

Vermeer's Portrayal of Women as seen in *Girl Interrupted at her Music* and
Mistress and Maid

Johannes Vermeer, a Dutch 17th century genre painter, shows the role women played in that century, the complexities of their lives and the differences between lower and upper class women. Women appear in Vermeer's paintings 40 times and men are only seen 14 times. Women are typically protagonists, seemingly at home and never nude. In my two examples, the women are both engaged in an activity. The identities of these women are unclear and do not have a religious context. Vermeer has such a small body of work and the way he has chosen to portray women is very interesting. Vermeer chose to portray normal women neither holy nor royal in a non sexual way and engaged in an activity, which was not common up to this point in art history as genre painting was just developing with a rising middle class.

Vermeer works from the model. This means that he sets up a real scene with real people and then recreates it in oil paint. None of the women that modeled for Vermeer have ever been identified. This further shows his focus on capturing the life of a normal woman during the 17th century. Critics have noted that the women featured in Vermeer's paintings are conventionally attractive keeping in mind beauty standards of when they were made. Some of the women are more girlish while others could be old enough to be mothers. They typically have high curved foreheads, soft features and are set in simple positions.¹

¹ Jonathan Janson, "Vermeer's Women," Vermeer's Women, accessed November 24, 2020, http://www.essentialvermeer.com/women's_faces/vermeer's_women.html.

Girl Interrupted at her Music was made by Vermeer during the Baroque period, more specifically the Dutch golden age. The painting is made using oil paint. It's smaller than one may guess at 15.5 inches by 17.5 inches. Like most paintings of its time this piece is realistic and not stylized. Costume experts have said that her lined cap is partly for decorative purposes, but also is to protect her hairstyle before and after she gets dressed.² On the table is a cittern, sheet music for voice, a wine glass and a Chinese pitcher with flowers inside of it.

The room is dark with the only source of light coming from the window with



geometric designs. Vermeer is known for the way he works with light in his paintings. Rather than choosing a basic window Vermeer features a multi paneled window with a complex design of interlocking geometric figures.³ Many of Vermeer's paintings have windows in a similar fashion. One way Vermeer captured the light so

perfectly is through dark paint layers below the final layer of paint. The under layers allowed for varying thickness in the final paint.⁴ The difference in texture creates a sharp contrast between where the light is hitting and where it isn't. He also created geometrically frames around the subjects using the room and window. In this work there are continued vertical lines across the top half of the painting. The chair is also

² "Girl Interrupted at Her Music - Google Arts & Culture," Google (Google), accessed November 24, 2020, <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/girl-interrupted-at-her-music/dQJyvYdqLElvKw>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Melanie Gifford, "Painting Light: Vermeer's Technique Transformed Reality - Google Arts & Culture," Google (Google), accessed November 24, 2020, <https://artsandculture.google.com/theme/painting-light-vermeer-s-technique-transformed-reality/uwKSJnG3nXaoJQ?hl=en>.