Vanessa Bell

FAMOUS WOMEN

Duncan Grant

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Vanessa Bell spent her adult life determined to achieve an alternative way of living, after having grown up in the crowded Stephen family home at Hyde Park Gate in the late Victorian era.¹ It was at 46 Gordon Square, where Bell and her siblings moved to in 1904, that the Bloomsbury group was formed. This band of friends and family made original contributions to painting, literature and economics as well as creating a new kind of domestic life.² Bell, inspired by French Impressionism, became a radical innovator in abstraction, colour and form, working across portraiture, still life and landscape. She exhibited in London as well as in Paris, Zurich and Venice. In addition, together with Duncan Grant and Roger Fry, she was co-director of the Omega Workshop, an artists’ co-operative for the decorative arts. Her most enduring creative partnerships were with her sister Virginia Woolf, and fellow Bloomsbury group member Duncan Grant, with whom she also had a sexual relationship and a daughter, Angelica Garnett. Together, she and Grant worked on multiple interior decoration collaborations and commissions.³ The artists’ inclusion of one another’s portraits in the Famous Woman Dinner Service indicates an enduring mutual interest in portraiture, decoration and each other – and stakes a claim to their seminal role in feminist art history.

Born in Scotland, Grant spent much of his youth in India. Upon returning to
Britain in 1893, he took up painting at the Westminster School of Art. He also
travelled in Continental Europe, where he studied with Jacques-Émile Blanche,
met Matisse and visited Picasso’s studio. Back in London, Grant became a central
figure in the Bloomsbury Group. He was a prolific artist, experimenting in tex-
tiles, interior decoration, ceramics, murals, illustration and theatre design. Taking
inspiration from the Old Masters as well as the modern art he encountered
during his travels in Europe, he enjoyed great success. He represented Britain
at the Venice Biennale in 1926 and 1932, and his paintings have been collected
by museums across the world. He inspired great affection in those whom he
met, as a compassionate, charming, gentle and humorous man. Although he was
actively homosexual, his longest union was with Vanessa Bell, with whom he lived,
loved and worked for nearly half a century, both in London and in Charleston,
their country home in Sussex.

WOMEN OF LETTERS
JANE AUSTEN
1775–1817 (Hampshire; Bath, UK)

CLAUDIA TOBIN

Jane Austen was the author of six novels: Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, Mansfield Park, Emma, Northanger Abbey and Persuasion. She enjoyed a steadily rising reputation in her lifetime and earned a large following of readers known as 'Janeites'. Her novels centre on eighteenth-century gentry society, and bring wit and cool observation to the predominant themes of female friendship and the pursuit of a suitable marriage.

Throughout her life, Vanessa Bell found great satisfaction in reading Austen. Her husband, Clive Bell, shared her high opinion of the author, as did Duncan Grant.2 After reading Virginia Woolf’s first novel, The Voyage Out (1915), Bell weighed the work of her sister in comparison to that of Austen as being, ‘of course to Virginia’s advantage, or at any rate equality’.3

Woolf gave her own assessment of the novelist: ‘What she offers is, apparently, a trifle, yet is composed of something that expands in the reader’s mind and endows with the most enduring form of life scenes which are outwardly trivial.’ While ‘gossip says of Jane Austen that she was perpendicular, precise, and taciturn’, Woolf nevertheless concludes by describing her as ‘the most perfect artist among women, the writer whose books are immortal’.4

2 Frances Spalding, Vanessa Bell Portrait of a Bloomsbury Artist (London: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2016), 39 and 53; Frances Spalding, Duncan Grant (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), 211.
The Victorian poet signed her early letters and poems with the initials, ‘EBB’ and retained the moniker after she married the poet Robert Browning in 1856. The publication of her two-volume *Poems* (1844) prompted her future husband to write to her and intimacy ensued, despite the strong disapproval of her father. The pair married privately in London and then fled to Italy, later settling in Florence. The collection *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850) tells the story of their courtship, while poems such as ‘The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’ express Barrett Browning’s social conscience and support for the abolition of slavery. Her novel-poem *Aurora Leigh* (1857) addresses women’s rights and artistic aspiration.

The design for this plate acknowledges the companionship between Barrett Browning and her dog, Flush. In 1933, Vanessa Bell made four illustrations for the first British edition of *Flush*, Virginia Woolf’s unconventional biography of Barrett Browning’s spaniel. Barrett Browning’s pose in these portraits seems to have served as a model for the depiction of her on this plate.

Woolf’s narrative draws attention to the similarities between Barrett Browning’s appearance and the face of her spaniel:

Heavy curls hung down on either side of Miss Barrett’s face; large bright eyes shone out; a large mouth smiled. Heavy ears hung down on either side of Flush’s face; his eyes too, were large and bright; his mouth was wide. There was a likeness between them. As they gazed at each other each felt: Here am I – and then each felt: But how different! Hers was the pale worn face of an invalid, cut off from the air, light, freedom. His was the warm ruddy face of a young animal; instinct with health and energy. Broken asunder, yet made in the same mould, could it be that each completed what was dormant in the other?

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The eldest of the Brontë sisters, Charlotte was a poet and novelist. Best known as the author of *Jane Eyre* (1847), her passionate and rebellious heroines challenged the conventions of Victorian morality and were regarded by some contemporary readers as ‘unfeminine’.¹ She published her first works under the pseudonym Currer Bell, while her two novelist sisters, Emily and Anne, published as Ellis and Acton Bell. Charlotte initially rejected a marriage proposal from the local curate, Arthur Bell Nicholls, but eventually married him in 1854. She died the following year.

In an essay on *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* (1916), Virginia Woolf noted that despite Brontë’s early death, she was ‘the centre now of so much legend, devotion, and literature’. She speculated that readers were attracted to the author ‘not for exquisite observation of character – her characters are vigorous and elementary; not for comedy – hers is grim and crude; not for a philosophic view of life – hers is that of a country parson’s daughter; but for her poetry’.²

Grant and Bell may have seen the portrait of Brontë by George Richmond at the National Portrait Gallery. Her father perceived in it ‘strong indications of the genius of the author’.³

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The English author Mary Anne Evans wrote under the pseudonym George Eliot. She published poetry, translation, journalism and seven novels including *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Silas Marner* (1861) and *Middlemarch* (1871–72). From 1851, she was Editor of left-wing journal, *The Westminster Review*. Her work is noted for its psychological realism and for plots with strong female characters.

Of Eliot's heroines, Virginia Woolf wrote:

> The ancient consciousness of woman, charged with suffering and sensibility, and for so many ages dumb, seems in them to have brimmed and overflowed and uttered a demand for something – they scarcely know what – for something that is perhaps incompatible with the facts of human existence.¹

The portrait of Eliot on this plate is rather more complimentary than the verbal portraits offered by her contemporaries, of which Woolf observed, ‘one cannot escape the conviction that the long, heavy face with its expression of serious and sullen and almost equine power has stamped itself depressingly upon the minds of people who remember George Eliot.’² Vanessa Bell recalled listening to her sister reading Eliot’s work aloud in their youth. ‘We read most of the Victorian novelists in this way, and I can still hear much of Eliot and Thackeray in her voice.’³

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² Ibid.
The British stage actress and author Fanny Kemble was the daughter of actors Charles Kemble and Maria Theresa De Camp, and the niece of the tragedienne Sarah Siddons. In her 1829 debut with her father’s company at Covent Garden, she played the role of William Shakespeare’s Juliet. She disliked performing and wrote:

I do not think it is the acting itself that is so disagreeable to me, but the public personal exhibition, the violence done ... to womanly dignity and decorum in thus becoming the gaze of every eye and theme of every tongue.¹

Her critical success meant that she had the luxury of only performing when necessary.

Kemble married an American in 1834, but the relationship ended following her visit to his family’s plantations in Georgia, where she faced disturbing truths about the slave labour that underpinned their wealth. She returned from America to Great Britain in 1846 to write a record of her experiences, indicting slavery in Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838–1839; she filed for divorce in 1847.² She wrote many other works including two autobiographies, several plays and poems, and a novel. Bell’s step-aunt, the author Anne (Annie) Thackeray Ritchie, included a verbal portrait of Fanny Kemble in her autobiography Chapters From Some Unwritten Memoirs (1895). In a diary entry dated from January 1915, Virginia Woolf notes that she was reading the autobiography of ‘Fanny Kemble’s Life.’³

Lady Murasaki Shikibu was a Japanese novelist and poet who served as a lady-in-waiting to the Empress Shoshi at the Imperial court, during the Heian period. Murasaki’s *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*, ca. 1005) is widely recognised as a classic of Japanese literature. Among the pictorial works inspired by the novel are twelfth-century handscroll illustrations, which represent ‘the type of small-scale pictures created to amuse Heian aristocrats, particularly women’.1

Duncan Grant’s early art education involved copying Japanese prints, and in 1925, he read the first volume of Arthur Waley’s translation of *The Tale of Genji*.2 In that same year, Virginia Woolf published a review of Waley’s translation, describing it as a ‘story of the enchanting boy – the Prince who danced “The Waves of the Blue Sea” so beautifully that all the princes and great gentlemen wept aloud’.3 Woolf paints a romantic picture of the novelist sitting down to write ‘in her silk dress and trousers with pictures before her and the sound of poetry in her ears’, in stark contrast to her contemporaries of the same period in the Western world, who were ‘fighting or squatting in their huts while she gazed from her lattice window at flowers’.4 In *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), Woolf mentions Murasaki alongside Emily Brontë and the Greek poet Sappho as a ‘great figure of the past’.5

Dorothy Osborne was an English gentlewoman famed for the letters she wrote to her husband, the diplomat William Temple, before their marriage. Her family, particularly her brother, opposed the match. The letters comment on a range of political, cultural and religious events and are remarkable for their discerning style, ironic wit and resolute judgement of character. In this correspondence (now held at the British Library), Osborne often described wanting to find ‘the most apposite word’ for her subject; she treated the letters as a site for both testing her own convictions and conversing with a man who related to her seriously. The letters were newly edited by G. C. Moore Smith in 1928, and Virginia Woolf was among those charmed by Osborne’s sharp and observant personality. Osborne, Woolf writes, ‘gave a record of life, gravely yet playfully, formally yet with intimacy, to a public of one, but to a fastidious public, as the novelist can never give, or the historian either.’


On the contents page, the editor states: ‘The two portraits are from the originals by Sir Peter Lely, in the possession of Sir George Osborne, Bar., or Chicksands Priory’, however, the second work is by Caspar Netscher (NPG), and although the frontispiece follows the format used by Lely for many of his portraits, a portrait of Lady Temple by Lely cannot be identified.

Vanessa Bell, Dorothy Osborne, plate design, about 1932, watercolour and pencil on paper. Copyright the Estate of Vanessa Bell, courtesy of Henrietta Garnett. Digital image courtesy of Jane Allcock.
The English poet Christina Rossetti was the youngest of the four artistically gifted Rossetti children: her siblings were the scholar and Anglican nun Maria Francesca Rossetti (1827–1876), the poet and painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882) and the civil servant and art critic William Michael Rossetti (1829–1919). Their father was a Neopolitan exile and professor of Italian at King’s College, London, and their mother was an educated woman, who trained her daughters to become governesses.1

Rossetti, who also wrote under the pseudonym Ellen Alleyne, published her most famous works in the 1860s, with *Goblin Market and Other Poems* in 1862 and *The Prince’s Progress and Other Poems* in 1866. Both had a frontispiece and decorations by Dante Gabriel.2 She is cited as having been involved, ‘emotionally at least’ in the formation of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and contributed seven poems to the Pre-Raphaelite journal *The Germ*.3

Virginia Woolf’s essay ‘I am Christina Rossetti’ outlines ‘the awkward ardour of my admiration’ for a fellow writer. Although dissimilar in many respects, Rossetti and Woolf shared numerous similarities: namely, both belonged to select companies of young artists and intellectuals, and both satirised pomposity. In a description, that also applied to herself and her sister, Woolf wrote that Rossetti:

liked her brother’s friends and little gatherings of young artists and poets who were to reform the world, rather to her amusement, for although so sedate, she was also whimsical and freakish, and liked making fun of people who took themselves with egotistic solemnity.4

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3 Duguid, ‘Rossetti, Christina Georgina (1830–1894)’.
George Sand was a prolific French author and is remembered for her rustic novels and unconventional lifestyle. She had many passionate love affairs – love in defiance of social norms is a recurrent theme in her works – and she sometimes dressed as a man to bypass the social inhibitions placed on women.¹ The plate is inspired by Delacroix’s portrait of Sand, and both draw attention to the androgyny of her radically short hair and ambiguous dress; Elizabeth Barrett Browning praised Sand as a ‘large-brained woman and large-hearted man’.² Les Maîtres sonneurs (1853) was Leslie Stephen’s favourite novel, and he passed on his admiration of Histoire de ma vie (1855) to Virginia Woolf.³ Anny Thackeray, the sister of Stephen’s first wife, had known Sand as a girl, and the Stephen children enjoyed ‘Aunt’ Anny’s stories of Sand and others: Woolf recalled her sense ‘that we have been in the same room with the people she describes’.⁴

Sappho was a Greek lyric poet renowned for the beauty of her writing style, which has impressed generations of readers with its lively sense of personality.\(^1\) She spent the majority of her life living on the island of Lesbos and writing among her ‘thiasos’, the female community that she led. Its purpose was to educate young women and the thiasos was in fact the main subject described throughout her writing. Aphrodite was its divinity and inspiration, while Sappho was the servant of the goddess, and homoeroticism (as in other ancient Greek same-sex communities) formed part of the context for explorations of poetry, religious passion and love, often in preparation for marriage. Sappho’s works were collected and published in the third and fourth centuries.\(^2\)

Aware of Sappho’s work, Virginia Woolf described her as being ‘a great figure of the past’ in *A Room of One’s Own*.\(^3\) In a letter to Dorothy Tyler, Woolf wrote that ‘Sappho was not a unique writer but supported many other poetesses. That I think until the late 18th century was never the case for England’.\(^4\) The supportive nature of Sappho’s thiasos was reflected by the collective nature of the Bloomsbury group.

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\(^2\) Ibid.
Anne-Louise-Germaine Necker, Baronne de Staël-Holstein was a prominent French-Swiss woman of letters, political propagandist and conversationalist, who was a leading critical commentator on the European culture of her time. She convened a salon for intellectuals and her writings include novels, plays, moral and political essays, literary criticism, history, autobiographical memoirs and poems. Her 1796 work *A Treatise on the Influence of the Passions upon the Happiness of Individuals and of Nations* is an important work in the European history of ideas, with particular relevance for Romanticism.\(^1\)

Her marriage to the Swedish ambassador in Paris, Baron Erik de Staël-Holstein, was ended by formal separation in 1797, and she had several liaisons with political figures. Her role in a liberal resistance group was perceived as a threat by Napoleon, who exiled her from Paris. Madame de Staël is mentioned during the Beouf en Daube dinner table scene in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927), alongside Voltaire and Napoleon as part of the ‘admirable fabric of masculine intelligence’ that Mrs Ramsay admires:

> What did it all mean? To this day she had no notion. A square root? What was that? Her sons knew. She leant on them; on cubes and square roots; that was what they were talking about now; on Voltaire and Madame de Staël; on the character of Napoleon; on the French system of land tenure; on Lord Rosebery; on Creevey’s Memoirs: she let it uphold her and sustain her; this admirable fabric of the masculine intelligence, which ran up and down, crossed this way and that, like iron girders spanning the swaying fabric, upholding the world, so that she could trust herself to it utterly, even shut her eyes, or flicker them for a moment, as a child staring up from its pillow winks at the myriad layers of the leaves of a tree.\(^2\)

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Virginia Woolf was an English writer and member of the Bloomsbury Group literary and artistic circle. She is renowned for her experimental modernist novels including *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Orlando* (1928), as well as for her essays, reviews and feminist polemic, *A Room of One’s Own* (1929). Its central dictum is well known, ‘a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction’.¹

Woolf was ambivalent about sitting for portraits, but her sister Vanessa Bell painted several images of her at different moments in her life. ‘Do you think we have the same pair of eyes, only different spectacles?’² Woolf wrote to Bell in 1937. She used Bell as a basis for characters in her novels including Katherine Hilbery in *Night and Day* (1919) and the painter Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*. The serene and delicate depiction on this plate has affinities with Charles Beresford’s photograph of the young writer in profile, and Bell’s recently recovered 1934 portrait of her sister at 52 Tavistock Square.

CATHERINE THE GREAT

Empress Catherine II of Russia • 1729–1796 (Stettin, Prussia [now Szczecin, Poland], Tsarskoye Selo [now Pushkin], near Saint Petersburg, Russia)

HANA LEAPER

Born Princess Sophie Friederike Auguste von Anhalt-Zerbst, Catherine changed her name in 1745, when she became a member of the Russian Orthodox Church and married the heir to the throne of Russia. In 1762, Catherine’s husband became Tsar Peter III; later in that same year, she usurped him and was declared Empress. Catherine advocated for culture, education and modernisation, as well as military conquest: she extended Russian territory into Crimea and Poland. Alongside her ambition and power, she is famed for her series of lovers, some of whom she helped promote to high office, for example, Stanisław Poniatowski, who became King of Poland, and Grigory Potemkin who became Prince of the Holy Roman Empire and Prince of Tauris.

Catherine the Great was a patron of the arts and her collection formed the basis for The State Hermitage Museum. Kenneth Clark claimed that his inspiration for commissioning the Famous Women set came when he dined ‘on a blue and gold Sèvres service made for the Empress Catherine of Russia’ belonging to Baron Joseph Duveen. During the Second World War, German soldiers discovered erotic furniture in her apartments and documented them with photographs, although the actual objects were soon lost. In February 2017, Sotheby’s sold a replica based on a table depicted in them, in homage to Catherine the Great’s ‘supposed secret erotic cabinet’.

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1 See ‘Catherine the Great (1729–1796)’, BBC History, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/catherine_the_great.shtml.
Queen Christina ruled Sweden for more than twenty years between 1632 and 1654. Highly educated, Christina was a collector and patron of the arts, who longed to make Stockholm ‘The Athens of the North’. Like Elizabeth Tudor, Christina was repeatedly pressured to marry but refused to do so. Unconventionally, Christina often behaved in what was perceived as a masculine manner – she occasionally dressed in men’s clothes, and was said to have female lovers.1 Towards the end of her reign, Christina planned to convert from Protestantism to Catholicism but faced strong opposition from her court. Eventually she abdicated, changed her name and moved to Rome, where she received a warm welcome from the Pope. However, Christina was not content to live quietly. She plotted to achieve power and had her lover Gian Rinaldo Monaldi killed for betraying her intrigues.2 Christina, along with Lola Montez, is mentioned in Flaubert’s novel Sentimental Education and it is possible that Virginia Woolf suggested her inclusion, as Woolf was an admirer of Flaubert’s writing. Vanessa Bell’s interest may also have been sparked by the film Queen Christina (1933) starring Greta Garbo.

Queen of Egypt and last of its native rulers, Cleopatra’s conflicted reign is famous through both historical and dramatic sources. She became queen after the death of her father, Ptolemy XII, in 51 BCE and ruled successively with her two brothers, Ptolemy XIII (51–47) and Ptolemy XIV (47–44), and her son Ptolemy XV Caesar (44–30).1 Cleopatra first allied with the Roman General Julius Caesar to regain her throne from her brother Ptolemy XIII. They became lovers in 48 BCE, though she was married to two of her brothers at different times during her reign. She began her legendary relationship with Mark Antony in 41 BCE. After marrying and having three children together, they committed suicide in 30 BCE.

In 1909, Virginia Woolf went ‘unsuitably attired’ as Cleopatra to attend an artists ball;2 and a photograph from the late 1930s shows Eve Younger as Charmian, one of Cleopatra’s handmaids, and Angelica Bell as Cleopatra from Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra. Photographs of Grant’s 1924 costume designs for The Birds also show a figure that appears to be based on Cleopatra.

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Elizabeth was the only child of King Henry VIII (1491–1547) and his second wife, Anne Boleyn (ca. 1500–1536). After her mother was executed, Elizabeth was declared illegitimate, but she became Queen of England and Ireland after the death of her half-brother Edward VI in 1553, the execution of Lady Jane Grey in 1554 and the death of her half-sister Mary I in 1558.¹ Her rule lasted forty-five years, during which time a moderate and stable Protestant Church of England was established, overseas exploration expanded significantly and the arts flourished.² She was comprehensively educated, spoke several languages and played the spinet and lute, as well as composing music. She is sometimes referred to as the ‘Virgin Queen’ as, despite many offers and great pressure, she refused to marry.³

Elizabeth is described as an authoritative leader in Virginia Woolf’s 1928 novel *Orlando*:

> It was in this very room, she remembered, that Queen Elizabeth had stood astride the fireplace with a flagon of beer in her hand, which she suddenly dashed on the table when Lord Burghley tactlessly used the imperative instead of the subjunctive. ‘Little man, little man’ – Orlando could hear her say – ‘is “must” a word to be addressed to princes?’ And down came the flagon on the table: there was the mark of it still.⁴


Eugénia María de Montijo de Guzmán, later comtesse de Teba, was born into a Spanish noble family that had fought for Napoleon I in the Peninsular War (1808–14). She married Napoleon’s nephew Charles-Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte (b. 1808, Paris–d. 9 January 1873, Chislehurst, Kent, England) in 1853, and was thus Empress of France between 1853 and 1870. She took an active role in political life and acted as regent in 1859, 1865 and 1870.

She was also an arbiter of taste and worked closely with the Couturier Charles Worth and the luggage maker Louis Vuitton to establish luxury fashions worldwide, including popularising a colour known as ‘Empress Blue’.

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Jezebel was a Phoenician princess, the daughter of the priest-king Ethbaal, ruler of the coastal Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon (modern Ṣaydā, Lebanon). She married King Ahab who ruled from about 874 to about 853, and became Queen of the kingdom of Israel. She persuaded Ahab to introduce the worship of the Tyrian god Baal-Melkart, and demanded the execution of prophets who were preaching of Jahweh, the national god of Iron Age Israel and Judah.

Her name has become synonymous with the archetype of the wicked woman. There are several biblical references to her immodesty: ‘Jezebel heard of it; and she painted her face’ (2 Kings 9:30, King James Version [KJV]); committing adultery, and refusing to repent her actions:

And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not.
(Revelation 2:21, King James Version [KJV])


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Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, Jezebel (detail from Famous Women), 25.5 cm diameter; ceramic. Copyright the Estate of Vanessa Bell, courtesy of Henrietta Garnett and Duncan Grant Estate, DACS 2017. Digital image courtesy of Piano Nobile (Robert Travers Works of Art Limited).

As the last Queen of France before the French Revolution, Marie Antoinette's life was beset with scandal and intrigue. After marrying Louis XVI in 1770, she soon cultivated a circle of court favourites. Her extravagance and failure to produce an heir provoked her rivals to spread stories of alleged affairs. Her stance against the popular movement to abolish feudalism made the Queen personally unpopular with activists. In 1789, she returned with the King from the palace at Versailles to Paris, where they became hostages of the Revolutionary movement. Although she attempted to restore the position of the crown with a series of secret negotiations, she was unsuccessful and the monarchy was overthrown in 1792. Convicted by the Revolutionary Tribunal for high treason, Marie Antoinette was executed by guillotine on 16 October 1793.

This Bloomsbury plate is indebted to Vigée Le Brun’s portrait Marie Antoinette à la Rose of 1783, depicting the Queen as the epitome of courtly decorum and propriety. The story behind the painting illustrates Antoinette’s role as a progressive and sexually emancipated woman. The Queen’s attire in an earlier version, Marie Antoinette in a Chemise Dress 1783, had caused uproar and was deemed highly unsuitable for public display.

Marie Antoinette’s life held a special place in the Bloomsbury imagination. Vanessa Bell often reminded her daughter Angelica that she had French blood in her veins, as her great-great-grandmother had been married to the Chevalier de l’Etang, a member of Marie Antoinette’s household. Quentin Bell claimed that De L’Etang was ‘attached to the household of Marie Antoinette – too much attached it is said’, and was banished from France to India.

2 Joseph Baillio, Katharine Baetjer and Paul Lang, Vigée Le Brun (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2016), 87.
Mary was only six days old when her father James V died and she became Queen of Scotland. Raised as a Catholic, she spent her formative years in France, while her mother, Mary of Guise, ruled as regent. Mary’s marriage in 1558 to King François II was short-lived and in 1561, she returned to Scotland as a widow. Her reign was characterised by a series of disastrous romantic relationships. She married her cousin, Lord Darnley, in 1565, shortly before he was murdered in 1567. Immediately afterwards, she married James Earl of Bothwell, who was suspected of being involved in Darnley’s murder. Rebellion followed, forcing Mary to abdicate in favour of her one-year-old son, James VI. She sought refuge in England with her cousin, Queen Elizabeth I. Over the next nineteen years, Mary became the focus of numerous Catholic plots to assassinate Elizabeth. Eventually, Mary was tried for treason and condemned to death in October 1586. She is buried in Westminster Abbey.¹

The likeness which seems to have inspired the image of Mary for this plate is a portrait by François Clouet of 1559–60. It depicts her, aged nineteen, in white mourning dress, signifying the loss of two members of her close family: Henry II in 1559, and her mother in 1560. The whiteness of Mary’s skin was praised by her contemporaries as a mark of beauty, a feature clearly emphasised in the Famous Women version.²

Although this sombre portrait celebrates her beauty, Mary was also famous for her ‘charisma, intelligence and determination to maintain her status’, which may have been reasons that Bell and Grant were drawn to her.³

¹ For further reading, see Antonia Fraser, Mary Queen Of Scots (London: Hachette, 2010).
QUEEN MARY

Mary of Teck, Queen Consort of Great Britain • 1867–1953
(Teck, Germany; London, UK)

ANNE STUTCHBURY

Although Princess Mary of Teck was engaged to Prince Albert Victor, Duke of Clarence, he died suddenly in 1891 before they could marry. Encouraged by the royal family, she married Prince George, Duke of York in 1893, Albert’s younger brother and next in line to the throne. When Edward VII died in 1910 and George V ascended to the throne, Mary became queen consort. Despite being criticised by some as dull and reserved, Mary was widely praised for her charitable work and active role in implementing royal social policy.¹

During the First World War, she coordinated the efforts of national charitable organisations and mobilised the Needlework Guild to participate in the donations of gifts to deserving causes. In 1914, she formed the Queen’s Work for Women Fund, a branch of the National Relief Fund. According to Mary’s official biographer, she had ‘an earnest desire to relieve stress and concern about social conditions’, and continued her patronage of many charitable causes after the end of the war.² Besides her public duties, Mary had a passion for collecting and spent time developing the royal art collection.

Mary’s image on this plate resembles the photograph taken by Bertram Park in 1927. Her reserved nature and gentility are emphasised by the way she grasps her pearls, and her straight-backed pose. This dinner plate portrait brought Grant and Bell the friendship of Lady Patricia Ramsay, the artist and granddaughter of Queen Victoria ‘for whom they gave a party at 8 Fitzroy Square’.³ Patricia had been a bridesmaid to Queen Mary at her wedding in 1893.⁴

Widely perceived as an exotic and mysterious woman of power, the persona of the Queen of Sheba has captured many European imaginations. Historically, she appears in many of the world’s great religious works, among them the Hebrew Bible and the Qur’an. According to Jewish and Islamic traditions, the Queen of Sheba was ruler of the kingdom of Saba [Sheba] in south-western Arabia, about 1000 BCE. Her story, told in the biblical account of the reign of King Solomon, describes her leading a camel caravan bearing gold, jewels and spices, to visit his court in Jerusalem. There to test Solomon’s wisdom, she proceeds ‘to prove him with hard questions’, which he answers to her satisfaction.¹ They exchange gifts and she returns to her kingdom.

The Queen of Sheba’s association with the exotic East clearly inspired Grant. His 1912 representation Queen of Sheba was painted for another extraordinary Bloomsbury associate, the classical scholar and linguist Jane Harrison ‘for a scheme of decoration in part of the cloister at Newnham College, Cambridge’.² This venture did not come to fruition, but Christopher Reed argues that this work, modelled by Grant’s cousins – Newnham student Pernel Strachey, and Lytton Strachey – challenges the conventional version of the tale, questioning the Queen of Sheba’s submission to King Solomon by portraying them meeting as equals.³

Depicting a black-skinned, muscular and warrior-like nude Queen of Sheba, Grant and Bell’s dinner plate image also challenges familiar perceptions of her race, power, physique and sexuality, disrupting popular contemporary representations, such as Betty Blyth’s risqué portrayal in the 1921 Fox film.

¹ The Bible, Old Testament, I Kings 10 v.1–13
³ Christopher Reed, Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture, and Domesticity (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press for the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture, 2004), 82.
THEODORA

Empress Theodora reigned with her husband Justinian from his succession in 527 until her death in 548. Much of what is known about the life of the ancient Empress has come from the inconsistent accounts of one contemporary observer, the historian Procopius of Caesarea. His speaks of her ‘wanton childhood’ and subsequent career as an actress and a prostitute in his work Secret History, and, in On Buildings, testifies to her many charitable works. According to Charles Pazdernik, Theodora’s life is a striking rags-to-riches story, a tale of palace intrigue and heartless manoeuvres, and a testament to her own convictions and contributions to the work of government.¹

After visiting the sixth-century mosaics at the Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna, in which Theodora is a central figure, Bell and Grant each painted a portrait of her in 1912, titled Byzantine Lady and The Countess, respectively. The section of the mosaic showing the Empress Theodora was reproduced in Clive Bell’s book Art in 1914.

Bell’s Self-Portrait at the Easel was also painted in 1912. The stylised profile, palette and textures combine ‘the strength of ancient Byzantine mosaics and the domestic associations of woolwork’.² The Famous Women plates show that Bell has remained interested in portraying historical women in a tailored idiom that synthesises their monumental status with everyday experience.

² Christopher Reed, Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture, and Domesticity (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press for the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture, 2004), 86.
Queen Victoria was just eighteen when she succeeded to the throne after the death of her uncle King William IV, in 1837. She fell in love and married Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg in 1840 and soon became pregnant with the first of nine children. They were great art patrons, a passion memorialised in the name of London’s Victoria and Albert Museum. When Albert died unexpectedly in 1861, Victoria was devastated and plunged into a deep mourning that continued for the rest of her life.1

Queen Victoria died in 1901 at Osborne House, after ruling for sixty-three years. In his biography Queen Victoria of 1921, Bloomsbury protagonist Lytton Strachey recalled the sadness felt by the country when the Queen was on her deathbed:

The vast majority of her subjects had never known a time when Queen Victoria had not been reigning over them. She had become an indissoluble part of their whole scheme of things, and that they were about to lose her appeared a scarcely possible thought.2

The widespread image of Queen Victoria as a stern, sombrely-dressed, unsmiling matriarch became an enduring image evident in many public statues and official photographs, such as Downey’s 1933 cabinet card. This likeness clearly provided Bell and Grant with a widely recognised model for their dinner plate portrait.

2 Lytton Strachey, Queen Victoria (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1921), 423.
Beatrice ‘Bice’ Portinari, a Florentine gentlewoman and wife of a banker, was the principal inspiration for several of the poetic works by Dante Alighieri in the thirteenth century.

Dante first met Beatrice in 1274, when he was just a boy. He went on to chronicle his love for her in *La Vita Nuova* and later immortalised her in the *Divine Comedy* as Beatrice, who takes over from Virgil as a spiritual guide through Paradise and leads the protagonist to the beatific vision.¹

Following her untimely death at the age of twenty-four, Beatrice became a muse once again in the nineteenth century, when Pre-Raphaelite painters including Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Henry Holliday represented her in their works.

Dante’s *La Vita Nuova*, in which Beatrice first appears, was included in Rossetti’s 1861 translation of Italian poetry into English, *The Early Italian Poets*.² He also made a number of paintings which feature Beatrice. The most famous is *Beata Beatrix*, a large oil painting made between 1864 and 1870. In this work, Rossetti draws a parallel between Dante’s despair at the death of Beatrice and his own grief at the death of his wife, Elizabeth Siddal, who died in 1862 after overdosing on laudanum.³


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Duncan Grant, Beatrice, plate design, pencil on paper, 19.5 x 20 cm. Charleston Trust (CHA/P/1652). Duncan Grant Estate, DACS 2016. Digital image courtesy of Charleston.

Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, Beatrice (detail from *Famous Women*), 23.5cm diameter; ceramic. Copyright the Estate of Vanessa Bell, courtesy of Henrietta Garnett and Duncan Grant Estate, DACS 2017. Digital image courtesy of Piano Nobile (Robert Travers Works of Art Limited).
Marian Bergeron became the youngest Miss America on record, in 1933, at the age of fifteen. After the competition, she returned to high school and reigned as Miss America for two years. During that time, she became a model with a New York agency, though her youth meant that she was allegedly not offered the studio screen tests that should have been part of the prize. Already an established singer, she became a featured vocalist with the bands of Ozzie Nelson, Rudy Vallée, Frankie Carle and Don Bestor. She became a wife, mother and Girl Scout Leader, as well as a representative of the Miss America Pageant.1 She became a wife, mother and Girl Scout Leader, as well as a representative of the Miss America Pageant.2

Sarah Churchill became one of the most influential women of her time, as the result of her close friendship with Queen Anne.¹ She was a devoted advocate of the Whig party and was able to exert significant political influence over the Queen while in favour.² Her political dedication ultimately led to her downfall, however; and in 1711, she and her husband were dismissed from court.³

The decision to include Sarah Churchill in the plate series may have been spurred by the Bloomsbury Group’s relationship with Bonamy Dobrée, who was a literary scholar and a close friend of Woolf’s husband, Leonard.⁴ In 1927, Dobrée published a book titled Sarah Churchill: Duchess of Marlborough, as part of the Representative Women series edited by Francis Birrell – another Bloomsbury associate. The series consisted of fourteen books by various authors, including fellow Bloomsbury group member Vita Sackville-West, detailing the lives of notable female figures such as Letizia Bonaparte and Christina of Sweden.⁵

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⁴ The Open University ‘Bonamy Dobree’ http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/makingbritain/content/bonamy-dobree.
Princess Pauline Clémentine Marie Walburga von Metternich, née Countess Sándor de Szlavnicza, was a Viennese socialite, who was famous for her patronage of contemporary music, art and fashion. She was given the nickname ‘The Metternich’ due to her strong leadership in court and social affairs in fin de siècle Vienna.1

In 1856, she married her uncle, Prince Richard von Metternich, who became the Austrian ambassador to France from 1859–1871. Her patronage of the House of Worth during this time helped cement the success of the fashion house established by the London-born designer, Charles Frederick Worth, in 1858.2

Metternich was also notorious for participating in an ‘emancipated duel’ with Countess Anastasia Kielmannsegg in 1892, reportedly over a disagreement regarding arrangements for the Vienna Musical and Theatrical Exhibition of which Metternich was Honorary President. The two women fought with rapiers until they drew blood, upon which they were advised to, ‘embrace, kiss and make friends’.3

2 Wagener, ‘Fashion and Feminism in “Fin de Siècle” Vienna’, 33.
Born Elizabeth Rosanna Gilbert in Ireland, Lola Montez was a performer famed for her Spanish dances, scandalous behaviour and her controversial relationship with King Ludwig I of Bavaria. Following an early marriage and swift divorce to an army officer with whom she had eloped, Gilbert set her sights on a stage career and travelled to Cadiz where she learned the basics of Spanish dance and language. In 1843, she returned to England as Lola Montez, a noble Spanish dancer. Critical responses to her performances were sharply divided, however, her unorthodox behaviour became legendary and she performed across the world.

In the late 1840s, Montez began a notorious liaison with King Ludwig I of Bavaria, who promised to grant her citizenship and make her a countess, much to the dismay of his cabinet. Their affair ultimately led to the cabinet’s resignation in 1847, bringing an end to nearly ten years of conservative Catholic government. Her subsequent notoriety persisted in part through references in popular culture, in particular via films depicting her life made in 1922 and 1955.

Montez may have been suggested as a subject for the dinner service by Virginia Woolf. Woolf was deeply interested in the writings of Gustave Flaubert, in whose 1869 novel, *Sentimental Education*, Montez is referenced.

Pocahontas was a Native American woman, the daughter of Powhatan, the paramount chief of a network of tribal nations. She is remembered for her association with the colonial settlement of Jamestown and is said to have saved the life of Englishman John Smith in 1607. She was later captured and held ransom by the English, and during her captivity converted to Christianity, taking the name Rebecca. Bell and Grant’s decision to include her in the plate series may have been influenced by David Garnett’s 1933 novel *Pochahontas, or the Nonparell of Virginia*, a work that has been described as ‘the most successful, subtle, and deeply moving of all the fiction’ based on Pocahontas’s life. The image of Pocahontas in the dinner service shows striking similarities to the only known portrait of Pocahontas drawn from life, an engraving by Simon van de Passe, in which she is depicted in Elizabethan dress, with a ruff and velvet hat.
According to the Bible, Rachel was ‘beautiful and well favoured’ and became the beloved wife of the patriarch Jacob, her cousin. She met Jacob while she was tending her father’s flock of sheep. He was entranced, kissed her, and they became betrothed. Rachel’s father agreed to their marriage but tricked Jacob into also marrying Rachel’s elder sister Leah. To Rachel’s sadness, Leah bore Jacob six sons, and her handmaids, Bilhah and Zilpah bore him several more children. Eventually Rachel gave birth to two sons: the elder, Jacob, led his people while they were in exile in Egypt, while the younger, Benjamin, was the ancestor of the biblical Queen Esther.¹ Because Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin, her longed-for second son, she is sometimes seen as the epitome of the mother mourning for her children.²

Rachel by James Agate was published in 1928 as part of the ‘Representative Women’ series edited by Francis Birrell. This series contains a number of overlapping figures with the Famous Women set and seems likely to have served as a source for the artists. A sketch in Charleston’s collection may relate to the biblical Rachel.

Juliette Récamier was born in Lyon and married Jacques-Rose Récamier in Paris in 1793. The marriage was platonic, and historians speculate that Jacques-Rose was her biological father. Récamier became a renowned socialite and salonnières in the Parisian Salons of the era, guiding discussions among leading literary and political figures.

In 1905, Vanessa Bell founded the Friday Club, hoping to recreate the cultural milieu she had observed in Parisian cafés. Like Récamier, who prided herself on her ability to maintain friendships with people of all political allegiances, Bell united disparate artists and kept a healthily argumentative society under control.

Quentin Bell reproduced François Gérard’s 1804 portrait of Madame Récamier in his 1947 history of fashion, *On Human Finery*, to illustrate ‘her simple chiton, her bare feet, her Roman hair style’. This appears to be the portrait that the Récamier plate is based on.

Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal was a painter, poet and artists’ model, who sat extensively for the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. She was introduced to the circle by Walter Howell Deverell, who had seen her working in a milliner’s shop and was struck by her fine and unusual appearance.

After sitting for Deverell, Siddal was painted by William Holman Hunt, then John Everett Millais for his famous Ophelia of 1852, then exclusively for Dante Gabriel Rossetti, whom she later married in 1860. Siddal herself began painting and drawing in 1852, and much like the Brotherhood, focused upon medieval and literary themes. She also illustrated a number of poems by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, including St Agnes’ Eve and the Lady of Shalott.

Siddal’s works were well received by her contemporaries, and in addition to support from Rossetti and Ford Madox Brown, she gained the patronage of leading Victorian art critic, John Ruskin. It was with Ruskin’s encouragement that she studied for a brief period at the Sheffield School of Art.

Despite increasing ill health and her worsening addiction to laudanum, Siddal continued to draw, paint and compose poetry until her death from an overdose in 1862. Distraught, Rossetti buried most of his poems, in manuscript form, alongside Siddal’s body in Highgate cemetery.1

1 ‘Elizabeth Siddal’, Grove Art Online: http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T078530
Agnes Sorel is renowned as the first officially recognised royal mistress in history. Nicknamed the ‘Dame de Beauté’ with her blonde hair, blue eyes, pale skin, slender figure and high, round breasts, she was selected as mistress by the French King, Charles VII (1233–1461) in 1444. A public celebrity in her time, Sorel modelled for a number of contemporary paintings, including most famously Jean Fouquet’s 1450 Melun Diptych in which she appears as the Virgin Mary.1

Charles was said to be besotted with Sorel, as Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini (later Pope Pius II) remarked: ‘He fell so much in love that he could not even spend an hour without her. Whether at table, in bed, at council, she was always by his side.’2 Sorel bore three of Charles’ children, all of whom he recognised.

Attributed with inspiring political and military success, her role has come to represent both a romantic affair and an effective political engagement within the court, which marked a turning point in women’s visibility in official spaces.3 In presenting Sorel to his court, and more importantly in giving her a quasi-official position within it, the king defined a new role for women and a new practice for French kings.4

Sorel died from dysentery aged twenty-eight, however, rumours of poisoning were rife. In 2005, tests on her hair and skin found that she had indeed died from mercury poisoning, although whether or not this was murder remains unknown.5

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3 Welman, Queens and Mistresses of Renaissance France, 26
4 Welman, Queens and Mistresses of Renaissance France, 25
In Greek legend, Helen of Troy was the most beautiful woman of Greece and
the indirect cause of the Trojan War. Daughter of the god Zeus by either Leda
or Nemesis, as a young girl Helen was carried off by the hero Theseus but later
rescued by her brothers. Her suitors came from across Greece, among whom
she chose Menelaus, Agamemnon’s younger brother.

In Menelaus’ absence, Helen fled to Troy with Paris, son of the Trojan king Priam.
After Paris was slain, Helen married his brother, Deiphobus, whom she betrayed
to Menelaus when Troy was subsequently captured. She returned to Sparta with
Menelaus, where the couple lived until their deaths.

Famously referred to by poet Christopher Marlowe as the ‘face that launch’d a
thousand ships’, Helen has represented the personification of ideal beauty for
artists throughout history, and it is therefore unsurprising that she was selected
by Bell and Grant as a beauty for their dinner service commission. Duncan Grant
had a particular interest in ancient civilizations and frequently depicted mytho-
logical subject matter in his unique style, once complimented by Roger Fry for
its ‘Doric delicacy’.

3 Roger Fry, ‘Mr. Duncan Grant’s Pictures at Patterson’s Gallery’ [sic], New Statesman, XIV (London: 21 February 1920),
586–7. See also ‘Greek Loves: Mediterranean Modernism and the Borough Polytechnic Murals (1911)’, in Christopher

Antonio Canova, Bust of Helen of Troy, after 1812, marble, 64 cm height. V&A collection. Digital image
courtesy of the V&A.
Simonetta Vespucci was an Italian noblewoman, who became regarded as the face of modern Florence under the Medici family and the greatest beauty of her age.1 Known as ‘la bella Simonetta’, Vespucci is believed to have modelled for paintings by leading artists of the Renaissance, such as Sandro Botticelli and Ghirlandaio, and to have inspired many writers of the age, including Angelo Poliziano, Sforza Bettini and Lorenzo de’ Medici.2

So powerful was the myth surrounding Vespucci’s beauty, that images and writing supposedly inspired by her continued to be produced long after her death at the age of twenty-two. The art historian Charles Dempsey argues that Vespucci was the living prototype for Lorenzo de’ Medici’s Florentine conceptions of ideal femininity.3

While some critics, including John Ruskin, assert that Venus in Botticelli’s The Birth of Venus (finished ten years after Vespucci’s death) closely resembles Vespucci, the art historian Ernst Gombrich has dismissed this idea as a ‘romantic myth’.4 Both Grant and Bell depicted Venus during their careers. In 1919, Grant painted Venus and Adonis, and in 1929, the two collaborated on The Toilet of Venus for Lady Dorothy Wellesley’s Sussex home, Penns in the Rocks.

DANCERS AND ACTRESSSES
Sarah Bernhardt was an actor, whose successful career spanned over sixty years. Her mother’s lover, the Duke of Morny, was determined to establish Bernhardt as a stage sensation, and at the age of sixteen, she was accepted into the prolific Comédie-Française. By 1866, her reputation as an actor was at its height. Throughout her career, Bernhardt played contemporary and Shakespearean characters as both male and female leads. The French dramatist Victorien Sardou wrote roles specifically for Bernhardt and reviews described her as ‘golden-voiced, brilliant and ever interesting’.¹ Her continued support for the military lead to her receiving the Legion of Honour in 1914.² When her husband died, Bernhardt had a stream of affairs with men, including the future King Edward.

Bernhardt was well-known for her unconventional lifestyle, on and off the stage. Duncan Grant was perhaps familiar with this aspect of her persona, and was inspired by her voice, having listened to her recordings on a gramophone in Parisian cafés in 1906.³ Leonard Woolf also speaks of her performance in 1901 as being ‘simply one superb whirl of sensation’.⁴

LA CAMARGO

Marie-Anne de Cupid de Camargo • 15 April 1710–20 April 1770
( Brussels, Belgium; Paris, France)

VANESSA JONES

Marie-Anne de Cupid de Camargo trained as a ballerina in Paris under the choreographer Françoise Prévost. La Camargo’s artistic style of small jumping steps made her a star pupil. She danced in Brussels and Rouen before making her Paris debut in Les Caractères de la Danse in 1726. Audiences were astonished that a woman could execute so perfectly the entrechat and cabriole, leaps normally performed by men. She rejected conventional dress on stage and instead opted to wear a shorter skirt with close-fitting drawers, also removing the heels from her slippers.¹ La Camargo had danced in seventy-eight ballets during her twenty-five-year career; she retired in 1751.²

The Bloomsbury group likely knew about La Camargo’s rejection of conventional gender roles due to their support of the eponymous Camargo ballet company, whose performances were frequently attended by Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant and Virginia Woolf.³ They were members of the Camargo Ballet Society and Bell designed theatre sets for Camargo productions including Fête Galante in 1934 and High Yellow in 1932.⁴

² Ibid.
Taking the name of her first husband, Mrs ‘Pat’ Campbell made her stage debut in 1888 at the Alexandre Theatre, Liverpool. She is best remembered for her performance as Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* (1895–1898) and her leading role in *Hedda Gabler* (1907). Her friend George Bernard Shaw claimed, ‘her Fedora threw Sardou out of the window’, and she ‘play[ed] Pinero off the stage’.1 She played the roles of several of the other Famous Women from the set including Mrs Jordan and George Sands, and was well acquainted with Sarah Bernhardt.2 In 1900, Campbell became her own manager and director, performing in New York with great success. Her first performance on screen was at the age of sixty-eight in *Riptide*.3

Vanessa Bell saw Mrs Campbell’s performance of *Hedda Gabler* in 1922. Bell wrote to Roger Fry describing her as ‘really magnificent. She’s amazing to look at, too. Only of course she was rather too good for the thing as a whole.’4

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1 George Bernard Shaw, Saturday Review (London: 1 June 1895), 726.
The Italian actress Eleonora Duse was born into a family of actors. She took to the stage at the age of four and was playing Shakespearean parts by the time she was fourteen. Inspired by Sarah Bernhardt’s success in modern plays, Duse took on serious roles in plays by Dumas, Zola and Ibsen and was known for her ‘fluent and expressive’ style. Duse was for a time the lover of the radical Italian poet and playwright Gabriele D’Annunzio, who wrote a number of plays for her and a book exposing their erotic life. Duse also had an intense relationship with the Italian feminist Lina Poletti. Duse set up her own theatrical company but ill health forced her to retire in 1909. Twelve years later, financial problems compelled her to return to touring. This is how Vanessa Bell came to see Duse perform in Ibsen’s The Lady from the Sea in 1923. In the same year, Duse became the first woman to feature on the cover of Time magazine. Despite Duse’s triumphant return to acting, continued physical ailments led to her death on tour in the following year.
Brought up in poverty, Greta Gustafsson was born in Sweden and trained there as an actress. She played her first major role in a silent movie in 1924 and at the director’s suggestion changed her surname to Garbo. She moved to the USA, and by 1930, she was a movie star in the talkies. She played romantic roles alongside John Gilbert and their real-life involvement added to Garbo’s fame. She cemented her enigmatic appeal by uttering the famous line ‘I want to be alone’ in *Grand Hotel* (1932). In the following year, Garbo starred in a fictional account of the life of *Queen Christina* (1933)—another Famous Woman in this set.¹ Garbo, who was herself attracted to both sexes, convincingly portrayed Christina’s bisexuality.² The Second World War meant the loss of the European market for Garbo’s films and she retired from the public eye. Her interest turned to art and she amassed a valuable collection that included work by Pierre Bonnard and Pierre-Auguste Renoir.³ In 1930, Bloomsbury associate Boris Anrep immortalised Garbo as the Muse of Tragedy in a mosaic in the entrance hall of the National Gallery, London.⁴ *Virginia Woolf* is represented in the same mosaic as the Muse of History.⁵

Regarded by most of her biographers as having been ‘low born’, Nell Gwyn was the long-time mistress of King Charles II and became the most famous actress of the Restoration era; this renown makes her an important forerunner of our modern celebrity culture.¹

Gwynn achieved great success in her acting career during an era when public discourse readily equated actresses with prostitutes. Virginia Woolf had discussed the idea that women are ‘all but absent from history’ in part because societies consistently find that ‘publicity in women is detestable’.² The publicity that Nell received during her career would have gone against established notions of femininity.

In 1926, a novel about the life of Nell Gwyn was published by Elizabeth Bowen. We know that Virginia Woolf has written essays about works by Bowen, specifically in her 1908 novel, *The Sword Decides*.³

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Peter Lely, Unknown Woman formerly known as Nell Gwynn, about 1675, oil on canvas, 127 x 101.6 cm. National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG 3976). Digital image courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery.
Dorothea Bland was born in Ireland to a theatrical family and began acting at an early age. She excelled in comedy and in popular ‘breeches’ parts, where actresses dressed in men’s clothes. While pregnant and unmarried, Dorothea adopted the stage name of ‘Mrs Jordan’ – the surname being both a suitable cover for her condition and a reference to her crossing a figurative ‘River Jordan’ between Ireland and England. Mrs Jordan went on to have four more children before beginning a twenty-year relationship with the Duke of Clarence, who later became William IV. She bore him ten children and her many pregnancies led to frequent absences from the stage and to protests from her audience. Nevertheless, she had a long and successful career at the Drury Lane Theatre, London, where Sarah Siddons also performed. The two great actresses are said to feature in Sir Joshua Reynolds’s painting Garrick between Tragedy and Comedy (1762), with Siddons as Tragedy (right) and Jordan as Comedy (left).

1 Claire Tomlin, Mrs Jordan’s Profession: The Story of a Great Actress and a Future King (London: Viking, 1994), 72.
Lillie Langtry, ‘the Jersey Lily’, had a successful career as an actress and producer. Born Emilie Charlotte Le Breton, the daughter of the Dean of Jersey, her second husband became a baronet in 1907, making her a Lady. She was a well-connected socialite and a prominent figure in society; she was a close friend of luminaries such as the writer Oscar Wilde, the politician William Gladstone and King Edward VII, with whom she allegedly conducted an affair while he was Prince of Wales.¹ John Everett Millais’ 1878 portrait A Jersey Lily was exhibited at The Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, where a policeman was assigned to guard what became one of the most celebrated portraits of its day.² Photographs and sketches of Langtry were produced for sale and she became one of the most popular ‘Professional Beauties’ of the era.³ She is mentioned in Virginia Woolf’s diary on Thursday 14 May 1925, where Woolf describes seeing Langtry, ‘coming down the playhouse steps … loveliness that struck me in the breast.’⁴ Her acting roles reflected society women and often received severe censure for their risqué nature. In her essay A Room of Ones Own (1929), Virginia Woolf wrote, ‘Chastity … has, even now, a religious importance in a woman’s life … to cut it free and bring it to the light of day demands courage of the rarest.’⁵ It would appear that Langtry possessed this courage, asserting that: ‘Every woman is entitled to her independence.’⁶

Anna Pavlova began her career with the Imperial Russian Ballet and toured Europe as a star of the Ballet Russe before founding her own company. Several of the Bloomsbury Group were present when the Ballet Russe caused a sensation on its London tour in 1911. Leonard Woolf observed that the ballet was part of a fever of ‘exhilaration’ and change, which was also reflected in Roger Fry’s first Post-Impressionist exhibition that same year.¹ Duncan Grant met many of the key figures from the Ballet Russe – Nijinsky, Massine and Diaghilev – and the expressive movements of the ballet were an influence, along with Matisse, on Grant’s many depictions of dancers.² Pavlova also inspired a younger generation of dancers, including Lydia Lopokova (1892–1981). In 1918, Lopokova was principal ballerina with the Ballet Russe and later married John Maynard Keynes, a central member of the Bloomsbury Group.³ Keynes is best known as an economist, but he was also passionately interested in ballet and the arts and helped set up the Arts Council of Great Britain.⁴

Sarah Siddons was part of the famous Kemble family of actors, which included her niece, Fanny Kemble.\(^1\) Tall and inspiring, Siddons was well known for playing Shakespearean roles, particularly Lady Macbeth, a part for which Ellen Terry was also famous. Siddons may have been one of the first actresses to use portraiture to propel her to celebrity status, commissioning Sir Joshua Reynolds and Sir Thomas Lawrence to paint her likeness. Her manipulation of her public image as a tragic muse may have set a precedent for other actresses, including Sarah Bernhardt and Greta Garbo.\(^2\) Siddons was an icon of the Georgian age, a period which Bloomsbury Group members such as Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey admired for its elegance and simplicity, as well as its element of fantasy.

There was a notable revival of interest in Georgian architecture and aesthetics in Britain by the 1930s, and women from the Georgian period are well represented in the dinner service.\(^3\) Bell’s continued interest in these figures can be seen from her fuller portraits of Siddons and Bernhardt from 1942.

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Trained by the renowned instructor Jean-François Coulon at the Opéra de Paris, Marie Taglioni was an Italian ballerina, who became one of the most important dancers in European history.\(^1\) In the year preceding her debut at the Hoftheater in 1822, she received intensive training under the guidance of her choreographer father, Filippo Taglioni.\(^2\) She was one of the first women to meaningfully incorporate dancing on extreme pointes into ballet, thus establishing herself as the first Romantic Ballerina.\(^3\) Having fallen in love with a devoted fan, Taglioni left her husband to start a relationship with Eugène Desmares. Although they never married, they had a child in 1836.

Taglioni would have been known to several of the Bloomsbury group members by virtue of their interest in ballet as an art form, and her enduring legacy in the world of dance. In 1916, ‘Bloomsbury Ballerina’ Lydia Lopokova performed in an adaptation of ‘Les Sylphides’, which was known to be the ballet that cemented Taglioni’s success, after performing in its theatre debut in 1832.\(^4\)


\(^3\) Editors, ‘Marie Taglioni’, *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 27 June 2017.

Alice Ellen Terry performed her stage debut in 1856 as Mamillius in *The Winter’s Tale* at the age of nine. She became one of the most popular actors in Britain and North America and worked closely with Sir Henry Irving.\(^1\)

In a bid to ‘save’ Terry from the stage – acting was seen as a precarious and morally dubious occupation for a woman – the artist George Frederick Watts invited Terry to New Little Holland House, where she became his muse.\(^2\) Watts had initially intended to adopt Terry, but decided to marry her instead.\(^3\) They were wed in 1864 – with the help of Bell’s great aunt, the photographer, Julia Margaret Cameron – although the sixteen-year-old actress and forty-seven-year-old painter separated within a year.\(^4\)

Terry maintained a prolific correspondence with the playwright and theatre critic George Bernard Shaw and published an autobiography titled *The Story of my Life* in 1908. The four lectures she gave on Shakespeare and *Ellen Terry’s Memoirs* were published posthumously in 1932. She became the second actress to be made a Dame Grand Cross of the British Empire in 1925.\(^5\)

Woolf’s 1928 burlesque play *Freshwater* was based on the social circle of artists and writers to which Watts, Cameron and Terry belonged. In 1935, *Freshwater* was performed at Bell’s London studio at 8 Fitzroy Square with Bell as Cameron, Grant as Watts and their daughter Angelica Garnett, who was an aspiring actress, in the role of Terry.\(^6\) Duncan Grant painted a pastel portrait Angelica in costume for Bell with the inscription ‘To VB from DG 1935’.

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2. Editors, ‘Ellen Terry’.