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Vermeer: The once-in-a-lifetime display of the most beautiful paintings in the world

Hundreds of thousands will flock to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, searching for the otherworldly peace and tranquility imparted by the paintings of Johannes Vermeer



Lara Marlowe in Amsterdam and Delft
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This is as close to perfection as museum exhibitions come: 28 oil paintings by Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675) – three-quarters of those known to exist – at the [Rijksmuseum](#) in Amsterdam until June 4th. The largest Vermeer exhibition in history took eight years to organise and is unlikely to be repeated.

The “impossible dream” became possible when the Frick Collection in Manhattan, which normally does not lend its three Vermeers, closed for renovation, says Taco Dibbits, director of the Rijksmuseum.

The Rijks and Mauritshuis together own seven Vermeers. Museums in Berlin, Dresden, Dublin, Edinburgh, Frankfurt, London, New York, Paris, Tokyo and Washington DC, and a private collector, [US billionaire Thomas Kaplan](#), loaned the rest.

An unprecedented 200,000 tickets sold before the show even opened. All 450,000 tickets have been sold at this writing, though late-night openings may enable more people to see it. Failing that, the actor Stephen Fry has recorded an enjoyable, free viewing on the Rijksmuseum’s website.

One cannot help hoping there is an afterlife so that Vermeer, who died penniless in a time of war and economic collapse, may savour his posthumous triumph.

The only previous monographic Vermeer exhibition was held in Washington DC and The Hague in 1995-1996, with 22 paintings. Arthur K. Wheelock, one of the world's leading Vermeer experts and curator of that show, recalls people queuing for 12 hours in snow to see it. A 2017 exhibition entitled [Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting](#), at national galleries in Dublin and Washington and the Louvre, was hugely successful, though with half as many Vermeers.

The Astronomer (1668) is another aching absence, because the Louvre sent it to its partner museum in Abu Dhabi for 20 months. Städel Museum in Frankfurt came through with The Astronomer's counterpart, The Geographer (1669). He leans over a map, compass in hand, staring into space, perhaps dreaming of unexplored tropics.

The Rijksmuseum paid tribute to Rembrandt, the other great of Dutch Golden Age painting, with blockbuster exhibitions in 2015 and 2019. They owed Vermeer equal treatment.

We know virtually everything about Rembrandt's life, precious little about Vermeer's. Rembrandt painted nearly 80 self-portraits. We're not sure what Vermeer looked like, though the grinning young man in shadow to the left of The Procuress (1656) may be a self-portrait. He wears a black beret and has shoulder-length, curly, reddish hair.

Several masterpieces eluded the Rijksmuseum. The Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna said The Art of Painting (1666-68), considered to be Vermeer's most important work, was too fragile to lend. Vermeer kept the painting with him until he died.



The Geographer, Vermeer, 1669, oil on canvas.

These are the only Vermeers in which men are central figures. Anton van Leeuwenhoek, who discovered micro-organisms, may have been the model for both paintings. Van Leeuwenhoek was, like Vermeer, born in Delft in 1632 and buried in the Old Church. Local authorities asked him to administer Vermeer's widow's bankruptcy.

Was the Girl with the Pearl Earring (1664-67) a figment of Vermeer's imagination? Stand in front of her in Amsterdam, or travel to The Hague when she returns early to the Mauritshuis in April. Contemplate her creamy complexion, parted lips and longing, liquid eyes. She looks back at you. She is alive.

Pearl Earring sold for two guilders – about €1 – in 1881 and was bequeathed to the Mauritshuis in 1903.

The painting inspired Tracy Chevalier's 1999 novel, which sold five million copies and was made into a film with Scarlett Johansson and Colin Firth. Chevalier's imagination fanned the Vermeer mania that started when the 19th-century critic Théophile Thoré rediscovered the long-forgotten painter and dubbed him the Sphinx of Delft.

[Forget the romance: Vermeer was a modern artist]

The Milkmaid (1658-59) too is part of the world's visual lexicon. A kitchen maid, dressed in a yellow bodice and lapis blue apron, Vermeer's favourite colours, pours milk from a jug. Vermeer's trademark pointillé dapples the bread crusts and ordinary objects with pearls of light. Like figures in other paintings, she concentrates intensely but appears somehow elsewhere. Action in Vermeer's paintings is minimal, often suspended.

Vermeer records every detail of the kitchen: damp plaster on the window wall; the nail and its shadow above the milkmaid's head; a foot warmer; Delft tiles comprising the floor skirting.



The Milkmaid, Vermeer, 1658-59, oil on canvas.

Advanced scanning technologies have revealed that Vermeer painted out a shelf with jugs and a large basket on the floor. He did no preparatory sketches, but painted directly on to the canvas, altering his composition as he went along, usually simplifying.

“It was important for him to isolate the figure of the milkmaid against the white wall. The effect is to make her more monumental, a sort of sculpture,” says Gregor J.M. Weber, co-curator of the exhibition. “Less is more was one of Vermeer’s mottos.”

Vermeer joined the painters’ guild in Delft in 1653, the year he married. He spent four years trying his hand at mythological and religious themes. *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (1657-58), on loan from Dresden, is the first painting that is immediately recognisable as a Vermeer.

A delicate woman whose blonde hair is arranged in a chignon with falling tendrils stands before an open window, her face reflected in the leaded panes. She clutches a letter in both hands and reads as if her life depended on it. A beautifully rendered Persian carpet and still life of fruit in a Chinese bowl appear on the table in the foreground. Infra-red studies found a cupid on the wall behind her, which had been painted over after Vermeer’s death. The theatre masque at cupid’s feet could be a premonition of duplicity. With Vermeer, there is always a story, but we are never certain what it is.

Officer and Laughing Girl (1657-58), from the Frick Collection, shows a seated man in a red coat and beaver hat conversing with a young woman wearing a gold and black bodice and white kerchief. The fresh-faced girl smiles engagingly, which is almost unique in Vermeer’s oeuvre. The map behind her appears in other paintings and could signify an absent loved one or the tremendous wealth of Holland as a trading nation.



Officer and Laughing Girl, Vermeer, 1657-58, oil on canvas.

The Rijksmuseum published Weber's book *Johannes Vermeer, Faith, Light and Reflection* to coincide with the exhibition. Despite a lack of documentary evidence, Weber has no doubt that Vermeer, who was baptised into the Dutch Reformed Church, converted to Catholicism. "To marry a Catholic woman and live in a Catholic neighbourhood, you had to be Catholic and bring up your children as Catholics," he says.

Jesuit doctrine influenced Vermeer's paintings, particularly the bizarre *Allegory of the Catholic Faith* (1670-74), his last work. Other canvases can be interpreted as morality tales.

The *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* (1662-64), from Berlin, holds a necklace up to her reflection in a mirror. She wears the yellow, fur-trimmed jacket that belonged to Vermeer's wife, and which we encounter in several paintings. The exquisitely quiet scene is in fact a typically Jesuit warning against the sin of vanity, says Weber.

The ethereal face of the *Woman Holding a Balance* (1662-64), from Washington, studies the small scale she dangles from her right hand. Gold and pearls are scattered on the table before her. A painting of *The Last Judgment* hangs behind her.

"The Last Judgment is a Catholic subject, because Calvinists believed one was predestined," Weber says. The tiny scales are empty. Is the woman weighing souls? Or merely the light glinting off the metal balance? With Vermeer, God is in the details.



Woman Holding a Balance, Vermeer, c. 1662-64, oil on canvas.

Seventeenth-century Delft was a centre for optical research, which Jesuits embraced as a way of exploring God's creation. Weber believes Vermeer used optical equipment at the Jesuit station next door to his home in the so-called Papists' Corner of Delft to perfect his painting technique.

The mainly Protestant Dutch Republic had just fought an 80-year war with Catholic Spain when Vermeer fell in love with Catharina Bolnes, a Catholic. Her family owned brick factories, so while she was more affluent than Vermeer, she also belonged to a persecuted minority. Catholics were not allowed to hold office or organise public gatherings.

Johannes and Catharina's first wedding banns were crossed out in the register, probably at the instigation of her mother, Maria Thins. The second time, Vermeer dispatched two friends, a painter and a ship's captain, to Thins' house to plead with her. She refused to give formal permission, but signed a document saying she would "not prevent or hinder" the marriage. It is on display in the Vermeer's Delft exhibition at Museum Prinsenhof in Delft.

The couple lived with Thins for 15 years. It cannot have been easy. Catharina bore 15 children, of whom 11 survived infancy. Vermeer was under great pressure to support them and is believed to have retreated from the noise and stress into his studio sanctuary.

“He loved his children, of course, but he also needed to live in the idealised world of his paintings,” Weber speculates. That idealised world was an illusion. “He depicted the very rich. The marble floors and other things were invented ... Vermeer wanted to match the status of his new family, to be a member of the upper class.”

The art history professor Frans Grijzenhout identified in 2015 the location where Vermeer painted *The Little Street* (1658-59). The red brick facade had been fissured by the explosion of the Delft powder magazine in 1654. Known as *The Delft Thunderclap*, the explosion claimed dozens of lives, including the painter Carel Fabritius.



View of Houses in Delft, known as *The Little Street*, Vermeer, 1658-59, oil on canvas.

Vermeer’s aunt sold tripe from a stand in the market to support her family, and lived in the house portrayed in *The Little Street*. Could she be the woman sewing in the open doorway? Or the figure cleaning in the alley? The only children in Vermeer’s oeuvre play on the stoop. The aunt’s house was rebuilt in the 19th century, but the alley is unchanged.

If one stands at the confluence of the canals and Schie river where Vermeer painted his *View of Delft* (1660-61), the skyline is recognisable, marked by the towers of the New Church and Old Church, where Vermeer was baptised and buried.

Marcel Proust called the View of Delft the most beautiful painting in the world. At an exhibition in Paris, his character Bergotte, a writer, goes into ecstasy over a little yellow wall – in fact a rooftop – bathed in sunlight and concludes: “That is how I ought to have written”. Bergotte collapses and dies in the museum.

Nothing, or very little, happens in Vermeer’s paintings. Yet hundreds of thousands of people will flock to the Rijksmuseum by June 4th, retreating from our over-stimulated age, searching for the otherworldly peace and tranquillity imparted by Vermeer’s paintings.

There is something similar about the oeuvres of Vermeer and Proust; the slow pace at which they were created, the minutiae and perfectionism, the desire to freeze time. “If a thing happens once,” the late poet Derek Mahon wrote, “It happens once forever”.

[Marcel Proust and Ireland: In search of connections]