

Great paintings framed by tragedy

Van Dyck's great portraits of Charles I on display at the RA exhibition show how out of touch with political reality the King was in his prime. Just as Inigo Jones's outstanding Banqueting House was both one of the Stuart triumphs and the stage set for Charles's death, so the large equestrian portraits of the King fixed for ever an image of a would be autocrat with so little understanding of his people.

Charles wished to part of the privileged and cultured elite of royal Europe. He married a well connected French Princess with good links to the Pope, having failed to marry the daughter of the Spanish Catholic King. This was only some thirty years on from the Spanish attempted invasion of England by an Armada out to enforce conversion to Catholicism on a heretic nation. He spent large sums he could ill afford on a grand collection of great art, and commissioned large paintings from the best painters of contemporary Europe. Rubens was persuaded to portray the Apotheosis of James I on the Banqueting House ceiling. The effect was to remind visitors of the newly found imperial power of the united thrones of Scotland and England, with Charles as the heir to the achievement of his father. Van Dyck became the main court painter, producing many images of the King that make him unforgettable to the generations that have followed.

There are several portraits of Charles in armour sitting on horseback. It is these images that would have been unsettling to his Parliamentary critics. A man who probably rightly ended wars with Spain and France early in his reign, was to turn his armour and his military power against his own people in a prolonged civil war. He may have loved Van Dyck's flattering portrayal of him as a powerful King and horesman, armed for a fight, but it turned out to represent a power Parliament did not want him to have and a military endeavour planned against the wrong people. Instead of him coming over as a loved father of the nation, feared by our country's enemies, he increasingly came over as an autocrat who did not understand the growing role of Parliament and the importance of listening to grievances of subjects as voiced by their MPs and peers. His Catholic Queen added to his unpopularity in an age of unpleasant and often violent religious intolerance. England and Scotland were by and large protestant and expected their monarch to represent the majority view.

It is true we see very regal and authoritative images of Henry VIII and Elizabeth, though not usually dressed in armour. Their images come across as representing England. Both of those powerful monarchs allowed Parliament to meet and to argue with them. Henry VIII relied on Parliament to legislate for his religious revolution to give it greater authority. Elizabeth knew she had to appeal to her Parliaments to grant her the money she needed for the conduct of government. Charles thought for a decade he could rule without Parliament, resorting to ever more annoying ways of raising money without consent to meet his extravagant lifestyle. He was a good connoisseur of art, but it came at a heavy price. The costs of his new Palace buildings and the many paintings increased the strains with his spurned Parliament.

Seeing all these paintings together in one exhibition is a feast of great art. I came away with a reinforced understanding of just how worrying the King's elite lifestyle and sympathy for the authoritarian monarchs on the continent would have been to the Protestant in the street or the puritan in Parliament. It was no wonder he ended his life in such tragedy. Parliament took its dislike of Charles following victory on the battlefield to the extreme and contentious decision to kill the King himself. The painting traditions of the more democratic and commercially successful Netherlands make a stark comparison to Charles's taste. In the Netherlands still life, cameos of the day to day and portraits of many successful merchants and Councillors stood in contrast to the imposing regal portraits and the extensive allegories of the grand canvasses and tapestries favoured in Whitehall, in Madrid and in Paris.