

English Modernists - Seminar 1

The painting and decorative art of the Bloomsbury Group

Beth Taylor - 14 October 2010

WAG

The context

The modern era was a period of immense historical, social, cultural, political and philosophical shifts in Europe and America. In 1900 Queen Victoria reigned over the largest empire ever seen, Britain led the world in industrial development and was the leading trading nation and banker to the world. By the end of World War 1, the old imperial, territorial and political hegemonies had collapsed. The Russian Revolution ushered in not just common ownership of the means of production but a reform of culture to bring about permanent revolution. The Great Depression which followed the Wall Street Crash had a major impact throughout Europe and America, and was a feature in the growth of fascism in Europe in the 1930s – a decade marked by the Spanish Civil War and the outbreak of the Second World War.

Timeline 1900 - 1939

1900	Freud <u>The Interpretation of Dreams</u> Cezanne late <i>Grandes Baigneuses</i> paintings
1901	Marconi's transatlantic radio transmission
1902	Lenin <u>What is to be done?</u>
1903	Wright brothers first powered flight Emmeline Pankhurst founds Women's Social and Political Union
1904	Matisse <i>Luxe, calme et volupte</i>
1905	Revolution in Russia Einstein <i>Special Theory of Relativity</i> Fauve group launched Die Brücke group founded in Dresden
1906	Picasso <i>Les Femmes d'Alger</i>
1909	Bleriot's cross channel flight
1910	Fry's Post-Impressionist Exhibition in London
1911	Mexican Revolution First Cubist collages Emergence of Kandinsky's abstract art
1912	Second post impressionist exhibition in London
1913	USA – Duchamp shows ready-mades Omega workshop opens in London
1914	First World war
1915	78 rpm records Dada cabaret in Munich Mondrian developing his abstract painting Malevich exhibits <i>Black Square</i>

- 1916** Dublin – Easter rising
Use of tanks at Battle of Cambrai
- 1917** Russian Revolution
- 1918** End of World War 1
Women over 30 given vote in UK
German Revolution
- 1909** Irish War of Independence
Weimar Republic in Germany
Alcock and Brown's transatlantic flight
Omega workshop closes
- 1910** Nazi party founded in Munich
Women awarded degrees at Oxford (but not at Cambridge until 1948)
- 1922** Mussolini's march on Rome
BBC founded
- 1923** Social crisis and inflation in Germany
- 1924** Death of Lenin; Stalin becomes General Secretary of Communist Party
UK's first Labour government
- 1926** General Strike in UK
Hitler *Mein Kampf*
- 1928** USSR First Five Year plan
Discovery of penicillin
Vote given to women in UK on same terms as men
- 1929** Wall Street crash
- 1930** Gandhi begins civil disobedience campaign in India
Development of synthetic materials
- 1931** Empire State Building in New York
Sydney Harbour Bridge
- 1932** First TV with cathode ray tube
- 1933** Reichstag fire; Nazis take power
Roosevelt elected President in USA
- 1934** China – the long march
Development of 'socialist realist' art in USSR
- 1935** Italy invades Abyssinia
USA Federal Art Project
- 1936** Spanish Civil war – bombing of Guernica
- 1937** Japan invades Manchuria
- 1938** Moscow trials
Victory of Franco in Spain
Ballpoint pen patented
- 1939** German invasion of Poland – outbreak of Second World War
Fission of uranium atom by Bohr
First electronic digital computer

The Bloomsbury Group

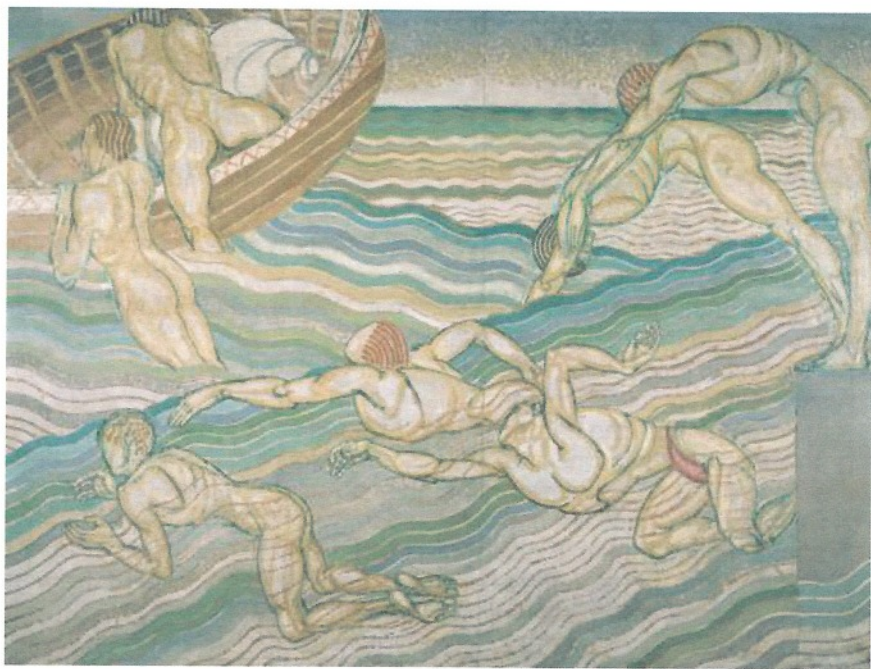
A group of artists, writers and critics who had an important influence on cultural and intellectual life in Britain during the early decades of the twentieth century. They included Virginia Woolf, E.M. Forster, John Maynard Keynes, Lytton Strachey, as well as the art critics, Clive Bell and Roger Fry and the artists, Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant. Following the death of their father, Adrian, Thoby, Virginia and Vanessa Stephen made their home at 46 Gordon Square where Thursday evenings of discussion were joined by Thoby's Cambridge friends. They were linked by their attitudes and interests, an intellectual elite in revolt against the artistic, social and sexual restrictions of the Victorian era.

Clive Bell (1881-1964) studied at Cambridge, writer and critic whose formalist theory of art as set out in his book Art, published 1914, has become one of the classics of twentieth century aesthetics. Married Vanessa Stephen 1907, father of Julian b.1908, Quentin 1910. Lived principally in London but spent much time at Charleston, the Sussex home of his wife and Duncan Grant. The marriage became one in name only by the outbreak of the First World War but Grant continued to provide financial support to Vanessa and allowed her daughter by Grant, Angelica, to be brought up as his child. He himself had a number of extra marital relationships.

Vanessa Bell (1879-1961) studied drawing with Sir Arthur Cope and then at the Royal Academy Schools. Her artistic practice was restricted by her responsibilities in running the family home after the death of her mother in 1895. Married Clive Bell 1907, two sons. Marriage became one in name only and she had a relationship with Roger Fry. Thereafter formed lifelong partnership with Duncan Grant by whom she had a daughter. Produced fairly conventional art until 1910 when she was influenced by post-impressionism. Closely involved in early stages of the Omega workshops and had a continued interest in decorative schemes, notably at her home Charleston.



Duncan Grant (1885-1978) early childhood spent in India and Burma, ed. St. Paul's School. Studied painting at Westminster School of Art, the Slade and in Paris and Italy. Lover of Maynard Keynes and Adrian Stephen, lived in a ménage à trois with his lover David Garnett and Vanessa Bell when they moved to Charleston, Sussex in 1916. Influenced by the French modernism of Matisse and Picasso, he made some of the most advanced work in Britain although his work became more traditional after WW1. A gifted designer of textiles, pottery, stage, scenery and costumes.



Roger Fry (1866-1934) ed. Cambridge, Natural Sciences degree but more interested in art. Studied the Italian masters as well as training as a painter in Paris and London. More successful as a scholar of Italian art than as a painter. Writer and successful lecturer on art. Curator of Paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, 1906. Left after row with chair of the trustees in 1910. In the same year, his wife was committed to an asylum for the mentally ill. Curator of Manet and the Post Impressionists 1910 and The second post Impressionist exhibition 1911-12. Founded Omega workshop 1913-1919, published Vision and Design 1920. Slade Professor at Cambridge at the time of his death.

Some key concepts

Modernism

This is a contentious term, covering various strands in early twentieth century artistic practice and criticism.

- Rejection of the past academic tradition in Western art for new forms, more appropriate to the modern condition
- An interest in innovation
- An interest in 'primitive' art forms
- A move away from the narrative to an exploration of the art medium itself, that is an interest in the forms, the shapes and colours of the work of art and its aesthetic effect on the viewer rather than its subject matter
- A view that art should not depict the modern world but find "a pictorial language appropriate to the sensibilities of the modern outlook" (Roger Fry)
- A shift from the focus on the relationship between the artist and the work to one on the relationship between the work and the spectator

Form

- The overall form taken by the work, its physical nature
- The elements of line, colour, texture, space and scale
- In traditional academic painting the feeling of volume – that is the illusion of solidity on a flat surface

Significant Form

This term was used by Clive Bell to describe the characteristics of the contemporary movement in art, now simplified by "the liberating of what is significant form from what is not". Significant form meant "lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, [which] stir our aesthetic emotions....it is the business of an artist so as to combine and arrange them that they shall move us....the profoundest of emotions are provoked by significant combinations of significant forms".

Roger Fry called this **expressive form** and thought that skill should not be used to produce illusion but should be completely subordinated to the direct expression of feeling in response to the "aesthetic impulse".

Primitivism

In the context of the early twentieth century the term applied in to the art of Africa south of the Sahara , Oceanic, pre Columbian and North American Indian art, that is the art of so-called 'primitive' peoples, notably those of colonized by the west. It was also applied to the art of children and of the mentally ill.

This art was thought to have a vitality not present in the art of the 'civilized' world.

Roger Fry, in his essay on 'Negro Sculpture' in Vision and Design,

"Western sculptural depictions of the figure are distorted to reflect forms which mark the nobility of man.....the negro....manages to give his forms their disconcerting vitality, the suggestion they make of being not mere echoes of actual figures, but of possessing an inner life of their own".

Abstraction

Abstract art applies to art in which the artist has started with some visible object and extracted elements from it to arrive at a simplified or schematised form. The term is also applied to art using forms that have no source in external reality. The emergence of abstract art is a major distinguishing feature of western art in the twentieth century.

Collage

Derives from French terms *papiers colle* or *decoupage* used to describe techniques of pasting paper cut outs onto various surfaces. First used as an artists' technique in twentieth century, notably by Picasso.

