

JAN VAN EYCK Active 1422; died 1441

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THE ARNOLFINI PORTRAIT

1434; oil on oak; 82.2 × 60 cm

This stunning portrait reminds us that artistic innovation was by no means limited to Italy during the early Renaissance. In the Netherlands, van Eyck perfected the technique of binding pigment (colour) with oil rather than egg, around seventy years before his Italian colleagues mastered this approach. Oil paint dries more slowly than egg tempera, and so can be carefully blended to create breathtaking naturalistic illusions. Van Eyck combined his meticulous rendering of surfaces with three-quarter views of heads or whole bodies, sometimes, as here, placed in invented but realistic settings. The effect astonished his contemporaries: for the first time, portraits appeared to present direct encounters with believable representations of actual people.

This is van Eyck's most famous and complex portrait. It probably depicts Giovanni di Nicolao Arnolfini, an Italian merchant who had settled in Bruges, together with his wife. They are presented as wealthy, pious and united – the dog is a symbol of their fidelity. Expensive oranges are strewn casually around; Arnolfini's tabard is lined with sable fur and his wife's fine woollen dress is made from so much fabric that she has to gather it up before her. The bunched folds would not have suggested pregnancy to fifteenth-century viewers: excess fabric

was a sign of wealth that was also used in the depiction of virgin saints from this period. Van Eyck has employed all of his illusionistic skills to represent the intricate brass chandelier and the convex mirror on the wall, whose frame contains tiny scenes from the Passion of Christ. On either side of the mirror hang expensive amber prayer beads and a clothes brush, showing that this couple has the means of maintaining both their inner spiritual wellbeing and external appearances.

Van Eyck signed this work above the mirror with an ornate Latin inscription that translates as 'Jan van Eyck was here 1434'. This has been interpreted in the past as legal language, as if the painting were some form of documentary evidence of this couple's marriage, witnessed by the artist. More recent research suggests that the signature is instead a witty reference to graffiti. Van Eyck often included inscriptions in his work or on their frames, to make sure that viewers were absolutely clear about the identity of the artist responsible for this amazing illusion.

Also in the National Gallery by this artist:

Portrait of a Man ('Léal Souvenir'); *Portrait of a Man (Self Portrait?)*



THE VIRGIN OF THE ROCKS

about 1491–1508; oil on wood; 189.5 × 120 cm

Leonardo da Vinci's insatiable curiosity and talent as a sculptor, architect, engineer and scientist meant that he did not devote all of his time to painting. Yet his achievements in the field remain extraordinary, and this is a superb example of why he is such a celebrated figure. We see the Virgin Mary kneeling to worship her son, joined by his cousin Saint John the Baptist. Christ, in profile at the front, raises his hand in blessing, supported by the protective arm of an angel. The composition is the epitome of the balance and harmony sought by Italian artists at this point, centred on the solid triangular shape formed by the Virgin. Faces, arms and hands lead the eye round in a subtle circular movement that suggests completeness and eternity. The design draws its serenity from its foundation on geometric shapes, but appears natural, surpassing the obvious symmetry rigidly adhered to by earlier generations of artists.

We see Leonardo's famous technique of defining bodies through light and shade, blended, as he wrote, 'without lines or borders in the manner of smoke', described by the Italian word *'sfumato'*. The setting of strange rocks and caves has been chosen partly as a metaphor for the Virgin and Child, suggesting sanctuary; it also offers the practical advantage of providing a dark background against which faces could be shaped with light. The illusion of depth is created by another of Leonardo's innovations, known as aerial or atmospheric perspective: distant horizons are painted in hazy blue-green tones, mimicking an optical effect we see when we look into the far distance of a

landscape. The carefully observed plants and flowers, including heartsease (a symbol of purity and atonement) at the bottom left, attest to Leonardo's passion for the scientific study of everything in the natural world.

This panel was part of a long-running argument over money with the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception who, in 1483, had commissioned Leonardo and his associates to provide an altarpiece for their new chapel in the church of San Francesco, Milan. Leonardo was outraged by the inadequacy of the bonus fee he was offered when the altarpiece was completed, and in his anger sold the central panel to a private buyer (that first version is now in the Louvre). The confraternity was not able either to cajole or pressure him into delivering this panel as a replacement until 1508. It seems that Leonardo initially experimented with the composition, perhaps reluctant to repeat something from his past. Recent investigations have revealed a drawing underneath this painting, which significantly changed the scene. Perhaps the confraternity protested, wanting what they had previously seen and lost. Or Leonardo may simply have decided that this design was in fact the best, and repeated it with just a few minor refinements.

Also in the National Gallery by this artist:

The Leonardo Cartoon

