

EXHIBITS

Johannes Vermeer, Artist of Divine Harmony

Exactly three hundred years ago, in 1696, some twenty-one works by Johannes Vermeer were auctioned off together in Amsterdam. Today, the first retrospective exhibit devoted entirely to the Dutch artist reunites twenty-one of his thirty-six known paintings at Washington's National Gallery of Art (November 1995-February 1996) and the Mauritshuis, The Hague (March-June 1996).

Not only has the show allowed hundreds of thousands of visitors the unique experience of seeing many rare Vermeers together at the same time, but it has also opened up new horizons in Vermeer scholarship, which are reflected in the excellent exhibition catalogue, *Johannes Vermeer*.

Vermeer was born in Delft in 1632 and died there in 1675. Nothing is known of his early training nor do we have any evidence of his ideas except as the paintings show them. He seems to have never traveled far from Delft. Archival research reveals that he was a "celebrated painter" within Holland and probably also in France in his day, and continued to be revered after his death, but his production was small and unknown to the broad public. He did not work for the open market and may have sold most of his pictures to a single patron, whose heirs dispersed that collection in the auction of 1696.

It is now clear that Vermeer's conversion to Catholicism, which occurred when he married a woman from a patrician Catholic family, Catharina Bolnes, in 1653, was a serious spiritual undertaking. He moved into the "papist ghet-



"Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid," c.1670.

National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin

to" of Delft, near the small group of Jesuits with whom his mother-in-law, Maria Thins, was close. Vermeer died at age forty-three, leaving his widow and ten minor children destitute. Rediscovered in the mid-1800's by the French writer Thoré-Burger, with the spread of photographic reproductions and art books, Vermeer has grown more and more popular, for the poetry of his art is unmistakable.

Delft Painter, Delft Microscopist

Vermeer's relationship to modern science is poetically captured in "The Geographer" (Frankfurt) [SEE front cover, this issue]. A young man leans over his table, one hand resting on a book, the other suspending a pair of dividers, and looks out the window before continuing his

work. Behind him is a terrestrial globe, turned to focus on the Indian Ocean; on the wall, a decorative sea chart. The large translucent chart on the table might be a nautical chart. Since the Low Countries were the center for mapmaking, the presence of many maps in Vermeer's pictures conveys national pride.

"The Geographer" is a secularized version of Renaissance paintings of scholar-saints surrounded by books and scientific instruments, both in northern Europe and Italy. The exhibition catalogue offers the tantalizing hypothesis that Vermeer's picture portrays his fellow Delft citizen Anthony Van Leeuwenhoek,

the famed microscopist. The resemblance to paintings of figures such as St. Augustine would be perfectly in key, as Van Leeuwenhoek saw microorganisms as a mark of the "providence, perfection and order of the Lord Maker of the Universe" (quoted by Albert Blankert in an essay in the catalogue, "Vermeer's Modern Themes and Their Tradition").

Although we do not know if the two men were friends, Van Leeuwenhoek did become a trustee of Vermeer's estate one year after the artist's death. Not only did the two men have many common interests—geography, optics, mathematics, navigation, and cartography (Vermeer traded in maps, and van Leeuwenhoek got his license as a surveyor in 1669). But the reading of nature as a "second Bible" may have bridged the social

gap between the Catholic Vermeer and the Protestant van Leeuwenhoek, in an era of renewed efforts by leading figures to seek ecumenical unity among Christians.

The name that leaps to mind is the universal thinker G.W. Leibniz (1646-1716), a Lutheran who worked throughout his life to seek common ground among the separated branches of Christianity and to reunify Europe. Leibniz admired van Leeuwenhoek and wrote his *Monadology* after reading the microscopist's writings. Later, in his "Reflections on the Common Concept of Justice," written in 1702, Leibniz argued: "Now nothing better corroborates the incomparable wisdom of God than the structure of the works of nature, particularly the structure which appears when we study them more closely with a microscope. . . . A man in

Delft [van Leeuwenhoek] has accomplished wonders at it, and if there were many others like him, our knowledge of physics would be advanced far beyond its present state.' "

"The Geographer" and a companion picture (not exhibited), "The Astronomer," are unique as male portraits by Vermeer. In most of Vermeer's pictures, however, it is women, often depicted making music or reading or writing letters, who are the protagonists. It is revealing to see these images, and others which show women in simple acts, like putting on a necklace, pouring milk from a pitcher, or simply opening a window, next to Vermeer's early history paintings. The juxtaposition suggests that Vermeer's art can now be seen as a key to unlocking the transcendent presence of God in the acts of everyday life, particularly of women.

The Cultural Matrix

The central irony in Dutch art in its Golden Age, the Seventeenth century, is that the religious denomination by which national independence had been won,



"Saint Praxedis," 1655.

radical Calvinism, was inimical to the cultural matrix in which the creative achievements of the Dutch people flourished. The Low Countries was one of the most highly urbanized parts of Europe. Two-thirds of the very soil on which the nation stood was reclaimed through human ingenuity from the sea. The region comprising modern-day Holland and Belgium had been the uncontested center of musical polyphony and a hotbed of painting and sculpture in the Fifteenth century. Such giants as painter Jan van Eyck and musician Josquin des Prés produced the "Northern Renaissance," rendering Christian religious themes in the language of a rich and complex life of trade and manufacture. A new spiritual movement for the renewal of the Church had been born in the Netherlands, the *Devotio Moderna* of the Brotherhood of the Common Life, which spread education of the common people throughout Europe, in the "Imitation of Christ" of Thomas à Kempis. Yet after 1550, the House of Orange fought to throw off the yoke of the Spanish Hapsburgs by adopting Calvinist orthodoxy,

which banned polyphonic music and religious art from churches as idolatrous!

In the conflicts of the 1570's, as the Low Countries battled for their independence, Spanish Catholic armies under the Duke of Alva committed hideous atrocities in order to quell the rebellion of Dutch "heretics," while Catholics were martyred at Gorkum and Alkmaar. The bloodshed waned, but Dutch Catholics were forced underground, unable to conduct public masses, or hold high public office.

The independence of the seven United Provinces of northern Netherlands was won in 1609, but not guaranteed until the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648. Meanwhile, the radical Calvinist minority ruling Holland had won a pyrrhic victory in attempting to suppress dissidents inside

their own Reformed Church. The execution for heresy of the political leader Oldebarneveldt eroded Calvinist control; in 1640, the Dutch national poet Vondel rocked Amsterdam by converting to Catholicism.

Faith and Works

Two of Vermeer's early religious pictures show a deep spirituality, which suggests that his conversion to the Roman Catholicism was not merely for family reasons. The rediscovered "St. Praxedis" (Barbara Johnson Collection, Philadelphia), signed and dated 1655, portrays an early Christian known for her reverent care for the remains of the martyrs. Vermeer's "Christ in the House of Mary and Martha" represents the story from the *Gospel of Luke* 10:38-42, in which Martha's efforts to get Mary to help with the housework instead of always sitting at the Master's feet, earn her a mild rebuke from Jesus.

The Bethany sisters were often used to represent the contrast between the active (Martha) and the contemplative (Mary) life. Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr.

writes in the catalogue: “In this painting Vermeer has thus touched upon one of the most fundamental theological disputes between Protestants and Catholics, the proper path to salvation. . . . [T]he Catholic interpretation of this biblical story is that the active and contemplative are both essential components of a Christian life.” Vermeer’s Martha, he points out, is not concerned with a myriad of worldly needs, but serves one thing, a basket of bread. “The eucharistic implication of her offering, which Vermeer has placed at the very center of the composition, further dignifies her role within the story.”

A Balanced Life

Exhibition co-curator Arthur Wheelock also produced a book, *Vermeer and the Art of Painting*, in 1995, in which he underscores the point that Vermeer was the first to imbue genre painting (scenes of everyday life) with the moral seriousness previously reserved for history painting. History painting, which deals with Biblical subjects, the lives of saints, and ancient mythology, had been deemed the highest category of art since the Italian Renaissance.

Many of Vermeer’s genre female subjects seem poised at a moment of speculation between the active and contemplative life, partaking of both Mary’s and Martha’s roles in a world in which the Christ figure is present by metaphor. “A Woman with a Balance,” (Washington) [SEE inside back cover, this issue] portrays a young woman, who appears to be pregnant (although this is not certain), standing before a mirror and holding an empty scale. Jewelry is scattered on the table before her, behind her is a painting of the Last Judgment, and her face is lit by light entering through

a small window on the left.

Her head is aligned with Christ sitting in majesty on the day of judgment. He has both arms raised, in a gesture which mirrors the opposing direction (arms down) of the woman’s balance. “His judgments are eternal; hers are temporal,” writes Arthur Wheelock. She is serene. “The character of the scene conforms amazingly closely to Saint Ignatius of Loyola’s recommendations for meditation in his ‘Spiritual Exercises’: . . . ‘I must rather be like the equalized scales of a balance ready to follow the course which I feel is more for the glory and praise of God, our Lord, and the salvation of my soul.’”

The Ecumenical Message

One of Vermeer’s most glorious late genre paintings, the Dublin “Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid,” of c.1670, captures the ecumenical spirit he shared with Leibniz. A crumpled letter on the floor in the foreground suggests an emotional moment, and Vermeer has

wielded variations in line, light, and color to contrast the serenity of the maid with the intensity of the lady.

Behind them hangs a large history painting of the “Finding of Moses.” The story not only refers to the role of Providence, but also to God’s ability to bring together opposing factions, since it was Pharaoh’s daughter who saved the Jewish child, naming him Moses. Wheelock writes, that “Vermeer seems to suggest that reconciliation comes through one’s own endeavors, carried out in concert with an abiding faith in God’s divine plan.” The same picture-within-the-picture hangs in the background of Vermeer’s “The Astronomer” (Paris).

Vermeer clearly believed that divine harmony was manifested through human arts—especially painting and music. This is the underlying theme of his “Young Lady at the Virginal with a Gentleman (The Music Lesson)” [SEE inside back cover, this issue] The inscription inside the harpsichord lid, “Music the Companion of Joy and Balm of Sorrow,” seems to sum up this remarkably contrapuntal composition.

Working in harmony with Providence, so as to assure a joyful outcome even from tragedy, was of great concern to Vermeer. Leibniz’s project of European unity comes back to mind. And although there is no evidence that Vermeer and Leibniz knew one another, besides the possible Van Leeuwenhoek link, a common thread runs through the Huyghens family, as essayist Ben Broos weaves a convincing web of proof in the catalogue, that ties Vermeer to Constantijn Huyghens, the secretary to the Stadtholder in The Hague, whose son, Christiaan Huyghens, was Leibniz’s mentor in Paris in 1672-75.

—Nora Hamerman



“Christ in the House of Mary and Martha,” c.1655.

National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh