

Painting the Secrets of Letters

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In 1926, the Postal Museum in The Hague received a most unusual gift: a 17th-century chest stuffed with 2,600 letters, 600 of them unopened. Written at the close of the Dutch Golden Age, these records of human exchanges are only now being brought to light by an international team of scholars. [1] An equally precious repository of human experience has recently become available through Leiden University. This time, it involves over 1,000 letters from the 17th and 18th centuries gathered from ships seized during the Anglo-Dutch wars of the period. [2] What these letters tell us is of inestimable value, not only in terms of the language used by the people of the time, but about the ways they felt about the world—and one another.

As these and other troves of 17th-century letters show, the Dutch Republic had a sophisticated epistolary culture. This is also attested by the numerous printed manuals about letter writing. [3] Where words proved insufficient for letter writers, images took on the task of expressing the motions of the mind. In a memorable example of a letter that never reached its addressee, a young woman enclosed a hand-colored cutout of a dove with a flaming heart to emphasize her devotion to her lover, while reproaching him for his absence. [4] Providing further testimony in images is an entire genre of scenes from daily life featuring letters being written to absent friends or lovers, or eagerly being read upon receipt.

Wordless, yet more eloquent than words, these intimate exchanges convey their meanings through complex and multivalent visual devices. In Gabriel Metsu's *Man Writing a Letter*, the globe behind the open window, together with the elegantly framed landscape painting on the wall, underscore the distance between the letter writer seated at his table and the addressee, while also reminding us of the microcosm of individual life vis-à-vis the macrocosm of the world at large [fig. 1]. In the pendant piece to this composition, *A Woman Reading a Letter*, Metsu delivers the second act of this private drama: the lady of the house reflects upon the letter she has just received, while her maid lifts a curtain from a painting on the wall to disclose a stormy landscape, symbolic of the imagined perils faced by the absent

lover [fig. 2].

Johannes Vermeer's *The Love Letter* is replete with similar devices [fig. 3]. The artist invites us to look into a lady's private space, yet leaves a curtain on the right to suggest the limits of our access. The lady has been playing her lute, a classic symbol of love and longing. Her maid interrupts her, delivering a letter. Two paintings on the wall, a stormy sea and a pastoral landscape, seem to echo the battle of feelings within her heart: a fear for her lover's life, and hopefulness about his eventual return. As for the letter itself, at the center of this composition, it retains its mystery behind its unbroken seal, affirming Vermeer's reticence as a storyteller.

In another version on this theme, *Woman Writing a Letter, with Her Maid*, Vermeer's lady writes her letter while the maid gazes thoughtfully through a window [fig. 4]. Once again, a painting on the wall intimates deeper meanings, while a curtain pulled to the side reminds us that we may never know them. The subject of the painting within a painting, the Finding of Moses, may emphasize the value of words, since Moses is said to have introduced the art of writing to the Egyptians. Conversely, it may allude to the fact that, just as Moses was miraculously rescued from water, the fate of the lady's absent lover (or even of love itself) is governed by divine providence. Neither words nor images, the artist seems to be saying, ever lead to perfect knowledge.

Yet if one were to choose a Vermeer painting that epitomizes the power of a love letter, one would certainly be tempted by *A Lady Writing* [fig. 5]. Unlike his other ladies who read or write their letters fully absorbed in their tasks, this young woman interrupts her writing to greet us with a smile. Just as the artist immortalizes her beauty with his brush, the woman uses her quill to record her sentiments toward her lover—that is, the person she is looking at. As we recognize this reciprocity of feelings, her unfinished letter becomes an equivalent of the work of art we behold.

Like the love letters from 17th-century chests, *A Lady Writing* is a time capsule of lived emotions. As a message to the beholder, it also calls to mind the Roman poet Ovid's advice to aspiring lovers—to pave the way to the heart of their beloved with finely crafted words.

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Gabriel Metsu, *Man Writing a Letter*, c. 1664–1666, oil on panel, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, Sir Alfred and Lady Beit, 1987 (Beit Collection), NGI.4536. Photo © National Gallery of Ireland



fig. 2 Gabriel Metsu, *Woman Reading a Letter*, c. 1664–1666, oil on panel, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, Sir Alfred and Lady Beit, 1987 (Beit Collection), NGI.4537. Photo © National Gallery of Ireland



fig. 3 Johannes Vermeer, *The Love Letter*, c. 1669–1670, oil on canvas, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Purchased with the support of Vereniging Rembrandt, SK-A-1595



fig. 4 Johannes Vermeer, *Woman Writing a Letter, with Her Maid*, c. 1670–1671, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, Sir Alfred and Lady Beit, 1987 (Beit Collection), NGI.4535. Photo © National Gallery of Ireland



fig. 5
NOTES

- [1] For this project and the letters that have been scanned and analyzed to date, see Museum den Haag voor Communicatie, “Signed, Sealed, & Undelivered,” brienne.org.
- [2] For this project, see Universiteit Leiden, “Letters as Loot,” <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/research/research-projects/humanities/letters-as-loot.-towards-a-non-standard-view-on-the-history-of-dutch#tab-1>; and Gijsberts Rutten and Marijke J. van der Wal, *Letters as Loot: A Sociolinguistic Approach to Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Dutch* (Amsterdam, 2014).
- [3] On the popularity of such manuals, see Marcel Bax, “Epistolary Presentation Rituals, Face-Work, Politeness and Ritual Display in Early Modern Dutch Letter-Writing,” in *Historical (Im)politeness*, edited by Jonathan Culpeper and Dániel Kádár (Bern, 2011), 37–87.
- [4] For a color reproduction of this letter, see Maev Kennedy, “Undelivered letters shed light on 17th century society,” *The Guardian*, November 8, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/08/undelivered-letters-17th-century-dutch-society>.