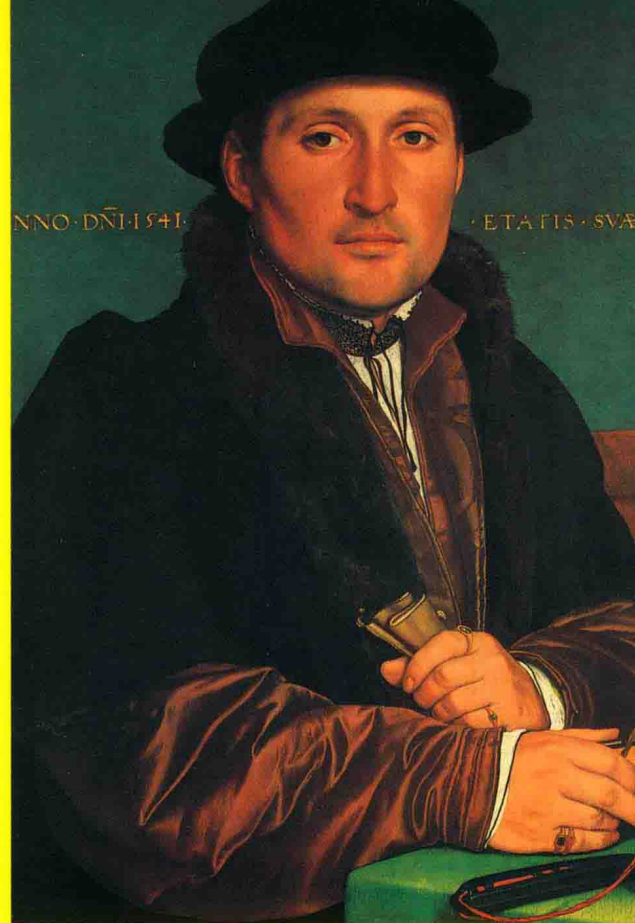


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HOLBEIN

Helen Langdon

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Helen Langdon

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Printed in Singapore

Cover illustrations:
(front) *Unknown Young Man at his Office Desk*, 1541 (Plate 48)
(back) *Christina of Denmark*, 1538 (Detail) (Plate 43)

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Holbein

'Add but the voice and you have his whole self, that you may doubt whether the painter or the father has made him.' These confident words are inscribed on Hans Holbein's portrait of *Derich Born* (Plate 26); they, and the elegant young man who leans on the parapet, demand our admiration and compel our belief. It was this quality of life-like immediacy in portraiture that most impressed Holbein's contemporaries. Erasmus wrote to Thomas More, on the receipt of a drawing of More's family, '... it is so completely successful that I should scarcely be able to see you better if I were with you.' Today, our first reaction on looking at a Holbein portrait is perhaps still one of wonder at the sheer skill with which Holbein used all the technical resources of Renaissance naturalism to create an image of completely convincing accuracy. His patient observation of surface detail, of the texture of skin, hair and fabrics is combined with an ability to suggest weight and volume and a sense of the dignity of the human personality. Holbein's sitters are recorded exactly as they were at one particular moment, but there is never any stress on the transitory; they do not greet the spectator with gestures or turned heads; they do not impose their personalities upon us by any play of expression; rather they are characterized by an unusual stillness, precision and clarity. Holbein's eye was unerring, and his approach one of unparalleled objectivity. He rarely allowed any emotion to intrude.

Hans Holbein was born in Augsburg in 1497/8, and his working life may be divided into four periods. He worked in Basle and Lucerne from 1515 to 1526. From 1526 to 1528 he was in London, but returned to Basle for the next four years. From 1532 he was again in London and died of the plague there in 1543.

Little impression of Holbein's own personality emerges from his works. The facts of his life are well documented, but there are no surviving letters or journals which tell us about the man himself; although he knew many famous men of his time he is rarely mentioned in their letters except as a 'wonderful artist'. Best remembered as a portrait painter, he was in fact an immensely productive artist in a variety of mediums.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century German art hovered on the brink of the Renaissance. Throughout the fifteenth century north European artists had been concerned with a faithful imitation of nature, the greatest exponent of which was Jan van Eyck who had developed a brilliant technique of oil painting. His works are based on a tireless and meticulous study of the effects of light as it falls on patiently observed details of fabrics, metals, stone, flowers and grass (Fig. 1). This feeling for the surface and texture of nature remained characteristic of the art of northern Europe for many years, and in this respect Holbein was truly the heir of van Eyck.

However, by the end of the fifteenth century, the splendour of the achievements of Italian artists of the Renaissance had begun to



Fig. 1
Jan van Eyck
The Madonna with
the Canon van der
Paele (detail)
1420. Oil on wood
panel, 122 x 157 cm.
Bruges, Musée
des Beaux-Arts

impress their northern contemporaries. Their own art must have begun to seem somewhat old-fashioned as they became increasingly aware of the Italian discovery of mathematical perspective, the Italian conception of the ideal beauty of the human figure (recreated from classical antiquity and based on the scientific study of anatomy) and the dignity and grandeur of classical forms of building.

Albrecht Dürer, who was twenty-six years older than Holbein, was the first German artist to attempt to understand the new principles of Italian art. He visited Italy twice and thereafter his work was a struggle to introduce into German art something of the grandeur of the Italian High Renaissance (Fig. 2). Dürer experimented tirelessly with Italian theories about proportion, perspective and anatomy; he tried to widen the narrow religious subject-matter of German art, introducing recondite allegories from classical mythology. Yet Dürer's works always remain recognizably Germanic; he was a melancholic, a man of intense religious convictions, and his art is full of the visionary and the fantastic. In sharp contrast to Holbein we know a lot about Dürer, who was fascinated by his own personality; he discussed himself in letters, journals and notebooks, and reveals himself through his art, as the cooler and enigmatic Holbein was never to do.

Dürer's only northern contemporary of comparable stature was Matthias Grünewald, who in every way represents a total contrast. Grünewald continued to work in the tradition of late medieval art, the aim of which was to communicate religious truths with intensity and passion. His most famous work was an altarpiece now called the *Isenheim Altarpiece*. The central panel shows the Crucifixion, and rarely has this event been depicted with such stark cruelty. Every detail

Fig. 2
Albrecht Dürer
Oswald Krel
1499. Oil on panel,
49.6 x 39 cm.
Munich, Alte Pinakothek

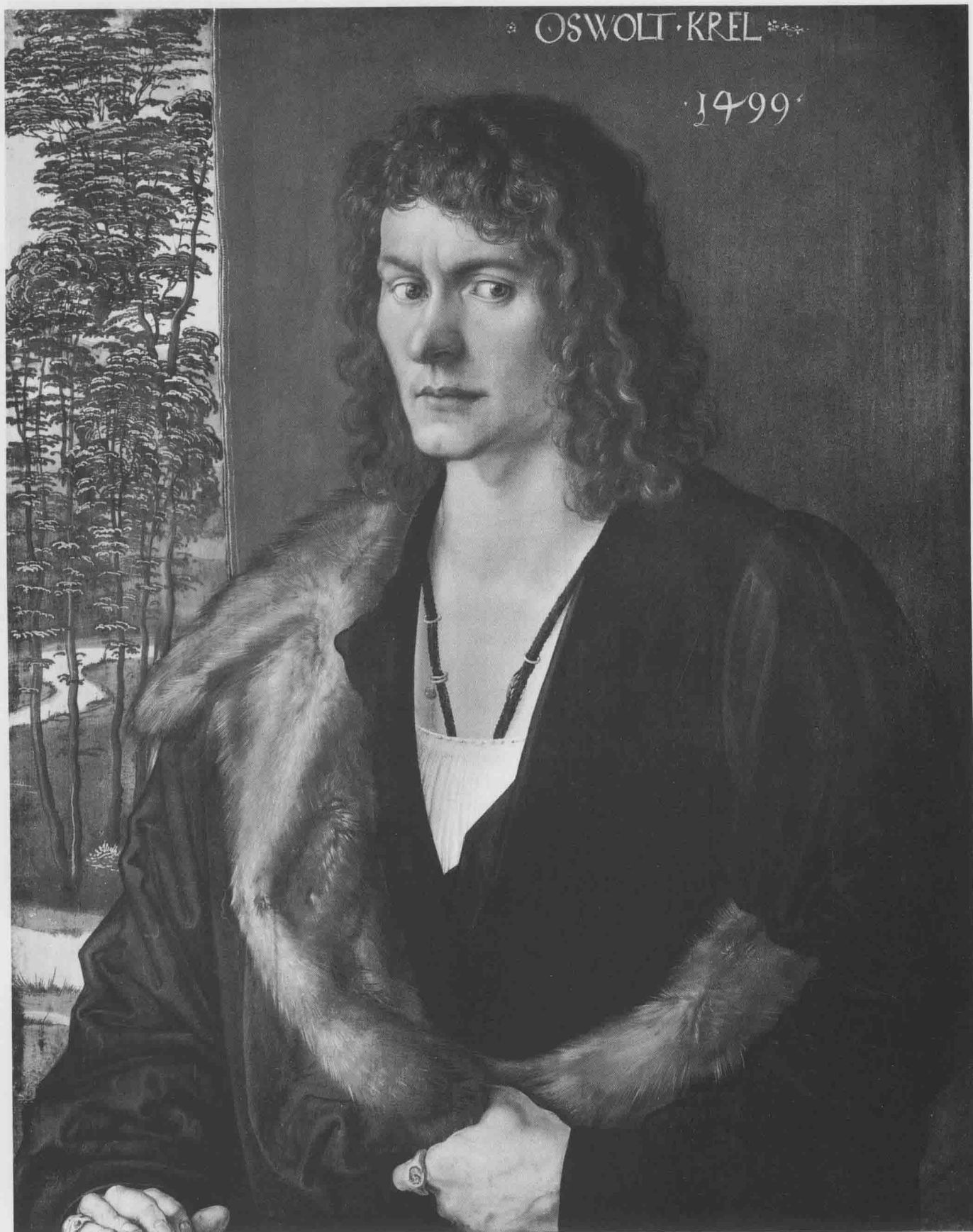




Fig. 3
Matthias Grünewald
The Dead Christ
in the Tomb
(Detail from the
Isenheim Altarpiece)
Oil on panel, 1515.
Colmar, Unterlinden
Museum

emphasizes the agony of Christ's suffering; the body, with the shoulders roughly pulled out of joint, hangs from a rough wooden cross; the decaying green flesh is covered with hideous scars; the hands are convulsed in agony. The painting is the culmination of a tradition of German Gothic paintings which show scenes from the Passion of Christ with the utmost brutality (Fig. 3).

Landscape was another interest of German artists of this period. Lucas Cranach and Albrecht Altdorfer had discovered the beauty of the Alpine districts around the Danube and developed a kind of romantic landscape painting and etching, often enlivened by dramatic effects of light (Fig. 4). An interest in dramatic nocturnal scenes is also apparent in the works of Dürer's follower, Hans Baldung Grien. Holbein was to become one of the most urban of artists, but, in his early religious paintings, he sometimes used romantic landscape backgrounds, and exciting contrasts of night and day. In other ways Holbein had little in common with his near contemporaries in Germany, all of whom were strongly individualistic. Hans Baldung Grien, for example, moved away from the influence of Dürer to explore more shadowy areas of human experience – the erotic, the sensual, the demonic, and the libertine (Fig. 5).

In a narrower context, Holbein's early training in Augsburg would have encouraged an interest in the Italian Renaissance. Augsburg was an important artistic centre, and artists of the preceding generation had begun to assimilate something of the Italian achievement. Hans Burgkmair had travelled to northern Italy, and had opened the eyes of Augsburg artists to the beauty of Renaissance architectural detail; he also experimented with Italian portrait types. Moreover, Holbein's father, Hans Holbein the Elder, was the leading artist of his generation in southern Germany; he was a late Gothic realist, whose capacity for precise and objective observation, particularly apparent in his numerous portrait drawings, anticipated something of his son's. His late altarpieces show the beginnings of a Renaissance interest in symmetry and a purely decorative use of Italian Renaissance architecture. Yet Holbein the Elder was also in touch with Grünewald, and in 1515 moved to Isenheim, when his son moved to Basle.

In Basle Holbein probably entered the workshop of Hans Herbst, with whom his brother Ambrosius was working in 1516. In c.1519 Ambrosius died; Holbein became a master of the Basle Guild in that year and probably took over his brother's workshop. About the same time he married Elsbeth Schmid.

There was a continuing demand for church decorations in the old style in Basle, yet the city was also the centre of classical scholarship and of the European book trade. Johann Froben, friend of Erasmus and publisher of his books, established his press there, and Holbein began to produce book illustrations for him in 1516. In these early

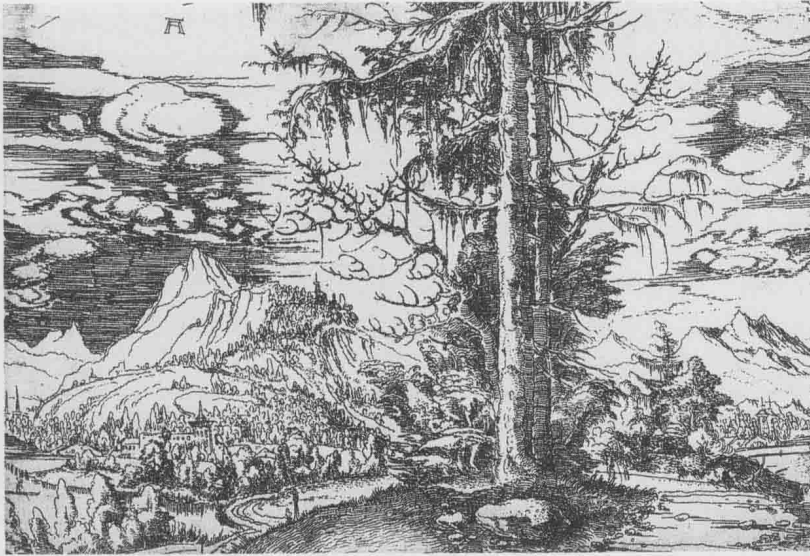


Fig. 4
Albrecht Altdorfer
Landscape
Etching.

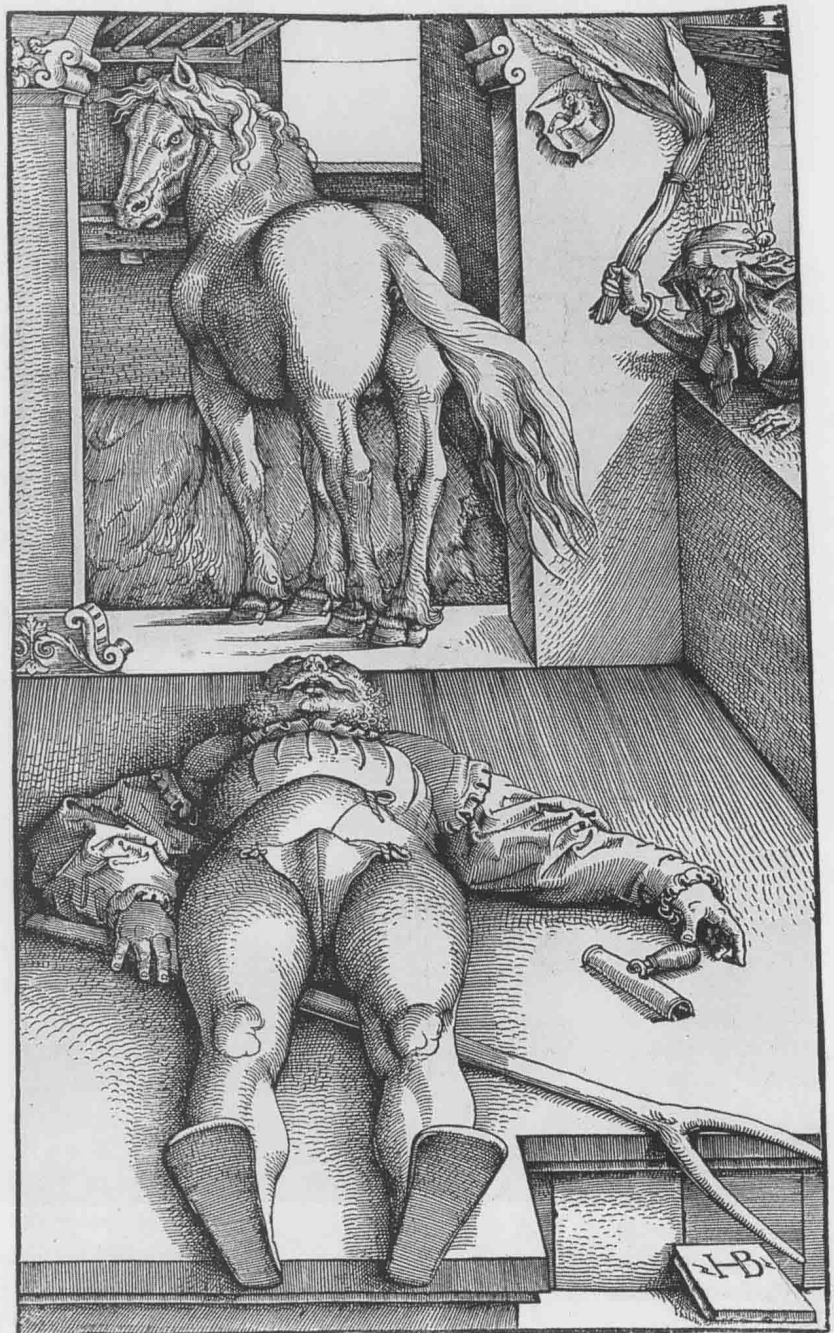


Fig. 5
Hans Baldung Grien
The Bewitched
Groom
Woodcut, 34.5 x 19.4 cm.
Metropolitan Museum
of Art, New York

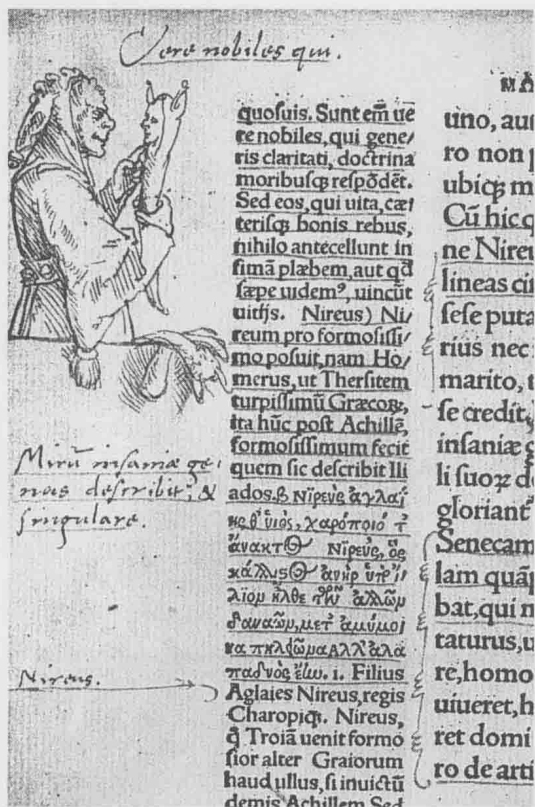


Fig. 6
Marginal illustration
for Erasmus's
In Praise of Folly
Pen and ink

Fig. 7
Andrea Mantegna
The Family of Count
Ludovico Gonzaga
and his Court
c.1472. Fresco. Mantua,
Ducal Palace

years Holbein, not surprisingly, veers between the old and the new. His religious paintings have an expressionist figure style and a violent subjectivity that suggest that he had studied Grünewald; yet he also studied with enthusiasm engravings of classical forms and used them sensitively in his work, often combining details of both classical and Gothic architecture in the same painting. The knowledge that Dürer had struggled so painfully to acquire was more accessible to the younger Holbein. To no other German artist did the potentials of scientific perspective reveal so much.

Holbein was a precocious artist, with an astonishingly mature grasp of form, and in his early works there is an element of exuberant display and delight in a complex treatment of space. He experimented ceaselessly with new problems, applying linear perspective even to book illustration and portraits. In his religious paintings, sweeping movements into depth create effects that are almost melodramatic; his decorative paintings use feigned architecture in a way that approaches *trompe l'oeil*, and are full of wit, gaiety and humour. In these early paintings we can most immediately feel the excitement of the boundless possibilities revealed to a northern artist of this period by the Italian discoveries of the *quattrocento*.

Despite his youth, Holbein was immediately accepted into humanist circles in Basle. He made his artistic debut with some informal marginal drawings that he did in a first edition of Erasmus's *Praise of Folly* of 1515, which later belonged to Erasmus himself. These are remarkable for their wit, humanity and instinctive sympathy with the spirit of Erasmus's irony (Fig. 6).

In the following year, although a young and unknown artist, Holbein attracted the patronage of the rich merchant classes, and painted the burgomaster *Jakob Meyer* and his wife *Dorothea Kannengiesser* (Plates 2, 3). Meyer was later to head the Catholic party in opposition to the reformers, and to commission from Holbein his greatest religious work (Plate 13). The composition of the Meyer portraits is based on a chiaroscuro woodcut of Hans Baumgartner by Hans Burgkmair (Fig. 8); husband and wife are shown against one continuous architectural background which is sumptuous in its elaborate detail and contrasts of red and gold. In this, the first portrait in which Holbein experimented with perspective to create depth, the architecture thrusts forcefully into space. Holbein was always to be far more inventive in his creation of new portrait types than Dürer had been. The bright reds against the blue of the sky, and the elaborate display of gold embroidery and jewellery, emphasize the effects of brilliance created by the architecture. Framed by this fashionably classical setting, the features of the couple remain stubbornly unidealized and sharply observed. They are close in feeling and in pose – particularly in the pose of the woman, with her hands concealed and her arms held away from the body – to the likenesses made by Holbein the Elder. It is a remarkably confident painting for so young an artist.

The showy qualities of the Meyer diptych have been eliminated from the portrait of *Bonifacius Amerbach* of 1519, which is a simpler and more striking work (Plate 4). Amerbach, a close friend of Erasmus, was Professor of Roman Law at Basle University, and owned many works by Holbein which later formed the basis of the famous collection now at Basle. Amerbach dominates his surroundings. The poem, composed by himself, which praises the lifelikeness of the portrait, leads the eye gently into space; the dress is elegantly unobtrusive. The portrait is not prosaically realistic but has a new dignity which expresses something of the humanist confidence in the power of man's intellect.

From 1517 to 1519 Holbein worked in Lucerne, where he collabo-





Fig. 8
Hans Burgkmair
Portrait of Hans
Baumgartner
c.1512. Woodcut.
British Museum, London

rated with his father on the decorations for the magistrate's residence, the Hertenstein House, now destroyed. This was the first of a series of decorations in which Holbein exploited the possibilities of illusionistic architecture, and which included a pageant scene heavily dependent on engravings after Mantegna's *Triumphs*. It is almost certain that sometime during these two years Holbein went to northern Italy; paintings of the 1520s, such as the *Lais Corinthiaca* (Plate 12) and the group portrait of Sir Thomas More's family, suggest a direct knowledge of works by Leonardo and Mantegna (Fig. 7).

Holbein's early religious works show the influence of Dürer, Grünewald and Hans Baldung Grien. The *Adam and Eve* of 1517 (Plate 1) is based on a woodcut by Dürer of 1511, which shows Adam and Eve embracing as Eve takes the apple; in Holbein's painting the tender melancholy of Adam's expression seems to suggest his awareness of the ensuing tragedy.

The figures in *Christ as the Man of Sorrows* and the *Mater Dolorosa* are also Düreresque; the complex architectural background plunges into space and, though the forms are classical, the sweeping movements and clash of geometrical shapes increase the emotional fervour; it is an idiosyncratic combination of southern forms with Germanic feeling. A further group of works from this period show scenes in which classical architecture is illuminated with dramatic, often nocturnal, lighting effects.

In the early 1520s Holbein achieved a truer balance between north and south. His *Dead Christ* of 1521 (Plate 8) is unimaginable without the example of Grünewald, yet nowhere is Holbein's capacity for detached and merciless observation more apparent. His painting makes no overt appeal to the emotions, there is no exaggeration of bodily agony in expression or gesture; yet it does move us to pity and fear because of its painfully accurate and unflinching description of the structure of the body, the putrid and decaying flesh turning green around the wounds, the swollen lips, sunken eyes and rigid hands.

The two shutters of an altarpiece (Plate 5) conclude this early phase of Holbein's development. Although the format and subject recall earlier German paintings, Holbein here tells the story of the Passion of Christ with a straightforward and human directness that is new in German art; the figures have lost the spikiness and bonelessness of the late Gothic style and become sturdy and compact, standing firmly on the ground. Both Christ and his persecutors are humanized, and Christ himself is no longer a pallid and pure victim. Holbein stresses the passionate intensity of his suffering in the garden, and the reluctant knowledge with which he submits to Judas's extravagant embrace; perhaps most astonishing is the unemotional representation of his body on the cross. Nor are his persecutors snarling animals in extravagant medieval armour; they are calm and grave, wear Roman dress, and their elegant poses recall Mantegna. *The Entombment* is based on Raphael's composition in the Borghese (see Fig. 16), but Holbein has broken up the classic grace and flowing movement of Raphael's painting in the interests of a starker realism.

In the *Meyer Madonna* of 1526 (Plate 13) all remnants of a Gothic format have gone; of all Holbein's paintings this most nearly approaches the grandeur and calm symmetry of Italian Renaissance compositions. The painting shows the Madonna of Mercy sheltering the praying family of Jakob Meyer beneath her cloak. In 1526 the two sons died, and between 1528 and 1530 Holbein added the profile portrait of Meyer's first wife, thus commemorating Jakob Meyer's whole family. The portraits retain a northern realism, but their expressions and taut poses suggest a spirituality that is far removed from the

worldliness of the earlier Meyer portraits (Plates 2, 3). The painting has an unusual combination of the majestic and the intimate; the composition is open and the group of figures brought close to the world of the spectator.

The soft painting of the flesh in the *Meyer Madonna* reveals the influence of Leonardo, whose work continued to interest Holbein throughout the 1520s. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the *Lais Corinthiaca* of 1526 (Plate 12), for which Holbein used the same model. Both the subject-matter – the model is shown as a Greek hetaira (dancing-girl) – and the overtly Italianate quality, which suggests Raphael as well as Leonardo, are unusual in Holbein's work.

Up till this period Holbein's career had been immensely varied and extremely productive; as well as portraits and religious paintings, he had produced designs for painted glass, woodcuts, façade decorations, and, in 1521–2, he had begun a series of wall paintings in the great Council Chamber of Basle Town Hall, which, within a framework of feigned architecture, showed scenes from classical history intended to advise the councillors.

Before 1526 he had produced a series of woodcuts illustrating the *Dance of Death*. Holbein's ironic tone throughout the series contrasts sharply with contemporary, more expressionist treatments of the subject. Death appears as a mocker, attacking every class of humanity and – as he beats a drum before the lady walking with her lover, and runs the knight through with a lance – reveals the futility of worldly power and concerns (Fig. 9). Some of the same social types are also shown on a design for a dagger sheath, where Holbein shows the dead and the living dancing together. The series is remarkable for its variety and for the precision of Holbein's feeling for different social types.

By the mid-1520s, however, the violent disturbances associated with the Reformation put an end to this productivity. Religious paintings were viewed with disfavour and Holbein decided to look for work in England.

The choice of England was perhaps encouraged by Erasmus, and his portraits of Erasmus form the prelude to the humanist portraits of Holbein's first English period. Erasmus settled in Basle in 1521 and Holbein supplied his publisher, Froben, with woodcuts for his books. Erasmus was the most famous classical scholar in Europe, sought after by princes and high churchmen; his portrait was done by many artists – amongst them Dürer and Quentin Massys – yet today we cannot imagine him without thinking of Holbein, in whom we sense a deep understanding of his irony, detachment, wit and seriousness.

Erasmus was attracted by the idea of exchanging portraits with his friends; he had already presented Sir Thomas More with a double portrait of himself and Petrus Aegidius by Quentin Massys. In 1524 Holbein took a portrait of him to France; in the same year two portraits by Holbein were sent to England, one of which was presented to Archbishop Warham (see Fig. 24).

In the fifteenth-century, portraits of scholars, usually Saint Augustine or Saint Jerome, surrounded by books and writing materials, were common. In the sixteenth century this portrait type was adapted to the humanist scholar, and Massys's and Holbein's portraits of scholars are variations on this theme. Massys tends to be more informal, and to attempt to create something of the atmosphere of the study. Holbein's portraits of Erasmus are more definitive celebrations of the supreme scholar. In the painting in the Louvre (Plate 11) Erasmus is shown in profile, writing at his desk; no details distract from this portrayal of a powerful intelligence, and the charmingly dec-



Fig. 9
Hans Lützelburger
after Hans Holbein
the Younger
Woodcuts from
'Dance of
Death' series
1524. Paris,
Bibliothèque Nationale

orative background adds a touch of intimacy and acts as a foil to the powerful modelling of the head.

In 1526 Holbein left for England. He carried with him a letter of recommendation from Erasmus to the Antwerp scholar Petrus Aegidius, asking the latter to introduce him to Quentin Massys. 'The arts are freezing in this part of the world', wrote Erasmus, 'and he is on his way to England to pick up some angels there.' Holbein probably also carried letters to Erasmus's friends in England.

Holbein's belief that England was the home of the arts at this time was not without justification. Henry VIII's reign had opened full of promise for the revival of classical learning; John Colet, who had travelled in Italy, was lecturing at Oxford from 1496 to 1504; Warham, Erasmus's friend and patron, was Archbishop of Canterbury; Wolsey had established himself as a great patron of learning and was encouraging Italian craftsmen and sculptors to work in England; poets flocked to Henry's court, and Wyatt and Surrey were introducing the Petrarchan sonnet. Sir Thomas More, after the publication of his *Utopia* in 1516, achieved a fame in Europe that paralleled that of Erasmus.

More exchanged letters with the greatest scholars of his day, amongst them Erasmus, Vives and Cranevelt, and was visited by them. Erasmus himself visited England several times in the early years of the century and was tempted to settle there; his letters give some idea of the atmosphere of optimism and hope with which the humanists awaited the rule of reason, learning, moderation and mercy. In 1499 he wrote to Robert Fisher, 'And I have met with so much learning, not hackneyed and trivial, but deep, exact, ancient Latin and Greek, that I am not hankering so much after Italy except just for the sake of seeing it. When I hear my Colet, I seem to be listening to Plato himself. In Grocyn who does not wonder at that perfect compass of all knowledge? What is more acute, more profound, more keen than the judgement of Linacre? What could nature ever create milder, sweeter or happier than the genius of Thomas More?' In 1518 Erasmus wrote to Henry VIII, praising him for his establishment of a Golden Age of universal peace, justice and scholarship.

Holbein arrived in England in 1526; More, who had been established in a position of power at court since 1521, wrote discouragingly to Erasmus, 'Your painter, dearest Erasmus, is a wonderful man; but I



Fig. 10
Family of Sir
Thomas More
1526. Pen and ink,
38.8 x 52.4 cm. Basle,
Öffentliche
Kunstsammlung