



6th Grade: JUNE

Girl With a Pearl Earring

Johannes Vermeer

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About the Artist

The following information is provided to give classroom teachers a comprehensive understanding of the artist and artwork. Use your judgment on what to share with your students based on their level of curiosity, observation/inquiry skills, comprehension and age-appropriateness.

Johannes (Jans) Vermeer

Johannes Vermeer was born in the Dutch town of Delft and baptized in the protestant Reformed Church on October 31, 1632, as Johannis. The town, prosperous from the development of textiles, was where his father, Reynier Janz, earned a modest income as a textile weaver. His mother was Digna Baltens. Around the time of Vermeer's birth, his father joined the Saint Luke's Guild and began selling art work. He eventually earned enough income to purchase a large house with an inn. Art dealing and innkeeping was a common combination of the day. Not much is recorded about Vermeer's childhood years. The twenty-year old Vermeer inherited the family business when his father died.

Vermeer lived during the height of the Protestant Reformation. Led by the monk, Martin Luther, the Reformation led to the development of new churches. In the Netherlands, the Dutch Reformed Church became the dominant protestant faith, one which Vermeer's family adopted. Many Catholics resisted the Reformation, causing an extremely uneasy time in history. The Church's reformation also changed governments.

In April of 1653, twenty-one year old Vermeer married Catharina Bolnes, a Catholic woman from a well-known wealthy family from the town of Gouda. Catharina's mother, Maria Thins, insisted Vermeer convert to Catholicism prior to the wedding and move into her house, rent free, near the Catholic church. The marriage elevated Vermeer's social status and in doing so, distanced him from his own family. The marriage was a happy one, blessed with thirteen children, several of whom died in infancy.

It is believed Vermeer's father exposed his son to the fine arts in his job as an art dealer. Interest and skill in painting grew and led Vermeer to fulfill a six-year apprenticeship with a master painter in the local Saint Luke's Guild. His early works were typical of 17th century artists. Much of his painting focused on religious topics, including *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha* (1655). To advance his painting skills and direction, his mother-in-law constantly exposed Vermeer to her personal art collection including works by Utrecht painters. These painters, which included Rembrandt and Caravaggio, stressed contrast between light and dark, known as chiaroscuro. Other noted painters such as Gerard ter Borch and Pieter de Hooch grabbed Vermeer's attention in

their portrayal of middle-class workers going about the routine of daily life. Vermeer's work in this genre was fundamentally different in that he was able to convey a sense of dignity and purpose in his figures as they went about their work. In addition, he choose to focus primarily on female figures. Of the fifty to sixty paintings produced during his lifetime, roughly forty of them featured women, contrasted with only fourteen men. Vermeer's women, compared to other paintings of the time, were intensely moral and intellectual. It was in these private domestic spaces that women were elevated to important roles. The women range from youthful to maternal and feature high curved foreheads, a classical feature of the period. All are wearing colorful clothing revealing various body types, mostly robust. It was not Vermeer's intention to paint portraits. In fact, his women have never been identified. Rather, he was capturing life in the context of physical space. The Dutch culture at the time encouraged introspection, reflecting on family, home, and contributions to family life. Therefore, Vermeer's paintings featured interior home space. In such settings, Vermeer captured architectural and decorative features as well as signs of some wealth.

Vermeer's skill for capturing architectural, lighting and decorative details astounded critics. After all, he, like other artists of the period, was well-trained in perspective drawings, a technique used to represent three-dimensional images on a flat, two-dimensional plane. Vermeer was also a meticulous painter, a perfectionist who completed about two paintings a year. Other critics claimed Vermeer used the camera obscura—a small box with an interior mirror that allowed light to pass through a hole, projecting the image reflected onto a vertical surface such as a wall or canvas. The camera obscura was a very common device of the time and many artists used it. For those artists who used it, and some continue to debate if Vermeer was one of them, it allowed projection of complicated details such as floor tiling and windows onto the canvas. Without the use of the camera obscura, such details might otherwise be avoided by the artist as too difficult to include. The common use of the camera obscura was evidenced by a substantial improvement in skills of artists.

Vermeer's paintings have been examined and x-rayed to solve the mystery of his possible use of the camera obscura. Such studies indicated a black and white image of the scene was painted first with an overcoat of color pigments, typical for camera obscura work. Any indication of perspective guide lines was not noticed nor was evidence, such as the lack of preliminary drawings setting the composition, which was common practice. On the other hand, no concrete evidence supports his use of the device. Unlike many artists whose reputation spread as their work filtered across the land, Vermeer's leading patron, Pieter van Ruijvan, collected

Discipline-Based Art Education

The following components are integral to students having a complete, well rounded art experience.

Art Aesthetics

Providing opportunities to develop perception and appreciation of visually expressed ideas and experiences.

Art Production

Providing opportunities to develop skills and techniques for creative visual expressions of emotions and ideas.

Art History

Providing opportunities to develop an understanding of the visual arts as a basic component of personal heritage.

Art Criticism

Providing an opportunity to develop an intellectual basis for analyzing and making aesthetic judgments based on an understanding of visual ideas and experiences.

ELEMENTS OF ART

- Line: A continuous mark
- Shape: Area enclosed by a line
- Color: Hue, reflection of light.
- Texture: Surface quality, real or implied
- Form: 3D shape or illusion of 3D
- Value: Graduated areas of light/dark
- Space: Illusion of depth

PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN

- Repetition: Imagery repeating pattern
- Variety: Contrast/variation
- Rhythm: Issues of eye movement
- Balance: Even visual weight
- Emphasis/Economy: Dominance/minimalism
- Proportion: Compare size relationships

COMPOSITION

- Symmetrical: Mirrored imagery
- Asymmetrical: Random placement
- Radial: Mirror image from center point
- Repetition: Repeating pattern, motif

ARTISTIC STYLES

- Realism: Realistic representation
- Abstraction: Personal interpretation
- Non-Objective: No recognizable depiction

ELEMENTS OF DESIGN IN PICTURE BOOKS

Children's literature that relate to this lesson due to elements of art or story content are:

- *Chasing Vermeer* by Blue Balliett
- *A Study of Vermeer, Revised and Enlarged Edition*, by Edward Snow
- *Vermeer: The Complete Works* by Arthur K. Wheelock
- *Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World* by Timothy Brook

REFERENCE/BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Gowing, Lawrence. *Vermeer*. University of California Press. 1997
- Wheelock, Arthur K. *The Complete Works*. Harry N. Abrams. 1977
- Wheelock, Arthur K. and Ben Broos. *Johannes Vermeer*. Yale University Press. 1995

almost half of Vermeer's paintings and kept them at his home in Delft. Vermeer is estimated to have painted a small number of paintings compared to other noted painters so limited production and rather expensive prices did not encourage Vermeer's fame. The economic crisis following the 1672 invasion by Britain and its allies factored into the low income generated for his work. His mother-in-law supported Vermeer, her daughter and their large family. By the time of his untimely death at forty-three, some say from financial stress, he was in significant personal debt, placing quite a burden on his wife and ten minor children. Following his death in 1675, Catharina petitioned for bankruptcy. If not for help from her mother, she and the children would have been destitute. It wasn't until 1699 that Vermeer's paintings began selling for high prices.

About the Art

Girl With a Pearl Earring was painted by Johannes Vermeer, oil on canvas, between 1665 and 1667. It measures 18 1/4 by 15 3/4 inches and is in the collection of the Hague in the Netherlands. Vermeer signed the painting 'JVMeer.' The painting had originally been called *Girl with a Turban* or *Young Girl*, but early in the 1900's the words 'pearl earring' were added to the title. Pearls in the 17th century were owned by the wealthy and considered an obvious status symbol. While scholars have tried to identify the sitter, she remains unknown. Some speculate it might be the artist's daughter, Maria. Others consider it was Magdalena Van Ruijven, the daughter of Vermeer's primary patron. The idea that the sitter was a maid in the Vermeer household is pure fiction, as no evidence supports such thinking.

Directed Observation

Show students an image of *Girl With a Pearl Earring*. Tell them it was painted, oil on canvas, between 1665 and 1667 by Johannes Vermeer. Offer students biographical information about Vermeer. After some time for thinking, encourage students to share what they see. Welcome all comments. The following questions are provided to help students use art vocabulary to talk about the work.

1. Discuss the composition of the painting. How does the body facing outward, with head centrally located, gently tilted towards the painter, and eyes level to the painter create a mood?
2. Consider the limited color pallet (gradations of blue, red, and ochre) against the solid background. How does this limited color palette affect the portrait? How does the absence of pattern

affect the portrait?

3. Look closely at the pearl. Describe how Vermeer captured its luminosity and reflective quality?
4. Repetition appears in the circular shapes of the girl's head, shoulder, eyes and pearl. This is set against the two straight lines of the draped scarf. How do these elements enhance eye movement?
5. Consider the use of value in the transition of colors from left to right in the flesh tones, lip color and fabrics.
6. How do you rate *Girl With a Pearl Earring* with other famous portraits?

Things to Do

1. Try your hand at portraiture using a camera. While every individual offers possibilities, consider a few basic tips. Just as in *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, sit your model on a stool facing to the side and have the model slightly turn the head to face the camera—roughly a 3/4 image of the face. Position the camera at the same level as the model's eyes. While the model holds the head still, turns the eyes to the camera, take the shot. Raising the level of the camera so the model has to look upward a bit, makes for a submissive look. Lowering the camera so the model looks down creates a commanding look.
2. Use one of your photographs as a reference to draw or paint the portrait.
3. Arrange to have someone take a color photograph of you from the shoulders up. Consider posing informally in front of an interesting background. Print out the photo on a minimum of 8 x 10 inch paper. Using small bits—no larger than 1/4 inch square of magazine clippings, reconstruct your portrait by matching colors, values and textures. Glue in place for a collaged look.
4. Convert *Girl With a Pearl Earring* to a value study by repainting it in a monochromatic color scheme (tints and shades of one color).
5. Common components of a Vermeer painting include an interior room with a window on the left, a checkered floor, and one figure or more. A map on the wall was also common. Design your own color composition Vermeer-style.
6. Compare and contrast portraits by famous artists. Use *Girl With a Pearl Earring* or another famous portrait and repaint it on a large scale. Replace the original face with your own face.
7. Learn about perspective drawings and how to create them. Chose a location, such as an interior hallway with doors or a street lined with buildings, to draw.