

NOT TO BE MISSED: VERMEER AT THE GETTY | by Marlena Donohue

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THANKS TO AN EPIC REMODEL,

Amsterdam's illustrious Rijksmuseum, which holds the greatest stash of work by Dutch Masters from Rembrandt to Van Gogh, has been closed since 2000. During the overhaul, some of the museum's prized possessions, like Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*, stayed home, on view in the institution's still-open Phillips Gallery, but other gems have traveled to museums around the world. After visiting the China Art Palace in Shanghai and the Museum of Art in São Paulo over the last year, one such masterwork, Johannes Vermeer's *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* — an intimate 18-inch oil painting circa 1662 to 1665 — has now arrived at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles.

*Vermeer's intimately sized *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, ca. 1662-65, is now on view through March 31 at L.A.'s Getty Museum, its last stop before returning to Amsterdam's renovated Rijksmuseum. Image courtesy of the Rijksmuseum*



A detail of the work shows the sensitive care and subtle incandescent light that are Vermeer signatures.

The painting is among the most recognized works by the fabled 17th-century Dutch realist, made all the more famous by Hollywood's 2003 fantasy of the artist (played by Colin Firth), and his silent, sexually fraught bond with maid, muse and model (Scarlett Johansson). That movie (based on Tracy Chevalier's best-selling novel) takes its title, *Girl with the Pearl Earring*, from another Vermeer painting currently making a stop in California at San Francisco's de Young. That work, borrowed from the collection of the Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, The Hague, is on view through June 2.

Parts of the overwrought film do ring true: Scholars agree that a focused, insular Vermeer was beset with too many kids and the financial demands of bourgeoisie life. But as Anne Woollett, the Getty's curator of paintings, shares with 1stdibs' Marlena Donohue, Vermeer ignored fashionable, lucrative clichés, like crowded portraits of military men, wealthy traders or dinner tables laden with fruit and fowl. Instead he doggedly pursued intensely sensual and sensitive observations of women, among other subjects, all bathed in the subtlest incandescent light. *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* has not been seen in the U.S. for nearly two decades, and the Getty is hosting this rare (and brief) stateside appearance only until March 31, alongside other contextualizing Dutch works — before the lady and her mysterious correspondence return to Amsterdam for the Rijksmuseum's grand reopening on April 13.

So the São Paulo show ended on February 9, and now it's your turn?

Since the Rijksmuseum's closure, there's a whole generation of viewers who have not been able to see key works. This is a chance for world audiences to see them.

Often these superstar canvases are featured alone in a specially staged room, like the Getty did so successfully with Manet's *Cafe at Folies-Bergère* some years back. That would be hard, as this is a small, concentrated work.

Part of our agreement with the Rijksmuseum was that we would incorporate the work into a display with other objects from our collection or on loan.

The Getty Museum's hilltop Richard Meier-designed complex, in Los Angeles's Brentwood neighborhood, is currently hosting Vermeer's work. Photo courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Trust



What are some of the works that it will hang with?

Most significantly, our *Music Lesson*, by Gerard Ter Borch, and two very famous Frans Hals portraits of Lucas de Clercq, a wealthy merchant, and his wife, Feyna van Steenkiste, also on loan to us as part of a conservation collaboration with the Rijksmuseum. The Getty agrees to conserve major works at no cost if the works can remain on view here for a time.

The 1650s might be called the first age of technology – telescope-type ground lenses, Copernicus, Galileo, Isaac Newton’s treatise on light. Much has been made of Vermeer’s possible use of the early camera, called the camera obscura, to assist him, if you will, in these masterful optical effects. What do you think about that?

Vermeer was certainly aware of all the trends around him. It is possible that he used this device, but in the end his work is based on a certain intense

optical sensitivity – a precise and very personal record of what and how he saw. I would say those experiments came early; *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* is a mature work where he is very much in charge of his method, and that would interest him more than apparatuses of his day.

Research on Dutch art stresses that the objects and still lifes are never the things themselves but elaborate symbols – shellfish a cautionary against overindulgence, grapes to remind proper Dutch Protestants of resurrection and so forth. Are these tropes in a Vermeer?

The work was indeed made right after the Protestant Dutch Republic won its independence from the Catholic Flemish kings, and it’s often said that the opulence you see in all Dutch still lifes has to do with a certain expression of civic and class pride, that these are cues for how one behaves and the proper ways that the Dutch merchants worshiped, recreated and took leisure. For Vermeer, I think the cues are a bit less fixed.

Gerard Ter Borch’s *Music Lesson*, ca. 1668, from the Getty’s own collection, hangs with the Vermeer, providing context. Image courtesy of the Getty Museum



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During their current Getty stay, Frans Hals's *Lucas de Clercq* and *Feyna van Steenklste* have been extensively cleaned as part of a collaborative conservation effort. Images courtesy of the Rijksmuseum

Can you explain?

For example, reading was widely encouraged at the time. Literacy was a definite value in Vermeer's social strata, and proper men and women were expected to read and write. Letter-writing became a kind of cultivated art form: There was precise written protocol for crafting a letter to ask a young women to walk in the garden, or a letter form for inviting guests. You see the theme over and over.

If letter writing in Dutch society was very systematic, this painting fills it with ambiguity, even intrigue.

Exactly. This is an invitation to contemplate. Who is the letter from? There are pearls on the table: Was she dressing and stopped short when the letter arrived? There's a jewel box open: Did she get the letter from the box where it was hiding? The map that Vermeer includes behind the woman offers another narrative clue; many feel that it's there to suggest distance and travel, like the letter came from far away. The work becomes a very subtle reflection on what is present and what is absent, the relationship between these two notions of time. We are invited to ponder private interior things like memory or longing. And let's not forget that the work is also a kind of concentrated essay on blue-ness, on that color's scope, nature and emotional qualities.



Then there is the dress. My college students often ask if she is pregnant – I try to explain that was the fashion of the day.

Garments were made to be gathered at the waist to suggest the desired female silhouette at the time, which was pear shaped. Your students are not far off; the shape of the clothing was intended to make a woman look round and fertile.

What did Vermeer reveal about himself as you prepared this exhibition?

Most interesting to me is that Vermeer left us only 35 paintings, and they all absolutely captivate us; that he insistently made quiet, sensual contemplative works in the midst of what sounds like a stressful household, a fast-paced city and an art market that was paying well for other things.

Woman in Blue Reading a Letter invites long looks and deep contemplation – not unlike the missive the painting's subject so carefully ponders. Photo courtesy Yasuyoshi Chiba/ AFP/Getty Images



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