

A SUSSEX GUIDE

BLOOMSBURY IN SUSSEX



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THE BLOOMSBURY GROUP

A LARGELY IMAGINARY GROUP OF PERSONS



A collection of immensely gifted and influential writers, artists and others, including the art critic Roger Fry and the economist Maynard Keynes, the Bloomsbury group pioneered and shaped many of the most important and attractive aspects of modern British life. They recognised the need for the repeal of cruel and discriminatory Victorian legislation, but did not equate this with the rather different task of changing public attitudes towards marriage, child-rearing and personal relationships, as well as to art and design.

In order to understand anything about Bloomsbury we need to think back to the Indian summer of late-Victorian imperial England in which its members grew up: a prosperous but deeply class-divided country bursting with xenophobic and chauvinistic self-confidence, in which oxen still toiled in the fields at the foot of the South Downs, and the Lord Chamberlain was authorised to censor all texts for public theatrical performance in order that they should conform to the most elaborate and exactingly hypocritical standards of public decency. It was a world of sharp double standards between men and women, where homosexuality was made entirely illegal in 1885, and in many respects the major institutions regulating public life had more in common with the age of Queen Anne than our own.

It was against this suffocating background that we must picture the Bloomsbury group's early exodus from London. Few of them came from

conventionally happy homes, and none had been at ease with their parents. The early years of the Stephen sisters were largely overshadowed by successive waves of illness, family losses and harsh treatment by their father and step-brothers after the early deaths of their mother and beloved older step-sister. All were dissatisfied with the rigours and rituals of the late Victorian middle-class household and its emotionally stultifying effects. From these, of course, they never entirely escaped, however unorthodox their subsequent lives may have been by the standards of most of their contemporaries.

In 1964 Leonard Woolf explained with characteristic insight that the term Bloomsbury 'was and is currently used as a term – usually of abuse – applied to a largely imaginary group of persons'.¹ Writing to her husband in 1931, Vanessa Bell drew his attention to an article in *The Times*,

*sniping at Bloomsbury. I really think it is time someone pointed out that Bloomsbury was killed by the war (...) not that it matters much, only one wonders what the cause is. Is it really hatred of Roger [Fry], or what? I can't think that anyone in their senses can now lump Duncan [Grant] and Roger together as artists or influences.*²

Yet lump them all together they did, and continue so to do.

Born in the 1870s and 1880s, the members of Bloomsbury were formed before World War I and were thus of a generation described by Virginia Woolf in her final novel who 'were neither one thing nor the other, neither Victorians nor themselves'³. The men had first met as undergraduates at Cambridge, soon mixing closely with one another's families and other friends. They famously honoured friendship, modesty, self-criticism, sexual honesty, creativity and intellectual enquiry, while not failing to recognise the ways in which these qualities may come into conflict. There was, however, no blueprint for how they might put all this into practice in their own lives.

Opposed to demagoguery and fanaticism of all kinds, opposed indeed to the sound of voices raised in anger, they were generally given to understatement, reason, dialogue and irreverent good humour. In spite of their many differences they stood collectively against the deep strain of

puritanism within British life and culture, and expressed themselves with vivacious candour, never more serious than when telling jokes. Moreover as Quentin Bell has suggested, it is doubtful whether any English group 'had ever been so radical in its rejection of sexual taboos'.⁴ Many of these values may be found reflected in the surviving Sussex homes of the original central figures of the group, and the nature and significance of their unique visual style is my central theme.

Certainly not everyone in Bloomsbury got on with one another. For example, Lytton Strachey never liked Roger Fry and many of the group became gradually distanced from Maynard Keynes, while Clive Bell and Leonard Woolf were never in any real sense friends. And of course they could get on one another's nerves from time to time, like all mere mortals. They did, however, generally feel a strong sense of Europe as 'a family of nations, bound to one another by the ethical standards of an old and common civilization', as Leonard Woolf once put it.⁵

Furthermore, the members of Bloomsbury shared an exhilarating sense peculiar to the handful of years before the outbreak of World War I that immense social change for the better was imminent, of which the arts were understood as a kind of litmus test. This went hand in hand with a general dislike of things Victorian. However, as the 20th century progressed, this early optimism was gradually replaced by a darker fear that the war had fatally undermined the entire inherited basis of European civilisation. With this perception went an increasingly pessimistic awareness that the Treaty of Versailles of 1919 had led directly to the rise of Hitler and, moreover, that those in power had by consistent policies of appeasement betrayed their own country by defending the Nazis as bulwarks against Soviet communism. Few commentaries on the rise of the dictators have stood the test of time as depressingly well as that of Leonard Woolf written in Rodmell in the late 1930s.⁶

Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf

At this point it seems helpful to turn briefly to the relationship between Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf whose personalities lay at the heart of Bloomsbury, which is perhaps best understood as two closely

overlapping circles of friends each focused on one of the two sisters. Nor should one forget the extreme rarity of significant creative gifts being shared by siblings, particularly in such different fields as painting and writing. For all his romantic fascination, Bramwell Brontë was hardly a great artist, and apart from the artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his poet sister Christina, no real parallel springs to mind.

Born respectively in 1879 and 1881, Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf were the daughters of Sir Leslie Stephen (1832-1904) and his second wife Julia Jackson Duckworth, who already had three children by her first marriage. She also had a further two sons with Sir Leslie, a distinguished author and critic and the founding editor of *The Dictionary of National Biography*, whose first wife Harriet was the youngest daughter of the novelist William Thackeray. Vanessa and Virginia thus grew up in an intensely literary household, dominated by a father who became increasingly tyrannical after Julia's death in 1895. Her loss was partly assuaged by their half-sister Stella who assumed many of Julia's thankless domestic responsibilities before her escape through marriage, closely followed by her own tragically premature death in 1897.

Their adolescence was largely blighted by what Quentin Bell has described as their father's 'savage, self-pitying emotional blackmail (...) of which they spoke but which they never made public'.⁷ In the seven long dark years between Stella's death and that of their father in 1904, they were also plagued by the overly intrusive attentions of their two considerably older half-brothers. Small wonder then that they eventually struck out on their own in a spirit of defiant rejection of the standards of conventional Victorian family life which had caused them both such unnecessary suffering. On their father's death, they quit the gloomy family home in South Kensington in favour of a new life in Gordon Square in the geographically and socially distant London district of Bloomsbury.

The subsequent history of the Bloomsbury group was largely the legacy of these two remarkable sisters, artists of the first calibre, both deeply wounded by their early life to which was added the loss of their beloved brother Thoby Stephen in 1906 at the age of 26. Both sisters were profoundly self-critical and at the same time contemptuous of

self-pity. Having early on defined their future respective careers as an artist and a writer, both were immensely productive, hard-working and self-motivated, and were equally committed to the highest artistic standards, sometimes at considerable cost to themselves and to those around them, who recognised something of the extraordinary nature of their personal and artistic achievements, not least in having survived the emotional rigours of their upbringing.

Together the sisters set the tone of Bloomsbury. Theirs was essentially a double-act: Vanessa the calm, dry, quiet ironist contrasting with Virginia's marvellously fanciful and imaginative personality which survives best in her incomparably amusing, gossipy, shrewd, worldly letters. Something of their mutual and complementary sense of humour may perhaps be lost on those of a more literal disposition in these over-literal times, but it is impossible not to respond to their seriousness about their work, which they communicated with the lightest of touches and the utmost modesty.

Virginia's mental fragility and periodic breakdowns were contrasted by them both to Vanessa's immense strength of will, expressed from early sisterly nicknames to an increasingly elaborate personal mythology which came to be widely accepted by their friends. Vanessa doubtless accepted her given persona as an archaic mother-goddess, part Aphrodite, part Demeter, in so far as it accorded well with her evident unwillingness to get involved in types of intellectual debate and enquiry which held no interest for her. Yet as Jane Dunn points out, it also locked her securely 'into the straitjacket of sanity'.⁸ Regarded by almost everyone around her as the personification of female authority and wisdom, Vanessa's vulnerability was rarely acknowledged. It was as if Virginia had her older sister's depression for her, which may be one reason why Vanessa often appears strangely incurious in her letters about the reasons for her sister's problems.

This was a dangerous area for Vanessa, since to delve too deeply into the causes of Virginia's difficulties threatened to raise issues about her own past which she clearly much preferred to forget. Vanessa's frequently stated disinterest in the subject matter of art was in some ways a

similarly convenient pose borrowed from Roger Fry in order to protect her privacy and to pre-empt further discussion of her inner life. Vanessa's goddess status was moreover a fiction which in some respects reversed the truth, since in many respects she was at least as harmed by her life-long struggles to deny even the acknowledgement of the constant threat of depression as her sister was by a more outwardly symptomatic mental illness. Moreover, Virginia was in many ways more of a fighter, as she herself eventually came to realise.⁹

To her own daughter Vanessa seemed much closer than Virginia to the everyday world.

By comparison she was calm, like a pool on which the coloured leaves slowly change their patten. She accepted, rather than protested; was passive, rather than avid. She did not care deeply about abstract ideas, and was led by her sensibilities rather than her intellect. In theory she supported rationalism, though her own acts were usually compulsive. She instinctively limited her life to the two things she cared for most: her painting and her family. The wider world seemed to her to threaten these two points (...) Love, with her, was an exclusive rather than an inclusive emotion; there was a chosen circle round which she planted a high palisade that cast its shadows both on those without and those within (...) Virginia danced round her like a dragon-fly round the water-lily, darting in to attack before Vanessa could take action (...) She sat and sewed or painted or listened (...) Even if she said little, there emanated from her an enormous power, a pungency like the smell of crushed sage. She presided, wise yet diffident, affectionate and a little remote, full of unquenchable spirit. Her feelings were strong, and words seemed to her inadequate. She was content to leave them to her sister and to continue painting.¹⁰

However, as Frances Spalding comments, Vanessa may have done

less for the women's cause than her sister and yet, judged by the standards of everyday behaviour, Vanessa was far more revolutionary (...) Her rejection of most of those habits and customs which curtailed the lives of other women of their class grew out of her belief in the absolute need for personal freedom.¹¹

This did not necessarily make for private happiness, and it is surely

significant that neither sister married for reasons of conventional romantic love, and both spent their adult lives in sexless central relationships, if for different reasons and with different consequences for themselves and those around them. Nothing more clearly reveals the extent of their equal underlying vulnerability than the fact that they both slept for most of their adult lives on chastely single beds. Nor did worldly success or recognition come early for either of them. Virginia did not publish her first novel until the age of 37, and Vanessa was 43 at the time of her first one-woman show in 1923.

In this context one is mindful of Virginia Woolf's observation that 'We think back through our mothers if we are women',¹² and her unforgettable description of her own mother as a woman who

*reversed those natural instincts which were so strong in her of happiness and joy in a generous and abundant life, and pressed the bitterest fruit only to her lips. She visited the poor, nursed the dying, and felt herself possessed of the true secret of life at last, which is still obscured from a few, that sorrow is our lot, and at best we can but face it bravely.*¹³

It is difficult not to feel pity for the children of such a remorselessly perfect being.

Much of Virginia Woolf's fiction involved a creative re-imagining of their shared past, taking Vanessa back to their childhood as a form of 'reality checking' as it were, and perhaps as much for her sake as for her own. Writing from France in 1927, Vanessa praised Virginia's recently published *To The Lighthouse* for providing a portrait of their mother in the person of Mrs Ramsay,

*which is more like her to me than anything I could have conceived possible (...)
It was like meeting her again with oneself grown up and on equal terms and it seems to me the most astonishing feat of creation.*¹⁴

Yet as Jane Dunn points out, while Vanessa regarded the character of Mrs Ramsay as a remarkable reincarnation of their mother, Roger Fry recognised in it 'a moving portrait of Vanessa', not least in her relentless need to control those around her.¹⁵

Given her background and history, it is not difficult to understand how Vanessa came to shelter behind a reputation of formidable strength in contrast with her younger sister's more evident fragility. However, both sisters were equally tortured by self-doubt and vulnerable to depression. Duncan Grant sacrificed much to the task of maintaining Vanessa's sanity, much as Leonard Woolf dedicated himself to Virginia's emotional welfare. In so far as Vanessa could accept mothering from anyone, she accepted it from him, and there is a deep gap in our understanding of Bloomsbury if we do not from the outset recognise her extreme inner vulnerability matched by her equally ferocious instinct to control those around her, from which Duncan and her children all suffered, albeit in different ways. Duncan doubtless greatly loved and esteemed Vanessa, but he never pretended that he was heterosexual, or made promises to her which might be held against him. To a considerable extent Duncan was her emotional prisoner, and intuitively recognising the reasons for her need to imprison him, did the best he could to soften her compulsive, self-inflicted role of disappointed suitor, over which she evidently had little control or understanding. Yet we should recognise that at the heart of Bloomsbury lay two remarkable, productive creative partnerships, which in the case of Duncan and Vanessa endured for more than half a century.

Bloomsbury Modernism

It is not my task in these pages to attempt to summarise the range of Bloomsbury's many public achievements, but it should be pointed out that on the whole the study of Bloomsbury has been heavily weighted towards the literary, reflecting the longstanding English tendency to belittle the visual arts, from which some members of Bloomsbury were themselves not always entirely immune. This situation is complicated by the fact that the painters of Bloomsbury were themselves modest and self-deprecating to a fault, and incapable of self-promotion.

Early Modernism was never a unified international 'movement'. On the contrary, it involved a wide range of responses forged in relation to local cultural traditions, whether in London or Amsterdam or St Petersburg, and it is absurd to try to judge them all by the same criteria.

Indeed, it is in the great variety of its many variant national styles that early Modernism seems, in retrospect, most exciting, and of these the version developed by the artists of Bloomsbury is every bit as valid and distinct as the Modernism of the De Stijl group in Holland, or the Section d'Or group in Paris. Nor was there any parallel elsewhere for the duration of the close creative dialogue between Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, which far too often goes unremarked or else is bizarrely understood as some kind of disqualification for taking them seriously, rather than making them and their work seem all the more interesting.

Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant privately shared the highest possible artistic standards, and one can only admire Vanessa for never forgetting nor forgiving John Rothenstein's foolish throwaway comment on a visit to Charleston that Titian couldn't draw.¹⁶ Indeed the whole history of Charleston is inseparable from the way in which Duncan and Vanessa felt safe with one another, away from their over-intellectual literary friends. For all her great respect of the intellect Virginia Woolf was well aware, as she points out in *Orlando*, that it 'often, alas, acts the cannibal among the other faculties so that often, where the Mind is biggest, the Heart, the Senses, Magnanimity, Charity, Tolerance, Kindliness, and the rest of them scarcely have room to breathe'.¹⁷

Consummate professionals to their fingertips, Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant not only shared a passionate excitement when young about the latest developments in painting in Paris before 1914, they were both also deeply grounded in the history of their medium. Their letters to one another are packed with constant references to painters and paintings about which they shared a profoundly nourishing mutual passion. Art was the primary substance of their private world, and sustained much of their private dialogue, a passion they could share with nobody else with the same intensity. If he told her that something was the colour of the dress worn by St Helena in Veronese's great picture in the National Gallery, she would instantly and precisely know the pale silvery orange-pink to which he referred. Such dialogue is quite different to that of most writers and is available only to those for whom the visual arts are the most significant of all.

In 1929 Duncan and Vanessa decorated the dining-room at Penns-in-the-Rocks, the late-17th-century home of the literary hostess Lady Dorothy Wellesley at Withyham in Sussex. At the time the decor was widely admired but it was unfortunately dismantled after Lady Dorothy's death. The prevailing colours were, as usual in Bloomsbury decorations, muted, with grey-green walls, a pale grey ceiling and carpet, and a pink fireplace decorated with pale green circles. The furniture, painted predominantly pale salmon-pink and grey, included an octagonal dining-table with a set of matching cane-backed chairs, side-tables and a sideboard, presided over by six large figurative wall panels, three by each artist, including two large upright panels flanking the fireplace, and three more along one wall, with a smaller panel filling a corner.

The room was lit by alternating octagonal mirrors fixed above ground-glass wall-lights like modernist candle-sconces, matching a larger octagonal mirror above the fireplace, to great effect. Vanessa Bell's curtains were of pale mauve silk appliqué with yellow and orange and patches of glittering sequins. Sadly the five surviving decorated panels now in the Southampton Art Gallery provide little sense of the integrity of the overall scheme which, like all their best work, depended on the overall relations of walls, furniture and fittings, conceived as an ensemble for a particular house and client.

High up on the right side of the main hall of Brighton Art Gallery hangs a single large wall-panel painted by Duncan Grant, one of six designed for the interior of an imaginary Music Room exhibited at the Reid and Lefevre Gallery in London in 1932. Displayed too high, and out of alignment with its surroundings, it makes the same point. Bloomsbury decoration involved schemes for entire rooms, and individual elements were never intended to stand alone in this way. Some of their painted furniture is sufficiently autonomous to stand such treatment, yet essentially theirs was a carefully calculated style of overall decorative effect, generally designed for specific locations and to be seen *in situ*.

Primarily painters, the artists of Bloomsbury are sometimes blamed for not having been 'proper' designers, yet this is to spectacularly miss the point of their insistence on the artist's continued role as decorator

and interior designer in the exhilarating early days of Modernism, and their refusal to hand everything over to architects. Born respectively in 1879 and 1885, Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant were leading figures from the earliest phase of British modern art which was all but extinguished in the trenches of Flanders, only to be rediscovered by later generations. Although British in outlook and training, they shared a deep love and awareness of the wider traditions of European painting and the decorative arts. Insistently not pasticheurs, they were in many respects much more defiantly modern than most of their successors in the 1920s and 1930s. Hence the exasperated tone of Vanessa Bell's comment on the decorative arts in England:

*where it seems to me one can never get away from all this fatal prettiness.*¹⁸

With few exceptions their work in all media was generally conceived for comparatively small domestic environments. Hand-made, vibrant, sensual, life-affirming, and quite different from the mainstream industrialised and streamlined Art Deco style of the interwar years, their experimental modernism evolved in the hands and through the eyes of artists initially sensitised to the taste and outlook of the Arts and Crafts movement. Above all they wished as artists to reclaim the field of interior design and to extend their work beyond the field of easel-painting onto walls, and into fabrics, furnishings, ceramics and other elements in the domestic arena. In this central respect they were without peers or obvious precedents.

They felt themselves to be the heirs of an unbroken living tradition of decorative art in Britain, and their mood is rarely if ever elegiac, by contrast with the later work of younger artist-designers such as Edward Bawden, Eric Ravilious or Rex Whistler. Indeed the mood of their work is quite different from the exquisite updated rococo visions of so much fashionable art and design in the inter-war years. Bloomsbury art and decoration lacks any trace of the ironic stance of the Sitwell circle and their decorators, and was far removed from the inter-war nostalgia for the lifestyle associated with grand country houses.¹⁹ This after all was

precisely what the artists of Bloomsbury had resolutely turned their backs on. They were not out to revisit Brideshead, nor were they vulnerable to the siren charms of the Second Empire.

At the Omega Workshops in London between 1913 and 1919, Vanessa and Duncan had pioneered and anticipated most of the trends which would subsequently become widely fashionable and commercially successful in the fabrics and ceramics of the 1920s and 1930s. Much of their early decorative work derived from the geometric abstraction of Cubism, but this was always balanced by an equal emphasis on boldly drawn curvilinear patterns including leaves, plant-forms and simplified figurative elements. This can be seen if one compares their many surviving painted screens, or their later painted decorations in the dining room and the garden sitting-room at Charleston. It is surely significant that they did not turn to the production of wallpapers, preferring to work directly onto walls in a much more painterly fashion, albeit sometimes using stencils. This was in marked contrast to their commercially produced fabrics and ceramics.

The whole style of Bloomsbury's enthusiasm for the decorative arts derived from the optimism of Europe before World War I, which was very different from the outlook of younger inter-war designers. This was not evasion on their part; on the contrary, it involved and required a particular kind of heroism, immensely serious in its aims yet expressed in terms of great playfulness and humour. To appreciate this point one need only compare Bloomsbury's book-covers to the very different if delicious nostalgia-drenched style employed by Rex Whistler and others to adorn the Sitwells' many publications. In this respect Vanessa Bell remained a full-blooded experimental Modernist in her work for the Hogarth Press, right up to the late 1950s. There is never a trace of historical pastiche. In its way, her natural decorative vocabulary of big circles and radically simplified architectural forms (including swagged curtains) represented a dramatic paring down of the inherited style of 18th-century designer-decorators such as Robert Adam, but the effect could hardly be more different.

Bloomsbury decoration never employed the type of fussily detailed, illusionistic techniques found so often in mid-20th-century English decorative art, and aspired to a rather grander, simpler style, which always emphasised the surface of whatever was being decorated. Duncan Grant in particular had a strong feeling for the big gestures of baroque art, but this was always translated into his own distinctive style. The *commedia del arte* figures found so often in his later paintings and decorations were part of his everyday artistic vocabulary, and they came to him as naturally as they had to Tiepolo or Watteau or Cézanne or Picasso, as living and timeless poetic visual embodiments of a shared European artistic heritage, always available to symbolise the simultaneous fragility and joy of life. The many buxom maidens and musicians who populate his decorative universe were stock figures from within the traditions of European art, but they were also resolutely modern, and quite unlike the dreamy, if to our eyes now equally charming, knights in armour and damsels in distress of so much late Pre-Raphaelite decorative art that understandably seemed entirely inadequate in 1910 to express the urgent sense of a new and better age just around the corner.

As Vanessa's old friend, the French artist André Dunoyer de Segonzac wrote of her work some six months after her death in 1961,

*The dominant characteristics of Vanessa's art are grandeur of conception, nobility and strength. (. . .) all is purity, frankness and perfect simplicity both in what is expressed and the means of expression. This accent of sincerity and truth has nothing to do with dull realism; it is stamped with a grand, natural distinction without a trace of affectation [. . .] "Fine painting" said Degas, "does not solicit"; and Vanessa succeeded in preserving throughout her life the sincerity and purity of her style. To these qualities she has added a discretion, reserve and modesty which remind us of the humility of a Cézanne or a Bonnard.*²⁰

Such a verdict would have moved her deeply, and is still valid today.

Neither Duncan Grant nor Vanessa Bell had initially encountered the work of Cézanne or Picasso and Matisse in a vacuum. On the contrary, they were both well-prepared for the encounter from their knowledge of the more abstract aspects of late-19th-century English art, such as

the work of James Whistler, Edward Burne-Jones and Walter Crane. Like so many other young European artists, they responded above all to the thrilling potential of the new pictorial vocabulary emerging in Paris, which so precisely expressed their belief that a new world was dawning.

Yet in England, strangely, the work of the Bloomsbury artists is often dismissed in its entirety as merely derivative, especially by those who have rarely looked at it and who at the same time applaud the impact of Matisse and Picasso on artists in other countries. This is part and parcel of a long-standing tendency amongst English critics and art historians to assume that England is a country of little artistic significance compared to the nations of mainland Europe. This was an attitude that the artists of Bloomsbury came up against all their working lives and, sad to say, it has not gone away.

