

Johannes Vermeer



Girl with the Pearl Earring, 1665
oil on canvas, 44 ½ x 39 cm
The Hague, Netherlands

The Artist

Johannes Vermeer

Born in Delft, Netherlands in 1632; died, Delft, in 1675

Johannes Vermeer is known through his 36 surviving paintings, and little else. Vermeer left no letters, drawings, sketches, writings, self-portraits, or even a grave to be remembered. He was born in the Netherlands, where his father was an art dealer. Upon his father's death in 1652, Johannes inherited his father's business and debt. The following year Vermeer married a wealthy Catholic divorcée, converted to Catholicism and moved into her home. The mystery surround this painter is what keeps so many people interested in his life and artwork. All of the information we have on the painter is from local city records. It is unknown whether he had a teacher and who it was, he was however a member of the painter's guild in Delft. Vermeer passed away at the age of 43, leaving behind his wife and eleven children and his debts. During his lifetime, his paintings sold reasonably well to local collectors and patrons, especially to Pieter van Ruijven. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that Johannes Vermeer's artwork came to be appreciated.

Art Movement

The Dutch Golden Age

This movement occurred in the seventeenth century, when the Dutch Republic gained independence from the Catholic Kingdom of Spain in the mid-seventeenth century. Dutch art at this time consisted primarily of realistic portraits of people and life, seascapes with battleships, tranquil domestic interiors, etc. The urban mercantile class became the main patrons of art in this time period in the Netherlands.

The Artwork

Girl with a Pearl Earring

Girl with a Pearl Earring is Vermeer's most famous painting. It is not a portrait, but a 'tronie' – a painting of an imaginary figure. Tronies depict a certain type or character, or a study of facial expressions and costumes. In this painting, a girl in exotic dress is wearing an oriental turban and an improbably large pearl in her ear. Johannes Vermeer was the master of light. This is shown here in

the softness of the girl's face and the glimmers of light on her moist lips. And of course, the shining pearl.

Discussion Suggestions

Talk about lighting:

- *Describe the painting, what might this girl be thinking? How do you think she feels? What makes you say that?*
- *Notice the light in the painting is it soft or harsh?*
- *Concentrate on the girl's dress and decorative turban does it look natural?*
- *Is this painting realistic?*
- *Consider the earring, the pearl is quite large, possibly an exaggeration?*
- *How does Vermeer use shadows and highlights to show light and color?*
- *Can you point out where Vermeer layered colors to create a realistic effect?*

Activity Idea

Re-create Johannes Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*:

- Start by sketching the girl.
- Paint the girl's coat with a wet-on-dry wash (wet brush on dry paper). Your watercolor paint should be a golden brown, and your brush should be very wet. Remember to paint quickly to avoid streaking.
- Paint the scarf with two more wet-on-dry washes (wet brush on dry paper) with a watered-down gray/blue watercolor paint and a pale yellow watercolor paint.
- Paint the face with a wet-on-wet wash (wet paper with wet brush). Wet the all of the face and neck (except for the eyes) with clean water. Then, add a bit of color and spread it around. If you do not already have a good color for the face, you can make it with red and yellow.
- Your painting is almost finished. It is time to add glazes to your painting. These thin, transparent layers of paint that you will apply over the dried layers you have already painted; will add depth to your artwork. With quick, spontaneous brush strokes, add a darker blue and a golden brown to the scarf, and a darker golden brown to the coat.

Materials Needed:

- Watercolor paper
- Watercolors
- Pencil
- Water
- Cup (for water)