

## **Holbein's Ambassadors, 1533, National Gallery, London.**

Life-size, double full-length portrait.

Oil on Oak (Northern Renaissance) linseed oil, squirrel-hair brush.



### **Context / Commission**

Holbein, from Augsburg, Germany, travelled to England in 1532 and soon became Court Painter to Henry V111. He had mastered a highly sought-after blend of idealism and realism, ideally suited to regal portraiture.

Jean de Dinteville is positioned on the left in this double portrait, and he commissioned the work. Terrified of his own mortality, he thought he was dying of a terminal illness and thus wanted to immortalise himself and his friend before he passed. Instead, perhaps, we have a seminal moment in the history of the Reformation. Dinteville lived on until the then ripe age of 51, outlasting his compatriot stationed alongside him in this brilliant painting by some 18 years.

The work was commissioned for Jean's château in France, and he points to this on the globe (Polisy in France), although some claim Rome is at the centre given its position as hub of the Catholic Church.

The painting hung in a very specific location in the château so that when its patron descended the staircase, at one given point the skull shifted its perspective to form a perfect skull. This is a technique known as anamorphosis, and was first introduced by Leonardo da Vinci in his sketchbooks. It is a complex piece of trompe l'oeil virtuosity, coordinated via catropic means, generating a form of 'depraved' perspective.

### **The Sitters**

The two men are emissaries / ambassadors / diplomats – French Courtiers and Ambassadors of King Francis 1 affiliated to the court of Henry V111.

It was painted in London, although for Jean de Dinteville's private castle in Polisy in the Champagne Region of France, where it remained for a long time prior to landing in the collection of the National Gallery, London.

### **Jean de Dinteville (LHS)**

Jean wears the short robe of an Ambassador (not the long robe of the Bishop) and the Pendent of the Order of St Michael, a coveted Order founded in France by Louis XI in 1469 for chivalry and service to the throne. St Michael subdued Satan, thus it may be redolent of triumph over the adversity the ambassadors faced at the time.

His age appears in Latin on the scabbard of his dagger: 'His age is 29'. The dagger is suspended by a tasselled cord from the belt at his waist. There is a small skull insignia on his cap as a personalised cypher and also a more generic reference to fate, i.e. a *memento mori*.

He is a Renaissance Humanist with an interest in music, painting & the sciences. He wears a diplomat's clothing replete with lynx lining, and is an eloquent sinner, versed in Latin. Black was an expensive dye at the time, and only worn by the wealthy. It is also elegiac or melancholy and synonymous with introspection and intellectual qualities.

### **Georges de Selve (RHS)**

Georges was the Bishop of Lavaur. Again, his age appears, yet on the spine of the book he leans against, atop a 'whatnot.' He is 25, and in fact died aged just 33.

He wears the longer habit or robe of the clergy as a reference to a Capuchin. Georges visited London in 1533 and attended the Coronation of Anne Boleyn in that very year. The floor tesserae mosaic in *cosmati* work is of Westminster Abbey (Henry VIII's Chapel). George's dark gown is fur-lined and his cap is a forerunner of the academic mortar board; an intentional doff of the cap to erudition and learning.

### **Their Mission**

To protect England breaking from the Church of Rome. This was indeed a doomed mission. The associated troubled times are signified by the skull / emblem of mortality and their earnest '*mien*.'

Henry wanted to divorce Catherine of Aragon, the aunt of Charles V of Spain, who was thus influential, and Henry had wanted to ally himself by a marriage to France. Henry of course wanted Anne Boleyn on the throne – partly because she was pregnant with who Henry thought would be the male heir to the throne.

### **Religious Significance**

The authority of the Catholic Church was being challenged by the Protestants. It was being undermined by scientific discoveries which were arguably more 'factual.' Easter week 1533 was when officially England broke away from the Catholic Church and established the Church of England with the monarch not the Pope at the head. Pope Clement VIII was reluctant to grant Henry VIII a divorce from the first Queen, Catherine of Aragon, so that he could instead marry Anne Boleyn.

It was a failed mission, representing a developing schism in the church, bringing about a fragmented Europe.

### **Iconography – Symbols & their Meaning**

All objects are depicted in a *trompe l'oeil* magnificence and highly veristic technique. The Ambassadors lean on a 'whatnot' (piece of furniture) displaying worldly objects.

### **The Lower Objects - The Earthly Realm**

The skull is portrayed in anamorphosis and extreme foreshortening, rendering the object's impression unintelligible from the front but comprehensive from a specific viewpoint. Holbein used a grid which he stretched and thus optically distorted the skull by catoptric means using reflective cylinders for the purpose.

The skull is an established emblem of mortality, and this links the painting to the *Vanitas* theme (from Ecclesiastes) as a *memento mori*. The skull appears to be laughing / smiling, meaning..... failure! A possible pun is that 'hollow bone' in German is *Hohles Bein* and thus a phonetic signature of the artist, Holbein.

The floor patterning in *cosmati* work reveals the 6-pointed Star of David, a circle, square and a triangle, thus is an example of theology through divine geometry. The arithmetic book is open on a page which states *divirdirt*: 'Let division be made' as a *double entendre* on the divide between the Protestants and Catholics. The book is open with a set-square as a bookmark, plus there is a pair of mathematical compasses on the lower shelf. Most symbols thus relate to division. The terrestrial globe marks the centre of the earth which Jean de Dinteville points to with his dagger. This is Polisy, near Troyes, or is it Rome linking to the divorce from the Church of Rome?

The foreshortened lute with a broken string is for discord or disharmony. Also, the severed string suggests the schism and the break from the Church of Rome. The Hymnal is translated into German by Martin Luther (Protestant) and the hymn 'Come Holy Ghost' links to the Ten Commandments. The book was printed in Wittenberg, the location of the church linked to Martin Luther's treatise. The Lutheran hymn book may be a plea for Christian harmony. The lute music is written in the form of 'divisionism' for split parts. Within the set of musical flutes, traditionally a symbol of harmony, one instrument is missing from the case, and is thus an ominous portent.

### **The Upper Objects - The Heavenly Realm**

A Polyhedron with many faces (sundials) is linked to travel and time zones. Other instruments which are featured are used for understanding the heavens and for measuring time. The overarching theme of travel is connected to the first circumnavigation of the globe by Copernicus. Our work is thus set during the Age of Discovery and the discovery of new continents (Columbus and the Americas).

The Celestial globe is key: Copernicus' revolutionary work which established that it was the sun and not the earth that was at the centre of the solar system. The Sundial provides the date as 11th April (Good Friday) as a crucial date in the Ambassadors' lives. It also specifies 10:30am. After 4pm in the Christian tradition, Christ was dead. The rug is Anatolian and expensive, imported and thus linked to travel and trade. Beyond the green brocade curtain in the top left, Holbein reveals a crucifix: Christ on the cross presiding over the Ambassadors. This is the only sign of salvation in an otherwise bleak and foreboding scene. It is also thought to be the 1500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Christ's crucifixion.

A plumbline is at the centre of the table and links to Apelles the Greek painter and an artist's display of technical proficiency in rendering a perfect line yet free-hand.

**A Final Thought.....**

Epidemics of fatal diseases such as the plague were common in Holbein's day. He died of the plague in 1543, so death was a more visible phenomenon. It struck quickly and without warning, which is why Christians felt the need to be spiritually prepared. This links to the skull floating on the floor as a key emblem of mortality, and possibly the crucifix at the top left also. This feels poignant now, as much as I imagine it did back then, in equally troubled times.