Theme 3: Vermeer and the World of Light

Lesson 6: Vermeer (continued)

Part 1

An interesting use of ekphrasis occurs late in Tracy Chevalier’s novel as the maid Griet poses briefly for the painting called the Concert, dated around 1665-66 (below). This scene is prelude to the painting she will actually sit for, the Girl with a Pearl Earring. In passing it may be noted that two men posing as policemen stole the Concert in 1990 from the Isabel Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. If you should happen to find the painting, there is a five million dollar reward. Contact the FBI.

The Concert presents a motif common enough in Dutch painting of this period. As Arthur Wheelock points out in an analysis of this painting:

The theme of music is a frequent one in Dutch art and is generally associated with love and seduction. Paintings by Steen, Van Mieris, and Metsu often include a small statue of Cupid surmounting a door or mantelpiece as a reference to the underlying emotional context of the scene. Associations with love and seduction are also evident in the general attitudes or the figures in these paintings.
Another element common in paintings of the seventeenth century is the inclusion of artworks by other painters. The landscape with the dead tree trunk on the left in the *Concert*, although it may be reminiscent of the contemporary painter Jacob van Ruisdael (1628–1682), has not been identified. However, the image on the right, as the narrator Griet makes clear, is Dirk van Baburen’s painting the *Procureress*, from 1622 (at left). According to the novel, Vermeer’s mother-in-law owns this painting, which is not surprising: Baburen came from Utrecht, the Catholic center of the mainly Protestant Netherlands, and Vermeer himself had converted to Catholicism in order to marry the daughter of this wealthy Catholic lady. Unlike most Dutch painters of the time, Baburen had studied painting in Rome, where he came into contact with Italian artists like Caravaggio (1573–1610), famous for the dramatic use of contrasting light and dark—called chiaroscuro—and the equally dramatic cropping of figures to present them large and up-close.\(^1\) Obviously, in the *Concert* Vermeer does not so much copy this painting as allude to it: the colors of the background image are completely washed out, rendered in monochrome, and the three figures are very nearly schematic when compared to the original, especially in the case of the muddy faces (at right). It is difficult even to recognize the lute in the younger woman’s hands, although this is precisely the point of contact with Vermeer’s musical subject matter.

\(^{1}\) See *Great Masters of Western Art*, pages 153-158.
Part 3
We may wonder why Vermeer did not simply reproduce his own painting of the Procuress (1656), seen below, in the background of the Concert. His Procuress presents the same subject matter as the Baburen painting: an older woman, the procuress, hooks up one of her prostitutes with a man with a coin in hand. We see the neck of a musical instrument, probably a lute, in the older woman’s hand. As a bonus, the grinning man in shadow on the left is said to be the only known self-portrait by Vermeer. Had he substituted his own Procuress for Baburen’s, Vermeer could have signed the Concert with his own likeness. Given the way he toned down the background images, however, the self-portrait would have been unrecognizable.

Perhaps the inclusion of the Procuress and the landscape picture in the background of the Concert supports the new role of painting: they hang decoratively on the wall of a typical upper-middle class residence of the day. Their only function is to be beautiful to look at. We have reached a turning point in the history of painting. Although Griet complains throughout the novel of the painted Crucifixion scene on the wall above her bed, Vermeer did not paint for the Church. Likewise, he did not paint for the nobility. He painted for what we might call the art public.

This new attitude will play out over the centuries. In the end this new role of the painter and his works will prove more significant than the ability to render a naturalistic, even photographic, likeness of the visual world—images on canvas that look convincingly the way three-dimensional objects look from a window, a doorway, a balcony. Art with a capital A will overtake and supersede the conquest of light as the object of painting. As we will see in Theme 4, this will also change the ekphrastic relationship to literary texts.