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Vermeer has always been my favourite painter. When the Rijksmuseum opened its 'once in a lifetime' exhibition, I jumped at the opportunity and was lucky enough to secure two tickets. This was no marketing boast by the Rijksmuseum: there are only 37 verified Vermeer paintings in the world and 28 of them are for the first (and almost certainly last) time all in one place.

I should come clean: I am a near-complete ignoramus of art history and cannot draw the simplest of objects, but I do have a deep if unexplained passion for Vermeer. My hope in visiting the exhibition was to try to find out what exactly in Vermeer's work stirs feelings in me like no other painter. My track record for this journey of self-discovery is poor: why does Mahler's *5th Adagietto* move me in ways none of Beethoven's symphonies do? Why do *Don Giovanni's* opening three chords inexorably make my heart beat faster? I have tried to answer these questions with a singular lack of success. What follows is the honest account of my personal quest for an explanation of Vermeer's power to move.

I suspect the exhibition's curators had a difficult decision to make: whether to show Vermeer's paintings in context by juxtaposing his work with his contemporaries' or to let them speak for themselves, unadorned. Luckily, they chose the latter, dispersing the 28 paintings across nine very large and high-ceilinged rooms, mainly in chronological order. This decision does not imply that little can be gained by comparing Vermeer's works with other Dutch masters, but that this comparative analysis is best carried out beyond the exhibition walls (for example, using the excellent and bulky catalogue that accompanies the show).

My own conclusion is that Vermeer is literally incomparable. One possible reason can be found by comparing two numbers: throughout his career



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Vermeer painted no more than 45 pictures, whereas Rembrandt chalked over 350. It follows that even though Vermeer was most decidedly a professional artist, he could not possibly have relied on his profession to feed his large family (his wife gave birth to 15 children, most of whom, surprisingly, did not die in their infancy). It follows, perhaps, that Vermeer painted for himself. This supposition is corroborated by his early decision not to follow the career path of the 'historical' painter, even though his first four works, in the historical-ecclesiastical tradition, would have made him a more than decent living, had he pursued it.

Could this provide a clue to Vermeer's special place in my mind (and, dare I say, in many other of his devotees)? Freed from the demands of patrons and market trends, what did he want to tell us innocent viewers of his art?

A clear message from the core of the exhibition is that his paintings are as far from being naturalistic as possible for a 17th-century artist. They are essentially *mis-en-scène*: every part of the composition is staged, from the floor to the background, from the pose of the (unnamed and untraceable) protagonists, from the windows to the rugs. But, of course, a stage presupposes an audience. Vermeer, one of the most introverted and inscrutable of painters, certainly does not court our plaudit for his extraordinary technical mastery. Indeed, I would go further and say that Vermeer wants us to understand the complexity of his mind even if this means manipulating us, the audience, forcing us to see what he wants us to see.

Let me provide an example. It is an obvious platitude to assert that Vermeer is an outstanding master in the use of perspective and pinpoint geometry. But in his case this is not (just) cold geometric perfection, but his way of putting us, the viewers, in our place. Literally. In some of his paintings, the position of the vanishing point is so orchestrated that the overall effect can be fully appreciated only if the viewer stands at a very precise distance from the canvas and at a very specific height. Vermeer's works do not come with a set of 'viewing instructions'. In fact, he has left no paper trail of any sort: no letters, no notes, no written record of any type. Even his face is a mystery as there are no portraits (a fabled self-portrait is among the missing, presumed lost, Vermeer masterpieces).

Another aspect of Vermeer's complicated relationship with the viewer is his repeated insistence in refusing to show us, the audience, the whole picture. He does this in two ways: first, by the use of curtains that deliberately obscure significant portions of the whole picture. He, the author, knows what lies behind the curtain; we, the audience, are left guessing. The second, and in my view more impressive and disconcerting, way of keeping us in our place is by what I would call 'cropping'. Many of his pictures appear to be cropped in the sense in which images are cropped on a computer screen. As a result, only part of a chair is shown, table legs are cut off, only sections of windows are visible, etc. Vermeer is explicitly telling us that what is displayed is enough to understand his message, indeed his mind.

Before trying to decipher Vermeer's message to me at least, if not to the viewer, there is one final feature of his paintings that is worth noting. Again, it is a platitude to say that Vermeer is a master of light. But why was he concerned with one very specific type of light? Only two of his pictures are outdoor scenes (a street and the port of Delft); in all the others, the source of light is unseen, typically coming through a window or from an unspecified place. The outside is another country. (The perfectly accurate maps adorning some of the paintings are a sign that Vermeer the hermit knew of other places,



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but that is what they were – other.)

It is worth pointing out here that Vermeer, unlike most of his contemporary respected painters, was not well travelled and that he spent most of his life within a very narrow radius in Delft (as narrow as 100 metres according to some historians). It is as if he did not need the outside world, just as he did not need an admiring audience.

Have I uncovered the mystery of why Vermeer manages to reach into my mind like no other artist? Probably not, but I may be a step closer. Perhaps it is the allure of the undiscoverable, combined with the challenge that the attempt, although doomed, is worth the effort. And yet. Take *Girl with the Red Hat*: one of the surprises of the exhibition was the realisation of how incredibly tiny the portrait is. Standing at 23cm by 18cm, painted on a wood tablet, it fills the room with wonder, in a way in which Rembrandt's gigantic *The Night Watch* never can (in my skewed estimation), even though one could fit well over 383 *Girl with the Red Hats* onto it.

As I was leaving the exhibition at closing time, I could not help noticing the many narcissistic idiots turning their backs to *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, used as background for yet another selfie to be posted on Instagram. If this is to be the sign of an artist's standing and reputation, perhaps Vermeer was right to dismiss popularity and to reserve his genius only for those willing to be challenged by it.

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