

Hans Holbein the Younger and the portrait of a money changer

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Among the artists who worked for the Basel printers, one achieved a fame that far exceeds the history of printing. Hans Holbein the Younger, born in Augsburg around 1497, came to Basel in 1515 with his brother Ambrosius and worked there, with interruptions, until 1532, when he settled definitively in London as painter to the court of Henry VIII.¹ In Basel, Holbein designed title borders, initials and illustrations for Froben and other printers, painted portraits of the city's leading citizens, decorated the façades of houses and painted the murals of the council chamber of the town hall. He also drew the famous marginal illustrations in a copy of Erasmus's *Praise of Folly* and painted several portraits of Erasmus.

Holbein's first portrait commission in Basel is of particular interest for a book about finance. In 1516, he painted the double portrait of Jakob Meyer zum Hasen and his wife Dorothea Kannengiesser. Meyer, who became the first mayor of Basel to be elected from the guilds, was a money changer and merchant. Holbein painted him holding a gold coin between his fingers, an allusion to his profession.² The painting, today in the Kunstmuseum Basel, is one of the earliest portraits of a financial professional in the art of northern Europe. It shows a man who is proud of his wealth and of his craft, and who wants to be remembered as a dealer in money.

A decade later, Meyer commissioned from Holbein a votive painting, the so-called *Darmstadt Madonna* or *Meyer Madonna*, which shows the Virgin Mary protecting the kneeling family of the donor. The painting, one of the masterpieces of the northern Renaissance, remained in private hands for centuries, passed through several collections and was sold in 2011 to a German collector, the entrepreneur Reinhold Würth, in a transaction reported at a price of several tens of millions of euros; it is exhibited in Schwäbisch Hall.³ The history of this painting, from its commission by a Basel money changer to its sale as one of the most expensive old master

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paintings ever sold in Germany, illustrates the transformation of art into an asset class, which Part H examines in connection with Art Basel and the modern art market.

Holbein's other works in Basel include the *Dead Christ in the Tomb* of 1521/22, a disturbing image of the body of Christ that Dostoevsky saw in Basel in 1867 and that plays a role in his novel *The Idiot*, and a series of woodcuts of the *Dance of Death*, which was published in Lyon in 1538. The Kunstmuseum Basel owns the largest collection of Holbein's works in the world, largely thanks to the Amerbach cabinet, which Basilius Amerbach assembled in the second half of the sixteenth century and which the city and the university acquired in 1661.

1 Notes

1. On Hans Holbein the Younger (1497/98–1543), his activity in Basel (1515–1526 and 1528–1532) and his later career in England, see HLS, article "Holbein, Hans d. J."; the publications of the Kunstmuseum Basel. Dates to be verified. ↩
2. Hans Holbein the Younger, double portrait of Jakob Meyer zum Hasen and Dorothea Kannengiesser, 1516, Kunstmuseum Basel. On Meyer's profession as a money changer and the coin in the portrait, see the museum's catalogue entry. To be verified. ↩
3. On the Darmstadt Madonna (Meyer Madonna) by Hans Holbein the Younger (c. 1526/28), its sale in 2011 to the Würth collection and its display in the Johanniterkirche, Schwäbisch Hall, see the press reports and the Würth collection's publications. Price to be verified. ↩

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