

EARLY NETHERLANDISH PAINTING part one

Early Netherlandish painting is the work of artists, sometimes known as the **Flemish Primitives**, active in the Burgundian and Habsburg Netherlands during the 15th- and 16th-century Northern Renaissance, especially in the flourishing cities of Bruges, Ghent, Mechelen, Leuven, Tournai and Brussels, all in present-day Belgium. The period begins approximately with Robert Campin and Jan van Eyck in the 1420s and lasts at least until the death of Gerard David in 1523, although many scholars extend it to the start of the Dutch Revolt in 1566 or 1568. Early Netherlandish painting coincides with the Early and High Italian Renaissance but the early period (until about 1500) is seen as an independent artistic evolution, separate from the Renaissance humanism that characterised developments in Italy; although beginning in the 1490s as increasing numbers of Netherlandish and other Northern painters traveled to Italy, Renaissance ideals and painting styles were incorporated into northern painting. As a result, Early Netherlandish painters are often categorised as belonging to both the Northern Renaissance and the Late or International Gothic.

Robert Campin (c. 1375 – 1444), now usually identified with the **Master of Flémalle** (earlier the **Master of the Merode Triptych**), was the first great master of Flemish and Early Netherlandish painting. Campin's identity and the attribution of the paintings in both the "Campin" and "Master of Flémalle" groupings have been a matter of controversy for decades. Campin was highly successful during his lifetime, and thus his activities are relatively well documented, but he did not sign or date his works, and none can be confidently connected with him.

Campin was active by 1406 as a master painter in Tournai, in today's Belgium, and became that city's leading painter for 30 years and maintained his standing and workshop until his death in 1444. He had attained citizenship by 1410, and may have studied under Jan van Eyck, who he knew personally. His fame had spread enough by 1419 that he led a large and profitable workshop. He had an extra-marital affair for which he was prosecuted in 1432 and sentenced to banishment for a year. However, this was reduced to a fine on the intervention of Margaret of Burgundy.

The early Campin panels shows the influence of International Gothic artists, but display greater powers of realistic observation than any other painter before him. He was one of the first to experiment with the use of oil-based colours, in lieu of egg-based tempera, to achieve the brilliance of colour typical for this period. He used the new technique to convey strong, rounded characters by modelling light and shade in compositions of complex perspectives. The **Portrait of a Stout Man**, **Robert de Masmines** (1425) shows with fine detail and unflattering and unidealised realism the depiction of the individual face, and the fully developed characterisation of his subject. A technique which was to become a hallmark of Flemish art.



The **Triptych with the Entombment of Christ**, c. 1425. (in the Courtauld Institute, London) is one of two of Campin's surviving triptychs. As an early work, it is highly innovative, especially in its application of oils, but betrays elements of International Gothic in its gold background and flattened perspective.



The **Mérode Altarpiece** (or **Annunciation Triptych**) of c 1425–28 is Campin's best known work. It is painted in oil on oak panels, and is relatively small, indicating that it was commissioned for private, domestic use; the central panel measures 64 × 63 cm and each wing is 65 × 27 cm.

The three panels represent, from left to right, the donors kneeling in prayer in a garden, the moment of the Annunciation to Mary, which is set in a contemporary, domestic setting, and Saint Joseph, a carpenter with the tools of his trade. The many elements of religious symbolism include the lily and fountain (symbolising the purity of Mary), and the Holy Spirit represented by the rays of light and a diminutive figure bearing a cross coming through from the left hand window.

The central panel was completed after 1422, it is thought by a member of Campin's workshop. An earlier version, now in Brussels, may be Campin's original panel. The outer wing panels are later additions by a workshop member, probably on request by the donor who sought to elevate the central panel to a triptych and place himself in the pictorial space. They contain views of the city of Liège, in today's Belgium.

The panels share a very steep perspective, in which the viewer seems to be looking down on the figures from an elevated point of view. In other respects the perspective is underdeveloped; neither the Virgin nor Gabriel seem to rest on solid ground, while the female donor appears to hover and to be barely able to fit within the space she occupies.



It is unsigned and undated, but attributed to Robert Campin and his workshop, although there is still controversy over the attribution: some authorities suggest that the central panel is by an assistant, following a copy of this, earlier, **Annunciation**, now in Brussels.

The Scottish art historian Ian Campbell describes the Mérode as "incoherent in design", lacking Campin's usual trait of spatial continuity, as found in the Seilern Triptych. Nevertheless the triptych is a founding and important work in the then emerging late Gothic, Early Netherlandish style, and has been described as a "milestone between two periods; it at once summarizes the medieval tradition and lays the foundation for the development of modern painting"

This altar diptych consists of two scenes: *The Trinity* and *The Virgin and Child by a Fireplace*. (1433-35) It is the very earliest Netherlandish work in the Hermitage. Together they illustrate the two central Christian dogmas, with Christ's childhood (the Incarnation) seen on the right wing and on the left his death for the sake of mankind (Redemption).



On the right wing, we see the Virgin in a typical interior of the kind one would expect to find in the comfortable house of a Netherlandish burgher. She is totally absorbed in the everyday concerns of motherhood: about to swaddle the child, she stretches out

her hand to the fire in order to warm it. The artist reproduces many details of the setting, the household objects, emphasizing their mass, solidity and texture: the marble tiles of the floor, the ermine wrap on the Virgin's knees, the bowl and ewer, the pure white towel on the rail, the nail heads, the window lattice. He marvellously conveys the cold, diffused daylight and the tiny fragment of an urban landscape visible through the window.

The symbolic depiction of the Trinity consists of God the Father enthroned, supporting the dead body of Christ (God the Son) and between them the dove representing God the Holy Spirit. In niches on the arms of the throne are sculptural images showing the Christian Church and the Synagogue. Above them are a pelican feeding its young with its own blood (the symbol of Christ's self-sacrifice and the sacrament of communion) and a lioness awakening its young with growl on the third day after their birth (symbol of the Resurrection of Christ at the call of God the Father). The iconography, static figures, combination of various points of view in the depiction of the place of action and the hard jagged folds of drapery derive from Gothic art.



These sensitively painted portraits, demonstrate a complete mastery of proportion and the rendering flesh tones. Usually grouped together under the title *A Man and a Woman* they are painted in oil and egg tempera on oak panels, and completed c. 1435. Although usually considered pendants or companion pieces, they may also have been wings of a since dismantled diptych. The latter theory is supported by the fact that the reverse of both panels are marbled, indicating that they were not intended to be hung against a wall.

Both figures wear extravagant and large headdresses; his is a chaperon made from red fabric, hers consists of two to three wrapped linen veils. There is no historical record of the couple's identities, and no evidence (inscriptions, coats of arms etc) on the paintings themselves. There is a significant age difference between the two. The man has brown eyes and sagging eyelids, while her eyes are bright and blue. Both were acquired in 1860 by the National Gallery, London, where they are hung alongside each other.

The **chaperon** consists of a padded hat (bourrelet), a tightly wrapped Liripipe (a *cornette* in French), and a shoulder-cape (*patte*). The chaperon began before 1200 as a hood with a short cape, put on by pulling over the head, or fastening at the front. The hood could be pulled off the head to hang behind, leaving the short cape round the neck and shoulders. It was a form of hood or, later, highly versatile hat worn in all parts of Western Europe in the Middle Ages. Initially a utilitarian garment, it first grew a long partly decorative tail behind called a liripipe. Later when, what was originally the vertical opening for the face began to be used as a horizontal opening for the head, it then developed into a complex, versatile and expensive headgear. It was especially fashionable in mid-15th century Burgundy, before gradually falling out of fashion in the late 15th century and returning to its utilitarian status. It is the most commonly worn male headgear in Early Netherlandish painting, but its complicated construction is often misunderstood.

A **liripipe** is the tail of a hood or cloak, or a long-tailed hood. The modern-day liripipe appears on the hoods of academic dress.

The word **Chaperone**, in the meaning of someone who accompanies and protects another person, derives from the early use of chaperon to describe a hood or short cloak.

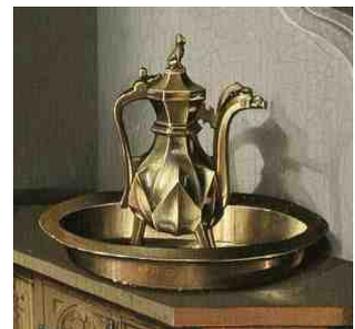


In this portrait by van Eyck the chaperon is worn in style A with just a patch of the bourrelet showing (right of centre) through the cornette wound round it, so as to be more practical for painting in.



The Werl Triptych completed in 1438, of which the centre panel has been lost, depicts in the right wing a seated, pious Saint Barbara, identified from the tower visible beyond the open window, who is shown engrossed in her reading of a bound and gilded holy book, seated in front of a warm open fire which lights the room with a golden glow. A popular saint in the Middle Ages, she was a Christian martyr believed to have lived in the 3rd century. Her wealthy pagan father Dioscorus, seeking to preserve her from unwelcome suitors, imprisoned her in a tower, however, she let in a priest who baptised her, an act for which she was hunted and eventually beheaded by her father. She became a popular subject for artists of Campin's generation.

Her brown hair is unbound and falling to her shoulders. She is seated on a wooden



bench draped with deep red velvet cushions. She wears a sumptuous green dress lined with heavy angular folds. The perspective of the room is complex, and uses a number of vanishing points, placing the viewer on a higher level than the saint. The panel's strength comes from her well-described clothing and the highly detailed objects placed around her (such as this gilded pot on the cupboard ledge behind Barbara) most of which are shaped and contrasted by the two sources of light falling on their generally golden and polished surfaces. Yet, it is suggested, Barbara's figure is weakly rendered – her shoulders and knees are anatomically unrealistic and she seems boneless.

The left wing has a portrait of the donor, Heinrich von Werl, who kneels in prayer in a domed interior - in the company of John the Baptist facing the missing devotional centre-panel, which is lost and unrecorded. The two extant panels are in Madrid and renowned for their complex treatment of both light and form. The panels became influential on other artists from the mid-15th until the early 16th century, after when Early Netherlandish painting fell out of favour until it was rediscovered in the early 19th century.

Campin was heavily influenced by van Eyck by the early 1430s, and this wing is indebted to him in a number of ways; in the fall of light, sharp detail and especially the convex mirror in the middle ground which reflects the scene back at the viewer, a direct reference to van Eyck's 1434 *Arnolfini Marriage*.



This tender depiction of the Virgin nursing the infant Christ known as **The Virgin and Child before a Firescreen**, was probably painted in the 1440s by a follower of Robert Campin. It appears to be a fragment of a slightly larger painting: the figures sit rather awkwardly within the space, with the window frame, cupboard on which she rests her arm and the folds and hem of her dress, close up to the edge of the picture. It seems also to have suffered some damage along the right side of the panel. Sometime before 1875 a restorer added strips to the top and right side of the painting, probably to replace these damaged areas.

This puzzling picture of the Virgin and Child is often called after the large wicker firescreen behind the Virgin's head. It is not known who it was made for, or where or how it was used. We are not even sure how it originally looked: it was extensively restored in the nineteenth century.

Although they are biblical figures, the artist has placed the Virgin and Christ inside a wealthy, even palatial, Netherlandish home. The Virgin is dressed as a queen. She wears a blue overdress over a linen shift, open at the neck to show her blue-veined breasts. Wisely, she has spread a white cloth over her knees to protect her clothes from the naked, wriggling child. A tiny hook at its corner would have allowed it to be hung up to dry.

Christ's genitals are clearly visible under the Virgin's left hand. They were perhaps meant to remind viewers that Christ was fully human, and shared humanity's vulnerability.



Jan van Eyck (before 1390 – 1441) is one of the most significant representatives of Early Northern Renaissance art. The surviving records of his early life indicate that he was born around 1380–1390, most likely in Maaseik (then Maaseyck, hence his name), in present-day Belgium. He took employment in the Hague around 1422, when he was already a master painter with workshop assistants, and employed as painter and *valet de chambre* with John III the Pitiless, ruler of Holland. He was then employed in Lille as court painter to Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy after John's death in 1425, until he moved to Bruges in 1429 where he lived until his death. He was highly regarded by Philip and undertook a number of diplomatic visits abroad, including to Lisbon in 1428 to explore the possibility of a marriage contract between the duke and Isabella of Portugal. This **Portrait of a Man** of 1433, in the National gallery, London is widely believed to be a self portrait.



About 20 surviving paintings are confidently attributed to him, all dated between 1432 and 1439. Ten are dated and signed with a variation of his motto ALS ICH KAN (*As I (Eyck) can*), a pun on his name, which he typically painted in Greek characters.

Van Eyck painted both secular and religious subject matter, including altarpieces, single-panel religious figures and commissioned portraits. He was well paid by Philip, who sought that the painter was secure financially and had artistic freedom so that he could paint "whenever he pleased". Van Eyck's work comes from the International Gothic style, but he soon eclipsed it, in part through a greater emphasis on naturalism and realism. He achieved a new level of virtuosity through his developments in the use of oil paint. He was highly influential, and his techniques and style were adopted and refined by the Early Netherlandish painters.



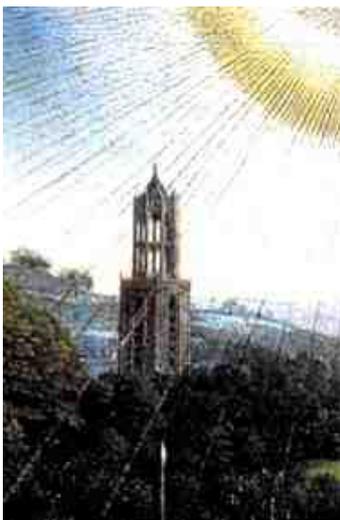
The **Ghent Altarpiece** (or the **Adoration of the Mystic Lamb**) is a large and complex 15th-century polyptych altarpiece. It was begun around the mid-1420s and completed before 1432, and is attributed to the brothers Hubert (1385/90 – 1426) and Jan van Eyke. The altarpiece is considered a masterpiece of European art and one of the most renowned and important artworks in European history.

The panels are organised in two vertical registers, each with double sets of foldable wings containing inner and outer panel paintings. The upper register of the inner panels represent the heavenly redemption,

and include the central Deësis of Christ the King (or perhaps God the Father), the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist. They are flanked in the next panels by angels playing music and, on the far outermost panels, the figures of Adam and Eve. The central panel of the lower register shows a gathering of saints, sinners, clergy and soldiers attendant at an adoration of the Lamb of God. There are several groupings of figures, overseen by the dove of the Holy Spirit.

A now lost inscription on the frame stated that Hubert van Eyck *maior quo nemo repertus* (greater than anyone) started the altarpiece, but that Jan van Eyck (calling himself *arte secundus* - second best in the art) completed it in 1432. The original, very ornate carved outer frame and surround, presumably harmonizing with the painted tracery, was destroyed during the Reformation; it may have included clockwork mechanisms for moving the shutters and even playing music. It is generally accepted that the majority of the panels were completed by Jan, from an overall design by Hubert, who probably oversaw the construction of most of the frames.

The closed altarpiece displays the Annunciation, donor portraits of Joost Vijdt and his wife Lysbette Borluut and grisailles of St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist, painted as trompe l'oil statues.



It is the only one of van Eyck's works intended for public, rather than private, worship and display. He pays as much attention to the beauty of earthly things as to the religious themes. The clothes and jewels, the fountain, nature surrounding the scene, the churches and landscape in the background – are all painted with remarkable detail. The landscape is rich with vegetation, which is observed with an almost scientific accuracy, and much of it non-European.

Lighting is one of the major innovations of the polyptych. The panels contain complex light effects and subtle plays of shadow, the rendering of which was achieved through new techniques of handling both oil paint and transparent glazes. The figures are mostly cast with short, diagonal shadows which serve to, "not only heighten their

spatial presence, but also tell us that the primary light source is located beyond the picture itself." In the *Annunciation* scene, shadows imply that they emanate from the daylight within the chapel in which they are housed. Further innovations can be found in the detailing of surface textures, especially in the reflections of light. These are best seen in light falling on the armour in the *Knights of Christ* panel, and the ripple of the water in the Fountain of Life in the *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*.

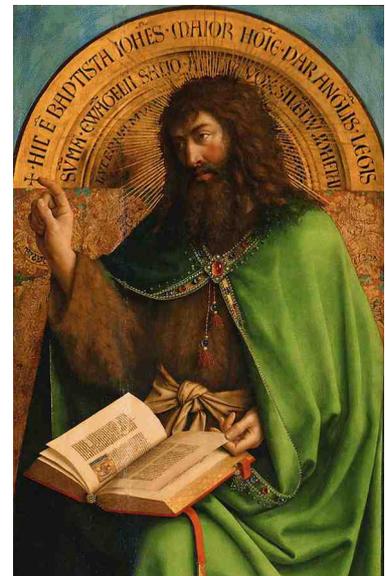




The three central upper panels show a Deësis of monumental and enthroned figures, each with a halo. They are the Virgin Mary, John the Baptist and a central figure who may be either God or Christ – a distinction much debated amongst art historians. Theories include that the panel shows Christ in Majesty dressed as in a priest's vestments, God the Father or the Holy amalgamated into a single person. The figure looks towards the viewer with his hand raised in blessing, in a panel filled with inscriptions and symbols. The golden brocade on the throne features pelicans and vine, probable references to the blood spilled during the Crucifixion. Pelicans were at the time believed to spill their own blood to feed their young. The vines allude to sacramental wine, the eucharistic symbol of Christ's blood.

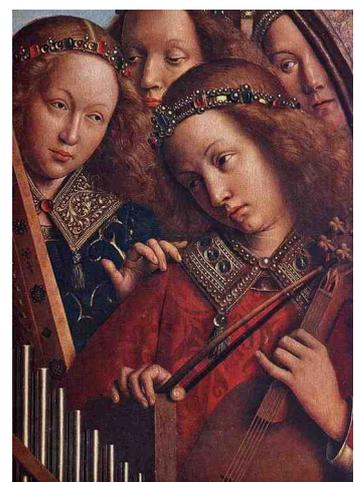
It is often assumed that given the foreshortening seen in the representation of God the Father, the artist was familiar with the either of the Italian painters Donatello or Masaccio, although it has been suggested that it was something he was "perfectly capable of producing without such models", and that the technique represents "a shared interest [rather than] a case of influence."

Like Mary, John the Baptist holds a holy book – an unusual attribute, and one of 18 books in the set of panels. He wears a green mantle over a cilice (an undergarment made of coarse cloth or animal hair worn close to the skin; used by members of various Christian traditions as a self-imposed means of repentance and mortification of the flesh) of camel-hair. He looks towards the Almighty in the centre panel, with his hand also raised in blessing, uttering the words most typically associated with him, *ECCE AGNUS DEI* ("Behold the Lamb of God").



Mary reads from a girdle book draped with a green cloth. The book is a normal attribute for Mary, as she is the "seat of wisdom" and this image might be based on the figure in Campn's *Virgin Annunciate*. She wears a crown adorned with flowers and stars, and is dressed as a bride. The inscription on the arched throne above reads: "She is more beautiful than the sun and the army of the stars; compared to the light she is superior. She is truly the reflection of eternal light and a spotless mirror of God".

The two musical panels, *Singing Angels* and *Music-making Angels*, each features a choir. The presence of the two groups on either side of the Deësis reflects a by then well-established motif in representations of the heavens opening; that of musical accompaniment provided by celestial beings. Unusually, they lack most of the attributes usually associated with angels depicted in northern art of the time. They do not have wings, and their faces are unidealised, and show a number of different individual expressions. Music historian Stanley Boorman notes that "the naturalism is so seductive that the viewer is tempted to consider the scenes as depictions of contemporary church music."

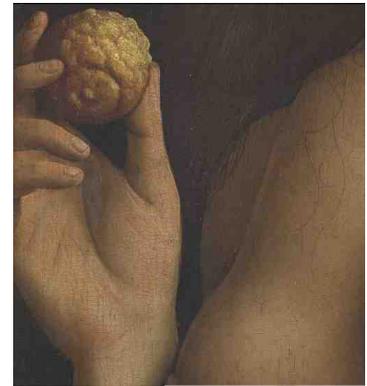




A number of art historians have defined the figures as angels. They are sexless and possess cherubic faces, which contrast with the realistic depictions of the other full-sized non-divine females in the work; they are dressed in elaborately brocaded ecclesiastical copes or chasubles, mostly painted in reds and greens. Van Eyck used the device of the open mouth to give a sense of life and motion to his figures. Borchert writes that the emphasis on the open mouths is "specifically motivated by the desire to characterize the angel's facial expressions according to the various ranges of polyphonic singing. To that end the position of the

angel's tongues are carefully registered, as are that of their teeth. Art historian Elisabeth Dhanens notes how "One can easily see by their singing who is the soprano, who is the alto, who is the tenor and who is the bass". The figures are positioned in a wave-like order of body height, with the orientation of each of the eight faces in looking in different directions. A number of scholars have remarked on their physiognomy. Their cherub faces and long, open, curly hair are similar but also show a clear intention by the artist to establish individual traits. Four angels are shown frowning, three have narrowed eyelids which give the appearance of peering.

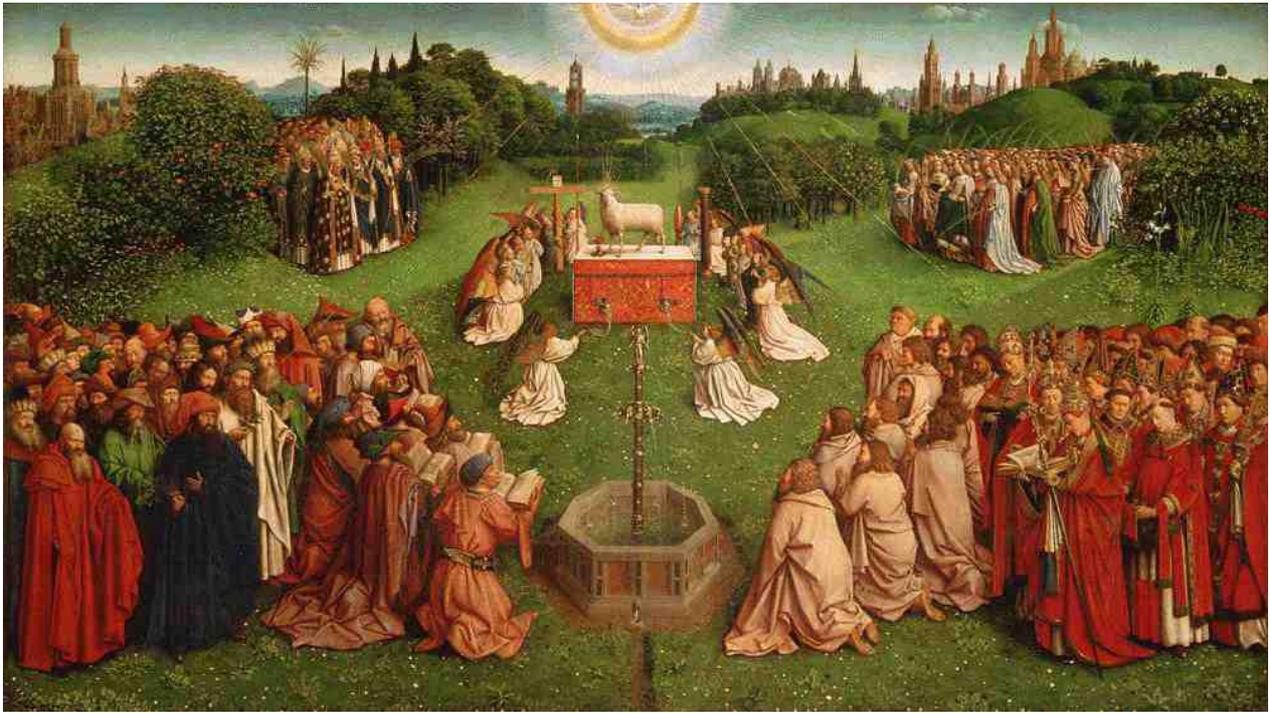
The two outer panels show near life-sized nudes of Adam and Eve standing in niches. They are the earliest treatment in Early Netherlandish naturalism of the human nude. They face inwards towards the angels and the Deësis, separating them. They self-consciously attempt to cover their nakedness with a fig leaf as in the Genesis account, indicating that they are depicted as after the fall of man. Eve holds a fruit in her raised right hand; not the traditional apple but a small citrus, most probably a citron.



The realism with which Jan approached his figures is especially evident in these two panels. The depiction of Eve exemplifies the International Gothic ideal for the female figure. Comparing her to a classical female nude, Kenneth Clark observed that "her pelvis is wider, her chest narrower, her waist higher; above all there is the prominence given to her stomach". Clark describes her as "a proof of how minutely 'realistic' a great artist may be in the rendering of details, and yet subordinate the whole to an ideal form. Hers is the supreme example of the bulb-like body. The weight-bearing leg is concealed, and the body is so contrived that on one side is the long curve of the stomach, on the other the downward sweep of the thigh, uninterrupted by any articulation of bone or muscle."

In contrast to the other panels in the register, Adam and Eve are positioned near the edge of each panel. Adam's foot appears to protrude out of the niche and frame and into real space. More subtly, Eve's arm, shoulder and hip appear to extend beyond her architectural setting. These elements give the panel a three-dimensional aspect, a trompe-l'œil effect which becomes more pronounced when the wings are turned slightly inwards.





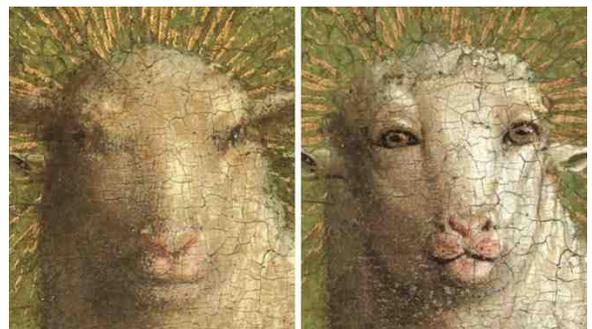
A continuous panoramic landscape unifies the five panels of the lower register. The large central panel shows the adoration of the Lamb of God (*Agnus Dei*) arranged in a scene derived from the Gospel of John. A series of crowds of people stream towards the lamb to worship; four groupings congregate at each corner of the central panel, another four arrive in the two pairs of outer panels – representing the Warriors of Christ and Just Judges on the left-hand side, and the holy hermits and pilgrims on the right. Of the eight groupings only one consists of females. The groupings are segregated by their relationship to the old and new estaments, with those from the older books positioned to the left of the altar.

Among the pilgrims is Saint Christopher, patron saint of travellers. At the rear of the hermits on the inner right-hand panel is Mary Magdalene, carrying unguents.



Measuring 134.3 x 237.5 cm, the centre panel has as its centrepiece an altar on which the Lamb of God is positioned, standing in a verdant meadow, while the foreground shows a fountain. Five distinct groups of figures surround altar and fountain. In the mid-ground two further groups of figures are seen gathering; the dove of the Holy Spirit is above. The meadow is framed by trees and bushes; with the spires of Jerusalem visible in the background.

Recent restoration has rediscovered the original human-like face, which was repainted in the 16th century, possibly to give it a more lamb-like expression, and on the assumption that van Eyke was faulty in his observation. Koenraad Jonckheere, a professor of Renaissance and Baroque art at Ghent University, speculated that the overpainting was done to neutralise the "intense and humanised identification of the lamb into an expressionless animal", and that the Van Eyck brothers chose to "represent the Lamb of God with human-like staring eyes", which was a common style in the Middle Ages. It is as if the lamb is looking straight out of the picture, in a slightly alarming way, announcing to mankind the new dispensation that will judge everyone according to their merits. It has a wound on



its breast from which blood gushes into a golden chalice, a reference to Christ's sacrifice, but shows no outward expression of pain. The angels have multicoloured wings and hold instruments of Christ's passion, including the cross and the crown of thorns. The front of the altar is inscribed with the words "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world".



A dove, representing the Holy Spirit, hovers low in the sky directly above the lamb, surrounded by concentric semicircles of white and yellow hues of varying luminosity, the outermost of which appear like nimbus clouds. Thin golden beams emanating from the dove resemble those surrounding the head of the lamb, as well as those of the three figures in the Deë's in the upper register. The rays seem to have been painted by van Eyck over the finished landscape, and serve to illuminate the scene in a celestial, supernatural light. This is especially true with the light falling on the saints positioned directly in front of the altar. The light does not give reflection or throw shadow, and has traditionally been read by art historians as representing the New Jerusalem of Revelation which had "no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it; for the glory of God did lighten it".

The illumination contrasts with the natural and directional lighting of the four upper interior wings, and of each of the outer wings. It has been interpreted as a device to emphasize the presence of the divine and accentuate the paradise of the central landscape. The dove as the Holy Spirit, and the lamb as Jesus, are positioned on the same axis as that of God The Father in the panel directly above; a reference to the Holy Trinity.

In the centre foreground, the fountain of life consists of a large stream of water, ending with a jewel-laden bed. The inscription on the fountain's rim reads "This is the fountain of the water of life, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb". symbolizing the fountain of life is "watered by the blood of the Lamb". From its centre rises a column with an angel above bronze dragons, from which streams of water fall into the fountain's basin. A vertical axis forms between the fountain, the altar, and the dove signifying the agreeing testimony of The Spirit, the water, and the blood. There is also similarity between the altar and its ring of angels, and the fountain surrounded by figures arranged in distinct groupings.



In the distance, a minutely detailed cityscape recalls New Jerusalem. The detail and close attention to landscape and nature is at a level previously unseen in Northern European art. The numerous recognisable species of plants are minutely depicted with high levels of botanical accuracy. Similarly, the clouds and rock formations in the distance contain degrees of verisimilitude that evince studied observation. The far landscape contains representations of actual churches, while the depiction of the mountains beyond contain the first known example in art of aerial perspective. Yet the panel does not strive for exact realism; the sum of the forensically detailed natural elements, in combination with the apparition of the Holy Spirit and extended beams of light, serve to create a wholly individual and uniquely creative interpretation of a classic biblical scene.

The painting in the National Gallery, London popularly known as *The Arnolfini Portrait* (or other titles) is a 1434 oil painting on an oak panel, believed to depict the Italian merchant Giovanni di Nicolao Arnolfini and his wife.

It is now believed that the subject is Giovanni di Nicolao Arnolfini, or his cousin and a wife of either one of them. According to a recent proposal, Giovanni's first wife Costanza Trenta, had died perhaps in childbirth by February 1433; this would make the painting partly an unusual memorial portrait, showing one living and one dead person. Details such as the snuffed candle above the woman, the scenes after Christ's death on her side of the background roundel, and the black garb of the man, support this view.

It is considered one of the most original and complex paintings in Western art, because of its beauty, complex iconography, geometric perspective, and expansion of the picture space with the use of a mirror. According to Ernst Gombrich "in its own way it was as new and revolutionary as Donatello's or Masaccio's work in Italy. A simple corner of the real world had suddenly been fixed on to a panel as if by magic... For the first time in history the artist became the perfect eye-witness in the truest sense of the term". The portrait has been considered by Erwin Panofsky and some other art historians as a unique form of marriage contract, recorded as a painting, signed and dated by van Eyck in 1434.



The two figures are very richly dressed. Although the woman's plain gold necklace and the rings that both wear are the only jewellery visible, both outfits would have been enormously expensive, and appreciated as such by a contemporary viewer. The interior of the room has other signs of wealth: a large and elaborate brass chandelier, a convex mirror in a wooden frame with scenes of The Passion painted behind glass (shown larger than such mirrors could actually be made at this date – a discreet departure from realism by van Eyck), the elaborate bed-hangings and the carvings on the chair and bench against the back wall, and the small Oriental carpet on the floor by the bed. Even the

oranges casually placed to the left are a sign of wealth; they were very expensive in Burgundy, and may have been one of the items dealt in by Arnolfini.

The couple are shown in an upstairs room with a chest and a bed in it during early summer as indicated by the fruit on the cherry tree outside the window. The room probably functioned as a reception room, as it was the fashion in France and Burgundy where beds in reception rooms were used as seating, except, for example, when a mother with a new baby received visitors. The window has six interior wooden shutters, but only the top opening has glass, with clear bulls-eye pieces set in blue, red and green stained glass.

Erwin Panofsky has argued that the elaborate signature on the back wall, *Johannes de eyck fuit hic 1434* (Jan van Eyck was here. 1434) and other factors, showed that it was painted as a legal record of the occasion of the marriage of the couple, complete with witnesses and a witness signature. The view in the mirror shows two figures just inside the door that the couple are facing. The second figure, wearing red, is presumably the artist. He also argues that the many details of domestic items in the painting each have a disguised symbolism attached to their appearance. While Panofsky's claim that the painting formed a kind of certificate of marriage is not accepted by all art historians, his analysis of the symbolic function of the details is broadly agreed.



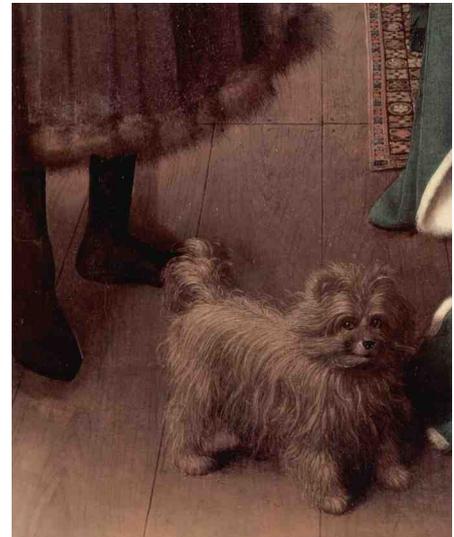


The symbolism behind the action of the couple's joined hands has also been debated among scholars. Many point to this gesture as proof of the painting's purpose. Is it a marriage contract or something else? Panofsky interprets the gesture as an act of fides, Latin for "marital oath". He calls the representation of the couple "*qui desponsari videbantur per fidem*" which means, "who were contracting their marriage by marital oath". The man is grasping the woman's right hand with his left, which is the basis for the controversy. Some scholars argue that if this painting does show a marriage ceremony, then the use of the left hand points to the marriage being morganatic, when a

man marries a woman of unequal rank and not clandestine.

Although many viewers assume the wife to be pregnant, this is not believed to be so. Art historians point to numerous paintings of female virgin saints similarly dressed, and believe that this look was fashionable for women's dresses at the time. Fashion would have been important to Arnolfini, especially since he was a cloth merchant. The more cloth a person wore, the more wealthy he or she was assumed to be. Another indication that the woman is not pregnant is that Giovanna Cenami (the identification of the woman according to most earlier scholars) died childless,

The little dog symbolizes fidelity (*fido*), loyalty, or can be seen as an emblem of lust, signifying the couple's desire to have a child. Unlike the couple, he looks out to meet the gaze of the viewer. The dog could also be simply a lap dog, a gift from husband to wife. Many wealthy women in the court had lap dogs as companions. So, the dog could reflect the wealth of the couple and their position in courtly life.



The green of the woman's dress symbolizes hope, possibly of becoming a mother. The bright green colour is also indicative of the couple's wealth; dyeing fabric such a shade was difficult, and therefore expensive. Her white cap could signify purity, but more likely signifies marital state. Behind the pair, the curtains of the marriage bed have been opened; the red curtains might allude to the physical act of love between the married couple.



The single candle in the left-front holder of the ornate six-branched chandelier is possibly the candle used in traditional Flemish marriage customs. Lit in full daylight, like the sanctuary lamp in a church, the candle may allude to the presence of the Holy Ghost or the ever-present eye of God. Alternatively, it is suggested that the painting is a memorial portrait, as the single lit candle on Giovanni's side contrasts with the burnt-out candle whose wax stub can just be seen on his wife's side, evoking a common literary metaphor: he lives on, she is dead.

The cherries present on the tree outside the window may symbolize love. The oranges which lie on the window sill and chest may symbolize the purity and innocence that reigned in the Garden of Eden before the Fall of Man. They were uncommon and a sign of wealth in the Netherlands, but in Italy were a symbol of fecundity in marriage.

Van Eyck used the technique of applying several layers of thin translucent glazes to create a painting with an intensity of both tone and colour. The glowing colours also help to highlight the realism, and to show the material wealth and opulence of Arnolfini's world. Van Eyck took advantage of the longer drying time of oil paint, compared to tempera, to blend colours by painting wet-in-wet to achieve subtle variations in light and shade to heighten the illusion of three-dimensional forms. The wet-in-wet (wet-on-wet), technique, also known as *alla prima*, is highly utilized by Renaissance painters including Jan van Eyck. The medium of oil paint also permitted van Eyck to capture surface appearance and distinguish textures precisely. He also rendered the effects of both direct and diffuse light by showing the light from the window on the left reflected by various surfaces. It has been suggested that he used a magnifying glass in order to paint the minute details such as the individual highlights on each of the amber beads hanging beside the mirror.



The *Madonna of Chancellor Rolin* c. 1435. was commissioned by Nicolas Rolin, chancellor of the Duchy of Burgundy, whose votive portrait takes up the left side of the picture, for his parish church, in Autun. The scene depicts the Virgin Mary crowned by a hovering angel while she presents the infant Jesus to Rolin. It is set within a spacious loggia with a rich decoration of columns and bas-reliefs. In the back-ground is a landscape with a city on a river, probably intended to be Autun, Rolin's hometown. A wide range of well detailed palaces, churches, an island, a towered bridge, hills and fields is portrayed, subject to a uniform light. A haze covers a mountain range in the far distance. As in many Early Netherlandish paintings, the steepness of the hills and mountains is shown as much greater than that found locally, for dramatic effect.

The small garden with many flowers identifiable (including lilies, irises, paeonies and roses), visible just outside the columns, symbolizes Mary's virtues. Beyond, two male figures wearing chaperons are looking through the crenellations of what looks to be a fortified balcony or bridge. There has been speculation that they may represent van Eyck and an assistant. Near to them are two peacocks, symbols of immortality and of pride, and two magpies. However, it is also suggested that Peacocks were the symbol of Jesus Christ and magpies were regarded as evil; so the opposition of the symbolic birds expresses the dichotomy between good and evil.



As in other van Eycks, the depiction of the space is not as straightforward as it first appears. Comparison of the floor-tiles with other elements shows that the figures are only about six feet from the columned loggia screen, and that Rolin might have to squeeze himself through the opening to leave by that way. Many van Eycks show an interior space that is actually very small, but the depiction is subtly managed to retain a sense of intimacy, but without feeling constricted.



The strength of character of the chancellor, wearing a fur-lined, elegant garment, is well rendered. The Virgin, covered by a red mantle is, in comparison to the Gothic painting tradition, shown the same size as Rolin. Above her an angel places an elaborate crown on her head. The infant Christ, holding a cross in his left hand, sits "on her knee" (i.e. on her thighs), which make a platform for the infant. This very traditional motif, known as the *Throne of Wisdom* was often used by Jan van Eyck, who elaborated the meaning in complex allusions. The Virgin's body was often compared to an altar, on which Christ was present as he was believed to be in attendance during the Mass.



The interior has complex light sources, typical of van Eyck, with light coming both from the central portico and the side windows. The architecture of the loggia, as in so many of his paintings, is in a rich and delicate Romanesque style far from the Gothic styles of his own day. The perfectionist rendering of details and textures, such as the capitals, the chequered pavement, the gold-work of the angel's crown or the garments is characteristic of Jan van Eyck's work, of which this is one of the finest examples.



There appears to be a series of illustrations of the Seven Deadly Sins distributed among the details of the painting. The reliefs just over Rolin's head show (from left) *the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise* (Pride), *the Killing of Abel by Cain* (Envy) and *the Drunkenness of Noah* (Gluttony). Then the lion-heads on the capitals behind Rolin may stand for Anger, and the tiny squashed rabbits between column and base in the loggia screen for Lust (which they were considered to exemplify in the Middle Ages). All these details are on Rolin's side of the painting; no

equivalents are visible on the other, divine, side. However this leaves Avarice and Sloth unaccounted for, unless perhaps the human figures of Rolin himself (with his purse), and the idlers out on the terrace (perhaps including van Eyck himself) represent the last two vices.