NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

Johannes Vermeer
Dutch, 1632 - 1675

Girl with the Red Hat

c. 1665/1666

oil on panel
painted surface: 22.8 x 18 cm (9 x 7 1/16 in.)
support: 23.2 x 18.1 cm (9 1/8 x 7 1/8 in.)
framed: 40.3 x 35.6 x 4.4 cm (15 7/8 x 14 x 1 3/4 in.)
Inscription: upper center of tapestry in ligature: IVM
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.53

ENTRY

Girl with the Red Hat has a curious status among Vermeer scholars. Although this small panel painting is widely loved and admired, its attribution to Vermeer has been doubted, and even rejected, by some.[1] The attribution of this work has often been discussed in conjunction with the only other panel painting in Vermeer's oeuvre, *Girl with a Flute* [fig. 1], which has been often wrongly viewed as a pendant.[2] The emotional response elicited by *Girl with the Red Hat* is, indeed, different from that found in other of his paintings, for as the girl turns outward, with her mouth half opened, her eyes seem lit with expectancy. The lushness of her blue robes, the almost passionate flaming red of her hat, and the subtle interplay of green and rose tones in her face give her a vibrancy unique in Vermeer's paintings. Unlike most of his figures, she does not exist in a cerebral, abstract world. Situated before a backdrop of a figured tapestry,[3] she communicates directly with us, both staring out and drawing us in.

The pose of a girl looking over her shoulder at the viewer is commonly found in Vermeer's oeuvre, although in no other instance does she lean an arm on the back of a chair. Nevertheless, similar poses are found in the works of Vermeer's contemporaries.[4] As he did in other works, including *Woman Holding a Balance*, Vermeer adjusted his forms to accommodate his composition. In actuality, the lion-head finials of the chair are too close to each other and are not correctly aligned. The left finial is much larger than the right one and is angled too far to the right. The top of the chair, if extended to the left finial, would intersect it above the bottom of the ring that loops through the lion's mouth. The finials, moreover, face

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toward the viewer, whereas if they belonged to the chair upon which the girl sits, they should face toward her.[5] As in Frans Hals' *Portrait of a Young Man*, only the back of the lion's head should be visible.

The questions raised by the position of the chair and its spatial relationship to the girl have bothered observers of the painting in the past.[6] Interestingly, the spatial discrepancies are not really noticeable until one begins analyzing the painting very closely. Visually, the spatial organization works; Vermeer succeeded in integrating his figure with the chair and at the same time in using the chair to help establish the specific mood he sought.[7]

Despite similarities in the way Vermeer adjusted his forms for compositional emphasis, the *Woman Holding a Balance* and this painting are undeniably different. Whereas the *Woman Holding a Balance* is an involved composition, imbued with complex forms and symbolism, the *Girl with the Red Hat* is no more than a bust, portrayed with a feeling of spontaneity and informality that is unique in the artist's oeuvre. It is as though this small painting were a study, or an experiment. Particularly striking are the light reflections on the right lion-head finial, which have the diffused characteristic of unfocused points of light in a photograph, called "halation of highlights." It is highly unlikely that Vermeer could have achieved this effect without having witnessed it in a camera obscura.[8] Indeed, it may well be that in this painting Vermeer actually attempted to capture the impression of an image seen in a camera obscura.

The hypothesis that Vermeer might have used a camera obscura while painting the *Girl with the Red Hat* was convincingly argued by Charles Seymour.[9] He demonstrated, with the aid of excellent experimental photographs, the close similarity of Vermeer's painterly treatment of the lion-head finial and an unfocused image seen in a camera obscura ([fig. 2] and [fig. 3]). Vermeer exploited this effect to animate his surface and to distinguish different depths of field.[10]

One of the many misconceptions about Vermeer's painting style that has affected theories regarding his use of the camera obscura, including that of Seymour, is that Vermeer was a realist in the strictest sense, that his paintings faithfully record models, rooms, and furnishings he saw before him.[11] As is evident in all his other mature works, the compositions are the product of intense control and refinement. Figures and their environments are subtly interlocked through perspective, proportions, and color. This same mentality must have dictated his artistic procedure, whether he viewed his scene directly or through an optical device such

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as a camera obscura. As has been seen, even in this small *Girl with the Red Hat*, which perhaps of all of Vermeer's images most closely resembles the effects of a camera obscura, he shifted and adjusted his forms to maintain his compositional balance. Thus, even though he must have referred to an image from a camera obscura when painting *Girl with the Red Hat* and sought to exploit some of its optical effects, including the intensified colors, accentuated contrasts of light and dark, and circles of confusion, it is most unlikely that he traced the image directly on the panel.[12] The possibility that he traced his more complex compositions is even more remote.

Vermeer's handling of diffused highlights in his paintings, including *View of Delft* (Mauritshuis, The Hague)[13] suggests that he used them creatively as well, and not totally in accordance with their actual appearance in a camera obscura. In *Girl with the Red Hat* he has accentuated the diffuse yellow highlights on the girl's blue robes, whereas in a camera obscura reflections off unfocused cloth create blurred images. He even painted some of his diffused highlights in the shadows, where they would not appear in any circumstance.

The actual manner in which he applied highlights is comparable to that seen in *The Art of Painting*, c. 1667 (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna).[14] Not only do the specular highlights on the finial share similarities with those on the chandelier in the latter work, but also the diffused highlights on the robe in *Girl with the Red Hat* are comparable to those on the cloth hanging over the front edge of the table in the Vienna painting. These similarities, as well as the comparably generalized forms of the girls' heads in the two paintings, argue for a close chronological relationship. It seems probable that both works were executed around 1666 to 1667, slightly before *The Astronomer* (Louvre, Paris), which is dated 1668.

Vermeer usually painted on canvas, and it is interesting to speculate on the rationale behind his decision to paint on panel in this particular instance.[15] The explanation may simply be that for such a small study panel was a more appropriate support than canvas. The choice of support, however, may also relate to the use of the camera obscura. He may have chosen a hard, smooth surface to lend to his small study the sheen of an image seen in a camera obscura as it is projected onto a ground glass or tautly stretched oiled paper.

Vermeer selected for his painting a panel that had already been used. The image of an unfinished, bust-length portrait of a man with a wide-brimmed hat lies under *Girl with the Red Hat*. It is visible in the X-radiograph [see X-radiography] of the

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panel ([fig. 4]) and with Infrared Reflectography ([fig. 5]). Because the man is in the reverse position of the girl, it is possible to examine his face in the X-radiograph without too much interference from the surface image ([fig. 6] and [fig. 7]). The painting style of this face is very different from that of Vermeer. The face is modeled with a number of bold rapid strokes that have not been blended together. The infrared reflectogram composite reveals a great flourish of strokes to the right of the face that represented the man's long curly hair.

Although it is impossible to attribute a painting to an artist solely on the basis of an X-radiograph, certain characteristics of the handling of the paint in the underlying image are remarkably similar to those seen in paintings by Carel Fabritius (Dutch, c. 1622 - 1654). The small scale of the panel, the subject matter of a male bust, and the rough bold strokes and impasto with which the head is painted are all features found in studies by Fabritius from the late 1640s, such as *Man with a Helmet* in the Groninger Museum, Groningen.[16] At his death Vermeer owned two *tronies* by Fabritius.[17] Considering that Vermeer was an art dealer and may have studied under Fabritius, he could well have owned others during his lifetime.[18]

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Attributed to Johannes Vermeer, *Girl with a Flute*, probably 1665/1675, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection, 1942.9.98

fig. 2 Detail of lion-head finial, Johannes Vermeer, *Girl with the Red Hat*, c. 1665/1666, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection, 1937.1.53

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fig. 3 Experimental photograph, lion-head finial. Photo: Harry Beville

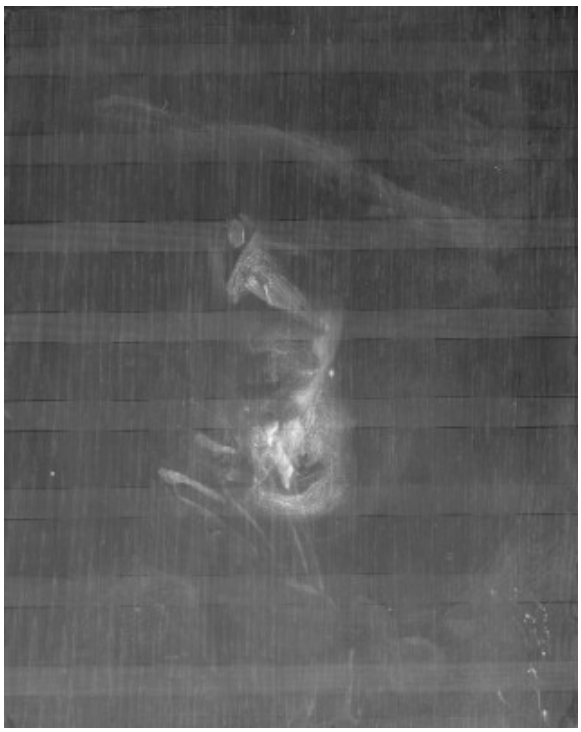

fig. 4 X-radiograph composite, Johannes Vermeer, *Girl with the Red Hat*, c. 1665/1666, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection, 1937.1.53

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fig. 5 Infrared reflectogram, Johannes Vermeer, *Girl with the Red Hat*, c. 1665/1666, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection, 1937.1.53

fig. 6 Upside-down X-radiograph composite, Johannes Vermeer, *Girl with the Red Hat*, c. 1665/1666, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection, 1937.1.53

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fig. 7 Upside-down infrared reflectogram, Johannes Vermeer, *Girl with the Red Hat*, c. 1665/1666, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection, 1937.1.53

NOTES

[1] The attribution of *Girl with the Red Hat* to Vermeer has been doubted by Frithjof van Thienen, *Jan Vermeer of Delft* (New York, 1949), 23. The painting was rejected by P. T. A. Swillens, *Johannes Vermeer: Painter of Delft, 1632–1675* (Utrecht, 1950), 65; Albert Blankert, Rob Ruurs, and Willem L. van de Watering, *Johannes Vermeer van Delft 1632–1675* (Utrecht, 1975; English ed., Oxford, 1978), 167–172; Yvonne Brentjens, "Twee meisjes van Vermeer in Washington," *Tableau* 7 (February 1985): 54–58; and Gilles Aillaud, Albert Blankert, and John Michael Montias, *Vermeer* (Paris, 1986), 200–201. For reactions to Blankert's rejection of this painting, see the reviews by Christopher Brown (Christopher Brown, review of Albert Blankert, Rob Ruurs, and Willem L. van de Watering, *Johannes Vermeer van Delft 1632–1675* [Utrecht, 1975], *Simiolus* 9 [1977]: 56–58) and Arthur K.

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Wheelock Jr. (Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., review of Albert Blankert, Rob Ruurs, and Willem L. van de Watering, *Johannes Vermeer van Delft 1632–1675* [Utrecht, 1975], *Art Bulletin* 59 [September 1977]: 439–441). Benjamin Binstock has attributed *Girl with a Red Hat* to Vermeer's daughter Maria Vermeer; see Benjamin Binstock, *Vermeer's Family Secrets: Genius, Discovery, and the Unknown Apprentice* (New York, 2009), 247–257, 253 repro.

[2] For a comparative analysis of the paintings, see the entry on *Girl with a Flute*.

[3] Although only a portion of the tapestry is visible, it appears that two rather large-scale figures are depicted behind the girl. The patterned vertical strip on the right is probably the outer border. A. M. Louise E. Muler-Erkelens, keeper of textiles, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, relates this format to late sixteenth-century tapestries of the southern Netherlands. She also notes that the tapestries in Vermeer's paintings belong to the same period (see her letter of May 7, 1974, to A. B. de Vries, copy in NGA curatorial files).

[4] For example, Frans Hals (Dutch, c. 1582/1583 - 1666), who apparently invented the pose, used it often. It is employed in his *Portrait of a Young Man*, to capture an informal, momentary impression of the sitter. He drapes the figure's arm over the chair, subordinating the horizontal for a more active diagonal emphasis. Vermeer minimized the diagonal thrust of the girl's arm by partially obscuring it behind the lion finials of the chair. It is possible that the girl was not sitting on the lion finial chair at all and that Vermeer placed it in the foreground to act as a foil. See Charles Seymour Jr., "Dark Chamber and Light-Filled Room: Vermeer and the Camera Obscura," *Art Bulletin* 46 (September 1964): 323–331.

[5] The first art historian to note this discrepancy was Reginald Howard Wilenski, *An Introduction to Dutch Art* (New York, 1929), 284–285. He hypothesized that the peculiar arrangement of the finials arose as a result of Vermeer's use of a mirror. His reconstruction of Vermeer's painting procedure, however, is untenable.

[6] Albert Blankert, Rob Ruurs, and Willem L. van de Watering, *Johannes Vermeer van Delft 1632-1675* (Utrecht, 1975; English ed., Oxford, 1978), 109, in particular, emphasizes the position of the finials in his arguments against the attribution of the painting to Vermeer.

[7] The idea that Vermeer adjusted forms in such a manner is incompatible with those who believe that he totally and faithfully recorded his physical environment. P. T. A. Swillens, *Johannes Vermeer: Painter of Delft, 1632–1675* (Utrecht, 1950), was the foremost proponent of this interpretation of Vermeer's manner of painting. This attitude also underlies the writings about Vermeer by Albert Blankert.

[8] The literature on Vermeer and the camera obscura is extensive. See in

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particular Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Jan Vermeer* (New York, 1981), note 41.

[9] See Charles Seymour Jr., "Dark Chamber and Light-Filled Room: Vermeer and the Camera Obscura," *Art Bulletin* 46 (September 1964): 323– 331.

[10] He may also have recognized that the peculiarly soft quality of these unfocused highlights would beautifully express the luminosity of pearls. Thus even in paintings such as *Woman Holding a Balance*, whose genesis probably has little to do with the camera obscura, these optical effects are apparent.

[11] This misconception lies at the basis of the interpretation of Vermeer's use of the camera obscura advanced by Daniel E. Fink, "Vermeer's Use of the Camera Obscura: A Comprehensive Study," *Art Bulletin* 53 (December 1971): 493–505. See Charles Seymour Jr., "Dark Chamber and Light-Filled Room: Vermeer and the Camera Obscura," *Art Bulletin* 46 (September 1964): 323–331.

[12] As suggested by Charles Seymour Jr., "Dark Chamber and Light-Filled Room: Vermeer and the Camera Obscura," *Art Bulletin* 46 (September 1964): 323– 331.

[13] See inventory number 92, from Mauritshuis, The Hague.

[14] See inventory number 9128, c. 1667, from Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

[15] The only other panel painting attributed to Vermeer is the National Gallery of Art's *Girl with a Flute*.

[16] Oil on panel, 38.5 x 31 cm, illustrated in Christopher Brown, *Carel Fabritius* (Oxford, 1981), pl. 3.

[17] John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 339, doc. 364. The term *tronie* had various meanings in the seventeenth century, but generally it denoted a small, relatively inexpensive bust-length figure study. Although such studies could have been commissioned portraits, most were probably figure types, or character studies, produced for the open market.

[18] For another small painting in the National Gallery of Art collection where one artist has reused a panel previously painted by another artist by turning the image 180 degrees, see Follower of Rembrandt van Rijn, *Study of an Old Man*.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

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The support is a single wood plank, probably oak, with a vertical grain. A cradle, including a wooden collar around all four sides of the panel, was attached before the painting entered the collection. A partially completed painting exists underneath the present composition oriented 180 degrees with respect to the girl. The X-radiograph reveals the head-and-shoulders portrait of a man wearing a white kerchief around his neck and a button on his garment. Infrared reflectography at 1.1 to 2.5 microns[1] shows a cape across his shoulder, a broad-brimmed hat, locks of long curling hair, and vigorous brushwork in the background.

The panel was initially prepared with a light tan double ground.[2] The male bust was executed in a dark brown painted sketch, before flesh tones were applied to the face and white to the kerchief. The portrait of the young girl was painted directly over the underlying composition, with the exception of the area of the man's kerchief, which Vermeer apparently toned down with a brown paint.

The paint used to model the girl was applied with smoothly blended strokes. Layered applications of paint of varying transparencies and thicknesses, often blended wet-into-wet, produced soft contours and diffused lighting effects. The paint in the white kerchief around the girl's neck has been scraped back to expose darker paint below.

The painting was treated in 1994 to remove discolored varnish and inpaint. The treatment revealed the painting to be in excellent condition with just a few minor losses along the edges. The painting had been treated previously in 1933, probably by Louis de Wild, and in 1942 by Frank Sullivan.

[1] Infrared reflectography was performed with a Santa Barbara focal plane array InSb camera fitted with H, J, and K astronomy filters.

[2] The lower ground consists of calcium carbonate, the upper ground of white lead lightly toned with earth and black (see Melanie Gifford, "Painting Light: Recent Observations on Vermeer's Technique," in Vermeer Studies, ed. Ivan Gaskell and Michiel Jonker [Washington, D.C., 1998], 185–199).

PROVENANCE

Possibly Pieter Claesz van Ruijven [1624-1674], Delft; possibly by inheritance to his wife, Maria de Knuijt [d. 1681]; possibly by inheritance to her daughter, Magdalena

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van Ruijven [1655-1682], Delft;[1] possibly by inheritance to her husband, Jacob Abrahamsz. Dissius [1653-1695], Delft; (sale, Amsterdam, 16 May 1696, probably no. 39 or 40).[2] Lafontaine collection, Paris; (his sale, Hôtel de Bouillon, Paris, 10-12 December 1822 [postponed from 27-29 November], no. 28). Baron Louis Marie Baptiste Atthalin [1784-1856], Colmar; by inheritance to his nephew and adopted son, Louis Marie Félix Laurent-Atthalin [1818-1893], Colmar and Paris; by inheritance to his son, Baron Gaston Marie Laurent-Atthelin [1848-1912], Paris and Château des Moussets, Limay, Seine-et-Oise; by inheritance to his wife, Baroness Marguerite Chaperon Laurent-Atthalin [1854-1931], Paris;[3] (M. Knoedler & Co., New York and London); sold November 1925 to Andrew W. Mellon, Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C.; deeded 30 March 1932 to The A.W. Mellon Educational and Charitable Trust, Pittsburgh; gift 1937 to NGA.

[1] Perhaps the *Girl with the Red Hat* was one of the *tronien* listed in the April 1683 inventory of possessions accruing to Jacob Dissius after the death of his wife, Magdalena van Ruijven, on 16 June 1682. See John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History*, Princeton, 1989: 359, doc. 417.

[2] John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History*, Princeton, 1989: 363-364, doc. 439. Item no. 38 in the sale is described as "a tronie in antique dress, uncommonly artful"; item no. 39 as "Another ditto Vermeer"; and item no. 40 as "A pendant of the same."

[3] Bernard Roulier, the Baroness' great-grandson, related the family's history of their ownership of the painting in a letter of 6 October 1983 to J. Carter Brown (copy in NGA curatorial files). Roulier suggests that Baron L.M.B. Atthalin might have purchased the painting at the 1822 sale, while his mother related to mutual friends of hers and J. Carter Brown that the baron bought the painting after seeing it in a shop window (letter, 28 June 1977, Brown to Mme Denise Kagan Moyseur, copy in NGA curatorial files).

EXHIBITION HISTORY

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1925 Loan Exhibition of Dutch Masters of the Seventeenth Century, M. Knoedler & Co., New York, 1925, no. 1.

1927 [Loan exhibition for the opening of the new building], Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, 1927, no catalogue.

1928 A Loan Exhibition of Twelve Masterpieces of Painting, M. Knoedler & Co., New York, 1928, no. 12.

1995 Johannes Vermeer, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, The Hague, 1995-1996, no. 14, repro.

1998 A Collector's Cabinet, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1998, no. 60.

1999 Johannes Vermeer: The Art of Painting, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1999-2000, brochure, fig. 11.

2001 Vermeer and the Delft School, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The National Gallery, London, 2001, no. 74, repro.

2003 Vermeer y el interior holandés, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, 2003, no. 37, repro.

2012 Vermeer: Il secolo d'oro dell'arte olandese, Scuderie del Quirinale, Rome, 2012-2013, no. 49, color repro.

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125–126, repro.

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1926 Kauffmann, Hans. "Overzicht der Litteratuur betreffende Nederlandsche Kunst." *Oud Holland* 43 (1926): 235–248.

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1927 Perkins, Harley. "Paintings by the Masters Lent for Fogg Opening." *Boston Evening Transcript* (18 June 1927): book section, 8, repro.

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1928 "Amerika: New-York." *Pantheon* 1 (1928): 270, 272, repro.

1928 Brière-Misme, Clotilde. "Overzicht der Literatuur betreffende Nederlandsche Kunst." *Oud Holland* 45 (1928): 90–96.

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