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How did the Portraits of Hans Holbein the Younger Function as Propaganda in Tudor England, and What was his Legacy?

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Contents

Abstract

This dissertation examines how Hans Holbein the Younger’s portraits functioned as propaganda tools in Tudor England, shaping public perception and reinforcing royal authority. Arriving in England during a time of considerable instability and religious turmoil, Holbein employed specific visual strategies that transcended literacy and, in so doing, created images that both legitimised Henry VIII’s reign and projected stability.

The case studies of key works, including portraits of Henry VIII, Sir Thomas More, Anne Boleyn, Thomas Cromwell, and The Ambassadors, the research investigates techniques such as idealisation, symbolic costume, and object placement to express power, virtue, and continuity. Finally, how has his legacy endured from the Elizabethan era to today's media, digital propaganda, representations of power, and collective memory

Introduction

My fascination with the Tudor era has been a constant thread throughout my life. As a young child, I was introduced to stories about Elizabeth I by a schoolteacher, a progressive and passionate woman. Miss Davies schooled us in the notion that understanding art and history would always put us in good standing to understand our contemporary world. As time passed, I gradually became interested in the stories of Erasmus, Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn, Thomas More, and Thomas Cromwell. My understanding of this era, its players and representations of power grew through contemporary books, films, and documentaries. However, when I think of Henry VIII and his court, I think of Hans Holbein the Younger. And I am not alone in this, but why do these depictions of power from over 600 years ago still resonate today?

As an artist, I am intrigued by Holbein's skill in capturing the complexity of power and vulnerability of humanity. I was first introduced to Holbein via his sublime, well-observed drawings. For me, his sensitive lines capture not just a likeness but the atmosphere of the person and their world.

Figure 1. Holbein - Drawing of William Warham and drawing of Mary Shelton – Royal Collection Trust

Even when I put aside my art practice in my early twenties in favour of the corporate world, I still doodled covertly to relieve the frustration and monotony. Today, like Holbein, my return to art practice is rooted in observation. And, whilst I live in a time where it's possible to show the individuality and vulnerability of humanity in many more abstracted and ambiguous ways, it is, in my own way, the atmosphere of the person and their world that I am most drawn to. It says much for Holbein that, despite the constraints of his age, he flourished in a time of considerable instability. But what motivated Holbein to create portraits that served as such powerful tools of political power? This dissertation allows me to explore these questions, examining how Holbein's work continues to resonate in the present day.

Chapter 1.

Tudor England and the need for Propaganda

When Hans Holbein the Younger arrived in England in the 1520s, he arrived at a court that was both captivating and dangerous. The Tudor dynasty was barely forty years old. Its second monarch, Henry VIII, had the charisma and the appetite for beauty. Still, he didn't have the secure line of succession or the international alliances that would safeguard the future king's seat of power. What Henry needed more than anything else was the power of persuasion. And persuasion, in a world where the reading and writing ability was modest, and sermons were as likely to inflame as to unify his subjects, came in the form of pictures.

Today, we may think of the term "propaganda" when we talk about how the Tudors used visual culture. But in the sixteenth century, this term did not exist, but the practice was woven into daily authority and control. Propaganda in Tudor times should be understood as a kind of visual rhetoric, a selective, carefully crafted image of kingship that could calm and mollify subjects, impress foreign ambassadors and silence the dissenters. It was a way of influencing and shaping perception without the need for words. As John Berger later observed, "*the way we see things is affected by what we know or believe"* (Berger, 1972). Sharp uses the term "spin", arguing that Tudor monarchs "*Deployed what we might now describe as 'spin', Tudor rulers worked actively as patrons and popularisers to present themselves to the best advantage*". (Sharp, 2017)

Holbein was the master of this skill. Intelligent, diplomatic, and a master of ambiguity, he adapted well to the idiosyncrasies of his English patrons. He was an artist who understood the power of a carefully crafted image, and in his hands, a brush became

a tool of statecraft. His sitters included Sir Thomas More, Anne Boleyn, and King Henry VIII—potential foreign brides such as Christine of Denmark and the arguably unlucky Anne of Cleves. Within a very short time of arriving in England, his central work was the projection of authority. Tudor Authority.

The question of how Holbein's art functioned as propaganda has been approached from many angles by art critics, Historians and Curators. Roy Strong used the study of Tudor imagery as political theatre. Franny Moyle biography "The King's Painter (Moyle, 2021) has added considerable depth to our understanding of Holbein as a shrewd operator at the very heart of the Todor court's visual politics. Waldemar Januszczak, through television and journalism, has argued that the Henry VIII we think we know – "*the strutting, giant powerhouse of a man, hands on hips, glowering out at us"*, is essentially Holbein's invention. (Holbein: Eye of the Tudors, 2015)

This dissertation follows in those footsteps but asks a specific question: how did Holbein's works function as propaganda in Tudor England, and what approach did he use to shape his patron's authority and public perception? It will argue that Holbein's images were neither accidental nor passive. These likenesses were carefully tailored to the shifting needs of the Tudor era, and his skill was such that his legacy remains evident even in today's contemporary Britain.

But first, why was this need for propaganda so imperative to Henry VIII? To understand this, you need to consider what was happening during the Tudor reign.

When Henry VIII inherited the throne at the age of eighteen, he also inherited a huge problem: legitimacy. His father, Henry VII, had claimed the crown through conquest at Bosworth in 1485, at long last uniting the warring houses of Lancaster and York

through his marriage to Elizabeth of York. But bloodlines were important, especially compared to those of the great houses of Europe. He was the new money and under constant threat from potential pretenders.

His son, Henry VIII, at first appeared blessed: a golden youth, attractive, athletic, fluent in languages, and a patron of the arts. He married Catherine of Aragon, sealing a powerful alliance with Spain. But as years passed without a surviving male heir, the golden promise began to lose its lustre.

Producing an heir was crucial for dynastic security. Without this, Tudor authority would end with him. Henry's fear of losing both his authority and legacy would have been a constant fixture in his mind.

This Dynastic uncertainty coincided with massive upheaval. Martin Luther, a German priest, was a seminal figure in the Protestant Reformation. And his writings sparked religious controversies that spread across Europe like wildfire. England at first seemed well insulated. Henry himself wrote a treatise against Luther, earning him the title of Defender of the Faith. Yet within twenty years, Henry would cut all ties with Rome and declare himself Supreme Head of the Church of England, and in so doing, unleash chaos.

To cut ties with Papal Rome was not simply a religious dispute but a political earthquake. To many in Europe, Henry was perceived as a usurper and a heretic with no authority, and domestically, the Dissolution of the Monasteries had sown considerable unrest. For ordinary subjects, comfortable with centuries of papal authority, the change was bewildering, but for noble families, especially with continental ties, it was dangerous.

It was in this feverish climate that the need for visual reassurance became acute. Henry had to convince his subjects that he was not a heretic. Still, God's chosen king, that his dynasty was secure, and that obedience to him was obedience to God.

Words alone were not enough. Images could cut across divisions of learning and geography. As Sharp (Sharp, 2017) has argued, image-making was not an optional luxury but a central instrument of government.

In the sixteenth century, paintings did not just hang on walls; they were never intended as decoration or as a superficial tool of interior design. They were powerful statements to every visitor who passed through. Miniatures were commissioned and given to potential brides or grooms as a token of deliberate diplomatic intent. Murals were an assertion of authority and grandeur.

Holbein's skill was to take the language of Northern Renaissance portraiture of realism and symbolism and bend it to Tudor needs. And in doing so, he gave Henry a visual language of power.

The Whitehall mural, though now lost except in copies, depicts a magnificent, full-length, life-size Henry towering over his subjects. (highly unusual for this time) His direct gaze and compelling, exaggerated-looking frame, heavily padded and clad in the finest fabrics and jewels available, present you with a King at the very height of his power and authority; to contradict him would be unthinkable. Some visitors to Whitehall Palace found Henry’s portrait so lifelike that when they encountered it, they momentarily feared they’d walked in on the king himself. (Institute, 2022) This was not the weary, bloated, ailing Henry of later years. This image was intended to silence all

doubt. As Moyle notes, Holbein supplied Henry with an armoury more potent than cannon or cavalry: an image that declared majesty (Moyle, 2021)

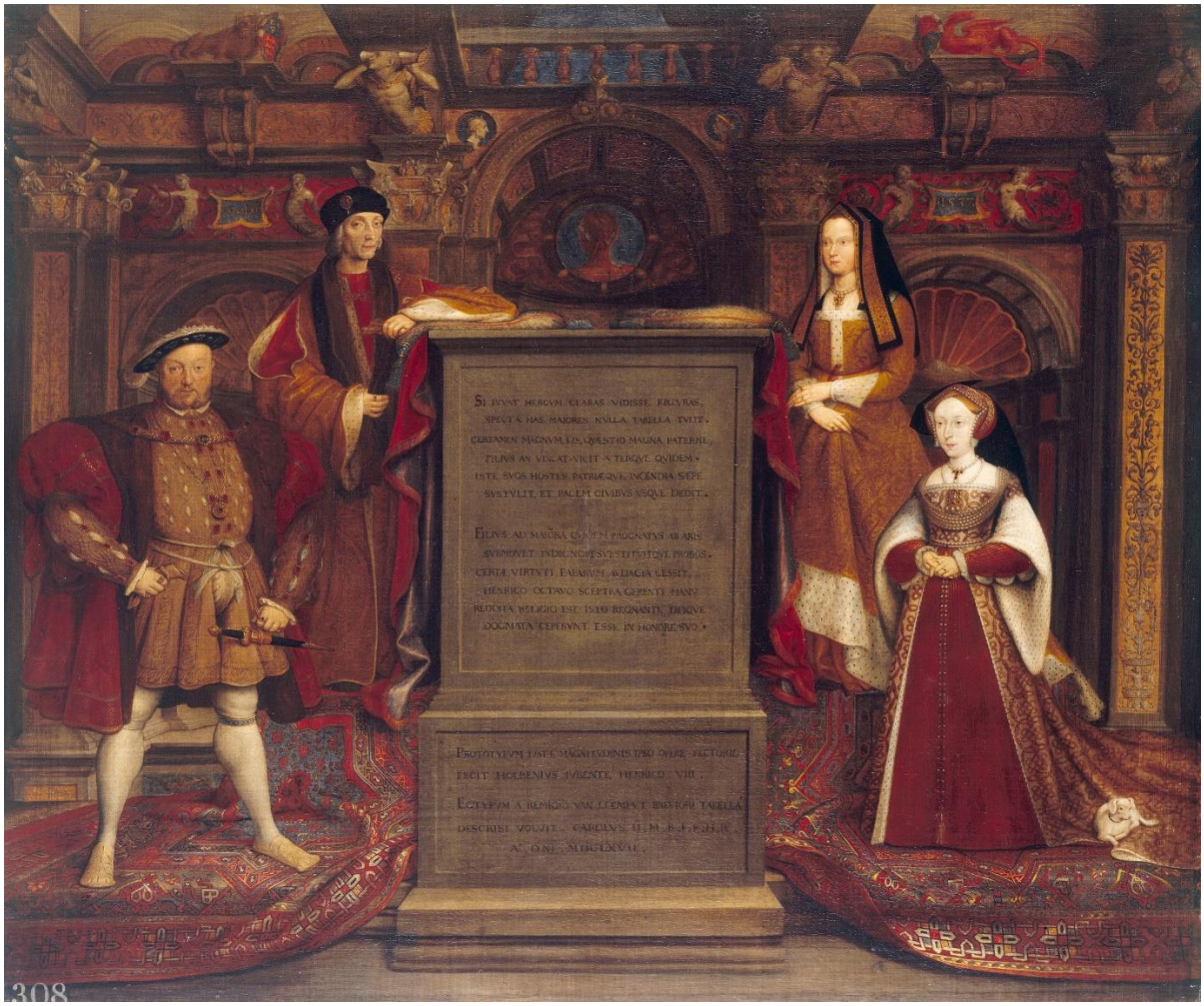

Figure 2, A copy of a mural by Holbein showing Henry VIII, his parents and his third wife Jane Seymour – Royal Collection Trust

Holbein's paintings created a shield against perceived weakness. The absence of a male heir until Edward's birth in 1537 was in part addressed by Holbein's portrait of Prince Edward; Holbein saturated this image with powerful symbolism of continuity. Which, in turn, helped frame any potential rebellion as treason not just against the King, but against God himself.

Portraits of queens were more than just likenesses: they were billboards for her virtue and reproductive potential, as Januszczak observed in relation to Anne of Cleves. The

stakes were high: the king's marriage prospects could shift European alliances in such matters, and a painter's brushstroke could carry the weight of treaties (Holbein: Eye of the Tudors, 2015)

And Henry's court was itself a kind of propaganda theatre. Carefully staged, ostentatious pageants and banquets were designed to impress. Holbein's work was part of this and was displayed prominently in spaces where ambassadors and courtiers could see it. As Guy (Guy, 2000) noted, Tudor politics was as much about performance as policy. Holbein's portraits were props in this drama, reinforcing the king's chosen role.

It was thanks to both Desiderius Erasmus's letters of introduction and Sir Thomas More's later protection and hospitality that Holbein was introduced to the Tudor Court. Erasmus was a significant influence on European thought, favouring reform of the Catholic Church from within rather than the more radical Martin Luther. An extensive traveller and writer, he developed a close friendship with both the young King Henry and Sir Thomas More. Holbein, possibly recognising the importance of Erasmus's connections and the respect he commanded, painted him on several occasions. And when Holbein decided that a future in Tudor England would be beneficial, Erasmus helped facilitate an introduction to his old friend Sir Thomas More.

Sir Thomas More was Henry’s Lord Chancellor, a generous and warm man; he offered Holbein both protection and purpose. Consequently, living among More’s erudite family and humanist contemporaries allowed Holbein time to hone his considerable experience to perfection, and through More’s influence, Holbein was gradually drawn closer to his introduction to Henry VIII himself.

Therefore, by the 1530s, the stage was set for Holbein's propaganda to operate for over a decade. It is in this context that the visual arts were not just luxuries. Holbein's arrival and his later appointment as King's Painter offered Henry VIII the chance to control how he was seen by subjects, rivals, and history. (Januskczak, n.d.)

In the next chapter, I examine just how Holbein set about achieving these aims.

Chapter 2.

Case Studies and Techniques of Propaganda in Holbein's Art

This chapter examines how Hans Holbein the Younger used specific strategies to create images that functioned as propaganda within the Tudor Court. It also examines key representations of power, i.e., how Holbein expertly used his propagandistic skills to portray Cromwell as an 'Administrative Power' despite his humble background. There is a wealth of paintings and drawings to draw upon but for this chapter I have on focusing on the following significant portraits, Sir Thomas More (1527), Anne Boleyn (c1500-1536), Thomas Cromwell (c.1532–34), The Ambassadors (1533), Henry VIII (1536–37), and the dynastic portraits of Christine of Denmark (1538) and Anne of Cleves (1539)

Idealisation

Although Holbein is remembered and revered for his "verisimilitude" [Moyle 2021], Holbein was in fact selective in his manipulation of reality, as evidenced by his portraits of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn. He would refine facial symmetry and bodily proportions to evoke strength or elegance. As Januszczak notes, "we think we know what Henry and his contemporaries really looked like because of Holbein". Still, when they are compared with other portraits of the era, such as King Henry VIII by an Unknown Anglo-Netherlandish artist, circa 1520, it becomes evident just how skilled Holbein was at controlled idealisation, which preserved credibility while achieving emotional persuasion. (Holbein: Eye of the Tudors, 2015)

Clothing as “Costume” – Symbolic of Power

Clothing was used as a “costume” with its own code. Jewels, silks and fur could indicate both hierarchy and wealth. Even the seemingly modest attire of Cromwell’s dark clothing conveys sober authority. Henry's bejewelled, sumptuous clothing sent out a clear message of wealth and grandeur. Costume could communicate hierarchy instantly—no literacy was required.

Objects – Symbols of Power

Books, instruments, documents, and religious symbols also provided a framework for viewers to interpret the sitter and Holbein's intended propaganda message. Cromwell’s documents associate power with bureaucracy, whereas Henry’s lack of objects frames monarchy as inherent rather than dependent. The sheer volume of objects in ‘The Ambassadors’ seems at first overwhelming, but each has an intention, a symbolic meaning. Ie the books allude to the importance of learning.

Sir Thomas More: Ethical Authority

Holbein’s portrait of Sir Thomas More (1527) holds a particular place in the Tudor period, as it expresses authority not rooted in absolute royal power but in its ethical legitimacy, unlike Henry VIII's portraits, which emphasise dominance. Holbein’s portrayal of More establishes an authority through his considerable intellect and a self-possessed dignity. This painting demonstrates that Tudor propaganda did not always rely solely on the adoration of regal power but instead focused on the ideals of virtue and conscience to uphold stability.

Figure 3. Holbein – Sir Thomas More, Frick Collection

Costume plays a key propagandistic role in building this identity. In private, More preferred simple attire and only “dressed up” when forced by occasion. Holbein captures More's judicial dignity via a restrained colour palette, reminding his viewer of More's position via his exquisite rendering of sable fur, “In an era when the type of fur one could wear was governed by sumptuary law” [Moyle 2021] More also wears his

Tudor Collar of Esses livery chain with Tudor rose, a sign of fealty to the King and that the bearer is in high office

More's hands are gently folded, and he gently holds a small, simple book. Still, no other documents or symbols of his office are included, suggesting contemplation and aligned with the dual value More placed on ethical understanding with leadership.

Warm flesh tones subtly contrast with the darker surrounding textiles, isolating More's face as the focal moral centre of the composition. His gaze is gentle and contemplative, yet penetrating, suggesting psychological introspection rather than political calculation. This emphasises how Holbein's rendering of facial expression acts as a conceptual tool. In More's portrait, Holbein sets out to emphasise compassion and intellectual gravity over ambition or dominance. Perhaps reflecting his personal warmth and admiration for More and his family.

The portrait's private circulation also plays a critical role in Tudor propaganda; unlike Henry VIII's full-length portrait, which was widely distributed, More's portrait circulated primarily within humanist circles. Consequently, its propaganda role did not promote royal dogma outwardly but aimed to strengthen a moral community within the court. The image reinforced the presence of ethical authority in Tudor governance, implying that legitimate leadership needed conscience as well as obedience.

However, this very idea was later to prove incompatible with Henry's push for religious absolutism. As the king insisted on being declared head of the Church of England, More's authority, grounded in Catholic doctrine and personal conscience, became politically dangerous for both him and his supporters. And in the end, More paid the ultimate price for his ethics, being executed in 1535. Holbein may have looked on in

horror at the demise of More, who had been instrumental in introducing Holbein to the Tudor court and whose generosity and kindness had been a mainstay for him. Perhaps it also offered a valuable insight into the precarious nature of serving in Henry VIII's court. Obedience, or at least the illusion of obedience, may have seemed to Holbein an essential life skill for ensuring his survival as 'The King's Painter'. (Moyle, 2021) Nevertheless, unlike Anne Boleyn's near-total pictorial erasure, More's image persisted and gained importance, mainly due to his Catholic canonisation.

Ironically, this reveals the dual nature of propaganda, and over time, the image's message shifted, and Holbein's portrait was repurposed as a symbol of resistance to tyranny. (Sharp, 2017)

Ultimately, Holbein's portrait of Thomas More shows that propaganda, however visually compelling, cannot ultimately protect the sitter from its coercive monarch.

Anne Boleyn – Image Construction and Erasure

Anne Boleyn introduces a complex aspect to Holbein's propagandistic role within the Tudor court. Unlike Henry VIII, Cromwell, or other prominent figures whose authority was reinforced through existing portraits, Anne's visual legacy is mainly characterised by absence and uncertainty.

Few verified likenesses of Anne remain. However, the approaches to Anne's portrayal, both before and during her reign as queen, demonstrate how propaganda operates not only through artistic creation but also through state suppression.

Anne Boleyn's rise to prominence came during one of the most unstable times in English history. Many incorrectly viewed Anne as the source of the King's break with

Rome. She was therefore considered a direct challenge to Papal Authority. In effect, she symbolised rupture. Therefore, her role would require careful management. Anne functioned simultaneously as a romanticised courtly icon and a politically dangerous disruption to tradition. Her image required both idealisation and restraint, aligning royal dignity with reformist ambition without inflaming conservative hostility.

Anne's representation in propaganda primarily depended on reproductive potential, elegance, and charm. This visual idealisation of Anne was intended to ease political fears about her rise. Her very existence was a potent reminder of Katherine of Aragon's seismic departure. It was important, therefore, that she should be depicted in line with what the Tudors valued in terms of feminine beauty. Therefore, her portraits display her pale skin, narrow shoulders, and delicately symmetrical features, qualities much admired in women during the Tudor era. Anne also needed to be portrayed as desirably fertile and morally refined; this was essential to justify Henry's assertions that breaking with Rome was driven by dynastic legacy rather than, as many speculated, by a King bewitched by youth and beauty.

Figure 4 – Holbein, Anne Boleyn, The Royal Collection Trust

Figure 5. – Holbein, Anne Boleyn, The Royal Collection Trust

Objects also served as propagandistic symbolic reinforcement. Prayer books and modest jewellery suggesting piety and restraint rather than ostentatious wealth to counter unsympathetic rumours of Anne as promiscuous or morally tainted. These visual strategies were intended to position Anne not as a scandalous disruptor but rather as an icon of virtuous renewal.

However, Anne's propaganda project was fragile and incomplete. Unlike Henry VIII, whose image was forcefully standardised through widespread reproduction, Anne's portraits seem to have circulated more sparingly. This limitation perhaps reflects both the briefness of her reign and the uncertainty of her legitimacy. While Henry aggressively promoted his authority, Anne's image remained a cautious addition rather than a bold instrument of state symbolism. (Foister, 2005)

The fragility of Anne's visual authority became painfully clear following her execution in 1536. Holbein's propaganda tools turned into instruments of erasure. Henry's fury at her alleged adultery and failure to produce a male heir was such that she was systematically erased. Anne was effectively delegitimised and came to be associated with seductiveness or treason.

Consequently, Anne's visual legacy forms a negative space within Tudor propaganda history—a sharp reminder that the power of representation involves both declaration and absence. Her absence supports Moyle (Moyle, 2021) assertion that Holbein and his contemporaries were not merely image-makers, but curators of royal memory itself.

Thomas Cromwell: Administrative Power

Holbein's portrait of Thomas Cromwell (1532–33) demonstrates how it is possible to elevate administrative authority to the visual importance traditionally reserved for

nobility, unlike depictions of Henry VIII or aristocratic courtiers, which rely on symbols of bloodline, divine right, and martial masculinity. Through careful use of pose, clothing, objects, and setting, Holbein depicts Cromwell not as a warrior or aristocrat, but as the embodiment of the machinery of state.

Figure 6. Holbein – Thomas Cromwell, Frick Collection

This depiction mirrors the broader changes during Henry VIII's reign, which increasingly valued service over noble bloodlines. As a blacksmith's son from Putney, Cromwell's rapid rise relied entirely on his skilled mastery of bureaucracy and political acumen.

Cromwell is placed solidly behind a heavy wooden desk, and rather than adopting a courtly stance, he is obscured behind furniture; this reduces visual emphasis on him

as a physical being – it's all about his intellectual authority. His gaze is not direct, his posture tense, almost as if he is too busy to be sitting for a portrait – busy for the King. This Cromwell is all about vigilance and calculation rather than theatrical self-promotion (Holbein: Eye of the Tudors, 2015)

Objects are used symbolically. Papers, documents, writing instruments, and letters with the royal seal fill the painting; his desk is the centre of administration and quite efficiency. Affirming Cromwell's authority. Sharp (Sharp, 2017) notes that this marked a radical departure from aristocratic portraiture conventions and visually aligned political power with documentation rather than blood.

These instruments of administration also demonstrate the considerable expansion of state authority under Cromwell's leadership. The reorganisation of legal institutions, royal finance and monastic administration required unprecedented oversight. Cromwell's hands suspend near the paperwork rather than resting decoratively – Cromwell never rests; he is the industrious and tireless administrator in service to the King.

Costume further reinforces administrative authority. Cromwell's clothing is dark, subdued, and plain. Heavy black fabrics dominate, in contrast to the jewel-encrusted splendour of Henry VIII's portrait. This identifies black as a colour of legality and seriousness within Renaissance visual culture, associating it with judicial office and civil discipline. Cromwell's attire thus rejects aristocratic flamboyance in favour of a sober, practical aesthetic.

Cromwell's facial expression heightens the image's rhetorical impact. His sharply defined profile, narrow eyes, and compressed lips convey complete resolve. His face

shows no warmth. He is all business. Januszczak (Holbein: Eye of the Tudors, 2015) interprets this as a visual metaphor for bureaucratic impartiality. Authority here is neither compassionate nor theatrical: it is efficient, impersonal, and relentless.

The private circulation of Cromwell's portrait further highlights its strategic purpose. Unlike Henry's official propaganda portraits, which were widely reproduced, Cromwell's likeness mainly circulated among court officials, diplomats, and reformist allies. The target audience consisted of individuals involved in government institutions rather than the general public. As a result, the image reinforced internal hierarchies: it visually confirmed where real power resided within the Tudor structure.

However, this power is always reliant on favour. Once out of favour, specifically, Henry's. Cromwell's position proved fragile, and when his fortunes shifted after the disastrous alliance formed through Henry's brief marriage to Anne of Cleves, his authority rapidly collapsed. His arrest and execution in 1540 revealed the hazardous limits of administrative power when detached from royal protection.

Following Cromwell's fall, his visual legacy mirrored the erasure of Anne Boleyn. Portraits vanished or were destroyed. The Tudor court showed no appetite for sustaining the image of a failed politician whose reputation threatened the myth of royal infallibility.

The Ambassadors: Knowledge as Power

Holbein's The Ambassadors (1533) is distinctive within his Tudor works. It depicts Jean de Dinteville, the French ambassador to England, and Georges de Selve, Bishop of Lavaur and diplomatic go-between. Their presence was intended to serve as a signifier of diplomatic power and to signal that Tudor England was not a cultural

backwater. However, it is unlike most court portraits of the time. Here, Holbein's priority appears to be in placing propagandistic power in objects as symbols of learning and global networks, thereby shifting authority from figures to objects as symbols of power. In effect, knowledge is power. (Foister, 2005)

Objects as Knowledge

At first glance, the painting seems stacked with an assortment of objects, but on closer inspection, you begin to see that they are all related or symbolic representations of astronomy, science, travel, religion and music. These objects are not intended as decorative; they serve as a visual code of conquest, religion, exploration, and trade.

Conceptually, this is a profoundly contemporary painting: power is represented not through Royal bloodlines but through data, measurement, and classification.

Figure 7. Holbein, The Ambassadors, National Gallery, London

Power and Mortality

This conceptual modernity is further explored in what could be argued as Holbein's most ambiguous moves. At the centre of the painting lies one of the most renowned optical devices in art history: the distorted skull, appearing as if slashed across the foreground and visible only when viewed from an oblique angle.

Holbein must have been well aware by now that power, including intellectual and diplomatic power, remains mortal, temporary, and morally complex.

Henry VIII: Absolute Power

Holbein’s full-length portrait of Henry VIII is arguably the most explicit piece of visual propaganda in Tudor England. Painted after Henry’s break from Rome, the image depicts Henry VIII standing with legs wide apart, with a body that is exaggerated way beyond realistic proportions.

Henry’s clothing is heavily laden with jewels, highlighting enormous sleeves and richly embroidered fabric. It’s all about conspicuous wealth and masculinity. Clothing is symbolic and designed entirely to project Henry’s virility, power, and resilience, even as the reality was an ageing King in sharp physical decline.

Figure 8. Holbein, King Henry VIII, Walker Gallery, Liverpool

The pose borrows from medieval statues of warrior kings, but with the absence of weapons, there is no need; Henry's sheer presence is a weapon in itself. Januszczak (Holbein: Eye of the Tudors, 2015) observes that Henry's legs are widened to fill the

pictorial space—commanding the viewer's attention and asserting psychological superiority.

Objects are notably absent. Unlike diplomats or ministers, whose authority is expressed through intellect, Henry's power is embodied directly to his audience.

The widespread distribution of copies meant Henry's image flooded England. These were displayed in palaces and public buildings, reinforcing loyalty through repetition.

This portrait transformed Henry VIII into an ideological myth. The ageing, bloated king was immortalised forever as a vigorous, powerful leader, a creation intended to bolster national confidence during uncertain times.

Christina of Denmark and Anne of Cleves: Power of Alliance via matrimony

Holbein's portraits of Christina of Denmark (1538) and Anne of Cleves (1539) are an interesting further example of Tudor diplomatic propaganda. On the advice of Henry VIII's Chief Minister, Thomas Cromwell, Henry commissioned both portraits some two years after the death of his third wife, Jane Seymour. Jane, having produced a long-desired male heir (Prince Edward), died several days later due to complications arising from childbirth.

These works show how Holbein's propagandistic portraiture became instruments of geopolitical strategy, reducing dynastic women to symbols of reproductive potential and alliance-building.

Christina of Denmark's portrait is regarded as a Holbein masterpiece; its hallmarks are psychological depth and compositional restraint. Christina was only sixteen and already a widow. The painting depicts her standing alone against a neutral

background, tastefully dressed in mourning attire. And unlike Henry VIII's public portraits, which exude splendour, Christine's subdued costume conveys modesty, humility and moral seriousness, qualities that aligned with Tudor ideals (Moyle, 2021).

Figure 9. Holbein, Christina of Denmark, National Gallery, London

Her pose is distinguished and regal. But Christine is fully aware of her political objectification. There is quiet opposition in her stance, a suggestion, perhaps, that while she is on display for inspection, she remains self-reliant. Legend attributes to Christine the remark that “she would require two heads if she were to marry Henry”, an anecdote underscoring her awareness of the risks of becoming Tudor queen (Moyle, 2021).

By contrast, Anne of Cleves’ portrait offers a distinctly different visual language. Also commissioned as part of marriage negotiations, the picture depicts Anne's richly elaborate headdress, layers of embroidered fabric, and heavy jewellery, which emphasise dynastic wealth and reproductive suitability rather than moral restraint. In contrast to Christine’s psychological introspection, Anne’s expression remains calm and inscrutable. She gazes directly forward but does not engage with her audience.

Figure 10. Holbein, Anne of Cleves, The Louvre, Paris

The intensity of Anne’s surface ornamentation draws attention away from psychological character. Her body is visually subsumed beneath the costume, suggesting the absence of autonomy and emphasising her dynastic alliance function. The image becomes an advertisement for fertility, contemporary, fashionable attire, and a clear, smooth complexion. All are intended as visual cues to project health and reproductive promise, all of which were important for Henry.

Together, these paintings demonstrate how women served as diplomatic tools within Tudor times; they were viewed not as individuals but as reproductive vessels for establishing and safeguarding alliances. Holbein’s role was to paint these women as commodities within the marriage market. Yet the emotional complexities encoded—especially in Christine’s portrait reveal how his considerable artistry preserves a moment of quiet mutiny against total commodification.

In this sense, Holbein’s diplomatic portraits not only reflect the Tudor era’s marriage politics but also form an early framework of gendered propaganda whose influence remains deeply rooted in contemporary visual culture.

It says something of Holbein's considerable skill, both as a painter and as a dispassionate mover amongst Henry’s court, that he not only survived his contribution to a disastrous marriage but continued to flourish. Cromwell was not so fortunate; his efforts to secure an alliance with the Duchy of Cleves through a marriage to Anne culminated in his downfall and execution.

Hans Holbein the Younger: The Power of Adaptivity and Ambiguity

A recurring question in my research for this dissertation has been: how did Holbein manage to feature so prominently in King Henry’s life and remain unscathed? Holbein

operated within a brutal regime and witnessed firsthand the execution of people he had close ties with, including Sir Thomas More, Anne Boleyn, and later Thomas Cromwell. All of them were disposed of when they no longer served a purpose to the volatile Henry. You wonder what his thoughts were while he painted Sir Richard Rich shortly after More's execution, fully aware that Rich's false testimony had tipped the scales during More's "show trial". Yet there is no discernible clue in Rich's portrait.

It is impossible to ignore the fact that Holbein was an active participant in shaping a visual language that legitimised authority and minimised instability. He effectively created the myth that is the Henry we know today and maintained the volatile and bloody regime that swept away many of his friends and sitters. Yet there are no records of Holbein's thoughts or deeds amidst these storms. This raises a difficult question: was his apparent neutrality a form of complicity?

I believe it is simplistic to view Holbein as amoral, especially when compared to More, whose authority stemmed from his conscience. Holbein's strength lay in his adaptability and ambiguity. He understood not only painting but also people. He had observed others closely since childhood and recognised the delicate balance between projecting strength and appearing confrontational. He had learned the vulnerabilities of visibility and the importance of discretion as means of survival. Within this context, examining his portraits more carefully reveals some of this ambiguity.

His depiction of More's ethical authority is clear, yet Holbein also hints at More's uncertain future if he chooses to obey his conscience rather than the King. Holbein understood the nature of power and how fragile authority could be in its face. He inhabited that challenging space between obedience and observation, not challenging power or completely yielding his humanity to it.

Conclusion

Holbein’s Tudor portraits served as persuasive tools of political propaganda, combining his idealised realism with symbolic language to influence public perception and royal authority. And his works conveyed a unique conceptual language regarding authority, legitimacy, character, and virility.

And with each of these portraits, he depicts Tudor propaganda with a distinct thematic approach. Cromwell’s portrait broadcasts administrative power. More’s portrait is an ethical resistance, and the portrait of Anne of Cleves represents the direct consequences of Holbein's compelling visual imagery.

Chapter 3

Legacy: From Holbein to Contemporary Representations of Power

Introduction

Holbein's legacy of propaganda extended far beyond his lifetime, shaping how later power brokers understood and managed their public image.

Elizabeth I, an exceptionally intelligent ruler, witnessed and understood this new visual language firsthand and adapted it to suit her reign. As with her father before her, legitimacy was always a constant threat to her reign, but through carefully controlled portraiture and the emergence of small theatres that complemented the Elizabethan propaganda machine, Elizabeth precisely crafted her public image as the "Virgin Queen," which became the very symbol of national unity. Shakespeare and his contemporaries contributed to this culture of regulated representation and completely transformed theatre into both a mirror for the Elizabethan court and the country. (Strong, 1977)

It is in this sense that we observe Shakespeare's insight that "all the world's a stage"—a world in which rulers, like actors, perform their role before an ever-watchful audience.

This chapter advocates that Holbein's propaganda techniques of idealisation, symbolism, skilful performance, and careful management of public events continued long after his death. Like all effective strategies, they adapted through changing cultures and new technologies, becoming ingrained in British political culture. From Elizabeth's emblematic iconography and Shakespeare's theatrical observations (Strong, 1977) to modern visual art, photography, broadcast media, and social

networks, the mechanisms of representation established by the Tudor court remain fundamental in shaping legitimacy.

Elizabeth I and the Mythologisation of Authority

Elizabeth, I took the Holbein propaganda a step further and effectively transformed herself from an individual ruler into a symbolic image that transcended both her body and her gender. Elizabeth understood that resemblance was much less critical than ideological perfection. Elizabeth, the woman, vanished beneath many layers of her unique symbolism. Pearls denoted virgin purity, serpents' wisdom, globes' imperial destiny, while star-shaped headdresses suggested divine election (Strong, 1987).

Figure 11, Armada Portrait, Date: c.1588, Artist: George Gower

The tightly managed distribution of these portraits also played a critical role. Elizabeth's court imposed strict rules; portraits were destroyed or ordered retouched if they deviated in any way. Visual identity was standardised to avoid any symbolic fragmentation. This policy represents a direct extension of Holbein's controlled realism: likeness was subordinate to political requirement.

Elizabethan propaganda evolved into a form of multimedia. Royal events and carefully staged ceremonies expanded portraiture into live spectacles. Audiences did not just look at paintings; they experienced them. And Shakespeare's theatre reflected this approach. With clear endorsement, he set about dramatising royalty as a performance. (Strong, 1977)

Power was exercised rather than inherited unconditionally. Shakespeare's portrayal mirrors Holbein's visual language: both demonstrate that monarchy relies on persuasive representation rather than inherent sanctity alone.

Elizabeth understood the value of including performance in governance. Her speeches, costumed appearances, and public ceremonies dramatised monarchy, viewing public visibility as a form of political control. Elizabeth's reign marks the shift from medieval sacral kingship to a state perspective of rule as spectacle.

Contemporary Political Image-Making in Britain

Whilst the most overt demonstration that continues is that of Royal propaganda, coronations, royal weddings, and jubilees, which are broadcast globally as reaffirmations of the monarchy through carefully choreographed continuity. Symbolic objects continue to serve as a visual reminder of legitimacy. After all, what is a King

or Queen unless they wear a crown or ermine robe? And today's media repetition replicates the circulation of Henry VIII's portraits through viral visibility. (Herh, 2019)

And whilst some modern politicians may lack a claim to leadership through blue blood, they cultivate legitimacy through carefully managed performances mediated by photography, television, and digital platforms.

Modern-day "Spin Doctors" ensure leaders are posed with strategic symbolism, hospitals convey their compassion, and factory visits express industriousness. Their 'costume' becomes symbolic: rolled-up sleeves signal to the audience that I am accessible and productive; well-tailored suits convey institutional authority; royal-style uniforms reinforce hierarchical command. These visual strategies echo Holbein's reliance on costume as a means of conceptual coding. (Claire Wardle, 2017)

Figure 12. Image of Putin with a baby, unattributed

Modern leaders also adopt numerous performative roles across diverse platforms — father figure, economic steward, national sentinel — adapting costume and language contextually.

Shakespeare's declaration remains accurate: "One man in his time plays many parts."

Contemporary Leaders & Digital Propaganda

Contemporary leaders routinely employ professional image consultants who manipulate lighting, camera angle, background symbolism and timing. Political photography rarely captures spontaneous leadership; instead, it arranges emotional resonance. (Herh, 2019)

Holbein's techniques of idealised realism are repeated in today's digital alterations. Visual truth is not the priority.

However, the advent of deepfake technology marks a new escalation. Unlike Holbein, who preserved resemblance within idealistic distortion, deepfakes erase the distinction between fabrication and accuracy. Consequently, trust once granted to political images increasingly deteriorates (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017).

Holbein's contribution to political imagery marks the birth of systematic visual propaganda in Britain. His strategies of idealisation, costume symbolism, iconographic messaging, and psychological performance not only shaped Tudor portraiture but also initiated a political language that extended into Elizabethan times and into today's statecraft. (Artnet News, 2025)

Modern visual culture, broadcast media, and digital platforms all continue to deploy these foundational techniques.

Authority within British culture has always depended upon visual performance. From canvas to screen, ruler to influencer, the same ideological machinery persists. As Shakespeare foresaw and Holbein visualised, rulers continue to stand not simply in power, but in performance before an audience shaped as much by illusion as by truth.

Final Conclusion

Through this investigation, I have reached a deeper understanding of why critical visual literacy is so essential in any era. Recognising the strategies of persuasion ingrained within images is a vital skill. With the benefit of hindsight, I now fully appreciate Miss Davies' intentions and wonder what she would have made of today's political advertising, celebrity branding, and social media performance.

Clearly, images still shape belief, and power continues to perform.

Completing this dissertation has strengthened my commitment to pursue formal postgraduate study. Engaging with art history and visual culture theory at this level revealed both the depth of the field and the need for extended opportunities to continue this research.

It is now my aim to deepen my academic engagement by studying the politics of images and the evolving relationship between representation and power.

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