William Beckford, the author of *Vathek*, is one of the most engaging of English eccentrics. He moves in his time a glamorous if somewhat insubstantial and indistinct figure. He was born in 1759 and lived until 1844—an eventful span of years stretching from the rococo coronation of George III through revolutionary turmoil to the girlish early days of Queen Victoria's respectable reign. Thus, although he was certainly a favored child of the eighteenth century, Beckford lived to become an honorable ancient of more or less modern times. At the age of one and twenty he became by inheritance the richest commoner in England and for most of his life commanded a seemingly inexhaustible shower of gold, which poured forth from his West Indian plantations. His tremendous wealth, his love of learning, of luxury, and of seclusion combined to make him perhaps the most spectacularly extravagant connoisseur of the age.

Beckford spent his life in traveling, in writing, in building, and in collecting rare books and objects of art. Naturally we are here concerned more with his activities as a collector. A number of works of art from his superb collection are now in the Museum; some of them are in fact among the great treasures of the Museum; and his exotic Arabian fantasy, *Vathek*, a small masterpiece written when he was twenty-two.¹ *Vathek* met with such high praise from every quarter that perhaps it seemed to Beckford to constitute in itself a whole literary career. Having achieved, in effect, all the rewards of authorship others have for us a special interest aside from their artistic qualities because of their intimate association with his very individual ideas about the decoration of his palatial Gothic mansion, Fonthill Abbey, one of the best publicized yet most mysterious buildings of its time. But all his activities reflect and illumine closely interrelated and mutually influential aspects of his extraordinarily interesting character, and it is impossible to consider him merely as a collector without reference to his other interests and occupations.

Beckford's brilliant, if amateur, efforts as an author were never pressed by necessity to any degree of sustained continuity, and his ambition to make a mark in the literary world seemed to be completely satisfied by the publication of such minor exercises as his *Lives of Extraordinary Painters*, a juvenile literary prank, and his exotic Arabian fantasy, *Vathek*, a small masterpiece written when he was twenty-two.¹ Towards the end of his life he finally published a volume of letters describing his travels in Italy, Spain, and Portugal.
ship at one stroke in *belles lettres*, perhaps he felt it unnecessary to add a solid foundation of other writings to buttress this flamboyantly ornamental imaginative romance. *Vathek* bears some interesting resemblances to another production of Beckford's lively imagination: his fantastic Gothic pleasure dome, Fonthill Abbey, which was an imaginative romance expressed in stone and timber.

To these quite original literary and architectural distinctions may be added another which rests upon his lifelong activity as a collector of paintings, books, prints, drawings, and rare and costly works of art of every kind. While traveling in Switzerland he once bought the whole library of the historian Gibbon, whereupon he shut himself up at Lausanne and read all the works in it that were new to him. In Paris during the French Revolution he found many opportunities to buy the luxurious furniture and ornaments stripped from the royal palaces. As he grew older the pleasures of collecting occupied more and more of his time. His tastes tended always to the greatest rarities, perfect in condition: things made of exotic or precious materials, such as Japanese lacquer, in which he was especially interested, and particularly works of art that had, in addition to all these qualities, the enhancement of historical associations, preferably associations with former royal owners.

As a young man Beckford spent his huge inheritance traveling on the continent in princely style with suites of tutors, attendants, physicians, musicians, cooks, and valets, like a wandering emperor. In 1783 he married Lady Margaret Gordon, daughter of the Earl of Aboyne; after her death in 1786 he traveled restlessly in Spain and Portugal. Sacheverel Sitwell points out in his interesting essay *Beckford and Beckfordism* the profound influence that Beckford's stay in Portugal had upon him. "His whole life work, whether that should be considered as writing or building, was broken in two by the French Wars. He began with a very genuine appreciation of the works of the generation before his own, in fact his letters from Portugal describe the life there in terms that show how much he appreciated the Rococo 

1 Published by Duckworth, London, 1930.
Portraits of Peter Beckford (d. 1735) and his wife, Bathshua (d. 1750), the grandparents of William Beckford, by Benjamin West (1738–1820). These paintings were ordered by William Beckford, the author of "Vathek," as part of the decoration of Fonthill Abbey. Bequest of John R. Morron, 1950
the Plantagenet cast of the whole chamber conveyed home to my bosom a feeling so interesting, so congenial, that I could hardly persuade myself to move away.”

About 1794 Beckford began to plan a fairly modest retreat at Fonthill that was to be partly sham ruin and partly habitable rooms, all in the Gothic taste. But as the structure arose Beckford was seized with the fever of building, until in the end, with the help of his architect, Wyatt, he had built a colossal palace of impractically huge medieval halls, with dim chapels and a cathedral tower almost three hundred feet high. The architectural decoration of this structure was largely heraldic, like the royal tomb chapels of Batalha.

This feudal concern with coats of arms and blooded ancestors was an element of the Gothic revival fantasy that caught and held his interest. During the planning of Fonthill he became one of the most persistent correspondents of the College of Heralds, seeking assistance in tracing his own and his daughters' descent. Naturally, in this elaborate game, the accent was perforce placed upon the very grand lines of noble blood running down through the centuries in his mother's family (the Hamiltons) and his wife's family (the Gordons) from the earls of Lancaster and the Plantagenet kings and from James I of Scotland.

It might be said that if the sham Gothic structure of Fonthill lacked the advantage of any knowledge on the part of the architect of medieval building principles, this insubstantial house of Beckford's was well served, thanks to his mother's ancestry, by the feudal arts of the College of Heralds. Many of the windows of Fonthill Abbey were filled with modern stained glass bearing armorial devices, the proud ancestral trade-marks with which his mother endowed him. Hundreds of corbels and brackets at Fonthill supported nothing more functional than a coat of arms. The extent of Beckford's preoccupation with the elegant pastime of heraldry is well set forth in the descriptive book on Fonthill Abbey published in 1823. In it are to be found no less than eight genealogical tables and a chart of the principal quarterings of Beckford's coat of arms. All of these, while explaining in a fashion the architectural decoration of the exterior and interior of Fonthill, point inexorably to the contrast between the long royal descent of his mother and the short plebeian rise of the Beckfords. To complement the heraldic decorations it was of course necessary to have a gallery of family portraits, and naturally among these there would have to appear portraits of the founder of the Beckford line and of Beckford's paternal grandparents, from whom his great wealth derived.

At the beginning of the line of Beckfords stands William's great grandfather, Peter, dressed in his best clothes, so to speak, and listed in the genealogical tables as grandly as possible: “a Colonel in the Army, president of council, lieutenant governor and commander in chief of the Island of Jamaica, died 1710.” The bald facts of the matter are that he held the office of lieutenant governor of Jamaica by default for only eight months in 1702. Modern historians hint broadly that he arrived in Jamaica sometime about 1660 as a common seaman and adventurer. Without exploring too far into the troubled history of Jamaica at this time, it is perhaps only necessary to point out that the island was then the headquarters of the infamous buccaneer Henry Morgan, the bloodthirsty pirate who plundered Porto Bello in 1668 and sacked the city of Panama in 1670. There is evidence that Peter Beckford sailed with Morgan on some of these piratical expeditions. In any case he apparently took every advantage of his opportunities, and when he died his estate included rich sugar plantations and slaves worth four hundred thousand pounds and an equal amount of cash, plate, and other property. This made his heir (also named Peter) one of the richest subjects in His Majesty's kingdom. The second Peter Beckford further increased his wealth by marrying the heiress Bathshua Hering. In the course of time their children went to England to live in style, and their vast property passed to their son, William Beckford (the famous Alderman Beckford, twice Lord Mayor of London). Thus when his son, William, came of age in 1781, he was given control of an estate valued at more than a million pounds and an income said to be more than a hundred thousand pounds a year.
Madonna and Child, by Giovanni Bellini (about 1430–1516). The Jules S. Bache Collection, 1949. The paintings and objects illustrated on these pages at one time were part of the collection of William Beckford.
Although Beckford was capricious and perhaps eccentric in some matters, when it came to the choice of a suitable painter to furnish him with appropriate ancestral portraits he naturally turned to the Painter to His Majesty, Benjamin West, President of the Royal Academy.

Among the most curious productions of the genius of Benjamin West are those decorations executed at Beckford’s command for Fonthill Abbey. One scarcely thinks of West as a decorator or designer and never as an artist of the Gothic Revival. However, it appears that, in spite of his lifelong preoccupation with the cold neoclassicism of the Royal Academy of his time, he took part in designing stained-glass windows and decorative paintings for this fantastic building. What has become of West’s efforts in stained glass no one knows, but recently two of the portraits he painted as decoration for Fonthill have been given to the Museum. These portraits at first glance seem prosaic enough, but on further examination certain rather puzzling curiosities appear. One is struck by the sort of indeterminate depersonalized character of the people portrayed. The costumes appear to be “costumes” rather than clothing. The slightly larger-than-life scale has a disturbing effect. All of these peculiarities, however, are explained when one is aware of the fact that these are not portraits in the ordinary sense but are consciously designed elements of the theatrical background Beckford planned in his Gothic palace.

The West portraits of Beckford’s grandparents were painted in 1797. Since both Peter Beckford and his wife, Bathshua, died in Jamaica forty or fifty years before this, there is no possibility that they were painted from life; at best the faces may have been copied from miniatures, but probably both of these portraits were the product of West’s rather limited imagination. Undoubtedly they were painted in a hurry, the artist’s hand spurred on by the directions of the impatient Beckford. At Fonthill they were ranged on the walls of one of those monumental salons whose heraldic and genealogical decorations formed such an insistent feature of the place.

Judging from the views of some of these galleries, the portraits were hung very high, near the ceiling, where they would appear as spots of color balancing similar ranks of other family portraits. In the dim light admitted by the emblazoned glass they doubtless made the proper impression as suitably rich and imposing ancestors; perhaps they were particularly designed in large scale so that they would show up properly in a vast, high-ceilinged gallery. Obviously they were from the first not intended as portraits of living people but as genealogical effigies and symbols of hereditary opulence. Bathshua Beckford, stifled in ruffles, sits in matronly leisure holding a book. Her husband, dressed in an approximation of the garb of a Restoration dandy, leans elegantly on a crumpled map of Jamaica, upon which he maintains symbolically a firm patrician grasp. From this portrait no one would ever guess that he was the son of a bold Jamaica buccaneer or that he was a provincial rakehell accused of murder.

In the creation of Fonthill Abbey Beckford saw the materialization of his romantic dream palace. As a house in which to live it was of course unbelievably inconvenient, even with a staff of thirty servants. On the building of this elaborate structure Beckford is said to have spent almost three hundred thousand pounds. The
method of building Fonthill was no less fantastic than its design, for it was erected with all possible speed by alternating gangs of laborers working night and day, winter and summer, sacrificing all solid structural practices so that the edifice appeared to rise at a stroke like some magical transformation scene in a theatrical production. Fonthill Abbey was, in fact, little more than a vast piece of theatrical machinery, a backdrop for the moonstruck Gothic pageant of Beckford’s glittering and ostentatious seclusion. Superficially the building might be considered as an example of Gothic Revival architecture, but actually it was merely the gilded and painted setting for the rococo Portuguese tableaux vivants of Beckford’s extravagance. The building not only had many of the insubstantial qualities of a theatrical setting; it also had a purposely de-

signed emotional impact with its soaring walls and tower, its heavy and draughty solemnity, and its ornate furnishings. Architecturally the place was a romantic echo of the Portuguese Gothic Batalha, but as a museum of treasures it was the translation into fact of the palace of the Caliph Vathek.

“‘The palace named ‘The Delight of the Eyes, or the Support of Memory,’ was one of entire enchantment. Rarities collected from every corner of the earth were there found in such profusion as to dazzle and confound, but for the order in which they were arranged. . . . Vathek omitted nothing in this palace that might gratify the curiosity of those who resorted to it, although he was not able to satisfy his own, for he was of all men the most curious.’”

For almost fifteen years Beckford lived at Fonthill behind its six or eight miles of twelve-foot wall. His neighbors never forgave him for his love of privacy. To many of them it seemed inexplicable that a man of such wealth should hide himself from society. The fox-hunting gentry of Wiltshire considered him an eccentric of the most extreme perversity when he barred the chase from his estate with a wall so high that no hunter or fox could top it. Their angry gossip gave rise to all kinds of darkling rumor as to what went on behind that wall.

In spite of the rumors of Arabian orgies, however, apparently nothing much went on at Fonthill except the amassing of one of the most extraordinary art collections and libraries brought together in the nineteenth century. When Beckford’s income from his Jamaica estates was severely reduced, shortly after 1820, he decided to sell the Abbey and its contents, except for his most rare and sumptuous possessions. These he took with him to his house in Lansdown Crescent, Bath.

The auction catalogue listing the remaining contents of Fonthill Abbey gives an idea of the smothering luxury in which he lived. The interior of this remarkable house was upholstered and hung with hundreds of yards of brocades and velvets (some of the windows were fifty feet high!). Scarcely a piece of furniture was without its historic associations or at least an applied ornamentation of some rare substance—malachite, lapis lazuli, onyx, amber, agate, lacquer, ivory, or mother-of-pearl. Over four hundred paintings by old and modern masters were sold. The auction lasted for thirty-seven days. Hundreds of eager buyers attended, and thousands of curious visitors strolled through the galleries of Fonthill, which had for so long been a glamorous place of mystery.

Within a very few years after Fonthill Abbey was sold the main tower collapsed and carried down with it large parts of the surrounding
wings. This prodigious if unplanned theatrical climax closed the tragicomic extravaganza of Fonthill with a suitably fantastic flourish.

Though Beckford lived on a much less grandiose scale for the rest of his life, his residence at Bath was filled with luxuries. He never ceased his activities as a collector, and his house and the curious tower he built overflowed with thousands of rare books and works of art.

At Beckford’s death in 1844 his treasures passed to his daughter, Susan Euphemia, who had pleased him mightily by marrying Alexander, Duke of Hamilton. In 1882 these things were sold at the famous Hamilton Palace sale—the most spectacular auction of the period. In 1919, after the Hamilton title had passed to another branch of the family, Beckford’s family portraits were sold. The great prizes of this later sale were the Romney double portrait of Beckford’s daughters (now in The Huntington Art Gallery, San Marino, California), which was sold for $273,000 (colossal price), and the portrait of William Beckford as a young man, also by Romney. The West portraits of Peter and Bathshua Beckford were also in this sale, but by contrast they brought comparatively modest prices. The Romney portraits can stand as independent works of art, but the Wests without their planned setting and without some explanation of their purpose are but fragments of a forgotten decorative scheme.1

Among the treasures of Fonthill Abbey and Lansdown Tower that have found their way into the collections of the Museum are two small Italian paintings, two pieces of porcelain from a handsome Meissen dinner service, a marvelous thirteenth-century French Gothic enameled chasse, or reliquary, and two superb pieces of French eighteenth-century furniture.

The two Italian renaissance paintings are not imposing in size, but they are both perfect little masterpieces of their kind: intimate and gemlike miniature works of the finest quality. These are Pesellino’s Madonna and Child with Six Saints (attributed in Beckford’s time to Fra Angelico) and Bellini’s Madonna and Child (attributed in Beckford’s time to Cima da Conegliano).

Beckford’s appreciation of the genuine Gothic of the thirteenth century, as opposed to his interest in the sham Gothic Revival taste of the late eighteenth century, is well exemplified in the jeweled and enameled chasse from his collection. Beckford was fascinated with things of this sort. His enthusiastic description of similar reliquaries shown him at Batalha moved him to write:

“One of the sacristans or treasurers, who happened to have a spice of antiquarianism, guessing the bent of my wishes, produced, from a press . . . several golden reliquaries, as minutely chased and sculptured as any I ever saw at St. Denis . . . one in particular, the model of a cathedral in the style of the Sainte Chapelle at Paris, struck me as admirable. Ten times at least did I examine and almost worship this highly-wrought precious specimen of early art, and as many times did my excellent friend, the Prior of St. Vincent’s . . . express a wish that I should not absolutely wear out my eyes or his patience.”

In Britton’s description of Fonthill Abbey the

1 West also painted a portrait of Beckford’s mother and one of his Aunt Elizabeth, Countess of Effingham, for Fonthill. The portrait of his mother is now in the collection of The Brook, New York.
Beckford chasse is particularly mentioned as one of the ornaments of St. Michael's Gallery: “an antient Reliquary . . . an article of too much curiosity, antiquity, and rarity to be passed with a slight notice only . . . a Greek shrine of metal, for containing relics, brought by St. Louis from Palestine,” which had “been deposited at St. Denys, whence it was taken during the French Revolution . . . . It was in the possession of Mr. Astle in 1789, and is said to have belonged to Malmsbury Abbey.”

The two pieces of French eighteenth-century furniture are perhaps the handsomest and most remarkable works of their kind. The famous matching lacquered commode and secretary designed by Riesener for Marie Antoinette were most probably bought in Paris during the French Revolution by Beckford. This cannot be definitely proved without a search through Beckford’s papers, perhaps not even then, but in a description of Fonthill Abbey published in 1812 there is a statement that may well apply to these pieces: “Here are two inestimable cabinets of rarest old japan [i.e. Japanese lacquer], enriched with bronzes by Vulliamy.”

Last but not least are the covered tureen and platter from an elegant Meissen dinner service specially made for the Prince of Orange about 1770 and decorated with delicately painted views of the ports and towns of Holland and its colonies. This service, when it was sold at Fonthill Abbey in 1823, consisted of about four hundred pieces.

These varied works of art, ranging as they do from the holy reliquary of a saint, through the rich possessions of princes and kings, to the profane faces of Beckfords but one generation removed from piracy, augment, in a way that no written description can, our picture of William Beckford, one of the most elegant and cultured connoisseurs and collectors of his time. By their very disparity these fragments of his surroundings cast a perhaps diffused but nevertheless illuminating beam into the shadows of the past where the eccentric shade of “Vathek” Beckford lingers, solitary and splendid, a paragon of luxurious tastes, whose literary and architectural fantasies have given him a specialized kind of fame in obscurity that would certainly have pleased and amused him.

*Meissen tureen and platter, part of a dinner service with views of Dutch ports and towns. German, xviii century. Bequest of Alfred Duane Pell, 1902*