

AN ARMADA EARRING

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In the early 1990s the Ulster Museum in Belfast acquired a gold, enamelled, and gem-set pendant jewel with an image of the Madonna and Child surrounded by a sunburst (Figure 1). This iconographical depiction is inserted within a later border that bears a double-line inscription in italics with strong traces of black enamelling. The lettering reads:

When Spanneshe fleet fled home for feeare [ANNO] This golden picktur then was
founde * Fast fexsed vnto Spanniards eare [1588] Whoo drowned laye on Irish groūd
x.

This unusual record tells us that what had once been a Spanish sailor's earring with a Catholic devotional image was, soon after its discovery, converted into this pendant. The new owner created a gem-set gold border with enamelled scrollwork decoration at the apex and a fleur-de-lys at the base to which is attached a pearl hanging pendant. The collet in which the large amethyst of octagonal form is set has then been inscribed at the sides with a further inscription: 'The first gift to Mary' (Figure 2). While this might be a reference to the Virgin Mary, it seems likely that as the jewel passed into its new context it took on new meanings.

In 1972, and prior to the purchase of the pendant by the Ulster Museum, this jewel had been sold at Christie's London by Sir John Simon Every, Bt. (1914-1988). A note in the sale catalogue states that the vendor, Sir John, was a direct descendent of the Mary referred to in the inscription.¹ Thus if the inscription is to be believed, it came from the ear of a dead Spaniard whose body was presumably washed up in Ireland following the English success in the Armada. It was then transformed from a trophy of war into a token of family love and affection and eventually into an important family heirloom. That an object with dimensions of only 30.34 x 59.72 mm can have such multiple resonances demonstrates the value of jewelled possessions both for their original owners and for cultural historians today.

When it was sold, the pendant was immediately recognised for its connections with a substantial collection of jewellery already on display in Ulster. Indeed it may have come from the same source: a Spanish galleass, the *Girona*, which was wrecked off Lacada Point, near the Giant's Causeway in County Antrim, Northern Ireland as it returned home in October

¹ *Icons, Mediaeval and Later Works of Art*, Christie's London sale catalogue, 22 February 1972, lot 30.

1588 following defeat during the Spanish Armada (Figure 3). When the ship was recovered in 1967 by the Belgian archaeologist Robert Sténuit off the Antrim coastline at Portballintrae, close to where it wrecked, it yielded important finds that provided crucial insights into sixteenth-century Spanish culture; above all it gave a glimpse into the material goods that gave meaning to an all-male environment and male consumption habits. For when it went down, the *Girona* was a military ship with only men on board, many of whom were the young noblemen taking part in the Armada enterprise. Yet amongst the salvaged artefacts were numerous jewels – gold chains, rings, and pendants – many set with precious or semi-precious stones, as well as other small objects of personal adornment, such as gold buttons (Figure 4). These archaeological survivals, which can be securely sited and dated, help us to understand better the complex relationships that Renaissance and early modern European men had with precious ornaments and jewels.

The earring-cum-pendant raises some interesting questions about the gendering of ownership and consumption of jewels. Not only did the status and meaning of this object alter as it passed into new contexts, but it would seem that it passed between male and female ownership and use. Very often within the early modern period it is difficult to state categorically whether an item of jewellery was intended for a man or a woman. There are certainly some categories of jewels that are usually classified as belonging to men, such as the hat ornament or heavy-set gold chains, but even here there are anomalies. While large gold chains were frequently depicted almost exclusively on men in English portraiture, these same items of jewellery can be found around the necks of Dutch women. While in the case of this Armada jewel it is clear that, in its original form as an earring, it was worn by a man, the earring as an object type was problematic in this period, since it was worn by men and women alike.

In the early seventeenth-century tract *Haec-vir*, a response to *Hic mulier*, the character of the Man-woman references the work of an Italian poet whose words condemn the womanly behaviour of men:

Into his eares two Rings conuayed are
Of golden Wyer, at which on either side,
Two Indian Pearles, in making like two Peares,
Of passing price were pendant at his eares.²

² *Haec-Vir: or the Womanish-Man: Being an Answer to a late Booke intituled Hic-Mulier. Exprest in a briefe Dialogue betweene Haec-Vir the Womanish-Man, and Hic-Mulier the Man-Woman.* (London, 1620), C3r. This extract was taken from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1516) translated by John Harington, London, 1591, and shows how the character of Rogero becomes effeminate in his pursuit of Alcyna.

These words would suggest that the earring was considered a jewel primarily to be worn by women, yet ‘The Chandos Portrait’, representing the playwright William Shakespeare (1564-1616), clearly shows the sitter with a gold hoop earring in his left ear (NPG 1).³

Contemporary portraiture also shows men such as Sir Francis Drake (1540-1596) (NPG 1627) and Sir Walter Raleigh (1552-1618) (NPG 7), figures hardly considered womanly in conduct, with a single earring. William Harrison (1534-1593), rector of Radwinter in Essex from 1558 until his death, may have had these men in mind when he wrote in his social commentary of England that ‘Some lusty courtiers also and gentlemen of courage do wear either rings of gold, stones, or pearl in their ears’.⁴

Charles I (r.1625-1649) is perhaps the most noted male figure to wear an earring. A watercolour miniature from the studio of Isaac Oliver (c.1565-1617) shows Charles as a boy with an earring in his left ear (NPG 3064), while a pear-shaped pearl pendant at his left ear is prominently displayed in the triple painting of the king by Anthony Van Dyck (1599-1641) (RCIN 404420). Such was his attachment to this jewel that Charles famously wore it to the scaffold. After his execution it was removed from his ear and given to his eldest surviving daughter, Mary Henrietta, Princess Royal (1631-1660).⁵ The earring, a drop-shaped freshwater pearl mounted in a gold and enamelled Imperial crown setting, now resides in the Portland Collection at Welbeck, Nottinghamshire (Figure 5). Its authenticity is confirmed by a manuscript note in the hand of Queen Mary II (1662-1694), also within the Portland Collection (Figure 6).⁶

The rhetoric against the wearing of earrings by men juxtaposed with visual and material evidence to the contrary reflects contemporary attitudes to the ornamenting of male bodies. While anxieties prevailed over excessive adornment, there is no doubt that most men were actively interested in making purchases of jewellery and in ensuring the safe-keeping and transmission of these valuable goods. In an earlier section of his work, Harrison

³ ‘The Chandos Portrait’, c.1600-1610, attributed to John Taylor (d.1651); oil on canvas; NPG 1. Scientific analysis has shown that the earring is contemporary with the portrait. Discussion on the identity of the sitter is in Tarnya Cooper, *Searching for Shakespeare* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2006), cat. no. 3.

⁴ William Harrison, *The Description of England. The Classic Contemporary Account of Tudor Social Life*, edited by Georges Edelen (Washington D.C; New York: The Folger Shakespeare Library; Dover Publications, 1994), p.147.

⁵ The earring remained within royal hands until it was given to Hans Willem Bentinck (1649-1709), first earl of Portland in 1688 by either William III or Mary II.

⁶ I am grateful to Derek Adlam, Curator of the Portland Collection, for providing me with information regarding the history and provenance of this earring and for alerting me to the existence of the supporting manuscript document.

bemoaned the excesses of appearance for being detrimental to one's character. His words rail against preferment of bettering one's external self than the internal.

Nothing is more constant in England than inconstancy of attire. Oh, how much cost is bestowed nowadays upon our bodies and how little upon our souls! How many suits of apparel hath the one, and how little furniture hath the other! How long time is asked in decking up of the first, and how little space left wherein to feed the latter!⁷

Yet many contemporary texts were confusing in the advice that they offered to men. The early seventeenth-century author Patrick Scot expresses the paradoxes so prevalent in early modern writings in *Omnibus et singulis* (1619), a work intended to serve as an advice book from a father to his son.

There is nothing whereby the inward disposition of the minde may bee sooner discovered, then by lightness or stayednesse of apparell; a phantasticall attyre being a confirmation of an unsettled minde. I doe advise you, not to follow the frantike humours of new Fashions, neither to bee superstitiously, basely, slightly clothed, nor artificially decked; but to vse your clothes in a cleanly, honest, comely, and careless forme. [...] it is an equal indiscretion to estimate a man's worth, either by his bodie or clothes; yet on the other side it is an ineuitable certaintie, that not only the common people and strangers, but euen wisemen are mooued and stirred vp with outward shewes, and their minde (according to those exterior things) prepared to receiue a deepe impressioe of liking or disliking, fauour, or disfauour, reuerence or careless retchlesnesse.⁸

Negotiating the difficult path between appropriate external manifestations and excessive consumption was challenging and potentially hazardous, as too little outward show could reflect poorly on a man's character and impact on his good-standing in the community, but conversely negative opinions could be formed from overt displays. This second view is articulated effectively by the author Robert Greene, in his role as arbitrator in a duel of words between the characters identified only as Cloth Breeches and Velvet Breeches. He describes seeing the figure of a man approaching them.

Apparelled, in a blacke Taffata doublet, and a spruce Leather Jerkin, with Christall buttons, a Cloake fac't afore with Ueluet, and a Couentry cap of the [...]nest wooll: [...] This fiery fac't Churle had upon his fingers as many gold Rings as would furnish a

⁷ Harrison, *Description of England*, p.146.

⁸ Patrick Scot, *Omnibus & Singulis. Affording Matter Profitable for All Men, Necessary for Euery Man; Alluding to a Fathers Advice or Last Will to His Sonne. Now Published for the Use of All Men, and Particularly of Those That Doe Inhabit Greate Britaine and Ireland* (London: printed by William Stansby, 1619), G2v-G3v.

Goldsmiths shop, or beseeme a Pandor of long profession to weare.⁹

It emerges that this character is a pawnbroker, and so clearly the author is commenting that only a man of disrepute would choose to clothe and adorn himself in such a fashion.

However, the use of fashionable clothing and jewels could be employed to one's benefit. Thomas A. King in *The Gendering of Men* (2004) locates the figure of the courtier in a position of subjection to the sovereign. Sartorial display became a necessary means to attract the favour of the prince. Emulative practice in consumption of dress and jewels was therefore both flattering to the sovereign and helped establish a courtier's place within court hierarchies.¹⁰

Axiomatic is the paradoxical attitude towards consumption of dress and jewels throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There was an inherent desire to adorn one's self and this was articulated not just through clothing and fabrics, but also with jewels. Despite these concerns, men did participate in this aspect of material culture and the Armada earring provides concrete evidence of this engagement.

⁹ Robert Greene, *A Quip for an Upstart Courtier: Or a Quaint Dispute Betweene Veluet Breeches and Cloth Breeches. Wherein Is Plainely Set Downe the Disorders in All Estates and Trades* (1583), D1r.

¹⁰ Thomas A. King, *The Gendering of Men: 1600-1750* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), pp.50-55.

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