

**VERMEER**



**MASTERS OF ART**

# **VERMEER**

Alexander Adams

**PRESTEL**

Munich · London · New York

Front Cover: Johannes Vermeer, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, c. 1664–67  
(detail, see page 83)

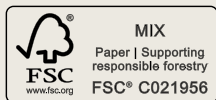
Frontispiece: Johannes Vermeer, *The Art of Painting*, 1668? (or 1666),  
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna  
pages 8/9: Johannes Vermeer, *View of Delft*, c. 1660/61 (detail, see page 65)  
pages 38/39: Johannes Vermeer, *The Glass of Wine*, c. 1659–61 (detail, see page 59)

© Prestel Verlag, Munich · London · New York 2024  
A member of Penguin Random House Verlagsgruppe GmbH  
Neumarkter Strasse 28 · 81673 Munich

The publisher expressly reserves the right to exploit the copyrighted content of this work for the purposes of text and data mining in accordance with Section 44b of the German Copyright Act (UrhG), based on the European Digital Single Market Directive. Any unauthorized use is an infringement of copyright and is hereby prohibited.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Editorial direction, Prestel: Cornelia Hübler  
Copyediting and proofreading: Vanessa Magson-Mann, So to Speak, Icking  
Production management: Martina Effaga  
Design: Florian Frohnholzer, Sofarobotnik  
Typesetting: ew print & media service gmbh  
Separations: Reproline mediateam  
Printing and binding: Litotipografia Alcione, Lavis  
Typeface: Cera Pro  
Paper: 150 g/m<sup>2</sup> Profisilk



Penguin Random House Verlagsgruppe FSC® N001967

Printed in Italy

ISBN 978–3–7913–7730–8

[www.prestel.com](http://www.prestel.com)

# CONTENTS

- 6 Introduction
- 8 Life
- 38 Works
- 110 Further Reading

# INTRODUCTION

Public love for, and critical appreciation of the paintings of Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675) have never been greater. A landmark 2023 Vermeer exhibition at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (which included twenty-eight paintings attributed to Vermeer—an unprecedented gathering) broke attendance records, as did a documentary film about that event. A wave of monographs, novels, films, television documentaries and secondary media has spread Vermeer's fame worldwide over recent decades. In multiple polls, Vermeer ranks in the top five most popular artists. During a Vermeer exhibition in Washington D.C. in 1995, altercations broke out among those struggling to enter the exhibition, attendance of which had been congested by visitors lingering longer than had been anticipated.

Yet in 1850 even learned art historians had not heard of Vermeer. How is such a meteoric rise from obscurity possible? No artist's reputation has experienced a more dazzling revival than Vermeer's, whose small body of paintings was—for almost two centuries—overlooked or mingled into the corpuses of more esteemed painters. There can be few painters who, once having reached maturity, painted so many masterpieces. Their range is limited, but the constricted nature of the selected artistic field—single figures or two figures paired in domestic interiors—allowed the painter to bring his vision to perfection, for (in the Western oil painting tradition) no art better deserves the epithet "perfect" more than that of Vermeer. The few discordant pictures produced by the artist demonstrate how carefully balanced and executed his successful paintings are. This book will try to answer why Vermeer is so supremely good and why he appeals to us so much.

Vermeer is one of the most elusive of the great artists, even more than Piero della Francesca and Giorgione, painters of an earlier age. It was not without reason that the critic who popularised him called Vermeer "The Sphinx of Delft". We have no drawings from Vermeer's hand; nor do we have any letter or contract written by him; there is no confirmed portrait likeness of the artist. There are no memoirs or letters attesting to Vermeer's appearance or character; consequently, most of what we know of the man Johannes Vermeer is inferred from his subtle, almost inscrutable, art.

Although the body of his work has been stable for about a century, and there has not been a generally agreed addition to that body since 1969, new information has been forthcoming. Imaging technology, radiography and pigment analysis has

advanced rapidly and revealed much about how Vermeer painted as well as the painstaking lengths he undertook to perfect his pictures. Technology has allowed us to discover elements only previous seen by the artist before he painted over them. We have scientific proof that later hands added objects and backgrounds after the paintings had left the studio; in some cases, these interventions have been reversed, restoring Vermeer's original paintings. Restoration of *Woman Reading a Letter at an Open Window* dramatically altered its appearance and has transformed our understanding of it. Additionally, cleaning has revealed details formerly obscured by layers of discoloured varnish.

Archive research has provided tantalising glimpses of Vermeer's world—the circumstances of his in-laws, Catholic institutions he would have known well, patrons who bought pictures—even if it does not show us the whole man. Paintings and maps (or versions of them, at least) that appear in Vermeer's pictures have been identified. While it seems very probable that we shall never find a portrait of the artist nor a document by his hand—and it seems just as likely that no lost Vermeer paintings will be brought to light—studies by specialists add almost yearly to our understanding of one of Western art's most astonishing geniuses. That research will be presented here in summarised form.

At a time when high-quality digital imaging technology, radiography and paint analysis reveal more of a painting than is apparent to the naked eye, we do well to remind ourselves that what is above all important about a work of art is what was left to us. To concentrate upon how a painting was made or how it changed during creation is much less significant than what is visible. What is most important is what we have—what the artist chose to bequeath us—not how it came to be. It is breathtaking subtlety, rigorous observation, relentless invention and humane compassion that mark out Vermeer as worthy of veneration, study and emulation.





# LIFE

