

The Tudors: Art and Majesty in Renaissance England

Elizabeth Cleland and Adam Eaker, with contributions by
Marjorie E. Wieseman and Sarah Bochicchio
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Reviewed by Katie DiDomenico
PhD Candidate, Department of Art History and Archaeology
Washington University in St. Louis

The Tudor monarchs of England only reigned for three generations five centuries ago (1485–1603), but their legacy looms large in historical memory and pop culture. Henry VII, Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary I, Elizabeth I, and many others of the era are well-known—thanks in large part to the intrigue, myth, and misinformation surrounding the Tudor courts. The divorces, deaths, and executions of Henry VIII’s six wives; Henry’s break with Catholicism and the formation of a new church; and the sovereignty of not one but two (some say three) female monarchs are just some of the aspects of Tudor court culture that have captured imaginations over time.¹ Their presence in contemporary films, books, music, theater, and social media (Henry VIII even has his own account on X/Twitter)

ensure their enduring appeal to a variety of audiences.

Those compelled by the art and material culture of the Tudor courts now have a splendid new scholarly resource: the catalogue for the stunning 2022–2023 exhibition *The Tudors: Art and Majesty in Renaissance England*, hosted by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Cleveland Museum of Art, and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. The exhibition was the first in the United States on Tudor patronage of the arts and the artistic production surrounding their courts. The catalogue plays a critical role in preserving and extending the legacy of this important exhibition, much as the artworks in the exhibition have maintained the dynasty’s legacy. The publication’s scholarship illuminates the Tudors’ status as the first English monarchs to cultivate the arts and

mobilize them to political advantage. Although the dynasty emerged out of the contentious Wars of the Roses with a tenuous claim to the throne, the Tudors were able to harness the power of the arts to project an image of legitimate and stable rulership, effective diplomacy, and courtly splendor on par with Europe's more established royal houses. They did so through an extensive network of artists, craftspeople, agents, dealers, and bankers, and their patronage of artists from Italy, Flanders, Germany, and elsewhere brought continental knowledge and new art-making techniques to the island. However, by the end of the Tudor period, as the catalogue seeks to demonstrate, a uniquely English or insular style had developed, characterized by "esoteric symbolism, decorative surfaces, and a close interplay between the visual arts and literature."²

The beautifully illustrated catalogue is divided into four sections: "Inventing a Dynasty," "Courtly Splendor," "Courtly Identity," and "The Tudor Legacy." Each section features essays and annotated catalogue entries by the exhibition's curators Elizabeth Cleland and Adam Eaker, with additional contributions from Marjorie E. Wieseman, Sarah Bochicchio, and Giulia Chiostrini. The catalogue

contains over 120 entries on objects from collections in Europe, the United States, and Canada, as well as over 140 additional supporting images. All images are full color, and many are full page, conveying the minute details and sumptuous materiality of an impressive range of objects, including canvas and panel paintings, prints, tapestries, metalwork, armor, clothing, jewels, and decorative works. One of the catalogue's advantages is that it includes objects that were cut from the exhibition due to COVID-19 interruptions. And it encompasses immovable art forms such as architecture, tombs, and large-scale sculpture, offering a wide-ranging view of the Tudor world.

Individual essays offer critical insights into Tudor tastes, their sponsorship of artists and strategic use of artworks, and the afterlives of Tudor objects and aesthetic values. In the section "Inventing a Dynasty," Cleland's essay "England, Europe, and the World: Art as Policy" argues that the Tudors manipulated art to propagate and sustain claims to legitimacy. It also addresses the increasingly international artistic contacts fostered by the Tudor court, albeit international only in the sense of Pan-European. Tudor political machinations are often reflected in their far-reaching artistic and

commercial networks, which facilitated the flow of both art and political brokers to London from places such as Antwerp, Florence, and Seville.

The objects included in this section demonstrate the Tudors' concerted effort to legitimize the dynasty through heraldic symbols such as the Tudor rose, as well as the geographical reach of their patronage. An illustrative example is the *Cope of Henry VII* (1499–1505, cat. 7), a ceremonial cloak. Made from Italian velvet cloth of gold brocaded with silk and gilded silver thread, the cope formed part of an expensive commission for over thirty vestments celebrating Henry VII and incorporating his newly formulated dynastic symbology. Intended for use by priests and deacons at Westminster Abbey, both his successors Henry VIII and Edward VI retained several garments from this commission for their personal collections even after the dissolution of the monasteries, demonstrating the reverence with which they held the set and its importance in communicating continuity of rule.

In the second section, "Courtly Splendor," Cleland's essay "Furnishing the Palace" addresses the material splendor of Tudor palaces and homes. Although many of these structures are no longer extant, surviving drawings,

inventories, visitor accounts, and artifacts provide a sense of their original grandeur. Sparkling jewels, glimmering metalwork, gilded leather wall hangings, Turkish carpets, intricate embroidery, and luxury tapestries impressed palace visitors with the dynasty's wealth and connections. Eaker's essay "The Tudor Art of the Gift" demonstrates the critical role of gift-giving at the Tudor court to secure support, obtain knowledge, curry favor, and drive diplomacy. Gift-giving even became a competitive practice as rulers and courtiers sought to devise the most original or distinctive gift. In "Honing the Tudor Aesthetic," Cleland traces the development of a uniquely Tudor visual taste, which combined classical references, an appreciation for the natural world, and the theatricality of Arthurian legend. It is in this essay that the catalogue's claim that Tudor tastes represented a uniquely insular style is most clearly articulated.

The objects in this section speak to the material wealth on display at Tudor residences. Although the original pieces are now lost, Hans Holbein's ornate designs for goldsmiths' works such as mirrors, cups, and weapons give a sense of their mesmerizing opulence. His design for a cup that Henry VIII may have given to Jane Seymour and which was later passed on to

Elizabeth I (cat. 39) was elaborately decorated with antique figures, mermaids, and putti, and further embellished with diamonds, pearls, and enamel. Henry VIII also spent extravagant sums on monumental tapestries and was well-attuned to developing trends in the medium, commissioning sets from leading masters such as Jan van Roome, Pieter Coecke van Aelst, and Raphael. These included sets depicting stories from David and Bathsheba, the Triumph of Hercules, and the Life of St. Paul, biblical and mythological figures with whom Henry sought to associate himself and his reign. Such tapestries manifest the sensorial splendor of his court, their gold and silver wrapped threads glittering in the candlelight and the life-size figures seeming to animate the palace walls.

The third section, “Courtly Identity,” contains three essays by Eaker. In “Hans Holbein and the Status of Tudor Painting,” Eaker evaluates Holbein’s status at Henry’s court and the development of his legacy as an “old master” during Elizabeth’s reign, when he became a model for a new generation of court artists such as Nicholas Hilliard and Hans Eworth. In “Fashioning the Courtier,” Eaker assesses the importance of images, objects, and clothing in constructing identity at the Tudor court—

identities that relied heavily on prevailing notions of gender. And in “Icons of Rule,” Eaker traces the evolution of Tudor royal portraiture beginning with early portraits from Henry VII’s reign, which are restrained and dependent on Flemish precedents, to Henry VIII’s and Elizabeth I’s full manipulation and mobilization of portraiture in painting, print, and metalwork to convey notions of power, control, and legitimacy.

Objects in the plates of this section tend to portraiture in varied forms, displaying the full gamut of courtly fashions, identities, and political maneuvering. There are, of course, the familiar portraits of Queen Elizabeth, such as the *Ditchley Portrait* (ca. 1592, cat. 119) and *Rainbow Portrait* (ca. 1602, cat. 120), both by Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger, and the famed *Sieve Portrait* (1583, cat. 114) by Quentin Metsys the Younger. Perhaps more intriguing, however, are those somewhat mysterious or enigmatic portraits for which a definitive interpretation still eludes scholars. These include Nicholas Hilliard’s 1590–95 miniature portrait of Henry Percy, Ninth Earl of Northumberland (and one of Elizabeth’s favorites) reclining in a garden with a spherical object and a feather hanging over his head (cat. 110), the meaning of which is uncertain.

The final section, “The Tudor Legacy,” explores the continued interest in Tudor histories and personalities to the present day, as well as the various times at which this legacy was used in support of historical, political, and aesthetic movements. Bochicchio’s essay “Iterations of Elizabeth: A Seventeenth-Century Legacy” discusses Elizabeth’s posthumous hold on seventeenth-century artists and writers, who played on different facets of her identity—both masculine and feminine, real and imagined. Wieseman’s essay “The Tudor Afterlife” surveys instances of Tudor revivalism in the centuries following their reign to better understand how subsequent generations received and utilized the Tudor legacy. These revivals took many forms: Horace Walpole’s romanticized vision of Tudor architecture at his mid-eighteenth-century Strawberry Hill villa; nineteenth-century France’s fixation on Tudor condemnations, beheadings, and executions as pictured in academic painting; and twentieth-century American industrialists who emulated the Tudor aesthetic at their urban and suburban mansions (some of the finest examples of which are located in the Midwest).

One of the catalogue’s best features is the literal treasure trove of artworks from diverse makers and

materials that it has brought together and made available. Many of these objects embody overlooked genres, media, and narratives, especially those pertaining to women, such as the manuscript works of Esther Inglis and the outstanding variety of Tudor embroidery. These may not be the objects that the art historical canon has traditionally valued, but here they are held up alongside paintings, sculpture, and architecture. That said, other critical narratives seem underemphasized. Despite the inclusion of some global objects such as Chinese porcelain and references to Tudor contacts farther afield—Sir Francis Drake’s circumnavigation of the globe, Eastern contacts made via the Muscovy Company’s trade, and Tudor miniatures surfacing at Mughal and Ottoman courts—the catalogue remains largely European in focus. It contains only one image of a non-European: the striking portrait of Moroccan ambassador ‘Abd al-Wahid bin Mas’ood bin Mohammed ‘Annouri, who spent six months in London negotiating trade relations and alliances with Elizabeth I. Additionally, while the catalogue makes note of Black musicians at court and Black weavers, needle makers, seamen, and other professionals working in and around London, it goes no further in illuminating their stories,

despite sustained scholarly interest in Tudor England's global contacts and ambitions at home and abroad. As early as the mid-1990s, scholars such as Kim Hall pointed to the Black presence in Tudor England (albeit not as present in the visual record) and to racialized discourses of light and dark in early modern English literature and aesthetics.³ Onyeka Nubia's 2013 study revealed the important role that skilled Black artisans and tradespeople played in Tudor England, and Miranda Kaufmann's 2017 book centers on ten case studies of Africans living in Tudor and Stuart England.⁴ Additionally, recent work by Matthew Dimmock sheds light on England's increasingly global contacts and ambitions during Elizabeth's reign—specifically with regard to East Asia.⁵ England's rise as an economic, political, and colonial power brought with it a complicated and fraught history, but a history with roots in the Tudor period. While the omission of a global framework for presenting Tudor art and majesty is striking, the catalogue remains an essential scholarly contribution to our understanding of artistic patronage at the Tudor court and English visual culture more broadly during the late Renaissance period.

¹ Lady Jane Grey (1537–1554), also known as the “Nine Days’ Queen,” was nominated by her cousin King Edward VI as his successor and proclaimed Queen of England on July 10, 1553. However, she soon lost support of the Privy Council, who deposed her after only nine days and proclaimed Mary I the new Queen. Lady Jane Grey was later labeled a usurper, accused of high treason, and executed. There is debate over whether or not she should be considered a reigning queen.

² Elizabeth Cleland and Adam Eaker, “Preface: An Insular Art?,” in *The Tudors: Art and Majesty in Renaissance England*, exh. cat. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2022), 17.

³ Kim Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1995).

⁴ See Onyeka Nubia, *Blackamoors: Africans in Tudor England, Their Presence, Status and Origins* (London: Narrative Eye, 2013) and Miranda Kaufmann, *Black Tudors: The Untold Story* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2017).

⁵ Matthew Dimmock, *Elizabethan Globalism: England, China and the Rainbow*

Portrait (London: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2019).