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*Sexuality and Social Standing in Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini Double Portrait**

by CRAIG HARBISON

WITH MEMORIES OF CHLOE HAMILTON YOUNG

IN ITS VISUAL ACUITY, the Arnolfini double portrait (fig. 1) is so beguiling that few have been able to resist its spell: "a simple corner of the real world has suddenly been fixed on to a panel as by

*Colleagues and students have greatly aided me as this project progressed: Professors James Mundy and Mark Roskill helped me sharpen my thinking in the early stages; they as well as the following people, read or heard an earlier version of this study and made helpful comments: Robert Baldwin, Anne van Buren, Miriam Chrisman, Jane Goldsmith, Dana Goodgal, Sherrill Harbison, Ann Jones, Robert A. Koch, Marilyn Lavin, Gary Niswonger, Stephen Philbrick, Peter Stallybrass, Leo Steinberg, Margaret Sullivan, Charles Talbot, Richard Trexler, and Joel Upton. Of course, all errors of judgment or fact are my own. Iris Cheney, Julia Bailey, and W. L. Wegener gave bibliographic help, as did the staff of the Interlibrary Loan Office (especially Edla Holm) at the University of Massachusetts. A graduate seminar at the University of Massachusetts in the spring of 1984 first listened to my ideas and then contributed many interesting ones of their own. All of them deserve my thanks: Michelle Alten, Christy Anderson, Maura Donohue, Catherine Egenberger, Hilary Fairbanks, Elizabeth Janus, and Karen Koehler. Julie Trudeau, another former graduate student at the university, first made helpful suggestions about the relationship of van Eyck and the court of Burgundy. Photographs were purchased with the help of a grant from the Research Council, University of Massachusetts, Amherst. This article was accepted for publication in May, 1988. A final draft of the text was sent to the editor in September, 1989. Since that time two further interpretations of the Arnolfini painting have come to my attention. One by Linda Seidel, "Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait: Business as Usual?", appeared in *Critical Inquiry* 16 (1989): 55-86; to my mind, it repeats the anachronistic mistake of several authors by attributing specific documentary significance to the image. At the Historians of Netherlandish Art conference, Cleveland, 29 October, 1989, Margaret D. Carroll gave a talk entitled "*Speculum Mercatorum*: Jan van Eyck's *Marriage of Arnolfini*"; I have great sympathy with Carroll's reading of the multi-faceted nature of the image's meaning.



FIG. 1—Jan van Eyck. Arnolfini Double Portrait, 1434. London, National Gallery.

magic.”¹ But in what ways can we speak of this portrait as a realistic image? How closely, for instance, does it portray a single moment or specific event in these people’s lives? Was it meant to be viewed as a marriage document or contract? The Arnolfini double portrait is unique. It is the only fifteenth-century Northern panel to survive showing presumably identifiable contemporaries engaged in some sort of dialogue in a carefully rendered contemporary interior. So far, critics have proposed as justification for this development the theory that this is a real scene of a real action; many have added that it is also deeply religious, even sacramental. It was Erwin Panofsky’s interpretation, published over fifty years ago, that first focussed attention on the possible significance of the myriad details of the painting.² Panofsky believed that these details would support a single symbolic/religious reading. But whether the painting as a whole, or any detail within it, is viewed as utterly real or narrowly symbolic, the opposites—realism and symbolism—beget, define, and limit each other.

The following attempt to describe some of the elements in this image, as well as the relation between the image and the world, stems in part from a desire to expand our notions of what and in what ways such a work could mean things to people in the fifteenth century as well as in the twentieth. Recent analyses have provided painstaking elaboration on symbolic details;³ or thorough-going interpretations of the work’s realism (in which various objects are viewed as merely the traditional accompaniments of specific contemporary acts).⁴ Both approaches ultimately produce similar results, as well as an increasingly narrowly-defined understanding of the painting’s field of operation. Yet the imagery of Jan van Eyck and other early Netherlandish painters seems to have had a more broad-based narrative function than many have allowed.

This discussion of the painting stems from a desire to come to terms with what the people represented in the picture were like, how

¹E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (London, 1962), 171.

²Panofsky, “Jan van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Portrait*,” *Burlington Magazine* 64 (1934): 117–27. Panofsky’s treatment of the painting in his *Early Netherlandish Painting* (Cambridge, MA, 1953), 201–03, takes account of some of the intervening criticism of his earlier article.

³For instance, Robert Baldwin, “Marriage as a Sacramental Reflection of the Passion: The Mirror in Jan van Eyck’s ‘Arnolfini Wedding,’” *Oud-Holland* 98 (1984): 57–75.

⁴See Jan Baptiste Bedaux, “The Reality of Symbols: The Question of Disguised Symbols in Jan van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Portrait*,” *Simiolus* 16 (1986): 5–28.

they viewed each other and their relationship, as well as how they viewed the making of this portrait. In focusing on the personal, physical, and political side of this painting I hope to be able to cut through the traditional but unsatisfying dichotomy of realism on the one hand and symbolism on the other. I want to try to show something more comprehensive about the fabric of these people's lives and of the image that was fashioned of them. The way the image was understood should be seen as both more complex and more ongoing than is usually the case.

We must first deal with the fact that most modern critics have seen this portrait as having a significant, if not exclusive, documentary function. The justification for the painting is, in this view, the portrayal of this couple performing some specific marital ceremony. Some critics even assume that it is accurate enough to have had some legal value as a record of a specific event.⁵ But a work of art would not stand up as fact in a court of law in the fifteenth century anymore than it would today. Viewing the work as accurate in this limited, photographic way has led to the supposition that it portrays, quite literally, a morganatic, or left-handed, marriage.⁶ Indeed, if the painting represents a specific ceremony then the specific gestures of the participants must relate to it.⁷ If what we see in the London panel is a marriage, it would be one performed privately, at home, and without a priest. These clandestine marriages were not always, after they took place, denied legality by the Catholic Church; they were, however, strictly discouraged, even forbidden. In France in the late Middle Ages they could be punished by automatic excommunication.⁸ But the other side of the situation is perhaps even more

⁵See Peter Schabacker, "De Matrimonio ad Morganaticum Contracto: Jan van Eyck's 'Arnolfini' Portrait Reconsidered," *Art Quarterly* 35 (1972): 375-98, esp. 379 for the painting's presumed legal value. This view was anticipated by Panofsky's interpretation.

⁶Schabacker's view is supported by Elizabeth Dhanens, *Hubert and Jan van Eyck* (New York, 1981), 198-99.

⁷See Bedaux, 7-11. Bedaux rightly, in my view, goes on to discount the idea that the London panel could portray a wedding ceremony. See also the efforts of Lucy Freeman Sandler, "The Handclasp in the *Arnolfini* Wedding: A Manuscript Precedent," *Art Bulletin* 66 (1984): 488-91; and her letter to the editor, *Art Bulletin* 68 (1986): 326.

⁸See Charles Donahue, Jr., "The Canon Law on the Formation of Marriage and Social Practice in the Later Middle Ages," *Journal of Family History* 8 (1983): 144-58, esp. 155. On clandestine marriage in general the following sources are particularly helpful: Jacques Toussaert, *Le sentiment religieux en Flandre à la fin du moyen âge* (Paris, 1963), esp. 229-32; Henry Ansgar Kelly, *Love and Marriage in the Age of Chaucer* (Ithaca, NY, 1975), esp. 163-76; Madeleine Jeay, "Sexuality and Family in Fifteenth-

important to emphasize: marriage ceremonies were essentially public events, especially when they occurred between prominent families. Church ritual, feasting, public festivities were a significant part of any important marriage. The couple in the London panel seems, merely from dress and accessories, to be prominent enough to have desired, even required, a public wedding ceremony.⁹ This has led specialists in fifteenth-century marriage, as well as some others, to believe that van Eyck has portrayed another moment, either before or after the wedding itself.¹⁰

Panofsky claimed that van Eyck's signature put the finishing touches on the work's documentary significance: "Jan van Eyck was here 1434," the artist wrote on the back wall of the room, as a witness to this marriage.¹¹ Van Eyck routinely signed his works in elaborate ways; three of his surviving paintings, all portraits, are dated down to the month and day of the year.¹² It seems strange, if the double portrait was meant to have a quasilegal function, that it was not

Century France: Are Literary Sources a Mask or a Mirror?", *Journal of Family History* 4 (1979): 328–45, esp. 334; and Beatrice Gottlieb, "The Meaning of Clandestine Marriage," in *Family and Sexuality in French History*, ed. R. Wheaton and T. K. Hareven (Philadelphia, 1980), 48–83.

⁹Panofsky, 1953, 439 n. 3 for p. 203, believed that one of the main reasons for the privacy of the presumed wedding in the London panel was the fact that the people whom he felt were portrayed, Giovanni Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami, had no documented relatives in Bruges at the time. It has more recently been pointed out that these two people were very prominent and no doubt had many important friends and contacts in the city; see Schabacker, 394 n. 24. The chief biographers of Arnolfini have observed that various members of the Arnolfini and Cenami families are documented in Bruges throughout the early fifteenth century; see Leone Mirot and Eugenio Lazzareschi, "Un Mercante di Lucca in Fiandra—Giovanni Arnolfini," *Bolletino storico lucchese* 12 (1940): 81–105, esp. 83.

¹⁰See Kelly, 174; and E. Schiltz, *Van Eyck-Studien* (Antwerp, 1958), 8–16. Jean Lejeune, "La période liégeoise des van Eyck," *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* 17 (1955): 64–67, also questioned Panofsky's reading of the gestures as well as the possibility that van Eyck would have painted an illegal ceremony. Brian d'Argaville gave a talk at the College Art Association meetings in 1980 with a similar point of view. Kelly's notion that the painting represents the private contracting of a marriage before its public celebration has recently been taken up by Bedaux.

¹¹See Panofsky, 1934, 124, and idem, 1953, 203.

¹²The "Tymotheos-Leal Souvenir" portrait (London) is dated 10 October 1432; the supposed self-portrait (*Man in a Red Turban*, London) is dated 21 October 1433; and the portrait of Margaret van Eyck (Bruges) is dated 17 June 1439. Two copies of a *Head of Christ* (after a presumed original by van Eyck) are also dated to the day; these are now in Berlin (31 January 1438) and Bruges (30 January 1440). For these last two paintings, see Dhanens, 292–294.

dated to the day as well.¹³ And too, there are the so-called "witnesses" to this event, the two figures reflected in the mirror who are standing in a doorway in front of the picture space. But these two red and blue turbaned figures recur in other of van Eyck's works (Rolin and van der Paele *Madonnas*) where they are surely not invoked as legally required attendants. They are a sort of trademark or informal motto of the artist, showing that he was there, perhaps literally but also metaphorically. When the combination of elaborate inscription, mirror, beads, duster, etc., was used later in the century, a motto, the duke of Burgundy's, was substituted for van Eyck's signature (see fig. 14). Perhaps, then, the artist's signature was included in a less legalistic, more assertive and creative vein than a strictly documentary point of view has allowed.¹⁴

One other bit of evidence has been forwarded to support a view of the portrait as a marriage certificate. In 1569, in his *Spieghel der Nederlandscher Audtheyt*, Marcus van Vaernewijck referred to a panel "on which was depicted the wedding of a man and a woman who were married by Faith."¹⁵ This was repeated, without apparently any direct observation of the original painting,¹⁶ by Carel van Mander in 1604, with the interesting qualification that the couple was portrayed "*as if they were gathered in marriage*" (*italics mine*).¹⁷ Any use of these later sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century sources must take into account the different attitudes toward marriage which existed at that time, 135 to 170 years after the painting was executed. Both the intervening Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation had given a heightened sacramental importance to marriage. If there were any question in someone's mind about the London panel's representing a wedding, it would have to be specified that this was a wedding "by faith," certainly not

¹³This point is also made by James Snyder, *Northern Renaissance Art* (New York, 1985), 112.

¹⁴Martin Robertson, letter to the editor, *Burlington Magazine* 65 (1934): 297, pointed out that a similar form using "huic fuit" ("was here") is found in sixteenth-century graffiti in the Arena Chapel, Padua. Bedaux, 24-25, treats the signature as a kind of courtly device.

¹⁵"... waerin dat geschildert was / een trauwinghe van eenen man ende vrouwe / die van Fides ghetrouwt worden. . . ." The complete original can be found in Martin Davies, *The National Gallery* (Brussels, 1954) 2:126.

¹⁶As pointed out by Panofsky, 1934, 118.

¹⁷"... als in Houwlijck vergaderende. . . ." The complete passage is in Davies, 1954, 126.

one conducted by the Church as was from then on formally required by the Council of Trent.¹⁸ When we go back to the earliest documents concerning this painting, which are still within the Northern courtly setting in which the work was executed, then we find the panel more simply described: a man and his wife, touching hands, standing in a room, the man identified as Hernoul le Fin or Arnoult Fin.¹⁹

There is then neither within the painting nor with reference to the specific customs and practices of the time any firm evidence to support the idea that van Eyck's portrait was meant to have a documentary function. It is not so much a pictorial marriage certificate (or contract) as a much freer and more complex image of the relationship of this man and woman done no doubt around the time of their marriage. If the panel is seen as a more generalized image, then many problems recently associated with it disappear, in particular, the left-handed grasp of the man. Marriage or engagement brooches show couples holding hands without regard for left or right (fig. 2).²⁰ Comparison of van Eyck's work with commemorative jewellery is appropriate for several reasons. Some scholars have reasonably hypothesized that van Eyck, in his capacity as Burgundian court artist, could have designed such *joyaux*.²¹ These pendants, and also manuscripts, show us the popularity of more ideal, less specifically ceremonial representations of young lovers. By viewing van Eyck's image as either realistic or sacramental, modern scholars have often been oblivious to this more human component. A whole middle-ground of sexuality and social history has been underplayed, if not entirely lost sight of. *Amor verus* has all too completely conquered *amor voluptarius*.

This is inherently unlikely in light of fifteenth-century sexual mores. Not only were marriages in general very public affairs, but sexual relations, especially between newlyweds, were a constant

¹⁸For the more serious attitudes to marriage of the later sixteenth century see, for instance, Gottlieb, 78; Steven Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled, Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), 1-49; and Lyndal Roper, "'Going to Church and Street': Weddings in Reformation Augsburg," *Past and Present* 106 (1985): 62-101.

¹⁹The inventories of 1516 and 1523-24 of Margaret of Austria are given in Davies, 1954, 125.

²⁰For the pendant in fig. 2, see Timothy Husband and Jane Hayward, *The Secular Spirit, Life and Art at the End of the Middle Ages* (New York, 1975), 253, cat. 248. Another example now in Vienna is found in Dhanens, 45.

²¹See Dhanens, 44.

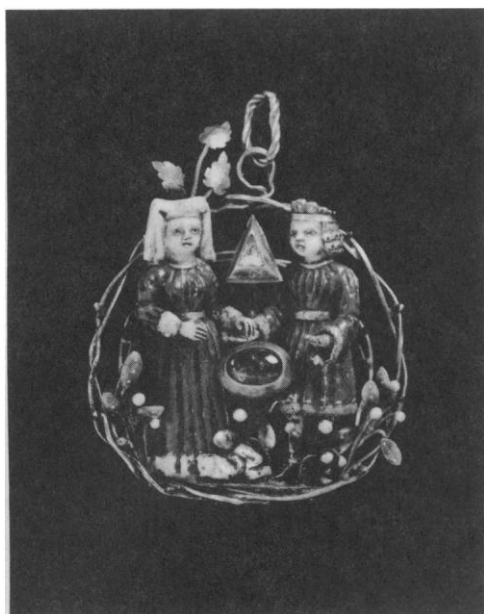


FIG. 2—French (Burgundian). *Marriage Pendant*, first half of the fifteenth century. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts (48.262).

source of humor and public comment, largely because of the loose sexual morals that seem to have existed, especially in the courts.²² The open and unblushing sensuality of the time has, for most critics of the Arnolfini double portrait, been bypassed in favor of an apparently more prestigious gravity. Nor is it simply a case of looking at elements within the painting, traditionally singled out for their supposedly pious meaning, in a new light in order to reveal a more integrated, human, sexual undercurrent. That we must certainly do. But perhaps even more significantly, certain aspects of the painting and its history have been almost totally ignored, apparently because they did not coincide with a strictly sacramental reading.

On the chair bench, directly above the couple's joined hands on the surface of the painting, is a pair of gargoyle-like figures, back to back (fig. 3). The mocking tone of this detail is more than matched by an inscription on the now lost frame of the painting, recorded in an inventory of the Spanish royal collection in 1700. The inventory

²²See Jeay, 329–30 and 336; Toussaert, 237–40; and Otto Cartellieri, *The Court of Burgundy*, trans. M. Letts (London, 1929), esp. 101.



FIG. 3.—Jan van Eyck. *Arnolfini Double Portrait*, detail.

records, without unfortunately giving the exact quotation, that the words were taken from Ovid and told how this couple deceived each other.²³ It seems difficult to believe that, without any knowledge of the sitters and long after the painting was executed, someone would have added verses that at least superficially seem somewhat at odds with the image itself. But, as we shall see, the Ovidian inscription is perfectly consonant with the Burgundian court milieu in which this painting originated.²⁴ At this point it is enough to suggest that the record of such an inscription, along with the certainty of the mocking chair decoration, present this couple's relationship with an element of irony or satire.²⁵ And this was certainly the case with other early fifteenth-century courtly discussions of love and marriage.

Rather than seeing the work as theologically complex—a view that is at least somewhat at odds with the non-ecclesiastical setting—we should begin with the obvious: the individuals in their world. The care with which the figures are placed in their world indicates their concern with their own spheres of action, their personal relationship. We can begin to question an approach that assumes this couple would have a single-mindedly religious attitude toward their world and that they would have wanted to express this sacramental view in a disguised, or at least oblique, fashion. This view can make what are very interesting and complex lay people into mere extensions of scholastic thinking. For this couple, and growing numbers like them, it must have been a question of enjoying the world at the same time that one took steps to insure salvation. In this apparent

²³See Davies, 1954, 126–27: “los versos [de Ovidio] declaran como se engañan el uno al otro.” The 1700 inventory was originally published in reference to the van Eyck panel by J. Allende-Salazar, “Don Felipe de Guevara,” *Archivo Español de Arte y Arqueología* 1 (1925): 191. Although “deceive” is probably the best single equivalent for “se engañan,” in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Spanish usage the word could imply a pleasant or delightful taking in, as well as a more deceptive cunning; both shades of meaning might in fact be applicable here. See Samuel Gili Gaya, *Tesoro Lexicografico (1492–1726)* (Madrid, 1960) 1:893–94; and *Diccionario de la Lengua Castellana, . . . compuesto por la Real Academia Espanola* (Madrid, 1732) 2:468. My thanks to my colleagues Rosemary Soons and Pauline Collins for help with this matter.

²⁴The inscription most likely came from the *Art of Love* (*Ars Amatoria*), several copies of which are known to have been owned by Philip the Good of Burgundy; see G. Dogaer and M. Debae, *La librairie de Philippe le Bon* (Brussels, 1967), 145, cat. 225; and Georges Doutrepont, *La littérature française à la cour des ducs de Bourgogne* (Paris, 1909; rpt. Geneva, 1970), 130.

²⁵Bedaux, 20, sees the carving as representing unchastity overcome by the sacrament of marriage, a meaning for which this couple's life and milieu would provide an ironic comment.

conflict, the Church insisted on some form of renunciation, while lay people found their own more complicated, and at times highly ambiguous, approaches.

* * * * *

Within three generations after van Eyck's painting was executed, it entered the collections of Margaret of Austria, where it was twice inventoried (1516 and 1523–24). Both times the man's family name was given, once as Hernoul le Fin (or Sin) and a second time as Arnoul Fin.²⁶ From this information the most likely identification for the man has always seemed to be Giovanni di Arrigo Arnolfini, a Lucchese cloth merchant born around 1400, who lived in Bruges from at least 1421 until his death in 1472. There were other members of the Arnolfini family in the North, in Bruges in particular, but none was nearly so prominent or so successful, or so closely tied to the court of Burgundy, as Giovanni di Arrigo.²⁷ In this connection, it must be stressed that because of his numerous court duties Jan van Eyck's non-ducal commissions were no doubt jealously guarded. He was also apparently forbidden by guild rules from working for anyone not connected with the court.²⁸ Thus it is unlikely that any Arnolfini, except the powerful and influential Giovanni di Arrigo, could have obtained the services of the duke's prized painter.

Giovanni Arnolfini's wife was Giovanna Cenami, the daughter of another Lucchese merchant, Guglielmo Cenami, who had been active in Bruges earlier in the century but in 1434 lived in Paris where Giovanna was also born. Giovanna Cenami died eight years after her husband in 1480. Unfortunately, we do not know exactly when the couple was married.²⁹ Neither their marriage contract nor any other legal document connected with their marriage survives. From their presumed birthdates, it does seem likely that they would have been united sometime around 1434. The first identification of the sitter in

²⁶See Davies, 1954, 125. Margaret's inventories reveal that the work was a gift to the regent from Don Diego de Guevara, a Spanish courtier who lived most of his life in the north and was a trusted counselor of Burgundian rulers. Exactly how and when the painting came into Don Diego's possession is unknown.

²⁷The basic biographical information on Arnolfini is found in Mirot and Lazzareschi.

²⁸In a document of 19 March 1472 (published by W. J. H. Weale, "Inventaire des chartres . . .," *Le Beffroi* 1 [1863]:205), Pierre Coustain, painter to the duke of Burgundy, is required to work only for the duke and his court if he is to remain exempt from guild authority. See Schabacker, 396 n. 56.

²⁹See Schabacker, 380.



FIG. 4—Roger van der Weyden and workshop. *Seven Sacraments Altarpiece*, ca. 1440, right wing. Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten (no. 395).

the London painting as, most probably, Giovanni Arnolfini comes only slightly more than a generation after the work would have left its original owners, presuming that the painting was not sold until the wife's death. The identification of the London couple as Giovanni Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami is thus, if not absolutely certain, extremely probable. What makes this identification seem even more likely is that much about this couple's lives, their attitudes, their histories, seems only to reinforce and add further historical significance to what can be deduced from the image itself.

Giovanni Arnolfini's marriage was a political one meant to produce heirs who would unite and strengthen the interests of two powerful Italian families living in northern Europe. It is thus fitting that the desire for fertility, the bearing of offspring, is one of the basic concerns that van Eyck's London panel seems to evidence. Getting into the marital bed is preceded by removing one's shoes. The connection of shoes and marital union is time-honored and rich in folklore custom.³⁰ The bared foot or accompanying shoe is an almost universal symbol of fecundity.³¹ Women especially must touch the earth to be fertile. It is commonly recognized that removal of slippers indicates the presence of sexual passion in seventeenth-century Dutch art;³² fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Northern manuscripts and panels can also be seen reflecting these ancient customs and beliefs (fig. 5).³³

The fruit on the windowsill and chest (oranges), as well as that covering the tree outside (cherries), can be connected in numerous ways to marital and fertility rituals. Especially when the newly-wed

³⁰The connection between shoes in the London portrait and various marriage customs was first noted by Helen Rosenau, "Some English Influences on Jan van Eyck," *Apollo* 36 (1942):126. See also Edward Westermarck, *The History of Human Marriage*, 5th ed. (London, 1921; rpt. New York, 1971) 3 vols.; Dr. Aigremont, *Fuss- und Schuh-Symbolik und Erotik, Folkloristische und sexualwissenschaftliche Untersuchungen* (Leipzig, 1909), esp. 55–56; and the *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, s.v. *barfuss, schuh*, etc. See also Bedaux, 12.

³¹See Aigremont, 9–12; and William A. Rossi, *The Sex Life of the Foot and Shoe* (New York, 1976), esp. 62–65.

³²See E. de Jongh, "Erotica in vogelperspectief, De dubbelzinnigheid van een reeks 17de eeuwse genrevoorstellingen," *Simiolus* 3 (1968–69): 36–37; *Tot lering en vermaak*, exhibition catalog (Amsterdam, 1976), 261; and John M. Nash, *The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer* (New York, 1972), fig. 178.

³³In the Arsenal manuscript reproduced in fig. 5 the couple's shoes are placed conspicuously at their bedside. For this manuscript see Panofsky, 1953, 439 n. 2; and H. Martin and P. Laner, *Les principaux manuscrits à peintures de la Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal à Paris* (Paris, 1929), pl. 76.



FIG. 5—The Trinity Granting a Child to a Couple. From Jean Marisel, *Traité divers*, third quarter of the fifteenth century. Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, MS 5206, fol. 174.

couple returns home to consummate their marriage, they are offered fruit and sweetmeats.³⁴ The fruit in van Eyck's work is no doubt meant to evoke fruitfulness in general, as it often did in painting at the time. A late fourteenth-century Italian marriage cassone shows a bridegroom conducting his bride to their new home through a landscape full of heavily-laden orange trees;³⁵ Italian marriage salvers and later fifteenth-century South German paintings associate the cherry with young lovers.³⁶ Newlyweds bring a candle into their chambers where, as an indicator of their love and sexual union, it burns all night.³⁷ And on the bedstead in van Eyck's painting, what might be a statue of Saint Margaret, patroness of childbirth, guards the fruitfulness of the womb.

Standing in the midst of such a variety of objects related to fertility and conception, the couple themselves are hardly represented as passive observers. In the ways they move and gesture to each other, they provide one of the chief means of conveying this message. The man in this particular case seems to add a subtle religious dimension. His raised hand has been fussed with by the artist quite a bit; it was originally more rigid and upright, more oath-like, in fact.³⁸ As it is in the finished painting, it is tilted slightly forward, more gently greeting the woman. It would seem an appropriate gesture of annunciation, acknowledging the desired conception and eventual birth of a child.³⁹ In this sense it is interesting that the first direct re-

³⁴See Westermarck, 2:474.

³⁵The cassone is in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, no. 5791-1880; see S. Tolkowsky, *Hesperides, A History of the Culture and Use of Citrus Fruits* (London, 1938), 185. A French herbal printed about 1500 claimed that the orange was a good antidote for the nausea of pregnant women; see Margaret B. Freeman, *The Unicorn Tapestries* (New York, 1976), 125.

³⁶Freeman, 111-15.

³⁷See the *Handwörterbuch*, s.v. *kerze*, *hochzeit*, etc.; Westermarck, 2:544; and Charles Du Cange, *Glossarium mediae et intimae Latinitatis* (1883-87, rpt. Graz, 1954) 2:83. A traditional sign of love, the candle is often shown burning near the marital bed, for instance in the miniature reproduced in fig. 5 and in Pieter Lastman's painting of the *Wedding Night of Tobias and Sarah* (Boston, Museum of Fine Arts).

³⁸An infra-red photo showing the earlier position of the man's hand under the present top layers of paint is published in Davies, 1954, pl. 296.

³⁹For Louis Viardot, *Les musées d'Angleterre, de Belgique, de Hollande, et de Russie* (Paris, 1852), 29, the man's gesture was indicative of chiromancy (referred to by Giorgio T. Faggin, *L'Opera completa dei van Eyck* [Milan, 1968], 94). For Mirot and Lazzareschi, 91, the man appeared to be blessing the fruit of his wife's womb. Peter Parshall has suggested to me that Arnolfini's hand movement is reminiscent of the secular gesture of greeting or invitation analyzed by Michael Baxandall in several later

flection of van Eyck's double portrait in later Flemish panel painting is found in the Louvre *Annunciation* usually attributed to Roger van der Weyden (fig. 6).⁴⁰ For the first time in Flemish art, the artist of this panel staged the Annunciation in a fully-fashioned domestic interior, based on the London couple's idealized chamber. It seems quite possible that this later artist found in van Eyck's painting more than an appropriate setting, somehow isolated from figures and storyline; the London painting was a model for the over-all theme, the theme of annunciation and incarnation. And although the earthly woman's conception will clearly not be virginal, some pains have been taken for the couple's "nuptial passion" to be seen as what the Church would have regarded as a proper Christian one. Around the mirror on the back wall are found small enameled medallions of Christ's Passion, perhaps meant to remind the observer that Christ's love (and consequent suffering or Passion) for his faithful was, for the Church, the justification and model for marital union on the earth.⁴¹

The dog at the couple's feet was representative of carnality and fertility throughout the Middle Ages, largely because it copulated freely in public; its habits were commonly used by priests to check the sexual practices of their penitents.⁴² Yet the sexual meaning that can and should be sensed in the dog, the bed, the shoes, the fruit, and the candle should not be taken to negate totally the possible, more pious significance of these objects. The room could be, like Mary's, a *Thalamus Virginis*, the shoes indicative of the holiness of the couple's intentions and act, the candle the all-seeing wisdom of God, the dog, perhaps, the couple's marital fidelity.⁴³ Yet, as we shall see, neither member of this union was faithful; they did not allow a single-minded religious façade to rule their lives, and there is little reason to believe they would have wanted it to rule their painted image.

fifteenth-century Italian works in *Painting and Experience and Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Oxford, Eng., 1972), 67–70.

⁴⁰See Panofsky, 1953, 252–53 and 256; also H. Beenken, "Roger van der Weyden und Jan van Eyck," *Pantheon* 25 (1940): 129–37, esp. 135.

⁴¹See Baldwin.

⁴²See, for instance, Maria Leach, *God Had a Dog* (New Brunswick, 1961), esp. 325–329; and Beryl Rowland, *Animals with Human Faces* (Knoxville, 1973), esp. 59–63.

⁴³As proposed for instance by Panofsky, 1953. Panofsky himself was of course aware of the "ambivalent" nature, as he called it, of much medieval symbolism; see esp. the footnote reference on dog symbolism in idem, 1934, 127 n. 35. However, he felt that he had to decide in any one instance in favor of one meaning or another.



FIG. 6—Attributed to Roger van der Weyden. *Annunciation*, ca. 1440. Paris, Musée du Louvre (inv. 1982).

Giovanni Arnolfini discreetly raises his hand to greet his wife; she responds by lifting her voluminous green gown. She is thus quietly receptive to his advances.⁴⁴ Is she at the same time already pregnant? Most critics have rightly decided that this is not the case; however, as any school child first looking at this image can attest, the woman's gesture certainly has the effect of making her look heavy with child. It is then again an indication of willingness, of expectancy, of a commonly shared desire between husband and wife for progeny.

⁴⁴On the basis of a comparison with the woman being married in Roger van der Weyden's *Seven Sacraments Altarpiece* (fig. 4), Panofsky, 1953, 438, and Martin Davies, *Early Netherlandish School*, National Gallery Catalogues, 3d ed. (London, 1968), 50–52, have suggested that the gesture of the woman's left hand may be a specific marriage symbol.



FIG. 7—Willem van der Haecht. *Picture Gallery of Cornelis van der Geest*, 1628, detail. Antwerp, Rubens' House.

We know one fact about this woman's life that makes it very doubtful that this desire was ever satisfied: she died childless.⁴⁵ Indeed, it is interesting to speculate that the painting might have been done partly in response to the couple's difficulties in having children soon after their marriage. Other paintings from this time can also be viewed as pleas for offspring. Jozef de Coo has offered a provocative interpretation of the Mérode triptych in this vein, based to some extent on the fact that the Christ Child is actually shown entering the Annunciation chamber.⁴⁶ A miniature, already mentioned because of the presence of discarded slippers and burning candle, shows the Trinity answering a couple's plea by sending down a child from heaven (fig. 5). Another miniature from the early fifteenth century shows a French princess, Marie d'Harcourt, who married the duke of Guelders, receiving an angelic salutation, "O milde Maria." The scene has been plausibly interpreted as a first-person Annunciation, the duchess of Guelders having assumed the Virgin Mary's blue robe and occupying the *hortus conclusus*. But Marie d'Harcourt's presumption remained somewhat pathetic, as she died childless.⁴⁷ The Louvre *Annunciation* attributed to Roger van der Weyden was at one time supplemented by an originally female (now male) donor on the left and on the right, a scene of the Visitation, Mary and Elizabeth touching each other's swelling bellies.⁴⁸ Childlessness was a difficult fate to bear and must have led to many private prayers as well as more vivid visual appeals such as these.⁴⁹ We could do more to discover under what conditions and in what manner images may have

⁴⁵This conclusion is based on the fact that Giovanna Cenami's nephew was eventually named Giovanni Arnolfini's heir, according to documents published by Leon Mirot, "Les Cenames (Etudes lucquoises, 4)," *Bibliothèque de l'Ecole des Chartes* 91 (1930): 114; see also the analysis provided by Schabacker, 381.

⁴⁶Jozef de Coo, "A Medieval Look at the Mérode Annunciation," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 44 (1981): 114–33, esp. 128–30.

⁴⁷The Book of Hours of Mary Guelders, Staatsbibliothek, Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin-Dahlem, MS Germ. quart 42, fol. 19^v. For this work and the idea that it represents a plea for children, see Panofsky, 1953, 101; and John Harthan, *The Book of Hours* (New York, 1977), 80–81.

⁴⁸See Panofsky, 1953, 300–01, for a discussion of this triptych (his pl. 172) and its original female donor.

⁴⁹Diane Owen Hughes, "Representing the Family: Portraits and Purposes in Early Modern Italy," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 17 (1986): 16 and 18, discusses a Petrus Christus female donor portrait where the woman, looking like the Annunciate Virgin, may, Hughes feels, reflect the hope of pregnancy to come. For a telling mid-fifteenth-century Italian example of the woes of a childless woman, see Iris Origo, *The Merchant of Prato: Francesco di Marco Datini* (New York, 1957), 165–87.

been felt to help insure the birth of a child. Fertility talismen were prominently employed near the bed or attached to the body.⁵⁰ Some of these uses could have been adapted to paintings like that of the Arnolfini.⁵¹

* * * * *

Giovanni Arnolfini was one of the most aggressive and successful merchants in Bruges. He is recorded numerous times as selling costly fabrics and tapestries to the duke of Burgundy (from 1423 on) and to his courtiers. He lent the duke money in 1446. By 1465, he was counselor, majordomo, and chamberlain at the court. From 1446 until 1460 he was allowed by the duke to collect tariffs on goods imported from England coming through Gravelines. From this privilege, the court historiographer reported, Arnolfini made a fortune.⁵² He so impressed the dauphin of France while he was in residence at the Burgundian court that when he became king, he made Arnolfini a counselor and Governor of Finance in Normandy. Arnolfini became a naturalized French citizen in 1464. He was buried in Bruges. Clearly he was an ambitious, social-climbing Italian emigré. If most of the Italian merchants in Bruges stayed bound to their own foreign colony,⁵³ Arnolfini apparently spent much time courting the Flemish nobility. The court historiographer portrays him as privy to ducal consultations and negotiations;⁵⁴ that is what his honors and titles also suggest.

How might van Eyck's London panel reveal the donor's pretension to noble status, his interest in a courtly ethos? Oranges, rare and costly imports from the south, were commonly considered the fruit

⁵⁰See Origo, *ibid.*, and Westermarck, 2:467–87. Westermarck, 466, also remarks that the color red is often associated with the marriage bed in order to insure defloration.

⁵¹Is this where we should look for the significance of the *Woman at her Bath* sometimes thought to be by van Eyck and recorded in a seventeenth-century gallery painting (fig. 7)? Julius Held believed the lost painting represented a marriage (purification) bath; see his "Artis Pictoriae Amator, An Antwerp Art Patron and his Collection," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, ser. 6, 50 (1957): 74–83, now reprinted and emended in *idem, Rubens and his Circle* (Princeton, 1982), 43–50 and 56. The relation between the *Woman Bathing* and the Arnolfini picture remains problematic to me.

⁵²Georges Chastellain, *Oeuvres*, ed. Kervyn de Lettenhove (Brussels, 1865) 4:33.

⁵³This is the picture given by Raymond de Roover, *Money, Banking and Credit in Medieval Bruges* (Cambridge, Eng., 1948), esp. 20–22.

⁵⁴Chastellain, 4:351 and 356.

DVCVM BRABANTIE.

9



ANSEGISVS ET BEGGA BRAB.DVCS.

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FIG. 8—Anonymous, Dutch. *Duke of Brabant Ansegisus and His Wife Begga*. Engraving from Hadrian Barland, *Ducum Brabantiae Chronica* (Antwerp, 1600), 9.

of kings and princes.⁵⁵ Arnolfini's high, broad-brimmed hat was an unusual and expensive status symbol of the wealthy;⁵⁶ another one similar to it is worn by Baudouin de Lannoy, a Burgundian courtier painted by van Eyck in a panel now in Berlin.⁵⁷ The somber colors of the man's clothing, dark purple, brown, and black, appropriately mirror the taste of the duke of Burgundy.⁵⁸ Cenami's pale complexion is no doubt due to heavily applied makeup favored by courtly women to give a refined impression.⁵⁹ Her robe, while not made of particularly costly fabric, has an elegant white fur lining and enormous sleeves decorated with applied dagging.⁶⁰ The lap dog playing at her feet is the constant companion of noble women,⁶¹ and the exquisite Anatolian rug near which she stands quietly proclaims the couple's wealth.⁶² In other words, this couple, while not offensively ostentatious, has left precious little question in the spectator's mind about their social status. It is not surprising that such an image quickly found congenial owners in the courts of Europe.

The Valois courts of Burgundy, to which both artist and sitters were drawn, was throughout the fifteenth century governed by an almost ludicrous sense of etiquette.⁶³ Even the simplest action followed a prescribed and elaborate form. The duke in particular prided himself on his dignified mien: he never ate with his mouth open, he spoke calmly and courteously to his companions, he moved with gravity and majesty. And he made certain that all this

⁵⁵See Tolkowsky, 150; and also Bedaux, 22.

⁵⁶See Blanche Payne, *History of Costume* (New York, 1965), 213. Bedaux, 12-13, connects the presence of the hat to marriage customs signifying the husband's power.

⁵⁷Dhanens, 329-32.

⁵⁸See, for instance, J. Huizinga, "La physionomie morale de Philippe le Bon," *Annales de Bourgogne* 4 (1932): 101-29.

⁵⁹See Hannelore Sachs, *The Renaissance Woman* (New York, 1971), 31.

⁶⁰See Margaret Scott, *Late Gothic Europe, 1400-1500* (London, 1980), 120-21.

⁶¹See Ludwig Baldass, *Jan van Eyck* (London, 1952), 85. The fact that the dog can indicate the nobility of its owners is mentioned by Dhanens, 141-42; and Zdzisław Kępiński, "Jan van Eyck: 'Malżeństwo Arnolfinich' czy 'Dawid i Betsabe,'" ("Arnolfini Couple" or John and Margaret van Eyck as "David and Bethsheba"), *Rocznik historii sztuki* 10 (1974): 157 and n. 44.

⁶²Thanks to Walter Denny for help with this item. He informs me that contemporary and later inventories show such rugs as among the costliest of a person's possessions. John Mills, *Carpets in Pictures* (London, n.d.), 10-11, thinks the pattern in the rug may have been invented by the artist.

⁶³See Cartellieri, *passim*; and Richard Vaughan, *Philip the Good* (London, 1970), esp. 127-63.

admirable behavior was recorded by court chroniclers.⁶⁴ Surviving images of court life show the externally grave and dignified ideal of court manners (fig. 9).⁶⁵ An amusing miniature from Bruges dating from the reign of Philip's son, Charles the Bold, provides the telling contrast of courtly propriety and servile intemperance (fig. 10).⁶⁶

There is also an important sense in which the panel is related to the professed if not literal realism of court imagery. One of the most important visual models for the London portrait, as well as one of the forums in which its influence can later be strongly felt, is the formal presentation miniature. During the first twenty-five years of Philip the Good's reign, until about 1445, manuscripts produced in and around the Flemish court remained largely under the influence of French, primarily Parisian, production. Works by the Boucicaut Master, the Bedford Master, and the Master of the *City of Ladies* lie behind most Flemish manuscripts at this time.⁶⁷ In a similar way, such paintings have been shown to form a strong component in the background of Jan van Eyck.⁶⁸ One of the most striking developments in these manuscripts in terms of the portrayal of contemporary court life is the presentation miniature. These are a particular feature of works of contemporary literature, in which the living writer is shown presenting or discussing his work with his noble patron. Thus the Boucicaut Master depicts Pierre Salmon, counselor to Charles VI, in conversation with the king, while other princes, including Philip the Good's father, John the Fearless, look on.⁶⁹ Or Christine de Pisan is shown presenting her collected works to Isabeau of Bavaria, wife of Charles VI, in a miniature that seems to be

⁶⁴See esp. Huizinga, 1932; also Chastellain, 7:213–36 ("Declaration de tous les hauts faits et glorieuses adventures de duc Philippe de Bourgogne").

⁶⁵For the work reproduced in fig. 9 see Robert Mullally, "The So-Called Hawking Party at the Court of Philip the Good, A Study of a Burgundian Primitive of 1431," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* ser. 6, 90 (1977): 109–12; and most recently Anne van Buren, "Un jardin d'amour de Philippe le Bon au parc du Hesdin," *La revue du Louvre* 35 (1985): 185–92.

⁶⁶Master of the Dresden Prayer Book (active in Bruges, ca. 1480), "The Temperate and the Intemperate," from Valerius Maximus, *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia*, Leipzig, Bibliothek der Karl-Marx-Universität, MS Rep. I 11b, fol. 2; ill. and discussed in Thomas Kren, ed., *Renaissance Painting in Manuscripts, Treasures from the British Library* (New York, 1983), 11.

⁶⁷See L. M. J. Delaissé, *Le siècle d'or de la miniature flamande, Le mécénat de Philippe le Bon*, exhibition catalog (Brussels, 1959), 15–16.

⁶⁸See for instance Panofsky, 1953, 204.

⁶⁹See esp. Millard Meiss, *French Painting in the Time of Jean de Berry: The Boucicaut Master* (London, 1968), 25–26 and fig. 72.



FIG. 9—Anonymous, Flemish. *Marriage Feast of Philip the Good and Isabella of Portugal*, ca. 1431. Versailles, Chateau.



FIG. 10—Master of the Dresden Prayer Book. *The Temperate and the Intemperate*, ca. 1480. From Valerius Maximus, *Facta et Dicta Memorabili*. Leipzig, Bibliothek der Karl-Marx-Universität, MS Rep. I 116, fol. 2.

a remarkably accurate representation of court life and ritual (fig. 11).⁷⁰ In illuminations like these we find many of the crucial elements of van Eyck's London portrait: the interior with its air of tranquility and repose, the bed, floor covering, domestic animal, shuttered windows giving an enticing prospect on the outside world, and the elegantly attired courtiers. Of course, the royal quarters are more richly furnished with wall hangings and embroidered bed covers. Yet the sense of the scene as an historical, albeit conventional, social document is similar.

Even closer to van Eyck are the presentation miniatures found in Flemish manuscripts executed after the date of the London panel. Numerous examples could be mentioned, again found especially in

⁷⁰This miniature was recently studied by Sandra Hindman, "The Iconography of Queen Isabeau de Bavière (1410–1415): An Essay in Method," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* ser. 6, 102 (1983): 102–10.



FIG. 11 — Master of the City of Ladies. *Christine de Pisan Presenting Her Work to Isabelle of Bavaria*, ca. 1410–1415. From Christine de Pisan, *Oeuvres*. London, British Library, Harley MS 4431, fol. 3.

works of contemporary authors, some possibly acquaintances of van Eyck at court. One illumination executed in the late 1450s may be singled out; it is the frontispiece to a treatise on the Lord's Prayer, translated into French by Jean Mielot who is shown presenting his work to Philip the Good (fig. 12).⁷¹ Other French courtly manuscripts at mid-century have been shown to have dedicatory miniatures reflecting van Eyck's London double portrait. In a manuscript of the *Thesiad* executed for René of Anjou, the presentation is made to a noblewoman, the whole scene being remarkably similar to that of van Eyck (fig. 13).⁷² The most striking later Flemish comparison to van Eyck's panel is not, strictly speaking, a presentation miniature, but it is an equally fascinating, if also conventional, record of

⁷¹See *La librairie de Philippe le Bon* 48, cat. 62 (Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, MS 9092, fol. 1).

⁷²Vienna, Nationalbibliothek, cod. 2617, fol. 14^v. The similarity of this work to the London double portrait was noted by Otto Pächt, "René d'Anjou-Studien, II," *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien* 73 (1977): 68–70. Dhanens, 62–67, connected the Vienna miniature with Barthelémy van Eyck, perhaps a relative of Jan's, who worked for René of Anjou from 1447 to 1472.

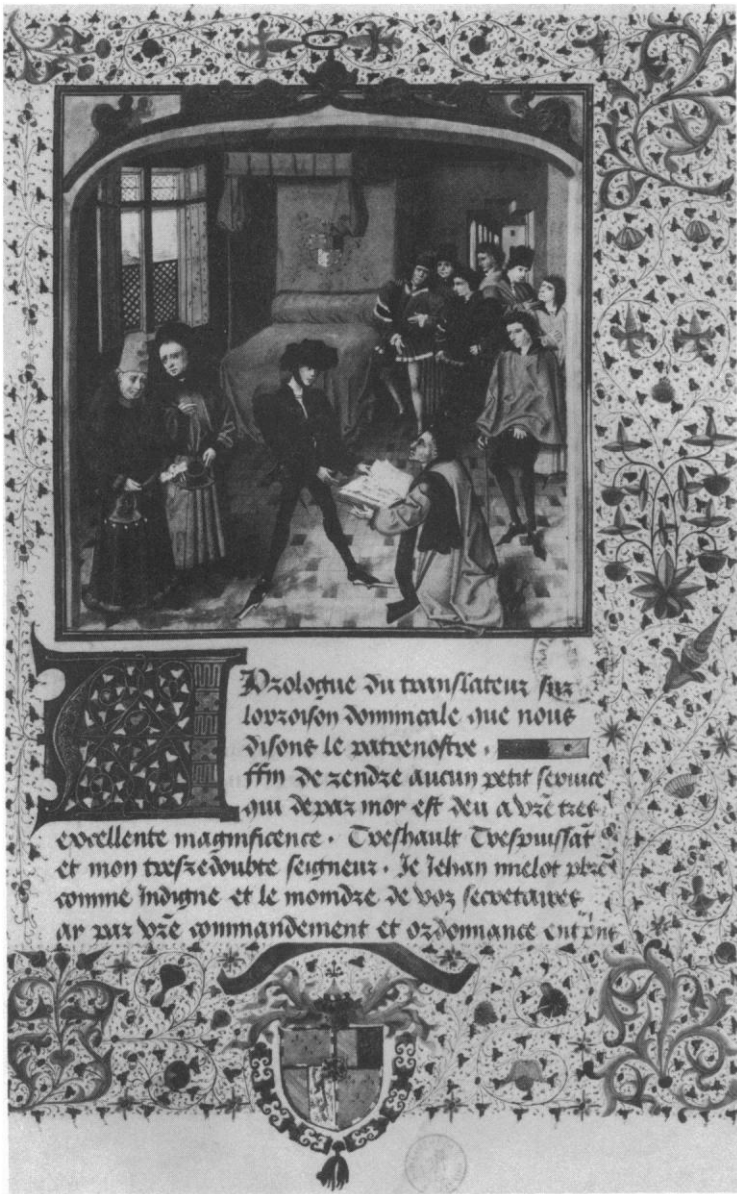


FIG. 12—Anonymous, Flemish. *Jean Mielot Presenting His Work to Philip the Good*, after 1457. From Jean Mielot, *Traité sur l'oraison dominicale*. Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale Albert 1er, MS 9092, fol. 1r.



FIG. 13 — Anonymous Artist working for René of Anjou. Dedicatory miniature, ca. 1460. From the *Thesiad*. Vienna, Nationalbibliothek, MS 2617, fol. 14^v.

Burgundian court life. In the third of a four-volume set of the *History of Charles Martel* composed by David Aubert for Philip the Good in the mid-1460s, there is a scene of Aubert at work in his study (fig. 14).⁷³ This history, a monumental literary and artistic endeavor begun by Philip, was completed only during the reign of his son, Charles the Bold, who is shown in the miniature visiting the author Aubert. On the back wall of this miniature is a collection of objects surely reflecting van Eyck's London panel.⁷⁴ Chandelier, convex mirror, dusting brush, and crystal beads are all present. Even more striking is the elaborately lettered inscription used in place of van Eyck's signature—"Je lay emprins," the motto of Duke Charles.

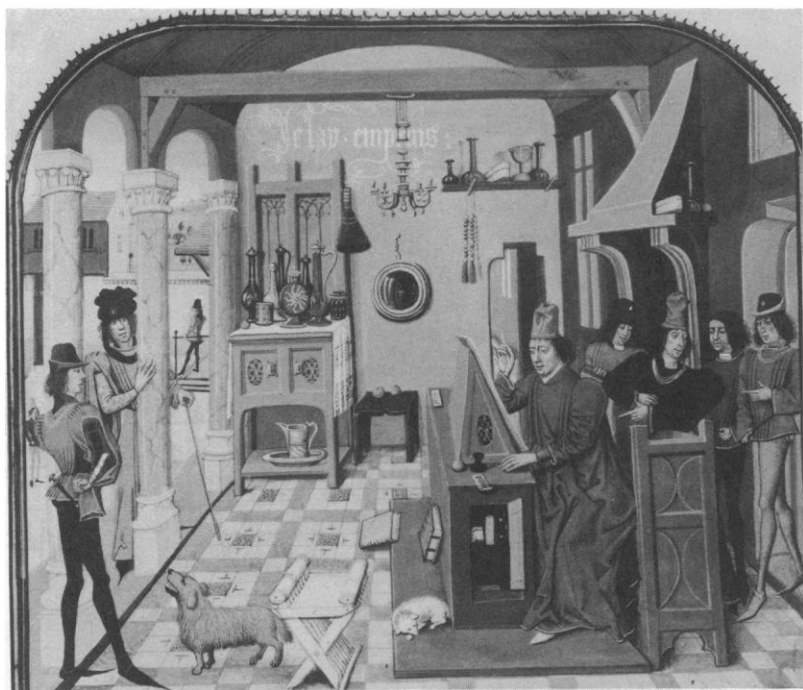


FIG. 14—Attributed to Loyset Liedet. *Charles the Bold Surprising David Aubert*, 1468. From *Histoire de Charles Martel*. Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale Albert Ier, MS 8, fol. 7.

⁷³Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, MS 8, fol. 7. For this manuscript see Friedrich Winkler, *Die flämische Buchmalerei des xv. und xvi. Jahrhunderts*, 2d ed. (Amsterdam, 1978), 75–76; and Delaissé, 125, cat. 46.

⁷⁴This was noted in passing by Davies, 1954, 122.

The Arnolfini double portrait both feeds out of and back into such imagery. The formal arrangements and conventions are similar, as is the interest in creating a believable visual image. Within a courtly ambience, van Eyck's choice of objects, his sense of hushed formality as well as historical documentation, his reportage is clearly stimulated and later appreciated.⁷⁵ The artist's signature is interpreted as a kind of motto; the painter may have been in control of his panel but the duke of Burgundy takes charge of his manuscripts. Such scenes of court life, especially presentation miniatures, were a particularly potent way of conveying an aristocratic ethos.⁷⁶ It is an ideology that van Eyck espouses throughout his career. His patrons in the London panel are also in sympathy with these noble aspirations and display. Mimicking courtly etiquette and customs, subtly displaying wealth and prestige, Arnolfini emerges from the portrait as a foreigner fashioning a self-image at once bold and accommodating, something to appeal to, and at the same time impress, the Flemish nobility.

* * * * *

In late medieval northern Europe, courtly attitudes toward love were in general sexually explicit and at the same time somewhat comic. The ultimate model for the combination of irony and overt sexuality was Ovid;⁷⁷ closer at hand was Boccaccio. Attitudes and atmosphere at the court of Burgundy were no exception to this general picture.⁷⁸ The duke and his courtiers composed a remarkable series of love stories, *Les cents nouvelles nouvelles*, which repeatedly portrayed spouses as deceitful and conniving. Women bore children to their husbands on their wedding night (no. 29), romantic intrigue and confusion developed while couples were attending mass (nos.

⁷⁵Another interesting work in this regard is the 1600 engraving of the duke of Brabant Ansegisus and his wife Begga (fig. 8). Dhanens, 141–43, has noticed the similarity between this work and the Arnolfini double portrait. Could the engraving be based on a lost van Eyck ducal portrait, and if so did the ducal version precede the Arnolfini and serve as a direct courtly model for the Italian couple?

⁷⁶See Gloria Fiero, "Courtier and Commoner: Two Styles of Fifteenth-Century Manuscript Illumination," *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 2 (1975): 15–34, esp. 17.

⁷⁷For Ovid and medieval love, see Kelly, 71–120. Kelly believes that Ovid also provided a model for taking love and marriage more seriously, an attitude that does not however seem to have been found at the court of Burgundy.

⁷⁸See Cartellieri, 115–16; Richard Vaughan, *Valois Burgundy* (London, 1975), 165–66; and Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (New York, 1954), 314 and passim.

37 and 53).⁷⁹ Sex was never treated solemnly at court. At the same time, the duke did not engage in the extremely ribald behavior favored by the king of France, who, so rumor had it, roamed the streets of Paris at night looking for young women to seduce.⁸⁰ Certainly the duke had his mistresses, whom he treated well, giving them houses and pensions.⁸¹ His bastards, too, quite publicly acknowledged, were well situated at court or in the country. Probably the number of these illegitimate affairs has been exaggerated, but they were in any case the duke's one vice, and as contemporaries said, a noble and controlled vice at that.⁸²

Here then it is that several features of van Eyck's work find an agreeable context. At the heart of the London portrait, a derisive chair decoration looks out over the couple's joined hands (fig. 3). It makes one think of the obscene grinning that contemporaries recorded at noble wedding feasts.⁸³ Remember too that according to one later inventory the painting's frame at one time had on it verses from Ovid, declaring how the couple deceived each other. A quotation from Ovid, especially of a mocking or ironic sort, would have been acceptable, even desirable, within a courtly milieu. The duke of Burgundy owned several copies of the *Art of Love* and no doubt fully appreciated its humor: "Be not timid in your promises; by promises women are betrayed" (I.631); "Make many vows, and all aloud" (II.327). The surface formality of this image, like the external dignity and restraint of the duke, does not totally cover a licentiousness and romantic irony.

Huizinga has pointed to the presumed inadequacies of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century painting in the erotic and comic spheres.⁸⁴ The tongue-in-cheek quality of late medieval poetry and romance is indeed difficult to see in the stylized visual representations of love at court. Fifteenth-century paintings of young lovers are so solemn and hieratic that they have been assumed to have come from a religious context. This was the case with the engagement or marriage portrait of Lysbeth van Duvenvoorde, whom one critic la-

⁷⁹*Les cents nouvelles nouvelles*, ed. Franklin P. Sweetser (Geneva, 1966). For this work, see in general Doutrepoint, 332-44.

⁸⁰See Cartellieri, 116.

⁸¹See Vaughan, 134.

⁸²See esp. Huizinga, 1932.

⁸³Huizinga, 1954, 109, refers to Froissart's account of the wedding of Charles VI and Isabeau of Bavaria.

⁸⁴Huizinga, 1954, 303-08.

belled a dismembered donor painting only by totally ignoring the inscribed banderole: "I am weary of hoping so long; who is he that will open his heart?" (fig. 15).⁸⁵ As can be easily demonstrated, the apparent leadenness of the visual imagery was hardly matched by any other contemporary production. Poetry, novels or short stories, theater, and songs, all show that in sexual matters freedom and irony were relished. Perhaps, then, we need to be more attuned to the sexual subtleties of imagery like that of the London double portrait. It may at first seem hesitant or primitive in relation to poetry, but careful investigation may also uncover at least some erotic and even comic or ironic allusions.

We can also understand court humor in subtler and more appropriate ways. One of the reasons for the mocking humor of courtly love poetry was to disperse the gloom of life's tragedies, of the plague in particular. Queen Isabeau of Bavaria was fond of reading courtly *ballades* when she was away from Paris avoiding an outbreak of the plague. Boccaccio's *Decameron*, on which Philip's *Cents nouvelles* was based, was written at least in part from such a motivation.⁸⁶ It was restorative, perhaps protective, to engage in the pleasures (including the deceptions) of love at court. Such witty touches could have been seen at the time not so much undercutting the whole spirit of the work as adding an element of intrigue and, finally, relief from the otherwise sometimes dismal facts of life.

One other feature of courtly love must be mentioned in connection with van Eyck's portrayal. The position of women at court was somewhat exceptional.⁸⁷ Whereas in general women were supposed to be homebodies, obediently accepting the domination of their husbands and being above all faithful to them, at court a woman could become a more active partner. Their sexuality, even promiscuity, was sanctioned, ultimately laboriously described in both male- and female-voiced lyrics. Although Cenami rather passively allows her right hand to be grasped by Arnolfini, as well as being receptive to the idea of progeny, she does stand firm and erect; here is a woman

⁸⁵See Huizinga, 1954, 314; also Albert Chatelet, *Early Dutch Painting* (New York, 1981), 203. The painting originally had a pendant, the woman's husband or husband-to-be, with the inscription: "I am greatly troubled; who is she who will honor me with her love?"

⁸⁶For all these examples, see Glending Olson, *Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY, 1982), esp. 194-95.

⁸⁷See for instance, Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman* (Cambridge, Eng., 1980), 64-65.



FIG. 15—Anonymous, Netherlandish. *Lysbeth van Duvenvoorde*, ca. 1430. The Hague, Mauritshuis.

who is not merely shrinking, soft or undulating. Remarkably for a woman shown with her husband in a fifteenth-century portrait, Cenami gazes across to her husband, not down toward the floor.⁸⁸ Within a courtly environment a man's and a woman's longings for extra-marital love-life, their consequent deception of their spouses would have been dwelt upon in delicate verses. Perhaps van Eyck's woman would as well be an appropriate subject for a courtly ballade.

This in general is what can be said about the courtly setting and the apparent presumption of the sitters in van Eyck's portrait. Once again, facts known from Arnolfini's and Cenami's later lives dramatically confirm both our sense of the image and the importance of its courtly pretensions. One aspect of Arnolfini's life is little-known and has seemed, to one author, inappropriate for the "blissful" scene portrayed in van Eyck's panel.⁸⁹ During the 1460s Arnolfini apparently had an affair with a woman from Bruges whose husband had been banished from the city because of his involvement with a murder. In 1470 the woman finally took Arnolfini to court, trying to regain some jewels that he had given her. She also revealed that he had promised her a pension and several houses,⁹⁰ interestingly enough exactly the treatment that the duke afforded his mistresses—only in this case, Arnolfini did not follow through on his noble promises. Not only that: he had his lawyer (he was sick and could not himself appear) use as a defense the fact that by law married women were not allowed to make presentations in court without the consent and presence of their husbands.⁹¹ Arnolfini was clearly willing to use the generally inferior legal status of women against his mistress. It would also probably be wrong to imagine this as his only extra-marital affair. That he waited until he was in his sixties in order

⁸⁸The fact that other artists felt uncomfortable with the greater equality of the sexes implicit in van Eyck's work is perhaps indicated by the later, dramatic lowering of the woman's gaze. This is true of the two scenes of marital union done after, to some extent derived from, the Arnolfini painting: Roger's *Seven Sacraments Altarpiece* (fig. 4) and the betrothal (?) image by the Master of the Aachener Schranktüren reproduced by Schabacker, fig. 2. It is also worth noting that Cenami's hand was originally grasped more firmly, not merely gently cradled as it is now; see Davies, 1954, 117–18 and pl. 298 (infra-red photo).

⁸⁹The episode is fully recounted and documents published by E. I. Strubbe, "Een episode uit het leven van Giovanni Arnolfini," *Handelingen van het Genootschap voor Geschiedenis, Société d'émulation* 89 (1952): 67–81. Dhanens, 199, found Arnolfini's unfaithfulness inconsistent with the painted image.

⁹⁰See the document in Strubbe, 76.

⁹¹See the document in Strubbe, 77; see also, for instance, Maclean, 77.

to indulge his passion is hard to believe. Confronted by a duke and courtiers who did not honor their marriage vows, he did not either.

And where was Giovanna Cenami during all of this? Quite simply, having courtly love poems composed about herself. In a typical collection of such lyrics is one whose object is demonstrably Cenami, her name being spelled out by the first letter of each of the fifteen lines.

Jusque au retour n'aray plaisance,
Eslongue de ma souffisance
Helas! en toulx biens assouvye,
Avoir n'eusse peu en ma vie
Nulle plus grande penitance

Nul sy n'a sa plaisant jovence,
El resjoist de sa presence
Chacun, fors moy, d'elle banye
Jusque au retour. . . .

Engre porte son ordonnance,
Ne me quiers moyen d'autre aisance,
A son vueil le mien se conduye.
Mieulx ne pays, quoyque l'on me die,
Je prendray tout en patience
Jusque au retour.⁹²

There is nothing particularly distinguished about this work as poetry. Its phrases and expressions, its forms and its rhymes, are found in much other contemporary verse.⁹³ The man will have no pleasure until his love (Cenami) returns. He is totally at her mercy and is also wary of public opinion; he will "suffer all until the return." It may need stressing that this poem was not written by Cenami's status-seeking husband; such courtly verse never was composed by or about one's legitimate spouse.⁹⁴ Cenami was left alone by her husband, but the poem suggests that she did not sit idle. And her love affair was broadcast in rare public fashion through the acrostic of her

⁹²This was published first in connection with the London painting by Mirot and Lazzareschi, 92; originally published by Martin Löpelmann, *Die Liederhandschrift des Cardinals de Rohan (XV. Jahrhundert)* (Göttingen, 1923), 198, no. 281. This collection includes several other acrostic poems; only one other woman is identified by her full name.

⁹³See for instance Pierre Champion, *Histoire poétique du quinzième siècle* (Paris, 1923): 374–81. An example comparable to that of Cenami's was composed by Georges Chastellain, *Oeuvres* (Brussels, 1886) 8: 317–18.

⁹⁴The suggestion of Mirot and Lazzareschi, 92, that Arnolfini had the poem composed in order to woo Cenami, is not therefore very likely.

name. It may not be possible, as it is with her husband, to say that Cenami's affair was consummated. Still the poem clearly situates her in the ambience of a courtly system of extra-marital sexual intrigue.⁹⁵ She came from a powerful and highly-placed family — "nata ex sanguine regio," as it was later phrased — and seems to have been as determined as her husband to enjoy the prerogatives of noble life, freely and openly.⁹⁶

* * * * *

The Arnolfini couple were also religious individuals, participating in typical pious acts and organizations of their day. They joined one of the many lay religious confraternities of the late Middle Ages, the Confraternity of the Dry Tree in Bruges, a charitable group dedicated to honoring the barren Saint Anne.⁹⁷ At their deaths they both went to some lengths to endow perpetual masses for their souls, thereby joining numerous contemporaries who had a veritable obsession with such rituals.⁹⁸ Clearly these people wanted to insure their salvation by deeds done on earth, both while they were alive and after they died. There are also several other ways that their religious interests and attitudes are evident in their portrait. A common and often lavish betrothal gift from the man was prayer beads, such as the elegant crystal ones which hang on the rear wall in the London panel.⁹⁹ Such a gift was needed in order to keep one's wife

⁹⁵See for instance the various relevant essays in Danielle Buschinger and André Crépin, eds., *Amour, mariage et transgressions au moyen âge*, Université de Picardie, Centre d'Études Médiévales, Actes du colloque des 24, 25, 26 et 27 mars 1983 (Göppingen, 1984).

⁹⁶Mirot and Lazzareschi, 92 and 104. The expression comes from an eighteenth-century document. At the same time Arnolfini is said to come "ex antiqua et nobili familia" (ibid., 102).

⁹⁷See W. H. J. Weale with M. Brockwell, *The Van Eycks and Their Art* (London, 1912), 117. For this confraternity see Alphonse de Schodt, *Confrérie de Notre-Dame de l'Arbre Sec* (Bruges, 1877). The possibility that the Arnolfini's membership in this confraternity, dedicated to the barren Saint Anne who miraculously bore the Virgin Mary, is related to their own childlessness is intriguing. Certainly not all members of the confraternity were without children, as we know in the case of Petrus Christus. Thanks to Joel Upton for bibliographic help with this matter.

⁹⁸The Arnolfini's concern that masses be said for their souls is documented in Mirot and Lazzareschi, 99–100. For the contemporary interest in endowing masses for oneself, see Jacques Chiffolleau, "Sur l'usage obsessionnel de la messe pour les morts à la fin du moyen âge," *Faire croire* (1981): 235–56.

⁹⁹See Eithne Wilkins, *The Rose-Garden Game* (London, 1969), esp. 53. It is puzzling that there are twenty-nine rather than the thirty beads one would expect in a rosary.

pious and faithful. On the other side of the mirror in the painting, hanging from the bedstead, is a dusting brush.¹⁰⁰ *Ora et labora*: the woman would be restrained by pious devotions to engage her mind and domestic duties to occupy her hands.¹⁰¹ Perhaps this domestic religious meaning sheds another light on the carved statue above the duster. Some have suggested that this could represent Saint Martha, the patroness of housewives, exemplar of domestic industry.¹⁰² In any case, the house was to be kept clean without dust or disorder; prayers were to be said regularly and mass attended in silence.

Women could not speak or hold important office in the Church. They were daughters of Eve whose words had seduced Adam, had incited him to concupiscence. Women were temptresses, responsible for Original Sin and characterized by extreme sexual ardor.¹⁰³ It would certainly be remarkable if an image like the Arnolfini double portrait did not contain some reference to this misogynist stereotype. At Giovanna Cenami's feet is a lively little lap dog, the frequent accompaniment, from the fifteenth through the seventeenth

¹⁰⁰This object is correctly identified by W. H. J. Weale, 116; also Dhanens, 203. The extent to which a religious interpretation of this painting has gone is shown by Baldass, 75, calling this object an aspergillum. The object in van Eyck's London panel is not at all like a sprinkler of holy water (such as is seen in the center of Dürer's Dresden altarpiece), but is rather a simple, stiff dusting brush. It is tempting to add a note on the possible sexual meaning of the small broom. In sixteenth-century Flanders the expression "to sweep a hearth" was a way of alluding to sexual intercourse, according to the text for the 1563 Antwerp Ommegang; see Jan Grauls, "Ter Verkaring van Bosch en Bruegel," *Gentsche Bijdragen tot de Kunstgeschiedenis* 6 (1939-40): 157, no. 2. Still today in colloquial Italian the word for broom and sexual intercourse is the same: *scopa*, *scopare*, to sweep or "screw." It is difficult to say whether such a vulgar meaning was in van Eyck's or Arnolfini's mind, just as it is hard to believe that either had in mind the proverb current in the sixteenth century, "to be married under the broom" (without the blessing of the church). This latter is illustrated in Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs* (Berlin). If Arnolfini knew of such meanings/sayings, he would, I feel, have referred to them only in jest. Further comments on the meaning of the brooms in such contexts is given by Bedaux, 19-21.

¹⁰¹See, for instance, Ruth Kelso, *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance* (Urbana, 1956), 108 and 111; and Natalie Z. Davis, "Women on Top," *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, 1975), 126.

¹⁰²See Davies, 1968, 50 and 51 n. 3. Martha can be shown standing beside a dragon, as she is in the London painting, because she was able to tame a monster ravaging the southern French countryside where she spent her last years.

¹⁰³See Davis, 124-51; Maclean, 14-17; John F. Benton, "Clio and Venus: An Historical View of Medieval Love," *The Meaning of Courtly Love*, ed. F. X. Newman (Albany, 1968), 32-33; and Theodore Lee Neff, *La satire des femmes dans la poésie française du moyen âge* (Paris, 1900), esp. 60-61, 89-95.

centuries, of seductive women.¹⁰⁴ The woman's role as temptress or deceiver is ultimately founded on the figure of Eve, on the deception she practiced on Adam with the fruit of paradise. Van Eyck has included that fruit in a particularly intriguing form. On the window-sill and chest below it lie four oranges or "Adam's apples," as they were often called at the time.¹⁰⁵ The artist used the citrus fruit as the fruit of paradise before, in the Ghent altarpiece, where Eve holds it up for our inspection.¹⁰⁶ Perhaps this relation explains why the orange was used to cure the morning sickness of pregnancy; certainly in Italy in the late Middle Ages throwing "apples of paradise" was a common way to invite love.¹⁰⁷

The theme of sexual temptation may also be alluded to by the bedstead statue, if it is read as representing Saint Margaret. Margaret was often confused with Pelagia of Antioch, a notorious prostitute and dancer.¹⁰⁸ Margaret herself tamed the devil, in the form of a dragon, and thus became a sign to men of the fearful power of women.¹⁰⁹ It also seems possible that in the Arnolfini double portrait van Eyck addressed the male need for dominance through a rather clever reference to religious associations. One of the main ways Arnolfini asserts his control in the painting is through gestures, in particular the Annunciation-like gesture of his raised right hand. Through the man's blessing/greeting, the old Eve of the Temptation becomes the new Eve of the Incarnation.

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If we view van Eyck's double portrait in over-all terms, it seems inevitably both private and public, secular and sacred. It might be thought to have begun as a private, even intimate, personal image. Yet its message is also a public one. The bed is a good embodiment

¹⁰⁴See Baldass, 85. Another fifteenth-century erotic painting with such a dog is often reproduced in connection with van Eyck's lost *Women Bathing*; see for instance Dhanens, 210, fig. 139. This presumably German panel, sometimes called the *Spell of Love*, is today in the Museum der Bildenden Künste, Leipzig.

¹⁰⁵See Tolkowsky, 177.

¹⁰⁶See James Snyder, "Jan van Eyck and Adam's Apple," *Art Bulletin* 58 (1976): 511-15.

¹⁰⁷See Tolkowsky, 159-63.

¹⁰⁸See, for instance, E. de Jongh, "Pearls of Virtue and Pearls of Vice," *Simiolus* 8 (1975-76): 85.

¹⁰⁹See Jan Grauls, *Volkstaal en volksleven in het werk van Pieter Bruegel* (Antwerp and Amsterdam, 1957), esp. 6-41.

of this conflation of meaning. At one and the same time, it was the setting for physical intimacy and one's most prized and quite public possession.¹¹⁰ In the fifteenth century, social boundaries were different and in particular ways less rigid than they are in the late twentieth century. The environment and the art fashioned within it do not stress the unequivocal or single-minded. For van Eyck and his patrons, the sacred and secular are hardly mutually exclusive. It would be more accurate to say that such concepts did not exist as distinct entities. These people are not theologians; they are lay men and women who seem intent on enjoying an earthly and a heavenly existence. The play between these elements results in occasional, but deliberate, irony. Court etiquette cracks a knowing smile, if ever so slightly, when notions of sexuality and piety meet headlong.

Perhaps the still chamber which van Eyck imagined in his painting seems far removed from the complex social world I have been describing. Yet we know that the Arnolfinis sought a social status that would have disrupted the clearly defined sexual roles that were accepted by most of those in the merchant class and that were certainly more common in Giovanni Arnolfini's native Italy. The painting's representation of such social factors is subtle, and my account has certainly accentuated the panel's significance in narrating such an ongoing story. On the surface, artist and patron will cultivate an aristocratic piety and formality, but they will also indulge their sense of courtly comedy, romantic irony. There is personal drama here that seems to begin with a very formal sense of submission and concession but ends with playful deception and subtle revelation. The couple's story quickly leads us beyond what are usually considered to be the bounds of van Eyck's portrait and beyond the bounds of our traditional discourse about what is real and what symbolic in early Netherlandish art.

Minutely defined, preconceived symbolic programs cannot be documented at this time. This suggests that it is perhaps pointless to argue for or against one specific or narrow line of meaning in these images. The notion of an object having a single, well-defined meaning may be misleading here. I have tried to suggest that early Neth-

¹¹⁰See Lawrence Wright, *Warm and Snug, The History of the Bed* (London, 1962), esp. 36–61; and Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners*, trans. E. Jephcott (New York, 1978), esp. 160–68. Both authors point out that it was usual practice among the upper classes of the fifteenth century to receive guests in the room where one's bed was.

erlandish paintings like the Arnolfini double portrait might be read as stories, narratives, texts that are complex and multi-faceted, that can have multiple meanings for the various audiences for which they were created. This may seem obvious in the case of a contemporary double portrait like that in London, but it is equally true of many other paintings from the period, especially those associated with known donors, like van Eyck's van der Paele *Madonna*.

Certainly in dealing with these images we need to be very careful to define a contemporary sense of reality. References to medieval or late medieval religious practices will not completely explain the objects observed and included in these images. That is one reason, for instance, I have invoked the courtly manuscript tradition both before and after van Eyck: to help establish a context for the sense of direct observation mingled with convention intended to project certain things about a person's status or way of life. The realism of van Eyck's imagery must be evaluated with such a mingling of observation, convention, and propaganda in mind. The heraldic quality of the painting is very important, very courtly, yet it is shot through with telling and evocative details. Other things are intermixed here as well. There is in this imagery what we might call a continuity of desire among various fields of action and response (such as what we may deem religious, on the one hand, and non-religious, on the other). We should thus be wary of the kinds of compartmentalization we usually employ when faced with intricate problems of interpretation in this kind of imagery.

Many early Netherlandish paintings can and should be read, in part, as an ongoing dialogue between art and reality. We might, therefore, take more seriously the fact that the relation between art and reality may change or grow in complexity over time. What an image says about this relation may not always have been totally intentional or apparent to artist and patron. Thus another aspect of the realism of these paintings must be the way desire becomes reality.

Where is van Eyck in all of this? He tells us: he was there. Jan van Eyck is there as story teller, realizing the multivalence of any incident, any object, any detail in a *nouvelle* such as this. Some may argue that, in a painting, an orange cannot refer simultaneously to fertility, temptation, and nobility. Or even worse, that a statue of a woman with a dragon could not suggest the figures of Saints Margaret and Martha—and elements of their respective legends—simultaneously. In this case it seems that an artist with van Eyck's power of observation and synthesis must have been able to understand that,

within the context of people's lives, objects could have multiple associations. The artist had an eye for the significant detail that can reveal the complexity of these people's story. In the Arnolfini double portrait Jan van Eyck was certainly there. Craftsman, magician, and social commentator, he has left us a compelling view of the intricate, intertwined relation of sexuality, religion, and social standing in fifteenth-century northern Europe.

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