

The Elizabethan Image: An Introduction to English Portraiture, 1558-1603

by Roy Strong. Yale University Press, August 2019. 224 p. ill. ISBN 9780300244298 (h/c), \$50.00.

Reviewed January 2020 Andrea Walton, MA, MLS



There remains no greater exemplar of painted portraits defining an age than those created during the reign of the Tudor Queen Elizabeth I. Her carefully designed likeness not only manipulated the public image of the queen but helped to set the court standard of dress. Through well-known, sumptuous images of attire laden with a richness of metaphors, the queen and her ambitious, upwardly mobile courtiers used portraits to signal their respective place in society and closeness to the queen herself.

The author of this book is Sir Roy Strong, noted authority on Elizabethan portraiture, historian, writer, broadcaster, former director of the National Portrait Gallery (1967-1973) and the Victoria and Albert Museum (1974-1984). Intended as “an introduction for the average reader to a subject that has undergone

fragmentation on a huge and bewildering scale,” Strong returns to his landmark research of over thirty years ago, neatly uniting it with work by subsequent art historians (readily acknowledged), coupled with his own new insights.

“Portraits of Elizabeth have been the subject of an ever-escalating body of academic literature over the last few decades, in which the objects, the portraits themselves, have tended to get lost,” Strong notes in an autobiographical preface engaging the reader without using obfuscatory, academic jargon, thus setting an example for the entire book. Eight richly illustrated chapters with subheadings (over 200 illustrations, the majority in color) follow the preface. Queen Elizabeth I is well-represented, but so are the aristocracy, landed gentry, and aspiring men and women of the emerging middle class in chapters ranging from “Our Glorious

English Court's Divine Image: The Procession Picture" and "Ladye or Queene: Patron and Portrait" to "The Perturbations of Melancholy: The World Out of Square" and "She Knows the Way to All Men's Hearts: The Rainbow Portrait." At the back of the book are notes, a list of artists - biographies of the most important painters during the Queen's reign, a calendar of events - indicating key dates and events (political and cultural) in Elizabethan history, a bibliography, list of illustrations, and an index.

This volume will appeal to those familiar with Strong's earlier publications as well as to new readers. His enthusiasm for this subject is delivered in full measure resulting in a rich overview of Elizabethan portraiture. The greater aim of this book is to recover and present what portraits reveal about "the person and the society for which they were created." Learned and accessible, Sir Roy's engaging and clear writing style is coupled with the deep understanding gained over a lifetime of studying Elizabethan aesthetics and history.