

Symbolism in Western Paintings: A Case Study of The Arnolfini Portrait

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Abstract. *The Arnolfini Portrait* is an oil painting on an oak panel created by Netherlandish painter Jan van Eyck in 1434, an artwork known for its multidirectional interpretation. The symbolism is open to interpretation, and the identity of the Arnolfini is still disputed. This article focuses on the discussion of the existing research and controversies about this artwork. It has a far-reaching significance for the interpretation of the symbolic meaning of the images in artworks; it is mainly devoted to the symbolic significance of the images in *The Arnolfini Portrait* with document analysis, searching, and reading the relevant prior materials and documents. The advantage of this method is that it enables the analysis of the detailed features present in the artwork, which is conducive to the study. The goal of this study is to analyze and summarize the interpretation of the images in *The Arnolfini Portrait*. To achieve this goal, tracing and sorting the existing popular theories is made. The artwork itself is only an item, and its value comes from its aesthetic means and artistic techniques, or the cultural, social, and ideological situation behind it.

Keywords: The Arnolfini Portrait; Symbolic significance; Image Analysis.

1. Introduction

The Arnolfini Portrait is an oil painting on an oak panel created by Netherlandish artist Jan van Eyck in 1434, an artwork known for its multidirectional interpretation. The symbolism is open to interpretation, and the identity of the Arnolfini is still disputed. This article focuses on the discussion of the existing research and controversies about this artwork. It has a far-reaching significance for the interpretation of the symbolic meaning of the images in artworks; it is mainly devoted to the symbolic significance of the images in *The Arnolfini Portrait* with document analysis, searching, and reading the relevant prior materials and documents [1]. The advantage of this method is that it enables the analysis of the detailed features present in the artwork, which is conducive to the study. The goal of this study is to analyze and summarize the interpretation of the images in *The Arnolfini Portrait*. To achieve this goal, tracing and sorting the existing popular theories is made.

2. Background

Jan van Eyck is a Netherlandish artist likely born in an aristocratic family in Maaseik, Belgium in about 1390 and is known as the Van Eyck Brothers with his brother Hubert van Eyck. He was one of the first Renaissance artists to master the technique of oil painting, and he excelled at convincing people of the authenticity of his work through small but persuasive details. Meanwhile, he is also considered to be adept at alluding to religious ideas through everyday objects in the scene. From October 1422 to 1425, according to payments in Court records of John of Bavaria-Straubing, he was employed by John III, Duke of Bavaria and Count of Holland as his honorary equerry and painter. After the Count's death in 1425, he was invited as a painter to Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy. The artworks created by Jan van Eyck pay great attention to the description of details and have a high degree of recognition, making them worthy of in-depth exploration, especially the details of *The Arnolfini Portrait*. The main characters in the picture are the Arnolfini, namely Giovanni Arnolfini and his wife. The Arnolfini family, originally from the Italian city of Luca, traded in valuable fabrics and had always done business with the court. There were two Giovanni Arnolfini in the family at that time, both of whom had lived in Bruges since at least 1419: Giovanni di Nicolao Arnolfini and his

cousin Giovanni di Arrigo di Arnolfini. The subject of the painting is unknown, and the exact purpose of its creation cannot be determined. At present, there are two mainstream theories, one is that the artist presented the painting as a wedding gift, and the other is that the painting is actually a tribute to his late wife through the painting. This article will discuss these two mainstream arguments and explore the specific meaning that the details of the work want to express.

3. Analysis

In *The Arnolfini Portrait*, Arnolfini and his wife stand side by side in the center of the room. In terms of the depiction of the figure, the husband is standing by the window on the left, wearing a black robe, a dark purple-brown fur robe, and a black braided round hat without shoes. His right hand is held up in front of his chest as if in a prayer gesture, and his left hand is extended to the side, palming up to support his wife's right hand. On the right side of the bed, the wife wore a blue-turquoise dress covered with a moss-green fur gown and a white headscarf trimmed with lace. Her robe was dragged to the ground, partly lifted by her left hand and held at her waist, the palm of her right hand resting on her husband's left.

In terms of decoration inside the house, behind the folded hands of the two protagonists is a wooden chair covered with red linen and red square pillows, the wooden chair armrest is carved with a pair of lion-like monsters sitting back to back, hanging linen next to a pair of red slippers, the ground is a grandmother check pattern carpet. Above the wooden chair is a convex mirror with a gear-shaped wooden frame, trimmed with a ring of blue turquoise. On the wooden frame, each tooth of the gear has a small circular picture, and ten paintings together depict the important events of Jesus' life. To the left of the mirror, a nail nailed a string of pale amber beads with tassels to the wall; On top of the mirror, it is written "Johannes de Eyck fruit hic 1434", Latin for "Jan van Eyck came here in 1434". Above, a chandelier hung from the ceiling. Its arms are decorated with iris-headed crosses four-leaf clovers with four diamond shapes, and an inverted crown candlestick with only a lighted candle in the first arm to the left of the opposite Angle. The window to the left opened, and on the windowsill and under the wooden cabinet below were fruits, which appeared to be oranges. Further down, a pair of black clogs with straps, and a brown little dog standing happily between them, beside the wife's robe. Beyond the hanging robes was a neat red bed with a finely carved wooden board at the head of the bed and a stigma carved with a figure standing on a dragon with a holy light on its head, with a brush nailed to the side.

3.1. Symbolic Significance in the Artwork

Jan van Eyck has an amazing eye for detail. Two people dress relatively low-key, not too much decoration, but with expensive materials. Both the husband and wife had tunics made of fur, while the wife's dress was blue turquoise, an extremely expensive symbol of the Virgin Mary. Their clothing may have suggested the Arnolfini family's financial prowess while at the same time suggesting they were in the fabric business and advertising family fertility.

First of all, in terms of color performance, the color near the wife's side is somewhat too bright than the husband's, and the white headscarf and the beige robe sleeve edge form a sharp contrast. Robert Witkin argues that "she seems nonrepresentational and symbolic, corresponding to the sweet Madonna figure found in many Gothic churches; The 'fish noodle' man image gives people more impression of individuation rather than typification." [1]. Panofsky agrees that "brides are much less 'personalized' than grooms to conform to a particular ideal of beauty." If the main character is interpreted as Giovanni di Nicola Arnolfini, this is interpreted to mean that Constance is dead, that she does not exist there, but the artist's imagination.

By location, the husband was on the left. He stood by the window, a position close to social and public places; The wife's position is on the right, she stands by the bed, a more domestic and private position. This position arrangement is interpreted as a tacit social responsibility and division of labor symbolizing the two's status as husband and wife.

The puppy in the middle of the picture was interpreted by Panofsky as the emotional fidelity between the Arnolfini couple and is sometimes thought to represent the couple's desire for children. Keeping dogs was a trend and fashion among the court ladies at that time, and this puppy may have been a gift from the husband to the wife. But the problem is that there is no evidence for the symbolism of the dog, everything is a conventional default that cannot be falsified but cannot be proven.

In the image, the wife's robe is picked up and folded around her waist, creating the optical illusion that she is pregnant. Since there was a custom of "the more clothes you wear, the more wealth and status you can show", it is not certain whether this gesture was used intentionally, but to show the financial resources of the Arnolfini family. If the main character is interpreted as Giovanni di Nicolao Arnolfini, this is interpreted as implying Constance's death in childbirth. It was seen as a compromise to the tradition that pregnant women should not be included in the painting.

The fruit in the picture is also believed to have symbolic significance. In Italy, orange blossom as the bride's tiara symbolizes purity and happiness, but also symbolizes marriage. The result can be interpreted as a marriage and pregnancy, implying a marriage between the two protagonists, and if the protagonist is interpreted as Giovanni di Nicolao Arnolfini, it is interpreted as implying Constance's death in childbirth. At the same time, oranges, as imported fruits, are expensive and difficult to keep fresh, which may be a symbol of the Arnolfini family's financial resources.

The presentation of details in some of the furnishings in the room was considered to have an obscure meaning. For example, the saint carved on the head of the bed standing on a dragon was thought to be St. Margaret, while the monster carved on the chair with goat legs and a fool's hat was thought to be a devil [2]. The preeminent symbol of fertility in St. Margaret's Christianity is the chaste virgin and patron saint of women who give birth. She refused the proposal of Roman Governor Olybrius and his request to renounce her faith and was beheaded. Her story is that she was swallowed by a Satanic dragon, and she killed the dragon with a cross to escape. If the main character is interpreted as Giovanni di Nicolao Arnolfini, this is interpreted as representing Constance's death in childbirth, and they are still praying for Saint Margaret's blessing that she may live. Bedo believes that one of the functions of marriage is to allow procreation while avoiding the felony of lust and that St. Margaret can be interpreted as procreation, thus implying marriage between the male and female protagonists.

The mirror behind the main character is thought to be an allusion to many meanings. The reflection of two figures in the mirror, one of which is believed to be Van Eyck himself, emphasizes the presence of the painter, and Panofsky believes that the two exist as witnesses to the wedding. The mirror is a symbol of the eye of God of Jesus, and its spotless appearance is also believed to symbolize the purity of the Virgin Mary. This is a convex lens that can focus light and, by extension, to converge phenomena into divinity [3]. The ten small paintings around the mirror depict important events in Jesus' life, but it is interesting to note that, clockwise from the top one, the first to five on the wife's side is from the crucifixion to the final judgment, which is certain to be the events after Jesus' death; The sixth through tenth sections on the husband's side are the events of Jesus' life, from the Annunciation to Jesus' sermon. If the main character is interpreted as Giovanni di Nicolao Arnolfini, this is interpreted as suggesting that Constance is dead.

3.2. Interpretation of the Artwork

Due to the different cognition of the identity of the protagonist, the interpretation of some details on the painting is also different.

The work has been thought to depict Van Eyck and his wife, a view suggested by Louis Dimier, but not as well known, and the main view is that it is definitively Giovanni Arnolfini and his wife.

Erwin Panofsky, in his 1934 essay "*Jan Van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait*" refuted the idea that it was a portrait of the author and his wife. He believed that the painting depicts the wedding of Giovanni di Arrigo di Arnolfini and Jeanne de Cenname (referring to Giovanna Cenname) [4]. He believed that

"Both of them had absolutely no relatives at Bruges (Arnolfini being an only child whose property finally went to a nephew of his wife, and Jeanne de Cename's family living in Paris), so that it can understand the original idea of a document at the same time, and in which a well-known gentleman-painter signed his name both as an artist and as a witness.", with the hands of the man and the woman folded (usually the right hand of the woman on the left hand of the man), and often in church wedding ceremonies [2]. But Panofsky's example is the right-hand holding), often used as a symbol of marriage in miniaturization, "Although the Church did its very best to caution the Faithful against marrying secretly, there was no proper 'impediment clandestinity is' until 1563; that is to say, two people could contract a perfectly valid and legitimate marriage whenever and wherever they liked, without any witness and independently of any ecclesiastical rite, provided that the essential condition of a 'mutual consent expressed by words and actions' has been fulfilled." [4]. As one of the earliest analyses of the work, Panofsky's views were widely disseminated and accepted, so much so that it is also known as the Arnolfini wedding. However, the discovery of the Duke's bill in the 1990s shows that Giovanni Arigo Arnolfini and Sanem married in 1447, 13 years after the painting was completed and six years after Van Eyck's death, apparently cannot be used as a witness or proof of their marriage.

About four years after the completion of *The Arnolfini Portrait*, Van Eyck completed a small portrait entitled *Portrait of Giovanni di Nicolao Arnolfini*. Giovanni di Nicolao Arnolfini in the painting is very similar to the husband in *The Arnolfini Portrait*, so there is another possibility for the identity of the main character in the painting. In "*The Arnolfini double portrait: A Simple Solution*", Margaret Koster made a claim that the couple may be Giovanni di Nicolao di Arnolfini and his wife Costanza Trenta, who died in childbirth in 1433, the year before the painting was completed, and the painting has been interpreted as a memorial portrait to his late wife [5].

While in recent studies, people usually focus more on items like the mirror on the wall, other details are also important in different scholars' eyes. As Marisa Anne Bass said, "More broadly, one wants to push against the tendency to fixate on devices such as mirrors, inscriptions, and frames as sites of authorship and meta-pictoriality, particularly when doing so is at the expense of recognizing the self-consciousness of the living creatures who are represented alongside them. " She thought that the little dog "also plays a role in asserting Van Eyck's creative presence within the painting, a role equivalent to the mirror and the inscription on the wall" [6].

To sum up, different scholars have different conclusions about the image interpretation of the same detail in the same work. " Not all the details are so obvious, and only subtle observation and taste may gradually become clear. If a certain detail of the painting happens to be a symbolic sign, the understanding of the cultural context is essential, and the interpretation from the outside to the inside is particularly crucial." [7]. The interpretation itself is a subjective act, the paths and perspectives are never unique, there is no right or wrong, and the so-called truth has long been lost in time. In each attempt, each scholar is trying to infer from his perspective the information he can collect.

4. Conclusion

By sorting through the current mainstream views, it can be found that Panofsky's research and views have had a significant impact on the research of subsequent scholars. As one of the earliest studies, his analysis of *The Arnolfini Portrait* was comprehensive enough that although the argument of some of his views was considered flawed by later generations, they still tended to think and extend from the perspective he proposed, demonstrating or refuting his views. So far, Giovanni di Nicolao di Arnolfini and his wife, Costanza Trenta, have more evidence to back them up as the couple in the artwork. It is worth noting that while international scholars have studied the identity of the Arnolfini couple, the purpose of the painting, and the symbolism of the objects in the painting, there are very few relevant studies available in China. No one was concerned about the identity of the Arnolfini couple, except to mention that the figures in the painting are Giovanni Arnolfini and his wife, a couple from an Italian merchant family.

But for now, the search for the identity of the Arnolfinis is almost complete. In the absence of new historical discoveries, such as the Duke's bill, it is difficult to come up with persuasive new ideas and arguments. As for other details, the current study has focused a little too much on the mirror on the wall and its frame. They are important, but other details deserve attention. The work of art itself is only a work, and its value comes from its aesthetic means and artistic techniques, or the cultural, social, and ideological situation behind it. Most of the research on this artwork will focus on the textual research and research on the marriage customs and folk customs at that time. Perhaps the cultural customs behind other furniture and ornaments in the work can still be the subjects of research.

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