London’s Art Scene: The Bloomsbury Group
Bloomsbury

A set of writers, artists, and intellectuals living in or associated with Bloomsbury in the early 20th century. (The Oxford English Dictionary)

Bloomsbury group, name given to a coterie of English writers, philosophers, and artists who frequently met between about 1907 and 1930 at the houses of Clive and Vanessa Bell and of Vanessa’s brother and sister Adrian and Virginia Stephen (later Virginia Woolf) in the Bloomsbury district of London, the area around the British Museum. (Encyclopaedia Britannica)
The members of the Group display [no] common and peculiar characteristics but rather an overlapping interconnected similarity of ideas and attitudes such as their values and beliefs concerning individual consciousness, external nature, isolation, time and space, love and death. Unlike most other kinds of intellectual or artistic groups, the Bloomsbury group was not formed out of common beliefs or shared aspirations. Bloomsbury originated rather in families and old friendships which predated any of the Group’s achievements or fame. From these relationships they developed into a collectivity whose work deeply influences modern English literature, visual art, aesthetics, criticism, and international economics as well as modern attitudes towards feminism, pacifism, and sexuality.

(S.P. Rosenbaum, The Bloomsbury Group Memoir Club, 2)
Leslie Stephen’s Death (1904) and the Start of the Bloomsbury Group

- Father of Vanessa Bell (née Stephen), Virginia Woolf (née Stephen), and Thoby and Adrian Stephen
- Sir Leslie Stephen was a writer, editor of Cornhill Magazine, first editor of the Dictionary of National Biography (*includes biographies of all important men in English history*)
- Received a fellowship from Cambridge and entered Holy Orders, but he renounced his religious beliefs
- Resigned from Cambridge and began a literary career in London.

Sir Leslie Stephen, 1902
Stephen Family:

- Virginia was the third child after Vanessa and Thoby.
- She was followed by Adrian.
- Julia and Sir Leslie Stephen were in second marriages and had children from their previous marriages. There were eight children in total.
- There were seven servants (this was not an excessive number at the time).
Death of Julia Duckworth (1895)  
Stephen and Stella Duckworth (1897)

- Vanessa and Virginia’s mother died of heart failure as a result of the flu when Vanessa was sixteen and Virginia 13.
- Two years later, Virginia Woolf’s half-sister and surrogate mother died.
- After her mother’s death, Virginia has her first mental breakdown.
- Virginia became lonely, as her brothers went to school. She also suffered sexual abuse from George Duckworth.
- She attempted suicide.

Gerald Duckworth, Virginia Woolf, Thoby Stephen, Vanessa Stephen, and George Duckworth (back row); Adrian Stephen, Julia Duckworth Stephen, and Leslie Stephen (front row) at Alenhoe, Wimbledon in 1892
• The two girls were educated at home, while their brothers went to school.
• Leslie Stephen wasn’t their formal teacher, but he was their informal teacher.
• In 1902, Stephen suffered from cancer, and his daughters had to take care of him until his death.

Sisters Vanessa Bell (née Stephen) and Virginia Woolf (née Stephen)
After her father’s death, Virginia Woolf was to reject the concept of “The Angel in the House” - the Victorian ideal of the self-sacrificing woman (picture: Virginia Woolf with her father Sir Leslie Stephen)
After their father’s death, Virginia and Vanessa left his home or—what Henry James called—the “house of all the deaths.”

They lived with their brothers Thoby and Adrian at 46 Gordon Square, Bloomsbury.

Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell enjoyed financial independence.

Virginia began to write, Vanessa began to paint.

They also began to meet new people.

Portrait of Virginia Woolf by Vanessa Bell, oil on board, 1912.
Thoby Stephen (1880-1906)—the brother of Vanessa (1879), Virginia (1882) and Adrian Stephen (1883).

Thoby Stephen has been to Cambridge and his university friends came to his new home.

Nearly all the male members of the group had been “Apostles”; i.e., members of the “society,” a select, semisecret university club. (watch 12:05 of Woolf doc.)

One of Thoby’s best friends was Clive Bell, who married Vanessa Stephen in 1907, a few months after Thoby died.

Thoby died very young of typhoid fever.

Thoby brought many of the members together but died before the Bloomsbury group really formed the way it did later on.
According to Leonard Woolf, who married Virginia Woolf in 1912, the 13 members of Old Bloomsbury included Leonard and Virginia Woolf, Vanessa and Clive Bell, Lytton Strachey, Roger Fry, Duncan Grant, J.M. Keynes, Molly and Desmond MacCarthy, E.M. Forster, Saxon Sydney-Turner, and Adrian Stephen.
According to Leonard Woolf, who married Virginia Woolf in 1912, the 13 members of Old Bloomsbury included Leonard and Virginia Woolf, Vanessa and Clive Bell, Lytton Strachey, Roger Fry, Duncan Grant, J.M. Keynes, Molly and Desmond MacCarthy, E.M. Forster, Saxon Sydney-Turner, and Adrian Stephen.

The members were either related or friends at two Cambridge colleges.
From left to right, we see Duncan Grant, Leonard Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Clive Bell, writer and publisher David Garnett, J.M. Keynes, Lydia Keynes, Desmond MacCarthy, Molly MacCarthy, Quentin Bell, and E.M. Forster.

Desmond MacCarthy is reading a paper while the others listen. On the walls are portraits of the three deceased members, Virginia Woolf (1941), Lytton Strachey (1932), and Roger Fry (1934).

Vanessa Bell, The Memoir Club, 1943
Vanessa Bell’s portrait reflects the changing nature of the Bloomsbury Group
Art critics: Clive Bell, Roger Fry
Painters: Vanessa Bell, Roger Fry, Duncan Grant (also Lytton Strachey’s cousin and Keynes’ best friend)
Critics and novelists: Virginia Woolf, E.M. Forster
Political theorists, author, publisher: Leonard Woolf
Biographer: Lytton Strachey
Writer: Molly MacCarthy
Literary critic and journalist: Desmond MacCarthy
Economist: J.M. Keynes

People associated but not formally belonging to the group, include Vita Sackville-West and her husband Harold Nicholson and T.S. Eliot
46 Gordon Square: Virginia, Vanessa, Adrian and Thoby Stephen’s home from 1904-7, is where the Bloomsbury Group began. Vanessa lived here after her marriage to Clive Bell. John Maynard Keynes, the economist, lived here from 1917 when the Bells left.

29 Fitzroy Square in Bloomsbury

Virginia and her brother Adrian moved to Fitzroy Square (Bloomsbury) after Vanessa moved into 46 Gordon Square with her husband Clive Bell.

38 Brunswick Square (the house no longer exists—it was bombed during WWII)

This is VW's third Bloomsbury home. Virginia and Adrian shared their home with Duncan Grant, Maynard Keynes and Leonard Woolf from 1911-12.
“Here and in neighbouring houses during the first half of the 20th century there lived several members of the BLOOMSBURY GROUP including Virginia Woolf, Clive Bell and the Stracheyes”
1910: Two Major Events

Roger Fry’s post-impressionist exhibition.

46 Gordon Square: Vanessa lived here after her marriage to Clive Bell. John Maynard Keynes, the economist, lived here from 1917 when the Bells left.

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Virginia and her brother Adrian moved to Fitzroy Square (Bloomsbury) after Vanessa moved into 46 Gordon Square with her husband Clive Bell.

Dreadnought Hoax
1) The Dreadnought Hoax

- On 7th February 1910, Adrian, Virginia and friends left 29 Fitzroy Square dressed up as the Emperor of Abyssinia and his suite and left for Weymouth by train to be shown round one of the largest and newest warships of His Majesty’s Fleet.

- The prank was organized by poet Horace de Vere Cole.

- Members of the Bloomsbury group of writers and artists donned beards and costumes to disguise themselves as Abyssinian princes and their foreign office guides and gained access to the pride of the British naval fleet—The Dreadnought.

"The Emperor of Abyssinia" and his suite
From left to right: Virginia Stephen (Virginia Woolf), Duncan Grant, Horace Cole, Anthony Buxton (seated), Adrian Stephen, Guy Ridley.
2) The Post-Impressionist Exhibition

In November 1910, Roger Fry organized an exhibition which he called “Manet and the Post-Impressionists” at the Grafton Galleries in London, which featured paintings by artists such as Cézanne, Van Gogh, Matisse and Picasso.

In 1912, he arranged a second post-impressionist exhibition.
Virginia Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”:

On or about December 1910, human character changed. I am not saying that one went out, as one might into a garden, and there saw that a rose had flowered, or that a hen had laid an egg. The change was not sudden and definite like that. But a change there was, nevertheless; and, since one must be arbitrary, let us date it about the year 1910.

Roger Fry, [these paintings] “do not seek to imitate form, but to create form; not to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life.”
Roger Fry

▸ In 1905, Fry was appointed curator of the Metropolitan Museum in New York and had to spend two or three months of the next five years in America.

▸ He disagreed with the president of the museum and left his position in 1910.

▸ Roger Fry was one of the Apostles at Cambridge and became a member of the Bloomsbury group in 1910 at the age of 44.
Virginia Woolf’s first novel The Voyage Out, 1915 edition

8 Fitzroy Street by Vanessa Bell Oil on canvas
G.E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica* (1903)

- The most valuable things in life were the pleasures of company and the enjoyment of beautiful things.

- “One’s prime objects in life were love, the creation and enjoyment of aesthetic experience and the pursuit of knowledge”

- Forster: "if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country"

- Clive Bell: “A work of art is an object beautiful, or significant, in itself, nowise dependent for its value on the outside world” (“The Artistic Problem”)
Portraits of Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant

"Despite various homosexual allegiances in subsequent years, Grant's relationship with Vanessa Bell endured to the end; it became primarily a domestic and creative union, the two artists painting side by side, often in the same studio, admiring but also criticizing each other's efforts." - Quentin Bell
This is a portrait of Angelica Bell (m. Angelica Garnett 1918-2012), the 16 year old daughter of the Bloomsbury painters and designers Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell (1879-1961). Angelica is shown in Grant's studio in a farmhouse at Charleston, East Sussex.

Angelica Playing the Violin (1934). Duncan Grant, Oil on canvas.
On her 17th birthday, Vanessa told her daughter that Duncan Grant was her father. It was devastating to Angelica: “Everyone knew, everyone except me, even my brothers,” she wrote in her memoir later.

Angelica Bell by Vanessa Bell, Oil on Canvas, 1930. This painting hangs in its original location in Duncan Grant's Bedroom.
Angelica was sworn to silence.

“They were painters, I suppose, and they didn’t care enormously about human beings. I suppose they didn’t make the connection between my knowing about my parenthood and my actual existence. I suppose they did not think it mattered.”

Duncan Grant, *Interior with the Artist’s Daughter*, c. 1935-36 Oil on canvas
Duncan Grant was in love at various times with Lytton Strachey, Maynard Keynes, Adrian Stephen, David Garnett, and finally Vanessa Bell, with whom he spent most of his life amidst other affairs. Roger Fry’s love for Vanessa was only briefly reciprocated;

Clive Bell’s flirtation with his sister-in-law and brief affair with Molly MacCarthy adversely affected both the Bell and MacCarthy marriages.

Lytton Strachey and Sydney Waterlow proposed to Virginia Stephen at various times; Lytton was briefly accepted then declined, to the relief of both. Despite these diverse affairs, there were no divorces in Bloomsbury. Old friends remained friends. (Rosenbaum 21)
Duncan Grant – Vanessa Bell

Duncan Grant – David Garnett

daughter: Angelica Bell

1942: Angelica married her father’s former lover David Garnett

Duncan Grant, Portrait of David Garnett, pencil and pastel on paper (1915)
There were three events that gave the Bloomsbury group notoriety/importance:

- The post-impressionist exhibition of 1910
- The Dreadnought Hoax
- The Hogarth Press (founded by Virginia and Leonard Woolf)
Hogarth press:

- Founded by Virginia and Leonard Woolf in 1917
- It published the works of Katherine Mansfield, T.S. Eliot, Clive Bell, C. Day Lewis, E.M. Forster, John Maynard Keynes, Vita Sackville-West, and, of course, the Woolfs themselves
- It also published the translations of Sigmund Freud’s work
Conclusion

- There was a strong value of friendship and honesty in the Bloomsbury group and a rejection of Victorian propriety.
- The Bloomsberries challenged Victorian gender values.
- There is an emphasis on internal experience rather than objective reality in the work of the Bloomsberries. In “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” Woolf contrasts spiritual with materialist writing.