

The Celebrated Eccentricity and the Problematised Modernity: a ‘Queer’ Portrayal of the ‘Beyond Bloomsbury’ Exhibition

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Abstract

The spring launch of 2022, ‘Beyond Bloomsbury: Life, Love and Legacy’ exhibition at York Art Gallery conveys a more radical connotation than this title sounds. Collaborated with the National Portrait Gallery and Sheffield Museums, this show demonstrated a reinvigorating art-historical narrative through portraiture with a focus on the extraordinary legacy of the Bloomsbury Group and their wide-circulated influence in England. Highlighting the group members’ life and love, ‘Beyond Bloomsbury’s exhibitionary narrative is far beyond the cliché of the interwoven network, the thoughts and works generated within the social circle. Articulated in Bloomsbury associates’ class privilege, racial consciousness and gender identities, the exhibition re-examined the art-historical complexity of their modernism and the avant-garde claimed to reject Victorian traditions, bringing together nerves and tensions in public conversations to re-engage in the dynamic contemporary value and the social equality approached today.

‘Beyond Bloomsbury’ displayed portraits of the Bloomsbury Group’s congenial and intellectually adventurous people. The exhibition included the group’s approaches, such as the Friday Club, the coined term ‘Post-Impressionism’ and the Omega Workshop, through which Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant and Roger Fry reshaped the landscape of British modern art by re-aligning the continental tradition of Europe. Issuing no manifesto, the Bloomsbury artists shared appellation with non-painters (including historians, sociologists, economists and psychologists from the Cambridge circle), maintaining open and continuous energy to process dialectical practices. Responding to the progress of scientific rationalism, they found an alternative modern language in abstraction, celebrating purely formalist expressions rooted in untamed aspects of human nature.

This study analyses the eccentric approach of ‘Beyond Bloomsbury’ through portraiture, which tangled with the modernism of their time. By re-examining Bloomsbury artists’ discursive power in reshaping intellectualism, culturalism and primitivism, this article explores the queerness in this exhibition’s interpretations of gender fluidity and other myths in early-twenty-century British modern art.

Keywords: Bloomsbury Group, art museums, portraiture, queerness