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HANS HOLBEIN.

In the realm of the arts the appeal of the beautiful and the perfect is universal and the nationality of the creative artist has little importance. It is pleasing, though, to reflect that in the case of Hans Holbein the younger (so-called to distinguish him from his father) it was on Swiss soil that his genius flowered to maturity.

He came to Basle in 1515, a young man of 18, accompanied by his brother Ambrosius. An uncle, Sigismund, was at that time already living in Switzerland, exercising the profession of painter in Berne. The Holbein family in Ausburg had fallen on evil times and it is probable that the young brothers left their birthplace under the necessity of earning a livelihood. The town of Basel no doubt attracted them because of the reputation it enjoyed as a seat of learning and a centre of artistic appreciation. The University of Basle was world-famous and the town was the home of many eminent writers and thinkers. It was an age of intellectual and artistic awakening. The Renaissance and the Reformation were stirring the minds and the influence of the humanists had begun to make itself felt.

Into this atmosphere young Holbein brought his talent. He soon found employment, at first as a painter of signboards and decorative house panels and in due course as a painter of portraits. His reputation grew rapidly, prominent people sat to him for their portraits, he painted altar-pieces and religious pictures and designed title pages for books printed in Switzerland. Among the latter were Thomas More's "Utopia," published by Froben in 1518, Luther's translation of the Bible printed in Zurich by Froschovér and others. He also illustrated the earlier works by Erasmus. One of the most famous of his youthful productions was the "Totentanz," a series of small wood-cuts, engraved by Luetzelburger. His best-known early portraits are those of Jacob Meyer, the Burgomaster of Basle, of Amerbach and Froben, the printers' and of Erasmus and Melanchton. The Solothurn Madonna also dates from his earlier days.

In 1517 Holbein lived for a short time in Lucerne. He soon returned to Basle, was made a member of the painters' guild and became an honoured citizen of the town. What prompted him to emigrate to England is not known, but in 1527 he arrived in London where he spent the rest of his life apart from two visits to Basle, one in 1528 and another in 1538. His wife did not accompany him, she remained in Basle with her children none of whom, by the way, seems to have inherited their father's talent.

In London he was admitted to the household of Sir Thomas More, the statesman and accomplished scholar who expiated on the scaffold his refusal to countenance Henry the Eighth's first divorce. The painting of the More family is lost but an original sketch is preserved in the Museum of Basle. During the next ten years Holbein executed a large number of portraits and established a great reputation. He was invited to enter the King's service and in 1536 was appointed official court painter at the princely salary of £30 a year. He was now at the height of his fame. The whole of Henry the Eighth's colourful court lives in the portraits he painted at that time. Chief among them is that terrible picture of the King himself, a magnificent, bloated figure complete with the small eyes and the cruel mouth of the Tudor despot. After the death of Jane Seymour, Henry's third queen, Holbein was sent to Brussels in order to paint the portrait of the young Duchess of Milan who is reported to have said she would gladly marry Henry if she had two heads. This lovely picture is now in the National Gallery. His next commission was a painting of Anne of Cleves who became Henry's fourth wife and whom he divorced six months later to marry the 18-year-old Court beauty Katheryn Howard.

Holbein's industry was remarkable. Many of his works are lost but some two hundred of his drawings and paintings can be seen in the art galleries of the world. Their outstanding merit is simplicity of design, a bold strong outline, exquisite draughtsmanship and the art of making the subjects seem alive.

His personal appearance can be judged from a self-portrait, the last of his known paintings, now in a private collection. It shows the bearded face of a man in the prime of life with regular features and calm, thoughtful eyes.

He died of the plague in 1543 and is probably buried in one of the plague-pits into which, at the height of the pestilence, the bodies of the victims were indiscriminately thrown.

Of his private life practically nothing is known and such scanty information as is available rests largely on circumstantial evidence. A side-light on his later years is thrown by his will, discovered in 1861 in the archives of St. Paul's cathedral. It contains a direction to pay 7/6 a month for the "kynting of my two chylder which be at nurse." Who the mother was and what became of the two "chylder" remains a tantalizing mystery.

One thing is certain: Basle and London share between them the honour of having harboured, four hundred years ago, one of the greatest artists the world has ever known.

J.J.F.S.

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