

Fame IV: Johannes (Jan) Vermeer, 1632-1675

Painting: Woman in Blue Reading a Letter

Can you name the four elements of composition? (Show chart) Today's lesson will focus on one of them. Which element is similar to opposites? I'm wearing black and white earrings, white gloves, a black shirt, and a black/gray/white skirt. The gray in my skirt is a hint that today's artist saw light and shadow as a continuum or blend(show black/gray/white visual).

Now I am going to demonstrate how a viewer can tell where light is coming from by looking at the direction of the shadow. (For younger students, you may use the illustrations from Bear Shadow by Frank Asch to make this point). May I have a volunteer, please? When I turn the light and point it at your back, the shadow falls to the front. What happens when I move the light to the side? Yes, the shadow falls to the left or right. The shadow always falls opposite from the source of the light.

Is all light the same color? Think about daylight vs. candlelight, winter sun vs. summer sun, and light in the forest vs. light in the desert. What affects the color of the light? The time of day? The season of the year? The surface touched by the light? Would a white shirt and a blue shirt be affected differently by the same light?

We are about to jump back in time to study an artist who was not appreciated during his lifetime, in fact, he was unknown for the next 200 years. Do you remember the Renaissance Era? (May show timeline chart and mention Michelangelo). Johannes Vermeer van Delft was part of the next era-Baroque, like Rembrandt whom we studied last year. In fact, Vermeer and Rembrandt were from the same country, Holland. (May show a map of Europe to locate Holland). Vermeer lived on the coast in a city named Delft. Here is what we think he looked like(show image of Vermeer); his nickname was Jan(yawn).

These men were born during an era when the Dutch nation was one of Europe's great powers. This time was part of the Golden Age of unparalleled economic, social, and political growth-a time when the first real middle-class was being created. For the first time, people other than princes and popes had begun to buy and collect art.

The Baroque artists portrayed what they saw around them; therefore, they were called Realists. Realism in art went with reason in science and philosophy. Men wanted to examine the reality of the physical world around them; hence, scientific principles were applied to art. Mystery gave way to experience; observation replaced superstition. (Use this sentence for upper grades: From this era came famous astronomers such as Johannes Kepler, who coded the laws regarding the behavior of the planets, and Galileo Galilei, who observed heavenly bodies through a telescope).

Art, philosophy, and science were allowed to develop freely in Holland long before other countries. Dutch Baroque art(1600-1750) became specialized into the categories (show chart) people wanted to see:

1. Still Life;
2. Portraiture;
3. Landscape; and
4. Genre-art of the everyday

Several of these types were either new or enjoyed the height of their popularity during the 17th century.

Landscapes without people were new. Genre painting-art with everyday life as its subject-was also a new form. Vermeer painted in this category. Genre painting found enthusiastic support from people who liked seeing themselves, their daily amusements, and their homes in paintings. By the late 1600's, for example, simple white tablecloths had been replaced by ornate Persian rugs in many homes-and in many paintings.

Vermeer completed less than 60 paintings all of which were forgotten for 200 years. Only 35 paintings are known to still exist. We don't know much about his life; his teachers, his religion, his reputation in Delft are all mysteries. We do know that his father-and later Vermeer himself-were art dealers. Jan was also an innkeeper. He married Catharina Bolnes when he was 20 years old. They had 11 children. He lived to the age of 43, and he died deeply in debt.

Vermeer saw and recorded the precise appearance of objects defined by light and space better than any painter of his time. In his works "time stands still". Deep calm and quiet prevail. There is peaceful harmony.

One reason Vermeer may not have been a popular painter in his time, is that his work does not tell a story. His figures remain cool, distant, and unfamiliar. One art critic declared that he was "too cold and lifeless for people's taste". Vermeer's single goal was to find beauty in the normal. He purified and idealized his subjects.

Let's look now at his painting, The Woman in Blue. Blues, greens, violets, purples-all cool colors-and gold are dominant in his works. The unexpected position of the chair and table in the foreground, separating the subject and viewer by physical objects as well as by distance, and is used in at least 12 of Vermeer's paintings.

As we look at Vermeer's works, we notice a pattern. Almost all of his paintings were set in two small rooms in his house in Delft. They show the same decorations, furniture in various arrangements, and often the same people, usually his wife or daughters. Many portray a pregnant woman-possibly his wife (though the women's clothing style of the time made women look pregnant when they weren't actually pregnant). Leather-backed, brass tack-studded chairs, Persian rugs used as tablecloths, a map on the wall, a white ceramic pitcher, and pearls appear in many of his paintings. (Point out these elements as you describe them). What other item is repeated in these paintings? (a letter).

The use of light is the most important characteristic of Vermeer's work. One critic described Vermeer as the "poet of light". (For upper grades: remember Rembrandt's Night Watch? He used chiaroscuro(light and shadow) to highlight, but did not use the laws of physics as we did in our earlier demonstration with the light). Vermeer used daylight streaming through windows, whether seen or unseen. His light was cool, white sunlight. His window faced north, so the daylight was not hot, direct sunlight. The daylight streams over the whole painting, binding it together.

Light is most interesting when it is flowing and making shadows and reflections. The light and shadow bring out the textures of clothing(showing deep folds), leather chairs, and shiny brass tacks. You can almost tell how they would feel. Notice how the background walls are white, yet light playing on the wall gives variation in color. Remember that Vermeer thought of light and shadow as a continuum or a blend, not as opposites.

Vermeer learned to achieve depth without sacrificing bright colors. He shaded a blue area (point out garment on "Woman in Blue Reading a Letter") not with brown or black overlay, but with a different blue hue, then another, then another, in thin layers. Shadows were always variations of color, not a muddy area. Subtle changes in light intensity included numerous shades of "white". (Pass around white paint chips. Read some of the color names.).

(Use this paragraph for upper grades). Many modern observers think Vermeer used a primitive camera lens known as a "camera obscura" to throw the image onto his canvas where he could trace an outline. By looking through a lens, he could see two dimensions, rather than three, so as to arrange his subject, furniture, and props most effectively. Each object was placed in relation to the rest, so there were no holes, no undefined empty space. The lens would also let him see the way the colors blended and fused together.

Vermeer's life was short and his works were few, but he has become recognized as one of the world's finest artists. His understanding of light and color influenced other artists through the years, especially the Impressionists. Vermeer was a pioneer in using light on the canvas. Now, we will learn about another Baroque artist, a composer who highlighted certain instruments in his music.