**Bell, (Arthur) Clive Heward (1881–1964)**

ABSTRACT

Clive Bell was an English art and cultural critic associated with the Bloomsbury Group. He is best known for the concept of “significant form”, which he outlined in his 1914 book *Art*. *Art* made a version of the case for appreciating artistic form independent of content, which is known as Formalism. At the expense of representative, narrative, or iconographical meaning, the book encouraged a contemplation of “relations and combinations of lines and colours” in art from the ancient to the modern. “To appreciate a work of art”, Bell argued, “we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions.” Though this approach eventually fell out of critical fashion, *Art* remains enduringly significant as a manifesto for the Post-Impressionist movement, for which Bell helped Roger Fry arrange important London exhibitions in 1910 and 1912.

MAIN TEXT

Though he wrote the first English book on the key modernist writer Marcel Proust, and was a controversially outspoken pacifist, Clive Bell is best known for the concept of “significant form” which he outlined in his 1914 book *Art*. Essentially, *Art* made a version of the case for appreciating artistic form independent of content, which is known as Formalism. At the expense of representative, narrative, or iconographical meaning, the book encouraged a contemplation of “relations and combinations of lines and colours” in art from the ancient to the modern. “To appreciate a work of art”, Bell argued, “we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions.” Though this approach eventually fell out of critical fashion, *Art* remains enduringly significant as a manifesto for the Post-Impressionist movement, for which Bell helped Roger Fry arrange important London exhibitions in 1910 and 1912. Bell is also remembered as a member of the Bloomsbury Group, an influential collection of artists and writers gathered in London which included Virginia Woolf.

Bell was born in Berkshire to a family whose wealth – drawn from the coal mines of Wales – meant that he would never have to earn a living. After Marlborough School, he went to Trinity College, Cambridge in 1899, where he studied History, and came under the influence of the philosopher G. E. Moore, whose *Principia Ethica* (1903) would influence *Art*. This time at Cambridge also initiated the friendships which would eventually become the male side of the Bloomsbury Group.

On graduation, Bell was awarded a studentship to enable him to pursue historical research. In 1904, he went to spend it in Paris, developing his early interest in art by acquainting himself with both the old masters and the dynamic contemporary art scene. On return to London, he transferred this taste for the society of artists to Bloomsbury and, after the death of his university contemporary Thoby Stephen, married Thoby’s sister Vanessa in 1907. Vanessa Bell was an important painter in her own right; her sister, the writer Virginia Stephen, would marry Leonard Woolf in 1912. In 1910, Bell’s circle of friends expanded to include the art critic and painter Roger Fry, one of his most important influences.After an early interest in the Italian Renaissance, Fry was turning to modern French painting, and the two men’s shared enthusiasm animated the important 1910 exhibition “Manet and the Post-Impressionists” (held at London’s Grafton Galleries) for which Fry had coined the term “Post-Impressionism”. The impact on London’s cultural scene was so great that Virginia Woolf would later write that “human character changed” around this time.

In the follow-up “Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition” in 1912, Bell oversaw the “English Group” of artists responding to the movement. In the “French Group” section of the 1912 catalogue, Fry noted that these were artists who “do not seek to imitate form, but to create form; not to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life.” There is a clear line from this observation to Bell’s 1914 *Art*. Acknowledging debts to Fry as well as profound disagreements with him, Bell’s preface to the book pointed out his slightly longer acquaintance with modern French painting, his intention “to develop a complete theory of visual art” and to justify the belief “that there is a real distinction between works of art and all other objects.” Though the possibilities were implied by Post-Impressionism, Bell’s writing never went so far as to advocate abstraction.

Bell was also a prolific and popular journalist and pamphleteer, writing about subjects beyond art; his 1915 *Peace at Once* was destroyed by the British authorities for its advocacy of a settlement with the Germans, and *On British Freedom* (1923) took the issue of censorship head-on. In the 1930s, a combination of pacifism and a belief — expressed in *Civilization: an Essay* (1928) — that “civilization” could be nourished under dictatorship led him to support the appeasement of Hitler.

Bell’s *Proust*, the first book on Marcel Proust (1871–1922), author of the novel A la recherche du *temps* *perdu (In Search of Lost Time)* (1917– 27), was published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf’s Hogarth Press in 1928, and suggested that his popularity stemmed from his ability to capture the “temporal colour” of the age. The book is symptomatic of Bell’s broader leanings towards all things French, and grew out of a period spent largely in Paris, meeting artists such as Pablo Picasso. In the later memoir *Old Friends* (1956), he reflected on his famous friendships with important modernist figures such as the poet T. S. Eliot.

**References and further reading**

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