sup> Gabo, 'Constructive', p.7.
- <sup>63</sup> Gabo, 'Constructive', pp.9, 7.
- <sup>64</sup> Gabo, 'Constructive', p.7.

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<sup>65</sup> M. Piper, 'Back in the Thirties', *Art & Literature*, 7 (Winter 1965), p.143.

<sup>66</sup> Gabo, 'Constructive', p.9.

<sup>67</sup> Largely from the literary tradition, namely lyrical constructions of traditional subject matter in fluidly executed painting or collage.

<sup>68</sup> Gabo, 'Constructive', pp.9-10.

<sup>69</sup> The insecurities I suggest were political and social, and can be pinpointed by scanning features in the *Listener* at this time. From mid 1934 through 1935, constructions of 'national character' in talks and articles had given way to concerns with aspects of militarism or warfare, and of Communism. Mid 1934 saw a feature entitled 'Defence of Civil Populations Against Gas', so prominent were such concerns. Halfway through 1935 Stanley Baldwin replaced Ramsay Macdonald as the leader of the National Government. The first half of 1936 saw the death of George V, the accession of Edward VIII, and later that same year, Edward's abdication and the succession of George VI. The second half of the year saw the review of constitutional structures such as 'Justice', 'Parliament', 'Law', and 'Government'. This was accompanied by a manifest mustering of resources and preparation for an impending war, the *Listener* features calling for land use for agriculture under titles such as 'Home Defence', 'Men and the Land', and 'Marrying Science and Practice'. A series on 'Nationalism' began with 'The Nationalism of Wales', 'The Case for Scottish Nationalism', 'The Case for Welsh Nationalism', 'Nationalism: An Englishman's Reply', and 'The British Nation'. R. Kipling's and G. K. Chesterton's deaths earlier in the 1936 would have contributed to a resurfacing of their writings on that theme. The Spanish civil war also erupted, and the Rome/Berlin alliance called 'Axis' was formed. These facts and features were only symptomatic of a long build-up of tension and uncertainty in the light of news arriving from overseas since Hitler's acceleration of power. By 1937 there was a substantial volunteer force migrating from England to Spain.

<sup>70</sup> The Artists International Association by 1937 was a 'consciousness raising', broadly-subscribed collaboration to publicise and oppose the rise of Fascism. Having been formed in 1934 under the title of the Artists International (running alongside the Writers International, whose publication was the *Left Review*), it raised funds to support anti-imperialist and pro-republican causes with exhibitions and sales. For its aims as the AI, and for its conversion to the AIA, see Harrison, *English*, pp. 251-52 and 304-09 respectively. Harrison notes that Piper was active in exhibiting with the association from 1935. M. Piper recalled the 'perpetual mixture of exhilaration and uneasiness.' At that time she implied that those who were concerned about 'modern art and literature' were also those constantly preoccupied with the 'threat of extermination.' See M. Piper, 'the Thirties', p.149.

<sup>71</sup> Gabo, 'Constructive', p.10.

<sup>72</sup> Gabo, 'Constructive', p.7.

<sup>73</sup> Helena Petrovna Blavatsky founded the Theosophical Society in 1875, whose concern was for a form of transcendental experience of the external world in a form of inner vision,

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through a belief in an ultimate truth about the forces of life. For an account of Mondrian's engagement with this philosophy see J. Golding, *Paths to the Absolute. Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko and Still*, (London & Princeton, 2000), pp.15, 26.

<sup>74</sup> Mondrian, 'Plastic', p.43.

<sup>75</sup> Mondrian, 'Plastic', p.42.

<sup>76</sup> Mondrian, 'Plastic', p.42.

<sup>77</sup> M. Evans, 'Order, order!', *Axis 6* (Summer 1936), p.8.

<sup>78</sup> Mondrian, 'Plastic', p.45.

<sup>79</sup> Mondrian, 'Plastic', p.45.

<sup>80</sup> The painter S. John Woods acknowledged this priority in Piper. 'Time to Forget Ourselves', *Axis 6* (Summer 1936), p.21.

<sup>81</sup> Mondrian, 'Plastic', p.54.

<sup>82</sup> Mondrian, 'Plastic', p.55.

<sup>83</sup> Mondrian, 'Plastic', p.55.

<sup>84</sup> Mondrian, 'Plastic', p.42.

<sup>85</sup> Piper, in J. Piper and G. Grigson, 'England's Climate', *Axis 7* (Autumn 1936), p.6.

<sup>86</sup> Piper, 'England's', p.5.

<sup>87</sup> Piper, 'England's', p.6.

<sup>88</sup> Piper, 'England's', p.6.

<sup>89</sup> Mondrian, cited in Golding, *Paths*, p.26.

<sup>90</sup> Mondrian, 'Plastic', p.52.

<sup>91</sup> Nicholson's early reliefs were configured freehand. For a brief account of this stage, and for the subsequent shift to his use of ruler and compass, see J. Lewison, *Ben Nicholson*, exh.cat., (London, Tate Gallery, 1993), pp.40-41, 44-45; for a reading of the relationship of Nicholson's reliefs to the contemporary craft world with which he was 'involve(d)', as a construction of 'Englishness' through a 'domestic vernacular', see C. Stephens, 'Ben Nicholson: Modernism, Craft and the English Vernacular' in Corbett, Holt and Russell (eds.), *Geographies*, 225-247.

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<sup>92</sup> Nicholson, 'Quotations', p.75.

<sup>93</sup> Nicholson, 'Quotations', p.75.

<sup>94</sup> Evans, 'Order,' p.8.

<sup>95</sup> The term used by Piper and Evans recalling the perception of himer in particular. See note 46.

<sup>96</sup> Also, Hepworth's *Unit 1* essay had been so redolent of Adrian Stokes's own attitude and writings (they worked on it together), that arguably the *Circle* essay was not wholly representative of her own thoughts.

<sup>97</sup> Hepworth, 'Sculpture', p.116.

<sup>98</sup> Hepworth, 'Sculpture', p.115.

<sup>99</sup> Hepworth, 'Sculpture', p.115.

<sup>100</sup> Hepworth, 'Sculpture', p.115.

<sup>101</sup> Hepworth, 'Sculpture', p.115.

<sup>102</sup> Hepworth, 'Sculpture', p.113.

<sup>103</sup> Hepworth, 'Sculpture', p.113.

<sup>104</sup> Hepworth, 'Sculpture', pp.113, 114.

<sup>105</sup> Hepworth, 'Sculpture', pp.113, 115, 114,

<sup>106</sup> See my comment, note 41.

<sup>107</sup> Hepworth, 'Sculpture', p.116.

<sup>108</sup> Hepworth, 'Sculpture', p.116.

<sup>109</sup> The defence from perceptions of 'escapism' suggests that it was currency at this time. Hepworth, 'Sculpture', p.116.

<sup>110</sup> Hepworth, 'Sculpture', p.116.

<sup>111</sup> Hepworth, 'Sculpture', p.116.

<sup>112</sup> Grigson suspected that the 'antipathy' was 'mutual'. Some of the 'contempt' directed at Read was, according to Grigson, 'explicable, if not exactly earned or justified.' He recognised however that 'no one [had] done more or so much to make art a living interest...for the indifferent English'. G. Grigson, 'A Conversation' in *The Contrary View*.

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*Glimpses of Fudge and Gold* (London, 1974), p.234; G. Grigson, 'Herbert Read' in *Recollections. Mainly of Writers & Artists* (London, 1984), pp.58-59.

<sup>113</sup> *Circle*, 61-66.

<sup>114</sup> Read, 'The Faculty', p.61.

<sup>115</sup> Read, 'The Faculty', p.64.

<sup>116</sup> Read, 'The Faculty', p.65.

<sup>117</sup> Read, 'The Faculty', p.66.

<sup>118</sup> Evans, 'Helion To-day: A Personal Comment', *Axis* 4 (November 1936), pp.8-9.

<sup>119</sup> Read, 'The Faculty', p.66.

<sup>120</sup> Read, 'The Faculty', pp.63, 65.

<sup>121</sup> Read, 'The Faculty', p.64.

<sup>122</sup> S. J. Woods, 'An Exhibition of Abstract Paintings', letter in the *Listener* (25 November 1935), p.932.

<sup>123</sup> Read, 'The Faculty', p.64.

<sup>124</sup> Read, 'The Faculty', p.65.

<sup>125</sup> *Circle*, pp.184-189.

<sup>126</sup> Piper had referred to the 'early religious artists', whose works were at once 'full, and popular', in 'England's', p.6. That year his article 'England's Early Sculptors', in the *Architectural Review*, 80 (October 1936), 157-65, had described the position of the artist as dominated by 'a strong outside idea', with rules within which the 'temporary inspiration could blossom and flourish' and which 'pointed a work with purpose'.

<sup>127</sup> Richards, 'Condition', p.184.

<sup>128</sup> Richards, 'Condition', pp.185, 184.

<sup>129</sup> Richards, 'Condition', p.185.

<sup>130</sup> Richards, 'Condition', p.185.

<sup>131</sup> See chapter 3, p.161.

<sup>132</sup> Richards, 'Condition', p.185.

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- <sup>133</sup> Richards, 'Condition', p.186. This had also been argued by Richards's predecessor Betjeman, in his volume *Ghastly Good Taste* (London 1933), as discussed in Hiscock, 'Modernity', p.198.
- <sup>134</sup> Richards, 'Condition', pp.186, 185.
- <sup>135</sup> Richards, 'Condition', p.187.
- <sup>136</sup> Richards, 'Condition', p.187.
- <sup>137</sup> Richards, 'Condition', p.187.
- <sup>138</sup> Elucidated through chapter 1.
- <sup>139</sup> Recalling Grigson's comment in 'England's Climate': 'You can flagstone pictures down on to the top of an abnormal unrest of the individual soul, or you can just paint *with* your unrest.' *Axis* 7, (Autumn 1936), p.6.
- <sup>140</sup> Read, 'Faculty', p.64.
- <sup>141</sup> Hepworth, 'Sculpture', pp.113, 115, 116.
- <sup>142</sup> Moore, 'Quotations', p.118.
- <sup>143</sup> Read, 'Faculty', p.64; see also chapter 2, pp.99-100.



CHAPTER V

*THE PAINTER'S OBJECT*

This chapter explores the extent to which Evans's anthology *The Painter's Object* related to *Axis*, and by implication how it represented a counterblast to *Circle*. Since superficially it did not appear to concern itself at all with abstract art, and even included contributions from a surrealist and a constructivist artist, it might be assumed that Evans and her cohort had by then abandoned abstract art altogether.<sup>1</sup> Late in her life, when asked if *The Painter's Object* was published to 'establish a clear artistic position', Evans claimed that it was 'just a squib..not a riposte to *Circle*', and thus not to be 'taken too seriously.'<sup>2</sup> Yet the ambiguities in her comments were, I want to demonstrate, significant.<sup>3</sup> Since 'squibs' are the most revealing of acts, the aim of this chapter is on the contrary to Evans's instruction, to take seriously those essays by her and Piper, and more briefly one by Nash, to establish whether their attitudes to abstract art had altered by this time in the light of their priorities as pinpointed at the beginning of chapter three, and according to *Circle's* own priorities.<sup>4</sup> More generally, other content in the collection is briefly reviewed for broader significances related to *Axis*.

For a brief summary of the collection, constellations of the other essays occur around such concerns as the social significance of art, the versatility of the true artist, and characteristic interests of particular artists. Taking the last first, Nash's essay 'The Nest of the Wild Stones' played upon the surreal ambiguity both of manmade and natural, and of animate and inanimate form, in constructing poetic metaphor.<sup>5</sup> The ambiguity of meaning derived from juxtapositions of ready-made images was discussed in Ernst's contribution 'Inspiration to Order', where collage and his own process of *frottage* constructed surreal narratives.<sup>6</sup> Significantly, surreal content appeared comfortably in this collection, but it was surreal in its subtlety of strange context and ambiguous form – the kind of surreal expression discussed by the Thwaiteses – and not in any obsessively Freudian subconscious

narrative.<sup>7</sup> Kandinsky's essay 'Empty Canvas, etc.' described his method of composing abstract pictures from his earliest phase through to the present, his pictorial basis for abstraction being asserted in his claim that the 'illusory space' of a picture, inferred as a 'truth', was articulated by the 'falsehood' of abstraction.<sup>8</sup> These essays tended to reiterate the characteristic interests of their writers, adding nothing more of particular significance to illuminate *Axis* interests; so it is now important to concentrate upon those that illuminated those interests further.

In her opening essay 'The Painter's Object', Evans declared that artists 'inherit the earth', that 'They turn everything to their advantage' in their 'racketeering'.<sup>9</sup> But she separated the artist (implied as Nicholson's cohort) who 'racketeers' from the artist who 'cannot ignore anything that may serve the ends of his own absorbing passion and function – art'.<sup>10</sup> She implied that versatile artists who trusted in their intuitions were untouched by dogma or categorisation which others attempted to impose. The evidence of this versatility was in the scope of particular artists' essays. For example, Moore's 'Notes on Sculpture' explained the concerns of the sculptor in his response to 'shapes' from nature, and the role that drawing played in that response.<sup>11</sup> He implied, in his reference to the 'quite unnecessary' 'violent quarrel between the abstractionists and the surrealists', that those categories which claimed his work as their own had never succeeded in gaining his singular commitment, since he did not seek to 'belong' to either.<sup>12</sup> This was appreciated by the *Axis* cohort, and reflected in the fact that Moore alone contributed both to *Circle* and *The Painter's Object*.<sup>13</sup> The metaphysical painter Chirico explored 'Gustave Courbet' as a romanticist rather than as a realist, and as if demonstrating the ridiculousness of the 'violent quarrel' as Moore put it, Evans's ultimate statement was the constructivist Moholy-Nagy's surreal 'film scenario' entitled 'Once a Chicken, Always a Chicken', prefaced by

illustrations of his meticulous constructions.<sup>14</sup> I propose that Evans, who had declared in *Axis* that ‘We are lost amongst individuals whose works protest at classification’, there being too many who did not work under ‘abstract’ or ‘surreal’, was demonstrating in her collection that disciplinary categories were unnatural to the genuinely creative process so that what was habitually presented to the public was by no means an artist’s full concern.<sup>15</sup> For example as discussed, painters Piper and Nash had written elsewhere about architecture, design and sculpture, and the painter-illustrator Graham Sutherland wrote on the surreal aspect of landscape sculpture, formed by strange, surreal geological formations, in ‘An English Stone Landmark’.<sup>16</sup>

Art was also placed in broader social contexts in this collection, moving out from the studio and gallery. Ozenfant’s essay ‘Serial Art’ promoted the democratic idea of the prototypical image, which could be mass produced in a bid to make accessible to the broad public the ‘best painting’.<sup>17</sup> The political edge was direct and uncompromising, in its call for democratising art. In an equally social framework, Trevelyan’s ‘Mythos’ perceived the ‘mass desires and individual experiences’ of the city as an interrelation of organisms.<sup>18</sup> Calder’s ‘Mobiles’ described his employment of pure form in the design of theatrical performance, transforming the unique art object into a dynamic scenario, reconstituted only in the choreography of its internal movements.<sup>19</sup> Léger’s ‘Painting and Reality’ argued for a new aesthetic realism, and the opportunity for the ‘popular masses’ to gain access to it through the collaboration of artists in design and architecture, where colour and light were used creatively and murals would express a ‘tranquil, interior type of art’.<sup>20</sup> But Léger’s forms, though being claimed as constructivist by *Circle*, were drawn from the physical world and retained its symbolic form.<sup>21</sup> For this critical reason, in the eyes of the *Axis*

cohort, they would maintain their independent integrity, unlike those of Mondrian or Nicholson.

Considered therefore as a collection of 'scattered writings' by artists 'extraordinarily exciting' to read, *The Painter's Object* was evidently not intended to 'uphold any creed or prove anything', but merely to reflect the 'directness of approach and lack of literary prejudice' characteristic of the expression of its contributors.<sup>22</sup> However, much as Evans may not have meant 'uphold' a 'creed', the evasiveness of the content concerning 'abstract' art speaks volumes about *Axis* priorities, and that voice is established loud and clear in her introductory essay. The collection does however imply a 'clear artistic position', and it certainly constituted more than a 'squib' in *Circle*'s direction. I suggest that the 'painter's object', meaning *either* the aim/objective, *or* the subject matter, meant also (and even more emphatically), the painters' (plural) *objection*. That 'the painters object', was a barely disguised 'riposte' to *Circle*'s clear denial of painting, I argue, as it is inconceivable that the Oxford English graduate had arrived at that wonderfully apt term 'object', insensitive to the fullness of its cryptic meanings.

Other than Evans's essay 'The Painter's Object', the collection included two contributions each from Piper, Nash, and Héliou, and one each from a range of those artists in whom she had remained convinced, such as Picasso, Kandinsky, Moore, Calder, Ernst and Léger, as well as others who had not appeared in *Axis*, namely Ozenfant, Trevelyan, Sutherland, Chirico and Moholy-Nagy. Some of the essays were reprints, and the frontispiece, a print of a Picasso *Still Life* of 1922 achieved through the process used for *Axis* colour reproductions, together with Héliou's *Axis* article, associated it with the review.<sup>23</sup> Its typography and layout were however, entirely conventional.

We have seen that Evans's writing on art was always sourced from the circumstances of the artist and the traditions of his practice. This interrelation continually confirmed that the artist's work was the outcome of a complex set of decisions. In her unique position of being an 'inside' observer yet not a practitioner, she was a consummate communicator of the artist's reality, and through that, the nature of art's resonance with its social and cultural condition. To elucidate her position at this pause in the run of *Axis*, it is necessary to examine her essay for evidence of this understanding, and its dissemination, together with its relation to abstraction, before attending to other contributions.

Evans made clear that by later 1937 she was exasperated that the 'internecine war' breaking out across the field of abstract art, and the 'silly battle' apparently raging between the abstract and the surrealists artists, were nothing but debilitating for the constitution of a healthy contemporary art.<sup>24</sup> Nor did she spare her spleen in identifying the sources of its decay, reiterating in the first pages that the public and critics needed to attend to the 'real goods', namely 'the artist, and what he really stands for', and scorning the 'autographing crowds' and the 'pressmen' for 'completely missing the boat'.<sup>25</sup> This diatribe against critics, public, and self-regarding artists, aimed to debunk the myth of the bohemian life of the artist, and the crass misconception of the business of art making.

Her essay revealed her thoughts at a time when there was clearly a public, no longer a private schism, between those who had worked apparently for the same (abstract) cause. Now, she revealed to the public the measure of antipathy she felt over the superiority assumed by certain artists. Her heavy irony betrayed the situation in which she found herself on one side of a divide whose other side consisted of a barely disguised cohort

(namely the Freudian Surrealists and the Constructivists) who were referred to as ‘the escapists’.<sup>26</sup> She designated as ‘artists’, only those that

fight to do what they really want to, suffering the stupid patronage of the public and the everlasting bullying of intellectual and highbrow contemporaries; [who] defy and scorn all the commonplace morality (duty to this, duty to that, self-abnegation, self-mistrust – both very important – the discipline of nine till six), and once where they want to be, never stop working<sup>27</sup>

The ‘tame artists’ or the ‘lay figures’, along with ‘the rest’ and ‘the others’, produced work ‘of astonishing and complicated sophistry’, in order to conform with society’s expectations of the artist ‘trembling on the brink of the gossip column’.<sup>28</sup> The fullness and reality of the artist’s daily life which formed and informed his work, was thus isolated in the eyes and mind of the public from its manifestation.

Evans demonstrated her understanding of the complexity of the artistic process by exemplifying it in the recent work of Picasso. Her and Piper’s longstanding respect for his professionalism was further strengthened by his impressive painting *Guernica*, exhibited in the Spanish Pavilion at the Paris International Exhibition that year. (Pl.41) The effectiveness of his biomorphic abstract form, and his cultural identification with the subject, constituted her chosen themes concerning the complex process of expressive abstraction. Evans explained the hitherto nebulous area of *how and why* an artist resolves the subjectivity of his response through the process of its objectification in a formal expression, with more clarity than Read had ever achieved in his theoretical writings. In direct, simple language, she addressed the emotional engagement with a subject and its transformation into distilled form as she perceived it to be expressed in *Guernica*. There had been no such demystified explanation of the process from the inspiration, development,

and final *effect* of a visual vocabulary to date, and it represented her and Piper's entire philosophy of abstract art.

I want to argue here that far from a fit of *pique* over a sense of failure to win public acclaim, which might be viewed as the reason for her initial robust diatribe, the entirety of her essay demonstrated that the histrionics were designed as a crashing overture, to be counterbalanced by her analysis of the realities of the process; and the eloquence of her explanation validated her despair. She was after all, repeating what Nash had argued since 1932, and which for the past three years had been present in *Axis* and other publications and even private letters from its cohort, all of which indicated in no uncertain terms that their predictions were indeed well founded.<sup>29</sup> The public was more interested in attaching itself to the social world and eccentricities of the 'racketeer' artist. Worse, artists themselves had dissented over the ethics of 'art' and an artistic morality. She aimed in her essay to blast away the fog. Against the progress of biomorphic abstraction, non-figurative geometric abstraction, now publicised as 'constructive' art, had nothing to 'say' of the contemporary experience, its distance from lived experience of the world was absolute, yet it claimed to serve as an inspiration for social and political democracy.<sup>30</sup>

Despite there being no discussion of abstract art *per se* in the essay collection as a whole, the priorities held in *Axis* were firmly established in Evans's opening gambit. It is therefore important to quote substantially from her commentary on *Guernica*, in which she explained the act of abstracting as 'purging into formality'.<sup>31</sup> In this case, the raw emotion of the artist's response to the subject was transmuted into biomorphic abstract form – the finding of 'the *abstract* qualities beneath the shattered limbs and the blood of "Guernica"'.<sup>32</sup> It



accounts entirely for the conviction of the *Axis* cohort that biomorphism expressed the conscious *and* unconscious apprehension of the subject, resulting in this particular case from an individual *cultural* identification:

It is a terrible picture of atrocities that would turn one's hair white if one met them in real life. It is not gently composed to soften the blow, either; not a Laocoon picture. Nor is it the wild testament of a man distracted by the thought of his tortured country, and least of all is it a 'Red Government' poster screaming horrors to a panic-stricken *intelligentzia*. It is a passionate recognition of the facts, so purged as to become almost detached statement, and ultimately so unrealistic as to be almost as abstract as his most abstract painting. Yet only a Spaniard could have done it because only a Spaniard could have exploited in just that way the present events in Spain. It is not *qua* Spaniard that he is able to do it, but as a member of a suffering race he is able to feel its sufferings and live them and use them entirely for his own ends. Picasso himself could never have painted a 'Guernica' for France or Germany or England in the Great War – then he was exploiting his detachment. To-day he is exploiting his actual implication – but all the time towards purging, resolving. And all the time whether in war or out of war, implicated or not implicated, whether apparently abstract or apparently realistic, the detachment is in the painting and not in the feeling; that is what gives his abstract pictures life and makes 'Guernica' a great painting and not just a piece of sentimental political propaganda.<sup>33</sup>

She continued to clarify art's expression as the result of specifically cultural experience:

But Moore is not a Spaniard, nor is Nash, nor Héliou, nor Léger, nor any of the others in this book, and their only way of dealing with the immediate problems of Spain is not to *act* as well as paint or carve, not to become for the moment Spaniards and try to express the revolution (and resolve it) as if it were their own, [...], not even to try to feel what they would feel *if* all this were happening in their own country – that is, a kind of perverted spiritual whoring – but to treat the war in Spain as part of the existing world, part of the world to which they have to find an answer in their own way, the world which as it was during the great war Picasso expressed through the wineglass and the guitar. And they have above all to ignore the clamours of the warmongers, the fighting men of letters...just as Picasso, the Spaniard, succeeds in doing.<sup>34</sup>

'To act', 'as if', 'to try', indicated the inauthentic to Evans. But to invent an 'independent piece of life', in which emotional responses are resolved, was precisely what Nash had advocated earlier on.<sup>35</sup> It was the means for the *Axis* cohort of bringing 'life' to art, in

forms distilled from lived experience. To a greater or lesser degree they were abstract, and biomorphic.

From the first issue of *Axis*, with Héliou's belief in the 'picture' as the site where 'ethics, esthetic, lyrism' converge, with Nash's aim to 'give life to a conception within the formal shell', and with Piper's own observation of Picasso's work as 'a red splash in perfect control', there could have been no stronger justification that what *Axis*, through Evans, had been engaged in, was an abstract art with universally humanist potency, which was at the same time a uniquely individual expression.<sup>36</sup> Evans now demonstrated through *Guernica* all conclusive beliefs and values inherent to *Axis*, namely the 'fullness' of an individual's experience of present life, 'purged' into evocative elements, implicit in which was that individual's social and cultural perspective. Recognition of these values in a painting signified recognition of an artist's integrity.

Inherent to that integrity was the artist's conscious and unconscious identification with his environment. This duality in the process of expression had been exemplified in *Axis* in the use of form and tonal range evocative of the environmental conditions of Alaskan sculptors, as discussed in Penrose's article.<sup>37</sup> In addition, the article by W. G. and M. Archer had described the colours of the wall paintings of the Santhal peoples from the Singhbhum district of Bihar, obtained from the soil and vegetative extracts, and the geometric designs they configured, as producing a 'regional style which tribal experience has sanctioned', demonstrating the unconscious absorption of their physical conditions, and referring to it as 'a living tradition', 'developed by family sensibilities and matured by repetition.'<sup>38</sup>

An inherited sensibility had been discussed in *Unit 1*, particularly by Nash, in the context of the unconscious evocation (born of a literary tradition) of mood or ambience through the qualities of formal elements in representing topographical settings, where it was referred to as the 'English genius' issuing from a 'native spring.'<sup>39</sup> But he was clear on the distinction to be made between unconscious evocation and conscious projection: 'The international character of modern art, by destroying the false values of nationalism, opens the way for a purely academic approach to the question of national idiosyncrasy, and, in proportion as art becomes more abstract, so the nuances of national or racial distinction become more subtle and, consequently, more interesting to trace.'<sup>40</sup> 'Idiosyncrasy' was the unconscious character which identified a group tendency.

Nor was Evans's notion of cultural inheritance of a nationalistic form of subject matter or narrative, but of a synthesis of technique and idiom emergent from a 'spiritual necessity' resonating a deeply rooted experience of place and community.<sup>41</sup> Her approach to understanding Picasso's response to the event at Guernica was through the 'spiritual necessity' born of his belonging to the Spanish culture.

Scanning the essay titles generally, there was little mention of the term 'abstract', whereas the terms 'surreal/surrealism/surrealist' were used, mostly by Ernst or Nash. Abstraction enjoyed little exposure as 'in itself a criterion', and was present as part of the process of representing, as conclusively claimed by Picasso in 'Conversation': 'Abstract art is only painting...There is no abstract art. You must always begin with something... the idea of the object...is what started the artist off, excited his ideas and stirred up his emotions.'<sup>42</sup> Nothing could have more solidly registered the empiricist position of the *Axis* cohort and its diametric opposition to the constructivist ideal.

That the freedom of biomorphic abstraction facilitated such individual solutions was reflected in the variety of art manifestations featured in *The Painter's Object*, in which their commonality was the broader evocation of an 'instinct for life and [...] knowledge of life today'.<sup>43</sup> Those artists, she declared, 'don't destroy, formalise and bring to life again; but absorb, create and set the creation going. An independent piece of life instead of a symbol for life' (implying the biomorphic abstractionists and the Constructivists respectively).<sup>44</sup> This approach to abstract art was constituted by 'each artist's personal painting-predilections combined with his particular cognizance and awareness of 1937 (or 1936 or 1938)'.<sup>45</sup> The 'personal' solution of her cohort to which she had later referred, 'might still belong to a new tradition which [they] were interested in. Art of the generations was a unity although it had variety.'<sup>46</sup> The fact of conscious *and* unconscious activity inherent in the process of *abstracting*, was the heart of the business of representing individual experience, and the fact of the *conscious* design of an abstract 'statement' as a categorical end, was another activity, removed from that channel of communication. Evans was convinced about the nature of the interrelationship of conscious and unconscious activity in artistic expression, even before her involvement with *Axis*, claiming 'my conscious thought and emotions influenced by the sub-conscious are the ultimate material of any work of art I may produce'.<sup>47</sup>

Implicit in this necessary tension was the resolution of particular and universal experience. In Evans's essay, the schism in contemporary art in England was made fully public. The reality of the present, as against the unreality of an imagined future, was for the *Axis* cohort, the imperfect and genuine condition of life, the only position from which an artist could communicate. Evans was resolute in her conviction that art needed to express that reality.

Conversely, in her *Circle* essay Hepworth was equally convinced that art's 'formal relationships...can be the solution to life and to living. This is no escapism, no ivory tower, no isolated pleasure' she declared, but the expression of 'our belief in a possible life.'<sup>48</sup> Yet Evans's comment below suggests that she, and by association the *Axis* cohort, had been accused of being escapists in their non-conformism to that ideology:

The real escapists are those who ask for conditions under which everything can be quite straightforward before attempting anything. (A ready-made Greek Republic, so as to be able to enjoy and produce ready-made Greek art.) The worst kind of escapism is practised by those who most shout about it; those whose whole life is paralysed by the fear that at some future date – perhaps to-morrow, perhaps in a year, two years, three, more – they will not be *free* to be their own whimpering selves... They want to be *right*, and above all they do not want to do anything except proclaim what they are right about for the rest of their short lives. Fear and desire are here inextricably mixed. But all their cries are public announcements...that they are tired of the struggle here and now, and look forward to another and a better life.<sup>49</sup>

The richness of the 'struggle here and now' was precisely what Evans believed engaged the artist.<sup>50</sup> It was the aim, 'The Painter's Object'. In an assertion that reinforced Piper's and Grigson's arguments in 'England's Climate', she cited the letters of Constable and Palmer as the clue to *their* reality and, therefore, to understanding 'how acute the problems of their own paintings in their own time were'.<sup>51</sup> Against the unbelief of their public they had also maintained their independence, and in their achievements had remained beacons for their successors: 'Work and belief in their own integrity has kept the Constables, Blakes and Cézannes of this world doggedly at their self-appointed tasks.'<sup>52</sup> The inference that Piper was one of those successors, was confirmed in his preoccupation with and inspiration from work on his Constable article during this time.

No imposition, from peers or public, should therefore corrupt the integrity of the ‘self-appointed task’. Yet it was an onerous one, given the tense cultural climate and the political precariousness at this time. According to Evans, artists had to suffer ‘the stupid patronage of the public and the everlasting bullying of intellectual and highbrow contemporaries; [and] defy and scorn all the commonplace morality’.<sup>53</sup> Most probably this ‘morality’ (‘duty to this, duty to that, self-abnegation, self-mistrust – both very important’) implied the membership of groups or the subscription of work to group exhibitions for various social or political causes, under which the artist subjugated his/her personal tendencies to a governing ideal.<sup>54</sup>

It was this aspect which, along with the rejection of a group style or idiom, subjected non-conformist artists to accusations of being ‘anti-social’ and ‘vicious’. Across the ranks, contemporary artists were canvassing support at this time for their dispersed cohort in Europe and England, and for the volunteer effort in Spain, through the AIA exhibitions and fundraising events.<sup>55</sup> Although a broad variety of artists entered work for exhibitions, I think it highly likely that constructivist art, having presented itself as ideologically motivated by democratic ideals expounded in the pages of *Circle*, would, also through its association with the Hampstead émigré community, have gained an amount of liberal and left wing recognition as a ‘moral’ movement. The *Axis* editor and co-editor, rurally based, were geographically and artistically removed from the centre of events, although they participated in exhibitions. This fact goes some way towards their insistent independence from group immersion, and the view of them by others as ‘escapists’.<sup>56</sup>

In this way, the artist's 'self-appointed task', implying a cultural, social and political, therefore a *moral* issue, was fraught with 'not one but a thousand battles'.<sup>57</sup> I suggest that the increasing threat of war and of the current purge of democratic rights in Spain and through Europe by the end of 1937, must have raised even the production of art at this time as a moral issue in itself. Whereas the pressure that Nicholson had placed on artists in the 7&5 to conform to a purely abstract idiom had signified his personal commitment to a visual aesthetic, Gabo's politically based influence consolidated much of Nicholson's and Hepworth's artistic convictions towards a more politicised position. But even before Gabo's establishment in Hampstead in 1936, Nicholson's reliefs as we have seen, had already provoked comments about their moral significance, which had cropped up in *Axis* and other contemporary publications over the previous two years.<sup>58</sup> What is significant is that the 'moral' reference had occurred more often than was merely incidental. This association clearly rankled with Evans, since in the abstract art *milieu* Nicholson was able to claim the moral high ground. Whilst it may not necessarily have been the case that Nicholson actively adopted this moralistic stance for his art, he did not deny its relevance, and his analogy of art with 'religious experience' set the filter through which he and his work were viewed.

There was little ambiguity in the identity of the 'escapists' in Evans's essay, who were 'not always content to let other people get on with their own work in their own way...

[Thinking] it immoral, bourgeois, and self-indulgent'.<sup>59</sup> To respond to the impurity of the modern condition by setting a personal project of exploration, was therefore viewed by others as 'immoral' and 'self-indulgent'. But to be *any* kind of abstract artist was anyway claimed by the Surrealists from their communist position to be bourgeois, yet in the eyes of

the greater public, to be an abstract artist, especially a non-figurative abstract one, was to be 'bolshevist'.<sup>60</sup> Political inferences, long established, therefore continued right through the thirties to muddy the waters considerably for those keen to understand the nature of abstraction, and for those artists seriously engaged with exploring it.

Evans's sense that all sight was being lost as to the genuine drive of artists to trust to their judgements and channel their thought and experience, 'to be present in their work', was forcefully conveyed in this essay.<sup>61</sup> Her spleen about the working and exhibiting pressures upon them needs however, to be viewed most of all in terms of her close first-hand experience of Piper's situation. Clearly, he in particular was undergoing enormous pressure to relinquish his continuing development of biomorphic abstraction, for as discussed, the projects he was involved in at this time were far from a devotion to abstract painting.

A further significant factor needs to be considered in this publication. In Evans's essay and the subsequent broad scope of artist's own commentaries, I submit that she unequivocally laid to rest the 'Art' and 'Life' debate from *Axis*'s point of view, establishing finally its position as concerned with the genuine process of expressing experiences through representing an imperfect not perfect, and a present not future, life.

The central claim of Piper's essay 'Lost, A Valuable Object', was that the activity of countless artists had entailed the search for the 'object' that cubism 'destroyed'.<sup>62</sup> That it was generally forgotten that contemporary painting was where it was because *of* the object, and not because of its *absence*. For the *Axis* cohort, to lose sight of this fact was to lose the premise of art itself. Piper recognised that even abstract art with its variety of aims, still



arose from the response to a form of subject matter, or 'object', arguing that abstract art seemed to return to it rather than to escape from it.<sup>63</sup>

But he recognised that the return was not towards the same idea of the object, and that this was the root cause of the problem in contemporary art. As the constructivist 'object' was the artwork itself, its only possible dimension of 'reality' was turned inward towards its own materiality and aesthetic qualities. The surrealist 'object' was merely the means to another 'reality', and therefore, its inherent 'reality', being focussed elsewhere, was a compromised one. As was the case for all the *Axis* cohort, Piper's belief was that the analysis of the object was only *part* of the whole contemporary endeavour, and the persistence of its reduction had finally substituted its actual presence in the physical world by either a fantasy or a concept: 'the object must grow again' he therefore declared.<sup>64</sup> By this he meant in its own integrity, as the source of pictorial exploration, and not as the means to another, non-pictorial, proposition.

But in the resolute resistance to this on the part of constructivist and surrealist painters, he had observed 'one striking similarity' in their attitudes towards the object: '*they both have an absolute horror of it in its proper context*'.<sup>65</sup> Throughout *Axis*, he had demonstrated that in order for painting to communicate the artist's experience of contemporary life, it needed to be grounded in reality and not idealised away. He elaborated: 'The one thing neither of them would dream of painting is a tree standing in a field. For the tree standing in the field has practically no meaning at the moment for the painter. It is an ideal: not a reality.'<sup>66</sup>

This was the pivot upon which the beliefs of the Constructivists and Surrealists on one side, and the biomorphic abstractionists on the other, were balanced. Yet it was neither Piper's nor Evans's view that a genuine expression could exist without aspects of both attitudes,

and that the degree of each in any one work was naturally variable. Piper was reviewing this relationship in his own painting since he was engaged with issues of representation and subject matter.

We have seen that 1937 was a busy and enriching period for Piper, which also accounts for the delay in publishing *Axis 8*. The subjects common to all his projects were the nature of representing objects and topography. I want next to explore the content of 'Lost, A Valuable Object', for the most significant connections with which to argue that through finding a 'corroboration and a sanction' in the work of Constable, Piper was resolving the conflict of 'form', as symbolic of the conflict of 'idea' in the 'modern world', which he perceived 'all form-conscious' artists to struggle with.<sup>67</sup>

The context for Piper's 'lost' 'object' in this essay illuminated further his approach to resolving this conflict. His introduction had raised the traditional subject matter of the artist's 'place', highly approving as he did of recent articles in a journal, featuring 'various localities' which had been 'sketching grounds' for artists in the past.<sup>68</sup> I suggest they appealed to him through the close connection of the resulting paintings with the artist's habitual activities, that is, part of his life. The drawing or painting emerged from the normality of visiting a place which was in his 'ambit'.<sup>69</sup> The re-establishment of the 'object' also extended it to the constituent 'objects' in a place, or a location, and thus his point of the inherence of constructed abstract forms (of 'objects') in the tradition of topography (or 'places') was complete. He had recognised one of Constable's 'great gifts' as 'the capacity to see a landscape whole, as a picture', drawn from 'pattern-exploration' and 'space-exploration'.<sup>70</sup>

Having been habitually absorbed in a new consciousness of the physicality of the ‘objects’ of topography throughout his painting career, Piper’s ordinary ‘object’ in this essay – ‘the tree standing in the field’ – was thus common currency in his daily (rural) life, and it demanded the same formal and sensual consideration as any other ‘object’.<sup>71</sup> The tree was placed into the general context of problem-solving in the process of representing. He then cited two metaphorical ‘objects’ which repeatedly ‘suggest[ed] themselves’ in his painting ‘Sometimes simply as facts. Sometimes as symbols.’<sup>72</sup> The objects were real yet imagined, geometric or ‘classic’, yet particular or ‘romantic’, and they were *in a place and the place itself*. His descriptions need to be quoted fully to demonstrate the controlled nature of this ambiguity:

A room. Evidently a room, but without any of a room’s recognizable qualities, such as a table, or chairs, or pictures. In the room, on the floor, or raised on a table that is not a table, a collection of shapes: some of them flat, facades simply, some solid. Nothing like boxes or rubbish in a box-room attic. Nothing like cookery going on in a kitchen, yet with the qualities of empty boxes, and also of the hard uneatable coloured icing on elaborate iced cakes. This collection in its whole general form is more or less geometrical, and something like a crystal; but it also has decided amorphous qualities. At its best it is in its form a combination of a crystal and a potato, with neither predominating too much, though one may predominate a little with advantage. It is rather large – like the room itself – but it varies in size, and can be only as much as two or three feet high.<sup>73</sup>

Illuminating this somewhat mysterious apparition, Piper explained its ambiguity further in his concurrent article on ‘Aspects of Modern Drawing’ as serving the necessity for tradition to be ‘stretched’ according to the needs of the time.<sup>74</sup> To elaborate on the ‘conflict’ of form and idea mentioned above, he observed that since the Cubists, the concentration on form in subject matter, which tradition had ‘stretched’ to accommodate (rather than concentration on its character as had been the convention), had required a continuing resolution in the work of artists, of ‘a conflict of shape – between that of a potato and that of a regular

crystal'.<sup>75</sup> Piper saw this conflict being enacted around him, as 'very expressive of something contemporary', and although he did not clarify the specific conflicting ideas (I suggest most likely the 'ideal' as against the 'real'), their confrontation was he argued, 'of a kind that moralists may regard as the root of a decay, but which it is not the function of the artist to be moral about, but to record.'<sup>76</sup> This was a significant insight into his own sense of artistic undertaking, namely his commitment to the work of 'recording' by engaging with the positive possibilities of the 'conflict', as against the partisanship of crusading for one side. It amplified his position as an abstract artist who was steering abstraction towards a renewed, independent, 'object'. This was his own 'building process'.<sup>77</sup>

However, not only was the 'object' to 'grow again', but it was to 'reappear in the 'country' that inspires painting'.<sup>78</sup> Without, I hope, extending a metaphor unreasonably, I suggest it is significant that Piper had not employed instead the term 'focus' or 'source' ('that inspires'), but a psychological *location* for the sensibility, with its sense of terrain or domain. The 'object' was geyed to its place or scenario in the artist's imaginative and real life. The tradition of representing aspects of his life would continually transform, because it had to 'include anything and everything that has a pointed reference to life, however little it appears to agree, or to be able to shake down comfortably with what has gone before it, or what we feel has got to come after, in point of time.'<sup>79</sup> The 'function' of the artist in Piper's view, was therefore 'to deal with' the 'conflict' in a steady and serious way (which was his own way), in the context of his daily life.<sup>80</sup> Evans had exemplified this independence in her statement that 'Work and belief in their own integrity has kept the Constables, Blakes and Cézannes of this world doggedly at their self-appointed tasks', and Grigson had (in *Axis*) presented the choice facing artists in this 'less full, less reasonable, less innocent and...less real existence. You can flagstone pictures down on to the top of an

abnormal unrest of the individual soul, or you can just paint with your unrest' he declared, about the transforming process as an emotional one as much as a formal one.<sup>81</sup> It was therefore, a matter of integrity both in personal as well as artistic terms. The solution for the *Axis* cohort was in the latitude which biomorphic abstraction provided for a modern, authentic, 'living art', at the same time 'keeping the tradition actively alive' and 'a fluid thing'.<sup>82</sup> Piper's second 'object' was 'bigger' and 'more imposing':

It is in fact a very large structure on a beach – for it seems to be a beach, usually. The thing certainly has maritime qualities. For instance, as elements in its construction, poles, of the kind fishermen dry their nets on, but much bigger. Also flats, like the flats of theatre scenery. Indeed, it might be described as personal scenery for a play or a ballet in which the sea is the only actor or dancer. And even the sea can be absent. But it is to do with the sea, because evocative maritime words help to describe it, such as (with the help of Roget's *Thesaurus*) coast, shore, scar, strand, bank, lea, sea-board, iron-bound coast, derelict, littoral. The time of day is vague. Also the weather. It is very stormy; also quite calm, according to the way you look at it. The colours are often surprising, seeing that it is a beach. There is dun-coloured sand, all right, but the fishermen's net poles are bright blue and shining white, as if they had been put up in the bathroom to dry the fishing nets, or the towels or whatever they are. There are chalk cliffs that are often clear grey, and other colours that sometimes contradict the facts, but they just manage to be recognizable as the cliffs. The scene might be Newhaven, or the Welsh coast, or the Yorkshire coast or Brittany – not further away than that. If there is a storm the waves break drily, and almost crackle. There is an absence of life, of seagulls, even; but a sense that life is ready to break in. The object itself might be described as a beach-engine, since it has elements in it at least symbolic of the machine-age (the movements of pistons here and there, for instance), but it also has tassels, and it might be a gigantic structure on which to hang over-size roller towels, the tassels belonging to the velvet-tasselled bellpulls of a lot of old-fashioned door bells. And in spite of the tassels and the poles and the ungainliness of the whole thing it must have an arrow-like, spire-like sharpness, and a hardness like granite, or more like dull steel, and in spite of the towels and the tassels and other protuberances it must be as smooth and as oblong and as massive as the promenade of the seaside town that it may have climbed on to from the beach.<sup>83</sup>

The contradiction and obliqueness in approaching the verbal representation of these 'objects' is analogous to the obliqueness of tackling the problem of visual representation

itself. These two 'objects' denied the qualities Piper ascribed to them as soon as they were encompassed in words, in a similar way to the struggle of the artist to express in visual terms something felt. All that is discernible is a tension between the two, yet even this is a delusion. Piper's allusion to the qualities of the more-or-less purity of abstraction (in the first) and the more-or-less impurity of surrealism (in the second), demonstrated his perception that they were *both about the same thing*, all representation being, and having involved, the act of abstraction. Chapter two of this thesis demonstrated that for the *Axis* cohort abstraction was a synthesis but always a matter of degree, which explains why, between the extremes, any apparent tension was superficial, as evidenced in the presence of aspects of both abstract and surreal expression, in Piper's 'objects'.<sup>84</sup> In fact these 'objects' already existed in generic artistic solutions, the first in the distilled but organic plasticity of an Arp, and the second in the fantastic yet the precise utilitarianism of a Wadsworth. (Pls.34, 42) In describing these two 'objects', Piper was symbolising his own position as embracing both but claiming no ultimate loyalty to either. Elsewhere he had argued 'People think it dishonest to be chameleon-like in one's artistic allegiances. On the other hand, I think it dishonest to be anything else.'<sup>85</sup>

I want now to propose that the biomorphic attitude of *Axis* was influenced not only by Evans through Héliou's attitude, but by Piper's own development of abstract painting. In view of his professed desire at this time to see 'objects' 'grow' again, and the priorities revealed in 'England's Climate', it is therefore appropriate briefly to examine his abstract practice for corresponding developments, and to illustrate my claims made above with examples.<sup>86</sup> This brief insight into his current practice illuminates his motives in preparing his contribution to *Axis* 8.

The rigidity of geometrical abstraction was never the starting point for Piper as an abstract painter. Despite his admiration for Nicholson's 'puritanical' forms, his own concern for colour and tone in the pictorial expression of spatial relationships steered his work in abstract form differently, as we have seen.<sup>87</sup> (This aligned him in sympathy with Héliou over the significance of evoking space and thus movement.) In 1934 Piper and Nicholson were both exhibiting reliefs, expressing space in actuality, but for distinctly different motives. Piper's *constructed* reliefs featured, other than a range of materials, colour, tone and shadow used as devices to produce ambiguity of pictorial recession. (Pl.16)

Nicholson's *carved* reliefs, begun in 1933 in one material, eventually employing white paint throughout, used shadow to express architectonic recession. (Pl.23) In 1935 – Piper's most severe phase of abstraction – he had returned to exhibiting the paintings of vertical configurations. His conceptual frame still embraced a form of 'reality' in the process of abstracting, the abstract elements perceived as 'objects'.<sup>88</sup> In the case of his 1935 abstracts which featured geometrical semi-circular curves, these were derived from his earlier naively painted series of nudes on the beach. (Pls.43, 33)

Piper's 1936 paintings, some of which were shown at the Abstract Concrete exhibition, dispensed with the curves, but their more painterly zones with ambiguous spatial qualities and less compact configurations, were more evocative of screens and 'rooms'. (Pl.44)

Increased use of diagonal elements also opened out the compositions deeper into a space.

By 1937, the forms were flowing, rhythmic and unified in irregular but interrelated configurations, with a stronger sense of movement and organicism, achieved by floating curves or ellipses.(Pls.45, 46) Some paintings, executed on canvas then mounted on board, had pieces meticulously cut and removed, as if surgically entering into another world. The board was painted beneath.

By removing the painted reality of the surface, the viewer was confronted with the painting's existential state. Such playful articulation of the re-presented painted 'reality', and the physical reality of the built-up object of the painting, had had its roots in the collages and *papier collés* of Braque and Picasso just before the war.<sup>89</sup> It was already a modern tradition of representing with equal authority visual 'reality', and the new *consciousness* of 'reality'. The point I am making is that Piper undertook to continue to 'stretch' that tradition. His next move was to make positive the cut out canvas forms, some resembling bottle forms or else indiscernible shapes, by mounting them on flat and curved card or board, and assembling them upright, together with painted rods and hoops, and standing them all on a base.(Pl.47) Here therefore, the forms of his abstract paintings, conceived of as 'objects', were removed from one world, to be returned to their original three dimensional realm. I suggest that in entitling it 'beach engine', Piper perceived with a new consciousness the whole assemblage as a shifting interplay of components. It resembled somewhat the second 'object' he described in his essay, which it accompanied. He made several of these 'beach engines', their features resembling those described in paintings of that year, one of which faced the title page of his essay, previous to his 'beach engine' image. Turning the two consecutive pages swiftly, easily demonstrated the two-dimensional source for the 'beach engine'.<sup>90</sup> (Pl.48) In examples of other paintings, references were more direct. For example, a painted ellipse became a three dimensional hoop (or a reference to the circumference of the object it surrounded, as in cubist paintings), the wandering brushline became a wire travelling through the air with the line still painted upon its side. (Pls.46, 47)<sup>91</sup> Marine 'objects' were suggested, such as described in his second metaphorical 'object'. For example, a striped shadow cast across a form, its origin elsewhere, evoking a speed-testing mark, the painted rods, a spherical sea-



mark on a pole, and evocations of cliff faces, all brought from one life to another life, insinuate Piper's exploratory process.

Piper's call for the 'fullness' of life to nourish painting was, as discussed above, not merely the physicality of 'objects' but the ambience of places through their presence. The sculptural strangeness of coastal objects recalled for him his time living on the Kent coast, where they were in his 'ambit' and, I suggest, his first meeting in 1935 with Nash in Swanage – 'a significant place to find him' Piper recalled.<sup>92</sup> Piper's mutation of the ordinary into the strange is clearly evident in the descriptions of his second 'object', and its surreal connection warrants a brief diversion. Whilst at Swanage researching for his Shell Guide, Nash had written a short essay entitled 'Swanage and Seaside Surrealism', reprinted in *The Painter's Object*.<sup>93</sup> I suggest it more than likely that he discussed aspects of its content with Piper when they met, as it brought together the place's history and topography related to specific objects in and around the town – the very interests of Piper himself. Nash's fantastic scenario of a lone 'shipwrecked stranger' was narrated at the cusp of two worlds – the real Swanage and its fantastic/imagined 'other'. This form of Surrealism, triggered from real objects and recognised as worthy of inclusion in *The Painter's Object*, was what Gascoyne had termed 'natural' surrealism, as opposed to 'political', and it was Nash's particular form of the surreal.<sup>94</sup> The strangeness of maritime paraphernalia was of such interest to Piper that as discussed, he not only began to use it in his work from late 1936, but was in 1937 preparing a substantial article for publication in the New Year on 'The Nautical Style', in which amongst discussions of the 'romance' of functional buildings and boats with their 'deep-rooted and reasonable' 'idiom', he discussed the 'romance of the coast object', built or constructed for 'use directly connected with the sea; for guiding, warning or harbouring mariners.'<sup>95</sup> This predilection was a strong example of

his pragmatic approach to abstraction as a constituent of representing the business of living. His perception of the coast objects was that removed from their useful context they became abstract forms in their own right.<sup>96</sup> It was an inversion of perceptions, of Nicholson's reliefs, for example, as architectural features.<sup>97</sup>

It is strongly in evidence therefore, that Piper's interests continued to engage not with abstraction primarily, but within the world of reality, and only secondarily in its representation through abstracted form. It is also unsurprising that he continued to explore working with abstraction through his favoured activity of collaging later in 1936, with ready-made strips of papers, composing and glueing topographical scenes with ancient landmarks and coast 'objects', working *in situ*. (Pls.49, 50) The sound lessons he had learned from abstract painting were therefore put to use in ways which represented his 'ambit', and although he was still working abstractly, he was now following his own representational inclinations steadily through 1937.

Locating objects in a 'place' was further explored in another context. That year Evans and Piper had joined the Group Theatre, where Piper worked with painter and designer Robert Medley. His first project was the set design for Stephen Spender's *Trial of a Judge*; and although the play did not open until the following March, it is significant that at this time (Autumn 1937) Piper would most probably have been considering the theatrical setting, and designing flats and wings for a dramatic scenario. It is significant for example, that he titled a painting *Screen for the Sea, Black Ground*.<sup>98</sup> (Pl.51) I think it entirely likely that the *fact* of his 'beach engine' arose from a logical amalgamation of spatial considerations in his paintings as discussed above, and actual physical implications in the considerations of designing a suitably evocative 'place' for a particular dramatic event. As objects the

‘engines’ are easily perceived as modern stage sets.<sup>99</sup> The particularity of that event – a trial – as composed and directed by the poet and writer Stephen Spender, would have required his consideration of an environment of appropriate mood or ambience for the scenario, as his description of the ‘beach engine’ and its manifestation suggested was possible. What seems startlingly pertinent are the remonstrations that occur in the dialogue within his chosen setting of austere, geometrical abstract forms, which bear quoting for their context. In these sterile surroundings, a Nazi officer demands of the judge an acquittal of some of his colleagues being tried for murder: ‘You seem to forget that the law is intended to protect the State from enemies and not to fulfil an abstract ideal of justice...here you sit fidgeting at jig-saw patterns in this white, square room when, outside, all the world in crisis shoots up to a prodigious firework.’<sup>100</sup> Fraser Jenkins’s analogy of Evans’s views on constructivist painting, with the evocative abstract setting, brings meaning forcefully on to another plane: ‘The modernist room created on the stage – comparable to Mondrian’s studio in Paris (which Myfanwy had visited and admired in 1934) – was shown to be an example of self-indulgence and an immoral escapism’.<sup>101</sup> Through these white stage sets with black red and blue lines and wings (finally realised in the early weeks of 1938), Piper had, in the protagonists’ inhabitation of an austere abstract space, allowed that austerity to speak volumes about the political and artistic correspondences perceived as implicit in constructivist abstraction. (Pl.52)

Notwithstanding the violations of human rights that were occurring across Europe at this time, even the lack of humanity and democratic rights in art was currently being experienced by Piper on the personal level as well as the universal, as in Spender’s play, so that individual, cultural, and political meaning was connected with abstract art for Piper and others in this project.<sup>102</sup>

With a view to these concerns, it is now critical to establish finally, the extent to which Piper's and Evans's senses of artistic morality were connected with their own cultural and political perspectives. The end of chapter three cited Grigson's view that the relevance of the 'past' to the present in modern art practice, was increasingly pertinent.<sup>103</sup> But as revealed, it was not a love of the past for its own sake that engaged the *Axis* cohort, it was the resonances of its lessons which they sought to make progress in the present. The final step to understanding their cultural and political perspective needs to be taken by revisiting Piper's 'England's Early Sculptors', reprinted in *The Painter's Object*. Evans's mocking call for '*intellectual freedom, FREEDOM, FREEDOM*' in her essay indicated that the *Axis* cohort's commitment to individual development did not by any means imply the need for total freedom.<sup>104</sup> It could only fruitfully occur within a guiding framework of the time. Purely dictatorial conditions suppressed the individual as Spender had indicated in his play, and as Piper had implied in his constructivist setting. But Piper observed that in any collection of early sculpture one 'quality' was always present: the 'free play of the artist's impulse working within ordered limits'.<sup>105</sup> He elucidated the conditions and their results, in the abstract carving of early English sculptors:

It was a powerful position to be in as an artist, to work under the dominance of a strong outside idea, guarded against diffuseness and detail by strict rules within which the temporary inspiration could blossom and flourish. There was no need to quarrel with the formal law and take liberties with it. It was in itself a liberation rather than a stricture because it pointed a work with a purpose, and all energy could be directed within it. The law was wide enough to give opportunity for the work, and conviction in doing it. In consequence... the whole of the form is felt, and the composition has an immense personal conviction. Indeed, most sculpture in England of the eighth to the twelfth centuries has this conviction.<sup>106</sup>

Local conventions differed, but even within an 'obvious narrowness' a carving could have 'something about it that allowed the artist or craftsman to work with the whole of *himself*,

and at the same time to produce something that was, above all, lucid and popular: not in the least “highbrow”.<sup>107</sup> Strengthening his observations in ‘England’s Climate’ of the loss of a ‘full and popular’ art since the early nineteenth century, he went so far in this essay as to reflect that this was something the contemporary artist ‘envies, and strives for.’<sup>108</sup> That this was his own feeling, was indicated in his commitment to exploring the possibilities of a popular, contemporary art.

Certain other factors need to be considered in his preoccupation with ‘Early English Sculptors’. Firstly, its quite obvious connection with tenets of the Arts and Crafts Movement in its embracing of the artist/craftsman, and the appropriateness of the fit between design, medium, and expression. The ‘truth to materials’ tenet – was prominent once more for modern artists in England.<sup>109</sup> Piper ‘booted the technique’ of painting or printing, but was always working to express pictorially with the quality of the medium, and Moore was working ‘within the limitations of the material’ and not ‘weaken[ing]’ it ‘beyond its natural constructive build’ as he described in his contribution to *The Painter’s Object*.<sup>110</sup> This attitude also lay at the centre of the design, architecture and sculpture featured in *Circle*, despite its ideological *raison d’être*. However, it was not central to its painting practice.

Secondly, the popularity of early carvings as English cultural heritage at this time of nation-building, extended beyond its artistic significance. It represented English history, uniting it with contemporary England composed from a nevertheless cultural heterogeneity: ‘a specially English character was nourished from many sources’, Piper stated in his essay, naming Celtic, Norse, Byzantine, Norman, Roman.<sup>111</sup> This search for the origins of ‘England’ itself in early art was also the subject of books and exhibitions. At the time Piper

was writing this essay, he was engaged on photographing such carvings, selling some to the Victoria and Albert Museum that year.<sup>112</sup> Unbeknown to him, the British Museum was also executing a photographic survey of this early work, to which Piper contributed some photographs.<sup>113</sup> The Royal Academy's and the British Museum's exhibitions of British Art and English Art respectively, both between 'Anglo-Saxon times to about 1860' did much to boost interest in England's history and that of her art.<sup>114</sup>

In connection with the artistic significance of this popular interest, I want to focus on the full-page advertisement that appeared in *Axis 7* (launched by 'England's Climate') for a new publication entitled *Creative Art in England: From the Earliest Times to the Present*, by W. Johnstone.<sup>115</sup> This profusely illustrated volume appeared in November 1936, and its prominence in *Axis* was rendered highly significant by the fact that the only other advertisement of that size in the whole run of the review (other than the customary Zwemmer's and Lefèvre pages) advertised *A General History of Music* in *Axis 4*.<sup>116</sup> Citing its contents as 'Many Anglo-Saxon and Early English Unknown Masters', it listed artists from Blake to Picasso, Piper to Moore, and Lewis 'and many others', stating that 'the book is not only a criticism of the state of mind that, from the time of Holbein, has sent English artists abroad to study, the author also considers the "Bases for a British Art", together with constructive suggestions'.<sup>117</sup> Not only are these views so closely aligned with those of the *Axis* cohort, but the distributor of *Axis 7* was changed to Stanley Nott, who was also responsible for distributing Johnstone's book, appearing as he did at the foot of the advertisement.

Little apparent substance though this evidence provides, it sufficiently corroborates the suggestion that Evans and Piper had by late 1936 become orientated so strongly in the

direction of early art's importance to contemporary developments, with further encouragement by Shell Guide visits to many ancient churches, photography trips for their own sakes, and Piper publishing on 'England's Early Sculpture' in October, that *Axis's* perception of 'abstract' needs to be resolutely reconsidered in this context also. It is indicative of its interpretative scope that Piper reported in his *Oxon* guide on 'an excellent cryptic, *abstract* carving (Romanesque) over a door'.<sup>118</sup> (my italics) Here is enough proof that the 'abstract' which he recognised was *abstracted* naturalistic representation, of varying degrees, confirming his early conviction of the abstract qualities of stained glass, and his liking for the work of Rouault alongside Picasso and Braque. It also accounts for his desire expressed that July to 'abolish[ing] the non-figurative rule entirely' in the 7&5 after Nicholson's withdrawal, and to include Frances Hodgkins.<sup>119</sup> In his and Evans's estimation, abstract and *abstracted* were generically the same process, of working with the present, whereas 'Constructivism [wa]s building for the future and so far an escape into the future' in its detached working process.<sup>120</sup> Evidently Evans's initial declaration that the term was problematic still remained the case, since Woods had recently argued the impossibility of any art other than Constructivism being 'abstract' in the pure sense, and that all 'so-called abstract pictures' were from 'nature' or a subjective response to its elements.<sup>121</sup>

It is important to press further the significance of Johnstone's book to connections between English history, English character, English places, and English expression, as inherent driving forces for the *Axis* cohort. After chapters on 'Anglo-Saxon Art', 'Norman Conquest to Holbein', 'Holbein to Turner', Johnstone arrived at 'The Contemporary Scene'. His opening statement was to 'indicate' that a 'revival of an indigenous British art' was discernible, but 'nothing insular or provincial, nor anything so limited as the

expression of racial character or local colour'.<sup>122</sup> He continued that rather than implying any rejection of international contributions to art, he meant 'an art tradition which encourages the British artist' to make a contribution that would be accepted and assimilated by others into the modern art world.<sup>123</sup> Illustrations ranged from Gill to Augustus John, Lewis to Nicholson, Piper to Hillier, Porteus to Wadsworth, and Spencer to Wood, amongst others. In essence, this short chapter on the current state of art probably marked a kick-start for Evans's diatribe at the beginning of 'The Painter's Object', although less dramatic in execution. Describing contemporary patronage as either 'merely confused', or uncritical – 'blinded by [...] superficial criteria' to 'vital distinctions' which needed to be discerned – he saw artists as 'forced' to 'flounder about in the swamp of fads to flatter a mindless public'.<sup>124</sup> Evans's as yet unwritten essay cannot but have been provoked to develop points made here, I submit. The 'danger' of contemporary art was its 'preciousness and exclusiveness', which 'scrapped' 'lesser' artists. In comparison, the 'Middle Ages' saw a 'creative urge' which 'affected everything', and no contribution was ignored.<sup>125</sup> Even the modern art dealer's 'racket', dependent upon fashion, foreshadowed Evans's 'racketeer artists' as similarly dependent.<sup>126</sup>

It is therefore difficult to imagine that what this volume represented to the *Axis* editor and her cohort was merely an interesting proposition. It also echoed remarkably, values and priorities concerning the English art tradition celebrated in 'England's Climate'. The value placed on English early and medieval achievement, the innovations of Constable, Cotman, Turner, and the Pre-Raphaelites, the loss of confidence in an 'inherited reverence for the foreign', were strikingly in accordance with views of the *Axis* cohort.<sup>127</sup> The sense of an incipient 'revival of an indigenous British art', not 'insular or provincial, nor anything so limited as the expression of racial character or local colour' was in effect, a *romantic*



revival in its description, already discerned by Binyon and characteristic of the interests of the *Axis* cohort.<sup>128</sup> Piper's exhortation in 'England's Climate', for an 'absorption in the tradition without an escape into it' was Johnstone's own position.<sup>129</sup> Similarly, Grigson's concern for the means to a healthy English art in the future, was also Johnstone's, whose view was that contemporary artists could 'pave the way for a new English tradition and better contribute to world and international tradition' through 'different solutions', which might take centuries, but were all 'possibilities, potentialities, in the contemporary flux', from which 'a great creative British art may arise.'<sup>130</sup> The numerous concurrences of the essay and the book, both published in the autumn of 1936, indicate the extent to which *Axis* was attuned to a broader, more democratic discourse than the Constructivists were to claim the following year, and that the popular nature of the discourse had been a well established one by the mid 1930s.

Therefore, both the editorial choices and the content of individual contributions to *The Painter's Object* demonstrated the implicitness of values and priorities which constituted the backbone of *Axis*, and which had now collapsed abstract art into the business of representing, from which it had evolved. Scanning the essay titles generally, the term 'abstract' enjoyed little exposure as 'itself a criterion', being present mostly as part of the process of representing, as was conclusively claimed by Picasso in his contribution to *The Painter's Object*, entitled 'Conversation': 'Abstract art is only painting...There is no abstract art. You must always begin with something... the idea of the object...is what started the artist off, excited his ideas and stirred up his emotions.'<sup>131</sup> Nothing could have more solidly registered the romantic, empiricist position of the *Axis* cohort in its diametric opposition to the constructivist ideal. Only a critical analysis of *Axis* 8 can establish how,

by early winter 1937, it (re)viewed 'contemporary abstract painting and sculpture' in the light of the developments discussed above.

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## NOTES

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THE PAINTER'S OBJECT

- <sup>1</sup> Ernst and Moholy Nagy contributed.
- <sup>2</sup> M. Piper interviewed by D. Masters in 'The Englishness of British Art. Arts and Society in Britain Since the Thirties' (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Open University, 1987), pp.304-05.
- <sup>3</sup> M. Piper in Masters, 'Englishness', pp.304-05.
- <sup>4</sup> Since Grigson was not a visual artist he did not contribute to *The Painter's Object*; chapter 3, p.144.
- <sup>5</sup> P. Nash, in M. Evans (ed.), *The Painter's Object* (London, 1937), 38-42.
- <sup>6</sup> M. Ernst, in Evans, *Object*, 74-79.
- <sup>7</sup> J. & M. Thwaites, 'Surrealism and Abstraction – the search for subjective form', *Axis* 6 (Summer 1936), 21-25.
- <sup>8</sup> W. Kandinsky, in Evans *Object*, 53-57; pp.57, 57.
- <sup>9</sup> M. Evans, in Evans, *Object*, p.6.
- <sup>10</sup> Evans, 'The Painter's', p.6.
- <sup>11</sup> H. Moore, in Evans, *Object*, pp.23-24.
- <sup>12</sup> Moore, 'Notes', p.28.
- <sup>13</sup> By Grigson in 'Comment on England', *Axis* 1 (January 1935), p.10; *Recollections. Mainly of Writers & Artists* (London, 1984), p.99; by Evans in 'Order, order!', *Axis* 6 (Summer 1936), p.8; 'Back in the Thirties', *Art & Literature* 7, (Winter 1965), p.144.
- <sup>14</sup> G. de Chirico and L. Moholy-Nagy in Evans, *Object*, 127-33 and 136-43 respectively.
- <sup>15</sup> Evans, 'Order', p.5.
- <sup>16</sup> G. Sutherland, in Evans, *Object*, 91-92.
- <sup>17</sup> A. Ozenfant, in Evans, *Object*, 43-51; p.47.
- <sup>18</sup> J. Trevelyan, in Evans, *Object*, 59-60; p.59.
- <sup>19</sup> A. Calder, in Evans, *Object*, 63-67.
- <sup>20</sup> F. Léger, in Evans, *Object*, 15-20. 'A Contribution to a Discussion between Aragon, Léger and Le Corbusier', pp.15, 18, 19.

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- <sup>21</sup> Léger appears in its list of 'painters'.
- <sup>22</sup> Evans, 'The Painter's', p.12.
- <sup>23</sup> Nash's 'Swanage, or Seaside Surrealism' was originally published in the *Architectural Review* (April 1936); Piper's 'England's Early Sculptors' in the *Architectural Review* (October 1936), 157-62; Hélión's 'Poussin, Seurat, and Double Rhythm' in *Axis* 6 (Summer 1936), 9-17. Moore's 'Notes on Sculpture' was published subsequently under the title 'The Sculptor Speaks', *Listener* (18 August 1937), 338-340.
- <sup>24</sup> Evans, 'the Thirties', p.147; 'Order', p.8.
- <sup>25</sup> Evans, 'the Thirties', pp.5, 12.
- <sup>26</sup> Evans, 'the Thirties', pp.10-11.
- <sup>27</sup> Evans, 'the Thirties', pp.12-13.
- <sup>28</sup> Evans, 'the Thirties', pp.12, 3.
- <sup>29</sup> Namely that art constituted conscious and unconscious activity, and that selfconscious preoccupation with creating a trend, a public persona or making history, led to losing sight of artistic purpose. P. Nash, 'Nature, Life and Art', *Week-end Review* (5 December, 1931), p.716; 'The Meaning of "Modern"', *Week-end Review* (16 July 1932), p.76; "'Going Modern" and "Being British"', *Week-end Review* (12 March 1932), p.322; M. Evans, 'A Review and a Comment', *Axis* 3 (July 1935), p.25; G. Grigson, 'Painting and Sculpture To-day' in G. Grigson (ed.), *The Arts To-day* (London, 1935), pp.104-08; letter to Nicholson, (January-July 1935) n.d., TGA 8717.1.2.1422; J. Piper, letter to Nicholson, (5 May 1936).
- <sup>30</sup> Evans, 'the Painter's', p.12.
- <sup>31</sup> Evans, 'the Painter's', p.8.
- <sup>32</sup> Evans, 'the Painter's', p.8.
- <sup>33</sup> Evans, 'the Painter's', p.8.
- <sup>34</sup> Evans, 'the Painter's', pp.9-10.
- <sup>35</sup> Evans, 'the Painter's', p.10; P. Nash, 'For, But Not With', *Axis* 1 (January 1935), p.26.
- <sup>36</sup> G. Grigson, 'Comment', p.10; Nash, 'For, But', p.26; J. Piper, 'Picasso at the Tate', *Axis* 1 (January 1935), p.28.

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- <sup>37</sup> R. Penrose, 'Notes on the Ratton Exhibition of North Western American Art, Paris', *Axis* 4 (November 1935), 18-19. See chapter 3, pp.173-74.
- <sup>38</sup> 'Santhal Painting', *Axis* 7 (Autumn 1936), 27-28; pp.27, 28, 27.
- <sup>39</sup> P. Nash in H. Read (ed.), *Unit 1. The Modern Movement in English Architecture, Painting and Sculpture* (London, Toronto, Melbourne, Sydney, 1934), p.79, p.80.
- <sup>40</sup> Nash, in Read, *Unit 1*, p.80.
- <sup>41</sup> Evans, 'A Review', p.25.
- <sup>42</sup> M. Evans, 'Dead or Alive', *Axis* 1 (January 1935), p.3; P. Picasso, 'Conversation with Picasso' in Evans, *Object*, 81-88; pp.82-84. Translated by Evans 'from the French of Christian Zervos'.
- <sup>43</sup> Evans, 'The Painter's', p.10. Her persistent use in this essay of 'to-day', 'life to-day', or 'life' demonstrates the extent to which the present experience of living was the source of authentic expression for her, as for the rest of the *Axis* cohort.
- <sup>44</sup> Evans, 'The Painter's', p.10.
- <sup>45</sup> Evans, 'The Painter's', p.10.
- <sup>46</sup> Evans (M. Piper), in Masters, 'The Englishness', p.301. This reference was to the early modern developments in Paris.
- <sup>47</sup> M. Evans, 'The Understanding of Art', *Architect's Journal* (23 August 1934), p.268. A book review of H. S. Goodhart-Rendel's *Fine Art*.
- <sup>48</sup> B. Hepworth, 'Sculpture' in J. L. Martin, B. Nicholson, N. Gabo (eds.), *Circle. International Survey of Constructive Art* (London 1937), p.116.
- <sup>49</sup> Evans, 'The Painter's', pp.10-11.
- <sup>50</sup> Evans, 'The Painter's', p.11.
- <sup>51</sup> Evans, 'The Painter's', p.11.
- <sup>52</sup> Evans, 'The Painter's', p.11.
- <sup>53</sup> Evans, 'The Painter's', pp.12-13.
- <sup>54</sup> Evans, 'The Painter's', p.13.
- <sup>55</sup> The Artists' International Association. See chapter 4, n.70.

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- <sup>56</sup> Implied by Evans's comment 'The real escapists are those who...'. Evans, 'The Painter's', p.10.
- <sup>57</sup> Evans, 'The Painter's', p.5.
- <sup>58</sup> See chapter 3, p.152.
- <sup>59</sup> Evans, 'The Painter's', p.11.
- <sup>60</sup> See chapter 2 for Read's ambiguous position on abstract art. For Gascoyne's declaration of Surrealism as 'totally in accord' with communist ideology, see D. Gascoyne, *A Short Survey of Surrealism* (3<sup>rd</sup> imp. London, 1970), pp.xii-xiii. For a communist refutation of this and an assertion of the bourgeois nature of both abstraction and Surrealism, see A. Blunt 'The "Realism" Quarrel', *Left Review* (April 1937),169-71. For a conservative review of Gascoyne's book and B. Rea (ed.), *5 on Revolutionary Art* (London 1935), in which Read's essay 'What is Revolutionary Art' appears (11-22), see W. Gaunt, 'Art and The Age We Live In', *Studio III* (February 1936), 74-76.
- <sup>61</sup> Evans, 'The Painter's', p.13.
- <sup>62</sup> J. Piper, 'Lost, A Valuable Object' in Evans, *Object*, p.70.
- <sup>63</sup> Piper, 'Lost,' p.70.
- <sup>64</sup> Piper, 'Lost,' p.72.
- <sup>65</sup> Piper, 'Lost,' p.70.
- <sup>66</sup> Piper, 'Lost', p.70.
- <sup>67</sup> Piper, in Evans, *Object*, 69-73. Argued by Evans of Héliou's recourse to Poussin, Rubens and Seurat, in 'Héliou To-day: A Personal Comment', *Axis 4* (November 1935), p.8; J. Piper, 'Aspects of Modern Drawing', *Signature* (November 1937), p.34.
- <sup>68</sup> Piper, 'Lost', p.69.
- <sup>69</sup> Piper, 'Lost', p.69.
- <sup>70</sup> J. Piper, 'Died April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1837: John Constable', *Architectural Review* (April 1937), p.150.
- <sup>71</sup> Piper, 'Lost', p.70. He stated that Constable, 'in a study of a tree, could get into a single manifestation of life...a sense of his whole experience.' Piper, 'Aspects', p.40.
- <sup>72</sup> Piper, 'Lost', p.72.
- <sup>73</sup> Piper, 'Lost', p.72.

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- <sup>74</sup> Piper, 'Aspects', p.34.
- <sup>75</sup> Piper, 'Aspects', pp.34, 36.
- <sup>76</sup> Piper, 'Aspects', p.34.
- <sup>77</sup> Evans, 'Dead or Alive', *Axis* 1 (January 1935), p.4.
- <sup>78</sup> Piper, 'Lost', p.69.
- <sup>79</sup> Piper, 'Aspects', p.41.
- <sup>80</sup> Piper, 'Aspects', p.41.
- <sup>81</sup> Evans, 'The Painter's', p.11; Grigson, 'England's', pp.5-6.
- <sup>82</sup> Evans, 'Dead', p.4; Piper, 'Aspects', p.34.
- <sup>83</sup> Piper, 'Lost', p.72.
- <sup>84</sup> This is explored throughout chapter 2.
- <sup>85</sup> Piper, 'Aspects', p.41.
- <sup>86</sup> Piper, 'Lost', p.72.
- <sup>87</sup> Piper in G. Power, R. Swift and E. Gunningham, 'John Piper', *Composition 2* (Spring 1979), unpaginated.
- <sup>88</sup> See chapter 3, pp.177-80.
- <sup>89</sup> Briefly described in chapter 3, p.179.
- <sup>90</sup> See *The Painter's Object*, p.68, p.71.
- <sup>91</sup> Possibly significant was the popularity of quoits and 'tennikoit' at this time. Letter from Piper to Nicholson, 5 May 1936. TGA 8717.1.2.3403.
- <sup>92</sup> J. Piper, 'Recent Watercolours by Paul Nash', *Design for Living* (May 1937), p.405.
- <sup>93</sup> 108-15. Originally published in the *Architectural Review* (April 1936). For an analysis of this essay see D. Denton, *Seaside Surrealism. Paul Nash in Swanage* (Swanage, 2002).
- <sup>94</sup> Cited by Nash in 'Swanage', pp.108-10.
- <sup>95</sup> The *Architectural Review* (January 1938), 1-18; pp.1, 2.



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<sup>96</sup> Piper, 'Nautical', pp.4, 6, 7, 18.

<sup>97</sup> The influence of the New Objectivity photographers is also possible in Piper's renewed consciousness.

<sup>98</sup> Dated 1938.

<sup>99</sup> There had been a precedent for this in the Russian constructivist stage design of Meyerhold.

<sup>100</sup> Quoted and briefly discussed by D. Fraser Jenkins, *John Piper. The Forties*, exh.cat., (London, Tate Gallery, 2000/2001), p.18.

<sup>101</sup> Jenkins, 'John Piper', p.18.

<sup>102</sup> Medley was not a Constructivist, and contributed to *Axis 8*.

<sup>103</sup> p.180.

<sup>104</sup> Evans, 'The Painter's', p.5.

<sup>105</sup> Piper, 'Sculptors', p.122.

<sup>106</sup> Piper, 'Sculptors', p.120.

<sup>107</sup> Piper, 'Sculptors', p.122.

<sup>108</sup> Piper, 'Sculptors', p.122.

<sup>109</sup> For a discussion of 'truth to materials' traced in modernist sculpture, see S. Tillyard, *The Impact of Modernism 1900-1920* (London & New York, 1988), p.29, pp.153-57. For a discussion of this attitude in Nicholson's work, see C. Stephens, "'St. Ives" Artists and Landscape', (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Sussex, 1997), pp.152-53, and 'Ben Nicholson: Modernism, Craft and the English Vernacular', in Corbett, Holt and Russell (eds.), *Geographies*, 225-247. However, what distinguished Nicholson from Piper in this attitude at the time I refer to was the exploration of the fluidity of paint, and the characteristics of printmaking materials and techniques Piper had been exploring since his work with 'Contemporary Lithographs'.

<sup>110</sup> "Booting the technique" was reported by Piper's first biographer Anthony West (a contributor to *Axis 8*), to have directed Piper's progress from about this time. A. West, *John Piper* (London, 1979), pp.89-90. Moore, 'Notes', p.24.

<sup>111</sup> Piper, 'Sculptors', p.122.

<sup>112</sup> S. Piggott, 'A Disciple of Leland' in G. Elborn (ed.), *To John Piper on his eightieth birthday* (London, 1983), pp.34-35; Spalding in D. Fraser Jenkins and F. Spalding, *John*

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*Piper in the 1930s. Abstraction on the Beach*, exh. cat., (London, Dulwich Picture Gallery, 2003), p.38.

<sup>113</sup> Spalding, 'John Piper', p.38.

<sup>114</sup> For a discussion of the Royal Academy exhibition and its impact see A. Causey, 'English Art and "The National Character", 1933-34' in Corbett, Holt and Russell (eds.), *Geographies*, 275-302; G. Hill, preface to *Guide to an Exhibition of English Art*, exh. cat., (London, British Museum, 1934), p.3. Hill demurred over 'English', describing the exhibition as 'Art in England', including as it did, 'works...produced by foreigners on English soil.' He also used it 'advisedly', rather than 'British', to avoid 'possible confusion with pre-Roman antiquities.' Hill, 'Preface', p.3.

<sup>115</sup> p.33; (London, 1936); Johnstone lived in Hampstead and was clearly interested in the significance of early carving and painting for modern art.

<sup>116</sup> p.30. I have not established any significance for this large advertisement, other than Piper's own musical accomplishments and interests.

<sup>117</sup> Advertisement, p.30.

<sup>118</sup> J. Piper, *Oxon* (London, 1938), p.31.

<sup>119</sup> Letter to Winifred Nicholson, 30 July 1936. Cited in Harrison, *English* (London and Bloomington, 1981), p.376.

<sup>120</sup> Piper in 'England's', p.5.

<sup>121</sup> S. J. Woods, 'Henry Moore and Ourselves', *Axis* 7 (Autumn 1936), p.30.

<sup>122</sup> Johnstone, *Creative*, p.185.

<sup>123</sup> Johnstone, *Creative*, p.185.

<sup>124</sup> Johnstone, *Creative*, pp.185-86.

<sup>125</sup> Johnstone, *Creative*, p.188.

<sup>126</sup> Johnstone, *Creative*, p.188; Evans, 'The Painter's', p.6.

<sup>127</sup> Johnstone, *Creative*, p.185.

<sup>128</sup> Johnstone, *Creative*, p.185.

<sup>129</sup> Piper, 'England's', p.6.

<sup>130</sup> Johnstone, *Creative*, pp.187-88.

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<sup>131</sup> pp.82, 84.

CHAPTER VI

*AXIS 8. 'NATURE', 'LIFE' AND (ABSTRACT) 'ART'*

The work of this chapter is to lay down the identified values, beliefs and priorities held by the *Axis* cohort to their deliberated demonstration of the authentic nature of art practice in *Axis 8*, and to ground that authenticity further in the realities of its contemporary culture. *The Painter's Object* had provided the freedom for Evans to express her beliefs and priorities outside *Axis*, as a consolidated opposition to *Circle* whilst, significantly for her approach to *Axis 8*, hardly referring to abstract art. Previous *Axis* issues had included as 'abstract' art, ethnic artifacts and painting, surreal abstraction, and early modern painting and sculpture, and *The Painter's Object* had revealed the differing perceptions of artists on the nature and variety of their tasks. This chapter reveals *Axis 8* as validating this breadth of vision in its insistence upon the act of abstracting as the business of perceiving and interpreting human experience of the physical world. It explores how, by linking abstract art to the history of representation, *Axis 8* asserted its perspective as a plurality of creative *practices* rather than variations of a singular, iconic idiom, as proposed by the Constructivists. It achieves this by reasserting the significance of history for the *Axis* cohort as the means to progress, namely their belief in the continual pattern of expressing human experience as the ethical foundation of art.

Furthermore, the belief that contemporary life illuminated history (and *vice versa*) framed their priorities and values, is argued through the articles of Piper and Walsh as revealing the implicitness of aspects of contemporary culture and popular interests in their perceptions of art's potential for a broader, more popular, meaning.<sup>1</sup> It is this aspect of *Axis 8* which is employed as the ultimate and unequivocal proof of the engagement of the *Axis* cohort with authentic contemporary expression.

On the face of it there could be no denying that *Axis* 8 constituted some kind of editorial shift.<sup>2</sup> But given that feature subjects and illustrations are steered by the governing motives of the project, I argue that a different content does not necessarily signify a change in the motives themselves. This chapter demonstrates that in the case of *Axis*, the shift merely indicated a new communicating strategy, fuelled by a renewed urgency to demonstrate its rationale concerning abstract art, rather than continuing with examples under the increasing prospect of artists and public losing touch with art's very *raison d'être*, in the light of the publicity of constructivist theories. Therefore it finally establishes my argument that the values and beliefs of the *Axis* cohort did not change from *Axis* 1, contesting the common assumption in histories of British modern art, that *Axis* changed its direction.

I suggest that the effect of the different subject matter of *Axis* 8 aligned it as a journal with the broader field of social and cultural interests within which aesthetic discourse articulated forms of representation. It could be argued for example, that in its discursive content, it approached *Cahiers d'Art*, a journal much valued by the *Axis* cohort. But the strategic shift worked also on a far subtler level, and it is the significance of this subtlety which requires some specific analyses, the fuller to discern both the intellectual and the emotional engagement with contemporary art practice that characterised the *Axis* cohort.

The inclusion of photographs of places rather than objects, was one of the first indications of a departure from the approach of earlier issues. Even the frontispiece, which also illustrated Piper's opening article, was the unprecedented subject of an aerial view of earthworks, followed by other, similar aerial views, which supported the article's text.(Pl.53) The other noteworthy departure was the strategic positioning of illustrations,

where their grouping and disposition often served dual functions. For example, the final page of the issue showed a view of a model of a town plan designed by 'Le Corbusier and Jeanneret', with the *effect* of an aerial view, advertising the publication of *Circle*.(Pl.54)<sup>3</sup>

The symbolism between the frontispiece and this final image, in their respective appearance at the beginning and end of *Axis 8*, contrasts the abstracted configurations of earthworks evolving form through living necessity, with the abstracted view of a designed configuration of forms dictating a necessary way of living. The former could be argued as suggesting a 'natural' evolution, the latter an imposed order. Situated as they were at the extremities of *Axis 8*, they could also be seen to have symbolised the distance between their respective philosophies represented by the biomorphism of *Axis* and the constructivism of *Circle*, evoking the 'internecine war' within abstract art.<sup>4</sup> What lay between those pages 'solve[d] the equation.'<sup>5</sup>

Piper's article was the most significant in demonstrating the immersion of contemporary values in the history of representing, and in presenting the most unequivocal statement hitherto of his empirical stance on abstraction. It also revealed his awareness of the power of visual narrative to illuminate the subtlety of his message. The text was undogmatic and impartial, establishing in the reader's mind the mutual implicitness of perception and sensual experience. Together, text and illustrations demonstrated unequivocally through art historical examples of topographical representation, that 'art' always was and still was, a symbolic language constituted by the author's lived experience of his time. In this way, the article's commentary was distanced from the discrete subject of abstract art.

In order to instate his points about the problem of visually representing the experience of contemporary life, Piper drew analogies with historical examples, uniting the past and the

present under the ordinary and enduring subject of landscape, by discussing how flying changed the experience of viewing terrain, from elevation to plan. A twentieth-century landscape view could therefore by implication, be a view from the air, in the same way that the Cubists constructed their still lifes from elevation, plan and section. He argued that flying had served to enhance a 'new consciousness' in terms of 'spaces and vistas'.<sup>6</sup> Even the textured flatness of the sea, photographed from the air, presented itself 'like nothing we have ever known – quite unlike any map, or Admiralty chart, or sailor's tale, or any writing or painting about waves or cliffs or ships that was ever thought of.'<sup>7</sup> Neither descriptive nor analogous of the known reality, the 'un-sea-ness' of such a perspective was a fresh provocation for the creative imagination. (my inverted commas) Possibly it called to the reader's mind the similar response of the Cubists to the first X rays, involved as they were with expressing the reality of solid form in space, which provoked their segmented and transparent representations of objects.<sup>8</sup> Landscape, like cubist still life, was not new but traditional subject matter, in twentieth-century conditions. Artists were expressing 'not a new world but the old world in new and shattered circumstances', as Evans later stated.<sup>9</sup> She, Piper, Grigson and Nash shared the belief that the perception of the artist was of a continual present, which superseded the conceptual framework of past methods of communication. Piper's awareness of Constable's fresh perception of the changing English landscape in the turmoil of rural industrialisation had, as discussed, been in the forefront of his mind that year.<sup>10</sup>

The attraction of such photographs for Piper was bound up with associations of their original practical use. As the functional X-ray was appropriated by artists not only for its revelation of a new consciousness but as a new visual aesthetic quality, so the aerial photograph, with its surveillance and ordnance functions also served, as Piper explained,



the evolving consciousness of archaeologists about the life of earlier communities. The evidence on the ground was supplemented in aerial photographs with more, hitherto invisible, information. Piper acknowledged that these photographs were now, after being taken for surveillance purposes, performing an 'archaeological-scientific' function, yet were still, he explained, 'photographs and not art-photographs', showing 'a site, not a composition'.<sup>11</sup> The quality needed for their original purpose, was 'sharp and detailed,' yet despite *and* because of their requisite content and quality, their configurations, having been abstracted from their physical origins and associations, made them 'among the most beautiful photographs ever taken.'<sup>12</sup> Out of their context therefore, their ambiguity excited a new visual and imaginative consciousness. This was a new source of aesthetic appreciation.

The point I am making is that fresh perceptions of subject matter could provide infinite possibilities for the abstract artist; and those fresh perceptions exemplified by Piper were actual abstractions from actual objects. That is, the aerial experience had performed the abstracting process, the configurations, real on the ground, becoming 'signs' from the air. In terms of landscape and topography, before the artist's role was usurped by the camera, a physical, sensual experience could only be represented by signifying lines or marks, codifying knowledge gained from experience. In time, there resulted conventions of representation, whose fundamental principles were valuable to the next generations. In order to consolidate this message, Piper had chosen juxtapositions of images from the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. With its empirical predicate, its historical validation, and its absorption of the abstract image in the process of representing, his article finally *publicised* his separation from Nicholson, and constructivist ideals.

The images Piper chose also worked on other levels of meaning, which are highly significant for reasserting that he believed implicitly that authentic art was interwoven with its culture. It could, as in the case of the constructivist artists, be so removed from life as to emerge merely from geometric constructions symbolising aspirations for a perfected future existence. This was no sudden change of heart, having been expressed previously, but it is significant that references to the connection between geometric abstraction and an ideal future world, only occur after the Abstract Concrete exhibition in the first half of 1936.<sup>13</sup> It is important therefore, to attend further to the role of the illustrations in order to demonstrate Piper's conviction that all artistic expression was *de facto* grounded in its present.

The first pair of illustrations, whilst approached and represented entirely differently, were recognisably of the same object, the earthworks of White Sheet Castle in Wiltshire. (Pl.55) The eighteenth-century draughtsman sought a way of symbolising the 'formidable' hill that needed to be 'toiled up and scrambled down', in order to represent it.<sup>14</sup> Lines and hatching suggested the hill as *experienced* in that human effort, whereas the aerial view of the site showed 'not much of a hill', as *represented* by the lens.<sup>15</sup> It was abstracted from the intimacy of physical exploration and the knowledge gained in such a way, and barely registered the hill. Together the engraving and the photograph referred to the business of abstracting from the 'object' (in this instance a place) and the different premises of representing. Furthermore, despite their subject matter, the images could be interpreted as abstract images.

The image facing this pair indicated both operations in one activity. This time, it was an aerial photograph of an ancient carving upon a hill, that of an abstracted form of the horse,

carved upon the Berkshire Downs at Uffington. (Pl.56) In the way that cave painting was, the configuration was possibly connected with a ritual function. However, the photograph's *own* function was explicit in the incidental inclusion of a clock dial in the corner of the image.<sup>16</sup> Metaphorically therefore, time was collapsed from prehistory to the split second of a twentieth-century shutter. So, therefore, was beauty and purpose, 'art' and 'life'. Piper's grouping of his illustrations was eloquent, and testified to his understanding of the potency of visual relationships as a form of inspiration and communication.

The second group of illustrations brought the processes of abstraction, significant mark-making, and abstract art together in the lived experience of a place. The pair of images consisted of an eighteenth-century engraved perspective and a twentieth-century aerial view of Silbury Hill, Avebury. (Pl.57) They echoed the first pair in the engraver's use of perspective to evoke the *sense* of relief, and in the photograph, the presence of strong shadows which were the *sign* of that relief. In both, the physical actuality of the site *appeared* credible, but demanded sensual and conceptual engagement respectively. Remarking that the engraving was executed by the antiquarian William Stukeley 'on the spot', Piper noted its 'pretty strong contrast in consciousness' with the photograph:

Stukeley, above all, wanted to record the effort and the feeling for shape of the men who built it. Size and contour are all-important. The story of the size is well told, and as to the shape to jump, run, walk, or struggle up each slope with Stukeley in his drawing is a real and as sharp an experience as to take a journey round a wineglass with Picasso. The air-photograph is flat and subtle. The effect of suddenness that the mound gives in the plain, and the sense of size that the surroundings try to contradict, is as strong as that of all Stukeley's fold-explorations.<sup>17</sup>

His point was that the actual experience encoded in engraved marks, could not be recorded by the lens. Stukeley's engraved lines, aiming to produce an 'effect' of relief, constructed a perspectival representation as experienced from his distant drawing position, of its

‘suddenness...in the plain, and the sense of size’ in its immediate figure-inhabited landscape, as would have been experienced by its builders.<sup>18</sup> This latter pair of images therefore, more clearly alluded to the transition between three and two dimensionality in the act of abstracting and representing, and through this contrast Piper argued that the visual ‘effect’ was ‘as strong’ as the actual climbing experience, but was diminished by the lens.<sup>19</sup> He concluded that both ‘representations’ gave a ‘very fair idea...but so different that it is hard to realise that each gives a reasonable account of the same monument.’<sup>20</sup>

Therefore both pairs of historic representations had the same aim but radically different methods. By using the two pairs of engravings and photographs, Piper was demonstrating that any form of representing was necessarily a visually coded experience because it resided in another spatial realm, and the code was achieved by abstracting from actual experience to thought experience. The previous year Héliou had asserted that in the act of painting ‘the shape becomes thought’ to describe the ‘language’ evolved between experience and its representation.<sup>21</sup> It was the latitude in evolving that code or ‘language’ which allowed for individual expression and the negotiation of possibilities, and it was the artist’s own contemporaneity which presented or steered the possibilities. That this had been historically the condition of representing, had been variously discussed or demonstrated by the *Axis* cohort.<sup>22</sup> By inference therefore, the ‘battle’ between Surrealists and abstract artists was indeed a ‘silly’ one, and there was no need for the ‘internecine war’ within abstraction.<sup>23</sup> Only Constructivism stood apart.

As with the first group of illustrations, this pair was faced by another, namely a reproduction by Piper, this time of a Miró painting, presenting an uncanny resemblance to the aerial view of Silbury. (Pl.58) Yet Miró drew on no particular objects for his

abstraction. His subjectively conceived image acted archetypally, the ambiguity of his biomorphic forms provoking a subjective and particular response in the viewer, especially in the context of the Silbury images. Piper could not have demonstrated this more clearly. There could be no such evocative potential in the geometry of Constructivism.

In general therefore, the illustrations exemplified visual responses to places in different historic periods. Some years later Piper explained how this process worked for him:

There isn't a difference between "abstract" and "topographical" in the sense that one might consider "abstract" as pure invention, and "topographical" as imitation. The reason for this is that nothing comes out of a visual consciousness that has not already been received by the eye. All visual invention is the result of visual experience and observation. Everything is drawn out of the stock-pot of visual impressions.

Abstraction is a way of inventing variations on the visual experiences one has had.<sup>24</sup>

This was manifest in the engravings, and the choice of the Miró illustration to resonate with the aerial views. Piper had early on described the natural 'exploitation of this rich store of transformed impressions' which contemporary artists were undertaking.<sup>25</sup> He found Miró's work, resonant of his own 'visual experiences' available to him in a quotidian context, as inspirational and as tangible for him as the places themselves. Where he found the flatness of Miró's painting as evocative of the linear marks from an aerial view, Piper's own abstract painting had as discussed, always been conceived in terms of 'picturing' a kind of three dimensional physicality – shutters or doors for example – as a means of constructing a two dimensional image with line, tone and colour. Alongside this activity, he had continued to execute collages of topographical subjects, under the influence I suggest, of the abstract qualities of pictorial structure employed by the English watercolourists. (Pls.59, 49) These collages, executed *in situ* from a folder of torn papers of colour and texture, and

overpainted or drawn with gouache and ink, represented I further suggest, the fulcrum of 'abstract', which weighed a topographical image equally with an abstract construction. In contrast therefore, to positing abstract painting and sculpture as the outcome of a somewhat mysterious or esoteric theory, too often misinterpreted as its *raison d'être* by critics and public, Piper was now revealing the legitimacy of a stimulating engagement with an originating subject matter as a means of abstract exploration. 'Exploration' had been recognised by his colleague Richards as the 'important' activity of abstract art, which was driven by a sense of 'curiosity', and served the 'social responsibilities' of the artist to strive beyond 'the mere "self-expression" that flatters his own sensitivity.'<sup>26</sup>

This approach challenged the habits of representation (not representation itself) by drawing upon the abstract qualities discernible in the physical world. Piper's references to the works of Cotman, Girtin and Cox, and to Constable and Turner, in 'England's Climate' and elsewhere, suggest to me that his interest in the English landscape watercolourists was as much because of their perception of the abstract qualities of landscape as it was of their expressive evocation of the subject.<sup>27</sup> His occupation with pictorial constructions from the abstract elements of subject matter as exemplified in his collages, reflected to an extent Héliou's method, explained at length in *Axis*, which discerned the fundamental structures beneath the compositions of Poussin and Seurat.<sup>28</sup> The critical difference was that Piper's premise was particular visual experience, where Héliou's was universal, organic composition.

As discussed, Piper's Constable article written during this year had testified to the historical approach to landscape and topography as analogous to that of an abstract painter, in its synthesis of 'nature' and 'painting'.<sup>29</sup> The process of abstracting from subject matter was

laid out for the reader of Piper's *Axis* article as the demonstration of his earlier argument that Constable's feeling was for 'pattern-exploration' and 'space-exploration', and always with reference to nature but without complete reliance on it.<sup>30</sup> In fact it is an apt description of the use of illustrations in his *Axis* article, where he referred to 'plan-patterns'.<sup>31</sup> Further, Piper remained committed to developing painting and its expressive potential, having identified with Constable's 'abstract symbols' developed through his 'passion[s]' 'nature' and 'painting', which made him 'one of the greatest artists that England has produced'.<sup>32</sup> He also held in great esteem the abstract vision of Turner.<sup>33</sup> Piper's choice of the Miró illustration exemplified the expressive qualities of biomorphic abstract painting and its evocative potential. Before the publication of 'Prehistory from the Air' therefore, he had continued to take as his abstract premises, lessons from the tradition, and the text and visual layout of the article constituted the most emphatic validation of his position on abstraction, and 'abstract' art.

It is appropriate to reiterate that the concentration on the use of subject matter did not mean that Piper's painting was no longer abstract, but that he was keen to demonstrate that his abstraction originated from tangibles, representing his diametric opposition to constructivist theories. As discussed, he continued to work in biomorphic abstraction, moving by this time into more gestural painterly expression, with evocations of three dimensionality and even of nominal sky or ground elements, and three-dimensional assemblages.<sup>34</sup> His collages discussed above, tipped over however, into pictorial constructions of favoured subject matter such as ancient sites, shores and landscapes, expressing his desire as he recalled later, for 'some of the natural energy and fecundity of nature to get into them, even at second hand.'<sup>35</sup>

I suggest that 'Prehistory from the Air' signified emphatically that there was nothing further to be said on the subject of 'abstract' art. In itself this small article encapsulated the convictions that the *Axis* cohort had communicated in the course of the previous two years in *Axis* and elsewhere. Artists only worked in the present about the present, and in order to do this they needed to develop a 'professional equipment', namely a form of signs and techniques appropriate for the purpose and the time.<sup>36</sup> Mondrian's perfection and final analysis was as yet an incomplete project, being only the base to build from. Art emanated from *and* constituted life, and they believed that genuine practice witnessed that relationship, Grigson stating that 'paintings and writings simply become life, they can be felt thoroughly as life.'<sup>37</sup> That Piper demonstrated this in his article is clear, but there is more to consider in this context concerning his use of aerial photographs.

These were a relatively recent source of interest in the public realm. Since the early twenties, aerial photography had been perceived as useful for archaeological, as well as for Ordnance Survey purposes.<sup>38</sup> These images performed an essential role in the locating and configuring of England's historic sites, which from the mid twenties, contributed to the lobby for the provision of local statutes and planning legislation by groups such as the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, to protect historic sites, as well as the countryside in general, from development and despoliation.<sup>39</sup> Archaeologist A. Keiller successfully purchased the Avebury site in 1924, which he proceeded in time to 'restore'.<sup>40</sup> In 1937 (the year of *Axis* 8) Wiltshire County Council were in the process of raising funds to execute the restoration, which would have had increased press exposure. Furthermore, Crawford had published that year an archaeologically specific O.S. map on the *Celtic Fields of Salisbury Plain*, one of a series of such maps.<sup>41</sup> A series of explanations and discussions of the Ordnance Survey maps had also appeared, in *The Listener* in 1935,



where the various functions and implications of their use had been discussed.<sup>42</sup> (Pl.60).

Concurrent with this series was another series on 'Ancient Britain', coexisting in one case with an article on flying.<sup>43</sup> (Pl.61)

Whilst it might be stretching a point to suggest that these were carefully orchestrated events, it can certainly be argued that the sources of abstract art, as demonstrated by the context of Piper's 'Prehistory' article, were 'out there' for all to see. Piper, a contributor to the *Listener* since 1933, and alert to the visual possibilities of current and long established interests would have been particularly stimulated by those articles.<sup>44</sup> Together with the incontrovertible evidence as to the 'immense influence on archaeological theory and practice' that the aerial photography of Crawford and Keiller had been having, and Piper's citation of their sources, alongside the sources of the engravings by Stukeley and W. Colt Hoare in his article, suggest that his premise for 'Prehistory' must surely have been to communicate 'the life of his time' and its everyday inspiration, as an approach to abstraction.<sup>45</sup>

I want to argue therefore, that through Piper's article, *Axis 8* was *visibly* inserting itself into popular culture, by employing subject matter that closely related hitherto inaccessible abstract art with current interests and activities, enabling a 'new consciousness' to be experienced by the mystified or sceptical viewer. His perception of visual analogies and suggestions resonated across a vast and differing range of visual material. It was the same sensibility he recognised and admired in its different forms in Picasso, and in Nash's surreal tendency. Popular interests in archaeology, in maps and hiking, bicycling and car excursions, and even in flying, were thus implicated in his attention to maps, views and representation.<sup>46</sup> *Axis* was interfacing art, and *abstract* art, with popular culture. Art's

dissociation from such reality, as exemplified in the beliefs of Nicholson and the Constructivists, amounted to a disingenuousness that its cohort manifestly would no longer countenance.<sup>47</sup>

The reality of an artist's conditions left no room for idealism. Piper's article therefore reflected not only the integration of artistic concerns with contemporary life, but in its engagement with popular interests, indicated his openness to the potential of earning, in an economic depression, by employing his art-related skills.<sup>48</sup> The non-elitist attitude of the *Axis* cohort to design or writing commissions meant that they were open to challenges, whose research and interface with a breadth of expression, nourished their perspectives of art and literature. It was precisely these activities – and for Piper particularly, for whom the demands of the Constable article and *Oxon Shell Guide* were exercising him during the preparation of *Axis 8* – that had enabled him to indulge his longstanding enthusiasm for antiquarian topographical imagery and text, and topography itself.

As apparent by 1937, the *Axis* cohort undertook frequent visits to historic sites and buildings. Nash had undertaken such trips in preparation for his *Shell Guide*, and invariably went alone, but Piper was often accompanied by Evans, or Betjeman, Grigson or Richards. The ambitious itineraries which Piper and Betjeman embarked upon, visiting historic buildings (most particularly churches) and writing their descriptions, and in Piper's case, drawing and photographing them, drew them together in a common empathy for vernacular English building.<sup>49</sup> But they shared more than this. Piper's earlier involvement with printmaking was paralleled by Betjeman's interest in and collection of engravings and typographic examples, reinforcing the importance to both of eighteenth and nineteenth-century engravings and aquatints of architecture, landscape, and topography.<sup>50</sup> But

Betjeman's recent experience of effective typography and layout was, I argue, influential for Piper. The way that Piper capitalised on groupings of illustrations in his *Axis* article to demonstrate how abstract art could be 'viewed', namely in a *coup d'oeil* in double page spreads or by adjacent comparisons, bore strong comparison with the way that Betjeman had worked when assistant editor of the *Architectural Review*.<sup>51</sup> That is, the immediacy of comparative imagery not only indicated source and outcome, but it demonstrated that the source was 'out there' in the world, more particularly in the landscape. Therefore, abstract art was derived from sensual engagement, and only afterwards developed in the imagination.

Betjeman and Piper differed over initial attitudes towards English culture and politics. Betjeman's aspirations were for the lifestyle and attributes of the earlier antiquarian pursuits of the connoisseur.<sup>52</sup> Piper, more concerned with the artistic tradition of topographical representation than the social status of the connoisseur had, as we have seen, used prints by the eighteenth and nineteenth-century antiquarians Colt Hoare and William Stukeley for the 'Prehistory' article. (Pls.55, 57) But they were both driven by a shared belief in the continuity of the English cultural traditions and character, Betjeman becoming vehemently opposed to international influence in English culture, and Piper remaining committed to the continental developments which nourished English modern art. Piper's earlier friendship with J. M. Richards, was also about a shared enthusiasm for visiting historic churches and vernacular buildings, which for Piper was as much about the kind of early carvings found in churches that he wrote about for the *Architectural Review* as about their vernacular characteristics. This fuelled further his fascination for medieval stained glass.<sup>53</sup>

Piper and Grigson traversed the regions of countryside which had inspired painters, poets and writers. Their interests were layered in the substance and appearance of landscape and natural history, the unselfconscious use of it by past communities, and the expressions of it by earlier artists and writers: ‘barrows, standing stones, churches, ruins, outcrops of rock, limestone especially, caves, waterfalls, etchings and watercolours by Cotman, full moonlights by Samuel Palmer...[we had a very special liking for] William Blake’, Grigson recalled.<sup>54</sup> Piper recalled, ‘I knew I must keep in touch through my paintings with...things outside myself that I had long loved: standing stones and hill forts, harbours and lighthouses and fishing boats pulled up on stone quays.’<sup>55</sup> Small surprise they collaborated on ‘England’s Climate’, and that the mood of this article effectively constituted the prelude to *Axis 8*. As expressed in ‘England’s Climate’, they shared a deep disquiet about the lack of connection between ‘life’ and contemporary art.<sup>56</sup>

Like Nash and Piper, Grigson was aware of the romantic nature of his interests. His boyhood in rural Cornwall, spent walking or cycling the lanes and hedgerows and fields in search of ‘something elusive’, and collecting local parish documents and maps to construct ‘a sense of life’ of his rural community, contributes a highly significant insight into the deep rootedness of his love of natural history, and his sensitivity to the history of places.<sup>57</sup> Since his youth he had subscribed to the archaeological journal run by O. S. Crawford, entitled *Antiquity*, which traced out history in the English landscape.<sup>58</sup> This preoccupation motivated Grigson’s article on ancient Cornwall in 1936, a time when Piper was constructing his collages of historic sites, amongst them Avebury.<sup>59</sup> (Pl.62) As a boy, Piper also had shared these interests, becoming secretary of the Surrey Archaeological Society at the age of fifteen, and later learning about the barrows and standing stones of Salisbury Plain, and Avebury with Silbury Hill. Apart from its current focus in the press at

this time therefore, longstanding involvement with such features illuminated further his choice of Stukeley's view of Avebury for his 'Prehistory' article.<sup>60</sup>

The archaeologist Stuart Piggott was a friend of Betjeman, and had 'a taste for architectural history, the Picturesque and the Romantic Revival'. He met and befriended Piper in 1936, through Betjeman, who lived at Uffington beneath the White Horse (also illustrated in Piper's article).<sup>61</sup> At this time he was Assistant Director of the Avebury excavations.<sup>62</sup> Significantly, this was the year that Grigson published his Cornwall article, and Piper and Evans were visiting churches to record their crude early carvings, out of which Piper published his article in the *Architectural Review* that October. From 1936 therefore, Piper and Evans were at the centre of a *milieu* stimulated by the historical dimensions of topography, architecture and art, and the nature of *Axis 8* witnessed the unfolding of their explorations and reflections upon their significance for contemporary artistic expression.

The subject matter of Evans's *Axis 8* article entitled 'Paul Nash' concerned the places or substance of the land, its illustrations being equally significantly chosen and arranged to work on several levels of meaning.<sup>63</sup> Their supportive role to Evans's rhapsodic description of Nash's sensibility (for this was the context within which she assessed his work) served also as an eloquent, autonomous narrative, moving from one of his most abstract paintings to naturalistic representation, to Surrealist 'objects'. Abstraction and Surrealism were therefore separated by the conventional form of representation, and as a group they exemplified the broad scope of Nash's work.

Since it is most fruitful to understand the full implications of Evans's observations of Nash's work through an insight into its hermetic meanings (the way he himself resolved his

synthesis of 'conscious' and 'unconscious' activity) it is appropriate once more to take the illustrations as the point of departure. For to view them as a mere support to her commentary would be to miss entirely the understanding she had of his entire process, and thus of the peculiarity of his sensibility. Nash's declaration of the indispensability of the 'particular', in a form of naturalistic representation in his *Axis 1* article, was characterised in the assertion of this element in a series of his most abstract compositions in the early 1930s, one of which was the first of the four illustrations in Evans's article. (Pl.63)

Facing the title page of the article, and entitled *Poised Objects*, was Piper's reproduction of Nash's biomorphic abstract drawing, palely coloured. The presence of an eye and a geometrical configuration suggests that this was not merely an abstract composition, but a narration of the *act* of abstracting by the perceiving eye, or just as significantly, the act of imposing geometrical form *onto* perceived subject matter. This geometrical outcome was however, a far cry from those historical illustrations also narrating the act of abstracting in Piper's article.

Although Piper and Evans would undoubtedly have known about the complex significance of this image, it is not appropriate to examine its evolution in detail, but sufficient to identify it as one of the designs Nash had executed for his illustration of Thomas Browne's *Urne Buriall and The Garden of Cyrus*, published under one cover in 1932.<sup>64</sup> More particularly it was used for *The Garden of Cyrus*, which represented God through 'his servant, Nature', illustrating that 'nature Geometrizeeth, and observeth order in all things.'<sup>65</sup> As a significant statement of Nash's interests in 1932, it would have supplemented in his mind, that debate of 'Nature' and 'Art' with which he and others were involved, and which underlay his *Unit 1* declaration that in his art he 'would solve such an equation.'<sup>66</sup>

However, published as it was in *Axis* 8 some five years later, it in no way related, as its appearance might suggest, with the geometry of Nicholson or other Constructivists. Its motivation was entirely historical and literary, and in any case, prior to Nicholson's arrival at that purely geometrical idiom. Therefore, although its appearance was more congruent with abstract imagery, its emanation from Nash's enduring preoccupation with the landscape as a palimpsest, is highly pertinent to the other content in this *Axis* issue.

The central illustration was a naturalistic representation of the hill fort of Maiden Castle entitled *Hill Architecture*. (Pl.64) In itself the title denied the significance of its subject matter, which aligned Nash with Piper's interests in 'Prehistory', the painting appearing to be merely a conventional rendering of landscape.<sup>67</sup> But the two full page photographs of surreal 'objects' appeared obtuse at the turn of the page.(Pls.65, 66) I suggest however that they also referred to land or landscape. Facing across the pages, the first was entitled *Lunar Hornet*, and consisted of a fragment of map, a root, a piece of stone and a setsquare, suggesting land, belonging and origins, and geometry. The second, entitled *Burnt Offering*, consisted of a partially burnt, turned wooden knob protruding from a rusting lock, standing upon a rock, and suggesting decay, openings, and land. Their disposition on the double spread could be argued to echo the opposition suggested by their emblematic roles, namely, geometrical abstract art (setsquare) and surrealist art (doorways to other 'worlds', thresholds, suggested by 'nature'). As with Piper's article, the dialectic of the actual and the coded was represented. The context of mapping landscape or terrain, and the contrast of its physical materiality and symbolic objects, made visually eloquent metaphors for imaginative journeys. The scope of his work suggested by these illustrations testified to Nash's detachment from orthodox attitudes in abstraction or Surrealism in their poetic dimension, only partly dictated by his authoritative position and his poor health.

The necessity of individual freedom of expression was fundamental to authentic practice, but for the *Axis* cohort the artist required *commonly* held frameworks of meaning within which to work. Yet the element of individualism claimed by the Constructivists, concerned the spiritual internalisation of a group ideology, worked into perfected form for its own sake. In her article, Evans therefore observed that there were ‘two kinds of individualists’.<sup>68</sup> Her cohort’s strong non-conformism rejected the pressure from Nicholson and the nascent Constructivists around the time of the Abstract Concrete exhibition, to suppress or relinquish their broader interests, regarded as inappropriate to the cause of abstract art.<sup>69</sup> Piper’s non-conformity was implicit in his view that ‘it [wa]s not good enough to be taken for a standard’ because it opened the individual to ‘criticism on the general level’.<sup>70</sup> This comment might just as easily have been attributed to Nicholson and Hepworth, who had themselves left Unit 1 and the 7&5, firmly rejecting the diversity of expressions with which they were having to exhibit. Yet Piper particularly was under enormous pressure from them to languish within geometric abstraction.<sup>71</sup> We have seen that by the autumn of 1936, the gulf which had opened between them over the implications of free expression had manifested more obvious factors of difference: non-figurative geometric versus biomorphic abstraction; internationalist versus native cultural motives; the real present versus the ideal future.

The independence Nash maintained was therefore notable in its resolve. Evans referred to his unique position, which employed abstract construction and surrealist conception. He had ‘escaped the conditioning’, and was ‘a born, untroubled individualist.’<sup>72</sup> This was achieved by a detachment from the domination of either tendency. He maintained his ‘fight for individuality’, negotiating an ‘apparently middle course’ whilst seeming ‘entirely



innocent to the predicament'.<sup>73</sup> He had 'never been subjected to the group morality', and was therefore 'outside the struggle'.<sup>74</sup> Her tone suggested the invidious position of the non-conformist – appearing disloyal and even artistically immoral:

The individual is subjected to the class every time.... For those with a herd instinct it is a grand thing; for the others there are only two possible courses; to become a leader (if necessary start a group of their own to be leader of) or, to fight for individuality and justify it. It is a very curious fight, because it is an ethical one between two kinds of individualists and all the morals have been cleverly acquired by the movement side: the other side has either to redefine morality or be content to be labelled anti-social and therefore vicious.<sup>75</sup>

Evans had not been alone in her perception of Nicholson and the constructivist lobby playing the 'moral' card. To be working for the good of a bright, efficient and democratic future by making a streamlined, precise iconic art, universally symbolic of such a society, was to have 'cleverly acquired...all the morals'.<sup>76</sup> The non-conforming artist, rejecting the social cause in favour of directly responding to the present chaotic world in an art of evocative, ambiguous form, was supposed to 'justify' himself.<sup>77</sup> As Piper had argued about Picasso, referring to the romantic 'red splash': 'what other approach has been possible than through use and constant control of the red splash? It was the only way to marshal any elements of this complex, constantly implicated existence.'<sup>78</sup>

It needs recalling however, that in rejecting the constructivist ideology, the *Axis* cohort were themselves proposing an alternative one, although such a perception was far from the truth of their motives. As briefly discussed, the romantic notion of the ancient country, and the countryside as England, was an established.<sup>79</sup> The conflation of a developing scientific attitude to history, and a romantic absorption of those remains in the substance of the land, constituted for ideological purposes, the repose of England's character in the countryside. This had been idealised by Baldwin in his speech 'On England', published originally in

1926 and strategically reprinted in 1933, as Hitler came to power.<sup>80</sup> Knowledge and romance further embedded the belief in the rightness of the preservation or the contemporary reworking, of English culture and its heritage, as the inspirational base for expressing belonging. The revival of rural interests and activities provided the means of social integration at the very site of English identity.<sup>81</sup> But for Evans and Piper, in the context within which they were living, namely removed from the metropolis in a secluded hamlet, this (ideal) identity had not been a modern one, and the *transforming* work that they saw (along with Nash and Grigson) as their project, which realistically brought the past into the present, was not appreciated by other progressives as the *raison d'être* for art.

I want to establish that the profiling of English history and subject matter, and the references to the cultural climate in *Axis 8*, which reflected the sense of belonging to a place, was not the conscious proselytising of an 'English' artistic 'vision'. The fact of its key feature subjects being 'English' – and in fact the subjects of the exhibition reviews were continental – merely reflected preoccupations in the lives of the (entirely English) writers and artists, in England. These preoccupations were realities and not idealisations. The issue here is with *Axis 8* as a statement, in its shifted method of communicating. It was engaging with abstraction as a means to expressing a 'new consciousness', through the circumstances encountered in daily life. The elision of (English) history with the present, and the (English) countryside in contemporary life, which manifested that elision, facilitated that 'new consciousness' described by Piper as the historical experience of artists. *Axis 8* therefore constituted the publicisation of private experience, and a courageous disclosure of personal perspectives, as the means to demystify the artistic process for a broader public, whilst locating abstraction as inherent to that process. However, as *Axis* was not intentionally subscribing to an 'English' artistic 'vision', it can at

least be seen as subscribing to the tendency at that time, to interpret character or quality of expression as linked to the place of its author.

There were already those who like Nash, linked characteristics of perception and expression with the geography and thus the climate, and with atmospherics and their constitution of a sensibility.<sup>82</sup> Whereas in an exaggerated form, this came dangerously close to a form of nationalist rhetoric in the cause of politics (as for example in Baldwin's addresses) the artistic allusion to the character of a place influencing character of the artist, and thereby his/her visual or verbal qualities of expression, is significant for understanding what the *Axis* cohort believed to be authentic expression.<sup>83</sup> Tendencies towards literary and poetic language in *Axis* indicate that an interpretative attitude towards the physical world, as the highly individual basis of expression, was the predominating priority amongst its cohort.

As early as March 1933, whilst reiterating the importance of landscape in English art, Piper had recognised in some contemporary painters, the infusion of atmosphere and mood in the weather as a vehicle for colour and its possibilities for structure:

It may be the inherent qualities in English landscape, with its paleness and subtlety of lighting at all times of the year, that have been responsible for the English 'feeling' for water-colour as a medium...water-colour, like stained glass, is an art of northern grey-lit countries.<sup>84</sup>

He discerned that such paintings were 'simple', 'romantic in outlook', and 'often the result of spontaneous reactions to things seen.'<sup>85</sup> Years later, he observed the part played by the English atmosphere for his most valued romantic artists, referring to it as 'the damp, misty evanescence of our beautiful island light and weather', and of England itself as 'a misty country that has long winter evenings, a climate that produces Bewick and Jack Smith,

Cotman and Roger Hilton, Fuseli and Francis Bacon and the drawings of Romney and Frank Auerbach.’<sup>86</sup>

The analogy of weather with the colours and medium of painting was also employed by Evans, in her likening of Nash’s artistic temperament to the English climate. It was his ‘universaliser’.<sup>87</sup> She saw the qualities of his colours (‘pearly’, ‘pale’), translating ‘everything into weather’, so that the atmospherics which refracted perception – both sharp and diffuse – enhanced the ambiguity with which his painting was able to embrace ‘both worlds’ of abstraction and surrealism, and be as changeable as the weather.<sup>88</sup> Her approach to his painting appropriately reasserted his own aspirations for an English ‘modern’ art ‘movement’, expressed in *Unit 1*.<sup>89</sup>

At this stage in the thesis, I propose that much of what Nash represented and argued for in his own conception of the Unit One project appears to have naturally materialised through his place amongst the *Axis* cohort. For example, his perception in *Unit 1* that the increase of abstraction (in the broad sense in which he perceived it to be manifested) effectively eradicated the exaggerated nationalism of other cultures, was entirely in sympathy with Evans’s argument emanating from Picasso’s *Guernica* in ‘The Painter’s Object’.<sup>90</sup> As Piper observed later, so Nash saw the climatic conditions as producing what he regarded as an English character in art, exemplified in Wadsworth’s colour, being ‘A peculiar, bright delicacy...somewhat cold but radiant.’<sup>91</sup> He also asserted the predilection in English painting for a form of particularity ‘a likeness rather than an equivalent...the very dew, the light, the wind as it passed’.<sup>92</sup> This ‘likeness’ was not therefore imitative, but evocative, or interpretative. Nash viewed this quality as masking an ‘imprisoned spirit’ of the ‘land’, declaring that ‘*genius loci*’ was ‘almost its conception’, and that it was ‘almost entirely

lyrical.’<sup>93</sup> This then had been his position in 1934. Within an internationalist basis for modern painting, ‘national idiosyncrasy’ prevailed at a deeply psychological level.<sup>94</sup> This was something with which the rest of the *Axis* cohort wholly concurred, and it was evident for them in historical example.

*Axis* has commonly been assumed as nursing a nostalgia for the past, a fundamental misconception which has long needed correcting. Once again, the motives behind its cohort’s consistent recourse to historical precedent in their approach to art, and in its nourishment by other interests, need attending to. The evidence throughout *Axis* confirms their belief that abstract art did not and could not, emerge from a vacuum. In their writings they stated clearly their cause of expressing a ‘fullness’ of the contemporary experience, attained, amongst other influences, by the effect of past experience, whether it was the work of Picasso or of Blake.<sup>95</sup> This was therefore no call for a reiteration of the past *as itself*, nor even for a populist patriotic stance of England’s history, but an engagement with the activities of their progressive (not academic) predecessors, in the light of contemporary conditions. Hélicon had been explicit in his own conceptualisation of *Axis*, that it was most appropriate for English artists to examine their own cultural history in order to develop abstract painting, *as he was doing himself*.<sup>96</sup> In these contexts therefore, the preoccupation with history was not a fascination for its own sake. The historical dimension permeated their work, their life and their philosophy.

Evans had confirmed this in her Nash article, declaring that his contemporary expression constituted ‘the intenseness of the past as *present*’, Nash having ‘no interest in the past as *past*’ when he composed his landscapes of earthworks and monoliths with foregrounded objects, but in ‘keeping some kind of thread going, some kind of continuity’.<sup>97</sup> Nash was

'specially gifted' to see 'time-and-space'.<sup>98</sup> Nash's way of encapsulating the past in the present, indicated to her that 'the reality *and* the romanticism of both is intensified.'<sup>99</sup> The 'romanticism' she referred to here was the imagined journeys to other 'realities', simultaneously in the present. It was this dimension that the English romantics, so admired by the *Axis* cohort, had achieved themselves. Grigson's appeal to 'join history' had therefore indicated the transmutation of the spirit of past endeavour into a contemporary solution.<sup>100</sup> When he declared that 'There are no pictures painted "in the past," equally there is exclusive Fair Isle of the present. There is only a human instant, a *being*', he was asserting the authentic experience as located *in* the present, and that all such art had been produced from a continual present.<sup>101</sup> To approach the art of the past with this awareness, was to come the closest to its meaning and achievement, in order to more genuinely undertake the mantle of the contemporary artist's transforming work.

Walsh's article 'Background' appeared between Piper's and Evans's articles, and concerned itself with the need for a 'new consciousness', which aligned it particularly to Piper's 'Prehistory'.<sup>102</sup> Where Piper's article represented a shift of sensual percipience, Walsh's represented a new psychological sense of 'self' as separate from the group. Using Shakespeare's *King Lear* as his metaphor for the medieval artist, the fuller implications of Walsh's article comes to us at third remove. He demonstrated how Lear's understanding of a 'new consciousness' emerged in his struggle to accept the individualist desires of his daughters against the pattern of the 'patriarchal group consciousness' of the old regime.<sup>103</sup> His argument was about the problem for the 'abstract painter' in gaining independence from the background of the established art of a visual verisimilitude.<sup>104</sup> Walsh's inference was that having analysed the physical world to a dead form of art (commonly exemplified as Mondrian's work) artists needed to build art again into life, and that the full significance

of 'Abstract Art' was not, nor could yet be, realised.<sup>105</sup> Two aspects of the problem were apparent to him, which he communicated through the metaphor of Lear.

Firstly, represented as the medieval artist of his own time, Lear was unable to see his daughters as individuals with new consciousnesses, separate from the context of past expectations. That is, Walsh drew the analogy of Lear's entrenched beliefs about the proper destinies of his daughters, with the inability of the medieval artist to separate out objects from 'the golden/divine background of Medieval Painting' – the making of symbols requisite of his monolithic faith – and to express their discrete reality in perspective.<sup>106</sup> Secondly, he drew the analogy of the need for distance from the group consciousness to the individual consciousness, as the means to develop the tradition. The pattern of Lear, representing inherited consciousness, wounded by his daughter's break away from his family 'intuitive-instinctive consciousness' to a mental consciousness, from 'group-consciousness to individual-consciousness', recalled the problem for the late Medieval artist with the effects of the rise of the renaissance artist.<sup>107</sup> Exemplified by Leonardo, Dürer and Michaelangelo (sic), the drive of the renaissance artist for knowledge and perfection led to the study of the object in painting from perspective, to the analysis of representation itself (cited as Cézanne) where the individual developed a new consciousness in searching behind mere appearance.<sup>108</sup> This had culminated in the struggle for individual expression on the part of the artist. Having disposed of the old religious motive for a structured 'artificial' practice, man was left in his quest for realism and 'truth' to examine his own motives, believing himself to be the centre of all knowledge. To Lear's traumatic revelation of his own insignificance and mortality through confronting the naked Edgar, Walsh proffered the analogy of the breaking down of the 'whole consciousness of man', resulting in 'psychoanalysis and materialism'.<sup>109</sup> Shining through

this complex metaphorical argument, were the Surrealists' analysis of the mind, and the abstractionists' analysis of objects. Implicit in Walsh's argument was that the individual 'consciousness' was separate from yet formed by, its past experiences – which in this *Axis* context, was abstract art, developing, whilst being formed by, its (English) cultural tradition.

As if in literal illustration, a Nash painting entitled *Swan Song* faced the article across the page. (Pl.67) Walsh's last paragraph had begun: 'Into this process of decay abstract art enters, dissects the body of painting into its colours and forms and attempts to build up a new synthesis.' It is surely no coincidence that this painting from 1929 features clear references to the cycle of life. From the transition of trees and dead leaves emerge the fungal forms of new life, and the presence of the elements of earth (grass, soil), water (sea), and air (cloudy and stormy sky) essential for life, are the necessities for that cycle. Furthermore, the central fungus is unmistakably that of the poisonous toadstool *Amanita muscaria* (Fly Agaric). Implicit even in the living fruit therefore, is the sense of mortality. But there are further ambiguities, which would not have escaped the sensitivity of a poetic audience. The dead leaves bear a close resemblance to crysalises, the promise of life within an inert appearance, and the red cap of the toadstool, distinct from the rest of the painting in its flattened purity of form, suggests an egg, with its universal symbolism of promised life. Other presences link the past and the present. For example, the central cap or 'egg' is also reminiscent of the traditional and cross-cultural mandorla whose perpetuation of the duality of the material and the spiritual world engenders the creative force.<sup>110</sup>

Particularly significant for Walsh's analogy of renaissance form emerging from the medieval background, the overall composition was highly redolent of Botticelli's *Birth of*



*Venus*.(Pl.68) The tradition implied here was the western renaissance painterly tradition, as developed by Italian painters, which formed the foundation for the academic tradition now viewed as moribund for progressive artists. Nash's symbolic objects echoed the hermetic tradition in renaissance painting. The horizon, the wood, and particularly the central position of the 'egg' above a foamy and breaking sea (where Venus would stand upon her shell) were unmistakable in their configuration. Zephyr blowing spring flowers, was replaced by Nash with storm clouds blowing dead leaves, with Flora being replaced by three dead leaves, disposed like the Three Graces in his *Primavera* (Pl.68), another reference to renewed life. In *Primavera*, the figures trod upon a carpet of flowers, in *Swan Song*, the flowers were transformed into fungi. The choice of this image, at the end of Walsh's subtly layered article, brought the past straight to the present and mirrored his sentiment in its role as a *memento mori* in opposition to its originating re-naissance title.

Returning to Walsh's statement above therefore, clearly he perceived meanings in Nash's paintings as a justifiable demonstration. In the form of an elipse devoid of modelling, the purity of its treatment throws it forward from its naturalistic background, thereby endowing it with an independence from its context. It was a form painted for its own sake. Its visual metaphor of the story of Lear, itself employed by Walsh as a metaphor of the problem of abstract art against the background of naturalistic representation, was a statement consummate in its eloquence.

This article was far more connected to current political and cultural interests than its somewhat unpredictable appearance in a review of abstract art would suggest. It grounded *Axis* firmly in its cohort's conviction of the primacy of the creative individual's role as a conscious and unconscious disseminator of his time, in both the approach and the execution

of his work. Furthermore, it validates further my assertion of *Axis*'s engagement with current events and current thinking.

In late December 1935 the *TLS* had published an essay by G. B. Harrison entitled 'The Background to "King Lear". A Time of Troubles and Portents', in which Harrison connected particular events and publications which, he argued, significantly influenced Shakespeare in his conception of the plot of *Lear*, and of specific details of its characters and narrative.<sup>111</sup> It also therefore, set a date to the play. The subject matter and its treatment – the subjective experience of particular and general conditions – and even the use of the term 'background' in the title, provided more than sufficient evidence to argue that it was a direct inspiration for Walsh in the writing of his article for *Axis* 8.

Harrison's findings were that Shakespeare's conception of *Lear* was a conscious *and* unconscious indicator of his human experience of events and tensions of the time, which Shakespeare transmuted into his scenario. Harrison's link of the conditions of Shakespeare's time to his artistic outcome was more direct than was Walsh's link of *Lear*'s to his own time, because Walsh further linked *Lear*'s example to the experience of the artist of the renaissance and then of the 1930s. Nevertheless, it was the reality of contemporary experience against the background of conditioning, and their effect upon artistic decisions, which was the common basis of their articles. 'All literary art depends on the quality of the author's experience' Harrison stated, which, he argued

is of two degrees: the inner, intimate experiences which are peculiar to the individual, and the outer, more general, experiences which an author shares with his contemporaries. The outer experiences come principally from things, seen heard and read; and, to a man whose business is writing, things read are an important part of experience. It is likely therefore that many of the inner and the outer experiences which came to Shakespeare

in the weeks before he completed *King Lear* be reflected (though not necessarily recorded) in the play.<sup>112</sup>

Walsh, a literary colleague of Evans would, I propose, have known that this statement supported the conviction of the *Axis* cohort in the freedom of individual expression, because its complexity produced a ‘living art’. The individual artist conveyed consciously and unconsciously (an echo of Nash’s earlier statement) the conditions of his time in the nature of his work.<sup>113</sup> The strictly geometric abstraction of the Constructivists for example, suppressed the potential of unconscious experience and expression in the cause of pure, iconic form. Walsh argued that the modern artist’s researches into the analysis of the object, rather than finding the ‘source of life’, had effectively destroyed it’s integrity, and ‘merely analysed the process of decay’ as Lear had discovered.<sup>114</sup> The play *King Lear* was in his perception the equivalent of a barely disguised story of abstract art.

Furthermore, as stated, the significance of Harrison’s article lay not only in its examination of the particularity of individual experience, but in its relating of that experience to the general condition of the time in which Shakespeare was writing, which could only be discerned in retrospect. Until issue 8, *Axis* had featured nothing socially or politically topical as the background to contemporary artistic developments, but Grigson and Piper had referred to the artist’s work as “mean[ing]” far more than itself alone. It “means” the life of the artist, – but beyond that, the life of his time.’<sup>115</sup> They were aware of the distance needed to see the effects of an age upon the consciousness of its artists.<sup>116</sup> The ‘fundamental gloom’ and ‘general fear of vague and limitless calamities’, although not necessarily the subject matter of Shakespeare’s play, nevertheless constituted its

conditioning climate for his creative imagination.<sup>117</sup> In retrospect, Harrison was able to declare that

when the play is read again in the light of contemporary events a number of passages take on new colour and significance. Had King Lear been written at any other time it would have been a very different play. It is in close harmony with the moody gloom of the discordant world in which it was conceived.<sup>118</sup>

Reflecting the need for distance in deriving the significance of statements, Walsh had declared in his article that ‘It is much too early yet to say what new form of consciousness will emerge. And therefore it is impossible to come to any permanent conclusions about the importance of Abstract Art.’<sup>119</sup> In this, he directly concurred with Piper’s argument to Nicholson the previous year. Finally, it can be no coincidence that Walsh used Harrison’s subject of Shakespeare and Lear to demonstrate artists ‘*inheriting the earth*’, with ‘whatever they do, feel, see, think’, being ‘bound in some way or another to be present in their work.’<sup>120</sup>

There was a similarity in the approaches of Piper’s and Walsh’s articles. The obliqueness of Walsh’s approach to his subject, namely diffusing it through another historically based argument on the same subject, related to Piper’s oblique approach to his subject through the contexts of other, historical artists’ propositions of the same subject. The complexity of their statements demanded of the reader a more reflective, intellectual process than many straightforward reviews of art had hitherto demanded. In this way they demonstrated that the process of abstraction was a central part of the creative act in general, whether in the transposition of visual experience, or in the refraction of life into a play, literature and poetry. Not only was the notion of ‘abstract’ collapsed into ‘art’, but into all creative expression.

The remainder of *Axis 8* provides context for confirming the convictions of its cohort, and therefore requires only brief commentaries. Having stated that hitherto, *Axis* engaged in no substantial reference to social or political conditions, the two exhibition reviews indicated the only political edge in its profiling of art's role as a social instrument and barometer.<sup>121</sup> Respectively, they demonstrated the success and health of the democratic will in art, as represented in the review of the Paris exhibition, and the impoverishment and oppression of the will in official art, as represented by the review of the exhibitions of 'Decadent Art' and the new German art, shown concurrently in Munich. Considering the English focus in the three articles I have identified as central to *Axis 8*, it is noteworthy that these reviews effect a cultural balance, by focussing upon the two acknowledged centres of progressive art in the earlier twentieth century, namely Paris and Munich.

In 'The Paris Exhibition', Taylor puzzled over the title of the exhibition he was to review, namely the 'Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques', which suggested to him that 'Arts' could be separated from 'Techniques', something he viewed as a 'quaint idea'.<sup>122</sup> As Piper and Grigson might have done, he argued the implicitness of technique in artistic expression, exemplifying the gothic cathedrals of Europe as the sites where designs, materials and techniques constituted the very qualities of their achievements.

But having observed the religious universality of motive and value in medieval cathedrals, Taylor, like Walsh, recognised the need for unselfconscious expression in a contemporary world governed by commercial pressures and expectations. He discussed the staging in Paris of the exhibition as indicative of the 'logical' French, and demonstrative of their 'great enthusiasms and great sensibility', even in their imaginative incorporation of the

Beaux Arts, Paris layout.<sup>123</sup> But he discerned in its architecture that the ‘official’ ‘watchword’ was ‘compromise’, signified by the favoured modern neo-classicism of the Trocadero, which ‘suppressed’ le Corbusier’s scheme.<sup>124</sup> ‘The real modern’ was thus ‘eschewed’ by external pressures for a form of academic moderation.<sup>125</sup> Taylor argued that the Crystal Palace and the Eiffel Tower had both represented a modern logic, which he saw as continued in the ‘evanescence’ of the nordic pavilions, whilst he noticed that the German pavilion ‘of actual masonry’ ‘supported’ ‘by girders’ formed a ‘noble spectacle’.<sup>126</sup> The response to the ‘modern’ was thus perceived as culturally specific.

Taylor’s proposed suffix to the exhibition title “‘Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques’...et des Sentiments Politiques’, revealed his response to the political tendencies in the designs and attributes of the pavilions, in addition to their concepts, namely the German eagle, the Russian hammer and sickle, the Czeck armament materials. These represented to him the ‘uncivilised thrill of modern Europe’, his tacit acknowledgement of the current political mustering.<sup>127</sup> Yet his equally tacit response to fascist oppression lay in his perception that only the Spanish pavilion, ‘brilliant’ and ‘vivid’ in its boldly independent modernity, could throw caution and official propriety to the wind and reflect the raw spirit of its internal strife, by celebrating the abstraction of Picasso’s *Guernica*.<sup>128</sup> Compared to the neo-classical realism of the nude sculptures in the German pavilion, Picasso’s vital biomorphic abstraction was ‘related to its time and place’, where German realism related to an outdated aesthetic (classical) ideal.<sup>129</sup>

Medley, the painter and theatre designer Piper was working with at the Group Theatre, reviewed the two concurrent exhibitions in Munich, namely the Decadent Art exhibition and that of the Approved German Art of the new National Socialists. The former

constituted all types of international modern art, with particular reference to German Expressionism. It is important to recognise that English perceptions of the implications of Nationalist Socialism were at this time relatively vague and as yet admitted a degree of tolerance or circumspection not in evidence several years later. Medley himself observed their new artistic achievements with some “fair[ness]”.<sup>130</sup>

In the same way that Taylor had noticed that the ‘real modern’ spirit of le Corbusier was ‘suppressed’ under an academic form of modern classicism exemplified by the Trocadero, so Medley recognised the ‘much more interesting and vital’ quality of the abstracted modern art of the Decadent Art exhibition not as merely ‘suppressed’, but as entirely superimposed by the modernised neo-classicism of the official National Socialist Art.<sup>131</sup> Despite the ‘insulting surroundings’ of the Decadent Art show (namely the lack of frames, the work stacked on the floor, the comments on labels, and graffiti on walls, all in very cramped conditions) he was acutely aware, as were many of the progressive art *milieu*, that the pieces all ‘attempted to say something’ in the integrity of their direct engagement with human experience.<sup>132</sup> In comparison, he found the Approved German Art to be ‘pleasant but dull’, in the realism of its heroic portraiture, and idealist or epic historical narratives.<sup>133</sup> The execution was ‘slick and slovenly or elaborately careful and sentimental’.<sup>134</sup> Against the ‘lurid’ and ‘hysterical’ examples of abstracted art, the ‘hysterical’ examples amongst the official art were ‘inhibited and sinister.’<sup>135</sup> This art was, like the neo-classical surroundings in which it was displayed, a hollow imitation of a lost world without reference to the contemporary spirit of the time.

Medley questioned the possibility of being both an official artist and a good one, concluding the official art could only be good when artists could exercise their freedom

without imposition, observing that the art of the Hitler regime was a 'hideous perverted failure', because of the 'essentially individual' nature of European art.<sup>136</sup> This was I suggest, pertinent to the light in which the crusade of the Constructivists was viewed by the *Axis* cohort. In his recognition of the *humanity* of the 'Decadent' art, Medley was reflecting the beliefs of the cohort in variable solutions of abstract art of a biomorphic, human quality, the 'vital' art of their day, because through it, artists could 'say something'.

Alongside the three revealing articles and the two reviews discussed above, the fourth article, by the young painter Anthony West, asserted as implicit in biomorphic abstraction, the priorities of the *Axis* cohort, and emphasised the need for understanding its motives.<sup>137</sup> As Evans had maintained, the problem that painting had most suffered from was its misappropriation for the viewer's own meaning.<sup>138</sup>

West argued that nineteenth-century realist painting had so exaggerated particularity as a vehicle for emotion, that the skill of painting as an architectonic art of universal quality was trivialised and served merely sentimental ends. He argued that the 'romantic attack' had corrupted classical painting – sentimentalism had corrupted the proper work of the artist upon structure.<sup>139</sup> Accordingly, he argued for the *artist* to evolve 'an expression of mature thought', as the aim of classical painting had always been, namely a crystallisation of form and its synthesis into a universal symbol.<sup>140</sup> To communicate the importance of apprehending the artist's aim, he then argued for the *viewer* to consider that what was before him was the outcome of the painter's own thoughts about his subject, resolved in paint. Critical for *Axis*, he embraced the equal possibility of this synthesis in 'representational' art, citing Rouault amongst others as successful.<sup>141</sup> As if resolving the 'classical school of painting' 'recreated' by Cézanne, with Rouault's universal



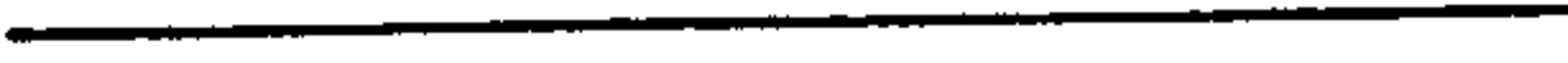
representation, he arrived finally at Miró.<sup>142</sup> Quoting Hemingway's description of the universal quality of Miró's biomorphic painting *The Farm*, he indicated Miró's abstracted forms as generally evocative and not particular, stating: 'It is the design in his mind not the memory in yours that he wants to express'.

Most significantly for the culmination of evidence in *Axis 8* however, was that West's perception of abstract painting was empirical, not ideological, and that it drew deeply from painting's heritage. In indicating the way forward he contemplated the past, revealing his non-conformism and anti-élitism.

In its general attitude, *Axis 8* demystified abstract art. On its cover it had maintained the absence of advisory commas around the term 'abstract' initiated in issue 7. This signified the conviction that 'abstract' was not a category ascribed to visual appearance but, as the symbolic outcome of a *process* of individual responses to the material world through a medium, was thus implicit in the artistic act, and *de facto* in historical art. It was the basis for building a contemporary art about contemporary life, in a genuinely individual expression. The authenticity of that expression resided in conscious and unconscious activity articulated by lived experience. These were the values and beliefs expressed throughout *Axis*.

Finally, I am not arguing that the difference of *Axis 8* signified no change at all, as any difference is significant. The difference signified the resolve with which the values and beliefs of Evans, Piper, Grigson and Nash, were brought to the fore and manifested in forms of public demonstration. In the introductory paragraphs of this chapter, I claimed that *Axis 8* constituted a 'deliberated demonstration' of their artistic concerns.<sup>143</sup> It is

difficult to imagine that this final issue was not orchestrated toward a cohesive statement of continuity. Moreover, it served to establish the validity of supporting a broad range of contemporary practices, as manifested in *The Painter's Object*, without the neurosis of preoccupations with abstraction as a problematic definition of a style. It was inherent in the process and manifest in varying degrees, and so I argue, it must have seemed to the cohort that there was little else to say or do about it.



NOTES

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AXIS 8. 'NATURE', 'LIFE' AND (ABSTRACT) 'ART'

- <sup>1</sup> J. Piper, 'Prehistory from the Air'; K. Walsh 'Background', both in *Axis 8* (early Winter 1937), 5-8 plus frontispiece and tipped in Pls.9-11.
- <sup>2</sup> As stated, *Axis 8* was not intended as a final issue. On the inside of its cover it declared the forthcoming issue (9) as marking a return to the regular quarterly programme, which had lapsed. Years later Piper confirmed the planning of issue 9, but no firm evidence accounts for its non-appearance. G. Power, R. Swift and E. Gunningham, 'John Piper', *Composition*, 2 (Spring 1979), unpaginated.
- <sup>3</sup> J. L. Martin, B. Nicholson, N. Gabo (eds.), *Circle. International Survey of Constructive Art* (London, 1937), p.146. (*Axis* repeated *Circle's* error of identifying le Corbusier and Jeanneret as two individuals.)
- <sup>4</sup> M. Piper, 'Back in the Thirties', *Art & Literature*, 7 (Winter 1965), p.147.
- <sup>5</sup> P. Nash in H. Read (ed.), *Unit 1* (London, Toronto, Melbourne, Sydney, 1934), p.81.
- <sup>6</sup> Piper, 'Prehistory', p.5.
- <sup>7</sup> Piper, 'Prehistory', p.5.
- <sup>8</sup> The X ray (electromagnetic ray) was first discovered by W. von Roentgen in 1895, and the popularity of its adoption for medical use occurred as a result of his Nobel Prize for Physics in 1901. References to its qualities appear in synthetic Cubism from around 1915.
- <sup>9</sup> M. Piper, 'the Thirties', p.148.
- <sup>10</sup> See chapter 4, pp.193-95.
- <sup>11</sup> Piper, 'Prehistory', p.5.
- <sup>12</sup> Piper, 'Prehistory', p.5.
- <sup>13</sup> M. Evans, 'Order, order!', *Axis 6* (Summer 1936), p.5; J. Piper in G. Grigson and J. Piper, 'England's Climate', *Axis 7* (Autumn 1936), p.5; M. Evans, 'The Painter's Object' in *The Painter's Object* (London, 1937), pp.10-11. See chapter 4, pp.201-02.
- <sup>14</sup> Piper, 'Prehistory', p.7.
- <sup>15</sup> Piper, 'Prehistory', p.7.
- <sup>16</sup> Clock dials were used to orientate in the absence of a compass. The method was demonstrated by Brigadier H. St. J. L. Winterbotham in 'How to Read a Map', *Listener* (10 April 1935), 605-08. Winterbotham was Director-General for the Ordnance Survey, 1930-35.

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- <sup>17</sup> Piper, 'Prehistory', p.7. See also chapter 4, p.197.
- <sup>18</sup> Piper, 'Prehistory', p.7.
- <sup>19</sup> Piper, 'Prehistory', p.7.
- <sup>20</sup> Piper, 'Prehistory', p.7.
- <sup>21</sup> J. Héliion, 'Poussin, Seurat and double rhythm' (sic), *Axis* 6 (Summer 1936), p.9; reproduced in M. Evans (ed.), *The Painter's Object*, (London, 1937), p.107.
- <sup>22</sup> By M. Evans in 'A Review and a Comment', *Axis* 3 (July 1935), p.25; 'Abstract Art: Collecting the Fragments', *New Oxford Outlook*, 22 (November 1935), pp.259-260; 'The Painters Object' in Evans (ed.), *Object*, p.11. By Piper in Grigson and Piper, 'England's', p.6; and as the entire premises of his articles 'England's Early Sculptors', *Architectural Review* (November 1936) reproduced in Evans, *Object*, 117-125, and 'Died April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1837: John Constable', *Architectural Review* (April 1937), 149-50. By Grigson in Grigson and Piper, 'England's' pp.5-6; 'Painting and Sculpture To-day' in G. Grigson (ed.), *The Arts To-day* (London 1935), pp.106-08. By P. Nash in his letter to the *Times* quoted verbatim, and in his essay, in H. Read (ed. and intro.), *Unit 1* (London, Toronto, Melbourne, Sydney, 1937), pp.10, 81.
- <sup>23</sup> Evans, 'Order', p.8; M. Piper, 'the Thirties', p.147.
- <sup>24</sup> J. Piper in S. Spender, 'A Talk with John Piper', *Encounter*, 20 (May 1963), p.59.
- <sup>25</sup> J. Piper 'Contemporary English Drawing', *Listener* (11 October 1933), pp.542-43.
- <sup>26</sup> J. Richards, 'Ben Nicholson at the Lefèvre: 7&5 at Zwemmer's', *Axis* 4 (November 1935), p.24.
- <sup>27</sup> J. Piper in Piper and Grigson, 'England's', pp.5-6; 'Constable', pp.149-150; 'The Recent Watercolours of Paul Nash', *Design for Living* (May 1937), p.404.
- <sup>28</sup> J. Héliion, 'Poussin, Seurat and double rhythm', (sic) *Axis* 6 (Summer 1936), 9-17.
- <sup>29</sup> Piper, 'Constable', p.149, discussed in chapter 4, pp.193-94.
- <sup>30</sup> Piper, 'Constable', p.150.
- <sup>31</sup> Piper, 'Prehistory', p.5.
- <sup>32</sup> Piper, 'Constable', pp.149, 150.
- <sup>33</sup> Quoted in R. Ingrams and J. Piper, *Piper's Places. John Piper in England & Wales* (London, 1983), p.21.
- <sup>34</sup> See chapter 5, pp.255-57.

<sup>35</sup> Piper in Spender, 'A Talk', p.61.

<sup>36</sup> This was a term used by Piper to describe a workmanlike attitude to developing an appropriate painterly language. He named Picasso as 'the best twentieth-century example of an expert artist – a painter who has invented, by rediscovery and hard work, a complete professional equipment.' Piper in Grigson and Piper, 'England's', p.6.

<sup>37</sup> Grigson in Grigson and Piper, 'England's', p.9.

<sup>38</sup> Archaeologist O. G. S. Crawford published 'Air Survey and Archaeology' *Ordnance Survey Professional Paper* (1923).

<sup>39</sup> Archaeology was at this time enjoying prominent exposure in England. The preoccupation with ancient and historic sites was manifest in a plethora of publications. In 1934 a series of articles appeared in the *Listener* on Roman Britain: G. Boumphrey, 'Along the Roman Roads', *Listener* (23 May-4 July 1934) published as a volume the following year, under the same title; Crawford and Keiller (also a pilot) published *Wessex from the Air* (Oxford, 1928), using aerial photographs; for an insight into the scope of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (formed in 1926) see its contribution, under the umbrella of the Design and Industries Association, in H. Peach and N. Carrington (eds.), and A. Williams-Ellis (intro.), *The Face of the Land. The Year Book of The Design & Industries Association, 1929-1930*, (London, 1930); for a discussion of preservationism generally at this time, see D. Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London, 1998), pp.25-32; for a broader discussion on the social significance of the countryside, leisure, and class interests, see J. Lowerson, 'Battles for the Countryside' in F. Gloversmith (ed.), *Class, Culture and Social Change. A New View of the 1930s* (Sussex & New Jersey, 1980), 258-285.

<sup>40</sup> For a brief discussion of the 'restoration' of Avebury, see Matless, *Landscape*, pp.78-79.

<sup>41</sup> Another, relevant to this discussion, was *Neolithic Wessex*, (1933).

<sup>42</sup> A series of three talks published weekly by Brigadier St. J. L. Winterbotham on 'The Map of England', *Listener* (10, 17, 24 April 1935). See also note 16.

<sup>43</sup> The collective title of the article series was J. Hawkes's, 'Ancient Britain Out of Doors', *Listener* (3-24 April 1935). It coincided with the Winterbotham series on 'The Map of England' (10-24 April 1935), the first of which also coincided with the short series on flying. The Hawkes article 'Britain Before the Romans' was a dialogue with archaeologist S. Piggott, in the same issue as 'Final Tests Before the License', and 'How to Read a Map' (10 April 1935). The activities featured in these articles relied upon viewing and interpreting visual signs.

<sup>44</sup> In late 1933 Moholy-Nagy had published an article on the potential use of photography for what Piper later referred to as a 'new consciousness'. L. Moholy-Nagy, 'How Photography Revolutionises Vision', *Listener* (8 November 1933), 688-89. Moholy-

Nagy was a key figure in the New Objectivity movement as well as a recent Bauhaus professor.

<sup>45</sup> Piper, 'Prehistory', p.5; Piper in Grigson and Piper, 'England's', p.6; for a discussion of this area see S. Smiles, 'Equivalents for the Megaliths: Prehistory and English Culture, 1920-50' in D. Corbett, Y. Holt and F. Russell (eds.), *The Geographies of Englishness. Landscape and the National Past 1880-1940*, (New Haven & London, 2003), 199-223.

<sup>46</sup> For a discussion of the popularity of these pursuits in connection with the English countryside, 'based on social and aesthetic distinctions concerning how to look and who could see the country', see Matless, *Englishness*, pp.62-88.

<sup>47</sup> Evans, 'The Painter's', pp.10-11.

<sup>48</sup> From 1928 Piper had published on art. See D. Fraser Jenkins, *John Piper*, exh. cat., (London, Tate Gallery, 1983), p.41. As all artists experienced during the thirties, there was little or no market for their work, especially progressive or radical work. Piper recalled this in Power, Swift, and Gunningham, 'Piper', unpaginated, and in A. West, *John Piper* (London, 1979), p.67. Nash had been more engaged with design commissions than had Piper, and had written on art and design from 1931, when he wrote 'Thank God I seem to be able to write. Journalism is my sole means of subsistence.' Letter to Hilda Felce, 23 November, 1931, quoted in A. Causey, *Paul Nash* (Oxford, 1980), p.221. For a discussion of the opportunities for artists in England in the early thirties, see A. Stephenson, "'Strategies of Situation": British Modernism and the Slump c.1929-1934', *Oxford Art Journal* (February 1991), 30-51.

<sup>49</sup> Ingrams and Piper, *Piper's*, pp.43-50.

<sup>50</sup> Piper had become interested in lithography under the teaching of Francis Spear at The Royal College from 1927. In 1936 he collaborated with Robert Wellington and Oliver Simon at the Curwen Press on a project to reinstate the status of lithography by encouraging English artists to work specifically for that medium. Contemporary Lithographs therefore aimed to reinstate the auto-lithograph. West, *Piper*, pp. 48, 90-91. Betjeman's library of antiquarian books was inspirational for him in his various critical writings and publishing ventures. See K. Hiscock, 'Modernity and "English" Tradition: John Betjeman at *The Architectural Review*', *Journal of Design History*, 3 (September 2000), p.194.

<sup>51</sup> Betjeman was Assistant Editor of the *Architectural Review* from 1930 to 1935. Under his editorial influence, he not only employed unconventional typography and papers, but his use of imagery constituted a potent form of subtle persuasion in its grouping, and its viewpoints. Hiscock, 'Modernity', pp.194-95, 199-203, 205-208.

<sup>52</sup> Hiscock, 'Modernity', p.194.

<sup>53</sup> Richards succeeded Betjeman as Assistant Editor of the *Architectural Review* in 1935.

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- <sup>54</sup> G. Grigson, 'John Piper' in *Recollections. Mainly of Writers and Artists* (London, 1984), p.157.
- <sup>55</sup> Ingrams and Piper, *Piper's*, p.21.
- <sup>56</sup> Grigson and Piper, 'England's', pp.5-6.
- <sup>57</sup> G. Grigson, *The Crest on the Silver* (London, 1950), p.78.
- <sup>58</sup> G. Grigson, 'Reading "Antiquity"' in *Recollections*, 115-119.
- <sup>59</sup> G. Grigson, 'King Arthur and Tristan in the West', *Listener* (9 September 1936), 477-79.
- <sup>60</sup> Piper later became a member of the Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, no date has been confirmed. J. Osborne, *John Piper and Stained Glass* (Stroud, 1997), p.125.
- <sup>61</sup> Piggott's father had 'a cottage' in Uffington. C. Lycett Green (ed. and intro.), *John Betjeman. Letters, I, 1926-1951* (London, 1994); S. Piggott, 'A Disciple of Leland' in G. Elborn, *To John Piper on his eightieth birthday*, (sic) (London, 1983), p.33.
- <sup>62</sup> Piggott held this position from 1934-38. Lycett Green, *Betjeman*, I, p.563.
- <sup>63</sup> *Axis 8* (early Winter 1937), 12-15.
- <sup>64</sup> For an examination of this project see Causey, *Nash*, pp.221-234.
- <sup>65</sup> Cited in Causey, *Nash*, p.222.
- <sup>66</sup> Nash in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.81.
- <sup>67</sup> The interest in such subjects is discussed above, but Nash was one of the first visitors to this site on its public opening in 1935. Photographs witness his visit. See A. Causey, *Paul Nash's Photographs. Document and Image* (London, 1973), pls.66-68.
- <sup>68</sup> Evans, 'Nash', p.12.
- <sup>69</sup> Implicit in Evans's diatribe, 'The Painter's', p.11
- <sup>70</sup> Letter from Piper to Nicholson, May 1936. TGA 8717.1.2.3403.
- <sup>71</sup> Letter from Piper to Nicholson, May 1936. TGA 8717.1.2.3403.
- <sup>72</sup> Evans, 'Nash', p.13.
- <sup>73</sup> Evans, 'Nash', p.13.



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- <sup>74</sup> Evans, 'Nash', p.13.
- <sup>75</sup> Evans, 'Nash', p.12.
- <sup>76</sup> Evans, 'Nash', p.12.
- <sup>77</sup> Evans, 'Nash', p.12.
- <sup>78</sup> J. Piper, 'Picasso at the Tate', *Axis* 1 (January 1935), p.28. See chapter 2, pp.113-14.
- <sup>79</sup> See chapter 4, p.197 and n.28.
- <sup>80</sup> S. Baldwin, *On England and Other Addresses* (London 1933), pp.5-6. The *Listener* had published a series arising from radio talks, entitled 'Our National Character', introduced by Baldwin, and under the supervision of Arthur Bryant, running weekly from 4 October 1933 to 4 April 1934. Bryant's lecture entitled 'The Englishman's Roots in his Countryside' was published in the *Listener* (11 October 1933), 531-33. More specifically, H. J. Massingham argued the organic *soil* of England as the nourishment of the nation, 'with ancient *Downland Man* as the original organic Englishman', and Avebury as the 'First Capital of England'. Massingham's *Downland Man* was published in 1926. See Matless, *Landscape*, pp.116-118.
- <sup>81</sup> Matless, *Landscape*, pp.139-142.
- <sup>82</sup> Nash in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.80. The year before, on radio and in article form, Bryant's 'Our National Character' series had featured a dialogue between himself and Professor H. J. Fleure entitled 'How Does Our Climate Affect our Character?', *Listener* (25 October 1933), 623-25. Significantly it did not question 'if', but 'how'. See also Penrose, chapter 3, pp.173-74.
- <sup>83</sup> Baldwin, 'On England', p.6.
- <sup>84</sup> J. Piper, 'Younger English Painters II', *The Listener* (29 March 1933), p.490. The painters he mentioned were Pasmore, Medley, Fitton, Coxon, McGuinness, and Hitchens.
- <sup>85</sup> Piper, 'Younger II', p.492.
- <sup>86</sup> Ingrams and Piper, *Piper's*, p.22.
- <sup>87</sup> Evans, 'Nash', p.12.
- <sup>88</sup> Evans, 'Nash', p.12.
- <sup>89</sup> Nash in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.80.
- <sup>90</sup> Nash in Read (ed.), *Unit 1*, p.80; Evans, 'The Painter's', pp.6, 8.
- <sup>91</sup> Nash in Read (ed.), p.80.

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- <sup>92</sup> Nash in Read (ed.), p.80.
- <sup>93</sup> Nash in Read (ed.), pp.80-81.
- <sup>94</sup> Nash in Read (ed.), p.80.
- <sup>95</sup> Grigson and Piper, 'England's', pp.5, 6, 9.
- <sup>96</sup> See chapter 2, p.96-97.
- <sup>97</sup> Evans, 'Nash', pp.12, 13.
- <sup>98</sup> Evans, 'Nash', p.13.
- <sup>99</sup> Evans, 'Nash', p.13.
- <sup>100</sup> Grigson in Grigson and Piper, 'England', p.9.
- <sup>101</sup> Grigson in Grigson and Piper, 'England', p.9.
- <sup>102</sup> *Axis* 8, pp.9-10, 9.
- <sup>103</sup> Walsh, 'Background', p.9.
- <sup>104</sup> Walsh, 'Background', p.10.
- <sup>105</sup> Walsh, 'Background', p.10.
- <sup>106</sup> Walsh, 'Background', pp.9, 10.
- <sup>107</sup> Walsh, 'Background', p.10.
- <sup>108</sup> Walsh, 'Background', p.10.
- <sup>109</sup> Walsh, 'Background', p.10.
- <sup>110</sup> As discussed in the context of his illustrations for Thomas Browne, Nash was deeply involved in mystical and esoteric subjects. See Causey, Nash, 221-243; M. Beale, 'Event on the Downs', *Burlington Magazine* (November 1989), 748-754. For his metaphysical reading of landscape, see P. Hendon, 'Paul Nash: Outline – the immortality of the 'I'', *Art History* (December 1997), 589-610.
- <sup>111</sup> 28 December 1935, p.896.
- <sup>112</sup> Harrison, 'Background', p.896.

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- <sup>113</sup> P. Nash, 'Nature, Life and Art', *Week-end Review* (5 December 1931), p.716. See chapter 1, pp.141-42.
- <sup>114</sup> Walsh, 'Background', p.10.
- <sup>115</sup> Piper in Grigson and Piper, 'England's', p.6.
- <sup>116</sup> As Piper had argued in his letter to Nicholson, 5 May 1936. TGA8717.1.2.3403. See chapter 3, p.155.
- <sup>117</sup> Harrison, 'Background', p.896.
- <sup>118</sup> Harrison, 'Background', p.896.
- <sup>119</sup> Walsh, 'Background', p.10.
- <sup>120</sup> Evans, 'The Painter's', p.13.
- <sup>121</sup> H. Taylor, 'The Paris Exhibition', and R. Medley, 'Hitler's Art in Munich', *Axis 8* (early Winter, 1937), 19-22, 28-29.
- <sup>122</sup> Taylor, 'Paris', p.22.
- <sup>123</sup> Taylor, 'Paris', pp.19, 20.
- <sup>124</sup> Taylor, 'Paris', p.20.
- <sup>125</sup> Taylor, 'Paris', p.20.
- <sup>126</sup> Taylor, 'Paris', p.20.
- <sup>127</sup> Taylor, 'Paris', p.22.
- <sup>128</sup> Taylor, 'Paris', p.20.
- <sup>129</sup> Taylor, 'Paris', pp.20, 22.
- <sup>130</sup> Medley, 'Hitler's', p.28.
- <sup>131</sup> Taylor, 'Paris', p.20; Medley, 'Hitler's', p.28.
- <sup>132</sup> Medley, 'Hitler's', p.28.
- <sup>133</sup> Medley, 'Hitler's', p.28.
- <sup>134</sup> Medley, 'Hitler's', p.28.
- <sup>135</sup> Medley, 'Hitler's', p.28.

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- <sup>136</sup> Medley, 'Hitler's', p.29.
- <sup>137</sup> A. West, 'No Revolution', *Axis 8* (early Winter), 17-19.
- <sup>138</sup> As for example, her objection to Surrealism's claim to Blake and others. Evans, 'Order', p.8.
- <sup>139</sup> West, 'No Revolution', p.17.
- <sup>140</sup> West, 'No Revolution', p.17.
- <sup>141</sup> Rouault was greatly admired by Piper from his early student days. West, *John Piper*, pp.27-28.
- <sup>142</sup> West, 'No Revolution', p.17.
- <sup>143</sup> See p.277.

**CHAPTER VII**

***AXIS IN PERSPECTIVE***

The first part of this chapter briefly examines the work of the *Axis* cohort after *Axis* 8 until the mid 1940s, in order to ascertain their trajectories from the last issue, and to illuminate the role that *Axis* played in developing progressive art in England. The second part confronts persistent art historical perceptions of *Axis* which have somewhat trivialised the position it represented on abstract art, and by extension, in English modern art discourse. It ultimately argues that the concept of 'modern' art in England needs fundamental reassessment as a romantically based response to continental developments, manifested in a broad field of progressive practices. As the initial move in this chapter however, terms such as 'modern' and 'abstract' need briefly revisiting in the light of *Axis* activity, in order appropriately to view the subsequent work of the cohort.

The characteristic that represented *Axis*'s attitude to abstract art was a modernising approach to the romantic aspect of the English painting tradition. Implicit in this was a predominant subjectivity, expressed as was traditionally the case, through ambiguity of language and device, to encourage an interpretative dimension and an aura or atmosphere. The last *Axis* exemplified how the relevance of the modern artist's experience of life could be disseminated to a broad but not necessarily specialist public.

There were other projects that confirmed this desire to communicate this relationship. From the beginning of 1937, by undertaking a series of BBC TV programmes about modern art and specific locations, Piper (sometimes jointly with Evans) continued to demonstrate their commitment to publicising modern art, and to working in whatever sphere their skills were useful. This form of dissemination was continued in 1938, when they filmed 'A Trip to the Seaside by Myfanwy Evans and John Piper'.<sup>1</sup>

Piper's predilection for topography particularly centred on coastal locations, which had been evident in the subjects of his early 1930s paintings and collages, and he turned his attention to this subject to publish 'The Nautical Style' in the *Architectural Review*, in January 1938.<sup>2</sup> This was a profusely illustrated article on the relation between function and style in marine building, and on 'objects' of shipping and coastal activity. It bore direct relation to his 'beach object' or '*beach-engine*' descriptions in *The Painter's Object*, and drew upon his sense of strangeness and utility, so sharpened by his Shell Guide explorations and by the company of Betjeman and Richards.<sup>3</sup> He looked at buildings, sea-marks and ships, all 'objects' whose abstract *and* surreal qualities appealed to him in the context of that very particular place. It signified to him a 'tradition' of 'sea-coast building' of a strength and presence, redolent of England's 'intense maritime pride and efficiency'.<sup>4</sup> I argue that he had been sensitised, during the formal lessons of the previous three years, to explore further the abstract qualities in everyday objects and contexts, which instilled in him a 'new consciousness' of everyday experiences.<sup>5</sup>

In May of this year the London Gallery staged his one-man show.<sup>6</sup> This was in itself a statement of his independence because this gallery showed surrealist art or art of that tendency, including the London group, and Nash exhibited there regularly.<sup>7</sup> According to Nash, Piper wanted it 'to be evident that although the solution of his equation is in "abstract" terms, the features of his design retain the influence of association', by displaying his abstract paintings and his latest collages together.<sup>8</sup> This clearly echoed Nash's *Axis 1* statement, concerning his 'aim in symbolical representation *and* abstraction'. The collages, produced as previously described, were 'executed', as Nash in the exhibition review stated, 'in front of Nature'.<sup>9</sup> Nash's reviewing of the show indicates his continuing friendship with Piper, and his own interest in sea and coastal subjects.<sup>10</sup> Piper continued on

this theme that Summer, publishing 'Abstraction on the Beach' in *XX Siècle*, and 'English Sea Pictures' in the *Listener*.<sup>11</sup> The former article brought together his favourite themes, the Early Christian sculptors, Picasso, Cézanne, 'popular' art and current affairs, and their implicitness in life, all in the metaphorical context of discussing abstraction in the experiencing of a (coastal) place with its timeless, natural features, and its contemporary, ephemeral elements of flotsam and jetsam. The sentiment behind this article was that without the 'flotsam and jetsam' of life, 'pure abstraction [was] undernourished.'<sup>12</sup>

The abstract paintings in Piper's solo exhibition showed his looser, more fluid versions of the vertical forms which had become his signature, and which had related to his 'beach-engine' of the previous year. In the same way that he had viewed the features of the immediate environment as 'abstract' 'objects' and had intimated this in his collages, so he had continued in his abstract paintings, intimations of 'objects' but by now, with an obvious sense of three-dimensionality and enclosure. In one mural commission, he even added 'base-plates' or cast shadow to the base of his 'objects'. His solo exhibition had thus finally staked out his ground regarding abstraction. 'Association' was both physical and psychological, and there could be no clearer indication of his beliefs about the elision of 'abstract' and 'figure', 'idea' and 'object', than in these paintings and collages; and effectively they closed the chapter on his work with non-figurative abstraction.

Nor had Piper sought to be identified with the political implications of abstract art, or with the implications of any ideal art as a state instrument. He and Evans were well aware of events in Germany, particularly since Medley had returned from Munich with his reports of the 'Approved German Art' and the 'Decadent Art' exhibitions for *Axis 8*.<sup>13</sup> Their involvement with the Group Theatre from the year before, where they had met Medley, had



led, by the end of that year and in early 1938, to Piper's occupation with designing the sets for Spender's *The Trial of a Judge*, in collaboration with Medley.<sup>14</sup> The contemporary analogies in the play were powerful, and discussions around this project were therefore highly topical. 'Real politics...pressed further and further into our consciences' Evans recalled.<sup>15</sup> 'There was a perpetual mixture of exhilaration and uneasiness. The fear and horror of war constantly took the attention of the only people who had any understanding of or interest in modern art and literature'.<sup>16</sup> Piper's choice of abstract sets for Spender's play – 'grim in its red, white and blue abstract setting' Evans recalled – was a highly significant statement of its perceived associations.<sup>17</sup> The flats converted the spatial concerns of the two-dimensional imagery of Piper's paintings, and the miniature construction of his 'beach engine' into a lifesize *mise en scène*. However, as discussed, the constructivist austerity of the design was apt as the setting for the unfolding of the narrative, where 'life' was separate from the forms but lived in and amongst them. That is, it was a 'life' under the oppression of a collective ideology. The judge was under trial for acting upon the reality of truth and justice, instead of the ideal, state dictat. He was eventually condemned and executed in an obscene inversion of the 'truth'.<sup>18</sup> The collective was the Nazi regime, and the storyline was based on factual evidence arriving from the continent in 1932.

Later in 1938, Piper was preparing drawings to be published the following year as a collection of prints of architectural subjects entitled *Brighton Aquatints*.<sup>19</sup> His continuing explorations of techniques was likely to have been prompted by his collaborations with Oliver Simon at the Curwen Press over the autolithograph series.<sup>20</sup> At the same time he and Betjeman were jointly compiling the *Shropshire Shell Guide* which, owing to the declaration of war, was not published until 1951. Piper had been accepted by the RAF to work at its photographic interpretation centre at Medmenham, from where he was almost

immediately recalled to join the 'Recording Britain' project.<sup>21</sup> He was also invited onto the War Artists Advisory Committee in April 1940.<sup>22</sup> His paintings at this time were required to be abstracted naturalistic representation, to record historic buildings under threat of war damage, and also those that had been bomb-damaged. He never returned to the dominance of the abstract element over the originating 'object' (which for the purpose of this work, was predominantly architecture) which encouraged his predilection at this time for a highly dramatic presentation of subject matter in a romantic ambience, and his propensity for 'boot[ing] the technique'.<sup>23</sup> This commitment to an exploratory attitude was what Piper admired in Picasso's work, prompting his view of Picasso as 'an expert artist – a painter who has invented, by rediscovery and hard work, a complete professional equipment.'<sup>24</sup>

However, his interest in everyday buildings continued, as was apparent in articles such as 'Fully Licensed – in Praise of the Ordinary Public House' for the *Architectural Review* in 1940; whilst the same year, his sustained studies of the English landscape watercolourists led to his article 'Towers in the Fens', bringing together his predilection for church architecture in topographical settings.<sup>25</sup> He wrote of the abstract effect of the monumental church towers on the flat terrain of East Anglia, referring to the Fens as 'a plinth – the best plinth for sculptural architecture in the whole country'.<sup>26</sup> Evidently, both his war commissions and his civilian work utilised his abstract experience gained over the *Axis* years. But the effect of its subject matter, composition and treatment, resulted on that basis, in the habitual representation of his work as 'neo-picturesque', or 'neo-romanticism'.<sup>27</sup>

Whereas the vision and configuration of Piper's work resulted in a renewal of the picturesque aesthetic, the idea that English art had for some time been devoid of romantic qualities is I argue, a misapprehension. The romantic tendency, representing the human,

emotive element, is inherent in art's very affectiveness. In the same way that the *Axis* cohort had found abstract and surreal elements together in all 'good' art, so they found both romantic and classic elements present. The romantic impetus required order, to a greater or lesser degree, and it was this position that Piper had established in the first *Axis*, concerning Picasso's work.<sup>28</sup> The argument here is that this attitude was therefore not a 'return', a 'neo' *form of* the romantic, but a complex attitude of the continuous, present, condition. It was as fundamental to Picasso as to Miró. Years later, when discussing definitions of "abstract" and "topographical", Piper had described topography as 'a branch of Romantic art' and 'also a branch of particularisation.'<sup>29</sup> Romantic art meant seeing a particular subject matter, and 'interpreting all nature through the particular', topography ('at its best') being 'the interpretation of the world as the vision of the place', with 'the spirit of the place in the time, not just the representation of the place'.<sup>30</sup> He saw Cotman as able to express his chosen places as nineteenth-century Norfolk.

Piper published his book on Romanticism in 1942, which established him as an artist not merely connected with a romantic attitude, but one who constructed his own line of romantic painters right down to his own time. Entitled *British Romantic Artists*, it started with Gilpin, Wilson, and Cotman, the essays moving through Turner, Constable, Bewick, Blake and Fuseli, Palmer, Martin and the Pre-Raphaelites.<sup>31</sup> Many of these names had cropped up in the writings of the *Axis* cohort, and much of the content of Piper's Constable article reappeared here. 'Romantic art deals with the particular,' it began, continuing with a Blakean definition:

it is the result of a vision that can see...something significant beyond ordinary significance: something that for a moment seems to contain the whole world; and, when the moment is past, carries over some comment on life or experience besides the comment on appearances.<sup>32</sup>

For Piper and the *Axis* cohort, this attitude had been a perception particular to the English culture, as witnessed in *Axis*. As Evans had connected Nash's sensibility with the English weather, so Piper ascribed that quality of 'vision' to the English in general:

As a race we have always been conscious of the soft atmosphere and the changeable climate of our sea-washed country, where the air is never quite free from mist, where the light of the sun is more often pale and pearly than it is fiery. This atmosphere has sunk into our souls. It has affected our art as it affects our life. But it has not resulted in congenital softness of vision. It has inspired the sharp-outlined visions of Blake as well as the vague adumbrations of Whistler's nocturnes.<sup>33</sup>

In his discussion of contemporary romantic painting, Piper made a significant statement which supported his belief, and that of Lewis's as he acknowledged, in the impossibility of a purely classical art in a romantic age.<sup>34</sup> It finally settled the 'internecine war', at least as far as he was concerned.<sup>35</sup> He cited 'recent British romantic movements' as

Abstract Painting, or Constructivism, which in the hands of a sensitive painter like Ben Nicholson has a Classical appearance but a romantic [sic] soul, and Surrealism – important in this country for its effect on a painter like Paul Nash, and a sculptor and draughtsman like Henry Moore.<sup>36</sup>

It is to be expected that the Surrealists would have been included in this attitude, but the fact that the 'Classical appearance' of Nicholson's painting masked 'a romantic soul', validates my argument that there was a conviction, at least between the *Axis* cohort, that the attitude of the leading English Constructivists (for Hepworth and Moore were no exceptions) was fundamentally romantic beneath the veneer of a radical ideology. The implication was therefore, that Nicholson's pure abstract painting was the overly conscious practice of suppressing a human, emotional response. This was clearly evident in Piper's comment in a letter to Nash:

The value of abstract painting to me, and the value of Surrealist painting to me are (paradoxically, if you like) that they are *classical* exercises, not romantic expressions. They are disciplines – even dreams can be disciplinarian – which open a road to ones [sic] own heart – but they are

not the heart itself. I doubt if under their complete domination one masterpiece will ever be created. After an abstract period – what a release one feels! The avenue at Stadhampton, or the watercress beds at Ewelme are seen with such new intensity! But if one abstracts them finally, so that those posts are areas of colour, and the waterfall into the watercress bed becomes like a Ben relief, then the result can be hung perhaps in Cork Street, but not hung against one's heart.<sup>37</sup>

This was astute, since Nicholson was already changing his palette that year in his Cornish location, and soon reintroduced references to landscape, and to still life in landscape, into his abstract compositions.

Other than Nash, Piper's other contemporary romantic painters were Frances Hodgkins and Graham Sutherland. But it was Nash who remained the centre of contemporary expression for Piper, who referred to him as his 'artistic father'.<sup>38</sup> Nash must nevertheless have objected to being included in his book (certainly he objected to Constable's inclusion) as evidenced in Piper's reference to his 'honest protests'.<sup>39</sup> Their difference rested upon the very quality that distinguished Nash's surrealism from Piper's lyricism, as indicated in the afterthought he added to his letter (quoted above): 'Do I confuse ROMANCE & POETRY? Do you confuse ROMANCE & FANTASY? Why should either of us call either of them a *confusion*?'<sup>40</sup>

I have indicated that 1937 was a signal year, in the publication of *Circle* and *The Painter's Object* as the result of the 'internecine war', and I have argued the desire to publicise convictions about abstraction and representation evident in *Axis* and *The Painter's Object* as the motive steering *Axis* 8, prefaced by the co-authored article 'England's Climate' in *Axis* 7.<sup>41</sup> By 1942 however, it had become clear that not only Piper had resolved his position in contemporary practice, but also that Grigson had reconciled his interests expressed in 'England's Climate' in his anthology *The Romantics*, that year.<sup>42</sup>

Significantly, in that formative year of 1937, he had also published in *Signature*, as had Piper and Nash. These alignments were I suggest no mere coincidence, but they testified to the alignment of the interests of the *Axis* cohort by its close. In the November issue, in which Piper's article 'Aspects of Modern Drawing' appeared, Grigson had contributed 'Samuel Palmer at Shoreham'.<sup>43</sup> He closed *New Verse* in 1939, publishing an anthology of its contributions over its six year run, and the same year publishing a collection of his own poems.<sup>44</sup>

The concurrence of their 'romantic' volumes testified to their shared values since 1937. Grigson had been interested in Surrealism, but he did not primarily connect it with the kind of imagination he admired in the work of the English romantics.<sup>45</sup> Like Piper, his belief lay in the link between reality and reverie, and not in pure fantasy, and he explained:

The Romantics are not to be sneered at...The thing to do about the Romantics is to read them and look...at their pictures...to forget some of the abstract theorizing of the school-books, and to follow them in their actuality. Precisely, in their images, their words and their paint and their buildings and their music.<sup>46</sup>

He featured Stukeley's writings prominently, including 'The Temple of Avebury', and those of Constable, Palmer, Blake and Fuseli.<sup>47</sup> Most revealingly, this volume was dedicated to Piper and to 'places': 'To John Piper, Bupton, Clevancy, Hafod, Fawley & Snowhill.'<sup>48</sup>

Other than an essay on Moore for the *Penguin Modern Painters* series, Grigson's subsequent work was largely devoted to expanding his activity in the areas which had long preoccupied him, namely romantic poetry, literature and art, and nature and topography, often published in anthologies and local or regional handbooks and guides.<sup>49</sup> These kinds of books needed furnishing with the writing of someone accustomed to the complexities of

‘seeing’. His friendship with Piper waned towards the end of the war, and he gradually withdrew from Piper’s circle.<sup>50</sup>

Both Piper and Nash were prominent members of Kenneth Clark’s War Artists’ Advisory Committee programme. Piper, who had been accepted by the RAF to work at the photographic interpretation centre at Medmenham, was recalled to work on the ‘Recording Britain’ project.<sup>51</sup> Nash worked for the Air Ministry in 1940, which resulted in a series of surreal paintings mostly in watercolour, of aircraft ‘*out of their element*’, wrecked in landscapes.<sup>52</sup> (Nash’s italics) His subsequent work for the Ministry of Information built upon his preoccupation with a portentous sky, in which the mystical aspects of another realm of existence was elided into surreal conjunctions of objects and clouds. In 1944 Nash published the essay ‘Aerial Flowers’, which developed this *leitmotif*, driven by his awareness of his impending death.<sup>53</sup> He was still working on a series of paintings arising from it when he died in 1946. Piper’s comments questioning Nash’s perception of ‘confusions’ between ‘romance and poetry’ and ‘romance and fantasy’, bore witness to the heightened mysticism of Nash’s last developments as rooted in its earthly origins.<sup>54</sup>

Between 1938 and 1947 Evans had three children. In 1946 she published the first number of her journal entitled *The Pavilion. A contemporary collection of British art & architecture*, intending, ‘in a series of volumes, to mix the unknown with the accepted, the past with the present, to avoid connoisseurship and to be ungrudging of space’.<sup>55</sup> The content had ‘grown ...inevitably and arbitrarily’, and was subject to ‘availability’ and ‘prejudice’.<sup>56</sup> No other volumes appeared, but the scope and sentiment behind this one employed the breadth of subject matter from *The Painter’s Object* whilst locating it entirely

within English culture. As such, it constituted an apparently disparate selection of contemporary views of art and architecture, theatre and gallery, and text and illustration.

It leaned towards *Cahiers d'Art* in its discursive nature and, as well as adopting its form in 'volumes', the format was virtually the same, recalling the simplicity of its layout, by employing similar lettering, on a plain yellow ochre card cover. The message suggested 'superior', rather than everyday 'utilitarian', as might be said of *Studio*. This was I suggest, a significant and uncharacteristic change of sentiment in Evans. Amongst others, she acknowledged *Axis* contributor S. J. Woods as artistic editor and layout adviser.

Betjeman's and Piper's influence was evident in the employment of differing typefaces, and the mixture of coated, and thin uncoated paper and card, with some tipped-in colour reproductions.<sup>57</sup> In this respect, its content may not have been radical, but as an object, neither did it attempt an orthodox stand. Its resemblance to Betjeman's moderately imaginative approach to the *Architectural Review* identified it rather with the aesthetic qualities of an established journal of the arts.<sup>58</sup>

Other than E. Bawden's contribution, its idiosyncratic content was predicated upon the importance of history to contemporary perspectives.<sup>59</sup> Evans's declared aim of 'Exploiting the things that affect the vision of English artists and writers' amounted at times to a eulogy of English cultural character never so boldly argued in *Axis* and 'The Painter's Object'.<sup>60</sup>

Her postwar celebration of the English ('perhaps we should say British') sensibility was however, edged with same irony:

However many future buttons we may be able to press to turn our modernistic house towards the sun, we shall not avoid the sullen light, the falling mists of the unpredictable grey months. And any giants that we may offer to the world state, however urban, will have been pitted and weathered and worn and moulded, like everything in England, and a Moore



will continue to differ from a Brancusi as long as a Pennine differs from an Apennine.<sup>61</sup>

Of the contributors to the *Pavilion*, Grigson, Woods, Medley and West were all from *Axis*. Betjeman and Lewis were associated with *Axis* through friendship, and so the painter and illustrator Edward Bawden was alone in being a newcomer.<sup>62</sup>

Alignments with *Axis* values and priorities were in plentiful evidence in this journal. For example, Lewis's article 'Towards an Earth Culture or the Eclectic Culture of the Transition' acknowledged the lack of 'unity' in the arts and the 'social... and intellectual confusion' as a 'healthy sign' of 'general eclecticism'.<sup>63</sup> But amongst this 'genuine international, or cosmic, culture', Lewis warned that there were grave issues to consider, such as the amount of 'latitude' granted to artistic expression, the 'comparative value of art itself', and the artist's 'responsibility'.<sup>64</sup> Together with his sarcastic observation that debating these issues was invariably from 'a basis comparable to religion', all this accorded well with views held by the *Axis* cohort.<sup>65</sup>

It would be fair to argue that war experiences had exaggerated established views, and Evans's editorial demonstrated a lack of circumspection that had at least been in evidence in 'The Painter's Object'. By now her tone had become proclamatory in her desire that the spirit of English eclecticism be genuine and not politically strategic:

If we are to have a noble eclecticism let us at least be sure that the English elements in that eclecticism are ours, and do not belong to some previous half-digested meal. Let us know what passion and what vision produced them. Let us be able to look at some pretentious modern work and speak of it with the same lively disgust that Ruskin let out, without worrying whether or not it is fashionable – and let us do the same by the work of the past. Above all let us not sit on some, while happily sending others up in balloons – which sometimes burst. Let us for a change use our eyes first and our minds afterwards.<sup>66</sup>

Some ten years later, her fervent explanations in *Axis*, and her exasperated ejaculations in 'The Painter's Object', had been fashioned into a messianic exhortation which contrasted uncomfortably as the introduction, with Lewis's acute and measured intellectual insights.

Ruskin enjoyed exposure in this journal in an excerpt from his "Academy Notes" where he roundly criticised a painting by Millais.<sup>67</sup> Evans's rationale in selecting this feature was I argue, to draw the analogy of Ruskin's perception that industrial England had fostered an art lacking human dignity and 'moral aims', with a similar contemporary situation. I suggest that both Evans's and Piper's art experiences since the end of *Axis* had contributed to their perception of a loss of heart at the centre of the art world, which demanded some galvanising effort to re-establish.<sup>68</sup>

Grigson's 'The Birmingham Art Gallery' responded to Ruskin's criticism in its assessment of the Pre-Raphaelite collection, as the response of English artists to 'a great, new, increasing, rich, self-conscious industrial' era.<sup>69</sup> Grigson might have been speaking of his own time in describing Pre-Raphaelitism as 'English...modern, ...deal[ing] with familiarities, ...claim[ing] a fidelity to nature, to things and to colour as seen both by the artist and [its viewers] and deal[ing] with moralities.'<sup>70</sup> The analogies and connections with 'England's Climate' were irrefutable. Grigson's conclusion about the status of the entire collection was of its lack of a much fuller English 'historical completeness', and he criticised its 'cautious' English modernism, and deplored its lack of 'important French painting'.<sup>71</sup> In a characteristically direct accusation he attributed this situation to the gallery's reliance upon the major constituent of works being 'childish by-products of the act of painting purchased by blind men from blind artists and dumped by will or gift' on

equally 'blind', 'tasteless', or 'spineless' committees.<sup>72</sup> His reference to the 'childish by-products of the act of painting' was laden with insinuations of amateurism and sentimentalism in the making of pictures.

There were further echoes of *Axis* and *The Painter's Object* in the *Pavilion*. Piper's predilection for medieval stained glass was represented by the reproduction of the same copy of medieval glass as headed 'England's Climate', together with three others.<sup>73</sup> But this feature expanded the field in its comparison with 'Victorian glass', in four sumptuous colour reproductions by him, prefaced by a commentary deploring the neglect of 'Victorian work' and predicting a revival of interest.<sup>74</sup> Betjeman's role in preserving Georgian architecture was already stimulating a further interest, in things 'Victorian'.<sup>75</sup> Although not otherwise present in *Axis*, stained glass was important for Piper's aspirations in his own abstract paintings, and in the case of medieval glass, for its testimony to a time in art's history when art was 'full and popular'.<sup>76</sup>

Connections between topographical objects from his 'Prehistory' article were also echoed in Betjeman's article on 'Francis Johnston. Irish Architect'.<sup>77</sup> His opening paragraph, having eulogised over the Irish landscape setting for his buildings, described his experience exploring the sites of Johnston's buildings, as 'the sensation of walking about in an aquatint'.<sup>78</sup> Both Piper and Betjeman were highly conversant with the picturesque as 'Nature' imitating 'Art'. Furthermore, this kind of perception was a piquant allusion to Piper's discussion of representing the experience of viewing objects as 'tak[ing] a journey round a wineglass with Picasso'.<sup>79</sup>

West's 'A Round of Visits. Arles and Vézelay' also expanded the artist's eye in the way that Piper had made his own, by finding himself, on his visit to explore the country of Van Gogh's paintings, following instead the quest of architecture in landscape, and combining visits to the churches in this region.<sup>80</sup>

Medley however, discussed his set designs as the painter's response to spatial design, in his article 'The Designer in the Theatre and Some Productions'.<sup>81</sup> His comparison of popular theatre ('art theatres') and intellectual theatre ('commercial' theatres) recalled the activities of Evans and Piper with the Group Theatre, whilst also reflecting their current and recent work with non-profit making ventures as well as with innovative composers such as Britten, for Glyndebourne.<sup>82</sup>

Other than Lewis's recent paintings, illustrations from an unlikely collection of artists and designers were tenuously linked by a surreal tendency. They were accompanied by illustrated poems and commentaries by E. Bawden, entitled 'Snails for All. Drawn from Daddie's Invaluable Collection', whose surrealism emerged from their childish eccentricity, and exposed the fine edge between triviality and earnestness.<sup>83</sup>

Evans had stated as 'difficult' the project she set herself.<sup>84</sup> She aimed to 'arrive at an unsentimentalised, unfashionable, yet interesting statement' in this journal, avoiding being 'chic' or 'dowdy'.<sup>85</sup> Evidently she had aspired to this in art, revealing throughout *Axis* and *The Painter's Object*, the hazards of not being unselfconsciously absorbed in the business of painting. However, even more revealing for the reader of the *Pavilion*, as a journal that explored the breadth of the arts, was that she was still engaged in referring to 'painting',

and the business of 'righting' the 'wrongs' of inauthentic art, and its blind validation by artists, critics and public alike:

The same chicness (or dowdiness) haunts art. New names are hard to find. New painters suffer from a special kind of modernistic snobbishness; they ignore their weather-beaten antecedents, at any rate in practice, ape successful giants (not realising their ultimate, though often disguised, faithfulness to tradition) and hanker, rather provincially, after a ready-made cosmopolitan eye.<sup>86</sup>

My argument is that whereas the rest of the *Axis* cohort seemed to have moved on and left behind the wrangles of the thirties, Evans alone seemed unwilling to, or unable to. At a time when their works were being recognised, and even celebrated, I suggest she continued to believe that the art critical position she had increasingly declared in *Axis*, remained unappreciated for its prophetic insights.<sup>87</sup>

It is important to reiterate that what is at issue in this thesis is the role that *Axis* played in English modern art. What I am addressing finally is the critical perspective within which *Axis* has been viewed in art history, and not the subsequent achievements of its cohort.

The key secondary sources for locating *Axis* within a history of English modern art are A. Powers's essay 'The Reluctant Romantics: *Axis* Magazine 1935-37', and C. Harrison's essay on Grigson's and Piper's article, entitled 'England's Climate'.<sup>88</sup> There is some congruency of the findings of this thesis with Powers's essay. In general, there is a shared recognition of the particularity of the English experience of modern life, and therefore of the necessarily different texture of its manifestations. As Powers has, so this thesis has also discerned English modern art's 'diagnosis of the *spiritual* problems of Modernity' as the project of the *Axis* group.<sup>89</sup> (my italics)

Powers's understanding of the achievement of the *Axis* cohort accorded in several ways with my own; for example, in their working 'from inductive first principles and from their own personal response to the culture around them', and their romantic position being established 'more by intuition than intention'.<sup>90</sup> This thesis concurs with his acknowledgment of Grigson as a key protagonist, and thereby that the literary texture that Grigson and others contributed to the review was recognised as a significant factor in its position. Other points of congruence are the 'revulsion' amongst the *Axis* cohort over Nicholson's 'active manipulation of art politics'; *Axis*'s achievement of distance from 'the exclusive wing of the Abstractionists and from the opposing Surrealists'; and the recognition as significant, of the diametric opposition in *Axis* 2 of the two pairs of articles on Klee and Kandinsky, and on Nicholson, respectively.<sup>91</sup>

However, Powers interpreted this significance as 'symptomatic' of Evans's editorial tendency to 'relish unresolved contradictions and oxymorons', and concluded that it was 'unimportant.'<sup>92</sup> This thesis has emphasised that contrary to Powers's conclusion, the 'conflict' in *Axis* 2 was the first tangible dissonance between two rapidly evolving philosophies.<sup>93</sup> In addition, whilst it has concurred with Powers's observation of Evans's 'anti-theoretical, empirical position [...] based more on individual artists and their work than on the ill-fitting programmes of different groups', it has sought to locate that position as a pre-eminent one.<sup>94</sup> It has also sought to demonstrate that the merely 'middle position' to which Powers ascribed *Axis*, was insufficient in its evasive connotations, adequately to account for the positively tangible imbrication of their convictions in the contemporary culture of which they were so much a part. *Axis*'s position was not merely 'middle', it was *central* to English contemporary culture.<sup>95</sup>

There were more distinctions to be made between Powers's findings and those of this thesis. The title of his essay implied that the pervasive belief that abstract art (therefore modern art) was 'Classic', meant that the *Axis* cohort were 'reluctant' to own to the romantic influence. Rather, this thesis has aimed to reveal that they did not consciously connect subjective abstraction with a romantic attitude, until their identification of its historical resonances clarified their position, and this was suggested to have occurred sometime in 1936.

Further, in Powers's essay, Read's overwhelming influence over Nicholson and Hepworth (to be superseded by Gabo's) was unappreciated for the resolving effect it had on the *Axis* cohort. Whilst this thesis has recognised Read as a 'significant figure', it has not concurred with Powers in viewing him as 'anxious to avoid the kind of closure in the name of international abstraction' as proselytised by Nicholson and Hepworth.<sup>96</sup> Rather, it has acknowledged Read's ambiguous position in the face of Surrealism and Abstraction, aesthetics and politics. The Read/Nicholson 'international' modern English art was rightly observed by Powers as the framework within whose 'terms and categories' Harrison 'argued his ['wholly negative'] case' against the modernity represented by *Axis*.<sup>97</sup> Harrison's essay now needs to be exposed as misrepresenting the generic, 'cosmopolitan' modernism, as the singular English modern art when it was only a fraction of modern achievement in England, and as effectively silencing other English modernisms in its own art history.<sup>98</sup>

By focussing on Grigson's and Piper's article Harrison drew conclusions about the entire achievement of *Axis*, and in placing *Axis* into a competitive situation with the Hampstead

art *milieu*, he found it representing art ‘for the greater part historically vacuous’.<sup>99</sup> His assessment was based on a preconception of ‘modern’ that did not pertain to 1930s England. Harrison’s earlier work on *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939* has been indispensable as the definitive volume for nearly a quarter of a century.<sup>100</sup> But, as evident in this more recent essay, his position remained rooted in the canon of that time, and has perpetuated a view of *Axis*’s insignificance even in its *own* day, its failure to represent abstract art, and its regressive attitude towards modern art and life. This thesis has aimed to reveal the situation to have been more complex than that implied in Harrison’s somewhat blunt assertions, articulated as it was by subtleties of difference and ambiguities of meaning, concerning understandings of ‘modern’, ‘abstract’, and the role of history in contemporary experience. Changes brought about by technology were not seamlessly incorporated into contemporary life, and that contemporary life was not merely an urban life at the cutting edge. *Axis* exposed this untidy but realistic condition.

Harrison’s claim that *Axis* was ‘determinedly internationalist’ from its first to its sixth issue, was a misapprehension which has fuelled the general perception that it reversed its thinking in the last two issues.<sup>101</sup> This thesis has sought to prove that this was by no means the case, and that what has been viewed as a change of direction or of priorities, was in reality the same percipient trajectory which, gathering momentum in the wake of numerous events over its time, was ultimately demonstrated as a resolute opposition of direction to constructivist ideology.<sup>102</sup> It was not a sudden recapitulation. Its cohort resolved the tension of past and present priorities by holding to values it perceived as inherent in English painting, whilst being engaged with current international art developments whose influences were to be absorbed *into* the tradition, rather than being perceived as a departure *from* it.



Harrison's inference was that under this assumed recapitulation, *Axis* apparently submitted, in the face of the successful, radical, utopian ideology which was Constructivism, to a 'drawing back' into 'landscape', 'empiric[ism]', 'romanticism towards the past' and a 'moderation sometimes associated with a virtuous amateurism'.<sup>103</sup> Whilst landscape, empiricism, romanticism, and history were precisely the driving forces of its cohort, this thesis has aimed above all, to reveal that those concerns were *inherent* in the history of the visual culture of which they *and* the English Constructivists were now part. To interpret the transforming work of the *Axis* cohort of their artistic heritage as a 'drawing back', instead of a grappling with the complexity of contemporary English life, merely emphasises the depth of Harrison's misapprehension of the predicates of *Axis* from the outset. Whilst his contribution to the canon has been indispensable for its staking of the ground of English modern art, it has unfortunately silenced equally significant aspects of modern art in England, in its insistence upon a *few* artists. They were those who were fully absorbed by continental developments rather than utilising them in the development of their own directions. The result has been that whereas the significance of *Circle* was its demonstration that English art *was* part of an international modern movement, precisely nothing has been recognised until recently, of the ongoing critical space that *Axis* provided for contemporary discourse on abstract art in its broader aspects, and its implicitness in the English experience of modernity.<sup>104</sup> Yet without that space, *Circle* might not have existed, initiated as it was as a statement of dissent from the broader discourse of *Axis*, and from that of Surrealism. The relative silence concerning the first journal in England on radical art, has obscured the understanding of what was viewed as 'abstract' art and its relation to the concepts of the 'modern', and of its imbrication in 1930s English life. This has been

inestimably detrimental to the understanding, and therefore to the status of, English modern art in general.

Harrison's status attributed to modern practices as represented or implied by *Axis* (other than Constructivism) was that they were 'second-rate', engendering the 'second discourse'.<sup>105</sup> This attitude was predicated upon the primacy of geometrical non-figurative abstract art, as proselytised by *Abstraction Création*. But this thesis has sought to reveal that Hélicon, Nicholson and Hepworth had rejected *Abstraction Création* before the conception of *Axis*. The assumption on the part of Harrison and others, that *Axis* was to have been an equivalent of *Abstraction-Création* the journal, and that its cohort failed to 'catch[ing]-up' with the 'avant-gardism' and 'cosmpolitanism' in Hampstead, was therefore irredeemably wide of the mark.<sup>106</sup> *Axis* was predicated upon 'english alive'(sic), which in reality embraced a range of attitudes as foreshadowed in Unit One and the 7&5 Society before it was purged.<sup>107</sup> The problem for Nicholson in his crusade for geometric non-figuration in confrontation of those attitudes, contributed to the problem of defining 'abstract' in England. The reality of that situation needs establishing as such in the history of English modern art. As a review, *Axis* exposed this insoluble tension between the private experience and the public significance of communicating modern life through its own abstracted forms. In broader terms, *Axis* exemplified the tensions of 'relating past and present', and of the 'rift between self and world', as cited by Corbett in his discussion of the duality of modern experience.<sup>108</sup> The apparently unifying ideology and appearance of Constructivist art had masked the tensions of the private, individual experience. To restrict the history of modern art in England to Constructive art, merely constricted the meaning of 'modern' within a philosophy and idiom unrepresentative of the greater proportion of

contemporary beliefs and practices. This thesis has sought to reveal the resistance of the *Axis* cohort to such rigidity from the first issue.

The propositions of the last *Axis* which were drawn from history, contextualised *and* demonstrated abstraction's implicitness in all representation, and illuminated the lived condition of modernity as characterised by a 'new consciousness', represented as the continuity of human experience.<sup>109</sup> Whilst Harrison rightly acknowledged that 'normal British art was...dealt with in different terms and to different people, and ....evaluated by reference to an unbroken insular tradition' his inference was that diversity was weak, and the use of historical subject matter and literary metaphor in contemporary art discourse was nostalgic, sentimental, and introverted.<sup>110</sup> But as we have seen, *Axis* remained uncompromising in its motivation by the contemporary pictorial transformation of past achievements, and not by any infatuation with the past as the past. At the time, it was the fact of having a subject ('object') at all as the point of departure for artistic expression which was at issue, not the fact of it being a certain *kind* of subject favoured at a certain period in history.

*Axis participated in an international context rather than pretending to a cosmopolitan identity, which was clearly not the case in England, even though the influx of political émigrés in the Hampstead art milieu from 1935 created a small, temporary, cosmopolitan community. The insularity of which *Axis* has been accused was merely a reality of life in the view of its cohort, and was embraced by them as positive fact. Excepting the matter of two or three years of a quasi cosmopolitan Hampstead, the majority of English artists could barely be viewed realistically as anything *other* than of insular cultural experience with continental influences and, even in the company of those other-cultural individuals, that*

influence underlay their constructivist solutions, as this thesis has argued.<sup>111</sup> A further point is that reality for the *Axis* cohort was rural as well as metropolitan and intimately local as well as cosmopolitan. Steele's identification of the reliance of 'metropolitan culture' for its vitality, through its 'continual[ly] rejuvenat[ion]' by the energy of external (regional) 'immigration', becomes superbly exemplified in *Axis*'s singularly fruitful contribution to, and dissemination of, the abstract art debate.<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, Evans's and Piper's private experience of modern life represented Clark's '*achieved distance*' not only literally, but like Nash metaphorically, which as Clark argued, was 'crucial' for the innovatory basis of a modern expression, in its resistance of any pressure to suppress authentic experience.<sup>113</sup> This thesis has argued that Piper's recourse to his predecessors was innovatory in his regard for their abstract qualities as much as their subject matter. The point is that the 'modern' in art was communicated just as legitimately by a variety of practices, of which non-figurative abstraction was only one. Modernism was not the sole prerogative of the Constructivists. To aspire to *be* modern was not to be *necessarily* modern, and this was the conviction of the *Axis* cohort.

As Harrison stated, 'England's Climate' did indeed imply that abstract art was 'devoid of life' in an 'assertive' tone.<sup>114</sup> In general, *Axis* performed a subtle cultural role and a positively critical role for progressive English art. By directly responding to articles and essays currently in the national and media press, and to the radio and television, it indicated the topicality of subjects to which abstract artists could aspire and by which they could be inspired. It never lost its anchorage in the commonplace interests of the time, and it proposed resolutions of the problems with 'modern' art that Nash had tackled from the early years of the decade, which were generally acknowledged as the interrelationship of 'nature', 'life' and 'art'. This pragmatic approach to abstract art reflected, in 'England's

Climate', in examples from English cultural history, was simply irreconcilable with Harrison's view that Grigson's and Piper's article was 'marked by that confidence about judgements of taste within the wider culture of art which, in England at least, carries the stamp of a class.'<sup>115</sup> That Piper's researches were concerned with 'taste' can be categorically denounced by studying the exploratory nature of his work at that time. As this thesis has aimed to show, it was Nicholson's work that was recognised for its 'admirable' 'taste' in its own time.<sup>116</sup>

The political colour which Harrison attributed to *Axis*, was as wide of the mark in this Post-modern era as the accusations made of the English Constructivists as bolshevist were, in the thirties. This is not to say that *subsequent* developments did not identify the Pipers as upholding stronger conservative priorities, thereby exemplifying Williams's 'progressive, classed, modernity', but this was not the case during *Axis*, which is the issue here.<sup>117</sup> Evans and Piper were demonstrably anti-totalitarian, liberal, and not radical. *Axis* constituted the site of separation of values which only *latterly* became concerns of the English Constructivists, namely the preoccupation with subject matter and atmosphere, and the desire to disassociate themselves from the dogma of a political ideology.<sup>118</sup> (In his declaration of the 'historically vacuous' art that *Axis* represented, Harrison did not equally refer to the subsequent recapitulations of those Constructivists to a significant proportion of *Axis* values.<sup>119</sup>) At the time, contemporary commentators on the left recognised the *entire* abstract art project as 'bourgeois', as did the Surrealists.<sup>120</sup> It was a time of contradictory and ambiguous loyalties, and not as strategically pure as Harrison's analysis suggested.

But an important aspect of Harrison's inference needs to be acknowledged. Some of what was perceived as 'wrong' with modern art by Holme, the editor of *Studio*, were still

pertinent to the *Axis* cohort, which indicated its moderate tendency.<sup>121</sup> Nash as we have seen, had been disturbed about the reactionary nature of Holmes's personal views. Nevertheless, some three years later, the very same concerns reappeared as *issues* for *Axis*. Identified as significant were: the assumption that internationalism was perceived as central to contemporary practice; that art was emanating from theory and not practice; that it claimed an intellectual superiority; that there was disagreement about the definition of professionalism in the artist; and that the status of painting might be viewed solely as decoration. But in tackling these issues in the pages of *Axis*, in the context of its broad scope of international and English modern art, its cohort's own attitude was clearly removed from the deep conservatism with which Holme had transformed his *Studio* editorials into a form of unhealthy and reactionary nationalism.

Little of the centrality of painting as a practice was mentioned by Harrison. Since it conveyed the very values that the *Axis* cohort sought to implement their 'new consciousness' and new language, it was a significant omission. As is still often the case, their recourse to art developments in history which Harrison identified as 'nostalgic individualism' was, as this thesis has aimed to demonstrate, paramount to renewing the tradition.<sup>122</sup> Their view that abstract art 'with its life-lines to Cubism or primitive painting or sculpture or pre-history or Cézanne or Surrealism, was a means of dealing with the remnants of the object, or of nature, left to us', and that 'In the technical and emotional exploration of shapes left by the analysed object, there is real growth and life', was interpreted by Harrison as a *despair* on the part of Evans and Piper that there was nothing else, or nowhere else for them to go.<sup>123</sup> They had 'come to see Nicholson and Hepworth as the virtual victors' of the 'internecine war', who had 'discovered a route to the future of art', leaving Evans and Piper to 'struggle with the fragments of the ...object and the

remnants of nature in the old world.’<sup>124</sup> Evans’s and Piper’s belief in the present as the only reality, and the importance of ‘struggle[s]’ with its conditions, constituted the very fact of authentic expression, as was often implied. The only ‘victor[y]’ which Nicholson and Hepworth appear to have won, was that of the moral high ground, in the claim to social change to which constructivist ideology purported.

This thesis has argued that it was the self-consciousness of political strategies and public proclamations, and the accusations of treachery (that Piper in particular experienced) which the *Axis* cohort had denounced for being so removed from the business of painting. It was the synthesis of modern continental developments with British, which had nourished a contemporary native expression. Nash’s insistence on citing the responses to academism by the Pre-Raphaelites was, similarly, not for his nostalgia for medieval or literary subject matter, but indicated his understanding of historical context – a painter’s recognition of innovation and true contemporaneity – which was demonstrated in the form of modern progress founded on historical example, and an astute response to a changing market condition.<sup>125</sup> The *Axis* cohort were in touch with their discipline and its interrelationship with the times.

In conclusion, *Axis* disclosed the effects of the experience of modernity in 1930s England. It revealed it as a set of individual tensions over competing beliefs, values and loyalties at a time of national vulnerability and cultural sensitivity. These were universally experienced conditions, and those who worked *with* them, struggling from within them for a fullness of meaning, with flawed and groping intuitions, were no less ‘modern’ than those who fastidiously negotiated a predetermined path towards a perfect resolution in a future world. The *Axis* cohort believed that the directness of response to conditions of living – the *fact* of

being attuned by a 'new consciousness' to an object or place, the *fact* of the physical possibilities of a medium, and the *fact* of a tradition from which to draw elements for a new language – provided in itself the very qualities which were modern in art, and that no other attitude or process could achieve that.<sup>126</sup> The denial of those facts was for them a retreat from the reality of the present, with its visual outcome being merely an *illustration* of modernity in iconic form. In terms of the art historical category of 'international modernism', what *Axis* came to represent was what its cohort wanted, a living tradition. It represented, as they had exemplified through Blake and the Pre-Raphaelites, an anti-academic, non-conformist, generically modern English expression of contemporary life.

As a way forward, the proposition of Dianne Sachko Macleod, that there was 'little agreement...about the fundamental question of aesthetic value' in Post-Modern art historical scholarship, was particularly helpful for expanding upon this thesis.<sup>127</sup> In her article 'The Dialectics of Modernism and English Art' she proposed the Post-Modern awareness of the grounding of 'universalizing concepts' in the 'multiple exigencies and ambitions of daily life' as the 'contrast to the abstract and intellectual realm of traditional iconology'.<sup>128</sup>

She implemented her proposition in addressing the significance of formal analysis by enquiring into the making and consumption of art in nineteenth-century England. The Pre-Raphaelites she argued, not only adopted the two-dimensional qualities of Fra Angelico, but in doing so 'embraced the spiritual qualities they perceived to be embedded in his practice' and 'which they, in turn, attempted to instil in contemporary art'.<sup>129</sup> This could be seen as analogous with the beliefs of the *Axis* cohort as representative of modern romantics, and demands a similar historical approach.<sup>130</sup> It needs stating that Macleod was examining



market implications as part of her proposition, which has not been central to my thesis. However, it was the texture of a form of artistic progressiveness or radicalism which she proposed, that resonated with the findings of this thesis on English modern art. Her assertion that the Pre-Raphaelites ‘placed themselves within, rather than in opposition to, a continuing history of art’, begged the question of whether this then made them ‘regressive’ or ‘progressive’.<sup>131</sup> Addressing this question to the *Axis* cohort, this thesis’s conclusion accorded with her response: ‘they were both. They were avant-garde in defiance of orthodoxy and in their manipulations of the picture plane, but conventional in their oracular expectations of the canon.’<sup>132</sup> Together with the admiring French critics (since the Pre-Raphaelites were more respected abroad), they ‘believed that tradition was the mother of invention and that originality could be born from crossbreeding with the past.’<sup>133</sup> More specifically, Macleod called for closer attention to the ‘dialectic between aesthetics and material circumstances’, namely the ‘discursive interplay of agendas *internal* to artistic practice with indigenous values located in nationalist cultural fields.’(my italics)<sup>134</sup>

Nash’s inclusion of the Pre-Raphaelite pictorial achievements in his *Unit 1* letter was entirely justified as the historical context for English modern art. In his comparison he was effectively promoting what he saw as an inherent *avant garde* stance within English art in 1933 as resonant with a moment in its history. England’s historical climate meant that Unit One did not represent a revolutionary stance, but at its outset it consisted of the whole gamut of English radicalism in its attitudes, and Nicholson’s and Hepworth’s withdrawal only served to strengthen percipient directions of the group, of which *Axis* came to represent one. Nash’s intuitions were therefore sound, and prophetic.

It is therefore no longer illuminating to refer uncritically to the category of 'international modernism' or even 'modernism'. Art history needs to attend to the comprehensive meanings of the experience of modernity in England as a means of identifying the 'modern' in a broad range of practices. Arguments about 'insular[ity]', 'gentrified art', 'nostalgi[a]', and 'defect[ion]' are not helpful in understanding how artists sought through the medium of paint, a clarity of expression which resolved the tension they felt between their private experience and their public expression of modernity.



NOTES

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AXIS IN PERSPECTIVE

- <sup>1</sup> BBC Television. 10 January according to O. Levinson, *'Quality and Experiment': the Prints of John Piper* (London, 1996), p.177, and 19 June according to D. Fraser Jenkins, *John Piper*, exh.cat., (London, Tate Gallery, 1983), p.44.
- <sup>2</sup> See also chapter 5, pp.253, 256-58.
- <sup>3</sup> pp.71, 73.
- <sup>4</sup> J. Piper, 'The Nautical Style', *Architectural Review* (January 1938), p.1.
- <sup>5</sup> J. Piper, 'Prehistory from the Air', *Axis* 8 (early Winter 1937), p.5.
- <sup>6</sup> Entitled: John Piper Paintings & Collages.
- <sup>7</sup> Probably the close alliance of Nash with Piper at this time was instrumental.
- <sup>8</sup> There were 31 works in all, including abstract oils, landscape collages and set designs for Stephen Spender's *Trial of a Judge*; P. Nash, 'John Piper', *London Bulletin* (May 1938), p.10; Jenkins, *Piper*, p.44.
- <sup>9</sup> See chapter 5, p.258; chapter 6, pp.285-86; Nash, 'Piper', p.10.
- <sup>10</sup> Manifested in the images of Dymchurch, from 1919, and in Swanage's 'Surrealism' from 1934.
- <sup>11</sup> 1 July, p.41; 28 July, pp.180-81.
- <sup>12</sup> Piper, 'Abstraction', p.41.
- <sup>13</sup> See chapter 6, pp.310-12.
- <sup>14</sup> See chapter 5, pp.258-59.
- <sup>15</sup> M. Piper, 'Back in the Thirties', *Art & Literature* (Winter 1965), p.149.
- <sup>16</sup> M. Piper, 'the Thirties', p.149.
- <sup>17</sup> M. Piper, 'the Thirties', p.149.
- <sup>18</sup> Jenkins, *Piper, Forties*, p.18. See also chapter 5, pp.258-60.
- <sup>19</sup> (London, 1939).
- <sup>20</sup> Piper had lessons at the Royal College of Art at this time, for aquatint and etching. Levinson, *'Quality'*, p.27; for a full description of this book see Levinson, *'Quality'*, pp.44-47.

- <sup>21</sup> Letter from Piper to M. Sadler, 22 October 1939. TGA 8221.2.132; 'Recording Britain' was 'organised by [K.] Clark and the Pilgrim Trust'. R. Ingrams and J. Piper, *Piper's Places. John Piper in England & Wales* (London, 1983), p.72.
- <sup>22</sup> The War Artists Advisory Committee was set up by Clark in September 1939.
- <sup>23</sup> See chapter 5, p.261 and n.110.
- <sup>24</sup> J. Piper in G. Grigson and J. Piper, 'England's Climate', *Axis* 7 (Autumn 1936), p.6.
- <sup>25</sup> 1 February 1940, 216-18, Piper contributed his own photographs; *Architectural Review* (November 1940), 131-34, Piper contributed 8 illustrations. He had read S. Kitson's *The Life of John Sell Cotman* (London, 1937), in 1938. He visited Sadler, with whom he had a sustained friendship, to see his once again his collection of Cotmans, taking Betjeman with him. Letters from Piper to Sadler, 22 October 1939. TGA 8221.2.132, and 3 September 1940. TGA 8221.2.133.
- <sup>26</sup> J. Piper, 'Towers in the Fens', *Architectural Review* (November 1940), reproduced in Jenkins, *Piper, Forties*, pp.51-53.
- <sup>27</sup> Nash and Piper headed the list of 'Neo-Romantic Artists' in M. Yorke, *The Spirit of Place. Nine Neo-Romantic Artists and their times* (London, 1988); referred to as the 'revival of romanticism and the neo-picturesque' in S. J. Checkland, *Ben Nicholson. The Vicious Circles of his Life and Art* (2000), p.170; Harrison distinguished between the "neo-picturesque" interests' of Piper, Grigson and Betjeman, and the "neo-romantic" work of Nash and Graham Sutherland' in C. Harrison, *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939* (London & Bloomington, 1981), p.322; acknowledged and discussed in Harrison's categories by F. Spalding, *British Art Since 1900* (London 1986), pp.128-134; together with Grigson and Sutherland, and discussed as exhausted after the war in M. Garlake, *New Art New World. British Art in Postwar Society* (New Haven & London, 1998), pp.86-92; Piper as 'reconstructing' 'neo-romantic topography' in A. Powers, 'The Reluctant Romantics: *Axis* Magazine 1935-37' and amongst Sutherland, Evans, Grigson 'and others' as Neo-Romanticist in S. Smiles, 'Equivalents for the Megaliths: Prehistory and English Culture, 1920-50' both in D. Peters Corbett, Y. Holt and F. Russell (eds.), *The Geographies of Englishness. Landscape and the National Past 1880-1940* (New Haven & London, 2002), pp.216, 269; Nicholson's 'profitable relationship with', J. Lewison, *Ben Nicholson*, exh. cat., (London, Tate Gallery, 1993), pp.54-62.
- <sup>28</sup> J. Piper, 'Picasso at the Tate', *Axis* 1 (January 1935), pp.27-28.
- <sup>29</sup> S. Spender, 'A Talk with John Piper', *Encounter* (May 1963), p.59.
- <sup>30</sup> Spender, 'A Talk', pp.59-60.
- <sup>31</sup> (London).
- <sup>32</sup> Piper, *British*, p.7.

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- <sup>33</sup> Piper, *British*, p.7.
- <sup>34</sup> As expressed in Piper, 'Picasso', p.28.
- <sup>35</sup> M. Piper, 'the Thirties', p.147.
- <sup>36</sup> Piper, *British*, p.46.
- <sup>37</sup> 12 January 1943. TGA 7050.1076.
- <sup>38</sup> Letter from Piper to Nash, 3 September 1940. TGA 7050.33.
- <sup>39</sup> Piper to Nash, TGA 7050.33.
- <sup>40</sup> Piper to Nash, TGA 7050.1076.
- <sup>41</sup> M. Piper, 'the Thirties', p.147; Autumn 1936, 5-9.
- <sup>42</sup> (London, 1942).
- <sup>43</sup> J. Piper and G. Grigson, *Signature* (November 1937), 33-41; 1-16. Grigson devoted much time to Palmer over the next ten years, culminating in his volume *Samuel Palmer. The Visionary Years* (London, 1947). The same year he published another anthology, *The Harp of Aeolus, and other essays on art, literature & nature* (London, 1947).
- <sup>44</sup> *New Verse. An anthology* (London, 1939); *Several Observations. Thirty five poems* (London, 1939).
- <sup>45</sup> He later described the attitude of *New Verse* to Surrealist poetry as 'half-hearted', and that he was 'being fashionable, not critical', concluding that Surrealism was more appropriate for painting: 'It didn't go very well into English, or with England of the Thirties.' G. Grigson, *The Contrary View. Glimpses of Fudge and Gold* (London, 1974), p.236.
- <sup>46</sup> Grigson, *Romantics*, p.viii.
- <sup>47</sup> Grigson, *Romantics*, pp.6-9.
- <sup>48</sup> Grigson, *Romantics*, p.iv. One of Grigson's more unusual publications was written and compiled under the 'exploratory, dictatorial vision of my friends John Piper and Percy Hennell', and was conceived and designed by Piper, as one of his series entitled *Studies in Composition and Tradition*. (Hennell was the colour photographer.) G. Grigson, *An English Farmhouse and its Neighbourhood* (London, 1948).
- <sup>49</sup> G. Grigson, *Henry Moore* (Harmondsworth, 1943).
- <sup>50</sup> G. Grigson, *Recollections. Mainly of Writers & Artists* (London, 1984), pp.160-63.

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- <sup>51</sup> For a detailed examination of Piper's wartime work see D. Fraser Jenkins, *Piper, Forties*.
- <sup>52</sup> A. Causey, *Paul Nash*, (Oxford, 1980), p.305. His series of photographs, drawings and paintings emanating from visits to Cowley aircraft dump grew immediately from these ideas. Causey, *Nash*, pp.312-15.
- <sup>53</sup> *Counterpoint* magazine, Oxford, 1944. This essay was published posthumously by 'his friends' the year following his death. *Aerial Flowers* (Oxford 1947). See Causey, *Nash*, p.504.
- <sup>54</sup> Letter from Piper to Nash, TGA 7050.1076.
- <sup>55</sup> (London, 1946); M. Evans, 'Introduction', *The Pavilion*, I (London, 1946), p.2.
- <sup>56</sup> Evans, 'Introduction', p.1.
- <sup>57</sup> Despite Evans's acknowledgement of Woods for the 'appearance' of the 'book', the adoption of so much of Betjeman's ideas suggests to me that Wood was directed to refer to the *Architectural Review* during his incumbency, for guidance.
- <sup>58</sup> For a discussion of this see K. Hiscock, 'Modernity and "English" Tradition. Betjeman at *The Architectural Review*', *Journal of Design History* (September 2000), 199-200.
- <sup>59</sup> 'Snails for All', *Pavilion*, I (1946), 39-48.
- <sup>60</sup> Evans, 'Introduction', p.2.
- <sup>61</sup> Evans, 'Introduction', pp.1, 2.
- <sup>62</sup> Grigson's friendship with Lewis was lifelong, and he published *A Master of Our Time. A study of Wyndham Lewis* (London, 1951). Lewis died in 1957.
- <sup>63</sup> 3-12; Lewis, 'Towards', p.3.
- <sup>64</sup> Lewis, 'Towards', p.4.
- <sup>65</sup> Lewis, 'Towards', p.4.
- <sup>66</sup> Evans, 'Introduction', pp.1-2.
- <sup>67</sup> J. Ruskin, "Academy Notes" verbatim in 'Outspokenness in 1874', *Pavilion*, p.69.
- <sup>68</sup> Ruskin, "Academy", p.69.
- <sup>69</sup> *Pavilion*, 71-76; p.71.

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- <sup>70</sup> Grigson, 'Birmingham', p.71.
- <sup>71</sup> Grigson, 'Birmingham', p.73.
- <sup>72</sup> Grigson, 'Birmingham', p.73.
- <sup>73</sup> *Axis 7*, p. 4; *Pavilion*, Pl.2.
- <sup>74</sup> Author unstated, but most likely Piper, untitled, *Pavilion*, p.13.
- <sup>75</sup> The Georgian Group was inaugurated in 1937, Betjeman played a prominent role. See C. Lycett Green (ed.), *John Betjeman. Letters I, 1926-1951* (London, 1994), pp.178-79. He was the co-founder of the Victorian Society in 1958. C. Lycett Green (ed.), *John Betjeman. Letters II, 1951-1984* (London, 1995), p.100.
- <sup>76</sup> A photograph taken by Piper of a display of his work and objects in his studio around 1936 shows his copies of medieval stained glass interspersed with his vertical abstract paintings. Jenkins, *Piper, Forties*, p.6. For a brief discussion of the significance of this picture see D. Jenkins in D. Jenkins and F. Spalding, *John Piper in the 1930s. Abstraction on the Beach*, exh. cat., (London, Dulwich Picture Gallery, 2003), p.122.
- <sup>77</sup> *Pavilion*, 21-38. Betjeman had spent the war years as cultural attaché in Dublin, during which time he much have executed research on Johnston.
- <sup>78</sup> J. Betjeman, 'Francis Johnston. Irish Architect', *Pavilion*, p.21.
- <sup>79</sup> J. Piper, 'Prehistory from the Air', *Axis 8* (early Winter 1937), p.7.
- <sup>80</sup> *Pavilion*, 49-55.
- <sup>81</sup> *Pavilion*, 57-60.
- <sup>82</sup> See biographical entries in Jenkins, *Piper*, pp.44-45.
- <sup>83</sup> *Pavilion*, 39-48.
- <sup>84</sup> Evans, 'Introduction', p.2.
- <sup>85</sup> Evans, 'Introduction', p.2.
- <sup>86</sup> Evans, 'Introduction', p.2.
- <sup>87</sup> One further factor is significant. As if to pre-empt (possibly customary) accusations of an insular remoteness, she organised abstracts of the key texts to be inserted in the back of the journal. French and Spanish versions internationalised the English (or 'perhaps we should say British') vision for the contemplation of a broader public.



- <sup>88</sup> In D. Peters Corbett, Y. Holt and F. Russell (eds.), *The Geographies of Englishness. Landscape and the National Past 1880-1940* (New Haven & London, 2002), 249-274; in B. Allen (ed.), *Towards a Modern Art World* (London & New Haven, 1995), 207-25.
- <sup>89</sup> Powers, 'The Reluctant', p.260.
- <sup>90</sup> Powers, 'The Reluctant', p.249.
- <sup>91</sup> Powers, 'The Reluctant', pp.255, 256.
- <sup>92</sup> Powers, 'The Reluctant', p.257.
- <sup>93</sup> Powers, 'The Reluctant', p.257.
- <sup>94</sup> Powers, 'The Reluctant', p.261.
- <sup>95</sup> Powers, 'The Reluctant', p.261.
- <sup>96</sup> Powers, 'The Reluctant', pp.251, 251.
- <sup>97</sup> Powers, 'The Reluctant', pp.249, 249.
- <sup>98</sup> Harrison, 'England's', p.211.
- <sup>99</sup> Harrison, 'England's', p.220.
- <sup>100</sup> (London & Bloomington, 1981).
- <sup>101</sup> Harrison, 'England's', p.211.
- <sup>102</sup> Harrison has not been alone in arguing a change of attitude in *Axis*. In his essay A. Powers recognised change in the last two *Axis* issues, suggesting the prominence of 'England' became 'more active'. 'The Reluctant', p.261; a 'shift in stance...a loss of nerve' was perceived by M. Yorke in 'John Piper' in *The Spirit of Place. Nine Neo-Romantic Artists and their times* (London, 1988); J. Lewison saw that *Axis* 'renounced its position in favour of a return to landscape painting and incipient Neo-Romanticism' in *Ben Nicholson* exh. cat., (London, Tate Gallery, 1993), p.43.
- <sup>103</sup> Harrison, 'England's', pp.219, 216.
- <sup>104</sup> Closer attention to *Axis* has more recently featured in D. Fraser Jenkins and F. Spalding, *John Piper in the 1930s. Abstraction on the Beach*, exh. cat., (London, Dulwich Picture Gallery, 2003); briefly in S. Smiles, 'Equivalents for the Megaliths: Prehistory and English Culture, 1920-50', and the essay by Powers cited above, both in Corbett, Holt and Russell (eds.), *Geographies*, pp.213-14, 249-74.
- <sup>105</sup> Harrison, 'England's', pp.220, 216.

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- <sup>106</sup> Harrison, 'England's', p.212.
- <sup>107</sup> Letter from Helion to Nicholson quoted in Lewison, *Nicholson*, p.44. See chapter 2, pp.96-97.
- <sup>108</sup> Corbett, *The Modernity*, p.13.
- <sup>109</sup> J. Piper, 'Prehistory from the Air', *Axis* 8 (early Winter 1937), 4-8.
- <sup>110</sup> Harrison, 'England's', p.211.
- <sup>111</sup> See chapter 4, pp.221-222 and chapter 7, pp.332-33.
- <sup>112</sup> Steele, *Alfred Orage*, p.9.
- <sup>113</sup> Clark, 'On the Social History of Art', cited in Steele, *Alfred Orage*, p.14.
- <sup>114</sup> Harrison, 'England's', p.214.
- <sup>115</sup> Harrison, 'England's', p.214.
- <sup>116</sup> Grigson, 'Comment on England', *Axis* 1 (January 1935), p.10.
- <sup>117</sup> Williams, 'The Bloomsbury Fraction', cited in Steele, *Alfred Orage*, pp.16-17.
- <sup>118</sup> See C. Stephens, "'St. Ives" Artists and Landscape' (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Sussex, 1996), p.160.
- <sup>119</sup> Harrison, 'England's', p.220.
- <sup>120</sup> For example, A. Blunt, 'The "Realism" Quarrel', *Left Review* (April 1937), p.170.
- <sup>121</sup> See chapter 1 for a discussion of these articles.
- <sup>122</sup> Harrison, 'England's', p.219.
- <sup>123</sup> M. Piper, 'the Thirties', p.148; M. Evans, 'Dead or Alive', *Axis* 1 (January 1935), p.4.
- <sup>124</sup> Harrison, 'England's', p.218; M. Piper, 'the Thirties', p.147.
- <sup>125</sup> P. Nash quoted in H. Read (ed.), *Unit 1* (London, 1934), pp.10-11.
- <sup>126</sup> Piper, 'Prehistory', p.5.
- <sup>127</sup> 'The Dialectics of Modernism and English Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol.35 (January, 1995), p.1.
- <sup>128</sup> Macleod, 'Dialectics', p.5.

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<sup>129</sup> Macleod, 'Dialectics', p.7.

<sup>130</sup> Powers's title 'The Reluctant Romantics' does not reflect the feelings of the *Axis* cohort towards being romantic.

<sup>131</sup> Macleod, 'Dialectics', p.7.

<sup>132</sup> Macleod, 'Dialectics', pp.7-8.

<sup>133</sup> Macleod, 'Dialectics', p.8.

<sup>134</sup> Macleod, 'Dialectics', p.9.

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**PLATES**

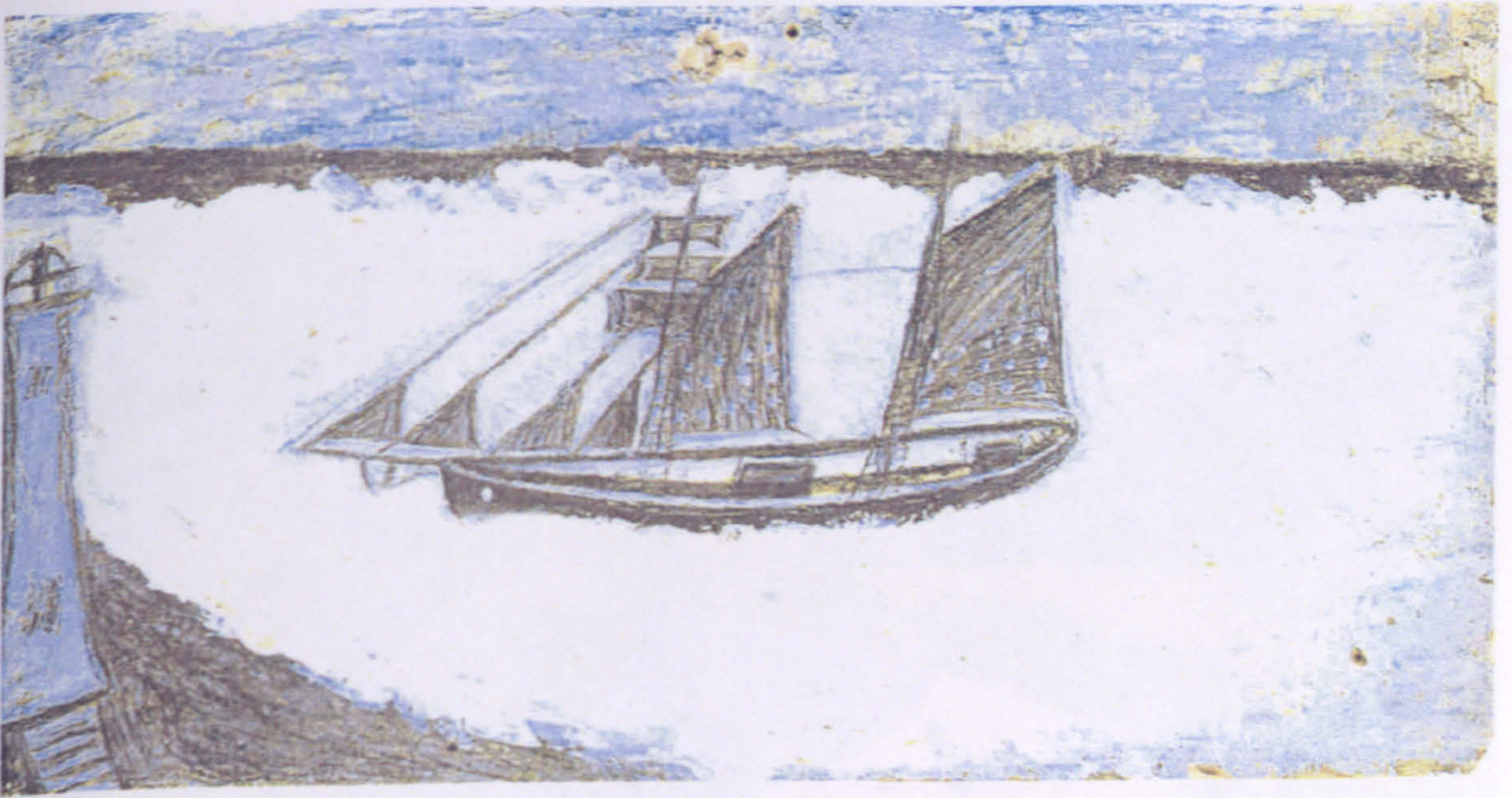




1. Nicholson. *Au Chat Botté*, 1932



2. Nash. *Month of March*, 1929



3. Wallis. *The Schooner and the Lighthouse*, 1925-28



4. Wood. *Le Phare*, 1929



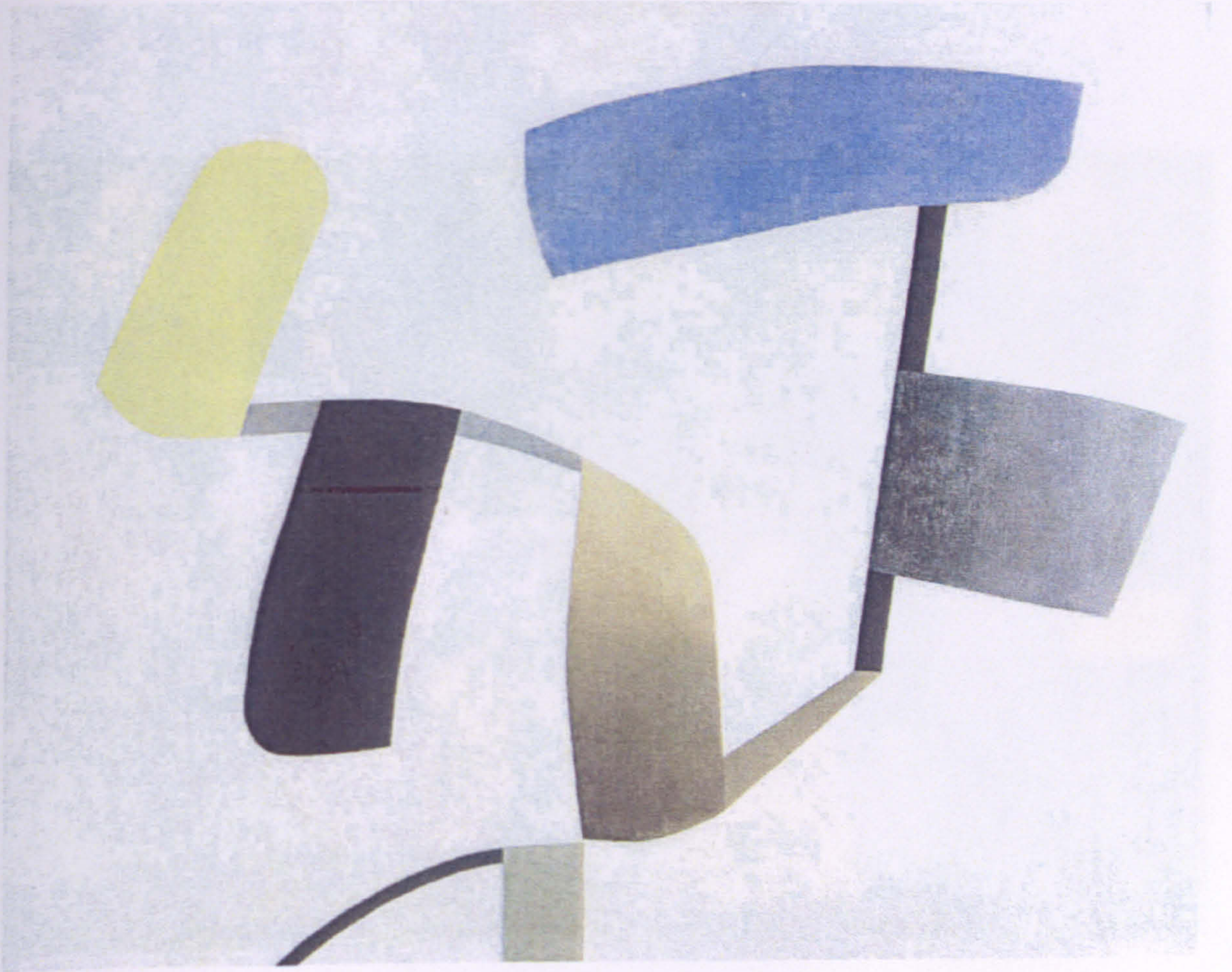
5. Nicholson. *Porthmeor Beach, St. Ives*, 1928



6. Nash. *Event on the Downs*, 1934

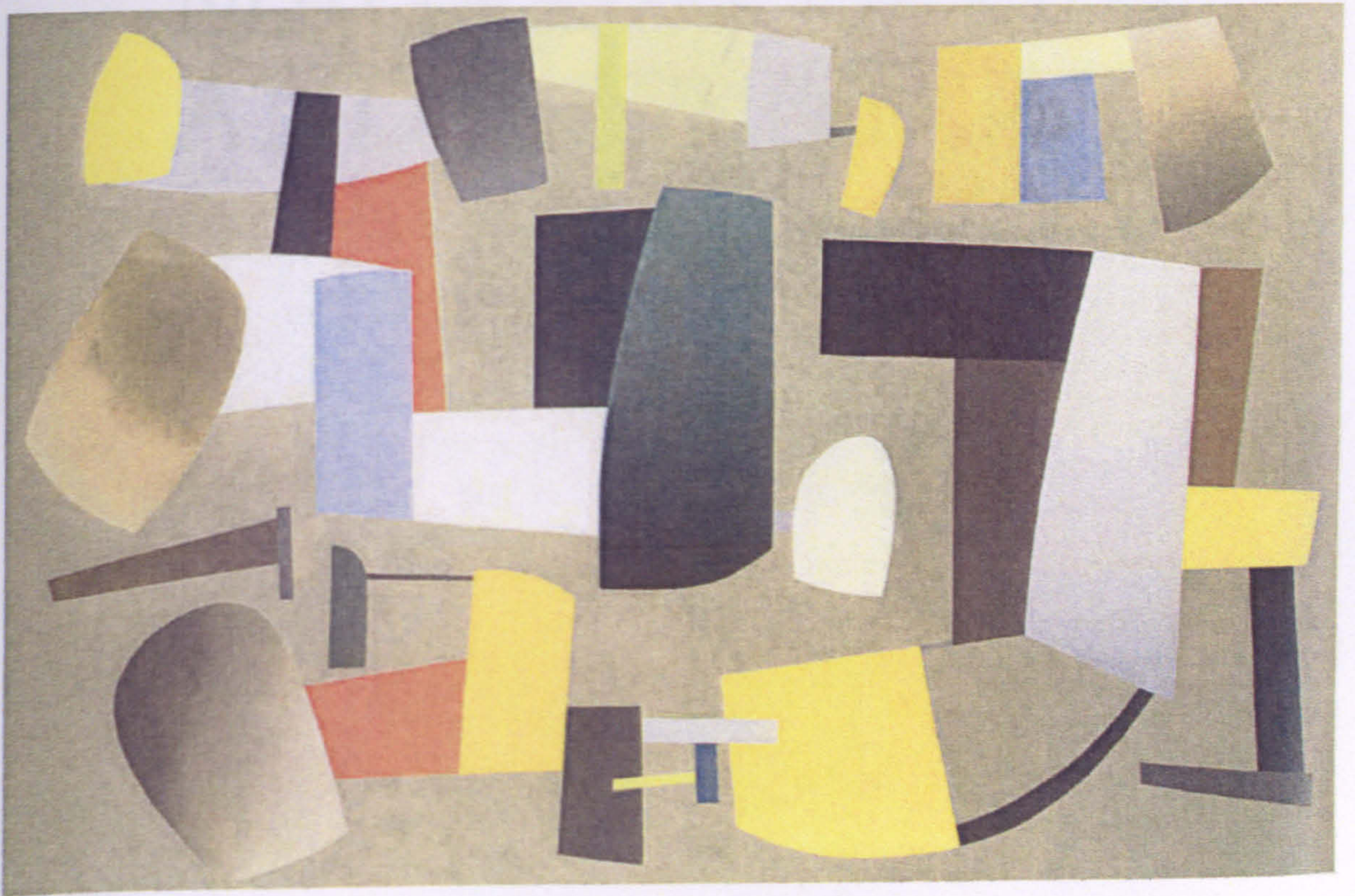


7. Héliou. *Circular Tensions no.2*, 1931-32



8. Héléne Helion. *Equilibrium*, 1933





9. Hélian. *Composition in Colours*, 1934

THE STUDIO  
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# AXIS

A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY  
"ABSTRACT" PAINTING & SCULPTURE

Editor: Myfanwy Evans



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● writers in this number

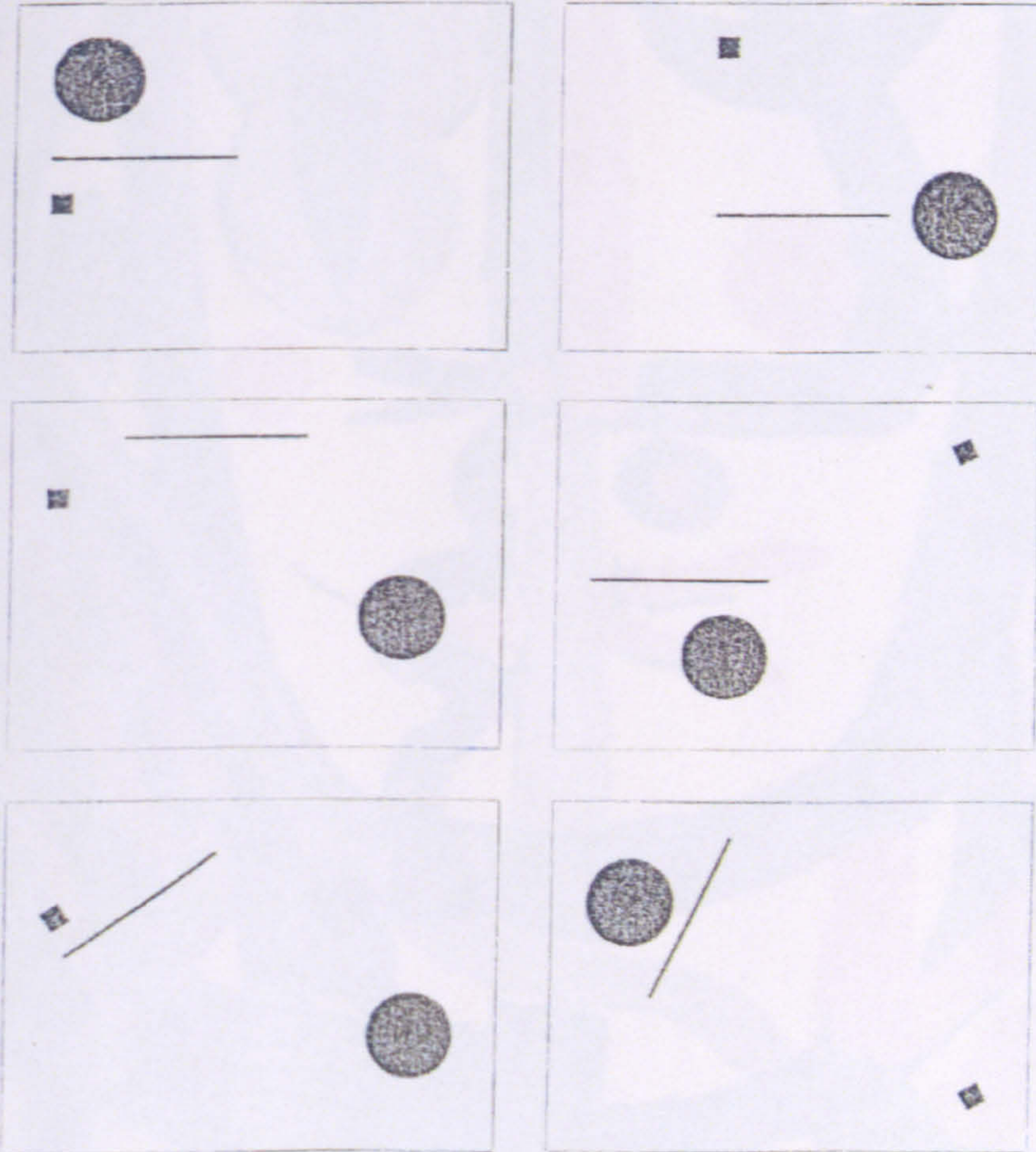
Herbert Read  
Geoffrey Grigson  
Anatole Jakovski  
Paul Nash  
H. S. Ede  
Myfanwy Evans

● artists

Arp  
Calder  
Domela  
Erni  
Giacometti  
Gonzalez  
Hélion  
Hepworth  
Jackson  
Kandinsky  
Miró  
Mondrian  
Moore  
Nash  
Nicholson  
Picasso  
Piper  
Richards  
Wadsworth

Im gleichen Sinne muß man nach dem richtigen Platz der Teile einer Satz-  
arbeit suchen. Doch haben wir es dort nicht von vornherein mit drei Elementen  
zu tun, sondern müssen diese in der Regel erst durch Ballung bilden; erst dann  
können wir die entstandenen Gruppen auf der Fläche ordnen.

Schon früher haben wir dargelegt, daß drei Gruppen die Regel bilden sollen.  
Bei ihrer Ordnung im Raum ist darauf zu achten, wie wir lesen. Der Ablauf der





13. Picasso. *Head*, 1926

arp	page 2
barbara hepworth	6
béothy	3
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domela	8
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elzbacher	11
fernandez	14
fischli	13
folty	15
freundlich	12
gabo	16
garcin	17
gleizes	18
gorin	19
hâtion	21
herbin	22
holty	23
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obro	27
rosnick-kloss	28
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aeuber-arp	45
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rillon	48
ordemberge-gildewert	49
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wadsworth	51
villimann	52

# abstraction création art non figuratif 1933



# 2

prix .. 15 francs  
étranger 20 francs

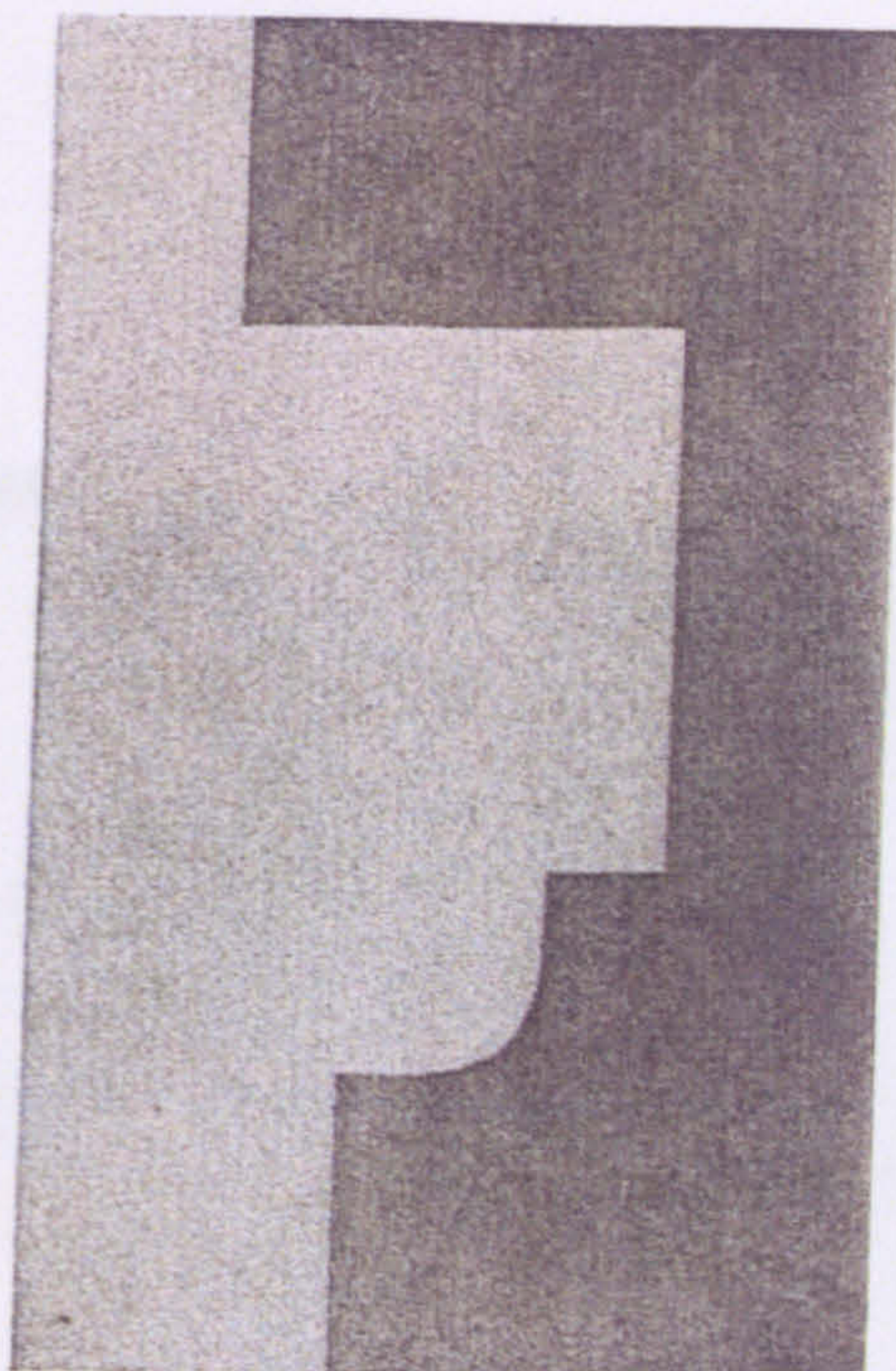
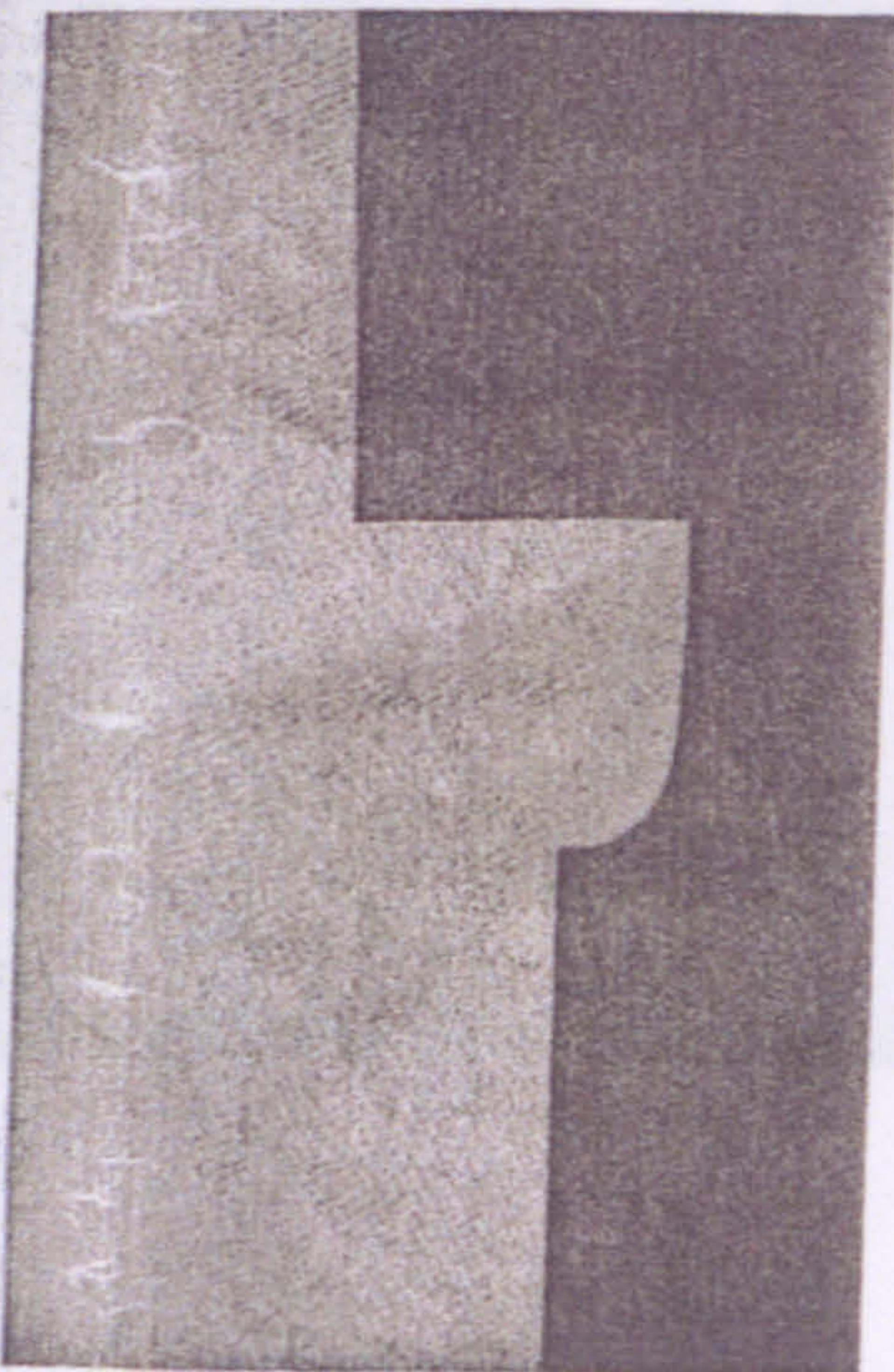
14. Abstraction-Création. Title Page, 1933

leurs rapports arithmétiques de dimensions deviennent des "motifs" d'art.  
 il ne faut pas considérer la nature de façon à voir les objets, mais la plastique contenue dans l'objet : le rapport des formes, cette manière de voir le monde réel c'est effectivement le moment créateur, c'est la découverte de la nature, son aperçu réel, indépendamment des notions que nous avons d'elle. la nature sous une forme changée nous enseigne à voir le monde différemment, à y remarquer des choses nouvelles ; en un mot : le voir.

**wladyslaw strzeminski ,**

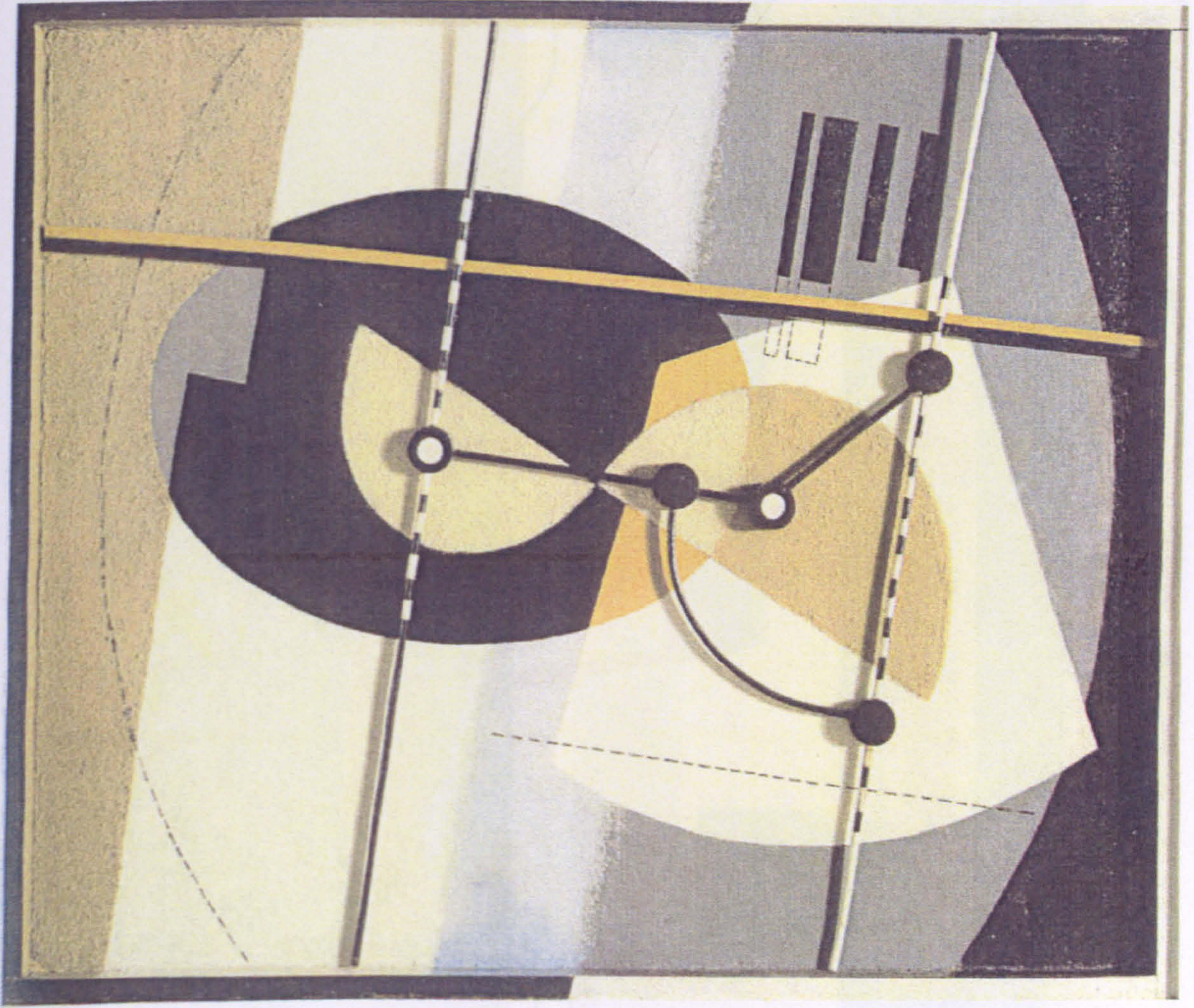
là, où il y a une division, le tableau est coupé en parties, quels doivent être leurs rapports ?  
 la ligne. s'il n'y en a qu'une, nous voyons alors sa relation avec les limites du tableau. s'il y en a plusieurs, nous voyons les relations des lignes entre elles et entre chacune d'elles et les limites du tableau.  
 la ligne créait toujours des sections du tableau. là, où nous avons des sections, quel sera leur rapport réciproque ? nous lions les parties divisées en un rythme de rapports d'une dimension avec une autre. il existe alors un rythme comme essence d'émotions esthétiques du tableau. ce rythme se

strzeminski w . 1928 .



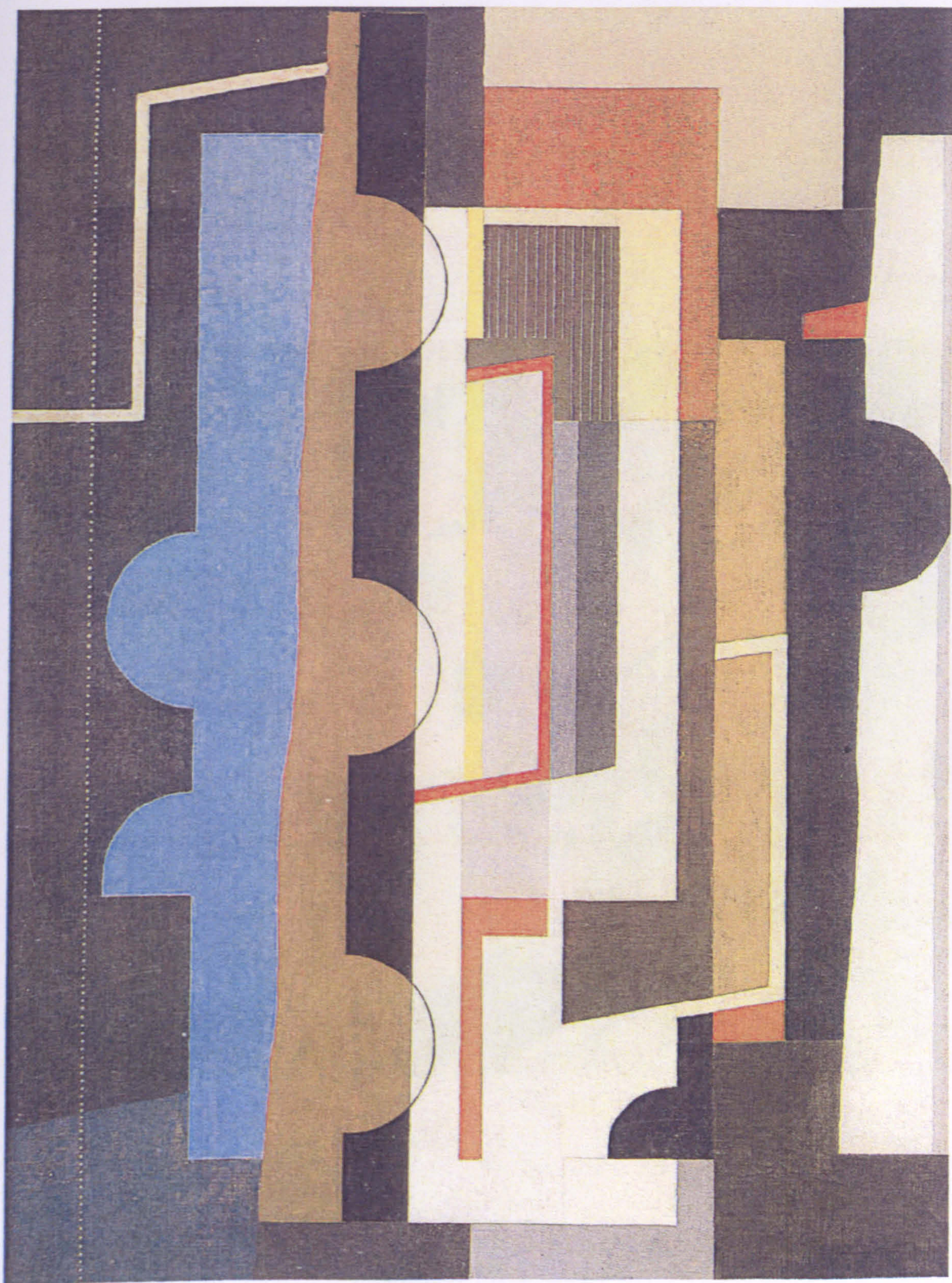
strzeminski w . 1928 .

forme de l'opposition des directions et des dimensions.  
 la loi d'unité du rythme ? on obtient l'unité du rythme en subordonnant les rapports de dimensions à la même expression mathématique. cette expression mathématique décide du rapport entre la hauteur et la largeur du tableau. toutes les fractions et toutes les formes sont maintenues dans ce rapport mathématique. de cette façon nous arrivons à une unité absolue du rythme de toutes les formes, dont la plus grande est le tableau même.  
 cependant là, où nous avons une ligne, nous aurons une division et au lieu d'un seul tableau nous aurons des parties séparées. la ligne divise — le but des tendances doit être non la division du tableau, mais son unité, présentée d'une façon directe : optiquement.  
 il faut renoncer par conséquent à la ligne. il faut renoncer au rythme, car il n'existe que dans les rapports entre des parties indépendantes. il faut renoncer aux oppositions et aux contrastes, car seulement des formes séparées peuvent former des oppositions et des contrastes. il faut renoncer à la division, car elle donne la concentration et la plus grande intensité des formes auprès du contour — et coupe le tableau en sections, contenant des formes concentrées et des formes débilles.  
 après avoir étudié dans mes tableaux le problème du rythme architectonique, je m'occupe maintenant de la conception d'unité du tableau. — ces tableaux étant irréproductibles en photographie, je présente des reproductions de tableaux plus anciens.



16. Piper. *Abstract Construction*, 1934

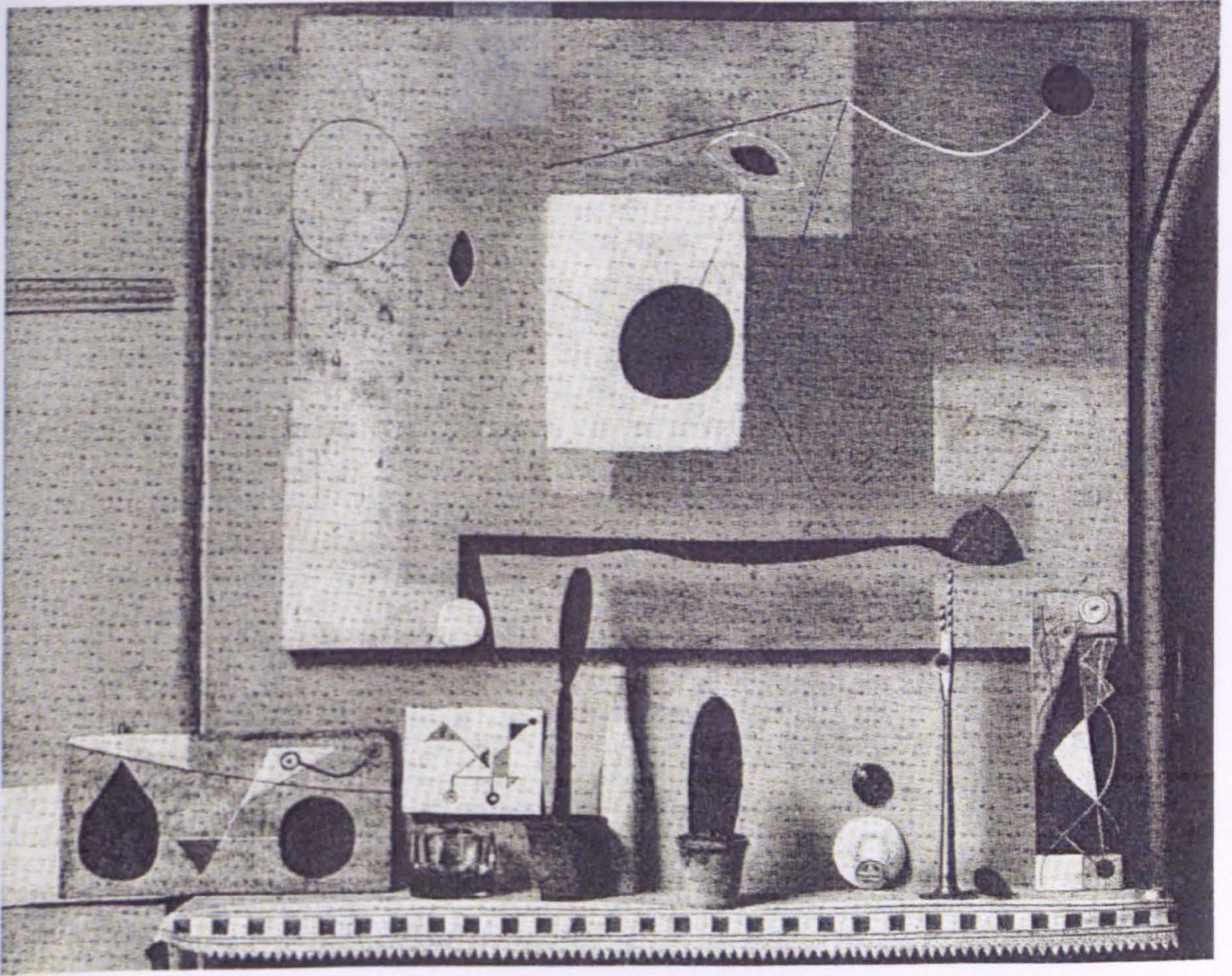




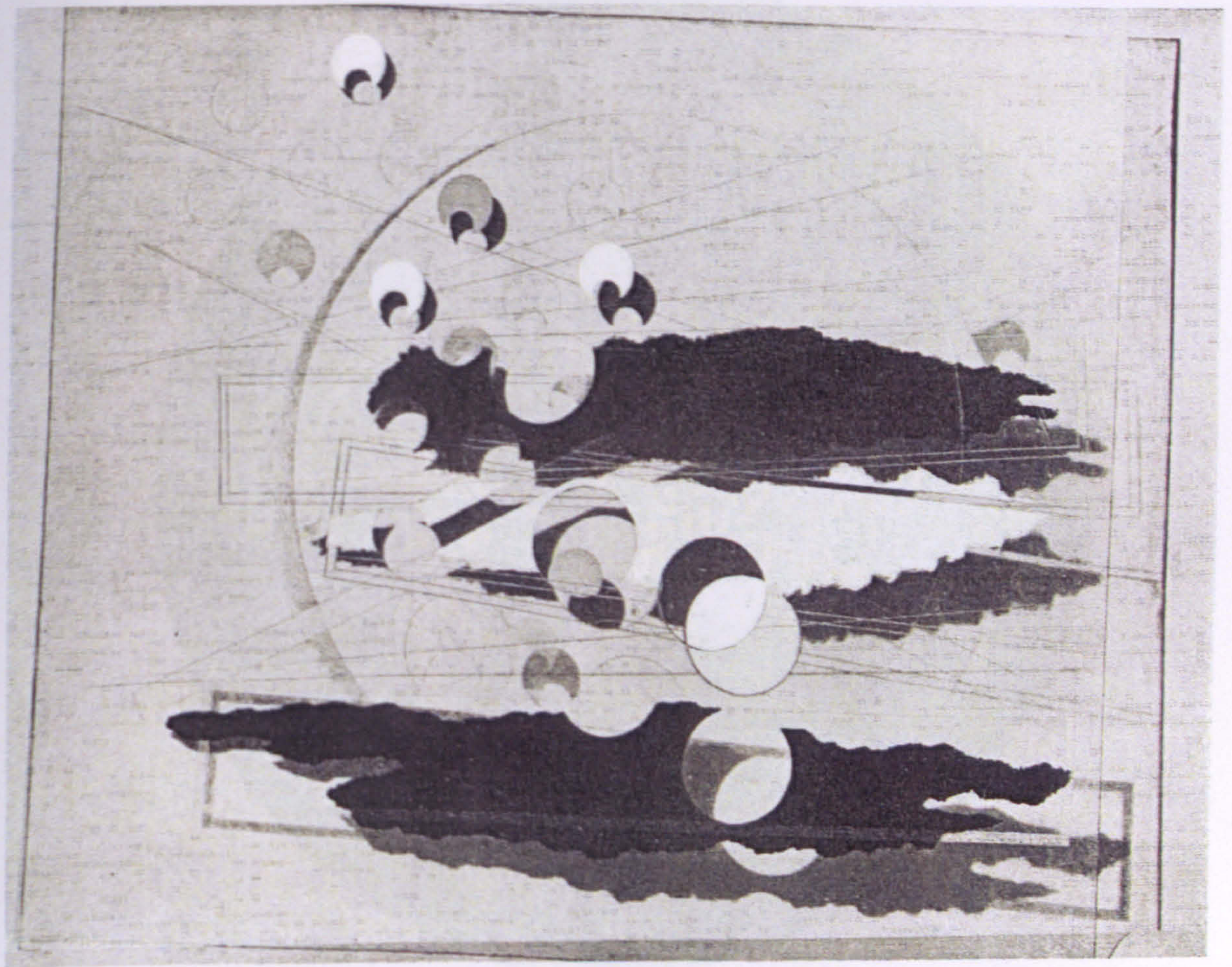
17. Piper. *Painting*, 1935



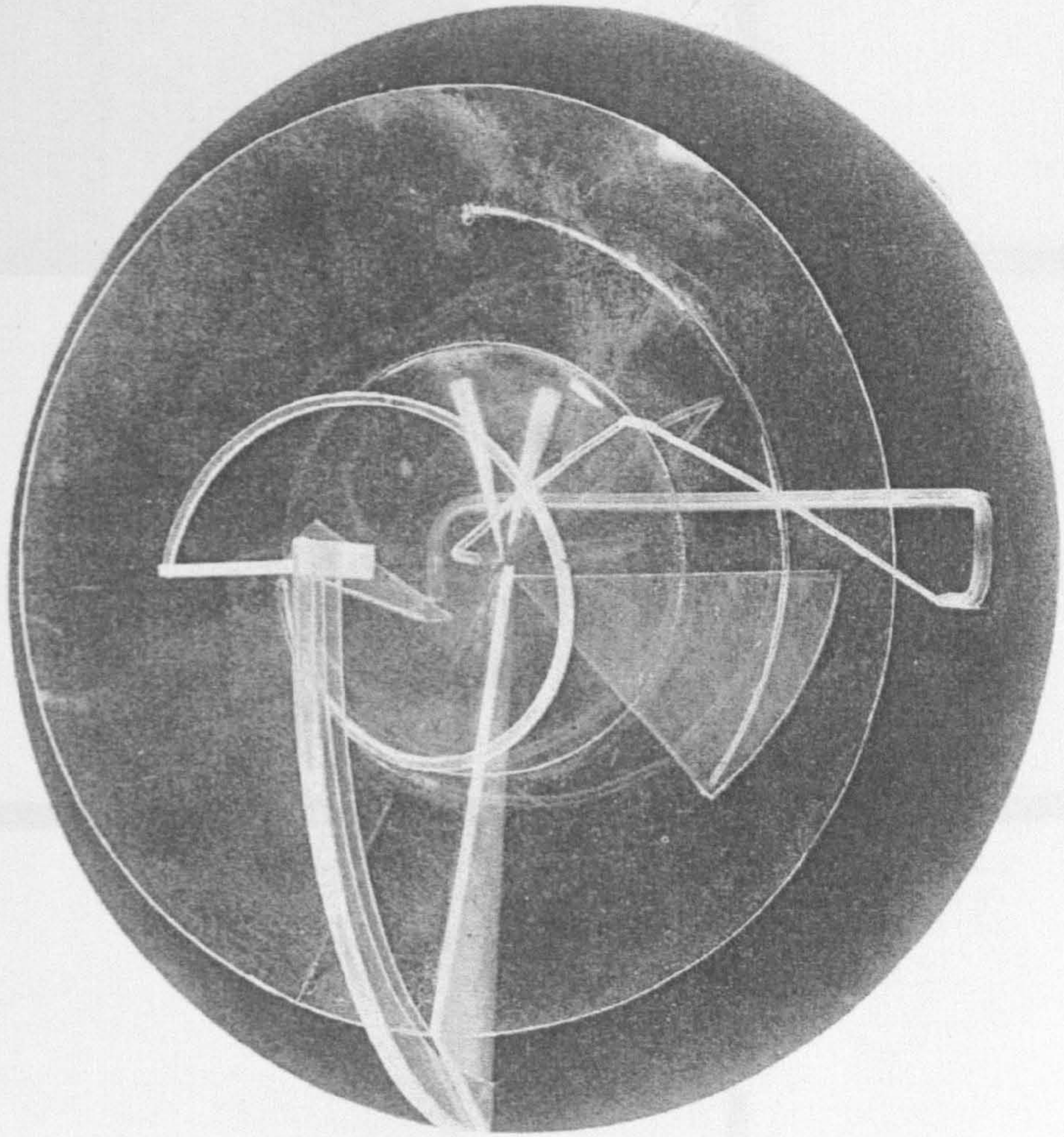
18. Kandinsky. *Picture no.183* (study for *Composition 7*), 1913



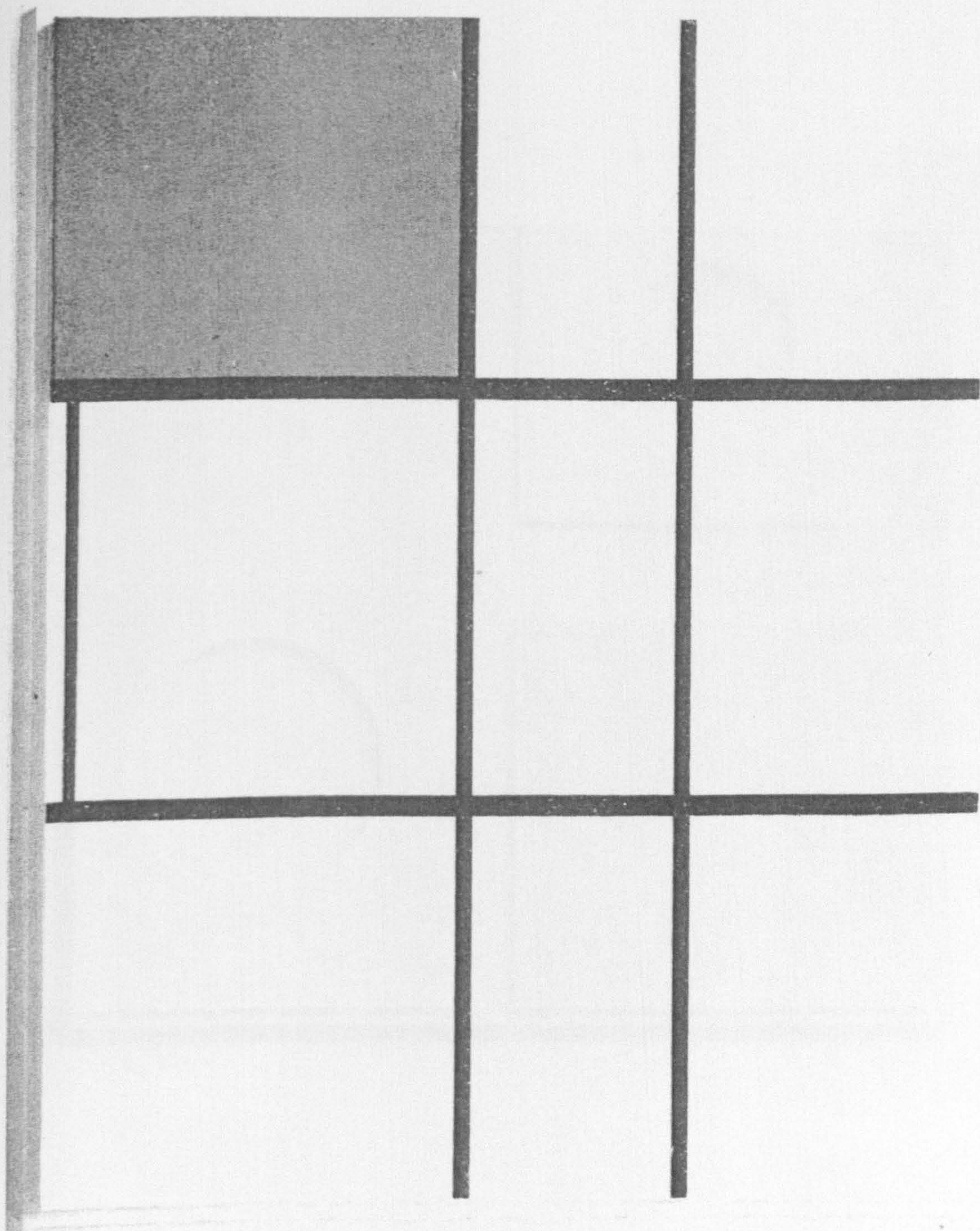
19. Nicholson. *Nicholson's studio, paintings and objects*, 1933



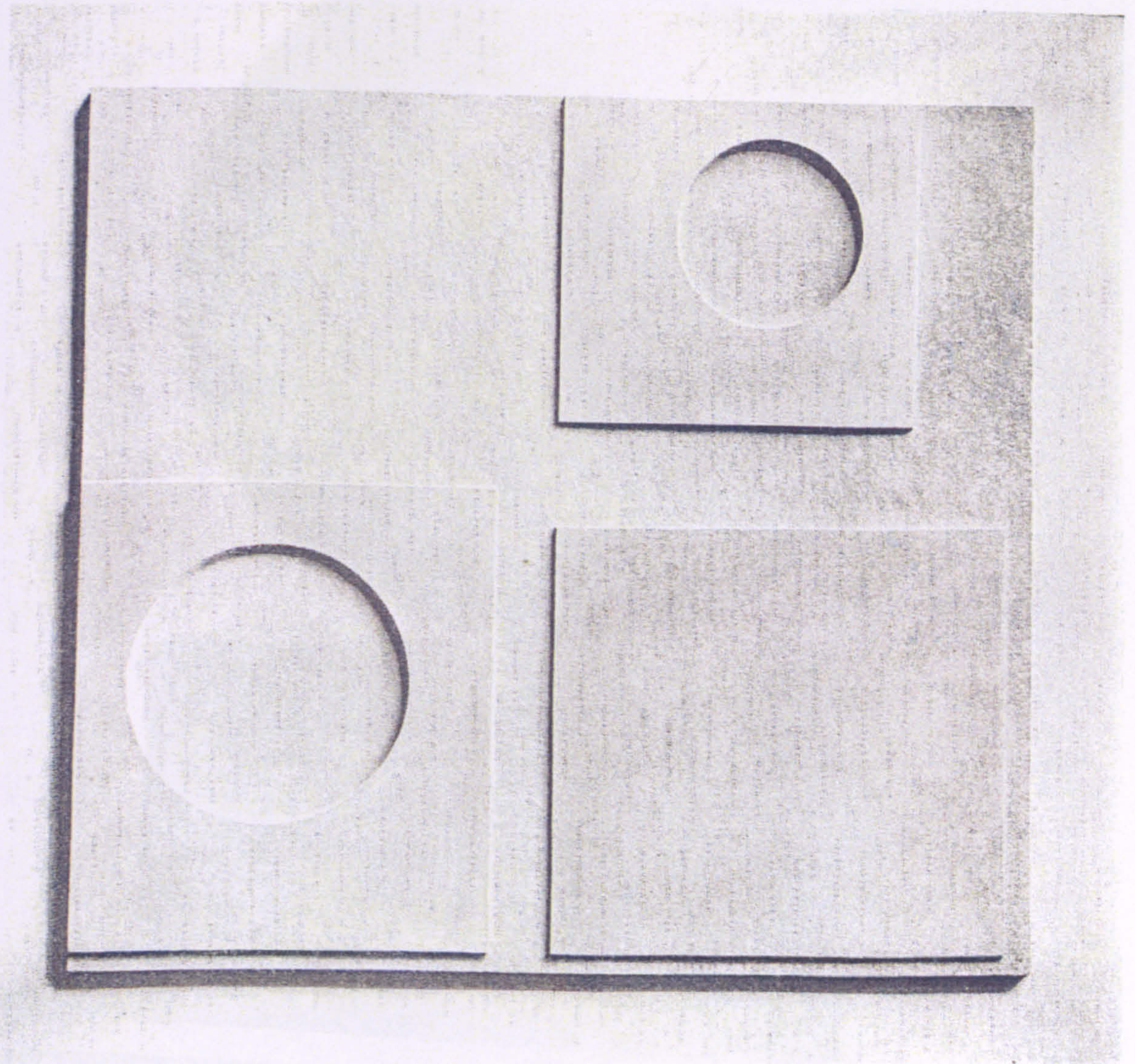
20. Moholy-Nagy. *Celluloidbild*, 1935



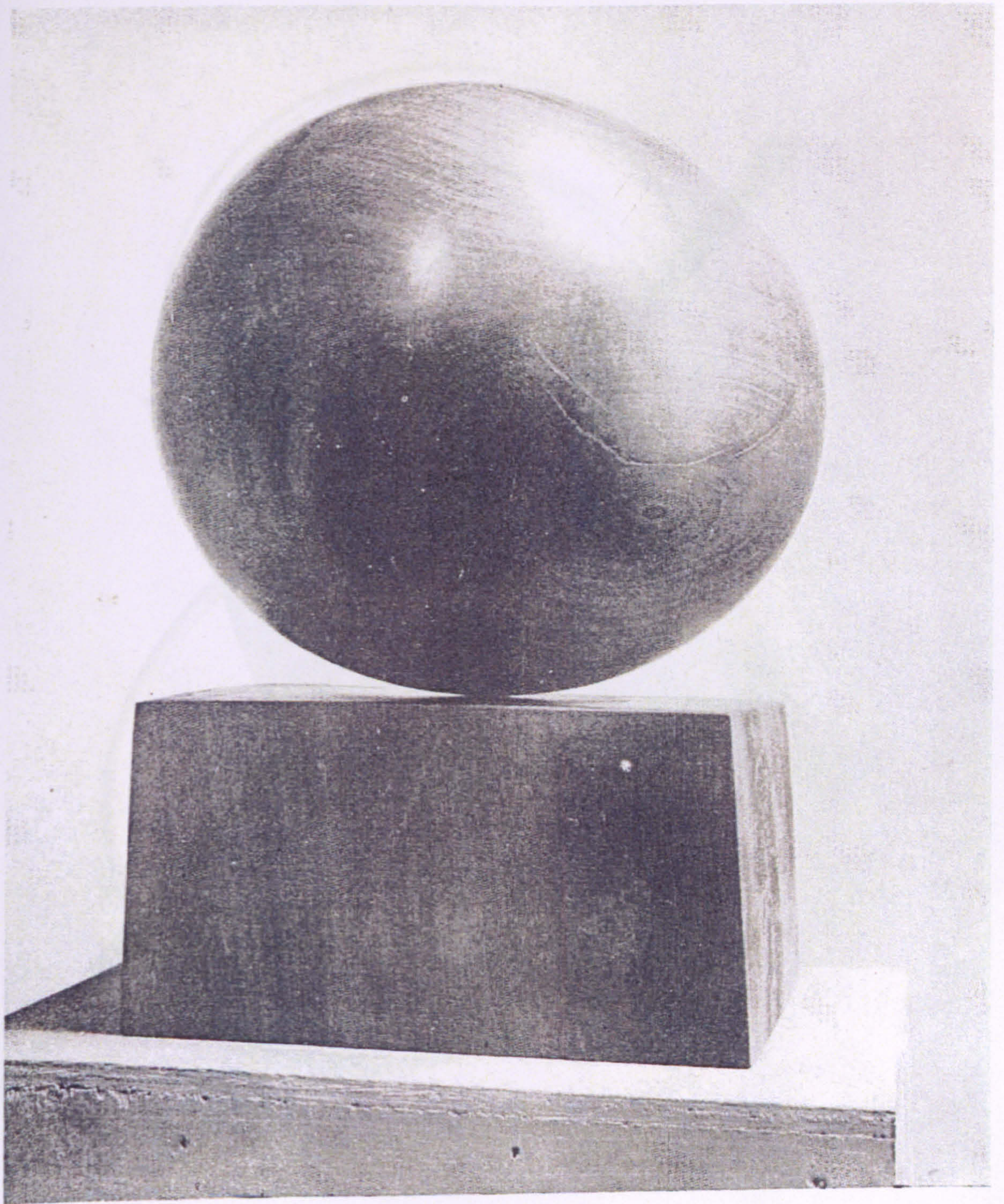
21. Gabo. *Construction in relief* (also *Circular relief*), 1925



22. Mondrian. *Composition*, 1935

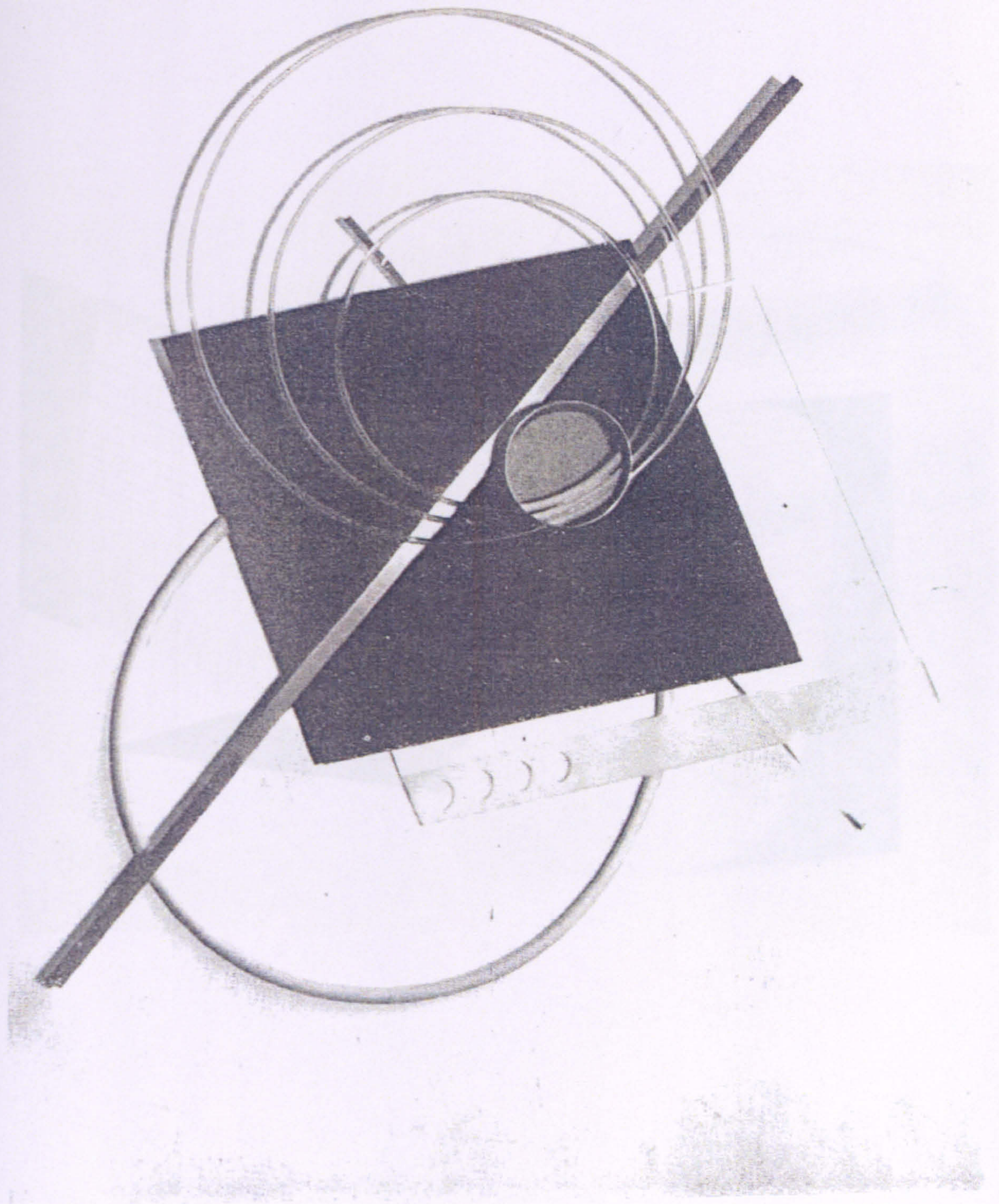


23. Nicholson. *Carved relief*, 1935

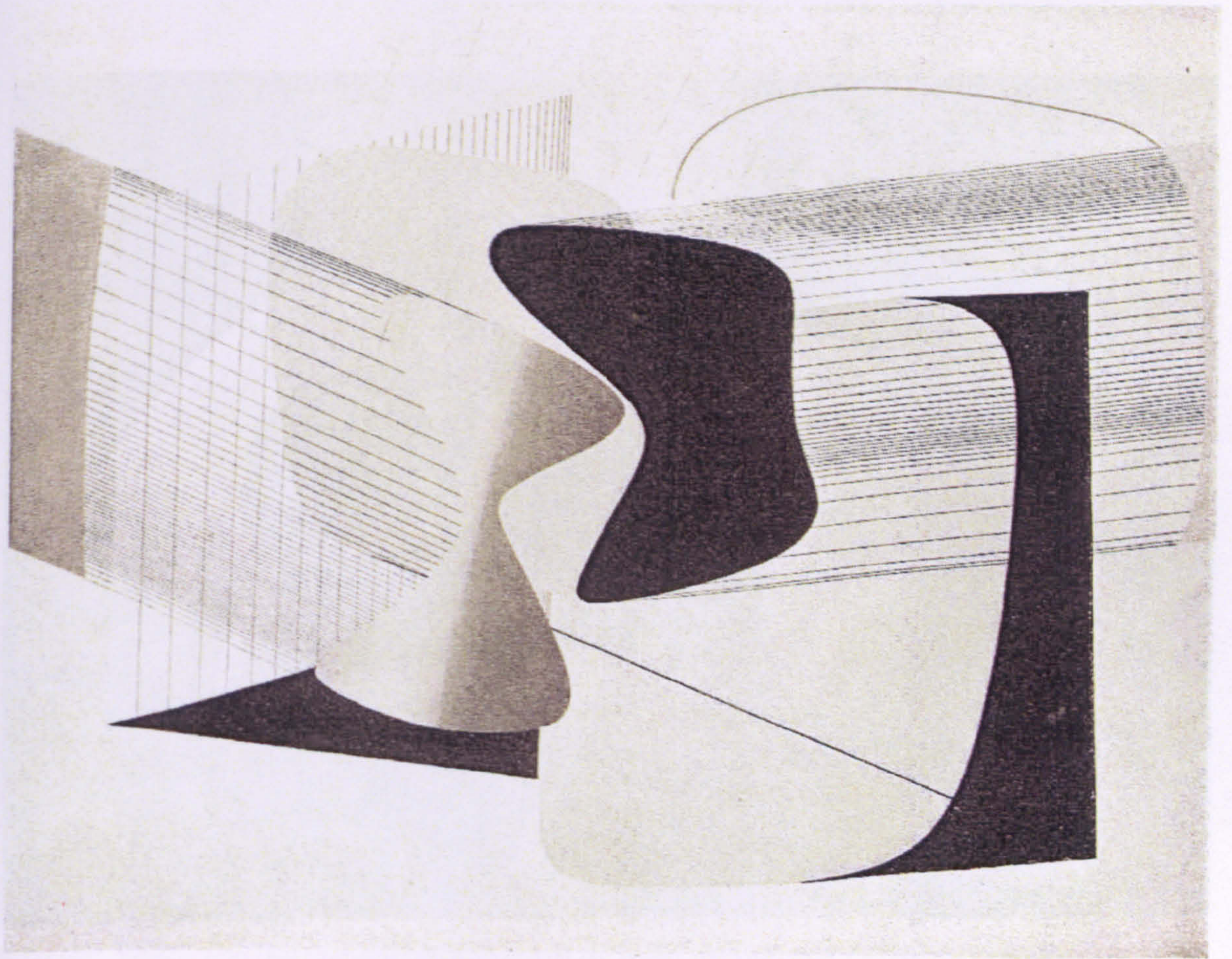


24. Hepworth. *Carving in wood*, 1935

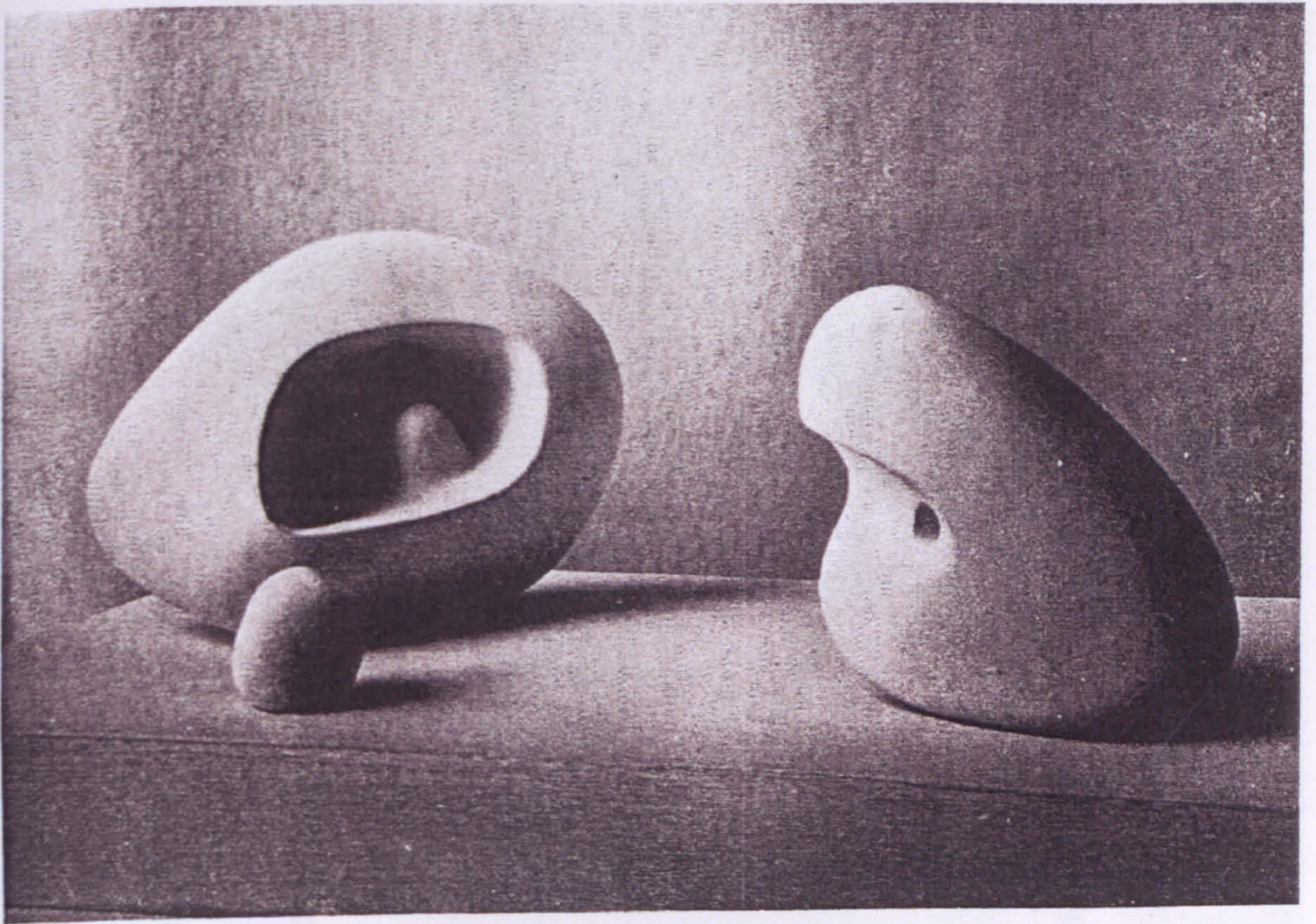




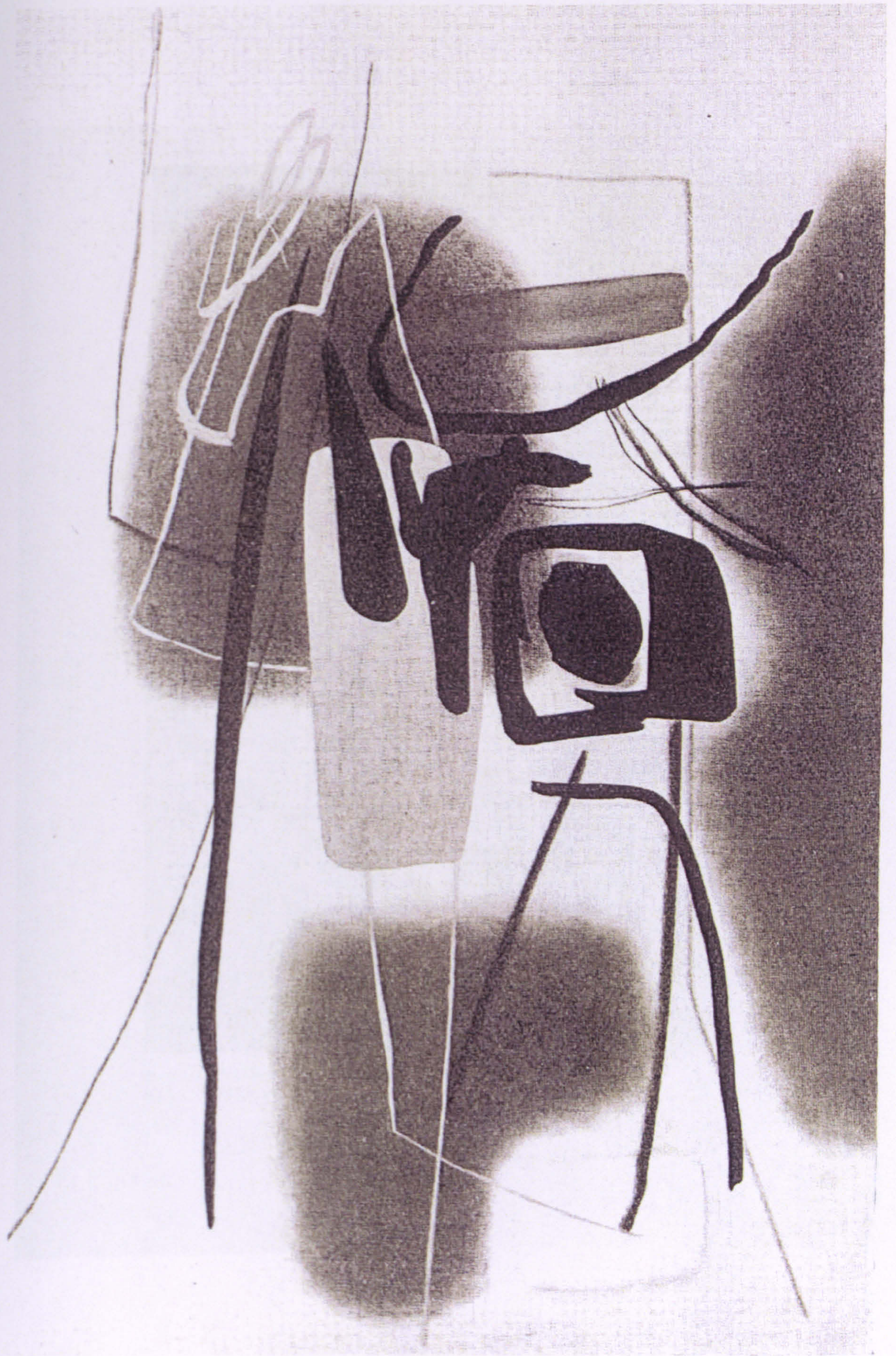
25. Domela. *Construction*, 1935



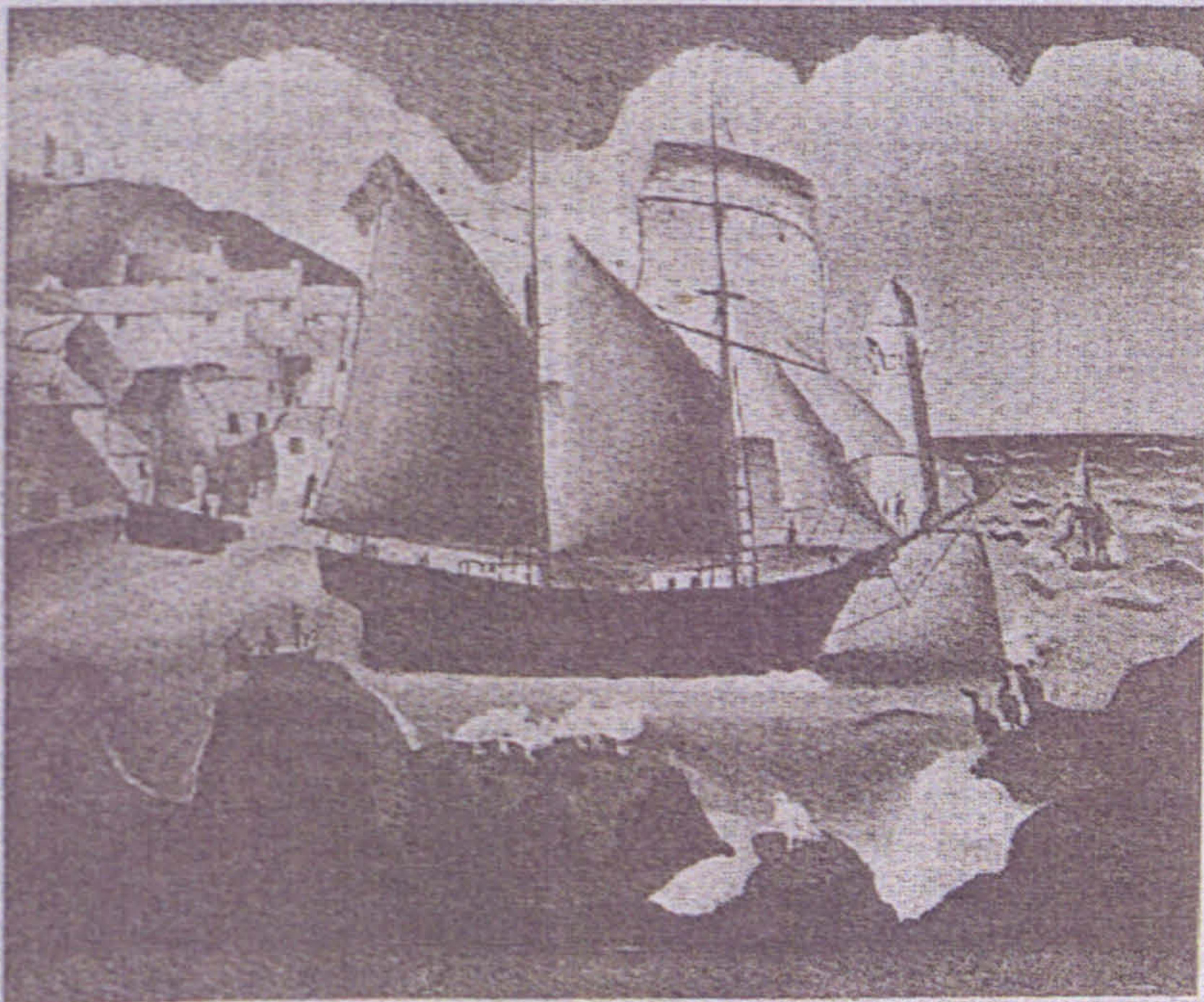
26. Erni. *Composition no.31*, 1935



27. Moore. *Carving*, 1935



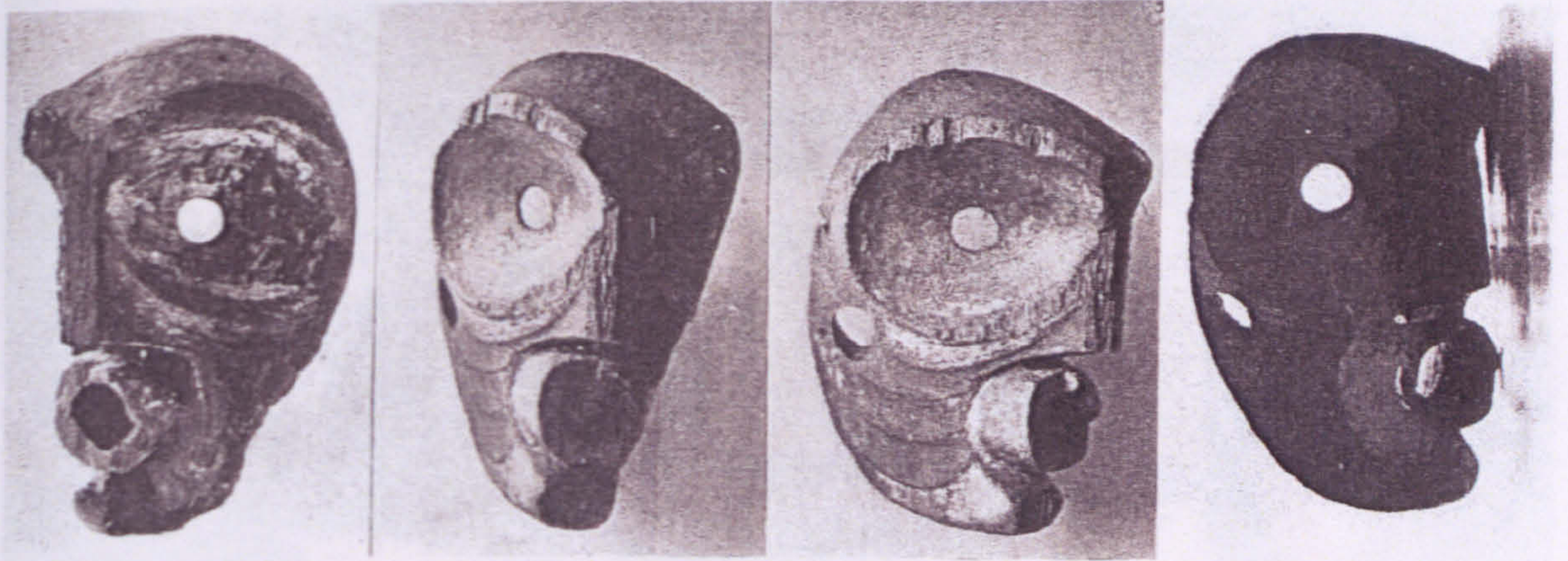
28. Hartung. *Painting*, 1935



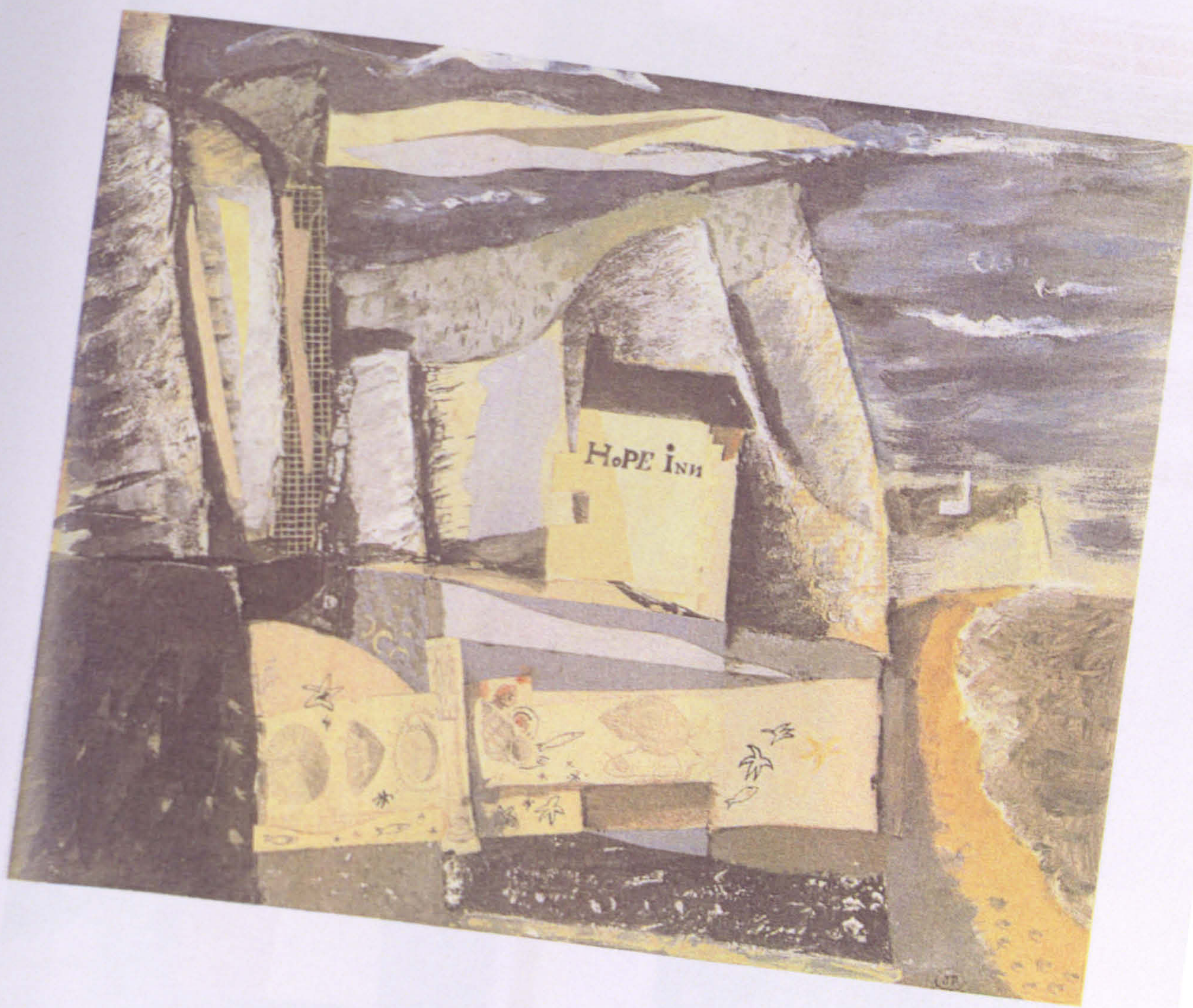
Above : CONSTABLE, Brighton beach with Colliers. (Victoria and Albert Museum.)  
Below : CHRISTOPHER WOOD, Leaving port. (Coll. Lord Berners. Photo courtesy Redfern Gallery.)



30. Piper. *The Stoning of St. Stephen, Grateley Parish Church, 1929*

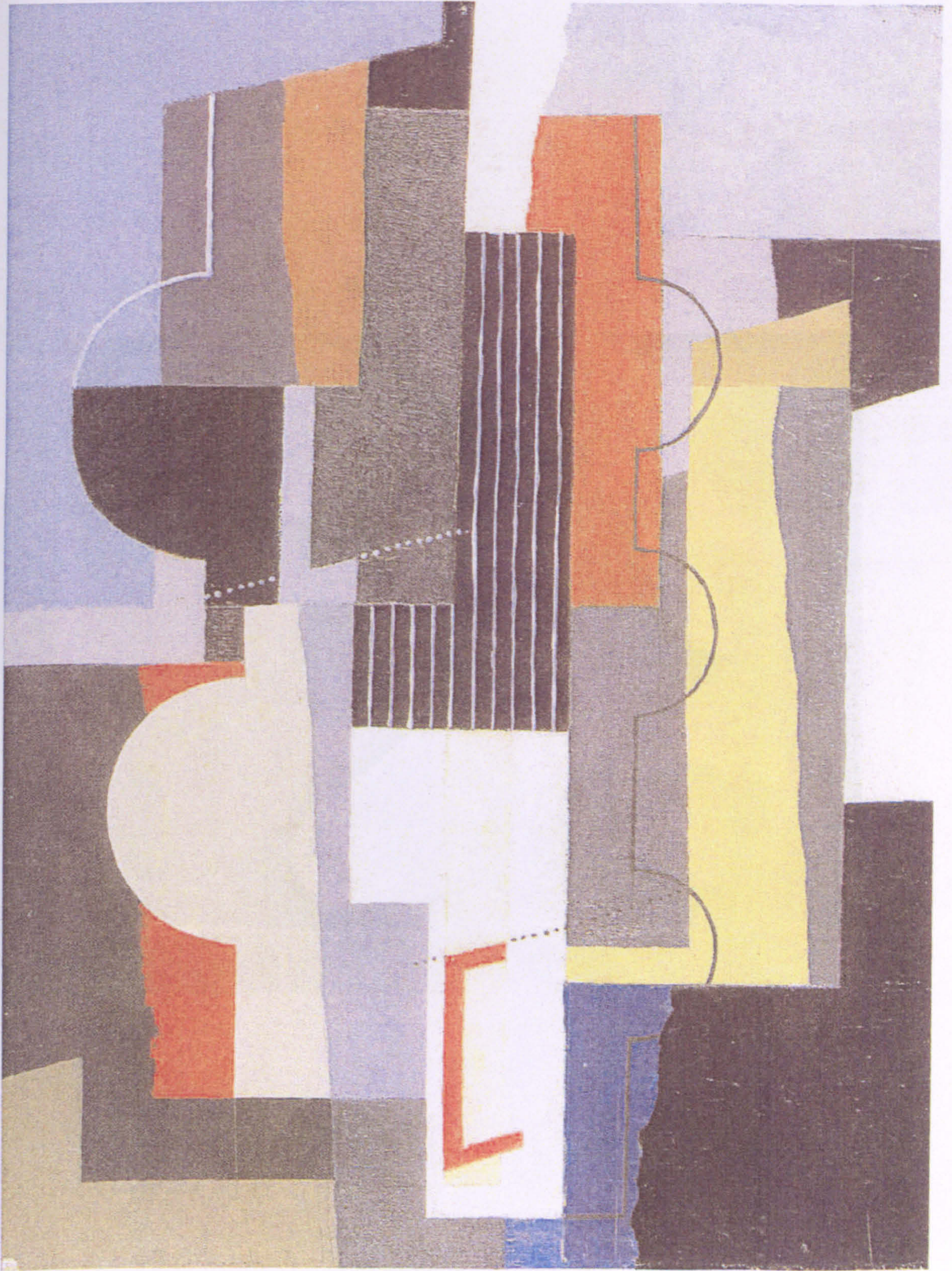


31. Mask. *North Western American Art, Vancouver Islands*, no date

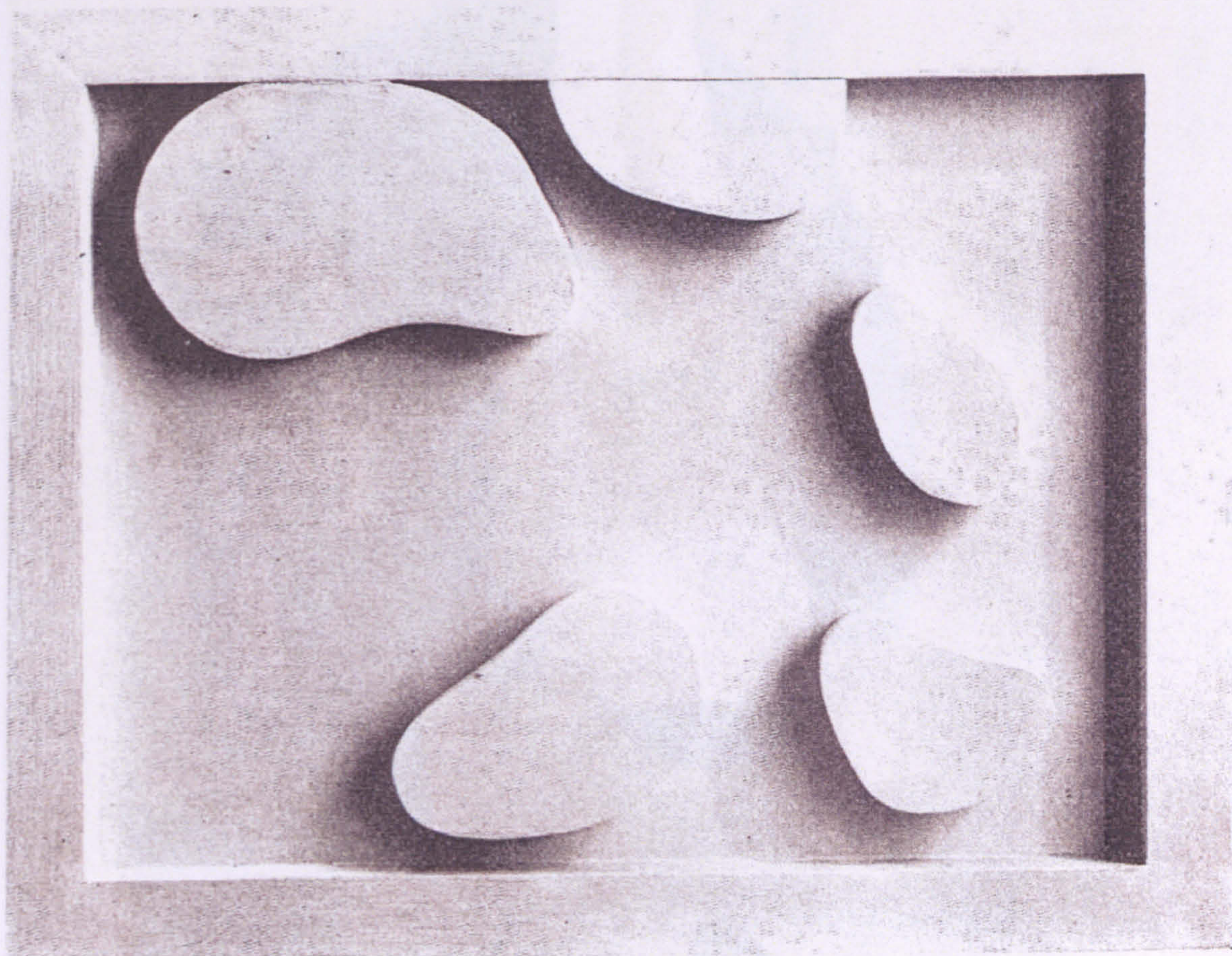


32. Piper. *Hope Inn*, 1934





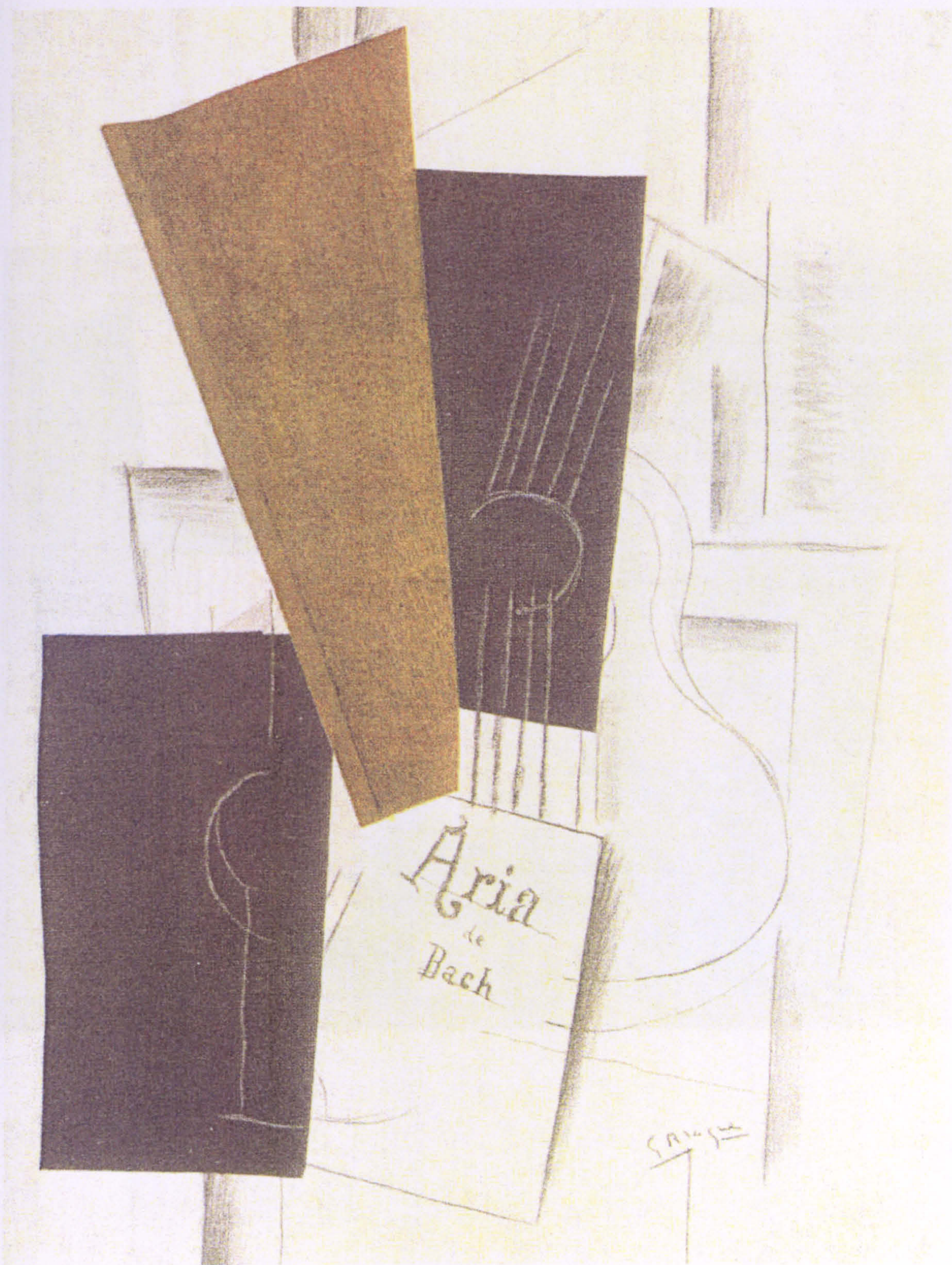
33. Piper. *Painting*, 1935



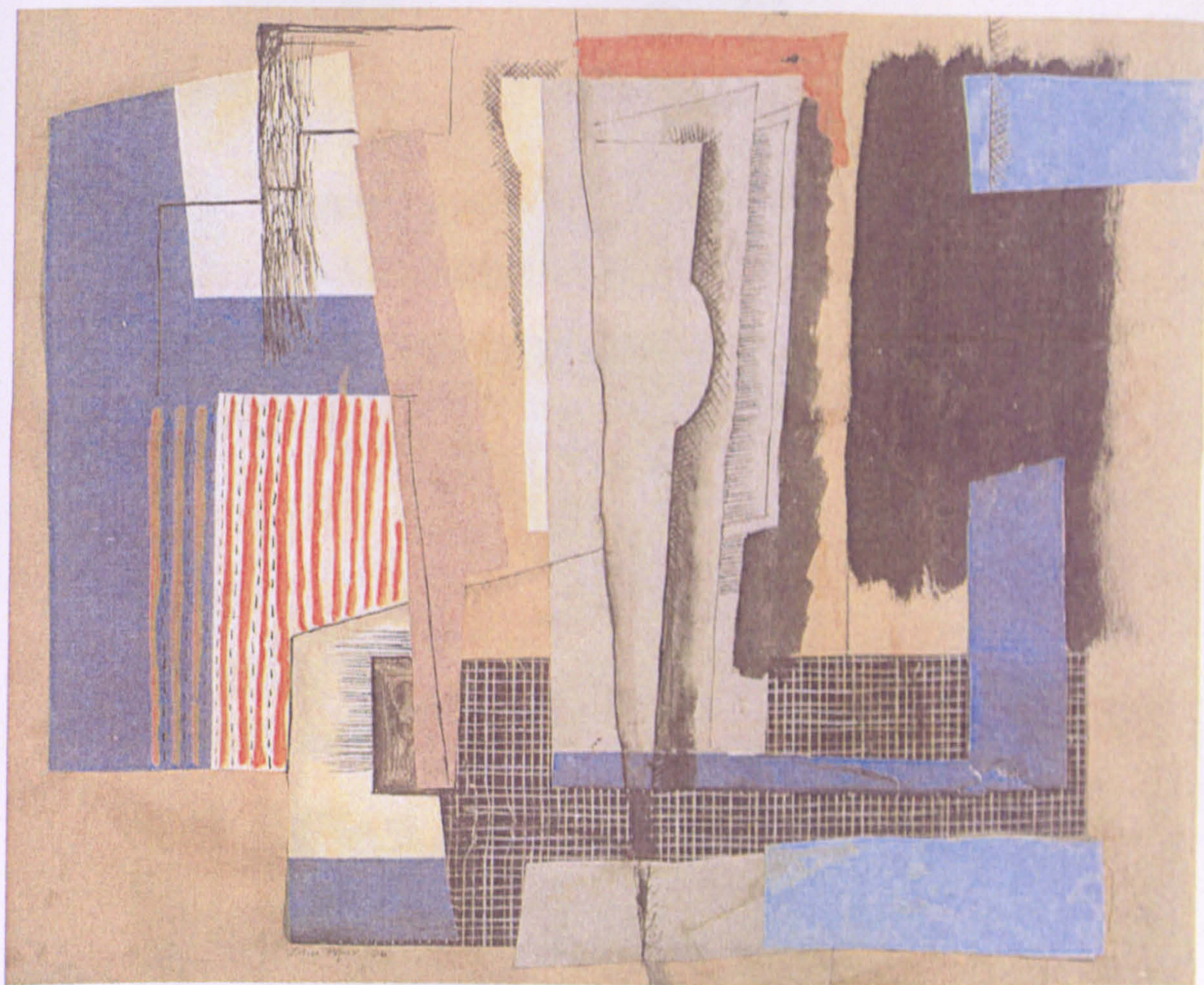
34. Arp. *Objects placés d'après les lois du hasard*, 1933



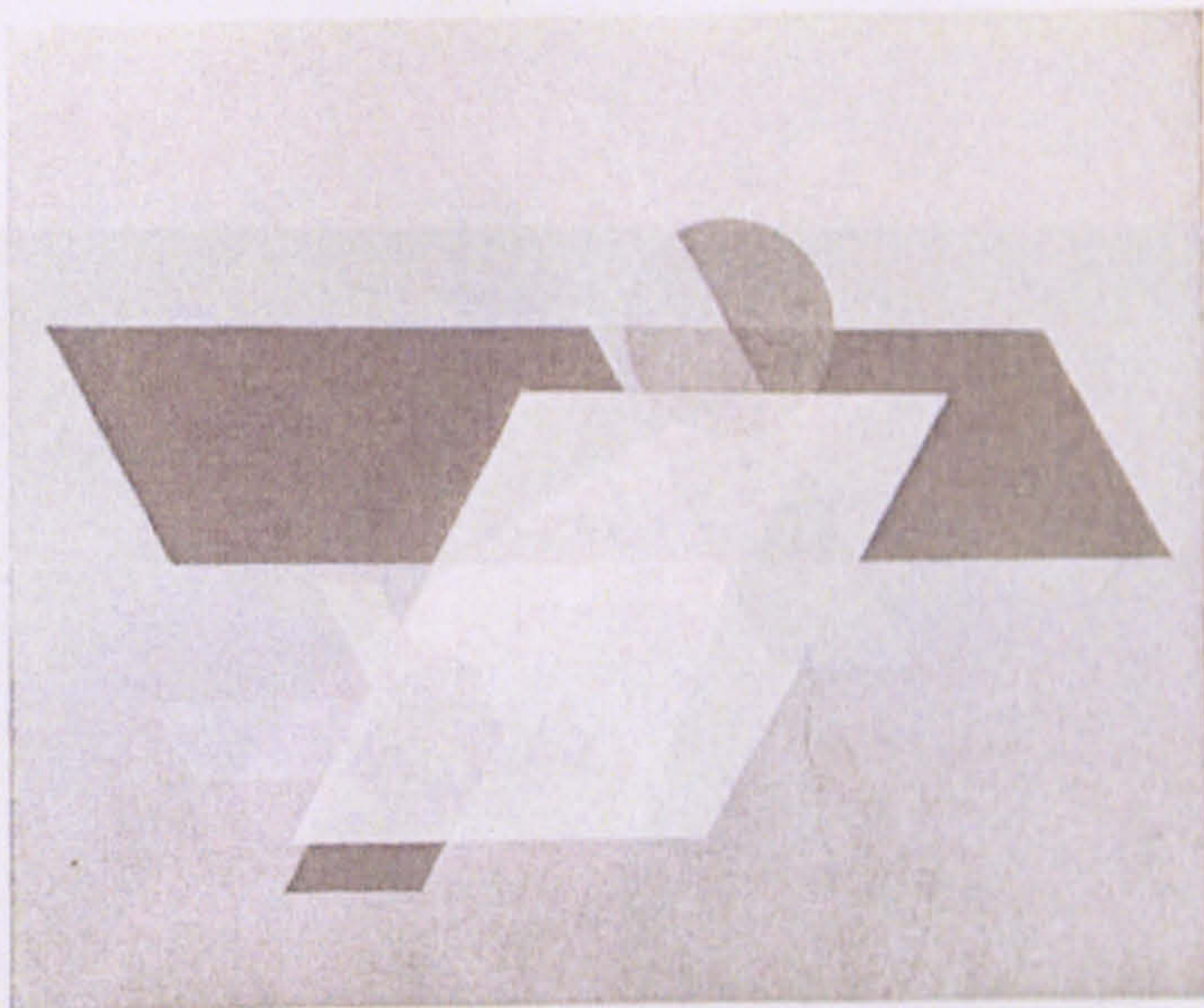
35. Picasso. *The Bottle of Suze*, 1913



36. Braque. *Aria de Bach*, 1914



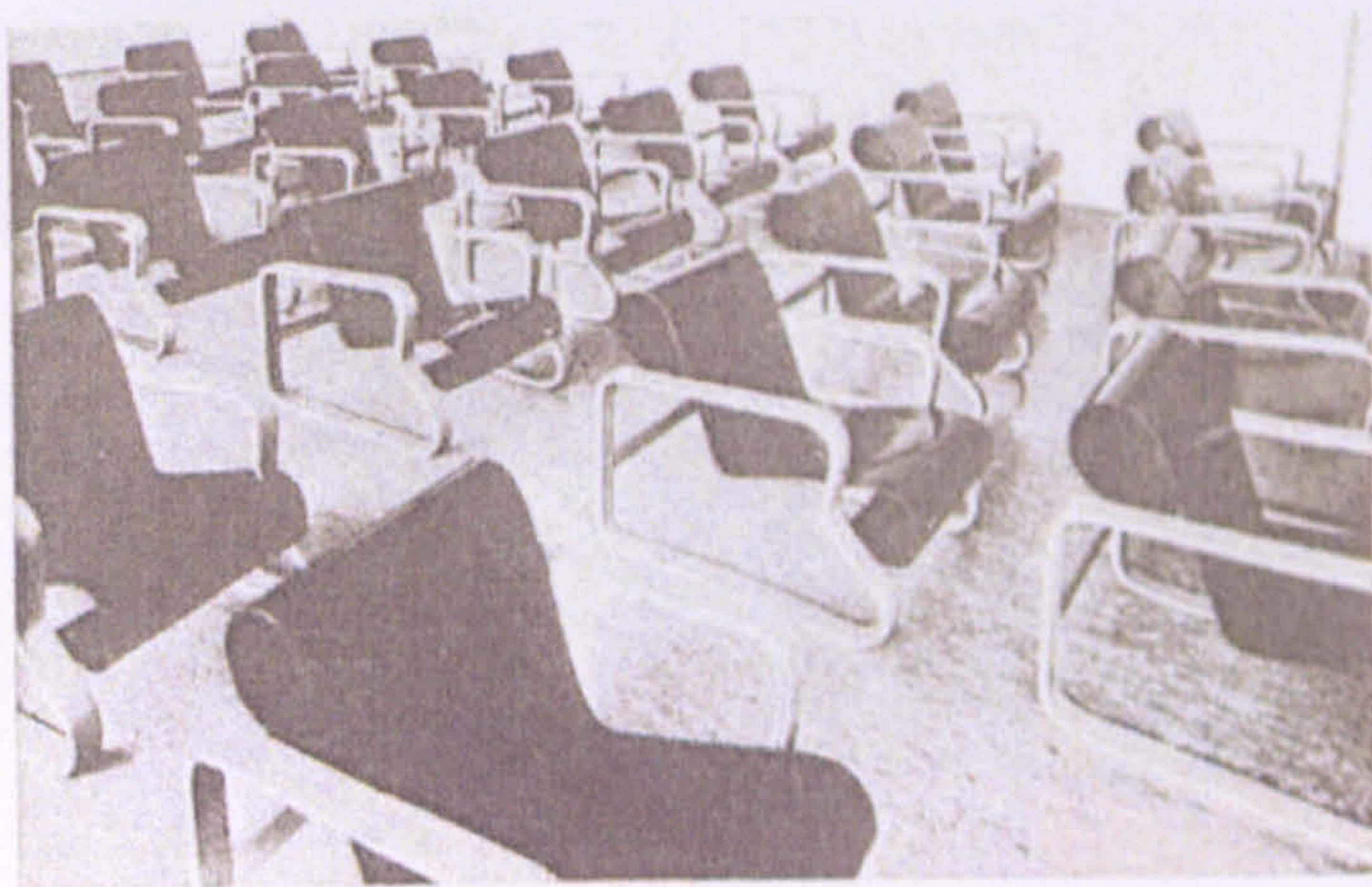
37. Piper. *Abstract Composition*, 1936



PAINTING BY  
MOHOLY-NAGY 1924

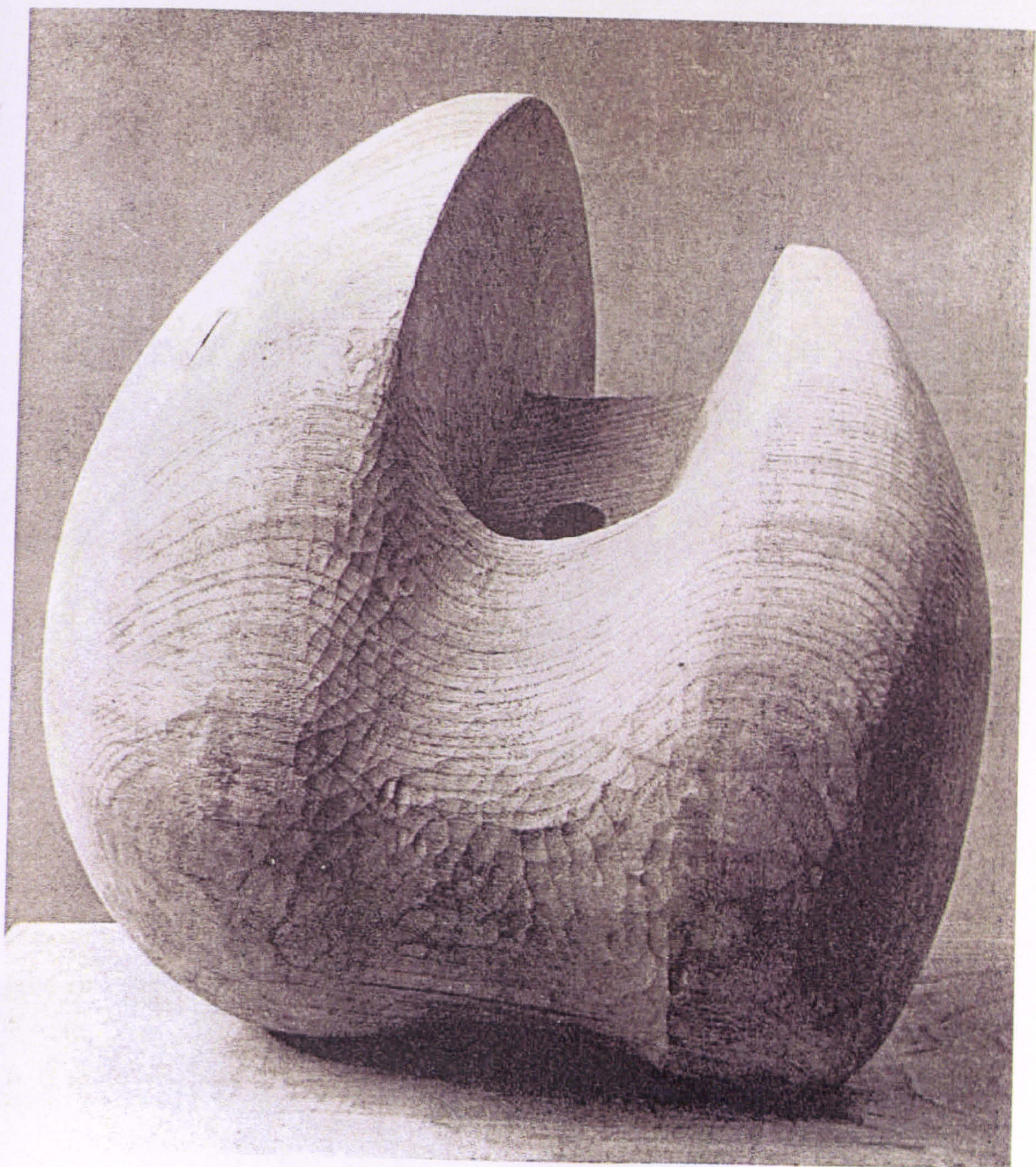


LANDQUART BRIDGE  
by MAILLART 1930

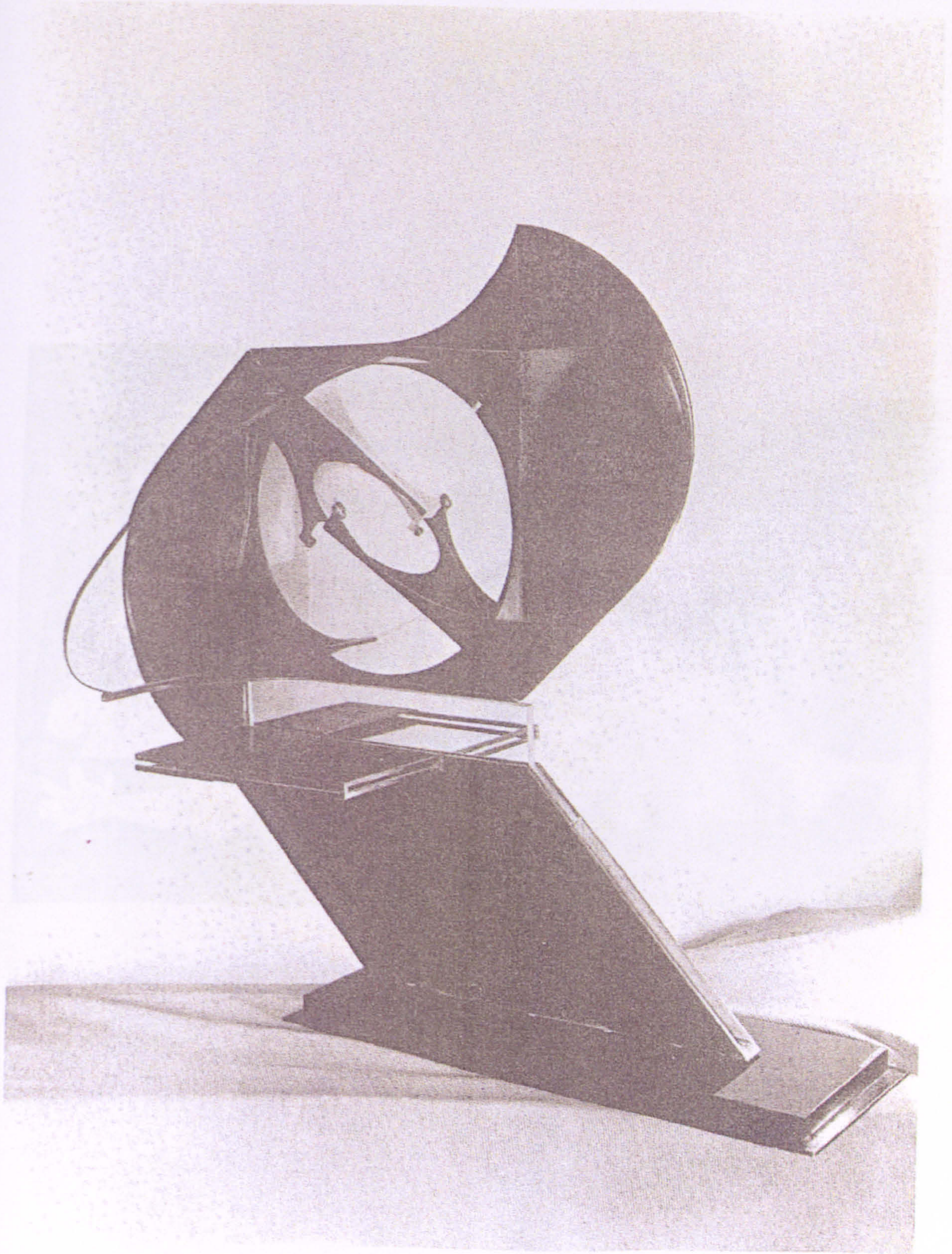


PLYWOOD CHAIRS  
by ALVAR AALTO

38. Moholy-Nagy. *Painting*, 1924  
Maillart. *Landquart Bridge*, 1930  
Aalto. *Plywood Chairs*, undated

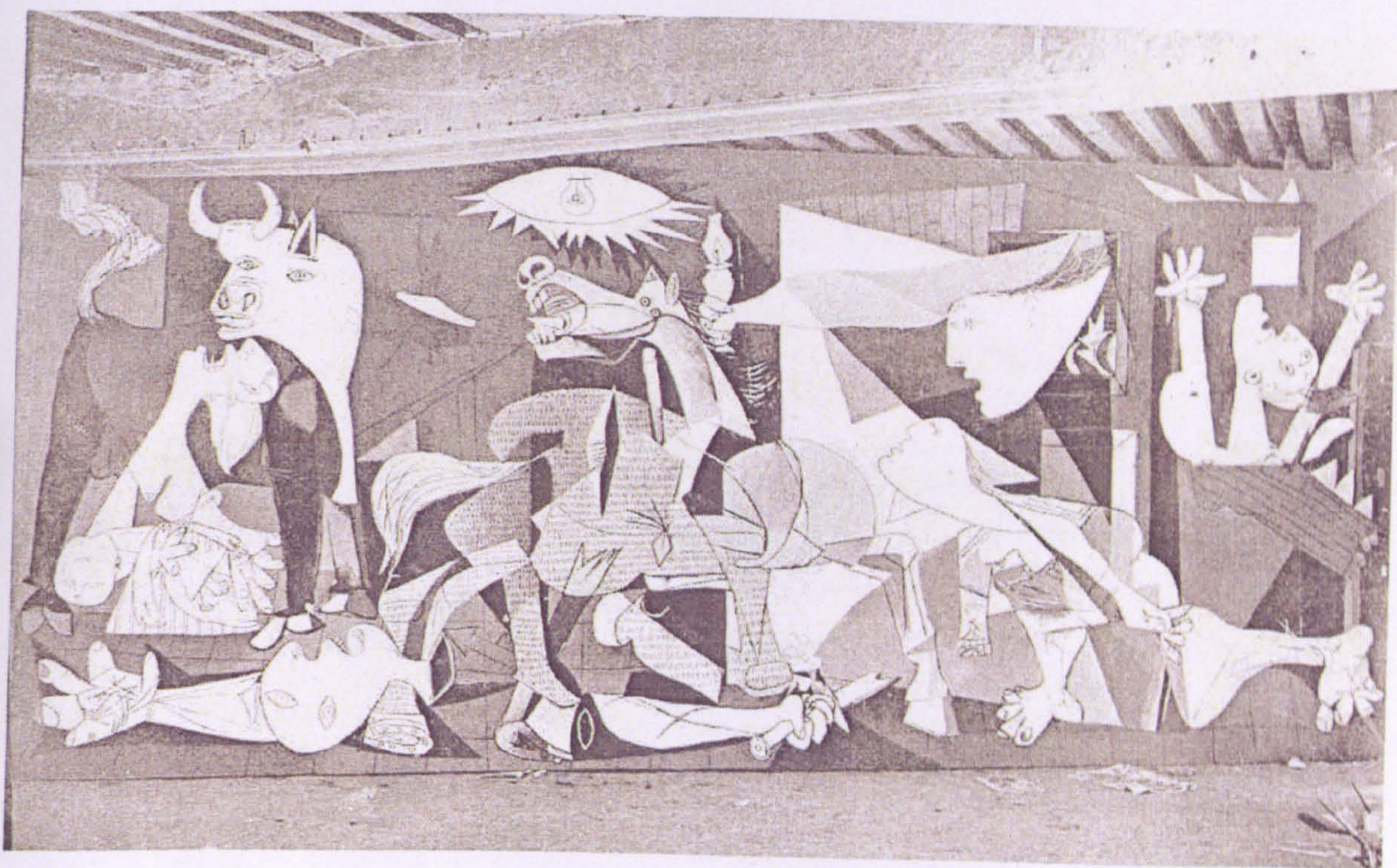


39. Moore. *Untitled*, 1936

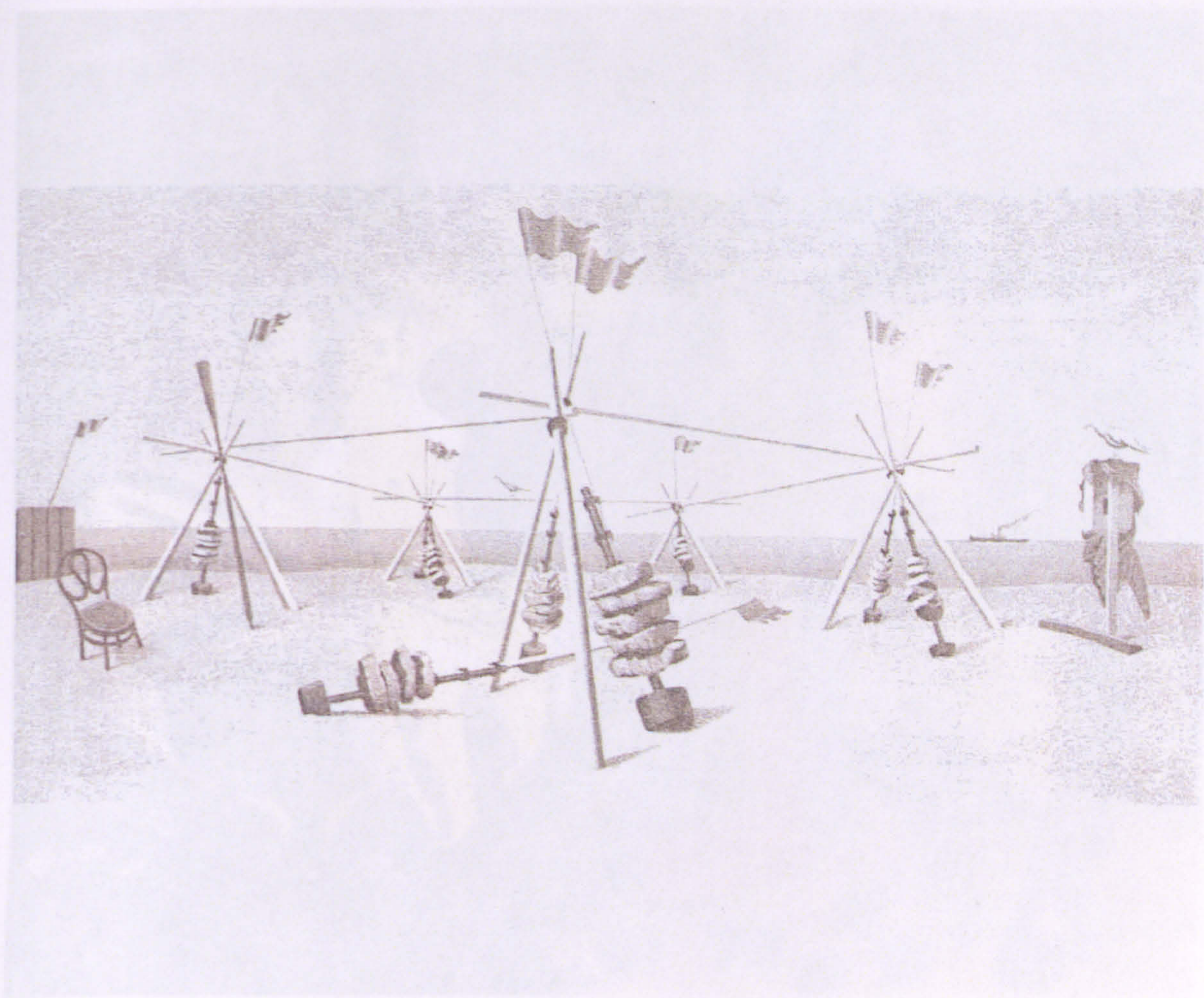


40. Pevsner. *Untitled*, 1934





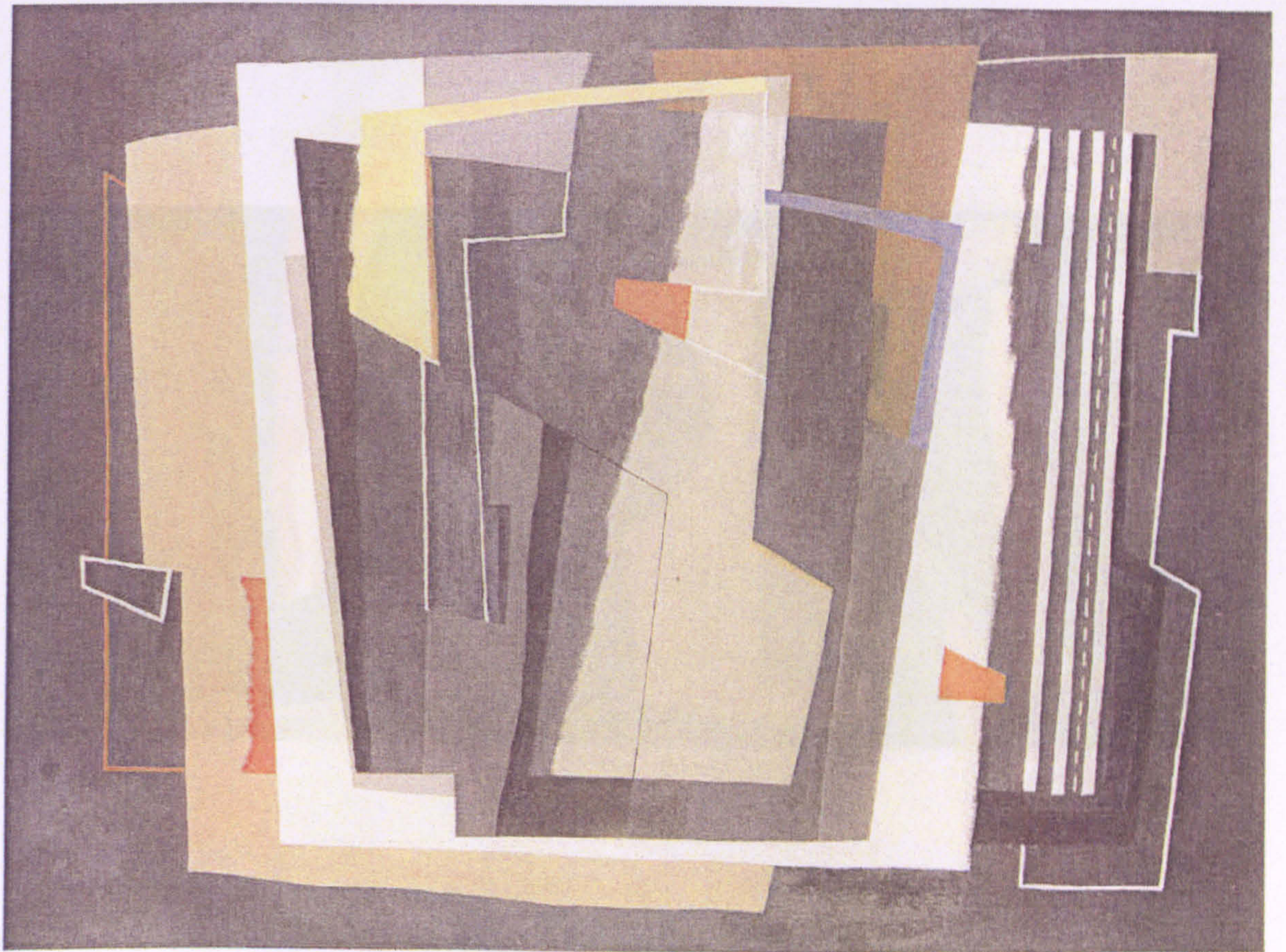
41. Picasso. *Guernica*, 1937



42. Wadsworth. *The English Channel*, 1934



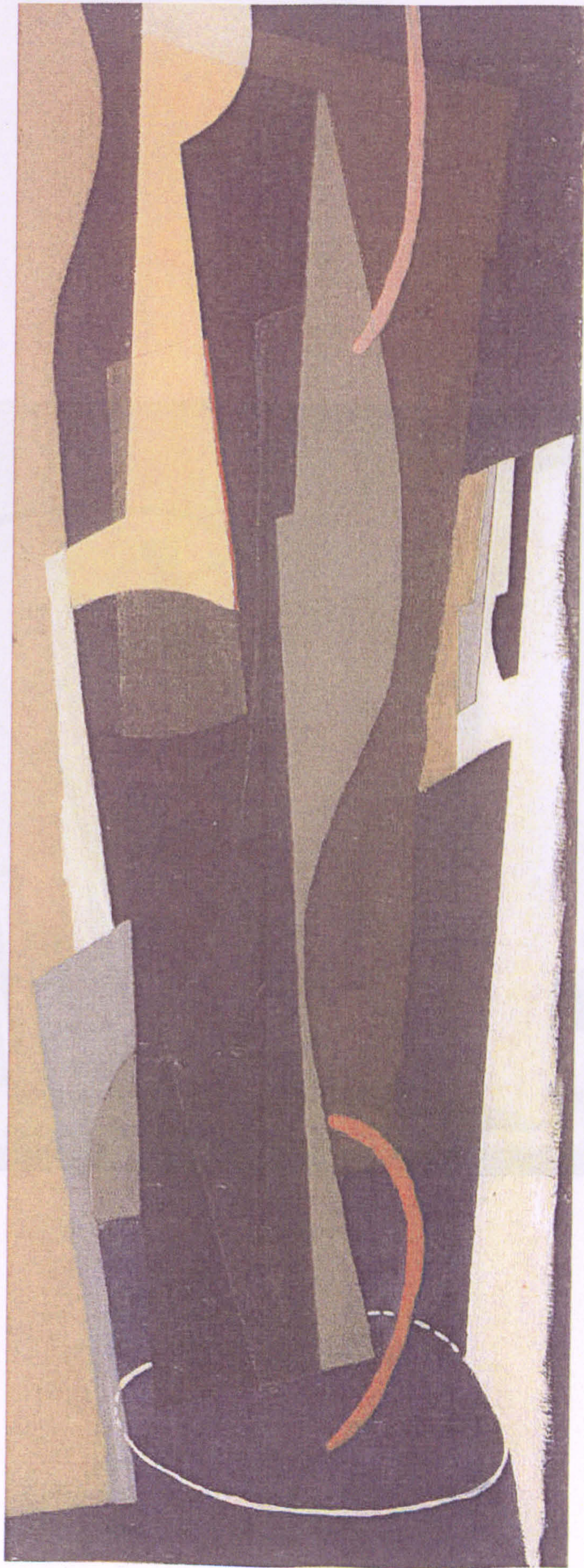
43. Piper. *Girls by the Sea*, 1933



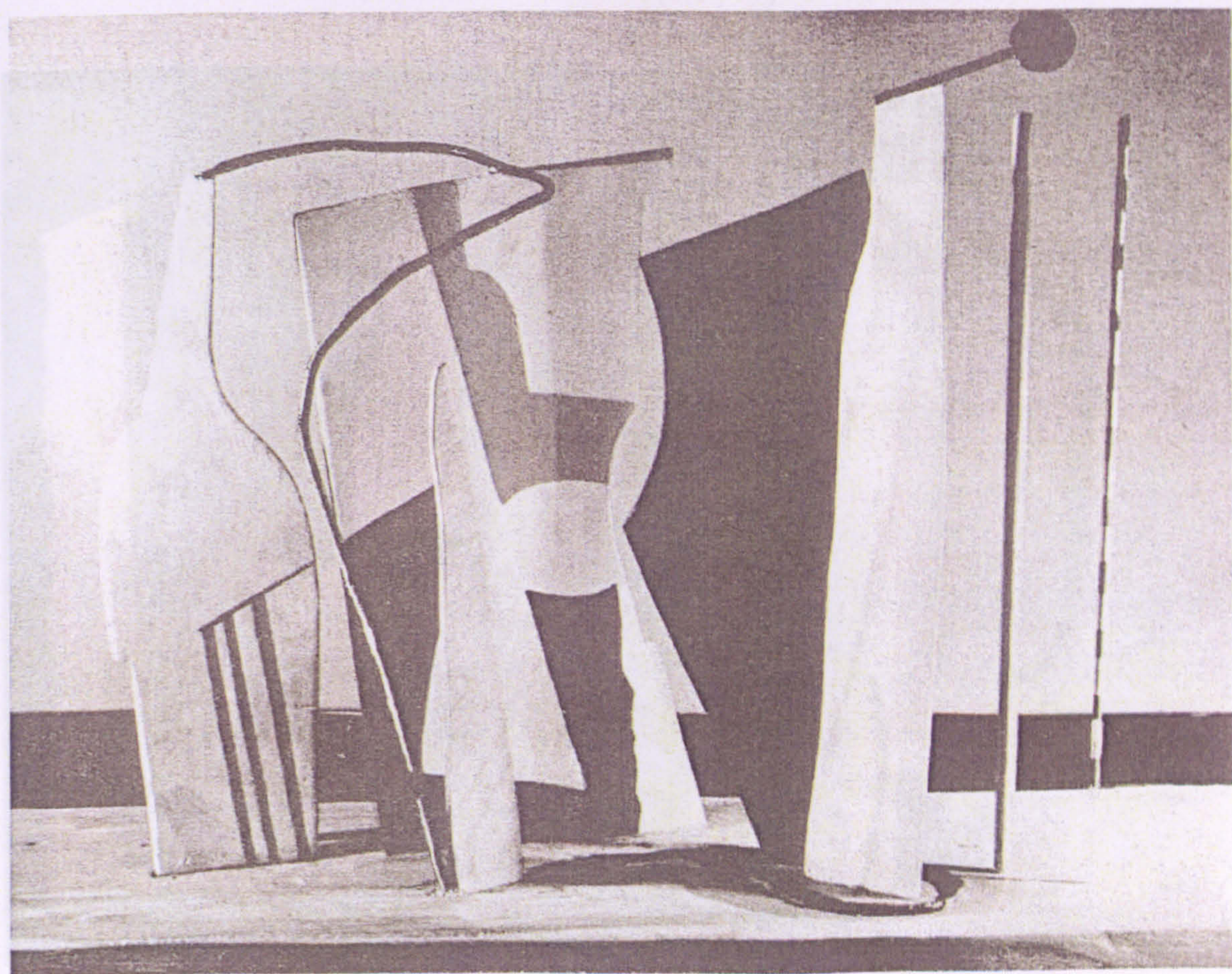
44. Piper. *Forms on Dark Blue*, 1936



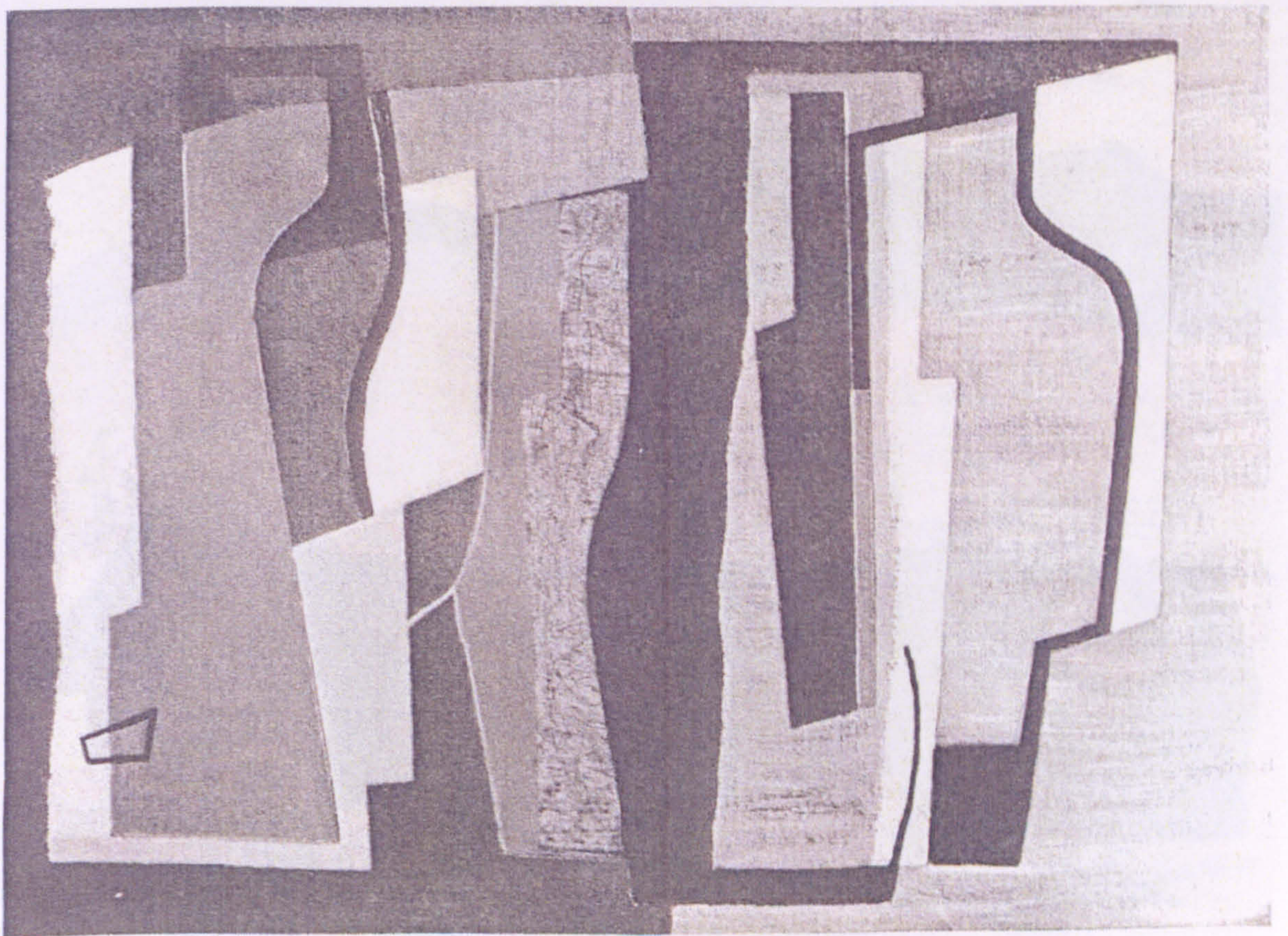
45. Piper. *Painting*, 1937



46. Piper. *Tall Forms on Dark Blue*, 1937



47. Piper. *Beach Object*, 1937

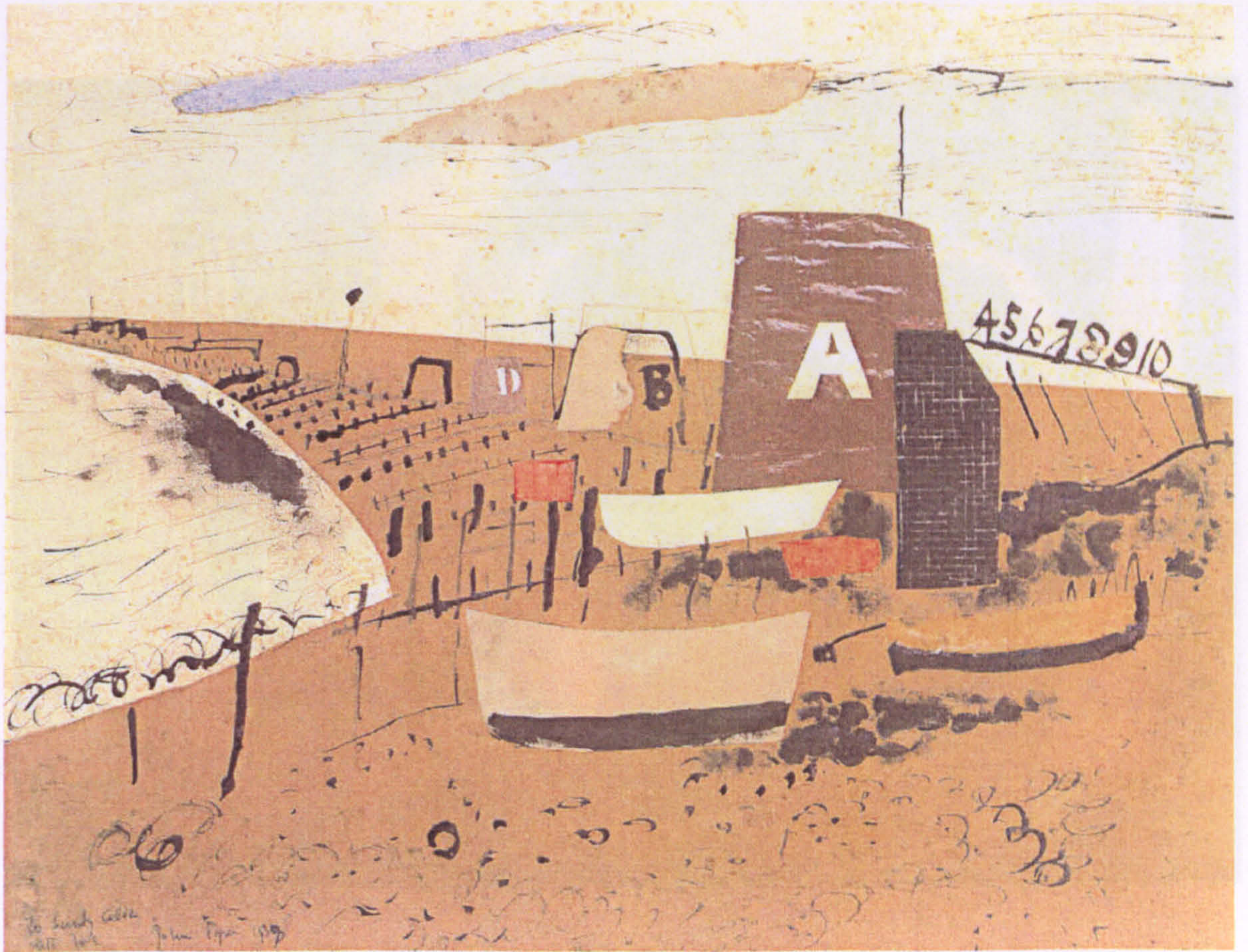


48. Piper. *Collection of Forms -- Painting*, 1937

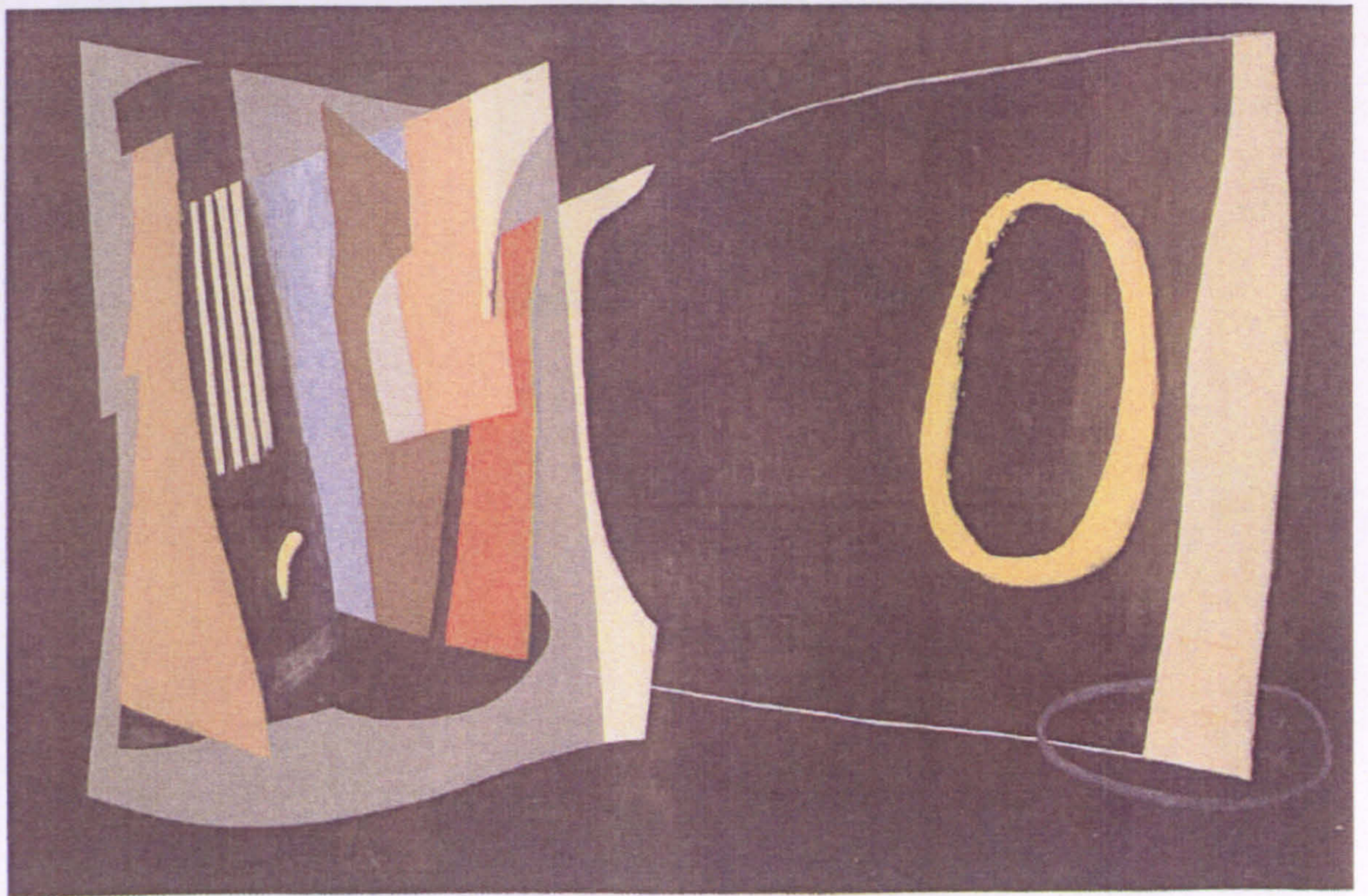




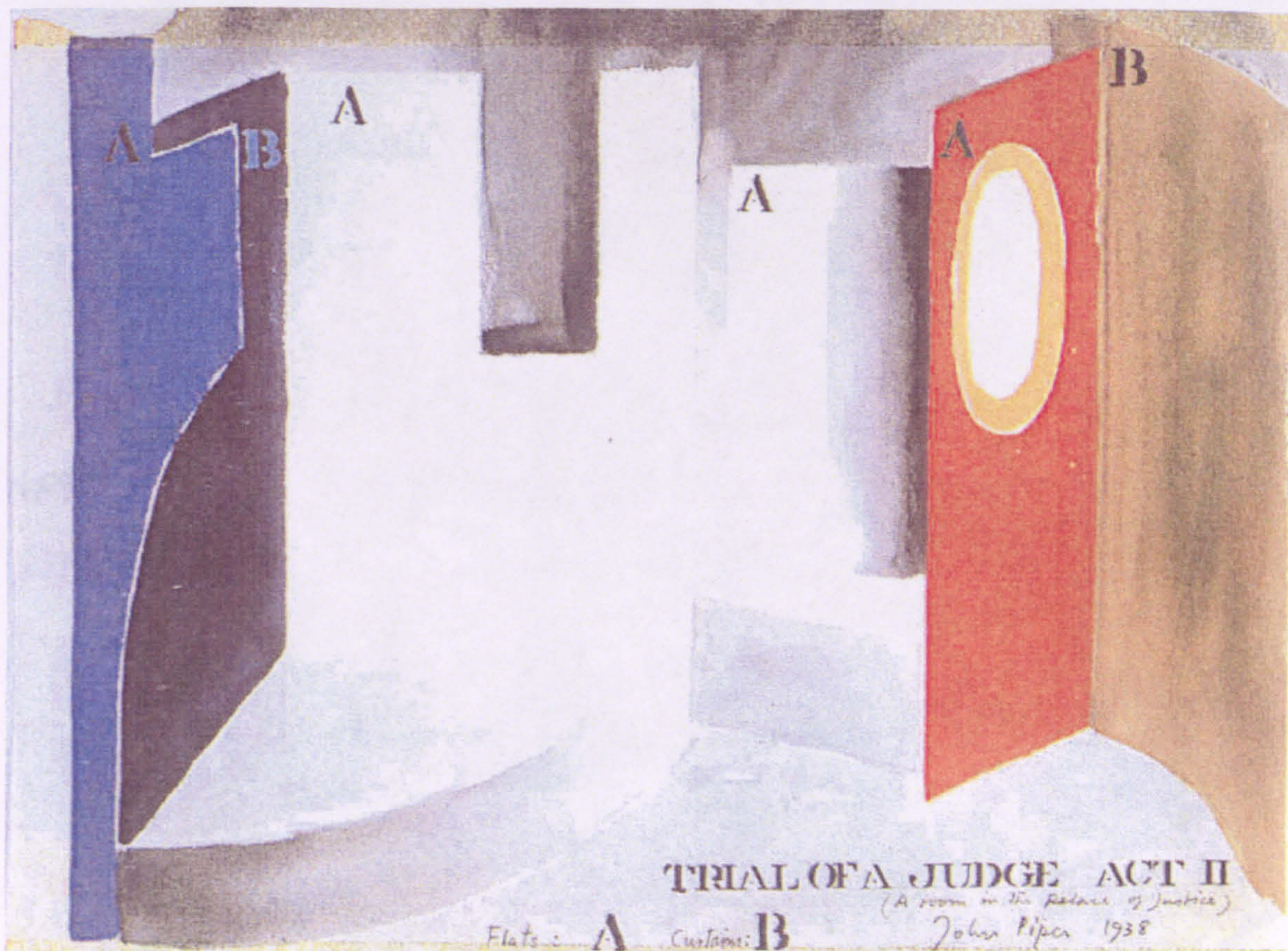
49. Piper. *Avebury or Archaeological Wiltshire*, 1936-37



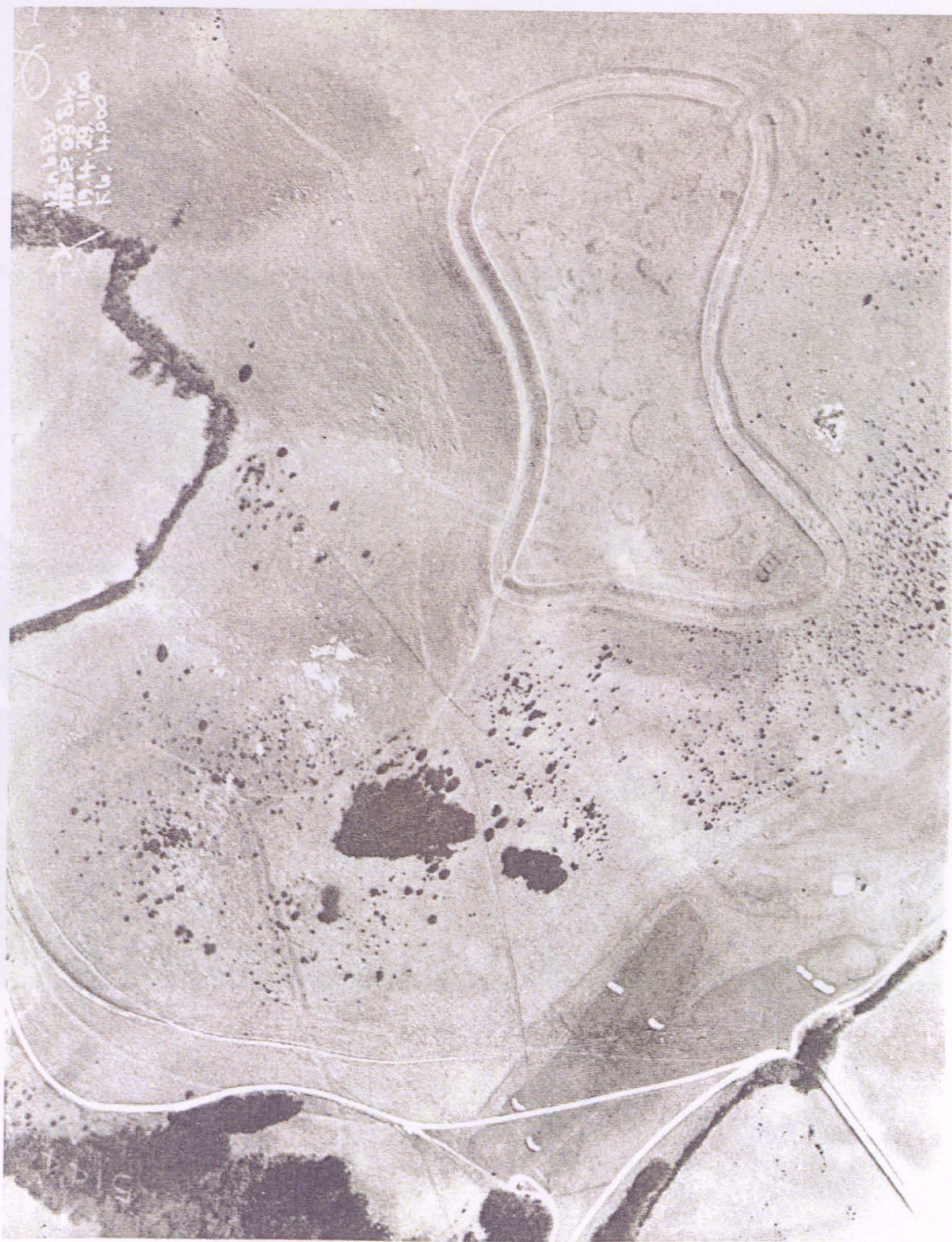
50. Piper. *Martello Towers at Hythe*, 1937



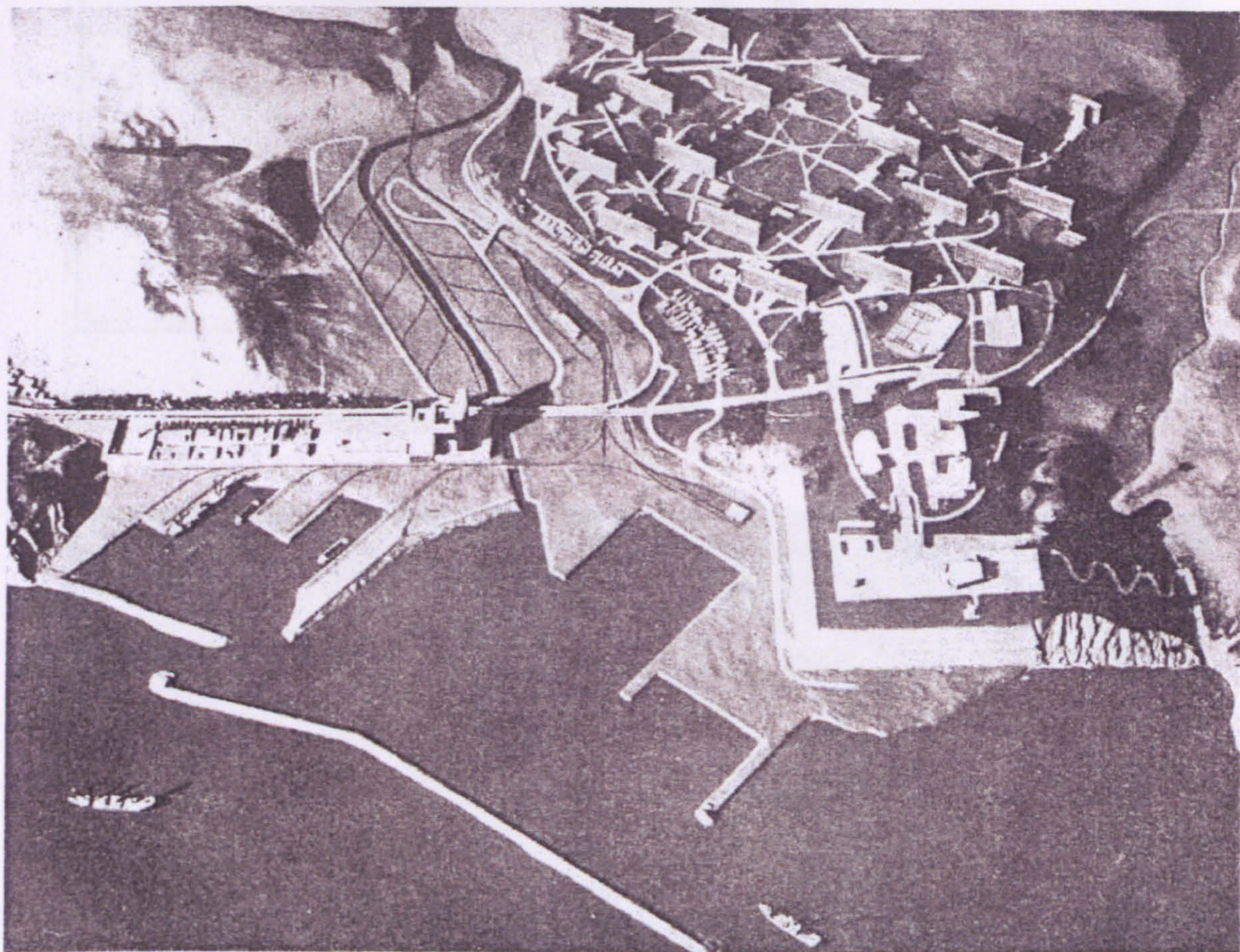
51. Piper. *Screen for the Sea, Black Ground*, 1938



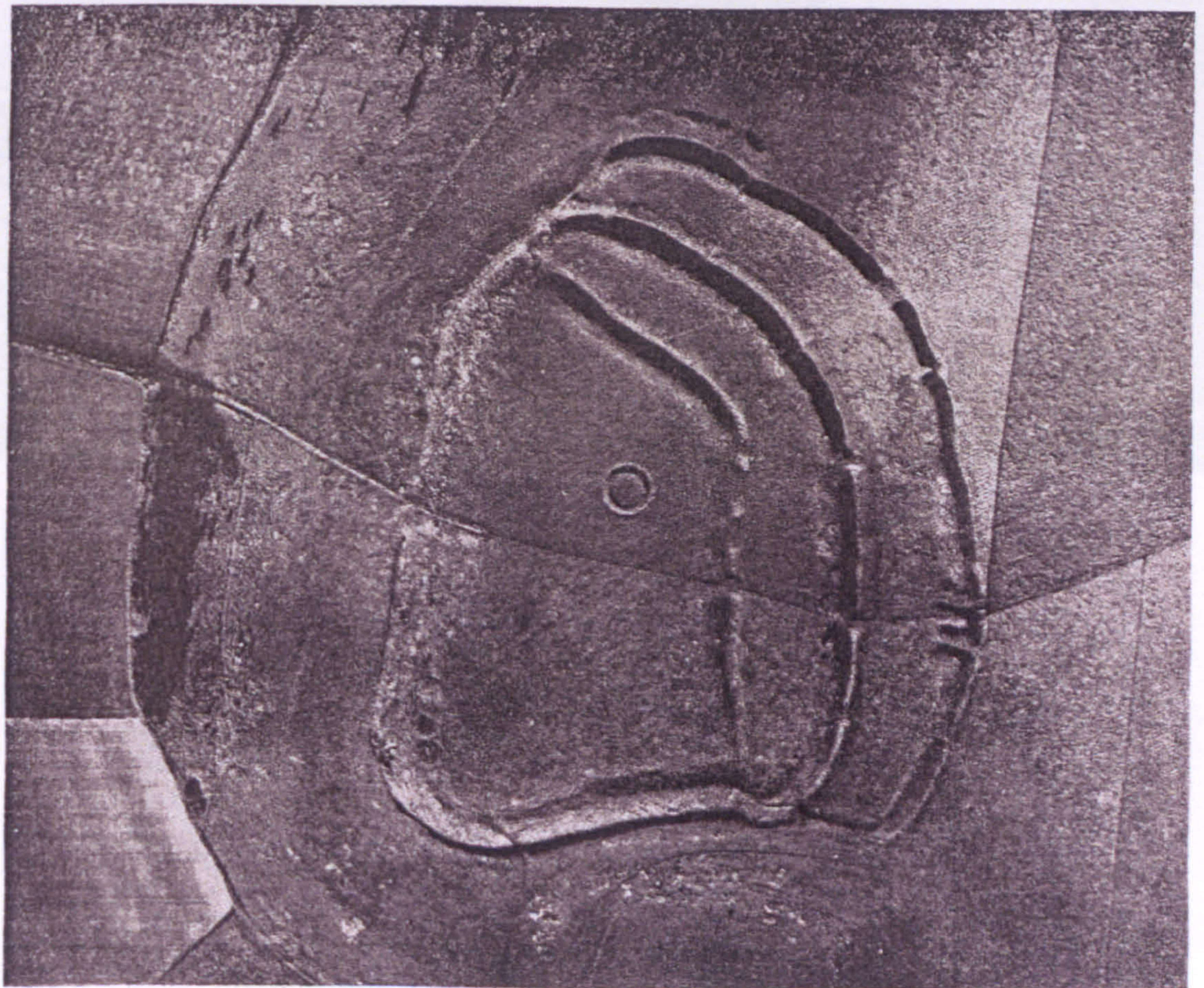
52. Piper. *A Room in the Palace of Justice: design for Trial of a Judge*, 1938



53. Beacon Hill, Hampshire, undated



54. Le Corbusier. *The Town Plan for Nemours, North Africa*, 1934



55. *White Sheet Castle, Wiltshire, undated*



56. *White Horse Hill, Uffington, Berkshire, undated*



Silbury Hill July 11. 1723.



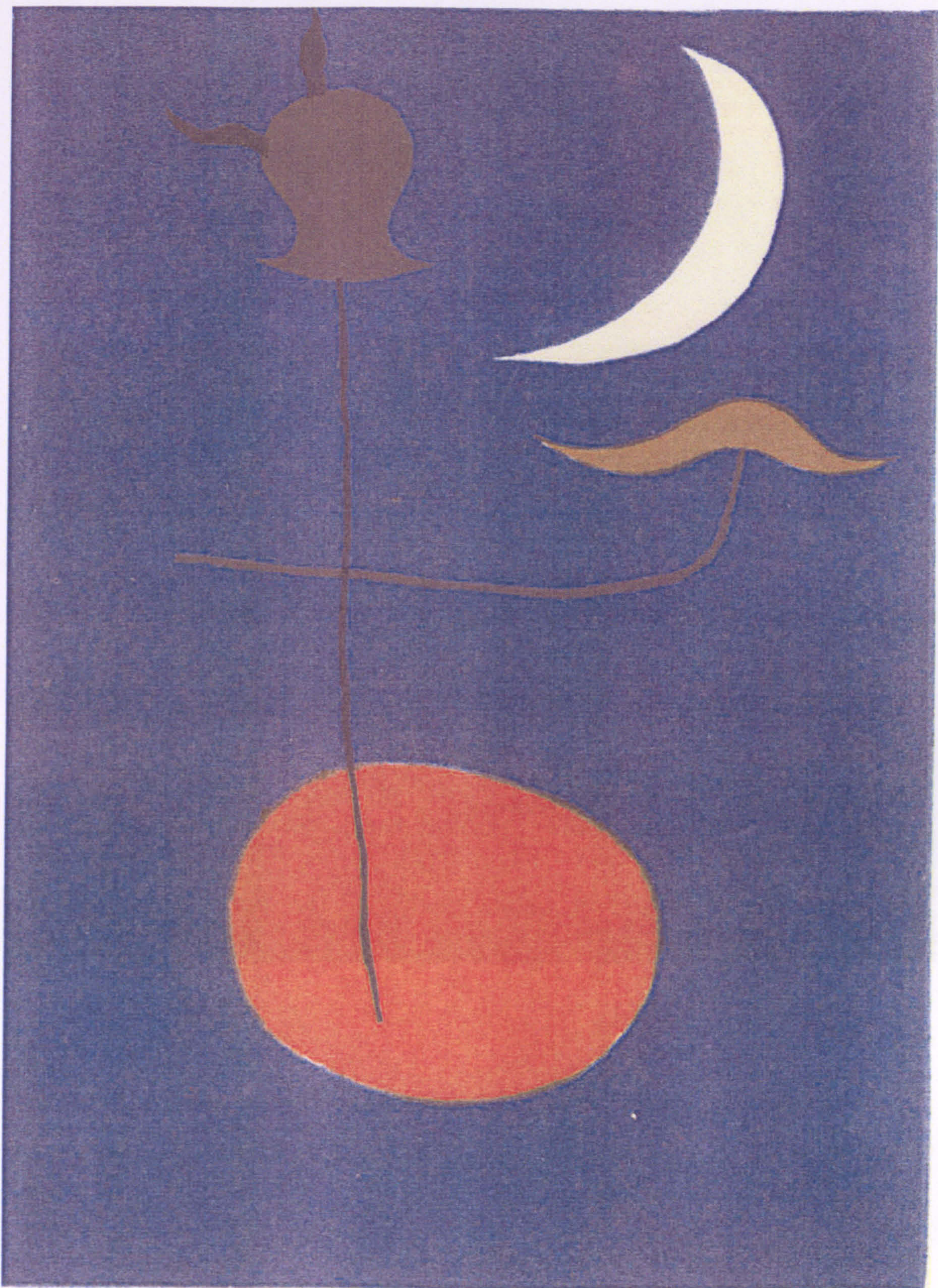
B. Stukely del.

A. The Roman road. B. the Snakes head or hakpen.

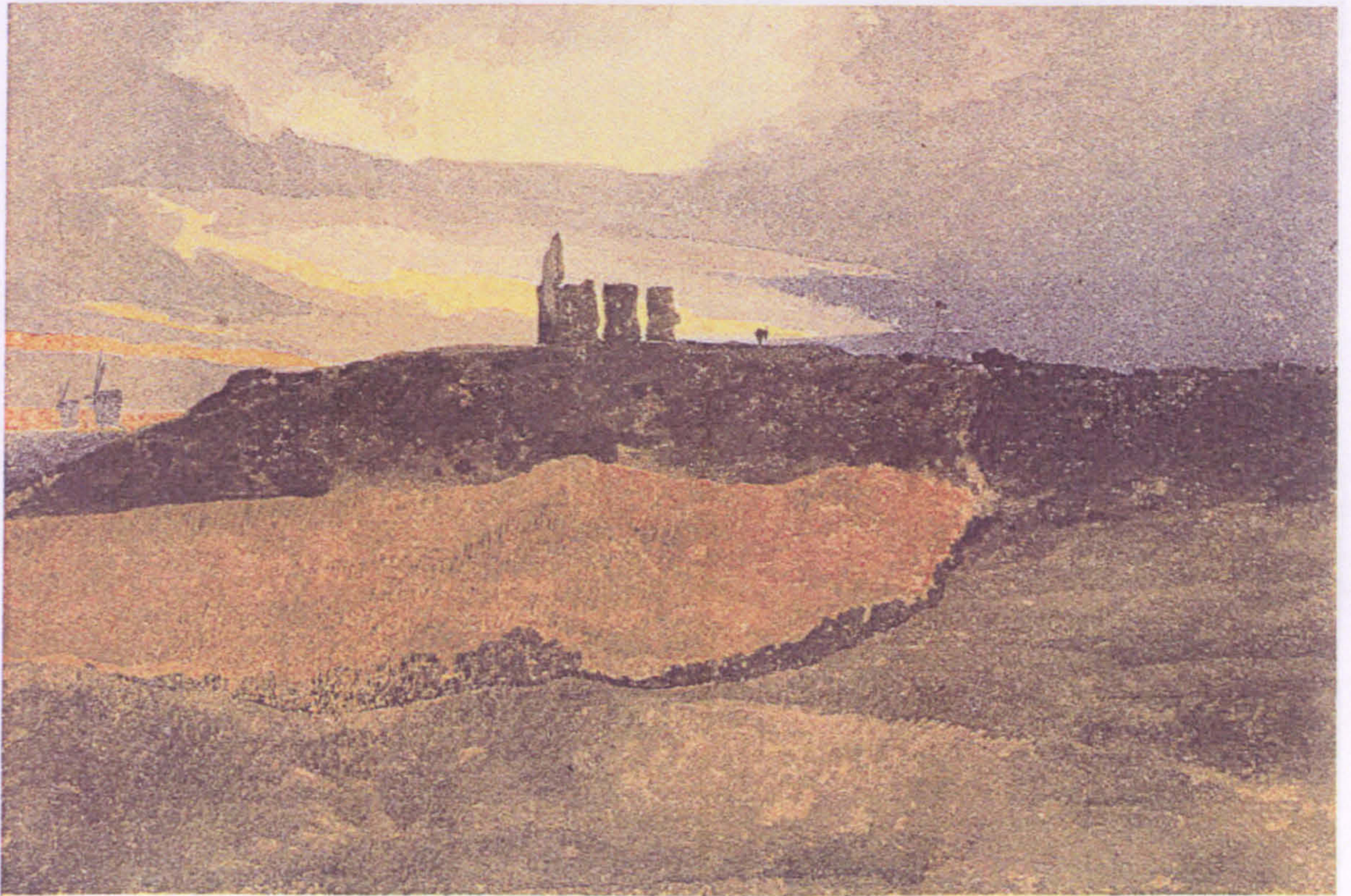


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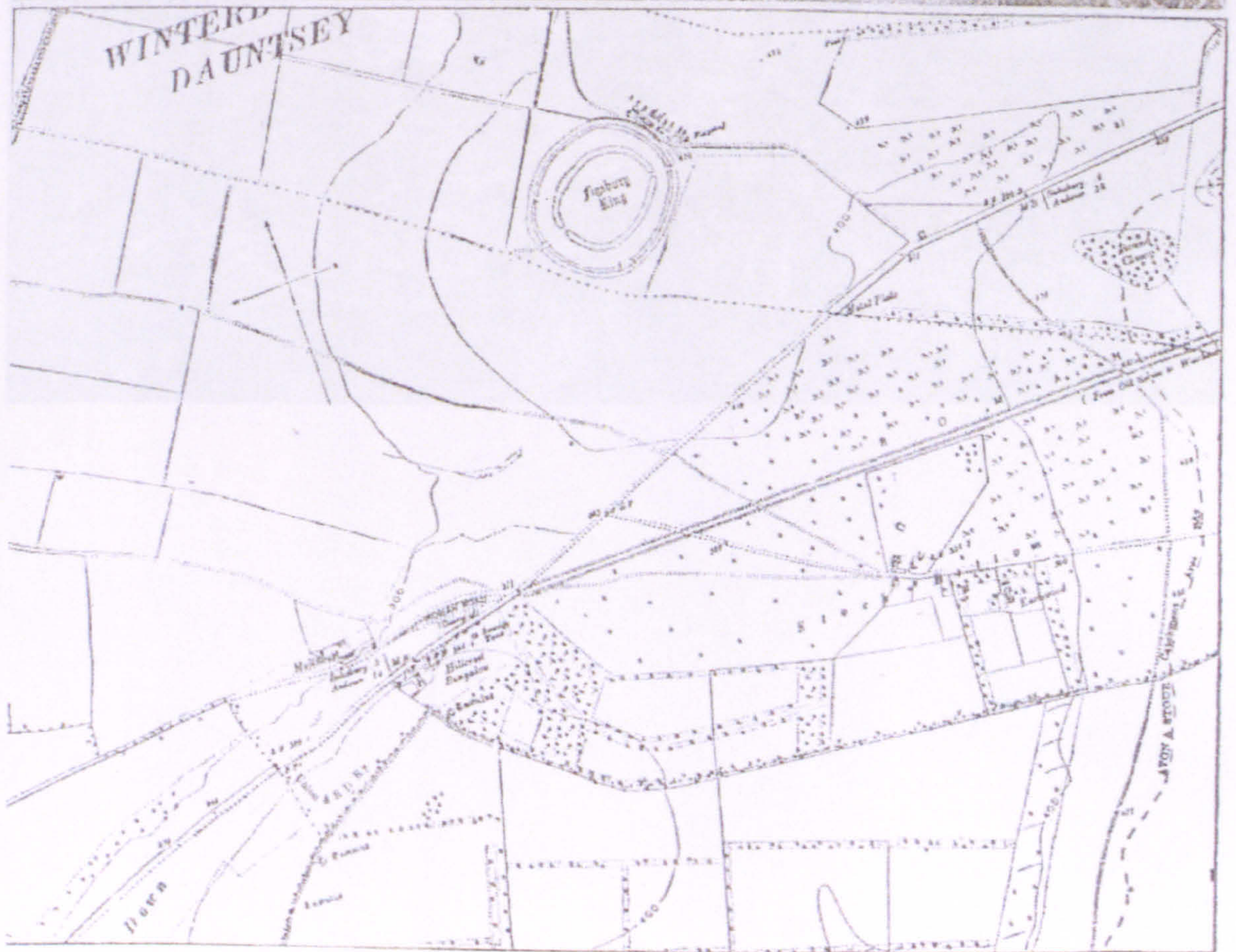
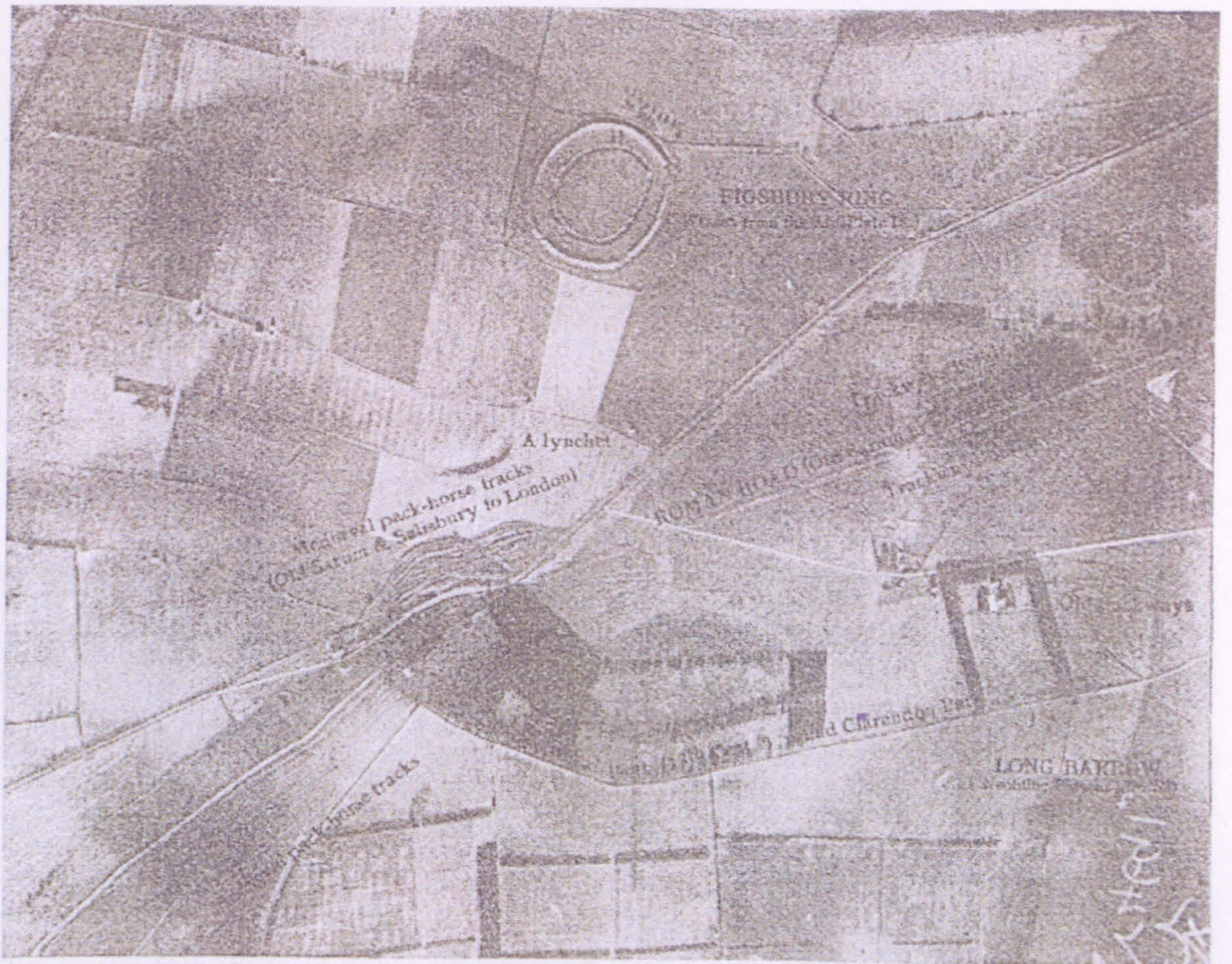
57. Silbury Hill, Avebury, Wiltshire, undated



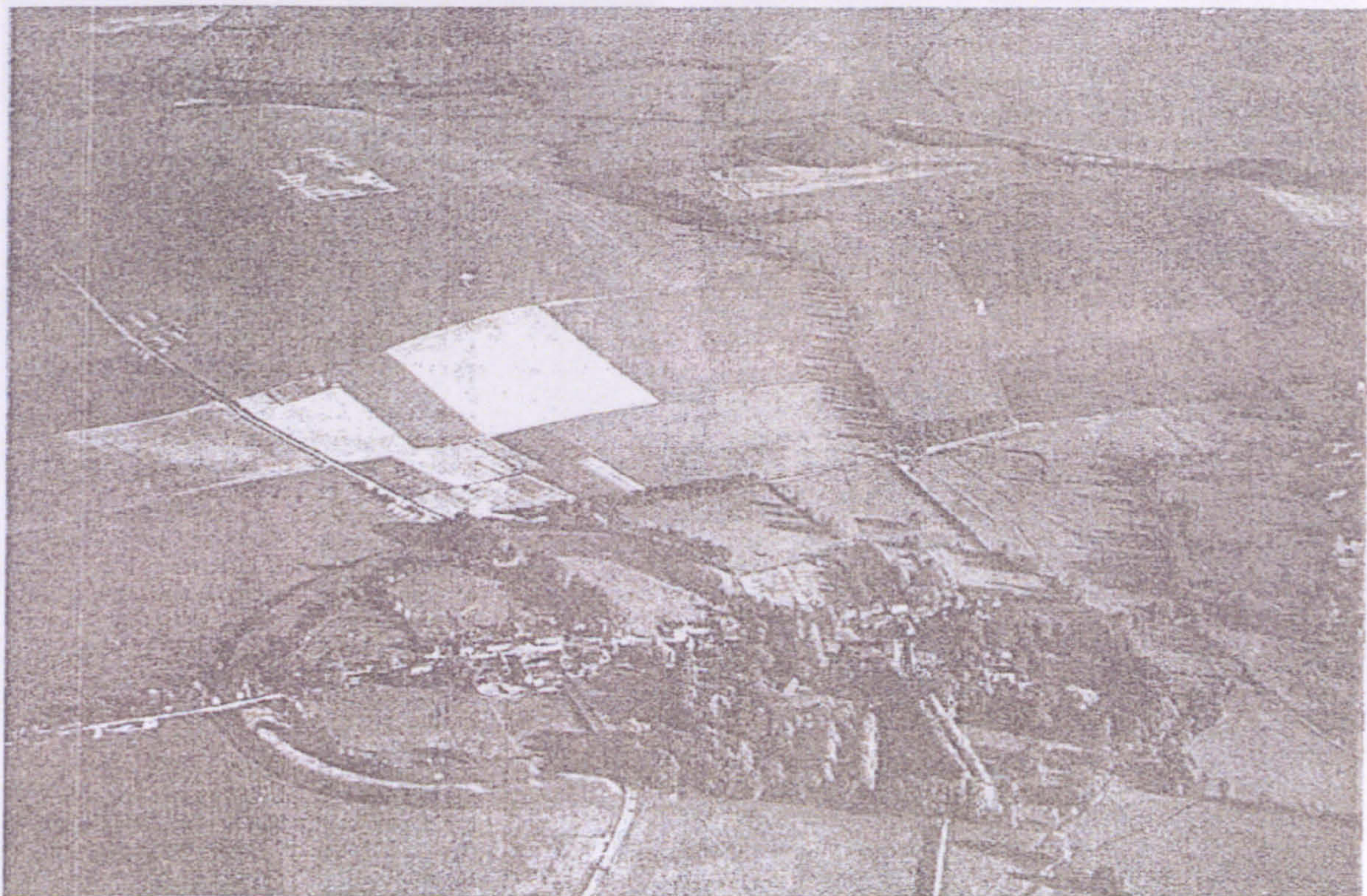
58. Miró. *Painting*, undated



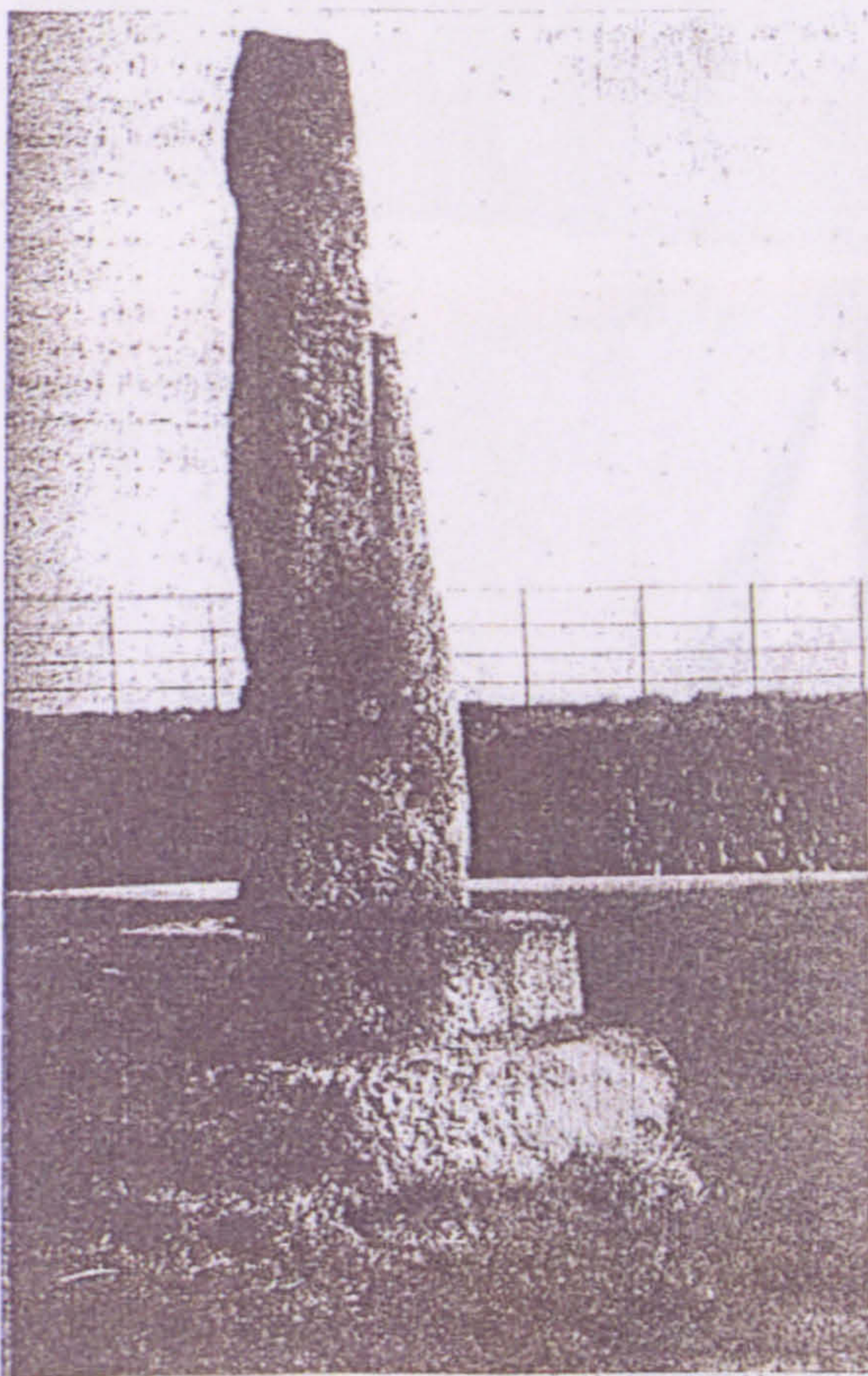
59. Cotman. *Kett's Castle, Norwich*, 1809-10



60. Figsbury Ring, Wiltshire, undated



61. Avebury, Wiltshire, undated



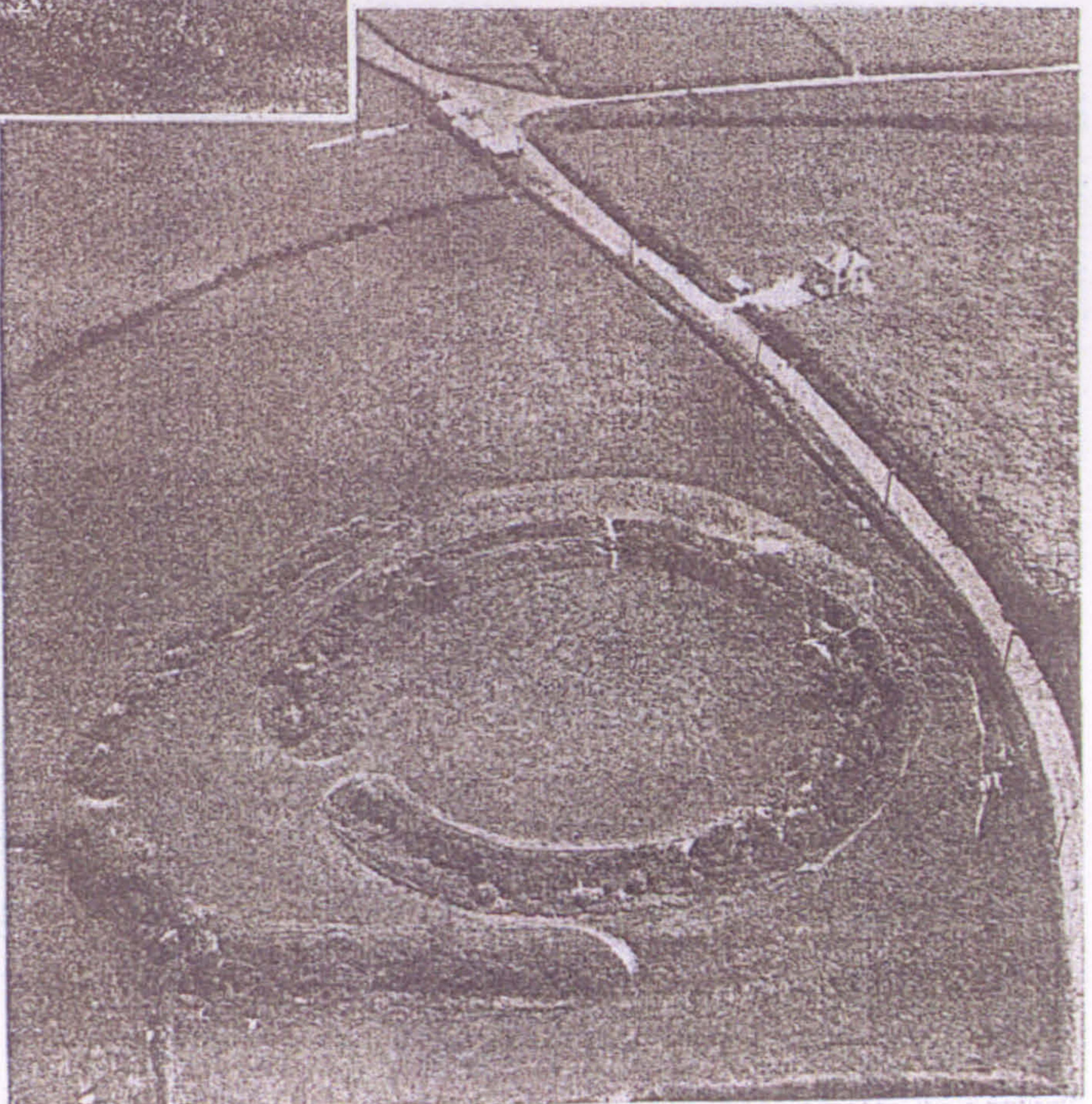
Tristan's Stone  
By courtesy of D. G. S. Crauford

Looe Island, which is too far away and from which the people of Lancien, as in the poem, could not have watched the battle, and then discovered evidence in the State Papers that an island once existed in the Fowey river itself; and in some versions of the legend the island of combat is called the island of St. Sampson.

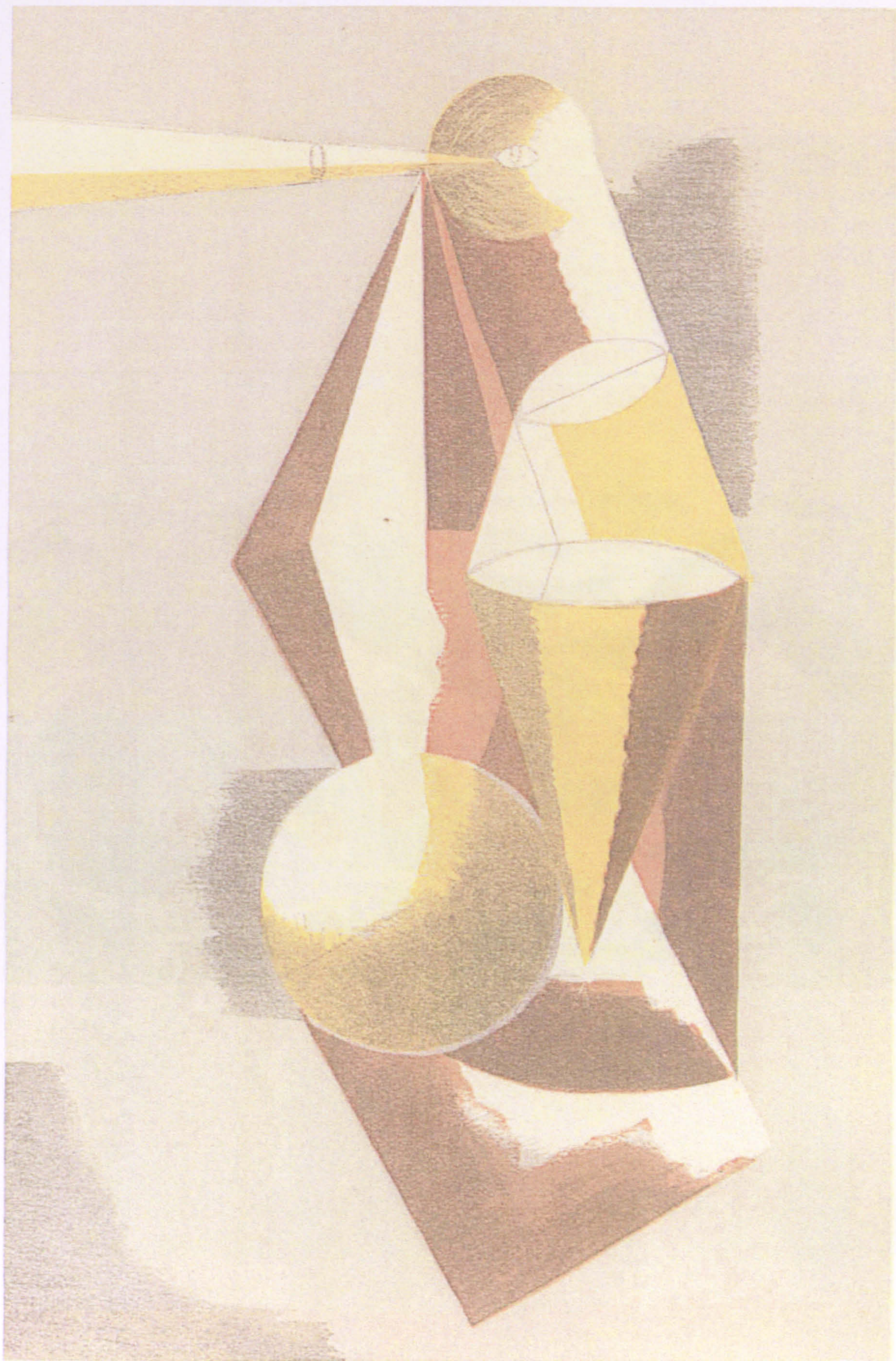
All the French Professor's ingenious identifications may not be sound. But better was to come. Within the former bounds of Lantyne Manor, on high ground looking to St. Austell Bay, and Hensbarrow Downs and the Bodmin Moors, and down on to the Fowey River, twisting among the trees, is a large hill camp with deep ditches and ramparts covered in gorse and elder, a camp which

camp (though it has now been moved nearer to Fowey) stood a stone inscribed with letters which have been read *Drustagni Fili Cunomori*, the stone of Drustagn, son of Cunomorus. Drustagn is one of the known early forms of the name Tristan; and Cunomorus, according to an early saint's life, is a name which also belonged to King Mark. So that here possibly—experts, though, dispute that reading of the first name—is the very tomb stone of Tristan, or at least a stone to do with his uncle. Purists who ask 'Why son, when Tristan was nephew to King Mark?' may be answered that the romances, anyway, held Mark to look upon Tristan, before the coming of Iseult, as his son, the king who would succeed him.

Castle Dore, as this hill camp is called, has alongside it, by the way, the small holding of Carhurles, which may be its earliest name, and which may mean, the late Cornish expert, Charles Henderson, thought, the Castle of Gorlois, who was, you will remember, that Duke of Cornwall who also owned Tintagel in legend, whose wife became the mother of Arthur by King Uther Pendragon. Just lately Castle Dore has been suffering from the excavator's spade, but however little the excavators may find which bears on its origin, it is now tolerably certain that the greatest love story of the world grew up out of events which happened in the Dark Ages by the banks of the Fowey, or at least that the legendary love of Tristan and Iseult was first written out by a forgotten Cornish poet who set it among the Cornish woods and valleys which he knew well, and that his lost poem became the basis of the Anglo-Norman of the twelfth century which has so luckily survived.



62. Top: *Tristan's Stone, Cornwall*, undated  
Bottom: *Castle Dore, Cornwall*, undated



63. Nash. *Poised Objects*, 1932



64. Nash. *Hill Architecture*, 1937





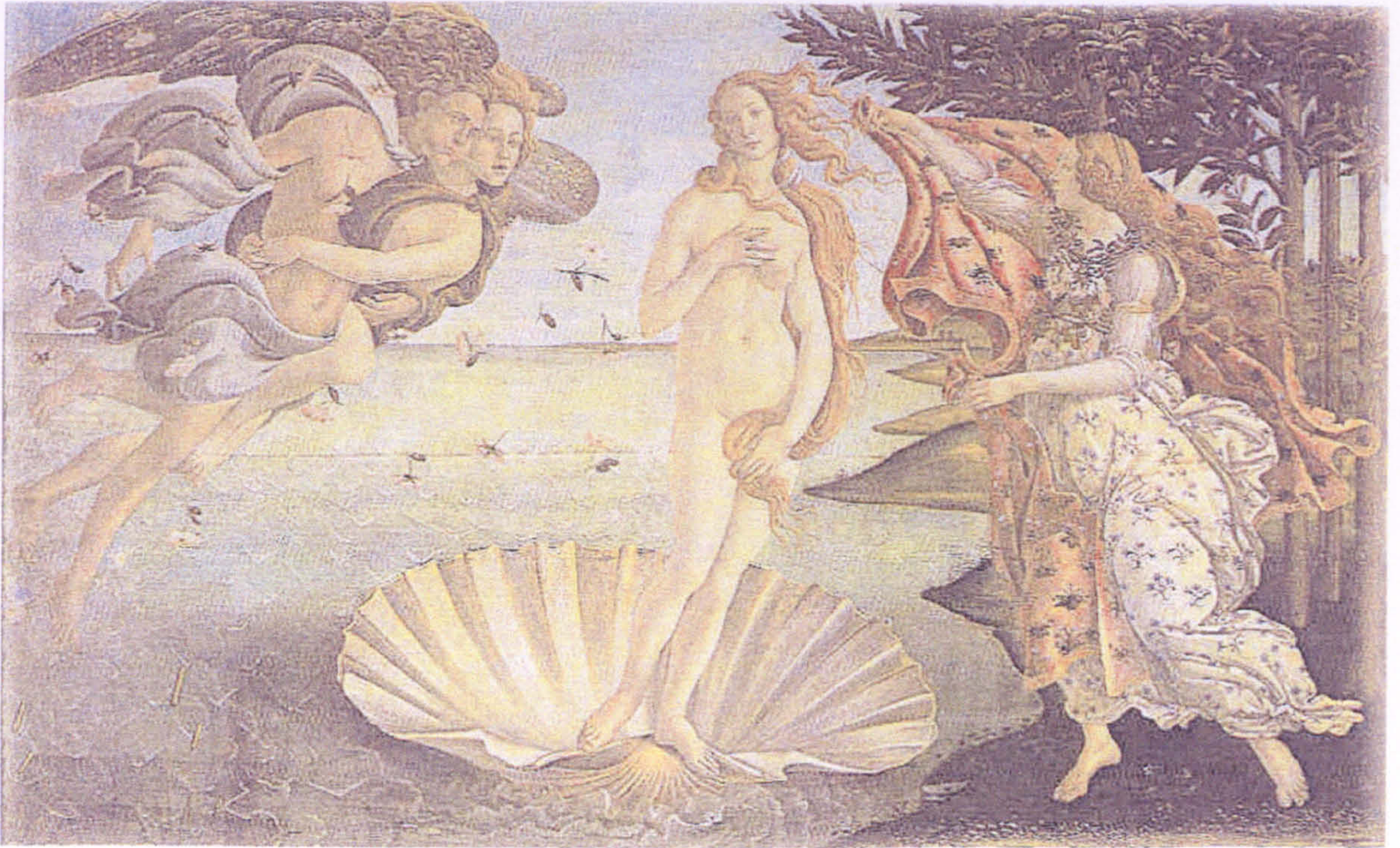
65. Nash. *Portrait of Lunar Hornet*, 1937



66. Nash. *Burnt Offering*, 1937



67. Nash. *Swan Song*, 1929



68. Botticelli. *Primavera*, 1447-48  
Botticelli. *The Birth of Venus*, c1485