

A Genius Cut Short:
Vermeer's Stylistic Path from *The Milkmaid* to *The Guitar Player*
(And Where it Might Have Led...)

Celebrated today as one of the most accomplished and endearing of the Dutch Golden Age painters for his intimate scenes of Dutch domestic life, Jan Vermeer (1632-1675) left a relatively small body of work. Of the thirty-five paintings that can be confidently attributed to Vermeer, twenty-one are single figure studies and all but two of them female subjects. Arguably the most famous of these is the painting of the kitchen maid, commonly referred to as *The Milkmaid*, dated to Vermeer's early mature period. Despite the fact that all of Vermeer's other single-figure paintings have as their subjects sitters of a more elevated and refined status, *The Milkmaid* has much in common with the later paintings; the domestic theme, the light-filled interior, the limited palette and small scale, the window as a source of light- often to the left of the figure - and the psychological moods evoked by the pensive expressions he gives his subjects. Yet if we compare *The Milkmaid* (Figure 1) to one of the painter's late works, *The Guitar Player* (Figure 2), thought to have been executed just three years before his death, striking differences in composition, application of paint and overall expressive content can be discerned. Noted art critic and curator of Northern Baroque Painting at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., Arthur Wheelock Jr., finds this later painting "interesting but awkward," but also posits that in it Vermeer successfully expands his compositional range.¹ I agree with this last point and will argue that in *The Guitar Player* Vermeer also evolves his application of paint to the point where he presages later developments in art. The fact that he retreated from this experiment to produce two last uninspiring and conventional scenes of bourgeois Dutch life, only to die a few years later, is one of the lasting tragedies in art history.

In comparing an early mature work with a later piece, it is important to remember that Vermeer's entire extant oeuvre spans a mere twenty years and only twelve or fourteen years separate these two paintings. The similarities are thus easier to dispense with. Both works take as their subject a young woman engaged in a domestic activity suitable to her station. The mood is intimate and the figures enhanced by a few carefully positioned items which give a sense of the sitters' material reality. In both paintings, the figure suggests a pyramidal shape framed by a rectangle. And in both, the light source comes from a window off to one side. These elements notwithstanding, while *The Milkmaid* is clearly a product of the iconographic traditions of Dutch genre painting with the figure confined in a well defined and articulated space, one where the laws of perspective dictate much of the composition, *The Guitar Player* departs from the tradition in ways I will establish in this essay.

¹ Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Vermeer* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988), 124.



Figure 1. Jan Vermeer,
The Milkmaid, ca. 1658-60.
Oil on canvas, 17 7/8 X 16 in.
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



Figure 2. Jan Vermeer,
The Guitar Player, ca. 1672.
Oil on canvas, 20 1/4 X 18 1/4 in.
(Kenwood, courtesy of English
Heritage as Trustees of the
Iveagh Bequest.)

What distinguishes the Dutch iconographic tradition owes much to the artistic currents of Vermeer's day, and, as in many societies throughout history, these were influenced by political events. Until the death of Prince Willem in 1650, royal patronage of the arts encouraged imitation of the classicistic, Italianate style with its flourishes and illusionistic designs. Commissions often went to artists who could create murals or other large-scale designs for the interiors of royal palaces. The prince's death, however, removed the necessity to design for royal tastes and ushered in a style more suited to a small city of growing importance, one where fresh approaches to the depiction of landscapes, cityscapes, architectural painting, portraiture, and genre painting could be pursued and developed. One significant impact of this new focus on realistic portrayals of life as it actually existed was the choice of subject. Whereas before 1650, and bound by classicist conventions, the subject was removed from the context of daily life, now artists actively sought to portray real people and their relationships to their environment.² It is unlikely that Vermeer would have felt free to even portray a servant had such a drastic change not occurred at the very outset of his career. As it is, *The Milkmaid* is the only painting in Vermeer's entire oeuvre with a servant as the central figure, much less as the sole subject of the painting.

The appeal of *The Milkmaid* and its significance to the Dutch themselves cannot be underestimated. Indeed, a visit to its home at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam drives the point home. A large reproduction of the painting drapes across the front façade of the building and its image adorns the tickets (Figures 3 and 4). The painting of a simple maid serenely pouring milk seems at once to embody the solidity and staunch moral rectitude of seventeenth-century Dutch Calvinism yet soothe with its calm order and the tranquility of the subject. The modesty of her downward gaze, the concentration on her domestic task, and the cleanliness of her surroundings underscore the values important to her time and place. Vermeer's hometown of Delft was, in the seventeenth century, both a commercial as well as a provincial center.³ Restrained and orderly, the maid's surroundings reflect this dual identity. Her kitchen is unpretentious, yet the crockery, baskets and other accoutrements of her reality speak of a concern for both economy and quality. An overall aura of tranquility pervades the scene, a tranquility no doubt much desired by those who might view the painting, and by Vermeer himself.



Fig. 3 The Rijksmuseum entrance



Fig. 4 Ticket for the Rijksmuseum

² Wheelock, 14.

³ Wheelock, 7.

In this sense, the air of serene order that Vermeer creates here as in his other paintings provides a safe haven from unpleasant external realities, then as now, defined by political turmoil, war, and casual and unexpected violence. While *The Milkmaid* speaks of an ordered and peaceful society, in fact The Netherlands in the mid 1600s was rocked by endless wars - between the Protestant United Provinces and the Catholic southern provinces of Flanders, between Holland and England and between both of these nations and France. Locally, life was often short and dangerous. At the beginning of Vermeer's career in 1654, a devastating explosion at the Delft Munitions Depot claimed hundreds of lives, including that of painter Carel Fabritius.⁴

There could be turmoil on the domestic scene too, not infrequently involving female servants. Vermeer's decision to depict a person of lower social status in such a positive light is a reflection of changing attitudes about working class people from the middle of the century on. Earlier depictions of female servants in drama and in painting had depicted maidservants as morally dubious, dangerously independent, man-crazy, and a bad influence on the mistress of the house and her children. Over the course of the century however, this attitude changed and, as Yale University Professor Bryan Jay Wolf suggests, servants as well as mistresses were increasingly viewed as moral exemplars.⁵ Certainly, Vermeer's maid exudes modesty and propriety. These associations notwithstanding, there is something luscious about her too which is only enhanced by the simplicity of her station and the domestic items with which she is pictured.

The overall composition contributes to much of this feeling of order and calm in this painting. The subject is located in the middle of the frame both spatially and in depth. With the table defining the forward plane and the wall at her back, she tranquilly attends to her chore in the middle plane of the painting. There is apparent an immediate vertical orientation, to which we initially note a nice balance in the horizontals created by the juncture of wall and floor on the bottom right, nicely accentuated by typical Delft tiles, and the horizontal lines of the window panes. The absence of decoration on the back wall emphasizes the simplicity of the subject and serves to focus the eye on the column of her form. It is as if Vermeer were telling us that it was of solid citizens such as she that Dutch society was bolstered up. But what further contributes to a sense of balance are the diagonals, the evident one created by the right edge of the table, and that implied by the imaginary line we could draw from the hanging basket in the upper left to the curious foot warmer in the lower right. Indeed, the combined form of the laden table and the maid herself cut a great diagonal from lower left to the middle point of the surface. Stopping there, the eye looks for completion and falls on the foot warmer. The diagonal becomes a pyramidal form, with table and foot warmer forming the base and the woman's head the apex. This reinforces the sense of calm stability and order. This woman is very much in charge of her environment, just as the Dutch felt themselves to be in charge of theirs in the Golden Age.

These strong, straight lines, evident and implied, are relieved by a series of curves and circular shapes: the round loaf, the ceramic or metal ware tankard behind it, the round "O" of the mouth of the pitcher and the elliptical opening of the bowl receiving the milk. These are echoed in the rounded forms of the folds in the woman's apron, in her bust and left shoulder, the scoop of her neckline, and the almost perfect oval of her face

⁴ Bryan Jay Wolf, *Vermeer and the Invention of Seeing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). 192.

⁵ Wolf, 135.

crisply accentuated by her quaint cap. The sublime balance of this composition evades a frozen feeling by the placement of the vanishing point just behind the subject's right shoulder, not as we might expect in the area defined by her face.

What balance Vermeer achieves in composition, he also achieves in color. Working with a limited palette comprised of the primaries, with its rich earthy tones *The Milkmaid* has more in common, color wise, with Vermeer's *View of Delft* and *The Little Street* than with his other interior scenes. (Not surprisingly, both of these paintings are dated within three years of *The Milkmaid*). The maid herself is a near perfect balance of the primaries. Our eye is guided from the complex yellow of her bodice, (which is significantly higher in value on her left side than on her right,) to the saturated blue of her apron with its dark folds. The bright blue edge of this garment compels our eye to complete its descent to the vertical bars of the deep ruby skirt. From there we are drawn up again to the richly textured still life of bread and earthenware, itself a superb balance, of yellow, blue and red, achieved, as Wheelock points out, through a combination of glazing, scumbling and thick impasto.⁶ These same techniques are evident throughout the painting; a thick impasto lends a sense of starched weight to the maid's headdress, highlights the muscle in her right forearm and creates small points of reflected light on the rim of the earthenware pitcher, the woman's knuckles and surfaces throughout the scene. Skin and fabric hint at undertones of contrasting colors; ochre and blue define contours and lend vibrancy to the overlay of flesh tones and surface hues.

The central figure, already dynamic in her garments of sharply contrasting primary colors, is made yet more immediate by the cooler ground built up with the same techniques just mentioned. Gradations from left to right reveal built up under layers of light brown/gray, umber and blue culminating in a chalky but luminous white to the right of the subject. The contrast of the cool light ground throws the figure into high relief and gives a sense of volume and mass to her shape. It also reflects the viewer's gaze back to the colors in the scene. Here an overall balance is struck by corresponding hues that relate across space; the touch of red in the foot warmer echoes the ochre of the earthen ware and the umber of the window frame; the pale yellow of the basket resonates with the woman's bodice and the bread on the table. The viewer's eye traces the patterns of primary colors, then moves to the subtle blendings, moves again to the luminous panes and plaster wall, and back again in a rich and leisurely tour of color and pattern.

The stark beauty of the wall allows for further emphasis on the boundaries where shape meets ground, that is, on line. Vermeer has accentuated the contour of the woman's back with a thin white line,⁷ which makes the blue of her apron almost vibrate. A very fine reddish line along the curve of her right shoulder serves the same purpose while the bold brushwork along her right hand suggests movement and accentuates its shape. The eye meanders, now tracing the patterns created by color contrasts, now following the sinuous outline of the figure. Within the figure itself, planes of color are bounded by similarly sensuous lines. The bright patch of lemony yellow on one side of the line created by the lacing in the bodice vies for attention with its sister on the other side, a warm, rich marigold. The languid curve of this line is echoed in the scoop of the neckline, the gently curved waistline, and the stitching in the shoulders. Another balance

⁶ Johannes Vermeer (exh. Cat., National Gallery of Art and Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis-Washington and the Hague, 1995, edited by Arthur Wheelock)>
http://essentialvermeer.20m.com/catalogue/tech/tech_milk.htm

⁷ Wheelock, 66.

is struck between these curved and flowing lines and the straight but soft lines created by the edges of the table and the cloth covering it.

Masterful as Vermeer's approach to color and composition is, it is his suggestion of texture which makes this painting so tactile. Here many reproductions prove inadequate and barring access to the original, one must depend on details to fully appreciate the painter's skill in this regard. (I was fortunate enough to gaze long and hard at the actual painting in March but appreciate the reminder a good detail can afford). I have already mentioned briefly Vermeer's glazing techniques. His use of *pointillés*, or spherical dabs of thick opaque paint, to suggest reflections of light, has been marveled at for three hundred years. That he uses it as in this painting to highlight coarse or bumpy surfaces such as the woman's garment and the bread in the still life on the table, or on smoother but less shiny surfaces such as the wood frame of the window, heightens the perception of texture for the viewer to the point that we can almost feel the coarseness of the woman's simple clothing, the irregular crust of the bread, the uneven surface of the bare plaster wall.

Much has been written of Vermeer's technique in this respect and how much he may have depended on the camera obscura to create the effects of light on surfaces. Wheelock's view, however, is that whether he viewed the scene directly or through an optical device, this only "paralleled his underlying sensitivity to the optical effects of light and color." Indeed he argues that where other critics see the *pointillés* in *The Milkmaid* as a strong argument for the use of a camera obscura, Wheelock argues that this "must be placed in the broader context of his achievement as an artist."⁸ It is hardly unrealistic to think that Vermeer could very well have devised techniques to suggest the types of diffused highlights evident in a camera obscura. These academic debates aside, Vermeer's technique with *pointillés*, in concert with his bold and vigorous brushstrokes and his use of rich earthy hues, enhances the illusion of three-dimensionality, allowing us to experience the painting more fully.

A similar boldness of application can be seen in the way Vermeer has used his brush to model the face, or as one critic put it, to sculpt it, by building up small dabs of paint with no effort to blend them. Small touches of paint white, light ochre, reddish brown, brown, and grayish green join together to build the form of her face.⁹ As Wheelock points out, the artist has matched his technique in this painting to the subject. Just as the maid suggests practicality, strength, simplicity and the roughness of a more menial existence, Vermeer's brushstrokes in this work are correspondingly more vigorous, his modeling is comparatively rough, and his palette is strong and earthy.¹⁰

If *The Milkmaid* stands as an exquisite example of Vermeer's early mature work in theme, composition, application of paint, and depiction of light, *The Guitar Player* displays striking late developments in the painter's techniques. The painting also poses intriguing questions: Had Vermeer lived out a natural life span, allowing him another twenty or thirty years, would his emphasis have continued to evolve more towards pattern and away from detail, as this painting suggests? Might he have expanded the range of expression of his subjects? Would his color have continued its evolution towards flatness? Might he even have left the drawing room and ventured into other

⁸ Wheelock, 37.

⁹ Jonathan Janson, *Essential Vermeer*, 2001, revised 2005, <http://essentialvermeer.20m.com/catalogue/milkmaid.htm>, 10 May, 2005.

¹⁰ Wheelock, 66.

environments? These questions might be an exercise in futility, but a close perusal of this piece, dated to 1672, begs that we ask these questions and more.

While the theme of *The Guitar Player* is in line with the rest of Vermeer's oeuvre, the way he approaches it is different, in exciting ways. Once again we enter the world of a young woman as she engages in a pastime, in this case playing her guitar. She looks off to her right as if there were a visitor just beyond our range of vision; perhaps she is taking a lesson. Whoever may be there with her, she is at ease and she strikes almost a modern pose with one leg outstretched and the other bent to support her instrument. Unlike the subject of *The Milkmaid*, who seems emotionally inaccessible to us, this girl could turn her gaze in our direction at any moment. The corner in which she sits is sparsely furnished; there is her chair, a low table to her left with a few books resting on top, and a painting intriguingly placed smack behind the girl's head. Aside from the obvious differences in the two figures, how has the expressive content of this later painting changed?

Earlier I mentioned the iconographic tradition to which *The Milkmaid* clearly belongs. This tradition, in which interior domestic scenes were painted in a convincingly realistic manner, was well established in The Netherlands by the time Vermeer began his career. Artists like Gerard Dou and Pieter de Hooch painted scenes of incredible detail with similar subjects.¹¹ On the surface, *The Guitar Player* seems to fit this pattern, yet the way she demands our engagement lifts her out of the limitations implied by it; for example there is less of an obvious concern with perspective in this painting than in most of the others dealing with women playing musical instruments. Indeed, the lack of the usual devices seen in the other paintings – the checkerboard floors, tables, clavichords or other large instruments, curtains - which allowed the artist to explore perspective precisely, give this painting more the effect of a portrait than a single figure study. Adding to this is its relatively small size. Though *The Milkmaid* is even smaller, at 20 ¼ inches by 18 ¼ inches *The Guitar Player* invites close inspection. Like Vermeer's portraits, there is also a more open expression on the subject's face, one that pulls us into the painting, not keeping us at a respectful distance as *The Milkmaid* does.

Another way *The Guitar Player* seems less tied to earlier iconographic depictions of females, not only in Dutch art but in Western art as a whole, is the way the subject is presented. In this, the figure presages developments in representational art that would come later. Where the figure of the maidservant is Madonna-like - in her positioning in the painting, her downcast eyes, her more formal and placid stance and emotional distance from the viewer, indeed in the rich blue that comprises part of her costume - the subject of *The Guitar Player* displays the informality, charm and accessibility of figures in more "modern" paintings. She is not drawn inward but looks to the outside world. She does not belong to a simple homespun past but to a cosmopolitan world of grace and accomplishment. The very instrument she holds is a departure from the earlier paintings where young women were depicted holding a lute, commonly taken as a reference to love.¹² Here the guitar, newly introduced to Europe, perfectly complements the more forward attitude of the young girl. She speaks to us of the coming eighteenth century and ways Vermeer might have developed his art had he lived long enough to do so, not only

¹¹ Wheelock, 22.

¹² Wheelock, 38.

in the way he represented the figure but in its relationship to the environment and the viewer as well.

For starters, let's look at the subject's orientation. Unlike our milkmaid who stands a discreet distance back from us, safe in her middle plane, this pretty subject practically jumps out of the painting. Her guitar is the only buffer separating her from us and even that can be said to rest as a unit with her in the front plane of the painting. Similarly, while the subject of *The Milkmaid* occupies her central space in the painting with a private unassailability, the girl in *The Guitar Player* is so far to the left that one elbow is cut off. Situated thus, where diagonals are only implied in the former painting, here they are overt. The form of the girl cuts across the bottom left corner of the painting, emphasized by the sweeping fall of her skirt. If the line of this continued its course, it would cut across fully a third of the surface. The viewer feels no loss of equilibrium however as this forceful line is balanced by the counter movement implied by the neck of the guitar. Were this line continued to the edge of the painting, it would create a corresponding cut across the lower right corner of the picture. The overall composition finds balance, too, in the way Vermeer has depicted space in this painting. The extreme grouping of the girl, guitar, and small painting behind her head to the left is balanced by the large curtained window just visible to our right with added weight provided by the pile of books.

Color comes into play when speaking of equilibrium. To a large degree, what makes the balance of right and left work in this painting, as it does in *The Milkmaid*, is Vermeer's superb command of his palette as well as his mastery at depicting light. The luminosity of the girl's gown and ermine ruff finds its counterpoint in the deep blue-green shadow of the curtain. The light-drenched wall on the left is balanced, again, by the dark curtain on the right. Indeed, both extend from the top edge of the painting to approximately half the length of the canvas. Patterns of color work at equilibrium as well; the circular movement of the viewer's eye compelled by the circular relation of the sitter's brown hair to the neck of her guitar to its body and back again to the hair is counteracted by the vertical pattern of gold frame to yellow jacket to rose pattern on the guitar. Our eye escapes from these patterns to explore the depths of the shadows on our right or the intriguing play of colors in the wall behind the girl, this itself exhibiting a masterful range of the artist's customary palette of gray-browns, ochres and blue-greens, in gradations from high to low value so slight we do not immediately notice how extreme the change is. The white between the girl's right cheek and her curls for example, is starkly higher in value compared to the gray-brown of the wall next to the curtain.

The wall gains interest of course through the same fascination with the effect of light on a surface that Vermeer explored in *The Milkmaid*. In both paintings the eye is treated to subtle gradations of color suggested by full light and shadow. Through the device of the window, Vermeer manipulates this effect and makes art more vibrant than life by having areas of the painting unexpectedly illuminated, such as our milkmaid's left shoulder. In the case of *The Guitar Player*, one wonders at the origin of such luminosity centering on the player when the curtain to the girl's left is apparently drawn. Moreover, note the bold suggestion of light just at the top of the curtain where it has seemingly pulled away from the window. With a few loose strokes, the top right corner of the painting achieves variety and pulls the entire dark area represented by the curtain out of what could have been a heavy obscurity.

What is most striking about color in this painting, though, is the way the painter has moved to a flat application of almost abstract planes of color, an example of which can be seen in the girl's dress. Folds in her skirt are suggested by bold, smooth swaths of gray-green that throw the adjacent ivory into high relief, while those of her jacket are done in a brownish red that echoes the spots on the ermine ruff. Where in *The Milkmaid*, three-dimensionality is suggested by the way texture is built up, here we find it created by the contrast of low and high values in broader patterns. Vermeer seems to be leaping two hundred years into the future in the way he employs "color modeling," where cool colors recede and warm colors project, a technique Pierce says was well exploited by Cezanne.¹³ The flat oval of the girl's face depends on such a use of red and pale yellow-white to bring forward the tip of her nose and the sunlit side of her face while the recess of her left eye, for example, is suggested by a flat oval overlay of pale brown. There are delightful examples of this throughout the painting: The delicate fingers of the girl's left hand, each joint a small plane in varying tones of the same hue, down to the knuckles; the greenish cast of the girl's breast with the shadow projected by her head a deeper shade of the same hue; the patterns in pale and darker gray of the cloth thrown over the arm of her chair.

As if this were not enough, Vermeer allows himself to indulge in an exuberant celebration of shape and pattern in the small details; the girl's curls are but flat brown squiggles, the end of the guitar's neck a pattern of stripes and dots, the chair finial (apparently the lion's head that appears in other paintings), a scalloped shadow. A thin yellow line in a plane of red becomes a loose page in a book. Dots of white on a curved band, now grey in the shadow of her neck, now white in the full light, become pearls. As Kren and Marx point out, "Vermeer has achieved a mastery of light and colors and a complete freedom of expressing himself technically by means of looser brushstrokes that are no longer bound to specifics of texture or materials."¹⁴ It is this confident control of his materials coupled with an eye for pattern preceding his age which seems to have given Vermeer free reign to explore the more abstract elements of his art in the later years of his short life.

The artist's relatively early death notwithstanding, and despite the differences in these two paintings, what makes both *The Milkmaid* and *The Guitar Player* works of lasting appeal is that quintessential element in Vermeer that Wolf refers to as "serenities." Whether it is a homely kitchen or an elegantly appointed drawing room, Vermeer reveals to us, across the centuries, "a space of domestic retreat, a place where we might shut the door safely upon history and its brutalities and dream ...of...young women unviolated by time and the wounds that time brings."¹⁵ With the recent revival of interest in Vermeer since the publication of a novel based on *The Pearl Earring*, and the subsequent movie made of it, and finding ourselves in yet another time of war and random violence, Vermeer's serenities speak to us as loudly as ever.

¹³ James Smith Pierce, *From Abacus to Zeus: A handbook of Art History* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson, 2004).

¹⁴ Emil Kren and Daniel Marx, *Web Gallery of Art*, 1996, <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>, 10 May, 2005.

¹⁵ Wolf, 8.

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