Lesson 10: The Northern Renaissance and Arnolfini Double Portrait

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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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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/
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
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The Northern Renaissance & the Arnolfini Double Portrait
Northern Renaissance art describes art that was made north of the Alps during the Renaissance.

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.
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).
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’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.
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.
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.
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.

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.
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.

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.
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.

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).

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.

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.

Some historians suggest that the face of Giovanni Arnolfini looks more naturalistic while the portrait of his wife seems idealized, pale, and otherworldly.
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.
We may never know.

Reading List: 10_The Northern Renaissance and Arnolfini Double Portrait

Introduction to the Northern Renaissance:  

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.