REVIEWS OF EXHIBITIONS


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
In a well-considered attempt to make the issues and problems surrounding the painting more accessible to the average reader and viewer, the exhibition was structured to provide the Ashmolean as a venue for the exhibition, with the aim of exploring the themes or topics, such as portraiture, iconography, Holbein’s painting technique, and Michelangelo’s use of drawings in perspective. The visitor was to be guided by the curators of the exhibition, who are members of the exhibition team. The Ashmolean is the only central body in the country that has a collection of manuscripts and drawings, and the exhibition was designed to provide an overview of the collection, along with a selection of works from other as well as other, more private collections.

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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* is 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 Caro 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.\(^5\) 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. 35 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. 5508-148). (6) The reason 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 *compass* 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 Dimeville’s request for a drawing of his complicated ‘oval compass’ (‘... le portrait du *compass ovale duplei mensuris*’) 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 *Lyra* has numerous other names (vultur cadens, allea, and even ettude), but ‘lyrëbird’ 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 Paris) and helps to support the idea that the painting has always been intended to be understood as set within a French context.

\(^5\) The quotation is taken from the taped commentary that accompanied the exhibition.
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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 1553. 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 amorphous 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 Pisy, 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 1551). 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.

The Royal Observatory, Greenwich

Kristen Lippincott

Conceived at a time of religious disunity in Europe and painted in 1553 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 Pisy, 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