

Hands On Learning

with Reading Museum Service

HOLBEIN DRAWINGS & TUDOR COSTUME A39

The pictures in this box are copies of drawings made by Hans Holbein the younger (1497-1543). He was born in Augsburg, Germany, and brought up in Basel, Switzerland. His father was an artist and trained the young man in the skills of his craft. The self-portrait on the right is thought to show him in 1542/3, just before his death.

Holbein made two visits to England in 1526-8 and 1532-43. He died in London, possibly of the plague. While residing in England, Holbein made a living from a variety of artistic activities, including wall paintings and designs for metalwork, but the bulk of his surviving work consists of painted portraits and the drawings that were made as preparation for them. His clients were merchants, churchmen, ambassadors, courtiers and King Henry VIII himself - the wealthy, upper class of English society. He was referred to as the 'King's painter' in 1536 and received a regular salary from the King from 1537.



On his first visit to England Holbein painted the famous group portrait of Sir Thomas More and his family (left). The original painting was destroyed in the eighteenth century, but fortunately a number of copies were made. When he returned to England for his second visit many of the people he had painted had fallen from power, including More, who was executed in 1535.

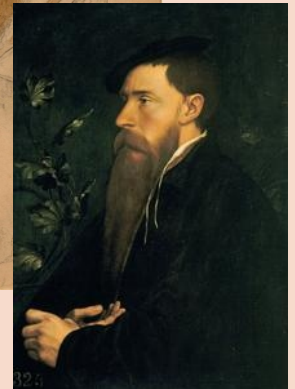
Holbein's skill, however, meant there was a demand for his work from the new people who had found favour with Henry VIII.

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Eighty-five of Holbein's drawings survive in the Royal Collection at Windsor. The drawings from the first visit are in black, white and coloured chalks on plain paper, while those from the second visit are chalk and ink on pink primed paper.

The drawings were made as a preparation for painted portraits. Several of the portraits that were made from these drawings still exist. The portrait painted from the drawing of William Reskimer can be seen on the right. In some cases, no portrait exists and may never have been made. In others, there are portraits, but no surviving drawings.



The Reskimer portrait follows the drawing very closely. This is because Holbein's usual method was to place the drawing over a sheet of paper, the back of which had been covered with black chalk. In effect, the second sheet was the equivalent of a modern piece of carbon-paper. The two sheets were then laid on a prepared panel. Holbein then traced over his drawing with a sharp metal point and the design was imprinted onto the panel. Many of the drawings have score marks on them, in some cases obliterating the drawn lines underneath.

Several of the drawings have the names of colours written onto the clothing as a guide to the artist when he came to creating a painted portrait from them. The language used is German, but the drawing of Mary Zouch (see page 3)

includes the word 'black felbert', which suggests Holbein was familiar with English.



Left: The drawing and portrait of Sir Richard Southwell. Southwell came to power under Thomas Cromwell. He played an active part in getting Sir Thomas More condemned and assisted in the prosecution of his childhood friend the Earl of Surrey. During the reign of Elizabeth he fell out of favour for, oddly, declaring himself a Roman Catholic. The drawing shows the marks of the metal point used to trace it.

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In 1590 it is known that the drawings were kept in a 'great booke'. They are described as showing 'certyne Lordes, Ladyes, gentlemen and gentlewomen in King Henry the 8: his tyme, their names subscribed by Sr John Cheke Secretary to King Edward the 6'. Cheke had served as tutor to Prince Edward from 1542 and could have known both Holbein and many of the people portrayed.



Sixty-nine of the eighty-five drawings have been given names. Most of the unidentified pictures seem to be from the time of Holbein's first visit to England. Cheke was not at court during this period. However, the situation is complicated by the fact that the inscriptions that we can see on the drawings today are not those by Sir John Cheke, but were added in the eighteenth century. Cheke's original identifications may have been on the backing paper of the 'great booke' in which they were stored. In any case, Cheke has got some of the identifications wrong. For example, the drawings marked 'Thomas Earl of Surrey' are in fact of Henry his son.



Whatever the case, Holbein's pictures have fascinated people ever since they were drawn. Even more than the paintings, they seem to capture their sitters with a startling realism. Looking at them we catch a glimpse of the world of Henry VIII's court free, for a moment, of the glitz and glamour of Hollywood films and BBC TV-serials. The faces of individuals who lived 500 years ago and who, in many cases, died a bloody death during one of Henry VIII's purges, are shown to be not so very different from ourselves.

Top right: Mary Zouch. The drawing is labelled 'M Souch', which may simply mean Mistress Zouch, in which case it could be any female member of the Zouch family. Top left: A drawing labelled 'Anna Bollein Queen'. However, this identification has been much disputed and is still not certain.

Right: Lady Margaret Elyot and her husband Sir Thomas - in this case there is no dispute about the identity of the people shown!



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The Lady Borow was the wife of William Lord Borough. Borow and Borough are actually the same name, but at that time it was common for names to be spelt in several different ways. William Shakespeare's name was sometimes spelt Shakspeare or even Shaksper.

It is always harder to find out information about women in the past than it is men. There is very little detail available about the Lady Borow, except that her first name was probably Catherine. Some recent research suggests tht she might actually have been called Elizabeth, daughter of Sir David Owen. It is a mystery!



Several women were known as the Lady Ratclif, so it is difficult to say for certain who the lady in this picture was. It is most likely that she was the wife of Sir Humphrey Ratcliffe, third son of the Earl of Sussex. The drawing was made in about 1532. Notice Holbein's notes about the material and colour of the cloth and the little drawing of the jewellery at the side.

The other two ladies are not named, but even so, they are an important source of information for the dress of the time. Look at the high, decorated collar worn by the younger lady facing to the side.



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The replica costume in the box is based on the clothes of the older lady, shown facing forwards. The picture on the right shows how it should be worn. The lady is wearing a partlet - a small garment that covered the chest and the back and tied under the arms. Older women would have worn these to cover their chest and throat. Look carefully at the lady's chest and you will see the lace-up at the front of the partlet - now look for the replica in the box. The lady is wearing a fairly complicated gable hood from the time of Catharine of Aragon. Her hair is kept away from her face with a covering, like the one in the box made from shiny material. We can't see her gown but it is likely to have looked like the navy blue example in the box. The material is heavier than those we use today - feel the weight of the gown, imagine wearing it all day!

