

British Art 1660-1735: Close Readings

20th May 2011 in the Clore Auditorium, Tate Britain

ABSTRACTS

Anthony Geraghty (University of York)

'Robert Streater at the Sheldonian'

"The Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford contains the earliest (extant) example of decorative painting on the grand scale in post-Restoration England. Hitherto little studied, I approach Robert Streater's painted ceiling from two angles. Firstly I explore how it continues the theatrical metaphor the building it adorns. And secondly, I situate its subject matter within the intellectual history of the late 1660s. I then show how these two things are related."

Sarah Monks (University of East Anglia)

'Drawing fire: the van de Veldes, and the imagery and implications of late Stuart naval conflict'

This paper looks at the images of contemporary naval warfare produced for the Stuart court during the 1670s by two immigrant Dutch artists, the Willem van de Veldes. The first embedded war reporters in modern times, this father and son offered their patrons a crucial means of reading Anglo-Dutch naval battles, huge and incoherent events whose status as victories or defeats often lay more in cultural interpretation than in elusive fact. Read closely, the father's drawings from the battlezone reveal the process by which advantageous truths could be fabricated, thanks to drawing's openness to alteration and improvement. Yet, as they lay bare the moments of judgement involved in their production, van de Velde the Elder's drawings (as well as his extraordinary pen paintings) are haunted by the spectre of errancy and therefore seem to have been problematic documents for a restored monarchy faced with an increasingly interrogative 'public'. Initially greeted with open arms, van de Velde the Elder was soon eclipsed in the court's favours by his son, whose oil paintings instead offered overtly glamorising images of contemporary naval conflict in which legitimacy is bombastically asserted. Looked at closely, these artists' distinct techniques held out different visions of late Stuart power.

Helen Pierce (University of Aberdeen)

'Francis Barlow: the political animal'

The reputation of the English artist Francis Barlow (d.1704) rests firmly on his status as 'the famous Paynter of fowle Beastes & Birds' (in the words of John Evelyn), as an expert in the painting of small, wildlife scenes, and the producer of several lavishly-illustrated editions of Aesop's Fables. This paper, however, provides an introductory survey of a little-studied aspect of Barlow's oeuvre: the political image.

Barlow's hand can be traced in the dense compositions of a series of single-sheet broadsides, book illustrations and playing card designs of the 1670s and 1680s. Through the close reading of several Barlow pieces, this paper will consider his response to political debate fuelled by the 'Popish Plot' and subsequent Exclusion Crisis, relating Barlow's artistic output to existing and established visual models, and placing this work within the context of a range of potential patrons and clients.

Debra Pring (University of London)

'When I behold my Picture': the negotiation of meaning in Edwaert Collier's *Still Life With a Copy of Wither's Emblemes*

In the modern age where it is possible to own a playable lute for the relatively modest sum of £500 and the development of man-made materials has reduced the production cost of almost every musical instrument to within the scope of most people who would seriously wish to own one, it may be difficult to appreciate the notion of musical instruments as valuable items in their own right. However, by the time that Gerard de Lairese described music in paintings as 'dignified and beautiful additions', musical content was already firmly established in the lexicon of representation and symbolism.

Unfortunately music's role in still-life in particular has come to be treated in a formulaic manner with, in many cases, scant attention paid to the specifics of the artist's formal-visual and iconological choices.

Edwaert Collier painted in excess of 70 still lifes with musical content and the work in question here is one of the many examples of where a literary text is also placed within the display. It is the reading of this text in conjunction with the interpretation of the musical objects which lead to the possibility of meanings beyond the generic.

Jacqueline Riding (University of York)

'The City Candidate: Joseph Highmore's "David Le Marchand" and the search for Kneller's heir'

This paper will focus on the portrait of the ivory carver David Le Marchand (c.1723) as a means of exploring Highmore's early City-based practice, and the influence of Sir Godfrey Kneller on his portrait production and career strategy.

Christine Stevenson (Courtauld Institute)

'Court, City, cosmos: mediations of London's second Royal Exchange'

London's second Royal Exchange building, a post-Fire replacement for that built by Thomas Gresham (1566-68), itself burned down in 1838. Taking as its point of departure Charles II's ceremonial laying of the first stone on 23 October 1667, this lecture explores late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century representations of the Exchange in printed texts and images, and in particular the paradox of mediating a building whose actual operations depended on collective experience, in real space and time, for the benefit of far-flung and isolated consumers.

Dror Wahrman (Indiana University)

'Close, closer, closest reading: Art, obsession and the media revolution c.1700'

The "Close Readings" conference calls for close examination of specific art works in order to explore intersections between art of the late 17th and early 18th centuries and broader political, social or cultural transformations in Britain at the same time. The set of art works I will focus on in this talk is the trompe l'oeil "letter racks" that Edward Collier painted after his arrival from Leiden to London in 1693. Reading them closely - sometimes almost perversely so - I will suggest that embedded therein, in a series of coded messages, witty games and private jokes, we can find an astute and extraordinarily observant critique of revolutionary developments in contemporary media/information/print culture.