Focus on Vermeer

Following the success of Vermeer and the Delft School at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (8 March–27 May), the exhibition has now come to the National Gallery, London (20 June–16 September). The record number of visitors at both venues has resulted in The Art Book ‘Focusing on Vermeer’, with Larry Silver reviewing the exhibition catalogue and Anna Bentkowska Kafel and Eleanor Tollfree considering two new titles: Vermeer’s Camera and Vermeer’s Wager.

Vermeer and the Delft School
WALTER LIEDTKE

Catalogues seem now to be the principal way to encounter current publications on Dutch painting; and American museums, often in partnership with the National Gallery in London, are leading the way. The latest spectacular tome to appear is the catalogue of a new exhibition on Vermeer and the Delft School, originating in New York at the Metropolitan Museum and then travelling to London. It follows on the heels of a similar exhibition of 1997–98, ‘Masters of Light’, on Utrecht, from the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (with San Francisco’s Legion of Honor) and London. One hungers now for more city-based exhibitions in future, particularly on Haarlem and Amsterdam.

The New York curator, Walter Liedtke, brings a full career and a quarter-century of preparation to this task. Beginning with his dissertation on architectural paintings in Delft, published in book form in 1982, and continuing with a series of studies of genre paintings, Liedtke has continuously investigated these materials. At the same time, other specialists, notably the National Gallery, Washington curator, Arthur Wheelock, and the Yale professor of economic history, Michael Montias, have added their own contributions to the scholarly dialogue on Delft art, by special attention to Vermeer. We are now well poised to generate the synthesis of understanding of both Vermeer and Delft art that is promised by this catalogue.

Of course, Vermeer has never suffered neglect, and his climactic major retrospective of 1995–96 (Washington and The Hague) was further complemented by a monographic presentation of Pieter de Hooch (Hartford and Dulwich, 1998–99). Delft itself even held an exhibition of ‘Delft Masters, Vermeer’s Contemporaries’ in 1996. Nonetheless, Liedtke’s initiative here is truly prodigious, amounting to five full chapters and over half the double-columned text of more than 200 pages that foregrounds the extensive catalogue of a further 300 pages. He analyses not only paintings but also drawings and prints (nicely catalogued by Michiel Plomp of the Metropolitan Museum), as well as decorative arts. A serious essay on culture and collecting by the noted Dutch social historian of art, Marten Jan Bok, rounds out this comprehensive overview, and Plomp provides an ‘imaginary walk’ through seventeenth-century Delft, complemented with annotated maps by Kees Kaldenbach. Even so, the celebrated Delft tile industry is scarcely shown or discussed and, for the most part, one would hardly know that the nearby court centre of The Hague is a short tram ride away from Delft, a proximity underscored by such patriotic associations with the House of Orange as the Tomb of William the Silent in the New Church, Delft, as habitually represented in the paintings of Gerard Hoochgeest.

A catalogue, of course, is today far more than the permanent record of an exhibition, but what an exhibition this is! Its alphabetical catalogue of painters spans a range from the intimate or sumptuous still lifes of Willem van Aelst and Balthasar van der Ast to the skyline panoramas of Hendrick Cornelis Vroom and the architectural interiors of Emanuel de Witte. The twin pillars of Delft art after mid-century, Carel Fabritius and Vermeer, are amply represented. Fabritius offers a cross section of highlights: two self-portraits, the marvellous optical tour-de-force View in Delft, the Schwerin Sentry, and the Mauritshuis Goldfinch. Sixteen Vermeers form the climax of the exhibition, including the cover image, the ravishingly restored Vienna Allegory of Painting. There are works of all subjects and periods of the artist’s output, ranging from the early Diana and her Companions, Dresden Porcelain, and Edinburgh Mary and Martha to the pair of late London Woman at the Virginal images and New York Allegory of the [Catholic] Faith. Generous loans from Washington and Berlin round out this representative selection of a most precious painter.

Liedtke’s pets, the architectural painters, are all here, often with images of Delft churches: van Bassen, Coesermans, Elsevier, Houckgeest (six panels!), de Man, van Vliet (four canvases) and de Witte. Skylines and city views also complement this distinctly Dutch painterly concern, including Egbert van der Poel’s Celebration by Torchlight on the Oude Delft and his reportage staple, View of Delft after the Explosion of 1654. (Of course, here one longs for the absent presence, Vermeer’s great Mauritshuis View of Delft, illustrated in colour as figure 23). Most of the
Some parts of the background history are more general to the Netherlands than specific to Delft, and the ample space spent on fifteenth- and sixteenth-century painters, while instructive, is not reflected in the exhibition nor is it a tradition with continuity (moreover, iconoclastic riots in both 1566 and 1573 took a terrible toll of religious art in Delft). Liedtke does make a case for Delft as a site for important work by visiting Dutch artists from other cities, but again this casts doubt on the validity of a distinctive Delft visual heritage. Surely Montias's strictly guild-based local account of Delft's artist community needs to yield to a greater inclusiveness, while also clearly acknowledging the vicinity of both The Hague and Rotterdam. It was only after the portraitist Michiel van Miereveld became prominent in the first half of the seventeenth century that the 1650s brought a spurt of collective, truly local innovation: Fabritius, Vermeer, de Witte, de Hooch. Despite the presentation here of such artists as Christiaen van Couwenbergh and Leonaert Bramer, Liedtke's detailed exposition of art before 1650 instructs us that Delft art can be closest in the opposite direction. Certainly the case can be made, especially within genre painting, for a kinship between Vermeer and ter Borch or van Mieris that outweighs and transcends their parochial differences.

In the end, Liedtke's attention, and our own, devolves to the three climaxes of Delft painting: Fabritius, de Hooch, and Vermeer, but in the presence of so much recent scholarship, especially on the latter remaining pictures follow de Hooch (12 canvases) in focusing on Liedtke's other specialty, genre scenes, while a few history paintings offer a more solemn note (Bramer, Couwenbergh), and the celebrated portraits by van Miereveld also serve to recall the nearby House of Orange-Nassau in The Hague.

Drawings are not usually featured within paintings exhibitions, but in New York the examples range from the meticulous album leaves of van der Ast, to the tonal ink views by Jan de Bisschop, to the ink and wash narratives of Bramer, to the toned blue papers with trois crayons chalks in the sketchbook of Hendrick Cornelis van Vliet. The Rembrandt school made its own representations of Delft, chiefly by Amsterdam artists Gerbrand van den Eckhout and Jan van Kessel; works by celebrated landscape draftsmen Jan van Goyen and Herman Saftleven provide other views by specialist visitors rather than local artists.

This catalogue’s essays provide a lasting primer of Delft painting, highlighted by Liedtke’s five chapters on painting, focusing on architectural paintings and genre. Additional chapters include Michiel Plomp on drawing and printmaking and Marten Jan Bok on ‘Society, Culture, and Collecting’. The ‘Introduction’ by Liedtke is filled with anecdotes, such as diary entries by visitors and glimpses into ordinary life in Delft, enhanced by maps and fine illustrations, many of them in colour. Connections with other centres, most notably The Hague and its court nearby, emerge from this well researched and learned exposition, which even raises the question of whether Delft art can be distinguished as a ‘school’ from that of The Hague and other contemporary centres, such as Rotterdam, closest in the opposite direction. Certainly the case can be made, especially within genre painting, for a kinship between Vermeer and ter Borch or van Mieris that outweighs and transcends their parochial differences.
two, this catalogue provides a synthesis, spiced with rich commentary on issues of perspective constructions of the former two painters. The arguments for Vermeer as a Delft painter are chiefly documentary, based on Montias’s thorough findings, plus the tested comparisons to de Hooch, though this time without trying to disparage less celebrated contemporaries to Vermeer’s advantage. Liedtke asserts (with Gowing) that the artist was a quite sophisticated synthesiser of other Dutch imagery, ‘anything but an innocent eye,’ and that ‘when one sees Vermeer as an artist of the Delft school his patrons can be envisioned as well’.

Once more the decline of both Delft and of Dutch art in general is posited chiefly as the consequence of disastrous external circumstances: the depredations in 1672 of both a French invasion and an English war. Similar remarks about the overall conditions of Dutch painting, from apogee to epilogue, are rehearsed authoritatively in Bok’s essay, which centres less on Delft than on the Dutch more generally. Here too a few Delft collectors, as well as dealers and the local guild, hold the spotlight, while attention properly notes the special close ties to The Hague.

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Vermeer’s Camera. Uncovering the Truth Behind the Masterpieces

PHILIP STEADMAN

Oxford University Press 2001 £17.99 $25.00
200 pp. 10 col/72 mono illus
ISBN 0-19-215967-4

A product of nearly 30 years research, this book is an important study of optics in Johannes Vermeer’s paintings of domestic interiors and townscapes. Steadman has published previously on the subject and contributed to popular television programmes, so his considerations in this book do not come as a novelty to either Vermeer scholars or the general reader. Some of the reconstruction photographs and drawings are also familiar. Steadman is concerned with 23 paintings (the greater part of the oeuvre attributed to the artist) but only one aspect of his working method: that of constructing perspective views. Earlier scholars have generally accepted that Vermeer used the camera obscura, and possibly other kinds of optical instruments, as an aid to painting. The earlier research tends to suggest that Vermeer used the device mainly to study light effects. Steadman’s approach is different and concentrates on perspective geometry. He argues plausibly that Vermeer might have projected and traced images.

The introduction gives away some of Steadman’s findings, which are explored in much depth in the nine chapters that follow. A brief history of the camera obscura and its types and principles are presented through some of the most influential sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts in the arts and sciences, including those by Leonardo, Della Porta and Kepler. One of the often forgotten appeals of the camera obscura has always been its ability to project the moving image: a person or bird invading the field of view, swaying branches or passing clouds. Steadman gives a fascinating insight into a scientific and intellectual debate on the merits of the camera, held between leading minds of the time, with personal contacts, correspondence and publications crossing geographical, social and language barriers with perhaps surprising ease. Other seventeenth-century inventions and experiments are also mentioned, such as Cornelis Drebbel’s submarine submerged in the Thames in 1621 and capable of replenishing its air supply through the implementation of some chemical reactions. The book is rich in fascinating glimpses into the visual culture of art and science.

The second chapter begins with an overview of Vermeer’s life and work. It continues with a historical account of how art historians, such as Gowing, Fink and Wheelock, had discovered the artist’s use of the camera. They recognised photographic effects in Vermeer’s work: his saturated colours and blurring of outlines, ‘globules of halation’ and soft focus on objects, as well as circular (instead of quadrilateral) reflections of light on shiny objects, and truncated objects and human figures at the pictures’ edges, all suggesting that the painter might have observed them through a lens. No evidence other than that from the paintings is known about his use of the camera. The inventory of the artist’s possessions made after his death does not mention any optical instrument of this kind.

In the chapters that follow, Steadman speculates on who taught Vermeer about optics. Could he have learned how to use the camera obscura from artists or scientists? If he used one, and Steadman believes he did, Vermeer was not the first Dutch painter to employ this instrument. Torentius and both the Gheyns were among those who used it earlier, as did some scientists. Famous for his important contributions to microscopy, Leeuwenhoek was Vermeer’s contemporary to the month: they were both born in Delft in October 1632. Vermeer’s contacts with artists or scientists are, however, uncertain. Steadman argues that it is equally possible that the artist may have been introduced to the wonders of the camera by Constantijn Huygens. This influential statesman and patron bought a camera obscura from Drebbe in 1622 and encouraged the Gheyns, and possibly also Vermeer, to use it. Steadman is not afraid to confront arguments against Vermeer’s familiarity with the camera, but subscribes to the view that its use had a specific impact on the artist’s painting. This is the truth behind Vermeer’s masterpieces that the author hopes to have discovered. The camera obscura was, Steadman argues, a ‘composition machine’ for the artist.

Steadman’s investigation of Vermeer’s interior pieces relies on a perspective analysis. He looks at architectural features and patterns in tiled, marble floors, analyses the design of window panes, measures maps, furniture and musical instruments, all in an attempt to reconstruct real spaces. His lists of measurable features in Vermeer’s paintings, appended to the book, impress with his meticulousness and determination in unravelling the secrets of Vermeer’s compositions. He determines the dimensions of the depicted rooms and tries to identify their possible actual location in the buildings where the artist is known to have lived in Delft. Although Steadman takes into account the possibility that Vermeer’s interiors are constructs of elements of actual rooms, he carries out three-dimensional reconstructions of the depicted spaces. In each case, he looks for the central vanishing point of the picture and the theoretical horizon; he draws diagonal lines that correspond to patterns of floor tiles, finds their convergence points and establishes the position of the theoretical viewpoint outside the painting; he then proceeds with the reconstruction of a plan and side views of the room and furniture. One of the most interesting reconstructions is that of The Music Lesson. This is because of the mirror hanging on the far wall and the reflection showing the part of the room outside the depicted space. Steadman observes striking consistencies and standardisation of spatial features, but finds that a full reconstruction of Vermeer’s spaces is not always possible. He also suggests a possible arrangement for the artist’s camera obscura in its original booth form, positioned within the space of the painted room. Vermeer might have worked inside the cubicle, tracing the reversed image projected through a lens onto the back wall. Vermeer’s paintings do not show any underdrawing. This may be an indication that he either painted the projected image directly onto canvas or traced it first on paper and then pricked the outlines in order to transfer them to canvas. The idea that Vermeer’s refined paintings originated as mechanically traced, upside-down compositions will certainly meet with criticism.

Steadman’s reconstruction techniques rely on geometrical drawing and photography. As part of the project, a model of Vermeer’s room was built at a scale of 1:6, based on Steadman’s measurements. The full-scale room was also recreated for television. Both reconstructions served as a means to analyse the artist’s working processes. Photographs of the reconstructed interiors taken during the experiment compare favourably with actual paintings. The use of computer models seems a likely next step in the debate on Vermeer’s methods. The Music Lesson, for example, has already been reconstructed digitally in order to demonstrate the potential of computer graphics, rather than to analyse the pictorial space. Unlike physical models, digital reconstructions offer a greater flexibility and impose strict geometrical rules in testing possible three-dimensional interpretations of flat pictorial surfaces. What computerised reconstructions
lack, however, is the love for material culture of the period that is so characteristic of Steadman’s approach. Models created for this project use figures dressed in hand-sewn costumes, Delftware and period furniture, maps and many other hand-made objects.

Does this pragmatic approach destroy some of the mystery surrounding Vermeer’s paintings? The artist emerges from Steadman’s most detailed analysis as a victor: his paintings defeat scholars and he remains as elusive as ever.

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Vermeer’s Wager: Speculations on Art History, Theory and Art Museums

Ivan Gaskell

Reaktion Books £16.95 $27.00
258 pp. 1 col/86 mono illus
ISBN 1-86189-072-9

In Vermeer’s Wager, Ivan Gaskell has achieved the ultimate feat in composing a book around a single painting, the Woman Standing at a Virginal (c.1672) by Johannes Vermeer. Many books have been written about this major seventeenth-century Dutch painter, focusing in particular on the iconography of the paintings, the geometry of their design and the pictorial evidence for Vermeer’s use of a camera obscura. Philip Steadman’s book (see review on page 5) is an important contribution to the literature on Vermeer, as it suggests that the artist’s dramatic change of style in 1656 almost certainly resulted from his use of this optical tool. At the end of Steadman’s book, however, one still retains a sense that Vermeer the man is tantalisingly out of reach.

Gaskell does not pretend to resolve this problem in his book. For example, in the first chapter, he concludes his analysis of ‘the matter of naming and the related problem of the imbrication of the linguistic with the visual,’ by discussing the ‘Vermeerness’ of Vermeer. He proposes that the knowledge of the artist sought by so many enquirers is of necessity fugitive, and of extremely limited extent. Vermeer provides such a fascinating test case in this respect because all the commentators have to go on is the paintings themselves. There is no serviceable corroborative evidence from other sources such as art historians habitually rely on.

What is striking about Gaskell’s book, however, is the way in which he explores what it might mean to know and use a particular painting by Vermeer by asking specifically ‘tutorial questions’ (his italics). He is concerned both with how the conditions of the display of the painting of the Woman Standing at a Virginal relate to the knowledge of the painting mediated in different ways by slides and photographs, for instance and with how we might conceive of the physical, conceptual and linguistic boundaries of the painting. His consideration of artist’s, theorist’s and curator’s practice today, as well as the circumstances in seventeenth-century Holland when Vermeer was executing his works, means that Vermeer’s Wager provides a refreshing account of the work of this important artist and one which should appeal to artists, curators, art dealers and art historians alike.

In the Introduction to his book, Gaskell explains what he means by ‘Vermeer’s wager.’ He suggests that after his earlier forays into history painting, Vermeer generally, though not invariably, eschews the seventeenth-century habitual visual codes of presenting abstract thought by means of the representation of either Christian or sacred reality, classical mythological exemplification or personificatory allegory . . . in favour of modern domesticity.

According to Gaskell, Vermeer’s art suggests that ‘we apprehend complex pictorial abstraction purely visually by means of the operation on the heart or soul directly through the eyes, evading language, in the manner of love.’ As a consequence, he considers it necessary to take into account both the iconography and physical characteristics of a particular art object and the afterlife of the object, ‘including its reproduction and incorporation into the art museum.’

Gaskell begins by dealing with the problem of the lack of written sources relating to Vermeer, which makes commentators on his work peculiarly reliant on the paintings. In Chapter 2, he considers the iconography of the painting of the Woman Standing at a Virginal, in particular the image of Cupid depicted in a painting on the wall at the back of the scene. In contrast with Eddy de Jongh, who in 1967 suggested that contemporaries would have related the image to that of a Cupid holding up a card inscribed with the number ‘1’ in Otto van Veen’s emblem book, Amorum Emblemata of 1608 (which was to suggest that ‘a lover ought to love only one’), Gaskell suggests that Vermeer has placed his classical Cupid, depicted as the new-born Venus’ attendant, Eros, in a specifically modern setting, using the device of a painting-within-a-painting to allow ancient and modern to be juxtaposed without anachronism.

In his opinion, this device was ‘one of Vermeer’s principal means of lending his modern subjects the sanction and dignity of history.’ In the next chapter he deliberately questions this conclusion by considering some aspects of what it means for the Woman Standing at a Virginal to be a three-dimensional object. Here, he provides an analysis of the geometrical construction of the painting and discusses the display of the painting in Room 15 in the National Gallery, where different paintings have, at different times, been placed on either side of it and special vistas created for viewing the painting.

In Chapter 4, he begins his analysis of the afterlife of the painting in terms of copies and reproductions, starting with the use of various modes of reproduction by scholars. He suggests that since the painting ‘is not
and probably never was, in terms of our perception – a single thing’, it ‘becomes, in our practical experience, a complex of objects, material images and mental images.’ Chapter 5 contains an intriguing discussion of the etchings after the painting, in particular the etching produced by Henri-Augustin Valentin in 1866. Curiously, Valentin decided to show the woman with her eyes facing askance from the viewer, to ensure that the image would not be associated with contemporary paintings of courtesans, such as Charles-François Marchal’s painting Phryné, which was exhibited at the Salon of 1868, or Édouard Manet’s Nana (1877), both of whom gaze in a forthright manner towards the viewer. Turning to photography in the next chapter, Gaskell suggests that just as an interest in Dutch painters such as Vermeer encouraged developments in photography, the registration of pictorial detail by photography led to an reappraisal of the verisimilitude captured by Vermeer in his paintings.

To end with, Gaskell considers the role of the work of art as a commodity. He focuses on the museum object, delineating the uses to which it might be put as determined by the finances of the institution and by its relations with its donors. Informed by his own participation in the Harvard ‘Mind/Brain/Behavior’ initiative, he also examines the therapeutics afforded by art museums and their contents, and concludes that the ‘purpose of art institutions necessarily affects the afterlife of the works within them, and . . . must be taken into account as we try to define our own position in relation to works of art and the understanding of them that we seek.’ The complexity of Gaskell’s approach makes Vermeer’s Wager a challenging read, but one which is definitely worthwhile for his intriguing ‘curatorial’ discussion of the reproduction and display of the Woman Standing at a Virginal, which remains one of Vermeer’s most captivating works.

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