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Museum Exhibition Review: Girl With a Pearl Earring: Dutch Paintings from the Mauritshuis

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Lea van der Vinde, ed. *Girl with a Pearl Earring: Dutch Paintings from the Mauritshuis*

Exh. cat. Munich: [Prestel](#), 2013. 144 pp.; 110 color ill. \$34.95 (9783791352251)

Exhibition schedule: [de Young Museum](#), Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, January 26–June 2, 2013; [High Museum of Art](#), Atlanta, June 23–September 29, 2013; [Frick Collection](#), New York, October 22, 2013–January 19, 2014 (with the title *Vermeer, Rembrandt, and Hals: Masterpieces of Dutch Painting from the Mauritshuis*)

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Gerard ter Borch. *Woman Writing a Letter* (ca. 1655). Oil on panel. 15 3/8 x 11 5/8 in. (39 x 29.5 cm). Mauritshuis, The Royal Picture Gallery, The Hague, Netherlands; inv. no. 797. XLM12.005.

According to the accompanying exhibition catalogue, *Girl with a Pearl Earring: Dutch Paintings from the Mauritshuis* brings “examples of Dutch Golden Age painting to the United States, including four works by Rembrandt van Rijn, three works by Jan Steen, two works by Frans Hals, and . . . Vermeer’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring*” (6). The thirty-five paintings on loan from the Mauritshuis represent some of that institution’s best-known holdings, and the High Museum of Art helps fulfill the curators’ stated aim of enabling “a wide American public to experience in person the masterpieces of the Mauritshuis” (6). On the whole, the show is geared for a general audience, and the gallery spaces and wall texts are appropriate for that purpose. The exhibition is divided into sections based on the hierarchy of genres with large wall texts announcing the beginning of each new section. The section divider texts are drawn from the exhibition catalogue, as are some portions of the wall text near certain works. Each of the gallery spaces is open enough to accommodate large numbers of visitors but still contained enough to encourage intimate interaction with each painting.

Each of the paintings is a well-known work by a major master from the period and offers museum audiences a rare opportunity to see and appreciate canonical images from famous northern European artists. The general flow of the show, from landscapes through portraits, gives attendees a solid overview of the variety of artistic production available in the Netherlands during the Golden Age. It also provides a primer on the subject matter that Dutch audiences found entertaining, intriguing, instructive, and worthy of attention. This curatorial decision places an appropriate level of focus on the

fact that such imagery was created for “a voracious popular market supported by varied clientele, including all but the very poorest” (21). The content and sequence of the exhibition support the curators’ assertion that the assembled paintings provide insight into what Dutch culture, on the whole, appears to have esteemed during its heyday as an international mercantile society.

While meeting the expectations of its target audience, and living up to its promise to give U.S. art lovers a rare chance to see works usually only on display in the Mauritshuis, the exhibition is not without its shortcomings. Three things in particular stand out, though to be fair they are the sorts of concerns likely to preoccupy art historians rather than the general audience the curators wish to address. One involves the historical narrative offered by the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue. The remaining two are the result of an attempt to appeal to the audience along popular lines by evoking the book and film titled *Girl with a Pearl Earring* and by trading on the romance surrounding the *Mona Lisa*. Though seemingly harmless, such an overreliance on popular culture, to my mind at least, significantly undermines the scholarly content of the exhibition. Certainly, addressing a general audience in a manner appropriate to its interest and educational level is important, and admittedly challenging, for any curatorial team. (This team consisted of Emilie Gordenker, Lea van der Vinde, Quentin Buvelot, Petria Noble, and Ariane van Suchtelen from the Mauritshuis; Lynn Federle Orr from the de Young Museum; and David Brenneman, Michael Shapiro, Nancy Green, Holcombe Green, Philip Verre, and Jody Cohen from the High Museum.) In the case of the *Girl with a Pearl Earring* exhibition, though, it seems that the capacity of a general audience to understand and appreciate complex information may have been underestimated and, as a result, an opportunity to promote a nuanced view of the scholarship of Golden Age painting may have been missed.

The first of my critiques involves the historical narrative associated with the exhibition. Both wall texts and catalogue communicate salient facts about the Dutch Golden Age without being loaded down with art-historical jargon. This choice is commendable but at times comes at the price of overly simplifying complex issues like identity, politics, religion, morality, etc. Such issues are important when the curators indicate that a general U.S. audience will be interested in seventeenth-century Dutch art because “many of the works from this period evoke middle-class prosperity and quiet domesticity. Dutch art projects a culture that placed a premium on home and family, cleanliness and morality, and the importance of communal harmony,” and these are seen as values shared between the Dutch and Americans (6). The tidy arrangement of works by genre, as well as the explanatory texts in the catalogue, present a unified view of life in the Dutch Golden Age in which the paintings “mirror shared beliefs in the virtue of honest labor, the warmth of a spare but comfortable home, and the quiet beauty of a productive landscape” (11). Describing all Golden Age Dutch art with such broad strokes presents a flattened view of the complex and, at times, contentious society responsible for the layered and subtle works on display in the galleries. The historical reality of the confessional divisions, political factions, migration pressures, and shifting patterns of wealth distribution at play in the Low Countries in the seventeenth century calls into question such a homogeneous model of Dutch exceptionalism, even for a general audience.

The second involves an informational video produced by the National Gallery in Washington, DC, about Vermeer and the camera obscura. The video features Arthur Wheelock discussing a *tronie* not included in the show, Vermeer’s *Girl with a Red Hat* (1665–66), in the context of the lighting effects characteristic of the artist’s works. In his portion of the presentation, Wheelock is careful to stress that Vermeer did not use a camera obscura and was not trying to imitate the device, but instead was inspired by the diffuse lighting associated with it. The remainder of the video describes the camera obscura and its workings. It does so by showing how a lion finial, like the one in the *Girl with a Red Hat*, would look projected by a camera obscura. The editing of this portion of the video, as well as its content, makes a tacit claim of a one-to-one correspondence that asserts the opposite of what

Wheellock assiduously outlines at the video's beginning. Rather than challenging the audience's perceptions about the artist, the video in effect reinforces a well-known scene in the film *Girl with a Pearl Earring* in which Vermeer demonstrates his camera obscura to the curious maidservant who serves as his muse. Complicating matters, the film is playing on a continuous loop in the gift shop, which has the potential of leaving visitors with a skewed impression as they exit the exhibition (and of perhaps unwittingly placing the Mauritshuis's imprimatur on the movie). While the world of fiction may take liberties with an artist's life, oeuvre, and working method, the educational content used in a museum should not—even if inadvertently.

The third involves the manner in which the *Girl with a Pearl Earring* is displayed. The catalogue and wall texts offer the painting as the "Dutch Mona Lisa" (45). In order to reinforce this perception, the work is singled out from the other paintings, placed in a gallery painted a darker tone than the other spaces, and left for the final room before the viewer exits to the gift shop. In this gallery, the *Girl with a Pearl Earring* is shown in a manner that evokes the Louvre's display of the *Mona Lisa*—it is ensconced in a thick wall niche and encased behind Lexan. As with the *Mona Lisa*, the viewer is held at a distance from the painting and is given the impression that it is more precious and/or important than the other objects seen thus far. By sectioning it off from the other *tronies* in the preceding gallery, the painting is removed from its larger context and is put into an indeterminate state wherein it is neither portrait nor *tronie*. Once again, the specter of the film rears its head. By sequestering the painting, and treating it like Leonardo's enigmatic but verifiable portrait, this exhibition strategy reinforces the romantic notion that the painting is indeed a portrait (perhaps of a maid, just like in the film) rather than a type of character study common and popular in the Low Countries in the seventeenth century. As with the video, this contradicts the scholarship behind the exhibition. The catalogue is careful to note that the painting is a *tronie* and that *tronies* "were not meant to portray specific sitters, so they cannot be considered portraits" (74). Rather than offering a substantive overview or conclusion, the final gallery of the exhibition perpetuates ideas that are appropriate to popular culture but have limited use, if any, in a serious scholarly discussion of a major artist and his works.

Despite the concerns I have noted, the exhibition is clear in its focus, is accessible to the general art-loving public it sees as its primary audience, and meets its stated goals of giving U.S. visitors the opportunity to experience in person some of the most important works of art from the Dutch Golden Age.

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