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HUM120
HISTORY OF
WESTERN ART

INSTRUCTOR
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1. In the **MID-TO-HIGH RENAISSANCE** we see the Church continuing to be vitally important as the new class of individuals—whose money was earned rather than inherited—flourished. *Humanism* (the belief in the inherent worthiness of each individual's ability for independent thought), the rise of a merchant middle class, and a decentralization of power developed and strengthened. Art-making diversified as new patrons gained economic and political voice.

One Renaissance legacy is *linear perspective*. The architect *Filippo Brunelleschi* first demonstrated *linear perspective* in 1420. His friend, architect *Leon Battista Alberti* codified *linear perspective* in 1436 in his treatise *Della Pittura* ('On Painting').

Through most of 15th century Flemish artists were considered best in Europe (Flanders occupied roughly the equivalent to modern Belgium and part of Northern France).

2. *Merode Altarpiece*, made for the Merode family by Robert Campin ('Master of Flemalle'), most likely for their private chapel. Campin portrayed the religious story of the Annunciation in a Flemish home—reflecting the growing interest in the images and experiences of everyday life and a way of connecting these 'everyday' occurrences with significant religious stories.

Note in the painting household items with religious significance:

- lillies on the table are a traditionally symbolic element of the Annunciation symbolizing purity and virginity.
- the hanging water pot and towel in the niche symbolize Mary's purity and her role as vessel for the incarnation of Christ.
- the mousetrap on the table in Joseph's carpentry shop references Christ as bait in trap set by God to trap Satan.

Note the candle just snuffed, does it denote...

- God's presence moments ago?
- the light of God now incarnate in Mary's womb?
- what other symbolism might it convey?

Note the altarpiece's donors to the left kneeling before the door...

- they are equal in scale to the angel, Mary and Joseph.

Note the painting technique of oil on wood panel, the wood surface sanded smooth and coated with Gesso. In the north the Gesso solution was made from ground chalk whereas Italian artists used plaster. A Gesso solution served to equalize the surface by filling the wood pores, after which it was sanded to prepare the surface for painting. Sometimes linen was stretched over the wood panel after the gesso and sanding to hide the seams of joined panels.

The previously popular tempera paint—ground pigment mixed with diluted egg yolk—when applied quickly dries quickly and is visibly opaque. It cannot be easily blended and must be varnished after the painting is completed. Oil paint is more translucent, and glazes allow oil paint to pass through successive layers. Campin is known to be the first to explore the qualities of oils.

See pp571–572 for detailed descriptions of the *Merode Altarpiece*.

4. The *Ghent Altarpiece* was begun by Hubert and finished by Jan Van Eyck. The Van Eycks were masters of oil paints and the first to use atmospheric perspective, in which objects in the distance appear darker and in less focus. The complex *Ghent Altarpiece* is comprised of three main sections—a *triptych*—with 20 component parts of varying size.

5. Note the realistic Adam and Eve at the far right and left of the open *Ghent Altarpiece*, appear intentionally prominent in their appearance, and this prominent style continues on the outside of the panels on the...

6. ...closed *Ghent Altarpiece* with external decoration of the Erithraean and Cumaeon Sibyls, Prophets Zacharias and Micheas, altarpiece donor Jodocus Vyd and his wife Isabelle Borluut kneeling beside two *grisaille*—painted gray to resemble statuary—representations of Saints John the Baptist and John the Evangelist, and the Annunciation by angel Gabriel to Mary. Two small panels separate the angel and the Virgin, one has an arched window revealing a city square, the other, a wash basin and ewer in a niche with a white towel hanging on a side rail.

- A striking feature is the disparity in scale of the figures: at least four scale changes are evident in the outside of the wings. There are concept disparities too, with some parts almost prosaically factual, others appear visionary.
- Three orders of reality are shown: a narrative representation of a sacred subject (the Annunciation), two highly factual donor portraits and two simulated sculptures. Yet there appears a strong attempt to impose a uniform framework on these disparate elements: in the all-over light in the panels from the right, in the beamed ceiling in the upper panels running through the entire scene, and, in the lower panels, of the same cusped trefoil arches to frame the figures.

7. The most crucial information to those of us who study art history is the the quatrain inscribed on the frame of the Adoration of the Lamb portion of the *Ghent Altarpiece*. The Adoration of the Lamb portion is the Van Eyck brothers' most celebrated work. The verse, "this *polyptych* was begun by Pictor Hubertus Eyck, and finished by his brother Jan, at the request of Jodocus Vijd, deputy burgomaster of Ghent and warden of the church of St John, and of his wife, Elisabeth Borluut, who commissioned it," was inscribed in place when the altarpiece was installed 6 May 1432.

This *polyptych* appears intentionally mystical—even esoteric—imbued throughout with both spiritual and intellectual significance. Open, it represents the communion of saints, "The new heaven and the new earth" in the words of the Revelation of St John. The central panel of the lower tier portrays the saints—symbolizing the eight Beatitudes—gathered 'round the altar where the sacrifice of the Lamb is taking place at the centre of the heavenly garden, the garden having sprung from His blood:

- left and right in the foreground are two processions facing one another. One procession shows Old Testament patriarchs and prophets, and the other, New Testament figures. Some are kneeling, and they are barefoot. Behind them is assembled the hierarchy of the Church: popes, deacons and bishops, wearing sumptuous jewelry and clothing in the bright red color signifying martyrdom. Two further groups are in the background, facing each other as if they had just emerged from the surrounding shrubbery. These are on one side, the Confessors of the Faith who are tightly packed together and most of whom are dressed in blue. On the other side are the Virgin Martyrs holding out palm fronds and wearing in their hair crowns of flowers of a kind traditionally worn by young girls at certain holy ceremonies. In the middle of the panel, surrounding the altar where the Lamb spills forth his blood, angels kneel, holding the emblems of His Passion. Grace is symbolized by a radiant dove hovering in the sky, and eternal life is represented by a fountain in the foreground. A paradisiacal landscape runs across all five lower panels, uniting them in a single composition strewn with plants from different countries and flowers of different seasons. The central panel is vibrant with green, while those to the sides are arid and rocky. The horizon is high in the frame, closed off by groves of trees, behind which we can distinguish clusters of fairy-tale buildings which symbolize the heavenly Jerusalem.

The community of saints also extends onto the side panels. Magnificently arrayed horsemen, representing the Soldiers of Christ, are followed by the Just Judges. Opposite them are the Holy Hermits who have renounced the world, and the Pilgrim Saints, who were favorite figures of identification throughout the Middle Ages. They are led by a giant of a man, St Christopher. Many later commentators have suggested that his great height would have reminded the contemporary viewer of Jodocus Vijd's brother, also called Christopher. In the middle of the upper tier is God Almighty, the Word, essence and origin of the universe. He is dressed in red and is crowned with a magnificent tiara. On his left is Mary and on his right, St John the Baptist. These central figures are surrounded by angels who are singing or playing instruments. At the far right and left of the composition respectively are the figures of Adam and Eve. They were painted by Jan Van Eyck, and are set into trompe-l'oeil niches. Light and shadow play delicately over their forms which stand out as though they had been sculpted in the round.

8. "A mother with her baby child, dominated by the colours gold, red and blue, and a rectangular format with a triangular top reminiscent of an altarpiece—at first glance an image employing the conventional iconography of the Madonna and Child. This might seem to be an unusual topic for a contemporary artist to pursue, but *One Flesh* (1985) by Helen Chadwick (1953–1996) is standing in a tradition of a number of artworks of the 20th century employing or addressing Christian religious imagery."
—<http://members.multimania.co.uk/exposuremagazine/helen.html> 25 Feb 2012).

Chadwick frequently chose to represent herself in her work, in part to question and confront conventional ideas about the human body, gender, and sexuality.

9. Margo Klass, *From States of Grace*

Artist's Statement:

"I am a collector of objects. On neighborhood walks, on the beach, in junk shops and flea markets my eyes snap to objects with qualities that transcend their physical selves. They need not be beautiful or valuable. Each one reaches some part of me that goes beyond aesthetic attraction, an intangible recognition that gives an urgent quality to our interaction. A stone that seems to distill an essence, an old game piece faded from use, discarded pieces from an iron smith, a weathered twig. Such objects surround me in my studio, they are my sculptural medium.

Images emerge, often triggered by the shape of a single object. An old ax head, for example. I see it primarily for its abstract self, with a certain color and texture, and in a certain position. Intuitively I join it with other objects. In my mind's eye they float weightlessly, they dance their parts, turning, touching, sometimes merging. Then, in a moment of spontaneous knowing I see the resolution, I realize total satisfaction and from then on the composition can be no other. The box constructed around the composition frames the image and defines its architectural space. Skylights and windows, most often made of mica, break down barriers between interior and exterior spaces.

Sometimes an object triggers a memory or personal narrative, which I recall symbolically through a juxtaposition of objects. At other times I wish to suggest an enigmatic question, or create an ironic, playful image. Recent work often reflects my travels in Japan where I absorbed the spaces and forms of Japanese gardens and temples, and studied the contemporary architectural works of Tadao Ando. In each case my sculptural response is an intimate reflection, a way to represent my response to experience.

Uniting all my images is an expression of quiet, a meditative stillness that comes from within. They can be seen as pauses in the rapid pace of the lives we lead, like the little roadside shrines one finds everywhere in Japan. My sculptures are small in scale and hung at eye level so that viewing them is at close range and by necessity a solo experience. I hope they breathe quietly, and gently invite the viewer to personal sanctuary. —Margo Klass

10. *The Arnolfini Marriage* (also known as *Double Portrait of a Giovanni Arnolfini and his Wife*) is this double portrait by Jan van Eyck Giovanni Arnolfini, a prosperous Italian banker who had settled in Bruges, and his wife Giovanna Cenami, stand side by side in the bridal chamber, facing the viewer. The husband is gently holding out his wife's hand.

In this restricted space the painter has contrived to surround the Arnolfinis with numerous symbols. Oranges placed on the low table at the left and on the windowsill are a reminder of an original innocence, of an age before sin. Rather than oranges, these may be apples (it is difficult to be certain), in which case they would represent the temptation of knowledge and the Fall into Original Sin. Above the couple's heads, the candle that has been left burning in broad daylight on one of the branches of an ornate copper chandelier can be interpreted either as the nuptial flame, or as the eye of God. The small dog in the foreground is an emblem of fidelity and love. The marriage bed with bright red curtains evokes the physical act of love, which, according to Christian doctrine, is an essential part of the perfect union of husband and wife.

Though these different elements are highly charged with meaning, they are secondary in importance to the mirror, the focal point of this composition. Historians often have noted two tiny figures are reflected in it, their image captured as they cross the threshold of the room. These figures are the painter himself and a young man, doubtless arriving to act as witnesses to the marriage. The essential point to the mirror, however, is that this convex mirror is able to absorb and reflect in a single image both the floor and the ceiling of the room, as well as the sky and the garden outside, both of which are otherwise barely visible through the side window. The mirror thus acts as a symbolic sort of hole in the texture of space. It figuratively sucks the entire visual world into itself, transforming it into a representation.

11. *The Arnolfini Marriage* is said to be one of the greatest celebrations of human mutuality. It is similar in emotion to Rembrandt's *Portrait of Two Figures from the Old Testament (The Jewish Bride)*; both paintings reveals to us an intimate gesture, suggested to possibly be the meaning of a true marriage.

12. *Double Portrait of a Giovanni Arnolfini and his Wife*(detail). Read from pp561,574,575.

13. *Deposition*, by Rogier van der Weyden. van der Weyden maintained large workshop in Brussels, and he attracted many apprentices. Oddly, no existing work bears his name. Scholars use the deposition as a base of comparison to identify other paintings. This is the central panel commissioned by the Louvain Crosbowmen's Guild sometime around 1442. The work once included other panels which represented the four Evangelists and Christ's resurrection.

Many scholars interpret the treatment seen in this piece to an earlier Gothic influence—it is hugely emotional. Other scholars interpret the highly charged emotion of the panel as reflective of secular humanists' concern with human emotion specifically and the recognition of the worth of the individual.

NOTE: during the Middle Ages (c. 500–1400) and the Renaissance (c. 1400–1600) in Europe the *guild system* was of prime importance both for the education of artists and for commissioning the works of art. During the late Middle Ages guilds dominated almost every facet of the commercial and political life of the European city.

Guilds were organizations of merchants and craftsmen. All self-employed carpenters, for example, in a town or region would comprise a guild. Each particular guild drew up rules for its profession, elected officials, and maintained a treasury. Guilds were specific to their trades, and only guildmembers could practice the trade of the guild. For example, only members of the carpenters guild could practice carpentry.

Artists in Europe during the Middle Ages were not considered 'artists'—as we think of them in contemporary times—but craftsmen, therefore artists were part of the guild system. To enter a guild, parents of a prospective guild member would make a contract with a guildsman to train a son in a profession (girls were excluded from the guild system until the late 16th c.).

A young boy—perhaps age seven—would become apprentice to a painter or sculptor. His parents would pay tuition to this master painter/sculptor. After a stipulated number of years of training (usually when the man was in his early twenties), the apprentice would create his 'masterpiece' thus becoming himself a master. As his reputation grew, he would in turn contract a growing number of apprentices.

14. The page, *February, Life in the Country* from the illuminated manuscript *Les Tres Riches Heures* is by Paul, Herman and Jean Limbourg. *Fevrier*, revealing the France Flemish style, was an example from this highly influential manuscript illumination. (Manuscript illumination was, incidentally, a field in which women excelled and gained some notoriety). Most famous of the northern illuminators during the early 15th century were the Limbourg brothers Paul, Herman, and Jean. Limbourg was not their last name but the where they were from.

Les Tres Riches Heures was produced for the Duke of Berry between 1413–1416. This *Book of Hours* included a calendar section with full-page paintings introducing each month. Subjects varied between the labors of peasants and the pleasures of aristocrats.

February shows a seemingly content peasant family warming themselves before a fire (most peasants lived in hovels at this time), yet with a more well-dressed woman in the foreground of their shelter. Read from p566, 567...note the beehives, timber frame buildings, sheepfold, woven fences, and the taking of cattle to market. (Of peculiar note is the men warming genitals before fire and the woman modestly averting her face!)

High placement of the horizon line is a convention from the Gothic period. The progression from foreground through midground to background is a convention begun in the Renaissance.

12. Textiles were important in the 15th century, with Brussels, Tournai, Arras, and Loire valley major weaving centers. Tapestries served as wall coverings providing insulation as well as type of portable wealth. Wealth of individuals was determined by the number of tapestries listed in a household's inventory. This tapestry was most likely produced for Anne of Brittany. The story of the unicorn told it could only be captured by a young virgin to whom it came willingly. The unicorn symbolized Incarnation: Christ as the unicorn captured by the Virgin Mary. Secular interpretation had the unicorn hunt as metaphor for romantic love, thus a suitable subject for wedding tapestries. The horn of the unicorn was believed an antidote for poison. Here we see the unicorn purifying water by washing its horn.

Other animal symbolism here include: lion, valor and faith; stag, resurrection and protection from evil; rabbit, fertility; dog, fidelity; pheasants perched on fountain, emblems of human love/marriage; goldfinch, fertility. Plants are symbols for protective and curative powers; strawberry, sexual love; pansy, remembrance; oak, fidelity; holly, protection and orange, fertility.