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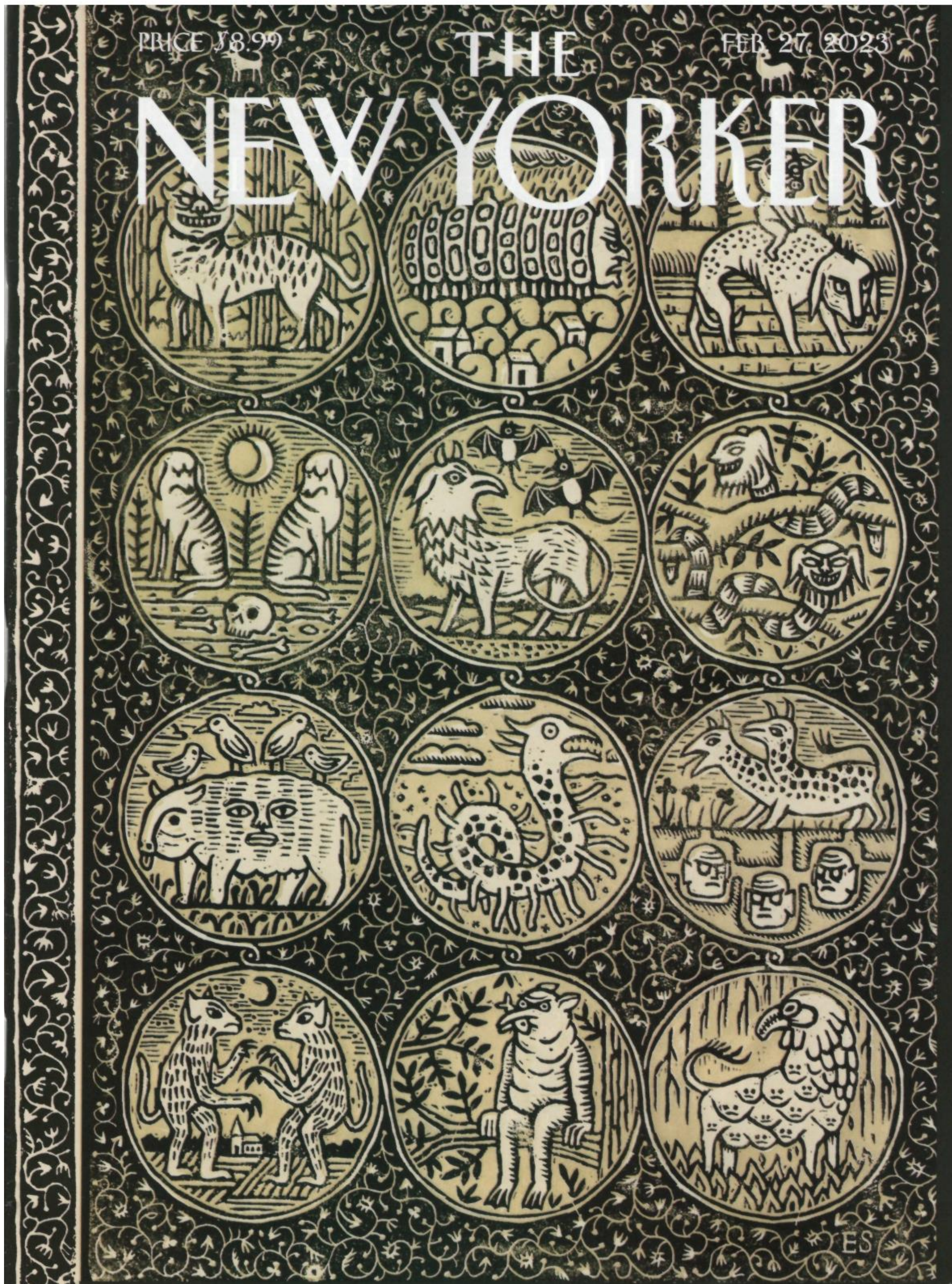


JOHANNES VERMEER / COURTESY MAURITSHUIS / RIJKSMUSEUM

THE ART WORLD

DUTCH TREAT

A bravura show at the Rijksmuseum gathers more Vermeers at once than the artist himself ever saw.

BY REBECCA MEAD

In the spring of 1914, James Simon, an art collector in Berlin, was approached by a London-based dealer with a proposition: Would he accept two hundred and fifty thousand dollars for a work in his collection, Johannes Vermeer's "Mistress and Maid"? The would-be buyer was Henry Clay Frick, the American industrialist, who in the late nineteenth century had embarked on an acquisition binge of Old Masters, and who already owned two works by the seventeenth-century painter from Delft. Simon's answer was definitive: although he had received equally lavish offers from other buyers—Frick was far from alone in his desire to gild his Gilded Age fortune with Golden Age masterpieces—he would not part with the painting. Five years and a crippling Great War later, however, Simon found himself in a weaker bargaining position, and for nearly three hundred thousand dollars—the equivalent of roughly

In "View of Delft" (circa 1660), Vermeer hangs the sky with low cumulus clouds. He paints dampness as well as light.

five million dollars today—"Mistress and Maid" was shipped across the Atlantic to Frick's mansion, on Fifth Avenue, where its new owner enjoyed only a short while in its company before his death, in late 1919. The painting—which depicts a lady seated at a table with a writing set, interrupted by a maid holding a letter—has remained at the mansion more or less undisturbed ever since. Frick turned his home into a museum bearing his name, and it has long been its policy not to lend his acquisitions to other institutions.

In 2021, when the Frick started renovations at the mansion and moved its collection off-site, a chink of light in the institution's tightly shuttered terms was spotted: during this interregnum, the works could finally travel. "Mistress and Maid"—along with the Frick's two other Vermeers, "Officer and Laughing Girl" and "Girl Interrupted at Her Music"—has now recrossed the Atlantic, returning to the Netherlands for a landmark show at the Rijksmuseum, in Amsterdam. The Rijksmuseum has corralled enough Vermeers to make the most hard-hearted of robber barons swoon—twenty-eight paintings, out of an acknowledged thirty-six or thirty-seven surviving works by the artist, who may have produced no more than fifty in his short lifetime. (Vermeer died suddenly in 1675, at the age of forty-three.) As Taco Dibbits, the general director of the Rijksmuseum, points out, the exhibition gathers more Vermeers in one place than Vermeer himself ever had the opportunity to see.

"Mistress and Maid," which Vermeer painted sometime in the mid-sixteen-sixties—and which used to hang in the West Gallery of the Frick mansion, near works by Rembrandt and Constable—now has a wall of its own, at the heart of the exhibition. At right angles to it hangs "A Lady Writing," which was acquired in 1907 by another art-hungry American, John Pierpont Morgan, and is now in the collection of the National Gallery, in Washington. (The National Gallery held its own blockbuster Vermeer show in the mid-nineties, bringing together what was then an unprecedented twenty-one works.) The two paintings have thematic and stylistic commonalities. Each shows a fair-haired woman, finely dressed in a yellow satin jacket and seated at a table, with a pen in her right hand and a sheet of paper at the ready. Each displays Vermeer's uncanny command of optical effects, with a dissolving focus on the fur trim of the jacket and a sheeny light reflected from a pearl earring. A blue tablecloth is rucked up in almost identical disarray, a circumstance that would be nothing but an annoyance to an actual letter writer—who doesn't prefer to lay paper on a smooth surface?—but which reminds a viewer that these are carefully staged scenes, with the folds of those draperies as deliberately arranged as the garments of a Renaissance Madonna. It is peculiarly moving to see these two works, which were painted within two years of each other, in juxtaposition. A viewer can take in one, and then the other, with a turn of the head no greater than that of the woman represented in either painting. Between them, these works consumed perhaps a year of Vermeer's labor—a scrupulous rendering of bourgeois appurtenances and a faithful imagining of internal lives, which might better be described as an act of devotion.

The Rijksmuseum show, which extends across ten galleries in the museum's special-exhibition wing, is organized thematically—Vermeer's use of musical instruments; Vermeer's depiction of gentleman callers—with works from differing periods placed together to show them to their best effect, like artfully rumpled drapery. (The gallery design, by Wilmotte & Associés Architectes, is similarly deft: extensive velvet drapes muffle the murmur of visitors, while the walls are painted in rich, dark colors lifted from a seventeenth-century palette.) A less than strict chronology also orders the display, which begins with Vermeer's only two known exterior scenes: "The Little Street," one of four works by the artist in the Rijksmuseum's own collection, and "View of Delft," which was borrowed from the Mauritshuis, in The Hague, and was painted in about 1660. The latter work, a cityscape in which the red-roofed town appears as a horizontal sliver between glimmering water below and a wide swath of sky above, inspired the rediscovery, beginning in the eighteen-sixties, of Vermeer, whose reputation had languished in the preceding two centuries. Its subject is light, which, as the artist expertly renders it, turns the spire of the Nieuwe Kerk a pale buttercream. But the painting also conveys the sensation of atmospheric humidity. In a catalogue essay, Pieter Roelofs, one of the show's curators and the head of paintings and sculpture at the museum, points out that Vermeer hangs this sky with low cumulus clouds of a sort that were almost never represented by his contemporaries. In this canvas, as in "The Little Street," with its weeping brickwork and stained whitewash, Vermeer paints dampness as well as light.

One of the best-known facts about Vermeer is how little is known about him; few documents survive him, and there are no contemporaneous descriptions of his methods, or accounts by his sitters. There are no drawings by him, or any definitive likenesses of him, though the three-quarter profile of a figure in an early work, "The Procuress," suggests that it may be a self-portrait. It's not the kind of sublimely refined figure one might imagine Vermeer to have been, however; this man is a sly, grinning onlooker to a lewd brothel scene, in which a soldier is putting a coin in a young woman's open palm with his right hand and cupping her breast proprietorially with his left. This large canvas, which Vermeer painted when he was in his early twenties, is on loan from the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden; it shares a gallery with several other paintings from the beginning of Vermeer's career, when he was experimenting with religious and mythological themes in various styles, among them Italianate. Aspiring Vermeer completists based in America or Europe will be grateful that the Rijksmuseum has included "Saint Praxedis"—a work, only in the past decade confirmed to be by Vermeer, that is usually displayed in the National Museum of Western Art, in Tokyo. An uninspired copy of an uninspiring painting by Felice Ficherelli, the work—which depicts a sweet-faced saint wringing from a sponge the blood of a nearby martyr who has just been decapitated—would hardly justify a trip to Japan.

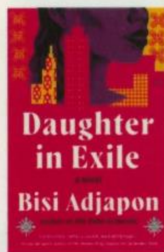
Little is known about Vermeer's painting of St. Praxedis—the attribution hinged in part on the fact that

the canvas bears the signature "Meer 1655." But Roelofs and his co-curator, Gregor J. M. Weber, who is the Rijksmuseum's head of fine and decorative arts, suggest that scholarship has in fact uncovered a considerable amount of detail about Vermeer's life, beliefs, and practices. Of particular interest is an inventory of household objects made after his death, many of which Vermeer used and reused in his paintings, like the costumes and props kept by a travelling theatrical company: curtains, chairs, Oriental carpets, the yellow jacket with its fur trim. There is no trace of the lenses or other optical devices that many critics (and the artist David Hockney) have argued Vermeer must have employed. Weber, though, proposes that Vermeer obtained a camera obscura—in which a chink of light in an otherwise shuttered chamber produces an inverted image of the outside world—from a Jesuit church next door to his house. (The Jesuits had embraced the device as a tool for observing divine light.) Weber found a drawing, made by one of the priests, Isaac van der Mye, that features idiosyncrasies of the camera-obscura technique.

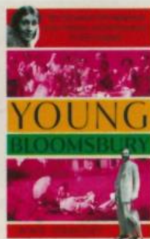
Mostly, however, there are only the paintings to go on. High-tech analyses, at the Rijksmuseum and elsewhere, have uncovered sometimes surprising evidence about Vermeer's methods. A single gallery is dedicated to "Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window," on loan from Dresden. Generations of museumgoers have known the work as a virtuoso exploration of perspective: a drawn curtain in the foreground reveals a rug-draped table, beyond which stands a girl with a bare wall behind her. More than forty years ago, X-ray technology revealed that behind the girl's head Vermeer had originally placed a large painting of a cupid, which had been covered up; in 2017, further analysis determined that the overpainting had been done decades after Vermeer's death. The cupid painting has now been painstakingly uncovered, and it takes up a quarter of the canvas, offering an unsubtle indication of the girl's thoughts. The painting, though, is most mesmerizing in its tiniest details, such as the points of light on the silken ends of the curtain's tassels. An exquisite reflection of the girl's

BRIEFLY NOTED

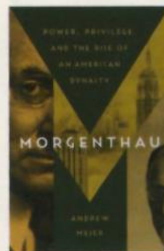
This Other Eden, *by Paul Harding (Norton).* This historical novel takes inspiration from the formation, in the mid-nineteenth century—and, in 1912, the forced eviction—of a mixed-race fishing community on Malaga Island, Maine. Harding's version is called Apple Island, and he movingly depicts the islanders' dispossession. He imbues his characters with mythological weight—a world-drowning flood is the island's foundational story—without losing the texture of their daily lives, which are transformed by a white missionary. Of his presence, one islander observes, "No good ever came of being noticed by mainlanders," foreshadowing the arrival of eugenicist doctors wielding skull-measuring calipers, a project to remake the island as a tourist destination, and the destruction of the community.



Daughter in Exile, *by Bisi Adjapon (HarperVia).* In this bildungsroman wrapped in a migrant story, Lola, a pregnant Ghanaian, travels to New York to join her fiancé, an American marine. After he ghosts her, she ends up near Washington, D.C., relying on the generosity of a succession of strangers and friends to navigate the harsh realities of life in the U.S. Her experience of sisterhood and solidarity among women reshapes her understanding of her relationship with her own mother. "In this world, you never know when you'll be the one in need of help," one benefactor tells Lola. "Who knows, one day my child might need someone too."



Young Bloomsbury, *by Nino Strachey (Atria).* This lively group biography offers an intimate glimpse of the Bright Young Things, the artistic coterie that emerged in the nineteen-twenties as successors to the prewar Bloomsburyites. Members included Eddy Sackville-West, a novelist and cousin of Virginia Woolf's lover Vita Sackville-West, and John Strachey, a journalist and cousin of Lytton Strachey. The author, herself a member of the Strachey clan, sees "transgressive sociability" as a hallmark of this generation, whose members were proto-"social influencers" and moved "seamlessly between gallery, studio, and nightclub." She applauds the group's embrace of sexual freedom, which gave queer members a sense of "life-affirming normality in a generally hostile adult world" and fostered "an inclusive way of living not seen again for another century."



Morgenthau, *by Andrew Meier (Random House).* Opening in 1866 in New York with the arrival from Germany of Lazarus Morgenthau, a Bavarian Jew who'd lost a cigar empire to American tariffs, this book traces the ups and downs (but mostly ups) of the family's fortunes over four generations, providing a window on a century and a half of the city's history. Lazarus's son Henry was a lawyer, a real-estate baron, and a diplomat, whose son Henry, Jr., served Franklin Roosevelt as Treasury Secretary; *his* son, Robert, was the city's longest-serving District Attorney, who oversaw some three million cases. There's enough here for four separate biographies, but Meier ably synthesizes the various strands, finding family likenesses among his disparate subjects.

head in the open window is a visual doubling that also poses a question: Could she be of two minds about the love letter she is reading, the cupid's looming presence notwithstanding?

One way to insure that your show has a record-breaking count of Vermeers is to be inclusive in your accounting. From the National Gallery comes not just the small, fabulous "Girl with the Red Hat"—whose gamine subject glances over her shoulder with an expression that somehow falls on the border between total confidence and total unease—but also "Girl with a Flute," a figure with similar features less finely rendered. The National Gallery recently downgraded "Flute" to "Studio of Johannes Vermeer," even though nothing is known of the artist's having had pupils or associates of any sort. The National Gallery contends that its analysis of the paint and the brushwork suggests a less skillful hand than Vermeer's; the Rijksmuseum counters that similar deficits can also be found in other, uncontested works by Vermeer.

Across the gallery is another attribution puzzle. The delicate "Lacemaker," usually housed at the Louvre, has been hung alongside "Young Woman Seated at a Virginal," whose authorship was questioned until, among other things, it was determined that the canvas had a weave matching that of the Louvre painting, and likely came from the same bolt. ("Young Woman Seated at a Virginal" is the only mature work by Vermeer to be in private hands; it belongs to Thomas Kaplan, an American billionaire businessman, and his wife, Daphne Recanati Kaplan, who also own the largest private collection of works by Rembrandt. Unlike Frick, Kaplan and his wife do not live with their art; they have gathered their paintings and drawings as the Leiden Collection, which operates as an Old Master lending library.)

The exhibit has a few unfortunate absences, including one of Vermeer's most resplendent compositions, "The Art of Painting," which depicts a painter working on a model posing as Clio, the Muse of history, in a studio more sumptuous than Vermeer could ever have afforded, with black-and-white marble floor tiles and a brass chandelier. The painting's owner, the Kunsthistorisches Museum, in Vienna, declined to lend it, citing in part its fragility (though it travelled five times between 1999 and 2004). The Louvre's other Vermeer, "The Astronomer," had already been promised to the Louvre Abu Dhabi. The pendant piece to it, "The Geographer," on loan from Frankfurt, is therefore the show's only image of a solitary man. The light from a window falls on his globe, his papers, and his forehead, "emphasizing the scientist's intellectual focus on the world," according to the wall text nearby.

Vermeer's greater fascination was with the world of women—mistresses and maids alike. "Girl with a Pearl Earring" is on short-term loan; she goes back to the Mauritshuis at the end of March, two months before the exhibition closes. If Vermeer's more accessorized interiors have their contemporary, bastardized equivalents in curated Instagram posts, "Girl with a Pearl Earring" is a paparazzi shot—its subject looks startled and not especially gratified by the attention. In "Woman in Blue Reading a Letter," both the subject's capacious robe and the shadows on the wall behind her are painted—like the pearl girl's head scarf—with precious ultramarine pigment. This costly choice lends a celestial touch to the mundane, an effect that Vermeer also employed when rendering the lead panes on the window of "Young Woman with a Water Pitcher," which is owned by the Metropolitan Museum. (That painting, and two of the Met's other Vermeers, have stayed in New York, either because they are too fragile to travel or because the terms of their bequest forbid it, although the Met has lent its two remaining Vermeer works.) In "Woman in Blue Reading a Letter," the figure rests her arm on a swelling belly, suggesting that she is pregnant—as Vermeer's wife, Catharina Bolnes, who bore fourteen or fifteen children in twenty-two years, was for most of their marriage. Scholars are justified in characterizing Vermeer's works—created in a domestic context that must often have been chaotic—as representing idealized moments of calm. But only a critic who has never been pregnant would look at a woman who appears to be in her third trimester and see stillness. The woman in blue is gripping the letter tightly with both hands—a map on the wall could signify that her partner is away at sea—and, in addition to her roiling emotions, she must be feeling the kicks and squirms of an imminent newcomer.

The jewel of the Rijksmuseum's own Vermeer collection, "The Milkmaid," is given a room of its own—something the young model who posed for the painting most likely did not enjoy. "The Milkmaid" is an exploration of minimalism, three hundred years *avant la lettre*. A recent analysis of the painting's surface revealed that Vermeer painted over a row of jugs that once hung behind the milkmaid's head, leaving a bare wall with the tonal nuances of a Morandi. The wall's surface is rendered with infinite care, its nails and holes painted in sharp relief. The graduation of shadow and light contributes to the sense of verisimilitude, though Vermeer adjusts optics for the sake of art by painting the jigsaw piece of wall between the jug and the milkmaid's arm a brighter hue, the better to accentuate her gesture. The eye is tricked into believing that it sees the world reproduced; what it actually sees is the world enhanced.

The viewer's vantage is that of someone seated slightly below the standing milkmaid, granting her a sturdy monumentality, her humble work elevated and dignified. She is a remarkable presence—worth waiting one's turn to lean against the velvet-covered guardrail that protects each painting, and taking a moment to commune with her. Critics have noted that a tiny cupid appears on a tile edging the wall behind her. Perhaps Vermeer intended viewers to infer that his milkmaid, too, had love on her mind. But who's to say that she is not, rather, reflecting on the task of pouring milk from a heavy jug—on the care that she must take in doing so, on the strength in her young arms? Perhaps she is thinking of neither love nor work, and is instead reflecting on how the slow, perpetual flow of milk serves as an endless measure of time—just as it appears to us now, as we regard her in her reverie. Like Vermeer's other women, the milkmaid evades trite allegory. The light falls on her forehead, too. ♦