

JAN VAN EYCK

by John H. Lienhard

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Today, artists begin what printers will finish. The University of Houston's College of Engineering presents this series about the machines that make our civilization run, and the people whose ingenuity created them.

Tradition has it that [Jan van Eyck](#) invented oil painting. He didn't really. Van Eyck was to oil painting what Watt was to the steam engine. Oils came into use a little before van Eyck. But by 1434 he'd used oil to change painting into a whole new art.

Jan van Eyck was born sometime before 1390 -- one of three brothers and a sister, all painters. That was soon after the worst of the Plague. It was just before Gutenberg. It was a world in ferment. We're so aware of the Italian Renaissance, just ahead, that we overlook what was going on in the Netherlands in 1434.

Dufay, Ockeghem, and finally Josquin made music into a rich descriptive and subjective medium of communication. One 15th-century writer claimed that nothing older was worth listening to.

Now Jan van Eyck: He made oil leap off painted boards and snatch you into his world. He invented glazes that gave oil a wondrous luminosity. His pictures had new depth and 3-dimensionality. He gave us the photo-realism of the Dutch masters, 200 years too soon. That's even stranger when you realize that the rules of perspective were just being written in Italy -- in 1434.

That year, Van Eyck painted The [Arnolfini Couple](#). A wealthy Italian merchant stands on the left in his fur-trimmed coat and large hat. On the right his bride, who may be pregnant, stands in green and white. They hold hands. A small dog guards them.

The most remarkable of many details is a [convex mirror](#) in the distance. It reflects the couple's backs and a small group in the door where you, the viewer, are entering. Only one thing reminds you this isn't yet Rembrandt or Vermeer. It's the perspective -- slightly out of kilter.

Now I sit in the University cafeteria thinking about that picture. The perspective of this room tapers off to a reflecting door in the distance. Sunlight flows through windows. Students talk quietly. It's a visual feast of faces and tables, trees through the window, light and reflection everywhere. And I realize that the Arnolfini couple is no Medieval icon -- no Gothic metaphor. They are my kin -- people I might've talked to and liked. Van Eyck's rich detail takes us into their lives. This lunchroom, rich in human undercurrent, is

a defining context for my life. So van Eyck's web of detail makes the Arnolfinis human for me.

It's often said that the Renaissance could begin only after the printing press gave us new means for sharing human experience. But Gutenberg really finished what Flemish musicians, and painters like van Eyck, had already begun. Van Eyck led us back into our own interior space. He gave us a new way to understand what it is that you and I -- and the Arnolfinis -- hold in common.

I'm John Lienhard, at the University of Houston, where we're interested in the way inventive minds work.

(Theme music)

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