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Maggie Perry
DePauw University

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Abstract Temptation

Vanessa Bell's Artistic Journey Amidst Temptations of Her Own

Artist Vanessa Bell provides a compelling artistic journey influenced by a complicated personal life. Through her many works, Bell highlights a theme of temptation and legacies among a range of different subject matters, styles, and media. Born in 1879, Bell would grow to become an integral member of the Bloomsbury group alongside her famous, yet troubled sister, the writer Virginia Woolf. Bell distinguishes herself from her contemporaries because of her daily access to a range of other artists, writers, art critics, and intellectuals who influenced her art in more ways than one. Within the Bloomsbury group, Bell found herself entangled in scandal within her marriage and two notable affairs. Bell was married to art critic Clive Bell, but she had multiple affairs with artists Roger Fry and Duncan Grant. Labeled “the Holy Trinity of formalism” (Shone 11), the odd trio of Vanessa Bell, Roger Fry, and Duncan Grant was connected on much deeper personal levels than merely their membership in the Bloomsbury group. Through her career as an artist, Bell created more than 100 works spanning decades, but arguably the most intriguing aspect of Bell’s work is how her style changed throughout major events in her life while still maintaining common themes. Initially taking inspiration from Picasso and Matisse, Bell embraced modernist and post-impressionist themes while developing her own style. She specifically shifted her focus from literal subject matter to relationships within her compositions (13). Additionally, Bell was one of very few women in England to experiment with abstraction (DiPalma) during two years of her affair with Duncan Grant. Although Bell did not write statements about her work, her paintings speak for themselves. From realistic depictions of still-lives to abstraction and back, Bell’s paintings represent more than visually appealing scenes; they represent temptation faced in life and how one must make decisions to our protect happiness and legacies—because life, in fact, is fragile.



Figure 1: Bell, Vanessa. *Iceland Poppies*.

Vanessa Bell's *Iceland Poppies* provides an example of the theme of temptation and legacies within one of Bell's earliest works. Vanessa married Clive Bell in 1907, yet much of what we know about Bell's work comes from later in her life. Therefore, the early part of Bell's marriage, prior to her affairs, is relatively undocumented. Her early paintings did not survive because in September 1940, an air raid set fire to her studio in London and destroyed many of her earliest drawings and paintings. Painted in 1908, *Iceland Poppies*, survived the fire because it was hanging in Vanessa Bell's private residence at her Charleston estate (Shone 59).

Iceland Poppies is a still-life which depicts a medicine bottle, a pot with a lid—that is traced back to 18th-century French pharmacists—a small cup, and three poppies: the poppies' stalks create a horizontal divide in the painting that is mirrored in the wall behind the jar (59); thus, separates the viewer from the still-life while still creating a sense of unity and enticement within the work. The shadows on the bottom-left and middle-right of the piece are striking and reveal that the light source for this still-life comes from the upper-left. It is quite unusual, though, because although the light creates a shadow behind the jar, the shadow in the lower-left corner hints at the existence of something outside of the frame that is blocking the light—be it a dresser, lamp, or even Bell herself, it adds a sense of mystery to the work and acknowledges the existence of the world outside of this concentration of objects. Most strikingly, however, is the bright red of the poppy and bright green of the medicine bottle in contrast with the muted color palette of the rest of the painting. In highlighting the poppies and medicine bottle above all, Bell emphasizes a medicinal theme. The theme of medicine is directly connected to the idea of our own mortality and legacies. Arguably, Bell attempted to make a statement on limited mortality and how we choose to spend our time on earth. Because Bell did not leave many descriptions or writings about her paintings (13), we cannot know for certain her intentions in the piece. However, in *Iceland Poppies*, the

theme seems quite obvious whether Bell intended it or not. Beyond the medicine bottle itself, the poppies bring to light a new meaning to medicine because poppies create Opium. Opium, as a drug, heightens a sense of euphoria in its user before reverting back to a state of calm. Despite initial positive sensations for a user, Opium is highly addictive, and the long-term effects are devastating. By placing poppies alongside a typical medicine bottle, Bell may have been making a statement about our own metaphorical medicines and temptations that can make life worth living or make life miserable—due to either love, relationships, passions, or even drugs themselves. In any case, this still-life is not merely a depiction of a few objects Bell found around her home. Although we cannot know if this still-life is autobiographical, it can be assumed that Bell knew what she was doing in her choice of objects and their placement. *Iceland Poppies* has survived more than a century; it is permanent, but life is not. Even the pharmacist jar is still on display at Charleston (59) while Bell and many of her paintings are long gone. In *Iceland Poppies*, legacy and the fragility of life based on our decisions and temptations are echoed beyond the still-life itself.

Painted in 1912, Bell's *Studland Beach*, which has been considered “the masterpiece of Bell's early period,” (90) represents the fear of missed relationships in life and how these lost opportunities can impact one's lasting legacy. *Studland Beach* depicts two figures in dusty orange and red watching five



Figure 2: Bell, Vanessa. *Studland Beach*.

other figures dressed in muted blues near a changing tent on the beach at Studland. What is initially striking about this piece is that all seven of the figures face away from the viewer and gaze in the direction of the water. Because this painting is simple in its details, it emphasizes the contrast of the dark blue water and the tan beach. The absence of a horizon and shrubbery that would be characteristic of Studland remains true to Bell's simple style. Interestingly enough, this depiction of Studland Beach is not Bell's first composition of the same subject. Prior to 1912, Bell made four visits to Studland and created five works, including an oil sketch, two studies of the bay, a large unfinished painting of eleven bathers, and a small drawing of almost the exact same scene as *Studland Beach* (90). According to art historian Lisa Tickner, the two figures in the bottom left of the painting are Bell's son Julian and his nurse, Mabel Selwood, while the five figures in the middle-right of the painting are representative of Bell's childhood memories of vacations in St Ives with her mother (90). Accordingly, the figure standing in the blue dress is most likely a representation of Bell's mother, Julia Prinsep Duckworth, and the four smaller figures around her are Bell and her three siblings. In the identification of the main figures of this painting, a theme begins to emerge. Julian and Mabel watch the other five figures from a distance which may represent the legacy left behind by Julia Prinsep Duckworth and her children, especially since Bell's son cannot be watching a scene unfold in which his mother is around his same age. If the theme of legacies is not the main intention of the piece, the extreme simplicity in the work takes hold of the meaning. Bell does not care for frivolities and only depicts what she sees fit, so we know that each decision of Bell's was calculated with intention.

One of these intentional moves is the curved line on the leftmost side of the painting that acts to divide the figures from the water and represents lasting divisions Bell felt from people in her life. The simplicity of this piece enhances the division of the figures from the viewer yet also lends *Studland Beach* a sense of incompleteness. The viewer is left wanting more. What are the figures doing? Staring into space? Are they speaking at all? It seems still with no motion on the water or the beach. Arguably, one could only imagine small movements of the children huddled by their mother's feet. Without the answers to these questions, what is *Studland Beach*'s legacy and the legacy of the figures within the piece?

Significantly, none of these figures are men: just women and children. Maybe Bell felt the most connected to other women, such as her sister, and her own children and felt their legacies best fit to be live on through this piece. During this period of her life, Bell and her husband Clive Bell had separated unofficially since both were having extramarital affairs. It is possible that Vanessa Bell felt confident and secure in her relationships with women and children while her marriage to Clive deteriorated because of temptations. Consequently, during this time, she began an affair with fellow Bloomsbury artist Roger Fry (DiPalma). It is quite possible that Bell's complicated personal life and temptations allowed her to create such striking works such as *Studland Beach*, which creates a "resulting impression of other-worldliness" depicted specifically through the faceless figures and the almost un-identifiable setting (Shone 90).

The uncertainty of *Studland Beach*, according to art historian Lisa Tickner, provided the inspiration for a scene in Bell's sister Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* (Lewis 92) in which Lily Briscoe, a struggling artist, battles self-doubt and worry for her lack of impact on the world while attempting to finish a painting. Lily recalls wrestling with how to avoid an empty space in the center of her painting, much like the empty space in the center of Vanessa Bell's *Studland Beach*: "It was a question, she remembered, how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left. She might do it by bringing the line of the branch across so; or break the vacancy in the foreground by an object (James perhaps) so. But the danger was that by doing that the unity of the whole might be broken" (Woolf 53). Despite the emptiness Lily Briscoe feels in *To the Lighthouse* and the emptiness in Bell's *Studland Beach*, art historian Pericles Lewis finds *Studland Beach* an "achievement of British post-impressionism" through the simplicity of colors and faceless figures (Lewis 92). Bell may have been making a statement in *Studland Beach* about the lasting effects of relationships in our lives compared to feelings of separation from those most important to us—seen within the sizeable empty space between the two groups of figures. In making decisions that impact relationships, we impact our own happiness and legacies as well. Therefore, *Studland Beach* represents distance from love and happiness through the fragility of life.

Bell's *Nude with Poppies* provides a quite obvious depiction of temptation through a naked figure and



Figure 3: Bell, Vanessa. *Nude with Poppies*.

two large poppies. The years 1914 through 1916 are defined by a period of abstraction in Bell's life that began with her longest affair with Duncan Grant. Their affair lasted from 1914 to 1961 and provided the framework and inspiration for a new, short-lived abstract phase in Bell's career, followed

by a quick return to a post-impressionist style more typical of Bell's work (DiPalma). Within this period, Bell painted *Nude with Poppies* in 1916 as a preliminary design for a headboard that a family friend, Mary Hutchinson had commissioned. Decorative headboards rose to popularity in the early 1900s, and this specific piece, appeared in *Vogue's* early February issue in 1919. The issue contained an article on the interior design of Hutchinson's house in which Grant and Bell were heavily involved. Beyond the headboard, another painting by Bell was included in the article and also happened to contain poppies. A few years later, Bell even asked Grant to paint her a headboard for which he chose to paint Morpheus, the God of Sleep, surrounded by two huge red poppies (Shone 164). Maybe poppies were more integral to Bell's life than we initially knew. It is not a coincidence that she chose to paint them over and over again. However, without her written acknowledgment, Bell's intentions with poppies are not explicitly known. In a rare description of her own painting, Bell wrote a letter to Roger Fry in which she worried about how her friend, Mary Hutchinson, would react to the headboard she had created: "I hope she won't be horrified to hear there's a nude figure of the most romantic description with poppies. . . . I don't think it's at all what she wanted" (qtd. in 164). Beyond her worry that Hutchinson would be appalled by the nude figure, Bell was not even sure about what her own piece meant at all. She notes that there is a woman asleep with a giant poppy, but when describing the background of the painting, she writes of "waves (I think)" and suggests that everything is "all very symbolical" (qtd. in 164), yet fails to reveal what this

symbolism truly is. It could have something to do with “the irony of Vanessa Bell painting a (single) bed for her husband’s (married) lover” (164) but with no written evidence that Bell herself felt uncomfortable, we cannot know for certain. The Bloomsbury group was no stranger to the temptations of extramarital affairs, so this incident is unsurprising for neither the Bloomsbury group nor Bell herself. It does, however, provide an interesting context for this painting and its recipient.

Because Vanessa Bell rarely depicted any nude forms at all, this nude portrait stands out in her work and is particularly interesting because Hutchison did not ask specifically for a nude on her headboard. However, the nude in question was created within the years of Bell’s abstract phase and therefore is neither very revealing nor accurate to the human form: the body is curved in unnatural ways and the torso is exceptionally long and thin; the subject’s arms are also draped oddly across her faceless head. The lack of a face calls to mind Bell’s *Studland Beach* painted four years earlier. Maybe Bell is again promoting the sense of incompleteness amidst the anonymity of the abstract woman’s frame. The poppies, as well, seem to be growing out of nowhere, and the teal background strokes would be completely unidentifiable without Bell’s letter. Bell may well be reveling in the beauty of the female form and the respect it deserves or she may be making a statement about sexual temptation, because the nude would be placed at the head of a bed and the poppy is a metaphor for addiction. In any case, *Nude with Poppies* is uncharacteristic of Bell’s post-impressionist style yet highlights her short-lived stint in abstraction encouraged by her affair with Duncan Grant.



Figure 4: Bell, Vanessa. *Interior with a Table, St Tropez*.

Painted in 1921, *Interior with a Table, St Tropez* provides a less obvious depiction of legacies and temptation through a residential still-life. This scene depicts a window to the harbor from La Maison Blanche—a house Bell and Grant rented for the winter. The small harbor is nestled on the southern French coast and had been the subject of inspiration for many artists including Matisse (208). In contrast to Bell's other paintings, this piece has a more

diverse color palette of bright hues as opposed to her usual muted hues. This type of varied color—shades of blue, green, orange, red, and purple—is rarely seen in Bell's works except for her abstract works of the 1910s, yet each color blends nicely into the next and provides an overall smooth and connected texture to the painting. In contrast, *Studland Beach* is composed of harsh divides and color-blocking while *Interior with a Table, St Tropez* blends one color to the next with precision and ease. This piece also calls to mind both Bell's still-life paintings, such as *Iceland Poppies*, and many landscape paintings she created throughout her career. *Interior with a Table, St Tropez* appears to be a mix of both subjects, with the landscape outside the window and the vase and table inside the room, and themes, with color symbolizing ambiguous temptation and the window enhancing the idea of actions and decision creating lasting impacts to the world around us. Also, this painting also seems to be a mix of styles between the realistic portrayal of the objects in *Iceland Poppies*, the semi-abstract portrayal of the beach in *Studland Beach*, and the bright colors from *Nude with Poppies*. The window to the landscape below provides a divide between the warm tones of the scenery to the cool tones in the room. To connect the harsh division, the vase of flowers and the table act as transitional points between the two scenes. The reflections on the shiny tabletop and the flowers that reach from one scene to the next connects the landscape to the room and also display Bell's mastery of complex painting techniques. Beyond the focal

point of the painting—the table and vase—Bell again makes use of shadows in her design. Shadows can be seen behind the curtains and table and reveal that the light source is indeed coming from the left. The lighting is particularly interesting since most logically the light would flow in from the window as well as from whatever light fixture illuminates the room from the inside. Yet without shadows coming towards the viewer, the window gives off no light, therefore adding to unrealistic undertones of *Interior with a Table, St Tropez*. Nonetheless, despite these undertones, Bell's mastery of theme reveals itself through shadows that conceal tantalizing colors and through legacies that lie in the impact had on perceptions of the scene.

Beyond symbolism and contrast in the shadows, the curves of the table and chair legs add depth to the piece in comparison to the strong vertical lines in the curtains and window. Through emphasized contrast in this work, the viewer is next drawn from the busy landscape with many different colors to the empty chair inside the barren room. We are then left with a feeling of wonder; what is missing? Had a figure just stood up from the chair that seems to be rocking backward? Or is the chair eternally empty? Are we to feel a sense of loss for the figure that no longer occupies this chair? Or to feel the legacy of their departure? In any case, Bell makes use of contrast to display her talent and connect the different scenes.

Critics have pointed out that, when Bell painted *Interior with a Table, St Tropez*, Bell and Duncan Grant has become increasingly similar; thus, their legacies had merged. Both artists had taken inspiration from each other and in turn, their styles had begun to morph. Uniqueness is crucial for an artist's legacy, so both Bell and Grant decided that while on this vacation, they would keep separate painting rooms and not show each other their works until the end of the trip. By the conclusion of their stay, both had returned to their old styles, so Bell and Grant were satisfied. Even art critics agreed that the artists had reverted to a more individualized style (208). Arguably, Bell used *Interior with a Table, St Tropez* to highlight her own style and made use of contrasts within the work to emphasize the existence of two worlds: one outside the window and one within the walls of La Maison Blanche. Both worlds, however connected in location, act as a metaphor for life's decisions and temptations. Will you take every opportunity to go and see the

world? Or merely stay inside and gaze from a distance. In some cases, temptation may harm us, but in others, temptation is suitable and must be accepted to gain the happiness and legacies we so desire.

Through the study of four of Vanessa Bell's paintings, her stylistic journey enhances themes of temptation and legacies. Throughout Bell's phases of post-impressionism and abstraction, she focused mainly on theme over subject matter with the vast majority of her artworks focusing on simple subjects without any unnecessary details. In both Bell's career and her personal life, temptation plays a large role in her legacy. In *Iceland Poppies*, the existence of poppies and a medicine bottle demonstrates temptations that we face every day and questions what we will choose: to avoid or accept temptation? *Studland Beach* represents the relationship aspect of temptation and how one decision can alter our lives and legacies forever. *Nude with Poppies* shows the theme of temptation most obviously in the female nude and two large poppies that symbolize addiction. Finally, *Interior with a Table, St Tropez* promotes the idea that our decisions to accept temptation may help us find true happiness and provide us with a noteworthy legacy in the end. Although Bell's life was unconventional by the standards of both her time and ours, her artwork is her legacy and provides a glimpse into Vanessa's complicated world and mind.

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