

Henry VIII and Painting

Brett Dolman

Curator of Collections, Hampton Court Palace

For the Tudors, 'Art' meant something very different to its normal, rather abstract, definition today. No-one at the Tudor court looked at a painting or a tapestry, or a building or a hand-crafted piece of jewellery, and experienced it purely in aesthetic terms. They did not debate the 'genius' of artists, nor deliberate on the underlying psychological subtexts inherent in a portrait. Painting, in particular, was not considered to be 'high art' and its position in the hierarchy of Tudor forms of interior decorative display was certainly below tapestry – something which was, usually, *intrinsically* expensive to produce, and therefore more highly admired and valued.

To put this another way – when we look at a Tudor painting, we are normally looking at in the wrong way. A Tudor painting served a particular and usually explicit cultural, political, religious or social purpose; it was almost never meant to be experienced aesthetically, nor meant as a route to understanding wider philosophical truths. It was not, to put it yet another way, 'Art', in the more modern sense of the word – a highly fashioned product of a highly skilled artist, to be enjoyed and understood for its own sake by anyone with artistic taste.

The Tudors certainly owned and made beautiful things. Owning 'treasure' – in the form of a palatial building, an expensive piece of jewellery or an exquisitely crafted gold clock – conferred status on the owner, reflected their importance and bought into the ubiquitous Tudor ideology of magnificence. As Maria Hayward describes, Henry VIII collected 'treasure' in all its forms as a means toward projecting his wealth, and therefore his power and authority.

Certainly too, there was an awful lot of artistic talent involved in creating some of this treasure: an army of embroiderers, goldsmiths, decorators, tailors, master masons and craftsmen of all sorts were employed, directly or indirectly at the Tudor court, to sate Henry's appetite for magnificence. Yet, most of this artistic product was appreciated, or at least certainly experienced, not principally for its aesthetic merit, but mainly for the expense of its constituent parts (the gold thread used in a tapestry) or the gaudiness of the spectacle of looking at it. Only occasionally do we find descriptions of artistic objects enjoyed for their rarity or the quality of workmanship, and this has less to do with 'Art', and more to do with accuracy of image or technical accomplishment.

What all this means is that the idea of 'Art' - as something that exists outside the context or purpose of the object itself - was not fully appreciated by the Tudor court. Similarly, the idea of an 'Artist' - of someone whose genius of artistic expression was in itself a reason for collecting or commissioning a work by them - is also an anachronism. This is key, particularly when thinking about the 'Art' that has survived from the Tudor period. What was it created for? How was it used? How should we talk about it? This essay looks at Henry's relationship with one form of artistic production at the Tudor court - painting - and attempts to answer these questions:

It is an art historical truism that there were no decent painters in England until the arrival of Hans Holbein. This is only true - if it is true at all - when painting is defined in the narrowest terms: painting on panels, and in particular, the painting of portraits. The reason why painting is often so narrowly defined, is that painting on panel (later giving way to canvas) gradually became, from the late 16th-century onwards, the pre-eminent artistic form, the most authentic way of experiencing artistic genius or of evaluating artistic merit. The art market was, until the

recent advent of all manner of alternative artistic media, dominated by this kind of portable art.

However, the average late medieval painter was actually engaged on all manner of painterly tasks that represented his identity as a particular type of artisan. These tasks incorporated everything from redecorating garden furniture upwards, from set design for theatrical events, the decoration of portable painted cloths with heraldic devices, to illustrating maps and illuminating court documents and prayer books with historiated or decorated initials – as well as painting portraits, either in miniature, or lifesize, on wooden ‘tables’ or panels.

Painters normally belonged to the Painter-Stainers Company – still ‘stainers of cloth’ rather than ‘artists’; they were apprenticed and trained in workshops, and collaborated on decorative schemes, which often meant teams of artists working on the same painting or series of related pictorial tasks. At court, they reported to the Sergeant Painter, a fairly low-ranking courtier, and worked for various royal departments including the Wardrobe, the Works and the Revels. We know the names of many of these artists from court payment receipts, including the successive Sergeant Painters John Brown, Andrew Wright and the Italian Antonio Toto del Nunziata, but very little of their work survives, or at least has been identified. This is essentially because most of their output was considered to be the product of a workshop, rather than any expression of artistic genius, and this product was often ephemeral, designed for a particular occasion.

Everything an artist did for the court had a purpose, a function – whether this was to provide a suitably colourful backdrop to a grand state occasion, or a blatantly jingoistic record of the King’s latest victories. Henry’s palaces were covered in highly coloured emblems, royal devices and ciphers; polychromed heraldic beasts sprung up on bridges and rooftops, and atop striped poles in gardens. All of this was meant both to provide a visually intense environment, as well as an

overt, and unsubtle, statement about who was in charge. More figurative work might include huge temporary painted canvases representing Henry's victories over the French in 1513 (as Holbein is recorded to have produced at Greenwich in 1527) or narrative cycles recording the royal progress to the Field of Cloth of Gold in 1520 (one version of which survives in the Royal Collection at Hampton Court today).

We can trace more of what once existed by trawling through Henry's own inventories of his collections. These detail a mixture of classical scenes, usually repetitions of well-worn favourites on popular themes - the sexuality of Diana and Actaeon, or the heroism of Hercules - alongside portraits and traditional devotional images taken directly from the Bible, or mystery cycles exploring the lives of the saints. All of these paintings would have once had an original context where their relevance to a design scheme, or a particular room, or a special occasion was obvious. Henry's collection was certainly not a 'trophy' collection of works of art assembled because of their artistic merit.

Indeed much of what was painted, judged from the small fraction that has survived, was decidedly average in quality, and this was particularly true of portraiture. Painting people's likenesses was an artistic challenge that required a degree of skill of which not all native English painter-artisans were capable. This became particularly obvious when their efforts were eclipsed by the advent in England in the early years of the 1520s of a phalanx of German and Flemish painters. The Netherlands in particular had a longer tradition of portrait painting, and a larger number of skilled practitioners working for an expanding client base that stretched outside the aristocratic court circles and embraced an enthusiastic, artistically literate, middle-class.

This had never been the case in England, but - encouraged by a King who was beginning to take an interest in all forms of European culture, and by the threat of religious unrest and continental war - many came

to England. Chief among them were the Horenboul family, Gheraert and at least two of his children Lucas and Susanna. Between them, they were responsible for the very first miniature portraits in this country, as well as influencing a higher quality of manuscript illumination, and, very probably, a portfolio of court portraits, which, unsigned as all paintings of this period are, remain difficult to identify.

What is certain is that the quality of portrait painting in the 1520s improves markedly, or – more accurately perhaps – portraiture in England moves from its previous purpose as a rather symbolic device intended simply to record status (by costume or explicit heraldic device or motto) or allegiance (by owning a portrait of your lord or king) to the continental model where its main function was to record *likeness*. This meant that English artists too, enabled by the skill of the northern European émigrés, were able to embrace a wider functional ambition, and English portraiture became ultimately a complex medium for describing and defining image, and for carrying a range of complex political, religious or social messages.

But this was a long process. Henry in particular never grasped the full potential of portraiture, or indeed of art in more general terms. He is, nonetheless, often credited with inventing a kind of portrait imagery, through his able court painter Holbein (who quickly followed the Horenboults to England), that transcended the mere recording of likeness, and became, in royal hands, a tool for propaganda. Henry, we are told, invented his own painted iconic figurative presence, realised its power, and commissioned hundreds of copies of himself to stand across the land.

Moreover, so little of the Tudor world has been left to us today, that it is tempting to use portraiture as a rare window into the inner psychology of its principal actors. We are burning, for example, to know what Henry VIII was really like, and – in Holbein's portrait – it is all too easy to find an answer. 'This is Henry VIII', screams the painting, but whilst this is

undoubtedly meant to be the portrait's literal intent, it is scarcely more than this. It is not a psychological character-study, nor the 'key to his mind'.

Holbein certainly intended to represent Henry's wealth and, therefore, his importance, and also attempted to record a faithful likeness of a man past his young athletic prime, but not yet overtaken by the sickness and obesity of his last years. But he was not looking to 'explain' Henry or to 'define' him, still less to 'market' him to a wide audience. These would all have been foreign concepts to Holbein, and, indeed, to Henry, for whom there is absolutely no evidence that he thought or understood this potential inherent within the artistic image. A visitor to Whitehall Palace in the early 1600s famously recorded how he felt 'annihilated' in the presence of Holbein's painting of Henry, the original full-size portrait that was lost to the Whitehall fire in 1698. Yet this experience would have been impossible without reference to the mythology of the man himself.

The function of Tudor portraiture, for Henry, and for Holbein, remained simple. Essentially, someone commissioned a portrait for one of three reasons. Firstly, to record the likeness of someone who wasn't there, and to offer as a gift or exchange: this was frequently part of the negotiations of a prospective marriage, just as Henry himself solicited portraits of possible brides between 1539 and 1540. Secondly, to show loyalty to a particular person: Holbein's portrait of Henry was copied during Henry's lifetime, possibly by Holbein himself, and certainly by other artists working close to him. This was nothing to do with some sort of centrally inspired 'spin' campaign, but all to do with courtiers keen to demonstrate both their loyalty to the King, and their own importance, by owning a copy of the latest portrait. Another key point here is that it didn't particularly matter who painted these portraits: people didn't want a 'painting by Holbein' but a 'portrait of the King'.

The art market that would one day determine Holbein's genius and his collectibility did not yet exist.

Thirdly, and finally, portraits were commissioned to tell us something specific and usually quite explicit. Almost all court portraiture has a basic message of wealth and status evidenced by elaborate costume and jewellery. Beyond this, there is occasionally another level of meaning: a portrait of Katherine of Aragon from the 1530s subtly alludes to her precarious position as she sought to resist Henry's attempts to get rid of her. At the same time, Holbein, in what is probably his first surviving image of the King, depicted Henry as the Biblical Solomon. This little coloured miniature may have been, some have suggested, an obsequious presentation gift from Thomas Cromwell to Henry. This is a more sophisticated composition that uses a Bible story to illustrate perhaps the redefinition of Henry's power after the split with Rome in the early 1530s. The Queen of Sheba, who stands for the Church, is shown addressing Henry, as Solomon. Her words declare that the power given to Solomon (and therefore to Henry) comes from God directly. The Papacy is redundant, written out of the equation.

Outside of portraiture, Henry had quite a traditional understanding of the power of image and association: he liked surrounding himself with tapestries, and paintings, featuring appropriate biblical or classical heroes whose martial or moral virtues he admired. He liked being seen as an 'Abraham' - the father of his people, a founder of a dynasty - which is why, presumably, he commissioned the *Abraham* tapestry series in around 1540. He also played the Biblical King David in one of the more private of his 'painting' commissions that survive - the British Library Psalter. But whilst Henry was keen to benefit from the power of visual association, there was no grand revolutionary public campaign of visual politics featuring Henry himself.

It was the 1540s nonetheless that saw the gradual emergence of painting, in particular, as a more highly admired and understood

mechanism for political and religious advertisement. This saw its full flowering under Elizabeth I, where portraiture and artistic iconography in general was manipulated in a much more active way. But in the last years of Henry's reign, we can trace the beginnings of this process...

In 1537, Holbein had used the clumsy device of text and image to ram home the political message of his enormous Whitehall Mural. He needed to add the text that told everyone how wonderful Henry was, because the development of visual iconography to make the same point was still limited. By 1545, the date of Henry's triumphalist dynastic family portrait, Henry was able to commission a painting which explicitly, without the need for explanatory text, described the King, together with his son and heir Edward, and Edward's mother Jane, within a holy setting, atop an Armenian carpet full of symbolic theological detail. By the 1570s, Elizabeth I could commission a painting which explicitly depicted her as Peace, and her half-sister Mary as War and Discord, in Hans Eworth's re-interpretation of what a Tudor dynastic painting should look like.

It was, to an extent, the Reformation that eventually brought about this sea-change in the way art was viewed and seen, not just at court, but in the wider world outside. The Protestant revolution meant that traditional religious devotional painting and sculpture became increasingly unpopular, and – in areas of radical Protestant northern Europe – idolatrous. Simultaneously, Henry's assumption of religious supremacy meant that religious subject matter became conjoined with pieces of raw political propaganda. Da Treviso's iconoclastic painting [\[insert link\]](#) of the Four Evangelists stoning the Pope – a painting which is recorded in Henry's Long Gallery at Whitehall in 1547, and which still survives in the Royal Collection – is a startling example of this convergence of religious and secular art.

At the same time, Henry's last wife, Kateryn Parr, was at the centre of a new circle of interested, reformist patrons keen, it has recently been

argued, to further their own agendas through painting, and even through more traditional portrait commissions. Kateryn herself seems to have been a prodigious patron of portrait artists – Eworth, Lievine Teerlinc, Gerlach Flicke and Guillim Scrots all arrived in England during these last years of Henry's reign. Three surviving panel portraits of Kateryn survive – all by different artists – and documentary evidence that suggests that she commissioned more, along with a hatful of miniature portraits. England's last queen, conscious of the fragility of her influence and overshadowed by Jane Seymour (dead, but still the mother of the heir to the throne), was perhaps keen to establish her own royal identity. She has also been credited with commissioning new portraits of all three of Henry's children, helping to lend her cultural expertise to bolster the newly revised and inclusive Tudor line of succession.

Kateryn's enthusiasm was matched by others too. Inside and outside court, new markets for artists were opening up: the economic redistribution of wealth catalysed by the dissolution of the monasteries enabled cultural change too. Gradually, as a more demanding and visually literate public expanded, so too did portrait artists' own visual and iconographic vocabulary. At the beginning of the century, a sitter might hold a book (as a symbol of learning or piety) or a sword (as a symbol of martial valour) but by the end of the 1500s, a whole dictionary of symbolism and metaphor had evolved to carry more complex religious and political messages, even if the intended audience was still specific, and the aesthetic reach of the artist still limited.