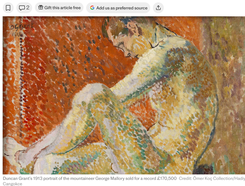
Colin Gleadell

How the art world fell in love with the Bloomsbury Group

Bell, Grant and co have always intrigued – but a new Tate show and surging high-profile collectors signal a renewed era of Bloomsbury mania

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Duncan Grant's 1913 portrait of the mountaineer George Mallory sold for a record £170,500. Credit: Orsi Koç Collection/Hadrian Gangsteur

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Show biography

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There was always something alluring about the Bloomsbury Group, a hornet's nest of artists and writers who, in the early 20th century, congregated around Virginia Woolf. Lytton Strachey and John Maynard Keynes. They famously "lived in squares, painted in circles and loved in triangles".

The visual arts wing of the group led by Virginia Woolf's sister, Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant and Roger Fry may not rival the European avant garde of Matisse, Picasso or Mondrian, but they certainly developed a style and identity of their own. Their Omega workshops which mixed abstract art with craft and furnishing designs were the apex of modernity and, after 1916, the group transferred, painting in a more naturalistic fashion, to the Charleston Farmhouse, their rural retreat in Sussex, now a museum. The narrative web of fluid and same-sex relationships that characterises the group adds intrigue to its appeal.

Even without an anniversary to celebrate, we are living in a whirlwind of Bloomsbury exhibitions. *Apollo Magazine* counted eight shows in prominent venues in two years from Charleston to Pallant House in Chichester and Milton Keynes, and now *Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant: Inside Bloomsbury*, which opens at Tate Britain on Nov 12. Next year Bloomsbury mania extends to Melbourne, Australia.



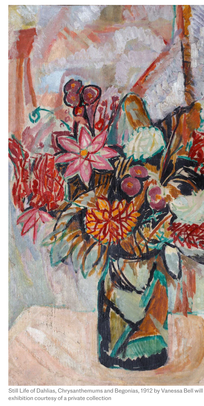
Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant will be the subjects of a new Tate exhibition Credit: The Charleston Trust

The last Bloomsbury show at Tate was 27 years ago, and it was widely harangued (the feeling being that the scandal of their private lives bolstered their more modest artistic achievements). Tate feels it's time for the next generation to have their say. The new show will not only include some different works but will focus on the central relationship between Bell and Grant (who was openly gay but fathered a daughter, Angelica) recreating their studio for the exhibition and displaying Grant's very personal homoerotic drawings in public for the first time.

And to those critics who have written the Bloomsbury Group off as mediocre I would say the market thinks otherwise. In 2018, Holland Park gallery, Piano Nobile, was instrumental in selling 50 rediscovered dinner plates hand-painted with images of famous women throughout history by Grant and Bell to Charleston. The asking price for these, which are on loan to the Tate for the new exhibition, was close to £1m. Robert Travers of Piano Nobile says that the market had been quite subdued up to that point. Then it began to turn.

In truth, the tide was already turning. In 2016, Grant's mottled 1913 portrait of the mountaineer George Mallory, sitting naked in a chair, that will be in the Tate show, sold for a double-estimate record £170,500 at Christie's. The buyer was billionaire Turkish businessman and art collector Ömer Koç, who had just funded a new contemporary art museum in Istanbul to the tune of $557m.

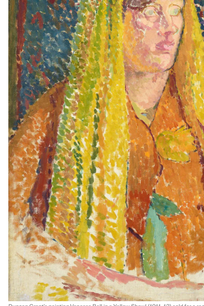
Another dealer to pick up on the Bloomsbury boom has been TV's *Fake or Fortune?* presenter Philip Mould who has not only loaned works owned by his clients to the Tate exhibition but is presenting an alternative display in his Pall Mall gallery. Looking at his list of exhibits I can reveal that the cost prices of some of them were at the top of the range. *Still Life of Dahlias, Chrysanthemums and Begonias* (1912) by Bell has held the auction record for her since 2021 at £256,250; *Poinsettias in a Vase* (1914-5) by Roger Fry is the second priciest work by him at £127,400, and a still life of flowers below a mantelpiece by Duncan Grant fetched a record £106,400 at auction in 2003.



Still Life of Dahlias, Chrysanthemums and Begonias, 1912 by Vanessa Bell will be in Philip Mould's exhibition courtesy of a private collection

High-profile collectors include musicians Bryan Ferry and Florence Welch, and designers such as Kit Kemp whose Charlotte Street Hotel interior is modelled on the aesthetics of the Bloomsbury Group. But perhaps the greatest Bloomsbury collector to emerge is fashion designer Kim Jones, until recently artistic director of Dior Homme, and currently vice president of Charleston whose passion for Bloomsbury is so great he buys not just for himself, but to give to Charleston.

Jones's contributions to the Tate show are an assortment of Omega-designed stools and chairs, desks and lamp stands; and paintings which range from Bell's 1902 portrait of her father, Leslie Stephen, which was bought through Piano Nobile at Rosebery's in 2020 for a multiple estimate of £18,500, to Grant's *Portrait of Vanessa Bell in a Yellow Shawl* (1911-12), that sold for a record £377,900 at Bonhams in 2022. There is also a multitude of books by Virginia Woolf with jackets designed by Bell including TS Eliot's copy of *Mrs Dalloway* and Grant's own copy of *The Years*.



Duncan Grant's painting Vanessa Bell in a Yellow Shawl (1911-12) sold for a record £377,900 Credit: Kim Jones on behalf of The Charleston Trust

Jones's enthusiasm has triggered not only the successful redevelopment of Charleston itself but a growing number of collectors stimulated by the rash of Bloomsbury exhibitions to compete in the market for anything associated with the stories they tell.