

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01824-2 - The Cambridge Companion to the Bloomsbury Group

Edited by Victoria Rosner

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

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Introduction

In 1913 London, while demonstrations for women's suffrage were escalating and tensions were mounting over the question of Irish Home Rule, Bloomsbury Group artists Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell, and Duncan Grant opened a furniture shop in Fitzroy Square. The furniture available was artist-made and gaily decorated, quite different from the somber style prevalent at the time. Furniture made by the Omega Workshops (as they named their establishment) was painted in exuberant colors and festooned with sensuous, joyous figures or with abstract designs that seemed to have danced off the painter's canvas and onto chairs, tables, and pottery. The style was French, modern, and spontaneous – all qualities commonly considered morally suspect by the British middle classes.

To no one's surprise, the Omega Workshops was controversial from its inception, both because of its aesthetic and because of its deliberate lack of craftsmanship. As Fry explained in the catalog, the work was hastily executed and deliberately underdone: “[The artists of the Omega] refuse to spoil the expressive quality of their work by sandpapering it down to a shop finish.”¹ What was surprising was the public's presumption that the furniture, in addition to being spontaneous, was somehow also perverse. Winifred Gill, one of the artists who worked at the Omega, wrote in a private communication to Grant about some shoppers she received one day whose salacious expectations were disappointed.

One morning after our opening, two ladies came into the showroom. I was rung for and came down to see what they wanted. They wished to see furniture. I showed them what we had. They were not satisfied. I had not shown them everything. I took them to the back showroom upstairs where there was some unfinished work. No. That was not what they came for. Hadn't we some furniture that we didn't show to everyone? There was some as yet unpainted furniture in the cellar. They inspected this. “What's in here?” exclaimed one of them, suspiciously opening the door of a shallow shelved cupboard in the showroom. At last they rather shamefacedly said that they had heard that our

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[More information](#)

ROSNER

furniture was “immoral” and they wanted to see some. “O,” said I, “that’s only because we paint our chairs scarlet.” It was I think the *Morning Post* that said that. Was that all, they said, rather disappointed. “We couldn’t think what immoral furniture would be like.” “Yes,” interrupted the other, “all we could think of was a sort of armchair and commode combined.”²

The ladies’ quest for “immoral furniture” indicates the suspicion with which the Bloomsbury Group has often been met. An aura of sex and self-indulgence clings persistently to Bloomsbury a century after its birth in a drawing room in Gordon Square, when a group of young people met together with no greater ambition than to speak freely and live as they chose. What is perhaps most surprising of all is that despite any and all immaturity, rebelliousness, and lack of plan, these young people left behind a body of work of profound creativity and beauty, a body of work so influential that in many ways can be said to have profoundly shaped twentieth century Anglo-American culture.

More than one hundred years have passed since the Bloomsbury Group met in a drawing room in a then-unfashionable London neighborhood, and the influence of its members is arguably more pervasive than ever. The economic theories of Maynard Keynes are debated in newspapers around the world. The novels of Virginia Woolf figure prominently on college syllabi. The homes and haunts of Bloomsbury receive thousands of pilgrims a year. Adored by some and derided by others, the Bloomsbury Group remains, as it has always been, difficult to ignore. As the novelist E. M. Forster had it, “No civilization or attempt at civilization has succeeded Bloomsbury.”³

There can be no doubt that the Bloomsbury Group continues to resonate today and that its legacy is still evolving. It might well be said that no other English-speaking gathering of friends in the past two hundred years has achieved such prominence or exerted such sway. This outsize influence derives in part from the range of the group’s endeavors: from paintings to politics, finance to fiction, design to dance. While there is no unified Bloomsbury philosophy, the group was bound together both by lifelong ties of affection and by shared ideas about aesthetics, philosophy, and psychology. In our age of specialization, Bloomsbury’s willingness to integrate ideas from outside their individual specializations is a signal reminder of the benefits that can accrue to the omnivorous intellect.

The Bloomsbury Group was an intellectual and social coterie of British writers, painters, critics, and an economist who were at the height of their powers during the interwar period. The boundaries of the group were loose and fluid, though any membership roster would need to include Clive Bell, Vanessa Bell, E. M. Forster, Roger Fry, Duncan Grant, Maynard Keynes,

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Desmond MacCarthy, Molly MacCarthy, Saxon Sydney-Turner, Lytton Strachey, Adrian Stephen, Thoby Stephen, Leonard Woolf, and Virginia Woolf. Other key associates were Dora Carrington, David Garnett, Lydia Lopokova, Ottoline Morrell, and Vita Sackville-West. There has been no little amount of conjecture about who precisely should be deemed “Bloomsbury,” and perhaps it is best to abide by Leonard Woolf’s reference to nothing more than a “group of friends,” to wit: “I was ... one of a small number of persons who did in fact eventually form a kind of group of friends living in or around that district of London legitimately called Bloomsbury.”⁴ The modesty of Woolf’s claim seems deliberately to belie the outsize nature of the group’s subsequent achievements.

The Bloomsbury Group’s members either originated or made foundational contributions to British Post-Impressionist painting, literary modernism, the field of macroeconomics, and a new direction for public taste in art. Theirs is a legacy that includes books as different but significant as Maynard Keynes’s *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919), a prescient critique of the Treaty of Versailles; and Virginia Woolf’s *A Room Of One’s Own* (1929), a landmark analysis of women’s authorship. It includes Roger Fry’s achievement in shifting the conversation about art to formalist issues, opening the public mind to modern, nonobjective art. The legacy of Bloomsbury also lies in its creation of a new kind of domestic life, one far more flexible, radical, and experimental than that of its Victorian predecessors. Indeed, the private lives of Bloomsbury have been of no less interest to posterity than the public works. Flouting convention with their bohemian lifestyles, espousing homosexuality and heterosexual sex outside marriage long before such practices were publicly countenanced or even legal, the Bloomsbury Group is often understood to have incarnated a certain version of the modern spirit.

The origins of the group lay at Trinity College, Cambridge University, where Thoby Stephen, son of the *Dictionary of National Biography* editor Leslie Stephen, set off to school in 1899, leaving behind his sisters, Vanessa and Virginia (formal higher education was unusual for women at the time). At Cambridge, Thoby fell in with a set of friends, most of whom were or would become members of the Cambridge Apostles, a discussion society for undergraduates. After leaving school, to recapture the pleasures of those exchanges, he invited his friends to visit his home on Thursday nights to keep the conversations going.

But “home” in 1905, when the Thursday evenings began, was not what or where it had been for Thoby and his sisters a few years earlier. In the intervening period Leslie Stephen had died of cancer and, because his wife

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

ROSNER

had died some years previously, the tall Victorian home in established, upper-middle-class Kensington where the family had lived was sold. The household dispersed, and the four children who were the product of Leslie and Julia's marriage (both had previous marriages and children) packed up and moved to Bloomsbury, a less-than-posh neighborhood laid out in residential squares. The transition was turbulent, but on the other side of it the young, emancipated Stephens found a new home and new routines of living. As Virginia Stephen (who would become Virginia Woolf) recalled, "It seemed as if the house and family which had lived in it, thrown together as they were by so many deaths, so many emotions, so many traditions, must endure for ever. And then suddenly in one night both vanished."⁵

When the last box was unpacked, the Stephens found themselves able and eager to construct a household far less formal and conventional than the one they had left behind, where the family had dressed for dinner every night and social niceties took priority above nearly all other activity. Once on their own, the Stephen children began to question some of the proprieties they had been raised to consider sacrosanct and to forge new values – from the trivial (the elimination of table napkins) to the weighty (creative work now took pride of place over household routines). Then they began to invite their friends over, and Thursday nights were born. Virginia Woolf's account continues, "These Thursday evening parties were, as far as I am concerned, the germ from which sprang all that has since come to be called – in newspapers, in novels, in Germany, in France – even, I daresay, in Turkey and Timbuktu – by the name of Bloomsbury."⁶ And she attempts to recollect the flavor of Thursday night debates, even while conceding the impossibility of the task because of the ephemeral nature of the occasions.

The argument, whether it was about atmosphere or the nature of truth, was always tossed into the middle of the party. Now [Ralph] Hawtrey would say something; now Vanessa; now Saxon; now Clive; now Thoby. It filled me with wonder to watch those who were finally left in the argument piling stone upon stone, cautiously, accurately, long after it had completely soared above my sight. But if one could not say anything, one could listen. One had glimpses of something miraculous happening high up in the air. Often we would still be sitting in a circle at two or three in the morning.... One could stumble off to bed feeling that something very important had happened. It had been proved that beauty was – or beauty was not – for I have never been quite sure which – part of a picture.⁷

Anyone who has ever passionately put forth a reasoned argument and carried the day may experience a sympathetic thrill in reading this account. Many of the young men at Gordon Square went to the Thursday nights on fire from their recent studies with G. E. Moore, whose 1903 work

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Principia Ethica became the closest thing to a Bloomsbury credo, with its reasoned support for maintaining the primacy of personal life over any other social relations. Virginia's sister Vanessa also felt that something new was happening at Gordon Square, something that might seem ordinary now, but was not at all common at the time. "There was nothing at all unusual about it I daresay, except that for some reason we seemed to be a company of the young, all free, all beginning life in new surroundings, without elders to whom we had to account in any way for our doings or behaviour, and this was not then common in a mixed company of our class."⁸

What, if anything, was so special about early Bloomsbury's Thursday nights? For intelligent and articulate young women like the Stephen sisters, who had been educated exclusively at home, the experience of intellectual debate must have been a revelation. To be able to mull over ideas, freely and without much regard for propriety, was a new experience for all those who took part. Moreover, the ideas that were hashed out in Gordon Square became, for many of those in attendance, the basis for future independent work. The pleasures of the party were such that the conversation, in various configurations, lasted lifetimes and helped to spawn a great deal of influential and well-regarded intellectual work. Certainly we would not be looking back to Thoby's Thursdays nights if it were not for their sequelae, the fruitful creative harvest of the Bloomsbury Group.

It would be wrong to give the impression that Thursday night talks focused exclusively on ethereal questions of philosophy; as often as not the discussion was decidedly earthy, and when it was, it was perhaps even more revelatory. In an age when relations between the sexes were far more constrained and homosexuality was punishable by imprisonment and forced labor, circumspection about one's private life was the rule. The year 1905, when the Gordon Square evenings began, was only five years after the death of Oscar Wilde following his imprisonment under the Labouchere Amendment, which famously outlawed "gross indecency" between men.⁹

But at Gordon Square this taboo, too, was breached, and sex was as available for discussion as anything else. Bloomsbury practiced what it preached, too: free love, same-sex sexuality, and acceptance of all kinds of unconventional relationships. Dora Carrington, for instance, married to Ralph Partridge and pursued by Mark Gertler, among others, found her strongest attachment was to Lytton Strachey. He returned Carrington's affection, though his physical desire was for men. Vanessa and Clive Bell remained married, though they frequently lived apart and pursued other relationships. Clive was seriously involved with Mary Hutchinson until about 1927, while Vanessa had a different kind of partnership with Duncan Grant, a gay man who was the biological father of one of Vanessa's children. Through all

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

ROSNER



Figure 1.1. Virginia Woolf's garden party. Angus Davidson, Duncan Grant, Julian Bell, Leonard & Virginia Woolf, Margaret Duckworth, Clive & Vanessa Bell, Pinska (dog). 1930. Taken from Vanessa Bell's family album: © Tate, London 2013.

this, Clive kept and used his bedroom at Charleston, and Vanessa and Clive maintained a continuing affection for one another (Figure 1.1).

Following Moore, Bloomsbury elevated personal relations to the realm of ethics. The group was keen to challenge social mores, and, perhaps for Strachey most of all, they were all at their happiest when analyzing and debunking received ideas. From Moore, as much as the substance of their philosophy, they inherited a style of intellectual engagement. Keynes recalls Moore's debating style vividly:

Moore at this time was a master of ... greeting one's remarks with a gasp of incredulity – *Do you really think that*, an expression of face as if to hear such a thing said reduced him to a state of wonder verging on imbecility, with his mouth wide open and wagging his head in the negative so violently that his hair shook. *Oh!* He would say, goggling at you as if either you or he must be mad; and no reply was possible.¹⁰

This is not a bad response when you suspect your interlocutor may be parroting an inherited position and you wish to draw it to his or her attention in a civil fashion. Following Moore, Bloomsbury debates were anything but academic. It might more fairly be said that debating was something of a blood sport in Bloomsbury. Thursday night conversations were carried out with – to put it mildly – a sense of conviction and purpose, with a sense that discoveries were being made, discoveries that would (and did) shape the future lives of those present.

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[More information](#)

Introduction

In the years to come, Bloomsbury tried to live out the ideas spawned in their early days. Their commitment to the primacy of personal relations, for instance, had consequences both juridical and political. The group's shared commitment to pacifism led Duncan Grant, Lytton Strachey, and others to apply for conscientious objector status during World War I; they were assigned to do farm work in fulfillment of their national service obligation. Looking back on this time in 1951, with not one but two world wars behind him, Forster famously observed, "If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country," a more than controversial opinion in the wake of World War II.¹¹ Conscientious objection was not, however, Bloomsbury's only response to armed conflict: Keynes, through his work with the Treasury, was involved in international affairs and the peace process. Desmond MacCarthy and Forster both served with the Red Cross, the former in France and the latter in Alexandria. And Leonard Woolf is well known for his foundational work with the League of Nations, a forerunner to the United Nations.

Though Bloomsbury has sometimes been characterized as disconnected from the chaotic political era they lived through, such was not universally the case. Keynes and Leonard Woolf worked together to forward a shared internationalist agenda in the *Nation* and *Athenaeum* and extended these positions through Leonard Woolf's work for the Labour Party (in 1922 he ran an unsuccessful campaign as Labour's candidate for the Combined University constituency). Keynes's Treasury positions and institutional vehicles including the League of Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and Bretton Woods combined to give him an important sphere of political influence. Of a different political order was Virginia Woolf's advocacy for women's causes, presented in public lectures and in tracts such as *Three Guineas* (1938). Money and connections, it must be noted, shielded Bloomsbury from many wartime depredations, though they did not prevent Virginia and Leonard from having their London home bombed to bits, and they did not prevent Julian Bell, son of Vanessa and Clive, from losing his life as a volunteer ambulance driver in the Spanish Civil War.

Members of the Bloomsbury Group were active on many professional fronts, but they are perhaps most frequently associated with aesthetics and the birth of modern art. Roger Fry began his career as a curator of Italian Renaissance art. Then, in 1906, he encountered the work of Cézanne and it changed his life. He altered his direction to focus on modernism. It was four years later that he, together with Clive Bell and Desmond MacCarthy, organized the groundbreaking 1910 Post-Impressionist Exhibition, held in London at the Grafton Galleries; in 1912, the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition followed. These two shows had a profound and lasting impact

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

ROSNER

on British art and, more broadly, on the collective sense of what art was and what it could do. It was the first time that many people had encountered the work of Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso, Gauguin, and Van Gogh; the visitors who thronged the show were horrified, exhilarated, and challenged. In the contemporary era when the avant garde's capacity to shock has been largely assimilated by the global art marketplace, it can be difficult to recapture this moment in which the new art was truly seen as a threat to public order. An unsigned review in the *Daily Express* warned the prospective visitor to the Grafton Galleries show, "There are more shocks to the square yard at the exhibition of the Post-Impressionists of France, at the Grafton Galleries, than at any previous picture show in England. It is paint run mad."¹²

Bloomsbury painters Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell were galvanized by the new European art, their practice transformed. Their paintings exploded off the canvas and onto walls, furniture, objects. As Vanessa recalls the moment, "Here was a sudden pointing to a possible path, a sudden liberation and encouragement to feel for oneself, which were absolutely overwhelming."¹³ For Bloomsbury, the move into decoration and design was directly suggested by the new aesthetic. As Roger Fry explained to a reporter, "One of the essences of post-impressionism is the return to a more architectural and structural basis of design, and therefore peculiarly adapted to the applied arts."¹⁴ The "Post-Impressionist Room," a product of the Omega Workshops on display at the Ideal Home Exhibition in 1913, was a total aesthetic environment with six-foot-high abstract nudes festooning the walls. At Charleston, Bell and Grant's Sussex home, over time almost every surface in every room came to be decorated with bright and colorful patterns, underlining the idea that to be a painter was less a profession than a way of life. The painter James McNeill Whistler had created exhibitions that were conceived as total artistic environments, but Bell and Grant's work was more exuberant, spontaneous, electric.

Bloomsbury's experiments in literature were less controversial, but equally radical. Lytton Strachey overturned the storied traditions of Victorian biography that focused exclusively on the public achievements of its subjects. Instead, Strachey tried to understand his subjects' psychology and motivations. He was not shy to criticize his Victorian predecessors in life writing, declaring in the preface to *Eminent Victorians*, "Those two fat volumes, with which it is our custom to commemorate the dead – who does not know them, with their ill-digested masses of material, their slipshod style, their tone of tedious panegyric, their lamentable lack of selection, of detachment, of design?"¹⁵ By contrast, Strachey produced biographical essays that were concise and opinionated, like a quick drink of whiskey after the heavy meal of the Victorian triple-decker.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

The roles of Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster in shaping British literary modernism are well known. Woolf, more formally experimental than Forster, wrote novels that have over time become recognized as major innovations in the genre, embodying early twentieth century quotidian experience and what Woolf termed “the dark places of psychology.”¹⁶ Each of her novels has a distinct architecture and agenda: In *Orlando* (1928), a young British nobleman born during Queen Elizabeth I’s reign lives more than four hundred years and transforms into a woman and a writer along the way. *To the Lighthouse*, a family saga written in the previous year, offers a portrait of the Ramsay family and their guests, before the First World War, and then after. *The Voyage Out* (1915), Woolf’s first novel, is the story of a young woman coming of age during a trip to South America. All these works are knit together by Woolf’s inimitable style: composed and lyrical, yet at the same time challenging and unsettling. Her prose has the beauty of poetry, but it can also bite deep. As for Forster, his novels offer sensitive and differentiated portraits of modern individuals under pressure from signal social and political forces from empire to urbanization to feminism. Forster, like any great storyteller, wears his learning lightly, but to read *A Passage to India* or *A Room with a View* is to be shot into the slipstream of modernity, struggling with class conflict, illicit desire, and unexpected intrusions of grace.

The lifelong personal affinities within the Bloomsbury Group produced unusual and fruitful lines of influence. Contemporary universities seek to promote interdisciplinarity, having seen what originality and creativity can come of cross-disciplinary collaboration. Bloomsbury seems always to have known that painters, economists, writers, politicians, and critics could learn from each other, and this volume attests to the influences that circulated within the group. Keynes, for example, shifted away from the rational actor hypothesis in economics – a decision attributable to his exposure to the literature of psychology through James Strachey’s translations of Freud, published by Virginia and Leonard Woolf’s Hogarth Press. Keynes’s focus on the demand side of markets and on the unpredictability and diversity of buyers can be traced both to this influence and to the complex portraits of individual motivation that emerged from Bloomsbury life writing.¹⁷ If an economist could be influenced by a new approach to biography, a fiction writer could be influenced by a new style of painting and the theory of art that inspired it. Virginia Woolf’s depictions of the act of viewing, her representations of the diverse and variable impressions produced by any given observer, are demonstrably in dialogue with Roger Fry’s characterizations of Post-Impressionist painting. As she writes in her position paper “Modern Fiction,” “The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

ROSNER

with the sharpness of steel.”¹⁸ In an era when technologies of perception, from the motion picture camera to the x-ray machine proliferated Woolf and Fry both became interested in the ability of the artist to provide other kinds of insights into how the mind receives and records sense data. It is the task of the modern writer, Woolf asserted, to record these impressions, to give the reader nothing more or less than a portrait of “an ordinary mind on an ordinary day.”¹⁹ This same focus on the subjective, the ephemeral, and the partial underlies Post-Impressionist painting.

There was a good deal of casual collaboration within the Bloomsbury Group, as came naturally to creative people who worked and lived alongside one another, but there were also more formal joint ventures that produced noteworthy results: the Hogarth Press, founded by the Woolfs; the Omega Workshops; the *Nation and Athenaeum* collaboration of Keynes and Leonard Woolf; the Post-Impressionist exhibitions. Many of these associations involved individuals who had nothing to do with Bloomsbury. None of these was publicized under the banner of Bloomsbury, confirming the informal nature of the group’s filiation. But all were activated by a common desire to participate in every aspect of whatever form of endeavor they undertook and to advance a distinctive vision (political or aesthetic). How many writers set their own type, as Virginia Woolf did? How many art critics taught themselves pottery and other crafts, like Roger Fry? How many upper class socialists set out to educate working men directly, as Leonard Woolf did? (Figure 1.2)

Critics have long debated the question of whether the Bloomsbury Group shared a common ethos or merely a personal fraternity. Many have taken the latter view. Here is Desmond MacCarthy, a central figure in Bloomsbury studies: “In fact, ‘Bloomsbury’ is neither a movement, nor a push, but only a group of old friends; whose affection and respect for each other has stood the test of nearly thirty years and whose intellectual candour makes their company agreeable to each other.”²⁰ This is also the viewpoint presumed by Bloomsbury’s own constituents, many of whom seemed to be almost goaded into disavowal of the group by the combination of critical hazing and gossipy reminiscence that constituted the early reception history. Clive Bell asserts, “Bloomsbury was neither a chapel nor a clique but merely a collection of individuals each with his or her own views and likings.”²¹ Yet a fairly unified set of values seems to have been jointly held by group members, among them the primacy of personal relations, an aesthetic focus on what Fry dubbed “significant form,” pacifism and anticolonialism, and a commitment to social reform in matters of sexuality and gender. A common set of locations also helped maintain the group’s ties, ranging from the squares of London’s Bloomsbury district to the fields of Sussex, to the Cassis