



THE ART NEWSPAPER

Johannes Vermeer // Feature

How to see every painting by Johannes Vermeer

Missed the blockbuster show at the Rijksmuseum? Fear not, we present an insider's guide to seeing all his 36 paintings across the globe, from London and New York, to Braunschweig and Tokyo



Installation view of Vermeer exhibition showing the use of velvet curtains to soften the space, at a quiet moment before opening
Photo: Rijksmuseum / Henk Wildschut

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The Rijksmuseum had 650,000 visitors for its highly anticipated Vermeer blockbuster, which closed on 4 June, making it the most popular exhibition in the Amsterdam museum's history. But such was the demand, it could almost certainly have sold twice as many tickets if there had been the space. For those who missed out have a slower-burn alternative: visiting the paintings once they return to their home museums.

There are Vermeer "pilgrims" who travel the world to see all the Dutch master's works in situ. Fortunately nearly all the 37 known Vermeers are in public collections. Only two are privately owned: *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal*, in the Leiden Collection of the US businessman Thomas Kaplan, and *Saint Praxedis*, which is owned by the Tokyo-based Kufu media company.

Vermeer's paintings are scattered between ten cities in Europe (London, Edinburgh, Dublin, Paris, Amsterdam, The Hague, Frankfurt, Braunschweig, Berlin and Dresden), two in the US (New York and Washington, DC) and one in Japan (Tokyo). Travelling to see them all may seem daunting, but over time the journey will take you to many of the world's greatest art museums. The Rijksmuseum managed to assemble 28 of the 37 Vermeers, so even those lucky enough to get into the show have a few more left to see.

An exception is *The Concert* (1662-64), which was famously stolen from Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in 1990, and remains lost. Considering his small oeuvre, Vermeer must rank as one of the world's most stolen artists. There were four other thefts of his works between 1971 and 1986, but fortunately all of those have been recovered.

Here, *The Art Newspaper* takes you on a whistle-stop tour of the remaining 36 Vermeers (excluding *The Concert*) worldwide, starting in Europe, then crossing the Atlantic and ending up in Tokyo.

Visiting each one in its home gallery has the advantage of avoiding the crowds of the Rijksmuseum exhibition (even though *Girl with a Pearl Earring* is always surrounded by her admirers at the Mauritshuis). Vermeer is renowned for his quiet, intimate scenes of everyday life. Ideally they should be viewed in an atmosphere of calm contemplation, rather than the rush of a "once-in-a-lifetime" exhibition.

Titles and dates for paintings are those given in the Rijksmuseum's exhibition catalogue

London



***Lady at the Virginals with a Gentleman/The Music Lesson* (1662-64), [Royal Collection](#) [↗](#)**

A woman is depicted from behind as she stands playing a virginal (an early harpsichord) with a well-dressed man at her side. He watches her intently, but is he teaching or observing her with a lover's gaze? Vermeer enjoys playing with ambiguity and mystery. This painting was originally acquired by George III in 1762 as a work by Frans van Mieris, a Dutch contemporary of Vermeer. It normally hangs in Buckingham Palace.



The Guitar Player (1670-72), [Kenwood House](#)

The musician turns her face away from us, seemingly looking at a companion outside the composition, perhaps entering through a doorway or sitting beside her. On the wall behind her is a pastoral landscape painting, redolent of harmony. The work is aptly displayed in the pastoral setting of Kenwood, an 18th-century mansion within Hampstead Heath.



A Young Woman standing at a Virginal (1670-72), [National Gallery](#)

This is one of a pair of paintings that were separated and then fortuitously reunited at London's National Gallery more than 100 years ago. An elegantly dressed woman plays a virginal while looking out at us. Hanging on the wall in the light-filled room is a large painting of Cupid, suggesting that love is in the air.

Edinburgh



Christ in the House of Mary and Martha (1654-56), [National Galleries of Scotland](#)

Vermeer's earliest surviving painting, made in his early 20s, is quite unlike the indoor genre scenes he became known for. It is also his largest work, measuring 1.6m high. In the biblical story, Martha busied herself providing food for Jesus, while Mary sat and listened to his words of wisdom—and won his praise. As we look at the painting, our eyes dance between the three figures.

Dublin



Woman Writing a Letter, with her Maid (1670-72), [National Gallery of Ireland](#)

This quintessential Vermeer scene centres on a letter writer. The woman is illuminated by a window, her eyes on the paper. The maid gazes outside, presumably waiting for her mistress to hand over the letter to deliver. After twice being stolen from the Beit family art collection at Russborough House in Ireland in 1974 and 1986, the painting was eventually recovered by undercover police in 1993.

Paris



The Lacemaker (1666-68), [Musée du Louvre](#)

This small, jewel-like painting shows a woman concentrating on making lace. Her face is softly rendered, half illuminated by sunlight and half cast in shadow. Our eyes dart between her face and the point where her hands come together at her intricate work. In the foreground the white and red threads tumble down, loosely painted.



The Astronomer (1668), [Musée du Louvre](#)

Only two surviving Vermeers depict a solitary male figure: this one of an astronomer and a companion painting of a geographer, held at the Städel Museum in Frankfurt. The astronomer sits facing a window in his study, reaching out his hand for a celestial globe that hints at the heavens beyond. In 1940 the painting was confiscated from the Rothschild family by the Nazis for Hitler's intended museum in Linz. It was restituted after the Second World War and later acquired by the Louvre.

Amsterdam



The Milkmaid (1658-59), [Rijksmuseum](#)

The Milkmaid counts as one of Vermeer's masterpieces, deftly capturing the woman pouring milk into an earthenware pot. Her eyes are lowered in concentration, an image of domestic virtue. The tabletop of bread loaves is a beautifully painted still life. This is one of four Vermeers in the Rijksmuseum collection.



View of Houses in Delft/The Little Street (1658-59), [Rijksmuseum](#)

Vermeer's only street scene shows part of two houses in his hometown of Delft in the southern Netherlands. There is a timeless quality to this peaceful scene, in which two women work quietly while two small children play beneath a bench. In 2015 a Dutch specialist [identified the location depicted by Vermeer as Vlamingstraat](#), although the original houses were demolished in the late 19th century.



Woman in Blue Reading a Letter (1662-64), Rijksmuseum [↗](#)

A woman stands by a table, illuminated by a window which is just out of sight. The light catches the letter which she is reading intently. Her profile suggests she might be pregnant, although this is uncertain. The map behind her on the wall makes a link with the outside world. Even though the woman is alone, the presence of the letter writer is palpable.



The Love Letter (1669-70), Rijksmuseum [↗](#)

Another of Vermeer's enigmatic letter paintings shows the mistress of the house with a slightly worried expression after being handed a letter by her maid. Dressed in an elegant jacket, she has been interrupted while playing a cittern. The room is viewed through a doorway, partly framed by a tapestry drape.

The Hague



Diana and her Nymphs (1655-56), Mauritshuis [↗](#)

This early Vermeer is his only mythological painting, depicting the goddess of hunting having her feet washed by one of her nymphs. It is a calm moment before Diana is disturbed while bathing by the hunter Actaeon, whom she transforms into a stag to be devoured by his hounds. A docile dog appears in a corner of the composition here.



View of Delft (1660-61), Mauritshuis [↗](#)

Perhaps the greatest early European townscape, the painting shows the ramparts and buildings of Delft, viewed from across the harbour basin. The tower of the New Church is bathed in sunlight but most of the rest of the city is in shadow as dark, stormy clouds gather overhead. The dramatic sky takes up more than half the composition.



Girl with a Pearl Earring (1664-67), Mauritshuis [↗](#)

The most famous Vermeer of all, this simple composition shows a young woman against a dark background. She wears a blue and yellow headscarf, along with a huge pearl earring that catches the light. Although many have speculated on the identity of the model, this is not a portrait, but what the Dutch call a “tronie”, an anonymous character study.

Frankfurt



The Geographer (1669), Städel Museum [↗](#)

This depiction of a scholarly man in his study is closely associated with *The Astronomer* in the Louvre. The geographer holds a pair of dividers in his right hand, leaning over a map laid on the table. He looks up, presumably distracted from his thoughts by the world beyond the window.

Braunschweig



The Girl with the Wine Glass (1659-61), [Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum](#) [↗](#)

A young woman smiles directly at us while a well-dressed man holds her hand and bends towards her attentively. Another man rests in a melancholic pose in the background beside a table with a pearly white wine pitcher—perhaps he has been less lucky in love. The picture was acquired by Duke Anton Ulrich of Brunswick-Lüneburg, a passionate collector of 17th-century Dutch paintings.

Dresden



The Procuress (1656), [Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister](#) [↗](#)

This early work depicts a couple alongside an elderly procuress and a musician. A young woman puts out her hand, ready to receive a gold coin from the soldier. The musician gazing directly at us with a knowing smile has been interpreted by many scholars as a self-portrait of the artist. Brothel paintings with a moralising element, like this one, were deemed quite suitable for a family home.



Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window (1657-58), [Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister](#)

A woman in profile intently reads a letter by an open window in this painting that was transformed when it was restored in 2021. A layer of later overpainting was removed to reveal a picture hanging on the wall at the back of the composition. This turned out to be of Cupid, the same work which appears in the National Gallery's *A Young Woman standing at a Virginal*.

Berlin



The Glass of Wine (1659-61), [Staatliche Museen zu Berlin](#)

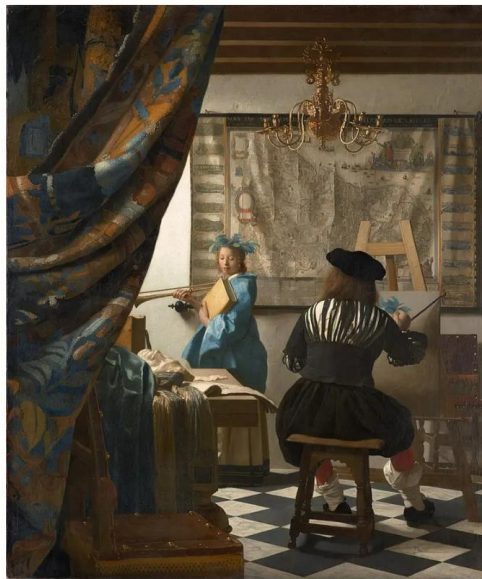
A woman at a table is drinking the last dregs of a glass of wine while a man stands with a pitcher at hand to offer a refill. The glass obscures the woman's face, rendering her thoughts obscure. Light floods in through a leaded-glass window.



***Woman with a Pearl Necklace (1662-64)*, [Staatliche Museen zu Berlin](#) [↗](#)**

The lady is alone, caught in a moment in time. She looks towards a small mirror as she holds a pearl necklace, perhaps considering whether it is the appropriate piece to wear with her ermine-trimmed satin jacket. Like most of Vermeer's paintings, its precise meaning remains elusive, leaving it up to us as viewers to reflect on.

Vienna



***The Art of Painting (1666-68)*, [Kunsthistorisches Museum](#) [↗](#)**

Vermeer's allegorical masterpiece presents an artist with his model, who plays the role of Clio, the muse of history in Greek mythology. She holds a book representing history and a trumpet representing fame. The long-haired artist, seen from behind and dressed in fine clothing, may be Vermeer himself. *The Art of Painting* was acquired by Hitler in 1940 and after the war it was handed over to the Austrian state.

New York



A Maid Asleep, (1656-57), [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#)

A young woman sits at a table with her eyes closed, but it is unclear whether she is actually asleep, deep in thought or drunk. Her pose, with her head resting on an arm, also suggests melancholy. This is the earliest known interior scene by Vermeer, a precursor of the great works that were to follow. It is among five Vermeers in New York's Metropolitan Museum—the biggest number in any one museum. (Two are prohibited from travelling by the terms of donation and were not in the Rijksmuseum exhibition.)



Young Woman with a Lute, (1662-64), [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#)

The lady is tuning her lute and gazes out of the window as she adjusts the peg. What, we wonder, is she watching outside the confines of her room? Behind her hangs a map of Europe, suggestive of the wider world that lies beyond.



Young Woman with a Water Pitcher (1662-64), Metropolitan Museum of Art [↗](#)

A woman opens a window and grasps a pitcher simultaneously in a slightly awkward combination of movements. However, her outstretched arms span much of the picture plane, unifying the composition. This was the first Vermeer to enter an American collection when it was donated to the Met in 1889.



Study of a Young Woman (1664-67), Metropolitan Museum of Art [↗](#)

The young woman has an air of innocence with her softly modelled face and slightly dreamy expression. Like the *Girl with a Pearl Earring* her hair is swept back under an exotic headdress and she wears a dangling earring. As with that painting, she probably represents a “tronie” character study rather than a commissioned portrait.



***Allegory of the Catholic Faith (1670-74)*, [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#)**

With its religious subject matter, this is a most unusual Vermeer. The work, painted near the end of his life, shows the allegorical figure of Faith in a dramatic pose, clutching a hand to her chest and resting her foot on a globe. On the floor lies a bitten apple, representing original sin. Blood spurts from the mouth of a twisted serpent that has been crushed by a stone nearby, suggesting the triumph of good over evil. Vermeer was brought up as a Protestant but he married a Catholic woman, Catharina Bolnes, and new research has reassessed the role of religion in his life.



***Officer and Laughing Girl (1656-57)*, [Frick Collection](#)**

There is a striking contrast between the shadowy outline of the officer and the glowing face of the young woman. His outsized scale creates a disconcerting effect, though she seems relaxed. All three Vermeers in the Frick Collection were lent to the Rijksmuseum exhibition, but this was during building work and was exceptional. A visit to New York is likely to be essential to see them in future.



Girl Interrupted at Her Music (1659-61), Frick Collection [↗](#)

The young woman has been distracted, turning to look at us with a quizzical expression. She and the man beside her both hold a piece of paper, presumably a sheet of music for a lesson or a duet. But is he a teacher or lover? Music was often associated with romance and harmony in the 17th century.



Mistress and Maid (1664-67), Frick Collection [↗](#)

The luxuriously dressed mistress sits at a table, her hand touching her face in an apprehensive gesture. Her maid holds a letter, although it is unclear whether she is handing it over or has just taken it for delivery. There is a sense of mystery about the exchange, perhaps concerning the mistress's absent correspondent.



Young Woman Seated at a Virginal, (1670-72), Leiden Collection [↗](#)

This painting was only attributed to Vermeer in 2004, when it sold at Sotheby's for £16.2m. Simpler and smaller than most of his compositions, it was rejected as a Vermeer in the 1940s, but new research by the auction house confirmed its authenticity. The painting now belongs to Thomas Kaplan, a billionaire investor who runs the Electrum Group and owns the New York-based Leiden Collection of 17th-century Dutch art. Although the Vermeer is not normally on public view, the collection is a generous lender to exhibitions. Until 10 October the painting will remain on view at the Rijksmuseum, before returning to Kaplan.

Washington, DC



***Woman Holding a Balance* (1662-64), [National Gallery of Art](#)**

A pensive woman gently holds a balance in her right hand; her left hand rests on the table to steady herself. The lady's head is framed by a painting on the back wall representing the Last Judgement with the weighing of souls, adding meaning to her actions. It is among four Vermeers in the National Gallery of Art collection.



***A Lady Writing* (1664-67), [National Gallery of Art](#)**

The lady is illuminated in a darkened room, sunlight falling on half of her face and her rich yellow ermine-trimmed jacket (which appears in no fewer than five other Vermeer paintings). Quill in hand, she turns to look at us. Light catches her pearl drop earrings and the discarded pearl necklace on the table.



***Girl with the Red Hat* (1664-67), [National Gallery of Art](#)**

This painting and the next have generated considerable debate over their authenticity, since they are both on wooden panels rather than canvas and are rather different from Vermeer's other works. Despite some earlier doubts, *Girl with a Red Hat* is now accepted as authentic. X-rays have revealed that it is painted on top of a portrait of a man, probably by another artist. Until 10 October the painting will remain on view at the Rijksmuseum, before eventually returning to Washington.



***Girl with a Flute* (1664-67), [National Gallery of Art](#)**

Unusually, *Girl with a Flute* appeared in the Rijksmuseum exhibition as an authentic Vermeer even after it was officially downgraded by its owner, the National Gallery of Art. The painting is now described by the gallery as coming from the “studio” of Vermeer. If the Washington experts are correct, this throws new light on Vermeer, who was previously assumed to have worked alone.

Tokyo



***Saint Praxedis* (1655), [National Museum of Western Art](#) on long-term loan from Kufu Company**

This is not a Vermeer composition, but a copy of a painting by the Italian artist Felice Ficherelli. It is a controversial picture, since its authenticity was rejected by most Vermeer specialists until its £6.2m sale at Christie’s in 2014. It was bought by the Japanese media company Kufu, which has placed it on long-term loan to Tokyo’s National Museum of Western Art. Surprisingly, the museum only lists it as “attributed to” Vermeer, although it was presented as authentic in the Rijksmuseum exhibition.