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BRITISH ART STUDIES

The *Famous Women* Dinner Service: A Critical Introduction and Catalogue

Look First by Hana Leaper

The *Famous Women* Look First Feature

One of the most exciting and unexpected objects in the 2014 Tate Britain exhibition Kenneth Clark: Looking for Civilization was a prototype plate by Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant for a dinner service commissioned by Clark in 1932. The completed set of 50 plates, which feature portraits of "famous women" throughout history, survived wartime bombing and several moves of house by the Clark family, but for the past 30 years its whereabouts had been unknown to art historians. In spring 2017, prompted by the Vanessa Bell monographic exhibition at Dulwich Picture Gallery, the owner of the dinner service contacted Piano Nobile art gallery. It soon emerged that not only was the set intact, but that the plates themselves, hand-painted on Wedgwood blanks, have been preserved in their original condition.

This Look First feature offers the first opportunity for close scholarly examination of a culturally and visually potent art object. The feature uses photography, archival materials, and film to explore the process of creating the set and its place in the history of art. The present article includes a catalogue with biographical entries for each of the women featured in the set, together with source images and preparatory materials. The article text establishes where this playful, yet ground-breaking work fits within the artists' oeuvres, and within a feminist history of art. Further materials expanding the feature's reach, including a filmed discussion with the artist Judy Chicago, will be released in early 2018.

Famous Women: “the familiar, the friendly even the facetious”

“...it turned out differently to what we had expected”¹

In 1932, Kenneth and Jane Clark ordered “36 large plates, 12 smaller plates, 36 side plates, 12 soup cups & saucers, 1 salad bowl & stand, 2 junket dishes, 6 oval dishes at different sizes, 2 sauce boats & stands, 4 pepper pots, 4 salt pots, 4 mustard pots, 2 sauce tureens & stands & handles, and 3 Liverpool jugs” from the artists Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant. The set that the Clarks received two years later challenged their expectations, and taste, in numerous ways.² Clark, an influential art historian, museum director, and patron, recorded:

As usual with commissions it turned out differently to what we had expected. Instead of a gay cascade of decorative art like the best Savona, Duncan and Vanessa conscientiously produced forty-eight plates each of which contained the portrait of a famous woman (Bloomsbury asserting its status as a matriarchy). These are in effect forty-eight unique paintings by Duncan and Vanessa, for which they made innumerable studies, and which will give posterity a good idea of their style in the ‘30s.³

Expecting luxurious fine dining ware, they instead received the *Famous Women* set of fifty portrait plates, a provocative and humorous work of art that challenged both the standard orientation of history and the way in which it is recorded, as well as consolidating a call for social change, beginning in the domestic realm (**Fig. 1**). Despite making a claim for the lasting art historical importance of the set in terms of representing the artists’ work of this period, Clark seemed disconcerted by these results.

The set is one of the foremost works of a then nascent feminist field of art that contests the visual history of “Civilisation” presented by Clark throughout his career.⁴ Often working in craft media, its practitioners continue to draw attention to hidden histories of inequality, including the lack of representations of women and minority groups. Recent examples include Lubaina Himid’s 2007 work *Swallow Hard: The Lancaster Dinner Service*, which uses dinner ware to examine Lancastrian involvement in the slave trade, and Jessica Lynn Whitbread’s performances of *Tea Time: Mapping Informal Networks of Women Living with HIV* (2011–ongoing), which uses a teacup to represent each of the women living with HIV who have participated in the project.

Like many of these works, Bell and Grant’s plates invite empathetic dialogues between subjects. In the case of the *Famous Women*, this has resulted in unexpected and joyful associations. In his autobiography, *Another Part of the Wood* (1974), Clark recounted that his initial inspiration for the

service came from dining with the dealer and collector Joseph Duveen in New York in ostentatious splendour “on a **blue and gold Sèvres service**

[<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/08/arts/international/hermitage-amsterdams-dining-with-the-tsars-examines-heyday-of-russian-royalty.html?mtrref=undefined&gwh=4743A3670652983E4AEB3353DAD1E958&gwt=pay>]

made for the Empress Catherine of Russia”.⁵ The **Catherine the Great** plate thus provides a fascinating point of connection between two paradigms: the artists’ ambitious and dissident work to challenge both the gendering of history—with its boundaries between craft and fine art—and the prevalent culture of formal hospitality; and Clark’s more conventional standpoint, both in terms of his inspiration for owning an artist-designed dinner service and the art historical models he popularized (**Fig. 2**). Including the original owner of Duveen’s Sèvres service in *Famous Women* recognizes her role as a patron of the arts and a powerful female ruler—two legacies which inspired the set.

Further, in a curiously feminist twist, despite Clark’s ambivalence towards the end product, letters between Bell and Jane Clark prove that Jane at least knew a great deal of information about the set during its creation, and seems to have taken charge of managing the project with Bell. A large group of letters between Bell and Jane survive—many more than between the artists and Mr Clark. They indicate a growing closeness between the two women. On 30 January, Bell wrote: “but don’t you think we might use Christian names? It’s so much less business like!”;⁶ and over the coming months they discussed their personal tribulations (“One’s children never leave one long in peace, do they?”),⁷ as well as making many appointments to meet, usually over lunch, tea, or dinner.

Bell described the ideas for the plates in detail to Jane, and in return, seems to have been encouraged in them. In February, early on in the process, Bell wrote:

We have considered the whole question of treatment a great deal & I want to ask your opinion about our present plans. We think there might be some sort of [?indecipherable] idea running through the service to give it character & unity while allowing a good deal of variety also and our idea is to make it an illustration of women in different capacities—famous queens, actresses & so on—this would give me a great deal of choice. We could have classical figures or modern or anything. At the same time there’d be [me/more] general idea & interest to connect all. But please say if you or Mr Clark don’t like the idea.⁸

This prompts a new reading of the set. Marginalized in accounts of Kenneth Clark’s life and his avid collecting, we might claim a place here for Jane as a sensitive and discerning art lover, for whom the unusual concept of a celebration of victorious women in a format that subverts artistic and historical conventions held great appeal.

Radical Hospitality

In the same year as Bell and Grant received the Clarks' commission, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, a contemporary of the Bloomsbury Group and leader of the Futurists, also aimed to revolutionize Italian culture through reinventing the relationship between art and domesticity. *The Futurist Cookbook* (1932) was a manifesto that reimagined dining as an artistic experience. Marinetti introduced the book, which contains recipes that combine ingredients based on aesthetic concerns rather than those of taste, as having the aim of:

changing radically the eating habits of our race, strengthening it, dynamizing it and spiritualizing it with brand-new food combinations in which experiment, intelligence and imagination will economically take the place of quantity, banality, repetition and expense.⁹

In England, the artists and writers associated with the Bloomsbury Group also utilized the dining table as an arena of radical hospitality, and their shared mealtimes were a gateway to the political, social, and spiritual reform of a nation. Like Marinetti, their forays into domestic redesign were riven with humour, and artistry; unlike Marinetti's, they were not intended to reduce calories or conversation to a functional minimum. Domesticity and home life—the culture of the table—were at the heart of the entwined lifestyle and artistic practice that this unconventional family pioneered. Their common passion for dining and conversation, collecting, and home-making transformed the strict Victorian homes and tables they had grown up with into creative, intellectual spaces full of colour and humour, where social norms were daily deconstructed.

In *Another Part of the Wood*, Clark called his dinner service commission “an attempt to revive his [Grant’s] interest in decorative art”.¹⁰ Yet, as Richard Shone has observed, both artists were already in great demand “when they squeezed in this commission to oblige new friends”.¹¹ The many decorative schemes they were individually and jointly involved in during the 1920s and 1930s shared both motifs and underlying values with the *Famous Women* set, underscoring their commitment to socially engaged domestic practice. Their “Music Room”, an “eccentric vision of the English landscape” exhibited at the Lefevre Galleries in 1932, did not prove commercially successful, but became the setting for a lauded cocktail party hosted by Bell and Woolf (**Fig. 3**).¹² In equal parts whimsical, sophisticated, and unconventional, it showcased the Bloomsbury model of an engaging and comfortable social space that encouraged enquiry. The themes of the room celebrated arts and culture, and prompted conversation: the six floral still life panels each represent a different composer and share motifs with the piano, stool, and gramophone. According to Reed, the artists’ liberal use of “cheerful pastiche and quotation” (for example, their images of swags and positioning of mirrors) expressed an “Amusing disdain for the rigors of high modernism”.¹³ The emphasis on pleasure over

formalism clearly positions the artists as advocates of witty heterogeneity rather than overarching narratives, and undermines contemporary standards of taste.

Images of musical instruments, reading and writing materials, cuisine and cultural figures from throughout history and from around the world, together with *trompe l'œil* motifs delivered with a fluid jocularity also occur throughout the privately commissioned rooms the artists designed for friends. Particular examples are those created for John Maynard Keynes at 46 Gordon Square (1918); King's College Cambridge (1920–22); and Leonard and Virginia Woolf at 52 Tavistock Square (1924). They were amenable spaces for hosting meetings that often intertwined professional interests with friendships (key concerns for figures then at the height of their social, political, and intellectual influence) and were designed to reflect their occupants' creative and intellectual values.

Rather than the heroic austerity of high modernism or luxury of Art Nouveau, their rooms pronounced the aspiration, shared by both the artists and their clients, to shape a lifestyle that married pleasurable aesthetics with what Christopher Reed terms "humanism with deep historical roots".¹⁴ The rural home that the artists created together in Charleston, Sussex from 1916 onwards exemplifies this ethos. Unexpected juxtapositions, such as kitchen cupboards decorated in 1950 by Bell with still lifes that look to seventeenth-century Dutch precedents, reveal a privileging of visual delight over functional or hierarchical propriety. Their seemingly irreverent, yet carefully curated juxtapositions of valuable antiques and avant-garde paintings with folk art and pottery from many places and periods show that "good taste", and etiquette were not valued as a reflection of creative capacity or moral propensity. Their respect for the domestic world of everyday pleasures and human relationships meant they invested huge amounts of energy in this realm, seen by few outsiders, and with no commercial value in the art market. The fabric of the home and the approach to hospitality inside it became an enduring artwork, eroding boundaries between high and low art forms, and allowing members of the household to live freely, supplanting gendered roles.

A more public contribution to this reimaging of the domestic order as a space of emancipated humanism and relaxed relationships was made by the mass-produced ranges that the pair designed for the 1934 government-sponsored *Modern Art for the Table*, an exhibition held at Harrods store in London to promote good design in the home. They contributed bone china wares for E Brain & Co (Foley China), alongside Barbara Hepworth, Ben Nicolson, Graham Sutherland, Paul Nash, Albert Rutherston, Ernest Proctor, and Angelica Bell; and earthenware for A J Wilkinson Ltd. Known as the "Bizarre" range, this became synonymous with the name of Wilkinson's artistic director and design leader, Clarice Cliff. Unlike the unique and exclusive high-end commission for Clark, the Clarice Cliff and Foley labels were emblematic of middle-class tastes and budgets, and belonged firmly to the territory of mass-produced collectibles.

By contrast, manufacturing the *Famous Women* service necessitated an involved process that took more than a year to organize and complete. It was facilitated by Billy Winkworth, a ceramics collector and connoisseur, who was a mutual friend of the Clarks and the Charleston artists and made

introductions to Wedgwood. The artists travelled to Stoke-on-Trent as the guests of Josiah Wedgwood V, where they toured the Etruria factory, and spent a day “looking at all the different shapes, glazes & colours in the Wedgwood pottery.”¹⁵ They selected a blank shape called the “concave pattern, that is a plain round plate with a slightly concave edge” for its “very practical” qualities; and a “grey body, which when it has a transparent glaze on it is a lovely cool white very like Delft.”¹⁶ Their choices of a fairly chunky shape, similar to those used for Omega ware, with an iconic finish suggests a self-conscious recourse to the history of fine dining combined with an ever-present spirit of subversion—a marriage of tradition and modernism, craft and high art (Figs 4, 5, and 6).

Promoting their dissident design sensibility as appropriate for both ends of the market demonstrated the artists’ enduring vision of radically transformed and transformational domesticity. From 1913–19, they had been co-directors at the Omega Workshops, a prototype social enterprise artists’ collective, where work went unsigned. Director Roger Fry’s prospectus for the Omega Workshops explained to potential customers and creatives their endeavour to “discover a possible utility for real artistic invention in the things of daily life”, and to use a new aesthetic language conducive to the freedoms and equalities these practitioners were exploring and advocating for in domestic life.¹⁷ Although the idealism ingrained in the foundations of the Omega Workshops was diminished by the war—and Bell later wrote how difficult it was in retrospect to believe they had been so optimistic about the political agency of home decoration on the eve of global, mechanized war—their playful, provocative, reimagining of home life became an enduring tenet of their shared practice and is evident in *Famous Women*.¹⁸

“If you could say what you like about art, sex, or religion, you could also talk freely and very dully about the ordinary doings of daily life.”¹⁹

There are many stories of meal times at Charleston, from the frugal to the fantastical. Food is mentioned frequently in letters, diaries, and memoirs, but the real feast the friends assembled for was primarily of ideas and friendships, and the tastes explored aesthetic.²⁰ Every stage in the developing relationships between this extraordinary group of individuals was marked with such gatherings. Their exploratory Thursday evenings in the social laboratory of Gordon Square formed the basis for lifelong friendships and overturned the conventions of polite hospitality and conversation. In contravention of the prescriptive rules under which they had been raised, where menus were elaborate, rituals entrenched, and men disappeared after dinner, Bell recalled:

I believe there was generally some whiskey to be had, but most of us were content with cocoa and biscuits. In fact, as everyone had had something to

eat and perhaps drink at about eight o'clock, it did not seem to occur to them to want any more at nine or at any time between then and midnight. Then, perhaps, exhausted by conversation, serious or frivolous, they welcomed some nourishment.²¹

When Thursday evenings resumed after Thoby Stephen's death (1906) and Bell's marriage to Clive Bell (1907), they were hosted by Virginia Woolf, now a professional writer growing in confidence. New figures were brought into the fold—including Grant, who had already had sexual relationships with Lytton Strachey and Maynard Keynes, and talk ricocheted between figures from "a fluid and indeterminate matrix of individuals, associations and ideas" including artists, writers, classicists, philosophers, and intellectuals.²² Bell records the energy and freedom, the intellectual exploration, and conversely the silliness, awkwardness, and ordinariness of these evenings:

I wonder what those who imagine a rarefied atmosphere of wit, intelligence, criticism, self-conscious brilliance and never any tolerance of ordinary dullness would have thought of the rather stiff young ladies to whom it did not occur not to talk about the weather; or of Adrian's dog, Hans, who insisted on entertaining the company by blowing out matches; of a great many rather childish doings and discussions. When it is said that we did not hesitate to talk of anything, it must be understood that this was literally true. If you could say what you like about art, sex, or religion, you could also talk freely and very dully about the ordinary doings of daily life. There was very little self-consciousness, I think, in those early gatherings, but life was exciting, terrible and amusing and we had to explore it, thankful that one could so freely.²³

This combination of the brilliant and the banal continued throughout many manifestations of this social circle: the Friday Club, the 1917 Club, the Memoir Club, and the less official visits, dinners, parties, and evenings in shared houses. When, as established professionals, they welcomed T.S. Eliot into their company on his first visit to Charleston with a dinner, Quentin Bell fondly remembered the occasion as "the night of the Great Covey" (a covey is a small flock of partridges) and "perhaps our finest hour". Bell miscalculated the portions and over-ordered the food with the result that:

Eleven birds were brought in, resting on various dishes and platters. There was a good deal of astonishment when this covey made its appearance

and some laughter; our guest of honour the poet was delighted. Eliot was funny, charming and still somehow impressive. It was a wonderful evening.²⁴

The friends' frequent sharing of hospitality led to the genesis of extraordinary ideas and manifested in repeated attention to dining utensils and food in their work. Bell's *Apples: 46 Gordon Square* (1909–10), *Apples* (1916), and *Tea Things* (1920); Grant's *Asheham, Still Life* (1912) and *Still Life with Jug, Knife and Onion* (1920) are all relatively early examples of themes that found purchase throughout each artist's oeuvre. Together with Roger Fry's many depictions of similar subjects, for example, *Still Life with Chocolate Cake* (1912) and *Biscuit Tin and Pots* (1918); and Woolf's many rich and evocative descriptions of food and dining—**Madame de Staél**, is alluded to as confirmation of the rich intellectual discussion taking place during the beef en daube dinner in *To the Lighthouse*—this demonstrates the enduring importance of domesticity and everyday life as an artistic inspiration, and indeed, tool. The few objects that Bell retained from her childhood home were intensely evocative of the connection between family, memory, and mealtimes. They included “blue-and-white willow pattern serving dishes”, which now hang over the kitchen ranges, and the “Dutch walnut glass-fronted cabinet which was one of a pair that once belonged to the novelist WM Thackeray”, which was placed in the studio and filled with “an eclectic range of ceramics” (it is now at Charleston and displays the four *Famous Women* test plates that remained there) (**Fig. 7**).²⁵

The artists' recognition of the importance of get-togethers with their network of friends and the support, inspiration, conviviality, and joy they afforded, let them imagine a network of Famous Women—overlooked by history—dining together, sharing the experiences of their remarkable lives. Their ideas for populating the plates can be traced from a lively variety of sources. It is important to acknowledge that neither artist staked claims on being scholars and neither were historians with vast stores of esoteric knowledge about historical women. Their inspiration came from the personal interests they had cultivated over time and discussions amongst friends, women and men, several of whom promoted the work of women through their own businesses or practice.

The Famous Women and Feminist Fancies of the Bloomsbury “Matriarchy”

Why did Bell and Grant invite this particular set of historical women to dine, so to speak, with Bloomsbury, and with the Clarks? A kindred zest for life and disregard for convention link many of the Famous Women to one another, and to the artists and their friends. Many were pioneers, either in

a particular professional field or leadership role; but many had lived inspirational lives, carving out opportunities for themselves where precedents were rare.

Hints in Bell's numerous letters to the Clarks on the subject of the plates indicate that a cross-section of well-wishers had known of the Famous Women's genesis, and perhaps had helped them to identify suitable figures; also that, at times, it was a struggle to do so. On 9 June (probably in 1933, though the letter does not record the year), Bell wrote to ask her now good friend, Jane Clark:

We wanted to ask if you'd mind if we had a tea-party to show them [the plates] to a few people before you have them, as so many people have been curious to see them.²⁶

The proposed tea party had the additional purpose of "attracting more orders too!".²⁷ Bell was adept at organizing events that combined friendship and patronage with celebration and discussion, as at the Music Room cocktail party.

An undated and unsigned fragment from the same collection of unpublished letters outlines some of the difficulties the artists faced with manufacturing the plates and deciding on women to include:

There are still 7 plates to be done. Two (Virginia Woolf and Ellen Terry) were failures & will be done again. Three actresses are wanted to make up the dozen & we propose to do Mrs Jordans, Pavlova & Greta Garbo. Two beauties are wanted & we propose Lady Hamilton and 1933. Would any others be preferred?²⁸

The forty-eight portraits eventually create an impressive depth and breadth of field—geographically and historically. Diana Wilkins, who worked with preparatory sketches in the Angelica Garnett Gift archive at Charleston and has contributed to the catalogue in Section 2 of this "Look First" feature, has analysed that while 40 per cent of the women are British, just over another 40 per cent of the women are of European, Scandinavian, and Russian in origin. As far as we can tell, two are African, one Japanese, two North American, one from Asia Minor, and two from the Arabian Peninsula. This transhistorical sorority encompasses women from the realms of ancient history to the present moment—contemporary women like **Miss 1933** (Marian Bergeron, the winner of the Miss America beauty pageant of 1933), **Virginia Woolf**, and **Greta Garbo**, to several from Before the Common Era, like **Helen of Troy** and **Sappho**.

This range demonstrates an extraordinary scope of reference, indicating the magnitude of the research that lay behind the service. Each portrait appears to have had an existing basis. Some are well known and have numerous manifestations; others are more mysterious, and we were unable to find a source for **Murasaki**. Several show striking similarities to famous portraits from Western art,

and were, in all likelihood, consciously based on these works—for example, Piero di Cosimo's **Simonetta Vespucci** (ca. 1480), Peter Lely's **Nell Gwynn** (ca. 1675), Louise Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun's **Marie Antoinette dite "à la Rose"** (1783), and Thomas Gainsborough's **Mrs Siddons** (1785) (Figs. 8, 9, 10, 11). The artists also looked to a wide range of media, such as the mosaic of **Empress Theodora** from the Basilica San Vitale, Ravenna; the sculpture of **Sappho** by Pierre-Nicolas Beauvallet (1813); and the engraving of **Pocahontas** by Simon van de Passe (ca. 1616) (Figs. 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17).

Whilst there are a number of surprising omissions from the artists' immediate circle, such as Annie Thackeray Ritchie, Julia Margaret Cameron, Vita Sackville-West, and Elinor Ewbank (Grant's distant relation, childhood companion, and the first woman to gain a First in Chemistry at Oxford), a number had precedents in Bell and Grant's previous work demonstrate an abiding fascination with these figures. The **Queen of Sheba** and **Empress Theodora** appear in Grant's 1912 pointillist painting *The Queen of Sheba* (shown in the *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition* of 1912) and Bell's 1912 *Byzantine Lady*. Test plates featuring La Princesse Mathilda, and Bell's ancestor Mme la Marquise de Caux (Adelina Patti), show that the artists' research extended further than the women who made the final cut (Figs. 18, 19).

The set belongs to the broader context of the quest which Bell shared with her younger sister, Virginia Woolf, to fashion appropriate ways to commemorate women's histories. Many of the authors commemorated in the set were women that Woolf had written essays about, including **Jane Austen**, **Emily Brontë**, **Emily Barrett Browning**, **Dorothy Osborne**, **Sappho**, **Madame de Staël**, **Sarah Churchill**, **Ellen Terry**, and **Christina Rossetti**. Whilst Woolf wrote famous polemics about the absence of women from history and literature, and produced commercially and critically experimental biographies of family, friends, and women she identified as creative forebears in the form of *Orlando*, *Flush*, *Freshwater*, and *Famous Men and Fair Women*, Bell's practice weaves together multiple generations of the women of her own family with canonical and religious imagery.

Bell also wrote several short pieces about their female relatives. In recounting the little she knew of her French great-grandmother, Bell mourned that it “isn’t enough”, and railed: “Why didn’t some of her innumerable descendants scribble something, silly and illiterate perhaps as this, but first-hand and real?” Far from a passing flight of fancy, her longing for intergenerational connection fundamentally affected her creative processes: “My wish to know more about her drives me on.”²⁹ Echoing this keenly felt sense of injustice at being robbed of her female ancestry, in her enquiry “Women and Fiction” of 1929 Woolf noted:

very little is known about women. The history of England is the history of the male line, not the female. Of our fathers we know always some fact, some distinction. They were soldiers or they were sailors; they filled that office or they made that law. But of our mothers, our grandmothers, our great-grandmothers, what remains?³⁰

Yet the sisters were encouraged in their artistic pursuits by their particular—and it must be noted, exceptional—family history. Their great aunt, Julia Margaret Cameron, is now recognized as one of the most important practitioners in photographic history, and their elder half-sister, Stella Duckworth, had been a keen and encouraging photographer. Cameron's practice provided, both literally and figuratively, a “lens” through which her great nieces were able to view their family, past and present. It also informed their own work, providing them with inspiration, a touchstone to affirm their identities as female artists, and a model for experimental and creative means of recording likenesses. Although Cameron does not have a dedicated plate in the set, her artistic influence is visible through the **Ellen Terry** portrait which was based on her 1864 photograph of the actress—an appropriate homage to her role in shaping visual culture from behind, not in front of the camera (Figs. **20, 21**).

The artists' emphasis on uncovering forgotten women and finding new modes for women's and non-heteronormative histories can be located as a forerunner of feminist art projects of the 1960s: yet it is equally important to acknowledge its roots in the networks of practitioners that the artists belonged to.

“the lives of the obscure—in those almost unlit corridors of history where the figures of generations of women are so dimly, so fitfully perceived”

The artists subdivided the set into four sections: Beauties, Dancers and Actresses, Queens, and Women of Letters. The title “Beauties” is a clue to the historical antecedents of this section. Peter Lely’s series of portraits known as the “Windsor Beauties”, and Sir Godfrey Kneller’s “Hampton Court Beauties” depict aristocratic young women of the Stewart Court of “the merry monarch’ Charles II”.³¹ Information from the Royal collection notes that whilst some held official court positions, others held less official posts as “noted courtesans”.³² The first series of eleven works were “apparently commissioned or at least assembled by Anne Hyde, Duchess of York, probably around 1662–5”; the second were painted for Queen Mary II and “described by Defoe . . . as ‘principal Ladies attending upon her Majesty, or . . . [ladies] frequently in her Retinue’.”³³

It is indicative of the subversive tenor of Bell and Grant’s selection that none of these official Court Beauties, whose portraits were crafted for the pleasure of the indulgent courts of the late seventeenth century, appear in the *Famous Women* set. Instead, they included figures like low-born actress and royal mistress Nell Gwynn, who is a member of the “Dancers and Actresses” section. Charles II lasciviously kept his private portrait of Gwynn “displayed behind a painting of a landscape. He enjoyed swinging back the panel to reveal her to his friends, so that they could all enjoy looking together.”³⁴ Yet despite receiving no titles and far less money than her aristocratic rivals, Gwynn’s name is better known to history than the more refined, discrete, and clothed women of the “Beauties”

series. In these seventeenth-century portraits, beauty signalled virtue, chastity and obedience, and conversely, sexual desirability. Bell and Grant's portraits subvert these qualifications of feminine appeal, venerating ambition, achievement, and autonomy—sexual as well as intellectual. Their “Beauties” do not form a passive category, but an inspirational history of women who gained celebrity status from their involvement in intellectual, political, artistic, and social elites—often from outsider positions. Some, like artist **Elizabeth Siddal**, had talents that went sadly unrecognized in the twentieth century. Others like **Helen of Troy** and **Pocahontas** are romanticized as the heroines of love stories that omit the bloody and brutal racial and colonial conflicts that characterized their lives. Many protested, or overcame sexist constraints by challenging expected behaviours.

Their women have been selected for their talent, power, and occasionally sheer bloody-mindedness, whilst the gentle grace or connections to royalty that were Mary II's criteria for commissioning the “Hampton Court Beauties” have little role to play. Gwynn, like numerous of her fellow Famous Women straddles sections, defying simple categorization. Whilst cataloguing the women, sections shifted: **Mrs Langtry** moved between “Beauties” and “Actresses and Dancers”; **Rachel** from “Actresses and Dancers” to “Beauties”; **Mrs Kemble** from “Actresses and Dancers” to “Women of Letters”. Most had complex personal lives as interesting to feminist art history as the public roles that brought them fame. Many vigorously crafted identities and statuses at odds with the mores of their historical epochs. Some were professionals; lots were lesbian, bisexual, or had unconventional sexual relationships; not a few had numerous titles, or used pseudonyms. With few exceptions, the lives of a majority of these women reflect the new sexual politics at the heart of the Bloomsbury understanding of humanism.

By making household utensils into a provocative medium of discussion and debate, and invoking the traditionally feminine space of the dining table to—paraphrasing Clark—assert Bloomsbury's status as a matriarchy, Bell and Grant created an artistic and discursive platform for sexual politics and women's histories. They created this feat in a work commissioned by an extremely influential, and well-connected collector, curator, and critic, in the knowledge that it would be documented within the annals of twentieth-century history and biography, and possibly publically displayed. They devised an innovative and outré project that, despite its idiosyncrasy in terms of form and subject, is no mere novelty item.

The service is a systematic and sustained gambit that contributed to an early movement towards recording women's achievements alongside other projects the artists would have known about. As previously mentioned, these include Virginia Woolf's writings, from which they selected many of the women of letters. It encompassed Francis Birrell's editorship of the “Representative Women” series, for which Vita Sackville-West wrote *Aphra Behn: The Incomparable Astrea* in 1927. The “Representative Women” series contained several figures that overlapped with the set, suggesting that it was used as a source, including **Sarah Churchill: Duchess of Marlborough** (Bonamy Dobree, 1927), **Elizabeth B Browning** (Irene Cooper Willis), **Rachel** (James Agate, 1928).

Another source for the plates may have been the “Pears Palace of Beauty” at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924. Actresses were hired to personify ten famous historical women in a series of rooms designed to reflect the appropriate epoch and souvenir postcards were created to commemorate the pageant. Seven of the Pear’s Beauties also received *Famous Women* plates. These were **Helen of Troy, Cleopatra, Beatrice, Mary Queen of Scots, Nell Gwynn, Mrs Siddons, and Miss America 1924** (updated to Miss America 1933 for the plates).

Edith Sitwell’s *English Women* (1942), a collection of mini-biographies accompanied by images was published a decade later with numerous overlapping figures including **Ellen Terry, Queen Elizabeth I, Virginia Woolf, and Christina Rossetti**. Published during the Second World War, this series seems to auger the growing acknowledgement of and appetite for women’s histories.

The dearth of painters in the *Famous Women* set is slightly disappointing, given the profession of its makers. However, the fortunes of the dictionary of women artists that art historian Daphne Haldin began to compile in the 1960s gives us a sense of how difficult it was to find published materials relating to women painters. The archive of her research was deposited with the Paul Mellon Centre library in the 1970s, and contains a whole file of material detailing rejections of the proposed dictionary by publishers. Centre archivist Frankie Drummond Charig records that: “Apart from a memorable visit to the Centre by Germaine Greer, who viewed the material whilst researching her book *The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and their Work*, the collection has only been consulted by a couple of researchers.”³⁵

The recovery of the *Famous Women* set makes clear its principal place in a feminist artistic tradition that continues to accrue in the twenty-first century—a community of pioneering women artists and feminist collaborators that echoes the lineage between the Famous Women on the plates. Working together in collaboration without signing the plates, Bell and Grant rejected the usual claims to authorship and instead embraced the creative dynamic of a partnership of equals. Collective work, frequently engaging domestic imagery and “low art” materials and techniques, became a cornerstone of much feminist practice.

Though the *Famous Women* set remained largely hidden from view in Clark’s collection, tantalizing hints of its existence emerged from time to time: an article in *The Sketch* in 1934, four test plates at Charleston, two preparatory sketches at the Ashmolean and one collected by the V&A, as well as the portrait roundels that occasionally appear for sale. It is impossible to ascertain, and ultimately unproductive to speculate whether other artists, critics, and writers knew of their earlier efforts. However, comparative analysis of Bell and Grant’s set with the numerous projects that also combine collaboration and conversation to celebrate radical hospitality and women’s histories promises to offer rewarding outcomes and lead to new avenues for research. To begin this process, we have invited Judy Chicago, creator of ***The Dinner Party***

[https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/home/] , and members of the Feminist Art Collective, whose recent work ***China Vagina*** [<https://www.vaginachina.org/>]

responds to Chicago's work, to film a conversation about the *Famous Women* set and their own projects together, which *British Art Studies* will publish in early 2018 (Figs. 13, 22, 23), (Figs. 11, 24, 25), (Figs. 26, 27, 28), (Figs. 29, 30, 31).

We hope that the *Famous Women* set will go on to ignite many more conversations about the characters emblazoned on the plates, and the role of this set and its creators in altering the paradigms of art history, from unquestionably accepting traditional narratives to honouring “the familiar, the friendly even the facetious”.³⁶

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This feature has developed as an intrinsically collaborative venture and it is has been my great pleasure to work closely with very many talented individuals and supportive institutions.

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Downloads

 **Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant: Famous Women catalogue** [62 MB pdf file](#)

[\[/media/_file/articles/famous-women-revised.pdf\]](#)

About the author

Dr Hana Leaper was the Paul Mellon Centre Fellow at the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art for three years between 2014–17. In 2014 she was amongst the first scholars to work on the Angelica Garnett Gift at Charleston. She was subsequently commissioned to contribute catalogue essays for the *Vanessa Bell* exhibition at Dulwich Picture Gallery in 2017 ('Between London and Paris'), and for the *Virginia Woolf: an exhibition inspired by her writings* touring exhibition beginning at Tate St Ives in February 2018 ('From Inheritance to Legacy: Virginia Woolf's place

within networks of women creatives'). Beginning in 2018 she will take up the role of John Moores Painting Prize Senior Lecturer and Development Manager, an embedded post based at Liverpool John Moores University.

Footnotes

Kenneth Clark, *Another Part of the Wood: A Self-Portrait* (London: Book Club Associates, 1974), 248.

1

Vanessa Bell, *Order Book*, manuscript, unpublished. PDF copy courtesy of Piano Nobile gallery.

2

Kenneth Clark, *Another Part of the Wood*, 248.

3

It is telling about Clark's relationship to feminist art history, or rather feminist art history's evaluation of Clark's mode of scholarship, that Griselda Pollock records: "the arch-enemy, or rather the first object of critical analysis in the Women's Art History Collective . . . was a book by Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art.*" Griselda Pollock, *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum: Time, Space and the Archive* (London: Routledge, 2007), 21.

4

Kenneth Clark, *Another Part of the Wood*, 245–46.

5

Vanessa Bell to Mrs Clark, 30 January [1933?], sent on paper headed "Charleton, Firle, Lewes, Sussex", collection of Yale.

6

Vanessa Bell to Jane Clark, July 1926 [1933?], sent on paper headed "Charleton, Firle, Lewes", collection of Yale.

7

Vanessa Bell to Jane Clark, 21 September [1932?], sent on paper headed "Charleton, Firle, Lewes", collection of Yale.

8

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *The Futurist Cookbook*, trans. Suzanne Bell, ed. Lesley Chamberlain (London: Penguin Books, 2014), 11.

9

Kenneth Clark, *Another Part of the Wood, A Self-Portrait* (London: Book Club Associates, 1974), 248.

10

Richard Shone, *Bloomsbury Portraits* (London: Phaidon Press, 2005), 231.

11

Christopher Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture and Domesticity* (London: Yale University Press, 2004), 272.

12

Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 271.

13

Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 230.

14

Vanessa Bell to Mrs Clark, 3 June [1933?], sent on paper headed “8 Fitzroy Square”, collection of Yale.

15

Vanessa Bell to Mrs Clark, 3 June [1933?].

16

Roger Fry, ‘Prospectus for the Omega Workshops’, in *A Roger Fry Reader*, ed. Christopher Reed (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 198–200 (199).

17

See Vanessa Bell, “Notes on Bloomsbury”, in *Sketches in Pen and Ink: A Bloomsbury Notebook*, ed. Lia Giachero (London: Pimlico, 1998), 95–114 (111).

18

Vanessa Bell, “Notes on Bloomsbury”, in *Sketches in Pen and Ink*, 105.

19

See Jans Ondaatje Rolls, *The Bloomsbury Cookbook: Recipes for Life, Love and Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014) for 384 pages of recipes, anecdotes, images, and quotes connected to the centrality of dining within this friendship group.

20

Vanessa Bell, *Sketches in Pen and Ink*, 100.

21

Grace Brockington, *Above the Battlefield: Modernism and the Peace Movement in Britain, 1900–1918* (London: Yale University Press, for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2010), 35.

22

Vanessa Bell, *Sketches in Pen and Ink*, 104–105.

23

Quentin Bell, “The Dining Room”, in *Charleston: A Bloomsbury House and Garden* (London: Frances Lincoln, 1997), 40.

24

Bell, *Charleston: A Bloomsbury House and Garden*, 42 and 77.

25

Vanessa Bell to Jane Clark, 9 June [1933?], sent on paper headed “8 Fitzroy Square”, collection of Yale.

26

Vanessa Bell to Jane Clark, 9 June [1933?].

27

Undated and unsigned fragment pertaining to the Famous Women dinner service. Vanessa Bell or Duncan Grant to the Clarks. Sent on paper headed “8 Fitzroy Square”, collection of Yale.

28

Vanessa Bell, *Sketches in Pen and Ink: A Bloomsbury Notebook*, ed. Lia Giachero (London: Pimlico, 1998), 49.

29

Virginia Woolf, “Women and Fiction” first published in *The Forum*, 1929 and reprinted in the collection *Granite and Rainbow*, 1958, in *Virginia Woolf, Women and Writing*, ed. Michele Barrett (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 44.

30

Maev Kennedy, “Hampton Court Exhibition Reveals Damned Beauties of Stuart Era”, *The Guardian*, 7 March 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2012/mar/07/hampton-court-portraits-stuart-women>

[https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2012/mar/07/hampton-court-portraits-stuart-women].

31

Sir Peter Lely, *Frances Stuart, Duchess of Richmond*. Royal Collection Trust, <https://www.royalcollection.org.uk/collection/404514/frances-stuart-duchess-of-richmond-1648-1702> [<https://www.royalcollection.org.uk/collection/404514/frances-stuart-duchess-of-richmond-1648-1702>].

32

Sir Godfrey Kneller, *Diana De Vere, Duchess of St. Albans*, Royal Collection Trust,
<https://www.royalcollection.org.uk/collection/404722/diana-de-vere-duchess-of-st-albans-d-1742> [<https://www.royalcollection.org.uk/collection/404722/diana-de-vere-duchess-of-st-albans-d-1742>].

33

Lucy Worsley, “Foreword”, *Beauty Sex and Power: A Story of Debauchery and Decadent Art at the Late Stewart Court 1660–1714*, Brett Doman, David Souden, and Olivia Fryman (London: Scala for Historic Royal Palaces, 2012), 7.

34

Frankie Drummond Charig, “Daphne Haldin’s Archive and the ‘Dictionary of Women Artists’”, *Still Invisible*, ed. Robyne Erica Calvert and Patricia de Montford, doi:[10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-02/still-invisible/p93](https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-02/still-invisible/p93) [<https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-02/still-invisible/p93>].

35

Letter from W W Winkworth to Vanessa Bell, 3 March 1932: KCC, quoted in Frances Spalding, *Duncan Grant* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), 321–22.

36

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