Microcosms: Illuminating the Global in Tudor and Early Stuart Portraits
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How to use this resource:

This resource is aimed at teachers to use with Key Stage 4-5 History students studying the Tudor and Stuart periods.

It focuses on issues of global exchange, migration, and the beginnings of empire that developed in England at the very time that these portraits were being commissioned and painted.

All the images from the National Portrait Gallery Collection can be viewed online via https://www.npg.org.uk using the NPG number in the image caption.

This pack is intended to encourage students to ask new questions about these artworks (and others), thinking critically about the dynamics of global production and exchange that informed their creation.

Teachers are welcome to adapt content for younger groups.
Setting the scene

An island, divided by the Reformation, struggles to articulate its identity. As a new dynasty, the Tudors seek to demonstrate their authority and legitimacy at home and abroad.

Monarchs and state agents asked themselves: were they part of Europe? A cosmopolitan nation in their own right? How would they govern the many individuals who came into the realm from other shores, from religious refugees to Africans in merchant households? And how might English identity change as a result of maritime exploration and colonizing new territories? These questions and ambitions have left ongoing and deeply fraught legacies today.

As the English began to engage with travel, trade, and expansion to a degree to which they never had before, glimpses of their global ambitions manifested themselves in portraiture.

Like the gold flecks enlivening these paintings’ jewels, these global elements, once seen, cannot be unseen. We encourage you to look for more!

Detail from Elizabeth I, unknown English artist, c. 1600 based on a lost portrait from 1558 (NPG 5175) © National Portrait Gallery, London.

This crown differs from the open crowns of the medieval period. It is called an imperial crown. What do you think is the significance of this?
Wooden conduits to golden worlds

Most sixteenth century portraits in the Tudor galleries were painted on wooden panels. If you approach a Tudor portrait, chances are you’ll notice evidence of its life as a tree.

Like portraiture, trade and exploration blossomed in the Tudor and Stuart era. Wood, too, was the medium that made this possible. Wooden ships, and the objects and people these carried, connected the English to the rest of the world.

Portraits are not just images, but objects. From the wood panels themselves, to the crushed bugs or gold leaf that artists used to express political ideas and personal taste, there is a distinct relationship between the global and the domestic, the desire to create national cohesion and yet the reliance on migrant artists and foreign commodities to do so.

Artists often used oak from the Baltic region (Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia) for Tudor paintings, as this was higher quality wood than English oak, and more suitable to cut down into regular-sized boards for painting. For more information on what wood tells us about paintings, visit:

https://www.rmg.co.uk/discover/behind-the-scenes/blog/against-grain-construction-tudor-panel-paintings

Watch the Dendrochronology film at the bottom of the webpage:
https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw02031/King-Edward-VI

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Microdetail of gold lettering on frame from King Henry VI, unknown artist, c. 1540 (NPG 2457) © National Portrait Gallery, London; below, detail of decoration on jewelled band, showing raised dots made from lead white covered by azurite from King Henry VIII, unknown Anglo-Netherlandish artist, c. 1520 (NPG 4690) © National Portrait Gallery, London.
Refugee artists

Activity:

Observe a range of Tudor and early Stuart portraits.

Who painted them? Which of them were painted by English artists?

Does it surprise you to see that most of the iconic images that we associate with English royalty were painted by migrants?

Many painters at the English court, as well as silversmiths, silk weavers, goldsmiths, physicians, and botanists, were religious refugees.

See p.21 for a link to the Runnymede Trust’s resource ‘Our Migration Stories’.

Born in France, the Protestant Isaac Oliver moved to London to escape the French wars of religion. His painting was influenced by the styles and techniques of Italian and Flemish painters.
London’s taste for foreign wares

The circulation of peoples and goods enlivens the seemingly fixed nature of portraits. Behind these images is a world of commerce and migration. Tudor and early Stuart London was a bustling port town, full of cross-currencies of exchange. Access to goods relied on vast trading networks involving foreign merchants and go betweens. The portraits at the National Portrait Gallery are indicative of rising consumerism in Elizabethan England. The inclusion of merchants in the Tudor galleries demonstrates the rising status of these individuals, who sought to show their wealth through forms of representation that had hitherto mainly been used by aristocrats.

A port record from the 1560s indicates some of the goods that came into London at this time:

- **Ambergris**, whale secretion used for perfume
- **Beaver skins**, North America
- **Brazilwood**, wood from a Brazilian tree, used as a dye
- **Glass** beads, Milan
- **Sugar** in large crystalized pieces, Morocco and the Levant (Western Asia)
- **Cochineal** insects used to produce a scarlet dye, Mexico
- **Fustian** fabric, Italy
- Drinking **glasses**, Venice
- **Pepper**, West Africa
- **Raisins**, Spain
- **Turmeric** for dye and medicine, East Indies
- **Wine**, Italy and France
- **Cheese**, Holland

With the establishment of trading companies like the East India Company and the Virginia Company, port records began cataloguing larger numbers of Chinese porcelain, Indian textiles, spices, silks, ivory, and tobacco. The trafficking of such goods involved the movement of people, too. Explorers and merchants brought **Africans** into England to serve as interpreters and guides for future voyages. Some Africans worked as sailors on board European ships. English traders were frequently in a position of vulnerability when they sought to establish trade with other powers and political systems, reliant on the abilities of those who helped them along the way.


Portraits like this one of Sir Thomas Gresham may not seem particularly extravagant. But the abundant gold hints at Gresham’s wealth, as does the rich depth of his clothes. Gresham founded the Royal Exchange – a place for City merchants to sell their wares from abroad.
Global colour networks: sourcing pigments

Ultramarine (above), the most expensive pigment for early modern artists, was a deep blue made from grinding lapis lazuli, a stone sourced in North Eastern Afghanistan.

Many of the blues in the Gallery (such as this striking image of Henry VII, left), are made from azurite, a costly blue pigment, though less expensive than ultramarine.
Pigment case study: cochineal (I)

Cochineal was a red dye used in some paints, clothes, and cosmetics, sourced from the prickly pear cactuses of Central America. Various shades of red featured prominently in Tudor and early Stuart portraits. The paintings here do not contain known traces of cochineal, but they depict fabrics and textiles that used cochineal dye.


X-ray radiography shows us the depth and range of reds in Wolsey’s clothing (detail of his hat).

Sir Thomas More, after Hans Holbein the Younger, c. early 1600s, based on a work from 1527 (NPG 4358) © National Portrait Gallery, London.

This detail from More’s velvet sleeves highlight the depth of colour in the sleeves.
Cochineal (II)

This rare English manuscript from the seventeenth century includes this detailed description of how indigenous Americans sourced cochineal in Guatemala and Mexico. Though some pigments were cheaply and widely-produced, this source encourages us to think more about the kinds of human labour required to source the costlier pigments in this gallery.

‘The cochineal is an insect bred in a fruit. [They] would rot in their husks...did not the Indians...spread under the branches of the [cactus] tree a large linen cloth, and then with sticks shake the branches, and so disturb the poor insects that they take wing to be gone, till the heat of the sun so disorders them that they fall down dead on the cloth, where the Indians leave them under they are thoroughly dry. When they fly [the beetles] are red, when they fall they are black, and when first they are dry they are white, though the colour changes a little after. These make the rich scarlet colour.’

Are we, like Elizabethans, consuming beetles? How might we be doing this?

Cochineal extract is still found in certain foods and cosmetics, including some lipsticks. Starbucks has used it as a colorant for their strawberry Frappuccinos.
Enquiry:

What can Katherine of Aragon tell us about cross-cultural encounters in Tudor England?

Women were important links that brought families and dynasties together. This often required them to leave their homes and settle in new households and countries. The early life of Henry VIII’s first wife, Katherine of Aragon, is often neglected in favour of the drama and intrigue of the breakdown of her marriage, Henry’s interest in Anne Boleyn and England’s break from the Catholic Church in Rome. Following Katherine’s journey as a traveller shows us some of the ways that women connected the Tudor court to the world beyond.

Katherine was born near Madrid. Her parents were none other than Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile – the royal couple who sponsored Christopher Columbus’ voyages to ‘India’, which eventually led him to the Americas in 1492. Growing up, Katherine travelled with her family through large parts of Spain, at a time when Castile and Aragon were at war against Muslim rulers of Granada.

The portrait of Katherine in the gallery is often purely considered as a companion portrait to Henry VIII’s (see NPG L246 and NPG 4690). But in her sumptuousness and steady gaze, Katherine is establishing herself as powerful in her own right, bringing prestige and wealth to the Tudors through her connections to the Spanish empire and its vast trade networks. Several other surviving portraits of Katherine, for example, include a monkey, a symbol of exoticism and a means of showcasing Spanish access to global goods.

Behind the power and wealth are the unseen individuals who dyed fabrics, crafted clothes, and attended and dressed the monarch. Katherine’s royal entourage would have included Spanish attendants, but also peoples who had been captured in Spanish campaigns to reconquer parts of Muslim-ruled Spain. One such woman was Katherine’s attendant and bed-maker, Catalina of Motril. Unfortunately, ‘Catalina’ was the name given to her after her conversion, so her real name is unknown.

The councillor Thomas More further noted a group of ‘Ethiopians’ (Africans) who were part of Katherine’s retinue. Suddenly, then, our understanding of the Tudor court becomes more complex – in private chambers and public ceremonies, non-European peoples including ‘Moors’ (Muslim North Africans) and ‘blackamoors’ (Africans) were present, even if they are not visible in the confines of these portraits.
Eastern empires

The Tudors established increasing contact with Eastern empires, including with the Ottomans (modern-day Turkey), Persians (Iran), and Mughals (India). Until merchants, ambassadors, and other travellers set up more direct exchanges, the English relied on accessing global goods via Venice, a bustling and multicultural city that had long benefited from contact with the Middle East and Asia.

After the Reformation, English monarchs rejected the pope’s ban on establishing trade and diplomatic relations with Islamic rulers. The fashion for the ‘Orient’ can be found in the appearance of Ottoman and Persian-made carpets in Tudor and Jacobean portraits, as in silk garments, the product of merchant access to eastern trades and diplomatic gift-giving. How many carpets can you spot in Elizabethan portraits?

Questions:

Who contributed to the knowledge that English merchants, ambassadors, and other travellers gained when they established trading relationships with non-European countries? How was this knowledge acquired? Who do you encounter or rely on for help or information when you travel to new places?
The Tudor court was multilingual and multicultural. Two of Henry VIII’s wives were European; Mary I married Philip II of Spain; ambassadors and diplomats came from Venice and France, among other countries. Africans and ‘Indians’ (individuals from the Americas or India) lived in the households of London merchants and courtiers. Elizabeth I’s personal physician, Roderigo Lopez, was a Portuguese *converso* (a Christian convert) with Jewish ancestry.

In 1600, Abd el-Ouahed ben Messaoud (left) visited the Elizabethan court in his capacity as Moroccan ambassador to explore the possibility of a military alliance between English and African forces against Spain. He spent six months at court, where he would have brought a large retinue of his own servants and attendants, and observed his own religious practices. Whilst in England, the group attended the November 1600 festivities that marked the anniversary of Elizabeth I’s coronation.
Persia fever

The English were fascinated by Persia and its empire. In fact, James I’s silkworm expert praised Virginia for being ‘in the same latitude that Persia is’. A similar climate would be beneficial to establishing a silk industry, just as ‘silks are the sinews of the Persian state’.

Questions:

Why do you think Protestant England made diplomatic alliances with Islamic powers?

Have you noticed the high heels that men begin wearing in portraits in the late 1590s and early 1600s? Persian military men wore heels for practical reasons, and the popularity of heels at European courts may have been the result of a Persian diplomatic mission to Europe in 1598. The Elizabethan adventurer Sir Robert Shirley (pictured right) befriended Shah Abbas and claimed to have helped train the Persian Safavid army. When he returned to England, Shirley often continued to wear a turban.
Clothing: global threads

Does the vogue for heels, earrings, feathers, bracelets, and certain colour associations make you think differently about how men and women fashioned themselves in this period? Think also about the body parts we choose to emphasize in our clothing. At James I’ court, men’s legs took centre stage, while Elizabeth was particularly pleased with her pale, slender hands.

Colour associations were different in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, too. Pink was considered a variant of red, suitable for women as well as men (though some of the pink colours we see in Tudor portraits may have faded from their original reds). Elizabeth favoured the combination of white and black.

Studies have revealed something known as the ‘pink tax’ - the marketing trick in society today whereby women today often pay more than men for the same product if it’s pink. Pink razors, for example, are more expensive than men’s razors that come in grey or blue. Yet as portraits show us, associations between colours and genders are not fixed over time.

Activity:

Between silk threads and imported textiles, Tudor and early Stuart self-presentation was the result of global connections. Chances are, the clothes you are wearing were not made locally. Look at the tags on your clothes or bags. Where do your clothes comes from? Who do you think made them?

How do our clothes reflect the influence of other countries and styles? Does the fashion for certain hairstyles or patterns ever become problematic or contested in popular media? Is cultural appropriation a bad thing?
Atlantic competition

When he ascended the throne, James I sought to end the many decades of English armed conflict with Spain. This portrait shows leading councillors from Spain and the Spanish Netherlands (left) and England (right) debating the terms of the peace at Somerset House in 1604.

James’ secretary of state, Robert Cecil (bottom right), was an influential figure in ensuring the terms of the peace granted the English greater freedom to pursue their Atlantic ambitions.

Whereas English monarchs styled themselves as rulers of ‘England, Scotland, Ireland, and France’, Philip III styled himself king of a vast range of territories including Castile, Sicily, Jerusalem, Portugal, Guinea, the East and West Indies, and ‘the islands and terra firma of the Ocean Sea’.

Why might such a large painting be seen as a political act on the part of the English?

Questions:

Check out the dimensions of this painting. Why do you think it is so large?

Think about the composition. What is the effect of the scene being painted in the way it is? Do you feel like you are in the room?

What signs of authority are evident? What is the significance of the paper, ink, and pen? The large carpet on the table?

‘It is generally known, that the West Indies are this day almost the only fountain, and Spain the cistern into which this wealth flows.’ (Speech in parliament, 1624)
Ruffs in Jamestown?

Jamestown, Virginia was the first successful English colony in America, founded in 1607. The colonization of Bermuda, New England, and parts of the Caribbean followed.

Questions:

What might armour in portraits tell us about how gentlemen wished to present themselves? What role does violence have to play in English colonialism, first in Ireland and then the Americas?

Understanding the importance of fashion in Tudor and Stuart portraiture gives us an indication of ideas of power and status in the early colonies, too. Archaeologists at Jamestown in Virginia have found five ‘goffering irons’ there – the tools that Jacobeans used to stiffen and arrange their ruffs.

Why do you think maintaining appearances was so important to gentlemen, even when it was humid and impractical to do so in colonial climates?

John Smith was a soldier rather than a member of the nobility. What do you think is the significance of his portrait appearing so prominently on this early map of the Northern American coastline?
This portrait depicts Pocahontas when she visited England. She died in Gravesend in 1617, about 25 miles from the National Portrait Gallery. Here, she holds ostrich feathers prized by English courtiers. As an Algonquin, Pocahontas came from indigenous societies that valued other sorts of feathers, such as those of turkeys.

Feathers

Questions:

What do feathers tell us about English trade with particular countries?

What other animal parts can you find in these portraits, from leather to furs? Where might these be sourced?
Pearls

Pearls are so pervasive in Tudor and Stuart portraits that they can become almost invisible. These were highly prized as luminous gems with potent mythological associations with the sea. They were deeply implicated in maritime empire, travelling into England through legal and illicit ways – in pockets and boxes, sewn into clothes or turned into earrings.

The English relied on Africans and Native Americans in Bermuda and the Caribbean to dive for pearls. The valuable skills of pearl divers becomes evident in other contexts, too. When the English warship the Mary Rose sank in 1545, the English employed the assistance of an expert West African diver, Jacques Francis, to recover sunken goods.

Activity:

Observe the range of pearl sizes, as well as the ways in which they were worn on clothing by men and women alike. What is the significance of the size of Ralegh’s pearl earring? How many pearls can you count on his cloak, doublet, and breeches?

Does thinking about the human labour that went into sourcing such goods provoke us into thinking differently about how Elizabethans and Jacobeans expressed power?
The African presence (I)

Records suggest that by the Tudor and Stuart eras, there were hundreds of Africans living in England in various capacities, from black attendants and performers at court to sailors and interpreters. A London parish record from 1611 notes a

‘Dederj iaquoah about the age of 20 years, the sonne of Caddi-bian King of the river of Cetras ...in the Country of Guinea, who was sent out of his country by his father in an English ship.’

European ideas about blackness were constructed over time, through a variety of influences that included cross-cultural contact but also a range of conflicting ideas transmitted through printed treatises, travel narratives, and plays. English uncertainties about how to categorize Africans began to change in the mid-seventeenth century, based on the need to justify the human labour needed to produce the vast quantities of tobacco and sugar that sustained English plantations in Virginia and the Caribbean.

Activity:

Africans in Tudor and Stuart England were often termed ‘blackamoors’. Region-specific words like ‘Ethiope’ existed alongside words like ‘negro’, the Spanish word for ‘black’. As a class, discuss how you feel about these terms. Why are many of these considered offensive today? Historian Onyeka Nubia has posited that Africans may have chosen to use some of these terms to convey ‘a black sense of self’. This invites us to contemplate how black Elizabethans may have viewed themselves, rather than how others categorized them.

Read this short essay on ‘blackamoors’ in England: [http://www.tideproject.uk/keywords-home/?keyword_id=40](http://www.tideproject.uk/keywords-home/?keyword_id=40) Discuss the role of trade and expansion in how ideas of blackness were constructed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. You can also use this resource as a departing point to further explore some of the black lives in Tudor England.
The African presence (II)

It is unfortunately very difficult to obtain the direct voices of Africans themselves. Their words were always mediated by those who wrote these accounts down. These records, however, hint at the variety of black lives in Tudor and early Stuart England.

Richard Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations*, 1599

‘We also among us in England have blacke Moors, Ethiopians, out of all parts of the Torrid Zones.’

Draft proclamation of Elizabeth I, 1601

‘Whereas the Queen’s majesty...is highly discontented to understand the great number of...blackamoors which (as she is informed) are carried into this realm since the troubles between her highness and the King of Spain; who are fostered and powered here.’

This proclamation calls for the deportation of ‘blackamoors’ in England. It is only a draft, meaning it was never actually legislated. However, it suggests that there was a significant number of people of African descent in Elizabeth London.

Westminster, London, 1602

Burial of *Fortunatus*, black servant in the household of Robert Cecil (for a portrait of Cecil, see NPG 107 and NPG 665).

London, 1610s

A South African man, ‘Coree the Saldanian’ of the Khoikhoi people, lived in the household of Sir Thomas Smith after being captured after boarding an East India Company ship. Coree used his growing knowledge of English to express his desire to return home. He did return to Africa, but died in 1627, protecting English trading interests.

For important research on black lives in Tudor and Stuart England, visit the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography’s ‘Early Black British History’:


The Runnymede Trust’s ‘Our Migration Stories’ includes resources about migrants from diverse backgrounds:

https://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/by-era/1500%E2%80%931750
The portraits on the left are relatively unique in that they depict an African girl and boy in their own right – not in the act of serving or attending another man or woman, but as individuals.

Attitudes to Africans shifted in the Stuart era. The image to the right, composed some forty years after those on the left, depicts the Duchess of Portsmouth with an attendant who seems to have been included purely to enhance the duchess’s status. The girl may have been a court attendant, or perhaps reflected the real presence of Africans at court without depicting a specific person.

There are many portraits of elite European men and women with Africans in the seventeenth century, from Anne of Denmark to Prince Rupert. These are highly stylized. Often, the African serves to gesture, quite literally, towards the elite sitter’s access to global goods. In the image of the duchess, the girl offers up coral and a shell brimming with pearls.

**Activity:**

Research other Stuart portraits that include Africans. Compare their gestures and clothes. How realistic do you think these portrayals are? Explore ways of thinking about the experience of these individuals beyond what the portraits seem to say about them?
Women did not lead journeys of exploration in the same way as Drake or Ralegh did, and their travels were more restricted than those of men. Yet they did express interest in colonization. ‘Virginia’ was so called because Elizabeth I styled herself as the ‘virgin queen’. Ralegh wrote several letters to James I’s wife, Queen Anne, about Virginia and Guiana. Anne met Pocahontas in London. From the 1610s and 1620s, larger numbers of women began travelling to fledgling English colonies including Virginia, New England, and Bermuda.

Women contributed funds for provisioning ships and setting up schools abroad. A few invested in the Virginia Company. They grew and smoked tobacco (right), cooked with spices and sugar obtained from other countries, and wrote letters to merchants and agents, asking for ‘India gowns’, rare plants, shells, and feathers.

Hints of these global interests begin to become more visible in seventeenth-century portraits. Parrots and monkeys appeared as ‘exotic’ companions. Pineapples and tulips featured in still life paintings and engraved on the cases in which miniatures were kept. Anne and other members of the elite commissioned portraits with African servants, linking their households to broader networks of trade and plantation. Increasingly, maintaining plantation industries led to the mass importation of enslaved peoples to English colonies.

Prestige and wealth in portraits were increasingly demonstrated through the proliferation of global commodities – ivory, pearls, emeralds, and silk. Note the number of pearls in Elizabeth’s necklace, hair jewels, and dress.
Who is missing?

Activity:

Use your new knowledge from this resource to research a Tudor or early Stuart individual who was not represented in an artistic medium. Imagine what their portrait might have looked like if they had been allowed to depict themselves.

For inspiration, view the short ‘Black to Life’ films by Akinola Davies on BBC Stories https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p07dt1d3

Widening the frame

Summary questions:

As forms of political propaganda, what do the materials and objects in these portraits tell us about the imperial ambitions of the Tudors and early Stuarts?

Based on some of the enquiries in this resource, what are the limitations of portraits? Who is being left out of portraits? Is there a way to integrate these stories to gain a fuller story of English identity?

Activity:

Respond creatively to some of the ideas in this resource, and to your favourite Tudor or early Stuart portrait. Design a piece of jewellery that reflects your own background and heritage, choosing specific symbols, mottos, inscriptions, and colours that speak to this.

Reflect on your own background and beliefs. How would you express your sense of self through a portrait? What elements would be most important for you to convey to the viewer?

Write a story that charts the experience of an object as it travels from its source of origin into a Tudor or Stuart portrait. Has it begun, like some pigments, to fade over time? Does being crushed into a brilliant pigment feel painful, or liberating? What was it like for the spun silk of a silkworm to travel across Asia and the Levant with a Venetian merchant, only to be bought by an English tailor who sewed it into a courtier’s jacket or pocket?

Research the travel writings of courtiers and explorers like Walter Ralegh’s *A Discovery of Guiana* (1596) or *The World Encompassed by Sir Francis Drake* (1628), an account of Drake’s circumnavigation of the globe from 1577 to 1580. In these sources, what are explorers looking for? Who do they encounter along the way?
This resource was written by Dr Lauren Working, Gallery Educator at the National Portrait Gallery and researcher on the TIDE project at the University of Oxford.

For short, free essays on Englishness and global encounters to use in teaching, visit the TIDE project website: 
http://www.tideproject.uk/keywords-home/

For more information on the National Portrait Gallery’s Schools Programme visit:
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