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| Bell, Vanessa (1879-1961) |
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| Vanessa Bell was a painter and decorative artist, and an innovator in interior design, who became central to the development of modernism in Britain in the early twentieth century. As a member of the Bloomsbury Group, she was a key figure in the ground-breaking Omega Workshops, set up by the artist and critic Roger Fry in 1913. She worked across several media, including painting, print-making, photography and textiles; and she designed illustrations and dusk-jackets for the Hogarth Press, notably for books published by her sister, the writer Virginia Woolf. Her work was at its most radical between 1910 and 1920, when she was among the first artists in Britain to respond to ‘post-impressionism’, a term coined by Fry to describe the new art from Europe. Her experimental art explored the limits of representation through a variety of modernist techniques, including bold use of colour, emphatic outlines, flattened surfaces, and *papier collé*, while her subjects were often intimate and domestic. |
| Vanessa Bell was a painter and decorative artist, and an innovator in interior design, who became central to the development of modernism in Britain in the early twentieth century. As a member of the Bloomsbury Group, she was a key figure in the ground-breaking Omega Workshops, set up by the artist and critic Roger Fry in 1913. She worked across several media, including painting, print-making, photography and textiles; and she designed illustrations and dusk-jackets for the Hogarth Press, notably for books published by her sister, the writer Virginia Woolf. Her work was at its most radical between 1910 and 1920, when she was among the first artists in Britain to respond to ‘post-impressionism’, a term coined by Fry to describe the new art from Europe. Her experimental art explored the limits of representation through a variety of modernist techniques, including bold use of colour, emphatic outlines, flattened surfaces, and *papier collé*, while her subjects were often intimate and domestic.  File: Mantelpiece.jpg  Figure Bell's *Still Life on Corner of a Mantelpiece* (1914), a painting displaying clear cubist influences.  Source: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bell-still-life-on-corner-of-a-mantelpiece-t01133>  The eldest daughter of the literary critic and author Sir Leslie Stephen and Julia Prinsep Stephen, Vanessa Bell was permitted to pursue her studies in painting from a relatively young age, attending art schools in her late teens and early twenties. Following her father’s death in 1904, she sold the family home and set up a household with her sister Virginia and their two brothers, Thoby and Adrian. Their Gordon Square home was quickly established as a meeting-place for what was to become known as the Bloomsbury Group of artists, writers, and political thinkers active in the early decades of the twentieth century. Vanessa married one of this group, the art critic Clive Bell, in 1907.  File: StudlandBeach.jpg  Figure Vanessa Bell, *Studland Beach*, 1912  Source: http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bell-studland-beach-verso-group-of-male-nudes-by-duncan-grant-t02080  The post-impressionist movement had a significant impact on Bell’s work and encouraged her to be freer with form and more exuberant in her use of colour. Between 1911 and 1914, her painting became increasingly abstract, a shift that can be traced through the successive versions of *Studland Beach* (1911–12), and through portraits such as *Virginia Woolf* (1912), which blank out the faces of her subjects. Her work explored the formalist aesthetics of Roger Fry and Clive Bell, yet it never entirely conformed to the principle that lived experience is irrelevant to art. Paintings such as *A Conversation* (1913/16) conjure up an intimate mood, even as they reject the conventions of realism, and critics have often noted the affective, atmospheric qualities of Bell’s painting. Four paintings by Bell appeared in the *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition* of 1912-13, curated by Fry (with whom Bell had an affair from 1911 to 1913) and showcasing works by British, French and Russian artists. Here Bell was exhibited alongside artists such as Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Paul Cézanne, Natalya Goncharova, Percy Wyndham Lewis and Stanley Spencer, as well as Duncan Grant, with whom she was to establish a long-term relationship from 1913 onwards. Her first solo exhibition was at the Independent Gallery in London in 1922, and she had four further solo shows in London galleries. In the post-war years, Bell (in common with many artists of her generation) returned to a more representational style of painting. Her late work is important for its treatment of colour, and for haunting portraits such as her *Self-Portrait* of 1958.  Interior decoration was intrinsic to Bell’s practice, and to her sense of herself as a liberated modern. In 1904, she marked her break from her Victorian upbringing by moving from the family home in South Kensington to the more Bohemian district of Bloomsbury, and redecorating in her own, modern style. She became the centre of the Bloomsbury group, a circle of artists and writers who made of modernism an experiment in living, and which included Roger Fry and Clive Bell, the artist Duncan Grant, and writers Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster and Lytton Strachey. In 1913, she joined Fry’s Omega Workshops, which employed artists to design furnishings on a collective basis that were inspired by post-impressionism; none of the works were signed by an individual. She contributed designs for fabric, wallpaper, rugs, and clothes, made ceramics, painted furniture, and painted interiors with modernist murals and colour schemes. The Omega designs fed back into her painting, as she played with pure abstraction in works like *Abstract Painting* (1914). While the Studio only survived for six years, being unable to sustain itself commercially, the Omega aesthetic regained some popularity and influence from the late twentieth century onwards. Often in collaboration with Grant, Bell continued to produce designs for, and often produce, murals, ceramics, textiles, carpets, curtains, lighting and furniture, for decades after the closure of Omega.  File: Charleston.jpg  Figure The drawing room at Charleston, featuring Bell and Grant's own interior decorations and designs. A self-portrait of Bell, dating around 1958, hangs to the left of the fireplace.  Source: <http://www.decorartsnow.com/2012/01/12/now-and-then-inspired-by-the-bloomsbury-group/>  Bell’s most important decorative project was Charleston Farmhouse, a rented property in Sussex where she lived with Grant at intervals from 1916 until her death. Grant’s lover David Garnett and the economist John Maynard Keynes lived at Charleston for long periods, and there was also a room set aside for Clive Bell. Over time, Bell and her friends decorated and redecorated every available surface, and the house is now preserved as a museum. In 1941 and 1942 Bell and Grant designed and painted the murals for Berwick Church near Charleston, which combine references to the artists of the Italian Trecento, such as Giotto and Fra Angelico, with men in military uniform (it was wartime), and scenes from local Sussex life. |
| Further reading:  (Anscombe)  (Brockington)  (Marler)  (Reed)  (Shone)  (Spalding)  (Tickner)  (Tranter) |