

THE ELIZABETHAN WALL PAINTINGS OF HILL HALL: INFLUENCES AND TECHNIQUES

Tobit Curteis

ABSTRACT

Executed in the late 1560s for Sir Thomas Smith, Queen Elizabeth's ambassador to Paris, the wall paintings of Hill Hall are among the finest of their period. Including both biblical and classical themes, the paintings are based on a series of Italian engravings and Flemish woodcuts. While European architectural influence of this period is well known, the response of English wall paintings to influences from the Continent has been less widely examined. Since 1994, the paintings at Hill Hall have been the subject of an extensive programme of investigation and analysis. Detailed examination of the original materials and painting techniques has shed considerable light on the little-known field of wall painting practice of this period. In addition, comparison of the print sources to both the underdrawings and finished paintings, reveals the adaptations made for a different medium and a different culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although, as a result of later alterations, it may appear undistinguished, Hill Hall is one of the most important early Elizabethan houses in the south of England. While the house, which is the main surviving monument to the life and work of the courtier and diplomat Sir Thomas Smith, is of considerable interest to architectural historians, its



Fig. 1 Plan of Hill Hall

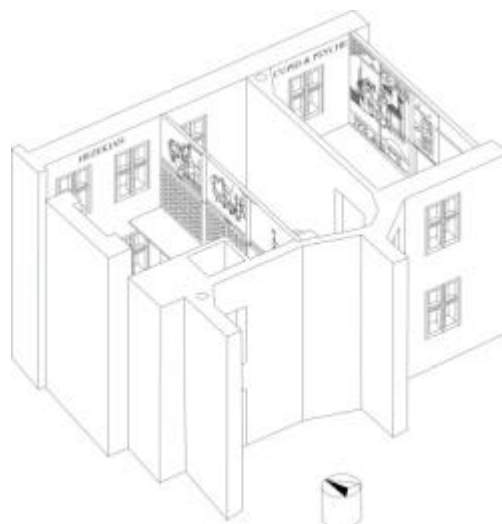


Fig 2. Schematic diagram of the west end of the north range showing the rooms containing the main wall paintings

main significance lies in the schemes of very fine figurative wall paintings with which it was decorated.

Due to the chequered history of the building and in particular as a result of the disastrous fire in 1969, the remaining schemes of paintings are somewhat fragmentary. However, the style and sophistication of the paintings is almost unique in the history of contemporary English wall painting and, as such, they give a significant insight into the artistic influences, painting technique and the role of the patron, in the latter part of the 16th century.

Since 1994, the wall paintings have been the subject of a research programme in conjunction with English Heritage, the current owners of the building. In addition to the examination of the paintings in terms of deterioration, there has been considerable research into the original materials and painting technique. This work has culminated in the conservation of the wall paintings which is taking place in two main phases in 1997-1998.

2. THE PAINTINGS

The surviving paintings consist of two distinct schemes, (Plates 1 & 2) one of which shows scenes from the story of Cupid and Psyche, based on Lucius Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, (Fig. 3) while the other shows scenes from the Old Testament story of



Fig 3. Detail of Psyche and her Sisters on the east wall of the east room

King Hezekiah, based on the passages in Chronicles II and Kings II. (Fig. 4) Although the main areas of the paintings survive in the west part of the north range of the building, numerous fragments of wall paintings were found throughout the building, indicating that originally, the paintings were far more extensive and formed the main decorative scheme for the whole of the house

The dating of the paintings is the subject of controversy due to the complex sequence of building and the lack of comparative examples in contemporary decoration. Archaeological evidence points to the present building having been reconstructed in a number of distinct stages. In 1568-9 the north and west ranges of the house were rebuilt, followed in 1574-5 by the south and east ranges. Later in 1576, further rebuilding was undertaken on the western extension and this continued after the death of Smith in 1577 and was completed in c1581. [1] During the archaeological investigation, fragments of the wall paintings were found in the debris from the original south and east wing, indicating that the paintings had already been completed in this area, prior to the rebuilding in the 1570s. [2] The fact that the north and west range were rebuilt in 1568-9 clearly shows that the paintings must post date this. If we assume that the scheme of paintings was considered a whole, it is unlikely that the painting in the north and west range would have continued after the first part of the scheme in the south and east was destroyed. Therefore, it can be concluded that the paintings were executed in the late 1560s. If this is indeed the case, it makes the paintings quite unlike any other known



Fig 4 Panel 1 on the east wall of the west room, immediately after its discovery, showing the scene of *Ahaz closing the temple*

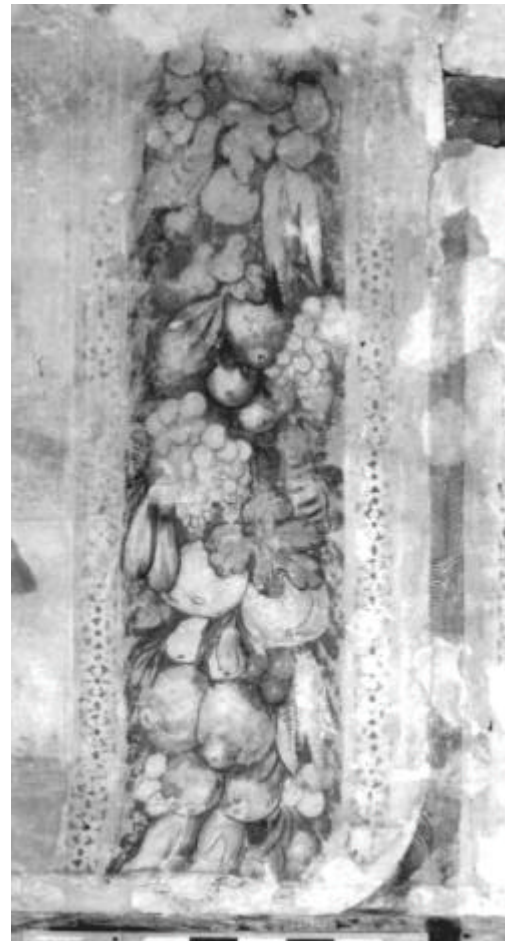


Fig 5. Detail of the tapestry border on the east wall of the east room

examples, 'freaks' as one commentator has described them, [3] and well ahead of their time in terms of artistic development in England.

The Cupid and Psyche paintings are based on a series of engravings by the Master of the Die and

Augustino Veneziano after drawings by Michael Coxcie. [4] Although certain aspects of the background have been altered and the paintings cropped to fit into the architectural space, the main figure subjects closely follow the engravings, with few additions and little interpretation. The most significant alteration is in the overall presentation of the wall paintings as a series of fictive tapestries. This is most clearly demonstrated by the use of a fruit swaged boarder, typical of contemporary Brussels tapestries. (Fig.5)

The use of alternative decorative techniques to imitate the more expensive tapestries was not uncommon in this period. In many cases, painted cloths were used as a cheaper alternative, although, due to their perishable nature, few examples survive. Wall paintings too were used to imitate tapestries, such as those by the Court painter Lewis Lizard, recorded in the long gallery at Richmond Palace. [5, p.27]

The second scheme of paintings, the story of Hezekiah, is situated in the room to the west of Cupid and Psyche. These are more loosely based on a series of woodcuts by the Flemish artist Bernard Salomon used to illustrate *La Sainte Bible en Francois*, published by Jean de Tournes in Lyon in 1553.[6, p.14] In terms of technique, these paintings appear noticeably more sophisticated than Cupid and Psyche and rely far less on a strict reproduction of the work on which they are based.* Unlike the Cupid and Psyche paintings, which run from floor to ceiling, the Hezekiah paintings cover only the upper part of the walls, with the lower section originally covered with panelling. This juxtaposition of panelling and painting was a relatively common decorative device used throughout the period and can be seen in Wolsey's Closet at Hampton Court palace in c.1537 and in the Dining Room at Bolsover Castle in c.1621.

In general the type of English wall painting which survives from the late 16th century is far less sophisticated than that found at Hill Hall. In many instances it consists of simple repetitive motifs or Antique work and grotesques based on 15th century Italianate designs and carried out in a simple black and white palette. A typical example of this form of decoration is the wall painting at the Golden Cross in Oxford.

Nevertheless, the influence of continental engravings and woodcuts on architectural decoration in England is extensively documented, with numerous examples of patterns from books such as Serlio's *Architettura* being incorporated into architectural detail from the mid 16th century.** However, the influence of these sources on wall

paintings is less widely studied. This is in part due to the enormous loss of wall paintings that occurred as a result of the over zealous restoration of

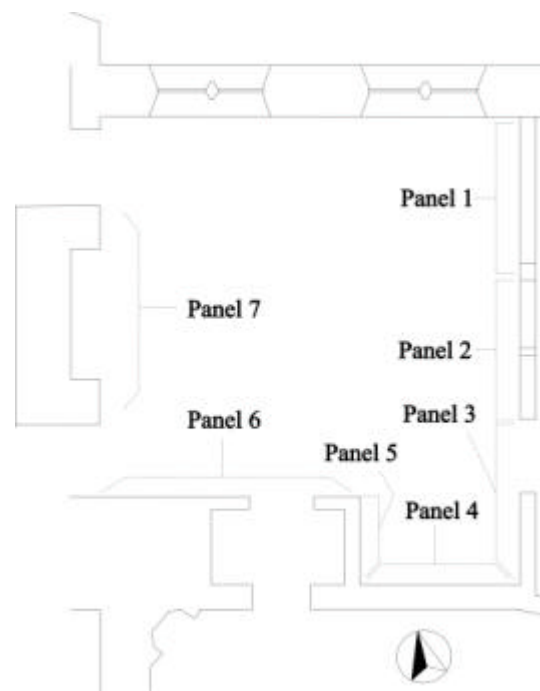


Fig. 6. Plan of the west room showing the position of the panels

buildings in the 19th century, which makes surviving examples are relatively rare.

Although, due to the quality of the work, the wall paintings at Hill Hall are almost unique in England, there are certain examples of other wall paintings where direct comparisons with prints from continental Europe can be made. Perhaps the most famous, and certainly most analogous with the work at Hill Hall, are the paintings of the Four Ages of Man on the walls of the Great Staircase at Knole in Kent. These are based on engravings after the Flemish artist, Martin de Vos and, despite the fact that the backgrounds have been removed and the figures painted in grisaille, the paintings are almost direct copies of their printed source, in a manner not dissimilar to the Cupid and Psyche scenes.[5, p.30]

Influences of this kind are not restricted to the grand houses of courtiers, as can be seen with the wall paintings of the Nine Worthies in a modest house at Amersham in Buckinghamshire, which have been shown to be based either directly or indirectly on a series of prints published in the late 16th century by Philips Galle of Antwerp (d.1612). [7, pp.115-119] Similarly, the unusual late 16th century paintings of the Twelve Patriarchs at Burton Latimer church in Northamptonshire, are clearly linked with series of woodcuts published c.1552 by Joos Lambrecht of Ghent. [7, p.211]



Fig 7. Detail of a hand in panel 1, showing the simple black underdrawing

Once certain decorative motifs had been used in English Court circles, they were quickly absorbed into the national artistic cannon and were reproduced widely. A typical case is the cross and octagon motif shown in Serlio's *Architettura*, book IV, folio 69r, which was initially used in such fine examples as the choir screen at Kings College Chapel in Cambridge in c.1533-6. Half a century later in the 1580 the same motif was used in a scheme of wall paintings in Queens' College, Cambridge, [8] while at almost the same time, a cruder version of exactly the same motif was being used to decorate the walls of a farmhouse some forty miles away in a small village in Essex.***

3. PAINTING TECHNIQUE

Due to the level of deterioration, significant passages of underdrawing were visible on both schemes of paintings, allowing a detailed assessment to be made of the differing preparatory techniques employed.***

The underdrawing in the Cupid and Psyche room is carried in a fine linear style using a carbon black paint. The outlines of the figures and some of the architectural details are very carefully laid out, although the level of shading or artistic finish is limited. The main painting follows the underdrawing rigidly, indicating that the emphasis was on the direct reproduction of the source engravings rather than an interpretation of them.

Although the floral and bird motifs of the main parts of the borders give the impression of repetition, close examination suggests that they are not stencilled, but are laid out with a similar underdrawing technique to the figurative scenes. Whether they are copied directly from an existing



Fig 8. Detail the head on panel 6, showing the developed red underdrawing

tapestry, or an intermediate source, is unclear from their execution. However, it is evident from both the preparatory and the main paint layer that the design was very carefully planned. In contrast to the main areas of the border, the red and yellow edges are carried out using stencils, and it is small areas of this stencilling which has made it possible to identify fragments of painted plaster throughout the building. †

Due to the nature of the deterioration, far more of the preparatory work was visible in the Hezekiah room than was the case in the previous example. (Fig. 6) The underdrawing on panels 1 to 5 was carried out in carbon black, possibly with a charcoal pencil. It is extremely loosely drawn and is clearly intended as an indication for the structure and position of the main features, rather than as a developed artistic model. This is particularly noticeable with the numerous alterations in the final work, with many figurative details, including the positions of hands and feet, being significantly different to those originally drawn. (Fig. 7) This would appear to reinforce the fact that while the Cupid and Psyche paintings are direct copies of their source material, the Hezekiah paintings are merely based on the woodcuts. The underdrawing technique of the fragmentary panel 6 is completely different to that on the other panels, being carried out in a red ochre paint, with a high level of finish. (Fig. 8) Only one

small area of plaster survives where panel 6 overlaps with panel 5, but this indicates that the two panels were in fact carried out at the same time.

The only other area where this developed style of underpainting has been identified, is a fragment of a figure on the ground floor, immediately below the Cupid and Psyche room. Adjacent to this figure, and on the same plaster layer is a fruit swag and stencilled border, identical to that used in the Cupid and Psyche room.

The analysis of the paint layer showed that although there was an apparent difference in the underdrawing techniques, there was a distinct similarity between the painting materials and techniques employed in both schemes.

All of the paintings were carried out on a single layer of lime plaster applied directly onto the brick wall. The timber structure of the wall would originally have been painted over giving a single, flat plane. The ground layer in all areas was found to be lime white with fine charcoal black particles, applied directly over the plaster substrate. †† The exception to this was on the wooden post which crosses in the scene of Psyche with her sisters, where the wood was first painted with white lead before having the lime ground applied.

Given the relatively developed artistic nature of the paintings, the painting technique was found to be surprisingly simple with no original glazes or varnishes and a relatively limited range of pigments. These consisted of red and yellow ochres, charcoal black, lime white, verditer, and red and white lead. Pigment mixtures were relatively unusual with most areas of decoration applied in layers of single pigment and in most cases modelling was achieved by applying a separate layer of pigment over the first, rather than by mixing the two. ††† An exception to this was seen in panel 4 in the Hezekiah room which shows a very dark battle scene. In this case the effect of chiaroscuro was achieved by mixing charcoal black with some pigments in order to emphasise the shadows, while in other areas the modelling was achieved by using lime white highlights over otherwise dark figures.

As is relatively common in English wall paintings, the paint layers were lean and degraded, with a limited amount of medium, making analysis extremely difficult. † This was further exacerbated by the presence of the later coatings, masking any original organic components. †† Where it was possible to measure the Palmitate/Stearate ratios, these were found to be indicative of either linseed oil or egg tempera. No significant peaks corresponding to Azelates were observed, indicating that of the two,

the linseed oil was the more likely medium. Traces of wax were seen on the chromatograms, however, no traces of resin were found. The chromatograms were found to be similar for all samples indicating that the same medium was employed in both the east and the west rooms. In some cases the samples were delaminated in order to examine any differentiation between the individual layers. However, the degradation of the medium was such that no clear conclusions were drawn in this area.

Due to the lack of comparative material it would be inadvisable to draw any general conclusions regarding the use of the painting techniques seen here, in a wider historical context. From what has been observed to date, it appears that all of the main underdrawing was applied freehand, with no evidence of any direct transfer techniques such as tracing or pouncing. It is possible that the original engravings were enlarged for direct transfer measurements, but this is merely conjecture. The only cartoon for an English wall painting to have survived from this period is Hans Holbein's drawing of Henry VII and Henry VIII for the Whitehall mural (destroyed by fire in 1698), now in the National Portrait Gallery. This cartoon, which is extremely finely finished, was certainly pricked for pouncing, however technical evidence has suggested that there may have been an intermediary layer which was used for the actual transfer. [9]

During the 16th century the roles of artist and decorator in England were dominated by the guilds of the Painters and the Stainers. Although the monarch had Sergeant Painters, the role of fine artist was not greatly recognised and the Sergeant Painters roles included the decoration of walls and the repainting of damaged murals as well as painting portraits. [5, p.26] Broadly speaking the Painters worked with oils and varnish while the Stainers worked with distemper and size. These roles were jealously guarded by the guilds and although there appears to have been some crossover, this seems to have been the exception rather than the rule. It was the Stainers who were responsible for the painted cloths used in place of tapestries, and it has been concluded by one commentator that they were the superior artistic painters. [10] In 1502, the two guilds merged to form the powerful Painters-Stainers Company which was to dominate the trade for the following century. The paintings at Hill Hall appear to be a perfect example of the amalgamation of the two types of painter, with an oil painting being carried out in a style more akin to that used on painted cloths. In 1582, the Painters-Stainers Company banned its members from using stencils because they were seen as detracting from the quality of their work. [4 p.22] This has been used by some as a reason for suggesting the paintings were

carried out at a later date by a foreign artist.[3, p.25] However, given that the date of the paintings has now been conclusively established as being prior to this date, there appears to be no reason to assume that the paintings were not undertaken by members of the Painters-Stainers Company.

The question of the identification of the painter at Hill Hall remains unresolved. Whoever carried out the paintings, and considering the size of the original scheme there would have been a large group, there must have been a central figure organising the layout of the individual scenes and the scheme as a whole. While the difference in pictorial style might suggest the presence of two separate groups of painters, the similarity of the materials and techniques observed in both schemes does not support this. It appears more likely that the same master painter was responsible for overseeing the decorative scheme as a whole, but was perhaps involved more directly with the execution of the Hezekiah paintings than with the Cupid and Psyche paintings. The name of Lucas de Heere has been suggested in conjunction with the paintings at Hill Hall on the basis that he was in England during the relevant dates and that he had carried out paintings for Smith's friend and fellow diplomat in France, Edward Clinton.[6, p.19] However, although the evidence is persuasive, it is far from conclusive.

In considering this aspect of the decoration we should examine the role of the patron, Sir Thomas Smith. It is clear that Smith was deeply interested in the arts and was well travelled in Italy and, in particular, France, where he had acted on a number of occasions as an ambassador for Elizabeth I. His developing interest in the visual arts has been clearly demonstrated from the inventory of his library. When it was listed in 1576, it included a number of books on art and architecture, including five editions of Vitruvius, Albrecht Dürer's *De Symmetria* and a book entitled *Pictura Psyches*. [6, p.14] Unfortunately this latter book has since been lost, however, it has been plausibly suggested by a number of authors that the book was a collection of the Augustino Veneziano and Master of the Die engravings. The library also contained a *Bible en François*, possibly the Jean de Tournes bible with the Salomon woodcuts. †††

This would suggest not only that Smith had an interest in the visual arts in general, but that he had a very specific interest in this scheme of paintings. Therefore, it is perfectly feasible that he played a direct role in the design of the scheme, just as he did in the redesigning of Hill Hall itself. It has been suggested by his biographer, that Smith himself carried out part of the painting. [11] However, although by the early 16th century there are recorded

incidents of what might be termed gentleman amateur painters,[3, p.185] there is no direct evidence to suggest that Smith's interests lay in this direction and it is almost certain that, the actual implementation of paintings would have been left to his master painter. †††† However, it appears more than likely that Smith supplied the original sources in the form of the engravings and woodcuts from his library, as well as his ideas on how the paintings should be laid out, based on his experience of similar decorative schemes in the French chateaux with which he was so familiar.

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FOOTNOTES

*Only a few of the original source woodcuts have so far been identified, and so the judgement as to how closely they follow the original layout is based on limited examples.

** Such sources also had a significant influence on areas of the decorative arts such as funerary monuments and stained glass.

*** Byeball, Great Samford, Essex. I am most grateful to Mrs Muriel Carrick for drawing my attention to this example.

*** Although both paintings were examined using infrared, the nature of the paint layer was such that little further information was visible.

† The use of stencilled decoration is not uncommon at this date, although it should be noted that many examples of repeated painted decoration which have been referred to as being stencilled, are in fact carried out using some other method.

†† In many cases this plaster was found to include large particles of charcoal.

††† A regular exception to this was the flesh tone which consisted of lime white, red ochre and red lead.

‡ The medium analysis and interpretation was carried out by Mr Spike Bucklow at the Hamilton Kerr Institute. Samples were analysed on a Perkin Elmer Gas Chromatograph, with a Hewlett Packard integrator.

‡‡ All of the samples were coated with a fine layer of beeswax and acrylic resin, which had been used in two previous restoration campaigns in the 1950s and in the 1970s.

‡‡‡ Smith's library was bequeathed to Queens' College, Cambridge.

‡‡‡‡ Smith's pen and ink illustrations in some of his own books do not suggest that he was an accomplished draftsman.

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