

TEN VERMEERS

ALL men fall under the spell of Vermeer's pictures, although the roads leading to the temple of their adoration are many. This man bends the knee because the Delfter has taught him what colour really is; the man yonder loves them for their charming intimacy. To him Vermeer is the *Elia* of painters because he can introduce a man to his family and relatives without boring him and at the same time make him feel that he is the one and only friend to whom he accords the privilege. Another may be drawn by the intrinsic *genre* revealed in the interiors. I think I was first attracted to him on hearing that he paid his baker with his pictures instead of with coin; for there was ever a dearth of the latter in the Vermeer home.

It doesn't really matter however *why* you like Vermeer: reasons are not always essential. We all understand the couplet:

'I do not like thee Dr. Fell.
The reason why I cannot tell.'

A man standing near me in Burlington House the other day gazed attentively for some time at the pictures and said finally to his wife: 'My dear, I love these quiet pictures, but I'm dashed if I know why!' I perceived at once that he had unconsciously touched upon their supreme secret by involuntarily describing them as *quiet*. They are indeed. Thank heavens they haven't hung Jan Steen's cacophonous orgies beside them in little Gallery VIII. That was right, too. Vermeers should live in a *little* gallery: nearly all of them are little pictures—and, besides, there are so few of them. Only forty-one indisputably accepted as his work.

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Now let us go and look at the ten which are at Burlington House to-day.¹ The first is the *Young Woman Reading a Letter*. We see her in profile, standing near a table. She is turned left and is reading, absorbedly, a letter; a pleasant, gossipy epistle: witness the slight but unmistakable smile. Yes, the canvas is unfortunately injured just below her ear, but you will get used to it in a moment. Think of it as an earring. The jacket she is wearing is the loveliest blue in the world, and so are the chairs with their studs gleaming like dew stippled on the velvet of petals. And what courage the artist had. Fancy daring to place the head with its halo of brownish hair against a background of precisely the same colour!

At what else shall I ask you to look? The white miracle of the letter itself? Truly the white magic of Vermeer is black magic: no man could accomplish such efforts without supernatural aid. He loved blue and white; but so did other Delft people. Look at the china they made. Then you will notice she is *enceinte*. One likes to think of her as the artist's wife. Just one more thing before we leave her. The blue of her jacket has strayed into her hands and arms! Don't talk to me of light and shade. Vermeer loved blue and he just couldn't help it!

The Cook is the next on our right. The light streams in through a window on the left and shows us a woman absorbed in pouring milk from a can into a stone pot. This stands on a table containing a basket with bread and a Nassau jug. On the wall hangs another basket and a metal utensil. Now for the colours: her bodice is of a lemon yellow, the apron and the table cloth are both blue. Notice in all these pictures the audacious placing together of the same colour. Her skirt is a darkish red—the red of the

¹ Exhibition of Dutch Art, 1450—1900. Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1929.

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Delft roofs in the landscape that lies a foot to the right where we shall be in a moment. The same wizardry of white is evident : in the milk—it may froth over the frame-edge any moment ; in the background . . . the sweat glistening on her brow ; for kitchens are hot. If you look steadily at the firm bosom you can remark the movement of her very breathing. Of course, she is cooking Vermeer's dinner. He just took his things into the kitchen and got on with it, and look at the result. None of your stiff, unnatural poses, china chins on waxen hands and all the paraphernalia of the modern portrait.

And now we come to what has been described as the ' world's most beautiful landscape,' *A View of Delft from the Rotterdam Canal*. Of Vermeer's forty-one pictures, only two are landscapes and both are in this room. In painting it the artist must have been seated on the first floor in a house facing the canal. The latter runs straight across the picture ; beyond lie the walls of Delft with the Schiedam and Rotterdam gates. In the left foreground there is a barge moored to the bank and a group of men and women chatting together. The colours, the atmosphere, the sunlight—are amazing. Vermeer has lavished the glow of a late June afternoon over the whole canvas. A shower is either just over or about to fall. On second thoughts I think just over. The people are so disinclined to move ; they have just emerged from shelter and know they are safe for a time. Great blue-black clouds are rolling through a blue sky. Below lie the towers and roofs of Delft, a joyous *mélange* of pink, blue, yellow, red and white tiles. Here and there the sun catches them and you perforce shade your eyes : the rest lie deep in the shade. The trees are blue . . . Now among those red and brown chimneys a white one is sure to spring or Vermeer didn't paint them. Ah, there it is, away to the right : a slender, snow-white

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finger. Look at the faint pool of liquid light through the arch in the centre!

The essential thing about this picture is its *placidity*. In the centre foreground you discern the traces of a man's figure which Vermeer has painted out himself. Why? Because the artist saw that its presence would have ruined the serenity of it all. The figure would have been comparable with the inquisitive, officious urchin who must always place himself right in front of the camera.

The next picture, *A Lady at the Virginals and a Gentleman* is rather sombre but none the less captivating. Its gloom is perhaps intensified by its proximity to the blinding *Portrait of a Young Girl* which we shall see in a moment or two. A lady, with her back to the world, is playing the Virginals. On her right stands a gentleman listening. I think he is a little *ennuyé*, but he is in love with the lady, so he must listen to the tune. The light comes from the left through a *vitral*, the details of which are beautifully painted. Go to Gallery IX and see what a sloven is De Hooch in this matter of windows. Observe how the colours of the Turkish rug which covers the table blend with everything else in the room. In the foreground—but it's no good, the next picture is too powerful and we must go to it. Here all men lose their hearts.

She is smiling, and her smile will linger with you all your life; she wears a blue and yellow turban and she is exquisitely beautiful. The flesh work is as soft as the breast of a dove and her skin is as silken as cream spilt on satin. The curve of her right cheek is like the bow of the new moon. The painting of the lower lips—a red petal which the sunlight has touched with a finger-tip is perhaps the most remarkable thing in the picture. She is certainly Vermeer's daughter, and the jewel suspended from her ear is her mother's;

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she is smiling with the joy of wearing it. Daddy said she could—just this once and for the picture . . .

Of the next two pictures I shall say little. They are large canvases and very fine; but I do not like Vermeer so much in his spacious moods. The paramount jewel of *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha* is Our Blessed Lord's right hand. He points towards Mary and all His love is in His hand. Fingers—hands are always expressive, we often talk with them, but never was a gesture so indicative of love as this.

One more thing you will notice : curiously enough it is Martha who has the contemplative face and not Mary, and this is not due entirely to the effect given by the Augustinian-like head-dress she is wearing. Study the features carefully.

Diana at her Toilet is the only Vermeer for which I have no enthusiasm. The colours are not his; the sombre trees in the background are too green. Surely Nicholas Maes painted this picture; but I suppose experts are experts . . .

The eighth Vermeer is called *The Love-Letter*. On the right a lady is writing at a table covered with the same Eastern rug as in *The Virginals*; behind her, to the left, stands a maid-servant waiting for the letter. That is all. The light in this picture is subdued, but it glows over the canvas like molten gold. The lady is all for her letter like *the Cook* for her milk : deep concentration. She resembles the lady who is playing the Virginals on the opposite wall. Look at the light that is lit in the centre of the jewel she wears at her breast. How did a man paint that? The maid-servant is looking through the window. What is going on outside in the street that amuses her so? Such speculations make life worth living. What! You hadn't noticed she was smiling? The greatest achievement in this picture is the painting of this servant's hands. The light has caught the tips of her finger-nails and they are like fairy mirrors.

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And now the last Vermeer but one, *The Little Street*. It is probably Delft. Here, as in the *View of Delft*, is the same *tranquillity*. One can't imagine Vermeer painting a storm, a turbulent scene or a restless picture. That woman in the doorway absorbed in her embroidery—do you think she ever once looked up at the artist who sat in front of her house? Not she! She wouldn't raise an eyebrow if a char-a-banc full of Cook's tourists were to thunder by. Again, there is the rainy sky; but they will be soft, gentle showers.

He has painted the brickwork of the façade as delicately as the flesh in the *Head of a Young Girl*, the last Vermeer in the room which is hanging directly above. And I shall not separate these two. Flesh, brick; brick, flesh, and white magic that is black magic in every molecule of paint.

If you want to enjoy pictures, do what I have tried to do in this essay. Speculate on the loves, lives and affairs of all the people in them. Here is material for writers of fiction, and to the ordinary man, if he will but use his imagination, there are adventures manifold in the right contemplation of them.

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