

Maid in Manhattan

AT LONG LAST, VERMEER'S ENIGMATIC *MILKMAID* IS ON VIEW IN THE U.S. BY JONATHAN LOPEZ



Johannes Vermeer,
The Milkmaid, circa 1658.

AS A SALUTE to New York on the 400th anniversary of Henry Hudson's voyage to America—a Dutch-financed venture that aimed to find the Northwest Passage to the Orient but instead found the waters around Manhattan island—the Rijksmuseum has placed Johannes Vermeer's famed *Milkmaid* on temporary loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The painting will be shown at the Met, through Nov. 29, in a special exhibition titled *Vermeer's Masterpiece "The Milkmaid,"* which also includes the five Vermeers in the Met's own collection as well as works by associated artists.

The Milkmaid has traveled to the United States only once before, when it was shown at the 1939 New York World's Fair. That visit was unexpectedly prolonged due to the German invasion of the Netherlands in 1940, and the painting remained in America for the duration of World War II.

The Milkmaid captures a fleeting moment in the life of a kitchen servant as she prepares food, most likely bread pudding or porridge. The sculptural solidity of her body; the brilliance of the sunlight streaming through the window to her right; the miraculously tactile depiction of the bread, earthenware vessels and basket on the table before her—all these elements combine to make the image indelible. If you close your eyes and say the word "milkmaid," this is probably the picture you will see.

And yet, instantly recognizable though this painting is, its ultimate meaning remains elusive. "A lot of people see *The Milkmaid* as a heroic, working-class figure who represents the salt of the earth, the strength of the people," says Walter Liedtke, curator of European paintings at the Met and a specialist in 17th-century Dutch art. Breaking with the received wisdom, Liedtke prefers to situate *The Milkmaid* in the extensive tradition of Dutch paintings devoted to the virtue or vice of women who contemplate amorous encounters. Married women, for instance, were often depicted allegorically, as in Gabriel Metsu's *Woman Seated at an Open Window*, in which a faithful housewife keeps the apple of her fecundity safe within the chaste aries of her home. Morality lessons about maids who neglect their work to think of romance were also fairly common: A lighthearted example included in the Met's show is Hendrick Sorgh's *A Kitchen*, which employs the motif of a cat getting into a pail of fish as an emblem of impropriety.

Liedtke points out that *The Milkmaid* contains symbolic elements, too, although they are considerably more subtle and discreet. On the floor behind the maid is a foot warmer, an object often used in Dutch



pictures to suggest arousal due to its ability to direct heat up one's leg. (A multitude of very uncouth prints and drawings use this device.) And on either side of the foot warmer, at the base of the wall, are two decorated Delft tiles, one depicting Cupid, the other, a wandering man with a stick and knapsack.


"The main component, the romantic element, is mainly the suggestion that the maid could be thinking of romance while she is doing this everyday household chore," Liedtke says. Making reference to early illustrated volumes intended to instill a moral precept, he adds, "In emblem books, you get this theme of women who are doing knitting, or sewing, or household chores, and are distracted by thoughts of Cupid. That's described in the texts of various emblems. And I think that the later *Love Letter* in the Rijksmuseum by Vermeer is about that theme—where the maid comes in with the letter and the woman is distracted."

Vermeer's treatment of this subject, whether in *The Milkmaid*, *The Love Letter*, or the Met's own *Maid Asleep*, is much more elliptical, subtle and elusive than that of any of his predecessors, in part because he is able to suggest so much about the interior psychological life of his models without

necessarily spelling out a narrative. In *The Milkmaid*, for instance, the model may be turning her back on Cupid to focus on her work, or she may be beginning to daydream while preparing her batch of porridge. "The wonderful thing about Vermeer in *The Milkmaid* is that he admires the industry of the woman, but she's treated as a real person," says Liedtke. "You see this in the *Maid Asleep* and other pictures where the possible thoughts of the maid or the young woman are actually considered."

The exhibition of *The Milkmaid* at the Met will give visitors a rare opportunity to see the painting in close proximity to the museum's own *Woman With a Water Pitcher*, a picture to which it is often compared because of its similar subject matter, composition and size. Despite these parallels, however, the two images are actually quite different. Notably, the women portrayed are of disparate social classes: The milkmaid is a servant, while the woman with a water pitcher is a young lady of the house. She wears a costly dress, uses a solid silver ewer to perform her morning ablutions and is shown at a table covered with a sumptuous Persian rug upon which a jewel box has been set. As Liedtke says, she appears to be good marrying material—"an ideal woman in an ideal home."

"I think Vermeer's later women in general are attractive and are meant to be appealing to the male viewer," he continues. "And I think that, beginning with *The Milkmaid*, the *Maid Asleep* and the *Letter Reader* in Dresden, Vermeer is addressing the theme of voyeurism in a rather subtle way—that he is playing with the male viewer who is attracted to these women and at the same time is given suggestions of other thoughts, including that the picture is just an illusion. Vermeer likes that psychological subtlety of presenting attractive young women who are forever out of reach."

True enough. But until the end of November, at least, Vermeer's *Milkmaid* will be far more accessible than usual. 

Clockwise from top left: Hendrick Sorgh, *A Kitchen*, circa 1643;
Gabriel Metsu, *A Woman Seated at an Open Window*, circa 1661;
Johannes Vermeer, *Woman With a Water Pitcher*, circa 1662.