

# Vermeer's Maps



# Introduction

... some, for one purpose, and some, for an other, liketh, loveth, getteth, and useth, Mappes, Chartes, & Geographicall Globes. Of whose use, to speake sufficiently, would require a booke peculier.

—John Dee, 1570

A large map hangs behind the smiling woman in Vermeer's *Officer and Laughing Girl* (fig. 1) at The Frick Collection. Mounted at top and bottom on two darkly colored rods with bulbous finials, the map is attached to the wall in two places by string suspended from nails. The wooden rods align the work and weigh it down sufficiently for the delicate surface to hang flat against the wall—or nearly flat, as the artist suggests some folds and creases on the paper's surface. Such rods also made it possible to roll a map for storage. Vermeer's depiction illustrates how wall maps, which were immensely popular in the Netherlands in his time, would typically have been presented in middle- and upper-class homes in the seventeenth century. The map we see in this painting is of the Dutch province Holland, home to both the map's makers and Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675). Its size and coloring draw the viewer's attention. Like the young woman—whose yellow, white, black, and blue attire it echoes—the map is brightly lit by the sunlight flooding the room through the windows on the left. It is a prominent feature on an otherwise bare wall in a setting that is—as in so many of Vermeer's works—at once serene and charged with energy.

**FIG. 1**  
Johannes Vermeer, *Officer and Laughing Girl*, ca. 1657 (detail of fig. 27)

*Officer and Laughing Girl* and the prototype of its colorful map—Van Berckenrode’s *Map of Holland and West-Friesland*—are at the heart of this book and were its inspiration. The map has long been recognized as an intriguing feature of Vermeer’s art. In 1866, when Théophile Thoré-Bürger ignited interest in the work of Vermeer, he famously dubbed the artist’s apparent interest in cartography a “mania for maps,” likening it to his own “persistent mania” for the rediscovered Dutch painter.<sup>1</sup> He singled out the map of Holland in *Officer and Laughing Girl* as an example, but this is just one of at least nine paintings by Vermeer that feature cartographic objects. The same wall map of Holland appears in three of these: besides the Frick’s *Officer and Laughing Girl*, fragments of it are shown in *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* (see fig. 48) and *The Love Letter* (see fig. 39), making it probably the first and also the most frequently depicted cartographic object by the artist. Three other wall maps and a set of terrestrial and celestial globes, as well as a sea chart, enliven the other six paintings (figs. 2–4, 31, 45, 46).

The relative frequency and unrivaled precision with which Vermeer depicts cartographic objects has invited many responses over the years. The most important scholarship on the subject, that of James Welu published in the 1970s, identifies the cartographic sources, pairing Vermeer’s pictures with the rare extant examples of the corresponding maps (or parts thereof), and offers iconographic readings of them.<sup>2</sup> During the following decade, Bärbel Hedinger further investigated the sociopolitical context for the depiction of cartographic objects by Vermeer and his contemporaries.<sup>3</sup> Around the same time, Svetlana Alpers contributed her influential chapter on what she refers to as the “mapping impulse” of Dutch artists, stressing the importance of visual description and optical knowledge for painters and mapmakers alike.<sup>4</sup> Kees Zandvliet’s essay in the 1996 exhibition catalogue exploring the scholarly world of Vermeer forms another crucial building block for this book.<sup>5</sup>

While scholars continue to remark on the prominence of maps in Vermeer’s art, these objects are rarely the center of attention. As is apparent from many early modern European comments on maps—including those of the renowned sixteenth-century polymath John Dee, cited above—cartographic objects fulfilled multiple roles during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Wall maps, the subcategory of maps on which I



**FIG. 2**  
Johannes Vermeer, *The Astronomer*, 1668.  
Oil on canvas, 20 $\frac{1}{16}$  × 17 $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (51 × 45 cm).  
Musée du Louvre, Paris



# Maps and Mapmakers in Seventeenth- Century Holland

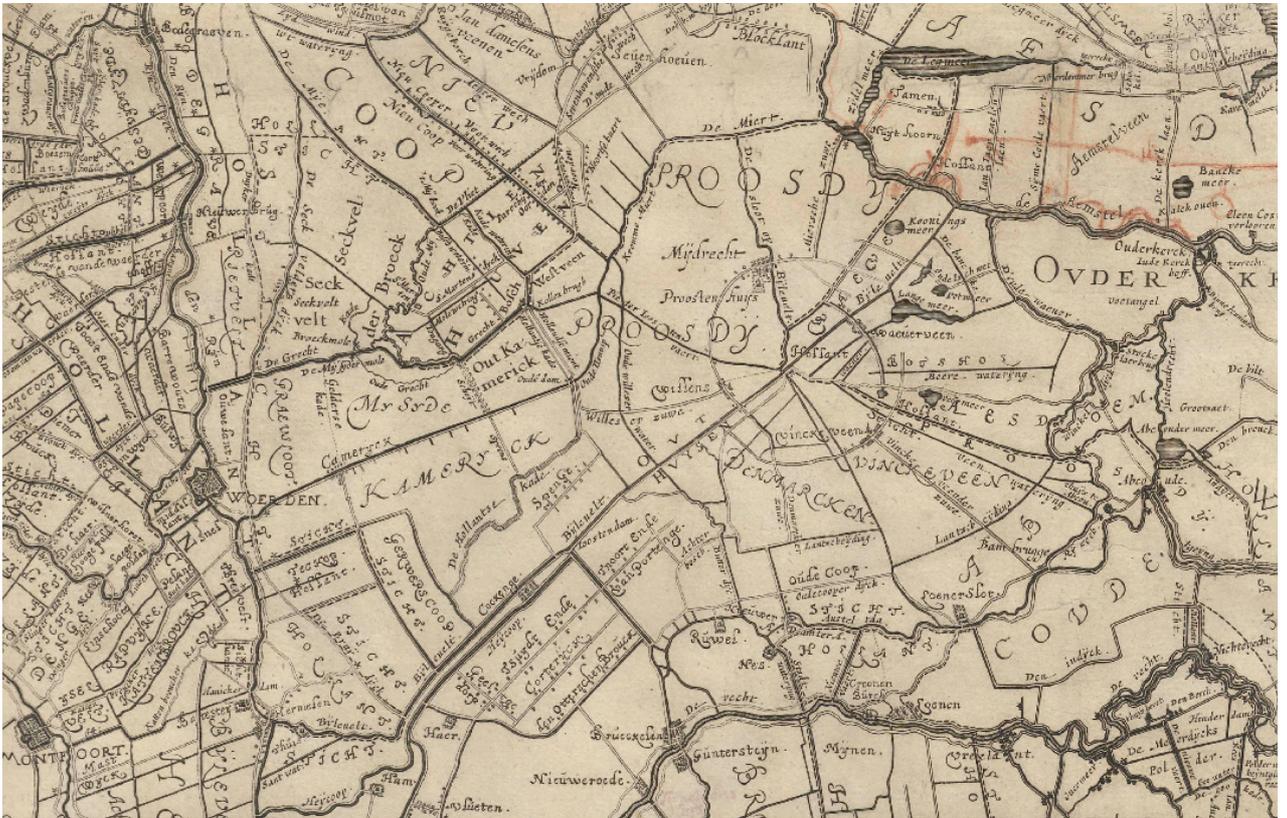
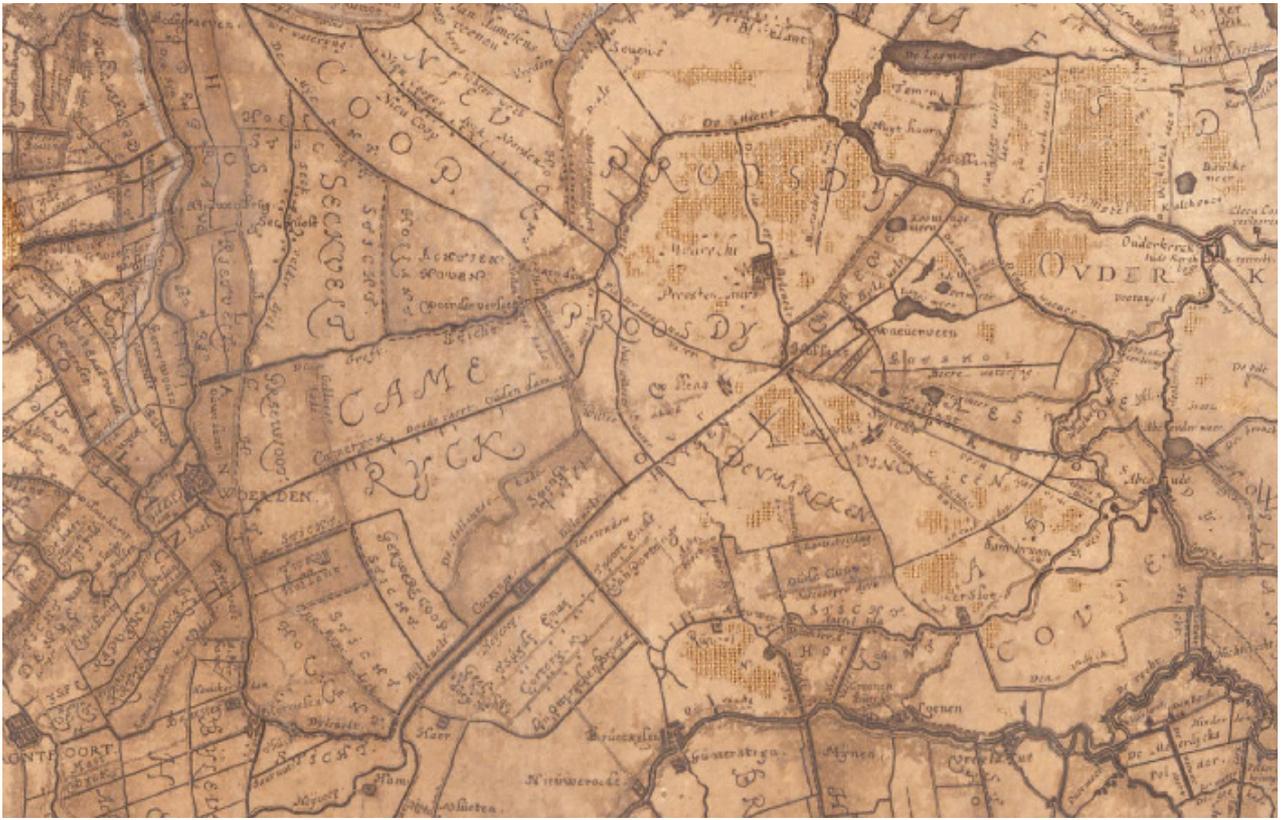
**A**bout 1570, the internationally renowned Flemish cartographer Gerardus Mercator (1512–1594) penned instructions for assembling a wall map. They began as follows:

Gerardus Mercator salutes the gentle reader,  
To oblige those wishing to save money as well as those living abroad and far away from us and to whom they can definitely not be transported after having been colored, because of the difficulty of assembling we have added to these maps of ours the following instruction from which one can learn how to use these maps in the form in which they have come from the press, just as if one had acquired them on linen and colored.

The assembling must start at the second sheet of the upper series. The right-hand margin, opposite our left hand, must be cut off at the edge.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, each sheet of the map had to be trimmed on one or more sides—“exactly on the line”—after which the sheets were glued together with a paste made from flour and boiled water. This was first done for every horizontal row, then the rows could be joined vertically,

**FIG. 5**  
Balthasar Florisz van Berckenrode and  
Willem Jansz Blaeu, *Map of Holland  
and West-Friesland*, ca. 1621 (detail of fig. 6)



the map, one in Hoorn and the other in Leiden, one can see that the area around Achttienhoven and Nieuwkoop was adjusted. We can therefore conclude that the version in Leiden is a later state (figs. 9, 10).<sup>32</sup>

The scale, content, careful execution, and level of detail found in the *Map of Holland and West-Friesland*—even including miniature town plans—suggest that the map was made with wealthy, local audiences in mind. The map focuses on a single province. Mounted (west-northwest up), the geographical content of the map alone reaches an impressive 93 by 143 cm; including the optional separately printed text, its dimensions total 114 by 170 cm. Divided into more than twenty-two parts, printed from seventeen copperplates, Holland is rendered on a scale of approximately 1:110,000. Its Latin title, much of which is legible in *Officer and Laughing Girl*, claims that it is a new and accurate depiction of Holland and West-Friesland as “described” by Van Berckenrode:

NOVA ET ACCURATA TOTIUS HOLLANDIAE WESTFRISI-  
AEQ[UE] TOPOGRAPHIA, Descriptore Balthazaro Florentio à  
Bercke[n]rode Batavo.

The part of Holland north of Amsterdam, facing Friesland across what used to be the Zuiderzee (now IJsselmeer), is traditionally referred to as West-Friesland.

This was only the second or third time the entire province was mapped based on new surveys. The map followed Jacob van Deventer’s 1537 survey and woodcut map and Joost Jansz Bilhamer’s 1575 work rendering the northern part of the province (1608 reprint in fig. 11).<sup>33</sup> Van Berckenrode updated the image of the province significantly, combining new surveys and printed map materials, uniting them in both scale and style, setting an example for the next generation of maps. The sight of several new polders, where there were once lakes, must have been striking.

A wealth of information is subtly conveyed through a combination of lines and signs. The maze of thicker and thinner single, double, and dotted tracings, interspersed with miniature city plans, indicates

**FIG. 9**  
Balthasar Florisz van Berckenrode  
and Willem Jansz Blaeu, *Map of Holland  
and West-Friesland*, ca. 1621 (detail  
of fig. 6)

**FIG. 10**  
Balthasar Florisz van Berckenrode  
and Willem Jansz Blaeu, *Map of Holland  
and West-Friesland*, ca. 1629 (detail  
of fig. 7)



# Beyond Delft: Vermeer's Wall Maps

**N**o other seventeenth-century Dutch painter devoted as much attention to the rendering of cartographic works as Vermeer. In six of his paintings, an identifiable map adorns the walls of a domestic space.<sup>1</sup> Vermeer followed the maps' contents and proportions scrupulously, depicting them with such care that their geography and cartouches, even the compass roses, vessels, and sea creatures, are recognizable. Some lettering is legible (fig. 26), and in the case of *Young Woman with a Lute*, the blank lines following the periods in the maps' surrounding texts match what we know from the few surviving copies of the *Map of Europe*.<sup>2</sup> To reproduce these features so precisely and translate the works on paper into paint, Vermeer would have had to study the maps very closely. But why? What was their appeal for the artist and his audience?

Interpreting the significance of the maps in Vermeer's art is challenging as there are few clues beyond what is presented by the paintings themselves. Maps, moreover, are complex objects, open to interpretation. Consider Vermeer's depiction of the map in *Officer and Laughing Girl* (fig. 27). To viewers of his time, this map may have been recognized as a reflec-

**FIG. 26**  
Johannes Vermeer, *Officer and Laughing Girl*, ca. 1657 (detail of fig. 27)



**FIG. 27**  
Johannes Vermeer, *Officer and Laughing Girl*, ca. 1657. Oil on canvas, 19 $\frac{7}{8}$  × 18 $\frac{1}{8}$  in. (50.5 × 46 cm). The Frick Collection

tion of the popularity of cartographic work as interior decoration and of the fact that, beginning in the 1620s, influential painters like Willem Buytewech (1591/92–1624) had incorporated wall maps into their genre paintings (fig. 28).<sup>3</sup> As Walter Liedtke illustrated, Vermeer's composition with the flirtatious couple fits squarely within a body of work by several of his contemporaries: the silhouetted figure, for instance, suggests familiarity with *The Procuress* by Gerard van Honthorst (1592–1656). Likewise, the setting—the corner of a room with a window to the left—was a frequently employed scheme, as in, for example, the similarly dated *Two Soldiers Playing Cards* by Pieter de Hooch (1629–1684). The arrangement of the figures, as well as the broad-brimmed hat, recall *Interior of a Tailor's Shop* by Quiringh van Brekelenkam (1622/30–1669/79).<sup>4</sup> Vermeer operated within a network of Dutch painters who imitated and emulated each other's compositions.<sup>5</sup> From this point of view, by the late 1650s a map on the wall of an interior scene was nothing new; for some viewers, Vermeer's skillfully painted maps may have been just that.

However, the extraordinary precision and attentiveness with which Vermeer depicted wall maps and the relative frequency with which he painted them signal something more. Already in the nineteenth century, Théophile Thoré-Bürger noted that Vermeer may have included the maps in his paintings not merely because of their decorative value but because of the artist's supposed fascination with Asia.<sup>6</sup> In the mid-twentieth century, Lawrence Gowing hypothesized a relationship between the map and the officer in the Frick painting, likening it to the recurring motif of a picture-within-a-picture.<sup>7</sup> But it was not until James Welu's groundbreaking studies in the 1970s that serious attention was given to the actual cartographic objects as they appear in Vermeer's paintings. Welu identified each of the maps, matching them to the few extant examples, and reconsidered the iconography of the paintings in which they appear.<sup>8</sup> The wall maps have since played a role in numerous moralizing and politicizing interpretations of Vermeer's paintings, linking his protagonists to themes of love, war, and national identity. But, despite Welu's identifications of the maps, the art-historical discussion of them has often been superficial. Many an interpretation is based on general ideas of seventeenth-century Dutch wall maps, rather than each map's specificity or the subtleties in Vermeer's rendition of them.