

VISUAL ART

Johannes Vermeer — the story behind the blockbuster exhibition of the year

The Rijksmuseum has negotiated the loan of 28 of Vermeer's paintings for a new retrospective that plans to show as close a picture of the artist as we've had, says Laura Freeman



The girl with the pearl is reunited with her friends
MARGARETA SVENSSON

Laura Freeman | Saturday January 14 2023, 12.01am GMT, The Times

Johannes Vermeer was the man who wasn't there. No letters or diaries survive. He wrote no memoir. There are no quotes, no anecdotes, no reminiscences of famous friends. There are no sketchbooks, no drawings, no annotated books. His family home on the Oude Langendijk in Delft, where he lived with his mother-in-law, Maria Thins, his wife, Catharina, and their 11 children, is gone. The house where Vermeer was born in 1632, an inn called the Flying Fox, run by his father, Reynier Janszoon Vermeer, is now a staging post on walking tours. At the back of the building is a lavatory decorated with old Delft tiles. Two have been dated to the 17th-century. It is possible, just possible, that the infant Vermeer might have gazed at those tiles.

He might have learnt to paint under Carel Fabritius, famous for his eye-tricking *Goldfinch* (1654). He might have studied in Amsterdam or Utrecht. We know he married Catharina in April 1653 and that he was admitted to the artists' Guild of St Luke soon after. Vermeer's parents were Reformed Protestants, Catharina a Catholic. Johannes converted.

The entry on Vermeer in the *Grove Dictionary of Artists* hums and haws and hedges its bets: “The identity of Vermeer’s teacher or teachers has long been debated”; “this has led to the misleading theory”; “there is no evidence . . .” Scholars hypothesize, experts differ, dates are invariably given as “circa”. He might have used a camera obscura — an early light projector — to achieve his lambent effects. Then again, he might not. There are a few words about Vermeer in a poem, a handful of dates in official town ledgers, an inventory of possessions found after his death. All that Vermeer left are his paintings. But what an all.



The Geographer, 1669
STYVOEL MUSEUM

Some say 37, others 36. The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, which in February opens the largest exhibition of the artist’s work yet, suggests a cautious 35. Over the years there have been disputes, misattributions, demotions, promotions, more-in-hope-than-expectations, thefts and downright dirty fakes. The Dutch forger Han van Meegeren, who painted 20th-century takes on the Dutch Golden Age masters, became a national anti-hero when it turned out that one of his agents has gulled the Nazi Hermann Göring into buying *Christ with the Adulteress*, a much adulterated “Vermeer”.

The Rijksmuseum has negotiated the loan of 28 of Vermeer’s paintings. I’d say the exhibition was unprecedented if the word were not so overused. The catalyst for the show was the closure of the Frick Collection in New York for several years’ renovation. According to the terms of the Frick bequest, the collection may not lend works bought by Henry Clay Frick, although it may lend paintings acquired later. But just as the Wallace Collection in London “reinterpreted” Lady Wallace’s 1897 will to allow it to lend Titian’s *Perseus and Andromeda* to the National Gallery’s [Titian: Love, Desire, Death](#) show in 2020, so the Frick has loosened its rules to lend its three Vermeers: *Officer and Laughing Girl*, *Mistress and Maid* and *The Girl Interrupted at Her Music*. From Frankfurt comes *The Astronomer*, from Washington *The Woman Holding a Balance*, from Dublin *The Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid* and from the Mauritshuis in the Hague *The Girl with a Pearl Earring*.

Search *Girl with a Pearl Earring* online and the first question that comes up is: “Is the movie *The Girl With the Pearl Earring* based on a true story?” Yes, no, maybe so. Vermeer is the perfect artist for fiction. [Tracy Chevalier](#)’s novel *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999), the starting point for the 2003 Scarlett Johansson and Colin Firth film, has sold more than five million copies. No pedant can say: that’s not what happened, or Vermeer wasn’t like that, or there never was a maid called Griet, and even if there was, she certainly wasn’t a model.

We don’t know what Vermeer looked like. There’s a tantalising reference to a Vermeer self-portrait “uncommonly beautiful painted” in a sale catalogue of 1696. It may yet be found in a Low Countries attic. It is tempting to see the figure in *The Art of Painting* (c 1666-1667) as Vermeer himself, albeit unsatisfactorily painted from the back. But it would surely be easier to get a man in to sit than to try to imagine what one’s own back and fashionably shredded jacket might look like from behind?



Officer and Laughing Girl, 1657-58
JOHANNES VERMEER

In her intriguing book *Traces of Vermeer*, the painter Jane Jelley offers the theory – irresistible, if unprovable – that the artist left a tiny self-portrait in *The Young Woman with a Water Jug* (c 1662) from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Such ruses were common among Dutch still-life painters. Pieter Claesz showed his distorted reflection in a mirrored sphere in his Nuremberg Vanitas *Still Life* (c 1630). Clara Peeters included her minute reflection in the lid of the jug in *Still Life with Cheeses, Almonds and Pretzels* (c 1615). Go on the Mauritshuis website and zoom all the way in. In an act of sheer showing-off, Peeters paints her self-portrait ten times over in the highly polished roundels of the right-hand goblet in *Still Life with a Vase of Flowers, Goblets and Shells* (1612). Now zoom in on the Vermeer pitcher on the Metropolitan’s website. Could Jelley be right? Is there not a man in a blue shirt, his face faintly pink, his arm at an angle holding a palette? Oh, how I want to believe.

“Most mysterious”, Taco Dibbits, director of the Rijksmuseum, calls Vermeer. Speaking on the phone from the Dutch Ambassador’s Residence in London, Dibbits says: “You can’t really grasp him. His paintings, his interiors have such intimacy, yet leave so much to the imagination.”

The smallest Vermeer discovery is international news. “RIJKSMUSEUM REVEALS GROUNDBREAKING DISCOVERIES ON VERMEER’S PAINTING THE MILKMAID,” read the press release that thundered into my inbox last September. A team of conservators, restorers and scientists had used advanced Macro-XRF and RIS scanning technologies to uncover changes to *The Milkmaid* underpainting including sketches for several jugs that the painter had later abandoned, and an outline of a fire basket, painted over with a foot stove and tiles. Hold the front page! With other artists, you have to come up with a cache of love letters, an illegitimate child or, better yet, nasty outdated opinions to warrant a news story.

A fire basket, if you’re wondering, was woven from willow stems, or withies. A fire bowl containing glowing coals would be placed in the basket to keep newborns warm and to dry nappies. In addition to the 11 surviving Vermeer children, four died in infancy. One certain truth noted by Chevalier’s book and the film is that washing and drying linen for a household of 14, in a rainy country, during the Little Ice Age, was no fun. Grinding pigments and priming canvases was nice, cushy indoor work if you could get it.



The Little Street c1658-59
RIJKSMUSEUM CAROLA VAN NULK

An inventory of Vermeer’s effects, taken in February 1676, after the artist’s death the previous December, shows that the household owned just such a fire basket. The clerk who came to scour the house and studio set it all down: 21 children’s shirts, assorted bedpans, pocket-handkerchiefs, muffs and foot warmers. There was an ash-grey travel cloak, a great wooden painted coffer and a yellow satin mantle with a white fur trim. Sound familiar? The mantle is there in *The Woman with a Lute*, *The Woman with a Pearl Necklace*, *A Lady Writing*, *Mistress and Maid*, *The Love Letter* and *The Guitar Player*. When it came to props and costumes, Vermeer got his mantle’s money’s worth. *The Guitar Player*, incidentally, was the one Vermeer Dibbits didn’t dare ask for. She is “too fragile” to travel. Lucky Brits can visit her at Kenwood House in Hampstead, north London.

Among the detritus of Vermeer's family life were also a tin butter pot, an old lantern, a pewter salad colander, a bad bed and a tin waterpot or chamber pot. There were five books in folio, 25 further books of all kinds, five or six old books and "three bundles of all sorts of prints". This unhappy posthumous document is one of the fullest records we have of Vermeer's life and work. It's a modest, motley collection. When the spendthrift, shop-happy Rembrandt van Rijn declared himself bankrupt in Amsterdam in 1656, bailiffs made a record of his cabinet of curiosities. They found busts of Caesar, Socrates, Seneca and Aristotle; paintings by old masters and noble contemporaries; a giant helmet, a wooden trumpet, a child by Michelangelo; bows and arrows, shells and spears, zithers and bells, gongs and flutes, Javanese dolls and African flasks; pistols, canes and curved cuirasses; globes and Chinese porcelain; an elephant tusk, an armadillo and a crocodile – both stuffed. Contrast this with the Delft clerk's dismissive final entry for Vermeer's studio: "The contents of some rummage not worthy of being itemised separately."

The bundles of prints were leftovers from Vermeer's second – or even first – career as a picture dealer. He sold prints, paintings and probably maps of the sort that hang in the background of pictures such as *The Geographer*, *The Art of Painting* and *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*. The 1670s were a bad time for painters and dealers. There was a market crash in 1672 – the so-called Rampjaar or Disaster Year – after French troops invaded the Dutch Republic. Vermeer couldn't find buyers for his pictures or anyone else's. In a document presented to the High Court after her husband's death, Catharina would tell how money worries and bad business had pushed Vermeer into a state of "decay and decadence" that led to his death "of a frenzy" in December 1675. The artist died in the shortest days of the year when the light for painting was scarce.

Light! We haven't talked about light yet. Reproduction dims Vermeer's lights. Pearls lose their lustre, white cuffs and collars turn grey, you miss the motes of dust. Art historians talk of Vermeer's pointillés: tiny dots of paint that subtly dissolve edges, recreating the effect of sunlight on surfaces. Spot them on the hunks of bread in *The Milkmaid* or on the ruched and ruffled carpets on the table in *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window*. Get as close as the Rijks guards allow.



RAIN, STEAM, AND GREAT RAILWAY BRIDGE
J.M.W. TURNER, 1844

There's a chair with a pair of lion finials that recurs in several paintings. Look out for them. See how subtly Vermeer varies the finish. Sometimes one lion is all in shadow, no more than a silhouette, while the other glistens as light catches the polish. The lion in *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* is a study in contour and shine. And that's before you even get to the pitcher, the salver, the glinting rivets, the white starched linen and roughly whitewashed wall, the window with its leads and irregular glass. Admire the woman's forearm and cuff. How immaculately Vermeer captures the sun on her skin and the way a frill of lace brightens a lamp-black sleeve.

Stillness too. That's the other word Vermeer inspires. Letters are read and written, milk is eternally poured, a woman waits for a balance to rest. Hardly anything happens, but Vermeer holds us in breathless suspense. He's the artist to redress the balance of our overstimulated age. "The paintings radiate a certain tranquillity," Dibbits says. "A stillness that we long for. When you look at Vermeer's paintings, time stops."

From February 10 to June 4, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (rijksmuseum.nl/vermeer)