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## The final piece of the puzzle

The secret meaning of Vermeer's art

By Timothy Brook



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#### Johannes Vermeer – Provocateur

Risk and courage in dissent

126pp. FriesenPress. Paperback, \$12.99.

Neil Thomas Proto

#### Vermeer

A life lost and found

416pp. Allen Lane. £30.

Andrew Graham-Dixon



"View of Delft" by Johannes Vermeer, c.1665 | © Mauritshuis, The Hague

When the brilliant but enigmatic Delft artist Johannes Vermeer died in 1675 at the age of forty-three, he was not yet recognized as one of the greatest Dutch painters of his time. Even into the nineteenth century, Vermeer remained largely unknowable. A shroud of ignorance encircled his world; nor was there any body of documents that could testify to his life and work. This is why Théophile Thoré-Bürger (1807-69), the French art connoisseur who delighted in his paintings, called him “the sphinx of Delft”. Not until the end of the twentieth century did we come a step closer to the reality of his life, with John Michael Montias’s *Vermeer and His Milieu: A web of social history* (1989). Montias gathered materials that revealed core aspects of the artist’s life, but he did this largely to insert Vermeer into the Dutch Golden Age, as specialists had come to call that period – a term to which Andrew Graham-Dixon takes a not unreasonably strong exception.

In the absence of archival documents that speak directly to Vermeer's thoughts, how can we reconstruct his life and understand his contributions to Dutch painting? To my mind, there are three contexts that make him more knowable. The first is his upbringing and the social world in which he lived; the second is the politics of the era; and the third is the larger world that extended outward from Delft to the entire globe. Let me take each of these approaches in reverse order.

My mission in *Vermeer's Hat: The seventeenth century and the dawn of the global world* (2008) was to explore the artist's paintings to see how they reflected the wider world that was unfolding to European eyes during his lifetime. I focused that book on the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (Dutch East India Company), best known as the VOC. Delft was the site of one of the six original chambers that constituted the VOC. Its warehouse dominates the vision of Delft in Vermeer's most famous urban landscape painting, "View of Delft". I had no larger theory for understanding Vermeer's incorporation of Asian objects into his paintings. They were simply what was available, and he took a visual interest in them. Vermeer was just barely part of the bourgeoisie of Delft, and the objects had probably belonged to his wealthy mother-in-law.

In his new book, *Johannes Vermeer Provocateur: Risk and courage in dissent*, Neil Thomas Proto addresses the second context, exploring how the artist shaped his paintings around his personal resistance to the dominant political ideas and cultural standards of his day. Vermeer did not just paint pretty pictures. He used his pictures to advance certain ideas against prevailing norms. Those norms included ostracizing Catholics and other religious dissidents, of whom he was one; depriving women of voice and full citizenship; and accepting slavery as a condition of empire. Vermeer was powerfully opposed to these norms, and Proto's persuasive argument is that he used his work to express this opposition. This perspective lends perfect sense to the paintings.

The rubric of the Dutch Golden Age has obscured the prejudice and violence of the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, and scholars have paid little attention to how the forces of racism, vengeance, colonialism and the new bourgeois lifestyle "may have tempered Vermeer's voice". This is what Proto sets out to do by highlighting the "forms of equality, tolerance, freedom, and dissent" in Vermeer's paintings. He falls back on the assumption, widely shared among Vermeer's biographers, that the painter cleaved more to Catholicism than to Protestantism. Proto sees the painting now known as "Allegory of the Catholic Faith", for example (the titles Vermeer might have given any of his paintings have been lost to us), as an act of defiance, a deliberate provocation, arguing that the serpent underneath a brick, blood trailing from its head, is an image of Calvinism.

Andrew Graham-Dixon's *Vermeer: A life lost and found* is where we learn that the missing piece of the puzzle is Vermeer's sympathy with Arminianism. I expect that many readers of the *TLS* will not be familiar with the term. Neither was I until last year, when writing about the library of the seventeenth-century English legal scholar John Selden. I discovered that those who opposed Selden called him an Arminian heretic, which he was implicitly, though without any doctrinal commitment to this school. He understood that people had to earn God's grace, not presume that they can enjoy it from the start as one of the elect. Claiming to be among the elect was, for him, the act of a scoundrel setting himself above having to meet any standard of moral conduct or belief. From this point of view, Arminianism was not a heresy, but a reasonable response to a serious theological error. Selden's view was that the conflict of the English Civil War could only dissipate when Protestants backed down from the extremist views of Calvinism.

The Arminians were native to the Netherlands. Also known there as Remonstrants and Collegiants, they were the Protestant opposition to Calvinist extremism within the Reformation. That is what the English Calvinists called those who were not devoted to the eradication of all opponents. The Arminians were committed to building peaceful ways to bring all Christians back to the faith as Jesus practised it.

Montias mentions Arminianism at least three times in *Vermeer and his Milieu*, though I slid right past those references when I first read his book. Pointing out that many of the high Dutch bourgeoisie and “well-born burghers” were more sympathetic to Arminianism than to Calvinism, Montias noted that Calvinists targeted and attacked them. Vermeer’s family was of this orientation, as were his principal Delft patrons, Pieter Claesz van Ruijven, who was heavily involved in the VOC, and his wife, Maria de Knuijt.

The Arminians took their name from Jacobus Arminius, who was born with the Dutch name of Jakob Hermanszoon in 1560. This Dutch Reformed minister, who later became a professor of theology at the University of Leiden, broke with Calvin over the idea that God elects some people for salvation unconditionally. In his view, humans had free will, which meant that it was up to each individual to earn or lose entry into heaven. A free pass to heaven was not a birthright. Those who were allowed to enter were not those who believed that God had pre-selected them, but those who acted in this life with goodness and faith, and sought to promote peace rather than war.

Examining all the documentation that survives, Graham-Dixon deepens Proto’s analysis, reconstructing brilliantly the issues embedded in the society in which Vermeer grew up and lived. As he insists, “context is everything”. He begins with a meticulous and cleverly narrated review of the history of Dutch Arminianism during the Eighty Years War (1568–1648), when the Spanish attempted to eradicate the Dutch for their religious heresies, which was capped by the immense destruction of the Thirty Years War (1618–48). The author thus digs deep into the past that troubled the Dutch before and during the artist’s life to show how Vermeer’s paintings were “inextricably linked to the story of the Dutch Republic itself”, and how profoundly shaped he was by the world in which he grew up.

At the core of Graham-Dixon’s analysis is the discovery that Vermeer was raised as an Arminian. The artist’s Arminian father, Reynier, became an art dealer to supplement his business as an innkeeper. His connections with regional artists and painting collectors, many of whom were sympathetic to Arminian philosophy, gave his son the education and confidence to enter that sphere of work. As Graham-Dixon writes: “Many of the artists whom Vermeer encountered as he was growing up were in sympathy with the tolerant ideals of the Dutch freethinker and religious rebels”. Vermeer’s family shaped him in this way, and throughout his life he carried their vision forward, supporting Arminian principles of peace and respect for women without fleeing to Catholicism as a bulwark against Calvinism. When he married the daughter of a distinguished Catholic, Maria Thins, Vermeer did not shift his religion to Catholicism. Johannes and Catharina married as members of religious minorities for love, not religion.

Graham-Dixon’s most telling document is the one that Montias found and reproduced in *Vermeer and his Milieu*, the auctioneer’s list of the collection of Vermeer’s principal patrons, Pieter Claesz van Ruijven and his wife, Maria de Knuijt. On their deaths, their collection went to their daughter Magdalena Pieters van Ruijven, who held onto them until her death in 1682, seven years after the death of Vermeer. Some thirteen years later, when her husband died, these paintings came onto the market in Amsterdam. For Graham-Dixon, this list is critical in indicating not just what happened to the artist’s masterpieces, but in telling us how Vermeer conceived and created his paintings, and revealing the depth of his commitment to the Arminian community and its liberal philosophy in Delft.

Significantly, De Knuijt and Van Ruijven were the leaders of the local Arminian community, their house on the Oude Delft canal sitting directly in front of Delft’s “invisible church” of the Arminians. Once he began painting for them in 1657, Vermeer set up “an arrangement without parallel in the history of art”, for almost all his paintings went to them. The following year, he pictures this set of buildings on the Oude Delft canal in the painting now known as “The Little Street”.

The auctioneer tended to follow the way in which Magdalena and her parents had organized the collection, leading Graham-Dixon to discover surprising pendants among Vermeer's work that have long since eluded us. The first pair he examines is two early paintings, "Diana and Her Companions" and "Christ in the House of Martha and Mary". He describes "Diana and Her Companions" as a "pretext for creating a vision of idealized womanhood in which certain attributes are carefully symbolized". The main action in the painting, the washing of Diana's feet, alludes to Mary Magdalene, who did the same for Jesus. "Christ in the House of Martha and Mary" is painted in a way that is emphatically opposed to Calvinism, as the Calvinists abhorred Martha, but celebrated Mary. In this painting, Martha is presented as active and Mary as contemplative, both postures attaining an equal place in representing female virtue.

The most surprising pair that Graham-Dixon deciphers are "The Milkmaid" and "Woman with a Balance". Most scholars date the pictures about five years apart, but the author argues that "they are a pair, conceived together, painted together, then hung together on the walls of Maria de Knuijt's house". He comes to this conclusion on the basis of their pairing at the auction of Vermeer's paintings in Amsterdam after the death of Magdalena's husband, as well by their near-equal size and the subtle mark of the nail half-hammered into the wall behind the women in both. Both depict women absorbed in the task of measuring: one pouring the milk, the other holding scales waiting for the pans to settle; both wearing a headdress of white and neither glancing at the viewer.

In the author's analysis, "each picture, each woman, is the mirror image of the other. Between them, they complete one another. This pattern is both the beginning of their meaning and its end". As in the earlier pendants, the milkmaid is actively doing something to assist others, whereas the woman holding the balance is engaged in a contemplative act. "We have met these women before, in different clothes, in a different setting and a different place", Graham-Dixon writes. He then asks: "Are they not Martha and Mary, the Active Life and the Spiritual Life, in another guise? ... At one and the same time they are Dutch women in the here and now, real people living real lives." Neither "bears a burden of sin".

This reading makes sense because of the Arminian philosophy that has driven Vermeer to paint them. One of Arminius's mottoes was that "a good conscience is paradise", and that is what these paintings depict. Graham-Dixon concludes that, hanging there in De Knuijt's house for the contemplation of her Arminian visitors, "the pair of women were evidently intended as role models, albeit of an elevated kind. Each represents one-half of a woman's best self". The so-called milkmaid embodies the active, evangelical life and the bourgeois woman with the balance embodies vigilant faith and the private reflective life. No one has ever been able to make this argument, which is so persuasive once the artist's religious world-view is brought into play. In fact, Graham-Dixon argues, most of Vermeer's paintings were devotional in the sense that he painted them to support Arminians in their practices of worship, which is why De Knuijt hung them in her house, located just within the frame of "The Little Street".

He concludes his examination of many pairs of canvases with the declaration: "We cannot accompany the painter on his travels, but we can explore the range of his thought by examining the beliefs of his fellow Collegiants, in particular their preoccupation with the Apocalypse". He explains that references in the Book of Revelation, including to the lost tribes of Israel, hold "the key to several of Vermeer's later paintings". "The Astronomer" and "The Geographer" have all along been supposed to be pendants to each other, as I argued in *Vermeer's Hat*, on the understanding that the VOC needed to understand and navigate the larger world. Behind their formal similarity, however, Graham-Dixon discovers an internal link – they were commissioned by one of the senior members of the VOC, Adrian Paets, also an Arminian.

The clue that reveals the intellectual context for these paintings is the book that the astronomer has open on his desk in front of him. It is the second edition of Adriaen Metius's *Institutiones Astronomicae & Geographicae* (1621), his textbook on astronomy and geography. It is open at the first page of Book III, which is where Metius argues that the first observers and measurers of the heavens were the Jews – which gave them the knowledge to flee Europe.

This text would have been more familiar to Paets than to Vermeer, whose Arminian religious orientation positioned him to want to find the lost tribes of Israel, which was considered the necessary precondition to converting the Jews to Christianity. This theme is supported by the painting on the back wall of the room in “The Astronomer”, which is a depiction of the finding of Moses by the daughter of the pharaoh who ordered all newborn Hebrew boys to be drowned in the Nile.

Place “The Geographer” next to “The Astronomer” and the geographer is plausibly seeking to locate the lost tribes of Israel so that the VOC can send a ship to bring them home. Graham-Dixon concludes by observing: “The pictures remain something of a puzzle, even after their meanings have been evacuated”. For Paets, finding the Jews overseas was a task that could lead to world peace. As the author concludes: “Apocalyptic fantasies clearly died hard. Vermeer’s two pictures for Adrian Paets are the relics of outlandish hope, and remind us that sometimes the past really is another country.”

Not all of Vermeer’s paintings are overflowing with Arminian content. No genre painting in which a woman is holding a glass or pitcher of wine was on display at Maria de Knuijt’s house. Vermeer’s purpose with those paintings was to capture the pure love that women could experience and display. For Arminians, the love that women felt grew out of their love of Jesus, which was an idea that Calvinists were not willing to embrace. So, if Vermeer was an Arminian, then what appears to be genre painting is not purely to celebrate the rise of the Netherlands and the booming wealth of the Dutch bourgeoisie. His work is closely conceived and carefully arranged to display the values that he and his community celebrated, even though the larger community beyond them did not.

This subtle messaging is why his paintings were not understood more generally in his time, or even today. They look like genre paintings, topographies or portraits, celebrating nothing more than the new wealth of the Dutch bourgeoisie. The titles on every one of his paintings today carries a hint of meaning that obscures his motives for painting them, which is why Graham-Dixon has returned to the Amsterdam auction to reconceive what his paintings depict. In fact, if you were an Arminian, and able to interpret what you saw, every painting carried a different and deeper meaning than it appears to. “This element of disguise”, as the author writes, “helps to explain why Vermeer’s pictures have tantalized so many people for so long.” The superficial resemblance of the artist’s paintings to other Dutch paintings of the same era meant that anyone who didn’t know Vermeer’s philosophical orientation had no way to read his work. Marcel Proust, for example, declared that Vermeer had been his favourite painter since he was twenty. He insisted that his enigmatic paintings included far more than meets the eye, but he had no way to identify what this content was or where it came from. Graham-Dixon’s amazing discoveries will surprise and delight most readers who are accustomed to leaving Vermeer submerged in the Dutch Golden Age – which, for him, was not a golden age.

The author opens his concluding section, entitled “Disaster, Death, Legacy, 1672–5”, with the observation that “history did not come to an end” in 1672, the year when Vermeer turned forty and stopped painting, three years before he died. The Dutch remember 1672 as the Year of Disaster. It was the year of Louis XIV’s mobilization of an army to take over the Netherlands, which started the Franco-Dutch War (1672–8). This chaos seems to have dropped a shroud over Vermeer’s paintings. The devastation of the early 1670s obscured the world he painted and the commitments he carried in his heart. As Graham-Dixon writes:

To a millenarian optimist inspired by a belief in the spiritual progress of mankind, the times must have seemed brutal indeed. Encouraged by more than two decades of peace to imagine that his world was becoming more enlightened, [he] was now condemned to watch it slipping into darkness and barbarism. War had seemed a thing of the past, but not so.

The author sums up his book by explaining that one of its main aims

has been to show that Vermeer was not a painter of things but of ideas. Its other closely related aim has been to give him back his rightful place in art history, to locate him as part of a religious and intellectual movement driven by the desire to reform society and make the world a fairer and better place.

Instead, most of us have surrendered to amnesia about the world for which Arminians believed that radical tolerance was the only key to escape the chaos that constantly threatened the Dutch. We should be thankful that Vermeer's paintings are still with us, giving us the opportunity to imagine the resolution of conflict without resorting to even greater conflict. The result of Andrew Graham-Dixon's approach is for him to have produced the best biography of Vermeer and the most complete analysis of his artwork that has ever been published.

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