

23 October 2007

From Reason to Revolution Art and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain

23 October 2007 to 27 January 2008

The fascinating conflicts and contradictions of the so-called 'Age of Reason' are illuminated in a new exhibition opening at the Fitzwilliam Museum today. *From Reason to Revolution: Art and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* examines this dynamic period of British history through paintings, prints, drawings, rare books, ceramics and sculptures, and includes works by William Hogarth, Joshua Reynolds, Joseph Wright and William Blake.

The Eighteenth Century was an age of infinite paradoxes: optimistic yet bleak in outlook; forward-looking yet captivated by the classical past; excited by ideas of human learning and potential yet in thrall to a transatlantic slave trade that oppressed millions. The exhibition's broad scope considers the significance of 'The Grand Tour', the journey that countless Europeans made to the ancient sites of Italy and Greece in the spirit of cultural pilgrimage. Portraits by artists such as Reynolds demonstrate the aesthetic ambitions of these eighteenth-century tourists, whilst landscape views and architectural studies reveal the inspiration that the classical ruins of the Grand Tour had upon Britain's artists. We also see the more mundane aspects of foreign travel as documented through comic caricatures, sketches and souvenirs, while the contemporary enthusiasm for exploration further afield is brought in focus with the observational drawings and paintings produced by artists such as John Webber, who accompanied Captain Cook's last expedition to the Pacific.

The contrast between Britain's burgeoning industrial successes and its less palatable social changes is brought into sharp relief with the eighteenth-century taste for acerbic satire, as evinced by works by James Gillray and Hogarth, whose cautionary narratives expose the public ills of London life. Elsewhere, the new spirit of social mobility receives a completely different treatment, in the aspirational portraits of the period's affluent professionals. The effect of the Enlightenment's advances in science and technology is evident from works such as Valentine Green's *Experiment with an Air Pump* after Joseph Wright's painting, whilst other works reveal a sense of apprehension regarding man's new relationship to nature.

To coincide with Black History Month and the ongoing commemoration of the Act of Abolition's bicentenary, *From Reason to Revolution* also examines the most disturbing paradox of the Eighteenth Century: the contradiction between the ideals of 'civilisation' and the injustices of the transatlantic slave trade. Opponents of the slave trade employed art as a political tool, yet works by Wedgwood and the librettist George Colman - from whose 1787 opera *Inkle and Yarico* the exhibition features illustrations - often betray certain moral ambiguities concerning race and identity, being more concerned with the implications of mercantile activity for Britain than human rights. The exhibition also demonstrates the dramatic resonance of the revolutions in America and France for contemporary British artists such as William Blake, whose works reveal the tension felt between ideals of reason and the passion of revolution.

A great many of the objects featured in *From Reason to Revolution* are from Richard, 7th Viscount Fitzwilliam's original bequest to the University of Cambridge in 1816. It was this consignment of his worldly goods to 'the Increase of Learning and other great Objects of that Noble Foundation' that brought about the foundation of the Fitzwilliam Museum.

From Reason to Revolution is accompanied by an illustrated guide, which provides visitors with the exhibition's historical context. In conjunction with Opera East Productions, The Fitzwilliam Museum will also present a concert performance of the 1787 anti-slavery opera *Inkle and Yarico*, to be staged in the Museum on Monday 26 November 2007. Tickets are £25 (£20 concessions and Friends of the Fitzwilliam Museum), available from Cambridge Arts Box Office, 6 St Edward's Passage, Cambridge, CB2 3PJ (01223 503 333, www.cambridgeartstheatre.com).

From Reason to Revolution is supported by Cambridge University Press and The Marlay Group.

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.../Exhibition details for publication; Further information and images

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Exhibition details for publication:

From Reason to Revolution Art and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain

23 October 2007 - 27 January 2008

Mellon Gallery
The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB

OPEN: Tuesday - Saturday: 10.00 - 17.00
Sunday: 12.00 - 17.00
CLOSED: Mondays, 24-26 & 31 December and 1 January

ADMISSION FREE

Further information and images from:

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Notes for Editors

The Fitzwilliam Museum

The Fitzwilliam Museum houses the University of Cambridge's art collection and is a public museum and art gallery with an international reputation. More than half a million objects and works of art are held in five curatorial departments: Antiquities, Applied Arts, Coins and Medals, Manuscripts and Printed Books and Paintings, Drawings and Prints.

The Fitzwilliam's treasures range from Ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman antiquities to the arts of the 21st century and include masterpieces by Titian, Canaletto, Stubbs, Constable, Monet, Renoir and Picasso, one of the world's foremost Rembrandt print collections, Handel music manuscripts and the famous Fitzwilliam Virginal Book, one of the most significant collections of Korean ceramics outside South-East Asia, medieval illuminated manuscripts and outstanding collections of pottery, porcelain and medieval coins.

The Fitzwilliam Museum welcomes over 300,000 visitors a year, offers a wide-ranging programme of temporary exhibitions and events, and has an award-winning Education Service. The Museum is open Tuesday - Saturday: 10.00 - 17.00, Sunday and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 - 17.00.

Admission to the permanent collections and to temporary exhibitions is FREE.

Website: www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk

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