



116 CONVERSATION PIECE

Oil on panel 27.5 x 37.5 cm
11" x 15" Private Collection

This painterly study of a convergence of three people in the drawing room⁵¹ of Bar House is the very essence of a conversation piece. Figures are grouped rather as Vanessa Bell's painting of the same name; they centrally merge and meet.⁵² Yet in this piece by Elwell their form constructs a web of intrigue. The body language appears to create an emotional distance, each elegant figure elongated towards the centre base, accentuating this strangeness.

Even the legs of the drop-leaf table join this enigmatic convergence. The fluidity of brushstrokes seems to recall Elwell's painting of *Léonie Reading* (Pl.126) in terms of its style; expressively Parisian in influence. Equally comparable is the quality of lamplight which imparts a glorious glow within the room. In *Conversation Piece* this luminescence highlights the exquisite standing figure who is dressed in diaphanous yellow against more yellow. We believe the man to be Alfred Munnings whose practice was to stay at Bar House for Beverley race days. His wife is seated opposite him in the room. The ethereal third figure in the centre has been compared with a

similar portrait by Alexander Forbes, of Florence Carter-Wood, Alfred's tragic first wife who died by her own hand at Lamorna.

It is speculative, of course, but we wonder if this third person may be a reason for the painting being secreted in the Elwell safe for 25 years. Could she be a vision from the past of a dearly loved friend, of whom her husband never spoke again? Much later, the picture was discovered,⁵³ together with *A Hidden Corner* (Pl.36), a view of Bar House by Mary Dawson Elwell. This was perhaps her last, before the disabling stroke that ended her career. Again, that painting only saw light of day after the safe was opened.