

# W

oman

in Blue Reading a Letter

*An Approach to Viewing Vermeer*

A 'Vermeer', like a 'Rembrandt' or a 'Van Gogh', is something more than a painting. A 'Vermeer', whether it be a painting of a young girl in a turban, a woman with a watering can, a lady with a balance, or a music lesson, will bring associations with it that transcend any of these specific images. Hidden somewhere within an appreciation of it are memories of other impressions: the quiescence of a woman – deep in thoughts – reading a letter, the soft light effects that play across a woman adjusting her pearl necklace, or the delicate nuances of blues and yellows that transmit the serenity of a woman writing a letter.

Although the individual paintings are well-known, their cumulative impact is all the greater because the relationships underlying them reinforce and enhance such work. Vermeer's images, whether of a single figure lost in thought or of a quiet street scene, are intimate ones that remind us of moments or experiences in our lives so fleeting that we were hardly aware of their existence. Vermeer's genius was to capture their beauty and to transmit it to us in a way that we can relate to our own experiences.

Despite the intimacy of Vermeer's poetry, he does not seem to insert himself into his paintings. Unlike viewing a 'Rembrandt' or a 'Van Gogh', we are unaware of any personal struggles that may have affected his life or art. Part of the reason is certainly that Vermeer's life story is not well known, but the biographical questions that spring to mind when we look at a 'Rembrandt' or 'Van Gogh' do not even occur to us before a 'Vermeer'. We accept the strong, sturdy milkmaid as a figure who embodies the wholesomeness of Dutch life without asking who she was. Likewise, it does not seem crucial to know if the beautifully serene woman holding a balance is Catharina, Vermeer's wife. But, as with all abstract concepts, the reality of Vermeer's oeuvre is somewhat more complex than the image of a 'Vermeer' would suggest. Paintings at either end of his oeuvre do not fit into this comfortable niche, and a few well-known masterpieces like the *View of Delft* and the *Allegory of the Art of Painting* likewise have to be considered apart. In some of these exceptional paintings, moreover, Vermeer reveals aspects of his personality and character that are otherwise muted.

Trying to discover the essence of a Vermeer painting is akin to describ-



Johannes Vermeer, *The Milkmaid*. c.1658-1660.  
Canvas, 45.5 x 41 cm.  
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

ing a sunset or reflections off a sparkling body of water; the description works only when it also takes into account the viewer's emotional relationship to the scene. While such discussions are by necessity subjective, they are nevertheless important in any analysis of Vermeer's works precisely because his paintings elicit such a response from the viewer.

In trying to find a framework within which to judge such reactions it is good to look more closely at the information Vermeer has provided for us in his paintings. He was an extraordinary craftsman who carefully conceived and structured his compositions to achieve the purity of expression he sought to convey. He had great sensitivity to optical effects found in the world about him, and translated these in his paintings through his use of light and colour. He mastered a wide range of painting techniques to allow his vision to take visual form. The mechanics of his painting techniques are, in fact, there to be assessed and analysed. It is also possible to examine the kind of changes in style and subject matter that occurred over the course of his career, as well as those more constant threads that he maintained within his approach to painting.

A particularly fascinating painting to approach in this way is one of Vermeer's most beautiful works from the mid-1660s, *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*. In this painting we encounter an image so radiantly pure and simple in its elements, and so familiar in its subject, that we immediately empathise with the woman and accept her world as completely as our own. Yet we are also aware that this woman and her world are not exactly like reality. We approach the work with a certain reverence, partly because it was painted by Vermeer, but also partly because the image demands that response. It is a quiet world, without sound and without movement. We are drawn to the painting by the warmth of the light and the serenity of the image, but we are kept at a distance as well. The woman is so totally



Johannes Vermeer, *Girl with Pearl Earring*, c. 1665.  
Canvas 46.5 x 40 cm.  
Mauritshuis, The Hague.

absorbed in her letter that she has no awareness that anyone has intruded upon her privacy. Seen in pure profile against a flat wall decorated only with a map of the seventeen provinces, neither she nor her environment welcome us into her physical or psychological space. Her pyramidal form, which is centrally placed in the composition, is partially concealed by the dark form of a table on the left and by a chair, turned slightly away from us, on the right. The physical barriers thus created effectively isolate her even though she is quite close to the viewer. A subtle tension exists in our relationship to the scene, one that pulls us back and forth as we subconsciously try to reconcile these conflicting signals.

By creating this psychological tension within the viewer Vermeer emotionally involves him in the painting and prepares him for the central focus of his work, the emotional response of the woman to the letter she is reading. He suggests her intense concentration subtly, without dramatic gesture or expression. The depth of her response, however, is clear in the way she draws her arms up tightly against her body, clasps the letter, and reads it with slightly parted lips. Vermeer is not interested in revealing the contents of the letter, or its origin, merely in that quiet moment when communication between the writer and the woman is at its fullest.

Vermeer captures that moment by creating an environment that echoes and reinforces it. A subtle light plays across the woman and the objects surrounding her, a light whose very presence helps establish the fullness of her privacy in the corner of a room for, by falling most sharply in the upper left, it implies the presence of a wall and window just outside the picture plane.

Johannes Vermeer, *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*.  
c. 1662-1664. Canvas,  
46.5 x 39 cm. Rijksmuseum,  
Amsterdam.



The horizontal and vertical shapes of the table, chairs, and map surrounding her, their colours of blue and ochre, and their inner design patterns, both complement the static nature of the woman's pose and act as a foil for her intense concentration on the letter. The blue-black rod at the bottom of the map that passes directly behind the woman's hands, for example, provides a visual accent to the letter she is holding. The map, its muted ochre tonalities echoing the flesh tones of the woman's head and the browns of her hair, forms a field against which her emotions are allowed to expand. Although Vermeer separates the head from the map by juxtaposing the woman's highlighted forehead with the dark tones of the cartouche, the patterns of rivers and inlets seem to flow from, and respond to, her own form.

Finally, the shapes of the white wall, the clearly articulated areas defined by the objects in the painting, visually bind together the various compositional elements. Vermeer has established three basic blocks of wall, balanced though not symmetrical: the one in the upper left, the one just in front of the woman, and the one behind her. These quite distinct shapes play an active role in the composition; they read as positive elements that help provide a framework for the figure. Their bold and simple shapes enhance the quality of stillness and tranquillity that pervades the scene.

Vermeer's *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* seems so right in colour, theme and mood that it is hard to imagine any other compositional solution. Indeed, as in other of his paintings, one has difficulty imagining Vermeer at work, as an artist who somehow had to compose and make tangible an idea



X-ray of *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*.



Infra-red reflectograph of *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*.

he had conceived in his mind. Part of our problem in visualising Vermeer's working procedure stems from a lack of available information. No drawings, prints, or unfinished paintings, indeed, no records of commissions offer clues to his intent or to aspects of his working process. No contemporary accounts comment on his work or his ideas. Our entire appreciation of Vermeer's achievement is focused on the end results of his extant paintings.

In recent years, however, it has been possible to look far more closely at the artist behind these paintings than ever before. Much information has come from the careful archival studies of John Michael Montias, who has unearched a wealth of material about the relationships within Vermeer's extended family. New information about Vermeer's artistic procedure has also been gathered through a variety of technical examinations of the works themselves.

An x-ray of the *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, for example, reveals that the woman's jacket once flared out at the back, and perhaps also slightly at the front. The shape of the earlier design is visible in the x-ray because Vermeer started painting the white wall with a lead-bearing paint (lead white) around the blocked-in form of the jacket. An infra-red reflectograph shows many of these same changes, but also gives added information. The reflectograph works on the principle of heat absorption and picks up patterns of black or grey applied over a light ground. Thus the underlying jacket seen in the reflectogram must have been blocked-in in greys over the light ochre ground. In the reflectograph we can see that this original jacket had a fur trim along its bottom edge. He almost certainly changed the shape of the jacket to simplify the woman's profile and to enhance her statuesque character as she stands silhouetted against the back wall. Microscopic examinations give added information about the jacket. Vermeer used natural ultra-

marine for the blue of the jacket, which he painted very thinly. In the microscope it is thus easy to see the underlying paint layer. No additional colours underlie the woman's jacket, which means that the shape visible in the x-ray and reflectogram must represent a preliminary compositional stage before Vermeer began introducing local colour.

Vermeer's sensitivity to the optical effects of light and colour and his ability to transmit them in paint is one of the primary reasons why his images have the visual impact they do. Light effects in his paintings, however, are often not totally consistent. He used light and shade selectively for compositional reasons. In the *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, for example, the chair near the wall casts a shadow, or, more accurately, two shadows. A pronounced shadow also falls just below the map. The woman, however, who also stands near the wall, casts no shadow at all. Indeed, Vermeer emphasised her separateness by giving the wall immediately behind her a brighter tonality, as though her being radiated light rather than obstructed it. He even accentuated this effect by purposely softening the juncture of her form and the wall: he diffused the contour of her jacket with a light blue colour.

The woman, by not casting a shadow, exists in a different spatial and temporal framework than the objects surrounding her. While we can more or less determine where she is standing, we cannot measure her precise location. By casting no shadow she appears timeless, even though she exists within a recognisable interior space where shadows of objects in the room will change as the sun moves in its orbit. Though Vermeer has represented a moment in the woman's life, a moment of great privacy and intense concentration, the moment does not appear fleeting. It has a permanence that strengthens the psychological impact of the woman as she gazes at her letter. We are drawn to her image and held by it in ways that are not totally explicable, but that clearly have much to do with the way Vermeer has handled light, colour, and composition.

ARTHUR K. WHELOCK, JR.

#### FURTHER READING

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A special exhibition of Vermeer's paintings will be held at the Mauritshuis (The Hague) during the spring of 1996.