
Women in Vermeer's home

Mimesis and ideation

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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).

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

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

