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TEACHER'S EDITION

Johannes Vermeer

Working With Composition

OVERVIEW

Johannes Vermeer [1632-1675] was hardly a prolific painter. During the height of his career, he produced perhaps two or three paintings a year. When Vermeer died, his widow had to barter away most of his work to pay the family's food bills and other debts. Today, around 31 to 35 of Vermeer's paintings (opinions vary as to the authenticity of some) are known to exist. When 21 of them were assembled in 1996 for an exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., more than 300,000 people braved snow, slush, and government shutdowns to see them. Paintings by this 17th-century Dutch artist have a timeless, and often mysterious quality that is still enthralling to viewers of the late 20th century.

More than a third of Vermeer's existing works are reproduced in this issue of *Scholastic Art*. We will focus on how Vermeer used compositional techniques, as well as light and color to create highly realistic — almost photographic — scenes from everyday life.

• **Before Reading:** Have students study the reproduction of Vermeer's *The Milkmaid* on pages 6-7. Some of them will already be familiar with this painting. It is not unusual to find a reproduction of *The Milkmaid* hanging in someone's kitchen. Why would this be appropriate? What is the young woman doing in this scene? She is performing two of the most basic and nurturing of human tasks: pouring milk and cutting bread.

Explain that *The Milkmaid* was painted in 1658 by a Dutch artist named Johannes Vermeer. Ask students to study the characteristics of this painting. They should keep them in mind as they read on and explore the other Vermeers in this issue. When they have looked closely at the other paintings, have them discuss the similarities and differences among Vermeer's works.

PAGES 2-3

THE POETRY OF THE REAL

Art History, Aesthetics

✓ **Why is so little known about the life of Johannes Vermeer?** (There are very few written records or other materials that tell us much about Vermeer's life. The artist left no letters, no written treatises, no drawings or study sketches, and no self-portraits.) ✓ **Why do you think there are so few known Vermeer paintings in existence?** (Vermeer was not a particularly prolific painter. His work was well respected, and he was able to support his family while producing perhaps two or three paintings per year. Vermeer also died relatively young; he did not live long enough to create a large volume of work.)

✓ **What historical event changed Vermeer's life and his career as an artist?**

(In 1672, the French invaded Holland. Suddenly, no one was very much interested in commissioning or buying art. Vermeer and his large family were left with very little income; the artist died three years later.) **What happened to most of Vermeer's paintings immediately after he died?** (Vermeer's widow was left deeply in debt; she had to sell or barter away most of his work. Two of the artist's paintings went to the neighborhood baker to pay off his family's large bread bill.)

✓ **Which of Vermeer's paintings was his widow most reluctant to part with? Why do you think she especially wanted that one?** (Vermeer's wife did everything she could to keep *The Art of Painting*. It surely must have reminded her of better times, when her husband was happy and flourishing as a painter. *The Art of Painting* was believed by many historians to be the only self-portrait done by Vermeer. The young woman in the painting may have been one of his daughters. It is also possible that *The Art of Painting* is not a self-portrait at all, but an allegory on the life and work of an artist. In an allegorical painting, the figures and their surroundings are symbolic; they are more likely to represent an ideal or a concept rather than a specific person.)

• **Carefully study the reproduction of *Girl with a Pearl Earring* on the cover of this issue. Compare it with *The Lacemaker* (pages 4-5), *The Milkmaid*, and *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* (pages 6-7). How does the painting on the cover differ from the other three works?** (Most of the women in Vermeer's paintings — as in the examples on pages 4-7 — are deeply absorbed in a task: making lace, pouring milk, reading a letter. They are usually placed in a specific setting such as a kitchen or sitting room; they do not "notice" or look out at the viewer. Vermeer surrounds these figures with everyday objects rendered in great detail. *Girl with a Pearl Earring* is unusual because the figure "emerges" from a dark background. The girl is close to the picture plane; she turns to look at the viewer, as if someone has called her name and she is about to answer.) **What kinds of things can you tell by looking at the "Vermeer women" on pages 4-7?** (We can tell by their clothing and surroundings that they lived in a different time and place; we also learn a bit about their occupations and social standing.)

✓ **Why does *Girl with a Pearl Earring* seem more "timeless" than Vermeer's other works?** (This figure is much harder to place. There is nothing about her costume that connects her with any particular period in history. Vermeer may have chosen to portray her in a turban, because many artists of his day were fascinated by Turkish costumes and culture. The subject could conceivably be a young woman of the 1990s, who chooses to dress in a flamboyant style.)

Note: ✓ indicates the questions that appear on the reproducible Skills Master on page 4.