

CRITIC'S PICK

The Absolute Vermeer, in a Show More Precious Than Pearls

This blockbuster at the Rijksmuseum, never to be repeated, pares the sphinx of Dutch art to the essence: 28 gemlike paintings.

By Jason Farago

Feb. 9, 2023

AMSTERDAM — What is a masterpiece?

There's a kind of confidence, generous but wrong, we afford classic works of art. They have passed "the test of time"; they have beaten the suspicions of fashion, revealed some inner greatness no one can dispute. We look at the Venus de Milo and we quiver, just like they must have two thousand years back; we listen to Beethoven's Ninth and our breath catches, from the same notes played in Vienna in 1824.

Only the history of culture screams back: it isn't true! Much of Beethoven's audience never heard a note of Bach, who lay in obscurity for decades after his death in 1750. Whole centuries went by when people looked at El Greco's attenuated saints and disciples, and felt nothing. Our ancestors lived and died deaf to the achievements of Dickinson, Melville, Kafka, Hurston. What is a masterpiece? A thing agreed on as such in time, riding high on the vicissitudes of taste, but always liable to fall.

On the highways and in the lowlands of European painting, there may be no more perplexing case of reputational caprice than Johannes Vermeer (1632—75). He was well established in Delft during his life; his art sold; and yet for two centuries after his death, his small and silent pictures of women reading letters or pouring milk elicited no attention at all. When "Girl With a Pearl Earring" came up at auction in 1881, it hammered at just two guilders. Now Vermeer stops traffic; he diverts planes. And you wonder: that luminousness, that inner calm, how could this not stop everyone's heart like it stops mine?

The largest ever Vermeer exhibition opens to the public on Friday at the Rijksmuseum here in Amsterdam. It will, almost surely, go down in history as the definitive exhibition of this artist, never to be replicated. The museum's own holdings, including the unperturbed "Milkmaid" and the tranquil "Little Street," have been joined by more than three-quarters of his surviving oeuvre. On the evidence of the advance ticket sales (over 200,000 sold), there has been no relenting in Vermeer's ascent from oblivion to megacelebrity. We perpetually distracted moderns have only fallen deeper

under his muted spell — into the crystalline sublimity of his small genre scenes and head studies, the modulations of sharp and blurry details that change oils into light.



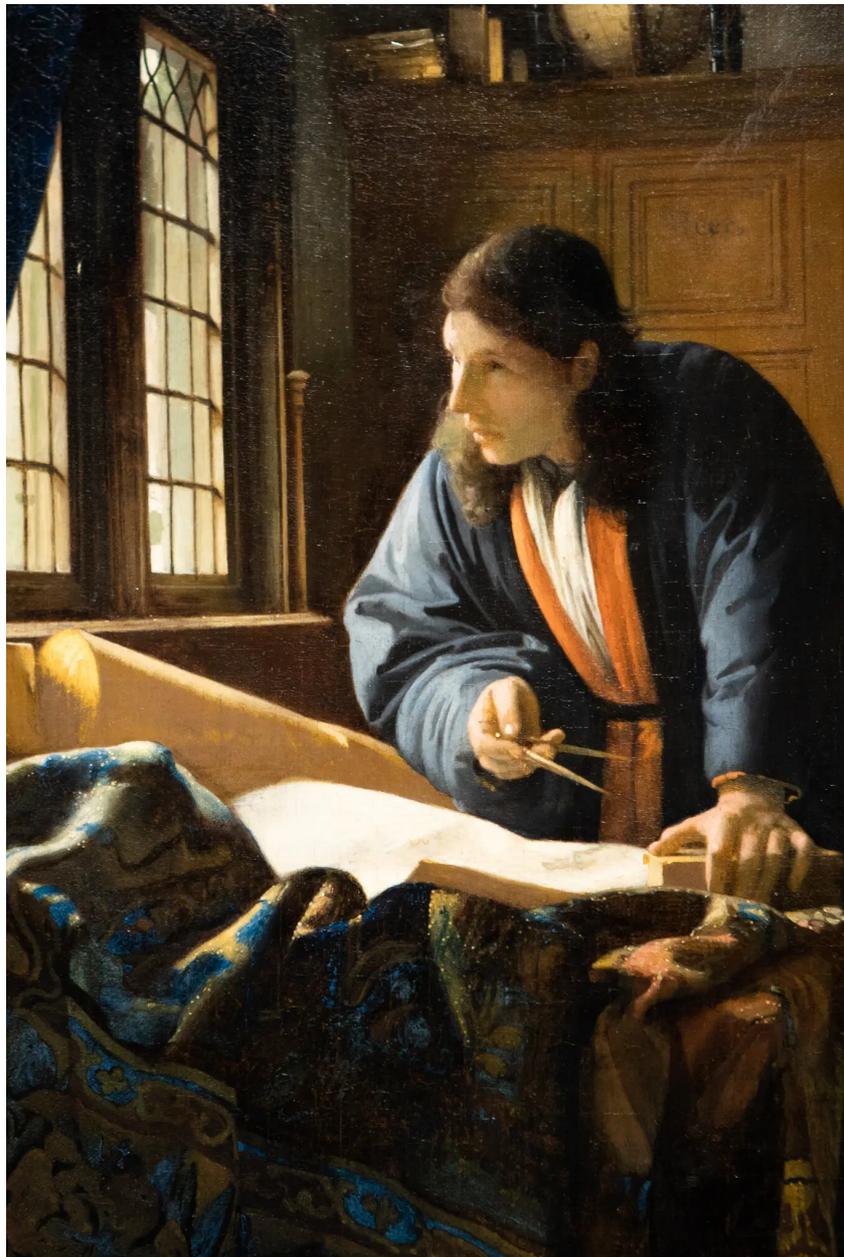
At the Rijksmuseum, Vermeer's only two streetscapes: "View of Delft" (1660-61), left, and "The Little Street" (1658-59). Melissa Schriek for The New York Times

It is just called "Vermeer," and from the title on, this exhibition is dazzlingly confident and impetuously spare. To call it rare is to undersell it severely. It took seven years of diplomacy to organize. Obtaining loans of this value was already mission impossible before 2020 — no museum parts with a Vermeer unless the ask is really, really legit — and the pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine only increased the costs and the logistical ordeals.

So if Vermeer is your guy you'd better log onto the KLM website, and then to the museum's ticket office; the first two months of the run are already sold out. Even those of us less devoted to his tranquillity — and I won't hide it from you, I like my 17th century a lot more baroque: give me Rubens, give me Flanders, give me saints on the rack and lovers twisting like corkscrews — will marvel in gratitude at this unprecedented assembly, and the chance it offers to see Vermeer unclouded.

Really, the show is just about perfect: perfectly argued, perfectly paced, as clear and uncontaminated as the light streaming through those Delft windows. And in its proudly spare galleries I felt a little closer to understanding the intense grip of these diamond

depictions on contemporary audiences, stronger still in the time of gigapixel reproduction. Why *him*, out of all the quiet masters of the eruptive 17th-century Dutch art market? Or better: why *us*? What happened to *us*, after Vermeer's long oblivion, to leave us so susceptible to his hushed views of writers and maids?



A detail of "The Geographer," 1669: one of many paintings by Vermeer with foreign luxuries and new scientific instruments. Melissa Schriek for The New York Times

One factor is scarcity. Vermeer produced little and died young. The number of still extant paintings is something like 37 (attributions being uncertain on a few), and the Rijksmuseum has got 28 of them. That's eight more than the National Gallery of Art mustered for the only other full Vermeer retrospective, in 1995, which provoked hourslong queues in the Washington winter.

Here at the Rijks those 28 small-to-smallish paintings luxuriate across 10 galleries. Each picture is ringed by a simple semicircular balustrade, which permits close

inspection and also distributes the crowds. (The show's designer is the French architect Jean-Michel Wilmotte, who's also hung heavy velvet curtains to muffle the sound; the curators are the Rijks' Pieter Roelofs and Gregor J.M. Weber.) Beyond that, and a few minimal texts, nothing. No comparative works, no distracting videos. Even the benches are off to the sides. The show burns slowly, noiselessly; its emptiness fills up with detail; the infinitely small starts to feel infinitely vast.



A visitor looks at Vermeer's "Milkmaid" (1658-59), which has its own empty gallery in the Rijksmuseum's retrospective. Melissa Schriek for The New York Times



In Johannes Vermeer's "The Milkmaid" (1658-59) "you can see all of Vermeer's power and poignancy," writes our critic. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Several pictures have been isolated in their own rooms — including "The Milkmaid," just 18 inches tall. Alone, in this one little painting of a kitchen maid pouring milk for what is likely bread pudding, you can see all of Vermeer's power and poignancy. In her concentrated gaze, in her modest leather bodice, each cohering through hard, unblended stipples of paint. In the proto-pointillist dabs that constitute the bread rolls, so far from the "naturalism" we still impute to his style. In that precise and perfectly Dutch art of describing, down to the nails hammered into the kitchen wall and the little Delft blue tiles along the floor. In the light, above all, which Vermeer made manifest through that soft dissolution of detail, from background to foreground, which we anachronistically call "photographic."

What is a masterpiece? In “The Milkmaid,” liquid becomes life in a transubstantiation to rival water becoming wine; the genre scene sets down its earthly moralism, and the working woman touches the divine. I like “The Milkmaid” much more, by the way, than “Girl With a Pearl Earring,” who gets prime position in a gallery of five of Vermeer’s tronies, or imaginary facial studies. (Pilgrims take note: She is only in Amsterdam through March 30, when she goes home early to the Mauritshuis in The Hague.)

That turbaned maiden has skin so seamlessly contoured she could give TikTok tutorials. The pearl, wondrous to see, is hardly more than two bare white strokes. But I keep bridling at her idealization, which has fueled all those campaigns to confect a Dutch Mona Lisa. I miss Vermeer’s spellbinding attention to things — to letters, to instruments; to maps on the wall; to Chinese porcelain and Turkish carpets and North American beaver hats — and how those things give his attention to people, women mostly, their descriptive eminence.

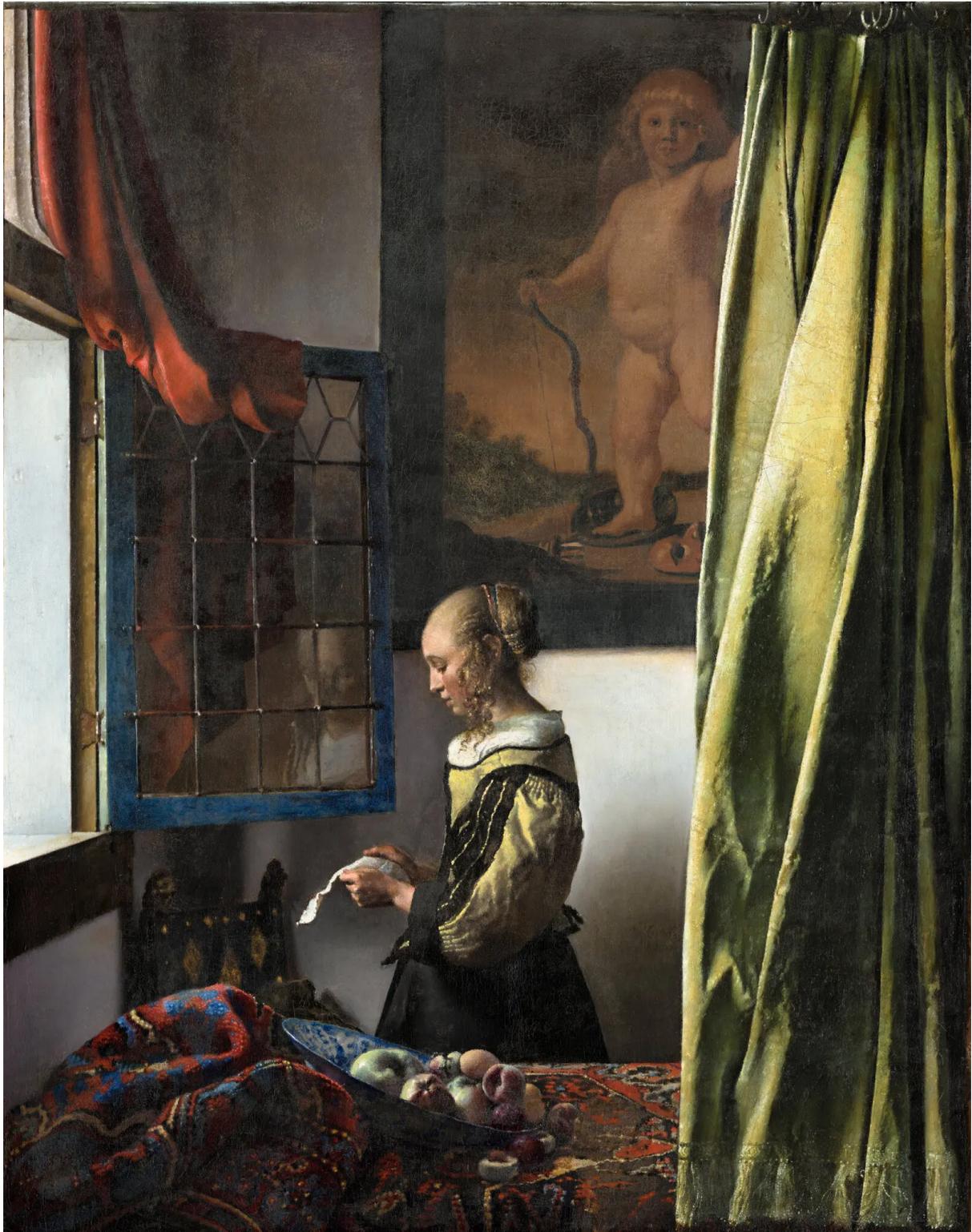
Such as in the most important loan here: his “Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window,” borrowed from Dresden, also awarded its own gallery to showcase a remarkable restoration. This is one of Vermeer’s first great genre scenes, after some sloppy early years of biblical and mythological painting. A young woman stands in profile, her head slightly bowed. In the panes of the open window, unsettlingly and then breathtakingly, we see her engrossed reflection. We see, too, the piling of the Ottoman rug, the sheen of the Chinese fruit bowl, the crinkles of the trompe-l’oeil curtain. For 250 years or more the back wall appeared empty — but in 2021, conservators finished removing posthumously added overpainting to reveal a pudgy, conquering Cupid: one of Vermeer’s many paintings-in-a-painting.

The letter, it now seems, is a love letter. The painting is a love letter too.



LEZEND MEISJE BIJ HET VENSTER
READING A LETTER AT AN OPEN WINDOW
1658
GALERIE ALTE MEISTER, DRESDEN

Visitors look at “Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window” (1657-58). Melissa Schriek for The New York Times



Vermeer's "Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window," after a yearslong restoration that revealed the painting of Cupid on the back wall. Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden; Photo by Wolfgang Kreische

The same Cupid appears in the background of two other paintings here (plus a fourth, not lent), though never painted the same way. Vermeer was always a contriver, a fabricator, whose acute powers of visual description disguised how deliberately he constructed his silent scenes. This retrospective's big miss, therefore, is his "Art of Painting," held back by the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, which even the catalog concedes is Vermeer's most important work. The Met, the Louvre and King

Charles also withheld a few. (Another absence is “The Concert,” depicting three musicians glimpsed from a distance, though if you know its whereabouts please contact the FBI! It hasn’t been seen since 1990, when it was snatched off the wall of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston.)

But the Frick Collection, currently subletting while its Fifth Avenue mansion is under renovation, has allowed all three of its Vermeers to leave New York for the first time in a century. In the Frick’s “Mistress and Maid,” an uncommonly grand Vermeer, the lady of the house edits a love letter while wearing a yellow morning jacket trimmed with white fur. At last it can be seen with the Met’s “Young Woman With a Lute,” Washington’s “Lady Writing,” Berlin’s “Woman With a Pearl Necklace,” and the Rijksmuseum’s own “Love Letter,” whose female models all wear that same yellow-and-white coat.



A woman scrutinizing “Mistress and Maid” (1664-67), exceptionally lent from the Frick Collection. Melissa Schriek for The New York Times

The Rijksmuseum show comes of course with a whole scholarly apparatus, reserved largely for two publications. The curators propose that Vermeer, a convert to his wife’s Catholic faith, was a far more Catholic artist than usually understood — and this in the Protestant Netherlands, where public Catholic worship was outlawed. They wager that Jesuit priests turned him on to the camera obscura, an optical contraption whose projected imagery likely helped him gradate focused and blurry passages.

They also delve into every item of an inventory of Vermeer's household possessions made after his death. Vermeer fanatics can geek out on every last detail about his "tapestry-upholstered chairs," like those we see in "The Geographer"; of a "wicker basket" for laundry, sitting on the floor in "The Love Letter" — and, not last, of his wife Catharina's "yellow satin mantle with white fur trimming." The fringe of that now iconic coat probably wasn't real ermine, we learn, but cheaper rabbit or cat fur. The pearl earring, which would have cost a fortune, was probably glass.



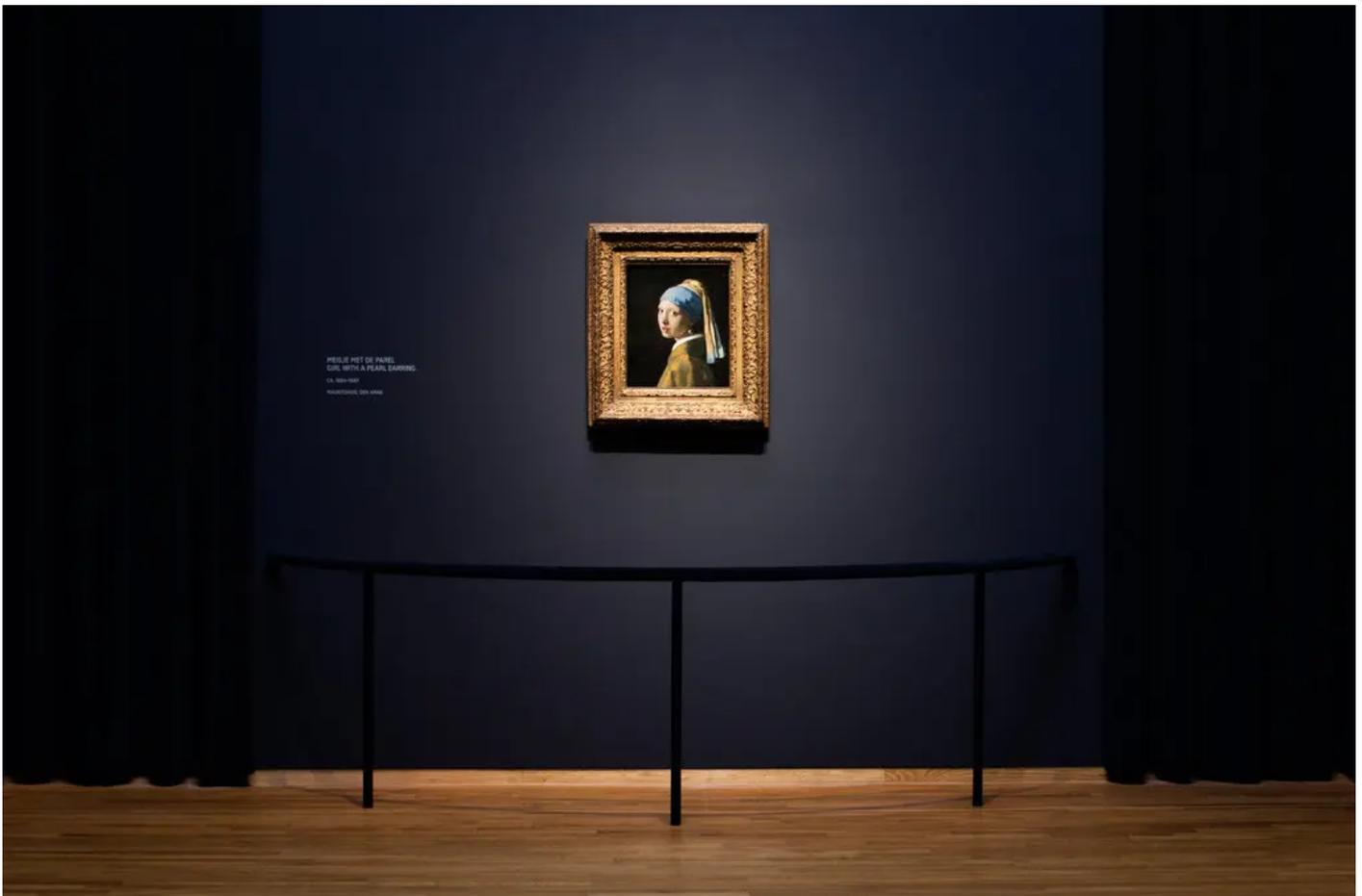
When "Girl With a Pearl Earring" came up at auction in 1881, it hammered at just two guilders. "You wonder: that luminousness, that inner calm, how could this not stop everyone's heart like it stops mine?" our critic writes. Peter Dejong/Associated Press

When he was rediscovered in the mid-19th century, Vermeer seemed to be more than just an overlooked old master. He seemed to have something particular to say to a Europe careening toward modernism — especially in his sharp-to-fuzzy optical tricks and unorthodox cropping that, to viewers then and even more now, make his paintings feel as "true" as a photograph.

That false innocence bewitched more and more in the alienated 20th century, which turned to Vermeer for transparency, order, harmony. (The paintings' secular subjects made this easier, whatever his Catholic stimuli.) But beauty and calm just aren't enough to explain the intensity of Vermeeromania today, and I think his appeal now lies somewhere else. It lies, much more, in the paintings' capacity for deceleration, and how the difference between their tactile reality and obvious construction can only be seen with time.

Be quiet and look at the girl with pursed lips, reading a letter aloud in the half-light. The clouded, motionless view of Delft. The maid directing all her attention to the milk that pours from a humble earthenware jug. Nothing important is happening, and yet that nothing is everything now.

Vermeer has become one of our last defibrillators of absorption and awareness. He matters now precisely for his vindication that we have not wholly decayed into data receptors; that we are still human, and if only we find the right master we can slow down time. What is a masterpiece, in 2023? A thing that returns to you — vitally, commandingly, after this clamorous world of news and notifications seemed to have wiped them out — your powers of concentration.



“The Girl With a Pearl Earring,” in pride of place in “Vermeer,” at the Rijksmuseum. Melissa Schriek for The New York Times