

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: VERMEER IN DIALOGUE:
FROM APPROPRIATION TO RESPONSE

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The intrinsic value of art rests in the response it conjures in its audience and the information this response can convey about the culture in which it resides. The paintings of the 17th century Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer are proving particularly relevant to our contemporary culture. The scholarly discourse on Vermeer and his paintings, the exhibition of his works, their reproduction in diverse media, and their appropriation by artists, novelists, and filmmakers have created dialogues on Vermeer that promote understanding of his meaning today. Surrounding Vermeer with the various dialogues that have surfaced in culture provides a way of understanding how meaning has been ascribed to this artist and just what this meaning is.

The degree of attention afforded to Vermeer through the exhibition forum has shifted his paintings into the full view of a broad international audience, made the artist and his paintings celebrities, and established Vermeer's aesthetic as a cultural emblem of beauty open to public response and interpretation. This thesis is argued within the

context of five museum exhibitions related to Vermeer that took place between 1995-2003 and through an in-depth discussion of the appropriation of his paintings by other artists, writers, filmmakers and their critics. Critical methods from art history, visual culture studies, film studies, consumer culture studies, anthropology, and ethnography are employed to support this thesis

Appropriation is an important theme in our contemporary culture; yet, there is also an historical context through which it has evolved. Artists have engaged in appropriation throughout art history and many traditional motivations for appropriation remain presently relevant. Methods of reproduction have tremendously affected the evolution of painting since the development of the print in the 15th century and this has had impact on art appropriation. Technological developments in reproduction methods since the 19th century have accelerated the appropriation of paintings in diverse media. The reproduction of Vermeer's paintings since the 19th century and especially through the museum exhibition and its media response in recent history have made his images well-known and encouraged their use as a way of conceptualizing and contextualizing ideas of refinement, perfection, and beauty.

VERMEER IN DIALOGUE: FROM APPROPRIATION TO RESPONSE

by

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

“Nobody can do anything for me,” said the King mournfully. “The Princess Lenore wants the moon, and she cannot be well till she gets it, but nobody can get it for her. Every time I ask anybody for the moon, it gets larger and farther away. There is nothing you can do for me except play on your lute. Something sad.”

“How big do they say the moon is,” asked the Court Jester, “and how far away?”

“The Lord High Chamberlain says it is 35,000 miles away, and bigger than the Princess Lenore’s room,” said the King. “The Royal Wizard says it is 150,000 miles away, and twice as big as this palace. The Royal Mathematician says it is 300,000 miles away, and half the size of this kingdom.”

The Court Jester strummed on his lute for a little while. “They are all wise men,” he said, “and so they must all be right. If they are all right, then the moon must be just as large and as far away as each person thinks it is. The thing to do is find out how big the Princess Lenore thinks it is, and how far away.”

“I never thought of that,” said the King.¹

--James Thurber, *Many Moons*

I remain an historian, that is, a story teller who tries to unfold the intricate plot woven by the actions of men, women, and teenagers (these last must not be forgotten), whose desires are the motive power of history. Material conditions interfere, results are unexpected, and there can be no single outcome.²

--Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence*

As the words of James Thurber and Jacques Barzun aptly explain, it is often our perceptions that offer the guiding force through which we build our assumptions and define our worlds. Found in a book intended for children in the former and in a tome on cultural history in the latter each nevertheless offers a message that the secret to understanding resides within the individual. Finding out what one thinks about whatever one is thinking about is at the heart of human discovery. This study will be no different.

This dissertation is a study of images and, specifically, the ways in which we can determine the meaning of images through a discussion of the dialogue surrounding them. The images I am concerned with are those derived from paintings and, in particular, those that can be traced through the scholarly discourse in the field of art history. Art history offers a plethora of paintings whose images have transcended their maker's time into our own. Paintings are appropriated in myriad ways, and this suggests that our appreciation of these works is in a constant state of evaluation and renewal. Although this dissertation will consider the parameters of this reality in order to posit the relevance of art history and painting more broadly in our culture, I will focus on the paintings of a single artist, the seventeenth century Dutch master, Johannes Vermeer.

At the heart of this dissertation is the idea that the underlying value of art rests in the response it conjures in its audience and the information this response can convey about the culture in which it resides. In this regard, value may be understood as an object's "meaning" with historical record – both written and visual – offering the evidence through which this meaning may be constructed.

As the art historical record clearly documents, images from art are subject to a multitude of "readings," many of which set forth diametrically opposed interpretations or theories. Although many studies privilege the written record penned by scholars, this study will seek to foreground objects, specifically the paintings of Vermeer, and then surround them with the dialogues they have inspired – penned or painted, published or spoken, publicly shared or more privately held, factually based or creatively invented. Like a diamond merchant considering the value of a stone by carefully studying its facets,

I will consider the many dialogues that can be used to study the history of these paintings and further understand their value within a larger construction of art history and culture.

Paintings are often considered in the scholarly realm as evidence of the culture that created them; in this dissertation, I will consider the more dynamic relationship of art to the culture through which it continues to exist long after its creator has ceased, most specifically in our own time. The paintings of Johannes Vermeer will be considered both as individual objects of unique character and construction and as images viewable through reproductions, as tangible things we can encounter repeatedly throughout our lives and as images that reside in our minds like spirits coloring our memories and imaginations.

Although aspects of my theses can be found in part within the works of a variety of scholars, my dissertation is unique in considering the appropriation of art, and specifically the art of Vermeer, within a broader range of media and viewer response. In considering the works of Vermeer and their meaning in our contemporary culture, I will focus on the ways in which his works have been appropriated, products of this appropriative process, and the new understandings about Vermeer that can be gleaned from these works. What precisely about Vermeer is being appropriated? Where are these appropriations occurring? The act of appropriation implies that the individual or culture that appropriated values the object borrowed. What can we conclude from a review of these appropriative acts in regards to the meaning of Vermeer's art in our contemporary culture? My discussion of Vermeer will focus on scholarship and the exhibition of his works, derivative paintings, popular literature, film, opera, and the critical responses to and uses of his work in the mass media. Each of these themes offers

a series of individual narratives, which when considered collectively, creates a broad dialogue on Vermeer that furthers our understanding of this Dutch master and, indeed, the history of art in our time.

Ideas related to the use of old master paintings as the departure for artworks by contemporary artists and film makers have proved the subject of a number of recent exhibitions, and in one instance, an exhibit that specifically focused on paintings that derived from the works of Vermeer.³ However, none of these exhibits or the essays found in their catalogues has addressed the specific responses to paintings that have spurred artists to create their new works or the ways in which the new works extend our understandings of Vermeer.

The Katonah Museum of Art exhibition and catalogue *Déjà vu: Reworking the Past* (2000), for example, focused on how our understanding of new works of art is altered by the inclusion of an object from art history, discussing the ways in which contemporary artists “play” with old master paintings to provoke ideas such as those related to race and gender.⁴ *Déjà vu* did not, however, consider specific information as to why artists selected one old master painting and not another, the active thoughts these artists had in creating their new works, or the ways in which these new creative works, in turn, reflect back on the old. Here, as in other essays or exhibitions on re-workings of art from the past, art is framed within inadequately defined theories of post-modernism with no clear discussion and linkage to the more historical roots of appropriation in painting.

In highlighting the accelerated pace of our current culture in the wake of technological innovation, *Déjà vu* curator, Barbara Bloemink, writes that “many artists feel that they cannot innovate quickly enough to meet the demand and choose instead to

turn to past models for inspiration.”⁵ This statement is highly simplistic and is unsubstantiated within the context of Bloemink’s research. As this dissertation will demonstrate, the act of appropriating the art of Vermeer is itself a form of engagement that, though acted out in the present, offers a pathway back to the past. Appropriation here is a form of dialogue, a discourse, an active connection with the past in the present, and a process and response shared by artists across time.

This study is heavily vested in art historical methodology in combination with other methodologies also related to cultural studies, including anthropology, consumer studies, and film studies. Contemporary art historical method implies a whole range of theories and methodologies likewise employed in the other fields and studies that I am including. More traditional methods of object description, iconographic discussion, cultural context, connoisseurship, and technical analysis, which are exemplified in the work of such noted art historians as Erwin Panofsky or Seymour Slive are at work within my discussion. Art historical methodology will be employed in the analysis of objects and paintings selected for my research and especially those of artists responding to Johannes Vermeer. Particular emphasis will be placed on understanding Vermeer’s technique and the overall aesthetics of his images, as this informs the ways in which art is being appropriated. The general characteristics of Vermeer’s paintings as both others and I have observed them will be utilized as a means of building an understanding of Vermeer’s works within our contemporary culture.

Descriptions of specific works that were inspired by or demonstrate affinities to the paintings of Vermeer will be discussed in the various media outlined. Art historical methodology is enhanced with methods of ethnography and includes a collection of

responses and perspectives of living artists, authors, art historians, and individuals related to this study through direct conversation, correspondence, formal interviews, or syndicated articles. In all cases I have limited my discussions to objects, artists and events with which I have had direct experience. Although dissertation chapters will at times emphasize one or another methodology within their specific discussion, each research method will be utilized in some way throughout the study.

The information and conclusions I will make in this dissertation are the composite of my research and experiences over more than thirty years. While admitting to the personal nature of my research, I am, like all of us, a product of my time and circumstances; thus what I have chosen to focus on – meaning what I believe to be important – is, in fact, illustrative of larger trends in our culture. My perceptions, ideas and meditations, therefore, appear to be informed both by my self, the circumstances in which my life has evolved, and by the culture in which I live.

Our understandings about perception have transcended into vastly different areas of life during the last century and importantly into numerous academic disciplines. Discourse in history, psychiatry, anthropology and other aspects of cultural studies are highlighting the more personal, autobiographical component of the research their authors embark on and, in some examples, these works are laced with personal, anecdotal information that connect the author's life in some way to the focus of their work.⁶ Such studies make clear what is true of nearly all scholarly pursuit; that the relationship of the scholar to her subject is nothing shy of intimate. The facts remain the facts but it is the individual who reconstructs them and puts the spin on things.

In seeking to understand how viewer response to Vermeer is formulated, I have consciously, self-reflexively, sought to identify the sources of my own ongoing fascination with Vermeer. The paintings of Johannes Vermeer are among my very favorite from the history of art and it is through this reality that a dissertation focused on a more general study of responses to his works has evolved. The ways in which, as well as the times in which I have seen Vermeer's paintings cultivated my interest. How I have considered his works within the context of other artists has influenced my responses to his works as well. Identifying my own appreciation and interest in Vermeer's paintings as a decidedly non-variable component of my research, I have chosen to incorporate it purposefully as an active, visible tool. This method of research is informed by discussions in anthropology and ethnography and particularly those related to self-ethnography, where the researcher acknowledges her engagement in the research and validates her role as an informant in the study being conducted.

A good description of the purpose of self-ethnography in research is found in Ruth Behar's *The Vulnerable Observer*.⁷ As Behar explains, self-ethnography offers a method through which "deeper connections between one's personal experience and the subject under study" can be drawn, that, in turn, can move the research in a direction it might otherwise not be able to go.⁸ Full-length autobiography is not the purpose; however, employing self-ethnography encourages a sharpened understanding of the "aspects of the self [that] are the most important filters through which one perceives the world and, more particularly, the topic being studied."⁹ Self-ethnography places the researcher in a position that Behar describes as vulnerable, yet, one that also parallels the individuals who are observed within the context of a study.

Ethnography and self-ethnography identify the personal dialogues that are at play in the subject of the research and these dialogues convey response. As my own lived experiences and dialogues with Vermeer are related to the content of this study, the methodologies in play, the broadened cultural focus, as well as the underlying philosophy of my research, they are embedded within the text and occasionally surface as first person narratives. These personal narratives offer additional insight into themes that are more broadly relevant to a discussion of the appreciation of Vermeer within our contemporary culture and, importantly, reveal the source of my fascination for this artist.

It is, indeed, somewhat hard for me to recall my first encounter with Vermeer; however, I am certain it was very early in life. I was fortunate to be living with my family outside Washington, D.C. during the early 1960s and we made frequent trips to the National Gallery of Art. My memories are filled with images of paintings in the National Gallery and Vermeer's *Girl with a Red Hat* immediately comes to my mind. Undoubtedly it was the hat that captivated my young imagination, as it is still what draws my eye first when I view this painting today.

It is a great deal easier for me to date with precision the first time I made a connection with Vermeer. It was the summer of 1971 and my father had taken our family on his version of the Grand Tour. Paris was our first stop and the Musée du Louvre a centerpiece. The Louvre, for a first time visitor, can be described as nothing less than awesome and for a child of eleven, I can honestly say, it is most certainly overwhelming. I have no memories of the people at the Louvre that day, although the crowds were surely thick. I can think of only painting after painting filling the walls in room after room after room. A number of these works made their impression; however, the scale of many was

so enormous and their subject beyond my grasp, that I was occasionally left with a dull sense of intimidation.

Perhaps it was the immediate contrast in size that drew me in or maybe it was that I had seen the painting in one of our travel manuals, but my first encounter with Vermeer's *The Lacemaker* is something I will never forget. Like many children of my generation I was always rather creative and sewing, knitting, and embroidery were skills I had successfully mastered by this time in life. Looking at Vermeer's painting, I could immediately relate to the concentration and contentment I perceived in the young girl as she worked, as I had also experienced a similar sense of self-absorption before myself. My eyes danced between her hands at work, the careful attentiveness of her face, and the brilliant red thread spilling from what was certainly her sewing kit. Although I could only have been partially aware of the formal language Vermeer used to communicate with me, it was a formative moment, and one most certainly linked to my ongoing fascination with Vermeer.

Before leaving the Louvre that day, I used some of the hard earned travel money I had saved for our trip to buy a book that reproduced *The Lacemaker* on its cover (fig. 1). Although written in French, which I could not read at the time, it was the pictures in the book that I was most anxious to have and particularly the young girl who had so captivated me. It would be hard to gage the number of hours I spent in the next years leafing through that book, gazing at Vermeer's little lacemaker, leaving the pages all dog-eared. My family had long since left Washington, D.C., for the Midwest; thus this book and others we had in our family library were how I learned more about Vermeer. When I was next in Paris in 1979 as a college student, I again visited *The Lacemaker*. I felt as

though I was seeing a dear old friend and at the same time meeting her again for the first time. I saw her as before but also differently. Mixed with my own memory of her was the information I had learned from the books I had read, the courses I had taken, and all the photographs I had seen of other Vermeer images. I have visited *The Lacemaker* many times in the years since and am always moved by my response. Held within the boundaries of her frame is not only a masterwork by Vermeer but also a small piece of my girlhood, my maturity, myself.



Figure 1. Outside cover of the Musée du Louvre catalogue purchased by Marguerite Glass during her family's trip to Europe in August, 1971.

Similar to many of his contemporaries and, indeed, numerous other artists of the 16th and 17th century, Vermeer's art and reputation fell into relative obscurity by the end of the 17th century. The extent to which his paintings provided influence on the works of later artists is, therefore, largely missing from the general discussion of art during a significant chunk of history. Vermeer's name resurfaces in the mid-19th century, at a time when artists were responding to dramatic shifts in perceptions and modes of expression, and has continued to draw critical acclaim ever since. This move from relative obscurity to notoriety has now become a matter of considerable scholarly record

on Vermeer.¹⁰ The enormous popularity his paintings enjoy within the culture in which we now live and precisely what this all means, however, has not been extensively discussed and it is in the pursuit of this facet of Vermeer Studies that this dissertation is engaged.

Many of my observations are a direct result of my teaching over the past seven years at Gallaudet University, the world's only liberal arts institution for deaf and hard of hearing individuals. As a University whose faculty, staff and entire student body is inherently linked to the visual, Gallaudet has influenced my perceptions and I believe my work there to be particularly relevant to a study involving an aspect of visual culture. Lacking the ability to hear, the deaf depend fully on their eyes and all of my lectures are conducted using American Sign Language (ASL). Images literally can and often do speak mountains in the deaf world. My own insights and shifts in perceptions have often been spurred by the visual acuity of my students, colleagues, and friends at Gallaudet. Within this context, my teaching has involved conducting classroom lectures on images contained in this study, soliciting student responses to these works, and giving talks in front of Vermeer paintings in the collections of the National Gallery of Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Frick Collection. My classroom has served as an open laboratory for much of my research and the observations tested and collected through all these experiences are embedded throughout this manuscript.

Dr. Arthur Wheelock has also proved both a source of and a sounding board for my evolving perceptions on Vermeer during a time period spanning more than twenty years. Since the early 1980s, I have been the beneficiary of numerous classroom lectures and countless conversations regarding his work on Vermeer, as well as other seventeenth

century Dutch masters, many of which extend observations set forth in his writing. As the curator of the 1995 *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition, he assembled an unrivaled archive of documents, articles, objects d'art, and memorabilia from this event, to which I have been afforded full access. This archive was particularly useful during the early stages of my research and in many ways offered a map I have followed in conducting my investigation. It became crystal clear through this archive that a museum exhibition can create new audiences for art, conjure deeply moving and creatively inspiring experiences, and can have lasting meaning long after the show has been dismantled.

I have adapted the ideas of other scholars and theorists in new ways to help conceptualize and explain the appreciation and appropriation of Vermeer's paintings in our contemporary culture. Writing in *Patterns of Intention*, Michael Baxandall was among the first to suggest that the traditional direction of influence between art and artists from the past to the present was in fact more appropriate and dynamic in the reverse and it is this idea that will prove central within the context of my dissertation.¹¹ Although my argument that the site of greatest meaning often lies within the viewer – the “reader” of the image and text – can also be found in the earlier work of Roland Barthes, I posit this response signals a route back to the author and not, in fact, his death.¹²

In addition to Ruth Behar, a number of scholars have demonstrated the usefulness of ethnographic method in understanding and interpreting meaning within culture and the self, including James Clifford, John Caughey, and in a related way, James Elkins.¹³ Support for considering non-American artists and routes as a means toward understanding our own culture and time is amply found within the pages of history and

was recently well articulated in Larzer Ziff's *Return Passages: Great American Travel Writing 1780-1910*.¹⁴

As John Berger explains in *Ways of Seeing*, art has become a kind of language transmittable through the reproduction that is open for appropriation for vastly different purposes.¹⁵ However, Berger was incorrect to shrug art historians off as being essentially burdensome and valueless to larger discussions relevant to our evolving visual culture, and was particularly wrong in his characterization of Seymour Slive.¹⁶ In seeking to understand and contextualize Vermeer in contemporary culture, art history and art historians will be shown to be critical both in the scholarly realm and as an influence on more popular discourse.

Similar to this dissertation, the work of Mieke Bal has considered the aesthetic elements found in paintings by Caravaggio that are providing the basis for quotation in the works of contemporary artists.¹⁷ Likewise, she has considered Rembrandt within the context of reading and text, arguing that a multiplicity of readings and interpretations are possible in art.¹⁸ I will broaden her focus on fine art alone to include literature and film as well as art in this discussion of Vermeer.

Angela Dalle Vacche argues that film directors have used painting as a means for communicating their own ideas concerning art, the medium of film, and their relationship to the characters in the film.¹⁹ In this regard, Dalle Vacche explains that the visual *misé-en-scène* in relation to the character dialogue can act as a signifier of the meaning the director seeks to convey through the film, a relationship she describes as an act of ventriloquism. Dalle Vacche's argument is perceptive and I will employ her idea on

ventriloquism in a similar way within a discussion of the fictional narrative and the novelist writing on Vermeer.

In *Moving Pictures* Anne Hollander argues the relationship of paintings and especially the paintings of Northern European artists as a foundation on which cinematic vision evolved.²⁰ She cites the intimate settings of 16th and especially 17th century paintings, with their compact figural groupings and their studied use of light, to have been particularly relevant to the development of early cinema and the template from which many films were shot. Hollander's arguments are suggestive but also highly subjective and, in dealing with her theme too broadly, she fails to be convincing. Here I will employ ideas suggested by Hollander within a significantly reduced theme most closely focused on Vermeer.

The central argument of this dissertation focuses on the critical elements of refinement, perfection and intrinsic beauty that appear to be universally recognized within the dialogues surrounding Johannes Vermeer and his paintings. Although these themes have been present in both the scholarly and popular dialogues on this artist since the advent of modernism, Vermeer and his paintings have proved to be particularly relevant to the culture and art of our own time. I will argue throughout the chapters of this dissertation, that the degree of attention afforded to Vermeer through the exhibition forum has shifted his paintings into the full view of a broad international audience, made the artist and his paintings celebrities, and established Vermeer's aesthetic as a cultural emblem of beauty open to public response and interpretation. Michael Baxandall's ideas will be employed as a means of demonstrating how acts of appropriation extend art

historical scholarship and further reinforce Vermeer's aesthetic as being emblematic of beauty.

The second chapter of this dissertation will serve as an introduction to the theme of art appropriation approached from an art historical perspective. Ideas concerning how and why artists have appropriated art in the past will be argued as presently relevant to more contemporary acts of appropriation throughout culture. Identifying what is being appropriated, why it is being appropriated, and what it all means will be explored within a discussion of art history and ideas on consumerism. The act of appropriation transfers cultural meaning and value from one object to another and art history is instructive in understanding this transaction. The theoretical framework set forth by Walter Benjamin in his article "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" will provide the starting point for considering images – specifically images of paintings – as "celebrities" in our contemporary culture.²¹ Although Benjamin posited that the aura of an original artwork is diminished through the process of reproduction he did not consider the way in which reproductions themselves can possess aura. Benjamin's ideas on originals and reproductions will be extended within a discussion of individual response, phenomenology, commodities, and the direction of influence between what is appropriated and the act of this appropriation. Igor Kopytoff's application of Margaret Mead's idea on the cultural value of biography for the study of objects will provide the lead into a closer discussion of the life of Johannes Vermeer and his paintings in our more contemporary culture.²²

The third chapter of my dissertation will focus on Johannes Vermeer, an artist whose work consists of an extant 35 paintings and whose life remains, for the most part, a

mystery. Here I will discuss contemporary ideas in Vermeer scholarship and how they have evolved. Within this context I will highlight the role of museums, curators, and art historians in attracting our interest and establishing our ideas on art and artists. I will consider five exhibitions related to Vermeer all of which I have viewed: *Johannes Vermeer* (1995-96, Washington and The Hague, Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr. curator), *Johannes Vermeer: The Art of Painting* (1999-2000, National Gallery of Art, Washington), *Vermeer and the Delft School* (2001, New York and London, Walter Liedtke, curator), *Art and Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt* (2002, Denver, Mariet Westermann, curator), and *Vermeer and Dutch Paintings of Domestic Interiors, 1650-1675* (2003, Madrid, Alejandro Vergara, curator). This chapter will demonstrate the various ways in which our experience with museum exhibitions can shape our responses to and understanding of artists like Vermeer. In the case of the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition, general audience response as demonstrated through correspondence received by Arthur Wheelock about the exhibit will be incorporated and discussed. In accordance with the underlying argument of this dissertation, I will argue that the exhibition forum and the dialogues surrounding it have shifted this artist into the full view of a broad international audience, making both the artist and his paintings celebrities open to public response and interpretation.

The fourth chapter of this dissertation will seek to discuss in greater detail the ways in which art influences art. Art historical discussion is utilized as a means toward bridging general argument and methodology to a study more specifically focused on Vermeer as a source of influence. Discussions will emphasize the works of contemporary artists, which have derived from the paintings of Vermeer with greatest

emphasis being placed on the works of four artists: Christina Linaris-Coridou, Mary Waters, George Deem, and Terri Priest. My research has involved meeting with and interviewing each of these artists about their works, viewing their works, and discussing their responses to Vermeer. The results of these interviews are incorporated into the text along with my own analyses and interpretations of their works. In accordance with my underlying argument, I will seek to demonstrate Vermeer's range of influence, the very personal responses an artist's interaction with his work can provoke, and the changing nature of these responses over time. The works of these artists underscore the myriad ways in which Vermeer's paintings are appropriated and the individual dialogues that are reflected in the creation of new works of art. The works suggested by or derived from Vermeer in turn extend our understanding of his works and reinforce his aesthetic as a cultural emblem of beauty.

Vermeer and his paintings have also influenced a number of recently published fictional novels and a discussion of these will be the focus of the fifth chapter of my dissertation. Books including Susan Vreeland's *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, Katherine Weber's *The Music Lesson*, Paul Watkins' *The Forger*, and Tracey Chevalier's bestseller, *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*, will be discussed. My arguments here will center on the development of characters and descriptions of Vermeer or his art within the narrative, their underlying plots, how they parallel or depart from the historical or art historical record, and, ultimately, the way in which dialogues serve as a kind of ventriloquism for the ideas and responses of authors to the paintings of Vermeer and the cultural discourse surrounding them. Other recently published novels based on the life and works of artists will be considered as a means of demonstrating the current focus of writers on novels

about artists and artworks and how these new narrative constructions present alternative readings that can influence the ways we see artists and their art.

The relationship of painting and the more lively arts of film and opera will be the subject of the sixth chapter of my dissertation. Here I will consider the qualities of Vermeer's paintings that have made them appealing to those engaged in the staging of the lively arts. Vermeer and his paintings have provided the focus for both the subject and the visual aesthetic of the cinematic medium and also an opera. Vermeer has offered the basis in which film has been both conceptualized and contextualized by directors and film critics. Often a reference is subtle and the allusion to Vermeer based on individual perception that is highly subjective. References to Vermeer by filmmakers, cameramen, critics and historians will be considered within a more general discussion of what precisely about Vermeer's aesthetic lends itself to appropriation in the lively arts. Ultimately, it will be shown that the relatively limited variation in the compositional design and subjects of Vermeer's paintings combined with the dynamic character of his visual effects and the technological innovations they imply, resonate within the minds of viewers, and particularly those engaged in aspects of the visual arts, to be retrieved and employed in the myriad discourse including that related to film. Vermeer has become a way of conveying refinement, perfection, and intrinsic beauty within performance based arts.

In my seventh and concluding chapter, I seek to summarize and extend the major arguments set forth in the six previous chapters while returning to a discussion more closely focused on a work by Johannes Vermeer, specifically, his *Woman Holding a Balance*. Using this single image by Vermeer, I seek to connect ideas on appropriation,

interpretation, individual meaning, and response in a way that demonstrates the relevance of our own connections to the past within a larger construction of history. As artists working in various fields today appropriate from the past within the idioms of our own time and culture, so did Vermeer appropriate from the past within the context of his then present. I will also seek to extend my argument on Vermeer and beauty through a discussion of two exhibitions, which took place concurrently on the eve of the new millennium. It is through the experience of viewing his paintings in the museum, within the context of others in the museum exhibition, and actively reading, looking, and exploring history that we can see Vermeer both as an artist of his time and, indeed, an artist we have selected for our own.

¹ James Thurber. *Many Moons*. 1943.

² Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 years of Western Cultural Life, 1500 to the Present*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers), 2000, p. xvi.

³ A discussion of the various exhibitions that have focused on the theme of appropriation occurs throughout this dissertation but especially in chapter four. The Stedelijk Museum Het Prinsenhof in Delft held an exhibition of Vermeer inspired art at the same time as the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition was at The Mauritshuis, The Hague. *In gesprek met Vermeer: Hedendaagse Kunst in dialog*, exhibition and catalogue, Waanders Uitgevers, Zwolle and Stedelijk Museum Het Prinsenhof, Delft, 1996. My thanks to Arthur Wheelock for having brought this exhibition to my attention during the early stages of my research. Two of the artists included in this exhibition, Christina Linaris -Coridou and Mary Waters are discussed within the context of this dissertation.

⁴ Katonah Museum of Art. *Déjà vu: Reworking the Past*, exhibition, Barbara J. Bloemink, Guest Curator, January 16 – April 2, 2000.

⁵ Ibid., unnumbered page.

⁶ Kay Jamison explores her own struggle with depression within a broader discussion of psychiatry; see: Kay Redfield Jamison, *An Unquiet Mind*. 1995. While illustrating the resistance through which personal accounts are often received within the scholarly realm, Jacques Barzun also reveals the personal nature of his own writing when he states: "I can only hope that this accountability will not tempt some reviewers to label the work 'a very personal book.' I would ask them, What book worth reading is not?" See Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life*, 2000, p. x. Simon Schama writes: "All history tends toward autobiographical confession..."; Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*, 1987. See also Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*, 1996, for numerous other examples.

⁷ Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*. 1996.

⁸ Ibid., p. 13.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ideas concerning Vermeer's reception in America are included in an earlier essay I co-authored with Arthur Wheelock. See Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr. and Marguerite Glass, "An Appreciation of Vermeer in Twentieth-Century America," Wayne E. Franits, *The Cambridge Companion to Vermeer*, 2001, pp. 161-181. See also, M. Elizabeth Boone. "Gilded Age Values and a Golden Age Painter: American Perceptions of Jan Vermeer." *Rutgers Art Review*, XII-XIII, 1991-92. Pages 47-68.

¹¹ Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, 1985.

¹² Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image Music Text*, Stephan Heath, trans., 1977.

¹³ In particular, James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, 1997; James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 1988; John Caughey, "Methods of Life History Research," (unpublished book chapter 2001); James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back*, 1996.

¹⁴ Larzer Ziff, *Return Passages: Great American Travel Writing 1780-1910*, 2000.

¹⁵ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 1972.

¹⁶ Berger uses Seymour Slive's work on Frans Hals to clarify his statement that "the art of the past is being mystified because a privileged minority is striving to invent a history which can retrospectively justify the role of the ruling classes and such a justification can no longer make sense in modern terms." Ibid., p. 11 and pps. 11-16.

¹⁷ Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio*, 1999.

¹⁸ Mieke Bal, *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word Image Opposition*, 1991.

¹⁹ Angela Dalle Vacche, "Michelangelo Antonio's Red Desert: Painting as Ventriloquism and Color as Movement," *Cinema and Painting: How Art is Used in Film*, 1996, pp. 43-80.

²⁰ Anne Hollander, *Moving Pictures*, 1989.

²¹ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, translated by Harry Zohn, 1968.

²² Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural biography of things: commoditization as process," Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. 1986.

Chapter 2 - Appropriation

Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things.¹

-- Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*

In this chapter I will seek to introduce and provide a theoretical framework for appropriation from the perspective of art history. I will argue that the ways in which artists from the past have appropriated the works of other artists and, importantly, their reasons for doing so, directly parallel the methods and motivations that are inspiring more contemporary acts of appropriation throughout our culture. Within this context, I will discuss reproductions of art, positing that they increase access to painted images, suggest connections to other ideas and images, encourage private sites of meaning in a way not always possible with original paintings, and, ultimately, facilitate appropriation both inside and outside the realm of painting. The purpose of this chapter is to set forth these aspects of my argument and to comment on the theories and ideas that are often employed to discuss appropriation in our contemporary culture. Although there are theorists we can look to in seeking to understand the phenomena of appropriation such as that related to the paintings of Johannes Vermeer, as I will argue, their ideas do not advance anything that has not already been set forth within the context of art history.

As the sole art historian in a small but growing art department, I have found myself focusing my lectures with increasing vigor on issues of appropriation in art. The

ways in which artists have continually copied and reworked the ideas of other artists in the creation of new works is fundamental to the study of art history and a source of long standing research and argument in the field.² Art has continuously inspired art and its study within a historic context is useful for the artist as well as the art historian as it renews our understanding of an object's significance or meaning.

Yet one need only open her eyes and look around to see the deepening relevance of art appropriation within a broadened cultural construct. We find art on the mugs we use for our morning coffee, in the advertisements we find in the newspaper, the films we watch, the clothing we wear, the cards we receive, the magnets we keep on our refrigerators, the games we play with our children, the stories we read them at bedtime and many, many other places (fig. 2). Often lacking titles or the names of the artists who created them, these artifacts from art history are nevertheless being burned into the human consciousness of a large general audience. Considering art appropriation in a more general, popular way offers the means of tying art history with the lived experiences of students and, thus, increases the relevance of the endeavor at hand. Rather than disregarding these popular, occasionally distasteful acts of appropriation, I have begun to collect them, study them and learn through them.



Figure 2. Illustration and text from *Owen* by Kevin Henkes in which he appropriates and reworks Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893) as the picture within his picture.

American culture has become increasingly visual and in many ways has developed a fixation on art, especially painting. For most of us, our exposure to great paintings in reproduced form far exceeds the opportunity to experience the originals. Copies of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, for example, began circulating in painted and print form soon after the work was completed, yet it is through developments in technology that she has found her way onto a seemingly limitless array of consumer products and thus is today internationally recognized as an icon.³

A discussion of how artists have appropriated art and popular imagery in the construction of their own creations is available within the visual and written record particularly as it applies to the history of the fine arts. Yet as our culture approaches a level of visual saturation never before attained, these traditional arguments become

increasingly difficult to pursue with any particular degree of certainty. The wells from which our contemporary artists quench their thirst spring forth from a variety of sources not least of which is American popular culture. Art, in its broadest definition, is everywhere yet so too is that which is called “high” art – the art enshrined in museums and that which I teach in the academy. Discussions of how art and particularly painting are more generally appropriated within popular, material culture and, more importantly, the meanings we ascribe to this process, are at once both obvious and compelling.

Considering the forms through which paintings enter our worlds, our exposures to these works in their “original” form, the ways in which they are reproduced, and the medium through which we encounter them in reproduced form enlivens art historical discourse. How are our responses to art being influenced by the ways in which we encounter paintings? How does the evidence supporting a renewed interest in the old masters inform our understanding of American culture of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries? Pursuing these questions offers pathways in both directions that expand our appreciation of the past while gaining understanding of our present. Yet before we can adequately address these questions, we must first consider more basic ones. What art is being appropriated? Why is it being appropriated? What does it possibly mean? The “what” in both instances here seems to best service the “why” between them; nevertheless, it is these questions that I will seek to address in the pages that follow.

What art is being appropriated?

Within the field of art history a critical body of paintings by a select group of artists has withstood the tests of time and evolved to form an important component of what is known as the art historical canon. The canon is in a constant state of flux with artists such as Vermeer being added to its roster during different times of history based on new information, developments in the market, and changes in aesthetic tastes. Although there is certainly some variance as to which of the many paintings from history may be considered canonical in western art depending on the scholar or source you are consulting, certain artists and certain works are indisputably canonical.⁴ Paintings included in the canon are found in collections that are open for public view and their images are widely reproduced in art related texts.

In the Western art tradition, Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, his *Last Supper*, Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*, and Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, all examples of Italian Renaissance painting, are all universally considered canonical works. All of these artists became known well before the invention of photography through written accounts of their lives and works and through copies made of their masterpieces in myriad forms by contemporary and later artists. All four of the artists listed above, for example, were included in Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, which was first published in 1550 and already in wide circulation throughout Europe and the world from that time onward. Recognized as the beginning of art historical scholarship, Vasari's *Lives* set forth a model for art historical discourse, which was based on the idea of the artist as intellectual genius and the artwork as an original masterpiece. It is many of these same

works and others enshrined in museums and recognized within the art historical canon of western art that continue to be appropriated in our own culture of today (fig. 3).

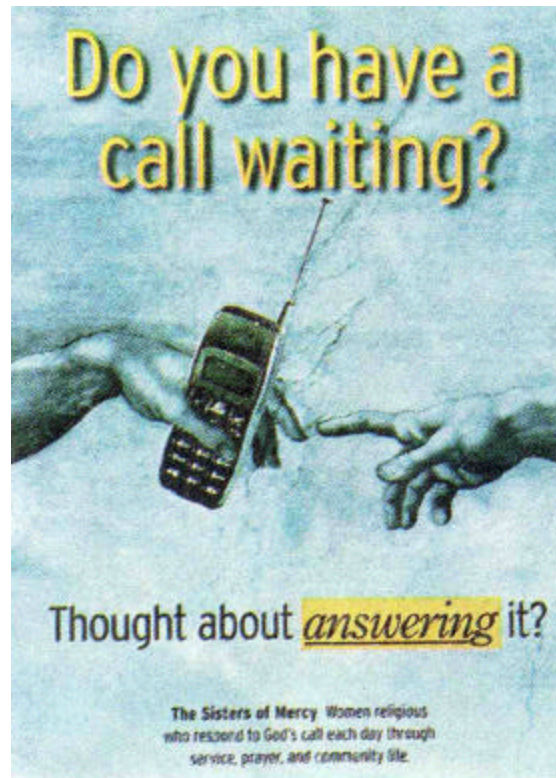


Figure 3. Recruitment poster for the Sisters of Mercy of America, an order of the Roman Catholic Church that appropriates and reconceptualizes Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam, Sistine Chapel*, Rome (c. 1511). Published in an article found on the front page of the *New York Times*, Sunday, January 16, 2000, titled "Sisterhood Recruits for a Next Generation," by Lisa W. Foderaro.

The role of the museum cannot be underestimated in regards to what we see and what becomes elevated to the art historical canon. As the primary protector and purveyor of paintings, the contemporary museum, and the museum related programming and research that is done inside its walls, act to both recharge old ideas on art and bring forth new artists overlooked or under discussed in history. Although certainly independent art historical research can promote artists and images in ways that make them more broadly visible, it is the museum and particularly the museum exhibition that receives most of our

attention. Exhibitions are events through which images of paintings become reproduced and disseminated in vast popular forms including street side banners; posters hung in mass transit systems; advertisements in newspapers, magazines, and tourist publications; websites; exhibition reviews; catalogues; as well as a whole array of consumer products available through museum gift shops such as mouse pads, T-shirts, calendars, note cards, and card games that are then offered as mementos, gifts, or even Christmas stocking stuffers to family members and friends. Museums, thus, encourage our knowledge of paintings as objects of unique value and wonder and, conversely, as images open for appropriation and enjoyment in forms uniquely suited to the individual (fig. 4).⁵



Figure 4. Pulte Master Builder advertisement featuring George de la Tour's *Cheater with the Ace of Diamond*, c. 1630s from the Musée de Louvre, found in *The Washington Post*, Saturday, October 24, 1998, p. E7. This painting was included in the National Gallery of Art Exhibition *George de La Tour and his World* of a little more than a year earlier.

Why is it being appropriated?

There are a number of reasons, many of which are historically based, why art is the subject of broad appropriation in our culture of today. Although the reasons for an artist appropriating another artist's work can certainly vary, there are several reasons that artists have done this in the past, which continue to be relevant today. Reviewing the reasons artists have appropriated in the past offers a necessary perspective for understanding appropriation in our own culture, an understanding required for my later discussion of the appropriation of paintings by Vermeer.

On a very basic level artists are engaged in problem solving in a way that is not dissimilar to mathematicians and scientists. Their problem is to visually express an idea or a theme through the particular medium in which they work, in this case the medium of paint. Often the design or an element found in the work of one artist will suggest or provide the means through which another artist's idea and how it should be presented come together. In other words, the work of one artist can serve as a kind of formula or basis for a new investigation in a way that is similar to the way Albert Einstein's theory of relativity has provided the foundation on which considerable research has been built. When Titian painted his famous *Venus of Urbino* in the 1530s, the problem of how to position his Venus was solved by employing the figure used by his teacher Giorgione in his much earlier *Sleeping Venus* (c. 1509). The connections to former antecedents does not stop here, however, as, indeed, Giorgione had based his Venus figure on a Roman copy of a Greek sculpture, based on an Egyptian original.⁶ Appropriating art is, thus, a tradition with a very long history.

Art is a form of discourse that like many others often engages in its own form of aggrandizement. Quoting another artist in one's own work can often accomplish two separate but related objectives. Recognizing that art has a history with a set of traditions associated with it, an artist who appropriates from this tradition presents their knowledge of art while at the same time connecting themselves to its history. The act of appropriation can, therefore, cause an artist to appear well studied and knowledgeable in art, the equivalent of an art scholar. When Caravaggio chose to base the gesture of Christ in his *Calling of Saint Matthew* (c. 1600) on a mirror image of the hand of Adam from Michelangelo's *Sistine Chapel* (1509-11), he did so because of the usefulness of this gesture to the subject of his own work but also to demonstrate his knowledge of the great Renaissance master.⁷ In quoting a celebrated artist like Michelangelo in his painting, Caravaggio connected their works by association, which thereby left little doubt of his own place in history. Although certainly Caravaggio was a great master of his own accord, appropriating the work of a recognized painter can, nevertheless, move one's work up a notch, making something that might itself be good, or even just okay, into something better, something worth taking note of.

Culture can also develop markets predisposed to particular art forms and this can create an environment conducive to and encouraging of appropriation. Art is on one level a commodity that is made for sale. For much of history, painters have created their works in response to a known or potential patron. We know, for example, that hundreds of vastly similar images of the Madonna and Child were painted in Italy for export during the years leading up to the Renaissance, with the stylistic differences between the more flattened, Byzantine images and those displaying a stronger sense of illusionism and three

dimension being created because of the demands of specific markets.⁸ Statistical records have also revealed that Dutch artists produced more than five million paintings during the seventeenth century.⁹ This considerable market brought forth works in a range of subjects including landscapes, still life paintings and those of home interiors. The frequency with which Dutch artists depicted certain themes is indicative of the market that existed. Likewise, the similarities between the representations of these themes in the oeuvre of a single artist or between the works of several artists demonstrate there was a fair amount of repetition and borrowing going on between them.¹⁰

The appropriation and use of images from paintings on other objects is also nothing new. Engravings made after paintings were in wide circulation in Europe from the fifteenth century forward made access to images in books or through individual prints that could be used for home decoration increasingly prevalent and affordable. Paintings also provided the source of ornamentation for numerous decorative art objects, which were likewise put to use in the home. Landscapes, church scenes, or figural groups based on paintings or prints by the Dutch masters, for example, were painted on tiles and plates, or even molded into silver in the seventeenth century.¹¹ More simplified representations of individual figures seen in paintings are painted on the simple blue and white tiles that were bountifully produced and commonly seen in Dutch homes.¹² Placed low along baseboards, entryways, and around the hearth, these simple home adornments brought themes common to the higher arts of painting to a more general audience, providing entertainment and an introduction to genre painting for everyone but especially to the little eyes of children whose level they were most certainly on.¹³ Often depicting children engaged in childish games like pinwheels or bowling, the images of these tiles

offer easy connections to figures seen in paintings such as the young girl in Pieter de Hooch's *Woman and Child in a Pantry* (ca. 1658) who stands in a room that includes such tiles, or the children playing in Vermeer's *The Little Street* (c. 1657-58).¹⁴

The historic precedents and reasons for appropriation that have existed throughout art history have continued to our present day. Artists continue to use the works of other artists as a means of solving the problems of visual representation, encouraging associations between their works and those found elsewhere in art history, and to make their own works somewhat better through this association. Artists also continue to be sensitive to the art market and are responsive to the requests of prospective patrons. Artists are also responsive to a variety of visual media including those gleaned from the lesser arts or those more commercially based. All of these issues are in play within the context of Vermeer and the appreciation and appropriation of his paintings in our contemporary culture. But there is much more to this story.

The rise of more popular forms of visual communication such as commercial graphics and the cartoon ran parallel with the increased circulation of paintings through the photographic reproduction in the late nineteenth century. Recognizing their commonality as a visual language, each of these new modes naturally traced their roots to art history and accordingly fell in step with its aesthetic traditions including those related to appropriation. As each of these modes matured, the boundaries between them and the more traditional art of painting began to blur. Further mixing of the visual arts was gradually enhanced by new understandings of the life of the human mind, which were being set forth in the evolving field of psychiatry. The paintings of Pablo Picasso and George Braque during their analytical and synthetic Cubist phase offered a visual

marriage between painting, the commercial arts, and ideas on how the mind sees. These ideas gave birth to new modes of painting and visual representation including mixed media, collage, surrealism, and abstraction that transformed ideas on visual aesthetics and extended traditions related to appropriation. Many of these new ideas ran counter to long-standing assumptions about the high art of painting and the expressive language of appropriation became harder to comprehend. Artists engaged with critics and connoisseurs, and museums and museum collections quickly became contested territory.

The past century has, thus, complicated the understandings and valuation of art in no small way. Definitions on just what constitutes “art” have loosened and traditional ideas on aesthetics and methods of appropriation have been challenged on nearly every possible level, perhaps most in relation to painting.¹⁵ Today our understandings of craftsmanship and painterly skill, once considered the hallmark of the artist, have been redefined in ways the late Renaissance masters would hardly recognize. Scientific methods of perspective and optics are now options available to the artist in constructing her works, but are no longer considered the primary mode of representation. The traditional brush and paint used by the great 16th and 17th century masters to execute their creative quotations likewise have become optional and are often replaced or used by contemporary artists in combination with cameras, movie cameras, and computers among other tools of the now twenty-first century. Questions of originality and artistic license have become the subject of debate and decision in the courtroom, and in the classroom the discourse is no less animated.

Art history is no longer the exclusive domain of artists, art historians, or the museum. As new visual media, technologies, communication methods, and other

creative modes of expression have evolved, their developers, like artists of old, have tapped artists and art history as a source of inspiration to solve visually based problems, encourage their own validity and notoriety, and to attract an audience through their association with recognized masters and masterworks. Framing these myriad acts of appropriation within the context of art historical tradition offers a new way of considering the value and afterlife of paintings, the manner in which they continue to be appreciated and provide creative inspiration in ever changing ways. These ideas will, likewise, be important to keep in mind within the context of my later discussions of Vermeer, the exhibition of his paintings, their circulation through the reproduction, their appropriation in various media, and the responses these appropriative works both reflect and create about Johannes Vermeer.

What does it all mean?

Appropriation in our contemporary culture is the subject of much discourse across disciplines.¹⁶ Appropriation is an issue very much at the heart of a large cultural dialogue, which is struggling to understand our uniqueness while at the same time position ourselves within the larger framework of history. Access to all forms of media has never been greater nor have the technologies, which are facilitating this access been more capable of morphing something old into something seemingly new. Historical and practical information related to paintings, their reproduction, viewer response, as well as theory shed light on the meaning of it all.

Increased Access

The mechanical reproduction is central to understanding the larger meaning of the appropriation of paintings from the past in our contemporary culture. Without the technological methods of reproducing paintings and particularly those that have evolved since the invention of the camera in the nineteenth century, our knowledge of paintings would be based fully on our ability to travel, our access to other artists' renderings of paintings, written descriptions, or the occasional lecture or conversation that is again likely to be without illustration. In other words, without more modern means of reproduction, our knowledge of paintings would be extraordinarily limited and art history a limp and lifeless discipline.

Reproductions have enhanced beyond measure our access to paintings like those of Vermeer and, importantly, transformed how we see them and use them. Available in photographic form since the nineteenth century, reproductions have enabled the growth of art history as a field of study. Reproductions are used to add visual support to an art historian's written arguments, and in the classroom or lecture hall, to frame discussions on artists, art works, artistic processes, stylistic characteristics, or more general ideas on history and culture. Visually displayed on the printed page or projected on a screen, reproductions offer the opportunity to connect one painted image with that of another in a way that is not always possible with originals. Juxtaposition visually connects images allowing each to in some way reflect off of and, conversely, enhance the other.

As will be discussed more specifically within the context of Vermeer in chapter three, the working methods of contemporary artists have also been dramatically altered

through the reproduction. In accordance with the more traditional methods outlined above, artists have continued to appropriate from the works of others. Increasingly, however, the act of appropriation is spurred by their interaction with photographic reproductions and not through their contact with original paintings. Their appropriation, therefore, is focused more on the interest of the image reproduced and less on the subject that the original painting was intended to represent.

Writing in 1936 in his article titled “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin, a member of the Frankfurt School, provided a theoretical framework in which to consider photographically generated reproductions.¹⁷ Although in principle art had always been open to imitation or reproduction, Benjamin claimed that photography had surpassed all previous technology and had, in effect, “freed the hand of the most important artistic functions which henceforth devolved only upon the eye looking into a lens.”¹⁸ Benjamin asserted that through the process of photographic reproduction a work of art became more widely available yet at the same time disconnected from its context in time and space. According to Benjamin, it was impossible to separate the unique character of a work of art from its ritual tradition. However, through the mechanical reproduction of the photograph, the work of art was “emancipated” from ritualistic dependence.

In his discussion of the mechanical reproduction Walter Benjamin argued that real art objects could be valued on predominantly two levels: cult value – meaning the purpose for which the object was created and through which it was intended to be understood – and exhibition value. According to Benjamin, cult value is displaced through photography and exhibition value elevated. With the disconnection from cult or

context, labeling or captioning of objects becomes imperative in order to maintain the identity of the artwork. Through the continuous “exhibit” of the work of art in the form of the reproduction, the object becomes a commodity capable of achieving a kind of celebrity status.¹⁹

The continuous reproduction of certain paintings in art historical discourse, particularly those from the canon such as paintings by Vermeer, has in turn suggested their re-appropriation in service of new creative works by contemporary artists working in a variety of disciplines. The visual artist’s ability to juxtapose and connect often-disparate ideas and images has been greatly enhanced through the use of reproductions offering an added fluidity to the construction of their creative works. Benjamin, thus, was correct in setting forth that the reproduction of paintings and other images would lead to their democratization.

Privates Sites of Meaning

The reproduction of paintings found in books, magazines, post cards, and posters has also promoted new ideas and avenues for collecting. Whereas original paintings may be unavailable for purchase or unaffordable for the vast majority of the population, reproductions have offered for many an economically feasible and acceptable surrogate. Available for more private, leisurely viewing within the comfort of the home, these new objects that reproduce the images of paintings like those by Vermeer, in turn become associated with a whole range of sensory experiences and perceptions that are part of our everyday lives. The images these reproductions convey, thus, can take on a whole new

life of their own that is unique and capable of deep meaning, indeed, separate from the original work from which they derive.

Benjamin posited that the original object maintains its authenticity but its *aura* is lost in and undermined by the reproduction. Although I will demonstrate the limitations of this argument later within the context of the viewer response to the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition, it is important to address what Benjamin did not consider in regards to *aura* and the reproduction. Benjamin's essay did not address ideas on the transference of *aura* from the original to the reproduction nor did he acknowledge the way in which the reproduction can create an *aura* of its own that is capable of both transmitting and defining sites of meaning for individuals.²⁰ Writing in *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images*, David Morgan describes this reality in regard to religious imagery, here specifically the popular image of Jesus created by Warner Sallman in 1940:

Worlds are composed of both the ordinary and the extraordinary, and images serve to configure each aspect of experience...The face of Jesus, which so many people fondly recall, was always there, hanging in one's bedroom, in the family dining room, in the neighbor's home, at church, in the YMCA. The image marked the sites of familial and communal life, transmitted institutional knowledge, and visually articulated the public rituals conducted at church or in the home. Sallman's pictures and a host of mass-produced images by other artists were not simply about the private sentiments of those who admired them; they were the very means of making concrete, uniform, and universal the memories and feelings that define the individual.²¹

Morgan's discussion is important in demonstrating the very real way in which images become personalized, reflecting ideas and values on life in a way that enhances our understanding of the human experience. Although the religious content of Morgan's subject strengthens his assertion, his argument is nevertheless applicable to a more

general discussion of reproductions and imagery including those related to Vermeer. Personal experience offers another way of extending Morgan's argument within a broader discussion of art, the reproduction, and the meanings we ascribe to them.

Several years ago my parents went through the arduous but necessary process of downsizing from their large family home in Pennsylvania to a smaller more simply maintained condominium dwelling nearer my home. After more than forty years of marriage they had accumulated a lot of stuff. Both my brother and I traveled the distance with our families to assist with their move and to go through, select, and pack material objects discarded from their collection. My father, who held degrees in engineering, had planned the move down to the most calculated detail. Living spaces, storage spaces, cupboards and walls of their new condominium had all been simulated so that just the right number of things would be moved – no more, no less.

One of the most interesting and prized among my parents' collections had always been their art, yet even this aspect of their lives was being downsized. As I surveyed the art discards in my parents' basement, my father called me over to show me what he and my mother had selected to keep. He was particularly intent upon showing me three simply framed reproductions, one each by George Braque, Amedeo Modigliani, and Maurice Utrillo. My memory of these particular objects surfaced immediately and, although I felt a sense of connection to them myself, I had never understood their particular significance to my dad.

My father explained how he had selected and purchased these reproductions from the Maryland Book Exchange when he was a graduate student at the University of Maryland in the early 1960s. Though he could not afford to buy a "real" work at that

time, the simplicity and strength of design of these reproductions were particularly inspiring to him. He wanted these works to be visible in his life, his home, and particularly within the eyesight of his children. What was impressive about our dialog was less the nostalgia of his description and more the way he ascribed formal artistic value to these simple, monetarily valueless reproductions. These images reflected something inherent to his belief system; something powerful and of lasting significance. Although they had over the years moved from a place of prominence in the home to their basement storage, my father was intent upon restoring them to a place of honor and, indeed, he did.²²

Although fundamentally concerned with architectural spaces and our human connections to them, Gaston Bachelard's ideas on phenomenology found in his essay "Poetics of Space" can also be applied to a discussion centered on paintings and particularly to the ways in which the images found in reproductions can become associated with our lived experiences and memories, such as those demonstrated by my conversation with my father.²³ Phenomenology is concerned with the full engagement of all the senses as it relates to our lived experience. Trained as a scientist and philosopher Bachelard was primarily engaged in work related to phenomenology and the theory of the imagination. He was influenced by psychoanalysis and surrealism and, in keeping with the ideas of Carl Jung, emphasized the importance of the daydream for understanding lived experience, evolving his own theory called "surrationalism".²⁴

Bachelard sought to analyze all factors that influence our attachments to particular spaces and was especially interested in the home environment. He argues that it is through our imaginations that the home takes on meaning and life. His discussion is

equally portable in reverse to the ways in which images connect individuals through memory to emotions, spaces, and times of life. He writes:

...the house furnishes us with dispersed images and a body of images at the same time. In both cases, I shall prove that imagination augments the values of reality...The house, like fire and water...recall flashes of daydreams that illuminate the synthesis of immemorial and recollected. In this remote region, memory and imagination remain associated, each one working for their mutual deepening.²⁵

Bachelard believed the greatest value of a house is as a place for daydreaming and it is there that our pasts are able to interact creatively with our present.

...the house allows one to dream in peace. Thought and experience are not the only things that sanction human values. The values that belong to daydreaming mark humanity in its depths. Daydreaming even has a privilege of autovalorization. It derives direct pleasure from its own being. Therefore, the places in which we have *experienced daydreaming* reconstitute themselves in a new daydream, and it is because our memories of former dwelling-places relive as daydreams that these dwelling-places of the past remain in us for all time.²⁶

Bachelard introduces the word “topoanalysis” that he describes as “the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives.”²⁷ He argues topoanalysis as an important avenue of study. His ideas on time and memory demonstrate how he believes time is supplanted by space.

Memory—what a strange thing that is! – does not record concrete duration, in the Bergsonian sense of the word. We are unable to relive duration that has been destroyed. We can think of it, in the line of an abstract time that is deprived of all thickness. The finest specimens of fossilized duration concretized as a result of long sojourn, are to be found in and through space. The unconscious abides. Memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are. To localize memory in time is merely a matter for the biographer and only corresponds to a sort of external history, for external use, to be communicated to others. But hermeneutics, which is more profound than biography, must determine the centres of fate by ridding history of its conjunctive temporal tissue, which has no action on our fates. For a knowledge of intimacy,

localization in the spaces of our intimacy is more urgent than determination of dates.²⁸

Bachelard's ideas on perception and the intermingling of experience within the mind have relevance to discussions on objects like paintings, reproductions of paintings, and acts of appropriation. Topoanalysis is useful in regard to my father's renewed interest in the reproductions purchased years earlier, my own response to Vermeer's *The Lacemaker* discussed in my Preface, and indeed, to how the objects each of us interact with, possess their own aura.

Our minds are continuously navigating time, between the past, the present, and the future. Interaction with objects actively encourages this multi-time dynamic. Our perception of things in general and paintings specifically changes based on time as well. Each time we see a painting or view a reproduction, we see it differently. Our vision is continuously expanded and altered. The relationship of objects to other objects and times in our life acts to influence our perception. Every object can reflect back on every other and the "seeing" of an object or work of art is ultimately influenced by the patterns of perception inherent to the viewer and is, in effect, unending. As will be shown later, this dynamic of ongoing review relates to the life of Vermeer in our contemporary culture.

Consumer Culture Theory

Walter Benjamin's theory on the reproduction of art comments on, in part, our current fascination for appropriating painted images. In accordance with Benjamin's predictions, the "exhibition" of paintings through the reproduction – in many cases through consumer products or public campaigns, such as those generated by museum

exhibitions – has elevated their images to the status of celebrities and diminished the connection to their original context.

Consumer culture studies offers a parallel way of considering the appropriation of paintings in our contemporary culture. Scholars and theorists comment on the phenomenon of appropriation in ways they claim are new but within a discussion of art history these ideas simply reinforce those previously in place through the working methods and relationships of artists throughout time. Portions of their arguments can be adapted to a discussion of Vermeer and the appropriation of his paintings; however, other aspects will not work in the way their authors say they will. For example, Marxist theories on the role of objects as simply commodities, which are set forth in the work of Igor Kopytoff and others, do not hold true within the context of paintings, which have proved to be meaningful to people over time. Kopytoff's essay "The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process" nevertheless does provide a useful framework in which to discuss art appropriation.

From a cultural perspective, the production of commodities is also a cultural and cognitive process: commodities must be not only produced materially as things, but also culturally marked as being a certain kind of thing. Out of the total range of things available in a society, only some of them are considered appropriate for marking as commodities. Moreover, the same thing may be treated as a commodity at one time and not at another. And finally, the same thing may, at the same time, be seen as a commodity by one person and as a something else by another. Such shifts and differences in whether and when a thing is a commodity reveal a moral economy that stands behind the objective economy of visible transactions.²⁹

Kopytoff defines a commodity as:

a thing that has use value and that can be exchanged in a discrete transaction for a counterpart, the very fact of exchange indicating that the counterpart has, in the immediate context an equivalent value.³⁰

According to Kopytoff, commodity status equates with value – either functional or monetary – and is capable of shifting over time depending on culture. This idea relates particularly well to the appropriation of paintings and is useful to a discussion of precisely what it is about Vermeer that our culture appreciates.

Kopytoff utilizes the ideas of Margaret Mead to think about things. According to Mead one way of understanding a culture is to look at the “sort of biography it regards as embodying a successful social career.” Tracing the biography of objects as a commodity – such as reproductions of paintings – offers one indicator of the object’s value within culture over time. Kopytoff claims commoditization to be “at the root of capitalism.”³¹ Objects as commodities go through a series of processes through which their value is determined. Cultural power structures frequently move objects through a process described as “singularization” in which they become a symbolic or “sacralized” commodity. The museum’s selection and use of a painting’s image as a means of advertising an exhibition or their collections, as will be discussed within the context of Vermeer for example, transforms the image into a symbol visually connected to the institution and the event.

Simon Schama’s *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* offers an example of the way in which ideas like those of Kopytoff and Mead are useful in a discussion of images.³² Schama’s work is essentially a collective biography of commodities deemed particularly valuable in The Netherlands of the 17th century. Numerous reproductions of engravings used in books or sold for hanging purposes and paintings, as well as discussions of craft arts, are included in his

book. His descriptions of these visual sources are frequently detailed and are used as “a document of beliefs” rather than as literal records. His thoughts here demonstrate the way in which the Dutch utilized objects as a means of constructing a moral identity, what Kopytoff calls a “moral economy,” and this seems useful in considering our contemporary culture’s appreciation and appropriation of paintings such as those by Vermeer.

An important theme carried throughout Schama’s book and one that seems particularly relevant to our own time and place is the Dutch interest in establishing links with the past in an effort to bolster the legitimacy of the evolving Dutch Republic. Connections with the evolving histories, which were based on a “free mingling of fact and fancy, fable and documented history,” are highlighted in the chapters.³³ Importantly, Schama argues that both the development of new imagery and the use of older emblems from antiquity offer support for ideas of legitimacy within the context of the visual record, and this could prove insightful to why Vermeer has become so visible in our own culture.

Other studies, including that of Colin Campbell, point to the middle class ethic where taste serves as evidence of moral and spiritual worth, as a way of contextualizing modern consumer culture.³⁴ The quest for pleasure and the appropriation or re-creation of a product appropriated renews and revitalizes one’s sense of morality and spiritualism. According to Campbell, modern consumerism is a of “self-illusory hedonism” in which the desire to realize experience created in the imagination is driving the market, and by extrapolation, is making one’s association with paintings via products that reproduce them an experience of individual construction.³⁵ These ideas relate equally well to the

ways in which artists have appropriated art in the past in order to associate themselves with the works of others.

Celia Lury extends Campbell's argument by addressing the conversion of cultural capital into economic capital in her book *Consumer Culture*.³⁶ Her argument is set forth through a culling together and substantive analysis of ideas and theories asserted in the work of a number of scholars. Citing the research of Dick Hebdige and Fred Hirsch, Lury explains the importance of the symbolic function of consumer products in the construction of individuality and style, framing consumption practices as a means of social positioning.³⁷ Although positional consumption was once limited mostly to the aristocratic class as also described within the context of art by Benjamin, it has become increasingly more democratic in modern society. In the context of paintings, mechanical methods of reproduction have been critical in providing the means for the increased consumption of images, including images of paintings by Vermeer.

Employing the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu and the "dynamics of taste," Lury explains how taste is socially constructed. Bourdieu states that "the resources or assets of different social classes are as much symbolic as economical, political, or organizational."³⁸ This idea relates to those discussed within the context of artists and appropriation where the use of another artist's work in the creation of a new one increases its symbolic value by association. Bourdieu's theory on "habitus" describes decisions concerning taste and relates to an individual's learned behaviors, past experiences and class positioning extending back to childhood. According to Bourdieu's definition, habitus is at work in my own ongoing interest in Vermeer and, by extrapolation, in the work of others who are also engaged in some way with Vermeer.

Habitus operates on a subconscious level in determining taste according to a “logic of practice.” The framework of habitus brings order to social experience and explains taste as “a variant of class practice.” However, the way in which an individual exercises decisions of taste also suggests social stratification. As Lury explains, competing classes will seek to impose their habitus on one another in a struggle for dominance.

The struggle Lury describes is manifest in the construction of the “art-culture” system, a term that derives from James Clifford’s work in *The Predicament of Culture*.³⁹ Essentially, the art-culture system seeks to relate the value of objects within the larger construction of culture. The system is dynamic rather than static and is, therefore, influenced by the changeable value systems endorsed by cultural groups. Within the art-culture system, particular meaning is derived from art forms considered to be authentic. An authentic painting by Rembrandt, for example, is traditionally understood as being of greater significance to Dutch culture than the reproduction that is more broadly circulated. In our own culture, however, the reproduction of a Rembrandt painting or another work of art is capable of achieving its own form of authenticity. As Lury suggests, divisions between what could be considered high or low art have narrowed in response to the art-culture system.

Lury equates the art-culture system with Bourdieu’s use of the term “cultural field”, which she describes as a conceptualization of an economy.⁴⁰ Within this construction, Bourdieu discusses “cultural capital” as the ability or competence needed to distinguish objects and values such as determinations on what really constitutes art. Different fractions of society possess varying amounts of cultural and economic capital

and this adds to the construction of hierarchical distinctions between high and popular culture. Lury writes:

Bourdieu suggests that different classes and different class factions are engaged in a series of struggles with each other to increase the volume of the cultural capital they possess, and to increase the valuation placed on the particular forms of this capital.⁴¹

The increased stylization of consumer products in our society – such as the myriad products bearing images of paintings – is characteristic of what Lury describes as the movement from “a fordist” to a “post-fordist society or what may more generally be understood as a movement toward a consumer oriented society. This movement encourages the development of a “new middle class” whose identity is constructed through the appropriation of recognizable aspects of distinct social classes.

Although theories on consumerism may be employed to discuss our culture’s interest in appropriating paintings, in reality, these more contemporary ideas do more to assert the value of art historical precedent than they do to advance any new understanding. Contemporary artists and manufacturers are producing myriad products that appropriate images from paintings for the same reasons consumers are buying them and these reasons are similar to those advanced by artists of old.

Effects and Conclusions

So what really is the meaning of appropriation and what lasting relevance does it have in the context of art history or a study of Johannes Vermeer? Is there anything particularly new about our own culture’s reuse of art other than its ability to be easily

appropriated by other visually based media? Although these questions are difficult to answer through a broad discussion, narrowing the field somewhat offers the chance for greater clarity. Additional theory, however, is at this point extremely relevant.

Writing in *Patterns of Intentions*, Michael Baxandall considers the relationship of artists and artworks by discussing ideas of influence from one to the other and the effect of culture on this process. Baxandall describes the relationship of painters to their cultures as a kind of barter system using the French word *troc*.⁴²

...the currency is much more diverse than money: it includes such things as approval, intellectual nurture and, later, reassurance, provocation and irritation of stimulating kinds, the articulation of ideas, vernacular visual skills, friendship and – very important indeed – a history of one’s activity and a heredity as well as sometimes money acting both as a token of some of these and a means to continuing performance.⁴³

He describes the relationship between the artist and the market – the *troc* – as “simple and fluid” but this relationship must also be understood within the context of institutions surrounding the artist. Institutions, Baxandall asserts, “embody latent assumptions about what painting is.”⁴⁴

Baxandall asserts that being a good artist requires one to be an individual. In this regard he discusses the notion of “influence”, or specifically the appropriation of one artist’s painting for use in another’s.

‘Influence’ is a curse of art criticism primarily because of its wrong-headed grammatical prejudice about who is the agent and who the patient: it seems to reverse the active/passive relation which the historical actor experiences and the inferential beholder will wish to take into account. If one says that X influences Y it does not seem that one is saying that X did something to Y rather than that Y did something to X. But in consideration of good pictures and painters the second is always the more lively reality.⁴⁵

What Baxandall is setting forth is the notion that artists who appropriate the works of painters like Vermeer, indeed, offer something back to Vermeer through the creation of the new work. Baxandall describes a whole “lexicon” of words to support the more energetic relationship of Y as the agent instead of X including “appropriate from”, “react to”, “quote”, “paraphrase”, “parody”, “revive”, “distort”, “elaborate on”, “subvert”, “perpetuate”, “promote”, “respond to”, “transform” and many more.

Baxandall elaborates on his discussion by considering Pablo Picasso’s relationship to Paul Cezanne. Ultimately, Baxandall asserts that Picasso accepted “Cezanne’s things...*en troc* from culture” within his own style and in so doing elevated the status of Cezanne. Thus, Picasso used Cezanne to further his *own intention* but in the end also did service to his predecessor.

Baxandall argues explicitly that culture informs our perceptions.

Cultures do not impose uniform cognitive and reflective equipment on individuals...But cultures also facilitate certain kinds of cognitive development in large classes of its members. Living in a culture, growing up and learning to survive it, involves us in a special perceptual training. It endows us with habits and skills of discrimination that affect the way we deal with the new data that sensation offers the mind. And because the trick of pictures – that is, making a flat plane suggest the three dimensional – puts a premium on expectation and visual inference, it is sensitive to otherwise marginal differences in the beholder’s equipment.⁴⁶

Of the ideas and theoretical frameworks set forth, those of Benjamin, Bachelard, and Baxandall can be most successfully adapted as a means of extending our understanding of contemporary responses to artists and paintings from the past. Benjamin’s ideas on the democratization of paintings through the reproduction; Bachelard’s ideas related to topoanalysis and the ways in which images reside in the

mind; and Baxandall's theory on influence, as well as his ideas on culture and cognition, can be employed to more carefully consider appropriation in our present day culture. The methods set forth by Igor Kopytoff and Margaret Mead to explore the cultural biography of particular paintings and their reproductions such as those of Vermeer provides a useful conceptual framework. In the chapters and pages that follow I will sharpen my focus to the works of Johannes Vermeer: the ways in which we encounter his paintings, appropriate their images, and in the process, renew and heighten their meaning. Unique within the context of Vermeer studies, I will also broaden my discussion to a consideration of the ways in which his paintings have provided inspiration both in their original form and through their reproduction, as well as how they have been appropriated in art, literature, and the more lively arts of film and opera. Importantly, I will also argue the meaning Vermeer and his paintings have acquired within our more contemporary culture.

¹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, New York, 1957, p. 109.

² Numerous studies could be cited to support this point; however, the exhibition and exhibition catalogue has offered some of the most explicit examples. The catalogue from the 1993 exhibition at the Musée du Louvre, titled *Copier Créer*, provides perhaps the strongest visual record of this fact. The exhibit and catalogue seek to document the ways in which works from the Louvre collection were reworked by artists who were active during the time period between Turner and Picasso. Musée du Louvre, *Copier Créer*,

(Paris: Editions de la Reunion des musees nationaux), 1993. Other examples include: Lene Bøgh Rønberg, Kasper Monrad, and Ragni Linnet, *Two Golden Ages: Masterpieces of Dutch and Danish Painting*, Rijksmuseum, 2001, an exhibition and catalogue that focused on the influence of 17th century Dutch painting on 19th and Danish painters of the 19th century; Peter van den Brink, *Brueghel Enterprises*, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussel where the copying of paintings by Pieter Brueghel the Elder by Pieter Brueghel the Younger and others as well as the whole issue of copying within the Flemish tradition of painting is discussed. Numerous other exhibitions that consider aspects of appropriation as well as discussions of appropriation found in other areas of the art historical discourse will be cited and considered throughout this dissertation.

³ For a discussion of the cultural history of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, see Donald Sassoon, *Becoming Mona Lisa: The Making of a Global Icon*, 2001.

⁴ The art historical canon is continuously under construction and is the subject of ongoing debate within the academy and the museum. Education, history, philosophy and politics are generally recognized as contributing factors to the establishment of the canon, which has been affected in no small way by methods of reproduction and transmittal. I have taken an extraordinarily conservative tack in presenting ideas on the canon. A good general discussion of the art historical canon and the nature of its composition can be found in Gill Perry and Colin Cunningham, eds., *Academies, Museums and Canons of Art*, 1999.

⁵ Not all painting that is canonical becomes the subject of appropriation within contemporary painting or other more popular aspects of culture. I can see no clear pattern as to why certain images and not others are continuously appropriated except for their association with the canon, their elevation through the museum and exhibition, the lendability of their subject to the subject of the appropriation, or, most importantly, the personal connection the image has somehow established with the artist or individual who appropriates it, which may, indeed, overlap with another or all of these other reasons. If I were to propose a historical canon of paintings found in the popular culture of today, certainly Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man*, Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*, Grant Wood's *American Gothic*, Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, and Leonardo's iconic *Mona Lisa* would be among the top 10.

⁶ *Ariadne Sleeping in Naxos* in the Museo del Prado, Madrid, is an example of a Roman replica of a Greek original that, likewise, resembles the Venuses.

⁷ This appropriation by Caravaggio of Michelangelo is part of the more general discourse in art history and is discussed nearly everywhere. One authoritative source for this discussion is John T. Spike, *Caravaggio*, 2001, pp. 94-96.

⁸ See Evelyn Welch, *Art in Renaissance Italy*, 1997, p. 21.

⁹ A summary of Michael Montias's research revealing statistics on art production during the seventeenth century is found in Mariet Westermann, *Art & Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt*, p. 21.

¹⁰ The similarities in artists' choices of themes and their representation is well documented in numerous studies related to Dutch art of the seventeenth century. See, for example: Alejandro Vergara, *Vermeer: Dutch Painting of Domestic Interiors*, exhibition catalogue, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, 2003.

¹¹ A discussion of seventeenth century objects that reproduce recognizable images of Dutch artists can be found in Walter Liedtke, *Vermeer and the Delft School*, exhibition catalogue, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2001, especially pages 536-546.

¹² A brief discussion on the subjects of Dutch tiles can be found in Mariet Westermann, *Art & Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt*, exhibition catalogue, Denver Museum of Art, 2002, pp. 67-68, 187.

¹³ This aspect of Dutch art and culture is interesting to consider and, to the writer's knowledge, has not been discussed to date. Connections between tiles and paintings and the ways in which the former provided imagery particularly accessible to children fits within more general themes on Dutch home and family of the seventeenth century. Within this context it would also be useful to consider the visual intent of Dutch tiles in regards to children and their possible relationship with the growing interest in books that introduce art and artists to the children of our own time and place.

¹⁴ In this discussion, the direction of influence from tiles to paintings or from paintings to tiles would be difficult to chart and perhaps unimportant to do so. What is important is the ways in which certain themes were represented within both painting traditions and the practicalities that existed for some overlap and borrowing between them. Pieter de Hooch's *Woman and Child in a Pantry* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) is reproduced in Alejandro Vergara, *Vermeer: Dutch Painting of Domestic Interiors*, exhibition catalogue,

2003, p. 119. Vermeer's *The Little Street* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) is reproduced in *Johannes Vermeer*, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1995, p. 103.

¹⁵ The renunciation of painting begun during the 20th century through the art of Marcel Duchamp and others is nicely summarized in Neal Benezra's essay "The Misadventures of Beauty" published in Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, "Regarding Beauty: A View of the Late Twentieth Century" (Washington: Smithsonian Institution in association with Hatje Cantz Publishers), 1999, pp. 16-38.

¹⁶ See for example, Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, 1988; Neil Leach, *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, 1997; Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, 1992. Appropriation surfaces as a theme in numerous articles, for example see: Daphne Merkin, "Last Tango: Anne Carson's new volume is a meditation on lust and love and a marriage danced until it's over," *The New York Times*, Book Review, Sunday, September 30, 2001, p. 12, that discusses appropriation of cultural ideas in the context of Anne Carson's book *The Beauty of the Husband*; Michael Rush, "A Life of Kinship With Borges's Ambitions," *The New York Times*, Sunday, October 22, 2000, Art/Architecture, pg. 43, discusses the work of Philadelphia based artist Osvaldo Romberg who appropriates Leonardo, Rubens, Bellini, Caravaggio and others in his creations in paint and video; Bruce Weber, "If Leonardo Had Had Access to PowerPoint," *The New York Times*, Monday, June 30, 2003, B1 and B4 that discusses the stage production of *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci* at the Berkeley Repertory Theater in New York.

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, translated by Harry Zohn, 1968.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, I.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, X. John Berger discusses aura and the "exhibition" of paintings through the advertisement. See John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 1972.

²⁰ A good discussion related to the aura of reproductions and the ways in which they create responses within groups can be found in Sally M. Promey, *Painting Religion in Public: John Signer Sargent's Triumph of Religion at the Boston Public Library*, 1999.

²¹ David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images*, 1998, p. 17.

²² This conversation took place in June, 1994. When my father's health required him to enter a nursing home these reproductions were hung on the wall of his room where they stayed until his death several months later.

²³ Gaston Bachelard, "The Poetics of Space," reprinted in Neil Leach, ed., *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, 1997, pp. 86-97.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Bachelard, p. 86-87.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

²⁹ Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural biography of things: commoditization as process," Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. 1986.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

³² Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*, 1987.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

³⁴ Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and The Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, 1987.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 202-227.

³⁶ Celia Lury, *Consumer Culture*, 1996.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 81. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, 1979, Trans. by Richard Nice, 1984.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 55-60. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, 1988.

⁴⁰ Op cit., Lury, p. 88.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁴² Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On Historical Explanations of Pictures*, 1985.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 58-59.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

Chapter 3 – Johannes Vermeer: Life and Afterlife

There is nothing personal about the facts, but there is about choosing and grouping them. It is by the patterning and the meanings ascribed that the vision is conveyed. And this, if anything, is what each historian adds to the general understanding. Read more than one historian and the chances are good that you will come closer and closer to the full complexity. Whoever wants an absolute copy of what happened must gain access to the mind of God.¹

--Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence*

...in some ways the sheer hunger for the unique object has never been more intense. It may be no coincidence that as digital technology conjures a world of endlessly reproducible, transmittable images, the museum is booming. Crowds contemplating a Rembrandt or Van Gogh or a painting attributed to Dong Yuan may not know what they're looking at, historically speaking, but they are clearly after some primal experience of the Real Thing.²

-- Holland Cotter, "On Trial at the Met: the Art of the Connoisseur"

In the last chapter, I introduced a theoretical framework for appropriation, arguing that the way paintings are being appropriated in our contemporary culture, as well as the motivations for doing so, indeed, have historical precedent. I also posited the importance of art reproductions for increasing access to paintings, suggesting their connection to other ideas and images, increasing opportunities for individuals to construct personal meanings for these images through their lived experience, and as a means of facilitating a painting's broader appropriation within art and culture. I also set forth the theories of Walter Benjamin, Gaston Bachelard, Igor Kopytoff, Celia Lury, and Pierre Bourdieu related to reproductions, phenomenology, commodities, and habitus, arguing the usefulness of these ideas in regards to the appropriation of paintings and particularly our

culture's appropriation and appreciation of Johannes Vermeer. I also considered the theories of Michael Baxandall concerning the direction of influence between art and artists where he argues that influence from present to past is more appropriate and dynamic than the more traditionally recognized direction of past to present.

In this chapter, I will focus on Johannes Vermeer and his paintings as a means of demonstrating the cultural relevance of this artist in our own time. Here I will discuss contemporary ideas in Vermeer scholarship and how they have evolved, with particular emphasis on the role of museums, curators, and art historians in formulating narratives that have contributed to a broader cultural dialogue on this artist. I will consider five exhibitions related to Vermeer, all of which I have viewed, spanning the years from 1995 – 2003. I will discuss in greatest detail the National Gallery of Art's exhibition *Johannes Vermeer* and the general response it received as demonstrated through media coverage and correspondence to its curator, Arthur Wheelock. In accordance with the methodology outlined for this dissertation, personal experience and insight is used within my discussion to broaden and narrow, clarify and extend aspects of the cultural dialogue. Ultimately, I will argue that the degree of attention afforded to Vermeer through the exhibition forum has shifted his paintings into the full view of a broad international audience, made both the artist and his paintings celebrities, and established Vermeer's aesthetic as a cultural emblem of beauty open to public response and interpretation.

Determining the true value of objects is not always an easy task as we value things in a number of different ways. Assigning value to art is particularly difficult as its value can be multifold. Art sales help in determining the current monetary value of an artwork; museums and art historical studies argue an object's value within the context of world art and past cultures; and sophisticated technological studies and analyses authenticate objects and inform us of their physical condition. Furthermore, there is considerable debate in our own culture of today, as has occasionally been the case in the past, on what precisely constitutes a “real” work of art. Artistic conventions that helped establish cultural ideas on beauty during different time periods of history are argued as no longer in place in our contemporary culture; what constitutes “beauty” seems continuously contested.³ Certainly historic and more popular records can provide ample evidence of an object's cultural worth throughout its existence. What becomes the subject of more popular discourse is often indicative of what is valued by the culture. Considering the visual and written “dialogue” on particular objects or works of art – in essence, their cultural biography – becomes a way through which an object’s meaning, its intrinsic value, can be more fully understood.

How paintings have been regarded over time is neither static nor uncomplicated. Objects outlive their creators and their history continues to evolve right up to the present moment. Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, for example, continues to exist as an object of interest and beauty despite its historical context as an expression of 15th century Florentine Neoplatonism.⁴ The study of art history encourages our understanding that the value or meaning of a work of art is not fixed. Each successive generation provides tangible evidence of their response to works of art. New meanings are invested in the art

of the past by the peoples that follow. An artist or artwork that was overlooked or openly ridiculed yesterday can, and often has, become the focus of praise and attention today.⁵ Conversely, what we value today might, indeed, provide little meaning for peoples of tomorrow.

Johannes Vermeer, a seventeenth century Dutch artist whose work consists of an extant thirty-five paintings, and one whose life remains, for the most part, a mystery to us today is nevertheless an artist who has become increasingly well known in contemporary popular culture. No doubt encouraged by the sense of mystery and intrigue that has surrounded the man and his works, the public has transformed Vermeer from someone forgotten to an artist who is greatly revered. Yet, if these aspects of Vermeer's story have encouraged one to look in his direction, it is his paintings that have continued to hold our gaze and interest. Vermeer's paintings have become tangible emblems of real beauty within our contemporary culture.

As no Vermeer painting currently resides in a private collection and there is little hope of an unknown work by this master surfacing and hitting the public auction, the museum offers the singular venue where one can physically regard a real Vermeer.⁶ The museum has, thus, provided the public forum through which contemporary ideas in Vermeer scholarship have found their way into the more popular realm of world culture and the primary conduit through which reproductions of Vermeer paintings have been released.

In the course of less than ten years, Vermeer has provided the framework around which four major museum exhibitions have evolved and gone on view in cities in the United States, Europe and Japan.⁷ The production of museum exhibitions requires huge

investments of time and money by the host museum as well by the numerous other lending institutions that must agree to the borrowing of objects from their collections for these events to happen. These recent Vermeer related exhibitions, thus, were not isolated ventures by one or two museums but, by necessity, received the endorsement of a much broader representation of the world's museum community. The exhibits have offered curators, art historians, and members of the general public the unique opportunity to view the paintings of Vermeer from one museum together with related works from other collections. Likewise, museum partnerships have provided the machinery through which one exhibition has become available in multiple venues offering the collection of objects and the narratives they set forth a much broader airing. The common purpose shared by members of the museum community in undertaking such a high volume of exhibits centered around this artist's comparatively small body of work is significant as it demonstrates both the desire and commitment to deepen the study of Vermeer, as well as a compelling need to do so.

Each Vermeer related exhibition has set forth a unique narrative context that has offered a backdrop upon which the growing consciousness of Vermeer has evolved. Likewise, each of the narratives has been born from a body of scholarship that has required years to gather and write, yet is offered some promise of permanence long after the installations disappear through the exhibition catalogue.

In order to better understand the growth in appreciation of Vermeer among more popular audiences and the narrative contexts and dialogues that have helped shape it, I will consider five exhibitions, all of which I have experienced both through the physical installation and the exhibition catalogue. I will consider three major exhibitions related

to Vermeer: *Johannes Vermeer* (1995-96, Washington and The Hague, Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr. curator), *Vermeer and the Delft School* (2001, New York and London, Walter Liedtke, curator), and *Vermeer and Dutch Paintings of Domestic Interiors, 1650-1675* (2003, Madrid, Alejandro Vergara, curator). Through their installations and accompanying catalogues, each of these exhibitions offers a different facet of the evolving story of Vermeer, each in succession providing fuel for the next. Particular emphasis will be placed on my discussion of the Washington exhibit; within this context, I will also discuss *Johannes Vermeer: The Art of Painting* (1999-2000, National Gallery of Art, Washington), as this exhibit of a single Vermeer painting effectively signaled the completion of the intended vision of the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition of three years earlier. As a means of further understanding the museum narratives that are informing our ideas on paintings by Vermeer, I will also consider a fifth exhibition, *Art and Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt* (2002, Denver, Mariet Westermann, curator).

The physical presentation of Vermeer's paintings through these exhibitions and the ideas set forth in the historical record have broadened participation in Vermeer-related discourse, enriched its response, and ushered in a whole new chapter in Vermeer Studies where the scholar and the layman share equally in the course of its evolution.

Johannes Vermeer

The work of Johannes Vermeer is a slender and perfect plume thrown up by the wave of Dutch painting at its crest. For a moment it seems that the massive tide pauses.⁸

-- Lawrence Gowing, *Vermeer*

In the context of scholarly studies, it is somewhat of a relief to understand that the known chronology of an artist can be rather quickly detailed as is, indeed, the case with Johannes Vermeer. Vermeer was born a protestant in Delft in 1632 and married Catharina Bolnes in 1653, which prompted his conversion to Catholicism. The same year, he registered as a master painter in the Saint Luke's Guild in Delft where he served as the headman of the guild in 1662-63 and 1671-72.⁹ His father, Reynier Jansz, who was trained as the maker of fine cloth, sold art from the walls of his inn, and his mother-in-law, Maria Thins was the owner of a small collection of paintings from the Utrecht school, several of which found their way onto the walls of the interiors Vermeer painted. Vermeer was the father of fourteen children although only eleven survived to adulthood. He appears to have been good friends with Leonaert Bramer, considered the foremost artist in Delft at this time, and was also acquainted with Antonie van Leeuwenhoek one of the seventeenth century's great cartographers, geographers, and scientists. He is also known to have owned paintings by other 17th century masters including works by Carel Fabritius, a famed student of Rembrandt who resided in Delft in the 1650s but was killed by the munitions explosion that destroyed nearly one-third of the city in 1654.

The best work to reconstruct the life of Vermeer and the facts surrounding his paintings has been done by John Michael Montias, an economist. Montias' book *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History*, first published in 1988, was a groundbreaking work in the study of seventeenth century Delft and can easily be counted among the most frequently cited, if not the most cited, work in the field of Vermeer Studies.¹⁰ While confirming much regarding Vermeer's essentially elusive character and the lack of documentary information to substantiate his personality and motivations as an artist, Montias utilizes existing records on other artists and family members to, as he puts it, "trace the outline of his character".¹¹ What is presented is the life surrounding Vermeer's life – the atmosphere and tempo of Seventeenth century Delft, the personalities and occupations of Vermeer's family members, the other artists and important individuals whose lives were within close proximity to Vermeer, the artists we know he engaged with, the spaces in which he moved, and the things with which he surrounded himself. As Montias himself admits, however, much of what he presents on Vermeer personally is through inference and, as it is constructed through civil and legal records, is not without a certain bias.

Vermeer was nearly penniless when he died in December 1675, leaving his wife to sell what paintings they had left to pay off large debts on essential household items like bread and meat. The events surrounding his death and the disposition of his meager estate offer a heart-wrenching narrative that is in stark contrast to our present day appreciation of Vermeer. Told in civil records through the voice of his wife Catharina Bolnes two years after the artist's death, she explains:

...during the long and ruinous war with France not only had [Vermeer] been unable to sell any of his art but also, to his great detriment, was left sitting with the paintings of other masters that he was dealing in. As a result and owing to the very great burden of his children, having no means of his own, he had lapsed into such decay and decadence, which he had so taken to heart that, as if he had fallen into a frenzy, in a day or day and a half he had gone from being healthy to being dead.¹²

Other records recounting Catharina's valiant efforts to keep *The Art of Painting* demonstrate both the desperation of the family's circumstances after Johannes' death and the pains through which she tried to retain possession of some evidence of his work (fig. 5). As *The Art of Painting* is understood to both personify and allegorize Vermeer's work, it is particularly distinguished among Vermeer's oeuvre and, therefore, was a critical work for Catharina to seek to retain for both practical and emotional reasons. Her actions in the end proved futile, however, and this painting and all others were sold and still the debt remained.

Although these facts are certain, little else is known about the man Johannes Vermeer. Despite concerted efforts by Montias and a host of other scholars, we still do not know with certainty with whom Vermeer may have studied, where he traveled, who he might have taught, for whom many of his works were painted, or precisely who or what many of his works were intended to represent.¹³ He remains, as one has described, "an almost mythical figure in art history."¹⁴

Although significant information revealed by Montias and other sources indicate Vermeer was a highly respected artist during his own time, the fact remains that following the seventeenth century the name of Johannes Vermeer passed into relative obscurity. Many of his paintings became misattributed to other 17th century artists such

as Pieter de Hooch and Frans van Mieris only to be reattributed to Vermeer in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The reemergence of Vermeer as a master painter is credited to Etienne Joseph Théophile Thoré, alias William Bürger (1807-1869), a French critic who began writing extensively on Vermeer in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* during the 1860s.¹⁵ The considerable scholarly record surrounding Vermeer documents the growing regard for his painting from the 1860s forward. The name of Johannes Vermeer thus emerged as one of the great masters from the Dutch golden age during the relatively recent past.



Figure 5. Johannes Vermeer. *The Art of Painting*, c. 1666, oil on canvas, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

The reemergence and rise to fame of a painter of such quiet, seemingly simple, and carefully crafted works might seem at first ironic during an era signaling the shift to industrialism, modernism and technical innovation. Yet the lack of a distinguishable narrative in the subjects of his paintings, the emphasis on compositional design, his willingness to allow negative as well as positive space to guide design, and his emphasis on the effects of light, aligned Vermeer's aesthetic interests with those of the evolving modern era. The timing of this renewed interest and attention seems to have proved fortuitous for Vermeer in part for these reasons and proved extremely important in encouraging his appreciation in America. The interest in collecting old master paintings in America coincided precisely with Vermeer's revival, offering many of our greatest patrons including Peter A. B. Widener, Andrew W. Mellon, Henry Clay Frick, and Isabelle Stewart Gardner, the opportunity to acquire Vermeers, thus, assuring that his work would be well represented in American collections.

Compiling and documenting the provenance of Vermeer's oeuvre was also begun in the late nineteenth century and has continued to provide intrigue right up to the present day. The precise number of works attributed to the master has shifted numerous times, affected both by new discoveries, new attributions as well as misattributions.¹⁶

The desire and potential opportunity for more works to be found by Vermeer created the right circumstances for enterprising forgerers during the first half of the twentieth century. Recognizing the relatively small number of models and props included by Vermeer in his paintings, forgers Han von Meegeren and Theodorus van Wijngaarden created new Vermeer pastiches comprised of any number of the artist's stock motifs.¹⁷ Using old canvas, glue-based paint, mechanical abrasion techniques, and

special drying agents like bakelite, these forgers successfully fooled numerous collectors and art historians with their pseudo-masterpieces, many of which were to enter important museum collections including the National Gallery of Art, The Hyde Museum and the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam. The art of forgery has offered an added element of mystery and excitement to an already intriguing story of Vermeer and, likewise, brought the recognition of his work to a broader audience. Indeed, even today the possibility of finding a work by one of the great masters from art history continues to exist and proves enormously newsworthy both inside and outside the art world.¹⁸

The numerous studies of World War II and Hitler's Europe have also added to the intrigue surrounding contemporary studies of Vermeer. Hitler's personal fascination with Johannes Vermeer and his exploits to obtain specific examples of his paintings have by now become well known in the written record. The Nazi ERR confiscated Vermeer's *The Astronomer* from the Parisian home of Edouard de Rothchild in 1940 and had it transported directly to Hitler for his personal collection.¹⁹ Also in 1940 and after the annexation of Austria to Germany, Hitler acquired Vermeer's *Art of Painting* from the Austrian Count Jaromir Czernin for a fraction of its value. Although both of these paintings were earmarked for the museum Hitler planned for his hometown of Linz, the steady toppling of the Nazi regime by the Allied Forces changed these plans dramatically. Hitler eventually had the *Art of Painting* transferred to the salt mines Altaussee for safekeeping where it was later recovered by the United States Army and taken to the Kunsthistorisches Museum in 1945.²⁰ Vermeer's *The Astronomer* was also found by the Allied Forces who later returned it to the Rothchild family. *Christ with the Woman Taken in Adultery*, another painting acquired as a Vermeer by Hitler's leading henchman

Goering, was later proved to be a forgery painted by none other than Han van Meegeren.²¹

The extraordinary value Vermeer's paintings hold within the world today has not been without its darker side in recent history. Vermeer paintings have also fallen prey to art thieves over the years both in the United States and Europe. His *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid* (c. 1670) has been stolen twice, first in 1974 and again in 1986 (fig. 6). Its owner bequeathed it to the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, in 1987 while the painting was still missing and it finally entered the museum's collection in 1993 upon its recovery. Likewise Vermeer's *The Concert* was stolen from the Isabelle Stewart Gardener Museum in 1990. Sadly, *The Concert* still remains missing.



Figure 6. Johannes Vermeer. *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid*, ca. 1670-71 (oil on canvas) National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.

Arthur Wheelock and *Johannes Vermeer*, Washington, D.C.

Of the works completed by Vermeer, only thirty-five have survived to our current century, all considered among the most prized masterpieces of Western art. His rise in rank over the last century and a half has been carefully argued and charted in the scholarly record. Numerous studies have speculated on the subjects of Vermeer's paintings and his relationship to possible patrons or to other 17th century artists. Others have set forth the more emotional character of his paintings, arguing their universal validity and appeal to the human spirit.

The works of two scholars, Lawrence Gowing and Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., have offered the most enduring and convincing narratives within Vermeer related discourse during the past fifty years.²² Both scholars set forth descriptions of this artist that summarily exclaim the refinement, perfection, and intrinsic beauty of Vermeer's paintings. From the first pages of their books both authors explain these ideas and, importantly, the more universal acceptance for them. Gowing writes in his 1952 book *Vermeer*:

It is simple, immaculate: the perfection of Vermeer no longer needs expounding. His pictures contain themselves, utterly self-sufficient. In each of them the surface and design alike mark an act which is accomplished and complete. Its limits are unconcealed. The scene is a familiar room, nearly always the same, its unseen door is closed to the restless movement of the household, the window opens to the light. Here a domestic world is refined to purity, to be conveyed on canvas in definite statement. On the surface of these pictures the forms of life lie flatly together, locked side by side in final clarity.²³

For Gowing, Vermeer defines perfection and, by extrapolation, illustrates in concrete form the idea of pure beauty within the parameters of his paintings.

Writing in *Jan Vermeer* in 1981, Arthur Wheelock expands on similar themes, while also arguing that part of our interest in this artist stems from the idea that the complete context of his paintings can never be fully realized. He writes on the initial page of his text:

The images Jan Vermeer has left us are few and of limited scope...Yet we esteem him as one of the greatest artists who ever lived.

The fascination of Vermeer's paintings, however, is not in his choice of subject but in the poetic ways his images are portrayed. It is in the way he uses light and color, proportion and scale, to enhance the moods of his figures. He imparts nuance of thought and meaning to his scenes which are at once understandable but not totally explicit. Ultimately, however beautiful or sensitive his paintings may be, they continue to appeal because they can never be completely explained.²⁴

Although significant additional research has been undertaken by Wheelock in the more than twenty years since *Jan Vermeer* was first published, the theme of intrinsic beauty, which he and Gowing before him set forth, combined with the idea that a full explanation of his work is largely unattainable, have, nevertheless, continued to be present in Wheelock's scholarship. It is these very themes of intrinsic beauty and interpretative open-endedness that have continued to resonate within the dialogues of a broader popular audience.

A significant body of scholarship has also involved methods of connoisseurship where modern technology has been utilized including X-radiographs, infrared reflectograms, and the analysis of paint samples in an effort to understand and describe Vermeer's working method. Arthur Wheelock's 1995 book *Vermeer and the Art of Painting* offers a good example of this kind of study.

Far from the mystifying, antiquated study art historians have occasionally been criticized for,²⁵ *Vermeer and the Art of Painting* conveys not only the visual experience of viewing a Vermeer, but, indeed, also offers an eloquent and instructive treatise on precisely how Vermeer paints.²⁶ Wheelock bases the book on an in-depth analysis in conjunction with painting conservators, focusing on seventeen of the artist's extant paintings. The way Vermeer has structured his paintings, applied or layered his paint in dense patches of color or transparent glazes, the way he frequently altered his paintings -- often removing whole figures or adjusting details -- and the way he created his captivating lighting effects, are all clearly detailed in the text of this study.

Wheelock's discussion of the National Gallery of Art's *Girl with the Red Hat*, for example, demonstrates how Vermeer uses color to enhance the structure and psychology of the painting, which, in turn, creates and encourages a dialogue between the viewer and the girl (fig. 7). As Wheelock describes, red and blue serve as the primary color accents with their secondary, tertiary, and complimentary colors subtly and harmoniously employed to unify the overall composition. The effects of Vermeer's color orchestration are intensified by the introduction of white in the girl's cravat and as an articulation of light across distinct areas in the painting. The way in which Vermeer has applied his paint -- whether in thick impasto or thin glaze, using quick strokes or by stroking away paint -- is carefully presented by Wheelock in clear, visually rich language, at once descriptive and instructive.



Figure 7. Johannes Vermeer, *The Girl with the Red Hat*, ca. 1665-6 (oil on panel), National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Andrew W. Mellon Collection.

Additional research by Wheelock and other scholars on the 17th century has revealed numerous treatises on science and painting that suggest the optical effects achieved by Vermeer were also aided by the use of the camera obscura. The camera obscura is a box viewing device containing a small hole to which is affixed a lens and through which light enters the box, reflecting the scene outside with the aid of a mirror onto a flat surface above, where it can then be viewed or copied. In *Vermeer and the Art of Painting*, Wheelock summarizes the scholarship concerning Vermeer's possible use of

the camera obscura in regard to the *Girl with the Red Hat*, referring to the "halation of highlights" apparent in the work which would seemingly have been impossible to achieve without the use of this device.²⁷

Vermeer and the Art of Painting, like many other books on the history of art, is richly illustrated throughout with high quality reproductions of the original art works as well as the other visual details needed in order to understand the extensive technical analyses. The discussion of the *Girl in the Red Hat* includes a beautiful reproduction of the painting as well as smaller images focusing on distinct areas of the painting as a way of further clarifying what has already been carefully presented in the written text. Black and white reproductions of an x-radiograph and an infrared-reflectogram, for example, illustrate and support Wheelock's intriguing discussion concerning the undersurface of the *Girl with the Red Hat*, which, indeed, contains another painting possibly by Carel Fabritius. Although Wheelock's *Vermeer and the Art of Painting* was preceded by numerous articles and publications related to Vermeer, including his vastly circulated *Jan Vermeer*, the technical analyses and quality of the reproductions represented a particularly distinguished study. As demonstrated in Arthur Wheelock's work, the written discussion by experts in the field of art as well as the ways in which they utilize reproductions, can significantly impact the way we see artists – who we look at, what we look for, and how we respond to important works in Western art.

The National Gallery of Art's *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition, considered by many the most important event in the contemporary life of Vermeer, offers a powerful opportunity to assess the value of original paintings, the degree to which reproductions of

Vermeer's works have proliferated within American culture, and the ways an exhibition can inform our contemporary understanding of the meaning of art. The exhibition, which continued for three short months, was more than eight years in the making and became an internationally recognized event broadly claimed as the exhibition of a lifetime. The impetus behind *Johannes Vermeer* was, again, Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr, curator of northern baroque painting at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., and Professor of Art History at the University of Maryland.

Though small in scale including just twenty-one paintings, it nevertheless contained more than half of Vermeer's known works. Vermeer's signature style of refinement, perfection, and intrinsic beauty, so carefully charted and argued within Wheelock's years of scholarship, was put forth again but this time with the tangible evidence of a significant number of real Vermeer paintings on view to back these ideas up. The media and the public understood and latched on to these themes and *Johannes Vermeer* became an exhibition hailed as an act of brilliance, inspiration and diplomacy. Scholars and lay people alike flocked to Washington to view more works by the artist than had been assembled together in three hundred years. Not since a sale of Vermeer's works in 1696, twenty years after the artist's death, had so many Vermeers been together in one place. The proximity of Vermeer's paintings to each other offered viewers the added benefit of seeing the works as they might have been seen in the 17th century as, indeed, twelve of the twenty-one paintings included in the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition are thought to have been owned by a single patron, Pieter Claesz. van Ruijven.

The exhibition was contained in six rooms – but seven separate spaces – of the National Gallery of Art's West Building. The simplicity of the overall exhibition design

and the economy with which wall text was used, was matched by Wheelock's simple narrative adding a sense of stillness and flow to the museum experience that was also apparent in Vermeer's paintings. These quiet aspects of the installation were greatly enhanced by Wheelock's insistence that audio guides, now commonly used in museums, not be a feature of this exhibition. Viewers were encouraged to experience the visual aspects of Vermeer relatively unencumbered by historical context and in this way were subtly guided to see the beauty of his paintings and to develop their own interpretations of his work.

Vermeer's paintings hung in four of the galleries interspersed both thematically and chronologically following a date sequence developed by Wheelock. The entrance to the exhibition bordered the Gallery's East Garden Court through which visitors encountered the first room, a space separated from Vermeer's paintings, which served to introduce the context for the exhibition. The room included a large seventeenth century atlas surrounded by text, which briefly discussed various aspects of seventeenth century life that were deemed necessary in preparation for viewing the paintings and, specifically, information about The Netherlands, Delft, and the artist Johannes Vermeer. The opportunity to view several of Vermeer's earliest works began in room two. Here the visitor's eyes were met first by Vermeer's *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha* (c. 1655), one of his largest paintings, which hung on the back wall of the room. Viewable from outside the exhibition's entrance, *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha* offered a powerful visual lure that also helped set the tone for a discussion of Vermeer's early interest in history painting. Vermeer's *Diana* (c. 1655-1656) and the more recently

identified *Saint Praxedis* (1655), a painting not universally accepted as a Vermeer, hung on adjacent walls to the left and right respectively.

One stood face-to-face with Vermeer's famous *View of Delft* (c. 1660-1661) in the third room, hanging prominently on a large, freestanding wall partition directly opposite the room's entrance (fig. 8). Like *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha*, Vermeer's *View of Delft* commanded the wall on which it hung and captured at once the visitor's gaze, holding it steady and drawing it forward. Painted during a time and in a place known for artists' beautiful renderings of landscapes and descriptive town views, the *View of Delft* is one of a kind in Vermeer's oeuvre. Smaller in size than the history paintings displayed in the room before, *View of Delft's* moderate proportions provided visitors their first glimpse of Delft and, in particular, the way in which the artist perceived it. Set between a sandy shoal and water on the bottom register and an expansive, cloud filled sky above, the fortified city walls, red tile roofs, towering chimneys and soaring spires of Vermeer's Delft offered viewers a city that seemed both one with nature while also in possession of the many bounties of an established, worthwhile human existence.



Figure 8. Johannes Vermeer, *View of Delft*, ca. 1660-61 (oil on canvas), Mauritshuis, The Hague.

Vermeer's painting of *The Little Street* (c. 1657-1658), which hung on the left wall perpendicular to *View of Delft*, helped navigate the exhibition's viewer beyond the walls of his city onto one of the many quiet streets where its residents made their homes and lived out their lives. There viewers could see the only little children Vermeer would ever paint, shown decidedly at play against the backdrop of their home and within earshot and eyesight of their mother who sits sewing just inside the doorway (fig. 9). *The Girl with the Wineglass* (c. 1659-1660) hung opposite Vermeer's quiet street scene and provided viewers with their first invitation inside one of Delft's many homes. Although Vermeer would continue to show us the light of day in his paintings, he would never again take us outside the home or offer us another painted view of his city. For the rest of his life and the rest of the exhibition, he would paint and we would be shown delicate renderings of Vermeer's vision of seventeenth century interior life.



Figure 9. Johannes Vermeer, *The Little Street*, ca. 1660-61 (oil on canvas), Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

The fourth space was perhaps the part of the exhibition most anticipated by its visitors. Here viewers could see five of Vermeer's most famous women, brought together from five of the world's most important collections, hung spaciouly and without embellishment in a single room. Entering from either side of the *View of Delft*, viewers were immediately greeted by these paintings of women set within the familiar spaces of the home, engaged in some momentary aspect of their daily life. The installation in this room allowed viewers to carefully observe the way in which Vermeer conceived and refined his simple compositional solution, which he then employed repeatedly to create beautiful images.

On the left wall of the fourth space hung *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, on the right hung *Woman Holding a Balance* (c. 1664) and directly ahead hung Vermeer's *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* (c. 1664-1665) and his *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* (c. 1664) on the left and right respectively (fig. 10). Behind on the freestanding wall partition hung Vermeer's *The Music Lesson* (c. 1662-64), the only painting in which a woman shared her space with another and, importantly, a man. Standing in this space of the exhibition one needed only to pivot slightly to engage with any one of these women or, indeed, with them all, marveling all the while as to how a theme so seemingly simple could be treated so similarly, yet so differently, and how these differences somehow made visible deeply held cognitive processes that are constant and unique to human beings, and ever-present within the viewers standing before Vermeer's paintings. The flow of this space and the manner in which these paintings were hung connected them to the images seen in the room before providing an easy sense of continuity that was maintained throughout the full extent of the exhibition.



Figure 10. Johannes Vermeer, *Young Woman with a Water Jug*, ca. 1663-65, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Henry G. Marquand, 1889.

As one turned toward Vermeer's *Woman holding a Balance* her eyes also connected these five images of women with others displayed on the walls of the exhibition's next room where *The Lacemaker* (c. 1669-1670) and *A Lady Writing* (c. 1665) could be seen hanging to either side of a doorway on the opposite far wall. *The Girl with the Red Hat* (c. 1665), as well as the *Young Girl with a Flute* (probably 1665/1670), which is only attributed to Vermeer, hung on the left wall, offering laymen and scholars alike the chance to analyze the physical properties of this work that has caused it to be left somewhat outside the Vermeer canon. Vermeer's beloved *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (c. 1665-1666) hung on the right wall of this room and on the left wall perpendicular to it was *The Geographer* (c. 1668-1669), one of only two works painted

by Vermeer that considered a male subject alone, and the single image of its kind in the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition.

The more technical aspects of the scholarly narrative were placed, again, at a small remove from Vermeer's paintings and were contained within the fifth room of the exhibition. This room was accessed through doorways located on either side of the wall on which the *Girl with a Pearl Earring* hung (fig. 11). Here the room was devoted to a discussion of the camera obscura and other information available to artists during the seventeenth century. Text explaining Vermeer's possible use of this device as an aid in creating several of his paintings was accompanied by seventeenth century books on Delft, treatises on art, photographs of modern technical studies demonstrating changes Vermeer made to his paintings, and a real camera obscura. Incorporating this kind of technical information within the exhibition structure added interest to an exhibition otherwise focused fully on the display of paintings and offered visitors the chance to more carefully assess Vermeer within the context of technology, a facet particularly well suited to a late twentieth century audience.



Figure 11. Johannes Vermeer, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, ca. 1665-66, (oil on canvas) Mauritshuis, The Hague.

Four works from Vermeer's latest period, those painted while in his late 30s and early 40s, just before his untimely death at the age of 43, concluded the exhibition in the sixth and final room. His *Allegory of Faith* (c. 1671-1674) commanded the focal point upon entering the room with *A Lady Standing at the Virginal* (c. 1672-1673) and *A Lady Seated at the Virginal* (c. 1675) being placed on the wall perpendicular and to the right of it. *Allegory of Faith* offered the strongest departure from the quiet restraint immediately apparent in his women of just a few short years earlier and required some additional text to help viewers understand and contextualize it within his vision. Much easier to fit within the framework of his earlier works yet much larger in size was Vermeer's *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid* (c. 1670), which hung on the side wall to the left of *Allegory of Faith*. Beyond the formal qualities of the work and the ways in which it extended our understanding of the artist's maturing technique, the painting's personal history offered a unique element of fascination different from the other paintings in the exhibition. Vermeer's *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid* had been stolen twice from its owner within the last thirty years and had only been recovered from the second theft just two years before the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition was installed. *Lady Writing*, therefore, provided a welcome expansion of the Vermeer theme during the exhibition's lengthy development, which could only have been imagined during the seven years in which it had remained missing from the art world.

Small in terms of the number of objects it included, yet large within the context of this artist's oeuvre, the size of the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition was nevertheless one of its greatest assets. *Johannes Vermeer* provided viewers with the unique opportunity of seeing his paintings solely within the context of his other paintings and with just enough

historical information and scholarly debate to further their interest. The simplicity of the exhibition design with its generous, open wall space, along with the economical use of text, and clear, uncomplicated narrative allowed Vermeer's paintings to command their space and the attention of their viewers creating an effect of both power and resonance. Visitors took from *Johannes Vermeer* the memory of physically regarding his works and through this experience, the refinement, perfection, and intrinsic beauty of Vermeer's paintings became something more than simply art historical discourse; in Vermeer's paintings the meaning of these ideas became both real and tangible.

Ideas suggested in the exhibition text were documented in a brochure that could be taken home by visitors without charge. Those desiring a more extensive elaboration on the history of the paintings and the scholarly debate surrounding them could find this information in the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition catalogue that was for sale in the museum's gift shop. Including essays by Arthur Wheelock, Albert Blankert, Ben Broos and Jørgen Wadum, the catalogue provides a more permanent record of the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition and offers expanded discussions on Vermeer's working methods, his choice of modern themes, his rediscovery and rise to fame, and the technical properties of the camera obscura that appear to have aided him in the creation of his designs. The catalogue also includes detailed entries written by Wheelock and Broos on each of the paintings displayed in the Washington show as well as the painting substitutions that were made at the second venue for the exhibition, the Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, The Hague.

Wheelock's discussion of *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, a painting displayed both in Washington and The Hague, provides a representative sample of the narratives

that were provided on each of Vermeer's paintings (fig. 12). While connecting *Women in Blue* with other works painted by Vermeer, Wheelock's discussion highlighted the unique properties of this painting that distinguish it within Vermeer's oeuvre.

In no other painting did Vermeer create such an intricate counterpoint between the structural framework of the setting and the emotional content of the scene. A mere description of the subject – a young woman dressed in a blue jacket reading a letter in the privacy of her home—in no way prepares the viewer for the poignancy of this image, for while the woman betrays no outward emotion, the intensity of her feelings is conveyed by the context Vermeer creates.²⁸



Figure 12. Johannes Vermeer, *Woman in Blue reading a Letter*, ca. 1663-65 (oil on canvas), Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

As Wheelock continues to explain, the central position of the woman, shown standing, with her figure set in profile to the left, is carefully held in place by the positioning of the table before her, the chair behind her and the map hung on the wall beyond her. Our eyes are continuously drawn to the letter tightly held between her hands through Vermeer's calculated use of lines created or implied through the angle of the rod at the base of the

map, the angle of the woman's arms or the steady gaze of her eyes. Wheelock uses a x-radiograph and an infrared reflectogram to show the subtle ways in which Vermeer altered the *Woman in Blue's* figure in order to encourage these effects. Wheelock focused the reader on the tangible elements of Vermeer's painting that demonstrate how he conceived and altered this painting to create an image of strength and resonance.

Wheelock also considers Vermeer's *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* within the context of his contemporaries, demonstrating how Vermeer was responsive to themes and the subtle nuances of compositional designs. The theme of women reading letters was a popular theme and is often associated with love in Dutch art. Gerard ter Borch's *Peasant Girl Reflecting on a Letter* from the Rijksmuseum is compared with Vermeer's *Woman in Blue* as a means of illustrating how artists enhanced the narrative content of their paintings through the body language and expressions of their figures. In *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, Wheelock notes an element of expectancy in the way Vermeer's woman tilts her head, parts her lips and holds her arms.²⁹ In other catalogue entries Wheelock sets forth explicit arguments on how Vermeer appropriated directly from other artists, such as in his entry on *Diana and Her Companions* where he posits that Vermeer appropriated Rembrandt's *Bathsheba* (1654) as the basis for his compositional design.³⁰

Ben Broos provides provenance information on each of the paintings included in the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition catalogue. Although it is not known who the original owner of the painting was, Broos explains, for example, that *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* changed hands quite a number of times during the 18th century with the catalogues for these sales all offering high praise for this work. In 1839, the painting was acquired by Adriaan van der Hoop who, lacking heirs, bequeathed *Woman in Blue* to the city of

Amsterdam, along with Rembrandt's *Jewish Bride* and Jacob van Ruisdael's *The Mill at Wijk Bij Duurstede* in 1847; all were placed on permanent loan to the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam in 1885. A reproduction of a portrait of van der Hoop by Jan Adam Kruseman is also included in the Wheelock/Broos entry.

Apart from the physical installation of the exhibition and the scholarly discussion within the exhibition's catalogue, *Johannes Vermeer* inspired separate, yet complimentary dialogues within more popular discourse. The extent of the media response to the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition could not possibly have been expected before it opened. The Smithsonian led these efforts with a feature article and cover photograph of the *Girl with a Pearl Earring* that fast became the recognized icon of the exhibit. Subsequent Smithsonian advertisements about their article on Vermeer boasted the readership for this issue and provides important information concerning the exposure Vermeer and his paintings had received with a broad cross-section of culture (fig. 13).

Newspapers on both coasts of the United States and throughout the Midwest, Europe, and Japan carried frequent coverage of the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition.³¹ Nearly every major magazine ran a story and often many stories on Vermeer, all including beautifully reproduced images from the exhibit. *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *Vogue*, *New Yorker Magazine* and even *Reader's Digest* featured articles praising the refinement, perfection and beauty of Vermeer's painting and the importance of the National Gallery exhibition. Media hype was bolstered by two government shut downs and a snowstorm that closed the exhibit for days.

Images of Vermeer's paintings were everywhere and the stories all raved about his technical brilliance, the luminosity of his colors, his use of light, the seemingly

otherworldly message the subjects of his paintings convey, and ultimately, the intrinsic beauty of his work. The language and discussions of Vermeer were so pervasive in the media that a syndicated cartoonist, Bill Griffith, even made them the subject of his comic strip *Zippy*.³² Another cartoonist, Richard Thompson, also poked fun at the degree to which Vermeer had dominated column space in the Style Plus page of the Washington Post by noting that the exhibit would, in fact, end and there would be a need for something else to fill the void.³³

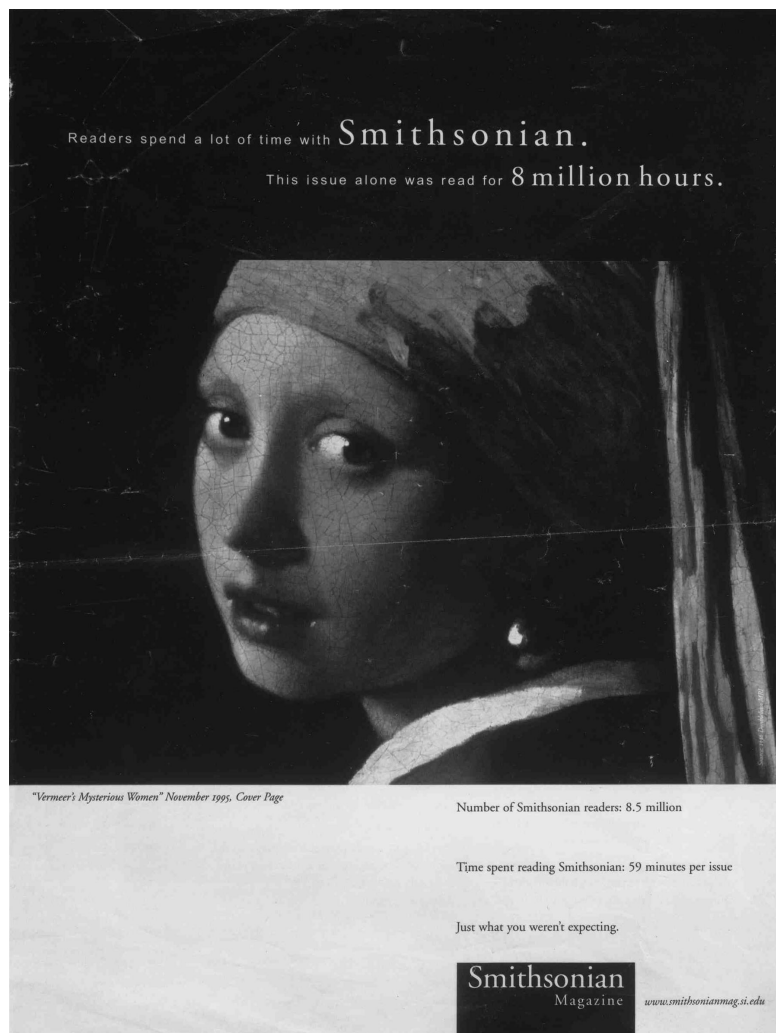


Figure 13. Advertisement for *Smithsonian Magazine* featuring the cover of the November 1995 issue.

Lines for the exhibit were another added feature of the popular dialogue on the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition. Although the National Gallery gave out hundreds of courtesy passes to the exhibit, many more thousands of people were left to brave the winter weather for the chance to see the original Vermeers. People traveled from all over the country and abroad, often standing in line for hours or even camping out overnight (fig. 14). Those who did wait in line found it well worth their time and this message became a prevalent theme throughout the exhibit.



Figure 14. Photograph and article highlighting the lines for the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition. *The Washington Post*, Thursday, February 8, 1996, C1. Collection of Dr. Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr.

Behind the exhibit development, yet most certainly in the forefront, was, Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., and his personal quest related to Vermeer became another theme to enter the popular dialogue on *Johannes Vermeer*. It was his vision, commitment, and diplomacy that had made the exhibit a reality. His dream had taken years to fulfill -- books had been published, articles written, and now everyone wanted to see the *Girl with the Red Hat*. Arthur Wheelock's name appeared everywhere. News media and talk show hosts interviewed him and he spoke eloquently and personally about his lifework with Vermeer. Wheelock conveyed ideas on the essence of Vermeer and the intrinsic beauty of his paintings in a way that brought meaning to thousands of TV viewers across the United States.³⁴

As a scholar on Vermeer and the curator of the exhibit, Arthur Wheelock conducted countless personal tours of the exhibit for colleagues, old friends as well as strangers who somehow had become friends through Vermeer. Movie stars, President and Mrs. Clinton, and Queen Beatrix of The Netherlands and her husband were among those given tours by Wheelock of the National Gallery's exhibition (fig. 15). He was a featured guest during an hour-long interview and tour of the exhibit with media personality Charlie Rose that initially aired in May 1996 with subsequent broadcasts during local WETA fundraisers that included an added interview with Wheelock during the phone break. Through the Charlie Rose Show, *Johannes Vermeer* was brought to thousands of additional viewers who might not otherwise have had the opportunity to see this exhibition. Although still not on the level of the infamous Sister Wendy, Arthur Wheelock, became for many people Vermeer personified and attracted a personal audience that has continued to follow his work to this day.³⁵



Figure 15. Left to right: Arthur Wheelock, Rusty Powell (National Gallery of Art Director), and President Clinton, viewing Johannes Vermeer's *The Allegory of Faith*, Johannes Vermeer exhibition, January 21, 1996.

Friends and strangers from all over the United States and Europe, and even from an inmate at the Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary, sent letters all praising Arthur Wheelock for his research and for bringing them Vermeer. Among these letters were poems, original artworks, or reproductions of artworks based on Vermeer. The dialogue created in these letters celebrates not only the promise and beauty of an exhibition on Vermeer, but also the personal accomplishments of Arthur Wheelock.³⁶

Contained within this correspondence are numerous poignant expressions of the real meaning of Vermeer's paintings for individuals and also the significance of photographic reproductions. Writing in advance of the exhibition's opening, George Sorrels of Kutztown, Pennsylvania summarizes the significance of Vermeer:

I, too, was first attracted to Vermeer's work because of his perfect composition and the harmony of his colors. But as I grew older and more mature, I began to sense that his work could help me understand my life experience.³⁷

Abelardo Morell of Massachusetts sent a catalogue of his photographs based on the use of modern-day camera obscuras, enclosing a letter pleased to see the camera obscura included in the exhibit. He writes "your exhibition had a great impact on the way I see things now."³⁸ Dr. Steven Levine of Bryn Mawr College sent a letter, enclosing a catalogue reproducing the works of Jack Levine including his painting from 1992 titled *Vermeer Goes to Washington*.³⁹ Rob Klassen of Rotterdam sent a series of photographs taken of women posed in the manner of Vermeer's paintings.⁴⁰ And on a lighter side a grandmother in Tacoma, Washington who believed her granddaughter bore a resemblance to Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, wrapped her granddaughter's head, took a photo and sent it to Arthur Wheelock (fig. 16).⁴¹



Figure 16. Amanda Pass from Kennesaw, Georgia as the *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. Photograph taken by her grandmother, Bette Dawson, Tacoma, Washington, January 1996. Collection of Dr. Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr.

A number of the artworks enclosed in the correspondence to Wheelock demonstrate the active way in which Vermeer has provided influence as a source to quote or as the source on which to base other artists' compositional designs. Often the correspondence highlights the usefulness of Wheelock's writing and the reproductions that illustrate his discussion on Vermeer. Anthony D'Elia of Bayside, New York sent Arthur Wheelock a slide of his painting *After the Music Lesson*, completed in tribute to Vermeer after seeing the exhibit (fig. 17). He writes in his letter "Whenever I am having a problem with one of my own paintings, I consult the reproductions in your book...for in those pages, I have learned as much about light and shadow, color and composition, as I have from my own direct observations and experiences".⁴²



Figure 17. Anthony D'Elia, *After the Music Lesson*, 1996, (oil on canvas). Reproduced from a slide in the collection of Dr. Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr.

Another artist, Isreal Zohar, who was born in Russia in 1945, a child of Holocaust survivors, sent reproductions of paintings he created between 1987 and 1995. He created these works in homage to Vermeer writing: "During my entire artistic career... I have been exploring the secrets of Vermeer's brilliance, being deeply influenced by him and absorbed by the quality and philosophy in his statements. Always believing that his art can be a source of inspiration to the Art of our Times." Zohar bases his compositional designs on clearly identifiable paintings by Vermeer including *The Music Lesson*, *Woman Holding a Balance*, and *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*, for example (fig. 18).⁴³



Figure 18. Isreal Zohar, *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*, 1994, (oil on canvas), from a series titled "*Reflections*": *Homage to Vermeer*. Image reproduced from the collection of Dr. Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr.

Mayer and Bernice Alpert from Sheboygen, Wisconsin sent Arthur Wheelock a copy of an article written about their life-long quest to see Vermeer's work, which shows them photographed surrounded by books reproducing his paintings (fig. 19). The article reads:

As art collectors, Mayer and Bernice Alpert stand alone.
 They collect Vermeers.
 More precisely, they collect the "experience" of standing before those softly-lit, simple, yet elegant, scenes of daily life that define the work of 17th century Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer. ⁴⁴



Figure 19. Front page, *The Sheboygan Press*, Sheboygan, Wisconsin, Thursday, January 25, 1996.

The National Gallery of Art exhibit quite clearly offered the opportunity to extend the study of Vermeer beyond the field of art history. The event was much more than simply a museum exhibit. It was a deeply moving experience that spurred large cultural dialogues relating to the meaning of art and creatively inspired numerous individuals in their own artistic undertakings. The exhibit was the culmination of a love affair between

an artist -- known through his paintings and not through his life -- and his audience. It was the "hottest ticket in town," and most likely the country. But more importantly perhaps, through the extensive media coverage, it provided a powerful vehicle through which the collective consciousness of Vermeer was elevated to an all-time high. From an artist long appreciated by artists and art historians, Vermeer, his paintings, and even Arthur Wheelock achieved "celebrity status". Vermeer became the center of a new kind of "fandom". As one woman who visited the exhibit explained:

There was a lot of hype generated around the show...I had never heard of Vermeer before then. And then I thought it seemed like something you had to do, so I went... and it was fantastic... I wanted to make sure my friends went back with me.⁴⁵

The scholarly dialogue that was generated by *Johannes Vermeer* was equally engaging, being accelerated both through the exhibition experience as well as through a symposium held in conjunction with it at the University of Maryland, College Park, and the National Gallery of Art. Sponsored jointly by the National Gallery of Art's Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, the University of Maryland's Department of Art History and Archaeology and its Center for Renaissance and Baroque Studies, and the Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, The Hague, the symposium entitled "New Vermeer Studies" offered two days of papers and events focused on a wide variety of themes in which Vermeer's paintings were considered and further contextualized.⁴⁶ The various papers presented at this symposium as well as numerous others were later compiled in an extensive volume titled *Vermeer Studies* that was published in 1998 by the National Gallery of Art's Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts.⁴⁷ Including twenty-four essays, twenty-three of which are grouped under the topics "Constructing

Vermeer”, “The Construction of Vermeer’s Paintings”, and “The Construction of Interpretation”, *Vermeer Studies* effectively maps the field within the parameters of scholarly discourse. The papers range from highly technical studies focused on analyses of paint and a painting’s physical composition to those speculating and interpreting the subjects of Vermeer’s paintings within the context of the seventeenth century or our more modern perspectives on visual culture.

As perfect as *Johannes Vermeer* may have seemed to its audience, however, the complete vision of its organizers had in fact not been fully realized. The original list of objects had also included his famed *The Art of Painting*, the same painting Catharina Bolnes had tried and failed to keep after Vermeer’s death in 1675. In preparation for the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition it had become clear that the condition of *The Art of Painting* was extremely fragile and its movement from its home at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna to Washington posed a potential risk. Although the Kunsthistorisches was willing to lend the painting, Wheelock in dialogue with conservators declined the offer. Extensive conservation work was needed to restore the paint structure of *The Art of Painting* before any traveling would be possible.

For anyone familiar with the story of Vermeer and *Johannes Vermeer*, the event that took place four years later was particularly poignant. On the eve of Thanksgiving, 1999 the National Gallery of Art opened an exhibit of a single painting, *Johannes Vermeer: The Art of Painting*. I remember standing in gallery 51 in the late afternoon that day as this simple exhibit opened. There was none of the pomp and circumstance, throng, or hype that became part of the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition story, at least not that day. There were just a handful of people who somehow were lucky enough to be

gathered together in the right place at the right time, as installers removed their ladders, stanchions were moved away, and there we stood before Vermeer's masterpiece.

The mood of the room that day was an odd mix of wonder and nostalgia and there was a stillness among all of us that seemed roughly equivalent to the arrested moment of Vermeer's painting. Standing before this painting, I was transfixed by its presence, yet at the same time keenly interested in the response of others around me. Movement was quieted and patient; few people spoke; their collective gaze seemed to penetrate and deconstruct, reconstruct and analyze. Slowly each viewer's gaze would break to the other Vermeers in the room and the two paintings by de Hooch displayed with them, then back to *The Art of Painting* again. There was no urgency in any one to move along.

The Art of Painting is large and commanding – more than twice the size of the other paintings in the room – and as I stood before it I became aware of having seen it many times before, yet I had never *really* seen it. My mind was a mix of reproductions, art historical arguments, and painting provenance records that I have sought out and studied over time, and my eye instinctively searched for the painterly details these had encouraged me to regard. Having satisfied this need, I felt freer to gaze on the painting in my own way.

The Art of Painting is luminous, colorfully rich and staggeringly beautiful. The elements of refinement and perfection so carefully presented in the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition are everywhere apparent. Vermeer has carefully structured the work so that the viewer, like the painter, gazes first at the standing female figure positioned in back of the room in front of a large map and dressed to symbolically represent the muse of history, Clio. Light enters the room through a closed window on the left that is obscured

from our view by a large tapestry drape in the foreground yet is, nonetheless, understood. The light clearly illuminates the woman, wall, map, table and surrounding areas. The visual experience creates a fascinating time interplay that is at once static and dynamic – an extension, it would seem, of the artist’s rapport with his subject. Yet the table, chair, drape and position of the artist keep the viewer at a measured distance. We are invited in and kept out, seduced and ignored.

Every color, texture, and form is carefully rendered in subtle modulations of paint that exemplify the mastery of technique that anyone familiar with Vermeer fully expects. Light and its interplay are everywhere apparent and one’s eyes can’t help but linger in the numerous pools of color that flow from one to the next in diffuse, nearly seamless progression. It is impossible to move quickly from this work. Each area of color captivates our eye and provokes a response – deep, sensuous, saturating.

The element of time is conveyed in *The Art of Painting* in a variety of different ways. The painterly effects created through light and composition suspends the picture within a moment in a day. The grayish ground on the artist’s canvas, the white chalk markings, and the painted laurel wreath imply the time needed by the artist to prepare before the actual painting can begin. Vermeer’s selection of the muse of history as the subject suggests an obvious relationship to the past. And the heavy, vertical crease in the map offers a visual metaphor for the political turmoil wrought in The Netherlands during this period of the artist’s life. As a viewer of *The Art of Painting* I was also keenly aware that this image predates our own time by more than three hundred years and by its existence connects our present to another time in Vermeer’s past.

For perhaps everyone who saw the painting that day, *The Art of Painting* also rekindled the memory of the National Gallery of Art's *Johannes Vermeer* exhibit of precisely four years before. The wall text and booklet that accompanied *The Art of Painting* reminded us that this painting was originally intended to be part of the earlier Vermeer exhibit but because of its condition at that time, it was too dangerous for it to travel. As I regarded *The Art of Painting* I remember being struck with a certain sense of irony. *The Art of Painting*'s presence filled the room, adding illumination to all the other works in its midst. Although hung amongst other remarkable paintings by Vermeer from the National Gallery's collection, it commanded the space and our attention. It offered a summary of the essential elements of all Vermeer paintings rolled into one. All the intrinsic beauty and pictorial resonance Lawrence Gowing and Arthur Wheelock had promised in the paintings of Vermeer was inarguably present in *The Art of Painting*. One could not help but now fully understand why it was that Vermeer's widow, Catharina Bolnes had tried so hard to retain this painting after his death and the deep love for both the artist and the artwork that was most certainly behind her actions.

The *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition was critical in shifting Vermeer and his paintings to the foreground of a large cultural dialogue. The themes of refinement, perfection, and intrinsic beauty that had long been discussed in art historical discourse by scholars like Gowing and Wheelock, were brought to life through the museum exhibition and were extended through the broader cultural dialogues that emerged as a result of its tremendous success. *Johannes Vermeer* made both the artist and his paintings celebrities and established Vermeer's aesthetic as a cultural emblem of beauty open to public response and interpretation. The cultural dialogues and ideas surrounding the paintings

of Vermeer were further reinforced through the National Gallery's later exhibition of a single painting, *Johannes Vermeer: The Art of Painting*.

Vermeer and The Delft School, New York

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Vermeer and The Delft School* (2001) was an exhibition that contrasted starkly both in number of objects and intended focus to the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition of six years earlier. Whereas *Johannes Vermeer* provided individual Vermeer paintings spaciouly hung in rooms that promoted the viewer's quiet pondering of one of this artist's works amidst others, *The Delft School* exhibition presented a huge menagerie of objects placed in close proximity to each other, fifteen of which were paintings by Vermeer. Rather than reflecting on the unique characteristics of refinement and beauty found in Vermeer's paintings, *The Delft School* show sought to broaden the historic context to other artisans active in the same place during the time before, during, and shortly after Vermeer's life. In fact, *The Delft School* exhibition actually appeared intent upon bringing Vermeer's art and reputation down a notch. Whether purposely intended or simply an outgrowth of the exhibition experience, *Vermeer and The Delft School* appeared to engage in an almost confrontational dialogue with *Johannes Vermeer*.

One was overwhelmed from the outset of *The Delft School* exhibition with the incredibly rich and diverse art traditions that the city of Delft had to offer in the 17th century. Although there was no real "school" that can be strictly described as "The Delft School" the phrase was coined by the exhibition's curator, Walter Liedtke as a means of

more succinctly describing the broadened cultural focus of the exhibition in contrast to the narrower focus of *Johannes Vermeer*.

The Delft School exhibition included fifteen of Vermeer's works painted during the roughly twenty-year time period in which he was active. Of the six paintings dating from Vermeer's first decade of activity, three had not been on view in Washington. The Vermeer paintings in the New York show included: *Diana and Her Companions* (1653-54), *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha* (ca. 1655), *The Procuress* (1656), *A Maid Asleep* (ca. 1656-1657), *The Little Street* (ca. 1658-1660), *The Glass of Wine* (ca. 1658-59), *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* (ca. 1662), *Woman with a Lute* (ca. 1662-63), *Woman with a Balance* (ca. 1663-64), *Girl with a Red Hat* (ca. 1665-67), *Study of a Young Woman* (ca. 1665-1667), *The Art of Painting* (ca. 1666-1668), *Allegory of the Faith* (ca. 1670-72), *Young Woman Standing at a Virginal* (ca. 1670-72), and *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal* (ca. 1670-72). The three paintings that had not been included within Washington's *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition were *The Procuress*, *A Maid Asleep*, and *Study of a Young Woman*, the latter two of which are from the Metropolitan's own collection. Having been newly restored, *The Art of Painting* made it to *The Delft School* exhibition on time and became the image reproduced on exhibit-related publications, banners, and a vast array of advertisements and provided the cover image for the exhibition's catalogue. Vermeer's *Clio*, the figure of history, was elevated as poster-girl (fig. 20).

The New York installation of *The Delft School* included more than 150 objects in a wide range of media: paintings, drawings, engravings, tin-glazed earthenware, silver, silver gilt, glass, tapestries, and a caparison made of wool and silk. The essence of

Johannes Vermeer was literally lost amidst the staggering array of artifacts that seemed literally crammed into a space much too small to contain them. All available gallery space was literally packed to capacity and, for anyone who had seen or read about *Johannes Vermeer*, these aspects of *The Delft School* exhibition were particularly startling. Following a roughly chronological sequence, Vermeer's paintings were distributed throughout the full length of the exhibition, hung alongside the works of other artists who were active contemporaneously in Delft.



Figure 20. Calendar featuring Vermeer's *Clio*, the poster-girl for the *Vermeer and The Delft School* exhibition, March – April, 2001.

Pedestals and exhibit cases containing the decorative art pieces occupied large portions of floor space throughout the rooms of *The Delft School* exhibition, breaking up the visual flow of the walls and frequently precluding the chance for distant views of Vermeer's or any other artist's paintings. The complexity and breadth of exhibition, combined with the awkwardness posed by the installation design and the density of labels and wall text, served to confound the viewer, making any real connection to any one work by Vermeer or any other artist a challenge at best. The exhibition narrative sought to provide tangible evidence of the active and thriving community of artisans that surrounded seventeenth century life in Delft and, in so doing, prove beyond any shadow of doubt that any refinement and beauty registered in the paintings by Vermeer had in no way sprung out of isolation.

Like the exhibition installation, the catalogue for *Vermeer and The Delft School* proved equally grand in size. It is a major tome filled with lengthy essays and thick description that, based on its physical weight alone – seven pounds in the soft version – in no way suggests light reading. In contrast to the simplicity of a narrative theme focused on the refinement, perfection, and intrinsic beauty of Vermeer's paintings that resulted in a leanly designed and portable catalogue for the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition, *The Delft School* in no way masked its desire to convey a *grand narrative* surrounding Vermeer. The catalogue contains eight essays including five by Liedtke, two by Michael C. Plomp and one by Marten Jan Bok. Liedtke and Plomp shared the task of writing the extensive catalogue entries along with five other scholars.⁴⁸ Sumptuous color reproductions of all the objects in the exhibition as well as numerous others that were not in the exhibition but are discussed in the text appear abundantly throughout this vast

volume and are augmented with many additional black and white images. Among the most interesting features of the catalogue are Michael Plomp's second essay "Along the City Walls: An Imaginary Walk through Seventeenth-Century Delft" and Kees Kaldenbach's "Plans of Seventeenth-Century Delft with Locations of Major Monuments and Addresses of Artists and Patrons", both of which are tucked away in the volume's back pages. Plomp's essay seeks to create a tour of Delft in the style of the seventeenth century travel log, using contemporary artist's drawings, paintings and prints to guide and illustrate his discussion. Kees on the other hand, utilizes state-of-the-art twentieth century graphic technology, including additional website information, to literally map the homes and important landmarks relative to Vermeer and the other artists whose works are represented in the exhibition.

Similar to *Johannes Vermeer, Vermeer and The Delft School* attracted large crowds from the earliest weeks it was open, drawing as many as 15,000 people a day.⁴⁹ Despite the crowds, the exhibition received relatively scant publicity in comparison to the Washington exhibit, and what publicity it did receive continuously compared it to *Johannes Vermeer*. The narrative set forth in *The Delft School* exhibition did not resonate with viewers in the way *Johannes Vermeer* had, in part because of its emphasis on cultural context and partly because of the added complexity created by its tremendous size. Indeed, the sense of nostalgia and resurgence in enthusiasm for the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition and its curator Arthur Wheelock was everywhere apparent, so much so that when Wheelock came to the Metropolitan to give the Sunday afternoon lecture on April 29, 2001, he was met by an auditorium filled to capacity and greeted with a nearly three minute standing ovation.

When comparing the two exhibitions, most reviewers highlighted the great expansion of the Vermeer theme offered by the Metropolitan's show in contrast to the smaller more intimate nature of *Johannes Vermeer*. Some articles, however, were far less than complimentary. Although certainly reflecting hometown loyalty if not a sense of rivalry in response to New York's effort at a "Vermeer" exhibition, *Washington Post* writer Paul Richard's assessments were less than flattering but for many quite accurate:

"Vermeer and the Delft School," a big and unpoetic show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which does its earnest best to drain him of his mystery, and partially succeeds....

...Its arguments though heavy, leave one hungering for more.

Comparing Vermeer and de Hooch, or Vermeer and de Witte, as here we're asked to do, is sort of like comparing Clark Gable and Victor Mature. Because both were leading men with thick, dark, wavy hair who worked in the same city at precisely the same time, and posed for the same cameras, and set the girls aflutter, weren't they pretty much alike?

No, of course, they weren't. Gable, we all know, was immeasurably, inexplicably superior.

So, too, was Vermeer.⁵⁰

Vermeer and The Delft School exhibition did much to demonstrate the critical components of the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition that provided such resonance and insured its international success. Although general members of the museum-going audience may not have known much about Vermeer in 1995, they did, indeed, know a great deal about his paintings by 2001. Whereas in the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition the narrative focused on the beauty and refinement of the visual record to provide an introduction to a figure from history whose life details were scant and speculation still possible, *The Delft School* exhibition sought to construct a vast, tangible context through which Vermeer's paintings evolved. Although the broadened context for Vermeer was

instructive and certainly useful, in the end, it was the chance to see a real Vermeer that brought popular audiences to *The Delft School*.

Art & Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt, Denver

Organized by the Denver Art Museum in conjunction with The Newark Museum, *Art & Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt* was an exhibition that most certainly sprang from the national interest in Dutch art that was the result of the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition. Although a city whose twentieth century distance from examples of 17th century Dutch art is one of both time and space, Denver and the Denver Art Museum nevertheless registered a desire for an exhibition that would offer its audience the chance to see real examples of this art. The museum invited Mariet Westermann to be the curator for an exhibition, giving her free reign to construct its narrative and decide its theme. Much like *The Delft School* exhibition, Westermann's vision focused on an exhibition embracing both paintings and the decorative arts within a narrower theme centered on the Dutch home.

Brought together from sixty-one collections in Europe and the United States, *Art & Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt* included 139 objects, most of which appeared in both the Denver and Newark installations. The exhibition opened in Newark, New Jersey on September 30, 2001, just weeks after the tragic terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center of September 11, an event that certainly added complexity and disruption to the already encumbered process of borrowing and transporting art.

Art & Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt was installed in Denver after Newark and remained on view there from March 2 through May 26, 2002.

Vermeer's *A Lady Writing* was the only Vermeer painting in this exhibition, no doubt in part because of the *Vermeer and The Delft School* exhibition, which would have posed fierce competition in securing objects for loan as one exhibition literally commenced as the other exhibition ended (fig. 21). The inclusion of Vermeer's painting was exclusive to the Denver installation and was an aspect of the exhibition on which the Denver Museum of Art capitalized. Despite the exhibition's subtitle "In the Age of Rembrandt", Vermeer's *A Lady Writing* became the poster girl for the Denver show filling banners and advertisements, offering a somewhat confusing if not altogether inaccurate image of the show. Vermeer's woman was elevated as a celebrity and she brought greater recognition to the artist and, indeed, draw to the *Art & Home* exhibition from a broader midwestern audience.



Figure 21. Johannes Vermeer, *A Lady Writing*, ca. 1665 (oil on canvas), National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Gift of Harry Waldron Havemeyer and Horace Havemeyer Jr., in Memory of Their Father, Horace Havemeyer.

The narrative focus on the home in *Art & Home* encouraged viewers to consider the 17th century Dutch home as both a theme in artworks and as a space that held objects that were used and valued within the lives of the people of a different time and place. The more intimate theme of this exhibition contextualized the objects in a way that promoted a more personal response than *The Delft Show*. In viewing the exhibition, visitors were encouraged to draw connections between the objects displayed and their own life experiences in the now twenty-first century.

In spite of the impressive number of objects in *Art & Home*, which included large and small furniture pieces, decorative arts, and prints, as well as a generous selection of paintings, the exhibition was comfortably installed in a series of rooms in the museum's ground-floor galleries. Furniture pieces were set against walls and the cases displaying silver and other decorative objects were contained primarily in one room, thus minimizing the number of interruptions to the exhibition's visual flow. In concert with the exhibition's central theme of home, *Art & Home* also included a comfortable resting space for visitors within the central core of the installation offering comfortable chairs for sitting and a table where younger artists were invited to draw a picture of their own that could be left as part of the exhibition record.

Though the inventory of objects included in the Denver show was only twenty items fewer than the Metropolitan's *Vermeer and The Delft School* exhibition, the catalogue for *Art & Home*, like its installation, was a much leaner, less complex, design. Including four essays as well as entries on each of the exhibition's objects, the length of the catalogue is a modest 240 pages. This economy of design is achieved in part by including small black and white images with the object entries and trimming the

discussion of each by referring readers to appropriate pages in the essays where each object is specifically discussed within the context of the broader essay theme. The essays themselves are of particular interest as they seek to relate the imagery found in seventeenth century paintings with the images created by our own culture of the twenty-first century, thus arguing a visually based context for our appreciation of Dutch art in our more contemporary culture.

In her lengthy essay “Making Home in the Dutch Republic”, Mariet Westermann writes, “Seventeenth-century paintings of interiors and modern advertising photographs both mirror back and promote certain ideals of domestic living to their viewers”.⁵¹ To illustrate her point, Westermann includes several color reproductions of photographs taken for the catalogues of Pottery Barn, Lenox, and *Martha Stewart Living*, arranged amidst pages displaying an array of seventeenth-century Dutch objects including paintings, engravings, and painted stoneware. While outlining the limitations of these analogies, Westermann asserts her larger argument, specifically “that the visual culture of Holland in the second half of the seventeenth century articulated with unprecedented emphasis and clarity protomodern ideals of home, privacy, and self, as well as the relationships among these notions.”⁵² Westermann introduces floor plans for several seventeenth-century Dutch homes within the context of her discussion, explaining the realities of these living spaces as well as the dimension they offer to a consideration of the objects contained within the exhibition. Her discussions provide a conceptual framework for the catalogue’s later essay by H. Perry Chapman where readers are guided to see visual parallels between the imagery of the seventeenth-century and the moving images of the modern-day television sitcom.⁵³

As Westermann explains in her essay, including Vermeer in the exhibition was extremely important as the qualities offered by his women set forth an image that was singular and without precedent in art, a quality she argues as protomodern:

Vermeer's painting of introspective women had no real precedents in Dutch visual culture, except perhaps in Rembrandt's striking, quiet early drawings of women resting or contemplating in peaceful interiors... With their emphasis on the face, Rembrandt's paintings of biblical protagonists, Bathsheba foremost among them, seem to allow for "deep" female thought more explicitly than his genre drawings. It is Vermeer's transfer of the possibility of independent moral thought from such epic heroines to seventeenth-century women that makes his paintings of them protomodern.⁵⁴

Westerman's focus on the inherent moral character presented in Vermeer's women and her emphasis on these figures as being "protomodern," promoted an aspect of Vermeer within the growing cultural dialogue that had not been broadly articulated within the context of the museum exhibition, yet, was, nevertheless, always on the surface.

Vermeer presents women as complex thinkers and not simply characters engaged in domestic activities. His women, such as that seen in *A Lady Writing*, are sharp, engaging, and able to be self-reflexive about their lives, their work, and their emotions. *Art & Home* argued that Vermeer's women are of the 17th century, yet they speak to women and men of our own time; Vermeer's paintings offer narratives that resonate with our own.

The excitement that was certainly generated by having a real Vermeer in the *Art & Home* exhibition might explain the museum's rather curious placement of *A Lady Writing* on the very last wall of the installation. Although the museum may have considered this arrangement as a way of emphasizing the singular qualities of Vermeer's painting, in seeking to understand the disjointedness the placement of *A Lady Writing* seemed to conjure, I have settled on this: Vermeer's lady offered a kind of bookend for

the art and home theme; she provided both the visual lure through which the exhibition was advertised in Denver and the final image its creators wanted viewers to leave with and ponder as they moved from the museum environment, back to their own twenty-first century homes.

While encouraging ideas on the resonance and beauty of Vermeer's aesthetic found in both the scholarly discourse, the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition, and the popular dialogues that surrounded it, *Art & Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt* also addressed the uniqueness of Vermeer's images within his own contemporary context. By focusing our eyes not only on the aesthetic characteristics of his paintings but, more specifically on his representations of women and what they seem to convey, *Art & Home* made clear what has been on the surface of both scholarly discourse and popular dialogue: we respond to Vermeer's paintings in part because in them we also find reflections of ourselves.

Vermeer: Dutch Painting of Domestic Interiors, Madrid

The *Vermeer: Dutch Painting of Domestic Interiors* exhibition held in Madrid's Museo Nacional del Prado from February 19 – May 18, 2003 was a visually intriguing exhibition that focused on the many similarities between artists' representations of particular themes painted of Dutch home life. Set against the backdrop of massive antiwar protests held in Madrid on eve the of the United States' and Spain's entry into war with Iraq, this exhibit with its quiet scenes representing domestic tranquility offered a

startling yet settling contrast to the events taking place just beyond the museum's walls. Moderate in size and thoughtfully hung, the exhibition encouraged viewers to note the influences and apparent compositional appropriations that occurred between artists active at the same time. Including just forty-one paintings by Johannes Vermeer and his contemporaries, including Gerhard ter Borch, Gerard Dou, Pieter de Hooch, Nicolaes Maes, Gabriel Metsu, Frans van Mieris, Caspar Netscher, Jan Steen and Emanuel de Witte, the Madrid's *Vermeer* was a gem of a show, offering perhaps the most telling selection of paintings of this genre ever assembled in one space.

The exhibition was installed in a single long room divided in sections on the right side to create four separate gallery spaces all of approximately equal size. The design encouraged viewers to move through the exhibition in a more or less serpentine fashion following a single line path around each space from the right, across the far wall, back up to the left and around the wall and to the right again into the next gallery space. A wide path was retained on the left that extended the full length of the room, affording visitors the opportunity to break between rooms, step back and look back and forth at the paintings in two different spaces or move forwards or backwards between any of the exhibition's four gallery spaces.

The Madrid show included nine Vermeer paintings, *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (ca. 1657), *The Girl with the Wine Glass* (ca. 1659-1660), *A Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* (ca. 1662-1665), *Woman Holding a Balance* (ca. 1664-1665), *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* (ca. 1664), *Girl with a Red Hat* (ca. 1665-1666), *The Art of Painting* (ca. 1666-1668), *The Love Letter* (ca. 1669-1672), and *A Lady standing at the Virginals* (ca. 1670-1673). Vermeer's paintings were placed throughout

the exhibition, hung within the context of the works of other artists whose subject or compositional design was suggestive. Pieter de Hooch's *A Couple with a Parrot* (1668), for example, was hung in close proximity to Vermeer's *The Love Letter* offering a clear visual alignment of two obviously similar compositional designs. Despite the very different subjects presented in these artists' paintings, the scenes of each are shown from the vantage point of a darkened doorway as if the viewer is standing in a small entrance hall outside the room. The outward slant of the door, pulled-back drape, broom and musical anecdote – in de Hooch's painting a lute and in Vermeer's a crumpled piece of sheet music – although not identical in the ways they are presented, make clear that Vermeer had seen de Hooch's work and absorbed certain aspects of it into his own unique design.

Numerous other visual alignments between Vermeer and another artist, or between his work or the work of others in combination with each other were easily made by the viewer throughout the exhibition through the careful grouping of paintings together in the small gallery spaces. As the paintings were accompanied by minimal text the visual narrative set forth in the exhibition installation was heightened and took precedent. The content and focus of Madrid's *Vermeer* exhibition offered viewers the chance to learn a great deal about Vermeer and the other artists, seeing for themselves the finely honed ways in which each artist benefited from their dialogue with others.

Ideas about the economy and refinement of Johannes Vermeer's design through which he achieved such quietly beautiful paintings became extremely evident through the visual alignment of his works with others. Vermeer's use of space, particularly negative space, was a ready distinction apparent throughout the exhibition. Whereas the tendency

among his contemporaries was to fill the space of their compositions, Vermeer resisted this urge, preferring to connect the elements of his design through simple relationships, often overlapping from one element of the design to another and leaving generous areas empty of content. As seen through his paintings, Vermeer's response to the themes and compositions of others reveals a carefully studied and reductive approach unique amongst his contemporaries.

The catalogue for the *Vermeer: Dutch Painting of Domestic Interiors* exhibition included three essays, two written by Alejandro Vergara and one by Mariet Westermann, the curator of the *Art & Home* exhibition.⁵⁵ Large color reproductions of each of the paintings from the exhibition are grouped alphabetically by artist with numerous other color images of paintings discussed in the text but not on view in the exhibition scattered throughout. Vermeer's paintings are generously reproduced in color, including nineteen additional Vermeer paintings beyond the nine included in the installation.

As Vergara asserts in his essay "Vermeer: Context and Uniqueness", the current appreciation of Dutch painting felt world-wide is in large part due to the great interest and attention that have been given to Johannes Vermeer.⁵⁶ Vermeer, however, was greatly aided by the milieu in which he lived and worked and this contact enhanced his own paintings. Vermeer was just one of many artists painting the same themes and utilizing similar compositional designs also used by a number of other artists active in The Netherlands of the seventeenth-century. Knowing what we know about Vermeer and, yet, having so few written documents to support his relationships with other artists or his direct contact with other artistic centers outside of Delft, Vergara focuses on the similarities between the paintings of the artists as providing clear evidence of their

knowledge of and dialogue with one another – what Simon Schama would call a “document of beliefs,” as explained in chapter one.⁵⁷

The assertiveness with which Vergara set forth basic assumptions that other scholars have only hedged at is, indeed, refreshing. For anyone who has visited The Netherlands, for example, experienced the relatively close proximity of their towns, the uniqueness each center has to offer, and has some knowledge of the transportation system in place in the seventeenth-century, it is impossible to imagine that Vermeer would have been content to remain in Delft, isolated and without first-hand exposure to the happenings outside his hometown. His single documented trip to The Hague could not possibly have been the only time he traveled and Vergara makes this assertion with certainty in his text, allowing the visual record to support his assertions throughout.

The visual record was paramount to Madrid’s *Vermeer* exhibition. By arguing Vermeer’s debt to other artists his uniqueness became more clear in a way that was not fully understood within the context of the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition. Vergara allowed the paintings a voice in the discussion and the visual dialogue they created essentially left mute any arguments requiring other documentary evidence. The exhibition proved both provocative and instructive, offering both the scholar and the layman a chance to see and understand the dynamic way in which these seventeenth-century artists influenced each other and appropriated from each other and just what was gained through this dialogue.

Conclusions

As we have seen in this chapter, the appreciation, mystery and intrigue that has surrounded both Vermeer and his paintings since their “rediscovery” in the 1860s, has

been significantly extended through a series of museum exhibitions during the past eight years. Building on simple ideas related to the refinement, perfection, and intrinsic beauty of Vermeer's paintings as argued by scholars like Lawrence Gowing and, especially, Arthur Wheelock, viewers have internalized these ideas and formulated their own connections with Vermeer. The *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition extended the visibility and appreciation of this artist to a large popular audience and, in so doing, established Vermeer's aesthetic as a cultural emblem of beauty open to public response and interpretation.

Although museums have sought to reconstruct the 17th century context of Vermeer's life and work as seen in the *Vermeer and The Delft School* exhibition, more successful efforts have offered the 17th century context from a twentieth century, self-reflexive perspective. By asking viewers to respond to objects within the context of their own lived experiences, the *Art & Home* exhibition promoted Vermeer's *A Lady Writing* as an image of a "protomodern" woman whose complexity and self-reflexivity mirrors aspects of ourselves. Likewise, *Vermeer: Dutch Painting of Domestic Interiors* offered viewers a visual narrative that presented the complex relationship of Vermeer in dialogue with other artists of his time, and, in so doing, brought our contemporary dialogue full-circle back to an understanding of the true refinement and intrinsic beauty found in Vermeer's paintings and their very real relationship to appropriation in our own time.

In the next chapter, we will focus on the ways in which our more contemporary artists are in dialogue with Vermeer through their own acts of appropriation.

¹ Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life, 1500 to the Present*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers), 2000, p. xi.

² Holland Cotter, "On Trial at the Met: the Art of the Connoisseur", *The New York Times*, Sunday, December 5, 1999, Section 2, p. 48.

³ Perhaps the best discussion of what may constitute beauty in the art of our contemporary culture can be found in the exhibition catalogue for the Hirshhorn Museum's 1999-2000 exhibition, *Regarding Beauty*, an exhibition I will consider in my concluding chapter, chapter seven. Neal Benezra and Olga M. Viso, *Regarding Beauty: A View of the Late Twentieth Century*, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, exhibition catalogue, 1999.

⁴ Separate from its ongoing relevance within the context of art historical discourse, Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* is an active player in our evolving visual culture. Although it would be difficult to detail all the uses or allusions to her image in popular culture, they span from at least as early 1970s to our present day. See for example, the album cover for *Skeletons from the Closet: The Best of the Grateful Dead*, 1974 and the artnet.com advertisement in *The New Yorker*, November 22, 1999, p. 57.

⁵ The life and career of Vincent van Gogh offers perhaps the most widely known example of this historic reality. See Richard Kendall, *Van Gogh's Van Goghs: Masterpieces from the Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam*, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1998.

⁶ Conceivably a possible exception to this statement might be Vermeer's *The Concert*, which was stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner museum in 1990 and whose whereabouts continue to be unknown.

⁷ Although I will be discussing the other exhibitions related to Vermeer within this chapter, I did not see, therefore will not discuss *The Public and the Private in the Age of Vermeer*, held at the Osaka Municipal Museum of Art, Osaka, Japan, April 4- July 2, 2000, and curated by Arthur Wheelock. Ironically, it was through a graduate seminar I took with Arthur Wheelock during the spring 1999 semester similarly titled "The Public and Private in the Age of Vermeer" that I first began considering the general content of this dissertation. My seminar paper and related PowerPoint presentation for this class was titled "Appropriating Meaning: Reinterpreting the 'Age of Vermeer'". Additional exploration of the appreciation of Vermeer in America was undertaken in an article I co-authored with Arthur Wheelock, op. cit., *Frantis*, 2001, pp. 161-181. For the Osaka exhibition catalogue see Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., *The Public and the Private in the Age of Vermeer*, exhibition catalogue, Osaka Municipal Museum of Art, 2000.

⁸ Lawrence Gowing, *Vermeer*, 1952 (1997), p. 17.

⁹ Biographical information has been gleaned from Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., *Vermeer and the Art of Painting*, (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1995.

¹⁰ John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: a Web of Social History*, 1988.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

¹² Found in op. cit., Montias, 1988, p. 212, Doc. No. 383, 27 July 1677.

¹³ More than half of the paintings assigned to Vermeer today appear to have once been owned by Pieter Claesz van Ruijven of Delft. See *Johannes Vermeer*, National Gallery of Art, exhibition catalogue, 1995.

¹⁴ Mareleine Jacobs, Editor's Page, *Chemical and Engineering News*, January 29, 1996. Duplicated in Documentary Binder, Vermeer Exhibit, collection of Dr. Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr.)

¹⁵ For more information see "Vermeer and Thore-Burger: Rediscoveries of Reputation," Frances Suzman Jowell in *Vermeer Studies*, Ivan Gaskell and Michiel Jonker, eds., 1998.

¹⁶ For a summary of some of the attribution and misattribution issues related to Vermeer see, Ben Broos, "Vermeer: Malice and Misconception," Ivan Gaskell and Michiel Jonker, editors, *Vermeer Studies*, National Gallery of Art, 1998.

¹⁷ See Arthur K. Wheelock, "The Story of Two Vermeer Forgeries", *Shop Talk: Studies in Honor of Seymour Slive*, Harvard University Art Museums, 1995.

¹⁸ In the last year an original drawing by Michelangelo was unearthed from a file of unidentified architectural drawings from the Cooper-Hewitt collection in New York, by Sir Timothy Clifford, the director of the National Galleries of Scotland in Edinburgh, as he engaged in research. See Michael Kimmelman with Paul Jeromack, "Expert Spots a 'Michelangelo' in an Old Box," *The New York Times*, Wednesday, July 10, 2002, pp. A1 and A21. One day later, newspapers told of a similar story where a painting by Peter Paul Rubens, *Massacre of the Innocents*, incorrectly attributed to Jan van den Hoecke, was found hidden in a darkened corner of a monastery in Austria, See Carol Vogel, "A Rubens Brings \$76.7 Million at London Auction," *The New York Times*, Thursday, July 11, 2002, p. B1.

¹⁹ See Hector Feliciano, *The Lost Museum: The Nazi Conspiracy to Steal the World's Greatest Works of Art*, 1995, p. 15.

²⁰ See Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Johannes Vermeer: The Art of Painting", exhibition booklet, National Gallery of Art, 1999.

²¹ See Lynn H. Nicholas, *The Rape of Europa: The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War*, 1994, p. 427.

²² Lawrence Gowing's *Vermeer* has continued to be in print since 1952. Although numerous studies by Arthur Wheelock will be cited within the context of my discussion on Vermeer, Arthur Wheelock's *Jan Vermeer* of 1981 was his first major publication on this artist and continues to be in print in numerous languages throughout the world. Lawrence Gowing, *Vermeer*, 1952. Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., *Jan Vermeer*, 1981.

²³ Op. cit., Gowing, p. 17.

²⁴ Op. cit., Wheelock, 1981, p. 9.

²⁵ See John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, Ltd.), 1972.

²⁶ In a letter written to Arthur Wheelock from John Ransome Phillips, he writes: "I want you to know how moved I was by the exhibition and your book (*Vermeer and the Art of Painting*) which I read on the train. It seems to me that it was written from the point of view of a painter..." A.L.S., February 1 (1996?), Collection of Dr. Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr. A catalog of paintings by John Phillips was included with this letter. Mr. Phillips works in oil and collage to create abstract paintings.

²⁷ Wheelock, *Vermeer and the Art of Painting*, p. 126.

²⁸ National Gallery of Art, Washington, *Johannes Vermeer*, 1995, p. 134.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 136.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 96-101.

³¹ Examples of these newspapers can be found in Arthur K. Wheelock's personal archives on the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition.

³² An undated copy of the Bill Griffith *Zippy* cartoon is in the collection of Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr.

³³ Reproduced in *The Washington Post*, Friday, January 19, 1996, D5.

³⁴ The Documentary Binders for the Vermeer Exhibit include a complete inventory of the interviews on television and radio, which feature Arthur Wheelock. I have viewed many of these interviews/tours throughout this study and have been continuously moved by the simplicity, enthusiasm, and feeling of Dr. Wheelock's words. His directness, honesty, and openness to response offers a powerful model of good teaching and oration in the art historical field.

³⁵ Arthur Wheelock continues to be the recipient of fan mail related to the exhibition and is the person to whom every new idea or theory on Vermeer is seemingly sent by what could be called "Vermeer hobbyists". These works represent very serious business for many of their creators. A particularly compelling example of the kind of materials Wheelock has received since the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition is a work by Robert A. diCurcio's *Analysis of Vermeer's Pictorial Compositions: Vermeer's Riddle Revealed: The Sphinx, The Jester, and the Grail Geometry*, © 2001, ISBN 0917358139. Mr. diCurcio's work is in two volumes, the first being the text and the second being the illustrations, the complexity of which would be difficult to describe. His letter to Arthur Wheelock states: "Your scholarship provided me with quite an incentive to study and analyze eight of Vermeer's paintings from a geometric point of view...My thesis is simply this: Vermeer used the same esoteric composition to lay out the composition of his paintings...and subsequently adjusting the salient features of his composition to register *precisely* with the lines, points, angles, and nodes of an ancient variation of Plato's Theorem of the Squares – as modified in the 13th century by Knights templar adapts to yield a 'treasure map' guide to their purported burial site of 'The Holy Grail' in the Languedoc of southern France." Mr. diCurcio's theory is intriguing and remarkably similar to that set forth by Dan Brown in his novel *The Da Vinci Code*, a book that currently ranks at the top of the *New York Times* Bestseller list, in regards to the works of Leonardo da Vinci. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, 2003. Copies of Mr. diCurcio's volumes are in the Collection of Dr. Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr.

³⁶ Letters, Vermeer Exhibit, Collection of Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr.

³⁷ George Sorrels to Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr. A.L.S., September 15, 1995.

³⁸ T.L.S., Abe Morell to Arthur Wheelock, November 1, 1996. Collection of Dr. Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr.

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- ³⁹ T.L.S., Steven Z. Levine to Arthur Wheelock, December 7, 1995. Collection of Dr. Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr.
- ⁴⁰ It is unclear when precisely Rob Klaasen sent his images to Dr. Wheelock. The earliest correspondence found is a letter from Mr. Klaasen to Dr. Wheelock dated November 11, 1994 in which he describes his "Vermeer on Photo" project. T.L.S. (on blue paper), Rob Klaasen to Arthur Wheelock, 29/11/94. It seems probable that the images were sent to Arthur Wheelock sometime later.
- ⁴¹ T.L.S., Bette Dawson (Tacoma, WA) to Arthur Wheelock, January 19, 1996.
- ⁴² T.L.S., Anthony D'Elia to Arthur Wheelock, November 29, 1996.
- ⁴³ T.L.S., Isreal Zohar to Arthur Wheelock, November 27, 1995. Zohar completed at least 25 paintings quoting Vermeer.
- ⁴⁴ Dawn Jax Belleau, "Meer Memories," *The Sheboygen Press*, January 25, 1996.
- ⁴⁵ Excerpted from the 10 O'Clock News, WTTG-TV (Fox) Channel 5, February 11, 1996. A transcription of this interview can be found in one of the two Documentary Binders for the Vermeer Exhibit, collection of Dr. Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr.
- ⁴⁶ The "New Vermeer Studies" Symposium was held November 30 and December 1, 1995 with days being divided between the University of Maryland, College Park, and the National Gallery of Art respectively.
- ⁴⁷ Ivan Gaskell and Michiel Jonker, ed., *Vermeer Studies*, 1998.
- ⁴⁸ Other writers of the entries were Reinier Baarsen, Jan Daniel van Dam, James David Draper, Ebeltje Hartkamp -Jonxis and Axel Ruger.
- ⁴⁹ Numbers quoted in Maria Puente, "Met's Vermeer paintings make quite an Impression", *USA Today*, March 30, 2001, Life, Section D, Arts & Culture.
- ⁵⁰ Paul Richard, "The Met Tries to Put Vermeer in His Place", *The Washington Post*, March 29, 2001, C5, Col. 3.
- ⁵¹ Mariet Westermann, "Making Home in the Dutch Republic", *Art & Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt*, Denver Art Museum and The Newark Museum, (exhibition catalogue), 2001, p. 18.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- ⁵³ H. Perry Chapman, "Home and the Display of Privacy", Mariet Westerman, *Art and Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt*, exhibition catalogue, Denver Art Museum and The Newark Museum, 2001.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 72-74.
- ⁵⁵ Alejandro Vergara. *Vermeer: Dutch Painting of Domestic Interiors*. 2003.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, Alejandro Vergara, "Vermeer: Context and Uniqueness", p. 205.
- ⁵⁷ Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*, 1997.

Chapter 4 – Appropriation as Response

We return to great works of art always expectant of a new unfolding, a new glistening of implication, yet acknowledging that these come from an object that remains the same despite its never-spent fund of meaning.¹

--Cesar Grana, *Meaning and Authenticity*

We begin to wonder whether the primary purpose of a great work of art may not be to provide an original matrix from which copies can be produced.²

-- Daniel Boorstin, *The Image*

In the last chapter, I focused on ideas that have appeared in Vermeer scholarship as well as the role of museums, curators, and art historians in formulating narratives that have influenced broader cultural dialogues on this artist. I discussed five exhibitions related to Vermeer, all of which I have viewed, spanning the years from 1995 – 2003. I considered the narrative impact of each of these exhibitions demonstrating the way in which the dialogue circled back to basic ideas on the intrinsic beauty of Vermeer's paintings that were set forth in the work of scholars like Lawrence Gowing and, particularly, Arthur Wheelock. I argued that the degree of attention afforded to Vermeer through the exhibition forum has shifted his paintings into the full view of a broad international audience, made both the artist and his paintings celebrities, and established Vermeer's aesthetic as a cultural emblem of beauty open to public response and interpretation within the contexts of our own time.

As was also discussed in chapter three, exhibitions on Vermeer have demonstrated the active ways in which he worked in dialogue with the artists and artistic conventions of his own time, engaging in a form of appropriation much like the artists of

our more contemporary era. In this chapter, I will seek to discuss in greater detail the ways in which art influences art as was begun in chapter one in my discussion on appropriation. However, here I will shift my focus to a study more specifically on Vermeer as a source of influence. Discussions will emphasize the works of contemporary artists, which have derived from the paintings of Vermeer with greatest attention being placed on the works of four artists: Christina Linaris-Coridou, Mary Waters, George Deem and Terri Priest. Using my personal interactions with each of these artists and their works, I will seek to describe the nature of each artist's dialogue with Vermeer, the sources for their appropriations and responses, and their implications. I will argue that each of these artists have found in Vermeer's aesthetic a recognizable cultural emblem, which has become for them a way of both conceptualizing and making clear the refinement, perfection, and intrinsic beauty that they likewise pursue within the context of their own expressive idioms. I will employ the ideas of Michael Baxandall, previously discussed in chapter one, to suggest throughout my discussion how works that appropriate Vermeer, in turn, serve to extend understandings set forth through art historical scholarship and the museum exhibition, and further reinforce Vermeer's aesthetic as a cultural emblem of beauty open to public response and interpretation.

A painter intent on presenting a subject or idea approaches his work within a specific language of art. Her work involves the communication of her own unique perceptions and intention that is expressed through the medium of paint. Like all of us, artists are responsive to the world around them and their own individuality does not

preclude their assimilation and response to the ideas of others. Paintings – as with other art forms – are the culmination of artistic process. They represent the point at which the artist determines her work to be complete – her idea fully represented. The merit of a painting to the artist who created it is signified by its existence and may be validated or disregarded by the viewer. Paintings, though often considered representations of reality, are ultimately constructions bearing the imprint of the artist – his sense of form, space, line, light, color, texture, value and tonality. How an artist composes her work, the palette she selects and the way she applies the paint are all inherent to the meaning she seeks to convey. To overlook a painting's compositional design, structure, and scale is to overlook the opportunity to critically evaluate what an artist is communicating which, in turn, informs our understanding of the work.

Time and space are inherently important to art. It requires time to evaluate art critically and this process changes based on when and where the evaluation process takes place. Where we are in our lives, and the experiences we have had up to that moment, influence how we see and how what we see is processed and ultimately interpreted. The time and place in which the artist who created the object lives and works is likewise intrinsic to the artwork's creation. What an artist sees or experiences influences her way of seeing. Cultural ideas inform artists' decisions including decisions related to the themes she will choose to paint and the colors and manner in which she will paint them. The availability of materials, the manner in which he was trained, the tools or technical devices he has available and chooses to use, the purpose for which the work is intended, and the experiences that are coloring his life are all important to how an object evolves.

As discussed in chapter two, the field of art history has long considered the ways in which artists have appropriated and reworked the ideas of other artists in the creation of their works. Art has continually inspired art. The 16th century Italian Renaissance artist Titian, for example, strongly influenced the paintings of Rubens and Rembrandt in the 17th century. Titian also inspired later generations, including the 19th century French artist Edouard Manet, and Gerhard Richter, a German painter considered by many to be the most important artist of our time. The debt that each artist has owed to his predecessor is the subject of considerable written discourse and is a viable component in any course in art history where juxtaposed images provide powerful visual information of these influences.

Technological innovation and expanded communication networks are often cited within art historical discussion as providing the source of inspiration for subsequent works and our current computer age is proving a fascinating medium through which traditional arguments are being refueled. The rapid technological and aesthetic changes of the past century have expanded methods for copying and, indeed, have brought the issue of copies to the forefront of cultural awareness and production. In a time when our lives are inundated with faxes, emails, gifs, and endless hyperlinks, reproductions are at a premium and this includes the reproduction of paintings. Reproductions of paintings can now be seen or purchased in myriad places and in a multiplicity of forms.

Reproductions have also led to reconfigurations in tried and true methods of painting instruction. Proximity to another artist and their works is no longer a critical issue for interaction. Artists seeking to study the work of another can satisfy their interest at least in part through reproductions of art works found in increasing quality and

prevalence in books, magazines, and on the internet. Although many artists continue to work directly from originals to create painted copies, others choose to forgo this time-consuming, often costly and frequently inconvenient step.³

Reproductions of paintings have become elevated to a status potentially greater than the original masterworks from which they derive as they offer a source for exposure and access far greater than a single painting hanging on a wall. Access to art reproductions has had significant impact on the evolution of the visual arts and has dramatically altered the working method of contemporary artists. By bypassing direct interaction with the objects created by an artist's hands one opts for a different kind of interaction with the object. The interaction between an individual and a reproduction of an artist's work is focused on the picture, its compositional design and content. Paintings become merely images through the reproduction. All truth of color, texture, tonality, and dimension inherent to the work of art is lost or altered. The inevitable alteration of paintings through their reproduction becomes a kind of machine-driven process of creative reworking, which in turn is offered a new validity and endorsement by their frequent association with and distribution through the museum or the field of art history. Reproductions, thus, can be understood as providing both a means of perpetuating the image of an original painting and the medium through which it becomes liberated.

In 1999, the Museum of Modern Art in New York opened an exhibition *The Museum as Muse*, which wrestled with ideas concerning the influence of art on artists, situating the museum as the foremost conduit in the construction of meanings about art.⁴ The installation brought together the tangible manifestations of artists' ongoing relationships with museums, including art works created primarily during the twentieth

century in a wide range of media. The exhibition's curator, Kynaston McShine, argued that Marcel Duchamp can be credited with making the art found in museums more intriguing and engaging for artists and viewers during the twentieth century. Works such as Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919), for example, dramatized how we know Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* – through the reproduction – and the ways in which artists interact with it – through the process of appropriation and reinvention. As McShine explained, Duchamp engaged in a kind of ironic dialogue with the museum through his writing and artistic production. McShine posited that museums fix our awareness of particular art in history, and artists, in turn, select and assemble their own “museum” based on these interactions.

The theme of appropriation and influence is prevalent in our culture of today and is proving a core principle in the formation of an increasing number of museum and gallery exhibitions. The exhibition *Fact/Fiction: Contemporary Art That Walks the Line*, San Francisco Museum of Contemporary Art (2000), for example, included a number of works of quotation including Yasumasa Morimura's *Mona Lisa in the Third Place* (1998), an orientalized version of Leonardo's iconic painting shown in the nude with a near full term fetus exposed in her gaping belly.⁵ In *Picturing the Modern Amazon* held at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, (2000), the objects included Kathleen Gilje's *Comtesse d'Haussonville, Restored* (1996), a work that marries Ingres' painting of the Comtesse with Robert Mapplethorpe's *Lisa Lyon*.⁶

As a recent exhibition has demonstrated, critics are not always appreciative of art that appropriates from other art. In September 2003, The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. opened an exhibition, *Beyond the Frame: Impressionism Revisited: The*

Sculptures of J. Seward Johnson, Jr. that was announced by a scathing review in *The Washington Post*. The exhibition which includes life-sized, painted metal sculptures by Johnson that cast in three-dimension famous paintings like Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863) or Auguste Renoir's *Luncheon Party* (1881), was pronounced by critic Blake Gopnik as "the worst museum exhibition I've ever seen."⁷ In this case, Gopnik was at odds with the content of Johnson's works, his craftsmanship, as well as the implications his new works have on the meaning of the great art they appropriate.

Art museums are also actively coupling two or more artists as a way of visually highlighting how the works of one artist have influenced or energized the work of another from history across time. Although the demonstration of influence is fundamental to many art exhibitions and art historical studies, the prevalence of such themes has increased of late. In 2003 alone, exhibitions have been mounted in major museums to present the exchange between Edouard Manet and Diego Velazquez, Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso, James McNeil Whistler and Rembrandt von Rijn, as well as Johannes Vermeer and his contemporaries.⁸ Even the new El Greco exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art seeks to highlight this older master's influence on more modern artists, such as Jackson Pollock, including within its installation drawings Pollock made from black and white photographs reproducing paintings by El Greco.⁹ These exhibitions have suggested the eyes-on interaction between one artist and the work of another both through originals and reproductions and the outgrowth of this exchange is witnessed in the new artwork. Exhibitions like these demonstrate the continuum of ideas throughout art history and the dynamism of the exchange between two or more artists. They can also be seen as offering a necessary historic framework and potential counter argument to our

current culture's debates over copyright and intellectual property, and could prove useful to viewers seeking to comprehend the new appropriative art created in our own time.

The process of appropriating an artist's work and concepts has proved meaningful to artists as it offers the borrower a chance for a more intensified discovery of the subject, working method, or sense of design used by another master which then, in turn, may influence her own work. Likewise, the reproduction has afforded artists opportunities for a more neutral kind of engagement where new works are informed by a specific image or group of images. The direction of influence from the older work to the newer creation is true; however, it is also true in the reverse: the results of the creative re-workings or reinterpretations of other artists invest us with new ways of seeing and this in turn can alter or enhance the way we see the original works from which they derive. Steeped within the boundaries of the new works are imprints of both the past and a former present and, more specifically, the ongoing relevance of the past for new idioms of the present.

Dialogues with Vermeer

The art of Johannes Vermeer survives relatively free from historic context and these factual omissions in the details of his life and career encourage our focus on his paintings, thus offering great freedom for viewers to fill in these voids with our own sense of meaning. Through the display of his paintings and their reproduction in art history texts, exhibition catalogues, museum-related promotional materials, and media coverage, Vermeer has attracted a broad following since his rediscovery in the 19th century. The consistency of his compositional designs, their clarity, and the intensity and

lifelike presence of his subjects have remained with viewers and encouraged associations between his paintings and other diversely formulated ideas and images.

Numerous artists have sought inspiration for their own art through the paintings of Vermeer and have found it both through their contact with original paintings and reproductions. The Danish artist Vilhelm Hammershøi, for example, saw Vermeer's paintings in the 1880s and responded to their influence in several of his later works. *Young Woman Sewing*, *The Artist's Sister Anna Hammershøi* (1887), for example, relates to the earlier master's *Lacemaker* in its subject and intensity. Likewise, Hammershøi's *Interior with Piano and Woman in Black* (1901) bears a strong resemblance to Vermeer's *The Music Lesson* in its inclusion of a single female figure shown from behind standing, with a piano before her, and light emanating through a window on the left.¹⁰

Salvador Dali was intrigued by Vermeer's paintings from a very early age and created both drawings and paintings in his idiom of surrealism in response to the Dutch master's works. Responding to *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, for example, Dali created *The Image Disappears* (1938), which aligns the form of the woman's figure with additional elements in the room to create an image that literally morphs between the suggestion of Vermeer's figure and the profile of a man with a mustache, an image of Dali himself.¹¹ *The Image Disappears* can be interpreted as providing a tangible representation of the very real way in which Vermeer subconsciously influences Dali; at times the effects of this master are more apparent on Dali and at others somewhat remote. Dali also responded to *The Lacemaker* when he painted *Critical Paranoiac Painting of Vermeer's Lacemaker* (1955); however, the inspiration for this work was a reproduction of Vermeer's painting, which hung in the home of his parents. Here Dali again suggests

Vermeer's woman from *The Lacemaker* mixed with his own mental meanderings to create a highly fractured and dynamic new image.¹²

The suggestion of Vermeer can also be recognized in paintings created by a whole range of artists spanning the twentieth century. Known for his playful appropriations of the works of artists from the pages of history, Norman Rockwell based the composition of his painting *Fruit of the Vine* (ca. 1930) on Vermeer in its arrangement of table, chairs, figures, and left-side window.¹³ Similarly, Roy Lichtenstein relates a near mirror image of Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* in his comic book style painting *Female Head* (1977). Gerhard Richter's 1994 painting entitled *Reading*, which spotlights a single woman positioned in profile facing left, her eyes gazing downward and her hands clasping the pages of a document she is reading, is likewise highly suggestive of Vermeer, especially his *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*.¹⁴

The subject, composition, or the essence of Vermeer's paintings has continued to inspire creative appropriations in a wide range of media throughout the modern era. Today artists working on both sides of the Atlantic have explored his work creating constructions and interpretations mixing elements from or allusions to Vermeer with contemporary ideas and methods. Sophie Calle, Richard Murray, Jeannette Christensen, and Claes Oldenburg are among the many artists in whose works the direct quotation of or suggestive reference to Vermeer can be registered. In many ways, the increased focus on Vermeer since the 1995-96 *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition, has both invigorated and ignited the interest in his paintings.

Understanding the contemporary interest in Vermeer by artists is somewhat complicated. For certain, this interest has been ongoing; however, the nature of the

exchange between Vermeer and another artist is not always implicit in the work this dialogue generates. What is it about Vermeer's paintings that are inspiring artists to appropriate them? What is the nature of the dialogue between Vermeer and an artist who appropriates his work? Do an artist's responses to Vermeer change or remain constant over time? In what ways do our understandings of and responses to Vermeer's paintings change through our contact with the appropriative works of other artists? What can we learn about artists and the appropriation of art in our culture through works that appropriate Vermeer's paintings? In order to consider these questions more fully, I will focus on four artists, Christina Linaris-Coridou, Mary Waters, Terri Priest, and George Deem. Two of these artists are from the United States and two are from Europe. Although none of these artists is native to The Netherlands, Linaris-Coridou and Mary Waters both now reside in Delft and Utrecht respectively. For all of these artists, their dialogue with Vermeer continues to be open and dynamic.

Christina Linaris-Coridou

In the middle of my age, I start my path.¹⁵

Christine Linaris -Coridou, June 2001

For Christina Linaris-Coridou, a contemporary artist working in Johannes Vermeer's hometown of Delft, a collage technique utilizing fabric, ready-made, and fragmented objects provides the desired idiom through which her works based on

Vermeer are developed. In *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* (1996) based on Vermeer's painting by the same name, Linaris-Coridou centers her composition within the parameters of a rectangle drawn in white chalk on a ground of tan cloth that is lightly frayed around the edges (fig. 22). A detail of Vermeer's painting is placed in the upper right register of her work in accordance with its correct placement in Vermeer's painting. Although cropped at the base of the map above the woman's elbow, the detail is completed below in silhouette form in a thin, more finely woven, white fabric. A piece of a wooden measuring device is affixed to the work and acts to continue the line drawn by the map rod, bridging the Vermeer detail and the cloth silhouette, and, at the same time, steadying the upper portion of the composition. A small piece of gold ribbon and a handwritten document fragment are pinned to the fabric ground in the upper right margin beyond the chalk parameter. A small piece of fabric pinned in the lower left margin and textual elements written directly on the tan fabric ground act in combination with the other compositional elements to complete the balance of Linaris-Coridou's assemblage. The whole assemblage appears suspended upon its mount, attached only with two pins in its upper two corners.

In her interactions with Vermeer and the composition of her own creations, Linaris-Coridou is conscious of her roles as both a viewer and an artist. She was first drawn to Vermeer seriously while still a student in the 1970s, finding his artistic mastery exciting if also somewhat overwhelming. She had relocated to The Netherlands from Greece and was in a private art school at that time studying theatrical décor and costume design while also working in a film laboratory. Her initial attraction to Vermeer was one based on time and distance: she was evolving her own expression as an artist and she was

building a new life in Holland; from within this experience Johannes Vermeer emerged. She finished her art degree at the Academie van Beeldende Kunsten, Rotterdam in 1976 where her final project was the production of a one-minute film. She thought about and struggled with Vermeer's work during this time and for many years after before she fully embraced it in her own.

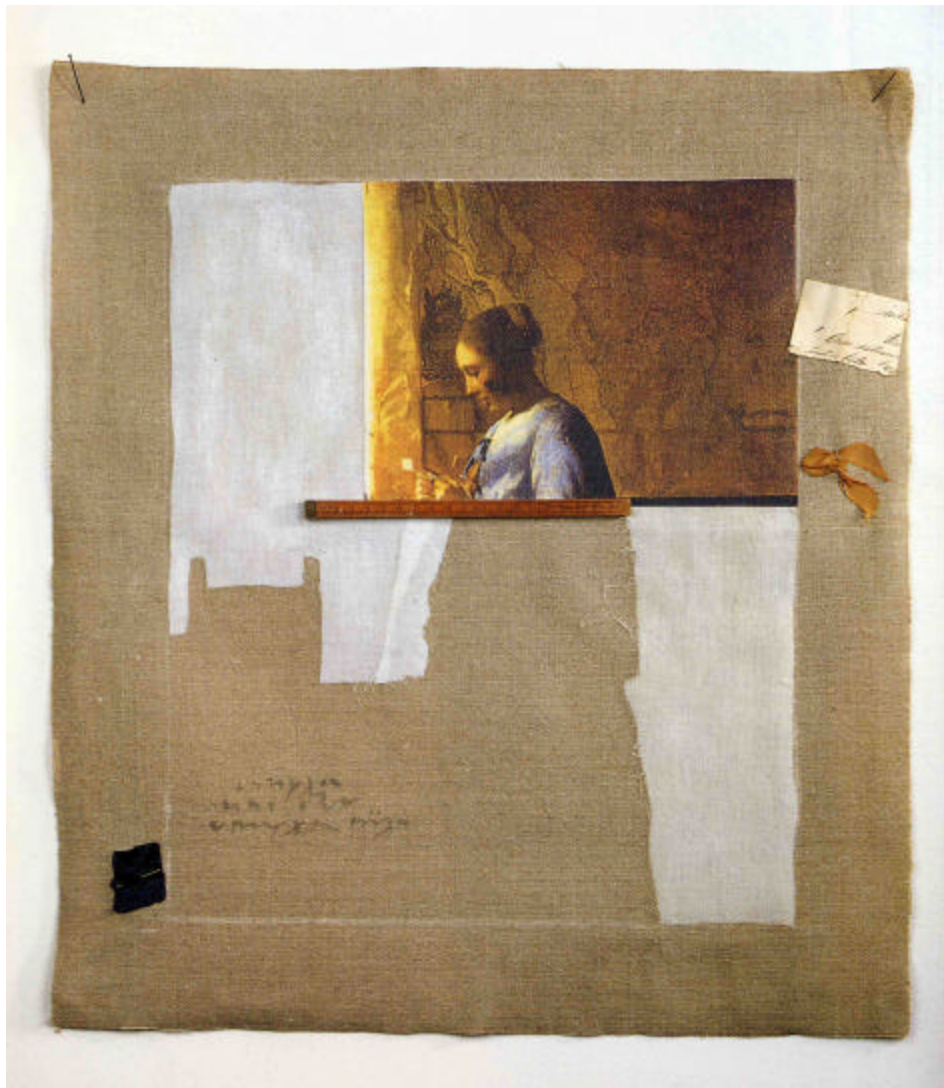


Figure 22. Christina Linaris-Coridou, *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, 1996, (mixed media on hennap cloth).

Linaris-Coridou is well versed in the scholarly record on Vermeer and has completed a close reading of Arthur Wheelock's first book, *Jan Vermeer*, which she refers to as the "Bible" for her work. Her close proximity to both The Hague and Amsterdam have offered her the chance to view original Vermeer paintings repeatedly over time. Linaris-Coridou has responded to both the visual and textual sources on Vermeer and actively incorporates aspects of their discussions into the creation of her works.

In one of the many sources she has read on Vermeer she describes learning that many artists of the 17th century used a kind of canvas called hennap that is made from the same plant as hashish. She was able to purchase this cloth for her own works from a supplier in Italy. Recognizing that Vermeer was in open dialogue with his contemporaries and that he seems to have shared or copied the ideas of other artists, Linaris-Coridou felt comfortable literally copying Vermeer's paintings and using photographs and photocopies made after them in her own works. Through copying Linaris-Coridou actively sought to connect her working methods with those of Vermeer, which were based on the careful assimilation and reduction of critical compositional elements found in the works of others, within the context of his own creative insights and painterly expression.

The collage effect of her works results from Christina Linaris-Coridou bringing together past associations and experiences from her life in combination with her active thoughts on Vermeer. As she recalls, the Athens, Greece, of her childhood was filled with refugees, many of whom established small weaving factories nearby her home. As she

made her way through the streets of Athens each day she saw bolts of thread in many colors and these images have remained strong with her over the years. During the 1980s Linaris-Coridou began collecting rubbish and other found objects. When a friend's grandmother died, she acquired bundles of letters with thread wrapped around them and this brought back her earlier memories of the weaving factories. She began connecting things she had collected using thread and glue to express her meditations and fantasies about Vermeer. She began making her own stories through his paintings, imagining herself in the room with Vermeer in the role of his wife watching him work.

Woman in Blue reading a Letter is one in a series of eight works after Vermeer that were completed by Linaris-Coridou beginning in 1996, the same year she saw the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition at the Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis. Linaris-Coridou's *The Lacemaker*, and *Woman Standing at a Virginal*, each based on Vermeer's paintings of the same title are two other works in this series. Like *Woman in Blue*, both *The Lacemaker* and *Woman Standing at a Virginal* are composed on unfinished hennap cloth with the outer edges of what would be the normal dimension of the work lightly sketched in white tailor's chalk. On each Linaris-Coridou utilizes a partial image of Vermeer's painting in the upper register of the work with other elements sewed or sketched in as a means of suggesting what is there in Vermeer's work but missing in her own. *The Lacemaker*, for example, includes a reproduced image of the girl from Vermeer's painting bent over and hard at work; however, the lower portion of the composition, with the exception of her left hand, is obliterated with masses of gold, yellow, green, white, black, gray and red thread (fig. 23). Some of the thread is wrapped around small rolled-up pieces of manuscript paper such as those acquired by Linaris-

Coridou from her friend's grandmother. Instead of only the upper corners being pinned to the mount, here Linaris-Cordiou uses straight pins to outline major portions of the girl's figure including her hair, eyelids, mouth, and upper arm.



Figure 23. Christina Linaris-Cordiou, *The Lacemaker*, 1996, (mixed media on hennap cloth).

In creating *Woman Standing at a Virginal*, Linaris-Coridou reminisced about a special dress she had worn in a pattern of black and white (fig. 24). She searched for this dress for some time among her things, and after finding it photocopied its pattern and incorporated a portion of it to suggest the black and white tile floor of Vermeer's painting. Small pieces of white satin ribbon connect to this floor fragment and define one side of the standing woman's skirt with the other side simply suggested by a slight outline in tailor's chalk. A small torn piece of light blue paper stitched to the hennap cloth between the ribbon and the reproduced segment of Vermeer's painting simply suggests the puffed upper sleeve of the woman's dress seen in the original painting. An inscription written in brown ink on the cloth at the right underscores the implied meaning of love seen in Vermeer's painting that has likewise been carried over into the new creation by Linaris-Coridou.



Figure 24. Christina Linaris -Coridou, *Woman Standing at a Virginal*, 1996 (mixed media).

In life and home Linaris-Coridou brings together a collection of objects and ideas, many of them fragments of the sort found in her assemblages. In her home living room, a cart that occupies a corner of the room contains an array of art supplies: fabric, a large ball of string, embroidery thread, pushpins, glue, paint brushes, poster colors, tape, and a scrap of projection film are among its many contents (fig. 25). Mounted on the right wall is an assortment of Linaris-Coridou's creations. One of the assemblages is composed of a plastic bag stamped with the image of Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* that has been sewn to lightly frayed hennap cloth using small stitches in a coarse, beige, string-like thread. The stitches, which vary in length from $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ inch, extend horizontally, diagonally, and vertically in a seemingly haphazard arrangement continuing in this manner beyond the margins of the bag in black thread. An actual pearl earring is affixed to the girl in the appropriate spot and the whole assemblage is attached to the wall with small silver pushpins. Another work consisting of color Xeroxes of the pots from Vermeer's paintings are affixed to canvas then mounted to a support cloth to which is then sewn shards of actual 17th century pots. The aesthetic of Linaris-Coridou's art transcends into her home and décor, enhancing an understanding and appreciation for her work. Her works communicate a feeling of time and the durability of things conveyed through the worn, aged character of the objects she lives and works with. The fragmented nature of her creations encourages their association with archaeology and excavation and implies connections to the past and at the same time to the self.

Christina Linaris-Coridou's work offers the chance to both reflect on and extend our understanding of Vermeer within a construction of myriad ideas. Her dialogue with Vermeer is personal, yet also carefully focused on the ways in which he crafted his

images. As Wheelock emphasized in the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition catalogue in his discussions of paintings like *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, Vermeer's technique is one of precision and refinement involving the careful placement and repositioning of objects and nuance. Linaris-Coridou's assemblages encourage our awareness and appreciation of the craftsmanship both she and Vermeer bring to bear in their work. The objects and props used by Vermeer, the precision with which he structures his compositions, the effectiveness of his use of space, and the time involved in the creative process, which have been discussed repeatedly in the scholarly record, are all implied in her assemblages through the measuring devices, drawn lines, pins, and other elements she brings together. Her appropriations are truthful to the source from which they derive, retaining the essence of Vermeer the artist in the ways we have come to know him through his paintings and the scholarly discourse surrounding them.



Figure 25. Detail of Christina Linaris -Coridou's living room in her apartment in Delft, June, 2002.

Vermeer's aesthetic has become for Linares-Coridou a recognizable cultural emblem that helps clarify the beauty she also seeks to convey within the context of her constructions. Linares-Coridou's work in many ways reflects the notion of a work-in-progress. Their incomplete character is intriguing in a way that is similar to the intrigue Wheelock argues is added to Vermeer's paintings based on their inability to ever be completely explained. Her works suggest that the explanation and, thus, completion of Vermeer's paintings – and likewise her own assemblages – ultimately lies within the power of the viewer and, thus, at least in a cognitive sense, will never be wholly complete.

Mary Waters

Vermeer is an artist for our time, for us now in the 20th century. The way he looks and the way he sees is how we see, the way we want to see.¹⁶

-- Mary Waters, June 2002

The paintings of Irish artist Mary Waters also frequently depart from the paintings of Vermeer. Often Waters works to isolate and exploit the compositional potential of individual elements found in Vermeer's paintings. The mouth in Vermeer's *Girl with the Red Hat*, for example, is the subject of her 1993 work titled *Mouth* (fig. 26). Surrounding her image with a black painted border, Waters focuses our eye and heightens our awareness of the sensual aspects of her subject. The redness of the lips, their moistness, and the immediacy and transience conveyed through their slightly parted position act to arouse and hold our interest. Waters' composition and luminous painting technique

actively extend our understanding of the way in which our eye naturally lingers on the light, color and sumptuous glazes presented in an original Vermeer while simultaneously calling to mind the numerous photographic details provided within the scholarly and popular record on the artist. True to Vermeer, *Mouth* nevertheless encourages our associations with the works of other twentieth century artists including Gerhard Richter and Andy Warhol.

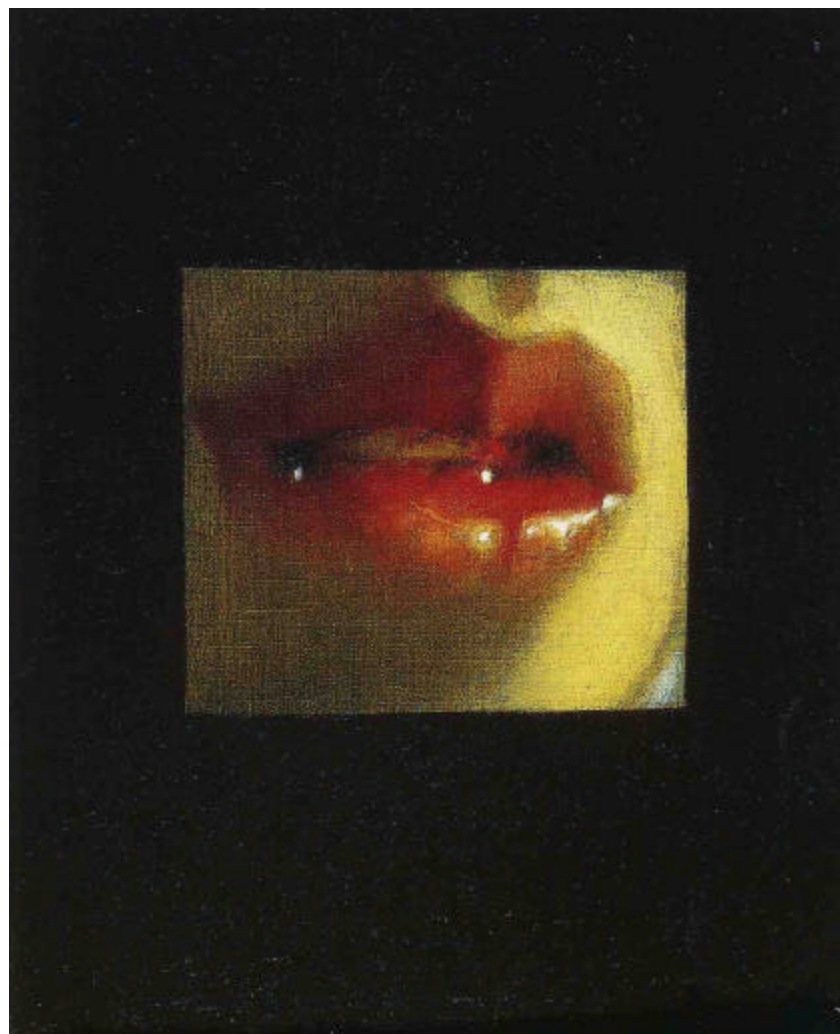


Figure 26. Mary Waters, *Mouth*, 1993, (oil on canvas).

In other paintings Waters frequently appropriates Vermeer in combination with other elements that emulate or precisely quote other artists and genres from the past. In *Girl and Vase* (1995) for example, Waters includes a portion of the head of *Woman Holding a Balance* in the lower right and fills the remaining vertical expanse with an arched niche surrounded by wall (fig. 27). Reflecting the general character of the botanical arrangements also painted by Vermeer's contemporaries, such as the works of Delft artist Willem van Aelst, Waters fills her niche with a decorative silver urn and succulent display of fruit. Although the light and patterns reflected on the urn's surface indicate the presence of windows to the left in keeping with the character of a typical Vermeer composition, light also emanates on a diagonal from the right of Waters' composition. The light in contrast to the darkness surrounding the woman's head, acts to soften and lighten the niche and its contents. The compositional effects add a dream-like quality to the work that encourages us to ponder if what we are seeing is the artist's projection of the physical reality of the woman, a representation of the woman's imagination or, indeed, a truthful reflection of the creative imaginings of the artist herself. This element of implied surrealism is likewise apparent in numerous other compositions by Waters.

Mary Waters was born in and grew up in Galway, Ireland a very wet, misty and windy town on the bay.¹⁷ It was a remote community as Waters was growing up but still maintained a sense of sophistication with many writers and artists in its midst. As Waters describes, Galway was a very relaxed but also very strict Catholic community and this, she explains, was important to her artistic development.



Figure 27. Mary Waters, *Girl and Vase*, 1995 (oil on canvas).

Because of the remoteness of Galway, Waters' only contact with old master paintings was in the form of reproductions, and it was through them that her whole idea of art evolved. It was not until much later that she found herself face to face with an original painting and then she did not know how to respond. A Vermeer on the wall was just a picture to her. Despite her inherently tactile nature Waters' claims her response to

original paintings is not pronounced. It is the idea of being able to look at images in her own time and her own space that makes reproductions so appealing to her. Water's did, nevertheless, attend the 1996 *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition at The Mauritshuis and has viewed his paintings in The Hague, Rijksmuseum, and The National Gallery of Ireland. Having lived in Ireland during the 1970s and 80s, Waters was also very aware of the thefts and subsequent recovery of Vermeer's *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid* .

Waters' first career was as a schoolteacher, which she left in 1990 to become a painter. Although she attended art classes at Galway College, Waters considers herself fundamentally self-taught. She first came to The Netherlands in 1992 through an artists' exchange program during which time she participated in the Amersfort Festival, a city-sponsored program that offered housing and studio space to thirty invited artists. Her work with this festival led her to Utrecht, a thriving cultural center with a long history in art and a currently active community of artists. Waters has continued to split her time between Utrecht, The Netherlands and Galway, Ireland ever since, finding this arrangement conducive to her desire to remain aloof and, therefore, more free to respond to things that interest her in her own unique way.

Waters describes herself as fundamentally visual, finding the written word far less compelling than visual images. She completes an average of twelve new paintings a year with the goal always being to create works of quality and permanence. The painting on which she is currently working she claims is always the most important. As she explains, the most important element of her paintings is the process followed in creating them. Although she used to work her compositions out using reproductions or Xeroxes of images, Waters has utilized the computer and PhotoShop in this phase of the process

since 1999. Her designs are scanned and printed after they are formulated and provide the compositional basis for her paintings. The colors she chooses for her palette, however, are worked out during the painting process.

Waters is meticulous about her work and places great emphasis on the quality of the materials she uses -- Alkyd oils; Marsbruin, Old Holland Classic; Golden Belgium linen, perfectly primed. Waters works up the entire canvas surface of her paintings at the same time, repeating this process in its entirety ten to fifteen times. The multiple layers of her paintings create the sense of depth she desires. Forms and nuance surface, slowly guided by her deliberate, patient process. She often touches the faces of the people she is creating in her paintings in an effort to “feel the face” that is emerging. The tremendous care with which she creates her paintings is inherent in her works, investing them with both intensity and a sense of intimacy. When looking at Waters’ paintings one understands why she describes her work as a kind of love affair, offering her a sense of rapture not afforded through any other means. The images she creates reflect the essential qualities of a Vermeer: refinement, perfection, and intrinsic beauty.

Vermeer is not Waters’ favorite artist; however, she finds his paintings as well as those of Gerard ter Borch to be the most intriguing of the Dutch masters. What appeals to her most is the way in which both Vermeer and ter Borch paint their images as though they are floated in water. She marvels at just how they each could create this effect, sensing that it was a way of seeing that could only come as a result of looking through a camera.

Waters has no intention of paying homage to Vermeer when she uses one of his images as the departure for her own. She describes herself as simply a consumer of

Vermeer. She stays with his images because they are aesthetically sound. Rather than responding to Vermeer as an artist or to the meaning of a work, she responds to the visual character of his paintings, allowing them to offer a kind of visual mantra that provides direction for her work. As Waters describes, her response to these images is very much that of a person living in the twentieth century; she is not looking back to the Golden Age of Painting. Ironically perhaps, it is Waters and not Vermeer who provides the only image of this Dutch master today in the Stedelijk Museum Het Prinsenhof, Delft.

Lacking an original Vermeer, the Prinsenhof acquired Waters' *Painting* (1996), which depicts a detail of Clio against the map as seen in Vermeer's *The Art of Painting*. Today Waters' painting hangs in the second room of the Prinsenhof surrounded by only artists of the 17th century, Hendrick van Vliet, Gerrit Houckgeest, and Cornelis de Man.

Unlike, Christina Linaris-Coridou, Mary Waters responds directly to the images of Vermeer's paintings as they are found in reproductions finding in them a cultural emblem of beauty that is easily recognizable. Her dialogue is less with Johannes Vermeer the painter, and more with the images he created. Although Waters engages in the dialogue found in the more scholarly tomes, it is primarily the visual arguments and not those set forth in the text that inform her own work. Waters is carefully focused on the subtleties of Vermeer's aesthetics: the softness of his edges, diffuseness with which he conveys forms, the details he has chosen to highlight, and the way in which all of these aspects of his working method are mediated through the reproduction. Like the visual details found in books such as Wheelock's *Vermeer and the Art of Painting* or in the catalogue to the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition, Waters' works argues the refinement, perfection, and intrinsic beauty of the fragmentary detail.

George Deem

I quote other artists but also am an artist and my own ideas come through.¹⁸

-- George Deem, April 2002

The work of George Deem provides tangible evidence of the multiple perceptions paintings leave with the viewer over time and the ways in which they can manifest themselves in their own creative endeavors. Within his own idiom of quotation, Deem's works since the 1950s have ranged from perfectly rendered reproductions of old master paintings to creatively conceived reinterpretations, from paintings that are deeply contemplative to those that prove enormously humorous if not somewhat irreverent.

Based in New York, Deem's art over the past five decades has frequently started with and returned to Vermeer. Deem has spent countless hours observing original Vermeer paintings: their size, their subject, Vermeer's sense of light and color, and the way in which the master repeatedly utilized a compositional formula to create uniquely sophisticated paintings that are at once both simple and complex. Starting with his own observation, Deem actively engages in reading the scholarly and popular record on art and particularly that of Vermeer. Nearly every painting by Vermeer has asserted its influence on Deem both in its original form and through reproductions. Deem collects images reproducing Vermeer paintings, each suggesting to him something different through its color, the way it has been cropped, the quality of the detail and its juxtaposition with other images. Utilizing all of these sources and combining them with his own intellect, imagination, humor and wit, his appreciation for art history as well as his mastery in the art of painting, Deem creates new works that move our minds both

backwards and forwards, yet ultimately spur us toward our own new revelations on painting and Vermeer.¹⁹

Deem cannot remember a time when he was not interested in art. He was born in 1932 along with his twin brother John who died when they were five years old. Deem's father was a farmer in Vincennes, Indiana, located about four hours south of Chicago and 30 miles from Evansdale. Deem's grandfather had a number of oil landscape paintings hanging in his home and as a child Deem would look at these paintings when he was taken to visit. After completing high school in Vincennes, Deem enrolled in the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1951. His studies there were interrupted when he was drafted by the Army and was called to serve from 1952-1955.

Deem regards his years in the Army as a very important part of his life, claiming the military's philosophy to have been very helpful to him. As true for many young men at this time, it was Deem's first time really far away from his home and there was a great sense of freedom that accompanied this. Deem was fortunate to be stationed at the Army headquarters in Heidelberg, Germany, and took full advantage of the museums and cultural resources of the surrounding area. He rented a room within walking distance from the Army base where he would go to paint on the weekends. Canvas was so rare and precious to Deem at this time that he would continuously paint and re-paint over his works, finally boiling the canvases in Epsom salts to remove the oils and begin again.

Deem visited Florence, Venice, Paris, and London for the first time through the Army and can remember viewing his first original Vermeer paintings at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam in 1953-54. Although Deem cannot remember having any previous study of Vermeer before this time, he remembers being immediately struck by Vermeer's

paintings, recognizing they were important. He found Vermeer somehow familiar and realized he must have seen a reproduction of a Vermeer painting and stored it away in his subconscious. Perhaps it is because of the immediate attraction or sense of awe that Vermeer spurred in Deem that day that this master was to become so central to Deem's work throughout his career. Certainly it struck a cord that has remained with Deem as his favorite painting by Vermeer is still *The Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*.

He returned to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1955 to resume his studies, completing his B.F.A. there in 1958. As Deem explains, the School was located in the museum at this time and the paintings in the collection became part of his education. Deem walked through the collection everyday and it was these paintings that captured his thoughts during these years.

Deem moved to New York in 1958 and began working in the display department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He began his life as a full-time painter in 1960. He lived and painted in London from 1966-67, returning to New York in 1967. In 1970, Deem rented a farmhouse on the estate of the Count and Countess Passerini in the southern Tuscan town of Cortona, located on the Umbria border in the Arezzo Province. His sojourn in Italy lasted seven years. Deem returned to New York City in 1977 where he continues to live and work today. In addition to his own painting, he has also held part-time positions teaching painting at the School of the Visual Arts, New York (1965-66), Leicester College of Art, Leicester, UK (1966-67), and at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (Spring Term, 1968).

Deem began thinking about Vermeer in combination with other artists from the outset of his career as an artist, completing his earliest derivative in 1959. His Vermeer-

related work from the 1970s demonstrates his characteristic interest in space; however, there is a decided emphasis on figures, which are taken from various Vermeer paintings, from the works of other masters, or represent personalities from his own time and place such as Rita Hayworth, Martha Graham, or George Deem himself. Deem actively and consciously constructs his works as a composite of his experience with a particular Vermeer painting and through overlapping experiences with the artist's extant oeuvre over time.

Vermeer's *The Art of Painting* has provided the basis of numerous works by Deem since the early 1970s. In each of his paintings, a new interpretation or extension of a theme is pursued. In *Rubens Vermeer* painted in 1972, Deem presents a visual alignment of two great masters of the Seventeenth Century (fig. 28). Deem focuses the painting on Vermeer's artist reproducing in shades of black the precise arrangement of the artist at work. Yet, although Deem's artist is clearly painting the laurel wreath likewise represented on the canvas in *The Art of Painting*, he has replaced Clio with Rubens' *Helene Fourment in a Fur Wrap* painted in shades of red. The contrast of replaced subject and the artist's continuation of Vermeer's intended subject, further emphasized through the contrasting colors, visually reinforces the subjective reality of the artist in the painting that is likewise manifest in Deem's reinterpretation.

Although this work is now referred to by Deem as *Rubens Vermeer*, Deem originally entitled this painting *Composition in Red and Black*. Deem, in fact, has often changed the titles of his works over time. Deem's original title bespeaks of his modern roots where titles often highlight the color of the painter's idiom, whereas his re-titling of the work to *Rubens Vermeer* refers the viewer back to the earlier artists whose subjects

and style provide the departure for Deem's painting. While in one way suggesting the ongoing changes in titles assigned to paintings that is characteristic of museum labeling of Dutch master works, the descriptive titles sequentially given to this and other works by Deem also firmly place him in his own time and culture and demonstrate the constructive, often reflective processes of creation that are ongoing in the artist – as in his audience – as he continues to regard his work long after paints and brushes have been put away.

Figure 28. George Deem, *Rubens Vermeer*, 1972 (oil on canvas).



In another painting based on *The Art of Painting* titled *Easel Painting* (1976), Deem moves Vermeer's subject ahead in time (fig. 29). In *Easel Painting*, the artist and model have left the studio, leaving the completed painting displayed prominently on its easel, positioned within the precise room environment established by Vermeer. In another painting from the same year titled *Vermeer Interior*, Deem reconceptualizes *The Art of Painting* within the context of Vermeer's *The Music Lesson*. To create this work, Deem widens the space of the room, adjusts the lighting, moves the figure of the artist closer to the viewer, and creates a platform on which he can be placed so that his same posture and position is maintained. In both *Easel Painting* and *Vermeer Interior*, Deem conveys much of the essential character of Vermeer – his choice of palette, calculated compositional design, and attention to natural light – yet through his combinations and extensions of original Vermeer ideas Deem asserts a new dynamic that is all his own.



Figure 29. George Deem, *Easel Painting*, 1976 (oil on canvas).

Deem's intent to alter the dynamic established in the Vermeer paintings on which he bases his own works is apparent in his notes on his 1976 painting *Vermeer's Moving* (fig. 30). He writes:

In *Vermeer's Moving*, I have assembled chairs that appear in various paintings by Vermeer, plus the stool on which the artist sits in Vermeer's *The Artist in His Studio* [*The Art of Painting*]. Vermeer's picture *Woman with a Water Jug* leans against the wall below the window. On the wall hangs Vermeer's *Woman Writing a Letter with her Maid*. I have placed this picture by Vermeer in the same room Vermeer painted it in, i.e. the painting hangs in its own room but I have removed the curtain from the window: Vermeer's moving.

The picture is hung askew on the wall, the chairs are not arranged but are placed haphazardly in the room, as if the house is in disorder, waiting for the moving to begin. My composition with its multiple diagonals introduces a new dynamic element into the familiar balanced composition of Vermeer, and sets his usual composition in motion: Vermeer's moving.²⁰



Figure30. George Deem, *Vermeer's Moving*, 1977, (oil on canvas).

Another work by Deem that is created in two parts and referred to as his *Diptych* (1979) is also indebted to Vermeer's *The Art of Painting* (fig. 31). In this work Deem creates two separate images: one that offers a near exact replica of Vermeer's painting titled "Vermeer's artist in studio" and serves as the right panel of his *Diptych*, and on the left an image titled "New York artist in studio" that re-conceptualizes the same scene within Deem's own time and place. Numerous details in the latter image have been altered to reflect Deem's then current time in history. The pattern of tapestry drape in the foreground is brighter and more geometric; the attire of the artist has been changed from the formal blouse, pantaloons and beret seen in Vermeer's work, to jeans, an oxford shirt, and white shoes; the model posing as Clio now wears what appears to be an academic robe in a shade of purple; the map is no longer that of The Netherlands of the 17th century but instead a modern map of the United States; and the ceiling is now constructed of white plaster board instead of wooden beams and the light suspended from it is milky glass instead of a shiny brass chandelier. When hung together the two images in *Diptych* offer a visual alignment of the two artists that engages us as viewers in our own reflections of time, timelessness and ideas on how what we see – and ultimately what an artist paints – is inherently caught up in time that is both real and imagined.

Deem explains that he has always looked to Vermeer and in working and reworking his own compositions he was seeking to teach himself how to paint perfectly. Deem's interest in perfecting his Vermeer inspired compositions does not stop with the surface details or luminous effects of the master's work, but extends inward to the complicated structures lying beneath the surface of Vermeer's paintings that often go undetected by the naked eye. Following a method of design in use since the Renaissance,

Deem utilizes a grid system of horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines onto which he organizes the elements from Vermeer's composition and builds up his colors.



Figure 31. George Deem, *Diptych*, 1979, (oil on canvas).

Deem's painting entitled *How to Paint a Vermeer* (1981) explicitly demonstrates this working method used to create a reproduction of Vermeer's *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* (fig. 32). Six rectangular vignettes of equal size in two horizontal rows, one above the other, are organized by Deem on a single canvas surface. Moving from left to right first on the top row and then on the bottom, Deem demonstrates six consecutive stages of his painting's development from beginning to end. The framing and documentation of these stages are in a sense cinematic, calling to mind efforts to record photographically an artist's work in progress using either still or moving film. Here, however, instead of building up a single image, Deem begins each of the six vignettes in the same way, building up each "frame" to the right one step further than its counterpart to the left, and ending with a completed "replica" of Vermeer's painting in the lower right. The roughly painted surfaces seen in the margins surrounding the

vignettes seem to remind the viewer of the medium with which a painter works and the way in which its potential is ultimately in the control of the artist.

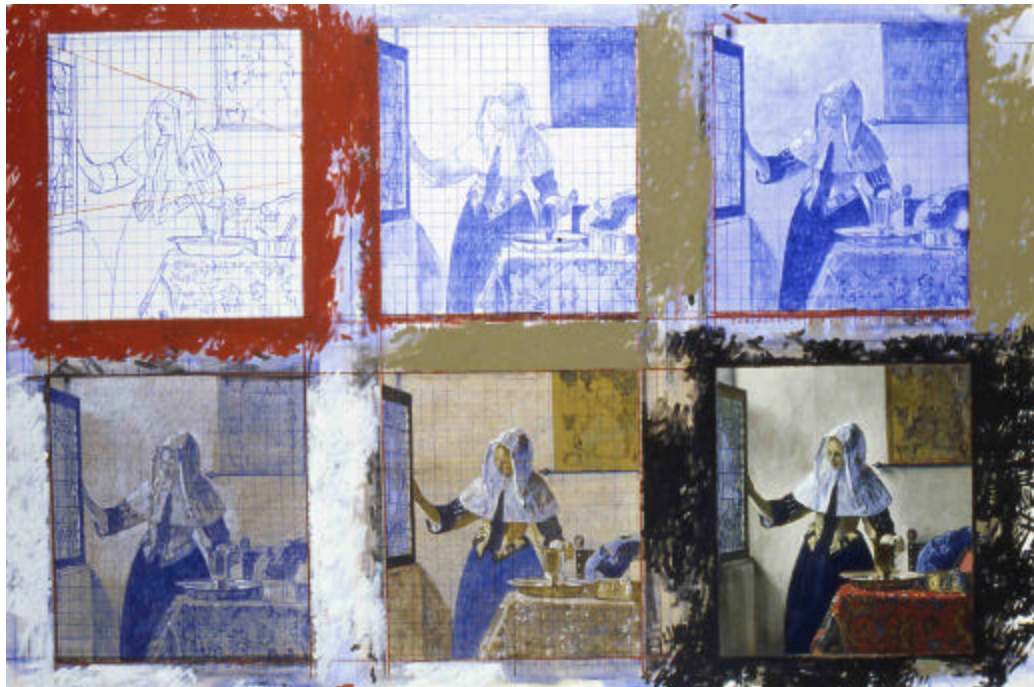


Figure 32. George Deem, *How to Paint a Vermeer*, 1981 (oil on canvas).

In his painting titled *Gowing's Vermeer, Page 1* (1979), Deem pays homage to art history and specifically to art historian Lawrence Gowing, whose book *Vermeer* became important to Deem after it was first published in 1952 (fig. 33). *Gowing's Vermeer* explicitly blends together the crafts of the painter with that of the historian in a way that renews our understanding of the mutually interdependent roles both assume in our evolving understandings of art past and present. In this work Deem creates an image emulating Gowing's book, shown open and painted in tones of yellow and gold with black scripting and details. The right side of the composition contains a written paragraph taken from Gowing's text, shown centered toward the bottom of the implied

book page. The left side of Deem's composition offers a facing page illustration containing a close-up of Clio, here again, from Vermeer's *The Art of Painting*.



Figure 33. George Deem, *Gowing's Vermeer*, 1979, (oil on canvas).

The proportions of the image of Clio in *Gowing's Vermeer* seem to correspond precisely with those of the canvas on which Vermeer's artist (presumably Vermeer) is painting in *The Art of Painting*. As the personification of history, Clio holds a book, which here also serves to reinforce Deem's goal of paying tribute to Gowing and his work as an art historian. Clio's other attribute, the brass horn, however, is not included in Deem's representation. Here Deem signals the choices Vermeer would need to make in the construction of his own work based on the positioning of the model, the way in which the horn is held, and how he has begun to paint on the canvas surface. Deem chooses to crop out the horn just as Vermeer might also have eventually done based on the physical properties of the canvas on which his artist works and its inability to accommodate the current configuration of the model and horn.

Tributes to other art historians and, indeed, to Lawrence Gowing are manifest in other works by Deem. In his work *Vermeer's Map* (1982), Deem creates an image based on the map hanging on the far wall in Vermeer's *Art of Painting*, which has been identified as a map of The Netherlands made by the cartographer Claes Visscher in 1594 (fig. 34). In a rare written summary of this work, Deem's own words provide its context while also demonstrating the ways in which his works intellectually engage in, respond to, and appropriate from art historical discourse:

James Welu, Director of the Worcester, Massachusetts, Museum of Art, has calculated that the dimensions of the map in Vermeer's *Art of Painting* are those of Visscher's 1594 map ("The Map in Vermeer's *Art of Painting*" by James Welu, *Imago Mundi, The Journal of the International Society for the History of Cartography*, Lympne Castle, Kent, England, 1978). I have drawn on Welu's suggestive study to arrive at the dimensions of my wall hanging: 60 by 84 inches.

According to Welu, the text at the base of Visscher's map is a history of The Netherlands in Latin and German. The text at the base of the map in Vermeer's painting is not readable. It is a calligraphic rendering of a text by Vermeer. I found that the pages in Gowing's study of Vermeer (*Vermeer* by Lawrence Gowing, Faber and Faber, London, 1952) were approximately the same width as the paragraphs in Visscher's map. With a calligraphic pen and black India ink, I replicated several pages from Gowing's book for the area of text at the base of my version of the map. I departed from Vermeer's calligraphic rendering of a text in this area by allowing some of Gowing's words to be readable. Similarly, some of the place names in the pictorial portion of my map are legible. As the words get smaller, however, I employ a calligraphic pattern to give the illusion of printed text.

Although it was my intention to make a painting of a map, and not an actual map, I nevertheless wanted a portable wall hanging that would appear to have the weight of and to hang like the map in Vermeer's *Art of Painting*. I therefore chose a cotton canvas ducking that would eliminate the need for a stretcher and a frame. I worked with a black and white acrylic medium on the gessoed canvas, and additionally in red watercolor and with pen and india [sic] ink. Finally, I washed the entire surface with a raw sienna oil glaze.

I stitch-bound the map with black wool yarn, and I had wood finials made to which I applied black lacquer.

I have signed and dated my work on the lower right, in the same area of the cartouche reserved for identification of Claes Visscher as the original map-maker.²¹



Figure 34. George Deem, *Vermeer's Map*, 1982 (mixed media on canvas).

George Deem's interest in teaching while also acknowledging the artists who have taught him is a constant element in his work throughout his career. Appropriately, he completed an ambitious series of paintings titled *Art School* including 38 individual paintings that appropriated and pulled together a number of elements from unique works by great artists from Western art while paying homage to their influence.²² An early work in this series was again based on Vermeer, titled *School of Vermeer* (1985) (fig. 35).



Figure 35. George Deem, *School of Vermeer*, 1985 (oil on canvas).

Similar to nearly all works in this series, the compositional view of *School of Vermeer* is from the back of a classroom looking forward across old-fashioned school desks arranged in three tidy rows that recede inward into the composition. As characteristic of many of Vermeer's paintings, light enters the room in Deem's work through windows on the left of the composition, in this case, the windows and wall from *The Music Lesson*. Figures, elements or images quoted in part or in entirety from Vermeer's oeuvre are carefully placed throughout *School of Vermeer*. Images of *The Girl with the Red Hat*, *Girl with the Pearl Earring*, *The Milkmaid*, and *The Art of Painting*, for example, are seen placed on the desk, scattered on the floor or hanging on the walls of the room. Likewise, many of Vermeer's cast of characters – including

figures from *Woman Holding a Balance*, *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid*, *The Milkmaid*, and *A Lady Standing at a Virginal* – are all cleverly positioned in newly conceived roles throughout the composition. Other clearly recognizable elements from Vermeer's oeuvre including a map, globe, chair and table have been added to complete the scene. The *School of Vermeer* offers a novel, intentionally humorous, yet wittily sophisticated ensemble that tangibly illustrates the ongoing, cognitive experience of Deem's encounters and reflections on Vermeer.²³

Deem recounts his experience viewing the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibit at the National Gallery of Art in Washington in 1995 as having a powerful impact on his thoughts and works on Vermeer since that time. Although the exhibit was crowded beyond anyone's expectations with many of the visitors having to wait in line for hours for admittance, Deem remembers the mood of the exhibit rooms being remarkably calm and still; there was no frustration or pushing to get to the paintings. With patience the crowds in front of each painting would clear and Deem could view the works at length. Deem recounts having viewed the exhibition in its entirety five times. He viewed the exhibit from the beginning to the end and then from the end to the beginning. He marveled at being able to see so many works by Vermeer at once and pondered their being together for the first time since the 17th century. He made a design of the installation noting where each painting hung. Deem noticed that the works were not all hung in chronological order and considered the way in which Vermeer's paintings could interact; which paintings faced which paintings entertained his imagination. The *Johannes Vermeer* exhibit fulfilled an important aspect of Deem's dialogue with Vermeer: he had now seen all the Vermeer paintings that are available to be seen.

Space and the relationship of compositional elements within his constructed spaces are central to George Deem's paintings throughout his career. His work since the early 1990s, and particularly since the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibit, has continued to consider Vermeer paintings individually and in combination with others from his oeuvre. In many cases, the works of other artists are also suggested, however, not through the use of their subjects, as in many of his earlier works, but through Deem's often-subtle adjustment of painterly idiom. Deem eliminates the figures in his recent works allowing the interior spaces of Vermeer's paintings to serve as his primary focus. Furniture and room embellishments are added and subtracted, suggesting shifts forwards or backwards in time and, ultimately, the timelessness and longevity of spaces and things. Although Deem continues to incorporate Vermeer's name in his titles, without knowledge of the older master's paintings, the interest, quietude, and sophistication of Deem's spaces stir their own unique reflections in the viewer, both on the craftsmanship inherent to painting and on the permanence, yet impermanence of our lived experiences.

In *Extended Vermeer* (2000) Deem creates a highly refined image, which, as its title implies, begins with a specific Vermeer painting and extends it. Deem's work here focuses fully on the interior space of a room, with a chair and simple curtain hanging from the far window being the only non-architectural elements included (fig. 36). Although at first glance a connoisseur of Vermeer might interpret Deem's painting as the precise space from a specific work by the artist, when considering *Extended Vermeer* more carefully, one can see this is not fully the case. The central core of Deem's painting, indeed, represents the room environment of Vermeer's *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid* where its contents have been emptied save a chair and curtain. Deem

literally highlights the space taken from this original painting by Vermeer by superimposing a perfect rectangle at his own painting's core that is clear and masterfully defined through subtle modulations of color. The resulting slightly darkened outer margins of the painting thus serve to precisely inform the viewer of where Vermeer's constructed reality ends and Deem's imagined spatial extension begins. The ceiling and closest window in Deem's work are traceable to Vermeer's *The Music Lesson*; however, his elaboration on these elements is fully his own. While in its clarity and definition Deem's emphasis on the rectangle begs comparison with the paintings of other modern artists including, for example, Josef Albers. The use of light and dark in *Vermeer Extended* also offers a brilliant visual metaphor for the fundamental reality of Vermeer Studies. All we really know about Vermeer is found in his paintings; the rest, at present, is shrouded in shadow and can really only be speculated about or imagined.



Figure 36. George Deem, *Extended Vermeer*, 2000, (oil on canvas).

As Deem has worked to re-contextualize important masterworks from art history, he has also actively engaged in dialogue with members of the art historical community. Deem openly and enthusiastically shares the idea or thought processes behind the creation of a particular work while at the same time entertaining the responses of others. He frequently explains how his works evolve in a way that could perhaps best be described as a kind of awakening or unfolding. As he works, Deem begins to see and reveal things about Vermeer's paintings that he has clearly pondered either consciously or subconsciously throughout his long career as an artist. Through the process of moving and reconfiguring the figures or furnishings from his Vermeer based interiors, the character of the rooms and their embellishments begin to reveal themselves to Deem in new and exciting ways. Frequently one new work can spur meditations leading to others. Like an archeologist removing a layer of ground and finding hidden treasures, Deem's enthusiasm for what he "finds" behind or around the elements he moves from Vermeer's paintings exudes his clever sense of humor and, indeed, the personal fulfillment he gleans from the creative process.

George Deem's paintings have been featured in numerous individual and group shows since the 1960s throughout the United States as well as in Germany and The Netherlands. Critical acclaim has followed his work and includes articles and reproductions of his paintings since the 1970s in *Arts Magazine*, *Connaissance des Arts*, *Art in America*, and *American Art Review* among others. Deem's *Hudson River School* and *School of Balthus*, both from his Art School series, were featured on the covers of *Harpers Magazine* in 2001 and 2003 respectively. His paintings have also been reproduced and discussed in several major books including a recent volume on Vermeer

Studies. A small book focusing on his Art School series was also published in the late 1990s.

An event held on April 3, 2002 at Pavel Zoubok, Inc., a small gallery located on Madison Avenue in New York, offered a unique opportunity for a crowd of invited guests to share a private viewing of an exhibit of Deem's paintings and engage in a conversation about the works. The exhibit titled *George Deem: Vermeer Extended* contained nine of Deem's paintings, the title image being his *Extended Vermeer*, discussed above. Although informal, the dialogue was led by Christiane Hertel of Bryn Mawr College and Walter Liedtke, Curator of European Paintings at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Hertel, a professor of art history, has authored several articles and a book related to Vermeer in which she includes images and some discussion of George Deem's works. Liedtke, who is well known within the field of Vermeer Studies, has written numerous articles and several major tomes on Vermeer, and was also the curator of the Metropolitan's exhibition *Vermeer and the Delft School* (2001). This kind of formal dialogue about a contemporary artist's work rarely takes place in a gallery setting and it offered a valuable opportunity to consider the ideas in Deem that spurred several of his paintings within the context of the responses they inspire in a discerning audience. The event also signaled the beginning of what will undoubtedly be a new chapter in Deem's career and certainly a major phase in Vermeer studies.

Walter Liedtke's remarks at this event highlighted himself and the gathered crowd as a tough audience for artists who indulge in "knocking off reproductions" of master works, yet, importantly, he registered in Deem a deep understanding of Vermeer as an artist. In discussing Deem's work *Painting Perspective* (2001), Liedtke remarked on his

method of exaggerating Vermeer's original idea to create here more of a "gymnasium"-like space that might, in fact, relate back to Deem's interest in dance (fig. 37). Liedtke aligned Deem's process of invention with the working method of Vermeer claiming, "The more you know Vermeer as a painter, the more you know he made it all up." It is unlikely, Liedtke explained, that the room in which Vermeer painted his scenes ever had a black and white tile floor as relatively few homes in Delft of the 17th century included this kind of flooring. Likewise, no houses in Delft contained ceiling beams that run to the windows as Vermeer records in his painting. As Liedtke explained, Deem essentially reconstructs something Vermeer had created, accelerating not only the original space but also the colors.



Figure 37. George Deem, *Painting Perspective*, 2001, (oil on canvas).

In *Painting Perspective*, Deem leaves visible portions of his under-drawing, exposing the grid work used to construct the painting's perspective and organize its elements. Deem alters his use of color on the far right of the composition, smudging and blurring the colors. On the left he introduces a kind of palette of color some of which is allowed to drip downward across the surface of his painting. Deem explains that he continuously looks at five or six reproductions of Vermeer's paintings when creating his works, choosing and mixing his colors from these. The colors of *Painting Perspective*, like that of other paintings by Deem, are thus variable and essentially his own. Although Deem did not explicitly state this, the implication seems to be that the abstracted color on the right and the suggestion of an artist's palette on the left were incorporated within his work as a means of expressing the reality surrounding the creation of his paintings. As Deem remarked, "I quote other artists but also am an artist and my own ideas come through."

The dialogue George Deem he has maintained with Johannes Vermeer over the last fifty years reflects in nearly every way that of a long and cherished friendship. Deep and probing, playful and reticent, ironic and profound, Deem's works demonstrate an artist engaging with Vermeer as one intellectual to another. The juxtaposition of elements from Vermeer's works with those by other artists, his extension of themes begun by Vermeer within new dynamics in time, and his melding of Vermeer's themes with diverse painterly idioms serve to reinforce ideas on the significance of Vermeer within the context of modernism. Vermeer has provided Deem with a recognizable and engaging cultural emblem of beauty and the means through which he has pursued his own objectives of refinement and perfection in his idiom of paint.

Extraordinarily well versed in the scholarly discourse, Deem has continuously paid homage to both Vermeer and art historians within the context of his paintings. His works like *Gowing's Vermeer* and *Vermeer's Map* directly respond to the dialogues created by Lawrence Gowing and James Welu and validate their arguments by literally placing them within dialogues on painting. Conversely, Deem also occasionally seems to challenge the arguments of art historians. His paintings *Vermeer Extended* and *Painting Perspective*, for example, could be seen as a visual rebuttal to Gowing's statement concerning the unconcealed limitations of Vermeer's paintings. Clearly Deem sees no limit to Vermeer's paintings or his ongoing dialogue with this artist.

Terri Priest

...it was the isolation and anonymity of the Vermeer women that encouraged me to look at his work again.²⁴

-- Terri Priest, May 2002

From the time she was seven years old Priest can remember being obsessed with drawing and particularly the copying of cartoons, especially *Prince Valiant* by Harold Foster.²⁵ Priest started taking art classes in high school, learning to draw and paint, and she decided at that time that she wanted to become an artist. She entered the Worcester Museum of Art School in 1946 and it was there that she received her first exposure to the work of Vermeer. Despite the inferior quality of the slides projected, Priest describes her first encounter with Vermeer as a kind of wake-up that sent her straight to the library stacks to learn more. Through books she was able to read more about Vermeer and see

other reproductions of his paintings. Her thoughts hovered with Vermeer; however, she did not entertain ideas of painting his works at this time.

In 1947 Priest was married and suspended her formal studies to continue her artistic development in the workplace. She began working as a graphic artist and sign painter, finding the rigidity and precision of this kind of work inherently suited to her own need for order. Her projects were often surrounded by rules and regulations and she approached them as a learning experience, internalizing each new skill as she progressed. Priest eventually left the workforce to stay home and raise her two children. She also resumed her formal training in painting through classes taken at the Worcester Museum Art School, part-time and always on the run.

When her marriage ended in divorce in 1977, Terri Priest was confronted with the urgent need to earn a better living if she were to continue to reside in Worcester. She returned to school, this time attending the University of Massachusetts in Amherst where she completed her B.F.A. through the University Without Walls, a program designed to help enable returning service people to complete their college degrees following the Vietnam War. Priest completed her B.F.A. and then her M.F.A. by commuting to the University of Massachusetts twice a week for four years. Upon completing her degree, she applied for and was appointed to a faculty position at Holy Cross College in Worcester where she continued to teach and paint for the next fifteen years.

Priest's paintings of the 1970s and 80s are technically precise works that emphasize the optical effects of color characteristic of Op Art. Her works of this period focus on the visual properties of color and line, many of which consisted of clear, orderly lines presented in simple color combinations like black and white and devoid of any

underlying subject. It was not until the mid-1990s that Priest began responding directly to the paintings of Vermeer.

Priest's turn toward Vermeer began as a result of her own inward search following the unexpected death of a lover. The event left Priest in a state of inertia, causing her to reflect and sort through the pieces of her life in an effort to move forward. She began digging out the old journals she had kept through the years and read them again, finding in them the record of old inspirations. Amidst her entries were her notes on Vermeer, penned in the 1940s at the outset of her artistic training. Priest began to reflect anew on Vermeer's works and found in the solitary, anonymous figures of his women a reflection of herself. She decided to give these figures a voice – her voice.

In considering how she would respond to Vermeer, Priest approached her work as a researcher. She pursued direct interaction with Vermeer's paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Frick Collection, the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and the Louvre. Priest also saw the *Vermeer and The Delft School* exhibition several times in New York; however, her trip to Washington to see the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition was unrequited as her arrival coincided with the government shutdown. Nevertheless, she claims to have been powerfully affected by the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition both through the catalogue and the extensive media coverage. The interest in Vermeer, which she had begun on her own, dovetailed with this important event and propelled her explorations of his work even further. She has since read nearly everything published in the last ten years on Vermeer and this includes both scholarly work and fiction. Priest particularly liked reading *Vermeer: A View of Delft* by Anthony Bailey, appreciating the

way in which the author had assimilated the lengthy discourse on Vermeer into an easily read narrative about the artist.²⁶

When Priest began her current series titled “Vermeer Women Making Choices” she started with his *Girl with the Pearl Earring*, which she put behind red stripes in the style of her own work, creating *Vermeer & Priest I* (1998) (fig. 38). This arrangement was intuitive for Priest and, although she didn’t understand why she did this at first, it became clearer to her as she progressed. “It wasn’t until I began to analyze what it was about Vermeer and his style of painting that I began to see the association of what I was doing with my striped and very minimalist approach to painting.”²⁷ It was the clarity and directness with which Vermeer organized his paintings and focused on women that appealed to Priest’s sensibilities.



Figure 38. Terri Priest, *Vermeer & Priest I*, 1998 (oil on canvas).

Priest continued exploring the possibilities of her own work in combination with Vermeer, creating a series of paintings including several of the women from his paintings. In *Vermeer & Priest III* (1998), Priest engages with the woman from Vermeer's *The Music Lesson* (fig. 39). Rather than back grounding the figure as Vermeer does in his painting, Priest focuses on the upper portion of her figure, placing her in the middle ground between two paintings that reproduce works by Priest. In front of the woman is Priest's *Lumen #8* (1980) a brightly colored work in predominant orange, violet and green and partially behind the woman, yet in this painting's foreground, is a black and white stripe painting, Priest's *Organic Interaction #28* (1963), hung from a wire-mesh storage wall such as those used by galleries and museums. The image that Priest creates becomes a powerful statement of the very real way in which Vermeer and his women had become central to her work. Priest is on the surface and in the depths, and in the center is Priest in dialogue with Vermeer's woman.



Figure 39. Terri Priest, *Vermeer & Priest III*, 1998 (oil and acrylic on canvas).

Priest's "Artist's Statement: Vermeer Women Making Choices" summarizes the intentions behind her Vermeer paintings, the essentials of her artistic process, and the meanings these acts of creation hold for her.

Beauty, order, color and light are themes that Vermeer pursued in his short career as a painter. They are the same themes that have kept me interested in painting since my days as an art student. However, it was the isolation and anonymity of the Vermeer women that encouraged me to look at his work again. I wanted to know more about them, to set them free both in space and time, to give them choices.

Since there is no historical data identifying Vermeer's models, nor his precise intentions, my objective has been to focus on the women as subjects in a broader context. By combining Vermeer's women with quoted images from recognized paintings of the twentieth century and by carefully observing gestures and expressions, I have been creating new and psychologically complex narratives.

My process begins with many collaged sketches using reproductions from a variety of sources. "Conversations" with the Vermeer women dictate the environment or action to be taken. Recently, as the composition develops I take polaroid photos to compare and determine the final image. Later I make slides of the collages and transfer them to canvas by projecting the image. This enables me to "draw" the figures and make adjustments to the final composition. Issues of surrealism, fantasy, gender and humor are freely introduced at this stage.

Finally, references to my own life about actual or imagined events, as well as traditional notions of domesticity and independence, continue to surface. Advancing years, have given me the freedom to go back to other artists whose works, like Vermeer, have provided me with inspiration, as well as the courage to express my own choices. The Vermeer women have become my alter ego.²⁸

As Priest describes, she relies heavily on the use of reproductions in the creation of her images. Like Christina Linaris-Coridou, Mary Waters, and George Deem, Priest surrounds herself with books and studies the reproduced images they contain. Priest purchases two copies of each book published on Vermeer, one of which is then disassembled for the pictures it contains. Priest then uses these images as the bases for

her paintings, adjusting the proportions of the figures and the palette as seems appropriate to the work she is creating.

As her artist's statement also conveys, several important factors come into play when Priest begins working on one of her Vermeer paintings. Certain artists and not others have come to mind in her explorations of Vermeer and she highlights these connections as critical to her work. Priest works in dialogue with Vermeer's women and the other artists she selects for her compositions. These conversations are not simply rhetorical according to Priest but are, indeed, quite literal. As Priest explained, "When I say I'm having conversations with these women, I'm dead serious. We're talking to each other in the studio. And sometimes a man in the studio across from me would knock on my door and ask me if I was all right because I'd be so excited in this conversation." When Priest chooses to use a Vermeer painting in combination with the work of another artist, it is in direct response to this dialogue.

In her painting *Vermeer, Modigliani & Pol Bury* (1999) Priest engages with Vermeer's *Lady Writing a Letter* in combination with Amedeo Modigliani and Pol Bury (fig. 40). She explains:

Here's this woman sitting at the desk writing a letter to whom? It's speculated by various art historians that she's writing a letter to a lover, because here's this pearl necklace on the table. And in my 20th century mind – I know we're into the 21st, but my real life is in the 20th century – what would be a rationale for a pearl necklace being on a table while she's writing a letter? Well it could have been a gift from her lover. So what did that imply? Well it implied a nude. And the sculpture by Pol Bury, the French sculptor, has very strong connotations to a phallic symbol, the ball and the column. And I thought what better combination of elements could I use that can tell this story about this woman writing a letter about her previous night's experience.²⁹



Figure 40. Terri Priest, *Vermeer, Modigliani & Pol Bury*, 1999, (old on canvas).

Here Priest changes the orientation of Vermeer's painting from vertical to horizontal, lengthening the table, replacing the various accoutrements on it with Bury's sculpted form *Sphere and Cylinder* (1969), and covering it with a patterned cloth. The Lady is positioned and cropped in the same way as in Vermeer's painting; however, here her head intersects with the thigh of Modigliani's *Reclining Nude* (1919) that is now hanging on the back wall of the room, replacing the picture Vermeer had incorporated, with its more subtle suggestion of love. Priest explains that the association of Modigliani with Vermeer came to mind because each had died much too early in life, yet each had left a profound mark on history. While making these modifications, Priest's painting nevertheless continues the essential design of Vermeer while at the same time extending the theme of love that is the favored interpretation of Vermeer's original work.

Priest has continued to connect her Vermeer paintings to herself or her work in both direct and more subtle ways. In *Vermeer, O'Keeffe & Priest* (2000), Priest focuses

on Vermeer's figure from *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* in combination with Georgia O'Keeffe's 1931 painting *White Calico Flower* (fig. 41). As in most of her other works, Priest changes the orientation of her painting from vertical to horizontal and shifts the girl's position to the foreground by eliminating the table and hanging curtain found in Vermeer's painting. Priest also updates the seventeenth-century leaded glass window seen in Vermeer's painting with modern panes replacing the girl's reflection in the glass with her own. The most dramatic change from Vermeer's original painting is Priest's shift in palette from primarily green to soft blue tones. Vermeer's girl stands separated from all elements in the composition, locked between O'Keeffe's painting on the wall and the windowpane holding Priest's reflection. Here it could be read as a conversation between women; however, Priest includes O'Keeffe not specifically because she is a woman but because she too had to make choices both in her personal life and in the creation of her paintings.



Figure 41. Terri Priest, *Vermeer, O'Keeffe & Priest*, 2000, (oil on canvas).

Numerous artists have entered into Priest's dialogue with Vermeer including Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Wayne Thiebaud, Edward Hopper, Stuart Davis, and Mary Cassatt. All of the artists Priest selects are modern and all in some way demonstrate a sensibility toward strong design, clarity, and order that is in accordance with both Vermeer's and her own sense of design. Although Priest chooses to focus primarily on paintings and occasionally sculpture as we have seen, she has also nodded in the direction of modern cinema and architecture. Her painting *Vermeer, Ruscha & Gropius* (2001), for example, conceptualizes Vermeer's *Girl in the Red Hat* as a movie star, set against Walter Gropius' *Workshop Wing, Bauhaus, Dessau* (1925-26) (fig. 42). Above the building, Priest reproduces Ed Ruscha's *Drawing for 20th Century Fox*, which serves to brilliantly illuminate Gropius' rooftop with the lights of Hollywood.



Figure 42. Terri Priest, *Vermeer, Ruscha & Gropius*, 2001 (oil on canvas).

The artist who seems to engage most in the dialogue between Priest and Vermeer is Roy Lichtenstein, an artist whose use of fine lines, clear color, and ben day dots is inherently linked to Priest's own style. *Vermeer & Lichtenstein III*, for example, offers a visual alignment between Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* and Lichtenstein's *Female Head* (1977) a painting Priest is certain Lichtenstein based on a mirror image of Vermeer's painting (fig. 43). Set below a large band of black ben day dots, Priest positions Vermeer's girl forward and to the right, cropping around Vermeer's original image just below the chin, through the turban and in the darkened ground on either side of the head. Lichtenstein's *Female Head* is set directly to the left of Vermeer's girl. The effectiveness of Priest's design is heightened by her use of space and color. Priest lightens and intensifies the yellow and blue on the turban of Vermeer's girl to match Lichtenstein's palette, allowing the darkened space between the two images to assume a shape that seems to bring together rather than separate the Vermeer and Lichtenstein women. The alignment of these two images within her own painting creates a work that is both compositionally sound and enormously suggestive.



Figure 43. Terri Priest, *Vermeer & Lichtenstein III*, 2000, (oil on canvas).

Another painting coupling Vermeer with Lichtenstein, Priest's *Vermeer & Lichtenstein IX* (2001), powerfully reflects the themes central to her "Vermeer Women Making Choices" series as well as the essential idiom she has created for these works. Here Priest returns to the woman from Vermeer's *The Music Lesson*, setting her against a backdrop reproducing Lichtenstein's 1992 etching with aquatint, *DE NOUVEAU au – desfus de Denver* (fig. 44). As characteristic of nearly all the paintings in her Vermeer series, Priest removes all obstructions and distance between the viewer and the woman, thrusting her form from the background to the immediate foreground. Priest reproduces the woman to three-quarter length, intensifying the formal properties of her form through the colors and the lines of her dress. Before the woman, and in place of the virginal seen in Vermeer's work, Priest paints a railing in clear tones of blue, gray and black, creating an element that both separates and connects the woman's form with the recreated Lichtenstein waterscape. The balance between the woman and her setting is heightened through the predominant blue of her skirt, which extends the more monochromatic tones of the railing and waterscape, off-set by the contrasting flesh tones around her head, yellow of her bodice, and strong red in the lower left portion of her skirt. By changing the orientation of the work from vertical to horizontal and positioning the upper edge of the painting a short distance above the woman's head, Priest connects the woman's gaze, implied by the slight turn of her head, with the horizon line of the distant view. As she looks out at the sun setting on the water before her it seems as if she may also connect herself with the reflection that seemingly dances across the water's surface.



Figure 44. Terri Priest, *Vermeer & Lichtenstein IX*, 2001 (oil and acrylic on canvas).

Priest describes the idea behind *Vermeer and Lichtenstein IX*:

[I wanted her to] enjoy a cruise on the river. She's looking at Denver there. That's Lichtenstein's print of Denver. So why not put her on a cruise ship and have her look at this wonderful sunset. But there's more to it than that. It's the simplicity of her costume. It's the crowned thing on her head and how it relates to the circular shape in the Lichtenstein print. And then the geometricity of her tunic and how I see that as a strong relationship to the stripes in the Lichtenstein. And of course these three primary colors that Lichtenstein favors all the time and that was the costume in Vermeer's painting – you know, the yellow, blue, and red. I'm looking at that and I'm saying I've put her on a cruise ship. And she's taking a respite from whatever is going on in the cabin or whatever hilarity might be going on in this cruise and she's saying to herself, I need a little bit of time for myself, and isn't it wonderful that I have this view in front of me and that I can get some air and refresh myself.

But somebody else is going to be looking at that and they're going to see her as lonely and sad and I don't see her as lonely and sad. What I see is a woman like myself who when the day is over the best thing I can do for myself is to come up here and make a quiet dinner and pick up a book and turn on some music. I'm not a TV watcher. So, I think most – especially women – men can do this more easily – women have a harder time being by themselves. They have a harder time being happy with who they are and understanding that quiet time is when you really refurbish yourself and your thinking and your ideas and all that you are in terms of health, in terms of psychology or whatever. And that's what she's doing. She's refurbishing herself.³⁰

This description by Priest of her work is interesting both for the way it conveys her interpretation of her painting as well as the ways in which she acknowledges that other viewers may choose to interpret it differently. As she explains, “Artists are creating narratives or creating images and we don't know where that's going to take us, what kind of life that's going to take unto itself. And we don't understand what people are seeing half the time when they're looking at the art.”

Like Linaris-Coridou, Waters, and Deem, Priest has identified in Vermeer's aesthetic a recognizable cultural emblem of beauty that is providing her both the means of expressing her ideas about herself and her desire to create refined and technically perfect paintings. Different from the other artists we have discussed, Priest's dialogue with Vermeer is mediated primarily through his women. Priest isolates these women and embraces them within her own fantasies and constructions of the self. Through her paintings, Priest establishes clear and dialogic relationships between Vermeer's women, herself, and the works of other artists from the modern era. Her works such as her *Vermeer, Modigliani & Pol Bury* both maintain and extend the iconographic subtleties of Vermeer's paintings within the context of modernism. Often abandoning the spaces conceived by Vermeer, Priest foregrounds his women, visually extending ideas like those

of Mariet Westerman's concerning the "protomodern" character of his women. Priest's paintings assert Vermeer's women as modern icons and, in so doing, she reinforces the emblematic character of Vermeer's aesthetic for contextualizing and making clear more contemporary ideas on beauty.

Conclusions

As my discussion of Christina Linaris-Coridou, Mary Waters, George Deem, and Terri Priest has demonstrated, each of these artists was inspired to appropriate the paintings of Vermeer precisely because of the aesthetic beauty they discerned in his works. Linaris-Coridou speaks of being attracted to Vermeer because of his artistic mastery; Waters finds Vermeer's images visually intriguing and aesthetically sound; Deem explains Vermeer as his guide to painting perfectly; and Priest identifies Vermeer's sensibility toward beauty and order as being akin to her own.

All four of these artists have also discussed the ways in which they work in dialogue with Vermeer through their acts of appropriation. Although the natures of their dialogues are highly personal and are mixed with elements of fantasy, curiosity, and self-reflection, each nevertheless has found in Vermeer's aesthetic a recognizable cultural emblem, which has become for them a way of both conceptualizing and making clear the refinement, perfection, and intrinsic beauty that they likewise pursue within the context of their own creative works.

Christina Linaris-Coridou's meditations and fantasies about Vermeer include her imagining herself in the role of Vermeer's wife, and have resulted in collages that bring together elements of Vermeer's working method with her own life experience. For Mary Waters the works of Vermeer offer her a visual mantra that has encouraged the richness and a visual intensity that is evident in her own paintings.

As we have seen, George Deem's dialogue with Vermeer has been ongoing for more than fifty years and in many ways resembles that of a well-seasoned friendship. Deem's and Vermeer's dialogue has resulted in new paintings that, although always skillfully constructed, have offered a thematic range that has moved from contemplative to humorous to irreverent to somewhat archaeological. Deem's paintings, in particular, offer a full understanding of the ways Vermeer has asserted his influence within the complex idioms of our culture over time.

The dialogue begun between Terri Priest and Vermeer during her early artistic training in the 1940s resurfaced in response to a loss in her life and has resulted in what she explains as literal conversations with the women depicted in his paintings. As Priest describes, Vermeer's women have become her alter ego and through them she has found ways of expressing aspects of her self and her relationship with Vermeer within the context of other artists with whom she is also in conversation.

Although each of these artists were already engaged with Vermeer prior to the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition of 1995-96, within the context of my conversations with them, each likewise conveyed a similar sense of the importance of this event to their understanding of this artist and the evolution of their work. The degree of attention afforded to Vermeer through the exhibition forum sharpened their own focus on his

works and increased the recognition of his images, subsequently making connections to their own works appropriating Vermeer easier for their viewing public.

Each artist expressed the significance of viewing original paintings by Vermeer; however, George Deem's emphasis on this practice was decidedly greater than all of the others and Mary Waters' was more focused on the *insignificance* of this experience to her work. In all cases, however, contact with Vermeer's paintings through reproductions was emphasized and this method of studying Vermeer that has had the greatest impact on the development of their creative works.

Each artist also spotlighted the influence of art historical discourse on the evolution of his or her work. Christina Linaris-Coridou has read numerous volumes on or related to Vermeer and refers to Arthur Wheelock's *Jan Vermeer* as her "Bible." Although Mary Waters does not engage in any serious way with the written arguments found within the published discourse on Vermeer, she nevertheless conveys the importance of the *visual* arguments offered through the reproductions and their placement in these texts that is likewise recognized by all four of these artists. George Deem has read and digested virtually everything published on Vermeer spanning most of the twentieth century and his response is both that of a scholar and a consumer. Everything published on Vermeer is acquired in duplicate with the second copy being dismantled for its images and the visual stimulation and connections they offer Deem within the context of this work. Priest is also well read on Vermeer; however her focus has been primarily on books published over the last ten years, which has included many of the popular novels. Like Deem, Priest purchases Vermeer publications in duplicate and dismantles one copy for its reproductions.

As I have suggested throughout my discussions on each of these artists, careful attention to artworks that appropriate the art of Vermeer can offer new insights on this master and, indeed, alter the way we see his paintings. My responses to these artists' works have led me to new insights on Vermeer that have fixed me with new ways of seeing Vermeer's paintings. As art historians naturally think of Caravaggio's *The Calling of Saint Matthew* when they consider Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*, I am now drawn to make mental connections between Vermeer's paintings and the artists who have appropriated them.

In his essay on appropriation found in *Critical Terms for Art History*, Robert Nelson discusses the personal dynamic that is set in motion by appropriation as individuals encounter its manifestations. Within his discussion, Nelson sets forth his own personal experience as a model for interpreting the connections between art and understandings of the self. He considers the historic origin of the word appropriation as a way of framing the personal within the larger meaning of art appropriation in our contemporary culture:

Etymologically, the word "appropriation" could hardly be simpler or more innocent, deriving from the Latin, *ad*, meaning "to," with the notion of "rendering to," and *proprius*, "own or personal," yielding in combination *appropriare*, "to make one's own." ... "to appropriate" today means annexed or attached, belong to oneself, private, and suitable or proper. "Appropriate" also has more sinister connotations, implying an improper taking of something and even abduction or theft. Taken positively or perjoratively, appropriation is not passive, objective, or disinterested, but active, subjective, and motivated.³¹

Nelson self-consciously asserts that what he sees when he looks at art that appropriates art, may, indeed, not be what someone else would see when looking at the same object. Citing Pierre Bourdieu, Roland Barthes, James Clifford, Simon Schama and Michael

Baxandall among others, Nelson discusses the construction of the individual and how our cultural background informs this process in a similar way to my own discussion found in chapter two of this dissertation. Although Nelson's point of focus is a set of mass produced horses that replicate in much smaller form the gilded bronze horses from the church of San Marco in Venice, and mine is the creation of hand-crafted art works that appropriate from Vermeer, his emphasis on the uniqueness of response and the validity of his own insights within the context of his scholarly discussion are, indeed, what is argued here.

Each of the artists I have discussed have identified in Vermeer's aesthetic a recognizable emblem of beauty which has proved useful for them in seeking to conceptualize and make clear their own creative goals of refinement and perfection. Considering their works has extended my own understanding of Vermeer as an artist and the ways in which his works are providing a framework through which myriad ideas on beauty can be expressed.

The works of Christina Linaris-Coridou have caused me to look more closely at the objects and artifacts Vermeer has placed in his paintings, the extraordinary artistic craftsmanship that they demonstrate, and the very personal messages that are communicated about this artist through both their content and design. The paintings of Mary Waters have encouraged my eye to focus most closely on the surface effects found in Vermeer's paintings, the extraordinary significance of these effects to both his aesthetic and the psychological impact of his paintings, and the way in which the softening of his surface details suggest strong connections between Vermeer and the older artist Gerard ter Borch (1625/26-1679) and, indeed, the implications these

connections present concerning the working relationship between these two artists.³²

The paintings of George Deem have focused my mind and eye on Vermeer as an artist and a skilled teacher. Considering the expansive interaction between Deem and Vermeer and the creative works this dialogue has amassed has reinforced my understanding of Vermeer as a working artist who, regardless of the missing documentation concerning his students during his own time, has clearly had influence on artists of our current era. Deem's paintings and the diverse ways in which he has appropriated aspects of Vermeer over a sustained period of time encourage me to consider Vermeer as an artist at work. Vermeer, like all artists, made decisions about the spaces that he chose to represent; the furniture, accoutrements, and artworks he would include; the figures he would paint; the colors he would choose; and how the interaction between all of these compositional elements was orchestrated to create an effect that has proved so enormously intriguing to so many artists and viewers particularly during our own time.

Through the paintings of Terri Priest and the personal dialogues she seeks to communicate between Vermeer's women and herself, I have found the tangible evidence of the ways in which artists and viewers assimilate subjects and images taken from paintings within the broader range of their human existence. Through Priest's alignment of herself with Vermeer's women I have been moved to understand aspects of myself and my own very personal relationship to paintings, and especially, the paintings of Vermeer.

It is clear through my discussion of artists and the appropriation of paintings by Vermeer that the historic precedents and reasons for appropriation that have existed throughout art history, which were discussed in chapter two of this dissertation, have in

many ways continued to our present day. Artists continue to engage in the representation of subjects and ideas and are using the works of artists like Vermeer as a means of satisfying their visually based problems. The degree of attention afforded to Vermeer through the exhibition forum has clearly shifted his paintings into the full view of a broad international audience, made both Vermeer and his paintings celebrities, and established Vermeer's aesthetic as recognizable and emblematic of beauty, and this has clearly brought attention to artists who appropriate Vermeer in a way they might not have received it otherwise. Artists continue to be sensitive to the art market and are both consciously and unconsciously responsive to these markets. All of these issues are in play within the context of Vermeer and the appreciation and appropriation of his paintings in our contemporary culture. But, again, there is more to this story.

In appropriating the work of a painter from the past, contemporary artists are engaging in personal dialogues with artists like Vermeer through the tangible evidence that survives from his creative life. Through the observation of original paintings and the interactions with reproductions that copy original images, contemporary artists are, in turn, providing our culture with tangible evidence of the meaning of the past to their present. Contained within these new works are imprints of the past and the ongoing relevance of artists like Vermeer to the present. Through Vermeer one finds a guide to painting, self-discovery, and, indeed, beauty.

I will now turn to a discussion of the ways in which Vermeer, the exhibition of his paintings, and the other scholarly discourse surrounding his works have inspired writers of popular fiction to also create novels based on Vermeer and his paintings.

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- ¹ Cesar Grana, *Meaning and Authenticity: Further Essays on the Sociology of Art*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers), 1989, p. 31.
- ² Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, New York, 1961.
- ³ For a brief overview on the continued relevance of copying directly from the original paintings of the great masters see: Joseph A. Harriss, "Master Class," *Smithsonian Magazine*, October 2002, pp. 76-81.
- ⁴ Kynaston McShine, *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1999.
- ⁵ For a review of this exhibit that includes a color reproduction of Morimura's work, see Tessa DeCarlo, "Laying Bare the Uncertain Underside of the Truth," *The New York Times*, Sunday, April 9, 2000, Arts Section, p. 39-40.
- ⁶ See Michael Rush, "So They're Muscular: Want to Make Something of It?," *The New York Times*, Sunday, March 19, 2000, Arts Section, p. 39 and 41.
- ⁷ Blake Gopnik, "A Bad Impression: At the Corcoran Gallery, Seward Johnson's Travesty in Three Dimensions", *The Washington Post*, Friday September 12, 2003, C1 and C8.
- ⁸ For the catalogues to these exhibitions see: Gary Tinterow and Geneviève Lacambre, *Manet/Velázquez: The French Taste for Spanish Painting*, exhibition catalogue, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2003; Elizabeth Cowling, et. al., *Matisse Picasso*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2002; Alexandro Vergara, *Vermeer: Dutch Painting of Domestic Interiors*, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, 2003. The exhibition discussing the influence of Rembrandt on the etchings of James McNeil Whistler was seen on the lower level of the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, August, 2003. Although there was no catalogue accompanying this small exhibition of prints the museum's shop was selling an earlier catalogue published by the Rijksmuseum to accompany their show. See J. F. Heijbroek and Margaret F. MacDonald, *Whistler and Holland*, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 1997.
- ⁹ See Carol Vogel, "Under El Greco's Spell: New Show for Master Who Inspired Modern Artists," *The New York Times*, Monday September 29, 2003, pp. B1 and B5.
- ¹⁰ Both of these paintings by Vilhelm Hammershøi's are reproduced in *The Age of Impressionism: European Paintings from Ordrupgaard Copenhagen*, The Walter's Art Museum, 2002, pages 255 and 259 respectively.
- ¹¹ *The Image Disappears* is reproduced in Dawn Ades, ed., *Dali's Optical Illusions*, exhibition catalogue, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, 2000, p. 134.
- ¹² See Frank Weyers, *Salvador Dali: Life and Works*, 2000, p. 65.
- ¹³ Reproduced in Maureen Hart Hennessey and Anne Knutson, *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People*, exhibition catalogue, 1999, p. 43.
- ¹⁴ Robert Storr, *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, exhibition catalogue, 2002, p. 255.
- ¹⁵ During my initial meeting with Christine Linari-Coridou she paraphrased the introductory words of Dante's *La divina commedia* as a way of describing her life, her work, and the point at which it all seemed to come together.
- ¹⁶ Quoted from my interview with Mary Waters in her studio in Utrecht, The Netherlands, June 27, 2002. June 2002.
- ¹⁷ The information that follows is a summary of my written notes taken during my meeting with Mary Waters in Utrecht, The Netherlands on June 27, 2002.
- ¹⁸ Quote taken from a response by George Deem to comments made by Walter Liedtke about Deem's work at a small event held in conjunction with an exhibition of Deem's recent works *Vermeer Extended*, held at Pavel Zoubok, Inc., New York, April 3, 2002.
- ¹⁹ I gratefully acknowledge the time and assistance George Deem and his assistant Ronald Vance have provided me within the context of my Vermeer research.
- ²⁰ Except from George Deem's Notes on Vermeer's Moving, April 1, 1980. Notes provided by Deem's Administrative Assistant, Ronald Vance.
- ²¹ Excerpt taken from the typed notes of George Deem on his wall hanging *Vermeer's Map*, March 22, 1996; provided by George Deem's Administrative Assistant, Ronald Vance.
- ²² George Deem, *Art School: An Homage to the Masters*, (San Francisco: Chronicle Books), 1993.
- ²³ The art of George Deem seems to tangibly illustrate the never ending processing of seeing that is the subject of James Elkin's book *The Object Stares Back*. James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing*, (San Diego: A Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company), 1996.

²⁴ Excerpt from Terri Priest's "Artist's Statement: Vermeer Women Making Choices", May 7, 2002.

²⁵ Information contained in this section on Terri Priest was gathered during our meeting on May 6, 2002, during which time I taped our discussion.

²⁶ Anthony Bailey, *Vermeer: A View of Delft*, 2001.

²⁷ Op cit., Terri Priest meeting May 6, 2002.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Robert S. Nelson, "Appropriation," Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shift, eds., *Critical Terms for Art History*, 2003, pp. 161-162.

³² The possibility exists that Vermeer, indeed, was a student of ter Borch. Michael Montias considered this idea and dismissed it based on the fact that the visual characteristics seen in Vermeer's paintings resembles ter Borch in his later works and not those of the 1650s when ter Borch is known to have been in Delft. As Montias, concludes the paintings of ter Borch, nevertheless would have been known to Vermeer and certainly can be argued as a source of influence. See Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History*, 1989, pp. 102-104.

Chapter 5 – Response as Dialogue

What was once the single, crystal-clear *Story of Art* has become a tangle of *Stories of Art*...¹

--James Elkins

Any gap in the historical record is an invitation, an opportunity for speculation.²

--Michael Upchurch

The future of Vermeer studies will most likely lean toward personal response to the artist's work.³

--Rex Weil, "Johannes Vermeer," *Artnews*

"There's an appetite out there for things via books"⁴

-- Alice Sebold

In the last chapter, I continued my discussion of the ways art influences art, as was begun in chapter two of this dissertation, then shifted to a study more specifically focused on the appropriation of paintings by Vermeer. I emphasized the works of four contemporary artists: Christina Linaris-Coridou, Mary Waters, George Deem and Terri Priest. Using my personal interactions with each of these artists and their works, I considered the nature of each artist's dialogue with Vermeer. I considered why these artists are inspired to appropriate the paintings of Vermeer; if their responses to Vermeer change or remain constant over time; how our own understandings and responses to Vermeer's paintings can be altered through our contact with works that appropriate his art; and, more generally, what is learned about artists and the appropriation of art in our current culture through a study of works that appropriate Vermeer. As I posited, each of these artists was inspired to appropriate Vermeer's paintings in response to the

refinement, perfection, and intrinsic beauty they sensed in his works; each benefited from their contact with the scholarly discourse and exhibition of Vermeer's paintings; each artist's response to Vermeer was informed by their own fantasies, curiosities, and self-explorations; and each of their new works, in turn, reflected back on the paintings of Vermeer in a way that both altered and extended how his paintings are seen.

In this chapter I will consider Vermeer within the context of the contemporary novel. Vermeer and his paintings have inspired numerous poems and other literary works over the last century and in recent years several popular novels.⁵ I will consider the growing popularity of art as a subject for contemporary novels as a means of introducing my discussion focused on four novels based on Vermeer and his paintings: Katherine Weber's *The Music Lesson*, Susan Vreeland's *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, Tracey Chevalier's *The Girl with the Pearl Earring* and Paul Watkins' *The Forger*. I will focus on the development of characters and the descriptions of Vermeer and his art within the narrative, the ways in which they parallel or depart from the historical or art historical record, and how they, in turn, influence our ideas and perceptions on Vermeer. I will argue that, similar to the creative works of Linaris-Coridou, Waters, Deem and Priest, the narratives of these novels reflect the personal responses of their authors and that their dialogues serve as a kind of ventriloquism for the ideas and meditations of these authors to the paintings of Vermeer, as well as the cultural discourse that surrounds them.⁶

Art and Storytelling

Artists, their objects, and the complicated issues surrounding their lives and works have provided ample inspiration for literature outside the more scholarly treatise. Poetry, short stories, fictional novels and novellas inspired by art have existed for centuries and these themes are proving particularly viable and marketable in our current culture. As creative manifestations of a writer's imagination, these works encapsulate both apparent and latent responses to art, a discussion of which can promote a more complete understanding of the meaning of art during a specific period of history.

The bond between art and story telling is in fact extraordinarily long and deep. As far back as prehistoric painting, art has often been appreciated and discussed for the "stories" it appears to illustrate. In the Lascaux cave paintings of France, dating from circa 10,000 B.C., for example, stories have evolved not only from the elaborate hunting scenes depicted in many of these early paintings, but also from the methods that seem to have been used by prehistoric artists in their creation. As written documentation clearly stating all the facts about these works is conspicuously missing, their stories are created by archeologists and art historians based partly on the factual evidence of their physical composition and partly on theory. The stories of these paintings have evolved through the tangible, physical evidence of their design combined with numerous fragments of other information about prehistoric life that were left scattered throughout Western Europe centuries ago, only to be pieced together and interpreted in times more recent to our own. Theoretical and inconclusive, these stories, like so many others found throughout the history of art, are engaging, infinitely stimulating, and continuously open to discussion.

The connections between painted images and written texts are also deep, extending at least as far back to the scrolls of ancient Egypt where artisans combined images of their pharaohs and gods with hieroglyphics. During early Christian and Medieval times painting evolved into an elaborate tradition within the context of book production, serving as both ornament and a visual supplement to primarily Biblical texts. The often highly developed images of these handmade books were intended both as embellishment and as a means of conveying the written information to those unable to read. Painting cycles such as that created by Giotto in the Arena Chapel (c. 1305) functioned in a similar way, as visual picture books offering literal depictions of individual scenes from within a text, in this case the Passion of Christ. Themes from literature and history have, indeed, provided the basis for numerous paintings in Western Art since the thirteenth century, many of which offer easy associations to their texts. Where needed, art historians have sought to resurrect and clarify themes overlooked or under discussed in contemporary culture. And within the museum, educational programs, printed brochures, wall labels, and audioguides continue to promote the narratives set forth in their special exhibitions as well as those shaped more generally from within the permanent collection.

When a definite narrative is either lacking or has been lost from a painting, its theme has frequently become the subject of great speculation within the art historical community. Art created during documented periods of history requires more rigid lines of reasoning within the academic realm and the extent to which creative license is permitted to come into play is continuously held in check. Historians will voice ideas or conjecture on their *feeling* about an artist, subject of a painting, or the relationship of

works to an artist's culture or lived experience, but without some sort of hard evidence or theoretical framework to support their ideas, few will publish them in the written discourse. The line is often fine between fiction and theory and though critics and literary writers may cross it, few historians choose to.

In her largely historical biography on the seventeenth century Italian painter Artemisia Gentileschi, Alexandra Lapierre confronted a personal dilemma in her writing, which, in the end, altered the genre of her book.⁷ The relationship of Artemisia and her father Orazio Gentileschi was central to her research and the quest for information took Lapierre all over Europe. Lapierre combed through civil and other historic records, finding a rich paper trail with numerous primary source documents. As a friend of Caravaggio and a painter of great reputation in his own right, Orazio offered Artemisia exposure and entry into a field in which she herself also attained great success throughout much of Europe. The depth of Lapierre's research nevertheless left her unable to construct the full picture she desired. Lapierre explains:

I was obsessed by the importance of accurately representing what had happened to the Gentileschis. Yet, paradoxically, after five years of intensive research, I ended up feeling that the only satisfactory way to express the many-faceted reality that I wanted to convey, would be to use the tools of story-telling and to fictionalize elements of the story.⁸

Utilizing the historic research she had so carefully amassed, Lapierre opted for historical fiction rather than pure history, adding an unprecedented sixty pages of notes at the end of her book. In taking this tack, Lapierre entered the ranks of numerous other writers and novelists who are dipping into art history for their themes, and in so doing provide embellishment and elaboration on the lives of artists and their artworks in ways the art historian cannot or will not, but nevertheless are taking note of.⁹

In the past five years, the lives and works of a wide range of artists well known in art historical circles have been spun into fiction. The nineteenth century British photographer, Julia Margaret Cameron; the nineteenth century American expatriate and Impressionist artist, Mary Cassatt; the twentieth century Mexican painter, Frida Kahlo; the seventeenth century French painter, Georges de La Tour; and the early twentieth century Viennese painter, Oskar Kokoschka are just a few examples of artists whose lives have been recreated in the fictional genre.¹⁰ Often probing information and theories that are inconclusive in the realm of art history, these novels bring attention to artists and artworks through a popularly accessible medium, promoting ideas and images that resonate with the reader and can change the way in which original works by these artists are then seen.

In *Headlong*, for example, noted playwright Michael Frayn tells the story of an art historian who is convinced he has found a lost work by the sixteenth century Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel hanging in the home of a neighbor near his vacation retreat in the British countryside. Frayn explores the very real issues of attribution and connoisseurship at the heart of art historical research, demonstrating through exaggeration the ways in which art historians will often lay their reputation on the line to pursue a hunch. Likewise, sports writer Frank Deford creates a strangely intriguing reinterpretation of Peter Paul Rubens' painting *Venus and Adonis* in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, using reincarnation as his premise for his book *The Other Adonis*. Using psychoanalysis and flashbacks, Deford constructs the real but fictional lives of the man and woman who posed for Rubens' painting during the seventeenth century, offering an exaggerated if still valid example of the strong responses and

connections paintings often spur in viewers. Dan Brown's suspenseful, page-turner *The Da Vinci Code* employs and dramatically reinterprets Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, *Mona Lisa*, and *The Last Supper* as the backdrops to murder and the physical clues to unlocking the secret societies and the institutional corruption that are behind these crimes. *The Da Vinci Code* was the runaway hit of 2003, staying weeks on the *New York Times Bestseller List* and receiving full-page newspaper ads and an article where Brown's creative theories are explained to be just that.¹¹

Not surprisingly, the paintings of Johannes Vermeer have inspired a number of creative interpretations within the literary genre. As early as 1926, children's literature such as *Tales Told in Holland* discussed Vermeer and his contemporaries within the context of the short story and poem supplementing the text with illustrations based on Vermeer's paintings.¹² Ideas on the value and importance of viewing a Vermeer painting were central to the dialogue of Inez Haynes Irwin's *Maida's Little Houseboat*, one in a series of books for young adolescents published in 1943.¹³ Books like these offered younger audiences an early inroad to Vermeer's paintings and promoted an appreciation of his work that has proved to be lasting.¹⁴

According to Reynolds Price, Vermeer's *A Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* provided the inspiration for the character of Rosacoke Mustian in his 1960 novel *A Long and Happy Life*. As Price explains, the inspiration of the story came from a melding of his own experiences with the visual qualities of Vermeer's woman:

I went to my worktable and wrote down the impulse in skeletal notes. Propped against the wall before me was a color postcard I'd acquired after seeing the original in Holland the previous summer – Vermeer's pregnant girl in blue at a window, absorbed in a one-page letter in her hands, a large map suspended on the

plaster behind her. Surely it had silently inserted itself into whatever crowd of motives had brought me my own instant picture, so slowly evolved.¹⁵

Although on the surface Reynolds Price's novel and Vermeer's painting bear little resemblance, the introspective mood of each stirs much the same response from its reader. As the simple patterns and shapes found in Vermeer's painting strengthen our overall sense of the work, leaving an imprint on our minds, so too does the simplicity of the dialogue and narrative structure in *A Long and Happy Life* construct characters and images that connect with our imagination and remain with us long after the last word of the story has been read. Indeed, Price's main character of Rosacoke seems to personify the woman in Vermeer's painting. Inherently reserved and simple in demeanor, Rosacoke's thoughts are deep and probing, precisely the sort of character one imagines resides within *Woman in Blue*.

The factual omissions in the details of Johannes Vermeer's life and career, while potentially discouraging for the art historian, have actually encouraged our focus on the paintings and this has offered great freedom for viewers to fill in these voids with their own sense of meaning. Lacking a fixed narrative, Vermeer's paintings are continuously open to interpretation, encouraging our imaginations in ways that are often deeply personal. A number of more contemporary novels deal in some way with different aspects of Vermeer, his paintings, or the events surrounding his works.

Not surprisingly, the 1995-96 *Johannes Vermeer* exhibit provides the context for several of these works. *The Red Hat* by John Bayley, for example is a whimsical story that unfolds around the character of Nancy Deverell whose physical resemblance to Vermeer's *Girl in the Red Hat* is discovered while viewing the *Johannes Vermeer*

exhibition at The Hague and leads her into a series of bizarre adventures.¹⁶ Although Bayley's book utilizes Vermeer's painting and the exhibition primarily as the premise from which his story evolves, several other authors have spotlighted Vermeer, his paintings, and the events surrounding his works as the focus of their novels.

In the pages that follow, I will summarize and discuss some of the ways in which Johannes Vermeer, his paintings and his life have taken shape within the more popular genre of the contemporary novel. The narratives presented in these novels reflect ideas concerning the significance and meaning of Vermeer's paintings to a culture geographically and chronologically distanced from his own. My discussion here will center on the development of characters and descriptions of Vermeer or his art within the narrative, their underlying plots and how they parallel and paradoxically extend art historical argument. I will consider novels by Katharine Weber, Susan Vreeland, Tracey Chevalier and Paul Watkins. Each author creates a work of fiction derived from some aspect of the multifaceted history surrounding Johannes Vermeer and his paintings. Through the twists and turns of their fictionalized characters and plots, each novel adds a new layer to our multi-dimensional appreciation of Vermeer, offering an increased understanding of the real meaning of art in our current culture. Contained within their pages is the tangible evidence of the ways in which viewers respond to paintings – in this case, the way in which the authors have engaged their imaginations to construct stories and dialogue; the extent to which art historical research has provided fuel for this literary genre; and, importantly, how these novels, in turn, can become phantoms in our own imaginations, influencing how we view or see Vermeer's paintings.

The Music Lesson by Katharine Weber (1998)

It was very obvious to me that I would probably not be alone as a writer who had been struck in some way by the Vermeer exhibition...¹⁷

I had been thinking about Vermeer in a particular way for a long time, though, so the exhibition was more of a connection for me, to something that had been percolating for some twenty years.

The painting *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid* (it now hangs in the National Gallery in Dublin) was stolen by the IRA in 1974, with a group of paintings then hanging in the Beit Collection in County Wicklow. It was found eight days later in a little village in West Cork where I spent my honeymoon two years later. During our time in the village, we heard all about the discovery of the paintings, which were being kept by an Anglo-Irish woman, Rose Dugdale, who had been masquerading as a tourist. She went to prison for her part in the crime.

Her situation intrigued me. What had her vigil been like? Had she ever looked at the paintings? What was her relationship to the paintings? So when I came face to face with that particular Vermeer for the first time, in The Hague, where I saw the exhibition, my thoughts inevitably returned to that odd interlude in the painting's existence, when it spent those days hidden in a cottage in that remote village, a pawn in a political intrigue. Out of that situation came the beginnings of *The Music Lesson*.¹⁸

-- Katharine Weber, October 8, 2000

In Katharine Weber's *The Music Lesson* the story evolves from the theft of a Vermeer painting -- *The Music Lesson* -- during its transport from The Hague to Queen Elizabeth's collection following the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition.¹⁹ The book is written as a diary in the voice of Patricia Dolan, a woman of Irish descent who is working as an art librarian at The Frick Collection in New York when the story commences. Entries are written as both a retelling in dialogue form and as present day events woven together with emotional intrigue offering the reader the sense of having stumbled upon a mystery

that has not yet been detected.²⁰ The story begins when Dolan's previously unknown and distant cousin Michael O'Driscoll (Mickey) from Ireland appears in New York and they begin a love affair that, in turn, serves as a prelude to art theft.

As the story reveals, Dolan's acquaintance with Mickey was no chance encounter but had in fact been carefully planned. Mickey, who is later revealed to be a member of the Irish Republican Liberation Organization a fictional offshoot of the IRA, is there to pump Dolan for information needed to shape the intended theft. Dolan's January 28 diary entry recounts their conversation centered on the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition as she unknowingly identifies the painting that will become the target for the heist and ransom. Weber mixes descriptive imagery from her painting with historical facts and provenance information associated with other works by Vermeer and not specifically *The Music Lesson*.

“Patricia, if you could have any single one of those paintings in the Vermeer exhibition, which one would it be?” A playful question asked in deadly seriousness.

“*The Music Lesson*,” I said without hesitation, matching him for gravity, not at all sure where this was going. “Do you want to see it? I’ve got about fifty books with Vermeers in them.”

...

“I love this woman,” I said after leafing through to find *The Music Lesson*. “I have always loved this woman. See? So, in answer to your question, I choose her. Absolutely the best. Look at that face. Look at those hands. Look at that sifted light. There’s no yellow in the world like a Vermeer yellow.”

...

I sneaked a peek at Mickey to see if he was listening. He seemed to be, so I kept talking. “*The Music Lesson* has never been questioned, by the way, even through it’s on an oak panel. It’s the only absolutely definitely A-OK Vermeer on a wood panel. So, if anything, that might add to its value, I suppose. Its provenance is impeccable. Vermeer’s widow sold it to a baker to settle a debt the year after Vermeer’s death. It paid for bread. Isn’t that amazing? This painting paid for bread for Vermeer’s widow and eleven children.”²¹

Mickey's intentions are slowly revealed and, responding to her Irish roots, Dolan signs on as an accomplice. As the story unfolds, her expertise and background in the museum field prove invaluable to the evolving plan.

For more than a third of her book, Weber leads the reader to believe the painting of her novel is, indeed, Vermeer's *The Music Lesson*. As Weber correctly recounts, *The Music Lesson* was acquired by King George III of England in 1762 as a Frans van Mieris but was later discovered to be by Vermeer. Vermeer's painting *The Music Lesson* is relatively large within the context of his other paintings of the 1660s and, like all of his other works except one, is painted in oil on canvas (fig. 45).²² As is characteristic of most of Vermeer's other paintings, *The Music Lesson* is set inside the home in a room whose contents include a tapestry covered table; a chair with lion finials, blue leather upholstery, and shiny brass tacks; a white porcelain jug; a painting hanging on the back wall; and windows on the left through which light enters. A woman stands at the far end of the room across an expansive floor of blue and white tiles. Separated both by her distance and her backward position, the viewer sees her face only through its reflection in a mirror hung above the virginal she is apparently playing. A man standing in side view to the right is either teaching or accompanying her.

The painting of Weber's novel, however, is a fictional construction bearing only scant resemblance to Vermeer's original painting *The Music Lesson*. Her first description appears in her entry of January 24, five days after Patricia Dolan begins writing from Ballyroe, Weber's fictional village in West Cork, Ireland, where the painting is taken after being stolen. The details of Weber's *The Music Lesson* contrast sharply to Vermeer's painting of that title.

I have spent the past hours up in a small windowless middle room where she must be locked away from the world, contemplating her again. I can join her in that simple peaceful chamber, with the rich afternoon light falling through the window across the wooden grain of the table, the glazed surface of the gleaming white pitcher, the soft, precise fuzz of the peaches on the windowsill. The sun has warmed the smooth black and white squares of the stone floor. The lute lies in her lap, under her fingers. Her gaze has a steadying, hypnotic effect...²³



Figure 45. Johannes Vermeer, *The Music Lesson*, c. 1662-1664, (oil on canvas), Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

The physical description of Weber's painting becomes a composite Vermeer rather than any single image. In this way, Weber has offered a creative appropriation that resonates as several Vermeer paintings with allusions to Jan van Eyck mixed in.²⁴ The book's jacket cover further extends Weber's painting to another by Vermeer, reproducing a detail appropriated from *A Lady Writing*, an image that projects precisely the genre through which the book evolves.

Dolan's entry goes on to describe the very personal response the painting conjures within her, a feeling she regards as being in conflict with her training as an art historian.

...with her, I feel safe. She connects with something in me. The smile that isn't quite a smile. The knowingness, the intelligence – they're generous gifts across the centuries. Nothing is more real, not the view out this window to the sharp little islands that have broken off this ferocious coast, not my own hands holding the pen moving across the page. Her presence dazzles me. How could Vermeer have made her up?²⁵

Weber's dialogue here is both insightful and ironic as she asks a question that, indeed, she has already answered through the imaginative image she creates for her book based on several Vermeer paintings. Her reflections continue:

She must have lived, I have to believe that there was an actual woman possessed of this sensibility who lived 330 years ago. And lives in the present, made immortal by the greatest painter who ever lived. What I can't quite reconcile, given my art history training (Smith, then Mt. Holyoke – my thesis was a consideration of the relationship of Cubism to the still lifes of three seventeenth-century Dutch painters) is my own refusal to know that I am responding to a painted image.²⁶

I confound myself with the feeling that this painting is merely a representation of something actual. While intellectually I can accept that this is indeed Illusion – I am in the presence of the genius of Vermeer – I am simultaneously convinced that she lived and she still lives, brought to life and kept alive on a painted panel.

Weber continues to return to Dolan's intense connection to *The Music Lesson* throughout the narrative, allowing the dialogue to seemingly become a kind of ventriloquism for Weber's own sentiments.

The painting in Dolan's book unfolds as a pathway to transformation, a way for Dolan to connect the pieces of her life left scattered through a series of personal tragedies and losses.

I will never know this woman – I will never know her name, or the music she is about to play. I don't know what foods she likes, or if she has children.

She remains silent. But I have come to know that she represents very well. And I am grateful for her lesson, for what she has taught me about integrity, and constancy. Through her, I have come to know myself, and I have begun to understand the world a little better, too. I have to figure out ways to live in my own rooms. I have started to recognize my strengths as well as my weaknesses. Some of my strengths, it turns out, *were* my weaknesses.²⁷

Connections to other literature and events from history are scattered throughout Weber's novel. Within the construction of Vermeer's paintings, Patricia Dolan describes the death of her daughter which, in turn, connects her character to that of Henry Clay Frick whose own young daughter's death reportedly had tremendous impact on his collecting decisions, including his purchase of the three Vermeer paintings currently in the Frick Collection.²⁸ By focusing the book on a theft of a Vermeer painting, the real life thefts of *Lady Writing a letter with her Maid* (1974 and 1986) and *The Concert* (1990) are also naturally called to mind and, indeed, are discussed within the story's dialogue. Weber also includes quotes from Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" throughout the book and she uses his theoretical framework as an opportunity to construct an ironic twist in the painting's "life" at the end of the story.²⁹ This ending, which links Vermeer's painting with the passage of life into death, is also reminiscent of the ending of Marcel Proust's *The Remembrance of Things Past*.³⁰

Interestingly, the connections Weber draws between events from history and the paintings of Vermeer have apparently caused some readers to misinterpret her novel as being primarily based on history. The paperback edition of her book includes an elaborate disclaimer:

In a novel, the fictions are not necessarily limited to character and plot. The world has never seen this particular painting by Vermeer, because it does not quite exist. The Vermeer at Buckingham Palace is a different painting altogether, and I have no reason to believe that it has ever been the object of a ransom plot. While there was a recent Vermeer exhibition at the Mauritshuis in The Hague, it did not actually take place in the month of January. It would be very rude to write about my neighbors, so I haven't. There is no village of Ballyroe in West Cork, but if there were, it might be near the village of Ardfield. I have no knowledge of any IRA splinter group calling itself the Irish Republican Liberation Organization.³¹

While acknowledging that her painting is not the Vermeer painting known as *The Music Lesson* nor any painting of tangible form, Weber nevertheless stakes claim in the creation of a new Vermeer that, indeed, becomes real through the words of her story and as an image readers construct and retain in their imaginations.

Although Weber never specifically communicates her thoughts about Vermeer in her commentary on *The Music Lesson* excerpted at the beginning of my discussion, what she is thinking becomes self-evident within the context of her narrative. In keeping with the dialogue set forth within the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition, Weber registers and communicates ideas concerning the tremendous refinement, perfection, and intrinsic beauty of Vermeer's images, as well as their ability to enlighten and transform one's life. In pondering the real life theft of *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid* and the relationship that may have transpired between her and the equally real accomplice Rose Dugadale, Katharine Weber clearly looked to both herself, art historical discourse, and the popular dialogue that surrounded the museum exhibition and it is a composite of these sources that became the voice of her fictional character Patricia Dolan. Despite the liberties she has taken in creating an image that is not but nevertheless refers to Vermeer's *The Music Lesson*, Weber has offered readers understandings about the history

of his paintings in a form that is more popularly accessible than the scholarly tome. Although Weber has taken precautions to alert her readers to the fictional nature of her book, the parallels between her story and the real thefts of Vermeer paintings as well as the way she reflects ideas prevalent in the popular discourse on Vermeer resonates with her readers and effectively extends the interest and intrigue that surrounds this master.³²

Girl in Hyacinth Blue by Susan Vreeland (1999)

I remember my step great grandfather who came from England to paint America as a young man. When I was nine he taught me to mix colors. With his strong hand surrounding my small one, he guided the brush until a calla lily appeared on a page of real, textured watercolor paper. How many girls throughout history would have longed to be taught that, but had to do washing and mending instead?

I've always envied writers whose novels gushed out from their own growing up, rich in ethnicity or place or history. Countering my complaints about my ethnic blandness, the lack of a ready-made family story, one of my writer friends said, "Go back further." All I had was a love for art, a Dutch name, and a trip twenty years earlier when, to my surprise, I passed through a village in North Holland named Vreeland. I had nothing more than that – except a library card, and uninterrupted days of solitude, two years of cancer treatment and recovery, during which I could imagine my way into Dutch paintings. They showed me a heritage alive with vitality and history and the endurance of beauty. They survived – and so would I. Poring over the National Gallery catalog of the Johannes Vermeer exhibition in Washington D.C., I felt a growing love for a people and a place I could call mine...I felt Dutch! It was Vermeer who gave me my heritage.

In him I saw my same reverence for items made by hand – by someone unknown to him. Vermeer, too, was a lover of the connotations and qualities of things in his own domestic life: the luminous variations of pale colors in a hand-dipped window pane,

a woman's silk jacket with fur trim, the rough nap of a red Turkish carpet, the strong lines of a golden pitcher, a hand-drawn wall map showing where that ship captain sailed. Now the cords of connection tightened, and I felt free to add objects of my own imagination – a glass of milk left by a sickly child, a sewing basket, a young girl's new black shoes with square gold buckles. I had a painting – and with news reports of so much art stolen from Holocaust victims by members of the Third Reich, I had a start.³³

-- Susan Vreeland, October 6, 2000

Similar to Weber's *The Music Lesson*, Susan Vreeland conceptualizes and constructs her own Vermeer painting in *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*.³⁴ Vreeland's story, however, focuses on the "life" of her painting in a much more traditional sense, tracing the fictional history of the work from the present to the moment in the past when Vermeer's idea was first conceived. Each of her eight chapters function as an individual story whose narrative details the lives of the people who acquire Vermeer's painting, how they acquire it, and the reasons it ultimately leaves their possession. In each situation the owner develops a strong emotional attachment to the painting yet ultimately must part with it. Precise dates are rarely offered within the sections allowing the reader to navigate time and distance through events or nuance that parallel known events from history. Collectively the chapters and the stories probe and inform the reader of some of the more intriguing aspects related to Vermeer studies.

In the chapter titled "Morningshine," for example, a young Dutch mother, Saskia and her farmer husband find Vermeer's painting swaddled and abandoned with a baby in their boat following a devastating flood. A note attached to the painting reads, "Sell the painting. Feed the child."³⁵ Due to the high waters, Saska is forced to live in the upper story of their home with her husband, other small children and the family cow, yet she

finds peace and the suggestion of a life she might not otherwise know through Vermeer's painting. The captivating beauty of the Vermeer, however, dims Saskia's sense of reality, and in the end she, like all the other characters in the book, must part with the painting, in her case, to obtain the economic means for survival.

Vreeland's story is spun around many of life's fundamental truths. Although each chapter or section in *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* could be read alone, when read together, each amplifies and extends the meaning of the story that preceded it. The sections move backward in time, then forward within the stories they tell. Each succeeding chapter overlaps with the story that preceded it, filling in details on events only suggested in the story before. The unique perceptions or experiences of the painting's successive owners are ultimately linked to the meaning the work had for Vermeer.

Like visual artists George Deem and Terri Priest, as well as Katharine Weber, Vreeland creates a new image that is based on physical characteristics and nuance demonstrated in Vermeer's aesthetics. Rather than divulging the full description of the painting in a single chapter or story, Vreeland's description of her "Vermeer" is scattered throughout the narrative. In the first chapter the narrator offers an opening description of the painting's image:

A most extraordinary painting in which a young girl wearing a short blue smock over a rust-colored shirt sat in profile at a table by an open window.³⁶

Through the course of her dialogue Vreeland, like the author of *Maida's Little House Boat*, constructs an art historical argument for the painting's attribution to Vermeer in a way that is reminiscent of scholarly discourse, particularly that found in the text of the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition catalogue.

“Look. Look at her eye. Like a pearl. Pearls were favorite items of Vermeer. The longing in her expression. And look at that Delft light spilling onto her forehead from the window.” He took out his handkerchief and, careful not to touch the painting, wiped the frame, though I saw no dust at all. “See here,” he said, “the grace of her hand, idle, palm up. How he consecrated a single moment in that hand. But more than that –“

“Remarkable,” I said. “Certainly done in a style of Vermeer. A beguiling imitation.”

Cornelius placed his hands on the arm of the chair and leaned toward me until I felt his breath on my forehead. “It is a Vermeer,” he whispered.

I sputtered at the thought, the absurdity, his belief. “There were many done in the style of Vermeer, and of Rembrandt. School of Rubens, and the like. The world is full of copyists.”

Vreeland accurately sets forth the history of Vermeer and his paintings and the ways in which imitations have, in the past, fooled collector and art historians. Vreeland’s Cornelius, however, is stubborn in his position leaving the reader to wonder if the painting she portrays is meant to be an original or a forgery.

“It is a Vermeer,” he said again. The solemnity of his tone drew my eyes from the painting to him. He appeared to be biting the inside of his cheek. “You don’t think so?” he asked, his hand going up to cover his heart.

“It’s just that there are so few.” I hated to disillusion the man.

“Yes, surely, very few. Very few. He did at the most forty canvases. And only a matter of thirty to thirty-five are located. *Welk een schat! En waar is dat alles gebleven?*”

“What’s that?”

“Just the lament of some Dutch art historian. Where has such a treasure gone, or some such thing.” He turned to pour us both a brandy. “So why could this not be? It’s his same window opening inward at the left that he used so often, the same splash of pale yellow light. Take a look at the figures in the tapestry on the table. Same as in nine other paintings. Same Spanish chair with lion’s head finials that he used in eleven canvases, same brass studs in the leather. Same black and white tiles placed diagonally on the floor.”

Vreeland’s dialogue charts some of the essential characteristics of a real Vermeer’s paintings that have similarly led experts in the past to mistake an imitation for a real

Vermeer. Resembling an argument taken from the pages of art history, Vreeland continues to explore the authenticity of the painting in the dialogue of her book.

“Subject matter alone does not prove authenticity.”

“Granted, but I take you to be a man of keen observation. You are an artist, Richard. Surely you can see that the floor suffers the same distortion of tiles he had in his earlier work, for example, *The Music Lesson*, roughly dated 1662 to '64, or *Girl with the Wineglass*, 1660.”

I never would have guessed he knew all this. He reeled it off like a textbook. Well, so could I. “That can likewise prove it was done by an inferior imitator, or by van Mieris, or de Hooch. They all did tile floors. Holland was paved with tile.”

“Yes, yes, I know. Even George III thought *The Music Lesson* was a van Mieris when he bought it, but even a king can't make it so. It's a Vermeer.” He whispered the name.

I hardly knew what to say. It was too implausible.

He cleared off books and papers from the corner of his large oak desk, propped himself there and leaned toward me. “I can see you still doubt. Study, if you will, the varying depths of field. Take a look at the sewing basket placed forward on the table, as he often did, by the way, almost as an obstruction between the viewer and the figure. Its weave is diffused slightly out of focus, yet the girl's face is sharply in focus. Look at the lace edge of her cap. Absolutely precise to a pinprick right there at her temple. And now look at the glass of milk. Soft-edged, and the map on the wall only a suggestion. Agreed?”

I nodded, more out of regard for his urgency than in accord.

“Well, then, he did the same in *The Lacemaker*, 1669. Which leads me to surmise this was done between 1665 and 1668.”

I felt his eyes boring into me as I examined the painting. “You've amassed a great deal of information. Is there a signature?”

“No, no signature. But that was not unusual. He often failed to sign his work. Besides, he had at least seven styles of signature. For Vermeer, signatures are not definite evidence. Technique is. Look at the direction of the brush's stroke, those tiny grooves of the brush hairs. They have their lighted and their shaded side. Look elsewhere. You'll find overlapping layers of paint no thicker than silk thread that give a minute difference in shade. That's what makes it a Vermeer.”³⁷

The doubt that Vreeland creates concerning the authenticity of the painting encourages thoughts on forgery within the reader, adding a welcome element of intrigue to her story. Vermeer's small oeuvre and the relative similarity of their compositional

design, indeed, makes it possible for one to become a connoisseur capable of dating his art in the same way as Vreeland's character does in her story.

As Vreeland's chapter continues we learn that the painting came into Cornelius' possession through his father who as a member of the Nazi guard, confiscated it from the home of a Jewish family in Amsterdam after a raid on August 6, 1942. Vreeland describes Cornelius' knowledge of the painting as a confusing mix between factual account, his research, and his own creative imaginings. As we learn, Cornelius' father chose to return to the home after the raid and take the painting to keep for himself rather than turning it in to the Nazis where it would have been meticulously catalogued with its provenance, including the Jewish family's name, duly recorded. She, thus, provides the reason for the lost records of the painting that might have proved its authenticity.

The second chapter of Vreeland's book "A Night Different from All Other Nights" continues the provenance of the painting backward in time while continuing to build on its description. Here we learn of Hannah, a pubescent girl in a Jewish family, who likewise becomes entranced with the image and whose father acquires the painting for her.

...Hannah sat looking at the painting above the sideboard. It was of a girl her own age looking out a window while sewing. The way she leaned forward, intent on something, and the longing in her eyes cast a spell over her every time she looked. The girl wasn't working, at least not at the moment. Her hands were lax, the buttons on the table like flat pearls yet to be sewn on, because what was going on in her mind was more important. Hannah understood that.

Vreeland's character of Hannah identifies with the painting in a very personal way. Her age and her response to Vreeland's painting is remarkably close to my own response to

The Lacemaker when I was eleven. Hannah's thoughts flash backwards to her memories of how she had acquired the painting.

It was on an excursion with Father, just the two of them, a couple years earlier that he bought the painting – 1940, just before her eleventh birthday. He'd been going to meetings of the Comite voor Joodsche Vluchtelingen, Jewish refugees from Germany, in the Rotterdam Café next to the Diamond Exchange and had taken her to an auction where families had donated paintings, vases, jewelry and Oriental rugs to be bid on by families as a means to raise money for refugee support. It was essential, he'd said, that the government not bear the expense of the Jewish poor. When this painting came up for bid, she gasped. The face of the girl in the painting almost glowed, her blue eyes, cheeks, the corners of her mouth all bright and glossy, the light coming right at her across the space between them. She seemed more real than the people in the room.

When Father cast a bid, Hannah sucked in her breath, astonished. He bid again. He grasped her hand when the bidding got above two hundred guilders; she squeezed his back when it passed three hundred. The higher the bids, the tighter she squeezed until, when he cast the bid that bought it, she cried, "Papa!" and didn't let go of his hand all the way home. Father buying it seemed to honor her in a way that made her feel worthy.

The moment they walked in with the painting, while it was still wrapped, Mother straightened up and looked from her to Father as if she could tell something significant had happened. Hannah remembered feeling light-headed as she walked through the rooms choosing a place, until she settled on the dining room above the sideboard. She unwrapped it and held it up. "See Mamela, how lovely?" Sitting bolt upright across from it at the dining table, just where she was sitting now, she was the last to go to bed that night.³⁸

Hannah identifies the girl in the painting with herself and Vreeland uses her reflections to describe both the outer appearance of the painting and the inner character of Hannah.

Now it became clear to her what made her love the girl in the painting. It was her quietness. A painting, after all, can't speak. Yet she felt this girl, sitting inside a room but looking out, was probably quiet by nature, like she was. But that didn't mean that the girl didn't want anything, like Mother said about her. Her face told her she probably wanted something so deep or so remote that she never dared breathe it but was thinking about it there by the window. And not only wanted. She was capable of doing some great wild loving thing. Yes, oh yes.³⁹

As the chapters progress backward in time, we learn that others who had owned the painting were also attracted to its physical appearance in part because of the way it reminded them of someone or, indeed, of themselves and their own life experiences. In the end, Vermeer's intention in painting the fictional work of Vreeland's novel is revealed as being simply his desire to convey a stillness and beauty that seemed otherwise unattainable in his real life existence. Even the subject of the painting, revealed to us in the final two chapters, as the eldest daughter of Vermeer, was without the peace her image projected and this understanding encourages our realization of the true subjective reality of Vermeer's aesthetic.

Girl in Hyacinth Blue like Weber's *The Music Lesson* offers a melding of the author's reflections on Vermeer within the context of the art historical discourse on this artist. Although the painting discussed in her book exists only in the imaginations of the author and her readers, Vreeland has nevertheless invested it with a clear history that reflects in many ways both the real and imagined history surrounding this artist's works. Mixed with her message of the extraordinary beauty and psychological power of Vermeer's images is a narrative that conveys the fundamental truth about his paintings: No matter how long or how hard we study his subjects, we will never really know who they are, but we may, in the process of looking, learn something significant about ourselves.

Girl with a Pearl Earring by Tracy Chevalier (2000)

I went to the Vermeer exhibition when it came to The Hague in 1996. I made a special pilgrimage to it, in fact, because I had loved Vermeer for so long and always wanted to see his paintings in the flesh. In fact one of my goals in life has been to see all 35 of them, and in one fell swoop I saw 23 (many of which I admit I had already seen). I didn't go with a book in mind, nor come back with one in mind. It wasn't till a year and a half later that I had the idea for *Girl with a Pearl Earring*...However, I suspect that the exhibition dislodged something in me, set the dust floating in the air, to settle months later.

I found the exhibition exhilarating in theory but disappointing in practice. There were so many people there that you got about two seconds in front of a painting before someone shoved you out of the way. And with so many bodies in the room there was no way there could be any communication between the paintings, so to speak. One of the miracles of exhibitions is to see paintings that were once together (in the painter's studio, or his/her patron or whatever) reunited. But the Vermeers got crowded out by the enthusiasm of the public. Victims of their success.

I've had a poster of *Girl-Pearl* in my bedroom since I was 19 – I've been looking at it for a long time. That poster is very faded now, so I thought that I would get a new one at the exhibition. The painting was restored for the exhibition and uncovered new things – pink highlights at the corners of the mouth, a fleck of white paint on the earring that was a mistake in an earlier restoration and shouldn't have been there, etc. So I bought a new poster but when I got it home I just couldn't put it up. It was so, well, clean, plus a lot darker than my faded one. The new one's still in a closet somewhere.⁴⁰

--Tracy Chevalier, October 9, 2000

Of the evolving body of literature using Vermeer's life, work and milieu as its departure, *Girl with a Pearl Earring* by Tracy Chevalier has become by far the most popular, continuing more than forty-five weeks on the *New York Times* Bestseller List and still in wide circulation.⁴¹ Chevalier's book constructs a story of the girl portrayed in

Vermeer's painting that in its historical accuracy and sensory detail seems to many both insightful and convincing. Intimately set within the life and times of Johannes Vermeer, Chevalier's protagonist is Griet, a sixteen-year-old girl whose comfortable working-class life changes to servitude when her craftsman father survives an explosion in a Delftware factory that leaves him blind and unable to continue work in his trade. At the arrangement of her parents, Griet becomes a maid in the household of Maria Thins, the mother-in-law of Johannes Vermeer, where she resides with the Vermeer family throughout the week. In addition to her responsibilities for washing, procuring food from the market, and assisting with the cooking, Griet is charged with the cleaning of Vermeer's studio, a room forbidden to all without invitation, including Vermeer's wife Catherina and his five children.

Perhaps the most appealing aspect of Chevalier's novel is the way in which she weaves threads of information gleaned from important Vermeer scholarship into an interesting fictional narrative. Fieldwork and research are certainly components of all good fiction regardless of its form and each of the novels based on Vermeer includes aspects of predominant arguments within the art historical field. Chevalier's facility within this genre is greatly enhanced by her careful assimilation of Simon Schama's *The Embarrassment of Riches*, John Montias' *Vermeer and His Milieu* and the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition catalogue.⁴²

Girl with a Pearl Earring is told in first person through the reflections of Griet, which commence in 1664 with her interview with Vermeer and Catherina when they come to her home near the Koe Gate off the Rietveld Canal in 1664.⁴³ Caught in the kitchen in the midst of chopping and arranging vegetables for soup, Griet's inherent sense

of life and visual effect is immediately recognized by Vermeer. Their introduction forges a rapport between the two that is wrought with sexual tension continuously steadied by their personal sense of propriety.

Chevalier describes Griet's first entry into Vermeer's studio using elements found in his paintings to explain the room's contents:

At the studio she searched among the keys, then unlocked and pushed open the door. The room was dark, the shutters closed – I could make out only a little from the cracks of light streaming in between them. The room gave off a clean, sharp odor of linseed oil that reminded me of my father's clothes when he had returned from the tile factory at night. It smelled like wood and fresh-cut hay mixed together.

Catharina remained on the threshold. I did not dare enter before her. After an awkward moment she ordered, "Open the shutters, then. Not the window on the left. Just the middle and far windows. And only the lower part of the middle window."

I crossed the room, edging around an easel and chair to the middle window. I pulled open the lower window, then opened out the shutters. I did not look at the painting on the easel, not while Catharina was watching me from the doorway.

A table had been pushed up against the window on the right, with a chair set in the corner. The chair's back and seat were of leather tooled with yellow flowers and leaves.

"Don't move anything over there," Catharina reminded me. "That is what he is painting."⁴⁴

After Catharina leaves Griet continues to regard the room before beginning to clean. Chevalier bases Griet's description on a synthesis of visual information culled from various Vermeer paintings as the room's physical character resembles aspects of several works by the artist including *The Music Lesson*, *The Milk Maid*, *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*, and *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*. In her description of his studio, Chevalier creates a world of seclusion for Vermeer, a world that certainly contrasted with the busy home life shared with a wife, mother-in-law, numerous children.

Now that I had a moment I surveyed the room. It was a large, square space, not as long as the great hall downstairs. With the windows open it was bright and airy, with white-washed walls, and grey and white marble tiles on the floor, the darker tiles set in a pattern of square crosses. A row of Delft tiles painted with cupids lined the bottom of the walls to protect the whitewash from our mops. They were not my father's.

Though it was a big room, it held little furniture. There was the easel and chair set in front of the middle window, and the table placed in front of the window in the right corner. Besides the chair I had stood on there was another by the table, of plain leather nailed on with brass studs and two lion heads carved into the tops of the posts. Against the far wall, behind the chair and easel, was a small cupboard, its drawers closed, several brushes and a knife with a diamond-shaped blade arranged on top next to clean palettes. Beside the cupboard was a desk on which were papers and books and prints. Two more lion-head chairs had been set against the wall near the doorway.

It was an orderly room, empty of the clutter of everyday life. It felt different from the rest of the house, almost as if it were in another house altogether. When the door was closed it would be difficult to hear the shouts of the children, the jangle of Catharina's keys, the sweeping of our brooms.⁴⁵

Here, no doubt influenced by historical accounts relating the Dutch tendency for cleanliness, Chevalier ponders intensely and takes great labor to explain how a maid must have tackled cleaning Vermeer's studio where a set-up would probably have continued a number of months while he was working on a painting.

I took up my broom, bucket of water, and dustcloth and began to clean. I started in the corner where the scene of the painting had been set up, where I knew I must not move a thing. I kneeled on the chair to dust the window I had struggled to open, and the yellow curtain that hung to one side of it in the corner, touching it lightly so that I would not disturb its folds. The panes of glass were dirty and needed scrubbing with warm water, but I was not sure if he wanted them clean. I would have to ask Catharina.

I dusted the chairs, polishing the brass studs and lion heads. The table had not been cleaned properly in some time. Someone had wiped around the objects placed there – a powder-brush, a pewter bowl, a letter, a black ceramic pot, blue cloth heaped to one side and hanging over the edge – but they had to be moved for the table really to be cleaned. As my mother had said, I would have to find a way to move things yet put them back exactly as if they had not been touched.

The letter lay close to the corner of the table. If I placed my thumb along one edge of the paper, my second finger along another, and anchored my hand

with my smallest finger hooked to the table edge, I should be able to move the letter, dust there, and replace it where my hand indicated.

I laid fingers against the edges and drew in my breath, then removed the letter, dusted and replaced it all in one quick movement. I was not sure why I felt I had to do it quickly. I stood back from the table. The letter seemed to be in the right place, though only he would really know.

Still, if this was to be my test, I had best get it done.

From the letter I measured with my hand to the powder-brush, then placed my fingers at various points around one side of the brush. I removed it, dusted, replaced it, and measured the space between it and the letter. I did the same with the bowl.

This was how I cleaned without seeming to move anything. I measured each thing in relation to objects around it and the space between them. The small things on the table were easy, the furniture harder – I used my feet, my knees, sometimes my shoulders and chin with the chairs.⁴⁶

Chevalier's description of many of the room details and objects found on the table suggests the room seen in Vermeer's painting *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*, which we find is indeed the case as the narrative progresses. Griet recounts working around the easel and canvas, cleaning everything but resisting the urge to look at the painting. Finally, however, she is caught off guard and regards the painting intently. Her first reaction is heightened through her dialogue with Maria Thins, Vermeer's mother-in-law who enters the studio as Griet stands before the painting. The dialogue conveys Maria Thins respect for Vermeer's work as well as her concern for more practical matters such as the work's monetary worth. Through their experience with the painting the two women forge a rapport based on shared understanding and regard that is renewed several times during the course of the book.

When I glimpsed the yellow satin, however, I had to stop.

I was still staring at the painting when Maria Thins spoke.

“Not a common sight, now, is it?”

I had not heard her come in. She stood inside the doorway, slightly stooped, wearing a fine black dress and lace collar.

I did not know what to say, and I couldn't help it – I turned back to the painting.

Maria Thins laughed. “You're not the only one to forget your manners in front of one of his paintings, girl.” She came over to stand beside me. “Yes, he's managed this one well. That's van Ruijven's wife.” I recognized the name as the patron my father had mentioned. “She's not beautiful but he makes her so,” she added. “It will fetch a good price.”

Because it was the first painting of his I was to see, I always remembered it better than the others, even those I saw grow from the first layer of underpaint to the final highlights.

A woman stood in front of a table, turned towards a mirror on the wall so that she was in profile. She wore a mantle of rich yellow satin trimmed with white ermine, and a fashionable five-pointed red ribbon in her hair. A window lit her from the left, falling across her face and tracing the delicate curve of her forehead and nose. She was tying a string of pearls around her neck, holding the ribbons up, her hands suspended in the air. Entranced with herself in the mirror, she did not seem to be aware that anyone was looking at her. Behind her on a bright white wall was an old map, in the dark foreground the table with the letter on it, the powder-brush and other things I had dusted...

Maria Thins seemed content to stand with me and contemplate the painting. It was odd to look at it with the setting just behind it. Already from my dusting I knew all the objects on the table, and their relation to one another – the letter by the corner, the powder-brush lying casually next to the pewter bowl, the blue cloth bunched around the dark pot. Everything seemed to be exactly the same, except cleaner and purer. It made a mockery of my own cleaning.

Then I saw a difference. I drew in my breath.

“What is it, girl?”

“In the painting there are no lion heads on the chair next to the woman,” I said.

“No. There was once a lute sitting on the chair as well. He makes plenty of changes. He doesn't paint just what he sees, but what will suit. Tell me girl, do you think this painting is done?”

I stared at her. Her question must be a trick but I could not imagine any change that would make it better.

“Isn't it?” I faltered.

Maria Thins snorted. “He's been working on it for three months. I expect he'll do so for two more months. He will change things. You'll see.”⁴⁷

As the story evolves Griet and Vermeer build between them a rapport largely based on an unspoken sense of understanding and trust. Through the dialogue between them as well as Griet's conversations with Maria Thins and also her father, the reader is

exposed to nearly all speculated and understood truths concerning Vermeer's working method. The way Vermeer mixes and applies his paints, the time involved in completing his paintings, and the way he frequently altered or simplified his designs are all discussed or explained within the dialogue. Of particular interest is Chevalier's discussion of the camera obscura, the use of which is still under debate within the context of Vermeer.

Through her narrative, Chevalier introduces the theme of the camera obscura in a more matter-of-fact way to the more general reader

When I arrived to clean the studio, the easel and chair had been moved to one side. The desk was in their place, cleared of papers and prints. On it sat a wooden box about the size of a chest for storing clothes in. A smaller box was attached to one side, with a round object protruding from it.

I did not understand what it was, but I did not dare touch it. I went about my cleaning, glancing over at it now and then as if its use would suddenly become clear to me. I cleaned the corner, then the rest of the room, dusting the box so that I hardly touched it with my cloth. I cleaned the storeroom and mopped the floor. When I was done I stood in front of the box, arms crossed, moving around to study it.

My back was to the door but I knew suddenly that he was standing there. I wasn't sure whether to turn around or wait for him to speak.

He must have made the door creak, for then I was able to turn and face him. He was leaning against the threshold, wearing a long black robe over his daily clothes. He was watching me curiously, but he did not seem anxious that I might damage his box.

"Do you want to look in it?" he asked. It was the first time he had spoken directly to me since he asked about the vegetables many weeks before.⁴⁸

According to Chevalier's story, Vermeer had borrowed the box from his friend van Leeuwenhoek. Vermeer explains to Griet that the box is a camera obscura and moves to position and adjust it so that she can view through it. Aware of her social position and the potential dangers of being found alone under the cape Vermeer directed she must pull over her head when viewing with the box, Griet asks Vermeer to leave the room while she looks.

And I was curious. It became easier to consider it without him watching me. I took a deep breath and gazed down into the box. I could see on the glass a faint trace of the scene in the corner. As I brought the robe over my head, the image, as he called it, became clearer and clearer – the table, the chairs, the yellow curtain in the corner, the back wall with the map hanging on it, the ceramic pot gleaming on the table, the pewter basin, the powder-brush, the letter. They were all there, assembled before my eyes on a flat surface, a painting that was not a painting. I cautiously touched the glass – it was smooth and cold, with no traces of paint on it. I removed the robe and the image went faint again, though it was still there. I put the robe over me once more, closing out the light, and watched the jeweled colors appear again. They seemed to be even brighter and more colorful on the glass than they were in the corner.

It became as hard to stop looking into the box as it had been to take my eyes from the painting of the woman with the pearl necklace the first time I'd seen it. When I heard the tap on the door I just had time to straighten up and let the robe drop to my shoulders before he walked in.

“Have you looked again, Griet? Have you looked properly?”

“I have looked, sir, but I am not at all sure of what I have seen.” I smoothed my cap.

“It is surprising, isn't it? I was as amazed as you the first time my friend showed it to me.”

“But why do you look at it, sir, when you can look at your own painting?”

“You do not understand.” He tapped the box. “This is a tool. I use it to help me see, so that I am able to make the painting.”

“But—you use your eyes to see.”

“True, but my eyes do not always see everything.”

My eyes darted to the corner, as if they would discover something unexpected that had been hidden from me before, behind the powder-brush, emerging from the shadows of the blue cloth.

“Tell me, Griet,” he continued, “do you think I simply paint what is there in that corner?”

I glanced at the painting unable to answer. I felt as if I were being tricked. Whatever I answered would be wrong.

“The camera obscura helps me to see in a different way,” he explained. “To see more of what is there.”⁴⁹

Chevalier expands on this discussion several pages later by noting Vermeer's removal of the map that hung in the background of the painting when he reworked it several days later. Here, again, Chevalier has determined the reasoning for Vermeer's alteration, which indeed took place during the artist's production of the work and was

discussed in the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition catalogue.⁵⁰ Chevalier's explanation that the removal of the map or the lute indicated above in her discussion with Maria Thins was a result of his use of the camera obscura, however, is not specifically discussed in the literature cited for her research and, thus, appears to be Chevalier's theory.⁵¹ Griet's own response to Vermeer's removal of the map focus on the benefits of the composition's simplification, declaring to Vermeer "It is a better painting now."⁵²

Chevalier admits the fictional nature of *Girl With a Pearl Earring* in a kind of confession through the dialog between Griet and her father. Descriptions of Vermeer's paintings and discussions of his technique are woven throughout Griet's story. As became her practice on her Sunday visits to her family home, Griet seeks in this scene to describe the painting Vermeer is currently developing as a means of satisfying her father's visual sense left numb by his blindness. Griet's own character and appearance are, in turn, amplified by this description.

"The baker's daughter stands in a bright corner by a window," I began patiently. "She is facing us, but is looking out the window down to her right. She is wearing a yellow and black fitted bodice of silk and velvet, a dark blue skirt, and a white cape that hangs down in two points below her chin."

"As you wear yours?" my father asked. He had never asked this before, though I had described the cap the same way each time.

"Yes, like mine. When you look at the cap long enough," I added hurriedly, "you see that he has not really painted it white, but blue, and violet, and yellow."

"But it's a white cap, you said."

"Yes, that's what is so strange. It's painted many colors, but when you look at it, you think it's white."

"Tile painting is much simpler," my father grumbled. "You use blue and that's all. A dark blue for the outlines, a light blue for the shadows. Blue is blue."

And a tile is a tile, I thought, and nothing like his paintings. I wanted him to understand that white was not simply white. It was a lesson my master had taught me.⁵³

"What is she doing?" he asked after a moment.

“She has one hand on a pewter pitcher sitting on a table and one on a window she’s partly opened. She’s about to pick up the pitcher and dump the water from it out the window, but she’s stopped in the middle of what she’s doing and is either dreaming or looking at something in the street.”

“Which is she doing?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes it seems one thing, sometimes the other.”

My father sat back in his seat, frowning. “First you say the cap is white but not painted white. Then you say the girl is doing one thing or maybe another. You’re confusing me.” He rubbed his brow as if his head ached.

“I’m sorry, Father. I’m trying to describe it accurately.”

“But what is the story in the painting?”

“His paintings don’t tell stories.”

He did not respond. He had been difficult all winter. If Agnes had been there she would have been able to cheer him. She had always known how to make him laugh.

“Mother, shall I light the footwarmers?” I asked, turning from my father to hide my irritation. Now that he was blind, he could easily sense the moods of others, when he wanted to. I did not like him being critical of the painting without having seen it, or comparing it to the tiles he had once painted. I wanted to tell him that if he could only see the painting he would understand that there was nothing confusing about it. It may not have told a story, but it was still a painting you could not stop looking at.⁵⁴

A discussion of the actual context or story represented within Vermeer’s paintings reoccurs several times throughout the narrative and in this way, Chevalier introduces the reader to ideas related to the subjectivity of seeing as well as to ideas on interpretation that are likewise part of Vermeer’s legacy within scholarly discourse. On another Sunday visit to her family home Griet’s mother confronts her on this issue.

“I think his paintings are not good for the soul,” my mother announced suddenly. She was frowning. She had never before spoken of his work...

“There is something dangerous about your description of his paintings,” she explained. “From the way you talk they could be of religious scenes. It is as if the woman you describe is the Virgin Mary when she is just a woman, writing a letter. You give the painting meaning that it does not have or deserve. There are thousands of paintings in Delft. You can see them everywhere, hanging in a tavern as readily as in a rich man’s house. You could take two week’s maid’s wages and buy one at the market.”⁵⁵

Griet is concerned by this exchange with her mother, and after considering more deeply the meaning of Vermeer's paintings she discusses this issue with him directly. While again bringing into the story some of the more persistent interpretations of Vermeer's work that are part of the scholarly debate on Vermeer and, indeed, on much of seventeenth century Dutch painting, Chevalier uses the dialogue as a means of introducing the true nature of Vermeer's religious upbringing and what might have been his insights on the purpose of imagery. Chevalier argues, however subtly, for freedom of interpretation, which, in turn, adds validity to her own. Her discussion amplifies the universal meaning of Vermeer's paintings that scholars like Arthur Wheelock have claimed as implicit in his works.

"Are your paintings Catholic paintings?"

He paused, the bottle of linseed oil poised over the shell that held the white lead. "Catholic paintings," he repeated. He lowered his hand, tapping the bottle against the table top. "What do you mean by a Catholic painting?"

I had spoken before thinking. Now I did not know what to say. I tried a different question. "Why are there paintings in Catholic churches?"

"Have you ever been inside a Catholic church, Griet?"

"No, sir."

"Then you have seen paintings only in houses, or shops, or inns?"

"And at the market."

"Yes, at the market. Do you like looking at paintings?"

"I do, sir." I began to think he would not answer me, that he would simply ask me endless questions.

"What do you see when you look at one?"

"Why, what the painter has painted, sir."

Although he nodded, I felt I had not answered as he wished.

"So when you look at the painting down in the studio, what do you see?"

"I do not see the Virgin Mary, that is certain." I said this more in defiance of my mother than in answer to him.

He gazed at me in surprise. "Did you expect to see the Virgin Mary?"

"Oh no, sir," I replied, flustered.

"Do you think the painting is Catholic?"

"I don't know, sir. My mother said –"

"Your mother has not seen the painting, has she?"

"No."

“Then she cannot tell you what it is that you see or do not see.”

“No.” Although he was right, I did not like him to be critical of my mother.

“It’s not the painting that is Catholic or Protestant,” he said, “but the people who look at it, and what they expect to see. A painting in a church is like a candle in a dark room – we use it to see better. It is the bridge between ourselves and God. But it is not a Protestant candle or a Catholic candle. It is simply a candle.”

“We do not need such things to help us to see God,” I countered. “We have His Word and that is enough.”

He smiled. “Did you know, Griet, that I was brought up as a Protestant? I converted when I married. So you do not need to preach to me. I have heard such words before.”...

“There is a difference between Catholic and Protestant attitudes to painting,” he explained as he worked, “but it is not necessarily as great as you may think. Paintings may serve a spiritual purpose for Catholics, but remember too that Protestants see God everywhere, in everything. By painting everyday things – tables and chairs, bowls and pitchers, soldiers and maids – are they not celebrating God’s creation as well?”

I wished my mother could hear him. He would have made even her understand.⁵⁶

Griet becomes intimately involved in Vermeer’s craft and through her we learn much about the art of painting. She shops for the supplies needed by Vermeer to make his paints and learns from the apothecary that Vermeer has never sent anyone to do this for him before.⁵⁷ Later she is asked to bring him a pig’s bladder from the butcher so that he might use sections of it to store and keep fresh the paints as they are mixed. Griet begins sleeping in the small attic room off Vermeer’s studio that is used as his workroom and helps to grind paints for Vermeer, using oyster shells to mix the colors in. Vermeer slowly begins to teach her how he paints, working from the ground layer of the painting upwards in careful progressions of color. Here Chevalier increases Griet’s importance within the context of Vermeer’s work in a way that goes well beyond her anticipated connection to the subject of his painting *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. Consistent with

traditional training in the art of painting, Griet has been signaled not only as Vermeer's helper but, more importantly, as his apprentice.

The only color he did not allow me to handle was ultramarine. Lapis Lazuli was so expensive, and the process of extracting a pure blue from the stone so difficult, that he worked with it himself.

I grew used to being around him. Sometimes we stood side by side in the small room, me grinding white lead, him washing lapis or burning ochers in the fire. He said little to me. He was a quiet man. I did not speak either. It was peaceful then, with the light coming in through the window. When we were done we poured water from a pitcher over each other's hands and scrubbed ourselves clean.⁵⁸

In order to avoid her other household duties and work with Vermeer, Griet constructs a series of excuses. Although both intend to keep her assistance with his work a secret, Maria Thins nonetheless discovers their growing relationship. Maria Thins' shrewdness and intelligence is, in turn, bolstered within the story as she considers the benefits of Griet's new tasks and ultimately their impact on the family purse.

She was quicker than I thought an old woman could be. By the time I put my foot on the top rung she was halfway up the ladder. I stepped back into the attic. I could not escape her, and there was no time to hide anything.

When Maria Thins climbed into the room, she quickly took in the shells laid in rows on the table, the jug of water, the apron I wore speckled with yellow from the massicot.

"So this is what you've been up to, eh, girl? I thought as much."

I lowered my eyes. I did not know what to say.

"Stomachache, sore eyes. We are not all idiots around here, you know."

Ask him, I longed to tell her. He is my master. This is his doing.

But she did not call to him. Nor did he appear at the bottom of the ladder to explain.

There was a long silence. Then Maria Thins said, "How long have you been assisting him, girl?"

"A few weeks, madam."

"He's been painting faster these last weeks, I've noticed."

I raised my eyes. Her face was calculating.

"You help him paint faster, girl," she said in a low voice, "and you'll keep your place here. Not a word to my daughter or Tanneke, now."

"Yes, madam."

She chuckled. “I might have known, clever one that you are. You almost fooled even me...”⁵⁹

Through her rich description and careful character development Chevalier offers an explanation for the visual character of Vermeer’s painting *Girl with a Pearl Earring* in addition to other paintings by the master.⁶⁰ According to Chevalier’s account, Vermeer painted *Girl with a Pearl Earring* in response to a request from his major patron van Ruijven who had asked to have Griet appear in a painting with him. Van Ruuijven’s lecherous intentions towards young women are well known to everyone as accounts of the local stories of the girl in Vermeer’s earlier painting, *The Girl with the Wine Glass*, detail. Chevalier describes how Van Ruijven had wooed this girl with wine and then had his way with her leaving the girl in a motherly way after the encounter. Although Chevalier’s descriptions of van Ruijven are purely imaginative, she nevertheless shapes our understanding of this real person from the seventeenth century.

Despite her own insistence, Griet becomes the model for Vermeer’s painting and through *Girl with a Pearl Earring* the desire between both painter and his subject is reconciled and its end signaled. The immediacy of the girl’s gaze in the painting, the sense of longing in her eyes that is heightened by the moisture on her parted lips and the shimmer of the pearl earring, and the inspiration and purpose of the headdress, are all explained by Chevalier within the context of her story. A Protestant girl on the cusp of womanhood, Griet becomes intensely yet subtly drawn to Vermeer, a Catholic man immersed in manifesting the sensual. Although Chevalier is careful to maintain Vermeer’s integrity, she permits Griet’s feelings to be answered in subtle, yet provocative ways by the artist. A particularly good example centers on the earring the girl wears in

the painting. Not having had pierced ears, Griet had to pierce the ear seen in the painting herself in preparation for Vermeer's work and it had become swollen and infected.

...He reached around to the cupboard behind him, picked up an earring, and held it out to me.

"I want you to do it." I had not thought I could ever be so bold.

Nor had he. He raised his eyebrows and opened his mouth to speak, but did not say anything.

He stepped up to my chair. My jaw tightened but I managed to hold my head steady. He reached over and gently touched my earlobe.

I gasped as if I had been holding my breath under water.

He rubbed the swollen lobe between his thumb and finger then pulled it taut. With his other hand he inserted the earring wire in the hole and pushed it through. A pain like fire jolted through me and brought tears to my eyes.

He did not remove his hand. His fingers brushed against my neck along my jaw. He traced the side of my face up to my cheek, then blotted the tears that spilled from my eyes with his thumb. He ran his thumb over my lower lip. I licked it and tasted salt.

I closed my eyes then and he removed his fingers. When I opened them again he had gone back to his easel and taken up his palette.

I sat in my chair and gazed at him over my shoulder. My ear was burning, the weight of the pearl pulling at the lobe. I could not think of anything but his fingers on my neck, his thumb on my lips.⁶¹

In addition to the fictional cast of characters developed in the novel including Griet, her family members, the butcher and his son Pieter, Chevalier takes great liberty in imagining and constructing certain real life personages of the Vermeer household and of seventeenth century Delft. Although Chevalier's descriptions of her real characters are at times partially based on ideas surfacing in the scholarly record and are therefore believable within the context of Vermeer, other characters are fully fabricated. Like van Ruijven, Vermeer's wife Catharina, emerges as an antagonist in the story. Catharina is perceived and described by Griet from the earliest pages of Chevalier's book as being impatient, clumsy, and ill witted. Her fitness in running the family household is called into question early in the book, as are her maternal instincts and ability to rear her

children.⁶² Chevalier's Catharina appears to have little understanding of Vermeer's work or indeed of much of anything.

While Catharina was unlocking the studio door on the second morning I asked her if I should clean the windows.

"Why not?" she answered sharply. "You do not need to ask me such petty things."

"Because of the light, madam," I explained. "It might change the painting if I clean them. You see?"

She did not see. She would not or could not come into the room to look at the painting. It seemed she never entered the studio...Catharina went downstairs to ask him and called up to me to leave the windows.⁶³

As Chevalier represents, Catharina's person is excluded from both the paintings and the studio, and it is only through her possessions that she provides inspiration for the artist. Her coat, her collar, her jewelry and jewel box, all become intrinsic to the story and Chevalier's interpretation of Vermeer's paintings. It is ultimately Catharina who is responsible for Griet's leaving the Vermeer household when she discovers that her own pearl earrings had been worn by Griet in his painting. This event leads to an unlikely hostile exchange between Vermeer and his wife and the near destruction of the painting of Griet, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*.⁶⁴

Chevalier's story becomes large and real in the imaginations of the reader in a way that has affected how viewers respond to both Vermeer and his paintings.⁶⁵ Despite the fictional nature of her work, *Girl with a Pearl Earring* has created a whole world in which Vermeer, his family, their lives and his work coexist and interact; a world that, regardless of how individuals saw his works before reading it, nevertheless has influenced what they see and look for when viewing an image of this painting.

The Forger by Paul Watkins (2002)

Paul Watkins' novel *The Forger* approaches Vermeer and his paintings from another perspective, choosing to focus, as the title implies, on the intrigue surrounding the forgery of his works. Like Weber, Vreeland, and Chevalier, Watkins builds his story on historical writing, in this case Hector Feliciano's *The Lost Museum*.⁶⁶ Although much broader in scope than the other books that focus on the fictional history of a single Vermeer painting, Watkins' book nevertheless considers complicated ideas related to value and meaning that are likewise fueling more popular dialogues on Vermeer.

The main character of Paul Watkins' novel is David Halifax, an American artist who wins a scholarship to study art in Paris in 1939. He arrives in the summer to study in the atelier of Alexander Pankratov located at 21 Rue Descalzi. There he meets Monsieur Fleury, a Parisian art dealer, and against the backdrop of the Nazi invasion and the outbreak of World War II, what began as a three-month sojourn evolves into an adventure into games of war centered on the art of forgery.

Strapped for money and finding art materials in short supply, Halifax procures a stack of old, but still useable sketchpads and begins to copy after the old masters in the Louvre. Although his intention was to learn from the masters Fleury collects the drawings and sells them.

He brought out another bundle of money, pinned as before with a brass paper clip, and tossed it over to me. "I sold the rest of the sketches."

Even with his commission taken out, that meant another month of living in Paris. More if I scrimped. "You are some kind of genius," I told him. "If it weren't for you selling these drawings, I'd be on my way home by now."

"What do you think about doing some more sketches for me?" he asked. "Same as the last lot. Similar, at any rate."

“Shouldn’t I be working on the paintings?”

“Those sketches went down very well. Let’s stick with them for now. Just do them exactly as you did the last lot. Same materials. Everything.”

“Suits me,” I said. I would rather have been working on the paintings, but it was worth it to me to put things on hold for a while, if it meant staying longer in Paris. “Why does this collector want my sketches?”

...

“Not everyone can afford original works. Those who can’t must make do with reproductions. They appreciate work like yours from a purely decorative standpoint. But don’t get me wrong, there’s nothing wrong with that. Most great artists have learned by copying the work of the masters who went before them. In time, even these copies become valuable. Until then, as long as your work gives people pleasure, you have a resource you’d be foolish not to exploit.”⁶⁷

As the story unfolds, Halifax learns that Fleury is actually selling the sketches as the works of recognized masters and, in so doing, Halifax, unknowingly, has become a forger. Later Halifax becomes involved with Pankratov in a plot to help save modern art works labeled as degenerate and in danger of being destroyed by the Nazis by trading them for forgeries created after the old masters. Reluctant at first, Halifax is slowly convinced to do the work and Pankratov explains how they will approach the making of forgeries and which artists they will seek to forge. Vermeer’s name, importantly, is mentioned from the outset.

“Even if I have agreed to do the work,” I told him, “you know damned well I’m not skilled enough to make copies and for the fakes to go unnoticed.”

“It is precisely that kind of thinking that makes the art of forgery possible,” said Pankratov. “We are not talking about creating a masterpiece. We are talking about creating the illusion of a masterpiece. In our work, the painting or the drawing itself is only a part of the puzzle. You are right that someone can’t just pick up a paintbrush and start churning out Caravaggios. The great forgers, the proof of whose greatness is the fact that we’ll never know their names, study the materials that go into the work of art, and after that, methods of aging. I am not saying you are a forger now. But those sketches of yours are proof that you have the makings of a forger.”

...

“You won’t be making direct copies,” continued Pankratov. That’s too risky. You’ll do work in the style of certain artists. Previously unknown

paintings and drawings are always turning up out of private collections, or they could be works that were wrongly attributed.”

“What good will that do, anyway? How will it save the originals?”

“They’ll be looking for people like Titian, Botticelli, Vermeer. They’re not going to set fire to every Degas, Manet or Van Gogh they get their hands on. Those paintings will be used for trade.”

“And we’ll be giving them fakes?” I asked.

“For originals. Exactly.”⁶⁸

Watkins’ discussion of creating the “illusion” to an artist like Vermeer and not a specific copy of an original is an important distinction that accurately reflects the history of forgeries.

The preparation and training needed to actually create an art forgery becomes an important element in the dialogue of Watkins’ novel. Through the discussion readers begin to learn the intricacies of paintings and the significant innovations and technological developments that have impacted the creation of great master works over time. Halifax describes how he was schooled in the art of forgery:

Pankratov’s teaching methods were erratic, but his lessons broke down into three basic categories. First, we studied the work of a particular artist. In the beginning, we focused entirely on the work of Lucas Cranach the Elder. This was no random choice. Cranach had been selected by Tombeau’s superiors, whom we still had not met, as an artist whose work would be in demand once the Germans arrived. The next category was study of materials – everything from brushes to paint and wood panels and canvas. Finally, Pankratov instructed me in the art of aging the work.

...

He liked to quiz me about what pigments had been invented when.

“Ultramarine. First used in what century?”

“Twelfth century.” I focused on the workbench behind him, where the brilliant red, blue and white powders and copper pans and spirit lamps were laid out from the lesson.

“Wrong. Thirteenth century. Prussian blue?”

“Eighteenth century.”

“Right! Would you see Prussian blue in a painting by Goya?”

“You could.”

“Right again. Good. Cobalt blue?”

“1802.” I knew that because I had made a rhyme of it. “Cobalt blue in 1802.”

“Titanium white?”

“1830.”

“Wrong!” He clapped his hands. “1930! Do you realize what will happen if you put titanium white in a painting by Delacroix?” When he spoke this way, he would never say “a forgery of” or “a painting in the style of.” He would say “a painting by,” as if somewhere in his warlock’s book of recipes was hidden the secret by which we would become the artists of our imitation. We summoned their flaked bones back into flesh and marrow and teeth and hair and eyes, then stepped into the framework of these men and wore their spirits like cloaks of thickened blood.⁶⁹

As the story continues, Halifax and Pankratov become unlikely heroes of sorts assisting the French resistance by moving forty museum paintings under the cover of an ambulance for safekeeping in a rural country home. When the truck stops at the home of the Count and Countess de Boinvilles, Halifax and Pankratov work quickly with several other Frenchmen to move their load into a hollow opening made ready in the wall of the country estate, which is then sealed over with plaster. Assisted in their work by local townspeople in disguise, Pankratov thwarts plans to remove the paintings from their stretchers so that they might fit more quickly and easily into the concealed storage space. Watkins uses the exchange to convey certain realities related to the preservation of paintings.

“You can’t roll these up,” Pankratov told them.

“We’ll be careful,” said Cristot. “Now come on.” He snapped his fingers and held his hands out for the first painting.

“First of all” – Pankratov dug his hand into the canvas bag and hauled out a paint-spattered iron file – “you can’t just gouge a canvas off its stretcher with one of these. And secondly, if you want to take an old painting off its stretcher, you need to place it on a wooden roller, which you turn only six inches a month. This is a job for specialists. Nobody’s taking these paintings off their stretchers.”

It seemed to grow very hot and quiet in the room. The floating dust was clogging up my lungs.

Tessel turned to Cristot. “I told you we never should have gotten involved.”

“You’re the one who talked me into it,” said Cristot.

“I have two children and a wife at home...”

“And I’m their godfather, for Christ’s sake!” Cristot interrupted. “Don’t lecture me, Jean-Paul.”

“Oh, and there you go using my real name!”

“It was only your first name.”

“Well, thanks a lot, anyway. And here I am risking my life with you of all people for a bunch of paintings that I’ve never seen and don’t care about.” His voice rose with indignation as he turned his attention to Pankratov. “I don’t care about your damned museums and...”

Watkins’ dialogue makes explicit that there are, indeed, individuals who do not appreciate the value of paintings from history; however, he introduces a painting by Vermeer as a means of asserting the captivating beauty and transforming power of his images.

He was going on like this when Pankratov lifted up one of the paintings, set it on the table, and with one flip of his hand, undid the bow that held the string in place. He swept away the white sheet wrapping. The painting came into view.

It was a Vermeer. I knew that at once. *The Lacemaker – La dentelliere*. It was a small painting, made on canvas laid over wood. It showed a young woman, maybe nineteen or twenty years old in a yellow dress with a broad white collar. The woman’s hair was braided at the back and curls hung down by her ears. She was hunched over her work, and it was hard to make out what she was doing. Something with pins and tiny spools of thread. Red and white silk spilled out, almost like liquid, from a soft case beside her. She looked tired and busy and the faint cheerfulness on her face seemed strained. Every time I had gone to the Louvre, I had sought out this painting just to look once more at the smile on the woman’s face. Each time I saw it, the smile seemed less and less sincere, as if she were stuck in some purgatory of a job that she knew would make her blind, as many lacemakers went blind. By now, I felt I knew her from some place beyond the confines of that canvas.

To see the painting there in front of us, robbed of its beautiful pale wood frame, beyond the safety of the Louvre, shocked us into silence. We just stared at it.

A long time passed before Cristot sighed noisily. “Oh,” he said, the way all Frenchmen say “oh,” deep-voiced and long.

“Are they all like that?” asked Tessel. The red handkerchief dangled from his hand.

“Just give me the paintings,” said Cristot. We’ll find a way to get them in.”⁷⁰

...

The dialogue twists and turns throughout the story, wrestling along its course with many of the more complicated issues surrounding art. The meaning of art, what determines beauty, and ultimately how value is understood and art appreciated surface within the narrative, revealing the thoughts of the author and challenging those of the reader. As Fleury and Pankratov had predicted, high-ranking Nazi officials work through Fleury with Halifax as his assistant to negotiate the exchange of master paintings in exchange for modern works confiscated from Jewish collections and galleries including the Rothschilds and the Wildensteins, collections really pillaged during WWII. Watkins' tale unfolds dramatically weaving known truths about life in occupied France, the disappearance of people, interrogations, and human transports to camps together with his own creative license.

Watkins continuously argues the value of paintings throughout the narrative of his story. At one point Halifax, frustrated by feelings of helplessness and a sense of inaction in the retaliation efforts against the Germans, must be convinced of the service his painting forgeries provides the resistance in a passionate exchange with Tombeau, a former member of the French police who quits his post to join a gangster organization as a cover for his own efforts in the resistance.⁷¹

The acts of the forgers put them in contact with many sinister characters of the Nazi ERR and SS determined to increase their own political position within the party by satisfying the fuhrer's love of art. Hitler's real fascination with Vermeer offers an intriguing shift in the narrative and the work of the forgers from creating paintings that

look like the work of renowned artists to creating an exact forgery of an original painting – in this case, Vermeer’s *Astronomer* – as a means of recovering a major collection of modern works thought to have already been incinerated during a Nazi demonstration

Goring opened the folder and took out a photograph. He held it out for us to see. “Have you seen this painting before?” he asked us.

“Yes,” said Fleury at once. “It is Vermeer’s *Geographer*. One of a set of two.”

“Exactly,” said Goring. “It was purchased from the Charles Sedelmeyer Gallery, here in Paris, in 1885, by the Frankfurter Kunstverein. It’s still in Frankfurt, at the Staedelsches Kunstinstitut.” He flipped the photo around to look at it himself. “The irony is not lost on me that if we had waited fifty years or so, we could have gotten it for free.” He put the photograph back inside the folder and took out another. When he showed it to us, Fleury didn’t wait to be asked.

“*The Astronomer*. The second painting in the set.”

“Yes,” said Goring. “In 1886, this painting was bought in London by the Baron Alphonse de Rothschild. It was last known to have been hanging in the home of Baron Edouard de Rothschild, in France. But it, and several other very valuable works, have managed to disappear.”...⁷²

Watkins’ laces his fictional account with continuous references to the actual story behind Vermeer’s *Astronomer*, which was, indeed, in the collection of Edouard de Rothschild prior to it being confiscated by the Nazi’s during WWII.

...”I want this painting,” he said, “and have what I think will be an interesting offer. Thomas tells me that you specialize in exchanges. Modernist paintings in particular.”

Fleury nodded slowly, eyes masked behind the light reflecting off his glasses.

“Have you heard of the Gottheim Collection?” asked Goring.

“I have,” said Fleury. “It was the property of Albrecht Gottheim, a Berlin art dealer in the thirties. The collection was confiscated in January 1939 and in March of that year was burned in public as a protest against *entartet Kunst*.”

Goring shook his head. “Not true.”

“Indeed they were, Herr Reichsmarschall,” Dietrich interrupted. “I saw those paintings burn with my own eyes.”

Goring shook his head again and smiled. “We had copies made. The burning was carried out at night and no one was looking too closely. We didn’t have to burn the originals to make our point. I have the actual works in storage. I will give you the entire inventory, over sixty paintings and drawings, if you will bring me *The Astronomer*.”

“But we don’t know where it is,” said Fleury.

Goring stood up wearily. He rested his knuckles on the tabletop. “No,” he said. “I don’t think you do, or you’d have offered it to Dietrich by now. But I think you can find it. Thomas tells me if anyone can turn it up, you can.”

There was total quiet in the room.

“The truth is,” said Goring, after a moment, “that I would like to make a gift of it. I will be candid with you. I would like to give this painting to Adolf Hitler, and as soon as possible. The fall of Stalingrad has caused a rift in our ability to understand each other. I made certain implications about the capacity of the Luftwaffe to supply the troops within the city.” He rolled his hand in front of him, as if to shape the words as they came out of his mouth. “These implications led to expectations which were sadly not fulfilled. (page 280) There was blame. There is a need to make amends. Hitler has become I think I can say this, mildly obsessed with the missing Vermeer. He has cleared a space for it on the wall of the Berghof and has declared that it will stand empty until *The Astronomer* hangs on his wall. And I think it would be a good idea for me to be the one who puts it there.”⁷³

The prospect of creating a forgery of a real painting by Vermeer that has been studied and is well known not only by Hitler but by the art historians he has surrounded himself with seems impossible in the eyes of Fleury and Madame Pontier, the primary liaison for hidden artworks. Pankratov, however, is convinced of Halifax’s abilities and together they assert that with the original Vermeer in front of him, Halifax could produce a convincing forgery of the original. Despite the apparent threat the undertaking may pose to his life, the original Vermeer is retrieved from hiding and Halifax begins to work on his forgery, the quality of which will be judged by Fleury and Madame Pontier before being offered to the Nazis. The retrieval of *The Astronomer* provides Watkins with another opportunity to convey the refinement, perfection and inherent beauty of Vermeer’s paintings.

Pankratov reached the ambulance, carrying the painting. He got down on his haunches, back against the door of the Citroen. He tore off the painting’s white cloth cover and wrapped it around his neck like a scarf. The painting was small. He held it at arm’s length, gripping the honey brown frame.

I sat down next to him. We stared at the Astronomer in his blue robe, long hair down around his shoulders. One hand touched a globe. The other gripped a

table, as if the shock and vastness of whatever knowledge was about to reach him might throw his body back across the room. A tapestry bunched on the table. Yellowy light through the window lit up the brilliance of the threads. It was the first time I'd seen the actual painting. Now I understood how someone could become obsessed with it.⁷⁴

Watkins' continues to discuss the intricacies of Vermeer's painting through Halifax's efforts to copy it.

My turpentine-fogged brain turned into a maze of technical complications concerning *The Astronomer*. Like most Vermeers, of which there weren't many, it was complicated work. This was particularly true in Vermeer's use of shadows. They were not merely shadows but incorporated all the colors of the objects – the wall, the armoire, the Astronomer's robe, the book being consulted by the Astronomer, Metius' *Astronomicae et Geographicae*. There was more to his complexity than any nameable sum of its parts. The painting, to a greater degree than any other work I'd studied, contained something overwhelming and mysterious. I became fixated on one thin line of white that showed on the Astronomer's left forearm, where his shirt peeked out from under the robe. I made myself dizzy thinking about the repetition of circles in the painting – in the globe and the Astronomer's head and the curve of his shoulder and the chart on the wall and the stained glass in the window. Sometimes I could hold all these ideas inside my head in some fragile scaffolding of thought. Other times, the whole structure would crash down around me and I would be left staring at the frosted windows of the Dimitri, too dazed even to talk. I thought about Hitler's art expert, Hermann Voss. I had imaginary conversations with him. I dreamed about him, and in those dreams he took on the face of the man in the painting.⁷⁵

Watkins ends *The Forger* on a dramatic note with Halifax's *Astronomer* playing its role against the backdrop of the chaotic retreat of the Germans from France and the Allied Forces' entry into Paris. Although Watkins distorted the real events that took place during WWII concerning the forgery of Vermeer's paintings and the *Astronomer* for the sake of his story, *The Forger* nevertheless introduces readers to these very real themes in the life of his paintings. As has by now become standard procedure in the

publication of these historically based fictional novels on art, Watkins provides a summarized version of the real story at the end of his book.

Using both factual and fictional information Watkins constructs a story that reflects a more or less accurate picture of the political and market value art has held throughout much of world history. Despite its fictional nature, his novel, like the other novels discussed, offers an accessible method for readers to begin learning about the history of art, its production, and its intrinsic meaning to culture. Like Weber, Vreeland, and Chevalier, Watkins creates a book that combines his own perceptions and fantasies about Vermeer and the art world with narratives taken from scholarly discourse. The messages of all these books continuously convey that refinement, perfection, and intrinsic beauty can be found in the paintings by Vermeer.

While certainly benefiting publicly and economically by their direct association with Vermeer through the reproduction of his paintings on their book covers, and the descriptions of his life and works in their texts, Weber, Vreeland, Chevalier, and Watkins have likewise effectively drawn our attention back to Vermeer's paintings in ways that encourage more general viewers to look again. Novelists are free to entertain their imaginations and, in turn, ours with inventive stories born from their dialogues with Vermeer's paintings and their reproductions in ways the art historian is continuously discouraged to do. Demonstrating his own hesitation to put in tangible form his speculations about the origins of Vermeer's *The Art of Painting*, Walter Liedtke, curator of European Painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art explicitly mapped out a story

line for how a novelist might depict the events surrounding the creation of this work in his catalogue for the *Vermeer & The Delft School* exhibition. He writes:

In a novel one might tell the tale of how the French diplomat Balthasar de Monconys went to Vermeer's studio on August 11, 1663, but the artist had nothing on hand to show him. And so Vermeer conceived *The Art of Painting*, which would reveal to subsequent visitors "the magic effects" of his brush...and the cleverness with which he could describe not only his own occupation...but also the very place in which the connoisseur found himself.⁷⁶

While slyly sneaking in his creative idea about Vermeer's painting Liedtke is also framing his own fantasy about this painting, something he has elsewhere argued that art historians should not do.⁷⁷

Conclusion

The life and works of Johannes Vermeer are proving a constant source of inspiration for scholars as well as creative artists in our contemporary culture. Fictional novels that appropriate Vermeer's paintings, his life, or aspects of the scholarly discourse surrounding both, are establishing and influencing perceptions on this artist. Providing art historical information, reconfigurations of historical facts, and the ideas and theoretical notions of their authors, the more accessible format of the novel genre is nevertheless engaging interest in artists and art within a more popular audience. As has been discussed in particular depth on fine artists in chapter four, and here within the context of writers of fictional novels, the authors' responses to Vermeer primarily focus

on the qualities of refinement, perfection and intrinsic beauty found in his paintings; were encouraged by popular events like the museum exhibition; and are tempered by their own life experiences.

Susanna Kaysen, also responds to Vermeer's paintings in The Frick collection in her novel *Girl, Interrupted*.⁷⁸ The Frick Collection was assembled by American steel tycoon Henry Clay Frick during early 20th century and was opened to the public in 1932. The collection contains three original Vermeer paintings: *Girl Interrupted at her Music* (ca. 1660-1661), *Officer and Girl Laughing* (ca. 1658), and *Mistress and Maid* (ca. 1666-1667). Because of stipulations in the collector's will, objects from the collection cannot be loaned out; thus the only place to see these Vermeer paintings is in the Frick. As the New York residence of Henry Clay Frick, the museum conveys a sense of intimacy and decorum that differs from the experience of a large institution. There is also the reality that seeing the collection in original form requires a pilgrimage to the museum and this encourages a reverence seemingly acknowledged by everyone who visits the museum.

Although Vermeer's *Girl Interrupted at her Music* is not discussed by Kaysen until the closing chapter of the book, she uses this chapter as a way of summarizing and framing her fundamentally autobiographical story as it has evolved from her adolescence and her institutionalization in a mental hospital, through to her life many years later (fig. 46). The brief pages of this chapter are worth quoting in their entirety as the narrative they construct reinforces the way in which responses to paintings can be intense, can change with time, and how our life experiences and associations can influence these responses.



Figure 46. Johannes Vermeer, *Girl Interrupted at Her Music*, ca. 1660-61, (oil on canvas), The Frick Collection, New York.

The Vermeer in the Frick is one of three, but I didn't notice the other two the first time I went there. I was seventeen and in New York with my English teacher, who hadn't yet kissed me. I was thinking of that future kiss, which I knew was coming, as I left the Fragonards behind and walked into the hall leading to the courtyard – the dim corridor where the Vermeers gleam against the wall.

Besides the kiss, I was thinking of whether I could graduate from high school if for the second year in a row I failed biology. I was surprised to be failing it, because I loved it; I'd loved it the first time I failed it too. My favorite part was gene-recession charts. I liked working out the sequence of blue eyes in families that had no characteristics except blue eyes and brown eyes. My family had a lot of characteristics – achievements, ambitions, talents, expectations – that all seemed to be recessive in me.

I walked past the lady in yellow robes and the maid bringing her a letter, past the soldier with a magnificent hat and the girl smiling at him, thinking of warm lips, brown eyes, blue eyes. Her brown eyes stopped me.

It's the painting from whose frame a girl looks out, ignoring her beefy music teacher, whose proprietary hand rests on her chair. The light is muted, winter light, but her face is bright.

I looked into her brown eyes and I recoiled. She was warning me of something – she had looked up from her work to warn me. Her mouth was slightly open, as if she had just drawn a breath in order to say to me, "Don't!"

I moved backward, trying to get beyond the range of her urgency. But her urgency filled the corridor. "Wait," she was saying, "wait! Don't go!"

I didn't listen to her. I went out to dinner with my English teacher, and he kissed me, and I went back to Cambridge and failed biology, though I did graduate, and eventually, I went crazy.

Sixteen years later I was in New York with my new rich boyfriend. We took many trips, which he paid for, although spending money made him queasy. On our trips, he often attacked my character – that character once diagnosed as disordered. Sometimes I was too emotional, other times too cold and judgmental. Whichever he said, I'd comfort him by telling him it was okay to spend money. Then he would stop attacking me, which meant we could stay together and begin the spend-and-attack cycle on some future trip.

It was a beautiful October day in New York. He had attacked and I had comforted and now we were ready to go out.

"Let's go to the Frick," he said.

"I've never been there," I said. Then I thought maybe I had been. I didn't say anything; I'd learned not to discuss my doubts.

When we got there I recognized it. "Oh," I said. "There's a painting I love here."

"Only one?" he said. "Look at these Fragonards."

I didn't like them. I left the Fragonards behind and walked into the hall leading to the courtyard. She had changed a lot in sixteen years. She was no longer urgent. In fact, she was sad. She was young and distracted, and her teacher was bearing down on her, trying to get her to pay attention. But she was looking out, looking for someone who would see her.

This time I read the title of the painting: *Girl Interrupted at Her Music*.

Interrupted at her music: as my life had been, interrupted in the music of being seventeen, as her life had been, snatched and fixed on canvas: one moment made to stand still and to stand for all the other moments, whatever they would be or might have been. What life can recover from that?

I had something to tell her now. "I see you," I said.

My boyfriend found me crying in the hallway.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked.

"Don't you see, she's trying to get out," I said, pointing at her.

He looked at the painting, he looked at me, and he said, "All you ever think about is yourself. You don't understand anything about art." He went off to look at Rembrandt.

I've gone back to the Frick since then to look at her and at the two other Vermeers. Vermeers, after all, are hard to come by, and the one in Boston has been stolen.

The other two are self-contained paintings. The people in them are looking at each other – the lady and her maid, the soldier and his sweetheart. Seeing them is peeking at them through a hole in a wall. And the wall is made of light – that entirely credible yet unreal Vermeer light.

Light like this does not exist, but we wish it did. We wish the sun could make us young and beautiful, we wish our clothes could glisten and ripple against

our skins, most of all, we wish that everyone we knew could be brightened simply by our looking at them, as are the maid with the letter and the soldier with the hat.

The girl at her music sits in another sort of light, the fitful, overcast light of life, by which we see ourselves and others only imperfectly, and seldom.⁷⁹

As the descriptive components of Kaysen's account detail, her personal tastes selected Vermeer's paintings over others in the Frick collection. In regarding Vermeer's paintings her momentary thoughts engaged with *Girl Interrupted at Her Music*, animating its image with her memories, her imagination, and her reflections on the course of her life. Kaysen's response is emotional, insightful, and dialogic. Vermeer's painting offered her a framework for drawing the disparate experiences of her own complicated life into a kind of unified whole. Within the dialogue of her novel, Kaysen reiterates aspects of what has already been discussed in chapter three within the context of the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition at the National Gallery in 1995, in chapter four in our discussion of artists who appropriate the works of Vermeer, and, indeed, through my own ongoing responses to this artist: Vermeer's paintings are captivating and beautiful and, may, indeed, help us understand the complexities of our own lived experiences.

What is validated through the novels on Vermeer, and likewise through other acts of appropriation, is the way in which his paintings and their stories captivate and entertain our imaginations. Their surface beauty feels real and uncontrived. Unable to assign a fixed narrative to his paintings, our minds are free to create dialogues of our own. The artist's patterns and nuance suggest a world of intentions that are pure, clear, unguarded, and directly locatable within our own time and place. Vermeer's art offers an aesthetic filled with beauty, special effect, and intrigues that both compliment and

contradict the lives and art of our current era. His paintings clearly offer a bridge between the past and the present; a new way of seeing, time and time again.

In the next chapter I will move on to consider the ways in which Vermeer has also entered into a dialogue related to cinema and opera.

¹ James Elkins, *Stories of Art*. Routledge: 2002.

² Quote taken from a review by Michael Upchurch of Katherine Govier's novel *Creation*, which deals with a chapter in the life of John James Audubon that is significant but under documented. Michael Upchurch, "Audubon's Sweetheart", *The New York Times, Book Review*, Sunday, July 13, 2003, p. 11.

³ Rex Weil, "Johannes Vermeer," *Artforum*, February, 1996. Duplicated in one of two Documentary Binders, Vermeer Exhibit, collection of Dr. Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr.

⁴ Taken from an article on Alice Sebold and her book *The Lovely Bones*. The story of Sebold's book deals with the disappearance and death of a child and is vastly different from the subject of this dissertation. The article, however, demonstrates the way in which fictional books borrow from contemporary histories and offer instruction into complicated issues for more general readers and this is indeed also argued here. Cathy Horyn. "A Summer Must-Read with Eerie Echoes." *The New York Times*, Sunday, September 1, 2002, Section 9, p. 10.

⁵ Although I have chosen to focus on Vermeer and the novel genre, poetry also offers a rich dialogue on Vermeer. See for example Robert Lowell's "Epilogue," (1977) found in Robert Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 2003. See also, Stephen Mitchell, *Parables and Portraits*, 1990.

⁶ The idea of dialogue as a form of ventriloquism for the thoughts of an author is borrowed from Angela Dalle Vacche in her essay "Michelangelo Antonioni's *Red Dessert*: Painting as Ventriloquism and Color as Movement", *Cinema and Painting: How Art is Used in Film*, 1995.

⁷ Alexandra Lapierre, *Artemisia: A Novel*, 1998; English translation, 2000.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

⁹ In the lengthy introductory label to the *Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi* exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, February – May 2002, referred in context to Alexandra Lapierre’s novel. Beginning by detailing Artemisia’s professional and personal background, including her rape by Agostino Tassi, a colleague of her father the text continued: “Small wonder that she has been the subject of three fictional biographies and a film. Yet, however fascinating Artemisia’s biography, it is as an artist that she states her claim to posterity”. This last statement proves ironic, as the first object in the exhibit was a reproduction of a fresco painted by Orazio and Tassi, whose label chose to again highlight Artemisia’s rape instead of discussing more specific aspects of her working relationship with her father. The label read: “The photograph shows the vault of the garden loggia or casino, that Orazio Gentileschi frescoes for Scipione Borghese, the nephew of Pope Paul V, in 1611-12. The work, done in collaboration with the perspective specialist Agostino Tassi, was among Orazio’s most important commissions. Each figure was studied from life; the woman with a fan is thought to show Artemisia Gentileschi who was raped by Agostino Tassi in May 1611.” Copies of Lapierre’s *Artemisia* were also for sale in the museum’s shop.

¹⁰ On Pieter Bruegel, see Michael Frayn, *Headlong*, 1999. On Julia Margaret Cameron, see Helen Humphreys, *Afterimage*, 2000. On Mary Cassatt, see Harriet Scott Chessman, *Lydia Cassatt Reading the Morning Paper*, 2001. On Frida Kahlo, see Barbara Mujica, *Frida: A Novel*, 2001. On Georges de La Tour, see David Huddle, *La Tour Dreams of the Wolf Girl*, 2002. On Oskar Kokoschka, see Susan Dodd, *The Silent Woman*, 2001. On Peter Paul Rubens, see Frank Deford, *The Other Adonis: A Novel of Reincarnation*, 2001.

¹¹ A full page ad for *The Da Vinci Code* can be found in *The New York Times*, June 20, 2003, pages B10. For an article seeking to set the record straight, see Bruce Boucher, “Does ‘The Da Vinci Code’ Crack Leonardo?”, *The New York Times*, Sunday, August 3, 2003, Arts Section, p. 26.

¹² Olive Beaupre Miller, editor. *Tales Told in Holland*. 1926.

¹³ Inez Haynes Irwin, *Maida’s Little Houseboat*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1943.

¹⁴ In a letter to Arthur Wheelock from Pamela Burke of Summit, New Jersey, dated Tuesday, January 18, 2002, Burke describes *Maida’s Little Houseboat* and how her appreciation for Vermeer developed through it. As she explains Maida’s father Jerome Westabrook was an art collector who owned a Vermeer. Burke writes: “Anyway, if Mr. Westabrook considered his Vermeer the prize of his collection, I needed to know more about this, and that is how, at about the age of ten, I went to the adult section of the Library and asked for a book with Vermeer pictures (probably mispronouncing his name) – and have been rapturously taken by them ever since. I still hug to myself your 1995 exhibit.”

¹⁵ Reynolds Price, *A Singular Family: Rosacoke and Her Kin*, 1999, p. 17-18.

¹⁶ John Bayley, *The Red Hat*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press), 1997.

¹⁷ Katharine Weber, October 7, 2000, published on *Readerville Roundtable: Vermeer in Recent Fiction*, <http://www.readerville.com/WebX?14@170.ZNnuaAJQabw^0@.eec9e95/0>, October 9 – 13, 2000, Karen Templer, Proprietor. This forum included Katharine Weber, Susan Vreeland, and Tracey Chevalier as well as the comments and questions of readers and the proprietor Karen Templer. The forum set forth a great deal of information concerning the ideas of each of these novelists and, importantly, created a dialogue among them.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, October 8, 2000.

¹⁹ Katharine Weber, *The Music Lesson*, (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc.), 1998.

²⁰ The element of mystery is also central in John Bayley’s *The Red Hat* as well as J. P. Smith’s *The Discovery of Light*. *Op cit.*, Bayley. J. P. Smith, *The Discovery of Light*, (New York: Penguin Books), 1992. Significantly, Smith included a personal inscription in a copy of his book sent to Arthur Wheelock that credits him for the inspiration of this novel.

²¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 94-101.

²² *The Music Lesson* measures 29 1/8 x 25 3/8 inches. Vermeer’s painting *Girl in the Red Hat* (ca. 1665-1666) is the only painting by him that was painted on panel. *The Young Girl with a Flute* (ca. 1665-1670), thought to have been started by Vermeer but finished by another artist, is also oil on panel.

²³ *Op. cit.*, Weber, p. 67.

²⁴ The peach that is described in Weber’s painting and its placement near a window correspond to elements seen in Jan van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Wedding* (1435), however, this connection is of her own invention. The connection by Weber of Vermeer’s *The Music Lesson* to van Eyck’s *Anolfini Wedding* is appropriate and

corresponds to connections made within art historical discourse. Each painting contains a mirror that reveals the artist's presence; in van Eyck, the reflection of the artist's image in the background and in Vermeer, the reflection of the leg of his easel. Weber makes this connection more directly in the dialogue later on in the story, see p. 99.

²⁵ Op. cit., Weber, pp. 67-68.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 140-141.

²⁸ See Martha Frick Symington Sanger, *Henry Clay Frick: An Intimate Portrait*, (New York: Abbeville Press, Inc.), 1998.

²⁹ Op. Cit., Benjamin.

³⁰ Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. By, C. K. Scott Moncrieff, Terance Kilmartin, Andreas Mayor, 3 vols., (New York: Vintage), 1982. For a good discussion of this and other literary works which have shaped our understanding of Vermeer, see Christiane Hertel, *Vermeer: Reception and Interpretation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1996.

³¹ Op. cit., Weber, unnumbered page.

³² My assessments here are based on my own experience with Weber's novel as well as the reactions of students who read this book as part of the required reading for a course I taught on "Art and Culture" at Gallaudet University during the Spring, 2001 semester.

³³ Susan Vreeland, October 6, 2000, Op. cit., *Readerville Roundtable: Vermeer in Recent Fiction*.

³⁴ Susan Vreeland, *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, (Denver: MacMurray & Beck), 1999. The book's original cover design for the cloth bound edition of *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, like Weber's *The Music Lesson*, can be linked to a real painting, here Vermeer's *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (c. 1657). In the case of Vreeland's cover image, Vermeer's painting has been reconstructed in reverse, the color scheme changed, and compositional elements cropped or eliminated.

³⁵ Vreeland, p. 114.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 4.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 4-8.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 40-42.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 51.

⁴⁰ Tracey Chevalier, October 9, 2000, published on op. cit., *Readerville Roundtable: Vermeer in Recent Fiction*.

⁴¹ Tracy Chevalier, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, (New York: A Dutton Book, the Penguin Group), 2000.

⁴² Chevalier cites these sources in her "Acknowledgements" found on page 234. Interestingly, the description of Griet, and particularly the way she wears her cap is the same as the Frans van Mieris portrait of his wife juxtaposed to the image of the *Girl with a Pearl Earring* in the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition catalogue.

⁴³ Vermeer and Griet's introduction occurs on the opening pages of Chevalier's text, pages 3-6. This description of the location of the family home is given by Chevalier on page 62.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 31-32.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 32-33.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 33-34.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 35-37.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 55.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 59-60.

⁵⁰ Op. cit., *Johannes Vermeer*, 1995, p. 154. The catalogue includes a reproduction of a neutron autoradiograph that clearly illustrates the placement of the map on the wall beyond the woman that was removed by Vermeer in a later stage of his work.

⁵¹ Chevalier would not have had the benefit of Phillip Steadman's book *Vermeer's Camera* when writing her book. Steadman claims the use of the camera obscura for all of Vermeer's paintings.

⁵² Op. cit., Chevalier, p. 64.

⁵³ Chevalier's text is not without flaws. Although this description occurs on page 90 of the book the actual lesson by Vermeer related to the color white does not actually occur until later in the story, on page 101 of the text.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 90-91.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 136-137.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 138-141.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 95.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 108. Within the context of Dutch iconographic tradition, washing is explained as a gesture that symbolizes purity and innocence. A discussion of this is found in the *Johannes Vermeer* catalogue, p. 148. Chevalier seems to take advantage of this symbolism within the context of Vermeer and Griet's working relationship to exonerate them from any wrongful behavior regardless of the subtle and not so subtle sexual undertones conveyed by Griet throughout the narrative.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 109-110.

⁶⁰ Among the other paintings explained by Chevalier are *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*, *A Lady Writing*, *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*, and *The Concert*.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 208. The exchange that is played out between Chevalier's Griet and Vermeer is a kind of metaphor for intercourse.

⁶² Ibid. Descriptions of Catharina repeatedly cast her in a negative light, for example, her fitness to run the home is discussed (p. 18); her decision to hire a wet-nurse instead of nursing her own children casts doubt on her fitness as a mother as well as her selfishness in the face of family financial difficulties (p. 50); her ineffectiveness at providing moral guidance for her children when her daughter Cornelia begins stealing from Griet (p. 147).

⁶³ Ibid., pp. 41.

⁶⁴ Chevalier's Catharina offers a stark contrast to my own vision of her character, which is colored by what I sense was a passionate and caring relationship shared with her husband Johannes. Although, Chevalier does not see Catharina as a subject of Vermeer's painting, it seems probable in this writer's opinion that indeed she was.

⁶⁵ This statement is based on student, faculty, and staff responses to Chevalier's book as expressed through a course I taught on "Art in Culture," at Gallaudet University during the spring semester 2001 and a campus wide discussion of this book sponsored by the University's Library in April 2002. I have also met with three book groups in the Kensington and Silver Spring areas of Maryland during 2001 and 2002. Although only a limited number of individuals actually completed the questionnaires I had prepared for their responses to Chevalier's book, their reactions were enthusiastic and unanimously expressed that *The Girl with The Pearl Earring*, in particular, had changed how they did or would view this painting and others by Johannes Vermeer in the future. Importantly, I was also within earshot of visitors viewing Vermeer paintings at both the National Gallery of Art in Washington and The Mauritshuis, The Hague who explicitly discussed their pleasure at having read Chevalier's book in advance of seeing examples of Vermeer's paintings (August, 2000 and June, 2001 respectively).

⁶⁶ Hector Feliciano, *The Lost Museum*, 1997.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 93.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 123-124.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 135-136.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 148-149.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 228-229.

⁷² Ibid., pp. 278-279.

⁷³ Ibid., pp. 279-280.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 296.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 301-302.

⁷⁶ Liedtke refers here to the visit by Balthasar de Monconys discussed in Montias, pp. 180-181. Walter Liedtke, *Vermeer and The Delft School*, 2001, p. 394

⁷⁷ In his essay "Genre Painting in Delft after 1650: De Hooch and Vermeer," Liedtke writes: "Vermeer's cast of characters is quite restricted, which has encouraged fruitless and essentially misguided attempts to identify some of his figures as people he knew." p. 166.

⁷⁸ Susan Kaysen, *Girl, Interrupted*, 1993.

⁷⁹ Ibid., pp. 165-168.

Chapter 6 – Afterlife as Response

Objects are thought to structure the environment immediately around themselves; they cast a shadow, heat up the surround, strew indications, leave an imprint; they impress a part picture of themselves, a portrait that is unintended and not dependent on being attended, yet, of course, informing nonetheless to whomsoever is properly placed, trained, and inclined.¹

-- Erving Goffman, *Gender Advertisements*

Artists in various fields are always the first to discover how to enable one medium to use or to release the power of another.²

--Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*

In previous chapters, I have discussed recent Vermeer scholarship, the proliferation of his paintings in the form of reproductions and, in particular, the presentation of real Vermeer paintings through the museum exhibition. I have posited that museum exhibitions and their related coverage have shifted Vermeer and his paintings to the foreground and shaped popular ideas and understanding of this artist's work as being emblematic of beauty. I have also offered a theoretical framework for appropriation, discussed the historical antecedents for the appropriation of art in our contemporary culture, and considered the appropriation of Vermeer's paintings by fine artists. I discussed the works of four artists who appropriate the paintings of Vermeer and, using my personal interactions with these artists and their works, discussed the nature of their dialogues with Vermeer as well as how the creative by-products of these

dialogues, in turn, influence how we view and respond to the paintings of the older master.

In chapter five I extended my discussion of Vermeer within the context of the contemporary novel. I considered the historic relationship between art, story telling, and books, and the contemporary evidence that suggest an increased interest in novels focused on art and artists. I discussed in greatest detail four novels based on some aspect of Vermeer studies: Katherine Weber's *The Music Lesson*, Susan Vreeland's *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, Tracey Chevalier's *The Girl with the Pearl Earring* and Paul Watkins' *The Forger*. I considered the development of characters and the descriptions of Vermeer and his art within the narratives of these books and the ways in which they both parallel and depart from the historical record. I argued that the narratives of these novels reflect the personal responses of their authors and that the dialogues serve as a kind of ventriloquism for the author's ideas and meditations on the paintings of Vermeer and the cultural discourse that surrounds his life and works. I argued that novels are offering an accessible counterpart to traditional art historical studies and are, in fact, influencing the perceptions of their readers about artists and art works from history. Ultimately, I returned to the themes of refinement, perfection, and beauty as a way of contextualizing the nature of the dialogues on Vermeer in these novels.

In this chapter I will turn to a discussion of the qualities in Vermeer's paintings that have made them appealing to those who stage the more lively arts of film and opera. In contrast to the tangible evidence readily available to discuss the creative responses of artists and novelists to the works of Vermeer, information demonstrating his influence on film is subtler and somewhat elusive. Filmmakers refer to Vermeer as a way of

describing the visual qualities they seek to create; cultural historians and critics employ the name of Vermeer as a way of conveying the visual qualities of what they see. As I will argue, the aesthetic of Vermeer's paintings and the dynamic they create are in many ways cinematic and thus are suggestive of the lively arts of film and performance. They have offered a visual template that can be appropriated as a way of both conceiving and describing elements of the cinematic medium. Vermeer has become a way of conveying the aesthetic qualities of refinement and beauty in the lively arts.

Cinematic Dialogues with Vermeer

Paintings and the lives of the artists who created them have provided both a departure for and a subject of numerous films since the introduction of this new medium more than one hundred years ago. The relationship of painting to film and, in turn, film to painting, however, is extraordinarily intricate and rich with nuance, some subtle, some more overt, but all in all complicated.³ The relationship of painting and popular film has been considered within the scholarly record and has been the subject of several exhibitions.⁴ Discussions have considered art in the mise-en-scene and the ways in which the mise-en-scene is based on art. Painting has been used in the development of the cinematic narrative both as a single component of the mise-en-scene and through its more active role in the development of characters and plots.

In Jan Jost's 1992 film *All the Vermeers in NY*, Vermeer's paintings provide both the theme of the movie and a critical element of the mise-en-scene.⁵ The story weaves together the lives of disparate, often complicated characters that are in some way entangled with art, money, or both. A prominent theme of the film is the sense of

unrequited searching and desire that seems only fulfilled through art and, in particular, the experience of viewing an original Vermeer. The central male character unsuccessfully attempts to duplicate the essence of Vermeer's women in real life when he meets a woman whose face and quieted movements remind him of the women shown in Vermeer's paintings. In the end, like Marcel Proust's Bergotte in *The History of Things Past*, the man meets death in the presence of Vermeer's paintings. In this film the director includes flashing images of Vermeers in postcard form as well as lengthy filming of central characters viewing Vermeer paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Jost also stages scenes that call to mind other specific Vermeer paintings such as a scene of the female lead shown in profile reading a letter before a window, which visually connects with Vermeer's painting *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, or a view of the New York cityscape that calls to mind Vermeer's *View of Delft*.

The name of Johannes Vermeer has, in fact, repeatedly surfaced as a source of inspiration for film directors, cameramen, artistic directors, and a whole host of other individuals associated with the increasingly complicated production of films. Vermeer is often cited within film criticism as a way of contextualizing the visual character of a particular scene or the style conveyed through this cinematic medium. Quite often these associations are difficult to distinguish and can only be precisely understood through the eyes of the individual who created these effects or those who seek to write about them. Perception is paramount within a construction of Vermeer and film.

Famed cinematographer Jack Cardiff, for example, credits his "passionate study of painters and light," including the works of Vermeer, as the key to his success as a cameraman and the reason behind his first big break into the film industry.⁶ Bill Desowitz

offers more tangible evidence of Cardiff's debt to the old master in his discussion of *Black Narcissis*, a film for which Cardiff won the 1947 Oscar for cinematography. In his *New York Times* article titled "Cinema's Vermeer," published on the eve of Cardiff receiving a lifetime achievement Oscar, Desowitz explains, "Using oatmeal-colored tones and chaste-looking light, Mr. Cardiff evokes Vermeer in the early scenes of somber introspection."⁷ Desowitz, thus, *senses* Vermeer; however, the evidence of Vermeer is not concrete, but is instead suggested through subtle nuance found in Cardiff's camera technique that is, in turn, seen by the critic. This observation seems all the more interesting as Desowitz noted it at the same time the *Vermeer and The Delft School* exhibition was drawing crowds across town at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In her review of Terence Davies' film *The House of Mirth* (2001), Sharon Waxman writes, "the tone of the film is quiet, its visual look rich and painterly – inspired by Vermeer, Davies says."⁸ Here, Waxman has observed the qualities of Davies' film and in discussing them with the director is informed of his interest in emulating Vermeer. The visual aesthetic created by Davies through the medium of film has, thus, been appropriated from Vermeer.

In her introductory catalogue essay for the *Art and Film Since 1945: Hall of Mirrors* exhibition, Kerry Brougher, a curator with The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, describes the ways in which she too senses Vermeer when she views the films of Jean-Luc Godard:

Jan Vermeer is one of the artists who comes to mind when viewing much of Godard's work. Although Godard rarely quotes a specific painting in his early films, he nevertheless suggests the poses, light, and sense of extended time of Vermeer, an artist who was also intimately focused on capturing the fleeting moment for eternity.⁹

As Brougher views Godard's films they are filtered through her mind where the residual impressions of Johannes Vermeer's paintings continue to exist and the similarities between the two visual media surface. Here again, Brougher's observations are based on her response to Godard's film – her own perceptions – and not on any concrete evidence. The timing of these observations and the *Hall of Mirrors* exhibition followed closely the international success of Washington's *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition, which may indeed have led to Brougher's coupling of Vermeer with Godard.

Anne Hollander discusses the paintings of Vermeer in *Moving Pictures*, a book that considers the evolution of cinema and particularly the mise-en-scene of film within the context of art history.¹⁰ Hollander argues “proto-cinematic” art evolved primarily in the form of paintings and was first known and recognized by the public through reproductions. As Hollander emphasizes, reproductions can be viewed in private and thus encourage viewers to engage in images on a personal level, unaware of the painterly effects of the artist.¹¹ Northern European artists from as early as the mid-fifteenth century had defined a form of painting carefully focused on the rendering of optical effects, rather than on more formal ideas, and these Hollander believes best describe the proto-cinematic character. She argues that the works of artists like Vermeer and Jan Van Eyck appeal to viewers on a personal and private level and contrast with the “common gaze of a convoked audience”¹² rendered by Michelangelo, for example. Hollander claims these pictures are unconsciously appealing and describes movies as a natural manifestation of a visual continuum begun by these earlier artists.

Hollander's discussion continues with a survey of paintings from art history that support her ideas on "moving pictures." The Northern landscapes of Pieter Bruegel, the intimate interiors of Pieter de Hooch, the powerful lighting effects of Rembrandt's etchings and George de la Tour's paintings, as well as the works of Piranesi, Chardin, Turner, Eakins and many other artists are all discussed and cited as examples of cinematic-prototypes. Within her discussion she suggestively juxtaposes still photographs taken from such early movies as *The Front Page* (1931), *The Great Lie* (1941) and *The Man Who Came to Dinner* (1941) with paintings by Vermeer and Rembrandt.¹³

While framing her argument within art historical debate, Hollander's effort to contextualize movies as an extension of art history is useful in considering the impact paintings may have on film directors as well as viewers of film. *Moving Pictures*, though highly speculative and, indeed, subjective, nevertheless argues the ability of paintings and reproductions to have resonating value that lingers in the memories and imaginations of the viewer. These observations are consistent with other manifestations of viewer response to Vermeer such as those seen in contemporary art and literature.

The recurrent appearance of Vermeer within a dialogue on film provides useful evidence of Gaston Bachelard's ideas on topoanalysis, as discussed in chapter two, and the ways in which they can explain how images become associated with our lived experiences, are stored within the context of these memories, and become intermingled with other ideas and perceptions through the workings of the mind. That Vermeer's paintings continuously are brought to mind in both the producers of films and, subsequently, their critics, demonstrates both the degree through which the images of his

paintings have been internalized within different individuals keenly focused on aspects of the visual arts, and an indication of the deeply held perceptions these individuals have about this artist. The relative uniformity of Vermeer's compositional design provides a kind of template – interior room, lit from the left, table, a few accoutrements, a few chairs, and a figure – that can be compared and measured against the mise-en-scene of film. Vermeer's paintings offer a visual aesthetic that is understood as refined, perfect, and intrinsically beautiful. In seeking to present these same qualities in their own work and, conversely, describe them to their audience, directors and critics are employing the name of Vermeer, and in so doing, assert the expectation that everyone engaged in their dialogue will understand precisely what they are talking about.

The particular style Vermeer sets forth in his paintings and the decisive time dynamic they convey encourages our associating his works with vastly different contexts including the moving images of film. The images of his paintings act as phantoms, coloring the imagination and filtering the ways in which film is made and viewed. As Arthur Wheelock writes in *Vermeer and The Art of Painting*:

A "Vermeer," like a "Rembrandt" or a "Van Gogh," is something more than a painting. Although we might make a special effort to see a Vermeer, whether it be a painting of a young girl in a turban, a woman with a water pitcher, or a music lesson, a Vermeer brings associations with it that transcend any one of these specific images. Hidden somewhere within an appreciation of it are memories of other impressions he has left for us...¹⁴

Indeed, the Washington installation of the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition, which was curated by Wheelock, offers a framework for considering the ways in which the images of Vermeer's paintings become reinforced, animated, and retained within the human consciousness.

Of the five exhibitions discussed in my earlier chapter, the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition was unique in its full focus on Vermeer. Unlike the other exhibitions, *Johannes Vermeer* offered the viewer paintings by Vermeer hung within the context of his other works. The visual effect of this presentation was clear and powerful; each painting built on and reflected back on the others displayed in close proximity to it in a way that is uncommon in museum exhibitions. Of the twenty-one Vermeer paintings displayed in the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition, the works found in the mid-spaces are perhaps most useful in seeking to understand Vermeer's apparent presence in dialogue on film.

As previously described, Vermeer's *View of Delft*, *The Little Street*, and *The Girl with the Wineglass* were hung together in a separate space within the third room of the exhibition, a room that was divided into two distinct spaces. Standing in this space, viewers could move their eyes between the three works, connecting them in much the same way as a film editor might connect individual shots taken during the production of a film. The color and shimmering light seen across the roof tops and in the reflection of the water in the *View of Delft*; the pure white surface of the buildings and the glimmering mortar of the brickwork in *The Little Street*; the edge of the window, sheen of the girl's dress, white table cloth, pitcher, and other white accents in *The Girl with the Wineglass* visually connect these paintings in the minds of the viewer in a way that is not unrelated to film (fig. 47). Like the art of the cinematographer Vermeer's paintings move us from the city, to the street, to an interior room within a house and back again.



Figure 47. Johannes Vermeer, *The Girl with the Wine Glass*, ca. 1659-60, (oil on canvas), Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Brunswick.

The Girl with the Wineglass provides the first glimpse of the home interior, a place Vermeer continued to represent for the rest of his short career. This painting is a relatively early work for Vermeer and presents certain disjunctions in the compositional design similarly evident in a painting not included in the exhibition, *The Glass of Wine* (1658-59), that will be more carefully articulated in his works of just a few years later. This painting is, in fact, somewhat curious and it is precisely these curiosities that bring to mind the medium of film. The painting shows three figures set in a relatively spacious interior illuminated by light coming through a stained glass window that stands open on the left. Seated in a chair positioned sideways in the direction of the window is a girl

wearing a bright red satin dress, the color of which contrasts starkly to the predominantly earthen tones found elsewhere throughout the painting. A man positioned just beyond the woman on her right side, leans down and seems to nudge with his hand a wineglass she holds in her own, upwards towards her mouth. Although the man's face and gaze are close to the woman, her own looks out at the viewer displaying an odd, goofy grin. Because of these details in particular as well as the symbolic imagery found in the decorative glass window, *The Girl with the Wineglass* has been interpreted within the context of temperance, a theme seen in numerous other paintings and prints of the seventeenth century.¹⁵

The third figure in *The Girl with the Wineglass* is a man positioned at the back of the room seated with his elbow resting on the table, fist supporting his face, at a decided distance from the other two figures. The man's position combined with the softened, hazy way in which Vermeer has painted him adds a mysterious character to his form that makes him seem almost apparitional. With the exception of the cape worn by the other man painted closer to the girl, the outward appearance and dress of both men are precisely identical. This backgrounded figure is often described as melancholic; however, dreamy seems more appropriate.¹⁶ His head visually connects to a portrait of a distinguished gentleman hung on the back wall within Vermeer's painting that also visually connects with the other man closer to the foreground and next to the woman. The connection forms a decisive male trio or perhaps even a kind of speech-bubble, adding an interesting, almost surreal character that is not dissimilar to elements found in film. Much as a cinematographer will overlay images, employ fade-ins and fade-outs, add contrasts in color, and adjust the visual tempo of a film to create a different time

dynamic or dreamlike sensation, Vermeer's *The Girl with the Wineglass* suggests a similar element of the surreal in his medium of paint. One wonders if Vermeer is really representing three men or, perhaps, simply three different impressions of one.

The space which contained *Woman Holding a Balance*, *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*, *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*, and *The Music Lesson* in the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition offered a view of Vermeer's works that can, indeed, be described as highly cinematic. Hung at rhythmic intervals within the four sides of the room, the paintings enhanced and repeated one another almost like separate frames or sequences function within a film. Each painting presented a different but also related scene to the one seen before it, the exact sequencing of which could be mixed up or simply maintained within the flow of the room. The women in Vermeer's paintings created a dialogue amongst themselves. The sensation of light that enters from the left in the rooms of each painting is highly atmospheric and pulsating, animating the surfaces and objects within each room. Although quieted the paintings do not seem static and are enlivened further through the imagination of the viewer.

As discussed above, frequently the allusions to Vermeer are merely perception and, as is so often the case in art historical discourse, the hard evidence that would prove these observations is conspicuously missing from the written record. Suggestions of Vermeer and allusions to his paintings can occur in the most unlikely contexts. Director Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* is a highly visual, richly cinematic film that has won praise from numerous venues since its release in 1982. The release of the original director's cut on the occasion of its tenth anniversary in 1992 furthered the film's already firmly established position within the cinematic genre. Based on the Philip K. Dick novel *Do*

Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, *Blade Runner* is set in Los Angeles in November, 2019, a time when highly advanced robots called NEXUS 6 Replicants, who had been developed to serve as slaves in “Off-World” colonies, began bloody rebellions and became illegal on Earth. Special police units called Blade Runners were established to hunt and “retire” (kill) illegal replicants. Studies have been completed on the design, production, and interpretation of *Blade Runner* from seemingly every possible angle. The theme of this film seems a highly unlikely place to discuss the appropriation of Vermeer; however, aspects of the film nevertheless have brought this Dutch master into the mix.

In the case of *Blade Runner* the photograph image found in Leon’s hotel room that was later used by Deckard in his quest to locate the illegal replicants appears to be based on a Vermeer painting. The photograph, which was pictured in several important scenes in the movie, bears a striking resemblance to Johannes Vermeer’s *The Music Lesson* with some tempering of the image in the manner of van Eyck. The left side windows, the placement of many of the compositional elements, and the overall design of the photograph recall this painting by Vermeer. Its later placement in the film in conjunction with a piano, sheet music, and the narrative theme of “learning” one can play music accentuate Vermeer’s *The Music Lesson* as an appropriate and likely source for Ridley Scott’s image. Although I made this observation independently, film critic Scott Bukatman’s impression of this object resonated in almost precisely the same way. He writes:

In *Blade Runner*, urban space moves toward the condition of cyberspace, and this is especially clear when Deckard electronically inspects one of Leon’s photos. This, first of all, transforms the status of the object. The frozen stillness of the photograph, its inactivity and emptiness, brings Hopper’s alienated urban interiors to mind, but the setting also strongly resembles something by Vermeer.

A sharp light illuminates the scene from the left side of the image, and a convex mirror plays with light, reflection and surface in ways that again recall Vermeer or van Eyck. Just as the scene's reflection on the status of the cinematic image locates hidden details in the depth of the mirror, so did both Vermeer and van Eyck include obscure painted reflections of themselves in their canvasses [sic].¹⁷

What might appear at first to be more subjective observation can, indeed, be argued in this case as an explicit appropriation of Vermeer's *The Music Lesson*. As Bukatman's discussion explains, the photograph was also enlivened in the film through the visual apparatus used by Deckard to analyze it, a point that also hints at Vermeer. As Deckard required the apparatus to clearly "see" the details needed to find the Replicants in the film, so too has it been suggested that Johannes Vermeer utilized the camera obscura to achieve the visual character found in many of his paintings.

The use of the camera obscura has been part of the discourse on Vermeer for more than half a century.¹⁸ The camera obscura is a box viewing device that utilizes a small hole affixed with a lens through which light enters and, through the aid of a mirror, projects an image of the scene outside of it onto a flat surface above, where it can then be viewed or copied. Although it will never be fully known whether Vermeer utilized this tool in the construction of his work, the possible use of the camera obscura within the context of his working method offers an intriguing connection to the precursory apparatus of the technology similarly used by film directors and photographers. As has already been discussed, this aspect of Vermeer's technique was embraced within the context of the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition and catalogue where it received a more widespread airing through the related media coverage.

As painting has been argued as the prototype for film, the camera obscura can, in fact, also be argued as the precursory apparatus to the film camera. Perhaps the best discussion to date of the possible use of the camera obscura as an aid in the creation of paintings is that of Phillip Steadman in *Vermeer's Camera*.¹⁹ Building on the research of Lawrence Gowing and Arthur Wheelock, among others, Steadman argues the use of the camera obscura by Vermeer for not one but perhaps all of his 35 extant paintings. The use of the camera obscura as an aid in painting appears to have become an acceptable working method for painters as early as the 16th century. Although the affinities of Vermeer's visual effects to those seen through the use of a camera obscura have been noted – for example the halation of his colors and the diffuseness of his line – art historians engaged in the study of Dutch painting from the 17th century are by no means in agreement on Vermeer's use of this device, or to the extent through which Steadman argues he used it.

Through a thorough discussion of the scholarly literature and the inclusion of scientific illustrations from the 17th centuries, reproductions of Vermeer's paintings, simulated reenactments of Vermeer's painting compositions generated through computer and photographed images of three-dimensional models, charts, graphs and modern illustrations, Steadman seeks to prove beyond any doubt that Vermeer not only could have, but actually did use the camera obscura in the creation of his works. The visual illustrations of his book alone are extremely compelling, many of which highlight the cinematic character apparent in Vermeer's paintings through their framing and compositional effects. Although Steadman's book should still be considered highly speculative, it is useful in connecting the paintings of Vermeer with technological

innovation, which in turn offers a bridge from the 17th century to our present age of digital media and perhaps the more contemporary notions of film and film criticism.

Vermeer has also been appropriated within the context of contemporary opera. Inspired by his visit to the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition at The Mauritshuis, The Hague, in 1996, Dutch composer Louis Andriessen, created *Writing to Vermeer*, an operatic collaboration with film Director Peter Greenaway.²⁰ The opera, which included Greenaway's characteristic melding of image and text,²¹ evolved around a trip Johannes Vermeer is known to have taken to The Hague in 1672 and a series of fictitious letters that he received from three women – his wife, his mother-in-law, and his model (fig. 48).²² The production included a cast dressed as figures from Vermeer's paintings and images projected against the stage backdrop that included details of the paintings as well as text from the letters the three women had written. As Greenaway describes, the opera evolved as a dialogue with the paintings based on certain assumptions he and others had about Johannes Vermeer.

It is a nice irony that the opera is called *Writing to Vermeer*. Vermeer is a painter, so why do we talk about writing? And in terms of the story, Vermeer is entirely and absolutely absent. The three major characters are Catharina Bolnes, his wife; Maria Thins, his mother in law; and, admittedly, a composite character, a model called Saskia de Vries. Dutch social life of the 1660s, 1670s is quite well documented but, strangely, we don't know an awful lot about Vermeer. We know more about the females in his life than we do about him...the content of the letters of the opera is deliberately very low key: domestic matters, genre matters, house, home, what are the children doing, what are the neighbors doing, what is the local "painterly business," where do I buy ultramarine, where does the best canvas come from. In a sense, the women don't talk to one another directly – obviously, because they're all writing to Vermeer – but they talk in parallel to him. And I think that the basic subject matter has to do with notions of male fantasy about these women who love this man in their different ways – carnally, emotionally, affectionately. And the consistent message of the letters is "come home."²³



Figure 48. Flyer for *Writing to Vermeer*, performed as part of the Lincoln Center Festival, July 2000.

Like the figures that continue to be ever-present in the paintings of Vermeer, it is the women who remain behind in Vermeer's absence who provide the basis of the story in the Andriessen and Greenaway opera.

The spaces of Vermeer's paintings, the figures that occupy them, and the thoughts they convey and conjure in the viewer, are all aspects of the dialogue found in

contemporary painting, literature, and film. But the appreciation and dialogue on Vermeer in our contemporary culture is also a result of a growing interest in his work from the outset of modernism, which, importantly, began shortly before the advent of film. Rediscovered at a time when artists were moving towards a full break from traditional ideas on aesthetics, Vermeer's paintings offered a common ground for collectors, artists, and critics. Each recognized in Vermeer's paintings a refinement, perfection and beauty that was indisputable within the art of painting. This dialogue on Vermeer has persisted for more than a century and has spread outwards in myriad ways within more popular aspects of culture. Accessible to Americans through museum collections, exhibitions, and through the reproduction, Vermeer's paintings have become widely known throughout our contemporary culture. Intrigued by stories concerning the rarity of Vermeer's paintings, the lack of personal information on his life, forgeries, and, sadly, thefts, Vermeer has attracted a steady popular following for much of the twentieth century.

Vermeer was a painter of simple themes, composed with limited variation, often focused on women. We know of only thirty-five paintings by Vermeer still in existence. What is seemingly simple and visually understated in Vermeer's works has, indeed, proved rich and resonating for our more contemporary culture. Whether it be a shot whose *mise-en-scene* is constructed and held in a way Vermeer might have envisioned it, or just a fleeting moment of quiet, subtle movements within the cinematic composition, images of Vermeer are continuously conjured because we know him. The spaces of his paintings offer a familiarity that is easily retained, welcomingly revisited, and purposely appropriated time and time again.

¹ Erving Goffman, *Gender Advertisements* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, Harper & Row Publishers), 1976, p. 6.

² Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press), 1997, p. 54.

³ An excellent discussion of some of these relationships can be found in Angela Dalle Vacche, *Cinema and Painting: How Art is Used in Film*. 1996. Anne Hollander has also provided an interesting discussion of the ways in which painting served as the prototype to film. See Anne Hollander, *Moving Pictures* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), 1989.

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⁴ Exhibitions that discuss the relationship between film and painting include: *Image World: Art and Media Culture*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York 1989; *Hitchcock and Art: Fatal Coincidences*, Le Musée des Beaux-Arts, Montreal, 2000; *Art and Film Since 1945: Hall of Mirrors*, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1996; *Peinture Cinema, Peinture*, Centre de la Vieille Charité Marseille, 1989.

⁵ Jon Jost, *all the Vermeers in NY*, film, 1992.

⁶ Jack Cardiff, *Magic Hour*, 1998, pp. 41, 44.

⁷ Bill Desowitz, "Cinema's Vermeer: A Gifted Colorist and Master of Light," *The New York Times*, Sunday, March 25, 2001, pp. 17, 43.

⁸ Sharon Waxman, "A Director Promotes the Wharton School: Terence Davies, Finding Modern Maladies in 'The House of Mirth,'" *The Washington Post*, Sunday, January 14, 2001, p. G6.

⁹ Kerry Brougher, "Hall of Mirrors," *Art and Film Since 1945: Hall of Mirrors*, exhibition catalogue, p. 70.

¹⁰ Anne Hollander, *Moving Pictures* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), 1989.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 441-453.

¹⁴ Arthur K. Wheelock, *Vermeer and the Art of Painting*, 1995, p. 1.

¹⁵ See catalogue entry in *Johannes Vermeer*, 1995, pp. 114-119.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

¹⁷ Scott Bukatman, *Blade Runner*, 1997, p. 46.

¹⁸ Although other scholars may have, indeed, discussed this aspect of Vermeer's working method, Lawrence Gowing's *Vermeer* (1950) is the earliest example I am aware of. Lawrence Gowing, *Vermeer*. 1950, see especially notes 7-10, pp. 69-70.

¹⁹ Phillip Steadman, *Vermeer's Camera*. 2001.

²⁰ Louis Andriessen, composer and Peter Greenaway, librettist, *Writing to Vermeer*, performed at the Lincoln Center Festival 2000, July 11-July 30.

²¹ Peter Greenaway is well-known for this visually rich film and complicated dialogue and textual references. *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982), for example, includes beautiful scenes stages to resemble paintings with characters reading texts that seem disconnected from the visual experience. In a more recent work, *The Pillow Book* (1997) Greenaway filmed his scenes while projecting text across the characters and background.

²² I attended the opening night performance of *Writing to Vermeer* at the Lincoln Center in New York on July 11, 2000. The doors to the theatre opened ten minutes before the opera was scheduled to start and as the audience entered and took their seats, three women, each standing on their own shallow platform suspended by ropes above the stage, were writing a letter addressed to Johannes Vermeer on a wall suspended the full height of the stage. The women, intended to be Vermeer's wife, Catharina, his mother-in-law, Maria Thins, and Vermeer's model, used large brushes and black paint to write the text of their letters in a hand that was large enough to be easily read from the distance by the audience. Sound effects resembling the scratching sounds of pens writing were amplified to accompany this visual interlude holding the viewer's attention on the act of writing. As each woman completed a line of the letter, the platform on which she was standing was lowered and she walked from the platform's right side to begin a new line of

text on the left. Upon completing their letters, the three women and their platforms were removed from the stage while the letters, in their entirety, remained to be studied by the audience. The full text of these letters and others contained in the libretto are reproduced in July 2000 Stagebill for the Lincoln Center Festival.

²³ Excerpt from the Stagebill for the Lincoln Center Festival 2000, p. 21.

Chapter 7 - Conclusion

Though the actual developments in many arts may seem to be leading us away from the idea that a work of art is primarily its content, the idea still exerts an extraordinary hegemony. I want to suggest that this is because the idea is now perpetuated in the guise of a certain way of encountering works of art thoroughly ingrained among most people who take any of the arts seriously. What the overemphasis on the idea of content entails is the perennial, never consummated project of interpretation. And, conversely, it is the habit of approaching works of art in order to interpret them that sustains the fancy that there really is such a thing as the content of a work of art.¹

--Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*

As long as human life lasts, art will go on being the one activity for which no amount of calculation can provide a substitute, and the job of the critic will be to explain why this is so. The ability to realize that he can never attain to an exhaustive analysis of the thing he loves best is the indispensable qualification for signing on.²

-- Clive James, *As of this Writing*

Every painting is always two paintings: the one you see and the one you remember...³

--Siri Hustvedt, *Yonder*

As has been seen in the previous chapters, the ways in which old master paintings are appropriated and discussed can provide tangible information on the meaning of an artist and his work in our more contemporary culture. Centuries after their lives have ceased, the creative manifestations of these artists continue, taking on new life and interest through the responses of the individuals who view them in both their original form and through the reproduction. Frequently, these responses will begin a kind

dialogue that then takes on a more tangible, public form as has been seen in the creative works of contemporary artists like Christina Linaris-Coridou, Mary Waters, George Deem, and Terri Priest. Occasionally these responses will become manifest in dialogues set forth in narrative form, serving as a kind of ventriloquism for the thoughts and meditations of novelists, such as those found in books by Katharine Weber, Susan Vreeland, Tracy Chavalier, and Paul Watkins. Similarly, Vermeer has also inspired works in both stage and film and, more importantly, has been demonstrated as a kind of filter through which the mise-en-scene is both conceptualized and contextualized through a film's production and subsequent criticism. As has been seen throughout my discussion, agents may vary but certain themes persist and, within the context of Vermeer, the dialogue consistently returns to the refinement, perfection, and intrinsic beauty of his paintings. Shaped and provoked in part through art historical discourse, and particularly the contemporary museum exhibition and its coverage, these responses present alternative ways of seeing and interpreting the paintings of the old masters, which, in turn, influence our own individual perceptions of original paintings like those of Johannes Vermeer.

Acts of appropriation, thus, can provide tangible evidence of an individual's dialogue and response to objects and the ideas surrounding them, in this study the paintings of Vermeer. These dialogues are both publicly and privately constructed; they are informed by an individual's unique cultural identities and the perceptions they promote. As has been seen in the works of artists who appropriate Vermeer in their various media, response is individual and highly personalized, yet is also driven partly by more public discourse like that related to the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition. Responses to

Vermeer reflect individual experiences, ideas on the artist, and the exact nature of the dialogue between the two is manifest in the new work created. Response conveys individual perceptions with perceptions being both dynamic and dialogical. Dialogues on Vermeer continuously circle back to beauty.

In the 1999 exhibition *The Museum As Muse* the appropriation of Vermeer was also a component; however, in this instance it is the memory of a Vermeer that is the subject of the appropriation.⁴ French photographer, Sophie Calle's series of works titled *Last Seen...* document both the assault on the museum through art theft and the ways in which the memory of art lingers in the imagination long after our encounter with it has ended.⁵ This series focuses on the 1990 theft of major works by Vermeer, Rembrandt and others from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. *Last Seen... (Vermeer, The Concert)*, (1991) for example highlights the theft of this beloved painting by Vermeer in a way that is at once intimate, if also somewhat morbid (fig. 49). Like all the works in this series, *Last Seen... (Vermeer, The Concert)* is created in two parts; the first part consists of a framed photograph reconstructing the place in the museum where the object hung, implying its presence by a drape hung over a frame. The second part is a text panel, also framed, that includes the thoughts and memories that Calle collected from various museum personnel on the Vermeer's *The Concert*.

The memories contained in the text panel of Calle's work range widely reflecting the diverse ways in which viewers respond to art. Sally Yard summarizes some of these responses in her entry on Calle's works in the exhibition catalogue:

The first voice to speak of Jan Vermeer's *The Concert* reports its unknowability: "I'll always remember this painting because I couldn't see it. It was displayed at waist height, behind a chair, covered with glass but next to the window so that the

glare caught the glass.” The crystalline interior and cloistered domesticity of *The Concert* prompted reticence in one viewer: “I could hear them singing but it seemed very private, quiet, and pure. You felt like an intruder and you wouldn’t want them to know you were watching.” The quotidian existence of the painting was disclosed in routines of companionable or contemplative proximity: “It’s a peaceful thing. I used to look at it every morning before work;” “I used to come here at night, late at night and just go up there and stand.” The observer who has the last word brusquely concludes: “I didn’t like it much, not my style.”⁶

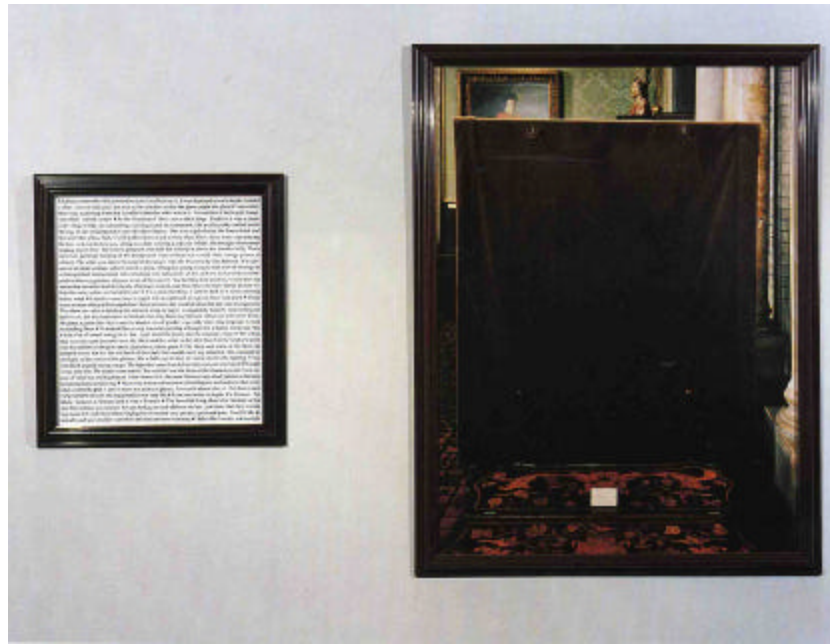


Figure 49. Sophie Calle, *Last Seen... (Vermeer, The Concert)*, 1991, (Ektachrome print and text), The Bohlen Foundation, New York.

The panel presented as text thus elevates viewer response to an equal level with both the visual object and the traditional museum text and, in combination with the other panel, suggests the selectivity and subjectivity of memory and the museum experience. Art works are important but so too are the responses they imply and provoke, all of which can be collected, studied, and reflected back onto the objects from whence they came through ethnographic methods tooled to engage the other and, indeed, the self.

Recent Vermeer related exhibitions and scholarship have also demonstrated the very real way in which Johannes Vermeer was himself engaged in a form of dialogue both with the artistic traditions of the past and those more current to his own time. Contained within his paintings are the tangible evidence of Vermeer's responses and the ways in which these responses can heighten our appreciation of his paintings within the context of others.

A Woman Holding a Balance is perhaps the most beautiful and pensive painting ever created by Johannes Vermeer (fig. 50). The painting focuses on a single figure of a woman standing before a table covered with precious objects – a rich blue velvet cloth, glimmering strings of pearls, gold coins and a carefully crafted box. The woman occupies the right side of the composition slightly turned toward the viewer, her gaze carefully fixed on the simple balance she holds up in her right hand, while resting her left hand downward on the edge of the table. Light enters the room through the upper portion of a window implied in the back left corner of the room, and is filtered by a yellowish curtain that hangs before it. On the same wall, and directly in front of the woman, hangs a mirror visible only through its frame and the reflected surface Vermeer subtly suggests through light strokes of white paint.

Like many of his other works, the room represented in *A Woman Holding a Balance* also contains a painting hung against the back wall, in essence, another painting within a painting. Although it is not known if this painting represents a copy of a work by another artist – either a painting or a print – or if the image is of Vermeer's own invention, the painting in this room nevertheless clearly depicts *The Last Judgment*, a theme amply represented in both sculpture and painting from medieval times forward.

Found in the New Testament book of Revelations, The Last Judgment forecasts the end of the world when all human beings both living and dead will stand before Christ to be judged, a decision that will either allow them to enter the kingdom of heaven or descend to the depths of hell for all eternity.



Figure 50. Johannes Vermeer, *Woman Holding a Balance*, c. 1664, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Widener Collection.

The inclusion of a painting depicting The Last Judgment positioned directly behind Vermeer's woman connects *A Woman Holding a Balance* to a very specific iconographic tradition related to representations of this theme. Numerous studies relate the inclusion of The Last Judgment theme to the meaning inherent to Vermeer's painting, citing the woman and the balance she holds as a kind of visual metaphor for the act of judging that is parallel to that of Christ.⁷ Interestingly, none of these studies have sought to consider Vermeer's painting within a larger construction of this iconographic theme throughout art history. Yet in painting *A Woman Holding a Balance*, Vermeer has both renewed and reconstructed this theme within the framework of his own time and place. The gesture of Vermeer's woman with her right hand up and her left hand down, reflects the precise gesture seen in numerous representations of The Last Judgment, including those found in the tympanum sculpture of Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals, such as that seen at Sainte-Foy in Conques, France, or, indeed, Michelangelo's fresco in The Sistine Chapel.⁸ Vermeer has thus appropriated a theme that, although outside predominant traditions in 17th century Dutch art, was nevertheless linked to previously established art historical traditions related to Christian imagery.⁹

The relationship of *Woman Holding a Balance* to other images of women weighing gold is well established in the art historical record. The catalogues for both the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition and the *Vermeer and The Delft School* exhibition discussed these relationships within the context of Vermeer's contemporary Pieter de Hooch and his painting *A Woman Weighing Gold*.¹⁰ Both catalogue entries place de Hooch's painting earlier than *A Woman Holding a Balance*, thus, by implication, arguing that Vermeer, indeed, borrowed his idea for this painting from another artist. The actual

juxtaposition of Vermeer and de Hooch's paintings was physically presented in the installation of the Madrid exhibition *Vermeer: Dutch Painting of Domestic Interiors*, where the affinities between *a Woman Weighing Gold* and *Woman Holding a Balance* were readily apparent and visually argued within a larger thematic discussion focused on Vermeer and his contemporaries. This physical juxtaposition encouraged the viewer's awareness of the connections between these two artists while at the same time clarifying the subtle, yet, dramatic adjustments, which Vermeer made in his own painting, that serve to shift our focus to the theme of The Last Judgment. *Woman Holding a Balance*, thus, encourages our understanding that Vermeer was not only not working in isolation but was, indeed, functioning both within clearly defined art historical traditions and within the artistic trends of his time.

Just as Christina Linaris-Coridou, Mary Waters, George Deem and Terri Priest appropriate the art from the past within their own more contemporary idioms, so too did Johannes Vermeer appropriate from past art traditions within those evolving in his own time. As *Woman Holding a Balance* offers us an understanding of the relevance of The Last Judgment theme to the everyday world of Johannes Vermeer, so too does our study of contemporary acts of appropriation encourage an understanding of the ongoing relevance and meaning of old master paintings, like those of Vermeer, in our own time. Carefully viewing Vermeer's painting offers us a 17th century interpretation of the Biblical story of The Last Judgment; his painting can be read through the Book of Revelations. The texts of our own time, such as the novels of Katharine Weber, Susan Vreeland, Tracey Chevalier, and Paul Watkins, likewise, provide a different literary genre through which Vermeer's paintings can be read. Neither of these texts provides a

full understanding of Vermeer's painting; however, each offers a way of considering Vermeer's intentions while offering details on precisely what viewers see when they regard his paintings.

Recent scholarship has also considered the original framing of *Woman Holding a Balance*, which ultimately predetermined the manner in which Vermeer intended viewers to see his painting.¹¹ According to the inventory of Jacob Dissius's collection that was sold in Amsterdam in 1696, *Woman Holding a Balance* was enclosed in a case, which scholars have concluded was probably similar to the shuttered frame Emanuel de Witte added to his painting *Oude Kerk in Delft during a Sermon* (1651).¹² In de Witte's work the physical character of the framing is much the same as a triptych, a tri-part assembly traditionally used for worship, which displays different imagery depending on whether it is seen with the side panels open or closed. When closed, de Witte's case displayed a still life of fruit, which iconographically is connected to the sense of taste, a temptation steadied by the image of worship presented on the painting seen inside.¹³

Although it is unknown whether there was one or two doors on Vermeer's case or, indeed, if these doors included other imagery, the framing of *Woman Holding a Balance* would certainly have required the direct interaction of the viewer and have fixed her position within close proximity to Vermeer's image. This original framing solution would have required the viewer to make a conscious decision as to whether or not he should open or close the frame doors; his act of decision would have offered clear parallels to those of Vermeer's woman and would have served in a similar way to redirect his thoughts beyond the pleasure of earthly beauty to the divine promise of The Last Judgment. The process of viewing Vermeer's painting would, thus, have extended to the

viewer the same sense of free-will implied in *Woman Holding a Balance*; an element that was, indeed, at play when Vermeer chose to appropriate The Last Judgment theme within a composition based on de Hooch, and one that continues to be relevant to our own acts of appropriation in our more contemporary culture.

In 1999 the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden of the Smithsonian Institution mounted an exhibition titled *Regarding Beauty: A View of the Late Twentieth Century*. Curated by Neal Benezra and Olga Viso, *Regarding Beauty* was intended to stimulate and provoke its audience into thoughts on what beauty really is. The exhibition asked its viewers to consider whether what we regard as beautiful now will actually withstand the tests of time and remain so in the future; conversely, it also asked whether something we find unpleasant now might, indeed, prove more beautiful to us later on.

Historical precedents for shifting ideas on beauty in art were mapped out within the exhibition text and received considerable attention in the exhibition's catalogue. *Regarding Beauty* directly confronted the extraordinary complexity with which much of contemporary art has challenged traditional ideas on aesthetics and the way in which it has often confounded the viewer.

While ascribing beauty to art may seem natural and appropriate, in recent decades beauty and contemporary art have been considered virtually incongruous. In an art world increasingly focused on global issues and social concerns, artist and critics alike have questioned beauty's efficacy and relevance for contemporary culture. Suggesting frivolity, the machinations of the art market, and a lack of seriousness and social purpose, beauty has indeed come under severe attack. The assault on beauty by the contemporary art world has left a confused and baffled art-viewing public uncertain about one of the very cornerstones of Western art and culture, namely, the pursuit of beauty.¹⁴

The exhibition included a wide array of art dating from the 1960s through the 1990s including the photographs of Cindy Sherman, Matthew Barney, Mariko Mori, and Yasumasa Morimura; sculptures by Michelangelo Pistoletto, Janine Antoni, Kiki Smith and Louise Bourgeois; and paintings by Yves Klein, Andy Warhol, Lucian Freud, and Gerhard Richter.

Across the mall and at the same time as *Regarding Beauty* was the National Gallery of Art's exhibition *Johannes Vermeer: The Art of Painting*. The irony of these two exhibitions happening concurrently was striking to me. The attention afforded to Vermeer through exhibitions, especially the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition of four years earlier, and the way Vermeer and his paintings had become celebrities through them, had clearly established Vermeer's aesthetic as a recognizable emblem of beauty in our contemporary culture.

It was the week between Christmas and New Year's, the eve of the new millennium. I had a meeting scheduled with Arthur Wheelock at the National Gallery and in the context of our discussion convinced him we should go see the Hirshhorn exhibition together. On our way to *Regarding Beauty* we stopped by the gallery where Vermeer's *The Art of Painting* was hanging. It was the fourth time I had come to see this painting but seeing a Vermeer with Wheelock is always a memorable experience. I shared with him the aspects of the painting that I had found particularly exciting and, always the teacher, Wheelock listened then called my attention the details of this work that were captivating his own interest at the time.

As expected, *Regarding Beauty* provided Wheelock and me with an instructive counterpoint for our discussion on art that day. Whereas the subject, aesthetic, and the

process through which Vermeer created *The Art of Painting* were completely in sync with one another, this was not always true with artworks included in *Regarding Beauty*. Frequently the subject of the object, its aesthetic, or the process through which it was created offered conflicting ideas on beauty. Janine Antoni's work titled *Lick and Lather* (1993-94) for example, included 16 individual busts of a woman, eight of which were molded in chocolate and the other eight molded in soap.¹⁵ The busts were positioned on top of individual pedestals, forming two lines, with the chocolate busts lined up on the left facing directly the soap busts on the right. Each of the busts was clearly cast from the same mold; however, they each were in different states of decomposition. In accordance with the title of her work, Antoni had either licked or lathered each of the busts to create an individual work based on a copy. Although each bust possessed its own element of visual interest, the process through which it was created challenged the viewer's limits on beauty. Similarly, Lucian Freud's painting *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping* (1995) is skillfully painted; however, the subject of the work, an obese woman in the nude, reclining, and asleep on a couch, presents an image that seems far from beautiful.¹⁶

Later, walking through *Regarding Beauty* I was struck by the way in which the two exhibitions seemed to complete one another. Although I knew it was just chance that they had happened at the same time, it was as if it all had all been planned. *Regarding Beauty* and *Johannes Vermeer: The Art of Painting* were in dialogue with each other. *Regarding Beauty* was asking "What is beauty?" and *Johannes Vermeer: The Art of Painting* was responding "This. This is beauty."

We scrutinize these works to interpret them, scrutinizing the visible for signs of the invisible. But here the invisible to be identified is not a moral symbolized, but the reality of another's inner life. These paintings stir in us an imaginative awareness of the value of another, and how it is that such moments as these, when we contemplate the extent of our human life, our ambition and presentiments, are when – where – we find life's value.

--J.M. Nash, "To finde the Mindes construction in the face"¹⁷

Despite any lingering aspiration toward originality in the world today, it is clear that everywhere we are responding to stimuli. Our ideas do not spring forth as isolated inventions but, more accurately, are woven of threads gleaned from the world around us within frameworks of time. Life in America involves a broad range of experiences including everything from family, to health, to education, to technology, to entertainment, to travel, and more. As we begin our myriad acts of creation, the colors, themes or expressions we choose, the patterns they inspire, and, ultimately, the ways in which the ideas of our minds manifest themselves in tangible form, have more to do with the manner in which we are able to engage with and blend together diverse sources of information and experiences, and less our ability to demonstrate originality. It is precisely through this engagement process – our ability to mentally relate and communicate with the worlds we construct around us – that we are able to assess value, draw meaning, validate the human experience, and, indeed, create something new.

As the oldest recorded language in the history of humanity, art has provided a rich source of inspiration for successive generations not least of which is our own. Our culture is becoming increasingly global and visual. Sophisticated technological resources

and computer networks connect us to the World Wide Web and bridge our access to a seemingly limitless collection of cultural resources throughout the world, including sites devoted to Johannes Vermeer.¹⁸

Clearly the watershed has collapsed and the art of the past is spilling out in all directions -- into advertisements, literature, product packaging, popular films, the Internet and more. The boundaries between the fine arts and popular culture are continuing to erode and questions of authorship, inspiration, and appropriation are becoming key to discussions of visual literacy. As an artist widely revered by the art community throughout the twentieth century and one whose fame grew significantly through a series of recent, highly publicized exhibitions, Johannes Vermeer offers a focus of study that provides insight into these larger discussions.

It is unlikely that further studies on Vermeer will reveal additional information that will assemble the missing pieces of the artist's life. Perhaps it was Vermeer's intention that we measure him only on the merits of his work, or maybe he pondered this little. Vermeer offers us many windows yet our view seems continuously directed inward. As we begin a new century following one filled with constant wrangling on the merits or meanings of art such as those conveyed in the exhibition *Regarding Beauty*, the mystery, beauty and momentary suspension of Vermeer's paintings are inspiring tangible evidence that informs these discussions.

Following his increasing appreciation within circles more closely associated with artists and art history, Vermeer's name was shifted into the spotlight of a more popular dialogue through the 1995-1996 *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition. The simplicity of his themes and their compositional design and, conversely, the complexity of his working

method, including his tendency toward subtle adjustments, reduction, and his probable use of the camera obscura, were aspects of the art historical discussion that transcended the realm of art history to more popular audiences. Walter Benjamin's assertion that the reproduction of paintings would make them more widely known – democratize them – has proved true for Vermeer. Artists, who have for some time appropriated aspects of Vermeer within the context of their own work, can now achieve new connections with viewers who recognize Vermeer in a way they never had before. Yet as I have also shown, contrary to Benjamin's predictions, the titles affixed to these appropriative works by the artists who create them carry Vermeer's name or some descriptive phrase or connection to his paintings, thus reasserting their context and deriving benefits from this association.

Gaston Bachelard's ideas on memories and the way they are attached to the architectural spaces of our lived experiences can also be adapted to a discussion of the memories we affix to objects, specifically paintings, as I have done within the context of this study. The experience of viewing Vermeer's original paintings and their reproductions has resonated in the minds of their audience and has created private sites of meaning. Writers of popular fiction can construct characters and plots, which meld their own fantasies and experiences with Vermeer and his paintings into themes that resonate with a public already primed to receive them. Filmmakers, playwrights, and critics seek to emulate and refer to Vermeer in the discourse surrounding the medium of film, bringing to mind an aesthetic that is universally acknowledged as exceptional. Within such a creative and visible discourse one can clearly see the ways in which these new dialogues shed both light and intrigue on our appreciation of the ever-present images of

Vermeer. New appropriative works have in turn broadened and enhanced our understandings of art history, thus the present has indeed influenced our perceptions of the past. As suggested by Michael Baxandall, I have shown this reverse proposition operating in connection with the paintings of Vermeer and the appropriative works they have inspired. Although he was a man who lived during the 17th century, Vermeer is undoubtedly an artist we have chosen for our own time. His paintings provide us with tangible evidence of refinement, perfection, and intrinsic beauty that, in the midst of our fast-paced, often harsh, technologically transfixed, and aesthetically diverse cultural dialogues, has continuously proved instructive, meaningful, and emblematic.¹⁹

As I hasten to complete my work and tie up all the threads I am continuing to find new information. My research has offered me many serendipitous encounters the outcome of which has proved enormously fruitful. Dear friends have been made of strangers and through our conversations they have led me to new paths that have in turn brought me to new connections. In a letter from Christina Linaris-Coridou she writes: “This morning I was thinking of you by looking [through] my papers, magazines, books, etc. and my eyes [caught] a poem written from a certain woman Jerdith Marrin is her name in 1994 and published in “The Paris Review”. It is in English. I immediately have in my memory our day in the museum in The Hague and in Delft.” The poem titled *Dream View of Delft: In Memory of Elizabeth Bishop* reads:

I Vermeer’s “View of Delft”
we down our dry manhattans
our feet up comfortably
inside the seventeenth century
on plastic-webbed American
Lawn loungers; we chat and smoke.

We are in the painting
without disturbing the painting,
drinking without alcoholism
or self-loathing. I'm not sure
what we're talking about
this and that relaxed.

We are tighter but separate,
the way the gold strand on the left foreground
is a version of a shadow
or the gray cloud overhead:
foreboding seen as light
or the way the sketchy two
female figures in the painting
stand almost but not touching
dressed in black. And too
double, the red-brick Delfts
one in, one out of the water.

Everything is meeting
and not meeting in the dream
or in the painting. Sun
inches up the red-brick
buildings here, Elizabeth.
And which Delft now is real?²⁰

It is clear that our evolving visual culture offers a treasure trove from which to create new images and construct new meanings. As the past informs the present, so too does our understanding of the present reinvest meaning in the past. If we are to fully understand the relevance and meaning of art in our own time, we need to excavate and ponder the myriad dialogues our culture is having with artists from the past, of which Vermeer is an excellent example. We will do well to extend our studies from a consideration of the history and meaning of such artists as Vermeer in their time, to a broader discussion of "the age of Vermeer" and others in our own.

¹ Susan Sontag. *Against Interpretation*. 1966.

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- ² Clive James, *As of this Writing*, 2003. Cited in A.O. Scott, "The Hungriest Critic of Them All", *The New York Times*, Sunday, June 29, 2003, Section 2, pp. 1 and 22.
- ³ Siri Hustvedt, "Vermeer's Annunciation," *Yonder*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company), 1998, p. 46.
- ⁴ Kynaston McShine, *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1999.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 136-139.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 136.
- ⁷ Arthur Wheelock includes a general summary of the various interpretations in his entry on *A Woman Holding A Balance* in the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition catalogue. *Johannes Vermeer*, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1995.
- ⁸ The Last Judgment tympanum of Sainte-Foy, Conques, France (c. 1130) is reproduced in Laurie Schneider Adams, *A History of Western Art*, Second Edition, 1997, p. 194. Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment* fresco, found on the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel (1534-1541), is also reproduced in Adams, p. 293.
- ⁹ I have been able to locate no other painting of The Last Judgement in 17th century Dutch art. Although he notes that the Flemish master, Peter Paul Rubens is known to have painted this subject, Dr. Arthur Wheelock, has informed me that he, likewise, knows of no other painting of this theme contemporaneous with Vermeer.
- ¹⁰ See the entry on *A Woman Holding a Balance* in the *Johannes Vermeer*, exhibition catalogue, 1995, pp. 140-145; and in Walter Liedtke, *Vermeer and The Delft School*, 2001, pp. 383-386. Also see the entry on this painting found in Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century: The Collections of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue*, 1995, pp. 371-377.
- ¹¹ See Arthur Wheelock, "The Framing of a Vermeer," (unpublished manuscript in the Author's possession), 2003.
- ¹² See Liedtke, 2001, p. 383. Emanuel de Witte's painting *The Oude Kerk in Delft During a Sermon* is reproduced on page 109, fig. 120.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 383.
- ¹⁴ Neal Benezra and Olga M. Viso, *Regarding Beauty: A View of the Late Twentieth Century*, exhibition catalogue, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 1999, p. 11.
- ¹⁵ Reproduced in *ibid.*, pp. 44-45.
- ¹⁶ Reproduced in *ibid.*, p. 56.
- ¹⁷ J.M. Nash, "To finde the Mindes construction in the face," *Vermeer Studies*, 1998
- ¹⁸ A search was completed by National Gallery of Art staff in 1996; see papers of Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr. A Search using the Infoseek search engine on 5/3/99 yielded 749 hits the majority of which were visited within the context of this study.
- ¹⁹ Interestingly, in his book *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms our Lives*, Todd Gitlin uses Vermeer's painting *The Concert* as a means of contextualizing the visual and auditory complexity of our current culture in contrast to the relative quietude of the past.
- ²⁰ A.L.S. to Marguerite Glass from Christina Linaris-Coridou, Delft, September 6, 2002.

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