



VERMEER

« A View of Delft »

ANTHONY BAILEY

AUTHOR OF REMBRANDT'S HOUSE AND STANDING IN THE SUN

Vermeer: A View of Delft

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Set against the dramatic backdrop of the "golden age" of Dutch culture, the story of one of the world's most beloved - and most elusive - painters.

In the seventeenth century, industry and commerce thrived in the Dutch city of Delft, as did art and culture. In 1653, the twenty-one-year-old son of an innkeeper, the artist Jan Vermeer, registered as a master painter with the city's Guild. Vermeer married well, had many children, and enjoyed a respectable local reputation as a painter until his death in 1675. But it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that his genius was widely appreciated. Today, Vermeer's thirty-five paintings are regarded as masterpieces.

In *Vermeer*, Anthony Bailey presents a compelling portrait of Vermeer's life and character, long lost in history. Bailey re-creates the atmosphere of the times, introduces Vermeer's contemporaries, and portrays his domestic life in vibrant detail. Drawing on period documents and his own intense curiosity, Bailey sheds light on the science and artistry behind the glorious, almost mystical, paintings. Meticulously researched and elegantly written, Vermeer will stand as the classic work on Vermeer for years to come.

Vermeer: A View of Delft Details

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From Reader Review Vermeer: A View of Delft for online ebook

Leslie Clark says

An in depth reading about the life and times of Vermeer and his Dutch hometown of Delft. Including Vermeer's methodology using light while painting his portraits.

Flora says

Only for hardcore art lovers...

J M says

There are limited resources for Vermeer himself which was obvious in reading the book. The info on the paintings and on Delft were what made the book worthwhile for me.

Habemus_apicellam says

Vermeer e il suo mondo

un tentativo di biografia di Vermeer, l'artista di cui sappiamo ben poco sulla base delle poche fonti storiche disponibili. Il libro comincia molto bene con una descrizione affascinante e coinvolgente di Delft, poi poco a poco come un dolly ci si avvicina a Vermeer parlando dei suoi concittadini, dei colleghi artisti, dei parenti... Nella parte di critica alle opere l'autore mostra un pò la corda, ma in generale un libro godibile ed interessante per chi ama l'arte e la storia dell'Olanda del Seicento

Mike says

A thin book but well written and draws as complete a picture of the artist's life and society as possible. Biographical facts are thin, but it is fleshed out by a thorough description of the era. Quick read.

Jeffrey Keeten says

”The era of the photograph was upon us, and photography--as Lawrence Gowing noted later, in the twentieth century--helped create the moment for Vermeer’s recovered and enlarged reputation. Artists came to see in a new way, and Impressionism would soon adopt Vermeer, and absorb Vermeer, as its ancestor. From being half-forgotten, Vermeer would eventually be in an equally invidious situation, with fame so great it seemed almost to suffocate its subject.”

View of Delft by Johannes Vermeer

It is no secret that very little is known about the Delft painter Johannes Vermeer. His father ran a pub named The Flying Fox which became a hangout for artists. He also began dealing in art possibly because he was accepting paintings to pay down debts from the patrons of his pub. I have a feeling Vermeer's father probably dabbled in a little of this and a little of that to keep the family hearth warm. Listening to these artists with their paint speckled hands wrapped around a mug of beer may have been the moment when Vermeer began to think about painting. This was a time period when "*everyone with a bit of money in Holland bought pictures--a wide-spread middle-class patronage which more than made up for the lack of royal and ecclesiastical buying, but left most Dutch artists dependent on market forces that could be fickle.*"

It is wonderful to consider a world like that. We now live in a world where only a very slender number of people can or will buy original art.

One in four men in Delft made their living off making pottery. The Delft blue pottery is China blue and was one of the most successful thefts of a concept in history. In the novel *The Girl with the Pearl Earring* Griet's father was a blue tile painter until he lost his eyesight.

Carel Frabritius self-portrait

We don't know who taught Vermeer to paint. Anthony Bailey speculates about who it might have been. Carel Frabritius is a possible candidate. "*Paintings by the former (Frabritius) turned up in the possession of the later (Vermeer), paintings of the latter seem to show the influenced of the former.*" I lean more towards Frabritius's paintings being an influence on Vermeer's work than I do Frabritius being Vermeer's master. Unfortunately Frabritius was killed in the Delft gunpowder explosion of 1654 at the age of 32. Gunpowder had been stored, ironically, in the local Convent. When the powder exploded it leveled a part of the city and killed hundreds of people and was so loud that it was referred to as the Delft Thunderclap. There are thoughts that Vermeer went abroad and learned from a master in a different country, but there isn't a single shred of evidence to give Bailey a solid footing to finding the truth.

There are only thirty-five paintings that experts can agree are works of Vermeer. Even in his most productive years he never produced more than two or three paintings. He married well and lived reasonably comfortably, despite his growing family, off the real estate income of his mother-in-law, Maria Thins. This was all fine and good until Holland went to war with France and flooded the surrounding farmland around Delft to keep from being invaded. Farmers do not pay leases on land that can not be planted.

The financial difficulties weighed heaviest on Vermeer and many believe this pressure led to his early death at the age of forty-three. One could say that while he was safely cocooned by the largesses of his mother-in-law that he was a Sunday painter or maybe a weekday dabbler when he wished to escape to his studio from the noise and chaos of his family. I like to think that he was very particular about what he would paint next. He had to be staggered by something so that he could stagger the rest of us.

There are speculations that he "cheated". The photographic quality of his work has lead people to believe that he used a camera obscura. "*It is an optical device that led to photography and the camera. The device consists of a box or room with a hole in one side. Light from an external scene passes through the hole and strikes a surface inside, where it is reproduced, rotated 180 degrees (thus upside-down), but with color and perspective preserved. The image can be projected onto paper, and can then be traced to produce a highly accurate representation.*"

As you can see here Tim from the movie Tim's Vermeer is using a modern version of the camera obscura to reproduce a Vermeer. I have not seen the movie, but from what I've read it is a compelling who-done-it type documentary.

Pshaw I say, though I wouldn't doubt it a bit if Vermeer did use one to help his already critically attuned eye to see something he was missing. His friend Antonie van Leeuwenhoek owned one. Many believe; and so do I, that Leeuwenhoek was the model for the Vermeer paintings *The Geographer* and *The Astronomer*.

Leeuwenhoek was a brilliant self-taught scientist. He had an insatiable curious mind. "*He seems to have been the first observer of bacteria, protozoa, spirochaetes, spermatozoa.*" He ground his own lenses and made his own microscopes. After his death over 247 microscopes were dispersed at auction. "*Sandwiched between glass, were muscle fibres of a whale, scales of human skin, human blood corpuscles, papillae from the tongue of an ox, the hair of an elk, the spinning apparatus of a spider, the brains of a fly, the eyes of a dragonfly, red coral, oyster shell, embryo oysters, and the germ of a rye seed.*"

Antonie van Leeuwenhoek by the artist Jan Verkolje

Vermeer was Marcel Proust's favorite artist. The last trip that Proust made out of doors was to see a Vermeer exhibit. He was shaky, but determined to see the paintings. Once at the gallery it was as if he were revived by the power of Vermeer.

As long as Vermeer was alive his painting called *The Art of Painting* was kept in the family. After his death Leeuwenhoek was overseeing the distribution of the Vermeer estate and *The Art of Painting* was consigned to be auctioned to pay off the family debt. His wife, Catharina, tried a few shenanigans to try to keep the painting in the family. In the process the painting disappeared, without a trace, for over a century.

I'd like to think that someone in the family covered it with an old dusty sheet and tucked it in an attic hidden amidst a jumble of junk. I can see it being temporary liberated for special family events when they all could hopefully remember their talented father and maybe see him in the artist depicted in the painting. The picture was obviously important to Vermeer and thusly important to his family.

In 1940 Adolf Hitler purchased the painting intending it to be one of the center pieces of his new museum of art. It was clear the owners of the painting were forced to sell while under duress, but then what choice did they really have. He simply would have found a reason to confiscate it. I bought a print of this painting while visiting the Kunsthistorisches Museum, in Vienna. It now hangs on the wall of my library.

The Art of the Painting print that hangs in my library over the piano.

I could go on and on sharing more and more tidbits about this book. It is only 256 pages and some reviewers have complained about the density of the information. I did not find it to be so. I was scribbling notes and finding myself becoming more and more excited about all the information that was swarming like bees into my head. This is not so much a biography of Vermeer. A comprehensive bio of Vermeer could probably be written in 25 pages or less because of the lack of information available about this elusive painter. The rest of the title after the colon is always the part that must be paid close attention to. **A View of Delft.** Some readers have given this book a poor rating simply because they felt they were hoodwinked. They wanted 256 pages of Vermeer revelations. I may not have bought a book titled *A View of Delft*, so I must commend the publishers or whoever decided to put Vermeer front and center because it insured that I would read this book. Sometimes it is good to be hoodwinked.

The first painter whose works I fell in love with was Vincent Van Gogh, the yellows and that frantic energy infused into every brush stroke. I then was introduced to Vermeer which of course was about the luminosity of how he portrays light. I did not throw over Van Gogh. There is no monogamy in art. I have over the years also developed a fondness for J.M.W. Turner. I discovered while reading this book that Anthony Bailey has written a book about him called *Standing in the Sun: A Biography of J.M.W.Turner*. It is interesting that Bailey keeps showing up when I research my favorite painters.

Gentian says

The book does not impress. I am very partial to Vermeer's paintings and, to be fair to the author his commentary on the paintings themselves is interesting. He has not, however, written a biography of Vermeer. So little is known about his life and therefore the author is reduced to conjecture.

He would have written a better book if he had taken each of the paintings by turn and spoken about its themes, design and execution. This would have allowed us to explore Vermeer's development as a painter and his interaction with his milieu.

I am rarely bothered by the presence or absence of colour plates or illustrations in a book. Where the subject of a book is inherently visual, however, it pays to have a good colour section. Schama's excellent *Rembrandt's Eyes* does this very well indeed. In this book (and the hardback version at that) the colour section is disappointing in scope and in the size of the reproductions. All in all a real letdown.

Cassandra says

This is the first book I finished in my month of nonfiction. In stating that fact, I'm ignoring that I actually started this book way back in September. Over the course of two months, I only read the first 50 pages. In the past week, I read the remaining 200.

Not much is known about the artist Vermeer and that is very evident in this biography. Much of the text is "we think this..." or "it could have been that..." or "Vermeer possibly..." Still, it was an interesting look at Dutch life in the 1600s. The book actually piqued my interest in a contemporary of Vermeer's, Antonie van Leeuwenhoek, a scientist who had an insatiable curiosity. I am very interested to learn more about the scientist.

Now that I've read a bit about Vermeer, I am hoping to view one of his paintings. A very small reproduction, even in color, shows so little of the true brilliance of paintings. I hope to someday see a Vermeer painting in person.

Bart says

If one did a LexisNexis search on the word "Vermeer" and then took the results and dumped them in a spreadsheet and then imported that spreadsheet into a word processor and wrote a sentence, or five, round most every line, one might approximate what author Anthony Bailey has done here. *A View of Delft* is not a

biography of Vermeer - not enough is known about the man to fill more than 100 pages with that - but rather a catalog of things that might have touched Vermeer while he was alive and have touched his work since he died.

Here's an excerpt of Bailey's writing that suffices as an example of the style and creativity that colors more than half this book's 262 pages:

Many Dutch artists celebrated in still-lifes and kitchen scenes the abundance of food that could occur in season: cheese, bread, prawns, crabs, lobsters, oysters, all sorts of fish, lemons, oranges, apples, pomegranates, grapes, nuts, melons, quinces, squash, artichokes, cabbages, peaches, plums, pears, turnips, cherries, raspberries, sugar, ham, chickens, pheasants, ducks, mutton, and hare. (p. 115)

One imagines a conversation between Bailey and his editor that happened round three in the morning a few days after their galleys went off to the printer:

"Oh, no, I fear I've forgotten the artichokes and quinces in the book's middle list!"

"One moment, let me take a . . . no, no, go back to sleep, you're fine; both the artichokes and the quinces are on the list."

This book is badly written, but it's badly written for the best of reasons. The author genuinely wants to help his reader understand Vermeer better, and he hopes that by papering the walls of his book with outputs from database queries, he'll be able to do it.

There are tales of an explosion that devastated Vermeer's hometown sometime before Vermeer began painting. There are the wars between Dutch and English factions. There's plenty of Rembrandt, who may have influenced Vermeer through a Rembrandt student named Fabritius, who may have taught Vermeer (though probably did not). There are chapters dedicated to Anthony van Leeuwenhoek, who may not have done more than bump into Vermeer at some point on the streets of Delft (or may have inspired two of Vermeer's better works). And then there's Vermeer's postmortem journey to recognition.

Along the way, every 15 or so pages on average, there's a paragraph or two about Vermeer that is interesting if not altogether engaging. And Bailey provides an excellent history of the camera obscura in the book's middle, too. While there's no way to recommend this book, it should at least be said that *Vermeer: A View of Delft* is now part of a catalog of books on Vermeer - and such recognition would seem to flatter its author.

Kalliope says

Now we all love to love Johannes Vermeer: his paintings and our diffuse image of him and his creative power. He both belonged to his painting tradition and stood out of it. He painted the concrete, like only the Dutch artists of the Golden Age knew how to do -- rivaling with the real. But he enveloped concreteness with the elusive and the ambiguous. And this gave him the passport to live amongst the Moderns.

Anthony Bailey provides a very fine and enjoyable approach to get a View of Delft and of our imagined idea

of his now most famous citizen. I read the book before traveling to the town to get my own view. But similarly to the way one does with paintings,--one has to have first an overall look at a certain distance, then get closer to examine its details (and this is particularly important when admiring the high definition of Dutch art at the high definition), and finally step back and examine the complete vista again--, I found that after sitting in the Market plaza in Delft, drinking a beer possibly in the very site where Vermeer lived when young, the *Mechelen Inn*, I had to reread this book and evoke a Vermeer panorama again.

And yes, after a second read, I can see everything in a more clear perspective.

As a fair amount of information on Vermeer has been lost, since we do not even know who taught him nor why he painted so very few works, Bailey approaches the subject with an excellent recreation of the historical and artistic context.

We learn of the string of tensions that accompanied the creation of this new Netherlands: tensions with Spain until they achieved their independence; tensions between the Calvinists and the Catholics; tensions between the two factions supporting the Republic and the house of Orange and their pretensions to a quasi-monarchy; tensions which developed into wars with England and France.

We learn of the optical developments taking place in Delft and the beginnings of 'microbiology' when the draper **Antonie van Leeuwenhoek (1632-1723)** pursued his scientific interests and examined his own feces under a microscope. This Leeuwenhoek was rather close to Vermeer since both their names are on the same page of the Baptism Registry and later the metamorphosed scientist became the Executor of Vermeer's Estate after his death. He could have also been the model for the only two paintings with a single, and somewhat leonine, male figure: 'The Astronomer', and 'The Geographer'.

We learn of the commercial activities in Delft, with beer making ranking high (about 300 breweries for 25k people in the 1630s), which together with the making of cheese, accounts for the notorious cleanliness of the city. A chapter is devoted to the new economic impetus that came to Delft when it worked out the techniques of porcelain making and filled the production void as China had entered into a series of civil wars. And since domesticity is important for Dutch art, Bailey expands on the way the interiors of the houses were arranged and furnished, when carpets were used to cover tables instead of floors, and when servants were ubiquitous. Vermeer's *Tanneke* was possibly the model for 'The Milkmaid'.

We learn about the **Guild of St. Luke** for painters, printers and faience makers, and about the many other painters with whom Vermeer would have conversed. The unfortunate **Carel Fabritius (1622-1654)**, who could almost make his painted birds sing, but who died in the disastrous gun powder explosion in the *Clarissee Convent* when Vermeer was in his twenties. Bailey identifies the arrival of **Gerard Terborch (1619-1681)** as a significant catalyst for Vermeer, for he brought the smaller scale and more intimate scenes to the Delft art circles. But it would have been **Pieter De Hooch (1629-1684)** who made him realize that the best subjects for paintings were around him, and Bailey undertakes a convincing comparative analysis of pairs of paintings in which even if Johannes could have been following Pieter, he achieved a greater effect by

simplifying further and bringing the viewer closer to the scene.

For it is fascinating to track how Vermeer found his interests after beginning with religious, Italianate, Caravaggesque canvases. And he did that quickly. He moved from

To this in only one year.

And soon after he would also drop the theatrical and abandoned the depiction of action (the *historia*), and concentrated on those stolen moments of frozen reverie for which we now know him. For Bailey has an eye and sharp appreciation of Vermeer's art. He stresses the significance of the female figures. There are almost four times more women depicted than men and these rarely have faces. The women are not portraits but could have been modeled by his wife and daughters. As for the men, Bailey quotes the painter John Nash for whom Vermeer's male figures are the equivalent to the "I" of the narrator, the ambiguous presence of the author in the fiction (Any Proustians reading?).

Bailey is particularly interested in the process of painting that Vermeer could have followed. Much has been written about his possible use of optical devices, but I found more interesting the discussion of the handling of paint. Although Vermeer's production was surprisingly low, for the other painters of the Guild would produce about 50 paintings per year, while Vermeer would paint about only 3 (and later Van Gogh would paint one a day!!), he probably worked fast. He did not draw and applied his paint wet on wet. Instead, he must have taken time to think of what he wanted to do or in changing his compositions. Possibly he only painted when it suited him and a suitable light may have been a factor. Most of his paintings have the light of the Northern and short summer.

Props were important for Vermeer, and they were also constant. The white jar, tables and rugs, musical instruments, jewelry, wine, letters, the yellow jacket with the white fur, the window and also the paintings in the background with their own iconographic hints, appear again and again. And yet, their significance is not clear-cut and do not help in clarifying the meaning of the overall painting. There is always a mystery enveloping the scene and my favorite for its ambiguity is one of his paintings now at the Rijks. Are we seeing through a door or looking at the reflection of a mirror?

Bailey closes his study with an account of how Vermeer's paintings dispersed, were forgotten, and were 'discovered' in the middle of the 19C by the French critic **Théophile Thoré-Bürger** who was lucky to own several of them (as well as Fabritius's 'Goldfinch'). Out of the whole array of subsequent writers, film makers, composers who have been inspired by Vermeer, Bailey selects Proust as the one creator who got closer to this Dutch painter.

Even if there are no paintings by Vermeer to be admired in Delft, I also feel I got closer to his world when I

visited his city.

In gratitude and before leaving, and taking with me **My View of Delft** (view spoiler), I went to pay my respects to where he lies in the *Oudekerk*.

Elisabetta says

Il titolo del libro forse è un po' ingannevole, anche se sicuramente di Vermeer si tenta di parlare. Considerato che del pittore si sa poco o nulla, è più che altro una storia dell'Olanda con molte supposizioni su Vermeer. E' comunque un buon libro, soprattutto sono interessanti i commenti ai quadri che appaiono nella parte centrale.

F.J. Commelin says

Baily gives an interesting story about life and about Vermeer in the golden age in Delft.

Melody Nelson says

Quite an interesting book, till the moment the author starts prattling on about the "camera obscura" theory without any evidence whatsoever. From being careful with his speculations, not much is known about Vermeer, he went all out in "conspiracy theory" territory when talking about Vermeer's methods of painting. Disappointing.

Stephanie says

I've always been fascinated by Vermeer's life and paintings, and recently I've been reading and watching a lot about him. This book is quite dense and took me a long time to read, but it is well written and I really enjoyed it. Some may be critical of Bailey's "may"s and "could"s--hardly anything is known about Vermeer's life so biographers mostly speculate. But I liked how Bailey wove all of his research about Holland, Delft, art, commerce, culture, the paintings themselves, and facts known about Vermeer's surroundings to paint a picture of what this man's life might have been like. Bailey went off on a few too many tangents, but I'm very glad to have read his book.

Rachel says

Basically a biography but simple to read - not just for art historians. Explores Vermeer's life & works even

discusses his legacy today.
