

## **The Arnolfini Marriage, the Ghent Altarpiece, and The Annunciation**

Choosing three pieces of artwork for an exhibit is an exercise in itself. However, I am faced with this duty. So, being naturally inquisitive, I was taken by the allure of the mysterious Jan Van Eyck. Thus, I decided to devote all my attention on him, choosing three of his pieces. The pieces I chose are the Arnolfini Marriage, the Ghent Altarpiece, and The Annunciation. The information I'll provide about each piece would be set by the paintings in an exhibit. Although slightly long-winded, I hope the information provided would encourage the same interest I have gained in Jan Van Eyck. Also, I would simply use the title of this paper at the entrance.

Jan Van Eyck has a controversial background. His life is rather a mystery to art historians. There are a few things however, that have been accepted as the truth. Van Eyck was born around 1390 and died in 1441. He was a Flemish painter, active in Brugge (Bruges). He and Robert Campin founded Ars Nova ("new art") of 15th-century northern late Gothic painting, which brought about the Renaissance in northern Europe (MS Encarta). It is thought that Van Eyck came from Maaseik (in the province of Lind Bourg). From 1422-1424, Van Eyck was employed at the court of John of Bavaria, count of Holland, at the Hauge. In 1425 Phillip the Good appointed him court painter. He remained court painter for the rest of his life and became quite close to Philip the Good (MS Encarta). "Otherwise, in ducal circles, Van Eyck seems to have been employed decorating castles and contributing to ephemeral displays, such as floats for ducal processions and food designs for banquets." (Harbison)

The painting that inspired American Gothic, The Arnolfini Marriage, is an oil painting on wood. The story behind it is not a simple one. The major school of thought as to why this painting was done is that it acted as a sort of marriage certificate; hence the name. Giovanni Arnolfini was a merchant who married in Bruges in 1434, the year the painting was done. Their

solemn, young faces are typical of Van Eyck's work. The Arnolfini Marriage is oil on wood. This piece is 2' 8" x 1' 11" (Pioch, Web Museum).

Also Typical of Van Eyck's work, and exemplified in this piece, is intuitive perspective. Van Eyck did not use a ruler or draw a vanishing point; he simply "eye-balled" the angle at which lines should flow. This can be noted by following the line created by the top of the bed as compared to that of the windows.

There are a few symbolic things that need to be mentioned about the Arnolfini Marriage. One is a candle, another is the mirror in the background, the image of St. Margaret carved into a chair back, and the last is Van Eyck's own signature.

Generally the candle is accepted to be a bridal candle. However, there are other possibilities such as "God's all-seeing eye, or simply a devotional candle." (Pioch, Web Museum)

"Another symbol is St Margaret (the patron saint of women in childbirth), whose image is carved on the high chair back." (Pioch, Web Museum) It should be mentioned that Giovanna Cenami, the woman in the Arnolfini Marriage, is portrayed with a large amount of cloth in her hand. The gathering of cloth around her stomach makes her appear to be pregnant. This also may allude to the prospect of children during the marriage (just as the image of St. Margaret does).

In the background of the Arnolfini Marriage is a mirror painted in amazing detail, especially for its size. The reflection in the mirror includes not only the backs of the newly married Arnolfinis, but also the reflection of two on-lookers. One of the on-lookers is wearing a red hat. The man in the red hat is a recurring theme among pieces attributed to Van Eyck; and is accepted to be Van Eyck himself. The other person is thought to be some sort of official witness to the ceremony, or the conductor of it. Around the mirror, painted to appear engraved in its frame, are the ten Stations of the Cross. The Stations of the Cross are parts of Christ's life/death.

The last symbolic detail is Van Eyck's signature on the painting. The signature has just as intricate detail as the mirror, and is directly above it on the wall. It is unlikely the writing on the wall was actually there. It is thought to be a detail meant to attribute the painting to himself

without interrupting it. Above the mirror is written extremely small yet clearly "Johannes de eyck fuit hic 1434" (Jan Van Eyck was here, 1434). "Normally a work of art in the fifteenth century would have been signed, "Jan Van Eyck made this." The wording here specifically refers to a witness to a legal document." (Stokstad, 628)

There are also a few symbols of faith. In the painting is a dog between the Arnolfini's feet. Dogs are considered faithful companions. On the window ledge there is fruit that could symbolize fertility and the fall from Paradise in the Bible. Also the shoes by Giovanni Arnolfini's feet are thought to allude to the sanctity of marriage. (Pioch, Web Museum)

The next piece I find very interesting, and hope many others will too, is the Ghent Altarpiece. The Ghent Altarpiece is Van Eyck's earliest known work (Stokstad, 626). This painting is made with oil on panel and extremely large. Finished in 1432, the altarpiece was roughly 11.5' x 7.5' closed and 11.5' x 15' open. The altarpiece is rather difficult to describe. That is because it opens twice to show two separate scenes, with one set of inner wings. I will explain the piece in sections beginning with the outer, or closed, section. The altarpiece remained closed at all times, with one exception - Easter. When closed the altarpiece had a much more toned down appearance than the bright extravagance within.

The altarpiece, when closed was divided into twelve sections. The two lowest center sections are St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist painted to appear as statues. Beside them are the donor and his wife; the donor was a wealthy official in Ghent. Above, the wing exteriors show Gabriel and the Virgin looking out on an old city from opposite sides of a room (Stokstad, 626), this scene includes four panels. At the top of the closed altarpiece, involving four sections, are ancient sibyls (female prophets) and Old Testament prophets who foretold the coming of Christ.

The open altarpiece was also divided into twelve sections. This section would be shown only on the feast of days, Easter. The opened altarpiece was much more vivid in color and lively than its outer companion. The largest section, in the bottom center, is dedicated to the Adoration of the Lamb. Also referred to as the Communion of Saints, the Lamb symbolizes Christ and is

surrounded by many believers. Directly above the Communion of Saints are three sections. The center section is the figure of God enthroned. On the right side of Him sits John the Baptist and on the left sits the Virgin Mary. John the Baptist and the Virgin are surrounded on each side by angel musicians (Stokstad, 612). Wings on either side of the angels open to reveal Adam and Eve. Looking solemn, Eve stands holding the core of an apple, the forbidden fruit, which she has eaten. Adam and Eve are covering themselves because according to the bible, only after Eve had eaten the forbidden fruit did they know they were naked. They are hiding themselves in shame.

The life of this piece is quite interesting. It has survived more than five centuries. At one point in the sixteenth century, when political struggles were rampant, the paintings were removed from their frames and hidden in a church more than once. Later, as a means of protection, the panels were separated and moved to different places. In 1894 Berlin royals had the six small panels split so both sides could be seen. After the First World War, it was put back together in Ghent, but someone stole two panels. Only one panel was found; the other is now a copy. During the Second World War the panels were moved around again. Then in the 1950s, it was finally put back together one last time in Ghent (Stokstad, 612).

The third and last piece I chose for a gallery show is The Annunciation. Completed in 1436, this piece was originally painted in oil on panel and was later transferred to canvas. Its name explains what is occurring in the painting. The Annunciation was when the Angel Gabriel told the Virgin Mary she was going to bear the Son of God, Jesus Christ. The Angel and the Virgin are shown with golden letters flowing from their lips. The letters form the Latin equivalent of "Hail, full of grace" and "Behold, the handmaiden of the Lord," spoken by Gabriel and the Virgin, respectively.

As in all of Van Eyck's work there are many symbolic points in this painting. A dove above the Virgin and Gabriel symbolizes the Holy Spirit. A stained glass window of God (surrounded on either side by two wall paintings of Moses) is parallel to three windows enclosing Mary. The three windows represent the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The juxtaposition of the three windows to the stained glass one represents the coming of a new era. White lilies in a

vase by her feet symbolize Mary. The floor tiles are decorated with signs of the zodiac that indicate the date of Annunciation (March 25). Lastly, the placement of the figures in a new church suggests that Mary is the new Christian Church (Stokstad, 18-19).

During the Middle Ages, the Church was the most powerful entity in Europe. The Church even had a great amount of say over political decisions. The religious art of the fifteenth century mirrored the political, social, and economic power of the Church. (Harbison) Each of the three paintings described in this painting contain religious references. In the Arnolfini Marriage there is the candle, and St. Margaret on the chair back. The entire Ghent Altarpiece is a religious painting. In the Annunciation, another entirely religious work, there is not only Gabriel and the Virgin but the windows as well. The reason behind the religious references is not only to show the power of Church, but too reawaken faith among people at a time when it was beginning to falter.

Come visit the gallery to learn more on the life and works of the mysterious Flemish painter, Jan Van Eyck. In the gallery you will see The Arnolfini Marriage, The Annunciation, and the Ghent Altarpiece (with a room of it's own), up close and personal. Our guides will assist you in finding all of the symbolic points I mentioned earlier as well as explaining some of Van Eycks life during the time these pieces were made. The Gallery de la Sol is located at on the north corner of 124<sup>th</sup> and Broadway in Manhattan. Lastly, in the Gallery, B. Dalton bookstore will be selling books about Van Eyck and some of his peers.

If you are interested in Jan Van Eyck but cannot attend or if you would like to find out more try reading about him. Here are some books I recommend: Jan Van Eyck: The Play of Realism, by Craig Harbison, Jan Van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait: Stories of an ICON, by Linda Seidel, and All the Paintings of Jan Van Eyck, by Denis Valentino.

