David Howarth. *Images of Rule: Art and Politics in the English Renaissance, 1485–1649*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997. Pp. xv, 323.

The wealthy and powerful of Renaissance Europe aimed to acquire and practice a wide range of accomplishments — expertise in dress and jewellery, building and gardening, dogs, horses, hunting and horsemanship, discernment in collecting everything from stuffed animals to old masters, appreciation of classical and contemporary literature, knowledge of foreign languages, and political, diplomatic and military skills. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the emerging apparatus of academia picked and chose which aspects of that curriculum to dignify with the status of a “professional” discipline. And since this was the era par excellence of academic specialism, the result was that the wide worlds in which these early modern aristocrats travelled were split up and studied either as narrow “fields” (art history, diplomatic, military, political history), which rarely connected with each other; or they were not studied seriously at all (curio collections, hunting, and so on). With the fences between disciplines set up, attempts were made to climb over them: but the nature of the result has greatly depended upon which “field” — especially whether art history or political history — the scholar in question started from. The relationship between art and power in this period was a theme pioneered by Sir Roy Strong, approaching from the “art history” side. Among historians, Hugh Trevor-Roper and R. J. W. Evans produced trailblazing studies. J. H. Eliot and Jonathan Brown, historian and art historian respectively, fruitfully collaborated in explicating Philip III of Spain’s Buen Retiro.

A major shift occurred in the 1980s, when “revisionist” historians of seventeenth-century England set out a programme which aimed to recreate the mental worlds in which politics operated, and called for a re-unification of the disciplines which had impeded their reconstruction. Kevin Sharpe urged us to consult material as well as written and printed records, as a basis for re-fashioning our account of politics and power. Malcolm Smuts has been another prominent scholar carrying out the “interdisciplinary” programme, whose work defies traditional classification as either “art history” or “history proper.” There has also been a response from the other side of the fence that still divides “history proper” from the “history of art.” David Howarth’s important earlier contributions — an excellent book in 1985 on the Earl of Arundel, and a useful collection of essays edited in 1993 — were identifiably “art history,” and despite its much wider scope, his book under review here also remains firmly rooted in that discipline’s traditional techniques and preoccupations.

The aim of Howarth’s book is stated, ambitiously, as a “consider[ation] of the relationship between political power and the visual arts in Renaissance Britain” (p. 1), and, more modestly, as “a survey of recent writing on visual culture of the early modern period in England ... to assess how much weight we should give to visual

artefacts in Renaissance Britain in understanding how people understood themselves and the times they lived in" (p. 10). The scope here is thus both much broader and much deeper than his earlier studies. How well suited is the traditional apparatus of "art history" — a focus on oil painting and architecture, a preoccupation with style, technique, iconography, classical and other influences — to a much broader consideration of "the relationship between political power and the visual arts"?

Howarth is familiar with what has been happening on the other side of the "fence": seventeenth century political revisionism; the reappraisal of the art-historical significance of the early Tudors, driven by the work of the historian David Starkey; Malcolm Smuts's brilliant achievement in returning art history's "fine arts" to the context of the other avenues of display available to the early modern elites of Europe — plate, tapestries, gilding, collections of stuffed animals, and so on — in the midst of which their (relatively cheap) oil paintings were displayed; even Professor Theodore Rabb's recent claim, that only a tiny handful of initiates cared, still less knew, what the artefacts which Howarth deals with, either meant, or were intended to mean. For all that, Howarth's methods and conclusions turn out to be unshakeably traditional. The author is clearly more at home after the demise of the Tudors, and resists the recent upgrading of the court of Henry VIII at the expense of the early Stuarts. (His account of Holbein as Henry VIII's image maker insists on using Van Dyck's relationship with Charles I as a yardstick, to the advantage of the latter — one example of the freestyle anachronism which art history apparently permits). Despite Howarth's genuflections to revisionism (and Professor Kevin Sharpe especially), his interpretation of early Stuart court culture — of which the bulk of the volume consists — is suffused by hindsight, and so is resoundingly doom-laden. Smuts's ideas are referred to, but Howarth does not even begin to think through their potentially radical consequences, for both the subject matter and the conclusions of a book such as this. As it is, Howarth's concluding (and most coherent) chapter insists on arguing, in parallel to Peter Thomas's "court-country" cultural dichotomy of more than 20 years ago, that the "court culture" of Charles I was indeed a large issue in bringing about civil war.

This summary, moreover, exaggerates the rigour and consistency of Howarth's arguments. The book is a rag-bag, loosely structured to begin with, then frequently striking off into territories far distant from the ostensible matter of each of the eight chapters. "The Royal Palace," chapter 1, is quite remarkably brief on the massive material foundations laid by Henry VIII, and then quickly takes us on a tour of Lacock Abbey in pursuit of mid-Tudor classicism, then to James I's commission on buildings in London, thence to an interpretation of the iconography of Inigo Jones's portrait engraving, and after massive over-emphasis on the Jacobean Banqueting House, to an even fuller consideration of Jones's supposed plans for a new Star Chamber building, which never progressed from paper. The rest of the book is similarly quixotic.

Yet for all its eccentricities of organization, argument, and indeed style (on page 43, Howarth observes that nowadays “historians discount the more lurid aspects of [James I’s] weak character and such of his policies as flopped conspicuously”), there is value in this book. The barriers between the histories of power and “art” do need to be scaled if we are to get close to understanding the political behaviour of those who ran early modern Europe: here revisionism is attempting to carry out the program sketched out by J. H. Hexter 50 years ago. It is true that historians like Kevin Sharpe do still tend to start with their knowledge of power, and then look for its reflections in art; while art historians like Howarth start with brushstrokes and Vitruvius, and look for echoes in the politics (which, to this reviewer, works better with a limited subject — like Howarth’s Earl of Arundel — than with a very broad one, like this book). Each discipline must still use the other’s work at second hand and on trust, and the hybrid results still rarely satisfy the subtle demands of aficionados of either. The present review, by a primarily political historian, is perhaps a reflection of this. For all that, Howarth has produced a work with a great number of individual insights on particular issues. And as another attempt to cross the barriers between disciplines, it is welcome: for the more frequently those barriers are crossed, the less imposing they become.

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