

The Rijksmuseum's Vermeer retrospective is momentous and dizzying

The largest ever gathering of works by the Dutch artist casts light on his mastery of acute looking and equilibrium

Jackie Wullschläger | 8 February 2023



© Detail of 'Mistress and Maid' | The Frick Collection

With Johannes Vermeer, “something well worn in Dutch art (like an old shoe) has become something never seen before (like a glass slipper),” said Walter Liedtke, who was curator of the Metropolitan Museum’s show of the artist in 2001. That enchantment of the real, an illusion more persuasive and enticing than reality itself, suffuses each mature painting,

and makes every exhibition memorable. The Met assembled 15 works, the largest gathering this century — until now. The Rijksmuseum's stupendous retrospective has 28: more Vermeers than have ever been shown together. The effect is momentous, almost dizzying.

We encounter first a panorama of spires and gables, intricately rendered yet subtly altered to harmonise into a frieze of light and shade, silhouetted against the sky, mirrored in rippling water: "View of Delft", a well-ordered 17th-century Dutch town at peace with itself, and also a fairytale city.

"The Little Street", Vermeer's only other landscape, sits alongside. A gabled house, weathered brick, whitewash, a gutter leading the eye to a figure bending over a bucket, and another woman seated, sewing, at the open door — this is the gateway to the rest of Vermeer's oeuvre. Through that door lie the enclosed secret spaces: the darkened rooms with black-and-white floor tiles; carpet-decked tables; heavy chairs with carved lion finials. Leaded, coloured windows are the narrow frame for a whole world of thought and feeling.



'View of Delft' by Johannes Vermeer (1660-61) © Mauritshuis

Perfect geometric representations of solid domesticity are transformed, “one little room, an everywhere”, as sunlight falls on the rapt faces of their occupants. Aged 25, Vermeer defined his characteristic small-scale composition: an engrossed young woman depicted in profile, standing three-quarter-length in a corner space, usually spotlighted by a window. These pictorial arrangements confer tremendous psychological intensity, at once inviting us in and keeping us at a distance.

The first two have a gallery each: “Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window”, slender and shimmering behind a velvet green curtain which partly guards her privacy, and “The Milkmaid”, sturdy with rosy cheeks and muscular arms, statuesque, carved from colour. The contrasting hues of her cap, jacket and apron against the kitchen wall introduce Vermeer’s typical palette of blues, lemon yellow, white, pearl grey. Here too emerges his near-pointillist application: vibrant dots, dabs, blurred outlines, in the virtuoso table still life of crusty bread, earthenware bowls, unctuous dribbling milk.



'Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window' (1657-58) © Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister

Vermeer painted what was at hand, rarefying earthly existence. An inventory of his family's possessions reveals his beloved costumes and props, notably his wife Catharina's fur-trimmed yellow jacket, appearing in five compositions here. The largest, "Mistress and Maid" (loaned from the Frick Collection in New York), dominates a splendid gallery where several women look up, as if spontaneously. Turning away from us, the Mistress displays the magnificent pearls zigzagging through her chignon. A few splashes of grey turn Catharina's squirrel pelt to ermine; satin folds are pools of light, ridges of shadow; soft fabric meets hard, gleaming pearls delineated in sprinkled dashes.

The pearl-encrusted "A Lady Writing", from Washington's National Gallery of Art, pauses to glance directly at us. Players interrupt their music to gaze out of London's two paintings depicting virginals. Suggestions of life outside enter through windows, or through pictures within pictures — a Dutch landscape, intricate maps. They declare artifice without interrupting the moment of interiority. Time is stilled.



'Mistress and Maid' (c1665-67) © The Frick Collection

Vermeer worked slowly, producing about two pictures a year (about 36 survive). He died in 1675, leaving debts and 11 children. For the next two centuries he was an art-world Cinderella, overlooked and underpriced, until Théophile Thoré-Bürger, pioneering supporter of the Impressionists, championed him. Now his crystalline, mysterious pictures are museum glass slippers — adored, obsessively sought, too precious and fragile to travel often.

He belongs to a tiny group of pre-Impressionists (Velázquez, Rembrandt) for whom paint was itself a subject, sometimes fantastically abstracted — the liquid flow of threads in “The Lacemaker”; decorative interlocking patterns on the instrument in “Young Woman Seated at a Virginal”. The distinctive handling defined what Proust called “a certain spirit, a certain colour of cloth and of places”, so that all Vermeer paintings are “fragments of one and the same world”, each recreating “the same table, the same rug . . . the same new and unique beauty”.



'The Glass of Wine' (c1659-61) © Christoph Schmidt, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, PK



'The Milkmaid' (1658-59) © Rijksmuseum



'Girl with a Pearl Earring' (1664–67) © Margareta Svensson

It is this extraordinary unity that the Rijksmuseum can now demonstrate at full reach; there are only a couple of serious omissions — Vienna's summation "The Art of Painting", and "The Astronomer", which the Louvre lent to Abu Dhabi instead of Amsterdam.

An early revelation is the Frick's "Officer and Laughing Girl", a luminously sweet, unusually constructed conversation piece. The soldier, huge in his spreading beaver hat, is seen only from the back, but one feels the force of his attention, setting the diminutive girl's animated features aglow as light streams through the window, picking out the gold in her dress.

A decade later, "Girl with a Pearl Earring" surveys us enquiringly; the face, built from countless highlights in the glinting eyes and half-open lips, is radiant yet uncertain in its youthful vulnerability — the innocently spirited "Laughing Girl" evolved into the enigmatic "Mona Lisa" of Dutch art.



'The Geographer' (1669) © Städel Museum

Recurring likenesses — round face, wide-apart eyes, strong jaw — and the close-up intimacy of small informal pictures such as “Girl with a Red Hat” suggest Vermeer’s wife and daughters as models, enhancing our sense of being within the magic circle of his domestic/painterly existence. Although the scope occasionally widens, the subject remains the mind engaged. The focus on maps in “The Geographer” brings continents and oceans into a tiny study. “The Lacemaker”’s expression is a haze of concentrated effort, as every object around her absorbs light differently: transparent filigree thread, glossy wooden board, pins glittery as the pearls on her lace collar.

Dutch artist Jan Veth saw Vermeer’s paintings as forged “from the dust of crushed pearls”. Among the pearl pictures, “Woman with a Pearl Necklace” and “Woman Holding a Balance” are both about acute looking and equilibrium, and they face each other in a specially rewarding pairing. As she adjusts her jewels, the girl’s rapturous gaze in the mirror “penetrates the breadth of the picture,” says curator Gregor Weber, while the veiled woman, testing the scales as she stands between spilling pearls and a painting of the Last Judgment, has an ecstatic calm. Weighing worldly delights of vision, touch and luxury against the spiritual sphere, she embodies the balance in all Vermeer’s art.



'Woman with a Pearl Necklace' (c1662-64) © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

So potent is his vision of interiority and the eternal presence of things that when you leave the show, the other paintings in the Rijksmuseum's permanent collection look suddenly too large, obvious, strident. Within his own tight emotional range, Vermeer casts a spell less explicable even than Rembrandt's, and never more bewitchingly than in this unrepeatable exhibition.

February 10-June 4, rijksmuseum.nl