

Girl With a Pearl Earring: The Mysterious Masterpiece of the Dutch Golden Age

By Kelly Richman-Abdou, June 28, 2021

One of the most acclaimed paintings to emerge in the 17th century is Johannes Vermeer's enticing portrait, *Girl With a Pearl Earring*. This painting represents the best of Dutch art. It portrays an anonymous woman wearing "exotic" blue-and-yellow clothing and sitting before a stark black background. The girl herself is a mystery who has inspired both a novel and a movie speculating on her true story.

The Girl with a Pearl Earring was the title of a 1999 novel by Tracey Chevalier and was adapted to film in 2003, starring Scarlett Johansson as Griet, a young servant in the household of Vermeer, played by Colin Firth. It received generally favorable reviews and grossed over \$31 million worldwide. It was nominated for multiple British Academy Film Awards, Academy Awards, and Golden Globes.

Often nicknamed the "Mona Lisa of the North," this painting captivates viewers with its subject's enigmatic expression and the mystery surrounding the piece itself. Like Leonardo da Vinci's masterpiece, Vermeer's *Girl With a Pearl Earring* has become one of art history's most beloved and studied paintings.

Girl with a Pearl Earring in Context

Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer is renowned for his depictions of contemporary Delft, the city in Holland where he was born, lived, and died. Specifically, he is known for his intimate portrayals of domestic interiors and portraits of women, like the figure featured in *Girl with a Pearl Earring*.

Vermeer painted the piece around 1665. It is one of just 35 paintings attributed to him. Although Vermeer saw moderate success during his lifetime, the painting did not attain international fame when it was completed.

In Vermeer's art, the pearl often symbolizes purity and chastity. Pearls are said to represent wisdom, generosity, and integrity. In many cultures, they have been prized for their rarity and natural beauty. In ancient Egypt, wealthy individuals were buried with pearls, and Cleopatra was said to have dissolved one in vinegar and drunk it.

Because of their association with jewelry, pearls are also linked to romance and love and are often present at weddings. In Ancient Greece, they were believed to be the tears of the gods. In some Christian traditions, it is said that the tears Eve cried after being banished from Eden turned into pearls.

As pearls are found under water, they have also been associated with exotic adventures and travel to faraway lands. They symbolize feminine beauty and luxury—qualities reflected in Vermeer's mysterious girl, whose luminous pearl captures light and attention as the focal point of the composition.