Theme 3: Vermeer and the World of Light

Lesson 1: Painting in the North

Part 1

We step back from the High Renaissance in Italy and shift our attention to northern Europe, to what is known today as Belgium and the Netherlands, as well as nearby areas of France and Germany. Art historians do not agree on a Northern Renaissance, many insisting instead on a Late Gothic period. Janson, for example, one of our authorities, uses the latter term, but always in quotation marks—"Late Gothic"—to underscore its dubious nature. There are a number of reasons for resisting the Renaissance label: the architectural context of these painters remained obviously medieval, which is to say Gothic; perhaps most importantly, northern painters did not cast aside the Middle Ages in hopes of reviving an idealized classical civilization.

It is impossible to overestimate two inventions in stimulating the revolution in painting of this period, whether we call it Late Gothic or Renaissance, whether in the north or in the south. No, not the printing press, invented around 1440 by Johannes Gutenberg, although one of the inventions did make printing economical enough to be profitable: paper. It not only made commercial printing feasible, as paper replaced the more costly parchment made from animal skin, painters began to draw, sketch, and plan as never before. Leonardo’s notebooks exist because of paper. It is also the key to Botticelli’s luminous precision; long before touching brush to panel he had worked out exactly what would go where. The painter could afford to make many small sketches to refine his idea, and then work out the composition full-sized on one or more large strips of paper. Once the drawing was done, he punched holes in the outlines, held the paper flat on the panel or canvas or wall to be painted, and tamped chalk dust or charcoal through the holes and onto the surface. The drawing would thus transfer in perfect proportion and in a way that was clean enough to vanish into the paint. This paper guide, called a cartoon, is still in use today.

The second ground-breaking invention was oil paint. As we saw at the beginning of Theme 2, painting from the Middle Ages tends to be bright and jewel-like and uses gold lavishly to cover whole areas of the composition. In the Early Renaissance painters like Fra Angelico still incorporated precious metals and ground gems into brilliant pigments. The new medium of oil paint gave artists much greater flexibility, as Janson explains:

The basic technique of medieval panel painting had been tempera, in which the finely ground pigments were mixed (“tempered”) with diluted egg yolk. It produced a thin, tough, quick-drying coat admirably suited to the medieval taste for high-keyed, flat color surfaces. However, in tempera the different tones on the panel cannot be smoothly blended, and
the continuous progression of values necessary for three-dimensional effects was difficult to achieve; also, the darks tended to look muddy and undifferentiated. [...] Oil, a viscous, slow-drying medium, could produce a vast variety of effects, from thin, translucent films (called “glazes”) to the thickest impasto (that is, a thick layer of creamy, heavy-bodied paint); the tones could also yield a continuous scale of hues, including rich, velvety dark shades previously unknown. Without oil, the Flemish masters’ conquest of visible reality would have been much more limited. Thus, from the technical point of view, too, they deserve to be called the “fathers of modern painting,” for oil has been the painter’s basic medium ever since.¹

This does not mean that tempera is inherently inferior to oil as a painting medium. Consider two female heads. On the left we recognize Botticelli’s goddess in the Birth of Venus, painted in tempera on canvas. On the right we see Vermeer’s Girl with a Pearl Earring, painted in oil on canvas. The tonal range—the scale from darkest dark to brightest light—is obviously more dramatic in the Vermeer than in the Botticelli. Soft contours, even carried as far as the sfumato technique in Leonardo da Vinci’s paintings, is typical of oil paints, as is the application of thick highlights, such as the drop of white in the eyes or on the pearl earring, and the layering of semitransparent glazes that create luminous shadows. Linear outlines and areas of bright color are characteristics of tempera. Oil paints can create a heightened sense of illusion, of real light striking solid objects in three-dimensional space; tempera pleases the eye more elegantly, rendering a plausible visual world created by the interplay of line and color. Although there are many masterpieces in tempera, the medium gradually fell out of fashion in the Renaissance and has never quite recovered. Until the late twentieth century and the advent of acrylic polymer medium, oil became virtually synonymous with painting in Western art.

Part 2

Back in the fifteenth century, of course, the choice of tempera or oil had less to do with personal preference or artistic vision and more to do with geography, culture, and tradition. This is clearly seen in the work of two contemporaries divided by distance and historical circumstance: Fra Angelico, whom we have already studied in some detail, worked almost exclusively in tempera, while Jan van Eyck\(^2\) (1390?–1441) is often credited with having invented oil painting, though art historians have disproved the claim again and again.

Van Eyck began his career painting in tempera, then mixed tempera and oils, and finally painted exclusively in oils. It was the latter which allowed him, as John Richards has written, “to represent with almost forensic clarity the textures of the visible world” (153).\(^3\) An example of Van Eyck’s eye-popping skill is seen in a fragment from the Annunciation at left. What appears to be a three-dimensional statuette inside a wooden frame with a mirror background is in fact a flat image entirely painted in oils. How does it work? The illusion of different textures (smooth glass, pitted wood grain, and sculpted ivory), soft-edged cast shadows, shallow but convincing depth, and a reflection that purports to show the back of the statuette, fool the eye completely. This ability of painters in the so-called Low Countries influenced their Italian counterparts and led directly to the adoption of oil as the preferred medium in the south as well.

It is the visible world these painters were after, rather than a mathematically coherent model based on orthogonal (receding) lines meeting at a single—and imaginary—vanishing point, a system of linear perspective that was developed and perfected in the Italian Renaissance. Both north and south created pictorial space, that is, the illusion of depth. Receding lines are really diagonals set at various angles to convince us that our space somehow continues into and beyond the picture plane. The painting becomes a window. The space allegedly behind the painted surface has to correspond in some way to optical truth. For Italian painters, the system is laid out as if one eye were focused on a fixed point in the distance, a photographic perspective we have been taught to accept as accurate. For Van Eyck, two eyes shift about, scanning the sides, the top, and the bottom of a bubble-like space. Walls seem to bow a little. The floor seems to curl slightly. If we really concentrate on how we see, our visible world seems to wrap and curve too. As discussed in Theme 1, two eyes set straight ahead and somewhat apart allow us to perceive depth, but took us years to master. The northern painters remind us of that way of seeing in the round.

The visible world is not only about space, of course. Van Eyck was a real master at capturing the texture of things, not only the surface pattern but also weight and

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\(^2\) See Great Masters of Western Art, pages 27–32.

thickness. His most famous painting, the **Betrothal** or the **Marriage of Arnolfini** from 1434, is a magnificent example of that skill at rendering detail and is rightly accounted one of the greatest and most important paintings in the world. Overlook for a moment the weird costume and hairless alien face of the groom, as if he had just stepped out of a UFO. Pay no attention to the circus-clown hairdo of his lovely teenaged bride. Go to London’s [National Gallery web site](https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk) and use the zoom feature to explore this painting in sharp detail. Compare the textures: for example, the wild and wooly dog hair with the soft mink and sable trim on the man’s cloak and the ermine trim on the woman’s gown; the grain of the wooden floor with the grain of the wooden frame of the mirror and both with the wooden clogs; the glass of the convex mirror and the crystal rosary beads hanging on the wall; the orange rind on the windowsill with the oranges on the chest; the fabric on the bed with the woman’s heavy gown and thin wimple; and so on. Visible texture is a function of light, the way light is broken up as it falls across the skin of the world, a pattern of tiny highlights and shadows, shifts in color, hardness and softness of contours, folds and edges, density and transparency.
Part 3

Paul Durcan is an Irish writer born in 1944. In addition to other works, he has written two entire collections of poetry devoted to paintings, Crazy about Women and Give Me Your Hand. “The Arnolfini Marriage” comes from the second book, published in 1994. As you read, ask yourself: who is speaking here?

We are the Arnolfinis.  
Do not think you may invade  
Our privacy because you may not.

We are standing to our portrait,  
The most erotic portrait ever made,  
Because we have faith in the artist

To do justice to the plurality,  
Fertility, domesticity, barefootedness  
Of a man and a woman saying “we”:

To do justice to our bed  
As being our most necessary furniture;  
To do justice to our life as a reflection.

Our brains spill out upon the floor  
And the terrier at our feet sniffs  
The minutiae of our magnitude.

The most relaxing word in our vocabulary is “we”.  
Imagine being able to say “we”.  
Most people are in no position to say “we”.

Are you?  Who eat alone?  Sleep alone?  
And at dawn cycle to work  
With an Alsatian shepherd dog tied to your handlebars?

We will pause now for the Angelus.  
Here you have it:  
The two halves of the coconut.4

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