

The Woman's Role in Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss the various interpretations of Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*. My goal in researching was to find a contextual approach to interpretations, particularly what meaning the painting would have held in 15th century Bruges. While initially seeking only the literal interpretations of the extensive symbolism in the painting, I soon became aware that the painting speaks much more about the roles of women during the 15th century. Societal expectations for women regarding marriage, gender roles and sexuality seem to have greatly influenced van Eyck's work. The painting offers insight into the subjects' lives and their society. I support this thesis with research into 14th and 15th century marriage customs as well as the idea of a secular versus a sacred marriage. I also compare the painting to images of "The Marriage of the Virgin," highlighting the newly elevated status of marriage in the church. Many of the symbols included in the painting also help to define the gendered roles of both subjects. I also explore the historical context of the painting if the subjects are identified as Giovanni Arnolfini and his second wife, a woman with whom he solely sought an heir.

Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* has for centuries captivated viewers and critics who have offered numerous interpretations. While many scholars have granted symbolic importance to the details within the painting, the double portrait's true meaning remains elusive. However, it might be asserted that the painting offers a contextual look into the life of a fifteenth-century couple and the effect that contemporary society had on that relationship. It should not be overlooked that this painting embodies idealistic representations of men and women at the time, especially their expected gender roles and their sexuality. Particularly, the imagery in the *Arnolfini Portrait* focuses on the societal expectations and roles of women during the Northern Renaissance, including expectations regarding marriage, pregnancy, and domestic life.

The main subject and cause for debate in the *Arnolfini Portrait* centers on observation of the two main figures (Figure 1). In the center a man and a woman are shown holding hands. Most commonly this gesture is referred to as a visual wedding contract, implying that by joining hands, the couple is joining together in matrimony. However, there are some inconsistencies with this interpretation when it is placed within the context of 15th century society. Wedding portraits had risen in popularity in the decades before van Eyck. Beginning in the 14th century, images of the marriage of the Virgin became much more prominent.

The first of these examples, Giotto's *Marriage of the Virgin* in the Arena Chapel, depicts Joseph placing a ring on Mary's finger



Figure 1. Jan van Eyck, *The Arnolfini Portrait*, 1434



Figure 2. Giotto di Bondone, *Marriage of the Virgin*, 1305

were presented as inseparable” (31). In the time leading up to the implementation of this doctrine, there were growing concerns within the church regarding clandestine marriages. The church viewed sexual intercourse before marriage to be immoral. As long as clandestine marriages could take place, there was little to distinguish whether a couple was actually married, and if they might be having sexual intercourse under the guise that they were married when they were not. Edwin Hall explains that the church took steps between the twelfth to fourteenth centuries to make all marriages outside the church invalid, going so far as to excommunicate anyone involved or to deny them last rights upon their death (26). The marriage of the virgin’s rise in popularity worked to solidify the idea that marriage was a significant part of religious devotion. Soon after, marriage was declared to be one of the seven sacraments (Hall, 13). One must not overlook the influence that these ideas and images would have had on Van Eyck and his portrait, whether in agreement or in contrast to the views of the church.



Figure 4. Master of Catherine of Cleves, *Marriage of the Virgin*, Hours of Catherine of Cleves

As much as Van Eyck’s portrait and earlier Christian scenes have in common, there are a few inconsistencies to note. The most important of these pertains to the figures’ hands. While Van Eyck’s figures hold hands in a similar fashion to those in the marriage of the virgin, they are not joining right hands as is the case in the other marriage scenes. This gesture leads many to question the true meaning of the marriage agreement. Some authors argue that a left-handed marriage is symbolic of a Morganic custom, whereby a woman is married to a man of a higher status. This marriage prohibited her or her children from inheriting her husband’s belongings upon his death (Binstock, 116). This very secular custom required a witness, which might explain the style of Jan van Eyck’s signature. Binstock observes that this writing style was similar to that of a notary signing a legal document. It is also asserted that van Eyck and the other figure appear in the concave mirror, acting as witnesses. While a marriage inside a church would not require a witness or notary, a secular marriage made for legal reasons would, further underscoring the bride’s lower social status, or that her voice would not hold as much value as that of her male counterpart.

While this idea gives a clear contemporary explanation for the left-handed marriage, one might consider that because the portrait holds so many other symbolic secrets, van Eyck has a deeper meaning behind the left hand. Seidel suggests that this alteration shifts the control between the two figures. A right-handed marriage suggests a consensual agreement between two figures. However, as the woman places her right hand into his left, she relinquishes control of the situation to her male counterpart. Seidel notes that changing a common image to something unexpected draws attention to the meaning behind that change: submission (42). A left-handed marriage is therefore in complete contrast with the holy couple that it seems to mirror so closely.

While it has been shown that the connotation of a left-handed marriage can shift the scene from a sacred to secular ceremony, there are other clues that also alter the dynamic of the piece. Van Eyck subtly changes a public religious scene to a private domestic one. This choice changes the image from a more masculine scene to a more feminine one, since

(Figure 2). After Giotto’s initial depiction, the scene became extremely popular in northern Europe. However, in all later depictions of the scene Mary and Joseph join their right hands. These scenes were included in frescos, carvings and prayer books (Figures 3 and 4), typically accompanying a scene of the Annunciation. The association between the two scenes worked to further the idea that conception should be joined with marriage. The Church’s use of these images visually reaffirmed its views on marriage and conception.

Another idea springing from these works centers on the inclusion of Joseph, who through these images was given more prominence. Linda Seidel has observed that, “Paintings that illustrated the formal union of the holy couple in the presence of a priest would have reinforced for viewers the Church’s approval of the newly elevated status of Joseph and its concerns for the public performance of marriage. The issues



Figure 3. Flemish wood carving of the *Marriage of the Virgin*

the church was traditionally dominated by men, and women were typically associated with the domestic environment. Similarly, Giovanni's appearance in the scene further separates him from the domestic space, symbolizing that he has come from the outside world and can go as he pleases. His muddy pattens in the lower left also show his arrival from the outside. His fur coat further suggests the idea of travel, along with his placement near the entrance. Meanwhile, the details of the interior clearly indicate that the bride inhabits this space. The broom hanging from the bedpost is a symbol of domestication. She, unlike her male counterpart, is unable to leave the space, reestablishing the idea of submission. This idea is expressed similarly in Piero della Francesca's double portrait of *Battista Sforza and Federico de Montefeltro* (Figure 5). In Battista's portrait she is landlocked, signifying her place in a domestic setting. It was not her place as a woman to travel outside of the confines of the home. In Federico's portrait, however, there is a river running through the background signifying his ability to leave and travel. In van Eyck's portrait, the woman's place was the home, where she was to be subordinate to her husband.



Figure 5. Piero della Francesca, *Battista Sforza and Federico de Montefeltro*, 1472

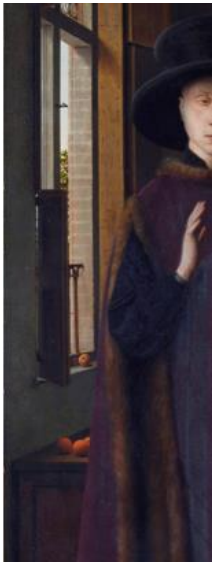


Figure 6. Detail of *Oranges and Cherries*

It should also be noted what the left-handed marriage may imply in regard to sexual intercourse and the consummation of the marriage. Fifteenth-century customs regarding marriage, particularly those involving a dowry, focused equally on the ceremony and the acts that followed. Dowries held so much importance that agreements were often made by the parents while the children were still young. These agreements often included the payment of large amounts of money once vows were exchanged. Seidel explains that as the amount expected for an adequate dowry grew, the city of Florence started a government fund to help provide for the dowries (59). While initially payment from this fund was acquired once the couple had taken their vows, by the fifteenth-century, payment was awarded only after the marriage had been consummated, leading to the practice of "Leading the Woman," whereby the bride was removed from her father's home to the house of her husband, a ceremony that implied sexual intercourse (Seidel, 66.) During this practice, the woman was led by her husband, her hand in his left and her arm placed above her belly, publicly on display announcing the consummation of the marriage.

Consummation, of course, leads to the idea of pregnancy, as depicted in the portrait. It has been argued that while the bride appears pregnant, her dress bulging around her stomach is merely a result of contemporary fashion. However, the bed in the corner and the inclusion of St. Margaret and her monster seem to contradict this assumption. St. Margaret is the patron saint of pregnancy and symbolizes an expected or wanted pregnancy. In his article, "Sexuality and Social Standing in Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini Double portrait," Craig Harbison makes many points regarding "desired fertility" (261). Harbison explains that from what scholars can gather regarding the figures' identities, Giovanna Cenami is the second wife of Giovanni Arnolfini. This marriage was likely made solely to produce an heir. Therefore, fertility and pregnancy, he explains, would have played a major role in the painting and in the life of the couple. Harbison identifies the cherries and oranges in the left-hand side of the image as symbols of fertility. They were frequently gifts offered as the woman was led to consummate the marriage (Figure 6). Even the shoes, previously mentioned as signifying Giovanna's domestic space, can also symbolize sexual passion and fertility. It is also important to note the single candle in the chandelier, a detail that often goes without interpretation, likely alludes to the practice where newly-weds would bring a candle into their bedchamber as a sign of sexual union (Figure 7). What complicates the situation is that if the woman is indeed Giovanna Cenami, records indicate that she died childless. It is therefore interesting that as a woman she was unable to fulfill the expectation that was desired of her. This expectation may indicate why fertility images are so prominent in this piece. Whereas the



Figure 7. Detail of *Candle in Chandelier*

dreams of a child were never realized, it cannot be denied that the woman's role in marriage and in the painting was to fulfill the sexual desires of her husband, a means of benefiting his ends.

Each of these interpretations offers some insight into the life of a newly married woman in the fifteenth-century. Various works of art, including the *Arnolfini Portrait*, help us to establish the very gendered roles of the time. These images shaped society's view of marriage and the expectations of a woman, but they simultaneously explain contemporary ideas about marriage. The female figure in the *Arnolfini Portrait* demonstrates how the woman was viewed as subordinate to her male counterpart in marriage. She was expected to give herself over to him, the submissive, domestic vessel for his progeny. This was very likely the reality for many women in the Northern Renaissance. Giovanna Cenami simply presents a snapshot of this ideal woman based on the societal expectations of the time, that van Eyck has immortalized through his portrait.

Works Cited

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