

## Dictionary of National Biography – Entry:

### Bell [*née* Stephen], Vanessa

(1879–1961)

- Anne Olivier Bell
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- [Previous version](#)



**Vanessa Bell (1879–1961)**

by Duncan Grant, c. 1918

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**Bell [*née* Stephen], Vanessa** (1879–1961), painter, was born at 22 Hyde Park Gate, London, on 30 May 1879, the eldest in the family of two sons and two daughters of [Sir Leslie Stephen \(1832–1904\)](#), the first editor of the *Dictionary*

of *National Biography*, and his second wife, Julia Prinsep Jackson (1846–1895) [see [Stephen, Julia Prinsep](#)], widow of Herbert Duckworth. Leslie Stephen also had a daughter from his previous marriage, and Julia had two sons and a daughter from her marriage to Herbert Duckworth. From an early age Vanessa and her sister [Virginia Woolf \(1882–1941\)](#) determined the one to be a painter, the other a writer. They were educated at home; in 1896 Vanessa began to attend Arthur Cope's School of Art in South Kensington, London, and in 1901 she gained admission to the Royal Academy Schools, where she was much influenced by the teaching of John Singer Sargent. By the time she left in 1904 it is clear that she had moved far from the artistic dominion of her mother's family, which had been on familiar terms with the Pre-Raphaelites and which venerated the work of George Frederic Watts.

The domestic and social pressures which fell upon Vanessa Stephen as the eldest daughter of an eminent widower and the protégée of her more socially ambitious relatives were eased on the death of her father in 1904, and later that year she moved with her sister and two brothers from Kensington to Bloomsbury, a respectable but unfashionable district, where they set out to follow their own pursuits without undue regard to the conventionalities and constrictions of formal London society. Increasingly they found themselves in the company of the Cambridge contemporaries of the elder brother, Thoby Stephen. In 1905 Vanessa founded the Friday Club in order to provide a meeting-place for artists and persons interested in art, and this led to a closer friendship with the art critic [\(Arthur\) Clive Heward Bell \(1881–1964\)](#), the most visually educated and aware of Thoby's friends, and, following Thoby's untimely death in 1906, to their marriage on 7 February 1907. The Bells' home at 46 Gordon Square was thereafter one of the focal points of what has come to be referred to as the Bloomsbury circle, which included such friends as Lytton Strachey, Desmond MacCarthy, and, somewhat later, Maynard Keynes, Leonard Woolf (who married Virginia in 1912), Roger Fry, and [Duncan Grant \(1885–1978\)](#).

Although Vanessa Bell shared her husband's interest in the developments of contemporary French art, her own painting remained essentially sober and tonal, having much in it of Whistler and of the New English Art Club, with which she sometimes exhibited. However, early in 1910 a close and lasting friendship between the Bells and Roger Fry began; this had a profound influence, both personally and intellectually—and particularly upon Vanessa, with whom Fry was to fall deeply and enduringly in love. In November of that year, with their enthusiastic co-operation, Fry promoted the notorious exhibition 'Manet and the post-impressionists', which was to give the British public virtually its first opportunity to see the work of such painters as Cézanne, Gauguin, and Van Gogh. In its successor of 1912, the 'Second post-impressionist exhibition', four of Vanessa Bell's paintings were hung, with examples by other British and Russian artists, among works by Picasso, Matisse, Derain, and other representatives of the school of Paris. Liberated from the English tradition of direct representation by the intoxicating example of the French and the stimulating theorizing

of Bell and Fry, Vanessa's work grew increasingly bold, with a simplification of design and form and a free and joyous use of colour, a progression which was to lead her, before 1916, to paint some of the first totally abstract pictures in Britain. But underlying the audacious innovations of this period, her passion for order, serenity, and harmony was always evident.

In 1913 Roger Fry founded the Omega workshops to enable artists fired by post-impressionism to apply their gifts to the decorative arts. Although it failed in 1919, Vanessa Bell was from the outset a wholehearted collaborator in this venture, from which she derived, besides a number of commissions, a permanent interest in the use of ornament and decoration. Textiles, embroideries, ceramics, painted furniture, and the many book jackets designed for the Hogarth Press are evidence of her remarkable and felicitous talent as a decorator. However, changes of taste and the disasters of war have all but obliterated her larger decorative schemes, which were usually undertaken in conjunction with Duncan Grant. The mural decorations (1940–42) at Berwick church, Sussex, and rooms at nearby Charleston, Firle (which became her country home in 1916 and after her death was preserved by a trust for the public benefit), survive from among the considerable body of work which they carried out together, mainly for private patrons; but she herself seldom lived in a house, studio, or flat without feeling impelled to decorate its walls and furnishings. This partnership with Grant was one of the happiest in the history of art, and from 1913—while remaining always on terms of amity with Clive Bell—they lived virtually as man and wife.

Vanessa Bell had two sons—[Julian Bell \(1908–1937\)](#) and [Quentin Claudian Stephen Bell \(1910–1996\)](#)—with her husband, and a daughter, Angelica Vanessa (1918–2012) [see [Garnett, Angelica](#)], with Duncan Grant. Julian, who lost his life driving an ambulance for the republican forces during the Spanish Civil War, was a poet; Quentin was a painter, potter, teacher, and writer. Angelica, an artist, became the wife of the writer David Garnett and wrote an account of her upbringing, *Deceived with Kindness* (1984).

During the First World War Vanessa Bell, as did most of her circle, held pacifist views; she lived in the country with Duncan Grant and her children, and the difficulties of domestic life in wartime left little time for painting. But she appears during this period to have come to feel that in abstraction she approached a dead end, and that, as she put it, 'Nature was more interesting'. She turned to the form of representational art which she felt best suited her. Her method, which allowed her to explore and to celebrate the solidity and brilliance of the natural world, was not radically changed for the rest of her life. Although she had a considerable gift for portraiture and used her friends and family as subjects when she could prevail upon them to sit, she painted few formal portraits and, from necessity as much as choice, applied herself to still life, landscape, interiors with figures, and, from time to time, interpretations of the work of the Old Masters.

Vanessa Bell contributed regularly to group exhibitions, particularly the London Group, of which she became a member in 1919, the London Artists' Association, and from the 1950s the Royal West of England

Academy. The first exhibition consisting solely of her own work was held at the Independent Gallery in London in 1922, and in the years that followed she had solo shows at the Cooling, Lefevre, Leicester, and Adams galleries. In 1964 a memorial exhibition of her work, organized by the Arts Council, was shown in six English cities. She gave generous encouragement to fellow artists, particularly the young, and was a sponsor of, and taught at, the School of Painting and Drawing (later known as the Euston Road School) when it opened in Fitzroy Street in 1937. From 1949 to 1959 she was an active committee member of the Edwin Austin Abbey memorial trust, which commissioned mural paintings for public buildings.

Between the wars Vanessa Bell lived very privately, mainly in London, devoted to her painting, her family, and her close friends. She travelled in Spain, Germany, and Austria, and made extended stays in Provence, Italy, and Paris. The death of Roger Fry in 1934 was a severe loss to her; but that of her son Julian in 1937 was a shattering blow from which she never fully recovered. The suicide of her sister Virginia Woolf four years later was a further calamity. With the outbreak of the Second World War she again began to live almost wholly in Sussex, with Duncan Grant and Clive Bell, painting industriously to the last. After a brief illness she died at Charleston, Firle, near Lewes, Sussex, on 7 April 1961 and was buried on 12 April, without any form of service, in Firle parish churchyard.

Vanessa Bell was a woman of grave and distinguished beauty, with a low and beautiful speaking voice—characteristics which tended to mask her wit and humour and capacity for laughter. Her affections when given were strong and enduring; she was a powerful centripetal force in the small group of friends whom she thought of as ‘old Bloomsbury’, and among such often difficult and egotistical people she was a conciliator and a peacemaker. As an artist she may be accounted one of the most gifted of her time in Britain, blessed as she was with an instinctive sense of colour and design. She had the intelligence and self-awareness not to be seduced by the pioneering experimentalism of her brilliant post-impressionist period into a sterile extremism; her integrity and sincerity of purpose, and her workmanlike discipline and total lack of affectation led her, during the last four decades of her life, to produce a body of work which affirmed her belief in the simpler pleasures and beauties of the visible world. Her own humility and her unwavering confidence in the superiority of Duncan Grant's genius may have encouraged critics to regard her as his follower, and thus to undervalue her real originality. Their community of interest was indeed close, but in fact the influences were reciprocal.

## Sources

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- private information (1981, 2004)

## Archives

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- Tate Collection, photograph albums and negatives
- U. Sussex, corresp. [copies]
- King's AC Cam., letters to Julian Bell and John Maynard Keynes
- Morgan L., letters to John Maynard Keynes
- NYPL, Berg collection, letters to Virginia Woolf

- Tate Collection, letters to Clive Bell, Julian Bell, R. Fry, Angelica Garnett, Portia Holman
- U. Sussex, corresp. with Leonard Woolf
- V&A NAL, letters to Julian Bell

## Likenesses

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- G. C. Beresford, photograph, 1902, NPG
- D. Grant, oils, 1918, NPG [\[see illus.\]](#)
- M. Gimond, bronze head, 1920–1921, Charleston Trust, Sussex
- M. Gimond, lead cast of bust, 1922–6, NPG
- D. Grant, oils, 1942, Tate collection
- V. Bell, self-portrait, oils, 1958, Charleston Trust, Sussex
- photographs, NPG, Strachey collection

## Wealth at Death

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£19,299 19s. 4d.: probate, 17 July 1961, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*

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## See also

- [Stephen, Sir Leslie \(1832–1904\), author, literary critic, and first editor of the Dictionary of National Biography](#)
- [Stephen \[née Jackson\], Julia Prinsep \(1846–1895\), celebrated beauty and philanthropist](#)
- [Woolf \[née Stephen\], \(Adeline\) Virginia \(1882–1941\), writer and publisher](#)
- [Bell, \(Arthur\) Clive Heward \(1881–1964\), art critic and writer](#)
- [Grant, Duncan James Corrowr \(1885–1978\), painter and decorative artist](#)
- [Bell, Julian Heward \(1908–1937\), poet](#)
- [Bell, Quentin Claudian Stephen \(1910–1996\), art historian and potter](#)
- [Garnett \[née Bell\], Angelica Vanessa \(1918–2012\), painter and writer](#)