

Seeing Beyond the Beauty of a Vermeer

The violence of his era can be found in his serene masterpieces — if you know where to look.

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The afternoon I discovered Vermeer, I was passing time by browsing the books and publications piled up on the shelves at home in Lagos. I was 14 or 15. Amid the relics of my parents' college studies (Nigerian plays, French histories, business-management textbooks), I found something unfamiliar: the annual report for a multinational company. I don't remember which company it was, but it must have had something to do with food or drink, because on the front cover was a painting of peasants in a rolling field and on the back was a painting of a woman pouring milk.

I remember the quietness of that afternoon and my fascination with the images on the report, which seemed to transfigure the space around me. I learned from the printed captions that the paintings were "The Harvesters," by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, and "The Milkmaid," by Johannes Vermeer. These names were new to me at the time, but I was already an avid student of art and knew enough to know when something moved me. The Vermeer, especially, had a plain and impressive mystery. Never had I seen a wall so well painted or a human figure so convincingly situated in pictorial space. And all of it was suffused with a light that made it seem more like life itself than like other paintings. I would not have thought to call it "Northern light" back then, but I did know that I was looking at something foreign and alluring, something set in a world radically unlike the tropical one in which I was living.



Detail of "The Milkmaid." Christopher Anderson/Magnum, for The New York Times

I am still moved by the quiet miracle of that boyhood afternoon. But my relationship with art has changed. I look for trouble now. No longer is a Vermeer painting simply "foreign and alluring." It is an artifact inescapably involved in the world's messiness — the world when the painting was made and the world now. Looking at paintings this way doesn't spoil them. On the contrary, it opens them up, and what used to be mere surface becomes a portal, divulging all kinds of other things I need to know.

This spring, at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, I stood again in front of “The Milkmaid,” returning 33 years after that day in Lagos to her humility, her solidity and the ongoingness of her domestic work. I love it — I love her — no less than I ever did. It was she who inspired Wisława Szymborska’s epigrammatic poem “Vermeer” (translated by Clare Cavanagh and Stanisław Barańczak from the Polish):

So long as that woman from the Rijksmuseum
in painted quiet and concentration
keeps pouring milk day after day
from the pitcher to the bowl
the World hasn’t earned
the world’s end.

The curators of the Rijksmuseum have brought together, in a much-praised exhibition, the largest number of paintings by Vermeer ever assembled, 28 of the surviving 35 or so generally agreed to be by him. It is a feat of coordination by the organizers and of generosity by the lenders, a gathering unlikely to be repeated in this generation at such a scale.

But I had not been keen on seeing the exhibition, and the reasons why not began to accumulate. The entire run of tickets, some 450,000 of them, sold out within a few weeks of the opening, and even if I did manage to get one, the galleries were sure to be crowded. I was also skeptical of the bluntly narrow focus of the exhibition: a painting by Vermeer, followed by another, followed by another; most successful exhibitions need more context than this. But what was really beginning to grate on me was the breathless critical acclaim. The name Vermeer is, by now, a shorthand for artistic excellence and so much of the praise for the exhibition sounded like emotional shorthand too. Greatness, perfection, sublimity: the appropriate vocabulary for a certain kind of cultural experience. Those who had seen the show were envied by those who hadn’t. That it represented a “once in a lifetime” experience was taken as gospel. (And yet, how many of our best encounters with art have happened in a minor museum on a quiet day? What moment, fully inhabited, isn’t “once in a lifetime”?) The idea that the images were wonderful had somehow gotten mixed up with the dogma that the images were nothing but wonderful. Amid all this rapturous consensus, critical dissent was hard to come by.

But some Dutch friends arranged entry for me, weakening my resolve. Then, Martine Gosselink, director of the Mauritshuis (home of “Girl With a Pearl Earring” and one of the major museum lenders to the exhibition), invited me to walk through the exhibition with her after hours. Well, refusal at that point would have been absurd. Late in the afternoon on March 13, joined by a friend, we entered the exhibition. The last wave of regular visitors was ushered out, and there we were, three lucky viewers, with 28 Vermeers.

He was not prolific: He is thought to have made as few as 42 paintings in all. It's reasonable to assume, as art historians did for a long time, that this slow rate of production was a consequence of a particularly meticulous technique. But X-rays and infrared imaging show that he made swift underpaintings and very few preparatory drawings. So what was he doing with all that extra time? For one thing, he had a day job as an art dealer, the profession he inherited from his father. For another, he was himself father to as many as 15 children (11 of whom outlived him). The household must have been noisy. Against the implied backdrop of that noise, the astonishing and self-possessed pictures arrive, two or three of them a year. These are pictures that seem to be doing things with light that no pictures had ever done before. The art historian Lawrence Gowing describes it as a certain heedlessness of subject, a certain faithfulness to pure appearance: "Vermeer seems almost not to care, or not even to know, what it is that he is painting. What do men call this wedge of light? A nose? A finger? What do we know of its shape? To Vermeer none of this matters, the conceptual world of names and knowledge is forgotten, nothing concerns him but what is visible, the tone, the wedge of light."

Our little group paused in front of "Woman in Blue Reading a Letter," and it was so beautiful that my heart almost stopped. The paint keeps to a narrow range of hues: The wall is off-white with blue undertones; the large map of the regions of Holland and West Friesland is light brown with a hint of green; the two chairs on either side of the woman have glimmering brass tacks that hold their deep blue upholstery in place. One chair is larger than the other, closer to us while the other is farther away, and between them is the space in which the woman stands. She is clad in a top of blue and a skirt of dark olive. All the colors are so muted, it is as though they are remembered rather than painted. The woman, in profile, in a deep reverie, her eyes dreamily downcast, holds the letter with both hands. There are ribbons in her hair. The blue top is a beddejak, a bell-shaped house jacket. She is pregnant. Scholars doubt that she's pregnant, or they say that we can't know. But we rely on scholars to tell us what we cannot see, not what we plainly can.



Detail of "Woman in Blue Reading a Letter." Christopher Anderson/Magnum, for The New York Times

What has he written to her — for surely it's a he and surely he's the father of her child? Her lips are parted. Vermeer tightens his cord of suggestion around us. The map, the early morning, the letter that has traveled through the night to be delivered: A narrative heaves underneath the silence of the scene. There's drama here, if not melodrama. We imagine someone far away whose awayness is being imagined by this other he has left behind. Perhaps the faraway one is a soldier or a sailor. The back of

the chair on the left casts soft, bluish shadows on the wall. The window from which the light comes is only implied, not depicted, and the light falls on the woman's forehead and on the gently swelling marine expanse of her beddejak. All of this is done in brushwork that is precise but not fussy, a wedge of light here, a wedge of light there. Our breath as viewers is collectively held because we don't want to interrupt whatever this is. The woman is waiting for her lover to return, she is waiting for her child to be born and the painter is waiting, after working at his easel each morning, for the next morning to arrive, and the next, waiting for those favorable hours, until the work is complete. Lawrence Gowing is right that Vermeer is a painter of light. He is also, exquisitely, a painter of time.

But let us find the trouble now. All through Vermeer's oeuvre are objects like those in "Woman in Blue Reading a Letter" that remind us the world is large. This was the world that was emerging after the protracted struggle by the Netherlands for independence from Spanish rule. During the 80-Years war and in its immediate aftermath, the Dutch established trading posts in Asia, Africa and in the Americas. An efflorescence of capitalism at home and overseas followed, and with it the beginnings of a colonial empire. Their own experience of subjugation did nothing to temper their desire to subjugate others. The Dutch East India Company dominated maritime routes and its shareholders raked in profits. The Dutch West India Company, meanwhile, was a significant force in the trade in enslaved people. Ordinary Dutch citizens grew wealthy from these criminal enterprises. With a renewed sense of who they were in the world, they filled their homes with rare objects and far-fetched finery. You could have luxurious things, and you could also have them depicted in paintings. The paintings were helpful reminders that you were mortal, yes, but also that you were rich.

In his perceptive book "Vermeer's Hat" (2008), the historian Timothy Brook draws out some of the global provenances of the things we see in Vermeer's paintings. He suggests, for instance, that the silver on the table in the "Woman Holding a Balance" could have had its origin in the notorious Potosí silver mine, a hellish place run on the labor of enslaved people in what was then Peru and is now Bolivia. The felt lining the hat of the soldier in "Officer and Laughing Girl" almost certainly came from beaver pelts sourced by French adventurers from the violent trade networks of 17th-century Canada. Brook traces a connection between this lighthearted genre scene and the bitter history of the "starvation winter of 1649-50," when European greed for pelts led to expulsions, wars and the mass deaths of Huron Indian children.

The beddejak in "Woman in Blue Reading a Letter," Martine tells me, is painted with ultramarine, the rarest and most expensive of the blue pigments that would have been available to a 17th-century Dutch painter. Ultramarine was made from lapis lazuli, which was imported into Western Europe from Afghan mines; it came from beyond the sea (Latin "ultra marinus"). Possibly the use of such an expensive pigment allowed

Vermeer to attach greater prestige and a higher price to his paintings. Possibly he liked its association with paintings from earlier eras in which it was used to paint the blue of the Virgin Mary's robe. The effect of ultramarine is dazzling, emotional. But who was mining the lapis lazuli in Afghanistan and under what conditions?

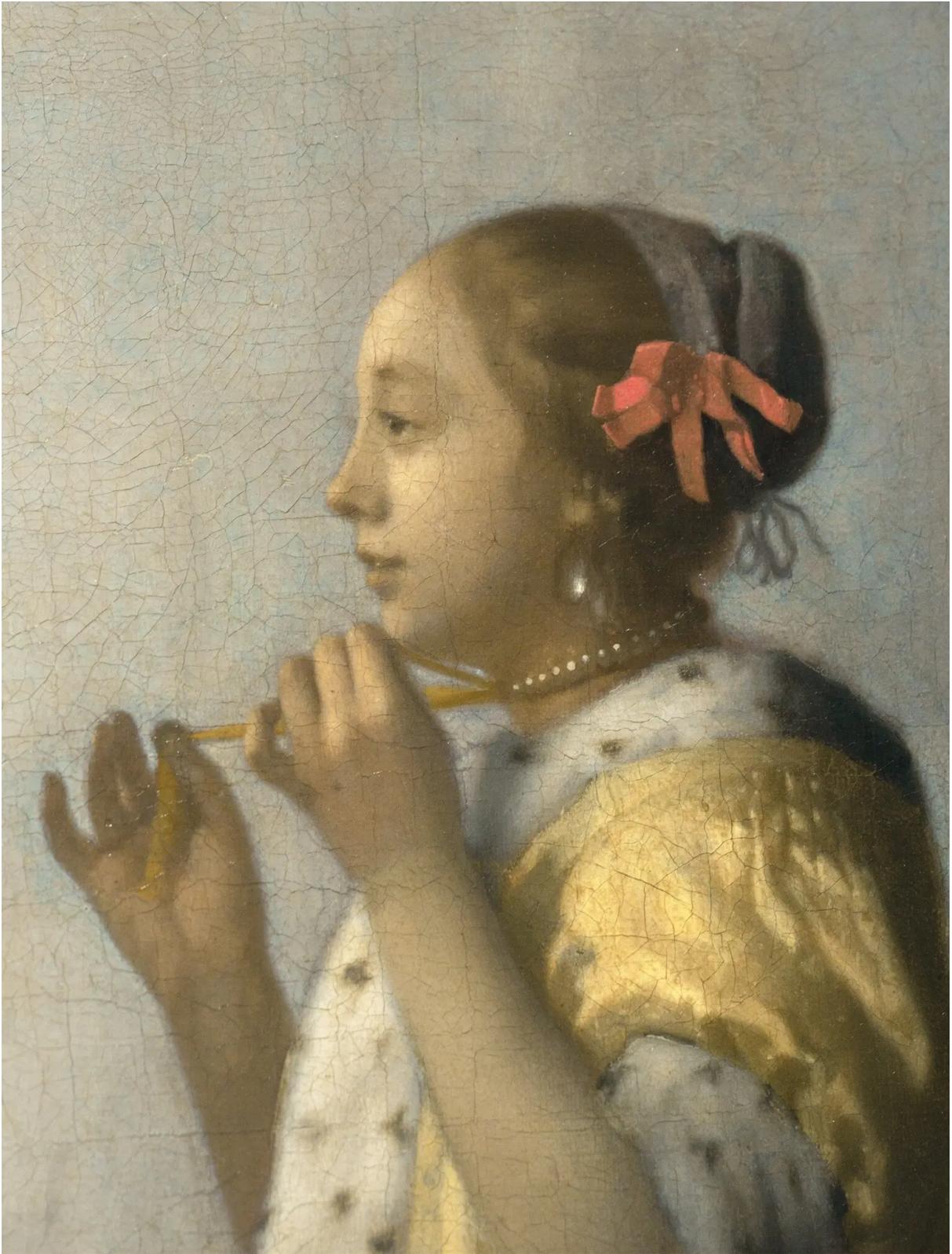


Detail of "The Glass of Wine." Christopher Anderson/Magnum, for The New York Times

Any work of art is evidence of the material circumstances in which it was produced. The very best works of art are more than evidence. Inside a single frame, within a

single great painting, complicity and transcendence coexist. This is what I thought as I went through “Vermeer.” The exhibition did not broach those subjects, and I did not read the catalog, which was scholarly and insightful, until later, but earlier that afternoon I had lunch with Valika Smeulders, the head of the history department at the Rijksmuseum. Smeulders co-curated “Slavery,” an epochal show held at the museum in 2021. It made use of artifacts from the Rijksmuseum’s own collections and a wide range of other sources. There were paintings, prints, drawings and documents, as well as plantation bells, foot stocks, a brass collar, a branding iron bearing a logo (probably of the Dutch West India company) and a ceremonial glass made for the raising of toasts by successful enslavers. Visitors to the Rijksmuseum, used to more vainglorious accounts of their national history, were confronted by visions of the brutality of life on plantations in Batavia, South Africa and the Banda Islands and by the stories of a select few of the hundreds of thousands of people enslaved by the Dutch.

One painting featured in that exhibition was by Pieter de Wit, who was possibly a student of Rembrandt’s. De Wit’s painting depicts the director general of the Gold Coast, one Dirk Wilre, in an ornate interior in Elmina Castle, in present-day Ghana. De Wit, as a painter, is not at all in Vermeer’s league, but I’m struck by the details his painting shares with Vermeer’s “The Geographer,” painted in the same year, 1669: the single open window to the left, the leaded glass, the terrestrial globe, the richly patterned rug on the table. But unlike “The Geographer,” De Wit’s painting has two other figures in it. One of them is a woman: Black, naked to the waist, down on one knee, clearly in a condition of servitude. If the slippers on the floor are hers, her servitude might be sexual as well. The kneeling woman offers Wilre a landscape painting showing Elmina Castle. Her body, and her land. The brutality is explicit.



Detail of "Woman With a Pearl Necklace." Christopher Anderson/Magnum, for The New York Times

The exhibition at the Rijksmuseum, which runs through June 4, is full of arresting pictures, many of them from the mid-1660s when Vermeer's career was at its peak of focus and invention. In those years he made a number of immortal pictures, several of them variations on the theme of a woman in a hushed interior, solitary, wearing a fur-trimmed beddejak. In "Woman Holding a Balance," she is pregnant and the room is darker than usual, lit primarily by the daylight that has sneaked around the lemon-

yellow curtain. The scales the woman holds up are empty — she’s balancing, not weighing. On the table in front of her are coins of gold and silver as well as pearls, and behind her is a painting of the Last Judgment. In another painting, the “Woman With a Pearl Necklace” stands in profile looking left. It’s the same yellow curtain, now drawn aside to admit gentle light. On the left side, in shadow, is a dark blue porcelain jar, its hard gleam contrasting with, on the right, the softness and yellowness — a yellow slightly cooler than that of the curtain — of her beddejak. “A Lady Writing” is another arrangement in yellows and blues. We don’t know who she is, this long-ago woman; we don’t know who any of them are and probably never will. She, too, wears the yellow jacket. (Vermeer’s few props recur like a playwright’s favorite actors.) She is seated at her writing table and looks at us directly with what seems to be real human understanding. It is a stunning picture, in the collection of the National Gallery in Washington. I had seen it before but never properly looked at it. This is why, finally, one goes to museums: for the chance to learn to see again, to see beauty, to see trouble. And, yes, there is the “Girl With a Pearl Earring,” a startling and *immediate* vision. In the context of its studio mates it is just another mountain peak in the range. But what a range, and what a peak.

As we were heading out of the exhibition, I dashed back and went to stand again in front of the painting that had surprised me most: “A Lady Writing.” Her gaze has a shadowy complexity to it, a soft smile; on her irises are white points. (She feels far more real to me than the “Mona Lisa” ever has.) There are white highlights, too, on the enormous pearl earrings she wears. If real, the pearls would have been harvested by pearl divers in the Gulf of Mannar, between present day Sri Lanka and India. In her right hand is a quill pen, paused. Underneath it, a streak of white paint perfectly denotes a sheaf of white paper. The ornate writing box, of different kinds of wood and with round metal studs, is most likely from Goa under Portuguese rule. Made by whom? I found myself asking again. Under what conditions? Behind her is a painting in dark umber of a viola da gamba, a stilled music that suggests or confirms the love theme of the picture. But if her lover is absent, who has interrupted her? At whom is she smiling with such gentle familiarity?



Detail of "A Lady Writing." Christopher Anderson/Magnum, for The New York Times

At you. This gaze has held yours for centuries, suspending time on your behalf. There's not a single hard line of drawing anywhere in the painting, just layers of paint set beside one another, patches of color blurring into one another as though seen through an old camera lens that refuses to focus. The softness of "A Lady Writing" is so pervasive, it's as though the picture were on the verge of dissolving. Morning after morning Vermeer sits at his easel, as the world rages out there, the world where people

are kneeling in subjection, where people are being branded with a hot iron. Even right outside his own door, there's the violent brother-in-law who threatens to beat up the women in the household. But the pictures are permeable to these outside troubles, are in fact continuous with them. Those amorous soldiers aren't playing dress-up. They fight, they kill. We scan Vermeer's oeuvre in vain for an image of a simple happy family, of mother, father, child in domestic peace. No, the world of the pictures is poetic and lyrical, but it is also fractured, vulnerable, isolated and anxious. His paintings (and those by others; the implications of this argument are not limited to Vermeer) cannot be taken as mere decorations or technical achievements. They contain the knowledge of their own sorrow and can tolerate more honest context than we often allow them. To reduce them to ads for beauty, free-floating signifiers of culture and elegance, does them a disservice. On their long journey across the ages, the paintings of Vermeer bring with them both consolation and terror. And so long as this is the case, this world has not yet earned its end.

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