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Ben Nicholson's Swiss retreat

The painter's former property inspired many of his paintings and is on the market for £3.7m



Paul Shearer

Ticino has long been a magnet for painters and thinkers - the British artist Ben Nicholson described the landscape as "entirely magical with the kind of visual poetry I'd like to find in my paintings".

In this southernmost canton of Switzerland, on the Italian border, wooded hills plunge straight into deep lakes and the warm climate allows exotic palms and olive trees to grow. It was here that Nicholson and his third wife, the landscape photographer Felicitas Vogler, built a house on the hillside overlooking Lago Maggiore, above the town of Brissago, in the early 1960s. The current owner of the property, Claudia Spiess, also a painter, is moving to Canada and has reluctantly decided to sell it, for SwFr7.4 million (£3.7 million).

The Nicholson house, pictured, is laid out in three well-defined areas: day quarters, night quarters and a studio. Each separate space has a subtly different atmosphere suited to its purpose. The whole ensemble is positioned discreetly on the wooded slopes, backing on to the forest.

The modest garden surrounding the house is laid out in a series of small terraces, interlinked by pathways of the local grey-blue stone. Everything is orientated to make maximum use of the splendid view down the lake towards Italy.

Down the hill, at Casa Gabriella in the upmarket resort of Ascona, the free thinker Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn had the idea in the 1920s to establish a "meeting place between East and West", which attracted such thinkers as Carl Gustav Jung and Richard Wilhelm. The Eranos Foundation that she created still holds meetings there.

"The colours of the lake are always changing, depending on the wind," Spiess says. She and her husband, Michael Spiess, a veterinary surgeon, bought the property privately four years ago and have modernised the house while trying to keep as much of the original interior as possible. In the bathroom there are blue wall tiles and a blue-and-white mosaic floor.

"Nicholson wanted to mirror the colours of the lake inside the house," Spiess says. "He also liked the look and feel of raw materials." She points to the varnished hallway floor of imported exotic wood boards. "Apparently, it was the cause of several arguments between Felicitas and Ben, as her preference was for easy-to-clean floors. So often, after a trip away, he would return to find shiny floors that he'd then strip back to bare wood."

The former butler's rooms have been converted into a spare bedroom, Vogler's darkroom is now a sauna and a swimming pool has been built in the garden. The studio, which had been subdivided, is

now restored to a single space revealing the door that was enlarged so that a large Nicholson painting could be carried out.

Nicholson, born in 1894, married the artist Winifred Roberts in 1920, then the sculptor Barbara Hepworth in 1938. He divorced Hepworth in 1951 but, six years later, it was she who introduced him to Vogler, who had travelled to the artists' colony at St Ives in Cornwall while researching English landscape for Bavarian radio.

Spieß says: "It's a very meditative place. It feeds the spirit to just sit on the terrace and look at the view."

Details: www.wetag.ch