

Philip II in *The Somerset House Conference Portrait*

Berta Cano-Echevarría

Universidad de Valladolid

berta.cano@uva.es / ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8585-1805>

Abstract: Critics have taken for granted that the famous group portrait of *The Somerset House Conference* accurately represents a room in Somerset House, and that the tapestry hanging on the wall behind the visiting Hispano-Flemish delegation must have been part of the English royal collection. It has been proposed that it depicts King David sending Uriah the Hittite to his death. However, the dates 1560 and 1561 on the tapestries framing the meeting do not tally with this scene. I propose instead that the tapestry portrays King Solomon commanding King Philip II to fight against the Ottomans, the first of an imaginary series about Lepanto that could only be in London as part of a uchronia that the painter is recreating. This reframes the whole painting and returns us to the question of attribution, and the more than probable commission by the Condestable de Castilla.

Keywords: Somerset House Conference portrait; National Portrait Gallery; Royal Museums Greenwich; Constable of Castille; Juan Pantoja de la Cruz; Philip II; Lepanto; tapestry.

Felipe II en el retrato de *La Conferencia de Somerset House*

Resumen: La crítica ha dado por hecho que el famoso retrato de grupo de *La Conferencia de Somerset House* representa con precisión una estancia en Somerset House y que el tapiz que cuelga en la pared tras la delegación hispano-flamenca visitante formaría parte de la colección real inglesa. Se ha propuesto que representa al rey David dirigiendo a Urías el hitita a su muerte segura. Sin embargo, las fechas de 1560 y 1561 en los tapices que enmarcan la reunión no concuerdan con esta escena. Propongo en su lugar que el tapiz representa al rey Salomón enviando a Felipe II a luchar contra los turcos, y que éste sería el primero de una serie imaginaria de tapices sobre Lepanto que solo podrían estar en Londres como parte de una uchronia que el pintor recrea. Esta hipótesis redefine el cuadro en su conjunto y nos lleva de vuelta a la cuestión de la autoría y su encargo más que probable por parte del Condestable de Castilla.

Palabras clave: retrato de la conferencia de Somerset House; National Portrait Gallery; Royal Museums Greenwich; Condestable de Castilla; Juan Pantoja de la Cruz; Felipe II; Lepanto; tapiz.

Cómo citar este artículo / Citation: Cano-Echevarría, Berta. 2025. "Philip II in *The Somerset House Conference Portrait*". *Archivo Español de Arte*, 98 (390), 1471. <https://doi.org/10.3989/aearte.2025.1471>

Fecha de recepción: 01-08-2024. Fecha de aceptación: 11-12-2024. Publicado en línea: 21-10-2025

The Somerset House Conference portrait has generally been understood as an accurate record of a historical occasion – the meeting of a group of delegates from Spain, the Spanish Flanders and England to sign the Treaty of London in the summer of 1604. Though the composition seems uncannily familiar, a group of men sitting around a table looking at the painter as if at a camera, few group portraits of the period are comparable. Here the off-centre table captures our attention, defining the vanishing point and dividing the delegates into two groups, presenting a symmetry of power that the diplomatic process itself aimed to achieve [fig. 1]. 'Process' is apt here, because the plans for the peace began in 1603, shortly after James I & VI acceded to the throne of England, and concluded in 1605, when an English delegation travelled to Valladolid (at that time the capital of Spain) to ratify the treaty in the presence of Philip III. So, the painting represents a key moment of this prolonged episode, the signing of the agreement in Somerset House, prior to subsequent ratifications in Brussels and Valladolid.

Given the three-legged nature of the peace, it seems appropriate that it has come down to us in more than one version, one (considered to be the original) now in the National Portrait Gallery and the copy in the Maritime Museum at Greenwich [fig. 2].¹ Both bear the signature 'Juan Pantoxa de la X', but despite the fact that the cleaning

¹ From now on the National Portrait Gallery version will be referred to as NPG and the one in the Royal Maritime Museum at Greenwich as RMG.

of the work carried out in 1967 proved that the inscription belonged to the same period as the painting, art critics have tended to be sceptical about this attribution on stylistic grounds, judging it more compatible with the Flemish than the Spanish style of portraiture, where the interior would be less prominent. John de Critz, Frans Pourbous or Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger have been proposed, though Pantoja de la Cruz has had his advocates.² As a consequence both museums have traditionally labelled it “anonymous”, or more recently “by unknown artist” on their websites, even though “apocryphal” would have been more appropriate, given the very visible signature of Pantoja de la Cruz in the bottom right hand corner.³



Fig. 1. *The Somerset House Conference*, National Portrait Gallery, London.

This preoccupation with authorship misses elements in the picture that might help unlock the puzzle it contains and respond to such questions as the when, where and why of its composition. The common assumption has been that it represents a room in the old Somerset House as it was when Juan Fernández de Velasco, Condestable de Castilla, was invited to stay at the Palace (Queen Anna's residence) for his sojourn in London. The Condestable arrived in London on the 20th of August and attended the last three sessions to discuss the terms of the peace before the signing ceremony took place in the presence of King James. According to this theory, the painter would have attended the meetings to sketch such details as the tapestries, the window and the carpet, as well as the delegates as they were placed hierarchically at the table. Some commentators propose that the portrait was taken from the position where King James would be sitting in his State as “the implied viewer is looking down on the assembled delegates”.⁴ The absence/presence of the King of England is an appealing, though in my view far-fetched notion that stands in contradiction with the fact that all the inscriptions in the painting are written in Spanish and the painting refers to the delegates on the Spanish side as coming “de parte del Rey Despana mi Sr”, while James is referred to as “el Rey de Ingalatierra”.

It is my contention that a royal presence in the painting is more evident if we look at the tapestry instead, a key element in the picture that has been frequently overlooked but that could be the key to understanding the intention and scope of the painting. Sitting with their backs to the wall, the Hispano-Flemish delegates are framed by a tapestry that gives them the place of honour, as if they were the hosts, rather than the guests. Behind the chairs, we discern a soldier in black armour with a helmet decorated with red and black feathers, kneeling at the feet of a king who is delivering an order. What appear to be two Turks wearing kavuks or turbans are observing the scene, one reading a letter, the other holding a horse by the reins; behind him, some soldiers, also in black armour, are mounted on horses. So far, the only interpretation proposed has been that this is King David sending Uriah the Hittite, husband of Bathsheba, to his certain death in battle.⁵ How such a scene would contribute to supplying some meaning to a meeting of dignitaries about to sign a peace treaty is unclear. But it is further complicated by the date inscribed on the fringe: 1560. Since this date cannot be associated with the biblical story, this could, hypothetically, be the date when the tapestry was finished, situating it in the time of Queen Elizabeth as part of the English royal collection inherited by James I. I propose instead that what we are looking at is a representation of an imaginary occasion: King Solomon commanding Philip II to fight the Ottomans. This has never been proposed before but it would explain the date and the apparent anachronisms in the attire of the characters, and frame the delegates in a Spanish context, thus bringing a new light to the whole composition.

² For the arguments in favour of Flemish authorship see Strong 1969, 351-352; Hearn 2004, 4; Kusche 2007, 200-203 and MacLean 2019, 99-106. For arguments in support of Pantoja de la Cruz see de Salas 1966, 351-54 and Ungerer 1998, 145-86; and more neutrally Brown and Elliot 2002, 144-146.

³ As of March 2024, this was the case in both websites.

⁴ Ungerer 1998, 175. MacLean 2019 suggests the same: “An absent presence viewing the scene, James is an obvious candidate to meet the gaze of the Spanish delegates”, 29.

⁵ Hearn 2004, 3 and Campbell 2007, 111. Identifying the kneeling figure with Uriah the Hittite has contributed to interpreting the painting as a piece of English propaganda.

The most recent extensive study of the *Somerset House Conference* has been carried out by Gerald MacLean, a specialist in Orientalism, whose argument pivots around the significance of the Ottoman carpet on the table, and also discusses the mysterious tapestry at length. MacLean proposes that the composition and such details as the carpet and the tapestry invite an allegorical reading. Both elements echo each other and bring the Ottoman empire into the representation of the peace talks, a connection that supposedly suggests the victory of Jacobean Britain over Spain:

The iconography of the painting celebrates James's claims to be a peace-maker who rules a realm that could boast of having long been a major player on the world stage, projecting continuities and associations with a heroic, splendid, and powerful place in world history. International alliances in the making of history are clearly on the agenda of the painting, just as they were at the conference itself. Yet in suggesting that the painting projects and celebrates a peculiarly Jacobean vision, iconography and myth of Britain's regal glory and historical importance, I would suggest it does so at the expense of the Spanish, fully aware that the little we know of the painting's thingness —its provenance and history— permit no certainty on this matter.⁶

In order to maintain the anti-Spanish reading MacLean has to dismiss the authorship by Pantoja de la Cruz as well as the significance of the inscriptions written in correct Spanish on both bottom-hand corners of the painting. Quoting from Karen Hearn, who curated the exhibition *Talking Peace 1604* in Somerset House,⁷ he explains that "it 'is generally presumed that the signature and the incorrect date, 1594 below it, were added to the picture later' and are consequently false".⁸

I will return to consider MacLean's interpretation of the tapestry in detail, but first I want to refer to the other lengthy discussion on *The Somerset House Conference*, because it holds the opposite view. Like MacLean, Gustav Ungerer was a literary historian, and his approach to understanding the portrait came from a careful reading of the written records that have come down to us relating to the Anglo-Spanish peace. Ungerer studied the significance of gift giving between the monarchs of Spain and England and the other major protagonists in the peace process and remarked on how the exchange of portraits was an unambiguous sign of mutual goodwill for the future. Juan Pantoja de la Cruz received commissions and payments for portraits and miniatures of King Philip, Queen Margaret and little Infanta Ana to be sent to England in an act of reciprocity for the portraits and presents that the Condestable de Castilla had brought back from his mission to London. This connects Pantoja with the peace process, but not necessarily with the group portrait in London. However, Ungerer found out that in the entries of Pantoja's register of royal commissions there is a "yawning gap of ten months in the chronological entries until 24 October/3 November 1604".⁹ His explanation is that from February to October he was away from Valladolid on his journey to London, where he accompanied the Condestable to draft "in situ" a sketch of the meeting that he would later finish in his studio at Valladolid. Ungerer speculates about the method by which he used miniatures to reproduce the likeness of the sitters once he was back in his studio and hypothesises that the presence of King James is implied by the top-to-bottom perspective of the group. Unfortunately, Ungerer does not discuss the significance of the tapestry or the carpet, but he defends the idea that the painting was commissioned by the Condestable de Castilla, as the leading figure in the Hispano-Flemish bloc.

The proposal that the image in the tapestry portrays King David handing Uriah a sealed message that will lead to his death in battle was first published in the catalogue of the above-mentioned 2004 exhibition *Talking Peace 1604*, where both versions of the picture (NPG and RMG) were exhibited together for the first, and only time:

The two tapestry panels both bear the date 1560; as such textiles never in reality included dates in this way, "1560" must have a significance yet to be understood. *The subject is unclear*. James I inherited Henry VIII's huge collection of tapestries, including various sets of the biblical "Story of King David". The hanging to the left *may* show David giving to his lover Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, the letter that will send him to his death, a classic emblem of betrayal.¹⁰

This suggestion, rather tentatively expressed, has been subsequently accepted for lack of a better explanation, despite Hearn's acknowledgement that the significance of the date 1560 was "yet to be understood". Thus, on the website of the Maritime Museum at Greenwich we can read:

The tapestry in front of which the Spanish sit represents a scene commonly associated with duplicity: David's message to Uriah [*sic*] the Hittite. Although it is uncertain as to whether these tapestries were imaginatively included later by the artist, it is not impossible that they were present during the meetings. It was not uncommon for tapestries to be used for the political potency of their imagery. Henry VIII is also known to have collected such biblical tapestries.¹¹

⁶ MacLean 2019, 19.

⁷ *Talking Peace 1604: The Somerset House Conference Paintings, 20 May-25 July 2004, Gilbert Collection, Somerset House, London.*

⁸ For the argument on authorship MacLean draws extensively from Karen Hearn and quotes from a personal email received on 18 November 2014 where the art critic gives further reasons for thinking the painting was from a Flemish, not a Spanish, hand, especially not from Juan Pantoja de la Cruz: "the NPG painting is simply not close enough to his style (or to that of his studio) for it to be by him." MacLean 2019, 20.

⁹ Ungerer refers here to "Quenta de las obras de pintura que Juan Pantoxa de la Cruz, Pintor de Camara del Rey Nuestro Senor, a echo de su arte para el seruicio de su Magestad desde el principio del ano de 1603," published in Maria Kusche's Ph. D. thesis. Kusche 1964, 243-48.

¹⁰ Hearn 2004. The emphasis is mine.

¹¹ <https://www.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/rmgc-object-14260>. Accessed 21-11-2024.

Similarly, the National Portrait Gallery's exhibit label identifies King David and Uriah as the protagonists of the tapestry.¹² The connection with the date on the fringe of the tapestry is again left unexplained. Although both paintings are almost identical, there are two significant differences precisely concerning the dates. The NPG shows the same "1560" date on both tapestries flanking the meeting, and adds "1594" below "Juan Pantoxa de la X"; the RMG omits this date by the signature and changes the date on the fringe of the right-hand tapestry to "1561". To my knowledge, this difference in the dates on the tapestries has not been pointed out before and may be a clue to unlocking the mysteries of the painting. The other difference is that in RMG the plant by the window has been left unfinished.



Fig. 2. *The Somerset House Conference*, Maritime Museum, London.

The identification of David and Uriah in the tapestry has been connected by most critics with the fact that in 1528 Henry VIII bought a collection of tapestries on the biblical story of David and Bathsheba.¹³ This magnificent collection executed by Pierre Van Aelst is now in the Musée National de la Renaissance in France but was inherited by Elizabeth I from her father and therefore could have been decorating the rooms in Somerset House shortly after her death, when the Condestable de Castilla was there lodged. However, comparing the piece where David hands the letter to Uriah [fig. 3] with the tapestry in *The Somerset House Conference* we can see how dissimilar the iconography is. Other, later iconographical representations of this moment show David seated on his throne inside his palace, and not on the battlefield – and never with Ottoman associations, as is here the case.¹⁴ We must therefore remember that the catalogue of the 2004 exhibition states that "the subject is unclear" and try to determine the meaning of the date/s: 1560/1561.



Fig. 3. Tapestry from the collection of David and Bathsheba, Musée National de la Renaissance, Château d'Ecouen.

¹² This was observed on a visit to the museum on 30th August 2024.

¹³ See Verdier 2017.

¹⁴ See, for example Pollack, who studies two paintings by Pieter Lastman representing this scene, one from 1611 and another one from 1619. Pollack states that "The subject of David and Uriah was rarely illustrated in art; earlier prints and drawings depict the meeting of the two men, not the final transaction of the letter. Lastman, however, rendered this fateful moment in such a way as to remind the viewer that it marks David's fall from grace." Pollack 2017.

MacLean tackles this question in his discussion of the tapestries and marks some important events in 1560: the Battle of Djerba, and the treaties of Berwick and Edinburgh. About these last two he remarks “A year of peace treaties in Great Britain, 1560 was clearly a suitable year to commemorate and recall in the reign of James the peacemaker, who wore the Scottish crown before assuming that of England”.¹⁵ But there is nothing in the tapestry or the painting that suggests such commemoration. The Battle of Djerba seems to be a more plausible reference due to the representation of Ottoman attire in the background, though the lack of an obvious connection with the biblical scene of David and Uriah is not questioned by MacLean. For MacLean the speculative reference to this naval defeat of Catholics by Muslims reinforces his thesis that the tapestry is mocking the Spanish and Flemish counsellors that have their backs turned to it: “The painting memorialises the Treaty of London as James’s victory over Spain, denigrating the Spanish by recalling their humiliation by the Ottoman navy and suggesting that their duplicity is of biblical proportions”.¹⁶ The whole argument stands on the premise that this is an English commission painted for the promotion of James’s plans as a peacemaker and founder of a future British empire. But, what happens if we take a glance at Spanish history as well, given that the painting is signed by Pantoja de la Cruz and dedicated to the King of Spain?

In 1560 Philip II attended for the first time a session of the Castilian parliament, convened in Toledo. One of the most pressing petitions the members of the parliament made was an appeal to defend the coasts of the Iberian Peninsula that from “Perpignan to Portugal had been abandoned and left uncultivated”,¹⁷ due to the continuous raids by Moors and Turks. The king acceded to the petition and started a levy to mobilize troops. That same year an agreement was reached with Sultan Abdallah al-Ghalib of Morocco by which some territories were ceded to Spain in exchange for protection against the Ottomans. Under the leadership of King Philip, a Christian alliance gathered a fleet comprised of Spanish, Papal, Genoese, Maltese and Neapolitan forces. It resulted in the sorry defeat at the Battle of Djerba, where the Ottoman forces managed to sink or capture around half of the Christian vessels; but Spain was able to rebuild its fleet to prepare for a new offensive.¹⁸ 1560, therefore, signals the beginning of a crusade against the Turks. In fact, the painter hints that the tapestry we are contemplating is only the first of a series that imaginatively decorated the salon where the delegation is meeting, as the date we see in the tapestry to the right is 1560 in NPG and 1561 in RMG, presumably showing the next episode of the struggle against the Turks that could culminate, appropriately, in the portrayal of the success at the Battle of Lepanto (1571) in subsequent tapestries.

Rather than David, I propose that his son Solomon is the biblical figure standing at the centre of the tapestry. Even as a prince, Philip would be presented as the New Solomon. The analogy was first made during his journey to the Low Countries, where he would be received as the future guarantor of peace and wisdom after years of war under his father, the Emperor Charles V. The comparison was both promoted by Philip and used by his subjects to show him the way towards an open-minded attitude concerning religious nonconformity.¹⁹ It was reiterated in England, when he married Mary I, and during the last part of Philip’s reign occurred most frequently in connection with the building of the monastery at El Escorial, the new Temple of Solomon [fig. 4]. As Kevin Ingram observes:

Solomon succeeded his father, the warrior David, and established a realm of peace and unity, marked by the building of a temple in which the covenant – or true religion of the people – was kept. It was now incumbent on Philip, who like Solomon followed a warrior father, to construct his own temple (metaphorically speaking) to peace, in which a revitalized, evangelical Christianity would be practised.²⁰

The most famous example of the Philip-as-Solomon iconography is Lucas de Heere’s *The Queen of Sheeba Visits King Solomon* (1559), painted for Saint Bavo’s cathedral in Ghent, where he is portrayed on his throne receiving the visit of the Queen of Sheeba, whose appearance has been compared to that of a young Queen Elizabeth I of England [fig. 5].²¹ In the tapestry of the *Somerset House Conference*, Philip is not equated to Solomon, but kneeling before him and receiving instructions in a more nuanced interpretation of the connection between the Old Testament figure and the modern Philip II. After all, vowing obedience to Solomon must have been considered more appropriately regal than agreeing to a petition from the Castilian Parliament. So, while in the tapestry we see a scene prefacing war, the portrayal of a Philip-Solomon link reminds us of his cultivated image as Rex Pacificus, a subtle combination that announces both the strength of the Spanish monarchy as a warrior nation, and its benevolent desire for peace.

¹⁵ MacLean 2019, 25.

¹⁶ MacLean 2019, 30.

¹⁷ Colmeiro 1883, 281-282. My translation.

¹⁸ Braudel 1976, 285-308. This battle is known in Spanish as “batalla de los Gelves”.

¹⁹ Ingram 2016, 129-149.

²⁰ Ingram 2016, 136.

²¹ Ingram 2016, 133.



Fig. 4. Statues of David and Solomon in the King's Courtyard in El Escorial Monastery, San Lorenzo de El Escorial.



Fig. 5. Lucas de Heere, *The Queen of Sheba Visits King Solomon*, Cathedral of St. Bavo, Ghent.

The identification of Philip II in the portrait is based not only on the dates in the tapestries, already discussed, but also on his features (with a prominent chin, coincident with other portraits of Philip) and, more significantly, on the symbolic garments he is wearing: the black armour evokes that which Philip wears in the portrait in the Prado Museum, *Philip II with the Armour of St. Quentin* [fig. 6], a painting that is paired with Juan Pantoja de la Cruz's portrait of his father, the emperor, also in black armour. Both pictures display a magnificent sallet helmet with feathers similar to the one featured in the tapestry.²² Commissioned by Philip III after a fire in the palace of El Pardo in Madrid destroyed numerous original royal portraits by Tiziano, Antonio Moro and Sofonisba Anguissola, these representations of deceased Habsburg monarchs were painted around 1605, aptly coinciding with the probable date of painting of *The Somerset House Conference*.²³ Significantly, the troops in black armour and mounted on horses to the right of the tapestry are easily identifiable as Spanish troops.



Fig. 6. *Philip II with the armour of St. Quentin*, Prado Museum, Madrid.



Fig. 7. Detail of the tapestry

²² I am indebted to Anunciación Carrera de la Red for this connection.

²³ <https://www.museodelprado.es/coleccion/obra-de-arte/felipe-ii-con-la-armadura-de-san-quintin/f3898af9-ca63-41ec-a9e7-8a8a735c0d68>

Such a tapestry would have never been hanging in Somerset House, of course, but for contemporary Spanish viewers its presence in this group portrait would have been perfectly legible. They would contemplate a self-aggrandising *uchronia* that could bring to mind a desired state of affairs, one in which the whole assembly is under the symbolical guidance of the Hispanic universal monarchy. We should bear in mind that, when the peace-making was re-enacted in Valladolid, the ceremonial hall that was prepared for Philip III's act of ratification in the presence of Charles Howard, Earl of Nottingham, was adorned with a similar collection of tapestries. The tapestries of *The Conquest of Tunis* by Charles V were displayed on the walls of the *Salón de Saraos*, newly built and decorated for the occasion.²⁴ This collection of twelve tapestries records the emblematic victory of the emperor Charles V against the Ottomans in his North-African campaign (1535). Sketched by Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen, who accompanied the emperor in the field, they were woven in Brussels at Willem de Pannemaker's workshop between 1550, and 1554 and completed just in time to be sent to England as a present at the wedding of Philip and Mary I.²⁵ They were not hung in Winchester Cathedral for the nuptials, as originally planned; probably because it would have appeared too unsubtle a display of Habsburg power. The tapestries came back to Spain after Mary I's death and were frequently used thereafter to decorate significant Habsburg occasions, such as the ratification of the Anglo-Spanish peace in Valladolid in 1605. This parallelism of displaying tapestries to celebrate the occasion of the peace, both in London and in Valladolid, is a circumstance evoked in the portrait, and can be no mere coincidence. Thus, the painter (most probably Pantoja de la Cruz) was both following the model of Charles V's collection of tapestries on the conquest of Tunis in 1535 and also hinting at Henry VIII's collection of David and Bathsheba that could have been part of the actual decoration of the room in Somerset House. Only, in this case, Pantoja would have decided, back in his studio in Spain, to change David for Solomon, and represent an allegorical occasion that could bring together the biblical with the military to promote the unique character of the Spanish monarchy.

There is no evidence that such a piece ever existed. In the inventory of the tapestries of Philip II a considerable number of large sized collections, the most valuable made of silk, silver and gold but also others made of silk and wool, are described. The themes include Old Testament episodes, mythology, ancient history and a few devotional topics, as well as hunting scenes with plants and animals.²⁶ The only collection dedicated to representing contemporary military history is the Tunis series, and this uniqueness gives it its special character.²⁷ The representation of battles in order to glorify the monarchs who achieved such victories was more common in canvas or frescoes, the most famous example from the time being the frescoes in the Sala de las Batallas in The Escorial Monastery, where the Battle of St. Quentin, in which the Spanish fought alongside the English against the French, is commemorated.²⁸ It would not be amiss to believe that weaving a similar series to commemorate Lepanto with Philip II as the central figure might have been considered, even if never finally commissioned. Starting the series in 1560, when the first Catholic league was organised by the Spanish monarch made perfect sense, as well as configuring King Solomon as having inspired the mission.

The painting is the chronicle of a moment that never happened as we see it; what we see is a deliberately biased visual narrative that subtly undermines the English side. If the tapestry is a purposeful addition to the painting's meaning, we could extend this to the Anatolian carpet, the other element pointing towards the Ottomans. The delegates, Catholics and Protestants, united around the table, make a peace that is justified by their common Christianity, defined in opposition to the Muslim religion. But the tapestry and the carpet are a reminder that the English monarchy had had no qualms in establishing a prosperous commercial and diplomatic alliance with Constantinople, from which the Turks had benefited at the expense of Catholic Europe. Such symbols, however, can be interpreted in radically different ways, as is the case with MacLean's reading of the centrality of the carpet:

But the carpet is no neutral zone, no impartial arbiter. It also separates and divides. Like the other furnishings on display in the conference chamber, it participates on behalf of the English team. [...] Visually, it pushes the Spanish and Habsburg delegates on the left up against the wall, holding them in, while the English on the right can back away any time.²⁹

While I agree that the carpet "separates and divides", the position of honour dictated by protocol is always with the back to the wall, as a host would receive a guest, protected and, in this case, "framed" by the tapestry.

We do not know how the actual delegates sat around the table, but we can assume that the seating, as so much else in the painting, is charged with symbolism. The seating is hierarchical, with the two most senior personalities of each side, the Condestable de Castilla and Thomas Sackville, the Lord Treasurer, flanking the open window (another symbolic detail) and presiding over the table. A cryptic sign of the pro-Habsburg sympathies of the painter/

²⁴ Marchante 2005, 603-624.

²⁵ Pascual Molina 2013, 6-25.

²⁶ Checa Cremades 2019, 845-877.

²⁷ A similar royal collection of tapestries commemorating the victory of a Christian monarch over Islam is the series commissioned by Alfonso V of Portugal to commemorate his conquests in North Africa (1458-71). Miguel Ángel de Bunes argues that although the topic of contemporary battles was rare in tapestries, both the Spanish and the Portuguese collection were a symbol of royal identity and power used to decorate significant political events. Bunes 2011, 225-47.

²⁸ See Glyn Redworth 2021, 15-31.

²⁹ MacLean 2019, 18.

commissioner can be observed in the gestures of the sitters, who are equally portrayed as dignified on both sides but insinuating more than a hint of doubt over the English party. Of the three papers that can be seen in the scene the most prominent is the one that Robert Cecil, the English Secretary of State, has in front of him, seemingly about to be signed. The Count of AreMBERG, the ambassador of the Spanish Netherlands, holds a paper in his hand where we can read “Alt Sere” – a reference to the Archdukes, usually termed “Altezas Serenissimas”, whose orders may there be written and are being presented. Yet another mysterious paper is being passed surreptitiously by the Earl of Northampton to Robert Cecil, unnoticed by the delegates on the opposite side. This suspicious gesture contrasts with the fact that four out of the eleven men are placing their hands on their hearts, a gesture that can be interpreted as a form of oath; but, are they all committing themselves to the same covenant?

The painting is therefore replete with clues that a knowing viewer would have been able to interpret – but this reading would have only been possible from a Spanish perspective. Such a hypothesis is consistent with the notion that the person behind the commission had been a member of the Spanish embassy. It has been argued both by Gustav Ungerer and María Kusche that the Condestable de Castilla, identified with the numerical figure one, is the most likely candidate. Even though Roy Strong and others have pointed out that the Condestable was absent from the negotiations and added as an afterthought, his presence in the painting being “something of a contradiction in terms”,³⁰ this was surely not the case. He arrived in London in time to convene meetings on the 25th, 26th and 28th August before the ceremony of peacemaking and subsequent banquet. Whether Pantoja travelled with the Condestable to London and was in Somerset House to sketch the painting and complete it back in Spain is something we cannot know with certainty. If, as Ungerer proposed, the work was sketched in situ and then, together with his apprentices, Pantoja finished it back in his studio in Valladolid, he must have been aided by miniatures of the sitters. Some of the faces are finished with more accuracy than others, and Robert Cecil’s portrait seems especially discordant with the rest of the profiles, being somewhat sketchy and caricature-like. The group portrait was presumably painted shortly after the occasion, but it is a matter of speculation why the Earl of Nottingham (sitting second from the window on the English side) was not shown the work when he travelled to Valladolid in May 1605 for the ratification of the treaty; as one of the sitters, it would surely have been of interest to him, and such a significant moment of revelation would have been recorded by one of the extant accounts of this visit. However, if it happened, there is no testimony that this ever occurred.³¹ And if this hypothetical viewing of the group portrait had taken place, the tapestry of Philip II and King Solomon included as part of the decoration in Somerset House would surely have raised English eyebrows, the same as the other offensive details of the painting considered above. So, either the canvas did not exist at this point, or it must have been hidden away on the 31st of May 1605, when the Condestable offered a splendid dinner in honour of the English delegation at his palace. Alternatively, the portrait was only completed after the English embassy left Spain. This would be compatible with the payment in 1607 that Robert Cecil made to John de Critz for a portrait of himself to be sent to the Condestable, but by then the *Somerset House Conference* would have lost its purchase.³²

The power to offend faded with the passing of time as the significance of the Anglo-Spanish peace was overtaken by subsequent events. It seems that the painting remained in the possession of the Velasco family for at least two generations, and it was during this period, presumably, that it was copied. An almost definitive proof that the original portrait was commissioned and owned by Juan Fernández de Velasco, Condestable de Castilla, can be found in the inventory recorded at the time of the death in 1652 of Bernardo Fernández de Velasco, his son. Item 294 reads: “Mas otro lienzo en que esta Retratado El condestable Juan fernandez y Los de mas q firm^{on} Las pazes de Ynglaterra”.³³ Even though the portrait is not recorded in the father’s surviving inventory, this does not mean he did not own it, inventories often being incomplete. The Condestable senior had two inventories of his goods made, one upon his first wife’s death and another at his own death in 1613, principally to value his art collection in the Quinta de Mirafuentes,³⁴ a villa he bought near Madrid after the court left Valladolid. His years as governor of Milan, his commission as ambassador abroad, and his position as broker for the King’s art collection made possible the gathering of a vast collection of his own kept in Mirafuentes. This makes the Condestable one of the principal art collectors of his time, and connects him with Pantoja de la Cruz, from whom we know he commissioned paintings around the same years as the peace was being negotiated.³⁵ The *Somerset House Conference*, though not kept in this villa, must have been one of his most appreciated pieces, and thus passed on to his son. The next we know of the canvas is that it was purchased in 1681 by Robert Spenser, Earl of Sunderland, from one Baron de Belleville, and in 1698 it is recorded in the Hamilton House inventory; finally, it was bought at auction by the National Portrait Gallery in 1882. So, the documented journey was from Spain to England, and the piece is never known to have travelled otherwise.

³⁰ Strong 1969, 352.

³¹ Among others: *Relacion de lo sucedido en la ciudad de Valladolid desde el punto del felicissimo nacimiento del Principe don Felipe*, Valladolid 1605 por Juan Godínez de Millis; Robert Treswell, *A Relation of Svch Things As were obserued to happen in the Journey of the right Honourable Charles Earle of Nottingham, L. High Admirall of England, his hignesse Ambassadour to the King of Spaine*, London 1605.

³² Hearn 2004, 4.

³³ “And another canvas where the Constable Juan Fernández and others that signed the peace in England are portrayed”, Burke and Cherry 1997, 490. My translation.

³⁴ de Carlos 2003, 247-254.

³⁵ In 1603 he had already ordered two portraits by the artist, one for each of his daughters. Ungerer 1998, 170.

Similarly, the RMG copy is reported to have been in the Madrid residence of Sir Richard Fanshawe, England's ambassador to Spain from 1664 to 1666.³⁶ The unfinished nature of this copy as well as its less sophisticated technique, has led to the identification of the NPG painting as the original and RMG as the copy, but since both bear the signature of Pantoja de la Cruz we could posit that they were both products of the same workshop, probably by different hands. RMG may have been executed later and perhaps in haste by some apprentice, possibly to be sent to London, a journey that would not take place until much later.³⁷ The enigmatic date "1594" below the signature in NPG, still requires an explanation. It may be significant that RMG lacks this date. Ungerer suggested that in the process of restoration someone had mistakenly changed a zero for a nine and a six for a five and obliterated the original 1604, the actual year of the conference.³⁸ This is a possibility, though 1594 may have a hidden meaning connected with Philip II's reign not yet evident to us.

It is ironic that the two extant versions of this famous painting are now in London, where the occasion evoked took place, but where the subtleties of the pro-Spanish subtext have long gone unnoticed. What the English travellers who bought them in the late seventeenth century saw in them we cannot know, but it is time now to consider these so called 'anonymous' pictures as most probably painted in Spain by the Spanish artist Juan Pantoja de la Cruz with a pro-Spanish political message and a new, hitherto unknown portrait of Philip II hidden in plain sight.

Acknowledgements: An early version of this paper was presented at the conference Sederi 34: Cabinets of Curiosities: Collecting, Displaying, Consuming, Universidad de Salamanca, April 2024. I would like to thank suggestions by Anunciación Carrera de la Red, Gary Taylor, John Considine and Rui Carvalho at the conference. My gratefulness also to Miguel Ángel Zalama, Glyn Redworth, and especially Mark Hutchings, for later conversations that have set me, I believe, on the right track.

Declaration of competing interest: The author of this article declares that there are no financial, professional or personal conflicts of interest that could have inappropriately influenced this work.

Funding sources: This research is part of the I+D project "Misiones y transmisiones: intercambios entre la Península Ibérica y las Islas Británicas en la época Moderna Extensa", Grant PID2020-113516GB-I00, funded by Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación and Agencia Estatal de Investigación (AEI).

Authorship contribution statement: Berta Cano Echevarría: conceptualization, research, writing (original draft), writing (review and editing), project administration and funding acquisition.

Bibliography

- Braudel, F. 1976. *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*. Paris: Armand Colin.
- Brown, Jonathan and John Elliot. 2002. *The sale of the century: Artistic relations between Spain and Great Britain, 1604-1605*. Yale: Yale University Press.
- Bunes Ibarra, Miguel Ángel de. 2011. "Las empresas africanas de las monarquías ibéricas en las tapicerías reales". In *Los Triunfos de Aracne: Tapices Flamencos de los Austrias en el Renacimiento*, edited by Fernando Checa Cremades and Bernardo J. García García. Madrid: Fundación Carlos de Amberes.
- Burke, Marcus and Peter Cherry. 1997. *Documents for the History of Collecting. Collections of Paintings in Madrid 1601-1755*. Los Angeles: Provenance Index of the Getty Information Institute.
- Campbell, Thomas P. 2007. *Tapestry in the Baroque: Threads of Splendor*. New York: Metropolitan Museum, and New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Carlos, María Cruz de. 2003. "El VI Condestable de Castilla: Coleccionista e Intermediario de Encargos Reales". In *Arte y diplomacia de la Monarquía Hispánica en el siglo XVII*, edited by J.L. Colomer, 247-273. Madrid: Fernando de Villaverde Ediciones.
- Checa Cremades, Fernando. 1999. *Felipe II, un monarca y su época: un príncipe del Renacimiento* [catálogo de la exposición] Museo Nacional del Prado, 13 de octubre de 1998 - 10 de enero de 1999. Sociedad Estatal para la Conmemoración de los Centenarios de Felipe II y Carlos V.
- Checa Cremades, Fernando. 2019. *Inventarios de Felipe II: Inventario post mortem, Almoneda y Libro de remates, Inventario de tapices*. Madrid: Fernando Villaverde Ediciones.
- Colmeiro, Manuel. 1883. *Cortes de los Antiguos Reinos de Castilla y León*. Madrid: Imprenta Rivadeneyra.
- Hearn, Karen. 2004. Exh. Cat. *Talking peace 1604: The Somerset House Conference paintings*. London: Somerset House.
- Ingram, Kevin. 2015. "Philip II as the New Solomon: The Covert Promotion of Religious Tolerance and Synergism in Post-Tridentine Spain" in *The Conversos and Moriscos in Late Medieval Spain and Beyond*, edited by Kevin Ingram and Juan Ignacio Pulido Serrano. Leiden: Brill, 129-149. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004306363>
- Kusche, María. 1964. *Juan Pantoja de la Cruz*. Madrid: Castalia.
- Kusche, María. 2007. *Juan Pantoja de la Cruz y sus seguidores*. Madrid: Fundación de Apoyo a la Historia del Arte Hispánico.
- MacLean, Gerald. 2019. "Ottoman Things in Early Modern England". In *Geographies of Contact: Britain, the Middle East and the Circulation of Knowledge*, edited by Hélène Ibata, Caroline Lehn, Fanny Moghaddassi and Nader Nassiri-Moghaddam, 92-107. Strasbourg: Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg. <https://books.openedition.org/pus/6035?lang=en>
- Marchante, Lucas. 2005. "Temples of dynastic memory in the seventeenth century: Valladolid and London". *Viator* 36: 603-624. <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.VIATOR.2.300024>

³⁶ Ungerer 1998, 174.

³⁷ It might be relevant too that the plant in RMG appears to be left unfinished.

³⁸ "a blurred 0 can be misread for a 9, and what may have been left of the lower half of the 6 probably looked like an S. In contemporary Spanish S and 5 were written alike". Ungerer 1998, 170.

- Pascual Molina, Jesús. 2013. “Porque vean y sepan cuánto es el poder y grandeza de nuestro príncipe y señor”: Imagen y poder en el viaje de Felipe II a Inglaterra y su matrimonio con María Tudor’ *Reales Sitios* 197: 6-25.
- Pollack, Rachel. 2017. “David Gives Uriah a Letter for Joab”. In *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*, 3rd ed. Edited by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Lara Yeager-Crasselt. New York, 2020-23. <https://www.theleidencollection.com/archive/> (archived December 2023).
- Redworth, G. 2020. “Where Were the English? Antoon Van Den Wijngaerde, the Evidence of Visual Culture, and the 1557 Siege of Saint-Quentin”. In *Exile, Diplomacy and Texts*, edited by Ana Sáez-Hidalgo and Berta Cano-Echevarría. Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004438040_003
- Salas, Xavier de. 1966. “Un tableau de Pantoja de la Cruz à propos d’une monographie sur le peintre”. *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*: 351-54.
- Strong, Roy. 1969. *Tudor and Jacobean Portraits*. London: National Portrait Gallery.
- Ungerer, Gustav. 1998. “Juan Pantoja de la Cruz and the Circulation of Gifts Between the English and Spanish Courts in 1604/5”. *Shakespeare Studies* 26: 145-86.
- Verdier, Thierry. 2017. “David et Bethsabée, un episode biblique de la scène du balcon et sa lecture iconographique au temps d’Henri VIII”. *Arrêt sur Scène Focus* (IRCL-UMR5186 du CNRS): 231-245.