

The arnolfini portrait by jan van eyck | analysis



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Jan van Eyck. The Arnolfini Portrait.

Jan van Eyck

The Portrait of Giovanni (?) Arnolfini and his Wife Giovanna Cenami (?) (The Arnolfini Marriage) . 1434.

Oil in oak.

81. 8 x 59. 7 cm.

The National Gallery, London.

The Arnolfini Portrait startles us by its apparent realism and attention to detail, which seem to anticipate Dutch painting of two centuries later. Much of the effect is owing to van Eyck's use of oil-based paints. He is often called the inventor of oil painting, though it seems more likely that he and his brother discovered the potential of the new medium by developing a varnish which dried at a consistent rate, allowing Jan to " make a glossy colour which could be applied in transparent layers or ' glazes'... and put on the glittering highlights with a pointed brush" (Gombrich, 240). The new medium was miraculous in its suitability for depicting metals and jewels (as well as the individual strands of hair in a dog's coat!), and, as Sister Wendy Beckett says, " more significantly, for the vivid, convincing depiction of natural light" (Beckett, 64). Equally original is the setting and milieu, for this is a " bourgeois commission" (Levey, 68), set not in a palace or a church but in a room in an ordinary house, every detail of which is depicted with total accuracy and naturalism, and shown, as Sir Kenneth Clark noted, " by a

miracle that defies the laws of art-history... enveloped in daylight as close to experience as if it had been observed by Vermeer of Delft" (Clark, 104).

Despite the naturalism of the scene, it is likely that the objects depicted are rich in symbolic meaning. The couple stand in a room, shown with precise concern for perspective – Levy calls it a “ perspective cube” (Levey, 68). They are dressed very richly, and stand in poses that suggest ceremony and serious purpose, hence the supposition that we are witnessing a marriage – as van Eyck is doing quite literally. He can be seen with another witness reflected in the convex mirror on the wall, i. e. standing at the point from which the perspective view runs, and he has left his signature above the mirror, in a legal Gothic script, saying that he “ was here” (“ only a moment ago, one might think” (Huizinga, 259)), not just that he painted this. The couple stand apart, as if separated by ceremonial considerations. He takes her right hand in his left, and raises his right as if to complete a vow or pledge. She has a shy expression, while he is earnest and solemn. His dress is sumptuous and expensive, hers is lavish and modest, in green, “ the colour of affection” (Baldass, 76). If this is the holy sacrament of marriage, to complete its validity there should be consummation, which is why we are in a bedroom.

In other parts of the room are objects painted with scrupulous accuracy, which at the same time have an iconographic purpose which is relevant to the ritual of marriage. The little dog is a symbol of fidelity. The shoes cast aside show that the couple stand unshod “ since this is the ground of a holy union” (Beckett, 64). The fruit on the window sill are either a reference to fertility or a reminder of the fatal apple. The single candle flame in the

magnificently rendered candelabra – a light which is not necessary for illumination – suggests the eye of God. Carved on the chair back is an image of St Margaret, a saint associated with childbirth, and the arms of the chair and the prie-dieu are decorated with the lions of the throne of Solomon. Most spectacular of all is the painting of the mirror, which with its convex shape reflects back the whole interior, together with the image of the painter and another man. Its frame is decorated with ten medallions showing events from the life of Christ, “intended to emphasise that the Original Sin is atoned for by the Passion of Christ” (Baldass, 75).

To emphasise the symbolic meanings of the objects in the painting (of which we cannot always be certain) is by no means to detract from the astonishing realism of the scene. The van Eycks began their careers as manuscript illustrators, and the concern for detail is apparent everywhere. The dog is intensely real, charming, and of no identifiable breed. The texture of materials is rendered in the finest detail, in the gilding of the candelabra and the way the light catches it, the glint of the beads in the rosary hanging by the mirror, and of course the glass of the mirror itself, and its concave shape giving a curved reflection of the room. The light is caught precisely on the inward curve of the medallion roundels in the frame. The presentation of the clothing is meticulous, both in the texture of the cloth and in the way it hangs on the body. Even the grain of the wood in the floorboards is exact. Colour too is handled with great subtlety, the green of her dress, with traces of blue in the undersleeves, set off against the rich red of the bed hangings, both lit by the single source of light, the window to the left. It is as if “a

simple corner of the real world has suddenly been fixed on to a panel as if by magic” (Gombrich, 243).

Huizinga makes a point related to this concern for total realism, that it is immensely valuable for us to see a late medieval artist depicting private life, and not bound by the requirements of the court or the Church. “ The Master... need not portray the majesty of divine beings nor minister to aristocratic pride” (Huizinga, 258). Van Eyck’s Gothic signature and declaration on the wall suggests that the whole piece might be a sort of legal act of witnessing. The whole conception marks the shift from the medieval to the modern world, because the witnessing is literally established for us through the precise application of the rules of perspective. The scene is viewed through the eyes of the man reflected in the mirror, and it is the view of the single observer which is to form the convention of painting from van Eyck until the end of the nineteenth century. In the Arnolfini portrait “ the artist became the perfect eye-witness in the truest sense of the term” (Gombrich, 243).

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