



CHAPTER VI.

Hans Holbein's connexion with the Dance of Death.—A dance of peasants at Basle.—Lyons edition of the Dance of Death, 1538.—Doubts as to any prior edition.—Dedication to the edition of 1538.—Mr. Ottley's opinion of it examined.—Artists supposed to have been connected with this work.—Holbein's name in none of the old editions.—Reperduus.



THE name of Holbein has been so strongly interwoven with the Dance of Death, that the latter is seldom mentioned without bringing to recollection that extraordinary artist.

It would be a great waste of time and words to dwell specifically on the numerous errors of such writers as Papillon, Fournier, and several others, who have inadvertently connected Holbein with the Macaber Dance, or to correct those of travellers who have spoken of the subject as it appeared in any shape in the city of Basle. The opinions of those who have either supposed or stated that Holbein even retouched or repaired the old painting at Basle, are entitled to no credit whatever, unaccompanied as they are by necessary proofs. The names of the artists who were employed on that painting have been already adverted to, and are sufficiently detailed in the volumes of Merian and Peignot; and it is therefore unnecessary to repeat them.

Evidence, but of a very slight and unsatisfactory nature, has been adduced that Holbein painted some kind of a Death's Dance on the walls of a house at Basle. Whether this was only a copy of the old Macaber subject, or some other of his own invention, cannot now be ascertained. Bishop Burnet, in his Letters from Switzerland,¹ states that "there is a *Dance* which he painted on the walls of a house where he used to drink; yet so worn out that very little is now to be seen, except *shapes and postures*, but these show the exquisiteness of the hand." It is much to be regretted that this painting was not in a state to have enabled the bishop to have been more particular in his description. He then mentions the older *Dance*, which he places "along the side of the convent of the Augustinians (meaning the Dominicans), now the French church, so worn out some time ago that they ordered the best painter they had to lay new colour on it, but this is so ill done, that one had rather see the dark shadow of Holbein's pencil than this coarse work." Here he speaks obscurely, and adopts the error that Holbein had some hand in it.

Keyser, a man of considerable learning and ingenuity, and the author of a very excellent book of Travels, mentions the old painting at Basle, and adds, that "Holbein had also drawn and painted a Death's Dance, and had likewise painted, as it were, a *duplicate* of this piece on another house, but which time has entirely obliterated."² We are here again left entirely in the dark as to the first mentioned painting, and its difference from the other. Charles Patin, an earlier authority than the two preceding travellers, and who was at Basle in 1671, informs us that strangers behold, with a considerable degree of pleasure, the walls of a house at the corner of a little street in the above town, which are covered from top to bottom with paintings by Holbein, that would have done honour to the commands of a great prince, whilst they are, in fact, nothing more than the painter's reward to the master of a tavern for some meals that he had obtained.³ In the list of Holbein's works, in

¹ Letters containing an account of what seemed most remarkable in Switzerland, Italy, &c. By G. Burnet, D.D. Rotterdam, 1686, 8vo. p. 265.

² Travels through Germany, &c. i. 138, edit. 4to.

³ Relations historiques et curieuses de voyages en Allemagne, &c. Amst. 1625. 12mo. p. 124.

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his edition of Erasmus's *Moriæ encomion*, he likewise mentions the painting on a house in the *Eisengassen*, or Iron-street, near the Rhine bridge, and for which he is said to have received forty florins,⁴ perhaps the same as that mentioned in his *Travels*.

This painting was still remaining in the year 1730, when Mr. Breval saw it, and described it as a *dance of boors*, but in his opinion unworthy, as well as the *Dance of Death* in that city, of Holbein's hand.⁵ These accounts of the paintings on houses are very obscure and contradictory, and the only way to reconcile them is by concluding that Holbein might have decorated the walls of some houses with a *Dance of Death*, and of others with a dance of peasants.⁶ The latter subject would indeed be very much to the taste of an innkeeper, and the nature of his occupation. Some of the writers on engraving have manifested their usual inaccuracy on the subject of Holbein's *Dance of Peasants*. Joubert says it has been engraved, but that it is "a peu près introuvable."⁷ Huber likewise makes them extremely rare, and adds, without the slightest authority, that Holbein engraved them.⁸ There is, however, no doubt that his beautiful pencil was employed on this subject in various ways, of which the following specimens are worthy of being recorded. 1. In a set of initial letters frequently used in books printed at Basle and elsewhere. 2. In an edition of Plutarch's works, printed by Cratander at Basle, 1530, folio, and afterwards introduced into Polydore Vergil's "*Anglicæ historiæ libri viginti sex*," printed at Basle, 1540, in folio, where, on p. 3 at bottom, the subject is very elegantly treated. It occurs, also, in other books printed in the same city. 3. In an edition of the "*Nugæ*" of Nicolas Borbonius, Basle, 1540, 12mo. at p. 17, there is a dance of peasants replete with humour: and, 4. A vignette in the first page of an edition of Apicius, printed at Basle, 1541, 4to. without the printer's name.

After all, there seems to be a fatality of ambiguity in the

⁴ See likewise Zuinger, *Methodus Academica*, Basle, 1577, 4to. p. 199. Remarks on several parts of Europe, 1738, vol. ii. p. 72. ⁶ Peignot places the dance of peasants in the fish-market of Basle, as other writers had the *Dance of Death*. *Recherches*, p. 15. ⁷ *Manuel de l'Amateur d'estampes*, ii. 131. ⁸ *Manuel des curieux*, &c. i. 156.

account of the Basle paintings ascribed to Holbein ; and that of the Dance of Death has not only been placed by several writers on the walls, inside and outside, of houses, but likewise in the fish-market ; on the walls of the churchyard of St. Peter ; and even in the cathedral itself of Basle ; and, therefore, amidst this chaos of description, it is absolutely impossible to arrive at any conclusion that can be deemed in any degree satisfactory.

We are now to enter upon the investigation of a work which has been somewhat erroneously denominated a "Dance of Death," by most of the writers who have mentioned it. Such a title, however, is not to be found in any of its numerous editions. It is certainly not a dance, but rather, with slight exception, a series of admirable groups of persons of various characters, among whom Death is appropriately introduced as an emblem of man's mortality. It is of equal celebrity with the Macaber Dance, but in design and execution of considerable superiority, and with which the name of Hans Holbein has been so intimately connected, and that great painter so generally considered as its inventor, that even to doubt his claim to it will seem quite heretical to those who may have founded their opinion on internal evidence with respect to his style of composition.

In the year 1538 there appeared a work with the following title, "Les simulachres et historiees faces de la mort, autant elegamment pourtraictes, que artificiellement imaginées." A Lyon Soubz lescu de Coloigne, 4to. and at the end, "Excudebant Lugduni Melchior et Gaspar Trechsel fratres, 1538." It has forty-one cuts, most exquisitely designed and engraved on wood, in a manner which several modern artists only of England and Germany have been competent to rival. As to the designs of these truly elegant prints, no one who is at all skilled in the knowledge of Holbein's style and manner of grouping his figures, would hesitate immediately to ascribe them to that artist. Some persons have imagined that they had actually discovered the portrait of Holbein in the subject of the nun and her lover ; but the painter, whoever he may have been, is more likely to be represented in the last cut as one of the supporters of the escutcheon of Death. In these designs,

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which are wholly different from the dull and oftentimes disgusting Macaber Dance, which is confined, with little exception, to two figures only, we have the most interesting assemblage of characters, among whom the skeletonized Death, with all the animation of a living person, forms the most important personage; sometimes amusingly ludicrous, occasionally mischievous, but always busy and characteristically occupied.

Doubts have arisen whether the above can be regarded as the first edition of these justly celebrated engravings in the form of a volume accompanied with text. In the "Notices sur les graveurs," Besançon, 1807, 8vo. a work ascribed to M. Malpé,⁹ it is stated to have been originally published at Basle in 1530; and in M. Jansen's "Essai sur l'origine de la gravure," &c. Paris, 1808, 8vo. a work replete with plagiarisms, and the most glaring mistakes, the same assertion is repeated. This writer adds, but unsupported by any authority, that soon afterwards another edition appeared with Flemish verses. Both these authors, following their blind leader Papillon, have not ventured to state that they ever saw this supposed edition of 1530; and it may indeed be asked, who has? Or in what catalogue of any library is it recorded? Malpé acknowledges that the earliest edition he had seen was that of 1538. M. Fuseli, in his edition of Pilkington's Dictionary of Painters, has appended a note to the article for Hans Holbein, where, alluding perhaps to the former edition of the present dissertation, he remarks, that "Holbein's title to the Dance of Death would not have been called in question, had the ingenious author of the dissertation on that subject been acquainted with the German edition." This gentleman seems, however, to have inadvertently forgotten a former opinion which he had given in one of his lectures, where he says, "The scrupulous precision, the high finish, and the Titianesque colour of Hans Holbein would make the least part of his excellence, if his right to that series of emblematic groups known under the name of Holbein's Dance of Death had not, of late, been too successfully disputed." M. Fuseli would have rendered some service to this question by favouring us with an explicit account of the above

⁹ Some give it to the Abbé Baverel.

German edition, if he really intended by it a complete work; but it is most likely that he adverted to some separate impressions of the cuts with printed inscriptions on them, but which are only the titles of the respective characters or subjects. To such impressions M. Malpé has certainly referred, adding that they have, at top, passages from the Bible in German, and verses at bottom in the same language. Jansen follows him as to the verses at bottom only. Now, on forty-one of these separate impressions, in the collection of the accurate and laborious author of the best work on the origin and early history of engraving that has ever appeared, and on several others in the present writer's possession, neither texts of scripture, nor verses at bottom, are to be found, and nothing more than the above-mentioned German titles of the characters. M. Huber, in his "*Manuel des curieux et des amateurs de l'art*," vol. i. p. 155, after inaccurately stating that Holbein *engraved* these cuts, proceeds to observe, that in order to form a proper judgment of their merit, it is necessary to see the earliest impressions, printed on one side only of the paper; and refers to twenty-one of them in the cabinet of M. Otto, of Leipsig, but without stating any letter-press as belonging to them, or regarding them as a part of any German edition of the work.

In the public library of Basle there are proof impressions, on four leaves, of all the cuts which had appeared in the edition of 1538, except that of the astrologer. Over each is the name of the subject printed in German, and without any verses or letter-press whatever at bottom.

It is here necessary to mention that the first known edition in which these cuts were used, namely, that of 1538, was accompanied with French verses, descriptive of the subjects. In an edition that soon afterwards appeared, these French verses were translated into Latin by George Æmylius, a *German* divine; and in another edition, published at Basle, in 1554, the Latin verses were continued. In both these cases, had there been any former *German verses*, would they not have been retained in preference?

There is a passage, however, in Gesner's *Pandectæ*, a supplemental volume of great rarity to his well-known *Bibliotheca*, that slightly adverts to a German edition of

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this work, and at the same time connects Holbein's name with it. It is as follows: "Imagines mortis expressæ ab optimo pictore Johanne Holbein cum epigrammatibus Geo. Æmylii, excusæ Francofurti et Lugduni apud Frellonios, quorum editio plures habet picturas. Vidi etiam cum metris Gallicis et *Germanicis si bene memini.*"¹⁰ But Gesner writes from imperfect recollection only, and specifies no edition in German. It is most probable that he refers to an early copy of the cuts on a larger scale with a good deal of text in German, and printed and perhaps engraved by Jobst Denecker, at Augsburg, 1544, small folio.

The forty-one separate impressions of the cuts in the collection of Mr. Ottley, as well as those in the present writer's possession, are printed on one side of the paper only, another argument that they were not intended to be used in any book; and although they are extremely clear and distinct, many of them that were afterwards used in the various editions of the book are not less brilliant in appearance. It is well known to those who are conversant with engravings on wood, that the earliest impressions are not always the best; a great deal depending on the care and skill with which they were taken from the blocks, and not a little on the quality of the paper. As they were most likely engraved at Basle by an excellent artist, of whom more will be said hereafter, and at the instance of the Lyons booksellers or publishers, it is very probable that a few impressions would be taken off with German titles only for the use of the people of Basle, or other persons using the German language. Proofs might also be wanted for the accommodation of amateurs or other curious persons, and therefore it would be only necessary to print the names or titles of the subjects. This conjecture derives additional support from the well-known literary intercourse between the cities of Lyons and Basle, and from their small distance from each other. On the whole, therefore, the Lyons edition of 1538 may be safely regarded as the earliest, until some other shall make its appearance with a well ascertained prior date, either in German or any other language.

In the edition of 1538 there is a dedication not in any of the others, and of very considerable importance. It is a

¹⁰ L'ib. ult. p. 86.

pious, quaint, and jingling address to Jeanne de Touszele, Abbess of the convent of St. Peter, at Lyons, in which the author, whose name is obscurely stated to be Ouzele, compliments the good lady as the pattern of true religion, from her intimate acquaintance with the nature of Death, rushing, as it were, into his hands, by her entrance into the sepulchre of a cloister. He enlarges on the various modes of representing the mortality of human nature, and contends that the image of Death has nothing terrific in the eyes of the Christian. He maintains that there is no better method of depicting mortality than by a dead person, especially by those images which so frequently occur on sepulchral monuments. Adverting then to the figures in the present work, he *regrets the death of him who has here conceived [imaginé] such elegant designs, greatly exceeding all other patterns of the kind, in like manner as the paintings of Apelles and Zeuxis have surpassed those of modern times.* He observes that these funereal histories, accompanied by their grave descriptions in rhyme, induce the admiring spectators to behold the dead as alive, and the living as dead; which leads him to believe that Death, apprehensive lest this admirable *painter* should exhibit him so lively that he would no longer be feared as Death, and that he should thereby become immortal himself, had hastened his days to an end, and thus prevented him from completing many other figures which *he* had already *designed*, especially that of the carman crushed and wounded beneath his demolished wagon, the wheels and horses of which are so frightfully overthrown that as much horror is excited in beholding their downfall, as pleasure in contemplating the lickerishness of one of the Deaths, who is clandestinely sucking with a reed the wine in a bursting cask.¹¹ That in these imperfect subjects no one had dared to put the finishing hand, on

¹¹ The dedicator has apparently in this place been guilty of a strange misconception. The Death is not sucking the wine from the cask, but in the act of untwisting the fastening to one of the hoops. Nor is the carman *crushed* beneath the wheels: on the contrary, he is represented as standing upright and wringing his hands in despair at what he beholds. It is true that this cut was not then completed, and might have undergone some subsequent alteration. He likewise speaks of the rainbow in the cut of the Last Judgment, as being at that time *unfinished*, which, however, is introduced in this first edition.

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account of the boldness of their outline, shadow, and perspective, *delineated* in so graceful a manner, that by its contemplation one might indulge either in a joyful sorrow, or a melancholy pleasure. "Let antiquaries then," says he, "and lovers of ancient imagery, discover anything comparable to these figures of Death, in which we behold the Empress of all living souls from the creation, trampling over Cæsars, Emperors, and Kings, and with her scythe mowing down the tyrannical heroes of the earth." He concludes with admonishing the Abbess to take in good part this his sad but salutary present, and to persuade her devout nuns not only to keep it in their cells and dormitories, but in the cabinet of their memory, therein pursuing the counsel of St. Jerome, &c.

The singularity of this curious and interesting dedication is deserving of the utmost attention. It seems very strongly, if not decisively, to point out the edition to which it is prefixed, as the first; and what is of still more importance, to deprive Holbein of any claim to the *invention* of the work. It most certainly uses such terms of art as can scarcely be mistaken as conveying any other sense than that of *originality in design*. There cannot be words of plainer import than those which describe the painter, as he is expressly called, *delineating* the subjects, and leaving several of them unfinished: and whoever the artist might have been, it clearly appears that he was not living in 1538. Now it is well known that Holbein's death did not take place before the year 1554, during the plague which ravaged London at that time. If, then, the expressions used in this dedication signify anything, it may surely be asked what becomes of any claim on the part of Holbein to the designs of the work in question, or does it *not at least* remain in a situation of doubt and difficulty?

It is, however, with no small hesitation that the author of the present dissertation still ventures to dispute, and even to deny, the title of Holbein to the invention of this Dance of Death, in opposition to his excellent and valued friend Mr. Ottley, whose opinion in matters of taste, as well as on the styles of the different masters in the old schools of painting and engraving, may be justly pronounced to be almost oracular. This gentleman has thus expressed

himself: "It cannot be denied that were there nothing to oppose to this passage, it would seem to constitute very strong evidence that Holbein, who did not die until the year 1554, was not the author of the designs in question; but I am firmly persuaded that it refers in reality, not to the designer, but to the artist who had been employed, under his direction, to engrave the designs in wood, and whose name, there appears reason to believe, was Hans Lutzenberger.¹² Holbein, I am of opinion, had, shortly before the year 1538, sold the forty-one blocks which had been some time previously executed, to the booksellers of Lyons, and had at the same time given him a promise of others which he had lately designed, as a continuation of the series, and were then in the hands of the wood-engraver. The wood-engraver, I suppose, died before he had completed his task, and the correspondent of the bookseller, who had probably deferred his publication in expectation of the new blocks, wrote from Basle to Lyons to inform his friend of the disappointment occasioned by the artist's death. It is probable that this information was not given very circumstantially, as to the real cause of the delay, and that the person who wrote the dedication of the book might have believed the designer and engraver to be one and the same person: it is still more probable that he thought the distinction of little consequence to his reader, and willingly omitted to go into details which would have rendered his quaint moralizing in the above passage less admissible. Besides, the additional cuts there spoken of (eight cuts of the Dance of Death and four of boys) were afterwards finished (doubtless by another wood-engraver, who had been brought up under the eye of Holbein), and are not apparently inferior, whether in respect of design or execution, to the others. In short, these designs have always been ascribed to Holbein, and designedly ranked amongst his finest works."¹³

Mr. Ottley having admitted that the edition of the Dance of Death, printed in quarto, at Lyons, 1538, is the earliest with which we are at present acquainted, proceeds to state

¹² It would be of some importance if the date of Lutzenberger's death could be ascertained. ¹³ An Inquiry into the Origin and early History of Engraving, 1816, 4to. vol. ii. p. 759.

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his belief that the cuts had been previously and *certainly* used at Basle. He then alludes to the supposed German edition, about the year 1530, but acknowledges that he had not been able to meet with or hear of any person who had seen it. He next introduces to his reader's notice, and afterwards describes at large, a set of forty-one impressions, being the complete series of the edition of 1538, except one, and taken off with the greatest clearness and brilliancy of effect, on one side of the paper only, each cut having over it its title printed in the German language, with movable type. He thinks it possible that they may originally have had German verses underneath, and texts of Scripture above, in addition to the titles; a fact, he adds, not now to be ascertained, as the margins are clipped on the sides and at bottom. He says, it is greatly to be regretted that the blocks were never taken off with due diligence and good printing ink, after they got into the hands of the Lyons booksellers, and then introduces into his page two fac-similes of these cuts so admirably copied as to be almost undistinguishable from the originals.¹⁴ One may, indeed, regret with Mr. Ottley the *general carelessness* of the old printers in their mode of taking off impressions from blocks of wood when introducing them into their books, and which is so very unequally practised that, as already observed, the impressions are often clearer and more distinct in later than in preceding editions. The works of the old designers and engravers would, in many cases, have been much more highly appreciated, if they had had the same justice done to them by the printers as the editorial taste and judgment of Mr. Ottley, combined with the skill of the workmen, have obtained in the decoration of his own book. With respect to the impressions of the cuts in question, when the blocks were in the hands of the Lyons booksellers, the fact is, that in some of their editions they are occasionally as fine as those separately printed off; and at the moment of making this remark, an edition, published in 1547, at Lyons, is before the writer, in which many of the prints are uncommonly clear and even brilliant, a circumstance owing, in a great degree, to the nature of the paper on which they are impressed.

¹⁴ An Inquiry, &c. ii. 762.

It were almost to be wished that this perplexing evidence against Holbein's title to the invention of the work before us had never existed, and that he had consequently been left in the quiet possession of what so well accords with his exquisite pencil and extraordinary talents. Thus it is, that the person to whom we owe this stubborn testimony, has manifested a much more intimate acquaintance with the mode of conveying his pious ejaculations to the Lady Abbess in the quaintest language that could possibly have been chosen, than with the art of giving an accurate account of the prints in question. Yet it seems scarcely possible, that he should have used the word *imagined*, which undoubtedly expresses originality of invention, and not the mere act of copying, if he had referred to an engraver on wood, whom he would not have dignified with the appellation of a painter on whom he was bestowing the highest possible eulogium. There would also have been much less occasion for the author's hyperbolic fears on the part of Death in the case of an engraver, than in that of a painter. He has stated that the rainbow subject, meaning probably that of the Last Judgment, was left unfinished; but it appears among the engravings in his edition. He must, therefore, have referred to a painting, with which likewise the expression "bold shadows and perspective," seem better to accord than with a slight engraving on wood. He had also seen the subject of the wagon with the wine casks in its unfinished state, and in this case we may almost with certainty pronounce it to have been a painting, as the cut of it does not appear in the first edition, furnishing, at the same time, an argument against Holbein's claim; nor may it be unimportant to add that the dedicator, a religious person, and probably a man of some eminence, was much more likely to have been acquainted with the painter than with the engraver. The dedicator also stamps the work as originating at Lyons; and Frelon, its printer, in a complaint against a Venetian bookseller, who pirated his edition, emphatically describes it as exclusively belonging to France.

Again, it is improbable that the dedicator, whoever he was, should have preferred complimenting the engraver of the cuts, who, with all his consummate skill, must, in point

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of rank and genius, be placed below the painter or designer; and it is at the same time remarkable that the name of Holbein is not adverted to in any of the early and genuine editions of the work, published at Lyons, or any other place, whilst his designs for the Bible have there been so pointedly noticed by his friend the poet Borbonius.

It would be of some importance, if it could be shown that the engraver was dead in or before the year 1538, for that circumstance would contribute to strengthen Mr. Ottley's opinion: but should it be found that he did not die in or before 1538, it would follow, of course, that the painter was the person adverted to in the dedication, and who consequently could not be Holbein. It becomes necessary, therefore, to endeavour at least to discover some other artist competent to the invention of the beautiful designs in question; and whether the attempt be successful or otherwise, it may, perhaps, be not altogether misplaced or unprofitable.

It must be recollected that Francis the First, on returning from his captivity at Pavia, imported with him a great many Italian and other artists, among whom were Leonardo da Vinci, Rosso, Primaticcio, &c. He is also known to have visited Lyons, a royal city at that time eminent in art of every kind, and especially in those of printing and engraving on wood; as the many beautiful volumes published at that place, and embellished with the most elegant decorations in the graphic art, will at this moment sufficiently testify. In an edition of the "Nugæ" of Nicolas Borbonius, the friend of Holbein, printed at Lyons, 1538, 8vo. are the following lines:

De Hanso Ulbio, et Georgio Reperdio, pictoribus.

Videre qui vult Parrhasium cum Zeuxide,
Accersat à Britannia
Hansum Ulbium, et Georgium Reperdium.
Lugduno ab urbe Gallie.

In these verses Reperdius is opposed to Holbein for the excellence of his art, in like manner as Parrhasius had been considered as the rival of Zeuxis.

After such an eulogium it is greatly to be regretted that, notwithstanding a very diligent inquiry has been made

concerning an artist who, by the poet's comparative view of him, is placed on the same footing with Holbein, and probably of the same school of painting, no particulars of his life or works have been discovered. It is clear from Borbonius's lines that he was then living at Lyons, and it is extremely probable that he might have begun the work in question, and have died before he could complete it, and that the Lyons publishers might afterwards have employed Holbein to finish what was left undone, as well as to make designs for additional subjects which appeared in the subsequent editions. Thus would Holbein be so connected with the work as to obtain in future such notice as would constitute him by general report the real inventor of it. If then there be any validity in what is here stated concerning Reperdius, the difficulty and obscurity in the preface to the Lyons edition of the Dance of Death in 1538 will be removed, and Holbein remain in possession of a share at least in the composition of that inestimable work. The mark or monogram **H** on one of the cuts cannot possibly belong to Holbein, but may possibly be that of the engraver, of whom more hereafter.



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