

For immediate release: Thursday, 9 November 2023

Largest UK Holbein exhibition in over 15 years opens at The Queen's Gallery

More than 50 works by Hans Holbein the Younger from the Royal Collection, including drawings, paintings, and miniatures, will go on display at The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace from tomorrow (Friday, 10 November), in the largest UK exhibition of the artist's work in over 15 years.

Holbein at the Tudor Court brings together more than 100 objects to chart the career and legacy of the great Renaissance artist at Henry VIII's court. The exhibition tells the story of Holbein's time in England, navigating the shifting sands of religious reform and political intrigue to rise to the position of king's painter and create the enduring images of Henry VIII and his circle that we know today.

At the heart of the exhibition are more than 40 of Holbein's intimate portrait drawings of the royal family and the Tudor nobility, from **Jane Seymour** to **Sir Thomas More**. Drawn from life during personal sittings in preparation for finished paintings, these closely observed studies imbue their subjects with a remarkable lifelike quality, bringing the viewer as close as they will ever come to the men and women of Henry VIII's court.

Kate Heard, curator of *Holbein at the Tudor Court*, said, 'Holbein's unparalleled ability to capture the essence of his subjects still astonishes nearly 500 years later. These drawings cannot be on permanent display for conservation reasons, so this is an exceptional opportunity for visitors to see for themselves the exquisite skill that made Holbein one of the greatest draughtsmen who ever lived.'

Among Holbein's earliest royal portraits is a drawing of **Anne Boleyn**, one of the few surviving depictions drawn from life. Her informal gown suggests that this may have been a preparatory drawing for a miniature, intended to be held in the hand and viewed privately by her husband rather than displayed on a wall.

The drawings are worked up to varying degrees, possibly reflecting the time available for a sitting. A portrait of the King's longed-for son **Prince Edward** is very slightly drawn, suggesting that the one-year-old may not have sat still long enough for a more detailed likeness. Many of the drawings bear written reminders in English and German of details Holbein planned to return to; he makes sure to note the yellowish tinge in the eyes of **Richard Southwell**, a notoriously duplicitous man and convicted murderer who was one of Henry VIII's closest advisers.

Visitors will be encouraged to look closely at the tiny details that make Holbein's portraits so lifelike, and to discover how the artist manipulated his materials to achieve them – from mottled chalk reflecting the broken veins in an old man's cheek (**John More**) to the smallest touches of white heightening to suggest the luminosity of a woman's skin (**Elizabeth, Lady Vaux**).

The immediacy of the drawings often gives the sense of being in the room with the sitter, looking over Holbein's shoulder. At times the viewer can feel his frustration as he reworks his compositions, struggling to capture the profile of the courtier **William Reskimer's** nose, or making several attempts to position the iris in **Elizabeth, Lady Audley's** left eye.

Evidence of this constant process of refinement can also be seen in Holbein's paintings. In two cases, the preparatory drawing will be shown alongside the finished portrait. Comparison between the images makes clear that Holbein made subtle and often flattering alterations as he transferred his composition from paper to panel. This is particularly evident in the lengthening and thinning of **Henry Guildford's** profile, giving him a more elegant and imposing appearance.

One of Holbein's most striking painted portraits is that of **Derich Born**, a 23-year-old Steelyard merchant. Recent conservation, undertaken in partnership with the Getty Conservation Institute, has revealed in greater detail than ever before how Holbein repeatedly altered the contours of Born's face to give him a more chiselled, mature appearance. The removal of old varnish and overpaint also revealed the clear imprint of a thumb – probably Holbein's – at the left edge of the panel, suggesting that the paint may have taken longer to dry than he expected. In two supplementary spaces within the Gallery, visitors will be able to learn more about this conservation project, as well as finding out more about Holbein's materials and techniques.

Visitors will be presented with the mysteries surrounding the identity of several sitters. These include a miniature of a woman traditionally identified as **Katherine Howard**, whose identity may be indicated by clues in her jewellery and clothing. The exhibition will also seek to shed light on the lives of the lesser-known women of the Tudor court, some of whom were authors, religious reformers and prominent landowners in their own right.

Through paintings and decorative arts ranging from a **Brussels tapestry** to **jewel-like miniatures**, the exhibition will demonstrate the vibrant international artistic culture that Holbein found on his arrival in England. A highlight will be **Henry VIII's magnificent armour**, usually displayed at Windsor Castle and on show in London for the first time in a decade. The armour was famously designed by the German armourer Erasmus Kyrkenar to be adjustable, to accommodate the King's expanding waistline.

The exhibition's final room will explore Holbein's work for Henry VIII and his artistic legacy. His life-size mural of the King and his family at Whitehall Palace – reportedly so lifelike that it shocked those who saw it – was lost to fire in 1698, but the many surviving copies of his portrait of Henry are a testament to its impact. From **Hans Eworth** to **Nicholas Hilliard**, Tudor artists continued to look to Holbein for inspiration after his death, cementing his reputation as the image-maker of the Tudor court.

Ends

Holbein at the Tudor Court is at **The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace, 10 November 2023 – 14 April 2024.**

A selection of images is available via [Dropbox](#). For further information, please contact the Royal Collection Trust Press Office, +44 (0)20 7839 1377, press@rct.uk.

Visitor information and tickets for The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace: www.rct.uk, T. +44 (0)30 3123 7301. The Queen's Gallery is open Thursday to Monday, remaining closed on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

The accompanying publication is published by Royal Collection Trust and is available at £24.95 from Royal Collection Trust shops and www.rct.uk/shop, and at £29.95 from all good bookshops.

An accompanying programme of events at The Queen's Gallery will include:

- **A lunchtime introductory talk by exhibition curator Kate Heard (13 November).**
- **An in-conversation event exploring maritime warfare and Tudor gun-shields with The King's Armourer Simon Metcalf; Dr Alex Hildred of the Mary Rose Trust; and specialist armourer Andrew Braund (23 November).**
- **An in-conversation event with exhibition curator Kate Heard and Dr Elizabeth Goldring from the University of Warwick, discussing some of the greatest mysteries in Holbein's portraits (30 November).**
- **A live demonstration of Tudor combat and armour by experts from the Royal Armouries (7 December).**
- **A day of drop-in costumed storytelling performances for families, focusing on Tudor Christmas festivities (16 December).**
- **A creative course in collaboration with The School of Historical Dress, exploring the construction of early Tudor garments (25 January 2024).**
- **A lecture by Professor Jenny Tiramani, Principal of the School of Historical Dress, discussing the clothes of Henry VIII and his court and how these have been translated into film (14 March 2024).**

Twitter: [@RCT](#) Instagram: [@royalcollectiontrust](#) Facebook: [@royalcollectiontrust](#)

#HolbeinExhibition

Notes to Editors

Royal Collection Trust, a department of the Royal Household, is responsible for the care of the Royal Collection and manages the public opening of the official residences of The King. Income generated from admissions and from associated commercial activities contributes directly to The Royal Collection Trust, a registered charity. The aims of The Trust are the care and conservation of the Royal Collection, and the promotion of access and enjoyment through exhibitions, publications, loans and educational programmes.

The Royal Collection is among the largest and most important art collections in the world, and one of the last great European royal collections to remain intact. It comprises almost all aspects of the fine and decorative arts, and is spread among some 15 royal residences and former residences across the UK, most of which are regularly open to the public. The Royal Collection is held in trust by the Sovereign for his successors and the nation, and is not owned by The King as a private individual.

Admission to The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace is managed by The Royal Collection Trust, a registered charity in England and Wales (1016972) and in Scotland (SC039772).