

Hans Holbein the Younger: Renaissance Style Art for England

Background Notes

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Hans Holbein the Younger, *A Lady with a Squirrel and a Starling*, 1526-8,
National Gallery, London



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HANS HOLBEIN the Younger [1497/8-1543]

Holbein was born in Augsburg into a family of painters. This simple sentence conveys no inkling of the unique career that would follow this child, later described as an artistic genius. Augsburg was and still is a financial hub in Germany. There was, in the 16th century, a mercantile elite in a city that was dominated by international banking and commerce. It was a proud, free, imperial city about 50 kilometres from Munich. After initial training in his father's workshop, by 1515 Hans and his brother, Ambrosius, were in Basel working for a local painter. This was the year that the respected scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam arrived in Basel to supervise publication of his Greek New Testament. Basel was strategically placed on the Rhine where Switzerland, France and Germany met. It was a cosmopolitan city where men of dangerously independent opinions frequently sought refuge from their persecutors. The combination of early experience in Augsburg and Basel could not have been a better education for a young man destined for a career in the modern turbulent age in England. The precocious talent of Holbein ensured that he was soon moving in the circles of humanist scholars rather than fellow painters and in 1516 he illustrated a copy of *Praise of Folly* by Erasmus. Three portraits of Erasmus in 1523 established his international reputation.



Hans Holbein the Younger, *Sir Thomas More*, 1527,
Frick Collection, New York

In 1524 Holbein visited France, possibly seeking the patronage of King Francis I. Fortunately for English Art in 1526 Holbein arrived in London with letters of recommendation from Erasmus to Thomas More and Sir Thomas Wareham. He stayed for 18 months, during which time he painted the large group of the More family, known only today by his drawing and a copy by Lockney and the magnificent portrait of More, now in New York. Portraiture of this calibre had never been seen before in England. The Tudor period in England marks the transition from the Middle Ages and Feudalism to the Modern World. Henry VII loved music and books, and gave painters of miniatures a boost by employing them in the Royal Library at Windsor as manuscript illuminators. There was nothing that could be termed an English school of painting. The acceptance of the human face and form as a fit subject for art was one of the by-products of Renaissance humanism. Before that, religious belief and thought encouraged study of the soul, not of the flesh. In the early part of 1527 Holbein painted a battle scene and cosmic ceiling designs for Henry VIII's banqueting hall and theatre at Greenwich Palace, both now lost.

Holbein returned to Basel in 1528 but the religious strife in that city increased and he arrived back in London in 1532 to find Thomas More out of favour and from 1532-36 he worked mainly for the merchants of the Steelyard in London (the wool staple and the Hanseatic League), producing half-length portraits of amazing virtuosity. In the turbulence of English politics there was no longer any demand for religious painting. Holbein was effectively the artist who, single handed, introduced portraiture to England. His style was grounded in the traditions of Robert Campin and Jan van Eyck in the Netherlands, to which he added influences of the Italian Renaissance (perhaps from the work of Mantegna) which he observed during his very brief visit between 1517 and 1519. To these he added the traditional German exactitude, clarity and precision of line that could be seen in the work of Albrecht Durer. The result was Holbein's individual style, today immediately recognisable and avidly studied by Art Historians, usually using a magnifying glass. He immediately developed a style which suited the intellectual classes in England, aware of The New Learning which had developed in Europe and in similar circles to those which he had experienced in Basel.



Hans Holbein the Younger, Title page of Miles Coverdale's English Translation of the Bible, first printed 1535, British Museum, London

Engraving was the principal contribution of artists of the German speaking lands to the Renaissance. For a generation after 1520 the Reformation provided a continuous stimulus and gave work to many artists no longer required by ecclesiastical patrons. It is clear from the many extant title pages he produced that Holbein was much in demand by printers. Basel was the perfect place to learn this skill which was used to great effect in England. Luther's German New Testament arrived in Basel in 1522, the local printer Adam Petri acquired copies as soon as they came off the presses in September. Within three months he had rushed his own edition onto the market. Holbein provided the title page and illustrations. The clamour for the German NT was intense, within months Petri produced two more editions, each with fresh illustrations by Holbein. In England in 1535 these skills would be re-used. England trailed behind Germany, France, Switzerland, Italy and the Netherlands with a vernacular Bible. Cranmer and Cromwell were the prime movers behind the project of acquiring a bible in English. When approached Henry VIII referred the matter to an episcopal committee. There was no question of putting a royal seal of approval on the work of Tyndale – dubbed a heretic. Miles Coverdale, a Cambridge trained evangelist and sometime assistant of Tyndale took advantage of the delay to work with feverish haste and produced a version using a combination of Latin, Dutch and German texts and Tyndale's New Testament which was put before the notoriously unpredictable king. Anne Boleyn intervened and lent her support to Coverdale's bible, fully aware of the delicacy of the mission. Henry conceded that it could be sold in England but not under royal licence. The magnificent title page was by Holbein who skilfully expounded the doctrine of Royal Supremacy and depicted Henry VIII as the beneficent monarch, distributing the word of God to his grateful subjects.



Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Ambassadors*, 1533,
National Gallery, London

The Ambassadors 1533 A life size full length portrait was virtually unknown in western art, and would have been extremely expensive for its patron Jean De Dinteville, who intended to take it home with him to Polisy in France. It marks a pivotal point in the history of England as well as in the career of the artist. Dinteville was a diplomat, in the service of Francis I of France, who was charged with smoothing the political path between Henry and the Pope and modifying Henry's religious 'innovations'. Even before the Frenchman arrived in England in February 1533, Henry had married Anne Boleyn on January 25th and in April parliament met and approved the Act in Restraint of Appeals which ended papal power in 'This Realm of England'. Bishop de Selve arrived in May to assist and

support his friend and fellow diplomat but the die was cast. This painting represents a defining moment in English history. It was an elaborate and costly work covering ten oak panels. Holbein was the only artist in London who could achieve what was desired and also because he was well known in Erasmian circles to be sympathetic to the principles important to the sitters. Nothing before or after in Holbein's career would come close to the complexity of this composition or create the intensity of line, form and colour to convey its message. It is a showpiece of technical brilliance.



Hans Holbein the Younger, *Henry VIII*, ?1537.
Thyssen Bornemisza Collection, Madrid

Not until almost the end of 1536 did Holbein become official painter to Henry VIII receiving payment of £30 per annum. However, only one original image of this relationship survives in the Thyssen Bornemisza Collection, the rest are lost and known only from copies. This portrait has a stillness and exactitude without mysticism or emotional involvement. It is simply a confrontation with a face, overlooking no detail or blemish. In this small portrait and the lost image of The

Tudor Dynasty, Holbein did not only produce an image of a monarch but created the image of a new monarchy. Never before had a ruler claimed kingship over a nation and also claimed to be Supreme Leader of the Church in that nation. With the unorthodox, full length, swaggering stance designed for the dynastic wall painting for the Privy Chamber of Whitehall Palace, Holbein created a precedent for Henry VIII which almost 500 years later still epitomises the Tudor Dynasty.

Suggested Reading

Hans Holbein: Portrait of an Unknown Man by Derek Wilson.

The Northern Renaissance: Durer to Holbein. Pub. Royal Collection Publications 2013

Hans Holbein by Oskar Batschmann & Pascal Griener. Pub. Reaktion Books



Hans Holbein the Younger, *Christina of Denmark, Duchess of Milan*, 1538, National Gallery, London

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