

THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fact Sheet

Mary Tudor by Hans Eworth



Title:	Mary Tudor
Maker:	Hans Eworth (active 1540 - 74)
Medium:	Oil painting on panel
Date:	c. 1553
Dimensions:	h. 109.9 cm, w. 80.0 cm
Museum No:	PD.1-1963
Gallery:	3

The Sitter

Mary Tudor (1516-1558) was crowned Queen Mary I of England in 1553. She was the only surviving child of King Henry VIII and his first wife, the Spanish Katharine of Aragon. This marriage was annulled in 1533 and Mary's legitimacy in turn was questioned. Mary was torn by loyalty to her father and King, her firm belief in her rights as heir to the throne and above all her Catholic faith which disallowed any acceptance of her father's self-created position as Head of the Church of England. Her Protestant brother Edward succeeded Henry to the throne, but Edward died young. Upon her accession to the throne, Mary tried to re-establish Roman Catholicism in England and gained the reputation of 'Bloody Mary' because of her persecution of Protestants. This is a misleading description. Mary was very devout in her faith, and also very intelligent: the Venetian ambassador to Mary's court commented '... she is skilled in five languages, not merely understanding, but speaking four of them fluently - English, Latin, French, Spanish and Italian ...' There was much sadness in Mary's life: in the early years following her parents' divorce she was declared illegitimate, her strategic marriage to Philip of Spain was unhappy and childless, and her relationship with her half-sister Elizabeth was troubled to the end.

The Tudor Monarchs

Henry VII - ruled 1485-1509

Henry VIII - ruled 1509-1547

The six wives of Henry VIII - Katharine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, Anne of Cleves, Catherine Howard, and Katharine Parr

Edward VI - ruled 1547-1553

Jane I - ruled 1553

Mary I - ruled 1553-1558

Elizabeth I - ruled 1558-1603

The Artist

Hans Eworth, a Flemish painter by birth, was active in England from about 1540. He followed in the wake of the great artist Hans Holbein, who had developed the art of state portraiture as a powerful tool to promote rank and status, and whose portraits of the movers and shakers of early Tudor England are still the images that reverberate today. Perhaps lacking Holbein's genius, Eworth nevertheless had great technical skill and is remembered for his recording of contemporary fashion and the individual character in the faces of his sitters. He was appointed Court Painter at Mary's court, and is best known for his portraits of the Queen.

The Painting

The costume in this painting suggests it was painted in or around 1553, the year Mary became Queen. The pose, standing with head slightly to one side and with clasped hands, is one that, for female sitters, traditionally denotes rank and high status. The identification of the sitter in the painting has been the subject of some discussion in the past with suggestions that she might be a lady of high rank or the Queen herself as a princess, but it is now accepted that it is a painting of Queen Mary, soon after her coronation in 1553.

One very unusual feature of this painting is the large shadow cast by the figure of Mary. Most portraits before this date had plain backgrounds. She is illuminated from a window on the left and the shadow is cast to the right in a very bleak grey setting. The setting could be seen as symbolic of the isolation, both emotional and actual, that Mary felt for so much of her life. The setting is made even starker when seen in contrast to the expensively clothed figure of Mary. Mary's jewels include a cross at her neck, a large brooch and three rings. She is also wearing a girdle-book hanging from a chain around her waist. This is a book of devotions bound within a case that was usually decorated with enamel and jewels.

The Costume

In the mid 1500s the main influence on European fashion was the Spanish court, with tight-fitting, sombre and mainly black clothes. The Venetian ambassador visiting her court in August 1554 wrote:

'Queen Mary's garments are of two sorts; the one a gown such as men wear but fitting very close, with an underpetticoat which has a very long train; and this is her ordinary costume, being also that of the gentlewoman of England. The other garment is a gown and bodice, with wide hanging sleeves in the French fashion which she wears on state occasions.'

In this portrait Mary is wearing an English variety of French hood (head-dress) and a chemise (undershirt), the neck frill of which is edged with black and is enclosed round her neck by a black and gold embroidered collar. The stiffened bodice is topped by a yoke and a Medici collar, wide oversleeves with pendant cuffs and red undersleeves are caught together at the seams and decorated with aiglets. Sleeves were very often made to be interchangeable, or with detachable foresleeves. The jewel at her breast shows the Old Testament story of King Ahasuerus and Queen Esther. She wears a Spanish farthingale, (which consisted of an underskirt distended by hoops of wire, wood or whalebone, growing larger towards the bottom of the skirt) over which the skirt (kirtle) is slit to show the red underskirt (forepart). Each kirtle required about seven and three quarters yards of silk. A small book hangs from her girdle, probably a Book of Hours. All the material used in the costume was highly decorated and enriched with ornaments and jewels.