

A Blue and White Sorority: Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant's

Famous Women Dinner Service

[*Famous Women Dinner Service*, Charleston Trust, Permanent Exhibition]



Figure 1. Full set of *The Famous Women Dinner Service* (Charleston Trust).

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I found myself greeted by a set of fifty decorative dinner plates as I entered the doors of Charleston Farmhouse, earlier this year. Located in the Outer Studio, the exhibit is hard to miss by those making their way into Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant's former country home via the visiting route of the now house-museum. The plates are displayed in glass cabinets opposite the entrance and lean on a wall shared with the

house's kitchen in which several blue and white willow pattern plates are also



Figure 2. Chinoiserie Plates at Charleston Farmhouse (photos by the Author).

collected. My research on Virginia Woolf's ornamental orientalism, which opened for me an interest in the Chinese or chinoiserie-style plates at Charleston, had led to my visit to the house in the first place. I was keen to study the china objects that would have been doubly serviceable as tools of décor and dining in the domestic spaces of Woolf and her extended family. Yet, the sets of plates displayed on the opposite sides of the wall together offer a curious sense of both juxtaposition and continuity that lingers on my mind even after visiting the rest of the house. The material medium of *The Famous Women Dinner Service*, as the fifty plates are collectively known, is a pivotal layer to its proto-feminist project. In particular, my protracted fascination with the plates is governed by a reflection on the project's value and reception in the global twenty-first century.

The fifty-piece dinner service set was privately commissioned in 1932 by Kenneth Clark, British art historian, broadcaster, and at the time newly

appointed director of Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, who was inspired to have an artist-designed dinner service of his own after dining with art dealer Joseph Duveen in New York 'on a blue and gold Sèvres service made for the Empress Catherine of Russia' (Clark 1974, pp.245-46). Clark and his first wife, Elizabeth Winifred 'Jane' Clark, invited Bell and Grant to paint the set of custom dinnerware without a specific brief for its design. The artists consequently had great freedom with their work and returned with plates two years later that challenged Clark's expectation of a decorative service in Sèvres taste. Jane, however, would have been less ambivalent towards the final product given her involvement in its creative process, which is evidenced by regular correspondences between her and Bell throughout the making period. What the Clarks ultimately received was an evocative work of feminist art that hosts painted portraits of 'famous women' through history on white Wedgwood plates. These ceramic portraits

are moreover subdivided into four groups of twelve based on the women that they feature: the plates are sectioned as ‘Women of Letters’, ‘Queens’, ‘Beauties’, and ‘Dancers and Actresses’, with the remaining two depicting the artists themselves.⁸ Little is known about what happened to the set when they left the Clark family’s possession; it is believed that the plates were gifted to Clark’s second wife, Nolwen de Janže-Rice, on her marriage to Clark in 1977, and then came up for auction in Germany some time later. It was not until 2017 that they were acquired by Piano Nobile gallery, which assisted Charleston

to purchase the dinner service to be kept at its original place of creation.

When asked about the dinner service plates, Matthew Travers, director of Piano Nobile gallery, noted the proto-feminist nature of their art by stating:

‘[A]ll of the women they depicted did something interesting and powerful, and often were quite scandalous – the Bloomsburys might have said “liberated” – in the way they lived their private lives,

⁸ The figures painted are as follows. Women of Letters: 1. Jane Austen (1775–1817), 2. Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861) and her dog Flush, 3. Charlotte Brontë (1816–1855), 4. George Eliot (1819–1880), 5. Fanny Kemble (1809–1893), 6. Murasaki Shikibu (c. 973–c. 1014 or 1025), 7. Dorothy Osborne (1627–1695), 8. Christina Rossetti (1830–1894), 9. George Sand (1804–1876), 10. Sappho (c. 630–c. 570 BCE), 11. Germaine de Staël (1766–1817), 12. Virginia Woolf (1882–1941). Queens: 13. Catherine the Great (1729–1796), 14. Christina, Queen of Sweden (1626–1689), 15. Cleopatra (70/69–30 BCE), 16. Elizabeth I (1533–1603), 17. Eugénie de Montijo (1826–1920), 18. Jezebel (died c. 843 BCE), 19. Marie Antoinette (1755–1793), 20. Mary, Queen of Scots (1542–1587), 21. Mary of Teck (1867–1953), 22. Queen of Sheba (c. 1000 BCE), 23. Theodora (c. 500–548), 24. Queen Victoria (1819–1901). Beauties: 25. Beatrice

Portinari (c. 1265–1290), 26. Marian Bergeron (1918–2002), 27. Sarah Churchill (1660–1744), 28. Pauline von Metternich (1836–1921), 29. Lola Montez (1821–1861), 30. Pocahontas (c. 1596–1617), 31. Rachel (Biblical figure), 32. Juliette Récamier (1777–1849), 33. Elizabeth Siddal (1829–1862), 34. Agnès Sorel (1422–1450), 35. Helen of Troy (Greek mythology), 36. Simonetta Vespucci (1453–1476). Dancers and Actresses: 37. Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923), 38. Marie-Anne de Cupis de Camargo (1710–1770), 39. Mrs Patrick Campbell (1865–1940), 40. Eleonora Duse (1858–1924), 41. Greta Garbo (1905–1990), 42. Nell Gwyn (1650–1687), 43. Dorothea Jordan (1762–1816), 44. Lillie Langtry (1853–1929), 45. Anna Pavlova (1881–1931), 46. Sarah Siddons (1755–1831), 47. Marie Taglioni (1804–1884), 48. Ellen Terry (1847–1928). The Artists: 49. Vanessa Bell (1879–1961), 50. Duncan Grant (1885–1978).

and often did not conform to the patriarchies they were living in' (Daley 2018).

Indeed, Bell and Grant's transhistorical selection of women subjects celebrate those who are recognised for their active roles in artistic, intellectual, and political pursuits, often in acts of patriarchal resistance and from outsider positions economically, socially, and racially. Focusing on the latter observation, only about 40 percent of the forty-eight 'famous women' painted are British. Diana Wilkins, who contributed to 'The Famous Women Dinner Service Catalogue', made the analysis that a little over another 40 percent of the women are of European, Scandinavian, and Russian descent, and to the best of the cataloguing team's discernment 'two are African, one Japanese, two North American, one from Asia Minor, and two from the Arabian Peninsula' (Leaper 2017). In its merging of aesthetics and dining, *The Famous Women Dinner Service* has utilised the ceramic

canvas to invite the international to the domestic. By bringing women of broad temporal and geographic scopes to the culture of the table, Bell and Grant's painted plates show a sorority of diverse female pioneers that can be admired from a place of dining. The medium of ceramic dinner plates on which their artistic practice materialises pushes to the centre an engagement with the portrayed women through moments of hospitality; the plates potentially prompt dialogues around the dinner table that continues the legacy of their subjects. As it happens, the artists themselves appear to have hosted a tea-party using the plates. In the aforementioned correspondences between Jane and Bell, a letter dated 9 June finds Bell asking the former about the event: 'We wanted to ask if you'd mind if we had a tea-party to show them [the plates] to a few people before you have them, as so many

people have been curious to see them' (Yale 1933).⁹

Returning to the opening sentiments of this review, therefore, a viewing of *The Famous Women Dinner Service* and the artists' willow pattern plates in tandem is not only apt but essential to exploring the complicated undertones that underlie the twentieth century's association between inheritance and dining. The ornate domesticity of the British plate bearers is inevitably intertwined with a history of imperial and colonial possession that, in turn, steers aesthetic tastes at home and makes possible the means to fund such practices. Even on first glance at the dinner service, it is noticeable that the largely blue and white colour scheme of the painted plates echoes that of the chinoiserie-style dishes on the other side of the wall. And to make matters complex, this discourse is the source of Clark's motivation for the service, which also lies in an appetite for

foreign Sèvres porcelain that has artistic origins in trades with the East. This is not to suggest that creative practices and products should be solely enjoyed by their rooted cultures, however that might be assessed, but the consideration is certainly based on an understanding that the shaping of modernist aesthetics is inexorably linked with the political dynamics underpinning their usage. The dinner service set that Bell and Grant created is resultant of an amalgamation between the 'exotic' and the familiar to its initial consumers. The plates are successful in translating the domestic space into a picture of the global. Yet these portraits, framed within the stagnant ceramic surface, invite viewers too to look at their subjects through the fixed lens of their makers.

In considering the orientalism that inexorably attaches to the performance of these plates, my attention lingers on the portrait of the Japanese novelist and poet

⁹ The letter does not record the year. Given its context, though, it should have been penned in 1933.



Figure 3. Dinner Service Plate of Lady Murasaki Shikibu (Charleston Trust).

Lady Murasaki Shikibu, who is the sole East Asian woman included in Bell and Grant's project. The inclusion of Murasaki to their plated portraits seems to be a mystery. Hana Leaper in her article on the dinner service for *British Art Studies* has even stated that 'we [the cataloguing team] were unable to find a source for Murasaki' (Leaper 2017), though the catalogue itself, on its page about Murasaki by Claudia Tobin, offers a more certain postulation to the connection by suggesting Grant's copying of Japanese prints in his early education and his reading of the author's classic novel, *The Tale of Genji*, as translated by Arthur Waley (Tobin 2017,

p.20). The catalogue too gestures to Woolf's review of the novel as well as her mention of Murasaki in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), the landmark book of twentieth century feminist criticism. Woolf's discourses on Murasaki, which would have reflected and formed similar ones in Bloomsbury, draws a full circle for my visit to Charleston. To mimic the careless homogenising in orientalist confluences of China and Japan, in the context of a much more careful contemplation on the political nuances produced by these acts, Bell and Grant's poetic trapping of Murasaki within the still walls of ceramic is a fitting replication of her entrapment in time to the audience who consumes her presence. For, in Woolf's review of *The Tale of Genji*, to give a compact example, she imagines Murasaki 'from the Eastern world' that has from it removed '[s]ome element of horror, of terror, or sordidity, some root of experience... so that crudeness is impossible and coarseness out of the

question, but with it too has gone some vigour, some richness, some maturity of the human spirit, failing which the gold is silvered and the wine mixed with water' (Woolf 1925, pp.267-68). The 'East' in which Woolf sees Murasaki residing is presented in stagnation; it is the epitome of idyllic removal from twentieth century British civilisation but also a place invented from ideas of aesthetic primitivism, temporally behind in experience and development to its fine dining counterpart. Fixing Murasaki on the ceramic plate is then another way of maintaining this orientalist fantasy.

It is clear that the reception of Woolf's text and, more importantly to the discussion of this review, that of Bell and Grant's dinner service, has spread to wider groups of unintended audience in the twenty-first century. The work of the artists is still to be admired; the *Famous Women Dinner Service* is a masterpiece of feminist expression and experimentation in modernist aesthetics. As we observe its

artistic and political legacy with eyes of the new century, however, it is also pertinent that we consider our role in the continuation and rerouting of its narrative for forthcoming generations.

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