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A Rare Reunion of Vermeers

At Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum, a history-making show will bring together 28 of the artist's surviving paintings.



Johannes Vermeer, 'Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window' (1657-58).
GEMALDEGALERIE ALTE MEISTER

By J.S. Marcus

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The Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer didn't live long, and he didn't paint much. By the time he died in 1675, at age 43, he may have spent more time working at other jobs, including art dealer and innkeeper, than as an artist. Scholars now believe that some three dozen of his paintings survive, about one-tenth as many as Rembrandt. Nearly every one of those paintings is a cherished masterpiece, typically marked by a delicate interplay of light and shadow and a transcendent view of everyday life.

On Feb. 10, Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum will make history with "Vermeer," bringing together 28 acknowledged paintings by the Dutch master, substantially more than

previous museum shows. The exhibition, which runs through June 4, reflects the latest important discoveries in Vermeer scholarship. For instance, a 2020 restoration of “Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window” (1657-58), in the Dresden State Art Collections, revealed that a seemingly blank wall was originally decorated with a painting of a Cupid. The painting is on view in Amsterdam, but most details about the dramatic change are saved for the catalog, since wall texts are being kept to a minimum. “We are trying to have ‘pure Vermeer,’” says Gregor J.M. Weber, the Rijksmuseum’s head of fine and decorative arts and the show’s co-curator. “If you have too much didactic material, it will destroy that feeling.”

“Vermeer” fills the museum’s Philips Wing, a high-ceilinged home for special shows with more than 10,000 square feet of exhibition space. The curators and the French architect Jean-Michel Wilmotte, the show’s designer, display the relatively small paintings in seven galleries, with walls painted shades of deep green, Prussian blue and a color that Mr. Wilmotte calls eggplant red. The galleries are decorated with sections of floor-to-ceiling velvet drapery the same color as the walls.

The show opens with the panoramic “View of Delft” (1660-61), followed by “The Little Street” (1658-59), which recent scholarship suggests was based on a real spot in Delft, Vermeer’s hometown. Visitors will then see the young Vermeer’s ambitions “stylistically to get out of Delft,” Dr. Weber says, by experimenting with Flemish or Italian trends, in works such as “Christ in the House of Mary and Martha.” Then begin the nearly two dozen genre and interior scenes that lie at the core of his appeal.

In a new biography of the artist, “Johannes Vermeer: Faith, Light and Reflection,” Dr. Weber argues that his art reflects the influence of a circle of Jesuit priests in Delft who were interested in optics. “The Lacemaker” (1666-68), on loan from the Louvre, is a good example. The contrast in the painting between sharp details and more indistinct areas reflects Vermeer’s experience with a camera obscura, a device or space that allows for the projection of a concentrated image through a pinpoint of light. Dr. Weber says this helped the artist to realize that “if I fix my eye on something that is further away, the foreground is blurred.”



Johannes Vermeer, 'The Little Street' (1658-59). PHOTO: RIJKSMUSEUM

The work is grouped with “Girl With a Pearl Earring,” which Dr. Weber says has become a “new ‘Mona Lisa,’” thanks to the 1999 novel about the painting by Tracy Chevalier and the subsequent film version. The final gallery includes paintings with theological implications, such as “Woman Holding a Balance” (ca. 1662-64), in which the woman is “weighing earthly and heavenly values, and deciding which way to go,” Dr. Weber says.

Dr. Weber says the idea for the new show was born in 2018, when New York’s Frick Collection announced renovation plans. (The collection’s Fifth Avenue premises have been closed since March 2020.) This inspired the Rijksmuseum to seek out a loan of the Frick’s three Vermeers, including the courtship-themed, vaguely ominous “Girl Interrupted at Her Music” (ca. 1659-61). Many scholars of Dutch art plan to make a pilgrimage to Amsterdam for a chance to make comparisons between paintings that have almost certainly never been underneath the same roof.

The leading Vermeer scholar Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., former curator at Washington’s National Gallery of Art, curated a major show about the painter in 1995-96 that included 22 Vermeers. In the new show, he is especially eager to compare Dresden’s restored “Letter” with other works from the late 1650s, including the Rijksmuseum’s “The Milkmaid” (1658-59), which, far beyond the world of art experts, has become a national symbol of the Netherlands.

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