EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES

***Holbein at the Royal Court, an exhibition at the Queen's Gallery*, Buckingham Palace, London, UK**
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This exhibition consisted entirely of artefacts from the Royal Collection – a collection that has over a million artworks. Inevitably, then, many of Hans Holbein the Younger's most notable works (*Lais of Corinth*, *Portrait of a Lady with a Squirrel and a Starling*, *The Ambassadors*) were not included – there was no effort to include Holbein works from other collections. The core of the exhibition was the drawings from a group of eighty portraits (mainly in chalk on paper with, sometimes, ink and/or watercolour additions) made by Holbein when he was in England between 1526 to 1528, and, again, from 1531 until his 1543 death. These drawings had been bound together in a 'Great Book' – a book 'discovered' by George II's wife, Caroline of Ansbach, in the 1720s and them disassembled by her. The drawings remain unattached, loose. The provenance of the drawings (and of other works) was accounted for admirably in accompanying information at the exhibition. The wording of information panels was invariably accurate and informative and never zealous in asking us to react to the artworks in any particular way. Sometimes, however, the offensive sectarianism of some of the antiquarian works on display could have been apologised for a little.

A small number of Holbein's works in oil were presented. However, other examples of types of Holbein's design work were presented and many non-Holbein contextualising works were shown too. The purpose of this review is really to note the structure of the exhibition and the way it used some Holbein works and many non-Holbein works to tell us a great deal about the complex visual messages sent out by Henry VIII's capriciously managed dynasty. The book published to accompany the exhibition, *Holbein at the Royal Court*, by Kate Heard (London: Royal Collection Trust, 2023, reprinted 2024), does no justice to the scale and layout of the exhibition. Although beautifully produced with

exquisite reproductions and full of useful information about Holbein's time in England and clear analysis of the sophisticated techniques he utilised, it lists only the Holbein works on paper and wood that were displayed. It does not feature other Holbein-related objects that were displayed, nor does it include non-Holbein works from the exhibition proper. In other words, to appreciate this exhibition one really had to be there in person.

There were five rooms, which one had to follow in sequence. They were arranged thematically rather than chronologically – although the first room, which had very little Holbein work at all, had the earliest pieces on display. It showcased various early sixteenth-century works, mainly Flemish, that had been commissioned and/or bought by Henry VII and Henry VIII. Some were portraits of European monarchs and aristocrats by anonymous artists. One was a religious work by Holbein – '*Noli me Tangere*', a pious depiction of the Resurrected Jesus trying to both calm a discombobulated Mary Magdalene and to tell her that his divinity is no longer human, no longer tangible or accessible to any tactile connection. States and their leaders always refer back to victories whilst downplaying defeats. So, it is no surprise to see a large-scale Flemish-style painting (dated vaguely to 1513 to 1547) of the 1513 Battle of the Spurs – one can easily imagine Henry surveying the vast numbers of mounted, winning English soldiers with smug remembrance. Two utterly different works stood out though. One was a 'Bust of a Boy' by Guido Mazzoni: this bust was something like life-size. Made from clay and painted brightly, the bust shows a young boy laughing with an apparently carefree disposition. His white teeth were startling – dental hygiene was not great in the 1500s, so it was a surprise to see so many apparently healthy (baby?) teeth. It is all quite mysterious – the boy could be anybody from a young Henry VIII to a favoured child of a court official. We will never know. But I was moved by the construction of the boy's carefree casualness. With his head turned three-quarters to the left, he seemed to be swaying airily. Bless him: he couldn't imagine the horrors of the sectarian and marital melodramas of the 1530s Tudor period. Those horrors are encapsulated by another artwork displayed in that room: the painting, *A Protestant Allegory*, painted by Girolamo da Treviso sometime in the early 1540s. It is a blatantly sectarian painting. In a stark, almost monochrome grey image in the grisaille style, the four evangelists drop rocks on the stricken Pope's head. Catholicism seems to be beaten with violence as much as the power of the Gospels in vernacular idiom. Although obviously metaphorical, the violence of the image exerts a chilling menace. It is notable that in the explanatory text there was no sense of present-day embarrassment about displaying such an image. Displaying, say, an anti-Islamic image from the 1970s without a humble proviso is unthinkable but displaying an anti-Catholic image from the 1540s needs, apparently, little self-reflection or even contextualisation. After all, Britain's monarchy remains constitutionally Anglican and

therefore constitutionally sectarian – I suppose there is no reason why they should be embarrassed by that. They are what they are.

The second room was more wholesome. Some materials relating to Holbein's Basle period were present – he lived in Basle from, roughly, 1515 to 1526. The left side of this room, on entry, was dominated by Desiderius Erasmus – then a sort of patron of the young Holbein. The painting of Erasmus displayed, though, was a 1517 effort by Quintin Matsys. In that painting, Erasmus sits happily writing, sympathetically lit by natural-seeming late-afternoon light. It is a loving portrayal, a homage to scholarship. Near that portrait, three books sat open in a heavy glass case. The books were all open at their title-pages. These three books were the only books in the whole exhibition – but what a threesome. They were the first edition of Thomas More's *Utopia*, the first edition of Erasmus' Latin translation of the *New Testament*, and Henry VIII's 1521 diatribe against Martin Luther, *Assertio Septem Sarcamentorum* (*Defence of the Seven Sacraments*). All very un-Protestant. The room also featured a hanging tapestry – the only tapestry in the exhibition. The tapestry, bought by Henry VIII for Anne Boleyn, featuring scenes from the Dido and Aeneas myth, is certainly arresting – but its post-Reformation provenance seemed inappropriate for this particular room. The exhibition's first real Holbein treat was on the opposite wall to the three books and to Erasmus: drawings of Thomas More and his family. These mark Holbein's Erasmus-approved first sojourn in London – from 1526 to 1528. The drawings, of course, are merely preparatory sketches (the final painting by Holbein is lost but copies after Holbein are extant) but they convey vivid character. More's father seems relaxed and secure, wrapped in fur with a slightly askew beret. More's wife and children all seem both pensive and calm; all seem happy with their lot – contented, cerebral people happy to sit patiently for their continental, chalk-armed artist. Patronage from Thomas More, a recommendation from Erasmus, commissions from the still loyal-to-Catherine-of-Aragon Henry VIII. Happy times indeed for this Catholic high society painter.

The third room can be described only in cliché: an embarrassment of riches. Dozens of the sketches from the Great Book were displayed on walls and in cases. Some of the sketches were accompanied by the oil paintings completed by Holbein subsequently. These 1520s, 1530s and 1540s paintings were painted after Holbein's Erasmus-snubbing conversion to the Reformed faith. Many of the drawings and paintings, though, do not engage with religion in any way. There is a stress on industry, on commerce, on professionalism. A 1532 painting depicts an unnamed Steelyard merchant. The sitter's life revolves around the maintenance of his magnificent beard, his paperwork and his money – coins are piled on his table. The Steelyard – a trading facility – was located near the present-day Blackfriars station. One can easily imagine a Thames mudlark hobbyist

joyfully digging up some of those carefully rendered coins today. The Royal Collections holds both Holbein's original sketch of Henry Guildford (1489-1532) and the finished oil painting. He is another professional, a knight of the realm and also Comptroller of Henry VIII's royal household. In the spare, austere drawing he is thickset and serious. He retains that formidable seriousness in the oil painting but, inevitably, the effect is richer, grander, with Guildford's collar of the Garter both framing his head and signifying his establishment status. Thomas Wyatt was one of Guildford's executors – scholars of what C.S. Lewis referred to, ludicrously, as the 'Drab Age', would be naturally drawn to the drawing of Wyatt. Another magnificently bearded fellow, Wyatt seems to gaze to his right – it is a far-off gaze, suggesting either thoughts of distant travels for his ambassadorial work or flights of poetic fancy. Suggestions that, of course, the viewer might be projecting onto Holbein's chalk and ink sketch.

The room was packed with vital drawings as well as the smaller number of works in oil. All these middle-ranking Tudor men and rights-bereft women seemed to wait patiently for attention. For me, though, the most striking drawing was a 1527 drawing of William Warham - the Archbishop of Canterbury from 1503 until his death in 1532. Warham, born *circa* 1450, was, I think, the oldest person that Holbein depicts in any drawing. He certainly looks ancient: Holbein has mercilessly recorded the Archbishop's cragged features, his unsmiling, grim expression and his tired, heavy eyes. His fur of office seems like a burden rather than a signifier of high ecclesiastical rank – he looks knackered in the finished oil portrait too (that is held by the Louvre). Warham did not live long enough to have to deal with Henry VIII's Brexit from Rome, but he was aware that Catherine of Aragon was no longer secure as consort - a quarter of a century in the still-Catholic Archbishop's role has clearly been demanding enough. Four-hundred and ninety-seven years after the functional sketch was contrived, I was moved to empathy and respect for the sheer weight of responsibility that Warham faced. There was one final revelation in this room of splendour. Another drawing of Thomas More was displayed – but it was held in a freestanding, vertical glass case. One could see the front of the drawing and the back of it. We could see More on the obverse and Holbein's instructions for himself on the reverse. These instructions, about such things as clothing and colours, are to aid Holbein as he works on the oil painting. A page has been attached to the rear of the drawing. With tracing in pencil, pricked pinholes and the careful notes for himself, Holbein shows us exactly how he amends the proportions and colours of the sitter from the sparseness of drawings to the richness of final oil paintings. It was an extraordinary insight into an extraordinary artist's extraordinary techniques.

The fourth room was the smallest room of all – it was a sort of bridge room between the two grandest rooms, three and five. But this fourth room had splendid treasures too.

Holbein designed fripperies for various metal works. The room had a collection of some metal works that are festooned with Holbein's designs. There was a grand, gold-plated chalice – one designed for an extravagant domestic interior. The room's armaments made a greater impression – for both their offensive capacities and for their obsolete quirkiness. The long, curved sharp sword, with a hilt elaborately decorated with Holbein-originated fripperies, could certainly do some damage still – but the two gun shields seemed laughable. They are each about eighteen inches in diameter. One would hold the shield in one's hand and point one's primitive gun through it. It could hardly have been effective against a well-aimed ancient lead musket ball let alone multiple arrows or cannon fire. A blasé Great War Lieutenant in *Blackadder Goes Forth* says that he wouldn't wish to face German machine guns without his stick; I could imagine him in the 1530s saying that he wouldn't want to face Franch cannonballs without his flimsy eighteen-inch gun shield.

Room five was the most spectacular room of all. The large rectangle room contained a few original Holbein drawings - one, putatively depicts Anne Boleyn, others, more certainly, show the young Princess Mary and Jane Seymour. There are later, post-Holbein renderings of Seymour too – it was good to be reminded that Seymour was something of a cult figure in the late-sixteenth century. She had, after all, given birth to an admittedly doomed male Protestant heir to the English crown, a feat not matched by any of the other (less mentioned, less often depicted) wives. The room was graced mainly by extravagant oil paintings though – one was of that male heir, Edward VI. Another work is an unspeakably iconic 1546 painting of the prayerbook-devoted future Elizabeth I. Most of these oil paintings were not Holbein originals of course, but early modern copies of Holbein works – or works not directly linked to Holbein at all. In our mind's eye we think we know what a Holbein painting of Henry VIII looks like – but we are more usually imagining Henry painted anonymously after Holbein. One such iconic image of Henry was a sixteenth-century copy of a Holbein original: it needs no description from me. You will know what it looks like even if you are not told which specific copy it is. Henry's eyes seem to bore into you. I felt that he was glaring at me because I laughed at his suit of armour. The suit, made around 1540, dominated the centre of the room – its hugeness only accentuated by its protective glass case. One should never laugh at anyone's physique, even that of a long-dead serial-killing tyrant – but I honestly laughed out loud at the sheer girth of the middle part of the suit. Henry was, of course, fitter in his younger days. A high point of his reign came at the 1520 summit with Francis I – the Field of the Cloth of Gold. The event is celebrated in a nostalgic painting of *circa* 1540. This enormous, four-metre-wide painting shows huge detail of a palace, fountains, noble men and women, senior clerics and massed ranks of English and French troops. But two things dominate: the shiny gold tent and the mounted Henry himself. Henry, as golden as the tent, dominates his obedient, head-down white horse and seems to stare out from the

massed ranks of followers and lackeys. This painting, of course, was not painted by Holbein but it is a crucial contextualiser – it seems to sum up Henry's prime-of-life glory-hunting.

There were many other notable works: a 1667 oil on canvas copy of the lost Holbein 'Whitehall mural' is an almost comically smug depiction of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York standing arrogantly (and, obviously, anachronistically) behind but above the equally arrogant Henry VIII and Jane Seymour. It was good to be made to recall the 1485 beginning of the Tudor dynasty as well as to reflect on its *diminuendo* ending. The sixteenth-century Reformation in England seems to be defined by a large work that rivals the one commemorating the Field of the Cloth of Gold. 'The Family of Henry VIII', from around 1545, celebrates Henry and, again, the long-dead Jane Seymour. Wives number four and number five are nowhere to be seen, though. But the young princesses Mary and Elizabeth are there. Their mothers (wives number one and number two) are gone and forgotten but, for now, the princesses share near equal status with their young brother, Edward. But only near equal status. Edward is standing right at the throne, literally by Henry's side; the two sisters are placed some distance away – and far apart from each other. This is a wide canvas – the wideness seems to unwittingly stress the distance between the siblings. A painting contrived to celebrate Henry's patriarchal reconstruction of a secure, hermetically sealed English monarchy serves only to remind us of its inner divisions and fractures.

The religious distance between these siblings would determine much of the rest of the 1500s. These distances and differences are depicted in many of the other works that were displayed in this room – or, rather, the differences are conspicuously ignored by these works. The exhibition's official book is inadequate and a review can only be so long so I will not recount the importance of the many other miniature, medium and massive works in this room. As has been stated before: you really had to be there.