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Women in Vermeer's home
Mimesis and ideation

H. Perry Chapman

Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675) is widely regarded as a definer of the Dutch domestic interior at its height in the 1660s. Yet comparison of his oeuvre to those of his contemporaries Pieter de Hooch (1629-1684), Jan Steen (1626-1679), Gabriel Metsu (1629-1669), Nicolaes Maes (1634-1693), and others, reveals that his pictures of home life are unusual in their omission of what were quickly becoming stock features of the imagery of domesticity. The domestic ideal that flourished in the art of mid-seventeenth century Holland entailed preparation for marriage, homemaking, housewifery, nurturing, and the virtues of family life, values that were celebrated, too, in popular household manuals of which Jacob Cats' *Houwelyck* is the best known.[1] But Vermeer painted no families, the stock and trade of Jan Steen, master of both the dissolute household (fig. 11) and the harmonious, pious family saying grace.[2] Nor did he paint mothers tending to children in the absence of fathers, a popular theme that increasingly cast the home and child rearing as mothers' moral domain, which was the subject of some of the most engaging pictures by Pieter de Hooch, his Delft contemporary (see fig. 17).[3] For that matter, with two small and somewhat anonymous exceptions (see fig. 1), Vermeer painted no children, which is noteworthy not so much for its contrast with his own full household but because it shows him going against a pictorial grain of endearing sentimentality.[4] Also unusual in Vermeer's image of domesticity is the absence of essential furnishings and accoutrements of home life. He painted, for example, no hearths, no cupboards, and no beds.[5] Yet, especially, beds – as either loaded with meaning or simply part of the background – are so ubiquitous in his contemporaries' scenes of home life and domestic sociability that they virtually signal 'home'.[6]

Vermeer's pictorial home is a resolutely adult, including young adult, world of private sociability, whether actual, as in *The Concert* (Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston) or implied, as in his several images of women reading or writing (love) letters.[7] For men, Vermeer's home is the site of scholarly pursuit in two pictures, the *Geographer* and *Astronomer*; it is also the artist's work place (see fig. 16). With these exceptions, Vermeer's domestic realm is inhabited largely by women. Many of his pictures signal new standards of upper bourgeois feminine conduct, either by showing women at cultivated leisure (playing musical instruments) or by emphasizing their literacy (pictorial tradition suggests the letters his women read are about love; they also speak to a burgeoning ideal of the educated domestic woman).

detail
Johannes Vermeer, *The art of painting*, *c.* 1666-1667, oil on canvas, 120 x 100 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (photo: museum).

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Only a few of his paintings actually treat the domestic woman in her specific sense of preparing for marriage, nurturing, and homemaking and those that do are singularly ideational. In these women are at home, seemingly alone and introspective. They never tend to children; they do engage, to varied degrees, in a range of activities, some of which come close to practical, virtuous domestic tasks.

This essay scrutinizes how Vermeer's 'artistic personality' plays out in four such single-figure interiors: the *Milkmaid*, *Young woman with a water pitcher*, *Woman holding a balance*, and *Lacemaker*, and one outdoor scene, *The little street* (figs. 7, 13, 15, 21, and 1). Examined together, these five paintings give us insight into how he put his distinctive artistic stamp on the pictorial language of domesticity. By 'artistic personality' I mean that, while remaining historically based and culturally grounded, I assume the primacy of the work of art and focus my attention on aspects of Vermeer's artistic creativity, or individual agency, that are not satisfactorily explained by historical circumstances. The interpretation of artistic personality has traditionally

1
Johannes Vermeer, *The little street*, *c.* 1657-58, oil on canvas, 54.3 x 44 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (photo: Rijksmuseum-Stichting).

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been the purview of psychoanalytic investigation, but that is not my interest. Vermeer psychoanalyzed on the basis of his paintings has resulted in a person who is afraid of women;[8] it has the potential also to make him a clichéd 'distant father', a road to unsupportable assertion down which I would rather not venture.

I invoke 'artistic personality' to counter the kind of contextual history that tends to overemphasize the ways art is determined by social circumstances while underestimating the ways it anticipates and effects societal changes or deviates from social norms. In the emerging of domesticity around 1650, paintings were just as likely to shape values as to reflect them. In exploring Vermeer's paintings of domestic life as the merger of his individual nature and the conventions of his culture, I enter the domains of cultural psychology (the study of the ways in which the individual mind intersects with the community consciousness) and of historical psychology (the study of how that dynamic evolves over time).[9] Applied to artistic production, this approach raises questions about convention and deviation, and it suggests ways to situate Vermeer's artistic personality and its reception within society. The crux of my investigation, then, is how the natural (individual) and the conventional meld in the paintings of Johannes Vermeer. By conventional I mean both conventions of subject matter (domestic values and their treatment in art) and conventions of representation (specifically naturalism and naturalistic genres).

Attending to Vermeer's artistic personality has led me to consider his achievement of a heightened balance, or convergence, of the mimetic and the ideational. The argument of this essay is that Vermeer's pictures of the home, and especially of women in the home, are singularly ideational. By this I mean that they are concerned with ideas, and ideals, to an unusual degree. At the same time, they are heightened mimetically. Fairly abstract ideas are couched in a visual style of extraordinarily real-looking (even for seventeenth-century Dutch paintings) descriptive naturalism. The result is a striking articulation of an emerging valuing of privacy and individuality. To our modern eyes, Vermeer's women appear to have an unusual degree of depth or subjectivity, what we might call interiority. Examined against the pictorial conventions of seventeenth-century domesticity, the substance of his women stands out as Vermeer's means of realizing ideals of feminine virtue.

A house as home

The little street (fig. 1), a relatively early work of about 1657 or 1658, exemplifies the inventive way in which Vermeer combined heightened mimesis with conventional meaning distilled to the point of ideation.[10] The earliest reference to this picture calls it not a 'street' but a 'house'. In the Dissius sale of 1696, it is one of two pictures, the other of which is unfortunately lost, either 'A view of a house standing in Delft' or 'A view of some houses'.[11] It seems more like a 'house', a house that in subtle but highly effective ways Vermeer turned into a home.

The naturalism of this small picture is so convincing that it appears to represent a real place. In his monograph of 1650, P.T.A. Swillens, working

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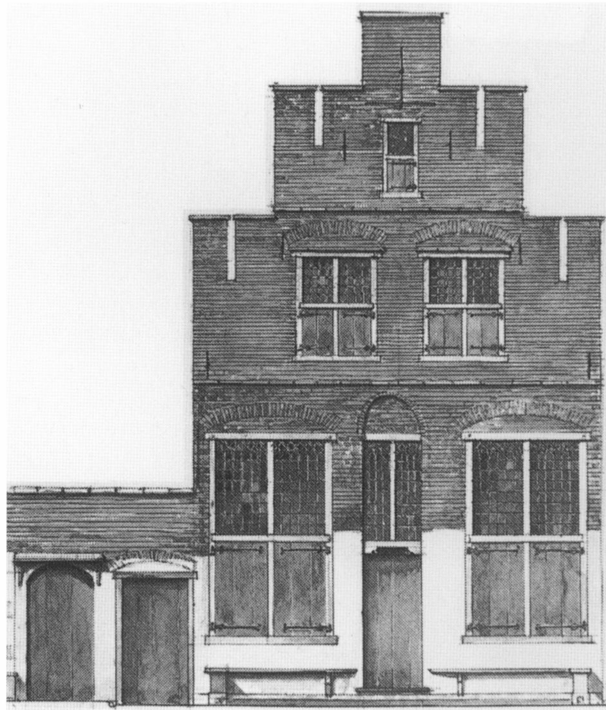

2
After Vermeer's *Little street* (by R. Royaards-ten Holt), illustration from R. Meinschke et al., *Huizen in Nederland: Zeeland en Zuid-Holland,* 1997 (photo: Image Master).

from the assumption that '*Everything he painted he saw immediately in front of him* (italics his)',[12] identified the scene as the view Vermeer could see directly across the canal when he looked out his studio window. That would make the building the Old Men's House chapel that was torn down to make way for the new St. Luke's guildhall, erected in 1661. Arthur Wheelock, with the help of a detailed-down-to-the-direction-of-roof-lines map of Delft, concluded that this identification could not be correct, although he did identify parts of buildings on the site that he thinks Vermeer may have drawn accurately from life.[13]

This impulse to make the *Little Street* a real place is certainly understandable, given the picture's astonishingly real look. Vermeer renders with breathtaking accuracy the bricks and cobblestones, the distant roofs and sky. He paints details – a trickle of water running down the gutter in the alley, tiles missing from atop a wall – that can be the product only of a habit of careful looking. As far as I can tell, this image was absolutely unprecedented in its close, frontal focus on just a single ordinary building. It is brilliantly composed to create a natural-seeming variety, for example, in the contrast of closed door, view down the bright alley, and foiled glimpse into the dim house. Placing the building off-center and cropping it at right, Vermeer created a slice-of-life sense of the accidental that, while familiar to eyes used to photographs, must have been striking in his own time.

This cropping of the house, combined with its attachment to the building at left and the benches to either side of its front door, evokes community, connectedness. This sense of neighborhood suggests, moreover, that this is not a 'portrait' of a specific house but a scene from daily life, part genre

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painting, part townscape. We tend to assume, then, that this picture represents a typical seventeenth-century scene: if Dutch painting ever was, in Fromentin's words, 'the portrait of Holland,' *The little street* epitomizes it.[14] Yet its marvelous look of the real has overshadowed – for us, but perhaps less so for Vermeer's contemporaries – some things that are not so real. For one thing, because of its sheer originality, Vermeer's knowledgeable viewers may have been better able to appreciate that this painting's reality effect was an illusion, a feat of craft and artifice.[15] Specific anomalies of the house – the off-center door, the unusual crenellation of the step gable – suggest that, though it looks (and may have been) drawn from life, it is just as likely to be a contrivance. Constructing a semblance of the real with a mix of observed and fictive architectural parts was common practice. At just the same time, Pieter de Hooch painted two pictures of a courtyard in Delft, one with a woman and child, which he set in outdoor spaces that were nearly identical except for their varied architectural elements.[16] Vermeer himself shifted rooflines and recomposed the city's profile in the *View of Delft* (fig. 4), just as he manipulated his interiors, changing floor patterns, windows, and furnishings at will.[17]

To Vermeer's immediate audience, whose social perspective on this picture would have been more nuanced than ours, *The little street* may have seemed markedly picturesque, pleasing in its unassuming charm and plain simplicity. The house, with its well lit, high-ceilinged ground-floor workshop or store, would have looked quite worn (run down is too strong, though the masonry has cracked and been repaired), fairly modest, and decidedly old. If it existed, it would have been built nearly two hundred years prior to when Vermeer painted it. *Huizen in Nederland*, a recent multi-volume history of Dutch housing types, uses a line drawing of Vermeer's painting to illustrate a late medieval house (fig. 2).[18] (Few enough of these are preserved in Delft that a painting of a house serves in lieu of an extant building.) It is emphatically not the kind of grand townhouse that the elite of Delft were constructing in the seventeenth century and it is probably not the sort of place in which the painting itself would have hung. According to Michael Montias' compelling research, this picture and the twenty others by Vermeer in the Dissius sale of 1696 most likely originally belonged to Pieter Claesz. van Ruijven, a wealthy Delft patrician, who, in 1770, purchased a country manor and whose daughter married Jacob Dissius. Van Ruijven appears to have had some kind of privileged right-of-first-refusal connection with Vermeer, much like the arrangement we know Gerard Dou had with one of van Ruijven's relatives.[19] For such a client, the *Little street* must have evoked a simpler past, an urban version of the sympathetic village peasant scenes of Adriaen and Isaack van Ostade.

The little street, in other words, needs to be seen as a (relatively late) manifestation of the kind of naturalistic rendering of prosaic subject matter that was considered *schilderachtig* during the second quarter of the seventeenth century. *Schilderachtig*, literally 'picture worthy' or 'worth painting', was a term widely applied in this period, though its meaning changed with changing taste. In the later part of the century, the 'classicists' Jan de Bisschop and Gerard de Lairesse would agitate to shift (and limit) its applicability to refined images of natural but ideal beauty. However, until the 1660s

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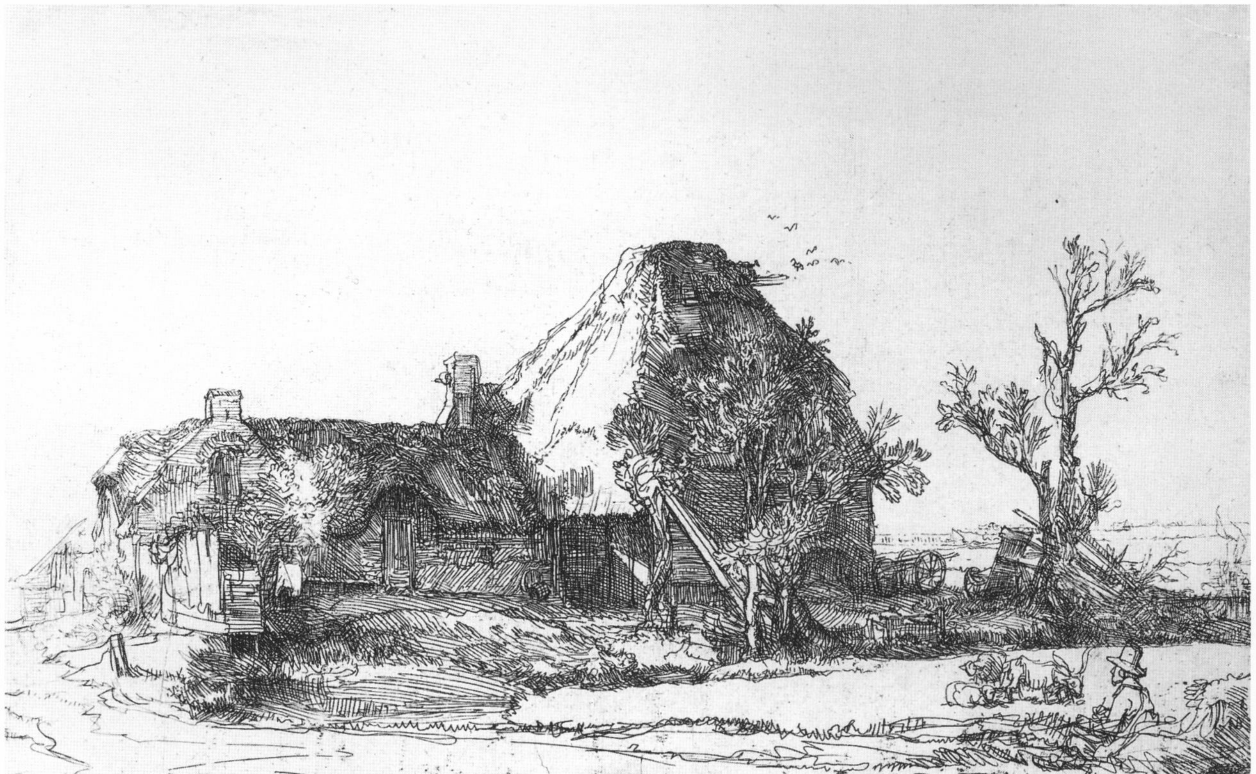
schilderachtig implied a range of pictorial qualities that, on the one hand, celebrated the rustic simplicity of the new Dutch republic, and, on the other, signaled a nostalgic valuing of, and longing for, a simple, idyllic world. It was used to describe the natural, ordinary, and unadorned, as well as the curious, unusual, or even ugly, particularly as painted or drawn *naer het leven*, or in a life-like manner. With connotations of a proto-picturesque (in the eighteenth-century sense), *schilderachtig* was used to describe features of the new Dutch realism as manifested in paintings of the local landscape by Esaias van de Velde, Jan van Goyen and others. It was also applied to Rembrandt's use of old clothing and armor and presumably would have fit his etchings of peasants and beggars and the prosaic realism of his more naturalistic works.[20] An apt rural parallel to the old-fashioned urban architectural imagery of Vermeer's *Little street* is found in the selectivity of Rembrandt's landscape etchings and drawings. As Linda Stone-Ferrier has shown, Rembrandt, in his wanderings around Amsterdam, chose to draw not the new kinds of farmhouses and barns that were then being built but the old and dilapidated.[21] Rembrandt's etching of an artist seated in a landscape drawing an old thatched farmhouse and barn (fig. 3) reminds us that such scenes would then have been considered *schilderachtig*, worthy of an artist's attention.

What could be more natural, more *schilderachtig*, than two women tending to chores and children and their two charges playing? Yet the people in Vermeer's picture are also less plainly real, more a construct than they seem at first. By offsetting the house, Vermeer focuses attention on the figures,



3
Rembrandt van Rijn, *Landscape with an artist drawing*, etching. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (photo: Rijksmuseum-Stichting).

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4
Johannes Vermeer, *View of Delft*, c. 1660-1661, oil on canvas, 96.5 x 115.7 cm. Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, The Hague (photo: Stichting Vrienden van het Mauritshuis).

which he carefully arranged in an upside-down triangle that is centered within the picture space and that compensates beautifully for the asymmetrical architectural setting. Infrared reflectography shows that Vermeer originally placed a seated figure at the entrance to the alley, which he then painted out, thereby simplifying and clarifying his composition conceptually.[22] Further, it is no accident that Vermeer chose, for the two women, the two occupations with the strongest connotations of domestic virtue. The woman down the alley at the side of the house stands beside a barrel and a broom. In seventeenth-century paintings and literature, sweeping and brooms, signifying cleanliness and purity, had become extremely conventional emblems of feminine virtue that could have both Christian and patriotic associations.[23] The woman seated in the doorway, keeping watch over her domestic domain, is doing needlework, probably sewing to judge by the large piece of white fabric hanging from her lap. Sewing, like spinning (and, by extension, making lace), was an attribute of feminine domestic virtue of Biblical origin.[24] Vermeer's so natural-seeming women, in other words, engage in established emblematic activities as representatives of model behavior. They are as notional as they are real, which supports the interpretation of the vines climbing on the house at right in light of Psalm 128: 'Your wife shall be like a

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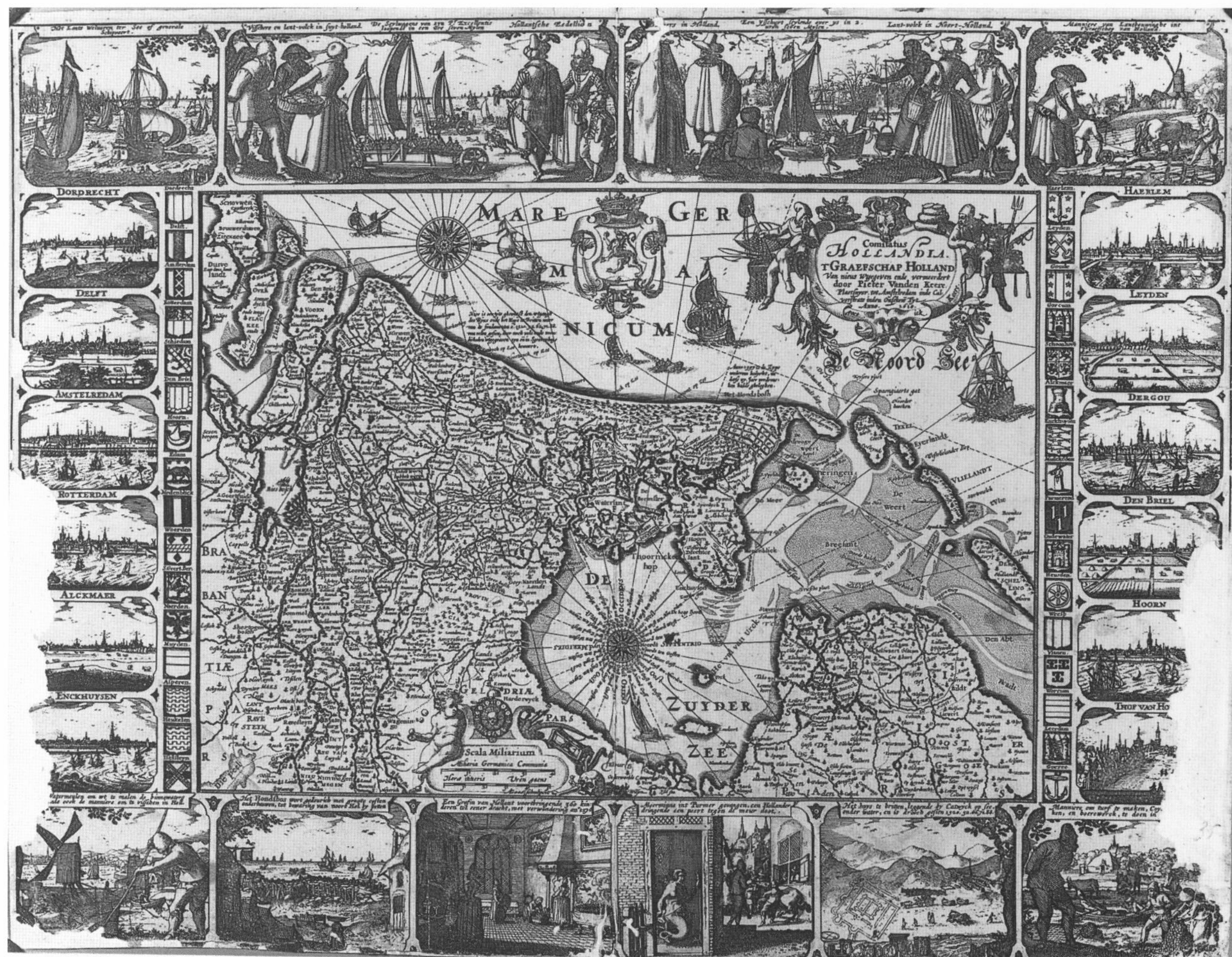

5
Abraham Goos and Claes Jansz. Visscher, *Map of the province Holland*, 1610, engraving and etching, 43.0 x 54.6 cm. Maritiem Museum 'Prins Hendrik', Rotterdam (photo: museum).

fruitful vine in the heart of your house'.[25] Further, the two women are positioned so as to control the secretive, still-to-be-civilized children, down on their knees playing, perhaps, knucklebones.

That the children are faceless and the women completely generalized underscores their presence as types, not people. I can drive this point home by comparing the people in the *View of Delft* (fig. 4). If ever a picture has caused us to marvel at its naturalness, it is this one.[26] Like the *Little street*, it is a picture without direct precedent in the way it takes a cityscape, enlarges and closes in on it, limiting our field of vision to make it all the more immediate.[27] Few have noted how odd this picture is in one respect: this is the port of Delft, the busiest spot on the heavily trafficked waterways around this important trading town. But, to say the least, hardly anyone is out and about and not much is going on. The origins of painted cityscapes have been located in the topographical views on the borders of large decorative maps of Holland and the United Provinces of the sort that Vermeer owned and included in *The art of painting* (fig. 24). I would like to suggest that just as the cityscape draws on the patriotic city views found around maps (and so

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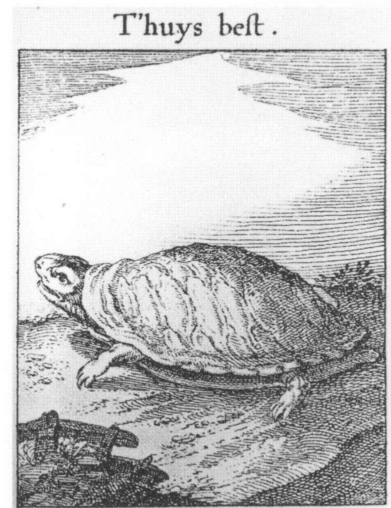
presents the *idea* of Delft), so too do the people derive from map borders. On a map of the province Holland from 1610 engraved by Abraham Goos (fig. 5), the border decorations, etched by Claes Jansz. Visscher, glorify Holland, its towns, and its prosperity at sea, with trade and fishing, and on land, with dairy farming and peat digging.[28] Across the top, representative pairs of Holland's citizens, the nobility, burgers, farmers, and fisherfolk, regard a land-yacht and an ice boat, recent Dutch inventions that had become symbols of the Hollanders' ingenuity.[29] The people in the foreground of the *View of Delft* are small and impersonalized. The two women closest to us wear not finery, but the clothes of tradeswomen. Some more prosperous men are in *burgerlijk* attire. They are representative citizens of Delft, the good burgers and the good producers, who, like the map people, regard the boats and the city behind. Vermeer appropriated and transformed the pictorial language of the map.

Just as the *View of Delft* is an image of this proud town and the civic virtue of its citizens, the *Little street* is an image of the home and the virtue of its inhabitants. In Vermeer's society, the ideal of home could be embodied in the emblem of a turtle captioned 'T'huys best', home is best (fig. 6); and the virtuous household was regarded as 'the seed of a common state' and the microcosm of the moral order.[30] The *Little street* is, in a sense, the microcosm of the *View of Delft*. Real the *Little street* may look, but it, too, represents not a view out the back window but an idea of home as a simpler, old-fashioned kind of place that is at once the site of domestic virtue and proper upbringing and part of the larger community.



6
Roemer Visscher, 'T'huys best', from: *Sinnepoppen*, Amsterdam, 1614 (photo: Image Master).

A maid of virtue

Vermeer's *Little street* stands alone (except for its lost counterpart in the Dissius sale) as an image of the home seen from outside. His domestic images are otherwise interior scenes to which I now turn. The *Milkmaid* (fig. 7), which Vermeer probably painted between 1658 and 1660, is another relatively early work that also participates in the urban picturesque or *schilderachtig*.[31] In its humble modesty and celebration of simple things, the *Milkmaid's* unassuming dignity is akin to that of the *Little street*.

To modern eyes it is, like the *Little street*, a marvel of naturalistic rendering. Scholarly approaches have tended to emphasize its truthful descriptiveness. Swillens was so convinced by the naturalism of this and Vermeer's other interior genre scenes that he thought he could use them to accurately plot the floor plan of Vermeer's house (fig. 8).[32] The handling of paint in the *Milkmaid*, specifically the glistening light on the crusty bread, and its saturated colors have been taken as evidence of Vermeer's near scientific study of vision and of the effects of the camera obscura.[33] The recent discovery, by Jørgen Wadum, that Vermeer used a perspective device involving a pin and strings – a pinhole is visible in this picture above the maid's right hand – to create the convincing illusion of space has simultaneously reinforced the sense of his scientific accuracy and pointed to the constructedness of his compositions.[34] The continued fascination with Vermeer's probable use of the camera obscura, his concern with optics, and, now his string and pins, all somehow make concrete the naturalism of these paintings. Likewise, the

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7
Johannes Vermeer, *The milkmaid*, *c.* 1658-60, oil on canvas, 45.5 x 41 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (photo: Rijksmuseum-Stichting).

virtually unparalleled (but for Rembrandt) level of technical investigations to which his works have been subjected and the intensity of the scientific endeavor currently dominating Vermeer studies speak, too, to this desire to see these images as attaining unparalleled heights of descriptive truth. Although, as Arthur Wheelock has demonstrated, x-rays and infra-red reflectograms often reveal the artifice in Vermeer's art by providing clear evidence of just how considered and deliberate his compositions are, the aura of science paradoxically can send quite the opposite message.[35] In short, our fascination with the near-scientific descriptive aspects of Vermeer's paintings tends to obscure the extent to which his pictures are notional, represent ideas in their essence. Only by shifting our focus to the content of, and pictorial contexts for, his paintings can we gain insight into how exactly Vermeer's astounding heights of naturalism serve his ideation.

More specifically, our fascination with this picture's naturalism tends to obscure the ways in which it is an anomaly among Vermeer's genre pictures. Vermeer's handling of paint is stark and direct, somewhat rougher than in many of his painting. We might attribute this to the picture's relatively early date, but it may also be that this coarser style was adopted for its

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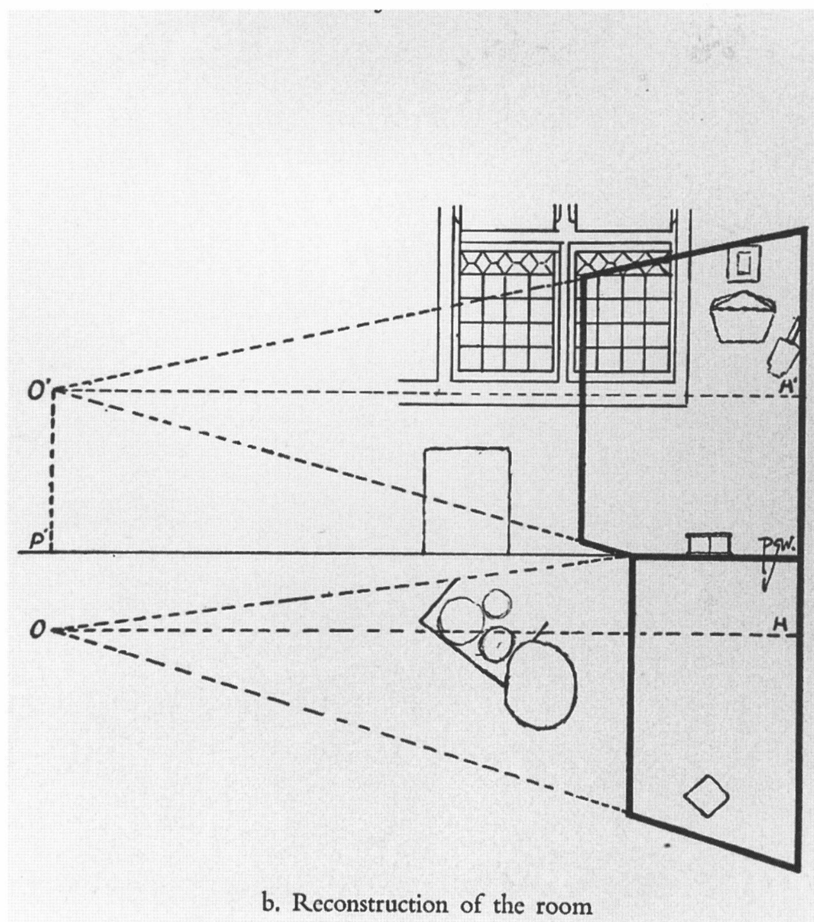

8
Illustration (plate 52) from P. T. A. Swillens, *Johannes Vermeer, painter of Delft*, 1950 (photo: Image Master).

suitability to the picture's decidedly plain setting and humble subject matter. Compared to Vermeer's other interiors, the corner setting is singularly spare and unadorned, with its stark and worn white walls, wood or dirt floor, and window in a rough frame and with a broken pane of glass. Hanging in shadow beside the window are a basket and a brass marketing pail of the sort used to carry sloppy things like meat and fish. X-radiography shows that Vermeer simplified the setting by painting out a map hanging on the back wall. The nail he left heightens our awareness of both his artistry and the room's bareness, of something missing.[36] This modest space, with its foodstuffs on a table with a plain cloth, is a kitchen.

So, too, this woman is of a different class from all the others in Vermeer's single-figure domestic interiors, although she is like the maids in some of his later scenes of women writing letters.[37] She is, indeed, a maid. Compared to Vermeer's refined mistresses of the house, in their fur-trimmed jackets, she is of stockier stock; her strong arms labor harder; her simpler clothes are of coarser stuff. With her hair pulled back up under her cap, her sleeves rolled (and protected with sleeve covers), and her overskirt (or apron) hiked, she is ready to work. The food on the table before her represents the

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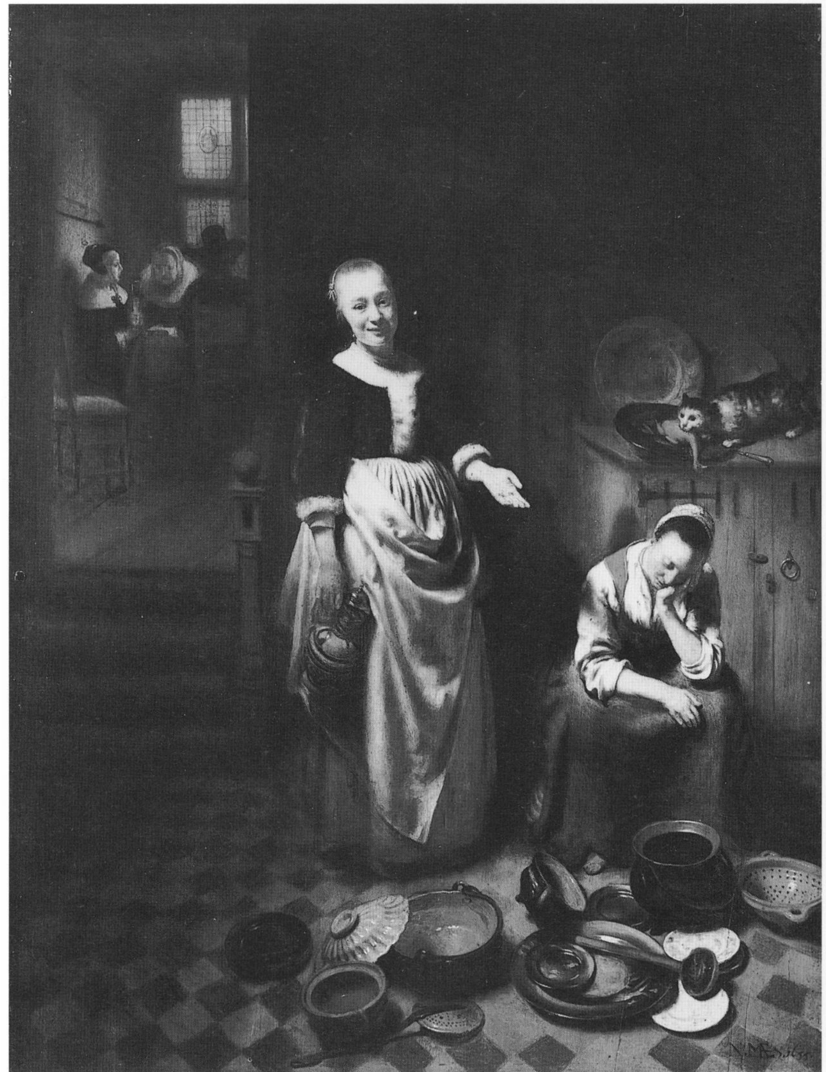
simple staples of life, just milk, crusty rolls, and a basket of bread. Exactly what she does is rather generalized. She pours milk from an earthenware jug into an earthenware bowl. The frugality of the meal and her action of pouring, which visually parallels watering wine, a traditional emblem of temperance, bring to mind the virtue of moderation; the hardworking maid is virtually the image of diligence.

At mid-seventeenth century, the *Milkmaid*'s aura of diligence and calm beauty might have confounded a knowledgeable viewer's expectations of a picture of a household servant. Vermeer's dignified, lone kitchen maid finds distant precedents in the sixteenth century, in such works as Pieter Aertsen's *The Cook* of 1559 (Brussels).[38] Yet the respectful treatment of maids, seen, too, in Pieter de Hooch's domestic scenes, went against a tradition of viewing servants with suspicion. Household manuals stressed that maids needed constant guidance and supervision, which is borne out in the many



9
Nicolaes Maes, *The idle servant*, 1655, oil on canvas. National Gallery, London (photo: © National Gallery, London).

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10
Jan Steen, *Dissolute household, c.* 1665, oil on canvas. Linsky Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (photo: museum).

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11
Gerrit Dou, *A girl with a basket of fruit at a window*, 1657, oil on canvas, 37.5 x 29 cm. National Trust, Waddesdon Manor (photo: Courtauld Institute of Art).

paintings that treat maids as an attribute of, or adjunct to, the vigilant housewife, who oversees her maid's cleaning or approves her choice of fish. In de Hooch's pictures, for example, maids served the housewife's image as able household manager and supervisor of domestics. [39] Common wisdom held, too, that maids were untrustworthy, lazy, loose, and prone to neglect their duty. In the section of his *Groot schilderboek* (1707) on the painting of modern life, Gerard de Lairesse would describe a bad family as one in which the servants go unsupervised and so steal, 'snuggle up together' and 'tipple daily'.[40] Maids especially threatened the family and the household, as they were liable to snuggle up with the master, too. Mid century saw a flourishing of often comic pictures that simultaneously exploited and made lessons of the by then proverbial reputation of maids.[41] Nicolaes Maes was the master of such titillating narratives, for example the *Idle servant* of 1655 (fig. 9) and

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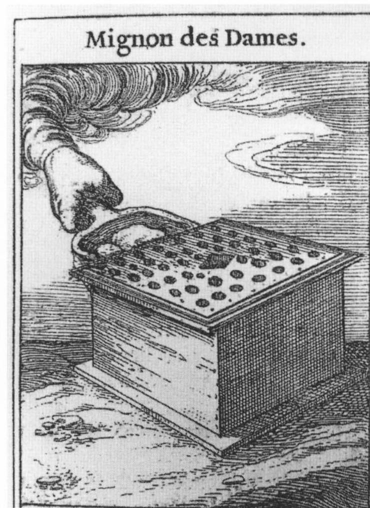
Eavesdropper of 1656 (London, Wallace Collection), in which the morally superior mistress of the house points out to the viewer a maid sleeping or necking in the kitchen. The maidservant in Jan Steen's *Dissolute household* (c. 1665; fig. 10) at once plies the mistress of the house with wine and locks fingers with the man of the house, played by Steen himself, who catches our eye. In Gerrit Dou's *Girl with a basket of fruit at a window* of 1657 (fig.11), a maid solicits the viewer, offering herself along with her wares.[42]

In contrast to these works, Vermeer's *Milkmaid* is a picture without narrative that neither addresses nor even acknowledges the viewer. At first glance, it appears to give little indication of maidservants' proverbial reputation. Yet, in the back of this picture, at floor level, are two things that quietly evoke the popular association of maids and love. First, there is a footwarmer, which Vermeer put in after first painting there a basket of clothes or sewing.[43] The ubiquitous footwarmer, as an emblem from Roemer Visscher's *Sinnepoppen* tells us, was the 'mignon des dames', favorite of women (fig. 12).[44] Hot and under women's skirts, signaling their erotic desires and availability, it had been a feature of Dutch love imagery since at least the early 1630s. By around 1660, Steen and others, who painted them repeatedly, often associated with lovesick women, had developed an elaborate sexual symbolism having to do with whether the brazier was in or out of the box, burning or not.[45] But this is the only time Vermeer painted one.



12
Roemer Visscher, 'Mignon des Dames', from: *Sinnepoppen*, Amsterdam, 1614
(photo: Image Master).

Second, at the base of the wall is a line of tiles. In seventeenth-century Holland, tiles were produced in limited variety of standard pictorial types, including children playing, mermaids, and soldiers. These are cupids. This juxtaposition, behind a maid, of two signs of love is Vermeer's subtle way of simultaneously alluding to and undercutting the tradition, pictorial and literary, that has maids more interested in love than in doing their jobs properly. He has humanized and dignified this maid; he has subtly transformed her bowed head and downcast eyes, a pose that could signal deference and servitude, into conscientious concentration. She has nothing to do with the trite, titillating meaning of the footwarmer. Vermeer's intelligence is that he imparts value in a fundamentally different way.[46] He takes one's expectations of a footwarmer and of a kitchen maid – slothful, lascivious – and confounds them, denies them. For the viewer who looks at this picture knowing about the pictorial conventions of maids and footwarmers, Vermeer has done something wonderfully inventive. He has displaced the footwarmer, overturned its meaning. She turns her back on it; still signifying love, it plays its opposite role. What makes this picture so bold is that Vermeer, in effect, imparts to this kitchen maid the dignity of the more refined women that henceforth become the subjects of his pictures.

Ideals of womanhood

The *Young woman with a water pitcher* (fig. 13), of the early 1660s, and the slightly later *Woman holding a balance* (fig. 15), exemplify Vermeer's shift away from the proto-picturesque mode of the *Little street* and *Milkmaid* to representing the kinds of refined people with which, presumably, the owners of his pictures might better identify. His turn to a more up-to-date, modern

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13
Johannes Vermeer, *Young woman with a water pitcher, c.* 1664-65, oil on canvas, 45.7 x 40.6 cm. Marquand Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (photo: museum).

kind of domestic subject matter was in keeping with, indeed may have anticipated, a development in the notion of what was *schilderachtig* or 'picture-worthy'. Ordinary, simple, and rustic were out; beautiful, refined, and 'city-like' were in.[47]

The *Young woman with a water pitcher* (fig. 13) represents a woman of the house – whether she is of marriageable age or married is hard to say – at home alone and introspective.[48] Though compositionally similar to the *Milkmaid* – both isolate a woman in a corner of a white-walled room, by a window – the differences between the two paintings speak to the conceptual and social gap between mistress and maid. Beyond their similar white walls, Vermeer has employed just a few details to ensure that the settings of these pictures accord with the two women's different stations in life. Where the milkmaid's wall is bare, a large wall map hangs in the *Young woman with a water pitcher.* The refinement of this picture's setting lies in the intricate pattern of the leaded-glass window; in the richly colored oriental carpet that covers the table; and in the silver pitcher and basin and the open jewelry box on the table. These differences are encapsulated in the contrast between the simple red earthenware jug and bowl and the elegant, shiny pitcher and basin.

14
Gerard ter Borch, *Woman washing her hands with a maid,* oil on canvas, 53 x 43 cm. Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (photo: museum).

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15
Johannes Vermeer, *Woman holding a balance*, *c.* 1664, oil on canvas, 42.5 x 38 cm. Widener Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington (photo: © Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington).

Compared to the stocky maidservant with her rolled up sleeves, this woman is more refined in proportion and of slighter build. Her clothes are much finer too; she wears a fashionable yellow jacket that is trimmed in dark blue. Over her clothes, to protect them, she wears a clean, crisp, and, it seems, newly starched and ironed head covering called a *hooftdoek* and a *nachthalsdoek,* or nightrail, on her shoulders, which women commonly wore at night or when tending to their morning toilet.[49]

Here, Vermeer achieved new heights in painting the convincing illusion of reality. Light pours in through the open window with awe-inspiring lifelikeness. Especially impressive is how he captured the effect of the multi-paned window, the translucency of her white linen head and shoulder coverings, and the shiny surfaces of the pitcher and, especially, the basin as they reflect the colors of the carpet. As straightforwardly descriptive as Vermeer's rendering of light and reflections, of stuffs and surfaces, may seem, the naturalism of this picture differs stylistically from that of the *Milkmaid.* Whereas in the *Milkmaid* paint is handled with a relative coarseness, aptly describing rough cloth and crusty bread, in the *Young woman with a water pitcher* it is applied with a refined touch. The paint surface is smoother, more highly

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finished, befitting the finer objects and materials and the more elegant setting.

We get so caught up in how convincingly Vermeer has painted the illusion of reality that we tend to assume that this woman, standing with one hand on the window frame and the other on the pitcher's handle, must be doing something perfectly natural, too. In other word, we are inclined to read this and Vermeer's other works literally, taking their naturalistic rendering as an index of their fidelity. Yet what exactly is she doing? It has been pointed out that the pitcher and basin are of the type used for washing; Gerard ter Borch's *Woman washing her hands* (fig. 14) makes it clear that it is useful to have a maid to help. But Vermeer's woman is not washing her hands. Instead, she is posed in private introspection, her gaze unfocused, perhaps not quite convincingly lost in thought, but not doing anything either. Vermeer abstracts the image by eliminating narrative. In pictorial and emblematic tradition, the wash basin and pitcher evoke innocence, purity, and cleanliness.[50] Vermeer paints her as virtually the personification of these fundamental feminine domestic virtues. He reinforces the idea of cleanliness through her pure white *hooftdoek* and nightrail and, especially through the bright daylight, long a symbol of purity too. Through her isolation, and the very realness of her presence, Vermeer creates the impression that she has completely internalized what might otherwise remain symbolic. We might think of her as a thoroughly naturalized, humanized, and genrefied personification, the near-complete transformation of a long tradition of single-figured female Christian allegories. Too real to be a personification, she carries the moral weight of one.[51]

In the *Woman holding a balance* (fig. 15), which is about contemporary with but strikingly different from the *Young woman with a water pitcher*, shadow and lowered lighting, devices more characteristic of Rembrandt than Vermeer, evoke absorbed introspection.[52] Although it is daytime outside, an orange curtain and closed shutters limit the light entering through the window and cast much of the room in shadow. Light singles out the woman, falling on the edge of her white cap, on the white fur that trims her jacket, and on her fingers that so carefully hold the balance. It glistens on the reflective surfaces of the pans of the scales, mirror hanging on the wall, pearls on the table, and the two lines of gilding on the picture frame behind her, which, together, encompass her by relieving the darkness. That her face is cast half in shadow, again a Rembrandtesque device, suggests her inner presence, her interiority.

This unusually low level of lighting has also been taken as an indication that the *Woman holding a balance* is singularly allegorical among Vermeer's genre scenes.[53] Perhaps it is more helpful to think of it as a complex painting that offers more interpretive possibilities to, and demands more work on the part of, the viewer. Its complexity and intrigue derive in part from the painting of the Last Judgment on the wall, a picture within the picture that has an obvious, if not clear, connection to the painting as a whole. Vermeer has placed his woman before the Last Judgement so that she covers up and, by implication, takes the place of the Archangel Michael, who traditionally holds a balance in which he weighs souls. Yet instead of weighing something, Vermeer's woman holds the scales with the pans empty and perfectly bal-

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16
Coin-weight box made by Roelof van der Schure, 1659, showing *Conscience* and *Justice* (on an engraving pasted onto the slide of the top drawer). Rijksmuseum het Koninklijk Penningkabinet, Leiden (photo: museum).

anced. Thinking descriptively, we might conclude she is calibrating the balance or, thinking ideationally, that she is posed holding it because it stands for something and is her attribute. That Vermeer placed the balance precisely in the center of the composition supports the latter, though it does not preclude the first.

The many explanations that have been put forward to account for this pointed juxtaposition of (pregnant) woman holding scales and Last Judgment involve aspects of judging or being judged, truth and justice, balance and moderation, and the doctrine of free will.[54] Perhaps the most useful reading to date is the most straightforward, recently arrived at independently by Arthur Wheelock and Eddy de Jongh.[55] This is that the balance alludes to conscience. Wheelock, reminding us that Vermeer, a Catholic, had contacts with the Jesuits, invokes the recommendation of Saint Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* to examine one's conscience and weigh one's choices. Loyola uses the metaphor of a balance: 'I must rather be like the equalized scales of a balance ready to follow the course which I feel is more for the glory and praise of God, our Lord, and the salvation of my soul'.[56] De Jongh, in contrast, looks to a more popular, more immediate visual source in which a balance is the attribute of Conscience. This very personification is found, sometimes paired with Justice who also holds a balance, on prints pasted inside the lids of coin-weight boxes that held portable scales, like the one she

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holds (fig. 16). Such scales were used to make sure that coins had not been lightened by coin clippers. Just such a box is on the table. The recommendation to examine one's conscience was part of seventeenth-century thinking, as was the connection between conscience and God's judgment. Augustinus van Teylingen, an Amsterdam Jesuit wrote, in 1630, '...examine your conscience as if you were to die this night and appear before God's judgment.'[57] This disarmingly elegant interpretation also accounts for the mirror on the side wall, for mirrors, symbol of truth, prudence, and wisdom, commonly evoked the admonition to 'know thy self'.[58]

Whether this woman is pregnant continues to be debated.[59] The way her belly, marked with deep orange and yellow, protrudes from the parting in her jacket suggests that she might be (or, reading too literally, that his model was or had been). Certainly Vermeer could make a woman slim waisted, witness the *Young woman with a water pitcher* (who looks like the same model). The context of the imagery of domesticity puts the possibility of her pregnancy in a new perspective. It was at just this same time that Pieter de

17
Pieter de Hooch, *Woman with children in an interior*, *c.* 1658-1660, oil on canvas, 67.6 x 53.6 cm. Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation (photo: museum).

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18
Frontispiece to J. J. Deutel, *Huwelijckx weegh-schael*, Hoorn, 1662 (photo: Universiteitsbibliotheek Amsterdam).

Hooch painted so many endearing pictures of mothers nursing infants and tending to young children. De Hooch's *Woman with children in an interior* (fig. 17), painted between about 1658 and 1660, before he left Delft, is a heartwarming – literally it is set beside a hearth – image of ideal motherhood. In *Houwelyck*, Jacob Cats had illustrated the chapter 'Moeder' with an image of a family with the mother suckling her child (reflecting the period's growing suspicion of wet nurses and increasing valuing of the mother's own milk). If Vermeer's *Woman holding a balance* is an image of impending motherhood, it presents an ideal quite different from de Hooch's. It distills virtuous motherhood to a state of being, to a mother's concern for her unborn child. The mother of conscience is presented as a moral model for her children. She is also a self-reflective person in her own right.

It is in keeping with Vermeer's notional mode of meaning that such a complex-looking, thought provoking picture could boil down to such a fundamental virtue. This is not to say that she necessarily is, or personifies, Conscience specifically or that Vermeer conceived of this picture with Catholic theology in mind. Judging well and weighing the consequences of

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one's actions had broad connotations. Relevant in the context of domesticity is the appearance of scales in the popular imagery of marriage. A balance features centrally in the frontispiece (fig. 18) to the 1662 edition of J.J. Deutel's *Huwelijckx weegh-schael* (Balance of marriage), a propagandistic tract, in dialogue form, that presents arguments for marriage, including the advice to imagine children gathered happily at table.[60] Farther back in pictorial tradition, Cornelis Anthonisz.'s mid-sixteenth century woodcut of an ideal couple, *The wise man and the wise woman* (fig. 19) attributes scales, signifying justice, to the man; his counterpart holds a mirror 'to defend myself against all pride'.[61] Then, as still was largely the case in Vermeer's time, the virtues necessary in a man were thought to be quite different from those desired in his wife. To be sure, female allegories have long personified weighty concepts, but these were not necessarily attributed to real women. As much as Vermeer's virtuous women may ultimately derive from, or draw on, the allegorical tradition, they differ significantly in that they are not abstracted but flesh-and-blood people, whose realness had potentially profound implications for the viewer. Confronted with the *Woman with a balance*, say, a woman might identify with Vermeer's virtuous woman in a way that she could not have with an allegorical figure of Justice a century before . Likewise, a seventeenth-century male viewer might admire her in a new way.[62] By

19
Cornelis Anthonisz., *The wise man and the wise woman*, mid-sixteenth century, colored woodcut. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (photo: Rijksmuseum-Stichting).

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20
Pieter de Hooch, *Woman weighing coins, c.* 1664, oil on canvas. Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (photo: Jörg P. Anders).

attributing to so contemporary a woman a traditional emblem of justice or conscience, Vermeer gave to her an unusual moral capacity. He thereby rendered the conventional emblematic meaning of the balance completely natural and newly profound. The outcome is a woman with depth who has interiorized self-examination.

The subject matter of the *Woman holding a balance* was not conventional in the same sense that the themes of women reading letters or making lace were. Whether Vermeer invented the subject is another question. Pieter de Hooch's version of the same theme (fig. 20) is certainly nearly contemporary, indicating that the two artists knew each other's works even after de Hooch moved to Amsterdam; Gabriel Metsu also appears to have painted a version of the same theme.[63] Comparison of Vermeer's picture to their works, however, only serves to confirm that he fully imbued his woman with the weight of the balance's potential significance.

Recent critics have questioned whether Vermeer or his contemporaries, from about the 1660s on, had any real interest in the content of their pictures. Dutch genre painting has been regarded as unusually bound by con-

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21
Johannes Vermeer, *The lacemaker*, *c.* 1669-70, oil on canvas transferred to panel, 23.9 x 20.5 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris (photo: Art Resource, NY).

ventions of subject matter that are often called moralizing, for lack of a better term, but that might better be thought of as valued, in the sense of imparting and reinforcing (and questioning, too) society's values, often in quite subtle and varied ways. Overemphasizing the conventionality of such so-called 'emblematic' meaning (and reducing its workings to simplistic finger-wagging sermonizing) has fostered the notion that content had become, by the second half of the seventeenth century, purely conventional, or no longer meaningful. In this view, traditionally significant pictorial types had become painters' vehicles for more purely artistic and aesthetic concerns. These same critics similarly maintain, based on the fairly limited written discourse on art, that elite viewers, too, were interested only, or largely, in issues of style – handling, finish, beauty, and naturalistic rendering – and did not concern themselves with content.[64]

Generally speaking, however, this notion of a monolithic viewing elite denies the possibility of viewers with varied interests, fails to consider differences between spoken conversations about paintings and the conventions of art writing, and just plain defies common sense. Further, discounting the

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22
Caspar Netscher, *The lacemaker*, 1662, oil on canvas. The Wallace Collection, London (photo: museum).

artist's agency and originality obscures the role of the artistic personality, whether culturally motivated or the product of the idiosyncratic imagination. It may well have been that the capitalist economy of mercantile Holland fostered competitive cultural strategies among artists seeking fame. But, however much Vermeer (or any other painter) may have sought to differentiate himself by developing a distinctive style or by transforming pictorial conventions, we cannot discount the possibility that his subject matter was among the myriad aspects of his art from which he derived personal satisfaction. More germane to the present topic, in the face of the confluence, at mid century, of so much imagery and writing about domesticity, this view that content held little interest for viewers or painters seems especially hard to maintain.

Examining the varied ways Vermeer responded to and transformed pictorial traditions of domesticity suggests that, however much care and

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attention he devoted to the aesthetics and craft of his paintings, he considered their content just as carefully. Wheelock views Vermeer's repeated representation of themes of virtue as evidence of his 'profound beliefs about the proper conduct of human life', a notion that is certainly plausible but for which there is little evidence beyond his pictures.[65] Alternatively, we might extrapolate from Vermeer's art his conviction that paintings should treat morally significant themes. The *Woman holding a balance* and *Young woman with a water pitcher* are so strongly ideational that they suggest Vermeer may have been aware that he was painting ideas, as must have been the case with his more obviously allegorical *Art of painting* (fig. 24) and *Allegory of faith* (c. 1671-74; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). Compared even to the *Little street* and *Milkmaid*, their abstractions are so obvious that they are more fully *schilderachtig* in the later seventeenth-century sense; they employ a picture-worthy pictorial language to convey picture-worthy ideas. Lisa Vergara has recently posited a 'theoretically-aware' Vermeer, which the *Art of painting* alone would seem to confirm. However, when it comes to imbuing

23
Gabriel Metsu, *The lacemaker*.
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (photo: museum).

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his domestic interiors with ideas, or morally significant content, he anticipates both Jan de Bisschop's expansion of *schilderachtig* to include the choice of proper subject matter and Gerard de Lairesse's argument that scenes of modern city life could have the moral weight of histories.[66]

To paint ideas, Vermeer pushed at the conventions he knew. Nowhere is this clearer than in the *Lacemaker* (fig. 21), a relatively late work of 1669 to 1670, in which he took an established type and made of it something entirely new. Lacemaking was emblematic of the feminine virtues of diligence and docility, which were instilled in a girl readying herself for marriage and remained necessary through a woman's life. In Cats's *Houwelyck*, lacemaking is the attribute of the young maiden who is preparing for a good match and a life of virtuous domesticity. Other manuals recommend needlework for young women because it thwarts slothfulness and promotes diligence.[67] Cultural anxieties about the moral vulnerability of youth account for the popularity of portraits and genre paintings, by for example, Caspar Netscher (fig. 22) and Gerrit Dou (*The lacemaker*, 1663, Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe), in which a young maiden making lace embodies not just docility and diligence, but the ultimate domestic virtue, chaste obedience; and of chastity narratives, such as Gabriel Metsu's *Lacemaker* (fig. 23), which turns a picture of a young woman faced with a proposition into a tale of feminine virtue or the potential loss thereof.[68]

Vermeer, in contrast, distills the lacemaker to an image of unprecedented visual truth and simplicity. I think it is not just wishful feminist thinking that sees Vermeer shifting the emphasis, in his *Lacemaker*, from suitability for marriage to the young woman in her own right. As in the *Young woman with a water pitcher* and *Woman holding a balance*, he creates a compelling illusion of interiority. But this time he ties it to her craft. This is the picture often cited as evidence of how well Vermeer understood the workings of sight. The objects at the periphery register not as forms but as light and color, slightly out of focus. These are the threads that spill out from the sewing cushion on the table beside her. Here, in particular, we sense that Vermeer has looked through the camera obscura as part of the scientific study that he brought to making a painting. His intense focus is on her hands; other areas not in the central field of vision are less focused. Vermeer studies how vision works and then paints, with unparalleled precision, the way light hits threads and the eyes see it.

This intense naturalism practically leads us to forget that this is not an arbitrary subject but a common, and loaded, one. I doubt that Vermeer's sophisticated seventeenth-century viewers would lose sight of the convention. While he may have distilled the pictorial type, he retained a prayer book or Bible on the table that reinforces the idea of virtue. Vermeer's subtle and clever innovation is partly that she makes lace not on her lap, as is usually the case, but at a special lacemaker's table, which is vaguely reminiscent of a prie-dieu. This shift might be likened to the painter graduating from holding a drawing board on his lap – as in pictures of drawing lessons – to sitting at an easel. This gives her craft substance: she is not an amateur, like the other lacemakers, but a craftworker. Her concentration on her craft, and Vermeer's concentration on her, gives new meaning to the idea of diligence. I am not the first to suggest that Vermeer presents her lacemaking as akin to his paint-

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ing, that this picture is as much about painting as it is about lacemaking. But perhaps I can add to this that her integrity, the diligence with which she works, and the precision of her work, are his.[69]

Vermeer's singular heights of naturalism and ideation strengthen each other. The combination of these two parts transcends their sum; the persuasiveness of the perfected visual reality of his pictures extends to their ideas. In the *Little Street*, the ideal of domestic virtue rendered so compellingly lifelike promises the possibility of so perfect a home. In the private, introspective, integrated, self-controlled lacemaker, milkmaid, and women with balance and pitcher, we respond to the perfectibility, not of light and space, but of a person.

The artist in the home

Vermeer's idea of the home, at least pictorially speaking, included the artist's studio to an unusual degree. By this I mean that, in a way unlike any contemporary pictures of artists' studios, Vermeer rendered the studio as part of a home. To be sure, we know that painters more often than not had their studios in their houses. But the *Art of painting* (fig. 24), Vermeer's one picture in this popular genre, with its black and white tiled floor, grand chandelier, and fine furnishings, has the look of a room in an elegant house.[70] Typically we marvel at the naturalism with which he rendered the *Art of painting*. In her recent, well-researched historical novel, *Girl With a Pearl Earring*, Tracy Chevalier constructs much of her plot around a (post-)modernist fiction of the interplay between Vermeer's home and studio life. Swillens' floor plan of Vermeer's house and Montias' meticulous but spare documenting of his life are brought to life, mixed with the standard amateur psychoanalysis – he keeps his studio locked and the family out – and woven into a tale in which painter and kitchenmaid see aesthetically eye to eye. Vermeer's fictional studio practice is premised on the assumption that he could paint *only* from the model in front of him. The maid, who is narrator and protagonist, becomes his co-slave to nature. Daily, she surreptitiously dusts his studio, taking excruciating care to reposition the still life objects and precisely rearrange the drapery he has set up to paint. Then she graduates to serving as his model for the *Young woman with a water pitcher* (fig. 13): 'One morning while I was cleaning he came and asked me to stand in for the baker's daughter, who had taken ill... "I want to look for a moment," he explained. "Someone must stand there."' She takes her pose as Vermeer directs: '"Look down, not at me. Yes, that's it. Don't move."' And a moment later, '"Don't look at what you're looking at," he said. "I can see it in your face. It is distracting you... You are thinking too much."'[71]

The art historian may take affront, or amusement, at the twentieth-century novelist who can only picture Vermeer's *Young woman with a water pitcher* as a real scene and the *Art of painting* as a truthful image of the connection between his studio and his home. But the distance between the assumption that Vermeer accurately represented his own studio and what he actually painted might make us think, too, about the implications of his distilled image of studio life and how it relates to his notion of home. In the *Art of painting*, Vermeer crafted a setting finer than rooms in all but the very

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most elite of homes – chandeliers like the one in the painting hung in churches and marble floors were rare.[72] He also eliminated most of the tools and other evidence of his daily professional life. Like beds in his genre scenes, notably absent here are the usual paraphernalia of a studio – brushes, paints, color grinders. Perhaps he is claiming status and refinement for the painter, but other aspects of the picture suggest he is up to more than that. He has boiled artistic practice down to painter and allegorical model. The model, with her book and crown of laurel, whether she is either Clio, muse of History, or, as Eric Jan Sluijter has recently proposed, Love of Art, the painter's highest goal and motivation, gets at the essence of his art.[73] That she is an allegory or personification has struck some as at odds with his more customary genre subjects. But, as my exploration of his ideational approach to domestic themes suggests, her allegorical guise does not set her as far apart from his other women as we have thought. Further, the combination of phenomenally descriptive rendering and familiar domestic setting has led many people, art historians and non, to call the painter in *The art of painting* either Vermeer or a self-portrait, without thinking it at all problematic to do so even though we see him only from the back. Though he may have Vermeer's hair, and whether his clothes are old-fashioned or not, his (near-) anonymity makes him not a specific painter (Vermeer) but the idea of a painter.[74] He is an ideational painter. That he shares domestic space with the *Young woman with a water pitcher*, *Woman with a balance*, *Lacemaker*, and even the *Milkmaid* downstairs, speaks not, I think, to the feminization of the painter's domain. Rather, it attests to Vermeer's attributing virtuous personhood to women, to his crafting of an ideal of female subjectivity, and to his respectful humanization, regardless of gender, of the domestic realm.

24
Johannes Vermeer, *The art of painting*, *c.* 1666-1667, oil on canvas, 120 x 100 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (photo: museum).

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Notes

I dedicate this article to Arthur Wheelock, who has taught me a great deal about Vermeer. I am also grateful to colleagues who listened to and commented on earlier versions of this paper, presented at the University of Pennsylvania, at the invitation of Larry Silver, and at the Princeton Art History Colloquium, at the invitation of Marilyn and Irving Lavin. For her insightful criticism and suggestions, I am especially indebted to Mariët Westermann.

1 For the art of domesticity, see S. Schama, *The embarrassment of riches: An interpretation of Dutch culture in the Golden Age*, New York 1987, 375-464, 481-561; W.E. Franits, *Paragons of virtue: Women and domesticity in seventeenth-century Dutch art*, New York 1993; P.C. Sutton, *Pieter de Hooch 1629-1684*, cat. exh. Hartford (Wadsworth Atheneum)/ Dulwich (Dulwich Picture Gallery) New Haven 1998, 68.

2 H.P. Chapman, 'Jan Steen's household revisited', *Simiolus* 20 (1990/91), 183-195; *idem*, 'Jan Steen as family man: Self-portrayal as an experiential mode of painting', *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 46 (1995), 368-393; M. Westermann, *The Amusements of Jan Steen*, Zwolle 1997, especially chapter 4, 'The rituals of Steen's laughable world'; W. Franits, 'The family at grace: A theme in Dutch art of the seventeenth century', *Simiolus* 16 (1986), 36-49; P.J.J. van Thiel, '"Poor parents, rich children" and "Family saying grace": Two related aspects of the iconography of late sixteenth and seventeenth-century Dutch domestic morality', *Simiolus* 17 (1987), 90-149.

3 Sutton, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 30-31, 68-75. On the increasing feminization of the domestic realm, see N. Armstrong, *Desire and domestic fiction: A political history of the novel*, New York/Oxford 1987, esp. chap. 2, 'The rise of the domestic woman', which, although it treats eighteenth-century England, has implications for understanding the earlier rise of domesticity in bourgeois, capitalist Holland.

4 At the time of his death, at age 43, eight of his eleven children still lived at home and the youngest was about two years old. See J.M. Montias, *Vermeer and his milieu*, Princeton 1989, 222, 236, 245.

5 According to the inventory made after his death, Vermeer's house, which was actually his mother-in-law's house, had in it four beds – three built in and one free standing – and one cradle (with another cradle in the attic). It seems like too few beds for the three adults, eight children, and one maidservant living in the house, but they were spread out in various rooms, including the kitchen. See *ibid.*, 222, 339-344.

6 Beds and bed curtains were expensive luxury items that had various connotations, depending on their pictorial context. They were as likely to signal brothel as home. Yet, their comfortable presence in domestic imagery, even in family portraits, reflects the fact that, in Dutch homes of the time, rooms still did not have clearly defined separate functions. By about 1700, bedrooms had become separate spaces. The absence of beds in Vermeer's pictures may anticipate an aspect of emerging privacy.

7 Sociability, an important aspect of life in the Dutch home that, in genre paintings, sometimes blurs boundaries between home and inn, tavern or gaming house, falls outside the scope of domesticity that interests me here.

8 L. Gowing, *Vermeer*, London 1952; E.A. Snow, *A study of Vermeer*, Berkeley etc. 1979.

9 As discussed, for example, by Z. Barbu, *Problems of historical psychology*, New York 1960; *idem, Society, culture and personality*, Oxford 1971; J.W. Stigler *et al.* (eds.), *Cultural psychology: Essays on comparative human development*, Cambridge/New York 1990; and C.J. Berry, *The idea of luxury: A conceptual and historical investigation*, Cambridge 1994.

10 On the *Little street*, see A.K. Wheelock, Jr., *Vermeer and the art of painting*, New Haven/London 1995, 49-53; and *Johannes Vermeer*, cat. exh. Washington (National Gallery of Art)/The Hague (Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis) 1995, 102-107, with full bibliography.

11 Montias, *op. cit.* (n. 4), 246-57, 363-64, doc. 439, discusses the sale, in 1696, of twenty-one paintings by Vermeer from the estate of Jacob Dissius.

12 P.T.A. Swillens, *Johannes Vermeer Painter of Delft: 1632-1675*, Utrecht/ Brussels 1950, 77.

13 *Johannes Vermeer*, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 104-105.

14 E. Fromentin, *The masters of past time*, Ithaca 1981, 97.

15 For the 'reality effect', see R. Barthes, 'The reality effect', in: T. Todorov (ed.), *French literary theory today: A reader*, New York/Cambridge 1991, 11-17; N. Bryson, *Vision and painting: The logic of the gaze*, New Haven 1983, 13-36.

16 Pieter de Hooch, *Figures drinking in a courtyard with an arbour* (1658; National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh); *The courtyard of a house in Delft, with a woman and a child* (1658; National Gallery, London), in: P.C. Sutton, *Pieter de Hooch: Complete edition with a catalogue raisonné*, New York 1980, 84-85, cats. 33-34. See also A.K. Wheelock, Jr., *Dutch paintings of the seventeenth century* (*The collections of the National Gallery of Art systematic catalogue*), Washington etc. 1995, 139-40.

17 Wheelock, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 76-80. Pieter Saenredam is also known for his manipulation of architectural imagery.

18 R. Meinschke, H.J. Zantkuijl, and P.T.E.E. Rosenberg, *Huizen in Nederland: Zeeland en Zuid-Holland* (Architectuurhistorische verkenningen aan de hand van het bezit van de Vereniging Hendrick de Keyser), Zwolle/Amsterdam 1997, 21, fig. 22. See p. 259 for a similar house still standing in Dordrecht that dates from the 1460s.

19 For the argument that Pieter Claesz van Ruijven was Vermeer's patron, see Montias, *op. cit.* (n. 4), 246-257; and J.M. Montias, 'Recent archival research on Vermeer', in: I. Gaskell and M. Jonker (eds.), *Vermeer Studies* (*Studies in the History of Art*, 55), New Haven/ London 1998, 93-99. Compare Wheelock, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 5, who maintains that the circumstantial evidence supporting the notion that Van Ruijven directly purchased works from Vermeer remains inconclusive. See also Wheelock in *Johannes Vermeer*, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 22-23.

20 On the concept *schilderachtig*, see J.A. Emmens, *Rembrandt en de regels van de kunst*, Utrecht 1968, 58, 95, 124-134; B. Bakker, 'Schilderachtig: discussions of a seventeenth-century term and concept', *Simiolus* 23 (1995), 147-162; R.L. Falkenburg, '"Schilderachtig weer" bij Jan van Goyen', in: Christiaan Vogelaar *et al.*, *Jan van Goyen*, exh. cat. Leiden (Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal), 1996, 60-69; M. Westermann, 'Local color',

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in: *Dutch art in the age of Rembrandt and Vermeer: Masterworks of the Golden Age from the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam*, exh. cat. Nagoya (Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art)/Tokyo (The National Museum of Western Art) 2000, 239-240. On nostalgia, see S. Stewart, *On longing: Narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection*, Durham 1993, which I thank Eric Gollannek for drawing to my attention.

21 L. Stone-Ferrier, 'Rembrandt's landscape etchings: Defying modernity's encroachment', *Art History* 15 (1992) no. 4, 403-433. A preference for the old is also evident in Rembrandt's drawings of Amsterdam landmarks. He chose to draw Amsterdam's Old Town Hall instead of the grand new one and he represented the Montelbaanstoren with its old, medieval tower instead of its seventeenth-century spire.

22 *Johannes Vermeer, op. cit.* (n. 10), 104, fig. 1. This is one of several instances in which Vermeer simplified one of his compositions by removing something. See. For example, his *A woman asleep* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), discussed in Wheelock, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 39-40, with bibliography on recent technical examinations of the picture.

23 Schama, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 375-383; Franits, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 95-100.

24 Proverbs 31; I.M. Veldman, 'Images of labor and diligence in sixteenth-century Netherlandish prints: The work ethic rooted in civic morality or Protestantism', *Simiolus* 21 (1992), 247-251; and Franits, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 22-29, 62.

25 *Johannes Vermeer, op. cit.* (n. 10), 107, n. 2. See also Franits, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 82.

26 Wheelock, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 74-80 and *idem*, 'Vermeer's *View of Delft* and his vision of reality', *Artibus et Historiae* 6 (1982), 9-35, has used x-rays, which reveal that Vermeer shifted church towers and manipulated rooflines, to show us where the art is in this picture. Yet we remain compelled to locate the spot on a map and then visit that very place on the banks of the canal because it looks so real. Also see, A. Chong, *Johannes Vermeer: Gezicht op Delft*, Bloemendaal 1982.

27 Comparison with such paintings as Hendrick Vroom's *View of Delft*, 1615, (Stedelijk Museum het Prinsenhof, Delft) and Aelbert Cuyp's *View of Nijmegen*, mid 1650s (Indianapolis Museum of Art) underscores the originality of Vermeer's transformation of the painted cityscape.

28 D. de Hoop Scheffer, (ed.), *Hollstein's Dutch & Flemish etchings, engravings and woodcuts*, Roosendaal 1991, vol. 38, 109, no. 219.

29 H.P. Chapman, 'Propagandist prints, reaffirming paintings: art and community during the Twelve Years' Truce', in: A.K. Wheelock, Jr., and A. Seeff (eds.), *The public and private in Dutch culture of the golden age*, Newark/London 2000, 48-50, discusses the patriotic connotations of the contraptions that sailed on sand and ice, which were thought to be the inventions of Simon Stevin (1548-1620), the leading scientist, mathematician, and engineer in the early years of the Dutch Republic.

30 Roemer Visscher, *Sinne-poppen*, Amsterdam, 1614; J. van Beverwijck, *Van de wtnementheyt des vrouwelicken geslachts*, Dordrecht 1643, 206-212.

31 On the *Milkmaid*, see Johannes *Vermeer, op. cit.* (n. 10), 108-113, with full bibliography, and W. Liedtke *et al.*, *Vermeer and the Delft School*, cat. exh. New York (Metropolitan Museum of Art)/London (National Gallery), forthcoming.

32 Swillens, *op. cit.* (n. 12), 69-77, plates 43-53, diagramed eleven interior scenes and concluded that Vermeer had accurately represented five rooms. Once he had mapped the pictures he had a clear idea of Vermeer's whole house. Never mind that a) that's not the way seventeenth-century painters worked – think of landscapes, which were emphatically not produced on the spot; and b) that Vermeer manipulated these spaces – for one thing, he varied the floor tiles at will – and possibly imagined them. Recently, C.W. Fock, 'Werkelijkheid of schijn. Het beeld van het Hollandse interieur in de zeventiende-eeuwse genreschilderkunst', *Oud Holland* 112 (1998), 187-246, has found that the black and white floor tiles and chandeliers, which pictures lead us to think were part of every upper crust home, were in fact extremely rare.

33 The bibliography on Vermeer's possible use of a camera obscura is extensive. See, most recently, Wheelock, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 68-69, and J.-L. Delsaute, 'The camera obscura and painting in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', in: Gaskell and Jonker, *op. cit.* (n. 19), 111-23.

34 J. Wadum, *Vermeer illuminated: Conservation, restoration, and research*, The Hague 1994; and 'Vermeer in perspective', in: *Johannes Vermeer, op. cit.* (n. 10), 67-79.

35 Wheelock, *op. cit.* (n. 10), *passim*. Compare S. Alpers, *The art of describing: Dutch art in the seventeenth century*, Chicago 1983, *passim*. In the recent Vermeer exhibition, the inclusion of a separate didactic room devoted to optics and perspective reinforced this emphasis on the 'scientific' accuracy of Vermeer's pictures. For recent publications on technical investigations of Vermeer's paintings, see also the essays by K. Groen, *et al.*, E.M. Gifford, and J. Wadum in: Gaskell and Jonker, *op. cit.* (n. 19).

36 M. Bal, *Reading Rembrandt*, New York/Cambridge 1991, 1-4, discusses the effect of the empty nail in Vermeer's *Woman holding a balance*.

37 *The love letter* (c. 1669-70; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) and *Lady writing a letter with her maid* (c. 1670; National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin) include maids similarly attired.

38 Wheelock, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 64-65.

39 Schama, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 455-62; Franits, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 100-110; *idem*, 'The depiction of servants in some paintings by Pieter de Hooch', *Zeitschrift fur Kunstgeschichte* 52 (1989), 559-566.

40 G. de Lairesse, *Het groot schilderboek*, Amsterdam 1707, 188.

41 Liedtke, *op. cit.* (n. 31), points out that the tradition of eroticizing milkmaids in particular goes back at least to Lucas van Leyden's *Milkmaid* of 1510, an images perhaps especially relevant to Vermeer's *Milkmaid*.

42 For Dou's painting of *A girl with a basket of fruit* see M. Westermann, 'Adriaen van de Venne, Jan Steen, and the art of serious play', *De Zeventiende Eeuw* (1999), 32-45.

43 For the infrared reflectogram showing changes in the area of the footwarmer, see Wheelock, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 70, fig. 49.

44 Visscher, *op. cit.* (n. 30), 178.

45 Some footwarmers in Dutch genre paintings are just footwarmers. However, see Dirck Hals' *Seated woman with a letter* (1633; Philadelphia Museum of Art, Johnson Collection), for an early example of a footwarmer with suggestive connotations. Compare Wheelock, *op. cit.* (n.10), who interprets the footwarmer more

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positively as an emblem of constant affection and warm caring. However, the language of the text to Visscher's emblem supports its association with illicit love. L.S. Dixon, *Perilous chastity: Women and illness in pre-Enlightenment art and medicine*, Ithaca/London 1995, 105-109, discusses the footwarmers that frequently appear in pictures, by Jan Steen and others, of women suffering from lovesickness, or female melancholy, as reminders of 'smoldering humors inflamed by unfulfilled passions'. A. Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen*, Amsterdam 1718-1721, vol. 3, 23, uses an anecdote involving a footwarmer to give a humorous, lusty spin to his account of Steen's courtship of his second wife.

46 F.F. Hofrichter, 'Judith Leyster's Proposition – between virtue and vice', *The Feminist Art Journal* 4 (1975), 22-26 (reprinted in N. Broude and M.D. Garrard, *Feminism and art history: Questioning the litany*, New York 1982, 173-182), discusses the comparable use of the footwarmer, some thirty years before, in Judith Leyster's *Man offering money to a young girl* (1631; The Hague, Mauritshuis).

47 Emmens, *op. cit.* (n. 20), was the first to call attention to this shift in the meaning of schilderachtig. See Bakker, *op. cit.* (n. 20); and L. Vergara, 'Antiek and modern in Vermeer's *Lady writing a letter with her maid*' in: Gaskell and Jonker, *op. cit.* (n. 19), 235-255. Nanette Salomon, 'From sexuality to civility: Vermeer's women', in: Gaskell and Jonker, *op. cit.* (n. 19), 309-325, has identified a parallel shift in Vermeer's scenes of sociability, which she describes as participating in a broader transition from an older tradition of mercenary love, *minne*, as in Vermeer's *Procuress* and *Maid asleep*, to the refined love, *liefde*, of 'civil trysts'. His *Girl with the wineglass* (Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig), with its awkward, forced attempt at an outgoing expression, signals this transition and, perhaps, the difficulty Vermeer had painting extroverted, easy sociability. If men and women court or socialize in Vermeer's mature construction of genteel domesticity, it is in a restrained, quiet sort of way, as in the *Concert*. But for the most part, his people are alone, engaged in solitary pursuits, scientific study, music making, and writing or reading letters, or lost in thought.

48 *Johannes Vermeer*, *op. cit.* (n. 10), with full bibliography, and Liedtke, *op. cit.* (n. 31).

49 M. de Winkel, 'The interpretation of dress in Vermeer's paintings' in: Gaskell and Jonker, *op. cit.* (n. 19), 329. For a wrinkled version of the cap and nightrail, see Gabriel Metsu, *The intruder*, c. 1660 (National Gallery of Art, Washington).

50 *Johannes Vermeer*, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 148; E. de Jongh, *Tot lering en vermaak: Betekenissen van Hollandse genre-voorstellingen uit de zeventiende eeuw*, cat. exh. Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum) 1976, 195, cat. 48.

51 On domestic duty as a Christian virtue, see Franits, *op. cit.* (n. 1), and N. Salomon, 'Early Netherlandish bordeeltjes and the construction of social realities', in: Wheelock and Seeff, *op. cit.* (n. 29), 144, n. 10.

52 Wheelock, *op. cit.* (n. 16), 371-377.

53 *Ibid.*, 374; D. Arasse, 'Vermeer's private allegories', in: Gaskell and Jonker, *op. cit.* (n. 19), 341-349.

54 Wheelock, *op. cit.* (n. 16) 374-376, especially n. 5, and in *Johannes Vermeer*, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 140-142, reviews some of these interpretations. See, especially, N. Salomon, 'Vermeer and the balance of destiny', in: A.-M. Logan (ed.), *Essays in Northern European art presented to Egbert Haverkamp Begemann on his sixtieth birthday*, Doornspijk 1983, 216-221; I. Gaskell, 'Vermeer, judgment and truth', *Burlington Magazine*, 126 (1984), 557-561; and also Liedtke, *op. cit* (n. 31). This interpretive indeterminacy (or richness, depending on your point of view) of the picture's content, which has been characterized as open-ended, multivalent, and personal, raises the question whether its specific or original meaning has been lost to us or whether, as is more likely, its meaning is more general than many of these interpretations assume.

55 Wheelock, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 99-100; Wheelock, *op. cit.* (n. 16), 374; E. de Jongh, 'On balance', in: Gaskell and Jonker, *op. cit.* (n. 19), 351-65.

56 *The spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius*, trans. A. Mottola, Garden City, NJ, 1964, cited in Wheelock, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 100.

57 A. van Teylingen, *Het paradys der wellustichheyt*, Antwerp 1651, 238-239, quoted in De Jongh, *op. cit.* (n. 55), 361.

58 For the significance of the mirror, see Wheelock, *op. cit.* (n. 16), 374.

59 Wheelock, *op. cit.* (n. 16), 374, notes 11-15, reviews this debate. See also De Winkel, *op. cit.* (n. 49), 331-332, and Liedtke, *op. cit.* (n. 31).

60 J.J. Deutel, *Huwelijckx weegh-schael*, Hoorn, 1662 (first ed. 1641); Franits, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 143, fig. 121.

61 C.M. Armstrong, *The moralizing prints of Cornelis Anthonisz*, Princeton 1990, 72-78, fig. 89. See also I. Veldman, 'Lessons for ladies: A selection of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Dutch prints', *Simiolus* 16 (1986), 113-114.

62 A.M. Kettering, 'Ter Borch's ladies in satin', *Art History* 16 (1993), 95-124, on the possibilities of gendered viewing.

63 See *Johannes Vermeer*, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 142-143, for the argument (of questionable logic) that De Hooch's picture served as a model for Vermeer's, which has to do with the fact that De Hooch's originally included a man seated at the table who was then painted out, and 42, fig. 17, for Metsu's painting.

64 P. Hecht, 'The debate on symbol and meaning in Dutch seventeenth-century art: an appeal to common sense', *Simiolus* 16 (1986), 173-187; *idem*, *De hollandse fijnschilders: Van Gerard Dou tot Adriaen van der Werff*, cat. exh. Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum) 1989, *passim*. As applied to Rembrandt, see E. van de Wetering, 'The multiple functions of Rembrandt's self-portraits', in: C. White and Q. Buvelot (eds.), *Rembrandt by himself*, exh. cat. London (National Gallery)/The Hague (Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis), London/New Haven 1998, 10-36, esp. 33-36. For a more moderate view, see E.J. Sluijter, 'Didactic and disguised meanings?', in: D. Freedberg and J. de Vries (eds.), *Art in history/history in art: Studies in seventeenth-century Dutch culture*, Santa Monica 1991, 175-207.

65 Wheelock, *op. cit.* (n. 16), 374.

66 Vergara, *op. cit.* (n. 47). Emmens, *op. cit.* (n. 20), 124-138; Bakker, *op. cit.* (n. 20), 157; De Lairesse, *op. cit.* (n. 40).

67 Although the forms of needlework often appear to be interchangeable in images of wives and mothers, the frontispiece to the 1625 edition of Cats' *Houwelyck* suggests there may have been a subtle distinction between lacemaking, which is associated with the young maiden preparing herself to be desirable for marriage. On the

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connotations of needlework and lace making, see Franits, *op. cit.* (n. 46), 22-29, 35-36, 47-48, 136-38.

68 An early example of this theme is Judith Leyster's *Man offering money to a young woman*, 1631 (Mauritshuis, The Hague), for which see, Hofrichter, *op. cit.* (n. 46).

69 Painting conservator David Bull, formerly at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, referred to Vermeer as the most careful painter he had ever seen, with the possible exception of Jan van Eyck. On the deliberation and precision of Vermeer's 'abstracted way of painting', see E. M. Gifford, 'Painting light: Recent observations on Vermeer's technique', in: Gaskell and Jonker, *op. cit.* (n. 19), 185-199.

70 Wheelock, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 129-139; D. Arasse, *Vermeer, faith in painting*, Princeton 1994, 40-59.

71 T. Chevalier, *Girl with a pearl earring*, New York 2000, 98-99. On the next page, the maid-narrator tells us: 'Sometimes the girl came an spent hour after hour standing in place, yet when I looked at the painting the next day nothing has been added or taken away...'. The notion that it takes the fictional Vermeer five months to complete this picture, with the baker's daughter coming in daily to pose, even for the dead coloring, is pure fantasy. From what we know of the ways seventeenth-century painters worked, this is hardly how it could have happened.

72 Fock, *op. cit.* (n. 32).

73 E.J. Sluijter, 'Vermeer, fame, and female beauty: The *Art of painting*', in: Gaskell and Jonker, *op. cit.* (n. 19), 265-83.

74 For the hair, compare Vermeer's *Procuress* (Dresden), which is thought to include a self-portrait. On the costume, the old-fashioned character of which is debated, see De Winkel, *op. cit.* (n. 49), 332-34.

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