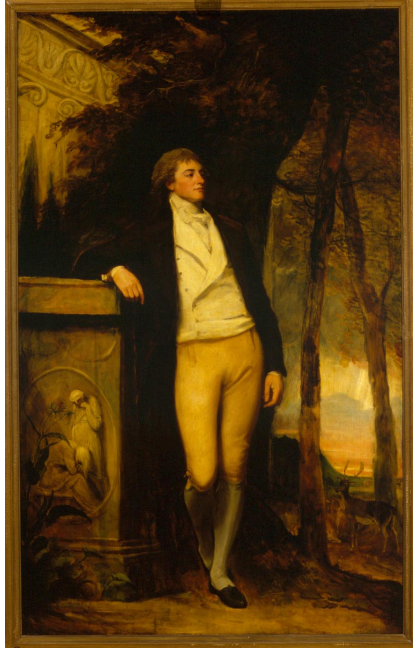




DULWICH PICTURE GALLERY

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William Beckford 1760 - 1844 An Eye for the Magnificent 6 February-14 April 2002



William Beckford by George Romney (Upton House)
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William Beckford (1760 – 1844) is one of the greatest names in the history of collecting. In 1822, his decision to sell the contents of Fonthill Abbey, caused a feeding frenzy. Fonthill Abbey revealed Beckford as a leading advocate of Gothic architecture, design and history, but his taste was broader than that – he had a passion for the Medieval period that stretched to include Oriental, Islamic and Renaissance work. Beckford ignited the enthusiasm and taste of a generation of architects and designers.

He inherited his family’s Jamaican sugar plantations, and was known as “England’s wealthiest son”. He completed a Grand Tour of unparalleled lavishness and became a figure of international repute as a young man, not least as the author of the sensational novel *Vathek*, which he wrote at 21, signalling the arrival of a person of truly exotic character and taste.

His marriage to the daughter of the Earl of Aboyne in 1783 was, however, swiftly followed by a fall from grace as dramatic as that of Oscar Wilde’s a century later. Found *in flagrante* with a young man, he was forced to embark on a decade of travel and social isolation on the continent, becoming one of the earliest and most interesting of travel writers in the process.

Turning inwards, sheer wealth proved to be his protection. On his return to England in the 1790s, he retreated behind the five miles of twelve feet high spiked walls around Fonthill, and focussed his resources of taste and money on the creation of a fabulous personal vision. Patron of artists, architects, sculptors and craftsmen, as well as novelist, composer of music and design impresario, his was a unique legacy of talent and taste, an archetype of Romanticism. His collecting was supremely well-informed, making a Beckford provenance a universally-recognised stamp of authenticity and quality to this day.

Entry to the Gallery and exhibition: £7; £6 seniors; £3 other concs; children free.
Open: Tues-Fri 10-5; Sat, Sun & BH Mon 11-5. Closed Mondays except Bank Holidays.

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