

Heaven is a place on earth

For the women of the Bloomsbury group, their country gardens were places of refuge, reflection and inspiration, as well as a means of keeping loved ones close by, discovers Deborah Nicholls-Lee

IN the early 1900s, the Bloomsbury district of west London was a hub for a bohemian circle of writers, artists and philosophers who would enrich our cultural and intellectual heritage. Although they became known as the Bloomsbury Group, much of their creative impulse came from the time they spent far from London, in the verdant gardens of their country homes. A new exhibition opening this month at London's Garden Museum puts a spotlight on four of these gardens and their female owners, displaying paintings, photographs, textiles, correspondence and even garden tools to tell their interwoven stories.

A dream of what England had once been'
When writer and garden designer Vita Sackville-West moved to Sissinghurst Castle in Kent, the moated Elizabethan manor was in ruins and its gardens, which stretched out over woods, streams and farmland, were, she wrote, 'crying out for rescue'. A Gallica rose was one of the few specimens to survive the dilapidation and became a motif for a lost Eden that she hoped to re-create by trailing her beloved old roses around apple trees and designing, in partnership with her husband, the writer and diplomat Harold Nicolson, an abundant rose garden that typified her 'cram, cram, cram' landscaping strategy. Her vision for Sissinghurst, wrote her grandson Adam Nicolson in 2018, was 'deeply nostalgic and retrospective, a dream of what England had once been'.

Sissinghurst's disjointed buildings forced an intimacy with the garden and Sackville-West traversed it at all hours and in all weathers as she moved between meals, work and bed—the celebrated White Garden, with its piles of white pompom dahlias, tulips, gladioli and irises, doubtless offering welcome luminosity at night. With her husband's precise planning and her know-how, the grounds were transformed into one of England's most admired gardens, which she enjoyed surveying from her study in the tower.

The sensuousness of the green spaces she tended nourished Sackville-West's poetry and prose. She notes the 'juicy sound' (1939) that the scythe makes in the long grass as it meets a fallen apple and the scent of sweet briar, which 'swells out towards you of its own accord, as you walk past, like a great sail filling suddenly with a breeze' (1950). Even donning manly gardening clothes—breeches and laced boots, often with a pair of secateurs pressed into the left one—had a powerful effect on her, releasing, she wrote in 1920, 'the secret of my duality' (she would count Virginia Woolf among her affairs) and causing her to feel 'like a schoolboy let out on holiday'.

‘She felt if Charleston was a paradise, none of us would find a better place to go’

‘A social space’ and ‘a lavish entertainer’
The grounds at Garsington Manor in Oxfordshire, presided over by Lady Ottoline Morrell and visited by both Woolf and Sackville-West, were also a place to unbutton convention. Garsington, explains Emma House, curator at the Garden Museum, was 'a social space' and Morrell 'a lavish entertainer', who relished bringing together the leading thinkers of the age. 'She describes the garden as wanting it to be a theatre and it had this wonderful pool of water they would all swim in,' adds Ms House.

These exuberant outdoor gatherings made perfect subjects for Morrell's prolific photography, which chronicled the lounging on the lawns, bathing and boating and, most memorably, the artist Dora Carrington climbing upon a statue without a stitch on. Morrell's →

The Charleston garden is bursting into life in Duncan Grant's *Garden Path in Spring*, 1944





O'Grant. 44



The social circle of 'lavish entertainer' Lady Ottoline Morrell (left) included Dorothy Brett, who painted *Pond at Garsington, 1919* (right)



An artist's garden: the idyllic setting at Charleston, glimpsed in *View into a Garden, 1926* (left), was an inspiration to Vanessa Bell (right)

camera and photos will feature in the exhibition alongside paintings of the garden by Carrington, Mark Gertler, John Nash and Dorothy Brett.

The garden was most likely also the setting for Morrell's scandalous affair with a stonemason who was carving plinths for her garden statues. The writer D. H. Lawrence, a regular visitor to Garsington, is thought to have modelled *Lady Chatterley's Lover* on this salacious transgression, which epitomised the hedonistic and socially unencumbered spirit of the Bloomsbury women.

'This is happiness'

If Garsington was a place to party, the informal flint-walled gardens of Virginia Woolf's Monk's House in Rodmell, East Sussex, were, by contrast, a place of sanctuary to the writer





Bell's Garden at Monk's House, Sussex, of 1947 (above) shows the 'lovely' space that was a sanctuary to her sister, Virginia Woolf (below)

during her most turbulent psychological episodes. 'The point of it is the garden,' Woolf wrote in 1919 to her friend Janet Case, having recently moved into the weather-boarded cottage. 'You must come and sit there on the lawn with me, or stroll in the apple orchard, or pick—there are cherries, plums, pears, figs, together with all the vegetables.'

It was here—first in a converted tool shed and later a wooden writing lodge—that Woolf completed her best-known novels and her 1929 essay *A Room of One's Own*, the manuscript of which can be seen in the exhibition. 'Women, to be creative and to function, need their own space. That's the premise of the exhibition,' explains Ms House. 'For all of the women, the garden provides that room, that creative space.'

Woolf's husband, Leonard, was the real gardener, but participating did appear to dent her depression. 'Weeding all day to finish the beds in a queer sort of enthusiasm which made me say this is happiness,' she writes in her diary in 1920. 'Gladioli standing in troops; the mock orange out. We were out till 9 at night, though the evening was cold. Both stiff and

scratched all over today, with chocolate earth in our nails.' In 1929, she notes: 'Never has the garden been so lovely—all ablaze even now; dazzling one's eyes with reds & pinks & purples & mauves; the carnations in great bunches, the roses lit like lamps.'

Hints at the pleasure Woolf took in her garden and the creative inspiration it provided permeate her writing. Her 1925 novel *Mrs Dalloway* is rich in floral description and symbolism and talks of breathing in 'the earthy garden sweet smell'. Other passages feel acutely autobiographical and point to the garden as a place of escape: 'Despairing of human relationships (people were so difficult), she often went into her garden and got from her flowers a peace which men and women never gave her.'

'A spiritual refuge'

A short distance away in Firle, East Sussex, is the best-known Bloomsbury retreat of them all: Charleston, which Woolf's sister, the painter Vanessa Bell, shared with artist Duncan Grant and his partner, the writer David →





Release: the garden at Sissinghurst, Kent (above), designed by Vita Sackville-West (right)

Garnett. The pond-fronted farmhouse was 'a really beautiful idyll that they went to to escape the First World War,' says Ms House. 'As conscientious objectors, farm work allowed the men to avoid conscription, whereas the gardens offered Bell a place far from the city where she could "recuperate and rest".'

The pretty walled garden we see today, with its sculptures and decorative paving, came later. Before that, its principal role was food production. 'There were potato beds coming right up to the drawing-room windows,' recalled the artist's son, Quentin Bell (1910–96), in *Charleston Past and Present* (1987). 'Against the walls there were pears, peaches, plums' and a greengage 'in the orchard somewhere'.

The garden also fed Bell's creativity and 'was an inspiration in lots of different creative ways,' explains Ms House. 'When she and Grant were working on the Omega Workshops, lots of the textiles and imagery that they were working around were based on floral motifs. In her still life, she painted a lot of flowers, but also these views of the garden and of her studio into the garden.'

'The garden here was not a gentleman's garden or a gardener's garden, it was always an artist's garden,' wrote Bell's daughter, Angelica Garnett (1918–2012), who was born

at Charleston. Like Woolf, Bell found the garden to be 'a spiritual refuge from the tougher aspects of the outside world,' Garnett reflected. As with Sackville-West and Morrell, it was also a means of keeping friends and loved ones close by. 'She felt that, if Charleston was a paradise on earth, none of us would find a better place to go to.'

'Gardening Bohemia: Bloomsbury Women Outdoors' is at the Garden Museum, London SE1, from May 15–September 29 (020-7401 8865; www.gardenmuseum.org.uk)



Blooming beautiful: more to delight Bloomsbury enthusiasts

- In association with the famous farmhouse in Firle, the newly opened cultural space Charleston in Lewes is showing 'Dorothy Hepworth and Patricia Preece: An Untold Story', opening the lid on a personal and professional relationship that deceived the art world and a classic Bloomsbury love triangle that defied all convention. *Until September 8 at Charleston in Lewes, East Sussex (01323 811626; www.charleston.org.uk)*

- 'The Shape of Things: Still Life in Britain' offers a history of British still life and includes paintings by Vanessa Bell and Duncan

Grant, as well as the painter Sir Stanley Spencer and photographer Lee Miller. *May 11–October 20 at Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, West Sussex (01243 774557; www.pallant.org.uk)*

- 'Vanessa Bell: A Pioneer of Modern Art' sees the artist's colourful paintings hang alongside abstract textile designs from the Omega Workshop, a collaboration with Grant and Roger Fry that blurred the line between art and interiors.

May 25–October 6 at The Courtauld at Somerset House, Strand, London WC2 (020-3947 7777; www.courtauld.ac.uk)