



IVON HITCHENS

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1893–1979



Beneath the Wildwood

When we together roved
Beneath the wildwood's oak tree bough
And Nature said we loved

John Clare
1793-1864



Curtain with flower design by Ivon and John Hitchens, 1960s (see cover).

Introduction

Fram Dinshaw

Ivon Hitchens was the only member of the Seven and Five Society to exhibit in all fourteen of its group shows between 1920 and 1935. The Society was a key showcase for contemporary British art between the Wars. A reviewer of the 1922 exhibition noted that Hitchens brought 'an entirely new and entirely alluring aspect of landscape painting before us'. Smaller and more close-knit than the Royal Academy or the London Group, the Society was less aggressive than Wyndham Lewis's wartime Vorticists or the contemporaneous, but less durable, Group X. To a critic of the first Seven and Five show in 1920 the exhibitors seemed more Menshevik than Bolshevik. The Society began somewhere near the Post-Impressionism of Roger Fry, Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell's Omega Workshops, with their Francophile still lifes and views from windows; Hitchens said Clive Bell's *Art* (1914) 'became my Bible'. It ended with the development in the 1930s of a more characteristically English style, flirting with International Modernism but more often occupying its hinterland and much more attuned to an English spirit of poetic landscape.

At different times the Society showed works by Hitchens, Ben and Winifred Nicholson, Henry Moore, Barbara

Hepworth, Christopher Wood, David Jones, Cedric Morris, Frances Hodgkins and John Piper.

From 1924 onwards its leading light was Ben Nicholson, tugging the Society in an ever more non-representational direction. Nicholson's journey into severely neutral geometric abstraction betokened an increasingly intellectual attitude to his art. He made sure that the final Seven and Five exhibition, at Zwemmers in 1935, would be exclusively non-representational, restyling its name as the more modernist '7 & 5'. Hitchens was interested to test the possibilities of abstraction; the results can be seen in the fine *Triangle to Beyond* (1936) and *Coronation* (1937), both now at Tate Britain. Others, like Piper, would drift away from abstraction in favour of a topographical Neo-Romanticism. Hitchens is an exception to both these tendencies.

While remaining on friendly terms with his previous associates, and also the remarkable wider artistic circle of Hampstead neighbours that included Paul Nash, Herbert Read, David Bomberg, Naum Gabo, Walter Gropius and Piet Mondrian, Hitchens remained resolutely his own man. His art combined the

development of a rigorous and distinctive aesthetic with a painterliness that he was reluctant to verbalise, since its source was instinctual and heart-felt. 'My pictures are painted to be listened to', he declared. A famous photograph taken in 1931 shows Hitchens on a Norfolk beach along with the Moores, Hepworth and Ben Nicholson. It is evidently quite a hot day. Moore and Nicholson have taken off their shirts. Nicholson sits barefoot on the sand. Hepworth stands smoking in a sleeveless black top, her arms held theatrically high behind her head. Hitchens stands a little apart, looking on quizzically from the left. He is warmly dressed in jacket, jumper and tie, with a macintosh incongruously slung over his left arm. It is something of a statement; Hitchens was modest and unshowy in everything except his art.

In 1940, when his Hampstead studio suffered severe bomb damage, Hitchens moved his young family to a gypsy caravan in six acres of secluded Sussex woodland. This sanctuary became the principal source and inspiration for his mature work, the ultimate development in oil paint of experimental landscape sketches in tempera and water-colour he had been making since 1920. In these mature works he retained an element



Portfolio with leather straps used by Hitchens.



Studio view with sketches and easel.

of figuration, however glancingly or freely painted. It is reinforced by their descriptive titles. His attachment to the sensuousness of paint is evident in the virtuosity and certainty with which he could handle a loaded brush. He began producing pictures at a very high level of technical proficiency often returning in series to the same subject as in *Terwick Mill* (1944) or *Warnford Water* (1960). From the 1950's onwards the tonal contrast between his bands of colour is often separated by a firmer edge or space which he described as 'building these channels with an edge, either a dark or a light boundary. But I prefer to keep the darks as part of the notation, so white becomes the natural and expressive boundary'. There were other such refinements over the years, but over an unusually single-minded sixty-year career his self-appointed task of transforming 'a visual reaction to nature' into 'line, tone, colour and plane' remained his key objective.

Ivon Hitchens was born in 1893 in Kensington Square. He was an only child and remembered his childhood as 'quiet and unexciting'. His father Alfred, also a painter, enjoyed a limited and conventional, late-Victorian career, exhibiting at the Royal Academy and living off portrait commissions.

Somewhat less conventionally he was an adherent of Theosophy, the esoteric spiritual cult drawing on Hinduism and Buddhism initiated in America by Mme Blavatsky and flourishing in England under the leadership of Annie Besant. In 1913 Alfred painted a portrait of Besant's Indian protégé and adopted son Krishnamurti, who she claimed was the new Messiah. Ivon's mother Ethel (née Seth-Smith) came from comfortable middle-class circumstances near Guildford. In 1895 the family moved to Englefield Green, near Windsor, but the search for work drove them back to Hampstead in 1909. Ivon had been sent to Bedales School, where the relatively non-conformist and relaxed atmosphere suited him. He could also 'absorb the surrounding English landscape'.

Hitchens trained at the Royal Academy Schools where he encountered John Singer Sargent, Sir William Orpen and Sir George Clausen as visiting teachers. An early work, *Curved Barn* (1922), possibly influenced by Claude Flight, is accomplished but rather careful and static. He had not yet found his own balance and rhythm, as he ruefully acknowledged when giving the picture to Pallant House Gallery just before his death in 1979.

However, the work of Paul Cézanne and Henri Matisse, mediated through the efforts of Clive Bell and Roger Fry was energising a quest for a more personal pictorial language where the arduous work of composition would rise to the challenge of evoking and resonating with an original emotional response. This would be an art where plane, tone and above all contrasting bands of colour rather than narrative or representation would create meaning. He was very conscious that the magic of colour could lead the eye a dance into depth while never forgetting the flatness of the picture plane. 'The essence of my theory' he told Herbert Read 'is that colour is space and space is colour'. He also said that 'Art is not reporting, it is memory'.

What Hitchens took from the Post-Impressionists can be exemplified by looking at the background of Matisse's *La Femme au Chapeau* (1905). If you narrow your eyes to occlude the portrait's features, what remains is a tone poem in which the dreamy and romantic sections of background colour clash with the red oranges of Mme Matisse's hair, ears, lips and collar as well as the boat-shaped horizontal gash of blues and purples that make up the hat's rim. That confidently loaded brushwork and freedom of

expression were an important influence on Hitchens.

In the 1930s, and even more in the Sussex years that followed, Hitchens repeatedly practiced and refined a style in which form, tone and colour would serve to anchor a composition. The mature Hitchens style, played out in an endless series of musical variations, is characterised by confidently balanced composition holding together daring visual experiments. The wide horizontal, 'cinemascope' canvasses that became his trademark are intended to be read like music from left to right, with rhythmic and multiple perspectives that mirror the experience of absorbing or 'reading' a landscape through time. Hitchens described this visual technique as 'eye-music'. The central portion of the wide view tends to be more intensely worked while the brush gestures at either end often evoke the sensation of peripheral vision. But the demands of the initial visual impulse are stringently balanced by the demands of the picture itself. The whole process of painting is a quest to match the one to the other. The essence of his achievement lies in the sophisticated balance between the freedom of – the increasingly virtuoso – brushwork and the structure and unity of the composition.



One of Ivon Hitchens' models, photograph by the artist, 1950s.



Workman cutting wood near the studio, photograph by Ivon Hitchens, 1950s.

Many right-handed painters energetically using the horizontal double-square format find their compositions tilting upwards to the right – Matthew Smith is often a case in point. In Hitchens' works freedom and energy coexist with compositional balance – there is nothing involuntary in their structure. Although there are some preparatory drawings, most of his work is painted freehand. Yet the discovery in his studio of large sheets of tracing paper, or possibly baking foil, covered in blue wash marks may suggest that these were some kind of premeditated anchoring notation. For so original an artist, Hitchens remains to a surprising degree a painter for the cognoscenti of twentieth-century British art. It is ironic to think, when looking at the recipients today of successive Turner Prizes, that Hitchens represented Britain in the Venice Biennale in 1956. As early as 1940 John Piper was comparing his patiently crafted technique to the poetry of both Edward Thomas and Gerard Manley Hopkins. In 1942 his old mentor Clive Bell detected in his Sussex landscapes 'a great leap forward'. Younger painters such as Roger Hilton, Lawrence Gowing, Patrick Heron and Peter Lanyon were generous in acknowledging his example. John Russell Taylor also noted in 1968 the obvious debt to Hitchens in the work of Howard Hodgkin, who was less

keen to acknowledge it, though it was to grow ever larger after Hitchens' death in 1979. All these acute observers saw how much Hitchens' distinctive development of his semi-abstracted vision of landscape could offer to British Modernism. In later life Hitchens seldom left this part of Sussex, although he acquired a beachside house in Selsey where he frequently painted. He should be celebrated as a pastoral English painter of single-minded concentration who captured moments of vision as intense as Samuel Palmer's. But in the scope and ambition of his landscapes he can also be seen as a twentieth-century heir to Turner. His very Englishness that was inseparable from a retiring and detached, but by no means passive, personality may have masked his importance in twentieth-century painting and precluded wider international recognition. Even today he remains something of a painter's painter, although this is changing.

May, 2022



View of the caravan used by Hitchens and his family in the early 1940s, before the studio was built.



1. *The Pine Tree* 1929 signed lower centre oil on canvas 20 x 18 in / 51 x 46 cm



2. *Figures by a Lily Pond* 1929 estate stamp verso oil on canvas 12½ x 15¼ in / 32 x 40 cm



3. Evening Primroses c.1935 signed lower right oil on canvas 25 x 20 in / 64 x 51 cm

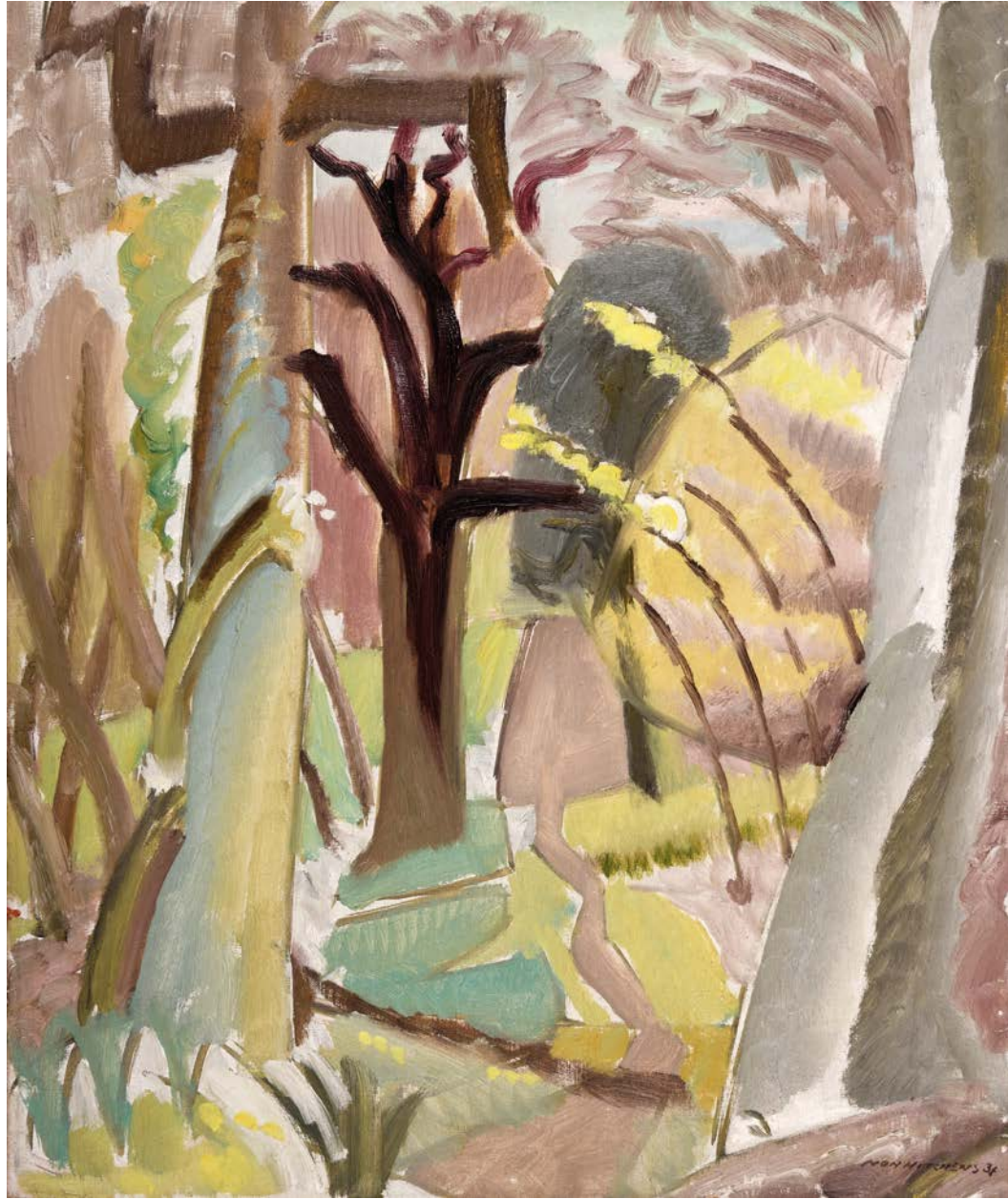


4. Hay Meadows c.1935 signed lower right oil on canvas 21 x 24 in / 53 x 61 cm

5. Spring Moon (reflected in a pool) 1938 signed lower right oil on canvas 21 x 52 in / 53 x 132 cm







6. Spring Woods 1931 signed lower right oil on canvas 24 x 20 in / 61 x 51 cm



7. Girl in a Boat 1938 signed lower left oil on canvas 20 x 24 in / 51 x 61 cm



8. Winter Walk (early series) 1945 estate stamp verso oil on canvas 15¼ × 36 in / 38.5 × 91.5 cm



9. The Wheelbarrow c.1942 estate stamp verso oil on canvas 27¼ × 23¼ in / 70.5 × 60.5 cm

10. Lake of Toumela c.1940 signed lower left oil on canvas 26 x 66 in / 66 x 168 cm







11. **Two Nudes (Bill & Mollie)** c.1944 estate stamp verso oil on canvas 19½ × 29½ in / 49.5 × 75 cm



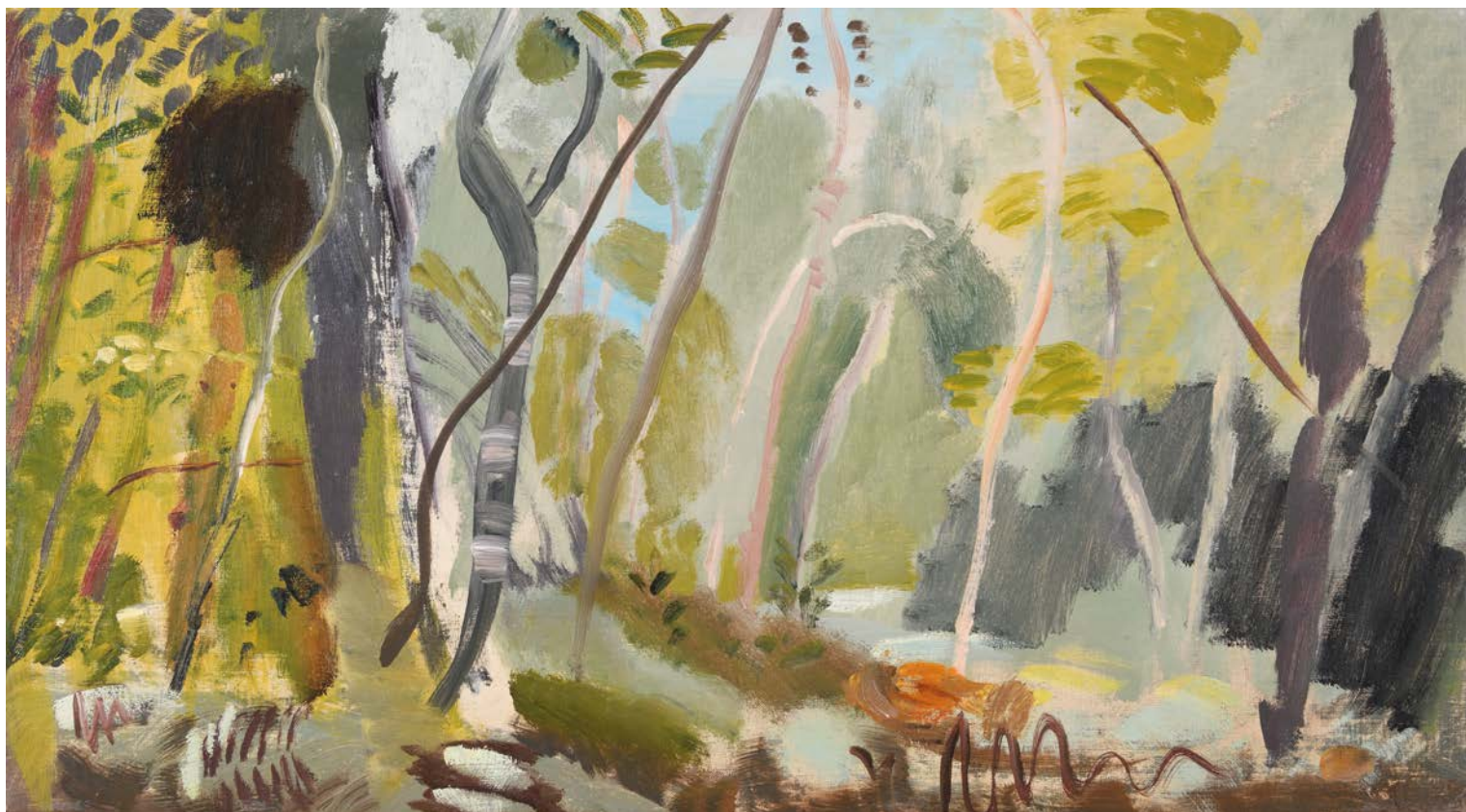
12. **Mother & Child** c.1946 estate stamp verso oil on canvas 19½ × 29½ in / 49.5 × 75 cm



13. Late Summer Flowers c.1938 estate stamp verso oil on canvas 21 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 23 $\frac{1}{2}$ in / 55 x 60 cm



14. Wild Bouquet c.1940 estate stamp verso oil on canvas 19 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 17 $\frac{1}{2}$ in / 50 x 44.8 cm



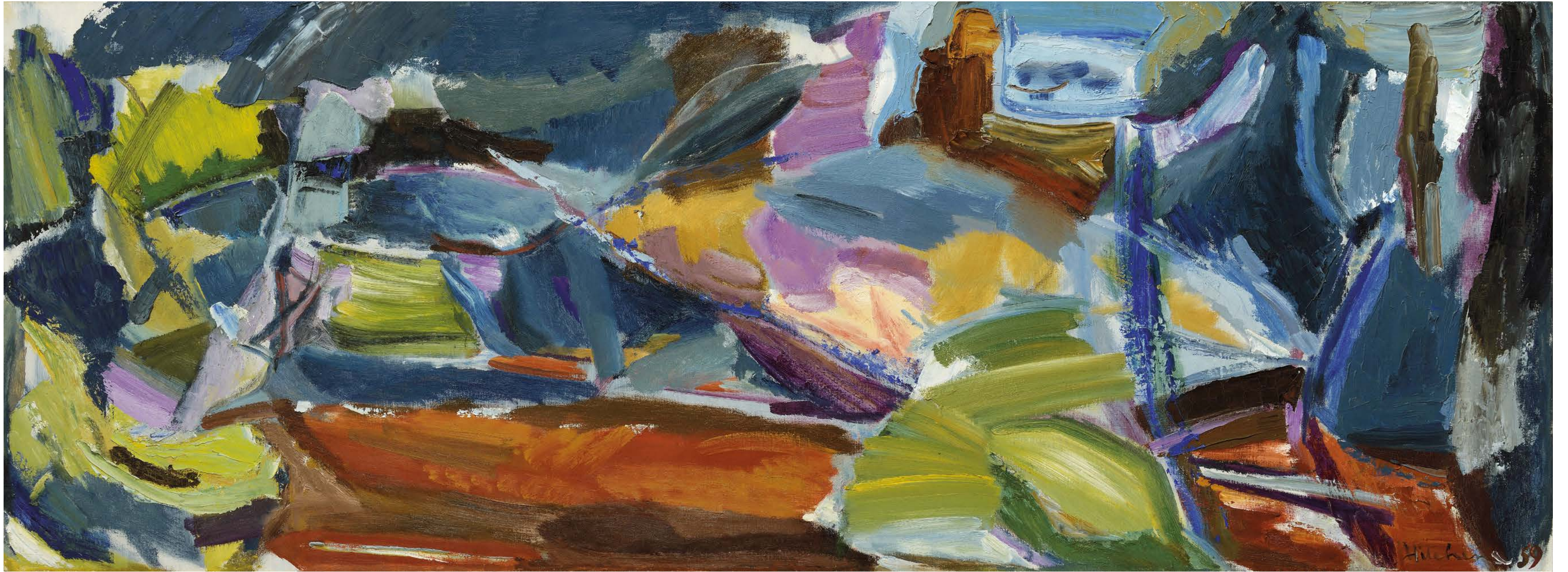
15. Sussex Woodland (Early Summer) c.1945 estate stamp verso oil on canvas 16 x 29 in / 40.5 x 73.5 cm



16. Early Blue Door Series 1943 signed & dated lower left oil on canvas 21 x 24 in / 53 x 61 cm

17. April Walk 1959 signed lower right oil on canvas 30 × 81 in / 76 × 206 cm







18. **Spring Flowers (Narcissi)** c.1937 estate stamp verso oil on canvas 21¼ × 24 in / 55 × 60.5 cm



19. **The Boathouse** c.1946 estate stamp verso oil on canvas 16 × 35½ in / 41 × 90 cm



20. Restless Figure II c.1959 estate stamp verso oil on canvas 21 x 36 in / 53 x 91.5 cm



21. Summer Still Life c.1957 estate stamp verso oil on canvas 20 x 32 in / 51 x 81 cm

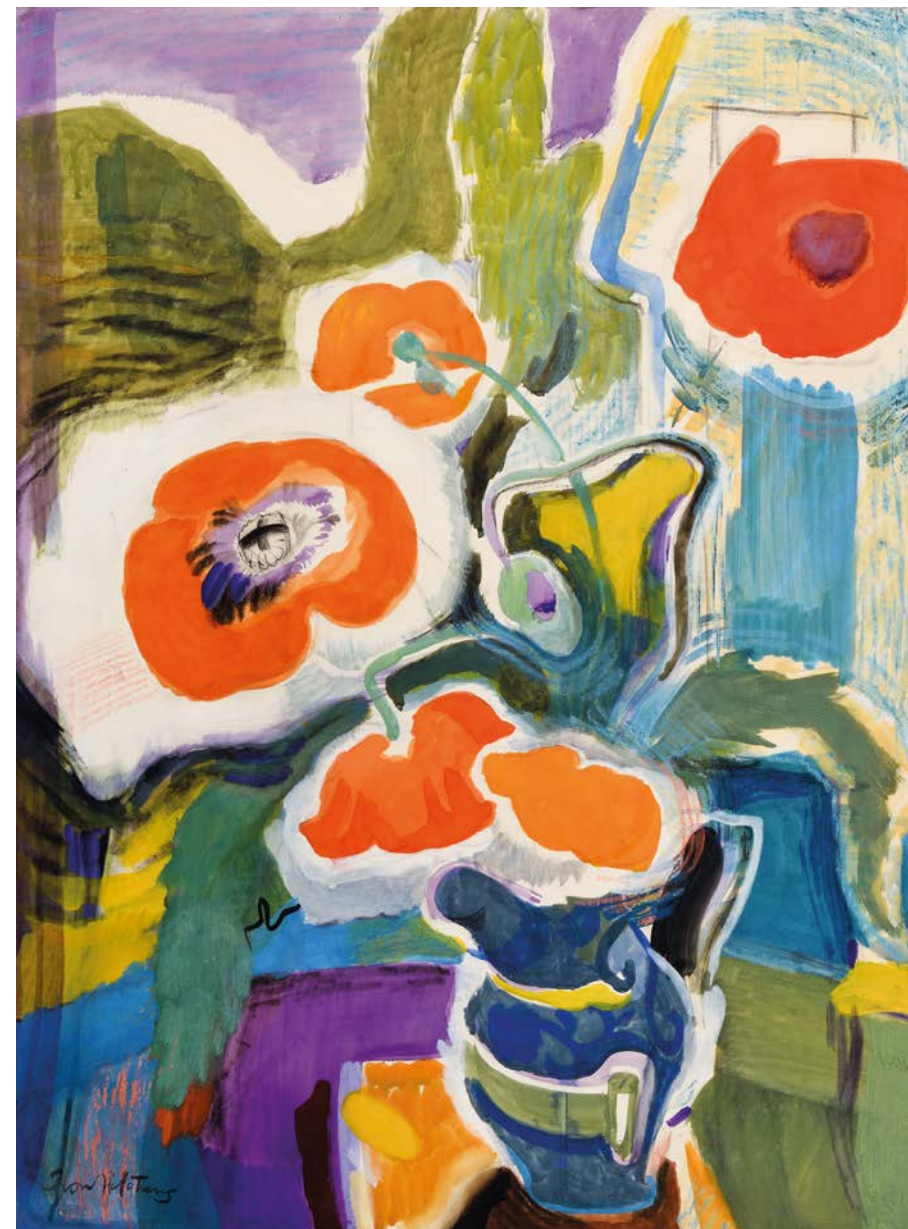
22. Boat & Foliage in Five Chords No.3 1970 signed lower left oil on canvas 24 x 64 in / 61 x 162.5 cm







23. **Deep Cavern** 1960 signed lower left oil on canvas 17 x 43 in / 43 x 109 cm



24. **Poppies** c.1968 signed lower left watercolour on paper 40 x 30 in / 101.5 x 76 cm



Ivon Hitchens on the steps of his greenhouse, 1970s.

Biography

- 1893 Born in London on 3rd March, son of the painter Alfred Hitchens
Educated at Bedales School, St John's Wood School of Art (1911) and the Royal Academy Schools (1911-12, 1914-16 and 1918-19)
- 1920 Elected member of Seven and Five Society
- 1925 First solo exhibition at the Mayor Gallery, London
- 1929 Elected member of the London Artists' Association
- 1931 Elected member of the London Group
- 1934 Participated in Objective Abstractions exhibition at the Zwemmer Gallery
- 1935 Married Mary Cranford Coates
- 1937 Elected member of the Society of Mural Painters
- 1940 Studio in London bombed, moved to West Sussex, son John born
First of ten solo exhibitions at the Leicester Galleries
- 1945 First retrospective exhibition at Temple Newsam House, Leeds
- 1951 Awarded purchase prize in the Arts Council Festival of Britain exhibition, 60 Paintings for '51
- 1954 Completed the mural in the hall of Cecil Sharp House in Regent's Park Road, London
- 1955 Publication of the first monograph on his work by Patrick Heron in the 'Penguin Modern Painters' series
- 1956 Represented Britain at the XXVIII Venice Biennale
- 1958 Created C.B.E.
- 1959 Completed *Late Summer Parkland with a Lake* for Nuffield College, Oxford Special mention at XI Premio Lissone, Italy
- 1960 First solo exhibition at Waddington Galleries, London
- 1962 Installation of mural painting *Day's Rest, Day's Work* at University of Sussex, Brighton
- 1963 Major retrospective exhibition arranged by the Arts Council at the Tate Gallery, London
- 1973 Publication of a monograph (with 120 colour plates) edited by Alan Bowness, Lund Humphries
- 1979 Third retrospective exhibition at the Royal Academy
Died 29th August
- 1990 Publication of a monograph by Peter Khoroch, Lund Humphries (updated and expanded edition published in 2007)

Selected Solo Exhibitions

1925 Mayor Gallery, London

1928 Arthur Tooth & Sons, London

1929 London Artists' Association, Cooling Galleries, London

1930 Heal's Mansard Gallery, London

1933 Alex Reid & Lefevre, London (also 1935 and 37)

1940 Leicester Galleries, London (also in 1942, 44, 47, 49, 50, 52, 54, 57 and 59)

1945 Temple Newsam House, Leeds (retrospective)

1948 Graves Art Gallery, Sheffield (retrospective)

1953 Metropolitan Art Gallery, Tokyo, Second International Art Exhibition

1956 Gimpel Fils, London
XXVIII Venice Biennale, British Pavilion

1958 Laing Art Galleries, Toronto

1960 Waddington Galleries, London (also in 1962, 64, 66, 68, 69, 71, 73, 76, 82, 85, 90, 93 and 96)

1963 Tate Gallery, London (retrospective)

1964 Civic Art Gallery, Southampton, University of Southampton Arts Festival

1966 Tib Lane Gallery, Manchester; Poindexter Gallery, New York; Worthing Art Gallery

1967 Stone Gallery, Newcastle

1971 Basil Jacobs Fine Art, London

1972 Rutland Gallery, London, Landscape into Abstract

1978 Burstow Gallery, Brighton College
Towner Art Gallery, Eastbourne (retrospective)

1979 Royal Academy of Arts, London (retrospective)

1980 Bohun Gallery, Henley-on-Thames

1982 New Art Centre, London

1987 Oriel 31, Welshpool and Newtown, Powys

1989 Serpentine Gallery, London (retrospective)

1991 Cleveland Bridge Gallery, Bath

1993 Bernard Jacobson Gallery, London; Pallant House Gallery, Chichester; Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal

2000 Jonathan Clark Fine Art, London, *A Visual Sound*

2003 Jonathan Clark Fine Art, London, *Landscapes*

2005 Towner Art Gallery, Eastbourne; Jonathan Clark Fine Art, London, *Nudes*

2007 Pallant House Gallery, Chichester
Jonathan Clark Fine Art, London, *The Flower Paintings*

2009 Jonathan Clark Fine Art, London, *Unseen Paintings from the 1930s*

2012 Jonathan Clark Fine Art, London, *The Poet of Exactitudes*

2016 Jonathan Clark Fine Art, London, *Under the Greenwood*

2019 Garden Museum, London, *The Painter in the Woods*
Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, *Ivon Hitchens: Space through Colour*

Selected Public Collections

Aberdeen Art Gallery

Barnsley: Cannon Hall Museum and Art Gallery

Bath Art Gallery

Bedford: Cecil Higgins Museum and Art Gallery

Belfast: Ulster Museum

Birmingham: City Museum and Art Gallery

Bradford City Art Gallery

Brighton Art Gallery

Bristol: City Museum and Art Gallery

Bury Art Gallery

Cambridge: Fitzwilliam Museum

Cardiff: National Museum of Wales

Chichester: Pallant House Gallery

Eastbourne: Towner Art Gallery

Edinburgh: Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art

Glasgow Art Gallery

Harrogate Art Gallery

Huddersfield Art Gallery

Kettering Art Gallery

Kingston-upon-Hull: Ferens Art Gallery

Leamington Spa: Warwick District Council Art Gallery

Leeds: City Art Galleries

Leicester: City Museum and Art Gallery

Liverpool: Walker Arts Gallery

London: Courtauld Institute Galleries, Royal Academy of Arts
Tate Gallery, Victoria and Albert Museum

Manchester: City Art Galleries, Whitworth Art Gallery

Middlesbrough Art Gallery

Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Laing Art Gallery

Norwich: Castle Museum

Nottingham: Castle Museum and Art Gallery

Oxford: Ashmolean Museum

Rochdale Art Gallery

Rugby Art Gallery

Salford Art Gallery

Sheffield: City of Art Galleries

Shrewsbury Art Gallery

Southampton Art Gallery

Swansea: Glynn Vivian Art Gallery

Swindon Museum and Art Gallery

Wakefield: City Museum and Art Gallery

Australia

Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia

Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria

Perth: Art Gallery of Western Australia

Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales

Canada

Montreal: Museum of Fine Arts

Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada

Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario

Vancouver: Art Gallery of Vancouver

France

Paris: Musée National d'Art Moderne

New Zealand

Nelson: Bishop Suter Art Gallery

Wellington: National Gallery of New Zealand

Norway

Oslo: Nasjonalgalleriet

South Africa

Natal: Tatham Art Gallery

Sweden

Gothenburg: Göteborgs Konstmuseum

USA

Buffalo: Albright-Knox Art Gallery

New Haven: Yale Center for British Art

Northampton: Smith Art Museum

Seattle Art Museum

Toledo Museum of Art

Opposite:
Pond and bench near Hitchens' former studio.

Cover:
Summer Flowers, 1960s, fabric design (detail)
by Ivon and John Hitchens, for Hull Traders,
screen printed on linen.

Frontispiece:
Sussex woodland close to Hitchens' former studio.



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