



HISTORIES OF BRITISH ART

1660-1735 RECONSTRUCTION AND TRANSFORMATION

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‘Death of the artist: the sale of James Thornhill’s collection’

The sale and dispersal of James Thornhill’s collection in 1735, following the painter’s death the previous year, was one of the last significant artistic events of the period encompassed by the *Court, Country, City* project. Over five days in February, the material results of more than thirty years of making and collecting art were assembled and laid out to view at Christopher Cock’s place in Covent Garden before being submitted to the vagaries of the auction room.

Even a cursory analysis of the two catalogues printed to accompany the sale reveals much about the aspirations, achievements and tastes of Thornhill’s England; and of an artist defined by his relationship to the court, the country and the city. Almost half of the sale comprised preparatory sketches and finished paintings by Thornhill himself, the remaining lots were works by contemporaries and old masters. The inclusion of important works by Rubens and Poussin, for example, and the overarching presence of Raphael (although represented only by copies of one sort or another) underscores Thornhill’s complex engagement with the previous three centuries of Continental art and theory, and the many religious subjects (one in five of all the painting lots) and landscapes raise questions about the relative status of these genres during the early eighteenth century. Meanwhile, the presence of more than a hundred casts of hands, arms and legs points to the scale of Thornhill’s enterprise and the seriousness of his efforts to establish a British academy of art.

As well as providing a vantage point from which to survey the art world of the early eighteenth century, those five days in February can also be understood as a summation of an individual artist’s career: a final reckoning of a creative life, uncoupled from the chronological and biographical conventions that have shaped our understanding of the art of the period. Embracing the death of the artist in this way offers an opportunity to reflect upon some of the methodological challenges raised by the study of British art of the period.