The British Castle
A SYMBOL IN STONE
The British Castle
A SYMBOL IN STONE
Castles have been a constant presence in the British landscape for the past thousand years. Essentially, a castle is a fortified residence of a royal or noble family. Unlike a palace, which is usually the unfortified home of royalty, or a fort, which is not a family home and primarily serves a military purpose, a castle both commands the surrounding landscape and forms the nucleus of a domestic community. Although some later residences have borrowed the trappings of a castle, true castles are the product of the middle ages. Hundreds of medieval castles dot the British landscape today—many are now ruins, but some are still inhabited by aristocratic and royal families or serve as government buildings. The story of these medieval structures in the modern era provides a singular lens for viewing British history.

This exhibition displays a collection of paintings that explore the place of castles in the British landscape and imagination, examining the ways in which these structures have intersected with the lives of people and communities from the Tudor period to the present. Over the centuries, the castle has had a range of meanings in British literature and art. As physical seats of power, castles were emblems of government; as the residences of aristocratic families, they became images of social continuity and domesticity; as great bastions, they became symbols of resistance in times of peril; as ruins, they became potent bearers of legend and folklore—from tales of princesses and chivalrous knights to the settings of gothic horror novels.

Dominating the surrounding landscape, a castle stands alone as the subject of a gaze, the setting of a story, or as the center of a reign. A vision of dynastic power and wealth, castles are among the most expensive structures realized for personal use. They are objects of multiple metonymies, becoming emblems of local community, markers of family identity, or icons of global empire. Thus they are bearers of local, national, or even global significance. Few structures have such a powerful pull on our collective imaginations.
The Inhabited Castle

Castles in British history mattered precisely because they were inhabited. Even as modern domestic technology and planning meant that genuine medieval castles were no longer the most comfortable houses available, their dominant position in the landscape and the symbolic role they played in connoting their owners’ ancient lineage meant that they remained desirable seats for powerful families.

After the English Civil War and during the start of the Industrial Revolution, castles took on a more complex role in modern society. Constitutional changes led castles to become strongholds of monetary and political power rather than military strength, while the development of cities and industry eroded the power of the aristocracy.

In these paintings, castles loom over developing industrial centers as reminders of an old way of life, lend a mark of status to portraits, and reflect the changing nature of the homes of the aristocracy. This wall includes stylized portrayals of life in castles as it was lived by those from all levels of society, from horse grooms to the children of court officials to the castle owners themselves. The wall also includes paintings that demonstrate the role of the castle as it finds its place in modern and growing cities.

Richard Dadd, *Sketch for the Passions: Pride*, ca. 1854, watercolor, black ink, and graphite on paper, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection
Dr. John Logan Campbell

Mungo Burton, 1790–1882
1838, oil on canvas
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1974.3.2

Dover

Richard Wilson, 1714–1782
between 1746 and 1747, oil on canvas
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1976.7.173

The site of Dover Castle has been significant since at least Roman times. Since its construction in the eleventh century, the structure has stood fast against invasions from France, even serving as an important military site during the Second World War. As the fortress located at the point closest to the Continent, its prominence in the British imagination is reflected in its nickname “the key of England.” Richard Wilson’s painting offers a view of Dover from afar that captures its elevated position in the surrounding landscape, overlooking the English Channel.

Outside the Guard House at Windsor

Edmund Bristow, 1787–1876
early nineteenth century, oil on canvas
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B2001.2.258

Portrait of a Girl

Sir William Beechey, 1753–1839
ca. 1790, oil on canvas
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1976.7.5
5

A View of Thames Street, Windsor

George Vincent, 1796–1832
1827 to 1830, oil on canvas
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.646

Thames Street, Windsor's main commercial thoroughfare, proves a vibrant cityscape on George Vincent's canvas: workers drag goods and chisel stone, families parade past storefronts, and white smoke wafts from chimneys. Equally central to urban life on London's eastern periphery, though, is the figure of Windsor Castle itself—quite literally elevated above the street's hurried activity. Like those workers and families, the castle is a character. Stately, omnipresent, and implacable, it appears an architectural manifestation of the British royal family. From their perch above these pedestrian happenings, monarchs keep watch over their domain.

6

Robert Dudley, first Earl of Leicester (1532/3–1588)

Unknown artist, sixteenth century
ca. 1565, oil on panel
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.445

7

Durham

Unknown artist, eighteenth century
ca. 1795, oil on canvas
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1976.7.126

8

Rochester

Edward Dayes, 1763–1804
1799, oil on canvas
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1976.7.109

9

Rochester Cathedral and Castle

Frederick Nash, 1782–1856
ca. 1825, oil on artist's board
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.478

This cityscape is full of motion: the river Medway glistens, smoke curls, and ships crowd around the docks. Rochester Castle anchors the scene with its twelfth-century tower, the tallest castle tower in all of Europe. Frederick Nash, who trained as an architect but primarily painted landscapes, carefully positions three vertical points of interest (the cathedral, the castle, and the ships) to denote three pillars of nineteenth-century British society—church, state, and commerce. Nash draws upon the historical prominence of Rochester Castle to highlight its endurance, a fortification that will stand for centuries more while modern industry develops in its shadow.
A Two-Decker on Fire at Night off a Fort

Charles Brooking, 1723–1759
ca. 1740, oil on canvas
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1976.7.9

Charles Brooking’s use of the term “fort” denotes the castle’s purpose as a military stronghold, and yet the building seems eerily abandoned, its gray-green stone melting into the glassy sea. The tranquility of the scene is interrupted by a burning ship being evacuated not far off shore. The haunting image juxtaposes the ideal function of a fort with its visible emptiness and contrasts the symbolic strength of a castle with the ephemerality of fire and human existence. The burning ship embodies the sublime in both scale and sudden disaster, simultaneously evoking fear and awe in a viewer. This is Brooking’s earliest known work, painted and signed when he was seventeen. A talented marine painter, he died at age thirty-six, leaving behind a collection of atmospheric seascapes.

Cordelia Championed by the Earl of Kent, from Shakespeare’s “King Lear,” I, i

Unknown artist, eighteenth century
between 1770 and 1780, oil on canvas
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Fund, B1975.5.15

As Shakespeare was dubbed England’s national poet in the eighteenth century, his works took on fresh importance as the country was swayed by cultural and political tensions. The family became a visual symbol of the state, with the relationship between a father and his children becoming a proxy for a more expansive relationship between the people and the king. The unattributed Cordelia Championed by the Earl of Kent therefore advances the values of the private, domestic, and filial with the marginalized Cordelia as the image of passive feminine piety. She and Kent balance the red-dominated center of the painting, and despite her sidelined position, she becomes an alternate focal point of dazzling purity contrasting with the male passions that define the rest of the painting.

An Unknown Man, Probably the ninth Earl of Derby

Willem Wissing, ca. 1656–1687, and background by Jan Wyck, ca. 1645–1700
1684, oil on canvas
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Fund, B1979.18

It may not be a coincidence that a generation before this painting of William Stanley, ninth Earl of Derby, was completed, his family’s castle was destroyed in a scene that likely looked similar to the one in the portrait’s background. Greenhalgh castle, constructed in 1490 by the first Earl of Derby, surrendered after a two-year-long siege (1644–45) launched by Oliver Cromwell’s forces during the English Civil War and was promptly slighted (partially destroyed) to ensure that it would never again be used for military purposes. In his portrait, Stanley grips a baton of command, signaling that his family’s loss did little to diminish his authority.
George Vincent, *A View of Thames Street, Windsor* (detail), 1827–30, oil on canvas, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.
The castle has historically occupied an important place in the British cultural imagination. Throughout the modern era, artists have used the iconography of castles to allude to a variety of aesthetic, political, and historical themes. The works on this wall are representative of the diverse ways that castles—either real or imaginary—were deployed in art; they functioned as emblems of specific cities, illustrations of mythological tales, or reminders of past ways of life.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the enduring ruins of castles served as inspiration for romantic art and writing, a movement that celebrated emotion and imagination. They were favored subjects in both the picturesque tradition and the sublime. William Gilpin, an important eighteenth-century theorist of the picturesque, noted that if a structure is to be endowed with “picturesque beauty,” one must “turn it into a rough ruin.” Alternatively, the irregularity of their decay and their often dramatic settings allowed artists to convey the awe-inspiring enormity of the sublime through their portrayal. Thus castles could feature in tranquil scenes or they could be sites of tumult and terror.

The Symbolic Castle

Sir Augustus Wall Callcott, 1779–1844
between 1808 and 1809, oil on canvas
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B2001.2.235

Augustus Wall Callcott’s dramatic rendering of Windsor Castle— at the time, the residence of an elderly and infirm King George III—celebrates the ancient construction that Britain’s rulers called home. A famed landscape painter, Callcott depicted the looming, silhouetted Gothic palace, built originally in the eleventh century, from the bucolic pastures of Eton, just across the river Thames. Here, dark clouds part, casting the pastures and castle alike in the golden glow of sunlight. In this way, Callcott, who was knighted in later years, uses symbolism to laud the monarchy: Windsor Castle presides over the romantic British countryside.

Windsor from Eton
14

Upnor Castle, Kent

Henry Pether, active 1828–1865
c. 1850, oil on canvas
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1976.7.139

In Upnor Castle, Kent, Henry Pether (possibly the son of Sebastian Pether, whose Moonlight River Scene also appears in this exhibition) paints a castle that once served as an Elizabethan artillery fort. Originally built to protect the dockyard and ships of the Royal Navy, it later became a naval ammunition depot for gunpowder, ammunition, and cannons. Pether’s depiction captures the passage of time and the changing function of the castle: he does not allude to the strategic role that Upnor Castle once played. Instead, the artist places the castle within an idyllic scene of daily life. Two men dock a boat while puffs of smoke drift out of a chimney on the right. The castle recedes into a moonlit background, a trait for which Pether was well known.

15

Caernarvon Castle

Joseph Farington, 1747–1821
c. 1780, oil on canvas
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1976.7.118

Edward I constructed Caernarvon Castle after his conquest of Wales in 1282, envisioning it as a symbol of English dominance over the region. The castle derived further authority from its association with the Roman myth of Magnus Maximus, father of Constantine and first independent king of Britain. Appropriating the status of this prestigious predecessor, Edward drew inspiration from Roman design; the polygonal towers and multicolored stone reference Roman forts and the walls of Constantinople. Eighteenth-century artists favored Caernarvon for its folkloric associations with Rome. Here, Joseph Farington positions the viewer inside the castle, emphasizing its grandeur and timelessness, even in ruin.

16

Port Mahon, Minorca

Gaspar Butler, active ca. 1718–1730
c. 1735, oil on canvas
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.84

Thomas Creswick, St. Michael’s Mount, Cornwall, ca. 1836, oil on panel, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.
John Inigo Richards, *Corfe Castle, Dorset*, 1764, oil on canvas, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection
St. Michael’s Mount, Cornwall

Thomas Creswick, 1811–1869
ca. 1838, oil on panel
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.178

St. Michael’s Mount is a small island off the coast of Cornwall crowned by a church and castle. This jewel-like painting captures the castle’s romantic setting, where twice a day, the tide recedes to allow access to the island via a cobblestone causeway. In legend, the archangel Michael guards England from a stone seat atop the mount; John Milton embraced that imagery in his famous poem from 1637, “Lycidas.” The artist, Thomas Creswick, was a member of the Birmingham School of landscape artists, which distinguished itself by a fascination with minute and accurate depictions of nature.

Dolwyddelan

Thomas Creswick, 1811–1869
ca. 1838, oil on panel
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.179

The Bard

John Martin, 1789–1854
ca. 1817, oil on canvas
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.439

Based on a dramatic poem by Thomas Gray, The Bard was painted by John Martin around 1817, at the height of the romantic period. Amid a powerful landscape with ominous clouds, a raging river, and gnarly walnut trees, the castle’s stony architecture parallels the peaks around it, making this emblem of English power a seemingly indestructible part of the landscape. Awestruck by the scene, the viewer must take care to notice the figure of the last remaining Bard, defiant after Edward I ordered all the bards to be put to death when he conquered Wales.

The Haunted Chateau, Grez-sur-Loing

David Gauld, 1865–1936
1896, oil on canvas
Yale Center for British Art, Gift of Isabel S. Kurtz in memory of her father, Charles M. Kurtz, B1989.17.1
Corfe Castle, Dorset

John Inigo Richards, 1730/31–1810

1764, oil on canvas

Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.526

Chepstow Castle

Hendrik Frans de Cort, 1742–1810

ca. 1795, oil on panel

Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.163

Caernarfon Castle

Richard Wilson, 1714–1782

ca. 1745, oil on canvas

Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1976.7.174

Sketch of Hadleigh Castle

John Constable, 1776–1837

1828 to 1829, oil on millboard

Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B2001.2.141

John Constable’s election as a full member of the Royal Academy in February 1829 came just months after the devastating death of his wife, Maria. Despairing, he wrote: “could I get afloat on a canvas of six feet, I might have a chance of being carried away from myself.” He began this oil sketch in 1828, more than a decade after visiting Hadleigh Castle in the summer of 1814 and describing it in a letter to Maria. In spite of, or perhaps fueled by, both his depression and the pressure of being a full Academician, he delivered the completed six-foot painting to the Academy in 1829. This impressive work can now be viewed in the Center’s fourth-floor galleries.
Moonlight River Scene

Sebastian Pether, 1790–1844
1840, oil on canvas
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.502

Sebastian Pether’s father, Abraham Pether, was also an accomplished painter, and he was known as “Moonlight Pether” for his frequent nocturnal landscapes. The younger Pether continued to romanticize moonlight and fire in night scenes, where color harmony is as instrumental as subject. He would frequently place castles in his imaginative landscapes. Here, Pether paints an intimate glimpse of life by the riverside, humanizing the castle by focusing on life outside of it.

West Gate of Pevensey Castle, Sussex

John Hamilton Mortimer, 1740–1779
between 1773 and 1774, oil on canvas
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Fund, B1984.9

Shrewsbury and the River Severn

Unknown artist, eighteenth century
c. 1720, oil on canvas
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.264
33

Shrewsbury Abbey

Unknown artist, eighteenth century
ca. 1720, oil on canvas
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.265

These two sweeping views (27 and 33) celebrate the market town of Shrewsbury, just east of the Welsh border. The panoramic perspective accentuates the town’s role as a source of culture and influence in the broader landscape, highlighting the trade and travel that the river Severn facilitates in one view and the bountiful pastureland and abbey in the other. Shrewsbury Castle, a red sandstone behemoth built along with the abbey in the late eleventh century, is conspicuously absent from both views, suggesting that the castle, in private hands at the time of the painting’s completion, had diminished relevance in comparison to the town’s religious and economic life.

28

Study for “Calypso’s Grotto”

Francis Danby, 1793–1861
ca. 1843, oil on panel
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.199

Francis Danby, an Irish-born romantic painter, is best remembered for his oscillation between poetic and quasi-apocalyptic subject matter. This painting captures this stark dualism by portraying an evocative sunset and introspective glow characteristic of Danby’s works, while imparting a sense of the sublime through the steep incline of the coastal cliffs on the right. Calypso, a classical archetype of the beautiful but deceptive woman, might allude to the expanding underbelly of manufacturing hubs in Britain. The contrast of the jagged cliffs with the calm ocean links the classical, embodied in Calypso, to the realities of the turbulent political situation in 1840s Europe. Danby harkens back to mythology nostalgically, while stressing the sense of unease and isolation resulting from rapid social and technological change.

29

Man in Armor

Edwin Austin Abbey, 1852–1911, Yale MA (Hon.) 1897
ca. 1900, oil on pressed paper board
Yale University Art Gallery, Edwin Austin Abbey Memorial Collection, 1937.2585
Cottage on Fire at Night

Joseph Wright of Derby, 1734–1797
between 1785 and 1793, oil on canvas
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.714

Hawthornden Castle, near Edinburgh

Alexander Nasmyth, 1758–1840
between 1820 and 1822, oil on canvas
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.482

Kenilworth Castle, Warwickshire

James Ward, 1769–1839
1840, oil on panel
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1975.1.24

Throughout its history, Kenilworth Castle served as both a fortress and a palace, as a site of siege and a source of artistic inspiration. The castle is a palimpsest of construction projects, the most extensive of which were ordered by Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester (whose portrait hangs on the opposite wall), in preparation for Queen Elizabeth I’s visit in 1575. The castle of Dudley’s creation would become an icon of Elizabethan court ceremony and a source of continued fascination for romantic artists such as James Ward. In this work, Ward envisions Kenilworth as a living ruin; despite its dilapidated state, it is integrated into a productive landscape.