

This photo is available in  
the print version of *Marriage*.

**A spiritual presence pervades the secular setting. Temporal pleasures combine with Christian hope. These two worlds unite subtly in every marriage as well, for matrimony is both a legal agreement and a spiritual covenant.**

*Jan van Eyck (1390-1441). THE ARNOLFINI WEDDING, 1434. Oil on panel, 82 x 60 cm. The National Gallery, London. Photo: © Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.*

# The Promise of Marriage

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Long believed to be a marriage portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami in the privacy of the bridal chamber, this treasure of the National Gallery, London, instead probably depicts their betrothal or engagement in the main room of the bride's house.<sup>†</sup> The artist signed the panel not in the conventional location on the frame but above the painted mirror in a formal script "Johannes de eyck fuit hic 1434" (Jan van Eyck was here 1434). Jan, like the two male figures reflected in the mirror (the one in the turban has been suggested to be Jan himself), is also a witness to this sacred and legal event of a promised marriage. Engagements in the fifteenth century were legal and financial contracts between two families that demanded careful preparation.

Arnolfini was an Italian merchant who lived in Bruges, Belgium. In this image he raises his right hand as if to take an oath while his left hand holds the right hand of his wife. According to Northern European tradition, wedding ceremonies took place in front of a church and the couple would join their right hands. So, rather than depicting their wedding, this double portrait probably commemorates the marriage that is planned.

The painting is rich in symbolism. The dog that stands in the front of the composition may be a loyal pet or an emblem of fidelity. (In Latin, *fides* is the root for the words "dog," "fidelity," and "betrothal.") Perhaps the couple have removed their shoes to show they are standing on holy ground, even as Moses removed his shoes before the burning bush and in the presence of God on Mount Sinai. Surrounding the mirror are tiny round images from the Passion and Resurrection narratives. On the seven-branched chandelier, a single lit candle (in the middle of the day) may symbolize the ever-present light of God. The woman lifts her gown as was the fashion of the day, but this gesture also may suggest her desire for children.

Jan van Eyck depicts the couple in a secular setting, but with a spiritual presence. Temporal pleasures represented in the lush furnishings combine with Christian hope expressed in the Passion and Resurrection stories. These two worlds unite subtly in every marriage as well, for matrimony is both a legal agreement and a spiritual covenant.

## NOTE

<sup>†</sup> Recent scholarship has also questioned the identification of the couple as Arnolfini and Cenami because they were married much later than 1434.