

The Ambassadors

*I am the most melancholy, weary and wearisome ambassador
in the world. -- Jean de Dinteville, 1533*

‘O wretched mortals,
open your eyes...’
So pleaded Leonardo,

one time for every day.

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(XLIX)

Of course, the verdant floral
curtain
deserves another look,
dominating the backdrop. So we step
into Holbein’s puzzling
oil on oak,
painted in the old Flemish School style.

Not only a full length double portrait,
but a meticulously rendered
still life.
An anamorphic mystery,
and rendezvous with death, or *memento mori*.
A repository of secrets,
and morality tale

memorialising the two childhood friends
and diplomats,
Jean de Dinteville, on the left,
and Georges de Selve, (Bishop of Lavaur)
on the right, posed
amid the chaotic curios of the day,
including two immaculately conceived globes:

One celestial, shows the mythological
constellations
where Cygnus the swan faces the viewer.
One terrestrial, shows Rome
at the geographical centre of the world.
On the higher shelf, we witness
a mare’s nest

of astrological and astronomical instruments,
 intellectual/revival objet d'art
 represented
 by the cylindrical shepherd's dial, a quadrant,
 a torquetum,
 and a polyhedral sundial.
 All devices, for the revelation

of time and cosmos, and still, we are not sure
 of the time of day.
 Then, on the shelf below,
 worldly concerns: A mathematics book
 open at the page on division,
 one Lutheran Hymnal, one compass,
 one set-square,

one lute with a snapped string
 and five bundled flutes,
 all clues to the pursuits of man. Lower still,
 under the bottom shelf,
 a discarded lute in full shadow
 turned upside down, another signifier
 of the earthly life.

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Have we missed anything, Hans?

-- Of course, we have
 missed
 the golden ceremonial scabbard,

and the gold medallion
 featuring the Arch-angel, St Michael,
 'defender of the church,' killing

the serpent with his spear.

*

In this arcane panel, heaven and earth vie
 for our attention.
 Even the Cosmati floor

tiled mosaic
 with its geometric motifs and Star

of David, boasts

of its ancestry, placing
the two Renaissance men at the centre
of the cosmos.

Now de Selve's gloves are off
in the battle
between the faiths. He looks suspiciously

at the painter, almost squinting to see
which way he might fall
in the antagonism between King, Emperor and Holy See.

*

We might conclude, a religious man,
however defensive
in his long damask robe and cleric's biretta

(like the closed book
he leans on
with his right elbow)

might well have more secrets than the French
Ambassador to England,
who dares us to guess his thoughts

in his salmon satin shirt,
and expensive silk gown lined with lynx fur;
his outfit for the coronation

of Ann Boleyn. Poor (devout) Catherine
of Aragon, 'humble
and loyal,' soon to be divorced.

*

What else will we remember of this
Good Friday portrayal
of two young noblemen, landlord

and churchman,

the last entreaty before the great schism
with Rome

putting a brave face on it?

*

At last, in the top left corner of the painting,
we find the last piece
of the puzzle

half concealed
by the closed green curtain --
the crucified Christ,

God's gift
to man, awaiting
all believers

in the one true faith, despite the April freeze.