



Looking again at Vanessa Bell's View into a Garden

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Today I want to talk about a painting of a room, but also about the friendships, ideas and ways of life that were associated with this room. This room, which was Vanessa Bell's painting studio, was a place of work, but it was also a place of solace, comfort, privacy, and, at other times, sociability, liveliness, gossip. I always feel a bit better after looking at this painting. I hope it has a similar effect on you.

As you can see, it's a partial view of a room with an open door leading into a walled garden. It's crowded with colour, texture and lots of repeating lines and shapes (circles, semi-circles, triangles and rectangles). What I always notice first is the round blue vase standing on the round table, and the tall, slender stems of the flowers rising up from the vase which mirror the forms of the towering plants in the garden. I'm also always drawn to the chairs. I'd like to sit for a while on the rounded chair with the padded seat and browse through that book, and then wander into the garden and test the wicker chair for comfort. The book could be a sketchbook; perhaps it's one of Vanessa Bell's sketchbooks. The rectangular form of the book with its loose sheets of paper highlighted in pale blue mirrors the rectangular form of the cushion on the chair outside.

Have you noticed the dark thick vertical lines of the curtains at either side of the picture? They are like the curtains of a theatre. Vanessa Bell shared this room with her long-term companion, Duncan Grant, who was also a painter. They both liked to include curtains as framing devices in their paintings. Grant, in particular, was obsessed with the theatre and Diaghilev's Russian Ballet company, and even produced costume designs for various theatrical productions. I think he liked the dramatic possibilities suggested by the inclusion of curtains. Is something about to happen in this room? But the curtains are mainly used as a formal device. They lead the eye into the room.

What do you think you would see if you sat on the wicker chair in the garden? If you turned to your left, you would see more of the garden, perhaps you would spot one

of Vanessa Bell's friends, Roger Fry, perhaps, in a tweed suit, making paper birds for Bell's daughter, Angelica. If you looked back into the room from the garden chair, you would immediately notice all the dazzling colours and the amazing hand-painted decorations covering the fireplace and walls, ceramics and lampstands, screens and cupboards.

The title of the painting is *A View into a Garden*. It's dated 1926, so Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant had been living in this house, Charleston in Sussex, for 10 years when it was painted. Bell took on the lease of Charleston farmhouse in the First World War with the very practical purpose of giving Grant and his friend, David Garnett, who were conscientious objectors, legitimate wartime occupations – they could do war work (i.e. farming) but also continue to write and paint in their spare moments. Charleston was not a full-time residence for Bell and Grant, who also rented flats in London. Instead, it served as retreat for extended periods from the difficult conditions of wartime London. After the war, it continued to serve as a refuge, a rural sanctuary, for their network of friends. This close circle of friends, now known to the rest of the world as the Bloomsbury Group, included some of the most influential British artists and writers of the twentieth-century: the novelists E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf, who was Vanessa Bell's sister, the brilliant economist John Maynard Keynes, the art critics Roger Fry and Clive Bell (Vanessa's husband, from whom she was separated). As the academic Christopher Reed has argued, Charleston was both a setting for the Bloomsbury Group's unconventional lifestyles and sexual relationships and "an expression of their values, [helping to] define and preserve their aesthetic and social ideals." One of the reasons people continue to be fascinated by Charleston is this sense of it as being "a world apart, an alternative to conventional ways of life" (Reed, 2004: 197).

Some of the men who stayed at Charleston were men who were sexually attracted to other men, and some of the women who visited the house had relationships with other women. Some were probably bisexual, but for others it was probably even more fluid than that. E.M. Forster, who most people now consider to have been gay, said that, "I never did find [a label] to fit me." Before getting together with Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant had been the lover of her brother Adrian Stephen, of Lytton Strachey, and of Maynard Keynes. When he and Bell moved to Charleston, he was passionately in love with the novelist David Garnett. Virginia Woolf was married to the writer Leonard Woolf and had relationships with women. Maynard Keynes was married to the Russian dancer Lydia Lopokova and had relationships with men. It must have been exciting at times, but it must have been accompanied by a certain amount of pain, sadness and anxiety. And it carried risks as well. In the 1920s, when Vanessa Bell made this painting, the legal situation for gay men, in particular, was very difficult. The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 had made all sexual acts between two men illegal. "In the legal and social context of early-twentieth-century Britain", writes Christopher Reed, "acknowledgment of sexual attraction between men could not be 'open'". On the contrary, such acknowledgment was carefully controlled and required a great deal of discretion (Reed, 2014: 72). The trust between the different members of the Bloomsbury Group rested on the

acceptance of sexual variety, but also an understanding that secrets must not be shared outside the group. Charleston was a “safe space” where different preferences and lifestyles could be spoken about, and acted on, in a way that wasn’t possible for the members of the group in other spheres of their life.

One of the things Vanessa Bell’s painting of a room might help us to reflect on is why some spaces matter more to us than others, and why some seem to enable whilst others constrain. Charleston seems to have been a place that enabled good things to happen, whether that is the creation of new ways of being together or new kinds of writing and painting. Morag Shiach has argued that the Bloomsbury Group’s ability to write, paint, think, discuss, be open or not about things, was “shaped by the scale and style of social possibilities and privacies offered by their...houses” (Shiach, 2014: 62). The way of living Vanessa Bell established at Charleston created both the solitude and the sociability necessary for creative work. And this was especially true of the room depicted in this painting. The studio, writes Angelica Garnett in her memoir of growing up at Charleston, “was half work-room and half-sitting room...[It] was the citadel of the house, the sanctuary in which I spent the most treasured hours of my life” (Garnett, 1995: 97). The Charleston studio, as Garnett suggests, was somewhere Vanessa Bell might talk to her friends or spend time with her daughter, but it was also a place of work. This blurring of the distinction between “the studio and the home, and thus between work and the domestic”, is something many of us have had to get used to over the past few months (Shiach, 2014: 65). Our kitchens, our bedrooms have become our offices during the coronavirus lockdown, and it has thrown up all kinds of challenges, especially for those attempting to juggle work and childcare commitments. Although Vanessa Bell seems have managed this interweaving of work and domestic life quite well, often sharing the studio with Duncan Grant, her daughter, or guests, there were moments when she insisted on the need for privacy and solitude. Her sister, the great novelist, Virginia Woolf, wrote a book on this very subject, *A Room of One’s Own*, published in 1929, three years after this painting was made. The central argument of the book is that women writers and artists have often lacked the material resources that make the creation of new novels, poems and paintings possible; not paints, pens or paper necessarily, but the even more important resource of space: a private space where the novelist or artist could go to think, write, paint, without being interrupted or watched-over. Virginia Woolf suffered from a series of devastating depressions in her life. So perhaps the need for a private space had another meaning for her as well: somewhere to retreat to when things got tough. Simon Watney has suggested that Vanessa Bell’s determination to protect her privacy may have been partly driven by her own struggles with depression. “Vanessa,” he writes, “came to shelter behind a reputation of formidable strength in contrast to [Virginia’s] more evident fragility. However, both sisters were equally tortured by self-doubt and vulnerable to depression” (Watney, 2007: 15, 17).

The environment Bell created for herself at Charleston, including the mutually supportive relationship with Duncan Grant, seem to have been a crucially important factor in sustaining her long career as an artist. It gave her the right mixture of

solitude and sociability. In his book on Bloomsbury in Sussex, Simon Watney writes that “the whole history of Charleston is inseparable from the way in which Duncan and Vanessa felt safe with one another.” “Art”, he says, “was the primary substance of their private world, and sustained much of their private dialogue” (Watney, 2007: 18). The other thing that bound them together was the shared project of Charleston itself. The farmhouse was a complete wreck when they first took on the lease in 1916, but over the years they transformed dark rooms and discoloured walls with their incredibly vibrant hand-painted decorations. In a letter to Duncan Grant written a few years after they had moved in, Bell reflects on how much they had achieved in a relatively short time. She was astonished, she writes, “to find how much energy we spent on this place, how many tables and chairs and doors we painted and how many colour schemes we invented. Considering what a struggle it was to exist here at all [during the war years], I can’t think how we had so much surplus energy.”

This investment in the domestic, whether that is the time and energy they devoted to Charleston, or in their paintings, which often focus on domestic interiors and objects, has meant that their work hasn’t always been taken seriously. Although Vanessa Bell’s work (especially the radical abstract paintings she made just before the First World War) has now received the recognition it deserves, for years she had to contend with the contemptuous and condescending attitude of many (mainly male) critics. Often her work was under-appreciated because of its subject matter. While her contemporaries were painting more obviously modern subjects such as urban landscapes, machines, the impact of war, she was concentrating on still lifes, corners of rooms, sunlight falling on a vase of flowers, as she does in this painting, *A View into a Garden*. At first glance, a room with a door opening onto a garden does not seem like anything special. Why devote attention to it? But Bell’s work helps us to re-evaluate what is worth paying attention to, demonstrating that a domestic scene such as this one has as much value as a subject of art as a devastated battlefield on the Western Front or a crowded street in London. Her friend, Roger Fry, could have been writing about this painting when he argued that “the human spirit has evolved from concern with the exceptional, the supernatural...to the familiar, normal, commonplace things of life...Little by little human beings have begun to see that the most familiar things if only we look at them with a concentrated imaginative gaze are full of wonder and mystery.”

References

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