



WILLIAM NICHOLSON (1872-1949)

White Cliffs

c.1910

Oil on panel
9 5/8 x 14 in. (24.4 x 35.6 cm)

PROVENANCE

Possibly Lady Henry Bentinck;
Christie's, London, 10 July 1922, lot 87;
W. W. Sampson, acquired from the above;
Edward Hudson and thence by descent;
Christie's, London, 3 May 1937, lot 128 [as *On the Cliffs*];
Private collection;
Sotheby's, London, June 1980, lot 32;
Sheridan Frederick Terence Hamilton-Temple-Blackwood, 5th Marquess of Dufferin and Ava, and thence
by descent;
Philip Mould & Company, acquired from the above 2026.

LITERATURE

Andrew Nicholson, (1996) *William Nicholson: Painter*. London: Giles de la Mare Publishers Limited, p.101 (illus.);
Patricia Reed, (2011) *William Nicholson: Catalogue Raisonné of the Oil Paintings*. New Haven: Yale University
Press, p.182.

EXHIBITED

Possibly, Goupil Gallery, London, 1910, no. 55 [as *Catching Butterflies*].



Fig. 1. William Nicholson, Judd's Farm, 1912
Towner

William Nicholson returned repeatedly to the cliffs at Rottingdean and the rolling South Downs, drawn to their elemental forms and luminous coastal light. In this work, the dramatic landscape is painted through tactile, broad brushstrokes that recall both Impressionist handling and the simplified spatial planes associated with modernist abstract painting.

Nicholson's landscapes of the South Downs occupy a particularly interesting position between realism and abstraction. As Miriam O'Connor Perks has recently observed, Nicholson's landscape painting could become an "almost abstract exploration of the interplay of light, tone and colour, whilst also being resolutely connected to the character of a place".[1] The tiny, playful figures walking along the ridge emphasise the monumentality of the landscape. Nicholson frequently included walkers in his Sussex landscapes, often members of his own family, and Perks has noted that the inclusion of these figures can serve to bring a composition back from pure abstraction.[2]

Nicholson later reflected on his method when discussing his painting Judds Farm: "*The colours – few, but inevitable; my subject – so simple that I could finish it in my head before releasing the paint ... Simplification in tone is a secret of great value*".[3] The success of its apparent spontaneity is

underpinned by considerable formal discipline where the colour is restricted and the landscape reduced to its most essential components. Long before his son Ben Nicholson became one of the major figures of British abstraction, William had developed a pictorial language based upon simplification, flattened space and the expressive possibilities of colour and surface.

Rottingdean became central to Nicholson's landscape painting from 1909, when he purchased the old vicarage there, renaming it The Grange. It served as his summer home and studio until 1915. The village then retained the character of a rural and artistic enclave, associated with figures including Rudyard Kipling and Edward Burne-Jones, with the South Downs looming immediately behind it.

[1] Miriam O'Connor Perks, (2026) "Harmony of Eye and Hand and Surroundings": William Nicholson's Landscapes and Townscapes", in Simon Martin and Melaine Vandenbrouck (eds.), *William Nicholson*. Chichester: Pallant House, p.137.

[2] Ibid.

[3] William Nicholson, (1934) 'The Making of a Picture', *The Artist*. quoted in ibid.