The Public Face of Early Modern England Artfully Revealed

As Richard Steele opined in one 1712 edition of *The Spectator*, a predilection for portraiture in post-Reformation England was something both recognised and respected by the journalist and his peers: 'No nation in the world delights so much in having their own, or friends', or relations' pictures; whether from their national good-nature, or having a love to painting, and not being encouraged in that great article of religious pictures, which the purity of our worship refuses the free use of, or from whatever other cause ... And accordingly, in fact, face-painting is no where so well performed as in England'.(1)

Yet Steele's claims sit somewhat awkwardly with the fact that the majority of pre-eminent artists practicing in England during the 16th and 17th centuries were themselves foreigners, arriving primarily in London, either by accident or design, to take advantage of this 'delight' found in visual representations of the monarch and their courtly retinue. Steele's own Kit-cat portrait, for example, a visual marker of his entry into the Whig club of the same name, was painted by the Lübeck-born, Dutch-trained artist Godfrey Kneller; Kneller's own appointment as principal painter to William and Mary, followed those of Antonio Verrio to James II, and Peter Lely to Charles II, with the inaugural title of 'Principal Painter in Ordinary' being bestowed by Charles I on the Flemish Anthony Van Dyck in 1632. English names – Andrew Wright, Robert Peake, George Gower, appear with far greater regularity in connection with the less specialised role of Serjeant-Painter at the Tudor and Stuart courts, for whom portraiture formed part of a wide range of responsibilities, alongside the decoration of coaches and barges, the production of temporary banners and hangings for festivities and the maintenance of palace interiors.

This pattern of monarchical and aristocratic patronage drawing skilled, foreign-born artists to England was a

familiar and longstanding one, as reflected in the words of Henry Peacham; writing exactly 100 years earlier than Steele, Peacham highlights the absence of native artists working within elite circles, and the contrasting presence of their European competitors: 'Onely I am sory that our courtiers and great personages must seeke farre and neere for some Dutchman or Italian to draw their pictures, and invent their devises, our Englishmen being held for 'Vaunients' [worthless persons]'.(2)

It is therefore not surprising that from Hans Holbein the Younger, Nicholas Hilliard and Isaac Oliver, to Rubens, Mytens, and Van Dyck, through to the later impact of Lely and Kneller, the study of foreign-born artists working at court has dominated our knowledge of the patronage and production of art during the Tudor and Stuart periods. But this dominance is at risk of compromising a more thorough and rounded understanding of the comprehensive 'delight' in portraiture present in the English psyche, as suggested by Steele at the beginning of the 18th century; the court's tastes and activities might have been influential, but surely cannot represent the totality of experiences and preferences of the nation in relation to face-painting during the early modern period.

Two important publications, by Robert Tittler and Tarnya Cooper, have begun to redress this imbalance, turning their focus on English portraiture away from the 16th- and early 17th-century courts and their associated members to a much broader populace, comprising the 'middling sort' of people, within London and out into the provinces. Both Tittler and Cooper offer a social and visual shift from elite artworks by Holbein, Gheeraerts and Mytens, commissioned by the nobility and, often, royalty (as covered thoroughly by Karen Hearn in the 1996 Tate Britain exhibition *Dynasties*, and its accompanying catalogue) to the work of an extensive range of artists, both known and unknown, and notably of native, as well as foreign, birth and training.

In *Portraits, Painters, and Publics in Provincial England, 1540–1640*, Robert Tittler's approach tracks most closely that of the revisionist historian, to produce, by the author's own admission, a study 'undertaken from an historical rather than curatorial or connoisseurial perspective' (p. 14). Although acknowledging the distinct stylistic qualities and aesthetic quirks of vernacular art, Tittler's purpose in this book is to place local or regional portraiture within a socio-economic rather than stylistic framework.

Tittler emphasises the limitations which influenced and shaped the output of the regional portraitist, immediately making these works distinct from those produced for royal or courtly patrons. A lack of aesthetic or creative input on the part of the artist commonly informs the vernacular portrait, with little or no demand for artistic agency, itself a factor understood as a catalyst for creative development and change in Renaissance Europe. The portraits of John Kaye and Dorothy Kaye of Woodsome near Huddersfield, painted in 1567 by an unknown artist and now part of the Kirklees Museum and Galleries Collection, are described by the author as 'intriguing and remarkably crude' (p. 61), and reveal the typical hand of an individual trained or employed in the broader categories of craft production, which included decorative painters, plasterers, masons and glaziers, rather than a specialist in portraiture. The figures of Kaye and his wife are static representations rather than physiognomic likenesses, their twin figures surrounded by lengthy textual inscriptions highlighting their status and genealogy, and supported by possibly putative coats of arms. Even sartorial flourishes are symbolic inclusions stressing the documentary nature of these artworks; the dagger grasped by Kaye hints at his social aspirations, not quite the sword which sumptuary laws granted the nobility to openly bear, but a clear reference to status and upward mobility.

Painters, whether applying pigments to wooden panels, to canvas, or to plastered walls, would often find limited support and training in any specialist field within the regional guild systems. In the city of Chester, a long-standing focus for Tittler's archival research, the Company of Painter-Stainers, Glaziers, Embroiderers, and Stationers provided opportunities for apprenticeships and, upon completion, the freedom to practice and trade as an independent master; by the author's own calculations, however, of the 63 individuals apprenticed to that Company between 1571 and 1635, just 14 went on to become freeman painters within Chester, representing a 'drop-out' rate of 78 per cent (p. 64). Those aspiring artists who did complete their apprenticeships commonly faced a precarious initial period as a journeyman-painter, embarking on an

itinerant life working on short-term contracts for more established guild members, whilst accumulating the necessary capital and contacts to set up shop independently. For those who had failed at apprenticeship level, to leave this system represented a breach of contract; the only option for many was to leave the city of their original and curtailed training for more secluded, rural surroundings, beyond the interests and reach of the relevant authorities. These conditions go some way towards explaining why vernacular artists often extended their range of professional activities to include employment as barbers, glaziers, translators and even unlicensed surgeons, with the painting of portraits forming part of a varied craftsman's *oeuvre*.

Great emphasis in this study is placed on the nuts-and-bolts (or pigment and panels) process of portraiture production, with its practical and economic elements. Tittler presents a highly detailed investigation into regional painters' resources, the cost and availability of which had their own impact upon the distinctive 'look' of vernacular art. Outside of London, the availability of specialist materials – certain expensive pigments, finer quality wood panels such as those from the eastern Baltic region – could not be guaranteed. Although artists with access to ports on the east coast of England such as Hull, Newcastle and Ipswich, were more likely to be able to secure such materials via Antwerp, the European trading centre for luxury goods, provincial craftsmen and workshops across the country were largely dependent on more local resources, and as such, faced the consequence of inferior results in terms of the finished product. Brushes used to apply pigments to panel or canvas also played a critical role in the resulting painting; fine 'pencil' brushes made from squirrel and sable tail hairs, which enabled artists to work up carefully blended skin tones and the elaborate details of lace collars, Turkey-work carpets and the play of light on jewels, were specialist tools arriving in London from Antwerp and Augsburg. Many vernacular painters relied on locally-produced brushes of a much coarser nature, and through necessity commonly substituted the delicate merging of pigments to shape and shade the contours of a face, for a distinctive, heavy outline in lead or charcoal. For painters practicing at some distance from London, the limited training offered by apprenticeship and guild membership was further compounded by the restricted availability of artistic treatises circulating in the capital: translations of Continental manuals such as Robert Peake's English edition of Sebastiano Serlio's *Seven Books of Architecture* or Richard Haydocke's A Tracte Containing the Artes of Curious Paintinge, Carvinge and Buildinge, translated from the Italian of Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo, and manuscript copies of treatises by Nicholas Hilliard and Edward Norgate. Instead, the vernacular artist was largely dependent on reproducing variants on a stock number of portraiture models, lightly adjusted according to the requirements of individual patrons.

The presence of the patron beyond the portrait itself remains a largely unknown quantity. Although archival study into wills and inventories has shed some light on the commissioning and ownership of artworks in early modern England, Susan Foister's 1981 *Burlington Magazine* article on paintings in 16th-century inventories being a pioneering example of this research, the question of the individual sitter or patron's wants and needs remains a largely unknown quantity.(3) Tittler's study emphasises the presence of a common, 'provincial vocabulary' of visual props to accompany sitters in their portraits, constructing a version of the sitter's identity and, on occasion, personality, that could at once be highly individual, yet generic in its execution: 'The common run of provincial imagery extends to items like books, gloves, swords (as opposed, for example, to lances or armour), hourglasses, clocks, skulls, scrolls, and distinctive (but not always elaborate) forms of dress' (p.129). These props are to be read primarily, if not exclusively, as documentary elements, assuming the same role as descriptive inscriptions and heraldic devices. The presence and significance of such objects can take precedence over the appearance and likeness of the individual sitter; the posthumous double portrait of John and Joan Cooke, Mayor and Mayoress of Gloucester, dated to c.1600–20 and today in the Gloucester Folk Museum, records the shift in responsibility handed, quite literally, to Joan Cooke, on the death of her husband in 1528. With Joan named as chief executor of his will, and held responsible for the establishment of a grammar school as part of the terms of that will, the prominent placement of a pair of gloves in her left hand signals the translation of financial and civic obligations from husband to wife, with gloves providing a common visual marker of gentility, conspicuous display, and, to members of the urban gentry, the status of freeman within a civic population. Accurate physical likenesses of the long-deceased Cookes have been superseded by the symbolic richness of

the gloves held by Joan and the red, fur-lined mayoral robes worn by her husband, their linked hands enabling the transfer of responsibility and respect.

Tittler provides in this important monograph a valuable window into the production of painted portraits by a category of artist until now little-studied within the history of English art, largely for reasons of modern aesthetic and intellectual taste. As the author states from the outset, this is a work grounded in archival research, and conscious of current historical and cultural conversations regarding the public and their particular 'sphere'. From this perspective, such portraits are most fruitfully understood as objects rather than artworks, functioning 'as an affirmation of personal or official legitimacy, religious belief, political loyalty, intellectual or cultural engagement, personal friendship, and/or as a memorial for posterity' (p. 174). Yet to analyse and interpret vernacular art primarily in terms of its potential as historical, documentary evidence, is to downplay the tricky questions of its aesthetic appeal, and broader iconographic significance.

In this respect, an alternative, yet complementary approach is provided by a second work on English portraiture of the 16th and early 17th centuries, produced, displayed, and viewed, beyond the elevated confines of the court. Tarnya Cooper's *Citizen Portrait: Portrait Painting and the Urban Elite of Tudor and Jacobean England and Wales*, again addresses art for the 'middling sorts'. The 'urban elite' of the title here include citizens as literal members of the freemanry of a particular city, successful in commercial enterprises, but also involves a much broader band of professionals: lawyers, scholars, physicians, the clergy, and an emerging creative body of playwrights, poets and actors.

Cooper's research, drawn from both her doctoral thesis and her current curatorial activities at the National Portrait Gallery, is concerned with London as a centre for artistic activity, in addition to regional practices, but as with Tittler, the 'middling sorts' of people are the focus here. The urban elite are not a homogenous group, however, but subdivided by the author into specific categories, with particular wants and needs of both their portrait and its artist.

Tudor and Jacobean portraits are considered from the outset in their response to post-Reformation judgements on visual material. The previously-discussed portraits of John and Dorothy Kaye (which also feature in this book), far removed from more modern concepts of aesthetic appeal and mimetic accuracy, fit neatly into the contemporary Protestant belief that such artworks should take care not to 'ravish' but to 'please' the eye, documenting rather than explicitly reproducing an individual's appearance. This response to religious and cultural restrictions conveniently worked in tandem with the more practical lack of training open to native artists on a local and regional level; as such, both the patron's wariness, and, more broadly, the artist's limitations, were implicit in the production of a portrait 'likeness'.

In London, the Painter-Stainers' Company, by its very name, represented a more focussed collection of professional painters than comparable companies in smaller cities, such as the Company of Painter-Stainers, Glaziers, Embroiderers, and Stationers in Chester examined by Tittler. The London Painter-Stainers' existed as a regulatory guild, one of its primary roles being to provide training aimed at maintaining certain practical, rather than creative standards. The latter were positively discouraged: 'As far as the Painter-Stainers' Company was concerned, artistic practice was not about innovation or invention' (p. 46); instead, the Company pursued the upkeep of approved standards of practical application of pigments to wooden or canvas supports. A triple portrait by an unknown artist, dated to 1632, depicts a master of the Company, John Potkin, together with two of his wardens, Thomas Carleton and John Taylor; the men are dressed uniformly in sober black with expensive lace collars and cuffs, with Taylor holding a parchment displaying the personal coats-of-arms of all three sitters. Mirroring, one presumes, their own daily duties as practicing artists painting the likenesses of the capital's professionals, these men are depicted as gentleman citizens, 'attempting to show their family credentials and their status as worthy civic figures rather than practicing painters' (p. 45). In contrast, George Gower's remarkable self-portrait of 1579, today in a private collection, sees the sitter emphasising his ambition in relation to his handiwork, rather than his family history. This half-length portrait retains a familiar stylistic flatness, but is enlivened by several additions: the artist prominently holds a palette in his left hand, whilst at his shoulder a pair of miniature scales find Gower's coat of arms,

and status as a member of a Yorkshire gentry family, outweighed by a compass, representative, in his own mind, of his artistic achievements and their future potential. In 1581 Gower was appointed as Serjeant-Painter to Elizabeth I, and this portrait in certain respects pre-empts similar sentiments found in the treatise of his contemporary at court, Nicholas Hilliard, who in *The Arte of Limning* (c.1600) describes his own artistic speciality of miniature painting as 'a kind of gentle painting', that is, a gentlemanly accomplishment. (4)

Cooper tracks the development of the portrait as a marker of status, achievement and ambitious potential for England's emerging urban elite across the 16th and early 17th centuries. The increasing wealth and influence of merchants and traders during the Tudor period means that they are one category of sitters for whom portraits began to be commissioned in significant numbers. Their upward social mobility ran counter to a developing Protestant understanding of the acceptance of one's fixed rank and calling in life, and the sins of pride and greed were easily understood as by-products of both the luxury goods a merchant might trade in, and the profits to be made from their sale. No surprise then, that sermons, treatises, and conduct books stressed the importance of humility and the dangers of social aspirations. William Chester, a draper and alderman whose portrait of c.1560 forms part of the collection of the London Drapers' Company, found himself the dedicatee of one such treatise, an English translation of Pierre Boaistuau's *Theatrum Mundi* published in 1574. However, as Cooper points out in her analysis of Chester's earlier painted portrait, the alderman cleverly uses this visual marker of wealth and success (he was appointed Mayor of London in 1560) to stress his personal humility and piety. In the background the figures of Christ and Death sit upon weights suspended from a clock; with the rise and fall of the weights signalling the passage of time, the figures come to demonstrate the fluctuating presence of sin in the life of every Christian. Chester is presented in a three-quarters position, turning away from the coat-of-arms at his left shoulder to the clock at his right, keeping a keen eye on matters of the soul rather than the consequences of financial success recorded in any account ledger.

While William Chester was able to shrewdly promote both humility and upward mobility in his painted likeness, as an urban professional and commercial citizen, other categories of sitters faced a range of expectations relating to their professional activities. Judicial dress appears to have standardised many portraits of many sitters belonging to the legal profession, for example. A series of at least ten portraits of judges, commissioned around 1619 by Sir Thomas Chamberlain of Gray's Inn, presents a uniform collection of half-length portraits on panel, each sitter portrayed simply and flatly in his robes of office, with his surname inscribed on the dark backdrop. In contrast, many portraits of the more creative types circulating within a middle-class, professional population – actors, artists, poets, playwrights – are conspicuously individual or experimental in their capturing of a likeness: 'The surviving literary portraits subtly differ from other portraits of this period in that they show sitters who are more playful with the traditional conventions and sometimes … seemingly aware of the artifice of presence and the nature representation as a type of performance' (p. 171). The actor Nathan Field, for example, represented in a portrait of c.1615 which hangs today in Dulwich Picture Gallery, is informal in his presentation, dress, and actions, gazing directly at the viewer as if about to address them, in what Cooper describes as 'an orchestrated or artful informality' (p.185).

Throughout *Citizen Portrait*, Cooper's work draws strongly and skilfully on the use of technical analysis, enabling the modern researcher to deduce much more than previously possible about the 'social life' of the painted panel or canvas, and, by extension, certain motivations of the artist, sitter, or patron. Partial overpainting, the recycling of existing panels, and unsympathetic later restoration, are all commonplace activities associated with surviving Tudor and Jacobean artworks, which can make dating, attribution and the identification of sitters especially difficult. The publication of this book coincides with the National Portrait Gallery's current major research project, 'Making Art in Tudor Britain', and certain of its scientific findings are acknowledged here. For example, infra-red photography of a half-length portrait of Elizabeth I of c.1580–90, from the collections of the National Portrait Gallery, reveals an earlier portrait of an unknown woman beneath the painted surface, together with the inclusion, subsequently painted over, of a serpent held within the queen's hand. The reuse of existing panels is most likely to have been prompted by the cost and

availability such materials. The recent discovery, however, of an existing painting of the Virgin and Child beneath a portrait of the staunchly Protestant 'spymaster' to Elizabeth I, Sir Francis Walsingham, also makes possible something of a private joke on the part of the artist, known or more likely unknown to this particular sitter.(5) Nor was the recycling of panels a practice limited to the early modern period; a portrait of c.1580–90 of a female innkeeper, Margaret Craythorne, belongs today to the collections of the Cutlers' Company in London, having passed into the Company's possession following Craythorne's death in 1591. Although this portrait appears originally to have been the work of a painter confident in decorative commissions rather than portraiture, as a physical object the portrait seems to have been held in some esteem since its creation. The archive of the Cutlers' Company records the purchase of the painting, together with curtain of silk with a gold fringe to adorn Craythorne's likeness in the parlour of the Cutlers' Hall; there is also evidence of a number of later restorations to the work, including the 19th-century replacement of the two side panels, which x-radiography reveal to have been acquired from existing artworks. The viewer is oblivious to a foot and cloak dating stylistically from the early 15th century, hovering over Craythorne's right shoulder, now firmly painted over.

Citizen Portrait is accompanied throughout by excellent colour and black-and-white illustrations, many of them full page (and many being of artworks in collections which are private or difficult for the public to access); *Portraits, Painters, and Publics in Provincial England* fares poorly (and somewhat unfairly) in comparison, with black-and-white half-page illustrations distributed across the text in limited numbers, and giving the reader scant opportunity to appreciate and analyse certain complex and intricate artworks for themselves. This is, however, a criticism directed primarily at the publisher, rather than the author, and one made with the full understanding that the current financial climate means that academic publishing in the field of art history is increasingly subject to aesthetic constraints.

The study of early modern British art has been enlivened by these valuable contributions to the broader examination of the patronage, production (and survival) of English portraiture beyond the familiar confines of the royal court and its satellites. Rather like the proverbial buses, scholars and students have been waiting some time for even a single focused and meticulous study on this subject; that wait has now been deeply rewarded by publication of two complementary books.

Notes

1. Selections From The Tatler and The Spectator of Steele and Addison, edited with an introduction and notes by Angus Ross (Harmondsworth and New York, NY, 1982), p. 496.Back to (1)
2. Henry Peacham, Graphice, or the Most Auncient and Excellent Art of Drawing and Limning Disposed into Three Bookes (London, 1612), sig. A2^V.Back to (2)
3. Susan Foister, 'Paintings and other works of art in sixteenth-century English inventories', *Burlington Magazine*, 123 (1981), 273–82.Back to (3)
4. Nicholas Hilliard, *The Arte of Limning*, edited by R. K. R. Thornton and T. G. S. Cain (Manchester, 1992), p. 43.Back to (4)
5. *Hidden: Unseen Paintings Beneath Tudor Portraits* < http://www.npg.org.uk/research/programmes/making-art-in-tudor-britain/case-studies/hidden-unseen-paintings-beneath-tudor-portraits.php [3]>[accessed 20 March 2012].Back to (5)

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