

The Lacemaker

by Johannes Vermeer

Print Facts

- Medium: Oil on canvas, mounted on wood
- Date: 1669-1670
- Size: 24 x 21 cm (9 5/8 x 8 1/4 inches)
- Location: The Louvre, Paris (much of the information on this painting came from their website)
- Style: Baroque
- Genre: Genre Painting
- The concentration of the model and the play of colors against the light gray background make this one of Vermeer's masterpieces.
- The woman (who is not, as has been claimed, Vermeer's wife) is not wearing work clothes.
- The colored cushion on the left is a sewing cushion, used to store sewing materials.
- A young lacemaker, is hunched intently over her work, deftly manipulating bobbins, pins and thread on her sewing table.
- The theme of the lacemaker illustrated feminine domestic virtues. The small book in the foreground is probably the Bible, which reinforces the picture's moral and religious interpretation. But this is also, as in Vermeer's famous Milkmaid, one of the peeks into domestic privacy that so fascinated him. He loved to observe the everyday objects around him and paint different combinations of them in his works.
- This is the smallest painting Vermeer painted.
- The center of our attention, the lacemaker's painstaking work, is shown in great detail and in sharp focus, particularly the fine white thread stretched between the young woman's fingers. Further away from this visual focus, the forms become more blurred, including, paradoxically, those in the foreground. The white and red threads hanging out of the cushion are rendered in almost abstract dribbles of paint. The tapestry, painted with little "pointillist" dabs of pure color, is also out of focus.
- Yet, despite the illusion of immediate proximity with the lacemaker, we cannot really penetrate her universe. The forms of the tapestry, sewing cushion and small table come between us and her, and her work is hidden in her right hand. Vermeer's pictures have a "poetry of silence" which places his figures, caught in an intimate, impalpable moment, in a world removed from ours, in a clear, gentle brightness that seems to cling to objects in soft specks of light.
- Lacemaking was a common or popular activity in the Netherlands during that time.
- At first glance it is easy to imagine that this picture is almost a photograph.
- Renoir considered this masterpiece, which entered the Louvre in 1870, one of the most beautiful paintings in the world.
- The harmonious color of this painting, so characteristic of Vermeer, fascinated Van Gogh, who in a letter in 1888 noted the beauty of its " lemon yellow, pale blue and pearl gray arrangement."

Artist Facts

- Pronounced: (yo-HAHN-ess vehr-MEER)
- Vermeer was born and raised in the Dutch town of Delft. (Baptized October 3 1632)
- Died December 15, 1675 (age 43)
- He died suddenly, most likely from a heart attack or stroke, though his wife blamed it on the stress from having 11 children and being unable to support them.
- His father was an innkeeper, and bought and sold paintings as well. He also was a silk worker. Vermeer often depicted this fabric in his paintings.
- He married Catharina Bolnes in 1653 and they had 11 children.
- Vermeer sold half of his paintings to a single collector, Peiter van Ruijven
- When he died, he left his wife bankrupt with 11 children to support.
- His wife scrambled to keep his paintings from the creditors who tried to claim them after his death, but large debts forced her to sell most of his artwork.
- Due to a war with France, there was an economic crisis in his Dutch town and he was unable to sell any of his paintings in the latter years of his life.
- Sadly, only 20 years after his death, his paintings sold for much higher amounts.
- Fame was a long time coming to Vermeer. There are only about 35 (some sources claim 36) surviving paintings by him. He was virtually forgotten for almost two decades after his death. Until about 1860, many of his works were admired, but thought to be by other artists.
- He very often did not sign his artwork.
- We don't know what Vermeer looked like. There are no confirmed portraits of him. Some speculate that the painting titled "The Art of Painting" shows the back of Vermeer painting. The checkered floor in that painting occurs in several of Vermeer's paintings, and he presumably had such a floor in his own house and used it as a model. (see the additional painting in this packet)
- Little is recorded of his career, although he appears to have been a respected figure among his fellow artists, who twice elected him as the governor of the Painters' Guild.
- He often only painted one or two people in his paintings.
- His favorite subjects were women, and he often included a window in his paintings.
- Vermeer often used the primary colors in his paintings.
- He painted from a low vantage point to give the impression that he was looking up to the person he painted. A way of giving respect even though lower class people? Something like that...

Key Element of Design to Teach

- Value is the use of light and dark in an art piece. Higher values are described as being light and lower values are referred to as being dark. In painting, value is often referred to as tint and shade. Tint is light and shade is dark.

Possible Questions and Suggestions to Teach Value

- Where is the light coming from in this artwork? How can you tell?
- Where else do you see light besides the woman's face?
- Where do you see shadow?
- What time of day do you think it is? How can you tell?

- Talk about the direction the light is coming from and how things (like the two sides of her face) are in light or have shadows. Point out the lighter and darker values in the painting and how the artist creates darker shades by adding black and lighter tints by adding white.
- Have the students squint at the painting to help them distinguish the light areas from the dark ones. (Dark areas will fade back when you squint.)

Keywords

- Value, Light, Tint, Shade, Texture, Mood, Portrait, Line, Primary Colors

Other Possible Questions

- What is this woman doing? What clues are there in the painting?
- What do you think this woman is thinking or feeling? Is she focused? How can you tell?
- What is the expression on her face? Is she smiling?
- What can you tell about this woman from this painting? Is she wealthy or poor? How can you tell? Does she seem to enjoy her work? (She does not have on work clothes.)
- What colors do you see in this painting? Would you call them primary or secondary?
- What textures do you see in this painting? (Notice the walls, the threads, the fabrics, her hair, the lace collar.)
- What is the mood of this painting? How does it make you feel?
- What is the woman holding in her hands? (Bobbins, pins)
- Do you see anything in the background of this painting? Why do you think this is? (Perhaps the artist was trying not to distract from the subject.)
- How does the artist draw the viewer's eye to the subject's hands? Notice how the lines lead to her hands, the viewer follows her gaze to her hands. (Painting hands to look realistic is VERY difficult. Many less talented artist hide them in pockets or behind things because of the difficulty.) Also, notice how the artist blurs the foreground to focus the viewer on the subject.
- Do you see any curvy lines in this painting? Where?
- This painting is quite small-bring in a cut piece of paper to show the actual size.
- Show the class what lace is; let them feel it.