

Benjamin West and William Beckford: Some Projects for Fonthill

MARTHA HAMILTON-PHILLIPS

Department of Art History, University of Pennsylvania

WHEN WILLIAM BECKFORD (Figure 1) became the patron of Benjamin West, he was hiring a national institution. Probably the most influential artist of the English and American schools in the last decade of the eighteenth century, West was Historical Painter to George III and second president of the Royal Academy. He was the leading teacher in London and master of that city's largest studio, in addition to which he negotiated commercial transactions of commodities as diverse as old master pictures and American real estate. Although Beckford may have sought West as his pensioner in the 1790s because of the artist's popularity at court,¹ he had a sincere and progressive concern for the patronage of modern English artists; West for his part valued Beckford's support second only to the friendship of the king.² The bulk of Beckford's commissions from West were undertaken between 1797 and 1799, the most affluent period in the multidimensional career of a man known as "England's wealthiest son," and a gifted author, famous bibliophile, art collector, connoisseur, builder, and genealogist. This last occupation was certainly not the least among Beckford's priorities, and the following discussion of previously unpublished drawings for West's least-known commissions for Fonthill Abbey should provide new insight into the personal, genealogical orientation of Beckford's art patronage.

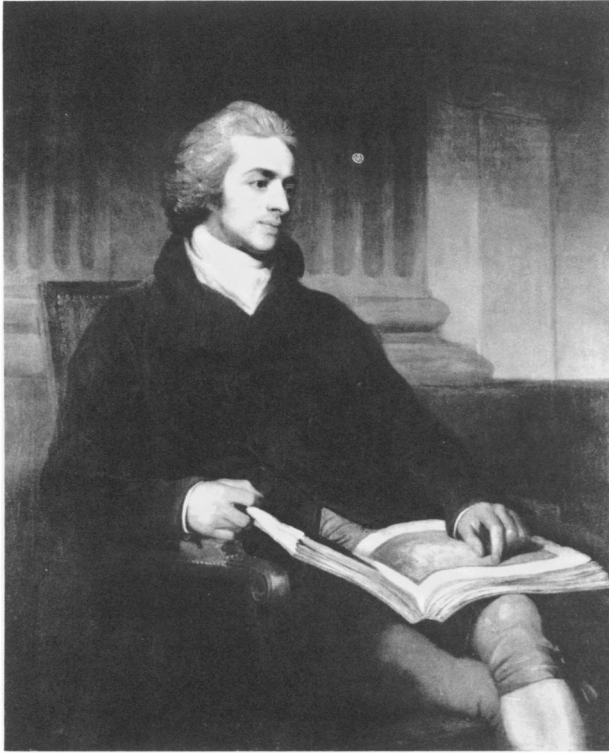
The vast West Indian fortunes that enabled Beckford to become a distinguished connoisseur and collector were founded by his great-great grandfather Peter Beckford, who left England in the 1660s to become a planter in Jamaica, where, as a contemporary of buccaneers like Henry Morgan, he established an empire of sugar plantations and slaves. His son, Colo-

nel Peter Beckford, served briefly as governor of Jamaica prior to his death in a brawl in 1710, leaving the expansion of the family's colonial interests to William Beckford's grandfather Peter Beckford. This third Peter, as violent and ruthless as his forebears (on one occasion he stabbed to death the Deputy Judge Advocate), served as Speaker of the Jamaican Assembly and married Bathshua Hering, daughter and heiress of Colonel Julines Hering, a wealthy landowner. Their son William, William Beckford's father, went to England for his education in 1723 and, as a London merchant with colonial manners but aristocratic means, became a Whig M.P., an alderman, and

A list of frequently cited sources is given at the end of this article.

1. This was the opinion of Beckford's architect James Wyatt, recorded by Joseph Farington in his diary, entry for Nov. 1, 1797 (Garlick and Macintyre, III, p. 912).

2. The annuity Beckford provided West was the same as the pension from the king—£1,000. For West's royal patronage, see John Galt, *The Life and Works of Benjamin West, Esq.* (London, pt. I, 1816; pt. II, 1820). Correspondence between Beckford and West is located in the Duke of Hamilton Papers, on deposit at both the Bodleian Library and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. West undoubtedly referred to Beckford's patronage when he commented in his Discourse to the Royal Academy in 1797 that "the means projected by other spirited individuals in opulent stations, for extending and perpetuating the works of British masters, fall short in no degree of the most fervid energies and examples, of which any country has been able to boast" (*ibid.*, II, pp. 145–146). Beckford's appreciation of West was considerable, even as late as 1808, when he concluded a letter of June 26 as follows: "ten thousand thanks for the friendly part you have acted . . . in everything . . . which concerns me, and receive the assurance of [my] invariable regard" (Philadelphia, *Letters of English Prose Writers Collected and Arranged and Presented to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania* by Ferdinand J. Dreer [1890] I, p. 29).



1. John Hoppner (ca. 1758–1810), *William Beckford* (1759–1844), late 1790s or ca. 1800. Oil on canvas, 51 $\frac{2}{3}$ × 41 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. Salford Art Gallery, Gift of Sir Thomas Agnew, 1868 (photo: City of Salford Art Galleries and Museums)

finally twice Lord Mayor of London before his untimely death in 1770. His marriage to Maria, daughter of the Hon. George Hamilton (second surviving son of James, sixth earl of Abercorn), joined the Beckford line with a family of distinguished ancestry and contemporary prominence. Young William Beckford was born at Fonthill in Wiltshire in 1759, the only legitimate son among many natural children fathered by the alderman. His childhood was spent in the seclusion of Splendens, the palatial mansion at Fonthill his father had had built between 1756 and 1765. His private education included music lessons from Mozart, literary admonitions from his godfather Lord Chatham, and visits to his cousin Sir William Hamilton, the famous diplomat and antiquarian collector in Naples. As a youth of intense intellectual precocity and imaginative sensibilities, William produced his literary masterpiece *Vathek*, an Arabian romance, in 1781–82, just after he had come of age. Although he was a member of the Church of En-

gland, and had been indoctrinated by his mother in her Calvinist concerns with fate and sin, Beckford, with his predilection for aesthetic magnificence, was attracted to the ceremonial pomp of the Roman Catholic Church and to the mystical saints whose splendid celebrations he attended during his travels through Portugal, Spain, and Italy in 1782–83. Shortly after his marriage in 1783 to Lady Margaret Gordon, daughter of the fourth earl of Aboyne, the hitherto brilliant course of Beckford's life abruptly changed: in 1784, charges of pederasty were brought against him in connection with his young friend William ("Kitty") Courtenay, whom he had frequently visited at Powderham Castle. Beckford's social status and moral respectability were permanently ruined, although the accusations were never proved. He became a recluse and nonconformist obsessed with restoring himself in society. His wealth enabled him to acquire both works of art and books, including Gibbon's library, and also to support the work of watercolorists and landscape painters such as Alexander and J. R. Cozens, Joseph Vernet, and the young J. M. W. Turner. Not inclined to pursue his father's parliamentary offices, he focused his ambitions upon the building of Fonthill Abbey, designed by James Wyatt in a magnificent neo-Gothic style, with an enormous but ill-fated 276-foot tower and extravagantly landscaped grounds. The near ruin of Beckford's West Indian plantations in the first two decades of the nineteenth century forced him to place the Fonthill property on the market in 1822. Having arranged a profitable sale to the gunpowder millionaire John Farquhar, instead of selling at public auction through Christie's as originally intended, Beckford moved his household to 20 Lansdown Crescent in Bath, where he built another great tower on Lansdown Hill. Upon his death in 1844, his estate passed to his younger daughter Susan Euphemia, duchess of Hamilton.³

Of the first twelve pictures commissioned by Beckford from Benjamin West, four were family portraits. They remained in the possession of Beckford's Hamilton descendants until 1919, when they were sold and brought to America to become part of two collec-

3. The chief authority for the life and correspondence of William Beckford remains Boyd Alexander. For Beckford's literary career, see also Guy Chapman, *A Bibliography of William Beckford of Fonthill* (London, 1930), and Robert J. Gemmett, *William Beckford* (Boston, 1977).

tions in the land of West's birth: the portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Peter Beckford, William's grandparents, are in the Metropolitan Museum (Figures 2, 3); those of Beckford's paternal aunt, Elizabeth, countess of Effingham, and of his mother are in the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. (Figures 4, 5). The importance of these works has been overshadowed by the series of sketches West painted for Beckford illustrating the Book of Revelation—elaborate, apocalyptic compositions, many of which West submitted to the annual exhibitions of the Royal Academy, and to which West scholars have dedicated their attention in recent critical literature.⁴ But while the Revelation subjects are significant within West's oeuvre, the quartet of family portraits, when examined together with surviving preparatory drawings and in context with related commissions for "sacred portraits" in Fonthill Abbey windows and altarpieces, conveys much more information about the complex personality of the patron.

The four Beckford portraits are as unconventional as their owner was eccentric: the dimensions of the canvases exceed the standard size for half-lengths (50 × 40 in.); the larger-than-life size of the figures is vaguely disquieting to a viewer at close range; and the colors, essentially primary, saturated hues dominated by crimson, are overlaid by sketchy, linear black brushstrokes, instead of being modeled according to West's theoretical methods.⁵ Furthermore, the perspective recession of the compositions and the foreshortening of the sitters' torsos are unusually pronounced. The likenesses do not address the spectator in the habitual, familiar sense, but appear rather as "fragments of a forgotten decorative scheme."⁶ The setting for which these icons were intended was not Splendens, where they were hung over the four doors to the "saloon" until at least 1801, but rather Fonthill Abbey, which Wyatt had already begun building for Beckford in 1796, and to which the portraits were eventually transferred upon the demolition of Splendens.⁷ The portraits of Peter Beckford and his wife are signed and dated 1797; that of Elizabeth, countess of Effingham, is signed, and, although undated, was most probably commissioned at the same time as the grandparents' portraits, given the similarity of execution. After the death of his mother in July 1798, Beckford left England to travel on the Continent from October until July of the following year. West was actively employed in 1799 during Beckford's ab-

sence, as he received an annuity of £1,000, and submitted six pictures destined for Fonthill Abbey to the annual exhibition at the Royal Academy.⁸ There is evidence to suggest that West painted the portrait of Mrs. Beckford posthumously, late in 1798 or in 1799, to accompany the other three imaginary portraits of Beckford's deceased relatives.⁹

To explain the peculiarities of these portraits, it is necessary to understand not only why Beckford chose West to design them, but how this historical painter

4. See John Dillenberger, *Benjamin West: The Context of His Life's Work with Particular Attention to Paintings with Religious Subject Matter* (San Antonio, 1977), and Jerry D. Meyer, "The Religious Paintings of Benjamin West: A Study in Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century Moral Sentiment," Ph.D. diss., Institute of Fine Arts, New York University (1973). It is interesting to note that while West charged Beckford between 300 and 400 guineas for each Revelation canvas, his invoice for a portrait of Mrs. William Beckford was only £84 (letter of Sept. 30, 1799, Historical Society of Pennsylvania).

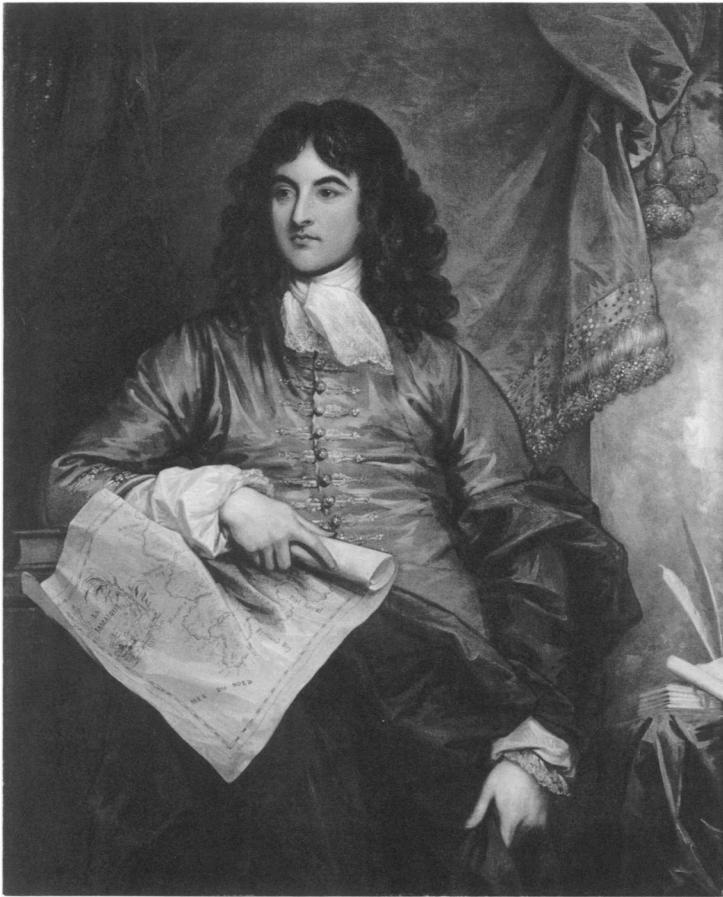
5. West's color theory was Venetian in inspiration; his models were predominantly Baroque. Early in his career, he hit on the notion of painting with pure, primary colors, and his philosophy concerning the "prismatic colours" is set down in his Discourse of 1797 as well as in later addresses to the Royal Academy. See Grose Evans, *Benjamin West and the Taste of His Times* (Carbondale, Ill., 1959) app., pp. 105–107.

6. Albert Ten Eyck Gardner, "Beckford's Gothic Wests," *MMAB*, n.s. 13 (Oct. 1954) pp. 41–49.

7. In 1796, Beckford returned from his travels on the Continent and launched Wyatt's plans for a new abbey. By Nov. 1797, he had already decided to demolish Splendens and enlarge the abbey to serve as his residence (Farington Diary, entry for Nov. 6, 1797; Garlick and Macintyre, III, p. 916). His income from the family plantations in the West Indies had been spectacular in 1796 and 1797, and he purchased additional land, planted over a million trees, and employed hundreds of people in the construction of the abbey and the landscaping of his grounds (described in a letter to his mother, quoted in Melville, pp. 221–223).

8. West's annuity is given in the Farington Diary, entry for Dec. 8, 1798 (Greig, p. 251; Garlick and Macintyre, III, p. 1106). The exhibited pictures are recorded in the Royal Academy catalogue of 1799 and in Dillenberger, *Benjamin West*, pp. 150–151.

9. The portrait of Mrs. Beckford differs stylistically from the other three. Although the painting bears no date, the letter of Sept. 30, 1799 (see note 4 above), presenting Beckford's agent Nicholas Williams with a statement of account, mentions a portrait—probably this one—of Beckford's mother. Mrs. Beckford lived in seclusion at Westend, Hampstead, and there is no evidence that she ever sat to West for a portrait. It would have been quite characteristic of Beckford to order a fourth commemorative portrait, of his mother, to join the other three "ancestral" worthies; he had a habit of ordering household decorations in quantities of four.



2. Benjamin West (1738–1820), *Peter Beckford* (d. 1735), signed and dated 1797. Oil on canvas, 57 × 45½ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of John R. Morron, 50.232.1



3. West, *Mrs. Peter Beckford* (d. ca. 1750), signed and dated 1797. Oil on canvas, 57 × 45½ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of John R. Morron, 50.232.2

developed the images through his preliminary drawings. West did not solicit portrait commissions; in fact, he is quoted as having said to Archibald Robinson, a prospective student whom he sent to Sir Joshua Reynolds, “I seldom paint portraits, and when I do I neither please myself nor my employers.”¹⁰ Although West’s first success as an artist was in the field of portraiture,¹¹ his fame was established by his paintings of historical narrative. He was amenable to portraying eminent persons such as members of the royal family, whose portraits he exhibited at the Academy from 1777 to 1783, but from 1784 to 1794, he submitted no portraiture whatsoever, and from 1795 to 1800, he was very selective in the subjects he chose—his adored sons, for example, and the military hero Gen-

eral Kosciuszko. The qualities that Beckford admired in West’s paintings—their grandeur, solemnity, harmony—are embodied in the artist’s illustrations of biblical themes and early English history, rather than in his portraits.¹² Beckford never commissioned West

10. William T. Whitley, *Gilbert Stuart* (Cambridge, Mass., 1932) p. 42. West’s alleged statement may reflect the negative reception of his portrait of the king in 1783.

11. According to Galt (*Life and Works*, I, pp. 119–121), West initially won recognition in Rome not through the customary medium of drawings after the antique, but by painting a successful portrait of Thomas Robinson—a likeness considered worthy of Mengs, the leading painter in Rome at mid-century.

12. Beckford himself cited these qualities in arguing for a high commercial evaluation of West’s *Abraham and Isaac* (letter of May 16, 1817, quoted in Alexander 1957, p. 207).



4. West, *Elizabeth, Countess of Effingham* (1725–91). Oil on canvas, 57⁵/₈ × 45⁵/₈ in. Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, Andrew Mellon Collection, 1947, no. 1009 (photo: National Gallery of Art)



5. West, *Mrs. William Beckford* (1724/5–98). Oil on canvas, 57¹/₂ × 45¹/₄ in. Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, Andrew Mellon Collection, 1947, no. 931 (photo: National Gallery of Art)

to paint his own portrait or those of living members of his family. For these likenesses, he hired the most fashionable face-painters of the period, among them, Reynolds, Romney, and Hoppner.¹³ But to obtain dignified and historically convincing images of his progenitors, Beckford needed an artist with West's documentary approach and professional reputation—in short, a history painter. That West derived some success from painting commemorative portraits is proved by the existence of a few other memorial portraits comparable in style and sentiment to those of Beckford's ancestors.¹⁴

There are two detailed preliminary drawings for the portraits of Peter and Bathshua Beckford in a collection of some two hundred scarcely known and vir-

tually unpublished West drawings in the Friends Historical Library at Swarthmore College (Figures 6,

13. When he came of age, Beckford sat to Sir Joshua Reynolds (bust-length, last known collection Mrs. S. P. Rotan, Chestnut Hill, Pa.); in 1782, he posed for a full-length by George Romney (National Trust, Bearsted Collection, Upton House, Warwickshire) and also ordered a full-length portrait of his cousin Louisa Beckford from Reynolds (Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight). Romney painted a full-length of his two daughters (Huntington Art Gallery, San Marino, Calif.), and John Hoppner, who by 1793 had been appointed portrait painter to the Prince of Wales, received Beckford's commission for his own portrait (Figure 1). This last likeness probably owes much to the composition of West's four Beckford portraits.

14. *General Wolfe as a Young Man*, a retrospective portrait (Collection of the Duke of Westminster), shows the youth with

7).¹⁵ This pair of drawings, closely corresponding in dimensions and technique, suggests inventiveness in West's preparatory method rather than simple copying after older family portraits.¹⁶ In the drawing for Peter, the subject is clad in a Van Dyck costume and holds a glove in his right hand like a dandy from the Restoration court. In the oil portrait, West has revised the hieroglyphic shorthand of the drawing to present a more readable vocabulary of forms in the pose and attributes of the subject: Peter holds his French map of Jamaica according to a formula probably derived from portraits of merchants and architects painted by Kneller, Hysing, and others a century earlier.¹⁷ West has placed writing materials and documents on the table at right, added a heavy gold fringe to the red

plans for the battle of Blenheim and books on the history of England. *General Kosciuszko* (Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Ohio), exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1797, honors the Polish revolutionary hero who was then thought to be dying of his injuries. Still another example is the portrait of Bishop Shute Barrington's wife (Cummer Art Gallery, Jacksonville, Fla.), completed by West in 1807, the year following her death.

15. The Swarthmore College collection, housed in the Friends Historical Library near the site of West's birthplace, was acquired in the last fifty years through alumni gifts. The drawings were partially authenticated by Helmut von Erffa in the 1940s, and it is evident from some of his surviving notes on file at the library that he recognized the drawings of Peter and Bathshua Beckford as studies for the Metropolitan Museum portraits. A catalogue raisonné of West's paintings, begun by von Erffa, is being prepared for publication by Allen Staley at Columbia University.

16. It has been speculated that West's portraits are copies made after older family portraits painted just before or during the decade of the 1760s. Beckford's half-sister Elizabeth Marsh (Mrs. Beckford's daughter by her first husband, Francis Marsh) recorded the portraits hanging in the dining room of Splendens in 1768–69 as portraits of her mother by Casali, Peter Beckford by Hoare, and Mrs. Peter Beckford and the countess of Efigingham by artists unspecified. Her account is known from extracts quoted in a letter written by Robert Drysdale, Beckford's tutor, to Robert Nairne; the letter, believed lost, was known to Beckford biographer John Oliver and to Boyd Alexander, who conveyed the information to William Campbell at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Britton's description (p. 230) of Splendens just prior to its demolition refers to West's portraits as having been "copied . . . from originals in a gallery on the chamber floor."

17. Representative examples West might easily have known through prints are Kneller's portrait (1718) of Dudley Woodbridge, Judge Advocate and agent of the South Sea Company at Barbados (engraved by John Smith in 1718), or Hysing's portrait of the architect James Gibbs (engraved before 1726 by Peter Pelham).



6. West, Study for *Peter Beckford*. Black chalk heightened with white on blue paper, 11 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 9 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. Swarthmore, Pa., Swarthmore College, Friends Historical Library (photo: author)

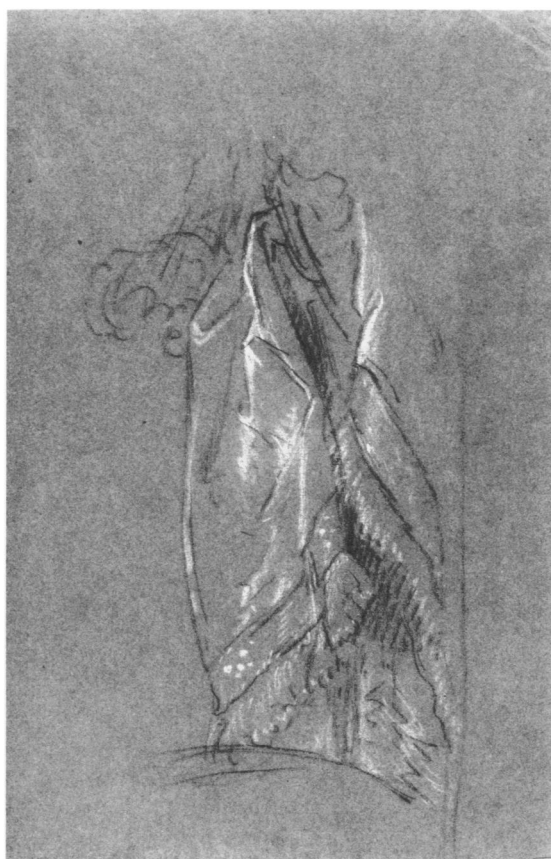
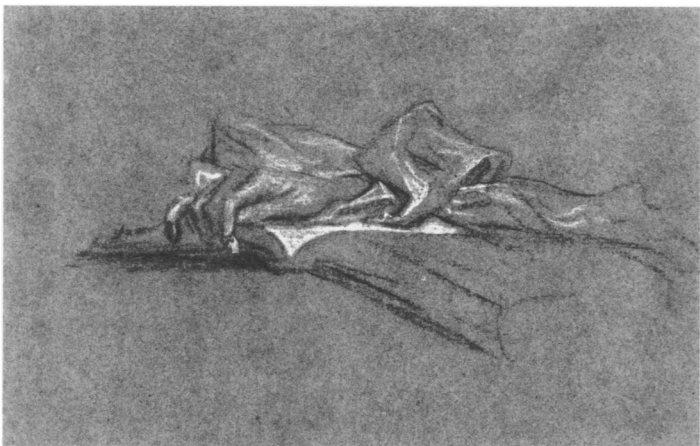
velvet drapery behind, and, in keeping with the fashion of the first quarter of the eighteenth century, has given the subject a longer hairstyle. The costume, consisting of a cravat trimmed with French lace, a red coat buttoned up to the neck with gold braid, and lace cuffs, is a compromise—not quite right for the seventeenth century, but not quite the “layered look” of the early eighteenth-century frock coat, either.¹⁸ Peter's handsome face, with its intelligent brow, distinctive Beckford nose, and haughty mouth, may be a flattering allusion to that of William Beckford, or perhaps West simply repeated here the physiognomic

18. There were costume handbooks West could have consulted for the “correct” male dress of the period from 1700 to 1735—for example, Thomas Jefferys, *Collection of the Dresses of Different Nations, Antient and Modern, Particularly Old English Dresses . . .* (London, 1757) II, pp. 226, 227.



7. West, Study for *Mrs. Peter Beckford*. Black chalk heightened with white on blue paper, 11 × 9 in. Swarthmore, Pa., Swarthmore College, Friends Historical Library (photo: author)

8. West, *Hand in a Sleeve Holding Open Book*. Black chalk heightened with white on blue-gray paper, 5¹⁵/₁₆ × 8⁹/₁₆ in. New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, 1970.11:165 (photo: Pierpont Morgan Library)



9. West, Drapery study. Black chalk heightened with white on blue-gray paper, 15¹/₁₆ × 9³/₄ in. New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, 1970.11:100 (photo: Pierpont Morgan Library)

type familiar from his previous portraits of the Drummond brothers, John Custance, or Arthur Middleton.¹⁹ The map of Jamaica becomes, in the final oil portrait, the most detailed and legible element of the composition; it is, after all, the symbol of Peter's legacy of land and riches in the West Indies.²⁰

19. West might have consulted miniatures, if Beckford had any in his possession. The close physiognomic resemblance between the portrait of Peter Beckford and West's patron is best demonstrated by comparing the former to Reynolds's portrait (1781) of William Beckford (Ellis Waterhouse, *Reynolds* [London, 1941] pl. 233). One of the distinctive traits of the Beckford family was a prominent nose—something West seems to have emphasized in the portraits.

20. Peter Beckford was described in a Jamaican history book published in 1740 as "The richest Subject in Europe," with "22 Plantations, and upwards of 1,200 slaves. His money in the banks and on mortgage is reckoned at a million and a half"

The marriage of Peter Beckford to Bathshua Hering united new wealth with old, and a questionable character with one utterly respectable. Mrs. Beckford survived her husband for fifteen years, and died only a decade before the birth of her grandson William in England. West's oil portrait of Bathshua follows his preparatory drawing quite closely, resolving indistinct passages in the costume and chair: the thicket of lines under the sitter's attenuated right arm has become a treatise;²¹ the square-backed chair has been rounded into a velvet-upholstered reading chair not unlike the one used by West for his own self-portraits of the 1790s; the costume is that of a dowager—a veil is worn over the crown of the head and cascades down the shoulder, a mobcap conceals the subject's hair, and the lappets are tied under her chin to fall in ruffles over the fichu of her mid-century-style bodice.²² The image on canvas appears older than the figure in the drawing, perhaps because West lowered the breast knot and expanded the fichu to create a more matronly torso, and both the ruffles and the face appear broader. One might easily identify this portrait as a study of Beckford's mother within a few years of her death in 1798, and it may be that West had an image of her in mind when he recreated the appearance of Beckford's grandmother. That West made careful studies from a model is suggested by two drawings in the Pierpont Morgan Library (Figures 8, 9): *Hand in a Sleeve Holding Open Book* is a study for Mrs. Peter Beckford's right hand, and the drapery study, though not precisely copied in the painting, is blocked off at the right and bordered beneath by the arch of the chairback in accordance with the portrait; in addition, the embroidered border and fringe of the background drapery is of the same pattern and texture as the Morgan drawing. With these two meticulous studies, West resolved two areas that are par-

(quoted by Alexander 1962, p. 200, from Charles Leslie, *New History of Jamaica* [1740] p. 267). Peter's reputation as the "richest Subject in Europe" was maintained within his grandson's life by, for example, James Storer's account of 1812, "A Description of Fonthill Abbey, Wiltshire" (Melville, app., pp. 355–366). For the financial affairs of the Beckfords, see Alexander 1962, chap. 16 and p. 289, n. 6.

21. The text of the book is not decipherable, but the presence of summary lines in the margin suggests that this is a biblical commentary or scholarly treatise.

22. The bodice is comparable to that of William Hogarth's *Miss Mary Edwards*, 1742 (Frick Collection, New York).

ticularly ambiguous in the full compositional drawing at Swarthmore.²³

West's painting of his patron's "Aunt Effingham"—as Beckford called her—appears to have been a straightforward and less complicated endeavor.²⁴ The costume dominates the portrait, since Elizabeth is dressed in her coronation robes—the white satin gown and ermine-trimmed red cape that she was entitled to wear after her marriage to the earl of Effingham in 1744. The earl's coronet is placed beside the countess's right arm, on a draped pedestal. A drawing in the British Museum has been identified by Helmut von Erffa as a preparatory costume study for

23. The model for West's study of the hand might simply have been his wife, who was said habitually to read in the parlor while West was painting in his studio nearby (Leigh Hunt, *Autobiography* [Oxford, 1928] pp. 111–115).

24. Elizabeth Beckford was the ninth child of Peter and Bathshua Beckford. She married first, in 1744, Thomas, second earl of Effingham, who died in 1763. She married her second husband, Field-Marshal Sir George Howard, in 1776.

10. West, Study for *Elizabeth, Countess of Effingham*. Black chalk heightened with white on blue paper, 17 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 11 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. London, British Museum (photo: British Museum)



this portrait (Figure 10).²⁵ West's drawing may have been copied from an earlier portrait of the countess at Splendens, or modeled after one of the royal portraits the artist would have known well at Windsor.²⁶ In the painted version, he has eliminated the drapery at the upper left corner, and simplified the ermine cape. West may have been able to study the countess's actual gown and robes, and, had he been sufficiently acquainted with Beckford's aunt before her death in 1791, he could have painted her face from memory. West's representation of the countess of Effingham appears, however, to have less in common with the

25. Correspondence of June 27, 1958, and Aug. 17, 1961, from Von Erffa to William P. Campbell, Department of American Paintings, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. The paper and chalk used for the drawing appear to be of the very same type West used in the two Morgan Library drawings for the portrait of Mrs. Peter Beckford. The hand and coronet at the left side of the British Museum drawing may have been trimmed off the sheet; the section of clouds was originally sketched in with white chalk at the upper right corner. Pentimenti in the oil portrait indicate that West first painted the background drapery and sky according to the scheme of his drawing, and then reversed the arrangement—perhaps to balance the composition of the countess of Effingham with that of Beckford's mother.

reality of a woman recently deceased than with the pomp of court portraits a century earlier.

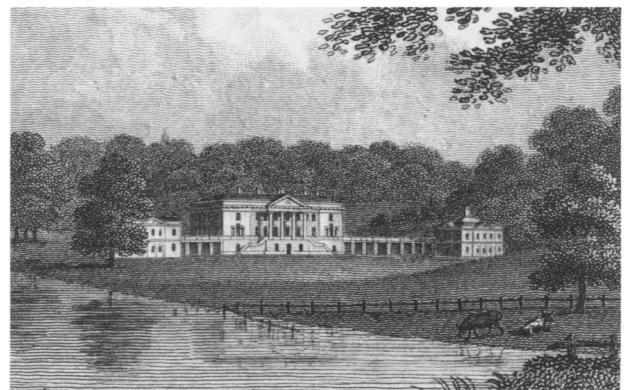
The portrait of Beckford's mother, both more original in composition and more finished in execution than West's other three Beckford portraits, provides the most information about its subject. That West considered a variety of poses for the figure is suggested by a sheet with two preliminary drawings in the Morgan Library.²⁷ The painting follows the composition of the more finished drawing (Figure 11), wherein Mrs. Beckford is seated in front of Splendens, a large book half-open on her lap, her

26. For example: Kneller's *Queen Mary II*, 1690, at Windsor; or Kneller's and Jervas's early 18th-century portraits of Queen Caroline; or Enoch Seeman's *Caroline of Ansbach*, ca. 1730, now at Kensington Palace (Oliver Millar, *The Tudor, Stuart and Early Georgian Pictures in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen* [London, 1963] pls. 150, 180, cat. nos. 338, 511). West had painted a portrait of Queen Charlotte in 1779 (Buckingham Palace), using a similar pose with a table and crown.

27. On the verso of the sheet, West drew the seated figure with a variety of arm gestures indicative of arranging the bouquet of flowers formerly placed at the right side of the composition. See Ruth Kraemer, *Drawings by Benjamin West and His Son Raphael Lamar West* (New York, 1975) pp. 71–72.



11. West, *Seated Woman with a Musical Instrument*. Black chalk heightened with white, reinforced with pen and black ink, 10⁹/₁₆ × 8¹/₂ in. New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, 1970.11:188 (photo: Pierpont Morgan Library)



12. James Storer after John Britton, *Fonthill*, detail. Engraving, from Britton, *Beauties of Wiltshire* (London, 1801) I. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Thomas J. Watson Library

body flanked by a vase of flowers at the left and a gamba (or cello) at the right. The tentative configuration of chalk lines that suggest the mass of the sitter's form has been selectively reinforced with bold pen lines along the neck and jaw contours, the shoulders, forearms, and hands. The assertiveness of these lines, echoed in the neck of the musical instrument, is less bold in the final painting: here, the accessories of the setting provide an environment supportive to Mrs. Beckford. Various descriptions by Beckford's biographers as scheming, domineering, autocratic, protective, and retiring, Mrs. Beckford was a wealthy aristocrat whose primary concerns appear to have been the cultivation of the Fonthill grounds and the discipline of her wayward son. West presents her in a dress of mid-century style in a somber shade of dark blue, which is set off by the rich crimson tone of the drapery at the left and the upholstered sofa at the right. He may have taken her head from a miniature or from an earlier portrait by Casali; the modeled contours are not unlike the faces by William Hoare, who is supposed to have painted family portraits for Alderman Beckford.²⁸ The youthful facial features in the drawing, which represents the face at the same angle as that of the countess of Effingham, are rendered more mature, imperious, and even implacable in the oil portrait. Mrs. Beckford's expression tells the viewer little about this doting mother, whom her son treated with conciliatory deference and dubbed "The Begum" in his correspondence. The text of the tome she holds is not legible, but the fine, gilded morocco binding of the book is elegantly displayed against the gold of the oriental scarf draped across her knees. The musical instrument, originally painted as a gamba according to the preparatory drawing, has been painted over as a cetra, or English guitar, the profile of which effectively reiterates Mrs. Beckford's posture. The architectural panorama in the background can be identified from engravings as the facade of Splendens (Figure 12)²⁹: the "grand style" portico of the central body of the house is visible at the left, and one of the elliptical Doric colonnades connecting one of the two square symmetrical wings of the mansion extends horizontally toward the right. Rising in the central distance is a verdant knoll, its sides and summit "thickly mantled with lofty groves, of ancient growth and luxuriant foliage."³⁰ A flock of pheasants is included in this glimpse of the estate, where Beckford ardently cultivated wildfowl such as

partridges and swans, and was even reported to have kept a flock of tame hares.³¹

The portraits of both the countess of Effingham and Mrs. Beckford present flattering retrospective images of the ladies in their prime—as middle-aged matrons rather than as the septuagenarians they would have been in the 1790s. West's intention was probably to confer an ageless, timeless dignity upon these eminent persons, and perhaps also to recall for his patron the memories of his halcyon childhood. On the basis of costume and setting, the portraits would be datable to the period between 1765, by which time the building of Splendens had been completed, and 1770, when Beckford's father died. Mrs. Beckford's jewelry as well as her dress are of the style worn by the most fashionable women in the middle of the decade;³² the English guitar that West painted over the traditional gamba had just been introduced into aristocratic music rooms at mid-century.³³ By including Splendens as a backdrop, West celebrated the house that was not only Mrs. Beckford's marital home, but also Beckford's birthplace. The state robes worn by Beckford's aunt symbolize the social rank she acquired through her marriage to the second earl of

28. Alexander 1962 (p. 299, n. 1) says that William Hoare (ca. 1707–92) "painted B's godfather Chatham and did posthumous portraits of earlier Beckfords for the Alderman." One surviving portrait of William Beckford as a boy (ca. 1764–65, private collection) is attributed to Hoare (*ibid.*, frontispiece).

29. Alderman Beckford built this stately mansion on the site of the previous Fonthill House, which had burned down in 1755. Descriptive accounts and illustrations of Splendens include *Vitruvius Britannicus* (London, 1767) IV, pls. 82–87; W. Angus, *Seats of the Nobility and Gentry in Great Britain and Wales . . .* (Islington, 1787) pl. 50, which was presumably engraved after a drawing by the young J. M. W. Turner; and Britton, pl. facing p. 208 (Figure 12).

30. Britton, p. 210.

31. Anecdotes on the fauna of Fonthill are recounted in a letter of Oct. 28, 1817, from Lady Bessborough to Lord Granville Leveson-Gower, relating secondhand the experiences of Samuel Rogers on a visit he made to the estate. Quoted in John Oliver, *William Beckford* (London, 1932) p. 276.

32. Pearls similar to Mrs. Beckford's could be found on the most stylish throats and coiffures of the mid-1760s; for example, *Nelly O'Brien*, as portrayed by Reynolds in 1763 (Wallace Collection, London).

33. West had featured the popular English guitar in his portrait of Mary Hopkinson, ca. 1764–65 (Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.), and this instrument also figured prominently in court portraits such as Francis Cotes's *Princess Louisa and Queen Caroline Matilda of Denmark*, 1767 (H. M. The Queen, Buckingham Palace).

Effingham. Although the earl died in 1763, Elizabeth's status was sustained through her second marriage to Field-Marshal Sir George Howard, who later presented young Beckford at court. Although William Beckford pretended an indifference to royal favor,³⁴ he was undoubtedly much impressed by his aunt's standing with George III. These portraits reflect one of the obsessive themes in William Beckford's life—his fascination with family lineage coupled with his frustrated desire for acknowledgment of his heritage in a formal peerage.

Unlike the Prince Regent, for example, Beckford was not simply assembling an ancestral portrait gallery. From his early childhood, he had investigated his genealogy.³⁵ Perhaps because "his father's descent did not satisfy him," he studied his mother's pedigree, tracing the Abercorn and ducal branches of his maternal Hamilton forebears, and developing a "pride of race that nothing ever eradicated."³⁶ It was said that the very erection of the abbey was intended to commemorate the "ancient Family of Mervin, who possessed Fonthill for a long Series of Generations, and from whom Mr. Beckford is lineally descended."³⁷ Claiming descent from Edward III and from all the barons who signed the Magna Carta, he ordered Wyatt to design a splendid King Edward Gallery for his abbey, and generously emblazoned it with coats of arms of the Knights of the Garter. A statue of his father as Lord Mayor, holding a scroll of the Magna Carta in his left hand, was displayed in a position of honor.³⁸ His ambition for a title led to his having a patent made out in 1784 to provide him with a barony and the title of Lord Beckford of Fonthill. His plans were never approved, however, owing to the Powderham scandal, which ruined his aspirations for the peerage.³⁹ The condescension of the English gentry embittered Beckford and only sharpened his desire for a title: "As soon as he was *en rapport* with anyone with supposed Court influence, the demand was sure to arise."⁴⁰ Beckford developed an attitude of "consummate pride to people of higher stations,"⁴¹ and surrounded himself in the seclusion of his abbey hermitage with lineal emblemata and baronial opulence. His calculated ostentation took many forms—the liberal use of crimson (the Hamilton family color) in his domestic decor, prolonged and costly negotiations to marry his younger daughter to the duke of Hamilton, and commissions for stained-glass windows in the abbey to glorify various among Beck-

ford's historical forebears and selected patron saints.

West was the principal artist commissioned by Beckford to make designs for the Fonthill windows. He had had considerable experience preparing religious compositions and "sacred portraits" for stained-glass windows, the most important of his projects having been St. George's Chapel at Windsor.⁴² Although the windows executed by Francis Eginton were largely destroyed when the Scotch fir and stone casing of the Fonthill tower collapsed,⁴³ drawings and

34. "Royal praise," he wrote to Fanny Burney on Sept. 22, 1780, "is an ornament of which I am far from being ambitious" (Melville, p. 91). This was his view in 1780, but later, when he suffered moral condemnation and social exclusion even from the artists of the Royal Academy, his desire for noble rank and court recognition became acute.

35. His earliest heraldic studies may have been kindled by his father's ownership of Eaton Bray in Bedfordshire, a residence of John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster, from whom Mrs. Beckford could claim descent.

36. Melville, p. 20.

37. Angus, *Seats of the Nobility*, commentary adjacent to pl. 50.

38. The statue of Alderman Beckford was carved "after the life" by J. F. Moore, and was "esteemed a striking likeness" (Britton, pp. 219–220). Formerly set into a niche at the center of the great gallery in Splendens, the statue was the focal point of the great western hall of the abbey (illustrated in James Lees-Milne, *William Beckford* [London, 1976] p. 60).

39. For the fairest account of Beckford's homosexuality and his alleged pederasty with Lord William Courtenay, see Alexander 1962, chaps. 5 and 8.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 245.

41. Farington Diary, entry for June 4, 1794 (Greig, p. 51; Garlick and Macintyre, I, p. 196).

42. West probably received more commissions for religious paintings than any of his English contemporaries. As a result in part of Reynolds's famous windows for New College Chapel at Oxford (1777–81), West received commissions for window designs for St. George's Chapel at Windsor and for the church of St. Paul in Birmingham. The Birmingham design, dated 1786, is now at Smith College, Northampton, Mass. For the history of West's unfinished work for the Royal Chapel at Windsor, see Jerry D. Meyer, "Benjamin West's Chapel of Revealed Religion: A Study in Eighteenth Century Protestant Religious Art," *Art Bulletin* 57 (1975) pp. 247–265.

43. The tower of the abbey collapsed Dec. 21, 1825. Eginton, who is credited with reviving the manufacture of stained glass in England, received £1,000 in April 1799 for his windows executed from West's cartoons. Eginton also made windows at Fonthill from the designs of William Hamilton—saints and fathers of the Church such as St. Jerome, St. Ambrose, and St. Augustine. The window of St. Thomas à Becket, originally installed in the east transept of the abbey, survived the collapse of the tower and is now in the church of St. Mark's in Bristol (illustrated in Lees-Milne, *William Beckford*, p. 62).



some preparatory oil sketches and cartoons have survived to document West's contribution to the decorative glazing of the abbey. That West was proud of his designs is suggested by his having exhibited a number of them at the Royal Academy in 1797, 1798, and 1799.⁴⁴ Best known of the sketches are the studies for *St. Thomas à Becket* and *St. Michael Casteth Out the Dragon*, in the Toledo Museum of Art.⁴⁵ Over life-size cartoons for *St. Thomas à Becket* and for *St. Margaret*,

44. He exhibited *St. Michael Casteth Out the Dragon and His Angels* in 1797, no. 242; *St. Margaret, Queen of Scotland* in 1799, no. 136; *St. Thomas à Becket* in 1799, no. 170, probably the same as no. 267, exhibited in 1798. He also exhibited his designs for the *Conversion of St. Paul* at the Academy exhibitions of 1791 and 1801.

45. See Millard F. Rogers, Jr., "Benjamin West and the Caliph: Two Paintings for Fonthill Abbey," *Apollo* 83 (1966) pp. 420-425 (including a color reproduction of *St. Thomas à Becket*, pl. III), and Dillenberger, *Context*, figs. 74, 75.



Queen of Scotland (Figure 13) have been preserved in the Fulham Palace collection. Information concerning the latter subject has not come forth in past scholarship, but the *St. Margaret* merits some examination in connection with Beckford's genealogical approach to the decoration of his abbey.

Two drawings in the collection of Swarthmore College appear to have been early studies for the figure of *St. Margaret*. Executed in the same technique and materials as the two portrait studies of Peter and Bathshua Beckford, one sheet (Figure 14) is marked with a grid for transfer and is unmistakably related to the Fulham Palace cartoon (Figure 13). A smaller figure drawn in the upper right corner of the *St. Margaret* sheet may possibly be an early stage in West's design for *St. Thomas à Becket*. Although this subsidiary drawing (Figure 16) presents the saint in a shorter military dress with a sword in addition to ecclesiastical

miter, his pose and the placement of the light source reiterate those of West's other known designs for *St. Thomas à Becket*.⁴⁶ The other drawing from Swarthmore, identified here as a study for *St. Margaret* (Figure 15), is on different paper and is less clearly defined; the placement of the arms, with the hands holding the Bible and crown, closely resembles the pose in the cartoon, and the ecclesiastical mantle tucked up under the saint's right arm falls in similar folds. Yet this figure has the dignity of an abbess rather than a queen. West's painted "sacred portrait" for the stained-glass window suggests a compromise between the character of a maidenly queen and that of a pious reformer.

Beckford's reasons for honoring *St. Margaret* were,

46. For example, the drawing from a private collection illustrated in Rogers, "Benjamin West and the Caliph," fig. 1.



13. West, *St. Margaret, Queen of Scotland*. Oil on canvas, cartoon for a stained-glass window at Fonthill Abbey, exhibited Royal Academy, 1799, no. 136. London, Fulham Palace (photo: Courtauld Institute)
14. West, Studies for *St. Margaret, Queen of Scotland* and two male saints. Black chalk heightened with white on blue paper, 12 × 9 in. Swarthmore, Pa., Swarthmore College, Friends Historical Library (photo: author)
15. West, Study for *St. Margaret, Queen of Scotland*. Brown chalk with crayon on buff paper, 10½ × 3½ in. Swarthmore, Pa., Swarthmore College, Friends Historical Library (photo: author)
16. West, Study for figure of a male saint, detail of Figure 14 (photo: author)



17. West, Study for *The Vision of St. Anthony of Padua*. Black crayon heightened with white chalk on brown paper, 6⁷/₈ × 5¹/₄ in. Swarthmore, Pa., Swarthmore College, Friends Historical Library (photo: author)

like the sentiments that attracted him to St. Thomas à Becket and St. Michael, probably personal and introspective.⁴⁷ Not commonly illustrated or well-known, St. Margaret of Scotland (about 1045–93) was the granddaughter of the English king Edmund Ironside; following the battle of Hastings, she fled to the court of Scotland, where in 1070 she married Malcolm III. Deeply religious, she engendered reform in ecclesiastical ritual and dedicated herself to benefactions and charity. She was canonized in 1250 by In-

nocent IV, and, in response to a request in 1693 from the deposed James II of Scotland, her feast day was established for June 10 by Innocent XII.⁴⁸ Beckford could trace the noble lineage in his maternal Hamilton ancestry back to the Plantagenet kings and from James I of Scotland. Beckford's wife, Margaret Gordon, could trace her descent from the earls of Lancaster, whose royal English and Scottish roots were the same. The name Margaret was given to Beckford's firstborn. Perhaps Beckford conceived a parallel between the exile of St. Margaret to the Scottish highlands and the apparent exile of himself and his bride Margaret to Switzerland after the Powderham scandal.⁴⁹ Certainly the figure of the pious and charitable Scottish queen in his Fonthill window symbolized the "high blood" and moral fiber of his maternal and marital heritage dating back to the saint's own century. This allusion would surely have pleased Beckford's son-in-law, the duke of Hamilton, who flattered himself the "true heir to the throne of Scotland."⁵⁰

William Beckford's selection of St. Anthony of Padua (1195–1231), native and patron saint of Lisbon, as his personal patron saint may also have been influenced by his fascination for genealogy—he claimed royal Portuguese ancestry through his maternal lineage. His veneration for St. Anthony as his special protector may reflect, too, Beckford's psychological sympathy with the legendary character of the aristocratic orator, miracle worker, and visionary.⁵¹ His interest was aroused in 1782, when he visited Padua and witnessed magnificent services honoring

47. See Rogers (*ibid.*, p. 422) and Meyer ("Religious Paintings," pp. 176–177) for parallels that Beckford might have seen in his life and Becket's, and for his identification with St. Michael, whose feast day, Sept. 29, was Beckford's birthday.

48. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross (London, 1974) p. 872.

49. Beckford's wife died in Switzerland in 1786, after giving birth to their second daughter.

50. The marquis of Douglas, later duke of Hamilton and husband of Susan Euphemia Beckford, was—like his father-in-law—obsessed with the study of his lineage. "He held it as an article of faith that as the descendant of the Regent Arran he was the true heir to the throne of Scotland" (Melville, p. 287).

51. The literature devoted to St. Anthony is second only to that on St. Francis of Assisi; see Butler's *Lives of the Saints*, ed. Herbert Thurston and Donald Attwater (New York, 1956) II, p. 536. St. Anthony is shown with the Holy Child according to a legend which dates back at least to the 17th century and which claims that the saint was seen "gazing in rapture" upon the Christ Child.

the Franciscan saint on his feast day. By 1794, Beckford had informed Wyatt of his intention to build a new oratory at Fonthill to honor St. Anthony,⁵² and, early in 1797, Beckford proudly wrote to his cousin Sir William Hamilton in Naples about the imminent completion of a great chapel.⁵³ He intended the abbey itself to be a monument to the glory and inspiration of the saint.⁵⁴ Throughout his life, he treasured a statue of St. Anthony carved by Rossi, and he commissioned West to paint the *Vision of St. Anthony of Padua*. A sketch was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1799 (no. 546). Praised by a visitor to Fonthill as a picture having “the tone and expression of some of the best productions of the Venetian and Bolognese schools,”⁵⁵ the painting was probably the one installed in the abbey as the altarpiece to which Beckford is supposed to have made nocturnal devotional visits.⁵⁶

Although West’s painting has apparently been lost, preparatory drawings for the *Vision of St. Anthony* have survived. A drawing in the Friends Historical Library (Figure 17) suggests that West conceived a traditional, Baroque composition for this subject, showing the saint in his Franciscan habit, kneeling before an altar with his arms raised in reverential astonishment at the apparition of the Christ Child. It is a more intense, theatrical scene than the standard representations of the saint holding the Christ Child, such as the images painted by Zurbarán;⁵⁷ the mystical subject is dramatized in the drawing by the effect of the stark black and brilliant white chalk against warm brown paper. West has imbued the composition with both energy and sobriety, and the painted version would undoubtedly have been a fitting complement to his *Pietà*, which is supposed to have hung with it in a room just west of the octagon in Fonthill Abbey.⁵⁸ One can well imagine the emotional power of such paintings, exhibited in conjunction with West’s visions from Revelation, and illuminated in the great Gothic galleries “where lights were kept burning the whole night.”⁵⁹ The artist William Hamilton, describing the effect of the building and its furnishings, said, “It fills the mind with a sentiment which is almost too much to support, certainly of too melancholy a cast to be long dwelt upon.”⁶⁰

Beckford’s household at Fonthill was, for all its magnificence and melancholy, not without humor or hospitality for the entertainment of rare visitors such as West. Among the drawings at Swarthmore College, there are informal sketches West made of the abbey

and of a singular member of Beckford’s entourage. Customarily greeting visitors at the great sixty-foot west doors of the abbey was Pierre Colas de Grailly, a dwarf from Evian called Piero and referred to by Beckford in his correspondence as Nanibus, Pierrot, or Perro (Figure 18). Beckford had discovered him during his travels on the Continent and had become his defender and protector. The small but self-important servant, a sort of Giaour from *Vathek*, fond of finery and dressed in gold and embroidery,⁶¹ was described by Beckford as “of all dwarfs . . . the most honest, adroit and useful.”⁶² Piero served his master faithfully for some forty years, both at Fonthill and at Lansdown House in Bath. Although he evidently took his responsibilities very seriously, he amused Beckford and provided a human foil for the colossal scale of the abbey.

On the verso of West’s rendering of the dwarf is a spare drawing of the abbey from the northeast, the tower of the “holy Sepulchre” rising remote and

52. Letter of April 10, 1794, sent from Lisbon to Wyatt (Melville, p. 214).

53. In a letter to Hamilton dated Feb. 2, 1797, Beckford describes the chapel as being “66 ft. diameter and 72 high” (Morrison MSS., Hamilton and Nelson Papers, I, pp. 227–228, no. 292; published in Oliver, *William Beckford*, pp. 235–236).

54. Writing to his son-in-law Sept. 2, 1822, Beckford remarked that “The Saint who inspired me with the Abbey will also arm me with supernatural courage to do without it, and perhaps even to erect yet another monument to his glory” (Alexander 1957, p. 338).

55. Britton, p. 225.

56. Dyce’s *Recollections of the Table Talk of Samuel Rogers* (New York, 1856) pp. 214–215, contains an account of Rogers’s three-day visit to Fonthill in 1818. Rogers mentions a “picture of St. Antonio, to which it was said that Beckford would sometimes steal and pay his devotions.”

57. A representative *St. Anthony of Padua* by Zurbarán is in the Kresge Art Center, Michigan State University, East Lansing.

58. This location is given in James Storer’s account (Melville, app., p. 365).

59. See note 56 above.

60. Farington Diary, entry for Nov. 8, 1800, quoted in Alexander 1962, p. 167; Garlick and Macintyre, IV, p. 1452.

61. The dwarf is described in Lady Bessborough’s letter of Oct. 28, 1817 (see note 31 above). The recto of the Swarthmore drawing is illustrated in Alexander 1962, facing p. 150, and a lithograph of the dwarf, shown striding past the abbey, is reproduced in Alexander 1957, p. 214, and in Lees-Milne, *William Beckford*, p. 71.

62. Quoted by Alexander 1957, p. 41. Even if Piero reminded Beckford physically of the Giaour in *Vathek*, his character was surely more salubrious.

brooding above the Wiltshire downs, not quite invading the swirling clouds above (Figure 19). The sketch records the same view of the tower as J. M. W. Turner's watercolor *View of Fonthill Abbey from a Stone Quarry* (Figure 20), at Brodick Castle.⁶³ Following a visit to the abbey, West remarked to Beckford's agent Nicholas Williams that the "elegant edifice" seemed "a place raised more by majick, or inspiration, than the labours of the human hand. . . ."⁶⁴ Seen at such a distance in West's drawing, the abbey suggests an architectural counterpart to its creator, called "the most isolated man of his day."⁶⁵ Ironically, it is not Beckford's vast stone monument that documents his social and genealogical ambitions, but his objects of vertu and private family pictures.

William Beckford let most of his West paintings go with Fonthill in the sale of 1822.⁶⁶ He did not, however, relinquish the most personal and private of these works; the formidable family portraits accompanied Beckford to Bath and were hung in one of the first rooms to be entered by visitors to Lansdown Tower.⁶⁷ Removed from the theatrical splendor of the abbey, West's portraits may provoke criticism akin to Horace Walpole's appraisal of early works in the artist's career—"All four hard and gaudy and little

63. This may be the view of the abbey that Turner exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1800 (John Rothenstein and Martin Butlin, *Turner* [New York, 1964] p. 90, no. 16b). Turner made a series of sketches at Fonthill during three weeks in 1799; Beckford commissioned seven watercolor landscapes of Fonthill for thirty-five guineas each. These and the drawings in Turner's sketchbooks provide the most vivid visual record of the abbey.

64. Letter of Jan. 5, 1801 (Melville, p. 238).

65. Alexander 1962, p. 168.

66. For a detailed account of the plans to auction the abbey through Christie's and the subsequent sale to Farquhar, see Alexander 1962, chap. 15.

67. Cyrus Redding, Beckford's earliest biographer, visited his subject in Bath, where he saw the portraits hanging in the "back room," which he described as "the first we entered" (*Memoirs of William Beckford of Fonthill, Author of Vathek* [London, 1859] p. 370).

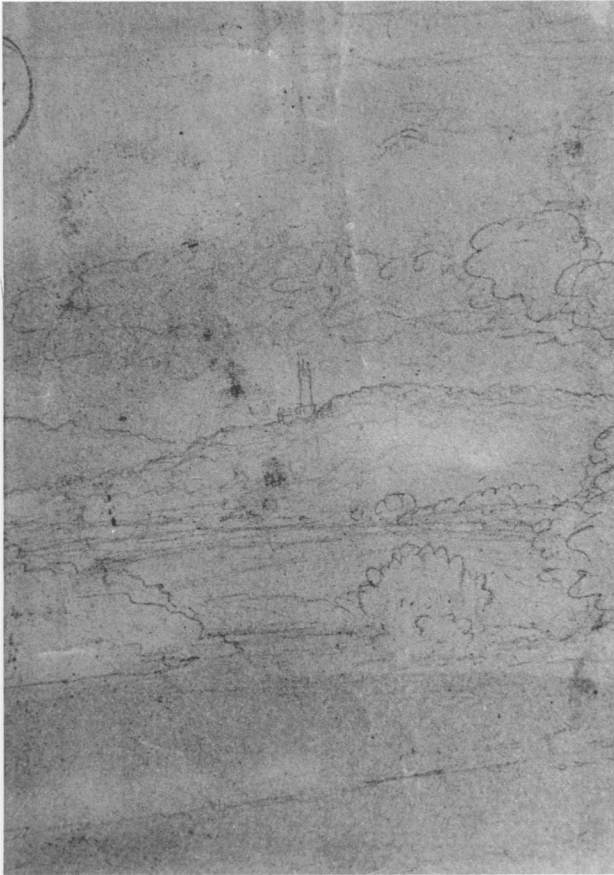
68. This was Walpole's impression of West's exhibited pictures in 1766 (quoted in William T. Whitley, *Artists and Their Friends in England 1700-1799* [London, 1928] II, p. 373).

69. Farington noted in his diary (entry for Nov. 1, 1797) that Beckford liked West's sketches but not his pictures, "and wishes him to make them as much like his sketches as he can" (Garlick and Macintyre, III, p. 912). West may have added the thinly sketched black lines over the surface of the portraits to achieve a sketchlike texture and more spontaneity in accordance with Beckford's preference.



18. West, *Beckford's Dwarf, Piero*. Black crayon on brown paper, 9 × 7⁹/₁₆ in. Swarthmore, Pa., Swarthmore College, Friends Historical Library (photo: author)

expression"⁶⁸—but to Beckford, technical perfection in these commemorative images would have been secondary to symbolic utility. The artist applied his brushstrokes according to his patron's aesthetic tastes,⁶⁹ and satisfied Beckford's propagandistic intentions with a substantial infusion of his own moral conviction. West's manipulation of art as a moral influence served Beckford well, for the artist projected in the ancestral portraits and even in the sacred images the genealogical rank, social dignity, and virtue to which Beckford himself aspired. If West's subjects lack the intimacy and immediacy of likenesses taken from life, they are heavily endowed with material details affirming their accomplishments and respectability. The images seem to echo West's exhortation that "Virtue is



19. West, *Northeast View of Fonthill Abbey*, detail, verso of Figure 18 (photo: author)

the road to Honours, and the basis on which every refinement has been raised.”⁷⁰ Yet Beckford retained his wry sense of humor even with regard to West’s didactic canvases, for, writing to his friend the Abbé Macquin just before the sale of the abbey, he revealed an unexpected aspect of the pictures’ decorative function: the flood of presale visitors to the abbey

70. Excerpt from a letter with an allegorical sketch, dated Dec. 24, 1814 (Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore).

20. J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851), *View of Fonthill Abbey from a Stone Quarry*. Watercolor, 27 × 40½ in. Brodick Castle, Isle of Arran, National Trust for Scotland (photo: National Trust for Scotland, Edinburgh)



would doubtless like to pause, mused Beckford, behind the wainscoting below “West’s great dauberics,” since there (so concealed) were the household water closets. The proximity of his stern ancestors to his privy, which must have “delighted Beckford’s sense of the incongruous,”⁷¹ added an ingenious Beckfordian twist to the elegant propriety of West’s paintings.

71. Letter in French, from Bath, Aug. 7, 1822 (Alexander 1957, p. 336, n. 2).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The research for this paper was undertaken during my tenure as an Andrew W. Mellon Fellow in the Department of European Paintings, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. I should like to express my gratitude to Sir John Pope-Hennessy and Miss Katharine Baetjer for their support, and to thank Mr. John Caldwell, formerly of the Department of American Paintings and Sculpture, Professor Allen Staley, Columbia University, and Mrs. Ruth Kraemer, the Pierpont Morgan Library, for their helpful advice. I am especially indebted to the staff of the Friends Historical Library, to Mr. J. William Frost for permission to photograph and publish the Swarthmore West drawings, and to Dr. Malcolm Campbell of the University of Pennsylvania for first suggesting my investigation of this collection.

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