

Arnolfini's best friend

Fellowship and familiarity in Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini portrait

Marisa Anne Bass

Errata

p. 35: *Johannes de Eyck fuit hic*

p. 35: The referent of the 'here' (*hic*) in the inscription...

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The Arnolfini portrait has always been a *ménage à trois* (fig. 1). Between the man and the woman at the center of the room is the assertive trace of a third party, the artist himself, made present by the inscription on the wall that tells us 'Jan van Eyck was here'. Every account of the picture from the sixteenth century onwards has recognized the relationship between these three protagonists as essential to the work's mystery and appeal.¹ Yet few have paused to appreciate the couple's little dog, a figure who stands equally front and center within the composition. To recognize his presence is not only to better understand how the painting draws us in as viewers and interpreters; it is also to be reminded that so often the best art-historical method is to stop and take a closer look.²

Detail fig. 1

A treasure of London's National Gallery, a staple of art-historical surveys, and a catalyst for artists from Van Eyck's immediate followers to the Pre-Raphaelites of the Victorian era, *The Arnolfini portrait* has achieved a status in the canon of Renaissance painting that is almost equal to none.³ But for all its celebrity, what we know about this picture is remarkably little. As Lorne Campbell has shown in his unparalleled investigation of the London painting, archival documents can only get us so far.⁴ The exact identity of the couple remains uncertain, and the circumstances surrounding the work's creation are still obscure.⁵ Attempts to explain the scene as a 'document' of a marriage or betrothal have not held up to scrutiny.⁶ Even the authorial inscription on the back wall is far from straightforward; indeed, it is only one among the painting's many captivating details that have variously invited and confounded interpretation.

One might object that a study of *The Arnolfini portrait* focused on the figure of the dog is flawed by design, that such a study risks treating the part at expense of the whole. Let me be clear from the outset. I do not propose the dog as the key that unlocks the meaning of Van Eyck's painting. Nor do I take the dog as a historical subject whose significance can be recuperated by trying to understand what people thought about dogs in Van Eyck's time, how they cohabited with them, or the customs that were associated with them. The historiography of *The Arnolfini portrait* has rightly taught us to be wary of interpretations in this vein, and iconographical readings of the picture have affirmed all too well that the notion of a meaningful detail is already overdetermined.⁷ Instead, I want to understand the way that the dog participates in the interaction between the painting's human subjects and its viewers, and the way that Van Eyck presents him as a subject in his own right. In short, I want to understand what the dog is doing within this



work of art, and I will endeavor to approach that question in two ways: by considering what dogs do in other works of Renaissance art and literature, and by appealing more universally to what dogs do in life.⁸

It matters to my argument that *The Arnolfini portrait* defies the bounds of portraiture as a genre. I am hardly the first to observe that the London painting is unusual – if not unprecedented – in its full-length depiction of a non-royal couple, in its representation of them within a domestic space, and in its prominent reference to the artist himself.⁹ But it is not just that Van Eyck flouted the representational conventions of his time. The trappings of the room also contribute to the work's radicality in essential ways. Technical examination of the panel has shown that Van Eyck did not plan the dog in his original underdrawing; he added the couple's fluffy companion only at a later stage of the composition, when he also added the prominent chandelier and several of the chamber's other accoutrements.¹⁰ Van Eyck used these elements as opportunities to showcase his astonishing skill both at manipulating the oil medium and at encouraging us to experience his pictorial worlds as extensions of the world around us.¹¹ This latter quality is not reducible to mere realism; beyond the sense that Van Eyck's works are true to nature, they also convey a sense of familiarity. Regardless of whether he shows us the Virgin Mary in a church or a couple in their home, he always invites us in.

This sense of familiarity matters to my argument as well. The Italian artist, architect, scholar, and theorist Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472), who was Van Eyck's contemporary and himself (as we will see) a lover of dogs, wrote that painting and friendship had something in common. As he declares in his treatise *De pictura* (*On painting*), both had the power to 'make the absent present'.¹² Just as one friend keeps the memory of another alive and close in mind, so too in Alberti's terms does painting draw its vitality from mimesis: the closeness established between representation and reality. There are many ways to think about the fellowship that we feel with paintings, and which they are designed to make us feel. As I hope to show, the fellowship that viewers from the fifteenth century to the present have felt with *The Arnolfini portrait* is not historically contingent, or at least not entirely so. It depends, in a fundamental way, on the fellowship we feel with our non-human companions.

The canine protagonist

The identity of the dog in the London painting is as elusive as that of his human counterparts. For convenience I have chosen to refer to the dog as a 'he', though neither his sex nor his pedigree can be determined beyond doubt. He has putatively been labeled an ancestor of the Brussels griffon, a nineteenth-century breed of aristocratic lineage characterized by one canine specialist as a 'little atom of a dog' with 'an alert and humorous intelligence' – a description that resonates in spirit (if nothing else) with our protagonist.¹³ His genealogy aside, one thing at least seems clear: this is no stray mongrel off the street but the well-groomed and well-fed companion of the couple at center who is accustomed to domesticity and all the comforts that attend it.

1

Jan van Eyck, *The Arnolfini portrait*, 1434, oil on panel, 82.2 x 60 cm, London, National Gallery (photo: National Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY)

2

Detail fig. 1

The Arnolfini portrait, 1434

Van Eyck painted the dog with love, delineating each strand of its wavy reddish-brown hair with a fine brush that must have been only a few hairs thick. The dog's nose is black, and the glints of light at his nostrils suggest that his buttonlike snout is a little wet, as if he had just licked it or sniffed excitedly (fig. 2). His mouth, which is ringed by a touch of gray hair, is pertly closed in the hint of a smile. His ears are perked and his tail is standing up as if he were in the midst of wagging it gently in the air. All these details support what his eyes confirm: this dog is reacting to something that interests him. His eager brown eyes seem to be concentrated intently on us, as if he were sentient of the world beyond the frame. At the same time, Van Eyck shows us that the dog's attention is also focused on the visitors *within* the world of the picture who are stunningly reflected in the mirror on the back wall. We are invited to imagine that these two figures standing at the entrance to the room, dressed in red and blue, have just encountered the same scene as the one before us: the scene of a man, a woman, and their dog.

In a landmark 1934 essay, Erwin Panofsky proposes two ways of looking at the dog in *The Arnolfini portrait* that have exerted an influence on nearly all subsequent scholarship. After introducing his ingenious (yet unconvincing) solution to the peculiarities of the couple's representation, Panofsky concludes his essay by gesturing to his influential (and much critiqued) concept of 'disguised symbolism', through which he endeavors to explain how the realism of early Netherlandish painting at once reveals

and conceals meaning. For Panofsky, the 'naturalistic tendencies' of Van Eyck's works do not preclude them from possessing symbolic significance; on the contrary, the 'preternatural associations' to which certain elements of his pictures give rise are supported – if not heightened – by the fact that they seem true to life.¹⁴ Panofsky buttresses this point, in the final footnote of his essay, with specific reference to the household pet in the London painting and to the canine companion in another famed work by the artist. By his account, each of these dogs can be regarded either 'as a "symbol" or as a mere "genre-motif" within the compositions they inhabit.¹⁵ Given the staying power of Panofsky's argument, it is worth considering for a moment whether this dichotomy really holds.

The second painting with a dog to which Panofsky refers, although no longer extant, is described by the Neapolitan humanist Bartholomaeus Facius in a 1456 treatise as a scene of a woman at her bath. In this picture by Van Eyck, Facius writes, one sees not only the woman depicted from the front but also her 'hind parts' reflected in a mirror hanging on the wall and many other engaging details besides: 'an old woman seemingly sweating, a puppy [*catulus*] lapping up water, and also horses, minute figures of men, mountains, groves, hamlets and castles.'¹⁶ Facius's choice of the Latin word *catulus* for puppy, a diminutive of the word *canis* for dog, implies a creature of small stature. In a depiction of the lost work within Willem van Haecht's 1628 *The collector's cabinet of Cornelis van der Geest*, we can just barely discern the little dog who is lying on the floor at the feet of the bathing woman and her maidservant (fig. 3).¹⁷ Although difficult to see – this is, after all, a detail of a painting within a painting – this dog is looking out toward the viewer rather than lapping up water; he is thus in even more direct parallel to his counterpart in the London painting.¹⁸

This juxtaposition reinforces understanding the dog in *The Arnolfini portrait* as a feature of the couple's daily lives. The puppy that Facius describes is lapping up spilled bathwater, as dogs are wont to do. The puppy that Van Haecht represents is dutifully keeping watch at the feet of his owner, as if to ensure that no intruder disturbs her bath. Likewise, a dog in one of Van Eyck's miniatures from the *Turin-Milan hours* is busy chowing down on a bone in the foreground beside a cat preparing to pounce on a bowl of discarded milk (fig. 4). These animals lend a certain naturalness to their settings by virtue of their prototypical behavior. Rather than illustrating a strict divide between 'symbol' and 'genre-motif', they embody the traits that lead to the association of dogs with more general qualities such as watchfulness, loyalty, and appetite.

At the same time, the dog in *The Arnolfini portrait* has a psychological complexity that distinguishes him from the dogs in the other works just mentioned. He is positioned at full attention, absorbed in a moment of encounter with two human visitors and with us as human viewers. He seems to be there for a more particular reason. Panofsky thought so too. He suggests that the dog should be understood not just as a pet but also as a symbol of the woman's marital fidelity, an interpretation he supports with reference to the dogs commonly represented at the base of medieval funerary monuments.¹⁹ The late fourteenth-century tomb of Jeanne d'Évreux, for instance, includes two small dogs at Jeanne's feet that might be taken

3

Willem van Haecht II, *The collector's cabinet of Cornelis van der Geest*, 1628, (detail), oil on panel, 102.5 x 137.5 cm, Antwerp, Rubenshuis (photo: Collectie Stad Antwerpen, Rubenshuis)



4

Jan van Eyck, *The birth of John the Baptist* (detail), in *The Turin-Milan hours*, fol. 93v, c. 1420, illumination on vellum, 26.4 x 20.3 cm, Turin, Museo Civico d'Arte Antica (photo: in the public domain)

to embody her faithfulness to her husband, King Charles IV the Fair, whose recumbent effigy is directly beside hers (fig. 5). Whether the dogs *should* be taken as symbolical is another matter, and on the evidence of the monument itself, such an assertion is difficult to prove.²⁰ The sculpted figures at the base of Jeanne's tomb testify to a more immediate investment in representing the true nature of their domesticated subjects.²¹ Each dog wears a collar adorned with bells to help their owner keep track of them, and one is depicted crouching and baring its teeth, as if surprised by the viewer's approach and instinctually defending his mistress from a potential intruder. Their liveliness animates the otherwise static representation of the deceased in a manner that seems to exceed mere iconographical convention.

The tendency to associate small dogs with female owners, whether on tombs or in life, also had a longer history not exclusively tied to the context of marriage. In the first book devoted to the classification of dogs, which was published in the sixteenth century, the English scholar and doctor





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Tomb of Jeanne d'Évreux (detail), late 14th century, marble, Paris, Basilica of Saint-Denis (photo: Patrick Cadet / Centre des monuments nationaux)

6

Hans Memling, *Allegory of vanity*, c. 1485, oil on panel, 20 x 13 cm, Strasbourg, Musée des Beaux-Arts (photo: Musée des Beaux-Arts de Strasbourg / Musées de Strasbourg / M. Bertola)

Johannes Caius distinguishes between dogs that belonged at the side of menfolk – namely hunting, sporting, and guard dogs – and those that were coveted as female companions. According to Caius, toy dogs are especially suited to the ‘games and diversions of ladies’ who are fond of holding them in their laps while reclining in their bedchambers and carrying them in their arms when going about town.²² These dogs, so he writes, ‘are essentially useless in all respects [*sane ad omnia inutile*],’ a comment that reflects back implicitly on their female owners.²³ In Hans Memling’s *Allegory of vanity* from the late fifteenth century, we can see Caius’s opinion of toy dogs anticipated in the close association between the nude woman gazing at herself in the mirror and little white lapdog posing alongside her; both woman and lapdog share a sensual frivolity that is set off by the two hounds reclining behind them, one of whom rolls over to expose his genitals (fig. 6). Lucas Cranach’s full-length double portrait from 1514 depicting Henry IV of Saxony and his wife, Catherine of Mecklenburg, also pairs each of its subjects with a gendered canine counterpart (fig. 7). A manly hunting dog lurks behind Henry’s legs while a small coiffed companion sits dutifully at Catherine’s feet. They are each two of a kind.²⁴

In contrast to these examples, the dog in *The Arnolfini portrait* stands squarely between the man and the woman. By the logic of the composition, he is no more connected to the one than to the other. His lively portrayal makes it difficult to write him off as a mere attribute. One might even say that he seems to possess a mind of his own. Given that neither iconography





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Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Henry the Pious, Duke of Saxony, and his wife, Katharina of Mecklenburg*, 1514, oil on panel, 184 x 83 cm (each), Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister (photo: bpk Bildagentur / Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister / Hans-Peter Klut)

nor convention has provided a very satisfying answer as to what he is doing there, it is time to move beyond Panofsky's two ways of looking at the dog in Van Eyck's painting and to consider him not as a symbol or mere motif but as a central participant in the story. If the dog is there for a reason, that reason may be right under our noses.

An encounter among friends

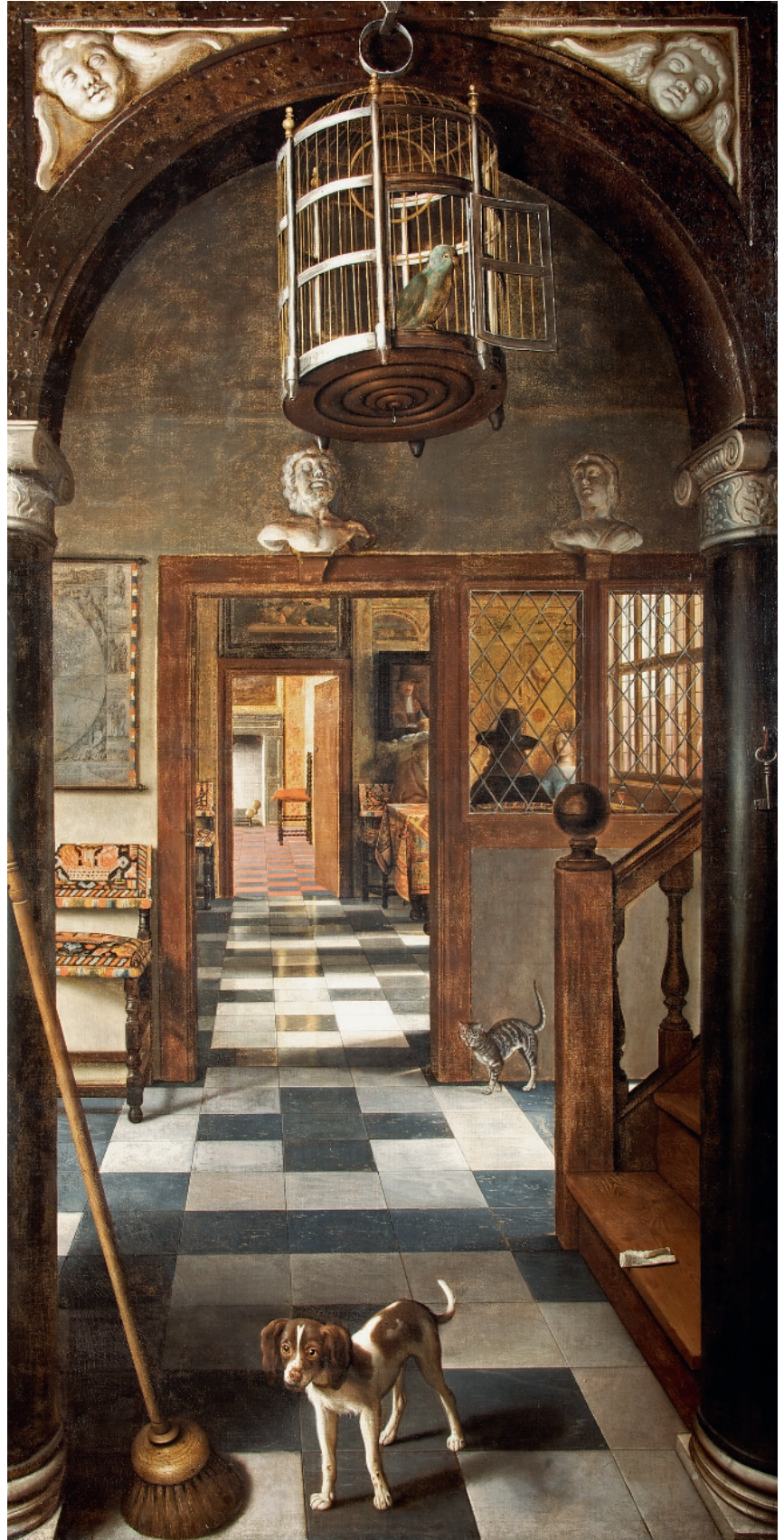
The Arnolfini portrait heralds the beginning of a larger phenomenon in the art of the early modern Low Countries: the inclusion of canine companions in depictions of everyday life. Whether in homes, churches, streets, or brothel scenes, the ubiquity of these companions is not hard to explain. Dogs live with us, are almost always at our sides, and want to do most everything with us. So it is that we refer to them proverbially as our best friends. The notion that dogs possess a humanlike capacity for affection and attachment is more than a habituated projection on our part. As domesticated creatures, dogs possess – both by nature and through acculturation – many of the qualities that we want to see reflected back at us. This may help to explain why dogs fit so naturally within the tradition of Netherlandish painting. The tendency of Netherlandish pictures to draw us across their thresholds into worlds that seem already familiar accords with the way that we look to dogs to serve as mirrors of ourselves.²⁵

In this light, I propose to embrace the human-canine relationship as a method of interpreting Van Eyck's painting, and to draw on a body of knowledge that I have acquired not through scholarship but instead through the years I have spent cohabiting with a little dog of my own. There are many rituals of encounter that those who share this living arrangement know well. The first is the most familiar, and as old as Odysseus and Argus.²⁶ I come home and open the door to find my dog waiting on the other side, pleased to see me but a little unsettled. In her mind, I have always been away too long and should never have left in the first place. The seventeenth-century Dutch artist Samuel van Hoogstraten depicted this canine state of mind in his tromp l'oeil painting now at Dyrham Park, where it is installed in a doorway to enhance the illusionistic effect (fig. 8).²⁷ The dog in the foreground stands at the picture's threshold with a wagging tail but a slight look of anguish, enthused by our arrival but still a bit agitated. Meanwhile a nearby cat models typical feline behavior and keeps at a more aloof distance.

The encounter that takes place in *The Arnolfini portrait* is of a different kind, though this scenario too is a familiar one. My dog and I are home together, and there is a knock at the door. Startled by the noise, she runs over to see who has arrived. If I open the door and my dog does not recognize the visitor, she maintains a wary posture. Her tail stays down, and she will bark with agitation if the suspected intruder dares to step inside. But if I open the door and my dog recognizes the person standing before her, her demeanor changes in an instant. Her tail shoots up and begins to wag, and she opens her mouth in an excited smile (figs. 9, 10). The fifteenth-century illuminator Loyset Liédet, who clearly knew the composition of *The Arnolfini portrait* and drew inspiration from it in several of his miniatures,

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Samuel van Hoogstraten, *A view through a house*, 1662, oil on canvas, 264.2 x 136.5 cm, Gloucestershire, Dyrham Park (photo: National Trust Photo Library / Art Resource, NY) / Bildagentur / Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister / Hans-Peter Klut)





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Detail fig. 1 *The Arnolfini portrait*, 1434

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Boucher Bass (photo: Nancy Bass)

depicted just such a scene in a manuscript for Charles the Bold (fig. 11).²⁸ A shaggy brown dog has left the side of the scribe at his desk to confront the two men who have just arrived at the threshold, and who are also reflected in a convex mirror on the back wall. In Liédet's miniature, the dog still seems in the process of sussing out the visitors, but not so with the dog in *The Arnolfini portrait*. Van Eyck has perfectly captured this little household pet, tail up and smiling, in the midst of welcoming friends.

The specificity with which Van Eyck rendered the dog in the London painting is consequential for three reasons. First, the dog's reaction provides a crucial piece of information about the visitors reflected in the mir-

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Loyset Liédet and workshop, *Charles the Bold visiting a scribe*, from the *Histoire de Charles Martel*, fol. 7, c. 1472, illumination on vellum, 41.8 x 29 cm Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale (photo: Bibliothèque Royale)



ror – information that we would not know otherwise. It tells us that the figures in red and blue are not strangers but welcome acquaintances. Second, the dog's reaction tells us that our relationship to the couple is a familiar one. As the dog looks out from the picture and recognizes the figures in the mirror, he also looks out in warm recognition at the viewer. We too are received at the threshold as if we were regular visitors to the household. Third and most importantly, the dog's capacity to distinguish a good person from a bad one, and to respond accordingly, tell us that things matter *to him*. By extension, he is a figure who can matter *to us* in a way that the inanimate objects in the room do not.

What does it mean for the dog in *The Arnolfini portrait* to be a figure who can matter to us? A long tradition of philosophical reflection on the human/non-human divide precedes this question. Already in the sixteenth century, the French essayist Michel de Montaigne pondered whether his relationship with his pet cat was quite what it seemed. 'When I play with my cat', he asked, 'who knows if I am not a pastime to her more than she is to me'?²⁹ Montaigne points not only to the difficulty of understanding his cat's mind but also to his intuition that she has inclinations of her own. As Christine Korsgaard has put it more recently, 'it makes (almost) no sense to rank creatures in a hierarchy of importance, because creatures are entities *to whom* things are important'.³⁰ Once we let go of the notion that the central human protagonists in Van Eyck's painting are necessarily higher on the hierarchy of importance than the non-human being alongside them, we can begin to appreciate one way in which *The Arnolfini portrait* pushes the boundaries of portraiture as a genre. Through the figure of the dog, Van Eyck transformed the London painting into an image that does more

than mirror reality or offer a convincing likeness of its two central human subjects. It is also an image that recognizes and responds to us as we are engaged in responding to it.

This fellowship, which is fundamental to the experience of Van Eyck's *Arnolfini portrait*, depends not only on its compositional design but also on the anthropomorphic perspective of its viewers. My own account of my domestic companion betrays a tendency to anthropomorphize that would be ridiculous to deny. Does my dog really smile, or do I simply project the idea of a smile onto her face? My inclination to see her behavior as person-like does not change the fact that she is responding to me in her own dog-like way.³¹ By the same token, Van Eyck represented the dog in the London painting in a manner that presumes human viewers accustomed to seeing canine behavior through the lens of their own personhood. We do not have to go down the rabbit hole of philosophizing about the distinctions between human and animal consciousness to acknowledge that within the world of *The Arnolfini portrait*, the dog is more responsive than the minute human figures reflected in the mirror, whose faces are too small for us to read. Even the couple themselves, whose responsiveness is confined to some extent by the formal conventions of portraiture, do not engage us as directly as the companion at their feet. The dog's world may be limited, but his world nonetheless includes us, and it is through his response that we recognize the friendship that underlies the encounter among the painting's human subjects, and which guides our own encounter with them.³² If the dog and the mirror are the two elements of *The Arnolfini portrait* that look back at us, it is the dog alone who looks back at us with the consciousness of a fellow being.³³

Portrait of an artist as a dog

Now that we have considered the dog in the London painting in relation to the couple depicted at center, to the figures in the mirror, and to the viewer outside the picture, it remains to address his relation to the work's most famed protagonist: Jan van Eyck himself. *The Arnolfini portrait* confronts any interpreter with the conundrum of the Latin phrase inscribed on the back wall, *Johannes de Eyck fuit huic*, or 'Jan van Eyck was here' (fig. 12).³⁴ This phrase is much more than a signature. It suggests not only that the artist created *The Arnolfini portrait* but also that he somehow was present in it, although the precise when and how are left open.

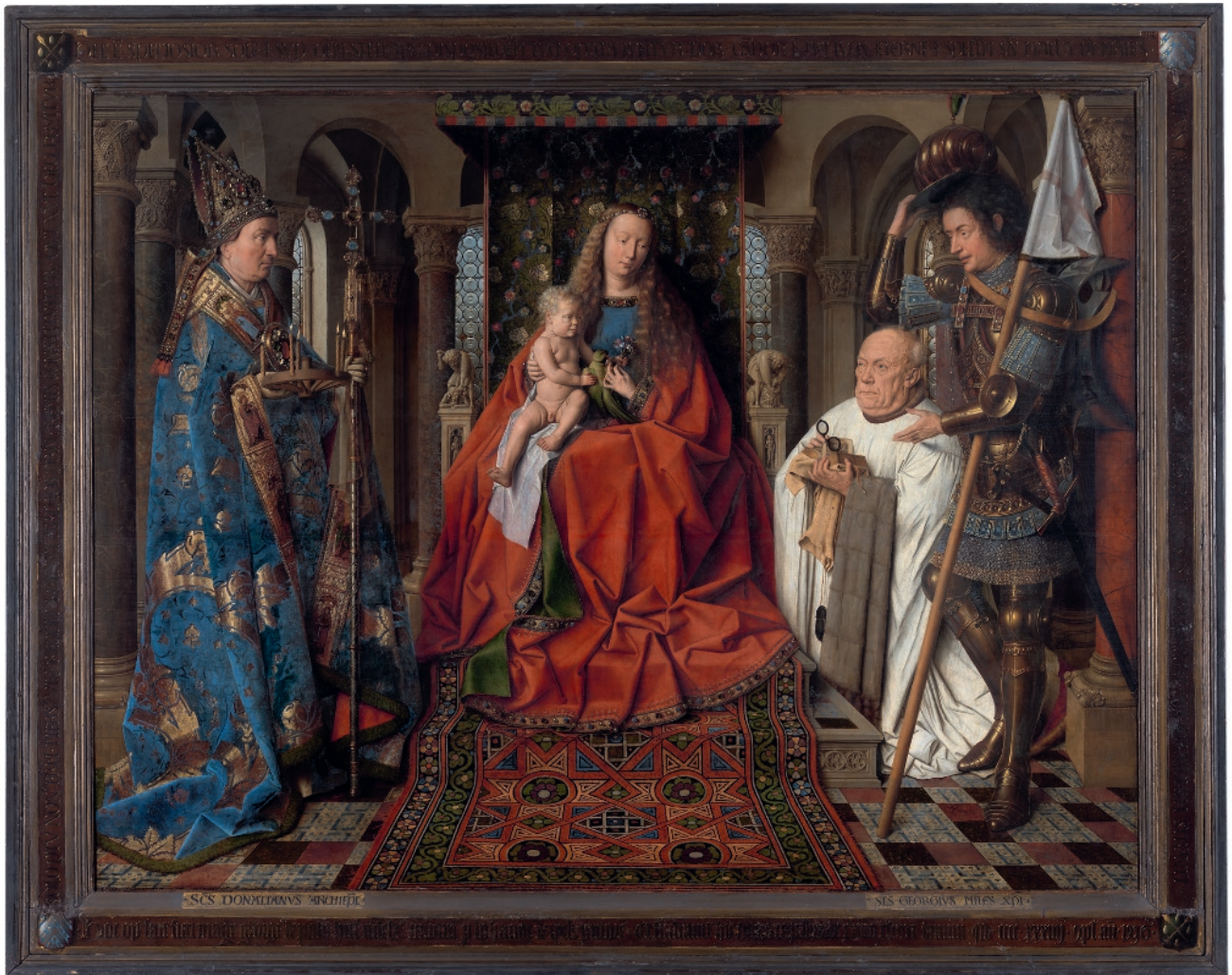
The referent of the 'here' (*huic*) in the inscription is the main source of ambiguity. The adverb could refer to the painting as a whole (Van Eyck's creation), to painting's illusive interior (the couple's home), or to the very spot where the text appears. More often than not, given the placement of the inscription on the wall above the mirror, *huic* has been understood to indicate that one of the figures reflected in the doorway represents Van Eyck himself as an internal witness to the scene – in other words, that he *is* there in the space and time of the composition.³⁵ This explanation is not entirely far-fetched since Van Eyck did include a putative self-portrait within a work that he created two years later, *The Virgin and Child with Canon Joris van der Paele* (figs. 13, 14). In the latter painting, we are given a clear

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Detail fig. 1 *The Arnolfini portrait*, 1434

hint that the figure reflected on the surface of the shield of Saint George is the artist; his placement evokes the affinity between the Dutch words for shield (*schild*) and for painter (*schilder*).³⁶ However, to argue that the inscription in *The Arnolfini portrait* similarly hints that Van Eyck is one of the two figures reflected in the mirror raises several unresolvable questions. Which of the two figures is Van Eyck? Who is the other person beside him? And if Van Eyck is actually there, then why is the verb of the inscription (*fuit*) in the past tense?

Just as surely as Van Eyck knew that saying 'I was here' and 'here I am!' are two different things, he must have known that the inscription would encourage us to see *The Arnolfini portrait* as a presentation not only of its subjects but also of his artistry. The ambiguous indexicality of *huic* actually points in this direction; it compels us to think through all the manifold ways that an artist can be perceived to inhabit a work of art, both actually and otherwise. The mirror, together with the inscription above it, could thus be understood to manifest Van Eyck's presence in a less literal sense. The London painting has been described as a 'self-aware image' – namely, one that possesses a kind of consciousness about itself as a representation



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Jan van Eyck, *The Virgin and Child with Canon Joris van der Paele*, 1436, oil on panel, 124.5 x 160 cm, Bruges, Groeningemuseum (photo: Musea Brugge / www.artinflanders.be / Dominique Provost)

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Detail fig. 13 *The Virgin and Child with Canon Joris van der Paele*, 1436

and as an object of aesthetic contemplation.³⁷ Inspired by Van Eyck's example, Netherlandish artists from Robert Campin to Quentin Matsys took up the convex mirror as a condensed visual means to signal participation in a distinctly northern tradition of painting that destabilized the boundary between the real and the illusionary, and between picture and viewer.³⁸ Yet as we have seen, *The Arnolfini portrait* is not just a tour-de-force example of painting as reflection; more uniquely, it is a painting that intimates a fellowship between its internal protagonists and viewers outside its frame – an intimation achieved most directly through the figure of its non-human protagonist.

So, by way of conclusion, I want to consider whether the dog in *The Arnolfini portrait* also plays a role in asserting Van Eyck's creative presence within the painting, a role equivalent to the mirror and the inscription on the wall. More broadly, I want to push against the tendency to fixate on devices such as mirrors, inscriptions, and frames as sites of authorship and meta-pictoriality, particularly when doing so is at the expense of recognizing the self-consciousness of the living creatures who are represented alongside them. If we look for a moment beyond the realm of visual representation, we find among Van Eyck's scholarly precursors and contemporaries a practice of associating themselves with their domestic companions in both verse and prose.³⁹ In the twelfth century, for instance, the Netherlandish abbot Thierry of St. Trond composed a poem on his deceased dog Pitulus that professes to 'ennoble' him beyond the grave, and which emphasizes the reciprocity they once shared. 'That his large master should love a small dog', writes Thierry, 'that was his duty, to play before his master'.⁴⁰

Thierry's description of Pitulus anticipates a more elaborate poem on a dog written by the Italian humanist Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374).⁴¹ Petrarca recounts in a 1347 letter to Giovanni Colonna that both he and his dog preferred the quiet of the countryside outside Padua, so much so that the creature would chase away any 'rude and impudent plebeian' (*plebs importuna procaxque*) who came by and threatened to disrupt the scholar at work.⁴² The dog not only guarded Petrarca's person, kept him company, and woke him if he slept too long; this clever canine also ensured his freedom to write in solitude. Petrarca singles out for particular praise the dog's ability to distinguish friend from foe, which he takes to affirm that the creature possessed 'some trace of our [human] intelligence' (*sensus vestigia nostri*).⁴³ 'While fierce with the others', so Petrarca observes, 'he sweetly runs up to friends with ears up and tail wagging'.⁴⁴ In contemporary portraits, including a much restored late fourteenth-century fresco in Padua, Petrarca is depicted with a dog curled up at the foot of his desk who is ready (so we might imagine) to chase away plebeians at a moment's notice (fig. 15).⁴⁵ Through this portrait of his pet, Petrarca expressed his own preference for a contemplative life over an active one.

The final example that deserves mention here is also the most spectacular: just a few years after Van Eyck painted *The Arnolfini portrait*, Leon Battista Alberti composed a work titled *Canis (Dog)* that is a witty self-portrait in disguise.⁴⁶ Its ostensible subject is Alberti's deceased dog, and its basic form is that of a eulogy, though the text recalls an array of models and



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Attributed to Altichiero and Ottaviano Prandino, *Petrarch in his study*, c. 1374-1379, fresco, Padua, Reggia Carrarese (photo: HIP / Art Resource, NY)

sources ranging from Petrarch's letter to the ancient genre of paradoxical encomium – and perhaps even to Roman funerary inscriptions honoring departed pets.⁴⁷ Alberti wrote this short text around 1438, not long after he completed his famous treatise *De pictura* (*On painting*), and as it turns out, the two works are not unrelated.⁴⁸ Alberti opens *Canis* with a description of his dog's lineage and physical aspect, drawing on an anecdote about the famed Greek artist Zeuxis that also features in *De pictura*. As the story goes, Zeuxis gathered together all the most beautiful maidens in Croton whom he could find, and selected from each their best traits, in order to paint the most beautiful woman of all. Accordingly, Alberti writes that his dog 'had such a handsome and noble face that Zeuxis could have easily derived from painting its lineaments all the beauty and grace that he took from the maidens of Croton.'⁴⁹ Next Alberti turns to his dog's disposition:

[My dog] passed every moment of his day engaged in honorable works. He considered any time to be wasted that was not consumed with learning, and he reported to me on the character and nature of those with whom he discoursed. He offered friendly greetings to good people and berated with his words all those who were lazy and arrogant.⁵⁰

This passage from Alberti's treatise echoes Petrarch in its emphasis on the dog's power of discernment, his ability to distinguish a good person from a bad one, which we observe in the dog of *The Arnolfini portrait* as well. No less significantly, the passage signals a strong affinity between the author and his subject. Even more so than Petrarch, Alberti has offered a description of his dog's character that mirrors his own. By attributing studiousness, diligence, and judgment to his pet, he speaks not only to his own sense of a virtuous life but also to the legacy that he hoped to achieve by pursuing the virtuous path.⁵¹ Alberti points to this aim in the final line of the treatise, which makes the parallel between himself and his departed companion all but explicit: 'And so farewell, my dog; just as you strove toward virtue, so too have I endeavored to show that you are immortal.'⁵²

We need not posit a direct connection between these literary presentations of self in creaturely guise and Jan van Eyck's presentation of his creative self in *The Arnolfini portrait* in order to gain something from the comparison. We know that Van Eyck was capable of representing a convincing three-dimensional space without having studied Alberti's theory of perspective in *De pictura*; so too was he capable of representing a dog in a manner both relatable and slyly self-referential without knowledge that Renaissance writers had done the same. If anything, Van Eyck's medium of painting allowed him to explore this kind of referentiality in a way that he could not have achieved on the page. He had no need for recourse to texts or textual traditions in order to demonstrate his learning.⁵³ He could do so instead by showing us his understanding of the way that we see the world and the way that we see ourselves within it.⁵⁴

James Marrow has compellingly observed that Van Eyck and his Netherlandish followers engaged 'new kinds and levels of consciousness' through their works, particularly when it came to representing the moments of

Christian salvation history and the ineffable mysteries of the sacraments.⁵⁵ Moving away from matters of iconography and style, Marrow writes that what truly distinguishes early Netherlandish painting is an exploration of innovative ways to structure and convey divine meaning through pictorial form. Marrow's point, as *The Arnolfini portrait* shows us, is not exclusive to Van Eyck's devotional paintings. The consciousness with which his works are imbued extends from the sacred to the everyday, and from the human to the non-human as well. For Bartholomaeus Facius, Van Eyck's lost scene of a woman bathing was for this very reason the work that justified the artist's reputation as 'the leading painter' (*saeculi pictorum princeps*) of his time.⁵⁶ The invitation to cross the picture's threshold – and to revel in the details of distant mountains and puppies lapping up water – made it a space in which the eye and mind felt welcome to reside.

Of course, it is not just that Van Eyck's paintings seem to anticipate our patterns of thought and attention; it is also their virtuosity that points to the learning and skill of their creator. This is as true of Van Eyck's ability to paint reflective surfaces as it is of his ability to convincingly paint a dog. Dogs are living subjects that are as lively and expressive as humans. They have moods and characters. They are fuzzy, fluffy, fine, coarse, rough, smooth, wet, dry, and come in all variety of shapes and sizes. It is not inconsequential that Alberti evoked the story of Zeuxis and its exemplary virtuosity in describing his own household pet. The dog in *The Arnolfini portrait* is likewise a super-human demonstration of painterly technique. When we stop to look closely at this creature who looks back at us – when we stop to notice the details of his glistening nostrils, his expression, and his fluffy coat – it seems impossible to deny that the dog is indeed there for a reason: he is the embodiment of all that Van Eyck could do with his brush.

I have argued that the dog in *The Arnolfini portrait* is a being to whom we matter, in the same way that Van Eyck makes us feel that we as viewers mattered to him. And I have titled this essay 'Arnolfini's best friend' not only to emphasize the importance of the dog within Van Eyck's London painting, but also in order to stress the dynamics of a relationship that seems to me inherent to the work's design. As Alberti shows us in *Canis*, friends – and best friends in particular – are essential to preserving our legacies. By writing in praise of his beloved companion, Alberti keeps the memory of his dog alive while buttressing his own legacy in turn. Van Eyck ensured the legacy of Arnolfini and his wife by creating a portrait that has roused viewers ever since with both curiosity about the couple and admiration for the cleverness of the work's creator. In this respect, it is Van Eyck who has proven over the centuries to be the couple's best friend, and it is their portrait that has paid back Van Eyck's friendship in spades. The artist may no longer be there in the flesh, but his legacy is there in the room, in the chandelier on the ceiling, in the fruit on the windowsill, in the pattens on the floor, in the inscription on the wall, in the convex mirror beneath it, but also – and perhaps especially – in the little dog standing expectantly before the doorway, tail up and smiling, who greets us as friends.

Ultimately, by approaching Van Eyck's *Arnolfini portrait* from the perspective of its non-human occupant we come to more fully appreciate its humanity – a humanity that is as foundational to friendship as to any great

work of art. Why then are the best-known paintings those that we so often struggle to see for what they are? If there is a bookend to the tradition of early modern painting that Van Eyck inaugurated, it is surely Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, another picture that is highly self-aware, that is both a portrait and more than a portrait, and that has always been a *ménage* between its patron, its sitters, and the artist himself (fig. 16). Here too, in the foreground, before the knowing gazes, the gestures, and the mirror on the back wall, is a dog: a sleepy mastiff whose well-groomed coat Velázquez depicted with the same love as the costly garments of the human figures that surround him, and who tolerates the dwarf stepping on his backside with a recognition that such abuse is a thing to be endured. He knows more about the daily machinations of Velázquez's human subjects than we ever will.



16

Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656,
oil on canvas, 320.5 x 281.5 cm, Madrid,
Museo Nacional del Prado (photo: Museo
Nacional del Prado)

Notes

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- 1 For the earliest references to the painting in the inventory of Margaret of Austria, see Campbell 1998, 174, and especially Eichberger 2002, 106, n. 211, and *passim*.
- 2 Here I nod to Arasse 2013.
- 3 For the London painting's reception among the Pre-Raphaelites, see *cat. London 2017*, with prior literature.
- 4 Campbell 1998, 174-211.
- 5 Campbell 1998, 192-198. The debate surrounding the identity of the sitters is beyond the scope of this essay, but it is important to note that the title commonly ascribed to the London painting stems from the association of the male sitter with the family name Arnolfini, an association that is itself not beyond doubt.
- 6 See Campbell 1998, 198-200, for a review of this literature, as well as Ridderbos 2005, 63-66.
- 7 See further Didi-Huberman 1989.
- 8 For a general overview, see Gelfand 2016.
- 9 Campbell 1998, 201-202.
- 10 Campbell 1998, 182, 201.
- 11 For the most recent overview of Van Eyck's works, career, innovation, and technique, see *cat. Ghent 2020*.
- 12 Alberti 1972, 60-61, II.25: 'ut quod de amicitia dicunt, absentes pictura praesentes esse faciat (...)'. See also Woodall 1997, 8-9, and Woodall 2007, 16-17, and *passim*.
- 13 Lampson 1955, 244. See also Lampson 1963, 84-85.
- 14 Panofsky 1934, 127.
- 15 Panofsky 1934, 127, n. 35.
- 16 Translation from Baxandall 1964, 102.
- 17 On this painting, see Held 1957, and most recently Marr 2019, with additional literature.
- 18 Speculation regarding the connection between *The Arnolfini portrait* and the lost painting of a woman at her bath commenced in full force with Held 1957, 74-83, though no attempt to understand them as pendants has ever proven conclusive.
- 19 Panofsky 1934, 125; a point reiterated in Panofsky 1966, 203. Most subsequent interpreters have either followed or attempted to nuance Panofsky's assertion. For instance, Dhanens 1980, 199, calls the dog 'the symbol of faithfulness'. Carroll 1993, 105, goes so far as to name the dog 'Fido'. Harbison 1990, 264, suggests that the dog could symbolize 'carnality and fertility' as well as fidelity. Koster 2003, 11, doubles down on the connection to funerary monuments, suggesting that the dog is not a symbol of fidelity but is instead meant 'to accompany the dead in eternity'. By contrast, see Bedaux 1986, 22-23, and Hall 1994, 114-116, who reject any symbolic reading of the creature.
- 20 As also observed by Hall 1994, 114.
- 21 On this point, see also Sadler 2016.
- 22 Caius 1570, 6r: 'Perexiguum id est plane, et foeminarum lusibus ac delitiis tantum expetitur, quibus quo minus est, eo gratius est, ut sinu gestent in cubiculo, et manu in pilentis, genus sane ad omnia inutile'. Compare with Desiderius Erasmus's adage on the *Catella Melitaea*, or Maltese lapdog, in Erasmus 1992, III.iii.71.
- 23 For further discussion of Renaissance perceptions of toy dogs, including this passage from Caius's treatise, see Schiesari 2010, 13-31, esp. 27-28. On lapdogs in the early modern Netherlands, see also *cat. Bokrijk 1984*, 150-151.
- 24 Of course, there are exceptions to the association of lap dogs with women. See, for instance, the Venetian artist Cariani's *Portrait of a man with a dog* (c. 1520) in the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. (inv. nr. 1950.11.2), which shows a man posing with a little white canine. See also Bowron 2006 for additional examples.
- 25 See further Vanhaelen 2012 on the tension between boredom and attention in the history of response to Dutch art.
- 26 I refer, of course, to the famous scene when Odysseus's dog Argus recognizes him even in disguise after the hero returns home after so many years away. Homer, *Odyssey*, 17: 290-327.
- 27 See further Brusati 2013.
- 28 On Liédet's engagement with the London painting, see further Campbell 1998, 178-180.
- 29 Montaigne 1958, 331. See also Derrida 2008, esp. 5-11, for an extended rumination on the human-feline relationship that takes up where Montaigne's question leaves off.
- 30 Korsgaard 2018, 63.
- 31 On this point, see further Ingold 1992 and Milton 2002, 42-48.
- 32 I refer here to Martin Heidegger's understanding of the difference between human and animal as defined in terms of attunement to the world. See Heidegger 1995, esp. 185-200, and also Kuperus 2007.
- 33 In her admirably revisionist article on the London painting, Seidel 1989, 57-58, also makes this important observation about the affinity in compositional function between the dog and the mirror. On the mirror and familiarity, compare also Cranston 2000, 140-145.
- 34 *Fuit* is the perfect tense of the Latin verb 'to be', which is also sometimes translated as 'has been' to distinguish it from the imperfect tense (which would be *erat* in Latin). The distinction in English is negligible.
- 35 Panofsky 1966, 203: 'here the artist has set down his signature (...) as a witness rather than as a painter. In fact, we see him in the mirror entering the room in the company of another gentleman who may be interpreted as a second witness'.
- 36 See especially Preimesberger 1991/2011, 483-484/45-47, and Brine 2018.
- 37 Stoichita 2015, 225-226, and *passim*.
- 38 The motif of the mirror may also be read in spiritual terms, though such a reading does not preclude understanding it in equal measure as a statement of artistry and of allegiance to an artistic tradition. See Woodall 2014, esp. 56-62.
- 39 See Reuterswärd 1981, Almási 2013, Walker-Meikle 2012, 96-101, and especially Papy 1999, who shows the *longue durée* of this tradition.
- 40 Ziolkowski 1993, 40, 272-273. For other ennobling discussions of dogs in the medieval context, see the encomium for a dog by Nikephoros Basilakes, as discussed in Schmidt 2019, 108-110, and Jean Froissart's 'Debate of the horse and the greyhound', as discussed in Figg 2002.
- 41 Petrarch 1951, 778-783, with Italian translation. For further discussion of this letter, see Schiesari 2007 and Schiesari 2010, 32-43.
- 42 Petrarch 1951, 778 (line 29).
- 43 Petrarch 1951, 780 (line 51).
- 44 Petrarch 1951, 780, (lines 53-54): 'torvus ut adversus reliquos, sic blandus amicis/auribus abiectis tremulaque occurrere cauda'.
- 45 On this fresco in the context of the *Sala Virorum Illustrium* in the Reggia Carrarese in Padua, see Mommsen 1952 and Armstrong 2016, esp. 85-106. On the representation of the dog in particular, see Reuterswärd 1981, 55, and Almási 2013, 394. See also Enenkel 2012, esp. 160-161 for Petrarch's cat, which was embalmed and became a kind of posthumous shrine to

- the poet himself. For an engraved illustration of the embalmed feline, as well as epigrams written in the cat's honor, see Tomasini 1650, 127, 130.
- 46 A modern edition of the Latin text was published in Grayson 1983; a subsequent edition with Italian translation is provided in Alberti 1984, 142-169. I cite the Latin from the latter below, with references to the line numbers provided by Grayson.
- 47 For the most thorough investigation of Alberti's sources, see McLaughlin 2011. On Alberti's engagement with the genre of encomium, see also Marsh 1998, 155-159, and Gibson 2016, esp. 35-39. On ancient epitaphs for pets, and their tendency to humanize their subjects, see Slater 2010.
- 48 On the importance of reading Alberti through Alberti, and his tendency to take up 'the same themes and questions in multiple works', see Grafton 1999, esp. 44.
- 49 Alberti 1984, 156-158 (lines 212-214): 'Canis noster facie honesta et liberali, lineamentis iis a quibus Zeusis facile omnen pingendi venustatem et gratiam ut a virginibus crotoniatibus sumpsit, exceperunt.'
- 50 Alberti 1984, 162-164 (lines 290-300): 'a digno opere nullum vel minimum hore momentum vacaret (...) omne tempus perditum arbitrabatur, nisi quod discendo consumeret (...) ad meque tantisper mores et ingenium eorum quos tractasset referebat (...) bonos comiter consalutabat; segnes ac petulantes castigabat dictis.'
- 51 A point further affirmed by the shared emphasis on virtue found in both *Canis* and Alberti's *Vita*. See McLaughlin 2011, 76-83.
- 52 Alberti 1984, 168 (lines 370-371): 'Vale igitur, mi canis, atque esto, quantum in me sit, prout tua expetit virtus, immortalis.'
- 53 The extent of Van Eyck's textual learning and knowledge has prompted considerable debate. See Preimesberger 1991/2011 and most recently Martens 2020 for a measured review of the question.
- 54 See Sutton 2016 for a similar argument regarding Rembrandt's representation of dogs across his oeuvre.
- 55 Marrow 2007, esp. 161.
- 56 Translation from Baxandall 1964, 102.

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