

Introduction

I

When Queen Elizabeth visited St. Paul's cathedral on New Year's Day, 1562, she found a newly bound prayer book on her customary cushion. Opening it, she discovered unfamiliar pictures of various saints and martyrs interspersed with the Gospels and Epistles. Far from being pleased, she frowned and blushed, shut the book, and asked for the one she had previously used. Following the service, she sought out Dean Nowell to inquire about the new book. He explained that he had purchased some prints from a German visitor and had had them bound into the prayer book as a New Year's gift. "You could never present me with a worse," replied the queen, and she went on to declare her "aversion to idolatry, to images and pictures of this kind."¹ In his defense the surprised Nowell said that he meant no harm, that his mistake sprang from ignorance. Elizabeth accepted the apology, but the incident had wide ramifications: "This matter occasioned all the clergy in and about London, and the churchwardens of each parish, to search their churches and chappels: and caused them to wash out of the walls all paintings that seemed to be Romish and idolatrous; and in lieu thereof suitable texts taken out of the Holy Scriptures to be written."²

Elizabeth's preference for words over pictures, at least in the ecclesiastical sphere, suggests a major direction of sixteenth-century culture in England. Creative impulses that in another country issued in frescoes and oil paintings, woodcuts and engravings, were diverted to other forms, especially those employing the written word. Artistic expression in England did not have the prestige it enjoyed in both the Catholic and the Protestant nations of Continental Europe. The training and traditions that nourished Dürer and van der Leyden, Titian and Rubens, Maarten van Heemskerck and Hendrik Goltzius, did not exist in England. Indeed, Richard Haydocke reports in 1598 that the English purchaser of a painting may fail "to bestowe anie greate price on a peece of worke, because hee thinks it is not well done"; the painter, for his part, may reply "that he therefore neither useth all his skill, nor taketh all the paines that he could, because hee knoweth before hand the slendernes of his reward."³ Henry Peacham provides a

telling indication of his countrymen's jaundiced attitude toward art: seeking to extol its value, he resorts to cataloguing the sums of money that Italian princes and popes spent hiring artists.⁴ When Elizabethan writers describe the work of artists, their language betrays disapproval: "the very terms used commonly to refer to painting – cunning, shadowing, counterfeiting, and tricking – carried the negative connotations of inauthenticity and moral baseness."⁵ As late as the Caroline era, Edward Norgate could describe "the end of all drawing" as "being nothing else but soe to deceive the eyes, by the deceitfull jugling and witchcraft of lights and shadowes, that round embost, and sollid bodyes in Nature may seeme round embost and sollid in *plano*."⁶

The finest painting in England was confined chiefly to portraiture, and the artists who executed portraits were either visitors or immigrants or descendants of immigrant families: Hans Holbein, Nicholas Hilliard, Isaac Oliver, Marcus Gheeraerts, Daniel Mytens, Wenceslaus Hollar, and Anthony van Dyck. On those occasions when new buildings required adornment, Continental artists and artisans were likely to be awarded commissions demanding expertise, especially in the final stages of decoration. Thus to complete Nonsuch palace, begun in 1538, Henry VIII invited "at the royal cost, the most excellent artificers, architects, sculptors, and statuaries of different nations, Italians, Frenchmen, Hollanders and native Englishmen."⁷ What the king did, evidently, was to hire "native artificers to raise the building according to their own unschooled notions of the Renaissance style and then, at huge cost, persuade the foreigners to apply to it a plethora of ornamental detail."⁸

No Maecenas followed Henry to the throne: "Edward, Mary, Elizabeth, James, who succeeded him, all failed to engage in active artistic patronage. After Henry's death in 1547 no new palaces were built, no major additions were made to those that already stood, no important commissions from the Crown were given for furniture, tapestries, paintings or any other art form."⁹ This diminishing interest in artistic endeavor may well have resulted from the depredations of the iconoclasts, unleashed by Henry's break with Rome and unrestrained during the reign of his son.¹⁰ Iconoclasts not only destroyed much of England's religious heritage but also inhibited the development of young artists and artisans, familiar with the expertise of their Continental counterparts. The effect was insidious, crippling English artistry at precisely the moment that the Italians, French, Germans, and Dutch were moving from strength to strength. Not surprisingly, when the Whitehall Banqueting House, the most important structure of early seventeenth-century London, neared completion, Peter Paul

Rubens received the commission to paint the ceiling panels, and Gerrit van Honthorst painted the large allegorical canvas that decorated the wall facing Whitehall.¹¹

Similarly, English country houses were adorned with materials designed and, in some instances, purchased abroad. The tapestries for the High Great Chamber at Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire, for instance, were made in Brussels. Designs for windows, doorways, fireplaces, hall screens, and fountains in this and other houses were inspired by the pattern books of Sebastiano Serlio, Jacques Androuet du Cerceau, Wendel Dietterlin, Cornelis Floris, and Jan Vredeman de Vries, as Anthony Wells-Cole has demonstrated.¹² Leonard Barkan does not exaggerate when he says, “by any European – and not only Italian – standards, the real level of visual culture in Elizabethan England was astonishingly low.”¹³ The English themselves acknowledge the deficiency. Henry Peacham, for instance, laments, “I am sorry 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 [good-for-nothings].”¹⁴ How, Peacham must have wondered, would English artists grow in sophistication without gaining the practical experience that would stretch and enhance their talents? The commissions that sustained Ghirlandaio and Piero della Francesca, Pinturricchio and Giovanni Bellini, were unavailable in England. Instead of financing the creation of architecture, sculpture, and painting, the English church branded the arts an impediment to salvation. A homily read in all Elizabethan parishes condemns any sort of ecclesiastical art as tantamount to the idolatry of pagan religion: “better it were that the artes of payntyng, plasteryng, carvyng, gravyng, and foundyng, hadde never ben found nor used, then one of them, whose soules in the syght of God are so precious, shoulde by occasion of image or picture peryshe and be lost.”¹⁵

The cultural climate fostered by such judgments proved inhospitable to artistic innovation. The English lacked even a vocabulary for discussing developments on the Continent. Lucy Gent observes, “The desperate shortage in sixteenth-century English of terms to do with art is a clear index of a lack of contact with works of art being produced, or recently produced, in Italy and France.”¹⁶ On those occasions when local artisans produced *objets d’art* for English houses, the results could be clunky; witness the fountain of Venus at Bolsover Castle.

Although their painting and sculpture were impoverished by Continental standards, the English nonetheless delighted in those kinds of artistic representation that escaped the label “Romish and idolatrous,” as the contents of

their houses attest. Writing in the 1570s, William Harrison offers eyewitness testimony to a growing interest in what might be called conspicuous materialism: “the furniture of our houses . . . exceedeth and is growne in maner even to passing delicacie: & herein I do not speake of the nobilitie and gentrie onely, but even of the lowest sorte that have any thing at all to take to.”¹⁷ Harrison’s remark is tantalizing: we should like to know precisely what he had seen or heard about. But he fails to describe a single identifiable artifact. He does, however, at least name the kinds of works that impressed him: “tapistrie, Turkye worke, pewter, brasse, fine linen.” Tapestries were likely to be the largest and most expensive artifacts in a room.¹⁸ Often these were made on the Continent and shipped to England for installation, though many were designed and made at the workshops founded by William Sheldon at Barcheston, Warwickshire, and at Bordesley, Worcestershire. In the early and mid-seventeenth century, large numbers of tapestries were also made at the factory in Mortlake, near London.¹⁹ Families with modest resources made do with painted cloths on their walls; Falstaff refers to such cheap artwork when he describes his soldiers: “slaves as ragged as Lazarus in the painted cloth” (*1 Henry IV*, 4.2.25–26).²⁰ We know that appliqué wall hangings also adorned private homes, as did illustrative panels painted on paper and attached to walls. Little Moreton Hall, in Cheshire, contains a rare surviving example: the painted frieze depicts the story of Susanna and the Elders (in Elizabethan dress).²¹ By “Turkye worke” William Harrison refers either to the carpets displayed in so many Elizabethan portraits (too valuable to be walked upon, they were customarily displayed on tables), or to the textile panels used for upholstering chairs and stools.²² Harrison’s references to pewter, linen, and brass describe objects used at mealtime: when the carpets were rolled up and stowed,²³ tables might be set with pewter goblets, plates, and other implements, and with damask linen napkins; at night brass candlesticks held the source of lighting.

Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline*, acted by the King’s Men in 1610, allows us to amplify Harrison’s account, for the play contains the rare description of a room’s contents. Jachimo, emerging from the trunk in which he has hidden, carefully surveys the bedroom of the sleeping Imogen and describes what he sees: “Such and such pictures; there the window; such / Th’ adornment of her bed; the arras, figures” (2.2.25–26). The “pictures” are evidently paintings; the “figures” are carved in wood, probably on the bed frame or headboard. The word “arras” may denote either the embroidered curtains that hang from the upper frame of a tester (i.e., four-poster bed), providing shelter from drafts, or the wall-hangings described in more detail later: the chamber “was hang’d / With tapestry of silk and silver” (2.4.68–69).

(In England's cold, wet climate, tapestries, which prevent warmth from being dissipated, substitute for the frescoes that adorn Italian houses and palaces.) Jachimo also reports that "the chimney-piece" (above the fireplace) is decorated with a scene of "Chaste Dian bathing" (lines 81–82). Since Jachimo refers to the "cutter" (line 83) of that scene, we surmise that this chimney piece has been made of either stone or wood, though molded plaster was the more common material in Shakespeare's England. The andirons in the fireplace "were two winking Cupids / Of silver, each on one foot standing" (lines 89–90), and although Jachimo doesn't mention a fireback, we know that iron shields, with designs impressed in the metal, ordinarily protected brick from the fire and directed heat into the room. Finally, "The roof o' th' chamber / With golden cherubins is fretted" (lines 87–88). Here Jachimo refers to a ceiling "with interlaced designs of raised plaster."²⁴ Such ceilings, typically characterized by geometric patterns and even pictorial scenes, adorned virtually all substantial Elizabethan and Jacobean houses. Some twenty designs adapted from Henry Peacham's *Minerva Britanna* (1612), for example, decorate the ceiling of the long gallery at Blickling Hall, Norfolk, while Old Testament scenes adorn the plaster ceiling of the gallery at Lanhydrock, Cornwall.

Jachimo's account of Imogen's room, together with the evidence of surviving buildings contemporary with Shakespeare, suggests that English houses were filled with embellishment of all kinds. Hugh Platt provides a glimpse when he writes about "The Art of Molding or Casting" in 1594. Platt offers detailed practical instruction on creating molds "of carved or embossed faces, dogges, lions, borders, armes, &c, from toombes, or out of noble mens galleries: as also of pillers, balles, leaves, frutages, &c, therewith to garnish beds, tables, court-cupboords [movable sideboards or cabinets used to display plate], the jawmes [jamb] and mantletrees [beams across the opening of fireplaces, serving as lintels] of chimnies, and other stately furnitures of chambers or galleries."²⁵ John Ferne, writing in 1586, urges that "al men embrodure [embroider], depaint, engrave, and stampe, upon their hanginges, walles, windowes, and other domesticall acconstrainmentes [accoutrements?]" the natural heraldry of Adam.²⁶ The embellishment described by Ferne and Platt was carried out on a palatial scale at Audley End, Essex, built between 1603 and 1616 for Thomas Howard, Earl of Suffolk.²⁷ Orazio Busino, chaplain of the Venetian ambassador, visited the house in 1618 and undoubtedly saw the immense hall screen still on view today: carved in oak are pairs of terms (pedestals merging into human forms at the top), male and female, garlanded panels and arches, Ionic volutes, decorated squares and rectangles, and elaborate strapwork. No longer

surviving, unfortunately, are the “handsome halls” and long galleries that Busino admired. Those galleries (one measured 226 feet in length) displayed portraits mostly, members of the family and social connections. The Italian visitor also remarks that the house was “richly ornamented with the most sumptuous furniture embroidered in silk and gold.”²⁸ Not until the reign of Queen Victoria would English interiors again be treated to such density of decoration.

The everyday objects that people wore, handled, and used in their homes also reveal a delight in the visual. Women wore earrings, pendants, chains, brooches, bracelets, clasps, rings, hairpins, and pomanders, some of these based on patterns engraved by Hans Collaert or René Boyvin. Men too sometimes wore earrings, and both sexes carried decorated handkerchiefs of the kind that Othello gives to Desdemona. Both men and women also wore around their necks starched ruffs of intricate design; they wore hat ornaments and carried scent bottles; they used decorated combs and manicure tools.²⁹ Their hands, festooned with rings, wore gloves with embroidered cuffs. Garments of men and women featured aglets, glittering ornaments usually made of metal, attached to large skirts or sleeves or hats.³⁰ Purses, which hung from belts, were similarly worn by both sexes; the purses might be embroidered, and the belts were often woven and cinched with metal buckles.

Miniature portraits, which could be employed as jewelry, were highly popular in Tudor and Stuart England and justly famous. In fact, Peacham celebrates the miniatures of Hilliard and Oliver as “inferiour to none in Christendome for the countenance in small.”³¹ Such paintings were often worn on chains around the neck: in the birth-to-death portrait of Sir Henry Unton, who served as ambassador to France and as warrior in the Netherlands, a miniature painting of Queen Elizabeth hangs from the neck of the sitter.³² Miniatures also made an appearance on the stage. They were almost certainly used in one of the early scenes of Marlowe's *Edward II*, when the king bids farewell to Gaveston: “Here, take my picture, and let me wear thine” (1.4.127).³³ The so-called closet scene of *Hamlet* also probably features miniatures when the prince challenges his mother to see the contrast between his father and uncle: “Look here upon this picture, and on this, / The counterfeit presentment of two brothers” (3.4.53–54). Today miniature paintings are on view at the Fitzwilliam Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Museum, the National Portrait Gallery, and the Wallace Collection.

Other sorts of pictorial display adorned Elizabethan and Jacobean homes too. Needlework cushions of the kind still extant at Hardwick Hall provided

visual interest while making benches, chairs, and stools more comfortable. Coverlets and pillow covers, sometimes made of linen, were worked with stitching to represent flowers or geometric patterns. Marquetry chests, painted hall chairs, and joined armchairs with elaborately carved backs (made by skilled joiners) were among the furnishings to be found in aristocratic houses. Wainscot panels, usually painted, were often embellished with carving; the long gallery built c. 1520 at The Vyne, Hampshire, displays not only the familiar linenfold motif but also flowers, royal badges, and cardinals' hats.

To walk into an Elizabethan interior was to experience what Eric Mercer has called "an uproar" of color: "Throughout the greater part of the period the only reason for leaving anything unpainted seems to have been the physical impossibility of reaching it with a brush."³⁴ Not even windows were exempt: some contained coats of arms in colored glass; others contained the stained glass that had become available with the dissolution of the monasteries or that had originally belonged to Continental churches;³⁵ Felbrigg Hall in Norfolk contains both native and foreign glass. Designs copied from books were used as models for painted plaster figures: for instance, on either end of the long gallery at Little Moreton Hall we find representations of Fortune and Destiny copied from the title-page of Robert Record's *The Castle of Knowledge*, published in 1556. Books of the well-to-do might feature embroidered covers or gold-tooled leather bindings, even polychrome decoration, and those same books sometimes contained engraved title-pages along with additional engravings or woodcuts illustrating the text.³⁶ Queen Elizabeth herself wore a girdle book, a miniature prayer book with a spectacular cover that dangled from a chain encircling her waist.³⁷

Compared with Palladian structures like the Villa Barbaro, adorned with frescoes by Veronese and filled with artifacts that flowed through Venice from all over the Mediterranean, English houses and their contents may fall short in aesthetic excellence.³⁸ But it would be a mistake to think that spare simplicity or blank surfaces represented the epitome of English taste.³⁹ Indeed, as the clothing visible in aristocratic portraits suggests, the English probably took as much pleasure in pattern, shape, and color as did their Italian, French, or German counterparts. Like them English men and women lived in a culture that relished display, whether in the form of a civic pageant, royal entry into a city, public entertainment, or funeral. Everyday life, moreover, presented a world of richly decorated surfaces. Pictorial or sculptural detail adorned dishware and drinking vessels, ewers and basins, jugs and platters, vases and tankards, cutlery and glazed earthenware plates,

saltcellars and caudle cups, watches and clocks, embroidery and carpets, tapestries and painted cloths, pillows and bolsters, overmantels and firebacks, wainscoting and plaster friezes, newel posts and firedogs, ceiling boards and hall screens, molded bricks and stove tiles, internal and external porches, tombs and monuments, swords and pistols, armor and shields, musical and scientific instruments, inn, alehouse, and shop signs, even pastry and sugar-work.⁴⁰ Nor were such artifacts reserved only for the socially privileged. William Harrison remarks that, although in times past “costly furniture” was largely confined to aristocratic houses, “now it is descended yet lower, even unto the inferiour artificers and most fermers,” who have learned “to garnish their cubbordes with plate, their beddes with tapistrie, and silke hanginges, and their tables with fine naperie.”⁴¹ Admittedly, ordinary laborers did not possess either the means to acquire the materials that Harrison names or the leisure to contemplate them. But even apprentices and illiterate servants accumulated a substantial visual vocabulary by virtue of living in a world where no object was deemed too large or too small to embellish.

II

If there was any place in Renaissance England that managed to combine, on the one hand, the word (spoken and written) so prized by Queen Elizabeth, and, on the other, the visual display enjoyed by so many, it was the theatre. Perhaps because most of us read plays rather than see them performed, we have a tendency to think of theatrical experience as consisting chiefly of listening. Visual aspects of play production are commonly ignored or deprecated: “The Renaissance was a time in which sight and visibility had an uncertain and less central place in the culture. People still *heard* plays in the Renaissance, while we *see* them today.”⁴² Admittedly, sixteenth-century writers characterize playgoers as “auditors” (from the Latin *audire*, “to hear”), and playwrights sometimes speak of playgoers as listeners: “Would you were come to hear, not see, a play,” writes Ben Jonson with typically highbrow condescension.⁴³ But this usage reflects disdain for the multitudes who, missing a playwright’s profundity, find more entertainment in what they see than in what they hear. Perhaps more typical is John Marston’s apology to the reader of *The Malcontent*. He expresses the hope that “the unhandsome shape which this trifle in reading presents may be pardoned for the pleasure it once afforded you when it was presented with the soul of lively action.”⁴⁴

By the early years of the seventeenth century, references to spectators and to seeing plays become far more plentiful, as Andrew Gurr has demonstrated, and, in any event, counting the number of references to “audience” as opposed to “spectators” is hardly a reliable guide to understanding theatrical experience, for the English Renaissance “never managed to evolve a term encompassing the feast of the conjoined senses which drama began to offer in Shakespeare’s time.”⁴⁵ The notion that the theatre was inattentive to visual display cannot be sustained. Indeed, the theatre stands at the intersection of a culture that, while investing the word with supreme (religious) importance, simultaneously finds both pleasure and edification in what the eyes behold.

Students of Renaissance drama make grand claims for the language of Shakespeare and his contemporaries in the theatre, and deservedly so. But when it is said that “the extraordinary power Shakespeare attributes to theatrical representation . . . does not reside primarily in the visual images of the theatre, but rather in the words that interpret and enliven them,”⁴⁶ we are in danger of forgetting that the plays touch us deeply not only by their language but also by the sheer force of their spectacle: a god descends from the heavens; a statue comes to life; a father and daughter, long separated, are finally reunited. Those Elizabethans hostile to drama, moreover, argue that what the playgoer sees constitutes the greatest source of appeal and thus of moral peril. Stephen Gosson, for instance, decries theatrical showmanship: “For the eye be beside the beautie of the houses, and the stages, hee [the playwright] sendeth in gearish apparell, maskes, vau[l]ting, tumbling, daunsing of giggas, galiardes, moriscas, hobbi-horses; showing of judgeling [juggling] castes, nothing forgot, that might serve to set out the matter, with pompe, or ravish the beholders with varietie of pleasure.”⁴⁷ Similarly Philip Stubbes excoriates “bawdry, scurrility, wanton shewes, and uncomely gestures, as is used (every man knoweth)” on the stage.⁴⁸ Even the theatres themselves come under attack for their physical appearance. T. W. [Thomas White?] in 1577 writes, “beholde the sumptuous theatre houses, a continuall monument of Londons prodigalitie and folly.”⁴⁹ And John Stockwood, in a sermon of 1578, complains that the Theatre built in 1576 was a “gorgeous playing place.”⁵⁰

When Elizabethan and Jacobean playgoers approached a public theatre, they would first have encountered a painted sign identifying the structure, and when they walked inside, they discovered a combination of textiles and painted wood intended to provide visual delight. Although the sole surviving depiction of a theatrical interior (in an outdoor playhouse) contemporaneous with Shakespeare shows a building with little adornment, the

artist's accompanying comments indicate that the decoration was splendid. The covering over the stage of the Swan theatre, Johannes De Witt reports, was "supported by wooden columns painted in such excellent imitation of marble that it is able to deceive even the most cunning."⁵¹ Another record (of a trickster who promised an entertainment at the Swan and then absconded with the money) tells us about some of the interior furnishings: "the common people, when they saw themselves deluded, revenged themselves upon the hangings, curtains, chairs, stooles, walles, and whatsoever came in their way."⁵² This account fails to specify exactly where the hangings and curtains were located, but the title-pages of *Roxana* (1632) and *Messalina* (1640), admittedly plays printed not long before the closing of the London theatres, depict hangings stretching across the tiring-house wall at the back of the stage.⁵³ Playgoers saw other sorts of decoration too. The contract for the Fortune theatre calls for carved satyrs to be set atop posts of the structure's frame and stage.⁵⁴ The drawings by Inigo Jones of the Cockpit in Drury Lane depict statues within niches on either side of the main opening onto the stage; the arch above the doorway is supported by two Doric columns; and draped above the two subsidiary doors are festoons of foliage.⁵⁵ The underside of the superstructure covering the Globe stage was painted to simulate the sky, probably the stars, possibly even the signs of the zodiac. The rebuilt Globe theatre in London, with its carved figures over the stage, brilliantly painted tiring-house, and decorated ceiling above the playing area, today provides some idea of the splendor that must have confronted Shakespeare's playgoers.⁵⁶

That splendor extended to the costumes on which acting companies spent lavishly.⁵⁷ Worcester's Men, for instance, paid more to purchase a black velvet dress for the chief female character in *A Woman Killed with Kindness* than they did to buy the script from Thomas Heywood.⁵⁸ Thomas Platter, who visited London in 1599, reports that "actors are most expensively and elaborately costumed."⁵⁹ He explains that noblemen typically bequeathed clothes to their serving men, who sold the (perhaps out of fashion and soiled) attire to actors. Theatrical companies also commissioned artisans to produce the costumes of ancient, mythological, and fantastic characters. Such costumes could be a valuable asset in a theatre that, lacking painted scenery of the kind common today, needed to establish a sense of locale quickly and effectively. Costumes were also a practical necessity in a theatre requiring actors to play more than one role in a drama, for costuming allowed the illusion that playgoers saw a different character when an actor re-entered in a different guise. It was costuming, of course, that transformed apprentice (youthful) actors into the semblance of adult women