

*Young Woman Seated at a
Virginal: A Second Look*

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Introduction

There can be no doubt that *Young Woman Seated at the Virginals* of the Leiden Collection is the most critically under-analyzed work currently attributed to the Dutch master Johannes Vermeer. This is remarkable. Despite the fact that the artist's oeuvre is characterized by what can only be called "conventional" subject matter, it has spawned a small mountain of art-historical literature. Moreover, the artist's surviving output, populated by a notably high density of masterworks, is extraordinarily limited and has shown scant signs of expansion in the sixty years following its definitive reduction to its present dimensions in the early 1950s. The only other attempt to scale the walls of Vermeer's impregnable fortress was the *Saint Praxedis*, which remains a source of scholarly debate.

Consequently, any addition to this painter's oeuvre can be considered an art historical event of no small importance—an event that would be expected to arouse a broad and intense range of critical inquiry. Yet, other than a nine-page technical report of the painting by conservators Libby Sheldon and Nicolas Costaras,¹ Walter Liedtke's *Vermeer: The Complete Paintings*,² and the catalogue entries of the Leiden Gallery³ little has been written about the picture since its 2004 sale.

For the sake of clarity, *Young Woman Seated at the Virginals* will be referred to as the "Leiden piece" or the "Leiden picture." Likewise, *Lady Seated at a Virginal* of the National Gallery of London will be referred to as "Lady Seated," and *Lady Standing at a Virginal*, also in the National Gallery, as "London Lady Seated" or "Lady Seated."



Young Woman Seated at a Virginal
(attributed to Vermeer)
c. 1670
Oil on canvas, 25.2 x 20 cm. (9 7/8
x 7 7/8 in.)
The Leiden Collection, New York

1 / Composition

Art historians have advanced various compositional similarities between the Leiden picture and some of the artist's late works—in preponderance with *The Lacemaker* (fig. 1), *The Guitar Player* (fig. 2), *Lady Standing at the Virginal* (fig. 3), and understandably, the London *Lady Seated*, whose compositional kinship with the Leiden picture is starkly evident (fig. 4). However, a thorough analysis discloses that the compositional approach of the Leiden work diverges significantly from the trajectory of Vermeer's late artistic endeavors, in which he began to explore dynamic compositional alternatives following a period of “classicist repose” in the mid-1660s.



fig. 1



fig. 2



fig. 3



fig. 4



Compositon

The near forty-year-old-painter's attempt to reinvent his art in the first years of the 1670s produced works such as *The Love Letter* (fig. 5) and *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid* (fig. 6). These are among his most innovative and finely crafted designs, regardless if one is partial or not to the abbreviated description of form, mannered brush handling, and sometimes perplexing iconographic agenda of these pictures.

The *doorkijkje* (see-through view) composition of *The Love Letter* stands as one of Vermeer's most ambiguous yet evocative representations of pictorial space. The three rectangular partitions in the planimetric layout are so strongly emphasized that they challenge the illusion of spatial depth created by the black-and-white floor tiles and a series of conspicuously overlapping objects.¹ One critic misconstrued the middle partition as a mirror against a dark wall, reflecting an unseen room. Equally daring, the asymmetrical composition of the late *Guitar Player*—the sitter's elbow is lopped off for no apparent reason—assures us that the painter still has more than one compositional trick up his sleeve. Even the composition of the minuscule *Lacemaker*, which might appear less complicated than the just-cited works, is one of the artist's most imaginative designs despite the fact that the canvas is little more than a span high.



fig. 5



fig. 6

Compositional Parallels

Even though some art historians have identified in *The Guitar Player* a shift toward compositional simplification that aligns with the plainness of the Leiden picture, the Kenwood painting is considerably more sophisticated in terms of spatial construction, planimetric organization, and color management.²

The viewer, whose gaze enters the picture intuitively from the left, is immediately confronted by the guitar player's presence and is riveted there by the bizarre descriptive vocabulary, the luxurious costume of the musician, and the astounding rendering of her instrument.³ The axial alignment (fig. 7) of the gilt frame

and the musician's body demonstrates a deliberate manipulation of compositional elements to achieve structural cohesiveness. The contrast between the crowded left-hand side of the painting and the dark, near-void on the right appears less as an oversight than as a conscious compositional gamble, perhaps an attempt to reformulate the spatial organization of the earlier *Music Lesson* (fig. 8), in which nearly all the movable objects in the scene are clustered on the right, leaving the left-hand side of the room almost an empty corridor.⁴ Whether one finds this specific solution as impactful in *The Guitar Player* as it is in *The Music Lesson*, the former's layout and spatial construction are unquestionably more visually and intellectually challenging than those of the Leiden picture.



fig. 7



fig. 8

Furthermore, *The Guitar Player* attests to Vermeer's ability to integrate narrative and formal design into a cohesive whole, representing one of the most significant achievements of the Delft painter. Rather than a trouble-free depiction of a real musician, Elise Goodman has persuasively argued that the painting serves as an ingenious indoor variation of the popular "lady and landscape" construct (originating in Italy), wherein elegantly adorned female musicians are juxtaposed with idyllic landscapes.⁵ The prevalent idea that the lady represented a masterpiece of nature, "to be admired, possessed, and displayed," was a recurring theme in countless poems, songs, and tracts on beautiful women in the seventeenth century.⁶ The connection between the lady and nature gains formal support from the resemblance between the dangling branches of the tree in the background landscape and the cascading curls of the lady's stylish coiffure, first noted by Lawrence Gowing.⁷

With regard to the musical theme, Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. has linked the painting's dynamic, off-center composition and crisp paint application to the lively music and banjo-like sound produced by the newly fashionable guitar, which was begun to surpass the melancholic sounds of the venerable lute.⁸ Because the guitar was also employed for musical accompaniment—many Dutch genre paintings with musical themes are thought to symbolize the progress of love as well as the cultural virtues of music—the guitar player's joyful gaze may hint at the presence of a lover who has just come into view, eager to partake in a romantic musical duet. The musician's turned head, sidelong glance, truncated elbow, and compositional

asymmetry extend the viewer's imagination beyond the picture plane, as the scene itself is perceived as incomplete and in flux. Although no definitive interpretation has been offered for the heavily abstracted books that lie near the lady, they may have been included to nuance the painting's narrative in a manner that would have been apparent to Vermeer's contemporaries. At the very least, they indicate that the musician was a member of the educated *haute bourgeoisie*.

Thus, *The Guitar Player*, which at first glance might be mistaken for a literal portrayal of a shiny young woman with a shiny instrument, unveils a nuanced discourse on female beauty, nature, music, love, and, through the conspicuous manner in which it is composed and depicted, on the art of painting itself.⁹ Notwithstanding that this curious picture is hardly a favorite among Vermeer aficionados, it suggests not a depleted, end-of-career painter, but an artist still riding upright in his saddle, sensitive to the deeper cultural concerns of his age and likewise attentive to the caprices of fashion.

Compared to *The Guitar Player*, the Leiden painting exhibits a compositional, chromatic, and narrative bareness that cleanly diverges from Vermeer's late stylistic direction. The use of a figure against a blank wall in *The Lacemaker* has also been cited to justify the Leiden painting's unembellished wall and compositional plainness. However, the composition of the Louvre canvas is orchestrated with such skill that it seems inevitable, and despite its small scale, it remains among Vermeer's most inventive designs.¹⁰ Perhaps in no other work by Vermeer do content, design, and style so seamlessly integrate with the narrative.

The young lacemaker and her equipment are organized within a broad, pyramid-like form that commutes an air of stability and purposefulness to the scene. The low vantage point and the spectator's proximity to the scene confer an unexpected sense of monumentality, a quality perhaps shared by only a few small-scale European easel paintings. Reinforced by the lady's lowered gaze, which prevents the spectator from connecting with her *persona*, Vermeer indicates through his pictorial design that it is by her commendable labor, rather than her outward appearance or personality, that we may know her.

The line of sight from the worker's inclined head meets the converging contours of her fingers and the taught threads of her craft, directing the viewer's eyes toward the concealed point where the next knot of lace will soon be tied (fig. 9). The thread on the left, subtly blurred, is captured in the luminous shadow created by the girl's curled hand, while its counterpart on the right, thinner and lighter in tone, escapes the shadow and appears perfectly taught and more advanced in space. This creates a pocket of palpable space between the figure's hands. The precise definition of the two middleground threads offers an aesthetic counterpoint to the blurred, meandering threads of the foreground still life, heightening the viewer's awareness of both the painting's theme—lacemaking—and the artful manner in which its illusion is crafted.

The protruding sewing cushion and the corner of the table constitute a novel *repoussoir* device that amplifies the sensation of spatial depth and forestalls the viewer's access to the figure, creating the sensation of suspense in what would otherwise be a mundane activity, dominated by endless repetition. Although Dutch interior painters occasionally truncated portions of *repoussoir* elements, the drastic cropping of the pillow might have appeared to the typical seventeenth-century viewer as an oversight rather than a deliberate artistic choice. The passages described above, comprising no more than a few square centimeters, reveal an artist in full command of his medium—a mastery that allows him to

Compositon

transcribe in paint any optical or spatial phenomena he might observe or imagine.

Not surprisingly, this complex picture has elicited a substantial number of interpretations. Some scholars see in the lacemaker's industry a parallel to the painter's craft (bobbin lacemaking is, in reality, a much noisier affair than easel painting). More conventionally, others interpret it as an allusion to domestic virtue, a cardinal value in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. One art historian went so far as to



fig. 9

perceive in the sewing cushion and the dangling red threads covert sexual implications.¹¹ Most identify the box-like object on the table as a small Bible, which, of course, would imply an invitation to lead a virtuous life. This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that the sewing cushion, displayed more prominently than in any other Dutch painting on the same theme, was, from the sixteenth century onward, a “symbol of the industrious, virtuous woman.”¹²

In an entirely different vein, the Spanish surrealist painter Salvador Dalí wrote, “The first time I saw a photograph of [Vermeer’s] *Lacemaker* and a live rhinoceros together, I realized that if there should be a battle, *The Lacemaker* would win, because *The Lacemaker* is morphologically a rhinoceros horn.” As improbable as an association between a ferocious African beast and a fragile, near pocket-sized seventeenth-century canvas may be, Dalí’s declaration emphasizes the composition’s exceptional vitality and evocative power.

While some of the above-cited interpretations are more speculative than others, the fact that a small canvas featuring such unassuming subject matter could provoke such a broad and intense range of interpretation attests to its extraordinary originality and the pictorial intelligence of its maker. On the other hand, as far as the present writer is aware, no critic, art historian, poet, or painter has extracted from the Leiden picture any narrative nuance beyond the straightforward storyline readily apparent to both the casual museum visitor and the informed art historian—a young woman seated at her virginal who gazes out toward the spectator—nothing more, nothing less.



fig. 10



fig. 11

The Composition of the Leiden Painting

The Leiden woman and her instrument, a *muselaar* virginal, are positioned in a frieze-like manner across the picture plane, directly accessible to the viewer (fig. 10). There are no objects in front of or behind the figure and her instrument, except for a bare, white-washed wall situated at an uncertain distance behind them. In contrast, Vermeer's later interiors consistently employ overlap as a means to accentuate the illusion of spatial depth, one of the artist's primary concerns. Even in *The Guitar Player* (fig. 11), which represents a shallow space by Vermeer's standards, the absence of a clear perspectival construction—the one-point perspectival recession is suggested only by a few orthogonals¹³—is offset by the careful manipulation of overlap, emphasized by tonal contrast and variety of shape.¹⁴ By comparison, the figure of the Leiden work leaps forward towards the surface of the canvas.

The absence of depth in the Leiden picture is also apparent when compared to that of the London *Lady Seated*, from which the Leiden composition is derived. Even when the more expansive composition of the London work is cropped, eliminating both the tapestry and the brightly lit bass viol (both intentional *repoussoir* motifs), the illusionistic space of the scene remains distinctly articulated in foreground, middle ground, and background. The illuminated corner of the faux marble panel of the virginal projects towards the viewer, establishing the foreground. The musician, seated at a discreet distance from the virginal's forward edge, occupies the middle ground. The sense of space between the front corner of the virginal and the figure is implied not just by the receding orthogonals of the instrument but also by the tonal and color contrast—the warm brown of the upper rectangle appears to advance, while the cool blue of the gown and bodice seems to recede. Writers on art from this period understood that warm colors tend to advance and cool colors to recede. The swaths of deep gray, shadowed wall to the left and right of the figure mark the background, offering a sense of space behind the illuminated figure. Meanwhile, the overlapping of the lady's head with the heavy gilt frame leaves no doubt as to the spatial relationships between objects. The deliberate omission of detail in the background picture-within-a-picture renders the bordello image less intrusive and more distant in space than the detailed objects closer to the viewer.

Instead, the space of the Leiden piece is uncomfortably compact. The figure is enclosed in a shallow

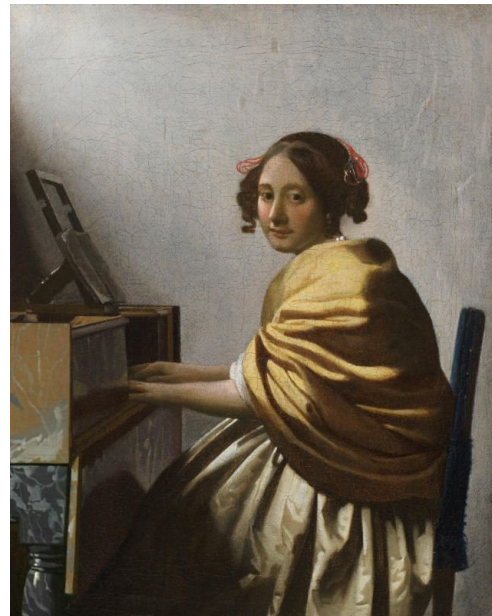
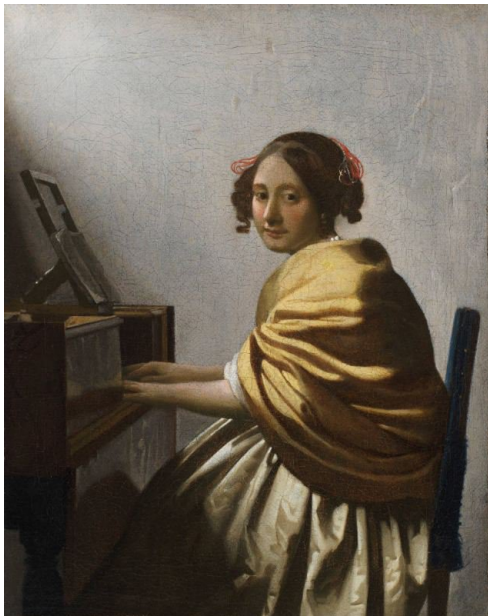


fig. 12

envelope of space. Notice how if the faux marble facing the spectator is illuminated in a way comparable to the London piece, as in the virtual enhancement (fig. 12), the instrument gains in structural integrity, and the picture acquires depth and resonance. As it is, owing to both its luminosity and the undulating contours of the yellow shawl, the solitary figure jumps out in front of the dull colored and under-defined virginal.



fig. 13

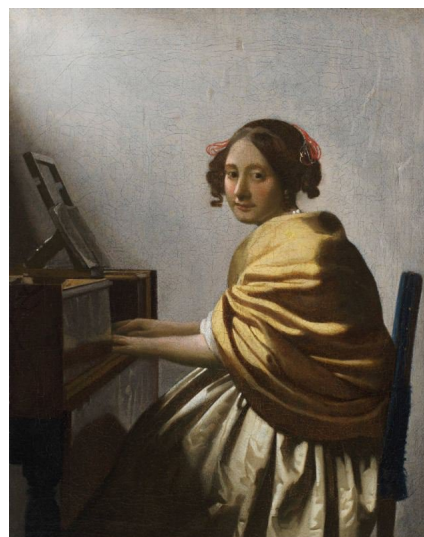


fig. 14

The planimetric layout of the Leiden painting is likewise rudimentary.¹⁵ Nowhere can be detected the refined dialogue of contours or the meticulous calibration of spatial interval typical of Vermeer's compositions by which figurative, narrative, and formal compositional elements are brought into a cohesive relationship.¹⁶ The use of negative space, crucial to Vermeer's compositional method, is almost entirely absent. Apart from the orthogonals of the virginal, which converge at a vanishing point located on the lady's shoulder, the principal contours of the composition seem to follow their own course and are rhythmically poor. The conventional framing of the figure lacks the careful manipulation of formal elements that typically distinguish Vermeer's compositions from those of his contemporaries. It

accomplishes even less than a simple work by Metsu, *A Woman Playing a Virginal* (c. 1664-1667) (fig. 13),¹⁷ which reveals a thoughtfulness in planimetric and spatial organization, perhaps not greatly distant from Vermeer's, yet utterly lacking in the Leiden picture itself (fig. 14).

Moreover, no late interior by Vermeer displays such a limited color scheme as that seen in the Leiden painting. Under normal viewing conditions, the bright yellow shawl is so intense that the dark blue of the chair becomes almost imperceptible. The flesh tones, the patch of yellow, and the expanses of neutral grays and browns offer no chromatic relief except for a few slender, bright-red ribbons. Note the rich palette in all of Vermeer's later paintings, which includes a range of blues, greens, yellows, reds, browns, and subtly nuanced grays.

Although the specifics of Vermeer's planning process remain uncertain, his familiarity with the camera obscura would have allowed him to bypass traditional methods (drawing or sketching on paper) used to plan pictures before they were actually painted. For Vermeer, the arrangement of objects within the three-dimensional arena and their interrelation with the planimetric layout was of utmost importance. The ability to organize and reorganize complex scenes and instantly visualize them on the camera obscura's screen as though they were already completed works of art may explain why no preparatory drawings, sketches, or experimental works have ever been discovered. While the artist was not obligated to use the camera obscura for every painting, it is clear that *The Lacemaker*, with its meticulous composition, refinements in tone, play with focus, and numerous *pointillés* demonstrates that the apparatus remained an option even in the final years of his career. In the Leiden piece, there is no sign of Vermeer's signature *pointillés*, which are visible in every one of Vermeer's late compositions, unless we consider the awkward pink highlight on the lower rim of the left-hand eye.

As much as one might hypothesize that the artist had inaugurated a "minimalist" phase with the Leiden painting, the intellectual effort required to organize this composition would have been minimal. It would involve nothing more than instructing his model to sit on a chair before the virginal, position her fingers on the keyboard, and turn her head toward him. One might reasonably ask, then, why such a sophisticated and innovative painter would be satisfied with such an undemanding program?

This is not to say that in some respects the Leiden painting does not resemble a Vermeer; a painting can outwardly mimic a Vermeer without being composed "from within" in the manner of a Vermeer. However, cropping the figure and virginal from the broader composition of the London *Lady Seated*, altering the wardrobe, and swapping a light background for a dark one hardly seem like challenges worthy of Vermeer's abilities.¹⁸

Composition and Narrative

What role, then, does the composition of the Leiden painting play in relation to its theme? Perhaps none. It may convey only that a well-to-do young lady is playing her music in a softly lit room and has momentarily exchanged glances with the viewer. Although the virginal and music-making carry a heritage of symbolic associations, the Leiden painting offers no interpretive key, such as Van Baburen's bordello scene in the *Lady Seated* or the oversized Cupid in the London *Lady Standing at a Virginal*, that could trigger any form of extra-aesthetic reading. Moreover, the picture's small scale does not preclude a more elaborate composition, as exemplified by Mestru's previously cited *A Woman Playing the Virginal*.

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Given such compositional and narrative shortcomings, even those who defend the painting's authenticity on technical grounds display little enthusiasm for its expressive merit.¹⁷ It is perhaps unsurprising that for many years the painting was thought to have originated in the nineteenth century, a period when easel painters felt no need to justify a pretty picture of a pretty woman.

In summary, while the compositional relationship between the Leiden painting and the *Lady Seated* is unquestionable, the connections between the Leiden painting and *The Lacemaker* and *The Guitar Player* are far less significant than sometimes incautiously suggested.¹⁹ Even if this painting might engage some viewers with its intimist treatment, it lacks an underlying compositional or iconographic strategy.²⁰ Considering that Vermeer's interiors, like all Dutch high-genre interiors, are not bare snapshots of daily life and that his compositions are always functionally linked to narrative, the Leiden painting comes across more as an uninspired quotation, or a literal copy and paste of *Lady Seated*, rather than a creative elaboration.²¹

2 / The Shawl

Undoubtedly, the most contentious passage of the Leiden picture is the yellow shawl (fig. 15). For many years, there appeared to be no consensus among art specialists about what precisely should be done with this anomalous element. However, a technical examination of the picture conducted by the Rijksmuseum's conservation department appears to have settled the debate concerning the authorship of the shawl—it is by the same hand as the rest of the painting.¹ The consequence of this will be elaborated upon below because, in the light of this newfound clarity, it is essential to scrutinize this shawl in the context of



fig. 15

previous art historical analysis, which will enable an approach to the question of the painting's authorship with greater acumen and, potentially, to revise previous assessments.

Despite the liberties Vermeer granted himself with color and brushwork, the garments worn by his interior sitters are depicted with such meticulous attention to form, texture, and accessories that most of them can be associated with period depictions by other artists and specific functions.² Occasionally, the artist's descriptive accuracy of attire verges on the doctrinaire. For instance, the black spots on the fur trim of the yellow morning jacket depicted in three paintings align remarkably well in both shape and distribution.³ Perhaps not even the artist's beloved wife Catharina, who presumably owned the garment, would have been aware of or interested in such optical fidelity.

The Leiden shawl bears no clasps, buttons, or decorative trim of any kind. Its clam-like shape, harsh chiaroscuro and weighty folds frustrate any attempt to identify its function or cut. Its folds are so numerous that, if unfolded, one has the impression it could reach the floor, resembling a blanket in its expanse. Furthermore, it lacks any nuances that might suggest it was a real garment observed from nature. It could have just as well painted from fantasy.

The Wrap

In his representations of domestic life, Vermeer never depicted such a garment, nor does it appear in any portrait of the higher end of the Dutch art market in which Vermeer worked, such as Gerrit ter Borch, Frans van Mieris, Caspar Netscher, or any other contemporary of Vermeer. Would a Dutch woman wealthy enough to have her portrait painted by a well-known artist have allowed herself to be portrayed wearing such a pedestrian piece of clothing?

From a technical standpoint, no passage of Vermeer's oeuvre is as crudely depicted. Its cumbersome shape swells out in all directions, suffocating the woman's anatomy except for her hunched back, which is emphasized by the razor-sharp contour on the right-hand side. The inner contours of its folds meander from left to right, forming one slab of yellow fabric after another, without successfully creating the illusion that they might wrap around the figure. The meager, two-toned chiaroscuro scheme lacks the all-important half-tones that impart form and light to solid objects. This deficiency compromises the garment's overall volume and generates a sense of disorder, which is more characteristic of an artist of modest abilities than of a master of form and light such as Vermeer.

Moreover, the shadowed valleys that penetrate the garment's brighter day side are not depicted in accordance with Vermeer's practice, by which the shadows within or near the day side of objects, particularly evident in his renderings of drapery, are lighter in tone than the tone of the mass shadow. This formula not only ensures the illusion of the natural fall of light but also preserves the object's overall volume. An example of this technique can be observed in the yellow sleeve—also painted with lead-tin yellow—of the *Washington Lady Writing* (fig. 16). Here, the shadows within the day side are much lighter in tone than the mass shadow of the night side, yet they accurately inform the viewer about the fabric's



fig. 16



topography and create an agreeable sense of puffy roundness. This technique is echoed by Roger de Piles (*The Principles of Painting*), the French art writer of the eighteenth century, who addressed the challenge of rendering chiaroscuro values of complicated objects through a well-known analogy of a bunch of grapes (fig. 17). He wrote, “The grapes, being separated, would each have its light and shade equally, and thus dividing the sight into many rays, would cause confusion; but when collected into one bunch, and



fig.17

becoming thus but one mass of light and one shade, the eye embraces them as a single object.”

What is the shawl made of? Some have conjectured wool, while ruling out satin, as it presents no glimmer or Vermeer's trademark pointillés, which often accompany his renderings of that fabric. The elongated folds that delve deep into the shawl's day side possess a sagging, rubbery quality, unlike any drapery in Vermeer's oeuvre. From a functional standpoint, its heavy material and loose fit seem discordant with the lady's fashionable hairstyle and luxurious satin gown, and is ill-suited for making music.

Art historians have been highly critical of this unfortunate passage. Walter Liedtke wrote: “except for the yellow shawl, the painting is consistent with several late works by the artist,” adding it may have been overpainted entirely or partially by another hand.⁴ In his Vermeer monograph, Wayne Franits referred to the shawl as “ungainly.”⁵ Sheldon and Costraras themselves noted the garment's “apparent inelegance,” suggesting that its lackluster appearance might be due to lost glazes or overpainting by another hand.⁶ A later investigation, whose aim was to discover why the yellow shawl “was painted so unskillfully,” came to no definitive conclusion but did provide evidence that “at least some of the yellows on the present costume have faded,”⁷ however, without explaining how or to what degree the presumed lost glazes would have positively effected the appearance of the “unskillfully” painted garment. In 1981, Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., wrote, “The compositional weaknesses in this little work, particularly the awkward pattern of folds in the cloak, have suggested to some that the painting was executed by Vermeer at the very end of his career, at a time when his artistic powers had substantially declined. The arguments are not convincing, for even in Vermeer's late works one can never find such simplified treatment of folds and textures.”⁸ In 2017, Wheelock reiterated his negative opinion in the version of the Leiden Collection online catalogue: “Despite this painting's many stylistic and thematic connections to Vermeer's late works, the somewhat wooden appearance of the large yellow shawl covering the upper portion of the woman's body is awkward both in its shape and in its modeling. The sharp edges to the folds are quite different from Vermeer's more nuanced manner of painting.... It is largely because of the unsatisfactory character of this shawl that the attribution to the artist has been contested in the past.” concluding: “The probability, thus, is that the shawl was a later addition, likely executed shortly after Vermeer's death.”⁹ However, in the 2023 version of the Leiden online catalogue, Wheelock, now Senior Advisor to the Leiden Collection, softened his opinion; the shawl's previously “unsatisfactory” and “awkward” appearance has been updated, more benignly, to “distinctive.”¹⁰

Notwithstanding the near unanimous condemnation of the shawl's “unsatisfactory” character, one art historian has proposed an alternative account: “The drapery that envelops her upper body may represent an attempt at a ‘timeless’ costume, sidestepping the whims of fashion that might otherwise date her ethereal beauty.”¹¹ Aside from the lack of evidence supporting that Vermeer might have deliberately sought the

abstract concept of timelessness in his genre pieces, a question arises: If the artist's intent were indeed such, why did he take such care in defining the lady's decidedly contemporary hairdo? While the Dutch costume expert Maireke de Winkel had to consult a range of period letters, prints, and paintings in order to date the hairstyle between 1669 and 1671,¹² one would imagine a contemporary of Vermeer would have been able to pinpoint the painting's date the instant he laid eyes on the hairstyle.

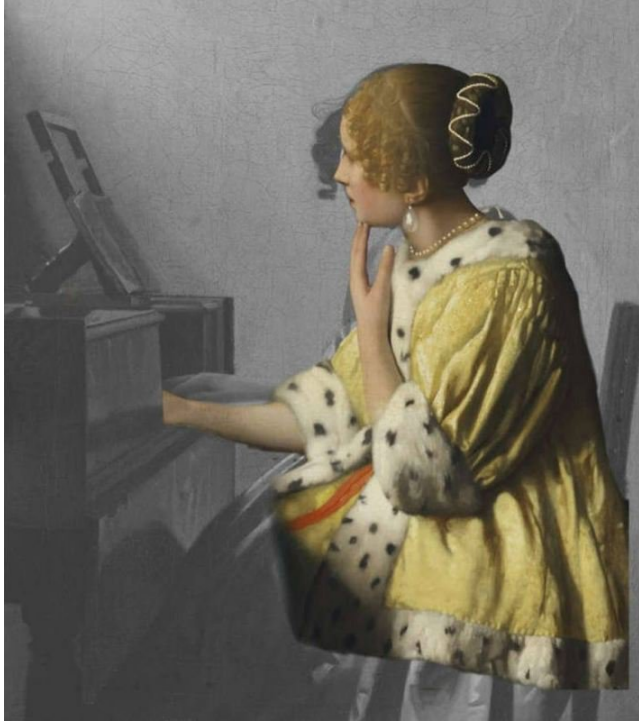


fig. 18

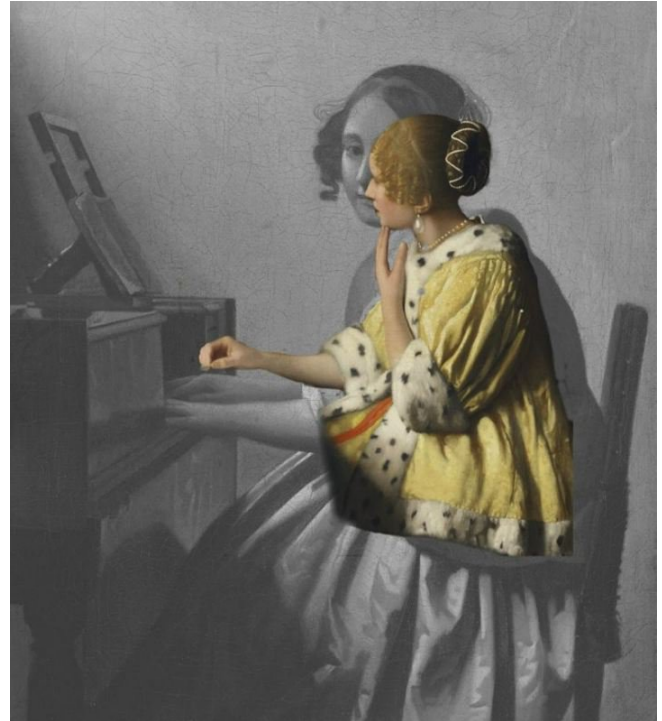


fig. 19

Some specialists have attempted to make sense of the Leiden shawl via X-ray and infrared reflectogram images made during the ten-year scientific analysis of the picture, but have probably created greater confusion than clarity. Sheldon and Costaras suggested that beneath the heavy folds of the shawl lies “a more intricately designed sleeve” made of “softer, finer material.” They also suggested that “a lighter area running around to the model’s back indicates she might have been wearing a bordered cape.”¹³ Moreover, the original collar was placed lower and would “have led the eye more pleasingly down from the neck to the arms.” Liedtke, however, believes that “dark spots in the light area of the collar,” which he notes were evidently missed by Sheldon and Costaras, indicate the artist had originally dressed the figure in the typical yellow morning jacket with faux ermine trim seen in his late works.¹⁴

In the latest revision of the Leiden Collection catalog (March 2023), the authors claim that Vermeer probably painted the yellow shawl on top of a “fully realized” fur-trimmed jacket in order to update the woman’s attire to be “compatible with the more flowing style of dress fashionable in the mid-1670s. Ermine-bordered yellow jackets, such as the one seen in *The Guitar Player* or *Mistress and Maid*, went out of favor after 1672.”¹⁵ This first assertion is highly speculative. A virtual reconstruction (fig. 18) shows the type of jacket seen in the two just-mentioned pictures would have extended almost to the bottom of the Leiden picture, covering great part of the satin gown. To fit completely under the present shawl, it would have to have been impossibly small (see fig. 19). There is no evidence that suggests any such jacket was actually painted before it was painted over.

If the garment was fully realized as the authors claim, why then did the painter cancel the garment below?

Their answer is: “Vermeer probably made this revision to update the woman’s clothing so that it would be compatible with the more flowing style of dress fashionable in the mid-1670s. Whether he did so on his own initiative or because of a patron’s request is a fascinating question that, tantalizingly, remains open.”¹⁶ There is no known instance of Vermeer overpainting the clothing in order bring them up to style.

But more crucially to the question of the painting’s Vermeer authenticity, the above-mentioned investigation at the Rijksmuseum has discovered that the shawl is by the same hand as the rest of the picture confuting the opinions of various Vermeer experts. “In the initial design, the pleats of the satin skirt extend under the shawl, but in the final paint layers, they do not continue, stopping instead at the shawl’s edge.”¹⁶ Accordingly the Rijksmuseum conservators confirm that the shawl and the skirt were elaborated at the same stage, and presumably, by the same artist.

However, a fundamental question arises from this new finding: How can we reconcile the Rijksmuseum’s finding that the shawl is by the same hand as the rest of the picture with the longstanding consensus among leading conservators, connoisseurs, and preeminent Vermeer scholars that one of the Leiden picture’s key passages is of such inferior quality that it alone warranted exclusion from Vermeer’s body of work? Could the artist who achieved such technical excellence in *The Lacemaker* and *The Guitar Player*—both painted in the same years as the Leiden picture—have conceived and executed such a desolate passage?

If one maintains that the shawl was indeed executed by Vermeer, there is little recourse but to maintain that for some unknown reason, the artist’s control of his medium had plummeted spectacularly, surpassing even the weakest moments of the London *Lady Seated*, the only mature work of Vermeer that displays

3 / The Pearl Necklace

Vermeer painted twelve pearl necklaces. Three lie on tables, one dangles from a jewelry box, and the remaining nine shawl snugly around the necks of the demure young women who occupy the artist's tranquil spaces. Like other preferred motifs, Vermeer did not adhere to a fixed recipe for painting his pearl necklaces but experimented with various methods to meet his evolving artistic demands.

Following a straightforward yet effective pictorial formula, Dutch painters of Vermeer's era depicted each pearl in a pearl necklace (typically illuminated from the left) as a light gray circle, marginally darker than the surrounding flesh and sometimes darker towards the center. A circular highlight of white impasto paint was skillfully positioned at either ten or eleven o'clock near the sphere's upper contour. Along the pearl's lower contour, its base tone was brightened with a shade of light gray or pink paint to suggest light reflecting from below, off the skin. This approach is exemplified in a portrait by Nicolaes Maes (fig. 20) in the Rijksmuseum.¹ More technically accomplished artists painted pearls using a wet-in-wet technique (unlike earlier painters who applied them over a fully dried layer of flesh-colored paint) allowing the light



fig. 20

gray paint of the pearl to blend with the underlying flesh tone, thereby imparting to the pearl its characteristic softness and opalescence. Naturally, each painter adapted this fundamental technique to suit the unique lighting conditions of the scene, the color of the subject's skin, and his own artistic style.

The Leiden Pearls

It is widely assumed that the two rounded dabs of white paint above the upper contour of the yellow shawl were intended to portray two pearls of the woman's necklace (fig. 21). This assumption is perhaps made more on account of the frequent appearance of pearl necklaces in Vermeer's oeuvre than on the basis of how the Leiden pearls are effectively depicted. In fact, the Leiden "necklace" presents optical inconsistencies that are challenging to reconcile.

At high magnification, the two dabs of white paint appear rather haphazardly applied to the canvas. Strangely, each has a slightly different shape and diameter. While it is conceivable that the shapes and dimensions of natural pearls of a single necklace could differ slightly, the variances between the two Leiden pearls seems implausible. Furthermore, it remains unclear whether these dabs were intended to represent the pearls' specular highlights or the illuminated sides of their spherical bodies. If meant to represent specular highlights, both are excessively large, nearly the same size as the pearls themselves.² On the other hand, if they were intended to represent the broader illuminated sides of the pearls, then a



fig. 20

darker tone would have been necessary. Otherwise, the pure white specular highlight—essential for imparting a pearl's characteristic opalescence—would be indistinguishable from the underlying tone of the pearl's body.

In any case, when comparing the pearls from the Leiden picture (fig. 22) to those of the London *Lady Seated* (fig.23), the two pearls from the Leiden picture are noticeably larger. It is uncertain how they are positioned in relation to the figure's neck. If they were attached to the neck, they would be obscured by the shadow from the lady's head, as observed in the London *Lady Seated*.³ Conversely, they appear to balance on the shawl cleanly separate from the musician's neck.

Moreover, based on the descending diagonal created by the upper edges of the two pearls, the logical progression of the necklace's pearls appears disrupted. We would anticipate seeing a third or more pearls to the left and right of the smaller pearl (see fig. 24). Given that there seems to be no optical justification for this confused passage, one could deduce that the artist who depicted it lacked the basic manipulative skill to adhere to the standard, and relatively simple method of depicting pearls, a skill common to Dutch painters of that era.



fig. 22

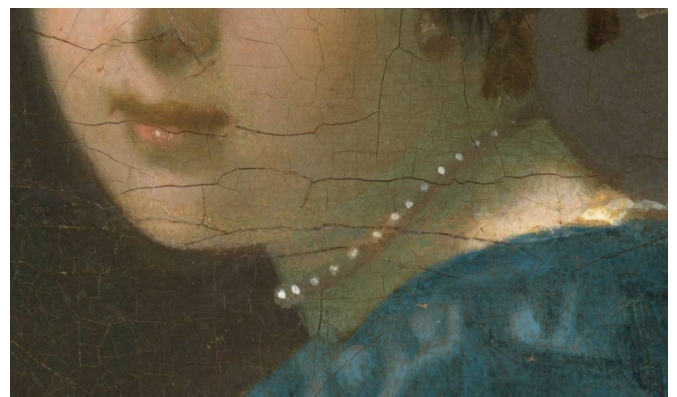


fig. 23



fig. 24

4 / The Virginal

The *muselaar* virginal on the left-hand side of the Leiden composition (fig. 25) resembles in structure and some details the keyboard instruments of the *Lady Standing* and the *Lady Seated* (fig. 26). The keyboard is set off-center to the right, a structural characteristic of this variant of the instrument. In all three renditions, the box-like instrument, whose brownish exterior is ornamented with a faux-marble motif (those of the Leiden piece can barely be discerned), rests upon a supporting black frame with sculpted legs. All three of these virginals feature lightly molded, ochre-colored trim that runs along the front edges of the instrument. In all three pictures, a protective lid hangs from the front side, attached just below the lower strip of trim. The Leiden picture and the *Lady Seated* feature a stand for sheet music, propped up at slightly different angles (the structure of the stand of the London painting is concealed by a large book of sheet music).



fig. 25



fig. 26

The Virginal

Although the Leiden instrument appears similar in structure and finish to the two London instruments, it presents a number of variances in the way it is rendered, some of which seem to be consequences of inattention or lack of manual skill rather than poetic license.

The upper strip of trim nearest to the viewer of the Leiden virginal (fig. 27) is depicted with a cool gray rather than the yellowish tone of the remaining parts of the trim, as seen in the London *Lady Seated* (fig. 28). The leg of the Leiden instrument is slimmer than those of the London counterparts and has no discernible faux-marble veining or highlights. Also, its contours, as the trim itself, are rendered with uncertainty in respect to the firm handling and deliberate boldness of the London pictures. While it is apparent that Vermeer took great care in emphasizing the geometric character of the instrument in both London works, the volume of the Leiden picture is weakly conveyed. Moreover, the contour that defines the foremost vertical edge of the virginal's keyboard recess (fig. 29) is not parallel to the instrument's



fig. 27



fig. 28

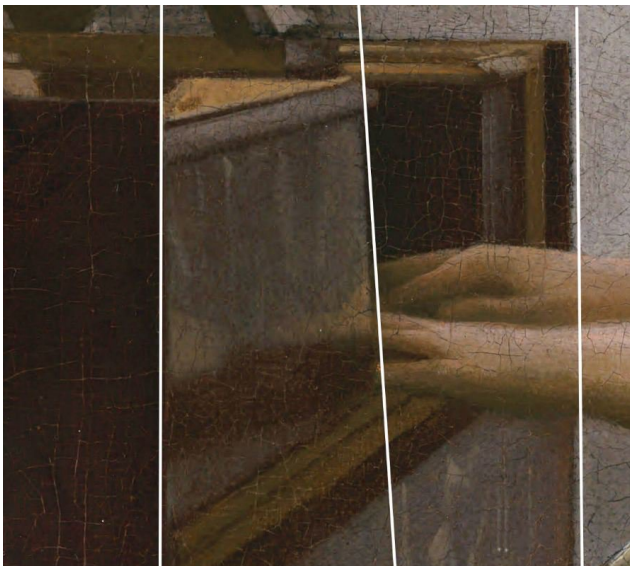


fig. 29

The Virginal

principal verticals but is tilted a few degrees counterclockwise.

On the side of the virginal facing the musician, a strip of yellowish trim runs horizontally along the upper profile of the hanging front lid. While the trim's outer contours are reasonably (but not perfectly) straight in the Leiden composition, the long, uninterrupted brushstroke of slightly darker paint within the trim's inner contours (fig. 30), intended to represent a light shadow of the trim's curved profile, is amateurishly rendered. Instead, in the *Lady Seated* virginal, the shadows of the trim's profile are depicted almost perfectly parallel to one another (fig. 31) and are handled with such finesse that the shape of its profile can be easily intuited.



fig. 30



fig. 31

The Music Stand

Both the Leiden picture (fig. 32) and the *Lady Seated* (fig. 31) feature a music book propped up on a music stand. In the London painting, the form and creases of the two open sheets, as well as the musical staffing, have undergone brisk stylistic distortion consonant with the calligraphic freedom reserved for other passages of this work. The book is rendered in a light manila color to suggest the appearance of aged paper. In comparison, the Leiden book is clumsily rendered: it resembles two slabs of roughly chiseled gray stone more than it does an often-thumbed music book made of sheets of thin paper. Moreover, the reduced size of the Leiden book exposes the inelegant structure of the music stand, which appears oddly flimsy given the artist's predilection for more structurally robust objects. The rectangular indentations of the music stand's thin vertical slats (fig. 32 a. and b.) are not equal. The indentation furthest from the viewer (fig. 32 b.) cuts deeper into the frame so much that, considering the stand is made of wood, its structural integrity would likely be threatened.

Both pictures reveal a contoured, lightly sculpted, hinged arm to angle of the sheet music. Careful observation reveals that both arms exhibit two cleanly painted highlights positioned along their uppermost edges. In the *Lady Seated*, the highlight to the left is circular (fig. 33 c.), while the other has a comet-like shape (fig. 33 d.). Surprisingly, the corresponding highlights (fig. 32 c. and d.)—lighter in tone in the Leiden picture—are almost identical in shape and position despite the fact that the two arms are set at different angles and the two virginals are lit from different directions and viewed from slightly different vantage points.¹

The Virginal

Considering that the Leiden picture was almost certainly created after the London piece, the double highlights of the Leiden picture were most likely not derived from direct observation but were copied lazily from the *Lady Seated* and pasted to the Leiden picture.

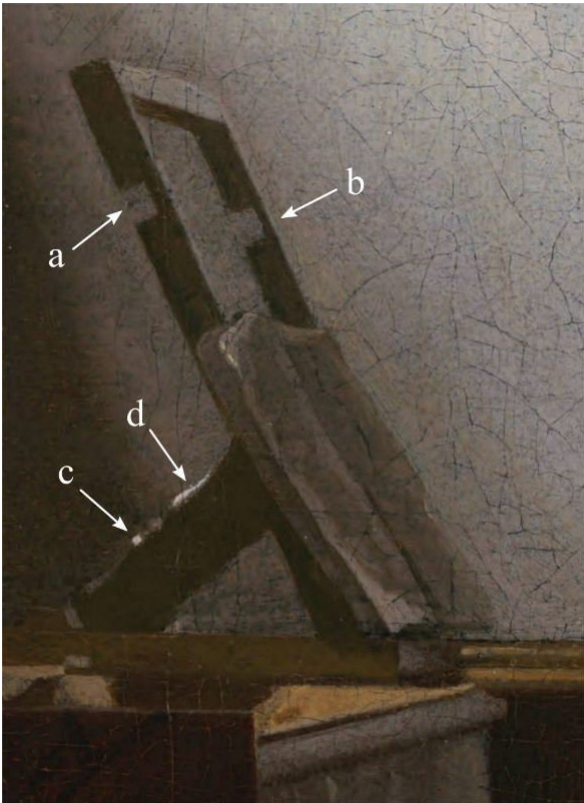


fig. 32



fig. 33

5 / The Young Woman

The Leiden woman momentarily suspends her music-making and looks out from the picture directly into the eyes of the spectator. Her flat, Byzantine face (fig. 34) is illuminated by a light source somewhere to the left, outside the pictured scene. Her expression is unclear. Perhaps she is somewhat troubled, despite sporting a lovely satin gown and the latest hairdo, embellished with fine ribbons and pearls.

Although art historians have seldom focused on the face of the London lady (fig. 35), it reveals a remarkable level of technical expertise and manipulative skill absent in the head of the Leiden painting. The almost imperceptible yet precisely controlled tonal transitions of the London lady's forehead and cheeks appear to have been achieved with some tool softer than the painter's brush, especially given its absolute dimensions. The subtle blur of the face's outer contour and the flawless transitions that define the orbits of the eyes indicate a great sensitivity of touch and a thorough familiarity with the differing opacities and viscosities of paint. The chromatic relationship between the warm, light pink of the sunlit flesh and the silvery greenish-grays of the shadows demonstrates the artist's understanding that the representation of volume and shadows of solid objects requires the alternating use of warm and cool colors.



fig. 34

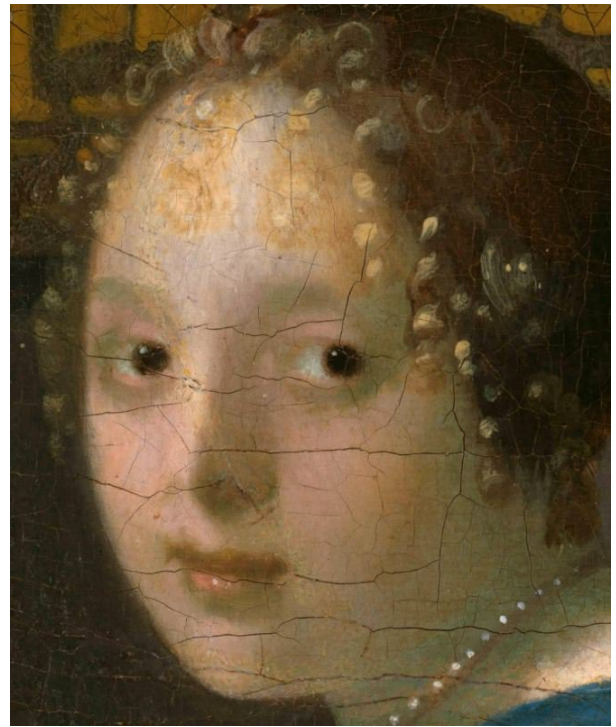


fig. 35

Certainly, one of the most remarkable, but largely unnoticed, aspects of the London face is the absence of linear definition of the inner forms. Like the earlier *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (fig. 36) and *Study of a Young Woman* (fig. 37), the illuminated side of the London lady's nose blends seamlessly into her sunlit cheek. Not even the faintest lines, still present in the two earlier works, indicate the upper eyelids but slight contrasts in tone. Nor do any lines define the nostrils, alar grooves, or columella. The upper and lower lips are not separated by a dark line, as convention dictates, but by a subtle shift in tonal value. This peculiar mode of representation, unique in Dutch painting, cannot but evoke Lawrence Gowing's



fig. 36



fig. 37

description of a painter's vocabulary of formal representation: "line, ... as a vessel of understanding has been abandoned and with it the traditional apparatus of draughtsmanship. In its place, apparently effortlessly, automatically, tone bears the whole weight of formal explanation."¹

Whether or not one is captivated by the young musician's dollish beauty, the head of the London piece serves as an exemplar of pictorial synthesis and exceptional manual skill.

The Leiden head, notwithstanding outward similarities, exhibits deficiencies in both concept and execution. For instance, when compared to those of *The Lacemaker*, the *Lady Seated*, and *The Guitar Player*, the forehead of the Leiden figure is noticeably flat.² This same flatness afflicts the right-hand side of her face, where the abrupt chiaroscuro transition does not allow the cheek to gradually round, as one would expect, but instead breaks at a sharp angle into the opaque, brownish shadow.

The modeling of the Leiden eyelids and eyebrows (fig. 38) is unusually crude with respect to its London counterpart (fig. 39). The shadow cast by the nose on the philtrum appears excessively dark in relation to the overall tonal values of the face. The opaquely depicted mass shadow of the jaw and cleft chin only accentuate the head's already pronounced materiality. The brightly illuminated shawl, which in reality would have been just a few centimeters away from the neck and lower cheek, would have reflected much more light into this shadow than that registered by a faint lightening of tone we see today.



fig. 38

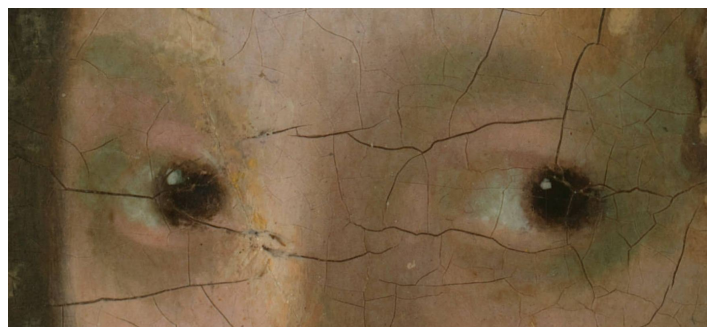


fig. 39

The Young Woman

The painter's attempt to depict the upper lip with a few bravado touches of reddish-brown paint, skillfully achieved in the face of the *Lady Seated* (see fig. 41), yields uncertain results in the Leiden painting (see fig. 40). It is difficult to determine whether the asymmetric dip in the right-hand part of the lip is an attempt to suggest a particular expression or a mere slip of the hand.

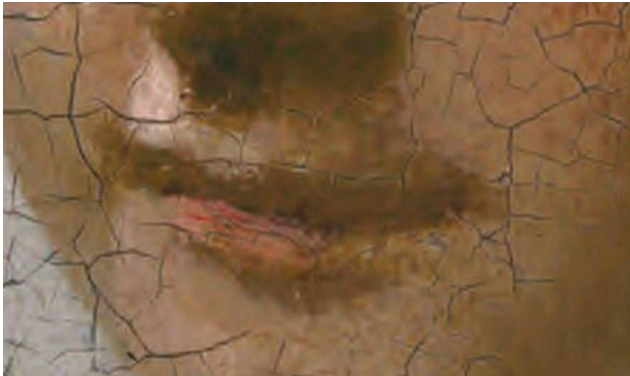


fig. 40



fig. 41

One of the most visible irregularities in the face from Leiden is the pronounced modeling of the bridge of the lady's nose (fig. 34). The diagonal brushstroke of light-pink impasto, running from the nasal root down to the tip of the nose, cleanly separates it from the left-hand cheek lending it an unusually pronounced plasticity.

The imprecise rendering of the eyes in the Leiden woman highlights the challenges painters face in maintaining anatomical symmetry while capturing the complex features of the human face viewed from an oblique angle. The shapes of the two irises are inconsistent. The catchlights of the eyes, crucial for providing the eyeball its moistness and spherical form, are only cursorily indicated (fig. 38). By contrast, the irises in the London lady are nearly perfectly circular, each containing a tiny, light gray catchlight situated at matching positions on both eyes (fig. 39). The painter's exceptional manual controls evident in the London painting, is confirmed by the finely and evenly blurred outer contour of each iris, despite their diminutive size—no more than a few millimeters in circumference.

Another irregularity in the eyes of the Leiden head is the presence of a light pink dot of paint at the far left of the left-hand eye's lower rim (fig. 38). Dutch painters, who focused on capturing the infinite textures and human forms, understood that a white highlight placed on the lacrimal caruncle (the small, pink, globular nodule at the inner corner of the eye) defines more precisely the eye's anatomy and enhances the illusion of its natural moistness. However, highlights rarely appear on the corner of the eye furthest from the nose, and none of this type are found in Vermeer's oeuvre.³

It could be argued that some or many of the technical and anatomical imperfections in the Leiden head cited above might be attributed to the painting's smaller absolute dimensions compared to the London work. However, in absolute dimensions, the head in the Leiden painting is only marginally smaller—approximately 10%—than its London counterpart. Neither the Leiden nor the London heads require miniaturist skills.



fig. 42

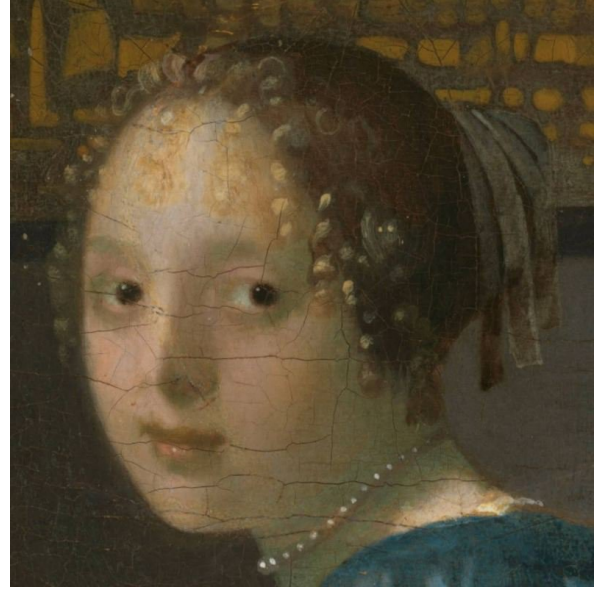


fig. 43

Hairdo

Art specialists have devoted more attention to the Leiden woman's hairstyle (fig. 42) than to her face. According to De Winkel, the combination of hair pulled back into a bun with ringlets hanging down on each side, and an array of thin red and white ribbons in the hair, was briefly in fashion between 1669 and 1671. However, it soon gave way to the style seen in the two London paintings, in which the hair remains in a bun but features numerous small decorative curls around the hairline, sans ringlets or other embellishments (fig. 43).⁴ Nonetheless, Liedtke dismissed De Winkel's dating of the work to a year around 1670 and, based on stylistic considerations, placed it sometime after the London *Lady Seated*, traditionally considered Vermeer's final work. Weismann also situates the painting shortly after the *Lady Seated*, but "around the same time as *The Lacemaker*."

The tonal modeling of the Leiden figure's hair is minimally differentiated, rendering it somewhat packed and lacking natural shine or fluffiness. On the right side of the face, the dark brown is sporadically lightened to imply the presence of curls, which appear in roughly the same location in the *Lady Seated*. Some art specialists interpret one of these curls as a pearl earring, though neither curl is distinguished by a noticeable highlight.

Additionally, it may be observed that the "2"-shaped, corkscrew ringlet dangling on the left-hand side of the Leiden woman's head (fig. 44) bears a striking resemblance to the ringlet in the earlier painting of *The Lacemaker* (fig. 45). Regardless of one's opinion on the authorship of the Leiden painting, it is evident that the hairdo were styled by different women (the hair in the Leiden painting is much darker than the chestnut color of the young lacemaker), possibly months or even years apart. Moreover, the ringlet appears on the right-hand side of *The Lacemaker*'s head, while it is on the left in the Leiden painting. The probability of a single, similarly shaped ringlets occurring in such diverse contexts seems remote. A cursory glance at Vermeer's *Guitar Player* reveals the variability of such springy ringlets, even when they belong to the hairdo of the same woman.

The only plausible explanation for this occurrence is that the painter did not base his depiction of the ringlet on observation but copied the curl from *The Lacemaker* and pasted it into the Leiden painting.⁵ If

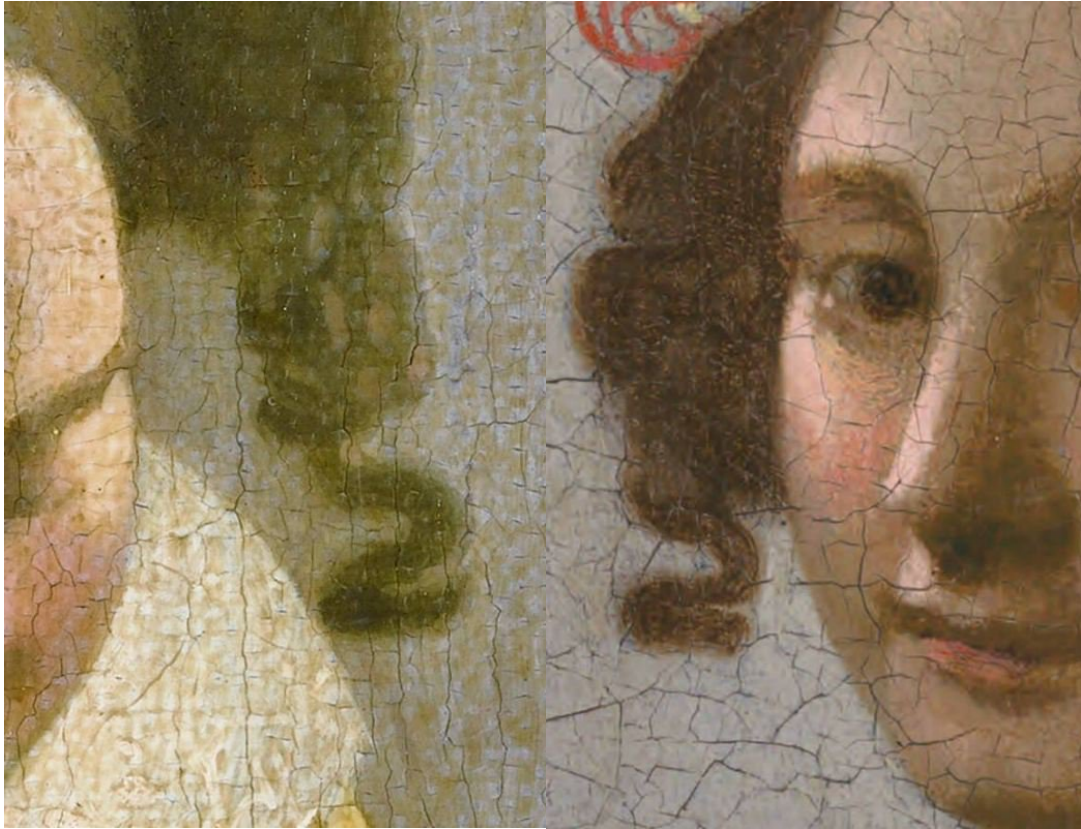


fig. 45

fig. 44

Vermeer was indeed the artist responsible for such a tactic, the question arises as to why such a sophisticated artist would feel compelled to quote himself so uncreatively. While it is well-known that the Delft master repurposed various motifs, his extraordinary powers of observation and artistic sensibilities always led him to represent them in different ways, based on the unique circumstances in which they were observed, as well as in accordance with the aesthetic requirements of each composition.

The Arms and Fingers

Emerging from beneath the large yellow shawl, the arms of the Leiden woman (fig. 46) extend forward toward her instrument. Her fingertips, concealed from view, rest on an unseen keyboard. The tonal contrast between the day and night sides of the farther arm is not pronounced, suggesting that this part of the lady is bathed in a soft penumbra. Conversely, the light pink hue of the nearer arm's lit side indicates that it receives more direct illumination from above.



fig. 46

The Young Woman

Depending on one's aesthetic inclination toward the unconventional representational vocabulary found in Vermeer's later works, the arms of the Leiden woman might be considered superior or inferior to those of *Lady Seated*. Those who agree with Lawrence Gowing's cautioning that the unique rendering of the London arms should not be interpreted as a moment when the artist was caught off guard, but rather as an example of a "pure visual standard of representation," may find the London arms authentic, albeit peculiar. Conversely, those who are troubled by the London lady's less substantial tonal arms may find the solidity of the Leiden arms more comforting.⁶

However, even if one favors the more robust rendering of the Leiden arms, they exhibit anatomical inaccuracies that become particularly evident when viewed in reverse (fig. 47). The upper and lower



fig. 47

contours of the arm closest to the viewer are not convincingly aligned. The lower contour swells unexpectedly as it approaches the garment on the right, while the subtle rise in the upper contour—presumably intended to indicate the swelling of the model's wrist—is too far to the right. Second, the diameter of the ring finger on the hand closest to the viewer is noticeably smaller than that of the little finger on the same hand. This conspicuous deformity, which becomes unignorable once noticed, cannot be attributed to the laws of perspective, an artifact of camera obscura vision, or any stylistic considerations. Moreover, the middle finger, protruding from behind the claw-like index finger, appears unconvincingly connected to the hand and seems disproportionately longer than the index finger.

It is unfeasible to attribute this anomaly to anything other than a simple mistake by the artist, whether or not he was aware of or concerned about it.

As tempting as it may be to speculate about a sudden and dramatic decline in Vermeer's technical skills, the clear conceptual and technical differences between the faces, hairstyles, and arms of the Leiden and London pieces—presumably executed within a few years of each other—are best explained by attributing them to an artist of modest talent who was, nonetheless, undoubtedly familiar with some of the stylistic idiosyncrasies of the more accomplished artist's later works.

6 / The Gown



fig. 48

Floor-length, light-gray satin gowns appear in five paintings by Vermeer: *The Concert*, *The Art of Painting*, *The Guitar Player*, *Allegory of Faith*, and *Lady Standing at the Virginals*. However, given the differences in decorative trim and color, it is likely that Vermeer did not portray the same gown in all five works.¹

The ability to suggest the physical and optical properties of various fabrics was a valuable skill for any Dutch painter who aspired to compete with top-tier figurative painters. Satin garments, in particular, if expertly rendered, were among the most appealing and financially rewarding motifs available to Dutch artists. Gerrit ter Borch, perhaps the most accomplished painter of satin across all eras, built a prosperous career with the aid of his uncanny ability to suggest the elusive qualities of this most luxurious of all fabrics.

Painting satin is a challenging task even for the most skilled painter. It requires not only the comprehensive knowledge of the artist's crude tools and materials and the lightest touch but also an understanding of the fabric's unique optical properties. Unlike matte, non-reflective fabrics, satin does not absorb and diffuse light rays in a more or less predictable manner. Rather like a mirror, it reflects much of the light that strikes its surface, complicated by the complex patterns of light and shadow created by the folds, pleats, and minor creases.

The maximum lights of satin must be rendered with light shades of paint, while the shadows must be rendered in lighter tones than those used in the shadows of similarly colored but non-reflective fabrics. Capturing the reflections in the deepest shadows is crucial; otherwise, the appearance of a shiny material will not be achieved. The halftones of satin—those crucial transitional tones that lie between the day and night sides of objects—must be minimized, or else the fabric will not glimmer. The depiction of satin is further complicated by the fact that, due to its stiffness, its folds may break at more or less sharp angles rather than bending predictably like more familiar, pliable fabrics. Owing to satin's capricious behavior, even the slightest wrinkle or crease, which would have been barely noticeable on other materials, emits



fig. 49

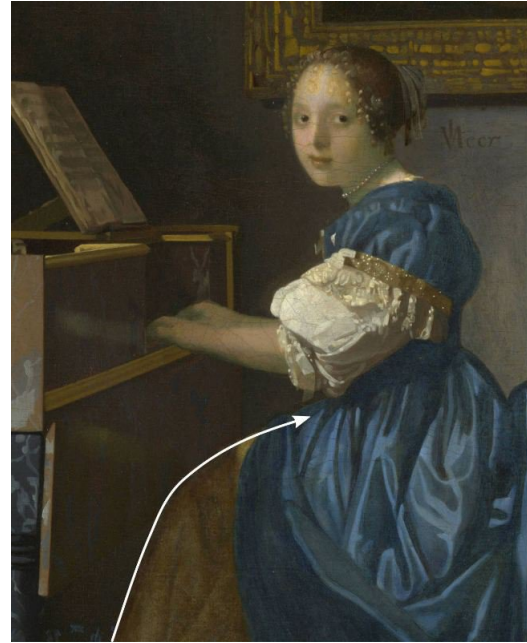


fig. 50

sparkles of light that, if convincingly rendered, captivate even the most jaded art viewer, making the painter appear more like a magician than a skilled artisan.²

If the yellow shawl is considered the most contentious element of the Leiden painting, the light gray satin gown is generally regarded as its finest (fig. 48). Its drooping folds suggest a heavier fabric than that of the gowns in other paintings by Vermeer, which, in contrast, display finer patterns of creases and folds and crisper handling. Curiously, although the woman's yellow shawl conceals the point at which her gown is fastened to her body, the ascending angle of the upper contour (fig. 49) suggests that it is secured above the natural waistline, recalling the Empire style.³ In comparison, the contour in the London gown (fig. 50) runs almost flat along the upper contour of the figure's thigh as one would expect, dipping below the elbow, while the Leiden gown's contour rises from the knee and extends above it.

Various art historians contend that the Leiden gown is comparable in treatment to those of *The Lady Standing* (fig. 52) and *The Guitar Player* (fig. 51). However, a difference in refinement becomes starkly evident when the Leiden piece is viewed in close proximity to both pictures. To begin with, the principal folds of the Leiden gown are defined by sharp contrasts in light and dark, rather than by calibrated tonal values, as in the *Lady Standing* or *The Guitar Player*. In fact, the Leiden gown is subjected to the same harsh chiaroscuro scheme that afflicts the yellow shawl, even though it does display similar crisp handling of paint and signature flourishes that are observable in Vermeer's late works. Rendered with a mute dark paint, a series of cavernous shadows—completely unrelieved by reflected light—divide the steep mountains and valleys of the Leiden's folds. The large shadow cast on the left-hand side of the gown is rendered with the same dark paint used to separate the folds, with barely a tonal variation.

The gown of the *Lady Standing* counts only a single, dagger-shaped recess, which runs down the middle of the gown, that is anywhere near as dark as the shadows of the Leiden gown. The overall lightness of the *Lady Standing* gown, although largely in shadow, can be verified against the pure black leg of the virginals to the right. The Leiden shadows are, instead, almost as dark as the black virginal leg to the left. The gown of *The Guitar Player* is also rendered with finely calibrated, sympathetic gradations of gray, which differ slightly in hue as well. Only in the deepest recesses are they anywhere near as dark as those

The Gown

of the Leiden picture.

Some readers might argue that the Leiden gown should be compared not only with the superlative gowns of the *Lady Standing* and *The Guitar Player* but also with the less-than-spectacular blue-green gown of the *Lady Seated*. The large folds are minimally defined. One can intuit the broad sweep of the fabric, its base color, and the direction and form of some of the principal folds, but the feel of the fabric and the minor incidents of material and light are absent. Nor is there any trace of calligraphic brushwork and Vermeer's signature pointillés so evident in the gowns of *The Guitar Player* and *Lady Standing*. However, there are compelling reasons to regard the London gown as either unfinished or in a poor state of preservation.

Upon close inspection, the visible blue-green paint layer of the London *Lady Seated*, appears to be thinly applied, almost a wash,⁴ making the monochrome brown undermodeling perceptible.⁵ Moreover, a thin band (reserve) of brown underpaint, left untouched by the gray paint of the wall or the blue paint of the gown, runs along much of the right-hand contour of the gown. The thinness of the blue-green paint coupled with the brown reserve indicate that this passage would have been worked up in in color, form,



fig. 51

and detail in a subsequent second stage or that the upper layers of paint has been seriously over-cleaned.

Regardless of the detrimental state of finish of the London *Lady Seated* gown, it stands in stark contrast to the superbly finished bass viol, the spinet, and the face. Given that the London *Lady Standing* and *Lady Seated* were conceived as a pendant, it is unreasonable that the degree of finish of the two gowns, which would have been observed in direct proximity, would have varied to such a degree. These inconsistencies imply that the current state of the gown of the London *Lady Seated* probably does not reflect the artist's initial intentions. Therefore, it should not serve as a basis for meaningful comparison with the gown in the Leiden piece.

In conclusion, although the Leiden gown displays a certain delicacy of touch and traces of the calligraphic shorthand characteristic of Vermeer's later works, it lacks the tonal refinement and detail—particularly in the darks—necessary to suggest the full luminescence of satin. Such mastery was part of the technical skillset not only of Vermeer but also of any artist capable of competing with the elite interior or portrait

The Gown



fig. 52

7 / The Wall & Lighting

The seated figure in the Leiden composition is set against an expanse of unadorned, white-washed wall. The light gray paint, lightest in the upper left-hand corner of the composition, gradually darkens as it approaches the right-hand side of the picture. The maximum point of brightness, located in the upper left-hand corner of the picture, is distant from pure white. The wall is occasionally punctuated by dabs and slashes of slightly lighter and darker gray paint, presumably intended to suggest cracks and crevices. An analogous technique, albeit more subtly handled, can be observed to the right of the large ebony-framed Cupid in *Lady Standing*. The light shadows projected by the cracks and crevices are depicted with a cool, light gray in the London work, but with light brown in the Leiden work. The paint layer of the wall in the Leiden work, appearing somewhat packed, is covered by a fine network of deep cracks not seen in other work by Vermeer.

The presence of two diagonally-falling shadows on the extreme left of the Leiden composition suggests, at least for those familiar with Vermeer's interiors, a partly opened window just outside the pictured scene. An analogous double shadow is clearly visible in *Lady Standing*, but in the Leiden piece, it is situated higher, indicating that the lower lite is closed while the upper light is open. The contours of the inner and outer shadows in the Leiden picture straddle the upright music rack. The inner shadow is firmly rendered; the outer shadow, by contrast, is rendered less firmly, especially when compared to that of the London work.

The lighting in the Leiden painting is puzzling. On the one hand, the distribution of light and shadow across the woman's shawl, arms, and head suggest that the light source is positioned three-quarters to the left, somewhere above the figure, coming from outside the depicted scene. This arrangement (fig. 53) is reminiscent of the lighting scheme in the London *Lady Seated* (fig. 54). In particular, note how the pattern of light and shadow on the faces of the two figures is nearly identical, which can only be explained if they are illuminated from the same direction and height. However, there are notable inconsistencies in the rest of the picture. For instance, the faux marble panel facing the viewer in the London piece is bathed in full light, while in the Leiden painting, it is inexplicably engulfed in deep shadow. Moreover, although the light in the Leiden picture clearly originates from above, it fails to illuminate the top of the virginals, yet

fig. 53

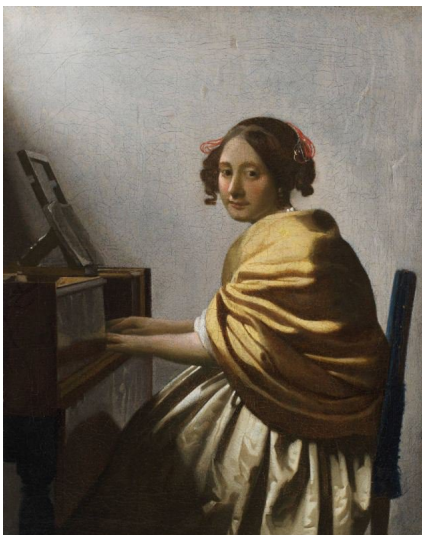


fig. 54



The Wall & Lighting

illuminates the upper side of the the figure's arms, and casts a strong diagonal shadow on the woman's satin gown. This is peculiar, especially when compared to Vermeer's *Mistress and Maid* (fig. 55) and earlier *Lady Writing* (fig. 56), where similar shadows are present, but the tops of the tables are fully lit, as one would expect to create such distinct, high-contrast shadows.

While it is true that Vermeer took liberties with the distribution of light and shadow in his paintings, accentuating, diminishing, or even eliminating cast shadows, a clear aesthetic or narrative advantage is always apparent. In the case of the Leiden picture, no such advantage is discernible. On the contrary. The London piece makes skillful use of light to establish a localized foreground with the illuminated panel of the instrument, thereby creating a sense of depth between the instrument's front and the figure's body. Instead, the brackish, nondescript treatment of the Leiden virginals flattens the already compressed

depth of the picture. Furthermore, the diagonally falling double shadows, the dark shadow of the forward side of the virginals, and the shadow cast on the figure's gown form a pronounced diagonal, which effectively bisects the composition into two contrasting areas of light and dark paint (fig. 57). This division starkly isolates the instrument from the brightly illuminated musician, as if the two had nothing to say to each other.



fig. 55

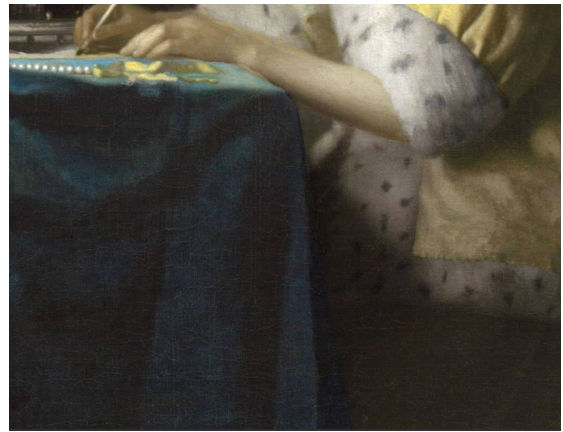


fig. 56

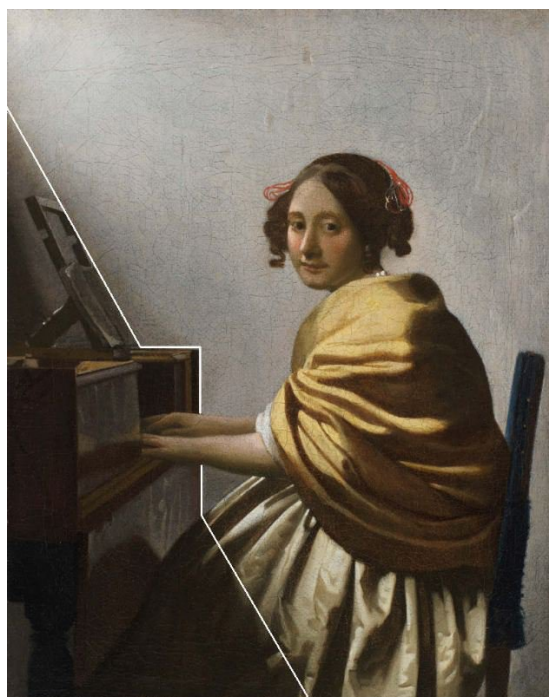


fig. 57

8/ Perspective & Ultramarine Blue

The Sheldon-Costaras study highlights two technical aspects about the Leiden picture, both as distinctive of Vermeer's studio practices.¹ The first is the presence of a small blob of thick lead-bearing paint that was presumably intended to fill a small pinhole in the canvas surface. The second is the presence of minute amounts of natural ultramarine in the gray paint of the wall and in the light flesh tint of the lady's forward arm. Both of these occurrences were interpreted by the conservators as typical features of Vermeer's painting methods and carry, in their opinion, weight in suggesting Vermeer's authorship.

As for the pinhole, the Sheldon-Costaras study reads: "On the basis of physical evidence from seventeen of Vermeer's paintings, Jørgen Wadum, has argued that Vermeer employed a very practical method with a pin and chalked thread to achieve accurate perspective. The pinhole, usually visible as a dark spot on the X-radiograph, is sometimes marked with a light spot when the loss of ground was filled with a lead-based pigment. Although the Leiden painting is rather small, and has a relatively simple composition, it too has a blob of paint that shows up as opaque in the X-radiograph, and this corresponds precisely to the vanishing point where orthogonals are drawn across from the instrument. The painting thus provides evidence of the same pinhole method observed by Wadum in several of Vermeer's works."

Wadum, however, also pointed out that this eminently practical method of establishing and verifying perspectival orthogonals "was not unique to Vermeer, but was in fact widely practiced among architectural painters of the time. It was used not only by Gerard Houckgeest and Emanuel de Witte, but also by Vermeer's slightly older colleague Pieter de Hooch, a painter of interiors. Similarly, pictures by genre painters Gerrit Dou, Gabriel Metsu, and others, also have irregularities in the paint surface where a pin was placed at the vanishing point."²

Natural Ultramarine in Vermeer's Painting

Sheldon and Costaras also highlighted the presence of a trace amount of ultramarine blue pigment the most costly of all pigments,³ in the light gray paint of the wall and the day side of the musician's forward arm. Such a use of such a limited amount of pigment is sometimes termed as "subliminal," in as much as its presence will not be spontaneously discerned by the average viewer.

It has been known for decades that Vermeer employed precious natural ultramarine not only to depict blue-colored objects but also as an admixture to other pigments for rendering objects that are not intrinsically blue, including white objects and their shadows. In 1968, Herman Kühn reported the presence of natural ultramarine in cross-sections of gray paint belonging to the background walls represented in three works by Vermeer: *Girl with a Glass of Wine*, *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, and *The Geographer*.⁴ Hubert van Sonnenburg, of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, remarked on its use in the *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*, concluding that "a small amount of blue seems to be present in every colour."⁵ And naked-eye observation of the bluish cast of the dimly-lit background walls of the early *Berlin Glass of Wine* and the *Girl Interrupted in her Music* also suggests the use of a blue pigment, if not natural ultramarine itself. Recent analysis conducted by Helen Howard has confirmed the presence of ultramarine in parts of the background wall of the *Music Lesson* and even in the brownish wooden ceiling

rafters.⁶ Another strong blue, azurite, was detected in the walls of the early *Maid Asleep*,⁷ suggesting that Vermeer's interest in nuancing light grays with blue had initiated before he began to employ ultramarine for that purpose. Azurite was also found in the gray paint of the walls of *The Glass of Wine* and *The Music Lesson*.⁸ Certainly, any knowledgeable art lover of the period would have instantly grasped that the *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* was not only a symphony in radiant blue—again dramatically apparent after the work's recent restoration—but a virtual exercise in the expensive and noblest of all pigments. Ultramarine insinuates itself almost everywhere in the painting.

In a study by Melanie Gifford and Lisha Deming Glinsman, a “striking correlation between painting practices and the prices artists achieved, citing two of most significant techniques illustrates that two features in particular—fine-scaled brushwork and the use of ultramarine blue. Highly paid artists almost universally worked with fine brushwork and relied on ultramarine. By comparison, these features appear more intermittently in the work of mid-range painters, and least in that of artists achieving the lowest prices. Technical study identified strategies that mid- and lower-price artists used in order to convincingly approximate the effects of fine handling and ultramarine.”⁹

Thus, Vermeer's use of ultramarine would not have been a trade secret but a technical and financial proposition of which buyers and painters working within the same genre, as well as possible emulators, would have been well aware.

The use of natural ultramarine in the background wall of the Leiden work warrants one further consideration. While trace amounts of natural ultramarine are evident in the background walls of some of his early and mid-career works, its absence in the walls of three later paintings may be indicative of a change of habit, or the unavailability of the raw material itself. Kuhn's analysis, in fact, did not detect natural ultramarine in the background walls in three of Vermeer's later works, such as *The Lacemaker*, believed by those who sustain Vermeer's authorship to be technically and chronologically comparable, or the two much larger and more elaborate compositions such as *The Geographer* and *Lady Seated* but conventional mixtures of white and black. Why then, would have Vermeer employed the most costly of all pigments in a modest, artistic project such as the Leiden piece? Would its exiguous dimensions and vastly simplified composition justified such an expenditure?

Conclusion: The Leiden Picture - What Is It?

Had not the Sheldon-Costaras investigation established that the Leiden picture was executed with materials and methods compatible with those used by Vermeer in some of his paintings, the compositional conception of this tiny work would bring to mind various twentieth-century Vermeer forgeries.¹ In a clever, cat-and-mouse game, the forger offers the viewer a familiar Vermeer theme featuring a single female figure dressed in yellow, surrounded by objects and pictorial motifs selectively borrowed from authentic works by the Delft master. The result is embellished with a few mannerist touches alla Vermeer, which, however, fail to integrate into the painting's expressive fabric. No Vermeer signature is added to the canvas, as the forger knows it might arouse more suspicion than approval. This minimalist approach exploits the seemingly uncomplicated figure-against-a-simple-background motif of Vermeer's *Lacemaker*, allowing the forger to sidestep direct competition with a genius in two of his primary technical domains: planimetric organization and spatial depth. The naïve flavor of previous forgeries designed according to the minimalist menu, such as the National Gallery's *Lacemaker* (fig. 58), owes—at least to post-Van Meegeren eyes—not to any good in the opportunist's heart but to the oversimplification to which he is constrained in order to mask his technical inadequacies. His malicious plan, then, was to cast a few tasty morsels of Vermeeresque bait and keep his bad cards close to the vest.

Setting aside the question of authenticity but nonetheless acknowledging that the Leiden picture is far from being a masterpiece, what, then, was the purpose of this painting? Why would Vermeer have created such a work?

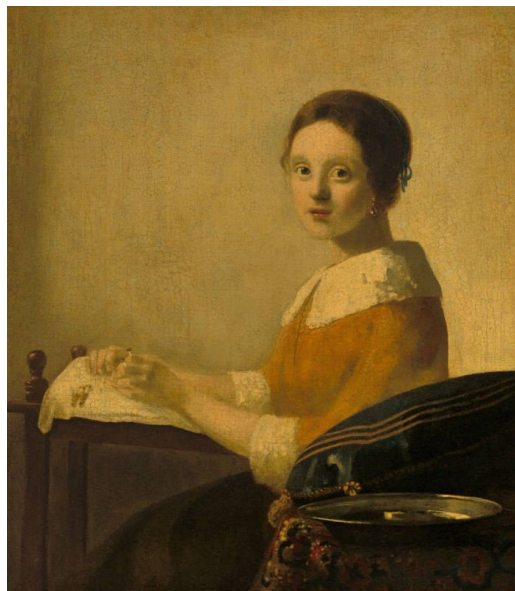


fig. 54

Genres

Although the hierarchy of genres was not immutable in the seventeenth century, the primary types of paintings circulating in the Netherlands would have been readily identifiable to any contemporary art connoisseur. A *tronie*, like Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, would never have been mistaken for a portrait, as is often the case today.² Even though many Dutch paintings of domestic interiors with high-

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life subjects appear to feature individualized faces, informed art historians maintain that such paintings were rarely intended to function as portraits. These interiors were not merely candid snapshots of daily life but complex pictorial constructs grounded as much in precedent as in innovation. The most accomplished interior painters, among whom Vermeer was a primary protagonist, not only appealed to the visual senses of their affluent audience but also offered intellectual engagement and, perhaps, even models of refined living for their owners who aspired to distinguish themselves from lower social classes.

The Leiden picture occupies a sort of compositional gray area: it is neither fish nor foul. A cursory examination of Vermeer's bust-length figures makes it clear that the Leiden picture has little in common with the Dutch *tronie* or formal portrait (comparing the black background of the *Study of a Young Woman* with that of the Leiden picture is like comparing apples and oranges).³ Nor, as has hopefully been demonstrated, can it be understood as an interior composition, at least not the kind pursued by Vermeer in each of his twenty-three domestic interiors. Furthermore, deprived of any symbolic content, the painting makes no intellectual assertions.

Technique

From a technical standpoint, the presence of one or another fault in the Leiden picture would not necessarily elicit concern. Even the most accomplished works by Vermeer contain imperfections. Alongside instances of great conceptual and technical sophistication, signs of technical uncertainty are not unfound, many of which are attested by pentimenti. Moreover, the risk of misinterpreting the unknowable effects of time, incompetent cleaning, or anonymous retouching as shortcomings is always present. However, a systematic examination of the Leiden picture reveals an abundance of technical anomalies, stylistic inconsistencies, unthinking copy and pastes, rudimentary narrative, and compositional paucity that prevent this picture from holding its own among Vermeer's later works, which, oppositely, from both a technical and narrative point of view, are among the artist's most complex and deliberately contrived inventions.

In fact, no painting by Vermeer, with the exception of the poorly preserved *Diana and her Companions*, one of the artist's early works, exhibits as many signs of technical and compositional weakness as does the Leiden picture. Even the *Lady Seated*, which might be Vermeer's least successful mature composition, features—in addition to its roughly defined gilt frame, the subdued background shadows, and the awkward blue satin gown—passages of extraordinary craftsmanship. The bass viol, the girl's face, the audaciously-painted linen sleeve, and faux marbling of the virginals in this painting are examples of remarkable pictorial synthesis, and can be considered unique occurrences in the artist's body of work. No such passages can be found in the Leiden piece. Even the work's finest passage, the satin gown, pales in front of those of the *Lady Standing* and *The Guitar Player*.

The Leiden painting emerges as a derivative synthesis of three of Vermeer's later masterpieces: the *Lady Seated* contributes the figure, pose, and virginals; *The Lacemaker* lends the hairstyle and the unembellished backdrop; and *Lady Standing* inspires the delicate red ribbons and pearls adorning the hair, the satin dress, the double shadows, and the blue chair.

The sole motif in the Leiden painting not found in any other work by Vermeer—the yellow wrap—is the painting's greatest liability, widely regarded as inferior to the other elements of the composition, and

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fig. 60

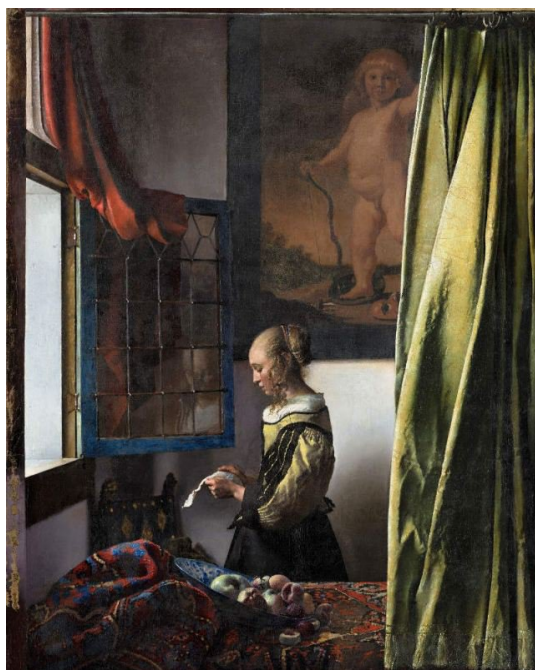


fig. 61

reason to doubt the work's authenticity.

Ironically, while the inferior quality of the shawl is nearly universal, recent technical analysis at the Rijksmuseum has affirmed it was painted by the same artist as the rest of the work.⁴ This raises the question: Could the artist who achieved such technical excellence in *The Lacemaker* and *The Guitar Player*—both painted in the same years as the Leiden picture—have conceived and executed such a desolate passage?

Options

Those who maintain that the Leiden canvas is by the hand of Johannes Vermeer have advanced various explanations for the origin of this work: (1) It is a preparatory or “exploratory” study for the *Lady Seated*; (2) a portrait; (3) a pendant to *The Lacemaker*; (4) or an elaboration of the London piece.

1. There exists no surviving example or documentary evidence of sketches, drawings, or preparatory studies by Vermeer. It can be questioned whether this well-seasoned painter would have found it useful to execute a time-consuming oil-on-canvas study for a small part of the *Lady Seated*. Moreover, if Vermeer was indeed in the habit of making small, preparatory oil studies for his compositions, one might ask how many would have been made for such complex works of art as *The Art of Painting*, *The Concert*, or *The Music Lesson*, and why none of them has survived. Evidently, Vermeer prepared his compositions otherwise.

2. The compositional simplicity, the lack of iconographic meaning, and the head that is turned toward the spectator might suggest that it was conceived as a portrait, thereby justify the lack of background accessories. Not only is the Leiden woman's informal yellow wrap unseen in any portraits of the time, as far as this author is aware, it does not appear in any Dutch portrait of the higher end of the Dutch art market in which the Vermeer worked, such as Ter Borch, Van Mieris, Netscher, or any other contemporary of Vermeer. Remembering that in Vermeer's age portraiture was the most conservative category of

painting, it is questionable if any Dutch woman wealthy enough to have her portrait painted by a well-known artist would have allowed herself to be portrayed wearing such a pedestrian garment. Moreover, Vermeer is not known to have painted a single portrait, except for a lost self-portrait cited in the 1696 Dissius auction of twenty-one Vermeer paintings in Amsterdam.

3. The idea that the Leiden picture and *The Lacemaker* were conceived as a pendant might be advanced because both works feature a single figure set against a blank background, are very nearly the same dimensions, and are said to be painted on canvas taken from the same bolt of linen. It is easy to see that both *The Geographer-The Astronomer* and *Lady Standing-Lady Seated* pendants exhibit an unequivocal thematic dialogue. As far as the present author is aware, there exists no pairing of needlework and music in seventeenth-century Dutch art.

4. To date, the most credible account for the genesis of the Leiden picture is that it was a small-scale elaboration on the more complex *Lady Seated*. While it is true that the artist occasionally retraced his steps and revisited former works, each elaboration brought with it something vitally new that conceals its debt to the work on which it is based. For example, the profile-figure captured in rapt attention as she reads a letter in the shimmering *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* (fig. 60) is a creative elaboration of the earlier *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (fig. 61). This adaptation not only revisits the theme but brings forth a hitherto unseen chromatic vibrancy and perfection in formal design. The Leiden painting, instead, presents no thematic nuance, no compositional innovation, not even a single technical sleight of hand with respect to its parent work. The conventional cropping of the figure and virginal in the *Lady Seated*, a change in wardrobe, and the exchange of a light background for a dark one are not the sorts of pictorial challenges we would expect from a painter of Vermeer's caliber. The Leiden work remains artistically subordinate to the London piece, devoid of technical invention or ingenuity, the latter of which, unlike artistic genius, is less likely to fail a painter so curious, so practiced, and so technically accomplished as Vermeer.

An alternative hypothesis exists that would explain the problematic nature of *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal* with great ease—Vermeer did not paint it. Let us consider the conclusion of 10-year scientific investigation of the picture by Sheldon and Costaras, remembering that the report remains the pillar on which the painting is attributed to Vermeer. They conclude: “if the artist who painted the *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal* was not Vermeer, it can only have been by someone who was not only intimately acquainted with his materials and practice, but also with his individual style. No such painter is known to us, and the facts presented here, therefore provide compelling arguments for accepting the painting as a work by Vermeer.”⁵ The authorship of the painting is, thus, according to Sheldon and Nicola Costaras, dependent, at least in part, on the assumption that there exists no evidence of someone who worked in Vermeer studio, be it an apprentice or anyone who might have frequented his studio in order to emulate his style.

However, based on a two-year scientific and stylistic investigation of the four paintings in their collection traditionally attributed to Vermeer, the Washington National Gallery of Art proclaimed in 2022, that the *Girl with a Flute* is not by Vermeer, but by a follower, who they have not identified but are resolutely certain of his or her existence.⁶ This belief is so strong that The National Gallery's Art Director, Kaywin Feldman, confidently stated: “The fact that other artists worked with Johannes Vermeer may be one of the most important things we've learned about him in decades... this discovery changes the way we think about

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Vermeer in a fundamental way.”⁷

In the case of the Leiden work, authenticity is dependent on the assumption that there existed no followers of Vermeer. Instead, the National Gallery concluded that the scientific evidence could be explained only by assuming the existence of a follower. So, in both cases, it is not a matter of believing or not believing the scientific evidence, but believing or not believing the interpretation of the scientific evidence.

In sum, unless one is satisfied with Liedtke’s musing that the artist may have conceivably been asked to paint a variation of the London picture “at a time when any type of sale was welcome,”⁸ it is difficult to comprehend the genesis of the Leiden work in light of the artist’s highly determined oeuvre. The use of one or another biographical scenario to explain what might have motivated such a talented painter as Vermeer to produce such a conceptually and technically inconsequential work as the Leiden picture—within the reach of many painters of the time—appears akin to art historical wishful thinking rather than a pondered art historical analysis. This appears a venture ill-suited for an artist who pondered every work, small or large, with the utmost attention.

Provenance

This is the story of a tiny painting that awkwardly expands upon a detail from a late Vermeer composition without any meaningful addition—in fact, diminishing the original. Efforts have been made to fabricate a pedigree for it, yet a verifiable record shows that it first emerged only in the early nineteenth century, in an auction of pictures from an art merchant’s estate, reappearing at the beginning of the twentieth century in the collection of a frugal Anglo-German magnate. Challenged by most scholars in the mid-twentieth century and subsequently sold to a collector of African art, it resurfaced in the early 2000s due to the owner’s tenacity and the art market, which, over the course of a few decades, transformed it into a “small masterpiece”¹.

Until the 1890s, the history of the Leiden Collection’s *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal* remained nebulous, except for a brief debut at an auction in 1814, after which it disappeared as quickly as it had surfaced.

Between the end of the seventeenth century and 1711, we know of three owners of paintings representing a virginal player by Vermeer: the Delft printer Jacob Dissius (1653–1695); the Antwerp banker Diego Duarte (1612–1691); and Maria Magdalena van den Hoeff (1624–1711), widow of Nicolaes van Assendelft (1630–1692).

There are good reasons to believe that the Leiden Collection’s *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal* was not a part of the collection of Duarte, nor that of Dissius.

Diego Duarte was a wealthy Portuguese jeweler, banker, and art collector, an accomplished organist and composer who lived in Antwerp. His house, called “Antwerp Parnassus,” became a meeting place for intellectuals, poets, and musicians. His collection was mentioned several times by travelers who frequented his house, such as the French diplomat, traveler, and amateur scientist Balthasar de Monconys (1611–1665), the English diarist John Evelyn (1620–1706), the diplomat, poet, playwright, musician, and art connoisseur Constantijn Huygens (1596–1687), and the Swedish architect Nicodemus Tessin (1654–1728). In particular, visitors praised Duarte’s works by the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italian masters such as Raphael, Titian, and Tintoretto, as well as seventeenth-century Flemish paintings, especially those by Rubens and Van Dyck.

In 1682, Duarte composed a catalogue of his collection, which furnishes not only insights into the formation of the collection but also the prices he paid for his paintings and, in some cases, their provenance. He possessed “Een stuckxken met een jouffrou op de clavesingel spelende met bywerck van Vermeer kost guld. 150” (A young lady playing the clavecin with accessories, by Vermeer, valued at 150 guilders).² Ben Broos, the former Chief Conservator of the Mauritshuis, speculated that either Constantijn Huygens Jr. or his father, Constantijn Huygens Sr. may have gifted Duarte, or at least advised him to buy it.³

In the description of Duarte’s Vermeer, the subject is a young woman with a virginal “met bywerck” (with accessories). Both of the London compositions featuring a virginal player are rich in accessories, but there

are two reasons that suggest Duarte's painting was the London virginal player. The first is that it depicts two instruments, a virginal and a bass viol, in great detail, which would likely have appealed to the musician and art connoisseur Duarte. Moreover, by the beginning of the eighteenth century, the London picture was already out of the Netherlands and part of Lothar Franz von Schönborn's collection in Pommersfelden, Bavaria. It did not return to the Netherlands until 1996, when it was displayed at the Mauritshuis in The Hague during the *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition.⁴

The London *Lady Standing at a Virginal* is also richly detailed, but the documentation on its provenance indicates that the painting was still in Amsterdam in 1797,5 when it fetched 49 guilders at the auction of Jan Danser Nijman's estate. It is unlikely that in an era when distances mattered, Lady Standing at a Virginal would have moved from Delft to Antwerp, only to end up again in Amsterdam.

The lack of accessories decisively rules out that the Leiden picture was once part of the Duarte collection.

Another painting by Vermeer featuring a musician at a keyboard instrument was a part of the collection of Jacob Dissius. Dissius was the son-in-law of the Van Ruijven couple, fellow citizens of Vermeer. They began collecting the artist's works almost from the outset of his career, acquiring at least twenty works. These, along with the rest of their rich collection, were inherited by their daughter, Magdalena van Ruijven (1655–1682), and subsequently passed on to her widower, Dissius. Following the death of Dissius, an auction was held in Amsterdam on May 16, 1696, featuring 134 paintings, including those from the collection of Van Ruijven and De Knuijt.⁶

Lot number 37, "Een Speelende Juffrouw op de Clavecimbael van ditto" (A lady playing the clavichord, by the same artist), was listed for 42 guilders and 10 stuivers.⁷ The Leiden picture has been proposed as a potential candidate, principally because the price seemed too low for one of the two London Vermeer paintings of a woman playing the virginal.⁸

The painting from the Dissius sale, *Lady Standing at a Virginal*, received low valuations also in subsequent auctions. Furthermore, during the Jan Danser Nijman (1735–1796) sale on August 16, 1797, Vermeer's *Geographer* sold for 133 guilders and *The Astronomer* for 270 guilders, in stark contrast to *Lady Standing at a Virginal* which fetched only 49 guilders.⁹ For the buyers of the era, the obtrusive presence of the Cupid behind the musician might have been a bothersome element. It was recently discovered that the same Cupid in the background of Vermeer's *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* in Dresden was painted over by a later hand, according to Stephen Kojka of the Gemaldegalerie Alte Meister, in order to increase the painting's market value.¹⁰

Moreover, in the Dissius auction, *Officer and Laughing Girl* (50.5 x 46 cm; fig. 62), a painting whose dimensions nearly match those of the two Vermeers in London (51.5 x 45.5 cm and 51.7 x 45.2 cm; fig. 64 & 65) sold for 44 guilders and 10 stuivers. All three compositions are rich in accessories, an important consideration for seventeenth-century art buyers who valued not only the artist's technical skills and his ability to capture the finest nuances of light but also, more prosaically, the abundance of depicted objects. For instance, de Monconys recorded in his journal after visiting Delft in August 1663 and meeting Vermeer: "In Delft, I saw the painter Vermeer, who did not have any of his works; but we did see one at a baker's, for which six hundred livres had been paid, although it contained but a single figure, for which six pistoles would have been too high a price." In the same sale, *The Lacemaker* (24.5 x 21 cm; fig. 69),

approximately the same size as the Leiden painting (fig. 68), was sold for 28 guilders, and *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* measuring 55 x 45 cm, for 30 guilders (fig. 63). If the Leiden Collection painting (was indeed number 37 in the Dissius sale, it would have realized 50% more than the elaborate *The Lacemaker* of the same dimensions and 40% more than *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* (fig. 63). Relative to its size, it would have achieved a price surpassed only by *The Milkmaid* (175 guilders; fig. 66) and *Woman Holding a Balance* (155 guilders; fig. 67)—an exorbitant result for a small canvas devoid of accessories.



fig. 62



fig. 63



fig. 64



fig. 65



fig. 66



fig. 67

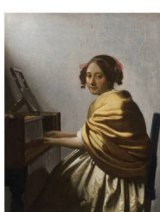


fig. 68



fig. 69

- fig. 62 *Officer and Laughing Girl*
- fig. 63 *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*
- fig. 64 *Lady Standing at a Virginal*
- fig. 65 *Lady Seated at a Virginal*
- fig. 66 *The Milkmaid*
- fig. 67 *Woman Holding a Balance*
- fig. 68 *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal*
- fig. 69 *The Lacemaker*

In 1711, another owner appears for a Vermeer canvas depicting a young woman playing a keyboard instrument. In the inventory of the estate of Maria Magdalena van den Hoeff (1624–1711), widow of Nicolaes van Assendelft (1630–1692), there is a painting listed as: “Een juff.r spelende op de Klavecimbel door Vermeer” (A young lady playing on the harpsichord by Vermeer) valued at 40 guilders.¹¹

Nicolaes van Assendelft, an alderman of Delft and a member of the Council of Forty, assembled an art collection with works by important Dutch masters such as Jan Steen, Adriaen van Ostade, and Philips Wouwerman. In February 1677, in his capacity as Lord of Delft, he, along with fellow and brother-in-law Adrian van der Hoet, approved an agreement between the curator of Vermeer’s estate, Antonie van Leeuwenhoek (1632–1723), and the seamstress Jannetje Stevens.

The background of this dispute dates back to February of the previous year. After Vermeer’s death, Stevens had requested the extinguishment of a debt to Vermeer’s wife, Catharina Bolnes (1631–1687). So, in February 1676, Catharina had ceded 26 paintings to Jan Colombier (1610–1680) for 500 guilders for the

Provenance

account and in the name of the petitioner Stevens.¹² Colombier, an artist, art dealer, and moneylender to artists and colleagues, was also a creditor to Stevens. He subsequently stored the paintings at his residence in Haarlem for approximately a year. The specifics of the 26 paintings, categorized as “large and small,” remain ambiguous; it is unclear who the painters were, whether the artworks were completed, their subjects, or if Colombier merely acted as a custodian or had somehow retouched some of them.

However, Van Leeuwenhoek, endeavoring to manage Vermeer’s estate as rigorously as possible, demanded the return of the paintings and initiated legal action against Stevens. The court’s decision mandated that Stevens be compensated with 347 guilders by Van Leeuwenhoek, and that the paintings be restored to the estate for auction at the Saint Luke’s Guild Hall in Delft on May 15, 1677. It was stipulated that any proceeds surpassing 347 guilders, up to a limit of 500 guilders, would be reallocated to the estate.¹³

Among the 26 paintings, it is possible that the painting now in the Leiden Collection was included. To our knowledge, Nicolaes van Assendelft’s encounter with Vermeer’s painting occurred solely under these circumstances, presenting him, perhaps, with an opportunity to acquire the small picture. Such an eventuality was proposed by the art historian Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. in a lecture: “Both of these paintings [*The Girl with a Flute* and *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal*], I’m quite convinced, were sold at a sale of Vermeer’s effects shortly after his death. He died in bankruptcy. There was a sale. We don’t know what was in it . . . but this painting, which I think may have been partly unfinished, they wanted to make it more elaborate so they added this cloak . . . I think [they] were made ready for that sale. . . .”¹⁴

On July 11, 1714, at an anonymous sale in Amsterdam, 27 paintings were presented, all by Dutch artists, including Gabriel Metsu, Jacob van Loo, Jan Steen, Paulus Potter, and Willem Kalf. Lot no. 12 was “Een Klavecimbelspeelster in een Kamer, van Vermeer van Delft, Konstig geschildert” (A clavecimbel player in a room, by Vermeer van Delft, artfully painted), sold for 55 guilders.¹⁵ This again raises the question of which of Vermeer’s virginal players it refers to. The price of 55 guilders paid for the Vermeer is slightly below the auction’s average price of about 59 guilders. For a painting of average dimensions, this price is plausible but improbable for a small painting like the Leiden piece, especially one devoid of accessories. The London *Lady Seated at a Virginal* can be excluded because by 1714 it was already part of the von Schönborn collection. It is unlikely that the painting would have returned to Amsterdam from Antwerp only to be found soon thereafter in Pommersfelden. Therefore, the painting in question might be *Lady Standing at a Virginal*, which, as in the Dissius sale, continued to receive a modest valuation.

The Leiden painting’s earliest known provenance is on September 21, 1814, even though the Leiden Collection website cautiously labels it as “possibly” originating from Wessel Ryers sale (“Possibly Wessel Ryers (his sale, Amsterdam, 21 September 1814, no. 93 [for 30 guilders to Willem Gruyter]”).

On that day, the collection of the art dealer Wessel Ryers’ (1739–1814) was put up for auction. It included a painting under the name of “van Meer (Delftsche van der)” at lot number 93 measuring 25.4 cm by 20.3 cm, on a wooden panel: “Eene bevallige Vrouw, zittende op het Klavier te spelen. Alleruitmuntend behandeld” (A pretty woman sitting at a piano playing. Exceptionally handled).¹⁶

Both the dimensions and description match those of the Leiden piece. The support is different, but this could be due to the catalogue compilers’ inaccuracy, as similar oversights have been noted throughout the

catalogue. The praiseworthy phrase “exceptionally handled” is reserved—albeit in different forms—for almost every one of the 229 works.¹⁷

The “pretty woman sitting at a piano playing” went for 30 guilders to Willem Gruyter the Elder (1763–1832), owner of an art dealership founded with his partner and son, Willem Gruyter Jr. (1798–1882).¹⁸

By the mid-nineteenth century, Théophile Thoré-Bürger (1807–1869), the French left-leaning art critic, frequently visited the Gruyter gallery, which was mentioned in several of his articles on Vermeer published in the *Gazette des beaux-arts* in 1866.¹⁹ Thoré arranged for his friend and collector, Jan Hendrik Cremer (1813–1885) of Brussels, to purchase a *Guitar Player* from Gruyter, which Thoré believed was by Vermeer. This piece now resides in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Initially regarded as an original Vermeer, it is recognized today as a faithful copy of the painting housed in London’s Kenwood House. Vermeer’s *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*, which Thoré would later purchase for himself, would also pass through Gruyter’s gallery. In the same gallery, Thoré reported seeing a painting of a small street, presumably by Vermeer, and two exquisite drawings by Brondgeest, inspired by Vermeer’s depiction of street scenes. Notwithstanding Thoré’s familiarity with the Gruyter gallery and his rigorous search for documents, testimonies, or clues that might lead back to Vermeer, no evidence suggests he knew the Leiden piece had passed through Gruyter’s hands.

There are no recorded updates on the Leiden painting from 1814 until 1904, when it was cited in “The art collection of Mr. Alfred Beit at his residence 26 Park Lane London,” compiled by the German art historian Wilhelm von Bode.²⁰

Alfred Beit Sr. (1853–1906) was a gold and diamond magnate. Born in Hamburg, he moved to South Africa at the age of 22, amassing significant wealth. His ventures expanded into gold mining and railway construction, positioning him among the world’s wealthiest individuals. His fortune in South Africa was significantly influenced by his association with Cecil Rhodes (1853–1902).

Although Beit preferred to stay in the background, he financially supported many of Rhodes’s political projects. He became involved, perhaps unwillingly, in Rhodes’s imperial ambitions, eventually co-founding Rhodesia and benefiting from its racist and protectionist laws imposed by Rhodes.²¹

Upon his return to Europe in the late 1880s, Beit settled in London. There, he began collecting art under the guidance of Wilhelm von Bode (1845–1929).²²

In his obituary in 1906, *The Guardian* wrote: “His house in Park Lane, just north of the great Dorchester House, was distinguished by a certain small neatness and luxury of appearance . . . He was not a notable buyer of pictures, but had, of course, many fine ones, and made some attempt at a distinct taste in his art possessions by collecting Italian bronzes. But he was first and always a financier, a man of regular appearance in the City. He had the look of a man whose health was not good and whose work was a great and unceasing strain that prevented him from being happy.”²³

Beit’s collection was born from his economic power and the advice of von Bode, who was known for his scholarship on Dutch seventeenth-century painting and Italian Renaissance painting and sculpture. He

began his career in the Sculpture Department of the Berlin Museum, which eventually led him to a primary role in developing the Prussian Museums in Berlin.²⁴

Von Bode cultivated relationships with private collectors, art dealers, intellectuals, and the Imperial House, and his judgments frequently influenced market evaluations.²⁵ Known for his inflexible opinions, he remained unswayed even in the face of incontrovertible evidence. He forged deep connections with affluent individuals like Beit, who possessed both the financial resources and the discernment to follow his guidance, with the implication that they might remember the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in their wills. According to Jonathan Lopez, the American art writer, von Bode “had worked hand in glove with dealers his entire career, trading favors to get the artworks he wanted for his beloved Kaiser Friedrich Museum, using his power to give or withhold certificates as leverage and occasionally taking great pleasure in cutting off dealers who displeased him.”²⁶

Von Bode made several stunning errors in attribution throughout his career, one of the most emblematic being the acquisition of a wax bust of the goddess Flora in 1909 for the Kaiser Friedrich Museum. He firmly believed the bust was by Leonardo da Vinci. However, one year later, an article published in *The Times* proposed that the work was instead by Richard Cockle Lucas, an English sculptor. Notwithstanding the proof offered by Lucas’s son, von Bode maintained his conviction that the *Flora* was a Leonardo masterpiece until his death.²⁷

Von Bode also committed gross errors in his attributions to Vermeer. He was aware that “in America a Vermeer is more prized than a Raphael or a Rembrandt, and his small pictures command prices as high as works by these masters.”²⁸ His certifications inflated the value of modest paintings in the American art market. According to Lopez, forgers specifically targeted von Bode, having closely analyzed his criteria for accepting or turning down specific paintings.²⁹ Lopez also notes von Bode’s financial difficulties during the hyperinflation of 1921, and cites an opinion from the art historian Hofstede de Groot (1863–1931) in a private letter: “If a dealer or owner of a picture knows how to talk to von Bode, he can get every picture testified by him.”³⁰ He certified as genuine Vermeer paintings such as *Portrait of a Woman*, *The Smiling Girl*, and *The Lace Maker*. *Portrait of a Woman*, rumored to have once been owned in Norway, was sold by the antique dealer Bottwieser in Berlin to Mr. and Mrs. E. W. Edwards of Cincinnati. On July 24, 1924, Bode described it as “An unquestionable and most characteristic and delightful work by Jan Vermeer of Delft, from his best period.”³¹ Now attributed to an unknown artist and with its whereabouts unknown, the painting has returned to the obscurity from which it emerged.

In 1926, *The Smiling Girl* was discovered in the private collection of Walter Kurt Rhode in Berlin and sold, with a certificate of authenticity by von Bode, as “a fairly early work of the Delft master, Vermeer.”³² It was sold to the American magnate and art collector, Andrew W. Mellon (1855–1937). The picture, now “Not on View,” is inventoried by the National Gallery of Art as a work by an imitator of Vermeer, dated c. 1925.

In June 1927, “Captain” Harold R. Wright, a young Englishman who styled himself as a cosmopolitan art connoisseur, arrived in Berlin with an unknown Dutch painting called *The Lace Maker*. Wright, who claimed to have found the painting in an Amsterdam antique shop, presented it to von Bode. Von Bode declared it a “genuine, perfect and very characteristic work of Jan Vermeer of Delft.”³³ It was purchased in 1928 by Mellon through Joseph Duveen (1869–1939), one of the most important art dealers in Europe.

Duveen made a fortune by buying works of art from declining European aristocrats and selling them to Americans. He quipped, “Europe has a great deal of art, and America has a great deal of money.” Like *The Smiling Girl*, *The Lace Maker* at the National Gallery of Art is cataloged as a work by an imitator of Johannes Vermeer, dated c. 1925, and is “Not on View.”

In the section on Vermeer in the Beit collection catalogue, von Bode wrote: “The picture by Vermeer was one of Mr. Beit’s earliest purchases; that by Pieter de Hooch was opportunely acquired along with some more valuable works of art; whilst the most important of all of them, namely, that by Maes, was obtained from Mr. Walter’s collection.”³⁴ Despite having advised Beit in the acquisition of the Leiden picture and being aware of the details regarding when, from whom, and for how much Beit had acquired it, Bode omitted any information about it. His judgment on it was: “The picture in Mr. Beit’s possession shows a young girl, in white and yellow, playing a harpsichord which is placed beside a pale-violet wall. It is the smallest picture by this painter known to the writer, and is not a particularly important one; but at the same time it shows us the striking characteristics of the artist.”³⁵

Following the publication of Alfred Beit’s collection catalog in 1904, several authors reinstated *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal* to Vermeer’s oeuvre, albeit without offering any praise.

Most of Beit’s artworks were inherited by his brother Otto (1865–1930). In 1913, von Bode described the posthumous distribution of Alfred’s collection: “His [Alfred’s] collection, with the exception of some important items which he bequeathed to different museums and to friends, passed to his only surviving brother and sole heir, Mr. Otto Beit. Mr. Otto Beit, following his brother’s example, has gradually eliminated inferior works of art, and has replaced them by pictures of first-rate merit, thus increasing the value of the collection”³⁶

Originally from Hamburg, Otto moved to England in 1888 to join the stockbroking firm Wernher, Beit & Co. A few years later, he relocated to South Africa to assume the responsibilities previously held by Alfred, who had already settled in London at that time. Otto gained extensive experience in the gold and diamond business during his six-year stay. In 1897, after returning to Europe, he married Lilian Carter (1874–1946), the daughter of a New Orleans businessman involved in railways and telegraphy. In 1924, Otto was appointed a baronet in recognition of his substantial aid to humanitarian causes and his generous donations to museums.³⁷

Sir Otto Beit died in 1930, a year after the death of his friend, Bode. His prestigious art collection was partly inherited by his widow, Lilian Carter, and partly by his son, Alfred Lane Beit (1903–1994), who inherited the title of second baronet. He was a lover of the fine arts and a music enthusiast. In April 1939, he married Clementine Mabell Kitty Freeman-Mitford (1915–2005). The Beits purchased their home at 15 Kensington Palace Gardens, which was redesigned and furnished to display their extraordinary art collection.

Sir Alfred served in the Royal Air Force Voluntary Reserve during World War II. He and Lady Clementine, disillusioned by the English political evolution, moved to South Africa to pursue their financial interests. Their art collection was temporarily lent to the South African and Irish National Galleries. Exasperated with the National Party’s apartheid regime, the Beits purchased Russborough House, a Palladian mansion located 30 kilometers outside Dublin. They brought their entire art collection,

enriched in 1946 by artworks inherited from Sir Alfred's mother, among which was the Leiden Collection *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal*.

Meanwhile, the Hans van Meegeren scandal prompted a period of self-examination within the art world. In 1948, Ary Bob de Vries (1905–1983), Dutch art historian and director of the Mauritshuis, published a second edition of his Vermeer monograph, in which he wrote: “It was only after the war that this bewildering forgery business had come to light. It opened my eyes completely. I now feel that I have to remove every doubtful work from the artist's oeuvre.”³⁸ In 1948, he removed ten paintings by Vermeer, which had appeared in the first edition of 1939.³⁹ Among these works was Sir Alfred Beit's small *Lady Seated at the Virginals*: “I have now placed among the dubious pictures the *Lady Seated at the Virginals*, which was always considered a poor work. If this little picture was actually sold at an auction in 1814, then we are not in the presence of a premeditated and relatively recent falsification, but rather of a pseudo-Vermeer. It may not even have been originally intended as such, but was perhaps the work of one of those artists who, about 1800, painted little interiors in the old Dutch manner. For the present the latter hypothesis seems to me the most plausible.”⁴⁰

As early as 1917, Albert Eugene Gallatin (1881–1952), one of the most influential American art writers and artists of the early twentieth century, observed: “‘A Girl at the Spinet’ (Beit Collection) is not a very interesting picture; curiously enough, it has never been pointed out that the figure of the girl, as well as other parts of the picture, are almost identical with the ‘A Young Lady Seated at the Spinet.’”⁴¹

Given the lack of enthusiasm that had surrounded the picture—including that of Bode, who had deemed it a small work of no particular importance, and De Vries' removal of it from Vermeer's oeuvre—Beit decided to part with his small painting, entrusting the task to Marlborough Fine Art of London in Bond Street, which at that time specialized in the masterworks of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

According to storytelling, Baron Frédéric Rolin of Brussels (1919–2001), a dealer in tribal art and occasional collector of Old Masters, saw Beit's picture in the window of the Marlborough in 1960, fell in love with it, and purchased it.⁴² Although the storytelling speaks of love at first sight, Rolin was cautious before acquiring the picture. He wanted to be sure that, at least, this picture was not a modern painting. The facts tell us that in a private report sent to Rolin in 1957, three years before the acquisition, Paul Philippot of the Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique, Brussels, had identified lead-tin yellow and ultramarine in the picture.⁴³ Still not convinced, Rolin asked Harry Fischer (1903–1977), one of the owners of the Marlborough, for a certificate of authenticity. In 1959, Fischer turned to Lawrence Gowing (1918–1991), the prestigious art scholar, author of the highly acclaimed monograph on Vermeer,⁴⁴ and prolific painter, who would have a solo exhibition at the Marlborough in 1967.⁴⁵ Gowing provided the requested authentication in a typed letter addressed to Fischer dated May 20, 1959, and signed it twice, with one spontaneous and one legible signature: “. . . one passage of this work—the hands, the instrument, and the space and light around them—would in itself be sufficient to prove the fact. The style of this detail, and much else in the picture, is absolutely distinctive.”⁴⁶ Nonetheless, given the debatable quality of the picture, Gowing relegated Beit's small painting to the status of “a sad moment in painting, the end of one of the greatest masters.”

In 1960, Rolin acquired the *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal*. We do not know what Sir Alfred gained

from the sale, but Rolin acquired the work by ceding paintings to the Marlborough by Paul Klee, Paul Signac, Pierre Bonnard, and Jean-Paul Riopelle.⁴⁷

Together with the painting, the Marlborough delivered Gowing's certificate to Rolin, in which Gowing expressed "regret" for not including the painting in the first edition of his Vermeer monograph, pledging to incorporate it in a future edition.⁴⁸ In a subsequent edition released in 1970, Gowing mentioned Rolin's painting in a terse note regarding the chronology of Vermeer's works: "The Lady Seated at a Spinnet, now included in Plate 80, may have been painted after Vermeer's move early in 1672."⁴⁹ However, in 1961, Gowing had previously authored a small book titled *Johannes Vermeer*, in which he dedicates the following to Rolin's painting: "A picture often excluded is illustrated, 'A lady seated at the Virginals' in the Beit Collection. The lady's shawl may have been retouched, but the picture is substantially by Vermeer. One passage alone, conveying the space and light between the figure and the reflecting surface of the virginals, is enough to place it outside the range of any other painter. It is a melancholy relic, perhaps the only picture that we have painted after 1672, when Vermeer left the house in the Grooten Markt, whose painting-rooms we know so well, and moved to the smaller one in the Oude Langendijk where he died in 1675."⁵⁰ In substance, while Gowing authenticated the painting in his letter to the Marlborough, he likewise acknowledges its apparent flaws, referring to it as a "melancholy relic."

By 1963, only three years after his acquisition, Rolin, "rather worried by the aura of doubt which clung to the picture,"⁵¹ enlisted the renowned auction house Christie's of London to sell his investment.

David Carritt (1927–1982), a British art historian and critic who was working for Christie's at the time, took on the task of finding a buyer for Rolin's painting. In a letter to Theodore Rousseau (1912–1973), the chief curator of European art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Carritt inquired if he knew "anyone who would be interested in acquiring it for the Metropolitan"⁵²

From Carritt's correspondence while handling the matter, it emerges that Christie's agent brought the small painting to Sir Philip Hendy (1900–1980), the director of the National Gallery in London, who believed that "The Trustees would be mad if they did not accept the picture as a gift to the Museum or in lieu of Death Duties."⁵³ Carritt also traveled to Amsterdam, where he met Arthur van Schendel (1910–1979), director of the Rijksmuseum and expert on Dutch painting, and Frits Lugt (1884–1970), both of whom were "completely convinced of the picture's authenticity."⁵⁴ Despite his efforts, Carritt received customary appraisals, but no buyer.

Baron Rolin renounced selling the painting. Years passed, and during the last decades of the twentieth century, various art specialists took a neutral stance regarding the work's authenticity. Several authors were skeptical, such as Piero Bianconi.⁵⁵ Christopher Wright⁵⁶ accepted it, but others explicitly rejected it, such as Wheelock,⁵⁷ and Broos,⁵⁸ the latter of whom described it as a "tasteless mishmash of the two women playing virginals." The Vermeer biographer John Michael Montias ignored it. Albert Blankert, in his seminal work *Johannes Vermeer van Delft, 1632–1675*, made no mention of the painting.⁵⁹ Rolin also consulted Blankert by mail, continuing to seek opinion. Blankert replied, "The picture . . . is a problem to me. Before seeing and studying it, I was convinced it to be a modern imitation. Now I feel rather sure it was painted before circa 1810. The painter must have had an intimate knowledge of several of Vermeer's works, which was very unusual at so early a date."⁶⁰

The painting was once again presented to potential buyers in the late 1970s, including the business magnate Armand Hammer (1898–1990). However, Hammer’s advisor dissuaded him with a question: “Do you want to be known as the collector with the worst Vermeer in the world?”⁶¹

In 1993, two years before the opening of the monumental exhibition *Johannes Vermeer*—curated by Wheelock at the National Gallery of Art, from which Rolin’s painting was excluded—Rolin approached Sotheby’s again with a request to undertake new research on the painting. Gregory Rubinstein, the Head of Old Master Drawings at Sotheby’s, recalls: “Baron Freddy Rolin walked into my office in the spring of 1993, carrying a small painting under his arm. Clearly, the first thing to do was to establish how it was made, on a technical level. We therefore commissioned a full scientific study from Libby Sheldon of University College London.”⁶²

Almost contemporaneously, on November 12, 1995, the Washington–The Hague *Johannes Vermeer* exhibition achieved unprecedented success. Tracy Chevalier’s popular novel, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, published in the wake of the exhibition, catapulted the Dutch master to Hollywood.

In the meantime, Sotheby’s, which had spearheaded the investigation of the Leiden picture, deemed Sheldon’s scientific expertise proof of the painting’s Vermeer authorship. Sheldon’s conclusion was: “The materials and working methods that could be identified have only served to strengthen the painting’s links with Vermeer. The evidence thus suggests that, if the artist who painted *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal* was not Vermeer, it can only have been someone who was not only intimately acquainted with his materials and practice, but also with his individual style. No such painter is known to us, and the facts presented here therefore provide compelling arguments for accepting the painting as a work by Vermeer.”⁶³

However, new research has opened an alternative explanation for the origin of *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal*. In 2022, after two years of research by the National Gallery of Art on its Vermeer paintings, Marjorie E. Wieseman, Curator and Head of the Department of Northern European Paintings, reported the results of a comparative study on *Girl with a Flute* and the three other Vermeer paintings in the collection: “The body of new evidence we have assembled indicates that Vermeer was not involved in the creation of *Girl with a Flute*. The awkward composition and the unskilled paint handling are evidence of an artist who had not mastered his craft. Nevertheless, analysis of the painting materials and practices suggests this painter had an intimate knowledge of Vermeer’s working methods. It seems likely that the artist of *Girl with a Flute* was a contemporary of Vermeer who had a close relationship with him. The artist drew inspiration from his style and emulated his idiosyncratic working methods, but lacked the skill required to replicate Vermeer’s masterful brushwork and subtle effects.”⁶⁴ The director of the National Gallery of Art, Kaywin Feldman, confidently stated: “The fact that other artists worked with Johannes Vermeer may be one of the most important things we’ve learned about him in decades. It fundamentally changes our understanding of Vermeer.”⁶⁵

Rolin died on November 15, 2001, without having sold the picture, but with the satisfaction that a few months earlier, Walter Liedtke, the Curator of Northern Painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, had displayed his picture as the end-piece in the Vermeer and the Delft School exhibition. Liedtke commented that Rolin’s picture “. . . cannot indisputably be rejected as an autograph work by Vermeer.”⁶⁶

The painting remained unremarked upon for several years, with only one exhibition in the twentieth century: the 1907 *Winter Exhibition of the Collection of Pictures, Decorative Furniture, and Other Works of Art at the Burlington Fine Arts Club in London*.⁶⁷ The once-ignored canvas became a veritable globetrotter, scoring twenty-three temporary exhibitions in twenty-three years. Nonetheless, doubts continued to persist.

On July 7, 2004, Rolin's heir put *Young Lady Seated at a Virginal* up for auction at Sotheby's in London, accompanied by a catalog entry marked by omissions, distractions, imprecisions, and contradictions.⁶⁸ For example, the catalog affirms that the painting's authorship is "no longer disputed by any of the leading scholars of Vermeer." However, suffice it to cite Albert Blankert, the eminent expert on seventeenth-century Dutch painting and foremost authority on Vermeer, who in 2001 declared: "It has elements taken from Vermeer's pictures, but the anatomy of the woman is wrong and the hands look more like pigs' trotters. It is an imitation."⁶⁹ In 2005, Blankert confirmed in an interview that his opinion had not changed.⁷⁰

Sotheby's official estimate of the painting was \$5 million. It was sold for \$30 million to Steve Wynn, a casino magnate and real estate developer, known for the expansion of his commercial empire in Las Vegas during the 1990s.

Two days after the auction, Brian Sewell, Britain's prominent and controversial art critic, published a scathing article concluding: ". . . the history of Vermeer in the twentieth century is littered with false attributions and downright forgeries enthusiastically attested by the experts of the day, and I confidently predict that the Sotheby's picture will join them as an object of derision—£16.2 million is monumental proof of folly, not authenticity."⁷¹

Wynn began collecting art at the age of 56, aiming to enhance the allure of his opulent luxury hotels in Las Vegas. Since he was unfamiliar with art, he asked Bill Acquavella, a renowned art dealer from New York, to guide him. With Acquavella's assistance, Wynn assembled a collection of numerous works by artists such as Manet, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Picasso, Cézanne, Matisse, and Warhol, spending hundreds of millions of dollars, but often reselling for a consistent profit shortly thereafter. An incident involving his Picasso painting *Le Rêve* exemplifies his ethos toward collecting. Acquavella, who had brokered a deal in 2006 with Steve Cohen for \$139 million, remembers a telephone call in which he announced: "Bill, I put my elbow through *Le Rêve*."⁷² The deal was canceled, and the repair cost \$90,000. Seven years later, Cohen purchased the painting from Wynn for \$155 million.

After Wynn had decided to focus his collection exclusively on modern art, in 2008 he sold *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal* to Thomas Kaplan, a New York billionaire, along with a Rembrandt self-portrait. Kaplan paid the same amount for *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal* as Wynn had originally paid. According to an anecdote later recounted by Kaplan, Wynn was willing to sell his Rembrandt self-portrait only if Kaplan also purchased the Vermeer. Kaplan sealed the deal, commenting later, "You can't threaten me with a good time."

Kaplan, born in 1962, is a natural resource investor and businessman renowned for his involvement in big cat conservation. Together with his wife, Daphne Recanati, he owns the Leiden Collection, the largest collection of privately-held Rembrandts. Like Alfred Beit, Kaplan's ascent also began with commodity

investments, in Kaplan's case, silver. His fortune saw a significant increase in 2007 after selling his hydrocarbon exploration company's natural gas assets for \$2.55 billion, a milestone that brought substantial wealth.

Prior to the opening of the landmark Vermeer retrospective at the Rijksmuseum in 2023, which showcased twenty-eight of the artist's works, the Leiden picture underwent a technical examination by the Rijksmuseum's conservation team. In the exhibition catalog, Bart Cornelis, curator of Dutch and Flemish Paintings 1600–1800 at the London National Gallery, wrote: "Recent technical research at the Rijksmuseum . . . has shown conclusively that the yellow shawl was not painted by a later hand, but is the result of an alteration made by Vermeer himself during the painting process."⁷³ However, the simultaneous creation of the shawl and the gown merely demonstrates consistency, not authorship. This consistency can, in fact, lead to an opposing conclusion if considered in its proper context. The shawl has been consistently criticized by earlier critics, with some arguing that it casts doubt on the painting's authenticity. Therefore, if these critics are to be believed, this would lead us to reject rather than accept the work as an authentic painting by the great master Vermeer.

In the same article, Cornelis recalls Carritt's letter to Rousseau, in which Carritt describes how Van Schendel, and Lugt, were both "completely convinced of the picture's authenticity." Despite their conviction, they neither acquired the painting for the museum nor recommended it to any wealthy benefactors who support museums, nor did they choose to share their opinion publicly.

Young Woman Seated at a Virginal has primarily drawn interest due to ongoing doubts about its authorship. Among the numerous articles praising the 2023 Rijksmuseum Vermeer retrospective and its paintings, one of the few commentators to mention this particular work is the Polish journalist Anna Debowska, who notes: "A *Young Woman Seated at the Virginals* (with a yellow scarf over her shoulders, looking directly at the spectator) . . . For many years, this painting was not recognized as a work of Vermeer; it was finally included in the list of his works in 2004. It is currently owned by the American Kaplan family (Leiden Collection). However, doubts about the painting's authorship persist."⁷⁴

Illustrations



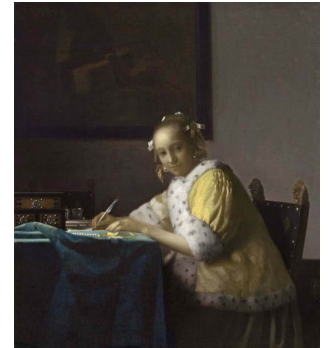
Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window
 Johannes Vermeer
 c. 1657–1659
 Oil on canvas, 83 x 64.5 cm. (32 3/4 x 25 3/8 in.)
 Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister (Old Masters Picture Gallery), Dresden



The Music Lesson
 Johannes Vermeer
 c. 1662–1665
 Oil on canvas, 73.3 x 64.5 cm. (28 7/8 x 25 3/8 in.)
 The Royal Collection, The Windsor Castle



Woman in Blue Reading a Letter
 Johannes Vermeer
 c. 1662–1665
 Oil on canvas, 46.5 x 39 cm. (18 1/4 x 15 3/8 in.)
 Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



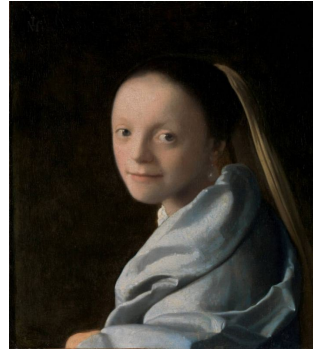
A Lady Writing
 Johannes Vermeer
 c. 1662–1667
 Oil on canvas, 45 x 39.9 cm. (17 3/4 x 15 3/4 in.)
 National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.



Girl with a Pearl Earring
 Johannes Vermeer
 c. 1665–1667
 Oil on canvas, 46.5 x 40 cm. (18 1/4 x 15 1/4 in.)
 Koninklijk Kabinet van Schilderijen Mauritshuis, The Hague



Mistress and Maid
 Johannes Vermeer
 c. 1666–1668
 Oil on canvas, 90.2 x 78.7 cm. (35 1/2 x 31 in.)
 Frick Collection, New York



Study of a Young Woman
 Johannes Vermeer
 c. 1665–1674
 Oil on canvas, 44.5 x 40 cm. (17 1/2 x 15 3/4 in.)
 Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



The Love Letter
 Johannes Vermeer
 c. 1667–1670
 Oil on canvas, 44 x 38.5 cm. (17 3/8 x 15 1/8 in.)
 Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



The Lacemaker
Johannes Vermeer
c. 1669–1671
Oil on canvas (attached to panel), 24.5 x 21 cm. (9 5/8 x 8 1/4 in.)
Musée du Louvre, Paris



The Guitar Player
Johannes Vermeer
c. 1670–1673
Oil on canvas
53 x 46.3 cm. (20 7/8 x 18 1/4 in.)
Kenwood House English Heritage as Trustees of the Iveagh Bequest, London



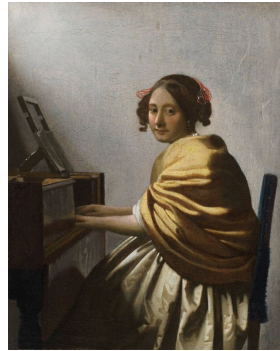
Lady Writing a Letter with her Maid
Johannes Vermeer
c. 1670–1671
Oil on canvas, 71.1 x 58.4 cm. (28 x 23 in.)
National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin



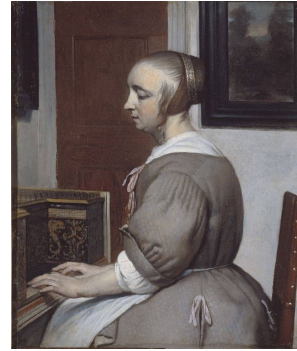
A Lady Standing at a Virginal
Johannes Vermeer
c. 1670–1674
Oil on canvas, 51.7 x 45.2 cm. (20 3/8 x 17 3/4 in.)
National Gallery, London



A Lady Seated at a Virginal
Johannes Vermeer
c. 1670–1675
Oil on canvas, 51.5 x 45.5 cm. (20 1/4 x 17 7/8 in.)
National Gallery, London



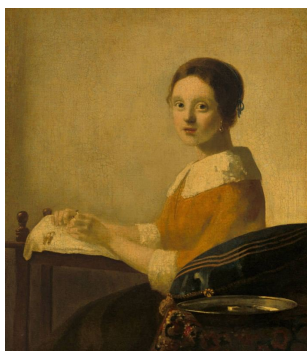
A Young Woman Seated at a Virginal
(attributed to Vermeer)
c. 1670
Oil on canvas, 25.2 x 20 cm. (9 7/8 x 7 7/8 in.)
The Leiden Collection, New York



Woman Playing the Harpsichord
Gabriel Metsu
Oil on panel, 23.9 x 19.9 cm.
Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris, Paris



Portrait of Petronella Dunois
Nicolaes Maes
c. 1677–1685
Oil on canvas, 69.2 x 57.8 cm.
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



The Lacemaker
Imitator of Johannes Vermeer
c. 1925
Oil on canvas, 44.5 x 40
National Gallery of Art, Washington D. C.

Footnotes

Introduction

1. Sheldon, Libby, and Nicola Costaras. "Johannes Vermeer's 'Young Woman Seated at a Virginal.'" *The Burlington Magazine* 148 (February 2006): 89-97.
2. Liedtke, Walter. *Vermeer: The Complete Paintings*. New York, 2008, 175-177.

Composition

1. Although overlap is the most primitive means for suggesting three dimensions on a flat surface, it is nonetheless the most unequivocal.
2. In the seventeenth century, color was considered principally as a means to create spatial depth and form rather than aesthetically pleasing harmonies.
3. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Vermeer and the Art of Painting* (New Haven and London, 1994), 150.
4. The late *Lady Writing a Letter with her Maid* presents the same compositional device as *The Music Lesson*.
5. Elise Goodman, "The Landscape on the Wall in Vermeer," in *The Cambridge Companion to Vermeer*, ed. Wayne Franits (Cambridge, 2002), 79–85.
6. Elise Goodman, "The Landscape on the Wall in Vermeer," in *The Cambridge Companion to Vermeer*, ed. Wayne Franits (Cambridge, 2002), 81–82.
7. This link was first pointed out by Lawrence Gowing: Lawrence Gowing, *Vermeer* (Oakland CA: University of California Press, 1997), reprint edition, 53.
8. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Vermeer and the Art of Painting* (New Haven and London, 1994), 150.
9. From a painter's point of view, the canvas is a technical delight. The coloring and tonal transition of the musician's hands and arms are among the most refined in the artist's oeuvre. The gilt frame, the guitar's decorative sound hole and satin skirt demonstrate a level of pictorial synthesis, which almost verges on brutality, unseen in the work of any other Dutch genre painter. The bizarre, calligraphic brushwork hints at a mysterious subtext which however, remains illegible in any other than purely pictorial terms.
10. Compare this Vermeer's work to Caspar Netscher's endearing, but undemanding treatment of the subject, which displays a collection of household objects distributed with nonchalance around the lacemaker, separate from one another on the picture plane: Caspar Netscher, *The Lace Maker*, 1662, oil on canvas, 33 x 27 cm., Wallace Collection.
11. John Nash, *Vermeer* (London: Scala Publications Ltd, 1991), 113.
12. Bianca M. Du Mortier, "Costumes in Gabriel Metsu's paintings: Mode and Manners in the Mid-Seventeenth Century," in *Gabriel Metsu*, ed. Adriaan E. Waiboer (New Haven and London, 2010), 145.
13. There are only three or four visible orthogonals in the painting: the diagonal of the right-hand side of the barely visible corner of the table and upper and lower contours of the wooden window sill to the right. The large book on the table seems to be set at right angle with the table, but its edges are not straight enough to determine clear orthogonals.
14. The musician's outstretched arm, bathed in friendly, warm sunlight, crisply overlaps the cool blue table cloth and pile of books while the rectangular picture-within-a-picture landscape is overlapped by her oval-shaped head.
15. Perhaps the only example of a consciously manipulated negative space (i.e. the positive definition of planimetric space between foreground objects) in the Leiden picture is constituted by the light gray triangle below the musician's outstretched arms.
16. On the other hand, the undemanding composition of the Leiden picture brings to mind picturesque but less-than-

genial Dutch single-figured genre works like Caspar Netscher's *Lacemaker* or Gabriel Metsu's *Woman at the Virginal* in the Musée du Petit Palais.

17. Vermeer sets himself apart from many other Dutch painters because the compositional elaborations of his own works always yield new, unsuspected fruit making each one an independent communicative statement.

18. Certainly, the most enthusiastic written appreciations of the work were penned by those directly involved in the painting's ownership: Gregory Rubenstein, "Seeing the Light," *Sotheby's Preview*, June/July 2004, 30-33; and the Leiden Collection catalogue entry, which describes the painting as a "tiny masterwork." See Walter A. Liedtke and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Young Woman Seated at a Virginal" (2017), revised by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (2023), in *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*, 4th ed., edited by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Elizabeth Nogrady with Caroline Van Cauwenberge (New York, 2023–), <https://theleidencollection.com/artwork/young-woman-seated-at-a-virginal/> (accessed February 11, 2024). If, then, we are to compare the Leiden picture and the *Art of Painting*, being both "masterpieces," the only difference would be in their dimensions.

19. The Leiden lacks the compositional ingenuity which distinguishes Vermeer's designs from those of all other Dutch interior painters, whether it be of the energetic kind of his late works or the meticulously arranged equipoise of the earlier works.

20. Such simplistic compositions are relatively rare among the top-tier Dutch artists such as Gerrit Dou, Frans van Mieris and Gerrit ter Borch with whom Vermeer was in direct competition. It was, however, more frequently employed by more modest Dutch genre painters whose aim was to recycle the bare bones of the latest motifs in order to pocket a few guilders

21. It is to note that some writers have interpreted an X-ray image of the Leiden painting rather benignly, imagining a more typical image of Vermeer's work below, perhaps influenced its suggestive vagueness. However, it may be hazardous to take the blurred X-ray image for a low-resolution snapshot of Vermeer's original purposes later painted over by a less-skilled hand. "The lack of clarity in underlying images is exacerbated by the use of similar pigments in the upper and lower paint layers..." which, in effect, suggests that the image does not represent a single instant of the painting process, but a composite of more instants.

The Wrap

1. Pieter Roleofs and Gregor Weber, *Vermeer* (Amsterdam: Hannibel, 2023), 226.

2. The simple wraps of the *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, *Girl with a Flute*, and *Girl with a Red Hat* are typical features of the Dutch *tronie*. Even the anonymous blue wrap that appears in the grandiose *Art of Painting* serves a clear function.

3. *Lady Writing*, *Mistress and Maid*, and *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*.

4. One of the few pieces of clothing that somehow recalls the wrap of the Leiden piece is in a painting by Caesar Boëtius van Everdingen (*A Young Woman Warming her Hands over a Brazier: Allegory of Winter*, c. 1644-c. 1648, oil on canvas, 97 × 81 cm, The Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam). However, when observed with attention, this expertly painted piece of clothing with its shiny satin and faux-fur trim is clearly identifiable with an elegant, fur-trimmed mantle, which is much shorter than the Leiden wrap. In early history paintings and tronies, both of which in the matter of clothing and its representation respond to profoundly different pictorial exigencies than those of the *haute bourgeois* interior genre of the Leiden picture.

5. Since x-ray images reveal that the gown originally extended a bit upwards beneath them some scholars have speculated that the lower folds were painted by a later hand. However, pentimenti are common in the artist's work but none are covered with such clumsy overpainting as in the Leiden piece.

6. The mentioned pictorial convention is rarely noticed but, very likely was born, as so many pictorial conventions, from a casual discovery which after a period of trial and error, perfected and codified into a replicable formula that with time became a standard illusionist tactic of most talented painters' repertoire.

7. Wayne Franits, *Vermeer* (London: Phaidon, 2015), 247.

8. Valerie Sivel et al., "The Cloak of Young Woman Seated at a Virginal: Vermeer, or a Later Hand?" *ArtMatters: Netherlands Technical Studies in Art 4* (2007): 91.

9. Valerie Sivel et al., “The Cloak of Young Woman Seated at a Virginal: Vermeer, or a Later Hand?” *ArtMatters: Netherlands Technical Studies in Art* 4 (2007): 96.
10. Marjorie Weismann, *Vermeer’s Women: Secrets and Silence* (Hartford, 2011), 208.
11. Hairdos, which can be changed from one day to the next, furnish us with perhaps a more precise chronology of the moving fashions dress. A costly fur-trimmed satin jacket which, for obvious economic motives, would not have been discarded so easily as a hairdo.
12. Walter A. Liedtke and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., “Young Woman Seated at a Virginal” (2017), revised by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (2023), in *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*, 3rd ed., ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Lara Yeager-Crasselt (New York, 2020–), <https://theleidencollection.com/artwork/young-woman-seated-at-a-virginal/> (accessed February 24, 2024).
13. Obviously, the scientific methods employed by the Rijksmuseum's conservation team may indicated that the same hand painted both the shawl and the rest of the artwork, but such methods are not sufficient to attribute the painting to a specific artist, but probably date.

The Pearl Necklace

1. *Portrait of Petronella Dunois*, Nicolaes Maes, 1677–1685, oil on canvas, 69.2 x 57.8 cm., Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
2. It is enough to look at any Dutch seventeenth-century portrait to see that highlights on pearls occupy a much smaller part of the pearls’ surface than those of the Leiden picture.
3. Notwithstanding the difference in intensity, the two heads seem to be illuminated from roughly the same direction.

The Virginals

1. The orthogonals and the vanishing points of the two works’ perspectival constructions reveal that the painter was seated to the left of the figure while he painted the London picture, while he was seated directly in front of the lady in the Leiden picture.

The Young Woman

1. Lawrence Gowing, *Vermeer* (London: Phaidon Press, 1952), 19.
2. The great part of foreheads of Vermeer’s woman are purposely round and ample.
3. One such highlight, along with the conventional highlight on the lacrimal caruncle, can be observed in *Portrait of Boy with a Hat* by Michael Sweerts. Sweerts’ highlight is lighter, cooler in tone, and smaller than its Leiden pinkish counterpart. Sweerts’ highlight creates a convincing illusion of the eye’s moisture, conveying an empathetic expression—an effect not achieved, if ever intended, in the Leiden painting. Sweerts sought the same effect in various other tronie heads.
4. Sotheby's Sales Catalogue Notes, 2004, "A Young Woman Seated at the Virginals," <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2004/old-master-paintings-part-1-104031/lot.8.html> (accessed February 24, 2024).
5. Gowing wrote, “Many who have glanced at the hands which rest on the keyboards of the virginals in the pictures in the National Gallery may have passed on thinking that they have caught the master in a weaker moment. But these details are quite characteristic; Vermeer's shadow does not only obscure line, it interrupts and denies it. Where fingers turn away from the light or an eye casts its hemispherical shadow Vermeer refuses, as it were, to admit to us that he knows what the darkened forms are, how they are divided, where lie their bounding lines.” Lawrence Gowing, *Vermeer* (London: Phaidon Press, 1952), 20.

The Gown

1. Lawrence Gowing, *Vermeer* (London: Phaidon Press, 1952), 19.
2. The great part of foreheads of Vermeer's woman are purposely round and ample.
3. One such highlight, along with the conventional highlight on the lacrimal caruncle, can be observed in *Portrait of Boy with a Hat* by Michael Sweerts. Sweerts' highlight is lighter, cooler in tone, and smaller than its Leiden pinkish counterpart. Sweerts' highlight creates a convincing illusion of the eye's moisture, conveying an empathetic expression—an effect not achieved, if ever intended, in the Leiden painting. Sweerts sought the same effect in various other tronie heads.
4. Sotheby's Sales Catalogue Notes, 2004, "A Young Woman Seated at the Virginals," <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2004/old-master-paintings-part-1-104031/lot.8.html> (accessed February 24, 2024).
5. Gowing wrote, "Many who have glanced at the hands which rest on the keyboards of the virginals in the pictures in the National Gallery may have passed on thinking that they have caught the master in a weaker moment. But these details are quite characteristic; Vermeer's shadow does not only obscure line, it interrupts and denies it. Where fingers turn away from the light or an eye casts its hemispherical shadow Vermeer refuses, as it were, to admit to us that he knows what the darkened forms are, how they are divided, where lie their bounding lines." Lawrence Gowing, *Vermeer* (London: Phaidon Press, 1952), 20.

Perspective & Ultramarine Blue

1. Libby Sheldon and Nicola Costaras, "Johannes Vermeer's 'Young Woman Seated at a Virginal,'" *The Burlington Magazine* 148 (February 2006): 93.
2. Jørgen Wadum, "Vermeer in Perspective," in *Johannes Vermeer*, edited by Arthur K. Wheelock [contributions by Ben Broos et al.], exhibition catalog, National Gallery of Art, Washington, and Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, The Hague (Zwolle: Waanders, 199X).
3. Herman Kühn, "A Study of the Pigments and the Grounds used by Jan Vermeer," *Reports and Studies in the History of Art*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1968, 155–202.
4. Sheldon, Libby, and Costaras, Nicola. 2006, 94. Note 12: "Private communications with..." However, Kühn reported only white lead and charcoal black in a sample taken from the upper edge of the wall.
5. It was also admixed with black and white in order to produce a fresher tone of deep gray in the dark marble floor tiles of the London *Lady Standing* and the *Allegory of Faith*.
6. The fact that this extravagant use of ultramarine may have been particularly favored by Delft painters is not surprising in light of the fact that in "the city of Delft, there seems to have been an accumulation of specialized knowledge of the nature, composition, and application of pigments and other substances used in painting..."¹ which would have favored innovative production methods and uses of pigments fundamental to the community of painters, tapestry weavers, and ceramic makers. from: Koos Levy van Halm, "Where Did Vermeer Buy His Painting Materials? Theory and Practice," in *Vermeer Studies*, ed. Ivan Gaskell and Michiel Jonker (New Haven, London, 1998), 141.
7. Melanie Gifford, Anikó Bezur, Andrea Guidi di Bagno, and Lisha Deming Glinsman, "The Making of a Luxury Image: Van Aelst's Painting Materials and Artistic Techniques," in *Elegance and Refinement: The Still-Life Paintings of Willem van Aelst* (New York, 2012), 76.
8. In an article written by Gregory Rubenstein and published before the painting was auctioned, the author incorrectly interpreted the results of the Sheldon-Costaras investigation. He wrote, "Her [Sheldon's] findings were extremely striking: not only were the materials and the pigments all totally consistent with Vermeer's techniques, but there were also several technical features of this picture that had never been found in the work of any other master. In particular, Sheldon found a remarkable extravagant use of ultramarine." Gregory Rubenstein, "Seeing the Light," *Sotheby's Preview*, June/July 2004, 30–33.
9. Melanie Gifford, Anikó Bezur, Andrea Guidi di Bagno, and Lisha Deming Glinsman, "The Making of a Luxury

Image: Van Aelst's Painting Materials and Artistic Techniques," in *Elegance and Refinement: The Still-Life Paintings of Willem van Aelst* (New York, 2012), 80.

10. Personal communications with Melanie Gifford, formerly Research Conservator for Painting Technology at the National Gallery of Art

11. Although there exists no pigment analysis of the painting, the background wall of Gabriel Metsu's Dublin piece, which shows clear signs of Vermeer's influence, is decidedly bluish in hue.

Conclusion

1. For example, the Washington Gallery of Art *Lacemaker* and the Metropolitan Museum of Art *Woman Reading a Letter* both hung out unceremoniously in out of sight storage bins.

2. The *Girl with a Pearl Earring* is continually referred to as a portrait in newspaper articles and popular literature.

3. It would be misleading to compare the empty backgrounds of Vermeer's tronies to the empty background of the Leiden picture. Comparing such different genres is somewhat like comparing apples to pears in that the two categories were clearly distinguished from one another in artistic and economic functions. The blank background of the tronie was nearly ubiquitous and had the unique function of focusing attention on the figure and its painting technique. For interior painters, the correct integration between figure and environment was one of the principal challenges of the genre, and no one succeeded in this challenge as well as Vermeer.

4. Close examination of both the gilt frame and the blue satin dress of the London *Lady Seated* strongly suggests that their inferior quality is due either to a poor state of conservation or to their not being fully completed by the artist. Both the degree of finish and the definition of the gown are far below those of surrounding passages, such as the bass viol and the virginals in all their parts. In many areas of the gown, paint is applied very thinly, allowing the brown underpainting beneath it to be distinguished with the naked eye. This suggests that the whole passage would have been worked up to the same level as the better-conserved parts of the painting. Moreover, one can clearly see a very thin reserve of brown underpaint (it almost looks like a line) between the outer contour of the gown and the light gray paint of the background wall. The nature of the contour, whether hard or soft, would have been determined with greater precision when the gown was brought closer to its final state.

5. Walter Liedtke, *Vermeer: The Complete Works* (London: Abrams, 2008), 177.

Provenance

1. Walter A. Liedtke and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Young Woman Seated at a Virginal" (2017), rev. by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (2023), in *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*, 4th ed., ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Elizabeth Nogrady with Caroline Van Cauwenberge (New York, 2023–), <https://theleidencollection.com/artwork/young-woman-seated-at-a-virginal/> (accessed December 7, 2024).

2. Edgar R. Samuel, "The Disposal of Diego Duarte's Stock of Paintings 1692–1697," in *Jaarboek van Het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen* (1976): 305–309.

3. Ben Broos, "Un celebre Peijntre nommé Verme[e]r," in *Johannes Vermeer*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Ben Broos, exh. cat. (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 51.

4. *Johannes Vermeer*, Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, The Hague, March 1–June 2

5. *Catalogus van een uitmuntend kabinet kunstige schilderyen, door beroemde Nederlandsche en andere voornaame meesters, fraaije in craijon en miniatuuren, door C. Troost, en anderen benevens Eenige gecouleurde en ongecouleurde prenten, alle in lysten met glasn, in veele jaaren, met kunde by één verzameld, en nagelaten, door wylen den Heere Jan Danser Nyman, het welk verkocht zal worden*, 1797, Amsterdam, 35, no. 169, "Door Delzelven [MEER. (Den Delfsche Van Der)]. hoog 20 breed 17 duin. Doek. Een Juffrouw, flaande voor een Clavecimbael te fpeelen; aan de Wand hangen Schilderyen: zeer fraai van penceelbehandeling." (Van de Meer di Delft, high 20 wide 17 inches. Canvas. A lady, standing in front of a harpsichord playing; on the wall hang paintings; very finely executed in terms of brushwork.)

6. Gerard Hoet and Pieter Terwesten, *Catalogus of naamlijst van schilderijen, met derzelver pryzen: zedert een langen reeks van jaaren zoo in Holland als op andere plaatzen in het openbaar verkogt: benevens een verzameling van lysten van verscheyden nog in wezen zynde cabinetten*, 1752–1770, vol. 1 (1752), 34–36; John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 246–257, 359, doc. 417.
7. Gerard Hoet and Pieter Terwesten, *Catalogus of naamlijst van schilderijen, met derzelver pryzen: zedert een langen reeks van jaaren zoo in Holland als op andere plaatzen in het openbaar verkogt: benevens een verzameling van lysten van verscheyden nog in wezen zynde cabinetten*, 36, no. 37.
8. Sotheby's Sales Catalogue, *A Young Woman Seated at the Virginals, Old Master Paintings*, Part 1, L04031 (London: Sotheby's, 34–35 New Bond Street, July 4, 2004). "One picture, in the catalogue, is described as Een Speelende Juffrouw op de Clavecimbael (A Woman playing the Virginal) lot 37. In terms of subject, this could either have been the picture now under discussion or one of the two now in the National Gallery, London, and the price it fetched, 42 guilders and 10 stuivers, does not help in clarifying which it actually was, since this seems a very low price for a major work such as one of the London pictures, but also perhaps rather high for a picture as small as this one."
9. *Catalogus van een uitmuntend kabinet kunstige schilderyen, door beroemde Nederlandsche en andere voornaame meesters, fraaije in craijon en miniaturen, door C. Troost, en anderen benevens Eenige gecouleurde en onגעouleurde prenten, alle in lysten met glasn, in veele jaaren, met kunde byéén verzameld, en nagelaten, door wylen den Heere Jan Danser Nyman, het welk verkocht zal worden, 1797, Amsterdam, 35, no. 169.*
10. Stephen Koja, "The Inner Cohesion of a World: Vermeer's Paintings as Spaces of Reflection," in *Johannes Vermeer: On Reflection*, ed. Stephan Koja and Uta Neidhardt (Dresden: Sandstein Verlag, 2021), 22.
11. Gemeentearchief, Delft, ONA 3003- II, deed 375, 18r as Een juff.' spelende opde Clavecimbael door Vermeer.
12. John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 219.
13. John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 228.
14. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., lecture on "Young Woman Seated at a Virginal by Johannes Vermeer," Chrysler Museum of Art, through August 22, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7AkIy7ftcZw&t=88s>.
15. Gerard Hoet and Pieter Terwesten, *Catalogus of Naamlijst van Schilderyen met derzelver Pryzen, Zedert een Langen Reeks van Jaaren Zoo in Holland als op Andere Plaatzen in het Openbaar Verkogt, Benevens een Verzameling van Lysten van Verscheyden Nog in Wezen Zynde Cabinetten*, vol. 1 (1752): 176, no. 12.
16. *Catalogus van eene Keurige Verzameling Schilderijen, meerendeels nagelaten door den heer Wessel Ryers, Dewelke in het openbaar door een daartoe bevoegd Beambte zullen geveild worden, Ten overftaan van Philippus van der Schley, Jan Yver, Cornelis Sebille Roos en Jeronimo de Vries, 21 September 1814, 22, no. 93.*
17. The authors of the catalogue abound in flattering expressions towards almost every single painting. "Natuurlijk gefchilderd" (Naturally painted), ". . . is van de beste fchilderii dezen Meester" (. . . is one of the best paintings by this Master), "Wel geteekend en meesterlijk gefchilderd" (Well drawn and masterfully painted), "Delikaat van penceelsbehandeling (Delicacy of brush handling)", "Kloek behandeld" (Treated well), "Meesterlijk behandeld" (Masterfully handled), "Meesterlijk gefchilderd" (Masterful painting), "Bevallig gefchilderd" (Gracefully painted.)
18. RDK.
19. Théophile Thoré-Bürger, "Van der Meer de Delft," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, October 1, 1866, 297–330; November 1, 1866, 458–470; December 1, 1866, 542–575.
20. Wilhelm von Bode, *The Art Collection of Mr. Alfred Beit at His Residence 26 Park Lane London* (Berlin, 1904), 9, 11. "This Catalogue has been issued by Messrs. Imberg & Lefson, Berlin S.W. in an Edition of 50 numbers each in English and German, printed on Japanese Hand Made Paper. The Heliogravures are by The Berlin Photographic Co of Berlin C. The Photogravures are by Mr. R. Bernick of Berlin Schöneberg."
21. Henning Albrecht, "Alfred Beit: The Hamburg Diamond King," (Hamburg: Hamburg University Press, Verlag

der Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg Carl von Ossietzky, 2012), <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/27583/1002422.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> (accessed April 12, 2024).

22. Wilhelm von Bode, *The Art Collection of Mr. Alfred Beit at His Residence 26 Park Lane London* (Berlin, 1904), 2. “The writer of these lines regards this collection from a standpoint of personal interest. Having been on terms of intimate friendship with Mr. Beit for a considerable number of years, he has been able to stimulate the latter’s interest in antique works of art, and to assist him with practical advice in the work of collecting. The writer is, indeed, partly responsible for the contents and the character of the collection, and it is therefore gratifying to him to be able to give some account of it as a whole, and to describe in detail its principal objects.”

23. “Mr. Alfred Beit,” *The Guardian*, July 17, 1906, 9.

24. In 1872, he was appointed assistant to the Sculpture Department of the Berlin Museum (later the Altes Museum), eventually becoming the director in 1883. Kaiser Wilhelm II appointed him Director of the Paintings Collection (Gemäldegalerie) in 1896, and from 1906 until 1920, he served as Director General of all Prussian museums.

25. Barbara Paul and Nicholas Levis, "Collecting Is the Noblest of All Passions!": Wilhelm von Bode and the Relationship between Museums, Art Dealing, and Private Collecting," *International Journal of Political Economy* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 9–32. “He built up Berlin’s public collections through endless acquisitions, established new departments, and made important additions to physical plant. Next to his own research and intellectual exchanges with his German professional colleagues, his continuous and intensive contact with art dealers and private collectors constituted an important basis for his work. It was only through their assistance that Bode was able to acquire art works on such a huge scale . . . he enjoyed good relations not only among the intellectual classes and the property-owning bourgeoisie, but also with the Imperial House . . . Bode's goal, above all others, was to see Berlin join the exclusive club of the great museum cities: Paris, London, and Vienna, as well as Munich and Dresden . . . Bode’s categorization of a painting or a sculpture as a masterpiece as a rule carried great weight, not only among academic specialists but also on the art market. His evaluations often quite tangibly determined the market price and guaranteed investment.”

26. Jonathan Lopez, *The Man Who Made Vermeers: Unvarnishing the Legend of Master Forger Han van Meegeren* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008), 66.

27. “Much-Disputed Bust, Is it a Work of Antiquity?” *The Times*, March 17, 1910. (An analysis of the wax composing the flora on the bust which Dr Wilhelm Bode attributed to the work Leonardo da Vinci, shows that it consists of lac spermacecti and beeswax, the same composition as Mr. Lucas was in habit of using. It is now argued more than ever that the bust was probably the work of Mr. Lucas, as spermaceti was unknown before the year 1700. Dr. ode is the director of the Kaiser Friederich Museum of Berlin, which purchased a wax bust at a fabulous price, believing it to be the work of the famous Leonardo da Vinci, in the sixteenth century. Doubt was first cast on genuineness of the bust by English critics, and the subjects has caused considerable scrimonious both in London and Berlin. The cable points to the probability of the bust having been a copy executed by the late Mr. Lucas. The German Imperator was amongst those who interested himself in the bust, and is said to have expressed his belief in his genuineness, and his delight at its acquisition. Dr. Bode himself describes the bust thus: “The form, pose, expression, and figure, notably the characteristic smile, leave no doubt that the bust can only be ascribed to Leonardo da Vinci. It corresponds exactly with the master’s most famous paintings of women, and his creation must be assigned, like theirs, to Leonardo’s last sojourns in Florence at the beginning of sixteenth century.”) The controversy persisted until 2021, when carbon-14 testing finally confirmed that the wax used was typical of the 19th century, consistent with materials used by Lucas but not available during the Renaissance. Albert, declared under oath that he had assisted his father in creating the piece, incorporating contemporary newspapers and pieces of wood into it, materials that were indeed later verified. See also: Reiche, I., Beck, L. & Caffy, I. “New results with regard to the Flora bust controversy: radiocarbon dating suggests nineteenth century origin.” *Scientific Report* 11, 8249 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-85505-x>

28. Wilhelm von Bode, *The Art Collection of Mr. Alfred Beit at His Residence 26 Park Lane London* (Berlin, 1904), 11. Sir Otto John Beit, Wilhelm von Bode, *Catalogue of the collection of pictures and bronzes in the possession of Mr. Otto Beit, introduction and descriptions by Dr. Wilhelm von Bode*, London, privately printed at the Chiswick Press, 1913, introduction, 9.

29. Jonathan Lopez, *The Man Who Made Vermeers: Unvarnishing the Legend of Master Forger Han van Meegeren* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008), 57.
30. Jonathan Lopez, *The Man Who Made Vermeers: Unvarnishing the Legend of Master Forger Han van Meegeren* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008), 66–67.
31. Philip Leslie Hale, completed and prepared for the press by Frederick William Coburn and Ralph Tracy Hale, *Vermeer* (Boston, 1937), 140.
32. Philip Leslie Hale, completed and prepared for the press by Frederick William Coburn and Ralph Tracy Hale, *Vermeer* (Boston, 1937), 139.
33. Endorsement dated June 25, 1927 by D. Wilhelm Von Bode. Courtesy National Gallery of Washington.
34. Wilhelm von Bode, *The Art Collection of Mr. Alfred Beit at His Residence 26 Park Lane London* (Berlin, 1904), 9.
35. Wilhelm von Bode, *The Art Collection of Mr. Alfred Beit at His Residence 26 Park Lane London* (Berlin, 1904), 11. In *Sir Otto John Beit, Wilhelm von Bode, Catalogue of the collection of pictures and bronzes in the possession of Mr. Otto Beit, introduction and descriptions by Dr. Wilhelm von Bode*, London, privately printed at the Chiswick Press, 1913, introduction, 9, the description of “Lady at a Spinet” remains substantially the same: “The Beit Collection contains two pictures by this master who was also Sir Alfred Beit, the smaller of which represents a young girl clad in white and yellow seated at a spinet; a white wall toning to grayish-lilac forms the background. It is the smallest picture known to me by this artist and, on the whole, not of great importance; but his piquant characteristics are apparent in it.”
36. Sir Otto John Beit, Wilhelm von Bode, *Catalogue of the collection of pictures and bronzes in the possession of Mr. Otto Beit, introduction and descriptions by Dr. Wilhelm von Bode*, London, privately printed at the Chiswick Press, 1913, introduction, VII.
37. *The London Gazette Publication*, April 22, 1924, 3295.
38. Ary Bob de Vries, *Jan Vermeer van Delft* (London, 1948), 63.
39. Ary Bob de Vries, *Jan Vermeer van Delft* (London, 1948), 63–66. *Portrait of a Woman in Budapest, Portrait of a Man in Brussels, Portrait of a Man, Young Woman with the Blue Hat, Lace-Maker in the Washington National Gallery, Lady Seated at a Virginals, Supper at Emmaus, The Music Lesson.*
40. Ary Bob de Vries, *Jan Vermeer van Delft* (London, 1948), 65.
41. Albert Eugene Gallatin, “Vermeer of Delft,” *The American Magazine of Art* 8, no. 10 (August 1917): 389–390, no. 32.
42. “Sir Alfred Beit, who eventually, in 1960, placed the picture on consignment with a London dealer. There it was seen by Baron Frédéric Rolin of Brussels, at the time a dealer in tribal art, who was also an occasional collector of Old Masters. Rolin fell in love with the picture, and even though he was aware that the attribution to Vermeer had by then been questioned, he acquired the little painting, in the time-honored fashion of collectors who fall in love with a work of art, by giving in exchange four others from his collection” “Young Woman Seated at a Virginal”: *Sotheby’s Sale Catalogue, Old Master Paintings*, 2004.
43. Libby Sheldon and Nicola Costaras, “Johannes Vermeer’s ‘Young Woman Seated at a Virginal,’” *The Burlington Magazine* 148, no. 1235 (February 2006): 90, no. 6.
44. Lawrence Gowing, *Vermeer* (London: Faber & Faber, 1952).
45. Lawrence Gowing, Exhibition Catalog Marlborough Gallery, London, January 1, 1965.
46. Letter from Lawrence Gowing to H.K. Fischer Esq., Marlborough Fine Art, Ltd., 18, Old Bond Street, May, 20, 1959. Courtesy Leiden Collection.
47. “Young Woman Seated at a Virginal”: *Sotheby’s Sale Catalogue, Old Master Paintings*, 2004. 48. Letter from Lawrence Gowing to H.K. Fischer Esq., Marlborough Fine Art, Ltd., 18, Old Bond Street, May, 20, 1959. Courtesy Leiden Collection.

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50. Lawrence Gowing, *Johannes Vermeer* (London: Blandford Press, 1961), 24. 51. December 12, 1963, letter from David Carritt of Christie's, London, to Theodore Rousseau, chief curator of European Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Leiden Collection's document.
52. December 12, 1963, letter from David Carritt of Christie's, London, to Theodore Rousseau, chief curator of European Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Leiden Collection's document.
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61. Paul Jeromack, "Art Market Watch," *Artnet*, July 2004.
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