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BLOOMSBURY



The Bloomsbury

Sick of Virginia Woolf? A New
Exhibition May Change Your Mind.

By Akiko Busch



Aesthetic

True, we live in an age of specialization. But why does literacy in one discipline so often accompany utter blinding ignorance in others? A composer I know whose work is generally considered intelligent, thoughtful, and provocative hasn't set foot in an art gallery in a decade; a film critic with comprehensive knowledge of cinematic history hasn't a clue who Seamus Heaney is; an artist friend whose canvases are deemed cutting edge in Chelsea thinks nothing of trotting off to see *Cats* when he and his wife decide to take in some theater. Sensitivity, inquisitiveness, insight, imagination, liter-

acy—call it what you will—in one of the arts often precludes any sense of like engagement in any other.

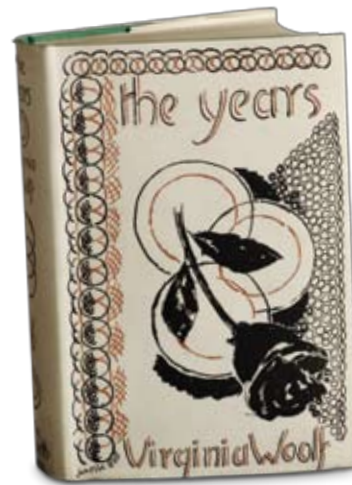
Why this is so I cannot imagine, but I suspect this condition to be peculiar to the American cultural landscape in the first decade of the new millennium. It's not this way in Europe, I think, where close national borders, a multiplicity of languages, and the proximity of diverse cultural perspectives all necessitate a broader view that extends to art as well as life. But the fact is I haven't spent enough time in London or Berlin or Amsterdam in recent years to know whether this is actually true, or



Duncan Grant, *Helen Anrep at Charleston*, 1942. Private collection. Image courtesy of Julie Magura, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art.



Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, *Table with tiles from Virginia Woolf's table at Monk's house, 1930s (tiles), 1990s (table)*. Hand-painted ceramic tiles. Private collection.



Virginia Woolf, *The Years*, 1937. Dust jacket designed by Vanessa Bell. The Hogarth Press, London. Collection of Mitch Bobkin.

Charleston's residents managed to balance aesthetic expansiveness with social insularity.

just wishful thinking.

What is certain, however, is that a century ago in London this sense of broader exchange between disciplines came with the territory. "A Room of Their Own: The Bloomsbury Artists in American Collections," an exhibition now making the rounds at several university art galleries, articulates among other things the cross-exchange that accommodated such disparate disciplines as set design, textiles, paintings, literature, and ceramics. As noted by Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina in her catalog essay, "Bloomsbury and Art: An Overview," African shapes, French light and coloring, Byzantine portraiture, Greek nudes, pointillism, cubism, abstraction, European frescoes, Nijinsky and the Ballets Russes were only a handful of the

references those artists and writers routinely looked to.

The irony, of course, is that the group's domestic arrangements were so excruciatingly inbred. If the Bloomsbury ethos mandated a broad view of the creative process, it was artfully balanced with a narrower approach to familial attachments. As is well known and amply documented elsewhere, incestuous relations and the routine exchange of partners within the circle were both the norm. It's an intriguing program and one that serves a particular kind of madness: Wander to the outermost limits in artistic inquiry, but stay with the known in emotional and family ties.

And then there's Charleston, Vanessa Bell's and Duncan Grant's country retreat, famous for having nearly every door, wall, piece of furniture, lampshade, bookshelf, and mantle



Dora Carrington, from Portfolio of Woodcuts for Bookplates, 1915-20. Collection of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin.



Vanessa Bell, Dust jacket design for Mrs. Dalloway, 1925. Collection of the Victoria University Library, Toronto.



Vanessa Bell, Decorative design for Cat, 1930s. Private collection. Image courtesy of Julie Magura, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art.

Duncan Grant, Farmers in a Field, Near Charleston, 1934. Collection of Mitch Bobkin. Image courtesy of Michael Gould.

BLOOMSBURY

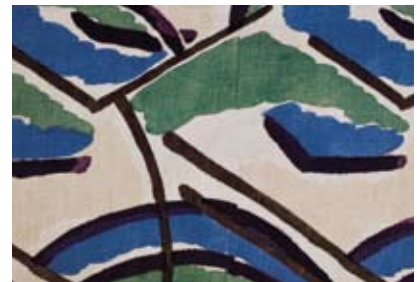
painted, sculpted, and otherwise decorated. Applied arts and fine arts were practiced with few of the customary distinctions. At the same time, however, the farmhouse was a place of social and political detachment, a kind of arts camp that managed to remain remote and disengaged from the social upheaval two world wars fomented elsewhere across the British landscape. As though operating on the premise that the human psyche can only accommodate so much provocation, so much of the unknown, Charleston's residents surpassed themselves in managing to balance aesthetic expansiveness with social insularity.

The canonization of Bloomsbury is a curious thing. As the exhibit and catalog together point out, Americans have always had a curious relationship with the group. In another catalog essay, "Virginia Woolf in America," Mark Hussey observes that Americans adopted Woolf more readily than their literary counterparts in England. The English were inclined to view Woolf's privileged background and socialist leanings more as inchoate confusion than the product of a curious and complex intellect. But as Hussey also points

out, in this country Virginia Woolf was first offered up as a reductive feminist icon, and later, particularly in the film *The Hours*, not simply as a depressive, but one who was "frail, homely, dour, alienated, and suicidal," all at the expense of her persona as a confident writer, prolific diarist, and vibrant social figure.

Surely the Bloomsbury soil is so fertile that it allows us to simply gather and cultivate those particular shoots and sprouts we find most appealing. The group's balancing act of insularity and expansiveness, while perhaps dazzling, is hard to take whole cloth, so instead we cut out those pieces and patches that we find most engaging. And in doing so, the distinctions we make conform to our own particular prejudices. And so it goes that every letter, every sketch, every journal entry is generally met by the American Bloomsbury industry with an orgy of breathless enchantment.

If our compulsion to take some narrow strain and imagine it speaks for the whole limits the view, "A Room of their Own" begs a more measured and discriminating perspective. Given that we are going to pick and choose any-



Duncan Grant, Design for Pamela for the Omega Workshops, 1913. Collection of Wolfsonian-Florida International University.



Vanessa Bell, Study for the Portrait of Leonard Woolf, 1938. Collection of the Victoria University Library, Toronto.

Dora Carrington, Cattle by a Pond, View from Ham Spray, 1930. Private collection. Image courtesy of Julie Magura, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art.



Roger Fry, *Paper Flowers on a Mantelpiece*, 1919. Collection of Bannon and Barnabas McHenry. Image courtesy of Julie Magura, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art.

way, this show encourages viewers to consider the particulars of Bloomsbury in a more thorough and disciplined way—surely what those artists and writers, brilliant and maddening in all their self-contradiction, deserve. It asks, for example, to what degree the lives of these artists and writers conformed to the strictures of Victorian era from which they came. And given that this exhibition is shaped by the perspective of the collector, how did it come to be that in the 1970s and 1980s *The Reader's Digest* owned the largest American collection of Bloomsbury art?

In a piece last winter in the *New York Times*, the critic Holland Cotter noted that university museums are uniquely positioned to take on subjects “too specialized or unglamorous or experimental to find a home in public art institutions.” Such museums, he suggested, offer “a model for small, intensely-researched, collection-based, convention-challenging exhibitions” out of reach to larger institutions

more financially determined to produce massive, crowd-pleasing blockbusters. “A Room of Their Own” is just such an exhibition.

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“A Room of Their Own: The Bloomsbury Artists in American Collections” was organized by the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Cornell University. The exhibition opened at Duke University’s Nasher Museum of Art and is now headed to the Herbert F. Johnson Museum at Cornell University (July 18–October 18). The show then travels to the Mills College Art Museum (November 7–December 13); the Mary and Leigh Block Museum at Northwestern University (January 15–March 14, 2010); the Smith College Museum of Art (April 3–June 15, 2010); and the Palmer Museum of Art at Penn State University (July 6–September 26, 2010). A comprehensive hardbound exhibition catalog is available at the museums. 📖

Akiko Busch writes about design, culture, and the natural world. She is the author of *Geography of Home: Writings on Where We Live* and *The Uncommon Life of Common Objects: Essays on Design and the Everyday*. Her most recent book, *Nine Ways to Cross a River*, a collection of essays about swimming across American rivers, was published in 2007 by Bloomsbury/USA. She was a contributing editor at *Metropolis* magazine for 20 years, and her essays have appeared in numerous national magazines and exhibition catalogues. She has taught at the University of Hartford and Bennington College and has appeared on public radio in the U.S. and Canada. Currently she a regular contributor to the *New York Times* Sunday regional section and teaches at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. She lives in New York’s Hudson Valley with her husband and two sons.