

VERMEER

and

WINE

THERE ARE ONLY 36 PAINTINGS ATTRIBUTED TO THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY DUTCH PAINTER JAN VERMEER. STUART GEORGE LOOKS AT VERMEER'S USE OF WINE IN SIX OF HIS CANVASES AND THEN CONSIDERS WHAT WINES HE MIGHT HAVE DEPICTED.

Johannes, or Jan, Vermeer (1632–1675) is a shadowy figure. Although he was head of the painters' guild in Delft, the small Dutch city where he was born, Vermeer was virtually unknown in his lifetime. Now he is considered a master and his paintings fetch millions. In July 2004 *A Young Woman Seated at the Virginal*, a tiny oil canvas measuring just 25.2 x 20 cm, was sold at auction in London for £16.2 million.

THE SPHINX OF DELFT

There are so few contemporary documents on Vermeer's life that Philip Steadman, a Professor at University College London and author of the extraordinary *Vermeer's Camera: Uncovering the Truth Behind the Masterpieces*, calls him "the Sphinx of Delft."

It has been established that Vermeer was baptised in December 1632, though his birth date remains unknown. There is no record of Vermeer again until his marriage to Catharina Bolnes in April 1653. Together they had eleven children.

Vermeer's father Reynier Jansson was a tavern keeper who also traded paintings. In 1655 Vermeer took over the tavern, so probably he had at least a

working knowledge of the wine that is shown in six of his paintings.

THE DISSIUS AUCTION AND BEYOND

The most convincing contemporary record of Vermeer's work is in the 1683 inventory of the estate and property of the Delft printer Jacobus Abrahamsz. Dissius, which lists 20 paintings. In May 1696 an auction in Amsterdam offered "excellent artful paintings, among them 21 pieces extraordinarily vigorously and delightfully painted by the late J. van der Meer (sic), representing several compositions, being the best he ever made..." The inventory tallies with the paintings offered at the auction.

Among the works were "A drunken sleeping maid at a table, by J. van der Meer of Delft" (*Sleeping Maid*); "A gay company in a room, vigorous and good, by ditto" (*The Girl With a Wineglass*); "A gentleman and a young lady making music in a room, by the same" (*Girl Interrupted in Her Music*); and "A soldier with a laughing girl, very beautiful, by ditto" (*Officer and Laughing Girl*).



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The Procuress



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Officer and Laughing Girl

Three more paintings by Vermeer are cited in documents as the property of the painter's widow and another five were seen in auction catalogues through the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. That leaves only half a dozen or so canvases not to have been mentioned in contemporary sources, suggesting that the 36 paintings now credited to Vermeer represent more or less his entire oeuvre.

THE PROCURESS

The earliest of Vermeer's "wine" paintings is *The Procureess*. It is typical of the Dutch *bordeeltje* genre, a brothel scene that usually showed drunken soldiers and busty prostitutes. Certainly its characters look as though they are enjoying themselves. Prior to this Vermeer had painted only Biblical themes.

The smirking young musician on the left, supposedly a self-portrait of the artist because his costume is similar to the painter figure in Vermeer's *The Art of Painting* (c. 1662–1668), holds what is probably a glass of beer. The young lady holds a glass of white wine.

The glass itself is a *römer*, a capacious glass with a knobly stem made from green *waldglas* (forest glass) to stop it slipping through drunken or otherwise distracted fingers. Such glasses were made in industrial quantities in Germany and Holland up to the nineteenth century.

Vermeer has depicted the wine jug, typical of those made in Westervald, with great precision. The Vermeer expert Jonathan Janson claims that the artist employed a pair of compasses to capture the jug's contours so accurately. The scratches of the compass are apparently still visible.

The foreshortening of this painting, however, is not entirely successful. There are two incompatible viewpoints, one looking up at the figures (forest glass) to stop it slipping through drunken or otherwise distracted fingers. Such glasses were made in industrial quantities in Germany and Holland up to the nineteenth century.

LIVE, LAUGH, LOVE

Officer and Laughing Girl clearly prefigures *The Glass of Wine*. Their compositions are very similar, both paintings showing a man and a woman in an interior setting with wine to hand.

Officer and Laughing Girl is a cheerful and optimistic scene – a complete contrast to the sombre *Sleeping Maid*. Here the girl is bathed in light, her cheeks are flushed – from the wine, perhaps – and she is obviously enjoying the company of the soldier who has made her laugh. They are absorbed in each other,

sharing a happy moment with a glass of wine. But always with Vermeer there are ambiguities.

Like the central figure in *The Procureess* the female figure here wears a yellow dress and smiles; the man wears a red coat and a large felt hat, like the soldier in the earlier painting. Her hands are open but the soldier's are bent curiously; we do not see much of his face. She holds a glass of wine like the central figure of *The Procureess*. Is this perhaps another *bordeeltje*?

Officer and Laughing Girl, like *The Procureess*, also has a disconcerting use of foreshortening. The discrepancy in the size and scale of the figures is correct mathematically but closer to what would be given by a camera lens, which led Philip Steadman to suggest that Vermeer used a camera obscura.

In *The Glass of Wine*, we see the man preparing to refill the glass of the girl during a silent pause in their dealings with each other. The body language is very different to that of *Officer and Laughing Girl*. The girl's left arm is tightly folded against her lap and we cannot see the man's hands, though his cuff encircles the wine jug at the centre of the composition. A songbook lies on the table, preceding *Girl Interrupted In Her Music*.

INTERRUPTED IN THEIR DRINKS

The Girl with a Wineglass anticipates *Girl Interrupted In Her Music*. The female figure in both looks out at the viewer, the first gleefully but the second demurely. The white jug of wine in *The Girl with a Wineglass*, typical of the tin-glazed containers then produced in Faenza in Italy, also appears in *Sleeping Maid* and *The Glass of Wine*.

The stained glass window through which the light pours into the room is the same in *The Girl with a Wineglass* and *Girl Interrupted In Her Music*. In Vermeer's work light is always shown coming in from a window on the left of the composition. This is because he – and other artists – painted with the light coming from the left so that the shadow cast by their hand did not taint the area on which they were working. It created an enclosed world in Vermeer's paintings – we can never see what is outside the window.

The second man in the background of *The Girl with a Wineglass* is perhaps a jilted lover. Or has he simply over-indulged, like the *Sleeping Maid* might have? As well as wine there is some tobacco next to him on the table.

There is a painting of Cupid on the wall of *Girl Interrupted In Her Music*, as in *Sleeping Maid*, suggesting a close relationship between the two figures.

WHAT ARE THEY DRINKING?

Wine in Vermeer's paintings is always white. In the seventeenth century the Dutch taste was for sweet white wine. Indeed, so strong was Dutch buying power in France that red grapes were grubbed up and replaced by white in areas such as Sauternes, Bergerac and Anjou.

Just as they liked their white wines as sweet as honey, the Dutch liked their red wines as dark as midnight. They were not interested in claret as the English were. But Cahors, the "black wine", was ideal for Dutch palates.

Not only French wine was imported into Holland. Rhine wine was convenient for Dutch merchants because Rotterdam, only 10 km southeast of Delft, lies at the mouth of that river. But the Thirty Years War (1618–1648) devastated the Rhineland and little wine was made or exported from here during Vermeer's lifetime.

Spanish wine was also drunk in Holland. For more than a century Holland was an outpost of the Spanish empire. But at the conclusion of the Eighty Years War in 1648 Spain was forced to accept Dutch independence. Even during the war Spanish wine was sent to Holland.

Greek wine was shipped with tulips from Turkey and Cretan Malmsey was bought from the Portuguese, who had already discovered that strong wine benefited from sea travel. The Dutch pioneered the use of sulphur to stabilise (sweet) wines in transit.

BRIGHT YOUNG THINGS

Like an extended and close-knit family, there are links and similitudes among Vermeer's 36 paintings. His use of wine as a symbolic and compositional device to suggest temperance or self-indulgence, piety or seduction, joy or despair, is as subtle and effortless as his use of colour and reinforces his reputation as one of the great artists of the seventeenth century. ♣

The Procuress (De koppelaarster, oil on canvas, 143 x 130 cm, signed and dated on the lower right as "J.V. MEER 1656");

Sleeping Maid (Slapend meisje, oil on canvas, 143 x 130 cm, unsigned, c.1657);

Officer and Laughing Girl (De Soldaat en het Lachende Meisje, oil on canvas, 50.5 x 46 cm, unsigned, c.1658–1660);

Girl Interrupted in Her Music (Onderbreking van de muziek, oil on canvas, 39.3 x 44.4 cm, unsigned, c.1658–1661);

The Girl with a Wineglass (Dame en twee heren, oil on canvas, 78 x 67 cm, signed by the wall by the window "I V MEER", c.1659–1660);

The Glass of Wine (Het glas wijn, oil on canvas, 65 x 77 cm, unsigned, c.1661).



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The Girl with a Wineglass