

## ***Beyond Bloomsbury Designs of the Omega Workshops 1913–19***

***Beyond Bloomsbury: Designs of the Omega Workshops 1913–19***, on view at The Courtauld Gallery, Somerset House, London, from **18 June to 20 September 2009**, takes a fresh look at a singularly creative moment in the history of modernist craft and design in Britain. Founded by the artist and influential critic Roger Fry in the summer of 1913, the Omega Workshops Limited was a laboratory of radical design ideas, and involved many of the most avant-garde artists of the day. Inspired by contemporary art in Europe, the Omega Workshops created a range of objects for the home, from rugs and linens to ceramics, furniture and clothing – all boldly coloured and patterned with dynamic abstract designs. For a short while, the Workshops' premises at 33 Fitzroy Square was the only place to shop in London for a 'Fauve' shawl, a 'Post-Impressionist' chair or a Cubist-inspired rug.

Fry sought to challenge the commercial market in domestic interiors with new and exciting products, and the Omega Workshops functioned as a beacon of opposition to mainstream Edwardian culture and aesthetics. As he told a journalist in 1913: 'It is time that the spirit of fun was introduced into furniture and into fabrics. We have suffered too long from the dull and the stupidly serious.' The Workshops managed to stay open during the First World War but eventually closed in 1919. Although it operated for just six years, it saw the creation of an impressive sequence of thrillingly bold designs which were well ahead of their time.

The Omega Workshops was a limited company, with shareholders, employees and several subcontracted craftsmen producing wares off site for the Omega 'brand' from original designs by the Workshops' artists. At its height they included Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant, Wyndham Lewis, Frederick Etchells, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and Winifred Gill – the remarkable young woman who ran the Workshops from the start of the War until 1916. Fry insisted that the designs were produced anonymously, bearing only the Greek letter  $\Omega$  (Omega) in a square, which also decorated the signboard outside 33 Fitzroy Square (fig. 1). The premises served as a shared working studio and a showroom where informed clientele could drop in to make a small purchase, choose to have something made from a wide range of designs, or even commission an entire interior. Clients included Virginia Woolf, George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, W.B. Yeats and E.M. Forster, as well as bohemian high society figures like Lady Ottoline Morrell and Maud Cunard. Fry was also adept at bringing visiting intellectual grandees such as Gertrude Stein to the Omega. There was no other shop in London like it, where artists and rich patrons rubbed shoulders and where artists' designs were sold directly to the consumer. Virginia Woolf recalled the lively atmosphere: 'There were bright chintzes designed by the young artists; there were painted tables and painted chairs; and there was Roger Fry himself escorting now Lady So-and-so, now a business man from Birmingham, round the rooms and doing his best to persuade them to buy.'

This exhibition unites the largest collection of surviving working drawings of the Omega Workshops, bequeathed to The Courtauld Gallery by Fry's daughter Pamela Diamand in 1958, with the finest examples of their printed linens, hand-knotted rugs, woven wools and splendidly painted silks. Concentrating on textiles and designs for textiles, the exhibition explores how the Omega artists moved from a painterly idea to the finished object. At the heart of the exhibition are spectacular examples of the Omega's range of abstract printed furnishing fabrics, ranging from the geometrical *Mechtilde*, named after the German ambassador's wife (fig. 2), to the fluid and painterly *Pamela*, named after Fry's daughter (fig. 3). Various colourways are displayed to show how printed textiles attained a freedom of expression comparable to painting on canvas. One of the highlights of the group of large-scale design drawings is a sketch, perhaps for a rug or scarf, which bears comparison with the very boldest abstract paintings of the period (fig. 4).

One of the revelations of the exhibition is the so-called *Peacock Stole*. This long stole of chiffon silk, which remained unsold, is painted in primary colours with a bold motif of confronting peacocks. Conserved especially for the exhibition, it has not been on view for over fifty years and this is a unique opportunity to see it reunited with two preparatory drawings in The Courtauld's collection (fig. 5). Shown nearby is Vanessa Bell's important painted screen *Bathers in a Landscape* – a transitional object between fine and decorative art, which displays passages of pure decoration and colour that resonate with the abstract textiles (fig. 6).

Another highlight in the exhibition is the set of spectacular rugs designed at the Omega, and probably made at the Royal Wilton Carpet Factory. These are shown together with their working drawings to reveal aspects of the design, commissioning and manufacturing process. They include the striking Ideal Home Exhibition Rug (fig. 7) and a small jewel of a rug designed by Vanessa Bell for Lady Ian Hamilton's flat at 1 Hyde Park Gardens. The finished rugs intentionally preserve the loose informal quality of the original design drawings, which was such an important part of the Omega's modernist aesthetic.

The exhibition also demonstrates the diversity and range of media made and sold at the Omega Workshops, in particular ceramics. It includes a distinctive selection of the tableware Fry made for the Omega, as well as a few lively, Matisse-inspired painted plates (fig. 8) and a row of handheld terracotta cats by the French sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, each glazed in a different colour, echoing Fry's experiments in glazes. The displays conclude with examples of other Omega products, illustrating the range of their design activity, including a Ballets Russes-inspired waistcoat made from an Omega woven fabric called *Cracow*, a marquetry tray by Gaudier-Brzeska, painted furniture and a series of eye-catching Cubist-inspired lamp-stands.

***Beyond Bloomsbury: Designs of the Omega Workshops 1913–19*** is a revealing reappraisal of this experimental moment in British design history. It seeks to lift the Omega Workshops out of the context of the 'Bloomsbury Group' of bohemian artists and intellectuals in which it has so often been seen and to consider it as a boldly ambitious experiment in design which had a far-reaching influence, particularly in the field of artist-designed textiles in Britain.

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## FACT SHEET

- Exhibition title:** *Beyond Bloomsbury: Designs of the Omega Workshops 1913-19*
- Dates:** 18 June to 20 September 2009
- Lead Supporter:** The Friends of the Courtauld  
Additional support provided by The Drapers' Charitable Fund
- Location:** The Courtauld Gallery, Somerset House, Strand, London WC2R 0RN  
Tel. +44 (0)20 7848 2526, fax. +44 (0)20 7848 2589, [www.courtauld.ac.uk](http://www.courtauld.ac.uk)
- Opening hours:** Daily 10 am to 6 pm, last admission 5.30 pm
- Admission:** Included in admission to permanent collection:  
Adult: £5.00, concessions: £4.00;  
Free admission: Mondays 10 am to 2 pm  
Free at all times for under 18s, full-time UK students and unwaged
- Catalogue:** The exhibition is accompanied by a fully-illustrated catalogue edited by Alexandra Gerstein, Curator of Sculpture and Decorative Arts of The Courtauld, published by Fontanka Press in association with The Courtauld Gallery. New research commissioned for the catalogue explores the Omega's working practice, its legacy and its place in relation to early twentieth-century textiles, ceramics and design. The essays are written by an international team of specialists and young scholars, with an introduction by Professor Christopher Reed, the recognized authority on Bloomsbury visual culture. Other essays are by Dr Grace Brockington, Claudette Joannis, Akiko Kato, Mary Schoeser, Elizabeth Sheehan, Dr Julian Stair, and Dr Jon Wood. ISBN 978 1 906257 04 0, 176 pages, paperback, size 260 x 216 mm, price £20.  
Hardback distributed by Thames & Hudson ISBN 978 1 906257 05 7
- Gallery Talks:** There will be a programme of talks by curators and Courtauld students, free with admission.
- Related Display:** An associated display will show a selection of rarely seen works on paper by Winifred Gill (1891-1981), the unsung heroine of the Omega Workshops. *Winifred Gill's Prints and Toy Designs* celebrates the recent generous gift to The Courtauld Gallery of a substantial group of Gill's linocuts and woodblock prints by the artist's niece, Dr Margaret Bennett. The display will include a selection of Gill's colourful and imaginative articulated toy designs, which form part of The Courtauld's existing holdings of the artist's work.
- How to get there:** The Courtauld Gallery is situated in the North Building of Somerset House, which has entrances from the Strand and the Victoria Embankment. Mainline trains to Charing Cross, Waterloo or Blackfriars; underground stations Temple (District and Circle lines), Covent Garden (Piccadilly line) and Charing Cross (Northern, Bakerloo and Jubilee lines); buses 6, 9, 11, 13, 15, 23, 77a, 91 and 176 to Strand.
- Access:** The Gallery is wheelchair accessible, with level access to most areas and a lift to all floors. Assisted ramp access is available for gallery 1.  
24 hour access information line +44 (20) 7845 4671
- Shop:** The Courtauld Shop is open daily during Gallery hours offering exhibition catalogues and a variety of merchandise inspired by the temporary exhibitions and the permanent collection.  
Tel. +44 (0)20 7848 2579, [shop@sctenterprises.com](mailto:shop@sctenterprises.com)
- Café:** The Courtauld Gallery Café is open daily 10.00 to 17.30 serving light meals and drinks.