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A possible reflection of the painter (Jan van Eyck) in the Ghent Altarpiece

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One of the most famous paintings of Jan van Eyck is undoubtedly “The Arnolfini Portrait” of the London National Gallery (1434) (*fig. 1*)¹. This is also one of the most interesting pieces of art from the point of view of semiotics, because it seems to have several levels of meaning (which is characteristic of Van Eyck). When I was teaching in Lugano, it was natural for me to choose this picture as an object of analysis for my seminar on the semiotics of art.

The painting represents a married couple, who can be recognized as the Italian merchant Giovanni Arnolfini and his wife. They are pictured in a Flemish room (possibly at their home at Bruges); on the wall behind them there is a convex mirror. The reflection in the mirror covers more than what is shown in the painting: in the mirror one can see the two represented figures shown from an opposite viewpoint, contrary to that of the observer. Reflected in the mirror, we see the backs of the married couple, and, besides, in front of these two figures (i.e. deeper in the mirror space) it is possible to see two other men standing in the doorway, who are not represented in the picture (*fig. 2*). They don't belong to the represented reality, they are outside the picture space. We do not see them depicted, but we see their reflections. This is, one could say, a different level of pictorial reality.

1 About this picture see, in particular, Panofsky, 1934; Dhanens, 1980, p. 193–205 (illustrations 131 and 133); Seidel, 1993; Hall, 1994.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

The position of these two persons (who are reflected in the mirror while not being directly visible) actually coincides with the position of a spectator who is observing the scene from outside and also with the position of a painter who is depicting the scene; this is one and the same position. It is probable that these are the figures of the painter (Jan van Eyck) and his assistant. The painter seems to demonstrate his presence in the depicted scene. He is outside the pictorial space, but, nevertheless, he belongs to the represented world. He is both a painter and a witness of the scene in question. This corresponds to the inscription on the wall above the mirror in the Arnolfini room (a representation of an imagined *graffitto*): “Johannes de Eyck fuit hic 1434” (*fig. 2*). The inscription is somewhat ambiguous: it may mean either “Jan van Eyck was here” or “Jan van Eyck was this man (the one reflected in the mirror)”. Indeed, the word *hic*, generally speaking, may be understood either as a pronominal adverb (“here”) or as a demonstrative pronoun (“this”). In the first case, the inscription appears as a representation of a *graffitto*, made on a wall, similar to *graffitti* we can see on rocks and ruins. In the second case, the inscription is correlated with the reflection in the mirror (identifying van Eyck with the man reflected in the mirror). In both cases, what we see is a signature of the painter. The first interpretation corresponds to the Latin usage; the second one presupposes a syntactic inversion. Hence, the first reading might seem more probable. However, the second one cannot be excluded: we do not know, indeed, whether van Eyck was a qualified latinist with a good knowledge of Classical Latin.

The use of reflection as a sign of the painter’s presence seems to be characteristic of Jan van Eyck. Indeed, we can find a similar device in another one of his paintings, viz. “The Virgin and Child with Canon van der Paele” (1434–1436) from the Stedelijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten (Groeningemuseum) in Bruges (*fig. 3*).

Here one sees St. George, patron of Canon George van der Paele, introducing the Canon to the Virgin and the Child. On the armour and the helmet of St. George, various figures and objects that we can see in the picture, are reflected; they are a reflection of the depicted reality. Simultaneously, on the shield of St. George, one can trace the reflection of a small figure, which is extraneous to the depicted reality; the figure is obviously outside the pictorial

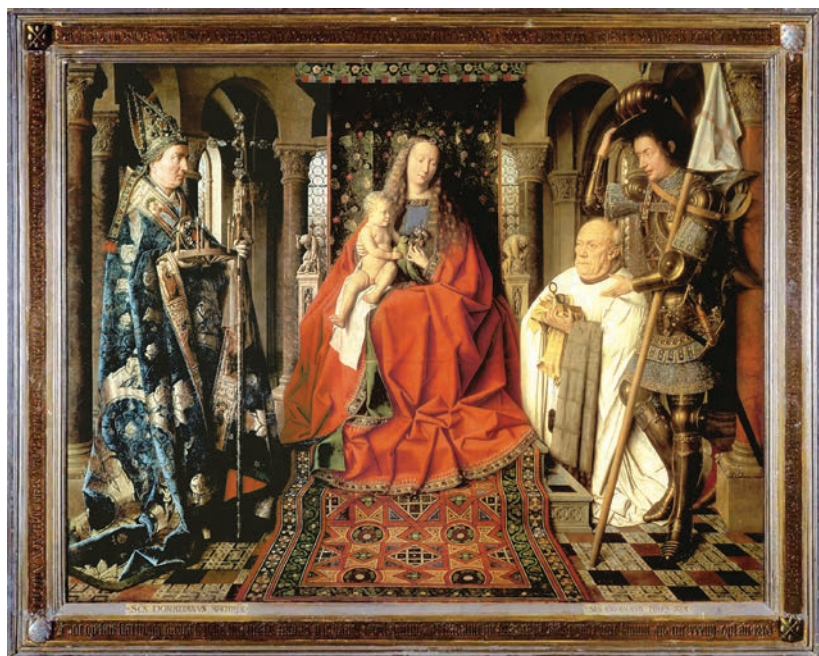


Fig. 3

space (fig. 4)². It is highly possible, again, that this is a reflection of the painter, i.e. Jan van Eyck. The reflection under discussion appears even more clearly in the copy of this picture made by a disciple of van Eyck, now belonging to at the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten in Antwerp (fig. 5)³.

As in “The Arnolfini Portrait”, this is a reflection of a real, not depicted figure. However, in this case, the reflection of the figure in question is not directly visible: the painter does not publicly declare his presence (as he did on the contrary in “The Arnolfini Portrait”). The reflection is a *sign* of his presence, a sort of *symbolic* presence: the painter is there,

2 See Carter, 1954, p. 61 and table 3; Farmer, 1968, p. 159–160 and table 5; Belting & Kruse, 1994, table. 51c; Panofsky, I, c. 429, note 3 (referring to p. 183).

3 See Carter, 1954, p. 61, note 4; Farmer, 1968, p. 159–160 and table 6; Šebková-Thaller, 1991, p. 6 and illustration 5).

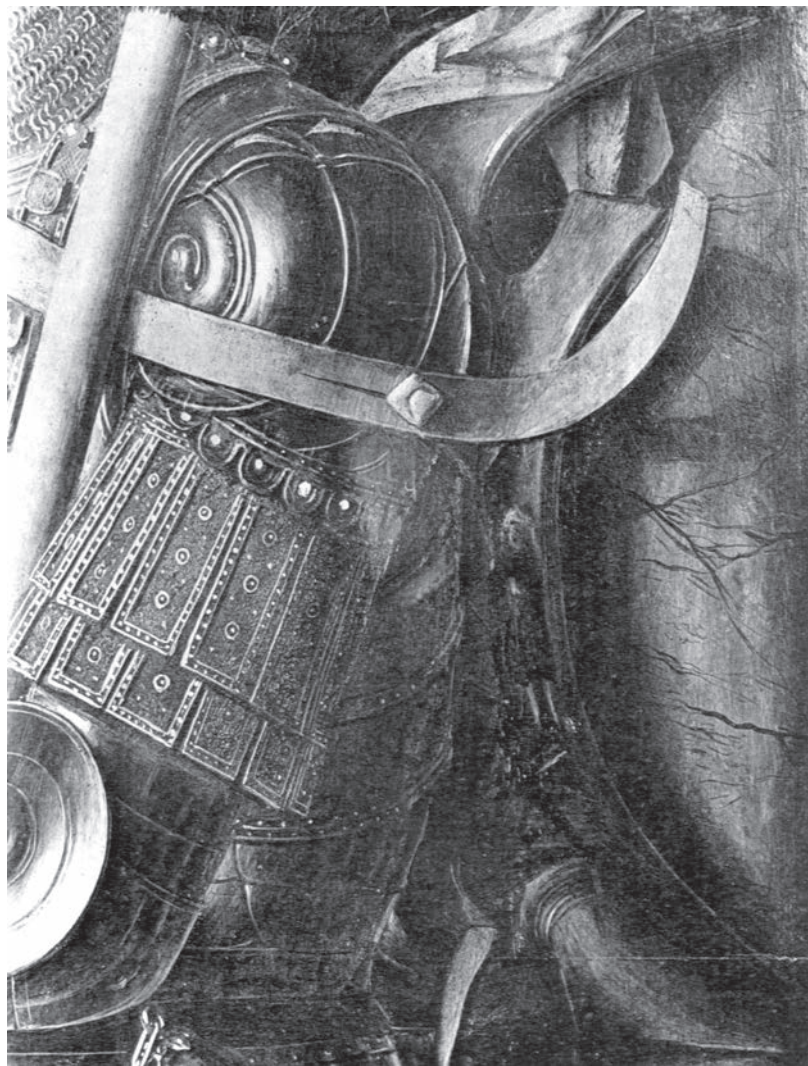


Fig. 4



Fig. 5

even if this is not evident for the spectator (unless the latter is equipped with a magnifying glass).

These two examples are relatively well-known: “The Arnolfini Portrait” is frequently discussed and also the reflection in “The Virgin and Child with Canon van der Paele” is sometimes mentioned in the scholarly literature. The aim of the present paper is to suggest a third example, which till now has never been an object of attention. It seems that one can observe a similar phenomenon of reflection in the Ghent Altarpiece by the brothers Hubert and Jan van Eyck (the final version of which obviously belongs to Jan).

In the central scene of the Altarpiece—the scene of the Adoration of the Mystical Lamb—the transformation of the blood of the Paschal Lamb into water, the Water of Life, is depicted (fig. 6). This is the source of Life (*fons vitae*) of the Book of Revelation.



Fig. 6

On the picture one sees the Fountain of Life from which flows out the Water of Life. The Fountain of Life has a spherical gargoyles spout unit. The spherical surface of the globe adorning the fountain is illuminated from the right (according to the point of view of the spectator of

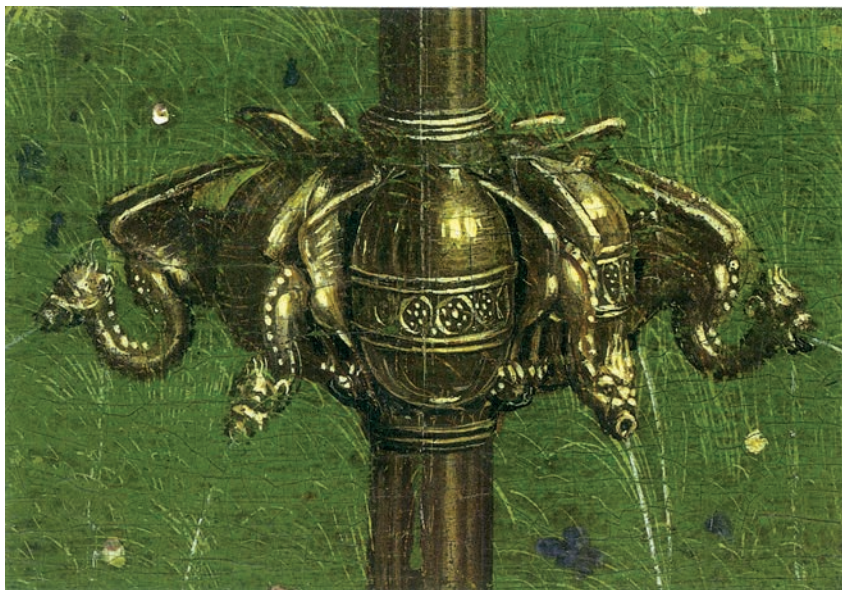


Fig. 7

the Altarpiece) and shadowed from the left. This corresponds to the initial position of the Altarpiece in the chapel of the Ghent cathedral of St. Bavon (which was formerly dedicated to St. John the Baptist), where the altarpiece was situated: the windows in the chapel (there were two windows) were at the right side of the Altarpiece; in other words, the light came from the right side. On the right (illuminated) part of the globe one sees the reflection of windows frames⁴. However, on the opposite (shadowed) part of the globe a reflection of two figures is traceable (*fig. 7*).

Who are these figures? Obviously they do not belong to the depicted scene, i.e. the scene of the Adoration of the Mystical Lamb, they are outside the pictorial space. We can guess, again, that they are a reflection of the master (Jan van Eyck) and his assistant, as in “The Arnolfini Portrait”.

4 See Schneider, 2012, c, 174–175 (fig. 9–3). Cf. Dierick, 1996, plate 18.

It is not excluded, however, that the reflection refers to the brothers Jan and Hubert van Eyck.

The two figures in the reflection are hardly discernible. They are not intended to be seen by the spectator of the Altarpiece. They are not connected with the pragmatics of the vision: they have a different, symbolic value. They evidence the presence of the painter in his picture.

A reflection may have two functions in van Eyck's art: illusionistic and symbolic. These two functions are sometimes intrinsically connected.

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