EXHIBITION ESSAY

A Window on the Left

Four interiors by Johannes Vermeer, painted between about 1660 and 1664

Johannes Vermeer spent his working life in Delft, and fewer than forty paintings by him survive. Most of them show the corner of a room, one woman busy with something small, and a window on the left through which the daylight comes. The four interiors brought together in this room were painted within some five years of one another. They now belong to three museums, in Amsterdam, New York and Washington, and in each of them the same kind of window is in a different state: shut, open, out of sight, curtained.

In *The Milkmaid* (plate 1) the window is shut. The maid stands side-on to it, pouring a thin stream of milk from an earthenware jug into a bowl, and the light reaches everything she is busy with: the jug, the bread, the blue cloth pushed back on the table, her yellow bodice and the sleeves rolled to the elbow. Vermeer painted the crust of the bread and the rim of the basket with small raised dots of pale paint, so that the highlights stand a little off the surface and catch the light of the gallery as well as the light of the kitchen. A wicker basket and a brass pail



Plate 1. Johannes Vermeer, *The Milkmaid*, c. 1660

Oil on canvas, 45.5 × 41 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, SK-A-2344, purchased with the support of the Vereniging Rembrandt. Public domain.

hang by the window. Low on the back wall runs a row of Delft tiles, and on the floor in front of them stands a foot warmer.

Kitchen pieces of the time were often crowded with game, fish and pans. Vermeer keeps a handful of objects and spends his care on the wall behind them, which is not white at all but a run of greys, ochres and faint blues, scored with nail holes and the marks of things that once hung there.

In *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* (plate 2) the window stands open. She holds the casement with one hand and rests the other on a silver-gilt pitcher standing in its basin. The linen over her head and shoulders reads as white, but almost none of it is: Vermeer painted it in the blues of the glass and the greys of the wall, keeping pure white for the few places where the light falls hardest. A map of the Low Countries hangs behind her, and a red carpet covers the table.

Woman Reading a Letter (plate 3) takes the window out of the picture altogether. We know where it is only from the light on the letter and on her face, and from the shadows that the chairs throw on the wall. Her jacket is painted with natural ultramarine, a blue ground from lapis lazuli and dearer than any other pigment of the day, and the same blue runs through the shadows on the plaster and the cloth on the chairs. She has stopped in the middle of the room to read, with her lips slightly apart, in front of a map of Holland.

Woman Holding a Balance (plate 4) is the darkest of the four. A curtain hangs over most of the window, and the little light it lets through falls on her fingers, on the pearls and coins spread over the table and on the gilt edge of the frame behind her, which holds a painting of the Last Judgment. She holds the balance by its loop between thumb and forefinger and waits for the beam to settle. Under the microscope its two pans are empty (fig. 1): she is weighing nothing.

Whether these rooms were the rooms of the house on the Oude Langendijk, where Vermeer lived with his wife's family, cannot be known. The same chairs with lion-head finials, the same leaded window and the same tiled floor return from one picture to the next, rearranged each time, as a stage is set again for another scene.



Plate 2. Johannes Vermeer, *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*, c. 1662

Oil on canvas, 45.7 × 40.6 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 89.15.21, Marquand Collection, gift of Henry G. Marquand, 1889. Public domain.



Plate 3. Johannes Vermeer, *Woman Reading a Letter*, c. 1663

Oil on canvas, 46.5 × 39 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, SK-C-251, on loan from the City of Amsterdam (A. van der Hoop Bequest). Public domain.



Plate 4. Johannes Vermeer, *Woman Holding a Balance*, c. 1664

Oil on canvas, 39.7 × 35.5 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1942.9.97, Widener Collection. Public domain.



Fig. 1. Detail of plate 4: the beam and its two empty pans. The 48 mm of canvas it shows print 60 mm wide, 1.25 times their size.

National Gallery of Art, Washington. Public domain.

A note on the plates

None of the four canvases is taller than 47 centimetres, smaller than most visitors expect. Plates 1 and 4 are printed inside the margins of the page, as large as the text block allows, under the running heads. Plate 2 is printed to the trimmed edge of the page and plate 3 runs past it into the bleed, so that after trimming the picture fills the page; on those two pages the running head and the folio are left off, and the caption stands on a band of paper at the foot. Every plate is printed from a file of at least 300 pixels per inch at the size it takes on the page. Figure 1 is printed at a fixed width of 60 millimetres, whatever the page around it.

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