

The Arnolfini Portrait



I. The Identities of the People in the Portrait



The painting became known as the Arnolfini Portrait due to its association with the Arnolfini family, initially owned by Don Diego De Guevara and later gifted to Margaret of Austria in 1516. The Arnolfinis, wealthy traders from Luca, Italy, are believed to be depicted in the painting. Originally, it was

thought to portray Giovanni di Arrigo Arnolfini and his wife Jeanne de Cename, but historical documents revealed they married after the painting's completion. Now, it's believed to represent Giovanni di Nicolao Arnolfini and his wife Costanza Trenta, despite her death in 1433, a year before the painting's date. Jan van Eyck's familiarity with Giovanni di Nicolao Arnolfini through another portrait supports this interpretation.

II. Hand Holding



Erwin Panofsky's influential analysis, "Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait," initially popularized the notion of the painting as a wedding portrait of Giovanni di Arrigo Arnolfini and Jeanne de Cename. This interpretation persisted for decades, contributing to the continued reference to the painting as the

"Arnolfini Wedding Portrait." However, Margaret Koster proposed an alternative theory in her essay "The Arnolfini Double Portrait: A Simple Solution," suggesting it might be a memorial portrait for the deceased wife of Giovanni di Nicolao Arnolfini.

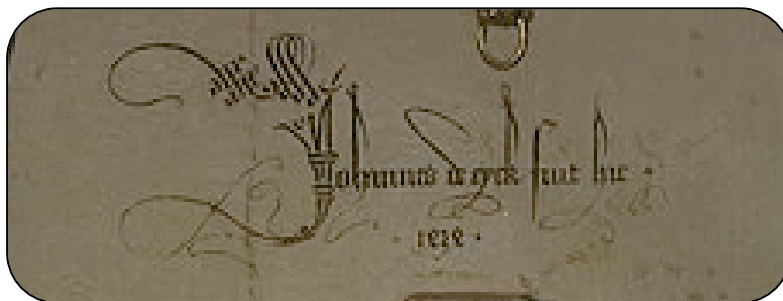
Panofsky's analysis, published in 1934, focused on the couple's hand positioning, drawing parallels to ancient Roman reliefs depicting *dextrarum iunctio*, a gesture symbolizing union. He interpreted it as a marital vow exchange. Yet, Koster argues that the hand-holding could symbolize the husband's clinging to his wife in death, with the nearby gargoyle suggesting their impending doom.

III. The Dog

The dog in the Arnolfini Portrait is often interpreted as a symbol of fidelity or loyalty. Its presence near the couple's feet suggests a sense of companionship and faithfulness within marriage. Additionally, in Renaissance art, dogs were sometimes associated with fertility, hinting at the couple's desire for children and the continuation of their lineage.



IV. Jan van Eyck's signature



The inscription "*Jan van Eyck was here*" is located prominently above the mirror, written in Latin. Erwin Panofsky suggested that this signature functioned as a form of visual

pun, akin to a modern graffiti tag, asserting the artist's presence in the scene.

Panofsky further proposed that the signature served as a symbolic witness to the marriage depicted in the painting. By signing above the mirror, van Eyck positioned himself as an observer or participant in the ceremony, reinforcing the idea that the painting was not merely a portrait but a visual record of a matrimonial event.

V. The Mirror, Its Passion of Christ Roundels, and The Reflection



Margaret Koster notes that the mirror is adorned with scenes from the Passion of Christ, with images of Christ's death and resurrection positioned near the female figure and scenes depicting his life placed near the male. This arrangement suggests a symbolic division between life and death, with the male figure associated with Christ's life and the female with his death and resurrection. Additionally, a third person is seen on the convex mirror's reflection which adds to the notion of having a witness celebrate the wedding of the couple.

VI. The Candles in the Chandelier

One other significant detail is the presence of a single burning candle in the chandelier. Erwin Panofsky suggests that this candle symbolizes the all-seeing eye of God, a common motif in religious art. Additionally, it aligns with Flemish marriage customs, where lighting a candle symbolizes invoking the presence of the Holy Spirit in the union. However, Koster proposes a different interpretation, suggesting that the candle represents life, particularly as it directly illuminates Giovanni di Nicolao Arnolfini, the male figure in the painting.



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Furthermore, Koster draws attention to the placement of another candleholder opposite the burning candle, with wax dripping from its side. She argues that this represents Trenta's death, particularly as it is positioned directly above her head. This juxtaposition of life and death symbolism reinforces the idea that the painting may serve as a memorial to Trenta, rather than a depiction of a wedding ceremony.

VII. The Window, The Cherry Tree Outside, and The Bed and Brush Placements



The Arnolfini Portrait has been interpreted as a representation of gender roles and marital dynamics in the context of Northern European society during the 15th century. Margaret Carroll suggests that the painting depicts a symbolic transfer of power and responsibility within the marriage, with the husband signing over control of his business affairs to his wife.

One key element supporting this interpretation is the positioning of the couple within the composition. Arnolfini is situated closest to the window, symbolizing his role as the provider and the one responsible for external affairs, such as business and travel. Conversely, his wife stands closer to the bed, representing her domestic responsibilities and role as caretaker of the home.

The presence of the cherry tree outside the window further reinforces this division of roles. The tree, traditionally associated with fertility and abundance, suggests Arnolfini's role in providing for the family through his business endeavors. Meanwhile, his wife's proximity to a brush, possibly held by a statue of either Saint Margaret or Saint Martha, symbolizes her domestic duties and role in maintaining the household.

The couple's hand-holding gesture can be interpreted as *fides manualis*, a symbolic act of consent and agreement. In this context, it signifies Arnolfini's willingness

to entrust his business affairs to his wife, symbolized by the legal document/agreement suggested by Carroll.

VIII. The Oranges and Rug

The portrait prominently showcases numerous luxurious items that reflect the wealth of the couple. For instance, the oranges, though possibly carrying religious or matrimonial symbolism, also serve as indicators of the Arnolfinis' affluence, given that they were imported into Bruges, a sign of wealth due to the city's lack of natural orange groves. Additionally, the ornate wood carvings of the bed, imported rug, and opulent furnishings



suggest the significance of these items to either the commissioner or the artist, sparking various theories regarding their meaning due to their deliberate placement.

IX. The Spirits and Patron Ornaments



The reference to St. Margaret, the patron saint of childbirth, adds a layer of symbolism to the Arnolfini Portrait. Traditionally depicted with a mythical beast, often a dragon or serpent, at her feet, St. Margaret is shown triumphantly trampling the creature, symbolizing her victory over evil and adversity. In the context of the painting, the presence of St. Margaret could be interpreted as a symbol of protection and intercession for women during childbirth,

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offering spiritual support and safeguarding against dangers associated with childbirth, which were significant concerns in the medieval and Renaissance periods.

Furthermore, the depiction of cut wooden grotesques above the woman's hand adds to the symbolism. Grotesques were often associated with themes of mortality and the transient nature of life. In this context, they may serve as a forewarning or premonition of the woman's mortality, suggesting a somber undertone to the scene. Combined with the imagery of St. Margaret, this detail could imply a sense of vulnerability and mortality, highlighting the precarious nature of life, particularly in the context of childbirth, where risks were high for both mothers and infants during the Renaissance period.

X. Their Shoes



The significance of the couple removing their shoes in the Arnolfini Portrait extends beyond mere etiquette; it carries symbolic weight, transforming the bedchamber into a sacred space. In many cultures, removing one's shoes is a sign of respect and reverence, particularly in areas deemed holy or sanctified. By removing their shoes, the couple acknowledges the sanctity of the bedchamber, imbuing it with a sense of sacredness and solemnity.

However, the presence of one of her shoes placed conspicuously on a carpet in front of the bed introduces a poignant and potentially tragic element to the scene. This detail alludes to the possibility that the woman depicted may have met her demise in childbirth. In some interpretations, the placement of the shoe on the carpet suggests a moment of transition or departure, symbolizing the woman's journey from life to death.

XI. The Clothing



The Arnolfinis' clothing underscores their wealth and social standing. The woman's attire features a vibrant green gown with intricate folds and ermine fur trim, along with gold jewelry, showcasing her high status. Van Eyck's glazing technique enhances the realism of the clothing. The husband's attire, in darker tones with fur-trimmed cape and silver ring, reflects his merchant status. These luxurious fabrics highlight the Arnolfinis' fabric business legacy and the fashion of the time. Despite the indication of springtime from the cherry tree and oranges, the couple's thick clothing suggests the portrait was likely painted in colder months, possibly for the sake of portraying opulence. The elaborate attire, especially the excessive fabric of the woman's gown, was a common strategy to convey wealth in portraits of the era.

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