

A comment on *Servant pouring milk (Milkmaid)* by Jan Vermeer

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The assumption is expressed that two very different, strongly mutually contrasting places are shown in '*Servant pouring milk*', and this is the "hidden" dynamic of thought of this picture by a genius, which amazed, despite its formal complete unpretentiousness, many famous painters and unknown art-lovers.

I am not alone, of course, in being a lover of the picture *Servant pouring milk*, often also quoted as 'Milkmaid', by the great Dutch painter Jan Vermeer (1632—1675). An amazing feature of this picture is that though the contrast between the very accurately painted defects of the walls and the somewhat smoothed painting of the hands of the woman is very unexpected, in some intuitive, psychological sense that is impossible to explain, these numerous small defects appear to be some very impressive adornments for the woman.

Of course, to what if not to art should the known words by the outstanding Austrian writer/thinker, Maria Ebner-Eschenbach (1830-1916), "If one can understand only what can be explained, -- one understands very little" [1,2], be relevant, and thus, how can we at all explain the causes of our impressions? However the secret of this picture is so unusual that it always interested me very much. Thus, for a long time I have had a thought regarding this secret, which I would like to share with others.

The impression (assumption)

The window is unexpectedly high-placed, which is obvious, but also when compared to other pictures by Vermeer where rooms are shown. This window has clearly not been washed for a long time, and is even broken (look hard at the picture). The walls are in a terrible state, and there are signs of water leakage under the window ...

All this does not belong to the room. You see all this in old European houses when you go upstairs. Then, you enter the room (apartment) and see this (such a) woman pouring milk and this wonderful bread on the table.

The union of these two different places – the room with the woman and the background stair-well – is the true "hidden" dynamic of thought of this picture by a genius, and this is the reason why this picture amazed, despite its formal complete unpretentiousness, many famous painters and unknown art-lovers, and why it will continue to amaze future generations.

One sees that in order to understand what these are, the woman, the milk and the bread, one has to come to all this from a place where nothing similar is found. More than that; already being in the room and seeing all that, one has to still remember that recently he had only these walls and this window ... This is, in fact, the basic meaning of *house*, *wife*, and "woman".

It even seems to be possible that all this is not inside an apartment, but that the woman has organized a small corner in the stairwell, letting the people who enter the house from the street immediately have the milk and the bread. The latter assumption is supported by the lacking the usual for Vermeer's home-type pictures "dialog" between two persons. Vermeer's pictures with single persons are not rare, but when only one person is shown, its *occupation* (reading or writing a letter, holding an adornment), or just a sensitive look (glance), usually suggests a background romantic contact with somebody. Let one, who never saw the "Milkmaid", guess

what should be painted in the “Servant pouring milk” by Jan Vermeer, and one will imagine/suppose a modestly dressed woman pouring milk before/for a better dressed woman or man of the owner’s family.

If so, then this small-size picture even compares the whole interior of the house-building of Delft to the outer space of the town, which “reduces” the suggested “dynamic of thought” to an *intuitively* seen/felt powerful contrast.

It could be that this window with the small broken piece of glass still exists and one can find it in the stairwell of an old house in the region of Old Delft where Vermeer lived, or in a picture by Vermeer or another Delft painter, showing the outside of the house.

References

- 1 Ebner-Eschenbach, Marie von & G.H. Needler (translator), *Aphorisms of Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach*, Canada, Burns & MacEachern, 1959.
- 2 *Aforizmy: ostryj z’enskij vzglyad* (*Aphorisms: the sharp woman look*, in Russian, collected by K. Dushenko and G. Manchka), Exmo-Press, Moscow, 2000.



Jan Vermeer, *Servant pouring milk* (1658-1660), oil on canvas, 45,5cm x 41cm (17 7/8" x 16 1/8")
Reijksmuseum, Amsterdam,



A Girl Asleep (about 1657) by Jan Vermeer, oil on canvas, 87.6cm x 76.5cm (34 1/2" x 30 1/8")
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.