

## Hans Holbein

Hans Holbein was born in Germany around 1497. He grew up on Augsburg, Bavaria along with his brother, Ambrosius Holbein. He first learned the art of painting from his father, Hans Holbein the Elder. He traveled to Lucern with his father in 1517, and there they painted murals for the mayor. His brother died in 1519 and Holbein returned to Basel. There he did most of his early work, including murals, altar pieces, illustrated bibles, and designed stained glass windows. He also did some limited portrait work at this time, although the portraits are much less detailed and refined than his later work in Germany.

## The Iconoclasm/Reformation

In the early sixteenth century Martin Luther and the protestant reformists were just getting into full swing. They sought to eradicate the corruption and frivolity that they saw in the church at the time. In their zealotry they also turned to expensive religious icons and art work, destroying the artwork, and sometimes resorting to killing the artist responsible. This made it somewhat dangerous to be an artist painting religious works in eastern Europe at this time, and the iconoclasm quickly forced Holbein out of the country, to England. This also likely influenced his later work, as almost all of his paintings done later in England are devoid of religious references, despite the church having had a heavy influence on his earlier art.

## The Move to England

Hans Holbein traveled to England around 1526. His move was made easier by a letter of recommendation addressed to Sir Thomas More, written by Erasmus of Rotterdam.

Erasmus was a Dutch humanist and theologian. He wrote several humanist works during his life, as well as Latin and Greek editions of the New Testament. During the reformation, he was continually committed to the catholic notion of free will - this pitted him against leading Protestant reformists, such as Martin Luther, and their belief in predestination.

Sir Thomas More was an English lawyer, author, and statesman. More coined the word Utopia while writing his most famous book by the same name. For most of his life he was a well respected British citizen, and a connection to him helped Holbein greatly in his transition. Later More was executed as a traitor to the crown, as he refused to acknowledge King Henry VIII as Supreme Head of the Church of England. Thomas More was canonized in the Catholic church by Pope Pius XI in 1935, and bestowed saint hood by Pope John Paul II. Today he is the patron saint of politicians and statesmen, a testament to the way he spent his life.

As a young man Holbein had drawn a series of pictures in the margins of a schoolmaster's copy of *In Praise of Folly*, a book written by Erasmus. He was later introduced to Erasmus and painted several portraits of him before the move to England.

These portraits are what probably secured his recommendation and smooth transition to England.

### Technique

Hans Holbein had a strict process for his portraits. Before beginning to paint, he would always first make a drawing as a basis for the finished work. These under drawings were perfectly to scale, so the end painting was exactly the same size. Although these renderings were made as a study for the painting, they can stand alone as individual works of art. The drawings were usually done in pen and ink, and were even sometimes supplemented with colored chalk in order to roughly outline the colors and shading in the final painting. Once the beginning rendering was complete, Holbein would transfer the image to his painting support using powdered charcoal, sifted through very small holes in the paper - so as to achieve an outline of the drawing directly on his support. He later used a type of transfer paper similar to carbon paper today. It is also of note that he always primed his support using a light pink primer. This likely gave his works a slightly warmer tone than would be achieved with a standard white primer.

### The Court of King Henry VIII

After his move to England, Holbein was fortunate enough to secure a place as an artist in the court of King Henry VIII. This was especially beneficial at the time, as Holbein was not yet an English citizen. There was a fair amount of hostility at the time towards foreign artists working in England, as the amount of imported work was negatively affecting English artists' ability to support oneself making artwork. Being a court painter would have afforded Holbein a great deal of protection from the retribution of English artists.

Most of Holbein's portrait work was done in England for King Henry and his court. Both the king, and members of his entourage would commission pieces from Holbein, and being a court painter was likely a fairly lucrative way to live, comparatively. Holbein was also employed to paint portraits of young women who might be romantically interesting to the King. Henry VIII is notable for going through wives fairly quickly, either through divorce, natural death, or sometimes even execution through false accusations of witch-hood. Holbein would paint portraits of suitable women, so that the King could see what they looked like. Holbein, knowing how quickly Henry went through women, would sometimes paint a woman's portrait more or less flattering based on how much he liked them. Women whom he had no attachment to, he might paint more beautiful than reality so that Henry might focus on them over a girl Holbein dimmed down, to save her from a possibly fatal marriage.

### Notable Paintings



The Ambassadors, oil,

King Henry VIII