

# PRIMARY TEACHERS' NOTES

The Ambassadors  
Hans Holbein the Younger



## The Ambassadors by Hans Holbein the Younger (1497-1543)



This double full-length portrait shows two Frenchmen who visited London in 1533. The flamboyantly dressed Jean de Dinteville on the left was an ambassador to the court of King Henry VIII. While he was in England he commissioned this painting from the German painter Hans Holbein who was living and working in London. Georges de Selve, on the right, was his friend; the second man's more modest clothing indicates that he was a cleric. He was in fact consecrated bishop of Lavaur, in France, the following year. The painting is unusually large and elaborate for this date. The men are leaning on a cupboard which displays, on the upper shelf, objects which related to the heavens and, on the lower shelf, objects which indicate their earthly interests (see right). There are many hidden messages and meanings in this work, the most dramatic being the large anamorphic skull in the centre foreground, which loses its distortion when seen from the side. This must be a reference to the mortality of the sitters and of all those who see the painting.

The artist [Hans Holbein](#) (1497-1543) was a German who spent two periods working in England. This painting was done on his second visit. That he has signed his name in the painting, JOHANNES HOLBEIN PINGEBAT 1533 (Latin for Hans Holbein painted it 1533), indicates that this was a work on which he wished to be judged. During his stay, he became a court painter to King Henry VIII.

## A note on the meaning

The meaning of this painting is not entirely clear. There are various pieces of hidden information. The ages of the sitters for example are written (in Latin) on the dagger's sheath and on the book on the top shelf (*Aetatis svae 29/25*). The various scientific instruments indicate the date and time: 11 April at 10.30 (or maybe 9.30) in the morning, while the signature tells us the year: 1533. There is a crucifix, barely visible behind the curtain in the top left corner. What is certain is that the large distorted skull in the centre foreground is meant to remind us of death; however, it is unreadable when seen from the front. It is likely that this picture was positioned beside a doorway so that the viewer, when walking past it and seeing it from the side, would suddenly be confronted by the grinning death's head. The cupboard (usually reserved for the display of gold and silver plate) is being used for a show of intellectual, rather than monetary, wealth.

## A note about their dress

It seems likely that both men are in their best clothes. Jean's coat is lined with expensive fur (probably lynx). His fine white linen undergarment is pulled through slashes in his red overshirt. He rests his hand on his dagger which is suspended by a tasselled cord from the belt at his waist. He also wears a sword. Black was an expensive dye at this time and was only worn by wealthy people: it also signified Melancholy and indicated that the wearer had introspective intellectual qualities, which were much admired at the time. Most of Holbein's sitters in the 1530s and 1540s wear black. Georges' dark gown is also fur-lined and his hat is a forerunner of the academic mortar board.

## Working with Prints

The National Curriculum for Art asks you to introduce Key Stage 1 and 2 pupils to the work of artists. If your school has no local art gallery, or if school outings are difficult, you may need to use reproductions instead of 'the real thing'. The experience will of course be a different one; you should make clear to children the difference between a reproduction and an original. However, working with a good quality print, such as the one of Holbein's 'The Ambassadors' accompanying this leaflet, can be a valuable and enjoyable activity. Looking at works of art can also enrich other curriculum areas such as History (where paintings can be used as historical sources), Geography or Science. A picture can even become the focus of a topic in itself...

### Where do I start?

Decide how you will introduce the print. You could display it without introduction for a week or two and see how the children react. You might put out a comments book or cassette recorder to register first impressions and only later have a more formal looking session, using the recorded comments as a stimulus for discussion. Or you could bring it out 'cold', perhaps at story time, and begin there.

## The looking process: some discussion leads

### The portraits

It is always best to start with what you can see; Holbein's dates and biography will be of limited interest to your 9-year-olds, and will not help them to work out what the painting might be about. Instead talk about what is obvious. This is a portrait. Encourage children to work this out for themselves by asking leading questions such as:

#### What stands out most in this picture?

The people do, but the objects are also prominent. Children will notice the distorted skull but will not necessarily be able to identify it. Keep this a secret at first; it will give the discussion an edge of suspense!

#### Does the picture tell a story?

Not in the usual sense. The men are standing, looking out of the painting at the viewer. There is nothing else happening.

#### Who might these men be?

Children studying the Tudors (and many who aren't) often say the man on the left is King Henry VIII, whose portrait Holbein also painted. They are rightly recognising a fashionably dressed Tudor, with a similar beard to the king's. Point out that if King Henry VIII walked into their classroom today, he might have trouble distinguishing one short-haired jeans-and-sweatshirtclad child from another.

Of course, they will not be able to name these men, but they might possibly work out that Georges de Selve was a cleric from his clothes.

Children also often think the men are brothers, even twins. Looking closely at both faces they will see that bone structure, size and shape of eyes, and skin colour are all different.

**What kind of characters might these men have had?**

We can't tell for sure from a portrait! But maybe Holbein hints at character through dress and pose. Jean is confident with open stance, left hand on dagger but right hand poised and relaxed; his clothes are eye-catchingly luxurious. Georges, though also richly dressed, appears more modest, with his coat drawn across his body, and perhaps less relaxed, clasping a pair of gloves in his right hand.

**Is this an unusual portrait?**

Only wealthy people could afford full-length and virtually life-sized portraits. The number and prominence of the objects surrounding these men are also special.

**The objects****Which objects can the children identify?**

Key Stage 2 pupils might be able to research some of the answers.

**Are the objects 'sorted' in any way?**

Everything on the upper shelf (except the book) is connected with the heavens. Those on the lower shelf are concerned with more earthly interests.

**(finally!) What is that object in the middle of the floor?**

You may get answers such as 'a feather' or 'a baguette'! Explain that the thing is distorted – suggest that colour and some shapes (the eye sockets) are clues.

**What might the skull stand for?****Would people in the 16th century have been reminded of death more than we are today?**

Epidemics of fatal diseases such as the plague were common (Holbein died of the plague in London in 1543), so death would have been a more visible phenomenon. Also it often struck quickly and without warning, which is why Christians would have felt the need to be spiritually prepared for whenever it came. You could mention the crucifix in this connection.

## Taking things further

### Art

Your time spent looking at and discussing this print with your class will help you teach them visual literacy, as required by the National Curriculum. But you are also asked to make connections between the work of artists and the children's own work. Work with 'The Ambassadors' might encourage an art follow-up activity such as:

#### Portraits

Full - length portraits of themselves or others. At Key Stage 2 pupils could scale up an A4 sketch to full-length life size. This is done by squaring up the sketch and scaling up the squares on the larger paper. They could include objects that have personal meaning for them. Two friends could update 'The Ambassadors' by painting themselves together!

#### Distortions

Draw everyday objects and distort them as Holbein did the skull.

#### Still life

Objects such as the globe were all 'state of the art' in 1533. Make arrangements of objects that are similarly up-to-date today and get the children to sketch or paint them.

**Paintings are about more than art – if you are able to, link your work with this print with other National Curriculum subjects...**

## History/Geography

### The Tudors

Find a map of the world as it was known in the Tudor period and compare it with the globe in the picture and with your classroom globe.

## English

### Spoken language

Discussing a painting is an opportunity to develop speaking skills. Ask children to describe the picture as if to a person who cannot see it. They will need to specify colours, and give the position of objects in the picture, and they will have to describe things whose names are unfamiliar to them.

### Writing

The children could write imaginary conversations between Jean and Georges.

## Maths

### Solid shapes

Older children could make their own polyhedral and cylindrical sundials out of paper.

## Music

### Music of the Tudor period

You could discuss 16th-century composers such as King Henry VIII (who wrote music while he reigned), Cornish and Morley. Find music for lute if you can.

## Personal and Social Education

### Death

Depending on the circumstances, you could use discussion about the meaning of the skull as an opportunity to talk about death, which might also fit in with work on bodies or life-cycles.

## Doing your own thing

These cross-curricular links are suggestions only. Your rolling programme of topics may prevent you from focusing on one picture in such a broad way, and you may find it fits most easily into the Art curriculum. But as you have seen, all works of art, including paintings, connect with main areas of learning. We hope you will exploit this in your own way as fully as possible.