**Eyck, Jan van: portraits**

This title has traditionally been given to this painting because it was thought to be a form of ``wedding certificate'' for Giovanni Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami, who married in Bruges in 1434. He was an Italian merchant, she the daughter of an Italian merchant. Their grave, youthful faces both have a lovely responsability that is typical of van Eyck.

Van Eyck's art reached perhaps its greatest triumph in the painting of portraits. One of his most famous portraits is The betrothal of the Arnolfini, which represents an Italian merchant, Giovanni Arnolfini, who had come to the Netherlands on business, with his bride Jeanne de Chenany. In its own way it was as new and as revolutionary as Donatello's or Masaccio's work in Italy. A simple corner of the real world had suddenly been fixed on to a panel as if by magic. Here it all was - the carpet and the slippers, the rosary on the wall, the little brush beside the bed, and the fruit on the window-sill. It is as if we could pay a visit to the Arnolfini in their house. The picture probably represents a solemn moment in their lives - their betrothal. The young woman has just put her right hand into Arnolfini's left and he is about to put his own right hand into hers as a solemn token of their union. Probably the painter was asked to record this important moment as a witness, just as a notary might be asked to declare that he has been present at a similar solemn act. This would explain why the master has put his name in a prominent position on the picture with the Latin words 'Johannes de eyck fuit hic' (Jan van Eyck was here). In the mirror at the back of the room we see the whole scene reflected from behind, and there, so it seems, we also see the image of the painter and witness. We do not know whether it was the Italian merchant or the northern artist who conceived the idea of making this use of the new kind of painting, which may be compared to the legal use of a photograph, properly endorsed by a witness. But whoever it was that originated this idea, he had certainly been quick to understand the tremendous possibilities which lay in Van Eyck's new way of painting. For the first time in history the artist became the perfect eye-witness in the truest sense of the term.

**From top to bottom: Symbolic candle**

The solitary flame burning in bright daylight can be interpreted as the bridall candle, or God's all-seeing eye, or simply as a devotional candle. Another symbol is St Margaret (the patron saint of women in childbirth), whose image is carved on the high chairback.

**An elaborate signature**

As today, marriages in 15th-century Flanders could take place privately rather than in church. Van Eyck's Latin signature, in the Gothic calligraphy used for legal documents, reads: ``Jan van Eyck was present'', and has been interpreted by some as an indication that the artist himself served as a witness.

**Convex mirror**

The mirror is painted with almost miraculous skill. Its carved frame is inset with ten miniature medallions depicting scenes from the life of Christ. Yet more remarkable is the mirror's reflection, which includes van Eyck's own tiny self-portrait, accompanied by another man who may have been the official witness to the ceremony.

**Symbol of faithfulness**

Almost every detail can be interpreted as a symbol. The companion dog is seen as a symbol of faithfulness and love. The fruits on the window ledge probably stand for fertility and our fall from Paradise. Even the discarded shoes are not thought to be incidental, but to signify the sanctity of marriage.