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The Reflection and the Mirror in Vermeer

Within the mysterious interiors of Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675) lie the figures and objects that make up these engrossing spaces. They define areas of color, create corners and angles, and nestle around figures just so, their presence adding to the ambiguity and specificity of the works, enchanting viewers and perplexing scholars. What do they mean, and what does their existence contribute to the painting? Vermeer's exasperatingly wonderful skill of showing without telling, the hazy but deft push-and-pull between what he allows the viewer to know and what he or she must infer, both enhances and deters this quest for meaning in his paintings. One of the objects in Vermeer's small oeuvre that scholars have not discussed at great length is the mirror. Though the motif is not used very often in the work of Vermeer, it is used often enough to make one wonder about its significance within Vermeer's interiors. How, exactly, does an object that at once both is utterly standard in everyday life, and carries a rich symbolic history operate in the seemingly tranquil domestic interiors of this mystifying artist?

By the Numbers: The Mirrors in, and of, Vermeer

It is best to begin by grounding oneself in the paintings themselves. First, however, the idea of the "mirror" ought to be expanded for the purposes of this exploration. After all, mirrors are nothing but enhanced glass: a colorless foil backing placed on a pane of flat, or curved, glass that increases its reflective quality.¹ But without

¹ Jonathan Miller, *On Reflection* (London: National Gallery Publications Ltd., 1998), 34.

the metal (often silver)² backing, glass still reflects, and thus adds the more complicated quality of transparency to it. And thus, “reflective surface” might be a better term, for Vermeer uses both glass and the actual mirror in his work.

Vermeer depicted reflective surfaces of various types only six times throughout all of his work: *A Maid Asleep* (c. 1657), *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (c. 1657), *The Music Lesson* (c. 1662-65), *A Woman Holding a Balance* (c. 1662-64), *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* (c. 1664), and *Allegory of Faith* (c. 1671-74), figs. 1-6 respectively. Each of these six paintings is rather different from the others; beyond the reflective surface, there is little, besides the obvious female figure in a domestic interior, that links them.

Of these six, just over half of those surfaces contain a mirror, and those are *A Maid Asleep*, *The Music Lesson*, *Woman Holding a Balance*, and *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*. But only *The Music Lesson* depicts a mirror whose reflection we can see; the rest of the surfaces are either in shadow or not visible from our point of view. However, Vermeer does show reflections in other glass surfaces in two other works—*Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* and *Allegory of Faith*, bringing the total of actual reflections to three.

According to his death inventory, Vermeer himself owned four mirrors. These mirrors were situated throughout the house—a “mirror with an ebony frame,” in the front hall (*Voorhuys*), a “bad mirror,” in a room adjacent to the front hall,³ a “little mirror” in

² Alan Macfarlane and Gerry Martin, *The Glass Bathyscaphe* (London: Profile Books, Ltd., 2002), 74.

³ John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and his Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 342.

the cellar room,⁴ and just a plain “mirror” in the back room.⁵ While of course we will never know if the mirrors in Vermeer’s house were actually used by the artist for these paintings, it is certainly a possibility, given his use in his work of other objects he seemed to have owned. Regardless, this underlines the fact that the interiors in which Vermeer lived, like the ones on which he based his compositions, held mirrors that had a utilitarian purpose. Perhaps, then, it was the artist in him, surely aware of the object’s rich symbolic ancestry, who decided to include it—and all its implications—in his art.

Mirrors in Western Society and Art: An Object and a Symbol

The mirror’s history, especially in relation to Vermeer’s oeuvre, is twofold: that as an object and that as a symbol. As an object, it all begins with glass, that magical liquid-solid form of sand⁶ that can be clear enough to look straight through or reflective enough to show you your own image. From Egyptian jewelry beads to monumental stained glass windows⁷ to domestic vessels,⁸ glass has been used throughout the ages of Western (and non-Western) society to show status, wealth, or the reflection of its owner.

During the Renaissance and Baroque periods, there were three major areas of glass (and mirror) production: Germany, Islamic states, and Italy, specifically Venice. Indeed, glassmakers in Venice even patented a mirror-making method in the mid-1400s.⁹ While Venice was, and remains today, one of the best glassmaking cities in the world,

⁴ Montias, 343.

⁵ Montias, 344.

⁶ Mark Prendergast, *Mirror Mirror: A History of the Human Love Affair with Reflection* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 116.

⁷ Prendergast, 117.

⁸ Macfarlane, 20.

⁹ Prendergast, 119.

they may have learned the craft originally (via trade economy) from German glassmakers in the forests of Northern Europe, where colony-like workforces created *Waldglas* (forest glass).¹⁰ It is likely that Vermeer's mirrors would have originated from one of these places.

The mirror was also lauded as an essential tool for the artist, particularly in the Renaissance. Leonardo da Vinci declared: "The mirror, above all, the mirror is our teacher."¹¹ He encouraged artists to use the mirror both to distort their world, thus making shape and composition easier to understand, and to correct their paintings, using it to check the actual world (in the mirror) with the depicted one (in the artist's image).¹² Of course, Brunelleschi famously used mirrors to discover perspective.¹³ Both concepts traveled north before Vermeer was born, and likely the artist was aware of both of these Renaissance masters' techniques. And interestingly, in Bruges—a Flemish city just south of Delft—painters were part of the same artists' guild as the mirror makers.¹⁴

Symbolically, the mirror has a birthplace that is less clear; indeed, the ancestry of the mirror's meaning can be traced to the Middle Ages, and even further back.

Regardless, we must take into account both its religious and allegorical allusions up until Vermeer's time. In Christian iconography, the mirror could symbolize the Virgin Mary, and by extension, virginity, chastity, and ultimately purity, for the clarity of the mirror's

¹⁰ Prendergast, 117-118.

¹¹ Prendergast, 131.

¹² Macfarlane, 64.

¹³ Prendergast, 134.

¹⁴ Prendergast, 136.

reflected image.¹⁵ Not only could she be represented by the mirror, but also by glass itself—for light, as Heinrich Schwarz eloquently notes, can “penetrate glass without violating it,” just as the Virgin herself was impregnated.¹⁶ Robert Campin, in his *Annunciation* (fig. 7), takes the symbol a step further: a tiny figure of the Christ Child with a cross flies through the window on rays of golden light, heading straight for Mary’s womb, illustrating the above.

Mirrors were also the attributes of various allegories, as illustrated by a popular Italian emblem guidebook by Cesare Ripa. His *Iconologia* was translated and reprinted for various readerships after its unillustrated, 1653 publication,¹⁷ including a 1644 Dutch edition, by Dirck Pietersz. Pers, of which Vermeer and his contemporaries were probably aware.¹⁸ However, even if Vermeer was not, he would certainly have known of the various allegorical interpretations of the mirror. The three main allegories that Ripa tells us use mirrors as essential attributes are split into two camps: the positive and the negative.

Of the positive, there are two. Ripa writes of Truth (fig. 8): “Truth is to be seen in a mirror, if we honestly see what is reflected. Truth is like a set of balancing scales, made up equally of things as they are and as they are perceived.”¹⁹ Ripa’s discussion of perception brings up an important concept related to the mirror—how does it help us, or

¹⁵ Herbert Graves, *The Mutable Glass: Mirror-imagery in titles and texts of the Middle Ages and English Renaissance*, trans. Gordon Collier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 105.

¹⁶ Heinrich Schwarz, “The Mirror in Art,” *Art Quarterly* 15 (1952), 98.

¹⁷ Cesare Ripa, *Baroque and Rococo Pictorial Imagery: The 1658-60 Hertel Edition of Ripa’s ‘Iconologia’*, trans. Edward A. Maser (New York: Dover, 1971), ix.

¹⁸ Pers, Dirck Pietersz. *Cesare Ripa’s Iconologia of Uytbeeldinghen Verstants*, 1644, <http://www.dbnl.nl/tekst/pers001cesa01/pers001cesa01_1152.htm>.

¹⁹ Ripa in Maser, plate 50, n.p.

hinder us, in perceiving ourselves? In this context, the mirror also represents self-knowledge, a concept that goes as far back as Socrates' creed ("know thyself").²⁰ The mirror's meaning of self-knowledge is also tied to Prudence (fig. 9), one of the four cardinal virtues, is, as seen in Pers' illustration to Ripa's text, always holding a mirror and accompanied by a snake, symbolizing wisdom.²¹ Her mirror implies that the quality of prudence gives the wise man the ability to see who he really is.

Alternatively, there is also the allegory of Pride,²² who is bedecked in jewels and gazes at her image within a mirror, which sometimes holds within it the image of Satan.²³ Pride, in particular, lends herself and her attributes to many a moralizing genre scene among Vermeer's contemporaries. One such example is Gerard Dou's *Lady at her Toilet*, 1657 (fig. 10), which has all of the usual attributes of an allegorical representation of pride, adapted for the secular realm: she is surrounded by rich, sumptuous belongings; a maid dutifully assists her; she primps her hair, while gazing at her reflection in the mirror. Though one cannot say that this genre scene is definitively a representation of pride, certainly there are deliberate overtones of it—a common practice of genre scenes at this time.

A final use of the mirror in art connects its symbolic and utilitarian functions. Jonathan Miller calls this use the "self-assertion" of reflections²⁴—that is, differing types of self-portraiture, for which the mirror clearly proved essential. Of the different types,

²⁰ Nanette Salomon, "Vermeer and the Balance of Destiny", in *Essays in Northern European Art Presented to Egbert Haverkamp Begemann on his Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Anne-Marie Logan (Doornspijk: Davaco, 1983), 219.

²¹ James Hall, *Subjects and Symbols in Art* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1979), 254-55.

²² Unfortunately, no image of Pers' Pride could be found. See above description and the later Maser edition of Ripa, plate 126, for further description of the emblem.

²³ Hall, 253.

²⁴ Miller, 189.

there is one that is particularly relevant to Northern art history: what he dubs an “incidental appearance,” in which the artist appears in a small, almost unnoticeable detail, a sort of special guest in his or her own painting.²⁵ This technique is exemplified by—and perhaps originated from—Jan van Eyck, in his *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait* (fig. 12). The convex mirror behind the couple depicts the scene in front of them, as a mirror would; and in that scene (presumably, in our space), we see a figure in a telltale red turban, whom many scholars believe is van Eyck himself. This subtle detail shows perhaps that van Eyck was a notary of sorts at the wedding the painting commemorates; but more importantly, it is a way for the artist to assert his control over and pride in his painting.

Overall—as both object and symbol—the mirror seems to have acted as a sort of catalyst for the self-discovery and individualism so prevalent in the Renaissance, only a half-century before Vermeer’s lifetime, which certainly—even if indirectly—contributed to his work. This theory, introduced by Alan Macfarlane and Gerry Martin, nicely connects the mirror’s history and symbolism in one. In conjunction with many other outward factors (the growing individualism of Christianity’s teachings, the rediscovery of classical ideals, and the economy), they contend that mirrors and glass, with their reflective qualities that encouraged an individual to study both himself and the surrounding world through new inventions, helped to catapult the intellectual atmosphere into one of enlightenment and innovative technology that paved the way for the modern

²⁵ Miller, 196.

world.²⁶ Certainly, this new technology and individualism was present, even subconsciously, in the mind of Vermeer as he created his work.

Strange Space and Wrong Reflection: Reflections in Vermeer

As discussed, a mirror has two “facets”: the object itself and its reflection. Let us look first at reflection, particularly in *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (hereafter referred to as the Dresden *Letter Reader* for simplicity) and *The Music Lesson*.²⁷ In each of these paintings, Vermeer shows us a great deal: various objects surround a female figure in a carefully lit domestic interior. But characteristically, he “tells” us very little, leaving us looking and wondering: what were his intentions in creating these spaces? Are they meant to be something “more” than just domestic interiors? And can the reflections in these paintings give us a hint as to what those intentions were?

In the Dresden *Letter Reader* (1657, fig. 2) a young woman in profile stands suspended, gazing downwards at a loosely held, well-worn sheet of paper, utterly lost in thought. She is surrounded by objects: a still life of fruit on a looming table in front of her; an open window; a chair; a whitewashed wall; and a deep green satin curtain. The girl’s expression, calm but complex, passive but engaged, immediately entrances the viewer, who wants to know her story—what is in the letter; what does she think about the letter, and its sender; who, and where, is she? But these questions are not jarring; indeed, they merely incite curiosity, for the calmness inherent in the rest of the painting draws the

²⁶ Macfarlane, 75-77.

²⁷ For a brief discussion of the reflection in *Allegory of the Faith*, see footnote 34.

viewer into this carefully constructed space, distracting us from Vermeer's game of showing without telling, initiated in this early painting.

For, as in most of Vermeer's paintings, it can be argued that space is the subject of this piece. The composition is carefully, painstakingly created; the objects are shapes, which create one of Vermeer's first attempts at a balanced, well-crafted pictorial area. Every corner and edge frames the girl, creating these shapes. The corner of the window protrudes just inches from her profile; the still life and the tablecloth slope gently downwards, allowing the eye to curve back around to the figure. This masterful still life effectively cuts us off from the girl: we cannot quite ground ourselves in the space. Instead, we can only look in, quietly trying not to disturb the girl. Soft daubs of paint glitter on the surface of the tablecloth, her coat and hair, and the edges of the windowpane, giving each object presence in the interior. The two curtains frame our vision: one, in the plane of the painting, echoes the letter, its heavy red folds falling downwards, draped over the open window; the other, a trompe-l'oeil, further separates us from this moment of thought, as if any moment the curtain could be tugged shut, and we ourselves would be left to our own thoughts.

The space, in fact, is slightly odd, and while the overall sense of introspection and tranquility still pervades, we cannot help feeling slightly disconcerted by our inability to position ourselves in it. We are doubly cut off from her, by trompe-l'oeil and still life, and without a sense of the floor other grounding architectural clue, we can barely imagine the space behind the still life (how far are we from the girl and the window?). When one studies the girl's reflection (fig. 12), our conception of this space is further complicated. The reflection is incorrect: her face should be turned slightly away from us, not in profile,

for us to be able to view her full face in the windowpane, as Vermeer presents it. According to X-ray examination, she *had* been turned slightly away from us, but Vermeer changed her pose to the one we see today²⁸—yet he did not change the reflection to correspond to it. Scholars tend to glaze over this detail, never assigning a reason for Vermeer’s decision. Vermeer was not a lazy painter—he certainly must have had a reason. What was his motivation for including a subtle, but nevertheless present, perspectival mistake?

To answer this, let us compare the Dresden *Letter Reader* to *The Music Lesson*, (fig. 3), a later painting that is both very different and quite similar to the pensive moment of the Dresden *Letter Reader*. In *The Music Lesson*, we have not one, but two figures practicing music at a set of virginals, pushed far to the back of the picture plane rather than closer to our view. But like the Dresden painting, we are in a sense separated from them, and although we believe initially that we can position ourselves into the painting, on closer inspection the task becomes more difficult. The floor tilts steeply towards us in deep perspective, encompassing half the painting in its almost dizzying incline. A huge, looming table with a pitcher atop it engulfs the right quarter of the painting. Far behind it, the figures practice away, engrossed in a moment of concentration, just like the letter reader. Above the virginals hangs a mirror on a slant, a conventional domestic place for a mirror to be placed (see fig. 13, Emmanuel de Witte’s *Woman at Virginals* of 1660). A blue chair and a viola da gamba further delay our visual journey to the human “action” in the painting—a human action that is still, and almost frozen.

²⁸ Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., *Jan Vermeer* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), 76.

But again, for Vermeer, this painting—even more so than the *Letter Reader*—is a study of shape, composition, and construction, more than of human activity. The shapes within it echo each other just as the hesitantly played notes of the virginals might reverberate in this large room. Rectangles ground the composition: the wood boards of the ceiling, the mirror frame, the painting-within-a-painting on the right, the many rectangles that make up the virginals, the back of the chair, and even the “white space” of the wall surrounding these objects create distinct edges and corners that frame other shapes. Trapezoids and diamonds complicate the composition: the tilting marble tiles, the seat of the chair, the stiff, angular folds of the tapestry tablecloth. And finally, four curved shapes cluster near the center-top-left of the painting: the man, his shape reflected by the vase on the table, and the woman, thus connected likewise (though less obviously) to the viola da gamba. The clarity and precision with which Vermeer executes this composition reveals his intense concern with what we now realize is perfection: he is utterly obsessed with creating an interior that is balanced and harmonious.²⁹

This is not without a cost, however. In his concern with this perfection, Vermeer has artfully ignored what many other contemporary artists probably would not: a concern for the realistic, true-to-life depiction of the room in which the figures are placed. Here, the viewer is immediately bothered by the strange, deep incline of the floor, and the skewed quality of the perspective. What further complicates the space—just as in the *Letter Reader*—is the reflection in the mirror (fig. 14). Again, this is the only mirror in Vermeer’s entire oeuvre that actually has a reflection the viewer can see: but it is quite a

²⁹ Wheelock suggests that Vermeer even went so far as to adjust the lid of the clavecin (virginals) to be “slightly wider to the right of the girl than it is to her left,” thus encouraging the viewer to subconsciously read the forms as separate shapes. See Wheelock, 100.

strange one, and indeed, perpetuates the idea that the space of the entire painting is simply not quite right. The reflection is painted with as much attention as the rest of the painting, but shows an almost surreally incorrect image. Within it, the woman turns as if glancing at the male figure; there is the corner of the tablecloth; and finally, we see the corner of a wooden artist's easel and, beside it, an artist's box.³⁰

Particularly disconcerting, though, is the reflection of the woman. The strangeness of the reflection in the Dresden *Letter Reader* is easily overlooked; its wavering glass panes distort the view naturally, and give another layer to the reflection that allows the viewer to more easily accept the strangeness of the space. Here, however, with the female figure directly below the slanted mirror's reflection, the inaccuracy is downright glaring. She should not be looking sideways at her companion/teacher—she should be studiously gazing downwards at the virginals. Just as in the Dresden painting, X-rays show that Vermeer adjusted the pose of the woman, who originally *was* looking at the man. Once again, scholars point the detail out, but never truly explain it.³¹ Moreover, the mirror, even though it is tilted downwards, does not reflect what is shown in the space between us and it: we see only the corner of the table, where we should see bits of the viola da gamba and the blue chair. In place of those objects, we see the artist's easel—a strange detail. It is unimaginable that Vermeer would not have realized that his

³⁰ Peter C. Sutton, *Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 344.

³¹ See especially Sutton, 344, who oddly and incorrectly asserts that the mirror's reflection “demonstrates Vermeer's sophisticated understanding of mirror images,” and Wheelock, 100, who simply points out the X-ray evidence of changes, as noted, and vaguely tells us the discrepancy “allow[s the two figures] to work more coherently in the total composition.”

change created a reflection that was incorrect; and so we must grapple with why Vermeer would have left such an obvious discrepancy in his carefully constructed work.

One possible reading of why these reflections are so strange is that Vermeer was trying to suggest the passage of time,³² which seems to be an unconventional part of his work, whose focus is normally on still, frozen moments in softly-lit interiors. However, it is certainly possible that these reflections represent past or future actions, implying some sort of chronological movement in the narratives, indeed, in the very lives, of these figures. For the Dresden *Letter Reader*, the movement is quite subtle: a gentle nod of the head, perhaps the result of a readjustment of her stance. For the woman at her *Music Lesson*, it is of a slightly greater consequence, but still has a fundamentally quiet quality. She has either just finished listening to the critique of her teacher, and glances down at her hands to attempt the piece again; or, if the mirror reflects a later moment, she has just completed her playing, and looks up for his approval, or criticism.

While this interpretation adds yet another layer to the mysteries that surround Vermeer's figures, there is yet more to be said; simply to show such a progression of time—a concept with which Vermeer does not seem to be overtly concerned in his other paintings—is probably not his ultimate intention of Vermeer in including these reflections in his work. Recall how carefully Vermeer constructs, depicts, and perfects his compositions: the only possible description for what he is doing is *manipulation*. Every object, every shape, every color and brushstroke—everything is manipulated to form a composition that is balanced, careful, and precise. When the viewer really studies

³² This concept was briefly mentioned in Arthur Wheelock's lecture, "What Makes a Vermeer a Vermeer?: Searching for Clues in the Conservation Laboratory" (27 November, 2007, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY), but has been expanded upon here by the author.

the work, they realize that something is not quite right, as we have seen. But they also come to explore the works so much that they realize that Vermeer's whole purpose, on a certain level, was the creation of a beautifully perfect surface: a flawlessly contrasting group of forms that comes together to form harmony and balance.

This begins to explain why Vermeer left these “wrong” reflections in the painting. Each of the reflections—especially the *Music Lesson*'s—give the viewer a visual clue of the strangeness of the space depicted. In realizing that the reflection is wrong, the viewer—as we have done—explores the rest of the space, and realizes that it, too, is not quite right. The ultimate effect of all of Vermeer's liberties in traditional compositional “correctness” is both slightly jarring and ultimately pleasing. In discovering the compositional details of these discrepancies, the viewer unearths evidence of the artist's touch. We see Vermeer's incredible skill in depicting these spaces—spaces that seem tranquil and perfect, and, in a sense, *are* tranquil and perfect (that is, their compositions are tranquil and perfect). But the spaces are only perfect because they are *imperfect*. The ambiguous space, framing elements, and trompe-l'oeil effects of the Dresden *Letter Reader* create a two-dimensional flawlessness; the tilted perspective, looming objects, and carefully constructed shapes of the composition make *The Music Lesson* a sophisticated study of precision and accomplishment. In each, the strange reflections serve as a catalyst for the viewer to notice not just these incredibly beautiful spaces, but Vermeer's own painstaking handiwork in creating them.

Underlining the artist's presence in *The Music Lesson*—and indeed, indirectly in all of Vermeer's oeuvre—is the artist's easel and artist's box reflected in the mirror. This device makes a nod to the fact that the painting was posed, but also gives us a view of

Vermeer's talent.³³ To expand on this in the context of his reflections and his perfected spaces, we can say that the inclusion of the easel is both his signature and his message to the observant viewer. Unlike van Eyck (recall fig. 11), Vermeer's signature is not a figural self-portrait, but an inanimate one, in the form of his tools, a poignant, and rare, self-reflection that allows us to explore, in the most indirect way, the psyche of this mysterious artist. The easel also acts as a message to the viewer, inviting them to register how strange the reflection is in the mirror, look even more closely at the carefully created composition of the painting, admire how beautifully and flawlessly the shapes fit together, and then return, once more, to the easel, to be reminded of the work the artist devoted to this piece, and realize the great and masterful talent of this man.³⁴

The Sun in the Morning and the Moon at Night: Mirror as a Light Source

With the important exception of the mirror in *The Music Lesson*, the three remaining mirrors in Vermeer's oeuvre do not reflect anything within their frames; indeed, can we only see the dark, impenetrable surface of one, and the rest are in "profile." Those three mirrors are in *A Maid Asleep* (or *Sleeping Girl*), *A Woman*

³³ Wheelock, 100.

³⁴ Not discussed in the above analysis is *Allegory of Faith* (fig. 6), the last of the three Vermeers that shows an actual reflection. In the glass orb hanging above Faith's head (fig. 15), the artist depicts, much like van Eyck (fig. 11), the rest of the room in front of the figure—that is, he shows the "real" space that we, the viewers, inhabit. Within this space, two figures can be seen: a figure shrouded in white seems to be entering the room (a thin individual in the exact center) and a figure that may be seated at the part of the table unable to be seen by the viewer (the white shape of a head and shoulder, far right). Is the figure Vermeer himself (unlikely, but still, a possibility), or perhaps the Holy Spirit? Though the identity—and indeed, even the actual presence—of each of these figures is certainly debatable, the fact remains that the reflection in the sphere can add an entirely new layer to the potential interpretations of the piece (which, unfortunately, the scope of this paper cannot explore).

Holding a Balance, and Woman with a Pearl Necklace. By refusing the viewer any glimpse into what these mirrors might show, Vermeer allows these objects to take on a more symbolic tone. Although it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to assign any definitive “meaning” to any of Vermeer’s paintings, there are historical connotations for the mirrors’ existence and indeed, certain aspects of the specific mirrors here, that can broaden and deepen our understanding and possible interpretations of the works, contributing to our wonder of them—which is, after all, part of the joy of immersing oneself in his interiors.

In the early *Sleeping Girl*, Vermeer shows us a young girl who has nodded off at a messy table that, like the still life in the roughly contemporary Dresden *Letter Reader*, separates the viewer from the scene. Indeed, a slightly more elaborate still life, with fruits, a glass, fabric, and a vase (as seen years later in *The Music Lesson*), is nestled among the thick folds of the tapestry tablecloth. We can see into the next room, considerably more well-ordered than the one in which we are ambiguously situated. The mirror (fig. 16) is utterly clouded; we cannot see anything within it. This painting seems to have had moralizing predecessors in both emblems and paintings that represent Sloth.³⁵ Perhaps, if we are to take this image as symbolic one, it parallels the girls’ inability to reflect upon her own situation, particularly with the clouded mirror in the next room, which could symbolize her inability to be self-aware. Again, while it is impossible to say authoritatively whether or not Vermeer intended for this interior to be interpreted

³⁵ See Wheelock, 74 for his more detailed discussion of these connections, and p. 52 for the related images, of the emblem by Hier. Wierix, *Acedia* (n.d.), and the related painting by Nicolas Maes, *The Idle Servant* (1655). See also Lawrence Gowing, *Vermeer*, 3rd. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 88, who mentions more of Maes’ works in the context of this painting.

this way, the connection is present. Moreover, in the context of this paper, this possible interpretation serves as a reminder of the fact that scholars are quick to attempt connections between Vermeer's works, ambiguous though they are, and emblems and allegories of the period.

The other two paintings that depict mirrors are two that also easily lend themselves to these sorts of interpretations, and it truly is tempting to read into the symbolic implications of the objects Vermeer places around his figures. Indeed, both of them—*Woman Holding a Balance* (fig. 4) and *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* (fig. 5)—have histories of scholarly debates concerning whether or not their female protagonists are allegories of Pride. For both, the motifs fit perfectly: a woman surrounded by jewelry, textiles, and other riches, dressed well, with a mirror placed directly across from each. While for *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*, the theme is more conventional, especially for Vermeer (recall Gerard Dou's *Lady at her Toilet*, fig. 10), *Woman Holding a Balance* has considerably more complicated interpretational possibilities.

Instead of gazing into the mirror, the *Woman Holding a Balance* is engrossed in the empty set of scales in her hands,³⁶ and stands against the backdrop of a large painting of the Last Judgment. For many scholars, this painting-within-the-painting holds the key to their understanding of this work. Christ's weighing of souls is clearly juxtaposed with the woman's own scales: His figure falls directly on the axis of her body. Wheelock proposes that the combination of all of these motifs suggests responsibility: her careful expression, engrossed in her task; the mirror, representing her self-awareness; the way

³⁶ Before it was revealed through (his own) microscopic examinations that the scales were empty, Wheelock, 106, notes that many scholars based their reading of the piece as a Vanitas (Pride) theme on the assumption that the scales held gold or silver pieces.

she is unmoved by, indeed ignores, the riches in front of her.³⁷ On the opposite end of the spectrum, Nanette Salomon focuses quite specifically on the woman's possible (and debated) pregnancy, asserting that everything reflects the woman's consciousness of the fate of her unborn child, just as Christ balances God's children's souls, so does she balance the soul of her child.³⁸ She also goes so far as to say that the painting portrays the Catholic religion, saying that the pearls relate to pregnancy through the iconography of St. Margaret, the intercessor at childbirth,³⁹ and also cites the painting's focus on all of the above in the context of the mother and the home.⁴⁰

Whichever interpretation the viewer chooses to agree with, or disagree with, Vermeer's beautifully evasive artworks ultimately elude the viewer's initial desire to bestow them with an ultimate "message." Both interpretations—and indeed, the many variations between them—are certainly worth being aware of; but the joy of these paintings ultimately lies in the viewer's own discovery of them. Just as with his strange spaces, his indirectness encourages the viewer to look closer at these pieces, and thus the careful ways he created them. In these paintings too, the mirrors act as a catalyst for the viewer's complete immersion in these paintings.

First, it is important to establish a link between these two paintings. While they are not the same size (*Pearl Necklace* is slightly larger by about two inches all around) and are not pendants in the traditional sense, they are without a doubt closely related, although the woman in each is definitely a different person. As in many of his paintings,

³⁷ Wheelock, 106-108; however, he is ultimately much more concerned with the careful construction of space and shape in this painting.

³⁸ Salomon, 219.

³⁹ Salomon, 219.

⁴⁰ Salomon, 221.

the light source emanates from the upper left hand corner, and their female subjects stand on the right. Both women seem to be about the same length of space away from the viewer, with the woman holding her scales perhaps a bit closer to us. Huge still lifes with similarly looming, heavy drapery on tabletops separate us from the women—as we have seen, a common technique of the artist. Even the rooms seem similar: perhaps they are one and the same, with their whitewashed walls and soft, yellow curtains. Though the floor in the *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* is difficult to make out, from the glimpse we get between the legs of the table, it looks to be of the same black-and-white marble tiles. Finally, in each, a mirror hangs on the wall, right next to the window, through which light enters into the room.⁴¹

The quality and the tone that the light of each painting produces differ significantly, but also work directly with Vermeer's painstakingly constructed compositions. Working within the probable assumption that the room depicted in each painting is the same one enhances the contrast between the two. In *Woman with a Balance*, the light is darker and creates a clear diagonal across the piece, even though the edges of the shadow are dark and fade gradually. The window seems to be partly shut or shaded; the only light enters in a beam through the upper pane, illuminating the top portion of a golden-yellow curtain whose color plays off the gilding on the frame and the yellow of the figure's skirts. The painting is divided into light and shadow, an effect that

⁴¹ On the subject of the paintings' possible connection, it is interesting to note that *Woman Holding a Balance* was once on a larger stretcher (as Wheelock related in his Vassar lecture; see footnote 32), whose dimensions may have been more similar to those of the *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*, although it is clear that Vermeer's intention was for it to be at this current, smaller size. Still, its adjusted size makes one wonder if at one point, long ago, someone thought the two belonged together and cropped *Balances* larger; or conversely, if the artist also intended for *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* to be cropped smaller.

beautifully complicates the shapes that Vermeer is so careful about creating. The bottom-left triangle, including the still life, is in shadow, the surface of the mirror and the sheen of pearls glowing through. The woman, meanwhile, is lit with gentle, evening-like light; she gazes serenely at the scales in her hand, her line of sight creating an X against the diagonal of the shadow, which is reinforced by the straight line of her forearm that lies directly atop it. As in *The Music Lesson*, Vermeer composes the shapes elegantly within the piece; the woman is framed by the *Last Judgment*, whose form is balanced by the huge still life opposite her; the slim lines of the mirror's surface and the frame of the painting echo one another; and the shadow gracefully melts across the whitewashed wall.⁴² The painting is defined, enhanced, and beautified by the contrast of light and shadow, which originates from the upper left corner.

In *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*, the light is of quite a different quality. Considerably more golden, the light diffuses, rather than melts, across the wall with a quality that radiates across the wall and lends a truly gilded effect to the curtain, the woman's clothes, and even the surface of her cheeks and nose. Here, rather than a diagonal, the "action" of the painting depends on the strong horizontal line of the woman's gaze, straight at her image in the small mirror across from her. She delicately holds up a string of pearls that glints in the light, as she considers the reflection we cannot see. Roughly parallel to her horizontal gaze, the lower half of the work is dark. Her round form is echoed in and balanced by the shape of the large Chinese vase that touches

⁴² As in all of Vermeer's compositions, every shape is dependent on the other; without one, the work would seem unbalanced, awry. Wheelock, 108, even goes so far as to say that the "space is contingent upon the woman's presence"—that is, all of the shapes depend on her existence, an interesting note in terms of the possible interpretations of her identity or implications.

the edge of the composition. The light streams in widely and brightly from the uncovered windowpanes, seeming to gently sweep away the golden curtains with invisible rays of light. The soft shadow left by the middle wooden beam of the window creates a soft, gentle, barely visible shadow that reinforces the line of the woman's gaze.

Having established the incredibly careful compositions of these mature Vermeers, let us consider the effect of the mirrors, particularly in the context of their placement in the paintings. In *Scales*, we can see the silvery surface of the mirror (fig. 17) across from the woman. Illumined by some unknown light source, the surface flashes, a thick swathe of silvery paint. The mirror sits directly at the origin of the diagonal shadow: in fact, the shadow bisects it, but does not affect the mirror. Rather, it is as if the mirror affects the shadow: the top half of the area surrounding it is illumined by light, the bottom shrouded in darkness. The mirror is exactly at the top of the composition, and is clearly connected to the window and the entrance of the light into the room.⁴³ In *Pearl Necklace*, the mirror is smaller, but also bisected by the window frame. This bisection strengthens even further the horizontal line of the woman's gaze, and connects the mirror and the woman together in an invisible but unbreakable union.

The placement of these mirrors and their close connection to the light source of the painting gives them an undeniable "action." They are situated so closely to the window that the mirrors themselves almost act as the light source, and in the context of the paintings, this subtle positioning adds a graceful touch to the works. It also further connects the two paintings. Knowing that they are painted in roughly the same period,

⁴³ This is further supported by the fact that, as mentioned in footnote 41, Vermeer originally cropped the painting smaller, which places the mirror at the top of the composition.

we can easily imagine that one painting is an artistic response or even challenge to the other; the two are without a doubt participating in a kind of dialogue.

The combination of light source and mirror adds both another possible meaning to the painting, and beyond than that, wonderfully complicates our understanding of the work. In *Scales*, the darker light and how it is concentrated at the upper left makes it seem a nocturne, in which the figure is, in the twilight evening moment of tranquility, contemplating her fate, her morals, or her responsibility, whether to herself, to God, or to her unborn child—her exact thoughts are impossible to pinpoint, but there within the work, at the very edges of the viewer's grasp. The mirror, overlooking her like a benevolent, silvery moon, hints at self-awareness, at the moment when she will look up from her balance and understand everything. In *Pearl Necklace*, although the figure is not the same woman, the dialogue continues in a calm reply: she has at last glanced up, as sunny morning daylight diffuses through the room. Her intense gaze signifies that she is conscious of herself, and her soft, almost wondrous expression shows that, for better or for worse (if the viewer chooses to view it as a *Vanitas*), she is completely lost in this moment of self-awareness.

Conclusion

Each mirror in Vermeer's oeuvre seems to act as a subtle means through which the people involved in his paintings—the figures within, the viewers outside, and Vermeer himself, who is, as the artist, present in both places—to come to a sort of “self awareness,” in the gentlest sense of the term. His figures, by engaging directly with the mirror, are able to come to some sort of conclusion: a conclusion that we, the viewers,

may never be able to fully comprehend, but one that we sense is certainly present. Forever still and calm, lost in thought, they contemplate their lives and their existences, softly bathed in the interior light Vermeer so beautifully evokes. On the “other side” of the painting, the viewer also contemplates the mirrors, and thus, the painting itself, spurred on by the artist, through active lines of sight or odd reflections. In doing so, the viewer also loses him or herself in the painting and its elusive story. But however elusive the narrative, the viewer is engrossed by the contrasting exactness of the composition, in its careful shapes and echoes, its spaces and niches; one begins to learn to separate the 3-D implications of the rooms from their perfected 2-D surfaces, and to accept and admire that surface for its virtuosity. In other words, one begins to see, and understand, Vermeer and his intentions (though never, completely, his meanings). And finally, Vermeer himself, who is both within the painting and on the “outside,” seems to come to a sort of self-awareness as well. He depicts himself in *The Music Lesson*, or at least, the object that he believes defines him best, and in doing so, shows his pride in and understanding of the perfection of what he has created in his work. The mirrors subtly, tentatively, hint at Vermeer’s own pleasure in the effort he has poured into these paintings, a pleasure which Vermeer invites us to share along with him.

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