

Background

What the Stirling Heads Show

Just who and what do the Stirling Heads show? Some are carved with such attention to detail that they have the feel of portraits. If so, they could bring us face-to-face with some of the mid-16th century people who actually walked through the palace and stared up at the ceilings the heads adorned.

Art historian Dr Sally Rush was commissioned by Historic Scotland to unravel the some of the secrets of the heads. That's no easy task. It is likely that when Mary, Queen of Scots lived in the royal palace she would have been able to instantly recognise each of the characters depicted. Indeed, their names may even have been painted in gold beside them. But much has been lost in the intervening centuries. It is believed that there were many more heads, and they probably decorated at least two ceilings. But little is sure, which has left scholars and enthusiasts to puzzle over a jigsaw with many missing pieces.

Dr Rush has dug deep into arts, crafts, fashions, politics and iconography of Renaissance Europe to gather evidence about the heads – like a detective opening a 450-year-old case. And in some cases the clues are very subtle, for example a flower in the hands of a woman showed she was married, and if her hair was down she was a new bride. The research suggests that many were portraits of real people, including contemporary European rulers, generations of the Stewart royal family, Scottish nobles and maybe some other well-known characters from palace life. Many of the likenesses would have been taken from existing portraits. In addition to the portraits were Roman emperors and familiar figures from the Classical past.

We now understand the Stirling Heads far better than before. Some identifications are firm, others tentative, and often it is still too early to put names to faces. But one thing is certain, the Stirling Heads have many more secrets left to uncover and will be the subject of academic study and debate for generations to come.

Family and allies

- King James V of Scotland wearing French-style court dress, including a caul beneath his bonnet. The palace was commissioned by James, but he died in 1542 and may never have seen it, or the heads, completed. (STC012).
- Mary de Guise, second wife of James V and mother of Mary, Queen of Scots. This remarkable Frenchwoman not only fought for the rights of her daughter and herself after the king's death but eventually became regent and ruled Scotland. This head depicts her with Italian-style headdress, holding a flower, which is a symbol of marriage and with her hair down. (STC040).
- Madeleine de Valois. This is a tentative identification of the French princess who was the first wife of James V, who died in 1537 shortly after arriving in Scotland. The face and headdress are similar to the representation of her in the Seton Armorial. A cherub shown on her breast may be even be a reference to her departed soul. (STC026).
- King Henry VIII of England, uncle of James V. He is seen in imperial parade armour with lion on his shoulders, possibly making a flattering comparison with Alexander the Great. Henry's presence was a reminder of the closeness of the Stewart and Tudor lines, and that Scotland had strong claims to the English throne. (STC039).
- King James IV. He is seen in penitential dress, having led an uprising which led to the death of his father, James III. This regicide undermined his claim to the throne and so public penitence was necessary for him to be accepted as his father's rightful successor. (STC027).
- Margaret Tudor, the English princess who married James IV in 1503. Seen wearing an English hood and holding a greyhound – one of the symbols of the Tudors. The marriage was of huge dynastic importance, bringing the royal families of England and Scotland close together. Indeed Margaret and James' great grandson, James VI and I, united the crowns in 1603. (STC017).
- King James I of Scotland. His presence is a strong indicator that the Stirling Heads would have included depictions of all the Stewart monarchs. This served to show

that they had been around for a long time and were the natural and unquestionable rulers of the realm. (STC009).

- Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor. This is among the less certain identifications, but clues like the Spanish cloak point in the right direction. Charles V ruled vast European territories and for James V to show him as an ally put Scotland in the political mainstream. Charles had already honoured James by sending him the Order of the Golden Fleece. (STC013)

The Romans

- Julius Caesar, wearing an imperial spiked crown. Caesar's significance was not simply as a Roman ruler, but he was also one of the Nine Worthies. The representation is taken from one by Hans Burkmaier. (STC007).

- Titus, the Roman emperor, in parade armour. This was an exciting discovery during the project. It was previously thought to be a fragment of furniture but the carver John Donaldson identified the border as being that of a Stirling Head. Titus was popular in Rome for completing the great amphitheatre known as the Coliseum but was also the military commander responsible for the destruction of the Great Temple in Jerusalem. (STC008).

- There are four more heads which are likely to be of Roman emperors, but it has so far not been possible to put names to them. They tend to emphasise the militaristic role of the emperor. An emperor during peacetime would be shown in a toga. But these show them in the paludamentum, a cloak worn by a military commander. One is wearing armour with a distinctive lion mask epaulet. Indeed, the heads may have included all 12 of Suetonius' Caesars – Julius, Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian, Titus, Domitian. (STC006, STC011, STC031, STC032).

The Nine Worthies of the Classical world

The Nine Worthies were characters from the pagan, Christian and Jewish Classical worlds who were exemplified important qualities – Hercules personifying the virtuous and courageous man. The exact makeup of the nine sometimes varied a little but generally included but typically featured:

Pagans:

- Hercules or Hector
- Alexander the Great
- Julius Caser

Jewish

- Joshua
- King David
- Judas Maccabeus

Christian

- King Arthur
- Charlemagne
- Godfrey of Bouillon

- There are several depictions which are likely to be of Hercules, who exemplified the virtuous man. In one case he appears with a creature or creatures that may be a reference to the pair of serpents, sent by Juno, which he slew in his cradle. They might also be two of the nine heads of the hydra. Another shows the hero with his club. (STC005, STC033).

- A muscular male figure wrestling a lion may be the Old Testament hero Samson. It could also be Hercules, whose first task was to defeat the Nemean Lion, which he had to strangle as it had an impenetrable hide. However, this would be as it shows three lions. (STC032).

- Six other heads are believed to be of the worthies, but it is not yet possible to put names to them. (STC001, STC002, STC003, STC004, STC010).

The female worthy

- Female Worthy. These paralleled the male worthies. They were:

Pagan

- Lucretia

- Veturia
- Virginia

Jewish

- Esther
- Judith
- Jael

Christian

- St Helena of Constantinople
- St Bridget of Sweden
- St Elizabeth of Hungary

One of the heads has been identified as a female worthy, though which one is unknown, which may suggest there was a full set. (STC020).

Courtiers and nobles

- There are heads showing richly attired noblemen of the era. All are in fashionable slashed doublets. Whether these were actual portraits, perhaps of leading Scottish courtiers, is not yet known. (STC014, STC022).

- Several of the heads show noblewomen dressed in the latest European fashions. One is in a bonnet with chin strap. Again, it is intriguing to think that some may have been portraits of actual people. (STC018, STC019, STC025, STC026, STC028).

- One of the most striking figures shown is that of a woman in an elaborate masquing costume. (STC029).

The new head

- In recreating the ceiling of the King's Presence Chamber 37 heads were needed, but only 36 original designs were available. The decision was made to create a new one. This is probably the nearest anyone has come in 450 years to knowing just what it would have been like for the original craftsmen. The Renaissance woodcarvers are likely to have worked from portraits and drawings of their subjects.

Something similar was done for the new one, with the craftsman using one of the statues on the outside of the palace – which is of a female worthy – as the inspiration for his work. (STC041).

The Jester

- Among the most distinctive and intriguing of the heads, is one that shows a jester, crouched, clutching one buttock, with his mouth wide open. The detail is superb, right down to the wrinkled material of his boots. One theory is that it was a visual warning to anyone entering the chamber to ask a favour, or make a complaint to the king, that they should watch their tongue or expect a sharp kick. (STC036).

Putti

- Dancing putti, little Renaissance imps. (STC037, STC038).

Note : The STC codes at the end are the identification numbers used by Historic Scotland.