

Between nostalgia and modernity: exploring place within Ivon
Hitchens' *Winter Walk* series (1948).

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Between nostalgia and modernity: exploring place within Ivon Hitchens' *Winter Walk* series (1948).

Against the backdrop of the Second World War and the threat of a German invasion, artists sought comfort in looking back with nostalgia to the English landscape tradition. Ivon Hitchens moved to the Sussex countryside after his Hampstead studio was bombed in 1940; the rural landscape providing him with a new subject matter for his paintings. Hitchens is often considered synonymous with his Sussex home, with some of Hitchens' contemporaries attributing the topographical association with the revival of English Romanticism in the 1940s.¹ Margaret Garlake builds upon this point, suggesting Hitchens' landscapes to actually represent a post-war "desired landscape, an ideal beyond the city".² However, responding to European Modernisms, some post-war artists instead moved towards abstraction, leaving topographical representation behind. Analysing Hitchens' oeuvre closely, Peter Khoroché and Patrick Heron argue his landscapes to convey his subjective response to place through aesthetic design.³ Reflecting upon Hitchens' position as an English landscape painter, Heron suggests that he evades categorisation as he was "neither 'realist' romantic-illustrative, nor non-figurative".⁴ Identifying the gap, this essay will consider Hitchens' contribution to the landscape tradition of the post-war years, reflecting upon both the subject matter and its portrayal in his *Winter Walk* series (1948) (figures 1 - 3).⁵

Hitchens as a Sussex painter: crossing "the abstract/figurative divide"⁶

Hitchens' subject matter of Sussex, exemplified within his *Winter Walk* series, has been considered the focus of his landscapes. However, arguably this reception views his paintings through biography instead of the artwork. Hitchens' *Winter Walk* series is not topographical; instead the paintings depict a glen with a tree-lined passage, providing pictorial rather than pastoral interest.

¹ An example being Raymond Mortimer. Referenced in Francis Spaulding, *British Art Since 1900* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 133.

² Margaret Garlake, *New Art, New World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 170.

³ Peter Khoroché, "Ivon Hitchens" in *Ivon Hitchens: forty-five paintings*, ed. Alister Warman and Caroline Collier (London: Serpentine Gallery, 1989).

Patrick Heron, *Ivon Hitchens* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1955).

⁴ Heron, *Ivon Hitchens*, 3.

⁵ The names of these paintings differ in varying reproductions. This essay uses the titles from Heron's *Ivon Hitchens*. Heron suggested the numbering of the paintings to relate to the sequence in which they were painted.

⁶ Garlake, *New Art, New World*, 43.

During the war, under Kenneth Clark, the War Artists' Advisory Committee (WAAC) was established, providing patronage to artists whose landscapes symbolised English identity, working within the pastoral landscape tradition.⁷ Read biographically, Hitchens' migration from Hampstead, a community of abstract artists in the 1930s, to Sussex can be understood as a retreat from modernism, with Hitchens seeking comfort in the landscape. In response to his exhibition titled "10 Years of English Landscape Painting 1945-1955", the curator, Andrew Forge, considered the post-war landscape genre as not "a prime mover", as it was unrepresentative of urban society.⁸ Arguably, working as an isolated artist, without a group of like-minded individuals, Hitchens' work is left vulnerable to pastoral and nostalgic readings. Khoroché recognises the deep cultural association between Hitchens and Sussex landscape, arguing "that no one who knows his painting can travel between Pulborough and Petersfield without seeing the landscape through Hitchens' eyes". Yet, whilst acknowledging his own predisposition to the connection between Hitchens and his subject-matter, Khoroché highlights Forge's misreading of post-war landscapes, suggesting "the very success [Hitchens] achieved in expressing his English sensibility to the landscape... sets the spectator off on the wrong foot" since it forces the viewer into appreciating "only the subject and its mood".⁹ A fruitful comparison can be made between an early painting of Sussex by Hitchens, *Didling on the Downs* (1920s) (figure 4) and *Winter Walk No. 3* (figure 3). Within the former, the subject matter of the Sussex hills is stylised, dotted with lambs, which harks back to the pastoral English landscape tradition. In contrast, his post-war landscapes rarely present the chalk hills that are synonymous with Sussex, with *No. 3* responding to a shaded woodland through abstracted forms and colour. Thus, in opposition to the view of Hitchens' work as pastoral imagery, his post-war landscapes seek compositions that set a challenge of how to accurately convey the subject through paint.

Considering his subject-matter, Hitchens placed an emphasis on conveying his subjective response to the landscape that contrasts the Neo-Romantics' concern for "the spirit of the place".¹⁰

⁷ Spaulding, *British Art Since 1900*, 137.

⁸ Andrew Forge, letter to Lawrence Alloway, quoted in Garlake, 1998, 150.

⁹ Khoroché, "Ivon Hitchens", 21.

¹⁰ David Gervais, "Ivon Hitchens and the Harmony of Colour", *The Cambridge Quarterly* Vol. 38, No. 1 (March 2009), 91.

Some of Hitchens' contemporaries, such as Raymond Mortimer, understood Neo-Romanticism as a label for those "whom identified with nature", with Hitchens grouped under the term.¹¹ However, whilst Hitchens sought to capture his authentic, personal response to nature, his concern for truth in his approach to the landscape distinguished him from the Neo-Romantics, whose landscapes were supplemented with dream-like symbolism. This is evident within a comparison between Paul Nash's *Landscape of the Vernal Equinox (III)* (1944) (figure 5) and Hitchens' *Winter Walk No. 3*. While both landscapes suggest a recession of space, the motif of a tree lined passage is evident within both. However, Nash's landscape does not convey the Berkshire countryside with the power of authenticity, but it instead acts as a backdrop for the moon and sun; the presence of both symbolising nature's processes. Writing about Nash, Hitchens argued "the spirit of the place is not my interest. [...] I am really interested in the problem set" by the landscape.¹² In comparison with the muted tones of Nash's painting, Hitchens' use of colour in *No. 3*, though not naturalistic, appears grounded in reality. His focus upon "the means of expression" creates a dialogue between the paint and the forest represented, placing Hitchens as both the viewer and recorder of impressions. Nash and other Neo-Romantics, such as Graham Sutherland, were commissioned by the WAAC. However, Clark did not support Hitchens, deeming his work unsuitable "unless there was some canteen mural painting required".¹³ The decorative connotations of a "canteen mural" suggest Hitchens to only engage with his subject on a surface level. Yet, arguably Hitchens' *Winter Walk* series moves beyond the Neo-Romantic's concern for representing the *genius loci*, his consideration of aesthetic forms allowing him to respond truthfully to nature, conveying his own subjective response.

Whilst the crisis of war provoked artists to return to England's traditional landscape genre, contrarywise, other artists rejected the presence of the pastoral idealisation in their landscapes, responding to modernist methods of representation that anchor abstraction to a reality. Comparable to Hitchens' move to Sussex, Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore moved to the extremities of England,

¹¹ Spaulding, *British art Since 1900*, 133.

¹² Hitchens (No reference), quoted in Anne Goodchild, "Space through Colour" in *Ivon Hitchens: Space Through Colour* (Chichester: Pallant House Gallery, 2019), 45.

¹³ Goodchild, "Space through Colour", 45-46.

living in St Ives. During the 1930s, Hitchens produced completely abstract compositions such as *Coronation* (1937) (figure 6) as part of the Seven and Five Society, that included Nicholson and Hepworth. The migration from London arguably saw Hitchens and Nicholson explore how their abstraction on the 1930s could be redeployed in their paintings, responding to their surrounding landscape. Considering the position of the landscape after the war, Chris Stevens argues St Ives artists to inhabit a “[s]ensitive zone between representation and abstraction”, exploring the “expressive potential of the material paint itself” to express the landscape.¹⁴ Heron, a St Ives artist himself, identified the existence of an artistic practice that inhibited a “middle way between pure abstraction and abject representation”.¹⁵ In response to the practice, he formulated a theoretical approach that he applied to Hitchens’ landscapes, suggesting him to convey depth through his colour palette.¹⁶ A colourist himself, there is inherent bias within Heron’s approach that disregards ‘the structural framework’ that Khoroché values in Hitchens art. Comparing Hitchens’ *Coronation* with *Winter Walk No. 3*, both paintings employ planes of vibrant colour. T. J Rosenthal connects Hitchens’ abstract compositions with Kandinsky, suggesting the juxtaposition of reds, ochres and blues in *Coronation* to create a visual harmony that Hitchens named as a “visual sound”.¹⁷ However, whilst *Winter Walk No. 3* shares a similar pictorial language and colour palette, Hitchens was critical of paintings that were not grounded in a ‘solid reality [where] the space between one object and another is of differing proportions’.¹⁸ Thus, Hitchens’ migration to isolated and supposedly more authentic areas of the country could be argued to corroborate Forge’s argument that the landscape is unrepresentative, however Hitchens’ engagement with both abstraction and representation suggest him, instead of uphold the pastoral landscape as a symbol of Englishness, to represent his subjective response to the landscape through paint.

¹⁴ Chris Stevens, “between Landscape and Abstraction, the Local and the International” in *Modern Art and St Ives* (London: Tate Publishing, 2014), 8.

¹⁵ Patrick Heron, “English and French in 1950”, *The New Statesmen*. 7th January 1949, pp. 547-8, quoted in Garlake, *New Art, New World*, 45.

¹⁶ Heron, *Ivon Hitchens*, 7.

¹⁷ Hitchens “Notes on Painting”, *ARK* 18 (November 1956). Quoted in Quoted in Michael Tucker, ““And all the harmonies were joined and whole”: The visual music of Ivon Hitchens” in *Ivon Hitchens: Space Through Colour* (Chichester: Pallant House Gallery), 81.

T. G. Rosenthal, “introduction” to *Ivon Hitchens*, ed. Alan Bowness. (London: Lord Humphries, 1973), 12.

¹⁸ Ivon Hitchens, “Notes on Painting”. Quoted in in Garlake, *New Art, New World*, Note 98, 264.

Hitchens' pictorial design: "the tree is paint and the paint is tree"¹⁹

Considering the subjective approach to place within the *Winter Walk* series, Hitchens was unconcerned with topographical representation and instead explored the extent that the landscape could be abstracted whilst still be recognisable. Within Hitchens' "Notes on painting", his most focused writing upon his work, he placed emphasis upon the process of perception in order to discover the "truth of nature".²⁰ Claudia Milburn identifies the value Hitchens placed upon process through his use of sketchbooks, that detail his repeated reorganisation of an image's compositional design.²¹ Hitchens' approach to working in series is similar. The repetition of the same subject within the *Winter Walk* series delineates Hitchens' desire to crystalise and distil the composition in order to truthfully represent the experience of being in the landscape. This is evident within the depiction of trees within the series; the differing presentations detailing the progression from analysing the visual scene to successfully representing the landscape through an economy of forms. Within *Winter Walk No. 1* (figure 1), the trees which form part of the wooded walkway are presented through individual brush marks. Whilst no detail is employed to further illustrate the trees, they appear descriptive in comparison to the presentation of the same trees within *Winter Walk No. 2* (figure 2), that are conveyed inseparably through a light-pink plane. Where Heron suggests *No. 2* to offer a greater harmony, employing his theory of "Space in Colour", Khoroché highlights a divide within Hitchens' paintings between abstract brush strokes and the subject they represent.²² Khoroché focuses upon the unpainted canvas which isolates a section of brush marks, allowing the marks to be viewed as paint and yet work at the viewer's subconscious which registers the marks as trees.²³ T. G. Rosenthal compares Cézanne's presentation of apples, such as *Still Life with Apples* (1878) (figure 7), with Hitchens' trees, suggesting that, instead of hiding the formal construction, he "can make one see the

¹⁹ Heron, *Ivon Hitchens*, 8.

²⁰ Hitchens, "Notes on Painting". Quoted in Michael Tucker, "'And all the harmonies were joined and whole': The visual music of Ivon Hitchens", 81.

²¹ Claudia Milburn, "The Landscape Sketchbooks of Ivon Hitchens" in *Ivon Hitchens: Space Through Colour* (Chichester: Pallant House Gallery, 2019), 66.

²² Heron, *Ivon Hitchens*, 7.

²³ Peter Khoroché, "Winter Walk 1948 by Ivon Hitchens", Goldmark Gallery, 17th February 2015, YouTube video, 1:24, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_K1_DXD6xdE [Date accessed: 29th October 2022].

essence of a tree so that it becomes almost a philosophical concept of a tree”.²⁴ Rosenthal’s argument identifies Hitchens’ development in the presentations of forms that allows him to convey the subject both as a landscape and a relationship of marks.

In a reaction to the tradition of the landscape genre that attempted to record nature through static, representation painting, Hitchens wanted the landscape perceptually discoverable for the viewer. Hitchens was critical of the lack of “progress” achievable within a landscape that was contained within the square format, arguing there to be “no time element in the square picture, which the eye sees all at once”.²⁵ Thus, Hitchens employed a long horizontal format, evident within the *Winter Walk* series, which affords the viewer the opportunity to explore the landscape, reflecting Hitchens’ relationship with it. Imola Antal Movity emphasises Hitchens’ desire to convey a personal view of the landscape, suggesting him to create, through the development of horizontal format, a “‘first-person’ narrative”.²⁶ The format allows the eye to roam reflecting human interaction with the natural world that does not remain focused upon a particular point. Reviewing *Winter Walk No. 2*, the landscape is formed out of several perspectives: the recession of space within the left hand side of the canvas and the area of green at the end of the tree-lined avenue to the right which compete for the furthest perspective point within the painting. Hitchens’ focus upon providing the viewer with a subjective response to the landscape harks back to the traditions of Claude Monet and Paul Cézanne. Malcom Andrews analyses Monet’s *Grainstack* series (1891) (figures 8 and 9), painted in different weather conditions, during different times of day, suggesting it to be futile to consider “ten juxtaposed *Grainstack* pictures as ten ‘landscapes’” but instead signal a “single environment”.²⁷ Thus, in line with the impressionists, Hitchens’ serial methods within *Winter Walk* and the use of multiple perspectives within one painting allow for a more subjective response to a changing landscape. Drawing upon developments within French painting, Hitchens pictorial language can be compared to the Cubists. Where Cubist still lifes, such as George Braque’s *Glass on a Table* (1909-10) (figure 10),

²⁴ Rosenthal, “Introduction”, 17.

²⁵ Hitchens, letter to Harold Bliss, 1947. Quoted in Garlake, *New Art, New World*, 169.

²⁶ Imola Antal Movity, “From Tradition to Modernism: British landscape painting in the postwar period” (PhD diss., University of Kent, 2008), 246.

²⁷ Malcom Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 193.

represent objects from multiple viewpoints to overcome the flatness of representational painting, the elision of multiple viewpoints in *Winter Walk No.2* introduces an element of time into the painting as the eye roams around the canvas, creating a three-dimensional image of the place within the viewer's mind. Heron exalts Hitchens' "extraordinary inventiveness before an unchanging subject".²⁸ Whilst Heron attributed this "inventiveness" to Hitchens' use of colour, Hitchens also overcomes the unchanging nature of the two-dimensional surface where elements are unnaturally distilled into an unchanging frame. Whilst not naturalistically correct, Hitchens' approach to the landscape suggests him to convey 'truth', not through naturalistic illusion, but through the viewer's ability to engage with it.

Whilst Khoroché upheld the important factor of Hitchens's landscapes to be the 'structural framework' that can be shrouded by 'the physical delight of his paint and brush work', Hitchens' approach and use of colour is arguably not supplementary, with the artist himself writing how "colour is space and space is colour".²⁹ Heron, in contrast to Khoroché, exalts his employment of colour, expressing a variation of Hitchens' statement in describing that "colour is light and light is space".³⁰ Reflecting Matisse's fauvist use of unmodulated colour to represent form, the woodland and tree-lined avenue in *Winter Walk No. 3* are detailed through warm tones which range from a light pink to burnt umber, evoking the sheltered half-light of wooded areas. The warm red tone delineating the trees of the woodland path contrast with the light green that describes the opening at the end of the passage. Corroborating Heron's claim that "colour is light", the warmth of the pink-red tones contrasts the green, portraying a variation in light intensity and thus signifying the area beyond the avenue to occupy a different space. Discussing the formal makeup of his painting, Hitchens describes his employment of the Japanese concept of *nōtan*, that Alan Bowness defines as "the progression from dark to light within a single coloured area".³¹ This is evident within the suggestion of space at the end

²⁸ Heron, *Ivon Hitchens*, 7.

²⁹ Khoroché, "Ivon Hitchens", 19.

Hitchens, letter to Herbert Read. Quoted in Herbert Read, *Contemporary British Art* (Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, 1951), 27

³⁰ Heron, *Ivon Hitchens*, 4

³¹ Alan Bowness, *Ivon Hitchens* (London: Lord Humphries, 1973), 32.

of the path, as the green is graduated from dark to light. This directs the eye upwards, adding to the suggestion of an expanse of open space beyond the picture. Hitchens described his use of *nōtan* as one of ‘seven instruments in a painter’s orchestra’.³² Arguably, there is a tension within Hitchens’ landscape painting, as his writings suggest his primary focus to be upon a painting’s aesthetic harmony instead of a concern for representing place. However, instead of relating to an abstract harmony, Hitchens’ colours are suggestive of his subjective response to a real location and thus his painting demonstrates how colour contrasts can be employed to evoke a truthful representation of space.

Analysing Hitchens’ approach to both his subject matter and his aesthetic abstraction, Hitchens’ concern for how to truthfully represent the landscape is revealed. Hitchens’ own writings upon his practice suggests the relationship between formal elements to be his primary concern. However, analysing Hitchens’ *Winter Walk* series, his abstraction is anchored to a reality that provides the viewer with something concrete to respond to. Consequently, truthful representation is arguably the central motivation in Hitchens’ paintings. Following the ideas of European modernism, Hitchens recognised that a truthful presentation of an object could be achieved through figuration, conveying a subjective response, instead of a realist imitation of the landscape. At the same time, whilst Hitchens’ landscapes do not follow the traditional pastoral associations with the English landscape genre, his subjective focus upon place necessitates a subject to respond to and thus Hitchens can be considered to contribute to the landscape tradition. Towards the end of his life, Hitchens’ paintings became ever more abstract and yet he remained unwilling to return to total abstraction, with Khoroché suggesting him to greatly value the “vital link between the thing seen and the mark on the canvas”.³³ Thus, with his concern for subject matter, Hitchens can be viewed not as a Sussex landscape artist but instead as a painter who employs the landscape to explore abstraction.

³² Ivon Hitchens, interviewed in Alan Bowness, *Ivon Hitchens*, 32.

³³ Khoroché, “Ivon Hitchens”, 22.

Figures

1. Ivon Hitchens, *Winter Walk No. 1*, 1948. Oil on Canvas, 51 x 104 cm, present whereabouts unavailable. No colour production available.



2. Ivon Hitchens, *Winter Walk No. 2*, 1948. Oil on Canvas, 42 x 110 cm, Government Art Collection, UK.



3. Ivon Hitchens, *Winter Walk No. 3*, 1948. Oil on Canvas, 43 x 109 cm. Private Collection.



4. Ivon Hitchens, *Didling on the Downs*, 1920s. Gouache on paper, 44.6 x 56.3 cm. Pallant House Gallery, Chichester (on loan from a Private Collection, 1996).



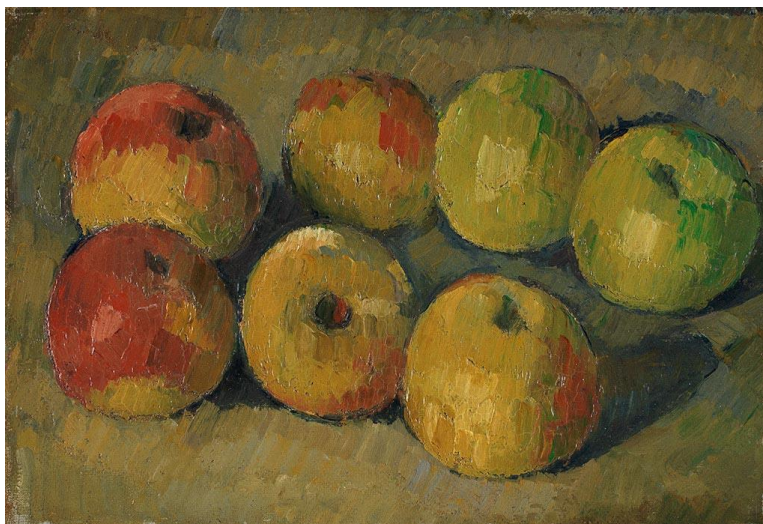
5. Paul Nash, *Landscape of the Vernal Equinox (III)*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 63.50 x 76.20 cm. National Galleries Scotland Collection.



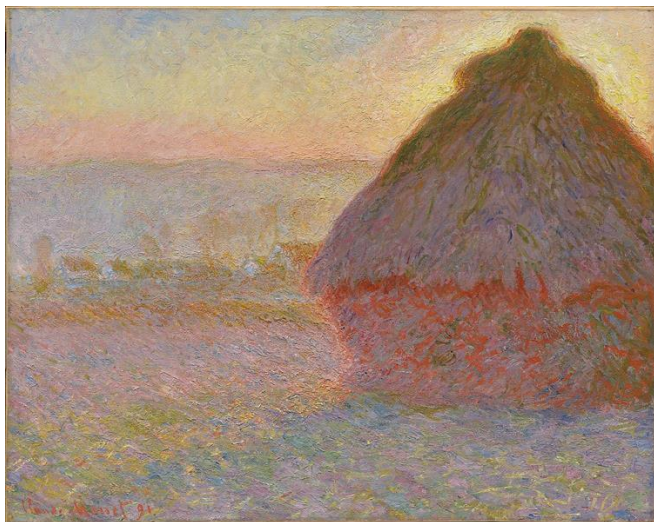
6. Ivon Hitchens, *Coronation*, 1937. Oil paint on canvas, 90.2 x 121.9 cm. Tate collection.



7. Paul Cézanne, *Still life with Apples*, 1878. Oil on canvas, 19 x 27 cm. King's College, Cambridge (Keynes Collection).



8. Claude Monet, *Grainstack, Sunset*, 1891. Oil on canvas, 73.3 x 92.7 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



9. Claude Monet, *Grainstack, Snow Effect, Morning*, 1891. Oil on canvas, 65 x 92. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



10. George Braques, *Glass on a Table*, 1909-10. Oil on canvas, 33.1 x 37.2 cm. Tate Modern, London.



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