

## A MORNING WITH JANE CHOY & HANS HOLBEIN

From the start of the 20th century, painted portraits tend to reflect the individual style of the painter, rather than promising something necessarily true to life. Portrait photographers such as Cecil Beaton and Annie Leibovitz are perhaps the modern equivalent of Hans Holbein, who achieved fame as the portrait painter of British royalty during the 1500s. Indeed, Holbein's portrayal of Henry VIII is the only portrait of the king known to have been painted during Henry's lifetime.

This was just one of the many comments and facts that ensured a fascinating morning for a large group of Club members who met at Jane Choy's home for a presentation devoted to Hans Holbein and his legacy. Born around 520 years ago in Augsburg, Holbein was probably trained by his father and quickly became a multi-talented artist in book illustration, religious works, and even house-painting. His illustrations for Erasmus' *In Praise of Folly* led to a well-received portrait commission from Erasmus himself, as well as introductions to the Court in London.

In London, Holbein's fate rested on his success in negotiating the vagaries of Court favouritism: More vs Cromwell; the rise and fall of Anne Boleyn; a beauty parade of possible new brides for Henry... and at times he needed to rely for a safe living on portrait commissions from London-based German merchants. As Jane explained, with the help of many excellent illustrations, Holbein's extraordinary ability to reveal "the mind of his subject" makes the individuals in his portraits seem just as alive today as they were 500 years ago. Lurking behind the sumptuous clothes, hats, furs and trappings of office which he painted so exquisitely, Holbein hints at his sitters' personal characteristics. Cruelty, avarice and pride were captured with the same precision as a photographic lens.

Holbein's visual record – "his own life through his painting" – is really all that survives, for he left no written record or memoirs. As a painter of the personalities of the day, whether the King's falconer, a pushy courtier and his weak-willed son, or the wife of a nobleman, Holbein was unrivalled. Our morning in Jane Choy's company allowed us to appreciate this through the details of her presentation.