

Investigation into Hans Holbein's the Ambassadors

1) First reaction:

When I first saw the picture I did like it. However I found it too general and I couldn't really find its meaning as it has many meticulously painted objects that contrast with each other as they have nothing to do with each other.

When I look at it I see the greatness of life and all the different ways of living. Some people like to feel powerful, others free, others want to love and be loved... therefore what I feel when I look at this artwork is the fragility of life and feelings.

This painting brings to my mind many images. One of them is friendship, as on the painting we see two very different men. One of them is wealthy and rich, and on the other hand, the other man represents the church and religion. However on the painting, in my opinion they are portrayed in a way that they seem equal as they are physically very similar and they look happy together.

2) Description

On the painting we can see many different objects. We can clearly see two globes (one terrestrial and one celestial) which could represent human change and progress, a sun clock and various textiles throughout the and the carpet on the upper shelf which are both mostly composed from Arabic patterns. The choice for the inclusion of the two figures can furthermore be seen as symbolic. One of the figures is in wealthy and most probably expensive clothes which does reference to its social and economical position while the other figure is dressed in clerical, discrete clothes. Their flanking of the table, which displays open books, symbols of religious knowledge and objects which represent progress is therefore believed by some critics to be "symbolic of a unification of capitalism and the Church." The commonly accepted symbol of discord, a lute with a broken string, is included next to a hymnbook suggesting strife between scholars and the clergy. However the most notable symbol in the painting is the anamorphic skull which is meant to be a visual puzzle as the viewer must approach the painting nearly from the side to see the form morph into an accurate rendering of a human skull. It is not exactly clear why Holbein incorporated a skull in the painting, however many artists do so as a reminder of mortality, or at the very least, death.

On the painting what we first see are the two figures. They are men who are not smiling and are leaning slightly on a table, each one on a side. One of them is dressed in posh clothing and the other one looks like a priest who is wearing a coat. The furniture they are leaning against has two shelves. On the top shelve there is a cloth with an eastern/Arabic pattern in which there is a tendency to red. On this shelve there are many objects like a large globe and a sun clock. Then on the bottom shelve there is another globe and a music instrument as well as many books and scrolls. Then the floor is covered by a carpet or maybe it's a pattern drawn on the floor which shows an intricate mosaic floor, based on the

remarkable medieval floor of Westminster Abbey. Then in the center at the bottom there is an anamorphic skull which you can only really see when you look at it from a side angle.

3) Formal Analysis

Colors

I think that the artist has used a strong, dull palette with a predominance of reds, greens and black.

In my opinion the colors that the artist mostly uses are primary; red, blue and yellow. However he mixes them a lot to create darker tones like greens and browns which are the colors that are used the most as well as red. On the other hand I think that there is a lack of purples and pinks and yellows and also blue in its pure form, as I think that blue has definitively been used to create other colors.

I think that the colors have been used differently depending on the part of the painting. Like for example red, which has been used many times in different forms and tones.

I am almost sure that the colors have not been used flat, in other words that most of the colors he used have been mixed to create new ones.

Tones

We can clearly see a use of shadows and light in this painting. For example on the rich man's sleeve the artist has used shading that makes his shirt look as if it was made out of silk. We also have a strong shadow underneath the skull which is part of the anamorphic view.

Looking at the picture we can see that the light is coming from the left as the shadows form on the right side of most of the objects.

I think that the forms in the artwork are realistically modeled as we can easily recognize what objects they are and they are drawn accurately to scale. Therefore it is easy to imagine them in 3D.

The painting also consists of a wide range of tonal contrasts as it has very light highlights and very dark shadows.

Use of media

The medium that has been used to produce this artwork has been oil paint on an oak board. The artist has used a very thin paint brush that allowed him to paint everything in precise detail. We can tell by looking at the pattern in the curtain, for example, or at the clothes that the men are wearing.

The painting was drawn very slowly and it took the artist around 4 years to finish the painting.

Composition



There is a large variety of shapes throughout the painting like for example rounded, geometric, horizontal; the shapes on the floor and the crucifix are some of the shapes we can appreciate. Therefore it is clear that there is a very large variety of shapes they are not too similar to each other, although they do share some characteristics.

Throughout the painting we can see many shapes that are spread around the artwork. However they are not spread too evenly because there are areas, like the center, that have many more shapes and objects.



It is

interesting to see how some shapes, for example the globes are repeated as it might have been a trial from the artist to call the viewers attention to that certain object or what the object represents. I think that the shape that is repeated the most is the circle.

By looking at the picture I get a feeling of peacefulness. I think that the artist creates such stillness by making the facial expressions of the characters very calm and polite. Also I think that the fact of using a thinner brush helps create a smooth feeling of serenity.

In my opinion the center of attention of the picture is the wealthy man. I think that this might be because he is wearing very visually impacting clothes that make him look big and powerful. Also the fact that his coat has white fur makes it visually attractive as it contrasts with the darker color of the garment.

I think the way the artist draws the viewer's attention to the painting is by applying lighter tones surrounded by darker colors that will cause a strong contrast.

Mood and Emotion

In my opinion the artist wanted the viewer to feel dragged into that time. As if by creating this feeling of peacefulness but at the same time including so many objects into the painting we could somehow feel related to that time.

To create a peaceful mood I believe that the artist has made his painting very light and organized. He has succeeded as he knew what colors would create this feeling. For example bright pink or purple could have created a happy mood, but they would have contrasted too much with the other colors and it would have affected the peacefulness of the painting.

I think that a peaceful mood could have also been created by using secondary colors. He could have used colors like violet, orange, green in very pale tones in order to not affect the stillness and serenity of the portrait.

4) Interpretation

What I think the artist is trying to show is that there are three levels: the heavens (as portrayed by the astrolabe and other objects on the upper shelf), the living world (as evidenced by books and a musical instrument on the lower shelf), and death (signified by the skull). So what he is trying to express is that we are all equal. In other words that the two men represent all humans, and that the different levels on the painting represent life.

In my opinion the main theme is life as a whole. The painting tries to reflect everything in life, friendship, power, religion, advances, arts... therefore if I were inside this artwork I'd be feeling very complete as I am expressed as someone who owns everything that is worth in life.

In my opinion the art work doesn't really tell a story, however it does have a religious purpose. Also I see it as a very realistic work as everything in it is accessible and real. Because even death is achievable, and I think that that is the message he tries to get through. If I were to explain this artwork to someone else I would ask them "what is the world to you?" or "what do you enjoy" and I think that they, themselves would be able to come up with their own version of the painting.

5) Evaluation

I think that Hans Holbein has created a painting that relates with the men who are in it. I think so because I think that he introduced in the painting what he felt that mattered to them. For example: human progresses which he represents through the globes. Or the importance of art which could be represented by the musical instrument. I also think that he has managed to show mood and personality in a room because the room really connects with the men who are in it, as if it contains everything that matters to them.



<http://markmeynell.wordpress.com/2009/07/21/holbein%E2%80%99s-the-ambassadors-unlocking-hidden-mysteries/>