

Colloquium Vermeer

By

David Eason Smith

When it was my turn to observe the painting up close, I took notice of the smaller details: The infamous ‘glistening’ of the subject’s lips. The bright gleam from the window within her dark brown eyes. Her white collar, carefully reflected in the bottom of a silver pearl earring dangling from her ear. I marveled at how a small handful of painted brushstrokes on a canvas could convey such a mastery of light, emotion, and reflection. There seemed to be a sort of chaos to the atmosphere created and captured within the painting, a free and eternal spirit which suddenly calls the viewer to meet her gaze. “Had she just looked toward me? Or was she just about to look away?”

Author Lawrence Wechsler broods upon this question and others in “Vermeer in Bosnia”, shining a light upon the chaotic atmosphere hiding just under the surface of some of Vermeer’s most famous paintings. In his essay, Weschler sketches the dark backdrop of a Yugoslav War Crimes Tribunal taking place in The Hague against his clear infatuation with Vermeer’s famous artistic work, raising the question of how to best “find peace” when confronting the chaos and injustice capable of society during times of great conflict (781). As war criminal Dusko Tadic peers ominously at Weschler through a courtroom camera, Weschler is startled by how much in that moment Tadic resembles Vermeer’s famous subject in a *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, free to glare, think, and feel.

The essay itself breathes as an ode to personal autonomy, free will, peace and dignity; all of which are themes of the titular Dutch artist's most famous works (782).

Standing in front of Vermeer's artwork at The Frick Collection, it was abundantly clear to me that Vermeer had captured something incredibly special in his painting. There was a familiar human emotion conveyed by the artist on the face of the girl before me. Her hesitant appearance, turned to look over her shoulder at me, reflects a natural moment of humility and an intimate moment of awkwardness, directly through the canvas. Our eyes can't help but meet. I realized at that moment that as Vermeer painted, he watched the girl; and as she posed, the girl watched him. Time passed. Now, as I stand in this New York City art museum, *I* watch the girl; and as if looking through the painting, the girl watches me.

In "Steps toward a Small Theory of The Visible," literary critic John Berger refers to this idea as a "collaboration" (Berger 108). Berger states that "every authentic painting demonstrates a collaboration' between the artist and his subject" which is "derived from the painter's experience of the visible" (107). Berger describes "the visible" as being the "permanence" of which the painting "strives to find" (107). We might be quick to point out an example of Berger's collaboration in the *Girl with a Pearl Earring* as the level of realness to the human-like emotion reflected back by the face of Vermeer's subject, but Weschler might counter this notion by suggesting there is more to Vermeer's paintings than merely the subject on its surface.

In his own essay, Weschler is quick to remind us of the value of historical context when making such judgments. "When Vermeer was painting those images, which for us have become the very emblem of peace and serenity, all Europe was Bosnia"

(Weschler 779). Indeed, several major wars occurred in Dutch history during Vermeer's lifetime. The first took place in 1568 while Vermeer was in his twenties and several others occurred around 1672 while Vermeer was in his early forties. Weschler describes these later wars as "tearing" into the Netherlands and "virtually shredding" neighboring Germany (779). This leads Weschler to postulate that the ever presence of these conflicts "may have constituted a proximate cause of the painter's early death, by stroke, in 1642" (779). Given this unique context, it is clear that much of the peace and serenity depicted in Vermeer's work is the antithesis of the environment in which it was created. Consequently, if we were to look hard enough, perhaps hidden within the cracks and crevices of the *Girl with a Pearl Earring's* layered oils might be the expressive brushstrokes of man who was anything but content with society's status quo.

Upon first glance, the wars and chaos encircling Vermeer's Delft did not seem to be present within my observation of the painting. There seemed to be what Weschler describes as a "felt absence" within the painting (780). The dim lighting in the room worked against my eyes to conceal any sign of artistic turmoil and imperfection. Oddly, nearly everything about the painting seemed incredibly precise, from the rich blue colors of the girl's thin headscarf to the painting's deep black background. Considering this, I began to wonder how Vermeer found the motivation to paint such tranquil and vivid scenes when the reality of his outside world had been anything but orderly. Perhaps, as Berger quotes from the famous Chinese artist Shitao, "The Brush is for saving things from Chaos" (Berger 108). Weschler, in his own work, describes this notion as well. "In times of storm, we mustn't allow the storm to enter ourselves, rather we have to find the

peace inside ourselves and then breathe it out” (Weschler 781). But where were the signs of Vermeer’s storm in *this* painting?

Looking deeper at the painting, one might notice that while the *Girl with a Pearl Earring* is brightly featured in the foreground, the painting’s background is a lost haze of uncertainty, chaos and darkness, which appears to be rapidly overtaking the subject as she continues to stare in our direction. In his essay “Crickets, Bats, Cats & Chaos”, Lewis Thomas recognizes that “Chaos occurs when any complex, dynamic system is perturbed by a small uncertainty in one or another of its sub units” (Thomas 492). Like a turbulent stream of water, Thomas relates that it is the outliers and other small sources of error injected into a system which throw the all-out order of things into systemic chaos (492). The unexpected darkness of Vermeer’s painted background works as an example of Thomas’s uncertainty because its color and presence is such a small minute detail in the greater context of the rest of the painting, and yet it still somehow throws the predictable order and light of a public encounter into an awkward, clumsy, and intimate moment for both the subject and the viewer.

One might also note that the girl in the painting doesn’t actually see the darkness. As the viewer of the painting, only I may see what looms behind her. The girl has her back to the darkness, and if we once again follow along with Berger’s notion of “collaboration”, she in turn watches *my* background; the state of *my society*. In this new context, Vermeer’s mindset pushes itself further into the foreground. The darkness in the painting represents the wars and destruction which surrounds him. The background behind the viewer represents a better time and a different place.

Yet despite this chaos looming in the black background surrounding her, the girl with a pearl earring still displays no sense of hopelessness or self-pity. I observed a personal and intimate self-sufficiency within her eyes. She knows I am present and watching, another random voyeur in the museum, but the pressing annoyance in her gaze tells me I am intruding and she would wish me to stop. But, perhaps that same gaze might mean that if I am already going to look upon her, and since I have already intruded, she would be willing to wait *just a little while longer* for me to stop, if I were to do so in a timely manner. A flirtatious game seems to be afoot.

Weschler even describes Vermeer's artwork as not just about "sexuality", but also "about female reserve and autonomy and self-sufficiency in the face of the male gaze" (Weschler 781). Berger recognizes this aspect in Vermeer's artwork also, calling it an "Energy," and referring to it as "the will-to-be-seen" (Berger 110). In fact, many of Vermeer's paintings seem to display this same type of "energy". While I spent a majority of my time at the museum in front of the *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, I also had the pleasure of observing Vermeer's *Officer and Laughing Girl*, *Girl interrupted at her Music*, as well as *Mistress and Maid*. Each of those works depicts a free-thinking female subject possibly being courted by a male suitor. This natural "freedom" and "autonomy," as Weschler describes it, is a large part of what makes Vermeer's paintings so intriguing (Weschler 779). Even the coincidentally largely male dominated crowd standing around me seemed to be quite transfixed.

It was then clear to me that this was Vermeer's way of finding of Weschler's "Peace." By distracting himself with what, at the time, were not-so-common scenes of love letters, music lessons, and the will of young maidens to be suited, Vermeer

invented the peace he and his country so desperately lacked in his daily life. The chaos and war is still ever present, but has been gently moved into each painting's background as a darkness, or perhaps a chair with a lion's head carving, or even a well-defined map on the wall. It is only fitting that Weschler himself finds Vermeer's artwork in much the same way, using them to find peace within the horrors uncovered during the war crimes tribunal of Dusko Tadic. "I found myself thinking of Vermeer with his camera obscura--an empty box fronted by a lens through which the chaos of the world might be drawn in and tamed back to a kind of sublime order" (Weschler 785). Losing track of time, I too had found it easy to get lost in Vermeer's paintings. For at least a short while, the hardships, reality, and stress of my own life seemed to be painted gently into the background. Time had stood still, and as the *Girl with a Pearl Earring* peered towards me, she flirtatiously beckoned Wechsler's question into my mind once again. "Had she just looked toward me, or was she just about to look away?"

I thought hard upon this question as I looked back upon Vermeer's painting, while I quietly exited the room. I thought of Lawrence Weschler's historical context of Vermeer's artwork, its "conspicuous exclusion," and Berger's "collaboration of the visible" which had captured my imagination. I considered the dark background, Thomas's chaos, and how it disrupted the peaceful order displayed by in the foreground. The result was a flirtatious conversation of human emotion and autonomy, held eternally inside a small rectangular oak frame. I took a deep breath, held it for a brief moment, and then let it out. I looked back upon the painting of the *Girl With a Pearl Earring*, and then I looked away.

Works Cited

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