

Discuss the Presentation of Women in the Work of Vermeer

Overlooked for centuries, Johannes Vermeer (or Jan van der Meer) of Delft is regarded as one of the most famous Master painters to emerge from the Dutch Golden Age.

Somewhat unheard of in his life it is said he was barely mentioned in print three times¹, although he was elected head of Saint Luke's Gulde, a trade association for painters four times. During the 17th century the painting of pictures was not considered an art, but simply a form of craftsmanship; a way to earn a living. Despite the fact that it is now widely acclaimed, no record exists that he ever sold any of his paintings throughout his lifetime. His work, comparable to other Dutch painters such as Rembrandt, relies largely upon the use of light and reflections to set mood and to animate a given scene and he is respected for his remarkable compositions and representation of space. There are merely thirty-five paintings accredited to him, this is generally blamed on the fact that he was a very precise painter who had a fairly brief life and profession as a painter. It is also assumed that many of his paintings were lost after his death. With a few exceptions, including some landscapes, street scenes, and portraits, Vermeer chose to paint sunlit familial interiors in which one or two figures are shown reading, writing, or playing musical instruments, a style called Genre Interior which was pioneered in the Netherlands in the early 1600s. His dedication to women is one of the primary characteristics which you observe when presented with his work, with only around a third of his surviving works containing men.

¹ Pg7 Goldschieder .L., *Jan Vermeer The Paintings*, Phaidon Press 1958

The men in his pictures are generally in subordinate roles, and three times with their backs to the viewer of the painting. Men, when painted with women are both courting and attending, the women seemingly have the advantage and control. In *Couple with a Wine Glass*, one man sits in the corner resting his chin on his hand and another gentleman leans in to speak to the young lady, yet she ignores him; smiling out at the viewer. On the other hand one could say that the men are in command of the women in *The Glass of Wine*, *Soldier and a Laughing Girl*, and *Woman and Two Men*; in each of these works men are trying to seduce young women by offering them wine. The females represented have rather childish smiles and flush faces, this suggests that Vermeer upheld the opinion of the period that alcohol was the gateway towards prostitution and it ought to be forbidden for women to consume alcohol at all². Men only appear alone twice; in *The Geographer* and *The Astronomer*, in both of which the man is positioned behind a table and before a window, in the majority of Vermeer's work this is the pictorial location of the women. It is said that in a lost painting of his, Vermeer illustrated a man washing his hands; a theme that other Dutch painters traditionally reserved for women. Are these men merely honorary women? Furthermore, in *Diana and her Companions*, where one would expect to see a man, there is no Actaeon to greet her.³ However, in terms of composition in the artist's paintings, the male and female are often perfect opposites, yet at the same time he manages to balance their rendering to create a harmonious result. Take *Officer and a Laughing Girl*, for example, he has his back turned, whereas she faces out of the

² Cite: <http://www.abcgallery.com>

³ Cite: http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1248/is_n5_v84/ai_18274572/pg_6

picture, his dark, silhouetted bulk complements her bright, colourful delicacy⁴. In doing this he embellishes differences between the sexes as well as their mutual attraction.

To display the delicate side of the female, when a physical male is not represented, his existence is implied through a letter or a picture in a picture. For example In *Love Letter* shows a girl with a letter looking up at her maid, the instrument in her hand affirms the subject of love and one of the paintings on the wall of a boat at sea suggests that her partner is away; that it is he who has sent the letter. The second image displays a lone rambler in a peaceful setting, an indication of a severance of lovers and an aspiration for reunion. This is reflected in *Lady Reading a Letter at an Open Window*, wherein the young woman is standing before an open window and reading a letter. As is commonplace in the artist's paintings; the window discloses no sight of the outside world, the female figure's consequential seclusion within the enclosed interior is a symbol of being alone, of loneliness. The fact that her gaze travels far to the assumed horizon displays her yearning for something or for someone; the man who wrote the letter.

Social stature of the women illustrated is indicated by the objects which surround them, which also serve to enhance the character you imagine for her. For instance, in *Woman Holding a Balance*, a sole woman stands behind a table which is laded with several gold coins and a jewellery box with overflows with gold and pearl necklaces. She is dressed in rich fabrics and a fur coat. Finally, beneath her feet there is a marble tiled floor, all of these features combined suggest a relatively high class and rich woman. A large orange

⁴ Cite: Frantis .W.E., *The Cambridge Companion to Vermeer*, Cambridge University Press 2001

sash can be seen around her waist which emphasises a seemingly pregnant bulge. Behind her there hangs a painting of the last judgement, this refers to an eventual reality, it was said that an awareness of which should aid in living an upright life. In three of his works Vermeer has painted a maidservant together with a lady which reaffirms the latter's superior position in society. In general, attire, company and location herald a world of urban upper class; where women had freedom to spend moments of privacy within the home.⁵

Looking at the women in Vermeer's paintings one observes that they cannot be regarded as conventionally beautiful, any beauty they do have originates from the style in which they are painted⁶. Due to the artist's gift in expressing subtle nuances of light upon skin, the women's faces appear radiant giving them an attractive, healthy glow. Despite the women in Vermeer's art being of various ages, they all have an appearance of youth. Even the bawd in *The Procuress*, who we assume to be middle aged, has no wrinkles on her face, indeed all of the female figures have smooth skin, large foreheads and round, wide eyes. Also noteworthy is that not a single one of Vermeer's women is a nude, "their costuming contributes so much to bodily construction and expression that the absence of nudes from Vermeer's oeuvre seems hardly surprising."⁷

Oddly, Vermeer seems to place his women doing stereotypically female pastimes; in many of his paintings you see them doing domestic chores or needlework. Vermeer painted virtues most valued in women in his time, such as charity, meekness and

⁵ Cite: Frantis .W.E., *The Cambridge Companion to Vermeer*, Cambridge University Press 2001

⁶ <http://essentialvermeer.20m.com/>

⁷ <http://essentialvermeer.20m.com/>

humility; however it seems that he painted these characteristics with affection and respect for women. In this way his perspectives on women appear to be sympathetic, perhaps biographical facts are accountable for this. He was said to have had a very strong relationship with his sister (his only sibling) and also a good relationship with his elite mother-in-law and wife.

None of the models in Johannes Vermeer's paintings have ever been identified, although some of them have posed more than once; this mystery has created great speculation amongst critics. It is often assumed that he used his wife, Catherina Bolnes, as the model for a fair number of his paintings, such as *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*. It has also been suggested that the prostitute in *At the Procuress* is the artist's wife, although she is the most attractive figure in the scene, it strikes me as odd that he would depict his wife as a prostitute. Nevertheless, if indeed the female figure in many of his paintings is his wife, this would account for the speculation whether or not the figure is pregnant. This is for the reason that, during their twenty-two years of marriage Catherina bore him fifteen children, and therefore was almost always with child.

In Dutch art, literature and music of the period, themes of love were among the most common, attracting a wide audience of both women and men. It may be observed in paintings such as *Girl with a Wine Glass* that Vermeer was conforming to the current fashion, however his style and lack of conventional female beauty does not. Vermeer's versions of womanhood subtly register complex social forces, but they often do so by countering gender instabilities. Vermeer's work makes maidservants remarkable in their

own right, these convincing representations of socially humble women indicates his understanding of class distinctions. The facial expressions and gestures made by Vermeer's women are crucial to his construction of their femininity. He has evidently observed human mannerisms and has thus positioned his women in simple, yet believable poses of habitual human activity.

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