The New Criterion

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OK, Cupid?

by Julia Friedman

"A 'new' Vermeer in Dresden"—the title of a press release recently put out by the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden—is not journalistic hyperbole. While Johannes Vermeer's *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (*ca.* 1657–59) is, technically speaking, not a new object in the collection of the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, it is certainly a new painting, if by "painting" one means a two-dimensional work of art with a distinct blueprint of visual, semantic, and iconographic content. By this definition, the former version and the partially restored one differ drastically. A recent reevaluation of x-rays and infrared reflectography confirms that, when the canvas left Vermeer's studio in the late 1650s, it contained an image within an image: a painting of Cupid that took up the entire upper right quadrant of the canvas.

Contrary to the prevailing assumption that Cupid was overpainted by Vermeer (the image in the background was first detected in the late 1970s), experts now agree that the change postdates the artist's death in 1675. In view of this discovery, the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, in consultation with outside experts, decided to restore the painting to its original condition, removing a layer of paint that obscured the Cupid. The restoration has been temporarily halted while the painting goes on public display. With the addition of this pivotal iconographic component in the background, the subject matter—a girl reading a letter—remains unchanged, but the content of the painting is transformed into a commentary on an amorous relationship. The open contextual possibilities of the former version are now fixed by the elaborate, yet unambiguous content of the restored one.

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For more than three centuries, *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* merely depicted a young woman in profile reading a letter before an open window. A red curtain, hanging from above the

upper left corner of the painting, is pulled towards the back wall, falling loosely over the windowpane. Its draped-over portion, visible through the sectioned glass, outlines the three-quarter reflection of the woman's profile. Her figure is framed on all sides: by the window in front, the formerly blank wall on the right, and a generously proportioned table on the left. The table is covered with a bunched-up carpet topped with a still life—a tilted platter of fruit spilling out in the fashion of a cornucopia. Another partially drawn foreground curtain, this one green, obscures the view of the right third of the scene, serving as a *répoussoir*. The vanishing point is located behind the woman's head, a choice that Jørgen Wadum, in his discussion of the painting for the catalogue of a 1996 exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., described as "irrational."

Wadum explained this unusual placement by its alignment with the bottom of the overpainted Cupid. At the time of the blockbuster Vermeer show at the nga, this picture within the picture was assumed to have been an early stage in the painting's development, eschewed by Vermeer himself. Wadum credited its removal to Vermeer's wish to "obscure the meaning," placing the emphasis on the painting's enigmatic sensuality instead. Wadum's article even included a reconstruction of the painting with the Cupid image and the table seen in its entirety, but without the green curtain in the foreground.

The half-restored version of Vermeer's Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window *(left) and the former version (right). Photo: © Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden / Wolfgang Kreische.*

In its restored version, *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* will feature both the green curtain

and the freshly uncovered painting of Cupid in an ebony frame, familiar from Vermeer's *Young Woman Standing at the Virginal* (*ca.* 1670–72, National Gallery, London). Reinserting the Cupid not only asserts the painting's romantic content, but also turns the green curtain into a semantically loaded prop that covers just enough of the picture within the picture to emphasize the evolving nature of love. In the fully uncovered variation known from the National Gallery painting, the Cupid's raised left arm is holding a piece of blank paper. In the *Girl Reading a Letter*, his arm is almost entirely obscured by the green curtain—now not only a compositional barrier, but also a metaphorical one. The *répoussoir* curtain doubles as a teaser: while the bow and the chubby nakedness reveal the actor, his gesture remains a mystery. With the Cupid in the picture, the Dresden painting loses its familiar cogency, leaving it open to what Umberto Eco called "aberrant decoding." It is easy to misinterpret the message when it is meant to be specific, and yet many of its fragments are literally hidden from view.

What happens when a painting is unmuted?

Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window is one of six paintings in which Vermeer depicted a young woman reading, writing, or receiving a letter. The scholarly consensus is that, among the thirty-five works attributed to the artist, these "letter" paintings stand out by avoiding the anecdotal while remaining circumspect about their subjects' emotions. The very silence inherent in writing and reading letters encourages silence on the part of the beholder. In the absence of an explicit narrative, the innate tranquility and the frugal elegance of Vermeer's compositions strike a chord with contemporary audiences who see his work as a visual equivalent of poetry, creating a space for solace and contemplation that is all too rare today. According to Ivan Gaskell's eponymous book (2000), "Vermeer's wager" was his reliance on the viewer apprehending "complex pictorial abstraction purely visually" and "evading language." Before its current restoration, Dresden's *Girl* was one of these silent "letter" paintings that invited meditation, and one of only two (along with the 1666–67 *Mistress and Maid* in the Frick Collection) without any iconographic cue from paintings or maps in the background, making the painting even less vulnerable to unequivocal interpretations. *Girl* emanates inwardness and calm, and the process of silent reading of the letter on canvas signals what the philosopher Mary Bittner Wiseman calls Vermeer's "art of silence," or what the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden's press release refers to as the painting's "mute" quality.

So what happens when a painting is unmuted? Bryan Jay Wolf's grim prognosis, laid out in his 2001 monograph *Vermeer and the Invention of Seeing*, is that the work would not survive the passage from inside to outside. Since Vermeer's "metaphors of silence" are contingent on the viewers' "beyondness," observers are not supposed to know what his subjects are thinking. Any intrusion results in an irretrievable loss of silence, and with it the magic of the painting.

Wiseman, on the other hand, sees the availability of information in the restored picture as a challenge. In her view, "the task of the viewer of a canvas by Vermeer is to get beyond mere

identification of the pictured scene . . . to recognize the silence pervading the canvas as a metaphor for the reality and the separateness of the minds of the depicted figures." Her solution is that the viewers should "*bear witness*" without intruding into the privacy of the world within Vermeer's paintings. Will the *Girl*'s silent poetry survive the arrows of the reclaimed Cupid?

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