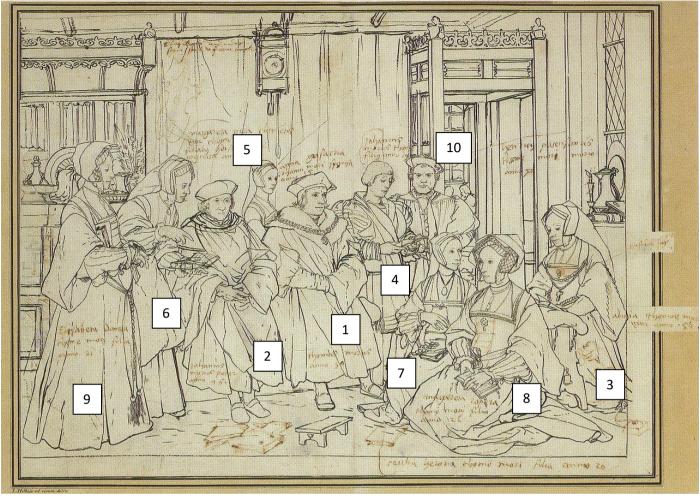
Thomas More family portrait by Holbein the Younger: a good example of a humanist family life



Study for a portrait of Thomas More's family, c. 1527, by Hans Holbein the Younger (Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland)

This spectacular group portrait shows Sir Thomas More (1478-1535), Henry VIII's Lord Chancellor, surrounded by several generations of his family. It is the original study of the lost portrait by Hans Holbein the younger, who produced over a hundred full-length and miniature portraits of members of the Henrician court. The portrait, one of Holbein's first English commissions, was destroyed by a fire at the Bishop of Olmütz's Palace (Olomouc, Czech Republic) in 1752.[...] Holbein's composition may be the earliest example of a domestic group portrait produced in England . The large scale suggests that More may have commissioned it for the Long Gallery of his new "Great House" in Chelsea. The gathering of the family conveys a strong sense of dynastic unity. In Holbein's sketch, each person is identified by a Latin inscription. Reading from the viewer's left is More's stepdaughter Margaret Clement (née Giggs), his daughter Elizabeth Daunce, his father Sir John More in his judge's red robes, and his ward Anne Cresacre. To the right of More is his only son John (whom Anne would marry), the household 'fool' Henry Patenson,[...] and, seated in the foreground, his daughters Cicely Heron and the celebrated writer and translator Margaret Roper. On the far right sits More's second wife, Lady Alice. [...]

https://www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/960059

Part one: Activities on the portrait

- 1. Using the text, draw an accurate genealogical chart including the number and name of each character on the portrait.
- 2. Using colored pencils, color in red the books presents on the portrait and hold by women, and color in green the people who seem to be talking to each other.
- 3. Using colored pencils, circle un blue an element linked with Time, in orange an element linked with wealth, in pink an element linked with nature.

Part two: Understanding the symbolic meaning of the portrait.

- 1. A family portrait (justify your answers with the portrait, the text, and the colored elements)
 - a) Identify and explain the elements showing this is mostly a domestic group portrait.
 - b) What are the every-day life elements here? Why did Holbein choose to represent them?
 - c) What are the sitters doing? Be as precise as possible.
 - d) Why, according to you, is it so important for More to convey this image of harmony and happiness (use his biography)?
- 2. The portrait of a powerful family (justify your answers with the portrait, the text, and the colored elements)
 - a) How is the permanence of the More dynasty is shown here?
 - b) Look closely sitters n°8 and 9's bellies and complete your answer.
 - c) List all the elements of wealth and power show in this study and link them to More's position at Court.
 - d) Describe the setting and the clothes of the sitters. Which impressions of the More family does Holbein try to convey to the viewer?
- 3. Humanists at work (justify your answers with the portrait, the text, and the colored elements)
 - a) Who is mostly holding books in this portrait? Comment on it and don't forget to use the text also.
 - b) What is sitter n°6 apparently doing? Why is it very unusual for the time?
 - c) The books hold by the sitters can be identified: (1) Boethius' Consolationis Philosophiae where he encourages readers not to pursue worldly goods such as money and power, but to seek internalized virtues and (2) Seneca's Epistulae, which comprises 124 letters addressed to young Lucilius and expresses "ardent concern for the journey to wisdom". What is the meaning of such a choice?
 - d) Why can we say that this sketch is a lesson of Humanism?

Part three: sump-up the main elements

Explain in a short paragraph how this sketch epitomizes the aims and ideals of the early Renaissance in England, who it is emblematic of Holbein's work and why the destruction of the original is a great loss for Art History.

To go further: https://thomasmorestudies.org/thomas-more-family-portrait/