

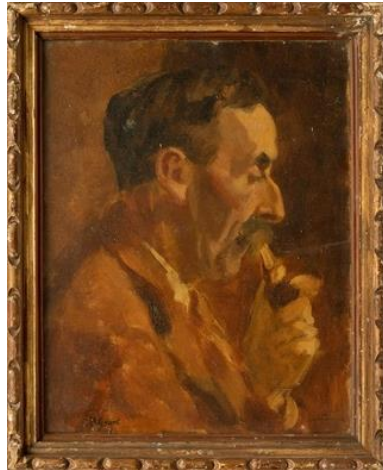
## ‘One may as well begin with the letter paper’

By Angelika Woodruff, first-year undergraduate in English Literature at New College.

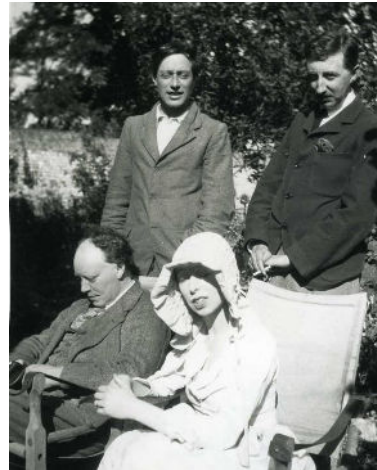
*This essay was selected as the winning entry of the 2023 Romilly Award Student Visual Response Prize, responding to the JWM Collection of Duncan Grant artworks at St Peter’s College.*



*E.M. Forster*  
Duncan Grant  
Pencil, 1919  
324 mm x 225 mm  
National Portrait Gallery

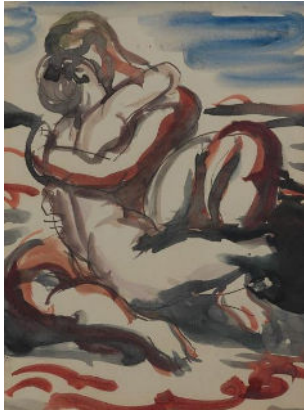


*A portrait of E.M. Forster*  
Duncan Grant  
Oil on canvas, unknown date  
165 mm x 135 mm  
Private Collection



Duncan Grant (back left)  
and E.M. Forster (back  
right) with Clive Bell and  
Mary Hutchinson  
Photograph, c. 1923  
©The Charleston Trust

“Only connect” was the epigraph chosen by E. M. Forster to open his 1910 novel *Howards End*, and if Grant’s artwork could speak, these are the syllables I think it would say. Although this imperative is most obviously one about the world of people, and not of paint, Forster’s idea seems to also articulate so much of Duncan’s aesthetic philosophy. The two men were certainly no strangers. Forster sat for Grant on more than one occasion, and multiple photographs show the pair side by side on a sunlit Charleston lawn.



*Embracing Couple*  
Duncan Grant  
Pen, ink and  
watercolour, c. 1923  
216 mm x 159 mm  
JWM Collection



*Classical Lovers*  
Duncan Grant  
Ink wash on headed  
paper, c. 1906  
222 mm x 165 mm  
JWM Collection



*The Bridge*  
Duncan Grant  
Oil on panel, 1928  
266 mm x 343 mm  
JWM Collection



*Mother and Child  
(roundel)*  
Duncan Grant  
Pen, ink and watercolour,  
c. 1940-1945  
241 mm x 241 mm  
JWM Collection



*Nymph with Child  
(roundel)*  
Duncan Grant  
Pen, oil and gouache,  
c. 1950  
229 mm x 229 mm  
JWM Collection



*Shell Poster, St Ives, Huntington*  
Duncan Grant  
Photolithograph, c. 1930  
762 mm x 1143 mm  
JWM Collection

Indeed, connections cover the walls of the Senior Common Room; from lovers interlaced, to scenes of maternal union, even Grant's two paintings of bridges seem surprisingly apt when thinking of 'connection' in structural terms. But the epigraph, I think, is not just of amorous and architectural relevance, but something broader in his artistic approach. Duncan Grant seems an expert at bridging the gap between the world of aesthetics and utility, between functionality and fine art.



*Still Life*  
Duncan Grant  
Ink on headed paper, c. 1914  
178 mm x 108 mm  
JWM Collection



*Untitled Drawing*  
Duncan Grant  
Pen and watercolour, c. 1946-1959  
The Charleston Trust

One may as well begin with the letter paper. A detail found in one of the collection's floral sketches provides the first piece of evidence of Grant's connective habits; upside down, placed centrally at the bottom of the page, we can make out an address printed: '46, Gordon Square, Bloomsbury'. Archivists might recognise this print from the countless letters sent between Grant and Vanessa Bell, whilst others may also recognise the address as one of the central sites of the Bloomsbury Group, in whose walls they would meet for weekly discussions and themselves "connect". Here, Grant has in some ways violated the intended function of the material, choosing art over articulation, but in doing so he also unites the two. Similarly, though not in the collection, envelopes were also illustrated on. For instance, the homoerotic biro drawing above, penned on the back of what was perhaps a used envelope. What was once an epistolary instrument, has now also become a stage for an erotic display. This was by no means a new habit however. As a boy in Hillbrow preparatory school, as a classmate recalled how Grant was 'impervious to arithmetic, illustrating all his book margins

with little drawings,<sup>1</sup> and later, at Charleston, Quentin Bell spoke of how ‘often after dinner he would pick up an old envelope and begin sketching on it’.<sup>2</sup> In just a few flicks of the pen, Grant is able to “only connect” the verbal and visual realms, transforming an object that is merely functional into one that deserves aesthetic appreciation too.

The connecting of utility and beauty would also reach the three-dimensional world. Grant’s generation had emerged in the aftermath of the Arts and Crafts movement, and thus inherited good portions of its ideology. William Morris’s famous statement that you should “have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful”<sup>3</sup>, for instance, seems particularly apt with places like Charleston in mind. Although Grant seems to do more than this, and advance Morris’s maxim. Perhaps his updated version might read something like this: “have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful *and* believe to be beautiful”. The “or” changes to “and”.

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from Carl Hillerus, a former classmate of Grant’s, from Frances Spalding, *Duncan Grant* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Quentin Bell and Virginia Nicholson, *Charleston: A Bloomsbury House & Garden* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2018), p. 81.

<sup>3</sup> W. Morris and M. Morris, “The Beauty of Life [1880],” in *The Collected Works of William Morris: With Introductions by his Daughter May Morris* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 51–80, p. 76. doi: 10.1017/CBO9781139343145.005.



*Design for a Piano Top for Leigh Ashton*  
Duncan Grant  
Gouache and watercolour, undated  
279 mm x 330 mm  
JWM Collection



*Study for Angus Davidson's Cupboard (La signorina)*  
Duncan Grant  
Pencil and watercolour, c. 1923-1924  
229 mm x 178 mm  
JWM Collection

In the collection we can find two such examples: Grant's *Design for a Piano Top*, and his *Study for Angus Davidson's Cupboard*. As indicated by both titles, art is applied to everyday domestic objects: a piano and a cupboard. Once again, the piano top is supposedly a neutral object whose sole purpose is to protect the instrument's interior, with no reason to have any inherent value aside from its function. Likewise, a cupboard would ordinarily be seen as merely an object of storage. Not for Duncan. In the artist's mind, utility and beauty can and should be connected, and furthermore, that does not just mean the artistry of the object's manufacture, but a union between the object and the separate disciplines of decorative art. Outside the collection, there are countless other items which enact this idea. Take the log boxes at Charleston, onto which Grant painted two elegantly contorted angels, both equipped with instruments and generating silent music into the room. In indulging in this decorative project, Grant bridges the gap between the terrestrial and the celestial, the domestic and the divine; connecting the two spheres through acrylic paint.





*Decorated Log Box*  
Duncan Grant  
The Charleston Trust



*Decorated Log Box*  
Duncan Grant  
The Charleston Trust

Forster's dictum however, may even extend to the display of the St. Peter's collection itself. Just as Grant was able to "only connect" the realms of functionality and fine art, the college may have — consciously or otherwise — done the same. The collection hangs on the walls of the SCR dining room, a decision not without symbolic significance. Exhibition halls and galleries are so often empty spaces, devoid of furniture or alternative function, whose sole purpose is artistic contemplation and thought. Not here. Grant's work has been placed in a space where two activities are forcefully connected: food and fine art. Within the art-crowded walls of the Senior Common Room, both an aesthetic and a culinary appetite can be satiated.