
Christiane Hille is a notable German scholar of the younger generation teaching as an assistant professor in Munich. This, her first book, is a study of painting and the masque in the reigns of Kings James I and Charles I of Great Britain. After studying at the Courtauld Institute, she wrote *Visions of the Courtly Body* in English; the book was published in Germany following the successful submission of its text as a doctoral thesis at Humboldt University. Her's is a humbling product of evidently a voracious intellect – the extensive bibliography taken alone will be of use to students – which is at home both on the wilder shores of Foucaultian modernism and on the homely plains of more traditional art history.

Stripped of the author’s commitment to, and familiarity with fashionable structuralist theory and jargon, her thesis is that George Villiers, the notorious favorite of King James, by whom he was elevated to the highest rank of nobility as Duke of Buckingham, and the industrious, but much criticized "first minister" of King Charles, discarded participation in the masque for painted portrayals of himself as a means of promoting his image. By focusing on the flamboyant valido’s neglected patronage of Van Dyck and Rubens (with a glance also at Honthorst), she seeks to right the imbalance of conventional art historical accounts of England round the third decade or so of the seventeenth century.

By way of introduction, portrayals of the chaste Elizabeth I, the virgin queen, in contrast to Holbein’s destroyed fresco of Henry VIII, his forebears and wife in Whitehall Palace are reviewed. Holbein, we learn, by his "emblematic rendering of Henry’s legs had served to confirm the Tudor monarch’s right to sovereign rule by emphasizing the king’s sexual power.” Then is considered Villiers’s “exploration of his courtly identity,” which leads
to a detailed discussion of the masque in the reign of King James. The favorite’s recognition of the “appeal of his body” requires discussion of the topic of his relationship with the monarch, deemed both to be sexual, and less controversially, a “significant aspect” of the reign.

The two successive venues for masques in James’s reign are surveyed with particular emphasis on Inigo Jones’s Banqueting Hall and the career of its versatile begetter. From 1615 Villiers excelled in twelfth night productions, as Hille recounts in her chapter "Competitive Displays of Erotic Masculinity in the Court Masque." The favorite’s growing ambition was then to be shown in the Running Masque, devised for his benefit in the winter of 1619/20, followed by his commission from Ben Jonson of The Gypsies Metamorphosed for the entertainment of the king at his newly renovated mansion, Burley-on-the-Hill, in the summer of 1621.

The favorite here played the main part as captain of the gypsies, but Villiers had already signalled a new cultural ambition in two paintings by Van Dyck in which he was depicted in the central role. Hille’s very close reading of the Christ Church Continence of Scipio builds on John Peacock’s analysis (Art History, XXIII, 2000) but she breaks new ground by suggesting that the painting may have been commissioned by the King for the favorite, and that the source of the pose of Scipio may have been that of Diomedes in the Ashmolean Felix Gem. Indeed a new link in the gem’s provenance may thus have been envisaged: it could have been part of the favorite’s collection for Van Dyck to have been influenced by it.

The other portrayal by Van Dyck is Venus and Adonis, which made a re-appearance at the Maastricht Fine Art Fair in the spring of 2014. In this full-length double portrait of Villiers and his wife, the former’s body is revealed “as the main asset of his wealth.” Here the artist abandoned Ovid’s theme of conflicting desires by showing the mortal (Adonis/Villiers) and the goddess (Venus/Katharine Manners, Villiers’s wife) joined in love, as, nearby, the “dog’s exposed pudenda … hint at the painting’s hidden subject of erotic devotion.” Talking of which (we might think), the author offers Alberti’s engraving of Socrates and Alcibiades as a “particularly wittily conceived design for the double portrait” where Alcibiades is shown holding a trophy of his mutilation of the Athenian herms. In Socrates’ seduction by Alcibiades is found a comparison with Villiers’s behavior with his king. The favorite’s portrayal as Adonis was, it is proposed, the first "role-portrait" of an Englishman. And thus in this painting was accomplished “the kind of imagery that the English king [James I] had been trying to obtain from Van Dyck’s master, Rubens, for the ceiling of
But first is discussed Rubens’s equestrian portrait of Villiers, now the Duke of Buckingham. Hille argues that it should be seen in the light of the sitter’s journey to Spain as escort to Charles, then Prince of Wales in 1623. She draws attention to the proposal by Balthasar Gerbier – already in the Duke’s employ – for a masque to celebrate the successful negotiations of the marriage for the hand of the Spanish Infanta. Gerbier’s idea was for Buckingham as admiral of the sea to be shown directing a seaborne chariot carrying the Prince and the Infanta in their journey to England. In her view Rubens’s equestrian portrait “shows a strong similarity with Gerbier’s design.”

While this work is placed in 1625 when Rubens and Buckingham met, Hille asks whether Rubens’s other painting for the Duke which was destined for a ceiling in his London residence, York House, could not have been planned earlier. She points out that the Duke is not clearly recognisable in the National Gallery sketch or in the photograph of the "lost" modello. She has new proposals concerning the finished ceiling painting. The figure pulling at the Duke “alludes to the Gorgon” and served as a reminder of the status of the favorite under King James. Above, the Duke is ascending to the Temple of Jove, as a pointer to this identification is the object held aloft by a putto, which is seen not as a palm frond but a feather, seemingly alluding to those offered to Ganymede by Jove in Marlowe’s *Dido Queen of Carthage*. And thus Buckingham in the painting is associated with Ganymede, with whom he had been scurrilously compared “because the myth of Jupiter and Ganymede seemed destined to serve as a metaphor for the intimate relationship between the British king and his greatest favorite’. Hence “the ceiling … was produced as the inversion of his [Buckingham’s] image in contemporary libel.”

The absence of any masque performances from after King James’s death in 1625 until 1631 is seen by Hille as marking a shift in royal patronage “that privileged painting over the masque.” In this light, she studies Honthorst’s *The Liberal Arts Presented to Charles and Henrietta Maria* (Royal Collection) of 1628, in which Buckingham plays the central role as Mercury. He is “the first courtier ever to appear in a canvas with the portrait of an English king.” She suggests that the composition is a “condensed version of the upper half of Federigo Zuccaro’s engraved design of *Il lamento della Pittura,*” and should be seen as “an allegory of Charles’s devotion to painting.”

1631 saw the revival of the masque at court, but their form and content were to differ from those earlier performed in so far as they now presented the king “in a framed image”
as Charles sought “to reshape the masque after the nature of the painted image.” At the same time he placed great emphasis on commissions to Van Dyck who had returned to London in 1632. Thus the king took over and developed the cultural preferences of his first minister, who had been assassinated in the same year in which Honthorst painted his huge canvas.

This bald summary of Visions of the Courtly Body hardly does justice to its comprehensive, informed content. Some may find the vocabulary and style a barrier to its appreciation, others may find its theoretical standpoint problematic and disagree with statements and conclusions, but there can be no doubt as to Christiane Hille’s deep engagement with the culture of the period. This would have been even more evident had an index been provided.

Gregory Martin
London

Editor’s note: Christiane Hille’s book is the winner of the Historians of British Art Book Prize for 2014.