

a minute scale, with his trademark variety of vignettes of individual people, milling about like ordinary mortals, paying little heed to the otherworldly miracle.

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FURTHER READING

H. Perry Chapman et al., *Jan Steen: Painter and Storyteller*. New Haven / London: Yale University Press, 1996; 256 pp. ISBN 0-300-06793-3.

The exhibition took place in the National Gallery of Art (Washington, DC) from April 28 until August 18, 1996. It will be at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam until January 12, 1997.

Vermeer and the Art of Optical Disillusion

In an eye-catching advertisement for its exhibition (1 March-2 June 1996) of twenty-two paintings by Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675), a photographic detail of the hands of Vermeer's *Lady Writing a Letter* crowned the Mauritshuis' proud announcement, '*Straks schrijven we geschiedenis*' ('Soon we will be writing history'). Merely judging from the extraordinary success it enjoyed in Washington (12 November 1995-11 February 1996 - weather and government shutdown notwithstanding), it seemed that the exhibition had already made history in more ways than its sponsors or organisers could have anticipated. For it is not simply the fact that two-thirds of Vermeer's notoriously small oeuvre had been assembled for view in one place for the first time in three hundred years, nor the fact that several pictures had been stunningly restored for the occasion, that makes this exhibition so historically significant. It is also the fact that it brought the art of the most reflective and least prolific of seventeenth-century Dutch painters to the attention of a larger and more receptive audience than ever before. The spare elegance of this show provided what for many museum-goers may be a once-in-a-lifetime luxury; namely, the opportunity to linger over a small cache of pictures whose optical riches and enigmas invite sustained reflection upon the curious links between visual experience and consummate representational artistry. Instead of quiet reverence, these pictures evoked much lively, if hushed, conversation; and those conversations which I overheard suggested that for most viewers, Vermeer's work posed more questions than it answered. The questions ranged from simple queries about the identification of particular figures, and the possible symbolic allusions of frequently depicted objects - letters, pitchers, musical instruments, maps, and empty chairs - to more fundamental questions about the visual anomalies so prevalent in Vermeer's pictures, especially in the figures. Why, for example, do the arms of the ladies playing the virginals appear so oddly unformed? How does one explain the startling contrast between the subtly described and smoothly modelled knob on the



impressive canvases of traditional festivities, including the lying-in feast, Twelfth Night, and Saint Nicholas Day, at the heart of the exhibition. These types of celebrations had come under virulent attack from Dutch Reformed preachers, who tried to suppress them as old Catholic rites. They were not successful, although by and large they made those once public festivals retreat into the home, where Steen situated them. Steen was a Catholic, but it is not clear from these pictures where his sympathies, or those of his urban, well-off patrons lay. On the one hand, such big paintings celebrate traditional festive laughter, yet on the other, they seem to ridicule it, by representing the revellers as disorderly drunks, laughing open-mouthed and unbuttoned in ways polite citizens should not.

All of Steen's themes mentioned thus far, mostly about the pleasures and problems of love, sex, marriage, childbirth, and domestic management, were the stock-in-trade of comic literature, for which Steen created an equivalent in genre painting. But not all Steen's pictures are in this vein. He made several unusual portraits, in which sitters like the famous *Burgher of Delft* appear set in a little story that is difficult to spell out. Steen also painted numerous scenes from biblical and classical history, especially back in Leiden in the 1670s. While not obviously humorous, he treated them as partly comic, choosing themes that lend themselves to rambunctious, even adulterous or drunken activity, such as the seduction and mocking of Samson or the *Marriage at Cana*. In such history paintings Steen not only applied the principles of tragicomedy - a new theatrical genre in the Dutch Republic - but also demonstrated his knowledge of Italian painting. The *Marriage at Cana*, for example, is indebted to the grand conceptions of Paolo Veronese in its composition, elaboration, and specific motifs such as the court dwarf, but Steen painted it on

Lacemaker's table and her starkly rendered facial features which, like those of the *Woman Writing a Letter with her Maid*, are indicated by abrupt and unmodulated tonal patches?

Viewers who look to the exhibition's handsome catalogue for guidance will find it satisfying on some fronts and disappointing on others. Those seeking factual information will find much informative commentary, both in the extensive entries on individual paintings and in the four introductory essays written by the prominent Vermeer scholars Arthur Wheelock and Albert Blankert, by Ben Broos, research curator at the Mauritshuis, and Jorgen Wadum, the Mauritshuis' chief paintings conservator. Together these interesting essays contextualise Vermeer's work in several usefully overlapping ways. Arthur Wheelock, who also wrote the catalogue entries in collaboration with Ben Broos, opens the catalogue with an account of Vermeer's life and artistry. Drawing attention to many of the important archival findings recently brought to light by J. Michael Montias and others, Wheelock supplements the familiar discussion of Delft painting and its influence on the artist by pointing to ways in which family and social circumstances are likely to have affected Vermeer's art.

While Wheelock focuses on the local circumstances of Vermeer's artistic practice, Blankert's essay situates the artist's work more generally within the context of contemporary genre painting, exploring the implications of seventeenth-century references to Vermeer as a specialist in 'modern figures'. Blankert presents Vermeer's paintings as examples of the modern pictures of fashionable young 'damsels and dandies' in interiors which had been introduced to Dutch audiences in the 1620s. He then goes on to demonstrate how Vermeer pictorially comments upon this popular genre by introducing subtle changes or injecting notes of ambiguity into his renditions of stock modern themes such as letter reading and writing, wine-drinking, music-making, and the so-called useful pursuits of making lace and pouring milk.

Broos, like Blankert, draws many telling inferences from the early sources which he has meticulously assembled in his discussion of Vermeer's critical fortunes. He presents compelling evidence of Vermeer's continued celebrity among a select group of admirers of his work from the seventeenth through to the twentieth century, thus laying to rest a prevalent misconception that Vermeer enjoyed a brief period of fame in the seventeenth century only to fade into critical obscurity during the eighteenth century until his rediscovery in the nineteenth century. Many of the documents cited in the essay resurface again in the catalogue entries as part of Broos' fascinating narratives of the provenance of each picture. These accounts chart the changing ownership of the paintings, and reveal sometimes surprising episodes in the history of their reception. In the entry on the *Milkmaid*, for instance, Broos recounts how the picture became the focus of national attention and parliamentary debate about its cultural value before the

Johannes Vermeer,
The Lacemaker. c.1669-1670.

Canvas, 23.9 x 20.5 cm.
Musée du Louvre, Paris.



Dutch government finally decided to purchase the painting to prevent its potential sale to an American buyer. Aside from being much more engaging than the customary abbreviated lists of the pictures' successive owners, these accounts succeed in presenting Vermeer's works within an ongoing history, rather than as static artifacts fixed in time at the moment of their creation.

Exactly how Vermeer went about creating these paintings is the focus of Jorgen Wadum's essay on Vermeer's working methods. As the conservator of paintings and project leader of the restoration of the Mauritshuis' *Girl with Pearl Earring* and the *View of Delft*, Wadum brings to the discussion of Vermeer's studio practice a wealth of information gleaned from close technical examination and analysis of Vermeer's pictures. Perhaps the most interesting of Wadum's technical observations is his discovery of pin holes marking a perspectival vanishing point in the ground paint layers of thirteen of Vermeer's pictures. He interprets these pin holes as evidence of the artist's use of chalked string stretched taut from the pins and snapped to register the orthogonal lines of his perspective constructions on his canvases. That Vermeer utilised this practical technique of plotting rectilinear elements in his pictures is not entirely surprising, given that it was a method widely used by seventeenth-century painters and well-documented in contemporary perspective manuals. Yet Wadum's conclusion that Vermeer used his knowledge of perspective to produce deceptively life-like images is misleading. For Vermeer did not produce eye-fooling illusions of the sort that contemporary artist-writers like Samuel van

Hoogstraten celebrated as displays of high pictorial ambition. Rather, as Wadum himself notes, Vermeer typically deployed perspective to construct interior views (described by contemporaries as ‘*perspectives*’) whose low vantage points and narrow viewing angles situate the viewer below the eye level of the depicted figures. The domestic views produced in this way appear displaced, as if seen through a lens or camera. The voyeuristic effect of this strategy is dramatically evident in such pictures as the Buckingham Palace *Music Lesson* or the Rijksmuseum’s *Love Letter* which stages an exchange between mistress and maid covertly spied through a doorway. Perspective, it turns out, is but one of several ways in which Vermeer simulated in his paintings the look of images seen and made in the optical device known as the *camera obscura*.

Wadum’s essay, like the catalogue as a whole, focuses on Vermeer’s familiarity with this device as evidence of his scientific interest in optics and the realism of the images it produced. Yet, as attentive visitors to the exhibition can readily observe, Vermeer’s pictures reveal a very different interest in the *camera obscura*. His pictorial preoccupation with unfocused highlights, shifts in focus, spatial compression between planes, and other optical features associated with the *camera obscura* calls attention to the artificiality rather than the transparent naturalism of its images. The *camera obscura*, it seems, provided Vermeer not with a tool for making realistic pictures but with a model of pictorial artistry itself.

Readers curious about the artistic significance of Vermeer’s interest in the optical artifice of the *camera*

obscura will have to look beyond the catalogue to the rich critical literature which explores this issue. I am thinking especially of the eloquent account of Vermeer’s artistry offered by the late Sir Lawrence Gowing in his 1952 monograph, and the responses to it by such scholars as Edward Snow, Harry Berger and Svetlana Alpers. All of these writers attempt to understand the peculiarities of Vermeer’s representational vocabulary and the pictorial thinking it reveals. They address explicitly the optical strategies by which Vermeer rejected the naturalist conventions so scrupulously maintained in the Dutch pictorial tradition. These texts thus alert viewers, in ways that the catalogue does not, to the epistemological implications of Vermeer’s pictorial inquiry into the optical limits of vision and painting which this historic exhibition so compellingly documents.

CELESTE BRUSATI

Johannes Vermeer (ed. Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr.), Zwolle: Waanders, 1995; 229 pp. ISBN 90-400-9794-3.

In the Shadow of Vermeer Master Forger Han van Meegeren

Is it possible that paintings can at one moment be sold at the highest prices and applauded throughout the world and then ten years later vanish into the cellar, forever reviled and banished from art history? This happened to a number of works by Johannes Vermeer (see *The Low Countries* 1994-95: 175-181 and 1995-96: 309-310) and Pieter de Hooch fifty years ago. At least those were the names originally attached to eight paintings that were sold for vast sums to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Boymans Museum in Rotterdam and the collectors Willem van der Vorm, D.G. van Beuningen and the German Field Marshal Hermann Goering in the late thirties and during the Second World War.

In 1938 the Boymans Museum bought a substantial painting, *The Supper at Emmaus*, by the Delft master Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675). This Rotterdam museum had moved into an impressive new building only three years previously and was under the inspiring leadership of its ambitious director Dirk Hannema. It had an exquisite collection of masterpieces from Holland’s Golden Age, including works by Rembrandt, Brueghel and Frans Hals; but there was no Vermeer, and this was a grievous lack.

Vermeer was, and still is, represented in Dutch collections by only a handful of paintings. The Rijksmuseum has four, and the Mauritshuis in The Hague three. Not a bad score all in all, since the Sphinx of Delft’s complete oeuvre comprised no more than thirty-five works. We know little about Johannes Vermeer, and apart from the limited number of works there are no other clues. Little can be said with certainty about his place of work, his teacher or his pupils. There are no preliminary studies, sketches or



Johannes Vermeer, *The Love Letter*, c.1669-1670. Canvas.

44 x 38 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.