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Johannes Vermeer, "The Milkmaid," c. 1660. Oil on canvas. (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam/Vereinig. (Rembrandt))

ART

There will never be another Vermeer show as great as this one

The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam has gathered 28 of 37 Vermeers for an international act of veneration



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AMSTERDAM — In 1995, it felt like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to visit the blockbuster [Vermeer show](#) organized by the [National Gallery of Art](#) in Washington. Curators had gathered 21 of the Dutch artist's some three dozen extant paintings, many of which rarely if ever traveled. Lines snaked around the block, the museum was overwhelmed by the fervor, and entrance passes were issued to control the crowds.

The cult of Vermeer, which had been practiced decorously by connoisseurs for at least a century — Marcel Proust and Edith Wharton were acolytes — became an international, ever-growing, pop-culture phenomenon, the stuff of novels, movies and popular documentaries and branded onto clothing, housewares and tchotchkes. When the rise of social media began about a decade later, Vermeer was ready, with suggestive but open-ended images perfectly suited to circulate as clever memes and icons of worldliness.

Now the world gathers once again for a great conclave of Vermeer. On Feb. 10, the [Rijksmuseum](#) will open an exhibition that includes 28 of what it argues are 37 known Vermeers, an even more impressive logistical accomplishment than the assemblage almost three decades ago. It turns out that the National Gallery exhibition was only a once-in-a-generation event, while this one almost certainly is the last great Vermeer show of a passing age in the history of museums, grand narratives and Western culture.



"Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window," 1657-58, by Johannes Vermeer. Oil on canvas. (Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden)

Even more important, scholars have been digging into the social, religious, gender and political context of Vermeer's paintings of women (and occasionally men), a vast shift in focus from the mid-20th century, when a popular art history textbook, by Ernst Gombrich, described Vermeer as a painter of still life, with occasional human props thrown in. We still know next to nothing about the man himself, beyond his birth and death dates (1632-1675), when he was married (1653) and a few other details, including his apparent despair after the French invaded the Netherlands in 1672, which tanked the economy, including Vermeer's personal fortunes. Almost everything else, including where and with whom he studied, is a matter of informed speculation.

But despite new insights and smart curation — Rijksmuseum co-curators Gregor J.M. Weber and Pieter Roelofs foreground Vermeer's Catholic faith, his association with the Jesuits and the Jesuits' interest in optical science — this is not a scholar's show. It is an international act of veneration, offering a tiny percentage of the world's most fortunate people the chance to demonstrate not just their interest in Vermeer, but also their devotion to him, by buying airline tickets, booking hotel rooms and posting on Instagram. (As I wrote those words, a handyman came into my hotel room to replace a missing picture, a photograph of a young woman in super-short cutoff jeans and a scanty top, with her head bound up by the blue-and-gold turban known around the world from the "Girl With a Pearl Earring.")



"Girl With a Pearl Earring," 1664-67, by Johannes Vermeer. Oil on canvas. (Mauritshuis, The Hague, Arnoldus Andries des Tombe bequest)



A woman dressed as the subject of Vermeer's "Girl With a Pearl Earring" poses for the media as scores of people wait to pick free tulips on National Tulip Day in Amsterdam on Jan. 21. (Peter Dejong/AP)

As of Monday morning, the Rijksmuseum had already sold 200,000 advance tickets. Local interest is vigorous, too. But some skepticism is in order, especially in one of the most environmentally conscious countries on the planet. Vermeer exhibitions aren't exactly carbon zero.

Taco Dibbits, general director of the Rijksmuseum, isn't surprised by the concern. But, he asks, without exhibitions like this one, what propels research forward? "We live in a time of general isolation," he says, while exhibitions still serve to create "a world without borders."



A climate protester wears a T-shirt depicting the "Girl With a Pearl Earring" painting under rising water in January. (Peter Dejong/AP)

So, is it worth it? I went in lightly armored with cynicism, which was stripped away as completely and effectively as the overpainting hiding that chubby naked Cupid in the Dresden Vermeer. The show is beautifully designed, with dramatic reveals and poignant sightlines. It begins with two cityscapes Vermeer made in his native Delft and then proceeds both thematically and roughly chronologically. Reproductions don't communicate the different scale of his work, from the large history paintings he made early in his career to the tiny "tronies" (character studies with particular attention to the head and face) for which he is particularly famous.

The Rijksmuseum is promoting the show with large blowups of details, the glint of milk pouring out of the jug in "The Milkmaid" or the lick of moisture on the lips of women in the tronies. That's smart, because it is details that justify the pilgrimage.



Johannes Vermeer's "The Milkmaid," c. 1660. Oil on canvas. (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam/Vereniging Rembrandt)

From reproductions, it is easy to miss the faint image of a face reflected in the open window of "[Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window.](#)" Positioned early in the show in a room by itself, this work introduces Vermeer's interest in domestic intimacy, and, suddenly, it felt of great importance. The reflection is a nice virtuoso trick, but it also brings an eerie double into a scene that captures aloneness and isolation. When we look at Vermeer's greatest works, the people he paints are real and substantial, while we are thin, spectral and transitory. They are also alone and content. But here is an image that complicates all that.

In a London painting known as "[A Young Woman Seated at a Virginal,](#)" there is a secondary highlight reflected on the faux-marble surface of the coffin-shaped harpsichord: light bouncing off the woman's arm or the white sleeve of her dress. It's another virtuoso moment, but it also makes her seem a more substantial figure. The usual reading of this painting emanates from the shadowy image of another painting behind her on the wall, "[The Procuress](#)" by Dirck van Baburen, which shows a nearly bare-breasted woman prostituted by an elderly madame.

But perhaps Vermeer's young woman isn't at all like the lewd figure behind her. Perhaps she's her own person, a soul emanating light, independent or opposite of this other, insubstantial woman seen only in a secondhand image within the image.

Details recalibrate our sense of another work, the Berlin "[Glass of Wine,](#)" which shows a scene rich with sexual overtones: a young woman with a wine glass, sharing the room with a man who holds the wine jug. Of course, this is a scene of seduction, except there isn't much or any wine in the glass. Perhaps she's drained it, or perhaps, given that the wide brim of the glass covers her eyes, this isn't a glass at all but a lens. Like wine, lenses make us see the world differently, and it's curious that the man in the picture, the supposed seducer, looks at her not with lechery or malice, but with curiosity and concern.



"The Glass of Wine," 1659-61, by Johannes Vermeer. Oil on canvas. (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Gemäldegalerie)

Lenses certainly changed the way Vermeer saw the world. The theory that he used a [camera obscura](#) — an early optical device that cast photographic-like images on the interior wall of a darkened box — is now widely accepted. We don't know whether he used the device to make actual paintings — tracing the ghostlike image reflected in the camera — or if experience with optical devices catalyzed an epiphany in how he saw the world, which he then transcribed independent of the machine. This exhibition argues for a more subtle thesis: that the fuzzy foregrounds and the blurry circular highlights seen in Vermeer were a visual discovery, laden with theological weight courtesy of the Jesuits, early adopters and practitioners of the science of optics.

There's no one key for unlocking the power of Vermeer, whose work is in another league from the intimate scenes, sumptuous fabrics and coy allusions painted by his contemporaries, Gerard ter Borch and Gabriël Metsu, among others. The optical way of seeing, however, offers one clue. Vermeer rendered the world not as it appears to the active eye, darting around to make sense of space, but as it appears through a lens. The details may be clear on a particular plane, often at the back of the image, near or identical to the wall, but everything else is progressively fuzzier depending on its distance from this plane of focus. And in Vermeer, fuzzy equates to poetic.

When we say that something “is pretty as a picture,” we are Vermeer's descendants. When we construct images of the world designed to make other people wish they could be there — vainly situating ourselves as objects of envy on social media — we honor Vermeer by making our own lives a little less livable. When we imagine it might be nice, for a moment, to be alone with our thoughts, in a perfect room with the light just a certain way, we extend and perpetuate the lovely lie at the core of so many of his works. Because Vermeer's people are never alone. No one who has ever posed for a picture, or appeared in one, ever is.

Time is always running out, but it never runs out in Vermeer. His most admired figures are all young, and beautiful, avatars of the golden age of being upper-middle class (a new era of prosperity fueled by colonialism, capitalism and the enslavement of others). Nothing seems to waste them, just as nothing seems to dent the popularity of Vermeer. Richly dressed, remote and substantial in their isolation, these magnificent creatures are consummate objects of desire: We want to be that person, to be with that person, to know what that person is feeling or thinking.

If Vermeer's works function well as memes, it is because they share that invitation to desire and projection common to the most effective memes. One might write at the base of an early and seemingly uncharacteristic Vermeer, “[Christ in the House of Martha and Mary](#),” “Find someone who looks at you the way Mary looks at Christ.” The fusion of imagery and moralism is so simple-minded, and so brilliant, that there is a kind of excess electrical charge, which is also true of the most effective, viral memes.



"Christ in the House of Martha and Mary," 1654-56, by Johannes Vermeer. Oil on canvas. (National Galleries of Scotland)

But time really is running out, on the middle class and on the world. Today's bourgeoisie — the audience for exhibitions like this one — lives in the dilapidated and disappearing remnants of Vermeer's idealized, mercantile milieu, where rooms were large but not palatial and a few of the best things in the closet were almost regal. The cost of perpetuating that world is an atmosphere clogged with greenhouse gases and weather on the boil. Even before it opens, time is running out on the Vermeer show, which closes in June. By then, too many people and yet not enough will have seen it, and if people are ambivalent about the costs and benefits of mega-exhibitions like this one today, it's hard to imagine anyone will attempt a reprise in our lifetimes.

Now I'm done, because nothing I say about Vermeer can compare with the inexhaustibility of Vermeer himself. I went in thinking I had already seen these paintings, or at least that I knew them, and it might be necessary to quibble with an exhibition that includes only Vermeer and none of his supremely gifted contemporaries. But I was wrong, and I was deeply moved. And now I want to go back and see them one more time, perhaps for the last time, before time runs out.

Vermeer Feb. 10-June 4 at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
rijksmuseum.nl/en.