

Title: HISTORY, INNOVATION, AND EXCELLENCE: AN INQUIRY INTO JAN VAN EYCK

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Abstract:

In reviewing the history of art and science together one frequently finds rich examples that interweave the two approaches. Probing these examples, in turn, often reveals people who deftly combine artistic and scientific forms in ways that speak of excellence. Jan van Eyck was a painter in this mold. He stretched the technical innovation of oil paint beyond its initial parameters and, as this paper will show, it is because he did so that he offers a means to critically investigate history, art, science, technology, craft, and excellence together.

The achievements of Jan van Eyck (~1395 ö 1441) were already distinctive by the sixteenth century. Both Giorgio Vasari, (in his *Lives of the Artists*, 1550) and Karel van Mander (in *The Lives of the Illustrious Netherlandish and German Painters*) described oil painting as a sudden technical innovation that was discovered by Jan van Eyck after much experimentation. In recent years, however, extensive documentation has established that many painters were experimenting with oil, even as far back as the 8th century. Considering this information in light of van Eyck's accomplishments we quickly see that what stands out in van Eyck's work was his capacity to not only see the optical possibility of using systematic glazing to make a painted surface look more realistic, but also his ability to produce work that did so. This visual quality is what makes his work unlike that produced by many other painters who were also experimenting with oils.

Yet, and a key point within the discussion, despite the evidence that clearly documents the invention of oil paintings was a cultural discovery that took place over a long period of time, people continue to be drawn to agree with the attribution of priority to van Eyck. His paintings are often introduced in art history books with the statement that in viewing them one can see why van Eyck had long been credited with the invention. This tendency to attribute the discovery of oil paint to van Eyck is then explained by looking closely at his work and at descriptions of van Eyck's virtuosity. For this reason, the second element this paper looks at critically is van Eyck's virtuosity.

In looking at this aspect of his craft, it will be noted that Italian art is generally used as the standard in discussions of Western art and that Jan van Eyck, a Flemish artist, offers a broader scope. More specifically, he was a Northern artist, who like many Northerners, had an interest in craft, color, and detail. Still, like Italian artists he brought an interest in perspectival elements to his work. This range of interests allowed his paintings to evoke comparisons with other innovative technologies that have expanded our capacity to see. This additional marriage between art, science, craft, and technology will be analyzed to demonstrate that van Eyck knew ways to make oil paint behave that no one had displayed before him. As the eminent art historian Erwin Panofsky wrote, van Eyck's eye operated as both a microscope and a telescope. As a result, according to Panofsky, the beholder's eye is compelled to oscillate between a position reasonably far from the picture and many positions very close to it.

In sum, it is because van Eyck's art establishes a complex relationship with the viewer that people are inclined to agree that Van Eyck excelled in painting. Close analysis of his work shows he was a technician as well as an innovator. Combining the art of science with the science of art, he developed a style of application most of his contemporaries could not duplicate, even when using the same materials and approach. His work itself highlights that something particular to van Eyck is evident in his paintings. His eye, his attention to detail and color relationships, his patience in application, and the rich quality of his descriptive product cannot simply be reduced to his knowledge of painting techniques or the evidence that the invention of oil paint was actually the result of the efforts of many painters. His paintings, as such, offer a means to re-consider how we interpret primary sources, what we mean by innovation, and what we mean by excellence.

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