

# About Time! Understanding the symbolic imagery in a 1581 Renaissance portrait of Sir Christopher Hatton.

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PLATE 1: Obverse of panel

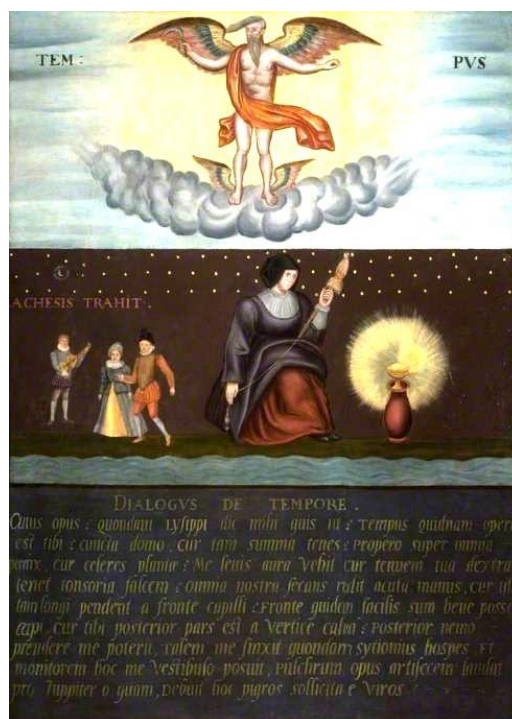


PLATE 2: Reverse of panel

## Abstract

This unusual double-sided panel painting (Northampton Museums and Gallery services Accession No. 1928-29.19) features Sir Christopher Hatton's portrait on the obverse within a pictorial schema of the astrological ecliptic (PLATE 1).

The reverse painting (PLATE 2) is a meditation upon and an exploration of time. It depicts *Tempus* amongst clouds, a violinist with a dancing couple, a waning crescent moon in a starry firmament, the Fate *Lachesis* with thread spinning tools, a brilliantly shining oil-lamp upon a short baluster, and a flowing river by a green bank. A Latin text, '*Dialogus de Tempore*', beneath all the images, simulates a Socratic dialogue between the viewer and *Tempus*: Time personified. The text's origin is explored and the actual source used by the calligrapher is identified in Pomponio Gaurici's work of 1541.

Although partly described by previous commentators, the actual meanings of the pictorial symbols and their interrelationships were unexplained. Systematic analysis of the images reveals implicit references to the threefold ancient Greek concepts of Time and their presiding deities: *Chronos*, *Aion* and *Kairos*, along with the metaphysics of the Classical elements, Cosmic harmony and the Eternal. The Elizabethan viewer is reminded of the function, philosophy and metaphysical meaning of music and dance as well as receiving encouragement in the personal quest for knowledge, wisdom and enlightenment. The viewer is implored to appreciate and grasp temporal opportunities that optimise the brief human lifespan.