



HISTORIES OF BRITISH ART

1660-1735 RECONSTRUCTION AND TRANSFORMATION

ABSTRACT: LAUREN DUDLEY

Lauren Dudley (University of Birmingham)

'Reconstructing the fragments of the past: British identity built on ruins?'

This paper will discuss the painting, *Allegorical Tomb of Lord Somers*, 1722, by Canaletto, G.B. Cimaroli and G.B. Piazzetta. It will be argued that, in the eighteenth century, the ruin motif reconstructed the past to forge a British Protestant identity, as is evident in this image. The painting originally belonged to a series of twenty-four allegorical paintings entitled 'Monuments to the Remembrance of a Set of British Worthies': the imagined tombs of military, political and intellectual men of merit from around the time of the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The series was commissioned by Whig politician and member of the Kit-Kat Club, the Second Duke of Richmond, to decorate his dining room at Goodwood House. In this space of sociability his fellow Kit-Kat Club members could feel a sense of community and continuity with the so-named 'Worthies', who were celebrated as Whig heroes and represented the liberty that was secured in 1688.

This paper will propose that through the imagined commemoration of the values and achievements that Somers's tomb signified, Protestantism and the dominant political culture were celebrated and legitimised. The Protestant liberty of the present was styled in contrast to the Catholic tyranny of the past. The scene of ruination that surrounds the tomb is an allegory of the Revolution, imaged through decaying antique architecture. The fragments of the past are reconstructed to shape the liberty of the 1720s and, by extension, the projected future. Through the series, the memory of the Revolution was manipulated in order to reconstruct pre-Revolutionary history from the perspective of the then dominant Whig government. This commission is part of a wider culture of arts patronage, architectural projects and archaeological excavations which aimed to shape British identity through this constructed history, shaped by the ruin motif.