ELIZABETH TUDOR AND MARY STUART: HISTORY AND MYTH

By Charlotte Gere

Just a century ago two epoch-making exhibitions were staged at the New Gallery in London. The *House of Stuart* opened in 1889 and the *House of Tudor* the following year, rekindling the never completely dormant interest in the resplendent or tragic Royal figures of that period. In the ascendant Royalty was absolute but precarious. With hindsight we can detect so clearly the advancing dangers. Our knowledge of their ultimate fates gives the glittering — but so often doomed — Royalties of this turbulent period a compelling interest. From the rich possibilities of the subject — the period after all, encompasses the lives of both Charles I and Bonnie Prince Charlie as well as Elizabeth and Mary — the two Queens who never met, but whose destiny was inextricably entwined, have been chosen as the focus for the special exhibition at the 1991 International Silver and Jewellery Fair.

It is illuminating to study the catalogues of the two exhibitions. The difference in perception is immediately apparent; Mary was venerated as a martyr and the jewels associated with her memory are relics. Elizabeth was a monarch triumphant, victorious and dominating, at the head of an expanding nation. Her portrait in cameo or miniature painting adorns many of the jewels that survive. The Loan Exhibition has been devised to reflect this divergence, because it has coloured the scholarship devoted to jewels associated with the two Queens, and is still an important factor in the continuing investigation of their authenticity.

Loans have been selected from the four centuries since the tragic death of Mary, Queen of Scots. By focusing on the exhibitions of a century ago, it is possible to demonstrate how the verdict of history has changed since 1890. The two exhibitions were organised under the auspices of a distinguished committee of antiquaries, heralds, numismatists, museum curators and librarians, and presented the most comprehensive survey of portraiture, memorabilia and medallic arts celebrating these Royal house that had ever been attempted. In the intervening hundred years scholarly investigation into provenance and other documentary evidence has greatly reduced the number of items that are accepted as authentic, but historic finds have been made to redress, in part, the losses.

Small precious objects were particularly susceptible to the myth-making process. Some family legends are perfectly plausible historically, but a crucially important break in provenance can make it impossible to detect whether a jewel or other small personal possession has not suffered a substitution. For example, it has been demonstrated that the celebrated Aberdeen pendant from among the 1889

Armorial pendant, enamelled gold set with a glass cast of the signet of Mary, Queen of Scots.
National Museums of Scotland.

exhibits has a history that goes back less than a century and a half (c.f. Diana Scarisbrick, 'The Aberdeen Jewel' in *The Burlington Magazine*, June 1988, pp 427–8). One of the pieces most widely accepted as authentic, the Arundel rosary re-surfaced after a worrying gap of more than a hundred years (c.f. Diana Scarisbrick, *Ancestral Jewels*, London, 1989). Five watches were featured in the exhibition, among them the skull watch exhibitions here, which was then the property of Sir T.W. Dick Lauder, Bt. Now in the possession of the Worshipful Company of Clockmasters, it is authoritatively dated not earlier than the late eighteenth century. Two seals were exhibited, both incorporating the initials 'MR'; these may relate to Mary II, wife of William of Orange, rather than to Mary, Queen of

Scots (c.f. *Treasures and Trinkets*, catalogue of the exhibition currently at the Museum of London, No. 269, and *A Royal Miscellany*, catalogue of the exhibition currently at the Queen's Gallery, No. 171). It has also recently been established that the armorial bezel of Mary's signet ring (now in the British Museum) was cast in glass. Mounted in a Renaissance-style enamelled setting it was purchased in 1939 by the National Museum of Antiquities in Edinburgh and described as French workmanship of 1550-60, (lent to the present exhibition by the National Museums of Scotland).

The tragic circumstances in which Mary's jewels were distributed in the hours before she mounted the scaffold and was beheaded invested these pieces with a desirability that far outweighs any consideration of intrinsic worth. Against the willing credulity of collectors the investigations of many dedicated antiquaries have done much the much to separate the wheat from the chaff.

With foresight that was to prove well-justified, the authorities ordered the burning of every scrap of apparel worn by the Queen at her death, fearing that any drop of her blood would be preserved and venerated. In spite of the historical facts that demonstrate the impossibility of her retinue having received gifts of jewellery at this moment, the legends persist. The lock of the Queen's hair, owned by Her Majesty the Queen, must be assumed to have been a gift to a member of the Queen's household in happier times. It was bequeathed to Queen Victoria by Robert, 8th Earl of Belhaven and Stenton, with the request that it should be preserved either at Holyrood or Windsor.

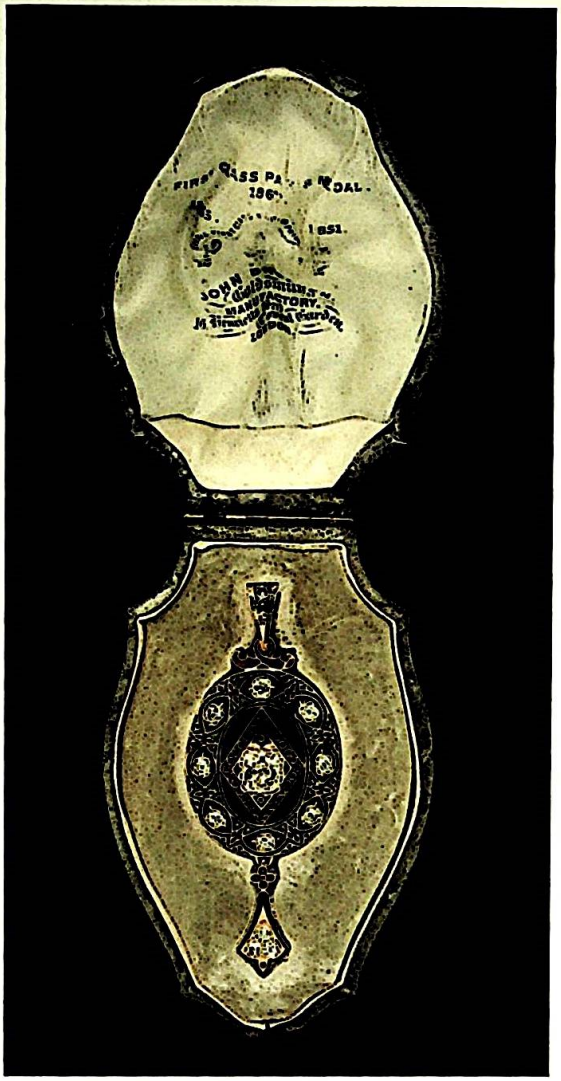
The nineteenth century Romantic movement provided a framework in which both the Virgin Queen and the tragic Mary, Queen of Scots shone with the legendary glamour. Any objects having an association with either of them became even more irresistible than they had been to the antiquarian enthusiasts of the previous century. Three kinds of object fed this continuing demand, the most treasured and smallest group being the unimpeachably authentic pieces with unbroken provenances from the Royal donor. The jewelled pendant set with a cameo of Mary, Queen of Scotts from the collection of the Dukes of Portland, generously loaned by the Lady Anne Bentinck, has a family provenance back to 1720 and a very circumstantial history linking it with Mary herself. It is clearly from the same source as the cameo-set pendant, loaned from the National Museums of Scotland, which is believed to have been given by Mary to one of her supporters, (c.f. Rosalind Marshall, *Queen of Scots*, Edinburgh, 1986, p. 105). Similarly the 'Knyvett' seal and case, lent by the Victoria and Albert Museum, which has a reliable family provenance, can be compared with the swivel seal cut with an intaglio portrait of Elizabeth I from a New York private collection. The relationship in form and technique is striking.

Secondly, the historical revival pieces made to designs taken from various sources — principally from portraits, but also surviving jewels of the period — form a fascinating study and collecting field in their own right. The Phillips-

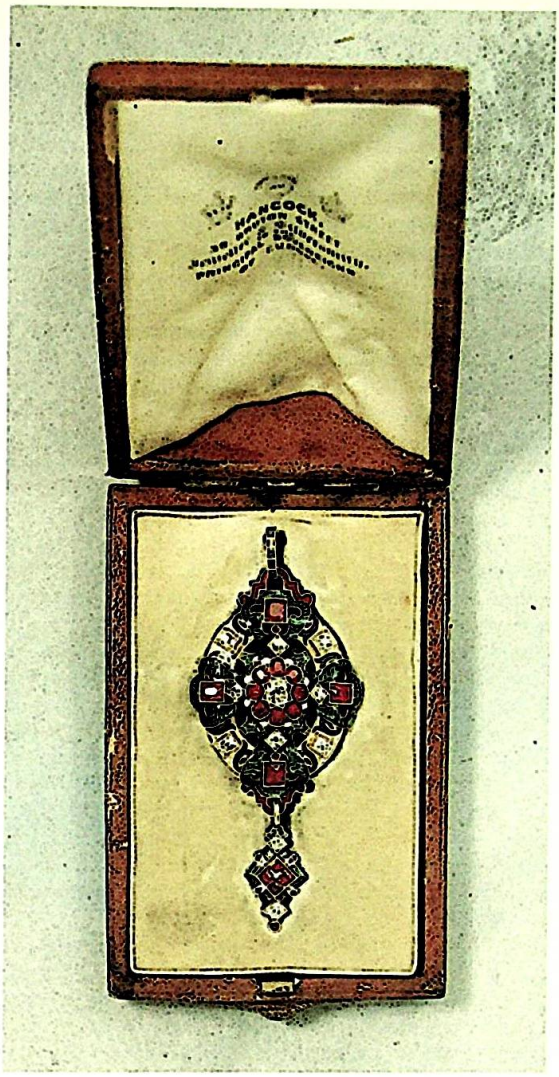
Princess Elizabeth, attributed to Holbein, H.M. The Queen, Windsor Castle.
Reproduced by gracious permission of Her Majesty The Queen.

Giuliano pendant from a private collection is based on the jewel worn by Katherine of Aragon in the painting now in the National Portrait Gallery. The Giuliano enamelled Tudor-style locket is a version of the Victoria and Albert's miniature case containing a portrait of Queen Elizabeth by Nicholas Hilliard which must have been well-known to Carlo Giuliano since it has been in the collection since 1857. The portrait of the young Elizabeth as a Princess in the Royal Collection has a particular relevance to this exhibition since she is depicted wearing a magical or prophylactic pendant like the example loaned here from the Victoria and Albert (formerly in the collection of Dame Joan Evans) as well as the pendant cross, the nineteenth century copy of which was so much repeated as to suggest that it was one of Robert Phillips' most successful romantic revival pieces. The example in the exhibition is lent by Messrs. Wartski. The popular 'Holbeinesque' theme is illustrated by pieces made by C.F. Hancock (loaned by Messrs Hancock) and John Brogden (loaned by Philip Antrobus), both in their original retailers' cases. Carlo Giuliano's superbly refined enamelling was endlessly called into the service of the Renaissance revival; the pendant from a private collection shows him at his dazzling peak. A late example of the 'Holbeinesque' is the intricately interlaced chain inspired by Tudor embroidery, made by Henry Wilson, the greatest jeweller associated with the Arts and Crafts Movement (Messrs Hancock).

Lastly come the pieces that were confected by making up a new item from genuinely period fragments, remounted, possibly without any intent to deceive, which now mislead



Mid-nineteenth century 'Holbeinesque' pendant in its original case, by John Brogden.
Philip Antrobus.



Mid-nineteenth century pendant in its original case, by Hancock.
Hancocks.

the hopeful collector. Included in the exhibition currently at the Queen's Gallery in Buckingham Palace is an emerald that belonged to Elizabeth I, now set in an enamelled gold 'Holbeinesque' mount dating from c.1860. Philippa Glanville, the expert on Tudor metalwork at the Victoria and Albert Museum recognised the obvious relationship with the Museum's recently acquired cameo pendant, which they have kindly lent to this exhibition, thus unravelling the likely history of a puzzling piece. Neither of these lovingly created pendants in the 'Holbeinesque' taste is a fake, and it is a pity that some of the jewels from this second category have become, through a misunderstanding of the historical revival impulse that created them, part of the story of jewel forgeries.

In this field the fakes and confected pieces have a longer history than the products of historical revivalism, and are the more difficult to detect. Museums are not immune from collectors' credulity as has been demonstrated by the recent 'Fakes' exhibition at the British Museum. The so-called 'Darnley' signet ring, loaned by the Victoria & Albert Museum, has recently been demoted to the position of an eighteenth century confection.

The surviving cameo portraits of Elizabeth range over the whole span from her own lifetime to the end of the nineteenth century. Among the finest are the 'Sieve' portrait cameo, depicting the Queen as a Vestal Virgin, from the Victoria and Albert and the cameo which has been in the collection of the Dukes of Portland since the 1740s, showing the Queen with flowing hair as Astraea, an object of worship, or the 'Queen of Beauty'. An exquisite example of these cameo jewels is the ring lent by Kenneth

Snowman enamelled with the emblematic eglantine, symbolising the purity of the 'Virgin Queen', (for the symbolism in the portraits of Elizabeth see: Roy Strong, *The Cult of Elizabeth*, London, 1977). The masterly cameo by the nineteenth century engraver, Georges Bissinger in an emerald and diamond setting by Mrs. Newman, lent from a private collection, exemplifies the nineteenth century revival at its most ambitious level. The fine cameo of Mary, Queen of Scots may also be by Bissinger; it is from the second half of the nineteenth century, and many of the recorded cameos by Bissinger are still lost.

This group of cameo jewels forms a microcosm of the field as a whole. The most useful purpose of this exhibition will be the opportunity to compare and contrast material from all periods of this Royal myth-making process and perhaps to arrive at fresh conclusions about some of the still-unresolved problems.

We would like to acknowledge the advice and support of the museum curators and private owners who have helped to make this exhibition possible; Philippa Glanville and Richard Edgcumbe of the Metalwork Department, Paul Williamson and Lucy Cullen of the Sculpture Department at the Victoria and Albert Museum; Dr. David Caldwell and Godfrey Evans at the National Museums of Scotland; Sir George White at the Worshipful Company of Clockmasters; Lady Anne Bentinck; Kenneth Snowman; Messrs Wartski; Messrs Philip Antrobus; and the many private collectors who wish to remain anonymous. Without the active participation of Geoffrey Munn this group of jewellery could not have been assembled and exhibited.