



- Today's talk is the second part of my two-part talk on Vermeer, one the great painters of the Dutch Golden Age.
- It is astonishing how much he created from so little. He painted most of them in the same room using a small group of household objects and a few models yet the intensity of these moments captured in time and frozen forever is far greater than many artists achieve touring the world and using a wide range of media and subjects.
- Let me remind you of some of the historical background to Vermeer's life. He was born, lived and died in Delft. When he was 21 (1653) he became a **Catholic** in order to marry **Catharina Bolnes** who came from a more wealthy family. **She had 15 children** although four died before they were baptised. At the end of that year he became a member of the **Delft painters guild** but it was a year of **plague and war** and he **did not pay the usual admission fee**.
- The following year was what is called the **Delft Thunderclap (1654)**, an enormous accidental explosion of a gunpowder store that killed a hundred people. Many wooden houses burned down and the city was rebuilt in stone and brick. Three years later Vermeer found his **most important patron Pieter van Ruijven** (pronounced 'rye-ver') who lent him money. The following years were a time of wealth for the Dutch Republic and Vermeer, as far as we know, was financially sound despite only producing about three paintings a year.
- This all ended in **1672, the so called 'Year of Disaster'**. **The war** with France and later England led to an economic depression. **Theatres, shops and schools closed** and it was **five years** before things recovered. **Vermeer borrowed money** using his mother-in-laws house as security but died **after a short illness aged 43**. Vermeer could not sell any paintings and was left with old masters paintings he could not sell and his wife attributed his early death to the stress of his financial problems.
- He was **almost unknown outside of Delft**, he never had any pupils and he only produced about three paintings a year. It was not until the **19th century that a French historian rediscovered Vermeer** and his reputation quickly grew.
- Let us continue from Part 1 in the 1660s when he was **in his thirties**.

BIOGRAPHY

BIO:VERMEER

- Johannes Vermeer (October 1632-December 1675) was born in Delft and spent all of his life in the town. His father was a silk worker who started buying and selling paintings just before Vermeer was born. Also, at the this time he leased an inn and later bought a larger inn in the market square.
- **In 1652 his father died and Vermeer took over the art business and the following year married Catharina Bolnes** (pronounced 'Bol-ness'). Her family were a lot wealthier and it is likely he converted to Catholicism to get permission to marry. At some point

they moved in with his mother-in-law and remained there the rest of his life. **His brother-in-law Willem Bolnes was extremely violent** and swore at his mother and on one occasion pulled a knife and tried to stab her. He also threatened to beat Vermeer's wife with a stick when she was 'pregnant to the last degree'. **His wife gave birth to 15 children** but four died before they were baptised.

- There is disagreement about whether Vermeer was an apprentice and to whom. He painted in the front room on the second floor and one other room in the house. He painted slowly and with great care and used the most expensive pigments. There is no other 17th-century artist who employed the exorbitantly expensive pigment lapis lazuli (natural ultramarine) either so lavishly or so early in his career. He even employed it as an underpaint to create a cool, crisp appearance such as in the shadows of the red satin dress of *The Girl with the Wine Glass*. He even continued to use it after his financial breakdown suggesting it was supplied by a wealthy collector, possibly Pieter van Ruijven (pronounced 'row', as in quarrel, 'fer').
- **In 1653 he became a member of the Guild of Saint Luke.** This was a year of plague, war, economic crisis and a terrible explosion that destroyed a large part of the city. Possibly for these reasons Vermeer did not pay the usual admission fee.
- At the time Gerard Dou (pronounced 'herard dow') was selling paintings for exorbitant prices and Vermeer charged higher than average prices and we believe most of his works were sold to a local collector. He probably competed with Nicolaes Maes (pronounced 'mass') who produced genre works in a similar style. **In 1662 Vermeer was elected head of the guild** and again in 1663, 1670 and 1671.
- **1672 was a year of severe economic downturn** (the 'Year of Disaster') because of the war with France and later England. Theatres, shops and schools closed and it was five years before things recovered. In 1675 Vermeer borrowed 1,000 guilders in Amsterdam using his mother-in-law's house as security.
- **In 1675 he died after a short illness aged 43.** In a petition his wife explained that he had been ruined financially, could not sell any paintings and was left with old masters paintings he could not sell and she attributed his early death to the stress of his financial problems. He was almost unknown outside of Delft, he never had any pupils and he only produced about three paintings a year.
- He produced fewer than 50 paintings of which 34 survive. Only three paintings were dated by the artist.
- There is a theory that Vermeer used optical devices, such as a camera obscura or a comparator mirror but none was found in his house after his death. However, he was a friend of the pioneering lens maker Antonie van Leeuwenhoek who was his executor after his death.
- He was overlooked by art historians for two centuries until his catalogue raisonné was published in 1866.
- Hans van Meegeren became a master forger and painted many new 'Vermeers' which he sold to the Nazis during occupation. When charged with treason

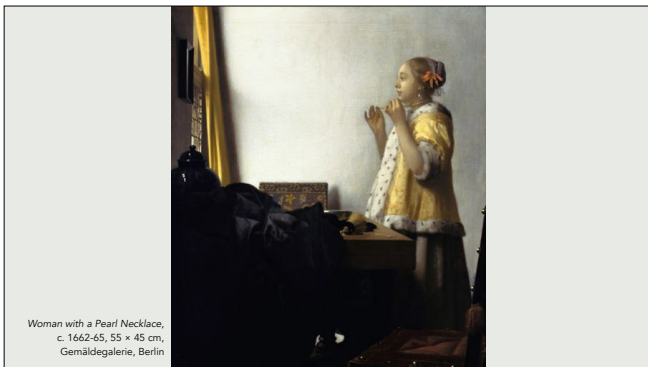
he demonstrated his skill by painting a new 'Vermeer' in court. Today his forgeries look like obvious fakes.

REFERENCES

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johannes_Vermeer
- <http://www.essentialvermeer.com/index.html> (an excellent and comprehensive analysis of Vermeer's work)

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Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*, c. 1662-65, 55 × 45 cm, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

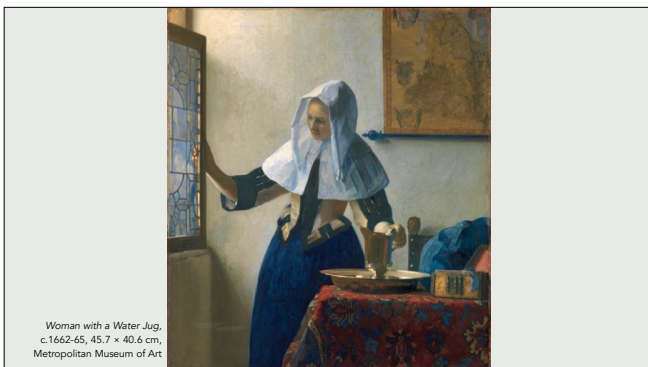
- **Men and women in Dutch society at the time both cared about their appearance** and beauty was regarded as what they called the '**first merit**' in women. This woman is from the **upper class of Dutch society** and is finishing her morning toilette with her **pearl necklace**. She has a rich, fur-lined jacket, large pearl earrings and ribbons in her hair. On the table are her powder brush and fine-toothed ivory comb. These objects are often associated with Vanitas paintings but in this case there is no criticism of the woman's activities.
- **The yellow jacket appears in five other paintings by Vermeer** and is listed in his death inventory of 1676 ('a yellow satin mantle with white fur trimmings'). It is likely it belonged to his wife Catharina. The jacket was worn indoors by the middle and upper-classes to perform household activities. Except in the wealthiest houses heating was limited to a fireplace in the living room and the kitchen and these jackets were designed to keep the wearer warm. It looks like ermine (the white

winter coat of the stoat with its black-tipped tail) but this fur is never mentioned in Dutch inventories so it is **probably white squirrel, mouse or cat**.

- This woman appears to have made the **minimal use of cosmetics but their use was widespread**. Some products, such as those containing lead, were poisonous and could result in hair loss, damaged teeth and skin and even death. A light skin was prized and various concoctions used including bathing the face in one's own urine.
- **The ideal Dutch woman** of this period should have a fair complexion, a round or oval face with a well-proportioned nose, large, moist dark eyes, a high forehead, and a small double chin. The mouth should be small with full lips and blond hair was considered so beautiful some women dyed their hair.
- The dark mass on the left is a blue tablecloth he also used in *Woman Holding a Balance*. The object behind the table is a chair decorated in tapestry. It is a type that was only made in Delft and few survive.

REFERENCES

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woman_with_a_Pearl_Necklace



Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), *Woman with a Water Jug*, c.1662-65, 45.7 × 40.6 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art

- There appears to be **no symbolic meaning**. The jug and the tray suggest **she has or is about to wash her hands**. We sometimes see a **woman in a brothel washing her hands** to indicate the removal of sin. In this case the jug and the string of pearls hanging out of the jewellery box might be linked to the concept of **purity** but this does not explain the map on the wall. It is more likely that there is no meaning it is simply a moment of a private life and one that would appeal to the male viewer.
- The map shows the **seventeen provinces of the Dutch Republic** with the south to the left. The map is by **Huyck Allart** although Vermeer has added some decorative cartouches. **The map was originally behind the girl** and its left edge ran down to the junction of her cap and shoulder covering. He has moved it so the rod holding the map down neatly nestles in her neck and creates a series of balanced negative spaces.
- The **white cap the woman is wearing appears in four other paintings** by Vermeer and his wife Catharina owned three. They were used to **protect the woman's hair** before and after the morning toilette.
- The gilded pitcher and its basin have been described as **one of the most beautiful still lifes in the world**. Although he never painted a still life his paintings contain some of the most exquisite still lifes ever painted. Remember in part one the loaf of bread in *The Milkmaid* and the tray with lemons in *The Girl with the Wine Glass*.
- It has been suggested the woman is opening the window to water some plants outside but the jug is too fine for this purpose and earthenware jugs were

typically used. It is more likely she is closing the window in order to complete her toilette by washing her hands.

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http://www.essentialvermeer.com/catalogue/young_woman_with_a_water_pitcher.html#top



Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), *Woman Holding a Balance*, c. 1662–4, 42.5 × 38 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

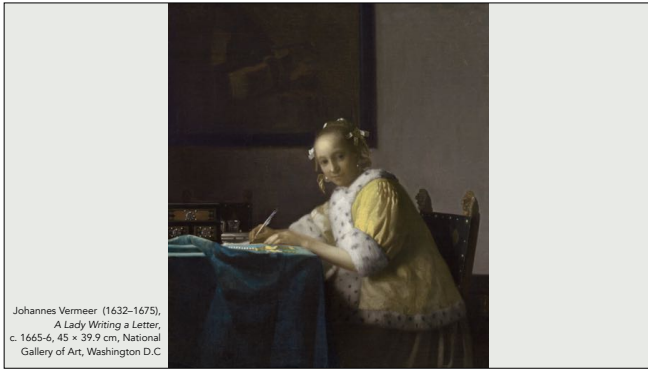
Pieter de Hooch (1659–1662), *Interior with a Woman weighing Gold Coin*, c. 1664, 61 × 53 cm, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

- This painting was assumed to be an allegory and the pans of the scale contain pearls or gold. However, detailed examination showed the **pans are empty** and so she is demonstrating balance, an important general theme in Vermeer's work. In other words it is a moral message that one should **conduct one's life with temperance and balanced judgement**.
- There are gold coins on the table and a set of brass weights. Coins were weighed as their **value was based on the weight of metal** not their face value.
- (CLICK) There is a painting by Pieter de Hooch called *Interior with a Woman weighing Gold Coin* that is very similar, raising the question of whether either artist copied the other. Single-figure scenes are exceptional in de Hooch's work and common in Vermeer's so it is likely that de Hooch was inspired by Vermeer. (CLICK)
- There is a mirror on the wall on the left. Some scholars think this indicates this is a Vanitas painting but others refer to **Cesare Ripa's book *Iconologia*** which tells us a mirror indicates self-knowledge and Prudence.
- The painting on the back wall is a Last Judgement but the artist has not been identified but one possibility is a late 16th-century Flemish painter Jacob de Backer.
- The jewellery box is the same as the one in the previous painting *Woman with a Water Jug* and the blue tablecloth is the one he used in the last but one painting *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*.

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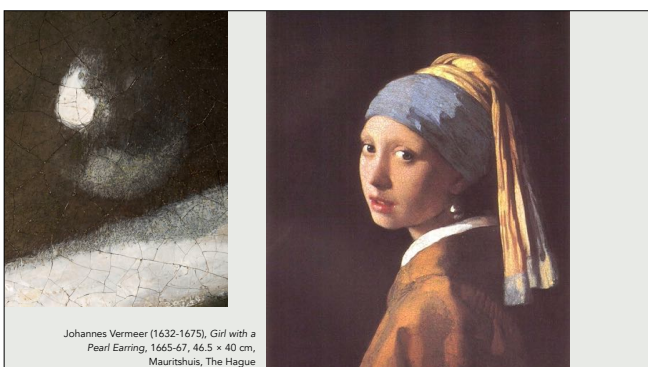
Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), *A Lady Writing a Letter*, c. 1665-6, 45 × 39.9 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

- The woman is looking at us which some have suggested indicates it is a portrait, possibly of his wife Catharina Bolnes. Her hair style with ribbons tied in bows was popular in the 1660s which has helped experts date it.
- She is writing and in the 17th century there was a **rapid increase in first-person statement ranging from diaries to letters and including, for the first time, by women**. Although many men and women were literate to a degree few would have the skill to compose a formal letter.
- We see the same **yellow jacket** again as in *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*. (It **appears five times in Vermeer's work** and it is listed in his death inventory. It is not ermine but cat, squirrel or mouse. Ermine, the winter fur of a stoat, is never mentioned in Dutch inventories.)
- The woman is **using a quill pen** which was first used about 700 AD and survived until the nineteenth century. Quill pens had to be regularly sharpened using a pen knife and a quill would last about a week. The best quills came from the primary flight feather of the left wing of a large bird such as a goose. Feathers from the left wing curved to the right so they did not get in the way of what was being written.
- On the table are a string of pearls and a yellow ribbon as in *Woman Holding a Balance*.
- The painting in the background is a still-life with a foreshortened viol de gamba by an anonymous artist. Still-lives were popular and were part of the Vanitas tradition. They were also known as *memento mori*, a Latin phrase meaning 'Remember you will die'.

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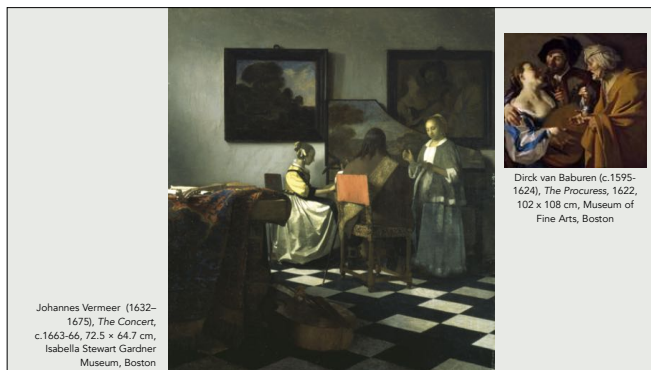


Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675), *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, 1665-67, 46.5 × 40 cm, Mauritshuis, The Hague

- **One of his most popular, haunting and timeless paintings.** We do not know why he painted it. Conventionally, artists painted what they called tronie, which were exotic heads of men and women, young and old that were sold as interesting subjects. We don't know who she is, in fact we don't know who any of his models were. Some critics believe it might be his eldest daughter Maria who would have been 12 or 13

years old in 1665-7. She is a European girl wearing an oriental turban and what is thought to be a large pearl earring, although one commentator suggested it was polished tin because of its bright reflection.

- The painting **was purchased at auction in 1881 for two guilders** (about £20 today) in poor condition and the buyer donated it to the Mauritshuis where it is still on display today. It was **restored in 1994** and it was discovered the **background was originally deep enamel green**. The green glaze was painted over a black background and the green has now faded.



Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), *The Concert*, c.1663-66, 72.5 × 64.7 cm, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston

Dirck van Baburen (c.1595- 1624), *The Procuress*, 1622, 102 x 108 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

- This was painted in about the **mid-1660s**. In **1662 (aged 30), he was elected head of the Guild of St. Luke**, the guild of artists in Delft, so he was a **leading artist in Delft** although he was **little known across the Dutch Republic**. He had a very small output, he painted a total of about 50 paintings, roughly two or three a year, of which only 34 or so survive.
- There are **three pictures in the painting**. The one of the left is painted in the style of **Jacob van Ruysdael** and is a rugged landscape with a dead tree trunk. **Women were regarded as the 'masterpiece of nature'** and they were frequently **set against a rugged landscape** as a counterpoint to their gently beauty.
- (CLICK) The picture on **the right is *The Procuress* by Dirck van Baburen** a Utrecht Caravaggisti. The painting was **admired by Vermeer** and was probably owned by his mother-in-law Maria Thins who had an art collection of the Utrecht Caravaggisti. She used her maiden name 'Thins' rather than her husband's name 'Bolnes' as he had beaten her and locked up their daughter so she left him to live with her brother in Delft.
- The **third painting is on the lid of the harpsichord**. It was made by the greatest harpsichord maker of all time **Ruckers of Antwerp** and would only have been owned by the wealthy **so it was probably loaned** to Vermeer for the occasion. The painting on the lid is a landscape that reflects the landscape on the wall.
- The man is playing an **almost concealed theorbo-lute**. His sash and sword indicate he is a military man perhaps a member of the prestigious Delft Civic Guard.
- The woman on the right has suffered from **poor restoration**. Her **grey dress was originally bright blue**. She is presumably holding a sheet of music. It is not clear if they are playing and signing sacred or profane music but *The Procuress* suggests it might by love songs with their **amorous undercurrents**.
- **Note the man's long hair**. The **fashion for long hair on men developed over Vermeer's lifetime**. Before the 1620s all men and boys had short hair. By the 1640s, youths, students and the urban elite all had long hair but one theologian expressed the fear of the elderly at the time that long hair endangered

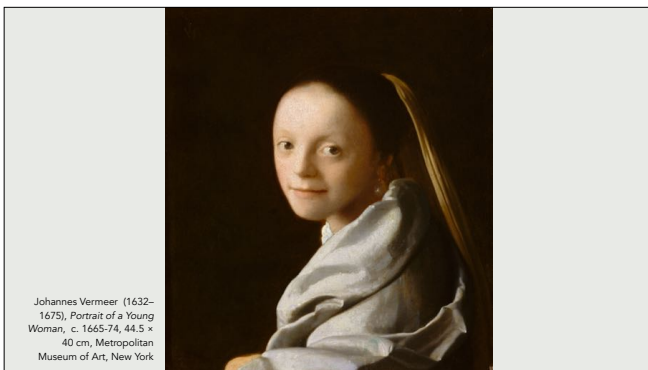
masculinity. The logic was that if a young man looked like a woman they must behave like a woman. By the 1670s most men had long hair and all Vermeer's men have long hair.

- The instrument on the floor is a viola da gamba and on the table is a cittern, a type of guitar and with its flat back cheaper to make than a lute.

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Concert_\(Vermeer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Concert_(Vermeer))

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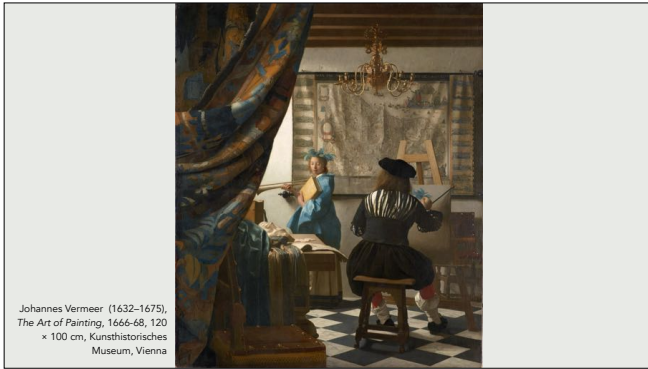
Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), *Portrait of a Young Woman*, c. 1665–74, 44.5 × 40 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

- **A different type of beauty** from the *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. The painting of the face is very soft and subtly. Some people have suggested it his **Vermeer's daughter** who would have been 13 and 20 depending when it was painted.
- The United Provinces was a society with the **most well-distributed wealth in Europe**. Nevertheless, there was an **enormous difference** between the wealthy and the poor. A **poor women** lived in a continual state of **undernourishment** and life was a daily struggle with disease as well as an **almost perpetual pregnancy**. **Rich women overate and avoided strenuous activities** and were therefore often overweight. They would eat large amounts of meat, fish, fruit, sweets and abundant amounts of imported wines and a wide variety of delicacies and were always beautifully dressed.
- **Dutch women were famous for their soft, clear complexion** but we know many women and men used **cosmetics** to improve their appearance and hide blemishes such as smallpox scars which were regarded as shameful. Vermeer may have **smoothed the skin** of his models to show them in the best light.
- The **dark background was a common device** as it isolated the figure and Leonardo da Vinci noted that it makes the object appear lighter.

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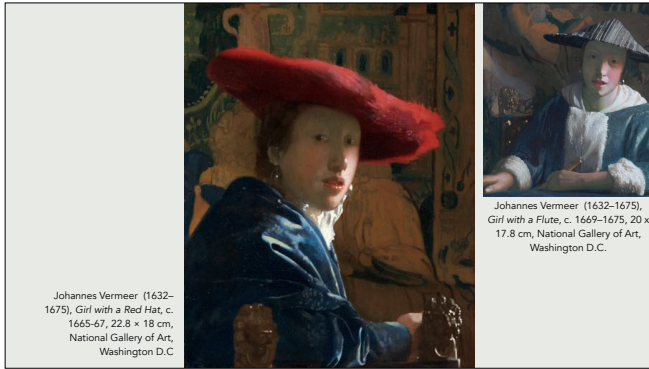


Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), *The Art of Painting*, 1666–68, 120 × 100 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

- In the last year of his life Vermeer used his mother-in-laws name to fraudulently borrow money in Amsterdam (1,000 guilders). When he died (in a 'frenzy' according to his wife) his mother-in-law explained how she had supported the Vermeer family and for her help she received this painting, *The Art of Painting*, **one of the finest, most mysterious and famous paintings in the history of Western Art.**
- We do not know if this is a **self-portrait** of Vermeer but it is probably the **generic representation of an artist.**
- The woman represents the **muse of history, Clio.** She is holding a **trumpet**, which **stands for fame**, and a **large book**, possibly by the **classical historians Thucydides** (c. 460 - c. 400 BC) or **Herodotus** (c. 485 BC - 425 BC). She is wearing a **crown of laurel denoting glory and eternal life.**
- The thin folio on the desk is probably sketches and it subtly links the model and the artist. Also on the table is a plaster cast, perhaps a reference to the requirement for artists to copy plaster casts to develop their skill at drawing and foreshortening.
- Maps like the one on the wall existed in great numbers but few have survived. **Only one version of this map has survived and it was discovered at the bottom of a locked chest.** There are town views down the sides and the central part consisted of **nine sheets.** We know from the actual map what the inscriptions say. The map represents **the history of the Dutch Republic** and one inscription in a cartouche reads "**The tremendous wars waged in these countries in bygone days, and still waged in these days, bear sufficient witness to the whole wide world of the great strength, power and wealth of these very countries**".
- **The large tapestry curtain functions as a repoussoir**, like the wings of a stage, it creates a strong perspective by adding a foreground, it suggests we are **viewing a secret** and entices us to pull it back fully. Perhaps, a reference to the **story told by Pliny the Elder of how Parrhasius fooled Zeuxis by painting a curtain** so realistically that Zeuxis went to pull it back to see the painting behind it.
- The **chandelier** is surmounted by a **double-headed eagle**, the **symbol of the Hapsburgs who had ruled the country in an earlier era.** It maybe that Vermeer added it as a **technical challenge** as painting a chandelier, its perspective and the reflections from the brass was regarded as an artistic challenge. Even the wealthiest burghers rarely had a multi-branch chandelier and they were more often found in churches.

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Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), *Girl with a Red Hat*, c. 1669, 22.8 × 18 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

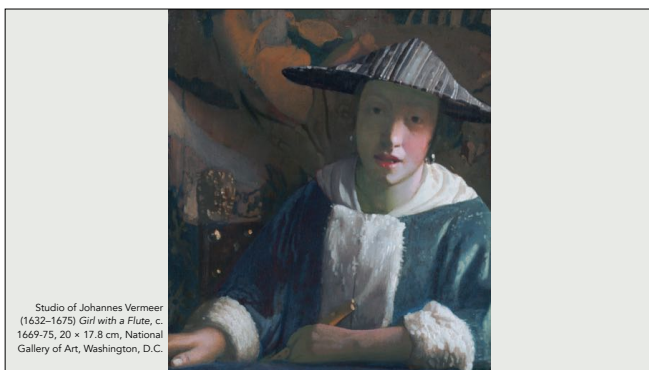
Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), *Girl with a Flute*, c. 1669–1675, 20 × 17.8 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

- **This is a tronie, literally a face.** It would have been modelled by a friend or acquaintance but it is not intended as a portrait but as a **representation of a type**, such as an old woman, a 'Turk' or a young soldier. Vermeer is known to have painted three tronies.
- **The red hat is very unusual** as no other hat like it has ever been identified. (CLICK) It is possible Vermeer created it by pinning fur or feathers on the brim on a hat like the one in *Girl with a Flute* which we will see next. (CLICK)
- **The attribution of this to Vermeer** has been questioned partly on account of the **chair finials**. Vermeer did have a chair like this and the finials are painted with the blurring characteristic of the camera obscura some claim he used. **However, the finials are not correctly in line and the left one is too large.** Some regard this as a mistake Vermeer would not have made others do not think it disqualifies the painting.

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Girl_with_a_Red_Hat

http://www.essentialvermeer.com/catalogue/girl_with_a_red_hat.html#top



Studio of Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675) *Girl with a Flute*, c. 1669–75, 20 × 17.8 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

- This was previously attributed to Vermeer but it was **carefully analysed during the Covid lockdown** and is now (since 8 October 2022) regarded as studio of Vermeer as it is not entirely painted by Vermeer.
- It may have been **intended as a pendant** with *Girl with a Red Hat* as both are similar size, on panel and show a young open-mouthed girl wearing an outlandish hat neither of which is found elsewhere in art of the Dutch Golden Age.
- Like *Girl with a Red Hat* this is likely the painting is a tronie, that is, a **picture painted to sell rather than one that had been commissioned**. They could be an old man, a young woman, or a dashing soldier and they often wore exotic and strange garments. They showed off the artists skill and were avidly collected.

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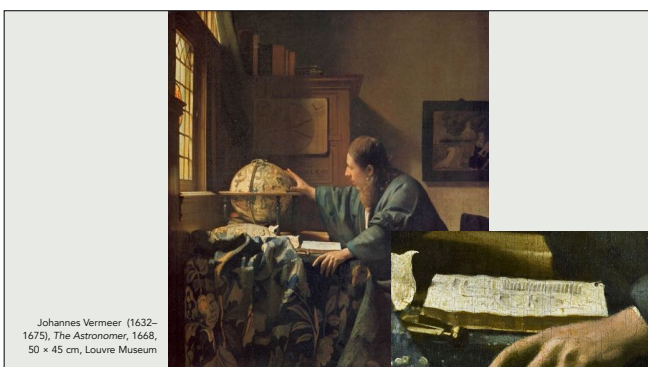
Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), *Mistress and Maid or Lady with Her Maidservant Holding a Letter*, c. 1666–68, 90.2 × 78.7 cm, The Frick Collection, New York

- There is more to this than at first meets the modern eye.
- **The theme of a mistress and a maid was very popular genre picture** at the time as different fashions and relationships could be shown. The maid is wearing a plain woollen dress and her mistress is wearing the **sumptuous yellow jacket we have seen before**. Her hair is in the latest fashion and contains pearls.
- He maid is handing her mistress a letter, and at the time it would have been regarded as a **love letter**. In theory maids were hard working and loyal but **Simon Schama** wrote 17th-century maids were "**indisputably regarded as the most dangerous women of all...**". The know all the secrets and in popular plays of the period they were frequently a threat to the security of the home.
- On the table the **mistress is in the middle of writing a love letter** and on the table in front of the maid is her writing set. They consisted of two small cups, **one for ink and one for blotting sand**, later stored in a shaker, and a quiver for the quills. More expensive sets like this one had one of two drawers for a pen-knife (a knife to sharpen the pen), signets and sealing wax. On the left of the table is an expensive **veneered casket identified as from Goa, India**. It was used to store jewellery or in this case **probably love letters**.
- The Dutch were great letter writers and books were written with advice about how to write a letter for each occasion. **A full fifth of one of these book** was taken up by **how to write a love letter** expressing everything from subtle encouragement to outright refusal.

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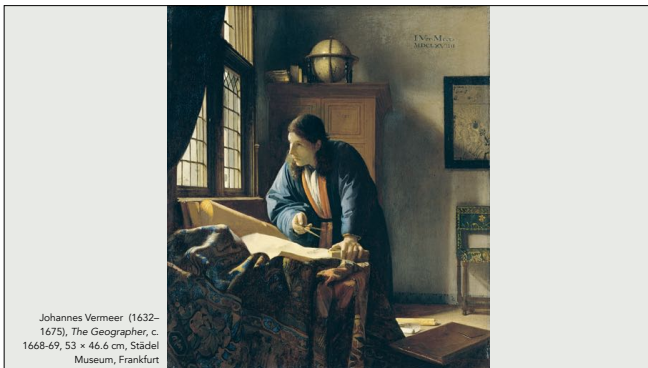


Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), *The Astronomer*, 1668, 50 × 45 cm, Louvre Museum

- This is **The Astronomer**. We must remember that **science as we know it today was only just emerging**. Some historians have pointed out **there is no telescope** and suggested that it is an **astrologer divining the future**. In fact there was **no clear distinction** at the time and both Johannes Kepler and Tycho Brahe were practicing astrologers.
- (CLICK) Believe it or not, even though **the book** on the

table is rendered with a few dabs of paint, it **has been identified**. It the second edition of *Institutiones Astronomicae at Geographicae* ('Astronomical and Geographical Institutions', 1621) by Adriaan Metius. The page recommends 'inspiration from God' for astronomical research.

- **The globe is a star map by Jococus Hondius**, a well-known maker. It shows, upper left, the Great Bear, the dragon and Hercules and to the right, Lyra. Three versions of this globe survive today.
- **The painting on the back wall is Moses in the**



Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), *The Geographer*, c. 1668-69, 53 × 46.6 cm, Städel Museum, Frankfurt

- This is regarded as a companion piece to *The Astronomer*.
- The geographer has paused in his measuring to **gaze out of the window**.
- He is **wearing a very rare and sought after robe**. It is **Japanese and is an Imperial kimono** that was given to the very few guests honoured by being allowed to visit the **royal court in Edo (Tokyo)**. They could not be bought in Japan but found their way to the West where they became very popular indoor-wear for scholars, scientists and gentlemen. By the late 17th-century they so popular they were banned from being worn in churches and by the mid-18th century they were mass-produced in Europe from imported silk.
- The **book in front of him has been over-restored** and so can no longer be recognised. The stool at the bottom right originally had a **sheet of white paper** on it but Vermeer darkened the corner so as not to distract the eye from the central figure.
- Vermeer was one of the few artists who used the background walls to establish the direction of light and create an atmosphere. The wall is also an example of a negative space. We normally focus on objects and artists carefully position objects in their pictures. The area between the objects is known as a negative space and Vermeer uses it to unify the picture. **Note how the shadow of the globe and the wardrobe reach out across the negative space to unite with the black-framed nautical map of 'all the sea coasts of Europe'** (by Willem Jansz Blaeu in 1600).

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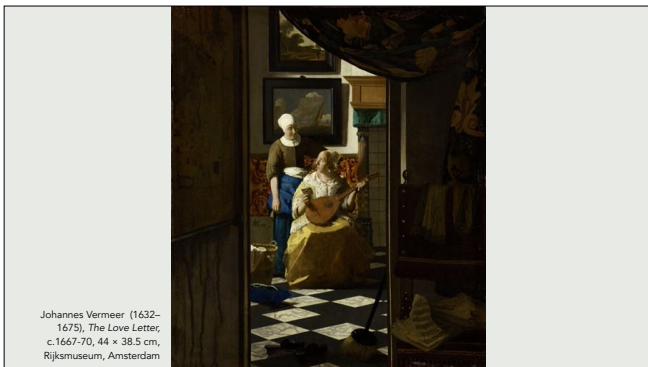


Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), *The Lacemaker*, c.1669-71, 24.5 × 21 cm, Louvre Museum

- The years **between 1648 until 1672 (the Rampjaar, Disaster year)** were a period of **tremendous affluence**. They saw the home as supporting but in conflict with the outside world of trade. In order to separate the two they invented a '**cult of housework**'. Even the most **minor examples of housework were elevated to a sacred status**. Many activities had an **extra dimension of virtue**. **Lacemaking and embroidery** were associated with the '**Education of the Virgin Mary**' and so exemplified the Dutch virtue of industry. A well-dressed woman with an elaborate hairdo is diligently working rather than sitting in leisure. The **small number of bobbins indicate that she is making a short, simple piece of lace** perhaps to be attached to a piece of linen as decoration.
- (CLICK) The book in front of her could be a prayer book or Bible but is **most likely a pattern book** as these appear in other pictures of lacemakers. The **red and white thread** coming out of the sewing cushion have been widely discussed by scholars because they are **out of focus** in exactly the way that a **camera obscura** would distort the image. (CLICK)

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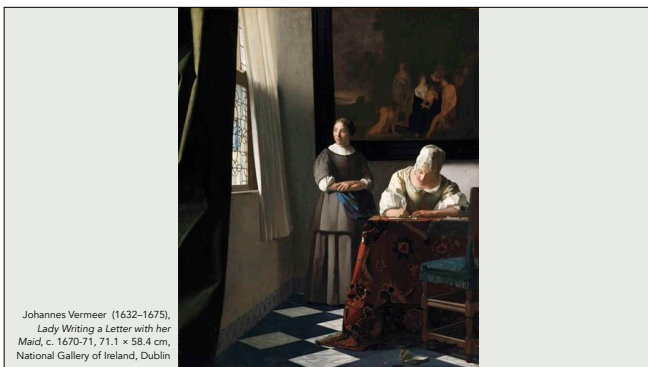


Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), *The Love Letter*, c.1667-70, 44 × 38.5 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

- Remember in his *Mistress and Maid*, the complex relationship between them as the **maid delivers a love letter**. In this painting **the maid has a wry smile and the mistress looks worried**. To emphasise the potential disruption this event could cause to the household Vermeer shows an **open laundry basket, morning slippers, a broom and a crumpled sheet of music** lying around in a **disorderly** manner, the antithesis of a well-ordered Dutch household where everything had its place.
- We are **peering at the scene through a doorway** partly obscured by a tapestry he used in other paintings.
- Their body language is a masterpiece of **hidden meaning** we can decode at a glance. The maid, **hand on hip** is for this moment in control as she leans over her mistress. The mistress looks up nervously as she is interrupted playing a lute. The mistress looks worried and wonders if the maid knows what is going on. **Maids always know what is going on.**

- Behind the maid's head is a seascape by an unknown artist, its billowing clouds reflected in the maid's head-covering. It may indicate that the **husband is away at sea while the wife has an affair**.
- Above the seascape is a **landscape** in the manner of **Adriaen van de Velde** which shows a lone wanderer. Such landscapes were often **associated with love songs and love poems** of the period and in the verse of Petrarch nature is seen as a sympathetic witness to lover's pains.
- According to music experts the **sheet music bottom right does not make any sense** so it is intended simply to represent disorder in the household.
- To the woman's right is a hearth, the centre of the Dutch household. In wealthy homes a hearth would be found in the *grote zaal* (main room), in side rooms, the dining room and even in some bedrooms. This hearth is in the *grote zaal* the most important room of the house.
- On the left hand wall is a map that he used in other paintings, more clearly seen in *Officer and Laughing Girl*.

REFERENCES



Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), *Lady Writing a Letter with her Maid*, c. 1670-71, 71.1 × 58.4 cm, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin

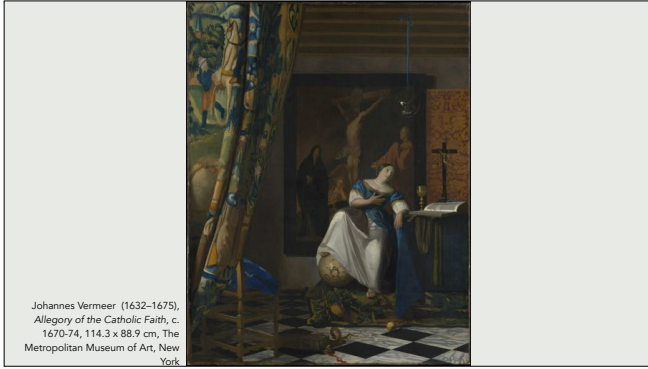
- Another maid with her mistress, as I said, a very popular theme at the time.
- The painting on the back wall might give us a clue as to the meaning. It is ***Finding of Moses*** attributed to **Peter Lely** (1618-1680), who was trained in Haarlem by Pieter de Grebber from 1636 (when he was 18) until he moved to London in 1641. Unfortunately experts argue about its meaning although it would have been clear to Dutch viewers at the time. One possible meaning is that the central figure standing figure is **Moses's 'sister' who was sent to follow the child and find out its fate, she is thus a messenger** suggesting the maid will soon be a messenger taking her mistress's letter to her lover.
- The mistress is **concentrating on the letter** in a pose reminiscent of *The Lacemaker* (reversed).
- The picture conveys hushed privacy enhanced by the transparent curtain at the window whose transparency is suggested by variations in tone. The quiet scene is energised by the strong diagonal of the curtain reflected up along the diagonal edge of the red tapestry covering the table.

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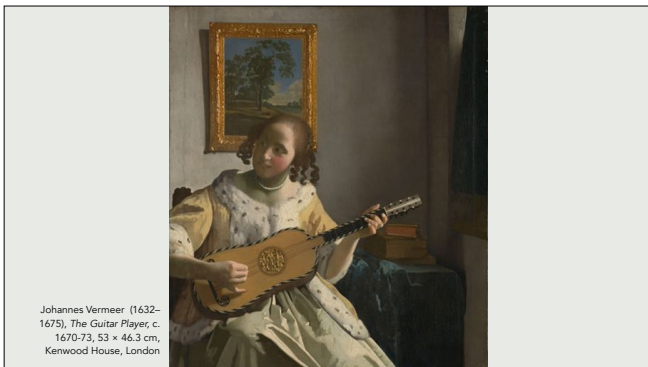
Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), *Allegory of the Catholic Faith*, c. 1670–74, 114.3 x 88.9 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

- Experts agree that this painting was **commissioned by someone with strong Catholic beliefs**, possibly a Jesuit priest. This is supported by the **image of a glass ball found in a Jesuit book of symbols** by Willem Hesius. The book explains that the sphere's ability to **reflect the vastness of the universe** is comparable to man's ability to believe in the **universal nature of God**. The Protestant Dutch allowed Catholics to continue to worship but often stripped their churches of altars and sometimes took them over for use Protestants.
- **On the floor is a serpent crushed by a marble slab** and spitting blood. This refers to the stone on which Christ ordered Peter, alias Simon, to erect his Church and found the papacy.
- The painting on the back wall is a **simplified version of the Crucifixion by Jacob Jordaens**. Vermeer has omitted the man on the ladder and Mary Magdalene who is replaced by the **swooning woman** who takes her place. The woman also **represents faith** who, according to Cesare Ripa's description has 'the world under her feet' represented by the same globe that we saw in *The Geographer*.
- On the altar-like table is chalice, a crown of thorns, a crucifix and an open Bible.
- Although this is **now regarded as one of Vermeer's weakest works** it was **highly regarded at the time** and **fetches the highest price of any of his paintings** sold during his life or shortly after his death.

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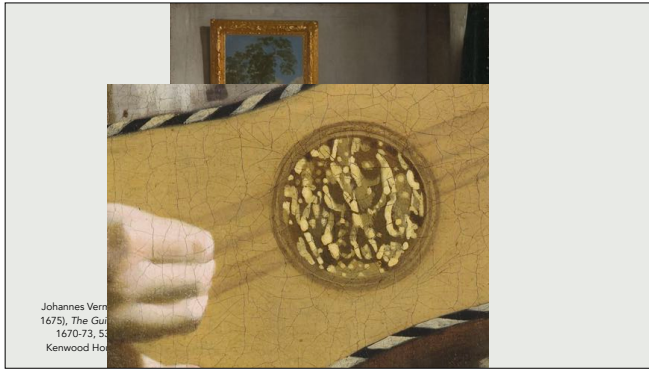
Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), *The Guitar Player*, c. 1670–73, 53 x 46.3 cm, Kenwood House, London

- This represents the convention I mentioned before of a **woman as a 'masterpiece of nature'**. Nature is represented by *A Wooded Landscape with a Gentleman and Dogs in the Foreground* by Pieter Jansz van Asch (pronounced 'ass'). The gentlemen and dogs are hidden by her head and Vermeer has cropped the painting on the right and slightly at the top.
- She is playing a new type of instrument, **a guitar...**

REFERENCES

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Guitar_Player_\(Vermeer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Guitar_Player_(Vermeer))

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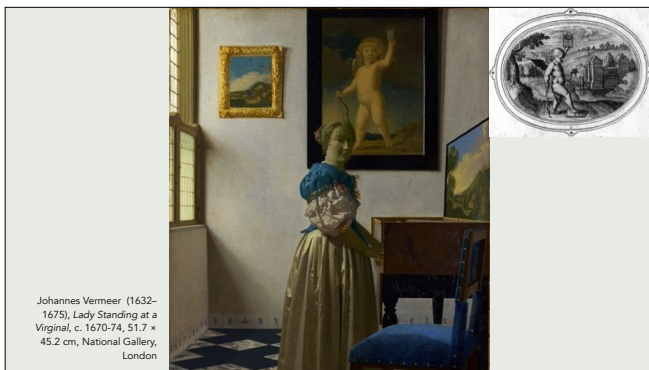
Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), *The Guitar Player*, c. 1670-73, 53 x 46.3 cm, Kenwood House, London

- (CLICK) The guitar was just coming into fashion as a popular solo instrument and the lute began to become associated with an idealised past. The guitar is a wonderful example of mature Vermeer. Its staccato black and white border and its hand-carved sound hole painted with just a few blobs of paint are masterly. If the strings are examined closely they can be seen to be blurred to represent vibration, a technique with few parallels in 17th-century art. (CLICK)
- Interestingly, along the top edge two fingerprints have recently been found. Someone, possibly Vermeer, picked off the canvas while the paint was still wet.

REFERENCES

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Guitar_Player_\(Vermeer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Guitar_Player_(Vermeer))

http://www.essentialvermeer.com/catalogue/allegory_of_faith.html#top



Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), *Lady Standing at a Virginal*, c. 1670-74, 51.7 x 45.2 cm, National Gallery, London

- It is possible Vermeer intended this as a pendant pair with *Lady Seated at a Virginal*, the next painting. Both are in the National Gallery which has placed them in identical frames.
- Pendants were painted as a set for many purposes, for example, for the five senses, the four seasons, husband and wife portraits and for opposing aspects such as here, of Sacred and Profane Love.
- (CLICK) This painting represents **Sacred Love** indicated by the Cupid which is taken from an **emblem book by Otto van Veem** (*Amorum Emblamata*) in which Cupid holds a card with the **Roman numeral 1 one lover for life**.
- She is wearing a formal silk garment called a *tabbard* which had a stiff starched gown and a heavily boned bodice. They were very uncomfortable and Vermeer's wife Catharina Bolnes owned one.

NOTES

- "No number els but one in Cupids right is claymed, All numbers els besydes he sets his foot upon, Because a lover ought to love but only one. A streame disperst in partes the force thereof is maymed."

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<http://emblematica.grainger.illinois.edu> Emblematica online



Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), *Lady Standing at a Virginal*, c. 1670-74, 51.7 x 45.2 cm, National Gallery, London

- Look at the area above her sleeve just below the blue. (CLICK) This is an extreme closeup of the upper sleeve showing **how freely Vermeer painted in his later life**. He is known for his **precise and detailed painting** but this **is an illusion** created when we step back. (CLICK)

REFERENCES

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lady_Standing_at_a_Virginal

http://www.essentialvermeer.com/catalogue/lady_standing_at_a_virginal.html#top

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Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), *Lady Seated at a Virginal*, c. 1670-75, 51.5 x 45.5 cm, National Gallery, London

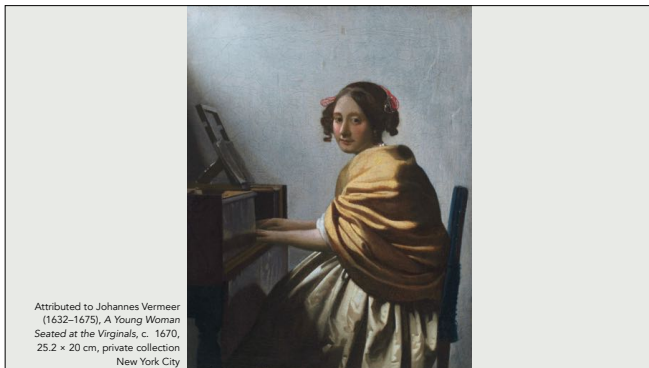
- If the two paintings are pendants representing Sacred and Profane Love then **this is Profane Love**. This is reinforced by the painting with the painting of *The Procuress* by Dirck van Baburen.
- (CLICK) I have overlaid the painting with a clearer reproduction. A similar dress with blue and white sleeves but in *The Procuress* a prostitute with, what else, a lute, has just attracted the attention of a client while the procuress holds out her hand for the money. Vermeer is using this more overt representation of Profane Love to make a point about the seemingly more demure seated woman.
- The painted pastoral landscape on the lid of the virginal is interesting as its **perspective is completely wrong to make it look correct**. Perhaps, when Vermeer looked at the scene through a camera obscura he found the dramatically foreshortened landscape looked wrong and so he misrepresented what he saw to make it look correct.
- The viol de gamba with its deep voice represents the absent male lover.
- It resonates with the tragedy of Vermeer's late years. His wife, Catharina Bolnes blamed his death on the stress of financial pressures. She wrote,

"...during the ruinous war with France he not only was unable to sell any of his art but also, to his great detriment, was left sitting with the paintings of other masters that he was dealing in. As a result and owing to the great burden of his children having no means of his own, he

lapsed into such decay and decadence, which he had so taken to heart that, as if he had fallen into a frenzy, in a day and a half he went from being healthy to being dead."

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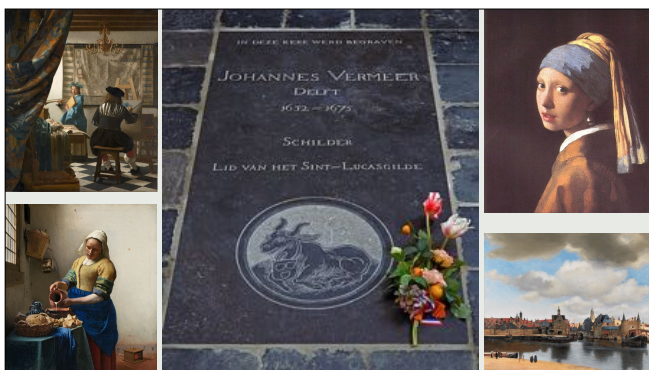


Attributed to Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675), A Young Woman Seated at the Virginals, c. 1670, 25.2 x 20 cm, private collection New York City

- This is the third and final work that was **questionably by Vermeer**. The face lacks the delicacy and freshness of *A Lady Seated at a Virginal*, which was painted in the same year.
- The shadows on the girl's face contain green earth, a pigment only very rarely used by 17th-century Dutch artists but it was used in Vermeer's late works.
- It was **regarded as a forgery from 1947 until March 2004**, when it was **finally declared genuine**, although some experts still disagree. It was in 2004 that Sotheby's announced it as an authentic Vermeer and since then most of the leading experts have come to accept it as a Vermeer.

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Young_Woman_Seated_at_the_Virginals
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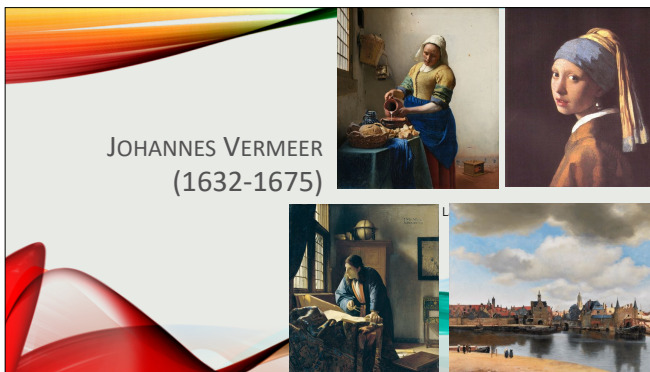


- This is Vermeer's tomb in the Protestant Old Church in Delft on 15 December 1675.
- **Vermeer was a respected artist in Delft but almost unknown outside**. His patron **Pieter van Ruijven** purchased most of his work which prevented his fame from spreading. We don't know why he painted so little although **he did not have a workshop or employ assistants**. He may have had little time because of the pressure of **bringing up 11 children and acting as an art dealer and inn-keeper** running the family business. Also, he was **head of the local guild of artists** and his extraordinary precision would have all limited his output.
- His work was **overlooked for two centuries** and many of his works were misattributed to other artists. The rediscovery began in 1860 when a German museum director saw *The Art of Painting* although it was misattributed to Pieter de Hooch. Research by Théophile Thoré-Bürger culminated in the publication of his catalogue raisonné of Vermeer's works in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* in 1866. Thoré-Bürger's catalogue drew international attention to Vermeer and listed more than **70 works by him**, including many that he regarded as uncertain. The accepted number of

Vermeer's paintings today is 34.

NOTES

- He was baptised as Joannis, but buried under the name Jan. When his was was buried in 1688 she was described as the widow of Johan Vermeer.
- 'Lid Van Het Sint - Lucasgilde' means 'Member of the Saint Lucas Guild'. 'in deze kerk werd begraven' means 'was buried in this church'.



- **That concludes our analysis of every one of the 34 paintings** firmly attributed to Vermeer as well as a further three possibles.
- He painted slowly and with great care and used the enormously expensive pigment, **ultramarine**, which few other artists used so lavishly. He even used it as an underpaint. He painted **mostly in one room of his house** and it is thought that **he used a form of camera obscura**.
- There was a severe economic depression in 1672 and he died three years later aged only 43. His wife explained that he had been **ruined financially, could not sell any paintings and was left with old masters paintings he could not sell** and she attributed his early death to the **stress of his financial problems**. He was almost unknown outside of Delft, he never had any pupils and he only produced about three paintings a year yet in his short life he produced more masterpieces than most other artist.
- Thank you.

BIOGRAPHY

BIO: VERMEER

- Johannes Vermeer (October 1632-December 1675) was born in Delft and spent all of his life in the town. His father was a silk worker who started buying and selling paintings just before Vermeer was born. Also, at the this time he leased an inn and later bought a larger inn in the market square.
- In 1652 his father died and Vermeer took over the art business and the following year married Catharina Bolnes (pronounced 'Bol-ness'). Her family were a lot wealthier and it is likely he converted to Catholicism to get permission to marry. At some point they moved in with his mother-in-law and remained there the rest of his life. His brother-in-law Willem Bolnes was extremely violent and swore at his mother and on one occasion pulled a knife and tried to stab her. He also threatened to beat Vermeer's wife with a stick when she was 'pregnant to the last degree'. His wife gave birth to 15 children but four died before they were baptised.
- There is disagreement about whether Vermeer was an apprentice and to whom. He painted in the front room on the second floor and one other room in the house. He painted slowly and with great care and used the most expensive pigments. There is no other 17th-century artist who employed the exorbitantly expensive pigment lapis lazuli (natural ultramarine) either so lavishly or so early in his career. He even employed it as

an underpaint to create a cool, crisp appearance such as in the shadows of the red satin dress of *The Girl with the Wine Glass*. He even continued to use it after his financial breakdown suggesting it was supplied by a wealthy collector, possibly Pieter van Ruijven (pronounced 'row', as in quarrel, 'fer').

- In 1653 he became a member of the Guild of Saint Luke. This was a year of plague, war, economic crisis and a terrible explosion that destroyed a large part of the city. Possibly for these reasons Vermeer did not pay the usual admission fee.
- At the time Gerard Dou (pronounced 'herard dow') was selling paintings for exorbitant prices and Vermeer charged higher than average prices and we believe most of his works were sold to a local collector. He probably competed with Nicolaes Maes (pronounced 'mass') who produced genre works in a similar style. In 1662 Vermeer was elected head of the guild and again in 1663, 1670 and 1671.
- 1672 was a year of severe economic downturn (the 'Year of Disaster') because of the war with France and later England. Theatres, shops and schools closed and it was five years before things recovered. In 1675 Vermeer borrowed 1,000 guilders in Amsterdam using his mother-in-law's house as security.
- In 1675 he died after a short illness aged 43. In a petition his wife explained that he had been ruined financially, could not sell any paintings and was left with old masters paintings he could not sell and she attributed his early death to the stress of his financial problems. He was almost unknown outside of Delft, he never had any pupils and he only produced about three paintings a year.
- He produced fewer than 50 paintings of which 34 survive. Only three paintings were dated by the artist.
- There is a theory that Vermeer used optical devices, such as a camera obscura or a comparator mirror but none was found in his house after his death. However, he was a friend of the pioneering lens maker Antonie van Leeuwenhoek who was his executor after his death.
- He was overlooked by art historians for two centuries until his catalogue raisonné was published in 1866.
- Hans van Meegeren became a master forger and painted many new 'Vermeers' which he sold to the Nazis during occupation. When charged with treason he demonstrated his skill by painting a new 'Vermeer' in court. Today his forgeries look like obvious fakes.

REFERENCES

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johannes_Vermeer
- <http://www.essentialvermeer.com/index.html> (an excellent and comprehensive analysis of Vermeer's work)

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- The notes are based on information found on the public websites of Wikipedia, Tate, National Gallery, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Khan Academy and the Art Story.
- If a talk uses information from specific books, websites or articles these are referenced at the beginning of each talk and in the 'References' section of the relevant

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