

Sotheby's & Charleston unite for a two-part exhibition celebrating the very best of the Bloomsbury group,
ARTDAILY, November 10, 2024



Vanessa Bell, *The Party*. Courtesy Sotheby's.



Duncan Grant, *John Maynard Keynes*

LONDON.- The Bloomsbury group was a circle of intellectuals, including artists and writers, who made an indelible mark on the trajectory of the arts in Britain in the twentieth century – challenging conventions through their progressive and bohemian ways of life. This autumn, Sotheby's hosts *Radical Modernity: From Bloomsbury to Charleston*, a private selling and loan exhibition in collaboration with Charleston – the first of its kind at an auction house. The exhibition celebrates the indefatigable spirit of the Bloomsbury group and the renewed interest in their work and lives today, across paintings, drawings, furniture, ceramics and literature by the likes of

Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant, Roger Fry, Virginia Woolf and Henry Lamb.

Though born in London's Bloomsbury, the movement found its spiritual home at Charleston in Sussex. The idyllic home and studio of painters Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant became the hub around which many of the early twentieth century's greatest minds gravitated. Today, Charleston – which is set to celebrate half a century as a charity in 2030 – is the custodian of a world-leading Bloomsbury collection. As part of the exhibition, Charleston loaned some of its most significant pieces, many not usually on public view. This includes recent acquisitions made as part of Charleston's '50 for 50' campaign, a hunt for the very best Bloomsbury works still in private collections that marks the forthcoming 50th anniversary.

The cultural significance of the Bloomsbury group extends today to contemporary art, design and the world of fashion, with designers long captivated by these characters. Among them, Kim Jones OBE, has for many years been a passionate ambassador of the Bloomsbury group, continuously finding fresh inspiration for his work with Dior and Fendi within not only the patterns and designs of the Bloomsbury group, but also within their writings. Earlier this year, Jones was appointed Vice President of Charleston. Jones is lending his eye for the curation of the galleries, as well as loaning pieces from his personal collection, which is one of the most significant in private hands.

Highlights from the Loan Exhibition

Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant lived and worked side by side from 1914 until she died in 1961. Although Bell was married to Clive Bell when they met, the pair had become lovers shortly before moving to Charleston together with Bell's two young sons and Grant's lover, the writer David Garnett. It was a different interpretation of domesticity, but one that was accommodated at Charleston. Although the sexual element of their relationship didn't endure, a lifelong platonic friendship and creative companionship prevailed. They had a daughter together, Angelica, who was born on Christmas Day at Charleston in 1918. A number of works by both artists are on loan from Charleston.

Grant used self-portraiture to experiment with self-identity, casting himself in many roles. The exhibition presents a striking self-portrait from 1909, which is rich with the influences, colours and traditions of Grant's childhood (though born in Scotland in 1885, he spent the first nine years of his life in India).

Portraiture also gives insight into the overlapping relationships within their circle. John Maynard Keynes, one of the most influential economists of modern times, had a room at Charleston where he would stay at weekends. In a painting from 1917, Keynes (who was working in the Treasury at the time) is pictured sitting in Charleston's walled garden, deeply engrossed in his writing, sporting an Omega

Workshops cap. Grant and Keynes had been lovers eight years before and remained great friends for the rest of Keynes' life.

The exhibition reflects the scope of Grant's dynamic working practices, for example showcasing a log box that he playfully decorated for Charleston soon after moving in. Depicting an angelic musician or dancer on each side, Grant brings the spirit of London, as well as Europe (from Renaissance painting to the Ballet russe) to the rural fireside in Sussex. This act of making the mundane beautiful was something the Bloomsbury artists achieved throughout their lives.

Bell's affinity with portraiture is also being represented, with a depiction of Grant's aunt Lady Jane Strachey in 1923. An incredibly inspiring figure, Lady Strachey started campaigning for women to get the vote in the late 1860s. Mother to 13 children, with five boys and five girls making it to adulthood, she made sure that all of her daughters (as well as her sons) went to university, at a time when it was not commonplace. It was Lady Strachey who persuaded Grant's parents to allow him to go to art school. This powerful portrait was last exhibited outside of Charleston in Dulwich Picture Gallery's acclaimed Vanessa Bell retrospective in 2017.

Among the paintings by Bell, an early work – depicting a hotel garden in Florence in 1909, where she spent several weeks with her husband Clive Bell, sightseeing, socialising and working – is left Charleston to go on view for the first time.

Artworks for Private Sale

Vanessa Bell's Gift to Her Sister

Among Vanessa Bell's oeuvre were landscapes, interiors and still lifes, as well as several portraits of her inner circle, but narrative paintings, such as *The Party*, are very rare. This work has always remained in private hands, having first been gifted to her sister Virginia Woolf, from whose estate it was sold to playwright Howard Ginsberg more than 40 years ago.

Painted in 1920, it was exhibited briefly two years later in a show on *The London Group* (for which it was framed by Duncan Grant), at Heal's pioneering Mansard Gallery in Tottenham Court Road (a pioneering destination where art, design and retail convened during the roaring twenties). The painting was reviewed by *British Vogue*, who illustrated it in black and white, who called it 'a charmingly inimical vision of the social amenities that is also a very striking composition'. Following the show, *Mrs Dalloway's Party* disappeared into the collection of Virginia Woolf, not to be seen again until it was rediscovered in her belongings by her nephew Quentin.

Evocative of the extravagant and liberal parties of 1920s Bloomsbury, the work was initially simply titled *The Party*, but when reemerging

in 1983 became known as Mrs Dalloway's Party – echoing Woolf's most famous novel, Mrs Dalloway (the preliminary title of which was The Party), published in 1925, for which Bell had created the cover art.

In Mrs Dalloway, the reader follows a day in the life of a fictional woman in London's high society, when she is preoccupied with the last-minute details of planning and hosting a dinner party. Fittingly, the novel originated from a short story on Mrs Dalloway wandering the shops of Bond Street (where Sotheby's has been located since 1917).

The sisters often found inspiration in each other, and so it is possible that this painting was a link in the evolution of Woolf's story (perhaps the impetus for the party scene that closes the novel). Such is the enigma, that Ginsberg was inspired to write a two-act play based on the work.

A Pair of Omega Workshop Ceramics

Founded by Roger Fry in 1913 in London, the Omega Workshops produced fabrics, furniture and ceramics, designed by Fry as well as other artists including Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant. The pottery was made anonymously as desired by Fry and stamped only with the symbol Ω , the Greek letter Omega.

The aim of the Workshops was to try and remove the boundaries between so-called 'high' and 'low' art through elevating everyday, functional objects such as pots and bowls with the group's characteristically playful and experimental approach. The production and selling of the Omega works also helped sustain Bell and Grant's lifestyles as artists.

A Silk Robe by Percy Wyndham Lewis

Percy Wyndham Lewis, founder of the Vorticist movement, was a major figure in the development of the Avant Garde in early twentieth century Britain. He had a fleeting yet influential relationship with the Bloomsbury group, and the Omega workshop in particular – where this hand-blocked printed and embroidered silk robe was likely designed and created in 1913-14. During his involvement with the workshop, he created a letterhead for the organisation, candle shade designs, folded screen and several painted ceramics, but a small group of textiles such as this robe were only recently discovered. Lewis left to found his own workshop, the Rebel Art Centre, a short-lived venture that ended at the beginning of August 1914 with the declaration of the First World War.