



# HISTORIES OF BRITISH ART

## 1660-1735 RECONSTRUCTION AND TRANSFORMATION

### ABSTRACT: EMILY MANN

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‘Making plans, improving prospects: a printed prospectus of English settlements in West Africa’

In August 1726, the Royal African Company of England commissioned William Smith to travel to West Africa and produce a series of ‘exact plans, draughts and prospects of all their forts and settlements’, as well as the principal rivers, harbours and ‘other places of trade’ that were expanding along the coast. The company’s aim was to obtain ‘complete knowledge’ of the territory and to assess the ‘nature, usefulness and strength’ of the forts that protected its interests there against local rulers and competing colonial powers. In March 1728, six months after Smith’s return to England, an advert in the *Daily Journal* proposed engraving by subscription ‘Thirty different pieces after the drawings of William Smith’, which had ‘given entire satisfaction as well to the company as all others who have seen them’. The printed prospects and plans of the company’s ‘property’ in Africa, published the following year, have become a valuable historical source, scrutinised by archaeologists and architectural historians for clues about the design of the forts, and used as evidence of the shape and scale of Britain’s military and economic intervention in this part of the Atlantic world at a crucial stage in its formation. This paper will consider the artistic reconstruction of the commercial survey in a series of ‘handsome ornaments’ designed primarily for display under glass on the walls of ‘rooms, closets, cabins of ships etc’. Advertised as filling a gap in the market for ‘true’ images of Africa and published at a time of turmoil for the African (and Atlantic) trade, the views together form a prospectus for a company that was struggling to survive.