



Brockington, G., & Tobin, C. (2017). In Focus: *Abstract Painting* c.1914 by Vanessa Bell. *Tate In Focus*.
<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/in-focus/abstract-painting-vanessa-bell>

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IN FOCUS: VANESSA BELL'S *ABSTRACT PAINTING* (1914)

This set of essays was commissioned by Tate Britain for its *In Focus* series on key works in the museum's collection. As lead author and editor, I wrote three sections, and invited Claudia Tobin to contribute two further sections.

Preface [Grace Brockington]

Vanessa Bell made *Abstract Painting* in the autumn of 1914, as one of a handful of paintings and collages that experiment with non-representation in art. These were innovative works, which made a bold and early intervention in the international abstract movement. They were also private, not exhibited until after Bell's death, and shared only with her immediate circle of 'Bloomsbury group' friends. Much of the critical response to *Abstract Painting* has therefore occurred relatively recently, since Tate bought it from the art dealer Anthony d'Offay in 1975. It has since become known as a key work in Bell's oeuvre, and in the canons of British and European modernism.

This In Focus project presents the first sustained analysis of this enigmatic painting. It explores the multiple ways in which a work which appears to reject the subject-matter of lived experience can still operate in the world, whether in the local context of Bloomsbury ideas and collaborations, or in the global context of European modernism and Islamic textiles. It draws attention to the political implications of abstract art in relation to theories of individualism, the modernist reinvention of the home, and the outbreak of the First World War which occurred shortly before Bell made *Abstract Painting*. And it tests the effect of reading the painting 'in conversation' with works by Bell and other artists, both historic and contemporary.

'Test for chrome yellow' [Grace Brockington]

When Vanessa Bell (1879-1961) took stock of her work toward the end of her life, she drew up an inventory that spanned some 50 years of painting and applied art.¹ Her style had ranged widely, from early tributes to modern masters such as James McNeil Whistler (fig.1), to mid-career experiments in abstraction such as *Abstract Painting* (fig.2), and then the more legible figuration of her later years (fig.3). The process of looking back must have seemed, to some extent, like remembering the work of several different artists. In the case of *Abstract Painting*, she felt obliged to add an explanatory gloss after the title: '(Test for chrome yellow)'. With its overlapping oblongs of maroon and different shades of blue anchored to the left and bottom sides of the canvas, and free-floating blocks of brick red and candy pink, all in a rich expanse of saturated yellow, the painting is a brilliant study in colour contrasts. But it is also a test of other qualities and ideas that are crucial to our understanding of Bell's work in the 1910s, and of wider developments in modern art.

¹ The inventory was made in 1951, and is referenced in Richard Shone, *The Art of Bloomsbury: Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant*, exhibition catalogue, Tate Gallery, London 1999, p.160.

The painting is, on the one hand, an extreme example of abstraction, in the sense that it seems to repudiate the subject-matter of lived experience. It is 'purely abstract', to use Bell's own loaded phrase.² Yet it also calls into question the possibility of any such purity, by accumulating associations in the mind of the viewer, whether personal or historical, that work against the notion of a non-referential work of art. The purpose of this *In Focus* project is to explore the different ways in which *Abstract Painting* puts abstraction to the test: how it makes an early, even 'precocious' intervention in the international debate about abstract art, pushing the hypothesis that art can be autonomous to its limit;³ and how it works simultaneously to conjure up ideas about modern life and how it might be lived. The dichotomy is one that lies at the heart of the critical debate about modernism and the extent to which it can really be 'isolated in its own aesthetic field', as the art historian Christopher Green puts it, in an analysis of cubism that questions the 'caricature' of modernist painting as necessarily flat.⁴

Bell did not sell or exhibit *Abstract Painting* during her lifetime. It remained in her possession, a private experiment which she shared only with her immediate circle of 'Bloomsbury group' friends. It was also a collaborative experiment. She worked alongside Duncan Grant and Roger Fry, her partners at the Omega Workshops Ltd interior design company, to create a collective corpus of abstract and semi-abstract painting, which included works such as Grant's *Interior at 46 Gordon Square* (fig.4) and Fry's *Essay in Abstract Design* (fig.5). We can date *Abstract Painting* to late August 1914, because Grant later remembered that it was made concurrently with his *Abstract Kinetic Collage Painting with Sound* (fig.6).⁵ He added that he could not remember which of them had made the first move into absolute abstraction. In the next few months, there followed a handful of abstracts by Bell, just four of which survive. They included another painting on canvas, *Abstract Composition* (fig.7) which, like *Abstract Painting*, sets up a dramatic contrast between richly coloured shapes and a bright yellow background; and *Composition* (fig.8), a study in green, which used the recently invented cubist

² Vanessa Bell, letter to Roger Fry, 24 August 1914, in Regina Marler (ed.), *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, London 1994, p.169. Bell wrote with reference to Duncan Grant's *Abstract Kinetic Collage Painting with Sound* (1914, Tate).

³ Matthew Affron, 'Decoration and Abstraction in Bloomsbury', in Leah Dickerman (ed.), *Inventing Abstraction 1910-1925: How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art*, exhibition catalogue, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 2012, p.182.

⁴ Christopher Green, *Cubism and its Enemies*, New Haven and London 1987, p.1.

⁵ Duncan Grant, in conversation with the Tate curator David Brown, May 1976, Tate Archive A22109, 'Vanessa Bell, Artist's Catalogue File', item 6. *Abstract Kinetic Collage* can be dated to late August 1914 from Bell's letter to Fry of 24th of that month (Marler 1994, p.169).

technique of *papier collé* (a collage consisting of pasted scraps of paper) to juxtapose different textures of brushwork.⁶

It was not until 1973 that *Abstract Painting* first appeared in public, when the dealer Anthony d'Offay included it in a Bell retrospective designed to raise the profile of Bell's modernist work.⁷ In 1975, Tate's decision to buy the painting put institutional weight behind his campaign. Since then, it has become central to Bell's oeuvre, 'much the finest of Bell's surviving works in this style', as the Bloomsbury scholar Simon Watney puts it, and a key work in the broader histories of British art and European modernism.⁸ When, in 2012, the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) staged a massive survey of the birth of the international abstract movement, entitled *Inventing Abstraction 1910-1925*, it gave *Abstract Painting* 'a position at the forefront of non-objective art.'⁹ The art historian Lisa Tickner, writing about the Bloomsbury abstracts more broadly, also placed them 'at the forefront of European modernism', arguing that 'neither Picasso nor Braque made the same move to abstraction in their collages nor adopted the vivid colouring of Omega's decorative aesthetic.'¹⁰

Here, Tickner intervenes in a political debate about art and national identity, by arguing against the assumption that British art of the period was backward and provincial. Watney likewise presents Bell's experiment in abstraction as a political, cosmopolitan gesture, one that 'firmly marks her allegiance to a *European avant-garde*.'¹¹ At *Inventing Abstraction*, MoMA mapped out the complex web of associations that gave the avant-garde its sense of collective identity (fig.9). In this schematic representation of multiple relationships, journeys and correspondence, Bell connects with Pablo Picasso in Paris, and Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova in Russia, as well as with Grant, and members of the Vorticist group in London. She knew the work of others on the MoMA map – Wassily Kandinsky, František Kupka, Fernand Léger – through exhibitions and journal publications.¹² MoMA's emphasis on multiple

⁶ The fourth surviving abstract by Bell is *Abstract Composition* (1914. Oil, gouache and collage on paper, private collection, reproduced in Richard Shone, *Bloomsbury Portraits*, London 1976, p.147). A fifth abstract, belonging to Roger Fry, was accidentally destroyed by fire. An unfinished sixth, noted in the Tate online catalogue entry for *Abstract Painting*, is untraced.

⁷ *Vanessa Bell: Paintings and Drawings*, Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London, 20 November–12 December 1973.

⁸ Simon Watney, *English Post-Impressionism*, London 1980, p.100.

⁹ Affron 2012, p.183.

¹⁰ Lisa Tickner, *Modern Life and Modern Subjects: British Art in the Early Twentieth Century*, New Haven and London 2000, p.193.

¹¹ Watney 1980, p.100. Note also that in 1923, the editor of the *Burlington Magazine* described Bell as 'the most important woman painter in Europe'. R.R. Tatlock, 'The London Group', *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, vol.43, no.248, November 1923, p.250.

¹² She would have seen abstract paintings by Kupka and Léger at the Salon d'Automne in Paris in 1912, and by Kandinsky at the Allied Artists' Association exhibition in London in 1913.

international networks reacts against the linear model of modernism proposed by Alfred H. Barr in the exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* (MoMA, 1936); and also against the structure of segregated national schools that was used, for example, by Tate in its exhibition *Abstraction: Towards a New Art, Painting 1910–20* (1980), where visitors were invited to ‘tour each country separately’.¹³

Bell herself was highly conscious of her position as a British artist working against the traditions and outside the institutions of a British school of art. She was wary of what she called ‘the usual English sweetness [...] coming in and spoiling all’, particularly when she considered Bloomsbury group painting alongside that of ‘Derain, Picasso, Matisse, etc.’¹⁴ In 1918, she told her sister, the writer Virginia Woolf, that ‘there is no-one worth considering as a painter in England today [...], even with whom its worth discussing one’s business. In France this is reversed.’¹⁵ This conversation took place in March 1918, in the midst of a seemingly interminable World War. When Bell made *Abstract Painting* in August 1914, that war had only just begun. The mood of cultural reaction that was triggered by the conflict generated a new, more dangerous context for the making of modernist art. As Bell remembered: ‘the excitement and the joy had gone. The hostility of the general public was real now; no longer a ridiculous and even stimulating joke.’¹⁶ In such circumstances, the denial of representation in *Abstract Painting* becomes in itself an oblique commentary on the world outside the painting, and a form of resistance to the cultural politics of the war.¹⁷

The debate about *Abstract Painting* is complicated by the fact that Bell was herself ambivalent about abstraction, and eventually repudiated it. She worked intuitively, and she was circumspect in her response to some of the more prescriptive theories of modern art that she encountered. A letter to Woolf of 6 February 1913 conveys both the intense excitement about art that she shared with her friends, and her reluctance to commit herself to any definite position. She wrote as follows:

Clive [Bell, Vanessa’s husband] has gone to London today to lunch with Roger, Duncan, and Miss [Gertrude] Stein. Roger was here Sunday and the air is teeming with discussion on Art. They think they are getting further. I don’t know. Roger’s views of course are more mature than ours. He is at one pole and Clive at the other and I come somewhere in between on a rather shaky foothold, but none of us really agree with

¹³ The exhibition brochure, quoted in Nancy Troy, ‘Abstraction Decoration, and Collage’, *Arts Magazine*, vol. 54, issue 10, 1980, p.156.

¹⁴ Vanessa Bell, letter to Roger Fry, [July 21? 1912], in Marler 1994, p.121.

¹⁵ A.O. Bell (ed.), *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, London 1977, vol. 1 (1915–19), p.120, entry for 2 March 1918.

¹⁶ Quoted in S.P. Rosenbaum, *The Early Literary History of the Bloomsbury Group*, London 1987, p.83.

¹⁷ For a discussion of Bloomsbury art in the context of the First World War, see Grace Brockington, *Above the Battlefield British Modernism and the Peace Movement, 1900-1918*, New Haven and London, 2010.

Leonard [Woolf, Virginia's husband], whatever he may say to the contrary, and Duncan tells me it is a gross libel to say that he does either. So your husband had better reconsider his position, I think. We shall go on till doomsday I suppose.¹⁸

A fortnight earlier, Bell had mused about the relationship between form and subject-matter in a letter to Leonard Woolf that constitutes one of her few written statements about art. Representation is 'not incompatible with great art', she argued, but it is irrelevant: 'it can't be the object of a great artist to tell you facts at the cost of telling you what he feels about them.'¹⁹ She explained that form mattered to her far more than content when she looked at a picture: that she was quite capable of seeing the shapes and colours in a work, without noticing what they were meant to represent. But she also conceded that the world could be a rich source of visual inspiration, because 'certain qualities in life, what I call movement, mass, weight, have aesthetic value.'²⁰ The letter works well alongside the abstracted portraits and figure paintings that she made in 1912, such as *Studland Beach* (fig.10) and *Frederick and Jessie Etchells Painting* (fig.11). It is consistent with the predominantly figurative nature of her work, and with her comment in later years that she regretted the 'loss' of subject-matter in abstract art.²¹ But it leaves us searching for an explanation for her apparently sudden conversion to absolute abstraction in the autumn of 1914.

The Tate exhibition *The Art of Bloomsbury* (1999) demonstrated a relationship between *Abstract Painting* and Bell's other, contemporaneous work, by hanging it amongst the designs that she made for the Omega Workshops in 1913 and 1914. Established by Fry in 1913, and directed by Fry, Bell and Grant, the Omega aimed to bring the spirit of European modernism into the British home by employing progressive young artists to decorate and design furniture and textiles.²² *Abstract Painting* clearly belongs with textiles that Bell designed for the Omega, which present entirely abstract arrangements of coloured shapes (fig.12). As the art historian Christopher Reed points out, the technique of working out textile and marquetry designs on gridded paper, that was required for commercial production of the Omega wares, strongly resembles the flat, geometric arrangements of the Bloomsbury artists' abstract easel paintings. The fact that it is sometimes impossible to

¹⁸ Vanessa Bell, letter to Virginia Woolf, 6 February [1913], in Marler 1994, p.137.

¹⁹ Vanessa Bell, letter to Leonard Woolf, 22 January [1913], in *ibid.*, p.133.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.133-4.

²¹ Shone 1999, p.160. See also Fry's comment to Bell in 1919 that: 'The only picture of yours that has gone thin on my hands is the big abstract business which I have in my studio and which doesn't mean anything to me now. All the rest have got better and better.' Roger Fry, letter to Vanessa Bell, 6 April 1919, in Denys Sutton (ed.), *Letters of Roger Fry*, London 1972, p.449. There is no record of the work he refers to, which was later destroyed by fire.

²² For an analysis of the Omega Workshops, see Alexandra Gerstein (ed.), *Beyond Bloomsbury: Designs of the Omega Workshops 1913–19*, exhibition catalogue, Courtauld Gallery, London 2009.

differentiate between studies for the paintings and Omega designs, demonstrates how much the two practices had in common.²³

Reed changed the terms of the debate about *Abstract Painting* when he argued that the Bloomsbury artists' abstracts were 'a direct result of their engagement with domesticity' at the Omega Workshops, rather than a response to the formalist theories that they debated so vehemently; and moreover, that their unconventional sense of home amounted to 'the basis of a new social and aesthetic order'.²⁴ His analysis of the radical politics that underpinned Bloomsbury's reinvention of domesticity – their commitment to an 'anti-authoritarian individualism' that shaped every aspect of their lives, from their art and aesthetics, to the way they furnished their houses and conducted their relationships – points, once again, to an unexpected political subtext for the apparently apolitical structures of *Abstract Painting*.²⁵ In this reading, abstraction becomes a shorthand for a liberated, modern way of life that permeates Bell's figurative painting, as well as her abstracts and Omega designs. In her *Portrait of Mary Hutchinson* (fig.13), for example, the abstract background, which so strongly resembles the composition of *Abstract Painting*, becomes an emblem of modernity, 'giving visual form to the desire to create environments where life – and especially women's life – can be lived in a modern way.'²⁶

The contextual, historicising method employed by Reed and other Bloomsbury scholars works knowingly against the formalist aesthetics developed by Roger Fry and Clive Bell; in other words, against their conviction that the fundamental properties of art are universal, and their willingness to make comparison between works based on their visual affinities alone.²⁷ Recently, however, Tate Modern has revisited Fry's method, by displaying *Abstract Painting* alongside the sculpture *Poem Wall* (fig.14), by the Lebanese artist Saloua Raouda Choucair.²⁸ The comparison is deliberately ahistorical, a pairing of artists 'from different periods and different locations who were both pioneers of abstraction in their own place and time.'²⁹ The effect is not simply to encourage a formal analysis of the objects at a remove from their contexts, but to raise questions about those contexts arising from the particular, material features of the work. In the case of *Abstract Painting*, it draws attention to the binary qualities of flatness and

²³ Christopher Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture, and Domesticity*, New Haven 2004, p.148.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.147 and 15.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.11.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.152.

²⁷ Reed argues that his approach would have been acceptable to Fry because it is art history rather than aesthetic criticism (*Ibid.*, p.16). The exhibition *Art Made Modern: Roger Fry's Vision of Art* (Courtauld Gallery, London, 1999) demonstrated Fry's formalism in action by mounting an historically mixed display of works that mattered to him.

²⁸ *Vanessa Bell and Saloua Raouda Choucair*, Tate Modern, 10 January 2014–23 August 2015.

²⁹ 'Vanessa Bell and Saloua Raouda Choucair', www.tate.org.uk.

depth that were fundamental to debates about modernism through the twentieth century.

Set beside *Poem Wall*, with its pattern of loosely interlocking, rectilinear blocks and voids, Bell's 'flattened [...] study in frontal geometry' becomes an exploration of chromatic depth.³⁰ The jutting and receding surfaces of Choucair's white-painted wall create a richly modulated tonal palette out of light and shadow. Spatial relationships generate an approximation to colour that brings sculpture and painting closer together. In Bell's painting, we notice the same process reversed: colour relations generate a sculptural effect through the optical illusion of recession and projection from the flat plane of the canvas. The pink square floats forward from the yellow field, the turquoise pushes up from under the darker oblongs that appear to overlay it.

At the same time, however, Bell uses the tactile, material qualities of paint and canvas to emphasise the actual flatness of the work. And once again, the comparison with Choucair accentuates certain features of her painting. Her brushwork is thin and applied without impasto, revealing the weave. Shapes loosely abut, rather than overlaying one another. The expanse of yellow could be read as background, or as a complex shape in its own right, jagged on the left-hand edge, and punctured by the pink square and brick-red oblong. The shapes in the centre left, which we take to be simple rectangles when we accept the illusion of depth in the image, are in fact irregular polygons, much like the crenulated blocks in Choucair's sculpture. Likewise, the hair's-breadth of bare white canvas that rims the shapes in *Abstract Painting* finds its negative in the shadowy black crevices between Choucair's blocks. The apparent lack of finish is deliberate. Both artists could easily have smoothed over the gaps. In Choucair, it evokes her grounding in Sufi poetry, with its interlinking of discrete parts.³¹ In Bell, it exposes the difference between the physical reality of the canvas as a flat surface decorated with adjacent patches of colour held slightly apart from one another, and the illusion of depth that it is capable of supporting.

It was a difference that Bell never tried to resolve, preferring to remain, as she put it in her self-deprecating way, 'somewhere in between on a rather shaky foothold'.³² Ultimately, the relentless logic of abstraction, defined as the absolute priority of form over subject-matter, did not interest her, any more than it really interested Fry.³³ Some historians have therefore characterized her abstract phase as an arid intellectual exercise, emotionally limiting and therefore quickly abandoned.³⁴ But on closer inspection, it becomes apparent that Bell's abstracts do not deliver the sort of 'conceptual purity' that the idea

³⁰ Affron 2012, p.182.

³¹ Jessica Morgan, 'Saloua Raouda Choucair, Poem Wall 1963–5: Summary', August 2010, www.tate.org.uk.

³² Vanessa Bell, letter to Virginia Woolf, 6 February [1913], in Marler 1994, p.137.

³³ On Fry's reservations about abstraction, see Reed 2004, pp.147–8.

³⁴ Shone 1999, p.160. Frances Spalding, *Vanessa Bell*, London 1983, p.125.

of absolute abstraction demands.³⁵ They are vital, sensuous paintings, with their rich colours and textured brushwork, not so much the ‘struggle toward the immaterial’ that Kandinsky proclaimed in 1911, as a celebration of the material of paint and the process of painting for their own sakes.³⁶ They are also equivocal, inquisitive works, ‘profoundly saturated’, as Watney remarks of *Abstract Painting*, ‘with ideas concerning the nature and status of painting itself’.³⁷ The following essays pursue some of those lines of enquiry, as they lead us deeper into the work, and out into the world in which it operated.

Bell in Europe [Grace Brockington]

The abstract movement was a colossal development in western art. As the curator Leah Dickerman explains in *Inventing Abstraction 1910-1925* (2013), it ‘amounted to as great a rewriting of the rules of artistic production as had been seen since the Renaissance’.³⁸ It was correspondingly competitive, to the extent that some early examples of abstract work were later backdated.³⁹ Vanessa Bell did not claim priority in this way, but her advocates have nonetheless emphasized her originality as an abstract artist. Lisa Tickner asserts that her experimental work of 1914 was ‘in the forefront of early modernism: neither Picasso nor Braque made the same move to abstraction in their collages’.⁴⁰ Richard Shone insists that ‘in 1914 Bell had seen virtually no non-figurative work by other artists’, and that her abstracts derived solely from her own painting and decorative design.⁴¹

Yet as Dickerman points out, there are other, potentially more productive, ways of assessing the role of individuals in the abstract movement. Abstraction was not the brain-child of an isolated genius. Rather, it was ‘an invention with multiple first steps, multiple creators, multiple heralds, and multiple rationales’, the pioneers of which were ‘far more interconnected than is generally acknowledged’.⁴² This essay will situate Bell’s *Abstract Painting* (fig.1) within the international abstract movement, not by demarcating her unique achievement, but by exploring the connections between her work and those of other abstract artists across Europe.

³⁵ Ibid., p.125.

³⁶ Wassily Kandinsky, letter to Franz Marc, 2 October 1911, quoted in Leah Dickerman, ‘Inventing Abstraction’, in Leah Dickerman (ed.), *Inventing Abstraction 1910-1925: How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art*, exhibition catalogue, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 2012, p.15.

³⁷ Watney 1980, p.101.

³⁸ Leah Dickerman, ‘Inventing Abstraction’, in Leah Dickerman (ed.), *Inventing Abstraction 1910–195: How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art*, exhibition catalogue, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 2012, p.13. My account of the abstract movement is indebted to Dickerman’s excellent essay.

³⁹ Ibid., p.18.

⁴⁰ Lisa Tickner, *Modern Life and Modern Subjects: British Art in the Early Twentieth Century*, New Haven and London 2000, p.193.

⁴¹ Richard Shone, *The Art of Bloomsbury: Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant*, exhibition catalogue, Tate Gallery, London 1999, p.160.

⁴² Dickerman 2012, p.18.

By the time Bell made *Abstract Painting* in the autumn of 1914, the practice of abstraction had spread rapidly and widely across Europe and North America, involving many of the major players in the modernist movement. The ground had been prepared gradually over many decades, but the key developments occurred within the space of two or three years, and with explosive impact on artists and their viewers.⁴³ The break with external reference came in December 1911, when Wassily Kandinsky showed *Composition V* (1911, private collection) at the first Blaue Reiter exhibition in Munich, and published *Concerning the Spiritual in Art (Über das Geistige in der Kunst)* as a manifesto for abstraction. During 1912, a handful of other artists joined the pursuit. In February, Arthur Dove showed a series of pastel abstracts in New York, in which the forms were an ‘extraction’, as he later put it, from the material of daily life.⁴⁴ In July, Robert Delaunay exhibited his semi-abstract *Windows (Les Fenêtres)* series in Zurich, with its prismatic, polychrome shattering of views through a window. And in October, Francis Picabia, Ferdinand Léger and František Kupka all showed radically abstract works at the Salon d’Automne in Paris.⁴⁵

Therafter, the movement escalated. Bell’s discovery of abstraction may have been made independently, or semi-independently, but she shared it with dozens of other artists. By the end of 1914, they included Kandinsky’s collaborators in the Blaue Reiter group, among them Auguste Macke who, like Bell, used abstraction to analyse colour combinations and their interaction with different shapes and textures. The worldly, iconoclastic vision of the Italian Futurists promoted abstraction as an art of modern life. In Russia, Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov invented rayonism, which depicted the rays of light striking an object, rather than the object itself. In Paris, the global ‘capital of the arts’, artists of many nationalities joined the abstract revolution, from the Dutchman Piet Mondrian, whose move to radical abstraction began with his tree series of 1912; to the Ukrainian-born Sonia Delaunay-Terk, who in 1913 collaborated with the poet Blaise Cendrars to make an abstract book, *Prose on the Trans-Siberian Railway and of Little Jehanne of France (La Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France)*; and the Finnish painter Léopold Survage, who made *Coloured Rhythm (Rythme coloré)* (1913, Museum of Modern Art, New York) as an early contribution to the new art of cinematography.

These artists, and many others, participated in the international community that constituted the abstract movement. The interwoven nature of that community is demonstrated by the diagram of personal acquaintance which prefaces *Inventing Abstraction*, and which enmeshes over 80 artists across Europe and America in an intricate cat’s cradle of encounter and collaboration (fig.2). Bell herself is linked directly with Pablo Picasso, Goncharova and

⁴³ For the long history of abstraction, see *Aux origines de l’abstraction, 1800–1914*, exhibition catalogue, Musée d’Orsay, Paris 2004.

⁴⁴ Arthur Dove, ‘Notes by Arthur G. Dove’, in *Dove Exhibition*, exhibition catalogue, The Intimate Gallery, New York 1929, n.p.

⁴⁵ For details of these works, see Dickerman 2012, pp.16–17.

Larionov, and the Vorticist group in London (specifically Percy Wyndham Lewis, David Bomberg, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and Lawrence Atkinson), as well as with Duncan Grant from her own Bloomsbury group.⁴⁶ One should also add her friend Roger Fry, both as an abstract artist in his own right, and as one of the ‘connectors’ whom the diagram highlights as instrumental in the process of linking people and disseminating material.⁴⁷ Fry’s work as a curator, bringing modern European art to London, and his critical defence of ‘post-impressionism’, as he loosely termed the new art, gave Bell access to art and ideas that transformed her creative practice.

Connectors enable associations between people whose paths might never otherwise cross. Bell had no direct contact with abstract artists such as Delaunay-Terk or Hans Arp, or with the poet and critic Guillaume Apollinaire, but she knew Picasso and his work, and he knew and worked creatively with all these people. The abstract movement was an ‘imagined community’ in the historian Benedict Anderson’s sense of the term, held together by knowledge of one another’s work and ideas, and by the virtual meeting-places of galleries and publications.⁴⁸ Like the ‘imagined community’ of the nation-state, but unconfined by national borders, it flourished under certain conditions.⁴⁹ Modern transport (steam-powered trains and boats, the first automobiles), communication technologies (telegraph, telephone, radio), a phenomenally efficient and coordinated global postal service, the cheap mass-production and circulation of print media, notably art journals and ‘little magazines’, a burgeoning exhibition culture and the arrival of international loan exhibitions: all these vehicles for mass communication and international travel enabled people, images and ideas associated with the abstract movement to move rapidly across the western world.

As a well-travelled woman, living in London, deeply involved in the modern art movement, with the time and means to visit galleries, and herself included in several major exhibitions, Bell was ideally placed to track the international abstract movement as it unfolded.⁵⁰ Take, for example, her letter to Grant of 25 March 1914, recounting ‘a most successful time in Paris’ where her party,

⁴⁶ Bell did not meet Goncharova and Larionov until after the First World War, so I do not discuss the connection here.

⁴⁷ For a discussion of connectors, see Dickerman 2012, pp.20–22.

⁴⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 1983.

⁴⁹ For a discussion of the systems and structures that supported international communities in the period, see F.S.L. Lyons, *Internationalism in Europe, 1815–1914*, Leyden 1963.

⁵⁰ Bell showed, for example, at the first Allied Artists’ Association exhibition (London, 1908), the *Exposition de Quelques Indépendants Anglais* (Paris, 1912), *The Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition* (London, 1912), the first exhibition of the Grafton Group (London, 1913), *Twentieth-Century Art: A Review of Modern Movements* (London, 1914), *The New Movement in Art* (Birmingham and London, 1917) and *Englische modern Malerei* (Zurich, 1918).

which included Fry, 'had a very exciting time with pictures'.⁵¹ They visited the modernist writer and salon hostess Gertrude Stein – another connector – whose collection of modern art included works by Cézanne, Picasso, Braque and Matisse, and who took them to visit Picasso in his studio. They also saw the collection of Michael Stein (Gertrude's brother) and Matisse's studio, and visited the major dealers in modern art: Daniel-Henri Kahnweiler, where they 'saw the Picasso you liked'; and Ambroise Vollard, to whom Fry proposed an exhibition of modern art showing new artists alongside Cézanne and the Impressionists. Projected for the winter of 1914, but presumably curtailed by the outbreak of the First World War, it would have completed a trilogy of post-impressionist exhibitions at the Grafton Galleries, London.⁵² 'It seemed rather a good idea', commented Bell.

What works might feature in an exhibition curated around the theme of *Vanessa Bell and the International Abstract Movement*? A priority would be the radically abstract paintings that Bell would have seen at the Salon d'Automne of 1912, such as Kupka's *Amorpha, Fugue in Two Colours* (*Amorpha, fugue à deux couleurs*) (fig.3), which caused such a stir in the international press.⁵³ Picasso would be crucial, despite his ambivalence about abstraction.⁵⁴ We would certainly request his cubist *Pots and Lemon* (*Pots et citron*) (fig.4), which Bell and her husband Clive Bell bought from Kahnweiler in 1911. For Clive Bell, it epitomised the priority of form over subject matter which, he argued, distinguished real art.⁵⁵ In 1912, Kahnweiler loaned thirteen Picassos to Fry's *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition*, which also included works by Bell.⁵⁶ In his Preface to the catalogue, Fry traced a trajectory within the selection, from the early, figurative portraiture, to the radical abstraction of cubist paintings such as *Head of a Man with a Moustache* (*Tête d'homme*) (fig.5).⁵⁷ When Bell visited Picasso's studio in Montparnasse, she described his *papiers collés* as 'amazing arrangements of coloured papers and bits of wood which somehow do give me great satisfaction'.⁵⁸ With reference to this, we might select a *papier collé* such as *Still Life* (*Nature morte*) (fig.6), with its arrangement of painted wood and upholstery fringe, for our wall of Picassos.

Kandinsky was key to the development of abstract art in Britain and his reception there suggests new ways of thinking about Bell's *Abstract*

⁵¹ Vanessa Bell, letter to Duncan Grant, [25 March 1914], in Regina Marler (ed.), *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, London 1993, pp.160–62.

⁵² The other two Grafton Gallery exhibitions were *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* (1910) and *The Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition* (1912).

⁵³ Dickerman 2012, p.16.

⁵⁴ For Picasso's thoughts on the problem of abstraction, see Christan Zervos, 'Conversation avec Picasso', *Cahiers d'Art*, special Picasso issue, 1935, p.173.

⁵⁵ The painting is reproduced in *Art* (London 1914), Clive Bell's manifesto for formalism.

⁵⁶ For details of Bell's exhibits, see Anna Gruetzner Robins, *Modern Art in Britain*, exhibition catalogue, Barbican Art Gallery, London 1997, p.100.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.73.

⁵⁸ Marler 1993, p.160.

Painting.⁵⁹ His work was available to her in exhibition throughout her experimental phase, and Simon Watney notes a similarity between the woodcut version of her painting *The Tub* (1917, Tate) and Kandinsky's woodcuts.⁶⁰ He first began showing in London in 1909 with the Allied Artists Association (AAA), an exhibiting society modelled on the progressive, international Salon des Indépendants. It was the 'pure visual music' of his submission to the AAA of July 1913 that converted a sceptical Fry to the possibilities of abstract art.⁶¹ He could, Fry explained, no 'longer doubt the possibility of emotional expression by such abstract visual signs' as he found in, for example, Kandinsky's *Improvisation 29* (fig.7). When Fry stayed with the collector Michael Ernest Sadler earlier that year, Sadler wrote to Kandinsky that Fry had been 'deeply interested in your drawings. He asked if I would lend them for an exhibition which he and some friends are organizing next week in London, and of course I gladly consented'.⁶² Fry did indeed show two watercolours by Kandinsky at the first Grafton Group exhibition of March 1913. They are now unidentified, but Sadler's collection of Kandinskys was extensive, and included abstracts such as *Fragment II for Composition VII* (fig.8), which we would wish to borrow for our *Bell in Europe* survey.

Our exhibition would also stretch to include 'the opposition' to Fry and Bloomsbury that became the Vorticist group, and that answered the challenge of Futurism with angular abstractions emphasizing the arrested energy of modern life, rather than its speed and mobility.⁶³ Bell had the opportunity to see works such as Bomberg's *In the Hold* (fig.9), Gaudier-Brzeska's *Red Stone Dancer* (fig.10) and Jacob Epstein's *Female Figure in Flenite* (fig.11), at various exhibitions in London, sometimes alongside her own work.⁶⁴ She

⁵⁹ For Kandinsky's early reception in Britain, see Adrian Glew, '“Every work of art is the child of its time, often it is the mother of our emotions”', *Tate Etc.*, issue 7, Summer 2006, www.tate.org.uk; and Caroline Maclean, 'Russian Aesthetics in Britain: Kandinsky, Sadler, and *Rhythm*', in Rebecca Beasley and Philip Ross Bullock (eds), *Russia in Britain 1880–1940: From Melodrama to Modernism*, Oxford 2013, pp.145–61.

⁶⁰ Watney 1980, p.103. Bell's woodcut version of *The Tub* was published by the Omega Workshops in *Original Woodcuts by Various Artists*, London 1918.

⁶¹ Roger Fry, 'The Allied Artists', *The Nation*, 2 August 1913, pp.676–7.

Christopher Reed discusses Fry's ambivalence about abstraction in *Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture, and Domesticity*, New Haven and London 2004, pp.147–8.

⁶² Michael Sadler, letter to Wassily Kandinsky, 11 March 1913, Tate Archive 8221/2/50.

⁶³ For a discussion of modernism and stillness, see Claudia Tobin, '“The Double Life of a Still Life”: Rhythm, Vibration, and the Poetics of Stillness from Paul Cézanne to Wallace Stevens', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Bristol 2015.

⁶⁴ Bomberg's *In the Hold* showed twice in London in 1914, first in March with the London Group, then in May at *Twentieth Century Art*, where Bell also exhibited. Epstein's *Female Figure in Flenite* was exhibited as *Carving in Flenite* with the Allied Artists Association in July 1913; and with the London

would doubtless also have seen a copy of the Vorticist magazine *Blast* (fig.12) which came out in July 1914, and which reproduced a number of Vorticist paintings, including Lewis's *Portrait of an Englishwoman* (fig.13). Fry and his circle were ostentatiously excluded from Vorticist platforms, and excluded Lewis and his allies in their turn, but Vorticism was nonetheless a presence and a stimulus in Bell's visual world, even if she found Lewis's political manoeuvrings 'inconceivably stupid'.⁶⁵

Our exhibition could culminate in a selection of work by European artists with whom Bell had no demonstrable connection, but whose practice ran parallel to hers: Robert Delaunay (fig.14) and Sonia Delaunay-Terk (fig.15), who used colour contrasts to create effects of pattern and movement in their abstract painting; and Hans Arp and Sophie Taeuber-Arp who, like Bell at the Omega Workshops Ltd, worked at the intersection between abstract painting and decorative design. Arp responded to the Cubist technique of *papier collé* by sewing abstract designs in needlepoint (fig.16). Taeuber-Arp translated her geometrical abstractions into embroideries such as *Composition Vertical-horizontal* (*Composition verticale-horizontale*) (fig.17). Such parallels between artists fit the pattern of multiple, converging inventions that characterized the abstract movement as a whole, and that militate against a narrative of singular innovation.⁶⁶

More than anything, however, our exhibition would leave an impression of stylistic miscellany, and of the absence of any visual relationship between Bell's *Abstract Painting* and the various models on which she might have drawn.⁶⁷ She may have seen these works, or ones like them, but they were clearly not the direct inspiration for her own abstract compositions. Historians have therefore looked to other, more immediate sources, namely her designs for Fry's Omega Workshops decorative arts company, and the simplifying tendency in her figurative painting from about 1912 onwards.⁶⁸ These different aspects of her own practice are certainly relevant, and Christopher Reed makes a compelling case for the political implications that Bell's abstract paintings acquired through their domestic associations.⁶⁹ However, I would contend that her response to European abstraction was stronger than might appear from the visual evidence. The key to the connection lies, I would argue, in the extensive literature that surrounded the abstract movement, and in the strong theoretical current that propelled its innovations. Like the Arts & Crafts, for example, and unlike Art Nouveau, abstraction was not stylistically

Group in March 1914. Gaudier-Brzeska's *Red Stone Dancer* showed at the second Grafton Group exhibition of January 1914, where Bell also exhibited.

⁶⁵ Vanessa Bell, letter to Roger Fry, [25 May 1921], in Marler (ed.) 1993, p.251.

⁶⁶ Dickerman 2012, p.18.

⁶⁷ Francis Spalding, Bell's biographer, identifies a stylistic similarity between Kupka's *Amphora, fugue à deux couleurs* (fig.2) and Bell's *Abstract Painting*, although to my eye it is not immediately obvious. See Francis Spalding, *Vanessa Bell*, London 1983, p.125.

⁶⁸ Shone 1999, p.160. Reed 2004, p.148.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.147–63.

or technically unified as a movement. Rather, it was held together by personal connections, shared ideas, and the challenge posed by the concept of abstract art, what Dickerman calls ‘the sheer difficulty of thinking such a radically new idea’.⁷⁰

Bell had access to writing about abstraction, as well as to abstract art, before she tried her hand at the genre, and she and her friends debated the new art intensely. The voluminous textual response to abstraction played a large part in defining the challenge. For example, she would have read Fry’s prediction in his Introduction to the catalogue of the *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition*, that the ‘logical extreme’ of modern art ‘would undoubtedly be the attempt to give up all resemblance to natural form, and to create a purely abstract language of form’.⁷¹ She would probably have read his review of the AAA exhibition of 1913, in which he celebrated Kandinsky’s ability to create ‘complete pictures’ out of the interplay of form and colour alone.⁷² She could have read about Kandinsky in other publications too: in the ‘little magazine’ *Rhythm*, where an article of 1912 by Michael T.H. Sadler (son of Michael Ernest Sadler, later known as Michael Sadler) presents the first discussion in English of Kandinsky’s *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*; in the younger Sadler’s translation of the book, published in April 1914 as *The Art of Spiritual Harmony*; and in Wadsworth’s review, which appeared in the first edition of *Blast*.⁷³

Kandinsky’s writing, mediated by his English commentators, suggests ways of thinking about Bell’s *Abstract Painting*, and of drawing it into conversation with the wider abstract movement. Sadler warns against the tendency for abstract art, to become ‘pure pattern-making’, an exercise in decoration.⁷⁴ He is drawn instead to Kandinsky’s theory that abstraction intensifies the expressive qualities of an image because it conveys the ‘inner soul of persons and things’, rather than the ‘outer conventions of form and colour.’⁷⁵ It is a question that conditions the debate surrounding Bell’s abstract painting: whether, as David Peters Corbett complains, she presents ‘only colour, pigment and composition within a decorative order’, a technical exercise that,

⁷⁰ Dickerman 2012, p.15.

⁷¹ Roger Fry, Introduction to the catalogue of *The Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition*, London 1912, reprinted as ‘The French Post-Impressionists’, in Roger Fry, *Vision and Design*, London 1920.

⁷² Roger Fry, ‘The Allied Artists’, *The Nation*, 2 August 1913, pp.676-77, reprinted in Christopher Reed (ed.), *A Roger Fry Reader*, Chicago and London, 1996, p.153.

⁷³ M.T.H. Sadler, ‘after Gauguin’, *Rhythm*, vol. 1 no. 4, 1912, pp.23-29. Wassily Kandinsky, *The Art of Spiritual Harmony*, translated with an introduction by M.T.H. Sadler, London 1914. Edward Wadsworth, ‘Inner Necessity’, *Blast*, 1914, pp.119–25.

⁷⁴ Sadler 1912, p.29.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.24.

according to Richard Shone, convinced her intellectually but not emotionally;⁷⁶ or whether, as Fry argued, she was committed above all to ‘the process of trying to express an idea’, an idea which Reed takes to be that of modernity itself.⁷⁷

The evidence of the work is subjective. *Abstract Painting* may or may not induce a spiritual vibration of the sort that Kandinsky anticipated. And as Reed reminds us, there is no visual connection between the Bloomsbury artists’ geometrical compositions and Kandinsky’s swirling improvisations.⁷⁸ Yet Wadsworth quotes Kandinsky’s dictum that ‘form alone, even if it is quite abstract and geometrical, has its inner timbre’, while Sadler’s account of Kandinsky’s psychological theory of colour, and the ways in which colours relate to each other ‘both singly and in combination’, recalls the arrangement of coloured shapes in *Abstract Painting*, either clustered together in the corner or floating in isolation across the canvas.⁷⁹ The idea of abstraction, communicated verbally through texts and discussion, seems just as likely a source for Bell’s painterly experiments, perhaps even more so, than the practical examples to which she had access.

Abstract Painting ‘firmly marks [Bell’s] allegiance to a *European* avant-garde’, as Watney asserts.⁸⁰ It does so by presenting an original solution – one of many original solutions – to a problem which was shared by artists across Europe, namely, how to realize the idea of an entirely non-figurative art. The fact that Bell participated in such a wide-reaching debate about abstraction, which played out through texts and well as images, need not diminish the scale of her own achievement. Rather, it widens the possibilities of interpretation, suggesting contexts and connections for a phase of her career which, as Sadler warns, ‘leads nowhere’ when seen in isolation.⁸¹

Form [Grace Brockington]

Bell made *Abstract Painting* (fig.1) during a particularly convivial phase of her life. She was enjoying the solidarity of her circle of friends, the Bloomsbury group, and she was working closely with other artists, notably Duncan Grant and Roger Fry. They painted together, often from the same subject, and they were co-directors of the Omega Workshops Ltd, the interior design company that Fry established in 1913. A photograph of the Omega studio draws attention to the communal spirit of the enterprise, projecting an atmosphere of

⁷⁶ David Peters Corbett, *The World in Paint: Modern Art and Visuality in England, 1848–1914*, Manchester and New York 2004, pp.230–31. Shone 1999, p.160.

⁷⁷ Roger Fry, ‘Independent Gallery: Vanessa Bell and Othon Friesz’, *The New Statesman*, 3 June 1922, pp.237–8, in Reed (ed.) 1996, p.348. Reed 2004, p.152.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.148.

⁷⁹ Wadsworth 2014, p.121. The translation is Wadsworth’s own. Sadler 1912, p.26.

⁸⁰ Watney 1980, p.100.

⁸¹ Sadler 1912, p.29.

camaraderie that was central to the company's ideology (fig.2). Indeed, the principle of collaboration was so important that all work was submitted unsigned to a central pool, to be identified only by the company logo.

Bell's abstracts were not pooled in this way, but they grew out of her designs for Omega textiles, and belonged to the same culture of creative collaboration.⁸² She worked on them alongside Fry and Grant, to the extent that Grant later said that he could not remember who had first led the way toward absolute abstraction.⁸³ The episode lasted just a few months, from the autumn of 1914 into 1915, after which all the Bloomsbury artists returned to a more figurative style. Their surviving abstracts are small in number but significant. They include works such as Grant's *Abstract Kinetic Collage Painting with Sound* (fig.3) and Fry's *Essay in Abstract Design* (fig.4), as well as *Abstract Painting* and the handful of Bell's other abstracts.⁸⁴

There are distinct similarities between these works, which mark them as belonging to the Bloomsbury corpus: their geometrical structures and rich colours;⁸⁵ the use of cubist techniques of collage and *papier collé*, which Bell encountered when she visited Picasso's studio in early 1914;⁸⁶ and the fact that the core works are entirely non-representational. They are therefore often discussed together as a collective statement of Bloomsbury's reaction to European modernism, their experiments in modern living, or indeed, their lack of enthusiasm for abstract art. However, as the art historian Simon Watney reminds us, 'Bloomsbury abstraction does not present us with a single unified style.'⁸⁷ There are variations within this body of work which point to differences of preoccupation amongst the artists, and which are accentuated by their very proximity. I shall examine these variations, with a view to

⁸² For the relationship between the Omega Workshops and abstract painting, see Christopher Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture, and Domesticity*, New Haven 2004, pp.147–63.

⁸³ Duncan Grant, in conversation with the Tate curator David Brown, May 1976, Tate Archive A22109, 'Vanessa Bell, Artist's Catalogue File', item 6.

⁸⁴ Four other abstracts by Bell survive: *Composition* (c. 1914, oil and gouache on *papier collé*, Museum of Modern Art, New York), *Abstract Composition* (1914, oil on canvas, private collection, reproduced in Richard Shone, *Bloomsbury Portraits*, London 1993, p.134), and *Abstract Composition* (1914, oil, gouache and collage on paper, private collection, reproduced in Richard Shone, *Bloomsbury Portraits*, London 1976, p.147). A fifth abstract, belonging to Roger Fry, was accidentally destroyed by fire. An unfinished sixth, noted in the Tate online catalogue entry for *Abstract Painting*, is untraced.

⁸⁵ Reed observes that Bloomsbury's 'geometrical style' distinguishes their abstracts from Wassily Kandinsky's 'free-flowing compositions'. Reed 2004, p.148.

⁸⁶ She described them as 'amazing arrangements of coloured papers and bits of wood which somehow do give me great satisfaction.' Vanessa Bell, letter to Duncan Grant, Wednesday [25 March 1914], in Regina Marler (ed.), *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, London 1994, p.160.

⁸⁷ Simon Watney, *English Post-Impressionism*, London 1980, p.103.

establishing the distinctive qualities of Bell's abstracts within the Bloomsbury corpus, and the ideas they might convey.

The core of my argument depends on a distinction that I propose between Bell's abstracts and those of Grant, broadly defined as the social versus the architectural. Grant made dense, crowded compositions which evoke built structures, both overtly, through devices such as the peaked roof shape which occurs in *Abstract Collage* (fig.5) and *In Memoriam: Rupert Brooke* (fig.6), and inferentially, through the effect of collapsing columns in *Abstract Kinetic Collage*, and the diagrammatic sequence of differently coloured 'rooms' in *Abstract Composition* (1915, Hoffmann Collection, Berlin). Their close relationship with a semi-abstract collage such as *Interior at 46 Gordon Square* (fig.7), which uses the same technique to delineate a view across a room, encourages us to read into them the spacial preoccupations of an architectural plan.

Bell's abstracts, on the other hand, draw our attention to the relationships between shapes, whether grouped together or suspended in isolation. Whereas Grant crams his surface with an all-over patchwork of shapes, Bell floats them against a more-or-less uniform background, creating effects of space and separation, and the 'monolithic' sense of scale that Watney observes in *Abstract Painting*.⁸⁸ Within that space, shapes hang singly or cluster together in a block. In *Abstract Painting*, the brick-red rectangle is the smallest shape in the picture, but its placement, alone and in the centre of the canvas, gives it a disproportionate significance. The pale pink square at top right competes for our attention, conspicuously different in colour and shape. It holds in balance the outgrowth of rectangles in the opposite corner, which combine in a jagged mass of contrasting and complementary colours.

'Bloomsbury's painters imagined an alternative domesticity', argues the art historian Christopher Reed, but in the case of Grant's abstracts, it is one without inhabitants.⁸⁹ His rooms are empty. The sofa in *Interior* is unoccupied. *In Memoriam*, which was so titled retrospectively, after the death of the poet Rupert Brooke in April 1915, is precisely about the loss of a living presence. Like a tomb, it substitutes an architectural structure – the black outline of walls and roof – for the human body. In contrast, Bell's abstracts suggest the human, not through direct representation, but through an association with her own portraits and figure studies, and with the theories of political and social relationships that were formulated by her friends and debated amongst them.

The abstracted portraits and group paintings that Bell made in 1912–13 opened the way for her 'purely abstract' paintings and collages in several ways.⁹⁰ As noted by her biographer, Frances Spalding, the blank, geometrical shapes in her abstracts were the 'logical outcome' of her practice of

⁸⁸ Watney 1980, p.100.

⁸⁹ Reed 2004, p.6.

⁹⁰ 'Purely abstract' is Bell's term for Grant's *Abstract Kinetic Collage*. See her letter to Roger Fry of 24 August 1914, in Regina Marler (ed.), *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, London 1994, p.169.

simplifying the human form to the point where she eliminated facial features altogether.⁹¹ The backgrounds of her portraits also demonstrate a trajectory toward abstraction, from *Frederick and Jessie Etchells Painting* (fig.8), in which the garden view is rendered as broad, flat bands of colour, to the entirely abstract setting of *Portrait of Mary Hutchinson* (fig.9), which echoes the cluster of rectangles in *Abstract Painting*, as well as its palette of blue, yellow and red.⁹²

Elsewhere in this In Focus project, Claudia Tobin argues that *Abstract Painting* still bears the trace of its origin in portraiture; that the red rectangle at its centre ‘can be understood as an abbreviation, even a denial, of the faces that occupied the focal point’ of portraits such as *Virginia Woolf* (1911–12, National Portrait Gallery).⁹³ Far from achieving absolute pictorial autonomy, Bell’s abstracts are haunted by human subject-matter. Here, I would extend this reading, to argue that they echo the preoccupations of her *group* portraits in particular. In these ‘conversation pieces’, Bell explores the relationships between people in compositions that are both formalized and atmospheric. The details of facial expression, costume and environment are erased. Instead, subtle effects of intimacy and isolation, conversation and companionable silence, are conveyed through her subjects’ demeanour – their shape in profile – and their configuration across the canvas.

Bell’s move toward abstraction in her figure painting achieves ‘the distillation – rather than the rejection or transcendence – of social experience’, as the art historian Lisa Tickner demonstrates in her brilliant analysis of the sequence of paintings that culminate in *Studland Beach* (fig.10).⁹⁴ Tickner shows how the painting’s ‘self-conscious geometry’, the way in which the two figures in the foreground draw together in ‘a single bisected shape’, creates a sense of ‘emotional contact’ between the subjects.⁹⁵ The composition also generates an atmosphere of ‘pervasive melancholy’ by isolating figures against the yellow-white of the sand and bathing tent, whether singly or in groups.⁹⁶ In *Summer Camp* (fig.11), by contrast, the geometry of the group holds it together in an easy familiarity. A pentagon of figures – I identify the fifth as the unseen artist or viewer, situated below the bottom edge of the picture – revolves around the pivotal point of the woman in blue, the v-line of her dress rhyming with the triangle of the tent behind and the forks of her companions’ knees. Other paintings in this set, such as *Conversation at Asheham* (fig.12) and *A Conversation* (fig.13), explore the dynamic between three figures in

⁹¹ Frances Spalding, *Vanessa Bell*, London 1983, p.125.

⁹² For an analysis of abstraction in Bell’s portraits, see Reed 2004, pp.148–52.

⁹³ Claudia Tobin, ‘Colour’, [Tate, please could you supply a web reference or could we use a hyperlink in the text?].

⁹⁴ Lisa Tickner, ‘Vanessa Bell: *Studland Beach*, domesticity and “significant form”’, *Representations*, vol. 65, Winter 1999, p.66. The paper is reproduced in Lisa Tickner, *Modern Life and Modern Subjects: British Art in the Early Twentieth Century*, New Haven and London, 2000, pp.117–41.

⁹⁵ Tickner 1999, p.67.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.68.

which one, set apart, commands the attention of the others. In all these paintings, the configuration of subjects, in groups or in isolation, evokes the arrangement of shapes, single or clustered together, in Bell's abstracts.

There is a politics to Bell's conversation pieces, which also pervades her abstract paintings: the politics surrounding 'the relationship of a part to the whole', that the literary historian Regenia Gagnier identifies as 'the key tension of the period.'⁹⁷ Reed and others have shown how the defence of individual liberty underpinned the Bloomsburys group's thinking in a number of areas, political and aesthetic alike.⁹⁸ 'The desire to ground modernism in anti-authoritarian individualism was fundamental to Bloomsbury'.⁹⁹ They rejected prescriptive structures of thought and social organization: grand theories, consistent styles, artistic groups with memberships and manifestos. Instead, they cultivated the loose, informal, improvised model of the conversation, which tolerates, indeed depends on difference, and assumes a more or less equal relationship between the participants.¹⁰⁰

In Bell's group portraits, these patterns of speech and of social organization play out in her sketches of friends at home, talking or just being together, at their ease. In her abstracts, they are 'distilled' in the patterning of shapes across the canvas, and the ways in which colours and shapes modify each other in juxtaposition. *Abstract Painting* is not a manifesto for individualism: for Bell that would have been too formulaic. But it does pose the question of how a part might relate to the whole without being subsumed into it; of how a pink square speaks to a maroon oblong across an expanse of yellow, and how all these shapes and colours adapt to the exchange. The painting is, fundamentally, a study in relationships, and the ways in which meaning is generated through differentiation. That is surely what Bell meant when she later described it as a 'Test for chrome yellow'.¹⁰¹

Colour [Claudia Tobin]

⁹⁷ Regenia Gagnier, 'Morris's Ethics, Cosmopolitanism, and Globalisation', *The Journal of William Morris Studies*, Summer and Winter 2005, pp.9. Gagnier writes with reference to the late nineteenth century, but the question was also central to political debate in the early twentieth.

⁹⁸ See, for example, Reed 2004, pp.10–13; and Christopher Green, 'Into the twentieth century: Roger Fry's project seen from 2000', in Christopher Green, ed., *Art Made Modern: Roger Fry's Vision of Art*, London, 1999, pp.13–30.

⁹⁹ Reed 2004, p.11.

¹⁰⁰ I discuss the theme of conversation in Bell's work in my article 'A "Lavender Talent" or "The Most Important Woman Painter in Europe"? Reassessing Vanessa Bell', *Art History*, vol. 36, no. 1, February 2013, pp.140–42.

¹⁰¹ Bell's gloss on the painting in the inventory of her work that she made in 1951, referenced in Richard Shone, *The Art of Bloomsbury*, exhibition catalogue, Tate Gallery, London 1999, p.160.

A 'great deal of excitement about colour'.¹⁰² This was Vanessa Bell's defining memory of an intense period of artistic experiment in the early 1910s. 'I suppose it was the result of trying first to change everything into colour', she continues, '[i]t certainly made me inclined also to destroy the solidity of objects'. She produced *Abstract Painting* (fig.1) in 1914, during this time of extraordinary innovation in the use of colour in art. Her observations about the metamorphosis of objects into colour call attention to the central theme that I shall pursue in this paper. What do her experiments with colour combinations in her abstract work reveal about the impact of her discovery of colour? What significance has this had for her critical reception? Situating *Abstract Painting* in the context of debates concerning colour and form, sensation and synaesthesia, which preoccupied her Bloomsbury group circle, and European painters more widely, in the early twentieth century, I shall examine the transformative properties of colour in Bell's practice, and its capacity to conjure an expressivity equivalent to speech.

Bell's elimination of representational content in *Abstract Painting* invites us to consider the subtle modulation of affective and emotional qualities through nuances of tone and texture. While dark-hued red rectangles dominate the visual field, the textured pink square surprises the eye and competes for attention, in what art historian Matthew Affron describes as an 'unusual contrast of the sweet and the earthy'.¹⁰³ Bell's deployment of strong complementary colours across a chrome yellow ground conveys a monumentality that exceeds the relatively small scale of the canvas: the triad of blue tones sets off the radiating warmth of the yellow field, and the thick blue-green oblong on the left-hand edge contrasts with the elongated plum-red that overlays it. The 'emotional charge' of Bell's work, as art historian Grace Brockington describes it, is arguably orientated in the central red oblong, which registers as an arresting, even threatening signal, partly due to the colour's widespread use in warning or 'stop' signs, and its long association with danger and passion.¹⁰⁴ In her abstract works Bell investigates the way in which colour changes our experience of different forms. She achieves a subtly different emotional impression, for instance, in the similar positioning of a black square over warm-toned ground and red oblongs at the centre of *Abstract Composition* (fig.2).

Bell's retrospective addition of 'Test for chrome yellow' to the title of *Abstract Painting* in an inventory of 1951 situates the work in a moment of modernist

¹⁰² Vanessa Bell, letter to Roger Fry, 19 September [1923], in Regina Marler (ed.), *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, London and New York 1994, p.272.

¹⁰³ Matthew Affron, 'Decoration and Abstraction in Bloomsbury', in Leah Dickerman (ed.) *Inventing Abstraction, 1910–1925*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Modern Art, New York 2012, p.182.

¹⁰⁴ Grace Brockington, 'A "Lavender Talent" or "The Most Important Woman Painter in Europe"? Reassessing Vanessa Bell', *Art History*, vol.36, 2013, p.134. For a discussion of the shifting historical associations of the colour red, see John Gage, *Colour and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction*, Boston 1993.

chromatic experiment.¹⁰⁵ Chrome yellow pigment, or lead chromate, became available from the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century, and painters were quickly attracted to its brilliance. Van Gogh deployed it to luminescent effect in *A Wheatfield, with Cypresses* (1889, National Gallery, London).¹⁰⁶ In the 1890s – the ‘yellow 90s’ – yellow became the colour of transgression through its association with the periodical *The Yellow Book*. It was ‘the colour of the hour [...] associated with all that was *bizarre* and queer in art and life, with all that was outrageously modern’, as the critic Holbrook Jackson wrote in 1913.¹⁰⁷ Eventually, it became the colour of Bloomsbury, when Aldous Huxley’s novel *Chrome Yellow* (1921) satirized the Bloomsbury patron Lady Ottoline Morrell and her circle. Morrell was later to paint her front door chrome yellow, a gesture which, it was noted, ‘distinguishes it from all the other dark brick Georgian houses in the street’.¹⁰⁸

Abstract Kinetic Collage Painting with Sound (fig.3), by the Bloomsbury artist Duncan Grant, was an important marker in the matrix of ideas about colour, music, and abstraction, at a time when he and Bell were engaged in close collaboration. She admired his chromatic inventiveness, in 1912 expressing concern that her designs might appear rather ‘dull’ in comparison.¹⁰⁹ The art historian Richard Shone has attributed the ‘rapid lightening’ of her palette the following year to his influence.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, while the vertical colour blocks with yellow and orange tones in *Abstract Kinetic Collage* are reminiscent of *Abstract Painting*, Grant’s composition is a self-declared investigation of movement, whereas Bell’s rectilinear forms are static in space and her colour contrasts more intense.¹¹¹ Furthermore, the spaciousness of the yellow colour field in her composition finds no equivalent in Grant’s more crowded abstract collages with their variegated colours, such as *Interior at 46 Gordon Square* (fig.4). Nevertheless, Bell’s abstract work coincided with collaborations with Grant at the Omega Workshops interior design company, where painted and pasted colour played an important role in transforming

¹⁰⁵ Richard Shone, *The Art of Bloomsbury: Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant*, exhibition catalogue, Tate, London 1999, p.160.

¹⁰⁶ For the history of the pigment, see Philip Ball, *Bright Earth: The Invention of Colour*, London 2008, p.175.

¹⁰⁷ Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex [1913] 1950, p.46.

¹⁰⁸ Reginald Colby, in *The Sphere*, 26 October 1963, quoted by Elizabeth P. Richardson, in *Bloomsbury Iconography*, Winchester 1989, p.125.

¹⁰⁹ Vanessa Bell, letter to Roger Fry, 2 November [1912?], quoted by Spalding 1983, p.116.

¹¹⁰ Richard Shone, Introduction to *Vanessa Bell, 1879–1961, A Retrospective Exhibition*, exhibition catalogue, Davis & Long Company, New York 1980, p.3.

¹¹¹ Compare also the dynamic concentric circles of Sonia Delaunay-Terk’s *Prismes electriques* (1914). Her practice of ‘Simultanism’, which she developed with her husband Robert Delaunay in about 1910, meant ‘transforming ordinary colors into provocative colors that moved’. Matilda Mcquaid and Susan Brown (eds), *Color Moves: Art and Fashion by Sonia Delaunay*, New York 2011, p.10.

everyday objects. One notes chromatic links to *Abstract Painting* in Bell's popular lampshade design, which consisted of 'three shades of chrome yellow, with a background of deep blue and purple', and in an Omega rug design (fig.5), attributed to Bell or Grant, with its brilliant segments of chrome yellow amidst interlocking rectilinear motifs.¹¹²

When Roger Fry, the Bloomsbury artist and critic, curated the exhibition *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* (Grafton Galleries, London, 1910), he introduced the audacious chromatics of French painters including Cézanne, Matisse, and Van Gogh, to a London audience. As Bell remembered it, the show was revolutionary for her generation, signalling 'a possible path, a sudden liberation and encouragement to feel for oneself'.¹¹³ Fry's attitude to colour shifted, from his statement in 1909 that colour is 'the only one of our elements [of design] which is not of critical or universal importance to life', to his declaration in 1911 that Cézanne had 'recovered for modern art a whole lost language of form and colour'.¹¹⁴ Here, he differed from the Bloomsbury critic Clive Bell (Vanessa's husband), who claimed in 1914 that colour 'becomes significant only when it is used as an attribute to form'.¹¹⁵

According to Simon Watney, colour was a definitive feature of English post-impressionism, and this was demonstrated when Bell's work was included in the *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition* of 1912.¹¹⁶ She assisted Fry in hanging the Matisse rooms, which were the centrepiece of the exhibition and included 34 drawings and paintings and six sculptures. Demonstrating what Fry called an 'entirely new use of colour', the painter's rough, expressive, Fauvist, approach made a profound impact on Bell.¹¹⁷ Her impression of 'changing everything into colour' during this period effectively describes Matisse's transmutation of objects in *The Red Studio (l'Atelier Rouge)* (fig.6), displayed at the exhibition, in which the architecture of the room dissolves in a rich, suffusing red. Her homage, *The Matisse Room at the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition, at the Grafton Galleries, London* (fig.7), features a miniature copy of the painting.¹¹⁸

¹¹² Winifred Gill to Duncan Grant, Letter III, June 1966, p.5. Tate Archive, TAM 24M.

¹¹³ Vanessa Bell, 'Memoirs of Roger Fry', October 1934, typescript, Tate Archive, TGA 20096/1/8-9, p.9.

¹¹⁴ Roger Fry, 'Essay in Aesthetics' (1909), *Vision and Design*, London [1920], rev. edn. 1923, p.35. Roger Fry, 'Post Impressionism,' *Fortnightly Review*, 1 May 1911, repr. in Christopher Reed (ed.), *Roger Fry Reader*, Chicago and London 1996, p.108.

¹¹⁵ Clive Bell, *Art*, London 1914, pp.11-12.

¹¹⁶ Simon Watney, *English Post-Impressionism*, London 1980, p.81.

¹¹⁷ Roger Fry, 'The French Post-Impressionists' (1912), *Vision and Design*, p. 240. Frances Spalding discusses the influence of Matisse on Bell in *Vanessa Bell*, San Diego, New York and London 1983, p.113.

¹¹⁸ This painting has previously been attributed to Fry, but Shone attributes it to Bell, in *Bloomsbury*

However, as Brockington observes, Bell's relationship to Matisse is 'never a straightforward case of imitation'.¹¹⁹ The pink square in *Abstract Painting* reads almost as a chromatic quotation from Matisse's *The Pink Studio* (*L'Atelier Rose*) (1911, Pushkin Museum, Moscow), in which modulations of pink describe the floor and walls, but the radical simplification of Bell's abstract painting has closer affinity with works in process in spring 1914, including *View of Notre Dame* (*Vue de Notre Dame*) (1914, Museum of Modern Art, New York), where architectural features are reduced to a series of descriptive black lines in a field of blue. Matisse's work would have been fresh in her mind when she began *Abstract Painting*, following a visit to his Paris studio in the spring of 1914, where she saw two unfinished paintings. She also admired 'several early things and one very large later one which was most beautiful' in the collection of Michael Stein.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, her *Abstract Painting* travels further into the realm of pure colour untethered by descriptive function. It represents an extension of the aesthetics of reduction already evident in *Studland Beach* (fig.8), where pared-down forms and flat bands of an intense blue convey an emotional resonance. The art historian Lisa Tickner finds in the colour compound psychological and cultural meanings: 'the blue of St Ives, of the void and divine light, of the Virgin's robe', with echoes of Piero della Francesca and Giotto, and the theme of motherhood as the site of 'ambivalence and loss'.¹²¹

Bell's participation in the broader conversation about emotional expression in abstraction comes further into focus alongside the work of European painters, notably Wassily Kandinsky, whose 'pure visual music' Fry praised in 1913.¹²² Her biographer, Frances Spalding, suggests that discussion of Kandinsky's works, which were shown at the Allied Artists' Salon in London in 1913 and at the exhibition of the Grafton Group the same year, along with those of František Kupka, may have encouraged her experiments in abstraction.¹²³ Kandinsky developed one of the most influential colour theories in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (*Über das Geistige in der Kunst*) (1911), which was translated into English by Michael Sadler in 1914, with extracts from the English printed in the Vorticist magazine *Blast* the same year. Influenced by Goethe's colour theory and by Theosophical philosophy, Kandinsky explored emotional and spiritual responses to colour, as well as its association with sound.¹²⁴ Looking at colours could produce a 'psychic effect', he argued, 'a

Portraits: Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant and their Circle, Oxford 1976, revised 1993, p.255, n.10.

¹¹⁹ Brockington 2013, p.148.

¹²⁰ Vanessa Bell, letter to Duncan Grant [25 March 1914], in Marler (ed.) 1994, p.161.

¹²¹ Tickner 2000, p.139.

¹²² Fry, 'The Allied Artists', *The Nation*, 2 August 1913, repr. in Reed (ed.) 1996, p.153.

¹²³ Spalding 1983, p.125.

¹²⁴ Sixteen Ringbom proposed connections between theosophy, anthroposophy and contemporaneous abstract artists in *The Sounding Cosmos: A Study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting*, Abo 1970, which were later brought to wider attention in the

corresponding spiritual vibration'.¹²⁵ According to his theory, yellow and blue represent a series of antitheses: between warmth or cold, ex- or concentric movement, and 'earthly' and 'heavenly'.¹²⁶ Whether or not we experience these sensory effects in Bell's colour combinations, Kandinsky's vibrational model of aesthetic experience offers a way of reading her work's emotional expressivity.

If, following the modernist paradigm, colour is evocative of sound, then Bell's bold use of colour resists the implicitly gendered narratives that characterise her as taciturn or silent. Colour has traditionally been seen as 'secondary' in art theory and history, where it is often presented as 'feminine', unstable and sensuous in contrast to the 'masculine' properties of form and line.¹²⁷ Keith Roberts deploys the quality as a negative term in his assessment of Bell as 'an essentially lavender talent', reticent and lacking in rigour.¹²⁸ However, a closer examination of her colour palette bolsters Brockington's counter-argument for Bell's 'distinctive, expressive power which complicates the dichotomy between speech and silence, critic and artist'.¹²⁹ Bell's sister, the writer Virginia Woolf, was alert to these subtleties in Bell's work, declaring her 'a poet in colour', even as she contributed to the legend that she and her paintings were 'as silent as the grave'.¹³⁰ Bell hints obliquely at the analogy between colour and speech in *The Conversation* (fig.9), through the chromatic relationship between the conversing women and the flower-bed outside the window, which is rendered as flat blobs of colour, almost like speech bubbles. For Woolf, this painting suggested Bell's ability as 'a short story writer', and she wondered whether she could 'write the *Three Women* [an earlier title] in prose'.¹³¹ There are implications here for what the literary critic Jane Goldman

exhibition *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, Los Angeles County Museum, 1986. John Gage discusses these influences on Kandinsky in *Colour and Meaning: Art, Science, and Symbolism*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1999, pp.192-5.

¹²⁵ Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. by M.T.H. Sadler, London 1914, repr. New York 1977, p.24. For a discussion of the metaphor of vibration in modernism, see Claudia Tobin, '“The Double Life of a Still Life”: Rhythm, Vibration, and the Poetics of Stillness from Paul Cézanne to Wallace Stevens', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Bristol, 2015.

¹²⁶ Kandinsky 1914, pp.36, 38.

¹²⁷ For further discussion see Gage 1993, pp.204-9.

¹²⁸ Keith Roberts, 'London', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 106, no. 733, April 1964, p.197.

¹²⁹ Brockington 2013, pp.134-5.

¹³⁰ Virginia Woolf, letter to Vanessa Bell, [4 February 1940], in Nigel Nicholson and Joanne Trautmann (eds), *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 6, London 1975–80, p.381. Virginia Woolf, Foreword to *Recent Paintings by Vanessa Bell*, London 1930, repr. in S. P. Rosenbaum (ed.), *The Bloomsbury Group*, London 1975, p.171.

¹³¹ Virginia Woolf, letter to Vanessa Bell, 12 May 1928, in Nigel Nicholson (ed.), *A Change of Perspective: The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 3, London 1977, pp.498-9.

calls the 'non-verbal, political significance of feminist colourism'.¹³² She situates Bell in the context of the Women's Suffrage Movement, which was making an impact at the time of Fry's post-impressionist exhibitions, and which deployed bold colours to promote the cause. Yet Bell's nuanced colour tones are difficult to render in precise language. 'I don't see how you use colours in writing, but probably you can do it with art', she wrote to Woolf in 1909, 'The mere words gold or yellow or grey mean nothing to me unless I can see the exact quality of the colours'.¹³³

The role of abstract coloured shapes in expressing mute yet emotionally powerful subjects is important in the portraits that Bell made leading up to *Abstract Painting*, exemplified in her practice of blanking out the faces of her subjects, as in her painting *Virginia Woolf* (1912, National Portrait Gallery, London). She went on to employ rectilinear patterns reminiscent of her abstract compositions in the backdrop of a number of portraits of women produced between 1914 and 1916, where, as Reed observes, the female figure is 'visually unified' with her 'modernist environment'.¹³⁴ In *Portrait of Mary Hutchinson* (fig.10) we observe accents of yellow-green which activate chromatic links between sitter and background. With the compositional structure of these portraits in mind, we can re-read the central red-orange rectangle in *Abstract Painting*. Endowed with presence and intensity through its suspension in the expanse of yellow, the rectangle can be understood as an abbreviation, even a denial, of the faces that occupied the focal point of her portraits.

Bell continued to experiment with the transformative possibilities of colour even as she returned to representational subject matter during the First World War. As Fry's review of her 1922 exhibition with the Fauve painter Othon Friesz testifies, 'it is as a colourist' that she 'stands out so markedly among contemporary artists'.¹³⁵ The following year, she could have been describing *Abstract Painting* when she recollected the 'intensity of colour' in the previous decade, and speculated on whether this could still be achieved 'without losing solidity of objects and space'.¹³⁶ The painting marks a frontier in the chromatic freedom and eloquence that would continue to invigorate her practice even as she moved beyond her experimental phase.

Texture [Claudia Tobin]

¹³² Jane Goldman, *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf: Modernism, Post-Impressionism, and the Politics of the Visual*, Cambridge 1998, p.137.

¹³³ Vanessa Bell, letter Virginia Woolf, 2 September 1909, cited by Diane Filby Gillespie, *The Sisters' Arts: The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell*, New York 1988, p.277.

¹³⁴ Reed 2004, pp.151-2.

¹³⁵ Roger Fry, 'Independent Gallery: Vanessa Bell and Othon Friesz', *The New Statesman*, 3 June 1922, repr. in Reed (ed.) 1996, pp.348-9.

¹³⁶ Vanessa Bell, letter to Roger Fry, 19 September [1923], in Marler (ed.) 1994, p.272.

Vanessa Bell's abstract phase coincided with her employment at Roger Fry's Omega workshops, a collective of artists established in 1913, where she undertook a range of decorative work, including textiles, ceramics, painted furniture, and murals. The writer Peter Wollen has suggested that this link with the decorative has deflected attention from the Bloomsbury artists' abstract canvases, a neglect that the art historian Christopher Reed seeks to address in his discussion of the Bloomsbury group and domesticity.¹³⁷ This essay examines the interaction between Bell's painterly and applied abstracts in more detail, arguing that this porous relationship comes into focus in the context of the Omega revolution in British interior design, but also in a larger, international framework in which modernist female designers were renegotiating the borders of the fine and decorative arts; and encounters with the non-European, specifically with Middle-Eastern textiles, enabled European modernists to rethink basic aesthetic categories.

The Omega revolution in modern decoration

The Omega contributed to the debate about the meaning of the decorative and its significance for modern painting, at a time when abstract painting was criticised on the grounds that it was 'acceptable as design' but 'unsuitable as art'.¹³⁸ As a departure from the 'fatal prettiness' deplored by Bell and her circle, the Omega sought to revolutionise the aesthetics and ultimately the values of the English interior with an approach to design informed by the new chromatic and formal freedoms of post-impressionism.¹³⁹ The elevation of the applied arts alongside painting underpinned Fry's vision. He objected to the 'rigid distinction' between them and asserted that artists could easily do the work of artisans.¹⁴⁰ By the 1920s he was arguing that the Omega demonstrated the influence of abstract painting on design, with artists attempting to limit themselves to the 'simplest forms'.¹⁴¹ However, critics have debated the nature of the exchange. Reed makes the case that the decorative arts freed the Bloomsbury artists from 'conventions of figuration in easel painting'.¹⁴² I shall argue that Bell's work for the Omega reveals a bilateral exchange with her abstract painting – a 'flexible association', to use the art

¹³⁷ Peter Wollen, 'Hitting the Buffers', *London Review of Books*, 8 September 1994, pp.10-11. Christopher Reed, 'Abstraction and Design (1914–15)', in *Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture, and Domesticity*, New Haven and London 2004, pp.147–63.

¹³⁸ Matthew Gale cites hostile critics who applied such criticisms to Bell's contemporaries, Percy Wyndham Lewis and David Bomberg, in 'Vorticism: Planetary Abstraction', in Leah Dickerman (ed.), *Inventing Abstraction 1910–1925*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Modern Art, New York 2012, pp.154-5.

¹³⁹ Vanessa Bell, letter to Roger Fry, [21? July 1912], in Regina Marler (ed.), *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, London 1994, p.121.

¹⁴⁰ Roger Fry, 'The Artist as Decorator' (1917), repr. from *Colour*, April 1917, in Christopher Reed (ed.), *A Roger Fry Reader*, Chicago and London 1996, pp.207 and 209.

¹⁴¹ Fry, quoted by Reed 2004, p.147.

¹⁴² Reed 2004, p.147.

historian Matthew Affron useful term – which presents both visual similarities and affinities in processes of making.¹⁴³

The association between Bell's abstracts and her work for the Omega is particularly evident in her textile designs. Omega artists produced painted silk scarves, furnishings, fabrics, carpets and embroideries, and a range of six printed linens in different colourways.¹⁴⁴ *Abstract Painting* (fig.1) resembles fabric and furnishing designs such as *Maud* (fig.2), with its broken-off patches of bold colours set off by zigzagging black lines. Structural similarities are also evident in Bell's gouache and pencil designs for a rug with dynamic black diagonals, the 'Lady Hamilton rug' (1914, Victorian and Albert Museum, London). Her design of 1914 (Courtauld Gallery, London) is made on paper with gridded squares, revealing an interest in line and structure which equally informs her abstract painting.¹⁴⁵

Bell's use of colour in her works on canvas and cloth reveals further affinities on the level of facture. She was attentive to the spatial organisation and application of colour in the years leading up to her work for the Omega. Following visits to see Byzantine mosaics in Turkey and Italy during 1911–12, she describes her attempt to paint 'as if I were mosaicking [...] by considering the picture as patches, each of which has to be filled by the definite space of colour as one has to do with mosaic or woolwork, not allowing myself to brush the patches into each other.'¹⁴⁶ Her use of intermedial analogies anticipates the exchange in her practice between the applied and fine arts in the early years of the Omega. One design for *Maud* (1913, private collection) evokes a mosaic with its outlining of carefully applied black gouache on squared paper. On the other hand, the printed linens reveal painterly effects. As the curator Alexandra Gerstein notes, they combine 'the unfinished appearance of the hand-drawn line with areas of strong colour liberally applied to the surface', and the majority were probably produced through stencil or block-printing, or a combination of the two, rather than by machine.¹⁴⁷ Examples of stencil-printing, an artisanal method whereby colour is brushed in through a stencil, and which therefore retains imperfections such as irregularly printed lines, can be observed in fabrics printed with Bell's *Maud* and *White* designs (both 1913, Victoria and Albert Museum, London). In the latter, the looseness of design, consisting of cloud-like patches of colour over-printed with a radiating palmette-like schema, is sympathetic to production by stencil, and there are

¹⁴³ Matthew Affron, 'Decoration and Abstraction in Bloomsbury', in Dickerman (ed.) 2012, p.184.

¹⁴⁴ Alexandra Gerstein, 'Printed Linens', in Alexandra Gerstein (ed.), *Beyond Bloomsbury: Designs of the Omega Workshops 1913–16*, exhibition catalogue, Courtauld Gallery, London 2009, p.112.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.98. See discussion of the similarity between rug design and abstract paintings in Reed 2004, p.143; and in Richard Shone, *Bloomsbury Portraits: Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant and their Circle*, Oxford 1976, revised 1993, p.142.

¹⁴⁶ Vanessa Bell, letter to Roger Fry, 5 June [1912], in Marler (ed.) 1994, p.119.

¹⁴⁷ Gerstein 2009, p.112.

'patchy or stippled' areas of colour on the back of the fabric, indicating the use of a brush.¹⁴⁸

With eyes sharpened to the weave and weft of Bell's Omega fabrics, we give greater attention to the texture and surface of her *Abstract Painting*. On closer observation, the field of yellow reveals flecks, stippling, and dashes of lighter white-yellow paint, which highlight the weave of the canvas and animate the surface. This draws attention to the materiality of the linen canvas, reminding us that it is itself textile. Another effect of the visibility of the weave in thinly painted areas is that it suggests pencil outlining delineating the coloured blocks, as if Bell had initially sketched or stencilled her design onto the canvas like one of her pattern designs. Furthermore, the uneven handling on the edges of the coloured oblongs and variation in the application of paint, for instance the slightly more built up texture of the pink square, aligns this work more closely with the Omega 'hand-made' aesthetic.

Bell's process of working simultaneously on cloth and canvas in the early days of the Omega would have allowed her to explore not only their affinities but also their differences and limitations. Designing and making textiles was demanding and time consuming in a way that was different from painting. The printed fabrics might appear free-hand and spontaneous, however, as Valerie Mendes notes, 'they meticulously conform to repeated pattern rules'.¹⁴⁹ The idea that painting could be a liberating practice was expressed by Bell in the midst of her work for the Omega, when she confessed to Fry that 'It's rather fun painting after doing all these patterns'.¹⁵⁰

Women artist-designers in Europe

The fact that women designers and painters played a central role in the reinvention of the applied arts in modernist circles suggests another way of situating Bell's work in the context of international modernism. While André Mare and his circle of French artists represented what Reed calls 'Bloomsbury's nearest French contemporaries', with their creation of modernist rooms in a cubist style, Fry's fundraising letter for the Omega workshops in 1912 aligned them with Paul Poiret's Ecole Martine, which operated in Paris from 1811–1929, commissioning working-class girls to design murals, textiles and painted furniture.¹⁵¹ Bell's Omega works also present strong parallels with designers of the Wiener Werkstätte, a community of artists and designers founded in Vienna in 1903, where the production of textile patterns and prints flourished during 1913–14.¹⁵² Bell's simplified

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p.122.

¹⁴⁹ Valerie Mendes, *The Victoria and Albert Museum's Textile Collection: British Textiles from 1900 to 1937*, London 1992, p.11.

¹⁵⁰ Vanessa Bell, letter to Roger Fry, 2 April [1913], quoted in Gerstein (ed.) 2009, p.112.

¹⁵¹ Reed 2004, p.127; Roger Fry, 'Omega Workshops Fundraising Letter', 11 December 1912, in Reed (ed.) 1996, pp.196-7.

¹⁵² Angela Völker, *Textiles of the Wiener Werkstätte: 1910–1922*, London 2004, p.51.

patterns and vibrant tones sit comfortably alongside Maria Likarz's 1910/13 *Ireland (Irland)*, with its floating rectilinear and geometric patterns and cross-cutting diagonals, and the vertical strips of bold colour in Vally Wieseltheir's *Andromache* pattern. Women remained at the forefront of European textiles over the subsequent decade, running the weaving workshops at the Bauhaus school established in Weimer in 1919, which positioned design at the heart of its project.

While many individual female artist-designers have been marginalised by art history, the work of Bell's European female contemporaries is increasingly coming into the foreground of reassessments of this period.¹⁵³ Situating her work in this way raises questions about the ways in which gender inflects the relationship between the fine and decorative arts. The sphere of textiles, long considered respectably feminine, was radically re-invented by the Swiss artist Sophie Taeuber-Arp (1889–1943), and the German artist, Hannah Höch (1889–1978), both of whom were involved with the Dada art movement. While the respective practices of Taeuber-Arp and Höch cross-fertilised painting and decorative work, unlike Bell they both received early formal training in textiles and this informed their involvement with Dada experiments in new materials for painting.¹⁵⁴ In 1915, Taeuber-Arp began collaborating with Jean Arp, the French artist who later became her husband, making works 'that drew on the simplest of forms in painting, in embroidery and in paper collé', and 'rejected everything that was a copy or description [...] to allow the elemental and the spontaneous to react in full liberty'.¹⁵⁵ The same year Taeuber-Arp was producing non-representational geometric paintings and watercolours, which recall Bell's works of 1914–15, as we observe in the carefully structured geometric blocks of colour in her pared-down *Vertical-Horizontal Composition (Composition verticale-horizontale)* (1916, Archive Stiftung Hans Arp und Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Rolandsweth). Like Bell in *Abstract Painting*, Taeuber-Arp explores the relationship between square and rectangle in different colour combinations. Critics have suggested that her early geometric compositions in paint may have been patterns for textiles and embroideries, but that she became increasingly attracted toward the square as a model for non-representational painting.¹⁵⁶ Her untitled embroidery of 1918 (known as *Composition with Squares, Circle, Rectangles, Triangles*) (fig.3), places a

¹⁵³ Reed's introduction to Gerstein (ed.) 2009, pp.11-15, gives attention to marginalized figures such as Winifred Gill, as do the contributors to this book more widely.

¹⁵⁴ In Taeuber-Arp's case this extended to interior design, sculpture, stage sets, and puppet-making; while Höch's oeuvre included a spectrum 'from murals to cushions, costumes to lampstands, and jewellery to tablecloths'. Ruth Hemus, *Dada's Women*, New Haven and London 2009, p.82. Taeuber-Arp studied textile design in Germany and taught at the Zurich School of Arts and Crafts (1916–1928). Höch studied at the Berlin School of Applied Arts from 1912–14, and at the National Institute of the Museum of Arts and Crafts in 1915. For further discussion see chapters 2 and 3, in Hemus 2009.

¹⁵⁵ Jean Arp, quoted in *ibid.*, p.72.

¹⁵⁶ Hemus 2009 notes Agnieszka Lulinska's suggestion, pp.76-9.

large red square at its centre, with similarly striking effect as the red rectangle in *Abstract Painting*.

The Omega aesthetic has affinities with Höch's work, which makes reference to 'the hand-made' and to 'domestic creativity' but also to 'repeatable models, patterns and principles'.¹⁵⁷ Her early work confronted the gender stereotypes of the Weimer Republic, particularly from around 1917 in subversive collage and photomontage. Troy suggests that embroidery enabled Höch 'to investigate the boundaries between traditional "women's work", images of the New Woman and the hierarchical distinctions between fine and applied art'.¹⁵⁸ Although Bell's work was not overtly subversive, her elliptical, identity-blurring treatment of the portrait and her use of bold, non-naturalistic colour and abstract design during the pre-and inter-wars period implicitly re-assessed gender and artistic boundaries. Arguably, the Omega's collaborative environment encouraged this fluidity since decorative work was produced not only by women trained in the applied arts, but also by male artists.

Of the female artists who developed pure abstraction during the pre-war period, Bell has closest affinity with the Ukrainian-born artist, Sonia Delaunay-Terk (1885–1979). Delaunay-Terk applied the principles of 'simultanism' – her theory of rhythm and movement generated by complementary colours – to painting and textile design and later to a range of decorative objects.¹⁵⁹ She claimed that there was 'no gap' between her painting and her 'decorative' work; rather, the 'minor arts' represented 'an extension' of her art.¹⁶⁰ She created her first 'simultaneous dress' in 1913, developing the aesthetic of her 'Cubist' blanket (1911) to incorporate a patchwork of coloured cloths into an abstract pattern. Bell also began experimenting with 'wearable' art in the spring of 1915. She envisioned a line of unconventional dresses which would 'use the fashions and yet not be like dressmakers dresses', exploiting the effects of vibrant new hues imported from European fashion and costume design.¹⁶¹ She had been inspired by Jacques Copeau's theatre on a visit to Paris in March 1914, and her *Maud* design proved forward-looking as it was taken up by Grant in his costume designs for Copeau's 1913 production of *Twelfth Night*, based on the director Edward Gordon Craig's theories of abstraction.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁷ Hemus 2009, p.117.

¹⁵⁸ Troy 2006, p.76.

¹⁵⁹ See Lesley Jackson's argument for Delaunay-Terk's 'importance to the history of pattern design', in terms of her 'promotion of pure geometric abstraction' and 'simultaneity'. In *Twentieth Century Pattern Design: Textile and Wallpaper Pioneers*, New York 2002, p.54.

¹⁶⁰ Delaunay-Terk, quoted by Petra Timmer in 'Sonia Delaunay: Fashion and Fabric Designer', in Matilda McQuaid and Susan Brown (eds), *Color Moves: Art and Fashion by Sonia Delaunay*, exhibition catalogue, Cooper-Hewitt Museum, New York 2011, p.25.

¹⁶¹ Vanessa Bell, letter to Roger Fry, Friday [9? April 1915], in Marler (ed.) 1994, pp.173-4.

¹⁶² Vanessa Bell, letter to Duncan Grant, [March 25, 1914], in *ibid.*, p.161; see the V&A Online Catalogue entry for *Maud*: <http://collections.vam.ac.uk>.

Like Delaunay-Terk, who used embroidery as ‘a means to break loose from the academic tradition of line structure dominating color’, Bell radically reconfigured the role of colour and line in the applied arts as in painting, although she did not adhere to specific colour theories.¹⁶³ Over the next few years, she oversaw the Omega production of waistcoats, ‘avant-garde kimono-like painted cloaks’ and ‘vibrantly coloured silk stoles’, which blended fashion and decorative art.¹⁶⁴ Virginia Woolf, Bell’s sister, supported her sartorial experiments at the Omega, but even she balked at the audaciousness of her colour schemes in a letter of 1916: ‘What clothes you are responsible for! Karin’s clothes wrenched my eyes from the sockets – a skirt barred with reds and yellows of the violent kind, a pea-green blouse on top, with a gaudy handkerchief on her head, supposed to be the very boldest taste.’¹⁶⁵

Examining Bell’s abstraction in relation to her designer contemporaries underlines not only her cosmopolitanism and connections with European modernism, but also her anticipation of its celebrated developments. Delaunay-Terk’s textile and fashion houses established in Madrid and Paris in 1917 and 1920 respectively, and her work for Metz and Co. in the mid 1920s, arguably represents a more sustained, commercially successful contribution to avant-garde embroidery and dress-making than Bell’s work.¹⁶⁶ However, it was only when Delaunay-Terk produced printed fabrics combining blazing colours and interlocking rectangles such as *Simultaneous Fabric no.60 (Tissu simultan  no.60)* (fig.4), that we see patterns as radically geometric as Bell’s of the previous decade. Omega artist Nina Hamnett testified to Bell’s pioneering experiments, when she recalled the impact of wearing a jumper made from the *Maud* fabric to a fancy dress dance in Paris. Her autobiography records: ‘No one in Paris had seen anything quite like it and although Delaunay-Terk was already designing scarves, this was more startling’.¹⁶⁷ As Nikolaus Pevsner affirms, ‘the style called “Teutonic Expressionism” or “Paris 1925,” [...] was in fact created as early as 1913 by the Omega’.¹⁶⁸

Bloomsbury, Matisse, and Middle Eastern textiles

¹⁶³ Timmer, ‘Sonia Delaunay: Fashion and Fabric Designer’, in McQuaid and Brown (eds) 2011, p. 28.

¹⁶⁴ Elizabeth M. Sheehan, ‘Dressmaking at the Omega’, in Gerstein (ed.) 2009, p.56.

¹⁶⁵ Virginia Woolf, letter to Vanessa Bell, in *Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 2, New York 1976, p.111.

¹⁶⁶ For further discussion see Cecile Godefroy, ‘The Metier of Simultanism’, in Anne Montfort and Cecile Godefroy (eds), *Sonia Delaunay*, exhibition catalogue, London 2014, pp. 156-160.

¹⁶⁷ Nina Hamnett, quoted by Gerstein 2009, p.116.

¹⁶⁸ Nikolaus Pevsner, ‘Omega’, *Architectural Review* (August 1941), quoted by Reed 2004, p.111.

For Fry and Matisse, who first met in 1909, the ground-breaking exhibition of Islamic art held in Munich 1910 inspired new ideas about the valorization of decorative art, and in particular about the importance of textiles.¹⁶⁹ This seminal moment in modern art puts Matisse and Bloomsbury in the same place. In his review of the exhibition, Fry admired Fatimite textiles, drawing attention to fabrics on display from the tenth to the twelfth centuries, and he enthused over ‘an art in which the smallest piece of pattern-making shows a tense vitality even in its most purely geometrical manifestations’.¹⁷⁰ The editor of Fry’s letters, Denys Sutton, has argued that the experience of seeing this exhibition was of ‘major importance in stimulating his conversion to the principles of modern art’ and that ‘Islamic art inevitably heightened his understanding of the vitality of design as something in its own right’.¹⁷¹ Remi Labrusse has described how a ‘love of fabrics played a leading role in the re-evaluation of the idea of decorative art’ during the late nineteenth century, when there was a ‘growing fascination’ in Europe with textiles of the Muslim Middle East, while in the 1900s, following the example of William Morris, the ‘imitation of Muslim “decorative artists” was encouraged’.¹⁷²

The discovery of Middle Eastern textiles enabled modern artists to rethink the relationship between painting and the decorative arts in ways that would inform Bell’s experiments in abstraction, mediated by both Fry and Matisse. However, Bell would have become familiar with oriental fabrics and patterns during her travels in Turkey with Fry in the spring of 1911, when their relationship was especially intimate. They met with a Turkish weaver and shopped for clothing in the bazaar; and Fry brought her printed handkerchiefs, shawls and rugs in the Ottoman city of Bursa.¹⁷³ Reed has recently drawn attention to the attraction of Omega artists to ‘all things generally Eastern’ and especially to Japanese art, but the impact of Middle Eastern visual culture, particularly on Bell, has not been fully explored.¹⁷⁴ If the provocatively vibrant hues and abstract pattern emblematised by *Abstract Painting* can partly be understood as a form of cultural protest or antidote to what Bell described as

¹⁶⁹ Frances Spalding, *Roger Fry, Art and Life*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1980, p.118.

¹⁷⁰ Roger Fry, ‘The Munich exhibition of Mohammedan art – I’, August 1910, exhibition review, in Michael Levey (ed.), *The Burlington Magazine: A Centenary Anthology*, New Haven and London 2003, p.20. Fry reprinted the article in *Vision and Design* (1920).

¹⁷¹ Denys Sutton (ed.), *Letters of Roger Fry*, vol. 1, London 1972, p.36.

¹⁷² Remi Labrusse, ‘“What Remains Belongs to God”: Henri Matisse, Alois Riegl and the Arts of Islam’, in *Matisse, His Art and His Textiles: The Fabric of Dreams*, exhibition catalogue, Royal Academy of Arts, London 2004, p.47.

¹⁷³ Spalding, *Vanessa Bell*, San Diego, New York and London 1983, p.96; and Spalding 1980, p.144. Sheehan’s chapter on ‘Dressmaking at the Omega’ in *Beyond Bloomsbury* also notes Bell’s use of Turkish silks in her dress-making and the influence of the East on early twentieth-century fashion.

¹⁷⁴ Reed 2009, p.128. See also Reed 2004, where Reed argues that trips to Turkey from 1910–12 fuelled Bloomsbury’s critique of conventional British culture and prompted their circle to take inspiration from Byzantine art (pp.65–86).

'London greyness', then the model of Middle Eastern art arguably extends her affinity with the sensuous warmth of Mediterranean colour and climate.¹⁷⁵ While critics have called attention to Bell's responsiveness to Matisse, and Reed notes the Matissean aesthetic of Omega products and its similarities to studio props in his 1911–12 interiors, the intersection between Bell, Matisse, and Islamic textile design invites closer attention.¹⁷⁶

Removed from European disciplines of linear perspective and naturalistic representation, and therefore offering an alternative model of space, Middle Eastern textiles prompted Matisse to explore new ways of organizing pictorial space and to experience 'the metamorphosis of the image into an independent, decorated surface'.¹⁷⁷ His family were weavers in the French textile town of Bohain-en-Vermandois and his lifelong interest in and collection of textiles profoundly shaped his visual language. As The Royal Academy's exhibition *Matisse: His Art and his Textiles* surveyed in 2004, his collection or 'working library' ranged from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French textiles, to Turkish and Moroccan fabrics and Persian carpets.¹⁷⁸ An image of the painter taken by photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn in May 1913 in his Paris studio reveals the characteristically fabric-draped environment Bell would have witnessed when she visited him at Quai Saint-Michel the following year.¹⁷⁹ She would already have been familiar with Matisse's deployment of textiles in *The Red Studio* (1911, Museum of Modern Art, New York), exhibited at the *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition* in 1912, which incorporates 'the warm blacks of the border of a piece of Persian embroidery placed above the chest of drawers' into the decorative field.¹⁸⁰ Matisse's biographer, Hilary Spurling, argues that during this pre-war period, he employed textiles 'as subversive agents in the campaign to liberate painting', while the art historian Jack Flam has noted the painter's 'use of abundant, severely flattened decorative motifs' as a means of 'animating the space of the "backgrounds" in his painting'.¹⁸¹ These effects are nowhere more evident than in *Interior with Aubergines* (*Intérieur aux Aubergines*) (1911, Musée de Beaux-Arts, Grenoble), where the counter-rhythms of jostling patterns charge the surfaces of the walls, screen and tablecloth, and confuse their borders.

¹⁷⁵ Vanesa Bell, letter to Fry, 17 September 1913, Charleston Papers, Tate Gallery Archives. Quoted in Reed 2004, p.131.

¹⁷⁶ Spalding 1983, p.171, compares the painters' 'deliberately anti-illusionistic' handling of paint and texture, but she also points to differences in composition. Reed notes 'the simple red furniture, the goldfish, the nude figures dancing or reclining, the sketchy rugs, the abundance of flowers'. Reed 2004, p.116.

¹⁷⁷ Labrusse 2004, p.58.

¹⁷⁸ Matisse, quoted by Hilary Spurling, in 'Material World: Matisse, His Art and His Textiles', in Hilary Spurling and Jack Flam (eds), *Matisse, His Art and His Textiles*, exhibition catalogue, Royal Academy of Arts, London 2004, p.16.

¹⁷⁹ Bell saw two unfinished new works at the studio. Vanessa Bell, letter to Duncan Grant [25 March 1914], in Marler (ed.) 1994, p.161.

¹⁸⁰ Matisse, quoted by Labrusse 2004, p.55.

¹⁸¹ Spurling and Flam (eds) 2004, p.23; Jack Flam, 'Matisse and the Metaphysics of Decoration', in Spurling and Flam (eds) 2004, p.39.

In an essay of 1930, Fry identified Matisse's reinvention of surface as a gift he shared with 'almost all Mohommedan art': finding 'rich new and surprising harmonies of colour notes placed in apposition upon a flat surface'.¹⁸² Like the best of Oriental craftsman, Fry argued, the painter sought 'perfect accord of all the colours' but also 'an element of surprise', which gave 'extraordinary freshness and vitality to his schemes even viewed as pure decoration, viewed as we might view some rare Persian rug'. Fry articulates a widely held position, which Labrusse describes as characteristic of 'an entire generation', for whom 'carpets and fabrics, decoration and the Orient were inextricably linked'.¹⁸³ His description of the Oriental craftsman also echoes the principles he set out for the Omega artisan-artist in 1914: 'to keep the spontaneous freshness of primitive or peasant work while satisfying the needs and expressing the feelings of the modern cultivated man'.¹⁸⁴ The vogue for what was loosely termed 'primitive' art meant that Omega products were marketed alongside 'Asian and North African textiles and ceramics, displays of children's drawings, reproductions of Byzantine mosaics at Ravenna, and contemporary Italian folk art'.¹⁸⁵ By the time Bell was making her abstract work in 1914, she was also designing for the Kevorkian Counter, an art dealer specialising in Near Eastern art.¹⁸⁶

The musical analogy widely employed in Fry's formalist discourses on art connects Eastern aesthetics to his own aspirations for non-narrative painting. Arguably, Bell was applying 'new and surprising harmonies of colour notes' to a flat surface in her pursuit of pure abstraction decades earlier than Fry's identification of this quality in Matisse. Despite the extreme simplification of her designs, she may well have found stimulus in the interlocking patterns and flat or tessellated designs of Middle Eastern fabrics. Moriz Dreger, one of the authors of the Munich exhibition catalogue with whom Fry would have found consonance, compared the effect of looking at the textiles to the experience of music. In his interpretation, the laws of Islamic art – of 'infinite relationship' and 'absolute surface' – are exemplified here in their purest form.¹⁸⁷ According to Labrusse, Matisse used textiles in a way that responds to these laws by 'putting pictorial space under tension in two ways: rhythm and folds'.¹⁸⁸ In works such as *Conversation* (fig.5), Bell too explored the rhythms created by folds in fabrics: her composition is structured by the interplay between the verticals of hanging curtains, the curving lines of the women's dresses, and the flattened green background which evokes a draped cloth with a floral pattern. While Matisse's use of decorative motifs typically creates a dynamic surface often radiating beyond the frame, in her *Abstract*

¹⁸² Roger Fry, 'Henri-Matisse' (1930), repr. In Reed (ed.) 1996, pp.408-9.

¹⁸³ Labrusse 2004, p.50.

¹⁸⁴ Fry, 'Preface to the Omega Workshops Catalog' (1914), in Reed (ed.) 1996, p.201.

¹⁸⁵ Reed 2004, p.125. On Fry's primitivism see Reed (ed.) 1996, p.247.

¹⁸⁶ Bell alludes to Kevorkian in a letter to Duncan Grant, 14 January [1914], in Marler (ed.) 1994, p.153.

¹⁸⁷ Quoted by Labrusse 2004, p.49.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.55.

Composition (fig.6) Bell creates surface tension through an optical oscillation between the triplet of red stripes and the oblongs on the opposite side of the canvas, an effect which is heightened by the stippling in the lower edge and upper left corner.

Middle Eastern textile design involved compositional processes which arguably encouraged both artists in their steps toward abstraction. Matisse's use of *papier collé* in the 1940s has been compared to the appliqué process of sewing an Egyptian khayamiya (curtain): both techniques, Sam Bower observes, 'may be described as "drawing with scissors"'.¹⁸⁹ Several features relating to Islamic decoration may also be identified in Bell's abstract painting and design, if indirectly and mingling with Byzantine sources. For instance, the repetitive floral and vegetal motifs, including the palm-like pattern in *White*, and stylised poppy, which appear in several paintings and designs by Bell and Grant of this period. The motif becomes the organising principle in a fire screen designed by Grant with a five flower pattern of rhythmic curves, which was embroidered in silk by Bell in 1913 (The Provost and Scholars of King's College, Cambridge).¹⁹⁰ She is believed to have added the contrastingly geometric border of narrow stripes in alternating colours, in a modification characteristic of her experiments in abstraction.¹⁹¹ Circular and geometric motifs, which are also fundamental in Islamic pattern, were pervasive in the Omega design vocabulary. Alternating blue and white circles appear within a gridded structure on the left hand of a rug design attributed to Bell (fig.7), which seems associated with her *Abstract Painting* in its rich contrasts of red with a central expanse of orange.¹⁹² Viewing these works alongside the warm oranges and browns of a sixteenth-century Turkish prayer rug exhibited in Munich (now in the Kunstgewerbemuseum, Berlin), reinforces the sense of Bell's affinity with the material and visual culture of this region.¹⁹³

This dialogue continues to resonate in the most recent display of *Abstract Painting* at Tate Modern, paired with *Poem Wall* (fig.8), an abstract sculpture by Lebanese artist, Saloua Raouda Choucair (born 1916), whose work is informed by Islamic aesthetics and the structures and meter of Sufi poetry. Both women pioneers of abstraction, Bell and Choucair reveal an attentiveness to design and pattern: the effects of interlocking geometric forms and the potency of spatial openings, whether through borders of unpainted canvas or the negative space between sculptural blocks. Bell's

¹⁸⁹ Sam Bower, 'Matisse and the Khayamiya: An Egyptian curtain unveiled', *Burlington Magazine*, vol.157, December 2015, p.844.

¹⁹⁰ Similar flower motifs can be seen in Grant's *Flowers in a Glass Case* (c.1917–18), and Bell's *Nude with Poppies* (1916, Swindon Museum and Art Gallery).

¹⁹¹ In his catalogue entry on Grant's design for the firescreen, Richard Shone notes that the striped border 'may have been Bell's invention as it appears on none of Grant's designs'. Shone 1999, p.145, no.67.

¹⁹² See Shone's discussion of the different aesthetic and symbolic functions of the circle for Grant and Bell, in Shone 1999, p.158.

¹⁹³ See Spurling and Flam (eds), 2004, p.49, for a reproduction of the Turkish carpet.

Abstract Painting can be seen, then, to participate in an ongoing conversation about abstraction and its relationship to decorative art, which went beyond national and even European boundaries, absorbing as much as it refracted and transformed these diverse cultural sources.