



EXPERIMENTS IN LIVING

Celebrating bohemianism in all its irreverent glory, Kathryn Conway curates a photographic essay on one of the most cerebral groups of the subculture

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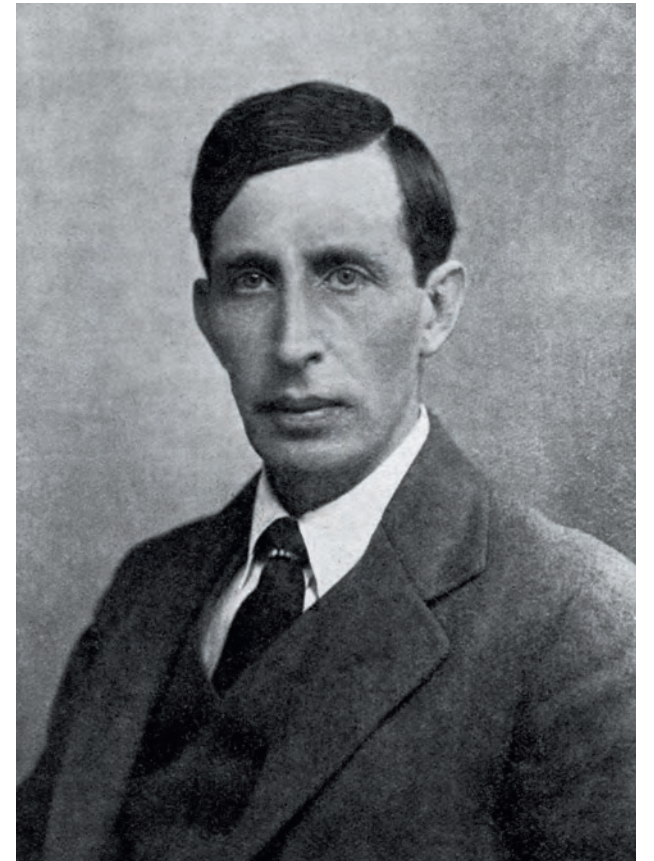
Although Leonard Woolf is believed to have claimed of the group of which he was a founding member that it was in fact “a largely imaginary group of persons with largely imaginary objects and characteristics”, the influence of the Bloomsbury Group is now widely acknowledged. It didn’t have a precise doctrine or manifesto, evolving as it did from a Thursday-evening writers’ group, established by Thoby Stephen, and the ‘Friday Club’, hosted by his sister Vanessa (later Bell) at the Stephen home in 1905. But the ‘Bloomsburies’, as they were affectionately labelled, were united by the pursuit of knowledge and a rejection of the restrictive artistic conventions of the day.



Roger Fry, an artist, critic and chief proponent of popularising the Post-Impressionist movement in England, was central to the values of the group, founding the Omega Workshops in 1913, which delivered designs for furniture and fabric that were wholly abstract and bold in colour. His modernist approach even extended to idyllic Charleston, the Bloomsbury Group's rural farmhouse in the bucolic

Sussex countryside (now a museum), where a walled garden based on Fry's designs was established.

But, it is in the interiors and textiles of the house, many designed and painted by Vanessa Bell and her lover Duncan Grant, that one feels the group's art and ideas most keenly. Surrounded by this visceral assault on the senses, so different from the Victorian and Edwardian conventions of the Bloomsbury



PREVIOUS PAGE: TENTS AND FIGURES, 1913, FOLDING SCREEN BY VANESSA BELL © VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM/THE ESTATE OF VANESSA BELL, COURTESY OF HENRIETTA GARNETT.
FACING PAGE: PHOTOGRAPH OF BLOOMSBURY GROUP ARTISTS IN A FAKE PLANE (LEFT TO RIGHT: UNKNOWN, DAVID GARNETT, VANESSA BELL, OLIVER STRACHEY, DORA CARRINGTON, DUNCAN GRANT AND BARBARA BAGENAL © TATE, 2015. THIS PAGE: VIRGINIA WOOLF PHOTOGRAPHED IN 1930 © ULLSTEIN BILD/GETTY IMAGES; LEONARD WOOLF, PHOTO BY ALFRED HARRIS © CULTURE CLUB/GETTY IMAGES



DUNCAN GRANT'S STUDIO AT CHARLESTON © TONY TREE/CHARLESTON TRUST

Group's day, it's not difficult to imagine the blithe existence the 'Bloomsburies' enjoyed here nor the inspiration each member who visited must have drawn from the surrounding scenery and landscape. The economist John Maynard Keynes wrote his book *The Economic Consequences of Peace* at Charleston in 1919, while Vanessa's husband Clive Bell, her sister Virginia Woolf and Virginia's husband Leonard, as well as biographer Lytton Strachey, all sought solace in the intellectual freedom such an escape provided.

A visit to Charleston, which is only a few hours from London, comes highly recommended, but should a trip not be possible make for the Dulwich Picture Gallery this spring to view the first major exhibition to celebrate the work of Vanessa Bell. Exploring the painter's fascinating body of work across the genres of portraiture, still life and landscape, *Vanessa Bell (1879-1961)* aims to reassess the contribution this experimental and pioneering artist made to British culture.

Charleston House opens from Wednesday to Sunday and on bank holiday Mondays from March 1.
View *Vanessa Bell (1879-1961)* at the Dulwich Picture Gallery until June 4.
www.charleston.org.uk ■ www.dulwichpicturegallery.org.uk