Grace Brockington

Bell, Vanessa (1879–1961)

IMAGE: Vanessa Bell, *Studland Beach*, 1912.

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Other useful information: current location is Tate Britain.

Vanessa Bell was a painter, designer and decorative artist who became key to the development of modernism in Britain. Her career was life-long, but her work was at its most radical between about 1910 and 1920, and critics have tended to focus on those experimental years. She was among the first artists in Britain to respond to the new art from Europe – to ‘Post-Impressionism’ as it became known - after Roger Fry’s controversial exhibition that took place in London in 1910. Her experimental art explored the limits of representation through a variety of modernist techniques, including unnatural colouring, expressive brushwork, flattened surfaces and *papier collé*. 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.

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 her home 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 who included 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 inspired by Post-Impressionism. 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). Her most important decorative project was Charleston Farmhouse, a rented property in Sussex where she lived at intervals from 1916 until her death. She and her friends decorated and redecorated every available surface, and the house is now preserved as a museum.

References and further reading

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