

The Guardian

Tracy Chevalier: why I travelled the world to see every Vermeer painting

Tracy Chevalier | Sat 16 Feb 2019



Johannes Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* on display at the Mauritshuis in The Hague, Netherlands.
Photograph: Peter Dejong/AP

Captivated by Girl With a Pearl Earring, the author wrote a bestselling novel telling its story. Twenty years on, she recounts her quest to see all of the artist's paintings up close

Bucket lists are often about travel: visit Petra or Angkor Wat, Oktoberfest or the Venice carnival. Or they include physical feats of derring-do: bagging Munros, run a marathon. Rarely do they involve art.

When I was 20 I had no concept of a bucket list. However, I did set myself a goal: I decided to see in the flesh all of the paintings by the 17th-century Dutch painter **Johannes Vermeer**.

In the autumn of the previous year, 1981, I first saw a poster of Vermeer's *Girl With a Pearl Earring* at my sister's apartment. Smitten by the lovely girl with her blue and yellow turban, her wide eyes and her enigmatic expression, I bought myself a copy, which I have to this day. While knowing nothing about Vermeer, I decided to seek out more of his work.

It turns out there is little to know. Vermeer lived his whole life in Delft, a small town just south of The Hague. He trained as an artist, traded in paintings, married a Catholic woman, had 11 surviving children, was in debt several times, and died, probably of a stress-induced heart attack or stroke, in 1675 at the age of 43. We have no letters to or from him, no other writing, not even any drawings. Just 35 paintings that we're certain of, plus two others that may or may not be by him.

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But what paintings! Most are of people alone, often women, set apart from us, performing domestic activities like pouring milk, writing a letter, putting on a necklace, playing a lute. They are beautifully lit and have a calm, transcendent quality that makes us want to climb inside to experience that feeling too.

At the National Gallery in my hometown, Washington DC, there were three Vermeers (and a "cautiously attributed" fourth). I had probably seen them before and just not clocked them – though it's hard to understand why not.

In 1982 I was a student in Britain for four months and saw two Vermeers at the National Gallery in London. On a visit to Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum, I laid eyes on four. It was then that I turned my natural interest into a challenge to see all of his work. Compared with the hundreds by Rembrandt or the thousands by Picasso, 37 paintings seemed achievable.

At first I didn't make special trips, but made sure to seek out Vermeer when I was visiting a city. Dublin, tick. Edinburgh, tick. Paris, tick tick. New York, where within a mile radius you can see eight: three at the Frick Collection, five at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Tick! It was like

twitchers crossing off the birds they've seen, or trainspotters with their books of engine numbers. I became a Vermeer spotter.



The Art of Painting by Vermeer at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Photograph: Johansen Krause/
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

Some visits were particularly memorable. At the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, I spent a blissful afternoon alone with *The Art of Painting*, in which an artist, thought to be Vermeer himself, wearing striking red stockings, paints with his back to us. Hundreds of unobservant visitors walked straight past it. At the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, a gorgeous house stuffed with art, I took for granted seeing *The Concert*; little did I know the painting would be stolen a few years later, never to resurface. From my London home, while writing a novel about Vermeer, I regularly walked a mile across Hampstead Heath to see *The Guitar Player* at Kenwood House, looking for inspiration.

By spring 1996 I'd seen 24 of the 37 possible paintings; then I hit the mother lode, going to a Vermeer retrospective at the Mauritshuis in The Hague, which was displaying 23 works. It was so popular I had to look at the paintings over a sea of shoulders and had only a few seconds in front of each before being jostled out of the way.

That is not the ideal way to see a Vermeer. Preferably you want lots of time in a calm empty room. They feel distant at first, and you have to focus on them over time in order to enter into their worlds.

There was no time or space at the 1996 exhibition, but at least I was able to cross off six more Vermeers from my list – including, fatefully for me, *Girl With a Pearl Earring*, which has its home at the Mauritshuis. I had no idea that 20 months later I would be lying in bed looking at my poster and would suddenly wonder, “What did Vermeer do to her to make her look at him like that?” So began the creation of the story that became my novel. I based the plot on the few details we know about the painting: that Vermeer had a large household, that he had different women wear his wife's clothes in various works, that he painted slowly. A pretty girl wearing a borrowed earring, modelling for months in a studio away from the family, with that look on her face? The drama practically wrote itself.

Twenty years after its publication and 5m copies later, I am still astonished by its success. Perhaps I shouldn't be. It turns out *Girl With a Pearl Earring* is a painting that has captured many people's hearts, and they want to know more about it. The paintings have become increasingly popular, with so many exhibitions since that 1996 show. Given the scarcity of his work, most create a theme – Vermeer and women, Vermeer and Delft, Vermeer and music – and add paintings by other Dutch artists. However good those are, the Vermeers always stand out from the rest, as if a spotlight is shining specially on them.

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Why see his paintings in the flesh, though? In the 80s when I began Vermeer-spotting, the only way you could view his work was through dubious reproductions. Now you can find all of them online – just a couple of clicks, for example, will transport you to the excellent website essentialvermeer.com. Google Arts & Culture has recently launched the **Meet Vermeer** app, where you can observe the portraits so closely you can see grains of dirt and bits of bristle in their brushstrokes. It even includes a “virtual exhibition” where all the Vermeers hang in augmented reality. Why bother to go to the Mauritshuis to see *Girl in person*, then?

I always prefer to be in the room with a painting. For one thing, screens are backlit and display a souped-up version of the work that is not true to life. Screens are also in places surrounded by lots of distractions – in offices, on trains, in cafes. It’s hard to focus on a painting with so much going on around it. Looking at an artwork in a gallery is rather like watching a film in a cinema: you are experiencing it in a space designed for this purpose. It gives you the physical and mental freedom to concentrate on the work. You can also move back and forth, in and out of a physical space, taking in the painting from different angles in a way that the “zooming” button on a screen doesn’t allow.

The three-dimensional aspect of a room also creates an atmosphere: the air around you, the soundscape, the light, even the smell – all of this contributes to how you experience a painting. With a screen, you look at *Girl With a Pearl Earring*, and then you click on a cat video or your email, and you wreck the atmosphere. Of course, gallery atmosphere can be wrecked too by the arrival of a tour group or people taking selfies. But you are more likely to be able to focus, and slow down, and take in *Girl* in a considered way when you are in the Mauritshuis room with her.

There is the added bonus of knowing that Vermeer himself touched the canvas and spent time with it. Standing in his place, I feel closer to this artist I will never meet. I only ever experience the magic of that moment with a real painting.

Once Vermeer had become so popular, it was relatively easy for me to polish off my list of paintings. In 2003 when the Prado in Madrid contacted me about doing an event during their Vermeer exhibition, my

first question was not, “What would you like me to talk about?” Instead I demanded, “Which Vermeers will be there?” I said “yes” only because *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* was being shown.



Vermeer's *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window*. Photograph: The Picture Art Collection/Alamy.

When I stood in front of that last painting, I felt a sense of satisfaction at completing my list, but also at a loss at having reached my goal. What would I do now? Should I “collect” another artist? Which one? Vermeer’s contemporary Fabritius? Too easy: there are only eight paintings. Rembrandt? Too hard: I adore him but there are more than 300. Caravaggio? Ninety-plus is more doable. But I don’t have the same attachment to these artists that I have to Vermeer. I have not written books about them or talked about them over the past two decades. Choosing to spot them would feel more mechanical and less emotionally satisfying. Perhaps it’s time to go to Petra instead. I’ve booked my ticket. Tick.

- *A new edition of Girl with a Pearl Earring is published by HarperCollins.*