

Birkbeck BA History of Art, 1250-1400, Year 2

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What do the controversies over the place of origin of the Wilton Diptych reveal about the practice of art around 1400 and the attitudes of historians to the period?

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Hardly any other medieval work of art in England is known so well and valued so highly as the Wilton Diptych, yet offers such meagre information about itself.¹

For a work about which so little is known the number of theories about its origin is remarkable. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century art historians and connoisseurs approached the *Wilton Diptych* from the point of view of style and bold historical facts. More recently the approach has been based on a consideration of historical detail and a detailed analysis of the work itself. However, a wide range of approaches is still found and so the history of *Diptych* commentary reveals a great deal about the practice of art history, perhaps because the quality of the work calls out for explanation and clues abound yet no contemporary information about the work is available.

The *Diptych* can be roughly dated to around 1400, the height of the period of the International Court Style, also called International Gothic. During this period there was a great deal of artistic cross-fertilization across Europe making it more difficult to determine its origin on stylistic grounds.² However, there were local traditions despite the general sharing of techniques.

The *Diptych* has a subtlety of colour, grace of line and sharpness in the detail typical of the International Style and it incorporates techniques from multiple traditions. This is clearly illustrated by the mixture of practices used in the production of the *Diptych*. For example, the skin tones are underpainted using green earth, an Italian technique, yet the panel itself is oak rather than poplar and the ground layer is chalk rather than gypsum, both indicating a

¹ M. Rickert, *Painting in Britain: the Middle Ages*, p. 157

² H. Honour and J. Fleming, *A World History of Art*, p. 423

Northern European rather than an Italian origin.³ It is clear therefore that the work is a mixture of national practices making it difficult to determine its place of origin.

Many possible nationalities for the artist have been discussed by historians, most typically English, French, Italian, Bohemian and German and many events have been discussed as possible reasons for the *Diptych's* production including Richard's coronation (1377), Bishop Spenser's crusade (1382), Richard's renewal of homage (1389), as a wedding gift for his marriage to Isabelle of France (1395-1396) or a devotional piece produced after his marriage to Isabelle (1396-1399).

One of the earliest works to analyze the *Diptych* in detail was Sir George Scharf's monograph of 1882.⁴ He provides a detailed description and drawings of the physical structure and state of the work and presents a number of possible theories of its origins. He is persuaded by the eleven angels and the Magi connotations that it was commissioned by Richard to celebrate his coronation on June 21st 1377 when, Scharf claims, he was eleven years old (specifically he says "in his twelfth year").⁵

The Magi connotations are frequently mentioned and are associated with Richard being born on the Feast of Epiphany and the typical Adoration of the Magi image of two standing and one kneeling figure. In the case of the *Diptych* there are three standing figures, nearest to Richard is his patron saint John the Baptist, behind are Saint Edward the Confessor and Saint Edmund, earlier English kings who came to be venerated as saints.⁶

³ A. Roy, 'The Technique of the Wilton Diptych', *The Regal Image of Richard II and the Wilton Diptych* (London, Harvey Miller, 1997), p. 128

⁴ G. Scharf, *Description of the Wilton House Diptych, Containing a Contemporary Portrait of King Richard the Second* (London, Arundel Society, 1882), found in the National Art Library

⁵ Richard's age at his coronation has caused some confusion variously being quoted as eleven and ten (the correct age). This may result from confusion between the Old and New Style calendars and his birth date should strictly be written 6th January 1366/7. The mistake is significant as some writers place much importance on the eleven angels. However, Mr. D. Gordon in *The Meaning of the Wilton Diptych* says that eleven angels are used in reference to Richard "being in his eleventh year" (a neat way of linking the number of angels with his age).

⁶ National Gallery, 'The Wilton Diptych', <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/cgi-bin/WebObjects.dll/CollectionPublisher.woa/wa/work?workNumber=NG4451> (accessed 12 January 2005)

A number of articles appeared between 1929 and 1931 prompted by the purchase of the *Diptych* by the National Gallery in 1929. In W.G. Constable's article⁷ in *The Burlington Magazine* July 1929 he starts by referring to Scharf's monograph and mentions the controversy over the date, occasion and nationality of the painter. He mentions Passavant's theory that the work is from the School of Fra Angelico and "probably by Cosimo Rosselli", Waagen's view that it was by an Italian artist living in Richard's court, Mrs. Jameson, Sir A.W. Franks and Sir J.C. Robinson's view that it is Bohemian, Sir G. Scharf, M. Conway and A.E. Popham's view that it is by an English artist, M. Henri Marcel's view that it is either an Italian or a French artist, Lafenestre, M. Louis and S.A. Strong's view that it is a French artist and W.H.J. Neale's view that it is by André Beauneveu, a French artist. Constable expresses surprise that a German artist has not been considered as Charles IV, Anne of Bohemia's father lived in the Rhineland for a long period. However, he concludes it was "by a painter closely in touch with Beauneveu, if not by Beauneveu himself."

The arguments put forward by these historians to justify the nationality of the artist are stylistic although many of the arguments are also tinged with more than a hint of nationalism or even jingoism, for example,

*"It is a picture English to the core and utterly outside the range of French painters."*⁸

*"I must record my very strong conviction ... that the Diptych is the work of an English painter working in England."*⁹

*"Overwhelming evidence must be produced to prove it is the work of a foreigner."*¹⁰

Such opinions are not found in recent historical texts and instead we find such balanced comments as "whether it was also painted in England and by an English painter have remained controversial issues."¹¹

⁷ W.G. Constable, 'The Date and Nationality of the Wilton Diptych', *The Burlington Magazine*, (1929: July), pp. 36-46

⁸ M. Conway, 'The Wilton Diptych', *The Burlington Magazine* (1929: November), pp. 209-212

⁹ C. Phillips, *Emotion in Art*, p. 246.

¹⁰ Quoted from A. E. Popham by T. Bodkin in *The Wilton Diptych*, p. 12

¹¹ D. Gordon, in the introduction to *The Regal Image of Richard II and the Wilton Diptych* (London,

Recent historical texts may be roughly divided into three approaches to art history - stylistic, analytic and scientific although many articles combine all three. By stylistic I mean they are based on the author's subjective feeling resulting from years of experience of looking at similar works of the period. Analytic refers to the approach based on considering aspects of the work in relation to primary sources of the period, for example, inventories of art works, references to bean pod collars in documents and so on. Scientific refers to any analysis of the work itself as it exists today and typically involves polarized light microscopy, X-ray and infrared spectrometry, X-ray photography, chemical analysis and so on.

The stylistic approach is rarely associated with the scientific and often associated with personal opinion and feelings and opinions ascribed to people at the time, often without documentary justification. The stylistic approach is also often combined with the analytic in so far as primary sources are useful in supporting an opinion.

The arguments regarding the date of the work are based more on historic facts than opinion but personal prejudice is not absent. For example, Scharf first mentions "the absence therefrom of any sign of Queen Anne of Bohemia proves it was painted before 1382, the year of his marriage."¹² It does not of course, and it is likely this statement was made simply to support his conclusion that it was made to commemorate when he "ascended the throne on June 21st 1377 when only in his twelfth year."¹³

In November 1929 in *The Burlington Magazine* Sir Martin Conway boldly states "what clearer indication does one need to prove this picture was a memorial of Richard's Coronation?"¹⁴ He says "every detail hangs together" although the only evidence he puts forward to support this bold claim is that there are eleven angels and he was "eleven years old" (sic).

National Gallery, 1997), p. 14

¹² G. Scharf (1882), p. 63

¹³ G. Scharf (1882), p. 63

¹⁴ M. Conway, 'The Wilton Diptych', *The Burlington Magazine* (1929: November), pp. 209-212

Constable¹⁵ analyses the possible dates more carefully and narrows it down to three possibilities. He agrees that all dates between 1382 and 1394 (during his marriage to Anne of Bohemia) should be excluded as “there is nothing to suggest any connection with Bohemia or Empire”. He considers the crusade of 1382 against Clement VII in Avignon as a possibility, “a votive offering by Richard at the shrine of Our Lady of Pewe on occasion of his coronation”¹⁶ or a much later date of 1396, Richard’s marriage to Isabelle, daughter of Charles VI of France. He recognizes the apparent age of the king favours an early date but argues it is difficult to tell the age. More significantly the broom pod collar was part of the livery of France and we know from documentary evidence that in 1393 Charles VI sent four broom pod collars to Richard. He also feels that stylistic arguments favour a later date and that the similarity with the Hours and Psalter in the British Museum (Roy MS, 2A XVIII) put it no earlier than 1401.

M. V. Clarke in her article in *The Burlington Magazine* in 1931 uses heraldic evidence to establish the fact that the *Diptych* must have been painted about or after 1395 when Richard started negotiations for his second marriage. Clarke explains Richard’s young appearance by suggesting that the artist deliberately idealised “a look of sensitivity and hope for the sly cynicism of the effigy”¹⁷ Such emotional arguments are common when discussing the *Diptych* but are little more than subjective speculation and add little to our store of knowledge.

Many books on medieval art mention the *Wilton Diptych*, for example Thomas Bodkin’s *The Wilton Diptych* monograph of 1947 and Margaret Rickert’s *Painting in Britain: The Middle Ages*¹⁸ (first published in 1954). Both Bodkin and Rickert state his age as eleven and mention the eleven angels as suggesting it was painted to commemorate his accession in 1377.

¹⁵ W.G. Constable (1929), pp. 36-46

¹⁶ W.G. Constable (1929), p. 41

¹⁷ M.V. Clarke, ‘The Wilton Diptych’, *The Burlington Magazine* (1931: June), p. 290

¹⁸ M. Rickert, *Painting in Britain* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1965), pp. 157-161 and p. 207

Bodkin points out that a collar of broom pods was not used in England but was worn by Charles VI of France at his daughter's wedding to Richard in 1396 and a similar collar was given to Richard at the time. This suggests that the *Diptych* may have been a wedding present as it unites the symbols of the families. However, all the wedding gifts were carefully recorded and reclaimed from Henry IV and there is nothing to suggest the *Diptych* was among them.¹⁹ Of course, the pun between *planta genista* (broom) and Plantagenet also applied to Richard and the evidence for its use in England before 1396 may have simply been lost.

Bodkin also suggests that the banner may refer to the Order of the Passion, a crusading order that used such a banner with the Lamb of God (held by Saint John in this case) and this would date it to about 1395 when the order gained many recruits in England. Another theory mentioned by Bodkin and first put forward by Mr. William A. Shaw in 1934 was that it was painted in Henry V's reign by Richard Herman as a loving memorial to his royal master. Stylistically there is a link between the *Diptych* and Herman's *Beauford Hours* in the British Museum. Professor Galbraith in 1942 advanced additional reasons to support it being a posthumous memorial.

Rickert raises a number of questions of origin such as the possible separate origin of the two panels. She writes of the portrait of Richard in Westminster Abbey that it is "generally agreed that it was executed in England" but that it "shows even less evidence of the style of an English artist than does the Wilton Diptych."

In 1992 the National Gallery completed an extensive restoration that resulted in a number of publications including the most recent "The Regal Image of Richard II and the Wilton Diptych"²⁰ The most exciting find during the restoration was the discovery of a tiny painting within the orb on top of the

¹⁹ T. Bodkin, *The Wilton Diptych in the National Gallery* (London, Percy Lund Humphries, 1947), p. 7

²⁰ D. Gordon (ed.), *The Regal Image of Richard II and the Wilton Diptych* (London, National Gallery, 1997)

banner in the right-hand panel showing “what surely is a schematic representation of England”.²¹

It is interesting to look at the approaches taken by the various contributors to this latest book on the *Diptych* and to compare them with the approaches taken in the past.

In general the nationality of the artist is not discussed in the speculative, opinion-based terms it was in the early twentieth century. In the introduction to this book D. Gordon starts with the assumption that Richard commissioned the painting²² although even on this basic point he adds in a footnote that not everyone would agree.²³

There is new evidence presented in the form of a detailed analysis of Richard’s jewellery and plate and a discussion of the possible meanings associated with the flowers and plants. For example, “rosemary was one of the badges of Anne of Bohemia and it was also the plant associated with remembrance,”²⁴ also ferns are associated with Anne and irises are the symbol of a new marriage alliance. Such iconography is at best speculative particularly in determining the nationality of the artist. The conclusion is that “The Wilton Diptych appears to have been painted for an Englishman”²⁵ The article speculates further, it “may be the work of Gilbert Prince (d. 1396) and/or his apprentice Thomas Zitlington.”²⁶

There are no articles in the book that are based solely on personal opinion and connoisseurship although style is still mentioned but in specific matters. For example, N. Morgan mentions that the way the Virgin holds the foot of Christ

²¹ J.A. Bumpus, ‘A Medieval Enigma’, *The Art Book* (1999: March), p. 6

²² D. Gordon, ‘The Wilton Diptych: An Introduction’ in *The Regal Image of Richard II and the Wilton Diptych* (London, Harvey Miller, 1997), p. 9

²³ D. Gordon (1997), footnote 1, p. 271

²⁴ D. Gordon (1997), p. 13

²⁵ D. Gordon (1997), p. 14

²⁶ Gilbert Prince was English and Court Painter to Richard II

with "the entire sole of the foot turned towards the viewer ... occurs frequently both in Italy and in Bohemia around the middle of the fourteenth century."²⁷

A few of the articles ascribe motives to historical figures without explicit evidence, for example, "it is doubtful if Richard saw anything incongruous in this combination of religious and secular imagery."²⁸ But most of the articles follow any such ascribing of motives with evidence, for example, Ms. M. Campbell writes "there is no doubt that Richard's contemporaries were struck by the lavishness of his court"²⁹ but immediately follows this by a quote from Froissart (c. 1337-c. 1404) and a 1399 quote from the Commons and the assumption is then questioned and examined by reference to the items in contemporary lists and inventories compared to other courts in Europe and other English kings.

These different approaches raise many questions about the role of an art historian. Is he or she a type of detective filtering the evidence, looking for clues in order to arrive at the objective facts and logical conclusions or an educator constructing a compelling narrative that captures our interest with a mixture of fact and speculation? There is a role for both approaches but it is important that it is made clear which approach is being used as facts can be used by other historians and speculation broadens the audience and can provide modern day relevancy.

One of the chapters in *The Regal Image of Richard II* takes the third approach and describes the scientific analysis of the *Diptych*. It points out the flesh painting "closely mirrors"³⁰ Italian practice of the same period as described in Cennino Cennini's *Craftsman's Handbook*.³¹ However, as previously mentioned Italian practice was to use poplar panels not oak and a gesso of gypsum not chalk. Also, he points out the pigment choices and sgraffito technique is Italian.

²⁷ N. Morgan, 'The Signification of the Banner in the Wilton Diptych' in *The Regal Image of Richard II and the Wilton Diptych* (London, Harvey Miller, 1997), p. 264

²⁸ D. Gordon, 'The Wilton Diptych' in *The Regal Image of Richard II and the Wilton Diptych* (London, Harvey Miller, 1997), p. 27

²⁹ M. Campbell, 'White Harts and Coronets: The Jewellery and Plate of Richard II' in *The Regal Image of Richard II and the Wilton Diptych* (London, Harvey Miller, 1997), p. 95

³⁰ A. Roy, 'The Technique of the Wilton Diptych', p. 128

³¹ C. Cennini *The Craftsman's Handbook: Il Libro dell'Arte* (New York, Dover Publications, 1960), translated by D.V. Thompson

However, he thinks it is "reasonable to suppose itinerant artists would exchange notes on techniques and ... materials".³²

He dismisses the use of egg tempera as an Italian medium and drying oils as a Northern European medium as a considerable oversimplification.³³ Interestingly, Melchior Broederlam the Flemish master who painted the Dijon altarpiece for Philip the Bold's Carthusian monastery used green underpainting for the flesh in the Italian manner. However, analysis shows it was green based on copper rather than the green earth Italians always used and which was used on the *Diptych*. So it appears Broederlam was "emulating the look of an Italian panel without knowing precisely how the effect was achieved."³⁴ He concludes "The technique of the Wilton Diptych fits none of these models precisely," this makes it a "unique survivor from a very skilled hand."³⁵

In conclusion, the balance of probabilities suggests the panel was produced after Richard's wedding to Isabella in 1396 (because of the bean pod collars) as a devotional piece commissioned by him (because of its absence from the French wedding gift lists, the high cost of producing it and its form as two panels that could be stood on a private altar) and with a very strong message of his divine right to the English throne. His eleven angels (with the white hart badges signifying their role as heavenly subjects of the earthly Richard and their number perhaps referring to his age at the moment the gift of England was granted) are encouraging the Virgin and Child who are presenting the banner as the "representation of England as the dowry of the Virgin"³⁶ across to Richard who is supported in a Magi-like arrangement with three saints, including two former kings of England. An alternative theory is that it was commissioned after his death by a follower of the cult of Richard, which flourished after he had been usurped. It combines many pan-European elements in its style and techniques and has the form of a devotional altarpiece, a *sacra conversazione* and of a donor piece but in reverse (with the donor receiving rather than giving).

³² A. Roy, 'The Technique of the Wilton Diptych', p. 128

³³ A. Roy, 'The Technique of the Wilton Diptych', p. 129

³⁴ A. Roy, 'The Technique of the Wilton Diptych', p. 131

The *Wilton Diptych* is “the most studied painting in the history of European art”³⁷ but the lack of evidence has enabled controversy to flourish and this makes the work valuable in revealing the practices of art history. The work incorporates methods of production and styles from many European countries of the late fourteenth century and this reveals not a single country of origin but a work produced by an artist who was conversant with techniques used all over Europe.

This positive recognition of a great international artist has unfortunately been offset in the past by the jingoistic attitudes of certain commentators of the early twentieth century. Recent art historical research is more balanced and we can look forward to new facets of the work and its period being revealed through careful analytic and scientific research.

³⁵ A. Roy, ‘The Technique of the Wilton Diptych’, p. 132

³⁶ D. Gordon, ‘The Wilton Diptych’, p. 11

³⁷ D. Gordon, ‘The Wilton Diptych’, p. 19

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