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Restoration Without Reflection: Author Neil Thomas Proto on Vermeer, Helen Frick, and the Lost Art of Moral Imagination

BY WORLD ART NEWS ON NOVEMBER 22, 2025 · (LEAVE A COMMENT)

The newly reopened and renovated Frick Collection—once the New York home of the Henry Clay Frick family—was celebrated, in part, through the thematic exhibition (June 18–September 8) of three paintings by the Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer. Titled “Vermeer’s Love Letters,” the exhibition melds aesthetically into the building’s subtly retained grandeur. But not into Henry Clay Frick’s history and that of the people who once lived in the home, especially his daughter Helen, who battled with John D. Rockefeller Jr. publicly, privately, and in courts of law to preserve her father’s original purpose for the Collection. And the exhibition does not meld aesthetically into Johannes Vermeer’s purpose. Neither the theme of the exhibit nor the titles of the three paintings were provided by Vermeer, reflect his imperatives, or describe the paintings’ content.

In its timidity, the Frick Collection chose to white out its most boldly engaging and uniquely appealing narrative as an art and cultural institution: the real-world forces and people that tempered Henry and Helen Clay Frick. And robed in its faulty foundational premise and in the absent recognition of real-world forces and people that tempered Vermeer, the exhibition and celebration are, predictably, a “pudding in search of a theme.”

There remains, however, a shining star in the debut. The exhibition clarified the dispute between two schools of thought—the Golden Age Apologists, reflected in the exhibition’s rationale, versus the New Vermeer Realists, given life by Professor Timothy Brook in Vermeer’s Hat (2006); by Harvard’s Teju Cole in a 2023 New York Times article, “Seeing Beyond the Beauty of a Vermeer”; and in Johannes Vermeer, Provocateur: Risk and Courage in Dissent (2025), my own book about who Vermeer was, what he painted, and what is portrayed in his paintings. If there is boldness to the reopening’s narrative, it is found there.

“Vermeer’s Love Letters” centers on three paintings by Vermeer (1632–1675): Mistress and Maid (ca. 1664-1667, The Frick Collection, New York); Woman Writing a Letter with Her Maid (ca.1670-1672, National Gallery of Ireland); and The Love Letter (ca. 1669–1670,Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam).

Johannes Vermeer, Woman Writing a Letter, with her Maid (c.1670). National Gallery of Ireland. Presented, Sir Alfred and Lady Beit, 1987. Beit Collection

None of these titles, singularly or collectively, were provided by Vermeer—and none of the paintings reflect a "love letter." The content of the accompanying coffee table book by Dr. Robert Fucci, lecturer at the University of Amsterdam and guest curator of the exhibition, only amplified the flaws in the exhibition's portrayal of the paintings.

Dr. Fucci begins by disavowing that Vermeer had a personality or unique moral compass that might be reflected in his work. Fucci writes about—and the exhibition is premised on—Vermeer's paintings as "falling broadly into a category called high-life genre painting." With these words, Fucci seeks to define Vermeer and the influence of others on these three paintings by looking at an artificial classification: "genre." Classifications such as "high-life" and "love letter" were not created or recognized by the Dutch in Vermeer's era.

The word "genre" doesn't emerge in English until the 18th century, borrowed from the French. It refers to a modern classification system created by art historians hundreds of years after Vermeer created the paintings. "In Vermeer's time," Vermeer historian Jonathan Janson wrote in The Essential Vermeer online, "there was no such catch-all definition to describe scenes of daily life."

The authoritative source Fucci relies on to support his premise, Adriaan E. Waiboer's Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Paintings (2017), further undermines the classification's legitimacy. Waiboer writes, "Individual cases of cross-fertilization [between and among artists] . . . have not been recorded. This means that all connections referred to in this catalogue are, strictly speaking, hypothetical." He continues, "The numerous relationships between genre paintings prompt the question of how and where artists assessed each other's works. Documents providing concrete answers have not survived."

As I argued in Vermeer, Provocateur, reliance on the notion of "genre" reflects "unnecessary timidity." Fucci portrays Vermeer as an unimaginative, valueless copycat, albeit with skilled technical variations. And the genre framework Fucci creates and the artists and paintings he relies on to support it are drawn from the fabled, but now tainted, "Dutch Golden Age." The reality of that era and its meaning for Vermeer and these three paintings are profound and readily known to Fucci and the Frick.

The New Netherland Institute and others, including Professor Brook, have documented the Dutch Republic's embrace—at home; on the sea; in the ports of Asia, Brazil, Western Africa, and the Caribbean; in the Hudson Valley—of the full horror and condescension of slavery. The Institute's historians especially note (often with the visual support of Vermeer's "letter" paintings) the role that well-informed Dutch middle-class woman—who were trained in ciphering, mathematics, and trade—played in ensuring that their families benefited from slavery through their management of purchases, sales, unregulated inheritances, and corrupt business dealings. In the paintings, those business dealings could be shown by a letter, an invoice, an agreement, receipts, sometimes only an envelope. Brook also described owning slaves as a domestic symbol of success and material comfort. Nowhere in the exhibition or meaningfully apparent in Fucci's work is there reference to the brutality of Dutch colonialism—well documented, including by King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands in July 2023—and the sophisticated business skill of the middle-class women Vermeer has portrayed in all three paintings.

Finally, another maid also delivers an envelope while her uneasy mistress, surrounded by and using accoutrements and instruments of wealth, seems engaged in business transactions that may now be in jeopardy or that she is about to consummate (Mistress and Maid). Missing as well from Fucci's presentation is that the fabled "lovers," not present in the three paintings, would likely have been colonial soldiers abroad or on slave ships or managers of trade, perhaps illicit—men who, as Teju Cole poignantly recognized, enforced "the world where people are kneeling in subjection, where people are branded with a hot iron."

All of these maids were in daily battle for the fullness of citizenship that they were denied by the women in the Frick show. The exhibition—not Vermeer—neutered their mistresses into merely lovestruck, benign women rather than skilled, self-serving business entrepreneurs exercising and indulging in their wealth. The Golden Age Apologists—the Frick Collection among them—have created a Vermeer that lived and painted in some place comparable to the seemingly moral, ethical, and oppression-free, Norman Rockwell-esque "Truman Show." The Vermeer Realists place him in the Dutch Republic.

The portrait of Henry Clay Frick that is located in his former home has raw power etched into his face and in the erect, tensile strength of his posture. His notorious antilabor repression, his disdain for working men and women, and the triumph of unfettered capitalism during the Homestead Strike of 1892 was an assassin's imperative. Frick was chairman of Carnegie Steel. The assassination attempt failed.
Frick was a remarkably successful man of industry—he became chair of US Steel when J. P. Morgan brought and Morgan and John D. Rockefeller Sr. reorganized Carnegie—with a hard-fought tenacity in the ethically unconstrained battle for accumulated wealth in the so-called Gilded Age. He was a realist. No illusions. No pretense or moral equivocation about his plainly spoken purpose. He also collected art throughout Europe, often with the guidance of his meticulously informed daughter, Helen (1888–1984). When he died in 1919–four years after the New York house was occupied—Helen continued that task with insightful judgment through the Frick Collection's opening in 1935 (following the death of her mother, Adelaide) and for decades beyond as the responsible member of the Board of Directors.

Early in her life, Helen began cataloging Frick's acquisitions, expanding them to include paintings and murals at risk of extinction and identified in photographic expeditions into homes and remote churches throughout Europe and America. She housed the catalog in the new home's basement and, during World War II, worked with the US government to avoid the destruction of paintings through Allied bombings. That creation—today the Frick Art Reference Library—became a globally renowned research archive, which she financed personally for the remainder of her long life. Her moral imperatives also were distinct from her father's. She volunteered as a nurse and hospital administrator near war zones during World War I; established a home and recreation center for women textile factory workers in Massachusetts; persuaded her father to donate to numerous charitable causes that she identified; and, in a manner that provided an aura of beneficence to her father's problematic history in Pittsburgh, preserved their family home, arboretum, and playhouse and added a new art gallery and a nearby city park—all freely accessible today—as well as the Henry Frick Fine Arts Building at the University of Pittsburgh. In the early 20th century, Helen's moral imperatives also included her famed battle with John D. Rockefeller Jr. (the Frick Board chairman) and the otherwise fully male board of directors.

Edmund Charles Tarbell. Henry Clay and Helen Clay Frick (1910). Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC

The vibrancy of her wit, power, and gender battle with Rockefeller had two enduring dimensions relevant today: First, she sought to preserve the Frick Collection as purely Henry Frick's. "The Frick Collection" she said, "breathes my father's and mother's tastes and I see no reason why it should not remain that way." "My father trusted me," she added, "and I am here to carry out his wishes which I know far better than anyone now living." Rockefeller wanted the Collection to accept donations from others, particularly elements of his own collection to be housed, as Martha Frick Symington Sanger in Helen Clay Frick described it, in a "Rockefeller Memorial Room." Although the battle—visible, harsh, and personal—went to court, Helen was advised to think of it in moral terms. As David Finley of the National Gallery of Art put it: "This never was a legal question. . . . It is a moral question." Finley also thought the board members "were not primarily interested in the arts, or in the Collection." Rockefeller simultaneously sat on the board of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

John D. Rockefeller Attended Re-Consecration of Rheims
Gamma-Keystone | Getty Image

Second, "Vermeer's Love Letters"—and the docility of women—would not likely be a special collection subject for paintings about hard-woven, business and culture-driven women that Helen Frick would embrace as the Frick Collection's definition of itself. That is, the prosperous middle-class women in the paintings—however problematic or antithetical their values were to her own—diminished as mere objects of love.

The Frick's reopening lacked imaginative storytelling. It seemed intent on just blending in by whiting out. It's here, in this history, that the meaning of the reopening had a theme in candor, reality, and distinctiveness that would have resonated nationally if not globally. That is, the intentions and battle of enormous wealth, gender, and the confident exercise of integrity and identity that ensured, through today, New York's renowned centrality to the global preservation and elevation of art.

Perhaps, in time, the Frick will embrace its own dynamically special story and the courage of Johannes Vermeer. In the interim, one recommendation: Borrow the portrait of Helen and her father from the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC. Place it in the Frick's elegantly restored foyer. It will ensure a patient public's anticipation.

About the Author

Award-winning author, lawyer, and educator **Neil Thomas Proto** has spent a lifetime at the crossroads of law, history, and civic passion. From the courtrooms of the United States, to the U.S. Supreme Court bar, to the classrooms of Yale and Georgetown, he has challenged power, defended the land, and told the stories of those who dared to resist injustice.

Proto's new book, **Johannes Vermeer, Provocateur: Risk and Courage in Dissent** is available wherever fine books are sold. For more information, visit his website at vermeerprovocateur.com