

Tiansheng Sun

FYSE Vermeer

Final Project

Porcelains, Delftware, and Vermeer:

Looking into Johannes Vermeer's Blue-and-White

In mid-17th century, when Dutch potters established more than 20 porcelain factories in Delft to locally produce porcelains which are later known as Delftware, Johannes Vermeer, a citizen of Delft, started his painting career in this Dutch porcelain capital. Now, Johannes Vermeer and Koninklijke Porceleyne Fles (Royal Dutch Delftware Manufactory), one of the only remaining 17th century porcelains factory, become Delft's symbols. Since Vermeer lived in Delft throughout his life, it is not difficult to see how the trading of blue-and-white porcelains with China, and the production of Delftware in his city influenced him. Vermeer painted functional blue-and-white porcelains in many of his paintings with detail and light-and-shadow effect, and the blue and white color of porcelains contributed to Vermeer's love and extensive use of these two colors in his oeuvre, which added context to the main theme of his paintings, and the detail and color that viewers have long praised of.

Starting from the Yuan and Ming Dynasty of China, the blue-and-white porcelains that Vermeer painted in his works started to develop and soon become popular when Chinese potters in Jingdezhen made many blue-and-white porcelains in Western style specifically for export.¹ After the development of a maritime silk road, trading porcelains with other countries became

¹ Robert Finlay, "The Pilgrim Art: The Culture of Porcelain in World History", *Journal of World History*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (University of Hawaii Press, 1998), 156.

big business in China. Chinese traders carried many porcelains to the Middle East, where its color scheme and design influenced the development of blue-and-white porcelains back in China,² and Islam merchants imported Persian cobalt, which Chinese potters processed to produce cobalt blue, a color used to paint the blue patterns on porcelains.³ The technological development in Jingdezhen also contributed to the production of blue-and-white porcelains. Potters in Jingdezhen, a major mining center, started to mix kaolin to the china-stone, creating porcelains with higher whiteness and hardness.⁴ This increasing quality of Chinese porcelains mesmerized Westerners, and the Yuan- and Ming- period blue-and-white porcelains soon became popular among foreigners, especially among a growing middle class, who although not rich enough to afford expensive silver, wanted to use something better than common materials like terra-cotta.⁵ To satisfy the flavor of their Western consumers, potters in China made many blue-and-white porcelains with Western Style for export purposes, including *kraak* porcelains, which is one type of porcelains that Chinese potters made especially for the Dutch market, and which became a famous scene in 17th century Dutch paintings.⁶ The metallic cap of a porcelain vase in *Girl Interrupted at her music*, that is unusual in traditional porcelains, suggested that Vermeer was using one of these Western-reformed porcelains.

²Ibid., 150-158.

³ Stacey Pierson, “The Movement of Chinese Ceramics: Appropriation in Global History”, *Journal of World History*, Vol. 23, No. 1, SPECIAL ISSUE: GLOBAL CHINA (March 2012), 10. Other scholars in other essays also discussed this Middle-Eastern influence to Chinese porcelains. See also Anne Gerritsen, “Fragments of a Global Past: Ceramics Manufacture in Song-Yuan-Ming Jingdezhen”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 52, No. 1, *Rock, Paper, Scissors: Fragments of Local History in Middle-Period China* (2009), 124.

⁴ Finlay, *The Culture of Porcelain in World History*, 150. Jing Sun, “Exotic Imitation and Local Cultivation: A Study on the Art Form of Dutch Delftware Between 1640 and 1720”, *The Transformation of Vernacular Expression in Early Modern Arts, intersections*, v. 19(Leiden: Brill, 2011), 374, also talked about this new process of producing porcelains. The article also discussed that the porcelains produced under such process have “the translucent body showing through the clear glaze, the fine blue hue, the exotic decoration, the thinness and durability”. These qualities separated them from Europeans potteries and accounted to why they are so popular in the Netherlands as they flew into the local market.

⁵ Finlay, *The Culture of Porcelain in World History*, 169. Also according to Finlay, he said that in the 17th century, this social class grew significantly in the Netherlands, which may account to my discussion of why they are popular in the Netherlands in 17th century.

⁶ Gerritsen, 125.

When the VOC (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie), also called the Dutch East India Company, began trading with China and brought back a large quantity of porcelains to the Netherlands,⁷ these blue-and-white porcelains immediately became popular in this new European power, where the demand for these potteries increased sharply. These blue-and-white porcelains were so popular in the Netherlands that local potters started to produce porcelains in a similar pattern, replacing the original “Italo-Flemish Polychrome decoration” that they initially produced.⁸ Although the trading of porcelains from China was hampered in the mid-17th century due to the internal warfare in China,⁹ the business of these potters increased when more local factories were built to address this new problem, and by 1588, more than 20 factories in Delft were in this business producing porcelains for Dutch’s own use.¹⁰ The porcelains made in Delft, called Delftware, or the “Delft Blue”, were famous for their blue patterns, an apparent influence from Chinese blue-and-white porcelains that entered this country. However, potters in Delft did not simply imitate Chinese porcelains, but instead made them in *Chinoiserie* style, imbricating original Chinese design with Western style to satisfy the unique taste of local market.¹¹ The abundant amount of porcelains and trade related to it in Delft gave Vermeer the opportunity to appreciate the design and patterns of these blue-and-white porcelains.¹²

As a contemporary of these newly emerging porcelain factories, Johannes Vermeer inevitably encountered with this new commerce in his hometown, which is indicated by the varieties types

⁷ According to Robert Finlay, “*The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History*” (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 258, VOC imported at least 43 million pieces of Chinese porcelains back to Europe in two centuries (17th century and 18th century) to Europe.

⁸ Ibid., 258.

⁹ This is the period when Qing dynasty was established in China after the perish of Ming dynasty.

¹⁰ Sun, 377.

¹¹ Ibid., 390.

¹² According to Robert Finlay, because of Delftware’s popularity, they entered the global market as Chinese porcelains did, traveling to Persia, India, and even the Swahili coast. This fact suggested the prosperous trade in Delft that was related to porcelains and Delftware, that may have influenced a Delft citizen like Vermeer. Finlay, *Cultures of Porcelain in World History*, 260.

of porcelains that he painted, like the bowl in *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* (Painting 1), plates in *Young Woman Reading a letter at an Open Window* (Painting 2) and *The Girl with a Wine Glass* (Painting 3), jug in *The Procuress* (Painting 4), and vase in *Girl Interrupted at her music* (Painting 5). These porcelains are part of the orientalism in Vermeer's oeuvre. Porcelains were not the only Eastern influence that appeared in Vermeer's oeuvre; rugs, which were originally from Turkey, silvers, and silks all showed evidence of Eastern influence to an international city like Delft. Vermeer used all these Eastern items to capture the Dutch life in the 17th century, when the Netherlands dominated world trade, making Amsterdam world's central commercial center, and the fact that the use of these imported items, such as ordinary porcelain bowls and plates in an ordinary Dutch home had already become a common practice in 1614.¹³ He also used these items to show detail and delicate patterns that added complexity to his paintings,¹⁴ like the small but meticulous and detailed porcelain patterns in the listed five paintings, and the pattern on the rug in *the Music Lesson*, which Tim Jenison, when trying to recreate this painting in his video, claimed to be the most complicated part to paint.¹⁵ Vermeer's effort in painting these details and patterns showed how Vermeer perceived them to be an important element that consisted his depiction of everyday life.

One way Vermeer captured porcelain's patterns is through his intentional placement of porcelains with rugs in the foreground in *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* and *Young Woman Reading a letter at an Open Window*. In *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*, a piece of rug separates

¹³ Finlay, *Cultures of Porcelain in World History*, 257-258.

¹⁴ The details that Vermeer depicted on these items are part of the optical effects what many scholars, like Wayne Franits, *Vermeer* (New York: Phaidon, 2015), 294-302, argued that showcased Vermeer's skill and intrigued Impressionism artists, general public in the era of photography, and art scholars when in the 20th century many art historians began doing extensive research on him. The realistic and photographic depiction of these details also became one central part of the discussion of whether Vermeer used Camera Obscura. Thus, these details on porcelains and other Eastern items make Vermeer an established and highly praised art master, showing their importance in understanding Vermeer's oeuvre.

¹⁵ *Tim's Vermeer*, directed by Teller (documentary, 2013)

the two porcelains on the table. The contour of the tall porcelain jug in the left naturally transits to the rug, which slowly leads to the porcelain bowl in the center of the painting with a gentle slope similar to the curve part of the tall porcelain jug. Moreover, Vermeer also subtly painted the transition of light on the porcelain and rug, which blends naturally with the light and shadow on the rear wall. Though the porcelains are painted in the shadow, the patterns on them are still clear to see. In *Young Woman Reading a letter at an Open Window*, furthermore, the porcelain plate lies gently on the rug at an angle, leaving out the beautiful blue patterns that lie naturally between the patterns on the rug and the detail of fruits. In both paintings, Vermeer clearly planned his placement of the porcelains to a position that harmoniously fuses with other items in the paintings. This meticulous plan of position shows Vermeer's willingness to paint porcelains with detail that show their importance in the paintings.

Besides placing porcelains with rug to fully exhibit the detailed patterns on them, Vermeer showed the greatest attention to the porcelain vase in *Girl Interrupted at her music*. In *Girl Interrupted at her music*, Vermeer clearly depicted the porcelain vase with Chinese-style plant patterns, as compared to the blurring image of the man's face and the score in front of the vase. Indeed, he placed it around with a golden ratio before a dark rear wall that strongly contrasts with the white color of the porcelain vase and the bright dot on the metallic cap,¹⁶ and minimized distraction from viewers' immediate captivation to the porcelain. Nevertheless, its prominence does not disturb the overall calmness and balance of the painting through the portrayal of delicate shadow on the porcelain. The uniqueness and conspicuousness of the porcelain vase in

¹⁶ The bright dot on the vase in *Girl Interrupted at her music*, along with the dots on the porcelain plate in *the girl with a Wine Glass* (1661-1662), suggested Vermeer's use of pointilles, an effect that could only be noticed and painted with the aid of a camera obscura. Halation, a limitation of optical devices, contributed to this pointilles effect. This limitation brings bright dot on the vase that significantly captured view's attention to the porcelain.

this painting shows Vermeer's willingness of painting porcelains as a central figure through careful composition and depiction of detail and lighting effect.

Although Vermeer's porcelains can be praised for its beautiful pattern, like his rug, a significant difference of the two is that porcelains are more functional, and add more implications to the main theme of the paintings. Vermeer painted different types of porcelains according to the setting: plates to place food, and vase and jug to place wine. The porcelain jug in *The Procuress*, for example, is used to place wine, an item indicating the sordid and raucous nature of prostitution. The fruits in *Young Woman Reading a letter at an Open Window* is also believed to have symbolism indicating "extramarital relationships",¹⁷ in relation to a letter-reading theme which in 17th century was a popular topic of love among upper class women (the letters are often believed to be love letters).¹⁸ The function of porcelains in placing items suggesting symbolism and the main theme suggests that Vermeer painted porcelains to not only show its extraordinary design and pattern, but also suggest broader themes of the paintings.

In addition to the depiction of porcelains with careful placement, detail and light-and-shadow effect that show Chinese blue-and-white porcelains' influence on Vermeer, the blue and white colors on his porcelains show another evidence of such influence and separates him from many of his contemporaries who drew similar porcelains without the blue and white color that Vermeer captured. Vermeer painted the porcelain jug in *The Procuress* with clean white surface and bright blue pattern that stands out from the background and placed it on the right corner very close to the young woman and man's hand like a "fifth person" with equal importance with the main figures, continuing illustrating the main scene of prostitution. However, although Nicolas Maes painted *The Idle Servant* (Painting 6) and Pieter de Hooch painted *Two Soldiers Playing Cards*

¹⁷ Norbert Schneider, *Vermeer, 1632–1675*, (Taschen, 2010), 49.

¹⁸ Franits, 151.

(Painting 7) with a similarly designed jug, the jugs in Maes and de Hooch's paintings are dull, shrink in size, and lose their significance as they totally merge with dark of the background. In comparison, even though the porcelains in Vermeer's *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* were painted in the dark, they were still painted with apparent blue patterns not seen in Maes's and de Hooch's paintings. Therefore, Vermeer's distinct depiction of blue and white color makes his porcelains stand out from the ones by his contemporaries.

Although people often compare Vermeer to Pieter de Hooch, another Delft School painter, a glance into the bright blue color of porcelains in Vermeer's paintings immediately separated him from Pieter de Hooch whose porcelains don't have that same attribute of blue color. Though often compared to Vermeer, de Hooch did not paint many porcelains in his oeuvre, but the three paintings *a Child Feeding a Parrot* (Painting 8), *Teaching a Child to Walk* (Painting 9), and *Woman giving Money to a Servant-Girl* (Painting 10) show some of his few. The three paintings have similar compositions, and each contains several porcelains, unlike Vermeer who generally painted only one porcelain in his paintings (except *Woman with a pearl necklace*). However, even though there are many porcelains in these three paintings, none of them are blue-and-white porcelains. Though the porcelains in *Teaching a Child to Walk*, for instance, have the most apparent patterns among the three paintings, they are still plainer than Vermeer's porcelains. Moreover, they are smaller and pushed to the back of the canvass. The fact that Vermeer lived in Delft longer, and was influenced more profoundly by the blue patterns on porcelains in his hometown may contribute to why Vermeer's porcelains are all blue-and-white porcelains with uncompromising blue patterns and attention unlike those painted by Pieter de Hooch.

Vermeer's love of blue and white porcelains is not only evident in Vermeer's depiction of porcelains, but it has a bigger influence in making blue and white two of his most widely used

and painstakingly painted colors. The rear walls in *the Milkmaid*, for example, is a celebration of white color. Light softly casts onto the plain wall, showing a natural transition of shadow without a significant boundary. The white of the rear wall is soft, and the lack of decoration spotlighted the milkmaid in the front. Moreover, Vermeer painted the right section of the rear wall without the maid, providing the audience with a comfortable and realistic depiction of the wall from the top to the bottom. The plain white on this right section of the wall serves as a metaphor, indicating milkmaid's lower class, and the simple life that she had, amplifying the central figure to the left. In conclusion, the delicately painted white added a powerful focus on maid, served as part of a light transition, and itself is a well painted artwork, receiving equal attention as the milkmaid.

Apart from Vermeer's skillful depiction of white color itself, Vermeer used expensive ultramarine pigment extracted from the precious stone lapis lazuli imported from Afghanistan to paint the blue color of the blue dress in *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* (Painting 11) and the tablecloth in *The Girl with the Wine Glass*,¹⁹ which Vermeer painted with nearby white-color elements. The use of ultramarine pigment on woman's dress in front of a white wall in *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* resembles a blue pattern on the white surface of a porcelain. The white wall, like the rear wall in *the Milkmaid*, also minimized viewers' distraction from the precious blue color on the dress. What's more, the ultramarine tablecloth in *The Girl with the Wine Glass* strongly contrasts with the white jug and cloth on top of it, which serve as a natural transition of the dark background and the bright main scene. The white jug and cloth also contrasts with the melancholy seated man in the corner, whose figure blended with dark wall and the dark ultramarine tablecloth in front of him, and blocks him from the central scene, suggesting the

¹⁹ Franits, 138-139

mystique of the man sitting at the corner, while lamenting his failure in this relationship.²⁰ The use of expensive pigment further suggested Vermeer's love of blue, and his contrast of white and blue colors not only show the power of these two colors in porcelains, but also leave influence in other broader themes of his oeuvre.

Like rugs, blue-and-white porcelains were the product of 17th century globalization that gave significance in the Western countries, especially the Netherlands, where the frequent trading of VOC with the East summarized its prosperous, where upper and middle class men and women were mesmerized by their patterns and high quality, decorating their house with this sense of orientalism, and where potters mimicked this Chinese design with their own patterns and styles. However, after 350 years, the Delftware and porcelain industries in Delft declined with only one factory Koninklijke Porceleynse Fles (Royal Dutch Delftware Manufactory) remaining. Although the factory tried hard to restore its glorious past, continually producing blue-and-white Delftware, the prosperity of producing Delftware in Delft no longer exists. Through his depiction of porcelains in his paintings, nevertheless, Vermeer profoundly recorded that period of history and imprinted his love of porcelains, with careful placement, design, and meticulous depiction of blue and white color. Their functionality as shown in Vermeer's five paintings reminds us how 17th century Delft citizens use them, while providing information to the main theme of the paintings. Living in the Dutch capital of porcelains, and influenced by his encounter and taste of blue-and-white porcelains, Vermeer captured significant light-and-shadow effect on porcelains, depicted realistic yet soft white color, and painted precious blue color with the use of

²⁰ H. Rodney Nevitt Jr., "Vermeer on the Question of Love," in Ivan Gaskell and Michiel Jonkers (eds) *Vermeer Studies*, vol.33(Washington, DC, 1998), 41-53. Nevitt talked about how the man seated at the table has been understood either as soporific because of the effect of smoking and wine, or as the rejected suitor by the woman in the central scene. The contrast of blue and white here help detach the man and illustrate his difference from the other two figures from the other two figures, who are neither too sleepy, nor suffered from a failure of relationship.

expensive pigments, continually telling stories of that bygone era, and mesmerizing viewers with magical optical effects showed in his oeuvre.



*Painting 1: Johannes Vermeer, Woman with a Pearl
Necklace, 1662-1665, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin*



*Painting 2: Johannes Vermeer, Young Woman Reading a letter at an
Open Window, 1657-1658, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden*



*Painting 3: Johannes Vermeer, The girl with a Wine Glass,
1661-1662, Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum, Braunschweig*



*Painting 4: Johannes Vermeer, The Procuress, 1656,
Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden*



Painting 5: Johannes Vermeer, Girl Interrupted at her music, 1658-1659, Frick Collection, New York



Painting 6: Nicolas Maes, The Idle Servant, 1655, National Gallery, London



Painting 7: Pieter de Hooch, Two Soldiers Playing Cards, 1657-1658, private collection.



Painting 8: Pieter de Hooch, Child Feeding a Parrot, 1668-1672, private collection.



Painting 9: Pieter de Hooch, Teaching a Child to Walk
1668-1672, Museum der bildenden Künste, Leipzig



Painting 10: Pieter de Hooch, Woman giving Money to a
Servant-Girl, 1668-1672, private collection



Painting 11: Johannes Vermeer, Woman in Blue Reading a Letter,
1663-1664, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

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