

# Exploring the Relationship between the Shaping of Female Images in Vermeer's Works and the Social Environment

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**Abstract.** This study takes the Nederland region in the 17th century as a starting point, which was in the golden period of development. In addition, it focuses on the mature genre painting works depicting family life and women under the differentiation of social division of labor. It focuses on the female images in the works of Dutch artist Vermeer in the 17th century, to explore the relationship between the shaping of female images in Dutch art schools and the social environment. This research used literature analysis to search and read relevant materials and literature, to better grasp the creative background and motivation of the painting, which is conducive to establishing a good analysis of iconology and promoting deeper research. This paper found that Vermeer's three works - *The Milkmaid*, *Woman Holding a Balance*, and *A Drunken Sleeping Maid at a Table* - showcase the dignity, power, and freedom of women in family life, while implicitly binding women with temptation, morality, and abstinence. This research believes that this phenomenon is derived from the demand for social capitalist identity at that time, the belief conflict under the "religious tolerance" system, and the anxiety and trade-off of the rise of women in the patriarchal society. It is a concentrated portrayal of the unbalanced social environment of economic development and spiritual belief in the Netherlands in the 17th century.

**Keywords:** Women; Vermeer; Dutch painting school; Netherlands region; Family life.

## 1. Introduction

This research focuses on the rapid economic development, unique geographical environment, and unique social division of labor and civic culture formed by the religious reform system in the Netherlands region in the 17th century - the separation of male and female spaces, where women are endowed with rights and status while being bound by morality and social norms. Among the 37 surviving works of Vermeer, there are over 30 that focus on women in family life [1]. Three of these works, *The Milkmaid*, *Woman Holding a Balance*, and *A Drunken Sleeping Maid at a Table* illustrate this feature from different perspectives. This study mainly focuses on the specific portrayal of female images in the works of Dutch artist Vermeer in the 17th century, with the ultimate goal of exploring the relationship between the shaping of female images in Dutch genre paintings and the social environment. To achieve the research objectives, it conducted a literature analysis method to search and read relevant materials and literature. The advantage of this method is that it can effectively analyze the creative background and motivation of female images in 17th-century Netherlands folk paintings, and relate them to the analysis of visual forms, which is conducive to the progress of the study.

## 2. Background

In the 17th century, the Netherlands was in a golden period of development, with rapid growth in maritime trade. With the help of developed industrial and commercial trade at that time, the middle class became the core force in the production and consumption of artworks during the "golden age" in the Netherlands. The art market also formed a more market-dependent trading mode, where art was circulated through collectors and brokers. In terms of ideological transformation, Protestant thought liberated the Netherlands from feudal traditional theology and placed greater emphasis on human values and essence. However, at the same time, the great abundance of material possessions



and the turbulence of traditional beliefs have given Dutch people a unique understanding of the interior, and the artistic style based on the theme of women busy with household chores in secularized daily life has reached maturity at this time. Moreover, the region of the Netherlands is narrow. Due to the constraints of the size of the walls on which artworks are hung in the room and the buyer's disposable funds, the "Dutch Small Painting School", which uses small paintings as a medium and focuses on restrictive indoor life, became popular [2].

### 3. Analysis

#### 3.1. The Milkmaid and Worship of Housekeeping

*The Milkmaid* is one of Vermeer's most representative works. This work reflects Vermeer's challenge to traditional sexual themes and showcases the concept of "household worship" in the 17th century Netherlands. As shown in Figure 1, the scene presents a corner in front of the kitchen window. A maid is wearing a light yellow tight jacket, lined with a tightly tied white shirt, arms wrapped in blue-green sleeves, and a red coarse cloth long skirt wrapped in a blue apron. The maid was lifting a milk jar with both hands and pouring it into a binaural jar. It is speculated that she is particularly focused on making a "bread pudding" that requires precise control of the milk ratio. Unlike the reverence for classical and grand heroism in contemporary Italy and other regions, this is a depiction that focuses on a laborer.



**Figure 1.** Johannes Vermeer, *The Milkmaid*, 1657–1658, Oil on canvas, 45.5cm×41cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands [3]

However, it is worth noting that in the works before *The Milkmaid*, "milk maids" were a theme full of charm and sexual implications - the word "melken" in Dutch slang means "attraction, temptation", and "young and beautiful women holding pottery jars" also had specific connotations because of this. The round mouth of their pottery jars was a symbol of pornography and teasing. A typical example is Gerrit Dou's work, *Woman Pouring Water into a Jar*, as shown in Figure 2. The posture of the woman in the picture is very similar to that of the characters in *The Milkmaid*. Her face faces towards the leaking jar but she raises her eyes to glance at the viewer's position. In addition, the carrot in front of her facing the same direction as her gaze makes this work full of suggestive elements. But Vermeer's *The Milkmaid* differs from such works, and this is also his ulterior motive. From the perspective of the desktop and the still life placed on it in the work, the viewer's viewpoint should be slightly higher than the upper edge of the binaural jar and lower than the lower edge of the window. As a result, Vermeer depicted the maid from a lower perspective, placing the viewer in an upward position and making her appear even taller. The undulating red long skirt resembles the Ionian-style column in ancient Greece, making the kitchen lady in the painting elegant and serene like a classical

goddess statue [4]. Unlike the teasing gaze and suggestive imagery in Gerrit Dou's paintings, the maid's eyes droop and focus on the milk flowing out. Her tall and strong figure vividly portrays a towering sense of alienation and the image of a diligent laborer. Yellow and blue were colors that symbolized nobility in society at that time and using them to color clothes also reflected Vermeer's sacred sentiment toward simple life. Vermeer's *The Milkmaid* is the end of the "milkmaid" theme. Although this work does not break free from the inherent teasing hints of maids, it gives workers a sacred posture in this theme, demonstrating recognition and respect for working women.



**Figure 2.** Gerrit Dou, Young Woman Pouring Water out of A Jug, 1655-1665, Oil on Panel, 36cm×27.3 Cm, Louvre Museum, Paris [5]

## 3.2. Woman Holding a Balance

### 3.2.1. The enhancement of women's rights

*Woman Holding a Balance* is a meaningful work by Vermeer, which focuses on the power, status, and responsibilities of women in the Netherland region in the 17th century. Like *The Milkmaid*, this work still depicts a woman's independent space. As shown in Figure 3, the woman in the picture is wearing a white hat, a blue fur jacket, and a yellow long skirt below. She held a balance in her right hand and faced a table by the window. There is a painting with the content of *The Last Judgment* hanging in the background of the painting [6]. On the wooden table, there is a blue cloth, an open box, pearls, a gold chain, and some stacked coins. A beam of light poured down from the high window and projected onto the woman's forehead and face.

Compared to the scene of men and women participating in household economic activities in the 16th century, there was a significant shift in economic control in the 17th century. In 16th-century Netherland paintings, the posture of "holding a balance" often appeared in scenes of weighing gold, with the participation of men. For example, in Marinus van Reymarswaele's *The Money Changer and His Wife* in Figure 4, the entire weighing process was dominated by men. But in Vermeer's paintings, "weighing gold" becomes an act that women independently complete [7]. This change more directly and clearly reflects the independent economic responsibilities of women in Dutch family life in the 17th century. Housewives, as the leaders of family life and Protestant doctrine, represent loyalty and responsibility as "partners" [8].

### 3.2.2. Symbols of morality and discipline

Carefully observe the balance in the picture, it may be empty except for weighing thin coins. This corresponds to the plot of *The Last Judgment* in the *Bible* depicted in the hanging paintings in the

background. In the final judgment, Saint Michael held a balance, representing the judgment of fate and the weighing of the soul. The woman played the role of an angel in the picture, and the silver coins and jewelry at hand were similar to the Dutch "Void School" still life painting, symbolizing "Vanitas" - fleeting life and fleeting prosperity [9]. The silent woman and the painting are independent and parallel to each other, just like the two parallel worlds of life and death, or the "soul view" in religion - the secular appearance and the true religious soul.

Vermeer used a woman as a symbol of judging the soul, which provided the possibility for the Protestant Virgin Mary with redemption as its core to liberate women from the "misogyny" caused by Eve's persuasion of Adam to steal the forbidden fruit in the *Bible*. The "occupational equality" advocated by Calvin's "duty view" once again strengthens the social concept of women's "worship of the Virgin Mary", which leads to the moral requirements for women - "motherhood, obedience, and chastity" [10]. The sunlight illuminated the woman's forehead, and here Vermeer used the zenith of light used by saints to shape the morality and discipline of women.



**Figure 3.** Johannes Vermeer, *Woman Holding a Balance*, 1662–1663, Oil on canvas, 42.5 cm x 38 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. [11]



**Figure 4.** Marinus Claeszoon van Reymerswaele, *The Moneychanger and his Wife*, 1539, Oil on panel, 83cm x 97 cm, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid [12]

### 3.3. Desire and Suppression in A drunken Sleeping Maid at a Table

A drunken sleeping maid at a table depicts the image of a sleeping woman leaning on the table with her right hand resting on her chin. The shirt tied tightly inside the jacket worn by the maid in *The Milkmaid* is untied in this work, revealing the skin on the woman's chest. The table was covered with a pleated table blanket, with messy meals and two utensils that could be vaguely identified. The hanging painting on the wall has only one corner, but compared to other works by Vermeer, it can be seen that this is the left leg of Cupid, the goddess of love, also appearing in the hanging painting in *A Young Woman Standing at a Virginal* (As shown in Figure 6) [13]. And the blurry mask at his feet also hinted at his disdain for the disguise in love [14]. From this, it can be inferred that the theme of the screen is related to the relationship between men and women.

Vermeer concealed the elements of love and loyalty in the painting, "X-rays showed that Vermeer initially depicted a man wearing a hat in the background room of the painting," and there was also the back of a dog in the chair position. (As shown in Figure 7) [15]. While the clear object of love and the dog symbolizing loyalty are erased, the chair and corner of the table in the foreground block the viewer's view, allowing their fancy to run wild and making the meaning of the picture more complex and implicit. The door in the background is half open, and the woman's eyes are lowered, reminiscent of Nicolaes Maes portraying a sleeping maid as negligent and lazy in *The Idle Servant* shown in Figure 8. Not only that, in the 17th century Netherlands, maids were also often seen as characters who leaked secrets from their masters and helped their mistresses to have a secret meeting. "A servant's access to keys is frequently dissected on the early modern stage as potentially dangerous to the order of the house." [16]. Women's earrings, dignified yet inappropriate attire, and fake moles on their cheeks were ironic in a society that saw temperance as a feminine characteristic. In this meeting with the theme of sexuality, Vermeer painted a harmonious and peaceful indoor life painting, abandoning many prominent educational symbols commonly found in previous paintings, but still subtly suggesting moral admonitions to women. The religious reform brought clergy back to secular life and marriage and family, promoting the liberation of women's emotions and sexual desires under the rule of the Vatican, but subtly implying their violation of morality. Society entrusts indoor power to women, but beware of them breaking the existing order.



**Figure 5.** Johannes Vermeer, *A Drunken Sleeping Maid at a Table*, 1656–1657, Oil on Canvas, 87.6 x 76.5 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York [17]



**Figure 6.** Johannes Vermeer, *A Young Woman Standing at a Virginal*, 1670–1674, Oil on Canvas, 51.7 x 45.2 cm, National Gallery, London [18]



**Figure 7.** X-Radiograph of *A Drunken Sleeping Maid at a Table* [19]



**Figure 8.** Nicolaes Maes, Interior with a Sleeping Maid and her Mistress (The Idle Servant), 1655, Oil on oak, 70×53.3cm, National Gallery, London [20]

#### 4. Discussion

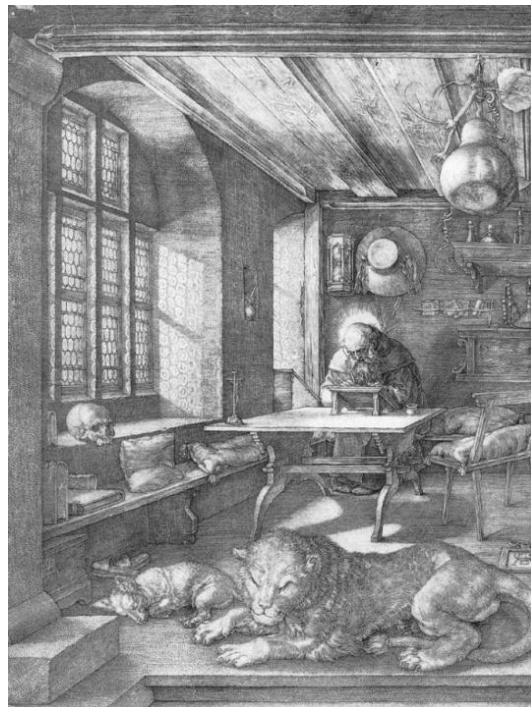
In Vermeer's lifelong genre paintings, the depiction of indoor women accounted for the vast majority. Taking the above three works as examples, the painters all adopted a peeping perspective in their creations. Unlike Albrecht Dürer's *Saint Jerome* in Figure 9, which uses perspective shortening to bring the viewer closer to the picture, Vermeer's works depict the low eyelids, focused expression, and narrow and private space of women. The table, window, frame, and woman only show a part of themselves, leaving people with imagination while reflecting the characteristics of "peeping through the hole". The women in the picture always appear by the window or door, with a sense of criticality, which shows the gap between male and female spaces in the Netherland region in the 17th century [21]. The power behind gazing at women sets them at a fixed origin as if it is an invisible positioning and constraint.

There are many implicit implications in Vermeer's depiction of women: the tall image of a laborer contains the motif of "milkmaid" representing "temptation"; Empowering women with the ability to manage the economy is constrained by biblical metaphors; Seemingly, behind the "negligent" maid is a depiction of love and desire... These hidden hints are actually the shaping of one's own class identity by the bourgeoisie. "Genre paintings are more positioned in the family affairs of the orderly urban middle class, rather than in the homes of rural people." [22]. As a representative painter serving this class, Vermeer uses this method to better meet the needs of the market.

Vermeer used subtle hints as a means to showcase the contradictory social mentality of the 17th century Netherlands, which was closely related to the religious changes in the region, such as the temptation and independence of milkmaids, the power and constraints of women holding a balance, and the love and oppression of a sleeping maid. The difference between the religious reform period in the Netherlands and other countries is that it achieved "religious tolerance". Originally a Protestant, Vermeer also converted to Catholicism with his wife and mother-in-law after marrying Catharina Bolnes from a Catholic family in 1653. So just as the "Redemption" ideology representing Protestantism in "Woman Holding a Balance" coexists with the "Judgment" ideology of Catholicism. In the religious reform, nuns entered the secular world due to their return to the family, and having a

married life further circulated the ethical and moral values of religion among social classes, allowing women to be redeemed by Protestant ideas while still being bound by morally dominated discipline.

In the 17th century, the Netherlands was in a patriarchal society, and one of the important significance of paintings created before Vermeer was education - by shaping idealized female characteristics, the image of devout, kind, and household-oriented, chaste women became a social identity [23]. Many of Vermeer's works have groundbreaking significance, such as his portrayal of tall women in *The Milkmaid* ending the theme of "milkmaids". His works have a pioneering significance, visualizing the changing social consciousness. Under the influence of Protestantism, women's original sins were redeemed and their status was elevated, further impacting patriarchal society - which was also an important reason for the spatial division between men and women in the Netherlands at that time. So in Vermeer's paintings, on the one hand, women's independent consciousness is portrayed, such as the power to govern the economy and the freedom of love and desire; On the other hand, he used a vague but still suggestive painting language to depict the imbalance between rapid economic development and cultural backwardness. The Netherlands achieved social anxiety by regulating women's desires.



**Figure 9.** Albrecht Dürer, St. Jerome in his Study, 1514, Printmaking, 25.9 x 20.1 cm, The National Gallery of Germany [24]

## 5. Conclusion

Regarding the research findings of this study, the author found from Vermeer's paintings that in the 17th century, there were many hidden contradictions in the depiction of women in Dutch genre paintings, mainly reflected in the use of seductive themes to depict the grandeur of working women, the constraints of moral values bestowed upon women with noble power and status, and the use of consensus on "continenence" to satirize the freedom of women's desires. The complex culture in the changing social environment of the Netherlands during the contract period is reflected in the implicit contradictions in this study, which reflect the fragmentation of gender space during the religious reform period in the Netherlands, the shaping of self-identity by the bourgeoisie, the collision of doctrines caused by "religious tolerance", and the balance of social anxiety caused by the imbalance between economic and religious development in a patriarchal society. Thus, it can be further concluded that the female images in Vermeer's paintings reflect the social division of labor and changes in the social status of Dutch women in the 17th century. Dutch women were given extremely

high status in family life, but still failed to break free from passive and unequal social identities such as vassals. This study provides valuable reference significance for future research in this direction, mainly reflecting the social awareness of women's space and image shaping in the Netherlands in the 16th and 17th centuries, in combination with social existence discussions; Admitting that paintings depicting female spaces reflect women's lives, while discussing the power of society in the processing and reshaping of images. Future research should broaden its perspective and compare it with other regions undergoing changes during the same period, in order to explore more specifically the connection between female painting in the Netherlands and social development.

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