



A "new" Vermeer in Dresden

For more than 250 years now, the famous painting by Johannes Vermeer featuring a profile depiction of a girl intently reading a letter in front of a light-coloured empty wall has held a firm place among the masterpieces in the Dresden Gemäldegalerie. This picture, which dates to around 1659, is regarded as one of the earliest interior paintings by Vermeer with a solitary figure. Previous x-ray examinations indicated that a picture of a naked Cupid in the painting had been overpainted. Today, new laboratory tests have conclusively determined that the overpainting was not by Vermeer's hand. On this basis, the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister decided in the course of the current restoration of the work to remove the overpaint. The painting can now be enjoyed looking just as it did when it left the artist's studio.



Johannes Vermeer, Brieflesendes Mädchen am offenen Fenster / Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window, um / c. 1659

Aktueller Zwischenzustand der Restaurierung zum 7. Mai 2019, Öl auf Leinwand / current intermediate state of the restoration on 7 May 2019, oil on canvas

A depiction of Cupid originally incorporated on the rear wall as a "painting within the painting" was later painted over again. As a result of the latest investigations and the current restoration of the painting, it has now been proven that this **overpainting was not done by Vermeer himself** but was executed by a different hand some years after the completion of the *Girl Reading a Letter*. It has not yet been possible to identify the originator of this overpainting that completely covered the background picture, including its broad black frame, nor to determine at what point in time it was performed.

Although only about half of the Cupid picture on the rear wall of the room has so far been exposed, the fundamental change to the overall impression of the painting is already evident. It is now clear that the Dresden *Girl Reading a Letter* is another one of the numerous interior scenes by Vermeer in which there is a "painting within the painting" located on the rear wall. In this case, the artist was probably quoting a painting in which a standing Cupid was depicted with an upright bow in his right hand and with his left arm raised. This motif is already known from three other interior paintings by Vermeer.



Pressekonferenz 07.05.2019



After being restored to its original condition, Vermeer's *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* will appear more overt and less muted than previously. The vivid, almost sculptural representation of Cupid painted in ochre and brown tones hanging directly above the delicate figure of the girl will be about the same size as the section of her body that is visible behind the table. The powerful presence of the Cupid figure, positioned in such a way as to face the viewer directly, will be seen as pregnant with meaning and constituting a "commentary" on the scene, thus contributing substantially towards the viewer's interpretation of the painting. The representation of the god of love will probably be interpreted as a reference to the amorous context of this seemingly innocuous everyday scene. The highly conspicuous background picture will create a spatial counterweight to the introversion of the letter reader, thus leaving the content of the scene open. It is then up to the viewer to decide how to interpret the letter in the girl's hand.



Johannes Vermeer, *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window*, c. 1659, Oil on canvas
prior to the restoration



In any case, the anticipated result of the ongoing restoration of the *Girl Reading a Letter* will undoubtedly show that the elements of concealment and seclusion in this early work by Vermeer in fact play a less dominant role than has been implied over the past two and a half centuries owing to the alteration of the composition by a different hand.



Press Conference on 7.5.2019

Presentation to the Public



Background Story

Presentation of the Cupid

The restoration – an interim report

When work began on restoring Johannes Vermeer's *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* in May 2017, it was possible to take advantage of numerous previous investigations. In 1965 Hermann Kühn had analysed paint samples taken from the painting. In 1979 the painting had been x-rayed and in 2009 it underwent infrared reflectography. In 2007 fabric structure analysis was performed on the picture support. In preparation for the exhibition "The Early Vermeer" in 2010, the painting underwent careful microscopic investigation, particularly with regard to the artist's painting technique and the state of preservation. Since 2017, a further extensive programme of research has been an integral part of the current project.



Restoration of "Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window" by Johannes Vermeer

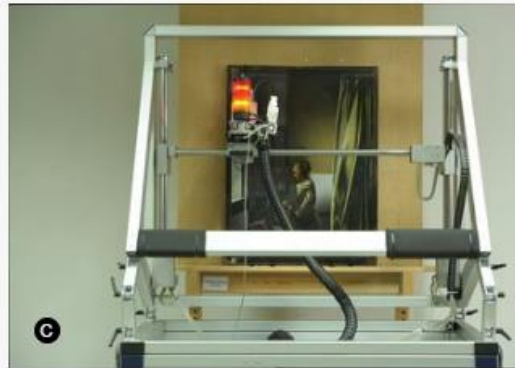


Removing the Varnish from "Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window" by Johannes Vermeer

Removal of the varnish

The first stage in the restoration process was the removal of multiple layers of varnish which had turned yellowish brown as a result of ageing. This coating had been applied in the 19th century and had been subsequently renewed several times. The removal of this varnish resulted in the subtle, cool colours of Vermeer's original painting being rediscovered. It also became evident that the painting – apart from the edge areas – is in an excellent state of preservation, given that it is 360 years old.

During the removal of the varnish, it was found that the solubility properties of the paints in the central part of the background differed from those of the other areas of the painting. It was already known, from the x-ray images taken in 1979, that a "painting within the painting" existed on the rear wall of the room – a depiction of a naked Cupid that had been completely painted over. For a long time, this overpainting was attributed to Vermeer himself.



Johannes Vermeer, *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window*,
c. 1659, Oil on canvas

Prior to continuation of work on this area of the painting, investigations concerning the structure of the paint layers were performed in the archaeometry laboratory of the Hochschule für Bildende Künste Dresden. These showed that aged layers of binding agent and a layer of dirt exist between the original paint layers applied by Vermeer and the paint used for painting over the Cupid picture. A period of several decades must therefore have intervened between the completion of the painting with the Cupid picture and the application of the layer of overpainting, which means that Vermeer cannot have painted over the background picture himself. When the painting came to Dresden from the collection of the Prince of Carignan in France in 1742, this major change to the composition had evidently already been carried out.

Following numerous tests, it was established that the most favourable method for meticulously removing the layer of overpainting was to use a fine scalpel under a microscope. Only in this way is it possible to retain the layers of binding agent between the original paint layer and the paint used for the overpainting. This layer may well be the last existing original varnish layer applied by Vermeer.

The later overpainting of the Cupid was undoubtedly due to altered tastes and not to any damage to the paint layer, such as the small areas of abrasion and the scratch above the boy's right arm, which have now been exposed again.

The restoration is taking place in the paintings conservation department at the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden and is being performed by paintings conservator Dr. Christoph Schölzel. Accompanying the restoration is a research project about the painting, carried out in cooperation with the archaeometry laboratory at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste Dresden, the Doerner-Institut at the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen München, the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam and The National Gallery in London.

At the outset of the restoration, a symposium was held in March 2017 with colleagues from Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Vienna and Dresden, colleagues who have investigated and restored works by the artist in the past years. They were invited by the Dresden Gemäldegalerie and will continue to accompany the conservation project and provide their professional input.

The research and conservation project is made possible in this form thanks to the generous support of the Hata Foundation in Tokyo.

After completing the restoration of Vermeer's "Girl Reading a Letter at a Open Window", this painting is going to be the centre and highlight of the special exhibition **Vermeer. Johannes Vermeer's "Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window" and 17th-century Dutch Genre Painting** in the Semper Building at the Zwinger in spring 2021. Along with nine other paintings by Vermeer and 40–50 works of Dutch genre painting from the second half of the 17th century it will enrich the exhibition.

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