Giovanni Arnolfini's Impalmamento

The central motif of Jan van Eyck's painting in London, the so-called 'joining of hands', has long been recognized as a special gesture with a specific meaning. It has been the subject of debate for decades, yet rarely has anyone ever described it correctly (fig. 1). The most careless writers speak of mutually clasped right hands, or state that the woman is holding the man's left hand. Those authors who describe the gesture as meaning or implying mutuality do not phrase their descriptions precisely. Nor does it suffice to speak of hands reaching out towards each other. Authors closer to the truth are those who emphasize the man's active and the woman's passive role. Nevertheless, these motionless hands cannot be described accurately by certain verbs in the present tense indicating movement or action. Only a few - otherwise inaccurate - descriptions mention the fact that the woman's palm is open. I have found only one description referring to the woman's palm being open towards the beholder. Its author, however, does not attribute a specific meaning to this.

In the picture the man holds in his left hand, between his thumb and four fingers, the woman's open right palm, which is facing the viewer. This portrayal of the open palm must have been very important to the painter - so much so, in fact, that he drew the man's left arm somewhat incorrectly: it is too short and the slightly upward-turning wrist is anatomically incorrect.

I believe that there may very well be a direct connection between the emphasized display of the woman's palm and the Italian terms palmata, impalmare and impalmamento. These Italian words derive from palma, i.e. palm. Palmata means a solemn oath of allegiance. The verb impalmare is equivalent to pledging one's troth, and originates from an old custom according to which the groom, as a confirmatory token of his marriage promise, grasped, touched, or poked the right hand or palm of his future wife. Impalmamento signifies an engagement, a promise of marriage; specifically, as a confirmation of prior agreements, it signifies the early phase of the long process of the marriage arrangement.

It is of course the ancient Roman dextrarum iunctio on which the ceremony is based. However, in Roman times the joining of hands sealed the free and voluntary will of both the man and the woman to marry each other. By contrast, in a medieval marriage the bride passed from her father's or guardian's ownership to that of her husband, her right hand thus symbolizing her person. If anything, the woman's open palm is a sign of her - joyous or reluctant - consent. The groom either inserts his right hand into the bride's, a gesture well-known from countless depictions of engagement scenes, or touches her palm with his extended finger. Sometimes this latter gesture is also illustrated, as in Sassettta's picture of St. Francis' Vow of Poverty, in which the Saint is stretching his index and middle fingers towards the right palm of the female figure in the middle (fig. 2).
As far as I know, the display of the palm in Jan van Eyck’s picture of Giovanni Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami is unique in the history of art. Even so, the context of this motif can be reconstructed, not only with the help of linguistics, the history of law and ethnography, but also on the basis of other images. Two illustrations by Boccaccio dated c. 1430-40 and Van Eyck’s own painting illustrate, like three successive film-frames, three consecutive phases of the impalmamento or engagement confirmed by taking the bride’s hand. In the first Boccaccio miniature the groom’s right hand is approaching the bride’s open right palm, which he is holding in his left from behind and below in such a way that three of his fingers clasp her palm (fig. 3).14 In the other Boccaccio miniature, from the same manuscript, the groom is again holding his bride’s open hand from behind and below – this time four of his fingers can be seen – and touching her palm with his right hand (fig. 4).15

In my opinion Jan van Eyck’s painting could thus portray the moment following this phase: the future husband has already lifted his right hand from his bride’s palm. The underdrawing confirms the fact that Van Eyck’s picture represents a phase in the described series of events, since it shows – in the same way as in the above examples – that Giovanni originally held Giovanna’s hand, not only from the back, but with two of his fingers clasped around it from below as well (fig. 5).16 In short, I think that Arnolfini has just touched his future wife’s palm with his right hand and is now displaying his newly acquired possession to the beholder. If he were to talk he would probably say, ‘Io ho impalmato lei’. In all likelihood he commissioned the painting from Jan van Eyck on the occasion or in memory of his impalmamento.17