

23 April 2012

Brett Dolman (Historic Royal Palaces, London)

The Wild, the Beautiful and the Damned: Art, Beauty and Debauchery at the Late Stuart Court

In the spring of 2012 ‘The Wild, the Beautiful and the Damned’ exhibition on the ‘beauties’ portraits of Sir Peter Lely and Sir Godfrey Kneller opened at Hampton Court. The exhibition curator, Brett Dolman, spoke about some of the problems raised by these paintings. Modern visitors tend to be puzzled by the idea that these women were ever considered great beauties. But confused reactions may not be so new. The ideas underpinning these paintings were probably always a bit ambiguous. When they were painted, beauty was conventionally seen as an outward indication of virtue. That was why Lely idealised his ‘Windsor Beauties’, and one reason why they look so similar. Yet beauty was also distrusted, for its power could entice and corrupt. In the case of the Lely set, sexual undertones were hardly concealed, given that it includes one of Charles II’s principal mistress at the time, Barbara Villiers. But that, in itself, implied that the aim of the ‘Windsor Beauties’ was not to condemn. After all, they were commissioned by Anne Hyde, Duchess of York, whose husband had married her only after getting her pregnant. The second set, the ‘Hampton Court Beauties’, painted a generation later by Kneller, were rather more decorous, which was perhaps to be expected for works commissioned by Mary II. Attempts to interpret these paintings either as pin-ups or as depictions of virtue miss the point; they were always both. **AB**