
Some Visual Aspects of the Monarchical Tradition

by Peter Trepanier

The Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 occurred in the midst of the gradual transformation of the old British Empire into the new Commonwealth of Nations. Constitutionally the adoption of a shared monarchy among autonomous nations was a relatively simple procedure made possible by such acts as the Royal Style and Titles Act of 1953. The task of transmitting this new reality into the consciousness of citizens was a greater challenge. This article looks at two initiatives intended to extend the notion of shared status beyond its legal dimension. The first was the Canadian tour of the Coronation Robes under the administrative responsibility of the National Gallery of Canada in 1954-55; the second was the opening of Canada's Parliament in 1957 by Queen Elizabeth II.

The Coronation of Elizabeth II, held on June 2, 1953, coincided with the beginning of television broadcasting and became the medium's first global production. The impact of television made royal pageants accessible in an immediate and vivid way. An estimated 27 million people in the United Kingdom watched the Coronation live, and hundreds of millions of people around the world watched filmed coverage of the ceremony within hours of live transmission in their homes on their newly purchased, rented, or shared black-and-white television sets. Elizabeth II's decision to allow television coverage of her Coronation, the pinnacle in a monarch's life, established the importance of the new medium in orchestrating royal ceremonial events from

then on. The Queen has since become the world's most recognizable and enduring media figure.

The dress she wore for the Coronation is among the most famous gowns of the twentieth century. Designed by Norman Hartnell, it was intended to focus on the wearer's presence in a glittering masterpiece of state pageantry and had to hold centre stage, competing against a riot of brilliant ecclesiastical and ceremonial robes, as well as bright television lighting. The gown was intended to signify that the one physical person wearing it is the embodiment of eleven countries. As such, the dress was an atlas of the Queen's realms.

The Coronation dress was made of white satin and was lavishly embroidered with gold and silver thread, as well as precious and semi-precious jewels. The embroidery incorporated the floral emblems of the United Kingdom and the Dominions of which Elizabeth II was Queen. The flowers of the eleven Commonwealth countries were intertwined in a floral garland, each flower or leaf nestling around the Tudor rose. Canada was represented by a maple leaf made of green silk and gold bullion thread veined with crystal. The dress was so heavily laden with jewels that it had to be lined with taffeta and reinforced with a horsehair crinoline, thereby making it hang

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straight without any distortion of the emblems and dispersing its weight so that it was easier to wear. As the Queen moved, her dress appeared light and delicate, shifting in gradations of colour from palest pink, to pale mauve, to soft green - yet the general effect was one of brilliant whiteness: the Queen glittered from head to toe in gold and a blaze of diamonds. The dress enhanced the drama. The Queen dazzled everyone as she glided by in an enchanted aura of majesty and splendour.

Elizabeth II was the first monarch to be styled and crowned Head of the Commonwealth. This new designation prompted the Commonwealth countries whose Head of State was Elizabeth II to pass appropriate legislation, before her Coronation, recognizing the monarch of the United Kingdom as their own within their respective parliaments. In Canada the legal embodiment for this change, *The Royal Style and Titles Act*, was approved by the Canadian Parliament and was established by Royal Proclamation on May 29, 1953. The Act conferred legally and publicly, on the eve of the Queen's Coronation, the principle of a distinct constitutional monarchy for Canada. Elizabeth II was equally Queen of Canada and the United Kingdom. The monarch remained shared, but the institution of monarchy had now evolved into independent constitutional entities. The Coronation also provided another opportunity to affirm the concept of the Crown's multiplicity, despite there being only one monarch. Although there was no hesitation among the Queen's realms in showing allegiance to their sovereign by appearing at her Coronation, their lack of official participation in the ceremony itself proclaimed to the world, in a dignified yet visible fashion, their status as equal, independent, and autonomous constitutional monarchies and their united belief that this was a religious ceremony of consecration unique to their sovereign's oldest realm, the United Kingdom. The British government was hoping that the Coronation would be an opportunity to use the presence of Commonwealth representatives to affirm its own position on the world stage. The Dominions, however, were reaffirming publicly to the international community their political independence from the British government even though the Statute of Westminster, passed in 1931, had granted the former colonies full legal independence and had declared that the British and Dominion parliaments were equal in status. Britain had to reconcile itself to the fact that it no longer had elevated status within the Commonwealth and that their queen was now equally, officially, and explicitly queen of separate, autonomous realms.

A monarch's supreme celebration is the Coronation. The significance of the changes resulting from the concept of a multinational crown and the reluctance of over-

seas governments to participate in the Coronation ceremony were not lost on the Queen. Elizabeth II understood instinctively the political and social values of monarchical display. She saw the potential of television to unite her realms by showing her person as the continuing embodiment of the elusive concept of monarchy. Three hundred years earlier, the first Elizabeth willingly cooperated with her courtiers to lend her presence to public occasions, thereby enriching the experience for her subjects. She cannily established and controlled her image and, not coincidentally, her reign benefited politically by her astute grasp of the power of costume and pageantry. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Edward VII eagerly participated in the royal spectacle as a way of strengthening the link between monarch and people. As Prince of Wales, George V, Edward VII's son and heir, believed that his royal tours in the Empire would further strengthen the sovereign's personal bond with the people, a connection that would rise above governments and politics. If television had the potential to link the Queen's overseas realms to their monarch in an imaginative and emotional way, the Queen in turn wanted to strengthen that multinational bond by opening her overseas parliaments in her Coronation dress and by exhibiting artifacts from her Coronation.

Exhibition of Coronation Robes and Regalia

Under the authorization of the Queen, the Commonwealth Relations Office proposed an exhibition of the Queen's coronation robes to the high commissioners, who in turn presented it to their governments. Canada responded informally "that if Her Majesty approves having the robes shown in Canada, they will be very welcome indeed."¹ As with the Coronation, a working committee composed of representatives from both the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth met on several occasions to discuss a timetable, the responsibilities of the parties, the costs and financial arrangements, and the content. An exhibition tour was approved by the cabinets of New Zealand, Australia, and Canada, starting in New Zealand and Australia, to coincide with the Queen's post-Coronation tour of those countries. The Canadian government assigned the National Gallery of Canada responsibility for all administrative arrangements while the exhibition was in Canada. From July 2, 1954 to January 10, 1955, the *Coronation Robes and Regalia* exhibition toured Canada's national and provincial capitals and also went to Montreal, Canada's largest city at the time. The length of the show varied from two days to two weeks, depending on the site; 162,210 people attended. The Commonwealth Relations Office supplied suggested plans, staging directions, and captions. The exhi-



Coronation Robes and Regalia Exhibition, National Gallery of Canada, July 1954

(Photo: National Film Board of Canada) Courtesy National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives. Exh. Number 710



bition was self-financed, although the National Gallery absorbed travel expenses for Gallery staff. A small admission charge (25¢ for adults and 10¢ for children) was encouraged to help defray costs. As requested, Canada donated the proceeds \$2,665 (£969.10) to the Westminster Abbey restoration fund.

The exhibition included several robes worn during the Coronation ceremony, furnishings used in the Abbey, and replicas (used in the rehearsals) of the Crown Jewels. The Coronation dress was not included because the Queen was wearing it to open the various parliaments during her post-Coronation tour. The Canadian portion of the tour also did not include the Red Crimson, or Parliamentary, Robe, which was needed in London by the Queen for the opening of the British Parliament that autumn. Organizers at the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto were hoping to add the Coronation dress to the exhibits, but their request was refused. The Queen would be wearing the dress at the opening of the various parliaments during her post-Coronation Commonwealth tour. Among the highlights of the Canadian exhibit were the following:

- The Robe of Estate, also known as the Coronation Robe, was worn by the Queen for her journey back to the Palace following the ceremony at Westminster Abbey. It is 20 yards long and made of purple velvet, lined with silk, with a Canadian ermine cape and border. Embroidered in gold filigree is a design of corn and olive sprays, denoting peace and prosperity. The

robe was installed under a gold canopy, which was held over the Queen during her anointing in the Coronation service.

- The Supertunica is a long coat of gold cloth, with wide flowing arms, and is a copy of a Roman consul's dress uniform. It was worn by the Queen after the anointing and for the crowning.
- The Duke of Edinburgh's Robe was woven in crimson velvet, edged with miniver, and "powdered" with four bars of ermine, the number of bars designating the rank of duke. The Coronet consists of silver gilt and a cap of crimson velvet, with ermine and a gold tassel in the centre. Above the circlet are eight gold strawberry leaves, again denoting the rank of duke.

The National Gallery clearly regarded the exhibition as a duty. A perfunctory press release that emphasized the constitutional and educational aspects of the exhibition signalled the Gallery's ambivalence towards the show's merits as an esthetic event:

For most Canadians, who were able to follow the Coronation only through the medium of the radio, television and the film, this will be a unique opportunity of seeing at first hand and close-up some of the objects associated with that memorable day. In a way, this exhibition is an informal recognition of the constitutional fact that Elizabeth II is Queen of Canada, as well as the United Kingdom, and that as Canadians we have a direct interest in her coronation. For the younger generation particularly, the objects on view and the explanatory publication accompanying them will do much towards promoting an understanding of its historical and religious significance.²

New Zealand and Australia published catalogues for the exhibition, but Canada did not. *Most Excellent Majesty*, an explanatory publication by Dermot Morrah, was selected to accompany the exhibition.³ It was not a catalogue but rather an account of the historical and constitutional position of the monarchy.

Local newspapers announced the exhibition when it arrived in their city; some provided a checklist and photographs. The items displayed included the vestments of the Queen's office and recalled a pilgrimage of relics for viewing and veneration. After all, the vestments were used in a divine rite, a solemn religious ceremony; they were not simply remnants of pageantry. However, the Coronation had taken place over a year earlier in a distant country that few Canadians had ever visited, and although the exhibition may have sparked an interest, it was unable to sustain the impact of the televised ceremony. The Gallery's neutral stance in promoting the event, along with the remoteness of time and place, compromised the experience. In spite of the large attendance, the exhibition was an event that passed without much notice.

Royal Visit of 1957

The euphoria did last for the post-Coronation tour of 1953-1954. Large crowds lined the streets and filled the squares to see the radiant young Queen. In the capitals of Ceylon (Sri Lanka), New Zealand, and Australia, the Queen established a precedent by wearing her Coronation dress and by opening Parliament, as their Queen, in a Commonwealth that celebrated modernity and equality over hierarchy and tradition. A few years later, Dermot Morrah offered this commentary on royal visits to the Commonwealth:

One object of a royal tour is to give the people visited their fair share of the panoply and pageantry of state ceremonial, by which monarchical society is so largely nourished.

There are processions in the streets, reviews of troops, state banquets and speeches. If possible what has been described above as the most solemn act after a coronation is repeated in the capitals overseas. That is to say that the political timetable is so adjusted that the opening of a new session co-incides with the Queen's visit; and then she opens Parliament in state, with a very close imitation of the ancient ceremonial at Westminster.⁴

Those familiar displays of monarchy were intended to give an impression of nobility, stability, and continuity in a period of constitutional change. Despite their respect for the Royal Family, Commonwealth leaders were not to be dissuaded from asserting the independence and autonomy of their nations. The Queen's strong sense of

duty and instinctive understanding of her role led her to reflect those changes.

In 1953 there was speculation that the Queen would go to Canada to open Parliament in formal recognition of her new constitutional position as Canada's Queen. The opportunity came when she was invited to visit the United States in October of 1957 to mark the occasion of the 350th anniversary of Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in North America. Plans were already under way for a royal tour of Canada to mark the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959. However, the Canadian government believed that every official transatlantic flight should include a visit to Canada, and as the Queen was to visit the United States that autumn, the government wanted to invite her to open Parliament as Queen of Canada. Elizabeth II opened our twenty-third Parliament on Canadian Thanksgiving Monday, October 14, 1957. She was the first reigning monarch to do so. Dressed in her Coronation dress, the Queen of Canada read the speech from her Canadian throne written by her Canadian government.

Local newspapers reported that people arrived early that morning on Parliament Hill, with their folding chairs and sandwich lunches, to guarantee a good viewing spot for the ceremony, which was scheduled to begin at 3:00 p.m. An estimated crowd of 50,000 lined the streets and Parliament Hill. The daily papers recounted the day in saccharine and obsequious prose, peppered with nostalgic imperial and colonial references.

It was a brilliant warm autumn day, where mother nature "splashed sunshine about in a joyous burst of royal weather" under a "sky as blue as the ribbon of the Order of the Garter" and with "the very Red Ensign [then Canada's unofficial flag] starched flat against the sky by a sharp wind out of the west." The local population watched as guests arrived in evening dress in a "picture reminiscent of a royal court... And there she was - the diamond circlet of tiara flashing, the blue ribbon of the Garter clearly visible on her shoulder, and the sunshine touching her neck where her Coronation dress dipped at the back." As the Queen "swept" through the main gates of Parliament Hill in an open state carriage, with a Royal Canadian Mounted Police escort, the guns roared their royal salute and the bells pealed from the Peace Tower. The royal couple reached the steps at the entrance to the Parliament Buildings, where the Prime Minister stood to welcome them under an archway. They stepped out of their coach and onto a dais, turning to the crowd who gasped at the sight of the dress and jewels as the band played *God Save the Queen*.⁵

The Queen's visit was the outstanding ceremonial and social event of the year in Ottawa.

The next evening the Queen wore another Hartnell creation, "The Maple-Leaf-of-Canada" dress, to a state dinner at Government House. The gown was pale green satin, the skirt edged with a broad garland consisting of deep-green velvet maple leaves appliquéd with crystals and emeralds representing our national emblem. The state gown embodied the Queen's status as the Queen of Canada. Afterwards, the dress was donated to the country and now forms part of the collection of the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

The Queen wanted to recall her Coronation to her overseas realms and dressed for Parliament to show that she was equally Queen of Canada and Queen of the United Kingdom. She could not say it but she could dress it. Her Coronation dress underscored the fact that she was Queen of many realms. Was the gesture too subtle and therefore not understood? Or did it mark the beginning of grudging indifference and ambivalence toward the royal presence in Canada?

In carrying out her ceremonial duties, the Queen chooses clothes that reflect the dignity of the bearer and the importance of the occasion. Her state gowns project splendour and majesty. They are meant to be clearly seen and to create a sense of awe. The silhouettes are well defined, and the sumptuous fabrics and glittering jewellery are clearly visible from a distance. In Canada, the travelling exhibition of her Coronation Robes and the Queen's wearing of her Coronation Dress to open Parliament were diplomatic gestures intended to reflect and to reinforce her constitutional right to reign. Although the crowds in attendance may have delighted in witnessing this display of royal dress, the performance of monarchy still had to maintain a precarious balance between a queen who is head of state and a country wary of ostentation and suspicious of deference. Canadian journalist June Callwood openly questioned the extent of royal habit and sentiment in Canada in her coverage of the four-day visit for *Maclean's Magazine*:

The Queen's role in Canada, it appeared to some observers, hinged on calculated pageantry, just enough to warm the pride of Canadians who revere tradition and stateliness above state but not so much as to antagonize those who consider royalty a blindingly off-color bauble in an age of lean fear.

To an increasing number of Canadians, the Coronation Dress and the exhibition of the Coronation Robes recalled a British crown rather than a newly independent Canadian one. The government was well aware of growing ambivalence towards the crown in Canada and consequently trod carefully in affirming its constitutional relationship with the monarch. The "maple crown" had yet to emboss its image upon the collective imagination.

Notes

1. Telegram No. 1378, from N.A. Robertson (High Commissioner for Canada, London, England) to J.W. Pickersgill (Secretary of State for External Affairs), 6 August 1953, National Gallery of Canada Archives, National Gallery of Canada fonds, Exhibition in Gallery, 5.5C Coronation Robes - Regalia Exhibition (File 1).
2. National Gallery of Canada Archives, National Gallery of Canada fonds, Exhibition in Gallery, 5.5C Coronation Robes - Regalia Exhibition (File 2).
3. See Dermot Morrah, *Most Excellent Majesty*, London: Central Office of Information, 1953.
4. Dermot Morrah, *The Work of the Queen*, London: William Kimber, 1958, pp. 187-188.
5. *Ottawa Citizen* and *Ottawa Journal*, October 14 and 15, 1957. See also Sylvia Seeley, "Royal Visit - 1957," *Canadian Geographical Journal* vol 55 no. 6 (December, 1957) pp. 206-231.
6. June Callwood, "June Callwood's Story of the Queen's Visit," *Maclean's Magazine* vol 70 (December, 1957) p. 16.