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Two Artists: Vermeer's Forger



Written by Dina Anastasio

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Jan Vermeer's painting, *View of Delft*, from 1661, shows the city 200 years before Han lived.

Great Masters

When Han Van Meegeren was a young child in Holland, he loved to draw. He enjoyed visiting museums and gazing at pictures by Dutch artists. The great painters Rembrandt and Vermeer had died more than 200 years earlier, but their paintings lived in Han's mind.

Han longed to spend his life as an artist. If only he could paint like those great Dutch **masters**. If only he could spend his life mixing colors and creating beautiful pictures. If only. . .

Van Meegeren's First Paintings

In 1908, when he was nineteen, Han began studying architecture. He designed a few buildings, but he still loved art, painting, and the great Dutch masters. So he quit architecture and began to study art.



These scenes of Delft in 1904 show buildings Han might have studied as an architecture student.



At first he did very well. He graduated from art school and was hired to teach other students. He even won some awards for his painting skill.

As time went by, Han did not work as hard, and many **critics** did not like his work. They said his work followed the old masters too closely. They said he had no **talent**. The bad reviews that these critics wrote about Han made him sad and very angry.



These paintings from the Dutch Golden Age show some of the techniques that inspired Han's work.

Han could not stop thinking about the critics. He wrote angry letters, but that was not enough. There had to be some way to get back at them. He wanted to fool and **embarrass** them the way they had embarrassed him.

An idea formed in Han's mind. What if he were to paint a picture and say the great artist Johannes Vermeer had painted it? Could he fool the critics into thinking his **forgery** was a genuine Vermeer painting? Would they praise it as they did Vermeer's other work? Han imagined what the critics would say when they found out he had painted it.

Artist Timothy Cole praises Vermeer's work in *The Century*, Vol. 50, Issue 6 (Oct. 1895).

The Century Magazine, 1895

But it is in Vermeer's small works that he appears as an independent master, and we become acquainted with an artist whose genius is akin to that of De Hooch and Metsu—a master of robust and refined intellect. I shall never forget the "Milkmaid" of the Six collection at Amsterdam, which is extraordinary in its naturalness, truth, breadth, and reality, without excess, and is notable for its brilliancy of tone, harmony, and solidity of touch.

One of the latest acquisitions of the National Gallery of London is a very fine Vermeer, which is the subject of the frontispiece of this number of *THE CENTURY*, namely, the "Portrait of a Lady standing at a Spinet." It is a small work, measuring about 11 by 15 inches, and cost the gallery £1700. It possesses a very charming and realistic effect of light coming in through the window. The varied adjustment of the spaces in the arrangement of the whole is a study in itself; and the use of so many angles—right, obtuse, and acute—serves to enhance the graceful lines of the figure.

In coloring it is softer and more refined than many of Vermeer's works that I have seen. The wall, suffused by the warm radiance from without, is a neutral gray of great delicacy of tone, and the gold frame of the little picture sparkles upon this background with piquant realism. The black frame surrounding the picture of the Cupid is nearly the strongest note of color in the whole. I have heard an artist of distinction as a colorist remark that only a consummate master would dare to balance the masses as Vermeer has done. The spinet is brown, and the dress of the lady is a warm, pearly gray, the part about her shoulders and breast being of a rich blue, while the seat of the chair is of the same shade. The Cupid is holding in his uplifted hand a clock, the pendulum being just visible as it swings from behind his arm. There doubtless is some relation here between Love and the lady in the sentiment pervading the whole.

T. Cole.

Copying a Master

Han knew a great deal about art and life during the years that Vermeer was painting. He was a smart man, and he knew that a **convincing** art forgery required many things. The subjects of the painting had to look as if they were from the time period when Vermeer lived. The paint and canvas also had to appear old. But most of all, his painting **technique** had to reflect Vermeer's **style**.



Vermeer's painting, *Lady and Gentleman Drinking Wine*, shows the clothing and furniture of wealthier people when Vermeer lived.

To start, Han needed to find and use a seventeenth-century painting that was more than 200 years old. Once he had found it, he cleaned the canvas, making sure to leave behind the aging cracks in the lower white paint layer. Old paintings have tiny crack lines.

Han worked on his painting for a long, long time. He chose subjects based on what the art critics might expect Vermeer to paint. Vermeer painted pictures of life during the late 1600s. If Han were going to paint Vermeer forgeries, he would have to learn a lot about life during that time. For instance, he would have to know how people dressed and wore their hair.



Vermeer's *The Milkmaid* shows a servant in humble clothes.



The Disciples at Emmaus shows details that point to Vermeer as its painter, but it is the work of forger Han Van Meegeren.

Han also chose his paints and brushes very carefully, using only brushes and colors identical to those used by Vermeer. Sometimes, he ground and created his own paints when he needed blues that were only made a certain way 200 years before. Also, since paints take many, many years to harden, he probably added a chemical to his paints to make them dry quickly. He also added a varnish that made the entire painting appear a bit old and dusty.

When he was finished, Han Van Meegeren called his painting *The Disciples at Emmaus*.

Master of Success

Han's first forgery was a success. Everyone believed that his painting was actually painted by Vermeer. He was able to sell it for a great deal of money. Best of all, the critics praised it.

Han planned to tell the critics he had painted the picture but decided against it. Han was a greedy man, and he had been paid much more than he expected. So he decided to paint more forgeries and get very, very rich.



Artist Han Van Meegeren became rich by forging paintings based on masters from the Dutch Golden Age.



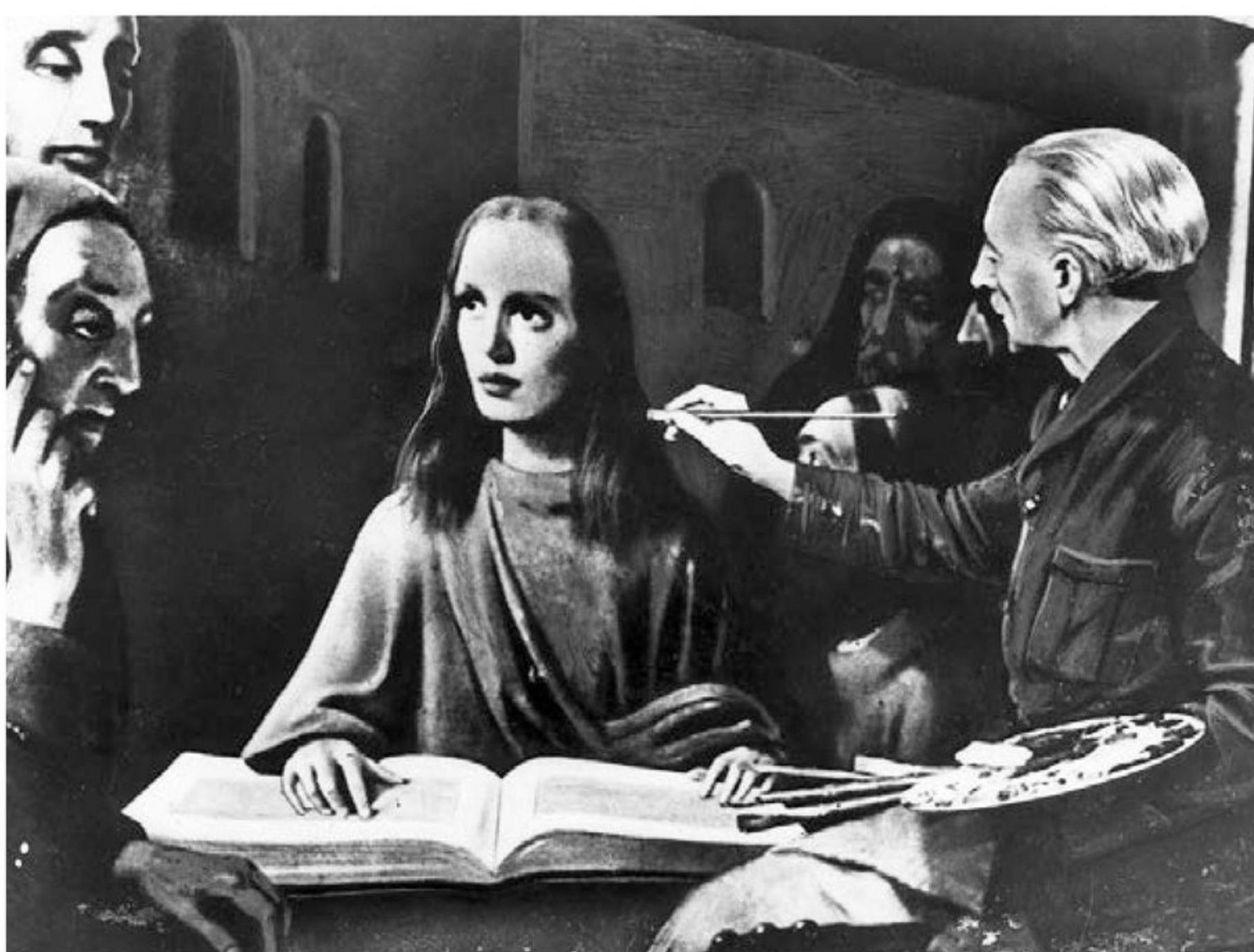
Works by Pieter de Hooch (above) and Frans Hals (right)—Han forged paintings by both.

Han studied Vermeer's real paintings carefully as he painted more forgeries. Every detail would have to be correct so the critics would not realize the paintings were fakes. Han painted and sold several "Vermeer" paintings, and he did become quite rich.



Forgery Uncovered

Like many criminals, Han became lazy. One of his forgeries was sold to a high-ranking Nazi official during World War II. The Dutch and Nazis were enemies, so after the war Han was nearly jailed for life for selling a Dutch **national treasure** to the enemy. He confessed the painting was a forgery. He painted a new “Vermeer” to prove he had done what he said and was punished with just two years in jail. However, before Han could go to jail, he died.



Han paints *Teaching in the Temple* during his trial to show how he forged the Vermeer paintings.



This forgery in the style of Vermeer is the one that got Han caught.

Vermeer's style and technique took Han many years to master. Vermeer was a **genius** at using light. In his paintings, light often comes through a window and shines on tiny details.

He was also a genius at showing the mood of his subjects and creating a feeling. He often chose soft colors to create the feeling of the painting.

Han's mastery of Vermeer's techniques cast a shadow over Vermeer's real works. Which ones were real, and which ones might be fakes?

What Is Her Mood?

In Vermeer's *The Guitar Player* the girl seems to glance up shyly. Can you guess what she might be thinking?



The Guitar Player

c. 1672

Oil on canvas,
53 x 46.3 cm

Kenwood,
English Heritage

The Real Vermeer

In 1993, a man came to a famous art house with a painting called *A Young Woman Seated at the Virginal*. He wondered whether it was a real Vermeer, or whether perhaps the famous



This 1661 virginal is an instrument similar to a modern piano.

art forger Han Van Meegeren had painted it. The art house agreed to investigate the painting.

Like Han, the experts from the art house studied the paints and brushes used by Vermeer in his other paintings. They used microscopes and X-rays to uncover brush strokes. But what they found most interesting of all was the small canvas on which the picture was painted. The coarse canvas was the same as the one used in Vermeer's *The Lacemaker*.

Do you think that *A Young Woman Seated at the Virginal* is a real Vermeer or a forgery?



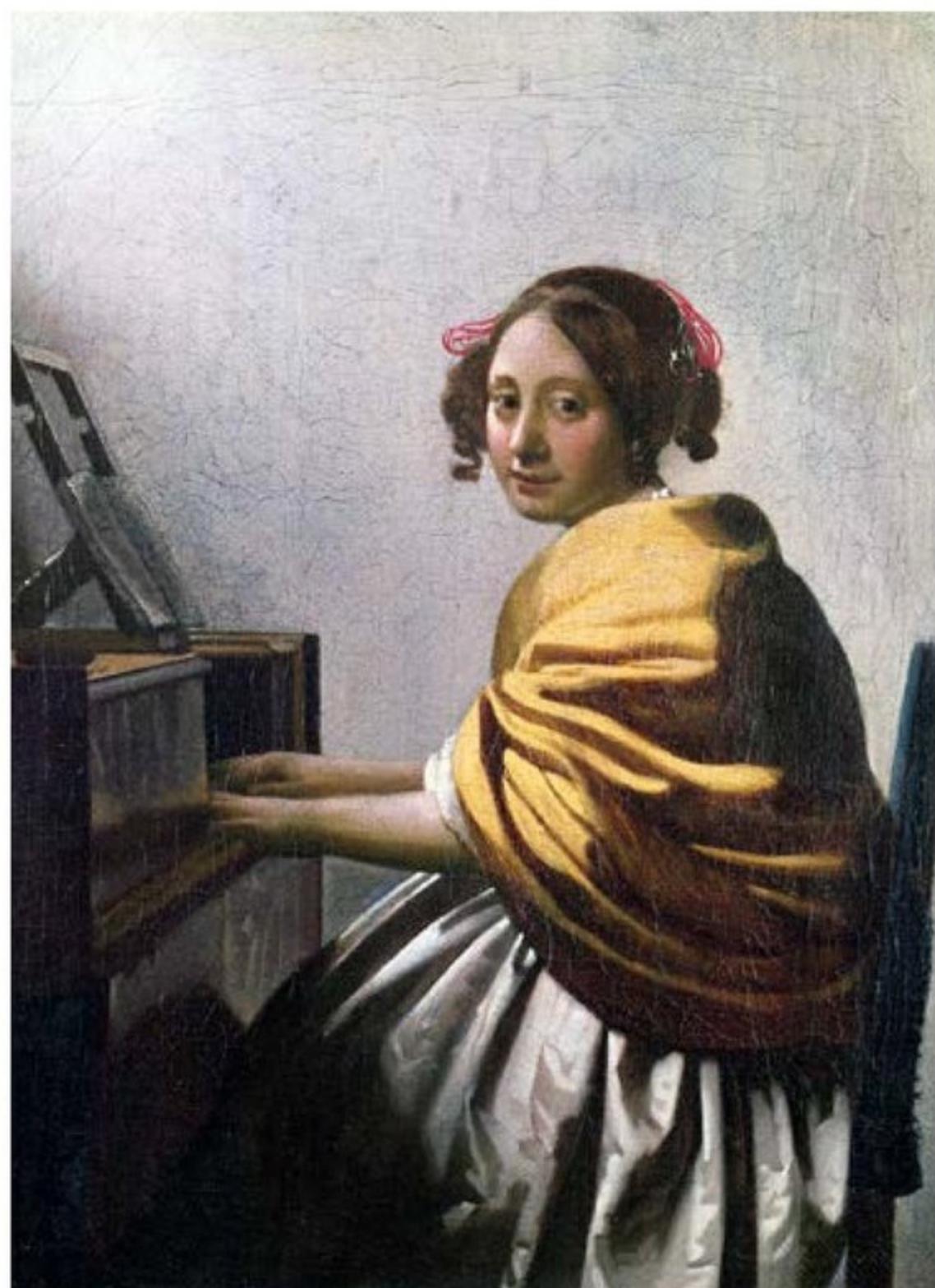
**A Young
Woman Seated
at the Virginal**

c. 1670

9 7/8 x 7 7/8 in
(25.2 x 20 cm)

Art Gallery
of Wynn,
Las Vegas

Las Vegas,
Nevada



The Lacemaker

c. 1669-1670

Oil on canvas
transferred to
panel

23.9 x 20.5 cm
(9 13/32
x 8 1/2 in)

Musee du Louvre,
Paris



Folds in the lady's dress in Vermeer's *Mistress and Maid* showed experts more examples of how Vermeer painted.

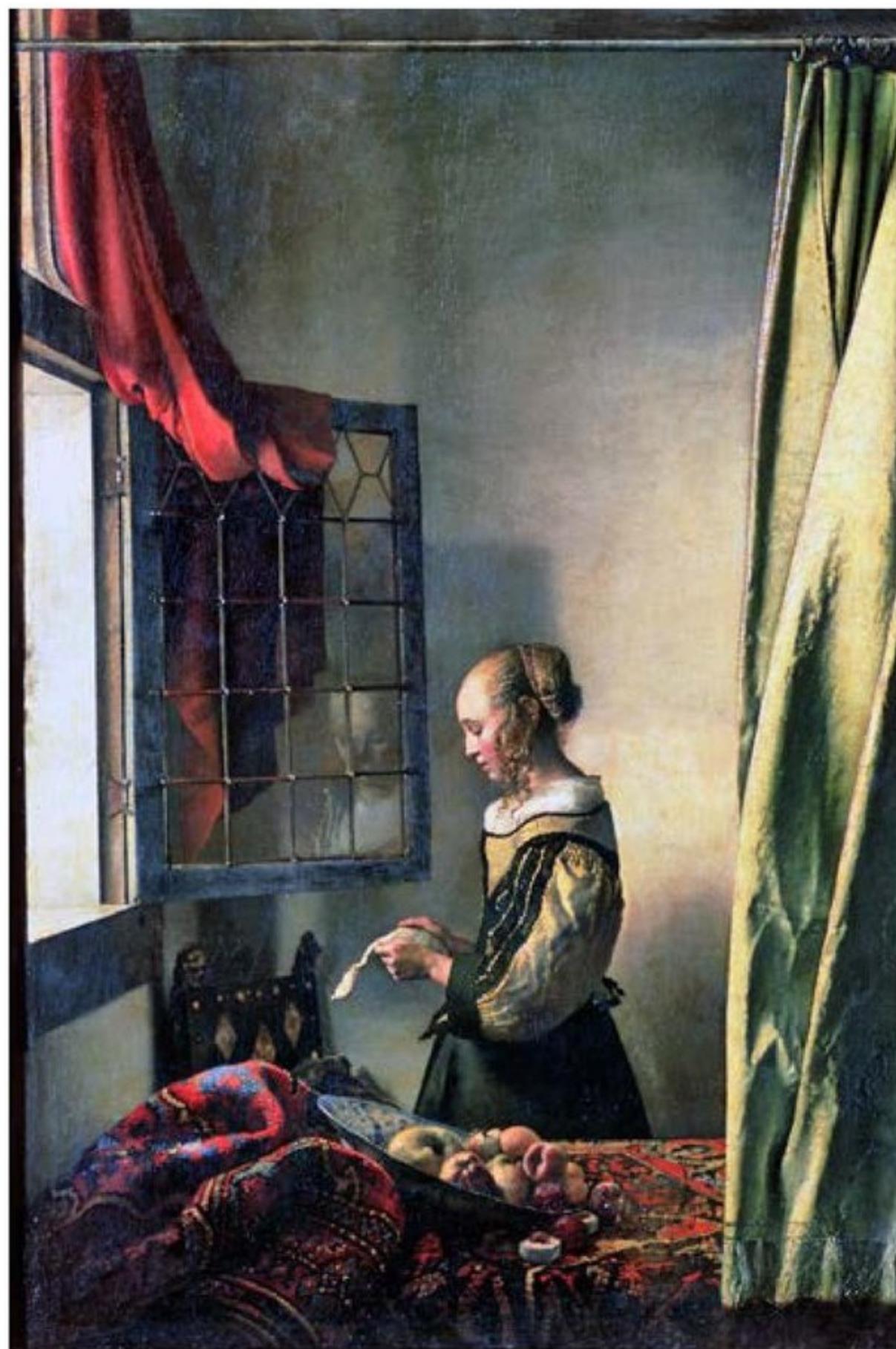
When the experts were done with the techniques, they turned to the style of the painting. They compared the painting to other Vermeer paintings of girls playing musical instruments, and they compared the folds in the skirt and other details to Vermeer paintings, such as *The Guitar Player*.

Then they cleaned the painting and found their answer in the cool lighting, the shadows, the wall, and the mood.

Famous forgeries like those painted by Van Meegeren changed the way art experts examine a painting. Experts have determined Vermeer painted about thirty-five known works of art. No one but Vermeer could have painted *A Young Woman Seated at the Virginal*.

Johannes Vermeer used light brilliantly. His colors were soft and gentle, and he chose them to create a mood or show a moment in time. He enjoyed painting the people he saw around him every day. He was a genius at expressing their feelings. What feelings do you see in Vermeer's paintings?

Vermeer's Girl at
the Window
Reading a Letter



Glossary

convincing (<i>adj.</i>)	appearing worthy of belief (p. 8)
critics (<i>n.</i>)	people who find faults or carefully judge for review (p. 6)
embarrass (<i>v.</i>)	to make to feel awkward, uneasy, or self-conscious (p. 7)
forgery (<i>n.</i>)	an illegal copy of something that was made with the intent that it look genuine (p. 7)
genius (<i>n.</i>)	someone with a tremendous skill or talent in a particular area (p. 14)
masters (<i>n.</i>)	people with great skill or influence in a particular trade or craft who are qualified to teach others (p. 4)
national treasure (<i>n.</i>)	something or someone of great value to a particular country or nation's heritage (p. 13)
style (<i>n.</i>)	a distinctive artistic form such as in music, art, or literature (p. 8)
talent (<i>n.</i>)	a natural ability or skill (p. 6)
technique (<i>n.</i>)	a skillful way of performing or doing something (p. 8)
varnish (<i>n.</i>)	a liquid used to give something a protective coating or gloss (p. 10)

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