

# William Kent: Designing Georgian Britain

On view September 20, 2013–  
February 9, 2014



William Aikman.  
*William Kent*,  
ca. 1723–25.  
Oil on canvas.  
National  
Portrait Gallery,  
London, NPG  
6063.

20  
YEARS

Bard  
Graduate  
Center: Decorative  
Arts, Design  
History, Material  
Culture

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*William Kent: Designing Georgian Britain*, on view at the Bard Graduate Center: Decorative Arts, Design History, Material Culture from September 20, 2013 to February 9, 2014, is the first major exhibition to examine the life and career of one of the most influential designers in eighteenth-century Britain. Visitors will discover Kent's genius, through nearly 200 examples of his elaborate drawings for architecture, gardens, and sculpture, along with furniture, silver, paintings, illustrated books, and through new documentary films. As most of his best-known surviving works are in Britain's great country houses, the exhibition is rich in loans from private as well as public collections. Organized by the Bard Graduate Center in collaboration with the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, the exhibition is curated by Susan Weber (BGC) and Julius Bryant (V&A). It will travel to the V&A where it will be on view from March 22 to July 13, 2014.



William Henry Hunt. *The Gallery, Chiswick House*, 1828. Watercolor. © Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth. Reproduced by permission of the Chatsworth Settlement Trustees, WC 44.



William Kent.  
Console table,  
Chiswick House,  
ca. 1727–32.  
Probably carved  
by John Boson.  
Carved gilt pine,  
Siena marble top.  
© Victoria and  
Albert Museum,  
London,

## Background

*William Kent: Designing Georgian Britain* explores Kent's work over three decades (1719–48)—a period when Britain was defining itself as a new nation and overtaking France as a leading world power. Like Robert Adam a generation later, Kent is identified not only with his own prolific and diverse output but also with an entire period style. At a time when most patrons and collectors looked to Italy for their art and design, Kent's versatility and artistic inventiveness set the style of his age and asserted the status of the modern British artist. From a time when no refined education was complete without the Grand Tour to Italy, the word 'Kentian' has come to denote rich, Italianate palatial interiors furnished with gilded sculptural tables, mirrors, and Old Master paintings, elaborately presented on walls lined with the richest silk damasks and velvets, and beneath painted ceilings. Kent devised a style that catered to the Grand Tour alumni, recreating the splendors of Roman palazzi. A jovial house guest of his patrons, 'Kentino' (as he was affectionately known) and his creations reminded them of the best days of their lives, before they returned, inherited, and dutifully managed their old family estates.

Many of the ideas we take for granted today about visual education, good design, and national style were established by Kent's generation. At the start of the eighteenth century, the United Kingdom of Great Britain was established through the Act of Union between England and Scotland (1707). Great expectations of new public buildings followed, especially for a new parliament and royal palace to replace those destroyed by the Whitehall Palace fire of 1698. From the accession of George I in



William Kent. Armchair, Devonshire House, ca. 1733-40. Carved gilt wood, modern crimson damask upholstery. © Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth. Reproduced by permission of the Chatsworth Settlement Trustees.

1714 through the death of Queen Victoria in 1901, the Royal House of Hanover reigned over Britain. With Kent's help, this German family reinvented themselves. The

new nation needed a new sense of style, both to define itself through design (in contrast to the Stuarts and the French) and to improve society at large. Responding to a challenge articulated in the Earl of Shaftesbury's *Letter Concerning the Art, or Science of Design* (1712), Lord Burlington is the best-known today of several patrons who took on this responsibility. Kent lived in his London townhouse, Burlington House (today the home of the Royal Academy) for most of his life and was also, in effect, artist-in-residence at Burlington's new Italianate villa at Chiswick. Essentially, Kent saw that good design is about visual experience, not only dependent on the erudite eye of the connoisseur or the knowledge of architecture's ancient rules, but also reliant on the emotional response as one moved through and around houses, offices, streets, and gardens.

## The Exhibition

*William Kent: Designing Georgian Britain* is divided into ten sections that introduce specific aspects of Kent's work, including signature private and royal commissions, and important periods in his career. William Kent's life and the historical age in which he worked is the subject of the first section. A highlight is William Aikman's portrait of Kent that hung over the mantelpiece at Wanstead House, and is now in the National Portrait Gallery, London. The second section focuses on Kent's formative

years on the Grand Tour in Italy where he was sent to hone his painting skills by copying the Old Masters, and to act as a purchasing agent for British collectors. Italian Baroque art, interiors, and furnishings made a lasting impression on Kent. Featured are seldom seen paintings and drawings, including Kent's copies after Agostino Carracci, Domenichino, and Carlo Maratti, and drawings of Italianate interiors by fellow Grand Tourist John Talman, that document this inspiring period in Kent's life. While in Italy, Kent met Lord Burlington who became his mentor and collaborator for the next several decades. Together they became early exponents of the designs of the late Renaissance architect, Andrea Palladio, which they eventually incorporated into their own Anglo-Palladian style that came to define the Georgian era.

Kent is best known for the interiors he designed for several grand country estates in Britain, and for his approach in taking responsibility for the design of the entire interior from the painting and furniture to the sculpture and decoration. Visitors to the exhibition will have the opportunity to explore a few of Kent's best-known early interiors, such as Chiswick House, Wanstead House, and Houghton Hall, Kent's most important early commission for the grand estate of Sir Robert Walpole, and one of the key buildings in the history of Palladian architecture



William Kent. Pair of pedestals, Garden Room, Chiswick House, ca. 1735. Carved by John Boscio. Carved gilt wood. © Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth. Reproduced by permission of the Chatsworth Settlement Trustees. Bruce White, photographer.



William Kent. Chandelier, for the Leineschloss, Hanover, 1736–37. Made by Balthasar Friedrich Behrens. Cast and openwork, strapwork, appliqué, repoussé, and chased silver. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, William Francis Warden Fund, Anonymous Gift in Memory of Zoë Wilbour, Gift of Henry H. Fay, and Gift of W. K. Flint, by exchange, 1985.854.



in England. In addition to drawings and plans of these interiors, the exhibition features rare examples of Kent's furniture designed specifically for these commissions.

In time, Kent began to receive important royal commissions, particularly from King George II and his son, Frederick, Prince of Wales. A section of the exhibition is devoted to designs for the new monarchy. In 1722, Kent was given a major commission to design the Cupola Room at Kensington Palace, where he was in charge of painting the ceiling and designing the furniture and chimneypieces. One of Kent's best known and somewhat unusual works was a state barge designed for Frederick. Although the barge is too large to travel, the exhibition will feature Kent's beautifully rendered designs, along with a detailed model. Other notable royal commissions explored include those for Queen Caroline's Library and Hermitage in Richmond Garden. Also on view will be several extraordinary pieces of silver, made after designs by Kent. Among these are

a chandelier commissioned by George II for the Leineschloss, Hanover, made by Balthasar Behrens, on loan from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and a large centerpiece (or epergne) for Frederick made by silversmith George Wickes.



William Kent. Design for the monument to Isaac Newton, Westminster Abbey, London, ca. 1727. Pen and ink, wash. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London, E.424-1946.

Another section looks specifically at the work Kent produced in London, both in private residences as well as in public buildings. Among the most prestigious of these commissions was the design of Devonshire House, the residence of the Duke of Devonshire. Although the palatial home was demolished in the 1920s, objects from and related to it survive, and the exhibition will feature drawings and a door designed by Kent. Of his public works, the exhibition examines 10 Downing Street, the Houses of Parliament, the Horse Guards at Whitehall, and the Royal Mews. Also explored are Kent's contributions to sculpture. Among the works shown are drawings for tomb monuments for Isaac Newton, William Shakespeare, and James Stanhope in Westminster Abbey, and Michael Rysbrack's terracotta model of Newton.

One section is devoted to Holkham Hall, designed with the assistance of Lord Burlington for Thomas Coke, 1st Earl of Leicester, who was among Kent's most important patrons. Now considered to be one of the finest examples of the Palladian revival style of architecture in Britain, Holkham Hall is shown through a number of important works that the BGC is fortunate to borrow, including a gilded and elaborately carved settee, drawings of the interior, and Francesco Trevisani's portrait of Thomas Coke, who built Holkham.

Although known today almost exclusively for his Palladian style, Kent worked in other idioms depending on the wishes of the patron. The exhibition looks at his Gothic works, including projects at Hampton Court and Esher Place, and his illustrations for books, most notably an edition of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*.

William Kent, with John Vardy. Banqueting House or Temple, Euston Hall, ca. 1735–38, 1746. Pencil, pen and ink, wash. ©Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 3309.



The final section examines Kent's contributions to the history of landscape and garden design. Through drawings, furniture, and video, visitors will discover how Kent revolutionized garden design and helped usher in a style of natural gardening that came to characterize the English landscape garden. Two of Kent's most important gardens, at Rousham and Stowe, remain today close to Kent's original designs. A BGC produced video will offer a virtual journey through these gardens so that visitors will gain a better understanding of his landscape designs.

## The Book

*William Kent: Designing Georgian Britain*, edited by Susan Weber, and published with Yale University Press, presents twenty-one essays by leading scholars of eighteenth-century British art, architecture, and design, including Julius Bryant (co-curator), Geoffrey Beard, John Harris, John Dixon Hunt, Frank Salmon, and David Watkin. The book is richly illustrated with over 600 color images, including the pieces featured in the exhibition. A chronology of Kent's projects, an exhibition checklist, and an extensive bibliography round out this publication.

## Gallery Programs

Lectures, study days, gallery talks, and conversations are offered in conjunction with the exhibition. For more information, please call 212-501-3011 or e-mail [programs@bgc.bard.edu](mailto:programs@bgc.bard.edu).

## Exhibition Tours

Group exhibition tours for adult and school groups are offered Tuesday through Friday between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. and Thursday until 7 p.m. Reservations are required for all groups. To schedule a tour, please call 212-501-3013 or e-mail [tours@bgc.bard.edu](mailto:tours@bgc.bard.edu).

The Bard Graduate Center Gallery is located in New York City at 18 West 86th Street, between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Thursday from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. The admission fee is \$7 general, \$5 senior and students (valid ID); admission is free Thursday evenings after 5 p.m. For information about the Bard Graduate Center and upcoming exhibitions, please visit [bgc.bard.edu](http://bgc.bard.edu).

## Support

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