A Seat at the Bloomsbury Group's Dinner Table

The Charleston Trust preserves an iconic farmhouse in southern England—and, as important, it looks to continue the kinds of discussions that took place there between great artists and thinkers. Brunswick speaks with its Executive Director and CEO.

The beauty of Britain's South Downs has inspired authors from Rudyard Kipling to Lord Tennyson, Jane Austen to William Blake. Virginia Woolf wrote of them: "Too much for one pair of eyes, enough to float a whole population in happiness, if only they would look."

In 1916, the artist Duncan Grant moved from Suffolk to a farmhouse in the South Downs with Woolf's sister, Vanessa Bell. The pair were not only fellow artists but also members of the Bloomsbury Group, a collection of English polymaths and painters, artists and academics so named because they had lived, studied, and socialized together in Bloomsbury, London. In addition to Grant and Bell, Bloomsbury's core members included Woolf and the novelist E.M. Forster, the economist John Maynard Keynes, and the influential art critics Clive Bell and Roger Fry.

The group's members have been the subject of countless biographies, and their lives and loves have furnished the plots for novels, movies, and TV shows. Their enduring relevance stems partly from the towering quality of their creative output, and partly from their personal lives, where they displayed "attitudes toward love and marriage … as unconventional and as ahead of their time as their ideas about modern painting, literature and design," according to the novelist Francine Prose.

At a time when homosexuality was criminalized in Great Britain, for instance, many of Bloomsbury's members had lovers or partners of the same sex. They also rejected the early 20th Century's rigid mores toward monogamy, family, and sexual identity. Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell had a child together while Bell was married and Grant's lover, David "Bunny" Garnett, was living at the farmhouse in the South Downs, known as Charleston.

That house became not only a site for Bloomsbury gatherings but also a work of art in its own right. "Grant and Bell were artists, so they immediately started work whitewashing the house and preparing it as a blank canvas," says Nathaniel Hepburn, Executive Director and CEO of the Charleston Trust. "And over the next 60 years, they—along with members of the family, and the Bloomsbury Group—added, developed, changed, and transformed the interiors and the gardens with their art."

The charity that Hepburn leads preserves that house so it can be shared with the public—*The New York Times* Style Magazine ranked the studio in Charleston sixth on its list of "25 Rooms that Influence the Way We Design."

The Charleston Trust also continues to share the spirit of the Bloomsbury Group through a range of programs, from art exhibitions to book festivals. "It was very important that Charleston didn't become a mausoleum for dead artists and thinkers—that instead it was a place that continued the conversations that they had around the dining table," says Hepburn. "You had a poet and an economist and an artist and a critic coming together and thinking about life differently. That informs our programming—that we aren't one single thing. I think Quentin Bell, Vanessa's son, said it beautifully. 'Charleston is not a place, it's a phenomenon.'"

In a recent conversation with Brunswick's Rachel Chang, Hepburn spoke about how the charity narrowly survived COVID, the challenges of preserving art in a damp 16th Century farmhouse, and what makes that house and its heritage still relevant—and special—today.

PHOTOGRAPH: THE CHARLESTON TRUST

A glimpse at the gatherings that were common at Charleston. Pictured from left: Frances Partridge, Quentin and Julian Bell, Duncan Grant, Clive Bell, Beatrice Mayor, Roger Fry and Raymond Mortimer.

The Bloomsbury Group was incredibly progressive for its time—and yet, it was almost exclusively white and middle- or upper-middle class. How do you contextualize that for audiences today? Does that influence how you approach fostering discussions about diversity, equity, and inclusion?

You could add that the Bloomsbury Group was also largely men—at least at the start—who met at Cambridge. You're right, they had the privilege of comparative wealth. Bell and Grant had staff when they moved to Charleston to support the running of the house. So yes, it was a story of privilege that allowed Charleston to be established, but they were still questioning and challenging large areas of society. And now that Charleston is a public space, it welcomes a plurality of voices—artists, writers, thinkers—to tell the story of the Bloomsbury Group and explore its contemporary relevance.

Charleston's queer heritage has always been very important. It was a place of sanctuary for Duncan and for Bunny. It was a place where others imagined a different concept of what a family was. The family was Duncan Grant, Vanessa Bell,

their children—Vanessa and Duncan had a daughter together, although their relationship across the 60 years was not predominantly a sexual one. You know, I think Vanessa was Duncan's only female love affair. And there were other parts of the Bloomsbury Group that experimented with a way of living across different sexual gender divides.

They were very progressive, and that continues to be a strong part of our programming. When we opened our galleries, we did so with an exhibition of the work of Zanele Muholi, the South African photographer and political activist documenting lesbian and trans lives in Cape Town. And we held that exhibition alongside one marking 90 years since Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* was first published, her wonderful fictional biography that tells the story of a poet living across any concept of gender or time. Some people refer to it as the first trans novel.

There's a lot within the social narratives of the Bloomsbury Group that are still hugely relevant. There are people like John Maynard Keynes, who was working in the Treasury and came down to Charleston every weekend. He had a room there for many years. And then, when he met the ballerina Lydia Lopokova, he moved three fields away to a house. Keynes's ideas, like so many of the Bloomsbury Group, continue to have huge significance.

Whether it's Bloomsbury's ties to post-impressionism or the house's beautiful garden, a connection with nature seems to be an important thread that runs through Charleston. That feels particularly important as we try and inspire collective action for the climate crisis. Can art meaningfully help with that?

An important figure within the Bloomsbury Group is Roger Fry, the great art critic and curator. It was Fry who brought the first post-impressionist artists to the UK in the early 20th Century—people like Cézanne, van Gogh, Gauguin. Those exhibitions, by the way, were met with great critical and public disgust. But Fry designed the layout of the garden and Charleston. Angelica Garnett, Bell and Grant's daughter, describes the garden not as a horticulturalists garden, not as a stunning house garden, but as an artist's garden. There's something of that post-impressionist aesthetic that flows out from the house through the garden—it's a special place for many, many people.

We host four book festivals throughout the year—our best-known is the Charleston Festival, England's third oldest. We also host one called the Festival of the Garden, which really came from the importance of nature and the garden at Charleston. It's become one of our more political festivals, examining humanity's relationship with the land. There are conversations around net-zero, sustainability and the climate crisis obviously, but also things like racism in the land, decolonizing the countryside.

I think Charleston has an interesting position to tell the story of the climate crisis. People care deeply around this very fragile house full of art. And we spend considerable time and money and effort conserving and restoring and protecting this house. Yet within a wider picture of the climate crisis, if we don't save the planet, what's the point of trying to protect this one special house within it? There's a kind of emotive connection we're able to make to help bring home the terrifying scale of the problem and its impact on us as individuals.

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You mention that the house is "very fragile."

If you were to build a museum with a world-class collection, you wouldn't put it in a damp, 16th Century farmhouse in rural Sussex. We have constant challenges of insects, rodents, damp, humidity, fluctuating temperatures. I think we are probably the only museum in the world that uses an Aga [an iron cooking range] as part of the environmental controls to protect the collection.

It would of course be a lot easier to hang the precious artwork on a wall in a modern gallery space and place everything behind ropes and barriers. But the charm of Charleston isn't that—it's experiencing the house as closely as possible to how the artists lived in it. We don't have precious objects behind Perspex or in roped-off rooms. We do not have text labels next to the pictures. That presents some fairly unique conservation challenges.

How did COVID affect Charleston?

We're an independent Charitable Trust. We have no core revenue funding. Many arts organizations in the UK have a degree of revenue funding either from the Arts Council England or from the local authority—Charleston has none of them. Ninety percent of its income is generated from visitors attending the site, buying tickets to events or exhibitions or the house, or through the shop and cafe. We had to close the doors on a 10th of March. And we had to cancel Charleston Festival, which is not only our big flagship but also a major fundraiser for us—which meant returning over £250,000 worth of tickets. We were 10 days away from insolvency. We had no alternative but to launch an emergency appeal.

I remember vividly conversations with our PR

advisors who were saying, "you can't launch an emergency appeal at this point." And if you think back to March and April in 2020, it was terrifying. Their point was: "you are a beautifully painted house, but there were people fundraising for the NHS [National Health Service] and for critical workers. This is life and death for many people." But we also were very aware that other cultural organizations were going to experience similar things, although maybe not quite as quickly as we were experiencing them.

Our appeal was that, at the end of this crisis, we would need places like Charleston—cultural organizations, museums, theatres galleries—when we could again come back together and spend time with each other. We were very fortunate that our emergency appeal attracted international press coverage and despite the financial challenges for people out of work and furloughed and families struggling, people understood what we were saying.

Over that year 2,673 people—I remember that number vividly—donated to Charleston. That was everything from significant donations to a very poignant donation of £7. I felt that that was someone who knew they wanted to give more than £5, but £10 was probably more than they could do.

For all the difficulties over the past year, Charleston had some great news—a "lost" treasure trove of Duncan Grant's erotic drawings being gifted to the charity in October 2020. How important has that been?

I remember receiving a phone call from Norman Coates who was trying to support us through our emergency appeal. He was trying to donate £100 through our online donation platform, and the technology wasn't accepting his donation. And I said, "Norman, you have something that would help us an awful lot more than your 100 pounds."

A few months before lockdown, Norman had shown me a collection of 422 of Duncan Grant's erotic drawings that had been given to him by his partner, Mattei Radev. I said to Norman, "if you were you to give those drawings to Charleston or lend them to us, we could fundraise around their conservation, their care, we could deliver exhibitions and programs, and they would be hugely exciting for audiences." I could almost hear him shaking his head over the phone. He'd promised them to a friend.

But I followed up with him over email. My point was, essentially, that Charleston celebrates Grant's life and were Grant alive today, he would not have

Nathaniel Hepburn in the iconic studio at Charleston—a space *The New York Times* Style Magazine ranked sixth on its list of "25 Rooms that Influence the Way We Design."

PHOTOGRAPH: AXEL HESSLENBERG

kept those drawings a secret. It was only because he was living in a time when homosexuality was criminalized that he had to keep these private. In the end, Norman said, "You're right. I don't want to go back in the closet and nor will the drawings."

It was a very generous gift, but also a hugely symbolic one—it was a vote of confidence in the charity's future. It came at a time when we were shifting from "save Charleston" to "reopen Charleston." After months and months of talking about financial difficulties, staring down the risk of insolvency, Norman's generosity really helped us talk with confidence and positivity about the future of Charleston.

One of Charleston's great appeals—its location in the countryside—is also a potential drawback. It's not in London, and not easy for people without a car to get to. How do you help diverse audiences experience the magic of Charleston?

I know that Charleston is very special to different people for different reasons. For some, it is a kind of queer sanctuary. For others, it's the beauty of the garden; for others it's the place's progressive, liberal intellectual history.

However, we know that Charleston hasn't always felt welcoming and inclusive. Our audience research in the past suggested that people felt there were significant physical, but also intellectual and emotional, barriers to accessing Charleston. Part of our work today is to remove those barriers, so that all audiences feel that Charleston has a story to tell them.

The physical barriers, for instance. It is on a farm in the countryside, down what was, before we repaired it, a track that was very jagged and rutted. We need over the next couple of years to deliver a transport plan that opens up the site to audiences—connects into the cycle tracks that have been built in the area, provides low cost, carbon neutral electric buses, things like that.

It's also about us taking our festivals and our exhibitions into communities and into different buildings that are away from the house itself. There's a huge amount of work to be done around those emotional, intellectual barriers. We've articulated Charleston as a cultural space, rather than as a heritage tourism site—a contemporary space for contemporary audiences. We've done work as part of that around our tone of voice, around how we talk. I think you can see that in our social media now.

There's the opportunity to bring a diversity of artists and writers and thinkers. We know that when we get great speakers, they can bring people to Charleston who wouldn't otherwise have felt that it was a place for them. Because when you come to Charleston, you do fall in love with the place.

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You mention falling in love with the place. So many artists, designers, writers have made "pilgrimages" to Charleston and done just that. You've spent more time at the house than pretty much anyone except its once-famous residents, so what's your sense? Is there a creative magic to it? And if so, I'd like to give you the impossible task of trying to put that into words.

There is something very naturally beautiful about the site, the house, the garden, the pond, that drew Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant to it in the first place. This simple house protected under rolling downland.

And when you look at the beauty of the house itself, that they spent 60 years pouring themselves into it, you see there wasn't really any division between their lives and their art. And I think it's that lack of division—or to put it another way, that unity—that continues to inspire creatives.

When we invite designers or photographers or artists here, they always seem to find something different in it. There's a depth to the objects and decorations and paintings and books and textiles. As you alluded to, I've been in that house pretty much every day for the last four years. And yet I'm constantly asking our curators, "Have you moved something? I'm sure I've never seen that before." And it's been there every day. You're endlessly discovering something new.

RACHEL CHANG is a Director based in London.

PHOTOGRAPH: LEWIS RONALD