

The Fullest View of Vermeer Still Leaves Plenty to the Imagination

A blockbuster exhibition brings together more paintings by the Dutch master than ever before. Yet he remains a mystery, despite efforts by authors, filmmakers and researchers to fill the empty space.



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Reporting from Amsterdam

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Sheer numbers are sure to draw many visitors to “Vermeer,” the blockbuster exhibition devoted to the Dutch Golden Age master that opens at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam on Friday. The Dutch national museum has managed to gather 28 of Johannes Vermeer’s paintings, representing about 75 percent of his known surviving works. That’s seven more than the public could see at the last major Vermeer retrospective nearly 30 years ago.

Numbers are important when it comes to Vermeer because he didn’t produce many pieces. Depending on how you count, his overall output was somewhere around 40 to 45 paintings, across a career that lasted no more than two decades. (Only about 35 of those 17th-century works are thought to exist today.)



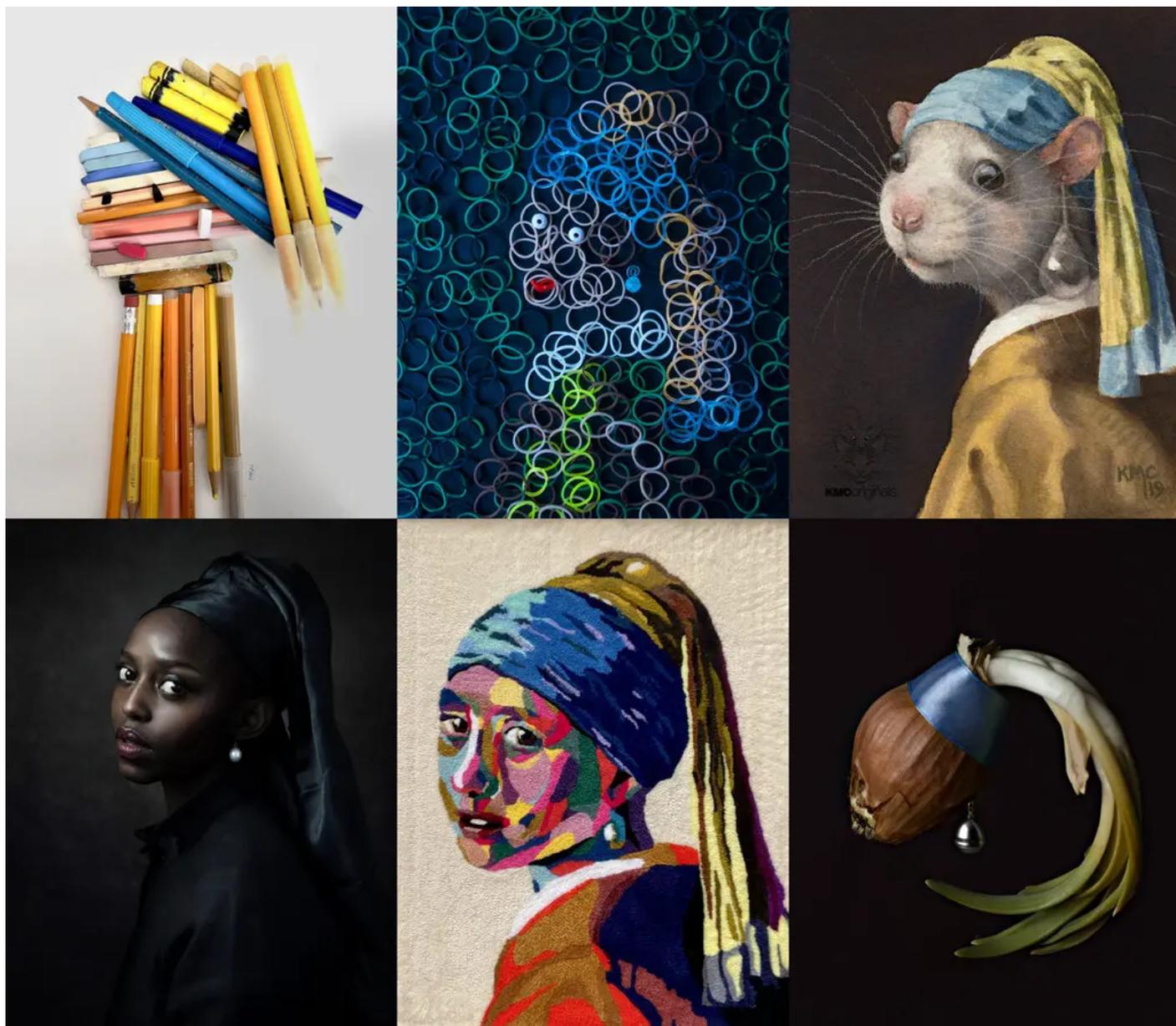
In “View of Delft” (1660-61) Vermeer depicted his hometown, with military, religious and commercial buildings clustered around the River Schie. Mauritshuis

His artworks are the most significant clue we have about the mysterious “Sphinx of Delft,” who was born in 1632, painted mostly in two rooms of his house, rarely traveled, left behind scant surviving documents and died penniless, in 1675. We still don’t even have a clear picture, for example, of what Vermeer looked like.

Yet, many people feel that they *know* Vermeer. His art has never been more beloved and widely accessible than it is today, and images of his most adored paintings, like “Girl With a Pearl Earring” and “The Milkmaid,” have been reproduced, photoshopped and turned into the world’s most circulated memes.

A seismic shift in Vermeer’s popularity came after the last major blockbuster devoted to his work, at the National Gallery of Art, in Washington D.C., and the Mauritshuis, in The Hague, in 1995 and 1996. That show — the first ever devoted exclusively to his work — brought together 21 paintings and revealed many new insights. But since then, there have been only small, and incremental, discoveries.

With a lacuna to fill about Vermeer's life, authors, filmmakers and other artists have fed the growing fascination through creative speculation. A huge part of the phenomenal appreciation for the artist can be attributed to the imagination. Some novels and films have furnished the empty spaces of Vermeer's domestic interiors with personal narratives, while others have sought to give us answers about the mysteries of his working method.



While "Girl With a Pearl Earring" is on loan to the Rijksmuseum, the Mauritshuis, where the painting is usually displayed, will show in its place creative responses to the work, submitted by the general public. Clockwise from top left: Miggie Wong; Ankie Gooijers; Kathy Clemente; Olga Pavolga; Lisette van Maurik; Jenny Boot Photography; via Mauritshuis

"Everyone can fill in what you don't see," said Martine Gosselink, the director of the Mauritshuis, which owns three Vermeers, including "Girl With a Pearl Earring," that are currently on loan to the Rijksmuseum. "With Vermeer there is always this idea that something is happening but you're not sure what it is," she added. "It's the unconscious mind that interprets the parts that are missing."

Vermeer's paintings invite this kind of fantasizing because of the simplicity of his scenes, said Erwin Olaf, a Dutch contemporary artist who takes inspiration from Vermeer's work. His photographs, like "Portrait #5," of a young woman in a yellow dress, can be seen as modern takes on Vermeer's minimalist stillness. In 2019, 10 of Olaf's photos were displayed alongside Dutch old masters in the Rijksmuseum, highlighting similarities.

"Vermeer isn't so much about creating portraiture, but a staged world," he said. "He's telling a story with one or two people — someone is reading a letter, staring out a window, or holding a milk jug. It's this simplicity that creates more opportunities for the viewer to create a story in their minds."



Erwin Olaf's "Portrait #5" (2005) can be seen as a modern take on Vermeer's minimalist stillness. Erwin Olaf; via Edwynn Houk Gallery

That was the case for the author Tracy Chevalier, who, in the late 1990s, began writing a novel about Vermeer's "Girl With a Pearl Earring." She quickly set herself some

parameters for the project, she said: “It would be short, it would be one point of view, and I would write it in the manner of a Vermeer painting, spare and focused.”

Because there wasn't a mountain of historical research, Chevalier didn't first have to read hundreds of books to educate herself on what was known about Vermeer. She found her greatest inspiration, she said, from an official inventory of possessions from the artist's home in Delft, the Netherlands, made a few months after his death.

“Every broken pot” was listed, she said, as well as the contents of each wardrobe in the house, “including all his wife's clothes: the yellow and black bodice, an ermine-trimmed jacket.” The specificity of the list, she added, helped her imagine Vermeer's private universe.

Chevalier's resulting novel, the 1999 best seller “Girl With a Pearl Earring,” follows Griet, a 16-year-old Vermeer family servant who sits for the artist as a model and becomes his muse. The intimacy in the studio builds and, in Chevalier's interpretation, Vermeer loans the girl his wife's pearl earring to wear in her portrait — suggesting an altogether different kind of intimacy.

The book was adapted for the 2003 film of the same name, starring Colin Firth as Vermeer — putting a handsome face on the artist — and Scarlett Johansson as the titular “girl.” While the story is a fantasy, the book and the film had a sensational impact, turning “Girl With a Pearl Earring” into a household name, and drawing huge numbers of pilgrims to the Mauritshuis.



Scarlett Johansson and Colin Firth in the 2003 movie “Girl With a Pearl Earring.” Lionsgate, via Everett Collection

“The film in particular reached people in parts of the world who weren’t familiar with Vermeer,” said Taco Dibbits, the Rijksmuseum’s director. “Suddenly they were familiar with him, and this distant 17th century became very close by.”

Soon enough, “Girl With a Pearl Earring” became one of the most reproduced images in the world, featured on coffee mugs and pillowcases, as well as the basis of thousands of towel-crowned memes: manga characters, Daisy Duck, Marge Simpson, Kermit the frog and all kinds of cats with pearl earrings.

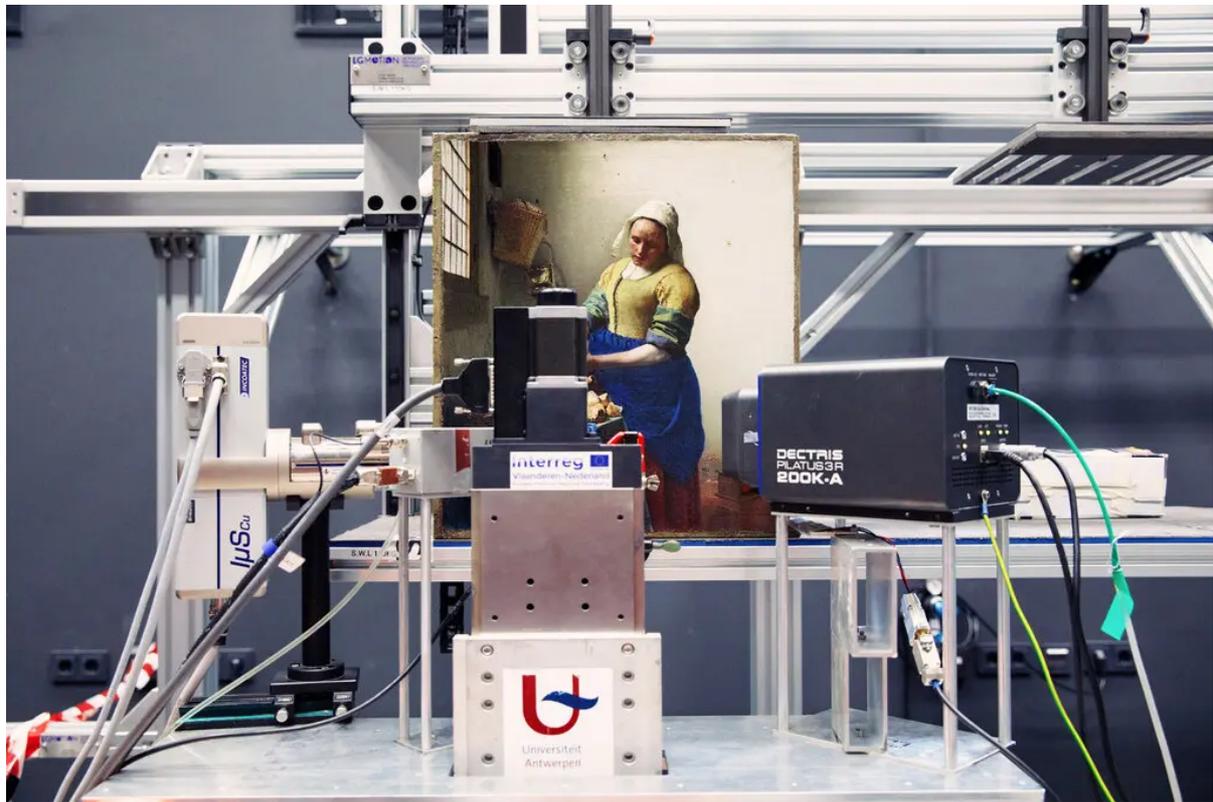
While some authors sought to fill in gaps about Vermeer’s personal life, others attempted to demystify his painting process. If we couldn’t know with any certainty *who* he was, they seemed to reason, at least we could understand how he worked.

In his 2002 book “Vermeer’s Camera,” the architect Philip Steadman argued that the “perfection” of the Dutch master’s canvasses could only be attributed to the use of optical tools. In particular, he revived an idea first floated in the 1920s that Vermeer made his paintings from inside a room-size camera obscura, a device that operates like a pinhole camera.

The artist David Hockney furthered this notion with his 2006 book and 2011 BBC TV show “Secret Knowledge,” which argued that Vermeer’s “photographic” effect was aided by optics.

The American magician Teller, of the duo Penn and Teller, tested that theory in his 2013 documentary “Tim’s Vermeer,” in which the inventor Tim Jenison tried to recreate “The Music Lesson” using a camera obscura in a Texas warehouse. The painting that Jenison created in his simulated Vermeer studio was so convincing that Steadman and Hockney felt he’d validated their claims.

“What Tim has done is given us an image of Vermeer as a man who is much more real,” Teller concluded. “Now he’s a fathomable genius.”



“The Milkmaid” undergoing pigment analysis in 2020 at the Rijksmuseum. Noninvasive scanning techniques have helped build a picture of how Vermeer worked. Kelly Schenk/Rijksmuseum

The question of whether Vermeer used optics was one of the major research focuses for curators at the Rijksmuseum preparing for the museum’s blockbuster show. Gregor Weber, the exhibition’s curator and author of its catalog, “Johannes Vermeer: Faith, Light and Reflection,” said he had concluded that Vermeer was most likely exposed to optical tools through the Jesuits in Delft, who owned such instruments and referenced them in their devotional literature.

Weber said Vermeer had probably entered a camera obscura, and “translated that experience into his own art.” In other words, he didn’t use the optical device as a tool in his studio, but instead as a source of inspiration for how light and perspective could be depicted in his paintings.

With scant proof either way, and archival records largely exhausted by scholars, some museum experts say the best place to find clues about Vermeer’s process are within the paint layers of his works.

Scientific advances in painting examination have helped researchers understand many minute aspects of his artistic process, said Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., an art historian who curated the 1990s Vermeer show in Washington and The Hague. “We have learned a lot about paintings and pigments since 1995,” he said. “And there’s still a lot of new research in that area.”

While such findings may not move the dial on our understanding of Vermeer in a

dramatic way, Wheelock said, “it’s all helping to refine the understanding of his work and his materials, and how his materials age over time.”

Noninvasive scanning technologies like infrared imaging have recently revealed that “Girl With a Pearl Earring” originally had eyelashes — now mostly faded from view — and that she didn’t originally stand in a big empty space. There used to be a green curtain behind her, but it has disappeared over time because of chemical changes in the paint.

Abbie Vandivere, a paintings conservator at the Mauritshuis who has worked on “Girl With a Pearl Earring” for several years, said that these technologies will soon allow museums to reconstruct Vermeer’s working method through digital simulations. For example, she said, a video presentation can show how he “built up” a painting, layer by layer from ground to surface level, and then show how it probably looked “straight from the easel” and how it has evolved over time as pigments degraded and colors changed.

Wheelock said that technology certainly brings us closer to Vermeer in some ways, but, he cautioned, “we still have to understand that we’re looking from a 21st-century perspective at works from the 17th century. We have to be aware of our own limitsto what we can say.”



Vermeer's "The Glass of Wine" (1659-61) is on loan to the Rijksmuseum from the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie

For now, the best way for visitors to the Rijksmuseum to contemplate 400 years worth of unsolved Vermeer mysteries may be just to look at the works on the wall. They can fill in the empty spaces with their own imaginations, one by one, canvas after canvas.

"Every time you stand in front of one of his paintings, you're drawn into his world," said Dibbits. "You may want to reconstruct the room, you want to understand that room. But really, we can't penetrate or deconstruct the illusion. It stays."