

Kings Insufficient

May 2, 2009

I have never felt entirely comfortable around monarchists, by which I mean people for whom a return to kings and queens would solve a large part of our present democratic woes. I agree that bygone monarchies like those of England, France and Russia are great landscapes for a nostalgia trip, and that Cromwell, Robespierre and Lenin were treacherous pioneers of a ghastly New World Order. Nevertheless the nostalgia comes across to me as a distraction.

Such thoughts arise from a visit to the delightful Exhibition at the Tate (Britain) Gallery in London, open until May 17, entitled "Van Dyck and Britain." Sir Anthony van Dyck, knighted by King Charles I, was the outstanding painter of 17th century England. Born in 1599 in Antwerp, in today's Belgium, he showed an early talent for painting, and soon became the "best pupil" of the famous Flemish painter, Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640). Amidst youthful travels on the Continent, in particular to Genoa to learn from the Italian masters, he made a brief visit to London in 1620–1621.

However, from 1632 until his early death in 1641, at the invitation of the Stuart King Charles I, a keen patron of the arts, van Dyck came to England mostly to stay. Here he became the fashionable and highly influential portrait painter of England's ruling class, projecting, as no doubt the King had wished, a glamorous image of the Stuart kingdom. The glamour lives on in the colorful and characterful portraits that make up the bulk of this Exhibition.

Like his Continental masters, Rubens and Titian, and like the King's spouse, Henrietta Maria of France, van Dyck was a Catholic. Even if a Puritan could be a painter, never could he rejoice as does van Dyck in the play of light upon gorgeous fabrics, nor could he portray costumes still more fanciful

than they were in reality, like van Dyck's ballooning sleeves. Of course the Puritans made war on Charles, and in 1649 they cut off his head, but with the Stuart Restoration of 1660 some of the color and joy returned, and van Dyck's influence upon English portrait painting lasted – one thinks in particular of Gainsborough and Reynolds in the 18th century – through to the early 20th century, when at last the lights were switched out all over Europe, and remaining monarchies were extinguished with them, or gutted.

Therefore kings alone are not enough. They may patronize the arts, and their courts may uphold for a while the glamour and the glory, as reflected for instance by van Dyck, in whose dashing canvases one finds surprisingly little or no trace of the murderous tensions underlying the 1630's in England. Nevertheless soon after him King and court were swept away, and only Restored on modern skids. What then does it take to overcome colorless and glamourless modernity? No less than the King of kings, and his Catholic Cross! "O crux ave, spes unica" – "Hail to thee, Cross, our only hope."

Kyrie eleison.