



The Bloomsbury Group
Virginia Woolf and her Circle
By Jerry James

For some reason we seemed to be in a company of the young, all free, all beginning life in new surroundings, without elders to whom we had to account in any way for our doings or behaviour, and this was not then common in a mixed company of our class.

—Vanessa Bell



Virginia Woolf (1882-1941)
by Vanessa Bell



Vanessa Bell (1879-1961)
by Duncan Grant

In 1904, following the death of their father, Thoby Stephen and his sisters moved into a house in London's Gordon Square, in the then-unfashionable neighborhood of Bloomsbury. There, Thoby was "at home" to his Cambridge friends every Thursday night. But his sisters, later known as Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell, were by no means content simply to serve cocoa and biscuits. Indeed, after Thoby's death in 1906, it was the sisters who became the founding mothers of the Bloomsbury Group—those who were fond of French culture, not fond of Victorianism and who called each other by their first names, unheard of in polite English society.

As a group, the Bloomsburys were privileged, of a certain class with a certain amount of money, that situation which always makes Bohemianism so much more agreeable. Both hermetically narcissistic and astonishingly acute, they were inspired by the philosophy of G. E. Moore, seeking what was good and true, while scorning all that was sham—and having a good time while doing so. Between the World Wars, this interdisciplinary group was the greatest influence on British culture in the fields of art (Clive & Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant, Roger Fry); literature (Leonard & Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey); and economics (John Maynard Keynes).

And sex, about which the Bloomsbury Group spoke in mixed company, frankly and directly, using short, Anglo-Saxon words. Many in the group were male homosexuals, illegal until 1967. Some were sexually fluid. Dorothy Parker misspoke when she said, "They lived in squares, painted in circles and loved in triangles." A chart of Bloomsbury relationships, with its color-coded arrows and dotted lines, instead resembles the whiteboard of a conspiracy theorist.

Art



Clive Bell (1881-1964)
by Roger Fry

Sir Leslie Stephen, editor of the first 26 volumes of *The Dictionary of National Biography*, sent his sons to Cambridge, his alma mater. His daughters were educated at home. Sir Leslie never considered sending Virginia to university, despite her being a Greek scholar and widely read in history and literature. Had he lived, she would never have become an author. Vanessa went to art school, which was acceptable.

When Sir Leslie died in 1904, Vanessa was 24, Virginia, 22. His death brought on her second mental breakdown—her mental health would be fragile all her life.—but the year also marked her first published review.

Following Thoby's death, the 27-year-old Vanessa took a quick inventory of her finances, swallowed hard and in 1907 married fellow Bloomsbury Clive Bell, a budding art critic. His family promptly gave him £20,000 (£2.5 million today). Vanessa thought her marriage would give her an opportunity to paint. It did, but with 2 sons, not quite in the way she imagined.

On a Cambridge train platform in 1910, Vanessa and Clive met Roger Fry, “scientist by training, art critic by vocation.” (Gillian Gill) As they rode to London, Fry and Clive discussed the new French painters and how vital it was that they be seen in London. So

it happened that later that year, with the aid of the Bells, Fry curated the first exhibition of the French Post-Impressionists (a term he invented). Centering on Cézanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh, while including Matisse and Picasso, it created a sensation. “Paint run mad!” cried the *Daily Express*. But Virginia disagreed. “Painting and writing have much to tell each other,” she said.



Roger Fry (1866-1934)
Self-Portrait

Fry established the Omega Workshop (1913), along with Vanessa and the painter Duncan Grant. Here, artists could sell “decorated furniture and objects, as well as fabric, rug and carpet designs.” (Frances Spalding) Drawing upon both William Morris' Arts and Crafts movement and the Wiener Werkstätte, it presaged the Bauhaus.

In 1914, Clive Bell published *Art*, a work heavily indebted to the thinking of Roger Fry, although it was “popularized,” that is, dumbed down. Clive would write 5 more books through 1931.



Duncan Grant (1885-1978)
Self-Portrait

After an affair with Roger Fry, Vanessa and her sons moved to Charleston, an estate in Sussex, with her new lover Duncan Grant and *his* lover, David Garnett. Vanessa and Grant set up their easels side by side. Clive visited on weekends. (It was all very French.) Following WW I, Vanessa and Grant, no longer members of the avant-garde, designed interiors together. Grant would come to be regarded as one of England's leading artists of the period.

Economics



John Maynard Keynes (1883-1946)
by Gwen Raverat

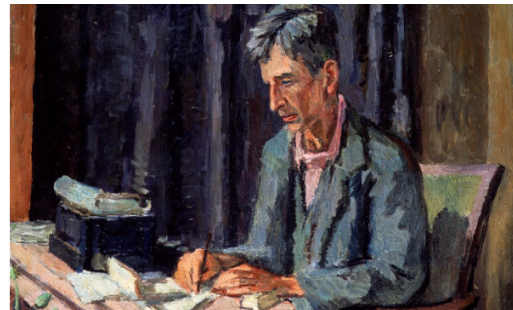
John Maynard Keynes was a dynamo. After Cambridge, he rose rapidly through various government offices to the Treasury, which he represented at the Versailles Peace Treaty of 1919. He resigned in protest at the war reparations imposed on Germany. At Charleston, where he was always welcome, Keynes wrote *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, which predicted the events leading to WW II with chilling accuracy.

Bloomsbury was a community of pacifists. Keynes was welcome at Charleston because in one day, he not only got Grant (his former lover) and Garnett status as conscientious objectors, he also arranged for them to work at Charleston as their alternative service. Leonard Woolf was excused for medical reasons, as was Lytton Strachey, after his application for CO status was turned down. When the examiner asked him what he

would do if a Hun was raping his sister, the fabulously gay Strachey replied, "I should attempt to interpose my body."

Keynes fell away from Bloomsbury after his 1925 marriage to a Russian ballerina, which baffled his friends. However, he continued to manage their investments. Keynes' distinguished public life continued until his death, its crowning achievement being *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936).

Literature



Leonard Woolf (1880-1969)
by Vanessa Bell

In 1912, at the insistence of Lytton Strachey, Leonard Woolf returned from government service in Ceylon and proposed to the 30-year-old Virginia. She accepted him, despite her misgivings. The next year, she had another breakdown. (Virginia probably suffered from a bipolar disorder.)

As a Jewish socialist, Leonard was never quite a member of the club in Bloomsbury, despite his achievements as publisher, editor, lecturer and essayist. His greatest success, however, was enabling Virginia to be as productive a writer as possible. She had published her first novel by the time they founded the Hogarth Press in 1917. The Woolfs rejected James Joyce's *Ulysses*, but did publish T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*.



Lytton Strachey (1880-1932)
by Dora Carrington

It was Lytton Strachey, not Virginia, who made the first Bloomsbury literary breakthrough with his snarky biography, *Eminent Victorians* (1918), a work Oscar Wilde would have loved. Strachey followed this with books on Queen Victoria (1922) and *Elizabeth & Essex* (1928).

In 1919, Virginia asked Roger Fry to send her a copy of *Swann's Way*, by Marcel Proust, which knocked Virginia for six. "Well—what remains to be written after that?" she asked. She found her answer in Fry's writings. "Literature was suffering from a plethora of old clothes. Cézanne and Picasso have shown the way; writers should fling representation to the wings and follow suit." Virginia did so, using a contemporary method—stream of consciousness.



Vita Sackville-West (1892-1962)
by William Strang

Her style further matured after she met the writer Vita Sackville-West. Out of this short-lived affair (entered into with Leonard's consent) came some of Virginia's finest work, including *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Orlando*, her love letter to Vita.

Sex

Let the following serve as a final example of sex in Bloomsbury: At Charleston, on Christmas Day, 1918, Vanessa Bell gave birth to a daughter, Angelica. Clive gave her his name, but Duncan Grant was her real father. (She was 17 before she learned this.) Grant's lover, David Garnett, was so taken with the newborn Angelica that he declared he would marry her, which he did when she was 24. He was 50. Even for the French, marrying your father's male lover might have seemed a bit much. Garnett turned this family tangle into a novel, *Aspects of Love* (1955), which was later made into a musical by Andrew Lloyd Webber (1989).

Coda

After the fall of France in 1940, a German invasion of England seemed imminent. Virginia and Leonard, knowing they would certainly be executed by the Nazis, made a suicide pact. But on March 28, 1941, as she felt another breakdown nearing, Virginia left a calm and considered note, put stones in her pockets and walked into the River Ouse.

Bloomsbury, like Camelot, was gone, not to be resurrected until the 1960s by the second-wave feminists and the memoirs of Leonard Woolf, keeper of the flame.

Jerry James has been working in the theatre for nearly sixty years. For forty of those years, he lived in New York City, where he was an award-winning writer and director.