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## SWISS MINISTER OPENS HOLBEIN EXHIBITION at the Victoria and Albert Museum on Monday, 15th November, 1943.

That a country, which is fighting for its very existence in one of the most terrible wars in history, can spare the time, and muster enough support to honour a foreign artist, is a remarkable achievement.

Through the intermediary of the President of the Board of Education, an exhibition in honour of the 400th anniversary of the death of Hans Holbein the younger, has been arranged at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

As a compliment to our country, to which he belonged, the Swiss Minister was asked to open this exhibition.

A most representative gathering, consisting of foreign diplomats, art connoisseurs and the Press, assembled at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Mr. R. A. Butler, the President of the Board of Education, was in the Chair, and on the platform was the Swiss Minister, accompanied by Madame Thurnheer and the Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

After a short address by the President of the Board of Education, in which he paid a high tribute to our country-man, as one of the finest artists throughout the centuries, he asked Monsieur Thurnheer to open this fourth centenary exhibition.

The Swiss Minister said:

Some time ago, the Minister of Education told me about his intention to arrange a Holbein Exhibition on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the painter's death. He asked me to open the Exhibition. I owe this privilege to the fact that Holbein was Swiss and every Swiss is, I know, most appreciative of the way in which Mr. Butler is honouring the memory of this great artist.

The origin of Holbein's ancestry is not fully known, but although he was born in Augsburg, Germany, probably in 1497 or 98, there is good reason to believe that his family came from central Switzerland. It is known that when his father was baptised in Augsburg, the grandfather, Michael, came from Basle to assist at the ceremony. He is mentioned in the townbook as a butcher of Basle. After having spent his childhood in Germany, the young Hans Holbein arrived in Switzerland and settled in Basle, probably in the year 1515. Altogether he must have lived there for about fifteen years.

Since the beginning of the 16th century, Basle had been a centre of the European humanism. The town owed this position partly to the fact that it was the seat of one of the oldest universities north of the Alps. Two great personalities of that time had chosen Basle as their home for a number of years, Erasmus of Rotterdam and Hans Holbein. It was a very prosperous town and the wealthy merchants fostered the arts and science — all this combined to make Basle a place of interest to artists and scientists.

Having arrived in Basle at the age of seventeen, Holbein, according to the customs of the time, became apprentice to an artist who was a member of the Guild. Several people of importance very soon became interested in Holbein and proffered him their protection. One of these men, Jacob Meyer, Banker and later Mayor of Basle, came to play a

big role in his life. In 1516, he invited Holbein to paint him and his wife; this was the first work of this kind, which was followed later on by numerous other portraits of important people of his time.

Thanks to Jacob Meyer, the Town Council asked Holbein to paint the frescoes of the Town Hall. It was also for Meyer that he painted his famous "Madonna." He came in contact, not only with wealthy and influential merchants, but also with literary people. For one of these, known under the name of Myconius, he illustrated a copy of "L'Eloge de la Folie." When Erasmus of Rotterdam saw a small portrait of himself amongst the drawings in the margin, he is said to have exclaimed "If Erasmus was still so young, he would at once take a wife."

Having finished his studies, Holbein set out for travels in Switzerland and perhaps went even so far south as Northern Italy. After his travels as a journeyman were over, he returned to Basle and became on September 25th, of the year 1519, a member of the painters' guild, which bore the delightful name "Guild of Heaven." In the guildbook one can still read: "The painter Hans Holbein was received into the Guild on the Sunday before the day of St. Michel in the year 1519, and has sworn to observe the rules of the Guild as does every other member of the painters' guild." On this occasion he had to pay to the Guild the sum of one pound three shillings. The following year he became officially citizen of Basle and married there the daughter of a Swiss tanner.

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With the exception of a journey to France, he lived in Basle until 1526. During these years, he painted a great number of his most famous paintings. They are so well known that I do not need to mention them all, but it is interesting to know that the Town Council which had given him the task of painting the frescoes for the City Hall were so enchanted by what he had done, that they paid him 120 florins even *before* his work was completed. This simple fact meant a lot, as the burghers of Basle were very careful how they spent their money. In the portrait Holbein has painted of the Burgomaster, he pictures him clasping a gold coin in his hand. Here should also be mentioned that he painted no less than three portraits of Erasmus of Rotterdam, which shows how intimate the bonds were that existed between Holbein and the intellectuals of his time. Allow me, finally, to mention one more portrait which hangs in the Museum of Basle, that of Boniface Amerbach, professor of Law at Basle University. I do this because it is largely due to Amerbach, who was a friend of Holbein, that the valuable collection of his paintings in Basle was made possible.

During Holbein's life-time religious dissensions became more and more intense and as the Reformation gained the upper hand, a hostility against paintings depicting the saints and the Madonna manifested itself. Consequently it became more difficult for the artists to earn their living. This is no doubt one of the principal reasons why Holbein decided to leave Basle. He went to England, having probably heard glowing descriptions of this country, where so many Swiss during the centuries have made their homes. With the exception of a few visits to Switzerland, he remained in England until his death, 1543. On one of these visits to his country, he brought back the original sketch of his painting of the famous English humanist, Sir Thomas More, with family, as a gift to their friend Erasmus.

As we have seen, Holbein's life as an artist was divided into two separate parts, one English, one Swiss. In each country he spent about the same number of years. Strangely enough, of his existing paintings, fifty per cent. were painted in Switzerland, fifty per cent. in England.

May I finish by expressing the hope that one day, when the world is again at peace, Switzerland and England will arrange a joint exhibition of Holbein's paintings.

Our common love and admiration for his works is yet another tie in the very old friendship which for centuries has bound our two countries.

And now, with the Minister's permission, I have the honour to declare this Exhibition open.

Monsieur Thurnheer was followed by the Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, who in his turn associated himself with the previous speakers in eulogizing the work of this eminent artist whose name has become famous throughout the world. —

I might mention here, that at present, Holbein's painting of Christina of Denmark, Duchess of Milan, a proposed wife for Henry VIII, is exhibited at the National Gallery, as the picture of the month. —

Owing to war-time conditions the display is restricted principally to reproductions, with the exception of a notable group of original miniatures from the collections of the Duke of Buccleuch, Lord Methuen

and of the Victoria and Albert Museum itself, amongst them the famous and exquisite "Mrs. Pemberton" one of the finest gems of its kind, which has been acquired by the Victoria and Albert. —

The fact that the majority of the exhibits are reproductions, does not impair the enjoyment of this exhibition; when one considers that no small number of Holbein's creations consist of drawings which lend themselves exceedingly well for reproductions.

No admirer of Holbein should miss the very fine collection of reproductions published by Dr. Ganz of Basle.

Most interesting are the pen and wash studies for wall paintings, as well as the various designs for jewelry.

Amongst the photographs of the original oil paintings, one comes across such famous works as :

Virgin and Child, The Agony in the Garden, The Last Supper, Magdalena Offenburg as Venus, The Scourging of Christ, The Passion, The Dead Christ in the Tomb (to me a remarkably beautiful work) Madonna and Child with the Meyer family, Jakob Meyer, Mayor of Basle, Holbein and his family, all in possession of the Basle Kunstmuseum, and no doubt known to many of our compatriots.

Considering that Holbein died at a relatively early age (he was 45 when he died) his creative work was enormous and he can be counted as one of the most prolific artists. The numerous paintings and drawings exhibited at such Institutions as the Louvre, Paris, Vienna Gallery, Berlin and Dresden Galleries, Kunstmuseum Basle and Solothurn, Washington Gallery, Uffizi Gallery Florence, Hague Royal Museum, Rome National Gallery, National Gallery London, Wallace Collection, London Windsor, Longford and Hampton Court Castles, etc., etc., are proofs of his prodigious artistic achievements.

I warmly recommend this really fine exhibition, which will be open to the public free until the end of February 1944.

England has made a *beau geste* in honouring one of Switzerland's most famous men, let all Swiss repudiate the saying "that a prophet is without honour in his own country" showing their appreciation by flocking to view this Hobbien collection.

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