

ARTEFACTS AND ART FACTS:

IMAGES AND SIR FRANCIS DRAKE

— Jane Card

Editorial note: This article reveals the power of the Internet in helping us all, adults and children, to bring portraits like Drake's to life. So, as you read, follow the links.

Introduction

A portrait is an artefact constructed to show the sitter's status, achievements and wealth, i.e. the sitter as s/he wants to be seen. To get the full message of Tudor portraits requires knowledge of the historical background, the cultural context and the symbols and objects portrayed. In my experience, pupils love the idea of decoding such artefactual pictures, especially if unusual knowledge is required. They can be exciting puzzles to solve individually, in pairs, groups or as a class.¹

One such artefact is the 1591 portrait of Sir Francis Drake by the fashionable painter Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger (Figure 1) that shows Drake in expensive black clothes, with four meaningful artefacts. (See, for example, www.shafe.co.uk/crystal/images/lshafe/Gheeraerts_Sir_Francis_Drake.jpg). What immediate impression of Drake does the picture give? How does historical and cultural knowledge help deepen our understanding? How do we decode the picture's artefactual clues?

Drake's career: the historical background to the portrait

Drake was born into a poor Devon farming family. Originally he was a seaman and then a privateer (licensed pirate) attacking Spanish ships in the 1570s. Drake sailed round the world in 1577-80, capturing on the way a fabulously wealthy Spanish galleon off the coast of South America. This brought him a knighthood, the Drake Jewel, and enough wealth to buy a landed estate – Buckland Abbey. Later adventures included a raid on Cadiz harbour in 1587, where he burned ships preparing for the Spanish Armada. As a vice-admiral he fought against the Armada in 1588. Subsequent privateering expeditions were unsuccessful. While on one of these he died in 1596 in Nombre de Dios Bay and was buried at sea.

There is a clear, detailed account of Drake's career by the National Maritime Museum on www.nmm.ac.uk/drake, with links to other useful websites, including an interactive one on Tudor Exploration for younger pupils. The site http://wapedia.mobi/en/Francis_Drake includes discussion of controversial aspects of his activities.

Drake's coat of arms: the cultural dimension

A dispute over Drake's coat of arms reflects cultural attitudes in Drake's lifetime: note that his coat of arms takes pride of place in his portrait.

Drake's fortune from privateering encouraged him to establish himself as a landed gentleman. He tried to use the arms of another Drake family: the Drakes of Ashe in Devon, a long-established landed dynasty (figure 2) whom he claimed were relatives. Significantly for Francis Drake their coat of arms featured a red dragon (wyvern). *Draco* means dragon in Latin; *El Draco* was also the Spanish nickname for Sir Francis. The family violently objected to Drake taking its dragon symbol, so Elizabeth I in 1581 granted Drake another coat of arms, together with an elaborate crest (on top of the helmet – figure 3). Before reading on, what do you think is the significance of the *symbolism* of Drake's new coat of arms?

- ▶ Drake's new coat of arms shows the northern and southern pole stars, separated by a wavy line for the sea.
- ▶ Black and white were also Elizabeth's colours.
- ▶ *Sic Parvis Magna* means "Thus from small things to great things" and presumably refers to his humble origins.
- ▶ The crest shows his ship being drawn by the hand of God around the globe, and includes half a wyvern.
- ▶ *Auxilio divino* means "With the help of God."

Even so, Francis Drake was not satisfied with this coat of arms: there was insufficient reference to the Drakes of Ashe, and, possibly, he thought his own seamanship rather than God was responsible for his success. At times, he used both coats of arms on his shield.

The website: www.wyvernngules.com/Documents/ArmsofSFD/arms_of_sir_francis_drake.htm shows beautiful illustrations of both coats of arms and a humorous poem about the dispute which should appeal to



pupils. What messages do the objects in the portrait give about Drake?

- ▶ His sword shows that Drake is a soldier and a knight – a status symbol!
- ▶ The Drake Jewel worn at his waist was a gift from Elizabeth I – a great honour.
- ▶ The globe refers to his voyage round the world, as does his coat of arms (shield). It also tells us about his status as a member of the landed class².

You can study other artefacts associated with Drake that include *Drake's Drum* and the *Coconut Cup*. Such artefacts can become icons and symbols: the legend of Drake's Drum became a national myth in later centuries.

How can we bring Drake's portrait to life in the classroom? We have used all of the following with our pupils:

1 Making artefacts

A coat of arms

Pupils have to think about artefacts and artworks as sources of evidence when they construct their own message-bearing coat of arms. They have to choose what messages to send and how to send them using images/pictures. They thus learn that images are not unmediated windows on the world, but carefully manipulated constructions with an audience in mind.

- ▶ They have to create their own coat of arms that tells people about themselves and how they would like to be known.
- ▶ Then, after pupils have studied Drake's career, ask them to work out in pairs which parts of it the coat of arms and crest refer to.
- ▶ Tell pupils the story of Drake's quarrel with the Drakes of Ashe. Ask them why they think the family would not let Drake use its coat of arms, and why they think Drake disliked his own coat of arms and crest.
- ▶ Pupils, in pairs or groups of 3-4, then as coat of arms designers create other designs which Drake would *like*, taking events from his career, notably those of 1587-8, i.e. the Spanish Armada.
- ▶ To make this more challenging, you can introduce them to some of the basic rules of heraldry. There is a step-by-step outline on www.houghtonkeep.com/heraldry/index.html – click on tinctures first, then symbols and shapes.
- ▶ This task could be done with either a computer, or art materials.
- ▶ Each group can then give a short presentation to the rest of the class on the thinking behind choice of symbols and its overall design.
- ▶ The class votes on the best design.

A portrait

Typing "*Tudor portraits for children*" into Google leads to sites with activities on portraits if you wish to explore these in depth. Typing just "*Tudor portraits*" produces an instant gallery of images which can be explored and discussed before starting work. If this is a class project, a gallery could be created, with an "exhibition catalogue".

A replica of Drake's Drum at the Buckland Abbey education centre



- ▶ Pupils can make Elizabethan-style portraits of themselves, showing what the pupil wants the viewer to know or think about them.
- ▶ Again, lay down some ground rules. For example, it must include two personal artefacts; it could show them in Elizabethan costume; it could include a motto; it could have their age in Latin (see below).

Mary/John Smith in anno (insert number - in Roman numerals if you wish) aetatis suae.

Mary Smith/John in the (number) year of his/ her age.

2 Research: Drake's Drum

Pupils can investigate the drum, the Victorian poem by Newbolt (recited in a Devon accent on www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhLE9G8hfVY), and the times it has supposedly sounded on www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A14017817.

A Victorian musical setting of the poem is on www.musicsmiles.com/drake's_drum.htm

Jane Card is an experienced teacher, who researches and writes on the use of visual historical sources.

References

- Morris, S. (1989) *A Teacher's Guide to Using Portraits*, Colchester: English Heritage, is a useful guide.
- Doran, S., (ed.) (2003) *Elizabeth: The Exhibition at the National Maritime Museum*. London: Chatto and Windus, p.136