Under the microscope

New discoveries in British Renaissance art

TARNYA COOPER and CHARLOTTE BOLLAND

Tarnya Cooper is Chief Curator at the National Portrait Gallery, and Curator of the 16th-century collection. Charlotte Bolland was Project Curator for 'Making Art in Tudor Britain'; she was co-curator of the recent exhibition 'Les Tudors' at the Musée du Luxembourg in Paris.

The new British Academy publication, *Painting in Britain 1500-1630: Production, Influences and Patronage*, edited by T. Cooper, A. Burnstock, M. Howard & E. Town, is available from Oxford University Press. Further information about the volume can be found at http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780197265840.do

In 2007, the National Portrait Gallery began working on a project called 'Making Art in Tudor Britain' in order to address some major gaps in our understanding of artistic production in Britain.[1] The project was interdisciplinary, and aimed to provide a new approach to research into the visual culture of the British Renaissance through technical analysis of works of art. The National Portrait Gallery holds the largest public collection of Tudor and Jacobean paintings in the world. During the course of the project, over 120 of these were examined, utilising technical analysis alongside substantial new art historical and archival research. The scientific techniques used included X-radiography, infrared reflectography, dendrochronology, paint analysis and photomicroscopy, and together these provided insights into the dating and attribution of works. The uncovering of new information on some of the most iconic works to survive from the period made it possible to address broader questions of artistic practice and patronage, and has served to reinvigorate research in the field.

Presenting new discoveries

It is this renewed interest in the subject, which offers a vital comparative to the study of the British literary renaissance and cross-cultural exchange, that is reflected in the new British Academy publication, *Painting in Britain 1500-1630: Production, Influences and Patronage*. Edited by Tarnya Cooper, Aviva Burnstock, Maurice Howard and Edward Town,[2] the volume brings together 31 scholars from art history, history, conservation and material science, and aims to provide a lively and incisive survey of current work in this field. The editors were particularly keen to present many of the new discoveries unearthed using technical analysis and new archival study about both individual paintings and artists, as well as the broader nature of artists' workshop practices, authorship, patron intentions, taste and an understanding of the complex category of 'art' in the 16th century.

The volume is divided into three sections: Material Practice; Tudor and Jacobean Painters and their Workshops; and Patronage, Markets and Audiences. These are prefaced by an introductory essay, and by a technical catalogue that presents some of the research results from 20 key paintings in remarkable detail. The selected paintings span the period and demonstrate the type of visual information and unique viewpoint that can be gained from the material analysis of paintings. The images in the technical catalogue are referenced throughout the volume, by authors discussing subjects as diverse as the association between artistic treatises and contemporary artistic practice, analysis of binding

1. The 'Making Art in Tudor Britain' project was supported by the British Academy, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, The Leverhulme Trust, The Mercers' Company and an anonymous donor. The project team would also like to express their thanks to the individuals and organisations that provided key support: Bank of America Merrill Lynch, John S. Cohen Foundation, Idlewild Trust, Leche Trust, PF Charitable Trust, Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, Märit and Hans Rausing Charitable Foundation, and the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

2. Dr Tarnya Cooper is Chief Curator at the National Portrait Gallery; Professor Aviva Burnstock is Head of the Department of Conservation and Technology at the Courtauld Institute of Art; Professor Maurice Howard is Professor of Art History at the University of Sussex; Dr Edward Town is Postdoctoral Research Associate at the Yale Center for British Art.

Figure 1
Katherine Parr, *c.* 1545. Oil on panel.
Attributed to Master John. NPG 4451.

Figure 2
Detail of Katherine Parr's gown showing the detailed depiction of the fabrics and the fur lining.

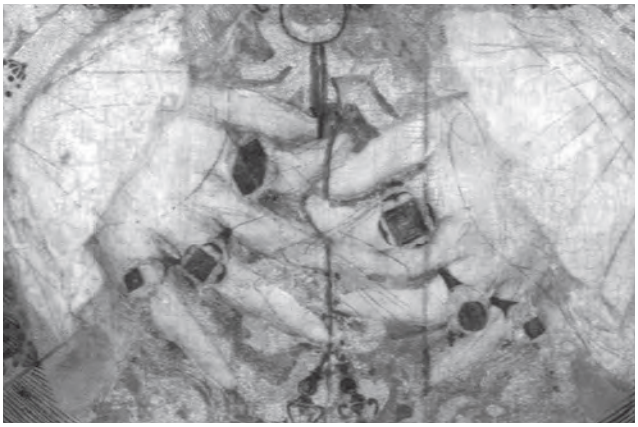

Figure 3
Digital infrared reflectogram of Katherine Parr's hands, showing the free and sketchy underdrawing used to delineate the form of the sleeves and the hands.

Figure 4
Detail of an X-ray mosaic of Katherin Parr's portrait that shows the construction of the panel and the supporting cradle on the reverse. The image reveals slight changes in the position of the upper necklace.

Figure 5
Photomicrograph detail of a cameo jewel worn by Katherine Parr, showing the high level of detail.

Figure 6
Photomicrograph detail of Katherine Parr's gown, showing the silver leaf applied over the raised loop threads above a layer of glazed silver leaf in order to depict tissued cloth of silver.

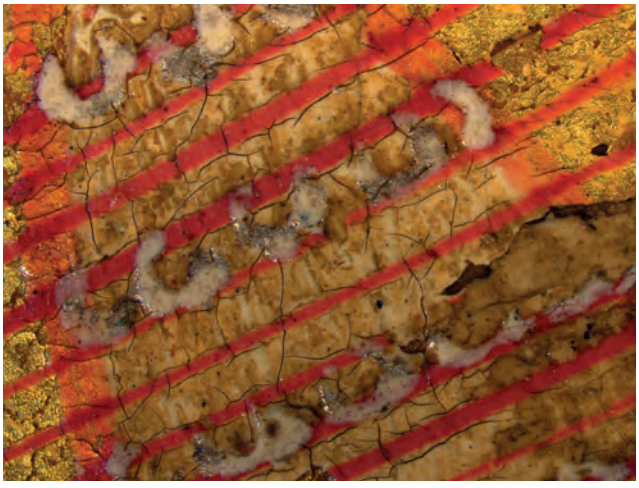

Figure 7
Photomicrograph detail of Mary I's gown, showing silver leaf applied to the raised threads in the bodice over layered gold leaf and red lake.

media, and the careers of heraldic painters. Together they demonstrate how the close examination of art objects is fundamental to research into material culture, and they also testify to the cumulative benefit of drawing on expertise from a variety of fields.

What can we learn from closer examination of the paintings?

Several authors touch on the full-length portrait of Katherine Parr (Figure 1), where technical research has provided us with much new information. Painted in around 1545, this portrait presents a striking moment in the development of a particularly English aesthetic in portraiture. Henry VIII's sixth wife is shown standing silhouetted against a strong blue background, the luxurious textiles of her dress rendered in careful detail (Figure 2). The eye is drawn from the queen's fine features and pale complexion towards the precise, almost literal, depiction of every surface detail, in which the artist skilfully captures the textural variation between fur sleeves, brocaded cloth of gold and silver, and woven carpet. It is perhaps one of the earliest embodiments of the characteristics that Sir Roy Strong would succinctly encapsulate in the title 'The English Icon'.

The work is attributed to an artist known only as 'Master John', who appears to have taken on the role of royal portraitist following the death of the German artist Hans Holbein the Younger in 1543. Master John's work clearly owes a debt to Holbein, with Katherine Parr's pose echoing that of Christina of Denmark, Duchess of Milan (National Gallery, London), but it nonetheless stands apart in its approach, and from that of the subsequent generations of émigré artists that came to England and painted the monarch – from Hans Eworth to artists such as Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger and John de Critz the Elder.

Frustratingly little is known about Master John's career, training and patrons, beyond a payment to 'John' for a portrait of Princess Mary in 1544, which is presumed to be the portrait inscribed with that date which survives in the National Portrait Gallery (Figure 8). The lack of contextual information surrounding surviving artworks is an issue that confronts researchers again and again when studying the artistic production of England, and Britain as a whole, during the 16th and early 17th century. This lack of supporting documentary evidence has meant that the study of individual works has often become disassociated from an understanding of specific questions of artistic practice, workshop technique and organisation, artistic status, patronage and English taste and therefore from a more nuanced understanding of the broader cultural context.

Specific aspects of the technical evidence have been particularly interesting, for example, infrared reflectography reveals the searching freehand lines that place Katherine Parr's hands (Figure 3), while X-radiography shows the slight changes that occurred during the painting process, such as the position of the neckline (Figure 4). The images captured down the microscope can be used for close comparative analysis of works

Figure 8
The Lady Mary (later Queen Mary I), *c.* 1544. Oil on panel. Master John. NPG 428.

whilst also allowing for a new understanding of the delicacy of the artist's technique, such as that seen in the detail of one of the cameo jewels (Figure 5). In the case of Katherine Parr, the meticulous approach to the rendering of tissued cloth-of-silver echoed that seen in the portrait of Mary I, with silver leaf applied over raised painted loops above a layer of glazed silver leaf (Figures 6, 7). This strengthened the association between the works, and thus the attribution of the portrait of Katherine Parr to 'Master John'. More unexpected was the discovery of the blue pigment azurite in the preparatory priming layer beneath the portrait. This accounted for the sitter's pale, almost ethereal complexion, and also provided a link to a full-length portrait of Edward VI that shared this idiosyncratic use of a blue priming (Figure 9).

The English tradition in painting

The portrait of Katherine Parr can perhaps best be read as a precursor to the linear aesthetic in English taste that was to reach its peak in the work of the most renowned English artist from the period, Nicholas Hilliard. But this style or English aesthetic can also be seen in the work of many anonymous English artists of the period. Why English art remains so distinct from continental practice at this period is a complex question, and one addressed in various ways in the essay volume. Part of the answer lies in the type of artistic training on offer in England and the limited interest patrons showed in

Figure 9
King Edward VI, *c.* 1547. Oil on panel. Workshop associated with Master John. NPG 5511.

Figure 10
Narrative portrait of Sir Henry Unton, *c.* 1596. Oil on panel. Unknown artist. NPG 710.

championing the value of skill, or a commitment to paying reasonable prices for high quality work. And yet, the aesthetic style of English painting may have also developed in response to Protestant ideals (and concerns over religious ideology) that undermined confidence in the value of realistic secular visual art.

How representative are the paintings examined?

Survival patterns of this period are addressed in the essays. Of the vast body of painted material produced in the 16th and early 17th centuries (including wall paintings, painted cloths, inn and shop signs, ephemeral decorative works for theatrical sets and celebrations such as the revels, and other architectural features) many, or most types of works have been lost. The powerful personal association of portraiture with their subsequent owners (as emblems of family lineage, heritage and status) has meant that a far greater proportion of portraits have survived to the present day. It is therefore unsurprising that research into the visual culture of the 16th and early 17th century has focused on this form. The volume focuses principally upon portraits, but it also touches on surviving paintings in churches.

Glimpses of the broader visual culture of the period, which would have informed and enhanced many aspects of everyday life, can still be found. For example, one of the more unusual works examined during the course of the project was the narrative portrait of Sir Henry Unton, in which Unton (Figure 10) is depicted surrounded by scenes from his life and death. After travelling in Italy, Unton served with Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester on campaign in the Netherlands, and as resident ambassador in France. In 1596, during his second term as ambassador, Unton fell ill and died, and in the portrait his body is shown being transported across the Channel in a black ship, with a hearse returning to his home in Faringdon, Oxfordshire. The close examination of the painting revealed new information about the composition – such as the fact that the cameo worn by Unton depicts not Elizabeth, as had long been supposed, but rather Henri IV of France. Most intriguingly, the analysis revealed that the structure of the painting had been substantially altered at an early point, through the addition of a narrow board along the base. This board

was prepared with a darker grey priming than the upper two boards and the paint was handled in a much simpler manner. The top two boards, which unusually appear to be made from walnut rather than oak, also had dowels inserted at regular intervals along the edge. Taken together, this new information suggested that the painting may originally have formed part of another structure, possibly a temporary memorial within Faringdon church, prior to the creation and installation of a stone monument. This would likely have meant that this highly unusual painting started life as a church memorial and at a slightly later date was displayed in a domestic context.

A foundation for further research

This field has previously been considered an under-researched area, and students studying British 16th- and early 17th-century art have needed to develop excellent research and detective skills in sourcing even secondary information about the practice and contexts of early British artists. We hope that our volume will address some significant gaps in knowledge – and inspire a whole new generation of students – through the sharing of this new research by expert scholars, and the presentation of a remarkable body of new visual primary source information for this area.

On 10 September 2015, the editors of this new British Academy book will discuss 'Painting in Britain, 1500-1630' at the National Portrait Gallery. And on 24 September, again at the National Portrait Gallery, Charlotte Bolland will talk about the findings of new research into the fascinating portrait of Sir Henry Unton. Further information can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/events/2015