

VERMEER'S PEARLS

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Above : *Woman Holding a Balance* (1662-1665) Washington National Gallery / www.nga.gov

Johannes Vermeer was a painter of light. He lived and worked in Delft, the heart of Netherlands, during the golden age of Dutch art in the 17th century. Very little is known about his life, we only know of his genius evident in his paintings, particularly his depiction of light.

Vermeer painted the most ordinary and made them profoundly extraordinary. His quiet and soft images of mostly women, doing the most ordinary tasks, seduce us to be still and into a state of silent meditative calm.

In the early and mid-1660's, Vermeer executed several small canvases aptly named the “pearl pictures” featuring women wearing pearls engaging in some private activity inside a room. Most courtly paintings at that time made use of diamonds, rubies and sapphires but Vermeer chose to adorn his subjects with simple pearls. However on canvas, his women took on a magnificent jewel-like preciousness which transformed their outer beauty into an ethereal one — a beauty that is beyond earthly splendor.

Unlike other jewellery, pearls reflect their light on Vermeer's subjects; they make the women shine.



Girl with the Pearl Earring (1664)
The Hague, Mauritshuis / www.mauritshuis.nl

In Vermeer's masterpiece's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, the single pearl gleams just like her eyes — the eyes and pearl have absorbed the arresting light and glow with beauty and luster. The pearl becomes a visual metaphor for the girl wearing it: luminous, radiant, a being seemingly brought to life by light itself.

It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see.

Henry David Thoreau

One of Vermeer's greatest talents is his ability to create a sense of intimacy in his interiors through his masterful use of light. Nowhere is this better displayed than in one of his pearl pictures, *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*.



Woman with a Pearl Necklace (1662-1965)
Berlijn, Gemäldegalerie SMPK / www.smb.spk-berlin.de

The woman's pearls become the points of convergence of light. They reflect touches of light on the thoughtful woman's face, adding a poetic sense to the frozen intimate moment. She gazes into her mirror entirely unaware of her surroundings: allowing us, the viewers, to linger and imagine we are peeking into a lady's private chamber.

What is she thinking? The painting perplexes and prods us to complete her story. Such is the magic of Vermeer: his painting speaks to us.

Vermeer paints the quiet room, the morning light, the white PEARLS. And in that simplicity, he reveals not just his virtuosity as a painter but the essence of the very act of **seeing**.

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