



BOULEVARD

OVERVIEW

Introduction to National Portrait Gallery (London)

When it opened in 1856, London's National Portrait Gallery (NPG) became the first portrait gallery in the world. The institution was founded to "promote through the medium of portraits the appreciation and understanding of the men and women who have made and are making British history and culture, and...to promote the appreciation and understanding of portraiture in all media." Today the National Portrait Gallery holds over 210,000 portraits, spanning from the 16th century to the present day and ranging from representations of Edward VI to Noble prize-winning chemist Dorothy Hodgkin and pop star David Bowie. Among the most frequently visited sections of the museum are the rooms housing the Tudor portraits.

The Portrait of Sir Henry Unton

Found within the grouping of Tudor portraits is one of the most iconic and celebrated paintings from NPG's collection, *Sir Henry Unton*. Sir Henry Unton (c. 1558 -1596) was a distinguished English soldier, parliamentarian and ambassador to France, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. This highly unusual narrative portrait was commissioned after Unton's death by his widow Dorothy. The portrait's author is unknown, and it is likely that a later additional section was painted by a different artist. At the center of the composition is the portrait of Unton, depicted writing dispatches at his desk. He is flanked by figures of Fame and Death and surrounded by nine scenes of his life and death which unfold, starting from the lower-right hand corner, in a counter-clockwise fashion. In each of the vignettes, the sitter is touched by a ray of light coming from the sun.

The 'story picture' of Sir Henry Unton provides a unique visual record of one man's life in the late sixteenth century, and the rich detail has provided information to scholars researching subject areas as diverse as music, the masque, the domestic interior and ambassadorial life.

Inspire Your Students Across Curriculum

The Boulevard AR *Sir Henry Unton* experience provides particularly rich inspiration for learning in European history, art history, literacy, civics, geography, art, and technology. The painting is appropriate for all ages.

How to Use This Resource

This resource is designed for use by teachers, educators or students to support and enrich the Boulevard viewing experience and encourage inter-disciplinary learning. Our Boulevard lesson plans will help you explore this painting through a range of different themes inspired by the work, offering discussion points and ideas for educational projects and activities.

Looking at the Work

When using *Sir Henry Unton* AR experience, you may find these suggestions helpful in engaging students to look closely and in generating basic group discussion. More specific questions and talking points are provided in the K-5 and 6 - 12 lesson plan sections accessible on the *Sir Henry Unton* Educate Page.

Ask students to respond to the portrait.

- What is your first reaction to the painting?
- How does it make you feel?
- What can you see?
- What interests or appeals to you about it?
- How do you think it was made?
- What words would you use to describe the world depicted in the work of art?
- If you could step into the painting what would it feel like?
- Would you like to have this object in your house? Why or why not?

The Tudor Period

The Tudor Period, which has become the best known and most widely studied in British history, takes its name from the family of five monarchs, beginning with Henry VII, who reigned in England and Wales from 1485-1603. The last ruling Tudor monarch was Queen Elizabeth I (the daughter of King Henry VIII) - for whom the Elizabethan era is named. This approximately 120-year span was one of Britain's most dynamic and influential. England underwent a religious reformation, transitioning from Catholic religion to Protestant faith, and the bible was first printed in English. The country saw its first female monarch, and especially under Elizabeth I, Britain became a significant maritime power, undertaking exploration resulting in the expansion of its empire and its culture. This era also witnessed a flowering of literary talent, with the appearance of major playwrights and poets, including William Shakespeare and John Donne.

The English Renaissance in Art

The fashion for portraiture in oil took off in England in the 1500s among those who could afford it: monarchs, princes, courtiers, cardinals, bishops, and wealthy merchants. Native English painters of the time were considered relatively humble artisans and rarely signed their pictures. Sometimes more than one painter from the same studio would complete one picture, making attribution to one artist difficult. During this period, English painters faced steep competition from talented foreign artists who settled there. Indeed, German painter Hans Holbein the Younger, who lived in England for several years, dominated the field, and his portraits of Henry VIII, are the often the first that spring to mind when the Tudor period is mentioned. Artists from the Netherlands were also widely admired during the second half 16th century. The style adopted by English artists during Elizabeth I's reign (when *Sir Henry Unton* was painted), often lacked precise perspective and was distinctive for its bold outlines and emphasis on surface pattern and texture. These paintings are also frequently characterized by minute detail and embedded with sophisticated allegory and symbolism.

More About the Painting

The Chronology of Sir Henry Unton's Life (as told through the nine AR vignettes)

- Vignette 1) In the lower right of the painting, Unton is depicted as an infant in the arms of his mother, Anne Seymour, formerly Countess of Warwick, at the Unton house of Ascott-under-Wynchwood.
- Vignettes 2 and 3) He is then shown studying at Oriel College, Oxford, where he took his degree in 1573, before travelling beyond the Alps to Venice and Padua.
- Vignette 4) He served with the Earl of Leicester on campaign in the Netherlands in 1586, and, in the portrait, Nijmegen is shown in the distance behind the military encampment.
- Vignette 5) The center of the right-hand side of the composition shows Unton's life at Wadley House; he is depicted sitting in his study, making music, and presiding over a banquet while a masque of Mercury and Diana is performed.
- Vignette 6) Unton also acted as resident ambassador to France in Spain in 1591-92, and then again in 1595-96, when he attempted unsuccessfully to avert a peace treaty between France in Spain.
- Vignette 7) Unton accompanied Henry IV to the siege of Spanish forces at La Frère, where he fell dangerously ill and was attended to by the French king's physician.
- Vignette 8) He died on March 23, 1596. His body was taken back to England across the Channel in a black ship and the painting also depicts the hearse on its way back to his home at Wadley House, Farringdon, near Oxford.

- Vignette 9) From the house his funeral procession leads past a group of the poor and the lame lamenting his death, and on to All Saint's Church, Faringdon, where his funeral was held on July 8, 1596, and where his tomb monument is shown in the foreground with Unton's recumbent effigy and the kneeling figure of his widow.

Transcript of the Audio Narration for the *Sir Henry Unton Experience*

Introduction - This unusual narrative portrait, painted in oil on a wooden panel around 1596, chronicles the achievements of Sir Henry Unton, who lived during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, the last of the Tudor monarchs.

While many Elizabethan portraits celebrated a single significant moment in a sitter's life, this landscape-format painting spans Sir Henry's entire life. Indeed, much of the painting's unique character lies in the multiple appearances of its subject. The Englishman appears no less than 10 times throughout, in a series of highly-detailed scenes unfolding around a large, central portrait.

Unton's widow, Lady Dorothy, commissioned the work after her husband's death in 1596. It is not known who painted the portrait, but it is evident that it was extended at an early point in its history. The wooden panel is comprised of three horizontal boards; the top two appear to be made of walnut, while the much narrower lowest board is made of oak.

The length of dark red-brown wall running beneath the line of mourners and buildings in the lowermost section of the work shows where the painting was extended. Compositional differences, varied paint handling and simplified figural style indicate that the later addition was painted by a different artist.

Flanking Unton at his desk, two complementary allegorical figures overlook the events of the Englishman's life. At his left shoulder, a skeletal figure of Death holds an hourglass. This commonly-used symbol serves as a *memento mori*, an inescapable reminder of fleeting time, which was intended to spur meditation on mortality. At Unton's right shoulder, a triumphant, winged figure of Fame offers him her crown and trumpets his everlasting memory, underscoring the purpose of the portrait itself.

Anchoring the painting from opposing corners of the panel, a smiling sun and a crescent moon look down upon Unton's life and death, serving as a reminder of the passage of time. Affirming the sitter's place in history, the sun's rays pinpoint his figure in each of the scenes from his life.

In the center of the painting, Unton looks out at us from his desk, writing dispatches and wearing a jeweled cameo on a chain. Unton was a soldier and diplomat who twice served as England's ambassador to France, and it is the French king, Henry IV, whose profile appears on the cameo. This seemingly minor feature reflects a major achievement in the Englishman's life. Such an unassuming inclusion could easily slip past 21st century- eyes, but tells us much about

the politics of the time, Unton's own interpersonal relationships and Tudor conventions. How many more elusive details are woven into this intricate, sprawling portrait?

Vignette 1 - Henry Unton was born around 1558 in Ascott-under-Wynchwood, in Oxfordshire, England. The son of Sir Edward Unton and Lady Anne Seymour, the infant Henry appears in his mother's arms, attended by a nurse and two gentlewomen, at the Unton family house. Bearing the coronet of a countess, the prominent Seymour coat-of arms sits in the center of a banner above his mother, flanked by inscriptions, unfortunately no longer legible, that emphasized Unton's noble pedigree, including his connection to King Henry VIII, through his mother's aunt, Queen Jane Seymour.

Vignette 2 - As a teenager, Unton was sent to Oxford University to study at Oriel College, where he received a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1573. He is shown here beardless, reading in his rooms, as scholars go about their business in the city.

Vignette 3 - Unton travelled to Italy, visiting Padua and Venice, depicted here as an island with the flag of St George flying above the domes of St. Mark's Basilica. Both Venice and Padua are clearly labeled in script, as if on a map. While curious from today's perspective, this convention of including names, titles, places, and even long inscriptions within a painting was not unusual in English Renaissance portraiture. Unton is shown on horseback, carrying - in what is perhaps its earliest depiction in English art - an umbrella, which would offer him protection from the sun and rain. The term 'umbrella,' derived from Italian, only came into common usage in England later in the seventeenth century.

Vignette 4 - In 1586, Unton travelled to the Netherlands as part of an English expeditionary unit sent by the Queen to aid Protestant forces in revolt against the rule of Philip II of Spain. Having been knighted following the Battle of Zutphen, Unton is portrayed here in armour, in front of his campaign tent. Somewhat confusingly, the artist has labelled the besieged town 'Nijmegen', which did not fall until 1591, by which time, Unton had long moved on. Its inclusion suggests this a composite scene intended to represent elements of the entire military campaign.

Vignette 5 - Within this scene of Unton's home life at Wadley House in Berkshire, he is represented multiple times, including sitting in his study, conversing with theologians, and playing an instrument. In the main chamber of the house, a feast is underway. Seated prominently at the centre of the table, Unton appears yet again, surrounded by guests and servants. His wife Dorothy is shown to the right, at the head of the table. The couple and their guests are depicted significantly larger than the servants, indicating their elevated status.

A dramatic courtly pageant, or *masque*, is being performed, with music provided by an ensemble playing both wind and string instruments. The masquers are led by a drummer and a presenter, who offers a paper explaining the performance to Lady Unton. The winged figure of Mercury, messenger of the gods, and Diana, the moon goddess, follow. Wearing a diadem adorned with a crescent moon, Dianashe holds a hunting bow and is attended by six women wearing masks. The entire troupe is accompanied by ten torchbearers.

This is the only known surviving representation of an Elizabethan masque being performed.

Vignette 6 - Unton was appointed England's ambassador to France in 1591, a post he held for nearly a year. At the time, France was divided by a religious civil war. Queen Elizabeth sent troops to aid the Protestant King Henry IV, and Unton travelled with them. As a result of this posting, he would develop a surprising friendship with the French King. In this scene, trumpets herald Unton's journey, but in fact, upon his arrival in France, he took ill and nearly died.

Vignette 7 - The French King Henry IV again sought military aid from the English in 1595, and Unton was re-appointed ambassador to France. He accompanied the king to Coucy La Fère, to fight the encroaching Spanish forces. There, he fell from his horse and developed a fever. The king's own physician attended Unton, prescribing a heart tonic, made according to an ancient recipe from kermes beetles compounded with musk, amber, gold, pearl, and unicorn's horn, with the application of pigeons to his side to reduce his fever. Despite this care, Sir Henry Unton died on March 23, 1596.

Vignette 8 - After his death, a black mourning ship with black sails transported Unton's body back across the English Channel. Watching over him during his illness, his friend Dudley Carelton, who had watched over him during his illness had noted Unton's 'desire at his first falling sick, when he had apprehension of death, to have his body carried into England'. And so it came to pass. Because he died in service to the crown, Henry Unton, who was in fact a knight, was accorded the honor of being brought home to Wadley in a baron's hearse.

Vignette 9 - Unton's funeral took place on July 8th, 1596. The procession from Wadley House to All Saints' Church, Faringdon, wove through throngs of mourners lamenting his death. Tellingly, while the rest of the scenes in the painting are lit by the sun's radiance, here the only illumination is offered by the crescent moon.

Figures of Faith and Hope flank Unton's sarcophagus inside the pale tomb monument. A reclining effigy of Unton, presided over by the kneeling figure of his widow, Dorothy, is heralded from above by Figures of Fame and Victory. Because this stone memorial to Unton

was not completed until ten years later in 1606, what we see here is an early concept for its design.

Postscript - Sir Henry Unton's portrait may have been intended as a temporary memorial while his actual tomb was being built. Unfortunately, the stone monument was destroyed a few decades later during the English civil wars, and only the figure of Lady Unton survives. The Englishman's legacy lives on, however, through the survival of this extraordinarily compelling and unique painting in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery in London.