



DUNCAN GRANT (1885-1978)

St Paul's Cathedral

1938

Oil on canvas

40 ¼ x 30 in. (102 x 76 cm)

PROVENANCE

Private Collection, U.S.;

Rago, New Jersey, 20 November 2025, consigned from the above;

Philip Mould & Company, London, acquired from the above.

PHILIP MOULD
—
& COMPANY



'Do finish St Paul's . . . my dear' - Vanessa Bell[1]

Duncan Grant was a central figure in the Bloomsbury Group and one of the British artists most closely associated with introducing the colour and freedom of European modernism to Britain.

St Paul's Cathedral held a particular fascination for Grant, who returned to the subject on several occasions. Painted in 1938, the present work belongs to a small but significant group of paintings depicting St Paul's. The subdued palette and softened contours lend the scene an almost dreamlike quality, furthered by its unusually imposing scale. A long barge passes across the foreground, and the Thames is rendered in short strokes of blue, grey and violet, so that the water appears as a field of colour against which the barge is set. It is arguably the most atmospheric of Grant's known treatments of the subject.

Three years after the present work was executed, Grant was commissioned by the War Artists Advisory Committee, under the directorship of Kenneth Clark, to depict St Paul's during the Second World War. Clark acknowledged the artist's long engagement with the subject, writing, 'I know you have painted St Paul's a great many times', before describing the cathedral rising from the surrounding ruins as though from 'Pompeii'. [2] Grant's resulting painting, now in Imperial War Museums, depicts the dome beyond the exposed cellars and shattered buildings of the Blitz. [3] The comparison gives the present work an especially interesting place within the sequence. The 1938 painting records the cathedral within the crowded, functioning riverside

city; the wartime picture, by contrast, presents the same monument newly exposed by destruction. Grant himself remarked upon the transformed wartime city as looking 'like Ancient Rome'. [4]

Other notable contemporary patronage included the Queen Mother, who acquired a view of St Paul's, which remains in the collection at Clarence House today. Another depiction belongs to the Government Art Collection. [5] The recurrence of the motif across private, royal and public collections gives some measure of the importance St Paul's assumed within Grant's work.

[1] TGA 20078/1/44/205.

[2] Kenneth Clark to Duncan Grant, 1941, quoted in Australian War Memorial, 'Shared Experience: St Paul's 1941', *Art and War*. Available at: https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/sharedexperience/iwmld_1844 (Accessed: 2 September 2026).

[3] Imperial War Museum, Art.IWM ART LD 1844.

[4] Duncan Grant, (1941) Letter to Kenneth Clark. *Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant letters to Kenneth Clark and Jane Clark*, MSS 39, box 1, folder 43. Yale Center for British Art, Archives, New Haven.

[5] Government Art Collection, 3812.