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# Jan Vermeer



Girl with a Pearl Earring 1665

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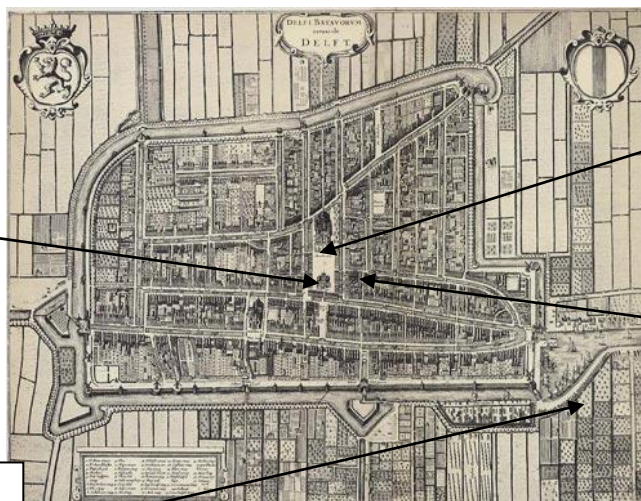
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I was inspired to do this project having read the book “girl with the pearl earring” by Tracy Chevallier. A historical novel I enjoyed and took interest in.

Many of Vermeer’s paintings are based about the following subjects: women, music, letters, and a few hold subjects as such as Geography and/or Astronomy. A small number of his paintings also have maps of the Netherlands. When he painted women (generally young women) they were often in a narrative situation. He did this by adding some attribute, such as a set of scales or more commonly a musical instrument. He rarely paints landscapes, as he rarely painted outside of his studio which held many windows so he could alter the intake of light for his paintings easily. But there are a few views of Delft. All of his paintings of people are painted portrait; but there are a few landscapes of Delft. His titles are simple and tell you what the eye can see, “Woman in Blue Reading a Letter”, “Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window”. Vermeer painted roughly 90 paintings in his life time.



The “Flying Fox Inn” where Vermeer was probably born

The “Mechelen” Inn, inherited by Vermeer’s Father

The house of Maria Thins, where Vermeer lived with his wife and children

The positions of which Vermeer painted “View of Delft”

# Vermeer's Biography

We know very little about Vermeer's life. It is said that he was baptised on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1632 in Delft, but his birth date is unknown. He had an older sister, but was the only son to his father; Reynier Jansz. Reynier was born in 1591 in Antwerp. He had specialised in the silk trade since he moved to Amsterdam in 1611. He married Digna Baltens in 1615, and then they moved to Delft. Digna Baltens father, a watchmaker, named Balthasar Claesz, narrowly escaped being commended to death and beheaded, when he and his accomplices bought moulds to forge coins. Instead he ran away to Gorinchem, where he lived undisturbed. In 1625 Reynier took up the job of an innkeeper to his own inn, the "Mechelen inn" the sign of which was a fox. The inn lay on the Northern side of the market square, for a very high price. It dated from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century and offered luxurious accommodation in a good part of the town. Reynier made art dealing his main occupation when he joined the Delft Guild of St. Luke, in October 1631. We know from documents that Reynier knew a good amount of well known artist at the time, such as; Balthasar van der Ast (flower painter), Pieter Steenwyck, and Pieter Groenwegen. This could have been the start of why Vermeer was such a great artist.

Vermeer married Catharina Bolnes on 20 April 1653, in Schipluy, a small town near Delft. Her mother, Maria Thins objected to there marriage; It may have been that at the time Vermeer's father was in debt and as she herself was well off, she thought that the marriage was not to be secure financially. Another possibility is due to their different religions (Vermeer a Calvinist, Catherina a Catholic). But thanks to one of Vermeer's Catholic friends, Maria Thins dropped her objection and thought more favourably of Vermeer. It was often said that she would prefer Vermeer to become a Catholic, although there is no evidence of this. At first, Vermeer and Catherina lived in the "Mechelen inn", now Vermeer's inheritance. But then they moved into Maria Thins house on the Oude Langendijk, near a Jesuit mission. Vermeer appeared well off at this time, being that he did not struggle to support his ever growing family as he did later on in life. Catherina had fifteen children, although sadly four on them died at an early age. Vermeer painted an average of two painting a year, and could not make a living alone from his low income. As an artist there is no information whether he continued to work at the "Mechelen", although it would not have been strange if he did as in the seven-tenth century two jobs was common. Vermeer also worked as an art dealer like his father. Although the job of selling others paintings earnt him more income he always thought of an artist as his occupation.

Vermeer and Maria Thins relationship improved, seeing that soon after the wedding Maria invited Vermeer and his large family to come and live with her. Maria Thins received a large sum of money, when she was separated from Reynier Bolnes her husband. She inherited several farms when in 1661 her sister died; her wealth can be seen from an inventory made in February 1676 containing a long list of furniture clothing house hold goods , and a house with eleven rooms, cellar and an attic. When Vermeer lived there they lived in the down stairs part of the house, but his studio was on the top floor. The studio was small and had two easels, three palettes and a heavy oak table. The table along with the leather-covered chairs and a series of paintings (belonging of Maria Thins) appear often in Vermeer's paintings. Also he used his wife's clothing and jewellery to dress the woman in his pictures; her ermine-trimmed yellow satin jacket, her pearl jewellery and he also used every-day-house hold objects, but often altered their proportions.

Vermeer painted very little work for the public art market, and most of his work was produced for his most popular patrons- this may account for the little number of art work he produced. Vermeer only left Delft once in his life when he travelled to The Hague in 1672, with another Delft artist, Hans Jordaen.

As Vermeer became older he fell into a nasty financial problem; debt. He had to take out massive loans up to 1,000 guilders in 1675. At this time war had broken out between the Netherlands and France. The French advanced into the northern part of the United Provinces, affecting Vermeer greatly; as the last form of defence against the French, Dykes were opened and they flooded massive amounts of land including the land Maria Thins and Vermeer rented out to people for their main source of income. That year was known as the rampjaar, and from then on Vermeer did not sell any more paintings. Cathrina later said, when talking about the destructive war, “Because of this, and because of the large sums of money we had to spend on the children, sums he was no longer able to pay, he fell into such a depression and lethargy that he lost his health in the space of one and a half days, and died.”

Vermeer died at the young age of 43 and was buried on 15th December at the family grave in Oude Kerk, Delft. All his eleven children came to see him buried, along with Cathrina Bolnes and Maria Thins. Cathrina then sold many of his properties along with hers and carried on living with Maria thins, with eight of the children. At this time the only paintings of Vermeer’s that were still in the house hold were “Schilederconst”, “Woman with a pearl Necklace” and “The Art of Painting”. She gave the art of Painting away on 24<sup>th</sup> February 1676 to discharge her mother’s debts. Most of the other paintings were owned by the printer Jacob Dissius, who died in 1695. At the beginning of 1696 twenty-one of Vermeer’s paintings were put up for auction in Amsterdam, out of 134 pictures (by other artists). His paintings were sold at high prices with up to 200 guilders for View of Delft! During the best period of Vermeer’s life he was clearly at the top of the price structure. It is even said that a painting of just one figure was sold for 600 guilders.

View of Delft, Vermeer



View of Delft, Today



## Woman Playing a Lute near a Window

Woman Playing a Lute near a Window was painted in 1667-68, with oil on canvas. It shows a woman sitting behind a table, in front of which stands a chair, barely seen as it is silhouetted. She is tuning her instrument – a lute, as her head is tilting slightly towards the instrument as if listening to it. The lute is a quiet instrument, suitable for indoor playing and not for loud concerts. As discovered in 1944 when the painting was cleaned, she is wearing pearl earrings and a pearl necklace. Like a few other pictures of Vermeer's, the painting is shaded with only small amounts of light entering through the bottom of the window, brightening her sleeve and collar. In the background is a map- Vermeer would have painted himself; there is also a lone chair in the corner of the painting.

“Woman playing a Lute near a Window” would have been painted for direct observation as most of Vermeer's paintings were (all except the maps). But if you did not know this you could tell from the detail of the content. It is realistic and doesn't tell a story. It has one texture of brush stroke, but different sized brushes would have been used. To prepare for the painting, Vermeer would have set out the content in many different ways before taking it on. He would have restricted time in the day during which to paint as he was using natural light (sun-light). Vermeer was a slow worker so the painting would have taken almost half a year. I think it was mostly painted in autumn/ winter, due to the fur robe the woman is wearing.

The colours consist of mainly yellows browns and dark colours, making the picture look slightly musky. There isn't much contrast, with an exception to the different amounts of light on her body. The Atmosphere is tranquil, calm and quiet the colour helps to convey this meaning as there is a lack of contrast and bright colours.



## Girl with a Pearl Earring

Girl with a Pearl Earring was painted in 1665. The girl is seen against a dark background, very nearly black. It establishes a powerful three-dimensionality of effect, a process recommended by Leonardo da Vinci. There is only one type of texture, but a lot of shadow casting over the right side of her body and face. She is seen from a side, and appears to be turning to gaze at us. Her lips are slightly open as if she is about to speak and they look as though she has some sort of gloss on them. She looks lost in thought due to her head being tilted but her eyes are interested and keen. Like many of



the woman in Vermeer's painting she is wearing pearls; a pearl earring. But in this case the tear-shaped pearl features most of the picture as it is very noticeable and stands out from her neck with a golden sheen. She is wearing an exotic blue turban (popular fashion in Europe) with a yellow cloth falling from it down to her shoulders, where it is met with a brownish jacket. The contrast in this picture takes place when her jacket meets the clear white collar and the blue turban with the yellow cloth. Also as the background is so dark, it appears to make the girl lighter, which shows up contrast. The picture is solid, and has plain pure colours used making the painting quiet. It is a realistic portrait done by direct observation. It doesn't have a story behind it although in 1999 a fiction book was published about Vermeer and the making of this piece. The book was then made into a film-2003 and a play-2008. Girl with a Pearl Earring was painted with oil onto wood. You cannot tell from the image when it was painted, as you are given no scenery or source of light. This painting is probably Vermeer's most famous painting and is now on show in The Hague, Mauritshuis.

I choose to paint girl with a pearl earring, and used oil paints for the first time. I have found out that they take a very long time to dry and it is easier to paint with them after thinning the paint using linseed oil. To try and get the proportions right I gridded the picture.

## Woman with a Pearl Necklace

Woman with a pearl Necklace was painted in 1664. It shows a woman- maybe pregnant with a pearl necklace and earrings on looking in a mirror on the left side of a window. She is wearing a yellow jacket, and is doing up her necklace with the tapes she is holding. From the evidence in the painting you could think that she is preparing to go out; as she not only is looking into a mirror but has a blusher brush lying on the table in front of her, next to which is a note, possible the invitations to why she is going out? So unlike the vast amount of Vermeer's paintings, maybe this painting is trying to tell a story. There is light coming through part of the window, but a small amount is immediately shielded from the



yellow curtain. Not much of this light falls on the woman, and almost none falls on her skirt as it is very nearly black (with lack of light) from being yellow. Woman with a pearl necklace was painted onto canvas; 55 times 45cm with oil. It contains lots of browns, orcas and yellow. Unlike Girl with a Pearl Earring, her pearls do not shine or gleam. Like most of Vermeer's paintings it was painted in his studio. There was no artificial light in his studio so the time of day he painted never really varied. In this case it was always in the day time. The painting gives you a warm feeling as there is a welcoming yellow in it. It is quiet as there are no loud colours and eye catching due to the contrast of the yellow- it is a very different colour from the rest of the painting as it is not as dull.



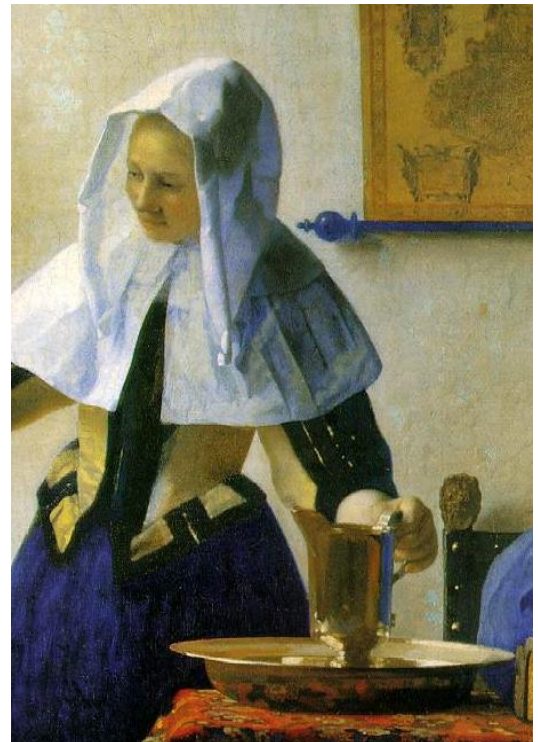
## Woman with a Water Jug



Woman with a water jug was painted in 1664-65. The painting shows a middle-class house-wife tempted to try on the pearls draped out of the box but knows she should carry on with her job. Her eyes are cast down modestly and she is holding the handle of a shiny silver jug with a matching tray. The light in the painting comes through strongly through the window lighting up her face and left side of her body. There is a lot of light on the jug reflecting the colours around, including the red table cloth draped over the oak table, and the blue cloth lying on the leather seated chair. A shadow from the open window is cast along the wall and the table cloth nearest to you is slightly darkened where the light has not reached it. On the wall behind the woman is a map possibly of the Netherlands. The walls are painted cream and the window is a blue colour. The woman is wearing a starched white head cloth with slightly transparent lace trimmings, a yellow & black jacket and a navy skirt.

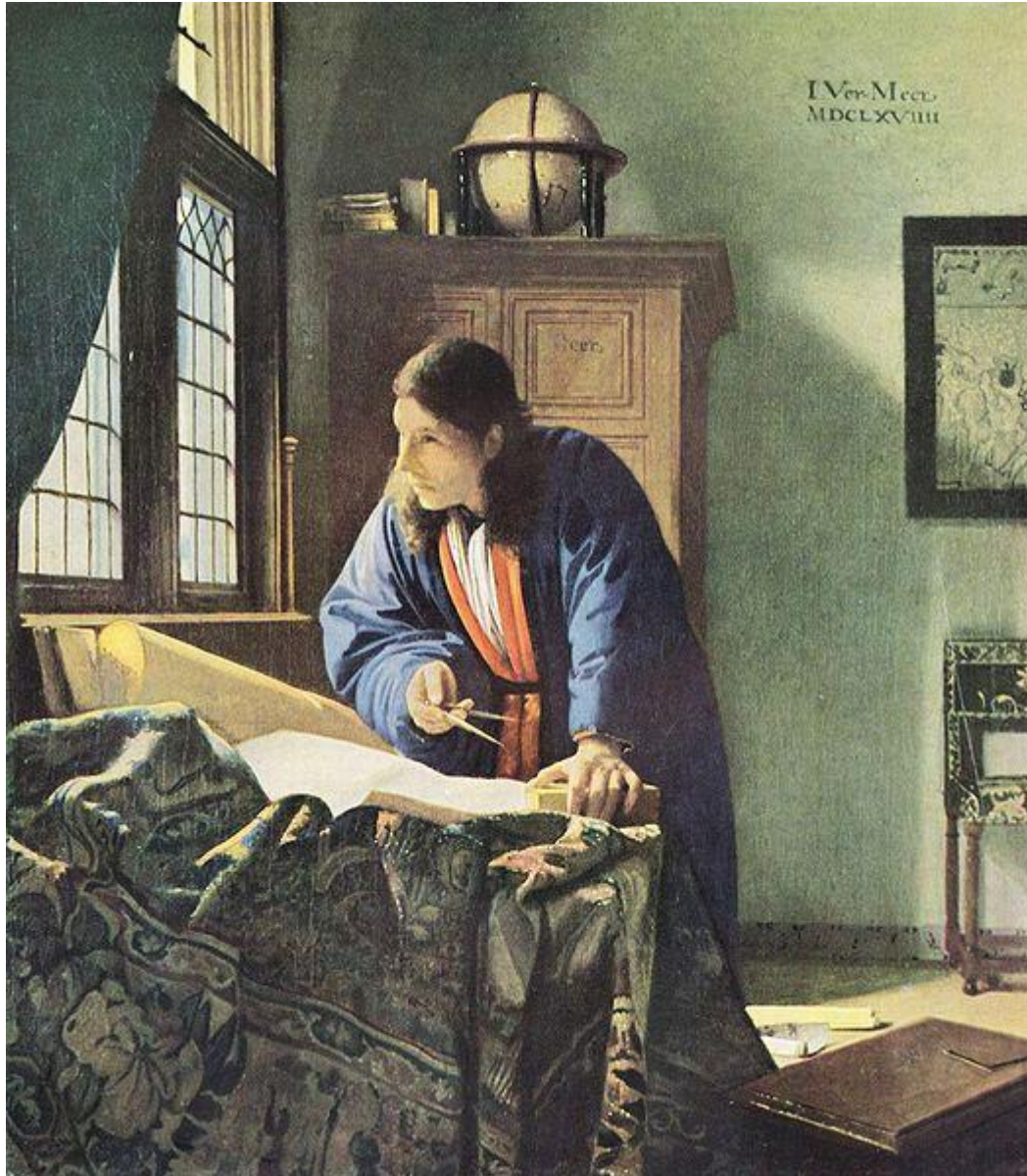
This picture was painted from direct observation and has not got a story behind although from looking at it you could make up your own story. Vermeer would have had restricted time in the day in which to paint again as he used a natural source of light.

“Woman with a Water Jug”, holds little but some contrast: where the white head cloth meets her surroundings there is contrast due to the lightness of the white. The main colours in the painting are creams and faded blues and yellow oil paints.



## The geographer

The geographer was painted in 1668 along with the Astronomer. It shows an academic man, with long hair tucked behind his ears, wearing a robe that reaches to the floor leaning over his work surface, and oak table covered by a cloth. He is using compasses to check distances, the details unable to be made out. He is looking to the window as if wanting the light to give him inspiration. The light coming through the window shines on his face and on his work. Behind him is a wardrobe with a globe on top. The man appears to be hard working and cheerful; the light colour helps to convey this meaning. There is contrast between the three different colours of his robe, and between the navy curtain and sunny window.



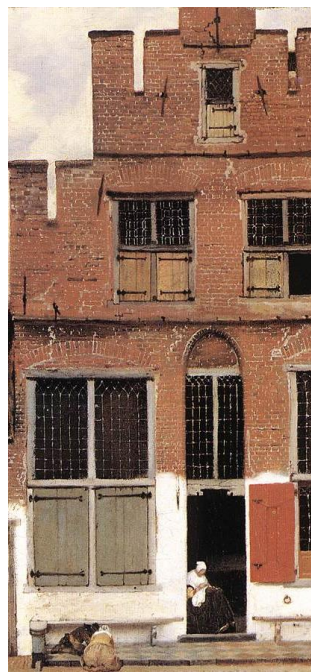
## The Astronomer

The Astronomer was painted in 1668 along with the geographer. Both paintings are very similar with the large wardrobe and half a picture in the background and the table covered by an elaborate cloth, also the same man posed for Vermeer. In the astronomer the man is not using a telescope as expected but checking descriptions in a constellations book against his celestial globe, (made by Jodocus Hondius). He is steadying the globe so that you can make out precise constellations': The Great Bear, The Dragon and Hercules, and Lyra. The painting is quite musky and holds many browns, leaf greens and yellows. The light coming through the window falls on the globe and the book he is looking at. It was painted from direct observation from Vermeer's studio, and for me doesn't convey much of a meaning of mood.



## Street in Delft

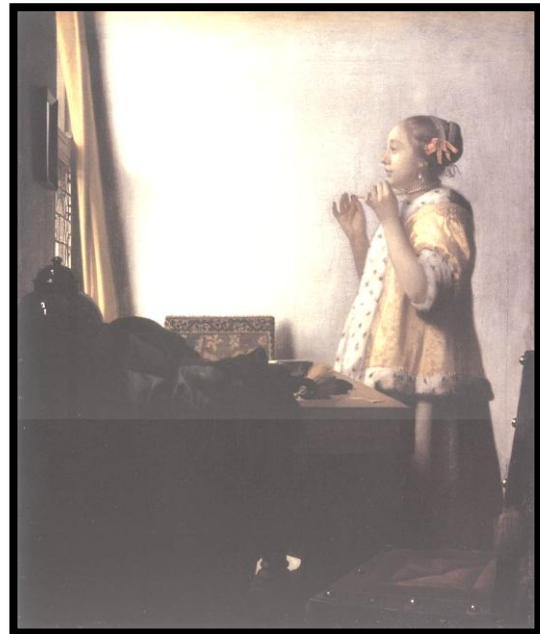
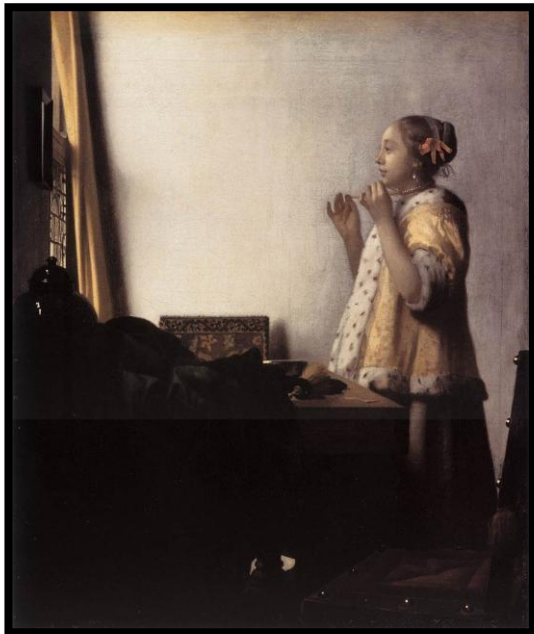
Street in Delft was painted in 1657, one of his earlier painting. It portrays a slow moving day with two women in the picture taking on day to day chores; needle work, sweeping and two children involved in some sort of game on the paving stones. There isn't much in the way to distract the woman, but the lady who is supposed to be sweeping has stopped and seems reluctant to carry on. Her face is cast away from you, where as you can see the woman sewing's face but it is little more than a blob of paint beneath her bonnet. In the background there is a house with closed shutters all but the one nearest the woman sewing. It is a very symmetrical house. Perhaps the house is deserted all but the woman? There is also a landscape behind of roof tops. The street is clean but looks much worn. Vermeer was probably sitting across the road when he painted it and not up in his studio. He would have painted it in the summer, when it is less likely to rain! It is a reasonably nice day in the painting with a blue sky crowded with puffy clouds and probably quite warm as people are going forward with their outdoor jobs. He has painted his clouds using lots of yellow and gray, there is hardly any white. The rest of the painting consists of the colour used for the red brick, and mellow greens and small amounts of blues and yellow. The only contrast in the picture is when the sky and pale pavement meet the house. The painting would have been done from direct observation but with the help from the camera obscura. The mood in this painting is mellow and calm. It is one of a few views of Delft. It's very hard to see the different textures Vermeer has used, but for the bush clinging to the left building I think he used stippling.



## Conclusion

I have really enjoyed doing this project and have found out so much more about Vermeer's life and how he painted. His studio was his main place to paint and apart from maps he always painted from direct observation. He used oil paints often on canvas and occasionally on wood, and he wasn't scared to paint hands- he didn't hide them beneath or behind things but put them into narrative. I find it amazing how he made the light streaming from the windows look so real- when he painted in his studio there was always a widow with few exceptions. Vermeer also listed to other artists.

I have seen his pictures in a book, but also on the internet and found that you can lighten the pictures and they look very different, and you can see some items of the painting more clearly, e.g.:



Here you cannot see much, but when lightened... you can see the seat of the chair and many more items on the table clearer, as well as there being much more light on the woman, making her jacket have a golden sheen.