Praised for its revolutionary technique and studied for its perplexing imagery, Jan van Eyck’s Arnolfini Portrait has remained a riddle since the 19th century. Completed in 1434 in Bruges, the work showcases a skilled use of oil paints and impressively realistic details. More famous and perhaps more important, however, than van Eyck’s technique are the two figures and the objects which decorate their setting. These elements together are the subject of many ongoing debates. These debates focused specifically on the identity of the figures, their gestures, and the overall meaning of the work.

The stream of controversy that has brought the Arnolfini Portrait such fame began with Erwin Panofsky’s article, “Jan Van Eyck’s Arnolfini Portrait.” This 1934 article was one of the earliest studies on this painting. Art historian Craig Harbison notes, “It was Erwin Panofsky’s interpretation, published over fifty years ago, that first focused attention on the possible significance of the myriad details of the painting. Panofsky believed that these details would support a single symbolic/religious reading” (251). Whereas Panofsky’s ideas are cited in nearly every study of this portrait, he is often criticized for what Linda Seidel terms his “orthodox” theories and far-fetched ideas (xiv).

The painting portrays a man and a woman linking hands. Lavishly dressed, the figures stand in a grand bedchamber. The male figure, on the left of the composition, raises his right hand. To the right, the female figure uses her left hand to lift the folds of her green dress. A small dog stands at the couple's feet. Two pairs of shoes lie discarded around the room. In addition, several pieces of fruit lie on a ledge beneath the window to the left. An ornate, golden chandelier hangs just above the couple's heads. It holds a single, burning candle over the male figure's head. Appearing along the far wall is a line of swirling text, which, translated from Latin, reads, “Jan van Eyck was here.” Underneath this signature is a circular mirror holding the reflection of two figures in red and blue turbans. The mirror is surrounded with small images of the Passion of Christ. A wooden figurine of St. Margaret stands atop a wardrobe, just to the left of the female figure's head. A gargoyle, another wooden figure, is meant to accompany the
image of St. Margaret, sitting above the couple’s handclasp. Describing the texture and lighting of the painting, Panofsky notes, “these statuesque figures are placed in an interior suffused with a dim though colored light, which shows up the peculiar tactual values of such materials as brass, velvet, wood and fur, so that they appear interwoven with each other within a homogeneous chiaroscuro atmosphere” (125).

An accurate identification of van Eyck’s figures is key to a comprehensive understanding of the work. It has, however, been a riddle since the painting’s first public appearance in 1843 (Graham 101). A popular theory regarding the identification of the two figures developed in the mid 1840’s, which proposed that the portrait represented van Eyck himself and his wife. In 1847 the National Gallery, home to the Arnolfini Portrait since 1842, adopted this as the portrait’s official identification. Disproving the self-portrait theory in 1861, in the inventories of Margaret of Austria named the figures as Giovanni Arnolfini and Jeanne Cenami (Graham 102). Further research revealed that the couple was, in fact, active in Bruges in the 1400’s, a time frame consistent with the commission of the portrait. In addition, it must be noted that Giovanni Arnolfini and van Eyck were both active in the court of the Duke of Burgundy (Harbison 259). Harbison points out that, “because of his numerous court duties Jan van Eyck’s non-ducal commissions were no doubt jealously guarded. He was also apparently forbidden by guild rules from working for anyone not connected with the court” (259). Since both artist and supported patron worked at the court, it was possible for Giovanni to commission a portrait from van Eyck.

In 1972, Peter Schabacker took on the debate over the identity of the figures once again by taking a closer look at the handclasp of the couple (Sandler 488). At the time couples typically joined their right hands in a marriage ceremony, but van Eyck depicts the bridegroom holding the bride’s right hand in his left. Schabacker, therefore, proposed that the painting illustrated a morganatic marriage, that is a union between two persons of unequal status. Any child of the parent of lower status cannot inherit anything from the parent of higher status. His theory, however, would be incorrect if the figures were meant to portray Giovanni Arnolfini and Jeanne Cenami, who were of equal social status (Graham 196). In 1980, art historian Elisabeth Dhanens offered support for Schabacker’s theory, noting it could be true if the male figure were Giovanni’s brother, Michele. Although it is an historical fact that Michele’s sons did not inherit his property, Bedaux saw it as an unlikely theory (9). He argued that, “[Giovanni] was the most prominent member of the Arnolfini family, and therefore the one most likely to have been depicted here” (Bedaux 9).
Another argument calls into further question the identity of the figures. Lorne Campbell, a researcher from the National Gallery, has recently discovered that Giovanni Arnolfini was not in Bruges until after van Eyck's portrait was completed, nor was he first married until 1447. Therefore, it would have been impossible for van Eyck to portray Giovanni Arnolfini and Jeanne Cenami in the portrait. Further research acknowledges the figures as Giovanni di Nicolao Arnolfini and Constanza, a couple who lived in Bruges and wed there in 1426 (Graham 197).

The couples' gestures, which seem to be at the root of nearly every theory regarding the portrait, are even more important in understanding the meaning of the Arnolfini Portrait. Van Eyck depicts Giovanni raising his right hand and using his left to hold Constanza's right hand. Particularly fascinated with Giovanni's oath-like gesture, Panofsky celebrated “the confident humility” and “the amount of tender personal feeling with which the artist has invested the conventional gesture” (125).

Though it is not certain what scene van Eyck is depicting, the figures' gestures are most commonly associated with that of a wedding ceremony. Bedaux explains that, “in several dioceses in Belgium and the north of France in the late middle ages, the couple gave themselves to each other by joining hands and, raising the other hand, making a gesture reminiscent of an oath” (7). Similarly, Panofsky remarks that gestures and affirming words were required to certify a marital union (123). “In art, the words could not be heard,” Sandler concludes, “only the handclasp could be shown, so it became the chief visual evidence of marriage” (480). Hall, on the other hand, suggests that the handclasp is not one of a marriage ceremony, but rather a betrothal. In this case, the couple can be seen pledging their faithfulness to their engagement in a ceremony that, in the 14th century, was comparable to a marriage (Colenbrander 418).

Known for causing “quite a stir in art-historical literature” is the manner by which Giovanni joins his left hand with Constanza's right hand (Bedaux 8). As previously noted, Schabacker attempted to justify the unorthodox gesture by suggesting it as a representation of a morganatic marriage. Recent research by the National Gallery, however, disproved this theory. Regardless, the nature of the handclasp remains a debated topic. Panofsky proposes that the only reason the couple joins their hands left to right is to prevent a disturbance of symmetry in the composition. Furthermore, Panofsky notes, “He endeavored to
avoid the overlapping of the right arm as well as the contraposto movement” (125). Though it is likely van Eyck worked to create a successful composition, Bedaux, among other critics, was not convinced by Panofsky’s claim. Instead, he notes that in some marriages, “it was customary to lay the right hand of the woman into the left hand of her spouse” (Bedaux 10).

Mystery has defined the Arnolfini Portrait since its debut, a result of the numerous objects painted in van Eyck’s portrait. Of these objects, the reflection of two figures in a mirror, the artist’s signature along the back wall, and the small figurines of St. Margaret and her monster are the most perplexing. Panofsky remarks that the symbols “impress the beholder with a kind of mystery and makes him inclined to suspect a hidden significance in all and every object” (126). His suggestion of “hidden significance” has inspired tedious research by art critics, resulting in the formation of numerous theories regarding the portrait’s purpose (126).

Often called the Arnolfini Wedding, the portrait is most popularly believed to portray a marriage. Supportive of this theory, Panofsky stated, “...Jan van Eyck’s... portrait could not be described more briefly or more appropriately than by calling it the representation of a...marital oath... by joining hands” (123). It is, in fact, the manner by which the two figures join hands that continues to justify the marriage theory. This gesture is repeated throughout art history, appearing solely in works depicting marital ceremonies. An engraved sarcophagus dating from the 17th century, for instance, represents a Roman marriage ceremony in which two figures join hands and the bridegroom raises his opposite hand as if to take an oath.

Though Panofsky adopted the marriage theory, he also defended the orthodox theory, which stated that the portrait held religious significance (126). He notes that the single candle, seen burning in the chandelier, doubles as a customary element of marriage ceremonies and as a symbol for the wisdom of God. In addition, he interprets the figurines of St. Margaret and her monster, which linger near the female figure, as a symbol for childbirth. Panofsky also noted the reflection of two figures in the mirror and an inscription on the back wall, which translates to “Jan van Eyck was here” (126). Both elements are said to prove the presence of witnesses at the ceremony, an element required in order to legalize a marital union.

Harbison, however, argues against the marriage theory, by first pointing out that a painting could not legalize a marriage (252). If it were able to stand up in
court, perhaps van Eyck would have signed the work with the day and month, as he did on his other paintings (Harbison 252). The so-called witnesses who are reflected in the mirror appear in other works by van Eyck, as they were a kind of trademark. Secondly, he notes the elaborate dress of van Eyck’s figures and assumes that the two individuals were quite wealthy. A marriage between two such people was a public event often celebrated with “church ritual, feasting, [and] public festivities” (253). Moreover, the Catholic Church looked down upon private marriage ceremonies, as it often resulted in the excommunication of the couple (252).

Harbison instead offers a different theory, suggesting that the sexual undertones of the work have largely been ignored. He notes, “By viewing van Eyck’s image as either realistic or sacramental, modern scholars have often been oblivious to this more human component” (Harbison 255). It is therefore suggested that the painting depicts a post-marriage celebration. Traditionally, newlywed couples return home after the ceremony to commemorate their union. In addition, returning home was often celebrated by indulging in fruits or other sweets. Perhaps this explains the abundance of fruit in the scene. In particular, orange trees and cherries were contemporary symbols of love and marriage. Candles, as seen in the chandelier, were representative of sexual union when associated with newlyweds. Atop a wooden chest stands a small figurine of St. Margaret, the patroness of childbirth. Her depiction is appropriate, as she represents fertility (Harbison 263). The pendants of Christ’s passion surround the mirror, reminding the couples of loyalty. The discarded shoes around the room represent sexual passion, foreshadowing a couple entering bed together. In addition, the allusion to bare feet symbolizes fertility (Harbison 261).

The theory currently supported by the National Gallery suggests that the piece was made in memory of the female figure, Constanza, who died before the painting was completed. With this information in mind critics have explored the nature of her death,

thus justifying multiple symbols in the painting. For example, Harbison states that Constanza died childless and proposes that the portrait was commissioned to represent the couple’s struggle conceiving a child (267). In contrast, Margaret Koster believes, “Everything in the portrait works to show that she died during childbirth” (197). Koster uses the symbols in the room to justify this idea. She offers the following observation:
“From the menacing gargoyle carved into the wooden bench that seems to hover above the couple’s hands joined in union, perhaps presaging its untimely ending, to the snuffed-out candle in the chandelier on the wife’s side which is contrasted with a full-tapered example, still alight, above her husband, the signs, it is suggested, are there to be read. Even the husband’s ginger grasp of his wife’s hand, ‘slips through his fingers, as perhaps did Constanza herself’” (Graham 197).

Harbison, determined to provide better insight into the lives of the two figures, explores the idea that the portrait focuses on sex and the desire for pregnancy. To the right, Constanza is seen lifting the folds of her green dress. Although her raised dress causes her to look pregnant, most scholars agree that this was not van Eyck’s intention (Harbison 265). Regardless, this action could mean other things. Harbison suggests that Constanza lifts her dress in reply to her husband’s wave. Since it is likely that the illustrated moment is following the couple’s wedding, Constanza’s pose may be an expression of her wish to conceive (Harbison 265). Giovanni’s gesture appears to be a relaxed oath, symbolizing his commitment to conception (Harbison 263).

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A final theory regarding the Arnolfini Portrait is one of the most intriguing, yet seldom discussed. Harbison cites a Spanish royal collection of the 18th century, which claims that van Eyck’s puzzling portrait once had a frame. Although it is missing today, the frame is said to have had an inscription on it. This inscription, implying the couple had been unfaithful to each other, alluded to the gargoyles which appear just above the couple’s hands, haunting the couple’s union (Harbison 256). The couple’s infidelity is plausible, as Giovanni worked in the court of the Duke of Burgundy, a group known for their “loose sexual morals” (Harbison 255).

Based on the plethora of ideas and theories offered on the piece, it seems van Eyck’s perplexing portrait will remain just that. Relentless critics have exhausted the portrait with constant analysis and debate. Harbison sums up the work adding, “Whether the painting as a whole, or any detail within it, is viewed as utterly real or narrowly symbolic, the opposites-realism and symbolism-beget, define, and limit each other” (251). The earliest writings on this work analyzed it simply as a portrait of two figures in a room. If the work is viewed by its earliest analysis, the Arnolfini Portrait becomes a work of art free of the confines of debate (Harbison 255). Graham offers a refreshing idea when she concludes, “van Eyck’s image itself may always speak more loudly than words, particularly than those MUSTERED by historical research” (197).
Works Cited


