

REVIEWS OF EXHIBITIONS

Making and Meaning: Holbein's Ambassadors, National Gallery, London, 5 November 1997–1 February 1998. Catalogue by Susan Foister, Ashok Roy and Martin Wyld, London: National Gallery Publications, 1997. £12.95. ISBN 1-85709-173-6.

Editor's Note: Holbein's double portrait known as *The Ambassadors* invites viewing from different perspectives (Fig. 1). For this reason two reviewers were asked to consider the National Gallery's exhibition dedicated to this painting and to offer their viewpoints regarding this intriguing work and its interpretation.

The exhibition, one in the 'Making and Meaning' series offered by the National Gallery, was planned to coincide with the recent cleaning of Holbein's well-known double portrait of 1533, depicting Jean de Dinteville, French Ambassador to England, and Georges de Selve, Bishop of Lavaur (Fig. 1). The process of cleaning the painting itself was the subject of intense and televisually-documented scrutiny, which should have convinced even the most nervous that the current generation of conservators at the National Gallery are both meticulous and cautious, and the nation's treasures are safe in their care. Newly cleaned, *The Ambassadors* looks marvellous. Most importantly, the range of tonal play in the shadows and darker areas of the painting has been brought back to life. The subtle textures of the fabric in the dark robes of the two sitters and the areas on the lower shelf of the table and on the floor below and behind it have emerged from the murk of deteriorating layers of varnish applied at the end of the nineteenth century; while not a whisker from de Dinteville's beard or a hair of his ermine-trimmed overcoat have been stripped of their fineness.

One of the blessings of Holbein's technique is that it is remarkably hardy so that one of the few areas of possible contention lay in the fact that much of the original paint loss had been sustained in the area of the distorted skull, which occupies much of the lower third of the painting. As it was clear that the nineteenth-century restoration of this area had been seriously flawed in its geometry, the conservators at the National Gallery were left with two choices: cover the areas of paint loss with an indeterminate scumble to indicate that we do not know what Holbein's skull may have looked like; or endeavour to paint the areas of loss with a new, convincing anamorphic display. In order to maintain the overall legibility of the painting, the conservators – in my view, wisely – chose the latter option.

One of the important chapters in the history of *The Ambassadors* is the fact that the painting attracted the attention of Mary Hervey, who published what is likely to remain the best study of the painting: *Holbein's 'Ambassadors': The Picture and the Men* (London, 1900). Hervey managed not only to uncover the document which helped to fix the identity of the two sitters, but her archival work provided a matrix of information to support virtually everything we have come to accept as 'true' about the



Fig. 1 Hans Holbein, *The Ambassadors* (1533), National Gallery, London

painting. For those areas in which she lacked personal expertise, she sought the advice of recognized authorities in the relevant subjects, but she always remained sufficiently circumspect regarding those aspects of the painting's iconography, for example, which might have led her into the realm of conjecture.

Sadly, the happy accident of a strong critical literature can also be a bit of a curse – both to subsequent scholars and to organizers of exhibitions. While it might be possible for the scholar to follow a specialist line of enquiry beyond where Miss Hervey might have left it, it is extremely difficult for the exhibition organizer or the generalist to succeed in adding anything new to the current state of knowledge without running the risk of seeming feeble or being, quite frankly, wrong. This is not to say that Miss Hervey's work on *The Ambassadors* solved all the riddles of the painting. Indeed, for this reviewer, one of the most disturbing aspects of the National Gallery's exhibition was how well it demonstrated the extent to which this 'well-known' painting remains a complete mystery. The authors of the catalogue hint at this rather fundamental problem by claiming that *The Ambassadors* is 'the most elaborately meaningful of all [Holbein's] surviving portraits' (p. 11). Be that as it may, the truth remains that we have absolutely no idea what all this supposedly elaborate meaningfulness might signify.

In a well-considered attempt to make the issues and problems surrounding the painting more accessible to the average visitor and reader, the exhibition was structured to present *The Ambassadors* as set against the backdrop of a number of 'themes' or 'topics', such as patronage, iconography, Holbein's painting technique, and Holbein's use of drawings in portraiture. The visitor was able to view *The Ambassadors* in the company of a number of Holbein's other large-scale and full-length portraits, such as the National Portrait Gallery's partial cartoons for the destroyed *Portraits of Henry VII and Henry VIII*, the superb *Portrait of Christina of Denmark*, and the unevenly executed, yet still intriguing, panel of *Henry VIII and the Barber Surgeons* from the Collection of the Worshipful Company of Barbers in London (which, oddly, was not reproduced in the catalogue). In other rooms of the exhibition, there were a number of smaller portraits, many with their preparatory drawings or with X-ray photographs to show the history of their underdrawings and *pentimenti*. This offered both a visual treat and a well-documented view into what the preparatory stages of Holbein's painting of *The Ambassadors* might have been.

Unfortunately, the other sections of the exhibition dealing with the issues of the patronage, iconography, and 'meaning' of *The Ambassadors* were less rewarding. One might be tempted to blame the blessed curse of Miss Hervey's excellent scholarship; but, in truth, these sections of both the exhibition and the catalogue seemed a disappointment in their own right. Opportunities were missed, big questions were avoided, and numerous, irksome errors of fact and interpretation were introduced. For example, one might have hoped that a closer examination of de Dinteville, his family, and the history of the château at Polisy would have helped to unlock some of the mysteries surrounding the commissioning and reception of the painting. Or that the study of the Reformation in England and the personality and publications of Georges de Selve might have shed some light on what the learned bishop was doing in England during the spring months of 1533. From the material presented, however, it was not even clear why de Dinteville himself was chosen to act as the French ambassador in England during this period. Obviously, the problem of Henry's divorce and his subsequent marriage to Anne Boleyn are central, but it does seem that it was the sex of Henry's child that must have occupied most of France's attention. The birth of a male child would have upset the delicate balance of interlinking marriages that Henry and François I had previously negotiated. But what did the presence of de Dinteville and de Selve add to the equation? And what could it have been about de Selve's appearance in England that was so secret that, even though de Dinteville felt free to report it to his brother, he implored that the news be withheld from the Duc de Montmorcy, the king's most-trusted advisor?

The organizers of the exhibition went some way towards hinting that the political and religious tensions of the day played a formative role in the iconography and iconology of *The Ambassadors*, but this tantalizing suggestion does create a certain number of irresolvable implications. It seems fairly clear, for example, that de Dinteville commissioned *The Ambassadors* specifically to hang in his home in Polisy. Exactly where the painting was hung remains unknown, but we do know that the painting commissioned by Jean's elder brother of *Moses and Aaron before the Pharaoh: an Allegory of the Dinteville Family* has roughly similar dimensions and was painted to

¹ This information comes from a forthcoming publication by Dr Elizabeth Brown which was partly summarized in a lecture she delivered at the National Gallery's one-day symposium on *The Ambassadors*, held on 1 April 1997.

It has long been argued that the instruments in *The Ambassadors* probably belonged to or were designed by Nicolaus Kratzer, Holbein's compatriot and collaborator on more than one project. A number of problems in the representation of these images (namely that, as depicted, few of them are functional) have been cited as errors that were introduced by Holbein. In the organizer's words: 'the inaccuracies in some of Holbein's depictions suggest that he [Kratzer] was not directly concerned and that Holbein may have been working from drawings rather than actual instruments'. All that we know about Holbein supports a view that he was meticulous in the rendering of details. Given this, it seems inconceivable that Holbein might have chosen the scientific instruments in *The Ambassadors* as an arena for experimentation or sloppiness. If one considers a number of the texts and scientific instruments associated with Kratzer's hand, however, one does note a relatively high degree of inconsistency and error. Three of the sides of the Acton polyhedral dial (often attributed to Kratzer's hand) are incorrectly plotted and the polyhedral dial represented in both *The Ambassadors* and in Holbein's *Portrait of Nicolaus Kratzer* so poorly constructed that it would never function correctly, regardless of latitude. Examination of Kratzer's notebooks further supports the idea that his mathematical skills were rudimentary, at best. It might seem petty to spend time trying to assess who might be the cause behind the fact that the instruments depicted in *The Ambassadors* appear to have been badly constructed. Conversely, one could view such a search as falling into the well-accepted genre of art historical enquiry into the complex relationship between the patron, the artist, and the so-called 'humanist advisor'. In this context, understanding the extent and nature of Kratzer's role in the construction of *The Ambassadors* is no different from searching out the contributions of Poliziano, Guarino, Borghini, or Carro to some of the great artistic programmes of the Italian Renaissance.

One other area for concern was the exhibition's claim that the instruments depicted in *The Ambassadors* are not particularly innovative in scientific terms. This is not the cutting edge of technology of the Tudor period, but evidence of a kind of general knowledge expected of any intelligent and well-educated gentleman.⁷ Not only is such a statement untrue; it may mask another key component of the picture's iconography. All of the scientific instruments, with the exception of the pillar dial and the horary quadrant, are either new, rare, or extremely innovative in their design. Furthermore, the majority of the instruments have a specifically German provenance.

the heavens and is primarily a didactic instrument, used to teach or explain certain astronomical or astrological precepts. (5) The zodiacal signs depicted on the cylinder dial are not Aries and Aquarius (as stated on p. 33 of the catalogue), but Aries and Virgo, the two equinoctial signs. These are the same signs shown on Holbein's small sketch in the British Museum (inv. no. 5308-148). (6) The reason that the polyhedral dial cannot indicate 'true' time in the painting is not because its compass is set at an angle (as stated on p. 35), but because the dial itself (as indicated by the compass arrow) is not aligned parallel to the meridian. Beyond this, however, the construction of the dial is extremely problematic, with evidence suggesting that it never would have functioned properly for any latitude. It is certainly not constructed for a North African latitude (as stated on p. 35). (7) During the sixteenth century, the term *compas* did not mean 'magnetic compass' (as suggested on p. 35). It was a term commonly used to indicate any type of sundial in France, England, and Germany well into the eighteenth century. De Dinteville's request for a drawing of his complicated 'oval compass' ('... le portraict du compas ovale designé en l'annee suivante') only makes sense when one understands that he is searching for an explication of a complex sundial and not a magnetic compass. (8) There is no constellation known as the 'Lyre-Bird' (p. 36). The constellation *lyre* has numerous other names (*multae cadens, alion*, and even *lyrebird*), but 'lyre-bird' is not among them. (9) The latitude for which the celestial globe is set is not 42° or 43° (as stated on p. 37) but is 48°N. This fact is important as it is the approximate latitude for Paris (and Polisy) and helps to support the idea that the painting has always been intended to be understood as set within a French context.

⁷ The question is taken from the taped commentary that accompanied the exhibition.

be hung over a fireplace.⁸ If *The Ambassadors* was also meant to be hung at a height (which might help to explain why both of the sitters seem to be somewhat more squat than average), there are resulting consequences concerning what sort of device might have been used to 'correct' the distortion of the anamorphic skull. The idea that one might stand at the picture's side becomes less plausible and the introduction of a glass viewing rod becomes more so. But the salient point here is not how high the painting may have been hung, but that *The Ambassadors* was intended to be viewed by a French audience in a château situated quite close to the king's own magnificent palace in Fontainebleau. The question to ask is: what kind of French ambassador commissions a painting for his French home which shows him standing proudly beside two shelves covered with German astronomical instruments, a German textbook, and a Lutheran hymnal? One can imagine a number of answers – none of which seem quite satisfactory. Perhaps de Dinteville was the sort of patron who left decisions regarding the 'iconographic' details of the painting almost completely to the artist (who in this case was German-born, with distinctly Protestant allegiances). Or perhaps the iconography of the painting reflects something of de Selve's influence on the ambassador. We know that the bishop, in 1529, had published a treatise urging the German Protestants to rejoin the Mother Church, and it seems just possible that, given the heterogeneous religious community in England during the period, some contemporary viewers in London may have understood that the odd collection of German books and instruments was meant to represent a plea for Christian unity. Evidence suggests, though, that *The Ambassadors* was never intended to be viewed by an English – or even an Anglo-German – public. What, then, would be the purpose of such a craftily composed message if its intended audience would never have the opportunity to benefit from it? Conversely, if the composition is based on a plea for the reintegration of the Church, it seems highly unlikely that the average, noble French viewer would have gained any enlightenment from it. Indeed, from a French point of view, within a few years of its completion, certain sections of the painting could have been interpreted as verging on the heretical by the French.

One of the basic theses of the exhibition was that the display of books and instruments set between the two 'ambassadors' could be interpreted in such a way that their significance underpinned the religious and political message of the painting. Sadly, however, it was the exhibition's section which attempted to describe and 'explain' each of the scientific instruments that was its most problematic. Miss Hervey claimed no expertise in understanding how these instruments worked, but her descriptions provided useful markers for future scholarship. In contrast, virtually every piece of new information or interpretation that the organizers of the exhibition added to Miss Hervey's original work was either incorrect or misleading.⁹

⁸ For example: (1) the labels in the exhibition and the catalogue made a clear distinction between the celestial globe and the 'series of instruments' on the top shelf of the table (p. 30). During the Renaissance, the celestial globe was a scientific instrument used to tell the time. It is worth noting, therefore, that all of the instruments on the top shelf of the table in *The Ambassadors* are time-measuring devices. (2) The peculiar C-shaped instrument in the middle of the table is not an altitude quadrant (pp. 30 and 33-6). And the object described as 'a round object with a vertical pointer' (p. 36) is part of the same instrument. The two parts, when assembled, would form a tool used for the plotting or laying out of sundials similar to a later instrument called the *estrate*. (3) The *imporium* is not a navigational instrument, as stated in the tape commentary that accompanied the exhibition. It is an astronomical instrument whose ability to be turned (*spereus*) made it particularly useful for tracking celestial phenomena, such as comets. The fact that comets are generally interpreted by astrologers as evil portents might be important here. (4) An armillary sphere is not 'an instrument used to represent planetary motion' (p. 33). It is a schematic rendering of the main axial coordinates of

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For example, both of the globes are state-of-the-art German instruments. The technique of using woodcut globe gores to aid in the manufacture of globes had been common practice for only a little over a decade. Moreover, the image of the *torquetum* in the painting could not have been constructed outside of Germany prior to the summer of 1533. Seen from this perspective, it does seem wise to reconsider what role the collection of instruments might play in the overall iconography of the painting. One presses on with this point only because it highlights how the treatment of the iconography of the various components of *The Ambassadors* has been remarkably uneven. Until it is possible to push the state of knowledge about the instruments forward and form a more consistent view of the different parts of the painting, it will be impossible to formulate a coherent understanding of what any of it might 'mean'.

The Ambassadors resolutely remains an extremely peculiar painting: a full-length double portrait of two men not united by royal blood – the format itself is without known precedent; the portrayal of two men whose relationship remains obscure; a *vanitas* painting with no great gesture towards regret or repentance included; a composition centred on a collection of scientific instruments, few of which seem capable of functioning; and a largely inexplicable, oversized anamorphic skull. An additional layer of irony is introduced by the fact that most viewers operate under a misguided notion of what *The Ambassadors* is. The painting is almost always presented as a great – if not the greatest – early English painting. It is the indicative Tudor achievement. Whereas, in fact, the painter was German-speaking, the patron was French, the painting itself was planned and designed to hang in de Dinteville's château at Polisy, and its commission seems to have been prompted by an unlikely alliance between de Dinteville's profound boredom, his thinly disguised distaste for England, and what seems to have been a latent competitive impulse directed towards his elder brother, François II de Dinteville (who appears to have had the greater luck as a potential patron of the arts, having been posted to Rome in 1531). Having said that, however, one should probably confess that *The Ambassadors* is as thoroughly English as anything else produced at the court of Henry Tudor – that is to say, that it is polyglot, transposed, contradictory, and unique.

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Conceived at a time of religious disunity in Europe and painted in 1533 during the crucial months in which Henry VIII's marriage to Anne Boleyn sealed the parting of the English church from Rome, Holbein's painting of *The Ambassadors* is packed with intriguing details which may allude to these events. The Making and Meaning exhibition of *The Ambassadors* at the National Gallery presented the newly cleaned painting in the context of other works by Holbein and of representational and documentary material relating to the painting. The exhibition also showed a selection of three-dimensional objects which relate to the instruments displayed in the painting. The comparisons offered by the inclusion of these objects were compelling, offering a glimpse into the intellectual and material world of Jean de Dinteville, Lord of Polisy, who commissioned the double portrait, and of his friend, Georges de Selve, who is depicted with him.

One aspect of *The Ambassadors* which might have been treated in greater detail without greatly altering the balance of the exhibition is the textile content. This review will discuss the textiles shown in *The Ambassadors* in the context of fresh insights afforded by the exhibition, and of the comparisons afforded by two major