Derich Born, 1533

Oil on oak panel
60.3 × 44.9 cm
Royal Collection Trust, Windsor Castle

"If we were to add the voice, then we would see Derich in the flesh, in such a manner that we might ask ourselves whether the artist or the Creator had made him. Derich Born, 23 years of age, in the year 1533." That is what is 'carved in stone' on the balustrade against which the aforementioned Derich Born (1510?-1549) is leaning. At the age of 23 he was the youngest member of the German merchants in the "Steelyard" in London (page 31). Unlike Georg Gisze (pages 84/5), he did not want any accessories in the picture which might have described him or his position. He was evidently self-confident enough without them. As the inscription states, the only thing missing for him to be actually present is his voice. Holbein refers here to the classic comparison of contemporary painters with Apelles and hence to Erasmus of Rotterdam, who saw Holbein in his portrait as Zeuxis and not as the new Apelles (pages 56/7).Apelles, for him, was Albrecht Dürer. So with this signature, Holbein positions himself in the place of Apelles and thus at the same time in that of Dürer, thereby sending an artistic response to his former patron Erasmus of Rotterdam. Apart from that, the picture is an understatement in itself, because if we study just the clothes of the young man, it becomes clear how expensive they are, and Born is well aware that the relevant viewers will see how successful he—or his family—already are. Above all, however, it is his pose and his gaze that Holbein captures with such skill. They radiate not only his pride but in this case also the entire arrogance of youth.

Derich Born was what we should nowadays call an arms dealer. He sold military equipment to the Royal Armourer, Erasmus Kyrkener. In 1541, he and his brother Johannes were involved in a dispute with the powerful Duke of Suffolk regarding the payment for a consignment of lead. As a result of this dispute he was excluded from the remunerative membership of the German trading association in London, because he would otherwise have jeopardised the privileges of all the other merchants.

In this picture, Holbein has succeeded in masterly fashion in portraying Born's personality. His head confronts the viewer from the middle of the picture and is supported within the composition by the elbow positioned exactly in the middle. As the other "Steelyard" portraits—of which there are seven in all—demonstrate, the reserved and modest representation of success and wealth were more in line with the style which appealed to the Hanseatic merchants rather than the ostentatious magnificence of Georg Gisze.


DERICHVS SI VOCEM ADIAS IPSISSIMVS HIC SIT
HVNC DVBITES PICTOR FECERIT AN GENITOR
DER BORN ETATIS SVÆ 23 ANNO

The Ambassadors, 1533

Oil on wood
207 × 209.5 cm
The National Gallery, London

When considering the fame of Hans Holbein's paintings, this picture of the two French officials at the English court must be among the most famous of all. It is probably the painting with the most allusions, hints and riddles, openly concealed in the equipment, globes and books which Holbein has painted in meticulous detail and on which we can read every letter. Most of them have been placed in the somewhat crudely carpentered shelf. But also the floor, the background and the anamorphosis hovering in the sphere in between, contribute to the enigma. What is less interesting—at least from a present-day point of view—are the two men, for whose benefit the entire effort has been made. They seem almost to founder in their gowns amidst this mass of information. They should be introduced nonetheless: on the left stands Jean de Dinteville, the ambassador of the King of France, François I, who is to report to the latter on Henry VIII's divorce from Catherine of Aragon and subsequent developments. At the time this portrait was painted he was 29 years of age, as we can read on the hilt of his dagger. The gentleman on the right is Bishop Georges de Selve, whose age on the book under his arm is given as 25 years. He is on a secret mission to England. He arrived in London in May 1533 and left again on 4 June. Holbein must at least have developed the concept and the young bishop's portrait drawing within this short space of time. At first sight the composition does not look particularly complex: two friends are standing, leaning on a shelf filled with equipment from art and science, whereby some items were evidently borrowed from *Nikolaus Kratzer* (pages 76/7). They reflect the men's interests and symbolise their status.
The distorted skull in the foreground, painted as an anamorphosis, opens up the possibility of interpreting the entire picture as a vanitas representation: death is omnipresent, even if it cannot always be immediately recognised as such. The skull divides the picture into two systems, Life and Death: it can only be viewed from a normal perspective as such from a point on the extreme left. Just when we succeed in identifying Death, however, we can no longer identify with the picture, in other words, with life itself, properly. Only one dimension can ever endure and so, even if Life and Death are united in this picture, they exclude each other mutually and cannot co-exist for the viewer, that is, for man. The only salvation appears at top left in the form of a crucifix. What lies behind the curtain which almost completely covers the crucifix, is perhaps only perceivable in death.

Charles de Solier, Sieur de Morette, 1534/5

Oil on oak panel
92.5 × 75.5 cm
Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden

Charles de Solier, Sieur de Morette (1480–1552) was a soldier, commander and chamberlain of the French King François I, and he succeeded Jean de Dinteville (pages 90/91) as his ambassador at the English court. He was quite obviously a completely different personality. Unlike his predecessor he is a clearly discernable person, although he remains inscrutable. He gazes directly at the viewer and we believe that in this directness we can detect a strong will and extensive experience of life, gained from both victories and defeats. He needs no elaborate accessories and seems to be facing the portraitist attentively, but with a degree of scepticism. Here Holbein has created one of his most impressive likenesses, in which he is concentrating entirely on the person and his character on the one hand, and demonstrating a rare brilliance in his painting technique on the other. A harmonious blend of dark shades of black, green and brown orchestrate the subject's concentrated presence, leavened only by the white of the sleeves and the gold of the items of jewellery. All the surfaces, from the fabrics and the precious metal to the hair and the skin on de Solier's right hand, are recorded on the panel with a rarely encountered realism. The dagger and its sheath look as if they have been chiselled rather than painted.

Holbein may have taken Jean Clouet's *Portrait of François I*, that he must have seen in Paris, as a reference or inspiration for this type of portrait. But unlike the French painting, Holbein has dispensed with Clouet's good-natured flattery and softness. Compared with the works of his French or Italian colleagues, Holbein's likenesses are usually more direct and merciless, which in this case may well have also been due to the subject. In spite of his obsession to detail, Holbein succeeds in imbuing de Solier with an inner greatness which derives from the actual simplicity of the composition.

As in the case of *The Ambassadors* (pages 90/91), Holbein may perhaps have hoped that this portrait, which is outstanding even within his oeuvre, would be seen at the French court and might thus have opened up an opportunity for him to offer his services to François I, who was a greater patron of the arts than Henry VIII—but in vain. The painting also had a remarkable provenance history: in 1746, Augustus III of Saxony acquired the picture in Modena believing it to be the portrait of Ludovico Sforza, painted by no less than Leonardo da Vinci. It had arrived there, unsigned and without a name, via the convoluted paths of the art trade. In this case, it would have been Leonardo who would have felt flattered by the mistake.

Robert Cheseman, 1533

Oil on wood
58.8 × 62.8 cm
Mauritshuis, Den Haag

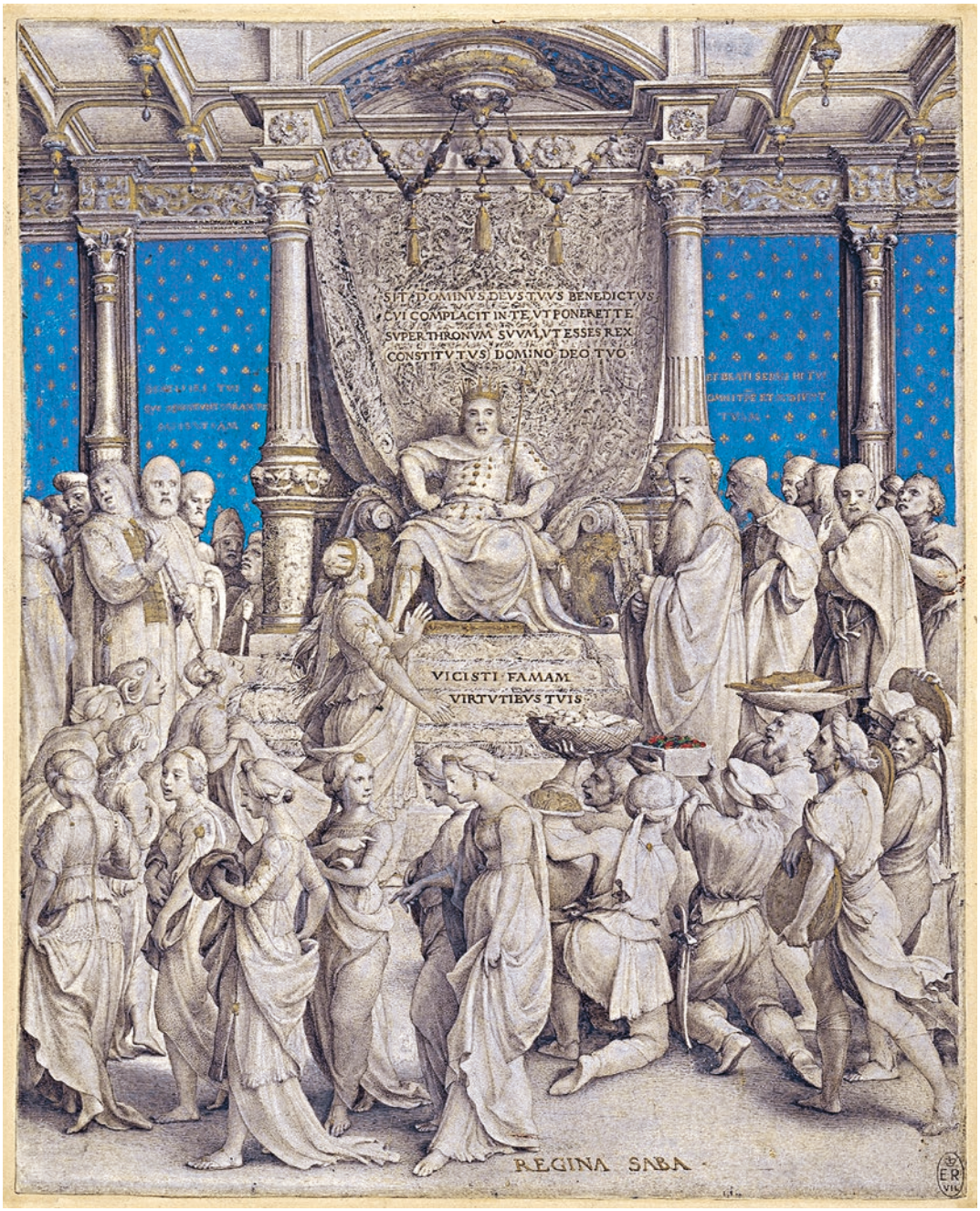
This portrait is unusual in Holbein's oeuvre for several reasons. Firstly, it shows an animal in a prominent position, which hitherto has only occurred in the portrait of Anne Lovell (pages 74/5). Moreover, the subject was neither a courtier, nor a representative of the Church, nor a German merchant. It is also the only solo portrait in landscape format. Hans Holbein evidently required this layout in order to ensure that the falcon and the falconer did not look too cramped. The broad format lends the picture a degree of serenity, which is emphasised in particular by the tension between Cheseman's concentrated gaze towards the left as well as his calming hand movement towards the falcon. The breadth of the composition is heightened by the writing, which tells us the name and age (48 years) of the subject and supplies the date as 1533.
It has often been maintained that Robert Cheseman was the King's Falconer. This, however, seems highly unlikely, since Holbein, with a few exceptions amongst his miniature portraits, never portrayed servants; moreover, the man's clothing is far too expensive. In fact, Cheseman was a wealthy country aristocrat whose father Edward had served Henry VII as chamberlain and confidant. He left his son Robert considerable property in Kent and Middlesex, which also enabled him to purchase a house in London in the same neighbourhood as Holbein. There are no documents that would confirm that Cheseman had a function or position at court, let alone that he was the Royal Falconer. His career included becoming a Justice of the Peace in Middlesex in 1528 and he was responsible for various commissions, among them tax collection. As part of his estate he founded a poorhouse for twelve needy women, for which a memorial in his honour in the chapel at Norwood was erected after his death in 1547. So falconry was evidently simply an important pastime for him, as it was for many noblemen, including Sir Ralph Sadler, whom Holbein also immortalised in a miniature portrait.
It seems as if Cheseman has adopted the penetrating gaze of his falcon, which the bird is denied at this moment because of the calming leather hood. The picture captivates the viewer with its unusual colour combination of blue and dark grey, which is heightened by the red silk sleeves and the brass bell.


· ROBERTVS CHESEMAN ·
ANNO · DM
· ETATIS · SVÆ · XLVIII ·
· M · D · XXXIII ·

Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, c. 1534

Mixed technique on parchment
22.9 × 18.3 cm (sheet)
Royal Collection Trust

This exquisite little drawing was a New Year's gift to Henry VIII from Hans Holbein, who was presumably already the King's Painter at the time. It shows the visit of the Queen of Sheba (who evidently did not have a proper name?) to the wise King Solomon, as described in the First Book of Kings. The Queen had heard of Solomon's legendary reputation and wanted to establish whether it was true. When she decided that it had been confirmed she praised him: "Thy wisdom and prosperity exceedeth the fame which I heard. Happy are thy men, happy are these thy servants [...]. Blessed be the Lord thy God which delighted in thee, to set thee on the throne of Israel [...]. Therefore he made thee king." The text is written on the background of the picture, on the wall and the fabric.
The Queen of Sheba is traditionally interpreted as embodying the Church, and Solomon is typologically understood to represent Jesus, who is responsible only to God himself. In 1534 Henry VIII had proclaimed himself the head of his own Anglican Church through the Act of Supremacy, therefore becoming answerable only to God. The separation from the Roman Catholic Church and the Pope was thus finally complete. Holbein's little masterpiece was, therefore, a most suitable gift; the subject and the time could not have been more appropriately chosen.
Holbein has arranged the thirty-four figures into various groups with supreme skill: at front left are the Queen's ladies-in-waiting, and her servants are on the right, offering gifts; near Solomon's throne are "men" and "servants" and the Queen is standing in the middle on the steps to deliver her eulogy of the King on the throne. He is somewhat confounding with his rather rough-and-ready pose, having placed his hands on his hips. This makes it clear, however, that the King symbolises Henry VIII. Holbein, of course, has built in a small sly comment, a minor detail which we only notice if we look very closely indeed: The King has splayed the little finger of his left hand. This gesture derives from the wall painting *The Arrogance of Rehaboam* (page 29) in Basel, where it stands for a warning sign of a bad ruler. But who, at the English court, knew the Council Chamber in Basel...?
The work on parchment has been executed in perfect *grisaille* technique using precious silverpoint, ultramarine and gold. It looks as if Henry is wearing the same ruby-studded garment as in the portrait in Madrid (pages 98/9). Incidentally, this is the only portrait-like drawing by Holbein that exists in the Royal Collection of the King of England who founded the Anglican Church.


SIT DOMINVS DEVS TVVS BENEDICTVS
CVI COMPLACIT IN TE VT PONERETTE
SVPER THRONVM SVVM VT ESSES REX
CONSTITVTVS DOMINO DEO TVO
VICISTI FAMAM
VIRTVTIEVS TVIS
REGINA SABA

Portrait of Henry VIII of England, c. 1537

Oil on wood
28 × 20 cm
Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

The duties of the King's Painter were wide-ranging: all sorts of works were required, from a painted family memorial to solo portraits in various sizes and versions. Holbein's workshop will have been kept very busy. It seems as if this very small and, from a present-day point of view, at first sight unremarkable portrait is the only one to have survived that is actually by Holbein himself. But it nonetheless packs a real punch—not only the painting but also its purpose.

Against an ultramarine background, Henry VIII fills the entire picture surface and is clipped at the edges to suggest a powerful and very physical presence. The body is at a slight angle and has the effect of acting like a strong pedestal for the regal head. The portrait radiates a disciplined and controlled energy which could erupt at any moment.

The King's tunic looks truly noble with its gold-embroidered collar and sleeves and the set rubies which have been applied to it. Henry is wearing a gold chain which is decorated with his repeated initials. It appears to have been made, or at least selected, to match his costume perfectly. The King set great store by his clothing. As the Venetian diplomat Sebastian Giustinian reported in 1519, Henry spent 16,000 ducats of his total household budget of 100,000 ducats on clothes alone. The King of England was considered to be the best-dressed of all rulers. Holbein has recorded this in corresponding elaborate and brilliant manner, from the precious ultramarine of the background to the shell gold for the chain, collar and sleeves as well as to the varnished shades of red for the rubies. Initially we see the picture as a modest whole until we draw nearer and admire the exquisitely painted details.

The question remains as to what the purpose of this small but elaborate portrait can have been. It was common practice for the royal houses to exchange such small-format portraits. In the inventory lists of the English court, we find mention of portraits, amongst others, of the Emperors Maximilian I and Charles V, of Margaret of Austria as well as of King François I of France. Similarly, Henry's portrait was to be found at the other courts. This special painting was probably intended for King François I of France, who was Henry's perpetual rival. With the outstanding and unusual quality of Holbein's portrait, Henry had surpassed François and thus, so the royal thought process, the English King was superior to the French monarch with regard to authority, magnificence and powerful dominance—and it goes without saying, not only in his portrait.

Christina of Denmark, 1538

Oil on oak panel
179.1 × 82.6 cm
The National Gallery, London

This is the only full-figure female portrait by Holbein that is still in existence. It was produced under unusual circumstances. Jane Seymour, the third wife of Henry VIII, died in 1537, two weeks after the birth of her son, the later Edward VI. During Henry's search for a new wife, Christina of Denmark (1521/2–1590) was included on the short list. She was the daughter of King Christian II and was also the niece of Emperor Charles V, which was considerably more important in this context. The Emperor was hoping for an alliance with England against France as a result of this connection and had therefore suggested the marriage. Christina was about 16 years of age and had been the widow of Duke Francesco II Sforza of Milan for over two years following the latter's death in 1535. The Duke had married Christina in 1533 but the marriage had not been consummated because of her youth—she was 11 years old at the time. In 1537, she returned to her home town of Brussels and was still in mourning for her deceased husband, whom she had evidently greatly revered.

Henry VIII sent his court official Philip Hoby and his painter Hans Holbein to paint a portrait of the chosen candidate, so that he could see what she looked like. The English ambassador in Brussels had already sent portraits, but remarked that they were "not as good as the matter requires, nor a match for what the aforementioned Mr Hans would achieve". Holbein arrived in Brussels on 10 March 1538, and two days later, he was granted an audience of three hours in order to make drawings of the young widow. During this short time, he probably recorded the face, the much-praised elegant hands and the figure as a whole. None of the drawings has survived. On 18 March, Holbein was back in London again, where he created this unusual painting. We can see the delicate Christina in her black velvet mourning cloak, standing in front of a blue-green wall, on which she casts a sharp shadow, as well as a door or window embrasure on the right. The prominent shadow on the wall ought to be visible on her face as well, or at least on her nose and hands. But as if to emphasise the contrast between her porcelain-like skin and the black velvet, the face and hands are almost shadow-free. There are few coloured accents, such as the fur trimming on her cloak, which interrupts the black, and her red lips and the ring.

Heinrich VIII was delighted and evidently fell in love with Christina at first sight. People noted that he had musicians play for him all day long. We do not know whether this was when he saw the drawings or the painting, however. Nonetheless, Christina refused to marry him. She had evidently heard too much about the King who had had his second wife beheaded, may have poisoned the first and then had the mother of his son cared for so incompetently that she died in childbed.

In 1541, Christina married François I, the later Duke of Lorraine (1517–1545), in Brussels. According to a marriage contract drawn up when he was still a child, François was actually destined to marry Anne of Cleves (pages 102/3). At the end of Christina of Denmark's life she returned to Italy which, as the widow of Francesco Sforza, she was entitled to do.

Anne of Cleves, 1539/40

Resin tempera on parchment, mounted on canvas
65 × 48 cm
Musée du Louvre, Paris

In the case of Christina of Denmark (pages 100/101), Henry VIII had experienced how quickly one can fall in love at the mere sight of a portrait. In the case of Anne of Cleves (1515–1557), he learned how far removed on occasion the wish can be from reality. After Christina's refusal, the King and his Lord Privy Seal Thomas Cromwell (pages 86/7), continued the search for a new bride who would suit Henry both politically and optically. Cromwell believed that he had found the answer in Düren near Aachen, in the person of Anne of Cleves. She was the daughter of Johann III, Duke of Cleves (1490–1539), a possible ally against Emperor Charles V and King François I of France. Once again, Hans Holbein was sent across the English Channel to produce drawings for the King's consideration. Holbein evidently began to work on Anne's portrait while he was still travelling, because it is painted on parchment, which was considerably more practical on a journey than the more usual wooden panels. The subject was 24 years of age and is dressed in an elaborate velvet dress that is extravagantly adorned with gold borders and pearls. The entire painting is a harmonious blend of shades of red, gold and dark green, and radiates a slightly remote aura. It shows Anne of Cleves in a front-view pose with regular features and a reserved, perhaps slightly naïve gaze.
The question is, to what extent Holbein portrayed reality in his picture, and to what extent he aimed to distract from any flaws—possibly even in accordance with Cromwell's wishes—by focusing on her magnificent costume. In any case, Henry VIII was enamoured and signed the marriage contract in Anne's absence on 6 October 1539. Anne finally arrived in London on 27 December 1539 with her entourage of 263 persons and 283 horses. The King was, to put it mildly, "not amused". Henry tried everything to prevent the marriage, because the "Flanders Mare" did not meet with his expectations at all. Nonetheless, the betrothal took place on 6 January 1540. The King, however, did not feel inclined to consummate the marriage, finding Anne of Cleves too repulsive and himself too disappointed. This time, Holbein had evidently not made the right choice while oscillating between courtesy and reality. The royal couple was divorced on 9 July 1540; Anne abdicated and became known as the King's "Beloved Sister". She was treated with consideration by him despite everything. Cromwell did not survive the disastrous marriage and was beheaded three weeks later. Anne survived Henry and all his wives and was buried as a former Queen in Westminster Abbey.

Edward VI as a Child, probably 1538

Oil on panel
56.8 × 44 cm
National Gallery, Washington

Edward was born on 12 October 1537 as the long-awaited son of King Henry VIII. The joy at the birth of a male heir to the throne at long last was only brief, however, because Jane Seymour, Henry's third wife and queen, died just twelve days after the prince's birth. Hans Holbein took advantage of the opportunity—and perhaps also to confirm his position as court painter after his return from Basel—by painting the child in full magnificence, as befitted an heir to the throne. This is not the portrait of a beloved child, as a comparison with the likeness of his own daughter Katharina, painted ten years previously, clearly shows (pages 80/81); it is above all the image of a successor and son and heir of a young dynasty. And that is how he is portrayed: The Prince of Wales, just over one year old, is shown in a regal pose behind a balustrade covered in green. In one hand he grasps a golden rattle, which he is holding like a sceptre; the other hand is raised in greeting, or in this case, as the future head of the new Anglican Church, in blessing. The inscription was composed by the Humanist and diplomat Richard Morrison, a confidant of Thomas Cromwell, and is a paean of praise for the father, disguised as an address to the son. If the young heir were to surpass his father, this would make him a king who could be outdone by no other monarch.

In painterly terms, the portrait also fulfils the highest expectations. The gold brocade of the sleeves gleams magnificently with the shell gold that Holbein has used. He applies it in fine strokes and lines and leaves the background shining through in places, thereby achieving a painterly effect using graphical means. It harmonises with the brilliant red, which will have been even more intense at the time. The bonnet with the ostrich feather has also changed, because the patches which are brownish today were originally decorated with silver leaf. The background has become badly discoloured over the years: investigations have indicated that here Holbein used smalt, a cobalt-blue pigment that produced a light slate grey-blue on the painting, a colour that probably looked suitably regal together with the clothing.

Holbein presented the picture to Henry VIII as a gift at New Year 1539. The King was pleased with what he saw, because he gave Holbein a golden goblet weighing almost 300 grammes as a token of his thanks. Edward's life was to be a short one. He was a sickly child and was brought up very strictly. He was crowned on 25 February 1547 following his father's death and died himself in 1553 at the age of only 15.


PARVVLE PATRISSA, PATRIÆ VIRTVTIS ET HÆRES
ESTO, NIHIL MAIVS MAXIMVS ORBIS HABET.
GNATVM VIX POSSVNT COELVM ET NATVRA DEDISSE,
HVIVS QVEM PATRIS, VICTVS HONORET HONOS.
ÆQVATO TANTVM, TANTI TV FACTA PARENTIS,
VOTA HOMINVM, VIX QVO PROGREDIANTVR, HABENT
VINCITO, VICISTI. QVOT REGES PRISCVS ADORAT
ORBIS, NEC TE QVI VINCERE POSSIT, ERIT.

Jane Small, c. 1536

Watercolour on parchment
Diameter: 5.2 cm
Victoria and Albert Museum, London

It was the Flemish painter Lukas Horenbout, a contemporary of Holbein, who introduced miniature portraits to England in the 1520s. These tiny pictures and portraits were usually painted in watercolours on parchment and were then mounted so that they could be worn as an item of jewellery. When Hans Holbein arrived in London for his second sojourn in England in 1532 and was later employed as the King's Painter, he was also permitted to work for other clients. He was in any case in great demand as a portraitist, and so he added miniature versions to his portfolio. Here, too, he very quickly outstripped his traditional colleagues, because, as we know from his marginal drawings for *In Praise of Folly* for Erasmus of Rotterdam (page 12) and his *Dance of Death* images, which only measure 6.5 by 4.8 centimetres, his tiny images display an incredible quality. In his so-called "English Sketchbook" he collected drawings which are no larger than spectacles lenses and which nonetheless narrate entire stories from the Old Testament. In this respect, painting miniature portraits made a welcome change for Holbein. Of the few which have survived, that of Jane Small is one of the most elegant. Jane Small (c. 1518–1602), who at that time was still probably Mrs Pemberton, was 23 years of age, as is noted on the picture in typical Holbein manner. The carnation in her neckline and the sprig of rosemary (?) in her hand suggest a betrothal with the prosperous cloth merchant Nicholas Small. It was probably on this occasion that Holbein painted her portrait in the little circle, which measures only just over five centimetres, thereby capturing her gentle personality. In was with good reason that in 1604 the Flemish writer and artist Karel van Mander praised Holbein so highly in his *Schilder-boek*, the first collection of artists' biographies to be published north of the Alps: "And since he had at his disposal a better, indeed an outstandingly good, drawing technique and perception and was blessed with greater intellect, he far surpassed Lukas [Horenbout]—as far [...]as the sun outshines the moon with brightness."
Holbein's quality set standards and helped this new but already very popular branch of portrait painting to great acclaim over the coming decades. One of his most famous and successful successors in this field was the English painter Nicholas Hilliard (1547–1619).


ANNO
ETATIS SVÆ 25