In focus: Hans Holbein the Younger

A learning resource featuring works from the National Portrait Gallery Collection, one of a series focusing on particular artists whose practice has changed the way we think about the art of British portraiture and who have in turn influenced others.
Contents

Introduction / 2

1: General context / 3
   Hans Holbein the Younger (1497/8–1543) / 3
   Holbein, his influence and impact / 5

2: Work in context / 5
   The drawing / 5
   The print / 8

3: Copied paintings / 9
   Reproductions / 9
   Printed portraits of royal women / 13

General enquiry questions / 14
Further research / 14

Introduction

It can be useful to look at developments in portrait painting through the lens of a single, significant artist, appreciating their techniques and innovations, and the way that they have been influenced by the advances of others and how in making their contribution they in turn influenced others.

Each resource focuses on a limited number of artworks from the National Portrait Gallery Collection and details taken from them. It includes questions about the practice and historical context of the artist, with suggested lines of enquiry and ideas for classroom activity, plus links for further research. The aim is to support teachers in encouraging students to investigate the artist and their practice in-depth. The narrow focus on the work of Hans Holbein the Younger (1497/8–1543) enables a concentrated view exploring qualities of his unique linear style. This resource coincides with the exhibition, The Encounter: Drawings from Leonardo to Rembrandt (13 July to 22 October 2017) at the National Portrait Gallery, London, and the related permanent Tudor display.

The works reproduced investigate important aspects of portraiture: quality drawing on paper, the notion of the icon, both the reproduced painted and printed copy, and the dynastic portrait. There is a focus on the importance of the copy and the reiterated portrait.

This resource seeks to explore the following key questions for teachers:
— Why is Holbein regarded as one of the greatest portrait artists of his time?
— What made his technique unique and special?
— How did a painter from Germany become so significant in the UK?
— What is his legacy now?
— What is the difference between an original, a copy and a print?
1: **General context**

Hans Holbein the Younger is famous for having created a unique and memorable image of Henry VIII long before the invention of camera technology and a machine’s ability to capture likeness. It remains one of the most universally recognisable portraits of a monarch today. Holbein’s larger than life-size drawing is possibly the most important artwork in the National Portrait Gallery and is the only autograph work by Holbein in the Collection. The image of the king is synonymous with what we know about Henry whose desperate desire for a male heir overwhelmed his life, led to the religious break with the Catholic church and the Pope in Rome, the founding of the Church of England, his six marriages and a country divided by religious beliefs.

Holbein also made numerous paintings and drawings of the people who populated Henry’s court. His representations transmit an idea of their faces and their attire. In addition to his role as a portraitist he designed temporary structures for festivities, interior designs including murals, decorative panels, metalwork and jewellery. Despite his ability and obvious genius in capturing a likeness he was not accorded the status of later artists such as Van Dyck (1599–1641) who was knighted by Charles I and given substantial financial rewards. The social position of the artist during Holbein’s lifetime was still linked to that of the craftsman rather than the landed gentry. Today, equivalent image makers might be found in the offices of *Hello* magazine who edit photographs provided by the paparazzi.

**Hans Holbein the Younger (1497/8–1543)**

Holbein was a painter, printmaker and designer, best known for creating characterful and realistic portraits. Born in Augsburg, Germany, he learnt painting from his father, Hans Holbein the Elder (1465–1524), and worked in Basle, Switzerland, before coming to England in 1526–8. He returned in 1531/2 and remained here until his death. Holbein depicted some of the most prominent figures at the court of Henry VIII (1491–1547). Crucially on his first visit he had an introduction by the great Humanist scholar Erasmus (c.1466–1536) to Sir Thomas More (1477/8 –1535) a fellow Humanist scholar, author, and statesman. More became his patron and it was this connection which consequently led directly to important portrait commissions at court including from the king and thus the establishment of his reputation.

The demand for Holbein’s work increased in the years following his death due to both the importance of his sitters and his own fame and reputation as an artist resulting in a lively market for copies of his portraits. The painted copies owned by the National Portrait Gallery all date from around the 1640s.

Holbein lived in the City of London and possessed dual citizenship. He is on record as having worked at Greenwich Palace preparing an entertainment for a French ambassador between January and May 1527. This was specifically for the decoration of two linked spaces, a banqueting area and ‘disguising house’ (a theatre). Holbein’s father had worked primarily in metal, and perhaps his son’s familiarity with design decoration influenced the type of complex drawings that he created. In 1536, Holbein was referred to as the ‘Kings painter’ and in 1537 his first salary was documented at £30 per annum, approximately double what a soldier would have earned in 1553.
King Henry VIII: King Henry VII
Hans Holbein the Younger, c. 1536–7
Ink and watercolour
NPG 4027

From top to bottom:

King Henry VIII
Unknown Anglo-Netherlandish artist
Oil on panel, c. 1520
Before Holbein’s influence
NPG 4960

King Henry VIII
Unknown Anglo-Netherlandish artist
Oil on panel, c. 1535–40
After Holbein’s influence
NPG 3638

King Henry VIII
Unknown artist
Oil on panel, 1597–1618
Based on a Holbein template
NPG 4980(14)
Holbein, his influence and impact

Holbein’s work still has impact today, as his portraits possess an intrinsic quality that echoes the reality of humankind in a way that suggests photo-realism before the invention of photography. His portraits, like those by painter and printmaker, Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) appear to us like real people displaying credible facial features. Because we lack photographic records of the sixteenth century, we rely on visual evidence such as his.

It is difficult to comprehend how he was permitted to create portraits that are so revealing, especially considering how minutely they conjure up the powerful personalities of that dangerous time. It is this conundrum that fascinates the viewer of today, precisely because Holbein appears to open a window into their physical space and has imprinted the stern royal features of Henry VIII into our collective mind’s eye. Internationally, Holbein’s influence was at one remove from the rest of the artistic milieu of Europe as England became increasingly isolated with the frantic political situation created by Henry VIII’s desire for a male offspring which led to the split with Rome.

2: Work in context

Henry VIII succeeded his father Henry VII (1485–1509) to the throne in 1509. He is remembered for his six marriages, and for ordering the dissolution of religious houses including monasteries which took place between 1535 and 1539. Henry established the Tudor family as the ruling dynasty in England. His quest for a male heir and a divorce from his first wife Katherine of Aragon, led to his self-appointment as head of the Church in England in place of the Pope in 1535.

The drawing

This drawing is huge, measuring 2578 mm by 1372 mm and only half of its original size. It is the left-hand section of a working drawing, known as a cartoon and was used as a pattern and the basis for a larger-than-life dynastic mural portrait of Henry VIII, his father Henry VII and their respective wives.

It is an important record as it helps us to understand Holbein’s technical approach to drawing and painting. Firstly we must consider that in 1536–7 paper of this size was made by piecing smaller sections of handmade ‘rag’ paper together with glue made from boiling rabbit skin. Holes were pricked along the main outlines of the composition into the paper which was then fixed in the intended position on the wall. Chalk or charcoal dust was then brushed into the holes made by pricking, thus transferring the outline directly and in full scale onto the wall. Holbein could then proceed with filling in his design. Both scale and image needed to be approved prior to commission. Paper was a convenient way of showing the design (flexible and portable) and modifying it if necessary. Some parts are cut-outs pasted on to the relevant area of the design, allowing us to see the edges and the pricked holes along the drawing outline. This method, called pouncing, was reliable for the formation of large works and for transferring the exact scale of the design onto the wall.

The intended mural was to be a declaration of Tudor supremacy, a grand proclamation of power, wealth and dynasty, an official image of post-reformation
monarchy. However on 4 January 1698 a fire in Whitehall Palace destroyed the mural. The only record of this Renaissance-type image is this drawing and an engraving dating from the seventeenth century created by Remigius van Leemput (1607–75). The reason that this drawing is so remarkable is that it shows us, almost 500 years after it was made, the identity and portly presence of this notorious ruler. His bulky figure is confirmed by the scale of his Greenwich suit of armour from 1540. The power and recognisability of this iconic image resides in the clarity of lines drawn by Holbein from life as he studied the king. Henry VIII did not sit often for his portrait, artists relied on patterns made by others to create his image.
Holbein’s drawings testify to his knack of characterising sitters with a few choice marks. This skill secured Henry’s face outline as the dominant pattern to be repeated over the years. The illustrations show Henry’s changing face pattern before and after Holbein’s drawing. Henry’s pose is an adaptation of a classic Renaissance formula derived from Donatello’s (1386–1466) painting of St George in Florence, Italy. His sumptuous, richly adorned and bejewelled clothes underpin his royal status and wealth. Standing on a ruched carpet, that would have been a luxury item imported from the orient, enhances the ostentatious display of possessions. His dagger is for display purposes and may have been designed by Holbein. His elaborate codpiece reinforces the importance of virility in relation to his stature as king and the importance of producing an heir.

The decorative details from the top of the Whitehall cartoon drawing allow us to focus on the sumptuous Renaissance-style background to this important dynastic portrait. Sir Roy Strong suggests that the painting continues the architectural features already extant within the room (Strong, *Tudor & Jacobean Portraits*, HMSO, 1969). The letters, H and I, denoting Henry and Jane (Jane Seymour 1508 or 1509–1537) are elegantly intertwined with true lover’s knots. These are flanked by a merman and mermaid surrounded by flourishes of swags and animal heads. The style of drawing here relates strongly to the highly decorative chimney piece reproduced for comparison, some of the design motifs are repeated and it includes Henry’s coat of arms.
The print

Van Leemput’s engraving gives us an insight into the overall composition and the female dynastic line. By using other extant portraits we can identify all four figures in the work. Opposite Henry VII is Elizabeth of York (1463–1503) and below her is Jane Seymour (1509?–37) Henry VIII’s third wife and the mother of his only male child, King Edward VI (1537–53).

The left-hand side of this print relates to the National Portrait Gallery drawing and we can see clearly how this copy is a pale imitation of the original, the figures appear insubstantial and puppet-like. Although the figures are correctly placed, and are dressed in equal finery with a backdrop to match, a close look at their features reveals morphed characteristics and Henry VIII’s face is turned towards us.

Copies of paintings were used as records and as artistic currency in that they could be recycled and disseminated *ad infinitum*. The scale of the copy is linked to the size of the paper or the printing press. It is important to appreciate that here we are viewing a copy (either online or as a computer print-out) of a copy by antiquary and engraver George Vertue (1683–1756), of Regius van Leemput’s copy from the original Holbein mural. That all three are graphic illustrations suggests an equality. However the nuanced changes visible in the reproductions are difficult to quantify yet definitely recognisable.
The original National Portrait Gallery drawing portrays a substantial figure of a king whose head is turned slightly to the side whereas in the copy he faces us squarely. The carpet is less generous and Henry VII appears less elegant and rather pinched. The scene is more perfunctory and less opulent, but it is described in equal detail. These issues of visual slippage are important to consider when confronted with copies, a process called degradation. There seems to be a qualitative hierarchy within the copies.

3: **Copied paintings**

**Unknown woman, formerly known as Catherine Howard after Hans Holbein the Younger**
Oil on panel, late 17th century
NPG 1119

**Reproductions**

Artists made exact replica copies of paintings in their studios, sometimes because they wanted to keep a record of a successful work but often because copies of certain sitters, such as royalty, were in demand and these images would be re-copied.
Clients would buy copies in sets of kings and queens, to decorate their homes and testify to their allegiance to the crown. Copies that can be directly linked to the artist’s studio are generally considered to be more reliable, in that they are more likely to be first-hand and not copies of reproductions. The muddle of multiple copies opens the door to misidentification.

There is no authenticated likeness of Catherine Howard and this painting is derived from Portrait of a lady, probably a member of the Cromwell Family by Hans Holbein, c. 1535–40, in the Toledo Art Museum, Ohio, USA. Sitter identity can be a complex minefield especially with the passage of time. The more a portrait is championed and identified, the more it can gain currency both factually and sometimes financially. In this instance, the identity of the sitter in the painting to which the NPG copy relates is in dispute. The Toledo portrait was once known as Oliver Cromwell’s mother and the false identification as Catherine Howard was made in 1909 and refuted in 1953. Because Catherine Howard was Henry’s fifth queen for less than two years, bore no heir and was beheaded for adultery, there was little public demand for her likeness and consequently no authentic way of identifying claims of this.

We know that on 3 September 1540 the French ambassador Charles de Marillac (c. 1510–60), described Catharine Howard as ‘a young woman of average beauty, but very graceful yet petite. She was modest and dressed in the French style’ (Strong, Tudor & Jacobean Portraits, Volume 1: Text, HMSO, 1969, p.42). Her sleeves are adorned with golden aglets, decorative button-like fastenings along the outer opening edges. This painting shows the sitter wearing a French hood worn over a stiffened white undercap (or coif) trimmed with gold brocade. The old-fashioned English hood was worn in the 1530’s and is more angular and shaped like the roof of a house, as can be seen in the engravings of Henry’s wives (see page 12).
Face templates would be used as a guide to facial features. These ‘portrait patterns’ were much reproduced resulting in varying standards of iteration. Initially the patterns, as they were known, could be employed by the copying artist to draw around or pin prick through, creating an outline in the exact size of the original. Creating face patterns was standard practice throughout Tudor times and not a Holbein invention.

Sir Thomas More was Holbein’s patron on his first visit to England and the fine copy of the original (see 1, above) in the Frick Gallery, New York, is a sympathetic and sensitive rendering of a brilliant intellectual and deeply religious yet wealthily attired man. The original painting was created directly from a drawing (now in the Royal Collection) and is a recorded likeness, taken from the living sitter and thence copied onto a wooden panel.

More was a Humanist scholar, author, and statesman. He served Henry VIII as diplomatic envoy and Privy Councillor prior to his election as speaker of the House of Commons in 1523. His chain of office does not denote a specific role but exists as an emblem of service to the king. In 1529 More became Lord Chancellor, resigning in 1532 over the issue of Henry’s divorce from Katherine of Aragon, and refusing to subscribe to the Act of Supremacy making the king head of the Church of England. Subsequently More was convicted of high treason, beheaded and in 1935 canonized by the Catholic Church.

Gathering together a series of print reproductions that are all derived from the same original source helps us to notice the similarities and standardisation of the reproductions. In these further copies of More’s portrait by Holbein, we can see shifts and changes in features and attitude despite the fact that they seem similar and are taken from the same first pattern. Holbein’s impact was huge, and the fact that so many different types of reproductions derived from one original source testifies to this. Often however he might have been the only artist with access to
1 Katherine of Aragon  
(1485–1536, m. 1509–33 divorced)  
After Hans Holbein the Younger  
Line engraving, probably 18th century  
NPG D24171

2 Unknown woman formerly known as Anne Boleyn  
(1500–36, m. 1533–6 executed)  
Wenceslaus Hollar, after Hans Holbein the Younger  
Etching, 1649  
NPG D21018

3 Jane Seymour  
(1508/9–37, m. 1536–7 died)  
Wenceslaus Hollar, after Hans Holbein the Younger  
Etching, 1648  
NPG D4061

4 Anne of Cleves  
(1515–57, m. 1540 January – July divorced)  
Wenceslaus Hollar, after Hans Holbein the Younger  
Etching, 1648  
NPG D11254

5 Catherine Howard  
(c. 1518–42, m. 1540–2 executed)  
Jacobus Houbraken, after a miniature by Hans Holbein the Younger  
Line engraving, probably 18th century  
NPG D24183

6 Katherine Parr  
(1512–48, m. 1543–7 widowed)  
After Hans Holbein the Younger  
Line engraving, probably 18th century  
NPG D24190
that sitter in which case, his is the only image that can be used. Sitting for your portrait then as now, was a costly affair.

If the design is copied directly from a work and not reversed, the print (by virtue of the printing plate process) will appear back to front. This can be avoided, but it is a point to consider in the printmaking context. Prints facing both ways and with a variety of face types purporting to be the same person exist because a number of different artists were copying the originals and subsequent copies at the same time.

Printed portraits of royal women

Of the portrait prints of the six wives of Henry VIII (see page 12), only numbers 3 and 4 can be directly related to paintings made of the sitter by Holbein, the rest are misattributions. There is no documented portrait image of Catherine Howard and number 5, is copied from a Holbein miniature in the Royal Collection. However, the Royal Collection website states, ‘No conclusive evidence has yet been put forward to substantiate the persistent, but late, identification of this subject as Catherine Howard, particularly since there is no authentic contemporary likeness of the queen in existence’. The prints here help us to appreciate how pictures of famous people were copied, recopied, re-attributed, re-imagined and disseminated in the past. They were a type of equivalent to our contemporary magazine reproductions of celebrity portraits, with famous faces seemingly almost interchangeable.

Etched and engraved prints would be created using the original painting as a template design thus reinforcing the iconography of famous personalities making their image available at a low cost to a wide number of people. The reproduced copy is often reduced in size and exists in monochrome. The roundel within which some of the portraits sit, acts as a framing device despite lacking a decorative border. These prints would have been considered to be standard representations of the personalities and reproduced in books or issued as loose sheets in sets.

Misidentifications can become authentications, for example the portraits of Anne Boleyn and Jane Seymour look remarkably similar, causing problems for art historians and historians. Additionally if similar fashions and, in the case of royalty, the same jewels are worn (as these gems would have been inherited) the reinforcement of a falsely attributed portrait can be the consequence.
General enquiry questions

— How did Hans Holbein revolutionise the art of portraiture in the UK?
— How does portraiture evidence change in fashion and art?
— Why might the original painted portrait be painted by more than one person?
— How can individual parts of a portrait reveal aspects of personality and power?
— Is it important for a monarch such as Henry VIII to control his image? How might this relate to contemporary marketing practices?
— What is the purpose of a copied portrait and how did these manifest themselves in former times?
— Is it only the figure in a portrait that communicates information about the sitter?
— How does the choice of shape and orientation of the canvas affect the final portrait?
— Initially considered an artist-craftsman, how has the passage of time influenced the change in status of the artist?

Further research

Images of Hans Holbein the Younger in the NPG collection and additionally a set of films relating to aspects of his work:
npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp07116/hans-holbein-the-younger

Portraits from patterns of Henry VIII in the NPG collection:
npg.org.uk/research/programmes/making-art-in-tudor-britain/case-studies/portraits-of-henry-viii

This lecture discusses Holbein’s work in the context of the city of London and the connections between European capitals at the time:
gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/hans-holbein-the-younger-a-man-very-excellent-in-making-of-physionamies

The Walker Art Gallery copy of Henry VIII by Holbein:
liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/walker/exhibitions/henry/walker.aspx

The drawing from which the painting of Sir Thomas More is derived:
royalcollection.org.uk/collection/search#/2/collection/912268/sir-thomas-more-1478-1535

The painting of Sir Thomas More from which the NPG copy is derived:
frick.org/collection/works_on_display

Discussion around the Portrait of a Lady c. 1540 in the Royal Collection:
royalcollection.org.uk/collection/422293/portrait-of-a-lady-perhaps-katherine-howard-1520-1542

Henry VIII’s wives:
hrp.org.uk/discover-the-palaces/monarchs/henry-viii/henry-viii-s-wives/#gs.godATtA
Previously known as a portrait of Catherine Howard in the collection of the Toledo Museum of Art. *Portrait of a Lady, probably a member of the Cromwell family* by Hans Holbein, c. 1535–40 Toledo Art Museum, USA. This portrait is the pattern for the NPG copy:

[scholarsresource.com/browse/work/2144618686](http://scholarsresource.com/browse/work/2144618686)

Remigius Van Leemput, copy of the Whitehall mural made for Charles II:


Technique and imitation:


Artists relied on patterns to recreate portraits:


Introduction to the exhibition *Elizabeth I and her People*. Covers the rise of the middle classes, the expansion of trade and territory and the use of royal imagery:


Ways to calculate and information about Tudor finances:

[queryblog.tudorhistory.org/2008/10/question-from-antonia-currency.html](http://queryblog.tudorhistory.org/2008/10/question-from-antonia-currency.html)

Information about copies of sets of portraits of kings and queens:


Information about the exhibition *The Northern Renaissance: Dürer to Holbein*:


Information about Henry VIII’s armour:

National Portrait Gallery Learning

For more information about the varied programme of school’s events and learning resources see:

npg.org.uk/learning.php

follow us on:

@NPGSchools

National Portrait Gallery
St Martin’s Place
London WC2H 0HE

telephone:
020 7306 0055
recorded information:
020 7312 2463