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HANS HOLBEIN'S PORTRAIT OF HENRY VIII: ENGLAND'S OWN PERSONAL JESUS

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ART 3130: Northern Renaissance, Spring 2023

Nominated by Dr. Caroline Hillard

Author Notes:

Hans Holbein's famous portrait of Henry VIII in a mural for Whitehall Palace is a shining example of the power of royal propaganda. The general consensus regarding the portrait's message has been that it highlights Henry's ability to continue the Tudor dynasty. However, I wanted to explore the possibility that Holbein's late-stage change in the composition of the portrait from a three-quarter view of Henry to a frontal view held an alternative motive – to present Henry as the head of the newly established Church of England and as equal to the pope, and possibly to Christ himself.

Faculty Notes:

Amy's paper presents a new interpretation of Hans Holbein's portrait of English king Henry VIII in a now-lost mural created for Whitehall Palace of 1537. She argues that the mural expressed not only the dynastic ambitions of the king, as generally thought, but also his position as the head of the Church of England. Her argument is grounded in astute visual analysis, sensitive examination of the work's historical context, and a thorough reading of the secondary literature on both the artist and his patron. Her writing is clear, effective, and seemingly effortless in its masterful handling of a difficult topic.

Hans Holbein's Portrait of Henry VIII: England's Own Personal Jesus

For most people, Henry VIII is instantly recognizable due to the portraits painted by Hans Holbein the Younger. The carefully crafted image presented by Holbein in a mural painted in 1537 for the privy chamber at the Palace of Whitehall has shaped our perception of him as a strong and masculine monarch (Figure 1). Despite the loss of the mural in a fire in 1698, numerous copies have provided art historians with the image of Henry VIII as a larger-than-life ruler who was not to be crossed, and this impression of the king has persisted through the centuries. A copy painted by Remigius van Leemput in 1667 gives a sense of the composition of Holbein's original work.¹ Though Holbein's portrait of Henry VIII exudes confidence, power, and virility, in reality, he struggled with his lack of a legitimate male heir, fallout from his decision to break with the Catholic Church, and his declining health. The underlying theme of *The Whitehall Mural* has been said to be the establishment of the Tudor dynasty and Henry VIII's ability to continue that dynasty.² Despite Henry VIII being an obese and injured man in his 40s, the prominent codpiece and the portrait's depiction of him as healthy and youthful indicate clear allusions to strength and masculinity.³ With the English Reformation and the establishment of the Church of England, Henry VIII fundamentally changed the role of the sovereign, and with that change, he needed to present an image that established and justified his right to be supreme head of the Church. This need led Holbein to change Henry VIII's pose in the final version of *The Whitehall Mural* from a three-quarters to a frontal view to make him appear more Christ-like and to strengthen and reinforce his position as the head of the Church of England.

Henry VIII owes much of his notoriety to his multiple marriages and his treatment of his six wives. However, it was Henry VIII's religious reforms and the establishment of himself as head of the Church of England, resulting from his pursuit of a divorce, that provided the deepest and most lasting effects within England. His eighteen-year marriage to his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, had only produced a single living daughter. By 1527, Henry VIII had become convinced that his marriage to Catherine, who had been previously married to Henry VIII's late older brother, was invalid in the eyes of God and requested an annulment from Pope Clement VII, who at the time was being held prisoner by Catherine's nephew, Emperor Charles V. Henry VIII grew increasingly frustrated with the pope's rejections and turned to Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, to annul his marriage to Catherine.⁴ Henry VIII's quest for a male heir came to be known as 'The King's Great Matter' and provided the catalyst for his break from the Catholic Church and the start of the English Reformation. In 1534, Henry VIII successfully broke from papal authority, establishing the Church of England and declaring himself supreme head of the Church. Though

¹ Astrid Lang, "Holbein's *Whitehall Mural* for Henry VIII: Spacing a Place for the King," in *The Interior as an Embodiment of Power*, ed. Hoppe, Breitling, De Jonge (Tiffin, Ohio: Heidelberg, 2015), 101.

² Susan Foister, *Holbein and England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 182-3.

³ Tatiana C. String, "Projecting Masculinity: Henry VIII's Codpiece," in *Henry VIII and His Afterlives*, ed. Mark Rankin, Christopher Highley, and John N. King (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2009), 150; Jean Marie Christiansen, "Assembling the King's Body: Examining Holbein's Portrait Techniques and the Fashioning of Henry VIII's Image in the English Renaissance," in *Renaissance Papers 2021*, ed. Jim Pearce, Ward J. Risvold, and William Given (Rochester, New York: Boydell & Brewer: 2022), 123.

⁴ Kevin Sharpe, *Selling the Tudor Monarchy: Authority and Image in Sixteenth-Century England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 67-8.

Henry VIII ultimately was able to divorce Catherine of Aragon and marry Anne Boleyn, his religious reforms to do so would have negative consequences on the king's image.

Henry VIII's split from the Catholic faith and religious reforms, especially the dissolution of the monasteries, were unpopular with many people in the kingdom, particularly in the north of England. Many of England's poor depended on these religious houses for assistance. There was also concern over the growing influence of Henry VIII's new Lord Chancellor, Thomas Cromwell. Furthermore, many noble families and other members of Henry VIII's court disagreed with his treatment and divorce of Catherine.⁵ In the fall of 1536, religious and economic grievances reached a head in an uprising called the Pilgrimage of Grace. Many rebels were executed, including the rebellion leader, Robert Aske, and members of prominent northern families.⁶ Henry VIII was criticized for his handling of the subsequent uprisings, especially by England's Catholic nobility.⁷

The consequences of his pursuit of a divorce from Catherine ultimately erased the line between religion and government and gave the king unprecedented power over all things secular and spiritual in the kingdom. In the same way Henry VIII's father, Henry VII, needed to prove his legitimacy as king after taking the crown, Henry VIII needed to convince the people that he was more qualified to be head of the church than the pope and that his authority to rule came directly through God. One of the most effective ways to do this would be through images. In his book *Selling the Tudor Monarchy: Authority and Image in Sixteenth-Century England*, historian Kevin Sharpe noted the importance of regal images in projecting a ruler's authority and stated images that emerged during periods of crisis were "part of the anxious and contentious process of constructing and sustaining that authority in the face of animadversion and contest."⁸ He also noted that a "concern for each reign is the visual representation of the ruler," and he quoted art historian Jonathan Brown as stating, "these images epitomize a ruler's self-concept."⁹ Sharpe continued, "The image and perception of the monarch were essential to the exercise of royal authority."¹⁰ Henry VIII, like monarchs before and after him, used artists and craftsmen to create works in a variety of media with the intention of representing their authority.¹¹ Henry VII secured his new position as king and reinforced his authority by using public images and spectacles.¹² Perhaps the most enduring and effective symbol established during Henry VII's reign, the Tudor Rose, combined the white rose of York with the red rose of Lancaster after his marriage to Elizabeth of York to symbolize the two house's unification and to validate Henry VII's claim to the throne.¹³

Hans Holbein first came to England in 1526, where he earned a reputation as one of the finest portrait artists of the Northern Renaissance, receiving endorsements and accolades for his work from the likes of Erasmus of Rotterdam and Sir Thomas More.¹⁴ His clientele included Anne

⁵ Sharpe, *Selling the Tudor Monarchy*, 68; Anthony Fletcher and Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Tudor Rebellions*, 6th ed. (London and New York: Routledge for Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 38-49.

⁶ Fletcher and MacCulloch, *Tudor Rebellions*, 48-50.

⁷ Fletcher and MacCulloch, *Tudor Rebellions*, 48-50.

⁸ Sharpe, *Selling the Tudor Monarch*, 47.

⁹ Sharpe, *Selling the Tudor Monarchy*, 44.

¹⁰ Sharpe, *Selling the Tudor Monarchy*, 81-2.

¹¹ Sharpe, *Selling the Tudor Monarchy*, 33.

¹² John N. King, *Tudor Royal Iconography: Literature and Art in an Age of Religious Crisis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1989), 29-30.

¹³ Gordon Marsden, "Henry VII: Miracle King," *History Today* 59, no. 3 (March 2009): 56.

¹⁴ Foister, *Holbein and England*, 11; Stephanie Buck, "Hans Holbein the Younger: Portraits of the Renaissance", in *Hans Holbein the Younger: Painter at the Court of Henry VIII*, (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2003), 19.

Boleyn, Thomas Cromwell, merchants of the Steelyard, and French ambassador, Jean de Dinteville.¹⁵ At some point during his time in England, through his work and contacts, Holbein caught the attention of the king. Though the exact date is unknown, court accounting documents show payments to Holbein in 1536, indicating he likely began work as Henry VIII's court painter by this time, while on his second trip to England.¹⁶ However, Susan Foister stated that in 1527, a 'Master Hans' was commissioned to paint decorative paintings for royal festivities, suggesting Holbein may have begun working in the king's court while on his first trip to England.¹⁷

In 1536-7, Holbein completed the large mural in fresco for the Whitehall Palace.¹⁸ The mural features the first two Tudor monarchs, Henry VII and Henry VIII, along with their wives Elizabeth of York and Jane Seymour, within an illusionary architectural space. The kings stand at the left of the composition and their queens at the right with a marble pillar set between the groupings. On the pillar reads an inscription:

If it pleases you to see the illustrious images of heroes
 Look on these: no picture ever bore greater.
 The great debate, competition and great question is
 Whether father or son is the victor. For both indeed were supreme.
 The former often overcame his enemies and the conflagrations of his country,
 And finally brought peace to its citizens.
 The son, born indeed for greater things,
 Removed the unworthy from their altars and replaced them by upright men.
 The arrogance of the Popes has yielded to unerring virtue
 And while Henry VIII holds the scepter in his hand
 Religion is restored and during his reign
 The doctrines of God have begun to be held in his honour.¹⁹

The inscription praises both kings, but not so subtly declares Henry VIII as the more successful and superior of the two. The pillar and inscription dominate the center of the composition, indicating its importance. The last few lines bring attention to and glorify Henry VIII's victory over the pope and removal of the "unworthy." The last lines are particularly telling of Henry VIII's pride and desire to highlight his achievements during the English Reformation: "And while Henry VIII holds the scepter in his hand religion is restored." The prominent place of the pillar and inscription suggest Henry VIII's religious reforms are the more important subject of the mural and possibly its purpose.

¹⁵ Buck, "Hans Holbein," 25-6.

¹⁶ John Pope-Hennessy, *The Portrait in the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 191; Paul Ganz, "Holbein and Henry VIII," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 83, no. 488 (1943): 269; Foister, *Holbein and England*, 12.

¹⁷ Foister, *Holbein and England*, 11.

¹⁸ Buck, "Hans Holbein," 31-2.

¹⁹ Lang, "Holbein's *Whitehall Mural* for Henry VII," 104.

The theme of Henry VIII's superiority is also seen in the way the two kings are depicted. Henry VII is behind Henry VIII and appears thin and frail; he is almost overwhelmed by his robes. Henry VIII, on the other hand, stands confidently, legs apart, hand on his dagger, and codpiece proudly on display. However, in reality, Henry VIII was obese and suffered from chronic injuries.²⁰ When comparing measurements of Henry VIII's body in Holbein's mural to measurements of his field armor from 1544 (Figure 4), we can see that Holbein had exaggerated the king's body, notably his shoulders and the length of his legs, to make him appear stronger, younger, and more powerful.²¹ This comparison with and dominance over his father can also be seen as symbolic of Henry VIII's dominance over Catholicism and the pope. Kevin Sharpe noted, "a claim to orthodox Catholic piety was a central motif of the representation of Henry VII."²² By placing Henry VIII in front of and as more fit than his father, Holbein was essentially portraying Henry VIII as victorious over the Catholic Church.

With a few exceptions, the most common pose for portraits in northern Europe was the three-quarters pose, with the profile pose second.²³ Portraits of other rulers, Francis I (Figure 5), Charles V (Figure 6), and earlier portraits of Henry VIII (Figure 7), overwhelmingly favor the three-quarters view. Portraits of the pope had also been in a three-quarters view (Figure 8).²⁴ The frontal-posed portrait had, until this time, been used almost exclusively for depictions of Christ, particularly in the 'Salvator Mundi', and 'Christ in Majesty' types (Figure 9, Figure 10).²⁵ As seen in other full-frontal portraits, most notably Albrecht Dürer's *Self-Portrait* of 1500, this more direct engagement of the viewer can take on a "Christ-like" appearance (Figure 3).²⁶ For a king who needed to establish himself as the supreme head of the church amidst ongoing religious turmoil, the image of Christ would have been an ideal choice. From the preparatory cartoon for the *Whitehall Mural*, we can see that Holbein had originally planned for Henry VIII to be in a traditional three-quarter pose (Figure 2).²⁷ However, a 1667 copy of the mural by Remigius van Leemput shows that Holbein ultimately chose to depict Henry VIII in a fully frontal view (Figure 1).²⁸ He is also the only figure to confront the viewer in a full-frontal pose; Henry VII engages the viewer, but he is in a three-quarters pose, while the queens do not engage the viewer at all. This can be seen as a reference to Christ as head of the church with Holbein equating Henry VIII as head of the Church of England.

With the symbolism related to dynasty, attention to portraying the king in top health and vigor, and references to Henry VIII's achievements in religious reform, *The Whitehall Mural* is clearly meant to reinforce the king's image as a powerful monarch not only capable of continuing his family line, but also of being supreme head of the church. Art historian Roy Strong stated, "With this image of Henry VIII, the use of royal portraiture in England as propaganda in the modern sense of

²⁰ String, "Projecting Masculinity: Henry VIII's Codpiece," 150; Christiansen, "Assembling the King's Body," 123.

²¹ Christiansen, "Assembling the King's Body," 134.

²² Sharpe, *Selling the Tudor Monarchy*, 67.

²³ Lorne Campbell, *Renaissance Portraits: European Portrait-Painting in the 14th, 15th and 16th Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 81-6.

²⁴ Christopher Lloyd and Simon Thurley, *Henry VIII: Images of a Tudor King* (Oxford: Phaidon Press Limited, 1990); Lisa Mansfield, *Representations of Renaissance Monarchy: Francis I and the Image-Makers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016); Irina-Andreea Stoleriu and Adrian Stoleriu, "Representations of the Pope in Western Art," *ANASTASIS. Research in Medieval Culture and Art* V, no. 1 (2018): 2.

²⁵ Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 43; Pope-Hennessy, *The Portrait in the Renaissance*, 129.

²⁶ Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* 43.

²⁷ Foister, *Holbein and England*, 175.

²⁸ Lang, "Holbein's *Whitehall Mural* for Henry VII," 101.

the word begins.”²⁹ Holbein’s mural is a masterpiece in image-making and royal propaganda. The image was such a success that he employed the same technique in depicting Henry VIII’s infant son and heir, the future Edward VI (Figure 11). The image created by Holbein helped solidify Henry VIII’s position as supreme head of the Church of England, a position that future English sovereigns have maintained to this day.³⁰

²⁹ Roy Strong, *Holbein and Henry VIII* (London: Routledge & K. Paul for the Paul Mellon Foundation of British Art, 1967), 44.

³⁰ With the exception of Mary I, who returned England to Catholicism when she became queen.



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Figure 1. Remigius van Leemput after Hans Holbein, *The Whitehall Mural*, 1667, Oil on Canvas, Royal Collection, Hampton Court Palace, England.



Figure 2. Hans Holbein, Henry VIII and Henry VII, cartoon for Whitehall Palace mural, 1537, Pen in black, with grey, brown, black, and red wash, Paper mounted on Canvas, National Portrait Gallery, London.



Figure 3. Albrecht Dürer, *Self-Portrait*, 1500, Oil on Panel, Alte Pinakothek, Munich.



Figure 4. Field Armor of King Henry VIII, c. 1544, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 5. Jean and François Clouet, François I of France, 1535, Oil on Panel, Louvre.



Figure 6. Titian, *Portrait of Charles V*, 1548, Oil on Canvas, Alte Pinakothek, Munich.



Figure 7. Joos van Cleve, *Portrait of Henry VIII*, c. 1530-5, Oil on Panel, Royal Collection.



Figure 8. Sebastiano del Piombo, Portrait of Pope Clement VII, c. 1531, Oil on Slate, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.



Figure 9. Hubert and Jan van Eyck, *Detail of Ghent Altarpiece*, c. 1432, Oil on Panel, St. Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent.



Figure 10. Hans Memling, Christ Giving His Blessing, 1478, Oil on Panel, Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena.



Figure 11. Hans Holbein, *Portrait of Prince Edward*, 1538, Oil on Panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

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