Theme 3: Vermeer and the World of Light

Lesson 4: Jan Vermeer

Part 1

By this time you should be approaching the end of Tracy Chevalier's novel *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, and thus you know quite a bit about Jan Vermeer (1632–1675) and life in seventeenth-century Delft. In fact, you know more about Vermeer than most art historians. He lived in a country that, following independence from Spain in 1648, became paradoxically poorer and marginalized. Although a number of legal, guild, and religious documents tell what Vermeer did on particular dates, they are empty of personal content. The lack of real information allows Tracy Chevalier to place the artist in situations of her choosing, to put words into his mouth, and to suggest motives for his actions; even for his paintings. This is a time-honored practice among writers who create fictional history or historical fiction—take your pick.

Of course, Tracy Chevalier bases her fiction on real paintings and on the existence of historical people: Maria Thins, the painter's mother-in-law; Catharina Bolnes, his wife; Antony van Leeuwenhoek, the biologist with the camera obscura; and Pieter Claez van Ruijven, the lecherous collector. But their personalities, however, are pure speculation.

The novelist also displays considerable investigation into the Low Countries of the seventeenth century, particularly the city of Delft, and writes convincingly of the painting materials and methods of the time. Vermeer hires Griet—the narrator-protagonist—to clean his studio and to grind pigment into paint, which helps introduce the fruits of this research in a fairly natural way.

Another historical touch brought out by the novel is the tension between Catholic and Protestant families. Differences in the practice of these denominations spill over to the arts. Griet is scandalized by a painting of the Crucifixion, for example. Churches are supposed to be white and unadorned. Images are idolatrous. It is no longer a question of humanism decentralizing and minimizing religion, or even, like Leonardo da Vinci, “aestheticizing” it; Catholic and Protestant visions were often at odds. As pointed out previously, in the early years of that century many artworks had been destroyed by Calvinists wanting to rid the world of offensive and idolatrous images.
Part 2
By jumping from Jan Van Eyck to Pieter Bruegel and from Bruegel to Vermeer, we do a grave injustice to some of the greatest painters in Western art. Students should at least leaf through the textbook and/or web sites to take a glimpse at masterpieces we have no time to study in this course.

Vermeer’s artistic output, as the novel points out, was rather small. Most of the acknowledged masterpieces belong to a ten-year period, beginning around 1657 and continuing through the timeframe of the novel, if we leave off the epilog. Even so, Girl with a Pearl Earring deals with only a fraction of the paintings attributed to Vermeer.

The first painting discussed is the View of Delft from 1659–60. It occurs when Griet’s blind father reveals that Vermeer is a painter:

“Do you remember the painting we saw in the Town Hall a few years ago, which van Ruijven was displaying after he bought it? It was a view of Delft, from the Rotterdam and Schiedam Gates. With the sky that took up so much of the painting, and the sunlight on some of the buildings.”

“And the paint had sand in it to make the brickwork and the roofs look rough,” I added. “And there were long shadows in the water, and tiny people on the shore nearest us.” (7)

Full-blown landscapes are relatively new in the seventeenth century. We have seen how Bruegel made landscape a central concern, but quite often hid it behind a purported religious or mythological subject matter. Like genre painting, landscapes—and later, seascapes—demanded a new public. The church had no interest in paying for such pictures; neither did kings and princes, at first. Religious and public-spirited art served a function in addition to any and all aesthetic value it might have had. Even the Birth of Venus told a story all educated people were expected to know something about.

Genre painting, landscape painting, and still life paintings were different. What ulterior purpose do they serve? The View of Delft tells no story, imparts no inspiration, and shows nothing of interest to someone who does not live in or has not visited the city, rather like a postcard of some unidentified place. Aesthetically, however, it would brighten any wall on which it hung. And now there are folks who can afford to buy a painting that came into being without any action or desire on their part: not a portrait of a family member, or a view of the castle, or a scene of an admired hero or saint. They find it, they like it, they buy it, and they hang it in the living room. Just like we do.

Not only was painting well on its way to becoming Art with a capital letter, an object whose primary if not sole function was to please the eye and occupy the mind. It had already become a commodity to buy and sell.
Vermeer was very good at making such objects, and the View of Delft made him a tidy sum. This is a portrait of the light that falls across the skin of the world, from the sunny spire to the shimmering reflections in the river. Does this light remind you of Van Eyck or Bruegel?

It is not a huge painting, measuring about a yard wide, and the people on the riverbank do indeed seem rather tiny, as the novel says. The rest of the novel’s description is brief. Is it effective as ekphrasis? For someone who has looked at the painting long enough to remember it, probably so. Often we are so fascinated by the landscape—which, in this case, is not so much natural as it is human, being dominated by buildings and by people going about their ordinary business—that we fail to notice that well over half the image is sky. What is the effect of so much space? On the cover of the novel is a truncated version of the View of Delft in which some of the foreground and virtually all of the “empty” sky have been removed. Which do you prefer? Why?

This is obviously an aesthetic activity: to look patiently, to look again, and to look for what we may not see at first, and then to ask questions—as focused as possible—about the effect (on us) of a composition or tonal range or theme or style. The list is long, and not everyone arrives at the same questions, let alone the same answers. But to take pleasure in the looking and the wondering, to approach a painting aesthetically, to admire the hand that painted it, to compare it mentally to other images we have looked at in the same way, and to make a (provisional) judgment based on experience and educated tastes—in other words, to make the whole viewing process as conscious as it is intuitive—turns us into the kind of viewer a painter like Vermeer was working for.
Part 3
Earlier painters worked for patrons, who would say: “We need an Annunciation about four feet tall and three feet wide that fits right there in that spot on that wall. Can you do it and how much will it cost?” The painter was an artisan like the plumber, the goldsmith, the stonemason, and the wheelwright. Skilled labor. “Can you do a decent likeness of my rich and powerful husband? History must remember him and the camera hasn’t been invented yet.”

Although he converted to Catholicism, Vermeer did few religious paintings, and never for a church or monastery. Nor are there famous people in his work. He painted the likeness of women in various poses, but none is a portrait in the strict sense: it is not meant to tell us anything about the unidentified person. Each subject is simply called a lady, a girl, a maid… He even paints people from behind.

After Leonardo and the complexities of The Da Vinci Code, a look at a quiet painter like Vermeer should be straightforward. Entire web sites are devoted to his paintings. In addition to the novel, other books on Vermeer are easy to find at most libraries. In order to complete the assignments successfully in this section, I recommend the following steps:

- Get to know Jan Vermeer. Read the short section in our textbook as an introduction, and then go to a first-rate encyclopedia like the Britannica or an art history book. Most Internet sites are suspect, so beware. Remember, the novel offers a fictional account of Vermeer, his life, and his painting career.
- Get familiar with Vermeer’s paintings. There are not many. Go online to view them. Find an analysis of one or two.
- Read the novel. Give yourself time to think about what you have read. Mark pages with ekphrastic text so you can find them again.