

NAME: Jan van Eyck

DATES: c1390-1441

NATIONALITY: Flemish

BACKGROUND: Brother to painter Hubert

KEY CLAIM: Pioneer of the 'Ars Nova' and pioneer of the oil paint medium



CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND: Ghent, Bruges and Ypres were the three leading Flemish cities of the time, and formed part of the duchy of Burgundy. In Flanders, there had been little, if any, large-scale painting before Van Eyck. There were magnificent, richly glowing stained-glass windows, but the great contribution Flemish painters were to make to Western art – the development of easel or panel painting – owed more to the tradition of manuscript illumination. To obtain an effect as bright and lustrous on panel, demanded the development of a new medium: oil paint. Mixing pigments with oil (usually linseed) and applying translucent films of paint to over opaque colours was to give an appearance of depth beneath a hard enamel-like surface. The great advantage was that unlike tempera, oil dried slowly and therefore permitted and encouraged great precision of detail.

TRAINING: Jan van Eyck trained as a manuscript illuminator in the service of Duke John of Bavaria, Count of Holland at The Hague from c1422. He was appointed court painter to Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy and ruler of most of Flanders, who also entrusted him with secret missions as far afield as Portugal.

KEY WORKS:

The Ghent Altarpiece, 1432, tempera and oil on panel, St Bavo Cathedral, Ghent

The Arnolfini Portrait, 1434, oil on oak, National Gallery, London

Man in a Red Turban (*self-portrait*), 1433, oil on oak, National Gallery, London

Madonna of Chancellor Rolin, 1433-34, oil on panel, Louvre, Paris

KEY QUOTES

Bartolommedo Fazio (author of 'Of Famous Men' the earliest account of the painter, written at the court of the King of Naples), called him "the leading painter of our time" for his technical accomplishment, truth to nature and the rediscovery of pigments known to Pliny. Extensive symbolism in Van Eyck's works illustrates St Thomas Aquinas "corporeal metaphors for things spiritual."

In relation to his mastery of the oil technique, Erwin Panofsky identifies "an overwhelming range of optical effects is produced by oil paint," as a result of "an exacting technique" (S. Porras).