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Theories Behind the Arnolfini Portrait



*The Arnolfini Portrait*—commonly known as *Arnolfini and His Wife*—is possibly one of the most mysterious and debated paintings to date. Created by the famous Netherlandish painter Jan Van Eyck in 1434, it has led to debates amongst art historians about who and what the painting depicts, with Arnolfini being the only certainty. Some theories claim to determine who the woman really is, what the objects symbolize, and what scene is being conducted in the painting, but the strongest suggestion is that it is a memorial to Arnolfini’s first wife who died during labor.

One of the more major questions regarding the painting is who the woman is. While nearly all art historians have assumed that she is Arnolfini’s wife—hence, the paintings alternate titles— not many specify which one. Arnolfini, for over a century, was assumed to have had only one wife by the name of Jeanne Cenami, who was thought to have been determined by British art historian James Weale in 1912. In Weale’s book *The Van Eycks and Their Art*, translated from French, it says “Joan [Jeanne] who survived her husband, was still living in 1490.” However, it is impossible for this woman to be Jeanne. In the 1998 book published *The fifteenth century Netherlandish schools* by Lorne Campbell, he discovered a document by chance that proved Arnolfini and Cenami were married in 1447, nearly thirteen years later than the painting's

creation, and about six years post Van Eyck’s death in 1441.

This has led historians to believe the woman is either Arnolfini’s later discovered first wife Costanza Trenta—the likeliest scenario—or that the man is neither Arnolfini nor the woman his wife. This is a more modern theory, suggesting that the man is a different Giovanni, Arnolfini’s cousin Giovanni di



*Portrait of Giovanni di Nicolao Arnolfini*,  
1438, Early Renaissance, Oil on wood, Jan  
Van Eyck

Arrigo to be exact, and his wife. Again, this is highly unlikely due to the discovery of another Van Eyck portrait depicting Arnolfini (Fig.1), who looks identical to the man in the *Arnolfini Portrait*. The idea that the woman is Costanza Trenta is the most logical option considering her history. She passed away in 1433, a year prior to the painting being created, due to childbirth complications. This idea is supported by other aspects of the painting to be discussed later.

Symbols are a bit trickier to determine, and when it comes to the *Arnolfini Portrait*, there are plenty of symbols filled with iconographic significance that can be interpreted differently. The most prominent one is the dog that stands in the foreground. The most common interpretation is that the dog is a symbol of fidelity, with “the common canine name *Fido* originated from the Latin *fidere*, “to trust”,” (Kleiner). To add to this interpretation, and to strengthen the strongest theory, dogs were commonly either buried with their owners, carved onto tombs or made into statues to be placed near their owner's tomb. This is a practice that expanded many cultures, going back as early as Ancient Egypt. This could be a hint to the wife’s death. Another hint to her death is the elaborate—and strategically placed—chandelier. With close examination, a lit candle can be seen above Arnolfini, whereas the remnants of a melted



Close-up of *Arnolfini Portrait*, 1434, Early Renaissance, Oil on wood, Jav Van Eyck

candle are above his wife (Fig. 2). While one could argue that the lit candle “represents the seeing eye of God,” (“The Many Questions Surrounding Jan Van Eyck’s Arnolfini Portrait”) it does not explain the melted one. A better interpretation is that the lit candle above Arnolfini represents his life, while the melted candle represents his wife’s death. To switch from symbols of death to ones of life, there are two symbols that represent fertility. The first and more obvious symbol is the way Trenta is holding up her attire. At first glance, it makes her appear to be pregnant, but this is unlikely. She holds it up because it is “a reflection of the current trend for voluminous robes.” (Arnolfini Portrait). It was also a common way to depict virgin female saints in paintings and sculptures. The second symbol is the carving on the bed that “depicts St Margaret, the saint of childbearing, implying a desire for a healthy family,” (Arnolfini Portrait). All of these symbols relate to the fact that Trenta passed away during childbirth.

When it comes to what scene the entirety of the painting depicts, there are three commonly departed ideas. The first, and most supported, is that the painting itself depicts the exchange of vows and acts as a documentation of their wedding. This idea is supported by the head covering Trenta is wearing, which a married woman would have worn, but also the way



Close-up of *Arnolfini Portrait*, 1434, Early Renaissance, Oil on wood, Jav Van Eyck

Arnolfini holds her hand. He holds her with his left hand (Fig. 3), which could represent a left-handed—or morganatic—marriage in which the spouses derive from different social classes or ranks.

Arnolfini also holds his right hand up in an oath-taking manner. This idea is odd, however, as Tom Nichols says “there are no other examples of double portrait paintings being used as marriage documents in the period,” (Nichols). The second suggestion is that Arnolfini is “conferring legal privileges on his wife to conduct business in his absence,” (Kleiner). This also makes sense, seeing as Arnolfini was a prosperous Italian banker in Burges and a merchant. The third depiction, and the strongest theory, is that the painting is a memorial to Trenta. Their hand-holding could also be interpreted as him holding her hand with her palm up, suggesting her presence in heaven. Also, with the painting being made about a year after her death, it makes the wedding idea even less likely because it would have been done eight years after their wedding in 1426. The only way for this to be a wedding portrait is if the woman was his first wife, Cenami, which was proven false.

For centuries, this painting has held its secrets from art historians. Many theories have been proven impossible, while others raise even more questions. Despite the many suggestions, the theory discussed seems to fit the most pieces together to form this puzzle. From the candles to the identified woman to the dates discovered, the theory that the painting is a memorial to Arnolfini’s second wife appears to be the most viable.

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