

**GIOVANNI ARNOLFINI AND HIS BRIDE:  
A HOPED-FOR PREGNANCY**  
FLEMMING GARNER

This paper was written for Dr. Joiner's Renaissance Art History course.



Jan van Eyck, *Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride*, 1435.

Jan van Eyck's celebrated painting, *Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride*, has been given many titles over the years: *The Arnolfini Portrait*, *The Arnolfini Wedding Portrait*, and *The Arnolfini Double Portrait* are the most common of these. And along with the painting's many titles has come a plethora of analyses and interpretations. Erwin Panofsky was among the first, giving what is now known as the classical analysis of the painting. Panofsky suggested meaning for images within the work, such as the signature of the artist, representing his witnessing of a marriage, making the painting in his words a "pictorial marriage certificate" (124). After Panofsky's 1934 commentary, the painting again came under scrutiny in 1989 by the feminist critic Linda Seidel. According to Seidel, Giovanni Arnolfini appeared to "have been marrying 'up'" (60), alleging that in fact

Giovanna Arnolfini had the money in the marriage. Each critic of *The Arnolfini Portrait* has given a new twist to the painting and to the meaning behind the two central figures. The varying interpretations notwithstanding, the work has a fundamental focus in the painting on fertility and childbearing. This focus is clear in the numerous veiled symbols and in the painter's allusion to a traditional Annunciation scene.

The two figures in the painting have been firmly identified: Giovanni Arnolfini, a Lucchese cloth merchant, and Giovanna Cenami, the daughter of a fellow cloth merchant, also from Lucca in Italy. Theirs was a powerful political union of two influential Italian families living in Northern Europe. As Arnolfini continued with his career and became very wealthy, he began to work for the Medici Bank and then found himself immersed in the politics of Northern Europe. The hope of this union was to produce an heir who would continue in the cloth business, especially since Giovanni Arnolfini was often away for political reasons. During the 15<sup>th</sup> century, moreover, women had specific responsibilities within the home, childbirth being the most important of these duties. The Arnolfini betrothal is one of many portraits created with the similar idea of presenting a newly-wed couple and then underscoring the hoped-for procreation.

In the case of Arnolfini and his young bride, van Eyck has featured several veiled indications alluding to the prospect of fertility and conception. The 15<sup>th</sup> century Northern community had high expectations for married women, especially for recently married brides, to conceive, preferably on the first night of the marriage. Because of the emphasis placed on the importance of having children and of forming a family, Northern women often surrounded themselves with tokens to induce fertility in hope for a successful pregnancy. Thus, Giovanna Cenami stands on the right of the portrait by a beautiful red bed, which not only displays her status in the home but also her wifely duty of producing children. As a follower of the customs regarding childbearing, Cenami stands barefoot beside the bed, her red slippers under a bench in the distance. As Craig Harbison observes, "The bare foot or accompanying shoe is an almost universal symbol of fecundity, [and] women especially must touch the earth to be fertile" (261). It was later that during the 17<sup>th</sup> century that artists displayed the removal of slippers as evidence of sexual passion. According to Harbison, "Northern

manuscripts and panels can also be seen reflecting these ancient customs” (261).

It is particularly in the painting’s fruits that van Eyck symbolizes fertility. Just outside the window is a tree crowded with cherries, noted by Chevalier and Gheerbrant as “expressions of sexual desire” (412). And below on the chest sit oranges that Harbison considers directly “connected in numerous ways to marital and fertility rituals; especially when the newly-wed couple returns home to consummate their marriage, they are offered fruit and sweetmeats” (261-262). Fruit was also offered as a “cure to the morning sickness of pregnancy” (Harbison, 286). This image in particular shows the eagerness of the couple to have children, for the oranges are already there in anticipation of a successful impregnation. And “the fruit in Van Eyck’s work is no doubt meant to evoke fruitfulness . . .” (Harbison, 263). Yet another symbol refers to childbearing. Just above the couple’s hands is a tiny statue of a monster, an attribute of Saint Margaret of Antioch. Margaret was a beautiful girl who declared her Christian faith to an admirer who took offense and locked her up in prison. It was while imprisoned that Margaret was tortured by the Devil in the form of a dragon; it is for this reason that Saint Margaret has the attribute of a monster. Margaret Carroll states that the little statue in van Eyck’s painting is a further attempt to ensure a successful conception, St. Margaret serving the couple as guardian to the fruitfulness of the womb and as the “patroness of childbirth” (107).

A further reference to pregnancy can be seen in the stance of the pair. Arnolfini and his wife have been compared to a traditional Annunciation scene. This interpretation hinges upon the gesture of Arnolfini’s right hand. Harbison has observed that this gesture was “originally more rigid and upright, more oath-like in fact” (263). X-Ray analysis has revealed that the artist altered Arnolfini’s right hand to be more of a greeting than in earlier versions. This emendation shows that the husband takes the place of the Angel Gabriel and his wife is then likened to the Virgin Mary, who will hopefully give birth to his child. In the words of Harbison, “It would seem an appropriate gesture during an Annunciation, acknowledging the “desired conception and eventual birth of a child” (263). To underscore this interpretation, Harbison sees the presence of the Lord indicated in the “discarded slippers [on the left] and burning candle, show[ing] the Trinity [and] answering a couple’s plea by sending down

child from heaven” (267). The discarded slippers in this context represent the couple standing on holy ground, while the burning candle reveals the Holy Ghost within the Trinity. A final presage of childbearing is seen in the fact that Giovanna Arnolfini lifts her green dress toward her waist, creating a protuberance akin to that of a pregnant woman. Edwin Hall writes that by “lifting her voluminous green gown [Giovanna is] thus quietly receptive to [her husband’s] advances” (xix).

These symbols—the fruit, the statuette of a monster, and the discarded slippers—together with the allusion to an Annunciation scene, underscore the Arnolfinis’ desire for a child. This interpretation strengthens the work Jan van Eyck created, because although Giovanni and Giovanna Arnolfini never conceived a child of their own; they nevertheless hope for one. This exact emotion apparent within the painting Jan van Eyck is able to capture; for the foundation of *Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride* is the couple’s assurance of a hoped-for pregnancy.

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