

FIRST NIGHT REVIEW

# The Shape of Things review — putting still life painting in the spotlight

A new show of fruit and flower paintings at Pallant House in Chichester is beautiful and imaginative

Laura Freeman

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Edward Wadsworth's *Bright Intervals* (1928), one of the paintings in *The Shape of Things: Still Life in Britain* exhibition at Pallant House, Chichester

DAN BROWN

Earlier this year, I posted a picture of Matthew Smith's painting *Lilies in a Jar* from the Courtauld collection on Instagram. I appended a sheepish caption saying I know it is very basic, but I do like a nice, pink still life. To judge by the outpouring of enthusiasm in the comments, I'm not the only one.

My sheepishness does not come from nowhere. In the old hierarchy of artistic genres, still life painting was lowest of the low. At the top was history painting with its stagey renditions of scenes from the Bible and the classical myths, then portraiture, then scenes of everyday life, then landscape painting, then animal painting and, finally, fruit-and-flower pieces.

Pallant House in Chichester is having none of it. In *The Shape of Things: Still Life in Britain*, the curators persuasively make the case that still life painting was — and is — a brilliant vehicle for expression, experiment and sheer artistic display. Along the way, we get a potted social history of Britain, a carousel of favourite artists and newer names and a whizz through movements and fashions. Bonus: there are some very pretty pictures — some pink — to look at. There are stunning loans from private collections. I'd never seen Winifred Nicholson's delicious *Vermilion and Mauve* before. It positively invites you to reach in and pick up its fallen petals.



Coloured Still Life, 1967, by Paul Caulfield  
PALLANT HOUSE GALLERY

If it were all pretty, the show would quickly pale, but there are enough skulking skulls and glassy hares to leave you with a frisson of something more sinister. Trust Walter Sickert to bring a sickly tinge to still life. His mushrooms look positively ghoulish, though the caption promises they were painted at a particularly happy time in his married life. Compare Sickert's sallow shrooms with the exuberant profusion of Ethel Walker's *Flower Piece No. 4* hanging nearby. Walker's painting is high summer incarnate, while Sickert's suggests the damp and mulch of autumn.

A suave still life by William Nicholson, also from a private collection, caught me out. I found myself moving my head to see my own reflection in the highly polished painted silver casket. Not real, but astonishingly convincing. It makes a striking counterpoint to a later painting by Caroline Walker of a breastfeeding pump and bottles, washed, sterilised, shining and drying in a rack. Very different subjects, but the same bravura surface finish.



Ironbridge Interior, 1941, by Eric Ravilious  
TOWNER EASTBOURNE

A room of Eric Ravilious, Ben Nicholson, David Jones and Cedric Morris offers delight after delight and just as it's all getting too rosy you prick yourself on the thorny, uneasy paintings of Paul Nash, Glyn Philpot and Gluck.

★★★★☆

To October 20, [pallant.org.uk](http://pallant.org.uk)

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