

43. Domestic flowerpot

In this response, Paddy Bullard, Associate Professor in Literature and Book History at the University of Reading, takes us on a lyrical, exciting, and complex journey through the personal and engaging story of an unassuming plant pot that has unexpected mid-century literary and creative links, and had one particular owner.

Quentin Bell, Decorated plant pot, 1951



The pot, as acquired through the Collecting Twentieth Century Rural Cultures project (MERL 2010/69).

A museum like The MERL can feel like a place of safety for a lot of objects, a happy refuge from obsolescence or indifference. But some objects, perhaps the less charismatic or curious ones, look like orphans in their display cases. This pretty, modest terracotta planter, with its melancholy blue decoration and simple, rather ghostly floral design, certainly falls into the second category. It is so engaging because it seems so very lonely, cut off from the everyday domestic uses for which it was intended. The four flowers painted on its sides appear to be water lilies. A deep blue wash seems almost to submerge them. Is there anything in the history of this little pot to explain its strange and forlorn air?

The pot is indeed an artefact in exile, one that belongs in a particular place, where it happens no longer to be needed. That place is Charleston, the famous Sussex farmhouse where the painters Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, Vanessa's husband the critic Clive Bell, and their extended family spent summers from 1916 onwards, attended by a rolling cast of Bloomsbury group celebrities—Virginia Woolf, John Maynard Keynes, T.S. Eliot, and many others. Charleston is now looked after by the Charleston Trust.



Side view of some of the floral decoration on the pot, with its distinctive and subtle style (MERL 2010/69).

The MERL planter was made by Quentin Bell, second son of Vanessa and Clive, later an art historian himself and distinguished biographer of his aunt Virginia. There is at least one circumstantial connection between Quentin and Reading: he stayed here as a boy, attending the Quaker public school Leighton Park. He left school at 17, and later, during the 1930s, Bell trained as a potter at the Burslem School of Art in Stoke-on-Trent. He kept up his studio practice while teaching at various universities, returning to it in a dedicated way when he retired from academia in 1975. Quentin Bell is remembered as a writer, but this planter is the product of a lifelong dedication to clay, wheel, and kiln.

The pot's strongest associations, however, are not with Bell. They are with the person who owned it, and for whom it was made as a gift. On the base of the pot there is a painted inscription: 'GH from QB,'

and then in larger numerals a date, '1951'. GH is Grace Higgens, who was in 1951 housekeeper at Charleston, where she had worked as maid, cook, nanny, and (occasionally) artists' model, since coming to Bloomsbury from her father's East Norfolk smallholding in 1920. In 1951 Grace was living with her husband Walter (known to the Bells, who were not always kind, as 'The Dolt') and her son John in three attic rooms at the top of the house. So, The MERL planter will have stayed at Charleston with them until her retirement in 1971.



View showing the simple hand-marked inscription on the round base of the pot (MERL 2010/69).

If we want to understand the aura that lingers around this peculiar little pot, we need to find out more about Grace Higgens. For someone like Quentin Bell to make for an employee an object like this, there must be an understanding on both sides. For a start, the relationship it celebrates is much more than professional. The giver must believe it will be valued—or at least not resented as a somewhat rough-and-ready homemade item. And the recipient must stand within the circle of creativity to which the object also belongs. These guesses about the planter are borne out by Grace's story. She came from a different social class to the Bells, and she worked for them, while they worked only for themselves. But she belonged at the heart of their house and was recognised by the family as an irreplaceable presence in their circle. The pot is a loving, if perhaps somewhere clumsy representation of that recognition.

We know a lot about Grace Higgins because the Bloomsbury milieu in which she lived is very richly documented, and because she herself left behind an archive of diaries, letters, and photographs (it is now held at the British Library). What those documents tell us is that she was a person of charisma who, despite her modest background, was able to leave a mark on her world. She was noticed in a way that was unusual for women of her generation and situation. This was due partly to a very happy and generous disposition. ‘I do not worry,’ she explained in her diary in 1924, ‘& I always feel so happy I could love everybody’. She also happened to be beautiful. ‘Grace looks more exquisite every day,’ noticed Duncan Grant in the early 1920s; ‘She wore a red handkerchief with white spots on her head yesterday and I think I may make a sketch of her to put into a picture’. On another occasion: ‘without her spectacles, she really is very handsome.’



Echoing this fleeting glance into the life of its original owner, here's a glance inside the pot (MERL 2010/69).

None of this escaped the young Quentin Bell, who from a child was especially close to her. Writing to Duncan Grant in his late teens, Bell imagines, not without a stab of jealousy, what must have been a familiar scene: his father, one among a host of admirers, paying very keen attention to the handsome housekeeper—‘Clive flirting with Grace’, as he puts it, ‘or at any rate dancing with her to the gramophone’.

Grace's diary is full of stories that detail how actively she participated in Quentin's childhood and adolescence. One entry, for example, records a pre-dawn expedition to Firle Beacon, up on the downs above Charleston:

'I arose very early & climbed the Beacon at about 5.30am with Julian [the eldest son of Vanessa and Clive], Quentin and Louie to see the sunrise. We arrived at the top long before it came up. All the clouds turned a gorgeous Salmon Pink, there after many false alarms the sun rose. We came back by the winding path and arrived back at Charleston, after Julian Quentin & I had paid each other extravagant compliments, about 7.30.'

Grace was conscious of participating in the shabby, haughty bohemianism of her employers, and of being seen to participate in it. She felt especially self-conscious one London afternoon when she and Quentin took a broken gramophone to be mended: *'We did look freaks prancing along. Quentin with green socks falling over his shoe tops and me with a huge Gramophone very badly done up, tucked under one arm & my frock all hitched to one side.'* Despite their different backgrounds the Bell family and their friends *'were my sort of people'*, she told a reporter from *The Brighton Evening Argus* who interviewed her in 1981: *'I was very fond of them all. They were just ordinary people who never interfered with anybody else [...] I never thought of them as being particularly talented. It was just their way of life.'* That way of life was one with which she identified herself, although her place within it was ambiguous.



The pot from another angle, showing the freehand aesthetic of this decorative floral bow (MERL 2010/69).

The little planter belongs, in its small way, to a group of works created at Charleston that register Grace's presence and personality. The most important of these is a large painting by Vanessa Bell,

displayed currently in an upstairs corridor at Charleston, called 'The Kitchen' (1943). It shows Grace kneading dough in front of the kitchen range, her worktable well stocked with a garden's autumn harvest. Severely bobbed and smartly aproned, she is a serene and rather remote figure. Another relic can be found in the kitchen itself. Behind the AGA is a set of hand-painted tiles made by Quentin during the restoration of the house. They are in fact a commemorative frieze, which reads: 'Grace Higgens, née Germany 1904-1983 worked here for fifty years & more. She was a good friend to all Charlestonians.' There were other staff working at Charleston from time to time, but Grace was alone in being painted and inscribed into its fabric.

The planter reveals traces of its deepest meaning in its simple function as a gift. Nothing distinguishes Grace's status at Charleston more than the presents she received from the Bells. 'There can be little doubt,' admits Quentin Bell's daughter, the writer Virginia Nicholson, 'that her employers exploited her loyalty.' The gifts were an awkward and unequal attempt to show gratitude for a lifetime of hard work keeping Charleston clean and habitable. But they also show a particular sense of her place in their world. When Grace married in 1934, for example, Duncan Grant gave her his 1931 painting 'The Colosseum from the Roman Forum'. Vanessa Bell took a special and perhaps slightly manipulative pleasure in buying clothes from Paris and London to flatter her willowy figure. In 1968 the 83-year-old Grant was still giving Grace the occasional cheque 'to pay for an outing to see some interesting place'. These gifts—and the MERL planter must be counted among them—were also bonds of a kind. Grace allowed herself, willingly enough, to be fastened to Charleston. This little pot has broken free from that famous place, though it still contains some of its original ballast: a family's admiration, love, and only half-recognised obligations.

Further Information (online):

For more information about the flower pot see: [MERL 2010/69](#)

For details of the Charleston Trust and how the house is used today see: <https://www.charleston.org.uk/>

For more about Grace Higgens and material at the British Library see: <https://blogs.bl.uk/english-and-drama/2013/10/the-angel-of-charleston-.html>

To take a look at the painting 'The Kitchen' see: <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/the-kitchen-at-charleston-east-sussex-73765>

For more about The MERL's Collecting Twentieth Century Rural Cultures project through which this object was acquired see: <https://merl.reading.ac.uk/collections/collecting-20th-century-rural-cultures/>

For more about the AGA cooker in The MERL collection see [MERL 2016/13](#) or visit the [Making Rural England](#) gallery at the Museum

Further reading (offline):

Quentin Bell and Virginia Nicholson, *Charleston: A Bloomsbury House and Garden* (1997; revised ed. London: White Lion Publishing, 2018)

The Bloomsbury Group Observed: A Collection of Memoirs and Commentary, ed. S.P. Rosenbaum (University of Toronto Press, 1995)

Angelica Garnett, 'The Earthly Paradise,' in Quentin Bell et al., *Charleston Past & Present* (London: Hogarth Press, 1987), 104-135.

Henrietta Garnett, 'Visits to Charleston: Vanessa,' in Quentin Bell et al., *Charleston Past & Present* (London: Hogarth Press, 1987), 153-60.

Stewart MacKay, *The Angel of Charleston: Grace Higgins, Housekeeper to the Bloomsbury Group* (London: British Library, 2013)

Virginia Nicholson, *Among the Bohemians. Experiments in Living 1900-1939* (London: Penguin, 2003)