

5.

Woman Asleep

Oil on Canvas

1600-01

Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC

Johannes Vermeer

1632-1675

Dutch



Artist Highlights: Until the end of the 17th century, Flanders and Holland were both part of the same country. Swept up by the Reformation in the 16th century, the northern provinces seceded from Spanish rule under the leadership of William of Orange. In 1648, Spain agreed to recognize the independent Dutch Republic, whose intense commercial activity now brought it unprecedented prosperity. Paintings had become a commodity and their trade followed the law of supply and demand. Many artists produced "for the market" rather than for individual patrons. They took pride in their independent country and shared a common enthusiasm for the everyday working lives of their countrymen. Three artists, Hals, Rembrandt and Vermeer stand out from the many who were active during this Golden Age of Dutch Painting. Vermeer, the youngest of the three, was born in Delft in 1632. He was a son of a silk weaver possibly an innkeeper and art dealer. After his father's death Vermeer continues his father's art dealer business. Vermeer marries in 1653 to Trientje Reinjiers the daughter of wealthy Catholics. He converts to Catholicism and moves in with her family. Vermeer returns to his family home upon the death of his parents. It is from this house that he paints some of his most famous scenes. The Vermeers had fifteen children, eleven reach adulthood. In 1653 he is accepted as a master into the painter's guild of St. Luke in Delft and later serves as president of the guild.

Although we do not know for sure who Vermeer's teachers were one possibility is the Dutch artist Carel Fabritius. Fabritius is considered the most gifted of Rembrandt's pupils and is an important link between Rembrandt and Vermeer. Vermeer owned several of Fabritius's paintings and sold several of the few remaining paintings of his work. (much of Fabritius work was lost in Delft gunpowder factory explosion that caused his early death)

Vermeer himself has only 35 known works (perhaps 36). It is believed he painted part time producing 2 to 3 paintings a year. It seems the need to support his growing family required him to focus on selling other artists work. He did have a wealthy patron in Delft, Pieter van Ruijven, who purchased 21 of the 35 known works. As an artist he was certainly influenced by his contemporaries including the artist de Hooch. This influence is seen by Vermeer's continuance of the Dutch love of realism and simple domestic pleasures.

Vermeer dies at an early age of 43 leaving his paintings, 3 Fabritius paintings and debt for his large family.

His work fell into obscurity for almost two centuries. In 1850, Thore Burger, a French critic, researched Vermeer's work and brought it to its rightful place in history.

The small number of his canvases and their high prices led the forger, Van Meegeren in the 1930's to forge Vermeers. He claimed that he had found them which he sold profitably until the fraud was uncovered. Scientific studies proved a difference in pigments.

Painting Highlights:



Johannes Vermeer

In 1921 a French critic posed a priceless question: "By what witchcraft did [Vermeer], representing the most daily and commonplace sights, manage to give the viewer so mysterious, so grand, so exceptional an emotion?" Vermeer produced only 36 paintings before he died at 43. Yet each piece blissfully tickles the viewer with the mystery of who he was and how he did what he did -- Vermeer united poetics with the mundane, and intense emotion with visual clarity.

"A Girl Asleep," shows a comfortable, dark interior and a girl dozing at a table. Her elbow rests on its surface, where we see the ingredients of an afternoon snack -- fruit and an egg. The white pitcher to her right suggests that she's probably drunk a little too much wine.

At first glance, the piece appears purely realistic and lacking in grand narrative. On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that the path of light sliding across the wine pitcher, fruit bowl, and the face, neck, and breasts of the girl is illogical. Often Vermeer manipulated light and color to induce drama. In this instance he bends light in order to illuminate the crucial, symbolic objects for his story: the food, the wine pitcher, and the sensual young woman asleep under its spell. The fruit refers to the Eve's temptation; the egg is a symbol of lust; the wine, obviously, betokens the young woman's dissipation.

Some critics go so far as to call Vermeer's work abstract because of his careful attention to composition and color. The hyper-realism that also marks his paintings may have been inspired by the camera obscura, a tool that presented objects in perfect, three-dimensional perspective. Two hundred years before film was invented, Vermeer commonly blurred foreground details such as the out-of-focus chair in "A Girl Sleeping." This technique probably reflects the way the camera obscura revealed vision, and enhances the photographic quality of Vermeer's work.

Equally Vermeer-ish is the focus on ordinary characters in domestic settings. Along with his colleague Pieter de Hooch, Vermeer tirelessly explored interior space. Within quiet, suspended moments Vermeer's figures stitch, pour milk, or strum lutes. He tapped into the uncanny peacefulness experienced when alone with only a small task and one's own heartbeat.

The ambiguity of Vermeer's life is as baffling as his symbolic realism. Little is known of his training. His mentor may have been Leonaert Bramer, a Delft artist who was a witness at Vermeer's marriage. Vermeer's wife spent much of her time in pregnancy (the couple had 13 children), yet it is not known if any of the artist's models were members of his family. Vermeer played a small part in the world's first middle-class art market, earning his living as an art dealer and innkeeper in Delft. Despite his artistic achievements, he died young and broke, of unknown causes.

MASTER MANUAL INFORMATION SHEET

ARTIST; JOHANNES VERMEER DUTCH 1632-1675

TITLE & DATE; A GIRL ASLEEP - AROUND 1657

SIZE & LOCATION; 33 1/2 X 30 INCHES METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART,
NEW YORK, NEW YORK

MEDIA & SUPPORT; OIL ON CANVAS

TYPE OF PAINTING; DUTCH GENRE INTERIOR SCENE OF EVERYDAY LIFE,
COMMON SCENES

HIGHLIGHTS Very little is known of Vermeer's life in comparison with that of his great contemporary, Rembrandt. Perhaps this is as it should be, for he painted people and scenes which, like his own life, are easily forgotten in an adventurous age. He chose for his subjects ordinary, stay-at-home, citizens, men and women who lived contentedly in solid comfortable houses.

It is the great charm of Vermeer of Delft that he shows the daily life of three hundred years ago so clearly and freshly that it seems like yesterday. A young maidservant falling asleep in her kitchen; a woman standing beside a window in a pleasant room; a music lesson beside a virginal; these are some of the quiet scenes which Vermeer painted with the precision of a miniaturist in clear, cool, silvery tones.

Vermeer's paintings are very simple in composition. Occasionally he shows two or three people together but more often there is only one figure, usually standing out clearly before a whitewashed wall or gleaming from a dark background. The paintings are filled with a cool, clear light which is reflected from the polished surfaces of unobtrusive household objects—from gilt frames, chandeliers, metal and porcelain jugs, or varnished maps such as the seafaring Dutch loved to hang upon their walls.

Vermeer was so closely associated with this city that he is often called "Vermeer of Delft." His whole life was spent in this, his native town, where he became a member of the painters' guild in 1653. He was a slow, careful painter who produced few pictures and is not known to have had pupils, although he influenced Pieter de Hooch and had a number of imitators. His work has the delicacy and enamel-like quality of miniature painting. There is a strong possibility that he sometimes used mirrors to reduce an actual scene to a small size, which would naturally tend to give it such crystal clarity.

At a public auction held in Amsterdam in 1696, at which a number of Vermeer's paintings were sold, our painting was described as "a drunken girl asleep at a table." However, our young person is in no sense related to the carousing girls who occasionally appear in the paintings of Jan Steen and other Dutch painters of the time. This is a respectable, untroubled nap in a well-ordered, 17th-century Dutch home. At the time of this painting, anecdotal painting was very popular in Holland, yet even this early in his career Vermeer turned away from subjects with historical or literary references and from subjects with sentimental messages. From this time on the content of virtually all his paintings is of relatively minor importance. He pictures people whose personalities are

only vaguely suggested, performing ordinary and simple acts, often among familiar, quiet surroundings. The WAY in which he painted the simplest scene, on the other hand, becomes more and more a matter of wonder.

Even where there is no vista, Vermeer's pictures give a sense of space. This comes partly from his attention to perspective. Before the days of photography painters were apt to even out the difference in the sizes of things far and near. But distant objects, as shown by Vermeer, are very much smaller than those in the foreground. Here the table and rug seem almost too big to be in focus. These characteristics and the crystal-clarity of his detail have left many to believe that Vermeer sometimes worked while looking at the reflection of the scene in a convex mirror. Without intentional reference to such a technique an admiring critic once wrote, "He holds, as it were, a silver mirror up to nature."

The reasons for Vermeer's shift from biblical and mythological scenes to gentry and cityscapes in the latter part of the 1650's are not known. Perhaps he was not entirely comfortable with large-scale figures, or perhaps such work denied him the opportunity to represent naturalistic light and perspective, an interest for which he seems to have had a natural interest. The arrival in Delft of Pieter de Hooch in 1654, and Jan Steen in 1655, may have led Vermeer in this direction since each artist, in his own way, demonstrated how effectively architectural and figural elements, drawn from daily life, could be fused to create a new vision of reality. Or perhaps all three of these painters responded to an artistic climate in Delft where artists sought to enlarge on the conceptual and stylistic innovations of the early 1650's.

"A Drunken Sleeping Maid at a Table" was the title listed for our painting mentioned in the 1696 catalogue. The title itself is proof that this beautiful dreamer is a direct descendent of the sleeping women in dingy inns in paintings by Jacob Duck and Gabriel Metsu. Metsu's sleeper, like Vermeer's, sits at a table covered with an oriental carpet, on which we see a wine pitcher and glass. A sewing basket with a "sewing cushion" on top rest neglected at the feet of Metsu's figure. This motif recurs in Vermeer's THE LOVE LETTER.

That Vermeer's sleeper was called a 'maid' in the 1696 catalogue indicates that a major difference in class was discerned between this woman and the many damsels in the other Vermeer's. The "Sleeping Maid" does, however, wear precious earrings. This suggests that she is living above her station.

Drink also plays an important role in Vermeer's paintings of elegant damsels. When music is being made, a wine jug and glasses are within arm's reach as in many paintings of dandies and damsels by other artists. But Vermeer's damsels never imbibe to excess the way her descendents were painted.

Through out his career Vermeer devised various means to establish private spaces for his figures, but this is only one of two paintings which include a doorway. While this compositional idea may have been his own invention, it is also possible that he drew inspiration from his former colleague in Delft, Pieter de Hooch.

The coloring of the picture is dark and severe, almost mournful; above the head of the girl hangs a heavy shadow. The motive of the seated figure with the elbow propped on the table, and the head resting against the upraised hand is very old indeed; it goes back to Greek figures on tombs. This figure is a personification of grief. In the SLEEPING

Johannes Vermeer
1632-1675
Dutch

Little is known about Vermeer; the only sources of information are some registers, a few official documents, and comments by other artists. Born in Delft in the Netherlands, Vermeer was moderately successful in his lifetime, producing relatively few paintings, and was virtually forgotten for 200 years.

It is not certain where Vermeer studied, nor with whom. It is generally believed that he studied in Delft. His father was a lower middle-class silk weaver, an innkeeper, and an art dealer. After his death in 1652 Vermeer inherited the Mechelen (his father's inn) and the art-dealing business. A hint that Vermeer had continuing financial difficulties was the fact that when he joined the Guild of Saint Luke, a trade association for painters, in 1653, he could not initially pay the admission fee. Although he was a protestant, Vermeer married Catherina Bolnes, a catholic, who influenced his life and work. Together they had 14 children. Later he and his family moved in with his wife's mother, and it is thought that she used her comfortable income to help support the struggling painter and his growing family.

In 1866, art critic Thoré Bürger published an essay attributing 66 pictures to Vermeer (only 35 paintings are firmly attributed to him today). Since that time Vermeer's reputation had grown, and he is now acknowledged as one of the greatest painters of the Dutch Golden Age. He is especially renowned for his use of light in his work.

Vermeer experimented with many painting techniques. The significant aspect of his painting was his extensive use of lapis lazuli instead of cheaper azurite. Today's artist has nothing to do but choose the color and quantity of paint he desires. The situation was not so simple in Vermeer's time. In many cases the painter had to hand grind paint necessary for the day's work. He possessed very few of the pigments, especially the brighter tones, available today. Throughout his entire career Vermeer, probably employed no more than 15 different pigments in all.

Upon his death, most of his paintings were sold to pay off his debts.