

November 2012

The Northern Renaissance: Dürer to Holbein

The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace

2 November 2012 – 14 April 2013



Hans Holbein the Younger,
Derich Born, 1533

This exhibition celebrates the Renaissance in northern Europe, the counterpart to the revolution in art and scholarship that took place in Italy during the 15th and 16th centuries. The period was dominated by the intense rivalry between the Habsburg Holy Roman Emperor, the kings of France and Henry VIII of England. Political ambitions were mirrored by fierce competition between rulers to attract the best artists to their courts – among them Lucas Cranach the Elder, François Clouet, Leonardo da Vinci and Hans Holbein the Younger.

While monarchs vied for territorial power, reformers questioned the central tenets of Christian faith, scholars sought greater understanding of their world and for the first time ideas were circulated in printed form. Artists responded to the changes around them, producing works of ingenuity, beauty and superb technical skill. Examples by the great masters Hans Memling, Quinten Massys and Albrecht Dürer are among the paintings, drawings, prints, manuscripts, miniatures, sculpture, tapestries and armour on display.

At the heart of the new thinking was the challenge to the teachings of the Catholic Church initiated by Martin Luther. This was to have a lasting effect on the art of northern Europe, which moved away from emotive devotional scenes to non-religious subjects such as portraiture and mythology. At the court of Frederick the Wise in Saxony, Lucas Cranach the Elder found success with his depictions of mythological subjects, among them the outstanding *Apollo and Diana*, c.1526. Cranach's *Judgement of Paris*, c.1530–35 would have particularly appealed to Frederick the Wise, who traced his lineage back to the Trojans. Cranach gives the classical subject-matter a contemporary feel by dressing Paris in German armour and adorning the goddesses with fashionable jewellery and hairstyles.

As in Italy, the Renaissance in northern Europe saw a revival of humanism, a movement which re-examined the roots of learning in classical civilisation and promoted intellectual freedom and individual expression. *Utopia* by the English statesman and philosopher Sir Thomas More, with a frontispiece by the German artist Hans Holbein the Younger, criticised contemporary society through its description of the religious, social and political customs of a fictional island. The first edition of *Utopia* was edited by Desiderius Erasmus, the leading thinker in northern Europe whose sharp and witty writings made him something of a celebrity. In 1517 Quinten Massys produced a striking portrait of Erasmus, commissioned as a gift for More.

With the invention of the printing press in Germany around 1450, books and pamphlets could be produced in large numbers and at low cost. The greatest printmaker of the period was Albrecht

Dürer. A clever entrepreneur, he achieved fame through the dissemination of his woodcuts and engravings in Europe and beyond. In 1498 Dürer produced the *Apocalypse*, a series of woodcuts that capitalised on a general fear that the world would end in 1500. The artist's illustrations of nightmarish scenes include figures from all ranks of society to remind the viewer that none would be spared judgement. These harsh images are in contrast to Dürer's delicate study of a greyhound, which reappears in his beautiful engraving *St Eustace*, c.1501.

During this period artists were increasingly forced to travel in search of work. Hans Holbein the Younger first arrived in London in 1526, returning again in 1528; by 1536 he had been appointed painter to Henry VIII. The exhibition includes a number of drawings, paintings, miniatures, and book illustrations by Holbein, including a remarkable group of penetrating life studies of members of Henry's court. The finished oil portraits of courtiers Sir Henry Guildford and William Reskimer are displayed alongside preparatory drawings, providing an exceptional insight into the artist's working methods.

Portraiture was an important part of the work of a court artist. With his brother Jean, François Clouet produced some of the earliest portrait miniatures, among them *Charles IX King of France as a Boy*, c.1561. Miniatures were usually made as private images, which may in part account for the appearance of the young Henry Fitzroy, Duke of Richmond and Somerset in his bedclothes in Lucas Horenbout's portrait, c.1533–4. The illegitimate son of Henry VIII, Fitzroy suffered from ill health, and the miniature was probably made at the time of his marriage to Mary Howard, two years before his death at the age of 17.

The increasingly prosperous middle classes of northern Europe were also important patrons. In 1505 Albrecht Dürer travelled to Venice, where he made a number of paintings for the German merchant community, among them his portrait of Burkhard of Speyer, 1506. In 1532 Holbein painted the striking portrait of the 23-year-old Derich Born, a German merchant living in London. The Latin inscription beneath the painted stone ledge asserts: *If you added a voice, this would be Derich his very self. You would be in doubt whether the painter or his father made him.*

Exhibition publications

The Northern Renaissance: Dürer to Holbein by Kate Heard and Lucy Whitaker, with contributions by Jennifer Scott, Emma Stuart, Vanessa Remington, Martin Clayton and Jonathan Marsden (Royal Collection Publications, hardback, 256 pages, 190 illustrations, price £39.95).

The Northern Renaissance: Dürer to Holbein by Leah Kharibian (Royal Collection Publications, 156 pages, 130 illustrations, price £12.95)

Tickets and visitor information: The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace,
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