

E. H. Gombrich, Review of Lawrence Gowing, Vermeer, The Observer, London, 7 September, 1952. [Trapp no.1952F.1]

The Artist's Vision

The case of the Vermeer forgeries will long be remembered for the resounding éclat with which it showed up the specialist art historian in all his fallibility. Professor Gowing is more variously equipped. He is a painter in his own right and one, moreover, who can write lucidly and intelligibly about his craft. In this well-produced book he uses his rare combination of gifts with impressive success. One doubts if van Meegren could have duped the connoisseurs if this searching analysis of Vermeer's technical triumphs had been available at the time. Our eyes are led to the crucial passages in the master's "impartial visual records" which show his astounding indifference to the conventional vocabulary of representation, his unorthodox concentration on tone and light at the expense of modelling. We are shown convincingly how much this method must owe to the study of optical effects in the camera obscura which alone can have enabled him to purge his vision of the preconceived "conceptual" formula.

One might have wished the author to dwell even longer on this fascinating theme. Instead of referring us to that nineteenth-century shibboleth, "the image on the retina," he might have probed a little further into the reasons why even this most sensitive of artists needed a mechanical aid to separate what he "saw" from what he "knew" – if, indeed, such a separation can ever be complete.

But Professor Gowing's main concern is not the psychology of vision so much as the psychology of the artist. It is his ambition to penetrate the "impeccable armour" of Vermeer's style and explore the depth of his elusive personality. To him "it seems as if the very efficacy of his still life method were a symptom in itself, as if the quality of surface observation sought to compensate for some deep impediment." "The delicacy of Vermeer's approach to figure painting, his cautious advance upon humanity down the measured, fortified field of his perspective, suggests an element in his attitude of something like fear." The dangers of this type of interpretation are obvious. For whether we accept the popular prejudice that a "detached" style must reflect a "detached" personality or prefer the more sophisticated view that a show of detachment must hide a deep involvement, we are always assuming a rather trivial connection between art and life.

If Professor Gowing's book escapes the charge of triviality it does so less, perhaps, by its theoretical assumptions than by the consistency with which the interpretation is carried through on all levels. The camera cabinet, on this level, becomes the place where the artist, behind thick curtains, can "watch the silent women move to and fro" and remain "immune and uncommitted." We are given a detailed and scholarly analysis of the master's subject matter, of its relation to the traditional erotic genre-piece of the period, and made aware of every possible hint of symbolism, notably in the pictures displayed on the walls of Vermeer's interiors.

Finally, the author ventures into the twilight regions of private meanings and seeks to unravel the unconscious symbolism of the master's favourite shapes and the objects of his surroundings. In this incommunicable sphere the line that separates sense from nonsense is perilously thin. Does it still make sense to say of the blue *Letter Reader* that "her pregnancy is shared by the saturation of the wall behind her"? Perhaps an artist might say such things of his own works, but can we divine such meanings across the gulf of three centuries?

Here, I think, is the crux of the matter. We may never know whether the image that emerges resembles Jan Vermeer, the respected burgher of Delft, father of eleven children. But it is the image of an authentic artist. How could it be otherwise? For even in his more fanciful moods the writer can draw upon his own insights into the many and elusive meanings the visible world can assume in a painter's dreams. But, imitators beware!