

## Women, Light, and Solitude

**T**HE 17TH-CENTURY Dutch master Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675) has been the object of much reverent adoration over the past century. The French novelist Marcel Proust held the painter in the highest esteem and immortalized him in his opus magnum, *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. Just prior to his death, Proust's last foray out of his Parisian apartment was made to view 3 Vermeers exhibited in the Jeu de Paume in 1921. Vermeer's legions of admirers are largely drawn by the aura of serenity and order that pervade the delicate interiors of his paintings. With the turmoil of modern life encroaching daily, the urban dweller may obtain a brief but cherished respite while peering into Vermeer's tranquil world.

Commensurate to Vermeer's wide appeal, many scholarly monographs have been dedicated to exploring the artist's ideas and techniques. However, factual details of Vermeer's short life remain mostly elusive, which may, in part, be attributed to the neglect that prevailed until the 19th-century restored the artist to his rightful pre-eminent rank in the artistic pantheon. The paucity of works, a mere 36 canvases, that are extant limits our insight into Vermeer's artistry and compels the viewer to wonder as to the true nature and breadth of his lost oeuvre. One of his works, *The Concert*, was stolen from the cloistered environs of the Gardner Museum in Boston in 1990 and has yet to be retrieved.

By all accounts, Johannes Vermeer lived a humble life in the small

Dutch town of Delft and was born the son of a silk weaver. With his union to Catherina Bolnes, he converted from his Protestant faith to her Catholicism and named their first son Ignatius, after the patron saint of the Jesuit Order. The couple would then have 12 more offspring, 3 of whom would die before the artist himself expired. It is believed that Vermeer trained under the guidance of either the artist Carel Fabritius or Leonaert Bramer. After his successful apprenticeship, he earned entrance into the Saint Luke's Guild and would assume the elected position as head of the Guild twice. Although much respected for his skill, Vermeer labored as a craftsman and was perceived as a tradesman rather than as an artist, as customary to his time. His untimely death left his wife destitute and debt ridden, and the renowned microscopist, Antonie van Leeuwenhoek, became trustee to his estate. Ultimately, Catherina sold her spouse's paintings to offset the overwhelming burden of debt. The few paintings that have survived have offered a rare glimpse into the quotidian affairs of 17th-century Holland.

Although the daily trifles of 17th-century Dutch life may seem a less-than-noble subject, Vermeer's restrained and careful study of his Dutch brethren is suffused with a splendor and beauty unmatched by the work of his contemporaries and would earn him in time the devotion of art scholar and lay admirer alike. The central figures that preside in Vermeer's paintings are women, in all different guises and poses, shown often unadorned and

at times less than idealized. Vermeer depicted women carrying out household duties, such as the virtuous *Milkmaid*, the pensive *Woman With a Water Jug*, or the studious *Lacemaker*. Also, women were viewed as objects of men's affections, such as in the *Officer and a Laughing Girl*, in *The Glass of Wine*, or *The Love Letter*. In his portraiture, women were painted in similar repose, such as in *The Girl With a Red Hat*, *Portrait of a Young Woman*, and *The Girl With a Pearl Earring* (**Figure**). When men are portrayed, they are relegated to a subordinate role whether they are courting women, painting them, or are entirely absent from the scene. Vermeer anchors his subjects in an orderly interior, marked by his masterful delineation of space and light.

*The Girl With a Pearl Earring* (Figure) is perhaps one of his most beloved works and was recently the title of a novel recounting the fictional exploits of the eponymous heroine. Although his elder daughters were speculated to have posed for this painting, they were too young at the time of its execution to have been his models. The girl in the portrait is clad in a simple cloth of yellow ocher contrasted with a white rim of collar. She also sports an exotic blue Turkish turban with a yellow veil. These brighter hues of dress are contrasted with the somber, ill-defined background. The pearl that graces the girl's ear completes the outfit and carries a divergent iconography, as a symbol of vanity or virginity, elegance, or purity. The beauty of the girl, highlighted by the luster of her moistened lips and decorative outfit, serves as a coun-

terpoint to the less comely appearance of the subject of the *Portrait of a Young Woman*, who is similarly posed.

Although the women portrayed on Vermeer's canvases may at times be less than a standardized ideal, they represent real-life individuals who exude their beauty through their virtuous hard work or by virtue of their more obvious feminine attributes. Vermeer captures a resplendent beauty and serenity in his painted works with the perfect interplay of character, light, and space.

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Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675), Dutch, *The Girl With a Pearl Earring*, 1665. Oil on canvas. 19 × 16 in (47 × 40 cm). Royal Cabinet of Paintings, Mauritshuis, The Hague, the Netherlands.