

By Helen Dudar, Smithsonian, November, 1995

Time Stands Still in the Harmonious World of Vermeer

It's a must-see show at the National Gallery of Art. Not since 1696 have so many of his paintings been brought together in one place.

In this age of the museum blockbuster, when we are inured to exhibitions demanding acres of walls and bottomless pools of energy, it is a sweet irony that possibly the choicest show of the season has just 21 paintings.

In a small way, it is a large event: these are paintings from the hand and eye of the incomparable Johannes Vermeer of Delft, and they represent more than half of what

we know—or the experts accept—of his life's work. There have not been so many Vermeers assembled in one place since 1696, when one family's collection of 21 of his works was auctioned off in Amsterdam.

This year they will be found in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. from November 12 until February 11, 1996; then the exhibition will move on to the Netherlands, where it will remain in the Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis in The Hague from March 1 to June 2. The show was organized by Arthur K. Wheelock jr., the National Gallery's curator of northern Baroque painting, and Frederik J. Duparc, director of the Mauritshuis. It is sponsored in Washington by United Technologies Corporation. The exhaustive catalog is being published by the National Gallery with the Mauritshuis, and distributed by Yale University Press.

When we think of Vermeer, those of us who know his work incompletely are likely to summon up images of his solitary women, hypnotically serene figures caught in some private act of concentration and oblivious to the observer, fixed forever on canvas: *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, perhaps, or *Woman Holding a Balance*. One has only to see a single Vermeer figure of a woman in a Dutch museum gallery, surrounded by works of the artist's 17th-century peers—Pieter de Hooch and Jan Steen and Gerard ter Borch—to realize how far outside the fashions of his day he stood.

He lived and worked in the golden age of Dutch painting, a time when much of the art memorialized and moralized over the daily lives of the monied merchant class. They are good-natured, busy, noisy paintings of domestic joys. Big families assemble around tables heaped with food; dogs frisk, musicians play; adults smoke and drink and mischievously allow small children to sample both pleasures. While in a painting nearby, dwarfed by the surrounding imagery yet larger than life, stands that Vermeer figure in blue, bathed in the cool northern light filtered through an unseen window, totally absorbed by a small sheet of paper.

We will be encountering her and other luminous images in Washington. Still, the coup of the show is the presence of *View of Delft* (next page), the only full-scale Vermeer cityscape we have, and a piece that Wheelock, a leading authority on the artist, considers "one of the great masterpieces in the history of art." The picture has never before left Europe. It is crucial to experiencing Vermeer's interests and work, and without it, he says, there could have been no exhibition. Serious questions had to be dealt with. Was it sturdy enough to travel? Could it be cleaned? At one point, a few years ago, a



Vermeer, *Woman Holding a Balance*, 1664



Woman in Blue Reading a Letter (1664): her intensity is so palpable that one hopes the news is not too bad.

committee of Vermeer experts from a half-dozen countries assembled at the Mauritshuis to examine the painting, study x-rays, confer, argue and, finally, conclude that restoration work and shipping would cause no damage.



Vermeer's one full-scale cityscape, *View of Delft*, is leaving Europe for the first time to be in the show. Its origins can be traced to the city profiles painted in the borders of large wall maps of the Netherlands. Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, The Hague.

Without its old, yellowed coats of shellac and varnish, shimmering in the glow of an unseen sun, *View of Delft* is a kind of architectural icon, the city as a hallowed place. We know that people live there because Vermeer has scattered a few small, shadowy figures on the riverbank facing the town, but this is his celebration of bricks, walls, towers, spires and rust-red roofs, the urban fortress that offered him shelter and purpose.

Among those who have celebrated *View of Delft* were famously, Marcel Proust, who first encountered it in the Mauritshuis in 1902 and knew he "had seen the most

beautiful picture in the world." He loved the painting and was transfixed by one small segment of it. On the right side of the scene, just to the left of a pair of towers, sunlight floods a fragment of a building: the "little patch of yellow wall" known even to those Proust addicts who don't know the painting. Proust's passion for the picture was bestowed on a character in *Remembrance of Things Past*, the novelist Bergotte, who, while admiring it in a Paris museum exhibit, is struck down by blood poisoning. He dies memorably, muttering, "little patch of yellow wall...little patch of yellow wall."



A recent convert to Catholicism, in 1655 Vermeer painted Saint Praxedis, who cared for martyrs' bodies.

Women reading or writing letters, women and men deeply immersed in music—these slightly enigmatic domestic scenes speak to us so indelibly as Vermeer subjects that it sometimes comes as a surprise to be reminded that his earliest art was in the tradition of "history" paintings: scenes from the Bible and from mythology. The exhibition has three of those youthful pieces, probably painted when Vermeer was still in his early 20s—*Christ in the House of Mary and Martha*, *Diana and Her Companions*, and the still controversial *Saint Praxedis*, first exhibited in 1969, which Wheelock believes is by Vermeer, but which some other authorities do not yet accept. Even Vermeer's history paintings were outside the expected mode. Dutch art of the time was often devoutly and charmingly narrative or anecdotal. Vermeer didn't tell stories; his figures often seem to be suspended between two significant moments, as if time had miraculously paused for them.

At first sight, *Saint Praxedis* is a startling departure from Vermeer subjects, the only painting preoccupied with blood. Praxedis, a holy woman who tended the remains of early Christians, kneels on the ground, her hands gripping both a cross and a sponge, from which she squeezes blood into a ewer; the blood comes from the decapitated martyr lying behind her. The piece turns out to be a close copy of a work by a contemporary Florentine, Felice Ficherelli. Nevertheless, head to the side, eyes cast down, totally focused on her labor, this saint has the pensive, faraway look of a Vermeer woman.

The discovery of an Italian work that clearly inspired *Saint Praxedis* was a small, all too rare triumph of Vermeer research. Art historians habitually mourn the absence of useful contemporary details about his life, but the fact

is—absent the tribes of critics and gossip columnists who feed our interests today—we don't have many details about Vermeer's peers either.

Most likely he abandoned historical themes for what are loosely labeled "genre scenes" in keeping with the period. The Dutch had defeated and expelled their Spanish occupiers, and most of the people had replaced Catholicism with Calvinism. The country had a prosperous mercantile class that bought art but probably was not receptive to dramatic New Testament imagery.

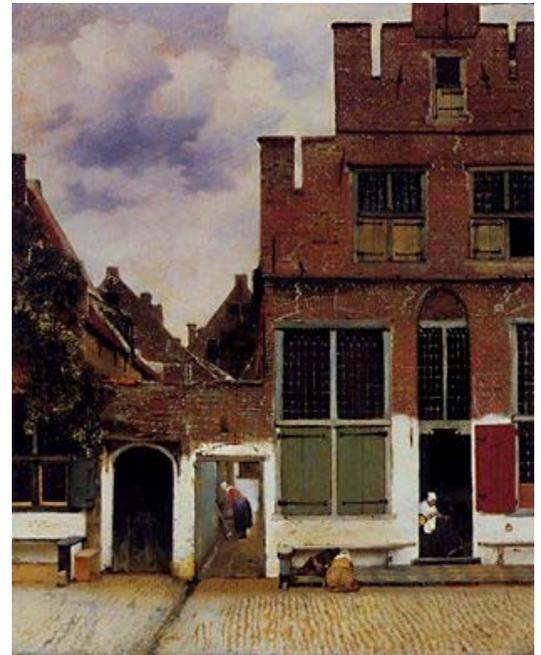
Vermeer's range was astonishingly limited. He did not paint landscapes (except for small works that decorate the walls of some of his interiors); he did not paint separate still lifes (although many of the pictures hold brilliant arrangements that are informally still lifes). None of the faces in his pictures are identifiable portraits. Except for a half-hidden pair of youngsters at play in *The Little Street*, children make no appearance in his work, although his home was crowded with them. Of the 15 he fathered, 11 survived infancy.

We don't know where he studied or with whom he apprenticed. There are no Vermeer drawings or oil sketches, the kind of swift notations that provide a beguiling glimpse of the artist thinking his way into a formal painting. On the other hand, x-ray machines and other modern instruments have found figures and objects that Vermeer eliminated or altered, giving explorers of the work a solid sense of slow, painstaking care. Wheelock knows what lies below the surface of all of the paintings that are or might be Vermeers. The underlayers always show changes.

One surprise is what was found under the small (9 by 7 inches) *Girl with the Red Hat*. It is, unusually for Vermeer, on a wood panel rather than canvas, and x-rays revealed that directly under the image of that sensuous young creature—with no paint layer separating them—is a bust-length portrait of a man in a brimmed hat. The style of the man's head, according to Wheelock, is similar to that found in small portraits by Carel Fabritius. It is a disconcerting discovery. Would Vermeer have obliterated the work of a man who was probably a friend or even, as seems possible to some scholars, a teacher? When he died, Vermeer owned at least two Fabritius paintings, and one of the rare published references to him actually suggested Fabritius at least as a major influence. Considered Rembrandt's most gifted pupil, Fabritius settled in Delft in 1650; four years later he was killed in a devastating explosion of the city's gunpowder storehouse. A history of Delft published in 1667 included an elegy to Fabritius, with these tantalizing lines: "But happily there rose from his fire / VERMEER, who masterlike, trod his path."



Scholars are still debating whether *Young Girl with a Red Hat* was painted by Vermeer or one of his circle.



Just under two feet high, Vermeer's *The Little Street* (c. 1657-58) conveys the poetic beauty of everyday life.

Kenneth Clark, the British art historian, once concluded from the evidence of the paintings that Vermeer must have worked in two rooms, each with a different set of leaded-glass windows bringing light from the left. But another authority observed that one could as readily conclude from the pictures that he set up his easel in as many as nine different interiors. In fact, he appears to have used or altered or invented spaces to suit his needs, and he could have done it all in a single studio.

One of the intriguing aspects of his work is the way Vermeer kept returning to favored objects. That famous ermine-trimmed, lemon-yellow satin jacket, which belonged to his wife, appears in six paintings. In nine paintings a brilliantly textured Turkish carpet (or tapestry) can be found, often crumpled, on a table. The wooden chairs with the well-known lion's-head finials are seen in 11 paintings. And in picture after picture we are offered glimpses of a luminous pearl earring or a shapely white Delft wine pitcher.

Those repetitions might signify a poverty of imagination or a poverty of props. Still, Vermeer was apparently capable of borrowing such costly items as huge wall maps and virginals when he wanted them for a painting. Maybe he felt most comfortable using known objects; it seems just as plausible to suggest that he was obsessed with a few

familiar things, with their shapes and colors and the ways they reflected and absorbed light—which was, above all, his eternally favorite subject.

Vermeer, born in 1632, grew up in fairly comfortable surroundings. His father owned an inn and was an art dealer. Delft was a thriving place with a population of about 25,000, an important pottery industry—famed for its blue-and-white Delftware—and 200 breweries; it was safer to drink beer than the water.

By the time he was 21, Vermeer had taken two major steps: he had married, and he had joined the local trade association, the Guild of St. Luke, a requirement for anyone whose livelihood involved making or dealing in arts or crafts. His wife, Catharina Bolnes, was Catholic, and Vermeer converted to Catholicism, possibly to placate a somewhat disapproving mother-in-law, Maria Thins. From the evidence of his art, a scholar once concluded that Vermeer must have had "a placid and lovely disposition," apparently lovely enough to develop a comfortable relationship with this difficult woman. Eventually she shared her home and income with his and Catharina's large family. Like his father, Vermeer also dealt in art and sold his own work, but his production was slow, and he seems to have perennially been short of funds. On his death, two Vermeers went to his baker to settle a huge bill for bread.

Because Vermeer painted so few pictures—depending on the authority, from 31 to 35 works are admitted to the canon, and perhaps 7 others have been lost—his name virtually vanished from the world of art for two centuries and has been forever burdened with a romantic fable of his isolation. Actually, Dutch collectors have always treasured his work, and he was sufficiently respected in his own time to be twice elected the dean or "headman" of the Guild of St. Luke. There are surviving diaries of contemporaries from other cities who made trips or detours to find him. One admirer traveled to Delft twice from The Hague, later writing in his journal, "I went to see a celebrated painter named Vermeer." In the past century, he became celebrated once more when King William I of the Netherlands acquired *View of Delft* and installed it in his royal gallery in the Mauritshuis. Experts in Dutch art began looking at paintings ascribed to other artists and concluded, not always correctly, that they were the work of Vermeer. Inevitably, collectors became interested. In 1887, on a trip to Europe, Henry G. Marquand, a New York financier and a lavish supporter of the young Metropolitan Museum of Art, bought the elegant *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* for \$800. Two years later, he gave it to the Met, the first of the master's art to reach an American museum.



Young Woman with a Water Pitcher is among 21 works in the exhibit--from a total oeuvre of only about 35.

Details of Vermeer's life are sparse, and much of what has found its way into print is the result of the diligence of John Michael Montias, a Yale University economics professor and art lover who spent parts of at least a dozen years exploring Delft's moldy municipal archives. In Vermeer's day, almost every major financial transaction was witnessed by a notary. Each notarized document was filed in one of the bulky volumes that survived the centuries, and almost everything bearing the Vermeer name turns up in Montias' *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History*.

We can only guess at the character and personality of the man who painted those serene images, but Montias' research yielded poignant details from the end of the artist's life. Vermeer was only 43 when he died in December 1675, leaving his large family in financial distress. The following year, his wife applied for permission to use the capital tied up in a trust, explaining her plight. A ruinous war—the French invaded Holland in 1672—had blighted the economy, and for some time Vermeer could sell nothing. "As a result," Catharina Bolnes related, "owing to the great burden of [his] children ...he had lapsed into such decay and decadence, which he had so taken to heart that...in a day and a half he had gone from being healthy to being dead."

Montias is also the source of speculation that for a time Vermeer had a single important patron who was the heir of a rich brewer; he not only lent the artist money but is assumed by some Vermeer scholars to have bought those paintings that, years after, were sold off from the estate of a son-in-law. The catalog of that famous 1696 auction offers tantalizing glimpses of Vermeers we will never know: a self-portrait; a view of some houses; a gentleman washing his hands in a room with sculptures.

The National Gallery exhibition will show one work that, sad to say, falls short of perfection, indeed a picture that Wheelock, among others, has bluntly labeled "a failure." This is Vermeer's *Allegory of Faith*, a religious piece completed in the last years of his life. The picture's setting is a rich Dutch interior, its Faith a large woman with one foot on a globe, one hand on her breast and her eyes melodramatically raised toward heaven. On the black-and-white-tiled marble floor is a bitten apple—symbol of the transgression of Adam and Eve—as well as a crushed, bloody snake representing Sin vanquished by Catholic belief. Wheelock points out that Vermeer seemed to find it necessary to place

his images in specific surroundings, and the image of Faith triumphing over Evil does not fit very well into a richly furnished 17th-century Dutch interior.

On the other hand, "real"—almost photographic—though his greatest pictures appear, they are magical inventions, ultimately realer than real. For years, for example, Vermeerists prowled Delft, searching in vain for the model of *The Little Street*. Contemporary street maps of the city show nothing like the collection of dwellings in the picture. It seems that Vermeer created the street, combining existing buildings, a small alley and the arrangement of doors and windows to suit himself.

Hardly anything was immune to the demands of his educated eyes. Consider the large contemporary map of the Netherlands that appears as a wall decoration in two paintings. It was a costly piece, probably borrowed, and an example can still be seen in the collection of the West fries Museum in Hoorn, in the central Netherlands. For each painting, the dimensions were altered and colors changed to suit the composition.

Finally, there is the wondrous matter of absent shadows. In *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, a chair against the wall is lit by the unseen window on the left and, quite logically, casts a shadow. Logically, the woman should also cast a shadow, but she does not. Its absence craftily, brilliantly emphasizes her presence. Wheelock felicitously calls this wily trick Vermeer's way of "manipulating reality." As only Vermeer could, he was gently compelling us to pay attention, and we do.



Dividers held in one hand, his other hand resting on a book, Vermeer's geographer embodies the spirit of inquiry. At the hub of exploration during the 17th century, the Netherlands was the center of mapmaking.

Frequent contributor Helen Dudar last wrote on efforts to control trafficking in stolen art (September) and about film company Merchant Ivory (March).