

The Sphinx of Delft: A Study into the Milieu of Domesticity in the Paintings of Johannes Vermeer

RAJARSHI ROY

ABSTRACT

The following paper is a piece of personal commentary and speculation based on the prior academic work available on the subject of Dutch Renaissance Art. The author, selects Johannes Vermeer, as an exemplary artist of the Late Renaissance age art in Netherlands. This essay will try and give the reader a less-academic and a simpler sojourn in to the deeply domestic milieu of Renaissance Art of the Low-European country. While Italian paintings have been at the major focal point of Renaissance scholarship, the scholar, who is as much an 'enraptured audience' of the domesticity of Low-European (Northern European) art, he wishes to take the readers in a journey to understand the finer politics of Protestant Artistry, without wishing to label it as "baroque", for its inherent closedness to artistic spezzatura.

INTRODUCTION

My Introduction to Johannes Vermeer came from a very unlikely source. I first came across the name in the Agatha Christie detective novel "After the Funeral", which may have been Vermeer's first popular culture reference. Certain historians also contend that the Nazi dictator, Adolf Hitler had himself been an avid admirer of his works. Details have in fact been obtained about his strict orders to the Nazi officers to "liberate" them from the earlier owners. After the Nazi defeat, those paintings along with certain others by Durer, van Eyck were

saved from a salt mine near Austria. One of those paintings were from Reichmarshall Hermann Goering's collection as well. While preparing for this blog, I also came across a film by Tracy Chevalier, called "The Girl with a Pearl Earring" which tried to make a fictional reconstruction behind the most famous painting in Vermeer's artistic oeuvre, "The Girl with A Pearl earring".



Figure (A): Movie Poster

The painting and the artist, had since then been at the centre of immense academic research work. It is considered that rarely any artist had such masterfully given a separate narrative to all the objects in a scene.

HIS SOCIO-POLITICAL MILIEU

In order to understand and appreciate the aesthetics of Vermeer's art; a somewhat rough idea of the socio-political milieu, under which he flourished must be understood.

If we go by the timeline of European Art History, we will notice that Vermeer belonged to the first generation of painters of the Baroque age, his time coincides with the Dutch Golden Age of Art.

Let us now consider the situation in post-Renaissance Europe. Majority of the European nations were going through Counter-Reformation. Descartes, Rousseau and others formed the highest echelons of philosophical thought. The Humanist ideals of the Renaissance had led to an increasing secularisation throughout Europe. The fusion of “reason with free-will”, bore fruit, as scientific successes. Consequently, a newer kind of cultural reform was emerging, establishing its own practical way of life. This was the rudimentary stage of the bourgeois form of life. Critics like John Carroll, in his book “Humanism: the wreck of western culture” suggests that this was actually a product of secularised Protestantism with Humanism. Home and family, were the core units of the bourgeois ideal. It was considered to be the sacred site of culture. The bourgeois idea also advocates that ideal work should take the form of a profession, thereby eliminating hobbies.

Vermeer’s importance in this rapid flowering of the European Bourgeois is immense. He paints the uninteresting, utilitarian Dutch households in the most sacred fashion. He arrests the focus of the viewer on the scene enfolding on the canvas, “not for once’ allowing us a peek outside the intricately designed windows”.

Arthur Wheelock Jr., a noted Vermeer critic muses that Vermeer follows no social hierarchy in the subjects of his paintings (who were mostly women). He paints the housemaid, the milk-woman and his own wife with similar passion. His works championed a class secularisation of unique kind.

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Johannes Vermeer was one of the most important artists of the Dutch Golden Age. He was known in his time as the “Vermeer of Delft”, due to existence of two other artists with same name.



Figure (B) – “A VIEW OF DELFT” – Vermeer

Vermeer was born in 1632 and raised in a Protestant household in the largely Catholic province of Delft. He was a part of the “Guild of St. Luke”,



*Figure (C) – “A MEETING OF THE GUILD OF ST. LUKE”
– Jan de Bray, a contemporary of Vermeer*

which was considered to be an immensely prestigious organisation at the time. The Guild was started by St. Luke who was identified by John of Damascus to paint the Virgin's portrait. He apprenticed under Carel Fabritius and later under Abraham Bloemaert.

In his early years, he mainly focussed on painting historical and mythological scenes. According to 17th century art theoreticians, paintings under the genre of historical and mythological scenes were considered highly important as they required the painter to use ecclesiastical knowledge and imagination.

In 1653, he married Catharina Bolnes, a wealthy Catholic woman and converted to her faith. It was during these middle years when he shifted to painting everyday life scenes from earlier historical paintings. Catharina in fact, modelled for many of his paintings including "Woman holding a balance" and "Woman reading a letter". It was through Catharina and her mother Maria's contacts Vermeer received patronages for his artworks, the most important of them being Pieter van Ruijven. He depended mostly on local patronages and never left Delft after his marriage, this earning the name "The Sphinx of Delft" from art critic Thore Burger.

During his final years, before his death, he ran up huge debts with the State due to which a lot of his paintings were seized as collateral. His decreased popularity was mainly due to the fact that he never left Delft and rarely marketed his artworks. Also unlike Rembrandt he never worked with woodcuts and engravings. His patronage dwindled severely during the Anglo-French war.

He died in 1675.

STYLE AND TECHNIQUE

Vermeer's style and technique of painting has been a topic of immense critical scrutiny since A.E Gallatin wrote the essay "Vermeer of Delft" in 1917 in order to popularise his works in the American Magazine of Art. Several theories, often conflicting, came into discussion.

What we mainly know today about 17th century Dutch Painting methods is largely based on information gleaned from contemporary art manuals integrated with modern scientific analysis. Period painting manuals were more apt to discuss the theoretic values of art and painting, rather than practical side of everyday studio practice. Even though the basic methodology was occasionally outlined and recipes were given for specific palettes, the actual craft of making a picture was largely transmitted from artists to young aspiring artists through years of apprenticeship. Although Vermeer experimented ceaselessly with specific techniques to render effects of natural illumination, evidence points to the fact that he largely worked within the boundaries of traditional studio methods of Northern European artists.

17th century Northern European painters proceeded according to a relatively step-by-step method which they had assimilated in a master's studio. The work load was thus divided into distinct phases in order to deal with the principal pictorial components one at a time. This was done to grant greater importance to perspective accuracy, naturalistic illumination and other finer details. Once the drawing and the lighting scheme was done with, the artists "worked up" their composition in pieces, painting one area at a time, in the "under-painting" stage. Vermeer critics have divided the methodology followed by Vermeer, into following stages: –

- *Choice And Support Preparation* – Out of 36 paintings produced by Vermeer, only two of the paintings were drawn on thin oak panels instead of canvas. The

preparation of the canvas was the first stage and most artists preferred making homemade canvases for their composition. The canvas was first sized according to the needed dimensions and stretched between wooden frames. In order to seal the paint to the ground surface of the canvas and the paint layers, animal glue was mainly used in the gelatinous stage. After this, sized canvas was smoothed with a pumice stone by a process called “grounding”. It provides the final layer on which the artist painted.

- *Dead Colouring* or Under-painting – The under-painting technique is a typical method which was followed by Vermeer. In this stage, in which the intended scene of the final painting is drawn in a monochromatic version. This technique greatly facilitates the realisation of finely balanced compositions, makes light depictions accurate and improves chromatic subtleties. Warm earth tones, cooler grey shades and shades of umber were used in this stage. This stage is rarely followed by modern artists.
- *Inventing or Drawing* – The 17th century concept of inventing corresponds to the stage of drawing or sketching executed directly on the artist’s canvas. It develops the contours of the subject and distinguishes the subject from the background of the painting.
- *“Working-Up” or Body Colour* – The main concern of this stage was to give everything its correct colouring, to render materials appropriately and fix the contours of the forms. Each distinctive area of painting was executed as a separate entity and finished in one or two sessions. “Whenever it was necessary to achieve strong, bright colours, the passage concerned was executed within sharply delineated contours using the fixed recipe,

including a fixed layering or specific type of under-painting”.



Figure (D): Body colouring stage of a painting (Zoomed view of “AN ART OF PAINTING”) – Johannes Vermeer

- *Glazing* – It is a technique which has been employed since the start of oil painting. It involves application of transparent paint with a fine bristled brush over layers of opaque paint. It grants the painting greater natural illumination and depth.



Figure (E): “GIRL WITH A RED HAT” – Johannes Vermeer,(shown in high contrast to understand the glazing effect)

MAJOR WORKS

Vermeer was brought back to public consciousness, after nearly two hundred years of obscurity by Gustav Friedrich Waagen and Theophile Thore-Burger. In an essay, Thore-Burger suggested names of 66 paintings which he felt was drawn by Vermeer. Till now, only 36 of those 66 paintings have been attributed to him with a doubt over one. (“St. Praxedis”).

In this section, we would make an in-depth study of five of his most well-known paintings.

1. “THE PROCURESS”

(du. “De Koppelaarster”)

Year – 1656

Medium-Oil on Canvas

Owned by – Old Master’s Picture Gallery, Dresden, Germany.



Figure (F): “THE PROCURESS” – Johannes Vermeer

Few of Vermeer's paintings are as provocative as this fascinating scene of mercenary love. It differs from Vermeer's earlier biblical and mythological scenes in its monetary gestures and expressions. Here, behind a balustrade covered by an ornate rug, a procuress looks approvingly at a soldier. He offers the young woman a coin while fondling her breasts with the other hand. The woman holds a wine glass with one hand and accepts the money with the other. Vermeer may have been inspired to paint this scene by Dirck van Baburen's "The Procuress".



Figure (G): "The Procuress" – Dirck van Baburen

This painting was owned by Maria Thins, his mother in law after Vermeer's death. On the left, an elegant looking dandy, dressed in a beret and a fashionable looking jerkin, smiles out at the viewer as he holds aloft a glass and grasps a musical instrument with the other hand. Critics like Arthur Wheelock Jr. And Lawrence Gowing suggests that it was possibly Vermeer's self-portrait. Certain, other critics are of the view that, the dandy is actually an artistic representation of the Biblical character "The prodigal Son". This is the first painting from Vermeer's collection that strove towards a sense of realism through his painting techniques.

Critical Aspects

- This painting belongs to the “bordeeltje” or the “little brothel scenes” genre of painting, which became a hallmark of the Dutch Golden Age of painting.
- The posture of the girl is of prime importance in this painting. Her downcast eyes and warm smile suggests she knows the nature of transactions she is conducting with the man in the red beret. Her clothing which is quite simple, is rather unusual for a woman of her profession. Her peaceful, self-contained disposition anticipates something of the sublime female characters that we come across in Vermeer’s later works.
- The man in the red beret is shown to place a coin in the girl’s hand, a symbol of the transaction.



Figure (H): The soldier placing a coin in the woman’s hand

- In contrast to the other brothel scenes of the time, Vermeer’s procuress looks dubiously androgynous and does not play an active role in the picture. She wears an uniformly dark dress and her face has no wrinkles. As if she wears a “masque”, camouflaging her true intentions and expressions.

- The elegantly grinning dandy who is painted in the foreground, is a common figure seen in most other brothel paintings of this age. By introducing this figure Vermeer hopes to achieve two things. Firstly, he may have intended it to be a tribute to the “Utrecht Caravaggists” who popularised the genre of brothel paintings. Secondly, the smiling face may have been his only self-portrait. Critics view the dandy, playing the role of the “third person narrator”, extraneous to the scene unfolding.



Figure (1): The dandy

- The dandy holds aloft a wine glass with one hand and grasps a musical instrument with the other, both could be interpreted as symbols of revelry.

2. “A GIRL WITH A WINE-GLASS”

(du. “Dame en twe heren”)

Year-1660

Medium-Oil on canvas

Owned by – Herzog Anton-Ulrich Museum, Braunschweig, Germany.



Figure (J): "The Girl with a wine glass" – Johannes Vermeer

The use of paintings to comment on courtship and amorous relations was common in 17th century Netherlands. Many of such paintings refer to the difficulty of resisting temptations of flesh and dangers of giving in to passions, under the influence of intoxicants. In this case Vermeer may have been influenced by contemporary artists like Ter Borch and De Hooch. The rarity of Vermeer's paintings and homogeneity of his works allow us to follow the development of his paintings and observe all small variations evident in his pictorial and compositional techniques and changing thematic interests over the years.

One of the most striking objects in this scene in terms of beauty and realism of execution is the white jug on the table. The wine, which the gentleman is shown offering, might have been poured from the jug, making it an element related to the licentious behaviour that the picture criticises. In sharp contrast, the portrait hanging on the wall, is that of an elegantly dressed man, a model of virtue, which the artist juxtaposes against the licentious actions of the characters in the scene.

Critical Aspects

- The young woman's openly expressive face is somewhat uncharacteristic of Vermeer, who tends to convey the discreet gestures of the subject through his work. Arthur Wheelock contends that the woman's expression is a knowing one. It indicates that she is not only aware of the situation but in complete control of it. She feels that, it is she who's seducing the gentleman offering the wine glass.



Figure (K): The Girl's expression

- The gentleman's intentions are evident through his holding of the woman's hand, which holds the glass. His highly formalised gesture makes it impossible to decode whether he is the seducer or the seduced in the scene.



Figure (L): The gentleman's expression

- The brooding figure in the background, is one of the very few openly negative figures in the artist's oeuvre. His dejected posture and shadowy treatment led critics to question whether he is a victim of love or plain simply drunk. Both are equally possible.
- The silver platter on the table is shown to consist of lemons and tobacco papers. Lemons were served in the Dutch household of Vermeer's time with shrimp, which is said to be good for masculine potency and virility. Tobacco papers and the wine jug could explain the inebriated state of the brooding man.

3. "THE OFFICER AND THE LAUGHING GIRL"

(du. "De Soldaat en het Lachende Meisje")

Year-(1655-1660)

Medium-Oil on Canvas

Owned by – Frick Collection, New York, United States.



Figure (M): "The Officer and the laughing Girl" – Johannes Vermeer

Considered by critics to be one of Vermeer's most glowing paintings. Although Vermeer seems to have adopted the subject

matter from De Hooch, his own conception of the scene is quite different. He heightened the contrast of scale between the two figures and intensified the contrast of light and colour. The effect is comparable when any image is seen through a wide angle lens or a convex mirror. Vermeer may have become interested in optical devices through his association with Fabritius, and apparently sought to capture the expressive character of their images in his work.

This image consists one of the first examples of Vermeer's precise sense of realism: the highly detailed map hanging on the wall. Wall maps were popular forms of room decorations in Vermeer's time. They are found frequently in his paintings.

Critical Aspects

- The woman in the picture is shown to wear a dress, which is quite simple keeping in mind the fashion of the time. Critics suggest that it was a regular wear for women of the time. The scene could hence be reconstructed thus: the woman was busy with daily household chores and the cavalier's visit was an unannounced one. The smile on the woman's face suggests that it was a welcome visit nonetheless.
- The fact that the visitor is an officer, is understood from the black sash he wears across his shoulder. Vermeer uses Caravaggio's "repoussoir" technique of placing an huge object in foreground, in order to increase the sensation of depth in the painting. The bright red colour sets the intense passionate mood for the painting.
- The map on the wall is suggestive of the banality and lack of excessive decoration in the rooms. They were a regular feature of Dutch households then.
- The ornately described window panes tell us about Vermeer's interest in geometric patterns. Interestingly he

never allows us a view outside. Thereby channelising our entire focus on the scene.

4. "THE ART OF PAINTING"

(du. "De Schilderkonst")

Year-(1662-68)

Medium – Oil on Canvas

Owned by – Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria.



Figure (N): "The Art Of Painting" – Johannes Vermeer

"An Art of Painting" comes late in the day for Dutch painting and towards the end of Vermeer's career. It stands as a kind of summary and assessment of what has been done. The poised yet intense relationship of man and woman, the conjunction of crafted surfaces, the domestic space – this is the stuff of Vermeer's art. But here it all has a paradigmatic status, due to its historic title and formalised presentation. The notable feature of this painting is the realistic rendition of the map on the wall, which is designed in great detail.

Vermeer appears to have cared enough for this painting, not to sell it. For it is unbelievable that van Ruijven would turn it down. After Vermeer's death, his mother in law, Maria tried protecting it from debt collectors but unsuccessfully. This

painting is considered to be Vermeer's most explicit statement of his art. What makes Vermeer's rare but powerful contributions to history of interior painting interesting, is the way they articulate thought in pictorial terms.

Critical Aspects

- The picture of the artist in the painting is conceived by some Vermeer critics to be a self-portrait. The long flowing hair of the artist may have been his own. No proof as such has been found to substantiate this claim.



Figure (O): The artist's hair (zoomed image)

- The artist is depicted wearing an elaborate historical costume. Through this, Vermeer tries to claim an affiliation to the Netherlandish painters of the earlier age. Artists of the age enjoyed painting themselves in such grandiose attire.
- The girl who is painted as the model in the painting is thought to be a representative of Clio, the muse of history, in the Cesar Ripa's book "Iconology". The model holds the book in her hand (Wheelock Jr.). She wears laurels on her hair, which denotes glory and a trumpet in her hand which signifies fame.



Figure (P): The subject's face (zoomed image)

- The empty chair in the foreground of the painting, is thought to denote a sensation of incompleteness to the painting. As if someone's missing from the scene.
- The marbled floors painted in the picture has been drawn to make the picture grand. Vermeer did not have his studio floor marbled.

5. "THE GIRL WITH A PEARL EARRING"

(Du. "Meisje met de parel")

Year – (1665-67)

Medium – Oil on Canvas

Owned by – Royal Cabinet of Painting, Mauritshuis, The Hague, Netherlands.



Figure (Q): "The Girl with A Pearl Earring" – Johannes Vermeer

“The Girl with the Pearl Earring” is perhaps the best known work from Vermeer’s oeuvre. Mainly due to its references in the popular culture. However, it has been the only other painting which has been likened to the “Mona Lisa” by Leonardo da Vinci, due to the mystery around the identity and the significance of the painting. Tracy Chevalier, who directed “A Girl with a Pearl Earring” based on the painting, contends that the woman in the painting was a Protestant maid who worked in the Vermeer household, called Griet. But this theory has been subjected to numerous debates. This painting is one of the only two simple portraits ever drawn by Vermeer, the other being “The study of a Young Woman”.



Figure (R): “The Study of a Young Woman” – Johannes Vermeer

The second painting was closely modelled on his own wife, Catharina’s face. This painting falls under the genre of “tronie” (du. Face). Tronies were immensely popular during the Dutch Golden Age, they concentrated on rather exaggerated facial emotion and contrastingly simple clothing.

In this painting Vermeer tries to depict an European girl wearing a simple dress and a rather oriental turban on her head. She is also shown wearing an improbably large pearl earring. It is a popular idea that the pearl earring was obtained from

Catherina's own collection. Vincent Icke, once popularly commented that the earring looked too big and shiny for a pearl. Vermeer may have over-painted the reflection on the earring.

Sociologists feel that, perhaps this painting of an abnormally large pearl earring, shining beautifully, is the most blatant example of "objective fetishism" in Vermeer's Art.

Critical Aspects

- Dark backgrounds were generally used in portraiture to enhance the three-dimensional effect of the figure. The Dark background makes the figure appear lighter. Initially, the background was drawn to be deep enamel like green. After the 1994 restoration, it appears somewhat mottled.
- The turban that the woman wears is reminiscent of older Dutch paintings with exotic tropes.



*Figure (S): "Boy In an Exotic Turban" – Michiel Swerts
(Possible inspiration for Vermeer's painting)*

- Usage of dark shades of colour, probably was sponsored by van Ruijven for a huge sum.
- The reflection on the girl's lower lip, possibly seen before through the camera obscura.



Figure (T): The Subject's Lips (zoomed image)

- Very simple clothing, suggests the model's economic status.

WORKS CITED

American Art News 6 (1917): 8–8. Web.

Carroll, John. *Humanism: The Wreck of Western Culture*. London: Fontana, 1993. Print.

Costaras, Nicola. "A Study of the Materials and Techniques of Johannes Vermeer." *Studies in the History of Art Symposium Papers XXXIII: Vermeer Studies* (1998): 144-67. *JSTOR*. Web. 8 Nov. 2015.

Girl with a Pearl Earring. Dir. Tracy Chevalier. Perf. Colin Firth and Scarlett Johansson. BBC, 2012. DVD.

James, Sara Nair, Walter Liedtke, Michiel C. Plomp, and Axel Ruger. "Vermeer and the Delft School." *Sixteenth Century Journal* 4 (2002): 1239. Web.

Jr., Arthur K. Wheelock, Albert Blankert, Rob Ruurs, and Willem L. Van De Watering. "Johannes Vermeer Van Delft 1632-1675." *The Art Bulletin* 3 (1977): 439. Web.

Vergara, Golahny Mochizuki, ed. *In His Milieu: Essays on Netherlandish Art*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2006. Web.

NOTE

All the paintings used in the paper have been collected from the public domain of the internet, the author does not hold rights over these pictures, they are freely available on the net for universal viewing.