

Visions of Utopia

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The British Library, London

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Visions of Utopia celebrates the 500th anniversary of Sir Thomas More's (1478–1535) work of fiction and political philosophy. In this small collection, viewers have the opportunity to press beyond a glimpse at the famous book to consider the genre this narrative about a fictive island inspired – the Utopian novel. Tucked into the [Sir John Ritblat Treasures](#) at the British Library, surrounded by some of the world's most important works of literature, law, religion, and science, *Visions of Utopia* successfully captures what the exhibition describes as the book's "timeless relevance."

Greeted by an enlarged engraving of Sir Thomas More in cap and fur-trimmed gown, spectators stand before the statesman, writer, and philosopher and bow their heads as they peer down into the four glass cases filled with 23 texts that comprise the exhibition. The illuminated cases organize the display to focus on the sixteenth-century world from which More's book emerged, *Utopia's* creation and early translations, followed by books it inspired.

The first case explores life at English court in the sixteenth century beginning with Desiderius Erasmus's 1499 prefatory letter to Henry VIII, "Prosopopeia Britanniae". The document sets a tone of confidants and advisors being neither equals nor friends to the Tudor monarch. The audience learns that the lengthy poem was composed after Erasmus inadvertently arrived at court emptyhanded and the prince recommended that he should craft some prose to demonstrate his gratitude. This is followed by "Rueful Lamentation" on the death of Queen Elizabeth, More's 1503 eulogy and first English poem, and More's "Verses for the coronation of Henry VIII," a suite of Latin poems he wrote in 1509 to express hope that King Henry VIII might usher in a new age of religious devotion, peace, and patronage to humanist learning. While the exhibit explains that More joined the King's Council in 1517 and was later appointed to Lord Chancellor in 1529, non-specialists likely pause when they learn that More was executed for treason in 1539 when the devout Catholic declined to acknowledge Henry VIII as Supreme Head of the Church of England and renounce papal authority. This first section places emphasis on the uneven relationship between intellectuals and the monarch who offered patronage. Where humanist scholars like More and Erasmus gained personal and professional advantage through their work at court, the exhibit reminds onlookers that they served at the pleasure of the crown.

The second case focuses on *Utopia*. A first edition printed in Leuven in 1516 is open to its iconic map of the fictive island. Three translations (German 1524, Italian 1548, and French 1550) are grouped together to show the slow pace at which More's commentary on political, religious, and social customs spread throughout Europe. A careful eye will notice a reader's annotations in the German edition using the Utopian alphabet – a thrill for the lover of marginalia. The first English edition printed in London in 1551 by goldsmith Ralph Robinson, 16 years after More's execution, brings attention back to sixteenth-century life and politics. Dedicated to William Cecil, later Lord Burghley, this edition was printed after civil unrest from enclosure riots throughout England in 1549. The edition is

paired with a letter from the printer to William Cecil dated sometime after 1572. Ralph Robinson was living in poverty and the letter asks Cecil for financial aid. The audience is again struck by this theme of unequal relations between scholars who spread humanistic thinking and the political elite on whom they depended for their livelihoods.

The third case shifts focus onto the influence of Utopian fiction as a literary genre. Examples include Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627) and Margaret Cavendish's *A New Blazing World* (1666). The viewer's attention is no doubt drawn to William Morris's 1893 edition of *Utopia* and his own work of utopian socialism, *News from Nowhere* (1890). Both books are printed by Kelmscott Press with medieval appearance and delightful ornamented borders. However, the true centerpiece of this case is Gilbert Burnet's 1684 edition of *Utopia*. Translated to English from the Latin original, Burnet's edition is unassuming with its simple title page and restrained ornamentation. While the exhibition might have included more detail about Burnet's history of voicing political criticism, this edition arrived at a time when England was working to reconcile recent political struggles – not entirely unlike Ralph Robinson's translation over a century earlier. Moving swiftly through substantial timespans, the exhibition effectively underscores the longevity and influence of More's ideas by weaving translation, reproduction, and genre together from its inception to the late-nineteenth century.

The fourth case brings together modern interpretations of the Utopian novel. With a shift into the twentieth century, the exhibit transitions towards darker political fictions including Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* (1949). These authors expand on More's subjects of political influence, education, religion, and cultivating citizens, to include modern anxieties about identity loss, surveillance, and the destructive powers of violence. The viewer can easily connect these enduring themes to our present world and the ongoing struggle for social justice and better political institutions.

The final item, a 2016 edition of *Utopia* edited by Jeremy Deller and Fraser Muggeridge, returns focus to the longevity and spirit of More's book. This edition is a particular curiosity as the editors translated the English text into the Utopian alphabet. Made to celebrate the book's quincentenary, it provokes thought about *Utopia's* cultural scope and how More's work carries an enduring influence beyond philosophy and literature. The idea of Utopia and the spirit for understanding the necessary conditions to live a happy life captures the imagination of artists, writers, and hopefully the exhibition audience.

As More's *Utopia* gave way to novels about dystopic futures, the curators demonstrate how readers and writers have made Utopia their own. The excellence in *Visions of Utopia* is how the exhibition quietly substitutes the common use of "utopia" to describe a perfect or ideal world for an ongoing struggle to improve social conditions and political structures.

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