

‘A Lively Picture’: Vividness in English Art c.1530-c.1630

Historically the century after the Break with Rome in England has been seen as one in which images were destroyed and not replaced.¹ Statues and paintings of saints were dragged from churches, defaced and burned.

Until the millennium, it was widely held that the violent iconoclasm of the mid-Tudor period led to widespread ‘iconophobia’ – fear of images in general – sparked by the reformers’ attack on idolatrous worship of images.² More recently scholars have shown that images continued to be produced for domestic settings.³

Yet historians still treat these objects as exceptions to the general rule of ‘iconophobia’. Images are said to deliberately distance the viewer to prevent idolisation.⁴

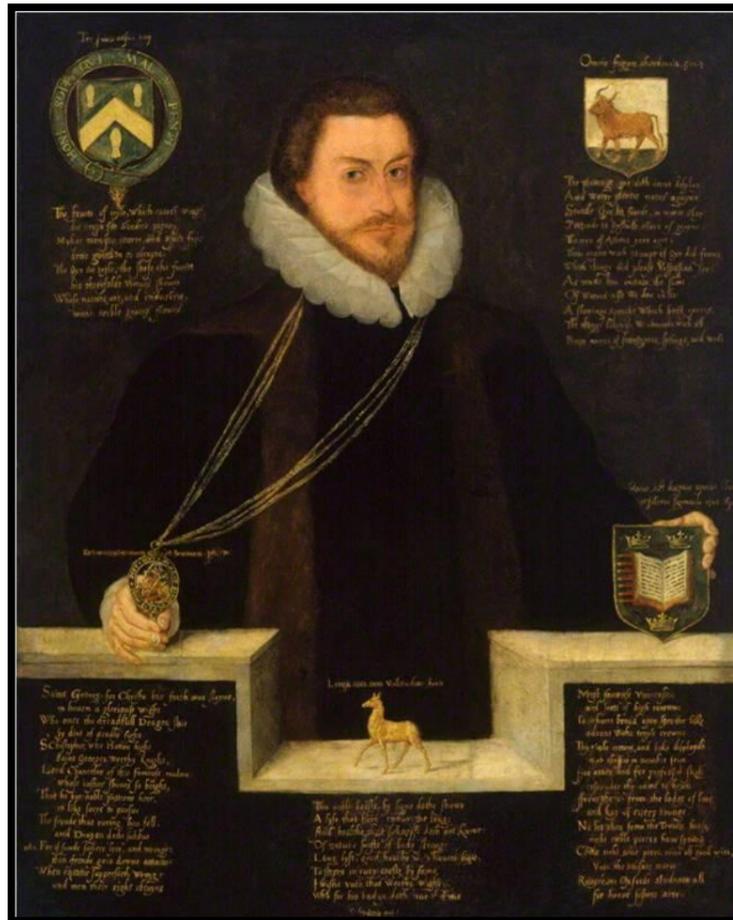


Iconoclasts, Anonymous English Artist, from *Edward VI and the Pope*, c.1570

My research counters ‘iconophobia’ through an analysis of the rhetorical concept of ‘vividness’ or *enargeia*. Rhetoric, or the art of eloquence, provided techniques for teaching, delighting and persuading an audience. It formed the basis for the Early Modern education system in England.

The most effective textual techniques tried to put described events ‘before the eyes’ of the reader, making them vivid and memorable. Such techniques have parallels in the visual arts.

Few people wrote about art in Tudor England. Rhetorical theory provides a period-appropriate way to analyse art objects as agents of communication.



Anonymous English artist, *Sir Christopher Hatton*, c.1588-91, National Portrait Gallery, London.

Floating inscriptions and heraldic badges on portraits (left) have been seen as distancing the viewer, indicating the picture’s artificiality.⁴ I argue that, by showing the sitter’s heritage & virtues, the details make the subject more, not less, vivid. Such portraits show the whole person – not just their outward appearance.

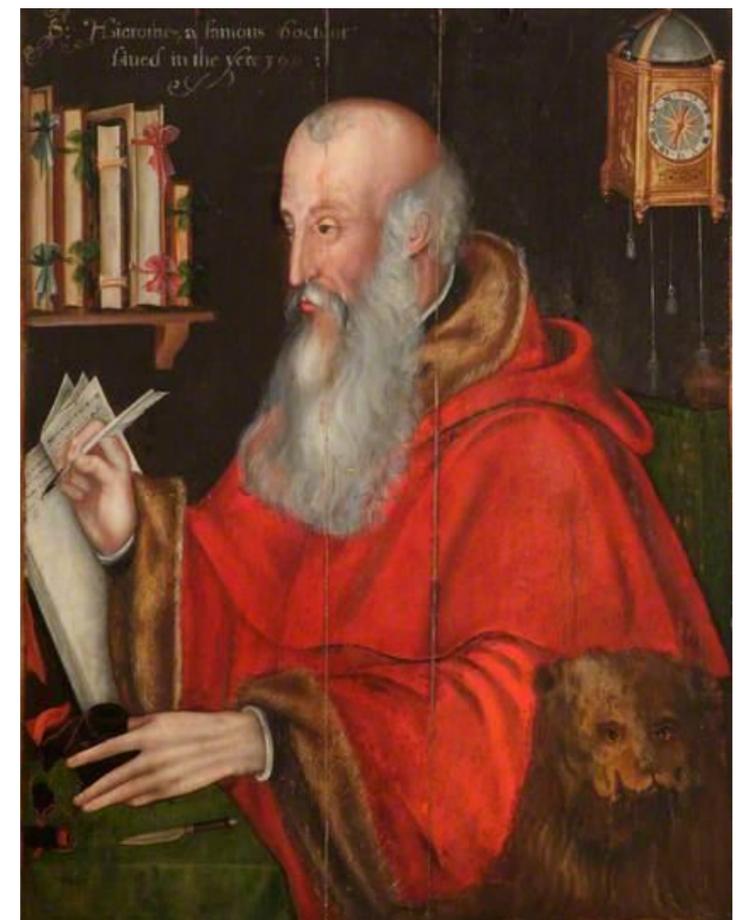


Detail, Window cushion, *Judgment of Solomon*, before 1601, Hardwick Hall (National Trust).

References

- ¹ Margaret Aston, *England’s Iconoclasts: Laws Against Images*, (Oxford, 1988). | ² Patrick Collinson, *The Birthpangs of Protestant England* (London, 1988). | ³ e.g. T Hamling, *Decorating the Godly Household* (New Haven, 2010); Hamling and R Williams, (eds.), *Art Re-formed: Re-assessing the Impact of the Reformation on the Visual Arts* (Newcastle, 2007). | ⁴ e.g. Cooper, *Citizen Portrait*, (London, 2012), p.31ff.

In many images (right and left) Biblical and historical figures are shown in sixteenth-century dress. This is designed to make the subject more ‘vivid’ and immediate for contemporaries. The technique has a textual parallel in the ‘historical present tense’, when a past event is narrated in the present tense.



Anonymous English Artist, *St Jerome*, c.1610, National Trust.