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2020

### Lesson 10: The Northern Renaissance and Arnolfini Double Portrait

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“The Northern Renaissance and Arnolfini Double Portrait” is part of the

## **ART APPRECIATION**

Open Educational Resource

by Marie Porterfield Barry  
East Tennessee State University, 2020

### Introduction

This course explores the world’s visual arts, focusing on the development of visual awareness, assessment, and appreciation by examining a variety of styles from various periods and cultures while emphasizing the development of a common visual language. The materials are meant to foster a broader understanding of the role of visual art in human culture and experience from the prehistoric through the contemporary.

This is an Open Educational Resource (OER), an openly licensed educational material designed to replace a traditional textbook.

### Course Materials

#### Presentations

The course materials consist of 24 presentations examining art across the globe from prehistory through the contemporary art world. These introduce key vocabulary, explore the way that culture and art are linked, describe the varying methods and techniques of the featured artists, and encourage classroom discourse.

#### Reading Lists

Each of the 24 presentations has an accompanying reading list which provides links to articles, videos, and other resources. The reading list is meant to reinforce and clarify information covered in each of the presentations.

#### Sample Assignments

A list of sample assignments is also included. Ranging from brief essays to simple art projects, these are designed to be completed in a sketchbook to more deeply explore course concepts. Intended to encourage learners to think like artists, art critics, and art historians, assignments emphasize practices of creative thinking and artistic method, while reinforcing concepts addressed in classroom lectures and required readings.

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Some of the images presented in this OER are marked with a Creative Commons license and include a tag for Educational Fair Use, especially works of art that have been photographed while installed in museums. The photographs of these works of art are licensed by the photographer but the two-dimensional works of art are protected under copyright. The images are therefore meant only for the purpose of education and contemplation and are included in a low resolution.

## Adopting, Adapting, or Expanding the Resource

The goal for this OER is to build an educational resource that is flexible enough to address concepts relevant to the contemporary discourse and scholarship in the visual arts. For those interested in utilizing these course materials, I am providing below some additional information that may be useful in expanding, adapting, or reinterpreting the materials. Editable versions are available in Microsoft PowerPoint and Word at <https://dc.etsu.edu/art-appreciation-oer/>

The font used to create the presentations and written documents for this OER is Calibri.

## Finding Additional Readings, Lessons, and Articles

**Smarthistory:** <https://smarthistory.org/>

Smarthistory is an extensive open educational resource which publishes outstanding essays and video lectures about art. The Creating + Conserving section of Smarthistory includes wonderful informational articles and videos about materials and processes: <https://smarthistory.org/tag/conservation/>

**MoMA Learning:** [https://www.moma.org/learn/moma\\_learning/](https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/)

MoMA Learning provides a wonderful selection of essays on works of modern art and also has assignment suggestions at the bottom of each section.

**KhanAcademy:** <https://www.khanacademy.org/>.

Khan Academy is an outstanding platform of open educational resources covering a variety of academic and scholarly topics.

**Trivium Art History:** <https://arthistoryproject.com/>

Trivium Art History is a free, online art history book with clean design and approachable descriptions of works of art, periods of art history, and fun artist biographies. The [Themes of Art](#) section is a nice tool to helping students explore works that match their interests. The [World of Art](#) section is a useful tool for an exploratory World Art sketchbook prompt. The [Timeline](#) section is useful, as it separates works of art into galleries based on period.

**Introduction to Art: Design, Context, and Meaning:** <https://oer.galileo.usg.edu/arts-textbooks/3/>

For a more traditional, textbook approach, there is an Introduction to Art open educational resource textbook available.

## Locating Images

If you are utilizing the course materials and would like to add new images that are public domain or licensed under Creative Commons, there are several useful tips provided below for finding images.

**The Met Museum:** <https://www.metmuseum.org/>

The Met has an option to search for Open Access images within the collection [here](#). Make sure that the “Open Access” box is checked. The image license is [CC0 1.0](#), and will be marked OA Public Domain at the lower left of the image.

**Google Images:** <https://www.google.com/imghp?hl=en&tab=wi&ogbl>

[Google Images](#) has an option under “Settings” > “Advanced Search” to search by “Usage Rights”. Choosing “Free to use share or modify” will allow a search for images suitable for expanding our OER.

**Wikimedia Commons:** <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>

[Wikimedia Commons](#) is an outstanding resource for finding open source images, with a strong collection of works of art.

**Flickr:** <https://www.flickr.com>

[Flickr](#) allows users to specify image licenses on uploaded photographs. Click “Some rights reserved” at the lower right of the image to check the licensing. Some images will say “Public Domain” or will be licensed under a [Creative Commons](#) (CC) license, allowing for the use in an OER.

**Smarthistory Flickr:** <https://www.flickr.com/groups/smarthistory/pool/>

The [Smarthistory Flickr](#) is expansive with images licensed for educational purposes.

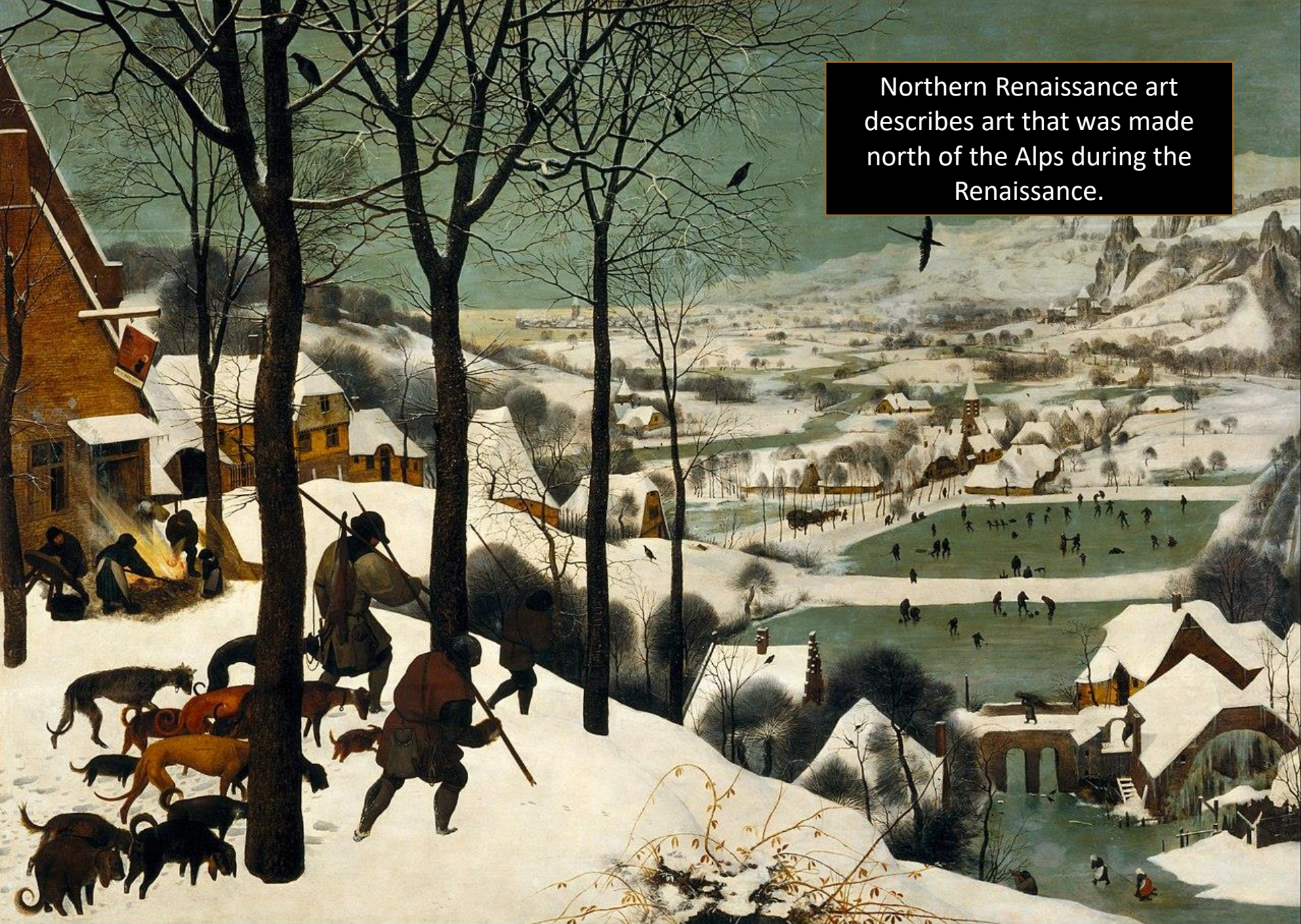
## Acknowledgements

This Art Appreciation OER was adapted from existing resources by Marie Porterfield Barry as part of East Tennessee State University’s Open Educational Resources (OERs) Initiatives, which are a collaboration of the Charles C. Sherrod Library and the Center for Teaching Excellence. Deepest gratitude for the support from Ashley Sergiadis of Sherrod Library and Phil Smith of the Center for Teaching Excellence during the building of this resource. Thanks as well to my students at East Tennessee State University whose feedback and participation during our Art Appreciation classes was immensely valuable in compiling and evaluating this OER.



The Northern Renaissance  
& the *Arnolfini Double Portrait*

Northern Renaissance art describes art that was made north of the Alps during the Renaissance.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Hunters in the Snow*, 1565. Author: Google Art Project, Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#), License: Public Domain



Northern artists like Albrecht Dürer traveled extensively and were therefore influenced by Italian Renaissance art and ideas.

Albrecht Dürer  
*Self-Portrait at 26*  
Oil on panel, 1498  
Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)  
License: Public Domain

However, Northern Renaissance artists developed their own unique styles, distinguishing themselves from their Italian contemporaries.



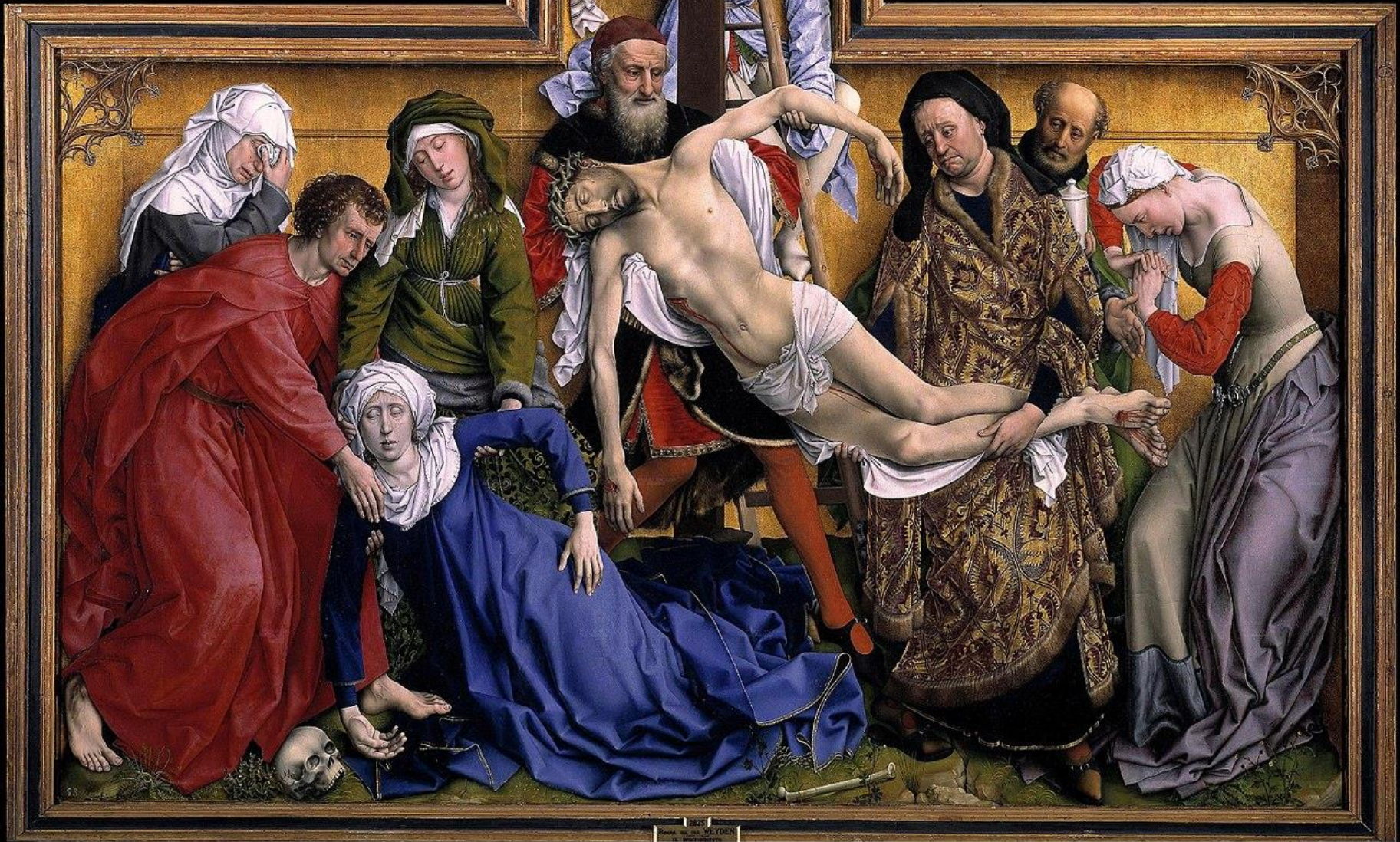
Hieronymus Bosch  
*Garden of Earthly Delights*  
Center Panel, Oil on panel,  
c. 1480-1505

Author: Museum del Prado, *Cropped from original*, Source: Wikimedia Commons, License: Public Domain



Northern Renaissance art is characterized by minute detail and clarity in highly symbolic works of art.

Rogier van der Weyden  
Deposition, Oil on oak panel, c.1435  
Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)  
License: Public Domain





Jan van Eyck  
*Arnolfini Double Portrait*



Jan van Eyck  
*Arnolfini Double Portrait*  
Tempera and oil on oak panel, 1434.  
Author: [National Gallery, London](#)  
Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)  
License: Public Domain

Who do you see in this painting, and what is their relationship?

What do you think is going on?

How are the figures experiencing this moment?



Jan van Eyck  
*Arnolfini Double Portrait*  
Tempera and oil on oak panel, 1434.  
Author: [National Gallery, London](#)  
Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)  
License: Public Domain

What other objects or creatures can you find?  
What kind of room are they in?  
What is the social status of these individuals?  
What is the significance of the mirror?  
What do you notice about the window?



Jan van Eyck  
*Arnolfini Double Portrait*  
Tempera and oil on oak panel, 1434.  
Author: [National Gallery, London](#)  
Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)  
License: Public Domain

Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Double Portrait* includes personal likenesses of real people and the signature of artist.

There are many interpretations for this painting...and art historians have yet to agree on the most likely scenario.

There are even several possible Mister Arnolfinis...(We know his name as Arnolfini from surviving records).

Jan van Eyck  
*Arnolfini Double Portrait*  
Tempera and oil on oak panel, 1434.  
Author: [National Gallery, London](#)  
Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)  
License: Public Domain



The couple are in a domestic interior...You can see the bed behind the female figure. (Not too surprising, as bedrooms were often used for receiving guests at this time.)

Historians point out that the male figure stands next to the window, as he was responsible for work outside the home, while the female stands in the interior, as she was responsible for the domestic realm.



Jan van Eyck  
*Arnolfini Double Portrait*  
Tempera and oil on oak panel, 1434.  
Author: [National Gallery, London](#)  
Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)  
License: Public Domain

*Is she pregnant?*

Not likely, as pregnant female figures were rarely depicted at this time.

Most likely she is just holding up her dress to display its extravagance (with expensive green dye for the exterior and luxurious blue dye for the underskirts.)

The hand held across her waist signals Renaissance female decorum.



Jan van Eyck

*Arnolfini Double Portrait*

Tempera and oil on oak panel, 1434.

Author: [National Gallery, London](#), *Cropped from original*,

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: Public Domain



Jan van Eyck's *Dresden Triptych* from 1437 includes a similarly shaped and draped female figure, depicting St. Catherine.

As St. Catherine was a virgin martyr, she is definitely not meant to be pregnant in Jan van Eyck's depiction.



St. Catherine detail from Jan van Eyck's *Dresden Triptych*. Author: [Google Art Project](#), Cropped from original, Source: Wikimedia Commons, License: Public Domain



Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Double Portrait*, 1434. Author: [National Gallery, London](#), Cropped from original, Source: Wikimedia Commons, License: Public Domain

Saints are often depicted in art alongside the objects of martyrdom. St. Catherine is seen here with an execution wheel, also called a Catherine wheel, at her feet.



St. Catherine detail from Jan van Eyck's *Dresden Triptych*. Author: [Google Art Project](#), *Cropped from original*, Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#), License: [Public Domain](#)

For years this painting was known as the  
*Arnolfini Wedding Portrait*.

The couple are standing and holding hands, as  
if taking a vow. The little dog may then be a  
symbol of fidelity. The removal of shoes  
suggests hallowed ground.



Jan van Eyck  
*Arnolfini Double Portrait*  
Tempera and oil on oak panel, 1434.  
Author: [National Gallery, London](#), Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#), License: [Public Domain](#)

This wedding portrait interpretation was supported by the fact that two witnesses are seen reflected in the mirror.

Jan van Eyck signed the wall, as if confirming that he was a witness for the event.



Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Double Portrait*, 1434. Author: National Gallery, London, *Cropped from original*, Source: Wikimedia Commons, License: Public Domain

Historians believe the figure in red reflected in the mirror may be a self-portrait of the artist, as he had depicted himself in an earlier self-portrait wearing a red turban.



Above: Jan van Eyck, *Portrait of a Man in a Red Turban (Self-Portrait?)*, Oil on panel, 1433. Author: [The York Project](#), Source: Wikimedia Commons, License: Public Domain  
Right: Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Double Portrait*, 1434. Author: [National Gallery, London](#), *Cropped from original*, Source: Wikimedia Commons, License: Public Domain



The decorated carving on the bed is St. Margaret of Antioch, patron saint of women in childbirth.

St. Margaret is depicted with a dragon because when she refused to reject Christianity she was tortured, including an incident in which she was swallowed by a dragon (Satan in disguise). The cross she carried then split open the dragon's insides and she came bursting forth.



*Left: Jan van Eyck, Arnolfini Double Portrait, 1434. Author: [National Gallery, London](#), Cropped from original, Source: Wikimedia Commons, License: Public Domain*

*Right: Detail from the Almugavar Hours, showing St. Margaret and the dragon, Author: [Walters Art Museum](#), Cropped from original, Source: Flickr, License: Public Domain*

Of course marriage and the hope for children were linked during the Renaissance.

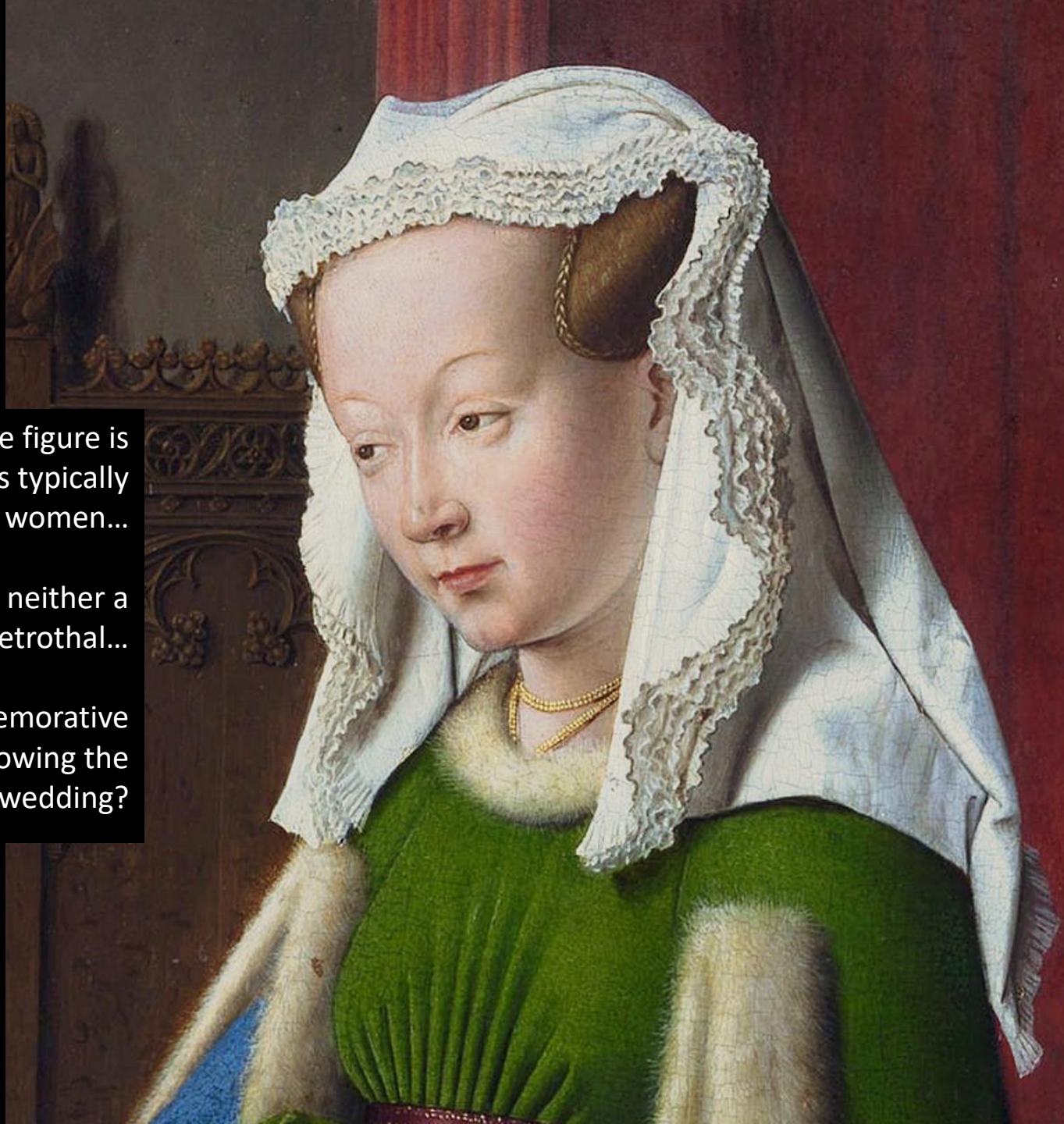
The patron saint of childbirth is positioned over the female's womb in this portrait.

And the oranges may allude to fruitfulness...perhaps all suggesting a hope for children.



Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Double Portrait*  
Tempera and oil on oak panel, 1434.  
Author: National Gallery, London  
Source: Wikimedia Commons  
License: Public Domain





However, the female figure is wearing a headdress that is typically reserved for married women...

Suggesting that this is neither a wedding scene nor a betrothal...

Although perhaps a commemorative portrait of a couple following the wedding?

Jan van Eyck  
*Arnolfini Double Portrait*, 1434.  
Author: [National Gallery, London](#),  
*Cropped from original*, Source:  
Wikimedia Commons, License:  
Public Domain



Historians believe that this is likely a portrait of one of two possible Giovanni Arnolfinis (*cousins*) who were wealthy cloth merchants...

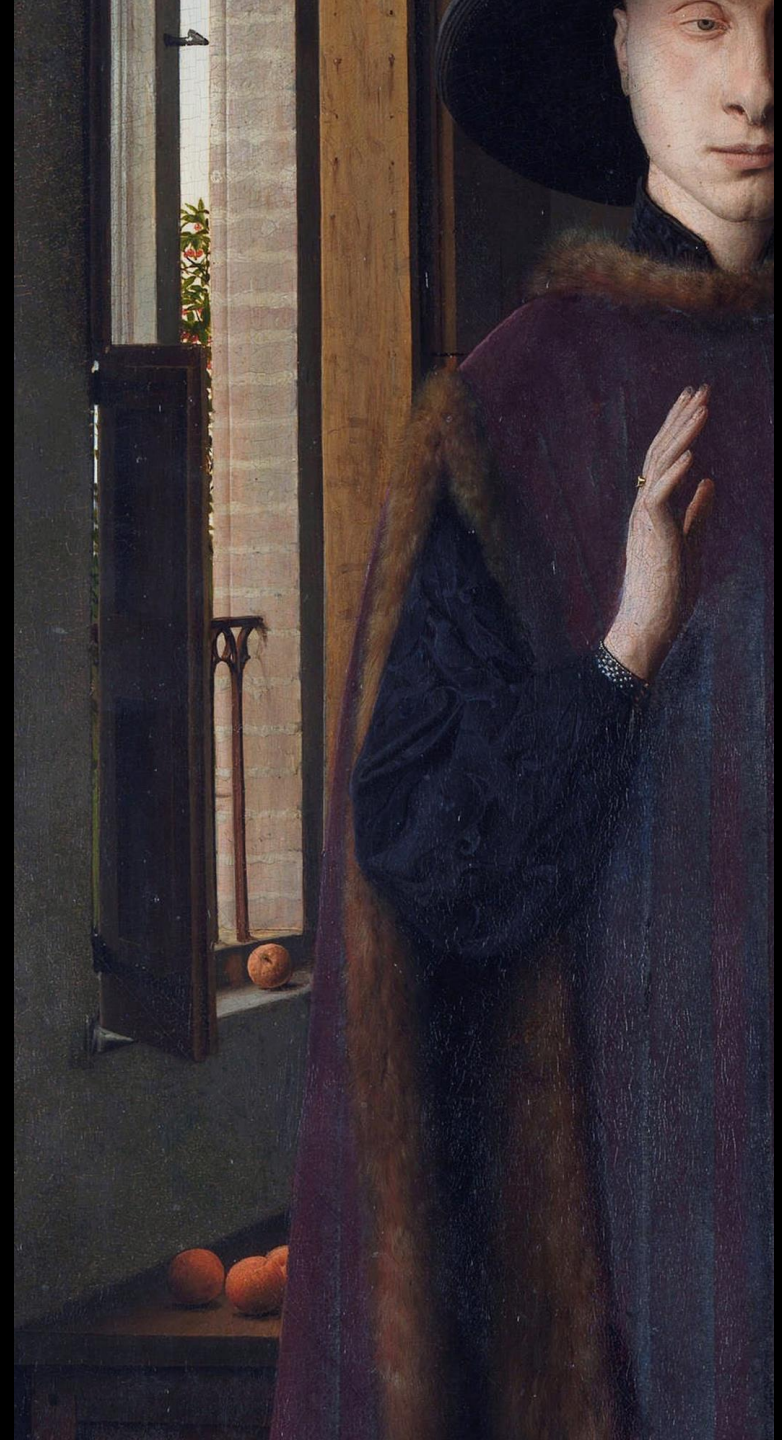
And resided in Bruges, where either might have met Jan van Eyck.



Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Double Portrait*  
Tempera and oil on oak panel, 1434.  
Author: National Gallery, London  
Source: Wikimedia Commons  
License: Public Domain

If this is a portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini, a wealthy cloth merchant, the luxurious costumes worn by the couple would allude to his business.

By looking at the window, you will notice that the trees are in blossom and the window is hanging open...suggesting that the weather is warm. Perhaps the couple is simply dressed in winter clothing to exhibit their business and enormous wealth.



Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Double Portrait*, 1434. Author: [National Gallery, London](#),  
*Cropped from original*, Source: Wikimedia Commons, License: Public Domain

Giovanni Arnolfini seems to have dealt in the importation of oranges as well, like the ones in the window.

Although oranges are also a signal of wealth, as they are a luxury item.



Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Double Portrait*  
Tempera and oil on oak panel, 1434.  
Author: National Gallery, London  
Source: Wikimedia Commons  
License: Public Domain

Some historians interpret the gesture of the hands between the couple as a sign that the husband is transferring to his wife the right to make business and legal decisions.



Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Double Portrait*  
Tempera and oil on oak panel, 1434.  
Author: National Gallery, London  
Source: Wikimedia Commons  
License: Public Domain

The most likely of the two Giovanni Arnolfini cousins to be depicted in this painting (as he was older, and married prior to the date of this painting)...

Was indeed married by 1434...except his wife was dead (one year prior, perhaps in childbirth).



Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Double Portrait*  
Tempera and oil on oak panel, 1434.  
Author: National Gallery, London  
Source: Wikimedia Commons  
License: Public Domain

Hence, this painting may in fact be a memorial image, a loving portrait showing eternal devotion to a deceased wife...

One who was failed by the patron saint of childbirth who hovers above her womb.



Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Double Portrait*  
Tempera and oil on oak panel, 1434.  
Author: National Gallery, London  
Source: Wikimedia Commons  
License: Public Domain

The sinister gargoyles painted so carefully above her hand and near her womb seem like little harbingers of death...of Arnolfini's wife and, perhaps, infant child.



Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Double Portrait*, 1434.  
Author: [National Gallery, London](#), *Cropped from original*, Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#),  
License: Public Domain

A candle burns brightly above the head of Giovanni while the remains of a snuffed out candle hangs above the head of the lady.



Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Double Portrait*, 1434.

Author: [National Gallery, London](#), *Cropped from original*, Source: Wikimedia Commons, License: Public Domain



Scenes from the life of Christ appear in the roundels along the side of the mirror where Giovanni stands.

While scenes following the crucifixion of Christ are shown nearest the lady.



Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Double Portrait*, 1434. Author: National Gallery, London, *Cropped from original*, Source: Wikimedia Commons, License: Public Domain

Some historians suggest that the face of Giovanni Arnolfini looks more naturalistic while the portrait of his wife seems idealized, pale, and otherworldly.



Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Double Portrait*, 1434.

Author: [National Gallery, London](#), *Cropped from original*, Source: Wikimedia Commons, License: Public Domain

The beauty of the painting, the richness of the details, and the enigmatic quality of the objects included in the portrait have led countless scholars to try to unravel the mystery and meaning in the portrait.



Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Double Portrait*  
Tempera and oil on oak panel, 1434.  
Author: National Gallery, London  
Source: Wikimedia Commons  
License: Public Domain

While other scholars argue that the interior is not meant to symbolize anything further than the fabulous wealth of the couple depicted in the double portrait.

Arnolfini is a wealthy man; his wife, a lady in her beautiful and luxurious home; the dog, just a dog.

Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Double Portrait*  
Tempera and oil on oak panel, 1434.  
Author: National Gallery, London  
Source: Wikimedia Commons  
License: Public Domain



We may never know.



Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Double Portrait*  
Tempera and oil on oak panel, 1434.  
Author: National Gallery, London  
Source: Wikimedia Commons  
License: Public Domain

## Reading List: 10\_The Northern Renaissance and Arnolfini Double Portrait

Introduction to the Northern Renaissance:

<https://smarthistory.org/an-introduction-to-the-northern-renaissance-in-the-fifteenth-century/>

About Albrecht Dürer's *Self-Portrait at 26*:

<https://smarthistory.org/durer-self-portrait-1498/>

Two video lecture about *Arnolfini Double Portrait*:

<https://smarthistory.org/jan-van-eyck-the-arnolfini-portrait/>

Article addressing the question of pregnancy in the *Arnolfini Double Portrait*:

<https://smarthistory.org/arnolfini-pregnancy/>

## **Sketchbook Assignment: 10\_The Northern Renaissance and Arnolfini Double Portrait**

*Arnolfini Double Portrait assignment must be given at least one week before the discussion of the work of art. Provide an image of the painting with detail shots.*

Study the *Arnolfini Double Portrait* as well as the accompanying detail images. Many works from the Northern Renaissance are highly symbolic, with each object included having meaning and significance. Without looking up information about the painting, study it and write a story about the people depicted. What is happening in the painting? Who are the people and what is their relationship to one another? Begin by making some notes about the details and what you think they mean and then form these into a brief story about the figures depicted. You may be straightforward or highly imaginative in your story, but make sure that it relates to the details you see in the painting.