# Chivalry and the Perfect Prince

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# CHIVALRY & *the* PERFECT PRINCE

## Tournaments, Art, and Armor at the Spanish Habsburg Court

**BRADEN FRIEDER**

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# Preface

The origin of this book was a visit to the Royal Armory in Madrid. As a young history student, I was attracted to the suits of decorated armor made for Emperor Charles V and his son, Philip II of Spain. Renaissance princes wore decorated armors not only for protection, but also as status symbols. I was intrigued by the idea that these suits of armor were really costumes for a kind of royal theater in which the ruler appeared to his people as the descendant of ancient gods and Christian heroes. The stages on which the prince acted out this role were the tournaments, state entries, and military campaigns of the Renaissance. The actors in these events commissioned armor and other artworks specifically for these occasions, their collective iconography expressing Renaissance ideas of the perfect prince. This common vocabulary of chivalric imagery was linked to historical events and to the unique problems faced by the Habsburg regime. By the middle of the sixteenth century, European monarchs rarely led their own troops into battle, though the worth of a ruler was still conceptualized in military terms. The ruling dynasty used the visual language of the tournament and martial display to symbolically affirm the legitimacy of their rule and the identity of the prince as a divinely appointed deliverer.

When I began my study, I found that, although there is a fair amount of literature on the connoisseurship of Renaissance armor, relatively little had been published on the context and meaning of these splendid artifacts. Shifting my research to courtly spectacle and festival art in the sixteenth century, I found that books and articles in recent years have tended to sideline the tournaments that accompanied the ceremonial entries of visiting princes. A closer examination of Renaissance spectacle shows that the tournament in the sixteenth century was not peripheral to the royal entry, but central to it. A search through the available literature on tournaments provided better hunting, but the main object of the chase still proved elusive. Compared to the large volume of material published on military history, only a handful of books were devoted to the tournament itself. For the most part, these studies focused on medieval tournaments, with the Renaissance tournament treated as a kind of denouement. This

seems strange indeed, considering that the tournament as an art form reached its apogee in the Renaissance. The tournaments held at the courts of sixteenth-century European monarchs were unsurpassed in size and splendor, and were remembered in these terms by contemporary writers on the subject. Their descriptions proved to be the most fruitful primary sources for my study, and form the basis for this book.

As Malcolm Vale points out in *War and Chivalry*, the comparative lack of interest in later chivalry can probably be traced to the writings of the cultural historian Johan Huizinga (1872–1945). Echoing the German philosopher Hegel, Huizinga believed every age in history was pervaded by its own fundamental spirit that determined all forms of cultural life. In the late Middle Ages, when the tournament-as-spectacle took shape at the courts of Burgundy and Flanders, the spirit of the age, according to Huizinga, was one of decadence and decline. This view continues to inform much of the current scholarship on chivalry and tournaments. Modern historians have also emphasized the widening gap between chivalry and real life at the end of the Middle Ages. People living in the Renaissance, however, were unaware that chivalry was in decline. The *Jouvencel*, based on a fourteenth-century manual of knighthood, went through five printed editions between 1493 and 1529. The tournament was still alive and well at the courts of Queen Elizabeth and King James of Scotland at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Apart from religion, chivalry remained the strongest of all ethical considerations, particularly among the ruling classes. Contemporary views on the subject are suggested by a curious incident alleged to have taken place following the Battle of Pavia in 1525. Emperor Charles V, exasperated with Francis I for breaking an oath taken as a condition of his release from captivity after the battle, challenged the king to personal combat as a way of settling their differences. Knightly warfare may have been out of date, but chivalric values were not.

The visual arts provide another invaluable source of information on the aristocratic ideals of warfare and the tournament in the sixteenth century. Renaissance artists were closely attuned to the needs of their patrons, and provided portraits and other artworks designed to appeal to their self-image. As the imperial family, the Habsburgs patronized some of the finest painters, sculptors, and armorers of the Renaissance. The imagery used to decorate Habsburg armor and artworks depicting important people wearing it was not simply arbitrary, but filled with constructed meanings pointing to the larger Habsburg agenda. In many cases, these artworks can be tied to sixteenth-century current events. Studied together in their original context, art and armor began to make more sense. Recent studies by Alan Young and others suggest a change in the air, and have returned to the tournament as an integral part of a wider spectrum of chivalric life and culture, which lost none of its

vitality in the Renaissance. Tournaments at the Spanish Habsburg court, however, are still understudied. It is to address these areas that this book was undertaken.

# Acknowledgments

A great number of people have assisted me in developing this project over the years, far too many to acknowledge here. First, I thank Andy Mancuso and Howard Rodee for encouraging an early interest. Funding for my preliminary research at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and travel to Europe was provided in part by grants from the Shorger Fund for Studies in Italian Art. In Spain, I would like to thank the staff at the Archivo General de Simancas, especially Dra. Isabel Aguirre Landa, for her help in navigating the labyrinth. I am forever indebted to Dr. Alvaro Soler del Campo, director of the Royal Armory in Madrid, who patiently stood by and answered all my questions while I photographed the armors under his care. In Italy, my thanks go to the staff of the Biblioteca Nazionale and the reading room at the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi in Florence. The staff at the Archivio di Stato and the Biblioteca Braidense, Milan, were also enormously helpful, and fielded both scholarly and nonscholarly questions about getting around in Milan. The work of historians Geoffrey Parker and Henry Kamen was of inestimable value in reconstructing the childhood interests of Philip II. My thanks also to Professors Narciso Menocal, Gail Geiger, and Jane Campbell Hutchison at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, who as members of my dissertation committee read and critiqued my initial research for this book. Silvia Giorgini checked my Italian translations. I would also like to express my appreciation to Professor Steven Orso for his advice and interest in my project. My wife lent constant support and also provided invaluable editorial assistance. And I will always remember Juan Antonio, Rubén, and Víctor for their friendship and encouragement. *Sí, vale la pena.*

# A Note on Sources

The primary sources for Renaissance tournaments are festival books, which are eyewitness accounts published to commemorate the visits of rulers and other important people to major cities in the sixteenth century. Translating this material into something resembling modern English proved an enormous task, though an extremely rewarding one. These accounts often include detailed descriptions of the tournaments and other pageantry that followed the ceremonial entries of Habsburg princes. Festival books themselves were modeled on contemporary chivalric literature, especially the prose cycle of *Amadís of Gaul*, a medieval romance that was eventually published and proved enormously popular in the Renaissance.

Inventories of the possessions of Emperor Charles V and his successor, King Philip II, have also survived, having been placed for safekeeping in the royal archives at Simancas near Valladolid, Spain. These documents were helpful in tracking down tournament armors and related artworks belonging to the emperor and his son. Original account books of the royal household are also preserved in the archives at Simancas. The records of payment are occasionally detailed enough to allow us to link armors and other artworks to specific events, or at least narrow the gap a bit.

The translations in this book are my own. Translation sometimes involves making a compromise between strict grammatical accuracy and conveying the sense of a word or phrase into the target language. Where this was the case, I ask the reader's indulgence for rendering the source into what seemed the appropriate English style.

# About the Author

Braden Frieder is assistant professor of art history at Morehead State University. His research interests range from Renaissance and baroque art to Latin America and the decorative arts. He has published articles in books and journals, and critical reviews on art, music, and cultural history. He received his doctorate in art history from the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

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