

Two Disputed Vermeer Paintings are Likely to Be Formally Attributed

A new Vermeer exhibition called *Vermeer's Secrets* will be opening at The National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. in October 2022. The museum will display all four of its paintings attributed to Vermeer. Two of these paintings, *Girl with a Red Hat* (1666) and *Girl with a Flute* (1665-75), however, have been questioned by historians in the past. The other two have been accepted as true Vermeers. It's expected that at this exhibition, the National Gallery will announce that the two questioned paintings are proven authentic masterpieces of Vermeer.

The National Gallery made use of Covid closures in 2020-21 to move these two paintings to their conservation studio to have them fully examined by specialists. The paintings were tested with the latest imaging techniques that are able to penetrate layers of paint. The *Girl with a Red Hat* is not a significantly disputed work, and the museum was able to confirm that it is, indeed, a Vermeer. Testing uncovered a surprise in that painting, however. Beneath the female figure, Vermeer had originally painted a man with a wide-brimmed hat, which he later turned into a girl.



Johannes Vermeer's *Girl with a Red Hat* (1666-67)

The *Girl with a Flute* presented a greater challenge for the National Gallery. It was discovered in 1906 and donated to the National Gallery by Joseph Widener in 1942. In 1950, Pieter Swillens, a notable scholar on the works of Vermeer, rejected the painting as authentic. His view was seconded by other historians throughout the years. In the 1990s however, Walter Liedtke, the New York City Metropolitan Museum of Art curator, believed the painting to be an original Vermeer. The National Gallery's own curator Arthur Wheelock at first was not ready to go that far, and would only say that it was "attributed to Vermeer." Wheelock later changed his position and wrote on behalf of the National Museum: "I have concluded that removing *Girl with a Flute* from Vermeer's oeuvre was too extreme given the complex issues surrounding this image." What has caused the controversy between scholars is that the painting is not at the quality level of other Vermeer's accepted works. It was also worked on during different time periods. The background and positioning of the figure were roughly outlined in 1665, but then the images were revised much later. Moreover, the painting is eroded in parts making attribution especially challenging. However, we can assume that *Girl with a Flute* will be finally attributed to Vermeer by the National Gallery at a ceremony in October, because this painting will also be traveling to the Rijksmuseum Museum in Amsterdam in February 2023 for a Vermeer showcase.



Attributed to Johannes Vermeer, *Girl with a Flute* (1665-75)

Along with these two questioned works, the National Gallery's other two Vermeers, *Woman Holding a Balance* (1664) and *A Lady Writing* (around 1665), are

already accepted as original masterpieces. However, the National Gallery's recent examination of *Woman Holding a Balance* revealed another surprise that provides insight about Vermeer's way of working. Most art historians believed that Vermeer painted slowly and cautiously, since we only know of 35 paintings in his 22-year career. But imaging of the layers beneath the surface of *Woman Holding a Balance* showed that Vermeer painted with quick, thick, spontaneous brushstrokes. These lower layers of paint are very different from the brush-strokes at the surface of the painting where smooth, delicate brushstrokes are barely visible. A National Gallery spokesman explained: "This discovery brings into question the common assumption that the artist was a painstakingly slow perfectionist."



Johannes Vermeer's *Woman Holding a Balance* (around 1664)
Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC



Johannes Vermeer's *A Lady Writing* (around 1665)
Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

What is most exciting about these new findings is not only that technology has given us greater insight into Vermeer's methodologies, but it has increased our ability to marvel at newly discovered authentic paintings of Vermeer.