

Time in Vermeer's Life and Art as Demonstrated in *Milkmaid* and *Lacemaker*

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مفهوم الزمن في حياة وفن فيرمير كما يظهر في لوحتي

Lacemaker و Milkmaid

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Abstract

Vermeer never left his city Delft, unlike his fellow men that moved to big cities for prosperous life and bigger art market. He dedicated his life to painting domestic space with its devotees who were mostly women. Painting process, regardless of being intellectual, creative and experimental, for Vermeer it needs commitment, strength and time. He was accustomed to spend long time in his studio since it was not only a working place, but an escapade from his heavy burden and financial restraint. His life seems to intersect with the lives of the people he presented in works such as the *Milkmaid* (1658) and the *Lacemaker* (1669). Vermeer and his painted figures are deeply absorbed in their own world and seem analogous in many respects: precise work, extended time, inadequate space, countless details and silent existence. In his thirty-five paintings, he painted forty women performing their tasks in great patience. His artwork illustrated a compassionate view of women. This paper assumes that the artist's observation of his broad time influences his art in many ways: He arrests the time to freeze moments of doing simple tasks; he paints static and expressionless figures; he exhibits local interiors, domestic objects and scrutinized details. **Keywords:** Vermeer, freezing time, expressionless, *Milkmaid*, *Lacemaker*

Introduction

Throughout the seventeenth century, the Dutch controlled the Baltic Sea Trade. Ships departed from Amsterdam ports to travel the world, trading slaves, spices, grain, wood, and iron. Merchants and fishermen were sailing for long travels, while their women waiting at home. Neither Vermeer (1632-1675) nor his paintings has traveled out of Delft. He devoted himself to paint Dutch interiors, domestic lives and females doing simple tasks. His paintings prove that he spent most of his time in his studio at home; you notice one specific room for the setting of eight paintings; his wife, mother-in-law

ملخص

لم يترك فيرمير مدينته ديلفت Delft ويذهب إلى المدن الكبرى باحثاً عن حياة أفضل وسوق أوسع للفن كباقي فناني عصره بهولندا. لقد وهب هذا الفنان حياته لرسم الأماكن المحيطة به بما فيها من أشخاص وكان معظمهم من النساء. كانت عملية الرسم لدى فيرمير تستغرق وقتاً طويلاً بالإضافة إلى الجهد العقلي والإبداعي والتجربي كالذي يبذله أي فنان آخر. لم يكن الوقت الطويل الذي يمضيه الفنان في مرسمه الذي كان في بيته بغرض العمل فقط ولكن كان هروبا من مسؤولياته الكثيرة ومشاكله المادية الكبيرة. وكما يبدو أن حياة فيرمير الخاصة تداخلت مع الحياة الوهمية التي نسجها لشخصه في الأعمال الفنية وخاصة في اللوحتين المختارتين لهذه الدراسة وهما *Milkmaid* في عام 1658 و *Lacemaker* في عام 1669. يفترض هذا البحث إنعكاس مفهوم فيرمير الشخصي للزمن على فنه من خلال تجميده للحظة معينة يتم فيها تصوير عمل بسيط، ورسمه لأشخاص في أوضاع ساكنة وبدون تعبير. كما اهتم كثيرا برسم التصميم الداخلي وبتفاصيله الصغيرة باتقان والتي لا يمكن أن ترى إلا بالملاحظة الدقيقة. ويصل البحث إلى أنه ليس شخصه هي التي تنوب بعمق في عالمها الخاص فقط بل فيرمير نفسه أيضا. ويظهر البحث كذلك التشابه بين الفنان وشخصه في أشياء كثيرة مثل الدقة الشديدة في العمل، والحاجة إلى وقت طويل لإنجازه، والتواجد في فراغ محدود، والإهتمام بالتفاصيل، بالإضافة إلى الهدوء والإستغراق الشديدين في العمل. لقد رسم فيرمير في خمس وثلاثين لوحة أربعين امرأة تقوم كل منهن بعملها بصبر وأناة بحيث يظهر فيها جميعا تقدير وتعاطف الفنان معهن في حالة لا توجد لدى أي فنان آخر.

and daughters are portrayed in many paintings. In general, his perception of women is always sympathetic and considerate and his painted women look realistic and far away from idealization. As a result of being captivated in his small space, Vermeer's name was local in Delft and after his death, it was gone soon and his paintings were out of sight. De Monconys, a French traveler visited Delft after 1675 and mentioned many names and places in his diary, but nothing about Vermeer.⁽¹⁾ There are four main reasons for neglecting such a great artist; personal, social, artistic and religious. As a man, it seems he was not ambitious enough to go further than Delft or to have access to the circle of elite collectors. His family had negative influences, too; a big family of a wife and fifteen children financially tied him up.⁽²⁾ Sometimes Vermeer was unable to provide bread for his family and simply couldn't afford paints for his work without support from Pieter Claez van Ruijven, his only patron.⁽³⁾ Many of his paintings were given to creditors for the huge debt the artist built up.⁽⁴⁾ As an artist, he never portrayed politicians, religious, or historical figures, unlike most Dutch artists. In his time, most artists distributed their images through engraving and etching techniques; Vermeer was not a printmaker. Selling his artworks to one collector was a fatal mistake; twenty one paintings were in Jacob Dissius collection, Van Ruijven's son-in-law. He rarely signed his paintings; therefore, his paintings were often confused and faked by other artists. Having painted small artworks, they were probably stored in cabinets and not exposed to many people. The last reason is religious; converting from Protestant to Catholic to marry his wife isolated Vermeer from his community. Catholics were explicitly forbidden to practice their faith in the public and the Catholic Churches were hidden.⁽⁵⁾ Many reasons worked out to neglect a great artist until he was rediscovered in the mid-nineteenth century.

The present study intends to investigate time in Vermeer's life and art. The paper demonstrates time in two paintings, Milkmaid and Lacemaker. It also studies the condition of Vermeer and his painted figures; the notion of time in his art; how he transforms expressionless and static figures into expressive and dynamic paintings; and the presentation of interior objects and small details.

Vermeer and His Painted Figures

Vermeer and his painted figures are deeply absorbed in their own world and seem similar in many aspects: their precise work, extended time, inadequate space, countless details and silent existence. Doing his paintings, he needs time, dedication and patience similar to other daily tasks such as making food and clothes. He was making his art almost for one patron; same as the milk maid and the lace maker who worked hard for their masters. In the Milkmaid, Vermeer heightened the maid to an ideal woman, "a paragon of homely virtue. She might be seen as the essence of the Dutch character: strong, simple, and direct" (Heindorff, 2005).⁽⁶⁾ In the Lacemaker,⁽⁷⁾ the girl captures the viewer by her dedication to work, bathed in soft and bright light that is reflected on her forehead and fingers. Her bent head shows how completely she concentrates on her work; neither does she look at the painter nor the viewer, the same as the Milkmaid⁽⁸⁾, whose heavy pottery jug needs a lot of attention, cleverness and precision.

The Notion of Time in Vermeer's Art

The artist's observation of his broad time influences him to arrest the time in painting and freeze moments of doing simple tasks. Unexciting moments are transformed into the most interesting instants in eternal truth, absolute devotion and timelessness. Vermeer engaged both figures in frozen time, timeless presence to bind hardworking with dignity and morality. He stops the time to freeze different moments: happy, exciting or tedious.

Horsley makes an interesting connection between Vermeer's artworks and love, asking "why do we fall in love with someone?" His answer is that because we feel them according to collective factors, temporal, psychological, physical and emotional. The author believes that "Vermeer's paintings freeze such moments. They infatuate us. They are ineffable, endearing and, despite their apparent stillness, energetic. They capture concentration; they are intense" (2001).

The Milk maid is pouring a thin dribble of milk; the viewer sees a woman elongating the process of dispensing. Vermeer lowers the bottom of milk jug so not release more. In reality, the process does not take place this way, unless one particularly insists to spend longer time doing it. Otherwise, Vermeer would have lowered the jug's top to make it release more milk and the maid finish the task faster. Hence she seems enjoying her job. Her descending eyes patiently looking at the leisurely-milk flow look like a mother breastfeeding her child in both patience and pleasure. The notion of time in both cases –the milkmaid and a mother- is irrelevant because they are willing to keep on doing it as long as needed.

Lessing states that "the visual art should concentrate on the moments of stillness" (1984).⁽⁹⁾ Alejandro Vergara states that "temporal freezing [is] implied by moving liquids" (2003). The Milk pitcher is never empty; Lefcowitz adds that "our perception of such images marks our efforts to stop the progress of time" (2004). Weschler too sees the painted figure as frozen in time and eternally considerate (1996). Pouring milk and making lace seem to take longer time than in reality; "once again Vermeer succeeded in transforming a transitory image into one of eternal truth" (Harden, 2008). Gombrich supports transfixing and preserving a moment for eternity, putting one condition that the moment "... clearly must not be an ugly moment" (1964). What Vermeer did is choosing an appealing setting, graceful poses and preserved simple moments for eternity.

Expressionless and Static Figures

Although Vermeer's painted figures look static and unexpressive, he created very expressive paintings without putting in any facial gestures. Their heads are bent to avoid any kind of eye contact; on contrary they captivate the viewer by their kindness, simplicity and sincerity. Both figures are enveloped in unusual expressive qualities that come from what they do, how they do it and where. You see their lowered heads, eyes, shoulders, arms, hands, fingers; milk jug, bobbin and threads; in each painting they converge at one single point (Gowing, 1963). The artist invested a sort of tension by focusing on his figure to allow more concentration on the task per se and show both formal and expressive

qualities. The viewer is relieved by the light flow on the faces, projecting both patience and dedication. He arranges his static figures in a dramatic setting, utilizing lights, colors, interior elements and diminutive details to add expression and dynamicity. He modifies the real world in order to realize the maximum perfection and the most powerful 'indirect' expression. In Vermeer's art, expression comes from all charming details, ultimate truth and technical qualities.

The artist adds more expression to his painting by using deep and sophisticated colors that are described as "dust of crushed pearls" (Wheelock, 1995). He mostly uses blue,⁽¹⁰⁾ yellow and grayish white. The jug, bowl, pitcher and dark bread⁽¹¹⁾ have glittering impasto⁽¹²⁾ sparkles (Heindorff, 2005). He also employed the psychological effect of colors to add more expressiveness; the lemon yellow in the lace maker's dress is a dynamic and strong hue that reinforces the perception of intense effort needed for her hand work. Vermeer uses yellow in the milk maid's dress for the same reason.

In a close study, one clearly observes the unique treatment of light; the artist portrays reflection of real light, neither idealized nor decorative. Once light flows from the window, it falls on both women's hands to emphasize their hand work. Cool milk also flows from the jug and the table's blue-textile cover continues the suggestion of flow.

In the Milkmaid, he sets off still life in the foreground against the maid to alert the viewer to the contrast between the active humanity and her inanimate environment.⁽¹³⁾ The connection between animate and inanimate is a fine white thread that is the milk flow. If you follow its dynamic lines, you will see Vermeer's paralleled curves from the woman's head, scarf and shoulders to the focal point that is milk flow.⁽¹⁴⁾ Her smooth outline, tucked up skirt, face, jug, pitcher, and the bread, show easy-going spherical forms that evokes Raphael's style.⁽¹⁵⁾ In the Lacemaker as well, Vermeer uses paralleled curves starting from the girl's head, hair parting, forehead, eyebrows, eyes, mouth, chin, collar, ending in one point that is her hands holding the lace bobbin⁽¹⁶⁾ to highlight both of the pensive figure and her task. An inverted triangle can be drawn from her hair down to her fingers –which again draw another small triangle- a recurrence of the triangular table for lace-making. The blue cushion, the book with many reading marks and table cover prove that the artist has a great talent for seeing surface patterns and surface depth at the same time

Presentation of Interior Objects and Small Details

Having stayed most of the time home, he had more chances to observe interiors and scrutinize details. Vermeer shows a great interest in painting female clothes such as, hats, pearls and colorful caffa folded drapery.⁽¹⁷⁾ Vermeer, who had long time to contemplate, his preference to paint this material, according to Montias and Janson, is a childhood remembrance of his father who was a master caffa worker (2001).⁽¹⁸⁾ The influence of his native culture is clearly exhibited in his paintings; Delft tile, pottery, lace, textile, coal foot-warmer, lace-making triangular table and the sewing cushion, all add seventeenth-century-Dutch interior intimate warmth. Another local influence on his art

is the white- washed wall in the background of both paintings which not only isolates the figures, but also reflects light and cleanness of Holland and of Delft in specific. It is interesting to mention that both words 'beautiful' and 'clean' mean 'Schoon' in Dutch language; so whatever Vermeer paints is beautiful and clean as well.

In both paintings, there is a dark silhouette against the grayish-white-washed wall, in which you are astonished with careful details; a nail set high with shadow and an irregular hole stands for a removed nail. Another detail is exhibited when the artist portrays the social and economic class of the milk maid; he elaborates on her rough clothing made of cheap, thick and old cloth that is worn for ages. Lighting the yellow upper part of the dress shows uneven stitches along left arms and shoulders (Wheelock, 1995). The cracked windowpane is another example of fine details that add expression to the painting and proof how much time he spent to perceive, observe, study and finally paint every single detail.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the seventeenth century, the French army had repeatedly invaded the United Provinces; consequently Dutch economy and art market were negatively affected (Gaskell, 2000).⁽¹⁹⁾ Vermeer isolate himself from his surroundings, the outside bloodshed and the inside hardship. He does the same to his painted figures (mostly family members), to create his peaceful subjects. He transforms tedious daily life duties into pleasing and tranquil paintings and concentrates on few paintings, studying light and color, domestic interiors, and freezing the process of doing simple tasks to mirror the frozen time in which he lived. Whether time is countable or uncountable, when one thinks of a time passage, it is countable. Time is relatively perceived depending on the viewer's personal reading of visual images. When a viewer thinks reasonably about cascading milk and crafting lace the milk flow will end as long as the second pitcher on the table is filled up or the first pitcher between her hands is empty. Also the other girl will finish making lace after a few hours of work and goes back home. The viewer sees each painting as an endless process, a photograph of it. The involved time here is artistic, perceptual and emotional.

To sum it up, Vermeer's life intersects with many of his painted figures, such as the Milkmaid and the Lacemaker. He and his painted figures are mesmerized in their own limited space. The artist's observation of his broad time influences his art. The extraordinary depth of Vermeer's vision highlighted the significance of space and time. He succeeded in transforming static and expressionless figures into dynamic and expressive paintings. Understanding the psychological effect of colors added different layers of meanings to his paintings. Passionately, he is able to depict every effect of sunlight as it falls upon his objects. He also exhibits many interior objects such as kitchen

crocery, foot warmer, tiles, table-cloth and cushions. Vermeer doesn't miss any of his real surrounding; he pays a tremendous attention to details like the nail, the nail's shadow, a hole in the wall, red and white threads, a book with reading marks and the transparent white collar with its shadow. Both paintings are perceived as an allegory of social values and domestic virtue. They also draw social and political statements on the status of working women at the time. If art was not a life necessity in Vermeer's life, he would have moved to the flourishing Amsterdam like most Dutch artists of 1660s. Although his life is underprivileged and financial stress behind his death, there are few advantages of Vermeer's poverty. He doesn't hire a paid model because he couldn't afford one. Having his wife and daughters modeling for most of his paintings,⁽²⁰⁾ made his figures look familiar and natural. To spend most of his time in his studio painting interiors that are studied today in history of Dutch Baroque interior design is another advantage. His oeuvres give a lot of information to understand the seventeenth-century Dutch culture. Although his painted figures may look impassive, they reflect unusual grace and expression.



Figure 1. Milkmaid, 1658, Rijks Museum, 46x41 cm.



Figure 2.: Lacemaker, 1669, Louvre Museum, 24x21 cm.

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Notes

1. The same traveler has visited Vermeer in 1663 during his life and saw one of his paintings (Kramer, 1970, p. 390). Another source says that Vermeer didn't have any of his works at home; the French traveler saw one painting at a baker's place (Montias, 1991, p. 98).
2. Four of Vermeer's children died young. The mortality rate among young children in the seventeenth century was high because of incurable diseases and bad hygiene (Snabel, 1996).
3. It is suggested that his patron Ruijven was buying him expensive paint (Montias, 1991, p. 99).
4. Vermeer's widow, Catherina Bolnes pledged two paintings to the baker Van Buyten, as payment of the sum of 616 guilder for delivered bread (Blankert, 1978, p. 10). In his Milkmaid, Vermeer portrayed different kinds of bread that look fresh, crispy and delicious, sadly enough, in reality he could not pay for bread.
After death, Vermeer's widow has hid his painting "The Art of Painting" in her mother's place to avoid selling it to creditors.
5. See (Montias 1991) for documents of the artist's marriage in the hidden church outside Delft.
6. In contrary to common mode in painting maids, in which maids look lazy and dull.
7. In the seventeenth century, making lace was a common subject in painting. Vermeer was influenced by Nicolaes Maes's painting Lacemaking, 1659 (Blankert, 1995).
8. A historian of seventeenth-century Dutch, points out that in Dutch countryside the whole milk was largely distrusted; one Dutch physician of the period recommended that a drink of milk must be followed with a rinse of wine or honey in order to prevent tooth decay (Schama, 2004, p. 34).
9. Lessing also discusses the distinction between time art and space art.
10. Vermeer used very expensive pigment such as lapis lazuli and natural ultramarine provided by his patron Ruijven (Montias, 1991, p.55).
11. Dark bread made of whole wheat was popular for poor families, while the white bread for rich. Many Dutch paintings at the time of Vermeer portrayed still life with bread; examples are: are Floris Claesz van Dijck and Peter Claesz.
12. Impasto is an Italian word means (dough). It stands for using very thick paints laid on the surface that the strokes of brush are visible. In addition to visual texture, it adds real rough texture, light and shadows (Lucie-Smith, 2003).
13. The term still life comes from a Dutch word 'stilleven' that means still model (Albany Institute, 2008).
14. In contrast, in many other paintings, he used very accurate perspective and geometrical lines that most data I found supported the use of camera obscura.
15. To paint his subjects, Raphael starts with drawing many ovals and circles in anticipation of coming up with dynamic figures and the best composition.

16. There are two different ways of making lace: bobbin and needlepoint. It was the product of industry that provided a living to thousands of workers, especially in Belgium and Netherlands. Lace making has old history that goes back to ancient Rome. In the fifteenth century, it was assigned in Belgium schools; the first book of patterns came in the sixteenth century in Italy. Making lace was a full-time job for both males and females, who worked hard for minimum wages in unhealthy dark and humid rooms. (Brassac, 2001).
17. Caffa is a satin made from silk and linen and widely used for clothes, curtains and furniture-covering.
18. See Montias, 1991 and Janson, 2008
19. Vermeer's family was falling further into debt as a result of 1670s wars between Netherlands and both France and England; he lost his small farm. His mother-in-law, who was financially helping his big family, lost her income from rented houses (Montias, 1991, p. 32).
20. For bearing fifteen children, she was pregnant fifteen times. For money wise, he wouldn't have afforded to hire a paid model. The female members of his family were modeling for him. In his paintings, there are about four pregnant women, which was not a common subject in art (Winkel, 1998, p. 327).