



BLOOMSBURY: A COLLECTIVE



The Bloomsbury Group was a group of artistic and intellectual friends. They came of age just as the conservative Victorian era of the 19th century was ending. As a loose and changing mix of people they were searching for new ways of thinking, living and loving. They initially met in the Bloomsbury district of London at the family home of the siblings Vanessa Bell, Virginia Woolf, and Thoby and Adrian Stephen.

An extremely privileged group, they were closely connected to British 'high society'. This wealth and class gave them freedom to live as they desired and time to discuss the philosophies they lived by. Many of them formed similar ideas around feminism, socialism, pacifism and sexuality while studying at the Universities of Cambridge or Kings College London. They considered their art making during the First World War as an act of protest against the conflict. The art, literature and ideas generated by the Bloomsbury Group would have an enormous influence on the rest of the twentieth century.

This exhibition includes works from The Courtauld and Ulster Museum to introduce the Bloomsbury Group, specifically three central artists within it – Vanessa Bell, Roger Fry and Duncan Grant. It also shares work by the Omega Workshops: a group of designers who sought to translate the ethos of the Bloomsbury Group into beautiful, tangible objects. The works on display here from The Courtauld were gifted from Roger Fry’s estate, who founded the Workshops and is often considered the curator of the Bloomsbury Group.

This exhibition is part of an ongoing collaboration between The Courtauld and Ulster Museum. The partnership is part of the Courtauld National Partners Programme which aims to share The Courtauld’s collection with audiences across the United Kingdom.





THE OMEGA GROUP

Roger Fry founded the Omega Workshops Ltd as a combined artists' studio, shop and gallery. It was situated in a three-story townhouse at 33 Fitzroy Square, Bloomsbury, in the heart of bohemian London. Fry's intentions were simple: 'It is time the spirit of fun was introduced into furniture and fabrics. We have suffered far too long from the dull and stupidly serious'.

When the Omega Workshops opened in July 1913, there was nothing else like it in London. Fry deliberately employed artists rather than professional craftsmen to create a range of modern and artistic household items. Between 1913 and 1916, its most creatively intense period, the Omega was host to a changing cast of artists, including Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant. Their designs were inspired by contemporary art – from post-impressionism to cubism – and by the geometric patterns of African fabrics.

Fry encouraged a collaborative and informal approach to design and enforced a 'rule of anonymity' at the Workshops. Instead of individual signatures, the Greek letter Ω (Omega) was used on all

items. Design and decorating were done in the Workshops by Fry and his artists while anything requiring specialised skills – such as carpet weaving, textile printing and pottery – was made off-site by professionals. Although the Omega attracted a small group of loyal clients it was not profitable. Fry struggled to keep it open during the First World War and it finally closed in 1919.





CHARLESTON

In 1916, Vanessa Bell, and her two children Julian (8) and Quentin (6), took up residence in Charleston, a large cottage on the Firle Estate in rural Sussex. They were joined by Duncan Grant and David Garnett, who were 'conscientious objectors' against the First World War. As committed pacifists, Grant and Garnett needed to do 'work of national importance' to avoid conscription into the armed services. Farm Labour was deemed acceptable as it contributed to the war effort.

This move to Charleston meant an end to their activity as part of the Omega Workshops, though the house did foster further collective activity. Serving as a home to Bell, Grant and Garnett, it also became a country retreat for other members of the Bloomsbury Group. Charleston enabled them to live freely and collectively, and to experiment with different interpretations of domestic life. The inhabitants often changed and, at times, included Clive Bell, Vanessa's husband, and her sister Virginia.

Charleston was an environment in which art and life merged. From the outset, the home became an artwork itself, providing the opportunity for Grant and Bell to collaborate by painting directly onto the walls and furniture of the house. Their paintings were also linked through their inspiration, style and subject, often painting the same models and still lifes, with the same objects also appearing in their paintings. Despite their shared subject matter, the painters retained their distinct and individual styles.

Charleston still stands today as a museum to these artists and their way of living.



Piazzetta dei Cavalli Marini (1935)

Vanessa Bell (1879 – 1961)

oil on canvas

Ulster Museum BELUM.U438

View on the Côte d'Azur, Menton (1916)

Roger Eliot Fry (1866 – 1934)

oil on panel

The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust)

Though painted two decades apart there are clear similarities between the techniques of these two paintings. They are a perfect example of the post-impressionism that members of the



Bloomsbury group used and how they were inspired by the bright colours and rich palette of the Mediterranean. At this stage in her career, Bell's work is more traditional in style although is still using similar brush techniques to her earlier work.

Fry visited Roquebrune, near Menton, in 1915. He likely made sketches there and then finished this at home the following year. Faced with the devastation of the war, Fry would write that all he "knew to do was paint". While on that trip he saw the work of Matisse and Picasso.

Interior (1918)

Duncan Grant (1885 – 1978)

oil on canvas

Ulster Museum BELUM.U454

At first glance, this painting appears to be an industrious scene of an artist and writer working together in quiet harmony, but this is not the case. Painted in Charleston's dining room and started when heavy artillery fire could still be heard across the English Channel from the battlefields in France, it is unlikely that these two people sat together like this. It depicts Vanessa Bell and David

‘Bunny’ Garnett – both of whom were Grant’s lovers at the time. Though Charleston was a safe and open space for people to live freely tensions and jealousy did still arise. It is possible this composition was created from multiple drawings of the individuals and the space.

It is believed that Grant spent a lot of time revising this painting, moving and changing details. This is evident in the overpainting which is very different to his usual loose technique. The perspective itself in this work is uneasy and hard to place – Bell sits central and upright, comfortable in her own space which she herself had decorated and often hosted dinners in. Garnett does not appear as comfortable and is even cropped in the frame. He sits slumped over his work translating the Russian novelist Dostoevsky: a task Garnett had said was too difficult for him.

Valley of the Rhône (1930)

Roger Eliot Fry (1866 – 1934)

oil on canvas

Ulster Museum BELUM.U452

As well as having the privilege to live unconventional lives that challenged the social norms of the time, members of the Bloomsbury group also had the means to travel. They would often visit Italy and France and return to England with new techniques along with social and political ideas. Grant lived in Paris at one stage and Bell’s husband was described as a true ‘Francophile’.



Seated Woman, Ka Cox (1912)

Duncan Grant (1885 – 1978)

oil on panel

The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust)

This painting is more typical of Grant than the *Interior* (1918), and the loose post-impressionist style of Bloomsbury. This is a portrait of Ka (Katherine) Cox, who Grant met in the 1911 and painted multiple times. Cox was a member of the socialist Fabian society and the 'Neo-Pagans'. This was a group of friends whose own socialist ethos of simple living and connecting to the land tied in well with the Bloomsbury Group. It was the writer Virginia Woolf, another member of the group and Bell's sister, who gave them the name 'Neo-Pagans'.

Here Grant has utilized a piece of old wood, perhaps part of a door, on the back of which he painted a standing male nude. The portrait was one of six works which Grant contributed to the 'Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition', organised by Roger Fry at the Grafton Galleries in London in 1912.

Arum Lilies (c.1919)

Vanessa Bell (1879 – 1961)

oil on canvas

The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust)

This painting perfectly encapsulates Bell's style at this time with the physicality of Charleston and the Omega look. The chair is characteristic of the cheap furniture Bell purchased for the house with the aim of painting it, while the background fabric and vase are in the Omega style.

This is a typical composition of Bell's, a rich and peaceful depiction of a domestic scene, which would often include a small and simple arrangement of flowers. It draws clear inspiration from the post-impressionist and abstract art that she was exposed to through exhibitions in London and travel to France. There is a strong confidence in her interpretation of these styles in a simple and bold execution. The shapes of the chair-back and vase echo each other, and the bold design in the background repeats the outline of the arum lilies.

This work is an example of how Fry could be considered the 'curator' of the Bloomsbury Group. He probably framed this work himself, selecting this much older frame likely because of the floral motifs. The section of wood at the top was presumably added by him to make the picture fit.



Flowers in a Ginger Jar (1931)

Vanessa Bell (1879 – 1961)

oil on canvas

Ulster Museum BELUM.U440

Bell returned to a more traditional style in her work in the 1920s and 30s. Her depictions became more realistic, and the colour and tones more muted. She wrote about this change to Roger Fry in 1923:

“I think Duncan and I have changed extraordinarily over the past 10 years or so I hope for the better. But also it seems to me there was a great deal of excitement about colour then – 7 to 10 years ago – which has perhaps rather quieted down now I suppose as a result of trying to change everything into colour... I wonder now whether we couldn’t get more of that sort of intensity of colour without losing solidity of objects and space.”

Interior of a bedroom (1913 – 1919)

Duncan Grant (1885 – 1978)

pencil and watercolour on paper

The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust)

Interiors were central to the Bloomsbury Group's visual language. They might be close domestic arrangement likes Bell's floral studies, or wider views of rooms like this one. Often the views would take in an element of the Bloomsbury and Charleston house style. The patterns on the chair and curtains here could be interpreted as Omega, though the furniture is not. This could be a design for a theatre set, as we know Grant also produced these, or an interior from one of his travels.

These interior images also represent the importance of domestic space for members of the group. They created safe spaces for individuals to share, discuss and be creative, whether through the bustling Omega studio or the private spaces found in Bloomsbury Square and Charleston.

There has been speculation about whether Grant is the true painter of this work, researchers have suggested this could be Fry's hand, as it relates to his interior work. This is an example of how the group were so close in style, subject and even colour – often artists would have used the same paints to paint the same scenes.



Designs for lampshades (1914 – 17)

Omega Workshops (1913 – 1919)

gouache on laid paper

The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust)

These lampshade designs are miniature mock-ups for the artist, attributed to Roald Kristian, in planning for the main design. If you look closely you can see the pinholes where Kristian would have held them together to see how they would look.

Tray design (1913 – 1919)

Omega Workshops (1913 – 1919)

watercolour, gouache, pencil and collage on paper

The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust)

This design for a painted tray is very interesting. The main image would have been the flat oval insert and in the top right-hand corner is the proposed pattern for the side of the tray. Familiar shapes appear in this image that initially seem abstract; is that a lamp, a window and some curtains? This could be an abstract of an interior.

Original Woodcuts by Various Artists (1918)

Omega Workshops (1913 – 1919)

bound book of prints

The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust)

Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell's sister and a frequent client of the Omega Workshops, described them as a beacon of civilisation in the midst of the chaos of the First World War. Keeping the Workshops open at this time was Fry's way of maintaining peacetime values during the war. This was in line with his pacifist beliefs and Quaker upbringing. The Omega employed conscientious objectors and held concerts to raise money for refugees. Instead of ceasing to produce new items for sale, like many others in wartime, Fry launched into publishing and pottery.



His decision to publish books in 1915, when paper was scarce and most private presses had closed, was also a form of protest against the war, reflecting Omega's pacifist beliefs. One of the Omega books was a free translation of the French anti-war poem *Vous êtes hommes* illustrated with jagged woodblock prints in blood red ink.

In 1918 Fry took forward the idea of producing a book of woodcuts first suggested by Leonard and Virginia Woolf. He made five of the fifteen in this book himself; the rest were made by artists of the Omega workshop and acted as a portfolio of their work. Most were new to woodcutting and as Grant recalled, 'We learned to do it ourselves, I think Roger may have helped at first'.

BIOGRAPHIES

Vanessa Bell

Vanessa Bell was born in London in 1879 to Sir Leslie Stephen and Julia Prinsep Duckworth. Sister to Virginia Woolf and, brothers Thoby (1880–1906) and Adrian (1883–1948). She was educated at home in languages, mathematics, history and drawing before attending a private art school in 1896. She then studied painting at the Royal Academy in 1901.

The Stephen family were central to the Bloomsbury Group, named after the 'Bloomsbury' area in London many of the members lived around Gordon Square. Bell also started her own group, the Friday Club in 1906 which discussed and exhibited art.

Her early paintings were traditional and in the style of the New English Art Club and they returned to this style later on. Though in the 1910s her work developed and became almost fully abstract as a result of her being inspired by Roger Fry's post-impressionist exhibitions. She had an affair with Fry during this time.

After moving to Charleston, she spent most of her time there until her death in 1961, though continued to travel throughout Europe. She designed for the Omega Group and beyond, including book jackets for her sister and the commissioned *Famous Women Dinner Service* with Grant In 1932. Her style further developed throughout her career and she is known for many of her captivating portraits of friends and herself.



Bell married Clive Bell in 1907 and had three children, two sons with Bell and a daughter with Grant.

Though she exhibited widely Bell didn't receive a full retrospective of her work until 2017, 56 years after her death.

Roger Eliot Fry

Roger Eliot Fry was an artist and art critic born in London in 1866 and grew up in a wealthy Quaker family. Initially studying sciences at Cambridge University, he travelled to France and Italy to study art and became a landscape painter.

Fry was married to the artist Helen Coombe and they had two children. Helen was hospitalised due to mental health issues in 1910, where she remained for the rest of her life. Following relationships with other women artists including Bell, Nina Hamnett and Josette Coattmellec, he spent the rest of his life with Helen Maitland Anrep.

As well as being member of the Bloomsbury Group, Fry was a champion of modern French painting, he coined the name *post-impressionism* and organised multiple exhibitions. He was the

first figure to raise public awareness of modern art in Britain. He was involved in the setup of The Burlington Art Magazine, was a curator at multiple galleries including The Met in New York and set up the Omega Workshops in 1913. He encouraged Samuel Courtauld and John Maynard Keynes to set up the The London Artists' Association in 1925.

Duncan Grant

British painter and designer of textiles, pottery, theatre sets and costumes Duncan Grant was born in 1885 at Rothiemurchus Estate in Scotland, the son of Major Bartle Grant and Ethel McNeill. He grew up in India returning to England in 1893. Although his family intended him to have an army career, he took up painting at the encouragement of the French painter Simon Bussy, entering the Westminster School of Art, London, in 1902. He travelled extensively around Europe in the early 1900s spending time in Italy, France and Greece. He met with and viewed the work of Matisse and Picasso in this time.

Grant was bisexual and joined the Bloomsbury Group through his lover Lytton Strachey. Grant and Vanessa Bell were closely associated in their professional and personal lives for more than fifty years. In 1916 Grant and Bell moved to Charleston near Firle, Sussex. They had a daughter Angelica in 1918. Together they decorated several houses, including Charleston, and carried out other commissions.

Grant exhibited at the New English Arts Club from 1909 and the Friday Club (founded by Vanessa Bell) from 1910. He became a member of the Camden Town Group in 1911. In 1913 he exhibited with the Grafton Group with Fry and Bell. He was influenced by the works of the fauves and Cézanne in the first 'Post-Impressionist Exhibition' of 1910 – 11 and contributed to the second that was curated by Fry in 1912. He became a member of the London Group in 1919 and was a member of the London Artists' Association from 1929 to 1931. He exhibited widely throughout his career and in 1975, in honour of his ninetieth birthday, exhibitions were held at the Tate Gallery and the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art.



OMEGA NOW!

Omega Now! is a competition run in partnership between The Courtauld and Ulster Museum. Students aged 14–18 were asked to create a surface design inspired by the designs of the Omega Workshops. This competition was inspired by the Bloomsbury exhibition at Ulster Museum (June–Oct 2022), which features works on loan from The Courtauld.

Students were asked to research the Omega Workshops and bring some of the group’s avant-garde attitude to their own designs. The overall quality of the entries was extremely impressive and demonstrates how using art history approaches to researching artists and their work can inspire innovative and contemporary designs. The winning designs have been manufactured into a tote bag and notebook set and are featured for sale in the gift shops at both organisations.

This project is the result of a partnership between Ulster Museum and The Courtauld through the Courtauld National Partners Programme. Since 2018 the programme has explored connections between art collections and the legacy of Courtaulds Ltd through exhibitions, work with young people in schools, and activities with volunteers and community groups.

For more information about the programme visit

courtauld.ac.uk/take-part/schools/national-partners-schools-programme/

Competition Winners:

Lily Stuart,
Omega Now!
competition winner,
aged 14.

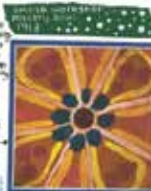


"I have taken my inspiration from Omega Workshops' paintings of flowers which used bold colour and line to create abstracted shapes. I have used these elements with a light and cold colour palette and the principle of pattern to give my flowers an abstracted look."



The Bloomsbury Group






The Bloomsbury Group were a group of five English British Bloomsbury Group artists who, amongst other things, were the last members to remain in the Bloomsbury Group in London. They were a group of artists who were interested in the arts and literature. The Bloomsbury Group were a group of artists who were interested in the arts and literature. They were a group of artists who were interested in the arts and literature.

My Design




Faye Gardiner,
Omega Now!
competition runner
up, aged 15.

*"I was inspired by the painterly
lines and colour palette of
the Omega Workshops tray
design. I used complementary
colours to attract the eye,
and I was also inspired by the
combination of organic brush
strokes, marks and dots."*





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