

Johannes Vermeer, 1632-75
By Celeste Brusati

Few old master painters are as esteemed as Johannes Vermeer. Nearly everyone, it seems, admires the exquisite simplicity and subtle optical appeal of his pictures. Usually focused on a single figure--most often a woman--or a few figures enframed in the corner of a room deftly suffused in light, his paintings epitomize that fantasy of domestic order and tranquility that only the world of canvas and pigment can fully indulge. It has often been noted that Vermeer's pristine domestic spaces have a still life-quality. Their inhabitants rarely speak, their gestures are few, and they tend to be quietly absorbed in such activities as reading, writing, sleeping, making music, making lace or simply looking. Even music-making appears to be a curiously soundless pleasure in this silent pictorial world.

Vermeer's reputation as one of the greatest artists of his day rests on an extant *oeuvre* of just more than thirty pictures. Most experts believe that he produced only about forty paintings during his twenty-year painting career. Compared to other well-known Dutch artists including Rembrandt, Frans Hals, and such contemporary genre painters as Gerard ter Borch and Pieter de Hooch, each of whom painted hundreds of pictures during the course of their careers, Vermeer was remarkably unprolific. Recent archival research has provided some explanations for how he managed to sustain a large family--Vermeer left his widow with eleven children when he died at the age of 43--on such meager production. Like many Dutch painters, he supplemented his income by dealing in art. He was also partly dependent on the wealth of his mother-in-law Maria Thins, who came from a distinguished Catholic family from Gouda, and on the support of a Delft collector, named Pieter Van Ruijven. Van Ruijven, a man of independent means who held a small municipal post in Delft, owned twenty of Vermeer's pictures and was in all likelihood his patron.¹

Vermeer's pictorial output was not only relatively small by Dutch standards, but also singularly focused. Nearly two-thirds of his works deal with amorous themes, mainly of men and women drinking wine or making music and of women reading, writing and receiving love letters. In these works, as well as in his other domestic scenes, his two townscapes, his portrait heads, and his rare forays into history and allegory, Vermeer always drew on well-established pictorial traditions, commenting retrospectively on popular themes rather than inventing new subject matter.

The elusive beauty of these pictures has often been described as enigmatic, poetically expressive, or reflective of the artist's innate sense of form and the "classical" harmony and purity of his designs. And yet, however much we may esteem Vermeer's artistry, there are many strange and even disturbing features of his art that too easily disappear behind such phrases. Looking at the splendid *Art of Painting* (plate 8), for example, it is difficult to imagine a poetic or aesthetic impulse that might explain why the unarticulated mass around the painter's brush refuses to take shape as the artist's hand. Equally puzzling is the question of how a "classical" sense of order might produce the calculated spatial ambiguities of foreground and background that Vermeer introduced into such works as *A Young Woman Asleep* (plate 3) or *Maid and a Woman Receiving a Letter* (plate 13). And terms like "poetic" or "expressive" are hardly meaningful when applied to features as curious as the mask like faces of his late pictures (fig. 1

and plates 12 and 14). Anomalies of this sort are reminders of the difficulty of characterizing Vermeer's artistic achievement, which is far more idiosyncratic--but no less compelling--than is suggested by unproblematic aesthetic evocations of it.

The most astute of Vermeer's admirers have realized that both the idiosyncrasy and the powerful appeal of his art are rooted in the distinctive artifice of his style, or what has been termed somewhat more accurately his "vocabulary of representation."ⁱⁱ Although Vermeer did not achieve the widespread fame of his more prolific contemporaries until the nineteenth century, it is clear from the high prices paid for his works and the critical judgments of them recorded in seventeenth-and eighteenth-century auction catalogues that Vermeer's unusual artistry appealed to and was highly valued by a small group of knowledgeable connoisseurs throughout the eighteenth century.ⁱⁱⁱ Critics and commentators typically described Vermeer's distinctive style in terms of the optical qualities of his art, the way in which his pictures not only represent luminous effects, but also appear themselves to be produced by the image-making properties of light. These optical qualities are epitomized in the splendid *View of Delft* (plate 6), which is among the largest of Vermeer's pictures. The painting was purchased by the Dutch government in 1822 for the Mauritshuis Royal Cabinet of Paintings, on the occasion of the palace's transformation into a public museum. It was also the first of Vermeer's works to be publicly displayed and to attract serious critical attention from foreign visitors and aficionados of Dutch art. It was purportedly the experience of seeing this picture that motivated the French politician and critic Etienne-Josephe Theophile Thoré to undertake the first serious research into Vermeer's *oeuvre* and archival remains.^{iv} What impressed Thoré and other early admirers of the *View of Delft* was its apparent lack of artifice, the natural quality of the light, and the apparent accuracy with which the view seemed observed. Today, most scholars agree that not only the "photographic" quality of this work but also certain striking features of Vermeer's style owe something to his knowledge of the *camera obscura*.

This precursor of the modern photographic camera was a fairly simple apparatus, consisting of either a box or a darkened room equipped with a small aperture, usually fitted with a convex lens. When light was shot through the lens, a shimmering colored reflection of whatever was placed before it appeared opposite the lens on the interior wall of the box. Although these shadowy images appeared upside-down and reversed from right to left, they produced an uncannily lifelike visual impression. Vermeer's contemporaries delighted in the almost magical fashion in which this device appeared to let nature to paint itself. They were especially taken with the cinematic way it captured both the movement and likeness of what it represented, and allowed the viewer to gaze unseen and from a distance at life as it unfolded in front of the lens. In addition to enjoying the technological amusement offered by its glowing images, seventeenth-century viewers also saw the camera obscura as an image-making device that offered knowledge of nature. On the one hand, the device was thought to demonstrate the optical process by which light formed natural images in the seeing eye. On the other hand, these images were seen as having the natural appearance, which Dutch artists sought to achieve in their pictures. Samuel van Hoogstraten, a Dutch painter and writer whom Vermeer may have known personally, offered the camera obscura's image as a paradigm of lifelike painting, and advised aspiring artists to study and imitate the pictorial reflections produced by this device to learn how to make their own paintings appear "truly natural."^v

It seems that Vermeer, too, took the camera obscura as a model for his own pictorial practice. The characteristic absence of delineated contours marking the boundaries of forms, abrupt disjunctions of scale and tone, juxtapositions of focused and unfocused details, circular dabs of paint on darker backgrounds which imitate the circles of halation that appear on unfocused highlights seen in optical devices have all been cited as evidence of Vermeer's acquaintance with this image-making technology. Despite general agreement concerning Vermeer's familiarity with the camera obscura, scholars have had different ideas about its relationship to his art. Initially, it was presumed that he used the camera as a mechanical aid to producing accurate images. In recent years, the celebrated realism of Dutch art has come to be understood rather differently, less as a product of accurate transcriptions and more as a function of the naturalizing pictorial conventions that give Dutch pictures the appearance of having been observed and faithfully recorded. This reassessment of Dutch realism has helped call attention to the ways in which the camera obscura might have provided the optical model for Vermeer's representational vocabulary itself.^{vi}

While it has long been thought that Vermeer used the device in making pictures like the *View of Delft* many scholars now realize that he did so with an eye to emulating the peculiarities of its optically produced image rather than to obtain an accurate record of the site. In part, the picture owes its impression of topographical accuracy to Vermeer's use of a pictorial format conventionally employed in topographical views that present city profiles as seen from across a river. The use of this formula itself gives the picture a factual appearance, despite Vermeer's alteration of many features of the townscape. Vermeer's adjustments are especially interesting in light of the overall effect of compression they produce. By altering rooflines and reorienting selected buildings, he gave the Delft skyline a more frieze like appearance, and collapsed spatial intervals between structures, effectively assuring that his painting would more closely resemble the look of the image formed optically in the camera obscura.^{vii}

Vermeer's emulation of the camera's representational means was not simply a question of style. His sustained interest in the artifice of images believed to provide empirical access to nature also raises larger questions about the kind of knowledge of the world such representations offer. Unlike Van Hoogstraten, who celebrated the descriptive and naturalizing properties of the camera obscura's pictures, Vermeer considered their possibilities with circumspection. By focusing the camera on the description of domestic life, rather than the picturing of nature, he repeatedly poses the pictorial question of what its optical artifice might reveal or conceal when directed at human subjects. Pictures that exemplify his optical method, like his haunting *Head of a Young Woman in a Turban* (plate 7) are among the most poignant of Vermeer's meditations on the elusiveness and intangibility of what we can know by way of images made by the action of light reflected on a surface, whether in the eye or on the canvas. In this respect, Vermeer's representational concerns diverged from those of contemporary genre painters, including Van Hoogstraten, Ter Borch, Dou, and Metsu, with whom he is often compared. In place of their imitative virtuosity, Vermeer's paintings reveal a gradual breaking down of the conventions of naturalism, which his contemporaries had refined to such an extraordinary degree in their works. In the course of his pictorial investigations, he moved from the clotted and crusty facture of such pictures as the *Woman Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (plate 4), with its tiny bright dots of reflected light glittering on the sleeve and hair of the letter reader to the smoothly laid on patches of color that characterize his handling of paint in pictures from the 1670s (plates 11-15).

Over the years, Vermeer gradually reduced his descriptive means to something like a "bare optical statement," adopting a seemingly impartial method of tonally mapping (rather than modeling) the myriad surfaces and textures in his mature works. The oddly disjointed patterns of tone visible in many of Vermeer's late pictures ultimately destroy the descriptive transparency of the naturalist convention, which his colleagues worked so hard to maintain.

Vermeer made the analogy between the optical basis of his own representational craft and that of the camera obscura very explicitly in his diminutive *Lace-maker* (plate 11), a tiny work of less than 10 by 8 inches in size. Both its small format and close-up view of its subject invite the viewer to lavish on the picture the kind of close attention that the lace-maker gives to her painstaking task. Upon close scrutiny the picture reveals not only the craft of the lace-maker, but also that of the painter, who has set up a complex interplay between his own artistry and hers, most conspicuously in details such as the juxtaposition of the razor-sharp lines of the threads she works with her bobbins and the more loosely articulated threads of paint spilling out of the sewing cushion in the left foreground. The circular dots of paint which represent the unfocused highlights on the threads and on the lace collar, the flat patches of pigment which constitute her braid, the juxtaposition of the crisply focused plane of the blank wall in the background with the numerous out-of-focus features of the figure and her accoutrements accentuate the optical craftedness of the image. Vermeer's insistence on the artifice of his method is all the more evident when his *Lace-maker* is compared to a fairly typical rendition of this subject by Nicolaes Maes (fig 2). Vermeer not only removes much of the descriptive incident so fully articulated in the Maes, he also concentrates the greatest optical ambiguity in the figure itself, insisting that we see disjointed flat patches of color where we would most hope and expect to find a seamlessly modeled hand, arm, or face.

As the above example suggests, questions of pictorial means and meanings are never totally separable, least of all in Vermeer's work, where representational issues are played out thematically in his choice and treatment of subjects. The vast majority of Vermeer's paintings present familiar genre scenes transformed into pictorial meditations on what might be called the erotics of representation. In these pictures he invites us to consider the eroticized visual attention paid by a male artist to a female subject in a variety of ways. Sometimes he examines this relationship vicariously in his depiction of men attending visually to their female companion (plate 5). Most often, however, it is in the staging of each scene that draws our attention to conditions under which both the artist and the beholder sustain their gazes upon female subjects. The single-mindedness with which he was able to explore this problem may owe something to the fact that so many of his works appear to have been done with the support of a single patron. It is not clear just how these pictures reflect Van Ruijven's interests, but without substantial financial backing it seems unlikely that Vermeer would have had the opportunity to investigate these issues in such a sustained and consistent way.

An unsuspecting visitor to the Mauritshuis might well be surprised to find alongside the *View of Delft* and much beloved *Head of a Young Woman Wearing a Turban* (plate 7) a painting of *Diana and her Nymphs* (plate 1) also by Vermeer's hand. Vermeer's earliest works were, in fact, large-scale biblical and mythological pictures quite different in size and style from the small cabinet pieces we usually associate with his name.^{viii} Yet even in these early history pictures, we can see him exploring thematic concerns that run throughout his work. In the *Diana*, for

example, Vermeer looks at the dangers of transgressive viewing via the tragic myth of Actaeon, the young hunter who paid with his life for accidentally spying on the chaste goddess at her bath. As punishment for straying into the sacred grotto closed to the male gaze by the goddess' proscription, Actaeon was transformed into a stag and then consumed by his own dogs who took him for prey. Vermeer has approached the subject with some delicacy, showing the goddess of the hunt enjoying a footbath in the company of her nymphs. He has presented both Diana and her entourage clothed rather than bathing in the nude, as they usually appear in painting. The few conspicuous bits of flesh he does include, such as the oddly illuminated breasts of the goddess, suggest more the painter's discomfort than sensual pleasure in painting them. Perhaps most strikingly, he has put himself and his viewers into Actaeon's place as illicit beholders. Lest we fail to note that substitution, Vermeer has included subtle reminders of Actaeon's tragic fate in the form of a dog, the animal that ultimately consumed the hunter, gazing at a thistle, a traditional symbol of transience.

In his repeated and somewhat reticent depictions of the domestic interior and its predominately female inhabitants, he often betrays a transgressive sense of the eroticized pleasures of looking at and representing what amounts to a domestic version of Diana's chaste realm. It is interesting to think about his *Procuress* (plate 2) of 1656, in the context of his ongoing concern with the erotics of representation. This life-sized picture, which is the earliest dated extant work, is rightly described as a bridge between the large-scale history paintings, which precede it, and the smaller cabinet pieces that follow it. Its format and subject matter derive from the work of a group of Utrecht painters, including Hendrick Ter Bruggen, Dirck van Baburen and Gerrit Honthorst, who were known for their half-length pictures of the sensual pleasures and dangers of the bordello and tavern. Their works, like the genre pictures of Caravaggio to which they are related, were much sought after by collectors at the time. Vermeer's early interest in their work may be related to the likelihood of his having had some of his training in Utrecht.^{ix} We also know that an inventory of the common property of Vermeer's in-laws included a painting of a *Procuress* by the Utrecht painter, Dirck Baburen, which was later transferred to his mother-in-law's house in Delft.^x Vermeer, who lived for a time with his family in that house, included this painting as an accessory on the wall in at least two of his paintings, the *Concert*, formerly in the Gardner Museum, and the *Young Lady Seated at the Virginals* (fig 1) in London. In his own version of the subject Vermeer departed from his prototypes in various ways, most notably in the figure of the procuress, normally a wrinkled old hag, but here shown as an indeterminately sexed figure in black with a smooth mask-like face that bears a remarkable resemblance to that of the male patron about to make his transaction. Sexual innuendoes concerning the character of this exchange are displaced onto the accessories like the lute neck and glasses held by the figures and the suggestively folded apron of the woman whose sexual favors are being purchased. Vermeer conspicuously omitted the exposed fleshy bosom, which usually identifies the prostitute figures in these scenes of sex for sale. The man who drops the coin into her hand while grasping her breast is perhaps the most striking figure of all, for he is the only male figure in a Vermeer painting who actually touches a woman in a frankly sexual way. Even as he does so, the illusory nature of his grasp becomes evident as the soft form of her breast begins to dissolve between his fingers. It is difficult to imagine this man with his fingers dripping in paint as anyone but Vermeer's surrogate. If he is, what is the nature of their transaction? Is he paying her sexual services, or for posing as his model, and for the erotic pleasure he takes in sustaining his gaze upon her while he paints?

In subsequent works Vermeer played out his relation to his model in terms of his gaze upon rather than his grasp of his subject. In the *Woman Asleep at a Table* (plate 3), for example, Vermeer uses sleep as a device for looking at his human subject in the guise of "stilled life," like the objects piled up around her. Iconographic readings of this picture, which focus on the proverbial and moral associations of sleeping figures with the vice of sloth, tend to avoid the issue of Vermeer's deployment of sleep as a pictorial strategy for observing his human subject. Vermeer's interest in the masking and unmasking aspects of this theme are evident in his juxtaposition of the mask like face of the sleeping woman with the portion of a painting visible behind it showing a discarded mask at the foot of a cupid. We might well ask if Vermeer is more concerned with making a moral judgment upon the woman's wine-induced sleep, or with alerting us to the unmasking of her amorous dreams and his own eroticized gaze as he paints her.

In the slightly later *Woman Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (plate 4), Vermeer frames his attention to his subject within the conventions of the popular amorous theme of the love letter, showing the female object of his gaze absorbed in reading a message of love, rather than dreaming of it. He suggestively pairs the elusive reflection of the woman's head caught in the window with the letter below it, as if to draw a comparison between the pictorial image wrought by his desire and that image of the beloved figured in the lover's missive. In its optical presence this mirror image of the woman resembles the mirror image above the head of the *Lady Standing at the Virginals with a Gentleman* (plate 5). Here Vermeer has made the popular theme of the music lesson or music-making couple an occasion for looking at the rapt visual attention a man lavishes on a woman, who seems only to return that gaze indirectly. Within the ebony-framed rectangle at the farthest remove from the viewer we can see not only a suggestion of the woman's reciprocal gaze, but also what appear to be the legs of the painter's easel. Bracketed off in this tonally rendered image is the optical artifice that would become his new way of painting. Vermeer gave a human face to this artifice in his compelling *Head of the Young Woman Wearing a Turban* (plate 7). Here it is the vagaries of tone rather than the certainties of delineation, which produce an image that epitomizes the fragility of the eyes and the painter's optical hold on the visible world that "truly natural painting" claims to capture.

All but a few of Vermeer's interiors feature mirrors, pictures or maps on their walls. The inclusion of such details is not surprising given the popularity of these forms of pictorial wall decoration in Holland at the time. These depicted images also serve--along with other interior furnishings--richly inventive signifying functions. As early as the 1860s, Théophile Thoré recognized that the accessories in Vermeer paintings, particularly the pictures on the walls, were of some significance. Much of the writing on Dutch genre pictures in the last two decades has sought to interpret these accessories with reference to their similarity to the images found in the Dutch emblem books so popular in Holland during Vermeer's time. These illustrated books were essentially collections of images furnished with captions and commentaries. These emblematic texts have been thought to provide the interpretive key to explaining the meanings of pictorial motifs, which appear both in paintings and in emblems. For example, the frequent appearance of marine paintings in pictures of women reading letters has been linked to love emblems in which an image of a boat at sea is accompanied by a verse comparing the beloved to a ship and the course of love to the sea. Thus, in pictures like Gabriel Metsu's *Letter Reader* (fig 3) the presence of a seascape on the wall alerts the beholder to the amorous nature of the letter as well as to the

steadiness or storminess of the relationship between the sender and the recipient of the missive. In his painting treatise, Van Hoogstraten praised the ingenious use of emblems and accessories to "covertly explain something", and described this practice as a form of pictorial writing through which painters could wittily make the hidden passions and emotions of their figures visible and legible.^{xi} What is remarkable about Dutch genre painting is the extent to which artists entrusted the task of describing human feelings and interactions to these cleverly disposed accessories rather than to the human figure itself.

Perhaps more than any of his compatriots Vermeer seems to have understood what was at stake in choosing to signify complex human emotions in this way. In his so-called *Love Letter* (plate 13) in Amsterdam, he literally put a frame around the popular theme of a woman receiving a love letter and its emblematic apparatus to pictorially comment upon it. Vermeer has staged the scene of a woman conversing with her maid in a brightly lit room behind the rectangular borders of an open doorway from which a curtain has been raised. Although Vermeer's picture is replete with emblematic accessories, they complicate rather than elucidate the unfolding narrative. Emblems of domesticity such as the broom, slippers and needlework are arrayed with the lute, the music and the paintings on the wall which all have amorous connotations. Indeed some of these accessories, including the broom, slippers, and needlework, can refer to both spheres of activity. Vermeer has left ambiguous whether the woman's unopened letter is being sent or received. By the same token, his use of the marine painting and the pastoral landscape on the wall behind suggests how neither image elucidates the contents of the letter or the substance of the conversation between the woman and her maid.

Vermeer was not alone in reflecting pictorially on the conventions of Dutch genre painting. Some years earlier, Van Hoogstraten had looked at the love letter theme in his enigmatic *Interior Viewed from a Threshold* (fig 2.). There he constructed a voyeuristic peek through three thresholds into an interior strangely bereft of human interactions, and furnished only with accessories. The most prominent of these is a painting of a woman receiving a letter, which is framed by an open doorway. The depicted painting, in turn, is clearly recognizable as an adaptation of works by Gerard ter Borch and his pupil Caspar Netscher. Both Vermeer and Van Hoogstraten incorporated into their love-letter pictures an array of objects with erotic connotations--the slippers, keys, lute--as well as others, such as the broom and needlework--associated with domesticity. Whereas Van Hoogstraten uses his accessories as pictorial glosses on a popular type of epistolary image and how we look at it, Vermeer alerts us to the problem of how emblematic accessories produce meanings at all.

Like Van Hoogstraten, Vermeer availed himself of the representational devices often used to introduce emblematic meanings into pictures to frame commentaries on the art of painting itself. Far from providing straightforward keys to the interpretation of his images, however, the paintings on the walls of Vermeer's pictures pose questions and generate meanings in a variety of ways. Sometimes he uses them to draw formal and thematic parallels between the human interactions described in his pictures and the depicted images behind them, as in the case of the *Woman Asleep at a Table* (plate 3) and the Buckingham Palace *Lady Standing at the Virginals* (plate 5), in which the attendance of the gentleman on the lady at the virginals is paralleled to the dependent relationship of the captive figure of the elderly Cimon suckling at his daughter's breast in the painting on the wall.^{xiii} On other occasions Vermeer

depicted a given picture in several different contexts, such as a large Cupid holding a love letter, which x-rays show that he painted out of the Dresden *Letter Reader* (plate 4) and which appears in the *Lady Standing at the Virginals* (plate 14) and the *Music Lesson* in the Frick Collection. He also displayed the Baburen *Procuress* twice, once in the Boston *Concert* and again in the *Lady Seated at the Virginals*. The *Finding of Moses*, which is writ large on the wall of his *Woman Writing a Letter With Her Maid* (plate 12), appears again in a more diminutive format in his *Astronomer* (plate 9). Interpreters looking for emblematic meanings in Vermeer's work have given far more attention to the content of these pictures than to the meaningfully nuanced ways in which Vermeer has represented them. Sometimes he crops out a specific fragment, other times he juxtaposes them strategically with maps, mirrors, depicted images and other representational elements in his paintings. Many of these commentators have been all too ready to presume that Vermeer's depicted paintings were meant as moral commentaries on the scenes before them--that *The Finding of Moses* in the *Astronomer* alluded to biblical proscriptions against astronomy, for example, or that the Last Judgment in the *Woman with the Balance Scale* (plate 10) was intended to be a moral judgment upon the vanity of her absorption in the worldly matters.

In recent years interpreters have been more inclined to consider questions of meaning in these works in broader terms.^{xiii} In studies of Vermeer's very accurate depictions of cartographic materials in his pictures, the scientific activity of *The Astronomer*, has been linked by way of the picture on the wall with Moses' knowledge of the wisdom of Egypt, which included astronomy and geography. Likewise, the darkened mirror, the empty scales and the painting of the weighing of souls in the *Woman with the Balance* have been connected to her pregnancy and read as references to the yet to be determined fate of her unborn child's soul. Some of the most provocative readings of his pictures have sought to examine how Vermeer used emblematic conventions to bracket and juxtapose different forms of pictorial artistry and call attention to the kinds of meanings each produces. Several critics have suggested how Vermeer used depicted paintings to point to pictorial subjects and concerns that are excluded from his optically rendered scenes of domestic life.^{xiv} Seen in this context, Vermeer's *Woman with a Balance* offers a powerful meditation on the relationship between the empirical visual judgment exercised by the woman checking the justness of her balance scale and the moral judgment enacted in the large painting of the final weighing of souls in the *Last Judgment* depicted on the wall behind her. In juxtaposing the figure of the woman with the depicted history painting Vermeer visually frames a comparison between two kinds of painting and two ways of understanding the world, one rooted in the judgments of the eye and the other grounded in judgments and considerations of a moral order.

Nowhere did Vermeer use this strategy more explicitly to reflect on his own art than in his ambitious *Art of Painting*, where he paired a marvelously ornate historical wall map with a model posing as Clio, the muse of history. In doing so he was making a pointed comparison between two radically different ways of pictorially representing history, one descriptive and geographical and the other figural and allegorical. Many features of this work, especially such obviously allegorical trappings the book, trumpet and laurel crown that identify the figure as the muse of history have led commentators to treat this picture as a straightforward allegory. Yet Vermeer has not really painted an allegory in his *Art of Painting*. Instead he has produced a commentary on the making of allegorical representations, by lifting the curtain on the pictorial

process through which allegories are crafted in the studio. The studio he describes is not just any studio, but one which closely resembles the domestic spaces in which Vermeer typically set his pictures. The painter, who wears so-called Burgundian costume of the sixteenth century, is as much on stage as his dressed-up model. Though not a literal self-portrait of Vermeer, the painter nonetheless represents Vermeer's artistry by demonstrating his manner of tonally mapping out the colored shapes of the leaves in the model's crown. Just as the unformed hand of the artist makes us see the limits of Vermeer's optical method, his staging of an allegory in the making calls our attention to the pictorial artifice by which allegorical meanings themselves are produced.

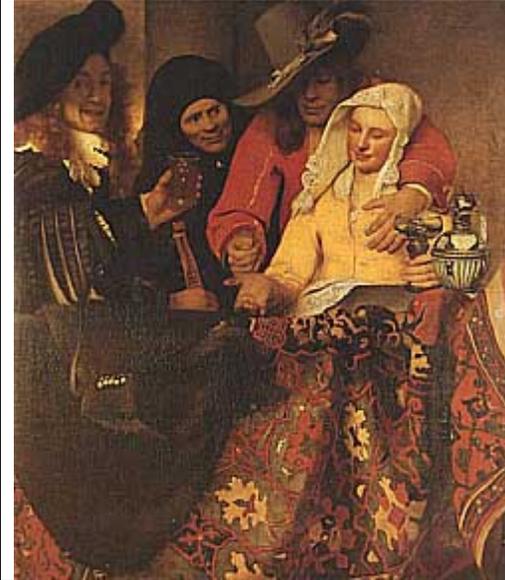
To return to the question of the appeal of Vermeer's art, it seems that its visual interest cannot be reduced to what might be seen as beautiful or poetical in any conventional sense. Much of what is so compelling about his meticulously crafted pictures, with all their optical idiosyncrasies, lies in the depth of feeling with which he meditated on the limitations of the descriptive artistry thought to be "truly natural" by his contemporaries. Perhaps better than any other Dutch genre painter, he reminds us of the complexities of life and meaning which will always elude that art's optical net. (For short citations, refer to Further Reading)É Special thanks to the graduate students in my seminars at the University of Michigan and Northwestern University for stimulating discussions on Vermeer, and to Jennifer Robertson for her critical reading of this essay.

PLATES

Diana and her Nymphs (plate 1)



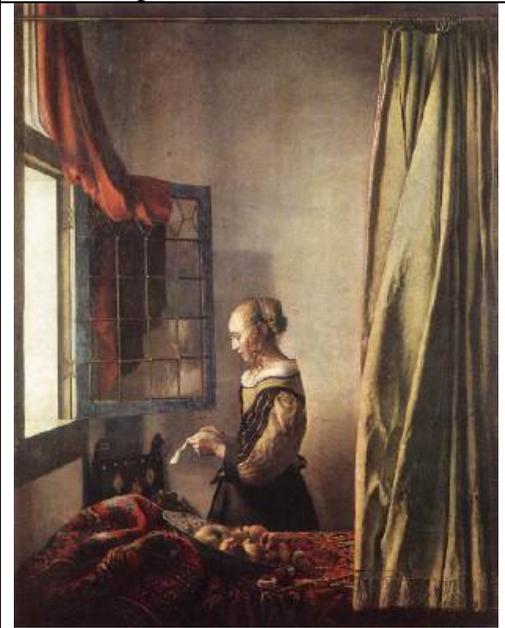
Procuress (plate 2)



Young Woman Asleep at a Table (plate 3)



Woman Reading a Letter at an Open Window (plate 4)



Lady Standing at the Virginals with a Gentleman (plate 5)



View of Delft (plate 6)



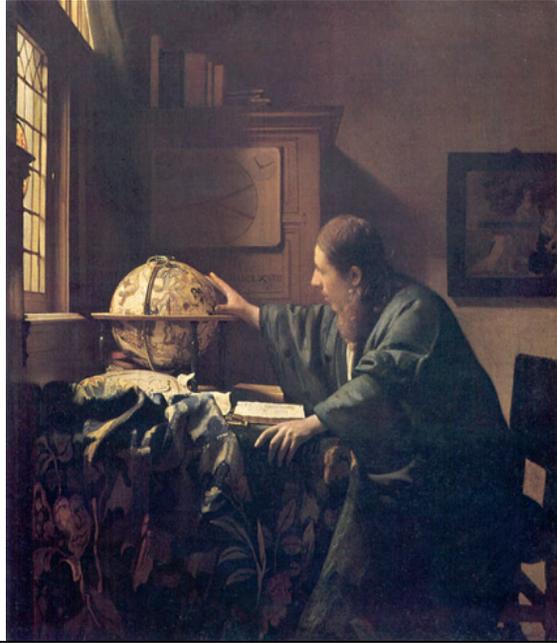
Head of a Young Woman in a Turban (plate 7)



Art of Painting (plate 8)



Astronomer (plate 9)



Woman with the Balance Scale (plate 10)

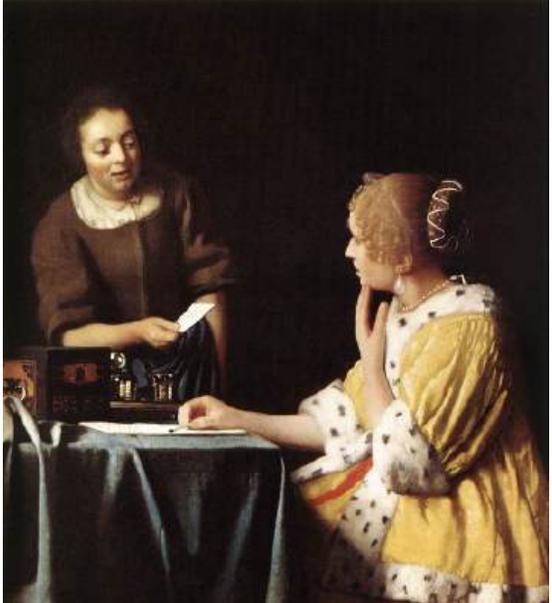


Lace-maker (plate 11)



Woman Writing a Letter With Her Maid
(plate 12)



<i>Maid and a Woman Receiving a Letter</i> (plate 13)	<i>Young Lady Seated at the Virginals</i> (fig 1)
	

NOTES

ⁱ Michael Montias gives a detailed and fascinating account of the archival story of Vermeer's family and professional connections in *Vermeer's Milieu, A Web of Social History*, Princeton, 1989

ⁱⁱ This phrase was coined by Lawrence Gowing in his book, *Vermeer*, London, 1952 [reprint: New York, 1970]. Gowing's study remains one of the most acute critical appreciations of Vermeer's artistry. This essay owes much to Gowing's insights as well as to the critical writings of Alpers, Berger, Nash and Snow, all of which develop aspects of Gowing's assessment of Vermeer.

ⁱⁱⁱ On the appreciation of Vermeer in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see Albert Blankert, *Vermeer of Delft: Complete Edition of the Paintings*. (Oxford: Phaidon, 1978), pp. 60-67.

^{iv} Thoré conducted his research on Vermeer while in political exile, and published his findings under the name of W. Bürger. He published a short essay and catalogue in W. Bürger, *Musées de la Hollande, II, Musées van der Hoop à Amsterdam et Musée de Rotterdam* (Brussels/Ostende: 1860), pp.67-88. The bulk of his research appeared in a series of articles in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, xxi, (1866), pp. 297-330, 458-70, 542-75.

^v Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst, anders de zichtbaere werelt* ["Introduction to the Academy of Painting, or the Visible World"] (Rotterdam: 1678), p.263.

^{vi}This re-thinking of Dutch realism was given particular impetus by the revisionist account of Northern art presented in Svetlana Alpers' influential study, *The Art of Describing*, Chicago, 1983. Alpers argued that the look of Dutch pictures and their compelling fiction of having been observed and recorded was the product of descriptive artifice rather exact transcription. Within her account of the she presents Vermeer as the premier artist who reflected on the implications of making pictures which present themselves as descriptions of the world seen in this way.

^{vii}Vermeer's manipulations of the topographic features of the *View Delft* are discussed in Arthur Wheelock and C.J. Kaldenbach. "Vermeer's *View of Delft* and his Vision of Reality." *Artibus et Historiae* 3 (1982): 9-35.

^{viii}In addition to the *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* in Edinburgh and the Mauritshuis *Diana*, a *St. Praxedis*, painted after an Italian picture, has been recently attributed to Vermeer. See Wheelock, "St. Praxedis: New Light on the Early Career of Vermeer."

^{ix}Montias discusses a number of good reasons for thinking that Vermeer spent time in Amsterdam and Utrecht during his formative years in *Vermeer and His Milieu*, pp. 98-107.

^xThe inventory was drawn up as part of the legal separation Maria Thins obtained from her abusive husband, Willem Bolnes. Montias gives the details of this separation and the events leading up to it, as well as documentation concerning the Baburen picture in *Vermeer and His Milieu*, pp. 116-22.

^{xi}Van Hoogstraten, p. 88.

^{xii}This picture, which depicts the story of the Roman prisoner Cimon, who was condemned to die by starvation and was suckled by his daughter Pero, may be the painting of "one who sucks the breast," mentioned in the inventory of pictures belonging to Vermeer's mother-in-law.

^{xiii}Examples include: Edward Snow, *A Study of Vermeer*; Harry Berger, "Conspicuous Exclusion," Nanette Salomon. "Vermeer and the Balance of Destiny," and James Welu, "Vermeer's Astronomer."

^{xiv}Most notably Alpers, Berger, Gowing, and Snow.