

This and That
A text by Rose Davey
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This leaflet is intended to aid the act of looking – to encourage viewers to identify the sensory scuffle set up by the artist. Any artwork of quality does something to itself. It makes visible a series of formal and conceptual rules, which are set up and then tested by the artist.

To explain this clearly, it is useful to refer back to historical European painting. If one can look past the narrative, the conceptual and visual disruptions deployed by the artist are explicit. Painters of the past were not afforded the luxury to make works that served only their own sensibilities and ideas, but the ones history remembers managed to fulfil two briefs; the one outlined by their royal, religious, or rich patron, and the one that caters for their own curiosity as an artist. The following works are all from the National Gallery's collection in London.

Carlo Crivelli is a master of the conceptual flick. In his painting of Saint Catherine, **01**. 1491–94, he includes a life-sized fly that appears to pause upon the surface of the painting. Its scale is in relation to our own, and not the scale that describes Saint Catherine. The fly must therefore represent a separate reality to the one in which she exists **02**. Is this a painting of Saint Catherine and a fly, or a painting of a painting of Saint Catherine with a fly on it? Crivelli reminds us of the process of painting. We are looking at a two-dimensional surface upon which a fly can rest as the image is painted. In Crivelli's *The Vision of the Blessed Gabriele*, c. 1489. **03**. the garlands of fruit, which bear little relationship to the rest of the image, cast shadows on the sky. Their inclusion downgrades the rest of the painting to deflated illusion. This is no longer sky, but a painted flat surface. **04**. Crivelli is again showing us that this is a painting, constructed by the artist using colour on a two-dimensional surface. He mimics the reality of shadow to show the physical reality of the panel on which he works.

Paolo Uccello's *Battle of San Romano* c. 1438–40, **05**. illustrates a more formal, rather than conceptual intervention. He presents us with a battle scene that is a masterful collision of colour and shape rather than a bloody depiction of war. Set before a beautiful backdrop of roses and citrus fruits, the impact of the battle is shown only through the broken lances and fallen knight. **06**. These are arranged to describe the recession of space and are made visible by the light pink ground they fall upon. More reminiscent of a light up dance floor than a battleground, it appears cut out from the grass, with a one square patch reserved for the shield of Siena, and another for Niccolò's rearing horse. The Florentine leader, without his helmet, seems ill-equipped in battle, but well equipped for the composition. His baton points you up to the distant colour wheel figures of red, yellow, green, and blue. **07**. Simultaneously hugely detailed and beautifully simplified. **08**. This impressive arrangement of shapes diverts our attention from the unbalanced fact that this battle depicts a whole army against one knight.

In Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*, 1434, **09**. we are witness to the original influencer post; a couple showing off their expensive lifestyle from the comfort of their own carefully cultivated home. Like many social posts, this is a constructed reality – here, brought about by the artist. The wealth of information is ordered for the eye as a series of verticals that run across the painting (L to R) from the window frame, fur trim, pleats of fabric, raised hand, beads, floorboards, carpet edge, folds of the green dress, edge of bed, fur-lined sleeve, and hanging red décor. The one horizontal line – the connection of hands – holds the energy of the entire painting, cupping the mirror and mimicking the shape of the satin slippers below. The hands are at the centre of a vertical line of information that starts with the chandelier and ends with the dog. **10**. The same blue and green of the woman's dress, and the red fabric furnishings repeat in the stained glass, mirror and carpet pattern. **11, 12, 13**. This strategic distribution of colour allows the eye to move with ease across an image laden with information. Van Eyck even shows us the space in which we stand, through the reflected figures glimpsed in the mirror. But it is the inclusion of his signature which is the most intriguing. 'Jan van Eyck was here, 1434' **14**. is elaborately written on the wall above the mirror. But in what capacity was he here? As one of the figures reflected in the mirror? As a person who had inhabited the very space he depicts, or is he omnipresent as creator of this painted world? Of course we do not know, and never will, but this added element of the signature shudders the narrative. No definitive answers are offered, and that should be just the way we like it.

Painting is its own reality, controlled by the artist. It is a fool's errand to try and make sense of it by comparing it to the physical world, since one is built from concept and the other is built by nature.

All artworks, old or new, should be up to something. Like all the artists in this exhibition, Crivelli, Uccello and Van Eyck probably asked themselves, what would happen if I did this... and then that?

List of images

Carlo Crivelli
Saint Catherine of Alexandria
1491–94
Egg tempera on wood
38 × 19 cm
Collection of the National Gallery, London

Carlo Crivelli
The Vision of the Blessed Gabriele
1489
Egg tempera with some oil on wood
141 × 87 cm
Collection of the National Gallery, London

Paolo Uccello
Niccolò Mauruzi da Tolentino at the Battle of San Romano
1438–40
Egg tempera with some oil
182 × 320 cm
Collection of the National Gallery, London

Jan van Eyck
Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his Wife
1434
Oil on wood
82.2 × 60 cm
Collection of the National Gallery, London



01.



02.



03.



04.



05.



06.



07.



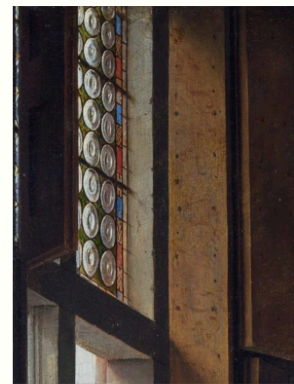
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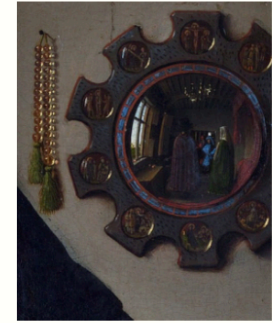
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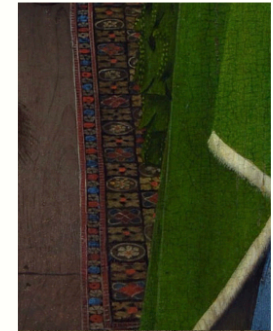
10.



11.



12.



13.



14.