



VERMEER'S MISTRESS AND MAID

Margaret Iacono

Even if you are closely watched, you will find the chance
To communicate to your lover through your maid.
You will have the chance to write back and forth.
Your little letters will go forth, and all remain hidden.

—Jacob Westerbaen, 1668

In the tense months following the official conclusion of World War I, Henry Clay Frick embarked on the purchase of Vermeer's *Mistress and Maid* (fig. 1) from a German collector. To do so, he was required to obtain a license from the War Trade Board as decreed by the Trading with the Enemy Act. In his 1919 application, Frick expressed his eagerness to acquire the work: "The painting by Vermeer . . . is an extremely valuable one and one that no doubt is sought by the art collectors of the world. I am anxious to secure it to add to the collection which I now have in my home in New York City."¹ Frick, whose collection of pictures and decorative art was by this time lauded by scholars and connoisseurs, was keen to add the painting to his holdings, which already included two works by Vermeer. The steel magnate's collection was particularly rich in pictures by Dutch artists, especially those active during the seventeenth century. Frick's first old master purchase, made in 1896, was by a Dutch painter, and while his aesthetic tastes would broaden over the course of his life to embrace artists from other schools, his admiration for Dutch Golden Age works remained constant.²

Mistress and Maid was the ninth authentic Vermeer to arrive on American shores, joining the two already in Frick's possession. Frick had acquired *Girl*

Fig. 1
Johannes Vermeer
Detail of *Mistress and Maid*,
1666–68
Oil on canvas
35½ × 31 in. (90.2 × 78.7 cm)
The Frick Collection, New York;
Henry Clay Frick Bequest

Interrupted at Her Music (fig. 2) in 1901, while still residing in Clayton, his Pittsburgh mansion. He purchased the canvas from Knoedler & Co. for \$26,000, a steep price that demonstrates his eagerness to secure it. In 1911, he acquired *Officer and Laughing Girl* (fig. 3), a superlative example of the master's art, for an astounding \$225,000. Frick did not often purchase multiple works by a single artist; so his decision to acquire three paintings by Vermeer speaks to his great enthusiasm for the Dutch master.

Vermeer chose a large canvas for his composition, which presents two women pondering a newly arrived letter. The seated woman, dressed in elegant attire, is dramatically lit by an unseen light source that illuminates her marble-like skin and yellow mantle. Set before her is a table spread with a cloth on which lie a sheath of paper, a veneered box, and a collection of glass writing accessories placed atop a silver tray. A modestly costumed maid emerges from the dark background to deliver a written message. The mistress's reaction, expressed by her hand stroking her chin, suggests her intense interest in the missive's arrival. The letter's inscrutable contents and the mistress's ambiguous response evoke a sense of mystery and uncertainty.

Depicting an interior domestic scene like so many of Vermeer's images, the painting explores the relationship between mistresses and maids and the writing and receiving of letters, two popular themes in the art and literature of the period. It also demonstrates Vermeer's technical virtuosity: bravura strokes suggest the pleating of the yellow mantle and the tablecloth's folds; shorter, bold strokes signify the flickering light reflected on the glassware; and dots of impasto convey the shimmer of the pearls.

The Sphinx of Delft

Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675) was born in Delft, a small but prosperous Dutch city boasting quiet canals, medieval spires, and a thriving beer industry; he would remain there for his entire life, apparently traveling only within the Dutch Republic. He was the second and youngest child of reformed Protestants Digna Baltens and Reynier Jansz. Vermeer. His father trained to weave *caffa*, an opulent silk cloth with printed or woven designs, before becoming an innkeeper and picture dealer, an occupation that likely introduced his son to local artists and collectors.

Little is known about Vermeer's life, thus his moniker "the Sphinx of Delft," but he probably began his artistic training in the mid-1640s. Several



Fig. 2
Johannes Vermeer
Girl Interrupted at Her Music,
ca. 1658–59
Oil on canvas
15½ × 17½ in. (39.3 × 44.4 cm)
The Frick Collection, New York;
Henry Clay Frick Bequest



Fig. 3
Johannes Vermeer
Officer and Laughing Girl,
ca. 1657
Oil on canvas
19⅞ × 18⅞ in. (50.5 × 46 cm)
The Frick Collection, New York;
Henry Clay Frick Bequest