

## Original Paper

# Leonardo's Skull and the Complex Symbolism of Holbein's "Ambassadors"

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### Abstract

*The depiction of memento mori such as skulls was a niche artistic trend symbolizing the contemplation of mortality that can be traced back to the privations of the Black Death in the 1340s, but became popular in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, the anamorphism of the floating skull in Hans Holbein's 'The Ambassadors' of 1533, though much discussed as a clandestine wedding commemoration, has never been satisfactorily explained in its historical context as a diplomatic gift to the French ambassadors to the court of Henry VIII who were in the process of negotiations with the Pope for his divorce. Consideration of Holbein's youthful trips to Italy and France suggest that he may have been substantially influenced by exposure to Leonardo da Vinci's works, and that the skull may have been an explicit reference to Leonardo's anamorphic demonstrations for the French court at Amboise, and hence a homage to the cultural interests of the French ambassadors of the notable Dinteville family for whom the painting was destined. This hypothesis is supported by iconographic analysis of works by Holbein and Leonardo's followers in the School of Fontainebleau in combination with literary references to its implicit symbolism.*

### Keywords

*Diplomacy, iconography, Renaissance, Hans Holbein the Younger, Leonardo da Vinci, painting, anamorphosis*

### 1. Introduction

The Renaissance was a period in which paintings were increasingly valued as an expression of individual philosophies of life. In the preceding medieval period, their main function had been as expository aids in the ecclesiastical settings of churches, basilicas and monasteries. This function was itself a radical restriction of the practice in the ancient, where painting and sculpture had a full-function application to the glorification of rulers, floor and wall decorations, scenography for dramatic works,

funerary portraiture, and both everyday and mythical evocations in wall-paintings, in addition to religious representations. As the culture transition into the Renaissance in 15<sup>th</sup> century Italy, in particular, painting took on progressively more secular functions again, from the celebration of weddings and military successes, to depictions of civic leaders and cultural figures, though often in the guise of a religious depictions such as the assembled populace in the “Adoration of the Magi”.

In this context, by the 16<sup>th</sup> century paintings were becoming progressively more symbolic, with the portraits surrounded by items of deep significance in the lives of those portrayed in the works. Of course, Christian saints were usually depicted with the identifying symbol of their martyrdom, but secular portraits such as the Arnolfini couple by Jan van Eyck and Vasari’s portrait of Lorenzo de’ Medici are early examples of the inclusion of numerous symbolic items relating to their lives. And a prevailing theme was that of the *memento mori*, or reminder of the fragility of life and the imminence of death in the context of the humility so prized in the Christian ethos.



**Figure 1. A. ‘The Ambassadors’ by Hans Holbein the Younger (1533, National Gallery, London), with its apparition of an elongated object hovering over the floor. Observation of the painting from the right side of the frame reveals it to be an anamorphic depiction of a skull. B. Non-perspectival orthographic compression of the skull along its long axis shows that it is depicted in convergent perspective, designed for the viewing location at the righthand edge of the picture. C. Perspective reconstruction of the skull from the optimal viewing position reveals the veridical skull impression. D. Depiction of a skull by Leonardo da Vinci, probably dating to about 1510, for comparison.**

In this context, one of the enduring mysteries of Renaissance art is why Holbein chose to include an anamorphic depiction of a skull in his iconic portrait of “The Ambassadors” (1533), reproduced in Figure 1. Although this work has been subject to extensive art-historical scrutiny through the centuries, a renewed focus on the historical context suggests a covey of novel interpretations arising from this work.

## 2. Method

In order to reach an understanding of the issue, we need to analyze the milieu in which the picture was painted. This goal is addressed by a combination of three approaches: historical, literary and iconographic. The historical aspect consists of an analysis of the roles of contemporary figures involved in aspects of the painting, including those depicted, alluded to, and responsible for its patronage and production, with specific reference to the historical timeline of relevant events. The literary analysis involves allusions in contemporary literary productions and subsequent art historical exposition, while the iconographic analysis focuses on the symbolic and chronological analysis deriving from the diverse array of ancillary objects in the picture. These three forms of analysis are brought to bear on Holbein’s motivations to including this particular assemblage of objects in the portrait image of two ambassadors at this particular moment in history, when the English king was preparing to withdraw his country from the millennially-entrenched embrace of the Roman Catholic church.

## 3. Analysis

### 3.1 *The Historical Context*

The first consideration is the courtly milieu within which the work was commissioned. Henry VIII was on the throne of England, and François 1<sup>er</sup> was holding court as the new patron of Renaissance culture since becoming king of France in 1515. One of his first acts (following his disastrous Italian campaign) was to invite the aging Leonardo da Vinci to take up residence at the court as the reigning genius of the age. By all accounts, Leonardo not only imparted his artistic knowledge, but designed remarkable machines such as a mechanical roaring lion that enlivened the court celebrations and even the unique cyclic architecture of Chambord, the paragon chateau of the Loire Valley. The chateau is built around a central double-spiral staircase and has unique rotational symmetry of the complex roof features (as explained by the tour guides there). He was also doyen of the nascent “School of Fontainebleau” cadre of Italian painters invited to France as the epitomize of the open spirit of the early Cinquecento Italian Renaissance. The initial patronage of François’ court included such luminous Italian masters as Andrea del Sarto, Correggio, Bronzino and Parmigianino. Leonardo died in the chateau at Amboise in 1519, only three years after arriving at the court, but his influence on scientific and artistic invention had extended across Europe.

In the same period, Henry VIII, though a devout king in his early years, was feeling the influence of the French Court. Many young English ladies of the period were visitors at the court of François 1<sup>er</sup> in the

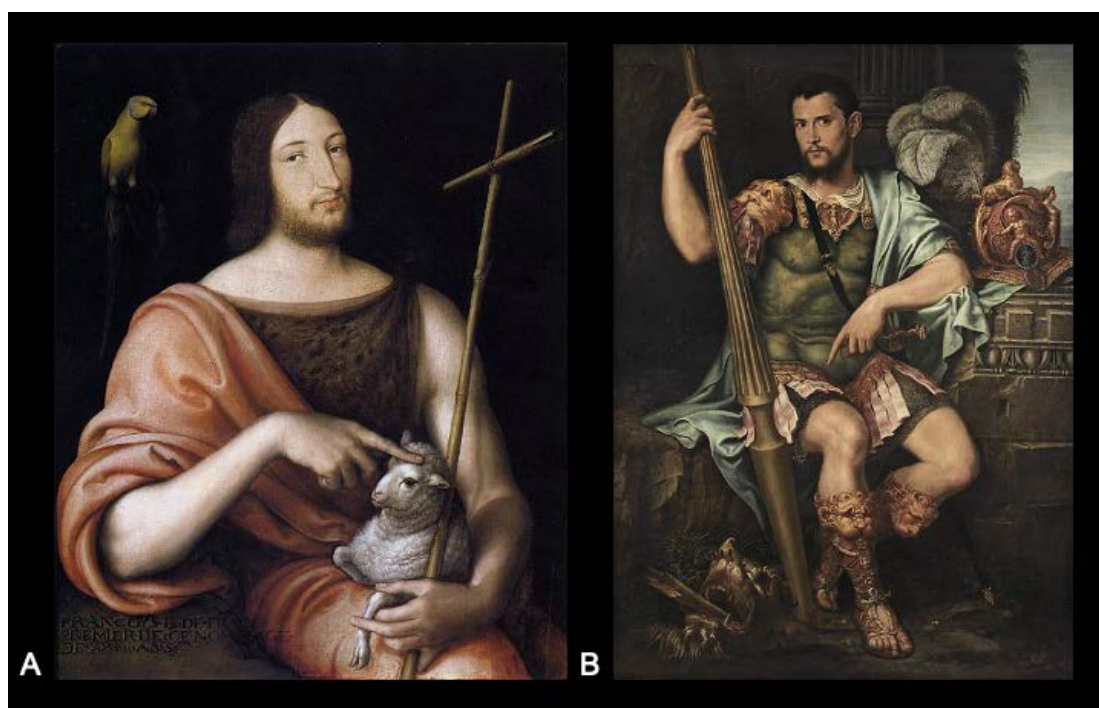
1520s, including the two Boleyn sisters (Mary and Anne), Mary Queen of Scots, Henry's sister Mary Rose (who had married King Louis XII just before the accession of François 1<sup>er</sup>), and many other court ladies. Thus, the court life of the two nations was closely intertwined, and the formal aspect of these connections were represented by the French Ambassador to Henry's court, Jean de Dinteville, the Seigneur of Polisy (in Champagne) and probably Georges de Selve (Note 1), recently designated as the Bishop of Lavaur, who was heavily engaged in diplomacy with the Emperor Charles V in this period (Hervey, 1900). As ambassadors to the court of Henry VIII in England, these two men were presumably key intermediaries with the Pope in Henry's quest for an annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon in order to marry the object of his present infatuation, who was Anne Boleyn. There was every reason, therefore, for Holbein to take a serious approach to the portraiture of the two ambassadors in order to give them maximum deference. Why, then, would he disfigure their honorific with a bizarre apparition, and one that is universally recognized, moreover, to be the symbol of death?



**Figure 2.** Detail from ‘Moses and Aaron before Pharaoh: An Allegory of the Dinteville Family’ (1537, School of Fontainebleau, NY Met), with portraits of, from left to right, Jean, Gaucher, François, unidentified, and Guillaume de Dinteville (Hervey, 1900). Note the resonance of the Jean de Dinteville's gestures with the characteristic style of da Vinci.

It should be appreciated that the Dinteville family had, in fact, a central place in the French court of King François 1<sup>er</sup>. The senior Gaucher de Dinteville had been secretary to King Charles VIII and accompanied him on the 1494 campaign of the conquest of Italy to as far south as Naples, when Dinteville was given the governorship of Siena. It was during this campaign that Charles VIII took Milan, then under the dukedom of Ludovico Sforza, and met Leonardo da Vinci. The visiting French was duly impressed with the illustrious artist and Dinteville would have been among the courtiers

viewing Leonardo's great works in Milan, the "Last Supper", the "Virgin of the Rocks", the portraits of the Duke's mistresses (Cecilia Gallerani and Lucrezia Crivelli), and the elaborate intertwined foliage of the ceiling decoration of the Sala d'Asse meeting room in the Dukes castello. The contemporary characterization of his eldest son, François de Dinteville: "Besides the liberal arts, he was a connoisseur in mechanics, loving above all things painting, and having always some painters in his house," (Note 2) probably indicates the interests of the whole family. Indeed, all four sons were featured in a painting of Moses and Aaron before the Pharaoh, of which a detail highlighting their four portraits is shown in Figure 2 (Note 3). Given this cultured family background, it is evident that any of the sons would greatly appreciate being depicted in a painting in association with the liberal and scientific arts depicted on the upper two shelves of "The Ambassadors", and would be sophisticated enough to appreciate the trope of a death's head in the lower register of the painting.



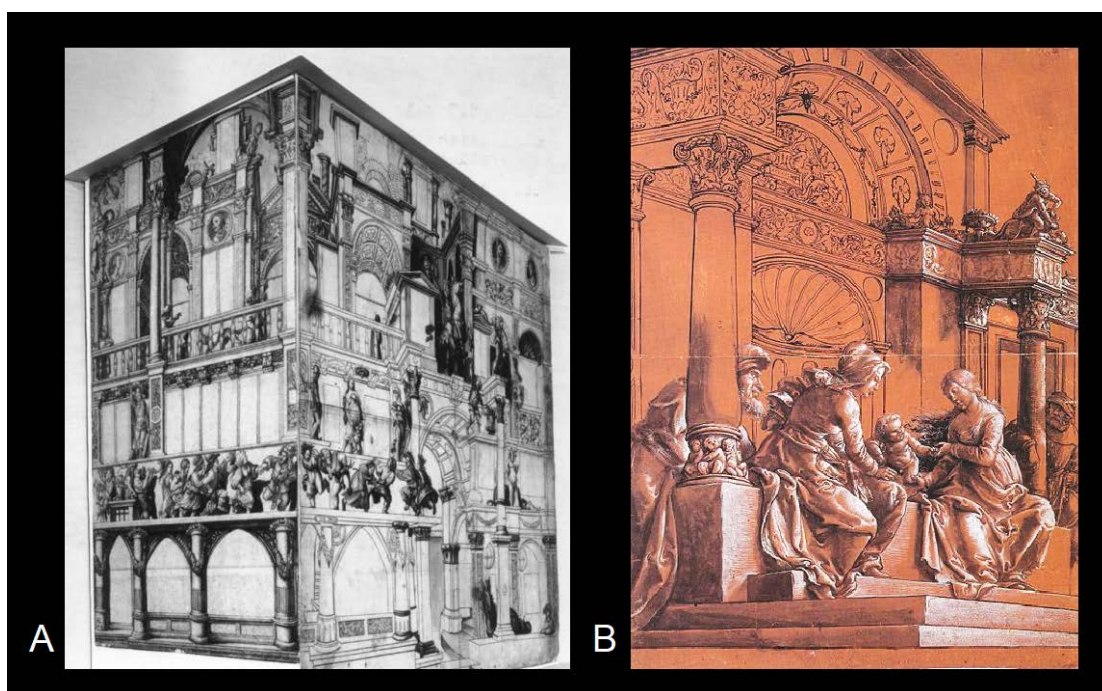
**Figure 3. Paintings from the Fontainebleau School inspired by the style and hand gestures of Leonardo da Vinci.** A. 'Portrait of François 1<sup>er</sup> as St John the Baptist' by Jean Clouet (1518, Louvre, Paris). B. 'Portrait of a Nobleman, Presumed to be Jean de Dinteville, as St George' by (or after) Francesco Primaticcio (1544, loc. unk.).

Three of the sons, Jean, Guillaume and the younger Gaucher de Dinteville, held a special place in relation to the royal family, being appointed by King François 1<sup>er</sup> as the guardians of his three sons, princes François, Henri and Charles in this period. Indeed, the three Dinteville guardians would have been present at the lavishly exorbitant celebrations of the Field of the Cloth of Gold, the 1520 meeting of nations between Henry VIII and François 1<sup>er</sup>, when Henry met and even played tennis with the three young princes, the elder two whom he had ransomed from their Spanish exile on François' behalf from



their hostageship engineered by François to escape his own imprisonment after his defeat at the battle of Pavia (Note 4).

Further evidence of the links between Leonardo da Vinci, the French court, and the Dintevilles, is found in paintings from the School of Fontainebleau at the time. Figure 3A shows a portrait of the king, François 1<sup>er</sup>, as John the Baptist in a pose strongly reminiscent of that of Leonardo's probable last painting of the same subject, together with a lamb derived from his "Virgin and Child with St Anne". Figure 3B reproduces a further honorific portrait of Jean de Dinteville as St George in heroic Roman garb, one of the highest honors that could be bestowed on a nobleman of that era. It would be fascinating to know what symbolic sacrilege is represented by the vanquished dragon, and whether it might relate to the death's head skull in the Holbein painting.

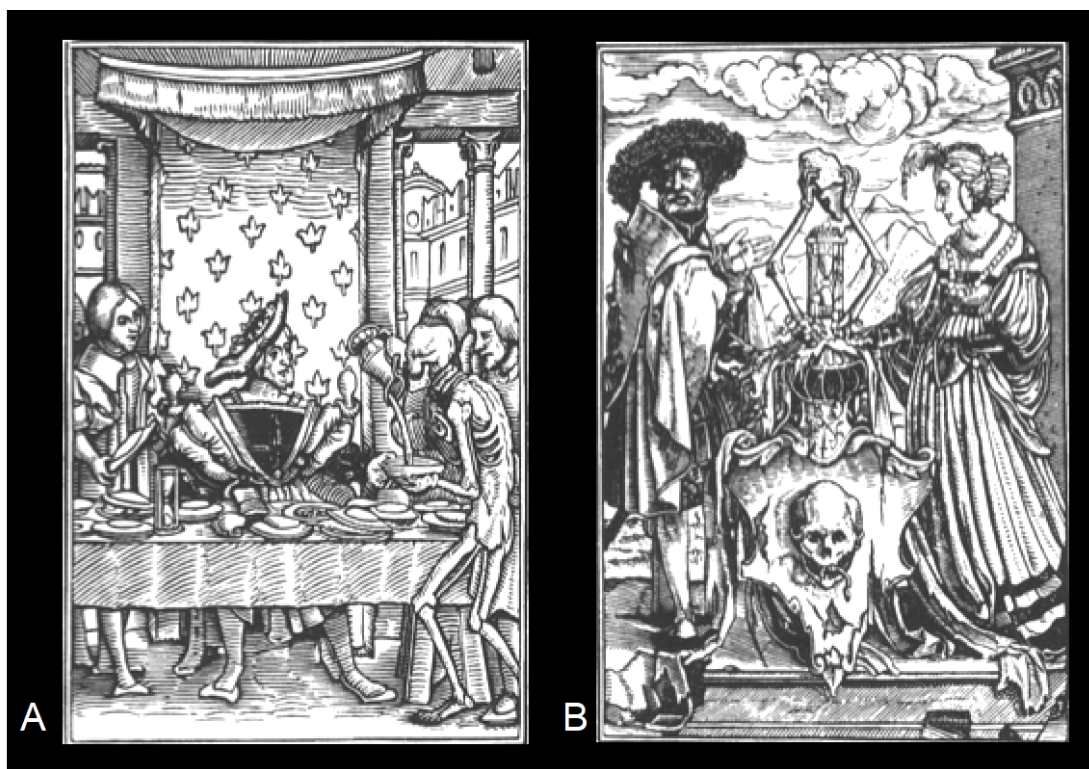


**Figure 4. Reconstruction of the façade of the House of the Dance, Basel, by Holbein (~1530, Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Kupferstichkabinett, Basel). B. 'The Holy Family with Joachim,' (~1519, Kunstmuseum, Basel) a silverpoint sketch by Holbein. Note the skillful use of elaborated two-point perspective for the circular alcove as well as the columnar pedestal features.**

### 3.2 Holbein Links to Leonardo da Vinci

Although Holbein's mature work is generally sober and humourless, he had had exposure to the more inventive aspects of artistic ornamentation as a youth in painting illusionistic decorations for the facade of two merchant's houses in Switzerland. A likely example of the style that they employed is revealed in a sketch of classical architecture from the same period reproduced in Figure 4. The extravagant

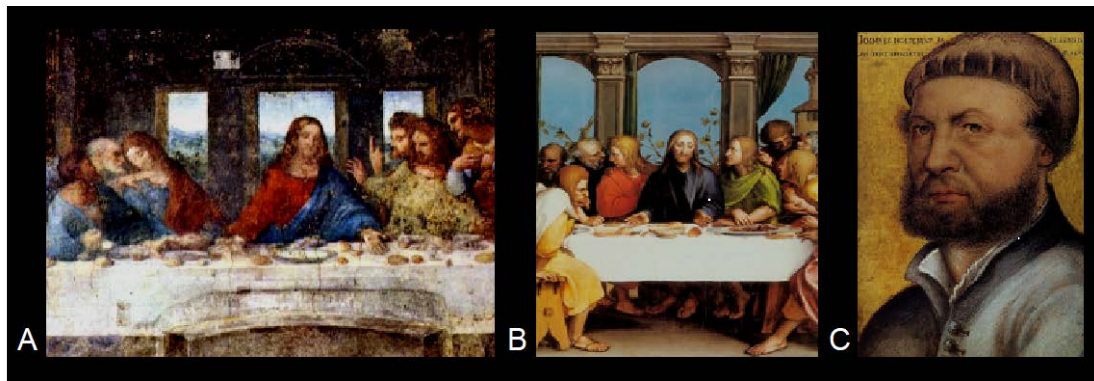
nature of the faux Roman décor implies an inventive side and a level of interest in perspective illusions that is not usually associated with either of the Holbeins (father or son).



**Figure 5. Holbein Woodcuts of A: ‘A King’s Banquet’ and B: the ‘Escutcheon of Death’**  
(1526/1538, Trechsel, Lyon).

The macabre insertion of the skull is also in keeping with Holbein’s known interests, which included an extensive series of woodcuts on the theme of the *Totentanz* (Dance with Death) that were published in Lyons in 1538. The engraver has been identified as Hans Lützelberger, who died in Basel before 1526, dating these works to the period just before Holbein’s first visits to France and England. One of them “The King”, is undoubtedly a portrait of François 1<sup>er</sup>, while another, “The Escutcheon of Death” is flanked by a man and a woman (Figure 5). The man bears a strong resemblance to Henry VIII and the woman is clearly not Catherine of Aragon, who had dark hair. Perhaps she was intended as a generic indication of Henry’s many dalliances prior to that with Anne Boleyn.

Holbein traveled to Italy in 1518-19 and was greatly influenced by Leonardo but could not have met him at that time since Leonardo was by then close to death in France. However, the next year Holbein embarked on his first known group composition, a reformatted version of Leonardo’s “Last Supper” in Milan (Figure 6B). Although the scene is compressed into a much narrower width, the style and postures of the apostles are so close to those of Leonardo that we scarcely recognize the hand of Holbein himself. Clearly Leonardo was a major influence on his artistic development.



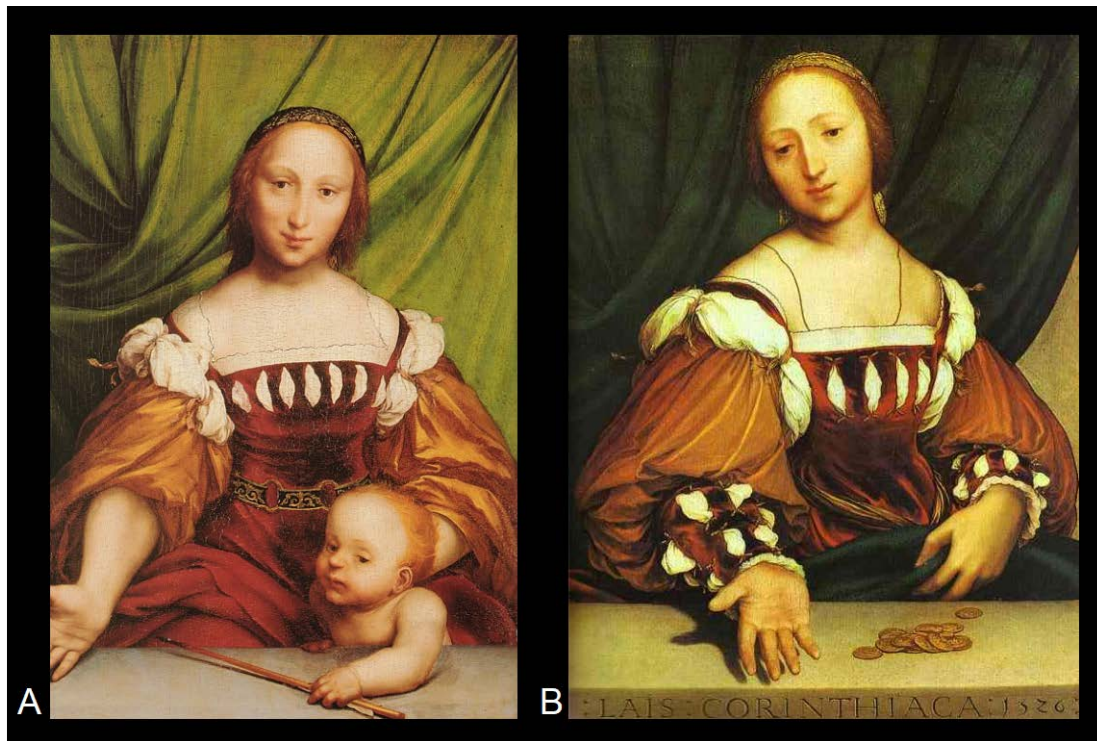
**Figure 6.** A. Leonardo da Vinci's 'Last Supper' (1490-95, Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan). B. Holbein's 'Last Supper' (1524-25, Kunstmuseum, Basel). C. Holbein's 'Self-portrait' (1423-4, Uffizi, Florence). Note derivation of the composition of the 'Last Supper' from that of Leonardo, which Holbein had visited in the previous year.

Further contact with Leonardo's oeuvre may have come in 1524, when Holbein is reported to have traveled to Amboise, perhaps hoping to attain employment at the court of François 1<sup>er</sup>. During this visit he likely came into contact with other works by Leonardo, with his pupil Andrea del Sarto, with the long-term court painter Jean Clouet, and with the heady influence of the High Renaissance spirit. This last is attested by Holbein's two portraits of Magdalena Offenburg, as "Laïs of Corinth" and "Venus with Cupid" in the style of the Mona Lisa, which reflect Renaissance ideals and in which the cupid again closely resembles those of Leonardo. Thus, Holbein's visit to the French Court may have represented contact with both the spirit of Leonardo and the dramatic demonstrations of anamorphosis, which could still have been available for viewing among the cadre of visiting artists although Leonardo had been long since deceased by that time.

### 3.3 Iconography of "The Ambassadors"

One possibility that can be dismissed is that the "apparition" of the anamorphic skull in "The Ambassadors" (Figure 1A) was a hidden figure that they were intended not to notice, and that Holbein was intending to secrete into their possession as a kind of voodoo charm. Its presence is far too obvious for that. It must have been intended as an explicit talking point, a puzzle figure to be pointed out in court to make an otherwise conventional portrait more interesting. The fact that, when resolved, it could be seen as a skull still seems distinctly risqué in that era of highly-charged politics, and remains something that has never been fully explained in art-historical circles. The apparition is understood as an artistic trope, but its historical significance has remained indeterminate. This trope takes the form of an anamorphosis, or perspective distortion that renders it unrecognizable until it is viewed under special conditions. In this case, the figure is rendered in extreme perspective that requires viewing from a notch in the righthand edge of the frame. It is only at this viewing location that the form of the skull is revealed (Note 5) (see Figure 1).



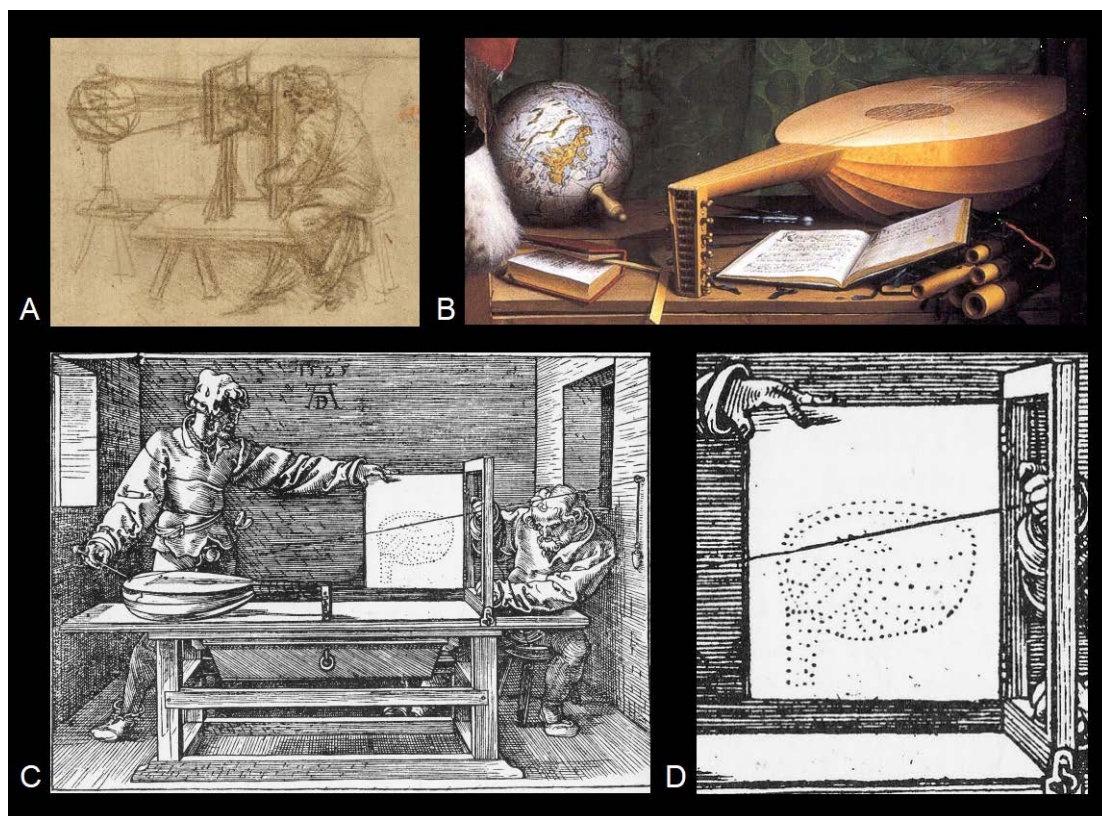


**Figure 7. A. “Venus & Cupid” (~1524, Kunstmuseum, Basel) and “Laïs of Corinth” (1526, Kunstmuseum, Basel)’ by Hans Holbein the Younger**

The angle of the apparition figure might suggest that the picture could have been intended to be hung on the stairs, so that it would naturally be viewed at an oblique angle by those ascending, who would then develop the impression of a skull suspended in mid-air in front of the painting. However, as Figure 1B shows, the anamorphosis has a perspective convergence that requires viewing from above, rather than below, and must have been intended for viewing by an observer standing at the right side of the painting. This viewpoint works well from eye height at the edge of the frame, but only if the painting is hung really low (about a foot from the ground), as was implemented in its display at the National Gallery, London, following its cleaning in 1995.

This configuration of the skull leads us to consider the connection with Leonardo da Vinci, a leading perspectivist of the time. Leonardo is often considered to have been the originator of the concept of anamorphosis, the “magic” of which he developed in anamorphic demonstrations for the court of François 1<sup>er</sup>, consisting of depictions of a battle between a lion and a dragon, and of rearing horses (as described by Lomazzo, 1584 (Note 6)). There is also mention from the same source of an anamorphic depiction of the head of Christ by Gaudenzio Ferrari, who may possibly have been the one to originate the concept of anamorphosis that Leonardo took up in the search for marvels with which to entertain the French court. His chief assistant, Francesco Melzi, also describes developing an oblique-viewing anamorphic depiction of a struggle between a lion and a dragon (Note 7). Whichever is the case, the first surviving example of such an illusion is an anamorphic depiction of a child’s eyes in the

Leonardo's Codex Atlanticus, dated to 1510, drawn well before leaving Italy for France at the behest of François 1<sup>er</sup> in 1516.



**Figure 8. Possible sources for the notable instruments in 'The Ambassadors'.** A. Leonardo da Vinci's diagram of a device for perspective projection of complex object such as the armillary sphere depicted here (~1480, Codex Atlanticus, 5r, Ambrosiana, Milan). B. Detail of the middle shelf of the display in 'The Ambassadors', highlighting the globe and the lute. C. One of the two devices for perspective projection depicted by Dürer (1525) in the first edition of his '*Underweysung der Messung*'. (Two others were also included in the second edition of 1538). Note the clever use of the lead weight to keep the string taut as it is stretched from a peg on the wall to different locations of the object (in this case, a lute), although this was a laborious, two-man process requiring the intersection to be marked with movable strings and the picture plane to be swung in and out of position as each location was pricked through the paper. D. Close-up of the pricked points of the foreshortened lute.

Given Holbein's evident appreciation of Leonardo's renown and the connection with the French court, we begin to discern a logic behind the inclusion of an anamorphic trope in "The Ambassadors", consistent with philosopher's (alchemist's) brocade coat worn by the figure on the right. It has been pointed out that the objects on the shelves that are such a feature of the picture fall into three classes (see Figure 1). Those in the upper tier on the tabletop are all astronomical instruments of some kind. Those on the middle tier (see detail in Figure 8B) are more concerned with earthly pursuits (music and exploration), while the lower tier is dominated by a reproduction of the inlaid floor before the High

Altar of Westminster Abbey (where Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn had been secretly married in January, 1533, at the onset of the same year as the painting) and the mysterious anamorphic skull, a symbol of the unexpectedness of death. The skull thus fits in a tripartite scheme of the symbolism of the array of depicted objects: the mind and intellectual pursuits on the top shelf, the body and sensual pursuits on the middle, and the soul and spiritual pursuits on the lowest level. Moreover, the skull was a personal symbol of Jean de Dinteville, who wears one as the insignia on his hat (Figure 2, upper inset).

A further integrating theme among most of the depicted objects is that of the projective challenge of rendering the perspective. Although Holbein is best known for his enduring portraits of the humanist thinkers of the age, for some reason he chose this particular commission to focus on the multiplicity of perspective projective constructions. Starting at the upper left, pride of place is given to a celestial armillary sphere, an instrument of astronomical analysis since the time of antiquity. (The earliest known example is a mosaic depiction from the 3rd century BC in Palermo (Note 8)). This choice makes a further link with Leonardo da Vinci, who used an armillary sphere as the object for his depiction of the first known drawing of a perspective projection device (Note 9), again from the Codex Atlanticus (Figure 8A). It seems implausible to suggest that Holbein could have known of this reference, since he would have been unlikely to have access to Leonardo's notebooks when he visited Milan in 1520 (although it is just conceivable if he was treated as a visiting artist and stayed at the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie while viewing Leonardo's "Last Supper").

Next to the sphere (Figure 1A) is a quadrant for aligning one's viewing angle with the sun in order to determine one's latitude, followed by a polyhedral form of sundial and an astronomical torquetum, both requiring highly challenging forms of the perspective projection of planar figures. The sundial is set to the time of 10:30 am on April 11, 1533, representing Good Friday that year, with the implication that Henry VIII was being metaphorically crucified by the Pope for his defiance in threatening to have his marriage to Catherine of Aragon annulled. On the shelf below is a terrestrial globe (Figure 8A), whose perspective again requires a deep understanding of the elliptical projection of circles that Holbein achieves almost perfectly, and the difficult figure of a lute, which itself was a trope that was essayed by many artists of the High Renaissance. The globe is labeled with many place names relevant to the French ambassadors that did not appear on its Ptolemaic source map (Note 10).

In terms of perspective projection, this particular view of a lute may well be an explicit reference to the 1525 perspective diagram of Holbein's fellow perspectivist, Albrecht Dürer, who used a lute in just this pose as the object being depicted in a perspective device using a movable string (Figure 8C, D). It seems highly likely that Holbein, as a fellow engraver from the same goldsmithing community of artists, would have had a copy of the "*Underweysung der Messung*" (painting manual) in which Dürer had published this image few years earlier.

The floor level, on the other hand, seems to play the role of a *vanitas*, a painting of objects depicting the passage of time and the inevitability of death. The skull is a typical reference to this theme, as perhaps is the floor design, which is derived from the mosaic floor of Westminster Abbey before the

high altar, together with the third (almost invisible) object of a black lute case with gold trim. This inverted lute case, which has seemingly passed unnoticed in most previous commentary of this heavily analyzed painting, must have been intended as counterpoint to the varnished lute on the shelf, which itself has a broken string that can be interpreted as representative of the discord engendered by Henry's efforts to marry Anne Boleyn. The presence of the both the lute and the lute-shaped case in this *vanitas* context thus makes a likely reference to the other women in his life at this time, the spurned Catherine of Aragon, who was always portrayed wearing black and gold clothing. The black was in mourning for her first husband (Arthur, Henry's older brother, who died six months after their marriage) while the gold symbolized her royal heritage. The lute itself, *a fortiori*, must represent Anne Boleyn (see Figure 8B), giving the fact that it has a broken string the different implication of a flaw specific to Anne herself rather than broadly accepted idea that it symbolizes European discord in general (Note 11). The natural interpretation would thus be that Anne was not a virgin, due to the challenge of keeping Henry interested in her during the four years of negotiations for a papal annulment of his marriage to his brother's ex-wife.

#### 3.4 Cultural Allusions

This interpretation is partially mitigated by the fact that the secret marriage took place in January, 1533 and her daughter Elizabeth was born in September of that year, so perhaps some other flaw is intended. Anne was known to have had prior affairs of some kind with Henry Percy, a young courtier, and the poet Sir Thomas Wyatt (1505-1542), so these affairs may have been what motivated the broken string. Indeed, Wyatt was famous for his poem "Blame Not My Lute! For He Must Sound" (Note 12), which included the lines:

Spite asketh spite and changing change,  
And falsèd faith must needs be known;  
The fault so great, the case so strange  
Of right it must abroad be blown.  
Then since that by thine own desert  
My songs do tell how true thou art,  
Blame not my lute.

Thus, the "fault" implied by Wyatt may have been his dalliance with the king's mistress, and it is interesting to speculate that the counterpoint of the "case so strange" a reference to the cast-off lute case in the shadows in "The Ambassadors", since Wyatt would have been intimately familiar with the goings-on in the court intrigue.

Interestingly, in the context of high passions involved in the protestant debates initiated by Luther and embedded in Henry's negotiations with the Pope in Rome, one of the few explicitly Christian references in the painting is a small crucifix revealed behind the curtain at the upper left corner of the



painting (another being the Lutheran Hymn transcribed in the music book). This crucifix seems to have the role of reasserting a Christian backdrop to what is otherwise a rather pagan array of instruments (Note 13).

The objects in the painting are therefore a fitting accompaniment to the play of the anamorphism of the skull that dominates the lower register of the painting. Presumably the role of these objects was to spark discussion in the courts and mansions where the painting might be displayed, and convey the sophistication of the painting's owner. What better device, then, than a reference to the most famous painter of the age, who had recently been the artistic inspiration for the court where the Dintevilles originated and one whose shadow has loomed over the practice of art from that time until the present? We may extend the idea that the anamorphism represents obeisance to the spirit of Leonardo to the idea that the topic of the anamorphism, the skull, may have been intended as a direct reference to the effect of Leonardo's death on Holbein himself.

It is even possible to propose a more elaborate scenario, in which Leonardo da Vinci had made an anamorphism of his own drawing of a skull for François 1<sup>er</sup> (now lost), which Holbein had seen and copied when he visited Leonardo's artistic progeny at Amboise. His visit there would most likely have lasted for several weeks, giving him ample opportunity to make such a copy, and his own interest in the Danse Macabre (Figure 5) would make this a likely choice. Rather than simply being homage to Leonardo, this skull could have been a reproduction of Leonardo's own skull drawing. Though speculative, this elaboration is indeed supported by the similarity seen in Figure 1 C,D between the flattened face and square jawline of both Leonardo skull and the reconstructed Holbein anamorphosis.

#### 4. Conclusion

Consideration of Holbein's youthful trips to Italy and France suggest that he may have been substantially influenced by exposure to Leonardo da Vinci's works, and that the floating skull in Holbein's "The Ambassadors" may have been painted in homage to the cultural interests of the notable Dinteville family, the French ambassadors to the court of Henry VIII for whom the painting was a destined. Moreover, it may have been an explicit reference to Leonardo's anamorphic demonstrations for the French court at Amboise, a hypothesis supported by iconographic analysis of works by Holbein and Leonardo's followers in the School of Fontainebleau in combination with literary references to the implicit symbolism of the items on the shelves between the two ambassadors.

#### Notes

Note 1. The figure on the right has traditionally been identified as Georges de Selve, Bishop of Lavaur, on epistolary evidence (Hervey, 1900), but this identification has been revised by Hudson (2003), and seems inconsistent with the internal evidence of the composition. Indeed, the oft-cited reference of the open hymnal to Lutheran themes would be inconsistent with his Catholic faith. Although this figure is wearing an elaborate outer coat, there is no sign of episcopalian garb in the clothes, which are more reminiscent of those of a philosopher or alchemist. The two figures

in the painting have highly similar faces as would be expected of brothers, and Jean de Dinteville's older brother François is known to have had extensive interests in the arts and sciences, consistent with the array of instruments between the two men. If indeed the figure is the brother of the ambassador, and the two are being flattered in their wide-ranging humanist interests, much more of the symbolism falls into place. However, François' age of about 35 at the date of the painting is inconsistent with the age of 25 indicated on the book on which his hand is resting, so an identification with Jean's younger brother Gaucher de Dinteville (1509-1540) may be suggested as another alternative.

Hervey, Mary (1900) *Holbein's Ambassadors: The Picture and the Men*. (London: George Bell and Sons.)

Hudson, Giles (2003). *The Vanity of the Sciences*. *Annals of Science* 60 (2): pp. 201–205.

Note 2. Fonds Dupuy, 702, fol. 131, Bibliothèque National, Paris.

Note 3. Brown, Elizabeth A.R. *The Dinteville Family and the Allegory of Moses and Aaron before Pharaoh*. *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 34, 73-100, 1999.

Note 4. Hervey, 1900, p. 62.

Note 5. Edgar Samuel (1963) has argued on intuitive grounds that the distortion of the skull is not compatible with a viewing location at the edge of the canvas. The anamorphic restitution on which his argument is based was that of Figure 1B, which is made on the basis of an orthographic perspective projection (or oblique shear affine transform, in mathematical terminology), without perspectival distortion. The residual distortion in the image of the skull to which Samuel refers can be clearly appreciated, but the construction lines make clear that it takes the form of a non-affine perspectival distortion with a defined vanishing point. This distortion is eliminated in Fig. 1C, in which the anamorphic restitution incorporates the perspective transform appropriate to viewing the image from the point where the axis of the anamorphic skull intersects the righthand edge of the frame. The skull now takes the regular form of a typical skull, as exemplified by Leonardo's own drawing of a skull reproduced in Figure 1D. Thus, the correct perspective restitution eliminates the residual distortions in the anamorphism.

Edgar R. Samuel (1963) *Death in the Glass - A New View of Holbein's "Ambassadors"*. *The Burlington Magazine*, 105, 727, 436-441.

Note 6. Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo (1584). *Trattato dell'Arte della Pittura*. P. Gottardo Pontio: Milano.

Note 7. Istvan Orosz (2014) *Leonardo's secret perspective*. *Hungarian Review*, V, 3:

Note 8. Dela von Boeselager (1983) *Antike Mosaiken in Sizilien, Hellenismus und römische Kaiserzeit 3. Jahrhundert v. Christus - 3. Jahrhundert n. Christus*. (Giorgio Bretschneider, Rome).

Note 9. Devices for perspective projection were described by Antonio Manetti, in his biography of Brunelleschi, who used a veil hung in the doorway of the Florentine Duomo early in the quattrocento to define the projective geometry for his depiction of the Baptistry opposite, and by Leon Battista Alberti, who describes a similar device in his *De Pictura*; but there are no surviving diagrams before that of Leonardo in his notebooks.

Manetti, Antonio. (1480) *Vita di Filippo di Ser Brunelleschi*, (Rome: Ed. Elma Tosca, Rome, 1927).

Alberti, Leon Battista (1435) *De Pictura*. Trans. John R. Spencer. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

Note 10. Elly Dekker and Rudolf Schmidt (1999/2000) *Die Globen auf Holbeins gemälde: "Die Gesandten"* (The globes in Holbein's painting "The Ambassadors". Der Globusfreund Bericht über das IX. Symposium der Internationalen Coronelli-Gesellschaft 47/48, 19-52.

Note 11. In fact, there were many levels of discord. Hervey (1900, p. 228) points to the discord of the deposing of Emperor Maximilian II in the French invasion of 1515, which was indeed symbolized by the broken string of a lute in a poem by Alciati in 1522, but this seems rather distant from the affairs of the English court.

Note 12.

**Blame Not My Lute! For He Must Sound**

Blame not my lute for he must sound  
Of these or that as liketh me;  
For lack of wit the lute is bound  
To give such tunes as pleaseth me:  
Though my songs be somewhat strange,  
And speaks such words as touch thy change,  
Blame not my lute!

My lute, alas, doth not offend,  
Though that perforce he must agree  
To sound such tunes as I intend  
To sing to thee that hearest me;  
Then though my songs be somewhat plain,  
And toucheth some that use to feign,  
Blame not my lute!

My lute and strings may not deny,  
But as I strike they must obey;  
Break not them then so wrongfully,  
But wreck thy self some wiser way:  
And though the songs which I indite  
Do quit thy change with rightful spite,  
Blame not my lute!

Spite asketh spite and changing change,  
And falsèd faith must needs be known;  
Thy fault so great, the case so strange,  
O right it must abroad be blown:  
Then since that by thine own desert  
My songs do tell how true thou art,

Blame not my lute!

Blame but the self that hast misdone  
And well deserved to have blame;  
Change thou thy way, so evil begun,  
And then my lute shall sound the same:  
But if till then my fingers play  
By thy desert their wonted way,  
Blame not my lute!

Farewell, unknown, for though thou break  
My strings in spite with great disdain,  
Yet have I found out for thy sake  
Strings for to string my lute again;  
And if perchance this foolish Rhyme  
Do make thee blush at any time.  
Blame not my lute!

Thomas Wyatt

Note 13. A more extreme interpretation would be that the placement of the crucifix behind the curtain was intended to emphasize the separation between the European backdrop of encompassing Catholicism and Henry's "deal with the devil" of the ill-fated marriage to Anne Boleyn symbolized by the skull hovering over the marriage chamber in Westminster Abbey. It is hard to imagine such an interpretation escaping Henry's wrath, since he would have been very alert to such symbolism, but it may be that he was so deeply engaged in the issues that he would have appreciated them being aired in this fashion.