

Transcultural Perspectives in Art History:
Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait*

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the origins of objects and the meaning of gestures in Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait* (1434) from a transcultural perspective. Drawing upon the older scholarship, which it seeks to redirect by using reception theory and a de-colonial approach, I conclude that writing history is always strategic, never neutral, and that the historical record itself is laden with unresolvable ambiguities in the present case. For centuries, scholars have examined the painting and its details without reaching a consensus. My thesis examines the various interpretations of the painting through reception theory, taking into account who its intended primary audience and later viewers would have been.

My original research emphasizes the necessity of understanding the work through this multicultural lens. Many of the objects and gestures have been identified on the basis of their appearance in multiple works of art made in the same period and region. However, the same elements can be found in different cultural contexts associated with different meanings. In the final analysis, this study intends to open the discussion of the *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait* to transcultural perspectives by focusing on the extra-European origins of the objects depicted and the multiple meanings assigned to its conventional gestures.

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Introduction

Throughout the period of what is traditionally known as the Northern Renaissance, many artists and their contemporaries created magnificent masterpieces that provide endless hours of research for scholars within the field of art history. Particularly, those from the fifteenth to seventeenth-century Dutch region of Europe. One such artist that exhibits this in almost every one of his creations is Jan van Eyck. This is particularly true in his painting of Giovanni Arnolfini and his bride in the *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait* which was completed in 1434 and is now in the London National Gallery's collection. With all the research that has been conducted in the study of art history, specifically surrounding art created before the nineteenth-century, it is difficult to imagine what else could possibly be written that has not already been published. I propose that scholarship should combine the traditional study of symbolism with more contemporary discussions that focus on transcultural perspectives.

In order to develop an expanded understanding of its personal and global influence, this paper will examine the different interpretations that scholars have proposed for the *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait*. Particularly, in terms of its context and why there has been so much contention over what this painting may actually represent. First, I will establish a historical background for the artist and the figures in the painting and share an analysis of their appearance. Then, I will discuss the symbolism scholars have thought resides in the objects in the portrait and their prospective origins. Finally, I will investigate the gestures in the painting through a range of interpretations, relating to the idea of a multi-cultural lens.

This discussion magnifies the possibility of an interpretive art history and how individual experience impacts someone's understanding. By examining a painting, it is impossible to get inside the artist's, or for that matter a patron's, head to know the work's original intention. Most of the information written is based upon subjective notions that sometimes takes into account historical accuracy. A person's experience dictates what they know and their understanding of art. So this paper is meant to synthesize different perspectives and, as a result, display the ambiguity of history.

For the purpose of this paper, the term *transcultural*, should be defined. Merriam-Webster's definition of "transcultural" is "involving, encompassing, or extending across two or more cultures."¹ To expand this definition, the term is used here to indicate different cultural perspectives of the same concepts or ideas, specifically those found in art history. I mean to take these notions and shape them into a single narrative, by taking "their" world and forming it into "our" world.² This process will be done with the goal to not emphasize one perspective over another and to break through the tight-knit boundaries of Westernized thought and bias. It is important to keep in mind that there are endless directions in which research could be conducted on this topic and the manner in which words such as *transcultural* could be utilized. Though this research may analyze material that other scholars have written about previously, I will employ the information differently. Using Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait* as a case study, I will examine the objects that originate from both inside and outside of Dutch culture to

¹ "transcultural" Merriam-Webster.com. 2017. <https://www.merriam-webster.com>.

² Timothy Brooks, *Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008. 25.

establish a transcultural perspective. I will also be considering the gestures of Arnolfini's figure to broaden the scope of interpreting the painting.

The term "culture" should also be clarified. It is meant to refer to the customs of the local community and not those set by a European standard. At this point in history, it is unlikely that there would have been any ideas of a unified continent, though "Europe" existed, just as many countries at this time were not even identified as unified nations. Therefore, I chose to focus on culture as dictated by local values because it is filled with nuances that may exist in multiple areas but they mean something different in each of those places. In this instance, it would be the people living in the fifteenth-century under the dukedom of Burgundy. These cultural ideas are what a viewer sees in a painting like the *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait*.

This research has largely been inspired by two scholars innovative explorations of other works of art that also do not conform to any precedent. In his book, *Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World*, Timothy Brooks delves into the rapidly expanding world of Northern European merchants.³ For example, he investigates how these merchants began conducting trade with Native peoples of North America for precious fur pelts, then used these pelts as a way to gain expensive silver from South America and porcelain from China. Brooks' research centers around objects found in Johannes Vermeer's paintings, in this case, *Officer and Laughing Girl*, which was created nearly two centuries after Jan van Eyck lifetime.⁴ However, despite the time difference, this manner of research is still relevant to examining the *Arnolfini*

³ Ibid.

⁴ Johannes Vermeer, *Officer and Laughing Girl*, 1655–1660, Oil paint, Frick Collection.

Wedding Portrait. Brooks' study surveys connections that existed even earlier than the seventeenth-century. Additionally, both Van Eyck and Vermeer are Dutch, therefore they are of similar cultural backgrounds.

Brooks' research impacts the discussion of art history as it avoids certain aspects associated with elitist and exclusionary European understandings of art such as the limited discussion of style, period, the artist as sole agent, and so forth. His approach allows for multicultural components in the paintings to be taken into account without bias. A majority of our inherited histories of art have been written by scholars to establish the West as the most "civilized" region during the colonial period of the nineteenth-century. Much like Brooks, to counter this biased and chauvinistic narrative, I have organized this paper to discuss aspects of the *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait* that most of the previous scholarship ignores. The argument is intended to deconstruct those preconceived notions of previous generations of scholarship that have (often unwittingly) aligned art history with the West at the expense of the rest.

Another source of inspiration has been Roger Crum's "Facing the Closed Doors to Reception? Speculations on Foreign Exchange, Liturgical Diversity, and the 'Failure' of the Portinari Altarpiece."⁵ In this study, Crum emphasizes the idea of how the primary reader with the work in its original context, prior to the museum setting, determined the meaning of the work of art. Then Crum goes on to explain that this had a major impact

⁵ Roger J. Crum, "Facing the Closed Doors to Reception? Speculations on Foreign Exchange, Liturgical Diversity, and the "Failure" of the Portinari Altarpiece." *Art Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 1, *The Reception of Christian Devotional Art* (1998). pp. 5-13. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/77798>.

upon how audiences formed their own ideas. He studies the initial reception for the *Portinari Altarpiece*, as its size and content were quite unusual for its primary viewers.⁶ This is mainly because the artist Hugo van der Goes was from Northern Europe and the altarpiece was created for a Florentine church. Crum's use of reception theory to show how an unfamiliar liturgical context affected the significance attributed to the visual content is especially pertinent as it can be incredibly easy to project the subjective experience of modern viewers on an image made in very different circumstances. When a work of art from a particular culture is received by people outside of that culture, its meaning changes. This to do with the idea that the viewer's mindset and personal experience informs how they interpret the work.

The *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait* has undergone centuries of research in the attempt to understand its original context. Despite this, there is no scholarly consensus, no unanimous acceptance of any one interpretation. Furthermore, despite all this research, it has proved extremely difficult to understand the meaning originally conveyed in this unusual painting. For this reason, I decided that the best place to start would be to examine why this painting was originally commissioned. I believe that the purpose of this painting is not simply about the act of marriage but that it is also a means to exemplify Arnolfini's wealth and status in a visual narrative.

I will also adapt the literary notion of "reception theory," where a viewer interprets "the text from a [personal] experiential standpoint."⁷ To develop the discussion

⁶ Hugo van der Goes, *Portinari Altarpiece*, 1475-1478, Oil paint, Uffizi Gallery.

⁷ Crum, "Facing the Closed Doors to Reception? [...] Portinari Altarpiece," 7.

accurately from an art historical perspective, I will begin by giving a broader historical context of the original viewing audience as they would have determined the meaning that the painting held for them. Then I will show how a viewer may take into account different cultural ideas, when applicable, about the same composition, so that different aspects can be compared in a transcultural framework. Additionally, I would like to address that some of the terms used in this analysis to describe the portrait are very much tied to the nineteenth-century construction of a *Westernized* art historical record. Nonetheless, these labels are well-known and understood by most at this point in time. There is no set vocabulary for a conversation about transcultural art history that is readily available. For the sake of articulating this paper in a concise manner, I have utilized these terms and labels. It is with this study I hope to encourage a unified understanding behind what art represents for different areas of the world.

Historical background:

Historical sources have found that after having served as artist for the Count of Holland since his late twenties, Jan van Eyck was appointed official artist of Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, in approximately 1425.⁸ Phillip the Good of Burgundy is known for his extensive patronage of Flemish art in various media. As a result of his patron's interest in the arts, van Eyck may have had the opportunity to perfect the technique of oil painting, which was considered new technology for artists in the early 1400's.⁹

⁸ Martha Wolff; Hand, John Oliver, *Early Netherlandish Painting*. Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1987. 75.

⁹ Till-Holger Borchert (ed), *Age of Van Eyck: The Mediterranean World and Early Netherlandish Painting*. Groeningemuseum, Stedelijke Musea Brugge, 2002. 92-94.

Additionally, being the court artist for Philip the Good might have led Giovanni Arnolfini to commission van Eyck to create his wedding portrait. Arnolfini was a wealthy man living within the dukedom of Burgundy, descended from a long line of merchants from Lucca.¹⁰ Trade in Bruges at this time comprised largely of luxurious goods including, tapestries, textiles, gold plates, and jewels, conditions that would have allowed Arnolfini to live quite comfortably.¹¹

Unfortunately, as time passed, the couple's exact identity became a topic of contention among scholars. Many have debated whether the figures were actually Giovanni Arnolfini and his bride, Giovanna Cenami. Though, given the status Arnolfini achieved during his lifetime, it is unlikely that the first inventories of the painting in the sixteenth-century were mistaken in identifying the figures.¹² In any case, this double portrait would end up being one of the most renowned creations van Eyck painted in his career.

Appearance:

The *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait* (Figure 1) itself has been praised by artists and historians alike in the centuries following its creation. The painting introduced stylistic aspects that are now thought to be synonymous with Dutch artistry. Jan van Eyck's skillful techniques are exhibited through every brushstroke in this work of art. This

¹⁰ Erwin Panofsky, "Jan Van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait". *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 64 (372). The Burlington Magazine Publications Ltd., (1934): 117.

¹¹ Edwin Hall, *The Arnolfini Betrothal: Medieval Marriage and the Enigma of van Eyck's Double Portrait*. California: University of California Press, 1994. 4.

¹² Ibid, 4-5; Hall writes: [a] great merchant capitalist who enjoyed close commercial and financial ties with the Burgundian court for half a century, Giovanni Arnolfini was eventually also knighted and naturalized as a Frenchman by Louis XI, and he served this king of France as well as Philip the Good and Charles the Bold of Burgundy in various important positions.

portrait was created on a wooden panel, as was customary for many artists during this period. Some aspects that are most interesting about this work of art are the Northern European standards of beauty from this period of time that are shown in the depiction of the Arnolfini couple.

When looking at the figures in the painting, we gain a sense of what would have been aesthetically pleasing for Dutch society in fifteenth-century Europe. The couple is idealized so that they appear tall in stature and quite thin underneath their heavy, draped clothing. Beyond this, the stylization of the couple's faces further indicates that they are idealized representations of beauty according to fifteenth-century Northern European standards. These ideas of beauty are corroborated by comparison with other portraits commissioned during this period, which exhibit similar features.

The faces are quite elongated, to the point of appearing 'corpse-like' with their neutral expressions and greyish pallor. However, this is most likely accurate as the couple would have been fairly pale in this locale given the cold climate. This Northern ideal of beauty is further accentuated by their high hairlines. Despite the fact that the male is wearing a large beaver felt hat, which will be discussed in-depth below, and the woman has a veil, their prominent foreheads are still noticeable.¹³ This further enhances the illusion of elongation. These idealized features are again, however, directly in line with fashion at this time.¹⁴ Overall, their appearance would seem to be an example of artistic representation as opposed to how they would have looked in reality.

¹³ Brooks, *Vermeer's Hat*. 42.

¹⁴ Neil Haughton, "Perceptions of Beauty in Renaissance Art." *Journal of Cosmetic Dermatology*, 3 (2004): 229–233. Women plucked and shaved their hairline to the top of their foreheads to achieve the impression of long features.

Displays of Wealth and Status: Objects and Their Origins

Previous art historical scholarship has argued that the artist meant to convey symbolic meaning in the gestures and objects depicted throughout the painting. The objects that are more commonly written about are known because of their appearance in different works of art throughout the fifteenth-century in this region. However, many of these object's definitions appear to be based on hypothetical research that has been severely influenced by Western civilization's rhetoric. What this means is that these objects have been labeled with idealized meanings as opposed to more relevant interpretations. Along with this trend, I also believe that there has been no consensus on this subject mainly due to the fact that this portrait was privately commissioned. Because Arnolfini and his bride privately commissioned the painting, I argue that their preferences for the items in the finished painting may not follow traditional "guidelines."¹⁵ This idea then makes it even more complicated to understand the objects.

These portraits were commissioned by the couple at a time when, most likely, they were only meant to be seen by the couple and those close to them. Thus, some of the items depicted may only have sentimental value to the individuals, rather than a shared cultural meaning. With this in mind, we must also remember that the significance that viewers think the objects may hold is often based upon their own cultural background. To adapt a term developed in literary reception theory, "the engaged reader[, or in this case *viewer*,] 'concretizes,' [the art by] bringing his or her own 'horizon

¹⁵ Lorne Campbell, Philip Attwood, and National Gallery (Great Britain). *Renaissance Faces: Van Eyck to Titian*. New Haven, Conn.; London; National Gallery. 2008.

of expectation' to bear on the construction and interpretation of the [painting]. The [art] is thus continually inflected by changing historical circumstances[.]”¹⁶ As David Carrier writes, “what we see in pictures is always dependent upon our prior beliefs, maybe our allegorical interpretations project modern concerns into [the] work.”¹⁷ This projection of personal experience seems almost inevitable when looking at any work of art, as humans naturally do in order to feel directly connected to the work.

Of course the possibility of meaning beyond the physical presence of the materials depicted may have some foundation, especially in the case of Northern painting where, it has often been argued, “disguised symbols [lead] the viewer ‘to suspect a hidden significance in ... every object... [so] that the effect of symbolic meaning occurs unconsciously. Nevertheless, it seems quite clear that he [Van Eyck] regarded the symbols as encouraging ‘quiet fascination’ rather than methodical deciphering.”¹⁸ Scholars who have written previously about the many ‘symbolic objects’ throughout this painting emphasize this Northern Renaissance rhetoric. Most notable is the work of Edwin Panofsky, who has written extensively on the symbolism that is supposedly attached to the objects of the painting.¹⁹ Many believe, Panofsky included, that these items were included with the intention of inferring what the couple wished to have in their joined life, as opposed to looking into where these items would have originated.

¹⁶ Crum, “Facing the Closed Doors to Reception? ... Portinari Altarpiece,” 7.

¹⁷ David Carrier, “Naturalism and Allegory in Flemish Painting.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (spring, 1987): 239.

¹⁸ John L. Ward, “Disguised Symbolism as Enactive Symbolism in Van Eyck's Paintings.” *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 15, No. 29 (1994): 9.

¹⁹ Panofsky, “Jan Van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait,” 117–119+122-127.

To begin investigating the different objects a viewer must always understand that, although some items may appear to be randomly chosen, the artist and patron(s) would have been in complete control as to what the portrait and its occupants outwardly represented. The composition as a whole is done with intention, influenced by not only cultural ideals but also artistic style.²⁰ Whether the objects filling the room in the painting were actually present in the room may never be known for certain. This circumstance does not detract from the significance that scholars have felt necessary for each item to represent.

Furthermore, when examining the subtle intricacies that lay within the *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait*, it is important to understand societal implications. Because such implications might have been placed upon the objects prior to any kind of figurative symbolism attached to them, with or without the artist's literal intention. It appears likely that these types of portraits would have primarily been created for social status, than just as a means of documenting the actual occasion for which the patrons initially commissioned the painting for. This social declaration is represented by way of displaying the wealth of the family through the display of various imports and luxury items, which will be discussed in greater detail later. However, it is crucial that in order to understand any style of painting one must understand its original context before the museum.

Setting the Scene:

²⁰ Ward, "Disguised Symbolism," 51.

There is no question that the *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait* is almost entirely composed of stimulating items that have been traditionally associated with symbolic meaning for the present and future of the couple depicted. For this analysis, I will begin by exploring the couple's setting. The room the couple stands in is filled with rich motifs and elegant furniture. In Dutch culture, this bedroom is considered to be the space a groom would have constructed for his bride as a "love-gift" to spend their wedding night.²¹ This tradition is certainly a means to display the groom's wealth and the luxury his wife will have access to throughout their marriage. This notion of a "love-gift" is thought to represent sacredness and importance within the space. Panofsky points out, that aspects are also implied by the shoes depicted on the floor (Figures 2-3).

There are two pairs shown in the painting, perhaps as a representation of the couple as a pair. The presence of unworn shoes has been thought to display the commitment and devotion involved in marriage. A person would have likely worn their shoes for the purpose of work or activities beyond the confines of their home and therefore the shoes would have been considered unclean. The fact that the shoes are not on the couple's feet is meant to indicate that the ground they are standing on is hallowed.²² This belief would be appropriate as many scholars have speculated that the couple is engaging in the process of contracting a marriage through their depicted actions and the artist inserting an image of himself in the mirror behind the couple. This kind of union would have been defined as a "clandestine marriage," which was done outside of the church

²¹ Panofsky, "Jan Van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait," 126.

²² Paul Crenshaw, Rebecca Tucker, and Alexandra Bonfante-Warren. *Discovering the Great Masters – the Art of Van Eyck's Guide to Understanding Symbols in Paintings*. New York: UniVan Eyckrise (2009): 29.

and yet still remained a holy act.²³ What this implies is that the devotion within this kind of marriage would have remained just as hallowed as ones that were performed within the church.

Additionally, the convex mirror in which van Eyck painted his self-portrait is actually a larger depiction than what would have been realistically produced during this time (Figure 4).²⁴ This exaggeration serves an inconspicuous departure from realism for Jan van Eyck. Although “[t]here is no program for Northern realism... because the Northerners failed to articulate one[.]”²⁵ The dramatization in size was likely done so that viewers are able to make out van Eyck’s form, as it would have been difficult otherwise.

Textiles:

While it could be argued that the entire painting was done to indicate Arnolfini and his bride’s wealth, some particular objects stand out amongst others in terms of their limited availability in the fifteenth-century. Throughout the painting there are items that signify the affluence of the groom and his bride. The furniture that adorns the room is depicted as quite costly and lavish. The materials associated with these furnishings appear to be similar to silk and velvet because of van Eyck’s “differentiation of textures through meticulous handling of [the] paint that leaves [no] trace of the painter’s hand.”²⁶

²³ Jan Baptist Bedaux, “The Reality of Symbols: The Question of Disguised Symbolism in Jan Van Eyck’s “Arnolfini Portrait””. *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 16, no. 1 (1986): 11.

²⁴ Lorne Campbell, *The Fifteenth Century Netherlandish Paintings*, London: National Gallery, 1998. 186-191.

²⁵ Craig Harbison, “Realism and Symbolism in Early Flemish Painting.” *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 66, No. 4 (Dec., 1984), pp. 588.

²⁶ Mariet Westermann, *A Worldly Art: The Dutch Republic 1585-1718*. New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1996. 88.

This authenticity is the kind of realism that van Eyck and his patrons are thought to have valued.²⁷ For example, the carpet, shown on the floor, most likely would have come from Anatolia. This item was a considerable luxury for this period as “[f]ine bedside carpets seem to have been... extremely rare” as they were ordinarily kept on tables or other surfaces (Figure 5).²⁸ However, despite the carpet’s Eastern origins and its association with Islamic devotional practices, the textile’s patterns are not that of a “prayer rug.”²⁹ Therefore, the item does nothing to further accentuate the sacredness of the space, as mentioned previously.

Nonetheless, this extravagant taste may not be only a result of Arnolfini’s status in society as it may also be influenced by van Eyck’s “position as court painter to the Duke of Burgundy [as] it is certainly logical that he might relate his paintings to his [high society] viewers’ own experience, to their social or economic position[.]”³⁰ Jan van Eyck would have been cognizant of who his audience would have been and their standards for excess.

Oranges:

The wealth of the figures is not only seen in the opulent textiles but it is also apparent in the fruit depicted in the background of the image to the left of the Arnolfini’s person (Figure 6). Scholars have categorized these fruits to emphasize a meaning

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Rosmond E. Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300-1600*. California: University of California, 2002. 76.

²⁹ Ibid, 84; Prayer rugs are described as “large rugs with rows of niches that were made for mosques... with symmetrical re-entrant carpets with keyholes at both ends[.]”

³⁰ Harbison, “Realism and Symbolism in Early Flemish Painting.”, 589.

beyond just their still-life presence. Similar to the ones shown in the *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait*, oranges have been displayed in many paintings throughout history. In Italy, the fruits were thought to symbolize fecundity in marriage, meaning fruitfulness, especially when used in settings of couple's portraiture.³¹ However, in the context of the *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait* it is likely that the fruit's presence would have been an extremely uncommon sight and would have indicated wealth in the Netherlands. It could be supposed that the oranges were another way to show that the groom would be able to provide for not only his bride but any children that may come as a result of their union. This idea of being able to provide for his children could contribute to the fruit's presumed meaning of promoting a "fruitful" venture. In any case, Arnolfini was wealthy enough to import such expensive items that were not indigenous to the regions surrounding Bruges.³² The fruits may have even been an import product Arnolfini dealt with in his work as an esteemed merchant.

The Dog:

Arnolfini and his bride's status and wealth continue to be indicated by the dog that is shown standing in the foreground between the couple (Figure 7). It is traditionally thought that the presence of the animal is meant to represent the fidelity and loyalty that the couple may have promised to one another in their marital vows.³³ In other cultures dogs and cats have been labeled as symbols of lust when shown in portraits. For this

³¹ Farrin Chwalkowski, *Symbols in Art, Religion and Culture: The Soul of Nature*, UK: Cambridge Scholar Publishing (2016), 159.

³² Citrus fruits grow in tropical and subtropical climates that have warm to hot summers and mild winters.

³³ Jan Baptist Bedaux, "The Reality of Symbols: The Question of Disguised Symbolism in Jan Van Eyck's 'Arnolfini Portrait'" *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, 15.

specific painting, the idea of lust could be implying the couple's presumed passion for a child.³⁴ This desire for a child is especially fitting given how the bride is shown with her left hand resting against what appears to be her protruding stomach, perhaps indicating the notion of pregnancy (Figure 8). This illusion is in fact created by the heavy fabric of her dress that she has intentionally raised to indicate her fertility. Yet, for the purpose of expanding beyond any culturally biased opinions, the dog may simply be a gift from Arnolfini to his new bride. With this characterization, it would seem likely that the dog served as another indication of wealth and status as only high society women of the court were known to have lap dogs as companions.³⁵

The Beaver Felt Hat:

According to the findings of Timothy Brooks, Dutch men would always be found wearing a hat, even "a poor man made do with wearing a slouch cap but the [wealthier] sort flaunted [more extravagant headwear]."³⁶ The only other time it would have been customary for someone to remove their hat would have been in the presence of royalty, as it was not yet customary (as it is today) for men to remove their hats when in the presence of women or when indoors. A courting man would have displayed his status through the quality of his clothing and hat to gain a woman's favor.³⁷

Given this cultural context, it is curious where Arnolfini's hat's fine material might have originated (Figure 9). Brooks discovered that before the fifteenth-century,

³⁴ Craig Harbison, "Sexuality and Social Standing in Jan Van Eyck's Arnolfini Double Portrait." *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (1990): 264.

³⁵ Ibid 270.

³⁶ Timothy Brooks, *Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World*, 26.

³⁷ Ibid 27-28.

European hat makers would have used indigenous beavers to make the felt for their creations. They used beaver underfur because it was found to be more durable than that of other animals, such as sheep. Yet, the indigenous species of beaver became extinct very quickly, leaving them to look else where for the hat material. Hunters then sought beaver from the Scandinavian region of the world, although over-trapping caused this beaver to be extinct as well.³⁸ Given this information, if Arnolfini's hat had been created around the time the painting was initially commissioned it would have likely been made of the Scandinavian species of beaver. At any rate, the material would have at least originated near this region of the world and it would have likely been very expensive given the fragile existence of the animal.

This is further supported by the fact that it was not until near the end of the sixteenth-century that tradesmen began to search for new resources of beaver in Siberia and Canada. With the demand, the Natives of Canada were able to hunt and sell the pelts for a good price with merchants because of the extinction of the European species from the hats created two centuries prior.³⁹

Understanding Gestures

Gesture may be one of the most important aspects of communication, perhaps even more important than the spoken word. According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, "the word 'gesture' refers to 'a movement of the body or any part of it' that is 'expressive of thought or feeling.'"⁴⁰ The acting of hand movements and body language can transcend

³⁸ Ibid 42-43.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Adam Kendon. "Gesture." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 26 (1997): 109.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2952517>.

the spoken language, allowing people to have some form of communication without actually having to speak to one another. Moshe Barasch writes, “The comparison of gesture to a language – a comparison whose life story has not yet been written – does not belong to a distant past only; it comes up time and again, and it is quite well known to modern man.”⁴¹ This idea of gesture and its ‘silent communication’ is something that is especially important in art, and this painting.

Gesticulations have been used in art throughout history by artists as a way to assist the audience in understanding the image's meaning or intent. Interestingly, Barasch mentions that, “Leonardo da Vinci advises the painter to observe and depict ‘the motions of the dumb, who speak with the movements of their hands and eyes and eyebrows and their whole person, in the desire to express the idea that is in their minds’[.]”⁴² Although Leonardo (b. 1452) was not yet born at the time the *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait* was created, the idea he presents is one that can certainly be applied to Jan van Eyck’s painting. His advice speaks to the fact that people who are deaf are able to communicate non-verbally with others around them. In his treatise, Alberti defines gestures and body language as “movements of the soul are recognized in the movements of the body.”^{43 44} Therefore, why not recreate this dialogue in a still-image that is forever attempting to converse with viewers years after its creation? When examining gesture from a twenty-first century perspective, that also keeps in mind social

⁴¹ Moshe Barasch, *Giotto and the Language of Gesture*, Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1987. 3.

⁴² Ibid 2.

⁴³ Michael Baxandall, *Painting & Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A primer in the social history of pictorial style*, Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1972, 60.

⁴⁴ Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*. Translated by Martin Kemp and Cecil Grayson. London: Penguin, 1991. 41-41.

constructions behind art of the fifteenth-century, it is simple to say that Giovanni Arnolfini's gesture could be interpreted in a multitude of ways. This section will be addressing two interpretations; specifically, that Arnolfini's hand may be communicating welcome or perhaps that he is in the position of taking an oath.

In the *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait*, Giovanni Arnolfini is shown extending his right hand toward the viewer (Figure 10). This kind of gesture is seen in many paintings, both inside and outside of "Western" Europe. Michael Baxandall even references a similar gesture when discussing gesture language in regards to a fifteenth-century woodcut, *Queen's Bishop's Pawn (The Innkeeper)* (Figure 11). He writes:

one recognizes [this] to be his gesture of invitation – 'he has his right hand extended in the manner of a person who invites.' The palm of the hand is slightly raised and the fingers are allowed to fan slightly downwards... [we] can find this gesture playing a part in many paintings; even when we already know the painting represents an encounter, knowing the gesture helps us read it more crisply, because the gesture lends itself to different expressive inflections.⁴⁵

It is important to note that it was, for the most part, completely up to the artist to communicate the intentions of the painting to the audience. The responsibility was not necessarily given to the subjects being depicted. However, this idea may be less likely in the case of the Arnolfini Wedding because it was a commissioned work that would have been important to Arnolfini and how he and his wife were perceived by their surrounding community. Therefore, they would have had more control over the message they were trying to communicate through their gestures. This idea relies on

⁴⁵ Baxandall, *Painting & Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, 67-68.

the assumption that they had a message to communicate beyond the aspect of announcing their marriage.

A Welcoming Gesture:

One translation of the raised hand could be that Arnolfini is addressing the viewers of the painting. It appears that in many cultures, this gesture is understood as a symbol of welcoming. Certain Indian groups and other societies in the East recognize that when “beckoning the hand is held up, palm outwards and the fingers moved downwards and inwards-just the reverse of our gesture.”⁴⁶ While it is unlikely Jan van Eyck would have been cognizant of this cultural context, this idea is applicable if the painting is depicting Giovanni Arnolfini’s wedding or engagement. Baxandall referenced the gesture as “*Demonstration*: a thing one has seen may be noted by opening the palm of the hand in its direction.”⁴⁷ Perhaps, van Eyck has made it so that the groom is directly addressing the viewer’s presence. This would mean that the groom is breaking the fourth wall to invite viewers to share in their happy union and stand alongside the two figures shown in the mirror to bare witness to this occasion.

Vow or Oath Gesture:

The most plausible interpretation of the gesture is most likely that van Eyck depicted the groom as though he were in the process of declaring his vows. The manner in which the figure is shown to be raising his right hand is extremely similar to

⁴⁶ H. A. Rose. “The Language of Gesture.” *Folklore*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Dec., 1919): 313.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1255111>.

⁴⁷ Baxandall, *Painting & Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*. 61.

the sort of gesture done when a person takes an official oath. This symbolic gesticulation would have been recognizable from a legal perspective, which, according to other scholars, was the source of many of these early gestures. Barasch writes, “[a] gesture borrowed from such a vocabulary, every artist must have thought, would be understood by the spectator.”⁴⁸ The vocabulary he is referring to is the established gestures typically used in a court room setting. It is possible that Jan van Eyck or Arnolfini had this notion in mind. It would be an appropriate inference considering the act of marriage has always been an aspect of the legal system.

The theory that Arnolfini is declaring his vows is also supported by the fact that his other hand is clasping one of the bride’s (Figure 12). This projects the idea that Arnolfini is establishing a line of communication between him and his bride while standing before the artist and witness. Additionally, the couple is shown angled toward each other and not directly facing the artist. This could indicate that they are in the process of their wedding ceremony instead of a presentation of the pair after the fact.

With oath-taking in mind, Arnolfini’s gesture is quite similar to that of the Roman orator (Figure 13). This kind of pose was quite important during the Roman Empire as it signified when someone possessed the eloquence of a public speaker. While it is difficult to conclude whether Jan van Eyck was aware of this particular signal, Giovanni Arnolfini may have been exposed to this Roman gesture at some point since he was Italian. Beyond this, we can also connect the orator’s characteristic hand gesture to that of the Christian Benediction gesture, which had been represented in countless works of art before and after the completion of van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait*.

⁴⁸ Barasch, *Giotto and the Language of Gesture*, 7.

The Benediction gesture is one that is composed of the ring and little finger being bent and touching the palm, while the rest of the fingers are poised straight up. The gesture is seen in many religious paintings, including van Eyck's *Madonna of Chancellor Rolin* (Figure 14). Here the Christ-child is shown displaying the two fingers which symbolizes authority (Figure 15).⁴⁹ This signal is deeply rooted in Christianity, although a similar gesture is used in both Hindu and Buddhist iconographies, wherein the gesture of displaying the right palm is meant to convey protection.⁵⁰ This reminds us that while a Western Christian society may have "[f]amiliarity with conventional gestures[, it] does not mean preservation of the gesture in its original context."⁵¹ That is *if* it truly has one original context at all, as human kind has never developed in a vacuum and such a simple hand gesture could have endless meanings.

Some scholars argue that the connection between these gestures may also point to theories about the couple's involvement in a clandestine marriage. Specifically highlighting the depiction of Arnolfini reaching for his bride's hand, the gesture has been interpreted as the contract of matrimony and the promise of marital faith.⁵² However, the same hand gesture was also used in Dutch society to symbolize the *promise* of marriage in the future. In this case, the image symbolizes or documents an engagement between the pair. This does not necessarily apply to this painting in particular as the

⁴⁹ Jan van Eyck, *Madonna of Chancellor Rolin*, Oil on panel, c. 1435. 66cm x 62cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

⁵⁰ Hatcher (2016); The "mudra" wherein a Hindu deity displays the palm of its hand toward the viewer (similar to Arnolfini) means "freedom from fear." Ghorl. et al. (2007); The Buddhist interpretation of this gesture is similar as the "Abhaya" mudra where the Buddha is shown standing with its right palm extended toward the viewer is meant to be the "have no fear" pose.

⁵¹ Barasch, *Giotto and the Language of Gesture*, 14.

⁵² Bedaux, "The Reality of Symbols" 7.

portrait was privately commissioned, as previously mentioned, and therefore does not have to adhere to certain *traditional* standards.

Whatever the true meaning of the gesture in this specific image, a majority of scholars hold that the reason Jan van Eyck included a miniature portrait of himself in the mirror behind the couple is to designate his role as a witness to Arnolfini and Cenami's marriage. In order to legitimize their marriage to the church and society, a couple was required to have at least one witness present.⁵³ In any case, the research indicates that gestures are historical, they are meant to convey some specific meaning shared by individual communities. Furthermore, while the intention of Arnolfini's gesture may never be recovered as we are outside of the painting's original context, we do know that such meaning existed and was vulnerable to change depending on time and culture. Barach states that:

Most important in our [modern] context is that conventional gestures are in the first place conceived as means of communication. The readability of the natural gesture is a side- or after-effect; it has little to do with the aim of the gesture. The conventional gesture is – at least in its origins – performed in order to convey a message. We are, then, fully aware that we are performing the gesture, and we are aware that it is supposed to carry a specific meaning... All these symbolic acts emerged at certain stages in history, they are often peculiar to a certain culture, and therefore unintelligible in another.⁵⁴

This aspect of misinterpretation is even possible within a single heterogeneous society.

To further understand this idea, we can think of how modern gestures are recognized,

⁵³ Ibid, 11.

⁵⁴ Barasch, *Giotto and the Language of Gesture*, 4.

such as a “thumbs up” or a “peace sign.” It is generally assumed that these signs are universally recognized but they can also signify different meanings cross-culturally. In the twenty-first century, the world as a whole has increased access to other cultures due to our social and global media networks. This was not the case for people living in the fifteenth-century. Thus, there would have been no way for an outsider to understand the *actual* intention behind the gesture in the *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait*.

Many notions of symbolism behind the objects and gestures in the portrait that have been discussed may not have been relevant to the time van Eyck painted it. Instead, these items may have been included solely as representations of the couple's, namely Giovanni Arnolfini's, overall wealth and social status. This painting serves as a reminder of these aspects, centuries after the couple's own mortality.

Conclusion

In the end, the only people who may have provided the most accurate reading of the portrait was Giovanni Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami when the finished painting hung on the wall of their home. As Roger Crum writes in relation to Hugo van der Goes' *Portinari Altarpiece*, “[t]he primary reader of the altarpiece would have surely been a priest. As an engaged spectator, the priest would have concretized the work by manipulating its form[.]”⁵⁵ Relating this back to the *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait*, we have to assume that van Eyck's intended primary audience for this private commission would have been the couple themselves. This is due to the idea that the painting's entire

⁵⁵ Crum, “Facing the Closed Doors to Reception? Portinari Altarpiece,” 8-9.

composition was largely influenced by Arnolfini and the image he wanted to portray. That is not to say that the artist would not have taken some liberties in the painting's execution. However, just as the priest of the church the *Portinari Altarpiece* is from would have controlled the work's narrative, Giovanni Arnolfini would have been completely in control of what the portrait meant. Any other interpretation of the work after the fact is likely swayed by one's own personal biases and experience.

Again, that is not to say that all of the previous research conducted on the painting is irrelevant, but that it should be understood in its original context prior to it belonging to an institution's collection. We must look at the painting in its original context and what it meant to its original owners. Only then can we appreciate the painting in its new context of the National Gallery, and how this setting influences the way a viewer interprets it.

Choosing to examine art in this way may allow the audience to be able to form their own conjectures about the image whilst keeping in mind historical context. It is important to reiterate that these speculations can never be completely proven true or false, as art is about interpretation. However, there is the added benefit to knowing historical context and purposed theories as more realistic observations can be created. People of different cultures may see the objects within a painting in different lights, even in the subtlest of ways. Without this, "we miss the degree to which perspective was a culturally inflected pictorial tool, limitless within the pictorial plane, but ultimately bounded by the pictorial frame and its multiple frames of reference."⁵⁶ An example of

⁵⁶ Dana Leibsohn and Jeanette Favrot. Peterson. *Seeing across Cultures in the Early Modern World*. Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2012. 42-43.

this is the aforementioned oranges of the van Eyck portrait. People who live in regions where oranges are indigenous may interpret their presence within a work of art differently than those who were not as familiar with them. They may not even feel that they are significant to the work at all, just a simple detail provided by the artist to bring more realism to the scene. If that were the case, would that viewer's perspective be considered as accurate even if the artist's intention was different? And who is to decide this?

Overall, when conducting research into the *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait*, the most compelling question to consider was whose perspective was the correct one to discuss? There are many different paths of research that could have been used to conduct this kind of investigation. The continued research of art history through a broadened scope is dependent upon taking these different perspectives into consideration and having the ability to apply them to the painting, alongside historical practicality. This style of research can be applied to practically any work of art. In the end, there may be no correct answer as to which perspective is most accurate, because none are more important than the other. What is important is these interpretations should serve as guide to new ideas and connections as this painting survives in a world that exposes it to a transcultural perspective.

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Illustrations



Figure 1: Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his Wife (Arnolfini Wedding Portrait), Jan van Eyck, 1434, oil on oak, 82.2 x 60cm,



Figure 2: Arnolfini Wedding Portrait. detail: red shoes

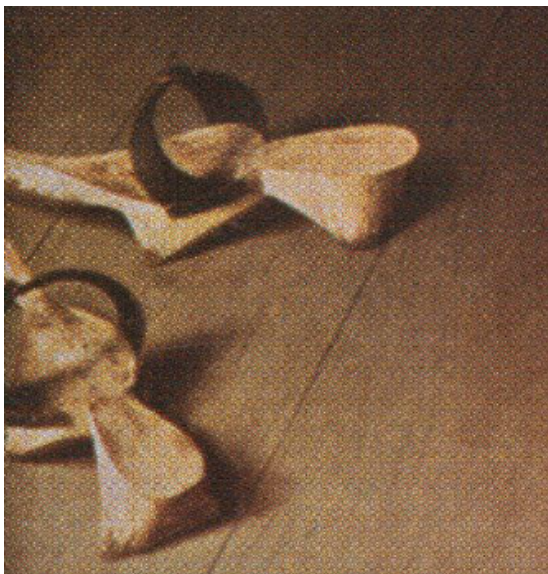


Figure 3: Arnolfini Wedding Portrait, 1434, detail: shoes.



Figure 4: Arnolfini Wedding Portrait, 1434,, detail: mirror

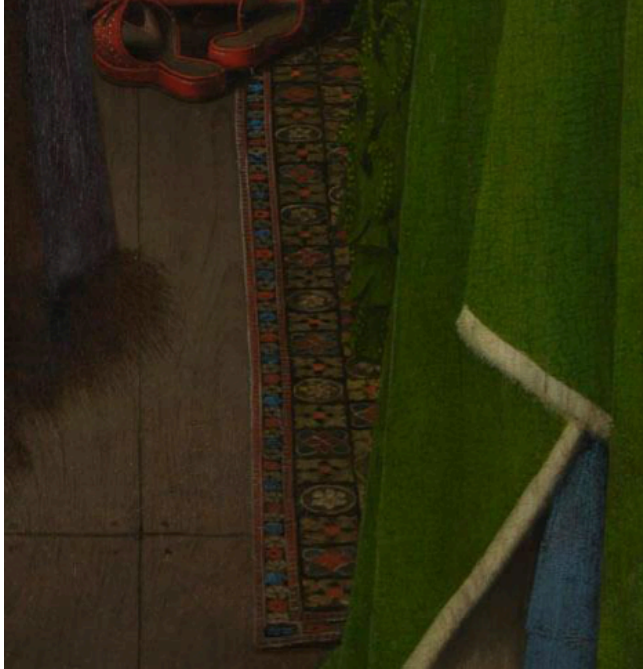


Figure 5: Arnolfini Wedding Portrait, 1434, detail: carpet.



Figure 6: Arnolfini Wedding Portrait, 1434, detail: oranges.



Figure 7: Arnolfini Wedding Portrait, 1434, detail: dog



Figure 8: Arnolfini Wedding Portrait, 1434, detail: dress.



Figure 9: Arnolfini Wedding Portrait, 1434, detail: hat.



Figure 10: Arnolfini Wedding Portrait, 1434, detail: Giovanni's right hand



Figure 11: The Queen's Bishop's Pawn (The Innkeeper). woodcut. From the Book of Chess. Venice. Courtesy of Getty Image.



Figure 12: Arnolfini Wedding Portrait. detail: clasping of hands.



Figure 13: Aule Metele "The Orator". 110-90 BCE.



Figure 14: Jan van Eyck, Madonna of Chancellor Rolin, Oil on panel, c. 1435. 66cm x 62cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris



Figure 15: Madonna of Chancellor Rolin, 1435, detail: Christ-Child

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