

Inhabiting the Story: Vanessa Bell's Photographs of Biblical Scenes

Sheona Beaumont

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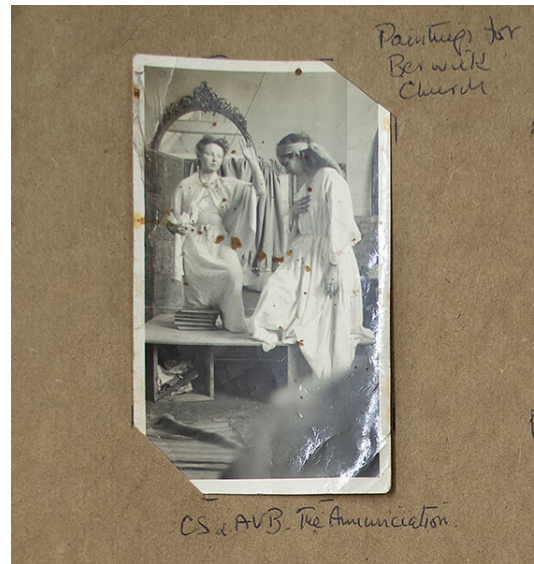


Here we are simply in the thick of parish intrigues. It's rather fascinating though tiresome. The good lady who objects to our paintings at Berwick as we, who have lived open lives of sin of all kinds, are allowed to paint a church and hob nob with a Bishop who speaks almost with tears in his eyes of the moral lessons of new art! Good God! Well, it will be very interesting to do it and it's a great relief that we can now go ahead. But I admit I feel rather a fraud.

Vanessa Bell, writing to Helen Anrep (partner of Roger Fry), July 1941.

'I feel rather a fraud'. So writes Vanessa Bell of her experience at the beginning of the commission at Berwick Church as it met local opposition. Of all of the Bloomsbury artists working on the scheme, it is Vanessa who seems most unsure of her position, most surprised perhaps that she has ended up painting for a church. She reflects, of course, a keen awareness that her background and the kind of liberal lifestyle shared by the Bloomsbury Group presented social and moral challenges to the acceptable standards of the day. She was also brought up in a family for whom organised religion was an anathema, her sister Virginia Woolf being particularly vehement that 'we are not Christians'.

Yet Vanessa goes on to assume a considered and diligent engagement with the Bible and the means to picture it. She applies herself to interpretations of the text that register more than her mildly amused intellectual interest. Here, I want to highlight in particular her photography of friends and family, dressed up and posed for the scenes which she, Quentin Bell, and Duncan Grant were to paint. The whole point, indeed, of a decorative scheme that followed a centuries' old tradition of pictorial story-telling was one of engagement, not just illustration – maybe even the whole point of biblical reading. Vanessa reveals a commitment to her work in which photography played a significant, and modern, part in making this engagement real.



The naturalism she brought to her painting was in large part because of photography's means of capturing views of the Downs, the pensive expressions in faces, or an animal's specific characteristics. It's almost too simple to say it, but using photographs as preparatory studies and to copy from was an obvious technique and very useful. It had this functionality in the very earliest days of its use: Delacroix and Degas used photographs to paint from when live models weren't available. So we see Vanessa's daughter Angelica and friend Chattie Salaman posing for *The Annunciation*, or for Quentin Bell's *Wise and Foolish Virgins*. For Duncan Grant in particular (overleaf), it seems that photographs taken by Vanessa (kept in her album from the period) aided in the portrayal of angels in flight, whose limbs aloft present certain challenges for their depiction in paint.





Even more pertinently, photography could capture the present moment, a moment which transported scenes of biblical stories into real-life surroundings and figures. Perhaps it was the realism of the present which could also unlock an ancient text. We know that this too wasn't without precedent in the traditions of painting – contemporary dress and landscape features in so many Renaissance paintings of biblical scenes – but when photography begins to do it, an even sharper frisson of the now and the then is evoked. The first photographs of Palestine were electric to their European audience: the actual places where Jesus had walked, in front of your eyes! Photography in this sense can be like visual transport for faith.

This has had diverse effects in the art of portraiture, one worth considering for a deeper appreciation of Vanessa's photographs. Because they are portraits, not just 'studies'. One of the main reasons we can't diminish the larger artistic project of these photographs, and the richness of their imagery in their own right, is because they evoke the tradition of *tableaux vivants*, even of the mystery play. Victorian *tableau vivants* were an arrangement of people and/or objects, usually posed to describe a scene from literature, and often performed in costume for an evening's entertainment. They borrow from a liturgical setting of biblical drama, as acted out in medieval mystery plays by a whole community – Oberammergau still pays tribute to this tableau form today, with lavish theatrical production scenes which are held still at various points in the course of the play. In other outlets for contemporary photography, the biblical tableau has serious cultural cachet, as in the work of David LaChapelle and David Mach, who both in different ways construct epic photographic scenes of the Flood, the Nativity, or of Jesus' interactions with present-day urbanites.

For Vanessa, the tableau had specific family lineage in the photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, Vanessa's grandmother. Cameron was a pioneer of portrait photography, using soft focus and close framing to capture beautifully evocative studies of characters such as Alfred Tennyson and Sir John Herschel. She was also a devout Christian whose images on the theme of mother-and-child were associated not just with biblical icon, but also with the fruit of the Spirit: representations of 'Goodness', and 'Kindness' (1864) were profoundly prayerful in tone, even as they were inspired by Raphael's and others' Madonnas. And though the intervening generation had certainly travelled far from Cameron's sincere Christian faith, Vanessa had grown up in the knowledge of her mother's modelling for Cameron (and others such as Edward Burne-Jones), as well as with a full appreciation of amateur dramatics and the creation of stage settings. Dressing the part had a certain expressive and creative legitimacy. It offered an inhabitation of story or character where the suspension of disbelief was deliberate and credible.



We come round and back again to feeling like a fraud, or perhaps, to looking like one. Something about the stillness of photography points out the artifice of dressing up. We the twenty-first century viewers are attuned to artifice, and we may smile as we see the contrivance in Vanessa's photographs, particularly as it seems to contrast with the ideal of biblical subjects. It might help to recognise that we accept artifice as a matter of course on stage or in a movie. Indeed, the film industry has continually paid tribute to the believable acted drama of Scripture from interwar productions such as 'The Ten Commandments' (1923) and 'Ben Hur' (1925), to, more recently, 'The Passion of the Christ' (2004) and 'Noah' (2014). What arises with the still image is a different effect of exclusion – we are that much more aware of our distance in time and space from the depicted scene. It is harder to overcome that distance, and it seems immovable.

And yet perhaps this is where Vanessa has still more to say. She's not, by any means, pretending that the photograph can immerse us in a movie-like experience – in fact she's said she can't overcome her own estrangement from the biblical stories, and the awkwardness she feels about addressing them. But what she is doing, nevertheless, is interpreting the Bible. There, in black and white, is Mary appearing in the albums of Vanessa's life. In those prints is a realisation of the Bible as fact – not as correlative fact (it isn't the real Mary of biblical times!), but perhaps as unintentional theological fact. The theological fact is the continuing fruit, or movement, of biblical understanding. Theologian David Brown called the Bible the moving text, because of the way it expands and reverberates in interpretation.

There's a validity here that I think is important. A validity of readers and artists who don't necessarily pick up the Bible with anything like ecclesial authority. A photograph's representation of a biblical subject becomes particularly important for emerging directly from such readers and artists, emerging as a real-life window on their own situation. Surely here is where Christians believe the Bible has something to say? Surely here is an opening, a connectivity, to our own lives in motion? Surely, even, it is here that the incarnation and the idea of Christ in our midst is felt to become real? I find it heartening that Vanessa's images are carefully collected and presented in her personal, autobiographical photo albums – the Bible is part of her story, inscribed in the faces of her friends and family. There's nothing fraudulent about that.

Postscript

My own work as a photographic artist has explored the tableau form too. In 2006, I produced 12 Stations of the Cross for Bristol Cathedral (now owned by Bible Society), and more recently I've considered the contemporary iconography of motherhood with reference to Cameron. In both projects, I asked friends and family to dress up and pose for me. In both I sought to bring the reality of now, of studio portraits and magazine images, to bear on older and perhaps more dignified versions of biblical events. There's a casual, banal effect I'm after, a sense that biblical reality doesn't have to reflect a hallowed realm of haloes and holier-than-thou. Photography is, after all, good at bringing the real.

Yet at the same time, I find that photography's reality makes you look a bit harder. In the process of deciding how to represent a biblical character with/through people I know, they – the real life people in front of me - become deeper, richer figures. Their living, breathing reality becomes more sacramental: a visible sign of how sacred human *being* actually is, like a gift. When I watch my children in their school Nativity Play, this effect seems particularly magnified. They literally join in the story of Jesus come down to earth as a baby, and the association of Jesus (or God) with our 'down to earth' is at the heart of it. If all of reality is redeemed like this, and if redemption is the reality, then photography has a pretty good eye for these kinds of transformations. Maybe we could start looking for it more too.

About Sheona Beaumont www.shospace.co.uk

Sheona is a photographer and researcher based in Wiltshire. Her practice with digital and appropriated photography considers the iconography and topography of the Christian faith, and her research explores the same throughout photography's history. She studied Fine Art at the University for the Creative Arts, gained an MA in Visual Culture at the University of Nottingham, and in 2017 completed her PhD at the University of Gloucestershire. A significant part of her exhibition experience has engaged church communities, from being an Artist in Residence at Trinity College Bristol to the curation of multi-site exhibition venues for local festivals. She also continues to speak and write for academic contexts, see www.shospace.co.uk for more information.

She recently held the position of Bishop Otter Scholar in the Diocese of Chichester (2017-2020), where she worked with clergy, academics, and artists to explore theology through the arts. Whilst in the role, she co-founded Visual Theology with art historian Madeleine Emerald Thiele (www.visualtheology.org.uk). Their vision is to champion creative and intellectual exploration of spiritual imagination in our modern culture. Visual Theology continues to develop opportunities for cross-platform exchange through conferences, exhibitions, and publications, and Berwick Church is delighted to support this work through the commissioning of Sheona's contribution here.

Images

Pages from Vanessa Bell's photograph album Ch.9, 1941-42, prints each approx. 10 x 15cm.

The album is in the Tate Library (London), TGA 9020/10, consulted and photographed with permission in 2017.

Photographs of the Berwick Church murals by Sheona Beaumont, 2017.