

Erwin Panofsky on "Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding*"

SUMMARIZATION

The issue at hand presented by Panofsky in this article from *The Burlington Magazine* is as to whether or not the *Arnolfini Wedding* portrait in London's National Gallery is the same as the "Hapsburg" portrait that passed through several different hands since the 1500s.

Panofsky first addresses the proof he has that the portraits must be one in the same: that is the proof provided by those who had possession of it before the picture moved northward. He begins by explaining that the artwork was a gift to Lady Margaret of the Netherlands from Don Diego de Guevara, a Spanish nobleman. The pictures, in two separate inventory accounts, are said to be depicting "Hernoul le fin," and then again but referred to as "Arnoult fin." The picture then passes into the possession of Queen Mary of Hungary who succeeded Lady Margaret (the governor of the Netherlands)'s position. It is after her – Queen Mary's – death that proof is revealed again, through an inventory account, that the painting was still the Queen's: Panofsky even believes that, although she had rule over the Netherlands, she probably took the portrait back with her to Spain. This seems logical since the next time we hear of the painting, it is in Madrid with Charles III in 1789. Last, he tells us of how the painting turned up in Brussels, discovered by an English military leader, Hays, in 1815, and was later purchased by the National Gallery in 1842.

Though one would think this would be proof enough, a man by the name of Monsieur Louis Dimier is in disbelief that the painting from the "Hapsburg princesses" and the one that is in London could possibly be the same due to (1) a mysterious inscription on the picture and (2) that his source – Carel Vermander – reports that in the Hapsburg version, the figures are holding each other's hands in a different position from the London version and that the "Priest Fides" character is actually a woman.

After refuting the faulty information retrieved by Dimier when he made these false claims and explaining the importance of *not* taking liberties when re-describing a portrait and/or adding information here and there when one has never seen the picture for himself, Panofsky also refutes the two reasons for which Dimier had been in disbelief! He explains that the inscription about "Johannes de Eyck" basically meant "Eyck was here," establishing his presence as the painter. But his "presence" with regard to this portrait went further in importance than being the painter alone: Panofsky – with historical facts – reminds us that up until 1563, couples could "marry themselves" so long as they conducted the "ceremony" with certain "words and actions" (i.e., exchanging words, lifting forearm, pledging with a ring, and the "joining of hands"). Raising the forearm (from the marital oath standpoint) could be translated as "Fides levata"; therefore, Fides was not the priest but rather the pledge itself, portrayed as a person only through symbolism. Because many weddings were conducted with only those concerned (the bride and the groom), there was oftentimes no proof that the wedding ever took place. This picture was the affidavit this couple had to represent proof of their marriage, and Eyck was the composer of it.

PANOFSKY'S METHODS OF ANALYSIS

So as to not repeat the history of his counter critic, Dimier, Panofsky had a systematic analytic approach to the proving of the credibility of the painting and the rebutting of Dimier's false claims – whether Dimier knew them to be or not – about the portrait...or rather, in Dimier's eyes, the "portraits."

First, Panofsky established the facts that *prove* the paintings are actually the same. He was able to confirm the previous owners' possessions by reading the old inventory accounts of Lady Margaret's and Queen Mary's art collections and found evidence that it had also passed to Charles III by the end of the 18th Century. Panofsky was also able to deduce – through deep and thorough study and reasoning – that the painting must have made it to London after being taken during the Napoleonic Wars. In addition, Panofsky is able to supply dates to establish the facts of when Hays found the portrait and when the portrait was actually bought and placed in the National Gallery twenty-seven years later.

Second, he refutes the false claims on the portrait made by Monsieur Dimier. Panofsky begins this by first establishing the importance of being detailed and efficient in one's study of a topic and to gain the proper knowledge of it from good sources before publishing what one's gathered. Two sources that Panofsky knew of Dimier using were Marcus van Vaernewyck (author of "Spiegel der Nederlantscher Audtheyt" and "Historie van Belgis") and Carel Vermander (who actually wrote a biography of Jan van Eyck!). Having seen the painting for himself, Panofsky *knew* that Vaernewyck had taken definite liberties in his writing when portraying the portrait; he was even known to make up his own history of the painting when solid facts about that particular topic were already published and well-known (i.e., he said that Queen Mary had bought the painting off her barber). This should have been enough to convince Dimier to "steer clear" of his reviews; but not only did Dimier seek Vaernewyck's critic reviews, but also those of Vermander (who had more or less copied the thoughts of Vaernewyck and "amplified them" by adding clauses and phrases to subjects as he fancied – this led to much confusion (for example, he misconstrued "per fidem" as "personification" when it is actually a law term: this only further solidifies how attentive Panofsky is to other types of assets such as legal sources). As he goes through and systematically answers Dimier's questions about the painting, it is almost as if he is speaking directly to him as he reiterates the fact that Dimier has never even clapped eyes on the actual picture – an important source of analyzing the portrait!

CRITIQUING

It is quite obvious that Panofsky is, first, extremely passionate about art and craves to sponge up more and more information about it. Based on reviewing his methods of analysis alone, it is evident that he put in an innumerable number of hours to research the topic, formulate a proper timetable of events, and piece together an organized and thorough publication on the subject.

The aforementioned statement is what leads me to my second thought: I see that Panofsky is interested not only in educating himself on the portrait, but others as well (Dimier included). In addition to uncovering, polishing, and then presenting those nuggets of gold we call *Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait*, Panofsky is also concerned that the doubts had by others would be scattered. With regard to Dimier's

questions, Panofsky diligently sought after explanations so that he could answer them to his fullest (this further shows how assiduous he was when it came to people's knowledge of art).

As I said earlier, Panofsky had a very organized writing style: each sentence he wrote was deliberate and had good reason to be where it was placed. His thorough way of writing was appreciated by me as an amateur student of art; he was sure to cover every detail about the painting, whether he was embellishing on something that was already discernable or explaining the complexity of part of the portrait that used symbolism (or was simply something more relevant to that time period, such as the wedding vows). It was so interesting to read his explanations, *particularly* the one about the conduct of marriages in the mid-1500s and earlier. How crucial that was in finding out the meaning of the portrait, and why and how it came to be!