

The Ceremonial Bedhead made for the marriage of King Henry VIII and Anne of Cleves



Sir William Burrell purchased the bedhead from John Hunt in 1938

The historian Simon Thurley has described this bedhead as probably the most important single piece of furniture surviving from the Court of Henry VIII.

Registration Number: 14-236

Material: Carved, painted and gilded oak

Background information:

The bedhead was made for the arranged marriage of Henry VIII to his fourth wife. First wife was Catherine of Aragon (divorced, 1 daughter, Mary); second wife Anne Boleyn (beheaded for Treason, 1 daughter, Elizabeth; third wife Jane Seymour (died soon after childbirth, 1 son, Edward).

The birth of a second male heir was important, in order to ensure the Tudor succession after Henry's death ('an heir and a spare'). The chosen candidate for marriage to Henry had to be a Protestant and of royal descent (which cut down the potential short list). Henry sent his Court Painter, the German artist Hans Holbein, off to depict possible candidates. Holbein's resulting miniature portrait of the successful German Princess Anne of Cleves is in the V&A. Preparations for the marriage, including making of the bedhead, went ahead before Henry met Anne. Although Henry did not find Anne attractive, he decided that he must go ahead with the marriage ceremony because he was afraid of "making a ruffle in the world" and putting her family in danger from the allied Catholic Emperor Charles V and the French King Francis I. After the ceremony, Henry and Anne were ceremonially put to bed, but Henry found himself unable to consummate their union. His excuse was that Anne appeared not to be a virgin, which - if true - would have made her ineligible to be Queen. Despite this implied insult to her honour, Anne accepted an amicable annulment of her marriage to Henry, and was granted a pension, house and land by him. She became a confidante to the royal princesses, and remained a respected member of Henry's Court. Anne was born in 1515 and died in 1557 at Chelsea Old Palace. She is buried in Westminster Abbey.

Description of the Bedhead:

The bedhead is designed in a classical-themed but rather fancy 'architectural' style, with columns in relief between each of the three main panels. Note the intricately-carved capitals on the two central columns and the gilt-painted 'egg and dart' motif on the entablature (the jutting-out horizontal element running along the top of the bedhead). Much of the gilt-painted decoration of delicate leafy scrolls has worn away, but enough remains to give an idea of the original, very rich effect. This style of decoration is found on other items designed around this time, including a cup design for Queen Jane Seymour by Hans Holbein (a drawing of this is in The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford). Although attempts have been made to attribute the design of this bedhead to Holbein, there is absolutely no evidence (i.e. no related drawings or written documents) to support this attribution. This mixture of classical and plant-themed motifs is related to the fashionable

decoration characteristic of the Renaissance period - decorative prints used as models by artists and designers were already circulating around Europe, particularly from Italy, at this time. (In Italy, Raphael and Leonardo da Vinci were dead; Michelangelo was 64 years old).

Main Inscription on the central panel, arranged in shape of a cross:

HENRY BY THE GRACE OF GOD KYNG OF ENGLONDE AND OF FRANCE LORD OF IRELONDE
DEFENDOUR OF THE FAYTHE AND UNDER GOD THE CHEFF AND SUPREME HEADE OF THE
CHURCH OF ALL ENGLONDE ANO DNI M CCCCC XXX IX'

[Henry, by the Grace of God King of England and of France, Lord of Ireland, Defender of the Faith and under God the Chief and Supreme Head of the Church of all England. In the year of our Lord 1539']

The cross-shaped motif in which this main inscription is enclosed is almost certainly symbolic of Henry VIII's role as 'Defender of the Faith' (a title which had been bestowed on him by the Pope before his split from, the Roman Catholic Church at the time of his divorce from Catherine of Aragon).

On left-hand panel: 'DIEU ET MON DROIT' [Royal motto - 'God and my Right']

On right-hand panel: 'AH', monogram for Henry and Anne

[WARNING - Adult-themed information follows!]



The carved figures decorating the corners (spandrels) of the bedhead are erotic in nature, and linked to the prime purpose of Henry and Anne's marriage - the begetting of another (or more than one) male heir to the English throne. At the top in each corner is a cavorting nude infant - male to the left, female to the right. Both are explicitly displaying their genitalia. The clothed adult figures below display symbols of fertility. The young man wears a prominent codpiece and holds a large fruit, possibly a melon, full of seeds. The female figure holds what appears to be a serpent in one hand and an upturned sword in the other (interpret as appropriate!).

Patricia Collins September 2006

