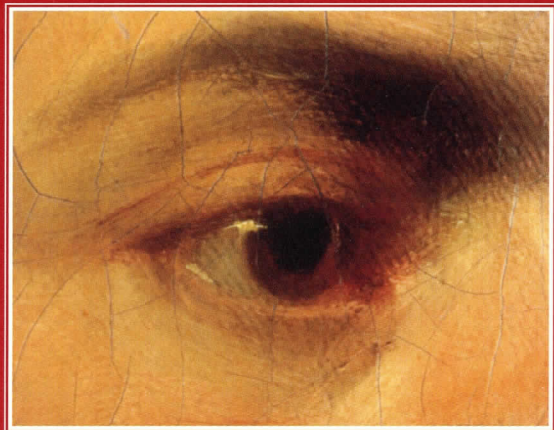


BGC

THE BARD GRADUATE CENTER

FOR STUDIES IN THE DECORATIVE ARTS, DESIGN, AND CULTURE



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

ON VIEW FROM
OCTOBER 18, 2001, THROUGH JANUARY 6, 2002

Who is William Beckford?

An impassioned and individualistic collector, designer, builder, and author, William Beckford was one of the leading tastemakers of the late-Georgian and Regency periods in England. With an aesthetic vision unparalleled for its breadth and discernment, he gathered objects ranging from luxurious Continental furniture and superlative British paintings to exquisite Japanese porcelains and fine Islamic glass. *William Beckford, 1760–1844: An Eye for the Magnificent* has reunited more than 150 extraordinary works that once belonged to his legendary collection, in an effort to better understand this idiosyncratic man and the legacy of his unique tastes.



William Beckford, oil on canvas, Andrea Casali, 1766, England
(Collection of Lennoxlove House, Haddington)

Beckford as “England’s Wealthiest Son”

Beckford was a child of privilege, son of the powerful Lord Mayor of London and related through his mother to the noble Hamilton family of Scotland. A precocious child, at a young age he developed an all-encompassing love of the arts. By his mid-20s he had traveled widely and studied painting, music, literature, architecture, and design. As heir to the vast riches of his father’s Jamaican sugar plantations, Beckford gained notoriety as “England’s wealthiest son.”



William Beckford, oil on canvas,
George Romney, 1781–82, England
(Upton House, Warwickshire,
The Bearsted Collection—The National Trust)

Beckford as Grand Tourist

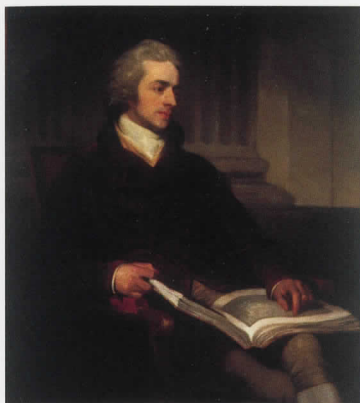
As was typical of young Englishmen of means, Beckford spent considerable time traversing Europe to visit the key monuments of Western civilization. When back in England, he resided mainly at his father's neo-Palladian mansion in Wiltshire. Inspired by the objects he acquired and the avant-garde Parisian styles to which he was exposed while living abroad in the 1780s and 1790s, Beckford transformed the classical interior to express his own aesthetic.



Fonthill Abbey. Perspective Design from the North West,
pencil and watercolor, Charles Wild to the design
of James Wyatt, RA, 1799, England
(Private Collection)

Beckford as Practicing Romantic

A growing interest in Romanticism inspired Beckford's fascination with the Gothic Revival. In 1797 he began the most ambitious design project of his life: the creation of an estate that featured the cathedral-like residence of Fonthill Abbey, with its 300-foot tower, and 8 miles of encircling walls to ensure his privacy. Consuming nearly 25 years and vast sums of his fortune, this extravagant enterprise contributed to Beckford's reputation as an artistic visionary, profligate spender, and ardent recluse.



William Beckford, oil on canvas,
John Hoppner, circa 1800, England
(City of Salford Art Gallery, Salford, England)

Beckford as Passionate Collector

The end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815 precipitated a collapse of sugar prices and a dramatic reduction of Beckford's income from his Jamaican properties. No longer able to afford his excessive lifestyle, he was forced to sell Fonthill Abbey in 1822 and then auction off his holdings in what was the most talked-about event of the time. Beckford relocated to Bath, where his passion for architecture and collecting flourished anew as he focused on the neo-Renaissance decoration of his residence on Lansdown Crescent and his nearby sanctuary of Lansdown Tower.

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT

Objects of Vertu, oil on canvas, Willes Maddox, 1844, England (Beckford Tower Trust, Bath—Sole Trustee, Bath Preservation Trust)

Vase, porcelain and silver gilt, James Aldridge, porcelain, circa 1800, China, mounts, circa 1815–20, England (Beckford Collection, Brodick Castle, National Trust for Scotland)

Nautilus Shell, with ivory, silver, gilt, marble, maker unknown, shell engraving, circa 1700, The Netherlands, mounts, late 18th/early 19th century, possibly England (Private Collection)





William Beckford, oil on canvas,
Willes Maddox, 1844, England
(Collection of Professor Bernard Nevill)

Beckford's Legacy

Beckford remained an avid collector and designer until his death in 1844. His impressive collection was divided—part bequeathed to his daughter, Susan Euphemia, wife of the 10th Duke of Hamilton, and the remainder sold at auction. The objects of Beckford's desire, which reflected his wide-ranging interest in the arts of many cultures and periods, have inspired subsequent generations of collectors, including the Rothschild dynasty, Henry Clay Frick, and J. P. Morgan. Today, some of Beckford's best pieces have found their way into noteworthy museums, historic houses, and private collections worldwide.



Susan Euphemia, Duchess of Hamilton,
oil on canvas, Willes Maddox, 1852, England
(Beckford Collection, Brodick Castle,
National Trust for Scotland)

Exhibition Tours

Group tours of the exhibition may be scheduled Tuesday through Friday between 11:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. and on Thursday evenings until 7:00 p.m. Advance reservations are required for all groups. Payment must be made in advance via check or credit card.

The fees for admission and guide(s) are:

1-20 visitors (single guide)	\$ 75
21-40 visitors (two guides)	\$100

Public Programs

An array of lectures, panels, study days, and other offerings is presented in conjunction with this exhibition. Special events are held for youth and senior audiences.

Catalogue

A scholarly publication accompanying the exhibition contains 16 essays by prominent scholars on such topics as "Filling the Void: The Development of the Beckford Taste and the Market in Furniture" and "William Beckford and the Landscape Garden."

The exhibition is made possible with the generous support of Constance and Harvey Krueger, New York Design Center, the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, Mrs. Charles Wrightsman, Martin P. Levy, Mrs. Frederick M. Stafford, and CHRISTIE'S. Promotional support has been provided by **nest** magazine.

Admission

General	\$3
Senior (65 and over)	\$2
Students (with valid ID)	\$2

Hours

Tuesday through Sunday: 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Thursday: 11:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.

Transportation

The BGC is located at 18 West 86th Street between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue and is easily accessible by public transportation.

Bus

86th Street Crosstown

M10 on Central Park West

M7 or M11 on Columbus Avenue

Subway

B or C train to 86th Street Station

Special Needs

The BGC complies with the provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act by making its buildings accessible to those with special needs. To discuss arrangements, please call prior to visiting.

Website

For up-to-date exhibition-related information, please visit the BGC website at www.bgc.bard.edu.

Information

For further information, please call the BGC Gallery at 212-501-3023 or TTY 212-501-3012 or e-mail gallery_assistant@bgc.bard.edu.



The Beckford Coat of Arms
(The College of Arms, London)

COVER IMAGE

William Beckford (detail), oil on canvas, John Hoppner, circa 1800, England
(City of Salford Art Gallery, Salford, England)