

Dear Friends:

This is an edited version of my talk from June 2024 on a major and much-loved painting by Paul Nash in the Gallery. I have edited out most of the colloquialisms, but retained the greater part of the original text. I hope that it helps you to consider this intriguing work in new ways.

Danae

Artwork of the Month, June 2024

Paul Nash, *Winter Sea*

Danae Reaves-Bey Brown



Figure 1: Paul Nash, *Winter Sea*, oil on canvas, 1925-37, York Art Gallery, YORAG 868

Geometric Abstraction in *Winter Sea*

Paul Nash's *Winter Sea* (1925-37) is quite different from other seascapes in York Art Gallery's collection, such as *Robin Hood's Bay in Winter* by Dame Ethel Walker (1861-1951), *Port de Goulphar, Belle-Ile-en-Mer* (1897-1903) by Gustave Loiseau (1865-1935), or *The Wave* (1898) by Roderic O'Connor (1860-1940). In comparison to these more sensorily evocative, kinetic illustrations of water, *Winter Sea* seems to be relatively motionless. One of many works that Nash created while living at Dymchurch in Kent, the painting is emblematic of the relationship between Nash's art practice, Surrealism, and Abstraction.¹ It differs from other seascapes in the Gallery because it does not seek to evoke the senses of touch (as in the water), sound (as in the crash of waves, or perhaps the calls of seagulls), or taste (as in the salt of the sea). We must wonder, then, what this painting is doing, and how we might be able to understand it in comparison with more 'realistic' seascapes.

In the text that follows, I place *Winter Sea* within Nash's wider artistic practice. I discuss the contexts Nash's art grew out of through a brief look at his biography. Along the way, I also discuss some of the other artworks that he created over the course of his career, to highlight subjects and ideas that were important to his work.

Paul Nash: Painter, Poet, Soldier

Paul Nash (1889-1946) was born to the barrister William Nash and his wife Caroline in London in 1889.¹ Paul Gough notes that Nash's family expected that he would become an architect.² When that wasn't possible, their next plan, the one most commonly mentioned in the scholarship, was that he should join the Navy. However, the young Nash struggled with the necessary mathematics for these career paths and chose another way. He went to study at Chelsea Polytechnic, where he was able to enrol in art classes, and then, finally, to the Slade School of Art. At the Slade Nash started painting what Gough calls 'neo-Romantic nocturnes' and 'visionary landscapes,' which attracted some patrons. This study was unfortunately interrupted by the start of World War I, during which Nash joined the 28th Battalion, London Regiment in 1914 to aid in the war effort from British soil.³ Later on, in 1917, Nash was posted to France as a second lieutenant. It was there that he worked on the front lines. However, that same year, he was medically discharged after a fall in the trenches which fractured a rib.⁴ After his return home, Nash also sadly learned of the death of his fellow officers in an enemy attack.⁵

¹ Roger Cardinal, *The Landscape Vision of Paul Nash*. London: Reaktion Books, 1989, p. 7.

² Paul Gough, "'Barren, silent, godless'": The Anti-Landscape Visions of Paul Nash," in *A Terrible Beauty: British Artists in the First World War*. Bristol: Sansom & Company Ltd., 2010, p. 131.

³ Gough, "'Barren, silent, godless....,'" p. 133.

⁴ Gough, "'Barren, silent, godless....,'" p. 147.

⁵ Ibid.

Nash's early life was also difficult in multiple ways. As a child, when he was not away at boarding school, Nash lived with his immediate family (mother, father, sister, and brother John, who also became a successful painter), together with a nurse at Iver Heath in Buckinghamshire. Unfortunately, all was not well at home. Nash's mother struggled with both her physical and her mental health, and as a result was often away in medical facilities. During this period of Nash's life, he also experienced his father as emotionally inaccessible, and found the most familial comfort in the nurse who looked after him and his siblings. Then, in 1910, when Nash was just 20 years old, he sadly lost his mother. This took a great toll on him, but resulted in his being able to improve his relationship with his father after the tragedy.



Figure 2:
Percy Robert Craft, *An English Garden*, oil on canvas,
York Art Gallery (YORAG 328)

Throughout this early period of Nash's life, he reported spending time in the family garden, as well as in Kensington Gardens with the family nurse. These engagements with the garden landscape, along with the Romantic poetry that he often read, probably contributed to the reverence he had for the natural world.⁶

The art historian Andrew Causey notes that the garden plays an important role in English art. We see its importance in paintings like *An English Garden* (figure 2) by Percy Robert Craft (1856-1934), which depicts a woman walking through a

colourful garden. The interest of British artists like Craft in portraying this type of landscape is a testament to its cultural importance. Furthermore, Causey argues that the garden functions 'as the place where wild nature and the ordering power of man intersect, where nature becomes the expression of culture.'⁷ 'The ordering power of man' is very important for *Winter Sea*. As mentioned earlier, realistic seascapes must accommodate the sea's entropic nature. Nash's 'abstract' seascape imposes a structure on the ocean, just as the garden imposes order on the landscape, thus limiting that entropy.

We might consider the latter part of Causey's quotation ('where nature becomes an expression of culture') in relation to Nash's engagement with a changing society after his time at war. David Peters Corbett, who has written on the influence of modernity on Nash's work, notes that Nash had a difficult time facing those societal changes directly, and therefore chose to 'assume a discourse of nature' wherein he used his

⁶ Gough, "Barren, silent, godless..." p. 147.

⁷ Andrew Causey, *Paul Nash: Paintings and Watercolours*. London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1975, p. 29.

depictions of the natural to represent his feelings about the world.⁸ If ‘nature’ is the ‘expression of culture,’ then Nash’s depiction of a militaristically ordered sea suggests a caging of his world, a feeling of inhibition rather than freedom. This view of the painting can ground its fractured aesthetic in Nash’s feelings of estrangement from British society following his military service.

A final note to this section: Gough writes that Nash’s landscapes reflected his understandings of death, regeneration, and decay. Although a seascape, *Winter Sea* does still refer to these elements of life (and time), but Nash’s compositional techniques transform them into something more. Here, I think, is the moment for us to take a closer look at the painting itself.

The Painting Itself

Nash conceived of *Winter Sea* in 1925, while he and his wife Margaret were ending a short period as residents of Dymchurch, a small village located in Kent. Its seashore, like all seashores, occupies a liminal boundary between land and sea. At Dymchurch, Nash painted both the ocean and the wall which kept it at bay in a series of paintings over the four years that he and his wife lived there.⁹ He eventually wrote to his biographer, Anthony Bertram, that the images he produced at Dymchurch were a ‘psychological record.’¹⁰

Causey has noted that, while in Dymchurch, ‘Nash was attracted to the ... tides and a continuously changing shoreline, and ... also [to the ‘porous’ boundary] between *dream* and *reality*’ (emphasis added).¹¹ This view has been echoed by Cardinal, who states that, at Dymchurch, Nash found himself fascinated by the boundaries between land and sea, choosing to work with the sea in almost an archetypal—or symbolic—fashion.¹² Another scholar, David Fraser Jenkins, also develops this thought, arguing that Nash may have used *Winter Sea*, along with the other artworks he created at Dymchurch, to ‘attempt to find a safe pathway between sea and land, and to cultivate his own personal escape’ from his memories of war.¹³ Although my aim here is not to try to reconstruct the artist’s psychology, these statements do provide information that helps us to understand Nash’s internal landscape, which he—as earlier noted—deemed important to his interpretation of the Dymchurch seascape.

Composition

⁸ David Peters Corbett, “‘The Third Factor’”: Modernity and the Absent City in the Work of Paul Nash’. *The Art Bulletin* 74: 3 (1992), p. 458.

⁹ Leonard Robinson, *Paul Nash: Winter Sea: The Development of an Image*. York: William Sessions Limited, 1997, p. 67.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹¹ Causey, *Paul Nash: Paintings and Watercolours*.

¹² Cardinal, *The Landscape Vision of Paul Nash*.

¹³ David Fraser Jenkins, *Paul Nash: The Elements*. London: Scala Publishers Ltd., 2010.

The water in *Winter Sea* seems to be divided into three major planes, then fades off into a glasslike and unmoving area on the far right. Nash painted the sea as still, glass-like fragments; and the waves—with the exception of the occasional curved line here and there—assume sharp, almost jigsaw-like shapes. They lack the roundness that waves often have—as in the earlier-mentioned seascapes that are displayed around the gallery. It has been argued that this aesthetic choice may have been partly inspired by Nash's engagement with retrospective exhibitions of Picasso and Cézanne,¹⁴ but,



Figure 3:
Paul Nash, *Totes Meer (Dead Sea)*, oil on canvas, 1940-41 Tate

it should be noted that not all of his images of the sea at Dymchurch follow suit. Among the others, his pencil studies often contained these sharp lines, but they tended not to fit together in the 'jigsaw-like' fashion of *Winter Sea*. Nash's flat and fractured interpretation of the sea raises questions about his reasons for choosing this aesthetic. His lifelong interest in spatial arrangements may offer something of a way forward.⁹ We can understand Nash's interest in the order of the natural landscape

as being reminiscent of his childhood experiences, where in moments of trauma he would retreat to garden spaces, finding comfort in particular trees or areas of the Nash land.¹⁵ We might also see his interest in order as linked to the organisation of soldiers in the warscape. In *Winter Sea* we are presented with an organisation of a body of water that is naturally disorderly into defined geometric shapes. It is possible that the fracturing of these shapes, along with the fact that this is a depiction of winter, implies a freezing of the sea water and an end to motion. We might interpret this end to motion in relation to Nash's experience of the flow of time (which we know can be destabilised by traumatic experiences). Following those scholars who highlight the importance of trauma to Nash's work, I would argue that Nash's depiction of a fractured ocean is a depiction of one that is frozen in time. Nash could have been gesturing to a 'frozen' emotion, a return to the traumas of the past that he often remembered at Dymchurch. However, not every scholar believes psychological elements are the main things at play in *Winter Sea*.

Inga Fraser, Senior Curator of Kettle's Yard at the University of Cambridge, views the flat, geometric appearance of the ocean in *Winter Sea* as something mechanical, man-made, and industrial. She relates the flat planes of this ocean to sheets of metal. If we

¹⁴ Simon Grant, "Into the Light," in *Paul Nash Elements lumineux = Sunflower Rises*. Arles: Fondation Vincent van Gogh, 2018, p. 78.

¹⁵ Gough, "'Barren, silent, godless'.

are to go along with this interpretation, the work becomes quite disturbing, in a way that perhaps mirrors the landscapes Nash is most famous for. On this account, the work suggests an ocean of martial industrial waste, thus illustrating another aspect of devastation wrought upon nature by war.

Totes Meer, the painting often regarded as *Winter Sea*'s sequel,¹⁶ can be seen as a further testament to this view. Created in the early 1940s, this later painting is one of Nash's most famous images of war. When viewed beside *Winter Sea* (figure 4), it becomes apparent why scholars have classified *Winter Sea* as a precursor. Both paintings use grey and muddy yellows in their palettes, and both sharpen the sea. However, one striking difference between the two works is that *Totes Meer* includes depictions of aeroplanes in the waves.

It is because of this difference, and also the fact that Nash used actual photographs to supplement his painting of the later work, that *Totes Meer* is seen as more of a documentary piece. The kineticism of the painting also suggests that it represents an account of events, whereas the stillness of *Winter Sea*, its emptiness, suggests that *Winter Sea* is doing something else. This is another likely reason for why *Winter Sea* is often associated with Nash's internal landscape, rather than directly with his documentation of the events of war.

Instead of the animated hues that we might see in more romanticised seascapes, *Winter Sea* contains a series of dull colours. Even the moon, which is in the centre of the upper third of the canvas, is shrouded. What might normally function as at least a light in the darkness is instead covered in a veil of fog, which obscures our ability to discern the realities of the ocean before us. We are presented with an image that requires us to accept the painter's 'internal' view of the seascape, and asks to understand his memories of the sea from his time as a soldier.

There is one last point I'd like to make with regards to the painting's composition. Interestingly, Leonard Robinson—who conducted research at York Art Gallery in the 1990s—found that this work might not always have looked the way it does now. In his text on *Winter Sea*, Robinson reported that the Gallery put this painting through an X-ray at York District Hospital to investigate what appears to be newsprint at the bottom right-hand corner.¹⁷ The results of the X-rays revealed that the moon that we see placed in the upper third of the canvas may have begun in the centre of the horizon line. It would seem that Nash reworked this part of the painting a few times, changing the composition and how we, as viewers, might interpret the work overall.

One has to wonder, if the artist had chosen to leave the moon in the centre of the work, would it have sustained the mournful tone that it has now? Or, would this

¹⁶ Gough, "Barren, silent, godless," p. 53.

¹⁷ Robinson, *Paul Nash: Winter Sea, the Development of an Image*.

different position have made the painting appear more hopeful, or even spiritual, despite the subject we think it engages with?

Concluding Thoughts

There is so much more to say about *Winter Sea*, but I will close here. Despite how it may have changed over the twelve years of its creation, we might still interpret this painting as a depiction of Nash's war-related trauma—as is often argued in the scholarly literature—or an illustration of his internal struggle with modernity. Even though Nash is known to have referred to himself as a ‘war artist without a war,’¹⁸ *Winter Sea*, and the interpretations I have presented here, suggest a need for a deeper



Figure 4: Paul Nash, *Winter Sea* (left) and *Totes Meer (Dead Sea)* (right).

look at that claim.

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¹⁸ Paul Gough, “Barren, silent, godless...,” p. 163, quoting Nash’s unfinished autobiography, *Outline*, p. 218.

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