

# STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



**Ben NICHOLSON (1894 - 1982)**

**Rome (July 1, 1954)**

Pencil and gouache on paper.

Signed, inscribed and dated Rome Ben Nicholson July 1 - 54 on the verso.

Further signed and inscribed Rome July 1 – 54 / Ben Nicholson on the backing board.

488 x 354 mm. (19 1/4 x 13 7/8 in.)

In 1950 Ben Nicholson made his first visit to Italy since the end of the Second World War, and over the next few years began to take a new interest in landscape. He produced a number of drawings of favourite views, sites and buildings throughout the provinces of Tuscany, Lazio and Umbria. As Peter Khoroche has noted of these drawings, 'He might spend the morning wandering around a town, then be struck by some architectural feature or grouping and feel moved to draw it. Laying no claim to a technical or historical knowledge of architecture, what interested him was the shape, the proportion, the lie of a building – its inner essence or personality would speak off an idea for a free variation upon it. Buildings, like still life objects, were a starting point only: naturally there was no point in mere imitation. On the contrary, Nicholson realized that he had to dare to be free when creating one work of art out of another. Architecture in landscape offered an opportunity to combine his love of precise structure with his feeling for poetry and acute sensitivity to the spirit of place.'

As the artist's inscription on the verso notes, this large drawing was made in Rome on the 1st of July, 1954, when Nicholson was staying with his niece Jenny Nicholson at Torre del Grillo, between the Forum of Trajan and the Quirinale. He also paid a visit to the gardens at Ninfa, southeast of Rome. The present sheet is apparently one of only three or four drawings made during this trip to Rome, as the artist found the Roman climate too hot. He returned to Torre del Grillo in the autumn of the following year.

Many of Nicholson's Italian drawings show his fondness for local architecture and landscape. As the artist's third wife Felicitas Vogler has written, "When I draw an Italian cathedral", says Ben Nicholson, 'I

don't draw its architecture, but the feeling it gives me.'...I have often observed on our travels how B.N. will sit rapt for an hour or two before his subject, usually motionless, but sometimes walking around it to view it from all angles...His landscapes and architectural drawings...are to my mind distinguished from a very early stage by clarity and the great art of omission. They have a delicacy combined with mastery in their strokes, which seem to become more and more economical with the passage of time. For all their fineness they are often of an almost palpable plasticity.' In many of his Italian drawings, Nicholson would first apply a thin wash of oil paint to the surface of the sheet, often well before he began the drawing itself.

Shortly after it was made, this drawing was lent by Nicholson to the important retrospective exhibition of his work organized by the British Council in 1954 and sent to Amsterdam, Paris, Brussels and Zurich before culminating at the Tate Gallery in London in the summer of 1955.

A closely related drawing of Rome - dated July 30, 1954 and showing the same view - was part of the extensive collection of drawings by Nicholson belonging to the artist's close friends, the pioneering collector Helen Sutherland and, later, the scholar Nicolette Gray.

### **Provenance:**

Gimpel Fils, London

Acquired from them in September 1965 by a private collector  
By descent to Janice Newman Rosenthal, until 2011.

### **Literature:**

Paris, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Exposition Ben Nicholson, British Council, 1955, no.82;  
Brussels, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Exposition Ben Nicholson, British Council, 1955, no.82; Zurich, Kunsthaus Zürich, Ausstellung Ben Nicholson, British Council, 1955, no.82; London, Tate Gallery, Ben Nicholson: A Retrospective Exhibition, 1955, no.83 (lent by the artist)

### **Artist description:**

The son of the painters William Nicholson and Mabel Pryde, Ben Nicholson spent a brief period at the Slade School of Art in London but was otherwise without formal artistic training. It was not until 1920 and his marriage to the painter Winifred Dacre that he began to paint seriously, producing mainly still life and landscape paintings throughout the following decade. In 1932 he and his second wife, Barbara Hepworth, traveled to France and there met and befriended Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Constantin Brancusi and Jean Arp, and later Piet Mondrian. It was also at this time, in the 1930's, that Nicholson began to work in a more Cubist manner, creating paintings and reliefs made up of abstract geometrical forms, and in particular producing a series of carved and painted white reliefs that have become icons of 20th century English modernism. At the outbreak of the Second World War, Nicholson and Hepworth and their children moved to the town of St. Ives in Cornwall, where they became the nucleus of a vibrant artistic community. Nicholson's reputation grew significantly after the war, and he won several artistic prizes in America and elsewhere. In 1954 a retrospective exhibition of his work was held in the British pavilion at the Venice Biennale, followed a year later by one at the Tate. In 1958 he left St. Ives and settled in Switzerland, having annulled his marriage to Hepworth in 1951 and remarried. A second Tate retrospective in 1968 was accompanied by the awarding of the Order of Merit.

Drawing was an important part of Nicholson's artistic process throughout his career. His drawings were, however, not made as studies for carved reliefs or paintings, and it should be noted that 'more than simply preparatory or exploratory tools, drawings were to him full-blown works of art...His drawings are characterized by a strong continuous line, which sinuously defines form and space without a break. Shading is used sparingly and any illusion of volumetric mass simply suggested by the interweaving lines.'