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Young Woman Seated at a Virginal

Johannes Vermeer
(Delft 1632 – 1675 Delft)

ca. 1670–72

oil on canvas

25.5 x 20.1 cm

JVe-100



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This tenderly entrancing picture captures the quiet joy of a young woman in harmony with her music. As she gently fingers the keyboard of her virginal, she leans slightly forward in her chair, quietly and not about to move, while looking out with a sympathetic expression, as though desiring to share the dulcet sounds of her instrument with the viewer. In style and execution this small masterpiece is similar to other of Johannes Vermeer's late depictions of young women playing musical instruments, including *Guitar Player*, ca. 1670, Kenwood House, London (**fig 1**); *A Lady Standing at a Virginal*, ca. 1670–72, National Gallery, London (**fig 2**); and *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal*, ca. 1670–72, also in the National Gallery (**fig 3**). As with these other works, it must date from the early 1670s.

In Vermeer's oeuvre, music making always serves the purpose of courtship. Much as with *A Lady Standing at a Virginal*, the viewer to whom the woman looks out assumes the role of a potential suitor. The tightly wound curls, red ribbons, and the strand of small pearls in her hair indicate that she is a young lady of proper upbringing and fine sensibility. But it is the expression, although abstracted as in some of Vermeer's other late works, which suggests she is a real person with emotions and feelings. In this regard Vermeer was indebted to Gerard ter Borch (1617–81)^[1] and, like Ter Borch, to the women who shared his private world.

This painting has only recently been reintegrated into Vermeer's oeuvre after having been removed from the public's eye for many years. Not only the subject matter, but also the modeling of the satin skirt, the reflective front of the virginal, the shape of the music stand, and the radiant white wall are all executed with the subtleties characteristic of Vermeer's late paintings. Lawrence Gowing was particularly struck by the distinctive rendering of "the hands, the instrument and the space and light around them."^[2]

Technical examinations have established many similarities in the materials and techniques found in this painting and in other of Vermeer's late works. The pale brown ground was applied in two layers, and is identical in composition and application to the ground layers in the London paintings. Natural ultramarine (lapis lazuli) serves in the final paint layers not only to color blue motifs (as in the back of the chair) but also to lend a cool luminosity to the background plane and to the highlights on the forearms.

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Johannes Vermeer, *Guitar Player*, ca. 1670, oil on canvas, 53 x 46.3 cm, Kenwood, English Heritage as Trustees of the Iveagh Bequest



Fig 2. Johannes Vermeer, *A Lady Standing at a Virginal*, ca. 1670–72, oil on canvas, 51.8 x 45.2 cm, The National Gallery, London, Bought, 1892 (NG1383), © National Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY



Fig 3. Johannes Vermeer, *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal*, ca. 1670–72, oil on canvas, 51.5 x 45.6 cm, The National Gallery, London, Salting Bequest, 1910

Vermeer used a green pigment in the shadows on the face, as he did in the London and Kenwood paintings. Finally, the orthogonal lines of the virginal were evidently snapped onto the primed or underpainted canvas by using chalked strings running to a pin stuck in the canvas at a point coincident with the woman's shoulder.^[3]

Studies on canvas weaves, undertaken in 2011 by C. Richard Johnson of Cornell University and Don H. Johnson of Rice University, have determined that this work is painted on a canvas cut from the same bolt as Vermeer's *Lacemaker* in the Musée du Louvre, Paris, ca. 1669–70 (**fig 4**).^[4] This information suggests that Vermeer used this bolt for this later group of paintings. At his death in 1675 Vermeer left “ten painter's canvases” among the supplies in his studio.^[5] These were most likely stretched and primed but otherwise unpainted. Paintings from the same bolt of canvas, thus, could have a range of dates depending on how quickly the artist worked and used up his materials at hand, and, for stylistic reasons, it is likely that *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal* dates a few years after *Lacemaker*.

Despite this painting's many stylistic and thematic connections to Vermeer's late works, the somewhat wooden appearance of the large yellow shawl covering the upper portion of the woman's body is awkward both in its shape and in its modeling. The sharp edges to the folds are quite different from Vermeer's more nuanced manner of painting, as seen, for example, in the shimmering quality of her white satin dress. It is largely because of the unsatisfactory character of this shawl that the attribution to the artist has been contested in the past. X-radiographs, however, have shown that beneath this shawl is a fully realized garment, with an intricately designed sleeve, that leads gracefully from the neck to the woman's arms (**fig 5**). The skirt came up in gathered folds to the waist, and the broad swag of drapery from the elbows to the back of the chair was not present originally. Pigment analysis has also determined that this undergarment was executed with a different mixture of lead-tin yellow paint than that of the shawl. The probability, thus, is that the shawl was a later addition, likely executed shortly after Vermeer's death. A similar situation occurs with *Woman with a Flute* in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., which also seems to have been reworked after Vermeer's death.

(NG2568), © National Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY



Fig 4. Johannes Vermeer, *Lacemaker*, ca. 1669–70, oil on canvas, 23.9 x 20.5 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Gianni Dagli Orti / The Art Archive at Art Resource, NY



Fig 5. X-radiograph of *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal*, JVe-100



Much of the magic of Vermeer's paintings arises from the visual restraint of his images, which gives them a timeless character despite the immediacy of his scenes. Here Vermeer has focused in on the woman and her instrument, giving the viewer no hint of the character of the room in which she sits other than for the simple white wall behind her. All of our attention, thus, is directed to her, and she responds in kind. This powerful human connection holds us in place, and find ourselves drawn into her world and imagining the quiet rhythms of the music she plays.^[6]

- Walter A. Liedtke and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

Endnotes

1. Vermeer and Ter Borch likely knew one another. See the biographies of Vermeer and Ter Borch in this catalogue.
2. Lawrence Gowing, letter to Marlborough Fine Art, London, in 1959, quoted in Libby Sheldon and Nicola Costaras, "Johannes Vermeer's *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal*," *Burlington Magazine* 148 (2006): 90.
3. Conservator Jørgen Wadum reported 13 cases of a pinhole at the vanishing point in canvases by Vermeer, in his article "Vermeer in Perspective," in Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. *Johannes Vermeer* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) (New Haven and London, 1995), 67, 71. In later reports Wadum has cited 17 examples (personal communication to the Walter Liedtke, 6 July 2009).
4. Walter Liedtke, C. Richard Johnson Jr., and Don H. Johnson, "Canvas Matches in Vermeer: A Case Study in the Computer Analysis of Fabric Supports," *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 47 (2012): 101–8.
5. John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 341, under doc. 364.
6. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century: The Collection of the National Gallery of Art, Systematic Catalogue* (New York and Oxford, 1995), 387–93, ill.

Provenance

- Possibly Pieter Claesz. van Ruijven (1624–74), Delft; possibly by inheritance to his son-in-law, Jacob Dissius (his sale, Amsterdam, 16 May 1696, no. 37).
- Possibly Wessel Ryers (his sale, Amsterdam, 21 September 1814, no. 93 [30 florins to Willem Gruyter]).
- Alfred Beit (1853–1906), London, probably acquired in the 1890s; by inheritance to his brother Otto Beit (1865–1930) by 1904; by inheritance to his son, Sir Alfred Lane Beit (1903–94), Blessington, Ireland [Marlborough Fine Art, London, 1960, to Baron Frédéric Rolin, Brussels].
- Baron Frédéric Rolin, Brussels (d. 2001), acquired in 1960, by descent to his heirs until 2004 (sale, Sotheby's, London, 7 July 2004, no. 8 [to Steve Wynn]).
- Steve Wynn Collection, Las Vegas, 2004 [Otto Naumann Ltd., New York].
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2008.

Exhibition History

- London, Burlington Fine Arts Club, Winter Exhibition, "Catalogue of a Collection of Pictures, Decorative Furniture and Other Works of Art," 1907, 4, no. 13 [lent by Otto Beit].
- New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Vermeer and the Delft School," 8 March–27 May 2001; London, National Gallery, 20 June–16 September 2001 [not in the catalogue; lent by Baron Frédéric Rolin].
- Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, "A Young Woman Seated at the Virginals by Johannes Vermeer," 11 August 2004–1 March 2005 [lent by Steve Wynn].
- Tokyo, Tokyo Metropolitan Museum, "Vermeer and the Delft Style," 2 August–14 December 2008 [lent by the present owner].
- New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, on loan with the permanent collection, 29 December 2008–30 November 2009 [lent by the present owner].
- Norfolk, Virginia, Chrysler Museum of Art, June–December 2010 [lent by the present owner].
- Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, "Vermeer's Women: Secrets and Silence," 17 September 2011–15 January 2012, no. 28 [lent by the present owner].
- Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, on loan with the permanent collection, January–September 2012 [lent by the present owner].
- Rome, Scuderie del Quirinale, "Johannes Vermeer and the Golden Age of Dutch Art," October 2012–January 2013 [lent by present owner].
- Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, on loan with the permanent collection, January–June 2013 [lent by the present owner].
- London, National Gallery, "Vermeer and Music: The Art of Love and Leisure," 25 June–8 September 2013 [lent by the present owner].
- Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, "Vermeer's *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal*," 26 October 2013–21 September 2014 [lent by the present owner].
- Raleigh, North Carolina Museum of Art, "Small Treasures: Rembrandt, Vermeer, Hals, and Their Contemporaries," 26 October 2014–4 January 2015; Birmingham, Birmingham Museum of Art, 4 February 2015–26 April 2015, no. 44 [lent by the present owner].
- Dallas, Dallas Museum of Art, "Vermeer Suite: Music in 17th-Century Dutch Painting," 17 January–21 August 2016 [lent by the present owner].
- Paris, Musée du Louvre, "Vermeer et les maîtres de la peinture de genre," 20 February–22 May 2017 [lent by the present owner].
- Beijing, National Museum of China, "Rembrandt and His Time: Masterpieces from The

Leiden Collection," 17 June–3 September 2017 [lent by the present owner].

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Technical Summary

The support, a single piece of medium-weight, plain-weave fabric, has been lined.^[1] The weave has slightly thicker threads every centimeter in the vertical and horizontal directions. The vertical threads run perfectly vertically while the horizontal threads slope downward when viewed left to right. All four tacking margins have been removed and there is slight cusping along all four edges. There is a green wax collection seal and numerical inscriptions along the stretcher and two red import stamps along the lining.

In 2010, the Thread Count Automation Project (TCAP) determined weave matches link the supports of JVe-100, dated ca. 1670, and the Louvre's *Lacemaker*, dated ca. 1669–70.^[2] Johnson and Johnson's report states: "Presuming Vermeer purchased canvas in sizes larger than his paintings, a weave match is strong evidence that both, now separate, canvases were once joined and both in Vermeer's possession. This argues for the authenticity of one half of a matching pair to carry over to the other half of the pair." This confirms L. Sheldon and N. Costaras's findings published in *The Burlington Magazine* (February 2006) that "a painting of a similar size to 'A Young Woman Seated at a Virginal,' the 'Lacemaker,' is on a canvas made of precisely the same type of rather coarse thread and has exactly the same thread count. . . . So similar is the appearance of the two canvases that they could well be from the same bolt."^[3]

A light gray ground has been applied in at least two layers followed by a thin red-brown imprimatura glaze.^[4] The paint has been applied dark to light, although dark glazes have been applied over the lighter brown paint along the drapery folds of the yellow shawl to enhance the illusion of depth. The composition's perspective lines converge in the yellow shawl draped over the figure's shoulder. A previously filled and inpainted point in the shawl, below and slightly to the left of the two white pearls along the figure's neck, may be the vanishing point.^[5]

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. The images indicate the yellow shawl was applied after the vertical folds of the skirt were painted. Dark pentimenti through the figure's hands and wrists indicate the figure was painted after the virginal.

The painting is unsigned and undated.

The painting was cleaned and restored prior to acquisition in 2004 and remains in a good state of preservation.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. Narrow remnants of primed canvas remain along all but the left edge.
2. TCAP codirectors Dr. C. Richard Johnson Jr. of Cornell University and Dr. Don H. Johnson of Rice University.



3. *The Burlington Magazine* 148 (February 2006): 89–97.
4. From page one of the painting analysis report by C. Hassall and L. Sheldon, UCL Painting Analysis Ltd, May 1997 (on file at the Leiden Collection).
5. Ca. 1 cm below and slightly to the left of the two white pearls along the figure's neck.