

BEGGARSTAFFS : William Nicholson & James Pryde

Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge | 7 May – 4 August 2019 | Free



In the 1890s the painters William Nicholson and his brother-in-law James Pryde formed a ground-breaking artistic partnership. Both rejected conventional artistic training and they began working together as ‘the brothers Beggarstaff’. Now for the first time, their cutting-edge graphic posters will go on show after decades, alongside their finest individual works as painters, many lent from private collections. The exhibition will be a revelation, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see these rare works brought together.

Inventing an entirely novel technique involving collage and stencilling directly onto huge sheets of plain brown wrapping paper, the Beggarstaffs created some of the most innovative and memorable poster images of all time, including their celebrated Don Quixote poster for Henry Irving’s Lyceum Theatre production. Six of these original Beggarstaff poster designs have been loaned by the V&A. The largest of these works on paper - some almost 3 metres by 2 metres - have been kept in storage, rolled up, and unseen for many years.

The exhibition will illustrate for the first time the fascinating ways in which these young artists’ powerful reciprocal influence and shared love of striking subject matter worked on their wildly differing temperaments to inspire two remarkable careers.

Press | The Fitzwilliam Museum

By the late 1890s Nicholson, ever the more restless and industrious of the two, went on to develop his skills as a wood-engraver. Following the great success of his notoriously irreverent portrayal of Queen Victoria, he created several series of much-loved coloured prints, including *An Alphabet*, *London Types* and *An Almanac of Sports*, as well as two sets of brilliantly characterised portraits of contemporary celebrities ranging from Kipling to Sarah Bernhardt. These bold and masterful prints secured his reputation as one of the leading graphic artists of the decade.

In the early years of the twentieth century both Nicholson and Pryde, though no longer as close as in earlier times, were both acclaimed as leading Modern British painters: Nicholson for the subtlety of his portraits and the brilliant naturalism of his still-life and flower studies and exquisite landscapes; Pryde for the darker, stage-set quality of his street-scenes and imaginary views of sinister ruins.



The Beggarstaff Brothers, 'Kassama' Corn Flour, 1894
© Desmond Banks / © Victoria and Albert Museum

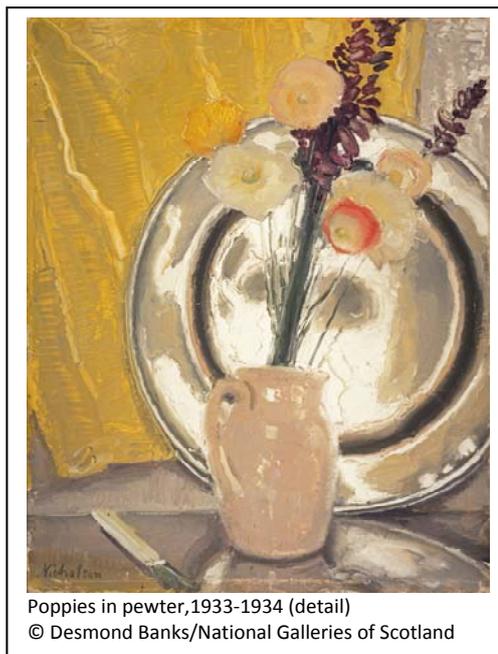
Initially both Nicholson and Pryde became obsessed with the imagery of legendary rogues, villains and other 'notable rascals' of history and literature. This fascination in turn led them both to the depiction of sinister scenes in real or imagined city streets. As they began more concertedly to explore the possibilities of painting, both adopted dark or low-key effects to enhance the moody power of their architectural and figure subjects.

Over time Pryde continued to express his more brooding and romantic temperament in superbly compelling depictions of ruined buildings and macabre interiors inspired by recollections of the Old Town in his native Edinburgh. Pryde's greatest artistic projects were two great series of pictures: the group of large capricci painted for Dunecht, the house of his Scottish patron Annie, Lady Cowdray, and his 'Human Comedy', an extraordinary sequence of canvases depicting vast four-poster beds (based, he claimed, on that of Mary, Queen of Scots, first seen as a child at Holyrood Palace) and charting the milestones of life - birth, courtship, illness and death - and ending with the decay and destruction of the great bed itself. Re-assembled as set-pieces in the show, these two great cycles will invite a re-assessment of Pryde's achievement as a modern master of the sombre and theatrical baroque.

By contrast, in the years before and after the Great War, Nicholson would develop a superb eye for exquisitely-nuanced effects of light and increasingly brighter colour harmonies in landscape, portraiture and still-life. But although at this time he gained recognition as a brilliant and incisive portraitist, he never relished the constraints of working to commission.

As the years passed, his real genius he put into small, informal landscapes and idiosyncratic still-life studies; such paintings, made largely for his own delectation, reveal his fascination with capturing fleeting shadows on distant hillsides, the precise colour of snow or the subtlety of reflections on the side of a polished metal jug. Now much-prized, these little masterpieces offer us a glimpse into the private world of a remarkable painter totally absorbed by his subject matter and in consummate command of his materials.

A loan from Her Majesty The Queen illustrates this perfectly. 'Gold Jug', 1937, by William Nicholson is HRH The Duchess of Cornwall's favourite painting. HRH The Duchess of Cornwall said in Country Life Magazine, '*Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother had an unerring eye for a good painting. Sir William Nicholson's Gold Jug is a testament to that. It hangs in Clarence House and I can never pass it without stopping to marvel at the way the artist catches the play of light on the jug's lustrous surface.*'



Poppies in pewter, 1933-1934 (detail)
© Desmond Banks/National Galleries of Scotland

Pride and Nicholson established themselves at the heart of London's artistic avant-garde and became prominent figures in the bohemian circles that met in draughty studios, down-at-heel pubs or the grand rooms of the Cafe Royal; this vibrant and amusing world is documented in the exhibition through photographs and personal drawings made by the two painters of each other and those made of them by their many artist friends such as William Open, James Gunn and Augustus John.

The exhibition curated for the Fitzwilliam Museum by Stephen Calloway.

Images for media use here. <https://bit.ly/2GaqlD2>

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Notes to editors:

About the Fitzwilliam Museum

Founded in 1816 the Fitzwilliam Museum is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge and lead partner for the University of Cambridge Museums (UCM) Major Partner Museum programme, funded by The Arts Council. It houses over half a million objects from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, masterpiece paintings from the Renaissance to the 21st century, world class prints and drawings, and outstanding collections of coins, Asian arts, ceramics and other applied arts. The Fitzwilliam is an internationally recognised institute of learning, research and conservation.

www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB | Free admission

OPEN: Tuesday – Saturday: 10.00 - 17.00, Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 – 17.00; CLOSED: 24-26 & 31 December, 1 January, Good Friday **Business Partners** The Museum is supported by our Business Partners during 2019; TTP Group plc, and Brewin Dolphin.