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I

Mystery  
and  
Recovery



Fig. 1.1. Johannes Vermeer, *View of Delft* (ca. 1660–63). Oil on canvas. 96.5 × 115.7 cm. Mauritshuis, The Hague

# 1

## Questions for the Sphinx

*This Vermeer has driven us crazy. But we have revived him.*

—THÉOPHILE THORÉ TO BARTHOLD SUERMONDT (1867)

“In the museum at The Hague, a superb and very singular landscape arrests all visitors and vividly impresses artists and connoisseurs.” So opens perhaps the most influential account of Vermeer ever written, a three-part article by the radical journalist and art critic Théophile Thoré in the *Gazette des beaux-arts* of 1866 that is widely credited with rescuing the painter from the oblivion—Thoré’s term was *l’oubli*—into which he had fallen. The landscape in question was of course the *View of Delft* (fig. 1.1), and after a brief description of its principal features, including the brilliance of its light, the intensity of its color, and the thick impasto of certain passages, Thoré quickly turned to his original encounter with the painting more than two decades earlier. “When I visited the museums of Holland for the first time in 1842,” he wrote,

this strange painting surprised me as much as *The Anatomy Lesson* and the other very curious Rembrandts in the museum at The Hague. Not knowing to whom to attribute it, I consulted the catalogue: “*View of the City of Delft*, from the canal side, by Jan van der Meer of Delft.” Oh! Here’s someone we don’t know in France, and who very much deserves to be known!

“Even after having seen the *Night Watch*, the *Syndics*, and the other wonders of the museum in Amsterdam,” he continued, “I carried back to Paris the indelible memory of this masterpiece.”<sup>1</sup>

Thoré's enthusiasm for Vermeer is unmistakable, and I suspect there are few viewers these days who would find his admiration for the *View of Delft* overstated. But there is also a bit of mythmaking in his narrative, a myth that has in turn become an integral part of Vermeer's afterlife. While Thoré may well have been struck by his initial encounter with this work by an artist hitherto unknown to him, sixteen years would elapse before he commented on the experience in print; and when he finally did so, his verdict on the painting was rather more equivocal.

Eight years before his groundbreaking article on Vermeer, Thoré had published the first of two volumes on the museums of Holland under the pseudonym of W. Bürger—a pseudonym he had adopted after his exile from France for political activity in 1849, and which he would continue to employ for the remainder of his writing career. (*Bürger* of course means “citizen” or “freeman” in German.) Here is his entry on the *View of Delft* in that volume:

In the painting at The Hague, *View of the Town of Delft, from the Canal Side*, he has pushed the impasto to a state of exaggeration that one sometimes encounters today in the work of M. Decamps. One could say that he wanted to build his town with a trowel, and his walls are real mortar. Too much is too much. Rembrandt never fell into these excesses [. . .].

[D]espite this masonry, the *View of Delft* is nonetheless a masterful painting and altogether surprising for art lovers to whom Van der Meer is unfamiliar.

This passage is immediately preceded by a brief account of Vermeer as “a great painter” about whom little is known, as well as short descriptions of two other works by “this strange artist” that Thoré had seen on subsequent visits to Holland: *The Milkmaid* (see fig. 3.7) and *The Little Street* (fig. 1.2), both then in the collection of the Six family in Amsterdam.<sup>2</sup> But it wasn't until the second volume of the book appeared two years later that signs of what Thoré would eventually term his “mania” for the Delft artist were really in evidence.<sup>3</sup>

In the interval, he had been invited to catalogue a collection belonging to the Duke of Arenberg in Brussels, where he encountered yet another painting by this “incomparable original”: the head of a young woman whose mysterious appeal he would later compare to that of the *Mona Lisa*. Though the current fame of the *Girl with a Pearl Earring* might lead us to imagine that hers was the picture in question, the Arenberg painting was in fact another so-called *tronie* (or anonymous head) by Vermeer—the *Study of a Young Woman* that now hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of New York (fig. 1.3). “How has this portrait, with its magisterial strangeness, never attracted much attention?” Thoré wondered. But the mystery on which he most began to dwell was that of the artist himself. The critic had thus far seen only four works identified with this “*Delfsche van der Meer*,” though the very difficulty of distinguishing that name—and its



signature—from its many variants was already proving part of the puzzle. What else did this Van der Meer paint, if anything, and where were those paintings to be found? Who had trained him? How long had he lived? Why, for that matter, did other authorities have so little to say about his work? Such were the questions posed by the figure Thoré began to call “this so provocative sphinx.”<sup>4</sup>

Fig. 12. Johannes Vermeer, *The Little Street* (ca. 1657–61). Oil on canvas. 54.3 × 44 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



Fig. 1.3. Johannes Vermeer, *Study of a Young Woman* (ca. 1665–74). Oil on canvas. 44.5 × 40 cm. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Wrightsman, in memory of Theodore Rousseau Jr., 1979. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Thoré continued to ask such questions—and to answer them—for the rest of his life. By the time the second volume of his *Musées de la Hollande* appeared two years later, his count of the surviving paintings had expanded fourfold, and he was already well on his way to tracking down more. The lengthy article on Vermeer for which he is now best known was the culmination of this process: both a glowing tribute to the art of the Delft master and a record of its author’s obsession with what he still liked to call “my sphinx.”<sup>5</sup> If he’d also managed to convince himself by that point that he had fallen in love with the *View of Delft* at first sight a quarter century earlier, such wishful backdating of his enthusiasm is surely forgivable.<sup>6</sup>

Thoré was not alone in his original ambivalence toward Vermeer's cityscape, a fact to which I shall return shortly. But what I want to emphasize here is neither his initial uneasiness at the painting's "excesses," nor his subsequent change of heart, but the power of his narrative to set the terms for those who came after him—even, or perhaps especially, when his rhetoric slightly exceeded the demonstrable facts.<sup>7</sup> Thoré's account of his first reaction to the *View of Delft* may not have been strictly accurate, but his "indelible memory" of his encounter with the painting made for a memorable opening to his study of the painter, as well as a template for later writers to follow on their own pilgrimages to the Hague.<sup>8</sup> Marcel Proust, who would make one such pilgrimage in 1902, later declared the *View of Delft* "the painting that I most admired in Holland," though it might be more accurate to translate his verb (*aimer*) as "loved" or "adored."<sup>9</sup> Whether or not Proust read Thoré himself, he certainly read those who read him, and it's also hard not to sense the reverberations of the critic's memorable introduction to Vermeer in the famous scene of *À la recherche du temps perdu* in which the writer Bergotte confronts the painting again at an exhibition in Paris—a painting "he remembered as more striking, more different than anything else he knew."<sup>10</sup> Proust's companion on the museum visit in 1921 that inspired this scene was Jean-Louis Vaudoyer, the poet and critic whose three-part article on Vermeer in a Parisian newspaper had originally prompted the ailing novelist to leave his sickbed for a final view of his beloved painting. "Once you have beheld the original," Vaudoyer had written of the *View of Delft*, "the remembrance that you keep of it transfigures any reproduction, and a feast of colors, light, and space immediately floods your memory."<sup>11</sup>

Like virtually everyone who wrote about Vermeer in the half-century after Thoré, Vaudoyer credited him with rescuing the artist "from oblivion," even as he continued to dwell on how much remained unknown about the painter.<sup>12</sup> (His article was entitled "Le mystérieux Vermeer.") Indeed, the image of the Delft artist as "an unknown of genius" may be among the most enduring legacies of Thoré's work, as well as the best example of how the genuine excitement of Vermeer's nineteenth-century revival inevitably became colored by some degree of mythmaking.<sup>13</sup> For if there is no question that the artist's name had fallen into obscurity by the time that Thoré consulted his catalogue in order to learn who had painted the *View of Delft*, it was hardly the case that Vermeer had disappeared from view altogether. The very fact that the catalogue correctly identified him argues otherwise, and so, of course, does the fact that the canvas was hanging in a public museum in the first place. The Royal Cabinet of Paintings at the Mauritshuis, in The Hague, had actually acquired the *View of Delft* in 1822—twenty years before Thoré's initial visit—and it did not come cheap. The price was 2,900 guilders, with the sellers' catalogue at the time of purchase calling it "the most famous painting of this master whose works seldom occur." The "way of painting," the description continued, "is the most audacious, powerful, and masterly one can imagine."<sup>14</sup>

Nor was this the only sign that Vermeer's work had continued to be admired in some quarters long after his death, as recent scholars have demonstrated.<sup>15</sup> Yet much of the evidence they have cited to question the myth of his total disappearance also helps to explain why Thoré could be said, with only slight exaggeration, to have rescued him from obscurity. The allusion to "this master whose works seldom occur" in the advertisement for the *View of Delft* is one such clue, since even as it celebrates Vermeer's achievement it reminds us that the sheer rarity of his paintings in circulation made it all too easy for that achievement to fade from public consciousness.<sup>16</sup> (Recall that Thoré had seen only three other works attributed to him before encountering the picture in the Arenberg collection.) Though we can't be certain why Vermeer produced so little by comparison to his contemporaries, the evidence strongly suggests that he was a slow and contemplative painter, much given to revision, who was partly shielded from the pressures of the market by his acquisition of a wealthy mother-in-law, and still more by a rich patron willing to pay high prices for the finished canvases. The fact that so many of the paintings had already disappeared into a single collection in the artist's lifetime clearly limited their capacity to circulate, though the death of the man who had inherited that collection in 1696—twenty-one years after the artist's own death—produced an auction catalogue that still provides the most authoritative documentation of Vermeer's work from the century in which he flourished. (That catalogue lists twenty-one paintings attributed to him, at least two of which have never been located.)<sup>17</sup>

Vermeer's name had also figured in a description of Delft published in 1667, where a commemorative poem on the premature death of Carel Fabritius—best known today for his marvelous *Goldfinch*—represents the dead artist as a phoenix from whose fires a magisterial Vermeer had arisen.<sup>18</sup> Despite that heady image, however, the standard accounts of Dutch painting in the century that followed scarcely registered his existence. One scholar has plausibly speculated that the damage was done when the earliest and most influential of these accounts, Arnold Houbraken's *Great Theater of Dutch Painting* (1718–21), accidentally skipped the crucial verse praising the artist risen from Fabritius's ashes, since it appears on a separate page from the rest of the poem.<sup>19</sup> Whatever the cause, Houbraken merely named Vermeer in passing, and subsequent authorities managed not to do even that. Nor did reproductive prints after his work help to stimulate the collective memory, as they did for many other Netherlandish artists of the period. The result was a vacuum of knowledge that effectively swallowed up the occasional mentions of Vermeer's art that nonetheless did surface from time to time over the following century, such as Joshua Reynolds's record of a painting he had seen on his journey to Holland in 1781: "A WOMAN pouring milk from one vessel to another" that Reynolds attributed to an artist named "D. Vandermeer."<sup>20</sup>

Even the few who singled Vermeer out for praise tended to imply that no one else had heard of him. In 1792 the French art dealer Jean Baptiste Lebrun



Fig. 1.4. Louis Garreau after Johannes Vermeer, *The Astronomer* (1784). Etching and engraving, as published in Jean Baptiste Pierre Lebrun, *Galerie des peintres flamands, hollandais et allemands* [. . .] (Paris, 1792). © The Trustees of the British Museum

set the pattern for such commentary when he published a brief entry on the artist, together with a rare print after his work—a 1784 engraving of *The Astronomer* (fig. 1.4)—in his so-called *Galerie* of Flemish, Dutch, and German painters. “This Vander Meer, of whom historians have not spoken at all, deserves particular attention,” Lebrun observed, before going on to characterize him as “a very great painter in the manner of Metsu” and noting his special skill at rendering the effects of light.<sup>21</sup>

Nearly a quarter century later, a pair of Dutchmen published a biographical dictionary of Netherlandish artists that did “speak of” Vermeer and singled out the same three paintings—*The Milkmaid*, *The Little Street*, and the *View of Delft*—with which Thoré would later begin. “It goes without saying,” the authors wrote, “that the works of the so-called Delft Ver Meer deserve a place in the most prestigious art collections.”<sup>22</sup> Six years after they delivered this verdict,

the state would acquire the *View of Delft* for the Mauritshuis. But perhaps because Dutch texts circulated less widely than French or German ones, the dictionary's pronouncement seems to have had little immediate impact outside the Netherlands. In 1833 the British picture dealer John Smith began his own brief commentary on the artist, whom he also associated with Metsu, by remarking, "Writers appear to have been entirely ignorant of the works of this excellent artist."<sup>23</sup> Thoré may not have been literally the first to break the silence, in other words, but that was only because the continuing silence had itself been one of the few things his predecessors knew about this "unknown of genius."<sup>24</sup>

And that genius had ironically remained unknown even when viewers were face to face with his work. Indeed, it's possible to argue that Thoré's greatest contribution to Vermeer's afterlife depended not so much on the capacity to see, as on the power to name: rather than observe the beauty of paintings no one had noticed before, what Thoré succeeded in doing was identifying them as Vermeer's. The *View of Delft* was not in fact the first of the artist's works to be displayed in a museum, nor was *The Astronomer* the first to be reproduced as a print; they were only the first to attain those forms of publicity under the name of their creator. A print of the *Girl Reading a Letter* (fig. 1.5) had appeared a year before *The Astronomer* engraving, but the painting it reproduced was then attributed to Govaert Flinck;<sup>25</sup> one of at least three artists, including Rembrandt and Pieter de Hooch, who were credited with the work before it was securely assigned to Vermeer.

*The Music Lesson*, meanwhile, (see fig. 3.10) has been in the Royal Collection at Windsor since the mid-eighteenth century, but was originally acquired as a Frans van Mieris; both the *Officer and Laughing Girl* (see fig. 1.14) in the Frick in New York and *The Art of Painting* (see fig. 3.13) in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna were once attributed to de Hooch; the *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* (see fig. 3.8), now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, twice changed hands in the late 1870s as a Gabriel Metsu; and the *Diana and Her Companions* (see fig. 2.1) at the Rijksmuseum was not officially identified as a Vermeer until the end of the nineteenth century, when curators determined that the signature of Nicholas Maes was a forgery.<sup>26</sup> And this is only a partial list—a fact all the more significant, of course, because the oeuvre was so limited in the first place.

One prominent scholar has sought to question the received narrative about the nineteenth-century recovery of Vermeer by arguing that a number of his canvases had long been admired under other names. But that's precisely the point: not until the oeuvre had been reassembled and identified as his did the artist we now celebrate emerge from obscurity.<sup>27</sup> The project was further complicated by a number of painters with similar names who also flourished in the seventeenth century, as Thoré noted with a mixture of bemusement and despair. There appeared to be a Jan van der Meer of Utrecht, for instance, who did make it into Houbraken's *Great Theater* and who specialized in large figure

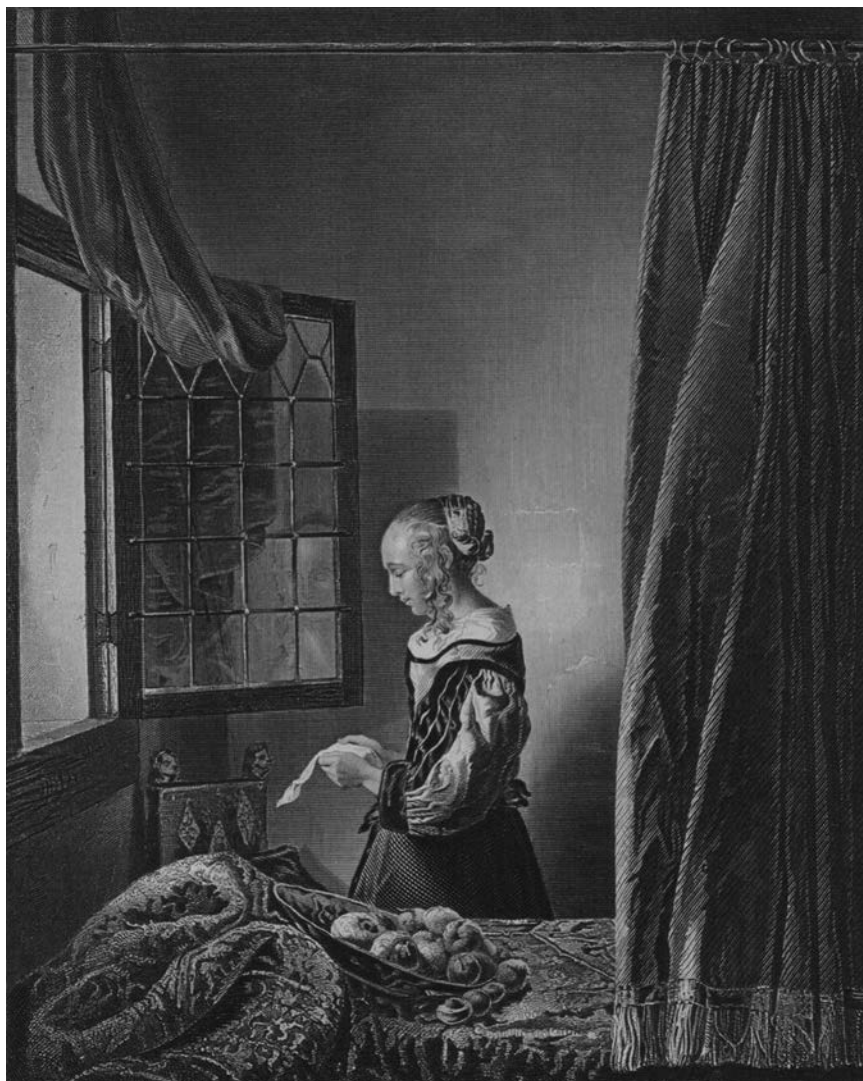


Fig. 1.5. A. H. Riedel Jr. after Govaert Flinck [Johannes Vermeer], *Girl Reading a Letter* (1783). Engraving

paintings; a father and son of the same name, both of Haarlem, who produced landscapes and animal pictures; and a B. van der Meer, listed as the painter of a large still life in the catalogue of the museum at Vienna, as well as a history painter recorded as H. van der Meer in a sales catalogue from Amsterdam—unless either or both of these initials, Thoré speculated, might simply prove to be typographical errors.<sup>28</sup> Hence his obsession with identifying the artist's signature: an exercise he charmingly sought to reproduce in his article (fig. 1.6). Only some of these signatures, incidentally, are now viewed as authentic, but the effort to reconstruct Vermeer's hand, in more than one sense, was key to solving the riddles posed by Thoré's "sphinx."

The surplus of artistic Van der Meers in the period was not the only source of potential confusion. Part of the puzzle, as Thoré saw it, arose from differences

Fig. 1.6. Page from W. Bürger [Théophile Thoré], "Van der Meer de Delft," *Gazette des beaux-arts* (1866)

C'est ce tableau de la galerie Six qui nous sert à authentifier toutes les *Ruelles* de Vermeer, non-seulement par les analogies du ton et de la touche, mais à cause de sa signature :

I. Meer

qui diffère un peu de la signature la plus habituelle sur les tableaux d'intérieur, sur la *Coquette* de Brunswick, sur les *Liseuses*, sur les *Pianistes*, sur la Tête de la galerie d'Arenberg, sur le *Géographe au compas*, sur la *Jeune femme qui se pare*, etc., et qui est

Meer ou Meer

La *Ruelle* de la collection Hudtwalcker à Hambourg est signée :

WEER.

Même signature, un peu fruste, sur ma *Ruelle* exposée aux Champs-Élysées.

L'*Intérieur de béguinage*, petite femme coiffée d'un béguin blanc et appuyée sur une demi-porte (voir la gravure en tête du premier article), est signé :

Meer

internal to Vermeer himself: differences first of all in his handling of the brush, but also in the kind of picture he set out to paint. By the time the second volume of *Musées de la Hollande* appeared in 1860, Thoré was beginning to wrestle with the problem. Having initially been struck by the thick impasto of the *View of Delft*, for instance (see fig. 1.1), he didn't quite know what to make of the thinly painted *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* (see fig. 2.4) that he'd recently seen on a visit to Amsterdam, nor how to reconcile its "very delicate" execution with "the firmness of drawing and modeling" in *The Milkmaid* (see fig. 3.7), another of the paintings that had helped form his early impression of the artist more than a decade before. The *Girl with a Wine Glass* at Brunswick (fig. 1.7)—which, like the *Woman in Blue*, was a recent addition to his list—only seemed to compound the problem, since this "charming" scene apparently resembled the others neither in technique nor subject matter:

I don't know a more delicious genre painting from the whole seventeenth-century Dutch school, including Terborch, Metsu, Jan Steen, and the best of them. Here, Van der Meer is no longer the brusque painter of his landscape in The Hague; what he seeks is no longer the firmness and character of *The Milkmaid* in the Six collection; it is the supreme elegance of this coquette



Fig. 1.7. Johannes Vermeer, *Girl with a Wine Glass* (ca. 1659–60). Oil on canvas, 71 × 67 cm. Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig, Germany. Photo: C. Cordes. bpk Bildagentur / Art Resource, NY

with the fine and elongated figure, the appealing, sensuous, and witty face. The execution is sober, sharp, without impasto [ . . . ]. Terborch does not handle his brush and colors more lightly.<sup>29</sup>

“This devil of an artist no doubt had various styles,” he observed wryly after describing his bafflement at the *Woman in Blue*, and his sense of that variety only intensified as his account of the oeuvre expanded.<sup>30</sup> The last installment of Thoré’s article on the painter six years later consisted of a catalogue with seventy-three entries, loosely divided among figure paintings, cityscapes, and landscapes, including one for still life, and a final number for several further possibilities labeled simply “divers” (various)—the word he’d also used to characterize the style as a whole in the previous discussion. Thoré hadn’t seen all of these canvases himself, and he frankly acknowledged that some of the identifications were tentative or dubious: despite his effort to distinguish one Van der

Meer from another, he also acknowledged that a small galaxy of artists by the same name might still be clustered in his catalogue. “Enough! and perhaps too much,” he ruefully exclaimed as he neared his conclusion. But Thoré remained an enthusiast, and even as he signed off with this endearing concession, he immediately followed up by encouraging others to continue his quest—especially, he emphasized, the quest for more paintings.<sup>31</sup> He might only have uncovered a few facts about the artist’s biography, he’d observed earlier, “but by means of the works, of which I know a great number, I hope almost to recreate the personality of Van der Meer. Don’t people say that we know the worker by the work? The painting reveals the painter.”<sup>32</sup>

As should be obvious by now, the painter potentially revealed by this exercise is only in part the Vermeer generally recognized by modern scholarship. In his eagerness to track down lost work, Thoré had allowed his wishes to outrun the facts, with the result that less than a quarter of the paintings listed in his catalogue are still attributed to the artist. The problem is partly endemic to connoisseurship, especially as it was practiced in an era before technological advances allowed at least some puzzles to be solved scientifically: witness the long-standing debate about the scope of Rembrandt’s oeuvre. But Thoré’s uncertainties were also fueled, I think, by the sequence in which he encountered the paintings, and by his early surprise at the *Woman in Blue*’s apparent departure from the style he first identified with Vermeer’s art. Consider what to our eyes might seem the baffling number of street scenes and landscapes—over twenty—that Thoré listed in his catalogue. While we’ve grown accustomed to thinking of Vermeer as primarily a figure painter, the *View of Delft* and *The Little Street* were two of the first three Vermeers that Thoré saw, and in 1859 he found—or so he imagined—another: “a sort of landscape” that belonged to a wealthy German collector named Barthold Suermondt and that Thoré immediately christened *The Rustic Cottage* (fig. 1.8). At one time attributed to Hobbema and at another to Ruisdael, the picture had recently been ascribed to the Dutch landscape painter Philip Koninck by the director of the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, Gustav Waagen, who had just completed a catalogue of Suermondt’s collection. But for Thoré, whose prior experience had convinced him that one of Vermeer’s “specialties” was to paint houses, both the picture’s subject—“the *portrait* of a house, full-face view, and almost filling the canvas!”—and “the magic” of its light clearly pointed to the creator of *The Little Street* and the *View of Delft*. Drawing on comparisons to both pictures, Thoré devoted more than five pages of an essay accompanying Waagen’s catalogue to making his case. *The Rustic Cottage*, he announced, “is incontestably a work—a masterpiece—of Jan van der Meer of Delft, and M. Suermondt has come round to my opinion.”<sup>33</sup>

Scholars now attribute the picture to Dirk Jan van der Laan, a minor Dutch painter who flourished more than a century after Vermeer. But having convinced himself of its authenticity at an early stage of his “mania,” Thoré inevitably



Fig. 1.8. Dirk Jan van der Laan, *The Rustic Cottage* (late 18th/early 19th century). Oil on canvas. 49.5 × 41.4 cm. Photo Jörg P. Anders. Gemädelgalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin. bpk Bildagentur / Art Resource, NY

looked for others like it, and it became part of the foundation on which his idea of the artist was constructed.<sup>34</sup> From the late 1850s until his death in 1869, Thoré increasingly acted both as an informal advisor to wealthy collectors like Suermondt and as a small collector in his own right, whose treasured acquisitions would include several authentic Vermeers, as well as more than one “little street” he mistakenly ascribed to the artist. (Among his other prized paintings was Fabritius’s *Goldfinch*.) In 1866, a few months before the first installment of “Van der Meer de Delft” was due to appear in the *Gazette des beaux-arts*, Thoré deliberately set out to gin up publicity for his beloved painter by arranging for eleven works attributed to him to be included in a so-called *Exposition rétrospective* attached to the Paris Salon. The effort succeeded—“our Vermeer is on his way,” he wrote triumphantly to Suermondt the following year<sup>35</sup>—even if this was another occasion on which Thoré’s enthusiasm outran his knowledge: only four of the canvases, including two from his own collection, are now viewed as

Fig. 1.9. Jacobus Vrel, *Street Scene* (ca. 1654–62). Oil on panel. 41.3 × 34 cm. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles



genuine. *The Rustic Cottage*, ironically, was a crowd favorite, as was another landscape from the Suermondt collection, a *View of Dunes* signed “J. v. Meer” that turns out to have been painted by one of the master’s lesser namesakes, Dirk Jan van der Meer. Critics were especially taken by the “harmony” and “poetry” of a *Street Scene* (fig. 1.9) that belonged to Thoré himself: one of two such “Vermeers” in his possession that would later be recognized as the work of Jacobus Vrel.<sup>36</sup>

Thoré, to his credit, increasingly began to question his attribution of those paintings, though he never abandoned his belief in *The Rustic Cottage*.<sup>37</sup> It didn’t take long, however, for others to cast doubt on that picture too. As early as 1882 the young Dutch art historian Abraham Bredius published a short article entitled “A Pseudo-Vermeer in the Berlin Gallery,” in which he attributed the painting to Van Laan, while scornfully dismissing those who had managed to confuse the Delft master with an artist who lived more than a century later.<sup>38</sup> But the particular association of Vermeer with the art of landscape lingered in

some quarters well after Bredius's demolition work. "Every bend in the road shows a fresh picture such as Vermeer alone of masters might have hoped to paint," one American travel writer gushed of a visit to Holland in 1912.<sup>39</sup> In a climactic scene of *The Outcry*, a relatively little-known novel by Henry James published in 1911, a young British connoisseur named Hugh Crimble outsmarts a wealthy American collector, loosely modeled on J. P. Morgan, by identifying a "small landscape" that the collector has "rapidly studied and denounced." The landscape belongs to an impecunious aristocrat whose collection of paintings the American, Breckenridge Bender, is hoping to plunder and ship off to the United States. "For what do you take that little picture?" inquires the aristocrat's daughter, who has heard about Bender's quick dismissal of the landscape as a "bogus Cuyp":

Hugh Crimble went over and looked. "Why, don't you know? It's a jolly little Vandermeer of Delft."

"It's not a base imitation?"

He looked again, but appeared at a loss. "An imitation of Vandermeer?"

"Mr. Bender thinks of Cuyp."

It made the young man ring out: "Then Mr. Bender's doubly dangerous!"<sup>40</sup>

Hugh's final triumph will ride on his identification of another rare painting, but it's his eye for the "little Vandermeer" that first certifies him both to the reader and to the young woman he will eventually marry. James, who seems to have known little about Vermeer apart from his new prominence among the cognoscenti, was almost certainly unaware of the historical irony that attends his hero's demonstration of critical prowess. Bredius had not only contested the authenticity of *The Rustic Cottage*: he had reassigned it to a painter who was in fact a Vermeer imitator.<sup>41</sup>

Some of the riddles posed by Thoré's "sphinx" were clearly of the critic's own making. But retrospective smugness about such errors is rarely warranted, especially regarding an artist whose paintings had long been assigned to others and whose oeuvre remains partly in dispute even today.<sup>42</sup> Bredius himself, for that matter, would later fall victim to one of Han van Meegeren's most spectacular forgeries. Though scholars sometimes question whether Thoré's role in Vermeer's recovery has been exaggerated, both the doggedness of his research and the power of his rhetoric surely made him the preeminent agent of the artist's revival.<sup>43</sup> But Thoré, of course, did not act alone, and the very fact that he could rely on the infrastructure of a nascent art world to take up and amplify his work was crucial to the success of his enterprise. Indeed, many of the same conditions that helped to make a career like his possible also help to explain how and why there was a public ripe for his discoveries. If Vermeer's virtual disappearance in the eighteenth century was partly the result of accident, the timing of his reemergence, by contrast, seems overdetermined.

As Thoré himself acknowledged, he was not the only writer to notice Vermeer at mid-century. Between 1858, when the first volume of *Musées de la Hollande* appeared, and 1866, when “Van der Meer de Delft” was published, a number of colleagues in France and Germany likewise commented on the artist’s work—often, but not always, in direct response to one another. Thoré accompanied his own early account of the *View of Delft* by citing previous remarks on the painting by two contemporary writers—Maxime DuCamp and Théophile Gautier—the former of whom, at least, seems also to have been struck by Vermeer’s liberal use of impasto. (DuCamp called Vermeer “a rugged painter, who proceeds by flat colors, broadly applied”; Gautier praised his “incredible force, precision, and fidelity of tone.”)<sup>44</sup> In his *Histoires des peintres de toutes les écoles* of 1861, the art critic Charles Blanc recalled his own initial distaste at the painting’s execution, which he’d found “coarse, with a brutal impasto and a monotonous appearance,” before describing how he’d been pleasantly surprised by the “marvelous” light of *The Milkmaid*, among other Vermeers “of rare merit” that had recently been restored to the public’s attention. Blanc, who now deemed Vermeer an artist “of the first strength,” duly credited Thoré for much of this recovery work, though he couldn’t resist a slight dig at the obsessive character of the quest: “Entirely devoted to his love [. . .] for this excellent painter that he’s brought to light, M. Bürger now sees the *Delftsche* a little bit everywhere.”<sup>45</sup>

Vermeer, as Ben Broos has observed, was clearly “in the air” around 1860.<sup>46</sup> In an article of that year the critic Paul Mantz singled out *The Geographer* (fig. 1.10) as “the capital piece” in the Dumont collection at Cambrai, even as he begged pardon for describing this latest find before Thoré himself, “whose patient studies of this master, recently famous—thanks to him—would naturally assign him the honor of speaking about it first.”<sup>47</sup>

It’s less clear whether Edmond de Goncourt had been reading Thoré when he recorded his own first impression of the *View of Delft* in his journal of 1861, though his suggestion that its “astonishing” creator was the unacknowledged precursor of the French Romantic painter Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps (1803–1860) echoes Thoré’s reference to the same artist in his first comments on the picture. (*The Milkmaid*, by contrast, prompted Goncourt to thoughts of his beloved Chardin.)<sup>48</sup> On at least one occasion, however, Thoré left no doubt as to who was reading whom, since the second volume of the *Musées* (1860) explicitly credited a catalogue compiled two years earlier by Gustav Waagen with identifying the *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* in Dresden (fig. 1.11)—a painting that had hitherto been ascribed to de Hooch, but which Waagen had recognized as the work of that “so excellent and rare master, whom the Dutch call the *Delftsche* Van der Meer.” This was the same Waagen who’d supposedly been so wrong about *The Rustic Cottage*, but in this case Thoré was happy to pronounce him right.<sup>49</sup>

Even more happily from Thoré’s perspective, the report of the Dresden picture had prompted him to visit the museum himself, where he not only



confirmed Waagen's attribution but made a discovery of his own—another large Vermeer hanging in plain view and serendipitously placed, as Thoré saw it, “right above one of the most precious paintings in the entire collection, the portrait of ‘Rembrandt holding his wife Saskia on his lap!’” The painting, now known as *The Procuress* (fig. 1.12), was then ascribed to Jacob van der Meer of Utrecht, but Thoré, who'd persuaded museum officials to let him mount a ladder for a closer look, succeeded in spotting not just the anticipated signature, but a date—1656—under the name: the first such record of which he was

Fig. 110. Johannes Vermeer, *The Geographer* (1669). Oil on canvas. 53 × 46.6 cm. Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt. bpk Bildagentur / Art Resource, NY



Fig. 1.11. Johannes Vermeer, *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (ca. 1657–59), before restoration. Oil on canvas. 83 × 64.5 cm. Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden. Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY



Fig. 1.12. Johannes Vermeer, *The Procuress* (1656). Oil on canvas. 143 × 130 cm. Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden. bpk Bildagentur / Art Resource, NY

aware, and one of only four that are recognized today. (The others are the *Saint Praxedis* [1655], *The Astronomer* [1668], and *The Geographer* [1669].) For Thoré, the discovery did more than fill in a crucial bit of Vermeer's biography, though having previously known only the artist's birthdate, he had reason enough to be excited by that. Both the coincidental placing of the picture and the evidence that it was painted around the time when similar artists were thought to have been working in Rembrandt's studio reinforced Thoré's conviction that Vermeer, too, had been a pupil of Rembrandt.<sup>50</sup> That conviction would prove almost certainly mistaken, but Thoré had a profound investment in the image of the artist it created: an image quite removed, as we shall see, from the Vermeer soon to be championed as a proto-modernist.<sup>51</sup>

In all this back-and-forth, it can sometimes be hard to judge who spotted what first. As early as 1859, for instance, Thoré had publicly speculated that *The Art of Painting* in Vienna—a work he knew only from a printed description—was “an authentic Vermeer” rather than the work of de Hooch, though he admitted that he had yet to see the canvas for himself.<sup>52</sup> Official credit for the

attribution therefore belongs to Waagen, whose *Handbook of the Dutch and Netherlandish Schools of Painting*, published three years later, characterized it as “one of the most beautiful works of the master from his mature period.”<sup>53</sup> Waagen claimed that he had made the identification in 1860, which prompted an apparently injured Thoré to note in his catalogue of 1866 that he’d already anticipated his German colleague—a bit of exaggeration for which he’s been tacitly scolded by a modern scholar.<sup>54</sup> But such squabbles are finally far less consequential for the story I tell here than the very conditions that made them possible. Art historical research of the kind that Thoré and the others practiced was a comparatively new phenomenon in the mid-nineteenth century, and it is very hard to imagine Vermeer’s recovery without the overlapping networks of publication and exhibition that undergirded their efforts—as well, of course, as the burgeoning art market, whose wealthiest participants would also prove critical to the artist’s reputation in subsequent decades.

The initial encounter with the *View of Delft* that Thoré would later transform into an “indelible memory” was itself a consequence of such institutional change, since he had only traveled to Holland because of his involvement in a new arts organization—dubbed the “Alliance des Arts”—that he had co-founded with another French journalist, Paul Lacroix.<sup>55</sup> Dedicated to cataloguing and analyzing—rather than merely listing—works of art, the organization would not endure for very long, but the technical experience it afforded Thoré would remain a permanent part of his arsenal. Lacroix in turn went on to inaugurate the first professional arts journal in France, the *Revue universelle des arts*, in 1855; three years later it would publish Thoré’s initial account of that “unknown of genius,” Jan van der Meer of Delft. The *Gazette des beaux-arts* had only been around for seven years when it ran his major article on the painter, though it would remain one of the most influential sources for connoisseurship and art history for over a century. The *Gazette des beaux-arts* was also the venue Paul Mantz had chosen for his earlier report on Vermeer’s *Geographer*, issued a year after the journal’s founding: one more sign of how closely entwined was the artist’s rebirth with this nascent infrastructure for circulating such news.<sup>56</sup>

Compared to commentators on the Continent, where a French critic named Henry Havard would follow up his own articles in the same journal by publishing a short book on Vermeer in 1888, the British were relatively slow to devote whole monographs to the artist. But from 1867, when the *Art-Journal* offered a brief account of Thoré’s findings, until the early months of 1901, when reports of a newly discovered painting by the artist at a London dealer’s first appeared in periodicals and newspapers, scarcely a year passed without multiple invocations of what the *Saturday Review* would call in 1886 “the magic name of Vermeer of Delft.”<sup>57</sup> (The painting discovered in 1901 was *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* [fig. 1.13]). Many of these contributions remained anonymous, as was then common journalistic practice, but a number were initialed or signed, and the authors of others have since been identified, as in the case of



“The New National Gallery at Amsterdam” published by *Macmillan’s* in 1885, that turns out to have been written by Mary Augusta (“Mrs. Humphry”) Ward, the woman soon to become famous for the bestselling novel *Robert Elsmere* (1888). Certain names, however, appear again and again, and all would figure prominently in the institutionalization of the late Victorian art world: the critic and novelist Frederick Wedmore, whose *Masters of Genre Painting*, published in 1880, may have been the first book in English to include an extended discussion of Vermeer; Sidney Colvin, Slade Professor of Fine Art and the first director

Fig. 113. Johannes Vermeer, *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (ca. 1654–56). Oil on canvas. 160 × 142 cm. National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh. © National Galleries of Scotland, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY

of the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge, as well as for many years the keeper of prints and drawings at the British Museum; Claude Phillips, who would become the first keeper of the Wallace Collection when it opened in 1900, and his successor, the Scottish watercolorist, art critic, and former keeper of the Tate, Dugald Sutherland MacColl; the newspaper critic Walter Armstrong, who served from 1892 until 1914 as director of the National Gallery of Ireland; and—perhaps most intriguingly—the Pre-Raphaelite painter Henry Wallis, best known then and now for his 1856 canvas *The Death of Chatterton*. “Such is his fascination,” Wallis would write of the Delft painter in 1877, “that having seen a picture of his one becomes his fervid admirer.”<sup>58</sup>

In both Europe and America, of course, the Vermeer revival was part of a larger shift of taste toward the painting of everyday life, a taste in turn driven by the increasing democratization of the viewing public in a bourgeois century. Thoré, whose very pseudonym (Bürger: “citizen”) made his allegiances clear, had preceded his pioneering article on the Delft master with two volumes on the museums of Holland that spoke explicitly for such preferences, by contrasting the progressive “art for man” created by the freedom-loving Dutch with the backward-looking work he associated with the popes and princes of Renaissance Italy.<sup>59</sup> Paradoxically, however, his revival of Vermeer came at a moment when the kind of humanism he championed was about to be partly eclipsed by artistic developments that would make the work of his beloved “sphinx” feel all the more timely.<sup>60</sup> Vermeer was obviously not an Impressionist, but the recovery of his intensely optical paintings, with their striking color harmonies and close attention to the behavior of light, can seem exquisitely calibrated to the decade in which it took place. Nor was such proto-impressionism the only ground that the contemporary art world began to find for identifying with the Delft master. The word “modern” doesn’t figure in Thoré’s account of Vermeer, but, as we shall see, it didn’t take long for it to enter the lexicon.

Vermeer’s revival didn’t depend on words alone, of course, though it’s not the least of the ironies that attend his reception that the painter who had been among the most unliterary of his seventeenth-century peers—this “painter’s painter,” as he would come to be called—should owe much of his second life to acts of writing.<sup>61</sup> As many commentators have noted, Vermeer reemerged at a time when a new mechanism for producing images seemed to many eyes like the fulfillment of techniques he’d perfected. But if the rise of photography in the period is yet another reason why the nineteenth-century revival of Vermeer feels overdetermined, the verbal analogy between his light-obsessed work and the new medium seems to have circulated before reproductive technologies made it feasible to accompany printed texts with photographs of the paintings themselves. In a journal entry of 1861 Edmond de Goncourt already made the analogy explicit, by describing the painter of *The Little Street* (see fig. 1.2) as “the only master who has made of the brick house of that country a daguerreotype brought to life.”<sup>62</sup> Writing for the *British Journal of Photography* in



1891, the American printmaker—and future biographer of Whistler—Joseph Pennell apparently inaugurated the still persistent obsession with the artist’s own possible use of the camera obscura, when he registered what he called the “photographic scale” of objects in the *Officer and Laughing Girl* (fig. 1.14).<sup>63</sup>

As best I can tell, however, the earliest photographically illustrated study of Vermeer didn’t appear until the following century: a 1908 book by the Belgian novelist, playwright, and art critic Gustave Vanzype, whose reproductions would in turn serve Proust as a sort of aide-mémoire after his visit to the exhibition that partly inspired his novel’s famous scene with the *View of*

Fig. 1.14. Johannes Vermeer, *Officer and Laughing Girl* (ca. 1655–60). Oil on canvas. 50.5 × 46 cm. Frick Collection, New York. Image © Frick Collection

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