Of all the painters whose work we value highly, Vermeer is perhaps the hardest to come to grips with. He thwarts our curiosity about his personality, his struggles with his work and with his life. Only scraps of biography are left, and about three dozen paintings. In none of them does Vermeer record his own features, as Rembrandt did again and again in a series of eighty-odd self-portraits that form a kind of wordless autobiography. When Vermeer paints an artist at work, it is an artist, not Vermeer himself—a man in old-fashioned costume who is part of an allegory of the art of painting (1, 62). His back is turned to us: it is not the man’s character or personality that matters to Vermeer, but his activity as an artist.

If Vermeer’s work is reticent about his character, so is history. Vermeer himself made it difficult for history to preserve him, for not only must he have painted very little, but he seems to have sold very few of his pictures, keeping them for himself. His reputation was narrow in his own time, and after his small production was dispersed there was no widespread demand for information about him. Vermeer virtually disappeared from history until his celebrated rediscovery in the last century.
The little we know about Johannes Vermeer can be told quickly. He was born in 1632, a whole generation later than Rembrandt and Jacob van Ruisdael, two generations later than Frans Hals. He probably lived all his forty-three years in the small, prosperous city of Delft. His father was a sometime silk designer who kept a tavern and dealt in works of art; when he died in 1655, he may well have left his stock to Johannes. In any event we know that the son became a dealer, too, for in Johannes’s estate are mentioned “works of art he had bought and with which he dealt.” Archives tell us nothing about Vermeer until he reached twenty; then, in 1653, he married Catharina Bolnes, a well-to-do Catholic who was to provide financial security and to bear eleven children. Later that year he joined the painters’ guild in Delft (2), legally becoming a member of a profession that was still closely controlled by its members. He must have been apprenticed years earlier to an established artist, but we do not know to whom.

Vermeer came to maturity at a time when art in Delft was given a special character by painters a little older than he, especially Carel Fabritius and Pieter de Hooch. Fabritius, a brilliant pupil of Rembrandt, was skilled at perspective and subtle effects of light and texture (4). He died young, killed in the tremendous explosion of the Delft powder magazine in 1654 that laid waste a whole section of the city (3). Like Fabritius, de Hooch (5) was expert at rendering complex spaces, had a taste for the intimate, and responded to the beauty of light and the colors and textures of ordinary reality. At the beginning of his career Vermeer experimented with other very different artistic possibilities, then turned to the Delft tradition to become its finest exponent.

A few documents give hints of how the man lived. He and his growing family occupied a large house on the Market Square; he occa-
sionally lent money, borrowed it, and stood security for others, evidence that he was solvent; twice he was elected to the board of the Delft painters' guild, a mark of esteem. We assume his income came mostly from his art dealing, and although no transactions are recorded we may have a glimpse of some of his stock in the backgrounds of his paintings, where works by various contemporary masters hang on the walls.

One fascinating episode reveals Vermeer as a connoisseur. In 1671 the prominent Amsterdam dealer Gerard Uylenburgh sold thirteen pictures to the Elector of Brandenburg for 30,000 guilders, including works attributed to Michelangelo, Holbein, Titian, Giorgione, and Raphael. Disturbing news about their authenticity reached the Elector, so artist-experts were called together in Amsterdam (there were no professional art scholars at that time). Opinion was divided, some calling the pictures trash, others saying they were not so bad. They were then brought to The Hague, where Vermeer gave his opinion that “they are so poor that they do not deserve the name of any good artist, let alone the exalted names they have.”

The art trade fell on very bad times toward the end of Vermeer's life, with the war between the Netherlands and France and the invasion of 1672, terrible inflation, rising taxes, and other hindrances to the sale of luxuries. Vermeer had to liquidate his investments, move into a smaller house, and borrow money. When he died in 1675, his wife was burdened with eleven children and heavy debts; she applied for bankruptcy, saying that her husband had not been able to earn anything during the war.
What of the pictures Vermeer had been painting for twenty years? He was no recluse, he was in the business of selling art, but his attitude to his own paintings was highly unusual. When the French connoisseur Balthasar de Monconys came to Holland on a buying trip in 1663, he went to see many painters. He wrote in his journal that he visited Vermeer in Delft, but oddly enough that the artist did not have any of his pictures. He saw one at a baker's house, however, and noted his surprise at the high price the baker had paid. At his death, Vermeer's wife apparently had nearly all her husband's paintings in her house; in dire need of money, she sold two pictures, then tried to buy them back, and eventually succeeded. All of this behavior suggests that Vermeer rarely sold paintings, but instead kept them together, evidently for his own enjoyment and possibly that of some select admirers. His wife must have felt some deep obligation to resist selling his pictures after his death, but she could not escape bankruptcy. A sale was held in 1677; in 1696 it was still possible to assemble twenty-one Vermeer pictures for an auction. The prices were respectable but hardly sensational. After the dispersal of Vermeer's work his reputation, always narrow, was nearly forgotten.

7. Vermeer, Young Woman with a Water Jug. Early 1660s. Metropolitan Museum, Gift of Henry G. Marquand, 89.15.21. The French collector Monconys saw such a "single figure" in 1663 in the house of a baker, and felt that the price, 600 livres, was vastly too much: although Vermeer rarely sold pictures, his price was high.

8. Vermeer, Detail of the View of Delft, also shown in Figure 30. About 1660. Mauritshuis, The Hague. After two centuries of neglect, Vermeer's art amazed Théophile Thoré: "In the Museum in The Hague a superb and very unusual landscape arrests every visitor and makes a vivid impression on artists and sophisticated connoisseurs. It is a view of a city, with a wharf, an old gate and arch, buildings of various styles, walls and gardens ... that strange painting surprised me as greatly as did Rembrandt's Anatomy Lesson and others in the same museum. Not knowing whom to attribute it to, I consulted the catalogue: 'View of the City of Delft ... by Jan van der Meer of Delft.' Heavens! Now there is someone we don't know in France, and who deserves to be better known!"
In 1718-1721, Arnold Houbraken’s chatty biographies of artists appeared, the most important source of our knowledge about seventeenth-century painters. Amid lengthy descriptions of minor artists, Houbraken mentions Vermeer but makes no comment, obviously lacking information. Later eighteenth-century biographies drop him altogether. As time passed a connoisseur who happened to be familiar with some of Vermeer’s paintings might speak highly of him—“a very great artist” (Lebrun, 1792), or pay a warm but strange compliment—“the Titian among the modern painters of the Dutch school” (van Eyden and van der Wegen, 1816). And from time to time pictures would sell for remarkable prices, suggesting that great respect for Vermeer existed among some of the knowledgeable. But other Vermeer paintings would appear in auctions under the names of painters who were then much better known, such as Terborch, Frans van Mieris, and Eglon van der Neer. Vermeer’s most famous work, The Art of Painting (62), still bears the faked signature of Pieter de Hooch and was bought as a Hooch in 1813. The fact that it is a fully signed work of Vermeer was not recognized until 1859.

It took the talented, energetic French critic Théophile Thoré to dispel two centuries of general ignorance and neglect of Vermeer. Stunned by the View of Delft when he visited Holland around 1842 (8), he wrote, “Later . . . I found two more extraordinary paintings, a Servant Pouring Milk and the Façade of a Dutch House—by Jan van der Meer of Delft! The formidable painter again! Must he not be one of the leading masters of the Dutch school, after Rembrandt and Frans Hals? How is it possible that we know nothing about an artist who equals de Hooch and Metsu, if he doesn’t actually surpass them?” Thoré plunged into a study of Vermeer, and in 1866 published a biography, a catalogue, and an astute appreciation of the special character of Vermeer’s work that is still worth reading.

The rediscovery of Vermeer, like so many rediscoveries, had a great deal to do with the moral and aesthetic values of modern art at that time. The 1850s and 1860s in France were the years of struggle between academic painting and several waves of insurgents—Rousseau, Millet, Courbet, and the young impressionists. Warmly supported by writers like Thoré, it is no wonder that artists and critics who sought to celebrate everyday experience looked back to Dutch art with a strong feeling of kinship.

Dutch domestic interiors had fresh appeal to mid-nineteenth-century audiences. The realism of Millet and Courbet (9) lent dignity to work and to everyday life, themes then especially admired in older art.

Photography had joined painting in the front lines of French realism at mid-century. City views like those of Bayard (10), seeming in their fixity and clarity to tell the whole truth about appearances, must have prepared the eyes of Thoré and others for such “modern” surprises as Vermeer’s Little Street (11).


Thoré embraced the Dutch character, “firmly attached to the earth and to humanity,” and while he acknowledged that in Vermeer there were touches of allegory here and there, he had little taste for these “literary” trappings, and no feeling that they really mattered. For Thoré and for many generations after him, what mattered in Dutch paintings was their evocation of place and time and character, as well as their pleasing arrangements of forms and colors. As the values of abstract art succeeded those of realism and impressionism, and as subject matter was abandoned altogether, Vermeer’s color and structure seemed the paramount aspect of his art to the generations of the 1920s through recent years. But for some time there has been a renewed interest in the way works of art were meant to function in their own time, and a revived curiosity about subject matter and how it was perceived by its original audience. Picasso’s remark that paintings are always changing, because the way they are seen depends on the eyes of the people looking, touches the heart of the question. We are now fascinated with the elusive meanings Vermeer’s pictures yield to our eyes; what will our children see in Vermeer?

“Although there are touches of symbolism,” wrote Thoré, “fortunately with Vermeer you do not discover these little bits of allegory until you have understood everything from the expressions.... Isn’t it just a simple fact, after all, that there is a proud portrait of a man in the boudoir where the Coquette, richly dressed, drinks with her rich lovers?” Thoré read Vermeer’s picture (12) as he would have read Degas’s (13), for its characterization and its pleasures. But it is likely that the portrait is more than simple fact. Other paintings of drinking by fashionable young people contain such portraits of older worthies in sober black costumes, and in Vermeer’s time the comment on modern morals must have been obvious.

If Vermeer’s earliest known painting were not signed, no one would be brave enough to attribute it to him. Probably done about 1654, Christ in the House of Martha and Mary (16) is a religious subject painted on a large canvas with breadth and fluency, an ambitious performance that contrasts startlingly with the cool, static scenes in domestic interiors that Vermeer was to paint later. Here the house is merely suggested, not painstakingly constructed. Our interest is directed entirely to the people, and like a skilled director Vermeer gives his actors expressive poses: Martha, who thinks she is doing her duty to Christ by bustling about, pauses for a moment at the table; Mary, who ignores the housework in order to listen, sits in rapt attention; and Christ, explaining that “Mary has chosen the better part,” links the two women with his gaze and broad gesture. The encounter is enlivened by vibrant colors and active drapery.

Vermeer is already so well developed and self-assured that it is hard to see who might have taught him. He must have painted still earlier works that could solve the puzzle, but they are lost or still unrecognized. Carel Fabritius’s religious paintings may have impressed him, as well as Jacob van Loo’s broad handling of drapery; it seems likely that he also admired the robust grace of Rubens and his school (14), and certain that he knew Terbrugghen’s religious works. This great Utrecht painter, who had formed his style in Rome under the influence of Caravaggio, had few rivals as an effective composer and original painter of large-scale religious subjects (15). Vermeer’s broad zigzag composition, his treatment of such details as Mary’s profile and turban, his handling of paint, and his attraction to pensive states of mind all recall Terbrugghen.
A second large early painting (18) begins to suggest the mood of reticent stillness of Vermeer's later works. The textures now include glossy materials that shimmer in the soft raking light. Vermeer's favorite chord of yellow-blue-red makes its first appearance, next to the odd richness of the coppery blouse and plum skirt of the woman at the right. Vermeer, who shopped avidly for ideas among the paintings of his contemporaries, here seized on a work by the facile Jacob van Loo as a starting point (17). Pleased with the poetic possibilities of showing a quiet moment in Diana's hunt, Vermeer took van Loo's composition, reversed it, and replaced the incidental detail and the visual bustle of arms, legs, and drapery folds with a simpler staging in which the rhythms are linked. Vermeer avoids the conventional byplay between people: his women are sunk in silent attention to the ritual of washing.

14. Erasmus Quellinus the Younger, Christ in the House of Martha and Mary (still life by Adriaen van Utrecht). About 1640-1650, Musée de Valenciennes. Vermeer seems to have taken the pose of Christ, a commonplace in Italian art, from this painting by a Rubens follower.


18. Vermeer, Diana and Her Companions. About 1655. Mauritshuis, The Hague. Until 1907, Vermeer's Diana was considered a work of Jan van der Meer of Utrecht. The paint surfaces are damaged, so that the faces in particular are difficult to judge.
In 1656 Vermeer took up subjects that would occupy most of his career. The Procuress in Dresden (45) is a bordello scene set in an undefined interior space behind a queer, arbitrary barricade of carpet and table. In the Metropolitan's Girl Asleep (19) Vermeer plays another game with space, closing off the foreground with a chair and an abruptly lifted carpet, and opening the background to a succession of spaces: the corner of a room, a hall seen through a doorway, and a large room beyond. The palpable mood of the picture, heavy and perhaps expectant, comes from the manipulated light and the odd prominence of the open door and the emptiness behind it. It is a mood that fits such a sleep in the daytime. Although the responses of seventeenth-century spectators to the picture are difficult to reconstruct, there is evidence that Vermeer was playing on associations of sleep, love, and self-indulgence that we know were common at the time. Despite severe damage (see Figure 88), the painting announces Vermeer's mature skill in portraying space and light, and in modeling flesh and still-life objects.

21. Nicolaes Maes, Sleeping Maidservant, 1655. National Gallery, London. Vermeer must have known the genre paintings of Nicolaes Maes, a contemporary who had been a pupil of Rembrandt. Here a maidservant, whose sleep is responsible for the mess on the floor and the piracy above her head, is pointed out to us with good humor as exemplifying weakness of the flesh.
The fascination of de Hooch and Vermeer with constructing spaces had a two-hundred-year-old history, going back to the Italian Renaissance and the notions that art was a science and that the rules of perspective were scientific principles to be learned. Codified by Alberti and Piero della Francesca, made popular in northern Europe by Dürer (22), simplified into handbooks by such writers in the Netherlands as Vredeman de Vries (23), strict perspective in the seventeenth century was a system to be acquired early by the aspiring young painter, then used at will, exploited, or discarded, depending on his inclination. An artist like Dirck Hals was capable of painting an interior in 1626 (24) that was preposterous by the rules of perspective, but logical enough in the way the walls, map, painting, and door reinforce the composition of the figures; early in his career Vermeer could also paint arbitrary but evocative settings. And just as Dirck Hals could use perspective when it suited him to create a convincing, large, empty space (28), so could Vermeer. But Vermeer’s preference for lucid spaces remained permanent. The Woman Reading a Letter (27) stands in another of those rooms that is hard to imagine entering, blocked as it is by the table; even our invitation to look might be

22. Albrecht Dürer, Man Drawing a Lute with a Drawing Machine. Woodcut, 1525. From Underweysung der Messung... (Nuremberg, 1525). Dürer not only prescribed the rules of mathematical perspective construction, but also showed how mechanical devices could make rendering easier.

23. Hans Vredeman de Vries, perspective construction. From Perspective (Amsterdam, 1604). A copy of Vredeman de Vries’s treatise on perspective must have been standard equipment in any Dutch painter’s studio, and would have suggested many possibilities to Fabrianius, de Hooch, and others.


26. Willem Kalf, Still Life. 1659. Metropolitan Museum, Maria DeWitt Jesup Fund, 53. 111. Kalf’s still lifes of the mid-1650s seem to have suggested the disordered carpet, tilted dish, and richly textured fruit that speak of human indulgence in the Woman Reading a Letter.
withdrawn if the curtain that has been pulled aside is closed once more. The painted curtain and rod may imitate curtains of a kind that were sometimes placed over Dutch paintings (Rembrandt fools the eye in this way in the Holy Family of 1646, shown in Figure 25, probably the ultimate source of Vermeer’s inspiration, although the device was common). The curtain might also hang in the painted room itself—the ambiguity looks deliberate.

The subject, a woman reading a paper we can assume is a love letter, was reasonably common in the 1650s (28). Vermeer gave it a subtle interpretation, emphasizing the privacy and self-absorption of the act. Small in relation to the setting, the girl is shown in pure profile, removing much possibility of expression—only the mouth might reveal something, and the mouth is carefully hidden in the image reflected in the window. The girl stands silhouetted against a wall whose mottled hue and matte texture Vermeer painted attentively. Set off against the wall is the vibrant color and distinctly granular character of the paint of her dress, the rug, and the still life. The granular surfaces seem to catch and hold light from the window, as well as to create palpable textures. Here, perhaps six years after he joined the painters’ guild, Vermeer has arrived at an image of quiet inwardness and a light-filled setting of ample privacy that will recur, with variations, throughout his career.

28. Dirck Hals, Woman Tearing up a Letter. 1631. Mittelrheinisches Landesmuseum, Mainz
The Officer and Laughing Girl (29), probably painted at about the same time, put into everyday clothing a raffish twosome painted earlier by another Utrecht artist, Gerard van Honthorst (31). Honthorst made popular a spectacular trick of lighting in which a candle silhouettes a man and casts brilliant light on a smiling girl. It is a trick so seductive that many artists including Rembrandt experimented with it. Vermeer creates the same tour-de-force using brilliant daylight. He balances the small bright form of the girl against the much larger dark form of the visitor, plays off the cooler hues of the right side against the warm red of the man's jacket, and contrasts broad areas of smooth pigment with the grainy, finely scumbled, light-catching paint of the girl's costume, hands, and glass. The virtuoso painter has arrived; the virtuosity goes several steps further in The Kitchenmaid (69), but in no other picture does Vermeer revive the swagger of this remarkable composition.

30. Vermeer, View of Delft. About 1660. Mauritshuis, The Hague. There is a small street scene by Vermeer (11), but only once did he paint a large city view, and then, characteristically, he seems to have consulted another painting, a small, unusual composition by Esaias van de Velde (32). Retaining the formula, he proceeded to record from an upstairs window a sweeping portrait of his own city, a view rivaled in power only by the contemporary landscape panoramas of Koninck. Dominated by sky, enlivened by light and shade, the city is touched with a constellation of tiny sparkling dots of light.
The highlights that help to make the View of Delft (30) so beautiful are unlike highlights in any painting before Vermeer: they are small blobs of pigment spread into circles. As a result they seem slightly out of focus. These and other effects in Vermeer's work cannot be observed by the naked eye in nature but only in some kind of optical viewing device. The development of Vermeer's art from this time on, which is still not well understood, was evidently linked in part to his experiments with such devices.

It was the camera obscura (35), a viewing machine that gives an image like that of a modern reflex camera, that seems to have attracted him. In 1620 Sir Francis Bacon described Kepler drawing a landscape using a lens that cast an image inside a tent. Already there was concern about the ethics of using the device; another observer protested that Kepler did it "not as a Painter, but as a Mathematician. . . . To make Landskips by it were illiberall; though surely no painter can do them so precisely." Not everyone took such a pragmatic view. In 1622 the scholar and connoisseur Constantijn Huygens noted that the images in the camera obscura were so beautiful as to defy words, and surpassed painting. There is no proof that Vermeer owned a camera obscura, or even that they were available in Delft during his lifetime, but there is plenty of circumstantial evidence. Research in optics and the science of vision by such pioneers as Della Porta, Kepler, and Descartes had yielded ideas and materials for tinkering by artists. Mirrors and lenses were in use, and by 1656 artists were constructing perspective boxes, peep shows to fool the eye with painted views of intricate interior scenes, sometimes extended by mirrors (36). Carel Fabritius evidently made optical experiments and built such perspective boxes before his death in 1654. It seems more than likely that Vermeer got further help and
inspiration from his friend in Delft Antoni van Leeuwenhoek, lensmaker, perfecter of the simple microscope, tireless experimenter.

The View of Delft looks as if it had been observed with a set-up like Kepler’s, in a dark upstairs room with a lens at the window to cast an image on paper or on a white wall. That image would have been the skeleton of the painting; it would also have suggested the disposition of light and shade and the peculiar pattern of soft, spreading highlights. No slave to the image, however, Vermeer was free to select a composition that satisfied him—one probably suggested by an earlier painting (32)—and to alter it by omitting the figure of a man and putting him in a better place. To observe interiors required a different device, probably like the one in Zahn’s illustration (35), a miniature dark chamber (literally, camera obscura) with a lens and a viewing-plane. His earliest observations seem to have led him to a selective use of the same spreading highlights and other optical effects in interiors of around 1660, of which The Kitchen-maid (69) is the most remarkable example. At some point a little later Vermeer took another step away from what the naked eye can see. In The Lacemaker (33, 65), the Woman with a Red Hat (37), and other works, he records an image in which the plane of focus is at the figure, and everything else is out of focus to the extent of its distance from the figure. In The Lacemaker the effect is uncanny: the hands are relatively sharp, but the threads on the table, much nearer to us, spread and flow together (33). No wonder they were once described as feathers! By contrast an artist such as Terborch, observing his scene directly, paints objects in consistently sharp focus (34).

There are other strange aspects of Vermeer’s pictures that are better appreciated with his optical observations in mind. Certain of his abbreviations have little precedent in art: the foreshortened hand of the painter in The Art of Painting (62) is strangely bulbous, an optical truth without poetic adjustment; the hands and arms of the women in the Couple with a Wineglass (12), the Young Woman with a Water Jug (7), and the Woman with a Red Hat (37) are similarly treated.

Inclined almost from the beginning to images of a certain still fixity, and attracted to the subtleties of light, painting little and for his own pleasure, Vermeer had found a tool that suited his temperament and his interests as a painter. It takes nothing from Vermeer’s achievement to imagine him bent over the camera obscura; the pictures still had to be painted, and


35. Viewing camera (camera obscura) of the 17th century, with movable lens. From R. Zahn, Oculus artificialis . . . (2nd ed., Nuremberg, 1701). In reducing reality to a two-dimensional image, the camera obscura offered huge advantages over such drawing machines as Dürer’s (22), for the image could be traced directly.

36. Samuel van Hoogstraten, Perspective Box of a Dutch Interior. 1663. The Detroit Institute of Arts, Purchase, Membership and Donations Fund
for the most part this involved adjustments of all sorts, a fine sensibility, and a brilliant and individual technique. Strange as we may find it to think of Vermeer's limpid poetry in terms of science, the one was not possible without the other. Dürer's drawing machine, a perspective short-cut based on mathematical principles, had evolved into a viewing device that delivered beauties never seen before, luminous visions of the everyday that must have been as startling in their way as the other new visions in the telescope or microscope, the moon and the planets or the swarming life in a drop of water.

Until recently the hypothesis that Vermeer used a camera obscura remained untested. Then Charles Seymour, Jr., set up a chair, drapery, and a tapestry similar to those in Vermeer's Woman with a Red Hat (37), studied them with a camera obscura, and had them photographed in a modern camera adjusted to simulate the image in the camera obscura (38). The optical effects in the photograph and the painting are similar: the sharpness varies noticeably, owing to a shallow depth of field; and highlights spread when they are out of the plane of focus. The artist is not painting his direct vision, but the image projected by the lens of his viewing device.


38. Photograph of a chair finial, drapery, and background tapestry (analogous to elements in Vermeer's Woman with a Red Hat), focused on the middle ground, reflected in a mirror. Photograph: Henry Beville, National Gallery of Art
By the early 1660s the discoveries are made, the territories mapped. Vermeer has found the settings he needs, the compositions and techniques that serve his ends. His last decade is spent in an unhurried treatment of subjects he has dealt with before, or that are in common currency in the work of other artists. The early 1660s see several ambitious interiors such as The Concert (39), in which the music-making trio is displaced to the back of the room by a table, a viola da gamba, and much empty space. Their motionless shapes are locked by the artist into a composition of the greatest complexity. The musicians are each absorbed by the music and do not look at one another; the muted light seems appropriate for such a scene of restrained pleasure. Now Vermeer’s light has come to bear a sensitive relationship to the human situations it reveals: warm bright light falling on a woman adorning herself (70), or vaguely ominous light on a woman performing an act with fateful overtones (75).

The Girl with a Pearl Earring (41) is so satisfying and engaging as an image that it is easy to overlook the subtle, broad painting of the turban and to miss such surprises as the undefined bridge of her nose. The Geographer of 1669 (40), robust and full of clutter, has a frank fall of light that lacks some of the magic of the light in earlier works. The Woman Standing at a Virginal of the 1670s (51), utterly lucid in structure and brilliant in its transcription of details, nevertheless strikes most observers as inexpressive, a strange consequence of Vermeer’s detached attitude and the impartial perfection of his technique. In the Woman with a Guitar (42), painted in his last years, Vermeer reached an extreme of summary recording that contrasts strangely with the bright modishness and activity of the subject. It is difficult indeed to visualize the pictures Vermeer might have painted had he lived longer.

42. Vermeer, Woman with a Guitar. 1670s. The Greater London Council as Trustees of the Iveagh Bequest, Kenwood.
Symbols and warnings

Vermeer's magical re-creation in paint of the real world, the "realism" that Thore found so compelling, has been illuminated by a good deal of recent study. That re-creation, made with the aid of the camera obscura, sprang from an even more single-minded, objective interest in visual appearances than we might have expected of any painter. He had a means to observe strange new kinds of beauty in the world around him, and had phenomenal gifts for getting them on canvas. In this sense realism develops very far in Vermeer's hands.

In recent years we have also learned, however, that we are easily misled by applying our modern idea of "realism," inherited from the time of Thore, to seventeenth-century art, especially to scenes of everyday life. Although Dutch genre painters did indeed explore daily reality with the greatest devotion, their purpose seems often to have been more complex than simply to give pleasure. New studies have helped us to understand genre subjects better, to recognize what is going on in pictures as the artist's contemporaries would have, and to know the ideas they associated with many subjects. More important, we have begun to see that seventeenth-century Dutchmen looked at pictures, and at reality, rather differently than we do. A large body of pictures-with-comments, especially prints with inscriptions and emblem books, suggests that many images were both to be enjoyed and to be pondered for the lessons they had to teach. The Dutch had a taste for moralizing that we struggle to imagine today. The educated had in addition a taste for complex allusions, puzzles, hidden meanings, and multiple meanings that is obvious in literature and is becoming obvious in art. This visual language could be used to teach; it could also be used to make all sorts of jokes, many of which show that the Dutch were not at all prudish.

Bordello scenes abound in Dutch art. Vermeer evidently owned The Procuress by the Utrecht painter van Baburen, since it hangs in the background of several of his pictures (39, 49). In his own Procuress of 1656 (45), he adopts the cast of characters, but substitutes satisfied smiles for leers and hilarity. The transaction between the girl and her customer is gentle, matter-of-fact. A stringed instrument and wine allude to other pleasures related to love, a standard association found, for instance, in Isack Elyas's picture (44). In the latter a background painting of the destruction of man by the Flood makes the moral lesson explicit: beware indulgence.

44. Isack Elyas, Merry Company. 1620. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Photograph: Copyright Rijksmuseum.
Women tuning lutes are frequently shown in fanciful dress or in decolleté that sets them apart from polite company and that may well have identified them as courtesans. Terbrugghen's woman looks away, perhaps in expectation (47); van der Helst's voluptuous creature gives us an overt invitation to play a duet with her, not only by her look but by the viola da gamba that lies waiting for us (48). Music serves as a metaphor for love, as it had since antiquity.

To our eyes Vermeer's young woman (46), dressed in an ermine-lined dress and wearing pearls, seems worlds apart from the brothel. We cannot be certain who she is; it is enough to say that unmistakable prostitutes appear in other Dutch paintings dressed in rich, tasteful clothing, and do not always misbehave. Amateur or professional, the erotic tradition to which she belongs is clear, and so is the meaning of the stock prop: under the table is a viola da gamba, waiting, once again, for the expected lover. As she tunes her lute she turns her head sharply toward the window, producing an effect of keen anticipation that Vermeer reinforces with a trick of composition, putting the dark form of the chair finial boldly against the brightest light in the picture. The “invitation to a duet” sometimes comes from a girl at a keyboard. Gerard Dou’s exquisite interior (50) includes a gamba for the invited lover, as well as other apparatus his audience would have understood: the wine in the cooler and the flowers in the vase both afford transitory pleasures, and the birdcage is symbolic of the “sweet slavery” of love. Vermeer’s treatment of the subject (49), eliminates the symbolic extras, but includes Baburen’s raucous scene of another girl musician (43), painted about forty-five years earlier. If the background painting was meant to make a comment on the action in the picture, it might well be plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.

50. Gerard Dou. Woman at a Clavichord. 1660s. Dulwich College Gallery, Dulwich
51. **Vermeer, Woman Standing at a Virginal. 1670s. National Gallery, London.** The large painting in the background surely offers a comment; recently it has been shown that its subject, Cupid holding up a card, derives from an emblem whose moral is that perfect love consists of fidelity to a single lover. Is this modish woman inviting us to honorable love, and is the comment from the background therefore straightforward? Or are we invited to venal love? If so, the comment holds both irony and caution.

52. **Vermeer, Girl Interrupted at Her Music. Early 1660s. Copyright The Frick Collection, New York.** In this scene of a vocal duet, the woman looks up with an expression that is hard to read. A birdcage near the window doubtless bears its usual associations with love; the familiar painting of Cupid on the wall raises the same questions about the messages it might have conveyed.

53. **Jan Meine Molenaer, A Musical Party. 1633. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond.** Music-making need not symbolize love-making. It can also embody harmony, concord, or temperance. In Molenaer's painting, where a young couple at right absorb the moral in the same fashion as Elyas's couple (44), many symbols associate music with the virtue of temperance, not the vice of intemperance.
A brisk traffic in letters enlivens Dutch art after mid-century. Letters are received from maids, read in solitude, written, and dispatched. By all indications these are love letters, and although some paintings represent the male half of the byplay, most are devoted to the female half and to various nuances of anticipation, curiosity, absorption, pleasure, and occasionally disappointment. The reactions of Dirck Hals’s letter-readers of the 1630s (28, 55) are very much more straightforward and obvious than those of the women painted by Vermeer’s generation.

It cannot be accidental that these were the years of a vogue in Holland for letter-writing, already a fashion in France that had been spread by manuels épistolaires. Handbooks of this kind also appeared in Holland with graceful sample letters for all occasions, including love letters, for writers deficient in grammar, inspiration, or confidence.

Two of Vermeer’s pictures represent the arrival of a letter. The example in Figure 54 shows the young woman in profile, putting her hand to her chin in an involuntary reaction to the maid’s news. Figure 58, a painting in which Vermeer’s earlier interest in spatial tricks is revived, shows a similar but more visible reaction.

54. Vermeer, Mistress and Maid. Late 1660s. Copyright The Frick Collection, New York.
58. Vermeer, The Letter. Late 1660s. This photograph was made before the picture was cut out of its frame and badly damaged by an extortionist in 1971. It has since been skillfully restored. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Photograph: Copyright Rijksmuseum.
59. **Vermeer, Young Woman Reading a Letter. Early 1660s. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Photograph: Copyright Rijksmuseum.** In one of Vermeer’s earlier paintings, a woman reads a letter in privacy (27). In the picture on this page the situation is complicated by a detail that may be unique in such scenes, the woman’s pregnancy. Is this a wife reading a letter from an absent husband? It is much more likely that we have a variant on a familiar theme, practically the only context in which pregnancy is shown, the “sickness without a cure” that ails the many languishing girls in Jan Steen’s comic scenes of doctors’ visits (60). Steen makes it obvious that the girls have only their loose living to blame for their condition. In Vermeer’s picture the erotic symbols are gone, and there are no leers or winks, only the woman’s open-mouthed attention and the gentle atmosphere that surrounds her. If this suggestion is correct, Vermeer has made another tactful, sober transformation of a stock erotic theme.

60. **Jan Steen, The Lovesick Maiden. About 1660. Metropolitan Museum, Bequest of Helen Swift Neilson, 46.13.2**
In 1676 Vermeer’s widow is mentioned as owning a painting identified as “de Schilder-const,” The Art of Painting (62). When it was sold in 1696, the title had been changed to “Portrait of Vermeer in a room with various details,” and so it remained until recent years, when Vermeer’s allegorical intention became better understood. The painter’s fanciful “Burgundian” or “antique” dress, based on styles a century old, removes him from the everyday; he embodies the artist. His model, wearing a laurel wreath and carrying a book and the trumpet of fame, is Clio, the Muse of History. On the table are attributes of the other Muses. As painting traditionally had no Muse of its own, attempts were often made by its writer-partisans to insinuate Pictura into the Nine Muses on Parnassus.

There are a great many rich ideas in Vermeer’s picture, and it is not certain exactly how the allegory was to be read. Here the painter proclaims his power to give form to History; History in turn can grant him fame, whose trumpet she holds so prominently. Vermeer was manipulating a literary apparatus to delight the nimble mind; like the artist in his picture, Vermeer himself was also creating an image of high significance, to survive him and help to secure his fame.

61. Adriaen van Ostade, The Painter. Probably 1660s. Etching. Metropolitan Museum, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 17.50.51-349. Ostade’s print is a more usual image of the artist at work, in a room full of studio apparatus, with an apprentice in the background.

Later in life Vermeer painted a second large allegorical picture. Like The Art of Painting, the Allegory of the Faith involved some judicious reading in the standard recipe book for symbols of abstract concepts, the Dutch edition of Ripa's *Iconologia* (1644). There Vermeer doubtless read that “The Faith is represented by a seated Woman... with a Chalice in her right hand, her left hand on a Book, which lies on a firm Cornerstone, i.e. Christ, and the World under her feet. She is dressed in sky-blue, with a carmine over-dress. Under the cornerstone lies a crushed Snake, and Death with his arrows broken; nearby an Apple representing Sin. She is crowned with laurel... Behind her, suspended on a nail, is a Crown of Thorns, which needs no explanation. In the background is a representation of Abraham who is about to sacrifice his son.” Vermeer changed some details including the last one, having at hand a large Crucifixion by Jordaens to substitute for the Sacrifice of Abraham.

This painting has given more trouble to Vermeer's admirers than any other, despite the wonder of its technique (Back Cover, 87). Both the literary content, against which people have long been prejudiced, and the awkward theatricality of the woman, have seemed out of character for the artist. Today the allegorizing seems far less strange than it once did, but the woman's gesture and expression, stock baroque indications of piety, may always appear uninspired.


64. Carlo Dolci, Detail of St. Mary Magdalen. Mid-1650s. Uffizi, Florence. Photograph: Alinari - Art Reference Bureau
Domestic virtue

Although a great many Dutch scenes of daily life depict vices of some sort and carry an implied warning to the viewer, there are many others that do not. Some appear to be neutral; if they had a moralizing function, we have lost the key. Others show distinctly virtuous activities, and may even be intended as exhortations. In the seventeenth century spinning, needlework, weaving, lacemaking, and other handwork could still carry the associations of blameless wifeliness they had had from the time of Homer, when Penelope’s weaving symbolized her virtue. It was a commonplace that “domesticity is the jewel in the wife’s crown.” When Metsu’s woman is tempted with wine by a man (68), lacemaking seems to be the attribute of her virtue.

The Kitchenmaid (69), too, belongs to a tradition in Dutch painting that goes back at least a century. More than most women in art, Vermeer’s powerful, serious kitchenmaid seems to give flesh to an elemental, wholesome aspect of life.

Light streaming into the room gives a warm radiance to the broad space between the woman and the mirror she is looking at (70), and heightens our sense of the woman’s pleasure with her own image. Again we might ask why Vermeer chose this subject. Because it was beautiful, familiar, psychologically interesting? Yes, but another motive must have been the powerful associations attached to images of women adorning themselves. Two centuries before, when Bosch needed someone to personify Superbia (Pride), one of the Seven Deadly Sins, he chose a woman in a well-appointed house dressing herself and looking in a mirror held by the devil (71). A beautiful woman with pearls and a mirror became one of the commonest embodiments of Vanitas, sinful preoccupation with worldly things, against which we have constant warnings in Dutch art (72, 73). As the seventeenth century wore on, the trend in genre painting was away from elaborate symbolic apparatus and toward reduced, less obvious, and sometimes cleverly disguised symbolism. It was claimed by writers of the period that a lesson well hidden had greater effect. But even when the traditional allusions to Vanitas are few, as in the paintings by Terborch (74) and Vermeer, we should assume that they were recognized and understood in their time.

While most people will admit that Vermeer portrayed a situation associated with Vanitas, some have found it hard to believe that he really intended a warning to his audience or that his picture had a moral purpose. It has been suggested that Vermeer merely took over visual traditions for purely aesthetic ends or that the meanings attached to these traditions had dropped away by Vermeer’s time. But there is ample evidence that pictures were “read” all through the century, and some of Vermeer’s own works demonstrate that he had a taste for the metaphorical, even the arcane; why not recognize the intellectual force of pictures as well as their beauty? His Woman Putting on Pearls is a masterpiece of concentration; a few key elements of traditional Vanitas imagery and the poetry of Vermeer’s light and color combine in an image of worldly pleasure that is wonderfully seductive. As so often in Dutch art, the celebration and the warning are one.

71. Jeroen Bosch, Detail, Superbia, from The Seven Deadly Sins and The Four Last Things. About 1470-1480. Museo del Prado, Madrid.
The Woman with Scales (75) is another picture whose rewards are more than visual. Seventeenth-century spectators would have been delighted with Vermeer’s exquisite rendition of the scene, and would also have responded to the ideas imbedded in it. Seeing the woman’s pregnancy, they could have recognized a bit of folk medicine, the use of scales for divining the sex of an unborn baby. They would certainly have sensed the implications of the gold coins and jewels on the table. In older art, gold weighers represent another kind of Vanitas and exemplify the dangers of worldliness: Massys’s banker weighs coins, distracting his wife from her devotional book (76); Dou’s gold weigher is a pinched, anxious man whose advanced years should suggest his mortality (77). Dutch art is full of the riches of the world displayed for our pleasure, but very often there are reminders of danger: de Heem’s showy still life includes a clock at the right, a familiar symbol of passing time and the transitoriness of human life that is not less important for being inconspicuous in the picture (78). Vermeer’s reminder is much more obvious—a painting of the Last Judgment on the wall.

In no other picture is light so powerfully manipulated. Entering the room through a window partly blocked by the curtain, it has a mysterious resonance that is greater because the dramatic yellow light at the window resembles the lurid yellow nimbus of Christ in the Last Judgment. This is not likely to be accidental. As so often in Vermeer, the visible world, beautiful in itself, is also the embodiment of an invisible world of ideas and values.

79. Pieter de Hooch, Woman Weighing Gold. About 1670. Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz Gemäldegalerie, West Berlin. Photograph: Walter Steinkopf, Berlin. Vermeer’s imagination can be gauged by a comparison with de Hooch’s treatment of the subject. Although the same meanings were probably attached to the gold weighing, de Hooch’s picture lacks the dramatic emphasis of Vermeer’s.