

# BOHEMIAN *rhapsody*

A brief glimpse into the artistic and aesthetic world of the Bloomsbury group and their home, Charleston House.

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COURTESY OF THE CHARLESTON TRUST



*“Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.”*

**Virginia Woolf**

#### A PRIVILEGED CHILDHOOD

The Bloomsbury Group remains to this day the synonym for a pioneering way of thinking, and the private club where young avant-garde artists, writers and philosophers were given the freedom of expression so blatantly denied to them by the buttoned-up protocol of the day.

At the epicentre of this volcano of revolutionaries and free thinkers were two sisters, Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf.

Born in an upper-middle class Victorian family, to an esteemed writer as a father, and a mother with aristocratic roots, Vanessa's and Virginia's life was one of privilege.

When widowers Leslie Stephen and Julia Duckworth married, they already had four children between them. Vanessa, Virginia and their brothers Thoby and Adrian were the new offspring of the union.

A cramped house with eight growing children did not offer much scope for freedom and individuality, two essential rights that both sisters craved. The Stephens were an intellectual atheist family and believed in education for their daughters as well as their sons. Both sisters had access to the extensive family library and were taught mathematics, philosophy and science.

Nevertheless, it would prove hard to break the mould of the rigid patriarchal rules of the time, and a thirst for knowledge was considered unfeminine. The Stephen boys would be expected to carve out an eminent career for themselves, and the girls would be shown how to run a home.

Following the premature death of their mother and step sister Stella, the girls were left in the hands of a grieving and domineering father who could not always comprehend their needs, and the forward attentions of their incestuous half-brother George.

#### SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

*"Broken asunder, yet made in the same mould, could it be that each completed what was dormant in the other?"*

**Virginia Woolf**

Vanessa, the more pragmatic of the two sisters was the quiet and sensible mother figure. An introvert with a dreamy and melancholic expression, who often felt that she was dull and intellectually inadequate.

Her silent and secretive manners made her appear aloof, and hid her passionate, bohemian nature. In times of difficulty, she would seek solace in her painting or anything visually stimulating.

Virginia, the younger sister, was bright and articulate, but immature and in need of praise and attention. Fiercely jealous and possessive, she lived in constant fear of losing the affections of her beloved sister, frequently resorting to emotional blackmail to keep her close.

Virginia possessed an extraordinary wit and was a delightful conversationalist, consistently surrounded by a willing audience, but had suffered bouts of severe depression from an early age. She was terrified of mirrors and loathed her physical appearance. Despite their countless differences, they were bound by a profound degree of affection and solidarity.

#### NEW FOUND FREEDOM

*"Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind."*

**Virginia Woolf**

After their father's death, the Stephens decided to leave the gloominess of their Kensington family home and relocate to the less sophisticated district of Bloomsbury. At 46 Gordon Square, Vanessa was finally granted the freedom to unleash her artistic and creative potential by re-decorating her new home.

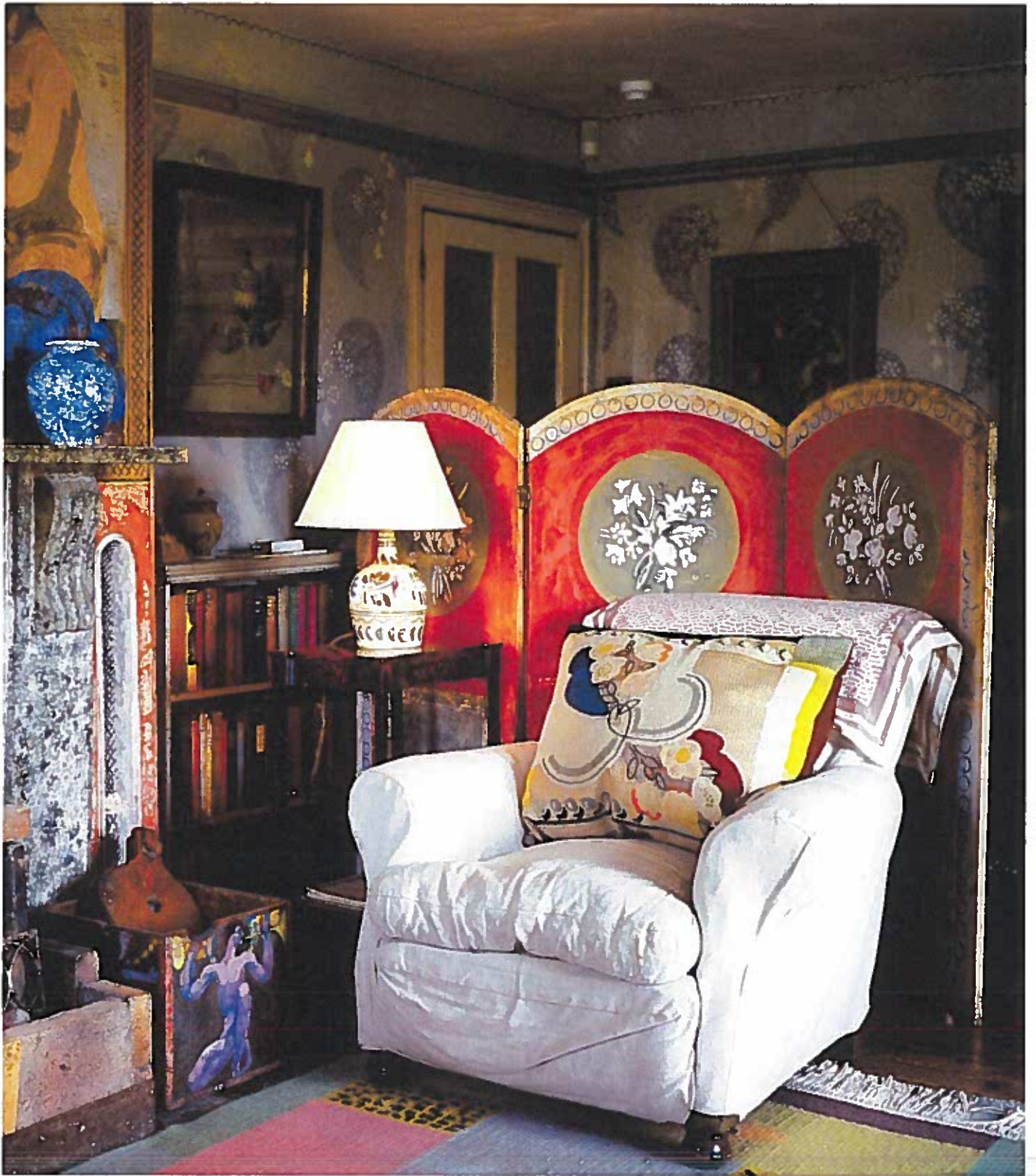
Thoby's Cambridge group of friends from Trinity College would often be invited to Vanessa's Friday Club soirees where they would discuss art, sex and politics without inhibition.


The newly formed Bloomsbury Group, largely inspired by the philosophy of G.E. Moore's "Principia Ethica", comprised the four Stephen siblings, art critic Clive Bell, biographer Lytton Strachey, political writer Leonard Woolf, economist Maynard Keynes, civil servant Saxon Sidney-Turner, editors Desmond and Molly MacCarthy, artist Duncan Grant and novelist E.M. Forster.

Any prudishness in terms of dress, conversation or opinion was quickly abandoned and the sisters were able to join in the debate. Several topics that would have been deemed preposterous or almost profane in more formal surroundings, were now liberally discussed.

Unlike most Bloomsbury members who were openly homosexual, Clive Bell's nonchalant flamboyance, his heterosexuality and elegant deportment made him an excellent candidate for Vanessa.

Vanessa liked Clive, but was reluctant to give up her independence. When her brother Thoby died, she finally capitulated and agreed to marry Bell. The initial marital bliss transformed her. She bloomed both sexually and artistically and her





confidence soared. In Virginia's eyes Vanessa had become a pagan fertility goddess. An ideal, that she would never achieve herself.

#### PROMISQUITY AND RIVALRY

*"You have the children, the fame  
by rights belongs to me."*

Virginia Woolf

Clive was quick to abandon the marital bed. His frequent escapades with other woman and the platonic love story with Virginia while acting as her literary critic and confidant enraged Vanessa, who was dedicating her time to the upbringing of her two sons Julian and Quentin.

The intellectual intimacy between her sister and husband, and Virginia's frequent remarks about writing being a superior art to painting was debilitating.

Vanessa vented her frustration by co-founding the Omega artistic movement with art critic and painter Roger Fry, with whom she embarked on a long affair. The Omega provided the platform for the post-impressionist artist movement and an opportunity for Vanessa to escape from her maternal duties and craft a serious artistic career for herself. Over time she became drawn to her friend and collaborator Duncan Grant. Duncan's attractive features, his vitality and unique vision for modern design greatly appealed to Vanessa.

Duncan however was homosexual. He had had a brief relationship with her brother Adrian and was in constant search for new lovers. While Vanessa craved stability, Duncan would only provide occasional sex and a flighty emotional attachment. The union produced a daughter, Angelica, who was deceived into believing her real father was Clive Bell.

During her early thirties even Virginia relinquished her spinsterhood and married activist Leonard Woolf. Virginia's fear of men, her changing moods and frigidity prevented her

from embracing a fulfilling relationship. Her books were a surrogate for the children she would never have, and a means to experience at least part of the family utopia that her elder sister so unequivocally embodied.

In later years, Virginia's alleged lesbian tendencies made her seek the company of other female intellectuals. Her relationship with aristocrat and socialite Vita Sackville-West was masterfully related in her epic, Orlando.

#### COUNTRY LIVING

*"I'm sure, if you get Charleston, you'll  
end up buying it for ever. If you live there,  
you could make it absolutely divine."*

Virginia Woolf

During their childhood years, the only escape from the stifling oppressiveness of London, were the holidays at Talland House in St Ives.

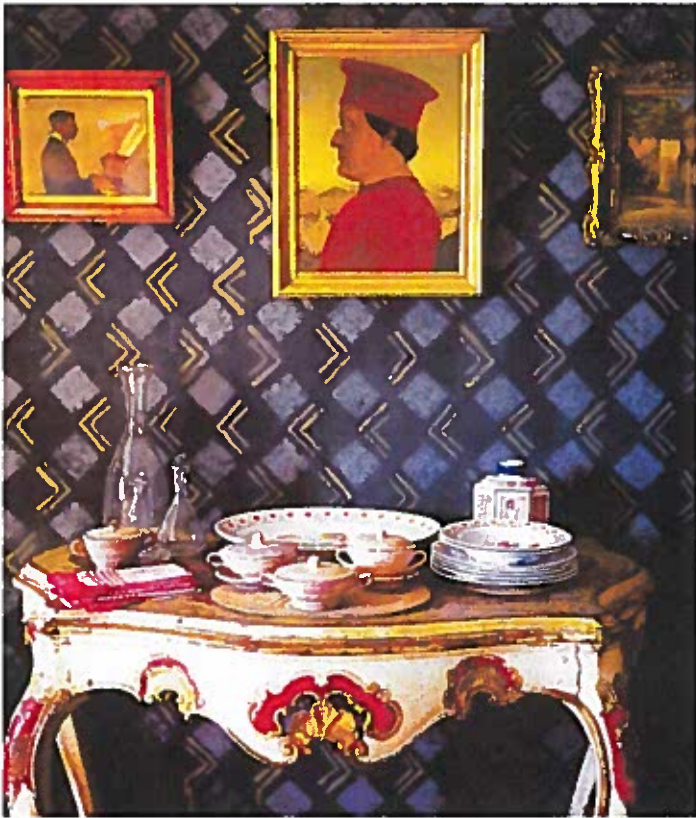
The refreshing shabbiness of the interiors at Talland, the white washed houses and bright blues and yellows of the Cornish seaside were reflected in Virginia's novel "To the Lighthouse". Vanessa's more visual perception of their holiday house would inspire the interior design at her future East Sussex home - Charleston.

Leonard and Virginia acquired a printing press and were successfully running their publishing company, Hogarth Press, from their Sussex Country homes.

Virginia's persuasive powers combined with the need to have her sister close by meant that in 1916 Vanessa, Duncan and his lover Bunny took a lease from the Firls estate, and moved to Charleston.

According to Vanessa, Charleston was: "absolutely perfect, most lovely, very solid and simple with flat walls, a wonderful tiled roof and a beautiful pond with a willow at one side". She was in her element again and embraced the new decoration project with gusto.

Despite its beauty, the house was in a state




of disrepair and had no heating, electricity or running water. Through the joint efforts and creative talents of its new occupants the house soon became habitable and its blank canvas feel was enlivened by the cheerfulness of the Omega pottery, fabrics and furniture.

The opulent visual sensations and bohemian ambiance of this relatively humble country home appealed to its visitors. The circular table in the dining room hosted many an eminent artist and writer of the day. According to guests, the hospitality was excellent and informal, the food simple but appetising, and the drink flowed in abundance. The dark blue stencilled wallpaper was created free hand by Duncan, Quentin and Angelica and served as contrasting background for the Bloomsbury paintings and ceramics.

The Garden Room was where Lytton Strachey read extracts from his work *"Eminent Victorians"* causing Duncan Grant to fall asleep, and the room where Angelica was told that Duncan was her real father.

The Library was originally Vanessa's bedroom, but it





later became part of Clive Bell's living area. Its sombre appearance is brightened by Duncan's post-impressionist figures on the door panels and white bookcase.

The studio was the heart of the house, with its brightly coloured caryatids painted by Duncan, and Vanessa's tiles behind the stove. This large and welcoming gathering place was ideal for the former Bloomsbury set guests, where they would converse, listen to music and discuss new artistic trends. The large walnut cabinet still hosts a collection of Omega ceramics, and a bust of Virginia overlooks the room.

The Garden was the children's playing area, but also served as a source of food during the years of rationing.

#### THE WAR YEARS

*"To see London all blasted,  
raked my heart."* Virginia Woolf

The period between the two World Wars brought desolation, destruction and loss.

Lytton Strachey died of cancer, shortly followed by his long-term companion and painter Dora Carrington who shot herself two months after his death. Vanessa's former lover and friend Roger Fry died unexpectedly after a fall at his London home. Only a few years later, Vanessa's eldest son Julian enrolled as a volunteer in the Spanish Civil War and was killed while driving an ambulance.

During the Blitz, the Bloomsbury district was badly hit and the sisters' London homes and possessions destroyed. Both Duncan Grant and Bunny Garnet were conscientious objectors and did not join the army, but helped with the war effort by farming the land.

Due to rationing, very little fuel was available, which made transport an occasional luxury. The need for basic provisions meant that the family had to economise and bake their own bread, grow fruit and vegetables, and keep rabbits, a pig, chickens and bees. By this time Virginia had become an

internationally acclaimed author, and alongside her writing she continued to work as a printer, binder and parcel dispatcher for Hogarth Press.

#### BEYOND THE WAVES

*"Death is the enemy. Against you I  
will fling myself unvanquished and  
unyielding. O Death!"*

(the last line of Virginia Woolf's  
"The Waves" and her epitaph)

In 1941, Virginia was once again suffering from severe depression and anorexia. The ever-present self-doubt in her abilities as a writer and the feeling of being inadequate as a wife were a constant source of torment.

But it was the loss of close family and friends and the destruction of their London homes that would eventually lead to her tragic demise.

At the end of March 1941, Virginia walked to the bank of the River Ouse, filled her pockets with stones and drowned herself. Her body was found three weeks later. After Virginia's death, Leonard continued his work for the Hogarth Press. Quentin Bell forged a career in education and worked as a crafter and potter. Angelica married Bunny Garnett, more than twenty years her senior and the former lover of her father Duncan Grant. Duncan continued his artistic career into old age.

Vanessa's pragmatic approach to life, that so often helped her to sail through adversity, made her continue to paint until her death in 1961.

Charleston, her evolving work of art for 45 years, has become her ultimate masterpiece.

Through obsession, sorrow, rivalry and love, the literary and artistic legacy of the two Stephen sisters has survived and remains strong to this day.

For further information about the Bloomsbury group and Charleston House visit [charleston.org.uk](http://charleston.org.uk)





## NOSTALGIANEER PROFILE

# KATJA DELL

### THE SWEET INDULGENCE OF THE TIME TRAVELLER

When I was 11 mum and I visited the Queen's Gallery at Buckingham Palace. I remember grinning broadly at the brightly-coloured paintings and feeling completely enveloped by the majestic gilded frames and the opulence of the place.

One of the walls displayed a collection of 17th Century miniatures by Samuel Cooper, and I fell head over heels in love with the portrait of the young Duke of Monmouth. Of the many historical crushes I experienced over the past decades (from Oscar Wilde to Prince Albert etc.), it was this one that made me want to hire a time machine.

Time travel is a soft and comforting blanket. And a journey back to lace, frills and petticoats is a sweet and harmless indulgence that transports me from a dull and sterile world to a time of beauty and chivalry.

In this modern desert of mindless consumerism, corporate culture and monochrome living, we are starting to develop a thirst for the values and traditions of times gone by.

The Pretty Nostalgic philosophy embodies these ideals perfectly and it has become an oasis for kindred spirits that are still able to appreciate the smell of a freshly published book or enjoy the visual feast of the Harrods Food Halls at Christmas, without resorting to their online catalogue.

### MY CREATIVE JOURNEY SO FAR

I always enjoyed doodles, colours, patterns and textures. My initial love was photography, but I later re-trained in illustration and was awarded a Master of Arts in Sequential Design/Illustration from the University of Brighton in 2011, specialising in Picture Books for Children.

At present I am a part-time illustratör and I had the opportunity to exhibit at several local galleries, open houses and art shows. For the past few years I have been one of the resident artists at the Naughty Pirates Gallery on the Brighton seafront and was recently invited to join the Cobbled Lane Art collective in Barnham, West Sussex.



The ideas for my artwork come from my passion for burlesque theatre, period dramas, antiques, tattoo art, vampires, decadent puddings and anything remotely Victorian.

The dark humour of Tim Burton and the pop-surrealist universe of Mark Ryden have always provided an invaluable font of inspiration.

On cold winter evenings the marvellously crafted and chilling "Tales of Terror" by Chris Priestley never fail to boost my concentration during painting. My dream is to expand and print my collection of images on toys, stationary and kitchenware, publish a picture book or write a historical biography

Most of my weekends are spent sipping tea with a Baron, scouring vintage markets and up-cycling second-hand furniture. Over the years I have accumulated an insane amount of books and knick-knackery and my interest will always be aroused by quirky objects that possess warmth and personality and a Pretty Nostalgic feel.

