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Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada, The Greek body and the formalist quest across the divide: from Aestheticism to Bloomsbury painting

Continuities between the painting of Aestheticism (1860-1900) and that of Bloomsbury are being reevaluated, but its legacy to the Aesthetic interest in the “Greek form” still needs addressing. Bloomsbury art theory privileged formalism, a novel approach to painting that emphasized composition, colour, line, brushwork and texture at the expense of subject and representationality. Formalism in art is strongly attached to Clive Bell’s notion of the “significant form,” and yet the Aesthetic artists and art theoreticians had also privileged a formalist approach to painting. The disparaging presentation of much Victorian painting by Bloomsbury art theoreticians has led to a lack of interest for the visual and formalist echoes between Aestheticism and the works of artists such as Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant. In particular, they were clearly inspired visually by the way Aestheticism had reutilized the classical forms of Greco-Roman art in their works. This article therefore intends to study some works by Bell and Grant so as to recognize this visual inspiration and to replace it within the Aesthetic context of the valuation of the proto-formalist potential of the “Greek form.” Indeed, the “Greek” form – often called “classical” – came to emblemize the formalist and self-referential qualities of art that were so fundamental to Aestheticism and so the human figure was modelled on Greek iconographical sources, often filtered through Renaissance art.

For about two decades now, the genealogy of art constructed by Bloomsbury art theoreticians has been challenged along several lines. The Bloomsbury modernists – whether painters, critics, or writers – needed the idea of a rupture in order to pinpoint new values for the reception of art. Clive Bell’s emphasis on the role of pure form in art entailed a rejection of the representationality which, to him, characterized most Victorian art. Likewise, Roger Fry excluded Victorian painting from the innovative art forms that were essentially preoccupied with the visual qualities of art. Yet in the remapping of art history across the divide has allowed a reevaluation of Aestheticism as part of the *avant-garde* formations that developed in late-Victorian Britain. David Peters Corbett (2004), for example, has studied the

role which texture played in Aesthetic painting so as to minimize the idea of the formalist divide between late-Victorian and Modernist art. Similarly, Elizabeth Prettejohn (2006) has established continuities between Aesthetic and Modernist art theory, showing how Bell's and Fry's critical idioms and ideas were largely influenced by the terminology and ideas of Aesthetic art theoreticians. In his essay "The School of Giorgione" of 1877 for instance, Walter Pater particularly valued the "abstract language" of art and the work's "true pictorial quality," by which he meant the "inventive or creative handling of pure line and colour" (Pater 103, 106) and which he opposed to the narrative, spiritual, and didactic content of the artwork.

Clive Bell's dismissal of most Victorian painting has actually contributed to eclipse the fact that in his essay *Art*, he did discern a few pioneers in the nineteenth century, among them "the French Impressionists," but also, and more unexpectedly, "the Aesthetes" (C. Bell 183). This category of painters was thus exhumed from the "bog" of Victorian art and yet the only "Aesthete" he mentioned was J.A.M.N. Whistler: the other Victorian artists are rejected on account of their tendency to privilege representation; the painters of Victorian *genre* and the Pre-Raphaelites were much too devoted to "imitation" (192) while the "Academic painter" merely reproduced "in the spirit, not of an artist, but of the 'sedulous ape'" (185). Bell identifies Frederic Leighton and Edward Poynter as "Royal Academicians" whose art was to be dismissed because it was concerned with "exact representation" (24). To these he opposed those artists who showed "sensitivity to the profound significance of form" (183), such as Whistler. Form is thus a central element in Bell's construction of the story of modernity, in which the loosely defined category of "Aesthetes" is included. Leighton is now studied as a prominent figure of Aestheticism (see Prettejohn 2007) but Bell did not include him within that group. However, Prettejohn (2006) has demonstrated that Clive Bell probably had Leighton's ideas and rhetoric in mind when he defined the "Significant Form" as "aesthetically moving forms" which to him were first and foremost "relations and combinations of lines and colours" (C. Bell 8). As a matter of fact, Leighton, in his *Address* to the students of the Royal Academy of 1881, had already called for an art in which "lines and forms and combinations of lines and forms, colours and combinations of colours have acquired a distinct expressional significance" (Leighton 57). In fact, a great many Aesthetic artists wished the formalist qualities of painting to be appreciated for their own sakes.

When, in his "Essay in Aesthetics" of 1909, Roger Fry attacked the dogma of representationality and praised the French Post-Impressionists for their rejection of "imitation," he did not mention the late-Victorian formalist experimentations. Only the Post-

Impressionists were cited as they did “not seek to imitate form, but to create form.” To him, the “logical extreme of such a method would undoubtedly be the attempt to give up all resemblance to natural form, and to create a purely abstract language of form – a visual music” (Fry 157). For example, Fry asserted that “[t]he first element is that of the rhythm of the line with which the forms are delineated” (22). However, the use of the musical trope to point to the formalist qualities of painting had been a central tenet of Aesthetic discourse. Incidentally, although Fry believed that the abstract quality of a work of art rested on the play on line, colour, form and rhythm, he did not call for a total rejection of figuration. Reed has suggested that “Roger Fry was deeply enmeshed in the late-Victorian avant-gardes and Bloomsbury’s rhetoric – both verbal and visual – draws heavily on that precedent” (Reed 4). He then briefly mentions the influence of Aestheticism and the Arts and Crafts movement on the element of domesticity present in Bloomsbury’s decorative works. But Aesthetic painters and art theorists had also paved the way for Bloomsbury’s formalist theories.

One may therefore reverse Anne-Pascale Bruneau-Rumsey’s suggestion that Fry’s vocabulary and critical axis came to be adopted by the representatives of the former tradition, as exemplified by the academic painter W.B. Richmond’s response to the “Manet and the Post-Impressionists” exhibition of 1910:

The formalist terminology to which the exhibition had given wide currency was perceptibly filtering into art criticism, including some commentators who had been first hostile to the exhibition, for example W.B. Richmond, who expressed his confidence about British painters who “strive to express the deeper significance of things rather than produce a make-believe of plastic reality. They will search for a new rhythm of line and colour, for a summary statement of the really essential features,” a terminology reminiscent of that used in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, where values as “linear design,” “abstract linear harmony,” and “rhythm” had been emphasized. (Bruneau-Rumsey 31-32)

However, these values had already been a concern for many Aesthetic artists – even though they never adopted a plastic language as innovative as that of Post-Impressionism. Richmond had indeed lamented that “[n]either form nor colour in the abstract appeals directly to northern sensibilities when they are disengaged from episode” (Richmond 465-66). He in fact wanted his British contemporaries to detach themselves from the dogmas of subject and illustration. He had experimented with Aesthetic formalism in his *Electra at the Tomb of*

Agamemnon of 1874¹: the illustration of Aeschylus's *Choephoroi* is turned into a purely Aesthetic arrangement of lines and colours. The composition is based on the rhythmic play of geometrical lines, with symmetrical female figures, two standing and flanking a stele, and two other sitting at its base. The whole disposition emphasizes the horizontal lines of the steps and frame as well as the vertical lines of the monument, tree trunks and figures, while this overall linearity is balanced by numerous curves. Thanks to the limited palette of secondary and complementary colours (orange, green and brown), the general effect is therefore one of "visual music," to take up Fry's expression, even though the mood is one of melancholy and sadness – a feature of many Aesthetic paintings. Richmond belonged to what many contemporary art critics, reviewers and journalists referred to as the "classical" school – which loosely regrouped a number of academic painters who revived themes and iconographical sources drawn from Greco-Roman antiquity while pursuing Aesthetic formalist experiments.

The academic valorisation of Greek models blended with the Aesthetic vocabulary of formalism. "Greek" forms, drawn from sculptures, vases and friezes of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., were envisaged as an artistic ideal. They were noble and pure because they entailed subjectlessness and universality. Painters like Leighton, Albert Moore, Edward Burne-Jones, or George Frederic Watts believed that Greek models provided them with an idealized and decontextualized human form. They were deeply influenced by Winckelmann's or Hegel's discourses on Greek statuary as well as by Kant's privileging of form.² Thus, many contemporary artists and critics lauded the "abstract" qualities of Greek forms, which meant that they were abstracted from the contemporary and that their beauty could be appreciated for its own sake, that is, for their harmonious combination of line, shapes and colour. The reference to the ideality of Greek forms accorded with the Aesthetic privileging of form over subject. In a letter he sent to the art critic J. Comyns Carr in 1873, Leighton evoked the abstractness of Greek forms:

By degrees, however, my growing love for Form . . . led me more and more, to a class of subjects, or, more accurately, to a set of conditions, in which the supreme scope is left to pure artistic qualities . . . These conditions classic subjects afford, and as vehicles, therefore, of abstract form which is a thing not of one time but of all time, these subjects can never be obsolete. (Carr 98)

¹ William Blake Richmond, *Electra at the Tomb of Agamemnon*, 1874, oil on canvas, 170.2 x 157.5 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Canada. See online: <http://www.ago.net/agoid5674> [all Internet images accessed March 2017].

² See Prettejohn 2007 for a study of Pater's and Leighton's indebtedness to German aesthetic philosophy.

The word “abstract” did not imply non-representationality but reflected Leighton’s wish to dissociate the human form from a spiritual, narrative or didactic content. His painting *Greek Girls Picking up Pebbles by the Sea*³ was paradigmatic of his desire to appropriate Greek iconographical sources as part of a formalist project. Leighton based his composition on a careful colour arrangement as well as on the mirroring disposition of the female figures, whose linear shapes pasted on a horizontal structure are matched by the curving lines of their whirling draperies. The women’s expressionlessness was a tribute to the serenity of Greek sculpture. For Leighton, treating the human form “abstractly” meant a purportedly “pure” manner. However, although the human form was meant to be “abstract,” decorative, aestheticized and idealized, the body still speaks of desire and anguish. Leighton’s *Greek Girls* transposes the story of sexual predation and gendered competition that was central to another of his visual sources – Guido Reni’s *Atalanta and Hippomenes* (c. 1615-18, Prado) – into a representation of barren craving and female loneliness. The women’s bodily postures and their eddying draperies reflect these conflicting forces, despite the idealist and formalist discourses on the Greek “form,” which tend to elude the fact that Aestheticism treats the body as a site of tension.

Greek forms also played an important role in Albert Moore’s formalist project, as they enabled him to concentrate on pure form and to abandon content. The art critic Sidney Colvin also referred to the discourse on the abstractness of Greek forms. In *The Marble Seat*⁴, Moore’s Aesthetic formalism rested on his treatment of Greek forms: “form goes for nearly everything, expression for next to nothing”; for Colvin indeed, Moore did “not attempt realism . . . but paint[ed] in low keys of colour figure-subjects with little dramatic purpose, that seem[ed] prompted by an aesthetic turn radically akin to that of the Greeks.” (Colvin 1867, 473) Moore’s canvas is in fact notable for its chromatic harmony and the formalist arrangement of the figures, which were derived from the Parthenon sculptures in the British Museum. The composition is structured on the vertical and horizontal lines of the figures and bench. Yet, many contemporaries overlooked Moore’s formalist intention and were puzzled by the three women engrossed in the contemplation of a naked servant, which was a gendered reversal of the iconographical theme of the Judgment of Paris. Colvin never commented on the erotic dimension of these inexpressive and yet sensual women, whose diaphanous Grecian

³ Frederic Leighton, *Greek Girls Picking up Pebbles by the Sea* (1871), oil on canvas, 84 x 129.5cm, private collection. <http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/leighton/paintings/22.html>.

⁴ Albert Moore, *The Marble Seat*, 1864, oil on canvas, 47 x 74.6 cm, private collection. <http://www.the-athenaeum.org/art/detail.php?ID=80544>.

robes enhance their voluptuous bodies and who watch a nude boyish cupbearer. Colvin lauded it because it was “undoubtedly akin to a Greek work” and realized “an ideal physical nobleness in the human type.” The laudatory comments on the work’s formalism – which was poised on the abstractness of the Greek forms as well as on Moore’s “power of arranging and combining the lines of the human form into a visible rhythm and symmetry not less delightful than the audible rhythm and symmetry of music” (Colvin 1870, 6) – may make one forget that the body is also eroticized.

Other art critics evoked the formalist dimension of those reutilized Greek forms. Cosmo Monkhouse thought that Moore was “Greek also in his choice of expressing himself greatly if not mainly by form, by accurate and delicate modelling,” adding that he was animated by a “‘purist’ ideal of art” and “preoccupied . . . with beautiful combinations of form and colour” (Monkhouse 193-195). Oscar Wilde even discerned a decorative and formalist quality in modern English art which to him derived from Greek sources: Whistler and Moore “raised design and colour to the ideal level of poetry and music” and were notable for “the mere inventive and creative handling of line and colour” as well as for “a certain form and choice of beautiful workmanship, which, rejecting all literary reminiscence and all metaphysical idea, is in itself entirely satisfying to the aesthetic sense – is, as the Greeks would say, an end in itself” (Wilde 30-31). For a number of critics, this formalist trend in painting was strongly related to the notion of “abstraction,” which in the context was understood as a carving out of all impurities from the human form – a classically-inspired delineation of the body and face. Yet this implied a renunciation of other, more complex trends in Aesthetic works, such as the eroticized treatment of the human figure. The critic of the *Pall Mall Gazette* explained that Moore, in order to “realize essential beauty of face or form undisturbed by dramatic feeling,” gave his figures’ attitudes “an abstract significance” that was inspired by Greek sculpture (*Pall Mall Gazette* 1875, 11-12). But in a later article, the same journalist contradictorily wrote that Moore “perfect[ed] a balanced arrangement of colour” by “treat[ing] the human form in its simplest relations, preferring by choice those abstract movements of the body that exhibit only the unconscious movements of the mind” (*Pall Mall Gazette* 1881, 11-12). In our modern post-Freudian context, this reads like a symptomatic approach to the body. Interpreting those Aesthetic bodies through the angle of formalism or idealism only leads to an aporia: the human form can never be abstract, despite the metaphoric value ascribed to it; it remains an “incarnation,” as Georges Didi-Huberman would put it (see Didi-Huberman 26-33), and it is charged with affects. The Greek body was clothed with an academic and iconological discourse that postulated its idealizing and disincarnating value; similarly, it

served the proto-formalist concerns of Aestheticism; but the body persists as a tangible or even a sensual form.

The Greek form recurs in Bloomsbury painting, raising comparable issues. If the term “abstract” meant a complete rejection of figuration, as exemplified by the title of one of Duncan Grant’s canvas, *Abstract Kinetic Collage Painting with Sound* (1914, Tate Britain), he and Vanessa Bell remained deeply attached to figurative painting. They also actually looked back to their predecessors’ aestheticist and proto-formalist mediation of Greek forms in their own Modernist treatment of the human figure, despite many stylistic differences. The eight mural panels⁵ they devised in 1919-1921 for Maynard Keynes’s rooms in Cambridge show their awareness of the visual potential of the Greek forms that had been revitalized by Aestheticism. Bell and Grant looked to Greek iconographical sources as well as to the artistic innovations brought by Aesthetic painters. Their murals – and the preparatory studies – represent female figures draped in variously coloured gowns that alternate with half-nude male figures wearing white loincloths. They adopt a frontal presentation of sculptural, caryatid-like figures, whose the draperies and props are clearly antique. The decorative and repetitive placing of the human figures within the composition and the bodily gestures evoke Aesthetic works. Music also plays a central role, both as theme and compositional device, since both the repetitive disposition and the play on colour evoke a rhythmic pattern. The treatment, however, is distinctly modernist, with the static figures drawn with generalized lines as well as with broad, flat forms. Still, Bell and Grant’s classical and allegorical figures, which embody artistic or academic disciplines and hold emblematic objects such as scrolls, globes or musical instruments, are visual reminiscences of the Aesthetic-cum-academic revitalised allegories, not only because of the treatment of the figures but also because of the presence of symbolical objects.

There are a number of visual similarities between the murals work and precise Aesthetic paintings. For example, E.C. Burne-Jones, in *The Hours* of 1882⁶, was also interested in a linear arrangement of static and repetitive figures. Grant did in fact admire Burne-Jones, as Quentin Bell recorded it (Q. Bell 7). True, Bloomsbury’s formalist innovations are bolder

⁵ J.M. Keynes’ room in King’s College decorated by Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, Webb’s Court, King’s College, Cambridge. See the studies: Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell, *Eight studies for the murals at J.M. Keynes’ rooms*, 1920, oil on canvas, 83.8 x 35.5 cm, private collection. <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/duncan-grant-1885-1978-and-vanessa-bell-1879-1961-5640049-details.aspx>.

⁶ Edward Burne-Jones, *The Hours*, 1882, oil on canvas, 77.5 x 183.4 cm, Graves Art Gallery, Sheffield. <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/the-hours-71651>.

than those of their Aesthetic predecessors, and yet these should not be overestimated. Indeed, the art critic R.A.M. Stevenson claimed that Burne-Jones “was content to suggest certain attributes by more abstract processes than those implied in the naturalistic use of oil-paint . . . Colour, shape, the inclination of surfaces, relative depths of space or distance, he rendered by abstract patterns, and scarcely at all by the natural method of light and atmosphere” (Stevenson 57-8). This was a probable allusion to his innovative flattening and schematization of the human figure, even though he never entirely discarded modelling, anatomic structure and individuality. Thus, in *The Hours*, Burne-Jones’s figures are much more delineated and detailed than Grant and Bell’s broadly sketched human forms, which present no facial features and whose bodies, limbs and faces are handled in a fluid manner inspired by Matisse and Picasso. Besides, the murals are devoid of any perspective as the backgrounds are flat red or dark planes with decorative patterns within an orange frame. The rectangular format enhances the verticality of the immobile figures, to which the flowing curves of the bodies bring a counterpoint. Still, the carefully chosen bodily gestures and the rhythmical disposition of harmonious colours undoubtedly evoke Burne-Jones’s canvases. The standing female figure in red holding a long scroll is a visual echo of Burne-Jones’s allegorical representation of *Autumn*⁷: the woman stands in a similar position, wearing an elaborate red gown and a drapery; instead of a scroll, she holds a fruit – a round object that functions as a potentially symbolical object. Bell and Grant actually placed bowls in many of their panels.

There are numerous visual echoes of Aesthetic precedents. An allegorical figure of the Arts and Sciences wearing a green drapery and leaning on a Doric column is an obvious reminiscence of Richmond’s *Electra*: the scenography is similar, with the two compositions based on the vertical lines of a stele, while the colour green is the one Richmond used for the draperies in his own canvas. Only the posture of the two artists’ erect figure is more hieratic than Richmond’s lamenting figures. In another panel, a woman in white holding a violin reminds one of some of the figures Moore represented in *A Quartet* (1868)⁸. In both works the figures are clad in white draperies, their hair is blond and they hold musical instruments. Only, Moore represented his three female figures with their backs turned to the spectator. In the two pieces, music functions as subject matter and formalist principle. Indeed, Moore too aimed at an abstract organisation of lines and colours.

⁷ Burne-Jones, *Autumn*, 1869-70, gouache and watercolour, references unknown. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/edward-burne-jones/the-seasons-autumn>.

⁸ Albert Moore, *A Quartet, a Painter’s Tribute to Music*, 1868, oil on canvas, 61.8 x 88.7 cm, private collection. <http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/moore/paintings/12.html>.

Bell and Grant also represent another allegorical figure – a woman wearing a blue drapery and whose attitude expresses pathos: she tilts her head slightly to the side and seems lost in some serious thoughts; her left hand rests under her chin while her right hand holds her other arm tightly. A visual parallel may be established with a number of Leighton's Greek heroines: her drapery and posture evoke Leighton's *Electra at the Tomb of Agamemnon* (1869 Ferens Art Gallery, Kingston upon Hull) while her arms recall the kind of rhetorical gestures and poses Leighton favoured, as in his *Helen of Troy* of 1865 (private collection). The rhetorical attitude of Bell and Grant's figure seems to express a similar moral dilemma as the Greek princess's. Obviously, those late-Victorian academic painters who illustrated Greek tragedy or epic in the Grand manner left their marks on Bell and Grant.

As to the male studies, most are half-naked figures who wear thin loincloths, except for one, who hides his nudity with an open book. He stands next to a kind of bowl surmounted with a vase-like form. Another figure leans on a column, engrossed in reading a book. The bowls remind one of the globes carried by the standing angels Burne-Jones represented in *The Days of Creation*⁹ – a series of six allegorical panels. Incidentally, W.M. Rossetti considered Burne-Jones's treatment of these repetitive figures as “abstract and symbolic” (Rossetti 396), probably because the Biblical and Greek iconography blends with the artist's highly idiosyncratic symbolism. Not only are Bell and Grant's male figures visual echoes of his angels but they also evince a similar taste for the symbolism of props. Only, their male figures are nudes, which is not the case for Burne-Jones's. Yet, these male nudes are reminiscent of another of his allegorical figures, the young nude man he represented in *Day*.¹⁰ The frontal position is similar and all are framed by horizontal lines. Burne-Jones seemed to have depicted the androgynous male body as a subject in itself. His slender body is inspired by Renaissance Florentine painters or sculptors, mostly Donatello. The epicene male bodies of the modernist panels evince a delicate musculature that also characterizes Burne-Jones's figure, whose latent homoeroticism must have appealed to Grant. This accords with Reed's opinion that “Grant's decorations for Keynes were conceived as an expression of sexual identity – an identity rooted in the legacy of Aestheticism.” (Reed 52-53) Indeed, Bell and Grant's male figures are not engaged in manly actions but are shown reading, writing or just watching in the distance. This was already a characteristic of many works by Burne-Jones,

⁹ Edward Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation* (six panels), 1870-1876, gouache, 102.2 x 35.9 cm, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard. <http://www.harvardartmuseums.org/art/298117>.

¹⁰ Edward Burne-Jones, *Day*, 1870, watercolour, gouache and metallic paint on white paper mounted, 121.7 x 45.5 cm. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard. <http://www.harvardartmuseums.org/collections/object/298118?position=8>. Web: <http://www.harvardartmuseums.org/collections/object/298118?position=30>.

Solomon or other Aesthetic painters, who had already paved the way for the blurring of gendered pictorial conventions as far as the male body was concerned¹¹.

Grant's Greek forms reflect a vision of life that is conceived in terms of decorativeness but also of ritual. This is evident in his favourite motif of the dance, which is the main subject of his *Dancers* of 1910-1.¹² But the dancing figures also appear like visual reminiscences of Watts's nude goddesses in the *Judgment of Paris*, especially in the version that is close to a sketch.¹³ Watts thought that he could find no beautiful forms in his contemporary world and so he looked to Greek and Renaissance art for a stock of visual sources. He believed that Greek forms were universal and pure and that their symbolism could speak to all. Interestingly, many contemporary critics defined his work as symbolical and idealistic, often using the term "abstract" to express this idea. The critic of the *Art Journal* said that his "forms and the compositions" were "so abstract and generic as to be removed far away from actual nature" (*Art Journal* 1870, 164). Heathcote Statham estimated that he generally treated the "figure . . . with almost the abstract idealism of sculpture," to which he imparted the "glow of colour" (Statham 964). Watts combined a modelling that was influenced by classical and Michelangesque forms, as show his massive and muscular bodies, and by a Venetian, atmospheric and translucent treatment of colour. Besides, he sometimes treated the figure as a fluid, sketchy form, devoid of a precise contour and modelling. This was the case for his *Judgment of Paris*, which is also notable for the monumentality and massive corporality of the naked women, who were modelled on Greek sculpture.

Grant's treatment of the bodies in his *Dancers* shows his legacy to Matisse's fluid technique and to Gauguin's chromatic arrangements and yet he was also probably influenced by Watt's canvas. The disposition of the female figures is quite analogous, except that Grant depicted five figures instead of three. They occupy the whole space and are placed on the first plane against a background that is devoid of a clear perspective. Placed in a semi-circle, they show their nude bodies frontally, from the rear and in profile, as in the traditional representation of the three Graces. In both works, the women are disposed in a rhythmical pattern. Grant's solid and monumental bodies too are modelled on Greek iconographical

¹¹ Reed also studies the Arcadian and Dionysian dimensions of Grant's art (52-57) and his inscription within a British tradition in which Greek precedents were used as signifiers of erotic or homoerotic transgression (242-244).

¹² Duncan Grant, *Dancers*, c. 1910-11, oil paint on wood, 53.3 x 66 cm, Tate Britain. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/grant-dancers-n06181>.

¹³ George Frederic Watts, *The Judgment of Paris*, 1872-4, oil on canvas, 76 x 66 cm, private collection. <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2015/victorian-pre-raphaelite-british-impressionist-art-115133/lot.10.html>.

sources, with some adopting a classical *contrapposto*. One finds a similar play on straight and curving lines: the figures, despite their statuesque rigidity, are animated thanks to their varied postures, their fluid bodies and draperies, and their elongated limbs. The colours are harmoniously disposed on the canvas, but where Watts mostly used ochre, white and brown colours, Grant adopted the bright palette of Post-Impressionist or Fauvist art, with complementary colours such as reds, blues, and yellows contrasting with the carnations of the figures. Grant's figures, thus, appear livelier than Watts's. Still, their thick contours owe as much to Fauvism and Post-Impressionism as to Watts's technique.

The motif of the round dance dates back to antique iconography as well as to Italian Renaissance painting, which Grant particularly appreciated. One famous example of a round dance is that of the three Graces in Botticelli's *Primavera*. Aesthetic painters had already been attracted to the motif of the dance on account of its potentially liberating pagan energy, as show a number of variations on the motif, from Burne-Jones's *Garden of the Hesperides* (1870), Spencer Stanhope's *Love and the Maiden* of 1877, to the more academic painting by Edward Poynter, *Horae Serenae* (1896). Closer to Grant, this theme recurs in the Symbolist painting by Franz van Stück, *Ringerlreihen* (1910), which may have been another source for Grant because of the similar composition and play on colours. All these works evince some kind of continuity in the motif of the dance, the choice of colours, and the symbolical value ascribed to it. The themes of rebirth, exacerbated desire or melancholy trance are expressed by the visual patterns of women rhythmically disposed along sequences of mainly primary colours – mostly red, blue, and yellow. Beyond its formalist dimension, Grant's painting also offers a complex vision of the individual.

The "Greek" body in Grant and Bell's painting was a complex site. It was paradoxically poised between formalism and figuration. Yet, the human figure could not completely function as an abstract visual sign, despite Bell and Grant's desire to reach a self-referential, decorative and subjectless form. This was a central paradox. Vanessa Bell claimed that "the principal preoccupation of the artist is with form and colour," which she opposed to the persistence of the "human significance." According to her, what interested writers were the "particular human associations" that gave a particular value to their objects. Painters, on the other hand, were exclusively sensitive to "colour and form" and to light effects (V. Bell 155-57). However, Bell was forgetting that representing the human form could be invested with a symbolical or even an erotic value. The body cannot acquire a total aesthetic autonomy; it can

hardly be wholly abstract. Besides, human forms circulate through time and so they are always given new meanings.

This is the case for Greek forms. The Greek visual sources are taken up in art history and mediated through various pictorial traditions that appropriate and acclimatize them. In so doing, they are still redolent of contextualized mythical, symbolical or even psychological associations. Vanessa Bell appropriated Greek forms through the filter of Aestheticism as part of a formalist and thus modernist project; and yet, she also reflected fantasies or anxieties concerning the body. Aesthetic painters and theoreticians had claimed that the Greek body could function as a self-referential form. Bell's own Greek forms were clearly influenced visually by these representations, as show some of the gestures, attitudes, and poses she depicted. These bodies, in fact, are signifiers; they reflect these "human associations" which she wanted to ascribe to writers only, and not to painters; they are crossed by symptoms and express desires. Catherine Bernard notes that for Bloomsbury, "[a]bstraction was but a transition towards the autonomy of figuration: they felt that the impersonality of abstraction could not measure up to the rich emotional palette of figuration" (Bernard 47). These bodies in fact also produce a mood, or an emotion.

Richard Shone has noted that Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant "were resistant to symbolic accountability, giving only formalist reasons for their choice of subject matter and rarely straying into self-interrogation" (Shone 13). This, however, was a paradoxical posture, as shows Duncan Grant's *Venus and Adonis* (1919).¹⁴ The painting represents a voluptuous and eroticized goddess based on the Greco-Roman theme of the reclining figure, either in the nude or draped. She watches to the left, most probably in the direction of her lover, Adonis, who appears as a tiny, naked figure wandering in the landscape. He is placed exactly between her buttocks and calf and so this position triggers a whole chain of associations. He seems to be protruding from her posterior and reaching for her leg. Adonis also appears eager to escape from an expectant and hieratic Venus. Shone sees this flight as a probable allusion to Grant's tensed relationship with Bell. The motif of the reclining figure was traditional in Greek sculpture, Roman frescos and Renaissance painting. But it was also a recurring theme of Aesthetic painting, and Grant could have found a direct source in Leighton's *Actaea Nymph of the Shore*.¹⁵ Indeed, both works bear visual resemblances, although the treatment is totally different. True, Actaea and Venus adopt

¹⁴ Duncan Grant, *Venus and Adonis*, c.1919, oil on canvas, 63.5 x 94 cm, Tate Britain. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/grant-venus-and-adonis-t01514>.

¹⁵ Frederic Leighton, *Actaea, Nymph of the Shore*, 1868, oil on canvas, 57.2 x 102.2 cm, National Gallery of Canada. <https://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=10042>.

inverted positions – Actaea turns her back to the spectator while Venus is shown frontally – but they almost have the same hair colour and there is a similar blooming carnation on their cheeks. Besides, in Leighton’s canvas, intriguing dolphins seem to protrude from Actaea’s buttocks too. Grant fragmented the body in cubist fashion, severing her face from her torso, as in works by Picasso (Grant had met the artist in 1912 and was very impressed by his style). With *Venus and Adonis*, then, he was able to conflate his interest in cubism with a taste for the classical form, nourished by his awareness of late-Victorian Aesthetic painting. However, despite its formalist and decorative dimension, the painting remains symbolical. Shone mentions that Grant “acknowledged only the minimal relation of the painting to myth, denying it was an ‘illustration of the subject, but a rhythm which *came out* of the subject.’” (Shone 1999, 13) and autobiographical¹⁶ Nonetheless, the eroticized and yet split body of the goddess of love speaks of desire and frustration, while the escaping figure of the mythical hunter has autobiographical resonances.

In a letter she sent to Fry in 1916, Vanessa Bell commented on her *Nude with Poppies* (1916)¹⁷, which also shows a reclining nude, in a way that may appear as a contradiction to her distinction between the art of the painter and that of the writer: “On one side is a woman asleep, rather like *Flaming June* by Leighton, with poppies and waves (I think) all very symbolical” (qtd in Shone 1999, 164). Not only did Bell draw a comparison with a precise Aesthetic painting, thus conceding a potential legacy; but she also acknowledged the presence of a “symbolical” element in her canvas, thus contradicting her claims to a purely formalist approach to figuration. Indeed, in both Bell’s *Nude with Poppies* and Leighton’s *Flaming June*¹⁸, it is impossible to sever the human form from any “human associations,” and this because of the sensuality and languor of the figure. Leighton blended from various artistic sources – mainly Greek drapery and Michelangelo’s massive, contorted bodies – and yet he claimed that he got a purely visual idea when he saw a model asleep. Paul Barlow thus sees Leighton’s painting as an exploration of the relationship between specificity and abstraction: “the drapery acts to transform the body into a carrier of pure colour, thus becoming the content of the image” (Barlow 196). However, despite these proto-formalist concerns, the

¹⁶ For a study of Grant’s Greek imagery (such as Venus, Adonis, Daphne, Narcissus, Psyche) and his subjects drawn from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, see Shone 2001, 75.

¹⁷ Vanessa Bell, *Nude with Poppies*, 1916, oil on canvas, 23.5 x 42.5 cm, Swindon Museum and Art Gallery. This was a decoration for Mary Hutchinson’s bed. <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/nude-with-poppies-64519>.

¹⁸ Frederic Leighton, *Flaming June*, 1895, oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm, Museo de Arte de Ponce, Puerto Rico. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flaming_June#/media/File:Flaming_June,_by_Frederic_Lord_Leighton_\(1830-1896\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flaming_June#/media/File:Flaming_June,_by_Frederic_Lord_Leighton_(1830-1896).jpg).

body evokes longing, desire and reverie; it is therefore also the carrier of “human associations.” Leighton had been influenced by a number of representations in which the female figure adopts a constrained position or a reclining attitude, with one thigh protruding and her neck bent.⁹⁹ Thus, Leighton’s figure cannot totally unite medium and subject in a way that abolishes meaning.¹⁰⁰ Likewise, beyond the formalist intention, Bell’s reclining female nude remains the site of erotic investment. She drew both from the Greco-Roman reclining nude and from Leighton’s *Flaming June*. The woman is completely nude and she sprawls even more than Leighton’s figure does; but the prominent thigh and calf appear in both. Besides, above the horizontal line are two red poppies, which evoke the exotic flower Leighton placed on the left-hand side of his painting. In both works, the flower’s red colour brings a warm note to the painting and emphasizes its general sensuality. In fact, “poppies” are “symbolical” indeed, since these flowers often symbolised narcotic stupor and even death, as in Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic painting. Bell represented a more abstract nude: the body is shaped like one elongated line and the figure has no facial features. She turned the human form into a decorative pattern and painted it with broad, abstract patches of colour – a wide expanse of pink for the flesh and a yellow area for her hair. Still, in her comments, she alluded to “waves,” which may well be those of desire. The canvas was devised for Fry’s bed, which recalls the Renaissance tradition of marriage paintings in which the female body functioned as a token of bliss or fertility. Bell therefore inscribes her *Nude with Poppies* within a long genealogy of sleeping female figures whose body is erotically available.

The Greek “abstract” forms of Aestheticism and Bloomsbury are ridden with conflicting forces. Indeed, abstractness and formalism were bound to conflict with the “human associations” that inherently characterize the visual figurations of the “Greek” human form. The body actually retains its immediate sensuous impact; it is also crossed by historically constructed layers of meaning. Greek forms circulated across the divide and attested to the visual and plastic continuities between late-Victorian Aestheticism and the Modernist art of Bloomsbury. The new versioning of the art historical divide therefore addresses both Bloomsbury’s visual legacies and departures from their Aesthetic predecessors through the circulation of forms but also through the fruitful aporias that typify their respective discourses on formalism.

⁹⁹ Michelangelo took up this antique female prototype in his now lost *Leda* (c. 1530), of which Rubens made a copy in 1598-1602, which Leighton must have seen as it was already in the National Gallery; Klimt then took up the figure in his *Danaë* of 1907.

¹⁰⁰ This is also Corbetts’s view, see 97.

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