

# Vanessa Bell Conference Programme

## Friday 24 January 2025

10am

**Exhibition and café open**

11am

**Welcome by Anthony Spira, MK Gallery Director in MK Gallery Sky Room**

11.10am

**Dr Wendy Hitchmough, *Shaping ambition***

This talk explores what it meant to be ambitious and a woman in the first decades of the twentieth century. It will discuss her family background and the Friday Club, which Bell founded in 1905, as a radical initiative, providing women with opportunities on an equal footing with men.

Hitchmough is emeritus senior lecturer at the University of Sussex. Her books include *Vanessa Bell. The Life and Art of a Bloomsbury Radical* (Yale 2025) and *The Bloomsbury Look* (Yale 2020). She was curator at Charleston in East Sussex from 2001-13.

11.30am

**Frances Spalding, *Stripping down and decluttering: the Path to Abstraction***

This talk is about Bell's alertness to the silent and elusive in art; about what is needed or not needed in the building of a picture; and what role abstraction can play.

Spalding is an art historian, biographer and cultural historian, whose books include *John Piper, Myfanwy Piper: Lives in Art* (OUP Oxford, 2009) and *Vanessa Bell* (Tempus, 2006). In 2014, she curated an exhibition on Virginia Woolf for the National Portrait Gallery.

11.50am

**Dr Darren Clarke, *Fatal Prettiness: Vanessa Bell and the Omega Workshops***

In her role of co-director, Bell shaped and influenced the look and style of the Omega. She despised the fatal prettiness that she saw in English design, asking Roger Fry: 'Can't we paint stuffs etc which won't be gay and pretty?' This paper asks: did she succeed?

Clarke is the Head of Collections and Research at Charleston. He has curated several exhibitions including *Post-Impressionist Living: The Omega Workshops* (2019) and *Collecting Modernism: Pablo Picasso to Winifred Nicholson* (2024). He has also contributed to *Queer Bloomsbury* (EUP, 2016) and edited eight editions of the Charleston Press.

12.10pm

**Dr Sophie Pickford, *Vanessa Bell, Bloomsbury, and the Ballet (1928-1933)***

This talk explores Bell's costume and set designs for ballet productions in Cambridge and London from 1928-1933. From her overlooked contributions to 'A Tschouvachian Wedding' at the A.D.C. Theatre to her Camargo Society work and designs for 'Pomona', Bell's work for the ballet casts fresh light on the connections between Bloomsbury and the stage.

Pickford is a Fellow in History of Art at King's College, Cambridge and an Affiliated Lecturer in the Department of History of Art, University of Cambridge, whose current research focuses on the cross-cultural interaction between the Bloomsbury Group and the Ballets Russes in the 1920s and '30s.

12.30pm

**Rob Gifford** will chair the morning's panel discussion with Hitchmough, Spalding, Clarke and Pickford and take questions from the audience.

Gifford is a cultural activist who has lived in Milton Keynes since 1986. He is co-curator of StonyWords, an annual community literary festival in Stony Stratford. He is also chair of Stony Stratford Theatre Society and a trustee of AHA-MK, the charity acting as an advocate for arts and culture across Milton Keynes.

1pm

**Lunch break and exhibition open**

2pm

**Welcome back by Fay Blanchard, MK Gallery Head of Exhibitions**

2.10pm

**Rebecca Birrell, *Vanessa Bell's Still Life: Domesticity, Intimacy and the Everyday***

This talk offers an overview of Bell's still life painting, looking at how she combined an almost diaristic attention to domesticity and everyday life with unexpectedly playful references to many cultural sources, from Jean-Siméon Chardin to Paul Cézanne, raising new questions about the relationship between genre, gender, domesticity and work.

Birrell is a Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellow at University of St Andrews and a Research Affiliate at The Fitzwilliam Museum, where she was Curator of 19th and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Paintings and Drawings. Her award-winning first book, *This Dark Country: Women Artists, Still Life and Intimacy in the Early 20th Century* was published by Bloomsbury in 2021.

2.30pm

**Dr Grace Brockington, *Talking about 'A Conversation' (1913-16)***

When Bell changed the sex of one of the three figures in her painting *A Conversation* (1913-16) from male to female, she radically altered the painting's meaning both in terms of its internal dynamics and its resonance with contemporary debates. This paper explores the implications of that change and the possibilities of interpreting this most enigmatic of works.

Brockington is Associate Professor in the History of Art at the University of Bristol. She is a specialist in modern British art, with particular interests in the connections between art and theatre, internationalism and literature. She has written on Vanessa Bell and the Bloomsbury Group, particularly in relation to the peace movement in the First World War.

2.50pm

**Dr Hana Leaper, *Dining with the Famous Women: A Legacy of Radical Hospitality***

Leaper examines why the Famous Women dinner service was conceived and created. Her paper will explore the women included in the set and consider its reverberations throughout art history.

Leaper is Reader in History of Art and Exhibition Studies and the John Moores Painting Prize Embedded Post Holder at Liverpool John Moores University. She completed her PhD 'Vanessa Bell and the Significance of Form' in 2014 and, in the same year, worked at Charleston with materials from the Angelica Garnett gift in Vanessa Bell's studio.

3.10pm

**Dr Stephanie Taylor** will chair the afternoon's panel discussion with Birrell, Brockington and Leaper and take questions from the audience.

Taylor is Emeritus Professor at the Open University, Milton Keynes, co-author of *Contemporary Identities of Creativity and Creative Work* (Routledge 2016), co-editor of *Gender and Creative Labour* (Wiley-Blackwell 2015) and author of *Narratives of Identity and Place* (2009).

3.40pm

**Break**

4pm

**Megan Hunter, *Days of Light: Taking inspiration from Vanessa Bell and Angelica Garnett in life, art and fiction***

Hunter will read from her forthcoming, Charleston-inspired novel, *Days of Light* (Picador, April 2025) and will be in conversation with Rebecca Birrell.

Hunter is a prizewinning novelist, dramatist and screenwriter. She is the author of three novels: *The End We Start From* (2017), which was adapted into a feature film, *The Harpy* (2020) and *Days of Light* (forthcoming in 2025). In September 2024 her dramatic monologue *Salt of the Earth* premiered at Venice Film Festival.

4.45pm

**Conference ends. The exhibition closes at 5pm.**

*Vanessa Bell: A World of Form and Colour* is organised by MK Gallery in partnership with Charleston. The exhibition is generously supported by the [Jerwood Foundation](#).

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