

ART110

The Vibrant Vermeer

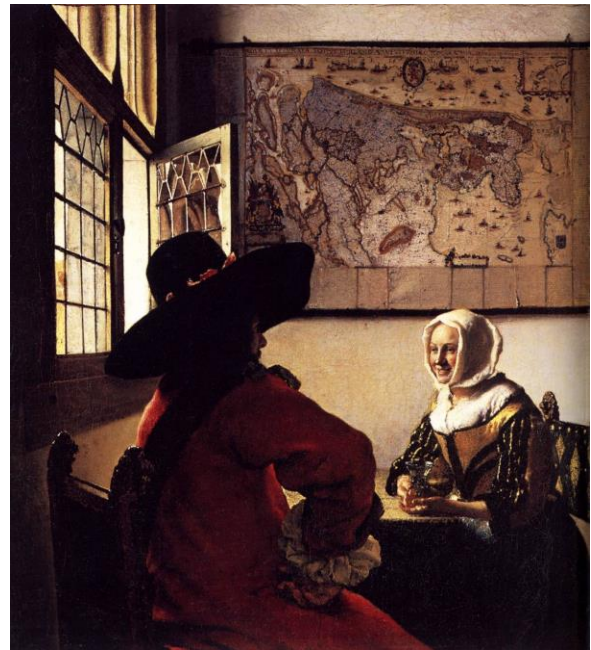
When asked about some of the most influential artists to exist, many people might think of Vincent van Gogh or Leonardo Da Vinci; while these people were extremely important to the development of the art world, one other influential artist can easily be forgotten: Johannes Vermeer. The artist was relatively unrecognized until the nineteenth century, and it is estimated he produced only around 45 works (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2003). Although a smaller artist, Vermeer made beautiful and influential pieces, using multiple principles and elements to bring together his works. By looking at the artist's life, his role and context in society and art, and his individual works, his influence on art and the world can be seen clearer.

Vermeer was born on or around October 31, 1632. While little information is known about his early life, he was exposed to the world of art from a very young age, as his father was an art merchant. Vermeer popped back on the board again when he married Catherina Bolnes, a Catholic woman, in 1653. He was a Protestant at the time, but he converted to Catholicism soon after. The couple had many children together, the number of which is disputed. Vermeer's influence upon the art world started to grow when his father died in 1652. Because of this, he took control over the art merchant business his father had been running ("Jan Vermeer Biography," 2014). In 1653, Vermeer signed up as a master painter with the Delft Guild. It is believed he had a friendship with a source inside, Leonard Bramer ("Johannes Vermeer and his paintings"). While Vermeer was somewhat successful in the Delft Guild, he struggled

financially. He stayed this way until his death on or around December 16, 1675 (“Jan Vermeer Biography,” 2014).

While his biography starts to show the two-way influence between art and Vermeer, the context of society and the art world further show this. The Dutch painter lived with the 17th century influences of Rembrandt and Caravaggio, in a time referred to as the Dutch Golden Age. While these influences are clear within his paintings, it is unknown who he apprenticed with, leaving his training and skill development open to questioning. Nonetheless, Vermeer took his influences and began painting of his own. He often focused on bright, colorful subjects that were in domestic settings. His works were realistic, but they were not specifically narratives (“Johannes Vermeer and his paintings”). The influences around Vermeer greatly helped him develop his styles, and he used them to create many amazing works.

In his pieces, Vermeer used many different elements and principles to put together a fluid, beautiful work. One of the concepts he used heavily was lighting. Whether it was highlights, shadows, or simple environmental lighting, Vermeer used these tools to effectively attract the eye to the subject. These techniques are strongly seen in *Officer and Laughing Girl*. The painting shows effects of the light streaming in the window on both the woman and the man. The



Officer and Laughing Girl, 1657

woman’s face is highlighted by the light source (the sun), and she easily draws attention. However, the officer also shows the effect of the sun; however, he shows it through shadows.

His character is dimly lit when compared to the woman, having only his left shoulder highlighted. It is believed that Vermeer may have used a device called a camera obscura to achieve these visuals. The device had lens sitting in a hole, which reflected an image from outside of a box to the inside. The reflected image would have greatly intensified highlights and shadows (“Johannes Vermeer Style and Technique”). This concept is seen yet again largely in



The Lacemaker, 1669-71

The Lacemaker. An unseen light source shines on the subject, highlighting her forehead and the left side of her body and clothes. The great distinction between the light and shadow is seen on her nose. Its left side is in the light, while the right side contrasts with dark and sudden shadow. The separation between the two lighting aspects is also seen on the pillow, where the side facing the light source is highlighted, and the side facing away sits in shadow. These lighting effects give the painting

a significant sense of space and depth, as well as positioning of the subject. The wall behind the girl has no shadow, and with the light source coming from her left, it can be assumed that a window outside of the painting is letting sunlight into a room. The window would be situated at such an angle that no shadow of the girl can be seen on the wall. While his particular technique of lighting, or chiaroscuro, was not as common, Vermeer drew in the viewer with these vibrant lighting effects. His paintings took on a unique and attractive tone, and they became largely known and appreciated as a result. While the chiaroscuro Vermeer used strongly defined his pieces, there was one more concept that helped complete his works.

The other significant concept Vermeer used throughout his career was color, specifically complementary coloring. He would paint using two or more colors that specifically made the other stand out, such as the distinction between yellow and violet or red and green. He would also use colors that provided a clear distinction between the subjects, the surroundings, and the backgrounds within his paintings. Although these colors together were usually not complementary, they were used in such a way as to strongly emphasize the subject of the work. The background would not draw the eye for quite some time, while the focus of the piece would hold a viewer's gaze for ages. Vermeer also used color strongly with his lighting techniques, using both to create vibrant colors, highlights, and shadows. One of the strongest examples of these styles is *The Girl with a Pearl Earring*. In the painting, Vermeer used varying values of the complementary colors yellow and violet, as well as a dark blue. These colors stand out strongly in contrast to one another, giving the clothing associated with the colors a very detailed and distinct look. Vermeer also used black as a simple background to intensify the colors of the subject. Little to no attention is given to the black emptiness behind the girl; however, the clothing and face of the girl stand out vibrantly. This is also in part to the lighting techniques used again. An unseen source is shining light onto the girl's face, highlighting the right half of it. The pearl earring the girl is wearing also shows



The Girl with a Pearl Earring, 1665

highlighting, as the light source creates a bright and reflective area on the piece of jewelry.

Finally, shadows are seen on the girl, as well. The backside of the girl and coat are covered in darkness, revealing that there is only one light source to the left of the portrait. Vermeer's use of chiaroscuro and coloring create a strong sense of depth within the painting. The girl looks and feels very three-dimensional; however, the background has a small or nonexistent sense of space. The pure black provides no detail or context of the girl's location, and it almost feels void. No highlight or shadow can be attained from the background, leaving the viewer with little to no sense of space behind the girl. Using all of these techniques and principles, Vermeer created a painting that is immensely attractive, full, empty, and vibrant.

While Vermeer was relatively smaller within the art community and world, his influence has stretched miles into that world. He was able to effectively take chiaroscuro and color to create vibrant works. He created a sense of space and depictions of life in a traditional, yet wonderfully new, way. The realism and detail portrayed within the paintings also established his influence as a leading artist. This Golden Age artist truly was the gold of the age.

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