

The Duke of Buckingham and van Dyck's 'Contenance of Scipio'

Pamela Gordon

Volume 10, Number 1, 1983

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1074638ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074638ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Gordon, P. (1983). The Duke of Buckingham and van Dyck's 'Contenance of Scipio'. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 10(1), 53–55.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1074638ar>

*The Duke of Buckingham and van Dyck's 'Continence of Scipio'**

PAMELA GORDON

Princeton University

The *Continence of Scipio* in Oxford (Fig. 1) is the only surviving painting both designed and executed by Anthony van Dyck which depicts an event from ancient history. Documentary evidence and stylistic analysis suggest that it was commissioned by George Villiers, the Duke of Buckingham, during van Dyck's first sojourn in London between November 1620 and February 1621.¹ To commission a picture treating the achievements of an illustrious Roman personage was unusual at the Jacobean court of the time, where the demand was still almost exclusively for portraits.² It thus would seem plausible that the selection of this theme was precipitated by a particular set of historical circumstances. An examination of events occurring in the life of Buckingham long before the arrival of van Dyck in England leads one to suggest that the patron sought to identify himself with Scipio, the great Roman general depicted in the painting. Indeed, it could be argued that no other scene from history or fable more closely accorded with the public and private concerns of Buckingham in 1620 than did the episode of the *Continence of Scipio*.

The story of Scipio and the Spanish bride is known through the writings of several Roman historians, chiefly Polybius and Livy.³ They relate that after the Roman capture of the Spanish capital of New Carthage, the most beautiful woman of the city was brought before the youthful commander Scipio, so that he might 'enjoy' her. Learning that she was engaged to be married, Scipio called for her fiancé and her parents, and announced that he was restoring the young woman to them untouched because of his great respect for the family. The parents and relations then produced a considerable weight of gold and offered it to Scipio as ransom; he accepted the treasure only at their insistent urgings, and then gave it to the

couple as a wedding gift. The family returned home filling their countrymen with praises of Scipio, a most godlike youth, who conquers more by his goodness and generosity than by the power of his arms.⁴ The virtues of Scipio were extolled in Renaissance literature. In the works of Nicolo Macchiavelli, for example, the incident of the Spanish Bride is cited repeatedly as a paradigm of statesmanship. 'Among all the ways wherewith the people are to be cajoled,' Macchiavelli writes, 'nothing goes so far as examples of chastity and justice as that of Scipio in Spain, when he returned a beautiful young lady to her parents and husband

* To my teachers, John R. Martin and Thomas L. Glen. This paper was originally presented in a graduate seminar conducted by Professor J. R. Martin at Princeton University in the spring of 1978. It was also read at the Symposium on the History of Art, The Frick Collection, in April of 1980.

¹ The Christ Church painting has always been thought to be identical with a work listed as 'the great piece being Scipio, by Van Dyck,' in the inventory of Buckingham's collection compiled in 1635, seven years after the Duke's death. It has been associated also with a payment made by Endymion Porter on behalf of Buckingham, to 'Van Dyck the picture drawer.' Though the document is undated and specifies neither the amount paid nor the picture concerned, it must have been drawn up before Porter left Buckingham's employ to enter Prince Charles's service in 1620-21. See O. Millar's discussion of the documents in 'Van Dyck's *Continence of Scipio* at Christ Church,' *Burlington Magazine*, xciii (1951), 125; and in *The Age of Charles I* (London, 1972), 18, n^o 10. Millar also discusses the stylistic grounds for the dating of the picture, which is based on a *Continence of Scipio* by Rubens of ca. 1617. Three compositional drawings for van Dyck's painting are known (see H. Vey, *Die Zeichnungen Anton Van Dycks* (Brussels, 1962), 176-178, n^{os} 106 and 107, pls. 141-143). For a summary of the literature on this picture, see A. McNairn, *The Young van Dyck* (Ottawa, 1980), n^o 64.

² Millar, in *The Age ...*, 18, n^o 10.

³ Polybius, *Histories*, x, 19; Livy, *Roman History*, xxvi, 50. Livy's account, on which van Dyck's narrative scene is based, is more elaborate, and varies in significant details from that of the earlier historian.

⁴ Livy, xxvi, 50.

untouched, a passage that contributed more than his Arms to the subduing of that Country.⁵

The themes of military prowess, statesmanship, and chastity present in the legend may have impressed the Duke of Buckingham by their affinity to two significant events occurring in his life just prior to van Dyck's first visit to England. The first of these concerns Buckingham's attainment of high public office; the second, of a more personal nature, furnished the English nobility with the 'scandal of the season' in the spring of 1620.

The acknowledged favorite of King James I, Buckingham accumulated great and various honours, and rapidly attained a position of enormous influence at court. In 1619, at the age of twenty-six, he was appointed to the office of Lord High Admiral of England, a military post which one of his biographers described as 'the Duke of Buckingham's greatest office ... one of the most exalted, as it is the most vital office in the entire administration of our island kingdom.'⁶ Before elevating him to the admiralty, King James composed a series of Latin couplets likening his favorite to the sea-god Neptune.⁷ From this time on Buckingham was, as one English chronicler expressed it, the 'all-powerful minister, reigning unchecked in solitary grandeur.'⁸

As Lord High Admiral, Buckingham may have harbored a notion of equating himself with Scipio, whose navy was unconquerable. The offspring of a divine race,⁹ Scipio attacked New Carthage by sea with the aid of Neptune who appeared to him in a dream and directed his naval strategy.¹⁰ An identification with Scipio would also be expressive of Buckingham's lofty ideals in the matters of war and diplomacy with which he was now concerned.

The fragment of an ancient frieze with gorgons' heads, prominently positioned beneath the figure of Scipio in van Dyck's picture, may have been intended to underscore a military association between Buckingham and the Roman general. The actual marble portrayed here was rediscovered when the site of the Earl of Arundel's house was excavated in 1972. John Harris identified it as the fragment in the painting. Probably originating in a Roman coastal city of Asia Minor in the second century A.D., it seems to have been one of the pieces in Buckingham's extensive collection of antique statuary before passing into Arundel's possession.¹¹ That an object owned by Buckingham was included in the painting adds a personal element to the composition. But the fact that the motif on the gorgon's head is repeated in the picture three times – twice on the frieze and once on an elaborately decorated urn – suggests that its appearance here may signify more than an allusion to the patron's collection of sculpture.

The three gorgons' heads probably refer to the myth of Perseus and the gorgons, a story which Buckingham may have known in the form of Francis Bacon's interpretation in his *Wisdom of the Ancients*, published in Latin in 1609 and in English in 1619. Bacon, then lord Chancellor to King James, had early on taken Buckingham under his wing and advised him on all matters concerning his career.¹² His recommendations to Buckingham on the making of war were similar to those offered in his treatise, where he writes that the fable of Perseus and the three gorgons

seems to direct the preparation and order that is to be used in the making of war; for the more apt and considerate undertaking whereof, three grave and wholesome precepts are to be observed. First, that men do not much trouble themselves about the conquest of neighbouring nations, seeing that private possessions and Empires are enlarged by different means ... Secondly, there must be a care that the motives of war be just and honourable: for that draws on and procures aids and brings many other commodities besides. There is no pretence to take up arms more pious, than the suppressing of Tyranny, under which yoke the people lose their courage, and are cast down without heart and vigor, as in the sight of Medusa. Thirdly, it is wisely added, that seeing that there were three Gorgons (by which wars are represented), Perseus undertook her only that was mortal; that is, he made choice of such a kind of war as was likely to be effective and brought to a period, not pursuing vast and endless hopes.¹³

The inclusion of three gorgons' heads in van Dyck's *Continence of Scipio*, then, may have been intended to signify the judiciousness of Scipio in matters of war, and that of Buckingham in his new position as Lord High Admiral of England.

5 Macchiavelli, *Discourses*, Bk. III, ch. 20 and 34; and *The Art of War*, Bk. vi, ch. 16, as quoted by J.S. Held, *Rubens. Selected Drawings* (London, 1959), I, 110, n^o 38.

6 C.R. Cammell, *The Great Duke of Buckingham* (London, 1939), 101.

7 The poem appears in S.R. Gardiner, *History of England from the Accession of James I to the Outbreak of Civil War, 1603-1642* (London, 1885), III, 207.

8 Gardiner, III, 206.

9 On the ancient legends of Scipio's divine origins, see H.H. Scullard, *Scipio Africanus: Soldier and Politician* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1970), 18-23.

10 Polybius, x, 11.

11 John Harris, 'The Link between a Roman Second Century Sculptor, Van Dyck, Inigo Jones and Queen Henrietta Maria,' *Burlington Magazine*, CXXV (1973), 526-530.

12 After Buckingham became the favorite in 1616, he applied to Bacon to be his instructor in political affairs. Bacon replied with a long letter of advice which is known in two versions, both published in *The Letters and Life of Francis Bacon*, ed. J. Spedding (London, 1872), VI, 13-56.

13 *The Wisdom of the Ancients ... Done into English by Sir Arthur Georges Knight* (London, 1619), ch. VII.



FIGURE 1. *The Continence of Scipio*, Oxford, Christ Church.

A second event of great importance to Buckingham, which may well have provided the initial impetus for his commission of a *Continence of Scipio*, was his marriage in May of 1620 to Lady Catherine Manners. Buckingham's courtship had been filled with tribulation owing to religious differences between him and the Earl of Rutland, the young lady's father. In March of 1620, an incident occurred which forced a resolution of the conflict.¹⁴ One morning, Lady Buckingham, the Duke's mother, called on Catherine and spent the day with her. Towards evening, Catherine was taken ill, and Lady Buckingham kept her in her own apartment for the night, accompanying her to her home the following morning. Much to their astonishment, the Earl had jumped to the conclusion that the young woman had passed the night with Buckingham, not with his mother, and refused them admittance. Believing that his daughter's honour and that of the family were irreparably tarnished, Rutland vented his fury upon Buckingham over a period of weeks. A duel was averted only through the intervention of the Prince of Wales. Rutland then came to realize that through his own ill-considered actions he had made the marriage that he had opposed imperative for his daughter's reputation, and he insisted that Buckingham marry her immediately.¹⁵ In reply, Buckingham wrote that Rutland's daughter 'never received any blemish on her honour,' and that 'I never thought before to have seen the time

that I should need to come within the compass of the law by stealing a wife against the consent of the parents.'¹⁶ Finally, through the efforts of King James, the dispute was resolved. A very private wedding took place, with no public festivities, so as not to attract further attention to the matter.

Just a few months after this course of events, Buckingham commissioned the *Continence of Scipio* from van Dyck. Representing the chastity and familial piety of a great military leader, the painting may have been of personal significance for the patron with regard not only to his statesmanship, but also to the circumstances surrounding his courtship and marriage.

For van Dyck the *Continence of Scipio* helped cement his fame in England, and set the stage for his return more than ten years later as a painter of histories. For Buckingham, the commission was a first and relatively modest step in his process of self-glorification. In 1625, Peter Paul Rubens arrived in England. The allegorical pictures that he painted for Buckingham, *Minerva and Mercury conducting the Duke of Buckingham to the Temple of Virtus* and the *Equestrian Portrait of Buckingham*, reflect a more explicit concern for the aggrandizement of an eminently powerful patron.

14 A well-documented account of this event may be found in Gardiner, II, 356-357. See also Cammell, 134-138.

15 The letter is published in G. Goodman, *The Court of King James I*, ed. J.S. Brewer (London, 1839), II, 189-191, and in Cammell, 136-137.

16 In Goodman, II, 192, and Cammell, 138.