

## The ‘Unusual Character’ of Holbein’s *Ambassadors*

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*To seek the essence of perception is to declare  
that perception is not what we presume to be true,  
but what we define as our access to truth.*

— Maurice Merleau-Ponty

### 1. Introduction

Widely recognized as one of the most intriguing portraits painted during the Renaissance, Holbein’s *Ambassadors* has not only been the subject of continual scholarly and interpretative attention but, following Lacan and Lyotard, has also become one of the most popular visual icons used, if not abused, in the service of post-structuralist writing. Holbein’s *Ambassadors* is, indeed, a painting that calls for, if not demands, an interpretation. The artificial setting of the two figures, the surrounding array of emblematic objects, the anamorphic composition that disrupts the placidity of the foreground, together with the half-hidden crucifix in the upper left corner—all seem to suggest the deficiency of a literal treatment of the painting, and call for one or another kind of figurative reading [Fig. 1].\*

In this paper, however, I wish to offer a different approach to the problem of meaning in the painting. I shall argue that the

*Ambassadors* is a painting that involves a secret, but that revelation of this secret cannot be effected by an inquiry founded on the contrast between literal and figurative meaning. Moreover, I shall try to show how the secret of the *Ambassadors* only discloses itself once we embrace the visuality of the painting rather than attempt to transcend it.

Yet, before I do so, allow me to first describe the type of approach I wish to circumvent. The *Ambassadors* is indeed a painting that does not permit us to make do with what the eye sees. On the one hand, it invites the viewer into the scene shared by two Frenchmen, luring our gaze to ensconce itself in an intricate matrix of masterfully detailed objects and materials while, at the same time, also contesting the authority of the eye and challenging any literal understanding of what is being seen. The painting makes clear that it presents the viewer a completely staged scene, organized, as such, by an active, albeit covert, intention. The site where the two ambassadors stand is manifestly nondescript. Its elaborate setting seems to have been constructed for the sole purpose of being painted. Nor does the *Ambassadors* offer any simple way of understanding the sundry objects on display within it. Such idiosyncratic elements as a lute with a broken string, or a flute case without one of its flutes, problematizes the possibility of a straightforward display of wealth. And, in fact, understand-



1) Hans Holbein the Younger, «Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve (*The Ambassadors*)», 1533, London, National Gallery.

ing that the relation between the men and the objects cannot simply be one of ownership is the typical starting point in attempts to discover the painting's hidden meanings.

Hence, the interpretation of Holbein's *Ambassadors* has long been implicated in a matrix of puzzles thought to require identification and the assignment of appropriate symbolic / emblematic meanings to the objects being depicted. For example, if the globes, quadrants and dials on the upper shelf represent the study of heavenly bodies, how exactly are they relevant to the lives or to the self-presentation of the ambassadors? In what ways are these objects related to the mathematical and musical objects on the lower shelf? Does the particular arrangement of the objects suggest an allusion to the *Trivium* and the *Quadrivium*? Why is one of the lute's strings broken? What is the role of a Lutheran hymnbook in proximity to George de Selve, bishop of Lavaur? Does it reflect de Selve's personal view on the burning issue of Christian disunity, or does it attest to the nature of his diplomatic mission? There are many such questions to be asked.

The complexity of these queries and the puzzlement they provoke increases, however, once we attempt to relate the significance of the objects to the anamorphic composition for which the portrait is so famous. Thus, for example, if we understand the figure of the distorted skull to be a *memento mori* we need to account for the relationship between the thematics of mortality and the ambassadors' apparent confidence in the sciences and arts, an expression of the human capacity to master the world. How, then, should this mysterious intimation of death be understood? Perhaps it is indicative of the illness and melancholy that tainted Dinteville's stay in England and, as such, serves only as a subjective perspective complementing the picture's main thrust. Or is this hidden image supposed to reveal a deeper vantage, one from which the vanity of all human learning and intellectual effort is disclosed? Does the concealed image of the skull ultimately negate the painting's apparent (humanistic) optimism? If so, should we specifically understand this negation—after Baltrusaitis, for example—as an expression of the views expounded by the magus Agrippa in his *De vanitate scientiarum*?<sup>1</sup>

I shall not address any of these prototypical questions in this paper. In fact, I shall try to keep these very interesting matters bracketed since I believe that they ultimately prevent us from reckoning with the fundamental puzzle of the painting. What I wish to do, instead, is to propose a new interpretation of the painting's enigmatic *core* and, at the same time, to explain why I think that the history of scholarly debate concerning the *Ambassadors* typically elides the painting's actual essence. My own point of departure for looking and thinking about the *Ambassadors* is philosophical, and more particular-

ly phenomenological. Of course, after postmodernism, phenomenology can no longer mean what it meant for Husserl or even for Merleau-Ponty. In employing the term 'phenomenology' in the contemporary context, I am primarily interested in a mode of reflection that resists the common philosophical temptation of subjecting the visual to the textual, a reflection capable of engaging the particular visuality of the *Ambassadors* without turning the painting into a mere illustration of a given theoretical position. This also means, however, that phenomenology is a manner of thinking that refuses to commit itself to any closed methodological or conceptual framework. We might even say, with Wittgenstein, that, in a fundamental sense, 'there is no such thing as phenomenology, but there are indeed phenomenological problems.'<sup>2</sup>

I shall now turn to show that the enigma of Holbein's *Ambassadors* assumes the form of such a problem.

## 2. The Appearance of the Unusual

In order to begin to see the alternative interpretative approach I have in mind, let us return to Mary Hervey's *Holbein's 'Ambassadors'* (1900) which established the field for investigation of the painting. In her introduction to this seminal work, Hervey writes as follows:

'The unusual character of the picture, the curiosity it has aroused, the complex and fascinating setting in which the two friends are placed seem to call for something more than a mere chronicle of its history. It is impossible to repress the question, what manner of men were these? Or to resist the desire to know how far the actual circumstances of their lives explain the choice of the many striking objects with which they are seen surrounded. As a matter of fact, a closer acquaintance in which they stood to contemporary thought and events, throws a flood of light on many points which, at first, appear obscure. In the history of their life and times is to be found the solution to any enigmas suggested by their *entourage*.'<sup>3</sup>

According to Hervey, the need for a comprehensive account of the *Ambassadors* arises directly from the painting's unusual character. Moreover, as she tells us, Holbein's portrait is so uniquely puzzling it unavoidably inflames one's desire to understand it. At first glance, Hervey's emphasis on the perplexing effect of the portrait may seem a rhetorical gesture, a slightly romanticized expression, if you will, of her conviction that the allegorical complexity of the painting not only needs to be untangled, but that it provides an intellectu-





2) Hans Holbein the Younger, detail of «The Ambassadors»: anamorphosis.

ally challenging and worthwhile subject for research and interpretation. In the century of scholarship produced since, this is precisely the meaning of such terms as 'unusual,' 'exceptional,' and even 'intriguing' that are commonly applied to the *Ambassadors*. That is to say, the inadequacy of a literal understanding of the *Ambassadors* has become one of the painting's 'trademarks'.

If we read Hervey more carefully, however, we may find her introductory words to contain another, deeper insight, one that, in my view, distinguishes her as having a particular sensitivity that eludes most of her successors. While Hervey clearly shares with subsequent interpreters the desire to decipher the emblematic aspects of the *Ambassadors*, her study is also driven by the puzzling presence of the portrait itself, i.e., its

'unusual character' and 'fascinating' appearance, as well as the 'curiosity' it provokes. In other words, Hervey's initial description of the painting is responsive to—even if not fully aware of—a sense in which the visuality of the painting can be said to be unusually enigmatic, enigmatic in a way above and beyond its specific emblematic, hidden references. More specifically, we may observe that in her opening exclamation of wonder Hervey acknowledges the distinct manner in which the painting shows itself, that is, the *Ambassadors*'s intriguing form of appearance.

Hervey herself did not reflect any further on the significance of the portrait's unusual appearance. But if we follow her initial insight, new and heretofore unnoticed questions arise. First, once we face, following Hervey, the 'unusual character' of the *Ambassadors*, we will need to recognize, and address, the fact that this is indeed an extraordinary painting. That is, we would need to interpret, and not simply be impressed by the fact that the *Ambassadors* is unique among Holbein's portraits, and that it is also unprecedented within the wider context of 16<sup>th</sup> century portraiture. In doing so, we will be taking an important step in facing the enigma of the *Ambassadors*.

How can the portrait's singularity, however, be spelled out? In what sense do we (can we) speak of Holbein's *Ambassadors* as a 'unique' or 'unusual' portrait? In the most straightforward manner—that is, without yet opening the question of the philosophical or phenomenological status of uniqueness—'unusual' means atypical, out of the ordinary, or, in this context, containing features not shared by most other paintings created during the same period. Once we focus on this sense of the painting's unusualness, we immediately notice several prominent features.

### 3. Two Unusual Features

The first striking feature of the *Ambassadors* is its impressive anamorphic composition [Fig. 2]. The hidden skull lying across the floor of the *Ambassadors* is generally acknowledged to be one of the earliest and most highly sophisticated examples of anamorphosis. But because it is also widely known that 'using the distortion known as anamorphosis, was not unusual in the sixteenth century', and that 'anamorphosis appears to have been somewhat fashionable',<sup>4</sup> Holbein's use of this technique is often discussed in a matter-of-fact way. In other words, discussion of Holbein's anamorphosis that acknowledges the general availability of this technique in the sixteenth century often leaves Holbein's daring use of this device unnoticed.

Therefore, I suggest that we concentrate, instead, on the sense, or the extent, to which Holbein's use of anamorphosis differs from, and transcends, the more common applications of this device as a playful form of illusionism or visual trickery. In doing so, however, we need to recognize that the standard comparisons made with other sixteenth century anamorphic works (such as Schon's woodcut portraits of Charles V and Emperor Ferdinand, or the 'painted witticism' of William Scrots' *Anamorphosis of Edward VI*) actually hide more than they reveal [Fig. 3a, b]. That is to say, we need to understand that Holbein's transformation of the anamorphic technique into a serious and meaningful artistic device, and his profound ability to integrate this device into the figurative and thematic complexity of a serene portrait, were completely unprecedented.

While recognizing the distinctiveness of Holbein's anamorphosis within the wider context of sixteenth century portraiture, we should also note its significance vis-a-vis Holbein's own work as well. In surveying the œuvre of this great portraitist we not only notice that anamorphosis is used nowhere else in his art, but we are not at all surprised by that fact. Holbein's mode of engagement with the visible—his expressive precision, his intimate yet rigorous exploration of the human face, and his attentive dedication to the physiognomy of specific men, women and children—does not seem to naturally lend itself to the kind of visual uncanniness evidenced in the *Ambassadors*'s anamorphic skull. We might put it another way and say that the *Ambassadors*'s anamorphic composition stands out as a rare and singular, and almost foreign, gesture within Holbein's artistic lexicon. (This may suggest that the initiative for painting the distorted skull was that of the person who commissioned the painting, Jean de Dinteville.)<sup>5</sup>

Now, whereas the anamorphic skull is a feature of the painting that interpreters never fail to mention, the *Ambassadors*'s contains another quite exceptional feature that is hardly ever noticed. I am referring to the green curtain appearing behind Dinteville and de Selve. The use of a background curtain is, in itself, a prevalent convention in Renaissance portraiture and is, in fact, common in Holbein's work. But once more carefully considered, the green curtain in the *Ambassadors* emerges as being quite distinct from any other background curtain painted by Holbein. We may observe that what makes this curtain singular in character is its theatricality, or, better yet, its implied suggestion of a hidden reality behind-the-scenes.

To be more specific, let us first note that Holbein uses the device of a background curtain in two basic ways. First, in such works as *Venus and Cupid* (1525-6), *Portrait of Charles*





3a) William Scrots, «Anamorphosis of Edward VI», 1546, London, National Portrait Gallery.

*de Solier* (1534), or *Portrait of an Unknown Gentleman with Music Books and Lute* (1534), one can point to a voluminous curtain that functions as a backdrop in the full sense of the word. Through its accentuated materiality, its expressive and abundant oblique folding, and its facile play of light and shadow, this kind of curtain embodies the ultimate background of the painted scene, the evident and unequivocal limit of the painting's depth. In this respect, the textile of the curtain functions in a manner similar to that in common backgrounds of flat areas of one color [Fig. 4].

The second type of curtain employed by Holbein is one that retains the form and ornamental function of domestic drapes. It is found in such works as the three-quarter-face portrait of Erasmus (1523) or the portrait of Sir Henry Guildford (1527). Curtains of this kind typically appear hanging in clear vertical folds (usually from a horizontal hanger). They occupy only part—a third or less—of the painting's background. Being drawn, they reveal the actual confines of the scene: the wall behind them [Fig. 5].<sup>6</sup>

In looking at the curtain in the *Ambassadors*, however, we notice that while sharing the material qualities of the second type of domestic drapery, it does not function in the manner typical of those drapes. Furthermore, the curtain in the *Ambassadors* neither opens up to an inner wall nor constitutes the measure of the scene's inner depth.

The curtain in Holbein's *Ambassadors*, the curtain with its clear divisions of vertical folds, is stretched across the room, occupying the entire background of the portrait. With its tremendous size, together with the orderly, serene manner in which it hangs, the curtain not only constitutes the background, but is an element of the scene itself. Hanging across the entire room, hovering about an inch above the floor, sepa-



3b) William Scrots, as in previous Fig., oblique view.



4) Hans Holbein the Younger, «Charles de Soliers, Sieur de Morette», 1534-5, Dresden, Gemäldgalerie—Alte Meister.

rated from the magnificent pavement by a thin horizontal black line—the curtain calls attention to itself as precisely that which hangs, a hanging. It is what divides the original space of the *Ambassadors* into the visible and the invisible. Moreover, as we consider the partially revealed crucifix behind the upper left corner of the curtain, the possibility of a reality existing behind the curtain is underscored. That is, instead of defining the interior bounds of the scene—establishing a clear limit for the viewer's gaze—the curtain suggests the presence of a depth beyond itself. Before we develop this point further, we need to take a step back and elaborate the connection between the problematics of the green curtain and the anamorphic skull.

These are two features of the painting whose uniqueness is commonly taken for granted. Yet, that uniqueness is not just



5) Hans Holbein the Younger, «Erasmus», 1523, London, private Collection on loan to the National Gallery.

a question of their rarity in Holbein's oeuvre. The ultimate issue here is the peculiarity of the form of their appearance, or, in other words, the specificity of their visual presence. Hence, the first thing to notice is that the distorted skull and curtain are not *objects*, properly speaking. In contrast to the numerous objects on display in the *Ambassadors* (for instance, the globe, the book, the lute), the skull and curtain are singular in the manner in which they participate in the perspectival space opened by the painting. They do not take up the space of the room in the same distinctive way as do the other objects in the

painting. They cannot even be said to be contained *within* the visual space of the *Ambassadors* for they do not occupy, or fill, a clear and distinct portion of the depicted interior<sup>7</sup>. Can we nonetheless positively characterize the visual presence of these two elements?

To begin with, it is possible to describe the initial appearance of the curtain in terms of its literal function in the painting, that is, its function as a background. In that sense, while lacking the form of an object (in the terms discussed above), the curtain presents itself to the viewer as the visual ground that grants the objects in the painting their presence. We might want here to make use of the phenomenological notion of a 'horizon,' following the interest of Husserl or Merleau-Ponty in developing a reflective sensitivity to the 'dimly apprehended depth or fringe of indeterminate reality'.<sup>8</sup> I think that visual indeterminacy is also characteristic of the appearance of the anamorphic skull, which, however, does not take the form of a 'horizon', but functions from within the very center of the painting. Hence, in commonly identifying the anamorphic composition with the form of a human skull, interpreters typically fail to address the significance of this indeterminate appearance as an (autonomous) element in the painting's overall composition. In other words, the interpretative focus on the hidden content of the distorted image, on the distinctive object in which the distortion assumes full coherence, prohibits a discussion of the visual presence of the disfigured appearance itself, a discussion that would address the meaningful fact that one of the more significant elements within the visual field of the painting is an unusual, rather large, indeterminate, and unrecognizable shape.<sup>9</sup>

In focusing on the actual appearance of this oblong shape, however, its disturbing presence becomes entirely obvious. The shape not only belies perceptual coherence but, in its very incoherence, calls attention to itself as a manifestly intriguing element that cannot be understood within the painting's general syntax of clear, distinct objects. The anamorphosis takes a visual form unsettling to the eye, presenting itself as that which the eye cannot grasp, as that upon which the eye cannot settle. This returns us to the structural similarity between the anamorphic composition and the background curtain. Neither the curtain nor the distorted appearance function as distinct objects in the painting. At the same time, both appear to the eye as a limit, or a constraint, on its visual potential. And, in fact, precisely in barring the eye from a covert range of visual possibilities these two elements testify to a dimension of the painting that the eye cannot immediately see. In referring to a dimension beyond their own visibility, the distorted shape and the green curtain speak for, and tell us something important about, the character of the painting as a whole. They tell us that the *modus operandi* of the

*Ambassadors* is regulated by a principle of concealment. The *Ambassadors* is a painting that hides by showing.

I wish to suggest that the two aforementioned elements provide the viewer with a crucial clue as to how to look at the *Ambassadors*. Thinking of the view, or of the visual field, opened by the painting, we can tentatively make a distinction between that which structures the specific visibility of this field and that which appears *in* the already structured visual field. This is a distinction between the structural conditions and the contents of the painting. Since we have observed, however, that the anamorphic composition and the curtain cannot simply be seen as emblematic objects in the painting, we may well want to understand them as being elements of a second order, as structuring elements that testify to the conditions framing the view opened by the painting.

In this respect, these two elements serve as keys for unlocking the visual order underlying the painting. The first thing they open up, or reveal, is the living presence of an aspect of the painting that, because of the painting's mode of presentation, the average viewer cannot see. I mean here that the anamorphic composition and the curtain allow us to recognize the fact that concealment is integral to how the painting communicates—that the painting speaks of what it does not want to say. Most simply, the painting is concerned with a secret.

#### 4. The Logic of Anamorphosis

There is more here than a simple allusion to the hidden presence of a secret. The principle of anamorphosis, in fact, allows us to take a step further. Anamorphosis is a visual cryptogram. It is a perspectival technique through which a given visual image escapes legibility when viewed from a standard—a conventional, or ordinary—perspective but which, at the same time, allows an illegible image to assume full coherence when viewed from an unexpected point of view.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the algorithm by which anamorphic technique encodes a given visual image is based on an alteration of that specific point of view on which the perspectival construction and reconstruction of the painting are so dependent. And so, the first step in deciphering an anamorphic composition consists in relinquishing one's ordinary perspective in favor of a completely new one.<sup>11</sup>

This is how I propose interpreting the anamorphic device displayed in the *Ambassadors*. In other words, in addition to the specifically meaningful hidden image of a skull, I believe that the presence of anamorphosis is in itself suggestive of the need to replace one's conventional view of the painting. More specifically, the *Ambassadors*'s anamorphosis not only declares the existence of a secret in the painting, but also



includes an instruction on how to unlock it: through a structural alteration of the viewer's perspective.

Still, how can we then see, or gain access to, the allegedly hidden dimension of the painting? The logic of anamorphosis teaches us that what is hidden is not so because it belongs to an inaccessible depth of the painting. What we attempt to see can indeed be found in the surface and should not be sought beyond it. In other words, there is nothing in the painting's actual appearance that bars us from seeing what we do not see. Our inability to apprehend the painting's 'secret' stems, rather, from the manner in which we habitually position ourselves when regarding the painting. Our sightlessness, in this context, is the result of our common tendency to take the painting's form of appearance for granted. Disclosure of the *Ambassadors*'s secret does not entail transcending the visual but, as Wittgenstein remarks in a context unrelated to the painting, in articulating 'observations which no one has doubted' and yet 'which have escaped remark only because they are always before our eyes'.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, if the secret of the *Ambassadors* eludes us because it is 'always before our eyes', we need to allow that which is before our eyes to lose its obviousness. We must alter our perspective in such a way so that the most obvious feature of the painting no longer seems so obvious but, in fact, is revealed as a completely contingent, questionable, and somewhat inaccessible fact—a secret.

What, then, is the most obvious, yet still the most enigmatic, or questionable, feature of the *Ambassadors*? In my view, it is the very joint portraiture of Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve.

## 5. The Double Portrait

The double representation of the two Frenchmen is the thematic frame of the painting. As such, it hardly calls attention to itself as questionable at all. But as we study this representation in the general context of Renaissance portraiture, we cannot but recognize that it is what ultimately makes the *Ambassadors* such an exceptionally curious portrait. Within the wide domain of Renaissance portraiture there are very few—not more than a handful of—portraits that resemble the *Ambassadors* in terms of type of subject. In the specific terms of sixteenth century double portraiture, the *Ambassadors* not only depicts the significantly less common instance of a pair of males, but stands out in particular in its failure to define the nature of the relationship between the two men. We may generalize that, in contrast to the *Ambassadors*, double portraits of the period (whether Italian or Northern) present one of several

types of relationship: family ties, holy (that is, apostolic) association, or political or institutional affiliation.

In our case, however, there is no clear designation for this joint representation of the two men, although the painting's title, 'Ambassadors,' may at first seem to provide one. Yet since the painting was not the product of a dual embassy or a mutual diplomatic mission, but seems to have resulted from a private visit paid by de Selve to his friend Dinteville, the French Ambassador in London, the fact that Dinteville and de Selve both served as diplomats in the service of Francis I is not a sufficient (generic) framework for categorizing this double portrait. Indeed, we can now finally ask a question that typically, and surprisingly, remains unasked, although it is most fundamental to the *Ambassadors*: Why do Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve stand together for a double portrait? What is the reason for the joint representation of these men?

In the literature devoted to the *Ambassadors* we find a limited discussion of the significance of de Selve's visit to London in the spring of 1533, the occasion of the painting. However, the various and inconclusive attempts to determine if the motivation for this visit was private or political make no room whatsoever for asking why these two friends chose to stand for a double portrait and what they wished to convey in their joint self-presentation. I believe that once we allow such questions to surface their importance for interpreting the painting becomes evident. If we agree that the basic function of Renaissance portraiture was understood as commemorative,<sup>13</sup> we can no longer avoid asking what Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve wished to commemorate. More specifically, if we agree to identify Dinteville as the man 'behind the painting,' that is, not only responsible for commissioning it but also deeply involved in elaborating its contents—the same Dinteville who was, at the same time, anticipating his return to France—we need to ask ourselves why it was significant for him to pose together with de Selve for that magnificent portrait he knew would soon return home with him to the Chateau of Polisy.

In asking these questions we have shifted our perspective of the painting, shifted our focus from the objects appearing in the painting to what has always been 'before our eyes' but has refused to appear in the form of an object and which we now recognize to be the main concern of the painting. The *Ambassadors* is a painting dedicated to the relationship between Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve. Furthermore, it is a painting that conceals its concern with this relationship. It conceals its preoccupation with the secret (of the) relationship between these two men.

I am suggesting several things here. First, I claim that interpretations of the *Ambassadors* should no longer be governed by the predominant conception by which 'visually [the



6) Jan van Eyck, «The Arnolfini Marriage», 1434, London, National Gallery.

painting] consists of two psychologically discrete portraits which are united by a single emblematic scheme.<sup>14</sup> Following the painting's 'anamorphic logic', we are now in a position to see that the painting consists of one psychologically related whole, a depiction of a particular human bond that only appears to be divided due to the presence of a complex and manifold emblematic scheme. To put it more directly, we may say that the intimate relationship between Dinteville and de Selve is the main concern of the *Ambassadors* in the same sense that the relation between Giovanni Arnolfini and his wife is the central concern of van Eyck's double portrait [Fig. 6]. At the same time, however, since the peculiarity of the *Ambassadors* arises from the indirect, if not underhanded, manner by which the painting chooses to express its concern, I am led to believe that the intimate relationship between the two Frenchmen is of a kind that could not be openly expressed, a relationship that asks, or needs, to remain a secret.

## 6. The Enigmatic Character of the *Ambassadors*

I do not think that the secret of a human relationship can ever be fully explicated. However, in this context, I find it reasonable to think of Dinteville and de Selve as sharing a 'forbidden' intimacy. Dinteville and de Selve were personal friends about whose friendship we have almost no evidence at all. In the two 17<sup>th</sup> century documents that enabled Mary Hervey to establish their identity, Dinteville is referred to as de Selve's '*intime amy*'.<sup>15</sup> The term '*intime*' is probably not used here in any secretive or sexual way. At the same time, these senses are a part of the connotative range of the 17<sup>th</sup> century French usage of the word. In this respect, they are not entirely foreign here. In a letter that provides the only known first-person testimony regarding the friendship between these two men, Dinteville briefly mentions to his brother that de Selve had visited him in London.

"Monsr. De Lavour m'a fait cest honneur de me venir veoir, qui ne m'a esté petit plaisir.  
Il n'est point de besoing que Mr. le grant maistre en entende rien."<sup>16</sup>

Dinteville's condensed allusion does not reveal the nature of his rapport with de Selve, but the tension between his use of the phrase 'no small pleasure' and his immediate request to keep this 'pleasure' unspoken of may serve as an intuitive lead. Furthermore, we may ask ourselves how, or whether, the intimacy between the two friends is connected to the fact that



7) Master of Frankfurt, «Artist and his Wife», 1500's, Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten.

neither of the men ever married. Whereas for de Selve, bishop of Lavaur, marriage was not a possibility, Jean de Dinteville was clearly expected to marry. As lord of Polisy, marriage expectations were probably higher for him than any other of the Dinteville brothers.<sup>17</sup>

Another hint concerning the nature of the intimacy between these two men is to be found by looking once again





8) Attributed to Dirck Jacobsz, «Unidentified Couple (*Vanitas*)», 1541, Amsterdams Historisch Museum, Amsterdam.

at their joint portrait. It is often noted in the literature on the *Ambassadors* that one of this highly complex painting's clearest sources is the pictorial tradition, particularly strong in the North, of the emblematic marriage portrait or, more generally, of the portrait of the married couple [Fig. 7].<sup>18</sup> The German, and the German-influenced, e.g., the Venetian, form of portrait of couples not only provides the general scheme for expressing the inner world of its sitters.<sup>19</sup> It also often makes a place for a pictorial meditation on the mortality of its sitters, manifested in the juxtaposition of the figures portrayed to a skull, a crucifix, and other symbols of finitude and temporality such as time measuring instruments, a candle, etc.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to its arrangement of sitters, skull, and crucifix, this portrait tradition also provides a pictorial source for the *Ambassadors*'s enigmatic concealment of the image of the skull. In considering certain German couple portraits from the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, we see, as Campbell for example argues, that they are executed as 'double-sided pictures showing, on the obverses full length portraits of young couples, and, on the reverses images of their decaying corpses'.<sup>21</sup> In other words, these are portraits whose preoccupation with mortality does not present itself in the painting's

immediate pictorial scheme, whose hidden presence of death can only be uncovered (as in the *Ambassadors*) by the viewer's ability to look at things from their 'other side'.

In considering the intimation of death in portraits of married couples the thematics of *vanitas* become crucial. And yet, we need to note that this does not by itself exhaust the matter. Indeed, the theme of mortality is typically more complex in depictions of married couples than in portraits of individuals. In the context of marriage, the fact of human finitude not only bears on one's own life (on one's own relation to God and on the possibility of salvation), but on one's relation to the life of another person. In other words, the preoccupation with mortality in the marriage portrait or in the portrait of the married couple is not limited to the theme of *vanitas*. It applies no less to the mutual commitment undertaken by the husband and wife in the face of death [Fig. 8].<sup>22</sup>

And so, if we read the *Ambassadors* against the background of a pictorial meditation on mortality which we find in portraits of married couples, we also need to recognize that Holbein does not simply 'borrow' specific emblematic elements from these portraits but that he imports a whole psychological framework which allows him to develop the theme of mortality in a specific manner. Mortality is presented in the *Ambassadors* in a manner sensitive to the particular context of the relationship between the depicted figures. In this respect, the appearance of such emblems as the skull and crucifix not only tells us about the painting's concern with death, finitude and salvation, but reflects a specific and prior understanding of the relationship between Dinteville and de Selve, an understanding resting on the pictorial model of marriage.

To illustrate this point more concretely, we may consider one of Holbein's earlier woodcut designs typically described as a thematic and compositional source for the *Ambassadors*. I refer here to the 'Coat of Arms of Death', the closing piece of Holbein's famous woodcut series, *The Dance of Death*, in which two elegantly dressed figures—a man and a woman—stand on either side of a timepiece and a large skull appearing on a shield [Fig. 9]. The gestures and proportions of these figures clearly remind us of those depicted in the *Ambassadors*, and we cannot but see that in both works 'the skull is centered in exactly the same way' between them. As 'the similarity between Holbein's woodcut design and the composition of the *Ambassadors* is striking',<sup>23</sup> the earlier work is often and quite reasonably regarded as one of the compositional precursors. However, in so explicating the relation between these two works, the gender difference between the two couples remains unnoticed, or insignificant. Is there really no significance to the fact that Holbein situates Dinteville and de Selve within a compositional and thematic framework whose original protagonists



9) Hans Holbein the Younger, «The Dance of Death: Coat of Arms of Death», c. 1525, London, British Museum.

were, as he well knows, two lovers, if not, more likely, a husband and a wife? Is this transposition of gender not ultimately tied, via the uncanny effect of masquerade or disguise,<sup>24</sup> to what we have already noted to be the *Ambassadors's* 'intriguing' appearance? And, furthermore, should we not view the solemn, somber appearance of the two men in light of the sarcasm, and provocation, contained in Dinteville's expression, an indication of a self-aware disposition toward the problematic status of, and sense of, implied sin in the depicted friendship?



10) Hans Holbein the Younger, «Christina of Denmark, Duchess of Milan», c. 1538, London, National Gallery.

Once we allow ourselves to consider the marriage portrait as a prism for viewing the *Ambassadors*, the possibility of an analogous intimacy between the two men will be visually supported—‘filled in’ in the Husserlian sense—even if not fully validated. Once we notice, for example, that in marriage portraiture the man typically appears on the left side of the painting (that is, standing to the right of his wife) we shall not be surprised to see that it is, in fact, Jean de Dinteville (the man of flair behind the painting, and the senior among the two friends) who occupies the conventional masculine position. Moreover, by so distinguishing between the traditional visual forms of masculinity and femininity, we open up the possibility of discerning an underlying matrix of nuances, of differences and similarities, through which the two men stand in relation to one another. We may begin in particular to address the relationship between the prototypically different—the ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’—forms of physiognomy, the distinct gestures and body language of the two figures.<sup>25</sup> For example, we might consider the central and significant place of Dinteville’s dagger, or the relation between his hand that holds the dagger and the symmetrical hand of de Selve’s that grasps, or closes, his robe. From a slightly different perspective, we might want to illuminate the apparent ‘femininity’ of de Selve’s posture by tying it to a more general vocabulary of feminine bodily gestures found in representations of women, and specifically in Holbein’s portraits, including his *Christina of Denmark*, *Duchess of Milan* [Fig. 10].

I have, of course, presented a far from exhaustive survey of the material that might help us determine the nature of the relationship between Dinteville and de Selve. It is, moreover, clearly beyond the scope and concern of this paper to attempt

such a historical reconstruction (which would be not only dependent on more sources concerning the actual lives of these men, but on the more general meaning and form of homosexuality during the Renaissance). In this respect, I have raised the possibility of a new of looking at the painting and perhaps opened an avenue for further research.

As noted, my motivation for reflecting on the character of the *Ambassadors* is primarily philosophical. And thus my interest in the question of intimacy between Dinteville and de Selve is a result of a phenomenological attempt to address, or thematically make a place for, the *unusual* or *enigmatic* character of the painting. In other words, I regard this paper as a philosophical response to a crucial yet evasive kind of visual presence that typically escapes the attention of interpreters. Unlike other symbolic or allegorical enigmatic forms, the enigma of the *Ambassadors* is intrinsically visual. It cannot be captured by the language of abstract thought. And it yields only to a kind of thinking that embraces what Merleau-Ponty calls the primacy of perception.

In this sense, I have tried to reveal the *Ambassadors*’s enigma—reveal rather than resolve—by means of a dialogue in which philosophy and painting are equal participants. I have consequently argued that:

- (1) the emblematic objects in the painting do not provide an interpretative key but function, rather, as an obstacle in approaching the painting’s enigma;
- (2) the painting is enigmatic precisely because it is concerned with the presentation of a secret; and
- (3) a shift of focus—from the objects’ allegorical meanings to the secret of the men themselves—is necessary for bringing us face to face with the mystery of the painting.<sup>26</sup>

\* I was introduced to the rich complexities of Holbein’s *Ambassadors*, as a graduate student, in Karsten Harries’ unforgettable lectures on ‘Infinity and Perspective’ at Yale.

<sup>1</sup> J. Baltrusaitis, *Anamorphoses ou Thaumaturgus opticus*, Paris, 1996, pp. 136-139.

<sup>2</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Color*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe, trans. L. McAlister and M. Schattle, Berkeley, 1988, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> M. Hervey, *Holbein’s ‘Ambassadors’: The Picture and the Men*, London, 1900, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> S. Foister, A. Roy and M. Wyld, *Making & Meaning Holbein’s Ambassadors*, London, 1997, p. 50. See also J. S. Ackerman, *Distant Points: Essays in Theory and Renaissance Art and Architecture*, Cambridge, Mass., 1994, p. 102: ‘Anamorphic pictures were popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the best-known example being



the skull placed in the otherwise normally constructed *Ambassadors* by Hans Holbein as a cryptic reference to the frailty of life.'

<sup>5</sup> It seems to me that Dinteville's artistic ambition may be understood against the background of an implied competition with the artistic achievements of Francis I. As I cannot develop this theme here, I shall only point out that it is possible to interpret the *Ambassadors* as a response to Clouet's famous grandiose portrait of the king. From another perspective, it is possible to think of the *Ambassadors*'s anamorphic composition as a counter-response to the anamorphosis Leonardo made for Francis I. On this issue see, for example, M. Kemp's, *The Science of Art: Optical Themes in Western Art from Brunelleschi to Seurat*, New-Haven, 1990, p. 50. Furthermore, if we keep in mind the importance of an aesthetic attitude as characteristic of the court life of Francis I, we can discern its influence on Dinteville. In this context, one can point to the drawing of Dinteville by Clouet (probably a study for a lost painting) or to the portrait of Dinteville by Primaticcio, who was one of the Italian painters invited to France in the service of the king to decorate the palace at Fontainebleau. See R. J. Knecht's *Renaissance Warrior and Patron: The Reign of Francis I*, Cambridge, 1994. An interesting glimpse at the complexity of the relationship between Dinteville and the king is also provided in Elizabeth A. R. Brown's 'Sodomy, Honor, Treason and Exile: Four Documents Concerning the Dinteville Affair (1538-1539)', *Societes et ideologies des temps modernes: hommage a Arlette Jouanna*, Montpellier, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> In certain works, such as *Lais Corinthia* (1526), the obliquely folded, voluminous curtain functions as a backdrop device while also offering the viewer a glimpse of a small portion of a back wall.

<sup>7</sup> We may, moreover, characterize their form of appearance as one lacking, or resisting, closure. That is, the distorted skull and curtain are visual elements not immediately reified by the viewer's gaze, elements which do not submit themselves to perception as definite, fully constituted, entities.

<sup>8</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. Book I: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, trans. F. Kersten, The Hague, 1983, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> To think of the distorted shape as a skull is to frame it as an object.

<sup>10</sup> For a stimulating discussion of the metaphor of anamorphosis in the seventeenth century, and particularly in Descartes's thought, see Karsten Harries, 'Descartes and the Labyrinth of the World' in *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, vol. 6 (Fall 1998), pp. 307-330. See also, Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective*, Cambridge, 2001.

<sup>11</sup> According to Kemp, for example, 'anamorphosis deliberately presents a scrambled image from the anticipated viewpoint, and often leaves the viewer to find the secret of its optical trickery by searching out its wildly improbable viewing position' (Kemp, *The Science of Art*, p. 208).

<sup>12</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford, 1984, p. 125.

<sup>13</sup> L. Campbell, *Renaissance Portraits: European Portrait Painting in the Fourteenth, Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, New-Haven, 1990, p. 193.

<sup>14</sup> J. Pope-Hennessy, *The Portrait in the Renaissance*, Princeton, 1979, p. 248. In O. Bätschmann and P. Griener, *Hans*

*Holbein*, Princeton, 1997, this idea finds expression in an analogy between the structure of the joint portraiture and that of Plutarch's *parallel lives*: 'The two friends are counterpoised 'en parangon' like a pair of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*—an author admires by de Selve and translated by him into French', p.184.

<sup>15</sup> The first document is a seventeenth-century parchment describing the painting and identifying its maker and sitters. Hervey had located and purchased this parchment from an antiquarian bookseller. The second document is a reproduction, dated 1654, of a memorandum drawn up by Camusat concerning the de Selve family, and specifically referring to Georges de Selve, Bishop of Lavaur, and the circumstances in which the *Ambassadors* was painted. The full text, a facsimile copy, and a discussion of these documents are found in Hervey's *Holbein's Ambassadors*, pp. 10-12, 18-21.

<sup>16</sup> Paris, Bibl. Nat., Coll. Dupuy, vol. 726, f.46. See a discussion of the full text of the letter in Hervey, pp. 78-82.

<sup>17</sup> Dinteville died, unmarried, in Polisy in 1555 at the age of fifty. A reexamination of the sodomy charges brought against Dinteville's brother may provide another lead. See, for example, E.A.R. Brown's 'Sodomy, Honor, Treason, Exile and Intrigue'.

<sup>18</sup> We may also think of the *Ambassadors* in comparison to several 'friendship portraits' we find in Italian Mannerism. Yet, in contrast, for example, to the explicitness of Pontormo's portrait in which the figures embrace Cicero's *de Amicitia*, the *Ambassadors* blurs the nature of the relationship between its two subjects.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Lucas Cranach the Elder's portrait of Joannes Cuspinian and his wife.

<sup>20</sup> Commentators often point to the image of Jerome, the scholar-saint sitting in his study, as another important source for the *Ambassadors*'s pictorial meditation on death.

<sup>21</sup> Campbell, *Renaissance Portraits*, p. 54.

<sup>22</sup> It seems to me that this is also the reason that German portraits of couples make such extensive room for moralizing inscriptions.

<sup>23</sup> S. Foister, A. Roy and M. Wyld, *Making & Meaning Holbein's Ambassadors*, p. 48.

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of aspects of 'self-fashioning' in the *Ambassadors* see Stephan Greenblatt's, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare*, Chicago, 1980.

<sup>25</sup> Consider, for example, Dinteville's self-presentation with an eye to what J. Spicer sees as the assertive, clearly masculine 'Renaissance elbow'. See, for example, 'The Renaissance Elbow' in *A Cultural History of Gesture*, eds. J. Bremmer and H. Roodenburg, London, 1993.

<sup>26</sup> If we agree that the unusual appearance of the painting does not issue from its specific contents but from a peculiar form of absence pervading the painting, and if we agree to explicate this absence in a figurative manner, then we may want to think of the *Ambassadors* as a double portrait in which an important third figure is conspicuously missing. This absent figure typically appears in German, or German-influenced, betrothal portraits, linking or personifying the erotic link between the young couple. The name of this figure is Cupid or Eros. In this context see, for example, Lorenzo Lotto's 1523 betrothal portrait of Messer Marsilio and his bride.