



Grant, Duncan (1885-1978)

by Douglas Blair Turnbaugh

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A self portrait by Duncan Grant.

Duncan Grant was one of the major British artists of the twentieth century, as well as the sexual catalyst of that remarkable group of friends, the Bloomsbury Circle, which included, among others, writer Lytton Strachey and economist John Maynard Keynes, who were to be among Grant's lovers.

Born Duncan James Corrow Grant in Tothiemurchus, Scotland on January 21, 1885, into an artistically cultivated Scottish family prominent in governing the British empire, Grant as a child recognized his attraction to other boys and actively sought out sexual encounters with them.

Grant spent his childhood in India but returned to Britain in 1893. He studied art briefly at the Westminster School of Art and at the Slade School, before traveling to Paris in 1906, where he studied with Jacques-Emile Blanche and became acquainted with Picasso and other influential artists of the time. In 1910, he returned to England to exhibit as a post-impressionist and then experimented with abstraction.

Acting on his belief in "art on any surface," he painted on walls, tables, tea trays, and other objects, pursuing an ideal of art in everyday life. In 1913, with art critic and fellow Bloomsbury figure Roger Fry, Grant founded the Omega Workshops, which changed the course of applied art and design in Britain.

Famous for his use of color, he was called "the Matisse of Britain." His career flourished and his work was widely commissioned and collected by patrons, including Queen Elizabeth (the late Queen Mother), as well as by museums throughout the world.

The high point of Grant's fame was in 1936, when he was commissioned to decorate the ocean liner, the Queen Mary (though his designs were ultimately rejected as too avant garde). But, as art historian Kenneth Clark has observed, "no one who loved life and visual experience as much as Duncan could have remained an abstract painter for long, and very soon flowers began to appear on his canvases, and seductive [male] nudes in pastel"

However, just as Grant abandoned abstraction, soon after World War II, the abstract school triumphed. Nevertheless, Grant continued painting in a representational style, where his unabashed depictions of the male figure declared his sexual preference.

Throughout his life, Grant produced homoerotic sketches and paintings. When he was commissioned to decorate the Russell Chantry in Lincoln Cathedral in the late 1950s, he used his lover, the youthful, blond, physically beautiful Paul Roche, as the model for the face and body of Christ.

Simon Watney has speculated that "Perhaps it was this element of frank sensuality that led to the closure of the Chantry in the 1960s, and its conversion to a store-room, where the murals languished unseen behind heaps of clerical detritus." Fortunately, the chapel has recently been restored.

Despite the oppressiveness of British law and social attitudes condemning homosexuality, Grant lived openly

as a gay man. "Never be ashamed," he liked to say. He remarked that his moral sensibility came from the Regency period, the pre-Victorian era noted for its relaxed sexual mores.

Although unabashedly homosexual in orientation, Grant was the object of desire of men and women alike. The painter Vanessa Bell, for example, with whom Grant and her husband art critic Clive Bell, shared a Sussex farmhouse for many years, fell in love with him.

Grant reluctantly yielded when she climbed into bed with him. She became pregnant and, in 1918, gave birth to a daughter she named Angelica. Grant neither acknowledged nor denied his paternity. However, when Angelica was a teenager, Vanessa told her that Grant was her father.

The young woman was traumatized with outrage and bitterness. After her mother's revelation, Angelica initiated an affair with and later married writer David Garnett, whom she knew to have been Grant's lover at the time of her conception.

Grant died peacefully on May 9, 1978, at the age of 92, in the arms of his companion, the poet Paul Roche. Grant's will divided his estate, including the copyrights to his work, between Roche and Angelica Garnett.

Unfortunately, Garnett has used this power to restrict and generally deny permission to reproduce Grant's work. As a result, the artist remains something of a ghostly figure, despite the resurgent interest in representational art and the perennial fascination with Bloomsbury.

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Douglas Blair Turnbaugh is Representative to the U.S.A. and Membre Conseiller of the Conseil International de la Danse/UNESCO. A contributor to *New York Magazine*, *The Atlantic*, *Playbill*, *Advocate*, *RFD*, *James White Review*, *New York Native*, *Performing Arts Journal*, *Ecrits sur Nijinsky*, among others, he is author of *Duncan Grant and the Bloomsbury Group*; *Private: The Erotic Art of Duncan Grant*; *Strip Show: Paintings by Patrick Angus*; and *Beat It: 28 Drawings*. He has been awarded the Nijinsky medal (Poland) and the Diaghilev medal (Russia). His *Serge Diaghilev* is forthcoming.