

A Window In Time: Two Paintings. Two Worlds.

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Johannes Vermeer was one of the three most significant painters of Dutch art next to Frans Hals and Rembrandt in the 17th Century. Vermeer distinguished his style in many ways. He portrayed domestic scenes into beautiful small-scaled and detailed works of art that contained hidden messages. For example, in his paintings, he used mundane situations frozen in time so that they would create an open story for the viewer to imagine. His paintings were worked with precision, which brought the theory that he used ‘camera obscura,’ a device which allowed to see the objects as points of light.

In analyzing two domestic interior paintings, such as *Officer and Laughing Girl* from 1657, and *Woman Holding a Balance* from 1664, the viewer can appreciate a well-structured interior. He incorporated natural light and the same tones of color to create a well-balanced peaceful atmosphere.

In *Officer and Laughing Girl*, the viewer is teased with a scene where the male figure plays in the foreground to create perspective or depth of field. This trick is called ‘repoussoir.’ It is unknown if the figures are in a romantic relationship. The officer is wearing expensive clothing showing his high status. The woman wears an apron over costly clothes. She was probably surprised by a visitor while doing her domestic chores. Her fancy clothes reveal to the viewer that she comes from a privileged social class. She is smiling and blushing, maybe because of her attraction to the officer or because she has a glass of wine on her hand. A map on the wall from 1620 gives the viewer a clue of the period because it shows geographical accuracy. There is a beam of light or spotlight coming from a beautiful stained glass window that reflects on the

woman. Because the window is the only natural light source, it gives the painting a more mysterious ambiance. The window also makes the viewer appreciate the play between light and darkness. Also, the window has no view of the outside world, which gives the painting a secretive atmosphere because the location of the encounter isn't shown.

The next painting is *Woman Holding a Balance*. It is a similarly small scale painting as *Officer and Laughing Girl*, forty-two centimeters by thirty-five centimeters. It is full of details that delight the eye of the spectator. In the domestic interior, a lavishly dressed pregnant woman holds a balance in equilibrium. In the table, the viewer can see pearls and gold chains glowing against a dark background. Her hand with the scale is at the center of the composition. The woman's pale face is glowing because of the ray of light coming from the window. This window is covered by a golden curtain next to a mirror on the wall. In this interior, the light source, such as the window, is not clearly shown. Maybe because it is a divine light, in a moment of reflection about life, the viewer can see a painting of the Last Judgement in the background, Christ as the judge, where judgment can be related to a scale to weigh good and bad deeds. This can also be a 'vanitas' painting where the viewer can see the ephemeral nature of life and worldly goods. During this time, freedom of worship for Catholics was restricted. It could be possible that the painting has hidden meanings like the Virgin Mary with child and the pearls relating to the parable of pearls in the Bible.

The first painting relates to political and social life, while the second painting refers to spirituality and morality. In both cases, Vermeer spent many hours with exquisitely detailed paintings and great lighting to give the viewer a story.



Fig. 1 Vermeer, Johannes, Officer and Laughing Girl, 1657, Oil on canvas, 50.5 by 46 cm, The Frick Collection, New York.



Fig. 2 Vermeer, Johannes, Woman Holding a Balance, 1664, Oil on canvas, 42.5 by 38.1 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

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