

ANTIQUES

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Magnificence
With the Flair
Of a Warhol

William Beckford (1760-1844) was the Andy Warhol of his day, a self-conscious aesthete, compulsive collector of art and furniture, an author, designer and famous style maven. "Beckford is largely legend yet truly legendary," wrote Timothy Mowl, one of his many biographers. "He was, by his taste and by his flamboyant lifestyle, the ice breaker in the frozen sea of 18th-century English classicism and the morning star of the English Romantic movement."

Though as notorious in his day as Warhol, he is unknown to Americans. It took Philip Hewat-Jaboor, a London art consultant who proposed the show, and Derek E. Ostergard, the associate director of the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture, five years to assemble 185 of Beckford's amazing possessions for "William Beckford, 1760-1844: An Eye for the Magnificent" (through Jan. 5).

The J. M. W. Turner watercolors, *pietra dura* cabinets, silver gilt ewers, medieval enameled caskets, French and Chinese porcelains and antique furniture come from many lenders, including the British Museum, the National Gallery in London, the National Trust of Scotland and nine English National Trust homeowners. Yale University Press and Bard have published a 448-page catalog with 16 essays, including one by Mr. Mowl and another by David Watkin, who writes about Beckford's relationship with the eccentric neo-Classical English architect Sir John Soane, one of Beckford's few friends.

Beckford was born rich. "England's wealthiest son," as Byron wrote, was the only legitimate child of a prominent Whig politician who inherited lucrative sugar plantations in Jamaica and was twice Lord Mayor of London. The family lived in Fonthill Splendens, a lavish palace in Wiltshire, near Salisbury. Beckford's father died when he was 10.

Maria Beckford, his educated but puritanical mother, was related to the Hamiltons, the premier ducal family of Scotland, and was descended from King Edward III. She insisted her son be tutored at home. A precocious child, he learned drawing, music, French, Latin and Arabic and fueled his imagination with books of Persian and Arabic literature.



The Bard Graduate Center

A Regency table, circa 1816, is supported by three gilt bronze dolphins.

"He had an isolated childhood," said Mr. Hewat-Jaboor, who was the curator of the Bard exhibition along with the English scholar Bet McLeod. And Mr. Mowl wrote that "by not sending him to Oxford or Cambridge, Mrs. Beckford ensured that her son would never see himself as a patriotic Briton but always as an outsider."

Beckford was destined for a political career, but his peerage and any political role were denied him after rumors of a homosexual liaison. He went to Geneva with his wife to escape the scandal and began a lifetime of collecting medieval, Renaissance and Baroque art, Islamic and Oriental objects, and rare books and manuscripts. He liked anything of the finest quality, particularly if it had a royal provenance or incorporated exotic materials.

Apart from collecting, Beckford frequently created his own furniture and works of art, often combining pieces with his own mounts. "His involvement with painters and craftsmen was quite extraordinary," Mr. Hewat-Jaboor said. "It was not something people of his station did."

One spectacular piece in the exhibition is a round Regency center table, circa 1816, supported by three huge gilt bronze dolphins of his design. Its top is a slab of ancient green marble from the Red Sea, a type

known as *breccia universale* because it is composed of fragments of colorful porphyritic and granite stones. Such marble was especially prized by the Romans.

The slab is actually two semicircular pieces joined together. Beckford bought them in a sale of the contents of Malmaison, Empress Joséphine's house outside Paris. In 1823, Beckford had Phillips auction house sell the table, along with much of the furniture of his second home, a famous Gothic Revival country house called Fonthill Abbey.

The catalog entry said the "extraordinary slab was brought from Egypt by the Emperor Bonaparte and presented to the Empress Joséphine and was bought at the sale at Malmaison in 1816." The table still belongs to the family of the collector who bought it in 1823.

Beckford's sumptuous tastes were nurtured by two grand tours on the Continent and long sojourns in Geneva, Lisbon and Paris. He bought some of his best pieces in Paris during the French Revolution.

"His taste was eclectic but superlative," said Anthony Blumka, a Manhattan dealer in medieval and Renaissance objects who is particularly impressed by Beckford's enameled copper reliquary, which was borrowed from the Metropolitan Museum of Art for the show.

The 10-inch-tall casket was made in about 1180 in Limoges, France, a center of medieval goldsmithing known for its fine enamel work. The Twelve Apostles, in brilliant blue and green champlevé enamel, are separated by a kind of intricate copper engraving done in a circular pattern known as *vermiculé* (wormlike). "This *vermiculé* chaise is the rarest of the rarest," Mr. Blumka said.

Like Warhol, Beckford self-consciously cultivated his persona. Nonetheless, he was shy and spent his time collecting and decorating. "He had an incredible desire to hold himself apart," Mr. Hewat-Jaboor said. "He was intensely interested in the juxtaposition of his things. The placement of objects was of great importance to him."

Mr. Ostergard said: "He did not shape his times because no one saw his things. Fonthill Abbey had a certain mythological stature." Before the auction there, 7,200 people, including half the British peerage, flocked to the site, curious to see the house and collections before their dispersal.

Beckford was a snob, perhaps because he never received his peerage and was not received in the great houses of his day. "He was completely obsessed with heraldry," Mr. Hewat-Jaboor said. "It was a psychological ego trip, showing he was descended from all these fabulous people. It's as though he had to put his mark on everything: carpets, textiles, china, candlesticks, even spoons."

After Beckford's youngest daughter, Susan Euphemia, married his distant cousin Alexander Douglas, who would become the 10th Duke of Hamilton, Beckford incorporated the Hamilton devices into his own.

Though he was a recluse who rarely entertained, he commissioned several tea sets, including a five-piece, silver gilt tea service that is engraved on every surface with what looks like a geometric motif. On closer examination, the pattern is a quiltwork of engraved heraldic devices, tiny Latimer crosses alternating with Hamilton cinquefoils. Similarly, a gold-mounted agate spoon, also in the show, has cinquefoils carved on its underside.

He kept building, designing and collecting until he died at 83 in Bath. He is buried in Bath in a pink granite sarcophagus that he designed. His daughter Susan inherited most of the collection, which was dispersed at a 17-day sale of the contents of her home, Hamilton Palace, in 1882.