



Translating Nature into Art: Holbein, the Reformation, and Renaissance Rhetoric

Jeanne Nuechterlein

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Hans Holbein the Younger is best known for his work in Henry VIII's England, where he painted portraits and designed decorative objects for courtly circles. England, however, only accounts for half of Holbein's working life. He developed his artistic identity on the Continent, creating a diverse range of artworks for urban elites, scholars, and publishers. *Translating Nature into Art* argues that by the time Holbein reached England, he had developed two roughly alternative styles of representation: a highly descriptive and objective mode, which he used for most of his portraiture, and a much more stylized and inventive manner, which he applied primarily to religious, historical, and decorative subjects. Jeanne Nuechterlein contends that when Holbein used his stylized manner, he acknowledged that he was the inventor of the image; when Holbein painted a portrait or a religious work in the objective manner, he implied instead that he was observing something in front of him and reproducing what he saw. By establishing this dialectic, Holbein was actively engaging in one of the central debates of the Reformation era concerning the nature and validity of the visible world. Holbein explored how much art should look like the visible world, and in the process discovered alternative ways of making representation meaningful.

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