

welcome

What's Next?

People are constantly asking our editors: What's next? What's the next important trend? What's the next big color? What's the next revival? Some of these questions can be answered with a degree of reliability: We watch prices at auctions and get an idea of what sorts of furniture or art are being aggressively pursued. Some answers are a matter of personal whim: I can tell you that purple is coming up on the horizon, and point to any number of fabric collections to back up that assertion; I could also show you that blue is looking strong. The field of forecasting is lots of fun—and quite lucrative. One well-known practitioner recently told her huge, rapt audience that she foresees a palette coming from our grocery bags, with cereals giving us our neutrals, radishes our reds, berries our purples, spices (mustard, saffron) our yellows, and so on. I suppose old spinach gives us the color of worn dollar bills lining pockets, too.

Most people I know don't think about "what's hot" when they're putting together their homes. Nor are they thinking about "what's next." For that matter, most of the time, most people, including the best designers, aren't even *thinking*. They're feeling. To put it quite simply, if your heart thrills at the sight of paisley, no well-paid prognosticators will convince you that you should pine for plaid. To put it broadly, the best rooms (and the best photographs, paintings, songs, poems, and stories about rooms) convey a feeling of the lives that are contained (however briefly), celebrated, and explored in those rooms. It doesn't matter if the rooms are out of step with the trends of their times. Indeed, we make our rooms so that we can have a place where we can fall out of the times, when we return home weary from having been too much in them.

All of this is on my mind because, this being an issue devoted to houses in England, I pulled a book out of my library about Charleston, the farmhouse and garden in the English countryside that belonged to Vanessa Bell, and was a gathering place for the Bloomsbury band of highly individualistic colleagues, friends, and lovers. Bloomsbury's painters, sculptors, writers, and political, social, and economic philosophers and activists most famously included Virginia Woolf (sister of Vanessa), John Maynard Keynes, Lytton Strachey, and Roger Fry. Charleston is a house whose decoration has fallen in and out of favor over the decades among the design cognoscenti, though that is irrelevant. It is a shrine for all who love the work from that period. Its walls are exuberantly painted and papered; floral chintz curtains hang in the windows; the furniture is bruised and dented, or lacquered, or decorated with painted swags,

flowers, and patterns of geometric shapes. The scattered Persian carpets are faded and frayed. There is color everywhere, all sorts of color, from loud to subtle, with all sorts of things happening to it as paint dissolves into the wallpaper beneath it, or blooms with chemical reactions to the wall's distemper. The bowls and mugs hanging from hooks in the kitchen are hand-thrown and hand-painted. The garden floor is flush with the floor of the house, so that when the French doors are open it seems as though a carpet of flowers will spill indoors; and life of course spilled out into the garden, where bees were kept, so it is easy to imagine the smell and color and sound of that place, the laughter and the tears, the enchantment of its lively charms.

Charleston's very walls express the sensual, intelligent, exuberant, imaginative, and contemplative nature of its occupants. Theirs were lives filled with art, books, music—culture. I was entranced to discover that Keynes wrote an essay (unpublished) called "The Influence of Furniture on Love"; that Lytton Strachey wrote, in an autobiographical essay, that "the influence of houses on their inhabitants might well be the subject of a scientific investigation"; that Roger Fry, in contrast to Le Corbusier's "machines for living," wrote, "If people were just to let their houses be the direct outcome of their actual way of life . . . wouldn't such houses have really a great deal more character, and therefore interest for others?" It *does* matter, all the painting and papering and pushing around of furniture. These writers were pointing to the deeper meaning of putting together a home, of choosing colors and fabrics and furniture and art as a way of expressing who you are, what you believe in—your individuality. But they were also concerned with the deep role that a sense of home played in their lives, what it said about their values, their ideals. Working through the terrible chaos of two world wars, they used their rooms as nurturing, inspiring places from which to engage fully with life—artistically, spiritually, politically. Yes, we must cultivate our garden (as Voltaire wrote in *Candide*), but that cannot be the end of it.

No one can forecast what is going to happen in the world around us, as economies falter, wars rage, and the environment is assaulted by our careless brutality. Will our children be drafted? Will our markets crash? Will our forests die off? No one knows. But I'll make a forecast about what's going to be important in our homes: the colors of caring, thoughtfulness, attachment, and activism—whether they're red, white, and blue, or pink, green, and purple.



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