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Six Lives: The Stories of Henry VIII's Queens

National Portrait Gallery, London, 20 June to 8 September 2024

Six Lives: The Stories of Henry VIII's Queens, by Charlotte Bolland, with contributions by Susannah Lipscomb, Alden Gregory, Benjamin Herbert, Brett Dolman, Nicola Clark, Nicola Tallis, and Valerie Schutte. (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2024)

As you entered the National Portrait Gallery's exciting exhibit on "Six Lives: The Stories of Henry VIII's Queens", the first thing you saw was the Holbein portrait of Henry, with a very prominent codpiece. The next room showed life size black and white photographs of wax models of the queens made in the 1990s by the Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto. Clearly, whatever you have entered, this is not a straightforward exhibit on Henry's wives.

The exhibit falls into two parts: the first part focuses not on portrayal of the queens after their death, while the second part explores the court and offers a room devoted to each queen. The first section offers an eclectic range of evidence, ranging from prints and paintings of the queens from the 17th to the 20th centuries, tube posters for Hampton Court, a clip from the 1920 silent film *Anna Boleyn* by Paul Scheurich, sketches for costumes, and a few actual costumes. The inclusion of a costume from the musical *Six* is a reminder that the long afterlives of the queens continues to today.

The second part of the exhibit is more expected: images and materials from the sixteenth century. It works from the outside in: beginning with a room

that provided context for the Court, and artists at the court, but in each room we are reminded that we know little of the inner life of the queens.

The rooms devoted to each of Henry's queens face a major challenge: aside from his long marriage to Katherine of Aragon, all the rest of Henry's queens were married to him for less than four years, three for barely a year. As one wife replaced the previous one, their predecessor's presence was often erased or overwritten. There are well documented Holbein portraits of Jane Seymour and Anne of Cleves; but there are no "securely identified" (15) portraits of Anne Boleyn and Katherine Howard: after they were executed, Henry did his best to render them invisible. Yet this limitation pushed the exhibit to do what made it so interesting: there are portraits (or suspected ones) of each queen, but there are also portraits of people who engaged with them, or who were important in their lives; and there are objects from their lives. These are often moving: a choirbook with a motet praying for children, a gift (probably) from Margaret of Austria to Katherine of Aragon; the book of hours in which Henry and Anne Boleyn shared notes to each other; an illuminated copy of the King's Great Bible. The ceiling of the Chapel Royal at St. James' Palace includes not only Anne of Cleves badges and mottoes, and names of her family's European territories, but also the intertwined initials of H and A. An elaborately bound copy of a theological treatise with Katherine Howard's initials reminds us how little we know of her; a copy of Petrarch with a cover probably embroidered by Katherine Parr underscores her intellectual interests. This attention to the material world is an effective

reminder of the many ways in which royal patronage left a record. It also expands our perspective on these women, who were more than just wives to a King: they were all literate, with intellectual and artistic interests.

In addition to the material objects included in the exhibit, two other inclusions help: first, portraits of people associated with a particular queen: thus the exhibit includes the famous Holbein portraits of both Thomas More and Thomas Cromwell as part of the discussion of Anne Boleyn, and a miniature of Thomas Cromwell with Anne of Cleves. Portraits of Henry's children are also present: Mary twice, in the room with her mother, and with Katherine Parr, whose close relationship to her step-children is evident. A second strength is the inclusion of documents relevant to a particular woman's life: letters written by Katherine of Aragon to Henry for instance; an account book from Anne of Cleves, the letter from Archbishop Cranmer describing his interview with Katherine Howard, and letters from Katherine Parr. This structure demonstrates the difficulty of getting close to any of Henry's queens; it also shows them as distinct individuals, with lives that go beyond the images of them, real or imagined.

The catalogue accompanying the exhibit provides not only a full account of the items in the exhibit, but specialized essays that link themes across the Queens. These include the emblems and badges that decorated Henry's palaces, as well as books and other items; the roles and fates of ladies in waiting; music and musicianship; royal entries; and the queen's jewels, and patronage. Nicola Clark charts the increasing vulnerability of

ladies in waiting; Valerie Schutte examines both the books patronized by the various queens, as well as the works dedicated to them, showing their role in shaping the culture of the court. This was most striking with Katherine Parr, who published a translation of psalms: the exhibit includes a copy inscribed by Henry VIII.

Six Lives serves as a powerful reminder of how little we know about even women who were married to the King beyond their role as queen. They were more than that. They were also so much more than the various ways their images and lives have been deployed in the centuries since their death, and the ways they still have a hold on the popular imagination. So often they have been seen as a group, and lost their individuality. *Six Lives* does an excellent job of offering us a sense of their individuality, and of their place not just in the court, but in the world.

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