

## Roger Fry

*A biography*

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Why write a biography on Roger Fry? Biographies are written for a variety of reasons, and given the popularity of the genre, commercial speculation is often a very weighty one. The ideal biography is of course of a man of action, well-known to the general public. Thus the most common subject is a politician, and as politics is part of history (once the only part), it is also part of an accumulation, and hence biographies of politicians are considered as historical documents, part of the fabric of evolving society and thus considered to be of some enduring value, as opposed to the attention to a more ephemeral figure such as a movie-star or a sports-hero. Fry does obviously not belong to either category. To the eyes of posterity, having been dead longer than he was alive, he is a minor figure, and it is doubtful that he would be considered today, had it not been for the biographical attention he received from Virginia Woolf (her only attempt at a biography) and the enduring reputation of the Bloomsbury circle, to which he was associated as a senior member.

Once a decision is made on writing a biography, you can go about it in many ways. There are the people who write about a figure they have never met, often one who has been dead long before they were themselves born. The writing of such a biography then becomes a challenge. No personal acquaintance with the subject exists, like a figure of fiction it has to be created, and in this case through the sources she or he has left behind. In some cases, but often not, there could in addition be individuals to be interviewed or even cross-examined in order to add to the written documentation<sup>1</sup>. Such a challenge involves a lot of so called research, and then a period in which all that should be digested and put into some shape through judicious selection. However, the selection cannot be too thorough, then much work would seem to have been in vain. The result are big tomes, often stretching several volumes on the shelf, and taking a big part out of the slice of the biographers own life. Then there is the opposite extreme, some person who is designed the official biographer often long before the demise of the main protagonist. Such a biographer gets privileged access to so called papers, and starts writing and organizing while the subject is still alive. Events unfold in real time, and the biographer has plenty of opportunity to get to know the subject, to subject to interview. The subject of course remains the ultimate authority, and the official biographer is of course hemmed in by the boundaries of given permission. Impatience, not the least coming from the subject itself, forces such

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<sup>1</sup> What is a legitimate historical source? Eye-witnesses are often exalted, especially in the public imagination, but according to Collingwood, memory does not count as a historical document. It is too fickle, too liable to be wrong. But a biography is more than a dry and factual historical work, it is meant to stimulate the imagination, and besides ultimately almost all written documents are based in individual memories

a biography to be written and published before life has come to an end<sup>2</sup>. One should of course be suspicious of such endeavors, but that does not mean that given the right circumstances, they could be quite successful, Boswells life of Johnson being a classical example<sup>3</sup>. The case of Virginia Woolf is different. It is clearly a labour of love, meant to pay homage to the man, and based primarily on her own personal acquaintance with the man, and written just a few years after his death. Although she as a biographer no doubt has consulted sources, ferreting out letters and anecdotes from common friends, and most likely learned one or two things about him and his life, she might not have had an inkling of; her conception of the man is not based on such research, which has played a mere auxiliary role in filling out gaps. Thus she can approach the matter with a freedom the usual biographer does not have. She does not need to learn everything about him, and by implication pass it on the reader, because she started out knowing already a lot of him. Thus the biography is not bogged down by excessive detail, it is comparatively short, and spared much tedious listing of chronological events. Instead you have a lively sketch, concentrating on the essential, and thus giving an individual life as a flow, along which also to view the surrounding scenery of the contemporary and collective. The writing is basically straight, the author has resisted the temptation to turn it into a novel, and maybe to the discerning reader, a bit too appreciative. It is a homage, although not quite an iconography, because she never seems ever to lose her conception of proportion as to his ultimate importance; and the reader looks in vain for some critical assessments or disparaging put-downs. Fry is not made into a saint, although it is close.

He was born in 1866, the only boy among what eventually would be four sisters, sired during a period of fourteen years<sup>4</sup>. He stemmed from solid Quaker stock, going eight generations back. Quakers married Quakers, and the tradition must have been quite overbearing, something that was already felt by his father, who had been barred from a scientific career due to the prohibition among Quakers to swear oaths, thus Cambridge and Oxford had been closed to him, and instead he had followed a very successful and lucrative judiciary career, ending up as a judge and with a knighthood. It says something about the tenor of life and the high regard of science in the Victorian Age, that a career as a Botanist would have trumped the one at which he had so gallantly pursued. Roger Fry was hence raised in a wealthy Victorian household, where differences of class and income were considered natural and deserving, the poor being of inferior stock. As many a frustrated father, Sir Edward had plans for his son, not to follow in his footsteps but step into those which had been denied him. Initially Roger was too eager to oblige, developing an interest in biology. He made it to Cambridge, where he was made a member of the Apostles and where he initially pursued a scientific education. But he became more and more entrenched by his interest for painting and started to dabble in it himself. Painting and drawing as a hobby was fine, many a cultured Victorian gentleman was a competent draughtsman, as well as deft at turning out a poem or two; but to pursue it as a profession

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<sup>2</sup> Not unlike the practice of many mathematicians to have their collected works published, if not in mid-career, at least well before the productive end is in sight.

<sup>3</sup> Although it is not clear, at least not to me, whether Johnson ever had an inkling of what was going on, or whether Boswell caught onto the idea of publishing only after the death of the sage.

<sup>4</sup> With the exception of Roger Fry himself, all of them would survive into the 1950's and beyond.

was quite another thing. His parents were aghast, not only because of the loss of social status that would involve, but more to the point as to its uncertain prospects. The niche for distinguished painters is very narrow, much narrower than that for scientists. If you did not make it as an artist, there would be little to fall back upon. Roger Fry, always eager to obey and please his parents, was put in a difficult position of conflicting demands, and some truce was eventually patched up with his father.

Fry was an ambitious and diligent student of art, he travelled to Italy and to France, and even attended some of the important studios in Paris. But he did not make much of a mark, he was still a rather timid, not to say shy young man. His paintings were also out of fashion, competent but old-fashioned, and he had great problems exhibiting as well as selling. He would for the rest of his life entertain severe doubts on his ability as a painter and the value of his paintings, although he would always consider it his core occupation. In order to make ends meet he started to lecturing and made quite a success of it, standing in front of packed audiences, showing slides and expounding and extemporizing on old masters. He also wrote a lot of art-criticism in a variety of publications, but writing did not come as easily to him as lecturing. His success as an art-critic was duly noticed and he was considered to be the prime choice for an upcoming art professorship in Oxford, but he was turned down. This was a blow, especially as such an appointment would have legitimized his choice of career in the eyes of his parents, whose disappointment in their only son had been aggravated by a socially unwise marriage of his<sup>5</sup>. Later on there was the possibility of the directorship of the National Gallery, after he had turned down a lucrative offer to head the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, with all its financial resources for collecting. But the British authorities dragged their feet and when the offer from New York was renewed with the proviso he only had to stay three months in the States, his ostensible excuse not to accept having been due to his family, he simply could not resist. It was not an easy appointment, he had to contend with Pierpont Morgan, the chairman of the Trustees, who thought of art acquisition as a means of enhancing his own status and expected continual flattery. But it had its compensations. Fry alone, or accompanying Morgan, set out on art expeditions throughout Europe, finding that in addition to the respect accorded to his erudition there had been added the power of the purse whose strings he was authorized to pull. From having a rather idealistic point of view of art and its world, he now was seeing at close quarters the unholy mixture of art, high sentiments and unbridled capitalism. It must have been an heady experience, and predictably Fry did not last long.

The pivotal year in his professional life was 1910, when he launched an exhibit of so called Post-Modernist paintings. This meant championing not only Cezanne, whom he had rather recently discovered and begun to fully appreciate (he later would write a longer essay on the artist), and van Gogh and Gauguin, but also Matisse and Picasso. The reaction of the public and the art-established was one of outrage. Fry was denounced as both a charlatan and a subversive, the paintings themselves were unfavorably compared to

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<sup>5</sup> The wife bore him two children, and suffered an early period of insanity only to recover. Eventually she was, however, permanently institutionalized, and faded out of his life. She died after he was already dead, an an autopsy revealed the source of her mental degeneration being the progressive thickening of her skull.

the untutored scriblings of children (which Fry incidentally held in rather high regard) . Fry was both disturbed, as well as taking it in stride. He was surprised that the educated public, to whom he for so many years had lectured, and which had so enthusiastically taken to having their taste in art refined, now came down on him with such vehemence. Could it be that what he had mistaken for a genuine love for art was nothing but social snobbism? On the other hand the very vehemence of the reaction testified to modern art having had an impact. A few years later, the attitude of the public would change, lending more fuel to the suspicion that it was but a fashion. The consequences were that Fry became ostracized among older established artists and instead became the leader for the new generation who tended to look up to him as a guru.

In 1912 he started on capital borrowed and presented to him as a gift a work-shop Omega, whose aim it would be to provide the public with good, everyday art. He had been aghast at the low level of public decorative art that was ubiquitous everywhere, and hoped that in this way the public would be educated and be prevailed upon to seek out and buy well-designed things, be it furniture, textiles, wall-paper. This enterprise probably called for more business acumen than he possessed, and the work-shop lingered on for many years, finding that much of what it produced was copied and degraded in order to satisfy the cruder tastes of a larger public. The war came, but Omega survived, but in the middle of the 20's he had to dismantle the whole enterprise on the eve of it really picking up. The stock was sold off at greatly reduced prices and the public flocked for the first time ever in significant numbers.

The last decade and a half of his life was in many ways the most productive, doing what he had always done but now even more intensely. He wrote a lot on art-criticism, engaged in interior decoration, fund-raising, travel (he loved France, especially southern France and dreamed about settling there in a large house), visits to art museums, and of course a maintaining a vast social circle, involving not only frequent epistolary activity, but also a fair amount of wining and dining, continually engaged in conversation and argument. This clearly is the way Virginia Woolf met and knew him (there are references both to her and her husband in the text), and clearly the way through which she had been charmed by him. He had matured, from having been a shy boy with a propensity to sit at some one's feet and take in what they had to offer (and then unsentimentally move on to another mentor), he became more self-assertive and extroverted, more concerned with the problems of others than with his own (a sure way to find happiness?) . Life was indeed very good to him, and he seemed to enjoy every minute, especially during his last decade. His health did not keep abreast though, years of neglect and irregular living, supposedly took its toll. He had all sorts of ailments, cramps, pains, going to a succession of doctors. Then one day he fell, broke his thigh-bone, seemed to rally at the hospital, but was then felled by a heart-attack, having enjoyed his professorship of Art only for a year at his alma mater - Cambridge.