The name Vermeer is almost as well known today as that of his famous contemporary Rembrandt. But while Rembrandt has never, since his death, been lost in obscurity, Vermeer was all but forgotten by 1700—twenty-five years after his death. It is curious indeed that Vermeer had to wait until the middle of the nineteenth century for rediscovery by a Frenchman, Étienne Joseph Théophile Thoré, writing about art under the pseudonym of William Bürger.

Thoré, a young political writer with strong democratic convictions, was a contributor to many of the liberal publications in France after the Revolution of 1830, in which he had taken part. Though primarily concerned with the political state of France in the turbulent years of the first half of the nineteenth century, Thoré was nevertheless much interested in art and an intimate friend of many artists. Paralleling his political activities were his activities as an art critic and author.

The rediscovery of Vermeer came about when Thoré first visited the museums of Holland in 1842. While at The Hague he was deeply impressed by a painting of a view of Delft, which interested him almost more than Rembrandt's famous Anatomy Lesson hanging in the same gallery. He found that the View of Delft had been painted by an artist unknown in France, Jan van der Meer of Delft, and he became curious to learn more about this unusual artist. Searching in vain for information about Vermeer in the works of the eighteenth-century chroniclers of Dutch artists, such as Houbraken and Van Gool, Thoré’s curiosity was piqued. He determined to search among the museums and collections of Europe for other pictures and in the archives of Holland for information to explain the mystery of Vermeer, whom he called his “sphinx.”

In 1848 Thoré founded a journal, La Vraie République, to which his friends Eugène Delacroix and George Sand, among others, contributed. It was suppressed by the government within a few months. The following year, having been one of the most active promoters of the Revolution of 1848, he expressed his disappointment with the new government in a new publication, Journal de la vraie république. His outspoken criticism led to the suppression of his journal, the confiscation of his property, and a sentence of exile. Barred from further political activity, he turned to his other great interest, art, and began a period of travel and study in England, Germany, and the Low Countries.

In addition to the paintings by Vermeer which he had seen on his first trip to Holland (the View of Delft in the Mauritshuis, The Milkmaid, and A Street in Delft, then in the Six van Hillegom collection in Amsterdam, both now in the Rijksmuseum), Thoré discovered the Head of a Young Woman in the gallery of the Duke of Arenberg in Brussels and The Procress, signed by Vermeer and dated 1656, catalogued by the Dresden Museum as a work of Jacob van der Meer of Utrecht. Grad-
ually he found and identified as Vermeer’s work paintings which had long been attributed to various of Vermeer’s contemporaries, such as Gabriel Metsu, Pieter de Hooch, and Gerard Terborch, even though some of them bore Vermeer’s signature.

Each painting that he discovered heightened Thoré’s conviction that Vermeer was one of the most important painters of the seventeenth century. Such paintings as he could afford Thoré bought for his own collection. Among them were the two now in the British National Gallery (the Lady Standing at the Virginals and the Lady Seated at the Virginals) and the painting of the Young Lady with a Pearl Necklace, recently on exhibition in this Museum with other paintings from the Kaiser-Friedrich Museum in Berlin. When he found others that were too high in price for him, he urged his wealthy friends to buy them. Thus the Officer and Laughing Girl now in the Frick Collection was bought by the collector Léopold Double, and Isaac Pereire acquired The Geographer (now in the Städel Institute, Frankfort on the Main).

By 1866, five years after he had been permitted to return to France, Thoré had gathered sufficient material to publish (under the name of Bürger) two long articles on Vermeer and a catalogue of his works in the Gazette des Beaux-Arts. He also had a large number of photographs of Vermeer’s paintings, having promptly recognized the value to art research of Daguerre’s photographic process perfected in 1839. He had gone to a good deal of trouble—committed follies as he himself put it—to obtain as many photographs as possible, and his collection was probably the first one made for study.

The archives of Holland and the literature on Dutch artists of the period had yielded little about Vermeer. But Thoré found that Van Bleijswijk’s Beschrijvinge der Stadt Delft, published in 1607, listed the artists then living in Delft. Vermeer’s name was on the list, with the information that he had been born in 1632. Thoré had also found a listing by Hoet of an auction held in Amsterdam, May 16, 1696, in which twenty-one paintings by Vermeer were sold. It had been suggested that the paintings in this auction comprised Vermeer’s estate, but Thoré doubted that so many paintings would have been unsold at the time of the artist’s death, and advanced the theory that the paintings in the auction were the stock of the elder Jan van der Meer of Haarlem, who was a picture dealer as well as a landscape painter.

To this day few records have been discovered which tell us anything more about Vermeer. The barest outlines of his life are found in a few documents which D. O. Obreen discovered in the archives of Delft and published in his Archief voor Nederlandsche Kunstgeschiedenis in 1881-1882. These documents disclosed the following facts about Vermeer. Johannes Reyniersz. Vermeer was baptized on October 31, 1632. When he was twenty-one he married Catharina Bolenes, on April 5, 1653, and was admitted to the Guild of Saint Luke on December 29 of the same year. He took an active part in the affairs of the Guild and was its dean from 1662 to 1665 and from 1670 to 1671. The various notarial records indicate that Vermeer’s financial status was occasionally so good that he could afford to lend money but usually so bad that he was heavily in debt. He died in December 1675, aged forty-three, and was buried in the Oude Kerk in Delft on December 15. He was survived by his widow and no less than eleven children, eight of whom were minors. The inventory of Vermeer’s estate made on February 29, 1676, comprised studio props and numerous paintings by various artists, including a large one of the Crucifixion, perhaps the same painting shown in the background of the Museum’s Allegory of the New Testament, which has been identified as the painting by Jordens in the Teirninck Bequest in Antwerp.

Thoré’s catalogue of pictures by Vermeer contained descriptions of over seventy works, fifty-two of which Thoré had actually located. Some of them were signed and dated, the earliest, The Procursus in Dresden, dated 1656, the latest 1668, The Astronomer, now in the collection of Baron Édouard de Rothschild in Paris. The other eighteen or more paintings, recorded in the auction of 1696 and in subsequent sales, still remained to be found and studied to deter-
mine whether Vermeer painted them or not.

While at least twenty-five of the paintings Thoré attributed to Vermeer have stood the tests of time and scholarship, others have been recognized as by different artists on the basis of our more complete knowledge of their work and Vermeer's. In the years since Thoré's pioneer work other scholars, among them Havard, Bredius, Hofstede de Groot, and A. B. de Vries, have studied this interesting painter, and we now have a quite considerable body of critical material on Vermeer and a group of about thirty-one paintings which are generally thought to be by him. This is less than half the number that Thoré had optimistically attributed to him.

Of the four paintings by Vermeer now in the Metropolitan Museum only one is listed in Thoré's catalogue. This is the Allegory of the New Testament. Thoré had not been able to find the picture itself, but he found it recorded as early as 1699 in the sale of Herman van Swoll's collection in Amsterdam and in various sales in the eighteenth century up to 1749. In Thoré's time the painting was probably in a private collection in Vienna, since it is said to appear in the background of a double portrait painted there in 1824 by Ferdinand Waldmüller. It reappeared in 1899 when it was sold to Abraham Bredius by a dealer in Berlin as a work of Egbert van der Neer. Bredius recognized it as a Vermeer. For many years it was lent to the Mauritshuis Museum in The Hague, until 1928, when Bredius sold it to Francis Kleinberger. Michael Friedsam purchased it and bequeathed it to the Museum in 1931.

The Allegory of the New Testament is one of Vermeer's rare religious paintings. The meaning of the subject seemed puzzling until Dr. Barnouw pointed out, in an article in Oud Holland in 1914, that Vermeer had followed quite faithfully the rules for the depiction of Faith given by Cesare Ripa in his Iconologia, published in Dutch in 1644 by Dirck Pietersz. Pers. Perhaps Vermeer executed this allegory as a commission; certainly he followed Ripa's directions closely. But the result, though quite as skillfully painted as any of his works, seems to be lacking in that harmonious integration of all the details which is characteristic of his other paintings.

The other three paintings by Vermeer in the Museum were not known to Thoré, and, indeed, did not come to light until some time after his death. The first of these to be discovered was the Young Woman with a Water Jug, a detail of which is reproduced on the cover of the Bulletin this month. It was presented to the Museum in 1889 by Henry G. Marquand, with part of his fine collection of paintings by old masters. Mr. Marquand, a Trustee of the Museum, had purchased the painting in Paris the previous year.

Until now, all that has been known of the earlier history of this painting is that it was acquired from the collection of an Irish nobleman, Lord Powerscourt. Some scholars have suggested that Lord Powerscourt inherited it from his "ancestor," Lord Castlereagh, but actually it was bought for him by Martin Colnaghi at the sale of Robert Vernon's collection at Christie's on April 21, 1877. It was catalogued under number 97 as a work by Metsu: "Interior, with a lady at a table covered with a carpet, on which is an ewer and dish, opening a window." Robert Vernon, English antiquary and connoisseur, whose well-known collection of contemporary British paintings was bequeathed to the nation at his death in 1849, had acquired the picture at some time prior to 1838, when he lent it to the exhibition at the British Institution in London as a painting by Metsu of "A Female at a Window" (no. 29). A writer in The Athenaeum, May 12, 1877, said of this picture:

"One of these missing works turned up at Messrs. Christie's, in a sale of pictures belonging to Mr. Vernon, on the 21st of April. In the catalogue it was given to Metsu, but those acquainted with the works of Van der Meer at once recognized the master's hand. . . . This latest discovered Van der Meer is composed in a similar sentiment and key to the Lady Reading a Letter in the Van der Hoop Collection at Amsterdam."

A Girl Asleep has been identified with number 8 in the sale of 1696, "Een dronke slapende Meyd." Nothing is known of this painting be-
tween 1696 and 1881, when it appeared in the sale catalogue of the collection of John Waterloo Wilson in Paris. Wilson apparently bought the picture some time after 1873, when the deluxe catalogue of his collection was published. After the Wilson sale it belonged successively to the French dealer Charles Sedelmeyer and to Rodolphe Kann. After the latter's death it was bought in 1908 by Benjamin Altman, who bequeathed it to the Museum in 1913.

The fourth Vermeer in the Museum's collection, the Lady with a Lute, was quite unknown until 1909 when Mrs. Collis P. Huntington lent it to the Hudson-Fulton Exhibition in the Museum. Mr. Huntington acquired it sometime before his death in 1900 from an English collection, which so far has remained anonymous. It was received by the Museum in 1925 with the bequest of Collis P. Huntington.

The four paintings here in the Metropolitan Museum illustrate various aspects of Vermeer's virtuosity as a painter. The Young Woman with a Water Jug is painted in cool tones of blue and white, warmed by the reds of the carpet and the polished brass of the ewer and basin. The Allegory of the New Testament is also painted in blues, whites, and grays, accented by the vermilion of the snake's blood on the tile floor. The Lady with a Lute, attired in a yellow jacket trimmed with ermine, is silhouetted against the gray wall with the light shining on her from the window. In contrast to these three paintings in which cool tones predominate, A Girl Asleep is a harmony of warm colors with the sunlight glistening on the girl's pearl earrings and on the surface of the overturned wineglass and bringing out the rich colors of the rug crumpled on the table. Scholars believe this painting to be a work of Vermeer's youth, painted at about the same time as The Procuress in Dresden, 1656.

Vermeer was an exceptionally gifted painter whose mastery and understanding of his medium far surpass that of the artists with whom he was for so long confused. He is a painter of light—the accessories in his paintings, and even the figures, are primarily of interest to him as surfaces to catch and reflect light. He plays with the figures and objects, turning them this way and that, highlighting now a profile, now the flat surface of a box or the rounded curve of a wineglass or ewer. Light and dark areas are juxtaposed to create an illusion of space and depth. He uses various textures, cloth, metal, wood, glass, fur, and flesh with equal interest, subordinating details to the harmony of the whole. The rich impasto, glowing colors, and pointillist technique give Vermeer's paintings a marvelous luminosity, which was not equalled by any of the Dutch painters of his time who shared his absorption with the problem of representing light.