

Antiek and Modern in Vermeer's "Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid"

Author(s): LISA VERGARA

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Antiek and Modern in Vermeer's Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid

Figuration: "twee personagien"

Over a period of about thirteen years, spanning half his career, Vermeer produced six paintings centering on the iconographic novelty of a woman with a letter, a motif commonly understood as pertaining to love. Although these pictures never functioned as a series in a strict sense, taken together they chart the unfolding forms of his artistic thought. From the earlier three, centering on a single figure, Vermeer moved on to explore a favorite Dutch pair, mistress and maid. Analyzing theme and variation in these works can yield greater understanding of the ways in which the artist's famous formal manipulations work expressively: for each painting he invented a special decorum of scale, space, color, light, focus, and touch, keyed to the figural subject. Here I will discuss aspects of just one of these paintings, *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid*, probably the last of Vermeer's painted meditations on epistolary themes (figs. 1, 2).¹

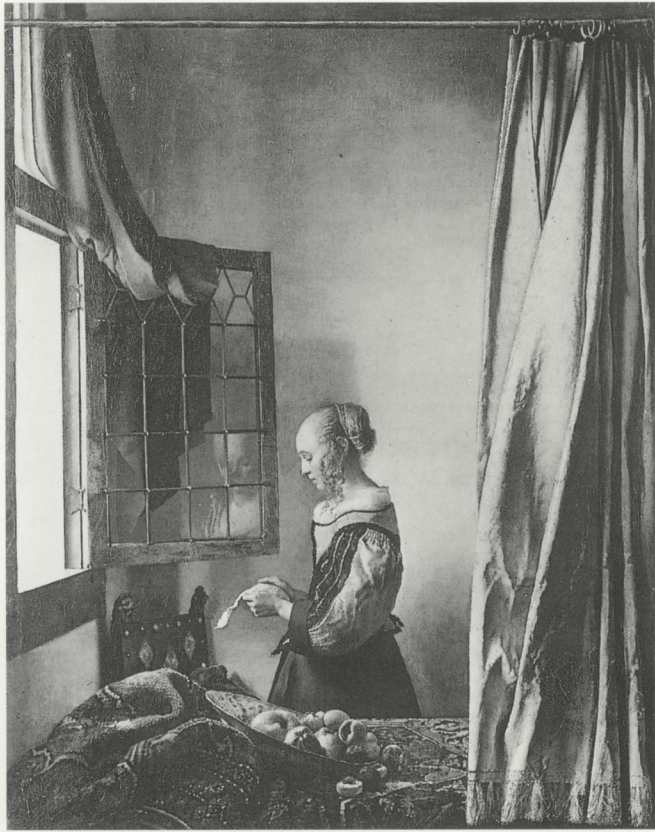
Scholars generally agree that *Lady Writing* was one of two paintings that Vermeer's widow, Catharina Bolnes, "sold and transferred" to the baker Hendrick van Buyten in 1676. The painting served as partial payment for a sizable debt, purportedly for bread. The work in question was described in a document of that year as "two persons, one of whom sits writing a letter."² That description, though minimal, best fits *Lady Writing*. If

this is so, Vermeer himself kept *Lady Writing* for a number of years, and the terms of the transfer suggest that his widow parted with it reluctantly.³

The painting itself poses several basic questions. What is the nature of the scenario? What forms of cultural rhetoric does it engage? How can we define Vermeer's discursive strategies, taking into account the aesthetic principles through which he structures representation? These questions can be approached via the painting-within-the-painting, *The Finding of Moses* (Exod. 2.1–10). The background image, I propose, functions to characterize the two main figures, primarily the letter writer, but also her servant. I maintain that Vermeer designed the biblical scene, indeed the entire setting, the shape and the contents of the interior, to define the mistress and maid—their qualities, situation, and disposition; and that this comprehensive yet highly concentrated vision constitutes his essence as a figure painter.

Throughout his work, Vermeer assigned unusual importance to axial relationships, and here he directly aligned the letter writer with a woman in the biblical scene above, the Madonna-like figure identifiable as Pharaoh's daughter.⁴ The connective principle, rooted in formal structure, is analogy: Madonna to Egyptian princess, princess to lady writing—ideal feminine types. By linking the pharaoh's daughter with the letter writer, Vermeer invites us to attribute to the modern

1. Johannes Vermeer, *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid* (detail), c. 1670–1672, oil on canvas
National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin



2. Johannes Vermeer's paintings of epistolary subjects

Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window, c. 1657, oil on canvas
 Staatliche Kunstsammlungen
 Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte
 Meister

Woman in Blue Reading a Letter, c. 1662–1664, oil on canvas
 Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

A Lady Writing, c. 1666,
 oil on canvas
 National Gallery of Art, Washington,
 Gift of Harry Waldron Havemeyer
 and Horace Havemeyer, Jr., in
 memory of their father, Horace
 Havemeyer

Mistress and Maid, c. 1667–
1669, oil on canvas
Frick Collection, New York



The Love Letter, c. 1668–
1672, oil on canvas
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

*Lady Writing a Letter with
Her Maid*, c. 1670–1672,
oil on canvas
National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin



Dutchwoman essential qualities of the biblical personage: her solicitousness, compassion, nobility, independence. Pharaoh's daughter thus expands the representation of Vermeer's principal figure.⁵ This analogy depends, of course, on the viewer's familiarity with the qualities of the Egyptian princess, which could be deduced from the biblical account and which were expanded by Flavius Josephus in his *Jewish Antiquities*, widely read in Vermeer's time. Pharaoh's daughter, whom Josephus calls Thermuthis, is entirely an instrument of God's tenderness—enchanted by the child's beauty, she provides for him, adopts him as her own, and later saves him from death. Pharaoh's daughter received further attention in such literary works as Saint Amant's long poem, *Moysé Sauvé*, in which she appears as a paragon of beauty who longs for a child (Paris, 1653; issued in the Dutch Republic seven times between 1654 and 1700).⁶ She was also represented in Dutch painting, the Finding of Moses being the most frequently depicted incident from the life of the prophet.⁷ In a few examples, a portrait sitter even appears in the guise of Pharaoh's daughter, evidence of her exemplary status. In Jan de Braij's version (1661; Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam), the sitter wears elegant contemporary clothing that, along with her individualized features, creates a conflation of biblical past and modish present.⁸

In his monograph on Vermeer of 1981, Arthur Wheelock drew a thematic connection between the letter writer and the story of the Finding of Moses.⁹ Relating the biblical narrative to the theme of Divine Providence (probably an old connection, made explicit nearly a century later in an emblem book), Wheelock reasoned that the presence of the painting-within-the-painting might express the lady's "desire that the person for whom the letter is intended will have been cared for and protected." This interpretation is similar to what I propose—Vermeer using the biblical scene to characterize the letter writer as solicitous. Yet there is something to be gained by shifting emphasis from Wheelock's conceptual sequence (the story of Moses; the idea of Divine Providence; a new narrative in which the letter writer harbors specific hopes for her correspondent) and more directly toward the painted figure of Pharaoh's daughter. This

allows us to examine more closely the way in which the biblical personage and the letter writer are each articulated by the artist, and how they are articulated in relation to each other. This procedure reveals the formal basis for the painting's metaphors, and it permits an interpretation that in no way subordinates the pictorial to the textual; on the contrary, it limits the textual more closely to forms, themes, and practices that are embodied not just in *Lady Writing* but throughout Vermeer's oeuvre.

My conceptual sequence begins with the recognition that by including the background picture in *Lady Writing*, Vermeer represents two different kinds of subject: one modern, domestic, bourgeois, and secular, the other ancient, royal, scriptural. Two kinds of vision are employed as well: the primary scene an illusion of filtered sunlight, palpable space, and dense materiality; the secondary—the painting on the wall—a representation of a representation, faded forms against a shadowy ground. Yet Vermeer integrates the biblical with the main scene through an elaborate series of calculations. The composition's most pronounced right angle, the heavy black picture frame, emphatically binds mistress and maid, each of them overlapping its darksome width. Implicitly, this formal linkage associates the two Dutchwomen with the biblical figures. The juxtaposed realms of the biblical scene and the lady's chamber are further drawn together through their similarities: in each, the lofty space and the light-infused openness at left; the stillness, even solemnity; the figural shapes; the feminine content. The forms of the lady writing, for example, reverberate in the trio of women crowning her in the painting above: Pharaoh's daughter shares her special illumination; the attendant behind the princess, like the lady, wears a scoop-necked dress and bends forward; and the nude curving around Moses at right gives the biblical threesome an enclosed shape mimicking the letter writer's own. By the same token, the forms of the biblical women surrounding the baby become amplified and focused in Vermeer's principal figure, the visual relationships being reciprocal.

Such devices—visual comparisons, echoes, rhymes, repetitions, concatenations, whatever we choose to call them—are essential components of Vermeer's sensibility. Another



3. Johannes Vermeer,
The Astronomer, 1668,
oil on canvas
Musée du Louvre, Paris

instance involves the sole standing woman in *The Finding of Moses*, whom I identify as Moses' "sister," a female relative who was sent to watch out for the child (Exod. 2.7–8). Her sentinel-like stance is imitated, in reverse, by the maid below, and a characteristic wedge of space simultaneously separates and connects each of these standing women and a figure seated nearby. In establishing a formal connection between the two standing figures, Vermeer evidently intended the viewer to grasp a thematic connection as well, since Moses' sister was to serve as a messenger, an expected role, too, of the letter writer's maid.

We can recreate, to some extent, the practice that accompanied this kind of artistic thinking. For *The Finding of Moses* in *Lady Writing a Letter*, Vermeer probably followed his documented habit of citing an actual painting, although in this case the latter has not survived.¹⁰ But it has long been recognized

that the biblical scene pictured in this painting is "the same" one that appears in Vermeer's *Astronomer* of 1668 (fig. 3)—a work that predates *Lady Writing*. Comparing Vermeer's treatment of the biblical scene in the two paintings is instructive. *The Finding of Moses* is depicted in far less assertive form in *The Astronomer*: it is much smaller, cropped, and relegated to the right background—thus completely unlike its tapestry-sized expanse in *Lady Writing*. One might construe the painting-within-this-painting as performing a correspondingly lesser role in the image of the astronomer, indicating such secondary qualities as his piety and his taste in art. But possibly Vermeer intended a significant analogy. If so, the connection apparently rests on a reference to "our ancestors the patriarchs . . . who have measured and described for us the firmament and course of the stars." James Welu discovered the actual book and page bearing the text that Vermeer displayed recognizably, if not legibly, before the figure.¹¹ If the viewer correlates the biblical scene with the text indicated by the painter, then *The Finding of Moses* serves to compare the astronomer with an august line of predecessors, among whom is Moses. In that sense, the ennobling, typological function of the biblical character is similar to what I propose for Pharaoh's daughter in *Lady Writing*. Welu convincingly places his iconographic discoveries within a broader interpretation of *The Astronomer* as an image of seventeenth-century Dutch science. But in the imagery of *The Astronomer* itself, the referential force of the painting-within-the-painting remains as oblique as its position at the margin of the picture, since Moses is shown still in infancy—destined for astronomy, but no astronomer yet. (An inescapable conclusion, I think, is that such a strained analogy was made with a particular client in mind, one who would appreciate the painting's conceptual webs.)

The remaking of *The Finding of Moses* in *Lady Writing* exemplifies one of the ways in which art begets art and making generates meaning. Recalling Vermeer's purposeful coordination of mistress-and-maid in their room with the enframed biblical personages, we can deduce a sequence of stages in the creative process that led to this match. After painting *The Astronomer*, the artist must

have begun to rethink the possibilities offered by *The Finding of Moses*. As he contemplated that biblical painting in the light of his earlier mistress-and-maid compositions (see fig. 1), it came to provide a crucial generative spark, suggesting the creation of an image allied to it but in a different mode: a scene of contemporary Dutch life, a fashionable artistic subject, rendered in the painter's signature style. Perhaps simultaneously, Vermeer made the decision to cite prominently in the new painting the very image that would shape key components of an evolving, overall conception. This required some modifications of the prior form of *The Finding of Moses* as represented in *The Astronomer*: enlarging the space at the left in the biblical scene and extending upward the foliage and sky, Vermeer aggrandized the outdoor setting not only in scale but also by making it visually loftier. These alterations must have been imagined in tandem with the similarly open, imposingly high-ceilinged chamber, in which a lady writes and a servant waits. The result, for the epistolary scene as a whole, is an unexpected grandeur.¹²

Of course patterns in the use of the picture-within-the-picture must be investigated across the oeuvre in order to evaluate the range of its functions within a specific work. That some painters of similar subject matter, such as Gerard ter Borch, rarely used this form of "accessory" (*bijwerk*) evidences the decisive importance of artists' personal predilections. The kind of subtle, strangely apt comparisons that we see in *Lady Writing* constantly recur in Vermeer's work, providing indispensable access to his artistic thought.¹³

Let us now shift attention to another component of *Lady Writing*, one that is opposite in kind and effect from *The Finding of Moses*, namely, the little still life on the floor. Against the large, tightly composed presence of the painting in the upper background, the still life consists of small, randomly scattered items in the foreground: a letter, its wrapper crumpled; a dark stick of sealing wax; and a bright red seal.¹⁴ A desire for tidy interpretation might make us wish for the maid to sweep away this stick, seal, and letter, but they function, in fact, as a standard artist's ploy, encouraging speculation. Speculation, in this case, might run in the following direction: was the mistress, shortly before, standing on our side of the table to open this letter? As

she opened it, did she crush the wrapper and send the seal falling to the floor? Why was the letter dropped? How did the stick of wax get there? Can we tease out the secrets of this tantalizing display?

Keeping in mind Vermeer's common bonds with painters of similar subject matter, we can usefully compare the grounded still life in this picture to such motifs as the thimble (a minimal still life) shining on the tiled floor in Metsu's *Lady Reading a Letter* (fig. 4). There the thimble must have fallen from the lady's finger or lap as she greeted *with emotion* the receipt of the letter—the letter that she now seems so calmly to read. In *Lady Writing*, as in Metsu's painting, the object on the floor sounds a note of urgency, enlivening a hushed interior. The foreground motifs act as tangible traces of feeling and gesture, characterizing the letter writer as indeed imbued with human passions. This strategy—the assertion of emotion through inanimate things—is peculiar to Vermeer only in the degree of importance that he assigns it.

One advantage of this strategy is that it maintains the formal and social integrity of the figures. Formal, in that Vermeer favors clear, closed shapes (the bell-shaped letter writer, the columnar maid, to use Gowing's terms); and social, in that it serves a code of restrained demeanor in scenes of patrician life.¹⁵ For Dutch art, we can quickly gauge the socially suitable by invoking Jan Steen's paintings, since many of them virtually define, through humorous opposition, a class notion of what it meant to be dignified. In his typically farcical *Doctor's Visit* (fig. 5), Steen the satirist abandons gestural restraint, evidence of its importance for gentrified social ideals. Here, too, a letter lies on the floor, but now before the seated patient. The letter apparently has caused the young woman's pulse to quicken—one repercussion of her love pain, which neither the quack doctor nor the sweet strains of music can heal.¹⁶

If Vermeer as figure painter was concerned mainly with characterization, as in this case, that explains why his narrative threads are so few, yet so choice. In this respect, at least, he does not differ from Ter Borch, Gabriël Metsu, and Pieter de Hooch. Contrary to what is so often remarked, he does not shun or subvert narrative any more than do most of his fellow painters of high-life genre scenes. Possibly

his technique compels us more forcefully to concentrate on the painted facts within the frame. Only styles of beholding will determine whether his artistry is overwhelming, discouraging interpretative, narrational responses, or whether it encourages them, even to the point of surfeit.¹⁷ Certainly, important aspects of Vermeer's approach derive from pictorial models developed centuries earlier, for Marian and other sacred devotional imagery. In early Netherlandish examples, where the approach later inherited by Vermeer first came to fruition, figural activity, assembled objects, and formal structure all refer to the sacred personage's nature and qualities—that is, they are attributive and celebratory. Jan van Eyck's Madonnas come most strongly to mind, for their tone of courtly ceremony and their combined grandeur and intimacy, and, of course, for the familiar window wall at left, the sunlight shining on rich fabrics and polished metal, and the lovely maternal woman that all these things serve to glorify.

But why might religious models be appro-

priate for the predominantly secular thrust of such works as *Lady Writing*? The answer the work itself offers is that Vermeer redirected the devotional purpose of Eyckian methods toward the version of femininity represented by the letter writer. Expressing this new devotional attitude, to a large degree, is the work's internal context. Here the vertical axis established by the mistress (fig. 6) is marked by motifs staggered behind one another: the lighted corner of the letter on the floor, then the chair leg, the letter being written, the lady writing (the axis neatly bisects her diamond-shaped brooch), and the biblical princess above. The letter writer, we discover, is enshrined exactly midway, between the missive at her feet and the pharaoh's daughter above. Visually, the mistress represents the "perfect mean." On the level of characterization, her placement adds to our perception of her own perfect composure, even, perhaps, to our sense concerning the rightness of the composition she pens. (And we now see that structural, axial requirements—as much as some imag-

4. Gabriël Metsu, *Lady Reading a Letter*, c. 1666–1667, oil on panel
National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin

5. Jan Steen, *The Doctor's Visit*, c. 1663–1665, oil on canvas
Philadelphia Museum of Art,
John G. Johnson Collection



ined action of the mistress—account for the position of the letter on the floor.)

Furthermore, Daniel Arasse has observed that in *Lady Writing* Vermeer combined a slightly lowered viewpoint with a relatively high horizon.¹⁸ This unusual combination monumentalizes the figures on the one hand, and creates a sense of proximity on the other, balancing aloofness and intimacy. This precisely calculated Vermeerian balance is spatial, then (accounting for the unrealistically abbreviated tabletop), but also psychological.

Vermeer devised other means, as well, to focus devotedly on the letter writer. The unexpected emptiness of the left foreground, for example, helps maintain the firmness of the vertical axis at right. The entire left third of the painting further is designed to facilitate the thrust of the floor line and window orthogonals toward this figure, where their vanishing point draws special attention to her luminous face (fig. 7). Thinking perspectively, Vermeer contrived the attending maid to serve art as well as her mistress: the window orthogonals pass first through her folded arms and wide-open eyes.¹⁹ That we do not notice the contrivance at first should be attributed to rightness of pose and gesture, that is, to Vermeer's skill as a figure painter.²⁰

The painting's structure, then, posits the servant's importance as a necessary adjunct to the kind of woman represented by the mistress, a patrician woman whose elegant lifestyle requires a dutiful handmaiden. At the same time, the maid's literal centrality, firm monumentality, and sympathetic humanity make her compelling in her own right, despite her perspectival and social subordination. Vermeer endows this figure with subjectivity through her prominent placement and vivid facial expression. He also assigns her a role within an implied temporal sequence: (1) letter received by the lady; (2) lady writing letter in reply; (3) maid waiting to deliver that letter to someone outside—a direction she signals through averted face and sidelong glance. This sequence adds narrative possibilities, since the maid's outward-directed look suggests that she is visualizing her task of transmitting the letter, an errand that might offer amorous opportunities for herself as well. Vermeer evidently designed her pose, then, to convey longings in common with the mistress, insofar as affairs of the heart are concerned.²¹



6. diagram of fig. 1

Whatever may be said of the servant, the form and furnishings of the epistolary scene give primacy to the mistress. Vermeer depicts her as a vivid presence, full and resplendent in her pale green dress and lace-trimmed coif. Formally, the brilliant white facets of her sleeves, rendered with voluptuous touch, optically dissociate themselves a little from the rest of the surface. This increases the letter writer's prominence and bestows on her an ineffable radiance, further distinguishing her from the sculpturally solid maid. As for the luxurious carpet-covered table, Gowing was right, I think, in comparing it to a pedestal.²² Through these means, the letter writer is quietly celebrated. The painting's argument is consistent, charged with persuading us of the mistress' sovereignty; and it does so through strategies that evoke the venerative language



7. diagram of fig. 1

of love letters themselves. That language was taken from love poetry, and indeed poems, copied out and sent, could themselves serve as love letters. Vermeer's placement of a fallen letter at the feet of the lady writing, and his depiction of her as a radiance surely engage widespread poetic conventions; the passionate yet formally rigorous love poems of P. C. Hooft, with their worship of a beautiful, virtuous woman, might well be cited.²³

Vermeer's frequent fusion of a carpet-covered table and a woman was associated with fertility by Gowing.²⁴ Here the artist assembled motifs from a variety of common carpet patterns in order to create burgeoning shapes floating before the red ground. One motif is a heart, with a stemlike form suggesting germination, encased as if within a seed. Such forms, as well as the baby above, hint at fecundity, a subtle leitmotif that

runs throughout Vermeer's images of women. Among his epistolary paintings, the pregnant shape of the *Woman in Blue* provides the most obvious example (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam).

"Love gives birth to art"

One aspect of Vermeer's stake in the kind of woman represented by the letter writer is hinted at by the position of his signature: significantly, on the piece of greenish cloth or paper that is of the same hue as the chair covering directly below it. Noting the repetition of this unusual shade, we might associate the empty chair with Vermeer's name, and be encouraged to conclude that the seat is reserved for him. If composition and rhetoric coincide in Vermeer's paintings, then we should also consider the form of the chair within the structure of *Lady Writing*. Located inside the space marked as private by the long curtain at left, the waiting chair edges the lady's table, suggesting in the letter writer a degree of accessibility. Furthermore, the diagonals of the chair rungs form perfect parallels to the slant of the fallen letter. This arrangement yields another hint, that the absent person who attends to this woman via a letter is the artist himself. That is, the placement of the signature forms part of the thematic structure of this and other paintings that focus on a woman who is lovely, always implying, however subtly and privately, that Vermeer is the absent beloved. As early as the so-called *Woman Asleep* (c. 1657, Metropolitan Museum of Art), for example, the signature is unconventionally placed between the daydreamer's head and the painting of Cupid, and much later, Vermeer positioned his name above the empty chair in *A Lady Standing at the Virginal* (National Gallery, London).²⁵ Up above in that painting stands Cupid, which prompted Gowing's oft-repeated comment that in this painter's art, "love is in the air." The visual conceit in such cases recalls yet another sentiment, one current in Vermeer's own day: "Love gives birth to art."²⁶ In *Lady Writing*, the signature concurs with the combined implications of the letter on the floor, the waiting maid, and the empty chair, to personalize the conventional subject of an amorous exchange. (Within the venerative terms of the painting, the letter in the fore-

ground can be regarded as a trace not just of the letter writer's emotions, but also of the artist's as he pays tribute to her. That is, the mistress' actions implicate Vermeer's own feelings.)

The love that gives birth to art may of course be construed in another sense as well, as a love directed at art itself.²⁷ And this latter love, too, can be seen to have inspired *Lady Writing*, in particular its concerted artistic willfulness. Yet figural aims always remain an essential part of Vermeer's assertively controlling vision. Consider the lighting scheme. The impression of the picture, with its muted tones, is certainly calm. Yet the room is suffused with inner drama, stirred by a heightened chiaroscuro that suggests complex content and mood, just as in the works of Rembrandt. But unlike the older painter's light, the illumination here appears natural, neither spiritual nor theatrical. It seems to fall randomly, highlighting not even the edge of the white curtain, but a section of that edge; not half of a face, as in Rembrandt, where it more clearly signals the different-sidedness of a personage, but an unnamable fraction of a visage. Yet it is surely art, not nature or accident, that places the letter writer so precisely between two extremes: equal wedges, shadowed on the left, sunlit on the right, frame her emphatically, giving equal prominence to the bright and dark sides of the figure, while isolating and concentrating her quiet action. (And the mistress' bright side is very bright: sunlight explains why the top of her sleeve closest to the window is bleached of its expected green color.) Vermeer, then, manipulates the play of light and dark more boldly here than in any of his other paintings, even pairing the opaque heaviness of one curtain with the transparent white airiness of the other. These diagonal curtains of light and dark, breaking into the shallow corner of a room, create an extraordinary sense of depth, and seem to deepen the significance of the lady's act as well. The whole chiaroscuro arrangement, down to the floor of black and white tiles, confirms the densely plotted nature of this work.

Part of that plot concerns Vermeer as painter, his peculiar artistry that *Lady Writing* announces and reflects upon, as when the maid's glance directs us toward the window. There, geometric tracery surrounds an oval of

warm and cool colors—stained glass repeating the painting's palette in miniature. And the shapes traced within the window, dark lines against white, are like rotated maps of the picture's solid-looking forms: parallel curves in the leaded glass reappear in the top of the servant's white blouse; a diamond outlined in the window glass is repeated in the lady's diamond-shaped brooch of the same size; the elongated vertical foreshortening echoes that of the narrow writing table seen from above; and short diagonals run parallel to the picture's space-making orthogonals. The tracery lays bare, so to speak, the geometric dimension of Vermeer's aesthetic; it is an internal reference to how the picture took shape.

If we deem the window design a stark exposition of the artist's love for geometry, then a contrasting tendency, his equally strong tonal perception, is advertised by two more internally bounded areas, the painting-within-the-painting and the carpet. Vermeer's tonalism embraces an ability to visualize a composition either as a broad structure of light and dark (the painting on the wall) or as a pattern formed through adjacent blocks of color (the carpet). Together these two displays of tonalism bracket, above and below, the more distinctly rendered letter writer. Vermeer's techniques are more wide-ranging, and more animating, than those of the *fijnschilders*, revealing more interest in working the paint: the wet-on-wet application imparting that voluptuous effect to the lady's white sleeve; incisions in the paint outlining the floor pattern; and such play with the brush as creates painterly veining atop marble tiles.

Probing further, we see particularized in this painting some of the general habits characterizing the oeuvre: (1) the shape of the visible part of the framed painting-within-the-painting is a measured square, and the distance from the top edge of the actual canvas to the lower edge of this motif is exactly the same as the distance from the lower edge of the canvas to the top of the carpet-covered table (the letter writer spans the distance between); (2) the central vertical axis is marked by a crisp fold in the maid's skirt, picked up again in a line of shadow beneath her elbow, and again at her shoulder, where the brown of her dress meets the white of her blouse; (3) a white-and-gray triangle—the vis-



8. Johannes Vermeer, *Diana and Her Companions*, c. 1655, oil on canvas, Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, The Hague

ible half of a floor tile—is the same size and shape as the dark space contained by the lower rungs of the chair (the chair itself forming a stack of five, nearly equal, triangles); and (4) to the right of the letter writer, two nail holes, depicted on the bright wedge of plastered wall, establish that this is the same far plane as its shadowed counterpart at left (cover the nail holes and the brightness jumps forward). All these artistic decisions, though masked by mimesis, would have worked on the viewer. For example, the complete interdependence of figures, setting, and compositional coordinates creates a feeling that this is a closed, self-sufficient world. Typically, Vermeer prevents the sequestered space of the room from opening up: looking again where the servant does, we notice in the colored center of the window a “standing” form that echoes her own pose and an area of blue that repeats the exact shade of her apron. Similarly, the designs on the skirting of tiles at left give the impression of upright figures—faint reverberations of the columnar maid. Through these subtle echoes of her shape at the boundaries of the room, the artist’s creation, an

aestheticized feminine world, closes back in upon itself.

The Modern, Elegant Burgher Mode

But why would Vermeer marshal the resources of his art to define, and moreover to enshrine, a particular version of womanhood, the mistress, with her adjunct the maid? I propose a theoretically aware Vermeer, which includes the following scenario. When he turned away, early on, from biblical and mythological subjects such as *Diana and Her Companions* (fig. 8), a new term came into play: “modern.” The Dutch word *modern* was often applied at that time to subjects that were not “antique” (not biblical, mythological, or treating of distant historical events), but instead were of, and about, contemporary life.²⁸ In the sense that I will employ the term, “modern” painting (our “genre” painting) limns characters, anonymous figures expressing values of particular significance to artist and audience. Strikingly concrete, modern characterizations constitute a hallmark of the period, and these describe the condition and behavior of a wider range of humanity than art had ever before explored.

As for Vermeer’s specific choice of characters, the artist was no doubt conscious of the market in higher-priced cabinet pictures, which placed an increasing premium on well-wrought images of youthful femininity.²⁹ Cultural and intellectual ideals played a part as well. A whole body of courtly material on the theme of love letters exists, from the late Middle Ages onward.³⁰ Vermeer never trivialized this theme, and the elite connotations that he invoked most likely derive from classical amatory sources. The latter were much in vogue in Vermeer’s Holland. The Hague poet Jacob Westerbaen (1599–1670), for example, translated Ovid’s collection of imaginary love letters from heroines to their absent lovers or husbands (*Epistulae heroidum*), giving it the title *Eenige brieven van doorluchtige vrouwen* (1657).³¹ On a somewhat lower level, Westerbaen adapted for the manners and mores of his time (*op onse tyden en zeden gepast*) Ovid’s *Art of Love*, enlarging on its recommendations to women “to show your mind with letters,” to learn to hold the quill in the right hand and the lyre in the left, and to entrust letters to suitable maids.³² Earlier, in the 1620s, Johan van Heemskerck had

similarly adapted Ovid's treatises on love, and his *Minne-kunst* in its 1660 reprint possibly gave added cachet to the category, just catching on, of letter-paintings. Vermeer may have been familiar with Van Heemskerck's and even Westerbaen's adaptations of Ovid, especially since so many of his own works proclaim that the art of painting and the art of love go hand in hand. If so, like these poets, boosters for the local tongue and local ethos, he so convincingly paints his own time and place—even to the brush strokes recording immediate sense impressions—that the humanistic background hardly seeps through. Another literary parallel to *Lady Writing* is the series of six poems, *Mute Messages, or Letters (Stomme-boden, ofte brieven, The Hague, 1625)* by the well-connected Delft-born playwright and one-time painter, Gerrit van Santen (1591–1656); the second poem contains autobiographical elements and the last three are ardent love letters. Vermeer's father very likely knew Gerrit van Santen, as possibly might have Vermeer himself.³³

In *Lady Writing*, Vermeer's definition of the letter writer along specific cultural and class lines, as well as the powerful artistic claims of the work as a whole, can be usefully placed against yet another kind of rhetoric, in what I take to be a long-standing, ongoing dialogue. Its somewhat later, codified (yet hardly systematic) form is found in Gerard de Lairese's discussion of the difference between antique and modern (*Antiek en Modern*) in *Het groot schilderboek* (Amsterdam, 1707, part one, book three). Since De Lairese (Liège 1640–1711 Amsterdam) outlived Vermeer by so many years, we tend to overlook his having been born less than a decade after the Delft painter. Arriving in Amsterdam as an experienced artist around 1665, and not going blind until around 1690, De Lairese had ample opportunity to observe and reflect on what we now refer to as "genre" subjects. No direct link between Vermeer and De Lairese need be posited for us to take advantage of the slightly younger artist's written formulation of a body of ideas about modern painting. Further, looking backward from De Lairese helps substantiate my view of a theoretically aware Vermeer—that is, of an artist fully cognizant of the nature and implications of his modern subjects and their innovative style.

In *Het groot schilderboek*, De Lairese is

an impassioned spokesman for the antique, which he takes great pains to distinguish from the modern. For him, the antique entails elevated narrative subjects from classical antiquity and the Bible; it patterns the human figure on proportions derived from classical statuary; and it is archaizing throughout.³⁴ In contrast, the modern—engaging the familiar, flawed, everyday world of the present—is in De Lairese's view too ephemeral. Dependent on passing fashion, the modern quickly becomes outmoded, while the antique—harmonious, stately, and dignified—will never go out of style.

Much of the fascination of De Lairese's discourse consists in its hedging and contradiction. According to him, paintings in the modern as well as in the antique mode must delineate human passions (*hertstogten*) and observe decorum in matters of time and place, with consideration given to every detail, so that the true meaning of the subject is expressed.³⁵ Despite an adversarial stance toward the modern as he construes it, De Lairese admits that many subjects (*concept of voorwerp*), and the fundamental human qualities they express—sadness, elegance, amorousness, and so on—can be depicted in both the antique and the modern modes, and he remarks that this is a new idea.³⁶

Significantly, De Lairese conflates the antique with the courtly, the aristocratic, giving his discussion a class dimension.³⁷ And it is precisely a consciousness of himself and his audience as burghers that complicates his doctrinaire endorsement of the antique. From a socioaesthetic position, De Lairese divides the modern into high and low, implying in spite of himself that depictions of the high end of the middle class, the life of elegant, well-to-do burghers (*het burgerlyke of cierlyke Modern*), can approach the theoretically higher antique manner.³⁸ He even concedes that the characters who populate elegant, modern, high-burgher scenes are equal to courtiers in beauty and virtue (*schoonheid en deugd*), and only grandeur separates them; but courtiers are characterized by luxury and pride, while to refined burghers belong modesty and temperance.³⁹ He states that since city life, with its daily events and gatherings, is peculiar to "us" (*de burgerlyke staat ons eigen is*), it is more convenient for a painter to make modern subjects his practice. Further,

these subjects allow greater freedom, especially in the matter of accessories, “since [with them] we are the master of our own inventions.”⁴⁰ (“Accessories” would include paintings-within-paintings.) One such *burgerlyk* subject that De Lairese recommends is a description of two young ladies (*juffers*) at tea.⁴¹ This description occurs under the subtitle, “An Example of Entreaty and Refusal” (*Voorbeeld van Verzoek en Weigering*): one of the young women, the visitor—despite entreaties from the hostess—refuses another cup of refreshment, her attention caught by a male servant (*knecht*) who has appeared at the door to fetch her. To make the situation more explicit, De Lairese recommends such details as a letter in the servant’s hand.

Later, under the same heading, De Lairese writes: “If you want to exemplify the same [passions] through gentlemen, you need merely substitute wine for tea, a bottle or jug for the teapot, glasses for cups . . . a manservant for the mother, and make the room a garden house if it be summer, and if winter, a chamber with a meal going on.” Thus feminine/tea and masculine/wine are subordinated to what De Lairese considers the more general organizing concept, contrasting passions. In the case of Vermeer’s *Lady Writing*, the contrasting passions, or psychological postures of the two figures, might be described as absorption and distraction. The lady’s pose bespeaks complete concentration on her writing, while the maid’s glance toward the window gives her a split orientation: she both attends to the mistress and thinks about something beyond the room.

We have seen that in their shapes and directional energies, the postures of mistress and maid are crucial to the working of the entire composition, and the contrast between absorption and distraction seems both subtler and more dramatic than the entreaty and refusal of De Lairese’s tea-taking *juffers*, for several reasons. Vermeer, after all, populates the chamber with only two figures, while De Lairese, for his imaginary painting, had recommended the addition of the hostess’ mother, another *juffer*, and a little brother stealing a lump of sugar. The more private states of mind and more private forms of sociability depicted by Vermeer contribute to the picture’s novelty, its modernity. Vermeer’s two figures, furthermore, are contrasted in many

terms beyond gesture; for example, higher and lower class, employer and employee, elegance and plainness of dress, effulgent and sculptural forms, half-length and full-length, seated and standing, proximate and remote.

Instead of moving into social and historical contingencies, and into art’s mystification of power, money, and sex, I want to keep to the task of clarifying the painting’s own terms of discourse. These emerge more clearly when set against the arguments of De Lairese, for whom high-burgher subjects imply a high-burgher artist. He declares: “It is easier for a burgher to play a burgher’s role rather than any other; so too for a painter to represent what appears to him daily, since our mind is like a glass ball hung up in the middle of a room, which receives all the visible objects present, and retains an impression of them.”⁴² This image of a reflective glass ball recalls that motif in Vermeer’s own *Allegory of Faith* (Metropolitan Museum of Art). In this painting the ball functions as a simile for the mind’s ability to grasp an understanding of God, but it also doubles as a simile for *the artist’s mind* and the impression that daily life makes on it. Vermeer’s frequent depiction of (and devotion to) easily available objects, often drawn from his own household goods, is obviously relevant. In *Allegory of Faith*, the ebony cross, the gold-tooled leather, and the large Crucifixion scene, even the situation depicted, of a home transformed into a sacred shrine—reminding us that Catholic churches in Delft were hidden within ostensibly domestic spaces—exemplify Vermeer’s practice of painting what he met with daily. The same could be argued for *Lady Writing*, that in it he depicts a situation, however idealized, with which he could boast familiarity.

But how authentic, in De Lairese’s sense, is *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid*? It is commonly held that Vermeer’s work exhibits many forms of artistic self-referentiality. Thus one can imagine other forms of self-reference in his scenes of private life, a more pronounced subjectivity (which concurs with De Lairese’s “freedom of invention”). Indeed a painting such as *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid* might represent on one level Vermeer’s complex response to his own personal circumstances. That is, the subject matter and tone of *Lady Writing* can be linked with aspects of Vermeer’s life discovered through

archival study and intimate social history, mainly John Michael Montias' work.⁴³

Documents reveal the instability of Vermeer's social and economic status. There is also evidence of conscious striving on his part to elevate his position—and some measure of success in doing so, despite his living among Catholic outsiders and his limited success as a breadwinner. The tone of *Lady Writing* suggests that the artist felt a certain awe (and a claim, I think, of rightful possession) before the kind of woman the letter writer represents. This can be understood partly with reference to Vermeer's own rise from the artisan class of his family to the society he entered upon his marriage. His mother-in-law, Maria Thins, had a patrician income and could claim that she "frequented in a familiar way and had good acquaintance with" high-born people.⁴⁴ Through her, as well as through prosperous collectors such as the artist's maecenas, Pieter Claesz van Ruijven, Vermeer gained entry into the kind of elegant households that his paintings represent.⁴⁵

In considering the cultural prestige attaching to the imagery of this picture, the subject of writing should not be ignored. In Vermeer's time, apparently far fewer than half of Dutch women could write.⁴⁶ According to Montias, the artist's mother was illiterate.⁴⁷ From the fairly fluent signature of Vermeer's sister, Montias concludes that "it would appear that she could read and write at least at an elementary level"; but she wed a man who was "completely illiterate" at the time of their marriage.⁴⁸ In contrast, Vermeer's wife, Catharina Bolnes, came from a social class that sent daughters to school to learn to write as well as read, and the way in which she signed documents demonstrates her "elegant hand."⁴⁹

Personal letters, if ever Catharina wrote them, do not survive. One sure gift that she did possess, however, was that of motherhood. Throughout her marriage, she was almost continually with child, giving birth to fifteen children within twenty-two years of marriage.⁵⁰ Of course, fertility was then regarded as a positive component of womanhood, and Vermeer's allusions to it here, in the baby above and the carpet blossoms below, are subtle. Indeed, the characterization of the letter writer—the kind of writing in which she engages, her implied "maternal" solicitude,

the dignified setting—generally conforms to high-burgher notions of femininity. Yet the painting can hardly be an accurate record of the artist's own household. (Where are the children? Did the household servant ever serve as lady-in-waiting?) Rather, Vermeer's vision isolates and encloses actual components of his private world (the very components, I speculate, that obsessed him the most), blending them with rarified social ideals.

That Vermeer's extraordinary late style serves those ideals so well suggests a strong degree of imaginative identification with the subjects of his pictures. De Lairese's biases against modish subject matter and what he considered too great a dependence on immediate visual impressions—opinions expressed in an artistic milieu that had changed considerably since Vermeer's time—clearly were not shared by the Delft artist and his high-burgher clients. For De Lairese, the modern implies a painter unable to assume the grand manner (*de prachtigste en allerhoogste trant*), though he states that painters should follow their own inclinations and that, ultimately, the choice between antique and modern is a private affair. "'Tis better," says De Lairese, "to be a good Mieris in the Modern mode, than a poor Raphael in the Antique."⁵¹ Yet the unusual degree of stateliness, grace, and figural poise in *Lady Writing* finds a parallel in De Lairese's notion of what constitutes excellence in the antique style. "State" and "carriage," he says, are "the very soul of a good picture."⁵² Citing Nicolas Poussin, Domenichino, and Federico Barocci as exemplary practitioners of antique painting, De Lairese writes admiringly of the unadorned simplicity (*eenvoudigheid*) of their figures, which expresses so well character and feeling.⁵³ Something for us to keep in mind, for *Lady Writing*, with its modern subject, its highly aestheticized approach to the familiar, its formally simplified depiction of an elegant burgher woman, and its tone of serious decorum that nevertheless conveys human passion, seems to proclaim in Vermeer's name: "True, 'tis better to be a good Mieris than a poor Raphael. But 'tis even better to make the Mieris mode of art equal Raphael's best."

Vermeer died in debt, and quite possibly of debt.⁵⁴ If *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid* is the painting that his widow used to pay Van

Buyten, we are left wondering why she had it to offer at all: had Vermeer been unable to sell this picture of dignified wealth, or had he kept it, to contemplate? In either case, the links that can be discerned between this painting and the artist's own realities and aspirations begin to explain the weight of feeling and height of aspiration that humanize even the most rigorous of his conceptions in paint. But the rather superficial play posited here between personal milieu and a *kind* of painting gains support from the more impersonal context of art theory—namely, De Laire's discussion of the high modern mode; his acknowledgment of personal temperament in choice of style; and his assertion that modern subjects offer greater freedom to the artist. More particularly, in *Lady Writing* we find that same juxtaposition of two modes, the antique-courtly, *The Finding of Moses*, and the elegant-modern, a woman writing a letter with her maid. Although the author of *Het groot schilderboek* intimates the potential equality of the two modes as a new idea, painters who had a stake in such matters certainly arrived at that conclusion much earlier.

The functions of *The Finding of Moses* in Vermeer's epistolary scene, then, are varied. The biblical painting comments on the letter

writer, placing her in a tradition of ideal femininity, an abiding concern in Vermeer's art. As a capsule depiction of the biblical painting that inspired him, it also locates a source for *Lady Writing* in a different kind of art, pointing to Vermeer's ambitions for modern painting. This gesture encourages us to regard the artist's pairing of biblical and bourgeois in yet another light. Over four decades ago, Gowing observed that *The Finding of Moses* pictured in *Lady Writing* recalls one of the painter's earliest known works, *Diana and Her Companions* (fig. 8).⁵⁵ Leonard Slatkes went further, proposing that the biblical scene might represent one of Vermeer's own youthful paintings.⁵⁶ Early in his career, Vermeer replaced such antique subjects, both biblical and classical, and their quasi-Italianate style, with a powerful new vision and his version of the "modern, elegant, burgher mode." The combination of two modes in *Lady Writing*—antique and modern—thus encapsulates Vermeer's entire artistic evolution, from early to late. Indeed, the crowning, spectral forms of the "antique" painting, the elevated biblical story of *The Finding of Moses*, recede behind the potent modesty, and majesty, of Vermeer's mundane subject: "two persons, one of whom sits writing a letter."

NOTES

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1. Sustained discussions of the painting include Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Vermeer and the Art of Painting* (New Haven, 1995), 157–162, and in *Johannes Vermeer* [exh. cat., National Gallery of Art and Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis] (Washington and The Hague 1995), 186–189. Lawrence Gowing in his much earlier monograph referred to the painting often, making important observations and acknowledging that “everything of Vermeer” is contained in it: *Vermeer* (London, 1952), 59.

Lady Writing measures 28¹/₂ x 23¹/₂ in. (72.2 x 59.7 cm). Wheelock 1995, 157, dates the picture c. 1670–1672, which seems reasonable in terms of a general developmental sequence. Throughout, with few exceptions, I have followed Wheelock’s dating.

2. “. . . twee personagien waeraff de’ene een brief sit en schrijft.” See discussion in John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 216–218, 338, doc. 361.

3. The description of the painting in the document of 1676 could also be applied to Vermeer’s *Mistress and Maid* (Frick Collection, New York). There, however, the lady suspends writing to listen to her maid. Only the painting in Dublin depicts a person in the act of writing, as the description states. We might also consider what the document omits—namely, any reference to an encounter between the two persons, such as Vermeer dramatized in the Frick painting, where the mistress reacts to the maid proffering a letter. In print, only Montias 1989, 260, has presented plausible reasons for identifying Van Buyten’s epistolary scene as *Mistress and Maid*: first, its larger size (35¹/₂ x 31 in.) compared to *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid*, since one of Van Buyten’s paintings by Vermeer was later described as being “large”; and, second, the apparently unfinished state of the Frick painting, which could explain why it might still have been in Vermeer’s possession at the time of his death. In response to Montias’ first reason, if “large” is construed in relative terms, the Dublin picture, too, is larger than any extant work identifiable as the other painting by Vermeer that Van Buyten acquired at this time. As for Montias’ second reason, Wheelock 1995, 142, judges the Frick painting finished, but the question still seems open to me.

4. Referring to the same biblical group represented in Vermeer’s *Astronomer* (Musée du Louvre, Paris; fig. 3), Thoré-Bürger cited the observation of his source Otto Mündler that it represented “une espèce de Sainte Famille”; Mündler no doubt was misled by the Madonna-like configuration of Pharaoh’s daughter (William Bürger, “Van de Meer de Delft,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 21 [1866], 560). The only other Dutch version of *The Finding of Moses* known to me in which the princess holds the infant Moses is by

Pieter de Grebber (1634; Dresden, Gemäldegalerie); although the effect there is different, this work may stand behind the Madonna-like conception in the painting that Vermeer represented.

5. In response to my musings on the elaborate formal connections between the biblical and the epistolary scenes in this painting, Lawrence Gowing proposed an analogy between the letter writer and Pharaoh's daughter, suggesting that we can attribute to the former the qualities of solicitude and tenderness, deduced from "the known disposition" of the latter (letter dated 5 December 1985).

One might argue that the woman holding the baby in the picture Vermeer represented is instead Moses' natural mother, who, according to Flavius Josephus, was entrusted with the child's nurture after Moses spurned the milk of more than one of the princess' Egyptian attendants; see Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray (Cambridge and London, 1978 [1930]), 2: 226–227. Since the Madonna-like figure is visually the most pronounced, and given that she is not actually suckling the infant as did Moses' mother, it seems more plausible to identify her as the main female character in both the biblical narrative and in Josephus' elaborated account; see further on Flavius Josephus, note 6 below.

6. Flavius Josephus, 2: 224–242 (as in note 5). Josephus' popularity in the Netherlands, in particular among Protestants, has often been noted; see, for example, C. W. Monnich and Michel van der Plas, *Het woord in beeld: vijf eeuwen bijbel in het dagelijkse leven* (Baarn, 1977), 68. On the importance of Josephus for Dutch biblical painting, see Christian Tümpel, "De receptie van de 'Joodse Oudheden' van Flavius Josephus in de Nederlandse historieschilderkunst," in Tümpel et al., *Het Oude Testament in de schilderkunst van de Gouden Eeuw* (Zwolle, 1991), 194–206.

In *Moysé Sauvê* (episodes 7–10) by Marc Antoine Gérard, Sieur de Saint Amant, the maternal longing of Pharaoh's daughter is a major theme. For Dutch productions of the text, see Jean Lagny, *Bibliographie des éditions anciennes des oeuvres de Saint-Amant* (Paris, 1960), 36–46.

7. See Marloes Huiskamp, "De Uittocht uit Egypte en de Verovering van het Land," in Tümpel et al. 1991, 55, where the long tradition of the subject in biblical illustration is also mentioned.

8. On De Braij's painting of a sitter in the guise of Pharaoh's daughter, see Albert Blankert et al., *Gods, Saints, and Heroes: Dutch Painting in the Age of Rembrandt* [exh. cat., National Gallery of Art, Detroit Institute of Arts, and Rijksmuseum] (Washington, Detroit, and Amsterdam, 1980–1981), 224–225, cat. 61; on another example, a group portrait *historié*, see Rose Wishnevsky, *Studien zum "portrait historié" in den Niederlanden* (Munich, 1967), 45–46, cat. 6 and fig. 1 (an old photograph, with an attribution to Abraham van Dyck).

9. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Jan Vermeer* (New York, 1981), 146.

10. Following Willem van de Watering, Albert Blankert, and Oliver Millar, Jacques Foucart attributes the background picture in the Dublin painting to Peter Lely, who made several versions of *The Finding of Moses*; see Jacques Foucart, "Peter Lely, Dutch History Painter," *Hoogsteder-Naumann Mercury* 8 (1989), 17–26. None of the extant renderings of the subject by Lely, however, matches the one depicted in summary form by Vermeer, and this, along with the fact that the overall composition of Lely's works is fairly commonplace, leaves the matter far from settled. Leonard Slatkes has suggested that the *Finding of Moses* represented by Vermeer was one of his own early works (see below, note 57). For additional representations of *The Finding of Moses* by seventeenth-century Netherlandish artists, one may consult the relevant photographic file of the *Decimal Index of the Art of the Low Countries* (DIAL 71 D 51.4).

11. James Welu, "Vermeer's *Astronomer*: Observations on an Open Book," *Art Bulletin* 68, 2 (June 1986), 266. Evidence adduced in earlier as well as subsequent literature on *The Astronomer* overwhelmingly supports the positive, exemplary function of *The Finding of Moses* in relation to Vermeer's figure. On a formal level, the shape of the biblical painting matches the sea chart in *The Geographer* (Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt-am-Main), often presumed to be a pendant to *The Astronomer*.

12. This scenario, in which a preexisting painting generates structural and thematic components of a new composition by Vermeer, one in which the pre-existent, "inspiring" work is represented, applies as well to *The Concert* (Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, stolen 1990), if we consider *The Procuress* in the background; and to *A Lady Seated at the Virginal* (National Gallery, London).

13. The meaningfulness of such visual rhymes is manifest throughout Vermeer's work and constitutes an important component of his artistic individuality. For example, in the *Art of Painting* (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) the contour of the painter's hat repeats that of the west coast of the northern Netherlands in the map above him. This device evidently goes beyond formal niceties, functioning as a kind of pledge of allegiance to the homeland on the part of Vermeer, who we can assume identified with the depicted artist. A specifically Dutch reference in the rhyme of painter and provinces is underscored by the crease in the map, often commented upon, which roughly coincides with the political split between north and south.

14. In Washington and The Hague 1995, 39, Blankert identifies the letter on the floor in the Dublin painting as a book, but the upturned sheet is too large to be its cover. G. D. J. Schotel, *Het maatschappelijk leven onzer vaderen in de zeventiende eeuw*, 2d ed. (Leiden, 1905), chap. 15 ("Briefwisseling"), illustrates a tightly folded letter that looks like a package, the usual form of a sealed letter as depicted in Dutch paintings. In my opinion, for the object on the floor Vermeer enlarged and showed unfolded this packet form.

15. Another example of this kind of artistic thinking is found in Ter Borch's *Officer Writing a Letter* (Philadelphia Museum of Art) where the ace of hearts on the floor signals the writer's amorous feelings—despite his impassive expression—and identifies his missive-in-progress as a love letter; see *Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting*, ed. Peter C. Sutton [exh. cat., Philadelphia Museum of Art; Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin; Royal Academy of Arts, London] (Philadelphia, Berlin, London, 1984), 146, cat. 10 [P. C. Sutton]. Vermeer's legible rendering of the words "joy" and "sorrow" (in Latin) on the lid of the virginal in *A Lady at the Virginal with a Gentleman (The Music Lesson)* (Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II) constitutes another example of his very subtle use of nonfigural elements to convey emotions that the body alone cannot represent (cannot because of decorum's demands for expressive restraint). On the importance of erect posture as a class marker in seventeenth-century Dutch life, art, and art theory, see Herman Roodenburg, "Over scheefhalzen en zwellende heupen: Enige argumenten voor een historische antropologie van de zeventiende-eeuwse schilderkunst," *De Zeventiende Eeuw* 9 (1993), 152–168. Roodenburg, 158, cites Willem Goeree's recommendation that a slight bowing to the side of the head in portraits of women conveys grace and gentleness; this convention in depictions of women goes back centuries and is found throughout Vermeer's work.

16. For extensive discussions of this painting, with many further references, see for example, Ben Broos, *Great Dutch Paintings from America* [exh. cat., Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis] (The Hague, 1990), 425–427, cat. 60, and Philadelphia, Berlin, and London 1984, 313–315, cat. 105.

17. Recently Wheelock (Washington and The Hague 1995, 162) offered further explanation for Vermeer's letter on the floor and its relationship to the picture-within-the-picture. "Letters were highly valued," he notes, "and not lightly crumpled and discarded: the implication, thus, is that the letter had been cast aside in haste and in anger. Given the calmness of the scene, it appears that the moment has passed. The mistress' quiet demeanor implies that her response has been measured, buttressed by her faith that divine providence [exemplified by The Finding of Moses] will control her destiny. With faith, Vermeer seems to assert, comes inner peace and serenity, even in matters of the heart." This line of narration is certainly plausible, although "anger" strikes me as too explicit, and unwarranted.

18. Daniel Arasse, *Vermeer: Faith in Painting*, trans. Terry Grabar (Princeton, 1994), 60–61.

19. On the structure of the window orthogonals and vanishing point in this painting, see also Washington and The Hague 1995, 186 (Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.), and 67 and 79, n.5 (Jørgen Wadum, on the physical evidence that Vermeer inserted into the grounded canvas, at the vanishing point, a pin with a string attached to it); and Wheelock 1995, 161.

20. Folded arms may suggest idleness in Netherlandish art, and here the maid indeed is "idling," but in the positive sense—like a plane on a runway—of actively awaiting further demands. The classic study of folded arms as symbolic of idleness is by Susan Koslow: "Frans Hals' 'Fisherboys': Exemplars of Idleness," *Art Bulletin* 57 (1975), 418–432.

21. I base this interpretation on the apparent youthfulness of the maid represented in *Lady Writing*, which is typical of painted representations of this type and time period, and may correspond to actual custom. Scholarship devoted to maidservants in Dutch life, writings, and art continues to grow. A recent contribution states: "Domestic service was regarded by critics from [Jacob] Cats to [Simon] De Vries not as a permanent occupation for a woman, but as a part in a life cycle, to be followed by marriage and motherhood. . . . It is reasonable to assume that most maidservants hoped to marry, and that this hope was reflected in their patterns of behaviour as servants": Marybeth Carlson, "A Trojan Horse of Worldliness?: Maidservants in the Burgher Household in Rotterdam at the End of the Seventeenth Century," in *Women of the Golden Age: An International Debate on Women in Seventeenth-Century Holland, England, and Italy*, ed. Els Kloek, Nicole Teeuwen, and Marijke Huisman (Hilversum, 1994), 92–93. And as Martha Hollander has observed in an innovative article that has important implications for Vermeer's art, "there appear to be two modes of servant-mistress relationship in Dutch art, often in the same image: those that distinguish the two women by their class, and those that link them through their sex": "The Divided Household of Nicolaes Maes," *Word and Image* 10, 2 (1994), 146.

22. Gowing 1952, 45.

23. See Henrietta ten Harmsel, "P. C. Hooft in Translation: Five Sonnets with Commentary," in *Hooft: Essays* (Amsterdam, 1981), esp. 82–83 for the analysis of Hooft's pervasive imagery of light as it is articulated within a particular poem, one whose dramatic closing lines read: "And even so, my Light, when you illumine me,/My heart swells up with awe and deepfelt ecstasy;/My gratitude to you and your Creator meet/Until my bursting heart falls broken at your feet." See also the comparison between a love emblem that Hooft devised and Vermeer's *Music Lesson*, in Washington and The Hague 1995, 130. On Dutch Petrarchism as a framework for the production and reception of the art of Gerard ter Borch (which has clear connections with Vermeer's) and that of his half-sister Gesina, see Alison McNeil Kettering, "Ter Borch's Ladies in Satin," *Art History* 16 (1993), 101–104, 107–108.

24. Gowing 1952, 45.

25. Vermeer was hardly alone in placing himself "on the scene" in the projected form of a signature. For example, in Metsu's *Lady Reading a Letter* (fig. 4), referred to above, Metsu signed his name on the envelope held by the maid. Perhaps the subtlest (and for this reason arguable) self-reference of this sort in Vermeer is the ornate design on the front of the vir-

ginal in *A Lady at the Virginal with a Gentleman* (*The Music Lesson*) (Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II), where a decorative pattern—abstract seahorse and plant forms—takes the shape of Vermeer's monogram, TVM in ligature. (I thank Marjorie Reilly for this observation.) Vermeer often used this monogram and variations on it, including in *The Music Lesson* itself (adding "eer," the last three letters of his name). Gowing 1970, 124 and 126 n.84, writing of *The Music Lesson*, proposed that Vermeer identified with the depicted gentleman, whose state of "captivity" is signaled by the bound figure of Cimon in the painting-within-the-painting. I believe that this idea is made a little more explicit by Vermeer's placement of his regular signature on the picture frame—that is, immediately to the right of the gentleman, and below the figure of the captive Cimon. Gowing 1970, 50, wrote of Vermeer's use of background paintings to contrive "almost secretly, his own mythology"; the way in which the artist "flags" certain elements in his works through his signature forms another component, I think, in his construction of such a mythology.

26. The Delft painter Leonard Bramer signed the *Album Amicorum* of a fellow painter in Rome with the motto, "Love gives birth to art" (*Liefde baart kunst*); see Eddy de Jongh, *Portretten van echt en trouw* [exh. cat., Frans Hals Museum] (Zwolle and Haarlem, 1986), 57–58; cited by Montias 1989, 100. De Jongh 1986, 57–59, 274–278, connects this motto to the notion of Eros as the teacher of painting and considers that theme in its bourgeois, marital variant.

27. Arasse 1994, 38, relates the concept of *amoris causa* to Vermeer, specifically giving priority to love of art—over Eros—as the chief stimulus to art, whereas in my opinion the prevalence of amorous themes in Vermeer's paintings and their treatment suggest that in his work the two loves operate hand-in-hand. The phrase *amoris causa* is more ambiguous than the *lucris causa* and *gloriae causa* with which it is sometimes grouped (as on Samuel van Hoogstraeten's National Gallery, London perspective box). On the concept *amoris causa* in the work of Hoogstraeten, see most recently Celeste Brusati, *Artifice and Illusion: The Art and Writing of Samuel van Hoogstraten* (Chicago, 1995), 213, which, however, does not comment on this ambiguity or on the possible connection between *amoris causa* and the anamorphosis of Cupid and Erato (Brusati's identification) on the top face of the London box.

28. On the use of the terms "modern" and "à la mode" in relation to art, see Lydia de Pauw-de Veen, *De begrippen "schilder," "schilderij," en "schilderen" in de zeventiende eeuw* (Brussels, 1969), 171 (Houbraken, for example, referring to Gabriël Metsu as "de vermaerde Moderne gezelschapschilder"); 174 (Van Mander referring to Bloemaert's "Moderne bancket"—that is, social company in contemporary clothing); and 173, 179. Gerard ter Borch senior, in a letter to his son of 3 July 1635, wrote: "And if you want to paint, then first paint something of the modern kind of figurative group (*ordonantsij van modarn*)," meaning figure groups

from everyday life as well as a way of painting; the letter is translated and analyzed in Alison McNeil Kettering, *Drawings from the Ter Borch Studio Estate*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam, 1988), 2:864–865.

29. Throughout most of Vermeer's career as an artist, genre subjects were gaining in popularity in both Delft and Amsterdam; see John Michael Montias, "Works of Art in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam: An Analysis of Subjects and Attributions," in *Art in History/History in Art: Studies in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Culture*, ed. David Freedberg and Jan de Vries (Santa Monica, 1991), 336. Pictures of fashionably dressed young women, maidservants, and other genre subjects by Dou and Van Mieris were among the most expensive paintings of the seventeenth century; the cost was related to their *fijn* style, but the subjects no doubt counted for part of the market value.

30. See Bernard Bray, *L'Art de la lettre amoureuse: des manuels aux romans (1550–1700)* (The Hague and Paris, 1967). The inspiration for Vermeer's epistolary subjects in other works of art—works that are at least as important as literary fashions—is well known, having received considerable attention in the art-historical literature.

31. Westerbaen's *Eenige brieven van doorluchtige vrouwen* is included in both editions of his *Gedichten* (The Hague, 1657 and 1672). In 1642, Joost van den Vondel translated the *Epistulae heroïdum* as *Nasos Heldinnebrieven* (published 1716); see, for example, J.F.M. Sterck et al., *De werken van Vondel* (Amsterdam, 1930), 4:327–427. An earlier Dutch translation, by Cornelis van Ghistele, was published in Antwerp, 1554.

32. Westerbaen's adaptation of the *Ars amatoria* is entitled *Avond-school voor vryers en vrysters* (*Evening school for sweethearts*, 1665); it is included in his *Gedichten*, vol. 2 (The Hague, 1672), as is his adaptation of Ovid's *Remedia amoris* (*Nieuw Avond-school*, 1666). On translations and reworkings of Ovid's love manuals in the Netherlands during this period, including Westerbaen's, and the role of love letters in them, see Petra van Boheemen, "'Hoe men een lief vinden en krygen zal': Ovidius als leermeester," in *Kent, en versint Eer datje mint. Vrijen en trouwen 1500–1800* [exh. cat., Historisch Museum Marialust (Apeldoorn)] (Zwolle, 1989), 53–54 and 98 n.3. For a succinct account of relationships among courtship imagery, normative texts, and actual courtship practice, see Wayne Franits, *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (Cambridge, 1993), 33–61.

33. In the second of the six *Stomme-boden*, Van Santen refers to his attempts at painting. The three love-letter poems, together comprising 108 lines, are conventionally adoring and pleading in tone. The poet, from a prominent Delft family, was the brother of Johan van Santen, a friend of Vermeer's father, and an acquaintance, at least, of Vermeer himself. Montias 1989, 77, speculates on the possibility that Vermeer father and son, as art dealer and painter respectively, had access to Gerrit van Santen's high-burgher, art-

loving milieu through Johan. Further, the Van Santen brothers were related to Vermeer's patron, Pieter Claesz van Ruijven (Montias 1989, 246). Peter C. Sutton, in Philadelphia, Berlin, and London 1984, 147 n.4, translated the description of a love letter by the character May in Van Santen's satirical play *Snappende Sytgen* (early 1620s): "He called me his joy, his consolation, his beloved love, his lodestar, his goddess, and a thousand similar things." May, "Lying May" [Leugenachtige May], is a servant girl.

34. For a more detailed discussion of De Lairese's concept of the antique and his contemptuous objections to the modern style, see Arno Dolders, "Some Remarks on Lairese's *Groot schilderboek*," *Simiolus* 15, 3/4 (1985), 214–220. Christopher Brown, *Scenes of Everyday Life: Dutch Genre Painting of the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1984), 63, expresses what I take to be the general view of De Lairese's discussion of the modern mode: "Ironically, the great age of Dutch genre painting was long over by the time Lairese provided it with a theoretical justification. . . . Jan Steen, Frans van Mieris and Gerard Terborch . . . had required no theory to justify their vigorous, beautiful and richly inventive practice." My sense of the situation is different, namely, that De Lairese set down long-standing, even if unwritten, concepts that had actively informed those artists' practice and that he did so with the aim of justifying not their art, but his own (with its classicistic bias).

35. Gerard de Lairese, *Het groot schilderboek*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam, 1707), 1:167–169: "De eigenschap en welvoegelykheid in 't ordineren der Geschiedenissen is het waare kenteeken van een vernuftig Meester. . . . Voert aldus uw *Concept* uit, acht neemende op de tyd en plaats, om uwe verbeeldingen daar na te schicken. . . . Ten dien einde is het nodig, dat men leesgierig zy, en zich wel voorzie van boeken. . . . moet ook een Schilder in de uitbeeldingen, welke hy het meest behertigt, en daar hy zich voornamentlyk op zet en toelegt, kundig wezen, 't zy dat hy aan het Antiek of Modern zyne meeste naarstigheit te koste legt." Further, 182: ". . . het geen minder konst is, een boertige als een ernstige zaak, een Landman als een Hoveling. . . . ; dewyl tot het een zo wel, als tot het ander, goede kennis vereischt word, om het wel te treffen." See also 185 and 195: "De Moderne schilderyen komen in alle deelen met de beste Antieksche over een, voor zo veel de konst betreft, als teekening, schikking, koleur, dag en schaduw, stoffagie, enz."

36. De Lairese 1707, 1:175: ". . . al 't geen [subjects for the Modern mode] ons deftig, minnelyk, droevig, of andersins, naar de toevallen zyn, te vooren komt. . . . konnen zo wel in 't Antiek, als in 't Modern, verbeeld worden. . . . beide even natuurlyk en bekwaam, zonder dat den een den ander iets hoeft te ontleenen, als alleen het *concept* of voorwerp. Dit oordeel ik aanmerkelyk. . . . te meer alzo in geene boeken, myn's weetens, daar van geschreeven is."

37. On this class dimension in De Lairese's discourse, especially with respect to the antique, see Dolders 1985, 217–218.

38. De Lairese 1707, 1:175, 178 (where he claims that Van Dyck excelled in both the antique and the modern), and 185.

39. De Lairese 1707, 1:182: "De pracht alleen is het maar, die het hoffelyk van het burgerlyk onderscheid: want overdaad en hovaardy is den Hovelingen, daar en tegen zedigheit en matigheit den Burgers eigen."

40. De Lairese 1707, 1:182, 185.

41. De Lairese 1707, 1:183.

42. De Lairese 1707, 1:185: "Maar gemakelyker valt het voor een Burger, een burgerlyke rol dan een andere te spelen, alzo ook voor een Schilder, te blyven by het verbeelden van het geen hem dagelyks voorkomt: dewyl onze herssenen zyn als een glaze bol, in 't midden van een kamer opgehangen, welke door alle voorwerpen, die zich vertoonen, aangedaan word, en een indruk daar van behoud."

43. In addition to benefiting from Montias 1989, I am grateful to the author for having shared with me some of his insights into the artist before the book's publication. Especially enlightening was his sense of Vermeer's feelings about the special status of literate women, to which I allude below.

44. Montias 1989, 210, quoting a notarial deposition.

45. Montias 1989, 261.

46. On female literacy in seventeenth-century Holland, see A. T. van Deursen, *Plain Lives in a Golden Age: Popular Culture, Religion, and Society in Seventeenth-Century Holland*, trans. Maarten Ultee (Cambridge, 1991), 122–124. As Van Deursen notes, the evidence is not always clear, and more extensive archival and statistical studies are needed before we can arrive at accurate rates of female literacy.

47. Montias 1989, 87.

48. Montias 1989, 78.

49. Montias 1989, 237; Montias reproduces an example of Catharina's signature in the frontispiece.

50. Montias 1989, 213–214, 245.

51. De Lairese 1707, 1:175: ". . . doch hoewel het laatste [het Antiek] veel loffelyker zy, en in deftigheit het eerste [het Modern] overtreft, is het niettemin veel pryswaardiger dat men een goeden *Mieris* in 't Modern gelykt, dan een slechten *Rafael* in 't Antiek."

52. De Lairese 1707, 1:57: ". . . de deftigheit en welgemanierdheit twee uitnemende zaaken zyn, aan welke zo veel gelegen is, dat wanneer het in een schildery ontbreekt, men het zelve niet voor goed kan keuren; ja ik ordeel het *de ziel van een konstig schildery te zyn*"; see discussion in Dolders 1985, 218–220 and in Roodenburg 1993, 158–162.

53. De Lairese 1707, 1:57.

54. Montias 1989, 212. From the extraordinary testimony of Vermeer's widow concerning his frenzy and death, Montias concludes: "A very plausible interpre-

tation of this story is that Vermeer, frantic over his inability to earn money to support his large family and to repay his debts, had a stroke or heart attack from which he had died in a day or two."

55. Gowing 1952, 96.

56. Leonard Slatkes, *Vermeer and His Contemporaries* (New York, 1981), 82, 100. Slatkes' suggestion is well worth considering, especially since the format of *The Finding of Moses* in *The Astronomer* is quite close to Vermeer's early *Diana*, and since the Madonna-like configuration of the main character suggests a Catholic orientation (compare Huiskamp 1991, associating Pieter de Grebber's precedent in this respect with the artist's Catholicism). It should also be noted that Van Buyten owned a *Moses*, apparently the only history painting in his collection, or at least the only one so designated by its subject (on Van Buyten's collection, see Montias 1989, 258–260). Since the biblical subject represents a deviation from Van Buyten's usual choices, I suspect that his *Moses* was bought as a "Vermeer," and that it was the work that served as a model for the biblical painting represented in *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid* and *The Astronomer*. In this scenario, that the *Moses* was not attributed to Vermeer by name in 1701 would be understandable, considering the remarkable difference between the artist's early history paintings and the later "modern" ones on which his reputation, by then, rested.