



Johannes Vermeer masterpieces

[Extra large view of the image](#)

With quiet concentration a woman pours milk into a bowl. With her left hand she supports the can she is pouring from. Around her are various objects: a loaf of bread, a stoneware jug, a basket and a brass bucket. The woman is standing near the window so she can see what she is doing. The light falls on her hands; her silhouette is dark against the white wall. There is a fascinating play of light and shadow in this painting. This is one of Johannes Vermeer's genre pieces in which he establishes an intensely intimate atmosphere. Although the artist observes his model from nearby, she continues with her work, totally unperturbed.

Title
The Kitchen Maid

Year
c. 1658

Artist
Johannes Vermeer

Technique
Oil on canvas

Dimensions
45,5 x 41 cm

Object number
SK-A-2344

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Genre

Genre paintings, drawings or prints depict people in their everyday surroundings: at home, in a café or at work. They appear to be painted from life, but in reality were usually thought up in the artist's studio. Sometimes (but not always!) they contain a moral lesson. In some works the message is clear, in other cases the viewer has to make an effort to interpret the picture. Often, however, these household scenes are simply decorative paintings designed to entertain and amuse.

'Genre' as a term

The term 'genre' was not coined until the end of the nineteenth century and only came into wider use in the twentieth century. In the seventeenth century, these paintings would often be given descriptions such as conversation piece, brothel scene, peasant meal or 'soldier with reclining girl.' The word 'genre' is also used in a more general sense, to denote various types of painting, such as a still life, portrait, history painting or even a genre piece. Genre painting as a category includes [peasant scenes](#), [brothel scenes](#), [outdoor scenes](#) and other subjects.

WebMuseum, Paris

Vermeer, Jan

Jan or Johannes Vermeer van Delft, b. October 1632, d. December 1675, a Dutch genre painter who lived and worked in Delft, created some of the most exquisite paintings in Western art.

His works are rare. Of the 35 or 36 paintings generally attributed to him, most portray figures in interiors. All his works are admired for the sensitivity with which he rendered effects of light and color and for the poetic quality of his images.

Little is known for certain about Vermeer's life and career. He was born in 1632, the son of a silk worker with a taste for buying and selling art. Vermeer himself was also active in the art trade. He lived and worked in Delft all his life. Not much is known about Vermeer's apprenticeship as an artist either. His teacher may have been Leonaert Bramer, a Delft artist who was a witness at Vermeer's marriage in 1653, or the painter Carel Fabritius of Delft. In 1653 he enrolled at the local artists guild. His earliest signed and dated painting, *The Procuress* (1656; Gemaldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden), is thematically related to a [Dirck van Baburen](#) painting that Vermeer owned and that appears in the background of two of his own paintings. Another possible influence was that of Hendrick Terbrugghen, whose style anticipated the light color tonalities of Vermeer's later works.



The Procuress

1656; Oil on canvas, 143 x 130 cm; Gemaldegalerie Alte Meister - Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden



A Woman Asleep at a Table

c. 1657; Oil on canvas, 87.6 x 76.5 cm; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



[View of Houses in Delft, known as "The Little Street"](#)



Soldier and a Laughing Girl

c. 1658; Oil on canvas, 49.2 x 44.4 cm; The Frick Collection, New York



[The Kitchen Maid](#)

During the late 1650s, Vermeer, along with his colleague [Pieter de Hooch](#), began to place a new emphasis on depicting figures within carefully composed interior spaces. Other Dutch painters, including Gerard Ter Borch and Gabriel Metsu, painted similar scenes, but they were less concerned with the articulation of the space than with the description of the figures and their actions. In early paintings such as *The Milkmaid* (c.1658; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam), Vermeer struck a delicate balance between the compositional and figural elements, and he achieved highly sensuous surface effects by applying paint thickly and modeling his forms with firm strokes. Later he turned to thinner combinations of glazes to obtain the subtler and more transparent surfaces displayed in paintings such as *Woman with a Water Jug* (c.1664/5; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City).



[View of Delft](#)

A keen sensitivity to the effects of light and color and an interest in defining precise spatial relationships probably encouraged Vermeer to experiment with the camera obscura, an optical device that could project the image of sunlit objects placed before it with extraordinary realism. Although he may have sought to depict the camera's effects in his *View of Delft* (c.1660; Mauritshuis, The Hague), it is unlikely that Vermeer would have traced such an image, as some commentators have charged. Moralizing references occur in several of Vermeer's works, although they tend to be obscured by the paintings' vibrant realism and their general lack of narrative elements. In his *Love Letter* (c.1670; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam), a late painting in which the spatial environment becomes more complex and the figures appear more doll-like than in his earlier works, he includes on the back wall a painting of a boat at sea. Because this image was based on a contemporary emblem warning of the perils of love, it was clearly intended to add significance to the figures in the room.



The Music Lesson

c. 1662-65; Oil on canvas, 74.6 x 64.1 cm; Royal Collection, St. James' Palace, London



The Music Lesson (detail)



[Woman in Blue Reading a Letter](#)



[Woman Holding a Balance](#)



Young Woman with a Water Pitcher

c. 1664-65; Oil on canvas, 45.7 x 40.6 cm; Metropolitan Museum of Art,



New York

*Girl with a Pearl Earring*

c. 1665-1666; Oil on canvas, 44.5 x 39 cm; Royal Cabinet of Paintings
Mauritshuis, The Hague

*The Concert*

c. 1665-66; Oil on canvas, 72.5 x 64.7 cm; Isabella Stewart Gardner
Museum, Boston

[*The Girl with the Red Hat*](#)*Mistress and Maid*

c. 1667-68; Oil on canvas, 90.2 x 78.7 cm; Frick Collection, New York

[*The Geographer*](#)[*The Art of Painting*](#)[*The Lacemaker*](#)[*The Love Letter*](#)[*Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid*](#)*The Guitar Player*

c. 1672; Oil on canvas, 53 x 46.3 cm; Kenwood, English Heritage

After his death Vermeer was overlooked by all but the most discriminating collectors and art historians for more than 200 years. His few pictures were attributed to other artists. Only after 1866, when the French critic W. Thore-Burger "rediscovered" him, did Vermeer's works become widely known and his works heralded as genuine Vermeers.

Intimate scenes

Barely 35 works are known to have been painted by Vermeer. His early paintings - mainly history pieces - reveal the influence of the Utrecht [Caravaggists](#). In his later works, however, he produced meticulously constructed interiors with just one or two figures - usually women. These are intimate genre paintings in which the principal figure is invariably engaged in some everyday activity: one is reading a letter, another is fastening a collar about her neck, yet another is pouring out milk. Often the light enters Vermeer's paintings from a window. He was a master at depicting the way light illuminates objects and in the rendering of materials. The Rijksmuseum has three domestic portraits by Vermeer and one street scene: the world-famous *Little Street*.

Photographs by [Mark Harden](#).

To Roy Williams' [Paintings of Vermeer](#) (caltech).

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