Hampton Court Palace: Henry VIII's Cabinet of Curiosity Exhibiting the Abraham Tapestries

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Hampton Court Palace: Henry VIII’s Cabinet of Curiosity Exhibiting the Abraham Tapestries

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THESIS

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Abstract

This thesis evaluates Hampton Court Palace as King Henry VIII’s cabinet of curiosity while looking at the Christian symbolism Henry associated with the Abraham Tapestries. Henry VIII was an avid collector, as shown in the 1547 Inventory that was completed 18 months after he died. The inventory recorded 2,450 tapestries, with one of the most important sets from that list being the Abraham Tapestries, which depict the relationship God had to Abraham and his son Isaac. Henry had a strong connection to the Abraham tapestries because of their Christian symbolism. Henry viewed himself as an Abraham to his people and felt that his son Edward had a story similar to that of Isaac. Both Abraham and Henry had their children late in life and both felt they were being rewarded by God for their work with their people. Henry VIII hung the magnificent tapestries inside his favorite palace, Hampton Court.

Hampton Court Palace was Henry’s cabinet of curiosity because he was choosing what was displayed to foreign guests and ambassadors and used some of the items as propaganda. Cabinets of curiosity were used to showcase the owner’s treasures and while they were normally seen as single room or cabinet, Henry used his palace as one large cabinet.
Introduction

King Henry VIII had an immense influence on British history. While many ponder his political decisions, his quest for a male heir, or the story of his six wives, one aspect that is frequently overlooked is his lasting impact on art and culture. Henry was an avid collector of all items, such as ships, artillery, musical instruments, jewelry, clothing, and even tapestries. The King owned over 2,450 tapestries making it the largest tapestry collection assembled to date. These tapestries are recorded in the 1547 inventory, which took 18 months to complete after Henry VIII died on January 28, 1547.¹ One of the most famous tapestry cycles recorded in the inventory is known as the Abraham set. The majority of the Abraham tapestries are still hanging in Hampton Court Palace today, a site where guests come from all over the world to experience the palace that housed the famous king.

Hampton Court was one of Henry VIII’s favorite palaces and he acquired it after the downfall of his advisor, Cardinal Thomas Wolsey during the early 1500s.² As noted by the

Cardinal Thomas Wolsey was born in Ipswich in 1475. He was educated at the University of Oxford before becoming an ordained priest in 1498. He became chaplain to Sir Richard Nanfan, who was deputy lieutenant of Calais. Nanfan recommended Wolsey to king Henry VII and when Nanfan died, Wolsey became Henry VII’s chaplain and Dean of Lincoln. In 1509, Wolsey was appointed Royal Almoner and became close to King Henry VIII. Under King Henry VIII, Wolsey became Bishop of Lincoln in 1514, Archbishop of York in 1514 and Cardinal in 1515. Also in 1515, he became Lord Chancellor. Under Henry VIII, Wolsey attempted to make peace between France and England with a European peace treaty. When France went to war, Wolsey committed English soldiers, but had to also raise taxes to fund the soldiers which caused animosity between him and others. When Henry VIII went to Wolsey asking for the Pope to grant him a divorce from Katherine of Aragon, Wolsey was unable to obtain it, which ultimately led to his downfall and death.
palace guidebook, “for many people, Hampton Court is Henry VIII.”⁴ After Henry made additions and changes to the magnificent palace, it was considered a “hotel, a theater, and a vast leisure complex.”⁴ Found on the “banks of the Thames, twelve miles from central London, [Hampton Court is] known for being the finest Tudor palace in England.”⁵ The palace could hold hundreds of people and included 30 suites for royal guests and members of the king’s court. When Henry VIII was staying at Hampton Court, up to 800 people accompanied him, including servants, cooks, guests, and foreign ambassadors.⁶ When entertaining guests and royal ambassadors or hosting a wedding, the tapestries housed inside Hampton Court were “rolled out over the walls, candelabra were strung across the ceiling on wires, and the lights from hundreds of candles transformed the hall into a magical setting for a fantastical court masque.”⁷ Hampton Court was decorated with some of the most elaborate and ornate tapestries found in Europe and the palace was dedicated to royal “pleasure and flamboyant display, where private intrigue and political debate played out.”⁸ Henry VIII collected items from all over the world, sending out buyers to Brussels, where many of the famous tapestries, like the Abraham set were created. Hampton Court then, served as Henry VIII’s personal showroom or museum for all of the items he acquired and items he was gifted. During the 16th century, the “elite of society first took up

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⁶ *Historic Royal Palaces*. "Great Hall: Discover the Magnificent Heart of the Tudor Palace.".
⁷ *Official Hampton Court Palace Guidebook*.
⁸ Ibid.
collecting on a widespread scale due to their monetary resources and time.”  Since Henry VIII was collecting vast amounts of items, he had to house them, and he found his palaces were the best showrooms.

Throughout this thesis I will argue that Henry VIII used this palace, Hampton Court, as his own cabinet of curiosity, highlighting the expensive tapestry purchases. Cabinets of curiosity, or Wunderkrammers, were used to showcase the owner’s treasures and while they were normally seen as single room or cabinet, I maintain that Henry VIII used his entire palace as one Wunderkrammer. Using the 1547 inventory I was able to identify a large group of items that have not been exclusively focused on in past studies. While the entire inventory is important, for this study I will examine the recorded tapestries, evaluate their connection to Henry’s personal life, and how he identified with the Christian messages weaved together in the Abraham set. While the inventory records 2,450 tapestries, my analysis is limited to the Abraham cycle, its acquisition, and the role they played in Henry’s overall collection. I chose to focus on the Abraham Tapestries due to them being one of the last remaining complete sets from the 16th century and because the tapestries have remained inside Hampton Court Palace, being removed only for coronation ceremonies and weddings during the 16th and 17th centuries. Based on my reading of the evidence, it seems possible that Henry VIII influenced other royal collectors as he was one of the first in England to focus largely on collecting and showcasing valuable items.

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11 “The Inventory of King Henry VIII.” MS Harley 1419.
I. Cabinets of Curiosity or Wunderkrammers

Wunderkrammers, or cabinets of curiosity, were established during the 16th century in England and were popular among the aristocrats or royalty. The original Wunderkrammer can be traced back to the end of the Italian Renaissance where the “first great collections began to form.”\(^\text{12}\) Prior to Henry VIII, one famous collector out of Florence, Italy during the 15th century was Cosimo de’ Medici. Others around Europe began to see the appeal of having a cabinet of curiosity so royals like King Matthias I of Hungary and Maximilian I of Austria started collecting artwork and other artifacts.\(^\text{13}\) Considered some of the first museums, cabinets of curiosity were created to be awe-inspiring and highlight what the collector found to be interesting. Collections and “cabinets of curiosity grew out of a general curiosity about the world, its contents, and its inhabitants.”\(^\text{14}\) The cabinets were “dubbed Wunderkrammer or wonders of miracles of the world and were intended to summarize the world to the very corners of the earth.”\(^\text{15}\) Wunderkrammers were seen as the beginning of today’s museums and many famous museums, like the British Museum in London, England, owe their founding to private collectors wanting to make their collections public. The Victoria and Albert Museum in London also owes its founding to cabinets of curiosity. The “cabinet concept played a vital role in the Victorian foundation of the V&A itself. More recently, the cabinet concept has taken on a new life as a term of choice for contemporary artists exploring artificialia and naturalia and reflecting


\(^{13}\) Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Museum: Cultural Institution."


\(^{15}\) Ibid.
on protocols of display.” The term curiosities “had also a more precise reference to actual collections of rare, strange, curious objects, both natural and man-made, that were the precursors to modern museums.” Hampton Court was “best suited to the pedagogic potential of a museum rather than the antiquarian preservation of an historic set of rooms.” Hampton Court has “a long history as a gallery for the display of royal collection paintings and for the 19th century it was one of the most important public art museums in the country.” After Henry VIII had lived in Hampton Court Palace, it slowly began to open for the public and allowed visitors. First-hand accounts of visitors to the palace are challenging to uncover, but through studying records from the Keeper of the Wardrobe and the Exchequer, it is possible to learn more about the palace during the time Henry lived there. When visiting Hampton Court, guests were supposed to be inspired by the decoration and the exquisite items. In 1842, Henry Cole, who was the future director of the Victoria and Albert Museum commented on the magnificence of Hampton Court. He remarked about the “glorious tapestries and general blaze of light.” The marvelous red brick palace has over 60 acres of gardens and 150 acres of parkland surrounding it. One of the most

19 Dolman, Brett. Curating the Royal Collection at Hampton Court Palace in the Nineteenth Century.
20 Lipscomb, Suzannah. "Historical Authenticity and Interpretative Strategy at Hampton Court Palace.” 103.
visited gardens is The Great Fountain Garden. It was created during the reign of William III and Mary II and includes 13 individual fountains. After viewing the gardens, guests would be able to see the tapestries and other pieces of art all throughout Hampton Court. Permanent tapestry collections were added to the palace starting with Charles II in the 17th century and continued with William III and Queen Victoria. There are over 50 tapestries on permanent display at the palace, which “rank among the earliest and most important works of art in the Royal Collection.”

When Dutch visitors came to Great Britain and toured around London during 1750, the travelers mentioned guides and books explaining London sites. “At Hampton Court…one traveler complained that no one showed him Wolsey’s hall; it was only when he consulted the catalogue once back in London that he realized he had missed it.” Another visitor in the 19th century commented about the palace, stating that “from 1838 it no longer functioned as a living space but solely as a museum. It opened to the general public, a new initiative which meant that the masses were also welcomed. The fact that the opening hours extended to Sunday, when the working classes had a day off, meant that the controlling social factors which had always played such an important role in the admission of visitors no longer existed.”

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25 Ronnes, Hanneke, and Renske Koster. "A Foreign Appreciation of English Country Houses and Castles: Dutch Travellers’ Accounts of Proto-museums Visited En Route. 120.
palace have continued to grow since the palace was opened to the public in 1838 by Queen Victoria. She “ordered the gates of Hampton Court Palace be thrown open to all her subjects as an early act of generosity. There had been many king and queens living in Hampton Court after Henry VIII, so the public was eager to see the royal palace. After Henry VIII died in 1547 the palace was inhabited by Queen Elizabeth I for brief visits, James I had Shakespeare and his company perform plays in the Great Hall in 1603, Charles I was imprisoned in Hampton Court by Oliver Cromwell in 1645, William III and Mary II added onto the palace in 1689, George I returned to the palace in 1717, and then the palace was abandoned in 1760. Although the palace was abandoned by kings and queens, the apartments were still used and maintained by royal servants until Queen Victoria opened the palace to the public in 1838.26 Visitors flocked to enjoy the stunning palace architecture, get lost in the maze and relax in the beautiful gardens.”27 While the palace was seeing growing visitor numbers, not everyone was excited about the constant stream of people. This sudden rush was not altogether welcomed by the grace and favor residents who had previously enjoyed exclusive rights to the palace gardens. Originally, Hampton Court Palace was a place for the wealthy and royalty. When Queen Victoria opened the gardens and the palace to the public, it created animosity between the social standings. The wealthy believed the working class would ruin the gardens and with more people visiting every day, the landscape became less exclusive. They “complained that the gardens became hell on earth, the people come

intoxicated and the scenes in the gardens on the Lord’s day are beyond description." Even with the complaints people still traveled from all over to visit the stunning palace. In 1839 there were 115,971 guests, in 1850 there were 221,119 guests, in 1860 there were 216,311 guests, and in 1865 there were 246,660 guests to the palace. Even after Henry VIII and other successors, Hampton Court continued to be a place that people wanted to see. It was like every other museum, it had items and objects inside that people wanted to view. They saw it as a museum and a part of history, telling the story of Henry VIII.

Cabinets of curiosity took longer to develop in England, since it was not as connected to the rest of the world. The cabinets found in England can be “described as an exuberant hodgepodge of rare and peculiar items.” The cabinets of curiosity found in England were small collections of “extraordinary objects, which like today’s museums, attempted to categorize and tell stories about the wonders and oddities of the natural world.” Private cabinets of curiosity were also used to showcase an individual’s wealth and social status. The owner would choose who would be able to view the Wunderkrammer, which gave the cabinets a sense of prestige and exclusivity.

While Henry VIII had servants, kitchen staff, royal guests, and ambassadors coming in and out of his palaces constantly, the general public was not able to witness the beauty of the

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30 Puyear, Lauren. 15.
tapestries or other items. Henry had the ability to choose who he felt deserved to see the collection, which made it more exclusive than most other cabinets of curiosity. As cited above

Henry VIII’s collection included many tapestries. If someone were to lay flat all the tapestries found inside Hampton Court, they would cover the area of six tennis courts.\textsuperscript{33} He had many uses for the tapestries and hung them all over the palace to be used for different events or celebrations. Tapestries were also used in normal everyday ways, like doorway coverings. When serving Henry VIII or his guests, servants or kitchen staff would sometimes enter rooms from behind tapestries as a way to magically appear and disappear.\textsuperscript{34} Along with doorway coverings, tapestries were also used to insulate against draughts in the damp palaces.\textsuperscript{35} Henry acquired his love of tapestries from the people he was surrounded by. His father, King Henry VII was known to have lavish amounts of tapestries and one of his trusted advisors, Cardinal Wolsey, was also an avid collector. Luxurious “beautiful, and portable, tapestry was the pre-eminent art form of the Tudor Court.”\textsuperscript{36} Tapestries were becoming connected to the Tudor Court image and one reason was for the Christian connotations. For some, “art was a narrative all to itself, where the very best paintings ought to be displayed in a purpose-built gallery.”\textsuperscript{37} For others, art was something they collected and kept for themselves. They wanted to lavishly decorate their homes for themselves and their families. Henry made sure to have most of his art on display in his palaces while others kept their collections private. Some also viewed art in religious connotations. Instead of collecting portraits and tapestries people would go to monasteries and

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\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Official Hampton Court Palace Guidebook.} \\
\textsuperscript{34} Hampton Court Audio Guided Tour. \\
\textsuperscript{35} Hampton Court Audio. \\
\textsuperscript{36} Campbell, Thomas P. \textit{Henry VIII and the Art of Majesty: Tapestries at the Tudor Court}. N.p.: Paul Mellon Centre BA, 2007. \\
\textsuperscript{37} Dolman, Brett. 279.
\end{flushleft}
other places of worship to see the stories of the Bible in art form. Many viewed the roots of collection being intertwined with religion “and science, art and history, curiosity and culture.”

Henry VIII used his tapestry collection as a way to showcase his wealth and status, while simultaneously portraying how he wanted to be viewed. He used the Abraham tapestry cycle and other Christian tapestries to reinforce how he was the God-anointed king and that he was meant to be the head of the Church of England. Henry VIII “declared himself Supreme head of the Church of England in place of the Pope.” With all of the political and religious turmoil that was happening around Henry VIII with the Reformation and the Dissolution of the Monasteries, Henry used the tapestries as a way to portray himself as the Christian king of England. Tapestry sets, like the Abraham set, were reused “most often to emphasis the antiquity and legitimacy of the crown.” Tapestries were “usually designed either as single panels or sets. A tapestry set is a group of individual panels related by subject, style, and workmanship and

38 Brown University, Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology & the Ancient World. "What is a Cabinet of Curiosities?"

The English Reformation happened during the 16th century and is centered around King Henry VIII separating England from the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church and created the Church of England. In creating the Church of England, Henry VIII turned the once Catholic country into a Protestant one. Henry’s decision changed the history of England and caused many rebellions centered around the Bible, the language of the Bible, and the Dissolution of the Monasteries. It caused religious turmoil for years and also created more Catholic enemies, like Spain, who were loyal to the Pope. Henry wanted a divorce from his first wife, Queen Katherine of Aragon because she had not produced a living male heir and had reached the age where she would not be child bearing any longer. Henry had met Anne Boleyn and he wanted to marry her, but needed permission from the Pope. When the Pope did not grant the divorce, Henry made himself head of the new Church of England with the Act of Supremacy in 1534. The Act stated that Henry would be the head of the church and would “sever ecclesiastical links with Rome.”
41 Royal Collection Trust. "Tapestries in the Royal Collection."
intended to be hung together. The number of pieces in a set varies according to the dimensions of the walls to be covered. The designing of sets was especially common in Europe from the Middle Ages to the 19th century.  

II. Henry’s Role in the Collection and How He Acquired the Tapestries

While the Abraham tapestries are some of the more famous tapestries in Henry’s collection, they were not the only ones used to decorate Henry’s palaces. Many of the tapestries in Henry’s extensive collection were inherited from his father, King Henry VII. Henry also acquired tapestries from his advisors, Cardinal Thomas Wolsey and Sir Thomas Cromwell. Commodities “also entered the royal household by other routes, namely inheritance, gift giving, and confiscation. Henry had less influence over the nature of the items acquired by these means, but they were to prove highly formative in the development of many groups of his possessions.”

When Henry VII was king he was also an avid collector of costly and beautiful items. Henry VII purchased a set in 1488 of the Trojan War and it was one of the “most elaborate tapestry sets available, developed in response to the taste for classical subject matter than prevalent [in] French courts.” King Henry VII was also purchasing fine tapestry sets in the early 1490’s for Richmond Palace and for the marriage of his first son Prince Arthur to Katherine of Aragon.

After Prince Arthur died in 1502, Henry was the next heir. As a child, he “had been surrounded by tapestries from the moment of his birth and the collection he inherited, perhaps numbering as many as 400-500 pieces divided among the most important royal palaces and removing wardrobes, had been a constant backdrop to his youth.” Henry VIII had been surrounded by tapestries and watched his father make the lavish purchases for special occasions like marriages. Along with acquiring possessions from his father, Henry VIII also inherited many royal palaces

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44 Campbell, Thomas P. Henry VIII and the Art of Majesty: Tapestries at the Tudor Court. 73.
45 Campbell, Thomas P. 79.
46 Ibid, 103.
and “buildings with standing wardrobes at Richmond, Westminster, Windsor, and possibly Nottingham Castle.”

It did not take long for Henry to continue his father’s work of purchasing tapestries and in the late 1510’s, he was purchasing pieces for his Greenwich palace. Henry VIII was left a large inheritance from his father, Henry VII, and had seen that spending money and procuring valuable items was a way to prove status to English subjects and to visiting royal ambassadors. When “Henry VIII became king in 1509, tapestry had been one of the principal forms of display for the English crown for more than 100 years.” The expensive tapestries were being created in Brussels and “could cost up to three pounds for a little less than a square yard at the time when a family could live off of five pounds for a year.” Henry VIII was used to seeing exquisite tapestries and continued the tradition of collecting the same throughout his reign.

Another mechanism for obtaining tapestries was from his relationship with one of his trusted advisors, Cardinal Thomas Wolsey. First as “Henry VIII’s right hand man between the early 1510s and the late 1520s, Wolsey’s obsession with tapestries and the material trappings of power in general illuminates the values and priorities of the minister who is closest to the young king.” Cardinal Wolsey used his connection to Henry VIII to gain status and with that came more properties and more personal gain. It was “in the years following Henry VIII’s accession that Wolsey’s personal wealth began to accrue through promotions and ecclesiastical preferment.” Two properties that Wolsey invested large amounts of money in were York Place and Hampton Court. Between his properties, Wolsey “amassed a collection of more than 600

47 Ibid, 122
48 Ibid, 123.
49 Ibid.
50 Official Hampton Court Palace Guidebook.
51 Campbell, Thomas P. 127.
52 Ibid.
One main reason why Wolsey and Henry VIII were collecting tapestries and purchasing grand sets was because of the rivalry with France. This “spirit of rivalry was a major factor in Henry’s lavish expenditure on precious textiles from the late 1500s.” Henry wanted to have the best tapestries made with the most expensive materials because it was a way of showing off wealth. If Henry had enough money to buy magnificent tapestries and decorate all his palaces with the different textiles it meant that the crown had enough money to support alliances and battles. It was a way to show power and status. Both Henry “and Wolsey committed increasing sums of money to tapestry purchases during this period. Setting new standards of grandeur and magnificence at the English Court.” A vast majority of the tapestries that Wolsey was purchasing were made from wool or wool and silk. He would also have the tapestries created with the finest thread available, many times, including gold thread. Wolsey was starting to amass a collection that was “growing faster than the kings and at Hampton Court, there was a time when Wolsey’s tapestry acquisition was unparalleled in England during the Tudor period.” Wolsey became Henry’s closest advisor for close to 15 years until he was unable to get Henry a divorce. Henry wanted to marry Anne Boleyn, but to do so required a divorce or annulment from his first wife, Katherine of Aragon. Henry went to Wolsey, who would need to get the divorce from the Pope. When Rome denied the divorce, Henry dismissed Wolsey. By the “time of Cardinal Wolsey’s downfall in 1529 this man of God had amassed some 600 tapestries. A handful of these still exist and can be found in the Great

53 Ibid.  
54 Ibid, 143.  
55 Ibid.  
56 Ibid, 140.  
57 Ibid, 159.
Watching Chamber today” Was Wolsey tried to please the king by offering Henry Hampton Court Palace but it did not work. On October 22, 1529, “Wolsey made a formal surrender of his goods to the Crown, and following his indictment for praemunire and the surrender of the great seal, he was ordered to leave Hampton Court.” Wolsey died before he could be executed.

Henry VIII acquired the tapestries that Wolsey left behind in Hampton Court and the ones from his other properties. When “Henry VIII finally took full possession of Hampton Court in 1529 he inherited a house already much embellished by Thomas Wolsey.” Throughout the years, Henry amassed a large collection of tapestries and “although a portion of these came from Cardinal Wolsey’s collection appropriated by the crown in 1530 and other may have derived from the dissolution of the monasteries during the 1530’s the number of high quality and thus high cost panels indicate that some at least must have been the crown purchases.” For 15 years, Wolsey had been Henry’s most trusted advisor and handled much of the politics and business that Henry was not interested in during the first years of his reign. When Wolsey died, Henry kept collecting tapestries and continued to live at Hampton Court. Wolsey’s “collection inevitably influenced the young king’s taste and when Henry VIII took over Hampton Court, all those tapestries came to him.”

Another trusted advisor to Henry VIII was Thomas Cromwell and due to the size of the collection, Cromwell “must also have been commissioning tapestries from continental

58 Official Hampton Court Palace Guidebook.
59 Campbell, Thomas P. 202.
62 Campbell, Thomas P. 165.
63 Official Hampton Court Palace Guidebook.
sources." Cromwell was Henry VIII’s chief minister who was “responsible for enforcing the king’s religious settlement and for prosecuting those who opposed it.” One aspect that Thomas Cromwell was responsible for was the dissolution of the monasteries. Tapestries and other items were obtained when the monasteries were being destroyed, which led to an increase in the royal collection. Another aspect from the monasteries was that large sums of money “generated by the dissolution appreciably increased the ambition and scale of Henry’s tapestry commissions during the late 1530s and 1540s.” Initially, Cromwell’s personal collection was small but it began to grow over the five-year span when he was made a part of the King’s Privy Council in 1531 “and subsequent appointments as chancellor of the Exchequer in 1533 and the King’s secretary in 1534.” Cromwell was obtaining tapestries for Henry VIII and “as the dissolution spread to larger institutions, the pickings became richer, and it is evident from the commissioners’ correspondence that they did find tapestries suitable for the king in a number of instances.” Throughout Cromwell’s time working for Henry VIII “it seems probable that the dissolution of the monasteries may have yielded between one and two hundred tapestries to the royal collection but that few would have been of especially high quality.”

While Henry acquired the tapestries from Wolsey and Cromwell, which made his collection grow dramatically, he was also finding his own tapestries to purchase or commission. Following “Wolsey’s disgrace in 1529-30, all of his tapestries were appropriated by the

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64 Campbell, Thomas P. 243.
66 Campbell, Thomas P. 243.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid, 244.
69 Ibid, 245.
crown.” When Wolsey was unable to get Henry his divorce from the Pope, Henry found that the only solution was to break from Rome and create his own Church of England. When Henry made himself Head of the Church of England, it allowed him to have more freedom of choice, and he no longer needed the approval for marriages or divorces. Henry continued to purchase tapestries and we “know that throughout the years of the divorce proceedings and the run up to his marriage with Anne Boleyn, thanks to a brief period in which records for the treasure of the Chamber survive from 1528-1530, and in which detailed accounts were also maintained for the privy purse.” The privy purse was an amount of money collected from the public, usually by taxes and was allocated to the king or queen for personal costs. The purchases the king made were detailed in records, which is how it is known what Henry was purchasing and how much he was spending. Henry was purchasing tapestries for every marriage as a celebration. Due to Henry having six marriages, one reason his tapestry collection may have grown was because he was purchasing so many tapestries throughout his life. Even though Henry had a part in which tapestries were being purchased and commissioned, he was not the one traveling to Brussels or other regions to collect them. He had a group of men who were responsible for obtaining the tapestries on Henry’s behalf and bringing them before the king. One of the first people who helped Henry acquire items was John Leland. He was chaplain and “librarian to King Henry VIII. He was the earliest of a notable group of English antiquarians. The special position of king’s antiquary was created for him in 1533 and he was authorized to search cathedral and

71 Campbell, Thomas P. Henry VIII and the Art of Majesty.
72 Ibid, 166.
monastic libraries for manuscripts of historical interest.”\textsuperscript{73} Leland promised “Henry the books and ‘quadrate table of silver’ that would give literary and visual substance to the Tudor ‘worlde and impery of England.’ Beginning in the mid-1530’s, Leland spent a decade travelling in order to establish the physical, cultural, and historical reality of the Tudor imperium.”\textsuperscript{74} Leland spent 1536 to 1542 traveling to different parts of England and surrounding counties on an “antiquarian tour of England and Wales.”\textsuperscript{75} While on his tour, he wrote of his discoveries and planned on writing a book for the king, but illness got in the way of him completing the series.

While Leland was searching England for antiquities and other manuscripts, Henry had a group of merchants purchasing tapestries for him in other countries. The most “viable transactions were handled through the rich London and Antwerp merchants who played such an important part in previous years.”\textsuperscript{76} One collector was Peter Van De Walle, who “continued to receive large payments for supplying a range of goods to the court.”\textsuperscript{77} Henry had many merchants who were buying tapestries and other items, while also settling the king’s debts. From “1545, immense sums were also delivered, via merchants such as Richard Gresham or Anthony Bonvisi, to Stephen Vaughan, Henry’s agent in Brussels to settle the king’s debts in the Netherlands.”\textsuperscript{78} One merchant, Jerome Crieckelman, was used on many occasions to “transport rich jewels, silver vessels, tapestries, and other merchandise from Antwerp to London.”\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{75} Encyclopaedia Britannica. "John Leland: English Antiquarian."
\textsuperscript{76} Campbell, Thomas P. 299.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid.
Antwerp is a city in Belgium and was a large producer of exquisite items. Antwerp grew into one of the largest tapestry cities in the globe, except for the Southern Netherlands which were “by far the most important producer of tapestries in Europe.”\textsuperscript{80} Antwerp “functioned in the sixteenth century as the international distribution center…the export-oriented tapestry industry involved absolutely stunning numbers: it is estimated that total exports amounted to 700,000 guilders annually during the second half of the sixteenth century.”\textsuperscript{81} Jerome Crieckelman was also “licensed by Henry VIII to import these goods in England without paying customs.”\textsuperscript{82} Another merchant that Henry VIII employed was Erasmus Sketes. He was also an Antwerp merchant who delivered at least one set of tapestries to the king.\textsuperscript{83} Sketes was “one of the richest merchants and bankers in Antwerp, having risen to prominence during the 1520s.”\textsuperscript{84} The Antwerp merchants were vital to Henry’s tapestry collection and were the ones bringing the expensive sets to palaces, like Hampton Court. Henry VIII had a role in the tapestry acquisitions during his reign. Along with tapestries, “other luxury textiles were also being acquired for the palace at this time, as documented by a payment of 120 pounds to Robert Handorde for certain clothes of arras bought of hym for the hangying of the kinges gallery.”\textsuperscript{85} Henry was using the wealth that was left to him from his father, Henry VII and the wealth of the crown to make extravagant purchases, like tapestries. He made sure the sets were created out of the best materials and paid merchants vast sums of money to make sure the pieces were brought back to the palaces in

\textsuperscript{82} Campbell, Thomas P. 299.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid, 300.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid.
excellent condition. Most tapestries during the 16th century were created out of wool. The “advantages of wool in the weaving of tapestries have been its availability, workability, durability, and the fact that it can be easily dyed to obtain a wide range of colors.”

Silk was also used with the wool to create “pictorial effects of tone graduation and spatial recession.”

Although “the forgoing records provide only partial evidence about the subject matter of the tapestries that Henry purchased from Smytting and Van Aelst, one point that does emerge clearly is the enormous scale of his expenditure on tapestry, even by comparison with the richest peers of the realm.”

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86 Jarry, Madeleine. "Tapestry."
87 Ibid.
88 Campbell, Thomas P. 282.
III. The 1547 Inventory and the Tapestries

While Henry VIII was king, there were multiple inventories done on his many palaces and belongings. A 1542 inventory was focused on Whitehall Palace, and the 1547 inventory that was completed after Henry VIII died. Covered all his possessions. The “contents of Henry’s palaces, particularly Whitehall, show that he was an insatiable collector of beautiful and costly things.”

Both inventories are similar, being only five years apart. The main difference is the 1547 inventory was a complete inventory of every item Henry VIII owned, and did not just focus on one palace. It took 18 months to complete the 1547 inventory due to the vast number of items. Through studying the 1547 inventory, it is evident that Henry VIII owned more tapestries than any other Christian king. When comparing other king’s tapestries, “no complete inventories for the tapestry collections of Henry’s contemporaries, Francis I, king of France, and Charles V, king of Spain and Holy Roman Emperor, have survived, but the extant lists and purchase documentation leave little doubt that, by the end of his reign, Henry’s collection was much larger than either.”

The inventory indicates that he owned 2,450 tapestry wall hangings “comprising over 300 sets of three or more pieces, 65 pairs of tapestry and about 160 individual tapestry hangings.” The inventory also includes 300 other tapestry pieces that were not primarily used for wall hangings but were more for furnishing small areas, which brought Henry’s combined tapestry collection to 2,770 pieces. Along with the tapestries, Henry was also a collector of militia items and precious metal trinkets. The inventory records “tens of thousands of individual

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89 British Library. "Cabinet of Curiosities."
90 Campbell, Thomas P. ix.
91 Ibid. ix-x
92 Ibid, ix.
93 Ibid.
items—from castles, ships, and more than 3,500 gold and silver trinkets. Part of the surviving inventory includes money, jewels, plate, artillery, munitions, ships, arms, armor, horses, masque garments, tents, liturgical vestments, and books." While the entire inventory does not survive, a large portion of it is housed inside the British Library, which gives historians the information needed to make the claims about Henry’s possessions. The 1547 inventory lists hundreds of thousands of objects and shows that Henry “possessed lavishly decorated furniture, numerous pictures, great quantities of jewelry, over 2,000 pieces of tapestry (the largest collection on record) and 2,029 pieces of plate.” The inventory also listed Henry’s “militia resources, [which] included 70 ships, 400 guns, and 6,500 handguns in the Tower of London, and 2,250 guns in other coastal and border fortresses.” The tapestries noted in the inventory after Henry’s death were valued later, during the civil war, and many were determined to be over a thousand pounds, which at the time, was “far in excess of any other item in the collection.” The tapestries found in Hampton Court Palace were a portable means of showcasing wealth and status to foreign ambassadors and guests. Henry would reserve the most financially impressive tapestries for the visits of royal guests. It was a way to impress the royal visitors and to show off the wealth he had at his disposal. If he was able to afford lavish tapestries, he was also able to afford war ships and battles, which would have been important to show to ambassadors since there was political and religious turmoil during the 16th century when Henry was king.

Henry made sure to keep the finest and most expensive tapestries, for separate occasions, like weddings, coronations, or the celebration of the birth of his only living male heir, Edward

94 British Library. "Cabinet of Curiosities."
95 Ibid.
96 Ibid.
97 Royal Collection Trust. "Tapestries in the Royal Collection."
VI. The finest tapestries included the Abraham set and the David set. The David set was purchased by Henry in 1517. They “were among the most expensive commodities of the day.”\(^9^8\) There were also tapestries “displayed on the processional route following Henry VIII’s marriage to Katherine of Aragon in 1509, as well as at their double coronation later that year.”\(^9^9\) Henry kept many of his tapestries at Hampton Court, and after his coronation, Henry was collecting as many as he could find. Henry VIII “amassed an immense collection of tapestries; at Hampton Court, you will find the precious survivors. They reveal as much about the importance of the collector as they do about his wealth.”\(^1^0^0\) The Abraham Tapestries were kept at Hampton Court Palace and were comprised of 10 total tapestry panels. Six of the panels were kept inside the Great Hall. At the time of their commissioning, they would have cost over £2,000. The tapestries remained at Hampton Court in the Great Hall and were on display for hundreds of years.\(^1^0^1\) They have been moved or taken down for different ceremonies, but have spent a majority of their display time inside Henry’s favorite palace. According to Hampton Court, it took 10 years to restore one panel of the Abraham set. The panels of the set are vast, usually being five meters by

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\(^9^8\) Campbell, Thomas P. 121.
\(^9^9\) Royal Collection Trust. "Tapestries in the Royal Collection."
\(^1^0^0\) Official Hampton Court Palace Guidebook.
\(^1^0^1\) "Tapestry Re-Hang at Hampton Court Palace." Video. Youtube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wfH3mTLDAbM.

Historic Royal Palaces released a video explaining the extensive preservation that goes into maintaining the Abraham Tapestries, as well as the others hanging all throughout Hampton Court Palace. They monitor dust, light, pests, temperature, and humidity constantly to make sure no outside element will disturb the delicate fibers. They also perform yearly cleanings. It takes 10 people or more to help remove and re-hang the tapestries back on the walls inside the Great Hall. To rehang the tapestries, they have found that Velcro is the best and strongest material to use to hold the tapestries in place without damaging them. According to the video another reason they used Velcro is in case there is a salvage situation, the tapestries can be removed quickly by pulling a cord found behind each tapestry.
eight meters. The “Abraham tapestries which line the walls today were commissioned by Henry himself, and probably first hung here for the visit of a large French embassy in 1546.”

Henry VIII did not acquire the tapestries himself. He would send out his buyers and collectors to retrieve the items and then have them brought back to the palaces. Jan Mostinck “had been the officer responsible for the tapestries belonging to Henry VIII.” Mostinck had previously worked for the “countess of Richmond and Derby, Henry’s grandmother, who had died in June 1509.” Mostinck was surrounded by tapestries, the moment he was born. He was Flemish and “he originated from Enghien, well known as a center of tapestry trade and production. He may have been related to the Simon Mostinck who supplied tapestries to Louis of Luxembourg, Lord of Enghien, in 1470.” Mostinck was given the title as “chief arras maker to the king,” and in early 1537 he was seen as the one to repair tapestries for the king. The “Wardrobe accounts for 1537-1538 and 1538-1539 both name Mostinck as the individual to whom payment was made for repair materials.” While working for Henry VIII, Mostinck received “letters of denization, with license to employ six workers who were not denizens. His workshop was probably in the Westminster parish of St Martin-in-the-Fields, where ‘John Mustyne, stranger’ had five servantes and goods valued at £60 in 1540.” Mostinck continued to work for Henry until he died and his son, Cornelius took over in 1546. Having “inherited his father’s workshop, and with the royal post, he would have had access to designs of both the

102 Official Hampton Court Palace Guidebook.
103 Campbell, Thomas P. ix.
104 Ibid. 213.
105 Ibid.
106 Ibid.
Tudor arms and the Enghien borders.”\textsuperscript{108} Along with purchasing and repairs, Henry VIII also had to have a way to transfer the tapestries around Europe.

When transporting tapestries, coffers were used and the 1547 “inventory of Henry VIII is a Pandora’s Box of information, including details on how the king’s possessions were packed and transported.”\textsuperscript{109} Coffers, which were cases or chests, were used for the transportation and storage of items. The 1547 inventory lists three different categories for the types of coffers used.\textsuperscript{110} There were large wooden chests, smaller boxes, and bags or cloth sacks. The larger “boxes could store items like tapestries, while the smaller ones would be used for jewelry, money and small personal items. Many small boxes were given to the king as gifts.”\textsuperscript{111} Before placing the tapestries into the large coffers, it was important to roll the tapestry, like we do with posters today. Rolling “a tapestry in the direction of the warp is the least damaging way to pack it for transit.”\textsuperscript{112} Due to the king having many expensive items being transported between palaces often, it was up to his personal coffer maker to make sure all items were being placed and stored properly for passage. William Green was the king’s coffer maker and also made some containers for the queen. Like “previous monarchs Henry VIII incorporated a number of London craftsmen into his extended household because they provided him with a broad range of specialist skills and luxury goods.”\textsuperscript{113}

William Green,

did not enter royal service until the middle years of Henry VIII’s reign. On 16 February 1522 Henry VIII ordered two standards, a coffer, a cloth sack and two ‘mayles’ (bags or

\textsuperscript{108} Delmarcel, Guy, ed. \textit{Flemish Tapestry Weavers Abroad: Emigration and the Founding of Manufactories in Europe}. 44.


\textsuperscript{110} Hayward, Maria. "The Packing and Transportation of the Possessions of Henry VIII, 8.

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid, 8-9.

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid, 11.

cases) from ‘Phyllype Enaker our coffer maker’. However, an early reference to Green in royal service appears on 8 February 1526 when William, described as a ‘coffer maker’ was granted by warrant dormant, ‘a red coat of our livery’. Once a craftsman was employed by the King, other opportunities within the royal circle could follow. A set of Anne of Cleves’s household accounts describe Green as the Queen’s coffer maker, making a delivery of coffers ‘for the queen’s stable and other places’ costing £6. It is quite possible that he held this office with each of Henry’s subsequent wives. 114

After Henry died in 1547, Green continued to be a coffer maker for Edward VI and Mary I. Outside “the confines of the Royal Household William Green is fairly elusive, and tracing him is made more difficult because several men with this name appear in the records.” 115

Along with coffers for tapestries, the 1547 inventory also notes the shirt coffer the king had and how it “contained 17 embroidered shirt bands, 33 shirts, 23 nightshirts, and a remnant of cam brick in a green sarcenent bag.” 116 While the inventory highlights information about the types of coffers used, the actual transportation material is limited. Along with transportation material being omitted, some other items were also left out of the inventory “either because of an oversight, because they were not felt to be important or because they were stored at a separate location and the inventory is incomplete.” 117 While the inventory may not be completely accurate, there is still a lot we can discern from it and one is that Henry VIII was “object rich in an age when most people had relatively few personal belongings.” 118 Some of the most valuable objects in the inventory were the tapestries. Made from the finest materials, including wool, silk, gold, and silver thread, tapestries were exclusive to the affluent parts of society. One of the most expensive tapestry sets Henry VIII owned were the Abraham ones.

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114 Hayward, Maria. "William Green, Coffer-Maker to Henry VIII, Edward VI and Mary I.” 2.
115 Ibid, 2.
117 Ibid, 14.
IV. Hampton Court as a Cabinet of Curiosity

When looking at Hampton Court as a historic building and museum it is important to remember how guests today will interpret what they see when looking at the tapestries, rooms, and art. The “desire is now to interpret Hampton Court Palace in a way that draws on the power of the real place, promotes a collective understanding of the past, engages visitors in creating unique experiences for themselves, tells stories and uses the senses. Above all, it is recognized that for visitors, authenticity is rooted in experiencing the past: visitors need to be able to glimpse, taste, and feel the past in experiences that work intellectually, emotionally, and physically.”119 When viewing the past, the historic houses and museums are the only way sometimes to understand how people lived during the time period and what items were most important to them. Museums and “historic buildings are one of the means through which people can engage with issues and ideas about themselves and their past. Museums and historic buildings, then, are to provide opportunities for people to learn about themselves and their world.”120

Hampton Court is considered a historic house and “serves as [a place] where the veil between the past and the present seems very thin.”121 It has been kept authentic and guests are able to see how it would have been set up during Henry VIII’s and future successor’s reigns. It allows people to get a glimpse into the world during the 16th century and lets them learn about the person through their objects. The most “natural way for visitors to learn, to enjoy history, and to be able to reflect back on their own lives…is through stories. Storytelling is how humans make

119 Lipscomb, Suzannah. 111.
120 Ibid, 108.
sense of the world. Stories have become humanity’s prime source of inspiration, as it seeks to order chaos and gain insight into life.”Hampton Court Palace is using storytelling and objects to highlight to guests what life was like during Henry’s reign. The best way to learn about a person or a place is to envision the stories of what happened there. Using objects left behind by the person being studied allows people to create stories and interpret the person’s life. When choosing what objects and monuments to put on display museums have to look at what is seen as valuable. Curators want to create their exhibits based on stories that will resonate the most with their audience. While most people know about Henry VIII’s six wives, what else would someone find interesting? Museums are having to make decisions about what to present to the public based on what items they have and if the items can make a cohesive story. Museums “are places where the objects and messages have been selected as ones of high cultural value, [like] a specific art collection. Sometimes objects are included because they are unique examples of a category – the oldest, largest, rarest, or most complex of their kind. Sometimes objects are presented for the exact opposite reason – to be common evocations of an interesting or important group, time, or place. Objects are displayed in systems designed to encourage visitors to consider a particular take on a discipline and to encourage reactions such as amazement, mystification, realization, and personal connection.”

While Henry VIII lived at Hampton Court Palace he made sure his tapestries were on display. Similar to museums, Henry chose which items he wanted displayed and when he wanted people to see the items. If a foreign ambassador was visiting, Henry would want the most expensive tapestries to be visible as a way to show off wealth. While museums do not focus their

122 Ibid, 114.
exhibits on the cost of their items, they do make sure to show the pieces the person being focused on found to be valuable. Henry also chose to display the Abraham Tapestries after the birth of his son, Edward, as a way to celebrate the birth of his only living male heir. Henry wanted people to know that the Tudor dynasty was going to continue after him with the birth of a legitimate son. It was a way to settle conflicts in England over who would ascend to the throne after Henry and also let foreign kings and queens know that the Tudors would remain powerful.

Hampton Court was a large cabinet of curiosity for Henry VIII because it is where he kept his precious items. He chose which ones were going to be displayed to the public, like a museum does, and which items he wanted for himself or his queen. He served as a curator in this regard. He was selective when choosing the items to display depending on who was visiting or the events happening in his life. He would change the décor when he was married or when his children were born. Henry chose which items he wanted displayed and also who saw them, so he was allowing certain people a glimpse into his life. He created his own large cabinet of curiosity using the objects he purchased, obtained, inherited, or was gifted, to create a museum inside one of his favorite palaces.
V. The Abraham Tapestries and Henry’s Self-Identification with Abraham

The Abraham tapestries are a set of ten panels, which weave together the narrative of Abraham from the book of Genesis. The “story of Abraham comprises ten scenes depicting the principle events of Abraham’s life as narrated in Genesis chapters 12 through 24 especially those pertaining to his role as the founder of the Hebrew nation, and the continuation of God’s covenant with Abraham through his son Isaac.”124 While it appears to be just a set of tapestries with religious meaning, it actually unveils Henry VIII’s self-identification with Abraham. The tapestries were woven in Brussels around 1540. For most of the 16th century, “Brussels was the center of high quality tapestry manufacturing in the low countries, and rich patrons all over Europe keenly sought its goods. Brussels was the place to get the best tapestries.”125 The tapestries are attributed to Pieter Coeck Van Aelst. Van Aelst lived from 1502 to 1550 and was “renowned throughout Renaissance Europe as a draftsman, painter, and publisher of architectural treatises.”126 According to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Van Aelst was designing marvelous tapestries and only the wealthiest of clients were purchasing the pieces. Some of the people who purchased tapestries from Van Aelst were “Emperor Charles V, King Francis I of France, King Henry VIII of England, and Grand Duke Cosimo I de’Medici of Tuscany.”127 Van Aelst died young, at 48, but was regarded as one of the “greatest Netherlandish artists of the sixteenth century. His paintings and drawings, initially wrought in the style of the Antwerp Mannerists,

124 Campbell, Thomas P. 284.
125 Ibid, 282.
evolved through his enthusiastic response to Italian Renaissance design, and influenced
generations of artists in his wake.”  

It took two years to create all ten panels and the exact measurements of the tapestries are 482.0cm by 770cm. The tapestries are attributed to Van Aelst but were woven in William Pannemaker’s workshop. It is believed that Pannemaker created them after looking at designs by Van Aelst. The set is made out of woven wool and silk with gilt metal wrapped thread. The ten panels are depicting scenes from the life of Abraham. Each panel represents a different part of the story of Abraham. The ten scenes depicted are:

1. The Departure of Abraham
2. The Return of Sarah
3. The Separation of Abraham and Lot
4. The Meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek
5. God Appears to Abraham
6. The Circumcision of Isaac and the Expulsion of Hagar
7. The Sacrifice of Isaac
8. The Purchase of the Field of Ephron
9. The Oath and Departure of Eliezer
10. Eliezer and Rebekah at the Well

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128 Ibid.
130 Campbell, Thomas P. 299.
The Abraham set reveal a lot about Henry VIII and how he did not mind spending large amounts of money on tapestries. Henry VIII commissioned the set after the birth of his son, Edward, and since he was Henry’s only living male heir, no expense was too great. When Charles I was executed in 1649, the royal collection was valued and the Abraham set was priced at £8,260. If compared to prices today, the tapestries would have cost £3,480,410.47. According to the National Archives in London, for the same price in the 1540, the cost of the Abraham tapestries could have paid for 275,333 skilled tradesmen’s daily wages. It was a “phenomenal amount money and [it] made [the tapestries] the most valuable items in the collection. It was the single most expensive item that Henry owned.” The Abraham tapestries were valuable to Henry for multiple reasons. The first was because they were beautiful tapestries that were awe inspiring to royal guests and visitors. The other and more symbolic reason was because the tapestries connected back to the story of Abraham. Henry “may have conceived this and its Old Testament patriarchal subject matter as particularly powerful in the context of his own political situation: following the break with Rome in 1530, the establishment of the Church of England, and the dissolution of the monasteries. Henry may have used the Story of Abraham and the covenant with God as a means of legitimizing his own direct God given rule.” When Henry’s third wife, Jane Seymour, gave birth to Edward in 1537, Henry had the Abraham tapestries commissioned as a way to celebrate the arrival of his son and heir. The set “celebrated the arrival of his son but it was also a very public statement about the legitimacy of his new role,

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132 Historic Royal Palaces. "Great Hall: Discover the Magnificent Heart of the Tudor Palace."
leader of God’s reinvented chosen people.”

Henry viewed that the break with Rome and the birth of his only living male heir were connected. Henry’s prayers were being answered by God. Henry believed that God was approving of his decision to break with Rome and create his own Church of England with the birth of his son, Edward. God was answering Henry’s prayers after getting rid of the Pope’s rule in England and creating a Protestant nation.

When viewing the Abraham tapestries, Henry connected the most to Abraham due to his covenant with God and Abraham’s son, Isaac. Similar to Henry, Abraham had his son late in life. Abraham, founder of the Hebrew nation and first of the great patriarchs, was the Old Testament model most congenial for Henry as he sought to establish a new Church of England centered on the Tudor dynasty. Chosen for a covenant of God, Abraham served as a prototype for the exalted role that the increasingly delusional king was now asserting for himself: he was the consecrated king of England, the spiritual and secular leader of his people. This analogy would have been additionally appealing in the late 1530s and early 1540s because, with the birth of Prince Edward in 1537, Henry finally had an heir, just as Genesis established Abraham’s undisputed succession through Isaac.

There are many examples found throughout the Abraham tapestries that highlight the connection Henry VIII had to the story of Abraham. The first is in the sixth panel, The Circumcision of Isaac and the Expulsion of Hagar. The panel looks at the “rejection of Hagar and the first-born child, Ishmael, in favor of a legitimate successor Isaac.” It resonated the most with Henry’s situation with his other children, Mary and Elizabeth. Before Edward was born, Henry’s eldest daughter Mary was technically the next in line for the throne. However, Henry did not believe a female could rule England and Mary was also a Catholic, which would

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136 BBC. "The Story of Abraham Tapestries at Hampton Court."
137 Ibid.
138 Campbell, Thomas P. 289.
139 Ibid, 293.
undermine all the work Henry had done making himself the head of the Church of England and making the English subjects Protestant.\textsuperscript{140} He believed that God approved of his decision to break away from Rome, so he did not want his Catholic daughter breaking his covenant with God. The sixth panel was “pregnant with meaning for Henry and his courtiers in regard to the predicament of Princess Mary following the birth of Prince Edward.”\textsuperscript{141} Another example can be found in the eighth panel, The Purchase of the Field of Ephron. The viewer finds Abraham purchasing “the field of Ephron as a burial place for himself and his wife.”\textsuperscript{142} This connects to Henry VIII, who in the late 1530s, early 1540s was trying to make plans for his own burial and was wanting an elaborate tomb created for his resting place.\textsuperscript{143} The King had envisioned an ornate tomb, when in reality, he still rests in a crypt located inside St. George’s Chapel at


In Henry VIII’s will, he declared that his successor would be his son, Edward VI and then his lawful heirs would follow. Only if Edward died and he had no lawful heirs would Mary become Queen. Minority and “female rule were topics that provoked irrational fears and stereotyped impulses in a deeply patriarchal society. The rule of a male minor was much easier to accept that of a woman.” 51. Before Edward died he tried to find another ruler who would not undo the Protestant work he had continued from his father, knowing that Mary Tudor, his sister was Catholic. After he died and his plan did not work, Mary succeeded to the throne at age 37. Her reign was short, only lasting five years and during that time she wanted England to go back to Catholicism. There were more rebellions due to the Protestants not agreeing with the changes, which caused more religious turmoil. She never had a child, so when she died, the throne went to her sister, Elizabeth.

\textsuperscript{141} Campbell, Thomas P. 293.

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid.
Windsor Castle. His tomb marker reads, “In a vault beneath this marble slab are deposited the remains of Jane Seymour Queen of King Henry VIII, 1537, King Henry VIII 1547, King Charles I 1648, and infant child of Queen Anne.” Henry VIII, like his father, Henry VII, had envisioned a grand burial site, but in reality, has remained in St. George’s Chapel and shares it with other monarchs and queens. Finally, the ninth panel depicts The Oath and Departure of Eliezer. In view “of Henry’s failing health from the late 1530s and the possibility he would die before Edward reached his majority, the demonstration of Eliezer’s loyalty in the final panels of the series must have been a model that Henry hoped his senior counselors would heed.” While there are similarities between Henry and the tapestries, like Henry fearing his covenant with God would be broken if Mary was Queen and also planning a lavish burial tomb, there remains the question of why and how the tapestries were commissioned. Some scholars believe the tapestries were created due to the birth of Edward, while others believe the tapestries were created as a type of propaganda. Henry wanted to show royal guests and ambassadors that he was the divinely-anointed king. If he commissioned a tapestry that shows a biblical figure and guests saw the connection between Abraham and Henry it could be seen as a type of propaganda. Especially during the time when Henry was dealing with religious turmoil and the English Reformation after creating a new Protestant church. According to author Thomas Campbell, who has done

144 Victoria and Albert Museum. "The Wolsey Angels Saved for the Nation." V&A. Accessed April 14, 2020. http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/w/wolsey-angels-appeal/. Henry VIII had always wanted to have an elaborate tomb for when he died to symbolize the great ruler he was. When Cardinal Wolsey died, Henry VIII acquired the items that Wolsey had intended to use at his tomb, including marble pillars and bronze angels. The tomb was not finished by the time Henry VIII died in 1547 so he was placed in St. George’s Chapel at Windsor Castle with his third wife, Jane Seymour. His body was going to be moved once the original tomb was finished, but it never was, so he has remained inside the Chapel at Windsor.

145 Photo taken by self at a Windsor Castle Visit in 2019

146 Campbell, Thomas P. 293.
extensive research on tapestries owned by Henry VIII, “even though the exact process whereby
the Abraham set was conceived remains in question, the date at which the set entered the English
royal collection, the relevance of the subject matter to Henry at the time, any extraordinary
richness and sale of the tapestries leave little doubt that it was intended to celebrate and promote
the parallels between Abraham and Henry, and the continuation in the person of his son, Prince
Edward, of the virtues that Henry embodied.”

The Abraham tapestries would have been delivered to Hampton Court sometime between
Autumn 1543 and early 1544. During that time, Hampton Court was undergoing vast
developments and the only room that could have accommodated “the set as a whole was the
Great Hall. It was built during the mid 1530s and the tapestries do indeed fit snugly beneath the
windows. Assuming that the tapestries may have been hung edge to edge and draped back
around doorways, rather than place to either side, it is conceivable that the entire set may have
been intended to hang in the Great Hall on ceremonial occasions, or in the sequence of state
rooms, now destroyed, that led from the Hall to the presence chamber.” The Abraham
tapestries are still hanging in the Great Hall at Hampton Court today. While the colors have
faded, there are still vibrant hues of green, blue, red, brown, tan, and gold resonating and still
being just as awe-inspiring to guests today as they were in the 16th century. Henry VIII intended
the tapestries to be on display for guests and royal workers, and today the display is still drawing
crowds. Tourists from all over the world flock to London and Hampton Court to see the home of
the famous Tudor King. The palace and the tapestries have become a museum and are

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147 Ibid, 297.
149 Campbell, Thomas P. 297.
showcasing what Henry VIII felt was important. His palace, Hampton Court, was filled with his own collections and artwork, making it his own cabinet of curiosity, on display for us today.
VI. Lasting Impact

After evaluating the Abraham tapestries and how Henry VIII valued Hampton Court Palace, I have come to the conclusion that Henry used his palace as his own cabinet of curiosity. He used his palace as a showroom, highlighting the tapestries and other items that were important to him. The Abraham tapestries were a celebration of his son, Edward, and how Henry connected to the story of Abraham. He recognized himself as an Abraham of his people and connected to the story of Abraham and Isaac. In Henry’s eyes, Edward was similar to Isaac. He was the first male heir, born late in life, and was securing the kings role as God’s anointed ruler. God had gifted Abraham a son because he approved of the work Abraham was doing with his people. Henry viewed that Edward was born because God approved of Henry making himself head of the Church of England and for making the country Protestant.

Hampton Court was used as a cabinet of curiosity, but was not open to the general public until the 19th century. Henry chose who was allowed inside the palace walls and he wanted the décor and items to make a statement. In contemporary museum terms, he was the director, curator, and interpreter. He wanted to show that he and the English crown were wealthy and from that wealth were ready for any event or battle. It was a way to intimidate foreign ambassadors and guests and show that England was powerful. While evidence supporting the idea that other nations saw England as powerful based on monetary expenditures may remain inconclusive, it can be inferred that all kings and queens wanted to make their country seem the most powerful as a way to stave off foreign threats. One way to intimidate other royals was to show that the crown had enough money to support the country both in aid and war efforts. Due to Henry purchasing the expensive Abraham Tapestries and other sets, it solidified that the crown was secure.
While there have been enormous amounts of work done on the inventories of Henry VIII, there has not been as much scholarly writing about different aspects of the 1547 inventory. It is largely studied as a whole, but rarely broken down and analyzed. Despite the “gigantic number of tapestries dispersed around the royal palaces and documentary evidence of the enormous sums that Henry spent on key sets, the royal tapestry collection has received scant attention in the studies of the Tudor kings.”¹⁵⁰ There has also never been a comparison to cabinets of curiosity. Hampton Court can be considered a museum, showing how past kings and queens lived, how different architectural designs were formed, and what it was like living as royalty in a magnificent palace. If it is considered a museum today, it should also be seen as one for Henry VIII’s reign. He selected items to be displayed for guests and made sure to pick ones that would show off importance and wealth. Today, museums pick items depending on which exhibits are happening and what time of year it is. They also choose which items to draw attention to depending on the person the item belonged to or the time period the exhibit is showcasing. Henry was demonstrating the same behavior, well before the first museum was created in Great Britain in 1677. He was using his items and tapestries to create his own cabinet of curiosity and his own museum.

This study of Hampton Court Palace, the Abraham tapestries, and cabinets of curiosity is important to the field because it is essential to recognize that just because Henry VIII was not advertising his collection to the entire public, does not mean it was not a collection that he wanted people to see. From royal guests to servants, people saw the tapestries. He had them on display. It is critical to examine the tapestries because “fewer than 30 tapestries remain from this once great collection. They are astonishing survivors that still give the best impression of how the

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, x.
palace would have looked in Henry’s day.” While historians and Hampton Court Palace employees are maintaining and preserving the Abraham set and other tapestries, there could be a time when they lose even more pigmentation. It takes ten years to restore one panel of the Abraham set, so preservation is having to continuously happen every year. The tapestries are a window into the world of what Hampton Court Palace was like when Henry VIII was king. Like museums, the objects tell the tales of the owners and what the time period was like. We can learn the most about a place or a person by what items they were purchasing or showcasing. It shows their personalities and what was viewed as most important to them. Hampton Court Palace is Henry VIII, and Henry made sure to leave behind the tapestries and objects that tell the story of his reign, the determination for a son, the birth of Edward, and his decision to break away from Rome which changed the English history trajectory. Henry VIII made sure to leave behind his legacy through objects and tapestries, inside his favorite palace Hampton Court, and created the first museum without knowing it.

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151 *Official Hampton Court Palace Guidebook.*
Images of the Abraham Tapestries

Images courtesy of Historic Royal Palaces

Figure One: The Departure of Abraham

Figure Two: The Return of Sarah
Figure Three: The Separation of Abraham and Lot

Figure Four: The Meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek
Figure Five: God Appears to Abraham

Figure Six: The Circumcision of Isaac and the Expulsion of Hagar
Figure Seven: The Sacrifice of Isaac

Figure Eight: The Purchase of the Field of Ephron
Figure Nine: The Oath and Departure of Eliezer

Figure Ten: Eliezer and Rebekah at the Well
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