

The Arts Society Sevenoaks – visit to Firle Place and Charleston, October 2021

The restaurant at Charleston provided us with a very satisfactory lunch, seated around one very large table.

We had an opportunity to view two exhibitions before our guided tour. That of Duncan Grant's work aimed to recreate his first solo exhibition in 1920. The exhibition displayed over 30 of his paintings. <https://www.charleston.org.uk/exhibition/duncan-grant-1920/>

Those of us familiar with Duncan Grant's work suppose that we can readily recognise his style, though it is difficult to distinguish his paintings from those of Vanessa Bell, with whom he closely worked. As one of the first artists to introduce European modernism to this country, we can imagine the considerable impact the original exhibition in London, and others like it, would have had 101 years ago.

We were divided into small groups for the house tour. Some of us had toured the house before, but there is so much to see that one cannot tire of looking through the rooms again. Apart from paintings by Duncan and Vanessa, there is much interest in the work which they collected, and there are many other decorative items and furnishings.



Clive Bell's Study, thought to have been previously used as a schoolroom for Julian and Quentin Bell. Clive lived in London, but spent long periods at Charleston.

It was tempting to spend the time just reading the labels on the picture frames, and finding those of familiar artists: Walter Sickert and Andre Derain in this room.

The Dining Room. The strikingly stencilled walls in this room were executed in the 1940s by Vanessa, Duncan, Quentin and Angelica Garnett (the daughter of Vanessa and Duncan). The large circular table was decorated by Vanessa.

We were intrigued by the ceiling lights in many of the rooms, with their pulley mechanisms for raising and lowering. This ceramic and bead lampshade was made by Quentin Bell.





Upstairs, we began in the Library. Duncan Grant decorated the bookcases when they were in the London home of Clive Bell, who moved many of his books, pictures and furniture from London to Charleston in 1939. Clive's money brought more comfort and convenience to the house, including a new kitchen and upgrading of the heating.

This was Duncan Grant's Bedroom, and remained so for over 50 years. Of all the bedrooms, this seemed the most desirable, with its beautiful view east over the garden pond.

One of the other bedrooms is described as Maynard Keynes's Bedroom. Keynes, an intimate friend of both Duncan and Vanessa, was their most regular guest.



Back downstairs we entered to the Garden Room, which has always been the sitting room of the house. The overmantel decoration is by Duncan Grant. With its French windows opening onto the walled garden and another window looking out to the pond and across the fields, this looked a very pleasant and comfortable room.

It was impossible not to think of the conversations that would have taken place in this room over the years.

Among the house guests at various times were Lytton Strachey, Roger Fry, Virginia and Leonard Woolf, E.M. Forster and T.S. Eliot.

The principal Studio of the house was added in 1925. Though less well arranged than other rooms, it is full of interesting artifacts. Even the gramophone cabinets are decoratively painted (by Angelica and Vanessa).

So concluded our tour. We had an excellent guide. One is always left wanting to return.

Many thanks to Helen Thorne, who chose Firle Place and Charleston for our first outing since the Covid lockdown, and made all the arrangements for our visits. All went smoothly thanks to her efficient organisation.

