



THE RENAISSANCE

文艺复兴简史

Jerry Brotton 著 赵国新 译



通识教育
双语文库

A VERY SHORT
INTRODUCTION



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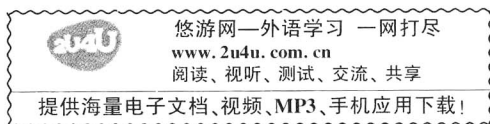
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Introduction

An Old Master

National museums and art galleries are the most obvious places to go to understand what we mean when we talk about ‘The Renaissance’. Most visitors to London’s National Gallery fail to leave without seeing one of the most famous works of art in its collection – Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*, dated 1533. For many people Holbein’s painting is an abiding image of the European Renaissance. But what is it that makes Holbein’s painting such a recognizably ‘Renaissance’ image?

The Ambassadors portrays two elegantly dressed men, surrounded by the paraphernalia of 16th-century life. Holbein’s lovingly detailed, precise depiction of the world of these Renaissance men, who stare back at the viewer with a confident, but also questioning self-awareness, is an image that has arguably not been seen before in painting. Medieval art looks much more alien, as it lacks this powerfully self-conscious creation of individuality. Even if it is difficult to grasp the motivation for the range of emotions expressed in paintings like Holbein’s, it is still possible to identify with these emotions as recognizably ‘modern’. In other words, when we look at paintings like *The Ambassadors*, we are seeing the emergence of modern identity and individuality.

This is a useful start in trying to understand Holbein’s painting as an artistic manifestation of the Renaissance. But already some



1. Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, an icon of the Renaissance, yet only discovered in the 19th century. Its enigmatic sitters and objects offer a wealth of insights into the period

rather vague terms are beginning to accumulate that need some explanation. What is the 'modern world'? Isn't this as slippery a term as 'Renaissance'? Similarly, should medieval art be defined (and effectively dismissed) so simply? And what of 'Renaissance Man'? What about 'Renaissance Woman'? To start to answer these questions, it is necessary to look more closely at Holbein's picture.

An educated Renaissance

What catches the eye as much as the gaze of both sitters is the table in the middle of the composition and the objects scattered across its upper and lower tiers. On the lower shelf are two books (a hymn book and a merchant's arithmetic book), a lute, a terrestrial globe, a case of flutes, a set square, and a pair of dividers. The upper shelf contains a celestial globe, and several extremely specialized scientific instruments: quadrants, sundials, and a torquetum (a timepiece and navigational aid). These objects represent the seven liberal arts that provided the basis of a Renaissance education. The three basic arts – grammar, logic, and rhetoric – were known as the *trivium*. They can be related to the activities of the two sitters. They are ambassadors, trained in the use of texts, but above all skilled in the art of argument and persuasion. The *quadrivium* referred to arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy, all of which are clearly represented in Holbein's precise depiction of the arithmetic book, the lute, and the scientific instruments.

These academic subjects formed the basis of the *studia humanitatis*, the course of study followed by most young men of the period, more popularly known as humanism. Humanism represented a significant new development in late 14th- and 15th-century Europe that involved the study of the classical texts of Greek and Roman language, culture, politics, and philosophy. The highly flexible nature of the *studia humanitatis* encouraged the study of a variety of new disciplines that became central to Renaissance thought, such as classical philology, literature, history, and moral philosophy.

Holbein is showing that his sitters are themselves 'New Men', scholarly but worldly figures, utilizing their learning in pursuit of fame and ambition. The figure on the right is Jean de Dinteville, the French ambassador to the English court of Henry VIII. On the left is his close friend Georges de Selve, bishop of Lavaur. The objects on the table are chosen to suggest that their positions in the worlds of

politics and religion are closely connected to their understanding of humanist thinking. The painting implies that knowledge of the disciplines represented by these objects is crucial to worldly ambition and success.

The darker side of the Renaissance

Yet if we look even more closely at the objects in Holbein's painting, they lead us to quite another version of the Renaissance. On the lower shelf one of the strings on the lute is broken, a symbol of discord. Next to the lute is an open hymn book, identifiable as the work of the religious reformer Martin Luther. On the right-hand edge of the painting, the curtain is slightly pulled back to reveal a silver crucifix. These objects draw our attention to religious debate and discord in the Renaissance. When Holbein painted it, Luther's Protestant ideas were sweeping through Europe, defying the established authority of the Roman Catholic Church. The broken lute is a powerful symbol of the religious conflict characterized by Holbein in his juxtaposition of Lutheran hymn book and Catholic crucifix.

Holbein's Lutheran hymn book is quite clearly a printed book. The invention of printing in the latter half of the 15th century revolutionized the creation, distribution, and understanding of information and knowledge. Compared to the laborious and often inaccurate copying of manuscripts, printed books were circulated with a speed and accuracy and in quantities previously unimaginable. But the spread of new ideas in print, especially in religion, would also provoke instability, uncertainty, and anxiety, leading artists and thinkers to further question who they were and how they lived in a rapidly expanding world. This relationship between achievement and the anxiety it creates is one of the characteristic features of the Renaissance.

Next to Holbein's Lutheran hymn book sits another printed book, which at first seems more mundane, but which offers another



telling dimension of the Renaissance. The book is an instruction manual for merchants in how to calculate profit and loss. Its presence alongside the more ‘cultural’ objects in the painting shows that in the Renaissance business and finance were inextricably connected to culture and art. While the book alludes to the *quadrivium* of Renaissance humanist learning, it also points towards an awareness that the cultural achievements of the Renaissance were built on the success of the spheres of trade and finance. As the world grew in size and complexity, new mechanisms for understanding the increasingly invisible circulation of money and goods were required to maximize profit and minimize loss. The result was a renewed interest in disciplines like mathematics as a way of understanding the economics of a progressively global Renaissance world picture.

The terrestrial globe behind the merchant’s arithmetic book confirms the expansion of trade and finance as a defining feature of the Renaissance. The globe is one of the most important objects in the painting. Travel, exploration, and discovery were dynamic, controversial aspects of the Renaissance, and Holbein’s globe tells us this in its remarkably up-to-date representation of the world as it was perceived in 1533. Europe is labelled ‘Europa’. This is itself significant, as the 15th and 16th centuries were the point at which Europe began to be defined as possessing a common political and cultural identity. Prior to this people rarely called themselves ‘European’. Holbein also portrays the recent discoveries made through voyages in Africa and Asia, as well as in the ‘New World’ voyages of Christopher Columbus, begun in 1492, and Ferdinand Magellan’s first circumnavigation of the globe in 1522. These discoveries situated Europe in a rapidly expanding world, but also changed the continent’s relationship with the cultures and communities it encountered.

As with the impact of the printing press, and the upheavals in religion, this global expansion bequeathed a double-edged legacy. One of the outcomes was the destruction of indigenous cultures

and communities through war and disease, because they were unprepared for or uninterested in adopting European beliefs and ways of living. Along with the cultural, scientific, and technological achievements of the period came religious intolerance, political ignorance, slavery, and massive inequalities in wealth and status – what has been called ‘the darker side of the Renaissance’.

Politics and empire

This leads to other crucial dimensions of the Renaissance addressed in Holbein’s painting, and which define both its sitters and the objects: power, politics, and empire. To understand the importance of these issues and how they emerge in the painting, we need to know some more about its subjects. Dinteville and Selve were in England in 1533 on the orders of the French King Francis I. King Henry VIII had secretly married Anne Boleyn and was threatening to leave the Catholic Church if the pope refused to grant him a divorce from his first wife. Dinteville and Selve were trying to prevent Henry’s split from Rome and act as Francis’s intermediaries in the negotiations. So while this painting, like much of the history of the Renaissance, is about relations between men, it is noticeable that at the heart of this image is a dispute over a woman who is absent, but whose presence is powerfully felt in its objects and surroundings. The insistent attempts by men to silence women only drew more attention to their complicated status within a patriarchal society: women were denied the benefits of many of the cultural and social developments of the Renaissance, but were key to its functioning as the bearers of male heirs to perpetuate its male-dominated culture.

Dinteville and Selve were also in London to broker a new political alliance between Henry, Francis, and the Ottoman Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent, the other great power in European politics of the time. The rug on the upper shelf of the table in Holbein’s painting is of Ottoman design and manufacture, suggesting that the Ottomans