

'Companion of joy, balm for sorrow': the paintings of Johannes Vermeer

by Nora Hamerman

Question: "What would you do if an elephant sat in front of you at the movie?" Answer: "Miss most of the movie." (From a children's riddle book.)

Question: Why is a great painting like a child's riddle? Answer: It sets you up by leading you to think in a fixed way, and then throws you off the fixed track by introducing some element that was there all along, but had escaped your attention (e.g., a different way of interpreting the verb "do"). The child's laughter at having been fooled by this silly riddle is not totally alien to the intellectual pleasure evoked by the artistry of the Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer (1632-75), who evokes beauty by inviting the viewer to be surprised by the creative powers of his or her own mind.

Consider one of Vermeer's finest compositions, "A Lady at the Virginal with a Gentleman," painted in the early 1660s. It is rarely seen by the art-loving public because it is part of the private collection of H.R.M. Queen Elizabeth II of England, having been acquired by her ancestor King George III prior to the American Revolution. By a nice irony, the picture purchased by that implacable enemy of the American republic, is currently in the United States as part of a splendid, once-in-a-lifetime exhibition—the first-ever retrospective devoted entirely to Vermeer. By a nastier irony, this and the 20 other Vermeers in the show have been inaccessible to tens of thousands of people who wished to see them during many days of November and December, because some of George III's latter-day epigones in the U.S. Congress, mad with the delusion that they are defending their posterity from debts, have held the National Gallery of Art, along with other federal institutions, hostage to their crankish obsession with "balancing the budget."

The riddle in the Queen's Vermeer, also called "The Music Lesson" (although the actual subject is unclear), is that the "action" is all in the background. If you're thinking hieratically, as in European medieval art where the saints were the largest, the royalty was second, and the commoners were the smallest, according to their importance in the established order, then the "elephant"—a table draped in an oriental rug—will keep you from seeing most of the show, which is playing out in the deep background, thanks to the science of perspective which was a great gift to world civilization by the European Renaissance.

Vermeer gives pride of place to a finely crafted keyboard

instrument which is being played by a young woman who stands with her back turned to us, at the far end of a large room brilliantly lit through windows from the left side. The perspective scheme of the picture is marked out by large, diagonally placed black and white tiles and interrupted by a table covered with an oriental carpet in the foreground, and a chair and a bass viol lying on the floor in the middle ground. The unmistakable focus converges on the left sleeve of the woman, drawing subtle attention to the unseen hand which would be playing the bass line of the piece—the "continuo" or ground bass, upon which the whole polyphonic structure of a keyboard piece of that era would be built.

The virginal has been identified as a costly one constructed by the famed Antwerp instrument maker Andreas Ruckers (1579-1654), the "Stradivarius" of harpsichord makers. A wealthy young woman would have been given private instruction in this most refined of domestic arts. The open lid of the Ruckers virginal is inscribed in Latin, "Musical Letitiae Co[me] Medicine Dolor[um]": Music is the companion of joy, balm for sorrow. The motto becomes an element linking other themes—musical, pictorial, and moral.

In this, as in many other pictures by Vermeer, recent studies have used radiography to reveal how the artist altered his compositions away from "realism" toward carefully contrived balances. For example, curator Arthur Wheelock shows that Vermeer eliminated some of the natural shadows in order to simplify the composition. Most extraordinary is the change in the woman's head, which he repainted to face directly back. The same woman's head, as painted originally, and as it still appears reflected in the mirror behind the virginal, turns toward the man on her right, who leans gently against the case of the instrument and watches her with rapt attention and with slightly parted lips. We also catch a glimpse in the mirror of another art form—the easel of the painter himself is reflected in the tilted glass. The "joke" is that we expect a mirror to give us back optical reality without distortion. This mirror talks back—it warps time, not in the ugly and nihilistic manner of a Picasso, but so as to synthesize a higher reality than a single moment could show us. The music is "between" the woman concentrating solely on the keyboard and the woman who looks at the man; "between" the depicted woman, and the depicted reflection of the depicted woman, and the viewer, who is "real." But we're not done yet.



"A Lady at the Virginal with a Gentleman," c. 1662-64, Lent by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. Arthur Wheelock observes: "The metaphorical relationships between Vermeer's composition and musical forms are many, but one is particularly fascinating: the building of rectangular shapes around the woman to give visual emphasis to her importance, a structural technique akin to the repetition of motifs in music developing toward a thematic climax. Then, as though returning to an earlier theme, but in a minor key, Vermeer reconsiders the woman through a mirror, revealing aspects of her that would otherwise never be known." The Ruckers virginal was probably the one documented to have belonged to the Huygens family, well known for its musical as well as scientific interests.

Next to the man on the side opposite the windows, hangs a large picture by an older Dutch master, Dirck van Baburen, of "Cimon and Pero," a valued item in the art collection inherited by Vermeer's in-laws. The partially seen picture shifts us back in time in a threefold way—to an earlier era of national art, to an earlier stage in Vermeer's extended family, and to ancient history, in its theme. It depicts a young Roman mother who kept her imprisoned father from starving by suckling him at her own bosom, and was known as "Roman Charity." The story had come to symbolize the ideal of Christian charity, with the daughter's love for her father being perceived in spiritual terms, for such unselfish love ennobles and allows the spirit to rise closer to God.

The details of the history of this Vermeer trace all of the major elements of Vermeer's art, life, and critical fortunes: save for the last chapter which should be written soon, when,

with the expected fall of the House of Windsor from power, it will permanently enter a public museum. The canvas was sold to King George III in 1762 by Joseph Smith, the British consul in Venice, as a work by another Dutch artist, Frans van Mieris, and only identified a century later as by Vermeer. Before Smith, it had been acquired by a famous Venetian painter, Gianantonio Pellegrini, who made his career in England and the Low Countries. And before Pellegrini, it was one of "21 works most powerfully and splendidly painted by the late J. Vermeer of Delft; showing various Compositions, being the best he has ever made," sold at auction in Amsterdam in 1696, exactly 300 years ago. It had been in the collection of Jacob Dissius, a Delft printer whose father-in-law, a wealthy Delft brewer, was likely the major patron of Vermeer.

Johannes Vermeer: an artist so often contradicted by the

oligarchical power of Venice and Venice's heir, Great Britain—yet manifesting a creative genius that cannot be smothered by any misfortune.

A difficult life

“Balm for sorrow!” Vermeer is a Mozart-like figure whose serenely radiant art gives hardly a clue to the adversity he endured. He was born in Delft, Netherlands in 1632 in the midst of the Thirty Years War that depopulated Central Europe as it drew more and more peasants into the nominally Catholic and nominally Protestant armies ravaging the countryside—while both sides were armed by the wealthy merchants of Venice's northern outpost, Amsterdam. He was a youth in 1648 when the Peace of Westphalia finally guaranteed the independence of his native country. Five years later, upon marrying Catharina Bolnes, the daughter of a patrician Catholic family, the 21-year-old converted to Catholicism.

Recent archival scholarship and the art historical studies have revealed that Vermeer took his new faith very seriously, although it meant a certain isolation and financial hardship. Though it may seem paradoxical, he was also an ardent patriot of the Netherlands—a nation dominated at the top by the Reformed Church—and of his native city, Delft, the historic center of the House of Orange which a century earlier had led the revolt against Spain under the religious banner of Calvinism. One of his most celebrated pictures, the “View of Delft” (The Hague) singles out the landmark of the Nieuwe Kirk (New Church), which contained the tomb of William of Orange, assassinated by a Catholic fanatic in 1562.

From Vermeer's marriage, 15 children were born in 22 years; four died in infancy; ten were still minors when the painter himself died in 1675, deeply in debt. Although he was twice elected headman of the Guild of St. Luke, the painter's guild, and enjoyed the highest repute as an artist and expert on art, it appears that he was unable to support himself ever by painting, but rather pursued the family trade of innkeeping and dealing in art and maps. He had neither church patrons nor did he work, like Rembrandt, for the open market. His few works were apparently purchased by a handful of patrons, one of whom was the brewer who originally owned “The Music Lesson.”

“Balm for sorrow” might also apply posthumously, for, although Vermeer was known in his lifetime as a “celebrated painter,” his fame only survived among a handful of connoisseurs after the turn of the 18th century and he had to be “rediscovered” (and misinterpreted) by a 19th-century French critic, Thoré-Burger. For admirers of Vermeer today, the latest wrenching disappointment has been the congressional lockout of visitors from the National Gallery's show.

Some historical context

Vermeer's attitude about the religious issues of his day is one of the surprising facets explored in this first-ever retrospective exhibition, particularly by curator Arthur

Wheelock, who devoted a decade to organizing this show and who produced a book, *Vermeer and the Art of Painting*, in 1995. Although the artist who worked in Delft is mainly known for his “genre” pictures—scenes of everyday life—he was the first to imbue these subjects with the moral seriousness previously reserved for history painting, which dealt with Biblical subjects, the lives of saints, and ancient mythology, and which had been deemed the very highest category of art since the Italian Renaissance of the fifteenth century.

Vermeer's art can now be seen as a key to unlocking the transcendent presence of God in many acts of everyday life, in the life of laypersons and particularly for the women who are the subject of so many of his pictures.

The family of Vermeer's in-laws was close to the small group of Jesuits who lived in Delft, and Vermeer moved, as newly discovered documents show, into the “papist ghetto” near their headquarters.

Although there was no established church, the Netherlands was controlled at the top by an oligarchy which embraced the harshest doctrines of Calvinist orthodoxy, which proclaimed total depravity of man and the inefficacy of any human effort toward salvation, which was reserved from eternity for a small elect.

The late 16th and early 17th century was an era of massive migration and frequent conversions, often under duress or for reasons of economic survival. In the bloody religious conflicts of the 1570s, the Spanish Catholic armies under the Duke of Alva committed unspeakable atrocities in order to quell the rebellion of “heretics.” In turn, Catholics were martyred at Gorkum and Alkmaar for maintaining their belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the eucharist. Anti-Catholic iconoclasts ravaged the churches of Delft and other Dutch cities, smashing statues, burning pictures, and shattering the stained-glass windows which were later replaced by clear glass. The Reformed (Calvinist) fanatics not only reciprocated fully the violence committed by the Spanish, but brutally suppressed their Protestant rivals, particularly those belonging to the peaceful Anabaptist sect.

The bloodshed waned after the 1570s, but Dutch Catholics were forced underground. They could not hold public masses and their churches were taken over by Protestants. They were allowed to hold mass in barns and private homes if they paid special taxes for the privilege (the arms of windmills were often set as signals that such a mass was to take place). Gradually, the Catholic population dropped under these pressures. Almost all the working people went over to Calvinism immediately, and only some middle class and wealthy patricians remained Catholic. Catholics were also forbidden to hold high public office. The decline continued into the 18th century.

Around 1620, a dispute broke out among the dominant Calvinists, when the Remonstrant faction questioned the extreme teaching in which the individual could do nothing to cooperate in his own salvation. Their leader, Oldenbarne-



"St. Praxedis," 1655. The Barbara Piasecka Johnson Collection Foundation.

veldt, who had been attempting to keep the peace with Spain, had long been a thorn in the side of Prince Maurits, who was not only Stadtholder but a paid agent of Venice. Thus, after a protracted trial, Oldenbarneveldt was executed by Prince Maurits for his alleged Remonstrant "heresy." This harsh measure deeply shocked Holland's intellectual class, including the founder of international law, Hugo Grotius, and led to a wide reexamination of Calvinist orthodoxy. One outcome of this reflection, was the conversion to Catholicism in 1640 by a man much influenced by Grotius, Holland's national poet and dramatist, Vondel.

The Martha principle

Two of Vermeer's earliest pictures, both on view in the retrospective exhibit, indicate his desire to show his loyalty to his new faith. The rediscovered "St. Praxedis" (Barbara Johnson Collection, Philadelphia) is such a surprise, that it took a decade and more for scholars to admit that the signature of Vermeer and date 1655 could be authentic. St. Praxedis was an early Christian known for her reverent care for the remains of the martyrs, which she buried and then distributed their goods to the poor. Her cult, celebrated with a basilica in Rome, was revived by the Jesuits in the late 16th century to emphasize the primacy of the Catholic Church. Vermeer's picture is a close copy of an original by a Florentine artist



"Christ in the House of Mary and Martha," c. 1655. Edinburgh, National Galleries of Scotland, expresses the balance between faith and works in Christian life.

of the Catholic Reform, Ficherelli. St. Praxedis is shown gathering the blood of a beheaded martyr. Vermeer's version of the picture adds a crucifix to the saint's hands, thus symbolically mingling the blood of the martyr with that of Christ. This quintessential religious image of the Catholic reform is also a woman reverently going about her feminine duties, and she will reappear in secularized garb in later Vermeers.

A second early Vermeer, "Christ in the House of Mary and Martha," emphasizes the Catholic interpretation of the story from the Gospel of St. Luke 10:38-42, in which Martha's efforts to get Mary to help with the housework instead of always sitting at the Master's feet, earn her a mild reproof from Jesus. The two sisters were often used to represent the contrast between the active life (Martha) and the contemplative life (Mary). Arthur Wheelock in his catalogue entry presents an interpretation which grew out of a 1994 graduate seminar at the University of Maryland: "In this painting Vermeer has thus touched upon one of the most fundamental theological disputes between Protestants and Catholics, the proper path to salvation. While Catholics believe that salvation is earned by joining faith with good works, Protestants view salvation, or grace, as a gift given directly by God. Indeed, the Catholic interpretation of this biblical story is that the active and contemplative are both essential components of a Christian life."



"The Geographer" c. 1668-69, Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main: portrait of van Leeuwenhoek? "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," writes Wheelock.

Vermeer, he points out, knits the three figures together, rather than separating Martha from Mary and Christ. Vermeer's Martha is not concerned with a plethora of worldly needs, but serves one thing, a basket of bread. "The eucharistic implication of her offering, which Vermeer has placed at the very center of the composition, further dignifies her role within the story."

It could perhaps be suggested that this large picture of Christ seated among his followers in a private dwelling might have been especially appropriate for Catholic patrons who did have mass celebrated in their homes—something which was also occurring, in the mid-17th century, in the North American colony of Maryland, where, after a short initial period of full religious freedom, the English government forbade public masses.

Many of the more familiar Vermeers, with their secular subject-matter, are also shown in the exhibition, which express metaphorically the artist's faith and ideas and practices cherished by his Jesuit friends. The actions of the figures are deliberately made hard to identify and define. For example, a young woman standing at a window with her hand on a

sparkling brass pitcher (New York) reminds one of similar artifacts in 15th-century paintings of the Virgin Mary by Jan Van Eyck, where they refer to her purity. Many of the solitary figures in these pictures appear as if they unified the spirits of Mary and Martha, poised between contemplation and action. One woman pauses before writing the next sentence in a letter (Dublin). Another casts an electric glance across an empty white space to look at her reflection in a mirror, as she adjusts a pearl necklace (Berlin).

Leeuwenhoek, Huygens, Leibniz

In a rare example of a male solitary figure by Vermeer, the "Geographer" (Frankfurt) leans over his table, one hand resting on a book, the other suspending a pair of dividers, and looks out the window before continuing his work. It appears as a secularized version of certain Italian Renaissance paintings of scholar-saints, especially those by Carpaccio and Botticelli, which showed St. Augustine in his study, surrounded by scientific instruments and books, at the moment his face is bathed in miraculous light because he perceives a vision from Paradise, transmitted by St. Jerome at

the moment of his death.

If, as the catalogue suggests, Vermeer's picture is a portrait of his fellow Delft citizen Anthony Van Leeuwenhoek, the famed microscopist, the notion of a heavenly vision is not far afield, for Van Leeuwenhoek saw microorganisms as a mark of the "providence, perfection and order of the Lord Maker of the Universe," as he is quoted by Albert Blankert in an essay in the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition catalogue, "Vermeer's Modern Themes and Their Tradition." Blankert emphasizes: "Hollanders of the seventeenth century viewed the world around them as the Creation of God and even, as 'a second Bible' in which God's presence reveals itself as much as in the scriptures."

Although we do not know if the two men were friends, Van Leeuwenhoek did become a trustee of Vermeer's estate one year after the artist's death. Not only did the two men, born in the same year in Delft (1632), have many interests in common—geography, optics, mathematics, navigation, cartography (Vermeer got his license as a surveyor in 1669)—but this common theological perception may have bridged the social gap between the Catholic Vermeer and the Protestant Van Leeuwenhoek in an era in which there were renewed efforts by leading figures to seek ecumenical unity among Christians. The name that leaps to mind is G.W. Leibniz. It was in the late 1660s, while Vermeer was still alive, that Leibniz, a Lutheran, wrote his "Catholic Demonstrations," which defended Transubstantiation, one of the most-contested dogmas of the Catholic Church, as part of his lifelong effort to show the common ground among the separated branches of Christianity and to reunify Europe.

Because of the writings of van Leeuwenhoek, Leibniz was moved to criticize the mechanistic theories of Descartes and to develop a vitalistic biology in support of the remarkable discoveries which the microscope was making possible. In his "Reflections on the Common Concept of Justice," written in 1702, Leibniz argued: "Now nothing better corroborates the incomparable wisdom of God than the structure of the works of nature, particularly the structure which appears when we study them more closely with a microscope. . . . A man in Delft [van Leeuwenhoek] has accomplished wonders at it, and if there were many others like him, our knowledge of physics would be advanced far beyond its present state." (quoted in G.W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, a Selection Translated and Edited by Leroy E. Loemker, D. Reidel Publishing Co., Dordrecht, 1970, p. 566).

These ideas of van Leeuwenhoek and Leibniz bring Vermeer's poetic vision surprisingly close to the American republic that came into being a century after his death to defend the "inalienable rights" of all men to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." As a recent, groundbreaking study in *EIR* proved, Leibniz was a philosophical founding father (*EIR*, Dec. 1, 1995, "The Anti-Newtonian Roots of the American Revolution," by Philip Valenti, and accompa-



"Woman Holding a Balance," c. 1664, National Gallery of Art, Widener Collection: "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."

nying articles).

In the era of Vermeer, Van Leeuwenhoek, and Leibniz, America was a palpable and practical reality. Missionaries like St. Isaac Jogues faced death taking the Gospel to the Mohawk Indians in North America while Vermeer was a youth; while others were building great cities in Hispanic America and bringing letters to the Inca Empire, where literacy was perceived as magic. This was the new reality to which the geniuses of the 17th century inevitably turned their eyes. The letters that occupy so many of Vermeer's figures bespeak an era in which letter-writing was considered an art, and a genius like Leibniz could produce his life's work almost exclusively as correspondence.

Of course, there is no reason (nor any need) to believe that Leibniz ever met Vermeer. The young German philosopher passed through Holland on his way back to Germany from Paris in 1676, but Vermeer had already died by then. But aside from the possible link between them embodied by Van Leeuwenhoek, they were tied by common bonds to the premier intellectual clan of the Netherlands, the Huygens family. In his catalogue essay, "Un célèbre Peijntre nommé Verme[e]r," co-curator Ben Broos weaves a web of compelling circumstantial evidence to show that Constantin Huygens, the brilliant secretary of Stadtholder Frederick Hendrik in The Hague, must "have performed a minor but vital role in the theater of Vermeer's life." In turn, Leibniz's mentor

in Paris during 1672-76, key years in his formation, was Christiaan Huygens, Constantin's son.

Human and divine judgment

The deepest of Vermeer's genre works with religious overtones is the "Woman with a Balance," a picture which belongs to the National Gallery of Art in Washington. The young woman, who appears to be pregnant (although this is not certain), stands before a mirror holding an empty scale. Jewelry is scattered on the table before her, behind her is a painting of the Last Judgment, and her face is lit by light entering through a small window on the left. One scholar has suggested that the woman is depicted as a secularized Virgin Mary, contemplating balanced scales which a Catholic viewer would have understood as an anticipation of Christ's life, his sacrifice, and the eventual foundation of the Church.

Such an interpretation remains speculative, but there is no question about the close association of the woman with the religious scene behind her. Her head is aligned with Christ sitting in majesty on the day of judgment. He has both arms raised, in a gesture which mirrors the opposing direction (arms down) of the woman's balance. "His judgments are eternal; hers are temporal," writes Arthur Wheelock in his book, *Vermeer and the Art of Painting*. She is serene. "The character of the scene conforms amazingly 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. Before meditating, Saint Ignatius urged that the meditator first examine his conscience and weigh his sins as though he were at Judgment Day standing before his judge. Ignatius then urged that one 'weigh' one's choices and choose a path of life that will allow one to be judged favorably in a 'balanced' manner: '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.' "

In his 1995 book, Wheelock also analyzes Vermeer's masterpiece, which is not in the Washington-The Hague show. The "Art of Painting" remained in the painter's studio when he died in 1675, and Vermeer's wife and mother-in-law desperately tried to keep it from being sold to pay the family's huge debt to the baker. It is now one of the treasures of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. In this picture—which the later "Allegory of Faith" (New York) echoes in its composition but without the inspiration—Vermeer portrayed himself before his easel painting a young model (perhaps a daughter?) who is dressed as the Muse of History, crowned with laurel and holding a trumpet in one hand and a book in the other.

Behind her is displayed a great map of the Netherlands—all of the provinces before they were split into two countries, one of which remained under the rule of the Spanish Hapsburg family, and the other, today's Netherlands, which be-

came independent. The crease in the map at the location of Breda, site of great battles and treaties, as commemorated in Velázquez's immortal painting of the "Surrender at Breda," may refer to Vermeer's regret at the political events that led to the division of the country. A subtle message is also contained in the great brass chandelier surmounted by the Hapsburg eagles, under whose insignia the Netherlands had once been unified.

Here we may again discover an unsuspected affinity with the political vision of Leibniz, who recognized that the Hapsburgs, for all their flaws, defended Europe by turning back the Turkish assault on Vienna in 1681—in contrast to the France of Louis XIV, bent on forging an empire at the expense of its European neighbors. In his youth, Leibniz had attempted to focus French military efforts on a unified European crusade against Egypt, with a plan which he drew up in 1671 and took to Paris in 1672. Unfortunately, the Sun King had already laid his plans for an invasion of the Low Countries, the invasion which created the disastrous economic climate to which Vermeer fell victim, as described by his widow in 1677: "During the ruinous and protracted war [Vermeer] not only was unable to sell any of his art but also, to his great detriment, was left sitting with the paintings of other masters that he was dealing in." Vermeer, whose creative powers declined visibly in those last years, died in 1675, leaving a small legacy of art which has been gathered by this exhibition's curators with a tenderness that reminds us of his "St. Praxedis," and which may still play its part in making this a better world.

Bibliography

Vermeer and the Art of Painting, by Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1995. 205 pages, illustrated, with index. (Essays on 17 of the 36 known paintings.)

Johannes Vermeer, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Art, Washington; Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, The Hague, 1995. Curators Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr. and Frederic J. Duparc. Essays by Alfred Blankert, Ben Broos, Jorgen Wadum, and Mr. Wheelock. 229 pages, softcover.

Vermeer Illuminated: Conservation, Restoration and Research, by Jorgen Wadum. V&K Publishing Mauritshuis, The Hague, 1995. (Describes how the two Vermeers, "View of Delft" and the "Girl with a Pearl Earring," were restored in full view of the public by installing the conservation studio in the galleries.)