

The Arnolfini Wedding: The World's Most Famous Phantom Pregnancy

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Jan van Eyck created the complex and beautiful *Arnolfini Wedding* in 1434 (32" × 24" oil on oak panel). It is perhaps the oldest surviving masterpiece made with oil-bound pigments; egg tempera was the medium of choice before this. But why would a wealthy and successful young couple choose to immortalize their awkward predicament, with the bride already pregnant at their nuptials? Giovanna Cenami does indeed seem heavy with child, but on closer inspection, she's simply holding up her full-skirted dress in the contemporary fashion. Look again and you'll see that her torso is erect rather than tilted backwards to balance the weight of a term pregnancy. Van Eyck may well have highlighted this sartorial gesture as a reference to the couple's desire for children. This is one of many

iconographic elements to this painting. Others include the small dog at their feet, symbolizing faithfulness, a carved figure of Saint Margaret (the patron saint of childbirth), shoes, a single burning candle, prayer beads, brush, oranges, and more. These have been variously interpreted as having domestic, religious, nuptial, and sexual significance. There are too many icons and details to relate in this short missive. Better to go and see the painting at the National Gallery in London, where it was purchased for £600 in 1842!

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J Obstet Gynaecol Can 2013;35(12):1152

