

# William Beckford, 1760–1844: An Eye for the Magnificent



• OCTOBER 18, 2001, TO JANUARY 6, 2002 •

The Bard Graduate Center for Studies  
in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture





*Objects of Vertu*, Willes Maddox,  
1844; oil on canvas; The Beckford  
Tower Trust, Lansdown Tower, Bath

This major exhibition will present for the first time in America the collection of William Beckford, preeminent English connoisseur of Georgian and Regency England.

Begun in the late 18th century and dispersed within a hundred years, Beckford's legendary holdings had an indelible influence on the great public and private collections of the 19th and 20th centuries. This exhibition will bring together more than 150 extraordinary works of art including paintings, drawings, gold and silver objects, European and Oriental porcelain, jade, and furniture.

Presented at The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture, it will be on view from October 18, 2001, through January 6, 2002, before traveling to the Dulwich Picture Gallery in London, where it can be seen from February 5 through April 14, 2002.

The exhibition emphasizes William Beckford's reputation as one of the towering figures of his time, a principal arbiter of taste with an artistic eye of unparalleled discernment. Author, bibliophile, builder, and passionate collector, he is best remembered as the owner of Fonthill Abbey, his fabled residence, and the author of *Vathek*, a sensational semiautobiographical Gothic novel.





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Hookah: bowl, India, 18th century; mounts by James Aldridge, ca. 1814–22; nephrite with silver-gilt and platinum mount set with gemstones, collection of the Honorable Lady Morrison, Madresfield Court, Worcestershire. Casket, ca. 1800; silver-gilt set with agates and hardstones; Burghley House Preservation Trust, Burghley House, Stamford, Lincolnshire. Spoon, ca. 1815–20; sardonyx, gold, and enamel; National Trust for Scotland, Brodick Castle

Single-minded in pursuit of the finest works of art, Beckford created a collection that was unsurpassed in its day, in breadth and complexity exceeding those of his better-known contemporaries, such as the Prince of Wales (later George IV), Sir John Soane, and Thomas Hope. Beckford's enthusiasm for medieval, Renaissance, and baroque art was unmatched throughout Europe; his appreciation of Islamic and Oriental objects and his passion for rare books and manuscripts were unrivaled. Of equal importance, he commissioned outstanding European artists, designers, and artisans to furnish his residences in Wiltshire, London, Lisbon, and Paris.

Beckford was a child of privilege, the son of the Lord Mayor of London and related through his mother to the Hamiltons, the premier ducal family of Scotland. A precocious child, he developed an all-encompassing love of the arts, honed by an exceptional private education. By his midtwenties Beckford had traveled widely and studied painting, music, literature, architecture, and design. As heir to the vast riches of his father's Jamaican sugar plantations, he was known as "England's wealthiest son."



Although he spent the better part of the 1780s and 1790s traveling in Europe, Beckford returned frequently to England, where he resided mainly in Wiltshire, at his father's neo-Palladian mansion. Using only the most highly skilled French and English craftsmen, he gradually transformed its interiors into an archetype of avant-garde Parisian taste just prior to the French Revolution.

A growing fascination with Romanticism, however, inspired a shift in Beckford's taste to the Gothic Revival, and he embarked on the most ambitious project of his life: the creation of a monumental cathedral-like residence, known as Fonthill Abbey; the project was so extensive that it required the demolition of his father's house in 1807. Working with James Wyatt, the royal architect, Beckford oversaw the design of the building, which included a 300-foot tower and eight miles of encircling walls to protect the animals on the estate from hunters and the owner from unwelcome scrutiny. The construction of Fonthill Abbey consumed nearly 25 years of Beckford's life and much of his fortune; it contributed to his reputation as an eccentric, a profligate spender, and a recluse, making him uniquely well-known.



*Fonthill Abbey*, Charles Wild, 1799; pencil and watercolor; private collection





Commode, ca. 1815;  
ebony, gilt metal,  
pietre dure, and marble;  
The National Trust,  
Charlecote Park,  
Warwickshire

The end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815 precipitated the collapse of sugar prices and the dramatic reduction of Beckford's income from his Jamaican plantations; this, coupled with his prodigal spending, forced him to put the Abbey up for auction. For the first time, Fonthill Abbey, so long a topic of interest and gossip, was opened to the public. Wealthy collectors, members of the aristocracy, and the merely curious were astounded by its magnificence. Contemporary accounts appeared in the press and in several lavish guides to the house. Initially scheduled by Christie's for 1822, the auction was canceled at the last minute when Beckford negotiated the private sale of the house and much of its contents. In the following year, the bulk of Beckford's collection was finally auctioned in what was the most talked-about event of its day.



Table, ca.1815; gilt bronze and  
*breccia universale* marble;  
private collection





By the time the auction was held, Beckford had already moved to the Georgian spa town of Bath, where his passion for architecture and collecting flourished anew. Now in his sixties, free of the burden of Fonthill Abbey and enriched by its sale, Beckford entered one of the most productive stages of his life. He continued to collect with enthusiasm, lavishing attention on a new residence in Lansdown Crescent. Above this house, on a hill with uninterrupted views of the countryside, Beckford built Lansdown Tower, in a style that signaled the return of his taste for classicism. Constructed expressly to house his most important works of art and his astonishing library, the tower was linked to the residence by a mile-long garden. Even in his eighties, Beckford remained an avid collector of books and a habitu   of the auction rooms. Just three years before his death in 1844, he had the interior of the tower completely redesigned, testimony to the progressive spirit, restless intellect, and brilliant eye he had so creatively exploited since his youth.

Two auctions of Beckford's possessions took place after his death, but a part of his collection had already been bequeathed to his daughter, Susan Euphemia, wife of the 10th duke of Hamilton. In 1882 the sensational Hamilton Palace sale of many of these pieces, as well as the library, brought his name renewed public attention. Beckford's wide-ranging interest in the arts of many cultures and periods has influenced generations of renowned collectors, including the Hertford family, the Rothschild dynasty, Henry Clay Frick, and J. P. Morgan.





FAR LEFT TO RIGHT: Tazza, Paul Storr, 1824; silver-gilt, jasper, and hardstone; The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham, Staffordshire. Kiyomizu bottle: bottle, Japan, 18th century; mounts, ca. 1800; porcelain with gilt-bronze mounts; The National Trust, Charlecote Park, Warwickshire. Armchair, ca. 1810; giltwood and upholstery; private collection

Today many of Beckford's finest acquisitions have found their way into such esteemed collections as The National Gallery, London, and National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; museums in Boston, Detroit, London, New York, and Toledo; private collections worldwide; and historic houses belonging to the National Trust of England and the National Trust for Scotland—all lenders to the exhibition at the Bard Graduate Center and the Dulwich Picture Gallery.

The exhibition also features new photographs of the European cities and historical points of interest Beckford visited as a young man on his Grand Tour, as well as several of the residences he occupied throughout his life. Derek E. Ostergard, associate director of the Bard Graduate Center, is project director and editor of the accompanying catalogue. The exhibition was conceived by Philip Hewat-Jaboor, cocurator with Bet McLeod; both are distinguished Beckford scholars.

Teapot and stand, Robert Sharp and Daniel Smith, 1784; gold; The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham, Staffordshire





## The Catalogue

An illustrated companion catalogue will be published by Yale University Press, in association with the Bard Graduate Center. It contains approximately 200 color illustrations and offers 16 essays by leading scholars on aspects of Beckford's life, houses, and collection. Objects in the exhibition are accompanied by scholarly entries.

## Related Programs

The exhibition will be accompanied by an array of public programs including tours, courses, lectures, and a symposium addressing the great collectors who followed William Beckford in the 19th and 20th centuries. Special events will be held for youth and senior audiences. For information on these offerings, please call 212-501-3013 or e-mail [programs@bgc.bard.edu](mailto:programs@bgc.bard.edu). For further information, please call 212-501-3000 or visit [www.bgc.bard.edu](http://www.bgc.bard.edu).

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Model of Fonthill Abbey, Michael Bishop, 1981; mixed media; The Beckford Tower Trust, Lansdown Tower, Bath

FRONT COVER: *William Beckford*, George Romney, 1781–82; oil on canvas; The National Trust, Upton House, Warwickshire

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