

# The Milkmaid

## by Johannes Vermeer

### Print Facts

- Medium: Oil on canvas
- Date: circa 1658
- Vermeer was 25 when he painted this painting
- Size: 17 7/8 X 16 1/8 inches
- Location: Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Netherlands
- This painting is sometimes called *The Kitchen Maid*, reflective of the woman's true position in the house. A milkmaid actually milks cows.
- A foot warmer is on the floor behind the maid, and the tiles in the background depict a cupid and a figure with a pole.
- The whitewashed walls of this kitchen indicate it was a "cool" kitchen where butter and milk were kept and prepared.
- Historians believe she was making bread pudding, due to the broken bread on the table, the dutch oven she is pouring the milk into, and the fact she is carefully pouring the milk-a requisite for making good bread pudding.
- The artist uses a low vantage point in this painting creating a sense of dignity to the woman.
- The diagonal lines of the maid's apron, the table in the front, and the objects hanging on the wall, and the woman's arms all lead the eye to the milk pouring from the jug, which is the focal point.
- The artist originally painted a sewing basket behind the foot warmer, and then changed his mind and painted over it. (He also did this with a wall map on the wall). These were discovered when the painting was x-rayed.
- A nice explanation of this artwork: <http://www.students.sbc.edu/mclemore10/The%20Milkmaid.html>

### 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.
- Vermeer's genius in the rendering of light is his true talent.
- 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 to lower class people he painted.

### **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 table and her clothes) have light and 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 do you think this woman is thinking or feeling? Is she concentrating or is she wistful/daydreaming? What is the mood of this painting?
- 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?
- What colors do you see? Do you see complementary, analogous or primary colors?
- What textures do you see in this painting? (basket, dress, wall, items hanging on the wall)
- What else do you see in this painting? In the background?