

Beyond the Concept of Genre Painting: Johannes Vermeer and Woman Holding a Balance

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Abstract: Though leaving not so many artworks, the Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer has always been known as one of the leading figures of Renaissance art in northern Europe in the seventeenth century. Many of his works are praised for the careful depiction of the daily scenes of the Dutch people, and as a result, being categorized as genre paintings. However, this general comment of “reflection of the reality” for Vermeer's works has been considered incomplete. The paper focuses on Vermeer's masterpiece *Woman Holding a Balance*, and the main purpose of this paper is to trace Vermeer's inner thoughts that he applied in his painting, based on his careful use of underpainting, color, and perspective. The result lies in visual analysis and contextualization of the painting, and it reveals the fact that Vermeer not only wants to present reality but also his artistic invention to form a distant inner world of the painting, with the sense of reverence and privacy of the daily scenes.

Keywords: Johannes Vermeer, Genre Paintings, Woman Holding a Balance

1. Introduction

The seventeenth century is an age of turbulence, sorrow, and chaos, but also passion and prosperity. In northern Europe, the Dutch Republic was one of the examples. The Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century went through a period of struggle for independence. After the ratification of the Treaty of Münster, the Thirty Years' War ended in 1648 and the Dutch people finally gained their freedom [1]. The boom in the economy results from overseas trade and connection with the outside world, and accordingly, the Dutch society changed into a new type, in which more and more citizens became the bourgeois. Johannes Vermeer's hometown, the city of Delft successfully received peace and prosperity under such circumstances [2]. With the accumulation of monetary affluence, arts in Delft and other cities in the Netherlands, as a long-lasting type of spiritual legacy, began to thrive in a novel aspect, because the requirements in terms of iconography were changed by their new patrons. They wanted to decorate their houses with pleasant things in daily life, which they could easily identify [3]. Specifically, in about the 1650s, there came a new dynamic style of painting in the city of Delft, and it offered the artists another choice other than the traditional yet conservative artistic conventions which were dominant among the arts in the city before.

Unlike arts in other parts of Europe, artists in the Dutch Republic were often under the patronage of private clients, instead of the commission of the church or the Court [1]. Artists started to involve characters in the interior room, using abundant painting techniques, such as *chiaroscuro*, and applying careful observation of the real world in the artworks [4]. Johannes Vermeer's paintings,

though not too many, are commonly regarded as great representations of that time. Many of Vermeer's genre paintings can be seen as a carefully designed reflection of Delft in terms of social, economic, and cultural significance. The artist himself, accordingly, has been regarded as one of the leading figures of Dutch Art during the "Golden Age" of the Netherlands as well as the whole of Europe.



Figure 1: Johannes Vermeer, *Woman Holding a Balance*, c. 1664, oil on canvas, Widener Collection, 1942.

Contemporary art scholars have divided Vermeer's works into several categories, including genre paintings, scenes of historic events, allegories, and landscapes. This way of classification has a problem, which is most apparent in the case of Vermeer's *Woman Holding a Balance* (Fig 1) [4]. The painting *Woman Holding a Balance* is now preserved in the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. The time when Vermeer completed it dates back to 1664. It is an artwork of relatively small size, yet the diverse elements in the painting are delicately treated by Vermeer with

equal attention. This painting, while seemingly similar to many other Vermeer's works with a single figure place in the interior settings, is often interpreted from many different aspects. Some interpretations take the *Woman Holding a Balance* as a genre painting, just like most of Vermeer's other artworks, and regard the elements in the painting as indicative of the result of the thriving economy. Because of the prosperity, tapestry weaving thrived as one of the major manufacturing businesses in Delft, which is also shown in artists' depictions. Tapestries were luxury products and they can be seen in many artists' depictions [2]. An example taken from the *Woman Holding a Balance* is the woman's dress and the blue cloth on the table. Another more obvious indication is the pearl necklaces slithering out of the wooden box on the table.

2. More than Genre Painting

The historical factors do need to be taken into consideration, more and more research begins to say that the *Woman Holding a Balance* is not merely a genre painting. Instead, art historians have discovered that the term "naturalism" is increasingly misused as a problematic label for Dutch artists in the seventeenth century [5]. Besides the realistic depictions of scenes of daily life that he had seen, Vermeer truly added some artistic contrivance to his paintings. Vermeer's pictures are so convincing that sometimes they might be considered a kind of deception [6], but what he conveys in his paintings is more than a "reflection of the real world".

This can be seen as one of the differences between Vermeer's works and those of other painters of the same time. As a painting of scenes in daily life, Vermeer's the *Woman Holding a Balance* has a sense of intimacy and privacy that keep the audience distant, and there are many explanations and interpretations of this slightly expressed feeling from the painting, which are related to Vermeer's careful observation of the real world, his excellent painting techniques, and his delicate perception and own understanding of the reality and artistry.

3. Reality and Virtuosity in the Woman Holding a Balance

Holding a bronze scale in her right hand, a woman stands by a table, dressed in a yellow dress and a dark blue coat with a white cap covering her hair. She tilts her head slightly and looked down at the scale in her hand with a nearly imperceptible smile on her face. Viewers can identify that the woman is the main figure, occupying about half of the space on the right, with picture-within-picture hung right behind her in the background. The woman puts her left hand on the table which is placed on the left half of the painting, and the wall behind is left blank, reflecting the differences between light and shadow. There is a blue cloth near a wooden box of jewels and necklaces with some of them scattering on the table. Right above the ultramarine tablecloth, a mirror framed in black is hanging on the wall opposite the woman. Light comes into the room through the window, though cannot be seen in the painting, on the wall from the left side, illuminating the top of the yellow curtain, the woman's face of serene countenance, and the painting hanging on the wall in the background. It is the scene of *the Last Judgement* that is preserved in a black and golden frame. Through the limited space presented at the bottom of the whole painting, one can see the woman standing on the floor paved with black and white tiles. The balance is placed approximately in the center of the painting, and it is regarded as the core of the painting. The painting presents a scene in one of the corners of a room, everything is ordinary to be found in daily life and is shown delicately.

One of the most attractive yet mysterious elements in the *Woman Holding a Balance* should be *the Last Judgement* hanging on the wall in the background. As a picture-within-picture, there must be some connections between the Biblical scene and the daily settings around it. Mostly Vermeer is considered a master of genre painting, but it is not surprising to find religious elements in his works. Before Vermeer devoted himself mostly to genre painting, he did work on some religious themes.

Apart from Vermeer's religious paintings which mostly come from the early times in his career, indications of sanctity never fade out in his later works. In the *Woman Holding a Balance*, the framed painting, *the Last Judgement* hanging on the wall in the background reveals Vermeer's intention of not merely working on a genre painting. This picture-within-picture is often regarded as the "key" to Vermeer's *Woman Holding a Balance* [7]. The painting depicts *the Last Judgement*, showing Jesus Christ's arms raised and stretched. The interpretations of *the Last Judgement* vary from one scholar to another and are closely correlated to Vermeer's inner thoughts on art and life.

There is a connection between the picture-within-picture and the woman, as well as the whole interior scene in the *Woman Holding a Balance*. Light flows in through the window and is reflected on the woman's clothes, jewelry on the table, the mirror hanging on the wall, and the golden trimmed frame on the wall behind the woman. Though not strongly illuminated, the elements around the woman and the scale in her hands mildly alleviate the darkness [8]. The woman does not look elsewhere, instead, she lowers her eyes and watches the balance intently. The tablecloth and the jewel necklaces are consistent with the lava in *the Last Judgement* in the background. Draperies were luxury products in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, the color blue was even more costly, both in the textile industry and in the artistic process.

The contrast between the suffering of Jesus in *the Last Judgement* and the richness of the woman, and the pigments used to paint the two parts, might be consistent with one of the interpretations, suggesting that people in the secular world should not be obsessed with material richness and need to regulate themselves. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the "*Woman Holding a Balance*" had been named "*Woman Weighing Gold*" until microscopic evaluation discovered that the scale in the woman's hands is empty [9]. If there is nothing in the balance, then the conflict between the woman's "well-being" and Jesus's Crucifixion would lack enough evidence. Since the pans of the balance turn out to be empty, then the woman is not weighing that precious jewelry and gold. Instead, it seems that the woman is waiting for the balance to come to a stage of equilibrium [10]. (page 559, contours of Vermeer) The complexity and obscurity lie in the fact that the pans of the scale are empty, and the moment Vermeer captured is a perfect balance [8]. On the other hand, although the scale in the woman's hand is in context with *the Last Judgement*, Wheelock suggests, that Vermeer's "essential message" is to express an idea of "one [conducting] one's life with temperance and balanced Judgement. [7]" Different from other paintings of Vermeer like the *Young woman with a Water Pitcher* (Fig 2), the light and shadow in the *Woman Holding a Balance* are at a lower level. The woman stands in front of the painting of *the Last Judgment* on the wall because Vermeer takes her as an implication of the replacement of the Archangel Michael, who is supposed to hold a balance to weigh souls traditionally. This can be considered an indication of Vermeer's allegorical purpose in this painting [8]. Instead of interpreting the woman as the antithesis of *the Last Judgement*, Arthur K. Wheelock sees the relationship between the religious allegory and the woman as a normal secular character. Remaining half in brightness and half in shadow, the woman shows her inner presence or her interiority in a serene atmosphere [8]. Wheelock claims that the woman holding the balance is weighing and judging her behaviors [11]. The perfect balance, which is a state that is hard to reach and easy to break, represents the truth and judgment of human beings as how they perceive the world which is created by God. Despite its religious and allegorical allusion, Vermeer's purpose is to encourage the viewers to think deeply, but not to preach them [11].

The reason why Vermeer juxtaposes the holy scene of Christ's suffering with the domestic interior with the tranquility of the woman remains mysterious, just as the reason for his shifting focus from religious allegories to scenes of everyday life. Wheelock gives a possible explanation that paintings of mythological scenes and biblical themes may prevent Vermeer from using naturalistic light and perspective [4]. In other words, Vermeer has a preference for naturalistic artworks. Vermeer is good at creating a peaceful atmosphere of daily life, and at the same time, he

presents the daily scene in his painting realistically. Vermeer's critical study and observation of nature lay a solid foundation for him to manipulate what he sees in reality with virtuosity [10]. One of the reasons why Vermeer is considered reputable is that he carefully and effectively combines his use of light and color together with his design of underpainting for careful composition.



Figure 2: Johannes Vermeer, Young Woman with a Water Pitcher, c. 1662, oil on canvas, Marquand Collection, Gift of Henry G. Marquand, 1889.

Vermeer's handling of light in his painting shows that he is sensitive not only to the values of light and shade but also to the color variations in his play of light [12]. Caravaggio (1573-1610), the Italian artist in the Renaissance time, usually contrasted light and darkness in his painting in a strong way. This phenomenon is called *tenebroso* or *chiaroscuro* a specialty of the Utrecht Caravaggisti in the seventeenth century. To some extent, this theory is applicable for Vermeer, since viewers can easily see the variations of brightness and explicit sense of space. Vermeer changed the shades of color to form a contrast of the same object in light and the shadows since he

found out that the viewer's eye can perceive different colors relying on the illumination intensity [12]. However, unlike the intense style of Caravaggio, Vermeer's choice is to use transition tones in the way of rendering *sfumato* [10]. In *Woman Holding a Balance*, the transitions between light and shadow on the surface of objects are presented naturally and tenderly. There is no sharp contrast of brightness and darkness between the blue tablecloth and dress or the yellow cloak the woman wears, but only moderate changes in the tones of the same color. Even in the case of the white wall in the background, which is much nearer to the light source, Vermeer mixed some other color with lead white. Also, some internal evidence is convincing that it suggests Vermeer's use of pins and strings as his tool for developing perspective systems directly on the canvas, which can be regarded as evidence that camera obscura was not used in Vermeer's artworks. It is Vermeer's dabs of paint that give an illusion of the effects provided by *camera obscura*. Vermeer intentionally chose this kind of visual effect in his paintings to be compatible with his abstract yet well-established painting method. Vermeer's painting practice conveys his deliberation in translating the effect of light and shadow he observed into the painting and leaves the audience with the impression of gentleness and authenticity [12].

Vermeer's design of composition and play of light can not be separated from his deliberation on the "blueprint" before his first stroke. In *Woman Holding a Balance*, Vermeer used a brown monochrome painted sketch as the blueprint of the whole work and followed his brown-colored underpainting closely. This approach of applying underpaintings was also employed by many other artists of the seventeenth century in northern Europe [12]. Vermeer's underpainting in the *Woman Holding a Balance* has more than one function. Apart from its basic use of determining the detailed composition, Vermeer's monochrome sketch forms a foundation for his use of light in the painting as a central component. Vermeer's sketch, unlike some rough drafts from other painters, is completed with delicate lines with deliberate planning. In the *Woman Holding a Balance*, the contour of the woman's forearm shows part of the brown sketch, which Vermeer had laid out as the preparation for his play of light and shadow for the final work [12]. Vermeer's use of pigments effectively presents the characteristic texture of different elements. Based on the underpainting, Vermeer added different degrees of colors to further develop the effect of *chiaroscuro*. Vermeer often places a deep blue dress against a background that is not equally dark. What is more, Vermeer sometimes omitted the expected shadow, but on the contrary, presented the brightly lit white walls [10]. It can be seen in the *Woman Holding a Balance* that the wall in the background is left blank with the effect of light and shadows while the woman is standing in front of the framed picture-within-picture, lacking apparent depiction of shadows. The lead-tin yellow and the color of ultramarine balance in a harmonious way, as it is shown in the woman's cloak and dress [12]. In the background of the *Woman Holding a Balance*, the gold trim of the frame is dark yellow which has huge semi-lucent particles. The right rims of the frame are painted brighter yellow than the left ones. What is even more meticulous of Vermeer is that within the bright yellow rims, there are also different tones of color, as the yellow in the middle is a little lighter than other parts, suggesting it is illuminated by the light flows in from the window on the left and indicating that the golden trimmed frame has a slight excurvature.

Still, if it is categorized as a genre painting, the *Woman Holding a Balance* successfully presents a daily scene in the bourgeois interior under Vermeer's excellent arrangements of elements and play of light. At the same time, on the other hand, Vermeer keeps his daily scene in the painting distant from the viewers, like the world inside the painting is unapproachable to the audience. The woman's right hand holding the balance is delicately designed. Three fingers point vertically out of the painting toward the audience, being in the same direction as the nail in the white wall in the background. The woman turns slightly to her left, showing the viewers about three-quarters of her front. However, although there are some interactions between Vermeer's figures and the audience,

some details still make the whole image detached from secular life, letting the audience feel a sense of silence and privacy. The woman's little finger, unlike those three fingers holding the scale, is depicted horizontally. Together with her ring finger, the two fingers curve in a natural but careful way, revealing the fact that the woman is waiting for the scale to reach a state of perfect equilibrium. She puts her left hand so gently on the table that there are rather few indications of shadows shown under her hand. Serenity can be identified in the whole image. Everything is carefully designed and depicted, such as the composition, the colors, and the texture. Elements of normal daily objects lie together in a careful arrangement, providing the audience with the beauties of ordinary life. Yet the frames of the mirror and *the Last Judgment*, and the cut-off extension of the space suggested by the wall on the left, which only occupies a little space from the viewers' sight, keep reminding the viewers that they are a distance from the outsiders and could not be touched [6]. Viewers can feel a sense of tranquility and spontaneously feel it necessary not to intrude, but to leave the scene in calmness.

In Vermeer's paintings, the scenes are often presented in a room which is similar in many cases of his artworks. The window is open to let the light comes inside, and everything remains in silence and a static state [6]. The interior scene in the *Woman Holding a Balance* is constrained in a rather small room, but Vermeer aesthetically placed each element and prevented the picture from being too crowded and in disorder. The artistic contrivance of Vermeer is for two purposes: one is to represent a certain attractiveness of richness and prosperity of the Dutch people, and the other is to establish a foundation for the use of perspective and spatial illusion [10]. There is a tiny nail in the upper left part of the wall in the *Woman Holding a Balance*, forming a sense of space from the viewers' sights. However, this kind of scene seldom appears in other paintings depicting bourgeois interiors in the seventeenth century. Also, as in many other Vermeer paintings of interior settings, one can see the floor of black and white tiles. This black and white form appears so many times, in Vermeer's and other artist's works in the seventeenth century, that people may think that it could be commonly found in Dutch interiors at that time. Again, this kind of marble floor in Vermeer's artworks was rare in real life [10]. This shows that Vermeer intentionally added some elements that were secular but could not be commonly found in daily life to deceive the viewers' eyes. The audience would feel a sense of alienation, though slightly, but inevitably.

In Vermeer's time, what a perfect painting needs to achieve is to present what does not exist convincingly, thus making the audience believe that what they see is reality [10]. Vermeer applies his mature painting skills, creating a picture of great aesthetic details and appropriate spatial perspective. The silence dominates in Vermeer's painting, revealing merely the presence of the subjects, but not suggesting their essence [13]. Whether the scenes Vermeer depicted exist or not remains unknown to the viewers. The sense of solitude perceived by the audience is the general atmosphere intentionally created by Vermeer. Like the case in the facial expression of the woman holding the balance, the viewers witness her tranquility but fail to understand her inner thoughts. The figures in Vermeer's painting have their own life, an inner life that shows their self-consciousness. It is true that to a certain extent Vermeer did depict reality in his paintings, but at the same time, he chose to add the figure's self-consciousness in his paintings. The distance between the viewers and the figures within the painting reminds the viewers that it is better to witness, but not to fathom the privacy of the depicted elements [13].

4. Conclusion

Considering the seemingly slightly inconsistent combination of secular and religious scenes, Vermeer's characteristics can be found in his particular observation and depiction of daily objects as outside resources which can be reflected in his play of light, use of perspective, and composition; but the formation of his artistic style is essentially internal and subjective. In the *Woman Holding a*

Balance, Vermeer inserted the picture-within-picture of the Last Judgment, applying a scene of both allegorical and secular features. People today would be easily attracted by the tangible world in his painting with tensions and the rejection of it, as it were at last reconciled. As the balance placed in the center of the painting, the harmonious state of life can be interpreted as important from Vermeer's perspective. Vermeer may have kept in mind that he was expressing ideas through his painting of the *Woman Holding a Balance*. Both the purity and divinity of the domestic world are unveiled on canvas. Secular scenes are not merely expressing the joy and peace of daily life, but also suggest an opportunity for meditation, both for the world and for the viewers themselves. People find Vermeer's paintings a little detached from the audience, and this is because Vermeer's works are not simply a reflection of reality. Figures in the painting have their world, their minds and behaviors will not change by the viewers. This is why Vermeer's paintings, though delivering daily scenes, are often shown in a sense of restraint. Vermeer's artistic practice creates a detached world for the audience, letting them perceive the presence of secularity and the essence of interiority and privacy. Even if the viewers can not hinder the inner world of the painting, they will start to think about if there is a new way of thinking and understanding the relationship between life, art, and themselves. Not only does he observe the world, Vermeer tries to reshape the world in people's eyes, that reverence and solemnity can also be discovered in ordinary life.

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