

Winifred Nicholson: Cumbrian Rag Rugs

Labels

1. Winifred Nicholson

The Warwick Family c. 1926

Oil on canvas

Private Collection

2. Designer unknown, maker attributed to Mrs Warwick

Sheep Dog 1920s

Rag Rug, textile

Private Collection

The Warwick Family portrait depicts Nicholson's neighbours, Margaret and Tom Warwick, alongside their daughter Janet and grandson Norman. Nicholson first discovered rag rug making in Cumberland in the early 1920s during a visit to Margaret Warwick. Nicholson encountered Warwick in her kitchen, using a proddy tool to craft a rug by pushing fabric strips from clothing through hessian stretched on a wooden frame.

The painting is one of Nicholson's rare group portraits, reflecting her close bond with the farming community where she lived on Hadrian's Wall in Cumbria. The piece, *Sheep Dog*, is believed to have been designed and made by Warwick in the 1920s at her farmhouse.

[Floor based plinth]

3. Designed and made by Mary Bewick

Two Cats by a Fire c. 1923

Hooked Rag Rug, textile

Tullie House Museum & Art Gallery Trust, Carlisle

Margaret Warwick designed and made *Two Cats by a Fire*, which the Nicholson's placed in front of their bedroom fireplace overlooking Warwick's neighbouring farm. It features an animated scene with a pink and yellow floral border.

4. Ben Nicholson

Birch Craig, Summer c. 1930

Oil on canvas

Private Collection on long term loan to the Middlesbrough Collection

Birch Craig, Summer by Ben Nicholson depicts a tranquil Cumbrian landscape, featuring gently sloping fields, dotted with solitary trees and a river flowing diagonally from the right corner. A faint mountain range outlines the horizon and in the foreground, farmhouses nestle into the landscape, accompanied by a striking red horse to the left. This painting captures the Cumbrian setting where many rag rugs were created and highlights the strong bond that Ben and Winifred Nicholson had with this landscape.

5. Ben Nicholson

Cumberland House 1920s

Wood and paint

Private Collection on long term loan to the Middlesbrough Collection

Ben Nicholson crafted *Cumberland Cottage*, a model cottage for his son Jake. The model was a cherished part of the Nicholson family's daily life, reflecting their deep engagement with Cumbrian life and its making traditions.

6. Designed and made by Mary Bewick

Galloway Bull 1960s

Rag Rug, textile

Private Collection

7. Winifred Nicholson

Galloway Cattle 1920s

Oil on canvas

Private Collection

8. Designed and made by Mary Bewick

Highland Cattle 1960s

Rag Rug, textile

Private Collection

In the 1960s, Nicholson revived the rag rug making tradition in Cumbria by encouraging local makers, including Mary Bewick, to make attractive rugs that could be sold. Bewick's rugs, such as *Galloway Bull*, characteristically feature farm animals, centrally placed.

Bewick's pieces are typically framed with simple borders and created from small tight loops of fabric. They are some of the finest and most technically intricate rugs. Her deep connection to farming and her keen observation of animals are evident in her work.

[Floor based plinth]

9. Designed by Ben Nicholson, made by Mary Bewick

Animal Squares c. 1925-1929

Wool, cotton, velvet

The Whitworth, The University of Manchester

In the mid-1920s, Ben Nicholson commissioned Bewick, to create *Animal Squares*, that can be seen on the plinth in this gallery. The rug took pride of place in the family kitchen. It depicts various farm animals such as a brown horse, black collie dog, turkey and horned ram

10. Designed and made by Mary Bewick

Two Cats by a Fire c. 1970

Rag Rug, textile

Private Collection

11. Designed and made by Mary Bewick

Sheep c.1960s

Rag Rug, textile

Private Collection

12. Designed and made by Mary Bewick

Animal Squares 1966

Rag Rug, textile

Private Collection

[Floor based plinth]

13. Designed by Winifred Nicholson, made by Mary Bewick

The Sun and the Moon c. 1970

Wool and hessian

The Whitworth, The University of Manchester

The sun with pointed rays shines in a bright sky on the right, while the crescent moon, surrounded by stars and glowing clouds sits on the left. Both are made from rich yellow material, feature smiling faces and are unified by a border.

Nicholson often explored cosmic and spiritual themes, reflecting her lifelong interest in light and celestial bodies. Her grandson, art historian Jovan Nicholson, notes that Nicholson, as a Christian, may have drawn inspiration from the biblical passage in Luke 21:

“There shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars... and then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory”.

This verse refers to celestial signs that signal Christ’s return. This adds a spiritual dimension to the piece, suggesting that the sun and moon are heavenly bodies symbolising the balance between earthly and heavenly realms.

14. Winifred Nicholson

Janet and Jacob Reading c. 1930

Oil on board

Private Collection on long term loan to the Middlesbrough Collection

15. Designed and made by Janet Heap

Tiger early 1960s

Rag Rug, textile

Private Collection

Janet Heap, the daughter of Margaret Warwick, occasionally cared for Winifred and Ben Nicholson's children between 1924 and 1932, becoming a part of their family life. The intimate painting *Janet and Jacob Reading* shows Heap reading with the Nicholson's son Jacob, reflecting the close bond between them.

Heap created four rugs for Nicholson, including *Tiger*. Her work is characterised by tightly worked loops and keen attention to detail, resulting in fabric so precisely worked that the hessian backing remains completely hidden. In *Tiger*, vibrant orange stripes echo the multi-coloured decorative striped border, and the bold orange is striking against the midnight blue background.

16. Designed and made by Mrs Davidson

Two Cats by a Fire c.1970s

Rag Rug, textile

Private Collection

Mrs Davidson, based in Bewcastle in North Cumbria, was one of the most prolific makers, crafting 31 rugs. *Two Cats by a Fire* depict the animals with wide eyes and pink noses curled in front of a fire with a pot on the range. The warm domestic scene is framed by a joyful border composed of tessellated multi-coloured triangles.

17. Designed by Winifred Nicholson, made by Florence Williams

Dancing Panther Cub c. 1966

Rag Rug, textile

Private Collection

A young panther cub leaps energetically, its legs and tail in dynamic motion, surrounded by a vibrant swirl of birds and flowers. The natural elements are echoed in the rich border of flowers and floral designs.

Nicholson based the piece on a newspaper clipping of a textile fragment from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The original clipping is displayed in the archive case in the gallery. On it, Nicholson left detailed instructions for the maker, specifying that the panther should be made 'yellow and black' against a 'deep golden green' background. She asked that the border be 'pale green' with 'every bright colour available' for the flowers.

18. Designed by Winifred Nicholson, made by Mrs Davidson

Lion and Lamb 1968-88

Rag Rug, textile

Private Collection

Mrs Davidson's work, *Lion and Lamb*, designed by Nicholson, depicts a tiny lamb nestled against a lion. This imagery may reference the Old Testament book of Isaiah 11.6, where the two animals are presented as visions of peace and balance in a world free from fear and danger.

19. Winifred Nicholson

Bewcastle 1972

Oil on board

Private Collection

Nicholson painted numerous scenes from Bewcastle, a small village in north Cumbria near the Scottish border. Bewcastle depicts simple wild flowers arranged in a tall, blue-striped jug in pastel shades of blue and

purple with a bright yellow rim, alongside a matching cup and saucer. The still life is set against Bewcastle's surrounding landscape, featuring green fields, grey-blue mountain ranges and cloudy sky. Nicholson was captivated by the luminosity of flowers, which she painted throughout her life.

Many rug makers were connected to Bewcastle, and Nicholson often took her visitors to see the area, renowned for the Anglo-Saxon Bewcastle Cross in the local churchyard.

20. Designed by Li Yuan-chia, made by a group of women meeting at the LYC Museum & Art gallery

Four Storks c. 1983

Rag Rug, textile

Private Collection

Four Storks was designed by Li Yuan-chia, an artist and curator who founded and ran the LYC Museum & Art Gallery (1972-1983). The piece was made collectively by three Cumbrian women at the LYC. It depicts storks circling a central irregular form containing a sun-like orb, and multicoloured geometric shapes. The blue background suggests sky or water.

The LYC Museum & Art Gallery was a vital cultural space in Cumbria that showcased prominent national and international artists and fostered cultural exchange. It served as a vibrant hub for the local community, hosting events and creative workshops.

21. Designer unknown, made by Florence Williams

Magpie 1970s

Rag Rug, textile

Private Collection

Magpie was designed by a Cumbrian school child. His art teacher was Andy Christian, a close friend of Nicholson who taught at the local school. The child, a passionate Newcastle United FC fan, was tasked by his teacher, Christian, to draw an image unrelated to football. The boy cleverly depicted a magpie, the emblem of his favourite club, without his teacher realising the connection.

The resulting rug, crafted by Florence Williams, features the bird-like figure that arguably resembles a dinosaur more than a magpie. An angular cream shape in the background suggests a goalpost, while the bird's outstretched wings evoke a celebratory stance, reminiscent of a triumphant player.

22. Designed by David Nicholson, made by Florence Williams

Batman and Robin 1968

Rag Rug, textile

Private Collection

Batman and Robin was designed by David Nicholson, grandson of Nicholson, and inspired by the iconic comic book heroes. It features a masked Batman in a blue-grey Batsuit against a deep blue-black background, alongside his sidekick Robin in a red suit with a black eye mask. The words 'POW' and 'ZOC' appear in sound-effect bubbles, echoing those found in the comic books and the animated series.

Batman and Robin are enduring crime-fighting heroes and key figures in popular culture. From 1966 to 1968, the comics were adapted into the live-action television series 'Batman' and the first film released in 1966. David Nicholson was influenced by the animated series of that era.

23. Designed by Jovan Nicholson, made by Florence Williams

Farmyard 1960s

Rag Rug, textile

Private Collection

24. Designed by Jovan Nicholson, made by Mrs Hall

Tractor and Haycart 1967

Rag Rug, textile

Private Collection

A number of rugs were designed by Nicholson's grandchildren and great-nieces. They were each paid one pound for their designs, which they drew boldly in marker pen on large pieces of hessian.

Jovan Nicholson, Nicholson's grandson, created designs including *Farmyard* and *Tractor and Haycart*. These designs were inspired by Cumbrian farming scenes and his experience of rural life.

Farmyard shows a farmhouse surrounded by lush farmland with grazing sheep, cattle and roaming chickens. A blue tractor and a horse-drawn cart traverse a winding path in the upper portion of the rag rug and, in the foreground, two buildings flank the left and right sides of the composition.

Tractor and Haycart features a patterned and colourful block-shaped tractor pulling a stacked cart filled with square bales of golden hay. They are set against fields depicted in shades of green.

25. Designed by Rafaele Appleby, maker unknown

Butterflies c. 1960s

Rag Rug, textile

Private Collection

26. Winifred Nicholson

Moth Flight over the Peloponnese c. 1960s

Oil on canvas

Private Collection on long term loan to the Middlesbrough Collection

Nicholson's painting *Moth Flight Over the Peloponnese* was created in Greece during the 1960s, and there are parallels between this and her granddaughter, Rafaele Appleby's design *Butterflies*. During the 1960s,

Nicholson frequently visited Greece, especially, Mycenae in the Peloponnese, where the ancient history, wildflowers and surrounding mountains inspired many of her pieces, including *Moth Flight Over the Peloponnese*.

27. Winifred Nicholson, made by a Cumbrian Volunteers Women's Club

Birds c. 1970

Rag Rug, textile

Private Collection

28. Winifred Nicholson

Blackbird in a Cumbrian Landscape c. 1970

Oil and silver spray paint on board

Private Collection on long term loan to the Middlesbrough Collection

Birds was designed by Nicholson and crafted by a group of volunteers from Cumbria. It features delicate stems and leaves, with various species of small birds perched or in flight, against a cream and yellow background with a subtly swirling pattern. The design reflects the influence of William Morris's, *Willow Bough* wallpaper, which decorated a room in Nicholson's home in the early 1960s.

Nicholson had a lifelong fascination with birds, painting species in Cumberland as well as during her painting trips to Greece from the early 1960s to 1973. *Blackbird in a Cumbrian Landscape* shows a blackbird in flight among slender trees against a cool grey-blue landscape, evoking the feel of the colder months. Soft purple and blue forms in the background suggest distant mountain ridges.

29. Designed by Jovan Nicholson, made by Florence Williams

Cumberland Landscape 1968

Rag Rug, textile

Private Collection

Jovan Nicholson's design for *Cumberland Landscape* mimics a painting through its distinct arrangement of foreground, middle ground and background. It features a vibrant patchwork of fields in shades of blue, green and yellow and at the top, grey sections suggest craggy mountain tops. In the immediate foreground to the right, tree forms emerge, while silvery tracks lead to a farmhouse nestled within the landscape—possibly the same farmhouse depicted in the rug *Farmyard*. The maker, Florence Williams, enhanced the farmhouse with intricate embroidery to add depth and texture.

30. Winifred Nicholson

St Mark's Lion 1951

Oil on canvas

Private Collection

31. Designed by Winifred Nicholson, maker unknown

Lion c. 1971

Rag Rug, textile

Private Collection

St Mark's Lion was created by Nicholson in Venice. The winged lion, symbolising St. Mark, Venice's patron saint, is surrounded by sea and ships, representing the city's maritime strength. The lion's front paws touch a structure, signifying St. Mark's protection over the city.

The rug *Lion* may reference this early painting, and is also inspired by a postcard of a hooked rug, *Lion and Beaver*, from the American Museum in Bath that Nicholson received from a friend in 1971. The postcard is displayed in the archive case in this gallery. In Nicholson's design the golden lion is surrounded by flowers, an ornate pink jar, a butterfly, foliage and various birds against a vibrant blue background with the beavers omitted from her interpretation.

32. Winifred Nicholson, maker unknown

Black Swan

Rag Rug, textile

Private Collection

Black Swan, designed by Nicholson, features a black swan with a bright orange beak gliding over bands of water in varying shades of blue, its red feet just visible beneath the surface. At the top of the composition, tangled stems and branches with orange specs against a beige and grey background, suggest a riverbank.

[Floor based plinth]

33. Designed by Winifred Nicholson, made by Florence Williams

Peacock December 1972

Hooked Rag Rug, textile

Tullie House Museum & Art Gallery Trust, Carlisle

Peacock is an intricately worked rug depicting a vibrant peacock with striking blue and green feathers, following a smaller bird that could be a female peahen or a baby peachick, with soft brown plumage. The birds are shown strolling across lush green grass amid richly coloured flowers.

Nicholson was inspired to design this rug after receiving a postcard from a friend that depicts a section from the sixth-century Byzantine mosaics in the Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy. The peacock symbolises resurrection and eternal life, themes that resonate with Nicholson's lifelong Christian faith. The original postcard is on display in the archive case in this gallery.

[Archive Display Case]

34.

[Top Row Left to Right]

Annotated newspaper of a textile fragment from the Museum of Fine Arts,
Boston unknown date
Newsprint
Private Collection

Winifred Nicholson

Sketch for a Tiger Rug early 1960s
Ink on paper
Private Collection

Postcard depicting *Lion and Beaver* from The American Museum in Bath
unknown date
Card
Private Collection

[Bottom Row Left to Right]

Rag rug making tools that belonged to Emma Gass
Wood and metal
Private Collection

Postcard depicting mosaics in Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna
unknown date
Card
Private Collection

Winifred Nicholson

Sketch for Animal Squares c. 1960s
Pencil on paper
Private Collection

35. Designed and made by Florence Williams

Jonah and the Whale April 1969

Rag Rug, textile

Private Collection

Florence Williams, a prolific rag rug maker, began her craft shortly before the Second World War while living in Warwick Bridge, Cumbria. Her work is noted for its technical proficiency, featuring tight loops, intricate details and embroidered embellishments.

In *Jonah and the Whale*, the Old Testament story is vividly portrayed with Jonah inside the giant whale and the dynamic motion of the sea is captured through bands of blue, white and green.

36. Winifred Nicholson, maker unknown

Animal Squares c. 1960s

Rag Rug, textile

Private Collection

Animal Squares is divided into fifteen sections, featuring animals in alternate squares. An accompanying sketch, displayed in the archive case, outlines Nicholson's instructions to the maker. Nicholson specifies which animals should appear in each square, these animals include a stag, horse, dog, canary and hen, bull, ram and cat. Notably the cat resembles a mouse rather than a cat in Williams' rendering.

37. Designed and made by Florence Williams

Witch on a Broomstick c. 1970

Rag Rug, textile

Private Collection

38. Designed and made by Florence Williams

Scarecrow 1970s

Rag Rug, textile

Private Collection

In *Witch on a Broomstick*, by Florence Williams, the vibrant, swirling sky evokes magic and movement as the witch soars, accompanied by her black cat familiar. *Scarecrow* features horizontal bands of colour to represent the natural landscape. The scarecrow's warm smile, contrasting with typical eerie depictions, suggests the rug was designed by a child.



Use the QR code to listen to an audio tour of the exhibition.