

Mysteries of a masterpiece of sixteenth century graphic art

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Art historians and dentists alike have attempted over the centuries to unravel the mystery of Renaissance artist, Ambrosius Holbein's Memento Mori Map. ¹ The woodcut map was created as Holbein worked as an artist and illustrator for Sir Thomas More's Utopia. This piece of early sixteenth century art was brought to the forefront of the masses when it was used by Peter Ackroyd in 1998. [Ackroyd P. The life of Thomas More. London: Chatto & Windus, 1998.] The author used Holbein's Map of Utopia on the back dust cover of his book Life of Thomas More, ² thus reviving a debate that had lasted for centuries concerning the unusual illustration.

Holbein's map includes an island, three sailing vessels and a land mass in the background among other objects. Upon closer inspection, the land mass is thought to be a human skull and the largest sailing vessel in the forefront is the skull's teeth. This unusual "discovery" caused quite a stir both in the field of art and in the field of dentistry. While the masses viewed the sketch as an "intellectual puzzle", it began to draw the attention of dentists who saw the sketch as an instructional guide in dental radiology.

It heightened their perception of concealed anatomical structures in the human mouth. In 1516, Thomas More commissioned a young artist, Ambrosius Holbein, ³ to illustrate his upcoming book, Utopia. Little did he know that five hundred years later, art historians and dentists alike would still be arguing about the hidden meanings of the woodcut sketch Holbein had produced. The hidden skull did not become apparent to viewers until a Third Edition of Thomas More's book [Holbein, H. Painting prints and reception. Washington: National Gallery of Art. Yale Studies in the History of Art 60.

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] was published. There were no illustrations in the second edition but the Third Edition contained a much more complex version of the original sketch. Art Historians continue to argue about whether Holbein could have completed the later version, since it is apparent that it's was a creator much more accomplished artist. The sketch of the Third Edition contains a number of similarities to the original but is a more complex work. In the sketch of the Third Edition, the teeth of the skull become much more apparent. The ribs and planking of the ship provide the so-called "teeth" of the grinning skull.

The lower row of rectangles is not a third row of teeth, but instead the bony root prominences of the lower incisors and premolars. In Peter Ackroyd's discussion⁴ of the sketch, he points out that the island as described in the book has the same dimensions as England, with the number of city states corresponding to the number of counties, plus London, which latter city the main town of the island resembles. These city states are reduced to six in the map. Another interesting enigma, these facts heightened the debate over Holbein's work. Was he a clever artist who enjoyed symbolism and trickery? Or was his original work a mere accident?

It becomes very clear in his second "Map of Utopia"⁵ that he indeed had realized the intriguing controversy his first map had instigated. In this subsequent work, he takes the drawing to a deeply detailed level not seen in the original. The island itself has been transformed, with its visual wit bringing it up to the same standard as the text it accompanies. At a time when much of book illustration was religious or classical in theme, Ambrosius Holbein's Utopia prints were distinguished by their modernity in showing

living people. This fact also sets the sketch apart from others of its day. Another well-known fact adds to the controversy.

Thomas More was known to be a clever sort of man who enjoyed word play. Did he originally commission Holbein to create this clever skull with “teeth”? Or was it merely a happy accident? Serendipity. It is interesting to note that the Latin word for death is “mors”. In 1533 Hans Holbein, Ambrosius Holbein’s younger brother, also an accomplished artist, painted *The Ambassadors*. [Queen Anne House, 2A St. Andrews Street, Hertfordshire, SG141JA] This painting was commissioned by King Henry the Eighth of England. In this monumental painting, the king is presenting the Charter of Union to the barbers and surgeons at Bridewell Palace in 15406.

In this painting, done fifteen or so years after his brother’s map, Hans plays with the laws of perspective by including an enigmatic anamorphic skull in the painting. A discussion ensued over this work as well. Was it a memento mori, a reminder of mortality? In 1997, a special exhibition in the National Gallery of London⁶ celebrated the completion of the cleaning and restoration of the “*Ambassadors*” painting. The exhibition was accompanied by an explanatory publication which reignited the debate over the Ambrosius Holbein’s “*Map of Utopia*”.

7 Considerable attention was paid to the skull in the foreground of *The Ambassadors*, the oblique slash of which is such a challenging enigma in the composition. To illustrate how the effect was achieved, both photographic and computer regenerated skull images of Hans’ anamorphic skull were shown. In the years that followed Ambrosius Holbein’s original and subsequent *Map of Utopia*, another “happy accident” occurred. The barbers <https://assignbuster.com/mysteries-of-a-masterpiece-of-sixteenth-century-graphic-art/>

and surgeons began to investigate the woodcut sketch for its value as an aid in dental radiology. Works Cited 1. Lupton J H. The Utopia of Thomas More in Latin and the English of Robynson's translation of 1551.

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