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PAINTING, PATRONAGE AND POLITICS

UNDER THE TUDORS

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In my lectures this year I shall be looking closely at the interaction between people, art and architecture. This is not about buildings, about art or about the people that commissioned either, it is about trying to understand how the Tudors and Stuarts thought about what we call art, what it meant to them and what it can teach us about the society they lived in.

This is a big subject and a complex one and in this, my first lecture, we are in an age when so little survives. We often don't know what people had in their houses and how things were shown. But nevertheless we know enough to bring out some important points about the uses and appreciation of what we would call art.

I'm going to use the term art to cover manmade objects that were not purely utilitarian – things that were made to please the eye as well as serve the hand. Nobody in sixteenth century England would have thought of art as we do. It was not a category of activity undertaken by artists. There was no morality attached to it – making things was a craft and one judged by criteria that we today would not necessarily recognise as those which would define an artwork.

Perhaps the most important criterion used to judge how impressive, important or beautiful an object was, was costliness. In contemporary descriptions the cost of an object is the most frequently commented upon characteristic – either in admiration as its gold and silver content was admired, or disparagingly if it was felt that something looked cheap.

So cost was probably the first thing people took into account in aesthetic appreciation, but they were also interested in craftsmanship which, at the time, was defined as cunning – the skill with which something was made. This applied equally to a dagger, to a fine coat, a goblet or an alabaster tomb chest.

Then there was novelty, a much-prized characteristic then, as now. The hunger for novelty was no less intense in the sixteenth century than it is in the twenty first and new forms of decoration, new manufacturing techniques and new types of object were hungrily sought.

Finally, there was placement, the relationship one thing had with another. An incredibly magnificent display of gold plate on a buffet set in front of a rich tapestry woven with gold thread would be regarded as a glittering aesthetic success.

Contemporaries who wrote about what they saw judged everything against cost, cunning, novelty and placement; take the example of George Cavendish, Cardinal Wolsey's contemporary biographer who described the splendour with which Wolsey entertained the French Embassy of 1527 at Hampton Court, after which they were then to move on to Greenwich where they would be guests of the king:

'the king was privy of all this worthy feast [at Hampton Court] and intended to far exceed the same... but to describe the dishes, the subtleties [desserts], the many strange devices, and order the same, I do both lack wit in my gross old head and cunning in my bowels to declare the wonderful and curious imaginations



in the same invented and devised... yet did this banquet far exceed the same as fine gold doth silver in weight and value’.

‘Wonderful and curious imaginations’ were the mainspring of Tudor art and architecture and were criteria quite different from the way we think about what we call art now. Our approach today relies, to a great extent on principles laid down by the work of the Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin in the first decades of the twentieth century. His achievement was to establish a more empirical way of judging art and architecture and his *Principles of Art History* set out how each artist had their own personal style that existed within a national style and within a period style. From this time the identification of personal, period and national styles, and naming them, has been one of the primary activities of art historians.

But we must start with an important point and that is that nobody in sixteenth century England bothered to sit down and write anything about what they thought about what we call art, let alone thought about style in a sense that it could be categorised. So to get some sort of clarity we have to stop thinking about art and start thinking about the objects with which the wealthy surrounded themselves. And in doing this I want to briefly take a step backwards and ask when it was that the wealthy men and women of society came to amass beautiful objects not only of functional value but of decorative purpose.

To do this we start with the wealthiest in the kingdom, the men and women who surrounded the monarch in their household. There is an important difference between a household and a court. The household was the organisation that made possible the monarch’s existence containing everything he needed for everyday life and for the normal business of ruling. The court is a more amorphous concept, because it had no static membership but contained the people who were, at that time, welcomed by the king as part of his daily round of life. They might be his friends, they were certainly his supporters and they were part of the setting of kingship - ornaments to the king’s power. So there was a sense of spectacle to the court, while the household was the machinery that made that spectacle possible.

A crucial component of a court is courtliness, a code of manners and behaviour to which its members subscribe. The early medieval kings simply didn’t have this; their closest attendants were tough soldiers geared to military action but, during the fourteenth century, these royal war bands gradually became more interested in what we call the arts; in tapestry, painting, poetry, sculpture and music. Macho aversion to such things gradually gave way to a sense of artistic accomplishment. At the same time more women were admitted into the everyday mix of people surrounding the monarch.

Many of these things can be discerned in England, perhaps, as early as the reign of Henry III, but all of them become a marked feature in the reign of Richard II (i.e. 1377-1399). In fact, a royal court in a recognisable sense to us today, begins to exist in England from his reign. Richard’s was a court which expressed an interest in culture, which comprised women to a much greater degree than previously, that could portray itself magnificently and that had a sense of hierarchy expressed in degrees of status and deference. Richard loved to wear his crown, he was preoccupied by ceremony and he loved expensive clothes, priceless personal jewellery, rich food and enjoyed having himself portrayed by painters.

Here we have the painting which to my mind epitomises the court of Richard II - the Wilton Diptych. This was painted as a portable altarpiece for the private devotion of King Richard II. The panels are made of North European oak, but have been transformed by immaculate painting and gilding, into a heavenly vision. On the inside, Richard II is presented by three saints to the Virgin and Child and a company of eleven angels. Nearest to Richard is his patron saint John the Baptist. Behind are Saint Edward the Confessor and Saint Edmund, earlier English kings who came to be venerated as saints. The outside bears Richard's arms and his personal emblem of a white hart chained with a crown around its neck.

The painting was obviously meant to be looked at from inside, but it could be folded up and carried about, and when it was, all that you would have seen were Richard’s badges and symbols. Such heraldry started as a system for identifying knights on the field of battle and, during the thirteenth century, became a formal system of visual communication policed by the royal heralds. The shield, with any supporters, the helm, the crest, together with



mottos, badges and seals were increasingly used by knights, not only in the field and at the tournament, but every day to express their knightly status.

It was King Henry III who set the fashion for using such heraldry in architectural display in the 1260s and, from that point onwards, if you had arms you would flaunt them on your buildings. As with almost everything else, Henry VIII took this to ridiculous lengths. His houses were slathered with heraldic devices; and there were plenty to choose from. Since 1198 the royal shield had three crawling leopards which, over course of time, were transmogrified into lions and then paired with fleur-de-lis to make the royal arms used by Henry VIII.

For the first twenty years of Henry's reign Katharine of Aragon's badges, the pomegranate of Granada, the silver arrows of Aragon, and the castle of Castile were used everywhere. Then there was the simple use of initials, HR for Henry or sometimes, an H entwined or juxtaposed with the initial of his queen. As under Henry one queen superseded another the heraldic palette changed rapidly - Katharine of Aragon's badges were expunged by those of Anne Boleyn and all too soon Anne's leopards were being altered by the royal carvers to look like the panthers of Jane Seymour: this particular problem was solved by 'new making of the heads and tails' but more often heraldic stained glass had to be replaced and coats of arms overpainted.

Heraldry may be to us obscure but in the sixteenth century it was not thought to be complex or subtle – putting your arms on a painting, a tapestry or on your house conveyed crucially important messages about your rank and loyalties. Heraldic symbols in the early sixteenth century were relatively clean and simple and far less complicated than they later became and so lent themselves well to artistic display.

The heralds were responsible for checking the correct use of badges and arms and they issued to royal painters and carvers' books of arms showing how they should be correctly used. Thomas Wriothesley, Garter King of Arms, who was intimately involved in every major ceremony of the first half of Henry's reign, maintained a workshop in Cripplegate where a team of painters kept the records needed to ensure that everything was done correctly. During the preparations for the Field of the Cloth of Gold, the Governor of Guisnes wrote, in a panic, to Wolsey asking that Wriothesley's heralds produce a book showing all the complex heraldry necessary for the meeting of two kings. The book does not survive, but that it was commissioned, demonstrates the close working between the heralds and the king's craftsmen. In fact the King's painter, John Browne, worked so closely with Wriothesley that their workshops were sited in adjacent houses in Cripplegate.

Henry's VIII's houses were therefore encrusted with dynastic signs and symbols, as indeed were many of its occupants from the humble Yeomen of the Guard to the Lord Chancellor wearing his heavy gold chain of office.

Entering a royal house, the first thing you would see was the royal arms carved, painted and gilded over the entrance gate: visitors to Hampton Court can still see these today. The royal arms showed explicitly to whom you owed loyalty and to whom the house would belong should he visit. Sir William Compton, a courtier who held a mass of royal offices under Henry VIII, built an entirely new house at Compton Wynyates, Warwickshire in 1523, here on his front porch were the royal arms; and in a near contemporary mansion built by a merchant at Hengrave, Suffolk from 1525 you see the same. Sir Thomas Kitson, a hugely wealthy London trader, thought, like Compton that he should dedicate his house to his monarch. So did the Fellows of Trinity College Cambridge.

The incorrect or inappropriate use of arms, particularly anything that looked like the royal arms could lead users into severe danger. The whole system of heraldry was policed by the Heralds and their reports could turn what looks to us like an innocent decorative device into a death warrant. In the mid 1540s Henry VIII became convinced that Thomas Howard, earl of Surrey was planning to take the crown from the future King Edward VI. The matter came to a head when Surrey quartered the arms of King Edward the Confessor an act that made his arms look like those of the heir to the throne. In fact, the arms of Surrey's ancestor Thomas Mowbray, 1st Duke of Norfolk show that he was entitled to bear Edward the Confessor's arms, but choosing that particular moment to emphasise his very distant royal connections was foolish.

Here is Surrey painted in 1546 in a magnificent painting with the arms of Edward II on the left and Edward III on the right. And this is the controversial quartering. The King ordered Surrey's imprisonment and that of his father, sentencing them to death on 13 January 1547 on a charge of treasonably quartering the royal arms. His father survived execution as the king died the day before that appointed for the beheading, but his son lost his head.

This cautionary tale shows that though heraldry was, as we shall continue to see this evening, one of the most important decorative devices of the sixteenth century it was not just a game. It conveyed crucial messages about rank and hierarchy and show the way decoration and the hard-edged issue of power, wealth and rank were intricately entwined.



While, during the whole Tudor period, heraldry was never superseded as the primary vehicle for display in everything from gatehouses to domestic tableware newer streams of thought and inspiration were becoming available to patrons, designers and craftsmen from around 1515. The courts of the two Henrys were cosmopolitan places. Most people were bilingual speaking fluent French, many also spoke Latin and most had travelled abroad to the Low Countries, to France and some as far as Spain or even Italy. There was a strong sense that the English were part of the universal culture of Western Christendom and the City of London, as a major centre of trade, reinforced international cultural ties. There were thus many arteries through which artistic influences flowed but, from the mid-1490s, northern Europe began to be increasingly exposed to decorative fashions from Italy. This was largely due to the fact that the French king, Charles VIII, had invaded Italy and, over a period of twenty years, his aristocrats, diplomats, merchants and soldiers helped diffuse across Europe the fashions that they saw.

Thus into England from France and northern European countries came an enthusiasm for a form of decoration known as the antique. This term, which first appears in England around 1513, refers to any form of decoration that drew its inspiration from ancient Rome. In particular it referred to a form of decoration known as grotesque-work which was invented in the last years of the fifteenth century.

In the Rome of the 1490s a group of daring painters began to explore the maze of underground passages and caverns that made up the buried remains of the Domus Aurea, the Golden House of the emperor Nero. This was a megalomaniac building project that made Henry VIII look like an amateur. It was a vast villa set in landscaped gardens covering 300 acres right in the middle of Rome, it was described by the ancient Roman historian, Suetonius, as 'ruinously prodigal'. Until explorers found their way into to its buried rooms nobody had ever seen the decorated interior of a high status Roman domestic building, but painters like Pinturicchio, by the light of their burning torches discovered, for the first time, the wonder-land world of painting that decorated Nero's house. The decorations they recorded soon became known as grotesques after the grottoes in which they had been found.

Grotesque-work was at first used to decorate architectural elements such as friezes and the strip down the centre of pilasters but soon it came to decorate panelling, walls and ceilings. It appeared in the background of paintings expressing the education and tastes of the sitters. Its key feature was the use of Roman masks, vessels, shields, plates, helmets and breastplates. These would most often be linked together by a sort of crazy candelabra into a tottering tower of treasure normally framed by putti and swirling foliage. By the early 1500s grotesque-work was all the rage and within a few years craftsmen and designers began to export it across Europe both in person and by the circulation of prints.

Printing was hugely important in the transmission of fashions in decoration. For the first time images could be mass produced and circulated quickly. From the 1460s English carvers were using printed sheets and books as inspiration for their work; most of these were produced in Germany but some also came from France and Italy. In 1504 Henry VII appointed Richard Pynson to be his official printer and, in 1518, he produced the first English title pages in the grotesque style. Prints became the source of inspiration and everything from stone carving, through stain glass to textiles were influenced by them. We should not imagine that this was a sign of some paucity



of imagination. It wasn't. The Great Holbein himself relied on a print to provide inspiration for the background of the Whitehall mural.

Enterprising designers and printers collected together numbers of printed designs and issued them in so-called pattern books. In 1538 a publisher in Strasbourg prefaced his book of patterns (which were for everything from the walls of a grand palace to the head-dress of a merchant's wife) with the words 'I... have assembled an anthology of exotic and difficult details that should guide the artist who are burdened with wife and children and those who have not travelled'. Many craftsmen and a number of patrons owned such books and so many individual features and designs from these books were copied in detail.

Take a look at the pilaster decorations at Kirby Hall, Northamptonshire which derive from the title page of one of John Shute's "The first and chief groundes of architecture" (London: 1587) the first architectural pattern book in English. These are examples of the magpie attitude to the language of the orders; they were effortlessly incorporated into the existing vocabulary of English decoration.



Now look again at the Stove tile and the cup design, and the portrait of Thomas Howard.



The way these new streams of decoration are key to understanding how tastes changed in the Tudor period. But so far I have been speaking of decoration, I now want to move on to the most important and admired art form of the age tapestry. Textiles and plate were the two things most admired by the Tudors and amongst these top of the range tapestry was unquestionably the most important.

For the modern eye the single biggest impact on entering the house of a rich sixteenth century courtier or a royal palace would have been the huge quantity of tapestry. In the early sixteenth century most tapestry was woven in the Low Countries and either bought off-the-peg from merchants or commissioned for specific locations or particular subjects. Quality varied enormously with the skill of the artist, the expertise of the weavers and the quality of the yarns and threads used. The best stuff was known as arras and was woven with gold thread (a gold filament wrapped round a silk core), very few people other than the king owned any of this and so, even for contemporaries, rooms hung with arras would have been arresting. Most tapestry was less glitzy and valuable and woven with varying mixtures of silk and wool. Wool tapestry could be bought for 8d per ell (an ell was 27 inches), silk cost a great deal more at 3s 4d per ell and arras was a steep 40s.



Tapestry was integrated with the architectural features in a room and was either made for it, or in the case of arras, the room could be designed round the tapestry. Normally it was hung from a cornice or jewel piece and reached down almost to the floor. There was a black-painted skirting at the bottom of the plaster to prevent a gleam of lime-washed wall peeping out at the bottom like a white sock under a pair of trousers. At the start of the reign rich patrons hung and bought tapestries in the prevailing style which was for extremely dense compositions with large numbers of figures crammed into scenes in very shallow perspective. The effect was dense and rich and reinforced the value and impact of textiles.

In 1528 Henry bought *The Story of King David*, one of his largest and most expensive sets of tapestry. At a cost of £1,548 it was worth the same as a Tudor warship and with ten pieces covering 420 square yards (a tennis court is 312 square yards) it was vast. The only rooms that could fit such a set were the outer chambers in the largest houses such as Greenwich. The tapestries set the biblical story in the sixteenth century Low Countries and King David's court could have been Henry's. But, by the time the Davids were hung, they were distinctly old-fashioned, as the great tapestry designers, influenced by stylistic innovations from the Italian painter Raphael, began to produce tapestries with deeper perspective and a smaller number of more life-like figures rendered much larger and in dynamic poses.

In 1538 Henry acquired such a set that told the story of St. Paul in nine scenes. It was another extremely rich weave laden with gold thread and was valued at the king's death at over £3,000. The change in style must have been startling to people at court, and it must have changed the whole feel of the state rooms. These tapestries were less oppressive, more three dimensional and exciting.

These new big scale tapestries were set in interiors that were redecorated to meld together traditional design elements with grotesque work. Here is the surviving ceiling of St. James's chapel. The design is one from Italy, and the decoration is full of detail of grotesque work.

Combining antique-work and heraldry with the existing vocabulary of architectural design required a new set of skills and, as well as native craftsmen, craftsmen and designers came from all over Europe. Although they were mainly northern European, known at the time as 'douche', who infiltrated the royal works in the 1520s and 30s, there were some Italians, but very few and they tended to employ French or German assistants. The Italians, however, brought quite a different quality to Henrician design. Wolsey had employed the sculptor Giovanni da Maiano in the early 1520s and he had supplied terracotta roundels containing heads of Roman emperors for Hampton Court. Henry VIII later commissioned more of these high quality sculptures for chimney-pieces at St. James's, Greenwich and Whitehall. Another Italian, Nicholas Bellin of Modena, seems to have brought the use of moulded stucco work into fashion at court. This was extensively used at Henry VIII's last great building work at Nonsuch.

But what is crucially important to remember is that this rich stream of decorative and artistic ideas, flowing from Europe to England was abruptly cut off as Henry VIII broke with Rome. There were huge consequences for this and the Reformation became a powerful force for decorative change.

Henry VIII's quarrel was not with traditional religion, it was with the pope. And it led to the assertion that England was, in fact, an empire, a realm without any superior on earth a notion enshrined in the Act of Supremacy of 1534 and given muscle by a new minister or Vice-Gerent, Thomas Cromwell. It was through the evangelically-leaning Cromwell that the break with Rome began to lead to theological reformation and it was under a clique of Protestant politicians in the reign of Edward VI that England's reformation became whole-heartedly protestant.

This political and religious break with Europe stopped the import of ideas from Catholic Europe and the Italianate grotesques of the first half of the century began to morph into something else – a craze we know as strapwork: most prominently first seen in the *Gallerie François Premier* at Fontainebleau, France. These were borders of writhing and twisting leather belts or straps which developed faces, animals, buckles, and studs to become a bizarre and comic world similar to that created by Bosch and Brueghel in painting.

Of the various designers who worked in this idiom by far the most influential in England was the extremely prolific and talented Jan Vredeman de Vries. The hall screen at Montacute House, Somerset is entirely made up of



elements from de Vries's books and, in the mind-boggling over mantel in the great chamber of the Red Lodge, Bristol (c.1585-95), both the cartouche and the atlases are direct copies from his prints.

This is the Mostyn Salt made in London in 1586-7 and you can see that on this monumental piece the framework is made up of strapwork filled in with various lively motifs of animals and plants.

It is no coincidence that so far I have barely mentioned easel painting. Let's return to the family of Sir Thomas More. You won't see any paintings hanging on his walls nor will you see a painting in Queen Elizabeth I's withdrawing chamber. The fact was that easel painting was not a particularly prestigious form of craft or decoration in sixteenth century England. In my next lecture I shall start to chart its rise in importance but for now we need to remember that plate and textiles were infinitely more prized than painted boards- even those by a great genius like Holbien.

One of the issues was that painting was, for many Calvinists, a problematic and potentially ungodly art. Not only was the risk of idolatry – which ruled out almost all religious subjects [Stoning the Pope] but there was the danger of the accusation that painters were copying God's creation which was perfect and needed no replication or improvement. Therefore, there were waves of iconoclasm that destroyed huge numbers of easel paintings, triptychs and wall murals in the 1520s and 30s and again in the 1540s and, as a result the huge amount of religious painting that existed in pre-reformation England has disappeared.

By Elizabeth's reign it was recognised that used in a secular context, an image of a man or woman for representational, civic or decorative use was acceptable and even in churches monuments that were really representative were very popular. In fact, a writer in the 1590s could say 'now every citizen's wife that wears a taffeta kirtle and a velvet hat must have her picture in the parlour'. This was exaggerated, but what is certainly the case is that by the end of Elizabeth's reign it was not only royal and aristocratic houses that contained portraits but the houses of wealthy merchants. Although there were a few painters who created what we regard as great works of art, like Hans Eworth, Isaac Oliver and Nicholas Hilliard, many concentrated on attempting to achieve a likeness most frequently to commemorate an event in a person's life. The yardstick was thus not some level of artistic achievement but whether the picture looked like its subject.

Here is the portrait of the 37 year old Hebrew Scholar and divine, Hugh Broughton in Christ's College Cambridge. It was painted to commemorate the publication of his first book in 1588 and his position as Tutor to a wealthy family. He holds a book of psalms a pair of gloves the text is Hebrew from Genesis. Note that we still have the coat of arms. A picture like this was a likeness but it, like the heraldry that it contained, conveyed information about the sitter.



It was for this reason that Elizabeth I started to try and control portraits of herself. Yes, of course it was partly motivated by vanity, but portraits that contained information could also contain mis-information. The Privy Council was ordered by the queen to seek out bad portraits of her and have them burned and then to ensure that new portraits were approved by the serjeant painter. The solution was to produce an official likeness and then licence people to copy it. This was not helped by the queen's extreme reluctance to sit for a portrait. Unlike Queen Elizabeth II who has been painted by hundreds of people Elizabeth I sat for only five painters.

Nevertheless there was an urgent need to produce portraits of the queen. She had been excommunicated by the Pope in 1570 and the display of a royal portrait was a gold-plated symbol of loyalty. One that many felt good to insure themselves with. You could buy a reasonably good likeness of the Queen for around £10. This meant that most families of any substance probably had a portrait of the queen and the aristocracy had prestigious copies around which their family portraits might be hung.

I deliberately show you here a middle of the road Elizabeth portrait which is a variant of one of the official versions painted at the end of the sixteenth century and perpetuates the ageless image of the Queen that had become fixed as the official iconography by that date. The face is an angular and masklike icon, and her torso is dazzled by a mass of jewellery, pearls and embroideries. By images such as these the loyalty of the subject was expressed as a near-religious devotion.



As I have suggested the things that we consider to be art today had meanings and powers in the sixteenth century that we now have to decode. It is for this reason that there have been misunderstandings about the consequences of the great wealth and power of subjects. Wolsey's fall in 1529 is sometimes attributed to his overblown architectural ambition and gargantuan appetite for beautiful objects. To see the matter in this way is fundamentally to misunderstand the situation. Before the 1530s churchmen were responsible for building most of the country's really significant domestic buildings. Wolsey was, in fact, the last in a long line of English bishop-statesmen who had built on a scale rarely exceeded by their sovereigns. Cardinal John Morton, who was bishop of Ely and then archbishop of Canterbury until his death in 1500, was also lord chancellor from 1487 to 1500. He was one of the two or three greatest builders of the fifteenth century in England, leaving monuments at Hatfield, Lambeth and Croydon to name a few. William Warham, archbishop of Canterbury from 1503 to 1532 and Lord Chancellor during the period 1504 to 1515, was responsible for the construction of Otford house in Kent, a house larger than Wolsey's Hampton Court, which was only a few miles from another of his residences at Knole. Wolsey's sits neatly within this pedigree. Wolsey reflected, in his buildings, the status conferred upon him by both his monarch and the pope. In an age of conspicuous display it would have been astonishing if he had not.

The same can be said of Lord Burghley in Elizabeth's reign, a man who built not one but two enormous houses. Theobalds and Burghley House were far larger and more spectacular than anything the queen had ever built and much of the contents of Theobalds would have equalled the magnificence of the queen's. But these were expected and enjoyed by Elizabeth, not resented or stopped by her. It was only when the accepted hierarchy was subverted or challenged as in the case of the earl of Surrey that there was a problem.

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