

The Ambassadors

The two men in this painting are Jean de Dinterville and George de Selve. One of them is a French ambassador in the Court of Henry VIII and the other is a bishop.

They have met in London where the Holbein has an important role in the court of the King. It could be that one of the two has commissioned this portrait.

Something that might be surprising is the age of the men. Jean de Dinterville's sword tells you he is 29 and the clue for the bishop is on the edge of the book he is resting on.

I wonder if they always looked so serious and much older or whether this was for the benefit of the painting. Can we tell anything about their characters and personalities?

Look carefully at the way the artist has painted the materials in the curtains, the robe of the bishop, the textures of the silk and the fur. Even the intricate nature of the rug on the shelf.

This is a 'vanitas' painting, it has images of objects that remind us of frailty and the transience of human life. This is linked with the Old Testament – 'Vanity of vanities.... all is vanity'. This refers to the vain futility of all human pursuits in comparison with the lasting truths of religion.

There may be another clue about the fragility and transience of life illustrated through the broken string of the lute which would strike a discordant note. This portrait was painted at a time of religious upheaval in Europe. Although the pope had refused to annul Henry VIII, King of England's marriage to Catherine of Aragon which resulted in a break with the Roman Catholic Church, in 1533 he married Anne Boleyn. The array of objects on the table seem to allude to discord; the arithmetic book, for example, is open at the page concerning mathematical division.

Think about some of the other objects – why are they there? Are they to show importance or worldliness, can you work out what they are?

Have you noticed the crucifix hidden up in the top left hand corner- does this have a hidden meaning?

Most importantly what is the object at the front of the picture? Try to look from half way down the right hand side of the painting.

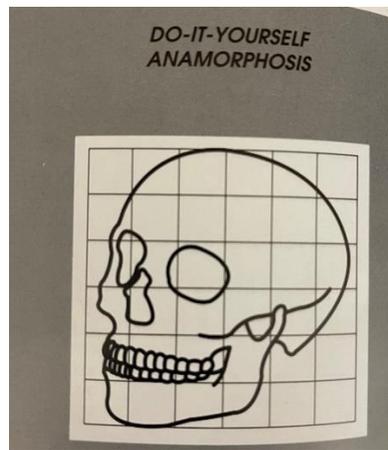
This type of imagery is called 'anamorphosis' which is a Greek word meaning to 'transform'.

You can have a try at this yourself – see on the next page.

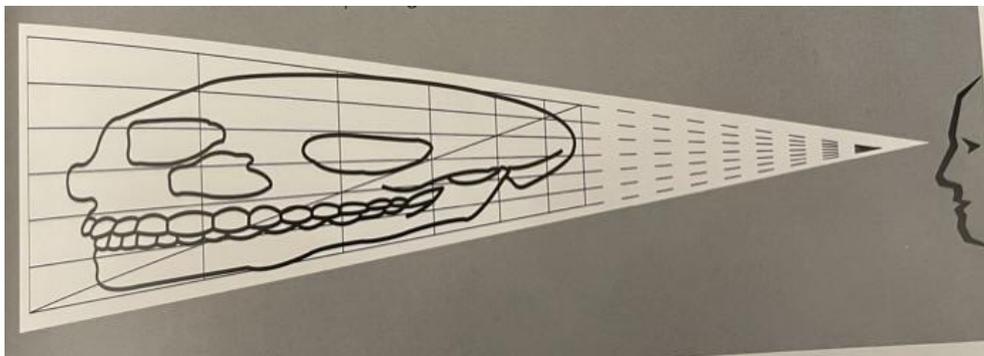
If you were having a portrait painted, what objects would you like have placed near you. Perhaps consider what you would wear. When you look closely at this picture the bishop who perhaps is more humble has a rather luxurious coat, highly patterned even if it is only one colour.

The richness of the surroundings is emphasised by the patterned floor tiles but 'the object' rather distracts from this.

Notice the fashion style of having gashes in material – a little like tears in jeans.



Create two grids, the first one of squares eg 1 cm x 1cm
The second elongated as illustrated below – the left hand side being the same dimension as the side of the first grid.



This is still a six by six grid it is transformed. Carefully copy the image carefully observing each square and then translating it. Whilst this shows a skull as in the painting this idea can be used to transform any picture.