

Vermeer—A major cultural event, a large collection of the Dutch master’s paintings at Amsterdam’s Rijksmuseum

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One of the most highly anticipated exhibitions in years opened February 10 at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. *Vermeer* is widely and quite rightly regarded as a once in a lifetime occasion to see the work of the widely revered 17th-century Dutch master Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675). This is the first time that the world-renowned Rijksmuseum, founded in 1885, has hosted an exhibition exclusively dedicated to Vermeer’s paintings.

The exhibition has evoked immense interest and enthusiasm both in the Netherlands and well beyond its borders. After tickets were put on sale, more than 200,000 were sold by the Rijksmuseum in less than 48 hours, and by mid-March no more were available. The museum’s website explains, “The Vermeer exhibition is definitively sold out. It is not possible to buy tickets via e-mail or by phone.”

This came as a genuine disappointment to large numbers of people unable to attend in person. The museum attempted to compensate for this to some degree by organizing Instagram livestreams led by the curator, watched by tens of thousands simultaneously in every part of the globe.

The exhibition is scheduled to run until June 4. However, one of Vermeer’s greatest masterpieces, *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1665), was only on display until the end of March.

Concurrent to the Rijksmuseum exhibition, Vermeer’s native city of Delft is hosting an event, *Vermeer’s Delft*, featuring an extensive collection of historical documents, including the artist’s marriage certificate, maps and household objects.

Taco Dibbits, the general director of the Rijksmuseum, has acknowledged that he had long had “this dream of having all the pictures together,” but that “we thought it was never possible.”

The present show includes four paintings from the Rijksmuseum’s collection, three others from the Maurithuis (a famed art museum in The Hague) and 21 other paintings loaned from private collections and institutions in six different countries. Out of a total of only 37 paintings that art historians generally attribute to Vermeer, 28 are now on display under one roof. Four of the works, in fact, are being displayed in the Netherlands for the first time in 200 years.

Vermeer’s life

The exhibition and the catalogue document the extensive research conducted by a team of international Vermeer experts, who have closely collaborated with the Rijksmuseum leading up to the event. The catalogue asserts that this has resulted in “new insights about his [Vermeer’s] social position, his household, his faith, his technique and the influence of his environment on his art. By connecting the latest knowledge about his

personal life and his work, we now come closer to Vermeer than ever before.”

No doubt the latest research has brought Vermeer’s 43 years “closer” to us. However, in comparison with our knowledge about other Dutch masters of his time, we still know relatively little about the facts of Vermeer’s life.

When the painter died in poverty in December 1675, he did not leave behind any notes, diaries or letters, no records about his teachers or his pupils and not a single self-portrait that can be identified with absolute certainty as his own. Furthermore, only 24 of his paintings were signed and only five dated. Some 350 years later, art historians still cannot determine for certain the number of paintings he produced. The unanswered questions and disputed facts have led time and again to the conclusion that “Johannes Vermeer is a mystery.”

Nonetheless, the general social, economic and cultural rise and decline that distinguished 17th-century Holland, and strongly influenced and shaped Vermeer’s life and work, are far from being a “mystery.” In sum, Vermeer’s life and fate were deeply entwined with the outcome of the Dutch revolt against Spain, the emergence of the Dutch “Gouden Eeuw” (Golden Age—approximately 1588 to 1672) and the eventual occupation of the Netherlands by France and Britain.

Vermeer’s exact date of birth, sometime in late October 1632 in Delft, is unknown. He was the second of two children. His family, in contemporary terms, might be defined as lower middle class. His mother, Digna Baltens, could neither read nor write, and her family moved from Antwerp, today’s Belgium, to northern Netherlands to escape the war with Spain.

Vermeer’s father, Reijnier Janszoon, had been primarily employed as a weaver in the textile industry. As of 1631 he became a “master art dealer” and ran an inn in Delft, which at the time was the third-largest Dutch city. The catalogue notes, “Thanks to his father’s business, Vermeer must have become familiar with paintings and leading painters at an early age. Pubs and taverns were important meeting places in the cities of the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century, social hubs where many people gathered and where paintings were often displayed and sold in the taproom.”

Aside from gaining familiarity with exceptional art works during his formative years, Vermeer also had contact with a handful of other prominent contemporary artists—those who lived in Delft or frequently visited the city. That group includes two prominent painters, Leonaert Bramer and Gerard ter Borch. From 1650 onward, Jan Steen, Pieter de Hooch, Cornelis de Man and one of Rembrandt’s pupils, Carel Fabritius, all settled in Delft.

The catalogue further observes that “although Delft no longer enjoyed the cultural and artistic elan of the previous decades, this mobility and

interaction of artists fueled a flourishing art production in the city and encouraged artistic innovations, both in the field of townscapes and contemporary interior painting, two genres in which Vermeer would also distinguish himself in the following years.”

The most prosperous period in the history of the Dutch republic came to an end in 1672, following simultaneous invasions by France and Britain. The war and destruction reduced the Dutch economy to shambles. Vermeer, like other Dutch masters of his time, could no longer sell his work, as the art market had collapsed.

Earlier, the death of Vermeer’s father in 1652 had been a financial blow. The older man left behind a debt of 250 guilders—equivalent to six months’ pay for a carpenter at the time—and Vermeer and his wife Catharina Bolenes, whom he married a few months after his father’s death, were liable for the debt. As a consequence in part of his protracted financial distress, Vermeer witnessed the death of four of his children.

Vermeer died December 15, 1675. Some 18 months later, his final days were summed up by his 44-year-old wife, Catharina, in the form of a petition. As a single mother with 10 children to raise and feed, she filed a petition with the authorities requesting a waiver of her debts. We learn from the catalog that due to the ruinous wartime conditions, Vermeer had not only been “unable to sell his own art, but also to his great sorrow had been stuck with the paintings of other masters in which he dealt.” Because of this, the catalogue’s authors continue, and the “very onerous burden of childcare, while he had no assets of his own, he had lapsed into such degradation and decline, which had affected him so deeply, that he, as though stuck by total confusion, had gone from healthy to dead in a matter of a day and a half.”

Following his death, Delft baker Hendrick van Buijten, who already possessed a painting by Vermeer, claimed two more to settle outstanding bills for bread.

The Dutch Republic

From the early years of the 17th century, the Netherlands, a country situated partly below sea level in northern Europe, experienced progress in the fields of science, technology, literature, culture and art at “lightning speed.” This found especially sharp expression in printing and painting. The Dutch Republic became known as the “bookshop of the world,” and its population was the most literate anywhere.

A powerful position in world trade and finance through a large shipping fleet, the slave trade and extensive colonial plunder created the foundations for the Dutch Republic’s hitherto unknown wealth and global status. Expensive and luxury goods from all over the world, such as gems and silks, sugar and fruit, porcelains and spices, tobaccos and wine, poured into Dutch ports to adorn, delight and enrich the newly emerging elite.

An estimated 300 million works, including pamphlets and documents, were printed in the Netherlands during the Golden Age, a figure far exceeding the total printed in all other European countries combined. Meanwhile, some 5 million art works were commissioned and executed. This is an extraordinary cultural achievement considering that Holland’s population by the middle of the 17th century was only 2 million or so. Definitive social and political conditions contributed to this remarkable burst of artistic and intellectual production.

The Dutch Republic emerged out of the popular revolt in the Seventeen Provinces, roughly coinciding with contemporary Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg, in the late 16th century against Spanish Habsburg rule. The revolt helped break the chains of feudalism and paved the way for the development of a new society rooted in capitalist property relations.

The German writer *Eigebret*, in his 1788 fabled the decades-long Dutch revolt against Spanish oppression, had his title character utter these lines in regard to the struggle with despotism:

Forward! Brave people! The goddess of liberty leads you on!
And as the sea breaks through and destroys the barriers that would oppose its fury, so do ye overwhelm the bulwark of tyranny, and with your impetuous flood sweep it away from the land which it usurps.

In 1848, Karl Marx pointed to the significance of the Dutch revolt, arguing that the model for the French Revolution of 1789 was the English Revolution of 1648 and the model “for the revolution of 1648 was the revolt of the Netherlands against Spain.”

In 1579 the northern Dutch provinces came together under the leadership of wealthy nobleman William of Orange to end Spanish Habsburg rule and establish the United Provinces of the Netherlands. The protracted conflict for independence—known as the Eighty Years’ War—between the Spanish armies and the Dutch independence forces came to an official end in 1648 with the Peace of Münster, which recognised the independent Dutch Republic as a sovereign state.

The WSWS has previously commented that the rupture with Spanish rule and accompanying economic and social processes encouraged “the Dutch artists to turn their attentions to everyday life in a manner that was unprecedented in the history of art.” Their subject matter no longer included “gods, mythology or the lives of kings and queens. The decision to devote intense artistic effort to depicting bakers, notaries, shipbuilders and prostitutes, the interiors of small shops, the family circumstances of a knife-grinder or the courtyard of a modest home in Delft had something heroic about it. This new middle class culture had a revolutionary aspect.”

Unlike the situation in Italy, France, Germany and other major European countries at the time, where the artists were dependent on commissions from the church, state or aristocratic patrons, Dutch painters in the 1600s were “free” to work for an “independent art market.” The great Enlightenment philosopher Baruch Spinoza, born in Amsterdam and whose life span (1632-1677) coincided almost identically with Vermeer’s, argued in 1670 that “in a free state every man may think what he likes, and say what he thinks.” This same principle, whether or not it could be realized at the time, undoubtedly emboldened the Dutch artists of the Golden Age.

Vermeer’s work

Vermeer, along with Rembrandt and Frans Hals, is one of the most remarkable of the great Dutch painters, creating intimate, meaningful and timeless work. Each picture in the current exhibition deserves detailed comment. It is impossible to go through the 28 works on display. We will limit ourselves to one of Vermeer’s best-known and best-loved works, and a highlight of the exhibition, *The Milkmaid* (sometimes known as *The Kitchen Maid*).

The title of this painting may be misleading because the woman in the painting is actually a housemaid pouring milk. Vermeer was in his mid-20s when he painted this work. Commentators note that in contrast to his earliest known historical paintings, the young Vermeer had made significant progress by this time in composition, perspective, lighting and, above all, subject matter.

The painter is frequently referred to as the “Master of Light” and indeed

he mastered both the science and the art of lighting. The manner in which he demonstrates command and skill in terms of his understanding of the nuances of light, in the form of gradients of luminosity, contrast and colour, not only in his *Milkmaid* but also in his later works, is simply outstanding.

In *The Milkmaid*, as in Vermeer's other interior domestic paintings, the soft and diffused key light falls on the left side of the composition from the viewer's perspective. The type of delicate, dispersed light he depicts is only possible if the subject is close to the light source and the light source is larger than the subject itself. Since Vermeer's rays of light passing through the semi-opaque or translucent glass are diffused, they illuminate the composition from multiple angles instead of from a single one. If the viewer takes a closer look at the window, he or she discovers that Vermeer includes a broken pane of glass, presumably to demonstrate how the light would have influenced the composition if it were not diffused.

The daylight, from a sole source, the sun, spreads fluidly on the kitchen wall, its plastered nooks and crannies, its cracks, nails and nail-holes. Against this backdrop, the female figure stands pouring milk into an earthenware bowl with singular concentration. If one stands close to *The Milkmaid* at the Rijksmuseum, the scene seems intensely and physically present, as though it were unfolding cinematically in front of one's eyes.

In his work, Vermeer did not use contrast in the narrower sense of the word, that is, the mere difference between light and dark, but rather in a broader fashion, using colour, texture and the placement of objects.

Along those lines, a further fascinating aspect of Vermeer's composition involves his palette, or range of colour. The pigments he used came from the four corners of the globe—in keeping with the new epoch of international economic life. The ultramarine blue in particular, which can be found in nearly all the painter's work, came from what is today Afghanistan. In the 17th century, this pigment was more valuable than gold. The subject in *The Milkmaid* is not an aristocrat, but a domestic servant going about her daily chores, represented with an expensive pigment that the painter was resolved to find, invest in and make use of.

Inspired by the Dutch masters, the German philosopher Hegel once observed that “in their paintings we can study and get to know men and human nature.” On June 4, by the time the Vermeer exhibition ends, more than half a million people will have seen this one artist's work in person at the Rijksmuseum. In an official climate dominated by reaction, social barbarism, national chauvinism, austerity and war, great numbers of people are putting themselves in position “to know and study men and human nature” through the great painter's efforts.

In itself, this is a remarkable social and cultural fact, which points toward the objective unity of the world's population and the logic of global economic and cultural life, incompatible with the reactionary, increasingly unbearable fetters of capitalism.



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