

CENTER FOR THE HISTORY OF COLLECTING IN AMERICA

Turning Points in Old Master Collecting, 1830–1940

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The “Sphinx of Delft” in New York: The Vermeer Purchases of Henry Marquand, Henry C. Frick, and Their Contemporaries

The rediscovery of the art of Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675) in the mid-nineteenth century by the French political journalist and art critic Théophile Thoré (1807-1869) has gotten much attention in the recent art-historical literature. The influential Thoré, who often wrote under the pseudonym William Bürger, devoted more than two decades to the study of the then little-known Dutch artist, whom he often called his “Sphinx of Delft”. In 1866, Thoré-Bürger published his many findings on Vermeer – some misguided, but many still valid today – in a series of three articles in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*. They included a biography of the artist, a tentative catalogue of his paintings, and an appreciation of his work. While Thoré listed circa 70 paintings in his catalogue, he gave only about 45 works to Vermeer, ascribing the others more tentatively to him. As we know now, Vermeer, who was also active as an art dealer in his native Delft, painted relatively few pictures; only 35 or 36 are regarded as autograph by most modern scholars.

It was in Thoré’s groundbreaking articles of 1866 that Vermeer was brought to international attention for the first time, and it was their publication that spawned the European revival of the master in the later decades of the nineteenth century. Until then, the artist’s reputation had been overshadowed by other Dutch genre painters, most notably by such contemporaries as Gabriel Metsu (1629-1667) and Pieter de Hooch (1629-1684), whose works were much more coveted by collectors of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and brought much higher prices.

In 1866, when Thoré published his articles in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, all of Vermeer’s paintings could still be found in Europe, and many were still in private hands. This situation would soon change drastically. At present, more than one-third of the master’s authenticated oeuvre can be found in the United States. Remarkably, the great majority of the Vermeers that are now in the United States were brought over before World War I. In 1887, Henry G. Marquand (1819-1902), a New York railroad financier, gave America the first of the 13 authentic works by Vermeer it now holds in its possession, *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* of about 1662. In 1889, the painting was part of Marquand’s first grand gift to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and as such the first Vermeer to enter a public collection in this country. The Marquand Vermeer was also the first of eight Vermeers to come to New York; three Vermeers are now at The Frick Collection, while The Metropolitan Museum has five, more than any other museum in the world. My lecture will focus on the Vermeer acquisitions of some of the great collectors of America’s so-called Gilded Age, among them, besides Henry Marquand, Isabella Stewart Gardner of Boston; Collis Huntington

of New York and California; Henry Clay Frick of Pittsburgh and New York; and J.P. Morgan and Benjamin Altman, both also of New York. I will discuss how America followed in Europe's footsteps, and how its taste for Vermeer was shaped in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition, I will consider what motivated (or may have motivated) some of these collectors to buy their Vermeers.

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