



It is thanks to an artist called Hans Holbein the Younger, who lived between circa 1497-1543, that we have surviving portraits of so many important people from the reign of Henry VIII.

A prolific painter, Holbein (called “The Younger” because his father was also an artist) completed an astonishing number of portraits, woodcuts and other works of art in his 45 years (approximately) of life.

This particular portrait, circa 1542-43, shows the artist not-long before he died (of a plague epidemic which swept through London in 1543).

What do we know about Holbein, the man? The British Museum provides some background:

Born in Augsburg, Bavaria, Holbein trained with his father, Hans Holbein the Elder, who operated a successful workshop. In 1515, he moved to Basel, where he worked for a circle of intellectuals and their printers.

His first major paintings were the portraits of the mayor of Basel, Jacob Meyer and his wife in 1516, and in 1521/2 he painted the famous Dead Christ (all in the Kunstmuseum, Basel).

If Holbein was born in Bavaria, and spent his early professional years in Switzerland, how did he end-up in England?

Social and religious conflict caused by the Protestant Reformation in Switzerland made Holbein seek elsewhere for patronage. After an unsuccessful visit to France in 1524, he traveled to England in 1526 with an introduction to Sir Thomas More from the scholar Erasmus, whose portrait he had painted in 1523.

He stayed for two years producing portraits at the court of Henry VIII, before returning to Basel where his wife and two children lived.

Did Holbein created so many portraits of Tudor-era England within just two years? No ... he returned to England in 1532 (not long before Henry VIII’s marriage to Anne Boleyn):

A particularly violent burst of iconoclasm in Basel in 1529 amid an atmosphere of religious crisis made Holbein decide to return to England in 1532.

Henry VIII commissioned a mural for Whitehall Palace glorifying the Tudor dynasty [which was destroyed by the disastrous fire engulfing the Houses of Parliament in 1698], which is recorded in Holbein’s preparatory cartoon (National Portrait Gallery, London). The famous image of Henry, hands on his hips and legs astride, derives from this mural.

Holbein’s prolific work ended, during his final stay in England, when he likely contracted bubonic plague (also known as the Black Death):

Holbein died suddenly in London in 1543 of the plague. His fame rests on his superlative painted portraits, such as the dazzling Ambassadors and the unknown Lady with a Squirrel and a Starling (both National Gallery, London) and his vivid yet informal portrait drawings (many in the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle). (See the [British Museum article](#) for this, and the above, quoted passages.)

How do we know that Holbein died of bubonic plague? London, where he was working, was hit by the pestilence in 1543. George C. Kohn tells us more about it in his *Encyclopedia of Plague and Pestilence: From Ancient Times to the Present*, at page 104:

In 1543, London was stricken by an epidemic that was probably plague ... London's severe mortality in 1543 prompted additional measures, including the airing of clothing worn by infected persons, the destruction of dogs, which were believed to spread the disease, and the burial of plague victims in deeper graves to prevent corruption of the air from their decaying bodies. (Kohn, at 104).

The image depicted here, of Holbein not long before his death, has had changes from the original work which features colored chalk with pen-and-ink. For one thing, the gold background is later-added. For another, the words at the top apparently make more clear what was earlier-written. Art historian John Rowlands explains:

Although this drawing has been enlarged on all sides and heavily reworked, enough of it still shows to allow the assumption that the original work was executed by Holbein. The inscription, although late in date, evidently records an earlier one, of which slight traces remain. There is no evidence to suggest that Holbein ever executed a painted portrait based on this drawing. (See *Holbein*, by John Rowlands, published, in Oxford, during 1985, by Phaidon Press, at page 239.)

The original work is maintained at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy. Click on the image for a better view.

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