

Conservation Work on Vermeer Painting Suggests It May Have Been His Final Work



BY DANIEL CASSADY April 11, 2025 12:25pm



Johannes Vermeer, *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal* (ca.1672-75). I
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A little dust never hurt anyone—unless, perhaps, you’re trying to date a **Vermeer**.

Conservation work on *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal*, the only Vermeer still in private hands, has uncovered a layer of 17th-century air pollution between layers of paint that helped date the rare Old Master picture, according to ***The Art Newspaper***.

Specifically, feldspar particles—byproducts of the booming Delftware ceramics industry in Vermeer’s hometown—were trapped in the composition, likely after it was first set aside. Their presence suggests Vermeer returned to the canvas years later to add the yellow shawl draped over the sitter’s bodice. That final touch may make *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal*, his last painting.

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Now on view in Amsterdam’s H’ART Museum as part of ***From Rembrandt to Vermeer***, the painting sits in the collection of **Thomas Kaplan**, the American billionaire and self-styled custodian of Dutch Golden Age masterpieces. His Leiden Collection exhibition includes 75 works, 18 of which are Rembrandts. The Vermeer is the showstopper—and for good reason.

The painting has had a tangled provenance. Its attribution was in doubt for decades, but by the time it re-emerged at Sotheby’s in 2004, expert consensus had tilted in its favor.

Kaplan, who opened the bidding but lost out to casino magnate Steve Wynn, ultimately acquired it four years later when Wynn decided to sell. He bought it along with a **Rembrandt** self-portrait.

Kaplan recently had the Vermeer examined and conserved by David Bull (who died in December 2024), with strict instructions to keep the intervention subtle, according to *The Art Newspaper*. “I want to see the artist, not the restorer,” he reportedly said. The result: a more legible modelling of folds in the sitter’s white satin gown, softer shadows, and a friendlier face—thanks to the removal of later retouching on the lips and eyebrows. Vermeer, it turns out, had a lighter hand than some of his fans.

Arthur Wheelock, former National Gallery of Art curator and now Kaplan's in-house expert, believes the painting was begun around 1670–72 and revisited in 1675—Vermeer's final year. The shawl, he told *The Art Newspaper*, may reflect a shift in fashion following the French invasion of the Dutch Republic in 1672. Or perhaps the change was simply commercial—done at the request of a buyer. The original owner remains unknown, though speculation centers on Vermeer's patrons Pieter van Ruijven and Maria de Knuijt.

The painting has also received a more fitting frame. Gone is the gaudy gilt affair from the Sotheby's sale. In its place, a sober Dutch ebony frame, more in keeping with the picture's quiet poise. The painting, travels next to the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach this autumn, just in time for to join the flock for snowbird season.

Also on view as part of the *Rembrandt to Vermeer* exhibition is Kaplan's first purchase by Rembrandt, a work on paper, *Young Lion Resting* (1638–42). Kaplan hinted that the *Young Lion* **will be up for sale next year** and hopes that it could become the most expensive work on paper to sell at auction.