

HENRY JAMES
and the Lust of the Eyes

Thirteen Artists in His Work

ADELINE R. TINTNER

For Meyer Schapiro
and
In memory of my parents and my sister

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7 Holbein's *The Ambassadors*: A Pictorial Source for *The Ambassadors*

The life of the occupant struck him, of a sudden, as more charged with possession even than Chad's or than Miss Barrace's; wide as his glimpse had lately become of the empire of "things," what was before him still enlarged it; the lust of the eyes and the pride of life had indeed thus their temple.

—*Strether's comment on Miss Gostrey's apartment in The Ambassadors*

ONE of the puzzles in Jamesian scholarship is the question of why the novel *The Ambassadors* remained untitled until James sent the finished manuscript to his agent, James Pinker, on July 10, 1901. James referred to all of his later novels (beginning with *The Spoils of Poynton* [1897] ^{an(^} including *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*) by title long before they were submitted for publication, as many of his letters testify. But the first time he gave any intimation that *The Ambassadors* was to be the title of this novel was when he sent the finished work to Pinker: "I enclose to you at last, by this post, the too-long retarded Finis of 'The Ambassadors'" (*HJL*, IV, 194). His proposal, sent ten months earlier to his publisher, Harper's, and dated September 1, 1900, reads simply, "Project of Novel by Henry James" (*CN*, 541). My conjecture is that something occurred between the date of his proposal and the date of his letter to Pinker that inspired his choice of title.

In fact, something did happen in London in 1900 to interest all concerned with art, and with Holbein specifically. The double portrait by Holbein in the National Gallery (Fig. 40), once thought to represent the court poet Sir Thomas Wyatt and his friend the antiquarian John Leland, was established by Mary F. S. Hervey to be a portrait of the French ambassadors to the court of Henry VIII: Jean de Dinteville, lord of Polisy, and Georges de Selve, bishop of Lavour. These two young men, both under thirty years of age, along with their talismanic objects

represented on canvas all that was the best in French civilization of the early sixteenth century. Hervey's discovery was the result of careful iconographic analysis and a study of archival material. She published her finding, which has never been seriously contested, in her book *Holbein's Ambassadors: The Picture and the Men*, explaining that the old French tradition of identifying the men in the painting as ambassadors had been supplanted erroneously by the English practice of naming Wyatt and Leland as the subjects of the portrait. With Hervey's revelation, Holbein's painting became known as *Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve* ("The Ambassadors")

The painting itself had been on view at the National Gallery since 1890, when the earl of Radnor had sold it to the government, which was assisted in the purchase by the private subscription of three wealthy donors. But ten years later the painting acquired a new designation as the portrait of official representatives of French Renaissance civilization. This development would have drawn James to the museum and probably to Hervey's book. It is unlikely that James owned the book, since there is no copy in his Lamb House library. However, from January to April, 1901, James lived in London at both the Reform and the Athenaeum clubs, and the library of the latter, which James frequently made good use of, probably had the book.² Even if James had not known all the details of Hervey's book, *The Ambassadors* would have come to his attention because his close friends Sir Sidney Colvin and Sir Edmund Gosse were associated with the National Gallery boards and were also undoubtedly influential in procuring the funds to purchase the painting. They would have related to James all the current gossip surrounding Hervey's finding and the large numbers of people that turned out to see the painting as a result.

We know that James's attention was upon Holbein a few months before he began *The Ambassadors*. He wrote the short story "The Beldonald Holbein" (1901) in the fall of 1899 and started his novel in the

1. Mary F. S. Hervey, *Holbein's Ambassadors: The Picture and the Men* (London, 1900); National Gallery, *Illustrated General Catalogue* (London, 1973), no. 1314.

2. Denys Wyatt, the then secretary of the Athenaeum Club, in a letter to me dated November 16, 1982, wrote, "I suspect that it is more than likely that Mary Hervey's book was on our shelves because, as you know, our Library is pretty comprehensive."

spring of 1900.³ James based "The Beldonald Holbein" on 1 Holbein's portrait of Lady Butts (Fig. 41), which his friend Isabella Stewart (Gardner had just acquired for her Fenway Court house and museum/ Even as a young art critic, James considered Holbein to be among **the** great masters of the portrait. In his essay on Eugene Fromentin's *Les Maitres d'Autrefois* (1876), James pointed out that the French critic had placed Holbein far ahead of Peter Paul Rubens as a portraitist (*PE*, 119). Perhaps it was this particular judgment by Fromentin that prompted James to have Chad Newsome give *Les Maitres d'Autrefois* as a gift to Mamie Pocock in the last quarter of *The Ambassadors* (*AM*, 263). Later, in 1909, James wrote a play to mark the occasion of England's retention of Holbein's *Christina of Denmark, Duchess of Milan* (Fig. 42). The painting was almost lost to an American billionaire (undoubtedly J. P. Morgan) but was purchased by means of a public subscription and a large anonymous donation, about which James wrote with interest to Gosse. The play became the novel *The Outcry*, in which James deplors the lax custody of art wealth in the hands of the English aristocracy.⁵ Having had such a longstanding appreciation of Holbein's genius, James, predictably, would have been interested in the renaming of the superb painting that was the first Holbein acquired by the National Gallery.

As we have seen with *The Tragic Muse*, it was not a novelty for James to name a work after a painting of great distinction. By titling the novel after *The Ambassadors* by Holbein, who was at this point especially high in his estimation as a maker of fine portraits, James would remind his readership of the newly diagnosed masterpiece. But the coincidence of the portrait's dramatic identification aside, do we have evidence that the painting's title would be appropriate for James's novel? Can we make a case for a clear relationship between Holbein's *The Ambassadors* and the content of James's *The Ambassadors*? Indeed we

3. Leon Edel, *The Treacherous Years, I&%-I<)OI* (Philadelphia, 1969), 328, 356, Vol. IV of Edel, *Henry James*, 5 vols.

4. See Adeline R. Tintner, "The Real-Life Holbein in James's Fiction," *A. K. Bookman's Weekly*, January 8, 1979, pp. 278-87.

5. Henry James to Sir Edmund Gosse, June 4, 1909, in *Selected Letters of Henry James to Edmund Gosse, 1882-1915: A Literary Friendship*, ed. Rayburn S. Moore (Baton Rouge, 1988), 240; Adeline R. Tintner, "Henry James's *The Outcry* and the Art Drain of 1908-1909," *Apollo* (February, 1981), 110-12.

can, and in doing so, we expand the field of their interrelation. *The Ambassadors* is James's novel praising Parisian civilization. He invokes the Balzacian "liaison" of the young man (Chad Newsome) with the older aristocratic woman (Marie de Vionnet), and he takes Lambert Strether on a trip through Notre Dame, the Louvre, and the countryside around Paris—all to demonstrate the civilizing aspects of modern France. Holbein's *Ambassadors* is likewise a tribute to French civilization, although of the Renaissance period.

Holbein painted *The Ambassadors* in 1533 under Dinteville's personal guidance during the Frenchman's first mission to England. Francis I had sent Dinteville to England to ensure stability in relations with that country during Henry VIII's divorce from Catherine and subsequent marriage to Anne Boleyn. The painting celebrates the seven liberal arts: grammar, rhetoric, and logic (the trivium); and arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy (the quadrivium). On the top of the table between the two men, there are objects of scientific interest: a celestial globe, a cylindrical sundial, two types of quadrants, a polyhedral sundial, and a torquetum, which determines the position of celestial bodies. On the shelf of the table there are objects representing the arts: a lute, a case of flutes, a hymnbook opened to Martin Luther's version of *Veni Creator Spiritus* and to his *Ten Commandments*, and a terrestrial globe on which the name of Polisy, Dinteville's home, is found.⁶ On the left is Dinteville, in Brantome's terms the *homme d'eepe, de robe courte*, and on the right is the bishop of Lavour, the *homme de plume, de robe longue*. One of Hervey's chief sources on French Renaissance society was the fifteen-volume *Oeuvres de Brantome*. James's set of *Brantome* is inscribed "Henry James, Lamb House," indicating that James acquired it after 1898.⁷ Did Holbein's painting and Hervey's book stimulate the purchase?

In James's novel, we have usually considered the ambassadors to be Strether, the litterateur, sent to France to fetch for Mrs. Newsome her son Chad, and viewable as the *homme de robe longue*, and his successor, Jim Pocock, the businessman, the *homme de robe courte*, the swordsman as opposed to Strether the penman. We are told, even if rather late in

6. National Gallery *Catalogue*, 321.

7. See Leon Edel and Adeline R. Tintner, *The Library of Henry James* (Ann Arbor, 1987), 158-91.

the novel, that they are, respectively, the outgoing and incoming ambassadors. However, once we learn that Dinteville, according to his dagger sheath in Holbein's painting, is twenty-nine years old (Fig. 43) and that Selve, according to the inscription on his Bible, is twenty-five, we may also view as ambassadors the two young men of the novel, Chad and his painter friend Little Bilham, twenty-eight years old and a few years younger respectively. Their situation mirrors that of Dinteville and Selve; they are the ambassadors in residence.⁸ At the end of the novel, Chad and Bilham are about to return to America after representing their country in Paris. Chad will bring with him the *education sentimentale* that France bestows on young men, and Bilham the ability to judge painting. No longer do we have the trivium and the quadrivium, but less traditional goals and objectives—above all, the goal of learning how to live a sensual life, to live all one can. There are other ambassadors as well in the novel, but they are subordinate to the two principal pairs, who in the course of the narrative exchange characteristics. Strether, for example, becomes younger-thinking and culpable as Chad becomes more mature and more responsible.

The chief evidence of an intended parallel between Holbein's painting and James's novel is that both embody the themes of *memento mori* and *carpe diem*. We can see how these themes are carried in the painting by looking at its iconography—both what is obvious to the layman's eye and what has been revealed by Hervey's analysis. Hervey tells us that Dinteville selected the symbolic objects that would surround him in the portrait; they are all reminders of death—the distorted skull in the foreground (Figs. 44, 45), the barely discernible skull pendant in his cap (Fig. 46), and the small crucifix in the upper left-hand corner of the picture (not visible in Fig. 40). Dinteville apparently had seen Holbein's "Dance of Death" series of engravings and "had adopted the skull or Death's-head as his personal ... badge (or devise)." He called himself

8. According to the *OED*, *ambassador* has two meanings: an official sent on a mission to represent his country; and one who acts as a permanent representative in residence for his country. Strether and Pocock are ambassadors in the first sense of the word; Chad and Bilham are resident ambassadors. In fact, almost every character in the novel except Madame de Vionnet fulfills the *OED* definition of an ambassador by serving fellow countrymen in a foreign land. Maria Gostrey's "mission" is the first one to be mentioned in the novel; Miss Barrace (rhyming with *Paris*) also aids her countrymen in an ambassadorial role.

"the most melancholy ambassador that ever was seen."⁹ As in the painting, death is hidden in James's novel. Death stalks behind the idea of *carpe diem*. "Live all you can now, for it will be too late if you don't." That motif is found in the first pages of James's proposal for the novel (*CN*, 542), in his *Notebooks* (*CN*, 225), and in several of his letters (*HJL*, IV, 199). It is *The Ambassadors'* main theme, expressed in Strether's advice to Bilham at the ambassadorial garden party given by the sculptor Gloriani: "Live all you can; it's a mistake not to. It doesn't so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life. If you haven't had that, what *have* you had?" (*AM*, 149).

Time is of the essence in *The Ambassadors*; James repeatedly characterizes it as passing quickly. R. W. Stallman discussed the novel's emphasis on time and suggested that the small object of domestic use that Strether refuses to name is a cheap alarm clock or some other time indicator.¹⁰ James describes Strether as having the "pen-stroke of time" on his wrinkled face. He remembers the inscription of the clock in Spain: *Omnes vulnerant, ultima necat* ("They had all morally wounded, the last had morally killed") [*AM*, 64]. Thus, time is the ally of death; and death and dying are mentioned often in the novel. Maria Gostrey says to Strether when she leaves him, "Till death!" (*AM*, 52). Jeanne de Vionnet, Madame de Vionnet's daughter, reminds Strether of "a portrait of a small old-time princess of whom nothing was known but that she had died young" (*AM*, 180). And Mrs. Newsome can be seen as the figure of death (she wears a black silk dress), who "wants to protect" Chad "from life" (*AM*, 50).

The approach of death is as apparent in James's novel as in Holbein's painting. For Madame de Vionnet, who is ten years older than Chad and who is a Catholic with a living husband, the passage of time is tragic. (She, too, wears black when Strether first meets her at Gloriani's party.) The last scenes of *The Ambassadors* pertain to the death of her love affair with Chad, who will be returning to his own life. It is evening, the death of the day, and she knows she "will be the loser in the end" (*AM*, 405). As for Strether, "it amused him to say to himself

9. Hervey, *Holbein's Ambassadors*, 204.

10. R. W. Stallman, "'The Sacred Rage': The Time-Theme in *The Ambassadors*," *Modern Fiction Studies*, III (1957), 49.

11. See Adeline R. Tintner, "High Melancholy and Sweet: James and the Arcadian Tradition," *Colby Library Quarterly*, XII (September, 1976), 109-21.

that he might, for all the world, have been going to die—die resignedly; the scene was filled for him with so deep a death-bed hush, so melancholy a charm." He views "the reckoning" as if it "were to be one and the same thing with extinction" (*AM*, 409).

Holbein's painting conceals its reminders of death in a typical sixteenth-century blend of device (the skull) and motto (*memento mori*). James's novel also employs a device and motto of sorts. The device may be read in the oft-mentioned clocks, including the clock at Berne whose figures emerge at timed intervals, and in the concealed object of Woollett manufacture. The motto can be read in "live all you can" and later in *omnes vulnerant, ultima necat*, suggesting a possible Latin inscription, now illegible, on Dinteville's dagger, which Hervey has inferred from a "design after Holbein for the sheath of such a weapon" in the museum at Basel. That sheath, "on a space corresponding to that which, on Dinteville's dagger, shows his age, bears the mysterious inscription: MORQUNOT. [This] strange conglomeration might be resolved into MORTE QUIESCAT NOT; a hotch-potch of Latin and German which may be translated 'Death stills all ills.'"¹² But it is the special emphasis James gives to the gray in Chad's hair, mentioning it four times early in the novel, that establishes a direct link to Dinteville's *memento mori*. James translates the small skull in Dinteville's cap, a personal device, into the realistic terms of Chad's graying hair. In fact, the fourth mention specifically recalls Dinteville's cap; James describes a hat covering Chad's hair (*AM*, 105).

Leon Edel has pointed out how James experienced his own *memento mori* just as he was preparing to write *The Ambassadors*; the beard he had worn since a young man was coming in "quite white." James wrote his brother that it made him "feel, as well as look, so old" that he shaved it off.¹³

There are many other parallels between the details of Holbein's *Ambassadors* and those of James's novel. For example, James must have found Holbein's exaggeration of the size of Polisy on the terrestrial globe an inspiration for his chief characters' exaggeration of Woollett, Massachusetts, as the center of the United States map. And Dinteville, by resting his hand next to a sundial, which is placed near a celestial

12. Hervey, *Holbein's Ambassadors*, 206.

13. Edel, *The Treacherous Years*, 355.

clock (Fig. 47), shows a sensitivity to the pressure of time similar to Chad's. The sundial gives the date April n, indicating it is springtime, as it is in James's novel. Chad further resembles Dinteville in the diplomatic skills he displays when arranging Jeanne de Vionnet's marriage in the correct French style. He is saved from being a cad by the *h* in his name (which we might read as the Holbein in him), for he leaves Marie not because he is bored with her—"I give you my word of honor ... that I'm not a bit tired of her" (*AM*, 423)—but because he must assume control of his family's manufacturing business. Chad behaves in the classical tradition of the young man from the provinces who has had a sophisticated love affair but who must resume his work because time is short. Dinteville had his melancholic motto and devices because, though young and already a successful diplomat, he was "often ill" and "the vision of Death hovered constantly before his eyes."¹⁴ He needed to remind himself of the swift passage of time.

Like Holbein's microcosm of French Renaissance thought and taste, James's microcosm of Paris in the early 1900s creates a mood in which the cultivated pleasures of civilization are invaded by reminders of fleeting time and inescapable death, a mood that established a pattern for twentieth-century novels. *The Sun Also Rises*, written twenty-five years later, is the most distinguished inheritor of this pattern, blending love in Paris with death in the bullfights. But death is approachable emblematically in *The Ambassadors*, as it is in Holbein's painting. In the novel *The Wings of the Dove*, which followed close on its heels, death is no longer hidden in mottoes or devices, but is actually experienced by the character Milly Theale. Death seems natural in that symbolist novel. But in *The Ambassadors*, considered James's most impressionistic novel, we are inclined to attribute the hidden apparatus of death to the newly revealed identity of Holbein's masterpiece. James has translated the French Renaissance techniques of device and motto into his twentieth-century novel of life and death of the heart in Paris, the center of the world, then and later, for good Americans.

14. Hervey, *Holbein's Ambassadors*, 204.



F'g- 43 Detail of Holbein, *Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve* ("The Ambassadors").

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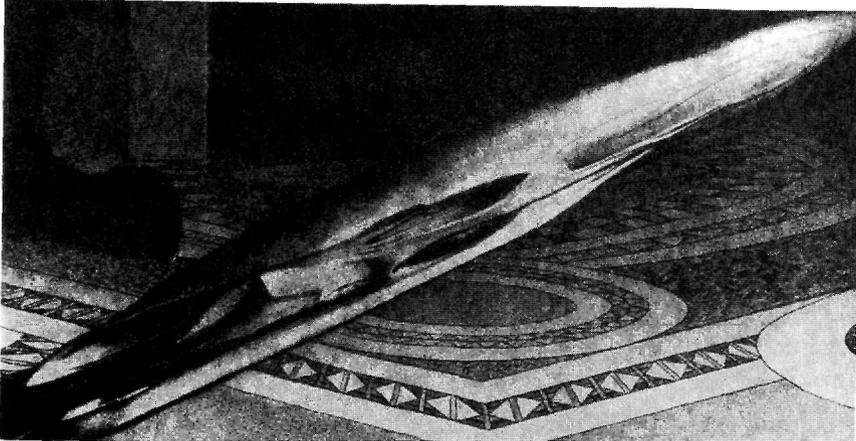


Fig. 44 Detail of Holbein, *Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve* ("The Ambassadors").

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Fig. 45 Photographic Correction of Detail of Holbein, *Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve* ("The Ambassadors").

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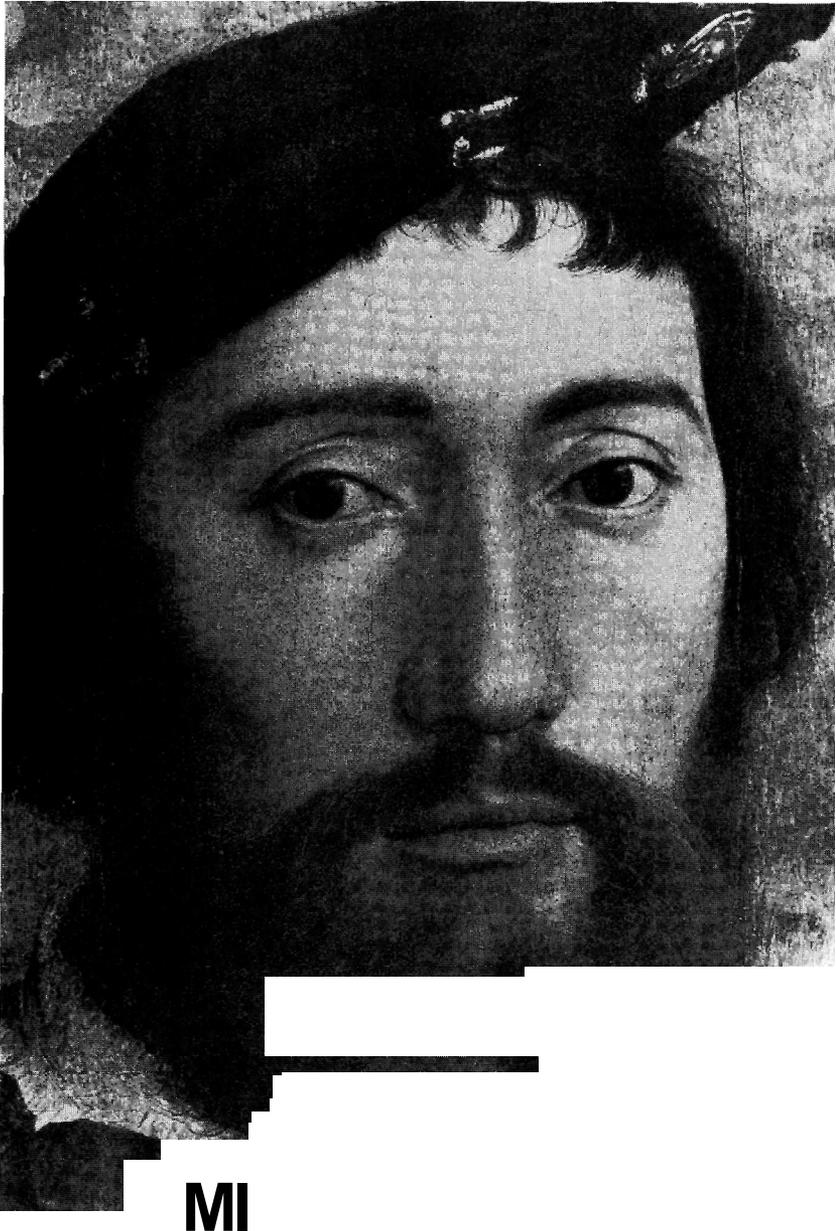


Fig. 46 Detail of Holbein, *Georges de Selve and Georges de Selve* ("The Ambassadors").

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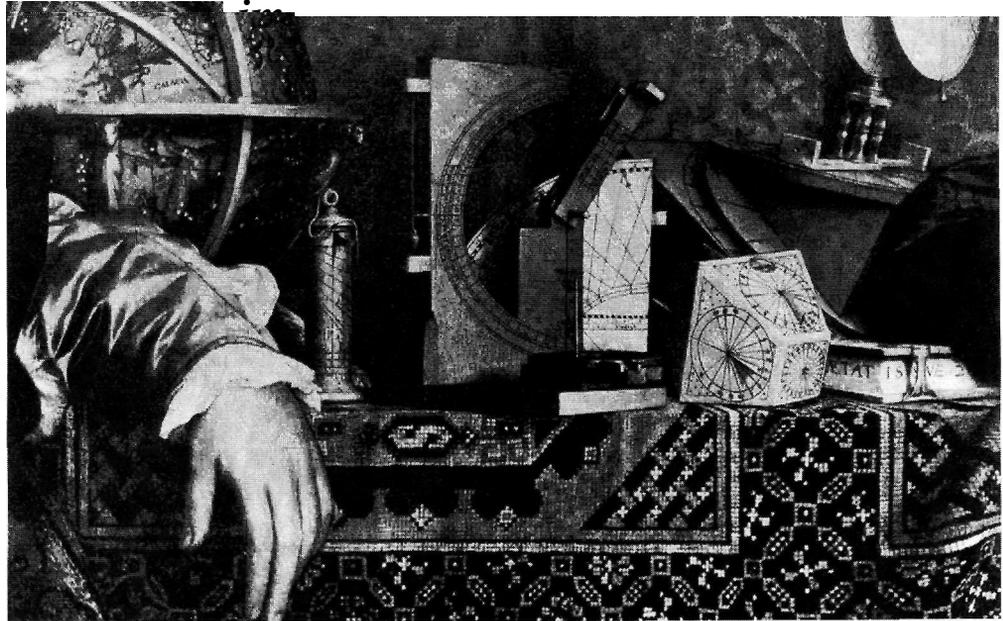


Fig. 47 Detail of Holbein, *Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve* ("The Ambassadors").

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