KETTLE'S YARD

Press Release

Christopher Wood: in love

13 February – 27 June 2027

Press View: 12 February 2027
10.45am – 1pm



Christopher Wood, *Self Portrait* (*c.* 1926-27)
Image courtesy Offer Waterman, London

"He painted […] in order to put down in his enthusiasm the reality of the thing he saw; it was an expression springing directly from the desire to say, 'I love this'."

— Jim Ede, founder of Kettle's Yard

Kettle's Yard is delighted to present 'Christopher Wood: in love', a major exhibition of more than 80 paintings and drawings exploring the life and personal relationships at the heart of Christopher Wood's (1901–1930) short but impactful career. A central figure in the Kettle's Yard collection, Wood is considered one of the most remarkable artists to have engaged with modern forms of painting and drawing in Britain in the early 20th century. Opening the Kettle's Yard 70th anniversary year, this exhibition will offer a new reading of Wood's work beyond his famed landscapes, offering fresh perspective on the artist's scenes of love and connection.

Drawn from public and private collections, many of the works selected for this exhibition have rarely been seen in public. 'Christopher Wood: in love' will trace the artist's travels between London, Paris, the Mediterranean and North Africa, following the friendships, romantic relationships and creative circles that shaped his life and work. Structured as a series of 'acts', the exhibition will bring together works in lively chronological and geographical groupings, with captions drawn from Wood's own letters to his mother.

Wood learned to paint as a teenager while recovering from a serious illness. He enrolled briefly at the School of Architecture at Liverpool University in 1919, but moved to London shortly after. It was there he met the collector and connoisseur Alphonse Kahn, an encounter which set in motion a transformative decade for Wood, as he followed a peripatetic way of life, meeting and learning from a variety of artists, writers and cultural figures across Europe and beyond. As his letters to his mother and others testify, Wood's idea of artistic success changed as rapidly as the company he kept. The exhibition will follow his swift evolution between 1921 and 1930, demonstrating how his style and subject matter transformed in response to his personal and artistic passions.

'Christopher Wood: in love' will open with a section exploring the subject of the family, establishing Wood's ambivalence towards this traditional relationship template, seeking both to reject and reinvent the idea of family for himself. The works in this and the following sections demonstrate how swiftly Wood experimented with and adopted new forms of modernism. Arranged in small, conversational groupings, paintings of close family units will be shown adjacent to a salon-style display of nude drawings, reflecting the dialogue between Wood's sense of himself as a student and his aspiration to be – in his words – 'the greatest painter that has ever lived'. The bold, graphic portraits inspired by the work of his peers in Europe illustrate this ambition.

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Wood's travels between London and Paris in the early 1920s marked another transformational period. It was between these two cities that he met an eclectic cast of characters who would also become his sitters, including the Chilean diplomat José Antonio de Gandarillas Huici and Lord Alington, a rebellious RAF officer and generous patron of the arts. Their portraits will be shown alongside works illustrating Wood's studio and living environs and some of his more sexualised subject matter such as *Dogs at Play* (1927), depicting two British 'redcoats' in intimate conversation in a park, and *Exercises* (1925), featuring the male guests of the Savoy bathhouse.

A section titled *Enfants terribles* will explore Wood's integration into Jean Cocteau's social and creative circle in Paris, featuring Wood's portraits of Jeanne and Jean Bourgoint, the siblings who provided the inspiration for Cocteau's novel, *Les Enfants terribles*, as well as Cocteau's own 1925 portrait of Wood. With Cocteau, Wood's use of opium increased, an addiction he was to struggle with for the rest of his life. This social circle also provided Wood's introduction to Sergei Diaghilev, founder of the Ballets Russes. Thanks to the support of Jean Cocteau and Pablo Picasso, Wood was commissioned to create designs for the Ballet's production of *Romeo and Juliet*, which were ultimately rejected as Wood refused to alter his work according to Diaghilev's wishes. The suite of Wood's designs form the heart of this section which also includes a painting of rehearsing dancers and his pencil portrait of the dancer Serge Lifar.

Sections devoted to the Mediterranean and the Atlantic will follow Wood's annual travels with Gandarillas between 1922 and 1927, whose companionship was at different times romantic and platonic. The new landscapes and experiences that Wood encountered along the way were reflected in his experimentation with form and medium. Highlights will include portraits of Constant Lambert, the composer who worked on Diaghilev's *Romeo and Juliet* alongside Wood and the artist and rebellious heir of the Anglo-Irish brewing family, Meraud Guinness, with whom Wood conducted a fraught relationship in 1927-28.



Christopher Wood, *Dogs at Play* (1927)
Private Collection, Christie's Images/Bridgeman Images.

Wood's friendship with Ben and Winifred Nicholson offered Wood a new direction both personally and artistically, and in the exhibition this will be represented by works made in Cumberland (now Cumbria) and afterwards, influenced by their views on art and life. Wood's trips to St. Ives with the Nicholsons, and later with his new partner, the glamorous Russian expat Frosca Munster, unlocked a new dimension to Wood's work, which he was further able to develop during stays in Dieppe and especially Brittany. The folk traditions of these regions opened a way for Wood to explore the mythic and the surreal, as seen in paintings such as *Ulysses and the Sirens (Mermaids)* (1929) and *Sleeping Fisherman, Ploaré, Brittany* (1930), depicting a sleeping fisherman lying semi-nude amongst his nets.

By 1930, Wood's regular use of opium had developed to a severe addiction, which was reflected in the hallucinatory qualities seen in his later work. As his condition worsened, he threw himself into his designs for the carnivalesque ballet *Luna Park*, written by his friend Boris Kochno. The ballet opened at the Palace Theatre in Manchester on 4 March, moving to the London Pavilion in Piccadilly Circus on 27 March 1930, and was widely admired amongst Wood's creative circles. His costume and stage designs for the ballet influenced paintings such as *The Yellow Man* (1930), in which a yellow-clad figure walks down a darkened street with a child, perhaps referencing the artist's own feelings of insecurity or immaturity.

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The final work in the galleries will be *Poppies in a Decorated Jar* (1925), referencing the cause of his tragic death in 1930 at the age of 29. The work stands as a poignant reminder of the vast stylistic changes that his practice underwent alongside a short, but rich life filled with friendship, passion, obsession and love.

Upstairs in the Edlis Neeson Research Space at Kettle's Yard, Wood's posthumous reputation, his relationship with Jim Ede, and his painterly materials and technique will be explored through a display of letters, photographs and ephemera, alongside a series of overpainted canvases that belonged to Wood, which were discovered in a sealed shed at Kettle's Yard in 2024 and have undergone conservation analysis at the Hamilton Kerr Institute, revealing the works hidden beneath.

'Christopher Wood: in love' is curated by Inga Fraser and will be accompanied by an illustrated publication, designed by Roland Brauchli and including essays by Megan Breckell, Inga Fraser, Erma Hermens and Paul van Laar, Aïcha Mehrez, Matthew Houlbrook, Alistair O'Neill, Sophie Oliver, and Gregory Salter.

The exhibition design is by P. Joseph, inspired by curatorial research into Wood's studios in Paris and London. As a practice, P. Joseph believes that architecture should be experienced as a unified whole, in which architecture, interiors and furniture are conceived together as part of one vision.

Kettle's Yard has also collaborated with design-led natural and mineral based paint company Atelier Ellis to produce a bespoke set of five colours for the exhibition, created in response to Christopher Wood's work. The colours form part of a special collection of paints, which also includes ten further shades inspired by the Kettle's Yard House. The full range will be available to purchase in 2027 via the Atelier Ellis website, with samples available to view in the Kettle's Yard Shop.

The exhibition graphics are designed by Christopher Lawson.



Christopher Wood, *Poppies in a Decorated Jar* (1925)
Image courtesy of Manchester City Galleries



Christopher Wood, *Constant Lambert* (1927)
Gift of Lucy Wertheim. On loan from Towner Eastbourne

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About Kettle's Yard

Celebrating its 70th anniversary in 2027, Kettle's Yard, part of the University of Cambridge, is a leading gallery and unique house with a remarkable collection of 20th-century art. Its founders Jim and Helen Ede believed in art's ability to transform lives, a vision upheld today through critically acclaimed exhibitions, pioneering community and learning programmes, and research of the highest quality. Our aim is to offer an inspiring and enriching experience for everyone who visits.
Find out more and get involved at: kettlesyard.cam.ac.uk

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