



HISTORIES OF BRITISH ART

1660-1735 RECONSTRUCTION AND TRANSFORMATION

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Brett Dolman: Historic Royal Palaces

‘The Shock of the New?’

Was the development of Lely's portrait style at Charles II's Restoration Court a revolutionary exotic style that helped women develop their own portrait iconography and navigate their way successfully through the new opportunities afforded by a culture that worshipped and rewarded beauty? Or are these same portraits examples of a misogynist and debased Court aesthetic which liked its women with few clothes and sexually available?

Is this a valid 17th century question at all, or are we guilty of applying 21st century ambivalence about beauty and its power on to a late Stuart Court audience. What did they think about Lely's Court Beauties and Gennari's royal mythological nudes? Is Nell Gwyn's naked portrait a revolutionary piece of self-expression or a desperate act? Or is it just a fairly normal painting of a Venus that no-one, apart from the odd diarist and poet, paid much attention to?

Was the portraiture of the late 17th century shocking or new? Is this the beginning of portraiture that can tell us something about the psychological identity of its sitters, or are we asking too much of our artists and our 17th century beauties?