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Bloomsbury revisited: a “postmodern” Roger Fry

by Hilton Kramer

On A Roger Fry Reader edited by Christopher Reed.

There appears to be no end in sight to the mythification of Bloomsbury. As a phenomenon of late twentieth-century Anglo-American cultural life, Bloomsbury has long ceased to be the coterie interest it once was. It has expanded its domain to become one of the mainstream myths of the modern era. In the universities, the study of Bloomsbury is a flourishing industry. On the literary scene, its participants are the subject of an immense biographical and critical literature. Even more improbably, the sex life of Bloomsbury has found its way into the manufacture of romantic idylls for the stage and screen. (Who, even a few years ago, would have dreamed that a character as unappetizing as Lytton Strachey could be turned into a romantic figure for the movies?) If there is not yet a Bloomsbury coloring book, there is already a Virginia Woolf calendar and a Virginia Woolf T-shirt. It hardly matters, moreover, that Bloomsbury produced, besides Virginia Woolf, only two other important talents: John Maynard Keynes and Roger Fry. It is in the nature of the mythification process that minor talents—and even people of no discernible talent at all—are elevated to a status that far exceeds their intrinsic interest. Whatever they may have lacked as writers, artists, or thinkers, these minor characters are assumed to command some enduring appeal simply on the basis of the roles they played in the lives of Bloomsbury eminences.

As the Bloomsbury juggernaut approaches a new millennium, moreover, we are sure to see further wonders offered in its name. The mythification process certainly shows no sign of abatement. Yet the meaning of the myth is bound to undergo some significant modifications as it accommodates itself to new cultural conditions.

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Now, just a little in advance of the new millennium, comes a glimpse of what the “new” Bloomsbury is probably going to look like. If the views of Christopher Reed, the editor of *A Roger Fry Reader*,¹ are to be taken as an augury—and there is ample reason to suppose that they are—then the new Bloomsbury, a Bloomsbury more suitable to the early decades of the twenty-

first century, will be a “postmodern” Bloomsbury. This is bad luck for an old Bloomsbury hand like Peter Stansky, whose new study of the subject, *On or About December 1910: Early Bloomsbury and Its Intimate World*, has also just been published and has already been rendered redundant by Mr. Reed’s revisionism. Mr. Stansky, the Frances and Charles Field Professor of History at Stanford University, takes what may now be said to be the old view: that the history of Bloomsbury belongs to the history of modernism. From Mr. Reed’s revisionist perspective, this old view will no longer do. “I am concerned,” he writes in his Introduction to *A Roger Fry Reader*, “to describe Fry’s activism in its historical context, with reference to the concerns and interests associated with postmodernism.”

Are we now, then, to regard Fry himself as a postmodernist? Well, sort of. Mr. Reed labors mightily to create the impression that inside the modernist Roger Fry there was all along a postmodernist provocateur struggling to make himself heard. In this regard, certainly, Mr. Reed shows himself to be a dab hand at postmodernist bodysnatching. It isn’t until the concluding pages of this volume, by which time—owing to his extensive commentaries and notes—it has become almost as much a Christopher Reed Reader as *A Roger Fry Reader*, and after much belaboring of the “historical context,” that Mr. Reed can bring himself to acknowledge that “Fry is not, of course, a postmodernist.” Yet even this *pro forma* admission is quickly followed by the inevitable disclaimer. “Nevertheless,” Mr. Reed reminds us, “today’s readers may find, in Fry’s consistent foregrounding in his personal subjectivity, in his antagonism toward authority, and, finally, in his doubt, a figure far more sympathetic than we have been led to expect.” In short, a postmodernist *avant la lettre*. As if modernism has remained untouched by such phenomena as “personal subjectivism”—what other kind is there, by the way?—or “antagonism toward authority” or even “doubt.” For an exponent of “historical context,” Mr. Reed proves to be a remarkably unreliable guide to history—especially the history of modernism, which is the subject he has undertaken to deconstruct in this book.

Anyone familiar with the strategies of postmodernist discourse will readily recognize, of course, that it is now standard procedure for its practitioners to invoke the claims of “historical context” for what actually amounts to a project of historical nullification. The only wonder in this case is that Mr. Reed should have chosen Roger Fry, of all unlikely candidates, for a project of this kind. Attempting to annex Fry—the greatest modernist critic of his day—to the bandwagon of postmodernism is, after all, a little like trying to assign Cézanne to the ranks of his *pompier* adversaries. It can be done, I suppose, but what except errant ideological nonsense has been accomplished in the process? The work itself will simply not support such an ill-conceived endeavor.

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It is significant, in this respect, that in the passage I have already cited from Mr. Reed's

Introduction to *A Roger Fry Reader* he should speak of the critic's "activism" rather than of his art criticism. Activism, which is to say social activism, is an enterprise dear to the hearts of every true postmodernist, whereas criticism—especially the kind of formalist criticism that Fry practiced in the heyday of his fame and influence—is regarded as mere grist for the postmodernist's deconstructionist mill. It is very much to Mr. Reed's purpose in assembling and annotating *A Roger Fry Reader* for a new generation of readers—readers unlikely to be familiar with Fry's writings on art—to give priority to what he describes as Fry's "sense of social purpose" while at the same time discounting the criticism that established Fry as the leading champion of modernism in the English-speaking world of his generation. Thus, from the two collections of Fry's critical essays that have long been regarded as classic contributions to the literature of modernism—*Vision and Design* (1920) and *Transformations* (1926)—Mr. Reed has chosen exactly nothing for this new *Reader*. This is in itself an act of historical nullification that leaves the newcomer to Fry's criticism unequipped to judge either the quality of his performance as a modernist critic or, indeed, the character of the distortions which Mr. Reed has been obliged to impose on Fry's critical *oeuvre* in the interest of claiming him as some sort of proto-postmodernist.

It is worth recalling, in this connection, that in the "Retrospect" which Fry appended to the essays he collected in *Vision and Design*, he famously defined his critical credo. "I conceived the form of a work of art to be its most essential quality," he wrote, adding in the same essay that "I conceived the form and the emotion which it conveyed as being inextricably bound together in the aesthetic whole." What he elsewhere in *Vision and Design* described as "the aesthetic vision, the vision with which we contemplate works of art," remained for Fry his fundamental critical priority. It was the sensibility and intellectual tenacity with which he applied his own "aesthetic vision" to the contemplation of works of art—and not only works of modernist art, of course—that gave his criticism its immense persuasive force and made Fry himself a crucial figure in the history of English modernism even for the many artists, art historians, cultural bureaucrats, and amateurs of the arts who dissented from his judgments and opposed his principles.

It is also important to recall that Fry did not come to modernism as an avant-garde incendiary. Far from it. He came to modernism after a protracted immersion in the art of the Italian Renaissance masters. It was in that field of connoisseurship, where he labored first as a disciple and then as a rival of Bernard Berenson, that Fry made his debut as a recognized authority on the art of painting. When he took up the cause of modernist painting in the first decade of the twentieth century, giving priority to the work of Cézanne and Matisse, he thus brought to it a keen sense of the pictorial traditions in terms of which the modernist painters he favored needed to be seen to be fully understood. He did not regard modernism, as so many doctrinaire avant-gardists did, as a break with tradition. Fry's understanding of the relation of the modernist painters to the traditions that preceded and nurtured them is now something we take for granted, of course, but it was a highly controversial idea at the time. Moreover, it remained a fundamental *donnée* of Fry's criticism

to the end. In 1930, twenty years after he organized the first “Post-Impressionism” exhibition in London, Fry devoted a monograph to Matisse which was similarly based on what he called “this long approach” to a modernist painter by way of traditions traced back to Byzantine art and the paintings of Caravaggio. It is one of the virtues of *A Roger Fry Reader*, by the way, that it reprints the text of the *Henri Matisse* monograph in its entirety. It is one of the failings of this volume, however, that it includes none of Fry’s writings on Italian painting—another omission that effectively eliminates one of the foundations of his critical thought.

In this respect, as in others, *A Roger Fry Reader* is a book very much at odds with itself, for it seems to have been designed to serve as both an indictment and a defense of its subject. What is under indictment—much of the time, anyway—is not so much Fry’s modernism as the bogeyman of “formalism,” with which modernism is routinely identified when it suits Mr. Reed’s critical agenda. It is thus one of the aims of the *Reader* to rescue Fry from his reputation as a formalist critic—“the ponderous ‘Father of Formalism,’” as Mr. Reed puts it, who would now have to be considered “the figurehead of a discredited age”—in order to recast him as a cultural emancipator on the social barricades.

At times, then, this obliges Mr. Reed to separate the “good” Fry—the kind of modernist who, as an “activist” battling for cultural reform, can somehow be construed to have been a precursor of the postmodernist assault on a privileged aesthetic—from the “bad” Fry, who is seen to have succumbed to a weakness for the sort of formalist criticism that gives priority to (what else?) a privileged “aesthetic vision.” If all this sounds like something of a muddle—well, I am afraid this *Reader* very often does collapse into a muddle from which the real Roger Fry is absent for pages at a time.

The muddle is somewhat clarified, to be sure, if close attention is paid not only to the ninety or so pages of tendentious commentaries which Mr. Reed has contributed to the *Reader* but also to the seventeen pages of notes that are appended to the commentaries. In a good many of those pages we are a long way from the Bloomsbury we once knew—we are, indeed, catapulted into the college classrooms of the 1990s where Mr. Reed is offering us a refresher course in the kind of cultural politics that now occupy a place of unchallenged privilege in American academic life.

In this postmodernist wonderland, we once again encounter Benjamin Buchloh instructing us in the evils of “advanced capitalism”—in which evils, not surprisingly, “the prisonhouse of modernism” is said to be complicit. Here, too, postmodernist doctoral dissertations on the politics of Bloomsbury are solemnly cited to support the notion that “Fry’s texts [on African sculpture] contribute to the twentieth-century project of conceiving a postcolonial world.” Then, of course, there is the expected assault on the art criticism of Clement Greenberg, without which no postmodernist discussion of bogeyman formalism would nowadays be compete. And for newcomers to the subject, there are convenient references to the political literature that attempts to reduce not only Clement Greenberg’s criticism but the entire post-World War ii New York School to the status of a Cold War foreign-policy strategy. To bring us fully up to date, moreover, Mr.

Reed refers us to his own recent contribution to postmodernist studies—an essay called “Making History: The Bloomsbury Group’s Construction of Aesthetic and Sexual Identity,” published in a volume called *Gay and Lesbian Studies in Art History*, edited by Whitney Davis and published by the Haworth Press in 1994. Some of the claims that Mr. Reed makes for the influence of Whistler and Wilde on Fry in the *Reader* are spelled out in more explicit political detail in this essay on “Aesthetic and Sexual Identity.”

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Given this deeply prejudicial approach to Fry’s art criticism, it is a considerable mercy that there is as much good reading in the *Reader* as there is. While the book is very far from bringing together the best of Fry’s writings on art—for that kind of *Reader*, the inclusion of certain essays from *Vision and Design* and *Transformations* would be essential—Mr. Reed is nonetheless to be commended for making available some fine examples of Fry’s criticism that are otherwise not easily available. I have already mentioned the excellent essay on Matisse. “Picasso” (1921) is interesting now for the glimpse it gives us of Fry’s doubts about the capacity of pure abstraction, with its tendency to eliminate the illusion of spatial depth, to produce as rich a pictorial experience as painting that remains tethered to the depiction of a third dimension.

Speaking in this essay of the younger Cubists who were influenced by Picasso, Fry acknowledges that while “there is nothing inherently impossible in the venture to create expressive form out of the minimum of representation possible,” he does not find the pictorial result entirely satisfactory. “For some reason,” he writes, “the effect on the mind of flat forms is feeble in comparison with the effect of forms that either present or represent relief in three dimensions.” Picasso himself, Fry points out, “is keenly aware of this, and nothing in his work is more remarkable than the extraordinary invention he displays in the discovery of new qualities of pigment calculated to suggest the relief of one surface upon another.” Yet his doubts persist. “The immense resource of suggesting real distance and, perhaps even more important, the circumambience of space,” he writes, “seems to be almost cut off, or at most reduced, in its power to persuade the imagination.”

Lest we are tempted to dismiss such doubts as a period failure of taste, it is worth remembering that Frank Stella’s *Working Space*, published in 1986, is largely devoted to the same aesthetic doubts. Never mind the problems raised by the art that Stella produced in response to the pictorial issues discussed in *Working Space*. The issues are essentially the same as those raised by Fry in 1921 about the pictorial implications of Cubism—issues (need one add?) that have remained central to formalist criticism down to the present day, and thus an integral component of the internal debate that modernist painting has conducted with itself. It is also interesting to note, in this connection, that in 1913, ten years before the “Picasso” essay, Fry showed distinctly less hesitation in embracing the early abstract painting of Kandinsky, describing two of the artist’s *Improvisations* as “pure visual music” and declaring that “I cannot any longer doubt the possibility of emotional expression by such abstract visual signs.” The pictorial space in these *Improvisations* retains,

however, what Fry called “the immense resource of suggesting real distance.” Kandinsky’s subsequent elimination of the “resource” from his abstract painting seems not to have elicited any response from Fry, but I think it is accurate to say that he never fully embraced the principles of pure abstraction. He much preferred the kind of “abstraction” that remained attached, however distantly, to some element of representation, and in that respect Fry was very much a partisan of the modernist aesthetic that governed the School of Paris in its heyday in the first quarter of the century.

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It is that allegiance that we have to keep in mind in accounting for some of Fry’s critical prejudices even in regard to French painting—his disparagement of Monet, for example. For the Paris avant-garde in the early decades of the century, Cézanne was a god and Monet was considered passé. Hence Fry’s dismissal of Monet—in a letter that Mr. Reed has included in the *Reader*—as an artist far too dependent upon “the casual dictation of natural appearance.” It’s a pity that Mr. Reed did not include the discussion devoted to Monet in Fry’s *Characteristics of French Art* (1932), for it is a classic example of the way a great painter—in this case, Monet—is bound to be misjudged when approached from the perspective of another great painter—Cézanne—who devised quite opposing principles for his art. It is also an example of how much we can still learn about Monet from Fry, despite his adverse judgment of the artist.

The art of painting does not, alas, appear to be a compelling interest for Mr. Reed. One of the essays I miss the most in this *Reader* is the one that Fry devoted to Albert Pinkham Ryder in the *Burlington Magazine* in April 1908. As far as I know, it has never been reprinted anywhere. Fry became acquainted with Ryder’s paintings during his tenure as the curator of the Metropolitan Museum in New York in the first decade of the century. His essay is one of the finest things ever written about Ryder, yet it remains largely unknown. Frances Spalding, in her 1980 biography of Fry, *Roger Fry: Art and Life*, made the mistake of flatly asserting that the critic took no interest whatever in American painting during his tenure at the Met, and it may be that Mr. Reed was misled by this error. But then, the essays on painting omitted from this *Reader* that one would need to know to understand Fry’s importance as an art critic would easily fill a volume as large as Mr. Reed’s.

Mr. Reed much prefers Fry in his role as an “activist”—which is to say, a propagandist laboring to reform the taste of the obdurate philistines of his day. Through the magic of the postmodernist prism, even a benign little essay on “Wedgewood China,” from 1905, can be made to assume the trappings of a social manifesto, especially when linked—as Mr. Reed hastens to do—with the political influence of William Morris and Oscar Wilde. In this regard, much is made of Fry’s role in establishing the Omega Workshops, an ill-fated endeavor that attempted to recast the aspirations of the Arts and Crafts movement according to decorative principles based on the Fauvism of Matisse and the Cubism of Picasso. In the history of modernist design, the Omega Workshops

project is little more than a footnote, but in this *Reader* it is made to sound as if it had been an achievement on the scale of the Bauhaus—though any comparison with the Bauhaus itself is wisely avoided. Instead, Fry's fragmentary reflections on modern architecture are favorably compared to Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture*. But it is nonsense to claim, as Mr. Reed does, that what he calls "Fry's architectural principles" should now be seen to occupy "a central place in the history of modernism." Fry said some very intelligent things about architecture, but his achievements in that field can hardly be said to extend beyond the house he designed for himself. Le Corbusier he was not.

What *A Roger Fry Reader* will remain valuable for are some of the essays that Mr. Reed has culled from the voluminous body of criticism that Fry contributed to journals and books that have not before been collected. Besides the Matisse and Picasso essays already mentioned, the outstanding examples are the Introduction to his translations of Mallarmé, the essay on "M. Larionow and the Russian Ballet," a hilarious polemic on "The Case of the Late Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema, O.M.," and "Blake and British Art." There are also a good many sharp observations buried in pieces that are otherwise no longer compelling. Too often, however, the "good" Roger Fry—Mr. Reed's nominee for posthumous postmodernist honors—turns out to be the promoter of good causes that were largely won before anyone thought of calling them "postmodernist." The "bad" Fry is the modernist critic—and the formalist critic of modernist art—whose work endures. It is a political sham, a postmodernist sham, to pretend otherwise.

There is a paragraph in Peter Stansky's *On or About December 1910* that states the traditional view of Roger Fry very clearly:

Fry was full of energy and imagination, and through his lectures, his pen, his gift for friendship, his gift for advocacy, he was able to preach a new doctrine, to become a magnet for younger painters, to bring the interests of the English into the international arena. He was also particularly important not only for making these French painters so much better known in the Anglo-American world but for enunciating ideas about them that made it clearer than had been true before what these pictures meant—at least according to him—that made them more self-consciously part of the movement of modernism. He helped liberate painting from the tyranny of representation and gave it a power that he felt had not been seen in European painting since the Italian primitives.

This isn't all there needs to be said about Fry, to be sure, but it is a better place to start from than all of Christopher Reed's tortuous postmodernist claptrap. Unfortunately, however, much of *On or About December 1910* is itself based on something very akin to claptrap—the observation famously made by Virginia Woolf in 1924 that "on or about December 1910 human character changed." The reference was to the first Post-Impressionist exhibition that Fry organized in London that year. That exhibition did indeed contribute something important to the modification of British taste in art, but you have only to examine the denizens of Bloomsbury itself to see how little the show changed *their* character, never mind that of the entire modern world. Newcomers to the Bloomsbury literature will find a useful introduction to the period in Mr. Stansky's book, and

readers already familiar with the Bloomsbury myth will find in Mr. Stansky one of its more devoted acolytes. For myself, it is the kind of book that so piously exaggerates the importance of Bloomsbury that it makes one yearn for some countervailing demystification of the entire movement. Unfortunately, Mr. Reed's postmodernist "cure" is far worse than the "disease" it purports to remedy—but I would be very surprised if his postmodernist travesty does not turn out to be a preview of the Bloomsbury that awaits us in the coming century.

Notes

[Go to the top of the document.](#)

1. *On or About December 1910: Early Bloomsbury and Its Intimate World*, by Peter Stansky; Harvard University Press, 289 pages, \$27.95. [Go back to the text.](#)
 2. For an account of Fry's study of Italian painting, see the new edition of *Giovanni Bellini*, his first book, originally published in 1899, which the Ursus Press brought out in 1995 with an Introduction by David Alan Brown and an Afterword by me. [Go back to the text.](#)
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1. *A Roger Fry Reader*, edited and with introductory essays by Christopher Reed; University of Chicago Press, 440 pages, \$50; \$19.95 paper. [Go back to the text.](#)

Hilton Kramer (1928–2012) was the founding editor of *The New Criterion*, which he started with the late Samuel Lipman in 1982.

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