CHAPTER TWO

ART AND PATRONAGE: SIR HENRY WOTTON AND THE
VENETIAN EMBASSY 1604–1624

Robert Hill

The significant role played by Sir Henry Wotton in the development of art collecting at the early Stuart court has long been recognized by specialists in the field. Nevertheless, there has been no detailed modern assessment of his role in spreading an appreciation of Venetian art resulting from his three embassies to the Serene Republic 1604–1610, 1616–1619 and 1621–1623. As an ambassador, Wotton proved a diplomatic lightweight in comparison to his counterparts such as Sir Ralph Winwood and Sir Dudley Carleton, who both went on to

1 Wilks 1997, p. 31, for example, has described Wotton, along with Arundel, as the ‘arbiters of taste and prime instigators of the collecting phenomenon’ in the years 1612–1619. Strong 1986a, p. 188, has stressed that ‘Sir Henry Wotton was the key figure in disseminating the taste for Venetian painting [in England] and we know that he was busy acquiring pictures for both Cecil and his heir’. (While it is true that Wotton supplied Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, with paintings, there is, in fact, no evidence to show that he directly acquired pictures for his son.) For Wotton’s relations with Salisbury and his son Viscount Cranborne see below. I would like to acknowledge the importance of the work of Tim Wilks, on which parts of this article have been based, and to thank Roger Lockyer for reading a draft ahead of publication and for suggesting a number of improvements. This article does not attempt to consider Wotton’s interest in, and contribution to, architecture in England which requires detailed consideration of its own.

2 A full scholarly biography of Wotton is long overdue. The key text on Wotton remains Pearsall Smith 1907. Virtually all the important letters for Wotton’s career are to be found here. Regrettably, Pearsall Smith is too indulgent of Wotton’s general indolence and of his failings as an ambassador, including his totally unrealistic schemes to detach Venice from Rome and his receipt of bribes from foreign powers such as Florence and Spain. (Wotton’s ambassadorial contemporaries, such as Carleton and Winwood for example, were never accused of augmenting their salaries by accepting bribes). Since 1907 there has been one general survey of Wotton’s life written by neuroscientist Gerald Curzon, which ‘centres almost as much on Wotton’s worlds as on Wotton himself’, and which does not seek to deal with artistic matters (see Curzon 2003, p. 16, for the above quotation). The only two recent accounts that discuss aspects of Wotton’s contribution to art collecting are to be found in Shakeshaft 1979, pp. 3–8 and pp. 20–24, and Jacobsen 2003, pp. 66–76. I would like to thank Paul Shakeshaft for his generosity in allowing me to photocopy his report.
use their foreign postings as stepping-stones to subsequent promotions as Secretary of State. Unlike other agents and ambassadors of the period, however, Wotton was a true connoisseur with a discerning appreciation of painting and with innovative views on how pictures should be displayed to best effect. He was also a man who, through his sophisticated taste and artistic awareness, educated the many English travelers whom he met and entertained at his various Venetian palazzos. Wotton did not have the financial resources to acquire an important collection of his own but he was the first Jacobean ambassador to appreciate the role that the presentation of works of art could play in gaining the support of influential patrons back home at the English court. He therefore played an important part in the assembling of the early groundbreaking collections of Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury and Prince Henry. His contribution to the collection of James I’s all-powerful favorite, the Duke of Buckingham, has long been acknowledged, but this study seeks to argue that he supplied paintings to the Earl of Northampton, to Anne of Denmark, and perhaps to the latter’s daughter Elizabeth, Queen of Bohemia.

After an undistinguished early career mostly spent traveling around Italy and the continent, Wotton was appointed ambassador to Venice in 1604. He therefore very sensibly set out to retain the support of the king, James VI/I, by sending him appropriate gifts and entertaining him through his witty and urbane dispatches. Little of Wotton’s official correspondence prior to 1607 has survived and the first reference to artistic matters does not occur until a letter of 3 September of that year. Realizing that the king had little interest in art, Wotton had the good sense to send the monarch paintings that would appeal to James’s religious sensibilities. In a letter to Salisbury, Wotton referred to the dispatching of ‘a very true portrait, in portable forme, of Maestro Paulo the Servite taken from him at my request, presum-

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3 See, for example, Howarth 1997, p. 235. Howarth writes that ‘the embassy in Venice (…) presided over by the art connoisseur Sir Henry Wotton (…) was not only a free pensione for the well connected, but an academy of polite accomplishments. Justice has yet to be done to the educative influence of Wotton’. Chaney 1998, p. 206 similarly comments that ‘above all Wotton introduced a significant selection of his travelling compatriots to Renaissance buildings and paintings in situ’. It is known that during his second embassy Wotton briefly occupied the elegant Palazzo Gusoni-Grimani on the Grand Canal. Its façade contained frescoes by Tintoretto.

4 Wotton had also spent the years 1595–1599 working for Elizabeth’s favorite, the Earl of Essex. The latter’s execution for treason had a disastrous effect on Wotton’s hopes of rapid advancement.