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EXHIBITION REVIEW

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Tourist Treasures: Plunder and Collection on the Grand Tour

The English Prize. The Capture of the Westmorland: An Episode of the Grand Tour. An exhibition held at the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, 17 May–27 August 2012; and the Yale Center for British Art, 4 October 2012–13 January 2013. Accompanying volume edited by Maria Dolores Sánchez-Jáuregui and Scott Wilcox (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012). Pp. xiv + 378. \$75.00.

The English Prize, an exhibition held at the Ashmolean Museum and the Yale Center for British Art, is a marvelous achievement; rarely have I seen an exhibit which so successfully combines accessibility with scholarly rigor and import. Its focus is the *Westmorland*, a vessel loaded with objects acquired by British Grand Tourists and captured as war booty by the French in 1779. The cargo—which included books, antiquities, paintings, and prints, as well as olive oil, fish, silk, and medicinal drugs—was then purchased by the Compañía de Lonjistas de Madrid, an organization of Spanish commercial agents. The perishable merchandise was sold quickly, but the crates of art objects languished until 1783 before being sent the Real Academia de Belles Artes de San Fernando in Madrid for examination. A few objects were purchased by the Spanish king, but the majority were not recovered by the Compañía and were thus absorbed into the Academia's collections. The foundation of the exhibition is a carefully contextualized assembly of the *Westmorland's* contents based upon painstaking archival work in Spain, Italy, France, and Britain. Crucially, though, it uses the objects as a launching pad for wider discussion about the Grand Tour: the practicalities of travel; the identities of tourists and collectors; the mechanics and aesthetics of the art trade; and the social roles of tutors, artists, and agents. The accompanying volume describes the exhibition as a “time capsule” or “snapshot” of the late eighteenth century, but these are slightly unhelpful phrases that imply unmediated access to a pristine past (ix, 81). In fact, the exhibition does something far more interesting and subtle. It presents a number of interlocking narratives about the interpretation and uses of the past, from the Grand Tourists' preoccupation with supposed classical aesthet-

ics and values, to the exhibit's own story of archival detection and display. In this respect *The English Prize* is a meditation on how people use objects to define and interpret both their own culture and the cultures of the past.

The exhibition's most important theme is the business of tourism in the eighteenth century. It provides a wealth of detail about the commercial life and consumer culture intrinsic to Grand Tourism; articles in the volume explore, among other things, the complexities of the Roman art trade and the challenges of trading and transportation routes, as well as the convoluted provenance of the *Westmorland's* cargo. This attentiveness to the circulation of goods and individuals allows us to appreciate the dynamic internationalism of eighteenth-century elite culture, and complicates over-familiar clichés about the emerging "nationalism" or disembodied "cosmopolitanism" of the period. To take one example, a decorative stone tabletop, inlaid with marbles from ancient quarries in Europe, Asia, and Africa (cat. 124), symbolizes not only the economic networks crucial to production and sale, but also the close relationship between antiquarian curiosity and decorative modernity in eighteenth-century thought. Importantly, too, the exhibition shows how the commercial realities of the art market affected aesthetic priorities. For instance, the relative scarcity of available Old Masters, as well as newly restrictive Roman export laws, stoked greater interest in reproductions and off-the-shelf souvenir prints designed for the tourist market. In their article, Jonathan Yarker and Clare Hornsby stress a crucial and underexplored topic: the role of commercial dealers in shaping the artistic interests of patrons and collectors (63–87). This analysis places market forces and business imperatives at the very center of eighteenth-century taste, challenging more conventional interpretations founded solely on aesthetic or moral sensibility. The volume and exhibition focus on the "sociability" of the Grand Tour: that is, the importance of socializing, performance, and public commemoration. In her piece on "Sculpture, Commerce and Sociability," Alison Yarrington shows how some tourists commissioned portrait busts both as an act of fashionable display, and to associate themselves with supposedly timeless classical tradition (106–14).

All of this permits new approaches to eighteenth-century culture. Most obviously, it highlights the material spread of Enlightenment ideas. It shows the importance of warfare—specifically, Mediterranean privateering and plunder—in distributing not just physical objects, but also new theories about, say, architectural design or artistic fashion (135). Indeed, it would be fascinating to know more about how the arrival of the *Westmorland's* cargo affected the Real Academia's teaching program and the wider contours of the Spanish Enlightenment. The exhibition also allows a reassessment of neoclassicism, particularly its relationship with notions of authenticity and antiquarianism. The galleries are replete with copies and "improved" versions of classical antiques made for the Grand Tourist market and intended to be shipped home for domestic display. For tourists and collectors, these are not simply relics of a bygone age; they are also modern objects that reach out to the past and repackage their supposed aesthetic and moral values for contemporary consumption. In other words, the objects are not just commemorative; they explore the relationship between past and present, both in terms of the inspirational virtues of the classics and the enhanced interpretation of them made possible by modern "progress." Importantly, too, neoclassicism is seen as a commercial exercise driven by the sale of commodities, and not simply as a lesson in detached classical veneration. Ironically, perhaps, something of this context is lost when we view such objects in the reverential silence of a museum; they were intended for domestic display, and it is important to remember their social uses as

symbols of status and learning in privileged everyday spaces. Of course, this focus on simulacra also requires a different attitude toward “originality.” The enduring legacy of Romanticism tends to value individuality and innovation in art, whereas here we must also recognize the crucial roles of imitation and gradual refinement in neoclassical aesthetics.

For all its undoubted triumphs, however, *The English Prize* is not without some minor problems. First, the exhibition places a high premium on biography in its organization of materials. We learn about the “individual stories” of many tourists, from Sir John Henderson’s love of French literature to Francis Basset’s lavish spending habits. It is a tremendous feat to have identified the original owners of so many objects and then to use them to reconstruct individuals’ itineraries and interests. However, this prioritization of individual actors sits slightly uneasily with the exhibition’s wider focus on commerce, networks, and markets. There are intriguing questions here that are left unexplored, principally concerning the extent to which individual tastes and priorities could assert themselves during a cultural activity so heavily guided—often in literal terms—by convention. That said, the decision to shape the exhibition around biography is entirely comprehensible, life stories often being a more compelling basis than impersonal concepts for engaging narrative. In this respect, *The English Prize* presents its objects as marketable products within an appropriate commercial framework, just as eighteenth-century traders had done two-and-a-half centuries earlier with different emphases and priorities.

A second issue relates to the accompanying volume and catalog. The essays are uniformly strong on the provenances of the various objects, but occasionally they lack sustained discussion of wider intellectual contexts. One example concerns the remains of Saint Clement, sent as a gift by Pope Clement XIV to Baron Arundell of Wardour. The bones were initially refused passage by captains of other ships before being hidden in a specially designed block of marble and loaded onto the *Westmorland*. Still more remarkably, some skillful private diplomacy by a Jesuit priest ensured that the remains were the only item from the captured ship to reach their intended destination in Britain. There are a number of fascinating issues here, not least the role of religious relics in the late Enlightenment, and the covert tactics of the smuggler’s trade, presumably required in this case by denominational controversies or customs complexities. But these issues are sadly not explored in an essay which confines itself to a narrative of the bones’ travels. Similarly, an essay on Anton Raphael Mengs’s *The Liberation of Andromeda by Perseus* provides an assiduous account of the painting’s eventual acquisition by Catherine the Great of Russia. But when we are told that the piece restored Mengs to “the top-ranked position in the Roman art world,” or that its display in St. Petersburg “was accessible to a public of high social standing, who would scarcely have differed from the public . . . in London,” there is a risk of oversimplification (98, 103). Why, precisely, was this particular work so highly valued by different constituencies, and what does its circulation tell us about the cultures that produced, admired, and desired it? At such moments one wishes for more details about how the networks of the art trade relate to the cultural and intellectual concerns of the period.

These absences are more keenly felt because the exhibition does, at times, discuss wider conceptual issues related to the *Westmorland’s* cargo. One display panel, for instance, speaks of the “virtual tourism” of the Grand Tour: the way in which items acted as both a record of a trip and a means to idealize both the places visited and the role of the traveler. In the volume, John Brewer describes Italy as “a land of texts” (50), a phrase which helpfully suggests the interrelationship of

“real” spaces and the landscapes of the mind generated by a classical education. The strongest articles, such as Kim Sloan’s piece about John Robert Cozens’s watercolors, and Frank Salmon’s discussion of architectural drawings, engage directly with this issue, showing how artistic production in these two media used both observation and idealized preconception to interpret the scenes of the Grand Tour (115–36). In another interesting essay, John Wilton-Ely talks about Giovanni Battista Piranesi’s “creative eclecticism,” an approach to architecture and etching which “radically transformed” conventional views of Roman antiquity from the 1740s onward by injecting “a strongly emotional and didactic vehicle of expression” into the interpretation of places (137–38). In such moments, we can appreciate the imbrication of neoclassical and Romantic aesthetics, helping to avoid the contrived separation that still tends to dominate conventional histories of Romanticism and the so-called Age of Reason.

These minor reservations notwithstanding, *The English Prize* is still an extraordinary accomplishment. Presented in an approachable and unpretentious manner for the benefit of the viewing public, it also contains rich details of great interest to specialist scholars from a number of fields. The catalog, too, is splendid; virtually every item is shown in excellent quality full-color images, making the volume a long-term research tool. Above all, the project is founded upon a labor-intensive and highly impressive archival framework. Tracing the ownership and origins of so many objects from cryptic or incomplete eighteenth-century inventories in multiple languages is a truly admirable achievement. To describe *The English Prize* as a foundation for our understanding of the Grand Tour is intended as a compliment, but could also sound slightly unfair, as it might imply a pedestal for something superficially more polished. What I mean, therefore, is something more fundamental and specific: the exhibition shows viewers the very *things* of the Tour—material objects, backed by archival sifting—without reference to which, any interpretation of Grand Tourism would risk being merely speculative.