UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Staging Death and Diplomacy: Hans Holbein the Younger's *Images of Death* and *The Ambassadors* as Theatrical Visual Art

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Art History

by

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September 2025

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Acknowledgements

This thesis was a labor of love, one inspired by my dedication to interdisciplinary studies and the desire to research and write on a topic that could connect my majors and minors (History, Art History, and Dance; Anthropology and Theater, Film, Digital Production) from undergrad in one study. There was a point, however, that it felt this text would never be finished, as problem after problem kept arising and delaying progress in my program, including breaking my wrist and having surgery to correct it. Despite these hurdles, my committee supported me fully through their flexibility and adaptability. I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my committee chair, Professor Kristoffer Neville, whose passion for Art History and teaching was clear in the first class I had with him in undergrad at the start of COVID lockdowns. It was this passion and his immense wealth of knowledge that led me to request him as my advisor and, without his guidance and patience, this thesis would not have been possible. I would like to thank my committee members, Professor Heather Rastovac Akbarzadeh, Professor Yong Cho, and Professor Jeanette Kohl, whose courses gave me the ability to really dive into specific aspects of my research and think on the topic in new and unexpected ways.

In addition, I would like to thank my mother for her continued love and support; her willingness to lend an ear while I edited and make comments to help me clarify and correct aspects of my writing helped this text become what it is. I thank Mr. Wayne Basinger, the first Art History teacher I ever had and the one who taught me the lasting impact of a good (or bad) piece of art…and the lasting impression a great teacher will have on a student. A big thank you to all the library staff who gathered the many, many

texts I consulted in the writing of this thesis; without them, I would have been among the books forever! I also wish to thank the entire cast and crew of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, as those films played on loop while I worked for over a year, bringing me comfort and joy during a period of stress. Finally, I thank God, without whom nothing would be possible. It was by His grace, mercy, and love that this thesis could be completed, and I pray He knows I am grateful for His presence every day.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Kamille Flack, my biggest supporter and my #1 fan in any- and everything. I love you, mom!

I also dedicate this thesis to my dog, Mr. Sirius Black, my research buddy, late-night writing sidekick, and overall greatest companion since the day I started grad school.

Last, but certainly not least, this thesis is dedicated to my LORD and savior, Jesus Christ. Thank you, LORD, for always watching over me and helping me complete this work.

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INTRODUCTION

Hans Holbein the Younger (1497-1543) was born in Augsburg, now in Germany, into a family of artists, training alongside his brother Ambrosius in their father, Hans Holbein the Elder's, workshop. In 1515, the brothers moved to Basle, Switzerland, where they illustrated Erasmus' *In Praise of Folly* for theologian Oswald Myconius. Holbein's early career included commissions in Basle and Lucerne, where he completed facades, portraits, and religious works. By 1519, he returned to Basle, married, and became a member of the artists' guild, and from 1520–24, Holbein painted portraits, religious scenes, and works for the city. In 1524–26, he likely traveled to France, where he adopted new artistic techniques and ideals; this is also the period in which he designed his well-known print series, *Dance* or *Images of Death* (c. 1524/6; published 1538). Holbein first travelled to England in 1526, producing portraits such as that of Sir Thomas More (Figure 1). In 1528, Holbein went back Basle, staying for several years before returning to England in 1532. He produced many portraits upon his return, including those of merchants based at the London Steelyard and the double portrait *The Ambassadors* (1533) for French diplomat Jean de Dinteville, and later served as court painter to Henry VIII, designing portraits and decorative works. Holbein made a final brief trip to Basle in 1538 and 1539, but ultimately died in London—likely of plague—in 1543.[1]

Holbein was one of the most skilled and influential portraitists of the Renaissance, particularly known for his work in England. Arriving first in 1526 with letters of

[1] Biographical information is found across each text on Holbein I engaged with, however this particular overview of his life follows the chronology from Oskar Bätschmann and Pascal Griener, *Hans Holbein*, translated by Cecilia Hurley, revised and expanded second edition (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 7-11.

recommendation from Erasmus, he quickly gained the patronage of influential humanists such as Thomas More, who was also an important figure in King Henry VIII's court, painting a now-lost group portrait of More's family (Figure 2). His early English portraits, including those of Sir Henry Guildford and Archbishop William Warham, reveal his exceptional ability to convey individual identity and social rank. During his second visit to England starting in 1532, Holbein's patrons began to include foreign diplomats, wealthy merchants, and the royal court. *The Ambassadors*, portraying Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve, remains recognized for its realism, symbolism, political messaging, and exploration of mortality, knowledge, and power through its objects and anamorphic skull. This second trip also marked a transition from humanist to royal patronage. Despite sparse documentation, Holbein was likely involved at court beginning in 1533, earning official recognition as the King's Painter by 1537.[2]

Holbein's court portraits were not only likenesses, but tools of diplomacy and political influence. Holbein's portraiture was defined by both courtly expectations and humanist ideals. His sitters ranged from influential merchants and scholars to royalty and courtiers. He portrayed Sir Thomas More and Erasmus with a sense of intellectual depth, while his portraits of courtiers like Sir Henry Guildford and Thomas Cromwell emphasized power and political presence. These works often feature meticulously rendered garments, jewelry, and heraldic devices, functioning as both representations of

[2] All of the biographical information in these opening pages (to page 4) comes from Susan Foister and Hans Holbein, *Holbein and England* (New Haven: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 2004); Stephanie Buck, "Hans Holbein the Younger: Portraitist of the Renaissance," in *Hans Holbein the Younger: Painter at the Court of Henry VIII* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 11-33; Franny Moyle and Hans Holbein, *The King's Painter: The Life and Times of Hans Holbein* (New York: Abrams Press, 2021).

the sitters and social statements. His preparatory drawings demonstrate both intimacy and formal clarity, serving as essential components of his working method. Possibly the most politically charged commission was his 1539 portrait of Anne of Cleves (Figure 3), intended to aid Henry VIII's marriage negotiations. While the painting was initially praised for its beauty, it was later deemed a misrepresentation of its subject, as Anne was not considered as beautiful as her image. His portraits also helped shape public images of the king and his allies; the now-lost mural at Whitehall Palace depicting Henry VIII became one of the most iconic royal images of Tudor England, influencing royal portraiture for decades (Figure 4). His role as a court artist extended beyond portraiture, including jewelry design and pageantry, particularly for Anne Boleyn's courtly presentations.

Religion plays a central and complex role in Holbein's oeuvre, reflecting both his personal context and the shifting theological landscape of early 16th-century Europe. Early in his career, particularly in Basle, Holbein produced religious commissions, which reveal his command of traditional religious iconography and his ability to elicit deep emotional and theological engagement. *The Body of the Dead Christ* (Figure 5) is especially arresting for its incredible naturalism and blunt exploration of death and decay, challenging traditional representations of Jesus by highlighting his humanity and mortality, a choice likely influenced by humanist thought and contemporary religious debate. As the Reformation progressed, Holbein's religious work became more critical, seen most clearly in his *Dance of Death*—also referred to as *Images of Death* woodcut series, which, confronts the spiritual consequences of immoral practices like pride, greed,

and corruption across all levels of society. Holbein's religious art was made with increasing caution as he carefully navigated Europe's volatile social-religious-political climate, producing works which would appease reformers and traditionalists alike. His ability to adapt religious themes to diverse audiences underscores both his artistic versatility and his sensitivity to the theological tensions of his time.

Hans Holbein the Younger is remembered as one of the most important Renaissance artists across Europe. Well-versed in painting, drawing, and even metalwork design, Holbein's work became sought by many through both his own accomplishments and on the recommendation of influential people such as Erasmus. He was well-travelled, which helped his work to spread from Augsburg, where he was born, to England, where he died. Hans Holbein has been studied extensively, with in-depth biographies, articles, book chapters, and exhibitions focused on his life and works existing already. As such, the following thesis does not recount most of what is known about him; this is not due to lack of importance, but lack of necessity. Instead of reiterating what has been written before in a new format, my goal is to build on the existing literature by suggesting additional readings for two of Holbein's famous works with their own comprehensive literature: *The Ambassadors* (Figure 6) and *Images of Death* (Figure 7). In all the literature on Hans Holbein the Younger and his works, his position as an artist during the Reformation is highlighted most. As a defining event of the century, the focus on the Reformation in relation to his work is understandable, however there was more happening in the early 16th century which scholars of Holbein have overlooked as possible influences for his work, including changes, developments, and events associated

with the performing arts. Hence, this thesis focuses on Hans Holbein the Younger's *Images of Death* and *The Ambassadors* to show the visual arts and performing arts can—and should—still be studied together, and that, by placing the arts as a whole in dialogue with one another, new readings of well-known, well-established artists and works can be made.

THE CHANGING ARTISTIC WORLD OF HANS HOLBEIN THE YOUNGER

Hans Holbein the Younger has been praised for his ability to adapt and work in a world fraught with change and uncertainty due to the social-religious-political upheaval brought on by the Reformation. In *Hans Holbein: The Artist in A Changing World*, Jeanne Nuechterlein analyzes how art historians understand Holbein as a person and artist, highlighting the difficulty of doing so due to Holbein's elusive character. Her emphasis on exploring Holbein's surviving works as both physical creations and reflections of his intent while acknowledging the limitations in doing so is of particular importance to this thesis, as it clarifies my approach in the upcoming chapters.[3] This admission of uncertainty when it comes to knowing Holbein's thoughts and intentions behind a work, what influenced it, and why, exposes the inherent flaw in understanding and interpreting Holbein and his achievements: the lack of explicit confirmation or denial from the artist himself. Due to the limitations with Holbein's history in particular, use of the information we do have on his life together with the immense knowledge of the cultural, religious, political, and social contexts he worked in is the only way to create interpretations, yet

[3] Jeanne Nuechterlein, *Hans Holbein: The Artist in a Changing World* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2020), 10-11.

they are essentially nothing more than speculation without Holbein's acknowledgement, something we will never have.[4] Also worth noting are the reasons for which certain interpretations come about. In the case of this study, my background in Dance and Theater Studies sparked interest in studying *Dance of Death* works, leading me to Holbein and, ultimately, to conclude that he created works that are theatrical in nature. Despite the separation with which different forms of art are discussed today, humanists of the European Renaissance did not think of the arts as distinct, individual categories.[5] While there is no explicit evidence linking Holbein to the performing arts, unlike artists, such as Andrea Palladio and Gian Lorenzo Bernini, who were known to be involved in design and other aspects of theater, the changing world he worked in has already been shown to influence his work. So, is it not possible changes in the arts, particularly performance-based arts,[6] may have affected how and what he worked on?

During the early modern period, the visual arts and drama, particularly the religious plays which were most common at the time, were difficult to imagine separately. Not only was separation rare, but what was considered a dramatic or theatrical performance was quite broad. From 1513 to 1521, during the reign of Pope Leo X,

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[4] This does not diminish the work done based on speculation—some of my own arguments stem from speculation based on both information of Holbein and his surrounding contexts. It is an important acknowledgement, however, as it explains nothing can be certain with limited information, thus explaining the myriad of interpretations for the same works over time.

[5] Inge Jackson Reist, "All the World's a Stage: The Theater Conceit in Early Modern Italy," in *A Companion to Renaissance and Baroque Art*, Babette Bohn and James M. Saslow, eds. (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 463. The sciences were also seen as connected to the arts by humanists.

[6] While I suggest this broadly, I do not include music as one of the discussed performance areas. Though not irrelevant to performing arts studies by any means, besides the obvious inclusion of musical instruments in both *The Ambassadors* and *Images of Death*, music does not have a great connection to Holbein or these works specifically. It could, however, be relevant to another visual artist or work(s).

development of performance spaces was a trend, specifically the establishment of proscenium stages and return to ancient Roman theaters.[7] Lectures, political ceremonies, and theatrical productions alike were held in these spaces, exhibiting how many different activities and events were considered performances. In the 15th and early 16th centuries, religious and folk theater were each growing in popularity. However, neither acting nor writing plays was actually considered a profession.[8] Additionally, a prevailing humanist metaphor during the Renaissance was that of *theatrum mundi*, the world stage or theater of the world, which explained "man's place in the universe."[9] Life and death was often described as a play written and directed by God, ending with everyone's final judgement before the Lord.[10]

Also ongoing during the early 16th century was a social-religious-political debate, separate but related to the Reformation, surrounded shifting views on dance and understandings of the body. Dance has long been a complicated and highly debated subject in the Church due to its perceived connections to sin. Dance has been linked to paganism, called a punishment for sinners, and seen as immoral and indecent for centuries. Kathryn Dickason traces "the demonization of dance" to the early Church Fathers and theologians who were intent on separating Christian thought, behaviors, and

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[7] Reist, 468. This trend is discussed by Reist regarding Italy particularly, but with the spread of ideas so prominent at the time, particularly with the dissemination of the architectural treatises which inspired the trend, it is possible to discuss this in relation to European theater more broadly. Also, it is argued Holbein travelled to Italy; if true, he likely would have seen these spaces while there.

[8] Franklin J. Hildy, "European Theater Scene," in *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, Vol. 1, Bruce R. Smith and Katherine Rowe, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 77.

[9] Reist, 466.

[10] Thomas Postlewait and Tracy C. Davis, "Theatricality: an introduction," in *Theatricality*, edited by Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 9.

principles from all aspects of paganism.[11] In the Middle Ages, the controversy surrounding dance was especially potent, but Dickason argues that "dance became a legitimate form of devotion in medieval Christian culture" and "became a locus of interaction between the secular and the sacred."[12] Yet, by 1524/6 when Holbein created *Images of Death*, discourse surrounding dance had shifted again. Despite the presence of dance and other performances in religious contexts just decades prior, incidents such as the "dancing plague" in 1518 at Strasbourg led to questions about the morality of dance: was dance itself a sin or was it a sign of sin, used as punishment from God? There were also moral concerns about men and women dancing together, as it was assumed that dancing with someone of the opposite sex could lead to impure behavior. Renaissance physicians seemed to take a more neutral stance, stating it could be both a good and a bad thing, depending on who was dancing and under what circumstances. Despite the debates it sparked across society, particularly in the religious community, dance was still prevalent in political settings, as it was used to socialize and make oneself known within the court.

Regardless of definitive proof of Holbein's awareness of these performing arts trends and taking them into account for *The Ambassadors* and *Images of Death*, or any of his other works, the fact they were going on at the same time and could have possibly influenced him means they are worth exploring. As Nuechterlein explains, available information is how art historians construct interpretations for surviving works since we

[11] Kathryn Dickason, *Ringleaders of Redemption: How Medieval Dance Became Sacred* (New York: Oxford University Press US, 2021), 2.

[12] Dickason, 3.

do not have the ability to confirm exact meanings with no longer living artists and little to no documentation. I believe it is negligent to overlook a phenomenon occurring alongside the Reformation when it could have been another source of inspiration or influence for Holbein. As such, in light of the thus-far ignored performance history and related elements of these works, I propose new readings for Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* and *Images of Death* using theatricality as a method of interpretation.

THEATRICALITY AND VISUAL ARTS

Theatricality is a difficult term to work with, as it is used broadly and within many contexts. In the introduction to *Theatricality*, Thomas Postlewait and Tracy C. Davis write, "One thing, but perhaps only one, is obvious: the idea of theatricality has achieved an extraordinary range of meanings, making it everything from an act to an attitude, a style to a semiotic system, a medium to a message,"[13] while Andrew Quick and Richard Rushton call theatricality "a slippery concept."[14] This implies it is impossible, or near impossible, to define theatricality, as it can mean many things and encompass many elements. Postlewait and Davis associate different cultural concepts and practices to theatricality even though they do not provide an explicit definition for the term, ultimately concluding "the domain of theatricality cannot be located within any single definition, period, or practice. Nor can it be limited to any one application…it is simply not possible to stipulate a single, regulative meaning for [theatricality]."[15] Quick and

[13] Postlewait and Davis, 1.

[14] Andrew Quick and Richard Rushton, "On Theatricality," *Performance Research* 24, no. 4 (2019), 3.

[15] Postlewait and Davis, 2-3, 38.

Rushton, on the other hand, define theatricality as "the quality of that which pertains to theatre…that which draws attention to theatre, where theatre is a zone or mode that is distinguished from 'reality' or 'real life,'"[16] in direct conflict with Postlewait and Davis' claim that theatricality cannot be defined. Additionally, Roland Barthes says theatricality "is theater-minus-text, it is a density of signs and sensations built up on stage starting from the written argument; it is that ecumenical perception of sensuous artifice—gesture, tone, distance, substance, light—which submerges the text beneath the profusion of its external language."[17]

The dictionary definition for theatrical is "of or related to the theater or the presentation of plays; having qualities suggestive of a stage play or of an actor's performance."[18] I do not argue that the visual arts should be equated to theater or a performance, but that they have theatrical qualities, elements indicative of artifice and spectacle, that allow them to be described in the same or a similar manner. Postlewait and Davis find it difficult to define theatricality due to its extreme use—and misuse—since the word came to exist in 1837,[19] and thoroughly explain the ways in which scholars have used and defined theatricality over time. While the word did not exist in English until

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[16] Andrew Quick and Richard Rushton, "Introduction: Questioning Theatricality," in *Theatricality and the Arts: Film, Theatre, Art*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2024), 1.

[17] Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 26, quoted in Christina Grammatikopoulou, "Theatricality and Performativity: The Non-textual Elements of Performance," *interartive: a platform for contemporary art and thought* (May 2017), https://interartive.org/2017/05/theatricality-and-performativity-the-non-textual-elements-of-performance-christina-grammatikopoulou.

[18] Merriam-Webster, s.v. "theatricality," Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/theatricality.

[19] Postlewait and Davis, 2.

1837, notions of theatricality existed prior to this, being noted particularly in 17th and 18th century visual arts, however the sentiment, as I argue, can be extended even earlier. While I agree that theatricality, and further theatrical art, cannot be limited to a single space, time, or medium, I believe having a basic definition for the term is essential. Additionally, while theatricality implies a connection solely to theater, it relates to all forms of performance, such as dance and opera, extending as far as daily life in which people perform different roles in different spaces. As such, I define theatricality as a quality suggestive of or resembling performance, particularly through indications of artifice over reality, and connections to physical forms of performance.

Despite the supposed inability to define—or, more accurately, produce a single definition for—theatricality, what it does and how it looks appears easier to identify. Josette Féral states theatricality occurs "'when behaviour is not natural or spontaneous, but composed according to rhetorical or authenticating conventions, to achieve a particular effect on its viewers.'"[20] Carmen Vendelin writes,

> Theatricality draws out emotions in the observer. In the performing arts, 'stage, setting, and mood'—the use of backdrops, props, lighting, and sound, and the application of the performers' craft in the physical space of the theater—work together to evoke sensations and sentiments in the audience. In the visual arts, artists employ theatrical, pictorial means to appeal to the sense. Colors, bold forms, and compelling subjects can be called on to elicit an emotional connection between viewer and artwork.[21]

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[20] Josette Féral, "Theatricality: Foreword," *SubStance* 31, no. 2-3 (2003), 6, quoted in Antony Eastmond, "Staging as Metaphor: The King's Body and the Theatricality of Power," in *Staging the Ruler's Body in Medieval Culture: A Comparative Perspective*, edited by Manuela Studer-Karlen, Michele Bacci, and Gohar Grigoryan (Turnhout: Brepols, 2023), 136-137.

[21] Carmen Vendelin, "Stage, Setting, Mood—Theatricality in the Visual Arts," *El Palacio* (magazine of the Museum of New Mexico), Spring 2016 issue, published March 2016, https://elpalacio.org/2016/03/stage-setting-mood/.

Quick and Rushton express, “Theatricality is not a matter of escaping from reality. Rather the aim of the theatrical artwork is to demonstrate to us - the audience - that reality itself is fabricated, that reality is performed, conventional, artificial.”[22] Essentially, theatricality presents itself in many ways: through *mise-en-scène*, viewer-response theory, and performativity, among others. Discussing theatricality in relation to visual art is by no means a new concept. In 1976, art historian Michael Fried published *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, which utilizes the writing of art critic Denis Diderot to highlight the painting-viewer relationship and responses to French art between the mid-1750s and 1781. In 2012, SFMOMA exhibited *Stage Presence: Theatricality in Art and Media*, featuring art “that def[ies] the traditional divide between the visual and the performing arts.”[23] In 2016, the New Mexico Museum of Art held the exhibition *Stage, Setting, Mood: Theatricality in the Visual Arts*, which highlighted “artworks that feature high drama, theatrical presentation, and narrative storytelling, demonstrate the connection between sensation and spectacle.”[24]

One of the first in-depth texts using theatricality as a method for studying visual art, mainly painting and architecture, in the early modern period is *Theatricality in Early Modern Art and Architecture*, edited by Caroline van Eck and Stijn Bussels. Though a great foundational text, and an important one due to its uniqueness and examples of how

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[22] Quick and Rushton, “Introduction,” 1-2.

[23] San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, “Stage Presence: Theatricality in Art and Media,” *SFMOMA Exhibitions* (July 14-October 8, 2012), https://www.sfmoma.org/exhibition/stage-presence/.

[24] New Mexico Museum of Art, **“**Stage, Setting, Mood: Theatricality in the Visual Arts**,”** exhibition page (New Mexico Museum of Art website, February 5–May 1, 2016), https://www.nmartmuseum.org/exhitions/stage-setting-mood-theatricality-in-the-visual-arts/.

theatricality applies to visual art, it has a limited geographic range, artists, and mediums included. For example, Gian Lorenzo Bernini's Cornaro Chapel (Figure 8) and *Four Rivers Fountain* (Figure 9), both considered to be related to theater and thus having theatrical elements, are not mentioned, though they have been studied in other texts.[25] It also is limited to architecture and different types of paintings. Regardless of its limitations, the essays in this text help create a framework for which to view and understand theatricality and theatrical art in the early modern period, and several address theatrical elements that can be found in *The Ambassadors* and *Images of Death*.

ON SPECTATORSHIP

An important element of the arts and theatricality which is highlighted throughout this thesis is spectatorship. Whether for performance or visual art, a beholder of some kind is inherent. Even when an artist draws in a personal sketchbook, one he has no intention of showing others, the artist himself becomes the spectator, just as the person who sings in the shower performs for herself.[26] Jacques Rancière reminds us that, traditionally, spectatorship is considered "the opposite of acting: the spectator remains immobile in her seat, passive,"[27] ultimately denying the viewer any interaction with a work beside simply looking at it. Due to historically negative views of theater, going back to Plato and ideas

[25] See Ann Sutherland Harris and Mark S. Weil's essays in *Art and Pageantry in the Renaissance and Baroque*, Barbara Wisch and Susan C. Scott, eds. (University Park, Pa: Dept. of Art History, Pennsylvania State University, 1990).

[26] Perhaps, in this way, all visual art could be classified as theatrical, however that is not the argument I am focusing on here.

[27] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2011) 2.

of mimesis, Rancière suggests the solution is a theater where spectators "become active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs."[28] Michael Fried's explanation of anti-theatrical painting holding "a paradoxical relationship" with the beholder, one where the viewer's presence goes unnoticed by the painting through means of absorption in the figures actions to show the fictitious nature of the work supports this solution, particularly for theater but extended to other forms of art, proposed by Rancière.[29] With theatrical artworks being seen as too staged, essentially showing the viewer what the artist wanted rather than allowing them to discover for themselves, the trend of absorption began as to better attract an audience for the work,[30] thus forming the paradoxical relationship between painting and beholder: in order to entice a viewer to observe the painting, it needed "to neutralize or negate the beholder's presence, to establish the fiction that no one is standing before the canvas."[31] In line with Rancière's solution for a new theater, art designed to allow the spectators to intellectually engage with it immediately makes them an active rather than passive viewer of the work, for they cannot simply see and know, but must explore and interpret the meaning of the work themselves.

Though the intention was for non-engagement with the viewer to be anti-theatrical, paintings like *The Ambassadors* show that subjects engaging with the

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[28] Rancière, 4.

[29] Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 108.

[30] Beth Harland and Sunil Manghani, "Michael Fried's Theatricality and the Practice of Painting," *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 22, no. 1 (2023), 53.

[31] Fried, 108.

viewer can accomplish the same goal as absorptive works, while *Images of Death* proves absorptive works can, in fact, be theatrical. Fried frequently declares "our lived reality and the world of the subject are entirely separate," however his reference to projection, the viewer's ability to "picture ourselves in the composition…actually inside the work, assimilating with it,"[32] suggests the opposite and is essential to this idea of the active participant. In *The Ambassadors*, the subjects are not absorbed in the world they are situated in; they do not focus on a particular object or task that prevents them from interacting with the viewer, but instead stare directly at the viewer as if engaged with them. This invites the spectator into the work, to assimilate into it as one of the characters, doing precisely what an "anti-theatrical" painting is meant to. Holbein takes this further by physically controlling how the spectator engages with the painting, only seeing what he wants them to see from specific viewing positions, making them a physically active participant in the world of *The Ambassadors*. *Images of Death*, on the other hand, does the opposite. All figures in each print are depicted as if completely unaware of their audience, as none of them gaze outward to draw the viewer in. And yet, it would have been impossible for the 16th century viewer to separate their lived reality from the world of *Images of Death* since the prints are a reflection of 16th century life, ideologies, and scenarios.

For Rancière, considering the spectator an inactive or passive participant is grossly ignorant. Whether they physically move to interact with the spectacle they observe or do so while stationary, the spectator is highly engaged with the work in front

[32] Annie Curtis, "The Theatricality Of The Everyday: A Question of Absorption In Contemporary Photography," *Art History Society*. https://arthistorysociety.org/essays/the-theatricality-of-the-everyday.

of them:

> The spectator also acts...She observes, selects, compares, interprets…She participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way…[Viewers] are thus both distant spectators and active interpreters of the spectacle offered to them. This is a crucial point: spectators see, feel and understand something in as much as they compose their own poem, as, in their way, do actors or playwrights, directors, dancers or performers.[33]

This emphasis on the spectator being just as active as anyone directly involved with the production of a spectacle shows their importance to a work; it situates them as an active participant, a performative spectator, in the artwork, whether painting or performance. Regardless of artist intent, the spectator will see, in the most literal sense, what the artist presents, but their understanding and interpretation, what they feel regarding the spectacle, is not something that can be controlled. For *Images of Death*, this is vital to acknowledge since the prints are not just art for viewing pleasure, but propaganda, designed to gain a desired response from the viewer. *The Ambassadors*, on the other hand, requires viewers to place themselves in direct conversation with the painting's "actors," Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve, to move around to see everything Holbein sought to convey, and become part of the performance to compose their own interpretation.

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The main reason I chose to write on this topic was to encourage less separation between areas of the arts. Where Vendelin compares visual artists to performers who "create other worlds in their chosen media,"[34] I view the subjects of an artwork as the

[33] Rancière, 13.

[34] Vendelin.

performers, with the artists more comparable to the composers, choreographers, and playwrights of the performing arts. Each of these fields—theater, dance, music, visual art—are a part of the larger category of "the arts," and yet, they are so often understood as separate and disconnected due to simple differences, such as the perceived impermanence of performing arts compared to the supposed permanence of visual art[35] and language used to discuss different forms of art and the artists behind the creations. During my research, one thing became startlingly clear: language is essential in how people come to understand something. In the following chapters, I use language which insinuates Hans Holbein the Younger was more than a visual artist, likening him to choreographers and playwrights; each are a type of artist who composes art through their specified medium: a choreographer uses movement, the playwright words, and the visual artist paint, chalk, metal, marble, clay, or another materiality. Despite the differing terminology between the visual and performing arts, I use Hans Holbein the Younger, a well-known, extensively studied artist whose work has never been discussed through the lens of theatricality, and rarely outside the context of the Reformation, to show the continued interconnectedness of visual and performing arts, and importance of interdisciplinary studies.

[35] I hesitate to call visual art permanent since it is not indestructible. Throughout history, the destruction of paintings, statues, and architecture, along with the reproducibility of art forms like printmaking, show that no art is inherently permanent, yet there is constant argument that performing arts are lesser arts due to their impermanence. Even with technology that can capture a performance—video, photography—it is, arguably, not the original performance, especially if they are edited. Additionally, no two performances are ever exactly the same, unlike visual art, which is typically protected and, thus, unchanging.

Chapter 1: *Images of Death*

From late 1347 to c. 1350, bubonic plague swept across Europe, killing at least one-third of the continent's population.[36] This particular outbreak, famously called the "Black Death," caused a fundamental reorganization of European life: people were fleeing large cities in droves to try and escape infection, there was a lack of laborers in all areas of specialization, and the entire continent was in a state of fear and panic. When the plague dissipated, the survivors had to cope with their losses and the disruption to daily life, which, after the decimation of the medieval European population, included depictions of death as part of contemporary popular culture. Anna DesOrmeaux writes that images depicting death/Death[37] as a response to the plague "preserve medieval peoples' preoccupation with and fear of death" while also highlighting the "the resilient nature of humans."[38] The Dance of Death[39] emerged as a subgenre of what DesOrmeaux calls "plague art,"[40] revealing the fascination with, awareness of, and fear of death, and reliance on faith that she attributes to the mass death during the plague. After millions of people from varying backgrounds died during the plague, Death was viewed as "The

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[36] Scholarship varies the amount of people killed across Europe. Accounts claim at least one-third, while others say almost two-thirds of Europe's population died. The outbreak began in Italy in 1347 and spread across Europe until approximately 1350, but spread beyond Europe all the way to Russia through 1352. For more detailed outbreak numbers, refer to Joseph P. Byrne's *Encyclopedia of the Black Death*.

[37] Throughout this chapter, the word "death" will be used two ways: death in all lowercase, which refers to the physical act of dying and, and Death with an uppercase "D" to refer to the skeletal figures as characters.

[38] Anna L. DesOrmeaux, "The Black Death and its Effect on Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century Art," *LSU Master's Theses* (2007), v.

[39] Like "death," "Dance of Death" will have variation throughout this chapter. When italicized, it is being used in reference to a specific work, such as Holbein's *Dance of Death*. When not italicized, it is in reference to the genre/theme of the Dance of Death.

[40] DesOrmeaux, 29.

Great Equalizer," the one experience everyone had without discrimination.[41] Since its inception, Dance of Death imagery was known for depicting a personification of Death as a skeleton with a "living" person, collecting and guiding them to the afterlife in a cheerful procession.[42]

The first recorded depiction of the Dance of Death is of a mural in the cemetery at the Church of the Holy Innocents in Paris, France.[43] While the fresco no longer exists today, it is still known due to artist Guyot Marchant's reproduction of its original content through prints, going so far as to recreate the architecture of the cemetery's cloister and including the wall text meant to be observed alongside it.[44] First published in 1485, Marchant's *La danse macabre nouvelle* maintained the hierarchy of the period—as outlined by the original painting—by starting the death procession with the pope and ending it with the hermit.[45] Unfortunately, Marchant, printing in book format, could not fully recreate the connected nature of the death procession, though he tried to keep the

[41] The term "Great Equalizer" was not initially used in regard to the Dance of Death imagery or Death at all—it was coined by Horace Mann in 1848 in reference to education—but has become used regularly in the discussion of the Dance of Death's prevalence and to explain the genre's popularity post-plague and beyond.

[42] It is important to note that describing the non-skeletal figures in Dance of Death motifs as living is a bit of a stretch, as these figures represent people as dying, at the moment of death, or already dead, but not having been judged by God yet. As such, Death is believed to be leading the figures to the afterlife, but more specifically to the location where the Last Judgement will take place before entering their soul's final resting place (Heaven or Hell). This idea of Death leading humanity to their final judgment is made evident in the inclusion of the Biblical narrative of the Last Judgement as one of the final scenes in the series.

[43] "La danse macabre nouvelle," from *Holbein: Capturing Character*, The Morgan Library & Museum.

[44] Elina Gertsman, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages: Image, Text, Performance*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2010, 6. According to Gertsman, the mural "was destroyed in a seventeenth-century campaign to widen the streets in the area"; without Marchant's woodcuts, there may not have been any record of what the mural looked like, simply that it existed. Gertsman also explains the destruction of murals like that at Holy Innocents was common practice, leaving far less Dance of Death imagery than originally existed.

[45] Gertsman, 5-6. It is worth noting the original fresco did not include any women, which undermines the idea of Death as an equalizing force.

processional spirit by always keeping two dead and two living together (Figure 10). Even still, the act of taking an artwork meant to be interacted with in a large-scale, interconnected context makes it difficult to read the image properly. As such, Dance of Death "processions" produced as prints started to show each character within scenes specific to each individual, as seen in Hans Holbein the Younger's version published in 1538.

Holbein's *Dance of Death* was first published as a bound text in Lyon, France, with the title *Les simulachres & historiées faces de la mort*, around twelve years after they were originally drawn and published as individual images.[46] According to Elina Gertsman, Holbein's *Dance* is fairly standard, following certain medieval conventions for the genre, such as maintaining the social hierarchy, continuing religious themes, and including text to be read alongside the images.[47] In many ways, however, it strayed from the medieval precedents it was based on. Due to its format as a series of prints that did not need to be viewed together, the typical death procession was exchanged for individual genre scenes; Death is seen wearing clothes, which show its impartiality towards its victims; and most of the skeletons no longer actually dance, as the name of the work

[46] Pascal Griener and Oskar Bätschmann, *Hans Holbein: Revised and Expanded Second Edition* (London: Reaktion Books, Limited, 2014), 92; Austin Dobson, Introductory note to Hans Holbein's *The Dance of Death*, New York: Scott-Thaw Company, 1903; Project Gutenberg, 2007, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/21790/21790-h/21790-h.htm. This is a shortened version of the original French title from that provided in the Project Gutenberg copy of Holbein's *Dance of Death*. In English, it translates to *The Images and Storied Aspects of Death*.

[47] Gertsman, 169. Holbein's hierarchy is slightly out of order when it comes to "The Countess," "The Old Man," and "The Old Woman," but not so drastically as to claim the medieval tradition was fully broken. The text was also added as part of the bound version by the publisher, not Holbein himself.

suggests they should.[48] The most obvious break in tradition is the lack of procession, which was abandoned due to the new format—Holbein even strayed from the inclusion of architectural borders like Marchant used, opting instead to create distinct scenes for each death so the images could be viewed individually. Holbein opens the cycle with four Biblical scenes and an image of skeletons in a cemetery before introducing Death's victims, beginning with the pope and ending with a young child, then closing with the Last Judgement and a coat of arms of Death. Gertsman summarizes the series this way:

> What Holbein gives us, then, is a comprehensive view of the history of humankind, from Creation through the Last Judgement, with the Dance of Death as a necessary and repeating episode in this chain of events. The Fall and the Last Judgement mark the first and the last instance of mortal, human history: the former establishing the moment Death came into the world, and the latter is the culminating moment in the history of humanity, when all the deceased—victims of Death—will rise again to be judged. The rest of Holbein's woodcuts are temporally set between these two pivotal moments as the series documents the progress of death in the world.[49]

The importance of including the story of Adam and Eve at the start of the series lies in the fact that death did not exist in the world prior to humanity's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, while ending with the Last Judgement shows where Death leads humanity before their souls ultimately rest.

Holbein's *Images of Death* follows the antitheatrical trend of absorption, where the subjects never engage the viewer and are not meant to be a spectacle.[50] However the

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[48] Not only does Holbein's entire series have minimal dancing Deaths, the few that are dancing do so less explicitly than those by Holbein's predecessors. In medieval and early printed *Dance*s, Death was shown in perfect fourth and fifth positions, pliés, or imitating ring dances, while Holbein's "dancers" are more erratic and less structured with their movements.

[49] Gertsman, 170.

[50] Beth Harland and Sunil Manghani, "Michael Fried's Theatricality and the Practice of Painting," *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 22, no. 1 (2023), 53.

inclusion of a personified Death in every scene, the lack of subject specificity, and the prints' role as social-religious-political propaganda makes them inherently theatrical. While the characters—for this is what they are, as they are unidentifiable beyond the role they play in society, essentially "stock" characters from theatrical performances—are engrossed in their scene, only interacting with the other figures around them. They were made by Holbein for the sole purpose of being viewed, not to be explicitly interacted with like *The Ambassadors*. Michael Fried called this use of absorptive techniques yet "acknowledgement of the beholder's presence" facingness,[51] due to the painting-, or in this case print-, beholder relationship. With *Images of Death* serving as propaganda, this print-viewer relationship is, arguably, more important to understanding the series than Holbein's own views and helps reveal the theatrical nature of the work.

Beyond spectatorship as an important theatrical component, the *Dance of Death* tradition is believed by many scholars to have theatrical origins. Holbein's series, however, is of particular interest when viewed with an understanding of performance in Europe during his time. Part of the changing social-religious-political climate of the early 16th century included shifting views on dance. A marked difference between Holbein's *Images* and earlier *Dance*s is the lack of dancing figures, a fact overlooked by scholars of Holbein and the *Dance of Death*. Additionally, when seen as a full series rather than individual leaflets, *Images of Death* embodies the idea of *theatrum mundi*, the great theater of the world. Postlewait and Davis write, "Life and death follow the arc of a basic drama, and we all are players. God, fate, destiny, or fortune provides the script…The

[51] Harland and Manghani, 54.

theatrum mundi topos thus articulates God's judgement: death unmasks everyone."[52] This is the structure *Images of Death* follows when viewed as a whole, a three-act play composed by Holbein but reflecting the reality directed by God—Act 1: Creation to The Consequences of the Fall; Act 2: Death entering the world and collecting people; Act 3: the Last Judgement.

Despite this lack of dance or explicit connection to performances, Holbein's *Images of Death* holds a theatrical spirit that transcends physical or represented performance. This chapter first covers how *Images of Death* is a theatrical print series through Holbein's composition and clothing as a form of *mise-en-scène* to elicit particular viewer responses, before detailing the series' connection—and lack thereof—to performance during the early 16th century. Discourse on *Images of Death* thus far have failed to address this shift in iconography from medieval *Dance*s, which included clearly dancing figures, as well as the debates surrounding dance in Holbein's time as a possible factor for his artistic choices. As one of his best-known works, *Images of Death* has been studied in excess, but primarily through a social-political lens related to the Reformation. As such, this chapter expands on existing understandings of Holbein's print series using theories of theatricality, performativity, and viewer response, in addition to dance history of early sixteenth-century Europe.

[52] Postlewait and Davis, "Theatricality: an introduction," in *Theatricality*, edited by Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 9.

SETTING THE STAGE

In "The Ruler's Multiple Bodies and Their Mise-en-Scène," Michele Bacci writes, "The strategies for constructing and displaying the outward appearance of the sovereign varied depending on how public the event in question was and, relatedly, how differentiated the participants were in social terms."[53] Though this references medieval event culture and royal reception, which is considered a type of performance, the same argument can be applied to art depicting a ruler or anyone of import. Holbein's depictions of nobility and other powerful figures, such as the pope and church officials, in *Images of Death* were staged to fit the narrative he sought to spread. As the prints were produced and sold to the public, meant to be seen by people across all social strata, he displays many powerful figures in seemingly typical situations for their respective stations in life: the pope is crowning an emperor (Figure 11), the king sits at a feast (Figure 12), the empress walks with her ladies-in-waiting surrounding her (Figure 13). For those he wants viewers to consider corrupt, however, his scenes, rather than inspiring awe for those in power,[54] are constructed to do the opposite: the duke turns away from a beggar woman and her child (Figure 14), the counselor ignores a poor man while a devil sits on his shoulder (Figure 15), the nun rests on her knees before a private altar while her lover sits on her bed (Figure 16). These depictions of nobility, church officials, and the rich as dismissive to those in need, gluttonous, and dismissive of their duties when compared to other, typically less fortunate, characters were strong social commentary fitting for the period.

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[53] Michele Bacci, "The Ruler's Multiple Bodies and Their Mise-en-Scène: Some Introductory Remarks," in *Staging the Ruler's Body in Medieval Culture: A Comparative Perspective*, Manuela Studer-Karlen, Michele Bacci, and Gohar Grigoryan, eds. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2023), 14.

[54] Bacci, 15.

Throughout his career, Holbein proved himself an artist capable of working in a changing social context, and the period during which he created *The Dance of Death* was a time of great change and strife. In 1517, Martin Luther wrote and posted his *Ninety-Five Theses* condemning certain Church practices and declaring a need for reorganization, an act which is historically recognized as the start of the Protestant Reformation. The significance of Luther's act and the distance and speed at which his ideas would spread across Europe could not have been predicted, but they did so quickly, which became dangerous to the Church. Basle in particular, the city Holbein held citizenship in, became a center for the printing and dissemination of Reformation images and information.[55] Eventually, the widespread acceptance of Luther's ideals and criticisms—at the very least, the extent to which they circulated—put the Church in a precarious position, leading Pope Leo X to excommunicate Martin Luther in 1521. This series of events and the continual, ever-growing schism in the Church in the years following heavily influenced Holbein's *Images of Death*.

As seen through visual cues like the aggression Death shows Church officials and, especially, the inclusion of the devils in his portrayal of the pope, Holbein's "series formulate[s] with considerable force a criticism of the clergy."[56] "The Pope," in particular, shows great disdain for actions of the Church. Traditionally, the characters in *Dance*s were anonymous, meant to represent a larger group rather than a specific individual, but the floating devil in Holbein's print holds a papal bull (Figure 17), which some scholars have accepted as an allusion to the many decrees Pope Leo X issued

[55] Griener and Bätschmann, 145.

[56] Griener and Bätschmann, 94.

related to Martin Luther.[57] However, people at the time of the prints' formal publication (1538) would have most likely associated this print to Pope Paul III, who reigned at that time, making the papal bull a more general reference to the position of pope than a specific person. Either way, by indirectly breaking this anonymity and identifying the leader of the Church as a sinner, Holbein was expressing clearly the belief that the Church was corrupt. On the other hand, his continued relationship with Erasmus, who was highly critical of the Reformation movement, as well as his seeming lack of criticism for other clergy, suggests that Holbein did not fully align with Reformation thinking either.[58] In fact, Basle became a difficult place for him to stay because he refused to produce work that fully aligned himself with either traditional Catholicism or radical Protestantism,[59] a probable reason for his decision to work outside the city. As such, *Images of Death* likely functioned as social-religious-political commentary—a trend amongst theatrical prints—related to the Reformation that could appeal to anyone, as seen through Death's partial and unequal treatment of different individuals throughout the series.

Once Death enters the narrative after "The Fall," medieval precedents show it as an indiscriminate guide for the dead. Yet, Holbein depicts Death as having clear prejudice

[57] The devil is believed to be holding a papal bull because Pope Leo X, leader of the Church during the Protestant Reformation, released three important bulls related to Martin Luther: one stating he had the right to sell indulgences, another condemning Luther's *Theses*, and the last formally excommunicating him from the Church. While it is believed the devil is holding a papal bull, I argue the document is left ambiguous so it may also be read as an indulgence, the sale of which was highly criticized by Martin Luther.

[58] Holbein is known to have a relationship with Erasmus as the artist presented Sir Thomas More a letter of recommendation signed by Erasmus when he arrived in London around 1526.

[59] Griener and Bätschmann, 171.

against certain groups.[60] One such figure in Holbein's series is the preacher (Figure 18). Gertsman explains the presence of the preacher was essential, as "he instructed, admonished, pointed out important things, and invited the viewer to follow the pitiful journey of the dancers."[61] Thus, in medieval tradition, the preacher serves as a visual foil to Death, since they address similar matters, like repentance and the inevitability of death, but do so quite differently, as "the Preacher is compassionate and composed, while the skeletons are derisive."[62] Traditionally, the preacher would be at the start or end of a procession, serving as a narrator for part of, rather than being directly involved in, the procession. Holbein's treatment of the preacher is far different than that of his medieval predecessors, possibly due to the new format for the *Dance*, though the rough, disrespectful way in which Death approaches the preacher suggests a deeper reason. In his series, Holbein preserves standard class divisions, so most clergy members are at the front or middle of his "procession," not the end. In fact, the preacher becomes a character of little importance to the reading of Holbein's *Dance*, as the preacher himself is an unsuspecting victim of Death. Standing on his pulpit, the preacher is shown giving his final sermon, unaware Death stands behind him, ready to strike him with a jawbone.[63]

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[60] I use the word "groups" here because the living did not, traditionally, represent specific people, but, rather, a set of "stock" characters associated with all levels of the social strata, which artists included at their discretion. While Death is always present in some capacity within these processions, the other characters—peasants, children, nobles, elderly folks, etc.—vary based on the context and author/artist. One exception to this, however, is the preacher.

[61] Elina Gertsman, "Pleyinge and Peyntynge: Performing the Dance of Death," *Studies in Iconography*, Vol. 27 (2006), 13. Gertsman explains the preacher is typically "at the beginning or the end of the procession," however this varies among images.

[62] Gertsman, "Pleyinge and Peyntynge," 17.

[63] Hans Holbein, *The Dance of Death*, New York: Scott-Thaw Company, 1903; Project Gutenberg, 2007.

Beside the preacher sits an hourglass, a common symbol throughout the series, with the sand running through it, showing he only has a short time left before Death makes its move. This contempt toward the preacher is completely different from how artists before Holbein approached the character; not only is the preacher no longer a special or important character, but Death approaches him with a smile on its face, excited for the moment it can claim the preacher's life. This violent, contemptuous behavior towards a member of the clergy can be interpreted as revealing an extreme level of criticism of not only the preacher, but many religious figures, by Holbein himself.

Per the socio-political hierarchy of 1524/1526, the pope is the first character depicted in the *Dance* cycle (Figure 11). The scene depicts papal authority at its peak, with the pope crowning an emperor in front of other clergy members. Two Deaths are also present, one by the pope's side, the other behind a cardinal, while devils float above, one specifically holding a papal bull, to highlight the pope's corrupt nature. Pascal Griener and Oskar Bätschmann write, "Holbein's woodcut does not simply juxtapose the highest ecclesiastical authorities with Death, it also shows the pope as having fallen into the hands of the arch-fiend, and hence is the Antichrist."[64] Claiming the pope is depicted as the Antichrist is bold, and yet, appears accurate considering this is one of only three images in the whole cycle which has two Deaths with a victim and the only scene with two devils.[65] As such, the pope is ultimately portrayed as someone who was exceedingly

[64] Griener and Bätschmann, 94.

[65] There is a fourth print, "The Soldier," (Figure 30) that includes multiple Death figures, however, there also appears to be more than one victim, as the soldier is depicted on a battlefield. As such, the second Death, who interacts in no way with the particular soldier that is the main character of the image, is most likely going after a different soldier. It was also an addition to later editions, so, even if both Deaths were after one soldier, it would not affect the interpretation for the original edition I reference for my analysis.

sinful in life, thus is doubly deserving of Death's wrath. Along with the preacher and pope, religious authorities such as the cardinal, abbot, abbess, mendicant friar, and nun are treated in a contemptuous, sometimes even violent, manner, with only the bishop, canon, and priest being spared this treatment.[66] The bishop in particular is treated with extreme care and gentleness, being led away from his flock hand-in-hand with Death (Figure 19).[67] The canon's face is not even shown, playing into the concept of an unidentifiable stock character, and Death simply confronts him with an hourglass, signaling his life has or is about to end (Figure 20). Finally, the priest is essentially ignored by Death; there is no interaction between the characters, but Death leads the priest elsewhere, presumably to the afterlife, and the priest goes willingly (Figure 21).

Though not a church official, the old woman is portrayed with two Deaths (Figure 22), visually comparing her with the pope (Figure 11). In this scene, one Death dances joyously by the old woman's side, its right arm and leg raised and a smile on its face, while the other has its back to them and produces music for their small death march. Unlike with the pope, Death appears more celebratory than menacing, only claiming this victim because her age necessitates it. These two characters also meet their end differently: the pope maintains his pious façade through his final act being one he is duty-bound to perform, completely oblivious to the Deaths approaching, while the old

[66] While the nun is not handled violently as some of the other church officials are, the way Death snuffs out the candle indicates an abrupt death. She is also clearly seen breaking her vows of chastity with the presence of her lover in her room, showing she was a sinner.

[67] There is some debate over what is occurring in the background of this print. Unlike prints such as "The Queen," Death is not openly violent nor seems to be dragging the bishop away. However, the bishop's followers, both human and sheep, appear lost. This could be due to the bishop's death, or it could be due to the bishop misleading them in life. Either way, there is no obvious hostility from Death, so I interpret the interaction between bishop and Death as gentle.

woman is pious of her own free will, as seen in her decision to accept Death with rosary in hand. This scene is particularly interesting because it not only shows Death as gentle only towards certain people, but also because it is one of only three prints with a Death that appears to be dancing. The other two prints, "The Expulsion" (Figure 23) and "The Noble Lady," (Figure 24) also show Death dancing with instruments, however their bodies and faces appear mocking, like Death celebrates the characters' deaths in a different way than for the old woman, whose death was anticipated. For Adam and Eve and the noble lady, the celebration seems to be because Death feels they deserve to die, that they are facing the consequences of their sins.[68]

VIEWER RESPONSE

As one views Holbein's prints, two messages become clear: no one is spared from Death, and those who are deemed unworthy are not dealt with gently. Elina Gertsman suggests medieval *Dance of Death* series are performative works, as they were based in and around medieval theatrical practices and intended to invite the viewer to engage with the content of each work. Gertsman particularly emphasizes viewer response through the lens of semiotics, focusing on how symbols like Death and other (often, but not always) permanent characters like the preacher—the gestures and dialogues of these characters—are conveyed to and interpreted by the viewer.[69] Her main visual source is the *Dance of Death* in Lübeck by Bernt Notke (Figure 25) and other pre-Holbein *Dance*s,

[68] Note that Adam and Eve are the only figures who appear again in the cycle after their initial encounter with Death. "The Expulsion," unlike the following prints, is a display of Death's birth, so to speak, the instance at which it enters the world, not the first time it takes life.

[69] Gertsman, "Pleyinge and Peyntynge," 4.

which differed from Holbein's *Images of Death* as his were originally unaccompanied by text, thus allowing the viewer to come to their own conclusions about the images. Despite this fact, Gertsman's ideas around the complex viewer-artwork relationship remain relevant to Holbein's *Dance*; she concludes that the images allow the viewer to simultaneously engage with and distance themselves from the Dance cycles because the imagery and text, when present, serve as warnings to spectators to prepare for d/Death by absolving themselves of sins through repentance rather than being swept away by Death suddenly and unprepared like the "dancers."

Given the complex social-religious-political climate in Europe at this time, however, Holbein's *Images of Death* also served as propaganda. Christina Grammatikopoulo explains,

> The concept of performativity defines how meaning is derived through perception during the theatrical act. This implies that performativity changes depending on the content of the performance and also the character of the audience. Factors like cognitive level of the spectators, their cultural preconceptions and their emotional response can have an impact on performativity.[70]

Here, performativity refers to the ability of words and actions—and images—to define, shape, or transform social reality. In the case of *Images*, the prints themselves are the theatrical "act," and the interpretation of the "performance" is determined by the person viewing it. The factors described by Grammatikopoulo would have been particularly important when viewing *Images of Death* considering the unease in Europe from the Reformation and all people suffering from its effects. The medium choice is also telling of Holbein's desire for spectators of all "cognitive levels," to use Grammatikopoulo's

[70] Christina Grammatikopoulou, "Theatricality and Performativity: The Non-textual Elements of Performance," *interartive: a platform for contemporary art and thought*.

words, to see his message since prints were accessible to the lower classes and their imagery did not require words to understand the general messages he was promoting. In a performed lecture from 2011, Susan Foster discusses theories of empathy, a notion touched on by Gertsman, and compassion from viewers to performers based on a shared feature: the body.[71] She reflects on writings from Louis de Jaucourt, Adam Smith, and John Martin which describe the viewer's capacity to feel empathy and compassion for a performer by imagining themselves in the position of the performer,[72] an essential act for viewers of *Images of Death* to comprehend the prints the way Holbein intended.

As is typical of the *memento mori* genre, *Dance of Death* works highlight the impossibility of escaping Death through the inclusion of people from all backgrounds and identities: men and women, old and young, rich and poor. Eventually, everyone is taken by Death and what they valued in life is stripped from them in death, as exemplified by the print of "The Last Judgment" in which everyone stands naked and awaiting judgment (Figure 26). Traditionally, as Gertsman points out, "Death's equalizing force was underscored by the uniform appearance of the skeletons,"[73] their "nakedness" symbolic of the equality everyone faces upon dying. Holbein's Deaths, however, are sometimes clothed, identifying them as once being part of a particular group in life. Not only does this undermine Death's role as "The Great Equalizer," but, in prints such as "The Queen," (Figure 27) it explicitly references disparities in the social strata during life that make

[71] Linda Caruso Haviland, "Reflections on 'Kinesthetic Empathies & the Politics of Compassion,'" *SUSAN FOSTER! SUSAN FOSTER! THREE PERFORMED LECTURES*, 2011, http://danceworkbook.pcah.us/susan-foster/kinesthetic-empathies.html.

[72] Haviland.

[73] Gertsman, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages*, 179.

Death vengeful. Death in "The Queen" wears the costume of a court jester, or fool, and grabs the hand of his struggling victim while holding an hourglass in hand to show her time has run out. Though less violent than other scenes from *Images of Death*, the scene is a call-back to an earlier work of Holbein, his *Danse Macabre Initials*. In this work, for the letter "G," (Figure 28) Holbein shows the queen with her necklace being violently ripped from her neck by the jester-Death, a character that would have been her subordinate in life. This gesture not only reveals Death's contempt for its victim, implying a hatred stemming from a master-servant relationship prior to death, but also comments on the queen's lack of piety. According to Isabelle Paresys, during the Renaissance, "Fashion became one of the symbols of the deadly sin of pride because it turned Christians away from modesty and the salvation of the soul,"[74] a vice the queen and other nobles were guilty of.[75] This pairing of the queen with a Death costumed as someone of lower rank than her, specifically one she would have interacted with in life, presents Death as violent, brutal, and unforgiving, a character seeking revenge on the victim rather than being present because it is their time to die.[76] For the upper echelon viewer, prints such as "The Queen" would have resonated with them and, possibly, inspired a reflection on their own character in order to recognize that, no matter what they acquire in life, it is meaningless upon death, to Death.

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[74] Isabelle Paresys, "The Body," in *A Cultural History of Dress and Fashion in the Renaissance*, Elizabeth Currie, ed. (London, England: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 73.

[75] Winifred Schwab, "Letters Without Words? The *Danse Macabre* Initials by Hans Holbein and His Followers," in *Mixed Metaphors: The Dance Macabre in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Sophie Oosterwijk and Stefanie A. Knöll, eds. (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2011), 372.

[76] In this way, costuming, an aspect of *mise-en-scène*, is simply used to identify those in the scenes, especially when Death was clothed to send a particular message like in this scene.

The difference in how Holbein depicts nobility with Death to the lower classes with Death triggers a particular viewer response to the work, such as anger, empathy, fear, even guilt. In her lecture, Foster poses the question, "Would [viewer] 'degree and kind of empathy be different based on all the clues signaling her identity?'"[77] By outfitting Death in clothes that clearly identify it by class, occupation, or other worldly categories that lose meaning after one's life ends, d/Death is no longer an equalizer, but instead acts as a vengeance seeker. However, this only holds true for certain prints, particularly those of Death with victims from the upper class and clergy.[78] This reveals three intended viewer responses for the series: 1) empathize with Death in prints where it is shown outfitted; 2) only some people should be empathized with upon death; and 3) anyone can be sinful and those who are should not be pitied. Though Foster emphasizes identity as a means of gathering empathy, Holbein not only relies on identity—be it age, class, gender—but action to underscore who should be empathized. Returning to "The Queen," her choice to indulge her vanity is sinful and, through the action of the jester-Death, there is an implication of her having bad character, possibly evoking an unfavorable response toward her from the viewer. For "The Knight" (Figure 29) and "The Soldier," (Figure 30) men who are seen as protectors, a response of empathy and gratefulness may be exhibited, similar to that of pity for "The Child." (Figure 31)

[77] Haviland.

[78] Not all prints of Death with nobility and clergy are violent, however those that do depict violence are limited mainly to those classes. When violence is depicted outside these classes, it is for people whose roles are viewed as evil toward others, depicting a sin, or, in the cases of "The Knight" and "The Soldier," from battle.

Despite these being the seemingly intended responses, as Grammatikopoulo and Rancière explain, the exact responses to each scene would differ based on the viewer, and their reaction to each print would vary given the different characters and scenarios they are each presented through. Rancière explains, "There is the distance between artist and spectator, but there is also the distance inherent in the performance itself, in so far as it subsists, as a spectacle, an autonomous thing, between the idea of the artist and the sensation comprehension of the spectator."[79] The response from each viewer, especially within the tumultuous circumstances they lived through, would have been heavily influenced by personal experiences and thoughts, thus making the desire for a particular response obsolete. Not only is there "distance," as Rancière calls it, between Holbein and the viewer, but also between viewers, that would elicit different interpretations and reactions to *Images of Death*. Regardless, Holbein sought viewers to actively participate with his prints through reflection rather than passively view them with no reaction.[80] The use of prints as a medium, used to spread information and political messages to a wider audience, shows the power of the spectator and their opinions on social-religious-political issues like those prevalent during Holbein's time.

PERFORMANCE AND *IMAGES OF DEATH*

Throughout this chapter, I have referred to Holbein's print series as *Images of Death* rather than *Dance of Death* because, despite being recognized as part of the *danse*

[79] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, translated by Gregory Elliott, (London: Verso, 2011), 14.

[80] Andrew Quick and Richard Rushton, "Introduction Questioning Theatricality," in *Theatricality and the Arts: Film, Theatre, Art* (Edinburgh University Press, 2024), 6.

macabre tradition, it lacks the "dancing" figures seen in its predecessors. Though the Dance of Death emerged out of medieval fear and fascination with death, it is also believed to have roots in medieval theatrical and religious ceremonial performances. Scholars such as Didier Jugan and Elina Gertsman describe feast day performances and processions for which people would dress in black clothing with painted on skeletons while others portrayed individuals across all social strata, often in churchyards or cemeteries with Dance of Death frescoes present, such as that in Church of the Holy Innocents.[81] These performances mirrored the ideas presented in the murals they were performed in front of. Once it left the confines of the church however, "the [pictured] *danse macabre* could suggest ideas that lacked religious and even ethical content."[82] This was just one of many fears about immorality and religion during the period, others being related to the physical act of dance. Not only was Death a recognizable character through the earlier public murals and corresponding performance celebrations, but was seen in morality plays such as *Everyman*, which came out of the Black Death alongside the *danse macabre* tradition. Clifford Davidson explains this play is explicitly based on the Dance of Death and both the play *Everyman*, and by extension Dance imagery, made "excellent drama out of the existential facts of life at a particular point in history."[83] Death became a

[81] For more on *Dance of Death* performances, see Didier Jugan, "Le cadavre, la Mort et le revenant. Origines théâtrales de la Danse macabre: scénario et nouvelles hypotheses," *Moyen-âge* 127, no. 1 (2021):105–37; Elina Gertsman, "Pleyinge and Peyntynge: Performing the Dance of Death," *Studies in Iconography*, Vol. 27, 2006, 1-43; and Elina Gertsman, "Performing the Dance of Death," in *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages: Image, Text, Performance*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2010, 77-99.

[82] Natalie Zemon Davis, "Pictures of Death and the Reformation at Lyons," *Studies in the Renaissance* 3 (1956), 97.

[83] Clifford Davidson, *Drama and Art: An Introduction to the Use of Evidence from the Visual Arts for the Study of Early Drama* (Kalamazoo, Mich: Medieval Institute, Western Michigan University, 1977), 101.

familiar character due to its presence in both performance and visual arts, but also its physical presence on the world stage during the Black Death, however invisible it may have appeared.

Within Holbein's series, there are only three prints containing Deaths that appear to be dancing with victims: "The Old Woman," (Figure 22) "The Noble Lady," (Figure 24) and "The Expulsion." (Figure 23) The lack of dancing figures throughout the cycle is shocking given its more common title of *Dance of Death*, yet the exact reason for a lack of dancing figures remains unknown. The Renaissance was an era of study with the emergence of texts and art dating to Antiquity, and the study of the body became particularly prevalent; Holbein himself produced a great deal of figure and proportional studies.[84] The study of the body permeated many fields and, for physicians, knowing what was and was not good for the body was important. On the matter of dance, physicians had varying views on its benefits: some recommended it as exercise or a preventative treatment, others believed it helped balance mind, body, and soul, and, in some cases, only certain bodies were allowed to dance, such as children and non-pregnant women.[85]

One reason for the lack of consensus on dance in the medical field was likely a result of the "dancing plagues" that swept across Europe from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries. *Choreomania* translates to "dancing madness," a phenomenon that frequently occurred during the late Middle Ages into the Renaissance in areas where major changes

[84] See Griener and Bätschmann, "Figure and Movement, Invention and Narration," from *Hans Holbein: Revised and Expanded Second Edition*, 67-103.

[85] For more information, see Alessandro Arcangeli, "Dance and Health: The Renaissance Physicians' View," *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 18, no. 1 (2000).

or events occurred, as was the case with the Strasbourg dancing plague.[86] Leading up to 1518, Strasbourg had witnessed a series of socio-political shifts, including changes to its elite and governing bodies.[87] When people began "dancing"[88] uncontrollably, physicians were at a loss as to why the victims were afflicted since there was no discernable cause for their actions. Today, it is known *choreomania* is a psycho-social response to major events, such as socio-political shifts, but in the Renaissance, it was typically considered a divine punishment from God or the result of demonic possession, which required Church officials to cure them.[89] While these bouts of continual dancing were seen as punishments for sinning, almost all religious factions related to the Reformation viewed dance in general as "a sign of impiety, excess, and moral folly," or as capable of causing someone to commit sin.[90] Christian authors painted dance as a pagan activity, possibly due to the biblical episode of people dancing around the golden calf, an act of idolatry that showed the Israelites lack of faith in God.[91] By using this example and emphasizing the use of dance—rather than the actual sin of idol worship—in a well-known ritual betrayal of God, the reasoning for dance as an unacceptable activity is understandable. It is, however,

[86] Kathryn Emily Dickason, "Decadence in the Late Middle Ages: The Case of *Choreomania*," in *Medieval Theatre Performance: Actors, Dancers, Automata and Their Audiences*, edited by Philip Butterworth and Katie Normington, NED-New Edition, Boydell & Brewer, 2017, 141; Lynneth J. Miller, "Divine Punishment or Disease? Medieval and Early Modern Approaches to the 1518 Strasbourg Dancing Plague," *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 35, no. 2 (2017).

[87] Miller, 150.

[88] While described as such, those afflicted with *choreomania* were not truly dancing. In reality, victims begin flailing about in hysteria.

[89] Miller, 150.

[90] Kathryn Dickason, *Ringleaders of Redemption: How Medieval Dance Became Sacred*, (New York: Oxford University Press US, 2021), 233.

[91] Exodus 32.

an extremely weak argument considering the Bible does not explicitly state dancing is a sin, but rather has several instances in which dance is used to worship God, such as in 2 Samuel, which says, "And David danced before the LORD with all his might."[92] Alessandro Arcangeli explains dance was often associated with gluttony and lust since the act of men and women dancing together often signaled the desire to court one another.[93] While this was only true in some cases—dance was not solely used in order to find a partner, but was often used to communicate and forge relationships in places like the court[94]—the potential for sin was more important to acknowledge than anything else for religious leaders. With his *Images of Death* having minimal dancing figures, perhaps these shifting views on dance and the body influenced Holbein's artistic choices and he took the socio-religious controversies surrounding dance into consideration while designing his scenes, choosing to show little and less articulated dancing forms than was traditional.

Despite the socio-religious debates surrounding dance, the activity remained prevalent across Europe, especially within the court. The court was the political center in which the ruling elite was based, making rank-based elitism and hostility amongst political enemies common. Dance was often utilized publicly and privately to navigate the political battlefield of court life, disguised as simple entertainment and social

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[92] 2 Samuel 6:14.

[93] Alessandro Arcangeli, "Moral Views on Sin," in *Dance, Spectacle, and the Body Politick, 1250-1750*, edited by Jennifer Nevile (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 285.

[94] For more information about the sociality of dance, see Anca Giurchescu, "The Power of Dance and Its Social and Political Uses," *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, Vol. 33 (2001), 109-121, and Mark Franko, "The Political Intertext: *Civil Conversatione* (Social Intercourse)." In *The Dancing Body in Renaissance Choreography: Kinetic Theatricality and Social Interaction*, Anthem Press, 2022, 85-100.

engagement. While those dancing at a ball could engage in private conversation (depending on the dance), there was also the potential for subtle establishment of power and control based on what was danced and who one's partner was. In the French court specifically, dance was a fixture, obsessively so; Margaret McGowan relates, during François I's reign from 1515-1547,[95] court entertainment was utilized often, for entertainment certainly, but also "as a deliberate strategy" to keep court members too busy to conspire against the crown.[96] At court, dance was both politically and socially driven—attending events allowed for the establishment of alliances that could lead to an increase in status, while hosting events helped maintain power and control. Mark Franko explains the key to these large gatherings was civil conversation, or social intercourse. Using Renaissance courtesy/civility texts, he explains the point of social interactions during the Renaissance era was to see what could be gained from the other person.[97] Franko writes, "Civility's theory of social interaction is the intertext for the dancing body's effect on the spectator,"[98] showing dance was used as a tool to persuade onlookers one was worthy of engaging with. According to these civility texts, civility and conversation requires observing bodily cues—expression, gestures, posture—and

[95] It is suggested by some scholars the print "The King" (Figure 12) depicts François I given the time the prints were created and location they were to be initially published.

[96] Margaret M. McGowan, *Dance in the Renaissance: European Fashion, French Obsession*, New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2008, 128.

[97] Mark Franko, "The Political Intertext: *Civil Conversatione* (Social Intercurse)," *The Dancing Body in Renaissance Choreography: Kinetic Theatricality and Social Interaction*, Anthem Press, 2022, 91. It is unlikely this was the case for **every** social interaction, considering social interactions included those with a spouse, children, friends, etc., however social dynamics then differed from today, so this is not really clear.

[98] Franko, 86.

controlling one's own body to effectively navigate social relationships.[99] In other words, the dancing, or, more generally, moving, body was a form of non-verbal communication, a reminder that "actions speak louder than words."

As court festivities were held constantly in Renaissance France, social intercourse was a frequent and inevitable occurrence among those in attendance. Just as Franko concludes dance can stand in or accompany words as part of social intercourse, Anca Giurchescu determines dance **is** social interaction.[100] She emphasizes that dance is inherently social, thus should be understood "as a culturally determined 'program' where social, historical and environmental factors interlock with the physical, psychological and mental features of the individual."[101] This is echoed by Franko, who similarly describes dance as having "already engendered certain expectations that convert the otherwise casual onlooker into an audience. Furthermore, the mutual expectations of interlocutors in their social performance will reveal a strategy of interaction inherent in the dance."[102] However, McGowan comments that ballets and other choreographed entertainment at court were riddled with socio-political ideology in the form of allegorical representations. Such events, then, were not solely for celebratory or entertainment purposes, but could be exploited by attendees and hosts as needed to send political messages, maneuver amongst enemies, and help rivals find fault with one another.[103] So, while there may have been

[99] Franko, 90.

[100] Anca Giurchescu, "The Power of Dance and Its Social and Political Uses," *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, Vol. 33 (2001), 109.

[101] Giurchescu, 109.

[102] Franko, 87.

[103] McGowan, 130.

specific intentions behind the dances performed, there was room for all parties involved in the social intercourse these festivities created to utilize them as they saw fit to gain what they truly sought: glory and power.

Despite the knowledge of dance history, use of dance, and debates the activity caused during Holbein's life, the true effect it had on Holbein's work is left a mystery. However, the theatrical elements and effects of the prints should not be ignored. To completely ignore this history in relation to Holbein's *Images of Death*, as has been the case thus far, is ignorant and complacent. By emphasizing Holbein's unique position as an artist during the Reformation, scholars have failed to question other possibilities for artistic decisions he made. While there may be no explicit evidence for the lack of dancing forms in *Images of Death*, which was expected due to their presence in previous *Dance of Death* works, Holbein's tendency to reflect the surrounding contemporary social-religious-political context—in this case, changing feelings, interpretations, and uses of dance—in his works is likely to have impacted the overall decisions made in this series, as well.

Chapter 2: *The Ambassadors*

For theater critic Elinor Fuchs, understanding the world of a play is the first step to understanding the text as a whole. While *The Ambassadors* (Figure 6) is not a play or a piece of text, the questions Fuchs poses in "EF's Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play" help the viewer "read" the painting and helps reveal its theatrical elements. Two men stand on a geometrically patterned floor in front of a green patterned curtain on either side of a two-tiered étagère covered in objects. The top shelf is draped with a fabric, upon which sits a globe, a small pillar that resembles a candle, and other elements that are unidentifiable to the uninformed viewer, but which can be associated with scientific and architectural endeavors. On the lower shelf sits another globe laid on its side, a small book held open by a square (the L-shaped instrument), calipers (a mathematical compass), a lute with a single broken string, a case of flutes with an empty slot, and an open music book. Under the shelving unit lies an upside-down black lute case. The man to the left of the shelves is dressed in a large fur-lined cape and black coat over a reddish-pink satin tunic with slits containing white fabric or fur. He has a black cap with a skull pendant on it, wears a gold chain with a decorative medallion, and a gold dagger in his right hand. Above his right shoulder, half covered by the curtain, hangs a crucifix. The man on the right of the painting is dressed in a long, dark brown patterned robe over a barely visible black shirt with a white collar. He wears a black angular hat and holds brown gloves in his right hand. Both men have facial hair, and they lean toward the shelves, resting their closest arms atop it. At the bottom center, painted at an extreme angle, is an unidentifiable figure, revealed to be a skull once the viewer moves from

directly in front of the painting to the right side. The space in which everything is positioned appears to be interior, possibly confined based on the separation from whatever lies behind the curtain, however the space in front of the men is also unknown. Time appears to stand still; there is no indication of movement, and everything looks perfectly staged, though there is no specificity of time. The tone of the image is simultaneously somber, stoic, contemplative. The men are dressed in dark, heavy clothing, giving a sense of chilliness in the room, and they wear matching expressions that show their thoughtful states.[104]

The many elements in *The Ambassadors* are based on the extreme turmoil throughout Europe at the time. It is a double portrait of ambassadors and acquaintances[105] Jean de Dinteville (left) and Georges de Selve (right), whose ages are indicated in the painting on items associated with each of them, respectively: Jean's age is on his dagger, stating he is 29, and Georges' on the book he leans on, indicating he is 24. In 1533, Jean was a French ambassador staying in London on behalf of François I to maintain good relations with Henry VIII and attend the coronation of Anne Boleyn. This is a significant detail since the geometric floor matches that of Westminster Abbey where the coronation took place, though the painted space does not match the interior of the church. As such, this is an imagined space full of real objects, materials, and figures, but is not based on a

[104] The series of observations is influenced by Elinor Fuchs' guiding questions in "EF's Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play," *Theater (New Haven, Conn.)* 34, no. 2 (2004): 5–9.

[105] The exact nature of the relationship between Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve is unknown. It is widely accepted that they were friends, mainly based on the idea that Jean de Dinteville commissioned the painting, an unconfirmed fact, and a letter to Jean's brother stating Georges visited him while in London. Thus, it has long been assumed they were friends, however some scholars, such as Jennifer Nelson, state this supposed closeness to be unfounded. Hagi Kenaan, on the other hand, concludes they may have been secret lovers based on the style of the painting. See Hagi Kenaan, "The 'Unusual Character' of Holbein's 'Ambassadors'," *Artibus et Historiae* 23, no. 46 (2002): 61-75.

real event or specific moment. This is further supported by the fact almost every object, specifically the books and scientific instruments, can be identified by who made it or what is on it.[106] The way in which Holbein references specific historical events and creations through the staged objects shows his dedication to establishing the social, political, and religious world of *The Ambassadors* for the viewer.

This chapter covers the theatrical elements of *The Ambassadors*, first by explaining how portraiture is essentially the creation of characters rather than being true representations of the subjects, which includes how they and the rest of the scene are staged. According to Michael Fried, portraiture is inherently theatrical since it is made to be viewed, much like a play or a film.[107] For *The Ambassadors*, the spectator is of great importance. As Quick and Rushton explain, "By proclaiming itself 'theatrical,'… [an artwork] will be performing a deconstruction of the real, one might say; it will be forcing us not merely to question the nature of art or performance by way of its theatricality; it will also be asking us to question the nature of reality itself."[108] This leads to active spectating, as it forces the viewer to not only see the art, but reflect on it: its nature and reality, nature and "real-life." Holbein takes this one step further by having the viewer quite literally be active through physical interaction with the artwork. This use of

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[106] For more on the specifics of the scientific instruments, see Elly Dekker and Kristen Lippincott, "The Scientific Instruments in Holbein's Ambassadors: A Re-Examination," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 62 (1999): 93-125. For detailed information on the various objects and figures, see Jennifer Nelson, *Disharmony of the Spheres: The Europe of Holbein's* Ambassadors (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019).

[107] Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 109.

[108] Andrew Quick and Richard Rushton, "Introduction: Questioning Theatricality," in *Theatricality and the Arts: Film, Theatre, Art* (Edinburgh University Press, 2024), 2.

movement leads to the viewer becoming a character within the work, a performative spectator, not only observing Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve, but being observed by them and Death as well.

CREATING AND STAGING THE CHARACTERS

An important aspect in *The Ambassadors* related to theater is the curtain. Curtains are used to block things from view and, in theater, a curtain typically hides the stage, set, and actors prior to a show, so as not to ruin the surprise to come. A curtain in paintings is usually seen in one of two positions: open to present something, such as in Hugo van der Goes *Adoration of the Shepherds* (c. 1480), where two green curtain panels are held open to reveal the nativity (Figure 32); or closed in order to hide something, which seems to be the case in *The Ambassadors*. Since the curtain covers part of the crucifixion in the upper left corner (Figure 33), which is already hard to see due to its small size, the viewer senses that something is being hidden from them, something that will only become visible once the curtain is removed or pulled back, an action that will never happen. But this begs the question: what lies behind the curtain and why do we (only) see what is in front of it? During the Renaissance, it was standard practice for people to present themselves in a not entirely forthcoming manner in their portraits. While these portraits are not wholly inaccurate, they tend to overemphasize the positive or highlight those traits which the sitter wants to be remembered by. Clark Hulse finds the reading of a portrait to "reduc[e] or eliminat[e] the play of invention, fictionality, or indeterminacy

whose disclosure has been the ultimate goal of reading,"[109] but portraiture has historically been referred to as unrealistic. In "The Eye of the Artist: Hans Holbein's Theory of Art," Jürgen Müller explains Erasmus' rather negative view of portraiture despite his friendship with Holbein, describing portraits as "dead images" due to their inability to do more than represent a person, lacking the distinct living quality a real person has.[110] Using the words of Anne T. Woollett, it was habit to "construct a patron's identity"[111] in Renaissance portraiture, a task Holbein was adept at; the story of King Henry VIII's outrage upon seeing Anne of Cleves in-person is well known, as he found the portrait Holbein made of her far more beautiful than the woman herself. (Figure 3)

Several of Holbein's portraits include a curtain behind the sitter, particularly green curtains, which, I argue, serve a more important and intentional purpose than being a mere backdrop.[112] Emmanuelle Hénin describes the curtain as "a marker of representation."[113] In other words, the curtain's presence signals the work as representative rather than completely truthful depictions of the subjects in front of it. Both Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve were French ambassadors. However, when

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[109] Clark Hulse, "Reading Painting: Holbein, Cromwell, Wyatt," in *Early Modern Visual Culture: Representation, Race and Empire in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 151.

[110] Jürgen Müller, "The Eye of the Artist: Hans Holbein's Theory of Art," *Studies in the History of Art* 60 (2001), 141.

[111] Anne T. Woollett, "The Pictorial Eloquence of Hans Holbein the Younger," in *Holbein: Capturing Character* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2021), 14.

[112] I do not go into the possible significance of the color green here, though this is a subject of debate among art historians as a green curtain is often found in early modern visual art.

[113] Emmanuelle Hénin, "Parrhasius and the Stage Curtain: Theatre, Metapainting and the Idea of Representation in the Seventeenth Century," in *Theatricality in Early Modern Art and Architecture*, Caroline van Eck and Stijn Bussels, eds. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 50.

viewed through the lens of theatricality, *The Ambassadors* can be understood as illustrating the two men in a specific manner, as characters on a stage for society to see; the curtain works as a mask for the subjects' true identities or selves, representing the characters they play in daily life. Additionally, the double portrait of Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve takes place in a fictional, or invented, space with an anamorphic skull between their feet, immediately revealing the lack of reality in the painting. While Hulse concedes there is a "constructed nature" to Holbein's portraiture—and portraiture more broadly—he does not agree to them being metaphorical or representative the way Müller describes them.[114] However, the heavily constructed nature of Holbein's portraiture, particularly *The Ambassadors*, reflects the concept of *mise-en-scène* in theater and film.[115]

Mise-en-scène is the staging, or composition, of a scene in theater and film productions, which includes placement of the actors, set design, lighting, and costuming, among other elements. In both the performing and visual arts, everything is intentional—the position of figures, inclusion of properties, often called props, color and design of costumes, and other elements are chosen for a reason. In *The Ambassadors*, there are innumerable things to observe that add to the story of the painting. Jennifer Nelson describes the objects on the étagère (Figure 35) as "display[ing] themselves to the

[114] Hulse, 151.

[115] Though not necessarily more constructed in terms of making the subjects more flattering or being in an imagined space, the depth and detail of the constructed scene is what makes *The Ambassadors* exceptional for a portrait at this time. The painting is already unusual for the fact that double portraits are typically not full body images, and because the anamorphosis is so out of place in the portrait. In addition to this, Holbein carefully and extensively designed the setting surrounding his subjects. A comparable portrait in this regard is another by Holbein from 1532, depicting Georg Giese (Figure 34). While clearly very constructed, there is far less going on compared to *The Ambassadors*.

viewer almost as if human, potentially communicating meaning relevant to the viewer's world."[116] Each item is extremely detailed; their realism, not only in how they look but what they represent, expose their importance to the world of the 1533 observer. Each of these items chronicles some form of disharmonious existence amongst themselves, mirroring the unrest that had pervaded Europe during the Reformation: a snapped lute string, a case missing a flute, scientific instruments with inaccurate displays of space and time, a crucifix with indeterminable facing, an unknown blurred form which only becomes clear at the expense of distorting the rest of the painting (Figure 36).[117] In plays during this period, "properties exist[ed] not only to mark identity but also to mark time and settings, to provide exposition or forward action, to serve as a symbolic reminder of a key theme or issue, or to further a moment of spectacle."[118] The objects on the étagère meet all of these criteria: the various globes and instruments to tell time express important dates, times, and locations relevant to these ambassadors; they provide exposition, or context, for the world outside the painting, reminding the viewer of the chaos occurring across Europe through their disharmonious display, a somewhat unsettling notion because of their seemingly precise layout; and they draw further attention to the social-religious-political spectacles Jean and Georges found themselves wrapped up in. These props are additionally staged to reflect the humanists' *quadrivium*,

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[116] Jennifer Nelson, *Disharmony of the Spheres: The Europe of Holbein's* Ambassadors (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019), 112.

[117] For an extensive explanation of the disharmony present within *The Ambassadors*, see Jennifer Nelson, *Disharmony of the Spheres: The Europe of Holbein's* Ambassadors.

[118] Fran Teague, "Properties," in *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, Vol. 1, Bruce R. Smith and Katherine Rowe, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 102.

the four subjects most emphasized in humanist education and practices.[119] Both men would have undertaken these subjects—music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy—as hobbies, having previously been educated in them, connecting them mentally, emotionally, and socially. These props work not only to establish the pair as ambassadors, but as knowledgeable, well-educated characters.

Another part of *mise-en-scène* includes staging and decorating the bodies of the actors to depict the characters well. Antony Eastwood explains, "in every case, our record of any given mise-en-scène comes second hand – either through texts or images…This necessarily imposes a filter on the event and projects it through the perspective of the writer, artist, or commissioner."[120] This mirrors Harry Berger, Jr.'s explanation of the pose as part of crafting or maintaining a specific social identity, one that can be questioned by onlookers. Berger writes, "portraits can be viewed as imitations or likenesses, not of individuals only, but also of their acts of posing."[121] He continues by describing portraiture as fabrications: "what it fabricates are poses; and poses as self-presentations generate or appeal to received ideas of personal identity that the very performance and representation of the pose—either by sitter or by painter or by both—may throw into question."[122] In other words, the deliberate posing and staging we see in portraits, both of

[119] While this is a continually discussed and seemingly accepted interpretation of the scientific instruments, there are scholars who offer a different understanding. See Kenneth Charlton, "Holbein's 'Ambassadors' and Sixteenth-Century Education," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 21, no. 1 (1960), 99-109.

[120] Antony Eastwood, "Staging as Metaphor: The King's Body and the Theatricality of Power," in *Staging the Ruler's Body in Medieval Culture: A Comparative Perspective*, edited by Manuela Studer-Karlen, Michele Bacci, and Gohar Grigoryan, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2023), 137.

[121] Harry Berger, *Fictions of the Pose: Rembrandt against the Italian Renaissance* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2000), 5.

[122] Berger, 7.

bodies and objects associated with the characters, is meant to immortalize the subject in a particular manner, but the performative nature of social identity—through gestures, actions, expressions, and words, both painted and not—allow us, the viewer, to form our own opinions of a portrait's subject, just as Rancière says we do with other forms of performance. In the case of *The Ambassadors*, Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve stand proudly as secular and religious ambassadors, respectively, of France, surrounded by objects and a space which emphasize their efforts and accomplishments as diplomats.[123] They are dressed elegantly, draped in fine fabrics and furs, and adorned appropriately for their respective statuses; they are, effectively, displayed as immovable French diplomats dedicated to securing the stability and harmony of Europe amongst the chaos and disharmony it faced. The combination of the curtain, their poses, and the abundance of specific objects, however, allow us to question if what we see of and about Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve is true or simply a performance. The placements of the men's bodies also leave us questioning the possible presence of a third character in their scene: the spectator.

THE PERFORMATIVE SPECTATOR

When viewing *The Ambassadors* by standing directly in front of it, Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve stand in a way suggestive of a three-way conversation: each has an arm resting on the étagère between them, angling them slightly towards each other while remaining open to interact with who they look toward, the viewer. Unlike in paintings

[123] Nelson, 122.

such as Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656) and Édouard Manet's *Un Bar aux Folies Bergère* (1882), there is no mirror to indicate the main subject(s) looking at something or someone other than the spectator (Figures 37 and 38). This observing of the observer rather than looking beyond the space is further made clear due to the inclusion of the anamorphic skull that reveals itself only when the viewer moves from the front of the image and observes it from a different position (Figure 39).[124] In the *Stage, Setting, Mood* exhibition (2016) of the Museum of New Mexico, a section titled "To Be or Not to Be," in reference to the famous monologue from William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, featured "artwork employing the skull as a device for reflecting on both mortality and judgments of morality."[125] Though preceding Shakespeare, *The Ambassadors* would have fit well in this section of the exhibit as it falls into the 16th-century portraiture trend of men with skulls. The way Holbein includes the skull and reflections on mortality is done in a unique and innovative way: rather than the subjects of the painting directly reflecting on mortality—neither of the ambassadors can even see the skull—it is the viewer who is forced to do so, specifically through movement. They are not only forced to witness and reflect on mortality, but the lack of unity of the world the characters both in- and outside of the painted scene face.

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[124] Edgar R. Samuel suggests the skull was to be viewed through a glass tube based on the fact that, through the glass, the skull is proportional and lacking the distortion that remains even when viewed from the oblique position accepted as the "correct" viewing position: the distention of the parietal lobe. Samuel argues this is a better way to view the skull in focus, as it aligns the skull with other objects in the painting and allows the spectator to continue viewing it from the front, preventing the distortion of the rest of the image which occurs when viewing from the right. For more, see Edgar R. Samuel, "Death in the Glass – A New View of Holbein's 'Ambassadors'," *The Burlington Magazine* 105, no. 727 (1963), 436-41.

[125] Carmen Vendelin, "Stage, Setting, Mood," *El Palacio Magazine* (2016), https://elpalacio.org/2016/03/stage-setting-mood/.

Holbein's use of anamorphosis was a way of controlling both the spectator's view[126] and their entire body, making them part of the world of *The Ambassadors* by choreographing their movement, to force them to confront the truth that life is followed by death and none of their worldly objects or roles will be of significance then. Jurgis Baltrušaitis describes the "special effects" of the skull as a theatrical element which likens the painting to a two act stage play, stating, "He conceived his *Vexierbild* (picture puzzle) in terms of theatre, with a change of scene and décor as in a dramatic spectacle."[127] He explained the first act takes place when viewing the painting from the entrance of the room—which is unknown[128]—in the Château de Polisy where Jean de Dinteville lived, and the second act occurring while the viewer begins to exit the room from the door at the right but, at the last moment, looks towards the painting and the image of the skull is revealed.[129] He writes:

> *The Mystery of the Two Ambassadors* is in two Acts. *Act One* is played when the spectator enters by the main door and finds himself a certain distance away from the two nobles, who appear at the back of the stage…Our visitor advances in order to have a closer look. The scene becomes even more realistic as he approaches, but the strange object [at their feet] becomes increasingly enigmatic. Disconcerted, he withdraws by the right-hand door, the only one open, and this is *Act Two*. As he enters the next room, he turns his head to throw a final glance at the picture, and everything becomes clear: the visual contraction causes the rest of the scene to disappear completely and the hidden figure to be revealed. Instead of human splendour, he sees a skull. The personages and all their scientific

[126] Olivia Smith, "Unstill Life: the Use of Illusion in Hans Holbein's The Ambassadors," from *Cognitive Confusions: Dreams, Delusions and Illusions in Early Modern Culture*. Ita Mac Carthy, Kirsti Sellevold, and Olivia Smith, eds, NED-New edition, Modern Humanities Research Association, 2016, 166.

[127] Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Anamorphic Art*, Cambridge (England: Chadwyck-Healey, 1977), 104.

[128] Little is known about exactly where and how the painting was to be displayed, which accounts for the many proposed ideas by scholars.

[129] Smith, 171.

> paraphernalia vanish, and in their place rises the symbol of the End. The play is over.[130]

This explicit description of the painting—and even life itself—as a play being performed shows the theatrical nature of Holbein's work. The fact that the viewer has to move from one point to another in order to see both "Acts" indicates his desire to incorporate the viewer into the work, to have them take on an active role in the performance, forcing them to preview the play of life. Smith describes Holbein's bodily control over the spectator as similar to a puppet master over his puppets,[131] giving the spectator simultaneous roles as audience member and performer: when viewing the painting from the front, we are the audience, watching a performance on the stage and having no access to behind-the-scenes, which hides behind the curtain. However, once we move to view the skull properly, we become the observed, the skull views us, blurring the line between viewer and viewed as we replace Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve as the performers. While the painted actors stand still, their insistent gazes point towards the viewer, suggesting that, while they cannot move themselves, they are aware what lies in wait upon the audience's change in position.

Though Baltrušaitis claims the painting was placed "level or slightly above the floor"[132] in an open room, research using Computer Aided Design (CAD) discovered two more angles from which to view the skull in perspective, leading Vaughan Hart and Joe Robson to speculate *The Ambassadors* was hung on a staircase with a balcony-hallway

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[130] Baltrušaitis, 104-105.

[131] Smith, 167.

[132] Baltrušaitis, 104.

that allowed for additional viewing options that show the skull undistorted (Figure 40).[133] While it was originally believed looking from the right side slightly below the skull is the only position from which it becomes undistorted,[134] Hart and Robson found it could also be viewed "from the right hand side above the skull."[135] When observing the painting from this angle (Figure 41), likely seen while descending the staircase—or maybe looking back, like Baltrušaitis believes the viewer to be compelled to do?—Hart and Robson note the seemingly insignificant fold in the tablecloth, seen when viewed from the front, becoming highly symbolic when viewed from a different position. From the new angle, the crease aligns to and visually unifies with the skull, hymn book, lute, and *apians torqutum* (which looks more like a candle), turning the fold into a purposeful decision to allude to an altar-like scene.[136] This reveals a brand-new meaning to certain elements of the painting, some of which, like the fold in the tablecloth, went unnoticed and was seen as unimportant.

The second newly discovered angle, below the skull from the left side (Figure 42), exposes similarly unknown, but significant, readings of the work. When viewed from

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[133] Vaughan Hart and Joe Robson, "Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1533): A Computer View of Renaissance Perspective Illusion," *Computers and the History of Art* 8, no. 2 (1999), 1. For exact viewing angles, see Hart and Robson, 5. This image is from the article. The theory of the staircase and balcony-hallway is unconfirmed by other evidence, and is contested by other scholars, including Susan Foister, Ashok Roy, and Martin Wyld.

[134] Mary Hervey and Edgar R. Samuel have suggested other means through which to see the skull undistorted, but they are not as widely accepted or known as viewing from the lower right corner. For more information on the other viewing possibilities, see Edgar R. Samuel, "Death in the Glass – A New View of Holbein's 'Ambassadors'," *The Burlington Magazine* 105, no. 727 (1963), 436-41.

[135] Hart and Robson, 5-6. This image is from the article.

[136] Hart and Robson, 9. Though a distinct connection to a particular element is unknown, Jeanette Zwingenberger suggests there is importance to the fold when viewed frontally, holding religious connotations often related to the Virgin Mary. See Zwingenberger, *The Shadow of Death in the Work of Hans Holbein the Younger* (London: Parkstone Press, 1999), 100.

this angle, Jean de Dinteville is distorted to resemble a cross, with his shoulder forming the horizontal beam and his legs, which blur together, to be the vertical one. This, along with the Westminster Abbey floor mosaic, crucifix above his shoulder, and skull at his feet—reminiscent of Golgotha, the "place of skull"—further reinforces the Christian context and church-like setting seen from the other viewing points.[137] It is important for this symbolism to be found in Jean de Dinteville, the secular ambassador, rather than Georges de Selve, a religious ambassador, as Georges was not in England as a diplomat, but merely to visit Jean, who was on an actual diplomatic mission, a fact the painting's title, *The Ambassadors*, fails to clarify.[138] Hart and Robson also see this choice as Holbein emphasizing "the legitimacy of the ambassador's mission, which most likely sought religious harmony and tolerance."[139] What this study reveals are Holbein's extreme use of detail, methodological approaches to, and mastery of painting, but also his desire to control, or choreograph, the spectator's body in relation to the work. To see all of these hidden details and gain several readings of *The Ambassadors*, the viewer must interact with the work; they cannot remain stationary in front of the painting, but need to move the way Holbein intended them to.

Using Baltrušaitis' interpretation of the painting as a play and Hart and Robson's evidence of more than two angles from which the painting can be observed, perhaps it is more accurate to liken *The Ambassadors* to a non-linear five-act play: *The Mystery of the*

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[137] Hart and Robson, 9-10.

[138] Note the painting's title is not original and comes from the information known about the subjects long after it was made.

[139] Hart and Robson, 10.

Two Ambassadors is in five acts, presented in a non-linear order. *Act One* is played when the spectator stands at the base of the staircase, prior to starting her ascent. Here, she sees a distorted figure, a man, with a skull next to his foot and unidentifiable objects to his left. Before climbing the steps, the spectator notices the man's resemblance to a cross, the geometric tiles of Westminster Abbey, and the skull at the foot of the "cross," reminiscent of Christ's crucifixion at Golgotha. Compelled to see the painting undistorted, she begins her ascent. Pausing briefly in front of the painting while on the stairs does not reveal much about the image other than the presence of another man, who they are, and what lies between them. This is *Act Two*: Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve each rest an arm on an étagère covered with astronomical, religious, mathematical, musical, and cultural artifacts. The initially perceived cross is gone, revealed to be Jean de Dinteville, and the skull is now distorted, appearing as a smear at the men's feet. The spectator continues her climb. With a final glance over her left shoulder,[140] *Act Three* places the spectator in a scene where the skull aligns to items on the table which are distorted in a way that simulates an altar waiting to be used, leading her to recall the earlier (perceived) presence of a cross. Moving towards the wall to see from a sharper angle, the "altar" disappears, leaving only the skull and the spectator, the dead and the living, a confrontation signaling "the End." But this is only *Act Four*, as the staircase turns into a balcony-hallway from which to see the painting a final time. Once again inspecting the image from the front, the spectator comes face-to-face with its subjects. Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve appear acutely aware of the viewer, breaking the fourth

[140] Hart and Robson's evidence require the painting to be situated on a wall to the left of a staircase for the additional viewing angles to be found.

wall that is the surface of the wood *The Ambassadors* is painted on, to observe the person observing them. An actual crucifix is revealed in the upper left corner and the skull again becomes a blur, simultaneously confirming and confusing the religious interpretations of the painting due to the inability to see all of its elements at once. With nowhere else to view the painting from, *Act Five* comes to a close, and the play ends.[141]

Unlike a standard performance, this proposed five-act production places the audience in motion while the performers—Jean de Dinteville, Georges de Selve, and, arguably, Death—remain stationary. Yet, their presence remains due to the intense observation of the viewer each one engages in. As stated earlier, Jean and Georges are staged to break the fourth wall: they stare out at the viewer as if waiting for her to deliver her line. The same goes for the skull, Death, who, when caught at the correct angle, gazes at the viewer despite its lack of eyes. In this production, the painted performers are staged but unmoving, while the physical, fleshy performers are choreographed "off-stage," off-canvas, their movement controlled by Holbein without their knowledge until after the performance ends. For *The Ambassadors*, this choreographed part of the performance is when the viewer becomes the performative spectator, an intellectually and physically active participant in the work. I use the word "choreographed" to describe the intentional

[141] This interpretation, just like Jurgis Baltrušaitis' and Vaughan Hart and Joe Robson's, is speculative and subjective. It heavily relies on Hart and Robson's claim the painting could have hung in a stairway while utilizing Baltrušaitis' idea of the artwork as a play. However, this remains a highly plausible reading of *The Ambassadors*, even despite its dismissal of the most well-known viewing angle recognized by The National Gallery, where the painting currently resides: the lower right corner. Despite the anamorphosis being revealed from this angle, there is no evidence of a specific narrative or new understanding of the work being discovered upon viewing from this position, as is revealed by the others discussed, so I chose to leave it out of the presented reading of the painting. Additionally, I do not comment on the fact this can all be viewed in reverse upon the spectator's descent from the stairs since they have already seen "the play at work." However, it is worth noting that, while this would not necessarily change the interpretation of the painting, the non-linear format supports a reverse reading/viewing.

movement Holbein required of the painting's viewers. With so little known about the exact hanging location of the image in the Château de Polisy, there is no distinct, pre-determined choreography, or movement pattern, but there is no way to view all elements of the painting without moving one's body from one point to another. As such, I loosely define choreography as intentional movement designed by an artist as part of a performance, with either pre-determined or improvised movement. In this case, the choreography is improvised given Holbein did not leave behind any known instructions for how to hang and observe the painting, nor has the painting always been displayed the same way.

Though an innovative, yet arguably unsettling, choice on Holbein's part, this shows that where and how an artwork is displayed is essential in revealing its theatricality. With the inclusion of the anamorphosis, *The Ambassadors* would have needed to be exhibited in a space and at a height where the skull could eventually be seen for what it is. Additionally, the painting is life-size, standing at six feet, nine inches by six feet, ten inches, making the viewer's interaction with Jean, Georges, and Death feel more intimate, as if actually standing among and interacting with actors on a stage, becoming a performer herself.[142] To hang it too high would remove the conversational manner and lead the figures to loom above the viewer, appearing larger than life rather than of normal height. Whether its position is how Jurgis Baltrušaitis or Vaughan Hart and Joe Robson postulate, or another way entirely, is unclear, however the details of the

[142] This does not conflict with the definition of theatricality I present in the introduction. In fact, I think it upholds the definition since it is a physical connection to performance, something I argue indicates theatricality. Spectatorship and performance are both integral elements of theatricality, so the fact that Holbein has the audience double as a performer fits into this larger concept well.

painting—particularly the skull, but those suggested by Hart and Robson as well—would never be revealed if simply hung at random. This is perhaps what makes Hart and Robson's study so compelling; as Fuchs' writes, "We must make the assumption that in the world of the play there are no accidents. Nothing occurs 'by chance,' not even chance,"[143] and, though *The Ambassadors* is not a literal play, Baltrušaitis and I show it can be read as one. As such, the additional viewing points and perceived messages which they divulge cannot, and should not, be ignored, for they reveal the importance of space to an artwork's theatricality and the spectator as an active part of Holbein's spectacle.

[143] Fuchs, 6.

Conclusion

In this text, I have analyzed Hans Holbein the Younger's *Images of Death* and *The Ambassadors* through the lens of theatricality to reveal the shared fundamental techniques used in both visual and performing arts that shape meaning and audience reception. This thesis highlights how Holbein's prints and paintings, while works of visual art, employ *mise-en-scène*, characterization, and symbolism in ways similar to performance, thereby encouraging spectators to engage as active participants in his spectacles both intellectually and physically. The introduction situates Holbein within the cultural and intellectual contexts of early 16th century Europe, particularly the humanist and reformist circles of Basle and England. It highlights how his artistic training, patrons, and religious environment informed his sensitivity to themes of mortality, morality, and power, establishing the foundation for interpreting two of Holbein's best-known works as reflections of broader cultural debates circulating at the time. The introduction also presents the theoretical frameworks of theatricality and spectatorship, explaining their relevance to *Images of Death* and *The Ambassadors*. By placing Holbein's art in dialogue with performance theories and study, this thesis shows that interdisciplinary approaches can uncover new interpretations of well-established works.

Chapter 1 looks to *Images* or *Dance of Death*, emphasizing the woodcuts as both devotional and didactic performances. The chapter shows how the series stages encounters between Death and individuals from all social ranks, blending moral critique with theatrical spectacle, and introduces Death as not only a symbolic figure, but a key performer in the play *Life*. This framing underscores the performative nature of Holbein's

religious imagery, as it both instructs and intellectually engages viewers through its dramatic contrasts. The chapter also provides a brief overview of relevant cultural perceptions of and debates over performance in Holbein's time to show he was culturally responsive to more than just politics and religion. Chapter 2 offers a close reading of *The Ambassadors*, focusing on the painting's staging, symbolism, and choreographed reflections on mortality. The chapter highlights how the composition resembles a theatrical stage, with figures and objects arranged to depict questionable social identities, and requires viewers to become performative spectators through physical and intellectual means to decode the work's messages. These analyses of *Images of Death* and *The Ambassadors* reveal that Holbein's art occupies a liminal space between visual and performing arts, with both works engaging spectators in performative acts of interpretation, enabling a deeper understanding of visual art not as static representation, but as dynamic interaction between image and viewer. Ultimately, the thesis concludes that approaching visual and performing arts as related fields of study can lead to new insights into Holbein's artistry and demonstrates the value of interdisciplinary research more broadly.

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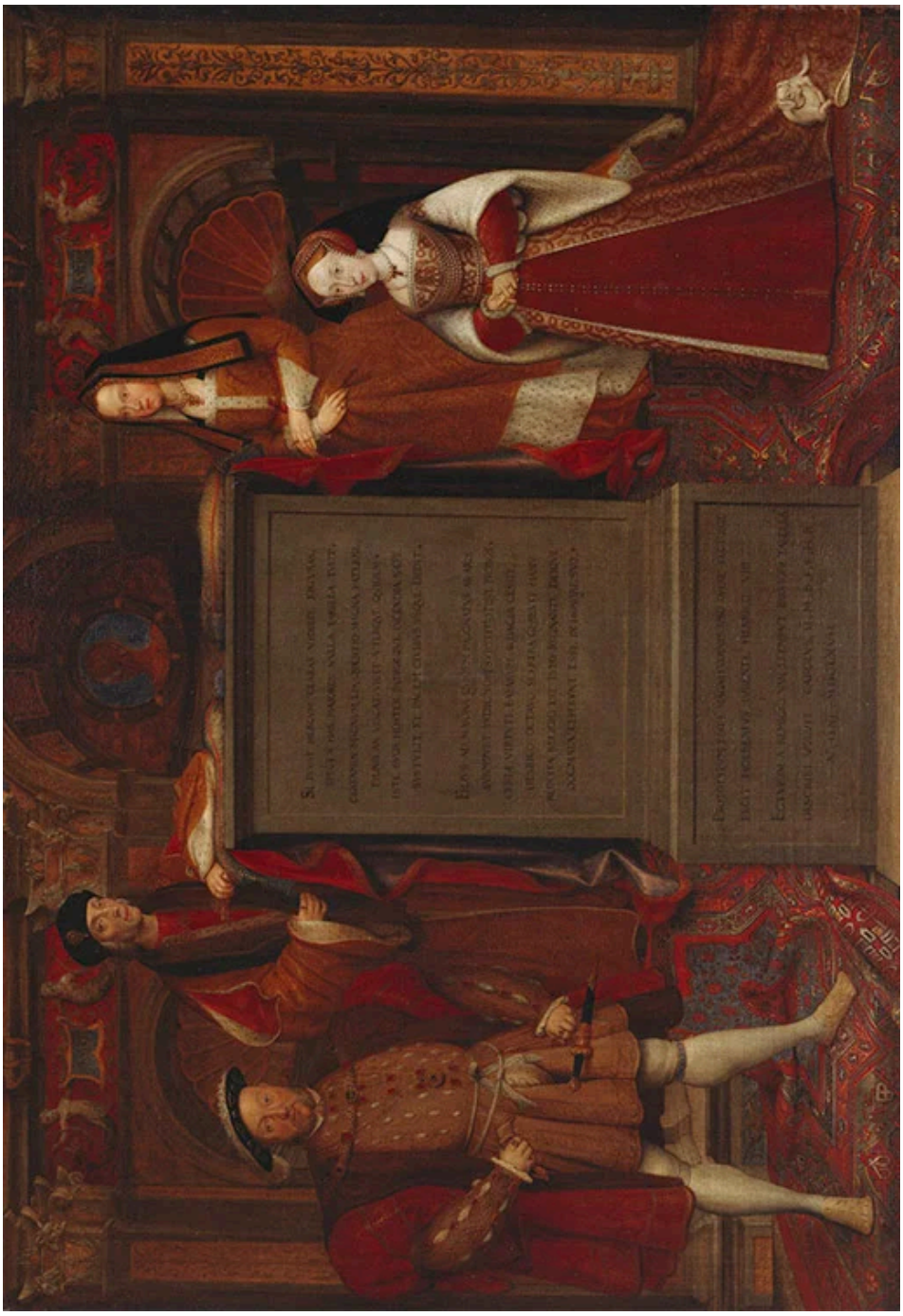

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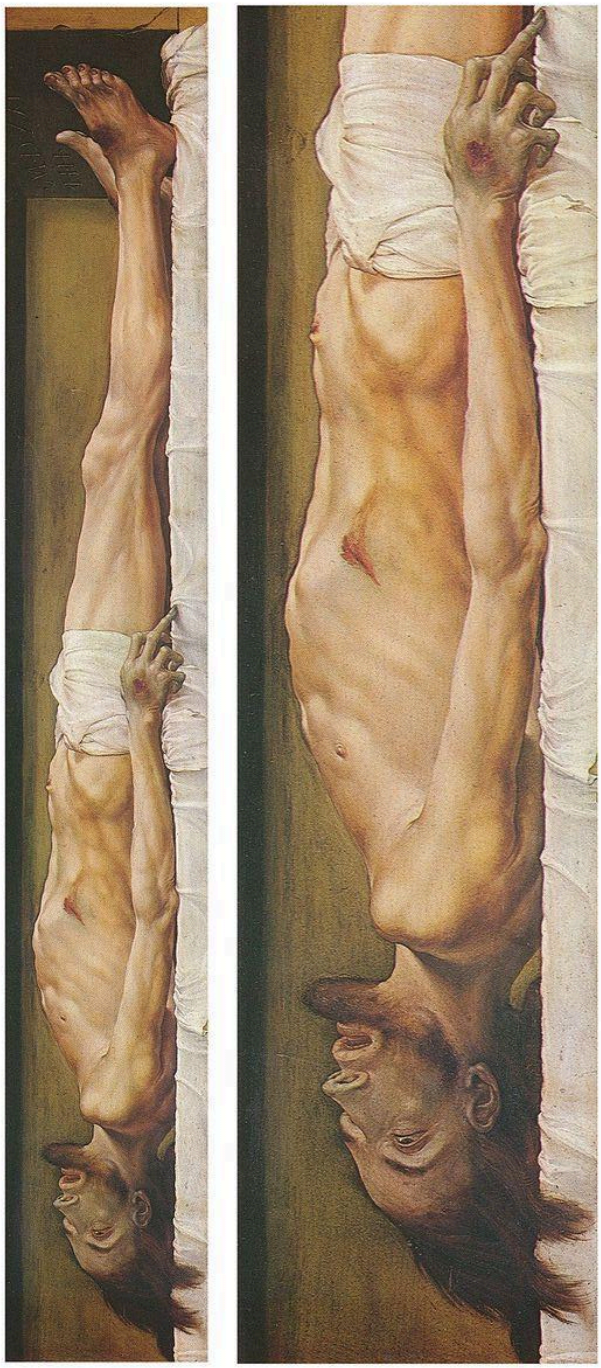

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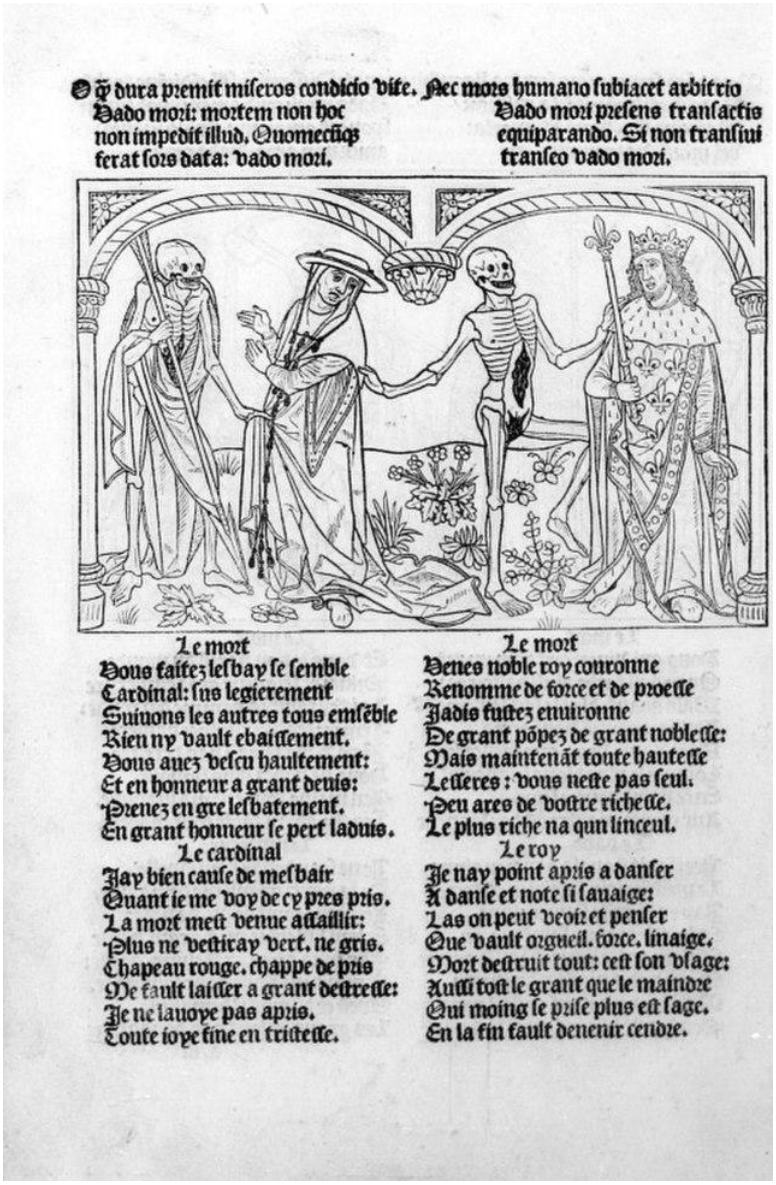

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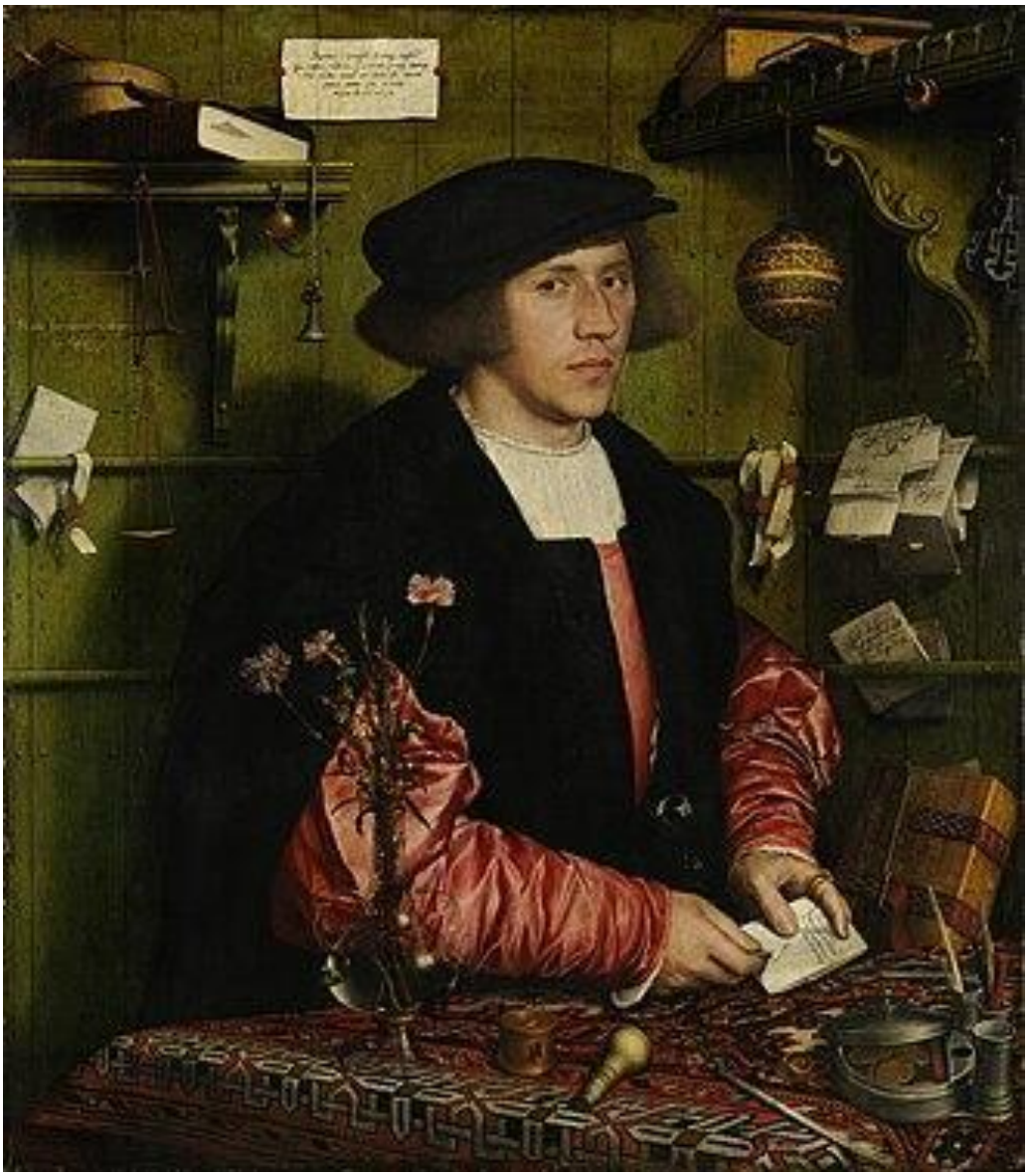

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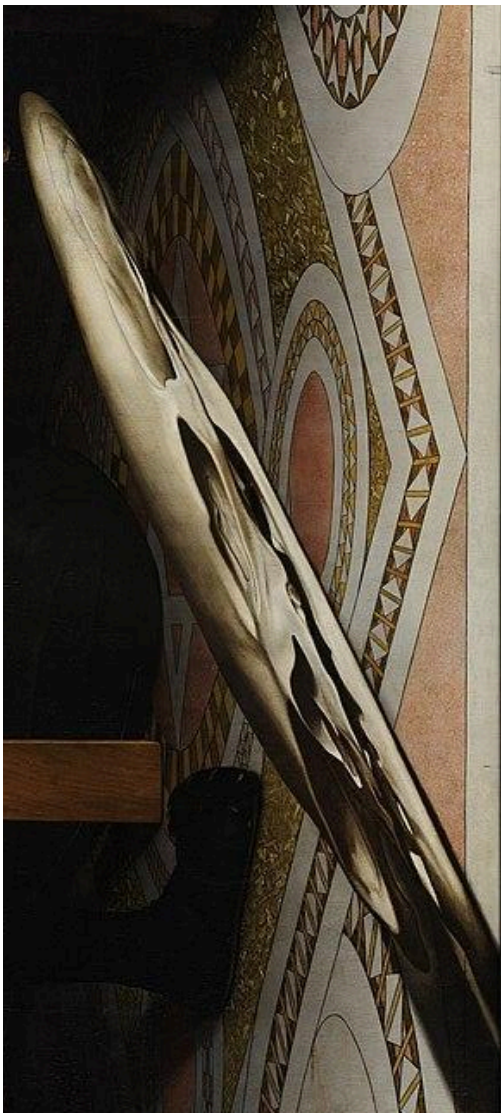

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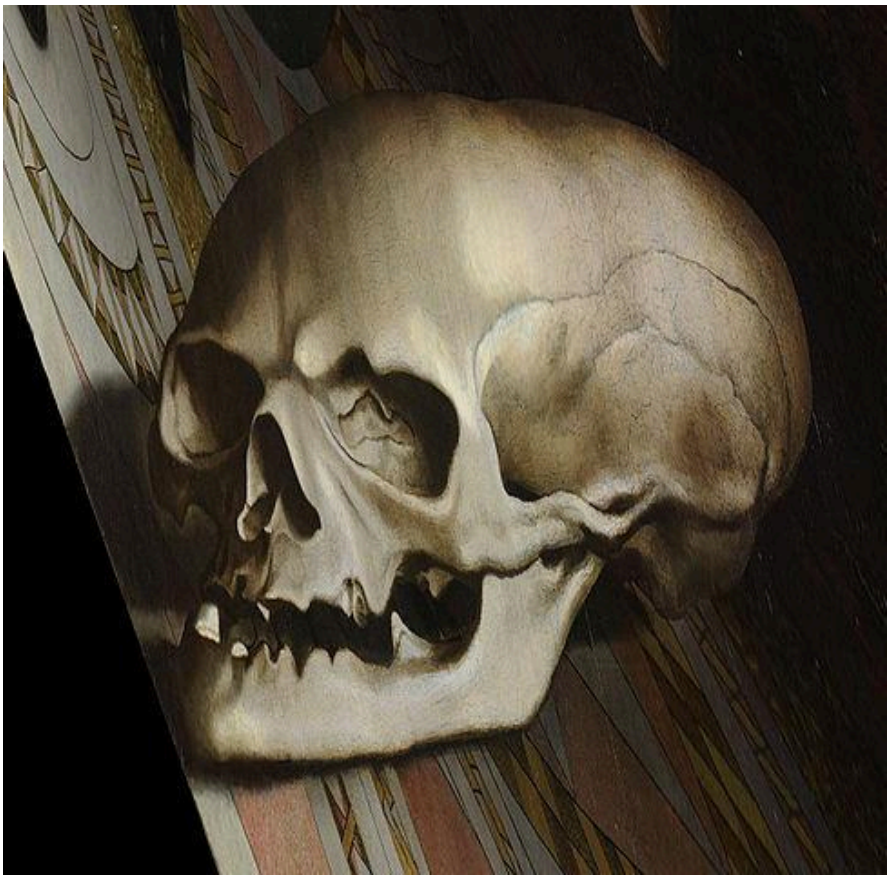

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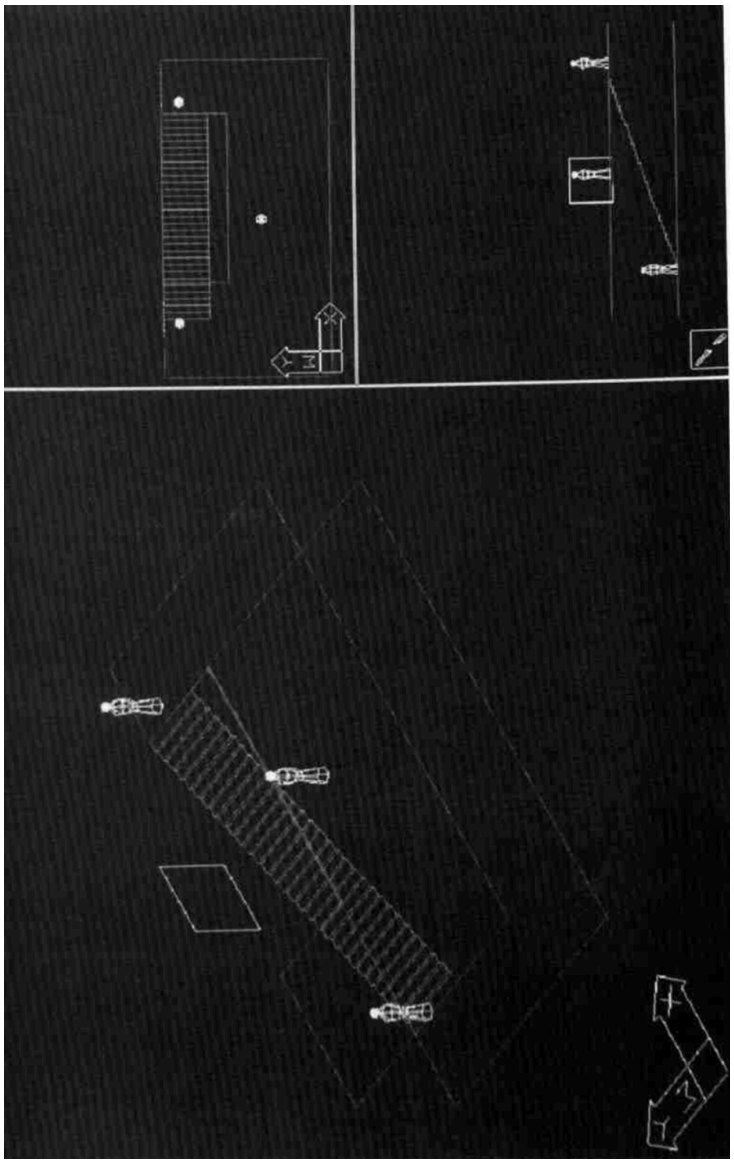

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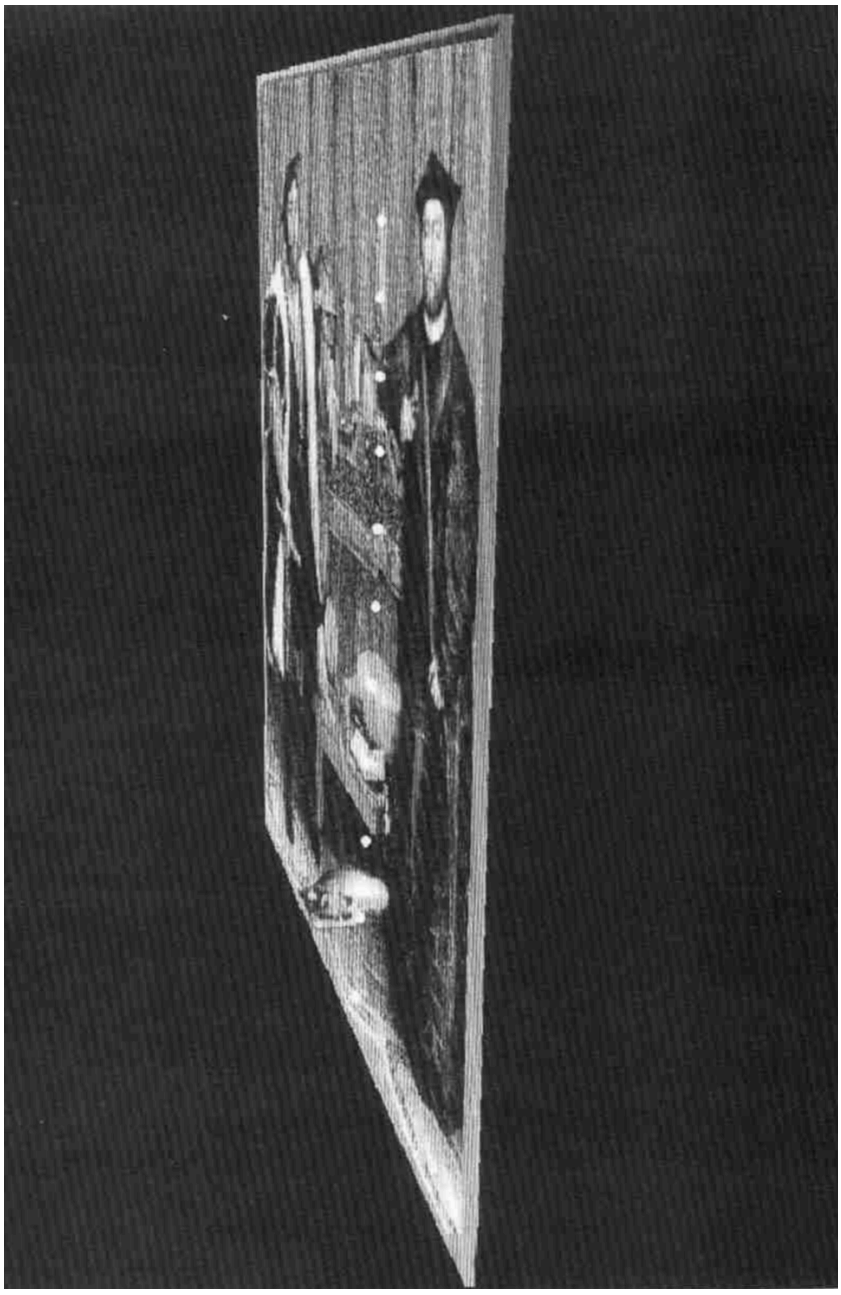

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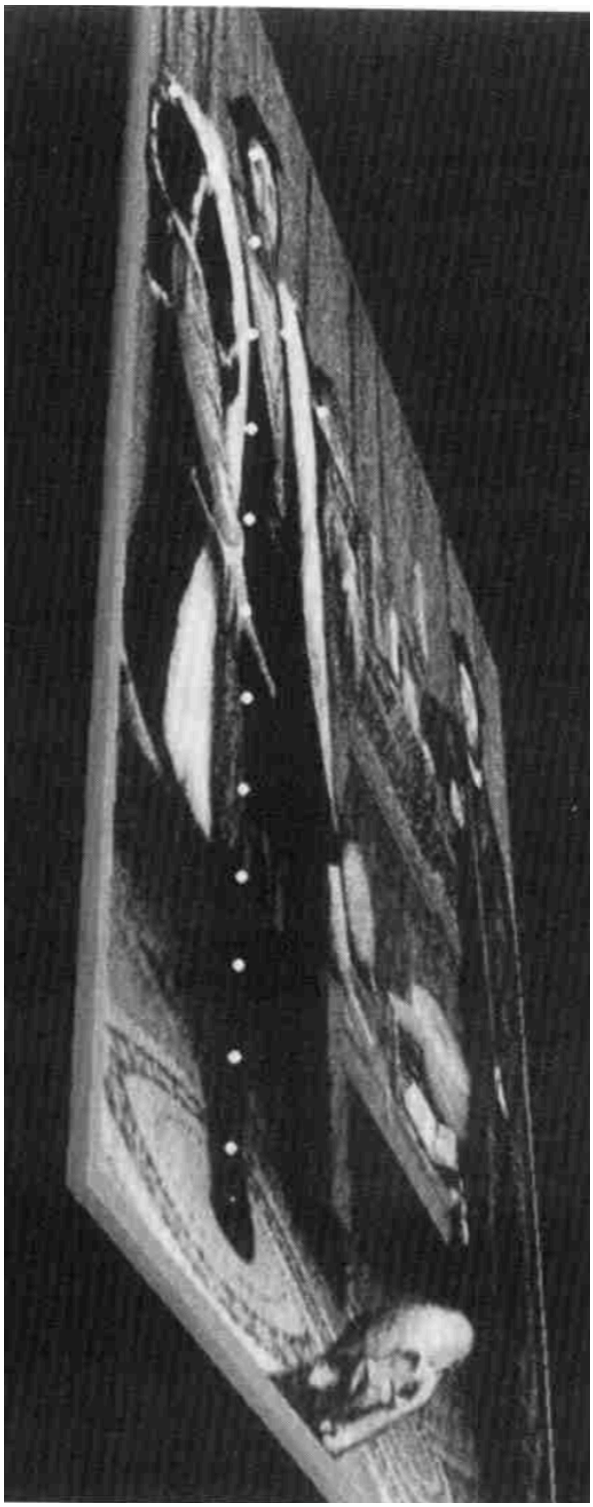

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