

I'LL HOUSE YOU

Charleston, in the South of England,
was a way of life for some...

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The Studio, Charleston Farmhouse, Firle, Lewes, East Sussex, England, 2010.



I'll be honest.

We debated long and hard over whether a feature on Charleston Farmhouse would fit in *Upstate Diary*. It just seemed so... obvious.

Set at the foot of the spine of hills that forms the South Downs, just beyond Lewes in West Sussex, England, Charleston has become shorthand for a certain lifestyle. To provide some perspective, this area of England is a close cousin to upstate New York (South Down County London?). It's where people of a certain bent — literary, artistic, liberal with a little L, *bohemian* — tend to gravitate towards, once they grow tired of London. And Charleston is the reason why many of them migrate here. Charleston stands for something. It's important. And yet it — and its devotees — have become something of a cliché. Speaking at Charleston's hugely popular annual literary festival, the artist and arch-provocateur Grayson Perry put his finger on the problem with typical élan. "Charleston is," he pronounced, "The house that launched a thousand kitchen makeovers." There were audible gasps of middle-class outrage at this statement. But it was funny because it was true.

Charleston is famous for many reasons (most of which we'll come to later), but chief amongst these is its role in blurring the boundary between decorative and fine art.

Essentially a rural, artistic outpost for the Bloomsbury Group of writers and intellectuals, who formed around the turn of the 20th century, in London, Charleston Farmhouse was the home of artist couple Vanessa and Clive Bell, who first settled here in 1916, together with the artist Duncan Grant and his lover, the writer and publisher David 'Bunny' Garnett.

They were connected to the Bloomsbury Group via Vanessa's sister, Virginia Woolf, who settled in nearby Rodmell and wrote to Vanessa to say she had found the perfect location from which they could pursue their art whilst working on the farm during the Great War (thus providing labor of 'national importance' — a necessity for Grant and Garnett, who were conscientious objectors to the war). "It will be an odd life," Woolf wrote, "but it ought to be a good one for painting."

She was certainly right about that. Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell in particular were inspired by their surroundings, painting their post-Impressionistic inspired scenes not just on the canvases in the light, airy studio at the back of the house, but also on any surface they could find — walls, tables, bedsteads... the lot. Charleston has, consequently, come to stand for a certain type of freedom and unconventionality.

Not just in terms of artistic boundaries, but also in relation to lifestyle. Amongst the extended Charleston collective were the writers Lytton Strachey and E. M. Forster, the artist and critic Roger Fry, and the economist John Maynard Keynes. Keynes, for instance, wrote his seminal *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919) while staying here. For his supporters, this was the Rooseveltian "New Deal" manifesto of its time, advocating stimulus packages to revive European's economy after WWI. To his detractors, it sowed the seeds for Hitler's appeasement in its emphasis on helping in the recovery of the defeated German state.

But Keynes (a giant of economics whose ideas still inspire post-recession theory in the 21st century) is a footnote here. Lytton Strachey helped to reassess Britain's national identity with his book *Eminent Victorians*, whilst Roger Fry was largely responsible for introducing the work of Cezanne, Gauguin, Matisse, Van Gogh et al to a largely unimpressed British audience in his 1910 exhibition *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* — a phrase he coined. In fact, whenever you hear someone drag out the age-old quip about modern art, "my 5-year-old could have painted that," they have Fry to thank: the remark originates from a cartoon in *Punch* magazine in response to his groundbreaking show.

In truth, the above paragraph does a disservice to Keynes. He played a vital role in the appreciation of modern European art that Fry did so much to propagate. As an advisor to the British Treasury in 1918, Keynes developed a cunning plan to acquire works of art from France in lieu of national debts owed to the United Kingdom. While the war still raged, Keynes headed to the continent with Sir Charles Holmes, Director of The National Gallery, armed with £20,000 of public money. Keynes returned to Charleston in a "government motor" loaded with priceless artworks. However, the car became bogged down in the notoriously muddy farm track, so Keynes was forced to complete his journey on foot, with his driver unloading his baggage in the driveway, to be picked up later. When Keynes arrived at the house, he famously announced to his guests, "If you'd like to go down the road, there's a Cezanne in the hedge."

In addition to Charleston's important and revolutionary approach to art, in a society still emerging from traditional Victorian values, its open-mindedness extended to sexuality. In short, it was a pioneer for the LGBT+ community almost a



Vanessa Bell's bedroom, Charleston Farmhouse, Firle, Lewes, East Sussex, England, 2010.



The Garden Room, Charleston Farmhouse, Firle, Lewes, East Sussex, England, 2010.

century before those letters were recognized. Vanessa Bell had affairs with both Fry and Grant: the latter fathered her daughter Angelica — a fact Angelica didn't discover until she was 18, having grown up believing Clive Bell was her father. (This was detailed in her deeply moving and empathetic autobiography, *Deceived With Kindness*.) To further confuse matters, Angelica eventually married Garnett — her real father's lover.

As a result, Charleston has become something of a mecca for queer culture, augmented by the fact that Vanessa Bell's sister, Virginia Woolf, wrote *Orlando* — the gender-bending, epoch-straddling epic that perennially comes close to the top of those endlessly repeated lists of "Greatest English Novels." Woolf, incidentally, based her famous book on her own tempestuous affair with the writer Vita Sackville-West, who grew up in the grand surroundings of Knole House, Sevenoaks (once owned by Henry VIII), and moved to the dilapidated ruins of Sissinghurst, in Kent. In a recent cult BBC documentary, *Sissinghurst*, Vita's grandson, Adam Nicolson, enthuses about the "rivers of lesbians" who descend on his family home every year and, at one point, is seen berating a member of The National Trust — who now own and manage the estate — that he hasn't "seen the word 'homosexual, once!' in an exhibition about his grandparents.

Due to its pivotal position, not just in the art world but in the wider sphere of gender politics, Charleston attracts an intriguing cross-section of society amongst its visitors. During one of my frequent visits there, one of its famously enlightening and hugely well-informed volunteer guides once remarked on the make-up of their regular crowd. They are typically middle class, female and gay. Noting that I only fulfilled one of those criteria, she took a bit of a shine to me. Most of the husbands, she remarked, spend their visits staring out of the window, half listening. Occasionally they might ask the odd, irrelevant question about a painting, or peruse the books in the library rather than the Picassos on the walls. But one incident tickled her particularly. As she discussed Maynard Keynes's role in government and mused that he had probably had a homosexual relationship with Duncan Grant, one distracted husband lingered behind and asked her, "When did you say he was home secretary?"

It's exactly the sort of anecdote that would have titillated the Bloomsbury Group. When Lytton Strachey refused conscription in the Great War, he was brought before a tribunal

to explain his pacifist stance. A standard tactic, designed to evoke a telling response, was to ask, "What would you do if a German soldier were raping your sister?" Strachey's response — playing to the gallery as always — was, "Why, I should attempt to come between them!"

But politics — sexual, social or otherwise — don't fully explain Charleston's appeal. There is something magical in its painted walls, the cross-hatching across its hearths, the inconsequential trinkets and artifacts that make still lifes come alive before your eyes.

In the years since Grant and the Bells first moved in, the house has been frequently photographed in celebration of its unique interiors, its furniture (much of it designed by Fry's Omega Workshop) and its seductive walled garden. Arguably, no one has done as much justice to its peculiar mood than Annie Leibovitz, the famed photographer who made Charleston a central theme of her *Pilgrimage* project (shown here), which focuses on places with a special resonance for her. I know the feeling. It's possibly my favorite place on earth, redolent with a certain optimism for what's possible in life. Want to be an artist? Paint your own walls! Want to be a potter? Make pots! Technical ability was no barrier: Vanessa and Clive's son, Quentin Bell, became a world-renowned art critic, artist and ceramicist — but when asked to provide vases for each table at Virginia Woolf's wedding, they leaked all over the tablecloths. "He wasn't a very competent potter!" his late wife, Olivier Bell, once recalled to me.

That is the whole point of Charleston: it defies categorization. Amateurism and professionalism are irrelevant terms. Fine art and decorative art, too. A paisley pattern against a black wall can be every bit a priceless work of art as a painting on canvas. A bathroom or a mug can speak to us in the same way as a sculpture. Charleston communicates this by juxtaposing all the above: it reveals modern art developing in a far from conventional family home.

It's anything but obvious. ■

Learn more at Charleston.org.uk All images ©Annie Leibovitz, from *Pilgrimage*, Random House, 2011. Mark Hooper is an award-winning editor, writer and author. He was the founding editor of *Hole & Corner* and worked at i-D, Arena and Esquire. He began his career writing for *The Face*, and consulted on its recent relaunch. He lives in Kent, England.