Puritan Picture: Vanity, Morality, and Race (New Haven, CT, 27–28 Sep 24)

New Haven, CT, USA, Sep 27–28, 2024
Deadline: Jun 17, 2024

Sarah Leonard, Yale Center for British Art

Puritan Picture: Vanity, Morality, and Race in Seventeenth-Century Britain.

The middle decades of the seventeenth century in Britain were characterized by radical political, religious, and social change. In this period, an unknown artist created a remarkable painting that spoke to fears and anxieties crystallizing around a perceived increase in moral laxity, gender transgression, and the insidious influence of foreigners. The painting depicts two women side by side, each wearing a conspicuous array of beauty patches. The woman on the left reprimands her companion with the words “I black with white bespott: y[o]u white w[i]th blacke this Evill / proceeds from thy proud hart, then take her: Devill.” Text and image combine to inveigh against the sins of pride, vanity, and worldly excess. The painting reminds the viewer that sinful behavior leads to the devil and exhorts them to seek salvation.

Purchased by the Yale Center for British Art (YCBA) at auction in June 2021, the painting was recognized as a work of outstanding significance to the study of early modern race and gender. After an export stop, it was acquired by Compton Verney, an art gallery in Warwickshire that is housed in a Grade I–listed eighteenth-century manor surrounded by 120 acres of parkland, landscaped by Lancelot “Capability” Brown. Compton Verney has loaned the painting to the YCBA for inclusion in the museum’s ongoing technical study of the theory and practice of painting skin tones. It will go on view at Compton Verney in November 2024. This enigmatic painting has never been subject to sustained research, and much about it remains uncertain. We do not know the identity of the artist or patron, or the original location of the painting, and it is not clear whether the two women are real or imagined figures.

The YCBA, in partnership with Compton Verney, will host a two-day symposium to increase understanding of this significant object in the history of British art and culture. We welcome proposals from established and emerging scholars and encourage participants to be imaginative in their approach. Themes for consideration include but are not limited to:

- artist circles and modes of production
- color symbolism and its connection to racial formation
- contemporary attitudes to piety and morality
- cosmetics, clothing, and accessories
- female sexuality and gender roles
- pigments and processes used by early modern artists for painting skin tones

- religious and ethnic minorities in early modern Britain
- the role of print culture and prescriptive literature

The symposium will be held at Hastings Hall, Yale School of Architecture, on September 27 and 28, 2024.

Please submit an abstract of no more than 250 words and a short biography to Sarah Leonard (sarah.leonard@yale.edu) by Monday, June 17, 2024. Final presentations should not exceed twenty minutes in length.

The YCBA will provide travel and accommodations for successful applicants.

Reference:

CFP: Puritan Picture: Vanity, Morality, and Race (New Haven, CT, 27-28 Sep 24). In: ArtHist.net, May 25, 2024 (accessed Nov 4, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/41953>.