
The Big Ideas That Shape Our World

THE RENAISSANCE



The Ambassadors, Hans Holbein, England 1533 CE

The Renaissance refers to a period in the history of art and thought during which the ideals of classical art and the science and philosophy of classical civilisation were promoted, studied and developed. *Re-* is a prefix meaning *again*, and *naissance* is from the French meaning *birth*.

This portrait by German painter Hans Holbein (1497-1543) dominates the wall on which it hangs in the National Gallery. The artist has depicted two wealthy, well-educated men surrounded by various artefacts from the 16th Century. The men are the ambassadors to England, from the court of France, and from the Holy Roman Emperor. The men are leaning against a cupboard, with objects related to the heavens on the top shelf and objects with more earthly connotations on the lower shelf.

The Ambassadors is much closer to our modern understanding of human identity than in much medieval art. The two men, in particular their confident gaze and the symbolic meaning of the items surrounding them, convey a belief in the power and possibility of human nature, for good and for ill. The celestial globe and the various instruments for understanding the heavens and measuring time symbolise the growing ability of humans to understand and interpret their world. These objects, along with the lute, the books (a hymn book and an arithmetic book) and other items, such as the case of flutes, represent the seven subjects of a liberal arts Renaissance education. The liberal arts consisted of the trivium (grammar, logic and rhetoric) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, music, astronomy and geometry).

There are many other hidden meanings in the painting, though by far the most significant is the large anamorphic skull in the centre. This distorted image of a skull, which loses its distortion when seen from the side, symbolises human mortality. It is a permanent reminder for those inside and outside the painting, that despite all our human advances, we cannot overcome our mortality.

The renaissance period was one that celebrated the past, but used the past as an inspiration to create things of great beauty and to innovate technologically. This balance between looking back and looking forward is important in a confident society.

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A. Use the text to find the answers to these 5 questions:

1. How does Holbein's painting get its name?

2. What makes *The Ambassadors* an example of Renaissance art?

3. Why is the painting more like a modern painting than a medieval painting?

4. What constituted a liberal arts education?

5. What is the function of the large skull in the centre of the painting?

B. GLOSSARY:

portrait	a painting, drawing, photograph, or engraving of a person, usually focusing on the face or head and shoulders.
National Gallery	an art museum in Trafalgar Square, in Central London. It houses paintings mainly dating from the mid-13th century to 1900.
artefacts	man-made objects, typically of cultural or historical interest
ambassador	an accredited diplomat sent by a country or state to represent their interests in a foreign country (an emerging role in the 16 th century)
Holy Roman Emperor	a very powerful medieval ruler who received his title from the Pope, and was elected by European royalty; at this time, the emperor, Charles V was King of Spain, as well as much of Germany and Italy
classical civilisation	a broad term that includes the Greek and Roman civilisations
human nature	a phrase for the general psychological characteristics, feelings of humankind, regarded as shared by all humans
celestial globe	a sphere that shows the apparent positions of the stars in the sky [<i>celest-</i> comes from, Latin meaning <i>heavens</i>]
liberal arts	a specific group of subjects taught at medieval and early modern universities, the term now refers to arts and humanities subjects as distinct from science and technology
anamorphic	distorted image or drawing that appears normal when viewed from a particular point or with a suitable mirror or lens

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C. What artefacts do you think reflect ideas about human identity in the 21st century?

- *Consider all the important national and international issues affecting society and the people living within it. These could be social, political or cultural.*
- *Which ideas captured in 'The Ambassadors' are still relevant today? To what extent do human beings still think and feel about the same things in 2019?*
- *Think about those artefacts in Holbein's painting. What might be the modern-day equivalents of them?*

Plan your response below:

