The Intersections of Domesticity and Globalization in Vermeer’s Young Woman with a Water Pitcher (1662)

Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer is known for presenting intimate views into the lives of men and women – though mostly women – in his mid-seventeenth century paintings. His œuvre, despite only comprising 36 known works, helps define the domestic realm of the Netherlands during an era of burgeoning globalization and expansion.¹ Vermeer’s Young Woman With a Water Pitcher (Fig. 1, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), an oil on canvas dated to 1662 and measuring 45.7 cm x 40.6 centimeters, illustrates a domestic scene of a woman opening her window while holding a metal water pitcher.² The intimacy of this scene is juxtaposed by the presence of a large map of the Seventeen Provinces of the Netherlands on the wall.³ The richness of the materials – textiles, metals, and pearls – in the woman’s home further indicates a cultural and financial wealth made possible by the expansion of trade between the Netherlands and other countries in Vermeer’s day. In this scene of a young woman’s daily routine, Vermeer explores how the lives of a particular class of Dutch people were touched by the transformation of the Netherlands into a global economy. Yet, while the economy served as a benefit to some, it was a ruin to others who lost their freedom to slavery.

By the time Vermeer produced this painting, the Dutch East India Company, or Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC), having been formed about 60 years prior, had

become the most powerful trading corporation in the world, contributing vast wealth to the Dutch economy.\textsuperscript{4} The VOC controlled many ports in Holland, sending thousands of ships from the Netherlands to Asia every year to trade in textiles, spices, porcelain, and other valuable objects.\textsuperscript{5} For \textit{Young Woman With a Water Pitcher}, Vermeer painted a map hanging on the back wall of the young woman’s room, which echoes this newfound internationally-based Dutch wealth, a theme recurrent throughout his corpus of domestic portraiture. This map of the Seventeen Provinces of the Netherlands has been attributed to the seventeenth-century Dutch cartographer Huyck Allart.\textsuperscript{6} In addition to the geographic features of the Netherlands, it includes an ornate cartouche – a drawing representing a folded scroll – depicting images of ships and the spoils of trade.\textsuperscript{7} The presence of the unique cartouche, which contains the map’s graphic scale, proves the identification of the map as Allart’s.\textsuperscript{8}

The material and cultural wealth gained from Dutch globalization are physically represented by objects in the young woman’s room. Her neatly-trimmed yellow jacket and deep blue skirt insinuate a kind of luxurious elegance and refinement that most likely was not present or available to much of the non-globalized world.\textsuperscript{9} Indeed, the deliberate rendering of refinement is a defining feature of this painting. The young woman’s starched and ironed head covering – called a \textit{hoofddoek} – reflects the soft Netherlandish light coming in through the leaded-glass window.\textsuperscript{10} The metallic sheen of the silver water pitcher and its matching dish reflect light as


\textsuperscript{5} Brook.

\textsuperscript{6} Welu, “Vermeer,” 534.

\textsuperscript{7} Welu.

\textsuperscript{8} Welu, 535.


well, causing the viewer to notice the opulence present in usually quotidian objects. Vermeer used a popular style in Dutch painting at the time, *trompe l’oeil*, to make it appear to the viewer that the water pitcher is actually made of metal, in order to make the lavishness of the scene almost tangible.\(^\text{11}\) Another spoil from trade, a deep red plush Turkish carpet with an intricate vegetal pattern covers the table on which the water pitcher sits. Next to the dish is a wooden jewelry box with carved animal motifs, out of which spills a string of pearls and a velvet blue ribbon. The young woman depicted in this painting is clearly of the upper class, a beneficiary of goods and wealth from Dutch trade with other cultures. The comfort of this domestic existence is the direct result of international trade, a material dialogue that Vermeer seems to embrace in *Young Woman With a Water Pitcher*.

Although much of the Dutch wealth during this period of globalization came from the trade of valuable commodities such as spices, silk, and tea, citizens also enjoyed sweeping prosperity enabled by slavery and colonization.\(^\text{12}\) From the sixteenth-century and throughout Vermeer’s lifetime, the Netherlands was a global slave empire.\(^\text{13}\) The country transported hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans across international borders with the intent to sell and exploit their labor for over two centuries.\(^\text{14}\) This reality, when juxtaposed with the idealized lifestyles that the women portrayed in Vermeer’s paintings were enjoying, challenges purely formal interpretations of his work. In order for the woman in *Young Woman With a Water Pitcher* to have the comfortable lifestyle that she enjoys, surrounded by objects from foreign,

\(^{11}\) Blankert, *Vermeer of Delft*, 20.
\(^{13}\) Nimako and Willemsen.
\(^{14}\) Nimako and Willemsen.
exotic cultures, men and women were taken from their homes, often in Dutch colonized
countries, and subjected to lives of abuse.

Scholars often compare Vermeer’s *Young Woman With a Water Pitcher* to a slightly
earlier work titled *The Milkmaid*, which depicts a young woman pouring milk from an
earthenware jug into a saucer (Fig. 2, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam). However, despite the
similarity in subject matter – both women completing household chores in deep concentration –
the essences of the compositions are in actuality quite different. The woman portrayed in *The
Milkmaid* clearly belongs to a lower class of Dutch society than the young woman in the later
painting. She is much stockier than her water-pouring companion and bears a ruddier
complexion. Her costume is less expensive-looking, with visible stitching at the sleeves and
collar, as if her dress had been mended on multiple occasions. Her sleeves are rolled up past her
elbows to allow for more freedom of movement in labor. Physically, Vermeer handled the paint
differently in the two paintings as well: in *The Milkmaid*, the strokes are somewhat course, while
in the later rendering, the paint is applied more smoothly, thus highlighting the refinement of its
subject.\(^{15}\) Finally, the walls in *The Milkmaid* are bare and show cracked paint, which stands in
stark contrast to the ornate map hanging behind the wealthier young woman.

The contrasts between the two paintings could represent class differences present in one
household, with the maid, at work in a kitchen, unable to aspire towards worldly spoils enjoyed
by her mistress outside the frame of the scene – someone akin to the young woman seen in
*Young Woman With a Water Pitcher*. Or, *The Milkmaid* can be viewed as a portrayal of the
realities of a working class home. Whichever is the case, this painting shows a quite different

view of Dutch social life, one untouched by the prosperity of globalization and an interconnected world. The two scenes, then, while at first appearing similar, are more distinct than they are alike. This makes evident Vermeer’s awareness of the effects of globalization, resulting in the marked divergence seen between the emergent Burgher class, as illustrated in *Young Woman With a Water Pitcher*, and the lower socioeconomic strata, such as rendered in *The Milkmaid*.

The domestic woman – represented in both paintings, albeit differently – was a popular subject in Dutch painting throughout the seventeenth-century. Those of wealthier classes, illustrating Dutch success, were more desirable among artistic patrons. In response, Vermeer painted various images of young women in corners of rooms, many displaying wealthy decor and maps of the Netherlands or the world hung on the walls. These images would have appealed to a sense of Dutch nationalism and pride, causing patrons to think of their own Dutch families. *Young Woman With a Water Pitcher* features such a romanticized image of a young woman surrounded by the spoils of Dutch international trade and a map of the great country that made it all possible. All the same, Vermeer was not wildly successful in his lifetime, as he lacked many patrons. Despite his posthumous fame, while he lived, he was considered no more than a provincial Dutch painter, certainly not the master many revere him as today. It is possible that he painted such glorified portraits of women and the spoils of trade in order to attract commissions (quite possibly to support his growing family; he had eleven children with his wife,

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16 Wieseman, *Vermeer’s Women*, 80.
17 Wieseman.
Indeed, after Vermeer’s death, Bolnes had to sell many of his paintings to ward off bankruptcy.

While globalization provided subjects of inspiration to Vermeer in paintings such as *Young Woman With a Water Pitcher*, it is imperative to remember the millions of lives ruined as a result of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade in which the Netherlands participated. Although Vermeer’s painting portrays a beautiful image of stillness and serenity in an environment fortunate enough to receive the gifts of trade, this reality was not present for most. One cannot know for sure the nature of Vermeer’s intention in including the maps in his paintings – whether it was to curry favor with art patrons by encouraging Dutch nationalism, to signal an awareness of what Dutch labor depended on, or for something else entirely. Nevertheless, any viewer of this painting today must take into consideration the social context in which it was created. This includes the exploited peoples whose labor funded the lifestyles of Dutch Burghers. The young woman with the porcelain skin and starched outfit holding a gleaming pitcher of water in front of an open window did not stand alone. As the map behind her reflects, the Dutch trading world extended far beyond her small room; parts of this world were far less tranquil and romantic than this masterpiece would have us know.

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20 Blankert.
ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1. Johannes Vermeer, *Young Woman With a Water Pitcher*, ca. 1662. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Fig. 2. Johannes Vermeer, *The Milkmaid*, ca. 1660. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


