Modern Couples
Art, Intimacy and the Avant-garde
Modern Couples: Art, Intimacy and the Avant-garde

This exhibition showcases the creative output of over 40 artist couples active in the first half of the 20th century – featuring the work of painters, sculptors, photographers, architctes, designers, writers, musicians and performers, alongside personal photographs, letters and diaries. The exhibition is part of The Art of Change season, highlighting how artists respond to, and reflect potentially effect change in the social and political landscape.

Modernism and the Avant-Garde – Innovation, experimentation and pushing boundaries...

The exhibition shows the lives and works of artists very much embedded in Modernism and the Avant-Garde. From the late 19th Century, huge shifts occurred in technology, industrialisation, society, culture and the arts – Modernism was born. The work in this exhibition reflects the change and possibilities inherent in Modernism – new experiences and values were explored alongside innovative approaches to creating art. This was a time to explore and experiment and move away from the constraints of tradition and history.

Modern Couples: Art, Intimacy and the Avant-garde – Art, intimacy and the Avant-garde at the Barbican Art Gallery, London is curated by Jane Alison, Emma Lurige, Eila Beausit and Carl Pilott.

The resource draws heavily on the exhibition catalogue and texts written by Jane Alison and Coralee Moulisard.

Plan your Visit

Barbican Art Gallery (Level 3), Barbican Centre
10 October 2018 – 27 January 2019
Sat Wed, 10am–6pm
Thu–Fri, 10am–10pm

A discounted group booking rate of £3 per adult student applies to all secondary and sixth form school groups of ten or more (up to age 19).

For bookings and enquiries please contact the school groups booking line. Tel: 020 7382 7211 (Mon–Fri 10am–3pm) Email groups@barbican.org.uk

Contents List

Up Close – explore key themes that stretch across the exhibitions. Highlights of individual artworks are outlined, including text about the artists and links to other exhibitions and resources.

Curriculum Links – Link your exhibition visit to different areas of the curriculum.

Spotlight on Artists – use the works of specific artist couples/groups to guide your visit and follow up activities. Each artist section includes related information, key questions, suggested creative activities and areas to explore further.

Up Close

Modern Couples is an exhibition focusing on intimate relationships in all their forms – obsessive, conventional, triadic, platonic, balancing, lifelong, heterosexual, homosexual, bi-sexual, non-binary and gender fluid. The exhibition also explores and reveals the way in which creative individuals came together – transgressing the constraints of their time, redefining gender stereotypes and identities, collaborating in exciting ways and forging new waves of experimentation and artistic innovation. One of the exhibition’s key concerns is to encourage the idea that the history of art was mainly composed of solo, predominantly male geniuses – and gives due recognition to the women in artist duos who were often omitted from the history books and unfairly marginalised.

Modern Couples offers a deeper personal and revealing insight into the transformative impact artists had on each other through their varied relationships. Creative cross-pollination, the development of radical ideas, the emergence of new forms of artistic expression and new ways of being in the world. These relationships were capable of dissolving, blending or transforming individual identities and were a demonstration of the incredible things that happen when we allow ourselves the space to really share and collaborate – unearthing new energies and creative riches.

Numerous themes or areas of key focus can be explored across the exhibition. These are highlighted in this section and explored further in the Spotlight on Artists section (including questions and activities) that follows.

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Avant-garde (meaning advanced guard, the part of an army that goes forward ahead of the real – originally described the artists and writers of the late 19th and early 20th century who were, in their own time, trailblazers, visionaries, boundary pushers and innovators in their fields, radically challenging old ideas and ways of working.

Explore the world of Modernism and the Avant-Garde. Also think about artists and individuals of today you believe to be pushing boundaries and creating change.

Collaboration and inter-disciplinary working...

This exhibition demonstrates how some of the most ground-breaking artistic works resulted when artists with very different backgrounds and experience from distant disciplines collaborated to spark new ideas, new art forms and ‘languages’. Think of ways of developing your own creative processes by blurring the division between genres (and curriculum areas) and trying out collaborative practice with others who have different ideas and skills. Collaboration with others and the development of new techniques can be enriching and surprising and worth stepping outside of one’s comfort zones for!

Collaboration is fundamentally about entering a conversation and sharing meaningful dialogue – exchanging and sharing points of view, inspiring another with fresh ideas, switching frames of reference and challenging one another’s preconceptions.

Art as a gift or an exchange of ideas and inspiration

Modern Couples reveals how often art, whether literature, poetry or object, can be a gift to a loved one. Sometimes that gift is a personal token or a piece of work created for someone who is special to you. Sometimes that gift is a poem or a song, sometimes a home made public for the world to see. The examples range widely – Virginia Woolf’s Orlando, a tribute to her lover Vita Sackville-West; Leonora Carrington’s Portrait of Max Ernst, which she gave to him when she met him in New York before beginning a new life with a new husband; shooting star drawings by Paul Klee to his lover O’Keeffe; and snapshots of couples and annotated and collapsed newspaper cuttings that were small enough to send to Federico Garcia Lorca in a letter, received by the poet Lorca writing his letter to Salvador Dalí, 1926.

Photography

Examine how photography has been used to document people’s stories and communicate ideas, themes and relationships.

Ask

• What impact do these images have on you?

How do these images foster relationships with their subjects and different styles impact the way the image is read?

In the exhibition, photography is brought to life through the collaborations of legendary figures including:

• Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore;

• Lucia Moholy and László Moholy-Nagy’s photographic portrayal of the Bahnhof Sackville West;

• Lee Miller and Man Ray’s shared experiences in the darkroom

• Edward Weston’s inspirational relationships with both Margrethe Mather and Tina Modotti;

• Hannah Höch and Raoul Hausmann’s masterful use of the photomontage as a political tool.

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History

The tragic events of the First World War from 1914 to 1918 – including immense loss of life – had a tremendous impact on the social, political and artistic movements that emerged in the first half of the 20th century. Women were suddenly unshackled from automatic domesticity and the constraints of marriage, and many traditional customary vanished. For many of the artists in this exhibition, their relationships offered a space of freedom and a retreat from the upheavals and shifting identities brought about by the First World War and its aftermath. Modern Couples charts the pursuit of personal freedom and artistic innovation in the first half of the twentieth century, hard won for those who dared to go against the grain.

Consider

• How the early 20th century saw the coming of age of the ‘queer citizen,’ the battle for acceptance of same-sex relationships and women’s liberation and demands for equality.

• How innovative artists, scientists and other creatives fled the rise of Nazism, and found sanctuary and inspiration elsewhere: for example, in the Like-minded and creative community spirit of Hampstead, London (where Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson lived and worked) or on Jersey where Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore retreated from Paris.

English literature

Literature plays a key role in Modern Couples. Within the exhibition, there is a focus on the leading Modernist writer Virginia Woolf and her landmark text Orlando, a celebration of her transformative relationship with Vita Sackville-West. Woolf’s rarely seen, original manuscript is on display. Also displayed are a selection of 35 first edition books published with her husband Leonard Woolf under the Hogarth Press.

At the same time as Orlando was published, Natalie Clifford Barney (playwright, poet and novelist) was holding evening seder (a) in which it became a space for female desire and artistic innovation, bringing together a range of writers, artists and poets. The exhibition has a section dedicated to the Temple and its wider community of lesbian and bisexual artists and writers.

The exhibition also includes an array of beautifully crafted books of love poems that came out of iconic Surrealist relationships and collaborations.

Consider

• The importance of visual art and literary forms and how they might overlap, reinforce or heighten each other’s meaning. Look at how artists and writers working in a new medium when influenced by a partner – for example, a visual artist turned poet/ writer.

• How words and images interplay to create different levels of meaning, including how image and text are used within the exhibition.

• How images communicate ideas, tell stories and inspire creativity in the viewer.

Students may use works in the exhibition as starting points for free writing, which can be further developed into narratives or short stories.

Vanessa Bell, Clive Bell and Roger Fry

Vanessa Bell had three significant romantic relationships in her life, all with men who encouraged her career as an artist and creator of beautiful things. Vanessa Stephen married artist Clive Bell in 1907. By this time, she was an accomplished and ambitious young painter. Their marriage was initially very happy with mutual encouragement and shared interests. Vanessa and Clive both admired the painter and art writer, Roger Fry. By 1911 Roger Fry and Vanessa were in an intimate relationship grounded in a shared love of painting and art. Her ability to sustain productive relationships with her men in her life was exemplified in 1912 when Clive Bell and Roger Fry worked together to curate and promote the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition. This exhibition introduced Modestmari art to London and coined the term Post-Impressionism to describe the art from Daugan, Van Gogh and Cézanne to early Matisse and Picasso. It also propelled the Bloomsbury Group into the public eye, with works by British Modernists and Bloomsbury Group members. Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant.

I believe you have an extraordinary effect on other people’s work. I always feel it when I’m with you… What is it you have in you Roger? I don’t know how you do it but you make everything bigger and more alive.

Vanessa Bell to Roger Fry, 16 August 1911

The Omega Workshops

In 1913, Vanessa Bell, Roger Fry and Duncan Grant co-founded the Omega Workshops to promote Modernist art and design, particularly for home interiors with products including ceramics, murrines and textiles. Designs were inspired by such varied subjects as dance movements, still life compositions and modern art, including the bold forms and colours of post-impressionism. Cubist and Fauvist artists. You can see the overlaps between fine art and design in some of Omega’s productions.

Bell and Grant’s artistic collaboration grew increasingly close, but she was far from alone in her admiration of him. Grant had been lovers with a number of men in Bell’s circle, including the influential economist John Maynard Keynes. Bell and Grant’s most striking collaboration was Charleston, their farmhouse in East Sussex, which is now open to the public as a house-museum. Gradually, their artistic output embraced the house from floor to ceiling, creating a successful work of ‘total’ art. Cubist/Mexican decorations spread across different surfaces including doors, tables and walls, with a hand-made aesthetic characterising the group’s unique mix of ingredients. Consider how their way of living was an unparalled experiment in alternative ‘family’ living and love that flowed English social convention.

Charleston became a home for the Bloomsbury group to meet and create. Roger Fry designed a studio addition, Clive Bell was a regular visitor and John Maynard Keynes wrote some of his most important work while staying at the house. In 1918 Grant fell in love with Vanessa. At a time when homosexuality and extra-marital sex risked social ostracisation and prosecution Clive Bell claimed paternity.

Try trying to work a ‘total’ art in the spirit of the Omega Workshop either yourself or in collaboration with others – eg spread your creativity over designing and decorating furniture, textiles/clothing, murrines, ceramics etc. Use a variety of starting points for inspiration eg the work of artists you admire, or trying to create visual equivalents for dance movements and music you enjoy. Develop your creative writing, perhaps exploring the characteristics of modern art, including the bold forms and colours of post-impressionism. Cubist and Fauvist artists.

Ask

To what extent did the success of the artists, writers and thinkers of the Bloomsbury Group depend on the influence and inspiration from others in the group? How far do you think they would have developed individually in their art forms without such relationships? Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf believed that artistically ambitious work would enable them to find true personal freedom and equality – do you believe they achieved this?

Explore Further:

Further figures from the Bloomsbury group, e.g. E.M. Forster

Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera

Legendary couple Frida Kahlo and Diego Riveras well-documented relationship was both rewarding and creatively productive. Diego Riveras art was focused on illustrating and reflecting on Mexican history and the peoples struggles in large-scale mural commissions. Frida Kahlo, by contrast, highlighted her Mexican identity by wearing binocular, traditional costumes, hairstyles and jewellery and creating small-scale, deeply personal works. Notice how Kahlos works often depicted her dreams, her pain, her feminism and her volatile love affair with Rivera. She often used the style of Catholic ex-voto or votive paintings which became very popular in 19th century Mexico: small paintings (often on an in or wood) which were created as an offering to Jesus, Mary or a saint to give thanks for a miracle or an answered prayer.

Despite their differences in approach, Frida and Diego were both engaged in the rebirth of their country (including the Mexican Revolution), becoming active members of the Mexican Communist Party and both wanted to create a ‘popular art’.

Between them, a ball of inspiration bounced back and forth, from one point to another, from one intellect to another. Even after Rivera had an affair with his sister, Frida continued to hold Rivera at the forefront of her thoughts – for example, consider how she pointed him sitting in the centre of her self-portraits to symbolise his importance to her.

Kahlos powerful and rarely seen painting The Wounded Deer (1944) embodies both the physical trauma she endured following an unsuccessful abortion and the fragility of her relationship with Rivera as well as more broadly encapsulating the pain that goes with love.

Try

Macro to micro. Personal and private to national or historical. Try large scale works eg murrines and smaller more intimate pieces on the scale of votives. You may try the use your own life experiences or historical/national narratives as inspiration and subject matter – or maybe a fusion of the two. Work on different surfaces such as tin and wood (as many votives were). Or locate and get permission to use a blank wall to design and create a collaborative mural with a group. As in Kahlo’s The Wounded Deer, use symbol to describe and allude to complex ideas (rather than literal illustration).

Ask

Frida Kahlos enduring pain in many forms during her life, ranging from a tram accident as a teenager, to as many as 30 operations, the amputation of her leg, to the emotionally painful, tempestuous relationship with Rivera. How does this pain inform and even transform her art?

Think of the overlaps and differences in the approaches Rivera and Kahlo take to their work. Would you say Rivera and Kahlo were political artists? If so, in what ways?

How does Kahlos communicate often overlooked female experiences? Would you describe Kahlo as a female artist?

Explore Further:


Frida Kahlo at the V&A https://www.vam.ac.uk/exhibitions/frida-kahlo-making-herself-up

Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore

Cahun wrote, ‘The couple is a duplicate entity. We come out of our split amid isolation; we borrow from the wider world. My lover.. shall be my collaborator… I am one half, you are the other’. Claude Cahun (born Lucie Schwob), along with her partner in love and art (and also step-sister), Marcel Moore (born Suzanne Malherbe), were embedded in the cultural life of Paris during the interwar years. Their adoption of gender-neutral names would have been a radical act in the early 20th century. Moore regularly contributed fashion illustrations to the Schwab family newspaper, where Cahun’s earliest writings also appeared. Moore’s illustrations also from Cahun’s version of a poem in a volume titled Vues et Visions, published in 1919. This book made their intense artistic and romantic partnership public. The couple participated in various avant-garde and experimental theatrical ventures (Cahun performed, Moore designed sets and costumes), hosted cultural and political meetings in their studio, and became active contributors to the Surrealist movement.

Throughout the 1920s, Cahun and Moore pursued a project of theatrical cinema that yielded hundreds of photographs of Cahun dressed in a variety of roles that disrupted and challenged ideas of established and narrow gender stereotypes. Consider Cahun’s words, ‘under this mask, another mask. I will never be finished removing all these faces’. In 1930 Moore integrated these photographs into a series of galleries published as Illustrations for Cahun’s Surrealist autobiography.

At the approach of the Second World War, Cahun and Moore moved to the island of Jersey. They were not safe for very long as the Channel Islands were soon occupied by German forces. Their resistance activities, including distribution of anti-fascist tracts, led to their imprisonment in 1944 with the German military requisitioning their house as a base. Soldiers rifled through their possessions, appropriating or destroying artworks they considered perverted. The couple very narrowly escaped deportation and were released when the island was liberated on 8 May 1945.

Try

Creating a range of self-portraits (or portraits of someone you know) in any media, exploring different aspects of self and identity, and the ‘masks’ we wear in life: considering your own and others’ expectations and perceptions in what you present?

Crossing disciplines such as drama, art and writing. Consider putting on a collaborative theatre/performance piece with sets and costume designs.

Ask

What are the ‘masks’ we wear in life – and for what purposes? Consider our layers of identity – e.g. nationality, gender, style, roles. How does dress add to the creation of an identity?

How far have we come since the earlier years of the 20th century in moving beyond gender stereotypes? Consider changing attitudes to gender-fluid identities and relationships over time.

Explore Further

Explore the context of Cahun and Moores work with the wider Surrealist movement. In relation to the couple’s work, look at the more contemporary work of Cindy Sherman and Gillian Wearing which also explores layers of identity.

Claude Cahun, Image of photomontage illustration from Vues et Visions, [Béatrice Doutreleau], 1933. Courtesy of the Jersey Heritage Collections.
Barbara Hepworth (1903–75) and Ben Nicholson (1894–1982) lived and worked together for over a decade. At the beginning of their relationship, they were deeply engaged with each other in every aspect of their lives including their embrace and exploration of abstract art. Their relationship was at its most reciprocal during the years between 1933 and the outbreak of the Second World War – if you look carefully at their work in Modern times, you’ll see when Nicholson begins to carve and Hepworth begins to draw. Hepworth’s open and closed forms reference the contours of the human body or landscape. Her work invites participation – to touch, look through or even climb in! She wanted to make art that was welcoming and tactile and liked her sculptures to be situated in public or natural places to encourage greater interaction.

Inspired by Cubism, Nicholson created abstract compositions of simplified geometric shapes and structures. In White Reliefs his work takes on a sculptural form of low abstract reliefs. Asked about his feeling for Hepworth, Nicholson exclaimed “Barbara and I are the SAME […] we live, think and work and move and stay still together as if we were one person”. As Nazism and fascism swept Europe during the 1930s, Hepworth and Nicholson lived for each other and innovated with spectacular creativity.

Try
In the spirit of reciprocity; try to make a draughting sculpture or sculpt a drawing/painting. Mix it up!

Using Ben Nicholson’s white reliefs as inspiration, make a sculptural painting, so that it has a more three-dimensional rather than flat surface.

Using Hepworth’s sculptures as inspiration, make a drawing sculpture. Try using tactile surfaces and mark making, in addition to focusing on form and dimensions.

Ask
Looking at the work of Ben Nicholson, in what ways can you see the influence of his relationship with sculptor Barbara Hepworth? In Hepworth’s work do you detect the influence of a painter?

Explore further
Explore the St. Ives School of artists and ‘noise’ painter Alfred Wallis. https://www.broadwayfield.com/