

# Hans Holbein the Younger [1497 – 1543]

## Structuring Concepts

- What is Renaissance (looking back and/or Italian) about Holbein's work? What is Early Modern (looking forward)?
- As an artist, how does he respond to the social/religious shift in the function of images?
- How does the idea of the 'self aware' artist emerge in his practice?

Holbein's career is significant and a model for the Renaissance artist.

- Renaissances by definition are characterized in part by emulation of the past – the classic Greco-Roman past.
- A distinct model for the individuated artist.
- He studied the treatises on art and perspective of Italian artists such as Mantegna and Alberti among others.

## Introduction: Overview of Life

The mere fact that we are addressing the work of a single artist suggests that we have arrived at the Renaissance/Early Modern era – the era of art

Born 1497 to a family of painters

### ***Kasheim Altarpiece and Madonna and Child* by Hans Holbein the Elder**

Hans Holbein the Elder was his father.

He and two brothers were trained in his father's studio.

In 1515, apprenticed to Hans Herbst; Holbein is signing some works "HH" denoting his status as an apprentice while also indicating the works he generated entirely on his own on behalf of his mentor.

His early career was conducted in Basle, where he established his own studio and married.

He travelled to France to procure a position at the Court of Francis II, however Francis was enamored of Italian painting, inviting Del Sarto and Da Vinci to the court to work.

### **Portraits of Thomas More and Erasmus**

Holbein moves on to England, bearing recommendation letters from Erasmus and becoming acquainted with Sir Thomas More, who was a friend of Erasmus.

Holbein returned to Basle from 1528 to 1531.

In 1528, liturgical works were being removed, and often destroyed or offered as firewood.

Holbein moved to England, leaving his family in Basle.

By 1537, Holbein became court painter for Henry VIII, designing jewelry for Anne Boleyn, textiles and other utensils for the king, as well as portraits of courtiers and scholars.

For the duration of his life, he painted portraits in England for courtiers and for Henry VIII who used Holbein's skills as a portraitist to procure images of prospective wives.

Died at age 46 of the plague.

Measuring up to Apelles: A classical model for the self-aware artist  
***Apelles painting* by Jacques Louis David, oil on canvas, first quarter of 19<sup>th</sup> ce**

Pliny (4<sup>th</sup> century BC). stated Apelles as the most legendary artist of his day Pliny's depiction of Apelles indicated the stature of great artists:

Alexander the Great went to his studio, rather than summoning Apelles to himself;

patrons paid exorbitant prices for his works (Pliny describes the payments not as counted out, but as *weighed* out).

Gradually, the title "The Second Apelles" became a way of distinguishing artists of the Renaissance.

The term had first been used to describe the work of Fra Angelico; then Albrecht Durer.

Erasmus himself reported that Holbein was an exceptional artist, but reserved the title "Second Apelles" for Durer.

Artists seek their role models among *Humanists* – like Erasmus.

Humanists, in turn, define for themselves a role in which they become experts on and recipients of art. (Batschmann and Griener).

The dependence on the status of text was evident when Beatus Rhenanus proposed in his preface to Pliny's *Historia naturalis*, that artists should be called "authors" (as opposed to artisans) – indicating their ability to produce original and intellectual work

***Holbein's coat of arms***  
***"Hans Holbein de maller"***

Further evidence for Holbein's desire to equate himself with another revered, ancient artist, was his coat of arms in the artist' guild in Basle – an image of a bull with a star above it's head: the symbol of the patron of artists, St. Luke.

## Signing Pictures: the artist individuating

One of the hallmarks of the renaissance/early modern era is the increasing self-awareness and individuality artists assert.

The signing of works is one of the most fundamental ways we begin to individuate artists of the past.

As a journeyman artist, Holbein began to sign his pictures (HH) – and the signing of works develops in this era. Signing works denotes phenomenon such as authority, origination, unique vision/style and genius.

Later, Holbein made use of the existing *passive form* of signing his work – asserting his creation through the words of the sitter.

The reason this passive form of signature is common in the Middle Ages may have to do with views on the subject which emerged in Antiquity.

Again we cite Pliny who believed – and wrote – that the artist’s modesty was indicated by the inscriptions in the third person.

The third person also indicated the imperfection of the piece – its completion arrested; and served therefore as a qualifying comment on the work – as if it might still be unfinished and might be resumed – a defense against criticism.

If an artist signs a work (indicate ownership/creative power/completion) it indicates confidence in the work; A gesture that was unpopular during Pliny’s day.

This belief influenced the renaissance emergence of the individual self-determined artist.

### ***Bonifacius Amerbach, 1519, oil on pinewood, 28 x 27***

*“Although a painted face, I do not differ from the living visage, but I have the same value as my Master [Amerbach], drawn with the help of exact lines. At the time when he had completed eight cycles of three years [Amerbach was 24 when he posed for this portrait] the work of art represents in me, with all the exactitude of Nature.”*

Holbein presents the assessment of the work then, *in the sitter’s voice* (imperfect tense) and draws a comparison between the subject’s likeness and Holbein’s replication of same – a way of asserting the verisimilitude of the work; Holbein’s facility.

### ***Erasmus of Rotterdam, 1523, oil on wood 76 x 51***

On the edge of the pages, book behind Erasmus’ head, it is written:

*“That I, Johannes Holbein, will less easily find an emulator than a denigrator”*

This signature takes the first-person voice of the artist, not the sitter

indicates a strong sense of confidence and completion of the work.

He dares the viewer to critique the work.

In looking at these two works, we can get a sense about the evolution of Holbein's emergence as a self-aware artist – and learn something of his sense of himself/his skills as an artist.

## Religious Works: 1520 - 1526

Moved to Switzerland with brother Ambrosius to open a shop in 1515

### **Solothurn Madonna, Holbein, oil, 1522**

*Sacra conversazione* -- group of saints around the Virgin and child.

Low view point (we look up at the figures)

Saint Martin offering alms to a beggar situated behind the Madonna.

On St. Martin's vestment:

images of Christ before Herod, Angel in quatrefoil (?), and the Crowning with Thorns.

Also on the pluvial (sleeve) is an image of the Centurion of Capernum.

He goes to Jesus, asking him to heal his sick son. Jesus agrees to visit the boy, but the man protests that [his faith in] Christ's power are so strong that with a word Jesus can heal the child without *seeing him*.

For Erasmus, Luther and Thos. More, this is the definition of true Christian faith: belief without seeing.

Positioning this narrative on the sleeve of Martin was a powerful representation: it suggested the subtle balance between a reliance on pictures and their total rejection.

The Centurion operates as a kind of model or remedy for the potential dangers of human representation of Divinity.

The other saint/knight may be St. Ursus a local patron of Solothurn a city which regularly staged the "finding" of the relics of St. Ursus.

May have been destined for a home as opposed to a liturgical setting.

The painting actually addresses the devotions of the patron, and town secretary, Johannes Gerster. It may have been intended as a gift to the church to celebrate a saint's feast day or as an epitaph of the Gerster family.

Function: May have been intercessory – Mary and the other saints seem to sit on one side of an archway or portal that divides the spiritual/heavenly realm from the earthly realm. They seem to guard the portal or serve as intercessors to the other side.

It was also at this time that the Christian/Catholic church began to be personified as female – represented by Mary as the Church body (this drew from biblical references to the body of the virgin as a temple).

***Christ as the Light of the World Holbein, woodcut, 1522***

While living in Basel, a city that (1) embraced the new reformed faith and that was (2) a center of (protestant) publishing, Holbein, in the pattern of Cranach's didactic prints, undertook similar themes/images.

Simple people follow the Son of God

Aristotle, Plato, the Pope and Church Fathers appear as blind men, falling into the abyss....

***The Selling of Indulgences, Holbein, woodcut, 1522***

This image was very likely released in tandem (or illustrated) Luther's 1521 pamphlet against indulgences.

Left: are King David, Manassah of Judah and an ordinary man in the role of sinner. The first two are figures from the Old Testament who repented their wrongdoings by appealing with remorse for sins to God directly. They are models for the protestant faithful, encouraged to direct appeals for forgiveness directly to God.

Right: the arrogant and unrepentant Pope Leo X presiding over the sales of indulgences

***The Last Supper Holbein, oil on limewood, 1524***

An example of a somewhat Italian-styled painting – a style he came in contact with second-hand from French painters emulating da Vinci -- depicting the Last Supper.

***The Last Supper Holbein and The Last Supper Da Vinci (1498)***

This image was badly damaged in an iconoclastic 'cleansing.'

This image has some things in common with the da Vinci Last Supper:

(1) The central composition, (2) the use of windows in the rear of the picture plane, (3) the apostles lined up across from the viewer, and (4) the use of physiognomy to suggest holiness and evil (Judas).

Here, Judas' physiognomy is in accord with contemporary ideas about the face's ability to belie the condition of the soul.

### ***Passion Altarpiece, Holbein, oil on limewood, 1524***

A conventional work that is strongly modeled on both the traditions his father employed in the *Kasheim Altarpiece*, as well as being linked to some Italian works on the same narratives.

The format of each is more or less the same

The events on the top register are alike; though the lower register events differ

### ***Kasheim Altarpiece by Holbein Elder and Passion Altarpiece, Holbein Younger***

What is interesting for our purposes is the way each sequence ends: The Elder Holbein ending with the Resurrection, the Younger ending with the entombment – a human death rather than a divine return to life.

### ***Darmstadt Madonna, Holbein, oil, 1526-29, oil on limewood***

This work was spared an iconoclastic end only because it was in Holbein's studio being reworked at the request of the patron. This work seems to have been his last religious commission in Basle

The work was made for Jakob Meyer who was a rich banker. Here, he appears with his family, protected by the cloak of Mary (this is an old pictorial form – The Mater Misericordia).

The reworking that was done was the addition of a portrait of Meyer's first wife. He also removed a collar or head garment that had nearly obscured Dorothea's face (Meyer's his second wife). Finally, the daughter's hair was reworked into a plaited arrangement to symbolize her betrothal.

The child held by Meyer's son is John the Baptist, referencing a pictorial form that was common in Italy at the time – showing both the Christ child and John the Baptist as infants.

A fig tree is in the background. The shell-niche in which Mary stands is an Italian form as well.

Mary wears a crown that is very similar to the crown of Charlemagne – a well-known work of art in its own right and which Holbein had drawn. As Charlemagne's crown it symbolized the spiritual and temporal realms of Charlemagne's reign.

The painting may have originated as a votive image: Meyer was a staunch Catholic and the image of Mary represented the values that were under threat.

The likely function/impetus for the image was to recommend his family to the Virgin's intercession, to proclaim his faith and commitment to the Catholic creed, and to depict his allegiance to imperial links.

The fig tree in the background symbolizes Eve and by extension, also to Mary, the "New Eve" – a way of bracketing the beginning of sin and the remediation of sin through imagery referring to two women.

The rosary held by Anna was a further devotional object directed to the Virgin and fundamentally Catholic.

Later, the reworking by Holbein at Meyer's request may have shifted the function of the image to an epitaph (the inclusion of the dead first wife) as well as prematurely, for all the members of his family.

***Dead Christ, 1521-22, tempera on limewood, 30 x 200***

***Detail of hand***

Nuechterlein discusses the position of this image during an era in which,

*“...the time-honored practice of contacting divinity through sacred objects was coming under fire, and it was only a few years before some reformers entirely overthrew the very conception of God’s perceivable presences in the world”*

Perhaps one of the least divine images of the dead Christ – this work depends on a certain humanist approach to subject and imagery.

The image of a dead corpse – clearly dead – the gaping wounds, the discoloured flesh, open mouth and staring eye – all cramped into a suffocatingly small niche present Christ in a manner that depends on an acutely physical, realistic representation of a dead body. This work emphasizes the humanity and vulnerability of the human condition experienced by Christ.

Nuechterlein suggests this image was a kind of *transi* -- a conventional 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century reminder of the inevitability of death

2D view: A direct straight-on view of the work, the body appears elongated and rather flattened, uncharacteristic for Holbein’s religious figures.

3D view: However, when approached from the left, the body appears to take on dimensionality, appears to be a physical presence in the viewer’s space (breaking the pictorial plane)

This image portrays, according to Nuechterlein, the departure of the soul – thus we are left with Christ’s humanity only.

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Holbein’s greatest period of production of religious images dated from 1520 – 1526 and ended with the effects of the Reformation and iconoclasm. Dissuaded from continuing to pursue religious commissions, he moved to England to fundamentally re-invent himself as a portrait artist.

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**Portraiture**

1526 moved to London, with a letter of introduction from Erasmus to Thomas More

***Thomas More, 1527, oil on oak***

More was a wealthy and powerful member of the King’s Council, knighted in 1521. More was also fervently anti-Lutheran.

He commissioned a portrait to test the artist’s skill.

The subsequent painting impressed not only More, who commissioned a life-sized family portrait (which has disappeared), but also recommended Holbein to the Court.

***The Astronomer Nikolaus Kratzer, 1528, oak***

Kratzer was the court astronomer and a close friend to Holbein.

Depicted here with the tools of his trade, asserting his position as a modern humanist thinker.

The inscription in the lower left: **“Imago ad vivam effigiem expressa Nicolai Kratzeri monasensis 9 [i] bavarus erat quadragessimu primu anu tpre tempore illo [com]plebat 1528”**

***George Gisze, 1532, oil on oak***

A member of the German steelyard, working in England. A proud nouveau-riche bourgeois.

Like the Kratzer portrait, this work indicates the detail and precision Holbein was capable of, from objects, to reflected light, to fabrics of varying kinds.

In these two works, Kratzer and Gisze, are portrayed with attributes that may draw from the conventions of portraying saints with attributes – here the objects and attributes address the profession, education or training of the sitter: “Renaissance” or self-made men and humanists.

Letters from colleagues are hung all over the space, suggesting the importance of Gisze.

“To the excellent Gisze in London, England” reads the letter in his hand.

Inscriptions: NULLA SINE MERORE VOLUPTAS = No pleasure without grief near a set of scales

Inscription posted on the rear wall is a poem:

**“Imagine Georgii Gysenii Ista refert vultus qua cernis,  
Imago Georgi Sic oculo vivos, sic habet ille genas Anno aetatis suae XXXIIII Anno dom. 1532”**

An example of a man who uses art/portraiture to project an image of himself. To fashion an identity for himself.

***Jane Seymour, 1536, oil***

A portrait of Henry VIII’s third wife.

She was lady-in-waiting to both Catherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn. Married Henry the day after Anne’s execution.

Bore him a son and died 2 days later.

***Henry VIII (small), 1536, oil on oak***

There is some historical evidence that this portrait may have originally been the left panel of a hinged marriage diptych along with the previous panel of Jane Seymour.

The gold in this image was painted with pure gold.

***Possible diptych arrangement of Henry VIII and Jane Seymour portraits***

***Edward Prince of Wales, 1538-39, oil on oak***

Henry's son by Jane Seymour

Holbein presented this portrait to Henry in an effort to demonstrate his fidelity to the English court and to further demonstrate his skills to the king.

***Christina of Denmark, 1538, on oak***

Court painter to the King of England. In the absence of fast, safe travel and cameras, Holbein was sent on several occasions to paint portraits of potential wives for Henry.

Christina is depicted in the dress of a mourning widow, her husband having recently died.

Holbein went to Brussels where she lived, and made studies of her over three hours. He returned to England with the studies and completed a formal painting for Henry VIII

No doubt aware of her potential fate if married to Henry is said to have terminated the marriage negotiations stating that she preferred to keep her head.

***Anne of Cleves, 1538 – 39, parchment on canvas***

Holbein in the difficult position of wanting to make an attractive portrait used a different strategy – making her look like herself, but more beautiful and adorned.

Henry approved the portrait and the marriage. But within 6 months he divorced her, calling her the “Flanders mare.”

***The Ambassadors (Double Portrait of Jean de Dinterville and Georges de Selve), 1533 oil on panel***

Two friends, both French diplomats, Dinterville an ambassador to Henry VIII from France, de Selve a Bishop often sent on diplomatic missions.

The pavement is that of Westminster Abbey. The pavement becomes symbolic as the floor on which Dinterville witnessed the coronation of Anne Boleyn an event that led to England's schism with Rome.

The Geometry gives order to the piece.

On Dinteville's dagger is inscribed his age (29 years) and that of De Selve (25 years) is written on the book lying on the table

Dintevilles' badge, attached to his hat represents a skull a *memento mori*, the most compelling symbol against the vanities of life.

### ***Detail of still life on table***

Among the objects on the table are the humanist's *quadrivium*:

Arithmetic = a 1527 mathematical treatise

Geometry = terrestrial globe describes the great capitals of the world map mundi of Dinteville, *Baris* for Paris and *Prittany* for Brittany betray Holbein's poor French

Astronomy = celestial globe on a splendid carpet and cylindrical sundial providing the time of year and day, a white quadrant that defines the altitude of objects, a polyhedral sundial and torquetum used to determine the celestial bodies.

### ***Detail of still life under table and anamorphic skull***

Music represented by lute, flutes and hymn book lower shelf

On the lower shelf of the table is an open Lutheran hymnbook with the first lines of his hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus*

the lute has a broken string suggesting discord.

### ***Entire work***

The anamorphic skull strategically cannot be seen when looking at the image portraying elements of life; conversely, when it can be viewed clearly, the objects of life become obscured.

Thus the image is constructed according to two perspectival systems. Both exist in the same painting, but are mutually exclusive – to focus on one is to lose sight of the other.

The Arts and sciences are contrasted with death

The other line of discourse in the painting are the religious schisms tearing apart the Christian world.

Both friends were simultaneously tolerant of Protestantism and hopeful that Catholicism would undergo a reform.

### ***Detail of crucifix behind curtain***

De Selve in particular held a theology that entailed God as a hidden divinity, *Deus Absconditus*....to this end, the crucifix on the far right of the image addresses Christ partially revealed.

## Bibliography

*Hans Holbein* by Oskar Batschmann and Pascal Griener

*The Mirror of the Artist*, Craig Harbison

*Northern Renaissance Art* by James Snyder

*Art History* by Marilyn Stockstad

## **Winter Quarter Studio Art Independent Research Projects**

***LS Bring:***

***Bound books, type-set examples,***

***Engraved examples***

***Linoleum cut examples***

- **A one-page prospectus describing the scope of the project due end of week 1**
- **Annotated bibliography addressing both art historical and visual research**
- **Artist's statement/reflective essay on what you did, learned, how your ideas or project evolved.**
- **Portfolio of completed project**

### **One-page prospectus describing the scope of the project DUE End of week 1:**

medium or artistic form you intend to pursue,

the materials or formal elements of the object or images; s

ome evidence of your visual research into images or works that are related to your proposed project (similar in medium, technique, function, context or imagery, etc.).

Your proposal will make clear how your project is related to some aspect of the program inquiry.

### **Annotated bibliography addressing your art historical and visual research (ongoing)**

### **You must have your topic approved by Lisa before beginning your project.**

The work should have a clear relationship the intersection of religion and visual culture, and draw on the forms we have covered in the fall quarter (though your 'style' does not have to look medieval or renaissance). You should develop a project that will fill your time, on average 24 hours of work per week. Some possibilities include: type setting and binding a small edition of books, exploring alternative book bindings of the era, creating a cycle of prints based on indulgences, etc.

**media: engraving, linoleum cut, woodcuts, book forms, typesetting or variants of these forms (ie you might explore alternative binding or book forms for your project)**

**form/content:** must have some connection to the function/form of medieval or renaissance religious objects or images (books of hours, devotional manuals, broadsides, indulgences, devotional prints, didactic or propagandistic prints, or other forms covered in our readings or lectures during the fall quarter). While your form may be linked to these forms, your style and the content of the work need not be Christian or reflect Christian ideas/theology. You may find that such forms work equally well for more contemporary issues or concerns: climate change, social justice issues, or other issues about which you have strong feelings or ideas.

Works created in response to the all-program print/book assignments are separate from the work you develop for the independent studio credits.

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*Kasheim Altarpiece and Madonna and Child* by Hans Holbein the Elder

*Apelles painting* by Jacques Louis David, oil on canvas, first quarter of 19<sup>th</sup> ce

*Holbein's coat of arms*

*Bonifacius Amerbach, 1519, oil on pinewood, 28 x 27*

*Erasmus of Rotterdam, 1523, oil on wood 76 x 51*

## Religious Works

*Solothurn Madonna*, Holbein, oil, 1522

*Christ as the Light of the World* Holbein, woodcut, 1522

*The Selling of Indulgences*, Holbein, woodcut, 1522

*The Last Supper* Holbein, oil on limewood, 1524

*Passion Altarpiece*, Holbein, oil on limewood, 1524

*Darmstadt Madonna*, Holbein, oil, 1526-29, oil on limewood

*Dead Christ, 1521-22, tempera on limewood, 30 x 200*

*Detail of hand*

## Portraiture

*Thomas More, 1527, oil on oak*

*The Astronomer Nikolaus Kratzer, 1528, oak*

*George Gisze, 1532, oil on oak*

*Jane Seymour, 1536, oil*

*Henry VIII, 1536, oil on oak*

*Edward Prince of Wales, 1538-39, oil on oak*

*Christina of Denmark, 1538, on oak*

*Anne of Cleves, 1538 – 39, parchment on canvas*

*The Ambassadors (Double Portrait of Jean de Dinterville and Georges de Selve), 1533 oil on panel*

*Detail of still life on table*

*Detail of still life under table and anamorphic skull*