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Holbein, Hans (der Jüngere), *Benedikt von Hertenstein* (ca. 1495-1522), 1517, Öl auf Papier, auf Holz übertragen, 52,4 x 38,1 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 06.1038

Documentation level



Name

Holbein, Hans (der Jüngere)

Other version/s of name

Holbai, Hans (der Jüngere)
Holbeine, Hans (Johnn) (der Jüngere)
Holben, Hans (der Jüngere)
Holby, Hans (der Jüngere)
Holbyne, Hans (der Jüngere)
Holpenius, Joannes
Olpeius, Hans (der Jüngere)
Olpenius, Hans (der Jüngere)
Olpenus, Hans (der Jüngere)

Dates of birth and death

* zwischen 1497 und 1498 Augsburg, † vor 29.11.1543
London

Municipality of origin (CH)

Basel

Nationality

CH, D, GB

Brief biography

Maler und Zeichner. Porträt, Altarbild und Epitaph, Wandgemälde und Fassadendekoration. Entwürfe für Formschneider, Glasmaler, Gold-, Silber- und Waffenschmiede, Miniatur. Sohn von Hans Holbein dem Älteren und Bruder von Ambrosius Holbein

Fields of activity

Malerei, Zeichnung, Grafik, Illustration, Wandmalerei, Buch,

Dekoration

Lexicon article

He probably served his apprenticeship in the large Augsburg workshop of his father, [Hans Holbein the Elder](#), and together with his brother [Ambrosius](#) was an assistant of [Hans Herbst](#) in Basel from the end of 1515. Holbein took writing and Latin lessons with Oswald Myconius, in whose copy of Erasmus von Rotterdam's *Laus Stultitiae* (*In Praise of Folly*, Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kupferstichkabinett) the brothers produced marginalia. 1516, double portrait of *Mayor Jakob Meyer* and his wife *Dorothea Kannengiesser* (both in the Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunstmuseum) and initial designs for print makers working on illustrated books in Basel. 1517–19, decoration of the façade of the new house of the *Schultheiss* of Lucerne, Jakob von Hertenstein, on Kapellplatz in Lucerne, and execution of the painting for the high altar of the Church of the Franciscans. 1519, return to Basel, admission to *Zum Himmel*, the painters' guild, and marriage to Elisabeth Binzenstock, the widow of a tanner; 1520, granted citizenship. On 15.6.1521, commissioned to paint the new council chamber of the City of Basel (first phase until the end of 1522, second phase 1530). Between 1521 and 1524, Holbein painted *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*; a panel with eight scenes of the *Passion of Christ* (both in the Kunstmuseum Basel); a Madonna for the Town Clerk, Johannes Gerster (*Solothurn Madonna*, Kunstmuseum Solothurn); panels for Alderman Hans Oberried (Freiburg im Breisgau, cathedral) as well as several portraits of *Erasmus of Rotterdam* (1523, London, National Gallery, loan, and Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunstmuseum; 1523–24, Paris, Musée du Louvre). The decoration of the façade of the Haus zum Tanz in Basel can be dated between the first phase of the Council Chamber and Holbein's journey to France, which he undertook in the spring of 1524 in search of commissions or a position at the court of François I. At this time, Holbein adopted the genre of the court portrait, Leonardo's ideal of beauty and the technique of drawing in coloured chalks, which he first applied in his drawings of statues in Bourges (Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kupferstichkabinett). These were followed in Basel by designs for stained glass windows of the *Passion of Christ*, drawings for the *Imagines mortis* and illustrations of the Bible (*Historiarum ueteris instrumenti icones*), the *Lais Corinthiaca*, the *Last Supper* (all Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunstmuseum and Kupferstichkabinett), the first version of the *Meyer Madonna* (*Darmstadt Madonna*, Darmstadt, Hessisches Landesmuseum), and the organ shutters for Basel Cathedral.

1526–28, first sojourn in England; Holbein travelled to London via Antwerp bearing letters of recommendation from Erasmus of Rotterdam to Petrus Aegidius (Pierre Gilles) in

Antwerp and Thomas More in London. Holbein was involved in painting the ceremonial architecture that Henry VIII had constructed in Greenwich for the reception of the French legation. Besides this, he produced only portraits, including the *Portrait of the More Family* (destroyed), portraits of *William Warham, Archbishop of Canterbury* (Paris, Musée du Louvre), the royal chamberlain *Sir Henry Guildford* (Windsor Castle, Royal Collections) and his wife *Mary Wotton, Lady Guildford* (St Louis, Missouri, The Saint Louis Art Museum), and the astronomer *Niklaus Kratzer* (Paris, Musée du Louvre). Holbein returned to Basel from 1528–1532, acquiring a house in August 1528, as well as the neighbouring house in 1531. Holbein painted *The Artist's Family* (Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunstmuseum), transformed the *Meyer Madonna* into an epitaph and completed the painting of Basel's council chamber in 1530, but was offered no important new commissions.

From 1532–1543, a second sojourn in England; Holbein presumably left Basel before the middle of 1532. He also travelled via Antwerp to London, again with recommendations from Erasmus of Rotterdam. In September 1532, Holbein received a first offer from the Council of Basel for an annual pension of 30 guilders under the condition that he return to the city. From 1532–34, he worked in England as a portrait painter for the Hanseatic merchants in London's Steelyard, for English courtiers and the French envoys in England (*Double Portrait of Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve*, 1533, London, National Gallery; *Portrait of Charles de Solier*; 1534–35, Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister). For the Steelyard, Holbein painted *The Triumph of Riches* and *The Triumph of Poverty* in grisaille, and in 1533 also completed the decoration for the coronation procession of Queen Anne Boleyn. As of the same year, Henry VIII probably employed Holbein as a jewellery designer. Portraits of courtiers are documented as of 1533 (*Portrait of Sir Richard Southwell*, 1533, Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi; *Portrait of Thomas Cromwell*, 1534, New York, The Frick Collection). The precise date of Holbein's appointment as court painter to Henry VIII cannot be established. Only from 1537 onwards have accounts survived, documenting Holbein's employment with a yearly income of 30 pounds. His duties included depicting the King at the Palace of Whitehall, painting portraits of marriage candidates and designing decorative and everyday objects. In 1538, Holbein took advantage of a commission on the continent to visit Basel, where he entered into negotiations with the Council, which offered him a yearly pension of 50 guilders, granted a further leave of absence of two years, and agreed to maintain the existing business relationship under the condition that Holbein settle permanently in Basel. On the journey back to London, Holbein took his son Philipp with him to Paris so that the latter could enter service as an assistant to the goldsmith Jacob David. In 1539, Holbein presented King Henry VIII with the portrait of the two-year-old heir to the throne, *Edward VI as a Child* (Washington, National Gallery of Art). In 1541, he completed the painting of *Henry VIII and the Barber-Surgeons* (London, Barber-Surgeons' Hall), commissioned by the Guild of Barber-Surgeons. In 1542–43, Holbein drew a *Self-portrait* (Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi), in which he described himself as a 45-year-old citizen of Basel (Ioannes Holpenivs Basilensis Ipsius Effigiatorae: xvl). On 7.10.1543 he drew up a will to ensure that his debts would be paid and two illegitimate children in England be provided for after his

death. Holbein died in London between 7 October and 29 November 1543, presumably of the plague.

Holbein embarked on a glittering career in Basel and Lucerne as a portraitist and designer of woodcuts and stained glass windows. He immediately gained access to the Mayor of Basel and members of the Council, the *Schultheiss* of Lucerne, the important book printers in Basel, and the humanists Erasmus of Rotterdam and Beatus Rhenanus. Besides numerous private commissions, he was entrusted with the most important secular and ecclesiastical assignments. All of his monumental decorative work has been lost. The reasons for this are Holbein's deficient technique (secco painting), water damage and the ignorance of the owners. In Lucerne, he painted a conventionally subdivided façade of the house belonging to the Hertenstein family with heroes and heroines from Greek and Roman history, the *Trial of Kingship* from the *Gesta romanorum* and a copy of *The Triumph of Caesar* by Andrea Mantegna (1431–1506). It was planned that the programme of the Basel Council Chamber of 1521 should include morally edifying episodes from Greek and Roman history. The painting was completed in 1530 with two scenes from the Old Testament. On the façades of the Haus zum Tanz, Holbein created a complete illusion, calculating its perspective to be seen from the street, by means of an architectural fantasy that broke every rule in the book. With this architectural chimera, Holbein claimed the same freedom of invention as that enjoyed by the poets.

These façades, as well as the designs for stained glass windows created at the same time, document Holbein's free use of the architectural forms of the Italian Renaissance. His familiarity with the Italian Renaissance can be traced partially to engravings and Cesariano's illustrated edition of Vitruvius's *De Architectura* (1521). Despite his thorough knowledge of the Italian Renaissance, which has yet to be documented in detail, Holbein did not recognise this as a leading style. Instead, he distinguished between various tasks, and like [Albrecht Dürer](#) sought to find links between northern and southern art. In *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, he emulated the brutal realism of Matthias Grünewald (circa 1480–before 1528) and Hans Baldung Grien (1484 or 1485–1545); in the *Solothurn Madonna* he grafted the northern Italian model of the *Sacra conversazione* onto the traditional archetype of the northern epitaph; the designs for stained glass windows of the *Passion of Christ* are based on models by Schongauer and Dürer; and the fascinating *Meyer Madonna* combines the Madonna of Mercy with the southern iconographic models of the standing Madonna before the throne and the Madonna with Jesus and John the Baptist as a child. It would appear that Holbein encountered works by Leonardo, Andrea del Sarto (1486–1530) and Raphael in François I's collection in France only in 1524. He immediately reinterpreted them in *Lais Corinthiaca*, which must have been destined for a private collection, and *The Last Supper*, whose original destination is unknown.

Holbein's use of the forms and subject matter of Italian art soon led to speculation that he had undertaken a trip to Italy. There is no documentation to that effect, and much of his knowledge can be explained by his familiarity with copperplate engravings or his journey to France. Carel van Mander, Holbein's first biographer, asserted in 1604 that

Holbein had not been to Italy, but this unsubstantiated claim was primarily aimed at breaking the predominance of Italian painting. Despite all the evidence, there is a considerable body of precise formal and iconographical references to Italian art in Holbein's work that is impossible to explain without assuming that a journey was undertaken. The hitherto overlooked document that provides information about Holbein's connections is the contract drafted by the Council of Basel in 1538. It obliges Holbein to be present in Basel and permits him merely to maintain his existing business relations. Apart from France, England and the Netherlands, Milan is expressly mentioned.

Once he had completed his monumental commissions in Basel, Holbein was able to employ his narrative abilities and skill at composing scenes featuring several figures only in small designs for woodcuts. In his *Images of Death* (*Imagines mortis*), Holbein transformed the traditional scenes of the dance of death into momentary images that remind us of the abrupt intervention of death in our lives, be they dissolute, arrogant, sinful or pious. For the illustrated Old Testament, Holbein invented magnificent small-format scenes based on older editions, featuring animated figures in extensive spaces. The editions, printed by the Trechsel Brothers, were published in Lyons after a long delay in 1538.

Due to the reformers' animosity to imagery, the emptying of the churches in 1528 and the iconoclasm of 1529, Basel could no longer offer Holbein sufficient commissions. In England, Holbein became the recognised specialist for portraits of courtiers, merchants, diplomats and ecclesiastical dignitaries as well as Henry VIII and his consorts. After 1524, Holbein always used coloured chalks to draw his models, using the portrait drawings to produce his paintings. He developed various types of portrait: scholars and merchants are depicted in their own environments and with their instruments, diplomats and the King, with his ancestors, are shown life-size and full-length, or powerfully bursting out of their frames. Holbein was soon extolled for his deceptively realistic portraits, but the *concetti*, or conceits, he introduced in them – the head of the Medusa, a fig tree, inscriptions or cameos – allude to more profound dimensions, such as the contrast between lasting portrayal, death and the hope of an afterlife.

Works: Most important holdings of paintings and drawings: Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunstmuseum and Kupferstichkabinett; Windsor, The Royal Collection. Several paintings or drawings: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie and Kupferstichkabinett (Museum of Prints and Drawings); Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum; Boston, Museum of Fine Arts; Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister; Freiburg i. Br., Münster, University Chapel; London, The National Gallery; London, The British Museum; Munich, Alte Pinakothek, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen; New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; New York, The Frick Collection; Paris, Musée du Louvre; Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum; Washington, National Gallery of Art.

Oskar Bätschmann 1998, updated 2011
Translation: Toby Alleyne-Gee

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[Holbein \(\[Mitte 15.-Mitte 17. Jahrhundert\]\)](#)

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