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## Vermeer and the Art of Stillness

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There is much talk these times of mindfulness: learning to stay in the moment to still that darting mind of ours and bring it to rest here and now. It struck me on my second visit (within one week) to the Vermeer exhibition in the National Gallery in Dublin\* that these paintings call for that kind of meditative response. They evoke stillness and interiority.

What is particular about this exhibition is the juxtaposition of the Vermeer paintings with others of the same time and the same subject. There are many aspects that we can consider as we compare: the whole aspect of 'originality' is called into question. These 'genre' painters didn't seek original subject matter and, in fact, were quite happy to 'quote' other painters, copying the subject matter but adding their own distinctive style. You could visit the exhibition many times and focus on different aspects to study: you could decide to look at the tapestry rugs adorning the tables and note how each painter conveys the impression of weight and richness with different brush strokes, detail and colour. You could look at the stance of the figures and their gaze. You could observe how the folds of the silken dresses are created with the painter's illusory art.

After each of my visits I found myself asking, 'But what is it that makes the Vermeer paintings stand out?' There are other marvellous paintings here by Gabriel Metsu, by Gerard ter Borch, by Frans van Mieris and many of these less familiar works are quite delightful. You might argue that we are influenced by the name, by the fact that Vermeer is the recognised master. In the exhibition the names of painters are found high up on the wall above the paintings thus encouraging the viewer to look first at the art and then claim the artist. Yet no matter what device might be used, the Vermeer pieces pull us inexorably towards them. And, for the most part, we are drawn like moths towards the light, the luminous quality

\* Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting is on show at the National Gallery of Ireland Dublin 17 June-17 September 2017

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of Vermeer's work. In almost all of the paintings shown here there is a window and Vermeer works with light and shadows. The light almost always picks up some white: on a piece of cloth, a collar, a shawl, the folds of a silken dress, the pearl beads of a necklace. Just look at one of the jewels in the exhibition: *Woman Writing a Letter with her Maid*, which (and what a privilege!) belongs to the National Gallery in Dublin and will return there after this exhibition has toured to Washington, and then note all the places the light is caught and how translucent those white garments appear. In this painting too we have a good example of the call to be mindful, and like the maid, with the half-smile playing across her face, as she enjoys her own quiet moment, we are silent too, lest we disturb the letter-writer deep in concentration. She has already rejected one attempt and the crumpled paper lies on the tiled floor. There are many stories here and each viewer adds their own narrative and that too is part of the attraction.

Look at the small painting of the *Lacemaker* (from the Louvre) and once more we observe someone totally absorbed in her delicate task. In this case the half figure fills the space and there is no room for a window and all is contained in this concentrated space of hues of blue.

Then stand for a long time in front of the *Woman with the Balance*. Look to the left to see the *Woman Weighing Coins* by Pieter de Hooch, a similar theme, and no one knows which artist influenced the other but that really is of little import. It depicts a domestic scene. The colours are quite muted. It is an attractive painting. Now return to the Vermeer and stay there and allow yourself to be drawn in by this young woman 'weighing things up'. She is both literally in the act of weighing, holding a balance, but also metaphorically appears to be considering the value of things. She is pregnant, and, perhaps the awareness of impending birth is causing her to reflect on matters of mortality; a picture of *The Last Judgement* hangs on the wall behind her. See the way the light comes through the window and how her white headdress and the white trims of her blue jacket hold that light. Notice the delicacy of the fingers holding the balance and the pearls spilling out of the box. One commentator, in an essay in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, refers to 'the reflective character and theological implications' of this painting. Telling us that the painting was originally exhibited within a box he suggests that it would have been reserved for 'those moments when the viewer was in search of inner peace and spiritual guidance'.<sup>1</sup> That is precisely what one

1 Arthur K. Wheelock JR, 'On Balance' in Adriaan E. Waibor with Arthur K. Wheelock JR and Blaise Ducos, *Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting: Inspiration and Rivalry*, (Yale University Press in association with the National Gallery of Ireland) 2017

senses when one stands in front of this painting long enough to experience this sense of peace.

I am sorry that the *Milkmaid* hasn't travelled here ( I recall seeing it at an exhibition in London and being transfixed by it) but I don't regret the absence of *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*. It might have dominated the exhibition and taken away from the sense of almost equitable and utterly quiet beauty in each of the masterpieces present.

The other aspect, apart from the luminosity, and to which I alluded earlier, is interiority. Of the ten Vermeer paintings exhibited in Dublin only two show a figure facing the viewer, *Lady Writing* and *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal*, and even in those instances the reflective character remains. The other eight all show figures in profile or heads bent, towards a task of lace-making or letter-writing, or music-making, or, as in the case of the only two male figures, *The Astronomer* and *The Geographer*, examining globes or maps. The effect of this is that we almost imagine an invisible 'do not disturb' sign above these figures and have the sense, in no way voyeuristic, that we are privy to these private moments, and indeed privileged to witness them. In contrast, some of the other painters portray their figures provocatively looking out at the viewer and occasionally with a curtain drawn back as if to reveal a stage set, as in Casper Netscher, *Woman Feeding a Parrot with a Page*, where the viewer is invited to meet the woman's bold gaze. The other genre painters demonstrating a similar interiority to Vermeer are among the other gems of the exhibition: Gabriel Metsu's *Woman Reading a Letter* (another Beit bequest) and the very lovely Gerard ter Borch, *Woman Writing a Letter*. In an age of pervasive 'selfies', the persistent desire to put oneself into every picture, it is refreshing to have these faces turned away from us and turned towards whatever it is that absorbs them. We find ourselves and our contentment, not by shouting out 'look at me', but by what we desire, what we love, by absorption and utter attentiveness to a task. With no photography permitted at the exhibition the visitor becomes absorbed in the forgotten art of simply looking and moving slowly from one piece to the other might just begin to reflect the inwardness of the paintings themselves.

Perhaps this time to contemplate beauty and artistry is mere escapism. I'm not so sure. For me those two visits lifted my spirits and, although this was a temporary respite from a summer of heart-breaking stories of devastation by fire, by terror, by war, I welcomed the reminder that 'though there are torturers there are also musicians' (poet Michael Coady) and, one might add, that 'although there are terrorists there are also artists.'

It is a naïve thought, and I confess that freely, but if we could

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put paintbrushes and pencils or violins and flutes into the hands of children, especially those in deprived circumstances, and show them how they have the capacity to create images and sounds of beauty, then maybe they would be less likely in their adult lives to take up guns and swords and wield destruction. And less dramatically: with a pencil or paintbrush in one's hand one cannot at the same time swipe a screen or send a text or tweet. We need reminders that we are created beings and made for creativity.

This exhibition offers moments of illumination that have the power to steady our restless spirits and allow glimpses of truth and beauty. I defy any visitor to emerge without a sense of gratitude for having been there.

**Cutting the turf.** I mentioned this at a gathering here in Glasgow the other night. A man from the islands came up afterwards. He had a sorry family history – hard times, homelessness, prison and now a courageous daily fight against the bottle. He said: 'I remember when we used to cut the peats. I'd always have an ear listening out for the cuckoo.' 'What did it mean to you?' I asked. He answered with one word, a word that issued from his yearning for a life that's better ordered. It was wrenched from childhood memories, with emotions rippling like the wind across his face, and he said it with a relish that made me shake ... 'Happiness!'

– ALISTER MCINTOSH, *Parables of Northern Seed*, (Wild Goose Publications, Glasgow) p. 118.