Fantasy Meets Reality in Vermeer's "Girl With a Pearl Earring"

by Ben Davis

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Johannes Vermeer, "Girl with a Pearl Earring," c. 1665

Many great paintings have earned their place in the canon of art history, but there are only a very, very few celebrity paintings. The just-opened show at the Frick Collection brings together some 15 Dutch masterpieces from the Hague's Mauritshuis museum, which is under renovation, by legendary Old Masters like Rembrandt and Hals. But everyone knows that Johannes Vermeer's diminutive "Girl With a Pearl Earring" (ca. 1665) is the larger-than-life star here. News that the canvas has alighted in New York has sent people stampeding to the Upper East Side, in much the same way that they stampeded to MoMA in March when it was announced that Tilda Swinton would be sleeping there in a box — only the "Girl," I think, is a bigger star than Swinton. Not only has it has inspired a best-selling novel and a Scarlett Johanssen movie, but earlier this year the *Guardian* actually proposed a fan fiction contest.

Hung in her own chamber (the show's other paintings are crowded together off to the side), the young woman in the picture greets visitors to the Frick with her cinematic sideways

look, conveying a flirtatious but fragile air of mystery. Fittingly, the artist who made this painting remains himself something of an enigma, despite a century and a half of art-historical curiosity about him. (Of modest fame in his day, Vermeer was largely forgotten until the mid-19th century, when he began his steady ascent to rockstardom.) He was a child of the Dutch Golden Age, living in the wake of the decades-long struggle of the Netherlands to tear itself free of the sclerotic grasp of Spain's Hapsburg crown, a struggle that laid the groundwork for Holland to become as the world's very first capitalist economy. For a half century, it was the most economically propulsive region in the world, a tiny nation with a merchant empire that stretched from Japan, where the Dutch were the first to establish formal trading ties, to the New World, where they laid the foundations for New York. These epochal societal transformations fertilized the artistic renaissance of the era: A rising new class of merchants and burghers displaced aristocrats as patrons, and new money created a tremendous hunger for novel decorations.

Vermeer, however, lived not in the swarming metropolis of Amsterdam but in relatively provincial Delft. In Protestant Holland, he married a Catholic, and converted to Catholicism himself, living and working in his mother-in-law's house, whose luminous interiors provide the setting for most of his paintings. Only a few dozen canvasses are attributed to Vermeer, which may be because he worked slowly and deliberately, using particularly rich and expensive pigments (that amazing ultramarine). But it also may be because he had more immediate concerns, including providing for eleven children. We know his artistic opinion was respected: He supplemented his living as an art dealer and became the head of the Guild of Saint Luke, the local organization that worked to certify painters and prevent competition from outside artists. But as the Dutch economy went into a tailspin in the 1670s and Delft's population cratered, Vermeer's fortunes took a turn for the worse. He died in 1675 at the age of 43, supposedly due to stress from his money woes, leaving a wife who had to petition the town elders to forgive the debts her artist husband had bequeathed her.

Such was the historical background that informed Vermeer's art, which explains some of its unique energies: It seems at once urbane and withdrawn into its own world, warmly luxurious and touched by quiet melancholy. He has all the earthy materialism of much Dutch Golden Age art; his famous paintings (minus the dreamy *View of Delft*) are mostly domestic interiors, and like other Dutch masterpieces they dwell on the textures and ornaments that were symbolic of a newly rich mercantilist society (maps, exotic carpets, and, of course, paintings themselves, often pictured in the backgrounds). At the same time, Vermeer's art feels cerebral and self-conscious, and tinged with longing. In many of his

famous canvasses, you are looking through doorways or at figures lost in the reverie of creation: a man painting a model, a woman sewing lace, a girl being tutored at piano.

He lived during a technologically curious age, when new ways of looking at the world were being explored. (Over in Amsterdam, the philosopher Baruch Spinoza, whose lifetime almost exactly overlapped with Vermeer's, made his living servicing the new interest in optics as a lens grinder.) The details of Vermeer's art are so vivid that art historians have spent a lot of time debating whether or not he worked from a *camera obscura*, the proto-photographic device. Even if he didn't, his work does often seem like it's trying to recreate the *camera obscura* effect, of being in a solitary room, seeing reality as a magical floating image. At any rate, he was fascinated with the functioning of light, and a work like "Girl With a Pearl Earring" feels almost more photorealist than realist, with its slightly woozy edges and glimmering patches of color; it seems to capture the image of a girl rather than a real girl.

Alternative titles for this famous painting include "Head of a Girl" or "Young Girl in a Turban," both of which lack the literary spice of its more established name, but both of which have their merits. The former emphasizes the archetypal quality of the image; the painting is a "tronie," a genre not meant as formal portraiture, but to evoke a type. The latter name emphasizes the element of dress-up and make-believe at play here, with the young woman clad in the fanciful headscarf, and that pronounced pearl at her ear. It has been suggested that the earring is an invention of Vermeer's imagination, and that no such jewelry existed in 17th-century Holland — it is a little marker of glamour and luxury that he could imagine, but that also eluded him. And so, all hype aside, the work's fabulous popularity speaks to something very basic and simple about how art works, how its ability to mix lie and truth into some strange new thing is what leads people to want to lose themselves in it.

"Vermeer, Rembrandt, and Hals: Masterpieces of Dutch Painter from the Mauritshuis" is on view at the Frick Collection, 1 E 70th St, New York, through January 19, 2013.