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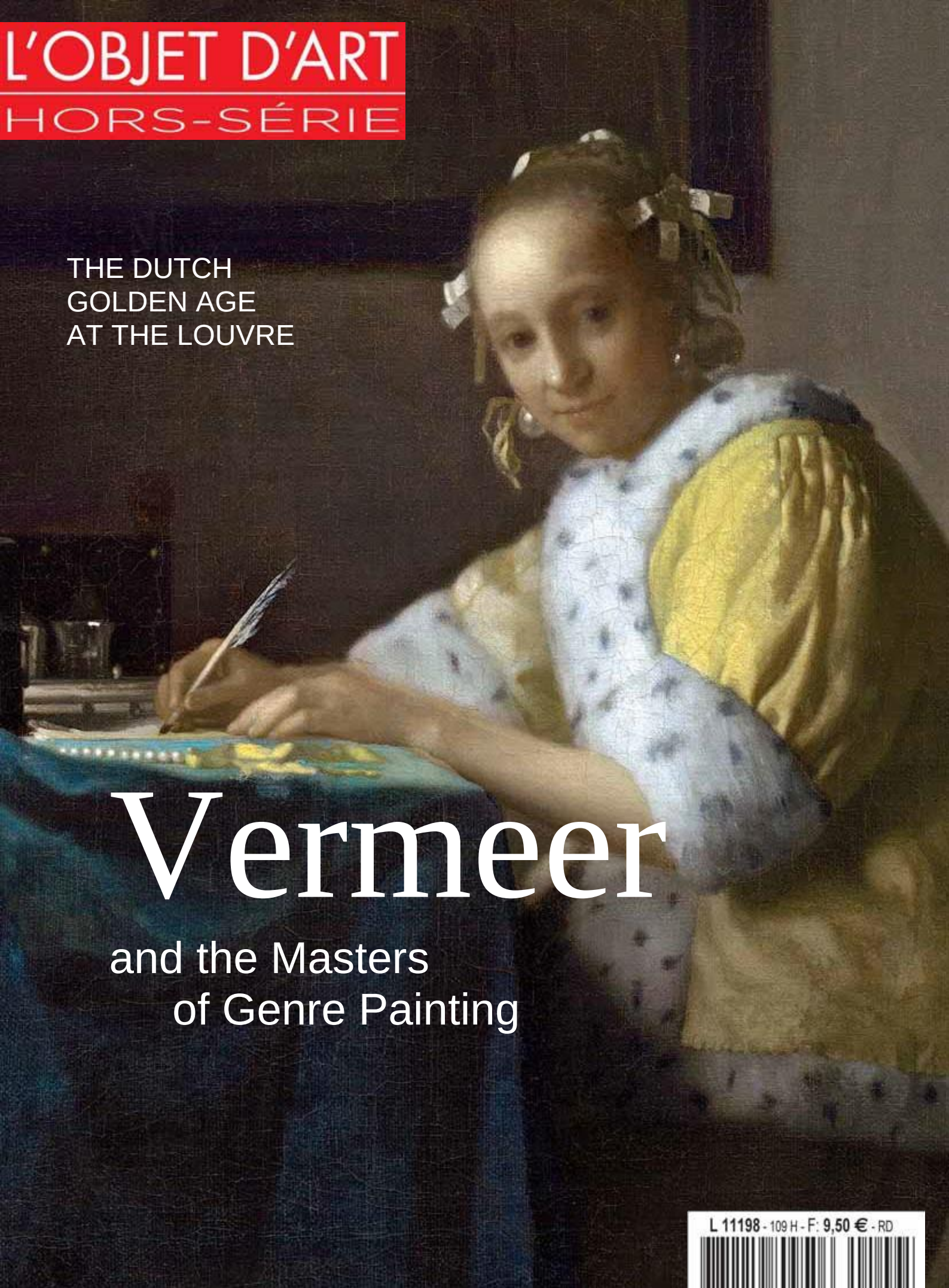

THE DUTCH
GOLDEN AGE
AT THE LOUVRE

Vermeer

and the Masters of Genre Painting

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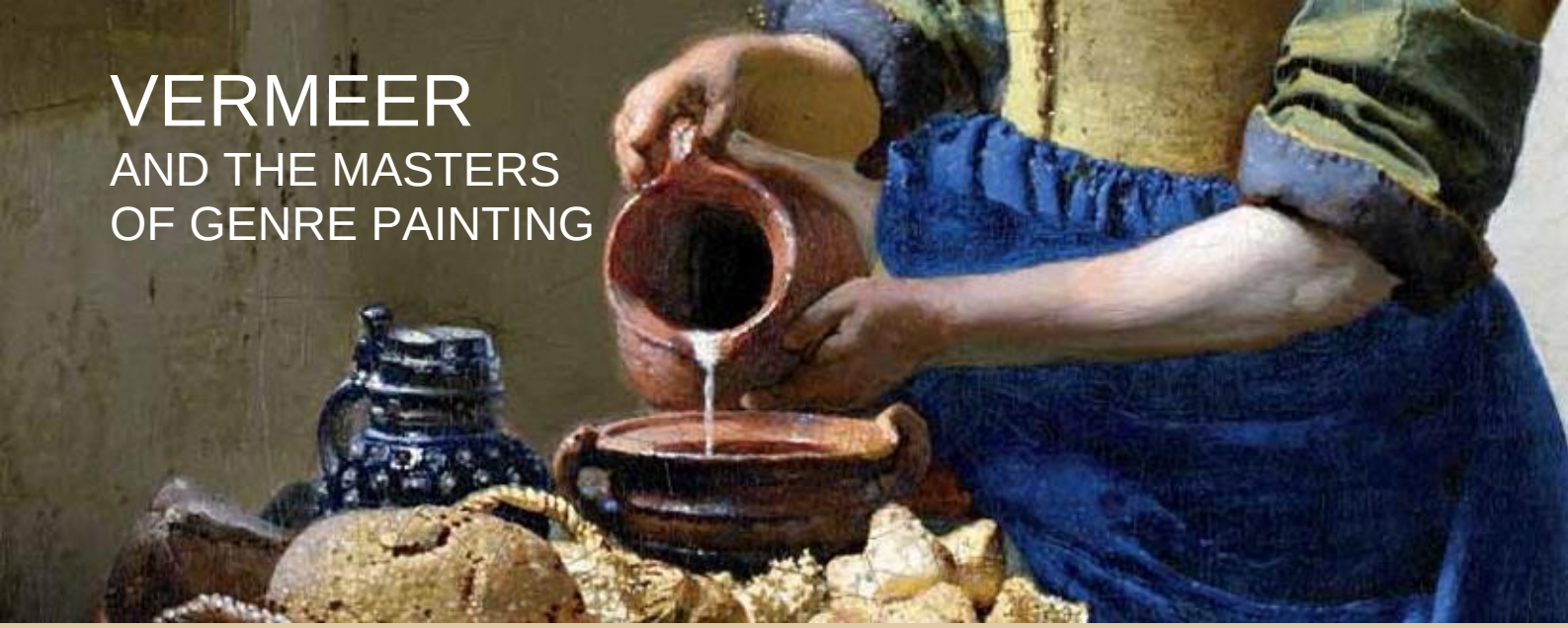

VERMEER
AND THE MASTERS OF GENRE PAINTING

February 22 to May 22, 2017,
in the Hall Napoléon of the Louvre

This exhibition has been organized by the Musée du Louvre, Paris, the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, and the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. It enjoys the support of primary sponsor Kinoshita Group as well as the support of ING Bank France and Deloitte. It will be on view at the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin from June 17 to September 17, 2017 and at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. from October 22, 2017 to January 21, 2018.

CURATORIAL STAFF
Blaise Ducos, Curator, Department of Paintings, Musée du Louvre. Adriaan E. Waiboer, Curator, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.
Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., Curator, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

HOURS
9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. except Tuesday. Night opening until 9:45 p.m. on Wednesdays and Fridays.

ADMISSION
Single museum admission: €15.
To purchase tickets: at the auditorium desk/by phone: 01 40 20 55 00/online at: www.fnac.com

INFORMATION
01 40 20 55 55, Monday to Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., or at www.louvre.fr

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Exhibition catalog, co-published by the Musée du Louvre/Somogy, 448 pages, 300 illustrations, €39

DOCUMENTARY
Vermeer's Revenge, directed by Jean-Pierre and Guillaume Cottet. Jointly produced by: ARTE France, Martange Production, Soho Moon Pictures, Musée du Louvre.

EXHIBITION EVENTS
Lectures in the Louvre Auditorium
- February 23 at 12:30 p.m. and 6:30 p.m., presentation of the exhibition by Blaise Ducos.
- March 2, 9, 16, and 30 (Thursdays) at 6:30 p.m., Understanding Vermeer, "The Sphinx of Delft," a series of four lectures:
From "Drolleries" to Interior Scenes: The Birth and Beginnings of Dutch Genre Painting by Sabine van Sprang (March 2).
"The Fabric of Society." Fashion in the Republic (1650-1680), by Bianca du Mortier (March 9).
Johannes Vermeer's Milkmaid, by Blaise Ducos, Musée du Louvre (March 16).
Vermeer Forgeries, by Jonathan Lopez (March 30).

FOR MORE INFORMATION
Daniel Arrasse, Vermeer's Ambition, Éditions Adam Biro, 2001.
Jan Blanc, Vermeer. The Creation of Glory, Éditions Citadelles & Mazenod, 2014.
Gary Schwartz, Vermeer in Detail, Éditions Hazan, 2017.
Gabriel Metsu and Dutch Genre Painting, Dossier de l'Art issue 181, January 2011.

THE DUTCH GOLDEN AGE AT THE LOUVRE
"Masterpieces of the Leiden Collection. The Age of Rembrandt," February 22 to May 22, 2017, Sully rooms. **Curated by** Blaise Ducos, Department of Painting, Musée du Louvre.
Publication Exhibition catalog, co-published by the Musée du Louvre/Somogy, 80 pages, 40 illustrations, €12.
Online catalog at www.theleidencollection.com.

"Drawing the Everyday. Holland in the Golden Age"
March 16, 2017 to June 12, 2017, Rotonde Sully **Curated by** Emmanuelle Brugerolles, Curator of Drawings, Beaux-Arts de Paris and Olivia Savatier Sjöholm, Curator, Department of Prints and Drawings, Musée du Louvre.
Publication Exhibition catalog, co-published by the Musée du Louvre/Liénart
208 pages, 250 illustrations, €29.
Lecture on March 24 at 12:30 p.m., presentation of the exhibition with the curators in the Louvre Auditorium.

SEE ALSO
"Valentin de Boulogne (1591-1632). Beyond Caravaggio" February 22 to May 22, 2017, Musée du Louvre, Hall Napoléon
Further Reading: *Valentin de Boulogne. Beyond Caravaggio,* Dossier de l'Art issue 246, February 2017.

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Paris, Musée du Louvre
Press Photo Service
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Press Photo Service
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VERMEER AND THE MASTERS
OF GENRE PAINTING

THE MODERNITY OF THE GOLDEN AGE AT THE LOUVRE

Vermeer, the tutelary figure of Dutch genre painting, is being honored at the Louvre, where viewers can see 12 of his paintings exhibited together. However, the reason why viewers should see this exhibition goes well beyond this tour de force: it lies in the assembling of works around these paintings by numerous Dutch painters from the second half of the 17th century who, like Vermeer, brought genre painting to its zenith, and in the reevaluation of Vermeer's contribution to the movement. This exposition, a collaborative effort between the Musée du Louvre, the National Gallery of Ireland, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., investigates within the artists' studios by using the works both as proof of and witnesses to the bonds and exchanges that connected them.

Interview with Blaise Ducos, Curator of the Department of Paintings of the Musée du Louvre, curator of the exhibition. Interview by Laurence Caillaud

This exhibition attempts to retrace the many relationships that formed among the Dutch genre painters of the 17th century, of which Vermeer was a member. What does elegant genre painting mean, exactly?

Genre painting was a very localized and brief historical phenomenon. Between around 1650 and 1680, at the economic apex of the Dutch Republic, a very sophisticated style of painting was developed called the elegant genre scene, the most well-known practitioners of which were Gerrit Dou, Caspar Netscher, Frans van Mieris, Gabriel Metsu, Gerard ter Borch... and Johannes Vermeer, who was not the dominant figure at the time.

In this very specific case, when we talk about genre painting, it should not be considered a representation of everyday life. Quite the contrary. The scenes are quite posed, thought-out, and theatricalized with luxurious props. For the elite of the young Dutch Republic, it was a means for asserting themselves in the face of a world dominated by monarchies. This exhibition is based on the intuition that the active artistic networks that existed on a local scale in Delft and that were studied in 2001[1] also existed on a national scale. In other words, in Deventer, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and in Delft, artists were working together and knew what their counterparts were painting.

Vermeer was primarily a genre scene painter, but the exhibition is not solely dedicated to him, hence the absence of famous works like *Girl with a Pearl Earring* and *View of Delft* (both at Mauritshuis in The Hague), which are not a part of this category.

What elements have been used in order to retrace the history of these connections between artists and to find out how their ideas circulated?

We do not have written records of the trips that the painters took from one city to another.

Johannes Vermeer, *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*,
1663-64. Oil on canvas, 51.2 x 45.1 cm
Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,
Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie

"Vermeer worked through subtraction.
He removed, he stripped away,
he painted the essentials, bareness, space"

In reality, the documents that we have are the paintings themselves, because certain compositions are clearly echoes and variations of each other. The exhibition therefore functions through groupings of two, three, or four works, and the result is rather spectacular. A vivid example opens the exhibition: Vermeer's *Woman Holding a Balance* (ca. 1664, Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) and Pieter de Hooch's *Interior with a Woman weighing Gold Coin* (ca. 1664, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, see p. 28). These two works were painted by artists that were not working in the same place. De Hooch is generally considered a follower of Vermeer who was active in Delft, but this painting dates from his period in Amsterdam. And yet, in both paintings, the format, the composition, everything is laid out in dialogue.

Given the similar chronology—many of these paintings are not dated—it would seem that Vermeer was the one who used De Hooch's composition. The exhibition demonstrates that many times Vermeer was not the great initiator, the one who started it all, but that rather he was an artist of synthesis and sublimation. He looked at his counterparts' projects and transformed them. This exhibition seeks to understand the nature of this transformation. Vermeer is not diminished in the process; the nature of his art becomes more precise. We are proposing a variety of relationships between the the various artists' works: plagiarism, citation, disguised borrowing, homage, a commercial flair being applied to a successful that works, etc.

The relationship between Vermeer and his colleagues is a part of this variety. There are so many echoes that we needed five years to prepare this exhibition to select the paintings and secure the loans, including those of the 12 Vermeers, which is a third of all of his work.

What is the best example of Vermeer's sublimation in the exhibition?

The best example is *The Milkmaid* from the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam (see p. 10), which has been loaned only for the Paris portion of the exhibition. The Louvre has the source painting, *The Cook* by Gerrit Dou. It depicts a young girl in a kitchen pouring water into a bowl. *The Milkmaid*, like other paintings in the exhibition, shows the debt that Vermeer owed to the Leiden Fijnschilders[2], a debt that operated on their method of rejection. I would imagine Vermeer being very irritated by Dou, who worked through saturation, disliked negative space, and endlessly worked on details… Dou accumulates and, in my opinion, has trouble prioritizing: the plumage of the bird hung next to the window is as important as the cook's hands. Vermeer loathed this lack or prioritization. He, on the other hand, worked through subtraction, and the exhibition makes it very apparent. He removed, he stripped away, he painted the essentials, bareness, space. What is the real subject? It is a milkmaid? Or, in another painting, a lacemaker? Yes, but it's also space, the qualification of a moral atmosphere through light. These elements are contrary to the art of Dou, whose paintings have a crude, bawdy, and subtly mocking tone. Vermeer preferred majesty, silence, contemplation, and time. These Vermeerian characteristics were not the result of an artist in isolation.

Gerrit Dou, *The Cook*,
1640s or the beginning of the 1650s
Oil on panel, 36 x 27.4 cm
Paris, Musée du Louvre.
Press Photo Service

Frans Van Mieris, *Young Woman Feeding a Parrot*, 1663. Oil on panel, 22.5 x 17.5 cm. Detail. New York, The Leiden Collection
© The Leiden Gallery, New York

He painted by eliminating certain things and keeping others: silence and detachment, which seem to be the quintessence of his art, could already be found in Gerard ter Borch's work. Ter Borch, who was active in Deventer, invented many compositions and ideas that were then adopted by Vermeer and others.

Vermeer was therefore part of a vast network of artists who were connected through a unique style of painting. What clues have you found in their paintings?
The paintings are grouped around a theme or a composition that was used by several painters. Certain compositions work like a fade-in fade-out: in one painting, we see what is almost the continuation of the action painted in another, by a different painter. We have put images from the same scene one after another, like one would do with a kinetoscope. Other times, you can see how motifs or characters are reused, like the page in French clothes. This little boy is strolling through paintings by Van Mieris, Steen, and others, even though they were painted in different cities. Other relationships are less obvious. In a painting from The Leiden Collection, *Young Woman Feeding a Parrot* by Van Mieris, a young seated woman is feeding a parrot. She has just interrupted her work, either needlework or lacemaking. On her knees, we see a green needle cushion that is nearly the same, down to the color, as the one in *The Lacemaker* by Vermeer (Paris, Musée du Louvre, see p. 22), with the same colored threads coming out of it. In fact, Van Mieris was painting a lacemaker, or perhaps a young upper-class woman who was practicing making lace. It is not just a woman with a parrot, it is also a variation referencing Vermeer.
It is also important to go beyond purely thematic aspects. For example, with the motif of the young seen from behind, she is a drinker in one painting, a musician in another, or a young woman welcoming a visitor in another. It's the same young woman, painted by different artists who were referencing each other, a figure in silhouette that evokes in the viewer the desire for her to turn around. By showing the networks at work among the painters, which has never been done before, the exhibition allows us to reconsider each of their places. Ter Borch appears as the genius without whom none of this would have occurred, Van Mieris reveals himself to be an extraordinary master, and Van der Neer and Ochtervelt, whose names are not well-known but whose works were in all of the collections, are rediscovered.

"The refinement of the collectors and their needs were symbiotic with the refinement of what was being made"

Nicolaes Maes, *A Young Woman Sewing*, 1655. Oil on panel, 55.6 x 46.1 cm. London, Mansion House, The Harold Samuel Collection Press Photo Service © Guildhall Art Gallery, City of London / Harold Samuel Collection / Bridgeman Images

This kind of painting was meant for the elite, for collectors for whom the double meanings that the painting had were not lost. Were these collections also places where the works could be seen?

The exhibition attempts to be a sort of recreation of a collectors conversation during the 17th century. These works quickly wound up in collections that were visited by aristocrats, foreigners, important bourgeois, artists, etc. They allowed for the works to be accessed, more so than the studios did. In 1663, a French traveler named Balthasar de Monconys went to Delft to visit Vermeer's studio. When he arrived, there was not a painting in sight. He was told to go see the baker, who was a rich man. He found a Vermeer there that was worth a fortune even though it only depicted a single figure, which the traveler found preposterous. And yet, there was a collection nearby that had 21 Vermeers, but the traveler was not told to go there. Genre painting was a bubble, a very valuable market that was subject to much attention and investment. The Dutch were creating scarcity. They wanted to inspire dreams. The exhibition does not take this aspect into account, but it suggests that the paintings were at the core of a sociability, of conversations between members of the elite. The refinement of the collectors and their needs were symbiotic with the refinement of what was being made. Evidently, such a thing can only ever be a window in the history of art. The economic conditions, social class, and talent pool to create these paintings had to exist to correspond to the expectations of the era, and then the bubble burst. It burst with the war against France and the invasion of Louis XIV's troops. However, for me, the genre scene was revived during the 1680s to 1690s by other painters by becoming an expression of French tastes produced in Holland.

How did Vermeer close this elegant genre scene window in Dutch painting?

The exhibition ends with a Vermeer that has been loaned only to the Louvre, the *Allegory of Faith* (New York, Metropolitan Museum), a highly abstract history painting placed within a genre scene. A great technician was needed to attempt this juxtaposition and to use the genre scene for something other than strictly elegant, sophisticated representation of a social class that wanted to assert itself. This painting is fascinating because it explores the boundaries of the style. This kind of painting was not just a wonderful pastime practiced by a few, it was intended to be modern, especially compared to the court art that was being made in other countries. Moreover, this word is used in the 17th century, particularly by Ter Borch: he wrote that he wanted to create a "modern" painting. By reinserting history painting into this style, Vermeer turned the page on this attempt at modernity and remained in a more traditional form.

1. In the "Vermeer and the Delft School" exhibition, which was held at the Metropolitan Museum in New York and at the National Gallery in London.
2. The Leiden *fijnschilder* style was characterized by the overlaying of very thin glazes that remove any traces of the painter's intervention on the materials (the "finish") and by the precision of its details and the meticulousness with which rearranged scenes of daily life were painted.

Johannes Vermeer, Allegory *of Faith,* ca. 1670-72. Oil on canvas,114.3 x 88.9 cm
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Press Photo Service © The Metropolitan Museum of Art RMN/ image of the MMA

Johannes Vermeer, ca. 1657-58
Oil on canvas, 45.5 x 41 cm Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum. Press Photo Service

THE MILKMAID

Nothing in the painting moves except the thin trickle of flowing milk. In theory, there is nothing more plainly prosaic, nothing more tightly sealed off from anecdote or reverie. And yet, we find ourselves before one of the most admired creations of Dutch art, or even of art as a whole. What could possibly be said to explain the fascination that this painting creates that has not already been beaten to death by a promotional release that is as trivial as it is silly? The subject of the painting is hardly captivating. It does not even have the merit of being novel. Rather similar domestic scenes have been found in northern Dutch paintings since the Renaissance. Perhaps Vermeer, as it so happens, had been reminded of a composition of his famous counterpart from Leiden, Gerrit Dou (1613-1675), the incredibly remarkable *Cook* (Paris, Musée du Louvre, see p. 6), painted during the 1640s. This painting from the Rijksmuseum is analogous in several ways (the positioning of the figure, the general composition, even the placement of the window) to the painting from the Louvre. However, these two works may be distinguished by two essential elements. The painting by Dou is as crowded as Vermeer's painting is bare (x-rays revealed that Vermeer had the fine idea of eliminating a map that originally decorated the wall in the background, leaving only a nail and several holes). Furthermore, while the pretty young woman is looking at the viewer in a somewhat alluring way in Dou's painting, the woman painted by Vermeer is less attractive and ignores the viewer. The joining of these two elements surely contributes to the perfect visual success that *The Milkmaid* has.

After making three or four genre paintings, hardly more, the Delft painter manages to find the unique niche that will distinguish him from the many (excellent) painters of everyday scenes in the Netherlands. The woman, absorbed in a simple task that Vermeer imbues with almost sacred solemnity, seems as though she has retreated inside herself, unaffected by time. At the same time, the painter manipulates the perspective and the light, using the considerable resources of his artistry to suggest the immediate and tangible presence of this woman, as well as the carefully selected objects and food that surround her. It is precisely in this extreme tension between the semi-photorealistic recreation of a transitory reality and an atemporality that is typical of the artist, between the banality of the scene and the quasi-heroic dignity of the figure (some evoke her moral authority), that Vermeer's genius resides. It is likely that the reading of the scene by his contemporaries would have been different from ours. The foot warmer on the floor that is next to the ceramic tiles decorated with little Cupids lends itself to several guesses: is the virtuous, modest milkmaid dreaming of romance, unless she is turning away from it precisely in order to accomplish her role of preparing food? These debates, which delight iconologist who propose that Dutch genre paintings essentially never entirely coincide with their explicit subjects, are not devoid of interest. Far from it. They are, however, far less weighty faced with the place that his veritable icon, which transcends the social and historical circumstances that allowed for this painting to be made, takes in our imagination.

Alexis Merle du Bourg

THE GOLDEN AGE IN THE NETHERLANDS

1576 The seven Calvinist provinces in the north of the Netherlands unify under the Union of Utrecht and proclaim the creation of the Dutch Republic against Spain.

1581 The Dutch Republic officially renounces King Philip II of Spain.

1621 War between the Dutch Republic and Spain. Dutch settlers found New Amsterdam, later New York. Creation of the Dutch East West Company, which contributes to the expansion of the Dutch colonial empire along with the Dutch East India Company, founded in 1602.

1613 Birth of Gerrit Dou in Leiden.

1617 Birth of Ter Borch in Zwolle.

1626 Birth of Jan Steen in Leiden.

1629 Birth of Gabriel Metsu in Leiden and Pieter de Hooch in Rotterdam.

1632 Birth of Vermeer, who is baptized on October 31.

1635 Birth of van Mieris in Leiden.

1637 Publication of the *Discourse on the Method* by Descartes, who has been living in the Netherlands since 1629.

1642 *The Night Watch* by Rembrandt.

1648 The signing of the Peace of Münster ending the Eighty Years' War against Spain and proclaiming the independence of the Dutch Republic.

1652-1654 First Anglo-Dutch War.

1653 Vermeer marries Catharina Bolnes on April 20. Becomes a member of the Guild of Saint Luke the same year.

1656 Vermeer paints *The Procuress* and *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary.*

1665-1667 The Second Anglo-Dutch War, which ended with the Treaty of Breda.

1667 Death of Gabriel Metsu.

1668 Vermeer paints *The Astronomer.*

1669 Vermeer paints *The Geographer.* Death of Rembrandt in Amsterdam.

1672 Louis XIV declares war against the Dutch Republic. William of Orange raises a coalition the next year with England, Spain, and Denmark.

1675 Death of Vermeer in Delft. He is buried December 16. Death of Gerrit Dou in Leiden.

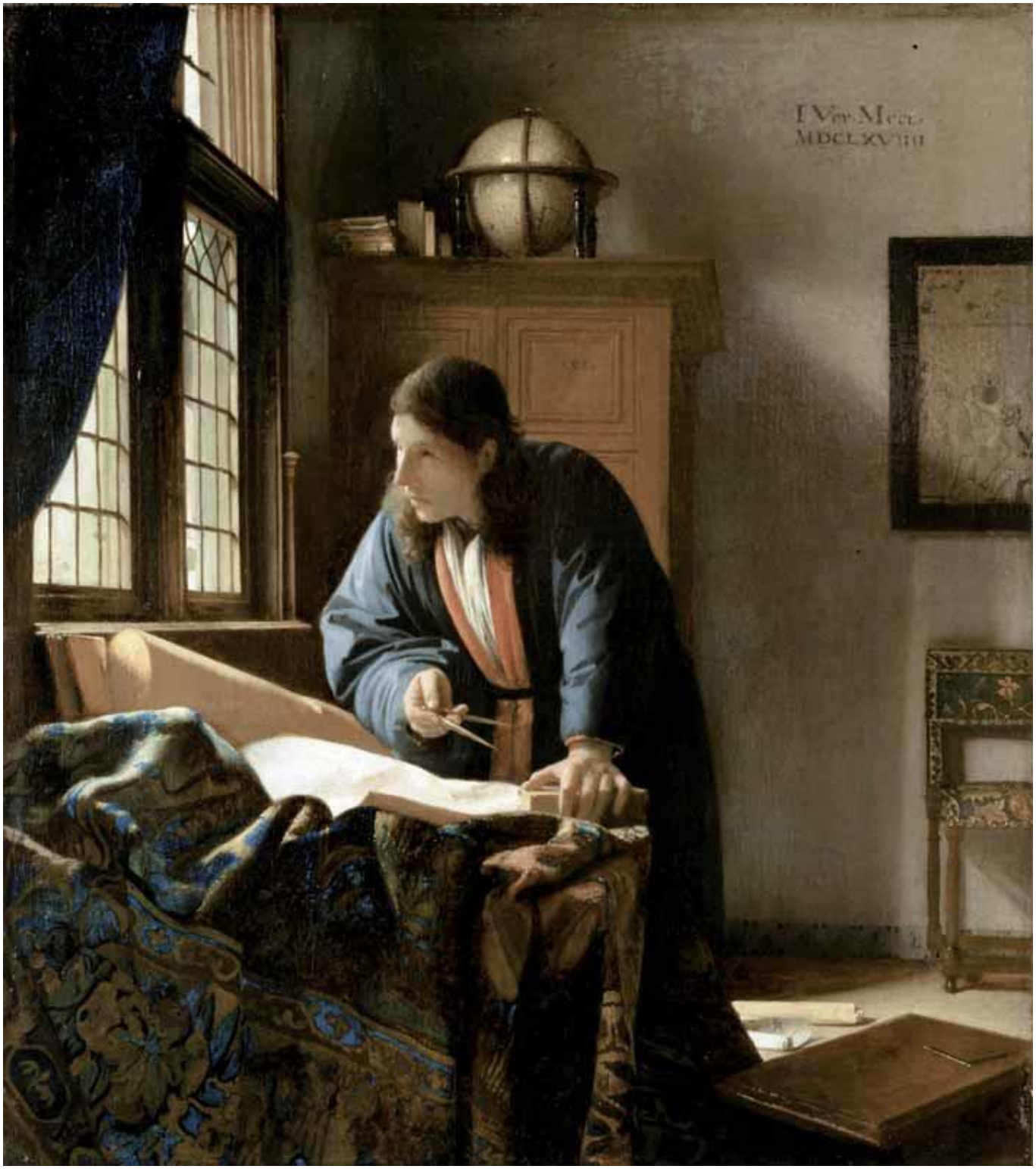
1678 The signature of the Treaties of Nijmegen, which end the war with France.

1679 Death of Jan Steen in Leiden.

1681 Death of Frans van Mieris in Leiden and Gerard ter Borch in Deventer.

1684 Death of Pieter de Hooch in Haarlem.

1689 William of Orange, stadtholder of the Dutch Republic, and Mary proclaimed King and Queen of England.



Johannes Vermeer, *The Geographer*, 1669
Oil on canvas, 51.6 x 45.4 cm. Frankfurt,
Städelsches Kunstinstitut. Press Photo Service

LEFT PAGE
Gerard ter Borch, *Gentleman Pressing a Lady to Drink*, ca. 1658-59. Oil on canvas,
41.3 x 32.1 cm. London, Royal Collection Trust

VERMEER, OR THE TWO SPHINXES OF DELFT

What accounts for the success that makes Vermeer one of the most famous and recognizable artists today? How was this painter, well-known during his time, forgotten only then to be rediscovered? How was his art, both unique and characteristic of his time, formed? To answer these questions, it is not only necessary to examine the elements of Vermeer's career, but also his paintings, which he painted as if they were riddles.

By Jan Blanc, Professor of Art History of the Modern Period, Université de Genève

Johannes Vermeer was born twice. His first birth was at the beginning of winter in 1632, several days before his baptism in the Delft Nieuwe Kerk on October 31, to Reynier Jansz Vos and Digna Baltens. But Vermeer was also born a second time, in 1859, when the French art critic Étienne-Joseph-Théophile Thoré, known as Thoré-Bürger, expressed his admiration for the Dutch painter in the catalogue that he dedicated to him at the Galerie d'Arenberg in Brussels: "Here is a great artist, an incomparable original, an unknown genius, even more unknown than Nicolaes Maes and Philips Koninck, and who, perhaps, has more genius than they do and who, like them, may be linked back to Rembrandt. He is the Jan van der Meer of Delft."

Johannes Vermeer, *The Art of Painting*, ca. 1666-68. Oil on canvas, 120 x 100 cm. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum © Bridgeman Images

REDISCOVERY AND REINVENTION

Thoré-Bürger is exaggerating. Vermeer was not entirely unknown when he wrote these lines. After his death in December 1675, the Dutch painter, who was well-known during his lifetime, disappeared from the art history landscape. His paintings, which were held primarily in small, private collections in Delft and Amsterdam, were missing from bourgeois and royal collections as well as the large sales catalogues from which the collections of stories of the lives of Dutch painters were written in the 18th century.

It is therefore hardly a coincidence that Vermeer's name reappeared in the 1780s when *The Astronomer* and *The Geographer* popped up on the Parisian art market. The art dealer Jean-Baptiste Pierre Lebrun then had reason to talk about this "Van der Meer that historians haven't talked about." Vermeer became a painter that people talked about again. In 1794, Goethe admired *The Procuress* at the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister in Dresden.

Johannes Vermeer, *The Procuress*, 1656. Oil on canvas, 143 x 130 cm
Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen

Johannes Vermeer, *The Astronomer*, 1668
Oil on canvas, 51.5 x 45.5 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre
Press Photo Service © RMN (musée du Louvre) – F. Raux

In 1816, art historians Roeland van Eynden and Adriaan van der Willigen emphasized that, "the works of the man who is called Vermeer of Delft deserve a place in the most prestigious collections." And in 1834, John Smith observed that, "authors seem to be completely unaware of this excellent artist's work," and that "this master is so unknown, due to the rarity of his work, that the fact that he was able to achieve the excellence that he displays in a great number of them defies explanation."
So while Thoré-Bürger did not "rediscover" Vermeer, he did however reinvent him. He was the first to remove him from the circles that were demeaning the "minor masters" of the Netherlands and turn him into a political symbol. Thoré-Bürger, who was a supporter of the radical groups of Saint-Simon and Pierre Leroux made Vermeer, like Rembrandt, synonymous with the "Dutch genius" of the "Golden Age," which was characterized by its religious tolerance and adherence to the republican political system, which he contrasts with the monarchical authoritarianism of Catholicism which, in his eyes, symbolized the career of Peter Paul Rubens. In the eyes of the critics, Vermeer was a Modern caught up in the world of the Ancients, a realist born too soon, the leader of an avant-garde that was waiting to happen.
This teleological, almost messianic re-reading of Vermeer's life and work was made all the more easy because, as Thoré-Bürger noticed, art historians did not know much about him. This ignorance was an opportunity: it allowed him to project all of his dreams and fantasies on the works of the artist that he called the "sphinx" of Delft.

A RARE AND SOUGHT-AFTER PAINTER

This is no longer the case today, thanks for the work of economist John Michael Montias, who immersed himself in the municipal archives of the main Dutch cities for decades. We know than Johannes Vermeer was born in 1632 to a Calvinist family that was close to the artist community. His father, who had been a member of the Guild of Saint Luke in Delft as an art dealer since 1631, kept two inns, the first named the Flying Fox (*De Vliegende Vos*), and the second named *Mechelen*. These inns were undoubtedly frequented by painters. In 1640, Balthasar van der Ast, Pieter van Groenewegen, and Pieter van Steenwyck, in the company of Reunier Jansz Vermeer, made a testament on behalf of their colleague Jan Baptist van Fornenburgh, who wanted to claim the wages of his son, who had been killed. And on July 10, 1647, Geertruyt, Vermeer's only sister, married master framer Anthony van der Wiel.

Vermeer was therefore naturally oriented towards a career as a painter, which he became in 1653 after marrying Catharina Bolnes and, undoubtedly in order to do so, converting to Catholicism. Vermeer's first known work, mentioned in an old inventory, was a mythological painting likely inspired by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. This work has been lost, but it was typical of an early career primarily dedicated to history painting.

Saint Praxedis, which Vermeer copied in 1655 from a work by the Italian painter Felice Ficherelli, and even *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*, painted the following year, are the only two religious paintings that have been saved that were painted by Vermeer, who over the years steered toward scenes of daily life, of which *The Procuress* is the first known example.

Two key moments defined Vermeer's career. The first was meeting Pieter Claesz van Ruijven at the end of the 1650s. This rich citizen of Delft became his protector and patron. He purchased or commissioned a large number of the paintings that we are familiar with today. This privileged relationship offered Vermeer the possibility of taking the time to conceive of and make his paintings, methodically building up their spatial composition, their perspective, and taking particular care when it came to making them, which often meant repainting them numerous times, which is revealed through radiographic analyses of his paintings.

Erasmus Quellinus II, *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*. Oil on canvas, 172 x 243 cm. Valenciennes, Musée des Beaux-Arts © RMN – R.-G. Ojéda

ABOVE
Johannes Vermeer, *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*, 1656. Oil on canvas, 158.5 x 141.5 cm. Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland © Bridgeman Images

Johannes Vermeer, after Felice Ficherelli, *Saint Praxedis*, 1655
Oil on canvas, 101.6 x 82 cm. Tokyo, National Museum of Western Art (on loan) © Christie's Images / Bridgeman Images

Dedicating at least six months of each of them, Vermeer managed to sell his work for very high prices, compared to the prices of paintings by Gerrit Dou and Frans van Mieris the Elder, who were the most expensive painters of the Dutch Republic.
Several years later, another event defined Vermeer's career: moving into the large home of his incredibly wealthy mother-in-law, Maria Thins, along with his wife and three children. This move not only allowed the painter to start his undeniable social rise, it also allowed him to save a substantial amount of money. At this time, he experienced the most prosperous period of his career, earning between 850 and 1,500 florins a year, the equivalent of the cost of a patrician house in Amsterdam. These successes made Vermeer one of the most popular painters in Delft.

Passing travelers flocked to the studio of the artist whom Pieter Teding van Berckhout, a citizen of The Hague, called the "famous painter named Vermeer." However, they did not allow him to escape the financial problems that many of his colleagues experienced during the devastating Franco-Dutch War (1672-1678). When Vermeer was buried in the cemetery of the Oude Kerk on December 16, 1675, when he was only 43 years old, he left a widow, 11 children, and a considerable debt that his wife only managed to pay off after resigning to sell the last of her husband's paintings, including The Art of Painting, his artistic manifesto.

HOW DID HE LEARN?

Vermeer's life and work are no longer unknown to us today, even if several areas gray areas still remain. The first is that we still know nothing of his period as a student. Vermeer was probably an apprentice between the end of the 1640s and the beginning of the 1650s, since he registered for membership in the Guild of Saint Luke on December 29, 1653 when he was 21 years old. At that time, he paid a membership fee of six florins and not three florins, which was the discount given to artists whose fathers were already a member of the guild—which was the case for Vermeer—and who had apprenticed for at least two years in the studio of a master of the guild. Vermeer therefore completed as least part of his apprenticeship outside of his birth city. But where?

Johannes Vermeer, *Diana and Her Companions*, ca. 1653-54. Oil on canvas, 97.8 x 104.6 cm. The Hague, Mauritshuis © Bridgeman Images

It was thought for a long time that he had learned his craft in the studio of one or several artists in Utrecht, but the painters what would likely have hosted Vermeer during this period were making paintings that were completely different from the artist's first known works. We must therefore look elsewhere. The most attractive hypothesis, even though it is not currently corroborated by any primary documents, brings us to the studio of Gerard ter Borch. On April 22, 1653, Vermeer cosigned a document with him, which shows that they personally knew each other.

Moreover, their paintings have numerous iconographic and formal similarities. After 1648, Ter Borch was living in the Spanish Netherlands, which is where Vermeer's mother's family is from and where he possibly visited. It was perhaps during this visit that Vermeer discovered the work of Erasmus Quellinus II, one of the main painters in Antwerp and whose painting *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*, then at St. Michael's Abbey, is comparable to the painting on the same subject by Vermeer in 1656. Vermeer could have also used this visit in Flanders to visit the famous collection of Archduke Leopold Wilhelm in Brussels and study *The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard* by Domenico Fetti, which he used as his inspiration for the main figure in *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*. Another attractive lead that does not exclude the hypothesis of an apprenticeship in Flanders is that of an apprenticeship in the Amsterdam studio of Jacob van Loo. In any case, the similarities that may be seen between the *Diana* that Van Loo completed in 1648, at the beginning of Vermeer's suspected apprenticeship period, and Vermeer's own *Diana* prove that the Delft painter was familiar with Van Loo work.

CONVERSATIONS WITH THE VIEWER

The main gray areas are those that Vermeer's own works cast on the viewer's gaze. The Dutch painter enjoys nothing more than ambiguity, even more than ambivalence. His paintings are not messages or speeches. They do not communicate or tell us anything. Instead, they create a space of conversation and collaboration with the viewer that can be compared to the space created by a riddle, which was a very popular literary form during the 17th century.

What can be said, then, of *Lady Writing a Letter with her Maid* (see p. 39)? What meaning should be ascribed to the crumpled letter and the red wax seal on the floor? Do these motifs express anger? Haste? Drama? Hanging on the wall is *Moses Saved from the Water*, adapted from a work by painter Peter Lely. What does Vermeer want to tell us? Is the woman that he is depicting a model of virtue, like a daughter of Pharaoh? Or is she waiting for a happy event, compared to Divine Providence? Contrary to Gerard ter Borch's minimalist paintings, which create confusion by depriving us of signs that are likely to generate meaning, Vermeer's art provides too many. It produces a *mise en abyme* of the riddle that it is trying to show us: that an unambiguous interpretation is fundamentally impossible. In this regard, it may be considered that the main figure of the painting is not the mistress of the house, but her servant, who acts as our representative within the composition.

Johannes Vermeer, *The Music Lesson*, beginning of the 1660s
Oil on canvas, 74.1 x 64.6 cm. London, Royal Collection Trust

She, like us, is standing. Like us, she is looking in the direction of a fictitious frame of representation: the frame of a window for her and the frame of a painting for us. Like us, she is witnessing a scene that she does not seem to understand but in which she is actively participating. By signing his painting on the strip of paper or fabric that is draped over the table, Vermeer marks his own absence from the scene. It seems as though he is affirming his refusal to intervene in the relationship that has been established between the viewer and the scene being depicted. There are, therefore, two "sphinxes of Delft." The first, born in the 19th century, ended up finding his voice thanks to the archives and documents that were found throughout the 20th century that today allow for Vermeer's life to be one of the most well-known of 17th century Dutch painting. And yet another "sphinx" continues to live on: the one that Vermeer hid in his works who, made of chiaroscuro, shadows and light, of empty and full spaces, chooses not to tell us everything in order to make himself desired and loved, contributing to the extraordinary popularity of a painter whose fame survived his own death.

THE LACEMAKER

Ca. 1669-70. Oil on canvas mounted on panel, 24.5 x 21 cm
Paris, Musée du Louvre. Press Photo Service
© RMN (musée du Louvre) – G. Blot

There is nothing more ordinary or more banal, on the surface, than what *The Lacemaker* is showing us. This woman, hunched over her work and clutching her bobbins and pins, seems like a faithful portrait of a good and obedient worker. The small dimensions of the painting invite the viewer to get as close as possible to the canvas, like the lacemaker is close to her work. She is working with the help of a sloped table on top of a hinged wooden frame, next to which is placed a large blue needle cushion. The small bound vellum book that may be seen in the foreground, held shut with long ribbons, is undoubtedly her pattern book. The parchment pricking card is placed not far from there. Its salmon-colored band may be seen beneath the lacemaker's hands.

By looking at this painting, it would be possible to reduce it to the moral praise of the domestic qualities of the lives of women who are wholly devoted to being virtuous. However, this moralizing interpretation is incomplete and shortsighted. Vermeer does not stop there. Right next to the viewer, he placed white and red threads of tangled skeins that, as Georges Didi-Huberman observed, seem like peculiar flows of color on the surface of the painting, analogous to those that can be seen in the *action painting* of Jackson Pollock or the abstract expressionism of Sam Francis.
By creating a *mise en abyme* of the subject of his painting, Vermeer presents himself "at work" at the same time as the lacemaker working away in the painting.

The Lacemaker by Vermeer is not simply the object of one's gaze. She is also, and perhaps above all, the subject of an action that directly and simultaneously concerns the act of painting a painting and the act of making lace. The composition is organized around this young worker. It is she who, like a second Arachne, patiently assembles the threads of her project, like the painter who seeks to create a painting whose colors and touches are harmoniously blended. It is undoubtedly not a coincidence that, in Old Dutch, the word *binding* (literally: "link") originally designated the weave of a fabric, i.e. the interlacing of warp and weft that constitute it, before being used metaphorically by painters to designate a color that, repeated in various parts of a composition, facilitate the effect of chromatic unity and consistency of the whole.
We find similar ideas in the writings of the French art history theoretician Roger de Piles who, in 1677, spoke of "the harmony of participation" when "several colors participate in a single one, which is made up of part of each, and that dominates all of the others," adding that, "the opposition of colors must only be employed with great discretion by *linking* them with a third color that complements them both." Therefore, for Vermeer, the difficulties of art, the labors of the craft, and the length of time spent are in no way shameful and are never concealed. His *Lacemaker*, in this regard, may be considered the explicit manifesto of a painter who wanted to clearly affirm his love of art; not one that is seen as, thought of, or practiced like a liberal art, but like a mechanical art, i.e. a manual art or a profession. For Vermeer, art is a woman. **Jan Blanc**

A HISTORY OF DUTCH GENRE PAINTING

The genre scene experienced a short but intense hour of glory in a country that used it as a means of expressing itself in an era of exceptional prosperity. The studios of painters who were devoted to depicting or inventing these scenes of daily life could be found in every major city in the country. The paintings of some fed the paintings of others, thanks to numerous relationships and continuously renewed emulation. The art of Vermeer was enriched by the creations of his peers, from Ter Borch to Metsu and Dou, in order to achieve a singular level of refinement and balance.

By Olivier Zeder, Head Conservator,
Director of Conservation Studies,
Institut national du patrimoine

Johannes Vermeer, *Officer and Laughing Girl*, ca. 1657-58.
Oil on canvas, 48.2 x 44.4 cm
New York, Frick Collection

Frans van Mieris, *The Duet*, 1658
Oil on panel, 31.5 x 24.6 cm. Detail
Schwerin, Ludwigslust, Güstrow,
Staatliche Museen © BPK, Berlin,
dist. RMN / Image Staatliches Museum Schwerin

ARTISTS AND IDEAS IN MOVEMENT

This exceptional flourishing resulted partially from the dynamism of the emulative influence between the artists, who were living in cities that were relatively close to each other and within the geographically narrow scope of Holland: Amsterdam, Haarlem, Leiden, The Hague, Dordrecht, and Delft. Canals made traveling from one city to another easy. While Vermeer worked in Delft his entire life, many of his counterparts, like De Hooch and Steen, changed where they did business. Many of them belonged to the Guild of Saint Luke in their home cities and were therefore part of active professional networks. Their friendships certainly played an important role: Steen and Mieris were friends, and Ter Borch and Vermeer may have been friends as well. Moreover, the painters' studios and collectors' exhibition rooms were accessible to nobles, whether artists themselves or simply patrons. In 1663, French traveler Balthasar de Monconys visited Dou, Mieris, Vermeer, as well as several collections. The world of art patrons was small: Pieter van Ruijven, who owned several Vermeers, was related to Dou's patron Pieter Spierincx.

The paintings themselves were also circulating. The originals changed hands, but the production of replicas by the artist or his studio and the proliferation of copies increased their reach. Distribution through engraving however was minimal, even though there are two etchings by Hendrick Bary (1640-1707) made from paintings by Mieris. The guilds organized exhibitions, and though the general public was rarely invited, there was an exceptional case of 29 Dou paintings shown to the public in Leiden in 1665 by their owner, Jan de Bye. The investigation into the influences among artists, through clues such as stylistic elements and patterns in composition and subject matter, is captivating but leaves many hypotheses unanswered due to the lack of convincing elements about the precise chronology of when works were made and the movement of artists and works.

Due to their technical quality and their poeticness, the elegant scenes of women's domestic life produced between 1650 and 1670 by Dutch painters constitute one of the most exceptional moments in European art. Vermeer belongs to this prestigious group of artists, along with Gerard ter Borch, Gerrit Dou, Pieter de Hooch, Gabriel Metsu, Frans van Mieris, Nicolaes Maes, Caspar Netscher, Jan Steen, Jacob Ochtervelt, and Eglon van der Neer. They were all born around 1630, except for Dou and Ter Borch, who were older and provided decisive suggestions to the younger artists. Around 1650, many of them abandoned history painting for the genre scene, which they ascribed a certain nobleness by choosing an elegant and refined society as their model. A multitude of formal and narrative solutions were borne out of this limited theme that Vermeer seems to crown through an aesthetic appeal that still fascinates modern viewers.

LIGHT AND SPACE IN THE DELFT SCHOOL

The art world in Delft provided Vermeer with decisive direction, particularly his predilection for intimacy and the depiction of natural light in a complex space. A tradition of painting domestic subjects existed with Jacob van Velsen (around 1597-1656) and Jacob Vrel (active around 1654-62) that was renewed by the influence of Nicolaes Maes (1634-1693), a former pupil of Rembrandt who was active in the nearby city of Dordrecht. Maes favored ancillary scenes showing lacemakers and sleeping servants painted in the style of Rembrandt with warm tones, like in *The Idle Servant* (1655, London, National Gallery). Vermeer used it as inspiration for his *A Girl Asleep*, dated ca. 1657 (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art), with its sensuous use of chiaroscuro. Another of Rembrandt's students, Carel Fabritius (1622-1654), was in Delft in 1651. Before perishing in the Delft Thunderclap powder explosion in 1654, he created *plein air* genre scenes in brilliant colors with intense light where the space is given incredible depth. His rich and expressive pictorial subject matter and his skillfully executed workmanship that evoke rather than explicitly draw forms left a strong impression on Vermeer, who owned several of his paintings when he died. The wall in *The Milkmaid* is steeped in light, like the wall behind the back-lit *Goldfinch* painted in 1654 by Fabritius (The Hague, Mauritshuis). Fabritius's dense, warm colors may be seen in Vermeer's first genre scenes: *A Girl Asleep* and *The Procuress* from 1656 (Dresden, Gemäldegalerie, see p. 16).

ABOVE
Carel Fabritius, *The Goldfinch*, 1654
Oil on panel, 33.5 x 22.8 cm
The Hague, Mauritshuis © Bridgeman Images

OPPOSITE
Nicolaes Maes, *The Idle Servant*, 1655.
Oil on panel, 70 x 53.3 cm. London, National Gallery © The National Gallery, London, dist. RMN / National Gallery Photographic Department

After arriving in Delft in 1654, Pieter de Hooch (1629-1684), inspired by Fabritius's lesson, painted genre scene is luminous, complex interior spaces. It was moreover his example that made Vermeer decide to abandon history painting for genre painting. His *Officer and Laughing Girl* (ca. 1658, New York, Frick Collection, see pp. 24-25) and his *Girl with a Wineglass* (ca. 1659-60, Brunswick, Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum) are derived from *Woman Drinking with Soldiers* (Paris, Musée du Louvre) and *A Woman Drinking with Two Men* (London, National Gallery), painted around 1658 by De Hooch. There was much wide-spread interest in depicting architecture in the art world in Delft. Gerard Houckgeest and Emmanuel de Witte painted highly illusionistic scenes of church interiors with a significant mastery of perspective and colors modulated by natural light. This zeitgeist in Delft certainly had an effect on the art of De Hooch and Vermeer.

After De Hooch left Delft for Amsterdam in 1660, his exchanges with Vermeer continued, despite the distance. De Hooch made *Interior with a Woman weighing Gold Coin* (Berlin, Staatliche Museen) and Vermeer made *Woman Holding a Balance* (Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) at the same time, around 1664. The subject, which was rarely depicted in the 17th century, is the same, and the similarity of the compositions is striking.

De Hooch painted an everyday scene that was made attractive and peculiar by the color, brought to life by the light coming in through the window, that played on the harmony between the blue and red and the gold of the cordovan leather wall coverings, a fashionable and luxurious decoration that he depicts in other paintings. Vermeer places the young woman in a soft, modulated shadow, where is seems as though she is meditating just as much as she is weighing. The *Last Judgement* hanging behind her confirms the religious and moral significance of the scene. Vermeer discovered the scene invented by De Hooch and gave it a complex, underlying meaning. Or perhaps De Hooch interpreted the work of his colleague and took the opposite point of view by opposing the clarity of the sun with the half-light by leaving the woman's expression hidden.

ABOVE
Pieter de Hooch, *Interior with a Woman weighing Gold Coin*, ca. 1664
Oil on canvas, 61 x 53 cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie. Press Photo Service © BPK, Berlin, dist. RMN – J. P. Anders

OPPOSITE
Johannes Vermeer, *Woman Holding a Balance*, ca. 1664
Oil on canvas, 40.3 x 35.6 cm. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art Photo courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

RIGHT
Pieter de Hooch, *A Woman Drinking with Two Men*, ca. 1658. Oil on canvas, 73.7 x 64.6 cm. London, National Gallery © The National Gallery, London, dist. RMN / National Gallery Photographic Department

THE TEMPTATION OF ILLUSIONISM

Gerrit Dou (1613-1675), who was a pupil of Rembrandt, perfected a style in Leiden based on illusionistic representation and careful precision in the rendering of subjects and details. When he applied it to the rustic genre scene, he achieved considerable success that allowed him to sell his work at very high prices and to secure the patronage of collectors such as Sweden's envoy to The Hague, Pieter Spierincx, and Jan de Bye, who owned 29 of his paintings, including *The Dropsical Woman* (Paris, Musée du Louvre).

Gabriel Metsu, *A Baker Blowing his Horn*, ca. 1660-63
Oil on wood, 36.5 x 30.7 cm.
Private collection © D.R.

OPPOSITE
Johannes Vermeer, *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window*, ca. 1657
Oil on canvas, 83 x 64.5 cm. Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen © BPK, Berlin, dist. RMN – E. Estel / H.-P. Klut

RIGHT
Gerrit Dou, *The Dropsical Woman*, 1663.
Oil on panel, 86 x 67.8 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre © RMN (musée du Louvre) – A. Didierjean

He had many emulators, called the *fijnschilders*, including Frans van Mieris, who was the most talented and was known as the "prince of his pupils." His success was as great as Dou's: Grand Duke Cosimo III of Tuscany and Archduke Leopold Wilhelm of Austria were among those who commissioned his work. His brilliance and the elegance of his compositions attracted so much attention and created so much emulation among genre painters that he abandoned Dou's rustic scenes for those of an elegant and bourgeois milieu. Few painters escaped the fascination with this technical virtuosity that bordered on trompe-l'œil and that appealed greatly to the public but that required a considerable amount of time to execute. Metsu used it regularly while also appropriating from the start of his career a facture that was broad and flexible, smooth, and very different. His *Baker Blowing his Horn* (ca. 1660-63, private collection) maintains the spirit of Dou's rustic subjects, while his *Young Woman Composing Music* (ca. 1662-63, The Hague, Mauritshuis) depicts a wealthy and cultivated society worthy of Mieris. In both cases, the paintings are highly polished and meticulously done. Steen, who was a friend of Mieris, and Adriaen van Ostade, who were at the pinnacle of their long careers around 1660, perfected their technique. Vermeer did not escape this trend. Towards the end of the 1650s, he commits to imbuing his details and materials with a sense of realness. The delicate and clear profile of the girl in *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* dated around 1657 (Dresden, Gemäldegalerie), the beautiful curve of her back, and her carefully and delicately painted hair evoke the style of Mieris.

THE BIRTH OF THE MODERN GENRE SCENE

Starting around 1650, genre scenes were no longer filled with characters with stereotypical faces and whose interest resided only in their collective actions, as they were in the brawls and merrymaking in Adriaen van Ostade's paintings or the balls painted by Pieter Codde. A narration was developed around a reduced number of figures whose faces, feelings, and expressions became essential to the meaning of the work. This evolution towards a modern genre scene that brought psychology into the picture was the work of Gerard ter Borch (1617-1681), who was active in Deventer. After several gate house and tavern scenes, at the beginning of the 1650s, he started depicting scenes from the domestic lives of elegant, rich women: a woman at her dressing table, receiving or writing a letter, visits with family, a concert in a small group, etc.

Frans van Mieris, *Young Woman Stringing Pearls*, 1658
Oil on wood, 23 x 18.3 cm. Montpellier, Musée Fabre
© Musée Fabre de Montpellier Méditerranée Métropole – F. Jaulmes

OPPOSITE Gabriel Metsu, *Elegant Lady Writing at Her Desk*
ca. 1662-64.
New York, The Leiden Collection © The Leiden Gallery, New York

RIGHT Gerard ter Borch, *Two Women Playing Music, Served by a Page*, ca. 1657. Oil on panel, 47 x 44 cm.
Paris, Musée du Louvre © RMN (musée du Louvre) – A. Didierjean

As a portraitist, Ter Borch knew how to impart faithful, complex, and touching individuality and expression to his subjects, which he linked together with their looks, sometimes captured by the reflection in a well-placed mirror or guessed when they are seen from behind. Few hints shed light on the nature of the links and relationships, which sometimes remain unclear for the viewer because the painter is trying to capture naturalness (*The Gallant Conversation*, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, see p. 36). Caspar Netscher, his student, and Metsu, Mieris, De Hooch, and Ochtervelt adopted these principles, each following his own direction. Vermeer does the same in the 1660s, perhaps through Metsu and Mieris, even though he and Ter Borch most certainly knew each other, since they signed a notarized act together in 1653. Furthermore, they have the commonality of understanding and rendering the psychology and humanity of their subjects better than their colleagues. They seem all the more modern because of it.

In the 1650s, Ter Borch painted concerts like the *Two Women Playing Music, Served by a Page* (ca. 1657; Paris, Musée du Louvre), which left an impression on Mieris, particularly for his *Duet* from 1658 (Schwerin, Staatliche Museen). Netscher, Steen, and Metsu also interpreted Ter Borch's model with subtle variations. Around 1662-64, Vermeer further appropriated this tradition with *Lady at the Virginals with a Gentleman* (London, Royal Collection, see p. 21). Everything seems still in order to let the musical notes rise up into the space and the light; the man and the woman seem to internalize the moment, listening to what is being played. The influence of Ter Borch's motif of the young woman seen from behind is certainly present, but Vermeer renews the tradition brilliantly. Epistolary themes, which were initiated by Ter Borch, are inventively repeated by Metsu, who around 1664-66 painted two works that are conserved in Dublin depicting a man writing a letter and a woman reading a letter (see pp. 35 and 38).

Their compositions inspired Vermeer for his various versions on the subject, but conversely, their luminousness and the geometric effects of the door frames and picture frames hanging on the walls could have been suggested by the paintings he produced around 1660. There was much cross-pollination within this community of young artists working on the same themes. Mieris often imitated formal innovations. Thus, his *Young Woman Stringing Pearls* from 1658 (Montpellier, Musée Fabre) shows a beautiful young woman seated at a table with a necklace in her hands looking cryptically at the viewer. The paint has a porcelain-like quality and the many details are precisely painted. A servant passes by carrying candles. Around 1662-64, Metsu repeats the motif of the seated woman looking at the viewer, with more candor and dynamism, in *Elegant Lady Writing at Her Desk* (New York, The Leiden Collection).

Dou did not refrain from taking inspiration from his younger counterparts with *A Woman playing a Clavichord* (ca. 1665; London, Dulwich Picture Gallery, see p. 44) and even his *Woman at her Toilet* from 1667 (Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen) where the flirtatious figure is seen from behind but is looking at the viewer through her mirror. His paintings seem as though they are overflowing with details, but the chiaroscuro that fills them ensures harmony. Around the same time, Vermeer's *Lady Writing a Letter* (Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) is looking at the viewer tenderly, pen in hand, a string of pearls nearby, in the soft and quiet half-light what erases the accessories and furniture, focusing the attention on her and her pensive, serene, and peaceful face. Vermeer crowns the glorious period of the Dutch genre scene, which will have an effect on painters for two more centuries, from Jean-François de Troy, Chardin, Greuze, Fragonard, Boilly, and Ingres to Courbet.

THEMES AND MOTIFS OF DAILY LIFE

Dutch painting during the Golden Age oscillates imperceptibly between the readily glorified representation of domestic and social life and a normative, moralizing aim operating as subtext in the way that it approaches the everyday. The artists were thereby holding out a magic mirror to their contemporaries that often reflected either an exhortation to virtue or the denunciation of their turpitude.

By Alexis Merle du Bourg

Gabriel Metsu, *Woman Reading a Letter*,
1664-66. Oil on wood, 52.5 x 40.2 cm
Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland
Press Photo Service

THE FIGURE SEEN FROM BEHIND
A MOTIF OF QUESTIONING

The figure seen from behind, a protagonist as inconspicuous as it is characteristic of “intimist” scenes of daily life in the Netherlands (and usually represented as a woman), questions the very nature of the viewer’s gaze on the painting in a fascinating way.

THE MAN—or woman—seen from behind has haunted European pictorial culture since the Middle Ages. Between the 13th and 14th centuries, the figure seen from behind primarily conveyed the feeling of tragedy brought to its highest point of intensity.
As early as Greek Antiquity, playwrights (Euripides) and painters (Timanthes) sensed that in order to express moral pain to the highest possible degree, there was paradoxically nothing better than the efficiency of a character deprived of its main expressive resources. By turning her head away (or hiding her face), she thereby left it to the viewer to project his or her affect without any limits. The “exclusive” protagonist, brilliantly ignoring the viewer that she is turning her back to—literally and figuratively—with a face that is turned and shies away, immediately creates a sort of tension by frustrating the person looking at her face, an area that is compulsively scrutinized in painting, which has been proven by every test about where viewers’ gazes are fixated when looking attentively at a painting.

The figure from behind is undoubtedly able to send the most diverse and contradictory messages. Helpless, it can embody retreating into oneself or renunciation. Conversely, it sometimes corresponds to an “active” obstinate body, unconcerned by obstacles or barriers. Gerard Ter Borch, a superiorly gifted master of intimist painting who had somewhat of a predilection for subjects with turned backs will capitalize remarkably on this tension towards the middle of the century with his painting *The Gallant Conversation*. Pieter de Hooch does the same thing in his superb painting *A Woman Drinking with Two Men*, now in London (see p. 29), probably painted at the end of his Delft period before moving to Amsterdam. In both

OPPOSITE
Gerard ter Borch, *The Gallant Conversation* (“*The Paternal Admonition*”), ca. 1654
Oil on canvas, 71 x 73 cm.
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

RIGHT
Jacob Ochtervelt, *A Woman playing a Virginal, Another singing and a Man playing a Violin*, ca. 1675-80. Oil on canvas, 84.5 x 75 cm. London, National Gallery

cases, the “issue” in the painting, the young woman, is thus partially effaced. Ter Borch’s painting, of which there are two signed versions in Berlin and Amsterdam, was once famous under the name *Paternal Admonition* a (scolding or even an instruction), mostly thanks to Goethe, who evokes it in his novel *Elective Affinities.* The bourgeois and bluntly moralizing interpretation of the painting (of kind parents scolding their more or less contrite daughter) that was popular at the time of the illustrious German writer was completely torn to pieces in the last century. The general agreement today is that it is a scene from an (upscale) brothel showing the conflict between the madam, sipping her white wine, the customer, and the young prostitute, who are in the middle of negotiating...

The thoughtful Jacob Ochtervelt, who like de Hooch was from Rotterdam, readily uses the figure seen from behind in his depictions of graceful musicians like Ter Borch did before him. Unaware of the viewers’ gaze, perhaps even disdainful, they primarily constitute a sort of “display,” meek figures offered to prop up the viewers’ imagination.

THE LETTER, A FASHIONABLE THEME AND ORIGINAL CREATION

Gabriel Metsu,
Man Writing a Letter,
1664-66
Oil on panel,
52 x 40.5 cm. Dublin,
National Gallery of Ireland

RIGHT
Johannes Vermeer,
Lady Writing a Letter with her Maid, ca. 1670
Oil on canvas,
71.2 x 59.7 cm. Dublin,
National Gallery of Ireland

Press Photo Service
© Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland

Starting in the 1630s, the theme of exchanging letters in many forms (a letter written or received, one that calms or drives to despair), particularly the rejected love letter, undoubtedly constitutes one of the most original creations of Dutch Golden Age civilization.

THE pronounced fondness for the theme of the letter in Dutch civilization expressed a remarkably more thorough exploration of the intimacy of men and women during that time, scrutinized through its most secret recesses and beyond a conventional character that should never be underestimated.
Towards the middle of the 17th century, the subject, which proceeded from a secularization of the abundant iconography of saintly characters reading and writing, created a veritable infatuation among the urban elite. This trend reflected the crucial position, particularly influenced by French works, that was now accorded to correspondence in the new way codes of sociability were defined, especially the codes defining the relationship between the sexes. The specialists of intimist scenes were committed to imbuing their (almost) inevitably smitten letter writers with a wholly aristocratic stylishness. Working in Amsterdam from around 1654, Gabriel Metsu, originally from Leiden, employed the theme numerous times, sometimes in the form of a pair of paintings (in which it is the man who writes and the woman who reads according to a gendered distribution of active and passive roles from which artists hardly strayed), like Gerard ter Borch did before him. Painted at the end of the 1650s, two paintings that are today housed in the Musée Fabre in Montpellier (*Man Writing a Letter*, an interior night scene) and the Timken Museum in San Diego (*A Lady Receiving a Letter*, an outdoor daytime scene) precede the two admirable Dublin paintings, which date from the mid-1660s. With it, Metsu achieved fame that rivaled that of Vermeer, who also frequently used this theme starting at the end of the 1650s. Is Metsu deliberately competing with his Delft colleague, as much through technique and the repertoire of colors as through the masterful organization of a composition bathed in crystalline light and underlined by secret yet relentless architectonics? These two paintings, forming a pair that is one of the absolute pinnacles of Dutch intimist painting, are characteristic of Metsu's final period. Everything in them, from the protagonists' clothing to the richness of the furnishings, suggests an atmosphere of utter luxury. It may be noted that Metsu's *Woman Reading a Letter* (see p. 36) and Vermeer's *Lady Writing a Letter with her Maid*, also conserved in Dublin, both share the feature of using the rather common theme of a "painting within a painting," which, if applicable, provides a commentary on the main scene. This was already the case in *Woman Tearing a Letter*, painted in 1631 by Haarlemmer Dirk Hals (Mainz, Landesmuseum). In the case of Vermeer, the hypothetical meaning of the painting, which depicts *Moses Saved from the Water*, remains unclear. The same cannot be said for Metsu. The gray seascape being uncovered by the maid, seen from behind, establishes a link in the most obvious way between the perils of love and navigating treacherous seas. Is a shipwreck inevitable? After all, the Dutch were well-known for their sea legs...

PARROTS
LUXURY (AND SENSUALITY?)

Intimist scenes from the Dutch Golden Age often include parrots. These exotic protagonists, of all types and colors, may be limited to referencing a luxurious way of life. Nevertheless, they sometimes suggest, in a more or less insidious way, a sensual atmosphere where attraction turns into lust.

A first-rate colonial power supported by a remarkable navy, the Seven Provinces or Dutch Republic provided the rarest goods brought back from the farthest horizons to those who had the means to buy them. Parakeets and parrots had been external symbols of wealth since Antiquity. Once coming from the Orient, these birds now were captured in the New World and thus became highly valued companions for the wives and daughters of oligarchs who often earned their fortunes through international business.

In this regard, they are above all "social markers." For painters of the everyday who were engaged in the celebration of the prosperity of the Dutch ruling classes during the second half of the 17th century, such as Metsu, Mieris, De Hooch, and Netscher, these birds, as well as costly fabrics, musical instruments, or expensive furniture, indicated that the depicted subjects—inevitably idle—were living in an atmosphere of elegance and luxury. However, the abundant (and naturally contradictory) issues with interpreting animal symbolism take these colorful birds with unsettling vocal mimicry skills down more dubious paths. We know that in religious painting, artists during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and later during the Baroque, naturally associated the parrot with the figure of Mary, the talking bird referring to the concept of the Incarnation and the Word becoming flesh. In secular art, however, the animal sometimes seems to suffer from an awful reputation that was inherited as early as the Middle Ages from Aristotle and Pliny the Elder (rather badly interpreted, as the case may be). They were ascribed a penchant for wine that led them to exuberant merriment that could lead to lasciviousness. In the late painting by Pieter de Hooch, the well-known motif of the uncaged bird was likely referring to a saucy innuendo for the young girl losing her virginity. The same

OPPOSITE
Caspar Netscher, *A Woman Feeding a Parrot, with a Page*, 1666
Oil on wood, 45.7 x 36.2 cm. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art Photo courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

RIGHT
Pieter de Hooch, *Couple with Parrot*, ca. 1675-78. Oil on canvas, 73 x 62 cm. Wallraf-Richartz-Museum and Fondation Corboud. Photo © Rheinisches Bildarchiv Köln, rba_c000088

certainly goes for the mischievous girl in Netscher's painting, which was recently acquired by the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. Still, nothing is truly simple with this animal, which is also known for its ability to learn (and sometimes for its cleanliness).

Above all, its ability to mimic the human voice made the parrot a companion of choice for those who were tortured by the absence of their beloved. What about the young melancholic woman in Mieris's painting (see p. 7)?

THE DOCTOR'S VISIT
BETWEEN TRAGEDY AND COMEDY OF MANNERS

"*And that is why your daughter is mute.*"
Molière, *The Doctor In Spite of Himself*, act II, scene 4

Powerless (when not more fearsome than the illness itself), the doctor is the actor in numerous 17th century Dutch paintings. The atmosphere, in tune with a morality that was all the rage, is often dramatic, but the majority of these practitioners exist in a lighter ambiance where the comedy of manners wards off tragedy of reality.

DUTCH painting of everyday life, when presented with the opportunity, did not shrink away from the representation of illness in its most lethal form in the poignant work *The Sick Girl* by Gabriel Metsu (Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, 1657-59). Painted with rather raw realism, the work does not foresee any other end than the death of the subject. Is the patient in for a better fate in *The Dropsical Woman* (see p. 31), painted by Dou with almost irritating virtuosity and meticulousness? Dou is one of the best representations of this "fine manner painting" (*fijnschilerij*) that made the reputation of the Leiden school. This painting from the Louvre depicts a seriously afflicted young woman in a sumptuous interior. Already being mourned by her servant, she turns away from a doctor who is putting on the airs of a charlatan (and who is carefully examining her urine) in order to leave her fate to Providence in order to gain salvation, if not her health. The enormous Bible, placed on the lectern on the left, puts the finishing touches on the opposition between the vanity of medical knowledge and the urgency of surrendering to God and his mercy. Consistently ridiculed, the doctors wearing outdated clothing who are examining a young patient in a painting by another famous Leiden *fijnschilder* (and pupil of Dou), Frans van Mieris the Elder, and especially in another great Leiden painter with a more relaxed style, Jan Steen, proceed from a far less dramatic, and less metaphysical, atmosphere. The patient, in a state of mind bordering on satire, farce, and comic theater, is indeed suffering from a broken heart or lost love—in Dutch, one talks about *zoete pijn* or *minnekoorts*—or perhaps even "erotic melancholia" (when not expecting a suitor's baby), a condition that one attempted to diagnose by examining urine. In Mieris's painting from Vienna, dated 1657, undoubtedly one of the earliest to have dealt with this theme, the doctor, with the demeanor of a crafty charlatan, is under no illusions about the real condition of this young sinner, reading the New Testament. Taking her pulse, he addresses the viewer in a theatrical manner, as in an aside.

Frans van Mieris, *The Doctor's Visit*, 1657. Oil on copper, 34 x 27 cm
Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum

For Steen, who tackled the subject at least 20 times (which was all the more interesting in a city that was home to one of the most famous medical schools in Europe), the little boy armed with a bow and arrow, referencing Cupid, and the painting on the back wall, Venus and Adonis (!) by the Italian Antonio Tempesta, similarly leave no doubt as to what the patient is suffering from.

Jan Steen, *The Physician's Visit,* 1658-60
Oil on wood, 49 x 42 cm. London, Wellington Museum, Apsley House
© Historic England / Bridgeman Image

MUSIC
CHORDS AND HARMONY

Amateur music playing is one of the most prized themes of 17th century Dutch intimist painting. As a mark of first-class education given to the children of Dutch patrician families, particularly girls, the mastering of musical instruments also referred to the world of chivalry through the concept of harmony.

MUSICAL instruments abound in depictions of the everyday, as we can see through the brushstrokes of the Dutch masters. In the most immediate sense, instruments first serve as social markers. They correspond to what English-speaking historians call a *status symbol*. Instruments for the wealthy, the educated, and urban and instruments for the poor or for the rural thus create a social boundary with a well-defined outline. Contrasting with the fiddlers leading dances for the coarse peasants in Van Ostade's paintings, the preferred instruments of the affluent are the lute and above all the harpsichord, clavichord, and the virginal, which have a keyboard. The playing and practicing of music also had another non-negotiable significance. They allowed, without causing a scandal, or at the very least under socially acceptable conditions, for men and women who were neither related by birth or by marriage (or the promise of marriage) to spend time together. Towards the middle of the century, and in spectacular fashion between 1660-70, the depiction of mixed company gathered around a musical performance became quite successful among the masters of intimism in various artistic settings: Metsu, Van Mieris, Ter Borch, Vermeer, and Steen. The concert or music lesson invariably take place in a very wealthy environment (in this regard, nothing is missing from Van Mieris's superb *Duet*, see p. 26). The attitudes of the subjects, and sometimes certain symbolic objects, often indicated that (inappropriate?) romantic relationships were forming between the actors or between teacher and pupil before our very eyes. Indeed, the association between music and love constituted a common trope that was used in particular to caution the era's youth against a faux pas that was to be feared all the more when alcohol further attenuated the vigilance that a sweet melody had already weakened.
What about these two women depicted alone at their instruments in *Lady Seated at a Virginal* or *Lady Standing at a Virginal*, two late paintings (constituting a pair?) by Vermeer currently in the National Gallery in London. The first painting is no doubt inspired by the admirable *Woman playing a Clavichord* by Dou, from Leiden, in the Dulwich Gallery. In any case, this time it is the viewer who is invited by their gazes to join the musicians to create a virtuous, or licentious, duet. In this respect, both Dou and Vermeer remain ambiguous.

Gerrit Dou, *A Woman playing a Clavichord*, ca. 1665. Oil on wood, 37.3 x 29.8 cm
London, Dulwich Picture Gallery

Johannes Vermeer, *A Lady Seated at a Virginal,* ca. 1671-74. Oil on canvas, 51.5 x 45.5 cm. London, National Gallery Press Photo Service © National Gallery, London

The master from Leiden clearly uses objects that refer to risky amounts of alcohol, but the closed cage above the young woman is rather an evocation of chastity. In the painting by Vermeer, his colleague from Delft, the presence of the caravaggesque painting by Dirck van Baburen explicitly depicting a brothel scene (*The Procuress*, currently in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) does not however provide an explicit explanation for the composition. Is the painting emphasizing that the nature of promised love is corrupt, whereas the painting in the National Gallery is emphasizing, on the contrary, its aspect of trustworthiness and selflessness? There is no way to be sure.

GALANT SCENES
DUBIOUS OR ROMANTIC?

An "untrained" viewer looking at paintings depicting the way of life of the wealthy classes painted with precision by the Dutch intimist masters would be led to conclude that the inhabitants of the Dutch Republic indulged in chivalry in all its forms. But painting is not reality.

THE theme of passionate love and courtship takes up a considerable place in paintings of everyday life in the Netherlands. It all seems like a pretext for depicting (more or less) attractive men courting comely and inevitably idle young women. Letter writing (see p. 38) as well as playing music (p. 44), feminine grooming (p. 48), and even the innocent presence of a parrot (p. 40) thus provide material for innuendos that are often rather risqué. It is useful to recall that, in reality, intimate relations were only lawful after marriage, the primary virtue of which, in the eyes of the members of patrician families, was to concentrate resources in the hands of those families thanks to the rarely ignored custom of marrying solely within that community. Chivalry, therefore, belonged mostly to the realm of fantasy, fed by romantic literature and poetry. In this respect, it went unrecognized for a long time that the privileged members of his commercial and industrious republic, modeled by an often-rigid Protestantism, more or less shared the wealthy aristocratic nations' imagination about princely courts full of romantic intrigue.

In Metsu's *The Intruder*, a dashing soldier accomplishes a transgressive act by trying to break through the door—and the privacy—of two young women who seem to illustrate two options: the comb that one is holding seems to refer to moral purity, while the slippers of the other seem to promise more immediate pleasures. In Ter Borch's painting from the 1660s, the gentleman pressing a lady to drink (this simple fact would tend to indicate that it is not a question of a gentleman or a lady...) has a more dubious nature (see p. 12).

Handled brilliantly by Pieter de Hooch (see p. 29) and Vermeer (*The Wine Glass* ca. 1658-60, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie and *Girl with a Wineglass*, 1659-60, Brunswick, Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum), the subject of alcohol consumption by those in high circles was no longer rare in Dutch painting starting in the middle of the century. Not without a sense of smugness, "moralistic" painting warns against intemperance and its damaging consequences: misconduct, adultery, etc. When stimulated by wine and music, passion soon knows no inhibition.

Gerard ter Borch, *The Gallant Soldier*, ca. 1662-63. Oil on canvas, 68 x 55 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre
© RMN (musée du Louvre) – P. Fuzeau

Gabriel Metsu, The Intruder, 1659-62
Oil on panel,66.6 x 59.4 cm
National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.
Photo courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

However, this excessive drinking can lead to an even murkier world, that of prostitution (is such the case for our Ter Borch?). In reality, many “gallant scenes” depict high-end prostitutes interacting with their clients. If there is love, it has a price. Known by the (ironic) title *The Gallant Soldier*, the remarkable painting at the Louvre by Ter Borch from the beginning of the 1660s unambiguously depicts an old fogey holding out the money for the services of a courtesan whom the painter regards with a sort of empathy.

GROOMING AND DRESSING
AN AREA OF AMBIGUITY

RIGHT
Jan Steen, *A Woman at her Toilet*, 1663.
Oil on canvas,
67.5 x 53 cm.
London, Royal Collection Trust
© S.M. Elizabeth II, 2017 / Bridgeman Images

OPPOSITE
Gerard ter Borch, *Woman at a Mirror*, ca. 1651-52
Oil on panel,
34 x 26 cm.
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum
© The Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

The abundant depictions of women at their dressing tables are full of ambiguity in Dutch painting. The penetration of the gaze into women's intimate lives coincides with the disapproval that had been inspired for centuries by finery, trickery, and other traps of seduction that readily passed for paths to perdition.

INTERTWINED with iconography from the Old Testament and mythology (Susanna bathing, Bathsheba in the bath, Venus with her mirror, etc.), the theme of feminine grooming wins its autonomy in European painting, particularly in Dutch painting, during the 17th century.

In the middle of the century, Gerard ter Borch used his sister Gesina (who became his muse) as a model to depict an elegant young woman finishing dressing. The richness of the woman's clothing, as well as the presence of a page and a maidservant, clearly situate her in the upper strata of society. The sophistication of the artistic device—the main character has her back conspicuously turned toward us and the mirror that the page is holding for her is reflecting a face gazing curiously at a third protagonist—creates an appropriate ambiguity. For centuries, the woman in the mirror has referenced a culpable frivolity and, finally, the denunciation of vanity.

And yet, there is no complacency in this innocent character, who is showing the superb nape of her neck but is not looking at herself in the mirror being held out to her. Far from any imprecation, perhaps here Ter Borch limited himself to illustrating an allegory of sight. Similar in its composition to the musician in the Dulwich Gallery (see p. 44), *A Young Woman at her Toilet* painted by Dou in the middle of the 1660s (Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen), invites us into an atmosphere that is just as luxurious but undoubtedly less innocent. Here, the mirror plays a much different role since it is through it that the flirtatious woman is shamelessly looking at the viewer. Moreover, the cage with the open door placed above the woman and her maidservant refers to losing one's virginity in the literature of the period and the emblem books that combine "morals" and illustrations. Painted with extraordinary precision, the depiction of grooming and private space here clearly seems to be coupled with a moralistic meaning that it as unconvinced as it is unconvincing. The sincerity of Jan Steen in his masterpiece *A Woman at her Toilet* from the British royal collections, is no less doubtful. In it, the artist creates two thoroughly opposed spaces. The first consists of an architectural frame decorated with motifs evoking fidelity, domestic virtue, and chastity (more specifically punished profane love). This symbolic threshold that keeps the viewer-voyeur at a distance opens up into a room occupied by an alluring young woman. Partially undressed, slipping on a stocking on an unmade bed, she is surrounded by objects (a skull, a lute, an extinguished candle, etc.) that are all traditional symbols for vanity and for the transient nature of life. Conversely, other accessories refer in a way that would have been transparent to its contemporaries to the consummation of physical love (the most notable being the stocking, *kous*, which is slang in Dutch for sex).

WORKS AND DAYS
OR THE IDOLIZATION OF THE EVERYDAY

The domestic sphere was one of the favorite subjects of Golden Age painters. It emanates from these interiors, painted with impeccable skill and which sometimes seem to anticipate our own deceptive impression of familiarity. These scenes often have a multitude of meanings that contradict their seeming prosaicness.

THE “photographic” character of 17th century Dutch intimist painting provides what is undoubtedly incomparable knowledge about the way that ordinary citizens, but mostly wealthy ones, lived in the Dutch Republic. No contemporary European nation cared to such a degree about depicting the domestic sphere in which its inhabitants lived. Yet this impression of immediacy must be put into perspective. The objectivity of the recreation of many of these interiors in Amsterdam, Leiden, or Delft, indeed seems suspect. Without being impossible, the luxurious black and white flooring in many of the homes depicted by Pieter de Hooch and his colleagues in reality only decorated the homes of the wealthiest citizens. In particular, the depiction of the domestic sphere was probably imbued with a social, symbolic, even metaphysical dimension by the painters, surpassing, for many, a simple project of mundane representation. For example, it means keeping in mind that Dutch society displayed an ambition that concerned the society as a whole in the way that it considered childhood and how it should be treated.

The belief that children, as future citizens, should be properly educated made domestic exemplarity a social issue. But that’s not all. It has been asserted that the Reformation contributed to eliminating the boundary between the church and the domestic sphere, which was also called on to become a place of sanctification, down to the performing of daily tasks. The woman caring for a baby in the touching maternal scene painted by Hooch from the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, in this respect, seems like a true “Madonna of the home.”

Let us however emphasize that the Catholicism of the Counter-Reformation at the time was promoting a type of religiosity that was, all things considered, rather similar. The atmosphere of striking implicit sacredness in so many everyday Dutch scenes naturally constitutes one of the most fascinating aspects of the art of Vermeer (who converted to Catholicism). Absorbed in her task as much as it is possible to be, the woman holding a balance in the painting from the National Gallery in Washington D.C. is thus in tense opposition with the depiction of the last judgement that takes up the back wall.

Pieter de Hooch, *Woman Nursing an Infant, with a Child and a Dog*, ca. 1658-60.
Oil on canvas. 67.8 x 55.6 cm.
San Francisco, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Palace of the Legion of Honor
Press Photo Service

The composition does not simply create an opposition between the futility of profane life and the great beyond, according to a two-fold articulation that is banally moralizing. The *Woman Holding a Balance*, as if painted by magical brushes, becomes a striking, *current* representation of the weighers of souls (psychostasis) and guides of souls (pychopomp) that have spanned art from Antiquity to Michael the Archangel. The same feeling of accumulated sacredness inhabits the ultra-famous *Milkmaid* from the Rijksmuseum (see p. 10), which was painted several years earlier. The humble, pious maidservant of Amsterdam was probably inspired by the one painted by Dou at the turn of the 1640s or 1650s (Paris, Musée du Louvre, see p. 6). Engaging and surrounded by foodstuffs and ambiguous objects, the maidservant of Leiden, who conversely seems to be inviting the viewer to share in earthly pleasures (probably without exception), lastly demonstrates the remarkable diversity of domestic scenes where an invitation to hedonism may border on a retreat into oneself.

Johannes Vermeer, *Woman Holding a Balance*, ca. 1664. Detail. Oil on canvas, 40.3 x 35.6 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.
Photo courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

THE DUTCH GOLDEN AGE AT THE LOUVRE

The *Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting* exhibition is the highlight in a series of events that the museum is dedicating this season to the Dutch Golden Age. The rehanging of the Flemish and Dutch painting rooms on the second floor of the Richelieu wing is at the heart of this project. In the Sully wing, the Louvre invites us to discover the Leiden Collection around a work that was recently added to the Louvre's collections: *Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well* by Ferdinand Bol. Finally, in the Rotonde Sully, the *Drawing the Everyday, Holland in the Golden Age* exhibition brings together 93 works on paper from the greatest artists of this incredibly rich period.

Johannes Vermeer, A Young Woman seated at a Virginal, ca. 1671-74
Oil on canvas, 25.1 x 20 cm. New York, The Leiden Collection © The Leiden Gallery, New York

IN THE RICHELIEU WING, THE PAINTING OF THE **NORTHERN SCHOOL** IN ALL ITS SPLENDOR

Under the guidance of Blaise Ducos, curator for the Department of Paintings in charge of the Northern school collections, no fewer than 530 paintings have today found a new home in the rooms set aside just for them on the second floor of the Richelieu wing. The new layout offers a more coherent approach to these works, notably by favoring monographic groupings. By Laurence Caillaud

Floris van Schooten, *Still Life with Ham*. Oil on wood, 62 x 83 cm. © RMN (musée du Louvre) – F. Raux

LEFT PAGE The new Northern painting galleries of the Department of Painting © 2017 musée du Louvre – A. Mongodin

Since the Grand Louvre project, which transformed the museum and allowed for exhibiting the Northern school collections in brand new rooms, which opened in 1993, nothing had moved on the painting floor in the Richelieu wing. The museum management's desire to undertake a large renovation of the spaces—which notably allowed for proposing to rehang the Italian paintings in the Grande Galerie and a new layout for the French paintings in the Sully wing—was an opportunity to entirely rethink the layout of the Northern school collections, as explained by Blaise Ducos: "We wanted to highlight the collection's strengths by designing groupings of artists' works around numerous iconic pieces that we have had the chance to acquire: the *Bathsheba at Her Bath* by Rembrandt, *Charles I at the Hunt* by Van Dyck, *The King Drinks* by Jordaens, and of course *The Astronomer* and *The Lacemaker* by Vermeer."

In the Louvre's 20 Northern school rooms, the time is at hand: the three great Flemish painters of the era, Rubens, Van Dyck and Jordaens, are now exhibited in three adjacent rooms that will be sure to dazzle visitors. The same goes for another great master, Rembrandt, whose 15 paintings viewers will discover a little further on. It is a magnificent ensemble complemented by the works of rembrandtesque artists who painted in the same style as Rembrandt or were his pupils.

The eight paintings by Frans Post, the first European painter to have painted the New World when he went to Brazil between 1637 and 1640, have also been brought together. Other rooms have been designed not around monographs but around themes, such as landscapes or still lifes, or around a school, such as the Leiden Fijnschilders. "Through these regroupings, works that before were spread out between several rooms find new meaning and renewed visibility," explains Blaise Ducos. "One of our guiding principles for this new hanging was a concern for absolute clarity."

Another was the history of the collection—some of the works had been acquired by Louis XIV or Louis XV—and what it reveals about the history of taste, even if it means showing its gaps when they have a historical basis, for example the rarity of Dutch history paintings or the absence of a large group portrait like those painted by Rembrandt and his contemporaries. "This approach not only allows for seeing the extraordinary richness of the Louvre's collection but also understanding the passions and tastes that started it," the curator concluded. Now it is up to the visitors to take over the space and to enjoy the new atmosphere.

THE **TREASURES** OF THE LEIDEN COLLECTION **UNVEILED**

The Louvre is exhibiting an assortment from the largest private collection of 17th century Dutch paintings, The Leiden Collection, which was started in 2003 by a couple of American collectors. This selection of around 30 works highlights the two focuses around which the collection is built: Rembrandt and his emulators on one hand and the Leiden fijnschilders on the other. By Laurence Caillaud

250 works, including 11 Rembrandts and one Vermeer, acquired in only 13 years: The Leiden Collection, so named in homage to Rembrandt's birthplace, which witnessed the inception and flourishing of "fine manner painting," is exceptional on all counts. It is the product of the passion of Thomas Kaplan, a wealthy American who made his fortune in the mining industry and graduated with a degree in history from Oxford. Along with his wife, Daphne Recanati Kaplan, this collector hunted down the works of one of the painters that he had admired as a child, Rembrandt, and discovered that the art market was still full of wonderful surprises for those interested in the Dutch Golden Age and who also had the means to acquire them.

It is precisely a story of means that is the origin of the link that connects the collector to the Louvre today (see p. 59) and that solidified the first exhibition devoted to this unconventional collection. While the Louvre could not compete with the means of Tom Kaplan, it did benefit, like so many other museums in the world, from his generosity. It is not uncommon for the collector to decide to loan out his pieces. The paintings exhibited at the Louvre have thus been brought together for the first time, even for the collector, who usually only ever views a portion of them. While the exhibition project at the Louvre was taking shape, another extensive project was bringing the collection to life: the online publication of its catalogue raisonné, edited by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., curator at the National Gallery in Washington D.C. Viewers have been able to discover this valuable trove of information at www.theleidencollection.com since late January.

Rembrandt van Rijn, *Minerva in Her Study*, 1635
Oil on canvas, 138 x 116.5 cm.

LEFT PAGE
Gerrit Dou, *The Cat or The Cat Crouching on the Ledge of an Artist's Atelier,* 1657
Oil on panel, 34 x 26.9 cm

Jan Steen, *Prayer Before the Meal*, 1660
Oil on panel, 54.3 x 46 cm

REMBRANDT AND HIS FOLLOWERS

The exhibition in Paris does a fine job of acknowledging the choices and inclinations that guided the composition of the Leiden Collection. The most spectacular grouping is made up of the paintings of Rembrandt—and includes one of his drawings—and his pupils and followers. One of the major works in the exhibition is Rembrandt's *Minerva in Her Study* (1635), which is one in a series of paintings now conserved in museums in Madrid, Saint Petersburg, and New York depicting the heroines of Antiquity. Also by Rembrandt, the collection contains a *Self-Portrait* from 1634, the very pretty *Study of a Woman in a White Cap* (ca. 1640), as well as three works from a series of the five senses painted between 1624-25, including *Unconscious Patient* (*Allegory of Smell*). This never-before-seen painting, which was thought lost, was rediscovered in 2015.

"FINE MANNER PAINTING" AND GENRE SCENES

The other passion at work in the collection is the collector's love for "fine manner painting," a specialty that developed in Leiden in the middle of the 17th century and that is characterized by its remarkable attention to detail. Two of its most famous representatives are Frans van Mieris, who painted *Traveler at Rest* (ca. 1657) and *A Woman Feeding a Parrot*, which is on loan for the exhibition in the Hall Napoléon (see p. 7), and Gerrit Dou, who painted *Scholar Interrupted at His Writing* (ca. 1635) and *The Cat* or *The Cat Crouching on the Ledge of an Artist's Atelier* (1657). In this little painting, the painter pays an extraordinary amount of attention to the slightest detail and turns his subject into a reflection on the art of painting and on illusion: in the background of the composition is an artist painting at his easel, while the cat, depicted in an alcove that blurs the boundary between the painting and the viewer, art and reality, is a symbol of sight.
The exhibition is also unveiling works by Jan Lievens (*Card Players*, ca. 1625), who is associated with Caravaggio's followers from Utrecht, Carel Fabritius, a brilliant student of Rembrandt who painted *Hagar and the Angel* (ca. 1645), and Jan Steen. Here, we can admire two of his history paintings, the *Banquet of Anthony and Cleopatra* (ca. 1673-75) and the *Sacrifice of Iphigenia* (ca. 1671), as well as a remarkable scene depicting a humble family saying grace, *Prayer Before the Meal* (1660). This magnificent collection has a final gem that, like the Van Mieris, viewers must come and see in the Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting exhibition: *A Young Woman seated at a Virginal* by Vermeer (see p. 53), painted around 1671-74 and that scientific analyses have shown was painted on the same roll of canvas as *The Lacemaker* in the Louvre.

REBECCA AND ELIEZER, A GIFT FOR THE LOUVRE

The names of Thomas Kaplan and his wife will remain associated with the Louvre for years to come. The couple recently made a gift to the museum of a work by Ferdinand Bol, *Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well* (ca. 1645-46), that the visitors of the Northern school painting galleries know well. The painting has been exhibited there since 2010. The collectors had loaned it anonymously after acquiring it the previous year and learning that the Louvre had also been eyeing it, a practice that they are familiar with but that had never ended with a gift.

The museum already owns portraits by this famous Dutch painter, a pupil of Rembrandt's, which were a specialty of his. This one, however, is the first religious painting. The composition, light, and range of colors contribute to making the work one of the artist's important paintings and a priceless acquisition for the museum, which owns few illustrations of the Old Testament by Dutch painters. L. C.

Ferdinand Bol,
Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well, ca. 1645-46
Oil on canvas,
171 x 171.80 cm
Paris, Musée du Louvre

THE **EVERYDAY** AS VIEWED BY **DRAFTSMEN**

Depicting the reality of everyday life, household routines, well-established social environments: numerous 17th century Dutch artists followed this trend, as shown by the exhibition “Drawing the Everyday: Holland in the Golden Age,” which is being presented at the Louvre and was created in partnership with the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-arts in Paris. More than just simple natural observations, these works on paper are evidence of the methods being used in workshops at the time and collectors’ tastes.

By Emmanuelle Brugerolles, Curator of Drawings, École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-arts

The exhibition at the Louvre, in collaboration with the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-arts, intends to show Dutch life during the Golden Age through two distinct worlds: the world of cities and their popular suburbs and the world of the countryside. The first part corresponds to a large, industrious population living in predominantly middle-sized cities and the second to fishermen, more or less well-off peasants, and the seasonal workers that populated the countryside.

In this context, draftsmen were reproducing aspects of this society as they were, or, more precisely, transposed this reality so that it corresponded to the image that the circles who were likely to purchase works of art had in their minds. Drawing played a fundamental role in this approach in that it contributed to creating a vision of an everyday that inhabitants wanted to discover. The range of observations is limitless, between kermesses, loose morals, the plight of the poor, tavern scenes showing tobacco, beer, and frisky maidservants, trades, and interior scenes full of stillness and toil.

Rembrandt van Rijn,
Young man writing or drawing near a window looking onto the IJ
Pen and brown ink, brown wash,
29.5 x 16.4 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre
Press Photo Service

Cornelis Dusart, *The Walking Wafer Seller*
Pen, brown ink and brown wash, 20 x 15.8 cm
Paris, Beaux-Arts de Paris. Press Photo Service

OPPOSITE
Rembrandt van Rijn,
Woman at a Window
Pen, brown ink, brown wash, 29.5 x 16.4 cm Paris, Musée du Louvre
Press Photo Service
© RMN (musée du Louvre) – G. Blot

RIGHT
Jan van Goyen,
Banks of a Canal with a Jetty Leading to a Cottage
Black chalk and gray wash, 17.2 x 27.2 cm
Paris, Musée du Louvre
© RMN (musée du Louvre) – T. Querrec

DRAWING PRACTICES DURING THE GOLDEN AGE

Except for Vermeer and the painters of the Delft School, for which no known works on paper have been conserved, Dutch artists were prolific drawers with a wide variety of subjects. The selection made for the exhibition at the Louvre is by no means exhaustive as it relies exclusively on existing resources in public French collections, but because of this seeks to uncover French art patrons' tastes in the Dutch school and the richness that has been accumulated in this area over the centuries. It does nevertheless allow us to sketch the specific paths of these artists through several masterful and significant works. Their visual collections, which are dense, diverse, and certainly incomplete (the amount that they produced that has made its way to us is only partial), contribute fully to their search for truth and in part meet the needs of a knowledgeable clientele.

It is still difficult today to determine whether such or such a drawing was made on the spot or if it was the result of an exercise in studio. We of course know than Rembrandt had the habit of sketching plein air landscapes or figures that grabbed his attention. With the Louvre's drawings, we discover characters taken out of their context, isolated from their social milieu and placed on a page like simple, fast notations. They are drawn with a few thick strokes of a pen or black chalk, never superfluous and always efficient. We also find this kind of work taken from nature among several landscape artists who were not only sensitive to nature but also to the lives of those who lived in the regions they traveled through. Thus, Van Goyen, during his trips along the great rivers of Holland and the outskirts of Kleve, observed the activities of the bargemen and peasants. He added to these views little scenes captured on the spot with a realism full of truth and freshness.

Nevertheless, most visual production did not occur outside but within the specific environment of the studio, where the successive steps for projects with multiple purposes were completed: studio practice, preparatory studies for paintings or etchings, or works in and of themselves.

FIGURE STUDIES

Figure studies undoubtedly make up the most significant collections: they most often depict isolated peasants drawn with outrageous attitudes according to well-oiled stereotypes. The subjects by Van Ostade and Dusart, often seen from behind, either appear standing firmly with their feet on the ground, legs apart with a prominent belly, or seated on a chair balancing on its two rear legs. These subjects are all partaking in the same worldly pleasures that were severely criticized at the time, alcohol and tobacco, which contribute to giving them caricatural expressions of drunkenness or abandon. This imagine of the peasant, which coincided with the perceptions and expectations of those who enjoyed this type of drawing, was based on work from a life model posing in the studio following the instructions of the painter. The goal was to create repertoires of motifs from which artists could take for their compositions as needed. Those depicting a very finished subject were designed from the beginning for buyers interested in this type of image of the peasantry.

The other social classes however are not to be outdone and figure prominently in this panorama: noblemen may be distinguished by their elegant clothing and their assured attitudes, while the bourgeois are depicted in their plush interiors that are ordered and clean. Far from the noisy and animated frenzy of the streets, they indulge in their various activities. Men often appear seated, immersed in reading or contemplating a work of art. As for women, they are leaning out their windows observing the movements of those passing by outside, praying, or reading letters. It is no longer a matter of distinguishing a social class as a whole but of identifying personalities.

Adriaen van Ostade, *Courtyard of an Inn,* 1674. Pen, brown ink, watercolor, and gouache,17.6 x 14.3 cm
Paris, Musée du Louvre © RMN (musée du Louvre) – T. Le Mage

Hendrick Avercamp, *Winter Scene*, 1574. Gouache and watercolor, black chalk, 19.2 x 32.1 cm
Paris, Beaux-Arts de Paris. Press Photo Service © Beaux-Arts de Paris, dist. RMN / image Beaux-Arts de Paris

OVERALL COMPOSITIONS

Besides these fragmentary studies that artists frequently indulged in, draftsmen designed overall compositions with entirely different ambitions. Certain ones are directly related to paintings or etchings, others were designed on their own in order to be sold. The importance of engraving in the Netherlands played a fundamental role as a vehicle for spreading the idyllic and charming image of rural life. In a series of landscapes around Utrecht, Abraham Bloemaert depicted views of farms that would charm urban dwellers and prompt them to go discover the pleasures of the countryside. This discovery was accompanied by the evoking of workers, peasants, sailors, and peddlers, whose modest lives and uncomfortable working conditions were remarkably illustrated in works by Dusart.

The most important category of these overall compositions includes drawings created independently and meant for a clientele that was fond of this type of art, where the world of peasants is omnipresent. While 17th century artists reuse certain caricatural aspects of this iconography that had already been developed by Pieter Brueghel the Elder, they gradually evolved into a new conception of the village celebration, described as a succession of the pleasures of country life. The kermess or fair corresponded to the day where everything was allowed and all social classes came together: landowners, seasonal workers, bohemians, musicians, peddlers, and urbanites came and rubbed shoulders. It was a period of relaxation and leisure where you indulged in games, drinking, and the depravity that was often caused by disagreements in taverns. The superb watercolors painted at the end of Van Ostade's life are characterized by their dignified balance between entertainment and a more meticulous and orderly environment.

To a lesser extent, Avercamp or Van Battem's winter scenes, which were also made to be sold, contribute to this festive image of the country and symbolize the prosperous and victorious era of the Dutch nation. These extensive landscapes illustrate the inhabitants' favorite pastime, with all social categories mixed together: wealthy and humble, peasants, servants, and bourgeois, in a sort of chronicle of life on the ice.

RARE WORKS AND A CONFIDENT MARKET

It seems as though draftsmen were rarely subject to specific commissions and that instead they merely met the demand of a flourishing and firmly implanted market. Dutch society thus saw the flourishing of collectors from various social backgrounds who created collections primarily from locally-made work. The search for these collectors was guided by the desire to acquire extremely rare objects related not only to botany, geology, and animals, but also science. For this reason, the work of art had to have a pedigree that proved its rareness and uniqueness. Signed watercolors were favored and each composition had to be distinguished by its own character, while the most prized etchings where those printed in small print runs. In addition to this desire of enrichment was the pleasure of displaying one's treasures and collectors shared their passion during regular gatherings between artists, friends, and patrons, during which they would unveil their masterworks.

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