

Essay 1

Read Erwin Panofsky's, *Jan Van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait* (1934).

Choose an Early Renaissance painting and consider the artist's use of iconography, a.k.a. "disguised symbolism." Panofsky suggested a three step approach to developing an understanding of a work through its iconology: 1. Consider the practical - the general sense of the painting, where your eye is drawn, and what elements your eye returns to repeatedly; 2. Identify the objects and figures depicted in the painting, and decode their symbolic meaning by comparing them to other cultural sources (for example, paintings by the artist's contemporaries, or literary works); 3. Consider the system of symbols that the artist uses to convey meaning and what that system says about the culture that produced it. Use this three step approach to discuss the general sense of the painting, the painting's symbolic meaning, and what that system of meaning reflects about the culture (place and time period) in which the artist lived and worked. Identify at least five objects depicted in the painting and discuss the connotative and denotative meanings of those symbols. Are there other interpretations, perhaps even contrasting interpretations, of this same work? Does the work fit into a geographic and/or historical tradition, or is it unusual in its imagery? Why?

You may find James Hall's Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art useful. In addition, sources like your textbook often provide interpretations of symbols used in paintings of this era.

- or -

Read Jonathan Jones', *Divine Inspiration*.

During the Renaissance, and after, artists regularly painted self-portraits. Choose two artist self-portraits in any media to compare and contrast, and use a biographic approach, as demonstrated in Jones' article, to understand their meaning. When using biography as a method for interpreting meaning, consider the following: 1. What do the details of the artist's life reveal about the work?; 2. How did the important events of the artist's life influence their choice in subject matter, and the manner in which they expressed their subject?; What associations or themes do we identify in the work that may be associated with this personal context or the artist's biography?

Consider how the artists chose to represent themselves, and what larger meaning is conveyed about their profession through their representational choices. What does this sense of their artistic practice convey about the role that the artist and art plays in shaping culture, responding to philosophical and political concerns, and conveying a sense of a larger world view? Do the two artists agree, or contradict, each other's world view and the cultural significance of art?