

Thierry Greub: Vermeer oder die Inszenierung der Imagination (= Studien zur internationalen Architektur- und Kunstgeschichte; 31), Petersberg: Michael Imhof Verlag 2004, 239 S., 40 Farb-, 42 s/w-Abb., ISBN 3-937251-09-x, EUR 49,00

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In recent years, an absolute glut of books of all types have appeared concerning the life and work of the eminent Dutch seventeenth-century painter, Johannes Vermeer (1632-75). These run the full gamut, from novels, such as Tracy Chevalier's hugely popular *Girl with the Pearl Earring* (1997), to the catalogues of important exhibitions in Washington D.C. and The Hague (1995-96), and New York and London (2001), respectively; from Philip Steadman's fascinating yet controversial examination of the artist's possible use of the camera obscura, *Vermeer's Camera* (2001), to volumes principally intended for the general public, among them, *Vermeer's World* (1997) by Irene Netta, Anthony Bailey's *Vermeer: A View of Delft* (2001), and Mariët Westermann's *Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675)* (2004). To this ever-growing corpus of Vermeer literature can be added the new scholarly study by Thierry Greub.

What immediately sets Greub's handsomely produced book apart from so many others is his approach to Vermeer's work. Any reader who expects this new volume to contain what one invariably encounters in books on this artist, namely, a sustained chronological analysis of Vermeer's life and work, will be disappointed. To the contrary, Greub's study is comprised of a series of chapters that closely explore various stylistic, perceptual, and economic aspects of Vermeer's pictures. Many of these chapters, in turn, can be divided between what can be called factors intrinsic to the artist's work and those extrinsic to it. As examples of the former, Greub addresses, among others, the presence in paintings of texts, curtains, *pentimenti*, "dots [Vermeer's famed *pointillés*], marks, and holes", and so forth. Examples of the latter include chapters investigating the glance of the viewer, contemporary terms associated with the master's art, and its purchasers.

What unites these somewhat disparate chapters is that each treats the aspect of Vermeer's art in question in a largely elastic, conceptual manner. Thus, chapter III, entitled "Frames", construes this term in the widest possible manner. It opens with a largely synoptic discussion of the formats of Vermeer's paintings and the frames upon the little pictures that appear within them. However, the term "frame" is subsequently expanded upon contextually to encompass the greater socio-cultural frame, more specifically the milieu of the Dutch Republic in general and

the city of Delft in particular, where Vermeer lived and worked. Similarly, Chapter VII, on texts within the images, consists of not only a thoughtful examination of such phenomena as inscriptions on musical instruments but also careful and sensitive interpretations of Vermeer's signatures, particularly their place within the overall composition, which, according to the author, are highly purposeful. Likewise, Chapter IV investigates the presence of curtains in the master's work in both a literal and a figurative sense with the latter being identified with Vermeer's pictorial strategy of "veiling" his painted surfaces for the viewer's delectation.

Greub is to be commended for adopting an alternative approach to that of the standard Vermeer volume - or for that matter, those of many other monographs in the field. To give credit where credit is due: with this study, Greub attempts to expand the parameters of our understanding of Vermeer, which is no easy task, given an artist as well studied today as this seventeenth-century Dutch master. As a result, he provides many novel insights, which is all the more remarkable since we are rapidly reaching something of a saturation point when it comes to Vermeer, owing to the plethora of publications on the artist that have appeared during the last twenty years. Especially rewarding are Greub's sensitive and fresh analyses of the correspondences between the self-consciously architectonic structure of Vermeer's canvases and those by modern masters, most notably, Piet Mondrian (see 112).

Through a wealth of observations, coupled with the frequent citation of the fascinating but highly debatable theories of Viktor Stoichita (who very obviously provided a ready source of inspiration), Greub's ultimate intention is to depart from traditional iconological studies, which he considers too limited - more on this momentarily - in favor of close readings of the surfaces of Vermeer's paintings. Greub examines these surfaces in terms of their structural totality, which he believes more completely guarantees the validity of any interpretation. A case in point is his protracted discussion of Vermeer's *Woman Holding a Balance* (Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; see pp. 114-115 and figs. 6 and 55). Greub's careful analysis of this picture, including a geometric examination of its surface, yields the conclusion that Vermeer's intention here, or rather, his theme, was the concept of harmonious measure, both in a pictorial and in a moral sense. This interpretation is considered more authoritative than those expounded in numerous earlier, iconologically based studies of this enigmatic picture, all of which Greub finds lacking in one way or another.

My problem with this type of reasoning lies not in the conclusions at which Greub has arrived here and elsewhere throughout his book. Rather it is with some of his assumptions concerning the iconological method and, by extension, the state of the scholarly field of seventeenth-century Dutch art. Early on in the book, specifically in Chapter II, Greub argues that the current state of Vermeer studies is reflected in the current state of Dutch art studies in which scholars supposedly vacillate between whether to consider this art "realistic" or (*italics mine*) whether to regard

it as having meaning, the latter subsumed within the iconological approach. Presumably it is the task of his book to provide the reader with an alternative way of looking at Vermeer's art, which handily circumvents this "problem".

Unfortunately, the unsuspecting reader will not realize that Greub's hypothesis actually applies to the state of the field about fifteen years ago, if not longer. In this regard, it is probably no accident that Greub's "straw-dog" example of a scholarly study of Vermeer that exemplifies this supposed problem was one published by Madlyn Kahr back in 1972! Thanks to the researches of, among others, Eric Jan Sluijter, Celeste Brusati, Elizabeth Honig, Mariët Westermann, and this reviewer - none of whom are cited in the bibliography - it is doubtful that many art historians today would support Greub's "either realistic or having meaning" position *vis-à-vis* Dutch art. For Dutch seventeenth-century paintings weave clever fictions, ingeniously synthesizing observed fact with a well-established repertory of motifs and styles to create a contrived image that ultimately transfigures the commonplace, as Honig has so aptly put it. Or as Brusati has pointed out (with reference to still-life painting but no doubt with more general application in my view), the descriptive specificity of Dutch art is not the result of some sort of accurate transcription of the surrounding world but rather the purposeful refashioning of this world on canvas or panel in culturally meaningful ways. Lastly, as Sluijter has repeatedly demonstrated, contemporary Dutch art theorists equated the prototypical painting to a "mirror" of nature: like an actual mirror, a painting delightfully yet deceptively renders an appearance, a "semblance of being" that actually does not exist. In sum, "realism and meaning" are no longer thought to be on opposite sides of the interpretive coin, as Greub maintains, but very much on the same side. Knowledge on the part of the author of this present state of scholarly affairs would have undoubtedly had intriguing ramifications for this otherwise engaging book.

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