



# VERMEER

RIJKS MUSEUM

HANNIBAL



PIETER ROELOFS  
GREGOR J.M. WEBER

# VERMEER

BART CORNELIS  
BENTE FRISSEN  
SABINE PÉNOT  
FRIEDERIKE SCHÜTT  
CHRISTIAN TICO SEIFERT  
ARIANE VAN SUCHTELEN  
MARJORIE E. WIESEMAN

RIJKS MUSEUM

HANNIBAL



**CAT. 1**

**Christ in the House of Mary and Martha** c. 1654–1655

Oil on canvas, 158.5 × 141.5 cm

Edinburgh, National Galleries of Scotland, inv. no. NG 1670;

presented by the sons of W.A. Coats in memory of their father 1927

pp. 6, 122, 126–129, 131, 150, 274



**CAT. 2**

**Saint Praxedis 1655**

Oil on canvas, 101.6 × 82.6 cm

Kufu Company Inc., on long-term loan at  
The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo,  
inv. no. DEP.2014-0001

pp. 7, 17, 32, 123, 126, 128-130, 136, 274



**CAT. 3**

**Diana and her Nymphs c. 1655-1656**

Oil on canvas, 97.8 × 104.6 cm

The Hague, Mauritshuis, inv. no. 406

pp. 7, 124, 126, 128-132, 137, 150, 274





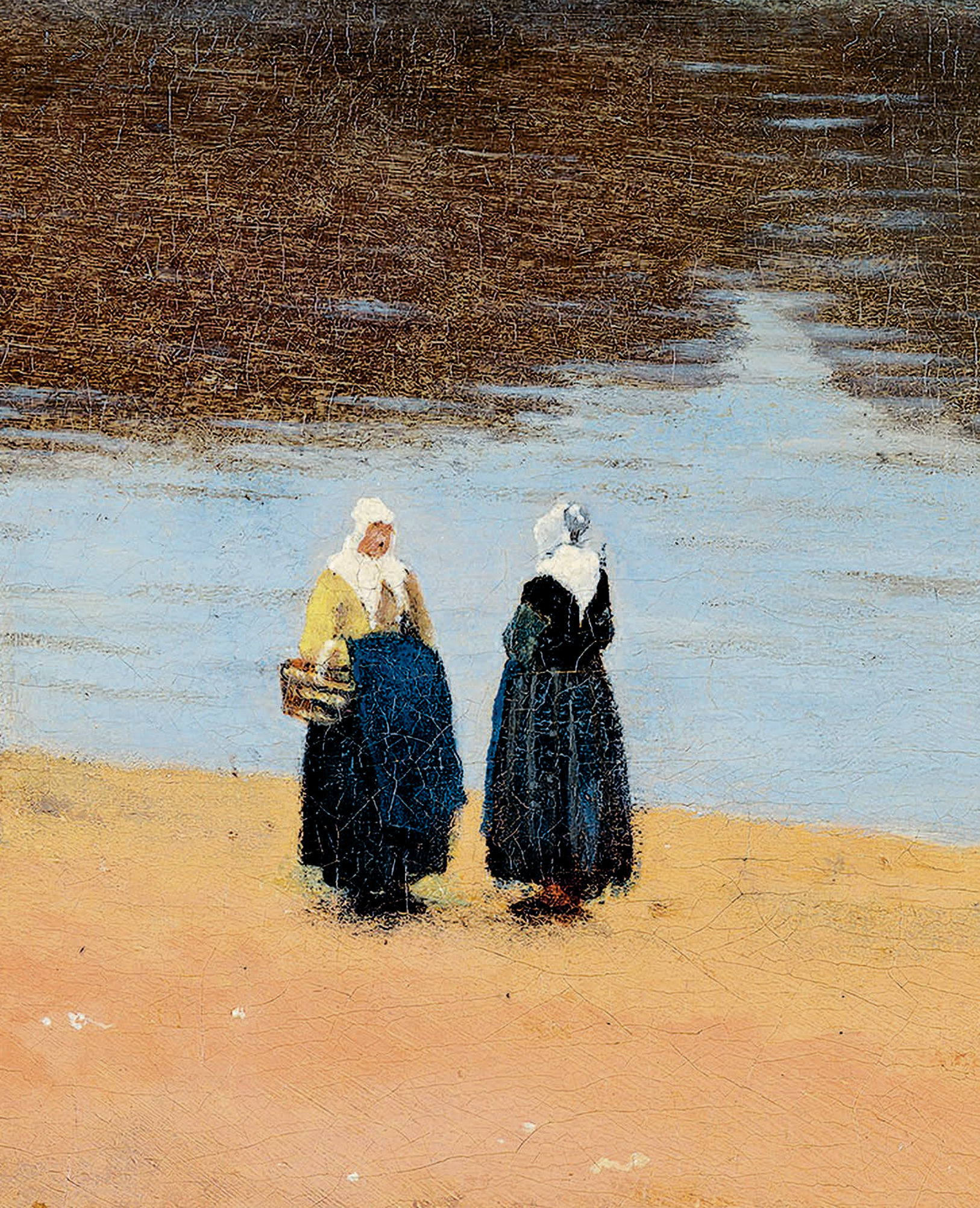


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CAT. 5 A Maid Asleep c. 1656–1657



*with a pestle/ A copper candleholder/ A copper bedwarmer/  
A pewter butterpot/ A pewter ladle with a wooden handle*  
[Maria Thins and Catharina Bolnes]

Immediately adjoining the great hall was a small room whose location was described by the notary's clerk as the 'small room next to the aforementioned great hall'. This also contained a fireplace adorned with a green mantelpiece coverlet. The furnishings of the room were modest. There were only two paintings and a worn mirror on the wall. This intermediate space has indeed been characterized in the art history literature primarily as a storage place for old things.<sup>146</sup> And in fact the 'rack', the 'green-painted wooden coffer with iron fittings' and the 'large, tall, tin container' must have



FIG. 13 Pieter de Hooch, *Interior with Women beside a Linen Cupboard*, 1663  
Oil on canvas, 70 × 75.5 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. SK-C-1191;  
on loan from the City of Amsterdam

served for storage. It was not so much 'old things' Catherina kept here, but rather tableware and utensils that she used in the adjoining room for meals and gatherings. Among the diverse dinnerware, the notary's clerk counted seven glass flasks, three roemer glasses, twelve earthenware plates, five earthenware shell-shaped dishes, eleven earthenware jugs with pewter lids – perhaps comparable to the jug in four of Vermeer's paintings (CATS. 5, 11, 13, 16) – as well as three Cologne butterpots, a copper mortar and pestle, a pewter butterpot, a pewter ladle with a wooden handle and some more earthenware. A loose round tabletop and a red-painted panel from a chest could be used as an extra table or to make an ironing board.<sup>147</sup>

From the point of view of seventeenth-century domestic culture, it is not logical to presume that one of the four heatable rooms in the house would only be used for storage. Johannes and Catharina would also have used the furniture in the room for rest and relaxation. In the vicinity of the fireplace stood an oak table and two armchairs with decorative

carvings, upon which lay two old tapestry-covered cushions.<sup>148</sup> It is not difficult to imagine that Vermeer or his guests would light a pipe from the pewter brazier, or that Catharina would take a break by the fireplace or sit with one of her small children, in this room.

Montias suggested that one or two of the young children probably slept in this small room, since the inventory lists two beds.<sup>149</sup> Because of the fireplace, the room was indeed a very suitable place to allow the little ones to sleep. In addition, the proximity of the marital box bed played an important role here. As Willem Goeree advised in 1681: 'The Rooms for the Children must be close to that of the Parents and especially of the Mother'.<sup>150</sup> Late into the twentieth century, beds were commonly shared by siblings. We can therefore conclude that the little room was used as sleeping quarters by more young children than Montias could imagine. Gertruyd (1664–after 1713), Catharina (c. 1665–after 1713), Ignatius (1672–after 1713) and the one-and-a-half-year-old youngest of the family (1674–1678/80) would have spent the night there in the two beds.<sup>151</sup>

With the bedwarmer, in which glowing coals or hot pieces of charcoal could be placed, Catharina was able to warm the children's beds before bedtime on colder days.<sup>152</sup> Overnight, two 'privy coffers', meaning commodes that could be closed with a lid, served as toilet facilities.<sup>153</sup> Johannes and Catharina and their children would have primarily lived their lives by daylight. In the evening, the glow of the fireplace lit the room. The copper candleholder could be placed on the table for more light, but candles were expensive. If Johannes or Catharina had to venture into the darkness, they lit their way with a candle placed in the iron candleholder. On their return the light source could be safely extinguished with one of the two copper snuffers.

The little room also featured a fire basket containing a *testje* (an earthenware basin) with glowing coals. Along with a foot-warmer this was a standard part of the household items of young families.<sup>154</sup> Catharina would have used the basket after giving birth to keep her new-born baby warm. In addition, a fire basket continued to be used, long after the seventeenth century, usually in babies' or children's rooms, to dry linens and nappies [FIG. 15].<sup>155</sup> Thanks to recent technical research at the Rijksmuseum, we know that Vermeer originally also depicted a fire basket with linen in the lower right-hand corner of *The Milkmaid* [FIGS. 17A, B]. He replaced this later with the small brown foot-warmer we now see in the painting, shifting the focus of the scene to the pouring of the milk.<sup>156</sup>

#### 'Inde binnekeucken' | In the interior kitchen

*A large painting representing Christ on the Cross/ Two tronie paintings done by Hoogstraten/ A painting wherein all manner of women's things/ One of Veronica/ Two tronies painted in the Turkish fashion/ A small seascape/ A painting*

FIG. 14A, B *A Lady Writing* (cat. 21), next page: *Mistress and Maid* (cat. 22), details showing comparable yellow satin mantles with ermine-like fur













CAT. 6 Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window c. 1657–1658





CAT. 8 The Milkmaid c. 1658–1659







# IN SEARCH OF THE PERFECT ILLUSION OF SPACE

GREGOR J.M. WEBER

Before Johannes Vermeer painted his famous small-format interiors featuring a single figure engaged in quiet, introspective activity, he made paintings with large figures and without a precise indication of the location. In the painting *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha* (see CAT. 1) there are on the left only vaguely distinguishable structures suggesting a window and a door, and in *Diana and her Nymphs* (see CAT. 3) just a few leafy branches looming out of the darkness. Nor can one really talk of a definite interior space in his first known genre painting, *The Procuress*, of 1656 (see CAT. 4).<sup>1</sup> At this point, Vermeer was clearly not interested in perspective depictions of interiors. Similarly, in his two subsequent genre paintings he used other, unconventional means in order to achieve an impression of space. So what were the phases that he went through, and what were his thoughts and observations as he went about developing his own personal way of depicting interiors?

## OVERLAPPING PICTURE PLANES

In theory, Vermeer could easily have acquired basic knowledge of the traditional device of single-point perspective.<sup>2</sup> He may indeed even have done so, but his first spatial depictions give a very different impression. As it must have been a few months after *The Procuress* that he completed his painting *A Maid Asleep* (CAT. 5), it was thus around 1656–1657 that he created what was his first depiction of an interior into which he invites us as discreet observers of a private scene. Seen slumbering at a table covered with a carpet is a young woman with her head propped up on her right arm. Over her dark-red dress with its silken sheen she is wearing a shawl, presumably a *kamdoek* of the kind worn to protect clothing when the hair was combed and also often kept on during the day.<sup>3</sup> As she has not quite closed it, part of her bosom is visible. In addition to her pearls she sports a conspicuous, large black beauty patch or *mouche* on her temple. In accordance with the contemporary ideal of beauty, dark patches were worn to make the skin look lighter. To enhance the effect, white powder (*blanketsel*) was usually applied to the face, with rouge for the cheeks. Patches could also be used to cover scars from infectious illnesses. In Amsterdam, the appearance of *mouches* in paintings coincides with the plague years 1652–1657. Delft

was hit by the plague in 1655, shortly before Vermeer made this painting.<sup>4</sup>

On the table, the carpet is rucked forward in the middle, with the area to its left occupied by a compact still life – porcelain bowls with fruit partially covered by cloths, a silver spoon, at the front a knife with an ornamented handle, a roemer glass that has been knocked over, and a white lidded jug. Clearly, a second person was sitting here, who has hastily left the table. In front of the slumbering maid is a Venetian glass, still half-filled, giving a clue as to her physical state – and even auction records of 1696 refer to her as ‘een dronke slapende Meyd’ (a drunk maid asleep).<sup>5</sup> All this confirms the impression that we are being allowed to observe a very intimate situation, being made as it were witnesses of a



FIG. 1 Nicolaes Maes, *The Account Keeper*, 1656  
Oil on canvas, 66 × 53.7 cm  
Saint Louis, Saint Louis Art Museum, inv. no. 72.1950

rendezvous that has just come to an end. Technical analysis has shown that Vermeer initially painted a man wearing a hat in the room behind, being observed by a dog in the doorway.<sup>6</sup> As in later works, Vermeer resorted to re-painting here in order to reduce the amount of anecdotal material appearing in the picture.

The lower part of the painting still shares a number of elements with *The Procuress*: the carpet seen up close in the foreground, which serves as a barrier; the table top shown from above but without the perspective being made clear; and the half-figure behind the table. In the upper part of the picture, the half-open door interrupts the brightly painted wall, disclosing, through a narrow corridor, a back room, where instead of the man initially planned we see a black-framed mirror hanging on the wall, a table with a red tablecloth, and on the right a darkened window. Above the maid in the front room Vermeer added a large dark-framed painting to the left of the doorway, next to an item of clothing hanging on a hook, and at the right-hand edge of



the picture a narrow section of a map. It is striking that the entire rear wall at the height of the painting-within-a-painting is strongly in shadow, as if a veil were slowly sinking down over the whole depiction.

In the painting on the left in the background, which is only partly visible, all that can be seen is the leg of a child and in front of it an upright mask; lying flat on the ground is a second mask, which has been transformed (in a restoration?) into a pile of debris.<sup>7</sup> Because the picture is only shown in part, the masks are the sole elements that can be regarded as pictorial motifs significant for the depiction as a whole. Traditionally regarded as signs of deception and falsehood, they complement what is and what has been going on in the foreground. But it is left up to the viewer to establish some



FIG. 2 Cornelis Boel, 'Inconscussa fide' (Sincere), emblem from Otto van Veen, *Amorum emblemata*, Antwerp, 1608, p. 55. Engraving, 151 × 202 mm Amsterdam, Allard Pierson, University of Amsterdam, OK 63-5938

connection between them and the drunken sleeper's present state and the experience she has gone through.<sup>8</sup>

The overall composition of the picture has no precedent in Delft painting. On the contrary, Vermeer took his cues from related ideas to be found in the work of Nicolaes Maes, a pupil of Rembrandt. Around 1655–1656, working in his native town of Dordrecht, Maes painted interiors with solitary women and, similarly, elements shown parallel to the picture plane; furthermore, the pictorial motif of the sleeping woman also appears a number of times in his oeuvre [FIG. 1].<sup>9</sup> Likewise, Maes uses the motif of an open door in the background, though mostly with a narrative purpose in connection with something of interest going on in the back room and being secretly listened to in the front room.<sup>10</sup> That Vermeer was originally inspired by these models from the hand of Maes is shown by his first idea for the painting, with the man in the back room and the dog observing him from the corridor.

It is surprising to see that the elements Vermeer uses to make up the room are almost exclusively horizontal or

vertical. In formal terms, they consist only of fragments of motifs parallel to the picture plane: a section of the back room, a part of the door, a section of the map, the edge of the table and so on. What is missing, even more so than with Maes, are diagonal vanishing lines created by walls, ceiling beams or floorboards. Only the large chair in the foreground is positioned obliquely, joining forces with the diagonal fold in the carpet to guide the eye of the beholder towards the doorway. The picture has no central vanishing point, so that a horizon line can only be posited approximately. Given that we see the table in the back room from above, the horizon line must lie some way above the sleeping maid, on whom we are thus likewise looking down. The sense of spatial depth is therefore generated principally by the overlapping and interweaving of the flat surfaces and by differentiation in their colouring. The painting's predominantly two-dimensional character enables it to be experienced as a convincing and credible depiction from a variety of different viewpoints.

In this early painting Vermeer manifests certain tendencies that are to be of defining importance in his later work, notably the liking for using an almost motionless figure to create a feeling of calm and peace, and a reluctance to overload a narrative with anecdotal details. In purely formal terms, he is beginning to show a preference for filling his empty spaces with static elements, usually horizontal or vertical, and for suggesting space by fragmenting its parts – leaving it up to the viewer to complete the depiction.

### A SCENE BEHIND THE CURTAIN

Nonetheless, Vermeer continued to think about how he could connect the illusion of space with the laws of our perception. One result of his thinking is a painting completed only a short time later: the *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* of around 1657–1658 (CAT. 6). Since the picture's last restoration the empty spaces have been filled out, giving it, surprisingly, more in common with the *Maid Asleep*.<sup>11</sup> For after perhaps as many as three hundred years, the restorer revealed a painting-within-a-painting that had been painted over with a blank wall at a very early stage, though not by Vermeer. The regained picture on the wall complements our understanding of the painting, considered above, that appears at the top left in the *Maid Asleep*: it shows Cupid striding forth and triumphantly trampling over two masks cast upon the ground.<sup>12</sup> Now we can see the mask that was turned into a pile of debris in the picture of the sleeping maid, and a further mask the inside of which Cupid is trampling on with his right foot. The iconography of the painting was inspired by the emblem 'Inconscussa fide' (Sincere) from the *Amorum emblemata* by Otto van Veen of 1608, which shows Cupid in a similar posture and activity, only different in that he holds up the ring of Gyges in his raised hand (here hidden behind the curtain). According to the legend, the ring makes its wearer invisible. As explained



in the associated text by Van Veen, true love is in no need of such games of hide-and-seek, because it is without falsity and deception [FIG. 2].<sup>13</sup>

This commentary on the painting's meaning relates to its subject, the girl at the open window reading a letter – given this context, presumably a love letter – with an air of intense concentration. Once again, Vermeer closes off the space at the front with an oriental carpet, which is lying on a table. To the left the carpet rises in large folds on which a Chinese bowl filled with fruit is lying tilted to the right. Vermeer enhances the effect of the back wall, which with its Cupid picture is parallel to the picture plane, with a window wall at right angles to it. Henceforward, this motif of a room corner was one that Vermeer would adopt repeatedly. A red curtain



FIG. 3 Louys Aernoutsz Elsevier, *Interior of the Oude Kerk in Delft*, 1653. Oil on canvas on panel, architectural frame on panel, 54.5 × 44.5 cm (together). Lisbon, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, inv. no. 1721

falls over the opened window, in which the girl's face is delicately reflected. As if in answer to the red curtain, Vermeer has placed a green curtain in front of the pictorial space, taking up almost a quarter of the whole depiction and with it also a strip of the Cupid picture.

Initially, before deciding in favour of this green curtain, Vermeer had other motifs in mind. Technical analysis has revealed that in the immediate foreground, even in front of the table, he had planned a Spanish chair with lions'-heads finials on its back.<sup>14</sup> An identical chair is seen in the corner of the room behind the table. Another motif ultimately painted over is a roemer glass about 20 centimetres tall ornamented with a wreath of vine leaves, which was in the bottom-right corner of the painting, as if sitting upon its edge.<sup>15</sup> Both motifs are reminiscent of foreground motifs in the *Maid Asleep*, where they are likewise placed as if were within the viewer's immediate grasp.

Now this role is taken over by the extremely three-dimensional, tactile green curtain. Painted in impasto, its

stiff vertical folds glint in the glancing light of the real room in which we stand. A curtain of this kind is a classic vehicle for showcasing illusionist abilities, reminiscent as it is of the ancient story of the contest between the two rival painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius. Whereas the former only tricked birds with painted grapes, the latter even deceived his rival, for when it came to Parrhasius's picture, Zeuxis asked him to draw back the curtain in front of it – only to find that the curtain was not real, but painted.<sup>16</sup>

The restoration of Vermeer's painting brought a number of surprises when the edges were freed of re-painting. The painted curtain is seen hanging with rings on a curtain rod that in reality would normally be affixed to a picture frame. On the painting, however, there is no painted frame running



FIG. 4 Cornelis de Man, *Flat Mirror Frame Painted with Putti and a Still Life*, 1655. Oil on panel, 82.5 × 65 cm. Delft, Stedelijk Museum Het Prinsenhof, inv. no. PDS 416

Purchased with the support of the Rembrandt Association (partly thanks to their Themafonds 17de-eeuwse schilderkunst, Johannes Vermeerfonds and VriendenLoterij Aankoopfonds)

all around the scene, and the representation of the rod ends before the edge of the picture. One logical explanation would be that Vermeer was intending the picture to possess a flat real frame upon which he continued the rod and its fitting – once again in *trompe l'oeil* –,<sup>17</sup> and that this frame was lost in the course of time. There are examples of painted frames, in Delft in particular, one being a painting of 1653 by Louys Aernoutsz Elsevier, who showed the interior of Delft's Oude Kerk in combination with an elaborately designed portal arch on a real wooden frame [FIG. 3].<sup>18</sup> In another example of 1655, Cornelis de Man made a painting on a flat wooden frame for a mirror that sits in a narrow but real gold moulding. On the wooden frame surrounding the moulding, towards the middle, De Man painted a depiction of a black frame with a rod carrying a purple curtain. As if that were not enough, De Man surrounded the black frame with a painted stone aedicule (a niche of the kind found in temples), before which eleven putti are disporting themselves with the curtain and a festoon of leaves. Between the bases of













CAT. 7 Officer and Laughing Girl c. 1657–1658





CAT. 18 Young Woman with a Lute c. 1662–1664









CAT. 35 Woman Writing a Letter, with her Maid c. 1670–1672