

De-frocking a Flapper Girl

I had driven down to Cheltenham to visit a friend's picture gallery with no other motive than to share a good lunch and chat about the art trade. His gallery specialised in marine works, a subject that held little interest for me as my area was Elizabethan portraiture, but he was always good company and besides, the weather was fine and he was buying lunch!

Leaning against the gallery wall, looking a little incongruous sitting between two pictures of nineteenth century marine oils, was a garish four feet high portrait of a 20's flapper girl. Why she was there was anyone's guess but something about it tempted me to examine a small area of paint on the bottom left hand side of the panel. The paint here was falling away and I noticed that the exposed under-paint was harder and much older than the modern paint covering the rest of the panel. It was a minute area – a couple of square inches, but I was convinced that this older paint might well spread over the entire panel. I asked the price and wasted no time in agreeing to a figure of sixty -five pounds.

Returning to London I couldn't wait to pop my flapper girl around to my restorer. At first he was appalled by this unsightly vision of a grotesque art deco girl, but I left it with him and asked whether he could at least try some cleaning tests. Next day I had the phone call: 'Richard, he shouted down the phone,' for God's sake jump in your car and come here now – it's too exciting for words.' I obeyed and arrived at the studio within minutes to be confronted, not by a slightly cleaner dancing girl, but by a demure and stunning portrait of Queen Elizabeth 1. She was depicted three quarter length holding a prayer book and the Tudor Rose. Behind her hung the 'Cloth of Sate', an unusual feature for Elizabeth portraits as the 'Cloth' had been seen only in depictions of Elizabeth's half sister, Mary Tudor.

Once Elizabeth was stripped of her flapper girl camouflage, I made an appointment with Dr Roy Strong, the then director of the V&A and the leading scholar on Elizabethan portraiture. He was suitably impressed and astonished by my discovery describing it as a major find in the art world. Dr Strong was puzzled though by who the painter might be; there were a number of candidates so it was a matter of deciding on a short list.

We dated the work to the late 1550's, around the time of her accession in 1558. Could it be either a portrait of her as the princess or was it showing her at the time of her coronation. When Roy asked me my thoughts on authorship, I suggested the great Hans Eworth, an artist who had painted Mary and many other Catholic sitters but very rarely, if ever, portraits of Protestants. My attribution presented, therefore, a conundrum: if the painting were by Eworth, then why would he be painting a Protestant? But if the work were made just pre accession, whilst Elizabeth was still a princess, then the commissioner would have been her sister Mary, who, of course, was

the reigning Catholic queen and had commissioned Eworth to execute many portraits of her.

There were some clues to the dating in the costume and details; the massive pearl hanging from a pendant was a gift from her father, Henry VIII, and known as the 'Invincible,' and her fur lined over-jacket was intended for winter, the time of year when she was crowned – more evidence that this was indeed an accession portrait.

My thoughts that Hans Eworth was the portrait's author would have to be proved but at this stage I had no idea how to accomplish this task. Roy and I decided on a wager: if I could prove that Eworth painted this portrait then he would buy me a bottle of fine claret.

In the 1970's dendrochronology – tree ring dating – was in its infancy but an enterprising Oxford scientist, Dr Fletcher, together with his team, had developed and refined the technique. He came over to my gallery, spent a morning with the queen upside down on my kitchen table, and counted tree rings. Half way through the examination a pedantic mood changed to one of excitement.

'Mr Philp, exclaimed the doctor, ' these rings appear to be identical to rings we examined on the portrait of Richard Wakeman.' This was indeed extraordinary news for this portrait, by sheer coincidence, had been in my possession and was signed by none other than Hans Eworth! The tests eventually proved that the Wakeman oak panels had come from not just the same tree, but the same plank of wood – at least circumstantial proof that both panels had been used in the same workshop – Eworth's workshop.

I couldn't wait to make my appointment with Sir Roy and claim my prize. The director kept his word and I was duly presented with a fine claret which was ceremoniously opened and consumed after my flapper girl lost the last remnants of her art deco dress and the queen was returned to her former glory.