

Material

Knowing

Meaning

Holbein

Shakespeare

“It is neither good or bad,  
but thinking makes it so”

Humanism

Humanism

## Hans Holbein the Younger: The Ambassadors: 1533; National Gallery, London

**Erasmus: 1523;**  
National Gallery, London

*The Ambassadors* is a signature double portrait combined with meticulous still life painting and masterful symbolic referencing that creates many levels of meaning. It relates specifically to a tumultuous period in history and more generally to how we know our world and the different ways that we can paint our “bigger picture”. This work is in the tradition of coupling learned men with the tools of their trade – scientific instruments and academic/religious books. The portrait of two childhood friends with different life paths – Jean de Dinteville, a landowner and French Ambassador to England in 1533, and his friend, George de Selve, the Bishop of Lavaur – also contains overtones of early 16th century politics (especially Anglo-French relations), the conflict between secular and religious authorities, and medieval-reformation theology. In addition, a lute with a broken string (discord) and a Lutheran hymn book suggests strife between scholars and clergy and a plea for Christian harmony.

The portraits frame and are framed by several levels of carefully arranged objects largely representing the contrasts between heaven and earth as well as the sciences and arts, respectively. There is a celestial sphere, a polyhedral sundial and various other instruments used to measure and understand space and time on the upper shelf; a terrestrial globe, a book of arithmetic and musical instruments on the lower shelf. Several elaborate textiles (variably based on western and oriental designs) provide a further backdrop for all these objects throughout. There are obvious and immediate tensions between the scientific, technological and material gain approach to exploration and dividing up the world, and the religious approach to holistic meaning and the after-life. The attire (secular *versus* clerical), postures and demeanor of the two figures epitomise the active and the contemplative life whereas the various objects associated with “knowledge” placed between the two men simultaneously connect and separate them.

The crucifix hidden behind the curtain on the left (imperfect square in the original, hence the disconnection from the main body of the portrait) resonates with both the dramatically positioned, schistic, anamorphic skull in the foreground (*vanitas* and *memento mori*) and the more subtle sundial (revealing the date of the painting as 11th April 1533 – Good Friday). All this is extremely provocative in a picture celebrating power and accomplishment. In contrast, the painting of the classically educated scholar Erasmus with his hands coming together, calmly on “his” book is equally masterful in its soft, wisdom-bathed portrayal of a humanist-theologian who balanced all points of view and embraced both “the middle way” and “*nulli concedo*” (I will yield to nobody – his motto but predominantly a reference to death). Erasmus was an independent scholar who used humanist techniques to champion religious toleration in the age of the Reformation, freedom of intellect and literary expression, and just and benevolent government for all. He was increasingly admired as a social critic, educator and writer with the passage and perspective of time.

**Tom Kotsimbos**

Dept of Medicine, Central Clinical School, Monash University; Dept of Allergy, Immunology and Respiratory Medicine, Alfred Hospital, Melbourne, Victoria, 3004, Australia. E-mail: tom.kotsimbos@monash.edu

From the Museum