

DESIGN & DECORATING

PILGRIMAGE

Art in Full Bloomsbury

A design fan journeys to the country house of the 20th-century London creatives

By LAUREN JOSEPH

WHEN I was in university in New York, my art history professors would occasionally touch on the clubhouses of artist groups. I'd perk up at whatever European cottage flitted across the projection screen, imagining an extended version of an artsy summer camp. But one got me truly jazzed: Charleston, the zany, craft-filled, maximalist farmhouse of the Bloomsbury Group's Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, sited in the soft

Bell and Grant filled every inch of the house with paintings, some applied directly on the walls. The duo's own landscapes, portraits and forays into abstract art hang among works by contemporaries. And when not creating canvases, they brushed decorative painting onto nearly every other surface, from dressers to window trim.

Despite my collegiate fascination, it wasn't until I moved to London a year ago that I set out to visit the house. It has been run as a private museum since Grant's death in 1978 and now stages contemporary exhibitions alongside tours of the home's interiors.

The shifting style of English homes helped fuel my renewed interest in Charleston's décor. West Londoners were rejecting sleek minimalism to crowd odd bobs next to oil paintings and drape their furniture with Suzanis and vintage saris. The fineness of traditional English design was being filed down in favor of a pared-back version of the abundant craftiness I remembered from those slides of Charleston.

I'd chosen a very English day to visit, cold and drizzly, unlovable to anyone who isn't wellie-clad. I hurried through rain into the vine-covered 15th-century stone farmhouse and, ducking into a side door, stepped first into the kitchen.

A clunky, white Aga stove

warmed the room while my eyes affixed on the light fixtures. They look like ceramic colanders hung with beaded necklaces from a street fair, each messily hand-painted in the folkish, primitive style of the pottery, handmade by Duncan Grant, throughout the home. On the mantel rest four blue-and-white porcelain transferware platters, remnants of a previous London life, buttoned-up bedfellows to those wacky lights. Somehow, the pairing looks confidently funky—even joined by a splattered teapot by Vanessa Bell's son, Quentin Bell.

I stepped into the dining room next. There, a hefty, round table reigns, painted by Vanessa Bell in looping concentric patterns. A vaguely art deco motif repeats on the wall, block-printed by Duncan Grant and Quentin Bell in 1939, the year after Adolf Hitler began his march across Europe. In his book "Charleston: A Bloomsbury House and

Garden," Quentin Bell wrote that he believed the pattern had a "sedative effect" on Grant. Letting my eyes linger on the geometric but painterly zigs smoothed out my nerves as well, a bit jangled after the early-morning scramble down to East Sussex. Later, I asked Manhattan interior designer Sean Scherer how this busyness could be so soothing. "Your eye likes to see repetition," he explained. "It helps to create a sense of calm even though there's a bit going on."

Another key component to Charleston's enduring appeal: its artful mix of the tattered and the polished. Fussy designs, like a gleaming marquetry table Vanessa Bell received as a wedding gift, live with threadbare rugs and worn armchairs. Walking room to room made me want to swath the prim sofa in my London rental with my collections of mud cloths and fraying French linens.

Ceramicist Sophie Wilson, who creates her Grant-like collection, 1690, in a crumbly English home not unlike Charleston, cites the closely knit relationships between Bloomsbury members, and the way those relationships affected the home, as part of its allure. To her, Charleston suggests that "who and what we choose to surround ourselves with is our most creative endeavor."



SINGING BACKGROUND Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant colored in the walls around their paintings to complement their work.



Above: In the dining room, a portrait of writer Lytton Strachey by Grant. Below: The stone farmhouse.






The artists decorated nearly every surface.


hills of East Sussex, England, so unlike the big-sky country of California where I grew up.


Bell and Grant, both painters and interior designers, were core members of the progressive group of artists, writers and intellectuals who originally congregated in London's Bloomsbury neighborhood in the early 20th century. The duo took up residence at Charleston during World War I, nudged on by Bell's younger sister and fellow Bloomsburian, author Virginia Woolf.

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