



Sir Henry Unton, attributed to Richard Scarlett, c. 1600. Wood panel, 163.2 x 74.0 cms. © National Portrait Gallery, London. Public domain.

## UNFREEZING TIME

Patricia Fara\*

Without the intervention of his widow Dorothy, Sir Henry Unton would have been relegated to a footnote in textbooks of English history. Fortunately for his posthumous renown, after his death she commissioned an extraordinary portrait that has generated reams of scholarly articles. First put on display at London's National Portrait Gallery in 1884, this large composite painting on wooden boards provides a unique depiction of Elizabethan attitudes towards time and mortality. Rather like an elaborate comic strip, it tells the story of Unton's life in successive snapshots from birth to death and beyond. For his Protestant mourners, it served as a reminder that human beings embark on the process of dying from the moment they are born: Unton's body lay within its tomb, but he had bequeathed his soul to God and his memory to posterity.

In the two upper corners, a bright jovial sun and a pensive crescent moon indicate the picture's broad division into two halves – Unton's daylight worldly existence on the right, the darkness of death to the left. He features most prominently as a large bust in the centre, adorned by a medallion showing the French king Henri IV, with whom he became very friendly while serving as an ambassador. Perhaps writing his autobiography, Unton is

flanked by the spectre of death – a skeleton carrying an hourglass – hovering near his left ear and the goddess of fame blowing her trumpet on his right. In addition, around twenty diminutive versions of Unton appear in the panel's multiple scenes, which are divided into three main sequences corresponding to his achievements, death rituals and afterlife. Following the artistic convention for displaying the lives of saints or Jesus Christ, these vignettes wrap around the central image.

Unton's life narrative begins at the bottom right, where the opening frame shows him as a baby at his family home, swaddled in red and nestling in the arms of his mother, Anne Seymour. To reflect her high social status, she is painted larger than her three attendants, while above her an inscription (now illegible) surrounding the prominent coat-of-arms advertises her son's illustrious kinship to Lady Jane Seymour, the third wife of Henry VIII. Moving upwards, the second stage shows Unton as a student at Oriel College, Oxford, where he graduated in 1573. Continuing anti-clockwise across the top of the picture, helpful labels record him travelling over the Alps to Padua and Venice, and then serving in the army in the low countries. Discreetly glossing over an unfortunate period when Unton was out of favour at court, this visual biography then fast forwards to the last few years of his life as Queen Elizabeth's ambassador in France.

Beneath those painted records of Unton's military and diplomatic career abroad, the

unknown artist has depicted scenes from his domestic life in England. They portray him enjoying the privileges of a wealthy yet devout gentleman: working in his study, consulting learned divines seated around a table, playing his viol in a small group of musicians. The most prominent of these pictures-within-a-picture show him presiding over a sumptuous banquet; recalling the couple's glorious wedding, the diners are entertained by a masque or musical play starring the mythological Diana and Mercury.

Unton's final journey begins just below his death bed scene next to the hovering skeleton; unfortunately, the French royal physician's prescription of amber, gold and unicorn's horn had failed to cure the fever from which he was suffering. Close to the central bust's left shoulder, his corpse is ferried across the Channel in a black boat for his hearse to be escorted back to his home near Oxford. Across the bottom of the panel, passers-by gaze at the pairs of mourners clad in black who are wending their way from Unton's house at Wadley towards his monument in All Saints Church, Faringdon. Commemorating his charitable donations to the poor, this procession is watched by grieving beggars sitting beneath trees bearing inscriptions such as 'This life grows worse and worse, he's dead and gone.'

The left-hand third of the picture is devoted to Unton's final resting place – an elaborate funerary monument decorated in black, red and gold; lying between two pillars, his effigy is clad in armour to celebrate his military career. Next to him, the chief mourner is identifiable by her widow's weeds, while the church is packed with a large congregation listening closely to the sermon. In the picture, the end of Unton's journey through life balances the scene of infancy on the right, but Faringdon Church – now the permanent home of his physical body – is by far the largest building. Above it, the heavenly realm is blurred, only vaguely depicted compared with the fine details of Unton's terrestrial exploits. Unton may have led a virtuous life, but he must wait until the Resurrection before his mortal remains can be reunited with his soul.

Until recently, art critics assumed that this complex commemorative vision was created in 1596, the year of Unton's death. That view has been challenged by Peter Sherlock,

whose surname perhaps confirms his role as a historical detective. He maintains that because funerary architectural fashions were changing rapidly, the design of this monument provides a metaphorical clock for reading the time of its construction. Sherlock has convincingly concluded that the picture must have been painted in or after 1606, when Unton's funerary monument was erected. One particularly clinching piece of evidence is the dead man's posture. Traditionally, the deceased were immortalised lying on their back, their hands clasped as if in prayer – but conforming with later styles, he is on his side, propped up on one elbow and clad in military armour.

His widow remarried during the ten-year interval between Unton's death and the construction of this monument, but she always signed herself 'Dorothy, Lady Unton' as if he were still alive. Unusually for the time, she ordered that she be shown next to Unton's tomb, kneeling in prayer – and she insisted on being buried with him at Faringdon. His funerary monument was destroyed during the Civil War, but this splendid commemorative picture survives as her tribute to the everlasting memory of her beloved first husband.

#### Major sources and further reading

Peter Sherlock, 'The Unton Portrait Reconsidered', William E Engel et al (eds), *Memory and Mortality in Renaissance England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 184–200.

Roy Strong, 'Sir Henry Unton and his Portrait: An Elizabethan Memorial Picture and its History', *Archeologia* 99 (1965), 53–76.

\*Dr Patricia Fara is an historian of science and has been President of the AHS since 2016. This is number twenty-four in a series of short articles in which she discusses a number of images, each illustrating a different way of incorporating time and its passing within a picture without showing a clock.