

## 'Vermeer and the Delft School': Magic Turns Light Into Life

By ROBERTA SMITH

Genius does not flourish in a vacuum. That's the simple lesson vividly conveyed by "Vermeer and the Delft School," an alternately tousled and crystalline show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It includes 15 paintings by Vermeer — nearly half of the 35 works firmly attributed to him — along with paintings, drawings and prints by a host of other artists and a smattering of decorative objects and books.

This show tracks the emergence of an increasingly effortless illusionism in Delft in the late 1650's and 60's. In the process, it demonstrates that Vermeer's miraculous images, the pinnacle of this illusionism, emanated from a petri dish of precedent, influence, inspiration, collaboration and patronage that contained more than a jot of pure chance, including an assassination



**The Art of Painting, (1666 - 1668 by Vermeer) Metropolitan Museum of Art**

William the Silent, the George Washington of the Netherlands, was killed in Delft in 1584, and in the following decades his son and successor, Prince Maurits, moved the court to The Hague, three miles away. Not a great distance perhaps — by the 1660's the two cities were connected by canal barges that left twice an hour in both directions — but enough to place Delft on the margins of court patronage and taste, which favored artists influenced by Caravaggio.

These events freed some of Delft's artists to investigate the ways light played upon the world around them, putting their own spin on ideas and conventions that were then in the air.

Picking up on work by Frans Hals, Nicolaes Maes and Gerard ter Borch, Pieter de Hooch helped revise the "merry company" tavern scenes popular in both Holland and Flanders into pools of domestic calm and intimacy. By 1650, influenced by Pieter Saenredam of Harlem, Gerard Houckgeest turned from grandiose evocations of imaginary Italianate architecture to measured renderings of the whitewashed interiors of the Old Church in Delft, setting a new standard for architectural perspective that de Hooch and Vermeer later applied to their domestic scenes.

The paintings of Vermeer, de Hooch and Houckgeest dominate this show, along with those of Carel Fabritius, a star pupil of Rembrandt who went to Delft in 1650 and may have taught Vermeer but certainly influenced him. Fabritius was 32 when he died, along with hundreds of others, in the accidental explosion of a gunpowder arsenal that leveled a sizable portion of Delft in October 1654. His "Sentry," painted that year, is one of the show's highlights, a dazzling arrangement of creams, gray and blacks that depicts a soldier dozing in the generous geometry of a sun-warmed courtyard.

But these artists have plenty of backup: the church interiors of Hendrick Cornelisz van Vliet, Emanuel de Witte and Louys Aernoutsz Elsevier, which sometimes cross over into trompe l'oeil; the flower paintings of Jacob Woutersz Vosmaer, Gillis Gillisz de Bergh and Balthasar van der Ast, with their increasingly transparent pockets of background space; the images of well-dressed burghers and their families in brick-lined courtyards or on front stoops by Jan Steen and Hendrick van der Burch.

There are wonderful paintings by artists you've never heard of, from museums you may never visit, notably Egbert van der Poel's "Barnyard Scene" of 1658, an orchestration of coppery browns, tenderly rendered farm equipment and fading afternoon light, lent by the Museum for Foreign Art in Riga, Latvia.

This exhibition comes only six years after the first retrospective of Vermeer's art, a show of 20 canvases seen in Washington and The Hague. While that show presented one Vermeer after another, like pearls on a string or a row of motionless beacons, the Met's exhibition is like a roving spotlight that almost giddily illuminates a succession of artists, mediums and generations. It has been organized by Walter Liedtke, a curator in the Met's department of European paintings, with Axel Rüger, curator of Dutch paintings at the National Gallery in London, where the show will be seen this summer.

In the wall labels, Mr. Liedtke parses the qualities that might be defined as local, regional and international. He proposes the Delft School as a porous, fluctuating idea that intermittently revealed "a preference for understatement, for rationality and reserve and for sober realism." There doesn't seem to be a discernible Delft School of landscape painting, although the show contains a little corner of breathtaking ones. And whatever school existed wasn't triggered by a single work or artist, or the sudden arrival of artists like Fabritius or Paulus Potter, but was built over several generations.

In the opening galleries, things feel a bit piecemeal and disjointed. Enormous tapestries and pieces of silver-gilt from around 1600 attest to Delft's role in the production of high-end luxury items and to its exacting levels of craftsmanship, which were carried over into its painting. Yet all the conventions and motifs that Vermeer and his generation would refine into a new kind of representation are present, in one work or another.

In its own gaudy, cramped, awkwardly drawn way, the show's first painting, Bartholomeus van Bassen's "Renaissance Interior With Banqueters," even offers a compendium, if not a caricature, of what lies ahead. Its carefully detailed, albeit palatial and Italianate interior contains a rowdy

"merry company," a more restrained group of well-dressed men and women gathered around a table next to a window, walls lined with art, a sort of still life and a checkerboard floor. (Few Dutch houses or churches had such floors, but they recur throughout these paintings, measuring the recession of space with clarity and éclat.)



**Vermeer's "Little Street", by Emmanuel de Witte at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.**

It is striking to realize how many of these elements, floor included, are present, profoundly realigned and transformed, in Vermeer's grand, enigmatic "Art of Painting," which awaits the visitor in the show's final gallery.

If this exhibition places Vermeer in context, emphasizing milieu over individual achievement, it proceeds in a restrained, object-oriented manner characteristic of the Met. Those expecting to see examples of the Turkish carpets that cover the tables in Vermeer's paintings, or the guild membership roll open to the page with his name, will be disappointed.

On view, however, are Gillis van Scheyndel's imposing engraving of the winding line of dignitaries (many identified by name) that formed Prince Maurits's funeral procession in 1625, and an even larger house-by-house map of the town, first published in 1678 by Johannes de Ram and Coenraet Decker. Both are resplendent examples of civic pride and close observation.

A large selection of drawings, among them two views of the devastation of the 1654 arsenal explosion, corroborate the assertion in a catalog essay by Michiel C. Plomp that there is more to the Delft School than oil on canvas. Other supporting material includes books on perspective and its use in painting; blue-and-white Delftware chargers, or presentation bowls, which mix Chinese motifs with local landscape scenes; and a single exquisite diamond-engraved wineglass, made in Delft around 1685.

This glass is placed to the right of Vermeer's "Glass of Wine," a painting of a woman who hesitantly drains a nearly identical one while her male companion waits. It confirms that

Vermeer's interiors, for their time, tended to be luxuriously appointed, in keeping with the patrician calm of his subjects.

But more germane is what leads up to this painting from the left side: a progression of four canvases from the mid- and late 1650's by de Hooch that display a growing confidence in the treatment of the domestic interior articulated by natural light. Almost painting by painting, we see spare paneled rooms, open doors and mullioned windows become the full-fledged partners, if not the stars, of de Hooch's interiors. It is a development that anticipates Vermeer's even more commanding use of the convention.

Luminous, compressed and perfect in every way, Vermeer's "Glass of Wine" trumps the lineup. It eliminates extraneous gesture or expression and any suggestion of narrative.

Yet his cool, omnivorous mind is everywhere, polishing every granule of surface until it communicates the maximum of visual information: about the painting on the wall behind the man and woman, the carpet covering their table, the light filtering through the slightly open stained glass window.

One of Vermeer's distinguishing strengths, beyond his skill at rendering the human figure (which de Hooch lacked), was his supreme evenhandedness. Painting the animate and the inanimate as if they were of equal import, he paradoxically implied the relentless inner pulse of life and thought, but from a discreet distance.

De Hooch and Vermeer were more equal outdoors, painting their brick courtyards and building fronts, which appear on the opposite wall of this gallery. First come two nearly identical paintings of brick courtyards by de Hooch that confirm that the Delft realists didn't necessarily stick to reality. A spate of big and little differences — from the street outside (visible through the passageway) to the angles of walls, the patterns of bricks and the courtyard's inhabitants — attest to ways that reality was constantly rearranged to suit the artist, or a client.

But again Vermeer trumps, this time with "The Little Street," with its orderly progression of brick surfaces and forms; the disparate activities but shared concentration of the four figures, which mirror his own; and the creamy, loosely indicated cobblestones rendering the canvas soft and open at its bottom edge.

This exhibition outlines a world without which Vermeer could not possibly have been Vermeer. But it doesn't diminish or flatten his achievement. It makes it sharper, more specific and more miraculous than ever.

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/03/09/arts/09SMIT.html>