



## Ten Vermeers. In Manhattan. Right now.



*A woman gets a close look at *Woman Writing a Letter With Her Maid*, on loan from the National Gallery of Ireland.*

*Photo by Jamie Lubetkin*

**By J. SCOTT ORR** June 19, 2025

Right now, New York City has more Johannes Vermeer paintings accessible to the public than any city since Amsterdam's blockbuster 2023 exhibition that drew 650,000 visitors. In fact, the Upper East Side of Manhattan has more Vermeers on display than any other country, including the artist's homeland of the Netherlands.

**The Frick Collection**, which reopened in April after a five-year \$220 million renovation, brought in loaners from Amsterdam and Dublin to add to the three Vermeers it has in its permanent collection for an inaugural exhibition called *Vermeer's Love Letters*. Just eleven blocks north on 5th Ave., **the Met** has five more on display. So you could easily take in the lot in less than an hour.

“There are five Vermeers in the building,” Frick curator Aimee Ng said during a press opening of the exhibition the other day. “And if you toddle up Fifth Avenue, 11 blocks, another five are there, so right now on the Upper East Side of Manhattan you have 10 Vermeer pictures, that's nearly a third of the incredible corpus of this artist,” she added.

Vermeer, the 17th-century Dutch master best known for his masterpiece *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*, created only 35 paintings in his entire career. Though his output was meager, Vermeer’s triumph came in his revolutionary use of light, instilling each precious time capsule with photo-realistic luminosity and technical precision. In Vermeer’s enduring world, quotidian domestic scenes, suggestive cross-gender encounters and portraits of ordinary subjects become transcendent. And light is weaponized.



*Installation view of Vermeer's Love Letters at the Frick. Photo courtesy the Frick Collection*

The last time this many Vermeers gathered in one city was for Amsterdam's exhibition at the Rijksmuseum in 2023. That historic show featured 28 Vermeer paintings, marking the largest assemblage of his work ever. The exhibition drew 650,000 pilgrims from 113 nations over 16 weeks. Lines snaked around the block, entrance passes were issued to control crowds, and the museum was overwhelmed by the fervor.

When the doors opened at the Frick on Wednesday, there was a line of eager viewers stretched out of sight eastward down 71st Street. A second line stretched off in the other direction for prospective viewers who were on “standby.” The Met, meanwhile, saw no such rush on its Vermeer room. It was closed that day.



*The line to get into the public opening of Vermeer's Love Letters at the Frick stretches down the hall, onto the sidewalk and down the street. Photo by Jamie Lubetkin*

The rarity factor amplifies Vermeer's pull. Each of his works is considered too valuable, too fragile to travel much, especially after *The Concert* was stolen from Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in 1990. Most museums treat their Vermeers like crown jewels, rarely loaning them out. In fact, the Rijksmuseum exhibition came about to some extent because of the Frick renovation, which freed up its three Vermeers to travel for the first time.

It was the Frick's strategic borrowing that brought two Vermeers to New York, one from Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum and one from Dublin's National Gallery of Ireland, creating a once-in-a-generation opportunity for art lovers to commune with so many Vermeer works in a single afternoon.



“We are grateful to both museums for these incredibly generous loans,” said Axel Rüger, the Frick’s director. “I know how difficult it is. Everyone wants your Vermeer, and it's really hard to part with these masterworks,” he said.

In addition to the 10 on display at the Frick and the Met, there’s also a secret 11th Vermeer that resides in New York in the private Leiden Collection: *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal*.

Smaller than a magazine cover but packing Vermeer's full voltage, the work has been authenticated and has been exhibited globally. The Leiden Collection, one of the largest and most important collections of seventeenth-century Dutch art in private hands, operates as a sort of lending library for Old Masters. Sadly, their Vermeer isn't currently in New York, it's on display at H'ART Museum in Amsterdam through August 24. It returns to the U.S. for an appearance at the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach October through March.

In *Love Letters*, which opened June 18, The Frick Collection offers a triptych of epistolary masterpieces that reveal something of an obsession with elite female subjects engaged at once with servants and the communication technology of the day. There's the maid delivering secrets, the mistress processing news, the servant waiting in theatrical darkness.



*Frick curator Aimee Ng and Robert Fucci, guest curator and a distinguished scholar of Dutch art from the University of Amsterdam, during Wednesday’s press opening of Vermeer’s Love Letters at the Frick. Photo by Jamie Lubetkin*

Robert Fucci, guest curator and a distinguished scholar of Dutch art from the University of Amsterdam, said the three paintings in *Love Letters* focus on letter writing but also on the interaction between the correspondent and her servant.

“This theme of the letter writing he treated in six paintings in total, out of his surviving corpus of 35 or 37 paintings,” Fucci said. “It’s significant that so many of his paintings, a sixth of his surviving corpus, treat this letter theme. The three paintings that are not in the exhibition are solitary women, and these probably came slightly earlier. This exhibition is built around the Frick’s incredible masterpiece of the *Mistress and Maid*, and this is when Vermeer begins to include the secondary figure of the maid in a very important way to thematize this interaction between the person writing and receiving letters,” he said.

In the *Mistress and Maid*, the servant emerges from shadow like a revelation, while her employer sits bathed in golden light. *The Love Letter*, on loan from the Rijksmuseum, flips the script, positioning us as voyeurs to the domesticity, the cittern suggesting harmony disrupted by correspondence. *Woman Writing a Letter With Her Maid*, on loan from the National Gallery of Ireland, stages the most theatrical tableau, with its maid relegated to background darkness while light pools exclusively on the letter-writer.

Ng noted that the Frick’s other two Vermeers, *Officer and Laughing Girl* and *Girl Interrupted at Her Music* “are still on view, don't worry, in their usual places at the foot of the grand staircase.”



Clockwise from top left, the Met's five Vermeers, *A Maid Asleep*, *Allegory of the Catholic Faith*, *Study of a Young Woman*, *Young Woman with a Lute*, *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*.

Meanwhile, eleven blocks uptown, **the Met's quintet** spans Vermeer's entire arc—from his earliest narrative experiments to his late allegorical fever dreams. In the early work *A Maid Asleep*, Vermeer abandons the cluttered storytelling of his contemporaries for psychological intimacy. That sleeping figure, hand supporting her head in melancholy, suggests Vermeer's concentration on female contemplation.

The trio of standing women—*Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*, *Study of a Young Woman*, and *Young Woman with a Lute*—showcase Vermeer's mid-career mastery of light as both illuminator and narrator. Each captures a different quality light: the pitcher woman bathed in morning clarity, the pearl-adorned study subject caught in soft afternoon glow, the lutenist suspended in golden hour reverie.

Then there's the wild card: *Allegory of the Catholic Faith*. This late work explodes Vermeer's intimate scale into baroque theatricality, complete with symbolic chalice, crushed serpent, and swooning allegorical figure. It's his most ambitious compositional gamble—and arguably his least successful, trading psychological subtlety for heavy-handed symbolism.

Compared to the Frick's epistolary trilogy, the Met's collection reveals Vermeer's broader range. Where the Frick paintings obsess over communication and class hierarchy through letter-writing scenarios, the Met works explore individual consciousness. The Frick paintings are essentially chamber dramas; the Met collection spans from intimate portraiture to religious propaganda.

Both collections confirm Vermeer's revolutionary approach: using domestic interiors as stages for psychological theater, weaponizing natural light to create mood rather than mere visibility, and elevating middle-class female experience to the level of high art. The Met's works feel more introspective, the Frick's more socially aware—together they reveal an artist equally fascinated by inner and outer worlds.

The 2023 Amsterdam show was a once-in-a-generation event. This NYC moment is more serendipitous and way more accessible. Vermeer's Love Letters runs through September 8 at the Frick. After that, Manhattan's Vermeer count will return to a mere eight, or nine if you count the secret Leiden Collection piece, hardly a shallow collection.