



Johannes Vermeer

(Delft 1632 – 1675 Delft)

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Johannes Vermeer, the second child of Reynier Jansz Vos (also known as Vermeer) (1591–1652) and Digna Baltens (1595–1670), was baptized in the Nieuwe Kerk in Delft on 31 October 1632. Reynier Jansz Vos initially earned a living as a weaver of a fine satin fabric called *caffa*.^[1] In addition, from 1629 he is mentioned as the innkeeper of *De Vliegende Vos* (The Flying Fox). He was also an art dealer, registering as such in the Delft Guild of Saint Luke in 1631. On 1 May 1641, when Vermeer was nine-and-a-half years old, the family moved from the Voldersgracht to a house and inn called Mechelen, on the Marktveld, where Reynier Jansz Vos actively continued to buy and sell paintings. Following his father's death in 1652, Vermeer took over the business while his mother continued to run the inn.^[2] Digna Baltens tried to sell the property in 1663, but when it failed to fetch the desired price, she put it up for rent. Vermeer inherited the inn after her death in 1670, and he continued to rent it out.

On 20 April 1653 Vermeer married Catharina Bolnes (ca. 1631–87), whose parents were Reynier Bolnes (ca. 1593–1647), the owner of a brickworks, and Maria Thins (1592–1680). Catharina's mother, who came from a distinguished Gouda family, refused to sign the customary deed of consent after the marriage banns were posted. She did promise, however, that she would not impede or prevent the marriage. Her reservations could have been prompted by Vermeer's relatively humble origins, but as a devout Catholic she may well have objected as well to his Protestant faith.^[3] In any case, Vermeer seems to have promised that he would quickly convert to Catholicism.^[4] The Delft painter Leonaert Bramer (1596–1674) witnessed the agreement Vermeer and Catharina Bolnes had drawn up before a notary prior to their marriage.

Where Vermeer and his wife settled in Delft just after their betrothal is not known. By 27 December 1660, however, they had moved in with Maria Thins in her home on the Oude Langendijk.^[5] Vermeer must have had a good relationship with his mother-in-law. For example, in 1656 she loaned the artist 300 guilders, which, as she stipulated in her will a year later, he did not have to repay.^[6] Other deeds reveal that Vermeer and his family lived with his mother-in-law until his death.

Vermeer registered as a master painter in the Guild of Saint Luke on 29 December 1653.^[7] It is not known who taught him to paint. A few days after his marriage, Vermeer cosigned a document with the painter Gerard ter Borch (1617–81) in Delft, but it is unlikely that Ter Borch was his teacher. Ter Borch, who resided in The Hague at the time, might have made a special trip to Delft to attend Vermeer's wedding.^[8] Vermeer may have received his first drawing lessons from his neighbour Cornelis Rietwijck (ca. 1590–1660), when he was living on the Voldersgracht. Rietwijck was a portrait painter and ran a school where subjects other than drawing were also taught.^[9] Leonard Bramer (1596–1674), who was probably a family friend, is regularly proposed as being Vermeer's second teacher, even though his manner of painting and subject matter differ from those of Vermeer's early work.^[10] It has also been suggested that Carel Fabritius (1622–54), who joined the Guild of Saint Luke in October 1652, was Vermeer's teacher.^[11] This proposal, however, is unlikely considering that Fabritius's profound interest in perspective did not leave a mark on Vermeer's style and subject matter until later in his career. Nevertheless, the connections of these two great talents resound in a poem written by Arnold Bon (before 1634–91), published in Dirck van Bleyswijck's *Beschryvinge der Stadt Delft* (1667), that concludes with a stanza on Fabritius's tragic death: "But happily there rose from his fire / Vermeer, who, masterlike, was able to emulate him."^[12]

Taking Vermeer's family into account, an apprenticeship with the Utrecht painter Abraham Bloemaert (1566–1651) is a credible alternative. Bloemaert was an uncle by marriage of Jan Geenz Thins (ca. 1580–1647), a cousin of Maria Thins who served as her guardian after her father's untimely death.^[13] An apprenticeship in Utrecht could explain the influence of the Caravaggists on Vermeer's early work. Artists from Amsterdam seem to have left their mark on him as well.

Vermeer was familiar with the work of Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69), and Jacob van Loo (1614–70), so it is possible that he trained there as well.^[14]

Vermeer began his career in 1653 as a history painter. Two early pictures can be securely attributed to him: *Diana and Her Companions* and *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*; a third painting, *Saint Praxedis*, signed and dated 1655, is likely also to be by the young master.^[15] Vermeer's first genre painting, *The Procuress*, is dated 1656.^[16] Aside from two city views and two allegories, he devoted the rest of his career to depicting genre scenes.^[17] Vermeer's production was decidedly modest. At present, only thirty-six paintings by him are known (meaning that he would have produced at most forty-five between 1657 and his death in 1675, thus an average of two to three a year). It is tempting to attribute this low production to Vermeer's precise and laborious painting style. This explanation, however, is not entirely satisfactory, if only because other painters known for their meticulous manner of painting, such as Gerrit Dou (1613–75) and Jan van der Heyden (1637–1712), left behind much larger oeuvres. In principle, anyone painting so few pictures annually could only make a living from his art if he had one or more regular patrons prepared to pay high sums for his work.^[18] Yet, as noted above, Vermeer was not only a painter, but also an art dealer, which would have provided him with an additional source of income.

It has been argued that Vermeer had one important patron in Delft, Pieter van Ruijven (1624–74), a fellow townsman and the wealthy son of a brewer.^[19] There are no documents making direct reference to Van Ruijven's patronage, and the loan Van Ruijven made to Vermeer in 1657 cannot be seen in this light. The assumption that it was a veiled payment for a painting he had ordered is not very convincing.^[20] A more obvious explanation is that Vermeer accepted the loan to replenish his stock.^[21] Nevertheless, even though not a single commission from Van Ruijven to Vermeer is known, it is likely that many of the twenty-one paintings by Vermeer in the estate of the Delft printer Jacob Dissius (1653–95) had formerly belonged to Van Ruijven. Dissius was married to Van Ruijven's only daughter, Magdalena (d. 1682), who upon her death in 1682 left twenty paintings by Vermeer to her husband and his father, Abraham Dissius (d. 1694).^[22] She probably came into possession of these works through the estate of her mother, Maria de Knuijt, who had died in 1681, seven years after her husband. That a special bond between the Van Ruijven family and Vermeer existed is evidenced by the fact that Maria de Knuijt bequeathed the painter 500 guilders in her testament of 1665.^[23]

Pieter van Ruijven was a distant cousin of Pieter Spiering (1595–1652), Dou's famous patron.^[24] As is known, Spiering paid Dou an annual sum of 500 guilders for the right of first refusal,^[25] and it has been suggested that a comparable contract existed between Van Ruijven and Vermeer. There is, however, no evidence to support this hypothesis.^[26] Those assuming the existence of such a relationship underestimate the uniqueness of Dou and Spiering's agreement and the extent to which it contributed to Dou's celebrity among his contemporaries.^[27] If there were such a contract between Van Ruijven and Vermeer, it would definitely have been known in Delft and also probably far beyond this city. Such an arrangement would hardly have escaped the notice of Houbraken, who did not devote a single word to Vermeer in his treatise on seventeenth-century Dutch painting.

Although Van Ruijven may have been Vermeer's most important patron, he was certainly not his only one. Vermeer's work was appreciated by other art lovers as well, particularly fellow townsmen, including the baker Hendrik van Buyten, who owned at least three paintings by the artist.^[28] Vermeer also enjoyed renown outside of Delft, particularly in The Hague. In the summer of 1663 the French art connoisseur Balthasar de Monconys (1611–65), residing in The Hague, visited Vermeer's studio.^[29] In 1669 the wealthy Pieter Teding van Berkhout (1643–1713) traveled two times from The

Hague to visit Vermeer, who showed him several pictures, “the most extraordinary and most curious of which consists in the perspective.”^[30] The summons that Vermeer received to determine the authenticity of a group of Italian paintings in the spring of 1672 also stemmed from The Hague. The organizer of the evaluation probably asked Vermeer to come to The Hague through the mediation of Pieter van Ruijven, who, together with Vermeer, deemed the paintings inauthentic.^[31] Van Ruijven resided in The Hague prior to his death in 1674, and he may have already moved there in 1672.

Vermeer, who fathered eleven children, made his living both as an artist and an art dealer. Never wealthy, he faced true poverty after 1672, when the Dutch Republic became embroiled in war with France and England, with disastrous consequences for the art trade. When, in April 1676, two months after Vermeer’s death, Catharina Bolnes petitioned the High Court for a transfer of debt, she blamed the war as the reason why her husband “had been able to earn very little or hardly anything at all, but also [because] the [works of] art that he had bought and with which he was trading had to be sold at great loss.”^[32] The court granted her request, and a notary went to her house on the Oude Langedijk to inventory the bankrupt estate on 29 February 1676.

The inventory would seem to validate Catharina Bolnes’s request. For example, no unfinished paintings are listed, suggesting that Vermeer was not working on anything in the period prior to his death. Whether the fifty-eight paintings spread throughout the house, however, are indicative of a moribund art business remains to be seen. This number was not exceptionally high, and a number of the works may have belonged to the family’s private collection. Among these were presumably twelve family portraits and five paintings mentioned by an artist’s name, including ones by Carel Fabritius and Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627–78).^[33] A few of the descriptions sound like unsold paintings Vermeer had made, for instance “a painting depicting a woman wearing a necklace” (een schilderij vertonende een vrou met een ketting aen). Pictures by him may also have been among the *tronies*, such as the two “painted in Turkish manner” (geschildert op sijn Turx).^[34]

On 30 September 1676, the eminent Delft microbiologist Antoni van Leeuwenhoek (1632–1723) was appointed executor of the bankrupt estate on behalf of the creditors. Fortunately, Vermeer was spared this humiliation for he had died a few months earlier. Vermeer was buried on 15 December 1675 in a grave in the Oude Kerk that his mother-in-law had previously bought.

- Piet Bakker, 2017

Endnotes

1. The couple had no more children after Johannes. Their first child, daughter Geertruy (1620–70), was eleven years older than Johannes. In 1647 she married the framemaker Anthony Gerrits van der Wiel. Unless otherwise noted, all of the biographical information on Reynier Jansz Vos is taken from John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 55–84.
2. Although Vermeer can only be directly linked with art dealing through a document after his death, he most likely continued his father's business immediately after the latter's demise. See John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 344–45, doc. 367.
3. See John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 308, doc. 249; Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Vermeer and Bramer: A New Look at Old Documents," in *Leonaert Bramer, 1596–1674: A Painter of the Night*, ed. Frima Fox Hofrichter (Exh. cat. Milwaukee, Patrick and Beatrice Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University) (Milwaukee, 1992), 19–22.
4. John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 101. The fact is that no Dutch Reformed Protestant baptismal certificate has been preserved for any of his eleven children, and two of them were named Franciscus and Ignatius, typical Catholic names. John Michael Montias, "New Documents on Vermeer and His Family," *Oud-Holland* 91 (1977): 280; Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History*, 174; Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Vermeer of Delft: His Life and Artistry," in *Johannes Vermeer*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (Exh. cat. Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art; The Hague, Mauritshuis) (New Haven, 1995), 16.
5. On that day Vermeer buried a child, giving this address as his residence. See John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 314, doc. 279.
6. John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 311–12, doc. 268.
7. Vermeer was elected headman of the Guild of Saint Luke for a two year term in 1661, and once again in 1671.
8. John Michael Montias, "New Documents on Vermeer and His Family," *Oud Holland* 91 (1977): 280–81; John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 102–3. See also the biography of Gerard ter Borch the Younger in this catalogue.
9. John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 103.
10. John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 103–4; Paul Huys Janssen, "Leonaert Bramer: His Biography as Told by Documents," in *Leonaert Bramer, 1596–1674: Ingenious Painter and Draughtsman in Rome and Delft*, ed. Jane ten Brink Goldsmith et al. (Exh. cat. Delft, Museum Het Prinsenhof) (Zwolle, 1994), 23.
11. A painter was allowed to take on pupils only after having registered in the Guild of Saint Luke. John

- Michael Montias, “Kroniek van een Delftse familie,” in *Vermeer*, ed. Albert Blankert, John Michael Montias, and Gilles Aillaud (Paris, 1986), 34.
12. “Maar weer gelukkig rees’ er uyt zyn vier / Vermeer, die ’t meesterlyck hem na kost klaren.” John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 326, doc. 315.
 13. Bloemaert was married to Judith van Schonenburch (before 1546–99), a sister of Clementia, the wife of Geen Jansz Thins, an uncle of Maria Thins. John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 106–7, 110.
 14. John Michael Montias, “Kroniek van een Delftse familie,” in *Vermeer*, ed. Albert Blankert, John Michael Montias, and Gilles Aillaud (Paris, 1986), 35.
 15. *Diana and Her Companions*, ca. 1655–56 (Mauritshuis, The Hague); *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha*, 1655 (National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh). *Saint Praxedis*, 1655 (Private Collection), which is a copy of a picture by the Italian painter Felice Ficherelli (1605–60), was probably also painted by Vermeer, though opinion is divided regarding this attribution. See Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., “*St. Praxedis*, New Light on the Early Career of Vermeer,” *Artibus et historiae* 7, no. 14 (1986): 71–89; Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., ed. *Johannes Vermeer* (Exh. cat. Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art; The Hague, Mauritshuis) (New Haven, 1995), 86–89, no. 1. The 1657 stock inventory of the Amsterdam art dealer Johannes de Renialme (1593/94–1657) mentions a painting by Vermeer of “The Three Marys at Christ’s Tomb” (De drie Maria’s bij Christus graf), which has not come down to us. De Renialme lived and worked in Amsterdam, but was also active as an art dealer in Delft and registered in the local painters’ guild. For De Renialme’s stock inventory, see Abraham Bredius, *Kunstler-Inventare: Urkunden zur Geschichte der holländischen Kunst des XVIten, XVIIten und XVIIIten Jahrhunderts* (The Hague, 1915) 1: 233.
 16. *The Procuress*, 1656 (Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden). The picture appears to be derived from one of the same subject by the Utrecht Caravaggist Dirck van Baburen (1595–1624) (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), which was owned for some time by Maria Thins. Vermeer used it in the background of *The Concert*, ca. 1665–66 (stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston), and *Lady Seated at the Virginal*, ca. 1673–75 (National Gallery, London).
 17. The two city views are *The Little Street*, ca. 1658 (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam), and *View of Delft*, ca. 1660–61 (Mauritshuis, The Hague). The two allegories are the *Art of Painting*, ca. 1666–67 (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), and *Allegory of Faith*, ca. 1671–74 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).
 18. John Michael Montias, “Cost and Value in 17th-Century Dutch Art,” *Art History* 10 (1987): 93–105.
 19. On Van Ruijven, see John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 268–78; John Michael Montias, “Recent Archival Research on Vermeer,” in *Vermeer Studies*, Studies in the History of Art 55, ed. Ivan Gaskell and Michiel Jonker, 93–99 (New Haven, 1998). For counterarguments to the great importance Montias attached to Van Ruijven as Vermeer’s “Maecenas,” see Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., ed., *Johannes Vermeer* (Exh. cat. Washington,

- D.C., National Gallery of Art; The Hague, Mauritshuis) (New Haven, 1995), 22–23. For Montias's rebuttal see John Michael Montias, "Recent Archival Research on Vermeer," in *Vermeer Studies*, ed. Ivan Gaskell and Michiel Jonker, 93–99 (New Haven, 1998).
20. For this supposition, see John Michael Montias, "Recent Archival Research on Vermeer," in *Vermeer Studies*, ed. Ivan Gaskell and Michiel Jonker, 93–94 (New Haven, 1998).
 21. It is possible that he repaid his loan with one or more paintings when, for instance, he was unable to do so with money.
 22. In the inventory drawn up in 1683, "uyt (...) hoofde van" (from ... the head of) Jacob Dissius due to the death of his wife Magdalena van Ruijven, daughter of Pieter van Ruijven, are twenty unspecified works by Vermeer that were part of what she brought into their joint estate. John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 359, doc. 417. According to the marriage certificate, Magdalena's property was to be divided among her husband, Jacob, and his father, Abraham Dissius. John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 360, doc. 420. When this collection was auctioned in 1696, it contained twenty-one paintings by Vermeer, many of the descriptions of which refer to known works. See Albert Blankert, John Michael Montias, and Gilles Aillaud, eds., *Vermeer* (Paris, 1986), 215–16; John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 363–64, doc. 439.
 23. John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 250, 322–24, doc. 301.
 24. Van Ruijven's mother, Maria Graswinckel, was a full cousin of Pieter Spiering. Her parents were Cornelis Jansz Graswinckel and Sara Menninx. Sara's two sisters, Maria and Oncommera Menninx (d. 1653), each were married, one after the other, to the famous tapestry weaver of Flemish origin Francois Spiering (1551–1630). His second wife, Oncommera, was the mother of Pieter Spiering.
 25. See the biography of Gerrit Dou and the essay *Gerrit Dou and His Collectors in the Golden Age* in this catalogue.
 26. John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 261–62; John Michael Montias, "Recent Archival Research on Vermeer," in *Vermeer Studies*, ed. Ivan Gaskell and Michiel Jonker (New Haven, 1998), 95.
 27. The regularly voiced supposition that such an arrangement also existed between Frans van Mieris the Elder and professor Franciscus de la Boë Sylvius is based on an erroneous interpretation of Houbraken's text in which he states that Sylvius: "Dikwerf [verzocht], dat al wat hy maakte voor hem mogt wezen, of hy keur hebben om het zelve te naasten tot zoodanig een prys als ymant anders daar voor wilde geven." Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1980), 3: 3; Quentin Buvelot, ed., *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681* (Exh. cat. Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art; The Hague, Mauritshuis) (Zwolle, 2005), 16–17, interprets this quote to mean that Sylvius paid Van Mieris a fixed fee for the right of first refusal, as we know was the case of the Swedish diplomat Pieter Spiering with respect to

Gerrit Dou. Houbraken, however, speaks of “verzocht,” or request, and his words are difficult to interpret as anything other than that Van Mieris was entirely at liberty to accept or reject such a request. See for a more in-depth interpretation also the essay *Frans van Mieris the Elder and His Four Leiden Patrons* in this catalogue.

28. For Hendrik van Buyten, see John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 257–61.
29. De Monconys visited Delft twice in short succession. He went to Vermeer’s workshop only the second time, in the company of a few fellow travelers from The Hague. His astonishment that the baker Hendrik van Buyten had paid 600 guilders for a painting he deemed worth less than a tenth of that amount could indicate that he had only become aware of Vermeer’s existence through his hosts. John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 180–81.
30. “dont la plus extraordinaire et la plus curieuse consiste dans la perspective.” For Teding van Berkhout’s visit, see Ben Broos, “Un célèbre Peijntre nommé Verme[e]r,” in *Johannes Vermeer*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (Exh. cat. Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art; The Hague, Mauritshuis) (New Haven, 1995), 49–50; John Michael Montias, “Recent Archival Research on Vermeer,” in *Vermeer Studies*, ed. Ivan Gaskell and Michiel Jonker (New Haven, 1998), 99–100.
31. For the affair concerning the sale of Italian paintings by the Amsterdam art dealer Gerrit van Uylenburgh (1625/26–79), see Friso Lammertse and Jaap van der Veen, *Uylenburgh & Son: Art and Commerce from Rembrandt to De Lairese* (Exh. cat. London, Dulwich Picture Gallery; Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis) (Zwolle, 2006), 79–102, esp. 87n168. For Vermeer’s role, see John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 207–8.
32. Abraham Bredius, “Nieuwe bijdragen over Johannes Vermeer,” *Oud Holland* 28 (1910): 62; A.J.J.M. van Peer, “Drie collecties schilderijen van Jan Vermeer,” *Oud Holland* 92 (1957): 96. John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 344–45, doc. 367.
33. In connection with an outstanding debt, two weeks earlier Catharina Bolnes had sent twenty-six paintings as collateral to the Haarlem painter and art dealer Jan Coelenbier (ca. 1610–80). According to Montias, who maintains that Vermeer dealt in art on a small scale, this lot encompassed Vermeer’s entire stock. See John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 219, 338, doc. 362. We know that the fifty-eight paintings did not constitute the entire holdings of Catharina Bolnes and her mother; a few paintings seem to have been kept separate from the estate, though this is only certain for the *Art of Painting*, ca. 1666–68 (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), which became part of a lawsuit. Catharina Bolnes had transferred the painting to her mother on 24 February 1676, but the receiver deemed the transfer wrongful and demanded that the painting be returned, which it was on 23 March 1677.
34. For a full transcription of Vermeer’s estate, see John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 339–44, doc. 364.

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