Jan van Eyck (Yahn van Ike)
Jan van Eyck’s date of birth is undocumented but it is estimated that he was born immediately before 1390 and came from the town of Maaseik in the Flemish region of what now is the border of modern day Belgium and the Netherlands. This small town has four main streets surrounding the square market place. Walls formed in a rectangle surround the town, and a castle is built against one of the walls. No detailed records of his childhood years exist other than that he had a brother named Hubert.

Van Eyck’s life was first documented in 1422 as a worker for John of Bavaria, count of Holland, in Holland’s administrative center, The Hague, until the count’s death. Van Eyck moved on to Bruges where he was appointed to the prestigious position of personal painter for Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy. In addition to his duties as painter, van Eyck also traveled as a diplomat for the Duke, once to Spain in 1427 to arrange a marriage between Philip and Isabella of Aragon. Philip the Good had never seen Isabella so he had van Eyck paint her portrait. The Duke was apparently delighted with her appearance once he saw the portrait. Philip the Good was very pleased with van Eyck’s artistic efforts, including work for private and civic entities for which he was exceptionally well paid. The Duke even identified van Eyck as an influential painter among others. The Duke had such a high regard for van Eyck that he served as a godfather to one of van Eyck’s children, a sign of true kinship. The Duke also assisted van Eyck’s widow upon his death.

One well-known van Eyck painting was the altarpiece, The Adoration of the Lamb (1432), also known as The Ghent Altarpiece, Adoration of the Mystic Lamb, or The Lamb of Godin, that was placed in one of the chapels in the Saint Baveo Cathedral, Ghent, Belgium. The altarpiece is made up of twenty-four panels with hinges that allows the altarpiece to viewed closed or opened and features Biblical images which capture figures in humble reality. Prior to this, Early Renaissance painters captured a classical idealized image. Jan van Eyck and his brother, Hubert, are named in the inscription on the frame but no one clearly understands in what capacity they contributed to the work. Some believe that Hubert, being a painter himself, started the painting and his brother, Jan, finished the painting. Others believe that Hubert created the structural framework. It was common in the day that the frame was integral to the painting and therefore, the area where artists placed their signatures. The Adoration of the Lamb survived a stormy history including the French Revolution, World War II and Nazi looting and several restoration efforts. The panels were painted in oil, still a relatively new process perfected by the van Eyck brothers in the 15th century. Another advanced painting skill of van Eyck was the use of multiple layers of transparent glazes that better captured the painted detail underneath. Prior to oil paints were tempera paints, a mixture of minerals (color), egg yokes (adhesive), and water. Oil painting (pigment and linseed or walnut oil) was introduced to the Netherlands around the 15th century by Chinese and Indian Buddhist painters who had used oil paint for almost a decade prior.

In addition to the Ghent altarpiece, several signed paintings executed between 1432 and 1439 were found with van Eyck’s motto, “Als ich chan” meaning, “As best I can.” These include two religious panels, the Madonna of Canon Georg van der Paele and the Annunciation. Others are portraits of his wife, Margareta, and a self-portrait titled Portrait of a Man (Portrait of a Man in a Red Turban).

Van Eyck was a learned man, trained in the classics, chemistry, geometry, and geography, who earned the respect of royalty and the common man. He died in Bruges in 1441 and was buried in the Church of St. Donatian, which was destroyed during the French Revolution. He was called the “King of Painters” for centuries.

8th Grade: NOVEMBER

Arnolfini Portrait
(Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami)
Jan van Eyck

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About the Artist
The following information is provided to give classroom teachers a comprehensive understanding of the artist and artwork. Use your judgment on what to share with your students based on their level of curiosity, observation/inquiry skills, comprehension and age-appropriateness.

The Adoration of the Lamb
The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb
The Ghent Altarpiece
The Lamb of God
Portrait of a Man (Portrait of a Man in a Red Turban)


Discipline-Based Art Education
The following components are integral to students having a complete, well rounded art experience.

Art Aesthetics
Providing opportunities to develop perception and appreciation of visually expressed ideas and experiences.

Art Production
Providing opportunities to develop skills and techniques for creative visual expressions of emotions and ideas.

Art History
Providing opportunities to develop an understanding of the visual arts as a basic component of personal heritage.

Art Criticism
Providing an opportunity to develop an intellectual basis for analyzing and making aesthetic judgments based on an understanding of visual ideas and experiences.

ELEMENTS OF ART
- Line: A continuous mark
- Shape: Area enclosed by a line
- Color: Hue, reflection of light.
- Texture: Surface quality, real or implied
- Form: 3D shape or illusion of 3D
- Value: Graduated areas of light/dark
- Space: Illusion of depth

PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN
- Repetition: Imagery repeating pattern
- Variety: Contrast/variation
- Rhythm: Issues of eye movement
- Balance: Even visual weight
- Emphasis/Economy: Dominance/minimalism
- Proportion: Compare size relationships

COMPOSITION
- Symmetrical: Mirrored imagery
- Asymmetrical: Random placement
- Radial: Mirror image from center point
- Repetition: Repeating pattern, motif

ARTISTIC STYLES
- Realism: Realistic representation
- Abstraction: Personal interpretation
- Non-Objective: No recognizable depiction

ELEMENTS OF DESIGN IN PICTURE BOOKS
Literature that relates to this lesson due to elements of art or story content are:
- 1000 Portraits of Genius by Charles Victoria and Carl H. Klaus
- Arnolfini Portrait by Ronald Cohn and Jesse Russell
- Portraits and Persons by Cynthia Freeland

REFERENCE/BIBLIOGRAPHY

medieval period in European history. Compositionally, van Eyck centered the couple on the picture plane for the viewer to observe. The room belongs to Giovanna Cenami as it’s marked by a woman’s furnishings, including her slippers at the foot of her prayer bench. The abundance of luxurious textiles is a testament to their wealth, especially the use of red-dyed textiles, the most expensive dye available at the time. Her richly embroidered green outer garment with fur trim is pulled up to her chest to provide ease of movement about the room while her blue underdress shows through the sleeves and lower skirt. The excessive use of fabric was both fashionable and a sign of wealth, especially for a textile merchant. Her headdress is consistent with that of married women.

His fur-lined outer clothing is also a witness to their wealth and to his occupation as a textile merchant. His cast-off mud-stained shoes indicate he has recently arrived into his wife’s chamber from the outside world. Her world exists in the confinement of the home; therefore, van Eyck placed her deeper into the room, near the bed and at the edge of the patterned carpet, while Arnolfini stands on the plain floor and closer to the window.

The room is considered to be an upstairs room. The viewer observes from the short side of the room so the entire depth of the room is visible. The mirror on the far wall cancels the distance and re-directs the eyes back into the room in an edited and reversed perspective. Lights floods into the room through the side window as well as from an unidentified source in the foreground. Objects in the rooms are carefully chosen and placed. Arnolfini’s shoes are located in the lower left corner, oranges sit on the window sill with beads hanging above. The prayer bench is placed on the far wall under the mirror and the beautiful chandelier hangs centered overhead with one candle lit.

Each of the elements in the room moves the viewer’s eyes over the canvas. Among them are the carved figure on the bedpost of Saint Margaret, the patron saint of pregnancy and childbirth. The presence of the dog is symbolic of faithfulness. The brush and rosary hanging next to the mirror suggest the domestic life of prayer and housework. The chandelier adorns the ceiling with one lit candle, symbolic of the unity of marriage and the Holy Spirit.

The mirror presents a reflective view of the couple’s backs and two people standing just inside the door, facing the couple. The one wearing red is presumably van Eyck himself, a friend of Arnolfini. Above the mirror is van Eyck’s large inscription stating, “Jan van Eyck was here 1434.” Among all the symbolic elements in the room is the unseen presence of the spiritual, God.

Directed Observation
Show students an image of Arnolfini Portrait by Jan van Eyck. Tell them it was painted, oil on oak panel, in 1434. Offer students biographical information on van Eyck. After some time for thinking, encourage students to share what they see. Welcome all comments. The following questions are provided to help students use art vocabulary to talk about the work.

1. Van Eyck was a master of capturing real imagery rather than using imagination. He was also a master of mixing and using oil paints. How important is mastery of techniques and materials to the visual artist? Why?
2. Van Eyck used the elements of art in this painting. Identify the elements and how they were used in Arnolfini Portrait.
3. Van Eyck used symbolism in his Arnolfini Portrait. How so?
4. Van Eyck painted imagery in a new way with the use of the mirror. In what new way might you paint?

Things to Do
1. To get a better understanding of the time period, study late medieval times and the transition to the early Renaissance.
2. What do you know about the history of mirrors? Research the topic.
3. Learn about tempera paints by making your own. Paint with them. Then, learn about oil paints and paint with them using “green” chemicals. Compare and contrast the difference of the two types of paint.
4. One of the interesting objects in Arnolfini Portrait is the convex mirror. Design and create a drawing or painting using a mirror reflecting objects viewed by the reflection. When designing the room, choose several meaningful personal objects to include as well as people you know, thus filling in the entire paper.
5. Have someone take a cropped photo of you in front of a carefully chosen background which represents you, such as in a library if you are an avid reader. Enlarge the photo with a computer or copier to 8” x 10” and print it out in color or in gray tones. Use the grid system to draw yourself enlarged on 16” x 20” paper.