

*Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*

c. 1663–1664

oil on canvas, 46.6 x 39.1 (18 <sup>11</sup>/<sub>32</sub> x 15 <sup>13</sup>/<sub>32</sub>)

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

## PROVENANCE

(?) Pieter van der Lip sale, Amsterdam, 14 June 1712, no. 22; Mozes de Chaves, Amsterdam, 1759; Sale, Amsterdam, 30 November 1772, no. 23 (f 40 to Fouquet); P. Lyonet sale, Amsterdam, 11 April 1791, no. 181 (f 43 to Fouquet); Sale, Amsterdam, 14 August 1793, no. 73 (f 70); Herman ten Kate, Amsterdam, 1793(?)–1800; Ten Kate sale, Amsterdam, 10 June 1801, no. 118 (f 110 to Taijs?); Sale [Lepinasse de Langeac], Paris, 16 January 1809, no. 85 (frf 200); Lapeyrière sale, Paris, 19 April 1825, no. 127 (frf 2,060 to Berthaud); [John Smith, London, after 1833–1839, sold for £70 to Van der Hoop]; Adriaan van der Hoop, Amsterdam, 1839–1854; Academy of Fine Arts, Amsterdam, 1854–1885; to the present owner in 1885 (on loan from the city of Amsterdam)

## EXHIBITIONS

London 1929A, 141, no. 298 and ill.; Amsterdam 1935, 30, no. 168; Rotterdam 1935, 37, no. 86 and ill. 67

## TECHNICAL DESCRIPTION

The support is a fine, plain-weave linen with a thread count of 14.3 x 14.4 per cm.<sup>2</sup> The support has been wax-resin lined and the original tacking edges have been removed.

The dark gray ground contains chalk, umber, and lead white.<sup>1</sup> The paint layers extend to the edge of the trimmed canvas on all sides. Some areas, such as the chair and the woman's yellow skirt, have ocher underpainting.

The surface is pitted, primarily in the white mixtures, but also in the blue parts of the background and jacket. Some blanching is evident in the blue tablecloth. The paint surface is slightly abraded, particularly in the raised edges of the paint.

The compositional refinements in Vermeer's paintings are so exquisite that it is difficult to understand how he achieved them. His mastery of perspective does not account for the sensitive arrangement of his figures or for the subtle proportions he established between pictorial elements. Perhaps he worked with a compass and ruler, as did Pieter Saenredam (1597–1665), or perhaps he developed a mathematical system for determining the relationships of compositional elements. Whatever the system, it succeeded because of the artist's unique sensitivity to structure as a vehicle for his artistic aims.

In no other painting did Vermeer create such an intricate counterpoint between the structural framework of the setting and the emotional content of the scene. A mere description of the subject – a young woman dressed in a blue jacket reading a letter in the privacy of her home – in no way prepares the viewer for the poignancy of this image, for while the woman betrays no outward emotion, the intensity of her feelings is conveyed by the context Vermeer creates for her.

Vermeer situates the woman in the exact center of his composition, her form almost fully visible between the table and chair in the immediate foreground. These structural elements, as well as the chair against the wall behind the table, appear to lock her in space. Likewise, the woman's hands are held fast visually by the horizontal of the black bar behind them. While Vermeer uses this geometric framework to restrict any sense of physical movement, he alludes to her emotional intensity through the meandering ocher patterns of the map behind her.

Vermeer's design sensitivity, however, is not limited to the placement of objects in his composition, but also extends to the patterns of shapes between objects. The

asymmetrical balance of the three broadly rectangular areas of white wall is crucial to establishing the sense of quiet permanence. Vermeer's awareness of their compositional importance is evident from the x-radiograph (fig. 1), where it is clear that he extended the map several centimeters to the left. This adjustment reduced the width of the wall to the left of the map so that it would be equal to the width of the wall to the right of the woman. The x-radiograph also reveals that Vermeer altered the shape of the woman's jacket. In the original conception it flared out, just as in *Woman Holding a Balance* (cat. 10).

Infrared reflectography also reveals that the jacket originally had a fur trim (fig. 2). The changes gave the woman a more statuesque profile and at the same time strengthened the rectangular shapes of the white wall on either side of the woman.

Vermeer was equally sensitive to the optical effects of light and color. The blue tonalities of the woman's jacket, the chair, and the table coverings are calming, restful



fig. 1. Detail of x-radiograph, *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*





fig. 2. Detail of infrared reflectogram, *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*

colors, as are the ochers of the dress and map. Light comes from two sources, creating both primary and softly diffused secondary shadows on the wall next to the chair behind the table. With his awareness of light's optical qualities, Vermeer gives the shadows a bluish cast. He infuses light into the woman's form by diffusing the contour at the back of her jacket. He also manipulates the flow of light quite arbitrarily for compositional reasons. For example, while the chair and the map cast shadows, the woman, who appears to stand quite close to the wall, does not. Vermeer thus sepa-

rates her from the temporal framework of the room, and in the process, enhances the sense of permanence that so pervades the scene.

This use of color, light, and perspective to reinforce the emotional impact of a scene is characteristic of his work throughout his career. In *Officer and Laughing Girl* from the late 1650s (page 35, fig. 6), for example, Vermeer intensified the relationship between the two figures through the vivid red and yellow of their clothing, the dramatic foreshortening of the window, and the sparkling effects of light flickering off the woman's striped sleeves and the map. Indeed, it is interesting to compare the map in these two paintings, for they are one and the same: a map of Holland and West Friesland designed by Balthasar Florisz van Berckenrode in 1620 and published by Willem Jansz Blaeu a few years later.<sup>2</sup> In his earlier painting Vermeer used colors to differentiate land and water and clearly articulated topographical features, but in *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* the map is larger in scale, monochromatic, and has a less defined topographical character. While certain of these differences are related to his own stylistic evolution, the willingness to modify shape, size, and color of objects for compositional reasons is a constant phenomenon in his oeuvre.

The reflective mood of this work, of course, is related to the subject: the reading of a letter. In Dutch art depictions of women reading letters almost always have love associations, and artists found various means to portray both the air of expectation at the arrival of a letter and the subsequent reaction to the written word. Often, as with Gerard ter Borch's (1617–1681) portrayal of a young peasant girl reflecting on the contents of a letter (fig. 3), the emotional consequences are evident in the figure's posture and expres-

sion. Vermeer's *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window*, c. 1657 (page 73, fig. 11), focuses on the woman's response to the letter by painting her reflection in the leaded glass window. Although the self-contained character of Vermeer's woman in *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* provides no hint about the letter's content, the bend of the woman's neck, the parted lips, and the drawn-up arms infuse her with a sense of expectancy.

Although Vermeer provides little context for the letter, it appears to have come unexpectedly, since she has interrupted her toilet to stop and read it. Her pearls lie unattended on the table, with another sheet of the letter partially covering them.<sup>3</sup> Significant, undoubtedly, is the map, which may allude to an absent loved one, as does perhaps the empty chair in the foreground. The woman's shape is also suggestive. It is decidedly matronly, perhaps as a result of fashion, but more likely, because she is pregnant. Vermeer, however, remains entirely circumspect about the circumstances of the woman's life, allowing each

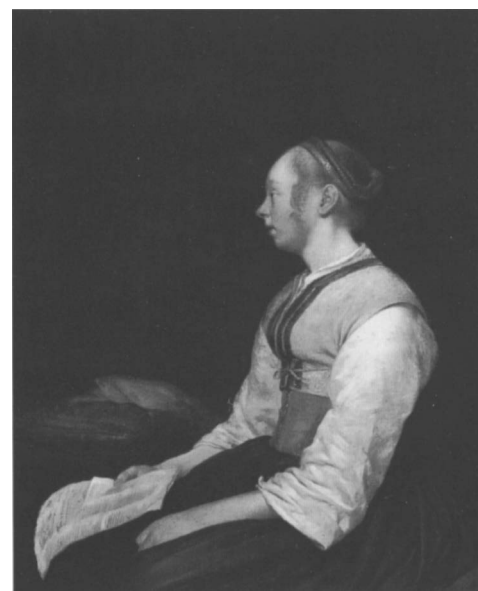


fig. 3. Gerard ter Borch, *Peasant Girl Reflecting on a Letter*, c. 1650, oil on panel, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam







viewer to ponder the image anew in his or her own way.

This painting was extravagantly praised in eighteenth-century sale catalogues: in 1772 as “very handsome, meticulously and naturally rendered”; in 1791, “its graceful light and dark bestows a beautiful [sense of] well-being”; and in 1793 as “extraordinarily handsome, meticulously and masterfully painted.”<sup>4</sup> In every instance connoisseurs knew this unsigned work to be a creation of Vermeer (or Van der Meer), whom they did not know by his surname, Johannes, but as “the Delft [painter]” (de Delfts[ch]e). Vermeer had already acquired that sobriquet in collectors’ circles of the early eighteenth century.

Herman ten Kate (1731–1800), the last Dutch collector to own the painting in the eighteenth century,<sup>5</sup> was a wealthy Amsterdam cloth merchant and member of parliament, who modeled himself after his great-uncle, the famous art and book collector Lambert ten Kate (1659–1727).<sup>6</sup> After Herman ten Kate’s ownership, the *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* came into the hands of the English dealer John Smith by way of two French collections (in 1809 and 1825).<sup>7</sup> In 1839 Smith traded it, as well as *The Hermit* by Gerrit Dou (1613–1675) and *The Holy Family* by Garofalo (1481–1559) (both in Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum),<sup>8</sup> for a painting by Carel Dujardin (c. 1622–1678).

Adriaan van der Hoop (1778–1854) (fig. 4) of Amsterdam became the new owner. He had been a partner of the famous banking house Hope & Co. since 1811, after the directors of this firm (the heirs of its founder John Hope) had fled Holland during the French occupation. Van der Hoop made his fortune quickly, becoming a millionaire by about 1840.<sup>9</sup> In September of 1839 he “made a trade in London with J. Smith & Sons, having bought from him... a good painting by the Delft van der Meer,

representing a reading woman dressed in blue.”<sup>10</sup>

The Van der Hoop Collection was the most enviable Dutch collection of its time.<sup>11</sup> Van der Hoop did a lot of his buying in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Because he had no direct heirs, he bequeathed his 225 paintings to the city of Amsterdam in 1847. About a year later the French critic Thoré-Bürger visited Van der Hoop, and recalled him as “a very likeable man and very simple in his habits despite his immense fortune.”<sup>12</sup> When Van der Hoop died, the city of Amsterdam was not able to accept his bequest until the collectors Carel Joseph Fodor and Jacob de Vos pledged to pay the succession taxes, which amounted to fifty thousand guilders; otherwise the City Council of Amsterdam would not have agreed to accept Van der Hoop’s three most important works: *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, by Vermeer, the *Jewish Bride*, by Rembrandt (1606–1669), and *The Mill at Wijk bij Duurstede*, by Jacob van Ruisdael (1628/1629–1682).<sup>13</sup>



fig. 4. Jan Adam Kruseman, *Portrait of Adriaan van der Hoop*, 1835, canvas, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

The Van der Hoop Collection was subsequently housed in the Old Men’s Home, which was also the location of the Academy of Fine Arts.<sup>14</sup> Thoré-Bürger described the *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* in 1860, exclaiming: “Encore le sphinx!” Thoré-Bürger described only six signed works by the Delft master at the time, so that he apparently had some difficulty accepting this single unsigned work. But he was won over by the incidence of light and by the color (“this pale light, these tender blues”), sighing in resignation: “This devil of an artist must no doubt have had several styles.”<sup>15</sup> In 1860 Thoré-Bürger pleaded in vain for the gathering together of the Mauritshuis and Museum Van der Hoop collections in one “Dutch Louvre.”<sup>16</sup> After Van der Hoop’s widow died in 1880, it was decided to move the collection to the newly constructed Rijksmuseum. In 1885 a wing of the building was cleared for the collection.<sup>17</sup> The *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* was the first Vermeer painting in the Rijksmuseum, which today owns four (see cats. 4, 5, 18).

1. Kühn 1968, 192.

2. See Welu 1975, 532–533. In *Officer and Laughing Girl* the land mass is blue, a color traditionally used to designate water areas. Whether Vermeer consciously chose to paint the area this unusual color, or whether he originally painted it green, and the color has changed over time, is not known. The only extant example of the map, in the Westfries Museum, Hoorn, is monochromatic.

3. I owe this observation to Aneta Georgievska-Shine.

4. Sale catalogue, Amsterdam, 30 November 1772, 8, no. 23: “Zeer fraai, uitvoerig en natuurlyk behandeld” (Lugt no. 2082); Sale catalogue, Amsterdam, 11 April 1791, no. 181: “het bevallig ligt en donker geeft een schoone welstand” (Lugt no. 4706); Sale catalogue, Amsterdam, 14 August 1793, 19, no. 73: “ongemeen fraai, uitvoerig en meesterlyk gepenceld” (Lugt no. 5100).

5. Many collections moved via Paris to England during the French Revolution. See *The Hague* 1990, 425 (with references).

6. *Familieblad* 1976, 95–99, and 315 (on Lambert ten Kate as collector, see Van Gelder 1970, 139–186).

7. Sale catalogue, Paris, 16 January 1809, no. 85 (Lugt no. 7502); Sale catalogue, Paris, 19 April 1825, no. 127 (Lugt no. 10869); in 1833 Smith was not yet aware of this painting (Smith 1829–1842, 4: 110 and 242).



8. See Knoef 1948, 63.
9. On the various generations of this family as collectors, see: Niemeijer 1981, 168; The Hague 1990, 420–422, 423 nn. 10–17.
10. “Lijst van de schilderijen van Adriaan van der Hoop te Amsterdam” (List of the paintings of Adriaan van der Hoop in Amsterdam), Rijksmuseum Archives, Amsterdam (inv. no. 388, 24): “te Londen met J. Smith & Sons eene ruil gedaan, hebbende van hem gekocht... een goed schildery van den Delftschen van der Meer, voorstellende eene lezende vrouw, in het blaauw gekleed.”
11. Knoef 1948, 51; Rijksmuseum 1976, 31.
12. Thoré-Bürger 1858–1860, 1: 1: “un homme très-aimable et très-simple de mœurs, malgré son immense fortune.”
13. Rijksmuseum 1976, 472, no. c216 and ill. (Rembrandt); 487, no. c211 and ill. (Van Ruisdael).
14. Museum Van der Hoop 1855, 10, no. 171 and Museum Van der Hoop 1872, iii–v, 50, no. 129.
15. Thoré-Bürger 1858–1860, 2: 67–68: “Encore le sphinx!”; “cette lumière pâle, ces bleus tendres”; and “Ce diable d’artiste a eu sans doute des manières diverses.”
16. Thoré-Bürger 1858–1860, 2: 3: “Louvre de la Hollande.”
17. Rijksmuseum 1976, 30–31: in addition to the Vermeer, Rembrandt, and Van Ruisdael, the collection also contained outstanding works by Hals, Hobbema, De Hooch, Potter, Rubens, Saenredam, Steen and many others; see also Fromentin 1876/1976, 302–303.

## COLLECTION CATALOGUES

Museum Van der Hoop 1855, 10, no. 71; Museum Van der Hoop 1872, 50, no. 129; Rijksmuseum 1887, 179, no. 1536; Rijksmuseum 1976, 31 and 572, no. c251 and ill. (with extensive literature)

## LITERATURE

Josi 1821, unpaginated, s.v.; Thoré-Bürger 1858–1860, 2: 67–69; Waagen 1863–1864, 3: 27; Thoré-Bürger 1866, 327, 459 and 558, no. 32; Havard 1888, 38, no. 35; Martin 1904, 4; Hofstede de Groot 1907–1928, 1: 600, no. 31; Hofstede de Groot 1907–1930, pl. 20; Plietzsch 1911, 43–47, 113, no. 1 and ill. 10; Johansen 1920, 191 and 198; De Vries 1939, 46–47, 87, no. 25 and ill. 1 and 14; Knoef 1948, 51–52 and 63; Hale 1937, 81, 84, 142, 174–175, 196, and pl. 5; De Vries 1948, 42 and 95, no. 21; Swillens 1950, 54–55, no. 11, 67, 78, 83–84, 88, 140, 144, 175 and pl. 11; Gerson 1952, 40 and ill. 113; Gowing 1952, 136, no. 21, and pls. C, 48–49; De Vries 1965, 39 a–b and ill.; Rosenberg 1966, 116, 119, 121 and ill. frontispiece; Goldscheider 1967, 14, 129, no. 17 and ills. 44–47; Blankert 1975, 62, 63, 71, 82, 94, 109, 147–148, no. 14 and pl. 14; Welu 1975, 532–533, 541 and ill. 3; Welu 1977, 40–41 and ill. 52; Blankert 1978, 42–43, 49, 54, 63, 77 n. 48, 160–161, no. 14, and pl. 14; Slatkes 1981, 27, 55, 58–59, and ill.; Wheelock 1981, 33, 104–105, 110, 134, and pl. 21; Alpers 1983, 122, 192, 203–206 and ills. 147, 224; Wheelock 1984, 396–398 and ill. 10–12; Aillaud 1986, 49, 112, 114–115, 157, 182–183, no. 14, ills. 87b, 117, and pl. 14; Wheelock 1988, 27, ill. 27, 80–81 and pl. 17; Montias 1989, 162, 190, 192, 259 n. 51, 266 and ill. 29; Blankert 1992, 51, 114–116, 126, 140, 157, 182–184, no. 14, 218, 223 ills. 90, 118 and pl. 14; Wheelock 1995, xii, 6, 7–19, 21, 58, 102, 103, 106, 107, 110, 142, 157, 165, 176, and ill. 1



*Woman Holding a Balance*

c. 1664

oil on canvas, 40.3 x 35.6 (15 7/8 x 14)

National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection

## PROVENANCE

(?) Pieter Clasz van Ruijven, Delft, before 1674;  
 (?) Maria de Knuijt, Widow Van Ruijven, Delft, 1674–1681; (?) Magdalena van Ruijven and Jacob Dissius, Delft, 1681–1682; Jacob Dissius (with his father Abraham, 1685–1694), Delft, 1682–1695; Dissius sale, Amsterdam, 16 May 1696, no. 1 (f 155); Isaac Roo-  
 leeuw, Amsterdam, 1696–1701; Paulo van Uchelen, Amsterdam, 1701–1702 (estimated at f 150); Paulo van Uchelen the Younger, Amsterdam, 1703–1754; Anna Gertruijda van Uchelen, Amsterdam, 1754–1766; Van Uchelen sale, Amsterdam, 18 March 1767, no. 6 (f 170 to Kok); Nieuhoff sale, Amsterdam, 14 April 1777, no. 116 (f 235 to Van de Boogaerd); Trochel et al. sale, Amsterdam, 11 May 1801, no. 48 (f 60 to Van der Schley); King Maximilian I Jozef, Nymphenburg, before 1825; King of Bavaria sale, Munich, 5 December 1826, no. 101 (DM 800 to Caraman); Victor-Louis-Charles de Riquet, Duke of Caraman, Vienna and Paris, 1826–1830; Caraman sale, Paris, 10 May 1830, no. 68 (Ff 2410); Casimir Périer, Paris, 1830–1832; Heirs Périer, Paris, 1832–1848; Périer sale, London, 5 May 1848, no. 7 (£ 141.15. to Lord Hertford); Auguste Casimir Victor Laurent Périer, Paris, 1848–1876; Jean Paul Pierre Casimir Périer, Paris, 1876–1907; Countess De Ségur-Périer, Paris, 1907–1911; [P. & D. Colnaghi & Co., London, and M. Knoedler & Co., New York, 1911]; Peter A. B. Widener, Lynnewood Hall, Elkins Park, Philadelphia, 1911–1915; Joseph E. Widener, Lynnewood Hall, Elkins Park, Philadelphia, 1915–1942; National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1942 (Widener bequest)

## EXHIBITIONS

New York 1912, 53, no. 49; Detroit 1925, no. 33 and ill.; Chicago 1933, 13, no. 80 and ill.; Philadelphia 1984A, 342–343, no. 118 and pl. 108.

## TECHNICAL DESCRIPTION

The support is a fine, plain-weave linen with a thread count of 20 x 16 per cm. The original tacking edges are present. The canvas has been glue lined.

The ground is a warm buff color containing chalk, lead white, black and an earth pigment.<sup>1</sup>

The layer structure of the paint is varied, creating different effects and textures, from thick impasto to thin glazes and scumbles. The edges of forms are rarely hard, but overlap only slightly or do not quite touch, allowing the ground to show through. Almost all areas were painted wet-in-wet. In selected areas of the painting, especially in the blue jacket, a dark, reddish-brown undermodeling is visible, particularly in the shaded folds. A gray-green underpaint is found in many shadowed areas. The vanishing point of the composition is visible as a small, white spot on the x-radiograph, to the left of the hand holding the balance. The balance was enlarged, as can be seen in the infrared reflectogram.

The ground and paint are in a good state of preservation.

Contemporary scholars generally divide Vermeer's oeuvre into categories – history paintings, scenes of daily life, tronies, cityscapes, and allegories – each relating to distinctive stylistic and iconographic traditions. Such an approach, however, denies the consistent philosophical framework underlying Vermeer's work. Whether depicting a mythological goddess, a woman in the privacy of her home, or an allegory of painting, Vermeer examined through his art the fundamental moral and spiritual truths of the human experience.

The artificiality of imposing separate categories upon Vermeer's oeuvre becomes particularly evident when considering *Woman Holding a Balance*, a painting stylistically similar to three other works from the mid-1660s: *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* (cat. 9), *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* (cat. 12), and *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* (cat. 11). Although each painting depicts a standing woman preoccupied with her thoughts in a domestic setting, the latter three are generally characterized as genre scenes, while *Woman Holding a Balance* has been allegorically interpreted. Indeed, some argue that *The Last Judgment* scene behind the woman provides a theological context for the scales she holds: to judge is to weigh.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, the difference between *Woman Holding a Balance* and these three paintings is merely one of degree. In each work Vermeer infuses a specific image of domesticity with broad implications about emotions and ideals central to human existence—the expectancy of love, the radiance of spiritual purity, and the importance of moderation. Just as the balance provides a thematic focus for broader philosophical concerns, so the letter, water pitcher, and pearl necklace serve similar functions.

While generally accepted as an allegory, *Woman Holding a Balance* has been inter-

preted in many ways over the years. Most early authors assumed that the pans of the woman's balance contained precious objects, generally identified as gold or pearls. Consequently, the painting was described until recently as either the *Gold-weigher* or the *Girl Weighing Pearls*. In addition, some contemporary authors speculate that the woman is pregnant while others conclude that her costume reflects a style of dress current in the early to mid-1660s.<sup>3</sup> Others interpret the painting theologically, viewing the woman as a secularized image of the Virgin Mary, who, standing before the Last Judgment, assumes the role of intercessor and compassionate mother.<sup>4</sup> One scholar argues that the image of a pregnant Virgin Mary contemplating balanced scales would have been understood by a Catholic viewer as an anticipation of Christ's life, his sacrifice, and the eventual foundation of the Church.<sup>5</sup>

While such an array of interpretations calls for caution, microscopic examination has resolved at least one dispute: the woman is not weighing gold. Vermeer did not paint the highlights in the scale pans with lead-tin yellow, the pigment he uses elsewhere in this painting to represent gold. Although the pale, creamy color of these accents is similar to that of pearls, he applies the paint here differently. Vermeer represents pearls in the mid 1660s with two layers of paint – a thin grayish one beneath a white highlight – a technique that permits him to depict both their specular highlights and their translucence. In the band of pearls draped over the box, for example, the size of the pearl (the thin, diffused layer) remains relatively constant while the highlights on the pearls (the thick, top layer) vary considerably in size according to the amount of light hitting them. Vermeer paints the highlights







on the scales with only one layer, thereby indicating diffused reflections of light from the window. Further reinforcing the conclusion that the scales are empty are the bound strands of pearls on the jewelry boxes and table. No single pearl lies separately, waiting to be weighed or measured against another.

Although the scales of the balance are empty, the jewelry boxes, strands of pearls, and gold chain on the table belong to, and are valued within, the temporal world. They represent, in a sense, temptations of a material splendor.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, pearls take on many symbolic meanings, ranging from the purity of the Virgin Mary to the vices of pride and arrogance. As the woman concentrates on the balance in her hand, she exudes inner peace and serenity, as opposed to the psychological tension that would suggest a conflict between her action and the implications of the *Last Judgment*. While Christ's judgments are eternal and the woman's are temporal, her pensive gaze toward the balance suggests that her act of judgment, although different in consequence, is as conscientiously considered.

The essential message appears to be that one should conduct one's life with temperance and balanced judgment. Indeed this message, with or without its explicit religious context, appears in paintings from all phases of Vermeer's career and must, therefore, represent one of his fundamental beliefs. The balance, an emblem of Justice, and eventually of the final judgment, denotes the woman's responsibility to weigh and balance her own actions.<sup>7</sup> Correspondingly, the mirror on the wall directly opposite the woman represents self-knowledge.<sup>8</sup> As Otto van Veen (1556–1629) wrote in an emblem book Vermeer knew, “a perfect glasse doth represent the face, Iust as it is in deed, not flattering it at all.”<sup>9</sup> In her search for self-knowledge and

in her commitment to maintenance of equilibrium in her life, she seems to be aware, although not in fear, of the final judgment that awaits her. Vermeer's painting thus expresses the essential tranquility of one who understands the implications of the Last Judgment and who searches to moderate her life in order to warrant salvation.

The character of the scene conforms closely to Saint Ignatius of Loyola's recommendations for meditation in his *Spiritual Exercises*, a devotional service with which Vermeer was undoubtedly familiar through his contacts with the Jesuits. As Cunnar has emphasized, before meditating Saint Ignatius urged the meditator first to examine his conscience and weigh his sins as though he were at Judgment Day standing before his Judge. Ignatius then urged that he “weigh” his choices and choose a path of life that will allow him to be judged favorably in a “balanced” manner.<sup>10</sup>

I must rather be like the equalized scales of a balance ready to follow the course which I feel is more for the glory and praise of God, our Lord, and the salvation of my soul.<sup>11</sup>

This painting exemplifies Vermeer's exquisite sense of harmony from the early to mid-1660s. The woman holds the scale gently in her right hand, extending her small finger to give a horizontal accent to the gesture. Her left arm, gracefully poised on the edge of the table, closes the space around the balance and echoes the gentle arc of sunlight sweeping down from the window. Vermeer suspends the scales, perfectly balanced but not symmetrical, against the wall in a small niche of space reserved for them. Indeed, the bottom edge of the picture frame before the woman is higher than it is behind her, thus allowing sufficient space for the bal-

ance. Throughout, the interplay of verticals and horizontals, of mass against void, and of light against dark, creates a subtly balanced but never static composition.

The 1994 restoration of the painting, moreover, provided new insight into Vermeer's extraordinary sensitivity to light and color, particularly in the subtle modeling of the blue robe on the table. Most startling is the discovery of extensive overpaint covering the black frame of *The Last Judgment*. The gold trim now revealed creates an accent in the upper right that visually links with the yellow curtain and the yellow and red accents on the woman's costume, thereby restoring Vermeer's original, and more dynamic, compositional intent.

Vermeer's achievement has often been compared to Pieter de Hooch's (1629–1684) *A Woman Weighing Gold*, c. 1664 (fig. 1), a painting so similar in concept that it is difficult to imagine that the two images were painted independently even though De Hooch was at that time living in Amsterdam.<sup>12</sup> While De Hooch's painting lacks Vermeer's compositional refinement, theological implication, and subtlety of mood,<sup>13</sup>



fig. 1. Pieter de Hooch, *A Woman Weighing Gold*, c. 1664, oil on canvas, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie



B. Tideman, J. Ottens de Jonge, C. Blasius en H. de Winter, Makelaars, zullen op Woensdag den 14 Maart en 's namiddags ten 3 uren precies, t'Amst. ten Huize van de overleedene op de Keizersgracht, O. Z. aver de kopen, een deffige en zindelyke Inboel, bestaande in frange Lit d'Anges, Ledikanten met derzelver Behang, haar toebehoren, Chaise, Catoene en Wolle Dekens, Stoele, kussens en Matrasjes, Nooteboome Kullen en Cab en Matras, Spieel en andere Tafels, Gerk donr, Nooteboome Stoelen met Zyde Damasse en Trype Zitlijsen Blaauwe en Geconleurde Porcelaynen, keurlyke gemaakte Lywaaten, en verders een fraai Cabinetje met Kon donr de beste Nederlandsche Meesters, als van Philip Wouwerman, N. Berchem, A. van de Velder, C. du Jord Dehise van der Meer, G. de Laire, G. M. de Mondaceter, J. D. de Fieck, C. Boga &c. Naader by Catalogus d'

fig. 3. Advertisement from *Amsterdamsche Courant*, 1767

fig. 2. Detail of x-radiograph, Pieter de Hooch, *A Woman Weighing Gold*

Vermeer probably based his composition on De Hooch's. X-radiography indicates that De Hooch originally included the figure of a man seated at the far side of the table (fig. 2). It seems unlikely that De Hooch would have introduced the figure of the man, and then removed it, had he derived his composition from *Woman Holding a Balance*, as has been generally assumed. De Hooch had probably painted out the second figure before Vermeer saw the painting. This evidence suggests that Vermeer remained indebted to De Hooch after the latter artist had moved to Amsterdam.<sup>14</sup>

Vermeer's painting has a distinguished provenance traceable in a virtually unbroken line to the seventeenth century. Enthusiastic descriptions of the work in sale catalogues and critics' assessments attest to its extraordinary appeal to each generation. The first and perhaps most fascinating reference is in the Dissius sale catalogue published in Amsterdam in 1696. The first painting listed in a sale that included twenty-one paintings by Vermeer, it is described as: "A young lady weighing

gold, in a box by J. van der Meer of Delft, extraordinarily artful and vigorously painted."<sup>15</sup> We know nothing more of the box in which it was kept, but it may have been a protective device designed to keep light and dust away from its delicate surface. Whether Vermeer conceived the composition to be seen within the box and whether the box was itself painted are questions that cannot be answered.<sup>16</sup>

The buyer at the Dissius sale was Isaac Rooleeuw (c. 1650–1710), who was also the owner of *The Milkmaid* (cat. 5).<sup>17</sup> Isaac Rooleeuw, a Mennonite merchant, was an artist and a pupil of Arnoud ten Himpel (1634–1686).<sup>18</sup> Rooleeuw went bankrupt five years after the Dissius sale, and his paintings were sold by foreclosure. After an inventory was taken by the appraiser Jan Zómer, the paintings were tied back-to-back and sealed with the city coat-of-arms. One of the works was described as "A gold weigher, by Van der Neer of Delft" (page 54, fig. 8).<sup>19</sup>

One of the two Rooleeuw Vermeers was acquired by the Amsterdam amateur and merchant Paulo van Uchelen (c. 1641–

1702), the most renowned bibliophile of his time and a collector of prints and atlases. After his death, an estate division was drawn up on August 1703 on behalf of his sons Pieter and Paulo and his son-in-law. "A gold weigher by Van der Neer" (page 54, fig. 9) went to his namesake Paulo (1673–1754).<sup>20</sup>

In 1767 the painting passed under the gavel for a second time in Amsterdam in what has up to now been known as an anonymous sale. However, the name of the deceased owner could be retrieved from an advertisement (dated 28 February 1767) in the *Amsterdamsche Courant* (fig. 3).<sup>21</sup> She was Anna Gertruida van Uchelen (1705–1766), Paulo's daughter. After divorcing, she had joined her father in the house "Zurich" on the Keizersgracht (no. 173). She died without issue or heirs, so that in 1767 her property had to be sold off to the highest bidder.<sup>22</sup> For more than sixty years, three generations of Amsterdam Van Uchelens had treasured the Vermeer picture. The sale catalogue called it "powerfully detailed and Sunnily painted on Canvas."<sup>23</sup>



Ten years later the scene was described as “very lushly and thickly painted, and also in the best period, of this master.”<sup>24</sup> The owner at the time was “the art-loving Mister NICOLAAS NIEUHOFF” (1733–1776), also an Amsterdam merchant.<sup>25</sup> *The Woman Holding a Balance* remained in Holland until 1801. At that time the owner was a certain P. P., and the sale catalogue commended the work for showing “everything corresponding to the truth, and attractively painted.”<sup>26</sup> The painting surfaced twenty-five years later in the collection of the deceased king of Bavaria, Maximilian I (1756–1825), who had resided at Nymphenburg castle near Munich since 1799. In the sale catalogue the attribution had been changed to Gabriël Metsu, apparently confirmed by a monogram reading “G M.” The reliability of this signature was not absolutely accepted, as the catalogue reported in fairness: “van der Meer according to others.”<sup>27</sup>

The buyer at this auction, the Duke of Caraman (1762–1839), thought the latter ascription more likely. He had been the French ambassador in Vienna since 1816. The day he was elevated to the dukedom on 11 May 1830, he put his paintings up for sale in Paris.<sup>28</sup> Rembrandt’s *Saul and David* (Mauritshuis, The Hague), which only later became famous, raised only 250 French francs,<sup>29</sup> while the Metsu/Vermeer turned out to be worth ten times that (2410 francs). One could read in the catalogue that the improved attribution to the Delft painter was owing to the connoisseurship of the Duke of Caraman. The text closed with a remarkable recommendation: “The productions of Vander Meer of Delft are so rare that we cannot exempt ourselves from pointing him out and commending him to amateurs.”<sup>30</sup> The revaluation of Vermeer was, so to speak, in the air (see page 57).

Casimir Pierre Périer (1777–1832) became the new owner of the painting. Périer was a famous minister of the July Monarchy, who supported the Belgians in their struggle against the Dutch.<sup>31</sup> After his death his various private possessions were auctioned in two stages: 1838 for paintings and curios, and 1848 for the (primarily) Dutch paintings. Lord Hertford bought the Vermeer.<sup>32</sup> The Périer family was apparently attached to the painting, since the minister’s son, Auguste Casimir Périer (1811–1876), bought the painting back from Hertford. This is apparent from a communication from Thoré-Bürger, who saw the painting in 1866 in the home of its owner: “how much pleasure it gave us to see it with M. Casimir Perier.”<sup>33</sup>

This last communication must have put Hofstede de Groot on the trail of the masterpiece, which had not been exhibited in public since the Périer sale. The enquiries he made in 1910 established that it was still in the possession of the family. The grandson of the ex-Minister, Jean Paul Casimir Périer (1842–1907), gained prominence as President of France for six months in 1894.<sup>34</sup> In December of 1910, Hofstede de Groot published a reproduction of the painting in *The Burlington Magazine*: “I ... succeeded the summer of the present year in identifying the picture in the collection of the Comtesse de Sègur, sister of the late President Casimir Périer.”<sup>35</sup> The Dutch press reported that the newly discovered painting had in the meantime been offered for sale at the dealers P. and D. Colnaghi in London, adding: “The work will probably soon leave for America.”<sup>36</sup>

In 1911 the American collector Peter A. B. Widener (1834–1915) did in fact buy the *Woman Holding a Balance* by Vermeer. He stipulated in his testament that his son and heir, Joseph E. Widener (1872–

1943), was to bequeath his imposing art collection to a museum.<sup>37</sup> Since 1942 the painting has been one of the prized possessions of the National Gallery of Art.

1. Personal communication from Melanie Gifford, who examined the painting in 1994.

2. For a review of the diverse interpretations in the earlier literature on this painting see National Gallery Washington 1995, 375–376 n. 5.

3. The theory that the woman is pregnant was first proffered in Carstensen/Putscher 1971. The authors concluded that the woman, following an old folk tradition, was weighing pearls to help her divine the sex of the unborn child. Since then, many authors have accepted as fact her pregnant state, including Walsh 1973, 79, and Grimme 1974, 54, who, as a consequence of the supposed pregnancy, attempted to identify the model as Vermeer’s wife, Catharina Bolnes, mother of his fourteen children. Salomon 1983 suggested that a pregnant woman holding scales would have been interpreted as a Catholic response to the religious controversy about the moment a Christian soul obtains grace and salvation, a theory accepted by Sutton in Philadelphia 1984A, 342–343. In my opinion it seems unlikely that the woman is pregnant. As seen in numerous paintings by Vermeer’s contemporaries, Dutch fashions in the mid-seventeenth century seem to have encouraged a bulky silhouette. The short jacket the girl wears, called a *pet en lair*, covered a bodice and a thickly padded skirt. The impression created, that of a forward-thrusting stomach, was evidently a desirable one (see also Aillaud 1986, 181).

4. Jones 1989; Cunnar 1990.

5. For an argument that Vermeer represented here “the divine truth of revealed religion,” see Gaskell 1984. To support his argument Gaskell refers to one of the personifications of Truth described by Cesare Ripa in the 1644 Dutch edition of the *Iconologia*.

6. Rudolph 1938, 409, proposed that the woman was a personification of *Vanitas*. Actually since Christian iconography treats the pearl, the most precious jewel, as a symbol of salvation, it would be unusual for it to have strong *vanitas* connotations. See Ferguson 1959, 23.

7. Ripa 1644, 144, 432. Ripa describes how the balance is one of the attributes of equality, *Vgvalita* or *Gelijckbeyt* (“Door de Weeghschaele wort verstaen de oprachte en waerachtige recht vacrdigheyt, die een ygelijck geeft, dat hem toebehoort”), and of Justice, *Giustitia* or *Gerechtigheyt*.

8. The mirror is frequently considered the attribute of *Prudentia* and *Truth*. For a discussion of the various connotations of the mirror in emblematic literature of the mid-seventeenth century, see The Hague 1974, 98.

9. Van Veen 1608, 182. The full verse is:

*Fortune is loues looking-glass*

Eu’n as a perfect glasse doth represent the face,

Just as it is in deed, not flattering it at all.

So fortune telleth by aduancement or by fall,

Th’euient that shall succeed, in loues luick-tryed case.

For further discussions of Vermeer’s use of *Amorum emblemata* see De Jongh 1967, 49–50.

10. Cunnar 1990, 501–536. Although Cunnar overinter-

prets the painting in many respects, he presents a fascinating range of theological issues current in the seventeenth century.

11 Mottola 1964, 85.

12. Oil on canvas, 61 x 53 cm. See Staatliche Museen Berlin 1978, 212. The comparison of this painting with Vermeer's *Woman Holding a Balance* is not new. For comparisons with slightly different emphases see Bode 1919, 86–89, and Rudolph 1938, 405–412.

13. De Hooch's woman weighs her gold before a wall richly decorated with a gilded-leather wallcovering and a half-open door leading into a second room. Neither of these elements reinforces the basic thematic gesture of a woman with a balance as strongly as does the painting of the *Last Judgment*.

14. I would like to thank Jan Kelch for providing me with the x-radiograph. For another probable instance of Vermeer deriving a compositional idea from De Hooch in the 1660s, see cat. 18.

15. Blankert 1975, 136, doc. 62: "Een Juffrouw die goud weegt, in een kasje van J. vander Meer van Delft, extraordinaer konstig en kragtig geschildert" (Hoet 1752–1770, 1: 34, no. 1). It sold for 155 guilders, the third highest price in the sale.

16. In the 1683 inventory of goods accruing to Jacob Dissius after the death of his wife, Magdalena van Ruijven, three of Vermeer's paintings are listed as being in boxes (*kasjes*). See Montias 1989, 359, doc. 417. Presumably one of these was *Woman Holding a Balance*.

17. Dudok van Heel 1975, 162, no. 67; not in Blankert 1975, 149–150, no. 15.

18. Broos 1985, 33 n. 17; he lived in the house "De Rotgans" (Nieuwendijk 35) that had been bought by his father, Isaac Jacobsz Rooleeuw (see Wijnman 1959, 61 and 69; and Wijnman et al. 1974, 262).

19. Gemeentearchief, Amsterdam (DBK., no. 402, fol. 171/3, 11 March 1701; see also DBK., no. 144, fols. 105v and 135v).

20. "Een Goudtweegstertien van vander Meer." Gemeentearchief, Amsterdam (Notary H. de Wilde, no. 6454, second sheet; no. 6455, deed 170, fol. 1490); see also Dudok van Heel 1975, 162, no. 67. On Van Uchelen, see De la Fontaine Verwey 1970, 103–106 and Van der Veen 1992, 329–330.

21. *Amsterdamsche Courant*, 28 February 1767, no. 26, second sheet: not previously published.

22. Gemeentearchief, Amsterdam (DTB, no. 189, 11; DTB, no. 719, 325; DTB, no. 1105, fol. 25v: with thanks to Bas Dudok van Heel and Carola Vermeeren).

23. Sale catalogue, Amsterdam, 18 March 1767, 5, no. 6: "kragtig uytvoerig en Zonagtig op Doek geschildert." The buyer was a certain Kok, who is mentioned elsewhere in this catalogue (copy RKD) as a painter and broker.

24. Sale catalogue, Amsterdam, 14 April 1777, 62, no. 116: "zeer malsch en vet in de verf geschilderd, en wel in den besten tyd, van dezen meester" (Lugt no. 2673).

25. Gemeentearchief, Amsterdam (DTB 610, 57; DTB 1060, fol. 21): "den kunstlievend Heer NICOLAAS NIEUHOFF." The introduction to the sale catalogue has nothing more to say about the deceased collector.

26. "alles overeenkomstig, de waarheid, en bevallig gepenceeld." This was the auction of the collection of the physician G.H. Trochel, where paintings by various contributors were sold; see sale catalogue, Amsterdam, 11 May 1801, 12, no. 48 (Lugt no. 6261).

27. Sale catalogue, Munich, 5 December 1826, 25, no. 101: "nach andern van der Meer" (Lugt no. 11305).

28. BNF, 7: cols. 1099–1100.

29. Mauritshuis 1993A, 283, 289 n. 16.

30. Sale catalogue, Paris, 10 May 1830, 35, no. 68: "Les productions de Vander Meer de Delft sont si rares, que nous ne pouvons nous dispenser de signaler celle-ci...aux amateurs" (Lugt no. 12364). See also Von Frimmel 1912–1913, 49.

31. Larousse 1865–1890, 12:609–610; since Blankert 1975, 150, no. 15 we also encounter the incorrect spelling "Percir."

32. Sale catalogue, Paris, 18 April 1838 (Lugt no. 15028); Sale catalogue, Paris, 5 May 1848, 4, no. 7 (Lugt no. 19009).

33. Thoré-Bürger 1866, 555–556: "Payé 141 livres 15 shillings (sans doute par M. Casimir Perier fils)" and "que nous avons eu tant de plaisir à voir chez M. Casimir Perier."

34. DBF, 3: 885.

35. Hofstede de Groot 1910–1911, 134.

36. *Delftsche Courant*, 6 December 1910 (Mauritshuis Clippings Book, 59).

37. Comstock 1946, 129–135; Widener 1948, 7–9.

#### COLLECTION CATALOGUES

Widener 1913–1916, 1: no. 47 and ill.; Widener 1923, unpaginated, ill.; Widener 1931, 50 and ill.; Widener 1948, 65, no. 693 and ill.; National Gallery Washington 1975, 362–363, and ill.; National Gallery Washington 1985, 421 and ill.; National Gallery Washington 1995, 371–377 (with extensive literature)

#### LITERATURE

Hoet 1752–1770, 1: 34, no. 1; 62, no. 6; Thoré-Bürger 1866, 555–556, no. 27; Havard 1888, 37, no. 30; Hofstede de Groot 1907–1928, 1: 586–587, no. 10; Hofstede de Groot 1910–1911, 133–134 and ill.; Bode 1911, 1–2 and ill.; Plietzsch 1911, 49–50, 98, 119, no. 35 and 132–133; Von Frimmel 1912, 48–49; Lloyd 1925, 124, 128 and ill.; Hale 1937, 140–142, 222 and pl. 27; Rudolph 1938, 407–412, 433 and ill. 2; De Vries 1939, 46, 58, 76, 86–87, no. 23 and ill. 48; Blum 1946, 30, 42, 60, 135, 171–172, no. 27; Van Gelder 1948, 36; Boström 1949, 21–24; Swillens 1950, 57–58, no. 20, 72, 78, 82, 84, 86, 88, 105, 118 and pl. 20; Gowing 1952, 44, 53, 135–136, no. 20 and ills. 44–46; Constable 1964, 117 n. 2; Goldscheider 1967, 14, 27, 130, no. 21 and ills. 51–52; Gerson 1967, col. 744; Carstensen/Putscher 1971, 1–6 and ill.; Blankert 1975, 62–64, 73, 82, 102, 149–150, no. 15 and pl. 15; Alpers 1976, 25, 35 and ill. 12; Harbison 1976, 83, 86–87 and ill. 8; Wheelock 1977B, 439, 441; Blankert 1978, 22, 42–44, 49, 54, 67, 161–162, no. 15 and pls. 15–15a; Seth 1980, 24, 26 and 34; Sutton 1980, 45, 68 n. 37 and ill.; Naumann 1981, 1: 65 n. 4 and 68; Slatkes 1981, 53, 55–56 and ill., 126, 130; Wheelock 1981, 41–42, 106–109 and ill.; Alpers 1983, xxi; Salomon 1983, 216–221 and ills. 1–2; Gaskell 1984, 557–559 and ill.; Aillaud 1986, 48, 49, 51, 64, 112, 114–117, 183–185, no. 14, and pl. 14; Reuterswärd 1988, 56–57 and ill. 2; Wheelock 1988, 40 and 82–83 and ill. 18; Nash 1991, 26, 28, 39, 98–101, and ill.; Blankert 1992, 49–52, 66, 114–118, 126–128, 140, 160, 184–185, no. 15, 223 and pl. 15; Wheelock 1995, 96–103, 105, 111, 122, 124, 176, 195 n. 1, 196 nn. 10, 13, and ill. 70



*Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*

c. 1664–1665

oil on canvas, 45.7 x 40.6 (18 x 16)

Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Marquand Collection,  
Gift of Henry G. Marquand, 1889

## PROVENANCE

Robert Vernon, London, 1801(?)–1849; Vernon sale, London, 21 April 1877, no. 97 (£404.5 to M. Colnaghi); Lord Powerscourt, Castle Powerscourt, near Dublin, 1878–1887(?); [Agnew, London]; [Bourgeois Frères, Paris]; [Pillet, Paris, 1887, for \$800 to Marquand]; Henry G. Marquand, New York, 1887–1888; on loan to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1888; to the present owner in 1889

## EXHIBITIONS

London 1838, 9, no. 29; London 1878, 50, no. 267; New York 1909, 138, no. 137; Amsterdam 1935, 29, no. 167, and ill. 85; Rotterdam 1935, 37, no. 85 and ill. 66; The Hague 1966, no. 4 and ill.; Paris 1966, no. 5 and ill.

## TECHNICAL DESCRIPTION

The support is a plain-weave linen with a thread count of 14 x 14 per cm.<sup>2</sup> The canvas has been lined and the original tacking edges have been removed.

The ground is pale gray and contains lead white, chalk, and umber.<sup>1</sup>

In the brightly lit areas of the wall is a thin gray layer, slightly paler than the ground, containing some ultramarine. Yellow ochre was added to this layer in the shadows and half-shadows. The left, shaded side of the basin has a red underpaint that extends under the adjacent part of her skirt. It is visible as a red outline describing the top edge.

The composition has been altered. There once was a chair with lion's head finials in the lower left foreground and the map on the back wall was placed further to the left in line with the left edge of the woman's headgear.

The red velvet lining of the jewelry box lid has faded, though the color is still intense where it has been shaded by the frame. Abrasion along all edges and in thin-glazed shadows, as well as scattered flake losses, are present.

Much as a poet who searches for the essence of reality, Vermeer created his images by distilling his visual impressions of the physical world. In a Neo-platonic fashion, the artist found that beneath the accidents of nature there exists a realm infused with harmony and order. His genius rests in giving visual form to that realm, and in revealing moments of human existence.

Vermeer sought, and found, that inner harmony in everyday life, primarily in the confines of a private chamber. Within the world of his interiors, individual objects – chairs, tables, walls, maps, or window frames – become vehicles for creating a sense of nature's underlying order. His carefully chosen objects are never randomly placed; their positions, proportions, colors, and textures work in concert with his figures. Light plays across the image, further binding these elements together. The various means by which Vermeer constructs his images reflect the extraordinary awareness he had for formal compositional relationships; less understood, however, is how these same concerns enhance the mood and thematic focus of his paintings.

The poetry of Vermeer's vision is nowhere better seen than in *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*. As though transfixed in a moment of time, a young woman stares absently toward the window, resting her right hand on the frame and holding a water pitcher in the other. While her embracing pose welcomes the cool light filtering through the leaded panes of the open window, her expression imparts a sense of repose and inner peace. Vermeer reinforces this mood through the quiet, restrained framework of geometric shapes surrounding her.

The serenity of this work is so all-encompassing that it is hard to identify any recognizable narrative. Unlike the understandable, physical activity in *Woman*

*Washing Her Hands* (fig. 1) by Eglon van der Neer (1634–1703), the central presence of the water pitcher in Vermeer's painting is not easily explained. If the woman prepares her morning toilet, why is there an open jewelry box with pearls, but no mirror, comb, or powderbrush, objects generally associated with such an activity? Why has Vermeer depicted her with a wide, white linen collar covering her shoulders, an accessory probably related to the toilet but not otherwise found in his paintings?<sup>2</sup> Finally, does the wall map of *The Seventeen Provinces* that Vermeer included so prominently behind the woman relate to a narrative, particularly since he depicts only the portion representing the southern provinces?<sup>3</sup>

Such questions, while appropriate to ask when considering some of Vermeer's works and most genre paintings by his contemporaries, seem irrelevant in the presence of a painting such as this. While Vermeer conceived *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* within an accepted iconographic framework, he differed from other artists in that



fig. 1. Eglon van der Neer, *Woman Washing Her Hands*, 1675, oil on panel, Mauritshuis, The Hague





he avoided narrative as a means for communicating meaning. For example, Van der Neer used the motif of hand-washing both for its narrative potential and for its symbolic meaning. In Dutch emblematic traditions, cleansing symbolizes purity and innocence, as De Jongh has noted.<sup>4</sup> The gesture of hand-washing in Van der Neer's painting thus symbolically differentiates one woman's moral character from that of another who emerges from the bed in the background. While the ideals of cleanliness and purity are also at the core of Vermeer's image, the artist expresses them in an entirely different way. As the woman stands poised between the window and the water pitcher, her actions seem suspended in time. Hers is a lasting, rather than fleeting, moment, one given further significance by Vermeer's pristine harmonies of light, color, and shape.

Vermeer's subtle compositional adjustments reveal the care with which he conceived his image. One of these adjustments, clearly visible with the naked eye, is a chair with lion-head finials that once occupied the left foreground. An infrared reflectogram demonstrates that Vermeer also altered the position of the wall map that originally hung directly behind the woman (fig. 2). In both instances Vermeer blocked in these initial compositional ideas with gray paints.

With these changes, Vermeer created a dynamic tension within the painting. The energy encompassed by the woman's body and gaze is now skillfully counterbalanced by the concentration of objects on the right. Moreover, by removing the chair and changing the position of the map, Vermeer preserved the purity of the white wall between the woman and the window, thus allowing light to flow directly onto her, uninterrupted by any visual interference.

As the entering light follows the graceful arc of the woman's arm, it reveals the

smooth planes of the white linen cowl draped gracefully around her head, and the sheen of her yellow jacket. The light, however, does not merely illuminate the woman, it infuses her with an inner radiance. Vermeer captures this radiance most vividly along the contour of the woman's blue skirt, an edge he has subtly diffused to suggest the interaction of light and form. The artist further captures this quality in the softly modulated half-tones of her lowered face.

From the nuances of ocher and blue in the leaded glass of the window that make up the woman's reflection, to the glistening highlights on the pitcher and basin, Vermeer's sensitivity to the interaction of light and color is remarkable. To help create the reflective surface of the basin Vermeer painted its form over a reddish tone applied over the ground. This selective ground layer, visible along the upper left rim of the basin, also extends under the woman's blue skirt, where it

warms that otherwise cool color. As is often the case with Vermeer, this blue passage consists of small particles of natural ultramarine mixed with bone black. High concentrations of natural ultramarine exist only along the ridges of the folds. Indeed, Vermeer's restraint with bright pigments includes his exclusive use of lead-tin yellow for the highlights of the woman's jacket, allowing a more subtle underlayer of ocher to define the shaded yellows of the costume.

Remarkably, the *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* was long taken for a work by Gabriël Metsu (1629–1667). Under that name the picture was shown in the 1838 exhibition in the British Institution in London.<sup>5</sup> Robert Vernon (1774–1849), one of the most remarkable British collectors of the nineteenth century, owned it at the time. Since 1820 he had collected paintings, primarily contemporary masters, of which he gave a part to the British nation in 1847.<sup>6</sup> In 1877, long after his death, a remnant of the Vernon Collection, comprising historical portraits and old masters, was auctioned in London where this interior scene with a woman at an open window was exhibited and sold under the name "Metzu."<sup>7</sup> An anonymous commentator on the auction noted: "those acquainted with the works of Van der Meer at once recognized the master's hand."<sup>8</sup>

The dealer Martin Colnaghi bought the "Metzu" in 1877 and sold it to Lord Powerscourt, who became convinced of Vermeer's authorship. He parted with his acquisition for the 1878 exposition in the Royal Academy, where it was shown as "Jan van der Meer, of Delft."<sup>9</sup> Mervyn Wingfield (1836–1904), seventh Viscount Powerscourt (fig. 3), was transformed into a precocious Vermeer admirer. In 1864 he had become a board member of the National Gallery of Ireland, for which he made acquisitions during his continental



fig. 2. Infrared reflectogram, *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*









fig. 3. Portrait of Mervyn Wingfield, Lord Powerscourt, 7th Viscount, from *Powerscourt* 1903

art tours.<sup>10</sup> His son, the eighth Viscount of Powerscourt (1880–1947), distinctly remembered his father's preference for the rare Delft painter. In 1881 he had already given a lecture in Dublin in which he sounded the praise of Vermeer, paying special attention to the *View of Delft*, which he had seen in The Hague (cat. 7).<sup>11</sup> He further lauded the “beautiful effects in his works, especially his way of depicting the effect of light through bluish window-glass, which seems to be the principal aim in many of his pictures, and which I do not remember to have seen so successfully rendered by any other painter.”<sup>12</sup>

In 1887, the *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* was bought by Henry G. Marquand (1819–1902) (fig. 4), who was a successful banker in his native city of New York. After retiring, he dedicated himself to the public welfare and to charity and became one of the moving forces behind the new Metropolitan Museum of Art, becoming its treasurer in 1882. His own home also

resembled a museum, as “He bought like an Italian Prince of the Renaissance.”<sup>13</sup>

In 1888 Marquand lent his Vermeer to an exhibition of his collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The spontaneous enthusiasm of the public was so great that Marquand decided to donate all thirty-five of the paintings exhibited at that time to the museum.<sup>14</sup> His magnanimity earned him great praise as a benefactor. A Dutch commentator wrote: “Honor be to the liberal and patriotic donor; may his noble deed evoke the emulation of all right-thinking men!”<sup>15</sup> Finally, in 1889 he was elected the second President of the Metropolitan.

In 1909 Vermeer became the revelation of the Hudson-Fulton Commemorative Exhibition in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. With J. Pierpont Morgan's *A Lady Writing* (cat. 13), the *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* was one of the gems of the exhibition.<sup>16</sup> For example, a certain William Howe Downes opined in the *Boston Evening Transcript* of 18 September 1909: “The rare and incomparable artist Vermeer...might

be called the revelation and the bright, particular star of this grand collection.” According to him, the *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* was “one of the immortal productions of the art of Holland, a gem of purest ray serene.”<sup>17</sup>

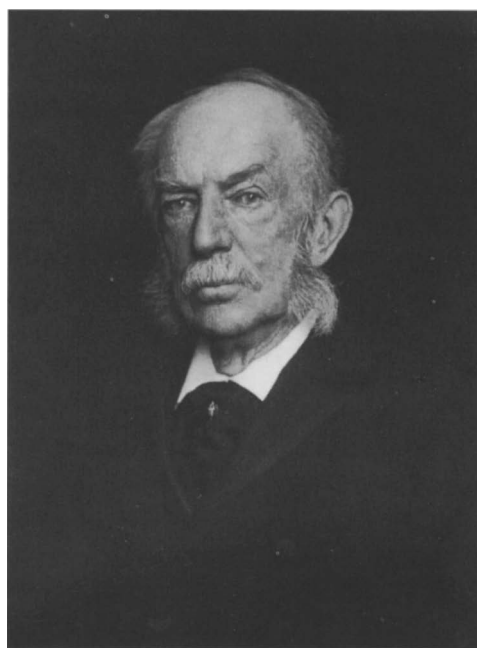


fig. 4. Henry G. Marquand, photograph

1. Kühn 1968, 186.

2. The one possible exception is the original shape of the collar seen in the *Officer and Laughing Girl* in The Frick Collection (page 35, fig. 6). See Wheelock 1995, fig. 40.

3. Welu 1975, 534–535, has identified the map as one published by Huyck Allart (active c. 1650–1675). South in this map is oriented to the left. A version of the map, dated 1671, is located in the University Library, Leiden (Bodel Nijenhuis Collection, No. P 1 N 69). Welu noted that Allart acquired the plates from an early seventeenth-century source and reprinted the map with added decorative elements.

4. De Jongh in Amsterdam 1976, 195, cat. 48. The emblem De Jongh cites, and illustrates, is found in B[artholomeus] H[ulsius], *Emblematia sacra, dat is, eenighe geestelike sinnebeelden*, no location, 1631, 100–104. The tradition relating to cleansing and purity, of course, goes back to the Bible. A pitcher and basin, similar to those in Vermeer's painting, are represented in Jan Lievens' *Pilate Washing His Hands* (Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal, Leiden). For an illustration of Lievens' painting, see Sumowski 1983, 3: 1180.

5. London 1838, 9, no. 29: “A female at a window. Metzu”; Graves 1913–1915, 2: 773 (1838, no. 29).

6. DNB, 58: 281–282; in 1876 his collection was housed in the National Gallery in London and later in the Tate Gallery; according to Hamlyn 1993, 193, Vernon inherited most of the old masters in his collection from his father, a London stable keeper, who died in 1801.

7. Sale catalogue, London, 21 April 1877, 12, no. 97 (Lugt no. 37364).

8. H. W. 1877, 616.

9. London 1878, 50, no. 267.

10. Burke's 1963, 1985.

11. Hale 1937, 109–110 (letters from the eighth Viscount Powerscourt to Hale, dated 18 January and 24 February 1936).

12. Hale 1937, 109.

13. DAB, 12: 292–293.

14. Loffelt 1889, 61 (quoting from a letter from Marquand to the museum), and Tomkins 1970, 74. Valentiner 1910, 11, mistakenly believed that Marquand had bought the painting as a De Hooch, an opinion still believed by Walter Liedtke in The Hague 1990, 17.

15. Loffelt 1889, 62: “Eere den onbekrompen en vaderlandslievenden schenker, wiens edele daad den naijver van alle weldenkenden moge opwekken!”

16. New York 1909, 137 no. 136, and 138, no. 137.

17. Clipping in the Mauritshuis documentation archives.

## COLLECTION CATALOGUES

Metropolitan Museum 1895, 95, no. 297; Metropolitan Museum 1920, 311; Metropolitan Museum 1980, 1: 191, 3: 446 and ill.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

H.W. 1877, 616; Havard 1888, 39, no. 56; Löffelt 1889, 62; Bode 1895, 18; Roberts 1897, 1: 268–269; Hofstede de Groot 1907–1928, 1: 271 and 595–596, no. 19; Hofstede de Groot 1907–1930, ill. 11; Cortissoz 1909, 166; Stephenson 1909, 168, 172 and ill.; Cox 1909–1910, 246; Breck 1910, 41–42 and ill.; Friedländer 1910, 98; Valentiner 1910, 11; Plietzsch 1911, 50–51, 118, no. 27 and ill. 12; Graves 1913–1915, 2: 773, 4: 1474; Lloyd 1925, 124–125 and ill.; Hale 1937, 107–111 and ill. 1; De Vries 1939, 40, 81–82, no. 11 and ill. 37; Swillens 1950, 56, no. 16, 72, 83–88, 118, 144 and pl. 16; Gowing 1952, 130–131, nr. 15 and ill.; Constable 1964, 105; Gerson 1967, col. 742; Goldscheider 1967, 141, no. 16 and ill. 43; Tomkins 1970, 74; Blankert 1975, 60, 62, 109, 146–147, no. 12 and pl. 12; Welu 1975, 534 and ill. 5; Blankert 1978, 41, 73, 159–160, no. 12 and pl. 12; Slatkes 1981, 50–51 and ill.; Wheelock 1981, 44, 48, 114–116, and pls. 26–27; Aillaud 1986, 50, 108–109, 112, 180–181, no. 12, and pl. 11; Wheelock 1988, 42 and 88–91, and pls. 21–22; Montias 1989, 190, 266 and ill. 42; The Hague 1990, 17 and ill. 1, 37, 39 and 43; Nash 1991, 26, 28, 31, 96–98, and ill.; Blankert 1992, 52, 109, 114, 181, no. 12, 223, ill. 38 and pl. 11; Hamlyn 1993, 193 and ill. on cover; Wheelock 1995, 104–111, 159, 178, and ill. 75

*Woman with a Pearl Necklace*

c. 1664

inscribed on the tabletop: *IVMeer* (IVM in ligature)oil on canvas, 51.2 x 45.1 (20<sup>5</sup>/<sub>32</sub> x 17<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>)

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie

## PROVENANCE

(?) Pieter Claesz van Ruijven, Delft, before 1674;  
 (?) Maria de Knuijt, Widow Van Ruijven, Delft, 1674–  
 1681; (?) Magdalena van Ruijven and Jacob Dissius,  
 1681–1682; Jacob Dissius (with his father Abraham  
 Dissius, 1685–1694), Delft, 1682–1695; Dissius sale,  
 Amsterdam, 16 May 1696, no. 36 (f30); Johannes  
 Caudri, Amsterdam, before 1809; Caudri sale,  
 Amsterdam, 6 September 1809, no. 42 (f55 to Ths.  
 Spaan); D. Teengs sale, Amsterdam, 24 April 1811, no.  
 73 (f36 to Gruijter); Sale, Amsterdam, 26 March 1856,  
 no. 93 (f111 to Philip); Henri Grevedon, Paris, before  
 1860; Thoré-Bürger, Paris, c. 1860–1868; Bürger et al.  
 sale, Brussels, 22 April 1868, no. 49 (Bf 3,500 to  
 Sedelmeyer for Suermondt); Barthold Suermondt,  
 Aachen, 1868–1874; acquired as part of Suermondt  
 collection in 1874

## EXHIBITIONS

Paris 1866 (not in cat.); Paris 1914, 52, no. 24, and ill.;  
 Amsterdam 1950, 56, no. 112, and ill. 107

## TECHNICAL DESCRIPTION

The support is a fine, plain-weave, linen with a thread  
 count of 21.6 x 15 per cm<sup>2</sup>. The original tacking edges  
 are still present. The top tacking edge is wider than the  
 others and appears to have been folded double. Marks  
 from the original strainer bars are evident along the  
 top and right edges. The support has been lined and  
 placed on a stretcher larger than the original strainer.

Over an off-white ground, black underpainting  
 indicates the shadow on the woman's back. An ochre  
 layer on top of the ground may cover the entire paint-  
 ing. It is not covered by other paint layers in parts of  
 the figure and in the stained glass window. The wo-  
 man's yellow jacket is underpainted with white, fol-  
 lowed by lead tin yellow in the light parts and two  
 layers of a black and yellow ochre mixture in the sha-  
 dows. In the flesh colors are various mixtures of white,  
 ochre, and black, well blended into one another. The  
 pearl necklace was painted wet-in-wet in white over a  
 gray/ochre layer.

A young woman stands transfixed, gazing  
 into a mirror and holding the ribbons of  
 her pearl necklace tautly in her hands.  
 Elegantly dressed in an ermine-trimmed  
 yellow satin jacket, her hair decorated with  
 an orange-red star-shaped bow, she seems  
 to be giving the finishing touches to her  
 toilet, for before her on the table, partially  
 hidden behind a dark cloth, are a basin  
 and a powder brush. Light floods into the  
 room through the leaded-glass windows.  
 The scene is a familiar one, yet it tran-  
 scends the common occurrences of daily  
 life. All movement has stopped, as though  
 the young woman has just seen herself in  
 the mirror for the first time.

This focus on a solitary woman stand-  
 ing in the corner of a room resembles  
 three other of Vermeer's paintings from  
 the mid-1660s, *Woman in Blue Reading a  
 Letter*, *Woman Holding a Balance*, and *Young  
 Woman with a Water Pitcher* (cats. 9, 10, 11).  
 Nevertheless, Vermeer has infused the taut,  
 sparse composition of *Woman with a Pearl  
 Necklace* with a different level of emotional  
 energy. The blank expanse of the white  
 wall and the yellows of the curtain and  
 woman's jacket provide an intensity of  
 color not seen in the other paintings, where  
 blues and ochers predominate. The most  
 important difference lies in the forcefulness  
 of the woman's gaze. Instead of being qui-  
 etly reflective, she is actively engaged. In-  
 deed, as the woman stares across the room  
 at the mirror, her gaze activates the entire  
 void of space in the center of the compo-  
 sition.

While representations of women at  
 their toilet became a favorite subject for a  
 number of Dutch artists during the 1650s  
 and 1660s, in particular Gerard ter Borch  
 (1617–1681) and Gabriël Metsu (1629–1667),  
 the closest prototype for Vermeer's compo-  
 sition is a small panel painting by Frans van  
 Mieris (1635–1681), *Young Woman before a*

*Mirror* (fig. 1). Although apparently simi-  
 lar in general concept, the differences in  
 the thematic content of these two works  
 are striking. In Van Mieris' painting the  
 darkness of the setting and the woman's  
 languid pose, low décolletage, and wistful  
 gaze are replete with sensuality, whereas  
 Vermeer's woman appears modest and self-  
 contained. She stands alone, caught in a  
 pose that betrays no movement, while Van  
 Mieris' woman is accompanied by an  
 expectant black servant girl who, with  
 upturned eyes, holds the jewelry box up  
 to her.

The folded letter on the table in Van  
 Mieris' painting reaffirms that the subject  
 is related to love. The mirror would thus  
 seem to relate metaphorically to love's  
 transience, a common theme in Dutch em-  
 blematic traditions.<sup>1</sup> Metaphorical associa-  
 tions with mirrors, however, are numerous  
 and frequently contradictory, ranging from  
 the sense of sight to indications of pride  
 and vanity. Indeed, in Vermeer's painting  
 the woman's act of gazing into the mirror  
 while adorning herself with a pearl neck-



fig. 1. Frans van Mieris, *Young Woman before a Mirror*,  
 c. 1662, oil on panel, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,  
 Gemäldegalerie





lace has been interpreted by scholars as a vanitas theme.<sup>2</sup> Yet, no other compositional elements reinforce such a negative message.<sup>3</sup> More in keeping with this serene image are those positive metaphorical associations traditionally connected with the mirror: self-knowledge and truth. According to Cesare Ripa in his *Iconologia*, a mirror is one of the attributes of Prudence, for with it she achieves self-knowledge. It is also an attribute of Truth. Just as a mirror accurately reflects reality, so does man achieve understanding when he comprehends the true character of the physical world.<sup>4</sup> Otto van Veen related the elements of truth and love to a mirror's reflection in his emblem "Cleer and pure."<sup>5</sup>

The woman's relationship to the mirror, however, cannot be separated iconographically from the pearls, which, like mirror reflections, had numerous metaphorical associations, both positive and negative.<sup>6</sup> As highly prized, worldly possessions they were linked symbolically with human vanity; even guileful "Vrouw Wereld" ["Lady World"] was said to be bedecked with pearls.<sup>7</sup> The white, flawless luster of the pearl, however, was equally associated with faith, purity, and virginity.<sup>8</sup>

One of the most remarkable aspects of Vermeer's genius is the elusiveness of his meaning, especially in the genre paintings, which are so carefully conceived. Vermeer avoided making overtly didactic statements. Rather than use explicit gestures or objects with unambiguous iconographic meaning, he conveyed meaning through mood. The calm serenity of the woman as she stands in bright daylight, poised almost as a priest holding the Host during the Eucharist, dismisses any possibility that Vermeer had conceived this image in a negative light. The gesture, mirror, and pearls together form a positive sense of wholeness, truthfulness, and purity.



fig. 2. Neutron autoradiograph, *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*

Technical examination of the painting reveals significant pentimenti, indicating many careful refinements to the composition. Neutron autoradiography shows that Vermeer originally included a musical instrument, probably a lute, on the chair in the foreground (fig. 2). An even more startling discovery, however, is that Vermeer originally planned to include a wall map, similar to that in *The Art of Painting* (page 68, fig. 2), behind the woman on the rear wall. Finally, this examination technique revealed that the dark cloth on the table covered less of the tile floor under the table.

The change in the shape of the cloth eliminated much of the light area beneath the table, leaving only the shape of one table leg to orient the viewer. As a result of this alteration the viewer's attention is focused more exclusively on the light-filled space above. While the elimination of the map and lute also simplifies the composition, it may also be related to thematic reasons. The map, representing the physical world, and the musical instrument, referring to sensual love, would have given

a context for interpreting the mirror and the pearls negatively rather than positively. Indeed, the sensual, earthy connotations are similar to those associated with images of "Vrouw Wereld".<sup>9</sup> By removing the map and lute he transformed the character of the image into a poetic one evoking the ideals of a life lived with purity and truth.

Although *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* has elicited great admiration throughout its history, none was more enamored of it than Thoré-Bürger, who described the painting as "delicious," after he acquired it around 1860.<sup>10</sup> Later, he proudly recalled that while the work was in his possession it had drawn the admiration of Ludwig Knaus (1829–1910), a celebrated painter of genre scenes, who looked to Holland's Golden Age for his inspiration. Knaus, who was well acquainted with the industrialist and collector Barthold Suermondt (1818–1887), whom he joined in visits to art dealers and museums,<sup>11</sup> probably convinced his friend to buy this painting when Thoré-Bürger sold it in 1868. The picture became



fig. 3. Ludwig Knaus, *Portrait of Barthold Suermondt*, oil on canvas, Suermondt Ludwig Museum, Aachen

the sensation of the Suermondt Gallery, which was particularly popular with artists from all over Germany.

The son of a Utrecht mint master, Suermondt had amassed a fortune in Belgium before settling in Aachen, where he assembled an extensive art collection. His friend and connoisseur Carel Vosmaer had this to say of Suermondt's aggressive manner of collecting: "His fortune allowed him to indulge his passion, and once he wanted something, he never let go."<sup>12</sup> The Berlin museum director Gustav Waagen wrote a catalogue for the "Galerie Suermondt" that appeared in 1860 with a foreword by Thoré-Bürger.<sup>13</sup> In 1874 this collection – the largest private one of the time – was sold to the royal museum in Berlin.

The early history of the painting can be traced back to Amsterdam in the seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries. There it had first been auctioned in 1696 as part of the Jacob Dissius collection (see page 53). The winning bid on "A Grooming ditto [young lady], very handsome by ditto [J vander Meer van Delft]" was only thirty guilders.<sup>14</sup>

In 1809 a description of the picture read: "In a furnished Room stands a graceful young Lady at a table...who seems to be Grooming herself...this charming scene is one of the most naturally and meticulously painted [works] by this famous master."<sup>15</sup> The collection in question had been "assembled with skill over many years" by the Amsterdam collector Johannes Caudri (1725–1809), "In his lifetime [the] Oldest Paymaster of the former East-Indies Company." He died without issue, so that his collection went to public auction.<sup>16</sup>

After being described in laudatory terms in sale catalogues of 1811 and 1856, the painting appeared in France, where thanks to Thoré-Bürger, interest in the

"forgotten" painter from Delft had been revived. Thoré himself acquired the *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* out of the collection of the lithographer Henri Grevedon (1776–1860).<sup>17</sup> Thoré presumably bought the painting at Grevedon's death in 1860, and, as mentioned above, sold it in Brussels in 1868.<sup>18</sup> Later, when Suermondt sold it, it became one of the proud possessions of the Staatliche Museen.

1. Van Veen 1608, 126–127. In an emblem entitled "Out of sight out of mynde" Cupid gazes at his own reflection in a mirror. The accompanying text provides the moral: "The glasse doth shew the face whyle thereon one doth look, / But gon, it doth another in lyke manner shew, / Once beeing turn'd away forgotten is the view, / So absence hath bin cause the louer loue forsook."

2. Walsh 1973, unpaginated, and Slatkes 1981, 53, associated the painting with the theme of vanitas. Kelch 1988, identified the mirror as an attribute of "Superbia" [Pride], and associated the woman with this vice. I would like to thank Jan Kelch for providing me with a typescript of his lecture.

3. This opinion was also expressed by De Jongh 1975/1976, 84.

4. Ripa 1644, 622 ("Prudenza. Wijsheyt... "Het spiegelen bediet de kennisse zijns selven, konnende niemand zijne eygene saecken rechten, soo hy zijne eygene gebreken niet kent."); 590 (Verita. Waerheyt... En de Spiegel bediet, dat de Waerheyt, als nu, in haere Volkomentheyt is, als wanneer, gelijk geseyt is, het verstand sich vast maeckte mette verstandelijcke dingen: gelijk de Spiegel goed is, wanneer zy de waerachtige gestaltenisse van de saecke vertoont, die aldaer uytblinckt...).

5. Van Veen 1608, 6. "Euen as the perfect glasse doth rightly shew the face, / The louer must appear right as hee is in deed, / For in the law of loue hath loyaltie decreed, / That falshood with true loue must haue no byding place."

6. For an excellent discussion of the multiple associations given to the pearl in Dutch literary and pictorial traditions, see De Jongh 1975/1976.

7. De Jongh 1975/1976, 82. Both G. A. Bredero and Joost van den Vondel described "Vrouw Wereld" as wearing pearls.

8. De Jongh 1975/1976, 88, has noted that the great Dutch poet and playwright Joost van den Vondel used the pearl as a token of the guileful "Dame World," a symbol of faith, and then of chastity.

9. For a discussion of Jan Miense Molenaer's *Vrouw Wereld*, see Eddy de Jongh in Amsterdam 1976, 176–179, cat. 43.

10. Thoré-Bürger 1869, 171: "Cette jeune fille en caraco cit-

ron, sur le fond de lambris pâle, d'un ton gris-perle, est délicieuse."

11. Thieme/Becker, 20: 570–574.

12. Vosmaer 1887, 97–98: "Zijn vermogen vergunde hem aan zijn hartstocht te voldoen en hij liet niet los als hij iets hebben wilde." See also Amsterdam 1989, 61–62.

13. Thoré-Bürger/Waagen 1860.

14. Hoet 1752–1770, 1: 36, no. 36: "Een Paleerende dito [Juffrouw], seer fraey van dito [J vander Meer van Delft].

15. Sale catalogue, Amsterdam, 6 September 1809, 14, no.

42: "In een gecubileerde Kamer staat eene bevallige jonge Dame voor een tafel...en schijnt zich te Paleeren... dit bevallig tafreel is een der natuurlijkste en alleruitvoerigst gepenceelden van deze beroemde Meester" (Lugt no. 7632).

16. Sale catalogue, Amsterdam, 6 September 1809, title page: "in vele jaren met kunde bijeen verzameld" and "In leeven Oudste Soldy-Boekhouder der voormalige Oost-Indische Compagnie." The dates have been taken from an undated manuscript (Centraal Bureau voor Genealogie, The Hague).

17. Thoré-Bürger 1866, 559, no. 33. Thieme/Becker, 15: 15; Henri Grevedon (not Grévedon or Crevedon) literally grew up in the Louvre, where his father lived in an official residence.

18. Sale catalogue, Brussels, 22 April 1868, 25–26, no. 49 (Lugt no. 30452) (bought by Sedelmeyer for BF3500, according to the Le Roy index cards, RKD, The Hague, no. 157).

#### COLLECTION CATALOGUES

Staatliche Museen Berlin 1883, 271, no. 912 B; Staatliche Museen Berlin 1891, 167, no. 912 B; Staatliche Museen Berlin 1921, 279, no. 912 B; Staatliche Museen Berlin 1975, 453–454, no. 912 B and ill.; Staatliche Museen Berlin 1986, 78, 347, no. 881 and ill.

#### LITERATURE

Hoet 1752–1770, 1: 36, no. 36; Thoré-Bürger 1866, 326–328, 459, 463, 558–559, no. 33 and ill.; Thoré-Bürger 1869, 171; Lemcke 1878, 19; Havard 1888, 38, no. 36; Hofstede de Groot 1907–1928, 1: 596, no. 20; Plietzsch 1911, 47, 89, 114, no. 5 and ill. 11; Eisler 1916, 263–264 and ill. 28; Hale 1937, 76, 81, 84–86, 106, 114, 142, 175, 187–189, 196 and pl. 9; De Vries 1939, 46, 87, no. 24 and ill. 49; Blum 1946, 175, no. 33; Van Thienen 1949, 22, no. 21 and ill. 21; Swillens 1950, 56, no. 17, 72, 78, 81, 84–85, 87–88, 118, 176 and pl. 17; Gowing 1952, 68 n. 5, 77 n. 4, 134, no. 19 and ill. 43; Goldscheider 1958, 141, no. 19 and ill. 48–49; Gerson 1967, cols. 743–744; Klessmann 1971, 50; Blankert 1975, 36, 62–63, 71, 82, 147, no. 13 and pl. 13; Blankert 1978, 25, 42–43, 49, 54, 77 n. 48, 160, no. 13 and pl. 13; Slatkes 1981, 52–53, 55, 60, 74 and ill.; Wheelock 1981, 25, 110, 124, 134, and pl. 24; Aillaud 1986, 46, 49, 57, 112–114, 181, no. 13, and pl. 13; Wheelock 1988, 84–85, 104 and ill. 19; Montias 1989, 184, 191, 256 and ill. 43; Nash 1991, 25, 29, 101–103 and ill.; Blankert 1992, 46, 51, 58, 85, 114, 116, 126, 140, 163, 181–182, no. 13, pl. 13 and ill. 89; Wheelock 1995, 102, 105, 177, and ill. A17



*A Lady Writing*

c. 1665

inscribed on the bottom of the frame of the still life: *IVMeer* (IVM in ligature)oil on canvas, 45 x 39.9 (17<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 15<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>)

National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Harry Waldron Havemeyer and Horace Havemeyer, Jr., in memory of their father, Horace Havemeyer

## PROVENANCE

(?) Pieter Claesz van Ruijven, Delft, before 1674;  
 (?) Maria de Knuijt, Widow Van Ruijven, Delft, 1674–1681; (?) Magdalena van Ruijven and Jacob Dissius, Delft, 1681–1682; Jacob Dissius (with his father Abraham Dissius, 1685–1694), Delft, 1682–1695; Dissius sale, Amsterdam, 16 May 1696, no. 35 (f. 63); J. van Buren, The Hague; Van Buren sale, The Hague, 7 November 1808, no. 22; Cornelis Jan Luchtmans, Rotterdam, 1808–1816; Luchtmans sale, Rotterdam, 20 April 1816, no. 90 (f. 70); F. Kamermans, Rotterdam, by 1819; Kamermans sale, Rotterdam, 3 October 1825, no. 70 (f. 305 to Lelie); Reydon sale, Amsterdam, 5 April 1827, no. 26 (to De Robiano); François-Xavier, Count De Robiano, Brussels, 1827–1837; De Robiano sale, Brussels, 1 May 1837, no. 436 (BF 400 to Hérís); Ludovic, Count De Robiano, Brussels, 1837–1887; Heirs De Robiano, 1888–1906; [J. & A. LeRoy, Brussels, 1907]; J. Pierpont Morgan, New York, 1907–1913 (bought for £100,000 from G.S. Hellman); J. Pierpont Morgan, Jr. (between 1935–1939, on consignment with M. Knoedler and Co., New York), New York, 1913–1940; Sir Harry Oakes, Nassau, Bahamas, 1940–1943; Lady Eunice Oakes, Nassau, Bahamas, 1943–1946; [M. Knoedler and Co., New York, 1946]; Horace Havemeyer, New York, 1946–1956; by inheritance to Harry Waldron Havemeyer and Horace Havemeyer, Jr., New York, 1956–1962; National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1962 (gift of Harry Waldron Havemeyer and Horace Havemeyer, Jr. in memory of their father, transferred in 1966)

## EXHIBITIONS

Brussels 1873, 76, no. 264; New York 1909, 137, no. 136; Rotterdam 1935, 37, no. 86a; New York 1939, 195, no. 399, pl. 72; New York 1941, 18–19, no. 17; New York 1942, 89 and 159, no. 68, ill.; New York 1946, no. 15, ill.; Paris 1976, no catalogue; Leningrad 1976; Tokyo 1987, no. 86; Saint Petersburg 1989, 34, no. 14; The Hague 1990, 456–462, no. 67, ill. (with extensive literature); Frankfurt 1993, 314–316, no. 85

## TECHNICAL DESCRIPTION

The support is a fine, plain-weave linen with a thread count of 12 x 14 per cm<sup>2</sup>. Remnants of the original tacking edges survive, and the canvas has been glue-lined.

The ground appears to be a single layer of a warm, light ochre color, containing chalk, (plant?) black, red, and yellow iron oxide (perhaps burnt sienna and yellow ochre), and lead white.<sup>1</sup>

The brushwork of the final paint layers is very thin, except in the lighter tones. Thicker paint has been used only in the form of rounded dots for the highlights. Two preparations of lead-tin yellow were used in the yellow jacket: one coarsely ground, and the other more finely ground and paler, used for the highlights on the shoulder pleats. X-radiography and infrared reflectography indicate that Vermeer made an alteration to the angle of the quill and to some of the fingers holding it.

In a dimly lit interior, a young woman looks up from her letter and stares out at the viewer. Holding the sheet of paper with one hand and a quill pen with the other, it appears that she has just been interrupted, yet neither her pose nor her expression indicates a recent disturbance.

At once direct and yet suggestive, this painting represents a subject frequently found in Dutch painting, and one that occurs in two other works by Vermeer, including *Mistress and Maid*, c. 1667–1668 (page 58, fig. 14), and *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid* (cat. 19). Within the thematic traditions of Dutch art, the subject of a woman writing a letter almost always relates to love, an association conveyed in many ways. Gerard ter Borch (1617–1681), for example, placed his letter-writer before a bed, an allusion to the letter's romantic content (fig. 1). Vermeer, in his two other depictions of letter-writers, included a maid, who either delivers the letter or awaits a reply. The narrative content of *A Lady Writing*, however, is negligible. The

only indication that its theme has a romantic connotation is the dark and barely distinguishable painting hanging on the back wall. It appears to be a still life with musical instruments, including a bass-viol.<sup>2</sup> As musical instruments often carry implications of love, it may be understood that the letter she writes is directed to an absent lover.<sup>3</sup>

Vermeer organized his compositional elements so as to enhance the tranquility of the scene. The woman rests her arms gently on the writing table and turns easily toward the viewer, her chair angled toward the picture plane. Other than the chair and a fold in the blue drapery that parallels the woman's arm, few diagonals exist. Vermeer provided a horizontal and vertical framework for the woman's form by means of the foreground table and the painting on the rear wall. Not only does the dark form of the painting provide a chiaroscuro contrast for the woman's head, its size, which extends two-thirds of the way across the background wall, relates proportionally to the width of the composition. Other proportional relationships further indicate the care with which Vermeer conceived his composition. The width of the wall to the right of the picture, for example, is equal to the height of the table, which is half the distance between the bottom of the picture on the back wall and the base of the painting.

Although *A Lady Writing* is not dated, its composition and technique, as well as the woman's costume and hairstyle, relate to other of Vermeer's paintings from the mid-1660s. The woman's elegant yellow jacket, for example, is found in *Woman with a Lute*, c. 1664 (page 26, fig. 13), *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*, c. 1664 (cat. 12), and *Mistress and Maid* in the Frick Collection. The ink wells and the decorated casket on the table are similar to those in the Frick



fig. 1. Gerard ter Borch, *Letter-writer*, c. 1655, oil on panel, Mauritshuis, The Hague



painting. The hairstyle, with a braided chignon and the ribbons tied in bows formed like stars, was popular in the third quarter of the seventeenth century, particularly after the early 1660s.<sup>4</sup>

Vermeer's other depictions of single figures in interiors during the 1660s portray women engaged in some activity, whether it be reading a letter, holding a water jug, or playing a musical instrument. None of these women seems remotely aware of the presence of a viewer peering into their private worlds. *A Lady Writing* differs profoundly in that the woman not only looks directly at the viewer, but has also interrupted her activity, the writing of a letter.

Just why Vermeer chose to break from the successful compositional formula he had already established is not known. One would expect the artist, like Ter Borch before him, to depict the woman concentrating upon the letter she was writing. Perhaps Vermeer felt that such a composition would have conformed too closely to established iconographic traditions. By depicting the woman looking out at the viewer Vermeer introduced an added component to the letter writing theme: the arrival of an unseen visitor to this quiet and ordered private chamber. The woman's calm demeanor as she looks up and pauses in the midst of her letter, however, does not indicate surprise or agitation. On the contrary, the only acknowledgment of the viewer's presence is the hint of a smile crossing her face. Indeed, even with his innovative adaptation of the letter-writing theme, which lends itself to a narrative encounter, Vermeer subordinated all physical action to focus upon the woman's reflective state of being.

One other possible explanation for the woman's striking pose is that this may be a portrait. By means of the letter-writing theme he achieved a convincing sense

of naturalism that formal portraits often lacked. Although no documentary evidence confirms that Vermeer painted portraits, certain compositional characteristics in this work seem to reinforce this hypothesis. Vermeer has posed the woman in the foreground of the painting, thereby enhancing her physical and psychological presence. Her distinctive features – a large forehead and long, narrow nose – are portrait-like characteristics that resemble those of *Portrait of a Young Woman* (page 75, fig. 13), and are not as idealized as those of women in his other genre scenes of the same period. Finally, her form is modeled with delicate brushstrokes that articulate her features. The subtle modulations in the colors of her flesh are particularly evident since the recent restoration of the painting.

The problem of identifying the sitter, however, seems insurmountable. The most likely possibility is that she is his wife, Catharina Bolnes, who, having been born in 1631, would have been in her early-to-mid thirties when Vermeer painted this work. While it is difficult to judge the age of models in paintings, such an age does seem appropriate for this figure. Little else, however, confirms this hypothesis. Although the yellow satin jacket with white ermine trim is almost certainly the same jacket mentioned in the inventory of household effects made after Vermeer's death,<sup>5</sup> it is worn by a different model in *Mistress and Maid*.

The earliest certain reference to *A Lady Writing* is the 1696 Dissius sale in Amsterdam, where the painting was described as "a writing young lady, very good, by the same [J. vander Meer]."<sup>6</sup> It is not known who bought the painting at the sale. More than a hundred years later *A Lady Writing* was part of the collection of J. van Buren, who was Bailiff of Noordwijkerhout, an

area between between Leiden and Haarlem. In 1808 his substantial collection of books, miniatures, prints, drawings and paintings was auctioned in The Hague. The catalogue lavished praise on Vermeer's painting: "A fetching young woman dressed in yellow satin [trimmed] with fur...exceedingly lovely, meticulously and masterfully painted by the Delft van der Meer...very rare."<sup>7</sup>

The painting was bought by (or for) Cornelis Jan Luchtmans (1777–1860), a physician in Rotterdam, where, in 1816, he sold a number of his paintings.<sup>8</sup> The Vermeer was presumably bought by F. Kamermans, an aged Rotterdam shipbuilder. In 1819 the painting was seen at Kamerman's home by Sir John Murray during his journey through Holland, who described it as being "remarkable for its softness."<sup>9</sup>

One of the owners after Kamermans was François-Xavier, Count De Robiano (1778–1836), who in 1816 became chamberlain to King William I in Brussels. In 1830, shortly after he acquired this Vermeer painting, he sided with the Belgian patriots and fell out of royal favor.<sup>10</sup> When the collection of the Belgian count was auctioned in 1837, his eldest son, Ludovic, bought back the painting. After his death in 1887, the painting passed to his sister (d. 1900) and her husband, Gustave, Baron de Senzeille, who kept the painting until his death in 1906.<sup>11</sup>

The work disappeared from public view, but in 1907 it turned up in New York, where it was soon acquired by J. Pierpont Morgan, Sr. (1837–1913) (fig. 2).<sup>12</sup> Morgan's acquisition of the painting has provided posterity with a fascinating anecdote about his collecting acumen. The antique dealer G. S. Hellman, who brought the canvas to the collector's attention, noticed to his amazement that Morgan had never heard



Vermeer's name. While Morgan gazed at the picture, Hellman informed him about the painter, his place in the history of art, and the amounts that were then paid for one of his paintings. Morgan then asked the price. "One hundred thousand dollars," said the dealer and the deal was concluded.<sup>13</sup> After Morgan acquired the painting he generously lent it to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where it was on view until his death in 1913.<sup>14</sup>

After Morgan's death the canvas came into the possession of his son, who once more put it on the market. The painting was eventually sold in 1940 to Sir Harry Oakes (1874–1943) in Nassau in the Bahamas, who, however, died shortly thereafter.<sup>15</sup> In 1946 his widow, Lady Eunice Oakes, sold the painting to Horace Havemeyer (1886–1956), son of renowned collectors Louisine and Horace Havemeyer.<sup>16</sup> In 1962 his two sons, Horace, Jr. and Waldron donated the painting to the National Gallery of Art. It was one of the last authentic paintings by Vermeer to move from private ownership into the public domain.<sup>17</sup>

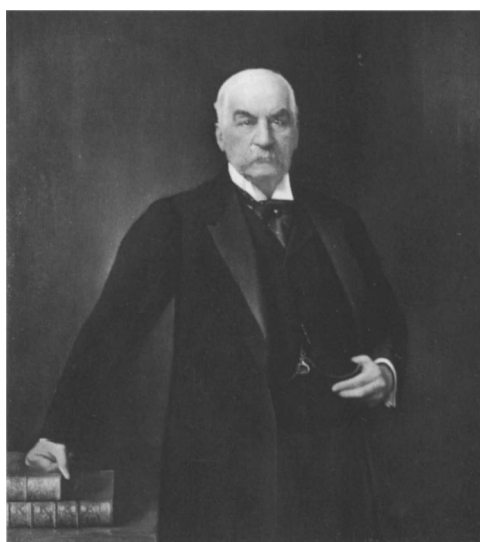


fig. 2. Carlos Baca-Flor, *Portrait of J. Pierpont Morgan*, c. 1914, oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

1. Robert L. Feller, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, identified the elements in the ground. His report dated 26 June 1974 is available in the scientific research department, National Gallery of Art.
2. Boström 1951, suggests that the painting may have been by Cornelis van der Meulen (1642–1692). The evidence, however, is not sufficient to sustain an attribution. A painting depicting "a bass viol with a skull" is listed in the inventory of Vermeer's possessions after his death in 1676. See Montias 1989, 340, doc. 364.
3. This thematic association was first suggested by De Mirimonde 1961, 40. For emblematic literature relating musical instruments to love see De Jongh 1967, 50–51.
4. This information was kindly supplied by A. M. Louise E. Mulder-Erketens, keeper of textiles, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
5. Montias 1989, 339, doc. 364: "a yellow satin mantle with white fur trimming."
6. Montias 1993, 402, doc. 439: "Een Schryvende Juffrouw heel goed van denzelven [J. vander Meer]."
7. Sale catalogue, The Hague, 7 November 1808, 264, no. 22 (Lugt no. 7474), first mentioned in Blankert 1988, 210: "Een bevallig vrouwtje in 't geel satyn met bond gekleed .... uitmuntend fraai, uitvoerig en meesterlyk gepenseeld door de Delfsche van der Meer...zeer raar."
8. Sale catalogue, Rotterdam, 20 April 1816, 26, no. 90 (Lugt no. 8868).
9. Murray 1819–1823, 29.
10. Concerning De Robiano, see The Hague 1990, 458–459, 461 nn. 3, 10. During his employment in the Netherlands he had frequented auctions and bought Dutch paintings of the Golden Age. At the Reydon sale, for instance, he bid successfully on a second Vermeer, which later turned out to be a Jacob Vrel. See sale catalogue, Amsterdam, 5 April 1827, 6, no. 27 (Lugt no. 11405); The Hague 1990, 461 n. 11.
11. The Hague 1990, 458, 461 nn. 4–7: the reconstruction of this nineteenth-century history was largely the work of Marjolein de Boer.
12. For Morgan as collector, see Rigby 1944, 282–285.
13. Allen 1949, 199; Canfield 1974, 107.
14. Shortly thereafter, Cornelis Hofstede de Groot saw the Vermeer in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and noted: "Is het schilderij dat zoolang zoek is geweest. Het is het vrouwtje, dat den beschouwer aankijkt" ([It] is the painting that has been lost for so long. It is the little woman who looks out at the observer); The Hague 1990, 458–459, 461 nn. 8–9.
15. He was apparently murdered by the Mafia because he would not tolerate a casino on the island. See Highsmith 1976, 853; De Marigny 1990; The Hague 1990, 460, 462 nn. 31–33.
16. Constable 1964, 76–79.
17. *The Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid* (cat. 19), which was stolen in 1986 and only recently recovered, is now the property of the National Gallery of Ireland.

#### COLLECTION CATALOGUES

National Gallery Washington 1975, 362–363, and ill.; National Gallery Washington 1985, 421, and ill.; National Gallery Washington 1995, 377–382 (with extensive literature)

#### LITERATURE

Hoet 1752–1770, 1: 36, no. 35; Murray 1819–1823, 29; Thoré-Bürger 1866, 564, no. 40; Havard 1888, 38, no. 43; Hofstede de Groot 1907–1928, 1: 603, no. 36; Plietzsch 1911, 118, no. 31 (36); Hale 1937, 101, no. 35, 226; De Vries 1939, 46–47, 88, no. 26 and ill. 50; Blum 1946, 179, no. 40; Swillens 1950, 53, no. 8, 67, 78, 82, 87, 89, 108, 155 and pl. 8; Goldscheider 1958, 141–142, no. 20 and ill. 50; Blankert 1975, 11, 36, 82–84, 109, 153–154, no. 20 and pl. 20; Blankert 1978, 10, 25, 54, 73, 164, no. 20 and pls. 20–20a; Slatkes 1981, 70–71 and ill.; Wheelock 1981, 124–127 and ill. 31–32; Brown 1984, 139–140 and ill.; Aillaud 1986, 11, 46, 52, 85, 132, 189–190, no. 20, and pl. 22; Wheelock 1988, 22, 96–97, no. 25 and ill.; Montias 1989, 191–192, 196, 256, 266 and ill. 44; Nash 1991, 19; Blankert 1992, 11, 46, 52, p. 189–190, no. 20 and pl. 22; Wheelock 1995, 145, 179, and ill. A22

*The Girl with the Red Hat*

c. 1665

inscribed upper left-center: *IWM* in ligature

oil on panel, 22.8 x 18 (9 x 7 1/16)

National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection

## PROVENANCE

(?) Pieter Claesz van Ruijven, Delft before 1674;  
 (?) Maria de Knuijt, Widow Van Ruijven, Delft 1674–  
 1681; (?) Magdalena van Ruijven and Jacob Dissius,  
 Delft, 1681–1682; (?) Jacob Dissius (with his father  
 Abraham Dissius 1685–1694), Delft, 1682–1695;  
 (?) Dissius sale, Amsterdam, 16 May 1696, possibly no.  
 38 (*f* 36) or 39 (*f* 17) or no. 40 (*f* 17); LaFontaine sale,  
 Paris, 10 December 1822, no. 28 (Ffr 200); Louis Marie,  
 Baron Atthalin, Colmar, 1823–1856; Gaston, Baron  
 Laurent-Atthalin, Limay (Seine et Oise), 1856–1911;  
 Baroness Laurent-Atthalin, Paris, 1911–1925;  
 [Knoedler Galleries, London and New York, 1925];  
 Andrew Mellon, Washington, 1925–1932; The A. W.  
 Mellon Educational and Charitable Trust, Pittsburgh,  
 1932–1937; National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1937

## EXHIBITIONS

New York 1925, no. 1; New York 1928, no. 12

## TECHNICAL DESCRIPTION

The support is probably oak, with a vertical grain.  
 A slightly larger cradle 24.3 x 19.2 (9 9/16 x 7 7/16) and  
 wooden collar protect the edges of the panel. X-radi-  
 ography shows, over the white chalk ground, a por-  
 trait of a man with a large hat. *The Girl with the Red  
 Hat* was painted directly over this earlier image (see  
 below). The painting is in remarkably good condition,  
 with only slight abrasion to the thin glazes of the face  
 and a few scattered minor losses.

*The Girl with the Red Hat*, widely admired  
 for both its intimacy and its immediacy, is  
 small even by Vermeer's standards. The  
 girl appears large in scale, however, because  
 of her close proximity to the picture plane.  
 As she turns and rests her arm on the back  
 of a chair, she communicates directly with  
 the viewer, her mouth half opened, her  
 eyes lit with expectancy.

The artist's use of color is exquisite, in  
 both its compositional and psychological  
 aspects. Setting the figure against the  
 muted tones of a tapestry backdrop,<sup>1</sup> Ver-  
 meer concentrates his major color accents,  
 red and blue, in two distinct areas, the hat  
 and the robe. The intensely warm flame-  
 red bordering the girl's broad, feathered  
 hat dominates, advances, and psychologi-  
 cally activates the image. It heightens the  
 immediacy of the girl's gaze, an effect Ver-  
 meer accentuates by subtly casting its  
 orange-red reflection across her face.  
 The blue of the robe is cool and recessive,  
 counter-balancing the red.

Vermeer's sensitivity to the effects of  
 reflected light is seen in the deep purple  
 hue of the underside of the hat, and in the  
 greenish glaze that shades the girl's face.  
 As in *Woman Holding a Balance* (cat. 10),  
 Vermeer adds an inner warmth by paint-  
 ing the blue robe over a reddish-brown  
 ground. He then accents folds with yellow  
 highlights. Finally, Vermeer animates ma-  
 terials by depicting light reflecting from  
 the hat, the blue robe, and the lion-head  
 finials. At the center of the composition,  
 the vivid white of the girl's cravat cradles  
 her face and focuses attention on her ex-  
 pression.

Vermeer's technique in *The Girl with the  
 Red Hat* generally parallels that in his other  
 paintings from the mid-to-late 1660s, par-  
 ticularly *A Lady Writing* (cat. 13). In both  
 examples Vermeer lays thin, semi-trans-  
 parent glazes over thin paint layers. The

rich, feathered effect of the girl's hat, for  
 example, is the result of a succession of  
 semi-transparent strokes of light red and  
 orange over an opaque layer of deeper  
 orange-red paint. Similarly, many of the  
 diffused yellow, white, and light blue high-  
 lights on the girl's blue robe are thin, allow-  
 ing the underlying blue to show through.<sup>2</sup>

Vermeer's technique for painting the  
 light reflections on the lion-head finials is  
 parallel to that in the pearls of *A Lady  
 Writing*, where opaque white highlights  
 are applied over a thinly painted white un-  
 derlayer. Their smooth transition into the  
 underlying paint suggests that Vermeer  
 may have painted them wet-in-wet. In *The  
 Girl with the Red Hat* Vermeer extensively  
 used the underlying layer to help model  
 the form.

The surety of Vermeer's modeling is  
 particularly evident in the white cravat,  
 which he achieves by stroking away parts  
 of the thick impasto with a blunt tool. To  
 lend animation and vitality to the figure,  
 Vermeer paints colored highlights in the  
 mouth and left eye. He accents the shaded  
 lower lip with a small pink highlight, and  
 enlivens the pupil of her left eye with a  
 light green highlight. He used this tech-  
 nique in the keys of the musical instrument  
 lying on the table in *The Concert* (page 17,  
 fig. 1), and in the colored yarn of *The Lace-  
 maker* (cat. 17).

Despite similarities in approach be-  
 tween this painting and other works from  
 the mid-to-late 1660s, *The Girl with the Red  
 Hat* is undeniably different. With the pos-  
 sible exception of *Young Girl with a Flute*  
 (cat. 23), Vermeer painted no other works  
 on panel.<sup>3</sup> It would be quite understand-  
 able, however, for Vermeer to paint such a  
 small bust, or *tronie*, on panel. Indeed, doc-  
 uments confirm that Vermeer painted *tron-  
 ien*.<sup>4</sup> The descriptions of these *tronien* – in  
 "Turkish fashion" in the inventory of his





effects, and in “antique dress” in the Dissius sale – could also apply to the exotic costume worn by this young girl.<sup>5</sup>

Another major difference is the remarkable spontaneity and informality of *The Girl with the Red Hat*. Even *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (cat. 15) seems studied and cerebral in comparison. To a certain degree the fluid execution seems related to Vermeer’s use of a camera obscura. The idea that Vermeer might have used this device while painting *The Girl with the Red Hat* was convincingly argued by Charles Seymour, who demonstrated the affinities between Vermeer’s fluid, painterly treatment of the lion-head finial and the unfocused appearances of an image seen in a camera obscura (figs. 1, 2).<sup>6</sup> Seymour further argued that Vermeer exploited this effect both to animate his surface and to distinguish different depths of field.<sup>7</sup>

Seymour, along with others, assumed that Vermeer faithfully recorded models,

rooms, and furnishings he saw before him.<sup>8</sup> To the contrary, however, Vermeer’s compositions are the products of intense control and refinement. Figures and their environments are subtly interlocked through perspective, proportion, and color. The paintings themselves are evidence that Vermeer’s approach must have been the same whether he observed his subject directly or through a camera obscura. Thus, it is most unlikely that he traced its image directly on the panel.<sup>9</sup>

For example, even though Vermeer painted the diffused, specular highlights on the finials in emulation of effects seen in a camera obscura, he creatively embellished other parts of his composition where he seems to have used a similar technique. The diffuse yellow highlights on the girl’s blue robes, for example, would not be seen with a camera obscura; rather, unfocused areas of cloth illuminated by intense light would have appeared blurred.

The most remarkable adjustment Vermeer made in this painting occurs with the lion-head finials. The left finial is much larger than the right one and is angled to the right. The top of the chair, if extended to the left finial, would intersect it above the bottom of the ring that loops through the lion’s mouth. The finials, moreover, face the viewer, whereas if they belonged to the girl’s chair, they should face her.<sup>10</sup> While some scholars have argued that the position of the finials creates reason to doubt the attribution of the painting, these modifications of reality are consistent with those found in Vermeer’s other paintings.<sup>11</sup> The finials, as they are painted, effectively define the foreground plane of the composition, while, by being slightly out of alignment, they allow sufficient space for the girl’s arm to rest on the chair’s back.

The unusual support may relate to Vermeer’s experimental use of the camera obscura. Vermeer’s attempt to exploit optical phenomena visible in a camera obscura – intense colors, accentuated contrasts of light and dark, and circles of confusion – suggests that the artist sought to recreate the impression of such an image. He may have decided to paint on a hard, smooth surface to achieve the sheen of an image seen in a camera obscura, traditionally projected onto a ground glass or tautly stretched oiled paper.

The panel Vermeer chose had already been used. An underlying image of a bust-length portrait of a man, upside-down relative to the girl’s position, is visible in an x-radiograph (fig. 3). His wide-brimmed hat, and the great flourish of strokes to the right of his face – representing his long, curly hair – are visible with infrared reflectography (fig. 4).<sup>12</sup> The style in which the face is painted is very different from Vermeer’s. The face is modeled with a number of rapid, unblended strokes.



fig. 1. Detail, lion head finial, of *The Girl with the Red Hat*



fig. 2. Photograph of lion head finial seen through camera obscura

fig. 3. *The Girl with the Red Hat*, x-radiographfig. 4. *The Girl with the Red Hat*, infrared reflectogram

Although one cannot attribute a painting solely on the basis of an x-radiograph, the brushstrokes and impasto of the underlying head are similar in style to those found in figure studies by Carel Fabritius (1622–1654) from the late 1640s, such as the *Man with a Helmet* (fig. 5).<sup>13</sup> At his death Vermeer owned two *tronien* by Fabritius.<sup>14</sup> Vermeer could have owned other works by Fabritius, under whom he may have studied.

When Thoré-Bürger made notes in 1866 on a number of Vermeer paintings unknown to him, “To be researched, to be verified, to be studied,”<sup>15</sup> he only knew *The Girl with the Red Hat* from an 1822 sale catalogue. He inaccurately transcribed the text,

fig. 5. Carel Fabritius, *Man with a Helmet*, c. 1648–1649, oil on panel, Groninger Museum, Groningen

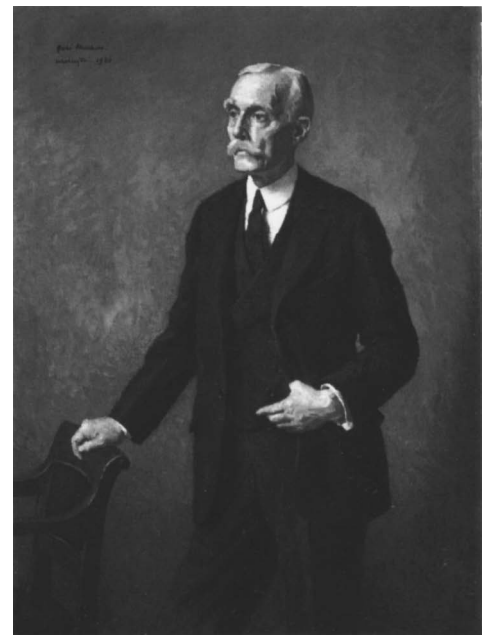
“Young woman portrayed in a little more than bust length” as “Young man portrayed in a little more than bust length.” He failed to quote the justifiably laudatory words dedicated to the depiction: “There is in this charming painting everything by which one knows the true painter; the execution is flowing, the color strong, the effect well felt.”<sup>16</sup>

Between 10 and 12 December 1822 the Parisian art dealer La Fontaine sold his stock, consisting primarily of paintings of the Dutch and Flemish schools.<sup>17</sup> Despite warm praise, his Vermeer fetched only 200 Francs. Baron Atthalin bought the painting a year after the sale: a clipping with the relevant text from the auction catalogue is still glued to the back of the panel.<sup>18</sup> Louis Marie, Baron Atthalin (1784–1856), a French general and landscape painter, treasured the charming head of a girl hanging in the study of his “hôtel” in Colmar. Baron Gaston Laurent-Atthalin (1848–1911), an adopted son of Louis Marie’s sister, inherited the panel which, after his death, came into the possession of his widow. In her Paris apartment Pierre Lavallée, curator at the École Nationale des Beaux-Arts, encountered the painting, which he published in 1925. An unknown Vermeer suddenly became world news.<sup>19</sup>

The periodical *The Connoisseur* at once made itself clear. “It would make a most desirable addition to the [London] National

Gallery, where Vermeer is hardly as strongly represented as he might be.”<sup>20</sup> Virtually all the press notices and articles in art periodicals spoke enthusiastically of the quality of the rendering.<sup>21</sup> The dealer Knoedler & Co. sold the painting in November 1925 for \$290,000 to Andrew W. Mellon (1855–1937),<sup>22</sup> banker and Secretary of the Treasury under three American presidents, who conceived and endowed the National Gallery of Art.

Mellon (fig. 6), like his friend Henry Clay Frick (1849–1919), was a collector of old masters. Frick had already bought his first Vermeer, *Girl Interrupted at Her Music* (page 24, fig. 10), in 1901.<sup>23</sup> Mellon’s main criteria for acquiring a painting were that it had to be in good condition and not too dark.<sup>24</sup> He loved “the very human faces of the Dutch Masters.”<sup>25</sup> At first Mellon collected for his own pleasure but in 1927 he decided to found a national museum that would have his collection as its core. In 1937, four years after his death, the

fig. 6. Gari Melchers, *Andrew W. Mellon*, 1930, canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Donald D. Shepard





National Gallery of Art opened.<sup>26</sup> *The Girl with the Red Hat*, which he had kept atop the piano in his sumptuous apartment on Massachusetts Avenue in Washington, was the first Vermeer in the new museum.

1. Although only a portion of the tapestry in *The Girl with the Red Hat* is visible, it appears that two rather large-scale figures are depicted behind the girl. The patterned vertical strip on the right is probably the outer border. A. M. Louise E. Muler-Erkelen, Keeper of Textiles, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, relates this format to late sixteenth-century tapestries of the southern Netherlands. She also notes that other tapestries in Vermeer's paintings belong to the same period (letter, National Gallery of Art, curatorial files).
2. Under microscopic examination, small pits, or craters, are visible in the yellow paint of these highlights, suggesting that Vermeer may have used an emulsion medium in his paint. Similar pitting occurs in the opaque yellow highlights of *Woman Holding a Balance* (cat. 10) and *A Lady Writing* (cat. 13), although in those two paintings the pits are smaller and less extensive.
3. A number of scholars cite the unusual panel support as one reason for doubting the attribution of these two paintings. The attribution of *The Girl with the Red Hat* to Vermeer has been doubted by Van Thienen 1949, 23. The painting was rejected by Swillens 1950, 65; Blankert 1975, 167; Blankert 1978, 172; Brentjens 1985, 54–58; and Aillaud 1986, 200–201.
4. The term *tronie* (*tronij*, *tronye*, *tronike*) derived from the old French, *trogne*, meaning a character head, in contradistinction to a portrait head. On *tronie* see De Pauw-de Veen 1969, 190–199; Bruyn 1983, 209–210; Paris 1986, 290 n. 21; Ford 1990; and Stuckenbrock 1993, 36–37.
5. Montias 1989, 340, doc. 364; 364, doc. 439. The exotic style of the red hat is quite remarkable, and no exact prototypes are known. A similar hat, however, is worn by Saskia in Rembrandt's portrait from the mid-1630s in the Gemäldegalerie, Cassel (Br. 101). See also the engravings of bust-length men and women Michael Sweerts pub-

lished in 1656, ill. in Bolton 1985, 96.

6. See Seymour 1964. For another point of view, see page 72 in the present catalogue.
7. Vermeer may also have recognized that the peculiarly soft quality of these unfocused highlights would beautifully express the luminosity of pearls. Thus even in paintings like the *Woman Holding a Balance*, whose genesis probably has little to do with the camera obscura, these optical effects are apparent.
8. This misconception lies at the basis of the interpretation of Vermeer's use of the camera obscura advanced by Fink 1971.
9. As suggested by Seymour 1964.
10. The first art historian to note this discrepancy was Wilenski 1929, 284–285. He hypothesized that the peculiar arrangement of the finials arose as a result of Vermeer's use of a mirror. His reconstruction of Vermeer's painting procedure, however, is untenable.
11. See, for example, the shift in the position of the lower edge of the frame of the Last Judgment in *Woman Holding a Balance*.
12. The infrared reflectogram of *The Girl with the Red Hat* shows only a partial view of the underlying image because of the different transparencies of pigments to infrared radiation. The natural ultramarine of the girl's cloak, for example, is transparent in the near infrared range, whereas the green of the tapestry is not.
13. Groninger Museum, panel, 38.5 x 31 cm.
14. Montias 1989, 339, doc. 364.
15. Thoré-Bürger 1866, 567, no. 47: "À rechercher, à vérifier, à étudier."
16. Sale catalogue, Paris, 10 December 1822, 12, no. 28: "Jeune femme représentée un peu plus qu'en buste" became "Jeune homme représenté un peu plus qu'en buste." Also, "Il y a dans ce joli tableau tout ce qui fait connaître le véritable peintre; l'exécution est coulante, la couleur forte, l'effet bien senti" (Lugt no. 10352).
17. Sale catalogue, Paris, 10 December 1822, unpaginated: "Avertissement."
18. New York 1925, unpaginated; the date 1823 is taken from a letter, 8 July 1952 from C. R. Henschel (Knoedler & Co.) to John Walker, then chief curator (National Gallery of Art, curatorial files).
19. Lavallée 1925, 323–324 and ill.; biographical data was

taken from DBF, 3: cols. 1430–1431 and IBF, 3: 1283; see also a letter from Baron Laurent-Atthalin, 9 April 1974 (National Gallery of Art, curatorial files).

20. Grundy 1925, 119.
21. See the literature for the year 1925.
22. Hale 1937, 133; the Louvre had wanted to buy the painting as well (according to the letter mentioned in n. 18).
23. Inv. no. 01.1.125; Blankert 1992, 204, no. B2 and ill.
24. Mellon 1949, v.
25. Gregory 1993, 144.
26. Mellon 1949, vi and xiii; see also Finley 1973.

#### COLLECTION CATALOGUES

Mellon 1949, 94, no. 53, and ill.; National Gallery Washington 1975, 362–363, and ill.; National Gallery Washington 1985, 420 and ill.; National Gallery Washington 1995, 382–387 (with extensive literature)

#### LITERATURE

Thoré-Bürger 1866, 567, no. 47; Hofstede de Groot 1907–1928, 1: 606, no. 46a; Hale 1913, 359; Barker 1925, 223 and ill. 226–227; Borenius 1925, 125–126; Constable 1925, 269; Grundy 1925, 118–119; Flint 1925, 3; L.G.S. 1925, 1; Lavallée 1925, 323–324 and ill.; Waldmann 1926, 174 and 186–187; Hofstede de Groot 1907–1930, 3: 4–5, 11 and ill. 49; Alexandre 1933, 164; Hale 1937, 132–133, no. 22 and ill.; De Vries 1939, 48, 89, no. 29 and ill. 53; Van Thienen 1949, 23, no. 25; Swillens 1950, 65, no. G; Gowing 1952, 21, 138, 145–147, no. 27, 148, and ill. 57; Reiss 1952, 182; Goldscheider 1958, 143, no. 25 and ill. 60; Gerson 1967, col. 740; Blankert 1975, 108–110, 120 n. 27, 167–168, no. B 3 and ill.; Brown 1977, 57; Van Straaten 1977, 36–37, ill. 43; Wheelock 1977A, 292, 298 and ill. 99; Blankert 1978, 73–74, 79 n. 109, 172, no. B3 and ill.; Glueck 1978, 55–56; Wheelock 1978, 242–256, ills. 1, 7, 13, 17; Slatkes 1981, 96–97 and ill.; Wheelock 1981, 39, 130 and pl. 34; Brentjens 1985, 54–58 and ill.; Aillaud 1986, 200–201, cat. b3, and ill.; Wheelock 1988, 37, 45, 100–101, 114, 126 and ill.; Montias 1989, 265–266; Blankert 1992, 205–206, no. B 3 and ill. 126; Gregory 1993, 144 and ill.; Wheelock 1995, 18, 119, 120–127, 134, 154, 159, 180, and ill. 84



*Girl with a Pearl Earring*

c. 1665–1666

inscribed top left corner: *IVMeer* (IVM in ligature)

oil on canvas, 44.5 x 39 (17 1/2 x 15 3/8)

Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, The Hague

## PROVENANCE

(?) Pieter Claesz van Ruijven, Delft, before 1674;  
 (?) Maria de Knuijt, Widow Van Ruijven, Delft, 1674–1681; (?) Magdalena van Ruijven and Jacob Dissius, Delft, 1681–1682; (?) Jacob Dissius (with his father, Abraham Dissius, 1685–1694), Delft, 1682–1695;  
 (?) Dissius sale, Amsterdam, 16 May 1696, no. 38 (f.36) or no. 39 (f.17) or no. 40 (f.17); Braams sale, The Hague, 1881 (day and month unknown), for f.2.30 to Des Tombe; A. A. des Tombe, The Hague, 1881–1902 (on temporary loan to the Mauritshuis in 1881); Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, The Hague, 1902 (bequest of Des Tombe)

## EXHIBITIONS

The Hague 1890, 57, no. 117; Paris 1921, 10, no. 106; Rome 1928, 100, no. 125 and ill.; London 1929a, 145, no. 306; The Hague 1945, no. 134; Antwerp 1946, no. 91 and ill.; Delft 1950, 11, no. 27; Washington 1982, 120–121, no. 38 and ill.; Paris 1986, 358–362, no. 54 and ill.

## TECHNICAL DESCRIPTION

The fine, plain-weave linen support, which has been lined, has a thread count of 14.7 x 14.3 per cm.<sup>2</sup> Only fragments of the original tacking edges survive.

The composition was laid in with light and dark areas. The ground is a thick, yellowish-white layer containing lead white, chalk, and possibly umber.<sup>1</sup>

The dark background and the deeper shadows of the girl's face, turban, and bodice were established with a mixture of black and earth pigments, and further modeled with a paler, ocher color. The shadow of her nose was underpainted with red lake while the highlights on her nose, right cheek, and forehead have a thick, cream-colored underpaint. The turban was painted with varying shades of an ultramarine and lead-white mixture, wet-in-wet, over which a blue glaze was applied, except in the highlights. A thin, off-white scumble of paint over the brown shadow of the girl's neck defines the pearl, and is painted more opaquely at the bottom where the pearl reflects the white collar. Small hairs from Vermeer's brush are found in the half-tones of the flesh areas.

As this young girl stares out at the viewer with liquid eyes and parted mouth, she radiates purity, captivating all that gaze upon her. Her soft, smooth skin is as unblemished as the surface of her large, teardrop-shaped pearl earring. Like a vision emanating from the darkness, she belongs to no specific time or place. Her exotic turban, wrapping her head in crystalline blue, is surmounted by a striking yellow fabric that falls dramatically behind her shoulder, lending an air of mystery to the image.

Dating this remarkable image has proven difficult, not only because the costume has no parallel with contemporary Dutch fashions, but also because the painting is so different in concept from Vermeer's interior genre scenes of the late 1650s and early 1660s. An effort to date the painting to the 1670s through an identification of the model as Maria, the oldest of Vermeer's children, is unconvincing.<sup>2</sup> In none of his paintings from the 1670s does Vermeer achieve the softly diffused flesh tones evident here, created by layering a thin flesh-colored glaze over a transparent undermodeling.

Vermeer developed this technique for rendering flesh tones during the mid-1660s in paintings such as *Woman Holding a Balance* and *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* (cats. 10, 11). In both works, moreover, Vermeer effectively suggested the shaded portions of the woman's headdress by painting a thin glaze over a selectively applied dark imprimatura layer. Vermeer exploited these techniques in *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, using them in an even bolder and more expressive manner. The soft contour of the girl's face creates a warmth that permeates the image. To enliven her face Vermeer placed light accents in her eyes, and, as was recently discovered in the 1994 restoration of the painting, accentuated the extremi-

ties of her mouth with small dots of pink paint.<sup>3</sup> The free and strikingly bold application of blue glazes in the turban contributes further to the sense of immediacy.

The expressive character of Vermeer's paint application is surprising given the care with which he designed his works. It also separates his style from that of a number of his contemporaries, including Frans van Mieris (1635–1681), who painted comparable subjects (fig. 1), but in a meticulous manner that has its roots in an entirely different tradition. Vermeer's broad manner of painting, which allows him to generalize forms and to suggest the subtle nuances of light falling across surfaces, is a fundamental aspect of his classicism, the origins of which are to be found in his early history paintings.

*Girl with a Pearl Earring* exhibits another aspect of the classicism that pervades Vermeer's work, from *Diana and Her Companions*, *View of Delft*, to *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* – timelessness. Set against a dark, undefined background, and dressed in an exotic costume, this striking young



fig. 1. Frans van Mieris, *Portrait of the Artist's Wife, Cunera van der Cock*, c. 1657–1660, oil on panel, Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees, The National Gallery, London





woman cannot be placed in any specific context. She holds no attributes that might, for example, identify her as an allegorical figure, perhaps a muse or a sybil.<sup>4</sup> Almost certainly, however, it is this very absence of a historic or iconographic framework that conveys such immediacy to all who view her.

While this work shares fundamental relationships with Vermeer's other paintings, it is, nevertheless, different in many respects. It is the first to focus on a single figure against a dark background. The scale of the head is larger and the image is closer to the picture plane than in any of his genre scenes. While it is entirely possible that Vermeer arrived at this compositional solution on his own, stylistic connections with the paintings of Michael Sweerts (1624–1664) are so striking that the possibility of contact between these two artists should be raised, particularly as Sweerts was living in Amsterdam in 1660–1661.<sup>5</sup> Sweerts, who had been an assistant at the Accademia di San Luca in Rome, and who had established an “academy for drawings from life” in Brussels after his return to his native city in about 1656, shared with Vermeer the ideal of investing scenes of daily life with classical dignity.<sup>6</sup> During his Amsterdam sojourn Sweerts painted a number of busts of youths with similarly pure profiles set against dark, undefined backgrounds (fig. 2). They all stare out of the picture plane with wet, lucid eyes, and at least one wears an exotic turban.<sup>7</sup> Despite the absence of documented contact between the two artists, Vermeer could have seen Sweerts' paintings in Amsterdam, where he had contacts throughout much of his life.<sup>8</sup>

It is remarkable that nothing is known about the early history of *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, although, as with *The Girl with the Red Hat* (cat. 14), it has been associated

with references to *tronies* in Vermeer's inventory: “2 *Tronies* painted in Turkish fashion.”<sup>9</sup> The first certain reference to the work did not occur until 1881, when the collector Arnoldus Andries des Tombe (1818–1902) bought it in The Hague for next to nothing. According to a newspaper notice, Victor de Stuers (1843–1916) recognized the work as a Delft Vermeer. It was offered by a Hague auction house and Des Tombe came to an understanding with De Stuers that they would not bid against each other.<sup>10</sup> That is how the latter managed to buy the work for two guilders, with a thirty cent premium.<sup>11</sup> Des Tombe sent the badly neglected canvas to Antwerp, where the painter Van der Haeghen restored it.

Des Tombe's collection in The Hague was accessible to the general public. Des Tombe, who was of distinguished ancestry, was married to *jonkvrouwe* Carolina Hester de Witte van Citters. Abraham Bredius – who occasionally advised Des Tombe – was the first to sing the praises of the girl's head: “VERMEER slays them all; the

head of a girl, which would almost have one forget that one is looking at a canvas, and that unique glow of light, takes sole hold of your attention.”<sup>12</sup> In 1890 Des Tombe lent the picture to an exhibition at Pulchri, the artists' society in The Hague, and in 1900 it was for some time on view in the Mauritshuis, together with the *Allegory of Faith* (cat. 20).<sup>13</sup> Des Tombe died on 16 December 1902. He bequeathed twelve paintings, including *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, to the Mauritshuis.<sup>14</sup> The media recalled how the work had been acquired for only a couple of guilders, reporting that its current value had been assessed at more than forty thousand guilders.<sup>15</sup> The public quickly took the “Dutch Mona Lisa” to its bosom. In 1908 Jan Veth articulated a widespread sentiment: “More than with any other VERMEER one could say that it looks as if it were blended from the dust of crushed pearls.”<sup>16</sup>



fig. 2. Michael Sweerts, *Portrait of a Boy*, c. 1659, oil on canvas, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund

1. Kühn 1968, 191.

2. Malraux 1952, 114. Maria's exact date of birth is not known, although it was probably in 1655 or 1656. She is mentioned in a document dated 18 June 18 1657. See Montias 1989, 311, doc. 268.

3. Wadum 1994, 23 and ill. 49.

4. Slatkes 1981, 69, first raised this possibility: “The unusually direct contact between sitter and spectator, and the slightly parted position of the lips, presents a sense of immediacy so great as to imply strongly some specific act or identity—such as a sybil uttering her prophecy or some biblical personage.”

5. The stylistic associations between Vermeer's and Sweerts' paintings have long been noted. See, for example, The Hague 1966, no. 28, where Sweerts' *Sense of Hearing* from Stuttgart was included in the exhibition because of its association with Vermeer.

6. See, for example, his *Interior of an Inn*, c. 1660, Munich, Alte Pinakothek, inv. no. 854, as discussed in Washington 1988, 124, 125, cat. 29, and ill.

7. Thyssen-Bornemisza 1989, 226–228, no. 49. Sweerts' painting is titled: *Boy in a turban holding a nosegay*.

8. As Meredith Hale has kindly suggested, Sweerts' depiction of *A Painter's Studio* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. A 1957) may be one of the visual sources for Vermeer's *Art of Painting* (page 68, fig. 2).

9. Montias 1993, 386, doc. 364: “2 *Tronien* geschildert op zijn Turx”; less probable is the association with “Een *Tronie* in Antique Klederen, ongemeen kunstig” [*A Tronie*

in *Antique Dress*, exceptionally artful] in the Dissius sale of 16 May 1696; see Blankert 1975, 152, no. 18 and 165, no. 37.

10. *Het Vaderland*, 3 March 1903 (Mauritshuis clippings book, 41).

11. *Nieuwe Courant*, 2 March 1903 (Mauritshuis clippings book, 41); 1882 is always given (wrongly) as the year in which the Braams (usually adduced as Braam) sale took place; this on the authority of Mauritshuis 1914, 407, no. 670.

12. Bredius 1885, 222: "VERMEER doodt ze allen; het meisjeskopje, dat men haast vergeet een dock voor zich te hebben, en dat éénige licht uitstralende, behoudt geheel alleen uwe aandacht."

13. The Hague 1890, 57, no. 117; Geffroy 1900, 118 claimed to have seen both Vermeers in the Mauritshuis.

14. Mauritshuis documentation archives (1903–1930; old inventory book).

15. *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 23 March 1903 (Mauritshuis clippings book, 40).

16. Veth 1908, 10: "Meer nog dan in één anderen VERMEER zou men kunnen zeggen, dat het uit stof van gestampde paarden saamgesmolten lijkt."

#### COLLECTION CATALOGUES

Mauritshuis 1987, 390–394, no. 66 and ill. (with extensive literature)

#### LITERATURE

Bredius 1885, 222; Lafenestre 1898, 106; Geffroy 1900, 118–119 and ill.; Martin 1904, 4; Hofstede de Groot 1907–1928, 1: 606, no. 44; Veth 1908, 10; Plietzsch 1911, 117, no. 21 and pl. 16; Hale 1937, 173–174 and pl. 4; De Vries 1939, 42, 84, no. 17; Swillens 1950, 62, no. 28, 105–108 and pl. 28; Gowing 1952, 137–139, no. 22, ill. 39 and pl. 49; Bloch 1963, 34, no. 49 and ill. 3; Goldscheider 1967, 27, 130, no. 23 and pls. 54–55; Blankert 1975, 66–68, 88, 152, no. 18 and ill.; Van Straaten 1977, 73, no. 93a and ill.; Blankert 1978, 46, 59, 163, no. 18 and pls. 18–18a; Slatkes 1981, 68–69 and ill.; Wheelock 1981, 118, 132, and pl. 28; Brentjens 1985, 55–56 and ill. 3; Aillaud 1986, 122, 142, 146, 186, no. 18, and pl. 18; Wheelock 1988, 92–93 and ill.; Montias 1989, 182–183, 196, 221, 266 and ill. 40; Nash 1991, 19, 31, 33 and ill. 34; Blankert 1992, 122, 148, 188, no. 18 and pl. 18; Wadum 1994, 18–29 and ill.; Wheelock 1995, 103, 123, 124, 178, and ill. A20



*The Geographer*

c. 1668–1669

inscribed on cupboard: *Meer*, and above map: *I. Ver Meer MDCLXVIII*

(neither inscription original)

oil on canvas, 52 x 45.5 (20 1/2 x 17 15/16)

Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main

## PROVENANCE

Sale (Paets et al?), Rotterdam, 27 April 1713, no. 10 or 11 (f 300, with *The Astronomer*); Hendrik Sorgh, Amsterdam, 1713 (?)–1720; Sorgh sale, Amsterdam, 28 March 1720, no. 3 or 4 (f 160, with *The Astronomer*); Govert Looten, Amsterdam, before 1727; Looten sale, Amsterdam, 31 March 1729, no. 6 (f 104, with *The Astronomer*); Jacob Crammer Simonsz, Amsterdam, before 1778; Crammer Simonsz sale, Amsterdam, 25 November 1778, no. 19 (with *The Astronomer*); Jean Étienne Fizeaux, Amsterdam, 1778–1780; Widow Fizeaux, Amsterdam, 1780–1785(?); [Pieter Fouquet, Amsterdam, and Alexandre Joseph Paillet, Paris, 1784–1785]; Jan Danser Nijman, Amsterdam, before 1794(?); Danser Nijman sale, Amsterdam, 16 August 1797, no. 168 (f 133 to Josi); Arnoud de Lange, Amsterdam, 1797(?)–1803; De Lange sale, Amsterdam, 12 December 1803, no. 55 (f 360 to Coolers); (?) Johann Goll van Franckenstein, Jr., Velzen/Amsterdam, before 1821; Pieter Hendrick Goll van Franckenstein, Amsterdam, before 1832; Goll van Franckenstein sale, Amsterdam, 1 July 1833, no. 47 (f 195 to Nieuwenhuys); Alexandre Dumont, Cambrai, before 1860; Isaac Pereire, Paris, 1866 (via Thoré-Bürger from Dumont); Pereire sale, Paris, 6 March 1872, no. 132; Max Kann, Paris, 1872(?); [Sedelmeyer, Paris, c. 1875]; Prince Demidoff, San Donato, near Florence, before 1877–1880; Demidoff sale, San Donato, 15 March 1880, no. 1124; A. J. Bosch sale, Vienna, 28 April 1885, no. 32 (ÖS 8000 to Kohlbacher); to the present owner in 1907

## EXHIBITIONS

Paris 1866, 35, no. 106; Paris 1874, 60, no. 332; Paris 1898, 104, no. 87 and ill.; Paris 1914, 54, no. 25 and ill.; Rotterdam 1935, 38, no. 87 and ill. 68

## TECHNICAL DESCRIPTION

The support is a closed, plain-weave linen with a thread count of 14 x 11 per cm<sup>2</sup>; the original tacking edges of which are still present. The canvas was lined, resulting in weave emphasis.

A gray ground containing chalk, umber, and lead white extends to the tacking edges.<sup>1</sup> The paint was applied wet-in-wet in places. Many different textural effects have been created with the use of glazing, scumbling, impasto, and dry brushstrokes. The vanishing point of the composition is visible in the paint layer on the wall between the chair and the cupboard. Some abrasion, particularly in the shadows in the map, has resulted from past cleaning.

The seventeenth century was a time of discovery, when the charting of new and unexplored worlds was a dream realized not only by adventurers and traders but also by geographers and astronomers. Although charts and maps had guided explorers for centuries, new information about land masses and coastlines, as well as improved surveying techniques, helped make the Netherlands the center for map making. The Amsterdam publishing firms Hondius, Blaeu, and Visscher, among others, dominated the industry, and their maps appear in numerous depictions of middle-class interiors, including those by Vermeer (see cats. 9, 11).<sup>2</sup> Among those who collected elaborately decorated atlases and wall maps, ranging from world views to city vistas, were philosophers, scholars, and “amateurs,” who found great intellectual satisfaction in pondering the physical character of the earth and the underlying laws of nature.<sup>3</sup>

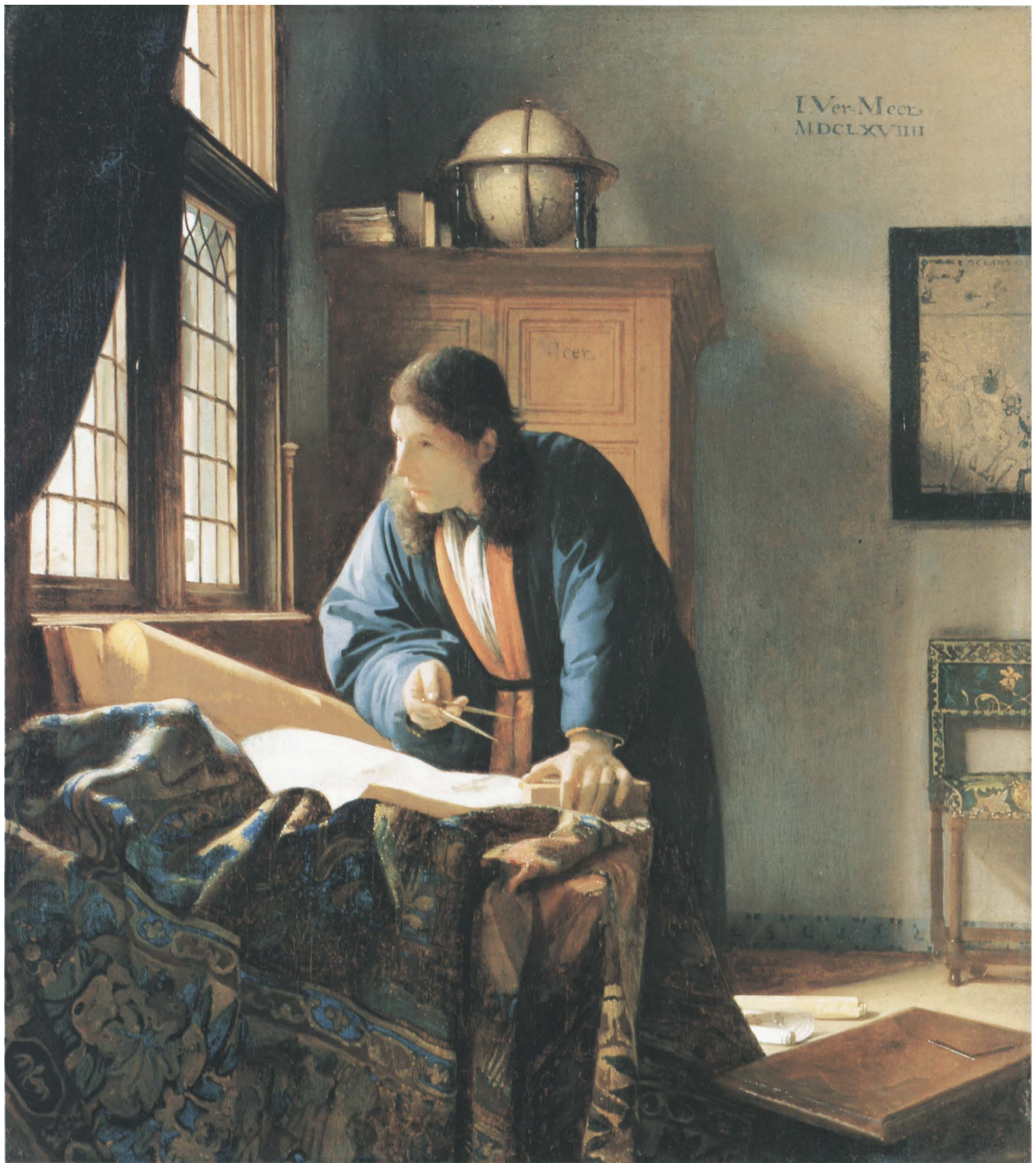
Vermeer’s geographer is, above all else, someone excited by intellectual inquiry. Surrounded by maps, charts, books and a globe, he stares searchingly toward the window as he rests one hand on a book and holds dividers with the other. Although Vermeer reveals neither the questions the geographer asks nor the answers he seeks, his active stance indicates an alert, penetrating mind. His scholarly mode of dress, blue robe with red trim and long hair pulled behind his ears, further confirm the seriousness of his endeavor.

The energy in this painting is markedly different from Vermeer’s quiet, contemplative images of women in interiors. It is conveyed most notably through the figure’s pose, the massing of objects on the left side of the composition, and the sequence of diagonal shadows on the wall to the right.<sup>4</sup> To reinforce this effect,

Vermeer subtly adjusted the composition. The vague shape of the geographer’s forehead can be seen to the left of the figure, an indication that the artist originally portrayed his head at a different angle, presumably looking down at the chart lying on the table.<sup>5</sup> Vermeer also altered the position of the dividers: they originally pointed downward rather than across the geographer’s body. Finally, Vermeer eliminated a sheet of paper that once lay on the small stool at the right, probably to darken the right foreground corner of the composition.

Another means by which Vermeer conveyed the geographer’s active nature was through the crisp, angular folds of his blue robe. Vermeer used these remarkably abstract folds only to describe the sunlit blue robe: the broad, rolling folds of the floral table covering in the foreground are closer to the carefully modulated folds of the yellow jacket in *A Lady Writing* (cat. 13), painted a few years earlier. Thus, in *The Geographer* Vermeer seems to have selectively introduced this technique of modeling drapery, which becomes an important characteristic of his late style (see cat. 19), to enhance the dynamic character of his image.

Vermeer not only captured the scholar’s energy, he surrounded him with accurately rendered cartographic objects appropriate for a geographer’s study. The decorative sea chart on the rear wall, showing “all the Sea coasts of Europe,” is by Willem Jansz Blaeu,<sup>6</sup> while the terrestrial globe was published in Amsterdam in 1618 by Jodocus Hondius.<sup>7</sup> As James Welu notes, Vermeer treats the globe, in its four-legged stand, as a scientific object by turning its decorative cartouches to the side to reveal the Indian Ocean – *Orientalis Oceanus*.<sup>8</sup> Other instruments include the dividers, used to mark distances, a square



lying on the stool in the foreground, and a cross-staff, used to measure the angle of the elevation of the sun and stars, hanging from the center post of the window. Among the various rolled charts in the room, the large one on the table is of particular interest. Welu proposes that, given its translucence, it is on vellum, and from a few faint lines, that it is a nautical chart.<sup>9</sup>

Vermeer must have been guided in his depiction by a scholar familiar with geography and navigation, as a comparably sophisticated awareness of cartographic instruments and books informs the pendant to this painting, *The Astronomer*, signed and dated 1668 (page 52, fig. 6).<sup>10</sup> Since the same young man modeled as both the geographer and the astronomer, it is possible that he was the source of Vermeer's scientific information.

This individual was most probably Anthony van Leeuwenhoek (1632–1723), the famed Delft microscopist, who in 1676 was named trustee for Vermeer's estate (see page 16).<sup>11</sup> Although no documents link Vermeer and Van Leeuwenhoek during their lifetimes, it seems hardly possible that they did not know each other. Both were born in Delft in the same year, both families were involved in the textile business, and each was fascinated with science and optics.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, as one author wrote only six years after Van Leeuwenhoek's death, aside from his interest in microscopy, he was so skilled in "navigation, astronomy, mathematics, philosophy, and natural science...that one can certainly place him with the most distinguished masters in the art."<sup>13</sup> In 1668–1669 Van Leeuwenhoek would have been about thirty-six years old, the approximate age of the sitter in *The Geographer*. Moreover, as far as one can judge from an image of the scientist made in 1686 by the Delft



fig. 1. Jan Verkolje, *Portrait of Anthony van Leeuwenhoek*, 1686, mezzotint, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

artist Jan Verkolje (1650–1693) (fig. 1), Van Leeuwenhoek's broad face and straight, angular nose resemble those of the sitter in the painting.<sup>14</sup>

The sudden appearance in the late 1660s of paintings depicting an astronomer and a geographer involved in scientific inquiry is surprising given Vermeer's predominant thematic concern, women in a domestic setting. Nothing we know about Vermeer's life accounts for this new interest. Van Leeuwenhoek's life, however, does offer one explanation for Vermeer's interest in these subjects: in 1668 and 1669 he must have been actively involved in scientific studies since on 4 February 1669 he passed his examination for surveyor.

Even if Van Leeuwenhoek inspired, or commissioned, Vermeer to paint *The Astronomer* and *The Geographer*, these paintings represent far more than mere portraits of scholars in their studies. Vermeer has conveyed in these works the excitement of scholarly inquiry and discovery. It seems likely, moreover, that the pendant relationship is more complex than the mere depiction of related scientific disciplines. Studies of the heavens and the earth represent two realms of human thought that have quite different theological implications, the former concerned with the realm of the spirit and the latter with God's plan for man's passage through life.<sup>15</sup> The charts and cartographic instruments in these paintings, thus, may have allegorical meaning as well as scientific

application. While the astronomer, reaching for a celestial globe, allegorically searches for spiritual guidance, the geographer looks forward into the light, dividers in hand, with assurance that he has been given the tools to chart the proper course of his life.<sup>16</sup>

While it seems probable because of the specific subject matter that *The Geographer* and *The Astronomer* were commissioned works, we have no information about their whereabouts in the seventeenth century. Neither work appears in the Dissius sale of 1696. The two were paired during most of the eighteenth century.<sup>17</sup> They were considered to be pendants even though the measurements do not altogether correspond and the compositions are not necessarily interdependent. In 1713 they were auctioned as pendants in Rotterdam for the considerable sum of three hundred guilders, as "A work depicting a Mathematical Artist, by vander Meer" and "A ditto by the same."<sup>18</sup> This "Mathematical Artist" must be the Frankfurt painting, where the man holds a compass in his hand. J. G. van Gelder believed that this anonymous sale was the tail end of the Paets' sale of the previous day, 26 April 1713.<sup>19</sup> Adriaen Paets (1657–1712) was Receiver of the Admiralty and an influential city council member of Rotterdam. He was the Maecenas of the young painter Adriaen van der Werff (1659–1722) and, it follows, a lover of highly refined painting (*fijnschilderkunst*). The sale of the Paets' collection was a major event that was announced even in the *Amsterdamsche Courant*.<sup>20</sup>

The paintings then, or shortly thereafter, moved on to Amsterdam, where they were auctioned in 1720 out of the collection of the art broker Hendrick Sorgh (1666–1720) who was the grandson of the painter of the same name (1611–1670).







Sorgh lived in Amsterdam all his life as a bachelor.<sup>21</sup> At the sale of his property the two paintings went for 160 guilders, as “An Astrologer” and “A repeat.” The laudatory commentary on the two depictions read “extra choice” and “no less.”<sup>22</sup>

A neighbor of Sorgh obtained the two Vermeers. Govert Looten (1668–1727), who, like Sorgh, lived on the Keizersgracht, became the next owner. He was a grandson of the Amsterdam merchant Marten Looten, who had been portrayed by Rembrandt (Los Angeles County Museum of Art).<sup>23</sup> Unlike that portrait, the two Vermeers were sold out of Looten’s estate in Amsterdam a year and a half after his death. The price had come down to 105 guilders for the two pictures, though the commendation was no less warm: “sublimely and artfully painted.”<sup>24</sup>

Fifty years later these two paintings, which had always been called “Astrologers,” were instead believed to be a pair of philosophers. They hung on the Prinsengracht at that time, in the home of Jacob Crammer Simonsz (1725–1778).<sup>25</sup> Crammer Simonsz was an amateur who had two other Vermeers in his possession, *The Lacemaker* (cat. 17) and a now unknown genre piece of a lady pouring wine.<sup>26</sup> After the death of Crammer Simonsz, *The Astronomer* and *The Geographer* appeared in the collection of the Huguenot banker Jean Étienne Fizeaux (1707–1780),<sup>27</sup> who lived on the Kloveniersburgwal. At his death he left a bankrupt estate and a notable art cabinet specializing in works by the *fiijnschilders*. His widow governed the cabinet, which was known to only a few art lovers, until 1797, when the collection came under the gavel.

It appears that the Widow Fizeaux had earlier attempted to sell several works, including the two Vermeers, to Louis XVI of France. To this end, she employed the

services of the painter and art buyer Pieter Fouquet, Jr. (1729–1800), who regularly acted for foreign clients.<sup>28</sup> As has recently become clear, Fouquet in turn involved the French dealer Alexandre Joseph Paillet (1748–1814).<sup>29</sup> Paillet undertook numerous foreign journeys between 1777 and 1786 to buy works of art for the French king. In 1785 he described a number of paintings that he had taken into consignment in Holland the year before, including Vermeer’s *Geographer* (“an architect”) and *Astronomer* (“an astronomer studying a terrestrial sphere”). He added: “No one here knows of any work by this master. They are so very rare....”<sup>30</sup> Perhaps he would have done better to omit this comment, because the transaction fell through, so that the two paintings were returned to Amsterdam. Fouquet was able to find a buyer there.

In 1794 Abraham Delfos (1731–1820) made a watercolor of *The Astronomer* (page 57, fig. 12). Together with *The Geographer* it was then presumably in the collection of Jan Danser Nijman, a true Vermeer lover.<sup>31</sup> He had bought *The Lacemaker* in 1778, which he may have sold to Jan Wubbels, and also found an opportunity to acquire *A Lady Standing at the Virginal* (cat. 21).<sup>32</sup> It was at the 1797 sale of his collection that *The Astronomer* and *The Geographer* were first separated. The connoisseur and print publisher Christiaan Josi (1768–1828) purchased *The Geographer* for 133 guilders, while the famous collector Jan Gildemeester (1744–1799) bought the “pendant” for twice this amount.<sup>33</sup> Josi sold his painting, conjecturing years later: “I believe they are both in England.”<sup>34</sup>

*The Astronomer* was indeed in the English art trade for a time, but *The Geographer* remained in Dutch possession, specifically, in two famous Amsterdam collections. In 1803 the work was auctioned



fig. 2. Rembrandt, *Faust*, c. 1652, etching and drypoint, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of R. Horace Gallatin

out of the collection of the art broker and collector Arnoud de Lange (1740–1803), who had also laid claim to Cornelis Ploos van Amstel’s collection of Rembrandt etchings. When De Lange died, Josi was the executor of his testament.<sup>35</sup> Pieter Hendrik Goll van Franckenstein (1787–1832) became the next owner of *The Geographer*. He represented the third generation of a dynasty of rich merchants, originally from Frankfurt am Main, who were among the most renowned Dutch art collectors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>36</sup>

After Goll van Franckenstein’s death, *The Geographer* also went abroad. Lambert Jan Nieuwenhuys (1777–1862) bought the Vermeer for 195 guilders at the Goll van Franckenstein sale and, via his firm in Brussels, the work ended up with Alexandre Dumont in Cambrai.<sup>37</sup> Paul Mantz “discovered” it there in 1860 and announced proudly that Thoré-Bürger did not yet know the work.<sup>38</sup> Not much later Thoré-Bürger was able to buy it from Dumont for his friend Isaac Pereire (1806–1880), a French banker and member of parliament.<sup>39</sup> Thoré-Bürger alerted the latter to the truly striking resemblance of *The Geographer* to Rembrandt’s etching *Faust* (fig. 2) of about 1652.<sup>40</sup> By way of the dealer Sedelmeyer, the painting entered

the collection of Prince Demidoff in San Donato near Florence in 1875 and was therefore briefly (after *The Music Lesson* [cat. 8], which was for some time on view in Venice) the only Vermeer south of Vienna.<sup>41</sup> Charles Blanc included it in his description of the Demidoff collection in 1877.<sup>42</sup> It made its last appearance at an auction in 1885, when it was finally purchased in Vienna for the Frankfurter Kunstverein.<sup>43</sup>

1. Kühn 1968, 199.

2. On the map-making industry in Amsterdam, see Van den Brink 1989.

3. For the intellectual content implicit in the decorative elements on maps, see, in particular, Bennett 1990.

4. Indeed, the combined shadows of the globe and the cupboard echo the pose of the geographer.

5. Vermeer, in fact, may have altered this figure yet again, for a vague indication of an earlier head can also be detected above the current form.

6. Welu 1975, 543–544. Welu illustrates (fig. 17) the precise map Vermeer depicted, which is in the Deutsche Staatsbibliothek, Berlin.

7. Welu 1975, 542 n. 70, indicates that the only extant terrestrial globe of this date by Hondius is in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg, No. W1 296. Vermeer used the identical globe in *Allegory of Faith* (cat. 20).

8. Welu 1986, 256–264.

9. Welu 1975, 544.

10. Welu 1986.

11. For Van Leeuwenhoek see Dobell 1932.

12. Van Leeuwenhoek lived in Amsterdam from 1648 to 1654, where he worked for a Scottish cloth merchant. He returned to Delft in 1654 where he married Barbara de Mey, daughter of a *saydrapier* (dealer in serge), and worked in the textile business. Over the years he was granted a number of remunerative municipal positions. In 1660 he was appointed Chamberlain to the Sheriffs. In 1667 he also became *generaal-wijkmeester* (alderman), and, in 1679 he was named wine-gauger of Delft.

13. Boitet 1729, 765.

14. This mezzotint is based on the artist's portrait of Van Leeuwenhoek in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. A957.

15. De Jongh 1967, 67, associates the allegorical content of *The Geographer* with the sentiments expressed in emblem twenty-nine in Adriaan Spinniker's *Leerzaame Zinnebeelden*, Haarlem, 1714.

16. The allegorical implications of *The Astronomer* are more explicit since Vermeer has hung a religious scene on the back wall of the room. This work, *The Finding of*

*Moses*, was traditionally associated with the guidance of Divine Providence. For further discussion of the allegorical implications of *The Finding of Moses*, see *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid* (cat. 19), where the same painting appears, but at a much larger scale.

17. Blankert 1992, 194–196, no. 24 and pl. 25.

18. Hoet 1752–1770, 2: 365, nos. 10–11: “Een stuk verbeeldende een Mathematis Konstenaar, door vander Meer” and “Een ditto door denzelven.”

19. Van Gelder 1974, 168–169.

20. Dudok van Heel 1977A, 109, no. 158; See, on the Paets sale, where six Van der Werffs were hammered down for an unheard of price of 16,000 guilders, for instance, Houbraken 1718–1721, 3: 400; Weyerman 1729–1769, 2: 409–410, 3: 57; Van Gool 1750–1751, 1: 238 and 260.

21. Gemeentearchief, Amsterdam (DTB 1103, Westerkerk, 43): buried on 23 January 1720; see also Van Kretschmar 1974, col. 258; Dudok van Heel 1977A, 115, no. 199.

22. Hoet 1752–1770, 1: 242, nos. 3–4: “extra puyck” and “niet minder.”

23. Bruyn 1986, 190–198, no. A 52 and ill.; on Looten's descendants, see Van Eeghen 1957, 154; see also the Looten Genealogy (Manuscript, Gemeentearchief, Amsterdam).

24. Hoet 1752–1770, 1: 333, no. 6: “heerlyk en konstig geschildert.” The paintings were not mentioned in the inventory belonging to the testament of Govert Looten (Gemeentearchief, Amsterdam, NA 8098, no. 400, notary H. van Aken, 26 May 1728).

25. Gemeentearchief, Amsterdam (DTB 101, Zuiderkerk, fol. 54 and DTB 1060, 28).

26. Hofstede de Groot 1907–1928, 1: 604, no. 40a.

27. His name is generally spelled incorrectly as “Fiseau” (Blankert 1992, 194) or “Fisau” (Foucart 1987, 100), but see Mauritsuis 1993, 136.

28. The Hague 1990, 136.

29. Edwards 1986, 197.

30. Edwards 1986, 197 and 200 nn. 9–11: “un architecte,” “un astronome etudiant sur le globe de la terre” and “On ne conois ici aucun ouvrage de ce peintre. Ils sont tres rarrres....”

31. Jan Danser Nijman remains a somewhat shadowy figure: his mother Maria Danser, widow of Pieter Nijman, died in 1784 (Gemeentearchief, Amsterdam, DTB 1050 Oude Kerk, 162).

32. Nijman had a special predilection for Cornelis Troost, see sale catalogue, Amsterdam, 16 August 1797, title page (Lugt no. 5640), and Niemeijer 1973, 439.

33. Sale catalogue, Amsterdam, 16 August 1797, 33, no. 167.

34. Josi 1821, xix: “Je les crois tous les deux en Angleterre.”

35. Laurentius 1980, 99–103; Aarnoud de Lange, Christiaan Josi and Cornelis Ploos van Amstel were close friends or related; see also Dudok van Heel 1977B.

36. Knoef 1948–1949.

37. Sale catalogue, Amsterdam, 1 July 1833, 19, no. 47 (Lugt no. 13358); Mantz 1860, 304–305; Blanc 1860–1863, 2: s.v., 3.

38. Mantz 1860, 305.

39. Thoré-Bürger 1866, 559: “C'est M. Dumont qui a bien

voulu me céder, pour la galerie Pereire, cette superbe peinture”; on Pereire (not Périère, see Swillens 1950, 60), see GDEL, 7: 7978.

40. Bartsch no. 270; see Berlin 1991, 2: 258–260, no. 33, and ill.

41. Sale catalogue, Florence, 15 March 1880 (Lugt no. 39989), no. 1124.

42. Blanc 1877, 416, speaks of the Max Kam [=Kann] sale before the painting came to San Donato.

43. Städelches Kunstinstitut 1971, 62.

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