ART APPRECIATION · THE TABLE AS ETHICAL SPACE

Vermeer

The Milkmaid · work, dignity and time



Look at the whole painting



From Millet to Vermeer

01

Dignity of labor

How do Millet and Vermeer give importance to an ordinary worker? What changes when we move from the harvest to a domestic room?

02

The person at work

How much can a painting tell us about the person whose work it shows? Use The Milkmaid to begin a wider study of Vermeer.

Vermeer in Delft

01

The painter and his city

Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675) worked in Delft. He was also an art dealer and a leader of the Guild of St Luke. His earlier paintings include religious and mythological subjects.

02

The domestic interiors

His later work often shows women reading, making music or working. These rooms are carefully arranged paintings. A convincing surface does not make them records of an ordinary day.

Pictures for the home

01

A changing market

The northern provinces gained independence from Spain in 1648. An urban market supported smaller paintings for homes, shops and other interiors. Everyday life became a subject buyers wanted.

02

An image can teach a social ideal

Genre paintings show ordinary activities. They can also present expectations about work, love and household conduct. A domestic scene can praise, tease or criticize the people it shows.

The same activity, a different encounter



Caspar Netscher, The Lace Maker, 1662. Wallace Collection.



Vermeer, The Lacemaker, c.1669–70. Musée du Louvre.

Netscher shows the woman with her chair, shoes and broom. Vermeer brings the hands and threads close. The shared subject does not produce the same relation between the viewer and the work.

A worker in the field, a worker in the room



Millet, The Gleaners, 1857. Musée d’Orsay.



Vermeer, The Milkmaid, c.1660. Rijksmuseum.

Millet places the gleaners before a distant harvest. Vermeer brings us close to one worker. Both give the figures importance. Neither tells us whether they welcome the work.

Who invites us to judge the servant?



Nicolaes Maes, The Idle Servant, 1655. National Gallery, London.



Vermeer, The Milkmaid, c.1660. Rijksmuseum.

Maes gives us a mistress who turns toward us beside a sleeping servant. Vermeer leaves one woman absorbed in her work. The difference changes how we are invited to judge the person.

What is she doing?

The familiar title names a milkmaid. The pictured action belongs to a kitchen servant.

Food preparation and household economy

The bread and careful pour support a practical possibility: she may be preparing a dish that uses stale bread and milk. That would connect her work with household economy. The recipe remains an inference.



The Milkmaid, c.1660. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Complete painting.

A substantial figure, a small action

“monumentality and perhaps a sense of dignity”

Walter Liedtke, The Met, 2009.

We look slightly upward at her. Her broad body stands against the pale wall, while the hands and falling milk keep the action small. The painting gives her presence without showing a moment of victory.



The Milkmaid, c.1660. Rijksmuseum. Complete painting.

The paint makes light and texture

A smooth-looking image can be made with different kinds of marks.

Pointillé: small touches of paint

Small bright dabs on the bread and basket suggest both reflected light and a rough surface. The sharp and softened edges do different jobs. The picture is convincing because of how the paint is used.



The Milkmaid, c.1660. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Complete painting.

Concentration and devotion

> “The steady performance of domestic chores was often praised in Dutch literature and pictures of the period.”
>
> **Walter Liedtke, The Met, 2009.**

Her lowered gaze and controlled pour suggest concentration. Calling her devoted adds a claim about her feelings. The Cupid tile and foot warmer also allow a reading concerned with desire.



Detail: Cupid tile and foot warmer. Rijksmuseum.

The quiet room was made



The Milkmaid, c.1660. Finished painting.



Rijksmuseum SWIR examination, 2022. False-color image.

Later scans identify a jug rack and fire basket that Vermeer painted out. The cleared wall and floor are decisions that concentrate attention on the woman and her task.

“Why can we feel so near to them, our eyes taking in every intimate drop of light (as though by observing we were drying slightly moist surfaces), and yet at the same time be so remote from them?”

John Berger, “The Painter in His Studio: Vermeer” (1966) · supplied extract, p. 123

A private action, seen from outside



Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window, c.1657–59. Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden. After restoration.

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“In nearly every interior he painted, there is either a map, a sheet of music, a letter, a chart, or a picture whose subject-matter functions like an ideogram.”

John Berger, “The Painter in His Studio: Vermeer” (1966) · supplied extract, p. 123

A letter is evidence of another life

We can see the letter and the act of reading. We cannot hear its writer. The Cupid painting suggests love, but the message and the woman’s response remain partly withheld.



Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window, c.1657–59. Dresden. Restored state.

An action beside an image of judgment

A pictured action can carry more than one kind of meaning.

Woman Holding a Balance, c.1664

The hand holds a small balance beneath a Last Judgment. The National Gallery reads their alignment as a link between weighing and moral judgment. That is an interpretation of the arrangement, not a transcript of her thoughts.



Woman Holding a Balance, c.1664. National Gallery of Art, Washington.

The painter makes an image



The Art of Painting, c.1666–68. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Complete painting.

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“The point of the confrontation is to demonstrate the difference between the living and the inert: a difference which transcends all the common visual elements.”

John Berger, “The Painter in His Studio: Vermeer” (1966) · supplied extract, p. 124

The model, the materials and the marks

“Breath is all!”

Berger’s imagined exclamation for Vermeer, p.124. Not Vermeer’s recorded words.

Berger follows repeated colors and forms between the model, the table and the curtain. The painter turns the model’s living appearance into marks. Those marks preserve an appearance, but they cannot become the person.



The Art of Painting, c.1666–68. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

“He was preoccupied, not by his limitations, but by those aspects of reality which by their nature defy visual representation.”

John Berger, “The Painter in His Studio: Vermeer” (1966) · supplied extract, p. 124

The world beyond the room

"The function of the closed-in corner of the room is to remind us of the infinite."



John Berger · supplied extract, p.125

“In front of a Vermeer woman exactly turning her head, reading a letter, pouring milk, trying on a necklace in a mirror, raising a glass, we become aware of the flow of time itself.”

John Berger, “The Painter in His Studio: Vermeer” (1966) · supplied extract, p.125

“He was able to portray with unique precision what constituted one moment because he was so keenly aware, objectively and without a trace of nostalgia, that each succeeding moment is unrepeatable.”

John Berger, “The Painter in His Studio: Vermeer” (1966) · supplied extract, p. 125

Return to the woman at work

01

Dignity of labor

How does Vermeer make this worker matter? Explain a relationship in the painting and compare it briefly with Millet.

02

A life beyond the image

What does the painting leave unknown? Use Berger and one other Vermeer to qualify your first reading.

Reading and continuation

John Berger, “The Painter in His Studio: Vermeer” (1966), supplied extract pp.122–125.

Rijksmuseum, Vermeer exhibition texts (2023).

Walter Liedtke, The Milkmaid (The Met, 2009).

National Gallery of Art, Woman Holding a Balance.

James Payne, The Milkmaid: Great Art Explained (2022).

Wallace Collection, The Lace Maker; Louvre, La Dentellière; National Gallery, The Idle Servant.

Rijksmuseum, new examination of The Milkmaid (September 2022).

The Milkmaid · Rijksmuseum collection

The Painter in His Studio · classroom scan