

# The Whitehall Circle: Connoisseurship and Collecting at the Stuart Court

Background notes

Dr Gillian White — 23 September 2020



**Gerrit van Honthorst, *Apollo and Diana or The Liberal Arts Presented to King Charles and Henrietta Maria, 1628***

## **‘a spectacle worthy of the interest of every gentleman’**

In the opening decades of the seventeenth century there was a revolution in English art collecting and connoisseurship. Through the long years of Queen Elizabeth, painting in England had taken on a very particular and characteristic form, delighting in symbolism, in surface decoration and in portraiture. Whilst not entirely blind to continental developments, English taste had generally become insular and certainly distant from the artistic styles of Italy and southern Europe. Politics and the lingering shock waves of the Reformation brought artistic timidity and, as Elizabeth aged, a certain stagnation and conservatism becalmed the English art world.

In March 1603 an unlikely saviour appeared. James VI and I was not much interested in painting – he was a literature man – but the policies that he supported at home and abroad created an environment in which the visual arts could flourish. James fancied himself a Solomon, a wise statesman who would bring peace to Europe and end the petty squabbles of religion, allowing trade, enterprise and the arts to flourish in his new kingdom of Great Britain. England’s drawbridge was lowered and the king’s subjects were encouraged to travel abroad and to engage with the arts. Moreover, James created a new network of English ambassadors, men of learning and taste who could not only receive their travelling countrymen but also introduce them to art markets and collectors. In this more open and youthful court, connoisseurship and collecting flourished, creating ‘a spectacle worthy of the interest of every gentleman’.

It was here that the greatest British royal art collector was moulded. Much attention has been paid to the art collections of Charles I but the king was just one of a group of men - and at least one woman - who enthusiastically and competitively collected art in the decades before the civil war. Although at the time they acted as individuals, they have subsequently become known as The Whitehall Circle or Whitehall Group. Here we look at just two of them: the great connoisseur, Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel, and the royal favourite and chief influencer, George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham.



**Peter Paul Rubens, *Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel*, 1629-30**

### **Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel (1586-1646)**

Thomas Howard has been described as ‘the first heroic figure in the history of British collecting’. Born in 1586, he was heir to the disgraced Dukes of Norfolk, a title in abeyance since the execution of his grandfather in 1572. Following marriage to a wealthy heiress, Aletheia Talbot, herself a considerable connoisseur, Howard travelled extensively in pursuit of artworks for his growing collection. In 1612 the couple visited the Low Countries, where they met Peter Paul Rubens; they would become his first English patrons and Rubens would later describe the earl as ‘one of the evangelists of our art’. Soon afterwards, the Howards travelled to Italy with an entourage that included one of their protégés, Inigo Jones.

The earl and countess's itinerary included a prolonged stay in Rome, itself an indication of the new religious mindset of the English court. In Italy they not only saw the popular sights but also made a serious study of art and architecture, even going so far as to learn the Italian language. When they returned, they brought copious books, manuscripts, prints, sculptures and paintings with them. Some of these can be glimpsed in the background of Mytens's portraits of the couple.



**Daniel Mytens, *Aletheia Talbot, Countess of Arundel*, c.1618**

Over the years the earl also amassed an internationally famous collection of Holbeins and an unprecedented collection of Old Master drawings, including many works by Leonardo that are now in the Royal Collection. In 1642, as war broke out, the Howards decamped to Antwerp, where the earl died in 1646. Unfortunately, they had only been able to get a part of their art collection out of England and so the inventory made after his death shows a mere 799

artworks, including pieces by Dürer, Raphael and Veronese, as well as the Holbeins and thirty-seven Titians. In an English context, Thomas Howard's collection was both substantial and innovative, setting an example of modern collecting that was highly influential on the Stuart court. In Howard we shouldn't see just a collector but also a connoisseur, someone who studied and understood, who shaped taste, who could serve as knowledgeable patron and mentor to artists, and who could exploit and develop England's connections with the nascent international art market. In Howard, it could be said, we see someone who valued art for art's sake.

### **George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham (1592-1628)**

Perhaps it is ungenerous, but it is less easy to see the same artistic motives in our second subject, George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham. He was born in 1592, the son of a minor Leicestershire gentleman. In 1614, aged twenty-one, he came to the attention of James I and his subsequent rise was meteoric: in 1616 he became a viscount, in 1617 an earl, in 1618 a marquess and, in 1623, a duke. As Villiers rose, he vied with Arundel to have the greatest art collection at the court. He was an astute and sophisticated collector but not, it could be argued, the student and connoisseur that Arundel was. Rather, we might view Villiers as someone who saw the political and social advantage in collecting art – art for power's sake, perhaps. After all, a great man, a man who would be the bosom companion of kings and princes, should display taste, should spend lavishly on the arts, should be international in outlook and should know how to use art to project an image of success.

Villiers amassed a collection of more than three hundred paintings, often using agents, such as Balthazar Gerbier, to find treasures for him. Like his competitor, Arundel, he favoured artists of the sixteenth-century Venetian school, including Tintoretto and Titian, as well as Caravaggio and other Italian painters. When commissioning new art, his attention turned to northern Europe and he was a frequent patron of Rubens, from whom he ordered celebratory portraits. (Rubens, incidentally, described Villiers as arrogant and capricious, but probably not to his



**Anthony van Dyck**, *Venus and Adonis (George Villiers and his wife)*, 1620/21

face!) Perhaps most importantly for the Carolean court, it was Villiers who first brought Anthony van Dyck to England, albeit for a brief stay more than a decade before the artist returned to become Charles I's principal painter. The portrait of Villiers and his wife as Venus and Adonis dates from this early period. It was during this initial visit that van Dyck first saw works by Titian, which would significantly influence his subsequent painting style. The Titians, incidentally, were in the collection of the Earl of Arundel.

Whatever influence Arundel was having on the wider Stuart court, there can be no doubt that Villiers held more direct sway over Charles. Neither their political nor their personal relationship is our business here but one event in 1623, to which

Villiers was central, would crucially influence Charles's artistic development. In that year, Villiers and the prince, wearing false beards and masquerading as Tom and Jack Smith, went on a secret and unlikely mission to woo the Spanish infanta. In Madrid, Charles and Villiers were received by the infanta's brother, Philip IV of Spain, who overwhelmed the prince with the full majesty of Spanish royal glamour and power, including access to the royal art collection. This was the largest and most prestigious collection of paintings in the world, consisting of more than two thousand works, with pieces by Titian and his contemporaries predominant. Here Charles truly learnt about the relationship between power and art. Works by Titian, such as *Jupiter and Antiope (The Pardo Venus)*, were pressed on the prince as gifts and both he and Villiers also went shopping on their own accounts, filling their luggage with paintings, sculptures and other delights. In Madrid, in the palaces of the young king, all the possibilities of art were laid before the prince: its skill, its voluptuous desirability, its luxury, and its role in the mystery and show of monarchy. And, as Charles marvelled, Villiers, the collector of art for power's sake, was at his side.



**Titian, *Jupiter and Antiope (The Pardo Venus)*, 1535-40, reworked c.1560**

The history of Charles I's art collection is a story for another time but by looking at Arundel and Buckingham we can learn much about the environment in which the future king's artistic tastes were formed. In Arundel we have a connoisseur and in Buckingham we have a collector. But don't forget the often-overlooked player in this tale, James I, whose outward-looking policies opened the door for connoisseurship and collecting at the Stuart court.

Ideas for further reading:

Christiane Hille, *Visions of the Courtly Body: The Patronage of George Villiers, First Duke of Buckingham, and the Triumph of Painting at the Stuart Court*, Akademie Verlag, 2012

David Howarth, *Lord Arundel and his Circle*, Yale, 1985

Desmond Shawe-Taylor, *Charles I: King and Collector*, Royal Academy of Arts, 2018

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