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# Why Was Jan van Eyck here?
## The Subject, Sitters, and Significance of *The Arnolfini Marriage Portrait*

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**Abstract** Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini Marriage Portrait of 1434 still poses fundamental questions. An overlooked account explained the groom's left hand holding his bride's right hand as a secular, legal morganatic marriage with a bride of lower social rank and wealth. That would explain Van Eyck's presence as witness in the mirror and through his inscription, and corresponds to the recent identification of the bride and groom as Giovanni di Arrigo Arnolfini and his previously unknown first wife Helene of unknown last name. Van Eyck's scene can be called the first modern painting, as the earliest autonomous, illusionistic representation of secular reality, provided with the earliest artist's signature of the modern type, framing his scene as perceived and represented by a particular individual. That is why Jan van Eyck was here.



**Keywords** Jan van Eyck. Signature. Arnolfini. Morganatic Marriage. Modern painting.

For Marek Wieczorek

What is the hardest of all? What you think is the easiest.
To see with your eyes what is before your eyes.
(Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Xenien* [1887] 1996, 230)

Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Marriage Portrait* of 1434 (fig. 1), a monument of world art, still poses fundamental questions. Who are the couple and what are they portrayed doing? Why did Van Eyck provide a notarial inscription in Latin, "*Johannes de Eyck fuit hic* [Jan van Eyck was here] | 1434" above the mirror that reflects him (figs. 1a-b)? The painting presents a challenge to art history, and an occasion to re-assess the history of scholarship and its methods, which need to be synthesized and brought to bear on the painting's visual particulars in order to come to a new understanding.

An earlier, overlooked account explained that, in contrast to conventional practice and images of sacramental marriages with couples joining their right hands, Van Eyck's groom takes his bride's right hand with his left (fig. 1c), because the scene depicts a secular, legal morganatic marriage with a bride of lower social rank and wealth.[1] That would also explain the need for Van Eyck's presence as legal witness instead of a priest, and the couple's location in a private bedroom rather than a church. The most recent identification of the bride and groom as Giovanni di Arrigo Arnolfini and his (previously unknown) first wife Helene of unknown last name corresponds to this account (Galoppini 2009, 203).

Yet these circumstances merely made possible a more fundamental innovation of the first modern painting. Van Eyck's scene presents the earliest autonomous, illusionistic representation of secular reality, provided with the earliest artist's signature of the modern type, framing his scene as perceived and represented by a particular individual, serving what might be called an

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**1** Schabaker 1972. Roger van der Weyden's *Seven Sacraments* of c. 1450 depicts a conventional sacramental marriage ceremony with a couple in a church chapel joining their right hands, which a priest binds together with his stole.

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Figure 1. Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Marriage Portrait (Giovanni di Arrigo Arnolfini and his wife Helene?)*. 1434. London, National Gallery. © The National Gallery, London


Figure 1a. Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Marriage Portrait (Giovanni di Arrigo Arnolfini and his wife Helene?)*, detail of Van Eyck signature and date. 1434

Figure 1b. Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Marriage Portrait (Giovanni di Arrigo Arnolfini and his wife Helene?)*, detail of the mirror. 1434

'author function', with future legal and economic ramifications, including the possibility of this explanation.[2] That is why Jan van Eyck was here.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's observation, cited as my epigraph, that the most difficult thing of all is to see with your eyes what is before your eyes captures both Van Eyck's singular achievement and our primary task as art historians. Van Eyck adapted his observations to a complex construction involving symbolism, social and legal conventions, and his unprecedented artistic innovations. We gradually articulate what we observe in his painting in a cumulative process of scholarship involving discoveries and errors, which must be tested against his painting as visual object, in a continual back and forth between image and text, art and art historical scholarship.[3]

## 1 What is Being Disguised: Religious Symbolism or Secular Art?

In his pioneering 1934 essay on Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*, Erwin Panofsky first introduced his concept of "disguised symbolism". The single burning candle in the chandelier is a marriage candle, appropriate for an oath, and an allusion to the "all-seeing wisdom of God"; the oranges on a cabinet near the window symbolize paradise; the groom's removed patens to the left evoke hallowed ground; the dog embodies (marital) faith; and the sculpture on the wood armchair at the back left represents St. Margaret, patron saint of childbirth, behind the bed in which the couple will consummate their marriage. Panofsky claimed that "as in the other works by Jan van Eyck, medieval symbolism and modern real-

**2** Foucault 1998, first coined the term "author function" as part of a broader critique, including his programmatic declaration borrowed from Samuel Beckett: "What does it matter who is speaking?" Leaving aside the value of this critique, we can recognize positive dimensions of the author function as inaugurated by Van Eyck, in which case it matters very much who is speaking, writing, or painting, or who was here and why. Van Eyck's inaugural gesture provides the possibility of recognizing his paintings, his oeuvre, and development, also in relation to other painters and his tradition, all of which constitute essential components of the meaning of his *Arnolfini Portrait*.

**3** Goethe's emphasis on observation in his *Xenien*, which he wrote together with his collaborator the poet and playwright Friedrich Schiller, was also the subject of their intense discussion during their first meeting that continued throughout their decade-long dialogue. Goethe drew an image of what he called the "primal plant" [*Urpflanz*], to which Schiller replied: "that is an idea!" Cf. Safranski 2017, 335. Goethe's observations were necessarily guided by ideas, yet his ideas were based on his observation of actual plants. Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* is the pictorial equivalent of Goethe's *Urpflanz*, the primal example of modern painting. We all bring ideas (prejudices, desires) to bear on the work, above all through existing scholarly texts, yet we must continually revise these ideas in observing Van Eyck's painting.

ism are so perfectly reconciled that the former has become inherent in the latter".[4] The bride holds up folds of her dress over her stomach, often seen as indicating her pregnancy, or conversely as an allusion to her fertility, the primary female attribute and purpose of marriage, which was not in contradiction with a virginal state, as with the Virgin Mary and other saints such as Margaret.[5] In his 1953 book *Early Netherlandish Painting*, Panofsky pointed to the painted roundels around the mirror with scenes from Christ's Passion, descent into Hell, and Resurrection, and the amber beads and wire brush on either side as tools of prayer and work.[6]

More recent scholars have objected that the symbols were not 'disguised' so much as social conventions, or quibbled about Panofsky's specific interpretations.[7] The former objection is contradicted by similar symbolism in Van Eyck's paintings of sacred figures, whereas Panofsky's particular readings of symbolic objects mostly hold up, with the significant exception of the groom's left hand, discussed below.[8]

Meyer Schapiro offered a much earlier and more trenchant critique of Panofsky's approach, largely overlooked by later commentators, in a 1945 essay on Robert Campin's *Mérode Altarpiece* (fig. 2) (1945, 181-7). As Schapiro observed, the naturalistic depictions of secular reality pioneered by Campin and Van Eyck after him "can hardly be credited to a religious purpose". Rather, "the enlarged scope of the artist's individual vision makes this art increasingly a vehicle of personal life and hence of subconscious demands". According to Schapiro, Campin's symbolism encompasses both theological concepts and anxieties related to repressed sexual desires in implicit critique of Church theology. Most obviously, the mousetrap fashioned by Joseph in the right panel makes allusion to Christ as "the devil's mousetrap" and at the same time to unclean sexual feelings, and by extension Church teachings about marriage and chastity anticipating the outbreak of the Reformation:

> The new art thus appears as a latent battlefield… Jan van Eyck's portrait of Arnolfini and his wife as a marriage document… is a revealing example of this combat… [evident in] the reflection of the figures (including the painter) in a mirror… encircled by tiny scenes of the life of Christ… In accepting the realistic vision of nature, religious art runs the risk of receding to a marginal position, of becoming in turn the

**4** Panofsky 1934, 126-7. Cf. also 1953, 203: "The principle of disguised symbolism could abolish the borderline between 'portraiture' and 'narrative,' between 'profane' and 'sacred' art".

**5** The bride has often been identified as pregnant, from the earliest commentaries up to Waldemar Januszczak's BBC TV program where he proposed to re-title the painting *The Arnolfini Pregnancy*. This conclusion implies a "shot-gun wedding", which even if it were the case, Van Eyck would presumably have presented as an allusion to fertility for reasons of decorum. Dhanens 1980, 199, first proposed that the bride's gesture was an allusion to fertility and compared the virgin St. Catherine in Van Eyck's *Dresden Triptych*, depicted in a similar fashion. *Eve* in Van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece* appears to be pregnant, but she is naked and did not marry *Adam* in a formal ceremony (figs. 9c-d).

**6** Panofsky 1953, 203. Infared reflectograms reveal that Van Eyck changed the mirror from an originally larger octagonal shape to a smaller crenelated one. Cf. Billinge 2000, 91, 93. Koster 2003, 12-3, convincingly proposed that the change served to accommodate two further roundels with Christ's descent into Hell and Resurrection alongside eight roundels of his passion, completing the cycle of redemption.

**7** Bedaux 1986, 12-16; Seidel 1989; Harbison 1990, 249-91; Carroll 1993; Hall 1994, 104-17, and Campbell 1998, 174-211. Bedaux in particular claimed that Van Eyck would not have disguised symbolic meanings from his contemporaries, whereas naturalistic objects make it impossible to know if these are symbols (21, 25), contradictory objections. Rather, Panofsky, proposed that "these significant attributes are not emphasized as what they actually are, but are *disguised*, so to speak, as ordinary pieces of furniture" (1934, 126).

**8** Panofsky noted that "the Arnolfini portrait is entirely analogous to Jan van Eyck's religious paintings, such as the marvelous Virgin of Lucca where many a symbol… is 'disguised' in a similar way" (1934, 127). The candle in Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* logically signals an oath in relation to the groom's raised right hand, and by extension marriage, yet hardly represents God's "all-seeing wisdom" any more than the other objects, particularly the mirror. The oranges, imported from Southern Europe, like the native Flemish cherry tree glimpsed outside the window, were surely meant to evoke paradise. The footwear has been self-consciously put aside, although a distinction could be made between the groom's sandals at the left, worn outdoors, and the bride's before the bench at the back, worn indoors. Held 1982, 46, proposed that the dog, a distant ancestor of the Brussels Griffon, here and in Van Eyck's lost *Naked Woman Bathing* (fig. 3), "may have been a symbolic feature but also at the same time [the bride's] favorite pet". The painted roundels of Christ around the mirror and the sculpture of St. Margaret on the chair are themselves works of art, encompassing symbolism and naturalism, like Van Eyck's painting. Partly at stake is the distinction invoked in Panofsky (1955, 31-2), between iconography [writing with images] as identifying individual symbols and iconology [the science of images] involving an understanding of an artist's individual approach, which in this case includes his development, relation to other artists, and broader tradition, discussed below.

Figure 2. Robert Campin, *Mérode Altarpiece*. c. 1426. New York, Cloisters. © The Cloisters Collection, 1956

> border element that secular reality had been [in the margins of manuscript painting].[9]

Panofsky barely mentioned the mirror in his 1934 essay, yet in his 1953 book, eight years after Schapiro's critique, he identified the mirror as a symbol of the Virgin (1953, 203). Subsequent scholars followed his lead in emphasizing the mirror's religious symbolism (Baldwin 1984, 57-75; Bedaux 1986, 14, 19). They sought to 'de-marginalize' the tiny scenes of Christ, to assert the religious character and purpose of Van Eyck's painting, yet his composition is primarily remarkable for its revolutionary representation of secular reality, representing what he saw with his eyes before his eyes, including diverse qualities and textures of different fabrics, skin, fur, wood, brass, and glass. The mirror at the center astoundingly condenses his composition through its miniaturist scale and exacting detail.[10] The

**9** Schapiro 1945, 185-7. Bedaux (1986, 25) cited Schapiro's essay, but only mentioned his invocation of Campin's theological symbolism, not his critique of the Church theology. Seidel (1989, 55) dedicated her essay to Schapiro, whose critique of capitalism she shared, yet she did not mention Schapiro's critique of Panofsky's art historical method. The debate between Schapiro and Panofsky reflected the divergent political, social, and religious outlooks of Campin and Van Eyck. As reviewed by Panofsky (1953, 154-5), Campin participated in bourgeois revolts against the aristocratic authorities in his town of Tournai, and was found guilty of adultery with his young mistress Leurence Polette (presumably the beautiful young woman in the companion portrait for Campin's self-portrait as *Man in a Red Turban*, both in the London National Gallery). He was punished with enforced pilgrimages, although his sentences were commuted through the intervention of a noble female patron. His rebellious attitudes corresponded to his implicit critique of Church theology. Conversely, Van Eyck was the personal attaché to the Duke of Burgundy, the most powerful monarch in Europe, and his paintings embody the ideology of the Church and nobility. The two artists' complimentary outlooks parallel those of Schapiro and Panofsky. Schapiro, the American-born, atheist son of Russian Jewish immigrants, and the first professor of art history in America at Columbia University, wrote essays for socialist and communist journals. Panofsky, an immigrant of Jewish descent from Nazi Germany, who assumed the leading position among American art historians at the Institute for Advanced Study Princeton, longed to convert to Catholicism at the end of his life.

**10** Campbell (1998, 191) rejected both symbolic associations and emphasis on Van Eyck's naturalism as naïve. He claimed that "the absence of the fireplace is disturbing; the chandelier cannot fit into the space it seems to occupy; the bed looks too short; and the mirror may be impossibly large and is unlikely to be a picture of a real mirror… Whatever happened, it is clear that Arnolfini and his wife did not inhabit a room exactly like the one depicted and they did not own objects precisely like all those that furnish the room". The image "is so contrived, is so much the creation of his imagination that 'only' Jan van Eyck was here". One could argue precisely the contrary. There is no reason why the couple could not have inhabited this room or owned these furnishings, notwithstanding Van Eyck's minor adjustments to the mirror and addition of the chandelier. The fireplace could have been located at either side of the front of the room, more likely at the foot of the bed,

earliest extant commentary on Van Eyck from 1458, referring to a lost painting, significantly claimed that "nothing is more wonderful in this work than the mirror painted in the picture, in which you see whatever is represented as in a real mirror" (Baxandall 1964, 102).

Another important and often neglected comparison involves Van Eyck's lost painting of a *Naked Woman Bathing*, reflected in a contemporary copy (fig. 3) and a 1628 scene of a Flemish art collection.[11] The lost panel had the same size and dimensions as his *Arnolfini Portrait* and showed what may have been intended as the same room, with a spherical mirror seen from the side at the window to the left, without the framing roundels, above a similar cabinet, and sandals below, with a dog in the foreground. Julius Held proposed that this scene was a companion piece and portrayed the naked bride performing her ritual marriage bath, anticipating by four centuries Francisco Goya's *Clothed Maja* and *Nude Maja*.[12]

The female attendant held a glass carafe, presumably carrying water for ritual ablution, corresponding to the basin on the cabinet and the small towel the bride held before her genitals. Campin and Van Eyck included similar motifs in their annunciation scenes as symbols of the Virgin's purity or liturgical ritual (figs. 2, 9a), yet these objects also make sense in a naturalistic domestic interior. Held identified the female attendant as Van Eyck's wife Margaret on the basis of her close resemblance to his later portrait of her (fig. 4), in which she wears the same middle-class costume and matronly 'horned' hairstyle of a married woman.[13] The bride in Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* likewise wears this hairstyle as newly married woman, in contrast to her naked incarnation as fiancée with unbound hair, who is also clearly not (yet) pregnant.[14]

These likely companion pieces should be taken into account in considering whether Van Eyck employed "modern realism" to disguise "medieval symbolism," as Panofsky claimed, or the other way around, as proposed by Schapiro.[15]

which is not too short by standards of the time. No painter represents the surrounding world with absolute accuracy, yet there is no reason to doubt that anything in Van Eyck's scene was not based on what he observed. Viewers in his time also presumably felt that "they were there", just as we do now.

**11** Friedländer 1967, 67-8. The copy in Harvard's Fogg museum illustrated here presents a thinner figure likely closer to Van Eyck's original than the fleshier figure in the seventeenth-century depiction.

**12** Held (1982, 35-64), proposed that both scenes depicted the same room and "the chandelier... was introduced into the wedding scene to allow for the display of the wedding candle—a feature which was obviously not needed, nor indeed proper, in the rendering of the wedding bath". There are other minor differences: the mirror is in a different location and without a frame or roundels, the bench at the back is gone and the wood armchair moved to the left, the bed drapery is a different color, and there is no Oriental rug. A more intriguing question that the copies cannot answer is whether the mirror reflected Van Eyck as witness to this most private scene; that would explain its displacement to the side, where it might have reflected Van Eyck at the mirror's edge in unrecognizably distorted, anamorphic form. Schabacker and Jones (1974-6) objected to Held's interpretation that marriage rituals were always public, yet their evidence is scant and their assertion counter-intuitive. Their proposed alternative that Van Eyck's scene showed the Old Testament heroine Judith before she kills Holofernes is less convincing, since none of her attributes or other elements in that story are included, and the attendant is dressed in contemporary Flemish clothing, leaving aside the parallels with Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*. Campbell (1998, 201), claimed that "the resemblances were probably coincidental" and did not include Held's essay in his bibliography.

**13** Held 1982, 50. The sculpture of St. Margaret in Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* also recalls his wife's name, located near his signature and reflection in the mirror.

**14** The two scenes thus presented complimentary private and public views, as well as implicitly before and after marriage, although the relation can be inverted insofar as the groom on his wedding night will privately see his bride once more naked with her hair unbound. Carroll (1993, 101) proposed that both women are identified by the headdress as married. The similar headdress could help explain the assumption of some early scholars that the couple were Van Eyck and his wife, including Weale, Brockwell (1912, 146) and Brockwell (1952). This theory continues to hold sway in France. See Bertrand 2006; Postel 2016. However, Panofsky (1953, 179) noted that Van Eyck and his wife married in 1433, and had a child who was baptized before June 30, 1434, for whom Philip the Good acted as godfather by proxy. Margaret therefore could have been pregnant while serving as Elizabeth's attendant as depicted in Van Eyck's lost Naked Woman Bathing; the attendant in the copies has a distended stomach (fig. 3), like many of his female figures. The painting would therefore date from before June 1434. Campbell reasonably proposed that "The cherries visible through the open window indicate the season is high summer" (1998, 191) in Van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait, which could therefore be dated ca. July-August 1434.

**15** Schapiro observed that "at the time of the Mérode panel appear also the first secular paintings of the naked female body, a clear sign of the new place of art in the contending, affective life of the individual" (1945, 187). Panofsky asked whether Van Eyck's painting "anticipates the modern principle of '*l'art pour l'art*', so to speak, or is still rooted to some extent in the medieval tendency of investing visible objects with an allegorical or symbolical meaning" (1934, 126). A plausible answer would be a transition from religious symbolism to secular art.

Figure 3. Copy after Van Eyck?, *Naked Woman Bathing (Giovanni di Arrigo Arnolfini's fiancée Helene and Van Eyck's wife Margaret?).* c. 1440. Cambridge, Fogg Art Museum. © President and Fellows of Harvard College

Figure 4. Van Eyck, *Portrait of Van Eyck's wife Margaret*. 1439. Bruges, Groenige museum. © Groeninge Museum

## 2 A Morganatic, left-handed Marriage

Panofsky identified Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* as a "pictorial marriage certificate" because "Jan van Eyck was here" was written in the notarial script used for legal documents and had "the same importance and implied the same legal consequences as an 'affidavit' deposed by a witness at a modern registrar's office". Yet he acknowledged that before the Council of Trent of 1545 witnesses were not required for sacramental Christian marriage, which also normally took place in Church.[16] Van Eyck's sitters undoubtedly celebrated their marriage publicly in Church, whereas his painting appears to record a prior, private, legal (economic) event. Panofsky further recognized that the groom holds his bride's right hand with his left hand, "contrary to ritual and contrary, also to all other representations of a marriage ceremony". Yet he explained the substitution as due to "compositional considerations", which is at odds with Van Eyck's scrupulous details and Panofsky's otherwise scrupulous arguments.[17]

**16** Panofsky 1934, 123-4; 1953, 203. Schabaker (1972, 383) pointed out that William of Bavaria in 1410 commanded that all marriages be conducted "publicly [and] in accordance with the commands and laws of the Holy Church", and Philip the Good in 1434, the year of Van Eyck's painting, threatened to bar from ecclesiastical blessing all marriages between minors without their guardians' consent, so that "the appearance of the couple at Mass or before the church portal was therefore tantamount to a public declaration".

**17** Panofsky 1934, 123-4. To adopt his own terminology (1955, 27) he mistook as a "primary, natural" motif what is in fact a "secondary conventional" symbolic one. Van Vaernewyck 1569, fol. 107*v*, and repeating him, van Mander [1604] 1936,

In 1972 Peter Schabacker explained the groom's use of his left hand as appropriate for a morganatic marriage between a man of high status or wealth and a commoner, a Germanic tradition in which the bride and her children were precluded from inheriting the groom's title or properties.[18] The term 'morganatic' derives from the traditional 'morning-gift' [*Morgengabe*] of money or properties given to the wife the following morning as a means of support in the event of her husband's death. By the fifteenth century, this secular custom was formulated as a legal measure that required a witness. That would explain the need for Van Eyck's reflection in the mirror and notarial signature (figs. 1a-b), and why the couple are located in a bedroom rather than a church. What Panofsky and Schapiro, from contrasting perspectives, called a "pictorial marriage certificate" and a "marriage document", corresponds to an extraordinarily vivid visual equivalent of a written legal document.[19] Schabacker proposed that Van Eyck served as "chosen guardian", giving away the bride in place of her father – complementing the maternal role of the female attendant in Van Eyck's *Naked Woman Bathing* who Held identified as the artist's wife (fig. 3) – whereas the second witness reflected in the mirror served as the 'orator' or prompter.[20] Yet Schabacker did not discuss the mirror in any specifics.

Van Eyck was presumably the man in a red robe and matching headdress behind, standing in the threshold at the back of the room (fig. 1b), across from the scene he witnessed and depicted. His costume corresponds to his presumed self-portrait, *Man with a Red Turban* of the previous year, which has been identified as the earliest autonomous painted self-portrait, and his subsequent self-portraits in a red headdress and robe reflected in St. George's armor in his *Van der Paele Madonna* and in a red turban on the mid-ground terrace of his *Rolin Madonna*.[21] The orator would therefore be the man in front of Van Eyck in a blue robe and matching *chaperon* headdress with a long *cornette*, who mediates between the artist as

13, neither of whom had seen Van Eyck's painting, both mistakenly reported that the couple joined their right hands, as was normal practice. Sandler 1984 illustrated an image in which the bride's left hand touches the groom's right, but their hands are not clasped and the image does not show a marriage ceremony. Bedaux (1986, 9-10, figs. 3-5) cited three images in which the groom ostensibly takes the bride's hand with his left, but in two of these he does not actually touch her hand, and none of them depict a marriage ceremony. Hall (1994, 77, 79, figs. 32, 33) repeated two of these examples, without citing Bedaux. Eörsi (1996, 113) identified the way the groom holds his bride's open palm in his own as an *impalmamento* signifying an engagement, or promise of marriage, yet that would not account for Van Eyck's role as witness or why the groom uses his left palm and raises his right hand in what appears to be an oath. There is only one unambiguous image from this period of a groom using his left hand, which was a direct response to Van Eyck's precedent: Christ marrying Eve in the *Eden* panel of Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (figs. 10, 10a), addressed below.

**18** Schabaker 1972, 375-89. Van Vaernewyck (1569), followed by Van Mander (1936, 13), who had not seen the painting, both reported that the couple were married by a personification of "Faith" [*Fides*]. Panofsky (1953, 117-8, 123-4) explained this error insofar as Vaernewyck misunderstood from earlier reports the Latin phrase *per Fides* [by faith], a legal term for a contract. The earliest recorded commentators, or their sources, thus appear to have understood the secular, legal nature of Van Eyck's scene, which is also in keeping with Panofsky's invocation of "legal consequences". Yet as reported by Holly (1984, 164), when he heard Schabacker's oral presentation of his explanation, Panofsky was horrified: "I was dumbfounded, my hair stood up, and my voice stuck to my mouth". Panofsky died in 1968, before Schabacker published his essay. Bedaux observed that an "awkward consequence of [Schabacker's] theory... was that it did not tie in with the traditional identification of the figures" (1986, 8-9). Resistance to Schabacker's explanation thus partly involved investment in Panofsky's authority or that of scholarly tradition. Conversely, Campbell credited Hall with "demolishing Panofsky's and Schabacker's arguments" (1989, 199). However, Hall simply asserted that "all the attempts to explain the anomaly [of the groom's use of his left hand] are unsatisfactory", (1994, 46) without addressing Schabacker's essay. As exceptions, Dhanens affirmed Schabacker's explanation as correct (1980, 199), followed by Binstock 2009, 35.

**19** Schabaker 1972, 379, proposed that such a record could serve to protect the bride "from the possibility of having the marriage declared a misalliance on the grounds of unequal birth (*disparagium*), while it protected the groom, or more exactly his family and heirs, from the possibility of a suit against his estate by his window and her family as well as by his own children". Seidel compared the mirror below Van Eyck's signature to notarial seals at the bottom of written legal documents (1989, 69).

**20** Schabaker 1972, 382. Panofsky, noted in the reflection "another gentleman who may be interpreted as a second witness" (1953, 203).

**21** Bauch identified Van Eyck's *Man with a Red Turban* of 1433 as the earliest autonomous painted self-portrait (1967, 96). A possible unrecognized prior precedent and source for Van Eyck is Campin's *Man with a Red Turban* in the National Gallery, London, ca. 1431. Carter 1954 first recognized Van Eyck's reflection in St. George's armor.

witness and the couple getting married.[22] The man in blue similarly corresponds to the man behind Van Eyck's self-portrait in the reflection in the armor of his *Van der Paele Madonna* and the man in a blue turban standing beside Van Eyck on the mid-ground terrace in his *Rolin Madonna*.[23] The unidentified sitter in Van Eyck's *Tymotheos Portrait* from 1432 (fig. 5) wears a similar *chaperon*, colored dark blue-green instead of blue, and was possibly the same man. This portrait significantly includes a dated inscription in the language of notaries on a simulated stone parapet.[24] Van Eyck, who served on several occasions as a diplomat for his employer the Duke of Burgundy Philip the Good, was apparently already versed in legal vocabulary (like Shakespeare), and thus well prepared to serve as witness for his *Arnolfini Portrait*.

The carving of a demon in place of the conventional lions on the bench finial just above the groom's left 'sinister' hand (fig. 1c) may have served a apotropaic function, warding off evil.[25] Early reports also connected Van Eyck's painting with lines from Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* – "See that you promise; what harm is there in promises; in promises anyone can be rich" – which may


Figure 5. Van Eyck, *Tymotheos Portrait (Hubert, sculptor of The Ghent Altarpiece?)*.1432. London, National Gallery. © The National Gallery, London

Figure 1c. Groom's left hand holding bride's right hand with demon carving on bench finial behind. Detail of Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Marriage Portrait (Giovanni di Arrigo Arnolfini and his wife Helene?)*. 1434

**22** Campbell was to my knowledge the first and only previous scholar to address the mirror in specifics, yet came to different conclusions on every point: "The man in front... appears to be raising his left arm [...]. It seems that he is descending the first of two(?) stairs which separate the corridor from the reception room and that he is just arrived in the doorway; he and the principal subject seem to be exchanging greetings... The implication is that Jan van Eyck is the foremost of the two men seen in the mirror; the man behind him is perhaps a servant, for Jan, as *varlet de chambre* to the Duke, was entitled, at least when he was in court, to have his own *varlet*" (1998, 189). Van Eyck was not at court here, unlikely accompanied by his own *varlet*, would not have introduced his *varlet* to the Arnolfinis, and was more likely the man in a red headdress behind. His companion in blue descends *three* steps located on the *near* side of the door into the *bedroom*, mediating between Van Eyck standing in the threshold and the couple before them. He is not gesticulating; rather, the diagonal blue arm before him is the bride's right arm emerging from her green robe, her right hand joined with her husband's left hand.

**23** Farmer 1968 first recognized the second man behind in the reflection in Van Eyck's *Van de Paele Madonna*.

**24** The inscription includes the notarial formula for concluding legal deeds "Actu[m] an[n]o d[omi]ni", as first noted by Wood 1978, 650-4.

**25** The demon wears a fool's cap, has a grimacing human face, a lion's ears, and a goat's hoofs. Bedaux 1986, 19, and Koster 2003, 12, interpreted the demon as a sign of un-chastity and an indication that the bride is dead, respectively.

have decorated the original frame or shutters.[26] The lines perhaps similarly offered a playfully ironic (apotropaic) reference to the morning-gift as a promise of riches. Van Eyck's depiction of a morganatic marriage supports Schapiro's view of the primarily secular rather than religious character of the scene.

## 3 The sitters: Giovanni di Arrigo Arnolfini and his first wife Helene?

The conventional title of Van Eyck's painting is based on the earliest inventory records referring to someone "called… Hernoul le Fin" (1516) and a "personage named Arnoul Fin" (1523-4), which scholars associated with the Arnolfini, a family of Italian merchants from Lucca living in Bruges, sometimes spelled "Arnoulphin" in contemporary documents.[27] In 1857, the groom, wearing what has been described as traditional Italian marriage garb of fur-lined purple cloak, together with a Bruges wide-brimmed beaver-fur hat, was identified as Giovanni di Arrigo Arnolfini with his bride Giovanna Cenami.[28] The same man was identified in a late Van Eyck portrait (figs. 1d, 6), dressed more simply with a read headdress. Born between 1400-3, Giovanni di Arrigo, who already became fabulously wealthy as a young man through his extensive dealings with Van Eyck's employer Duke Philip the Good, would have been between 31-4 years old at the time of Van Eyck's painting.[29] Schabacker questioned these traditional identifications because Cenami's family was wealthy and powerful, in contradiction with a morganatic marriage.[30] In 1997 Jacques Paviot discovered that Giovanni di Arrigo married Giovanna Cenami on November 11, 1447, six years after Van Eyck's death.[31]

In 2009 Laura Galoppini proposed to return to the traditional identification of the groom, with a different bride.[32] The account books of

**26** Ov., *Ars Am.*, book 1, part XII, 443-4. Dhanens (1980, 197), Bedaux (1986, 14) and Koster (2003, 4) all thought the lines from Ovid were likely part of the original painting in its frame. Campbell noted a statement in a 1700 inventory that "the verses declare how [the couple] are deceiving each other" (1998, 176) and concluded: "as it appears impossible to see the painting as a depiction of the deceitful man making empty promises… there is no need to take seriously the idea that the lines from Ovid were original" (198). Rather, the assumption of the 1700 inventory that the groom is deceitful should not be taken seriously.

**27** "*qu'on l'appelle*…" "*personnage nommé*…" The inventories are cited in Campbell 1998, 174, 204, notes 3-4. Van Eyck's *Lucca Madonna* from ca. 1435, now housed in Frankfurt, presumably found its way to Lucca in the hands of the Arnolfini family.

**28** Crowe, Cavalcaselle 1857, 100. Weale, Brockwell (1912, 116) and Bedaux (1986, 13) noted the groom's traditional marriage garb. Schabacker (1972, 396, note 54) noted that beaver-fur hats were a Bruges specialty.

**29** Campbell 1998, 195; Galoppini 2009, 183-5, both cited a 1418 document that indicates Giovanni di Arrigo was born between 1400-1. Yet Galoppini also concluded that Giovanni di Arrigo was of majority (eighteen or above) by the time of a major business deal in 1421 (2009, 190), which would indicate he was born between 1400-3.

**30** Schabacker did not know of a morganatic marriage among members of the Arnolfini family, and instead proposed that the inventories named Arnolfini as the person who sold the painting to its first recorded owner Don Diego de Guevara (1972, 388-9). Dhanens (1980, 199) reported that documents referring to Giovanni di Arrigo's youngest brother Michele's wife Elizabeth did not mention her family name, and therefore identified them as Van Eyck's sitters in keeping with Schabacker's explanation. However, Galoppini (2009, 184, 186, 202) demonstrated that Michele married Elisabetta Miliani, a daughter of a prominent and wealthy Tuscan merchant family in Bruges (see Appendix A).

**31** Paviot 1997, 21. Campbell (1998, 197-8) accordingly proposed instead that the groom was Giovanni di Arrigo's cousin Giovanni di Nicolao. He married the thirteen-year-old Costanza Trenta in 1426, yet she died, perhaps "shortly after her marriage",and certainly before February 26, 1433 when her mother mentioned that she was dead. Campbell acknowledged that "no proof has yet been found that Giovanni di Nicolao married a second wife, though it seems likely that he did", and concluded that he was "the most likely candidate" for the groom, depicted with "his putative second wife". Koster (2003, 9, 11) rejected Campbell's assertion that Giovanni di Nicolao had an undocumented second wife, and proposed instead that Van Eyck's painting depicted him together with a memorial portrait of the late Costanza, who would have lived until the age of twenty in early 1433. Koster cited tombs as pictorial models for Van Eyck, and the candle, the dog, the mirror roundels, most recently Koerner 2016, 162, the demon carving, and the groom's costume as references to Costanza's death. Koster's account has been widely adopted, yet presents fundamental problems. The couple are depicted in a marriage ceremony eight years after their actual marriage; Van Eyck attested through his reflection in the mirror and his signature that he was present in 1434, when Costanza was no longer alive; his role as witness, the groom's left hand, and the bedroom setting indicate a morganatic marriage, whereas Costanza's family was wealthy and powerful; the references to the bride's potential pregnancy and the naked companion portrait would have been grossly inappropriate if she were already dead.

**32** Galoppini (2009, 181-206) explained that Campbell was mistaken in his assumption that Giovanni di Nicolao was the elder of the two cousins, active in Bruges commerce in the early 1420's, and forced to withdraw from business because of failures in the 1440's. Rather, Giovanni di Nicolao, likely born between 1408-10, was younger than his cousin and therefore called 'Giannino' [little Giovanni] or *le jeune* [the younger]. Not yet independent of his father in the early 1420's, he would

Figure 6. Van Eyck, *Portrait of a Man (Giovanni di Arrigo Arnolfini?)*. c. 1438. Berlin, Gemäldegalerie

Figure 1d. Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Marriage Portrait (Giovanni di Arrigo Arnolfini and his wife Helene?)*, detail of Giovanni di Arrigo Arnolfini's head? (reversed). 1434

the church of St. James in Bruges from the period 1443-67 include a payment for the funeral of "*Helene te Jan Arnulphiins*" [Helen at Jan Arnolfini's].[33] Galoppini hypothesized that Helene was Giovanni [i.e. Jan] di Arrigo's first wife, depicted in Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*, who presumably died, in keeping with the high mortality rate of young persons at this time, especially women, particularly in child birth, sometime between 1443 and 1447, when Giovanni di Arrigo married Giovanna Cenami.[34] In contrast to the other known Arnolfini wives who came from prominent Italian merchant families, Helene's last name was not mentioned (if she had one), so she could have been a native (Flemish) commoner, hence the need for a morganatic marriage.[35]

not have had access to business capital, whereas his promise in 1442 not to engage in business was a practical matter of status and citizenship. See also Jolivet 2009, 246-7.

**33** Strohm 1985, 235, note 61, identified Helene as Giovanni di Nicolao Arnolphini's second wife and gave the date of the document as 1449-50. Campbell proposed instead that she "was perhaps a member of the family or household of Giovanni di Arrigo Arnolfini, who lived in the parish of St. James" (1998, 208 note 179) and reported the document's date as "18 May 1449". Galoppini identified the document as from a volume from 1443-67 (2009, 203 note 103). The identification of the sitters, which was long presumed certain and then thrown into doubt, may well prove elusive, yet Galoppini's is the only plausible one among those currently proposed (see Appendix A).

**34** Galoppini 2009, 203. Campbell (1998, 197) and Koster (2003, 11) assumed that Costanza Trenta died in childbirth. A mother's possible death in childbirth explains the dragon on which St. Margaret traditionally stands, also in Van Eyck's composition. After Helene died, Giovanni di Arrigo could have sold the painting to its first recorded owner De Guevara; the two men were in contact, as noted by Campbell (198, 210 note 255).

**35** If, as Schabacker proposed, Van Eyck served as "chosen guardian" (1972) in place of the lowly bride's father, the latter could have been dead, or unsuited to this milieu. Although commentators sometimes refer to "Margaret van Eyck", we don't know her last name either (if she had one); wives did not yet take their husbands' last names at this time.

Early commentators characterized the bride as 'Flemish' or 'German', and the groom as 'Mediterranean'.[36] She has delicate features, fair hair, and striking pale skin – which were more evident in Van Eyck's lost *Naked Woman Bathing* (fig. 3) – qualities more common among, if not limited to, Northern European women. Italian merchants living abroad often married locals (Galoppini 2009, 372). Yet this case involved a commoner. As it turns out, even after his (second) marriage to Giovanna Cenami in 1447, Giovanni di Arrigo fathered two illegitimate daughters and carried on an affair in 1458 with a Christina van der Wijck ['Christina from the neighborhood'], who "was later to accuse him of having raped her, to whom he promised mansions in Bruges and Brussels and to whom he gave impressive quantities of jewelry and furniture" (Campbell 1998, 195). He was apparently attracted to Flemish women of common background and prepared to go to great lengths and expense to satisfy his desires. His contract of a morganatic marriage to Helene, the equivalent of what is now called a 'pre-nup.', was exceptional, perhaps occasioned by a pregnancy, or even love – which neither written nor pictorial documents can prove or disprove in this case – so we must instead explain the written and pictorial documents that we have.[37]

## 4 Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* as the First Modern Painting

It makes sense that new secular, legal and economic possibilities, in marriage and art, would coincide in this way. As with Van Eyck's lost *Naked Woman Bathing* as record of a ritual marriage bath, his *Arnolfini Portrait* as visual document of a legal morganatic marriage was surely in large part an excuse for what is above all an astounding work of art. Van Eyck's pioneering innovations in naturalistic description, self-portraiture, and inscriptions constitute the precondition of, and most likely served as the occasion for, his role as legal witness reflected in the mirror and marked by his signature. These in turn made possible the first (extant) modern painting (since his *Naked Woman Bathing* is lost), along with related concepts of authorship, masterpiece, and genius, all of which are articulated belatedly through our written discourse.

Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* has long been characterized as a 'genre piece', a self-contained representation of secular reality.[38] The term 'genre painting' was first coined in eighteenth-century France to refer to the diverse categories [*genres*] of seventeenth-century Dutch portraiture, still life, interiors, and landscape. From G. W. F. Hegel onward, genre has usually been characterized as scenes of 'low' everyday content made 'high' through the artist's subjective formal rendering (Hegel [1835] 1975, 168-9). Genre can also be identified as modern art, which Émile Zola succinctly defined as "a corner of nature viewed through a particular temperament" [1866] (1923, 25), a good working definition of Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*.

Earlier Italian painters including Duccio and Giotto had affixed their names as makers to their paintings, a tradition reaching back to the

**36** Schabacker (1972, 384), Campbell (1998, 176) Warburg [1902] (1999, 299 note 11), also noted that Giovanni di Arrigo "according to Crollalanza, *Dizionario storico-blasonico*, was of German descent", which might help explain his first choice of bride and investment in the Germanic tradition of morganatic marriage. Wedekind (2007, 325-46) took issue with previous attempts to identify the sitters' ethnicities.

**37** Given their morganatic marriage, we should not expect any record of surviving offspring, and there may have been none. Galoppini (written communication) does not believe that a man as wealthy and powerful as Giovanni di Arrigo could have married a commoner. Leaving aside the evidence of his predilections, the art historian must try to account for the visual evidence of the painting, which does not appear to lend itself to any other explanation. Seidel (1989, 56, 63, 68, 85), claimed that interpretations of Van Eyck's painting are simply "stories we tell", that "it is unclear where the scholar's story stops and the painter's begins [...or] what is knowable about the Arnolfinis and what is merely imaginable about their lives". She accordingly sought to over-turn the patriarchal precedent of Panofsky's account as "business as usual" by focusing on the bride as "the absent object of her family's trade" and "the pawn in men's games". Yet explanations of Van Eyck's painting are not arbitrary stories; we choose among those that most convincingly address the evidence. Business as usual can also take the form of routine procedures or conventional consensus in scholarship, whereas ideological critique or politics 'begin at home', with art historical method. In trying to resolve this case, and re-examining our assumptions, we may discover the opposite of business as usual, including a different bride, from another family, and other reasons for a marriage, which does not mean she was any less of a pawn in someone's game.

**38** Friedländer, claimed the composition was "altogether unique... The 15th century records no full-figure portrait in the Netherlands, let alone two in a single space" (1967, 40-1), although he forgot about Van Eyck's lost *Naked Woman Bathing* (fig. 3). Earlier portraits, set against plain backgrounds and artificially framed, do not show an autonomous reality so much as individuals. See Bauch 1967, 97 ff.

Ancient Greek sculptor Phidias who is said to have included a tiny 'cameo' self-portrait on Athena's shield in the Parthenon.[39] Van Eyck also adapted the radical naturalism of Giotto's Renaissance successors such as Masaccio, whose (unsigned) *Trinity* and Brancacci chapel frescoes Van Eyck apparently saw on a secret mission for his employer Philip the Good.[40] Van Eyck's refined oil painting technique and observation and detailed representation of his immediate surroundings further elaborated on Campin's pioneering innovations (fig. 2), contributing to Van Eyck's breakthrough to modern painting in his *Arnolfini Portrait*.

Van Eyck's inscription is comparable to texts on walls in images from his period, yet would not be appropriate on the walls of his sitters' bedroom.[41] Rather, his innovative oil painting technique allowed for his gossamer calligraphic signature to be placed on the surface of, as if hovering within, an illusionistic perspectival 'picture window' onto a naturalistic interior space. As Martin Robertson first observed, *fuit hic* (or rather, *Hic fuit*) was a common graffito of visitors to Giotto's Arena chapel in Padua, which Van Eyck had likely seen, a rudimentary formula – "John was here" – that he lends superlative form in what is perhaps the most beautiful signature in the history of art (1934). *Fuit hic* in the 'preterite' tense furthermore specifically means 'has been here' in a continuing sense, which Van Eyck could have meant as "once was and remains here" through the ongoing testimony of his painting, also a possible reason the date does not specify a day, the marriage lasting in theory for eternity.[42]

Elaborating on his earlier self-referential legal and literary inscriptions on framing devices and simulated frames as if three-dimensional, material objects within the viewer's space (fig. 5), Van Eyck transferred his signature to the surface of the picture as precious object, no longer the medieval sacral object, but rather a modern work of art. His graphic signature in notarial script together with his tiny reflection in the mirror testify to his presence as legal witness, yet simultaneously commemorate his role as artist of the composition as a whole, not just maker, but also experiencing consciousness in Zola's sense, capturing two people in a corner of a room at a specific moment in time six centuries ago as only Jan van Eyck could.[43]

**39** On earlier artists' signatures, see Horsthemke 2013. Van Eyck's reflection in St. George's armor possibly referred to the precedent of Phidias. His earlier inscriptions on simulated frames in his *Tymotheos Portrait* of 1432 and *Man in a Red Turban* of 1433 include "a. ioh de Eyck" [by Jan van Eyck] and "Johes de Eyck me fecit" [Jan van Eyck made me], respectively, conventional formulas corresponding to earlier artists' signatures.

**40** Meiss (1952, 138) followed by Bauch (1967, 109-12), Phillip (1971, 206 note 399), and Dhanens (1973, 106) recognized parallels between Masaccio and Van Eyck's paintings. Dhanens specifically compared Masaccio's "startlingly plastic" Adam and Eve in his Brancacci chapel frescoes with Adam and Eve in *The Ghent Altarpiece* (figs. 9c-d). Both artists depicted the light from the chapel window striking their figures, an idea Van Eyck made explicit as sculptural figures come to life. At stake is an archetypal contrast of southern and northern European modes that Gombrich (1976, 19-35), characterized as *lume* and *lustro*, as well as complementary approaches to theoretical, linear perspective and practical, optical perspective. Ridderbors (2002) answered the charmingly-posed question of his title in the negative. One could just as easily claim that the archetypal Northern artist Van Eyck's painting was profoundly Italian, influenced by both Italian art and his Italian sitters.

**41** Seidel (1989, 58) and Hall (1994, 122) assumed that the phrase should be understood as written on the back wall, whereas Campbell (1989, 189) was skeptical about that possibility.

**42** Panofsky (1934, 124) noted but did not explain this more specific tense, which was presumably not relevant to rudimentary graffiti on the Arena chapel. Seidel recognized that Van Eyck "distinguishes his own completed activity from what he wished to have perceived as the painting's ongoing role. [… It is] not the painter but the painting that bears witness" (1989, 82). All preserved inscribed dates on Van Eyck's portraits include the day he completed these, possibly also the sitters' birth days. The date on Van Eyck's *Portrait of Jan de Leeuw* is preceded by the phrase "who first opened his eyes on" [*dat claer eerst met oghen sach*], i.e. his birthday. The same principle could apply to Van Eyck's *Tymotheos Portrait* (October 10, 1432) and his *Portrait of his wife Margaret* (June 17, 1439) (figs. 4, 5). Given the unusual mix of Roman and Arabic numerals in the date (M°CCCC°. 33°) on his presumed self-portrait as *Man in a Red Turban*, this possibly records his birthday (October 21, 1433) and also his age (33). Van Eyck would thus have been born in 1400, married and fathered his first child at 33, and died in 1441 at 41, corresponding to the report by Van Mander 1936, 6, that Jan 'died young'. The only other inscribed date associated with Van Eyck that includes a day is May 6, 1432 on *The Ghent Altarpiece* (figs. 9a, 9c), when the altarpiece was dedicated on the occasion of the baptism of Philip the Good's son Josse. In his subsequent multi-figure paintings, Van Eyck reverted to inscriptions on simulated frames that likewise include dates without the day (see Appendix B).

**43** Panofsky first recognized that Van Eyck "signed his name both as artist and as witness" (1934, 124) whereas he later claimed that Van Eyck signed his painting "as witness rather than as painter" (1953, 203). Hall insisted that Van Eyck's signature "instead of indicating an artist's new perception of rising social status in the 15th century… represent[s] continuity with an earlier medieval tradition" (1994, 122). Both Stoichita (1997, 193) and Gludovats (2005, 146) disappointingly agreed with the later Panofsky that Van Eyck signed only as witness, and had little new to say about what is perhaps the most self-

The half-spherical, eye-like mirror, which probably served Van Eyck as a compositional aid, evokes his alternative Northern (empirical) optical and aerial perspective construction (fig. 1b) as opposed to the rectangular 'picture window' of Italian (theoretical) Brunelleschian or Albertian linear perspective.[44] The juxtaposition of the strikingly realistic mirror with the rudimentary painted roundels further suggests his miraculous oil painting displacing earlier tempera and other media. The mirror makes the extraordinary claim to represent the room in 360 degrees, including his position as viewer, which as an intriguingly obscure, Antonioni-like motif, appears to document the painting's origins, as a pictorial 'navel'.[45] Van Eyck's reflection together with his signature correspond to one of the earliest instances of what André Gide called *mise en abyme*, when an artwork contains and reflects on itself or its own production, and more specifically, transcends its historical context to address us in the present 'as art'.[46] His Bruges interior with its religious trappings still seems distant or foreign to us, something from the irretrievable past depicting people who are now dead, yet in the mirror we find an uncanny portal to our own time, through which we can enter Van Eyck's painting and recognize ourselves.[47]

## 5 Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* within his Oeuvre and Tradition

According to Panofsky and other early scholars, Van Eyck's earliest extant works were illuminations of unsurpassed sophistication in the so-called *Turin-Milan Hours*, an unfinished manuscript owned by Duke Jan of Bavaria, Van Eyck's first employer from 1422-4.[48] The page with Van Eyck's *Birth of St. John* miniature (fig. 7) directly anticipated his *Arnolfini Portrait* with a similar setting, comparable pose and costume of Mary to the right, and even a little dog (together with a cat). The through-view to another room at the back likewise anticipated the miniscule mirror reflection. As Panofsky explained, Van Eyck's settings had progressed to the furthest possible naturalism, yet his figures remained tiny and weightless, due to their context on the flat manuscript page (1953, 235-6).

The next stage in Van Eyck's development is evident in his *Crucifixion* and *Last Judgment* (*"New York Diptych")* of around 1426 (fig. 8) depicting tiny figures in complex settings on long medium-sized panels, which Panofsky and others also assigned to the young Van Eyck.[49] Technical examination recently revealed that the uppermost quarter of the New York *Last Judgment* was

aware of all early modern meta-paintings. The combination of legal witness and artist who recreates reality involves an implicit disparity between humility and ambition characteristic of Van Eyck and particularly his motto *A^C. IXH. XAN* [*als ich kan*; my humble best] inscribed on the simulated frame of his *Man with a Red Turban*.

**44** Carleton (1982) proposed that Van Eyck used a mirror as a compositional aid. As addressed above, Van Eyck was familiar with Albertian perspective through Masaccio.

**45** We can imagine, without being able to make out, that Van Eyck is standing sketching the scene over the right shoulder of the orator in blue. The hyper-realistic nature of the mirror leads us to expect such a revelation at its core, yet the mirror can also be seen as the most artificial element of Van Eyck's composition, implicitly something he could never have seen, observing himself in a mirror on the wall from the opposite threshold. Significantly, the dog appears to be missing in the mirror.

**46** Gide 1956, 17. Gide cited as examples sixteenth-century paintings with spherical mirrors (derived from Van Eyck's painting), the play within a play in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and the mirror (reflecting a painting within a painting) in Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, itself a response to Van Eyck's painting. Hamlet's reworking of an existing play ('the mousetrap' – confirming Schapiro's reading of Campin's *Mérode Altarpiece*) echoes Shakespeare's reworking of his textual sources, and the play's effect on Hamlet's uncle Claudius, which reveals his repressed feelings, echoes the impact of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* on us as audience. Velázquez's royal double portrait, which is staged within an informal narrative with the royal household, and collapses the positions of the royal couple and subsequent viewers, emphasizes how his painting transcends the limits of court protocol to engage us as human self-definition through visual communication. See Steinberg 1981.

**47** Panofsky observed that "to find an analogous composition in northern painting, we must go forward to Holbein's *Ambassadors*" (1934, 124), and Van Eyck's mirror could be characterized as the inverse or corollary of the anamorphic skull in Holbein's painting, which signals death as an order beyond being outside the composition. Conversely, Van Eyck may have incorporated an anamorphic self-portrait in the side of the mirror in his lost *Naked Woman Bathing* to signal the outside of his composition in relation to sex, rather than death.

**48** Panofsky 1953, 232-46. Marrow (1998) likewise maintained that Van Eyck painted these illuminations, yet sought to shift the emphasis from (often abstruse) debates about attribution and dating to their exceptional artistic quality. Marrow first introduced me to art history and Netherlandish painting as well as the idea that Van Eyck painted not only the *Turin-Milan* illuminations but also *The Ghent Altarpiece*.

**49** Panofsky 1953, 237-9. Van Eyck's *New York Diptych* can be dated ca. 1426, before his trip to Portugal, among other reasons, because he included Philip the Good and his advisors at the foot of the cross with the Good Thief on the right in

Figure 7. Van Eyck?, *Birth of St. John page in Turin-Milan Hours*. c. 1424. Turin, Museo Civico. © Fondazione Torino Musei

Figure 8. Van Eyck?, *"New York Diptych" (Crucifixion and Last Judgement)*. c. 1426. New York, Metropolitan Museum. © Fletcher Fund, 1933

painted in a rudimentary manuscript technique, leading scholars to posit an unknown illuminator who completed Van Eyck's work after his death.[50] Rather, this illuminator was the young Van Eyck, who had reached the limits of his medium a quarter of the way down his *Last Judgment*, when he adapted his technique to forge more complex layered forms and represent a more ambitious subject. If he did not actually 'invent' oil painting as Giorgio Vasari claimed, Van Eyck at least radically transformed the medium, along with Campin.[51]

As Panofsky and others recognized, Van Eyck saw Campin's *Mérode Altarpiece* of ca. 1426 (fig. 2) when he passed through Tournai in 1427-8, and later elaborated its elements in the annunciation of *The Ghent Altarpiece* of 1432 (figs. 9a, 9c) (De Tolnay 1935, 38; Panofsky 1953, 165, 204). Because of the fragmentary, incoherent altarpiece inscription and seeming formal disparities among its panels, Panofsky and others characterized *The Ghent Altarpiece* as "a makeshift assemblage of disparate parts" pieced together by Van Eyck from works left behind by his otherwise unknown elder brother Hubert (1953, 208). Others assigned the *Turin-Milan* illuminations and *New York Diptych* to Hubert or another paint-

his *Crucifixion*, but did not yet show the Erythrean Sibyl at the far left mid-ground as Isabella of Portugal, as he did in his *Ghent Altarpiece* of 1432 (see Appendix B).

**50** Buck 1995, 65-72, Ainsworth (1998, 86-9). This theory already involves a contradiction insofar as the more advanced technique used for Christ's face was painted on top of the more rudimentary one, as Buck herself observed, but could not explain.

**51** Vasari: "in 1510 [Van Eyck] invented and brought to light the method of oil-painting in colors" [1568] (1979, 3: 2060). Van Mander proudly echoed this claim and noted that Van Eyck "no longer needed to apply color in streaks" (1936, 5-6), yet corrected Vasari on the date, which he claimed was 1410. Rather, Van Eyck and Campin simultaneously transformed oil painting around 1426.

Figure 9a. Van Eyck?, *Ghent Altarpiece*, exterior, reconstruction. 1432. Ghent, St. Bavokerk. © Closer to Van Eyck: Rediscovering The Ghent Altarpiece

er, whereas Panofsky, who assigned them to Van Eyck, did not assign *The Ghent Altarpiece* entirely to him, and therefore could not offer a coherent account of his development (Panofsky 1953, 237-9; Friedländer 1967, 51; Borchert 2008, 80-3). In 1971 Panofsky's student Lotte Brand Phillip reconstructed the altarpiece inscription naming Hubert as sculptor of the frame, followed by Jan as painter of the panels (Phillip 1971, 48-9). Yet her reconstruction of Hubert's lost frame was unconvincing, and she did not recognize the program of Van Eyck's painted panels, adapted from Campin's *Mérode Altarpiece*, as sculpture absorbed into and

Figure 9b. Van Eyck?, *Ghent Altarpiece*, exterior, second position (reconstruction). 1432

gradually transformed by painting, echoed by the sculpted frame and altarpiece inscription.[52]

Panofsky contrasted Campin's irrational, piecemeal approach, both to symbolism and to perspective, space, and rendering, with Van Eyck's perfect balance (1953, 143-4). Yet in both regards Campin proceeded on the basis of a deliberate strategy. The naturalistic interiors and exteriors in Campin's *Mérode Altarpiece* were a major advance on previous paintings includ-

52 The altarpiece inscription named Jan as 'following' Hubert [*arte secundus*] in a competition in which painting ultimately triumphed over sculpture and not, as proposed by Phillip (1971, 4) because of the chronological order of the production of sculptural frame and painted panels. The ideas in this and the following paragraphs were first introduced in Binstock 2009, 34-7.

10a. Hieronymus Bosch, *Garden of Earthly Delights*, detail of Adam, Christ, Eve in Eden. c. 1500.

ing his own *Seilern Altarpiece* with archaic gold background and arched tops. X-rays reveal that he painted over gold in the window of his central panel with blue skies and the donor's coat of arms in stained glass, and revised the divine figures to make their faces and drapery more plastic and rounded, lending them archaic form, which scholars have compared to relief sculpture.[53] He presumably made these changes when he added the side panels with the donors rendered more naturalistically in lower perspective at the left, and the biblical Joseph in his second story workshop in an intermediary rendering and perspective on the right.[54]

Campin thereby established separate realms for man and God that he brought together within his altarpiece. Mary and the angel Gabriel approximate relief sculptures within an altarpiece shrine, evoking a mystical vision of the donors seen through the threshold at the left that ambiguously continues in the open door of the left panel, echoing the way the left wing of the triptych opens onto the miraculous event of the center panel. The nearly round table raised at an awkwardly high angle at the center of the annunciation further visually suggests a Eucharistic Host in its box-like ciborium or Host container, the symbolic representation of Christ's incarnation and sacrifice.[55] Campin's symbolic use of space, perspective, and surface forms mediate between his naturalistic, illusionist narrative and the sacral altarpiece, Host, and Mass. The so-called 'Flemish primitives' were more sophisticated than has been recognized: the archaic, iconic qualities of their divinities as well as their distorted settings serve to distinguish them from ordinary naturalistic, mortals. Among more recent scholars, Campbell (1974, 638), re-assigned *The Mérode Altarpiece* to 'The Master of Mérode', Wilhem Bode's name for the artist later identified as The Master of Flémalle and then as Robert Campin. Kemperdick and Sander (2009) then argued that the triptych was pieced together from panels by three different artists. The primary evidence for their claim is the distinction between the rudimentary rendering of the holes in the fire screen in the central panel and the more convincing holes in the board on which Joseph is working in the right panel. Like Campbell and others, Kemperdick and Sander assume that formal variations necessarily manifest different artists' hands. Yet the distinction in this case is easily explained insofar as the fire screen is a minor motif in the distance, whereas Joseph's plank was painted later within the painter's rapid development, is held up before our eyes as if protruding through the 'fourth wall' of the picture space, and serves an important symbolic function. The plank with bored holes not only potentially condenses Joseph's sexual feelings sublimated into work as proposed by Schapiro (1945, 187) but can also be understood as an

**53** Suhr 1957, 144; Rousseau 1957, 123-5; Campbell 1974, 66 note 79.

**54** The idea of distinguishing between modes or realms by means of formal approach can be traced further back to the manuscript miniatures of the Limbourg brothers, in which peasants and aristocrats were depicted in more naturalistic or conversely archaic styles, associated with the brothers Pol and Jean, respectively.

**55** The table intersects with the path of the incarnation of the tiny baby Christ carrying his cross from the window to the Virgin's womb, making possible his sacrifice celebrated during the Mass at the altar table. The angel Gabriel dressed as priest appears to 'hold' the table like a Host with his right hand. The visual approximation of the Host within its box resembles the Host ciborium carried by St. Clare on the exterior of Campin's *Betrothal of the Virgin*.

Figure 9d. Van Eyck?, *Ghent Altarpiece*, exterior, last panel combination (reconstruction). 1432

implicit stand-in (*mise en abyme*) for Campin's altarpiece as a crafted object (three planks with holes for hinges), and more specifically a competition between sculpture, in its most rudimentary possible form as a board into which holes were drilled, and painting, which 'represents' the holes through perspectival illusion. Joseph's plank in the right panel, the door in the left panel, and the table in the center panel all call attention as surface forms in different ways to the viewer's space and experience.

Van Eyck adapted Campin's ideas in more systematic form and ambitious scale in his *Ghent Altarpiece* (fig. 9a) through variations in perspective and rendering among his panels as a means to distinguish between and inter-relate separate


Figure 9c. Van Eyck?, *Ghent Altarpiece*, interior (reconstruction). 1432
Figure 10. Hieronymus Bosch, *Garden of Earthly Delights*. c. 1500. Madrid, Prado. © Museo Nacional del Prado Difusión SAU

realms for man and God. The donors inhabit the altarpiece structure and pray as intercessors to grisaille statues of Saints John the Baptist and John the Evangelist, evoking three-dimensional, material objects on the altar table in the viewers' space, a scheme indebted to Masaccio. Mary and Gabriel above represent grisaille relief sculptures within a narrow box-like shrine gradually coming to life as colored, textured living beings in a narrative setting in the mystical vision of the donors below.

The narrow center panels first open to reveal an iconic *Christ* (fig. 9b), as otherworldly being based on various forms of sculptural representation, and the mystical origin of his own incarnation within the exterior box as metaphor for the Virgin's womb, the Hebrews' ark, and the Christian tabernacle or *ciborium* (Host container). The other panels then open to reveal the heavenly and earthly Jerusalem on the interior (fig. 9c).[56] *Adam* and *Eve* at the sides represent humanity as symbolic sculptures come to life, which also fold in to flank *Christ* (fig. 9d), joining with him as the altarpiece cycle concludes in its closed position. These last panel combinations illustrate redemption, and St. Paul's equation in Ephesians 5: 31-2 of the union of husband and wife with Christ and his Church, the sacramental counterpart of the legal morganatic marriage depicted in Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*.[57]

The young manuscript painter Van Eyck thus gradually combined the sophisticated illusionism of his settings with massive, plastic, 'sculptural' figures integrated in space in his *Ghent Altarpiece*.[58] Two years later, in his *Arnolfini Portrait*, he moved beyond divine figures and the sacred art object and integrated three-dimensional, full-length figures within a convincing naturalistic interior. He thereby combined in a single scene the diverse approaches in the panels of Campin's *Mérode Altarpiece*: the naturalistically portrayed donors at the left; the interior setting and religious symbolism of the center; and Van Eyck's presence as contemporary equivalent of Joseph in his studio at the right, standing in the threshold of the bedroom.[59]

Later Netherlandish painters followed Van Eyck's paradigm shift to an autonomous, consistent, illusionistic picture space, which is one reason

**56** Van Eyck adapted the characteristic juxtaposition in manuscripts of interior spaces in the miniature above and landscapes in the *bas de page* below in the overall scheme of the interior panels of his *Ghent Altarpiece* (figs. 7, 9c). He also developed his scheme partly from the upper third of his *Last Judgment* (figs. 8, 9c), where Mary, Christ, and Saint John the Baptist already appear in larger scale and more archaic form. The distorted perspective and rendering of the central sacred figures in his *Adoration* below similarly elaborate on the comparably distorted saints in the foreground of his *Crucifixion*. There are also connections between the virgins and lamb in Van Eyck's *Adoration* and the *bas de page* of his first, most archaic miniature for the *Turin-Milan Hours*, *The Virgin among Virgins*, which anticipates the compositional schemes of his mature paintings of the Virgin such as his *Lucca Madonna*.

**57** Bedaux (1986, 7, 14) cited Thomas Aquinas' three criteria for marriage: *proles* [offspring] represented by the bride's gesture of holding her robe above her stomach and the statue of St. Margaret; *sacramentum* [sacrament] represented by the roundels with images of Christ around the mirror; and *fides* [faith] represented by the couple joining of hands and their oath signaling a mutual contract, whereas their union symbolizes that of Christ with his Church. Baldwin (1984, 59-60) and Bedaux (1986, 28) invoked the theological connection between Christ's sacrifice and the sacrament of marriage and what might seem to us a strange connection between Christ's passion and marital intercourse. The juxtaposition of the last panel combination of Van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece* and his *Arnolfini Portrait* (figs. 1, 9d) illustrates the gulf between late medieval spirituality and early modern bourgeois realism, also relevant to what Schapiro (1945, 187,) perceived as an anticipation of Protestant critique related to bourgeois marriage in Campin's *Mérode Altarpiece* (fig. 2).

**58** Panofsky (1953, 12-20) recognized the illusionism of late medieval manuscript illuminations, Renaissance perspective, and the three-dimensional form and monumentality of Gothic sculpture as the primary sources of the new naturalistic painting. Campin implicitly brought these together in his *Mérode Altarpiece*, and Van Eyck explicitly did so in his *Ghent Altarpiece*. Intermediary stages between Van Eyck's *New York Diptych* and *Ghent Altarpiece* are evident in his *Mellon Annunciation*, which shows larger yet relatively flat figures from an unusually high perspective in a composition dense with symbolism, and his *Madonna in a Church*, which adapted the setting of his *Funeral scene* miniature from the *Turin-Milan hours* through the plastic, sculptural figure of the Madonna in disproportionately large scale as metaphor for the Virgin as Church, anticipating the program of sculpture transformed by painting in his *Ghent Altarpiece*. Both his *Mellon Annunciation* and *Madonna in a Church* were originally part of diptychs that likely related donors and divine figures in separate realms. Van Eyck's multi-figure paintings after his *Arnolfini Portrait* depict mortal donors together with archaic, iconic divine figures frozen in motion like sculptures in narrowly confined interiors. He also returned to elements of his early more fluid, miniaturist manuscript style in his late *Dresden Triptych*, *St. Barbara*, and *Madonna at a Fountain* (see Appendix B).

**59** More specifically, Van Eyck can be thought as if standing between Campin's left and center panels: like Campin's donors, we as viewers are vouchsafed a miraculous view of the interior, but this is inhabited by the bride and groom in place of divine figures. Van Eyck's mirror, encircled by ten Host-like roundels, also displaces Campin's table as an approximation of a Host-wafer at the center of the composition: Van Eyck's mirror represents the triumph of art over prior religious and legal structures of meaning and value (being).

why his *Ghent Altarpiece* and Campin's *Mérode Altarpiece* have been seen, anachronistically, as 'make-shift'. The transition entailed enormous freedom for the artist, yet ultimately heralded the decline of religious art. Schapiro recognized that the conflict implicit in Campin and Van Eyck's naturalistic art, at the end of their tradition, "comes out into the open and assumes a terrifying and melancholy form in the fantasies of [Hieronymus] Bosch [as…] a counter-offensive of the unhappy religious conscience against the prevailing worldliness in a period of decay of the church" (Schapiro 1945, 187).[60] In *Eden* of Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* triptych (figs. 10, 10a), Christ stands between Adam and Eve, echoing the last panel combination of Van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece* (fig. 9d), and marries Eve as a type of Ecclesia with his left hand, the morganatic formula from Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*. Her descendants accordingly do not inherit Christ's spiritual properties in the paradise of Bosch's central *Garden*. The equivalent of the central *Adoration* panel in Van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece* as an autonomous, illusionistic picture space, Bosch's *Garden* is overrun by ordinary penitents, its naturalistic ambiguous theological-sexual symbolism brought out in the open or undisguisedas 'earthly' delights. No longer part of a sacred altarpiece, but rather a modern secular paintingas , it is self-consciously a representation (projection, dream) of paradise. Hieronymus Bosch was here too.

## 6 Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* and art historical method

The history of scholarship on Van Eyck's painting reflects changing methods in art history that are most productively brought together, as cumulative rather than successive, and brought to bear on the painting as visual object and a work of art. Our task as art historians, and the best method, is to strive for what Goethe called the most difficult thing of all: to see with our eyes what is before our eyes, through the eyes of the artist who was there before us.[61]

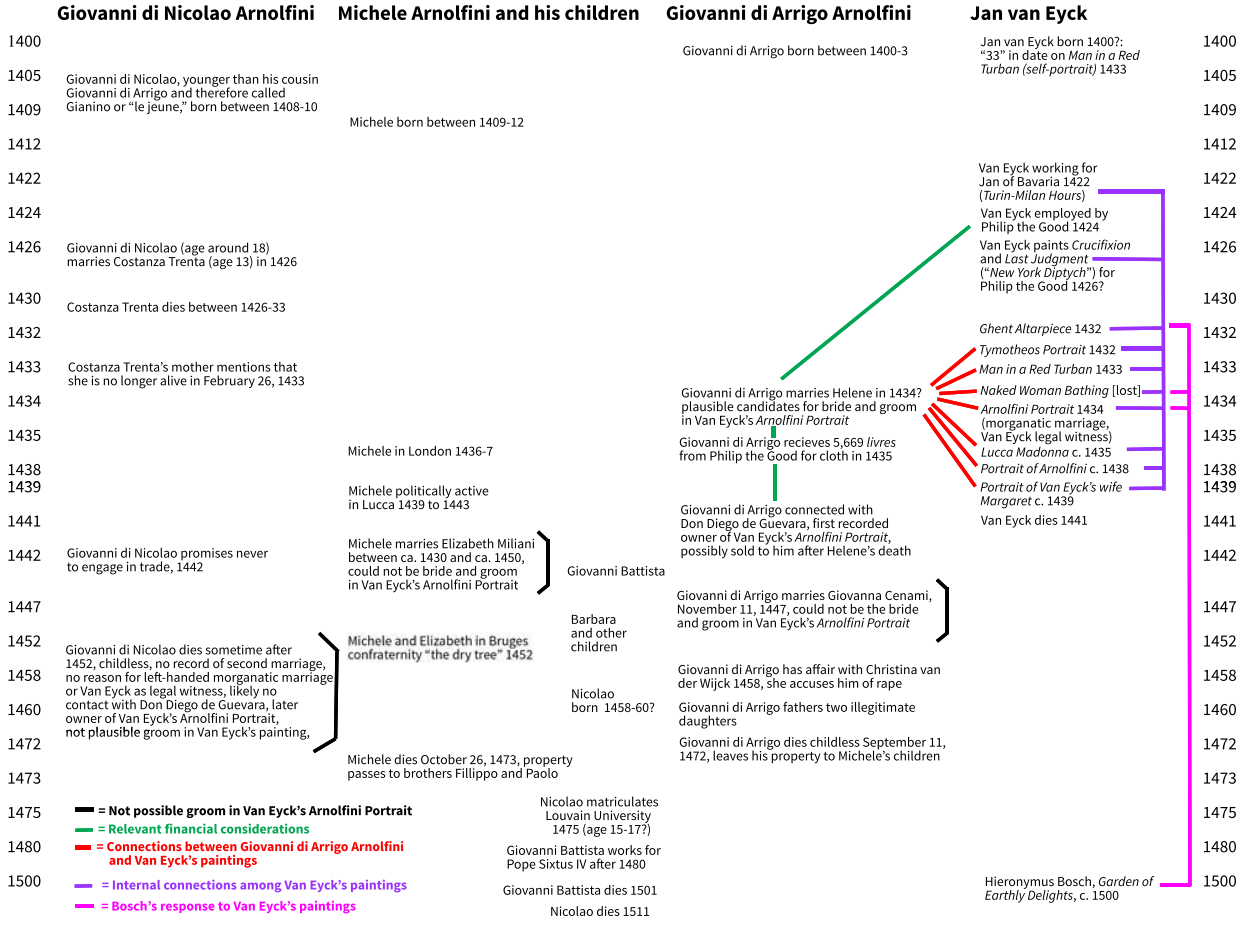
Koerner (2016, 179-222), along with his brilliant, and in cases unsurpassable readings of Bruegel, offers fascinating interpretations of particular details in Bosch's Garden, yet does not identify the subject or resolve the debate (false or real paradise), whereas his adoption of Carl Schmitt's category of "enemy painting" is to my mind too abstract. Koerner does not address Bosch's response to his predecessors Campin and Van Eyck or his extensive critique of the Church (all concrete 'enemies') or Schapiro's account, who is not cited in Koerner's index (his book has no bibliography).

**60** Panofsky significantly ended his study of Netherlandish painting by omitting Bosch with the ironic comment "This, too high for my wit, I prefer to omit" (1953, 358). More accurately, Panofsky repressed Bosch because his art undermined Panofsky's account of the religious function of "disguised symbolism".

**61** Both Seidel (1989, 57 note 5) and Hall (1994, xxi), espoused Carlo Ginzburg's 'micro-history' as their own method, yet their attention was reserved primarily for texts that ostensibly furnished historical context for Van Eyck's painting, rather than the painting itself as visual document. Ginzburgian micro-*art* history would mean finely-grained looking at *images* (Leo Steinbergian art history). It is not enough to look as a (social, political, economic) historian, or a theologian concerned with God (or his own position or that of his institution), or a patron concerned with the value of an investment (including a wife). Rather, one must look as an *artist* at the work of *art* as an aesthetic object and an original conception that encompasses all these dimensions.

## Appendix A

Timeline of evidence about possible grooms for Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*



## Appendix B

Chronology of Van Eyck's paintings and related events

| | Paintings by Van Eyck | Events in Van Eyck's life | Related events | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1400 | | Jan van Eyck born 1400? age "33" in date of *Man* (self-portrait) *in a Red Turban* | | 1400 |
| 1416 | | Van Eyck apprentice illuminator in France c. 1414-20? | Limbourg brothers die of plague 1416 | 1416 |
| 1422 | illuminations for *Turin-Milan Hours* for Jan of Bavaria?: | Van Eyck employed by Jan of Bavaria 1422-4 | | 1422 |
| 1423 | *Virgin among Virgins* [lost], c. 1423<br>*Prayer on the Shore* [lost], c. 1423<br>*Arrest of Christ* [lost], c. 1423 | | | 1423 |
| 1424 | *Voyage of St. Julian* [lost], c. 1424<br>*Funeral Mass*, c. 1424<br>*Birth of St. John*, c. 1424 | | | 1424 |
| 1425 | | Van Eyck employed by Philip the Good May 1425 onward | Jan of Bavaria dies January 1425 | 1425 |
| 1426 | | Van Eyck on "secret mission" (to Italy and Holy Land?) 1426 | | 1426 |
| 1427 | *Crucifixion* and *Last Judgment* ("*New York Diptych*"), c. 1426-7 for Philip the Good? | | | 1427 |
| 1428 | *Mellon Annunciation*, c. 1427-8 | | | 1428 |
| 1429 | *Portrait of Isabella of Portugal* [lost], c. 1429 for Philip the Good | Van Eyck with ducal delegation to Portugal October 1428 through December 1429, in charge of Wedding Festivities | Philip the Good marries Isabella of Portugal December 1429 | 1429 |
| 1430 | *Berlin Madonna*, c. 1430 | | | 1430 |
| 1431 | *Portrait of Baudouin de Lannoy*, c. 1430-1 | | | 1431 |
| 1432 | *Ghent Altarpiece*, May 6, 1432<br>*Tymotheus Portrait* (*Hubert, sculptor of* Ghent Altarpiece?), October 10, 1432 | | Baptism of Philip the Good's son Josse, May 6, 1432 | 1432 |
| 1433 | *Man in a Red Turban* (self-portrait), October 15, 1433 | Van Eyck marries Margaret 1433 | | 1433 |
| 1434 | *Naked Woman Bathing (Giovanni di Arrigo Arnolfini's fiancée Helene with Van Eyck's wife Margaret)* [lost], May? 1434 | birth of first child of Van Eyck and Margaret June 1434 | | 1434 |
| | *Arnolfini Portrait (Giovanni di Arrigo Arnolfini and his wife Helene?)*, July? 1434 | | Giovanni di Arrigo Arnolfini marries Helene 1434? | |
| 1435 | *Lucca Madonna,* c. 1435<br>*Rolin Madonna*, c. 1435-6 | | Giovanni di Arrigo Arnolfini sells Philip the Good tapistries in Arras 1435 | 1435 |
| 1436 | *Van der Paele Madonna*, c. 1436<br>*Portrait of Jan de Leeuw*, October 26, 1436 | | | 1436 |
| 1437 | *Dresden Triptych*, 1437<br>*Grisaille Annunciation*, c. 1437 | | | 1437 |
| 1438 | *St. Barbara*, 1437<br>*Portrait of Niccolò Albergati*, c. 1438 | | | 1438 |
| 1439 | *Portrait of Giovanni di Arrigo Arnolfini?*, c. 1438<br>*Portrait of Van Eyck's wife Margaret*, June 17, 1439 | | | 1439 |
| 1441 | *Madonna at a Fountain*, c. 1439 | Van Eyck dies 1441 | | 1441 |

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