

## Hans Holbein (the Younger)



*The Ambassadors*, 1533  
Oil on wood, 207 x 209.5 cm  
National Gallery, London



*Self Portrait*  
~1542–1543.  
Florence, Uffizi

## The Artist

### Hans Holbein (the Younger)

Born Ausburg, Germany 1497, Died London 1543

The son of a painter, Hans Holbein the Younger was educated by his father. Born in Ausburg in 1497, he left Germany early in his career to go to Basel, Switzerland where he met Desiderius Erasmus, a scholar. Erasmus helped Holbein get a job in 1526 as the court painter for Henry VIII in England. As the court painter, Holbein's job was to paint portraits of the royal family, Henry VIII, his wives, and prospective wives. He finished portraits of Edward VI, Anne of Cleves, and Christina of Denmark, as well as many other members of the aristocracy. He also painted a mural of Henry VIII and Queen Jane Seymour. Holbein's attention to detail made his portraits very vivid and gives us an excellent view of courtly life during that time. He died in London in 1543 as a result of the plague.

## Art Movement

### Northern Renaissance

The extension of the Italian Renaissance in northern Europe after 1500. Although late Gothic influences were visible until the Baroque period, Renaissance art, music, literature, and science soon came to dominate the region. Largely a result of the invention of the printing press, Renaissance ideas spread to the low countries, Scandinavia and Bavaria with an amazing swiftness. The accessibility of printed materials and the relative ineptitude of the Catholic Church after the Western Schism and the Black Plague led to an explosion of both secular and religious publications. While similar to the Italian Renaissance in most respects, Northern authors wrote in the vernacular rather than Greek or Latin and northern art dealt more with Christianity as a result of the Protestant Reformation.

## The Artwork

### *The Ambassadors*

Painted during Holbein's time in England, *The Ambassadors* is a portrait of two French ambassadors. Part of their job in England was to try to keep England from breaking away from the Catholic Church. Both men were in their late 20s and were wealthy, educated, and powerful. The objects between them reflect their education. The top shelf contains objects related to the study of the heavens, while the bottom shelf contains objects related to the study of things on earth. The skull painted at the bottom is done in anamorphic projection. To see the image, you must look at it from an angle. The skull represents death. It is a contrast to the youth of the two men.

## Discussion Suggestions

### **Talk about the objects shown on the shelves between the two men:**

- *What are the objects?*
- *How do they represent heaven and earth?*
- *What do you think the objects say about the men?*

### **What is sticking out behind the curtain in the upper, left-hand corner of the painting?**

- *Why do you think only half a crucifix shown?*
- *What does this say about what was happening at that time?*

### **What is the big blob at the bottom of the painting?**

- *Why do you think Holbein paint a skull?*
- *Why do you think the skull is painted like it is?*
- *What do you think it means for the men?*

## Activity Idea

### **Draw Your Own Portrait**

Pre-Activity (Things to consider **before** drawing):

- Was anything Holbein painted made up? (No. He painted very realistic things.)
- Everything in his paintings had a specific meaning.

### **Activity:**

- Put students into pairs of two.
- Give each pair a piece of plain white paper and allow them to use their own crayons or colored pencils.
- Instruct the students to draw a portrait with their partner similar to Holbein's *The Ambassadors*. They should include objects that tell something about themselves. For instance, if they like baseball, they could draw a baseball and a bat.

### **Materials Needed:**

- White Paper
- Crayons, colored pencils (optional)

### **Draw an Anamorphic Picture**

- Does it look easy to draw an anamorphic picture?
- Give students a piece of white paper and instruct them to try drawing an anamorphic picture by sitting on the floor and leave their paper on their desk. With their eyes level with the paper, see if anyone can draw an anamorphic picture.