





1 Painter of Light

Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675) is famous for his paintings of intimate, quiet scenes of everyday life in the seventeenth century. His paintings are especially treasured because they are so rare—only thirty-five of his paintings survive, and none of his personal writings or drawings has been found.

Much about Vermeer's life and career remain a mystery. He lived most of his life in Delft, a wealthy trading city in the Dutch Republic. His father was an innkeeper and art dealer, so Vermeer must have been surrounded by art as a child. It is not known where or with whom he trained, but his early work was as a history painter, specializing in scenes from ancient history, mythology, religion, and literature. Vermeer soon developed a special interest in genre scenes. In these images of daily life, he painted small-scale views of domestic scenes, such as musical concerts or women writing letters. Since these are not portraits of specific people, his paintings tend to have a timeless, universal quality.

After his death at the age of forty-three, Vermeer's reputation as an artist faded, probably because he left behind few works. After Vermeer's work was "rediscovered" in the nineteenth century, his masterful technique, delicate use of light and shadow, and poetic simplicity became greatly admired.

2 A Life in Balance

In *Woman Holding a Balance*, a woman stands quietly, looking down at a perfectly balanced scale. She wears an elegant blue jacket trimmed with white fur, and she stands in front of a table that holds coins, pearls, gold, and other precious objects. A large painting of a religious scene hangs on the wall behind her.

This painting presents themes and characteristics found in many paintings by Vermeer.

A moment in time: It captures a moment that seems to be frozen in time forever. His works leave us wondering: What might happen next?

Looking into a private world: This woman is lost in her own thoughts as she gazes at the balance held in her right hand. Vermeer presents a quiet, intimate scene of a solitary figure. His works make us curious: What might the woman be thinking or feeling? Why is she holding the balance?

Sunlight and shadows: Daylight streaming through the window on the left casts a diagonal beam of light across the scene. The woman's face and hands are illuminated, and the pearls and gold glimmer in the light. Meanwhile, the rest of the scene is dark with shadows, creating a sharp contrast.

A limited palette of colors: Vermeer created his tranquil paintings by using just a few tones and shades, including yellow, ochre, brown, gray, and ultramarine blue. These color tonalities give the painting a visual harmony.



3

Contemplative Moments

Woman Holding a Balance shows a scene of everyday life, but it is also an allegory—it uses a story and characters to represent a larger idea about the moral and spiritual aspects of being human. Common in Dutch genre scenes of the seventeenth century, allegories reminded viewers not to let the wealth and prosperity of the times distract them from important spiritual goals.

Pearls, gold jewelry, and coins—references to earthly beauty and wealth—spill from a jewelry box and spread across the table in front of her. The large painting hanging behind her shows the Last Judgment, part of the end of the world as described in the Bible. Paintings of the Last Judgment remind viewers to consider their actions and decisions carefully because they will be assessed and weighed at the end of time. Vermeer added one more important object to the scene: a small framed mirror that hangs on the left wall directly opposite the woman's face. Artists often used mirrors to symbolize self-reflection or self-awareness.

Through this tranquil painting, Vermeer emphasizes that riches and wealth are not the most important things in life. Instead, people should lead a balanced, harmonious life, one spent in moderation and self-reflection, and weigh their worldly possessions with their spiritual life.



Both *A Lady Writing* and *Woman Holding a Balance* show moments of thoughtful attention. Consider other similarities as well as differences between the paintings.

The lady at her writing desk looks as if she has been interrupted. What might she be thinking? At whom might she be looking? To whom might she be writing?

Many of the same objects—pearl necklace and earrings, jewelry box, fur-trimmed coat, table draped with blue fabric, chair with lion head finials—appear in Vermeer's paintings. This leads art historians to believe that he had these props in his studio and reused them to compose different scenes.



far left: Johannes Vermeer, *Woman Holding a Balance*, c. 1664, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Widener Collection

above: Johannes Vermeer, *A Lady Writing*, c. 1665, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Gift of Harry Waldron Havemeyer and Horace Havemeyer, Jr., in memory of their father, Horace Havemeyer

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Vermeer and the Camera Obscura

People have long wondered how Vermeer was able to create paintings that look like snapshots. Before photography was invented in the nineteenth century, it was unusual for paintings to have this quality. This has led some to believe that Vermeer may have studied light effects through a *camera obscura* (Latin for “dark room”). Used since the Renaissance, this pinhole device projects an image onto a wall surface with the aid of a lens. Scientists and mathematicians utilized it for astronomical observation, and some artists employed it to aid in topographical drawing. With the study of optics and the development of lenses (for microscopes and telescopes) in the Dutch Republic during the seventeenth century, the *camera obscura* became yet another way for artists and scientists to study the world during this time of great exploration and discovery.

Although he did not paint in a darkened room and copy images from a camera, Vermeer noted the particular effects of the *camera obscura* and adeptly translated them in his compositions. *Girl with the Red Hat* is a good example of some of the phenomena observed through a camera. The girl, wearing a large “Turkish” style hat and draped in blue fabric, is seated in a chair (with lion head finials similar to the one in *A Lady Writing*). She turns around as if she’s been interrupted, her mouth open as if she is about to speak.



Effects of the *camera obscura*:

A focused and unfocused (blurry) areas

B composition: figures and objects are cropped at the edge of the picture, which occurs when you look at a scene through a lens and box

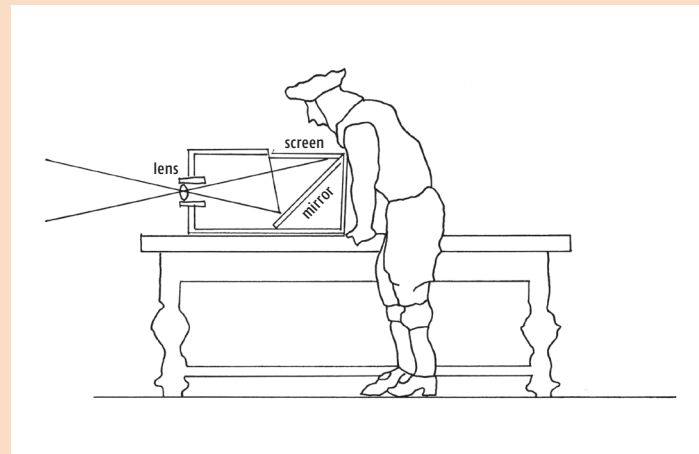
C flattened space (shallow depth of field):

it's hard to tell that a tapestry is on the wall behind her, and you don't feel a great sense of space in the room

D sharp contrasts of light and shadow

E intensification of color

F diffused highlights (halation): this occurs when light hits a reflective surface. Vermeer often painted these areas with dabs of white to exaggerate their effect; up close they look abstract.



above: Johannes Vermeer, *Girl with the Red Hat*, c. 1665/1666, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Andrew W. Mellon Collection

The diagram to the left shows a simple *camera obscura*: a box with a lens, mirror, and glass screen. Light travels through the lens, reflects off the surface of the mirror, and projects an image from the world onto the glass.