

ARTnews

Curator Behind 1995 Vermeer Retrospective Talks About What Goes Into Mounting a Blockbuster Exhibition

BY **KAREN K. HO**

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Tourists line up outside the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., to view a Vermeer blockbuster in 1995. The National Gallery of Art is one of the few government buildings open during the shutdown and is currently operating with the assistance of private funds. PHOTO JOYCE NALTCHAYAN/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

It would be an understatement to say Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., a specialist in Flemish and Dutch art, understands why there has been **such high-demand** to visit the **Rijksmuseum** in Amsterdam for its blockbuster retrospective on **Johannes Vermeer**, the **largest such exhibition** ever mounted with 28 of the around 35 works by the Dutch master.

“One of the fascinating things is once you’ve seen a Vermeer, you never forget it,” said Wheelock, who cocurated his own Vermeer blockbuster in 1995 for the **National Gallery of Art** in Washington, D.C. “Beyond being beautiful, they somehow speak very directly to people as somehow reaching deep inside them. They make us feel better about ourselves.”

Co-organized with the Mauritshuis in The Hague, Wheelock’s “**Johannes Vermeer**” brought together 21 Vermeers, a record gathering only surpassed by the current Rijksmuseum exhibition. Several paintings, like the NGA’s *Girl with a Flute* (1664–67), had recently been cleaned ahead of the 1995 exhibition.

Wheelock retired from the NGA in 2018 after more than 40 years. He is currently a senior adviser to the Leiden Collection, a lending library of Old Masters, which loaned *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal* (ca. 1672–75), one of the few Vermeer works still in private hands, to the Rijksmuseum exhibition.

ARTnews spoke to Wheelock by phone, shortly after his visit to **TEFAF** in Maastricht last week, about his memories of the NGA exhibition, his thoughts on why demand for Vermeer has only grown exponentially, and the additional logistical issues Rijksmuseum faced in mounting their Vermeer retrospective nearly 30 years after his.

A Series of Compounding Issues

Wheelock began working on his Vermeer exhibition about nine years before it opened. In addition to the scholarly research and painting conservation that went into mounting a show of this scale, securing loans was one of his biggest concerns in the run-up to the exhibition. Recalling the stress of how many Vermeers would actually be assembled when the show opened, Wheelock said, “When you contact somebody, and they don’t answer how long do you wait before you inquire again? How do you find the route in to make an opportunity to borrow a painting?”

The exhibition opened to the public on Sunday, November 12, 1995. The week prior it seemed like the show would have only 19 Vermeers, still a feat. But just a few days before two more works arrived: *The Geographer* (1669) from the Städel Museum in Frankfurt and *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* (ca. 1662–64) from the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin. The Städel hadn’t received its export license for the painting from the German government until the previous Friday, and the Gemäldegalerie’s then director Henning Bock hand-delivered the painting. They were both installed on the same day.

“That night, thus, was the first time that I saw the show together! I remember vividly how the guards just let me sit there for a while to take it all in. It was an amazing experience,” Wheelock said.

Wheelock’s exhibition was also the victim of two government shutdowns during its run, as a Republican-controlled House pushed to make deep spending cuts in exchange for approving the federal budget. (The National Gallery of Art is a federally funded museum, though it is not part of the Smithsonian Institution.) The museum closed on November 14, two days after it opened, before reopening for a couple weeks, and then closing once more on December 16 before reopening on December 27 via private funding—for **the Vermeer exhibition only**—while the second shutdown lasted until January 6.



Young Woman with a Pearl Necklace, ca. 1662. Found in the collection of the Staatliche Museen, Berlin. (Fine Art Images/Heritage Images/ Getty Images) HERITAGE IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

As this was happening, Wheelock had to reassure the European museums that had lent to the show that their priceless masterpieces were secure, and the show would eventually reopen. “One of the toughest things was to actually persuade European colleagues that the paintings are safe and that they shouldn’t take them back,” he said. “I had to have some very difficult discussions with colleagues from Europe about those issues. One of the diplomatic things that I’m most proud of is we kept all the paintings here—that was a real challenge.”

Issues with Time and Space



Lady Writing a Letter with her Maid is in the collection of National Gallery of Ireland. PHOTO FINE ART IMAGES/HERITAGE IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

Taking place before online ticket sales or social media, the NGA's Vermeer exhibition exceeded expectations, proving that art lovers would line up—even in the winter months—to get a chance to see high-caliber shows by one of art history's most important figures. According to the museum, more than 300,000 people saw the paintings.

“We knew it was going to be popular but we had no clue,” Wheelock said, noting that the museum had done some modest publicity to advertise the show. In addition to advance tickets, the NGA made 2,500 tickets available each day on a first-come, first-serve basis. Lines stretched for hours on some days, and a handful of people even **camped overnight**.

Even though the National Gallery of Art is one of the largest museums by square footage in North America, capacity proved to be a major issue for the 1995 exhibition due to room occupancy limits. “The problem was back then is that people stayed much, much longer than normal in an exhibition,” Wheelock said. “They just didn't want to leave. It was that special to be among these Vermeers.”

Vermeer, Then and Now



Visitors look at the painting *Mistress and Maid* during the opening of the Johannes Vermeer exhibition in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam on February 9, 2023. KOEN VAN WEEL/ANP/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Though the Vermeer mania is as real as it was 30 years ago, that wasn't always the case. He wasn't well-known during his lifetime outside of his hometown of Delft; his importance to art history wasn't established until the 19th century. What has long fascinated Wheelock and countless others about Vermeer's paintings is their sheer beauty, employing a delicate use of color and light and careful attention to composition.

Even beyond that, Wheelock said there's also a permanence, timelessness, and quietude to these works. Though subjects are shown going about everyday activities, like reading a letter or opening a window, there's a gravitas and grandeur to their inner lives through Vermeer's use of subtle gestures and expressions, Wheelock explained.

"Look at how beautiful and how important and significant that seems in the Vermeer painting," Wheelock said. "You take from Vermeer something special that comes back to speak to you directly and internally."

A key difference between the 1995 show and the current one is that after its debut at the NGA, it traveled to the Mauritshuis, meaning that Europeans didn't have to travel across the Atlantic to see it. But since the Rijksmuseum is the only venue for "Vermeer," Wheelock said that is likely what caused the exhibition to sell out so quickly, especially given that the logistics that went into a planning this show means it is likely a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that may never be matched again. "That adds an element that this is not something to miss, you may never have that opportunity again," he said.

Plus, the Rijksmuseum launched an extensive international publicity campaign to promote the new exhibition, "creating a demand beyond anything you can probably handle," Wheelock said, adding that as with the 1995 show it's likely that "nobody is going to want to leave quickly."

The Rijksmuseum is now tasked with managing an extremely popular, sold-out show thousands of people are still desperate to get tickets for, with unverified listings on eBay selling tickets for several hundred euros.

"There's already sense of anger that they can't get tickets," Wheelock said. "That's not something you want to see happen at all. You want it to be seen a positive experience to have brought these paintings together so people can see them and have experience of the overarching view of Vermeer and what he did throughout the course of his career."

The Rijksmuseum has made it very clear they're not giving special access to anyone, including journalists and critics because, **according to the museum**, "due to the great interest, the maximum number of press accreditations has now been reached."

For those still desperate to see the exhibition, Wheelock ventured that Amsterdam hotels might "have acquired blocks of tickets, that if you get a room in a hotel, you will get a ticket to the show," and if you happen to make the trek to Amsterdam "maybe you're lucky and call up while you're there and tickets become available," he said.

Barring seeing the exhibition, there's no better way to honor Vermeer's legacy than to experience the region of his birth, Wheelock said: "There are lots of other great shows in the Netherlands right now. So maybe you go enjoy the Netherlands and the tulips and other exhibitions."