

Jan van Eyck's "Arnolfini 'Wedding' Portrait"

Marriages in the fifteenth century were not based on romantic love. The woman did not have a choice; the decision is made between the fathers of the bride and groom. It is more of a business relationship between the two families. This marriage gave Giovanni Arnolfini a significant boost to his financial fortunes when he married Giovanna Cenami, the daughter of one of the most prominent Lucchese families established in northern Europe.

Jan van Eyck is the only fifteenth-century Northern painter who routinely signed his panels. The 'wedding' portrait is a special case though; his signature is not simply inscribed on the picture's border or frame, but instead forms a part of the pictorial illusion. "Jan van Eyck was here" was inscribed on the wall in Latin. This draws the viewer's attention to the artist's role in creating this illusion.

Some scholars believe that the inscription acted as a record of being witness to the marriage. If you look closely into the mirror, you can see the presence of two other people within the reflection. Some scholars believe that one of these two people is the artist himself. The other is believed to be an official witness. Carved into the frame of the mirror are the Stations of the Cross. These tiny intricate details are one of van Eyck's trademarks found in several of his other paintings.

No one knows the exact meaning of each detail in the painting. Everyone interprets them differently. For example, the dog may symbolize the control that a breeder has over his purebred; just as a father has control over his daughters' marriage. It may also signify

fidelity, or faith. Also along the central axis of the picture are Giovanna's shoes and a chandelier. Her shoes are not on her feet, which could signify that she is on holy ground. The chandelier has only one candle lit. This can be seen as the unity candle or God's all-seeing eye. The central axis also includes the mirror, van Eyck's signature and the Arnolfini's hand in hand. Even though God is not present, the axis shows his unseen presence. The swag formed by their joined hands matches the exact form of the mirror hanging on the back wall.

Aside from the central axis, objects seem to be divided into pairs. Giovanna is a female and is on the domestic side, whereas Giovanni is a male and has the outside world on his side. He has the cherry tree on his side, and she has the bed on her side. He has the prayer beads and the candle on his side, and she has the dusting-brush and the dog on her side. There are many other small details that can be interpreted. His outdoor clogs are off of his feet, which again shows walking on sacred ground. A bared foot has also been a common indicator of fertility. Other symbols of fertility include: a molding on the bedpost of Saint Margaret, who is the saint of childbirth and the oranges sitting on the chest and windowsill. The oranges are seen as sexual, like a woman's anatomy, fruitful and equate to procreation. The fact that the couple would have such an exotic item is a sign of good economic fortune. Another representation of her wealth is the train on her dress. The green color of her dress could also represent the fact that she is being exchanged, as if she were money.

As he looks forward, she looks down while facing him. Her life is in his hands; he is in control of her. His hand is positioned up, as in a gesture of an oath. Her form makes her look like nothing more than an extension of the bed, leaving her passive and

internally directed. On the rear wall there is a set of crystal prayer beads. This was a typical engagement gift given to women to symbolize the requirement of remaining quiet and devout. Women were also expected to manage the home, and this is represented by the whisk that is hanging from the bed. The carving thought to be of Saint Margaret, could also be that of Saint Martha who represents the patron saint of housewives.

The couple dies childless, but that doesn't necessarily mean they have never had any children. Their children could have predeceased them. As she lifts up her robe, some believe that she is pregnant, but it could also represent her desire to become pregnant. It is recorded that Giovanni did have an extra-marital affair. He had promised another woman several houses and a pension and had given her gifts of jewelry. In 1470 this woman took him to court, to regain not only what he had taken away from her, but also these things which he promised her.

Even though this painting is not a documented record of a wedding ceremony, there are so many details to support it that it seems logical to consider it to be a marriage portrait. Beside the wedding question, van Eyck shows us a compelling view of the relations between sexuality, religion and social standing in northern Europe during the early fifteenth century. It is a fantastic example of his expertise. His use of intricate detail is amazing and is very unique.

Bibliography

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