HUMANISM and the CLASSICAL TRADITION:
NORTHERN RENAISSANCE:
(Albrecht Dürer, Lucas Cranach, and Hans Holbein)
NORTHERN RENAISSANCE: Durer, Cranach, and Holbein

Online Links:

Albrecht Durer – Wikipedia

Lucas Cranach the Elder – Wikipedia

Hans Holbein the Younger – Wikipedia

Durer's Adam and Eve – Smarthistory

Durer's Self Portrait - Smarthistory

Cranach's Law and Gospel - Smarthistory article

Cranach's Adam and Eve - Smarthistory
NORTHERN RENAISSANCE: Durer, Cranach, and Holbein

Online Links:

Cranach's Judith with Head of Holofernes – Smarthistory

Holbein's Ambassadors – Smarthistory

French Ambassadors - Learner.org A Global View

Hans Holbein the Younger 1/3 – YouTube

Hans Holbein the Younger 2/3 – YouTube

Hans Holbein the Younger 3/3 - YouTube

Holbein's Henry VIII – Smarthistory

Holbein's Merchant Georg Gisze – Smarthistory

Albrecht Durer - YouTube Part One of 6
The German taste for linear quality in painting is especially striking in the work of Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528). He was first apprenticed to his father, who ran a goldsmith’s shop.

Then he worked under a painter in Nuremberg, which was a center of humanism, and in 1494 and 1505 he traveled to Italy. He absorbed the revival of Classical form and copied Italian Renaissance paintings and sculptures, which he translated into a more rugged, linear northern style.

He also drew the Italian landscape, studied Italian theories of proportion, and read Alberti. Like Piero della Francesca and Leonardo, Dürer wrote a book of advice to artists- the *Four Books of Human Proportion.*
Left: Watercolor drawing of a young hare by Albrecht Dürer

Like Leonardo da Vinci, Dürer was fascinated by the natural world. His watercolor drawings indicate a desire to strictly follow nature as observation yielded truth. Dürer agreed with Aristotle (and the new Renaissance critics) that “sight is the noblest sense of man.”
Albrecht Dürer. *Great Piece of Turf*, 1503, watercolor

This watercolor by Dürer is as scientifically accurate as it is poetic. Botanists can distinguish each springing plant and grass variety—dandelions, great plantain, yarrow, meadow grass, and heath rush.

“Depart not from nature according to your fancy,” Dürer said, “imagining to find aught better by yourself; ... For verily ‘art’ is embedded in nature; he who can extract it, has it.”
Albrecht Dürer. *The Four Horsemen*, from the Apocalypse series, c. 1498, woodcut

The *Apocalypse* was the first books to be designed and published by a single artist. In it Dürer included the full text of the Book of Revelation in Latin and German editions, which he illustrated. In *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, the aged and withered figure of Death rides the skeletal foreground horse, trampling a bishop whose head is in the jaws of a monster. Cowering before the horse are figures awaiting destruction. Next to Death, and the most prominent of the four, rides Famine, carrying a scale. War brandishes a sword, which is parallel to the angel above. Plague, riding the background horse, prepares to shoot his bow and arrow, whose wounds were associated with the sores caused by the plague.
Woodcut—occasionally known as xylography—is a relief printing artistic technique in which an image is carved into the surface of a block of wood, with the printing parts remaining level with the surface while the non-printing parts are removed, typically with gouges.

In this image, Dürer took evident delight in the graphic and psychological expressiveness of line. The powerful left to right motion of the horses and their riders is created by their diagonal sweep across the width of the picture space. The less forceful, zigzag lines of the cowering figures reveal their panic in the face of the relenting and inevitable advance of the horsemen.
It is now thought unlikely that Dürer cut any of the woodblocks himself; this task would have been performed by a specialist craftsman.

However, his training in Wolgemut's studio, which made many carved and painted altarpieces and both designed and cut woodblocks for woodcut, evidently gave him great understanding of what the technique could be made to produce, and how to work with block cutters.

Dürer either drew his design directly onto the woodblock itself, or glued a paper drawing to the block. Either way, his drawings were destroyed during the cutting of the block.
Albrecht Dürer. *Self-Portrait with Landscape*, 1498, oil on wood

Dürer was one of eighteen children of a Nuremberg goldsmith. Nuremberg at that time was a free imperial city with strong business, trade, and publishing interests. The young artist had difficulty selling his work. To bolster his income, Dürer began to publish his own prints, and ultimately it was these prints, not his paintings, that made his fortune.
Right: Albrecht Dürer street in Nuremberg

Below: Albrecht Dürer. *Artist and Nude*, c. 1525, woodcut
Above: Albrecht Dürer. *Self-Portrait with Landscape*, 1498, oil on wood

Left: Albrecht Dürer. *Self-Portrait*, 1500, oil on wood
Dürer’s growing interest in Italian art and theoretical investigations is reflected in his 1504 engraving *Adam and Eve*, which represents his first documented use of a canon of ideal human proportions. His nudes were based on Roman copies of Greek gods, probably seen as prints or small sculpture in the antique manner that had become so popular among European collectors by 1500.
As idealized as the human figures may be, the flora and fauna are recorded with typically northern European microscopic detail.

Dürer embedded the landscape with symbolic content related to the medieval theory that after Adam and Eve disobeyed God, they and their descendants became vulnerable to imbalances in body fluids that altered human temperament: An excess of black bile from the liver produced melancholy, despair, and greed; yellow bile cause anger, pride, and impatience; phlegm in the lungs resulted in a lack of emotion, lethargy, and disinterest; and an excess of blood made a person unusually optimistic but also lustful, compulsively interested in the pleasures of the flesh.
These four human temperaments, or personalities, are symbolized here by the melancholy elk, the choleric cat, the phlegmatic ox, and the sensual rabbit.

The mouse is a symbol of Satan, whose earthly power, already manifest in the Garden of Eden, was capable of bringing perfect human beings to a life of woe through their won bad choices.

The parrot may symbolize false wisdom, since it speaks but can only repeat mindlessly what is said to it. Dürer’s pride in his engraving can be seen in the prominence of his signature— a placard bearing his full name and date hung on a branch of the Tree of Life.
Rather inventively, Dürer gave his serpent a peacock’s crown (the four pin-like protrusions coming out of its head). Peacocks were birds of paradise but also, because of the way they strutted around, extending their tail feathers, one of the time-honored emblems of pride. Dürer suggested with this small device that it was the snake’s appeal to Adam and Eve’s pride that led to their downfall.
Humor: BLOOD
Season: SPRING
Element: AIR
Organ: LIVER
Animal: RABBIT
Ancient Name: SANGUINE

Humor: YELLOW BILE
Season: SUMMER
Element: FIRE
Organ: GALL BLADDER
Animal: CAT
Ancient Name: CHOLERIC

Humor: BLACK BILE
Season: AUTUMN
Element: EARTH
Organ: SPLEEN
Animal: ELK
Ancient Name: MELANCHOLY

Humor: PHLEGM
Season: WINTER
Element: WATER
Organ: BRAIN/LUNGS
Animal: OX
Ancient Name: PHLEGMATIC
The four temperaments (Clockwise from top right: choleric; melancholic; sanguine; phlegmatic)
Clearly outlined against the dark background of a northern forest, the two idealized figures of Adam and Eve stand in poses reminiscent of the Apollo Belvedere and the Medici Venus—two Hellenistic statues probably known to Dürer through graphic representations.
Albrecht Dürer. *Melancholia I*, 1514, engraving

Dürer’s copper engraving of *Melencolia*, or Melancholy, signed and dated 1514, is an early example of the tradition of portraying artists as having *saturnine*, or melancholic, personalities.

That the female winged genius is meant to represent Dürer himself is suggested by the location of his monogram underneath her bench.

She leans on her elbow in the pose of melancholy that had been conventional since antiquity.
Dürer’s Melancholy is an idle, uninspired creator, an unemployed “genius,” looking inward for inspiration and not finding it. She is in the grip of obsessive thinking and therefore cannot act. Idle tools, including a bell that does not ring, empty scales, and a ladder leading nowhere, reflect her state of mind.

The winged child conveys a sense of anxiety that probably mirrors the anxiety felt by the uninspired artist. Other details, such as the hourglass above the genius, refer to the passing of time.

In the upper-left, a squeaking bat displays a banner with MELECHOLIA I written on it. The bat, associated with melancholy because of its isolation in dark places, comes out only at night. By combining the bat with the darkened sky pierced by rays of light, Durer seems to be making a visual play on the contrasting mental states of black melancholy and the light of inspiration.
The complex symbolism of *Melencolia I* is based primarily on concepts derived from Florentine Neo-Platonism. The instruments of the arts and sciences lie strewn in idle confusion about the seated, winged figure of Melancholy; she is the personification of knowledge that, without divine inspiration, lacks the ability to act.

According to then current astrological theory, the artist, or any individual engaged in creative activity, is the subject of *Saturn*. Such a person is characterized by a melancholia bordering on madness that either plunges one into despondency or raises one to the heights of creative fury; Michelangelo was regarded as subject to this humor.
Dürer and Michelangelo both conceived of artists (and thus of themselves) as geniuses who struggle to translate the pure idea in their minds into gross but visible matter. Thus, the monumental image of the winged genius, with burning eyes in a shaded face and wings that do not fly, becomes the symbol for divine aspirations defeated by human frailty and, in a way, is a “spiritual self-portrait of Albrecht Dürer.”

*Melencolia I* seems to reflect the self-doubt that beset Dürer after he returned from Italy, caught up in the spirit of the Italian Renaissance, with its humanist ideals of the artist as a divinely inspired creator... The melancholic person was thought to live under the influence of black bile—the bodily fluid associated with things dry and cold, the earth, evening, autumn and age, and the vices of greed and despair- and Dürer’s melancholic figure’s pose can be seen as that of one in deep thought as well as of sloth, weariness, and despair. In this engraving, Dürer seems to brood on the futility of art and the fleeting nature of life.
One of the four temperaments, she holds the tools of geometry, yet is surrounded by chaos. She thinks but cannot act, while the infant scrawling on the slate, who symbolizes Practical Knowledge, can act but not think. This is, then, the melancholia of an artist, perhaps Dürer himself.

He cannot achieve perfect beauty, which is known only to God, because he cannot extend his thinking beyond the limits of space and the physical world.

This image comes from the humanist Marsilio Ficino, who viewed melancholia (to which he was himself subject) as the source of divine inspiration. He tied it to Saturn, the Mind of the World, which, as the oldest and highest of the planets, he deemed superior even to Jupiter, the Soul of the World.
Albrecht Dürer. *Knight, Death, and the Devil*, 1513, engraving

*Knight, Death, and the Devil*, in sharp contrast with the immobilized *Melencholia I*, is an image of the *vita activa*, the active life, and a metaphor of the Christian soul marching resolutely through a sinful, threatening world. The soul, as mounted, armored knight, ignores the menaces of Death and Devil, as it makes its way to its destination, the citadel of Virtue on the distant mountaintop. The Knight is accompanied by his faithful retriever; alert and eager, the dog symbolizes right reason in pursuit of elusive truth.
Death, a crowned, mouldering cadaver, wreathed with snakes, holds up an hourglass, a reminder of time and mortality. The Devil, almost pathetically hideous, carries a pickax. These grisly phantoms inhabiting the desolate wilderness through which the knight passes cannot terrify him, armored as he is with Christian fortitude.

The theme, symbolism, and characters are all medieval: the Knight in search of the Holy Grail, and Death and the Devil are conventional Gothic grotesques. But the monumental figure of the Knight and his mount have the strength, the movement, and proportions of the Renaissance equestrian statue. Dürer was probably familiar with Leonardo’s sketches for the Sforza monument in Milan; and doubtless he knew the Gattamelata of Donatello and the Colleoni of Verrocchio.
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The knight on his mount, poised and confident as an equestrian statue, embodies an ideal that is both aesthetic and moral. He is the Christian Soldier steadfast on the road of faith toward the Heavenly Jerusalem, undeterred by the hideous rider threatening to cut him off or the grotesque devil behind him. The dog loyally follows its master despite the lizards and skulls in their path.

Italian Renaissance form, united with the heritage of “Late Gothic” symbolism (whether open or disguised), here takes on a new, characteristically Northern significance. Dürer’s convictions were essentially those of Christian humanism. He seems to have derived the subject of *Knight, Death, and the Devil* form the *Manual of the Christian Soldier* by Erasmus of Rotterdam, the greatest of Northern humanists, whom he later met.
A new and hopeful type of reform movement emerged in the sixteenth century thanks to Erasmus of Rotterdam. Under the inspiration of the classical revival in Italy, a number of scholars in northern Europe began to recommend a return to the best of both the classical and the Christian traditions through a study of the classics and the Bible in this movement known as Christian Humanism.
They argued that if men could appreciate the ethical perfection of Socrates and Jesus, of Plato and Paul, then the absurdities of theological hair splitting and the irrelevance of many ecclesiastical practices would become evident.

Reform would inevitably follow from a better understanding of the simplicity of primitive Christianity - and of the noble ideals of the Greeks and Romans, which they felt to be complementary rather than antagonistic to Christianity.

Let the Church take for its guides the Bible and the early Fathers rather than the scholastic theologians of the Middle Ages. Abuses would disappear if laymen and clerics alike would recognize that Christianity was an attitude of mind and a way of life, not a complex set of dogmas and ceremonies.
Christian Humanism offered the last chance of peaceful reform. But it was a movement that needed time, patience, and understanding to have any impact on the upper classes, and it never had much appeal for the mass of the population.

As a practical program it was doomed to failure. It was too aristocratic and too intellectual. This engraved portrait shows Erasmus writing in his study, surrounded by the books that denote his substantial interest and scholarship.

The vase of lilies refers to his “purity” of mind and soul, while the prominent Classical inscriptions are signs of his humanism. The Latin reads, “This image of Erasmus of Rotterdam was drawn from life by Albrecht Dürer,” and the Greek below: “His writings will show what is better.” Signed with Dürer’s monogram, and dated in Roman numerals, the engraving also reflects the humanist character of the artist.
Above: Albrecht Dürer. *The Last Supper*, 1523, woodcut

Right: Albrecht Dürer. *St. Jerome in His Study*, 1514, engraving
Dürer’s major work in the oil medium is *Four Apostles*, a two-panel oil painting he produced without commission and presented to the city fathers of Nuremberg in 1526 to be hung in the city hall. Saints John and Peter appear on the left panel, Mark and Paul on the right.

*Four Apostles* documents Dürer’s support for the German theologian Martin Luther (1483-1546), who sparked the Protestant Reformation. Dürer conveyed his Lutheran sympathies by his positioning of the figures. He relegated Saint Peter (as representative of the pope in Rome) to a secondary role by placing him behind John the Evangelist.
John assumed particular prominence for Luther because of the evangelist’s focus on Christ’s person in the Gospel. In addition, Peter and John both read from the Bible, the single authoritative source of religious truth, according to Luther.

Dürer emphasized the Bible’s centrality by depicting it open to the passage “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1).

At the bottom of the panels, Dürer included quotations from the four apostles’ books, using Luther’s German translation of the New Testament. The excerpts warn against the coming of perilous times and the preaching of false prophets who will distort God’s word.
In the right panel, prominence is given to S. Paul, often regarded as the spiritual father of Protestantism, who stands in front of the evangelist St. Mark.

The lengthy quotations inscribed below are from Luther’s translations of the New Testament. The warnings to the secular powers against taking “human misguidance for the Divine word” alludes not only to the Roman Church but also to extreme forms of Protestantism, which had recently come to the surface during the Peasants’ War. These he firmly denounced, as did Luther.

So the paintings may perhaps be interpreted as a plea for balance and sanity in a world torn by dissension.
By 1517, dissatisfaction with the Church had grown so widespread that Luther felt free to challenge papal authority openly by posting in Wittenberg his Ninety-five Theses, in which he enumerated his objections to Church practices, especially the sale of indulgences.

Indulgences were Church-sanctioned remittances (or reductions) of time Catholics had to spend in Purgatory for confessed sins. The increasing frequency of their sale suggested that those who could afford to purchase indulgences were buying their way to Heaven.

This copy of the Ninety-five Theses in the collections of the Berlin State Library was printed in Nuremberg by Hieronymus Höltzel.
Dürer admired Martin Luther, but they never met. Yet this gift to the town hall, for which he received a honorarium of 100 florins, clearly demonstrates is Protestant sympathies.

Dürer wrote, “For a Christian would no more be led to superstition by a picture or effigy than an honest man to commit murder because he carries a weapon by his side. He must indeed be an unthinking man who would worship picture, wood, or stone. A picture therefore brings more good than harm, when it is honorably, artistically, and well made.”

Luther himself said, “Albrecht Dürer,... used to say he had no pleasure in pictures that were painted with many colors, but in those which were painted with a choice simplicity. So it is with me as to sermons.”
Dürer is known to have intended the figures to exemplify also the four humors or temperaments – sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric, and melancholic-associated with the elements forming the basic substance of all creation. In so far as the theory of the humors accounts for physical and psychological diversity, it embodied Protestant beliefs about human nature, and thus *The Four Apostles* expresses another aspect of Protestantism.

But Dürer went further, illustrating Protestantism at a deeper level. His four figures constitute a divine whole greater than the sum of its parts, like the Lutheran conception of the Reformed Church, composed of equal individuals without a hierarchy.
Lucas Cranach the Elder (c. 1472–1553), was a German Renaissance painter and printmaker in woodcut and engraving. He was court painter to the Electors of Saxony for most of his career, and is known for his portraits, both of German princes and those of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation, whose cause he embraced with enthusiasm, becoming a close friend of Martin Luther.

He also painted religious subjects, first in the Catholic tradition, and later trying to find new ways of conveying Lutheran religious concerns in art. He continued throughout his career to paint nude subjects drawn from mythology and religion. He had a large workshop and many works exist in different versions; his son Lucas Cranach the Younger, and others, continued to create versions of his father's works for decades after his death.
The largest proportion of Cranach's output is of portraits, and it is chiefly thanks to him that we know what the German Reformers and their princely adherents looked like. He painted not only Martin Luther himself but also Luther's wife, mother and father.

He also depicted leading Catholics like Albert of Brandenburg, archbishop elector of Mainz, Anthony Granvelle and the Duke of Alva.
Lucas Cranach the Elder. *Adam and Eve*, 1526, oil on panel.

Cranach’s *Adam and Eve* (1526) is one of quite a few versions of this biblical story he produced. The climax of Eve having tasted and handing the fruit to Adam. Eve looks so knowing, appearing like the cat that swallowed the bird, and now looks downright crafty herself. Adam, however, isn’t in the know yet, so he scratches his head stupidly with his left hand, the exact opposite of Eve. The painterly complementarity is heightened by their skin tones, with earthy Adam the color of soil as his name implies in Hebrew (אָדָם ‘adam “man” and אָדָמָה ’adamah “ground”) and Eve the hue of palest marble, as in Egyptian and even Greek art.
Medieval bestiaries derived from the Classical *Physiologus* often suggested moral lessons associated with certain animals. The majority of animals in Cranach’s foreground around Adam and Eve are artiodactyls or similar mammals, horned beasts like the stag and its mate and a pair of male and female gazelles, in direct symmetry with Adam and Eve. These particular beasts and stags in particular are also often allegorically symbolic of lust, rampant desire and concupiscence in medieval bestiaries. The boar, also present here behind Eve, often corresponds with gluttony or desire for food (“she saw the fruit was good for food and pleasing to the eyes” *Gen. 3:6*), and the sheep behind Adam can often be emblematic for docility or even stupidity (he is ignorant until tasting the fruit).
Right: "Free will does not exist," Luther's letter to Erasmus translated into German by Justus Jonas in 1526

Above: Hans Holbein. *Erasmus of Rotterdam*, c. 1523, oil on panel
He had great respect for Martin Luther, and Luther always spoke with admiration of Erasmus's superior learning. Luther hoped for his cooperation in a work which seemed only the natural outcome of his own.

In their early correspondence, Luther expressed boundless admiration for all Erasmus had done in the cause of a sound and reasonable Christianity and urged him to join the Lutheran party. Erasmus declined to commit himself, arguing that to do so would endanger his position as a leader in the movement for pure scholarship which he regarded as his purpose in life. Only as an independent scholar could he hope to influence the reform of religion.

When Erasmus hesitated to support him, the straightforward Luther felt angered that Erasmus was avoiding the responsibility due either to cowardice or a lack of purpose. Erasmus held to Catholic doctrines such as that of free will, which some Reformers rejected in favor of the doctrine of predestination. His middle road approach disappointed and even angered scholars in both camps.
Marginal drawing of Folly by Hans Holbein in the first edition of Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*, 1515

Erasmus's best-known work was *The Praise of Folly*, a satirical attack on the traditions of the European society, of the Catholic Church and popular superstitions, written in 1509, published in 1511, dedicated to his friend, Sir Thomas More, and inspired by *De triumpho stultitiae*, written by Italian humanist Faustino Perisauli.
Above: Hans Holbein the Younger. *Self Portrait*, c. 1540-3, colored chalk on paper

Right: Hans Holbein. *The French Ambassadors*, 1533, oil and tempera on wood
The last great German painter of the High Renaissance was Hans Holbein the Younger (c. 1497-1593). He synthesized German linear technique with the fifteenth-century Flemish taste for elaborately detailed surface textures and rich color patterns.

Perhaps his greatest achievements were his portraits. Holbein’s family came from the southern German city of Augsburg, which, like Antwerp, was a center of international trade.

At the age of eighteen, Holbein traveled to Basel, where he met Erasmus and painted his portrait. (seen left)
The young Holbein learned his craft in his father's workshop in Augsburg (top left), a city with a thriving book trade, where woodcut and engraving flourished. Augsburg also acted as one of the chief "ports of entry" into Germany for the ideas of the Italian Renaissance.

By the time Holbein began his apprenticeship under Hans Herbster in Basel, he was already steeped in the late Gothic style, with its unsparing realism and emphasis on line, which influenced him throughout his life. In Basel (bottom left), he was favoured by humanist patrons, whose ideas helped form his vision as a mature artist.
While in England, Holbein painted a double portrait of the French ambassadors to England, Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve.

The two men, both ardent Humanists, stand at either end of a side table covered with an oriental rug and a collection of objects reflective of their interests: mathematical and astronomical models and implements, a lute with a broken string, compasses, a sundial, flutes, globes, and an open hymnbook with Luther’s translation of *Veni, Creator Spiritus* and of the Ten Commandments.
The two represent different sectors within the diplomatic corps, named after their styles of dress: “l’homme de robe courte” and “l’homme de robe longue.” Men of the short robe were worldly ambassadors; those with long robes were clergymen. To be sent on a diplomatic mission by the king was an honor, but seldom a pleasure in the 16th century.

Above all, it was expensive. The king granted fiefs, benefices and allowances to both clergy and nobility. In return, these were obliged to perform services, a duty extending to the disposal of their incomes. They were thus expected to pay for their stay in foreign lands out of their own pocket. Once there, they were generally treated with due politeness, but also with suspicion.
Contemporary manuals and memoirs give us some idea of the abilities expected of a diplomat: First of all, he should cut an appropriately representative figure, wearing clothes that were fine enough, and expensive enough, to be worthy of his master. He should be eloquent, have an excellent knowledge of Latin (the lingua franca of the day), and be educated to converse with scientists and artists.

His manner should be urbane, charming, never too curious; he must be able to retain full composure while listening to the worst of news, and be skilled in slowing down or speeding up negotiations whenever necessary. His private life should be impeccable, precluding even the slightest hint of a scandal. His wife must stay at home, of course; after all, she might gossip. It was considered of the utmost importance to retain an able cook; good food is often a ticket to the best information.
As a young man, the English king Henry VIII had married Catherine of Aragon. She was an aunt of the powerful Spanish king, Charles V. Henry and Catherine had a daughter, Mary, who herself became engaged to Charles V of Spain. However, while Mary was still a child, Charles V dissolved his engagement to her, for he wished to marry Isabella, the Infanta of Portugal a match which would directly increase his wealth and sphere of influence. Henry, meanwhile, in whose opinion Charles V was becoming altogether too powerful, sought to ally himself by marriage with France.

Before remarrying he needed the pope to declare his marriage to Catherine null and void. But the pope had been dominated by Charles V since 1527. He was therefore unable to annul Henry’s marriage. The matter was made even more complicated by the Privy Council, who wished to see the English noblewoman Anne Boleyn, rather than a French princess, on the throne of England. It was against this background, in the spring of 1533, that a French ambassador was sent to London.
Jean de Dinteville was an archetypal Renaissance nobleman: a humanist with an interest in music, painting and the sciences. The artist portrays the nobleman with the Order of St. Michael hung on a long golden chain around his neck. This was the French equivalent to the Spanish order of the Golden Fleece or the English Order of the Garter.

Francis I, the French king, had sent Jean de Dinteville to London for the first time in 1531. In the spring of 1533, he was sent to London again, for in the meantime, the alliance between the two countries had become even more confused. Henry VIII had secretly married the pregnant Anne Boleyn in January, though the pope had not yet annulled his previous marriage. Francis I offered to use his influence in the Catholic Church on Henry’s behalf.
Bishop Georges De Selve, opposite him, wears the robe of a clergyman and rests his right elbow on the Bible on the upper shelf, as the representative of the church. The free central axis that links the two worlds is occupied by a high table with two tiers, and the instruments and objects displayed differentiate the upper from the lower, the domain of the heavens and that of earth. This is clearly presented, first of all, by the two globes. Below is an exacting reproduction of a terrestrial globe, the type designed by a German geographer, Johann Schoner, in Nuremberg in 1523. Directly above it is the larger celestial globe with various heavenly constellations indicated: Galacia, Perseus, Pisces, etc...

In keeping with this division of heaven and earth, the intricate instruments scattered across the top shelf are those used for the measuring of altitudes, positions, and times of the heavenly bodies: two sundials; a quadrant and a torquetum, both used for determining angular altitudes and positions; and an unidentified object.
The lute, a traditional symbol of harmony, has a broken string suggesting the growing discord between Catholics and Protestants that was to lead to bitter warfare. Holbein refers to the notion of reunification by means of a hymnal lying open on the lower shelf. The book is neither French nor English, but the German Johann Walther’s *Book of Hymns*, printed at Wittenberg. The book lies open at two of Luther’s hymns. In content and tradition both are good “Catholic” texts, emphasizing the common ground between the new Lutheran and old Roman Catholic standpoints. De Selve evidently had some sympathy for Luther’s endeavors as a reformer; he nevertheless opposed the division of the Church.
By Selve’s left hand is a sundial showing the date April 11, 1533, a crucial point in the ambassadors’ lives. Easter week 1533 was the moment England effectively broke away from the Catholic Church, and established the Church of England with their monarch, not the Pope as its head.

Religion was not the only cultural arena in which major shifts were taking place in the sixteenth century. New wealth, emergent nationhood, and artistic developments were also impacting the lives of Europeans. Holbein’s painting is in some ways traditional, drawing on familiar iconography to convey its message of mortality. At the same time, the opulence of the objects portrayed and the evident delight Holbein took in painting them suggest a changing perspective—one in which worldly existence is not to be eschewed entirely, but balanced carefully against the requirements of salvation.
All of the instruments located between the two figures are linked in some way or another to applied mathematics. (Music, too, was considered a mathematical art at the time.) Both men had been to university, where mathematics had become one of the most important academic disciplines of the Renaissance. This contrasted with the Middle Ages, when a religious explanation of the world had been considered more appropriate than the study of natural sciences, and mathematics had consequently fallen into neglect.

However, as times changed, scientists began to search once again for laws of mathematics and physics which would make it possible to explain how the world functioned. Even painters occupied themselves with the study of mathematics. In his *Instructions for Measurements taken with the Level and Compass*, Holbein’s compatriot Albrecht Durer had celebrated geometry as the true foundation of all painting.
One recent theory proposes that the predominance of curious still life details rightly belongs to the subject of *vanitas*, and that the painting is a warning against pride in learning and the arts. The notion of “vanitas” had wider connotations at the time than it does today. It meant blindness towards the most important things in life; also, the futility of human endeavor. A vain person believes that science can give him knowledge of the world. In a pamphlet in Latin in 1529, shortly before Hans Holbein executed this painting, the German writer Cornelius Agrippa complained of the “uncertainty and vanity of all art and science.”
Everything in Holbein’s painting, whether persons or things, is represented more or less realistically, with one exception: the skull suspended above the floor. At first glance it is hardly identifiable. It is only recognizable as a skull when seen from the right or left edge of the painting, and only when it is viewed through a lens which alters its proportions altogether does the image become quite distinct.

Anamorphoses, or distorted images of this kind, were a well-known trick at the time. In Holbein’s meticulously real-seeming picture, the distortion also functions as a signal that reality, as perceived by the senses, must be viewed ‘correctly’ to reveal its full meaning. A frontal nod of recognition at the worldly semblance of things is not enough.
Holbein created a series of woodcuts called the *Dance of Death* (1523–26), refashioning the late-medieval allegory of the *Danse Macabre* as a reformist satire. Holbein's series shows the figure of "Death" in many disguises, confronting individuals from all walks of life. None escape Death's skeleton clutches, even the pious.
HUMANISM and the CLASSICAL TRADITION:  
NORTHERN RENAISSANCE:  
(Albrecht Dürer, Lucas Cranach, and Hans Holbein)  
ACTIVITIES and REVIEW
STUDENT PRESENTATION #1:

After completing your research on Dürer’s *Adam and Eve*, devise a question to present to and answer for the class. Create a five-point rubric in which a ten-minute response might be formally assessed.
STUDENT PRESENTATION #2:

After completing your research on Dürer’s *Four Apostles*, devise a question to present to and answer for the class. Create a five-point rubric in which a ten-minute response might be formally assessed.
These works are both engravings depicting Adam and Eve. How does the work on the left (by Lucas Cranach) differ from the Durer print on the right? Discuss probable reasons why.
Discuss ways in which the figures shown (painted by Hans Holbein) reflect an interest in humanist pursuits.
Trailer created by a YouTube user for the movie Luther

Official Trailer for the Movie Luther
Secrets of Hampton Court Palace