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Vermeer as Aporia: Indeterminacy, Divergent Narratives, and Ways of Seeing

Iain MacKay

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Vermeer as Aporia: Indeterminacy, Divergent Narratives, and Ways of Seeing

Iain MacKay

Senior Thesis

**Written in partial fulfillment of the
Bachelor of Arts**

in

Art History

April 23, 2020

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ABSTRACT

Vermeer as Aporia: Indeterminacy, Divergent Narratives, and Ways of Seeing

Iain MacKay

Although Johannes Vermeer's paintings have long been labelled "ambiguous" in the canon of Western Art History, this research aims to challenge the notion of ambiguity. By shifting the conception of Vermeer's works from ambiguity to indeterminacy, divergent narratives emerge which inform a more complex understanding of Vermeer's oeuvre. These divergent narratives understand Vermeer's paintings as turning points in stories that extend beyond the canvas; moments where the possibilities of a situation diverge in different directions. Thus, a myriad of narratives might be contained in a single painting, all of which simultaneously have the possibility of existing, but not the actuality. This interpretation of Vermeer takes evidence from seventeenth-century ways of seeing and the iconographic messages suggested by the paintings within paintings that occur across Vermeer's oeuvre. Here for the first time, an aporetic approach is utilized to explore how contradictions and paradoxes within a system serve to contribute to holistic meaning. By analyzing four of Vermeer's paintings – *The Concert*, *Woman Holding a Balance*, *The Music Lesson*, and *Lady Seated at a Virginal* – through an aporetic lens, an alternative to ambiguity can be constructed using indeterminacy and divergent narratives that help explain compositional and iconographical choices.

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Introduction

Johannes Vermeer's paintings *Woman Holding a Balance* (figure 1), *The Music Lesson* (figure 3), *The Concert* (figure 8), and *Lady Seated at a Virginal* (figure 13) share a quiet simplicity and equivocal nature. These images are emblematic representatives of the seemingly enigmatic *tranche-de-vies* that occur throughout Vermeer's oeuvre. Extensive scholarship has noted a sense of narrative ambiguity that pervades Vermeer's works.¹ This ambiguity often presupposes an objective intent by the artist which can be uncovered by an appropriate application of art historical methods. The project explicated in this paper argues for an alternative interpretation of Vermeer's works which focuses not on ambiguity, but on indeterminacy. Although this distinction might seem pedantic, it is crucial for understanding what will be referred to as divergent narratives.

These divergent narratives understand Vermeer's paintings in terms of referent positions that are turning points in stories that extend beyond the canvas; moments where the possibilities of a situation can diverge in different directions. Thus, a myriad of narratives might be contained in a single painting, all of which simultaneously have the possibility of existing, but not the

¹ See Wayne E. Franits, *Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting: Its Stylistic and Thematic Evolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 170; Daniel Arasse, "Vermeer's Private Allegories," *Studies in the History of Art* 55 (1998): 341, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42622617>; Lawrence Gowing, *Vermeer* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952), 18-20; Martha Hollander, *An Entrance for the Eyes: Space and Meaning in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (Berkeley C.A.: University of California Press, 2002), 93; Robert D. Huerta, *Vermeer and Plato: Painting the Ideal* (Lewisburg, P.A.: Bucknell University Press, 2005), 15; J.M. Nash, *The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer: Dutch Painting in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972), 42; H. Rodney Nevitt, *Art and the Culture of Love in Seventeenth-Century Holland* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4; and Elise Goodman-Soellner, "The Landscape on the Wall in Vermeer," *Journal of Art History* 58, no. 2, (January 1989): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00233608908604225> for discussions of ambiguity in Vermeer.

actuality. This interpretation of Vermeer takes evidence from seventeenth-century ways of seeing and the iconographic messages suggested by the paintings within paintings that occur across Vermeer's oeuvre.

It is not appropriate to apply modern ways of seeing to Vermeer's pieces. Utilizing the conscious and subconscious ways of seeing employed by the seventeenth-century Dutch art viewer is most conducive to understanding Vermeer. Ernst van der Wetering wrote that the Dutch viewer's "main purpose was to understand paintings so as to be able to discuss them with other devotees and, preferably, with painters as well."² With this in mind, it does not seem that offering several distinct accounts of what a painting might be about would be satisfying to the Dutch art lover. For this reason, a contemporary imposition of a framework of ambiguity does not appear to map perfectly on to the ways seventeenth-century Dutch viewers saw art. Thus, our understanding of ambiguity needs some revision. If the ambiguity of a painting actively contributes to the meaning and understanding of the painting, rather than leading to disparate understandings, then perhaps the Dutch viewer would find this an even more intellectually stimulating exercise. Due to the shift in understanding of ambiguity outlined here, indeterminacy will be used to refer to this complex intersection of meaning and interpretation.

In addition to indeterminacy, there are several reasons this work uses divergent narratives rather than ambiguity as a way of understanding Vermeer. Arthur K. Wheelock wrote in 1981 that Vermeer should be understood poetically rather than narratively.³ This prompted Goodman to respond in 1989 by saying "and poetically allusive rather than factually assertive our

² Ernst van de Wetering, *Rembrandt: The Painter at Work* (Berkeley C.A.: University of California Press, 2009), 141.

³ Arthur K. Wheelock, *Jan Vermeer* (New York: Abrams, 1981), 9.

interpretations [of Vermeer] must be.”⁴ Although in some ways there is contradiction with Wheelock’s assertion through the very use of the word narrative here, this project does set out to explicate the amorphous poeticism Wheelock suggests. For the purposes of this paper, narrative does not mean a logical, unchanging, temporally ordered set of events. Narratives here still implicate events, but it can involve contradiction, anachronism, and a multiplicity of simultaneous existences. Narrative captures the whole of the understanding of the world created in Vermeer’s paintings and the possibilities that this entails.

Divergent narratives were something immediately familiar to the artist or art viewer living in the Dutch seventeenth-century world. Contrasts in art that contribute to two inherently entwined possibilities – though these possibilities lead to disparate potential realities – were known as *acutezza*, or wit.⁵ Through *acutezza*, counterfactuals within a work corresponded not only to each other, but also to distinct possible worlds. “It is paradigmatic of the Dutch Republic’s baroque nature, . . . the equally confusing but also liberating idea that one world embodied the potential of many.”⁶ Frans Hals is identified as one of the masters of *acutezza* in Dutch art for his deceptively simple genre images.⁷ Vermeer was clearly aware of these images, as he studied the effects of light from Hals’ paintings.⁸ Though Vermeer’s works are not

⁴ Goodman-Soellner, *The Landscape on the Wall*, 77.

⁵ Frans-Willem Korsten, *A Dutch Republican Baroque: Theatricality, Dramatization, Movement, and Event* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 98.

⁶ Korsten, *A Dutch Republican Baroque*, 101.

⁷ Frans-Willem Korsten, “The Comedic Sublime: A Distinctly Dutch Baroque in the Work of Frans Hals,” *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 8 (2016): 14.

⁸ Walter A. Liedtke, Michiel Plomp, and Axel Rüger, *Vermeer and the Delft School* (New York: Yale University Press, 2001), 148.

acutezza in the strictest sense because they lack overt commentary, it is helpful to understand that his paintings still exist in a tradition and awareness of *acutezza*.

Influenced by Baruch Spinoza, Gottfried Leibniz, and the interplay of Catholic and Protestant church doctrines, the presiding belief found in seventeenth-century Dutch society was one centered on the present moment.⁹ Though the past was considered necessary and fixed, the future was seen as importantly open-ended and responsive to human action.¹⁰ The consequence of this present focused worldview had a twofold effect on the way divergent narratives should be understood in art. The worldview centered on the present moment received the past and postulated about the future in similar, but importantly different ways.

Regarding the past, art was seen as a truth that hides its own justification to the seventeenth-century Dutch viewer. The perceived necessity of the actual world dictated that an image must also be a necessary truth for the world the painting exists within. Despite the inherent truth of the painting however, the viewer is not given knowledge of the circumstances that led to the scene depicted. For example, it is easy for a viewer to look at *Woman Holding a Balance* (figure 1) and see that a woman is standing in a room with jewelry and a balance, but the viewer is denied important information about the scene. How long has the figure been present? When did they arrive? Where did they come from? What are they thinking about? The facts allowing for existence are unknown. Though many possibilities could have led up to the scene occurring – e.g. the scene could be the same if the woman arrived an hour before the moment or if she arrived just five minutes before – only a single possibility can logically correspond to the truth of the pictorial world.

⁹ Korsten, *A Dutch Republican Baroque*, 99.

¹⁰ Korsten, *A Dutch Republican Baroque*, 93.

Like considerations about the past, the future within the narrative of a painting also presents itself as unknown. Will the figure in *Woman Holding a Balance* leave soon? Where might she go? Will she engage in some new task? Through the various future possibilities emerge divergent narratives. Each narrative grasps a possible thread of future actions.

There is an important distinction to be made between past and future considerations in relation to seventeenth-century Dutch art. Past considerations grasp at possibilities which cannot be known, but which either have a very real truth or falsehood to them. To the Dutch art viewer, the statement “the woman arrived five minutes ago” is only either wholly true or wholly false.¹¹ If this statement is true, then the statement “the woman arrived an hour ago” must be false.¹² While future considerations also grasp at possibilities which cannot be known, these possibilities do not invoke truth in the same way. For a Dutch viewer, statements about the future possess neither truth nor falsehood until the moment they come to pass. Thus, a Dutch viewer could envision the seemingly contradictory statements of “the woman will depart in five minutes” and “the woman will depart in one hour” as statements that can coexist, and perhaps even complement each other.

This methodology for understanding meaning in Vermeer is heavily influenced by aporia.¹³ This concept is borrowed from the philosophical tradition and indicates a sort of puzzle.

¹¹ Korsten, *A Dutch Republican Baroque*, 97-100.

¹² Although, of course, the possibility still exists that both these statements are false, and a different statement is true. I do not mean to suggest that all truth value statements were a binary to the Dutch viewer. They understood that there are infinitely many false statements to be given, e.g. “the gentleman arrived three centuries ago,” but only one statement about each aspect of the work could be true.

¹³ The aporetic approach as applied in this paper is indebted to the scholarship of Alexander Nagel and Lorenzo Pericolo. Their discussion of aporia appears here as synthesized

Indeed, aporia invokes paradoxes that call attention to contradictions within a system. While necessary, paradox alone is not a sufficient definition of aporia. “A-poros” translates to “a path that is blocked.”¹⁴ It is important to recognize that the path is blocked, as opposed to a path that has never existed. It implicates the idea that there at one point was a way that allowed the possibility for resolution, but this way has become impassable. An aporetic approach to Vermeer acknowledges that manifolds exist in his works. This approach calls attention to the contradictions and lack of narrative resolution as crucial aspects of the status of Vermeer’s paintings. Just as these facets can render concrete interpretations of Vermeer’s works questionable, they can also participate in revealing intentional indeterminacy and divergent narratives. The use of aporia to analyze Vermeer’s paintings is a new approach. While aporia has been applied to other Early Modern artists, it has never been applied to Vermeer.

It is helpful to clarify two points about the use of aporia. This approach advocates for neither relativism nor absolutism. Aporia does not contend that there are infinitely many ways to understand Vermeer’s art. Furthermore, it rejects the idea that all interpretations of Vermeer are equally legitimate. Inevitably, some understandings of Vermeer have and will continue to rise to prominence, and this is quite beneficial to our knowledge. Secondly, the aporetic approach as employed here does not aim to deny the validity of alternate interpretations or even cast significant doubt upon them. The present application of aporia only strives to better inform and revisit Vermeer’s works.

and modified. For a more detailed explanation of aporia see Alexander Nagel and Lorenzo Pericolo, eds., *Subject as Aporia in Early Modern Art* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010).

¹⁴ Alexander Nagel and Lorenzo Pericolo, eds., *Subject as Aporia in Early Modern Art* (Burlington, V.T.: Ashgate, 2010), 9.

Woman Holding a Balance

Painted with oil on canvas around 1664, *Woman Holding a Balance* (figure 1) measures 13.9 by 15.6 inches. It depicts a sumptuously dressed woman standing in partial profile at a table and holding a small set of scales. Light from a window high on the left of the image provides contrast between the illuminated woman and the shadowy corners. A mirror hangs on the wall above the table, although it is difficult to make out from the viewing perspective. Below the mirror, a brilliant blue cloth has been cast aside on the table. On the table closer to the woman, a variety of gold jewelry, pearls, and coins spill out of a wooden box. A painting behind the figure frames her. It is an image of the *Last Judgment* (figure 2). The woman wears a subdued earthen yellow skirt and a blue coat lined with fur. Her head is blanketed by a white cap. She has a contemplative expression and gazes with neither intensity nor absentmindedness at the metal balance she holds.

The name of *Woman Holding a Balance* has been rather fluid. It has previously been called *Woman Weighing Pearls* and *The Gold Weigher*.¹⁵ Recent analyses have determined that the woman in the painting is likely not in the act of weighing pearls or gold. One study specifically contradicts the idea that the woman is weighing pearls.¹⁶ This study compares the treatment of the paint on the scales to other depictions of pearls by Vermeer and posits that there is little similarity. Another technical study determined through chemical analysis that the scales contain no lead-tin yellow – the pigment Vermeer used to represent gold in *Woman Holding a*

¹⁵ Arthur K. Wheelock, *Vermeer & the Art of Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 98.

¹⁶ Wheelock, *Vermeer & the Art of Painting*, 98.

Balance and other paintings.¹⁷ Based on these research projects, it is reasonable to extrapolate that the scales are actually empty. The slight shine in their basins is nothing more than a studied reflection of the light filtering through the above window. The empty scales are one piece of evidence that supports an indeterminate understanding of *Woman Holding a Balance*.

Some previous understandings of *Woman Holding a Balance* label it as a moralizing message. Specifically, this moral understanding is one birthed from the comparison and contrast of the *Last Judgment* image and the woman holding the scales. A disapproving moral view of the woman is that she is so absorbed in her worldly possessions that she is neglecting her duties as a Christian.¹⁸ In the moment, she is unconcerned about the *Last Judgement* literally looming behind her. A more approving moral judgment of the woman is that she is purposefully contemplating the physical world contrasted with the spiritual one. This interpretation points to pearls as symbols of the purity of the Virgin Mary.¹⁹ Furthermore, the woman is graceful, and her expression is pure – two characteristics that do not suggest conflict. Were the scales to contain gold or pearls, as originally believed, or another object that carries iconographical weight, then an interpretation devoid of moral judgment would be more difficult to maintain. As the scales are empty however, they allude to the indeterminacy and divergent narratives of the pictorial world.

The inclusion of a *Last Judgment* scene in *Woman Holding a Balance* in conjunction with Vermeer's conversion to Catholicism could lead one to believe that the image was painted as

¹⁷ Melanie Gifford, "Painting Light: Recent Observations on Vermeer's Technique," in *Vermeer Studies*, ed. Ivan Gaskell and Michiel Jonker (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 189.

¹⁸ Walter A. Liedtke, *Vermeer: The Complete Paintings* (New York: Ludio Press, 2008), 118.

¹⁹ Herbert Rudolph, *Vanitas* (Leipzig: A. E. Seemann, 1938), 118.

a moralizing Catholic story. However, the inclusion of a *Last Judgment* scene alone should not be enough evidence to commit one to the understanding that *Woman Holding a Balance* is a Catholically charged admonition. It is important to understand that Vermeer thought of himself as an art dealer first and an artist second.²⁰ Therefore, the motivation for Vermeer's earliest paintings of religious subjects appear to be born not out of his faith, but out of his desire to run a profitable business.²¹ Furthermore, records show that Vermeer sold both his own works and the works of others to Catholics and Protestants without obvious discrimination.²² In fact, it was not uncommon for Catholic artists to receive Protestant commissions and vice versa.²³ There was tolerance and even fluidity of religious belief in the broader Dutch Republic and in Delft, where Vermeer lived.

Even if one grants that perhaps the *Last Judgment* scene is a product of Vermeer's Catholic faith, it is still not necessary that the *Last Judgment* affect our moral reading of *Woman Holding a Balance* in a way that leads us to believe she should be morally condemned. The *Last Judgment* could be included because Vermeer's Catholic faith caused him to be familiar with a particular painting of this scene. Vermeer often populated his paintings with images he was

²⁰ Jane Iandola Watkins, Peter C. Sutton, and Christopher Brown, eds., *Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1984), 337.

²¹ Laura J. Snyder, *Eye of the Beholder: Johannes Vermeer, Antoni van Leeuwenhoek, and the Reinvention of Seeing* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), 73.

²² Mariët Westermann, *A Worldly Art: The Dutch Republic, 1585-1718* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1996), 28.

²³ Xander van Eck, "The Artist's Religion: Paintings Commissioned for Clandestine Catholic Churches in the Northern Netherlands, 1600-1800," *Simiolus* 27, no. 1 (1999): 70.

familiar with and had access to – *The Procuress*, for example.²⁴ Furthermore, like Dutch personal beliefs, the *Last Judgment* image in *Woman Holding a Balance* is private, though visible in the home. In Vermeer’s time, religion was equally important as a personal identity as it was a public one.²⁵ Vermeer could have included the *Last Judgment* as a gesture of personal identity, but not intended for this identity to seize control over the perceived narrative of *Woman Holding a Balance*.

Another piece of evidence that supports an indeterminate understanding of *Woman Holding a Balance* is the placement of the woman’s head in relation to the *Last Judgment* painting. She obscures the central bottom foreground of this background image and would occupy the center of a triangle drawn between the three groups of figures in the *Last Judgment* scene. On the left of the image are those who have been chosen for salvation, while the souls of the damned are shown on the right. Presiding above all at the top of the painting is Christ. He is depicted in a ruddy gold mandorla as the final judge. By placing the woman in *Woman Holding a Balance* between the space of the saved and the damned, Vermeer suggests that she currently belongs to neither group.

Through an aporetic approach it is possible to see how Vermeer could have intended a viewer to see a variety of narratives contained within *Woman Holding a Balance*. The image can be understood as neither a painting about a moral saint nor about a short-sighted sinner. The woman in it is not praise or blameworthy – yet. The image exists in a moment that is soon to be resolved where the woman will decide to give herself over to her worldly goods and neglect the spiritual, or to invest herself in her faith and affirm her belief in a world beyond the material. The

²⁴ This painting was owned by Maria Thins, Vermeer’s mother-in-law and is discussed in detail later in this paper.

²⁵ Van Eck, “The Artist’s Religion,” 70.

contradictions that arise when scholars and art viewers attempt to interpret *Woman Holding a Balance* are crucial components of the work as a whole. My view helps reconcile previous narrative interpretations of *Woman Holding a Balance* by demonstrating that the woman could indicate that both views are true despite their apparent contradiction.

The Music Lesson

The Music Lesson (figure 3) was painted between 1662 and 1664 and is oil on canvas. This small painting measures 29.2 by 25.4 inches. The scene is illuminated by sunlight coming through windows on the left. In the center of the composition, a woman stands at a virginal facing away from the viewer, while a man on her right watches her attentively.²⁶ In the right foreground is a table covered in a rich red and blue carpet – the same carpet and table as appear in the left of another Vermeer painting, *The Concert* (figure 8). Between the table and the figures lies an askew and unused chair and a bass viol similar to the one shown in *The Concert*. A mirror hangs in the center of the wall above the woman and offers the viewer a glimpse of her face. In addition, this mirror reveals the bottom portion of an easel which suggests the presence of the artist.²⁷ Largely out of frame, but still recognizable, a *Roman Charity* (figure 4) painting hangs in

²⁶ Virginals were popular keyboard instruments in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century. Their sound was similar to that of a harpsichord. Earlier virginals were somewhat movable and were typically placed on a table when played. Later virginals were made with attached legs. It is unclear whether the virginal in *The Music Lesson* is on a table or has an attached stand, but the similar rendering of the wood on both parts suggests the latter.

²⁷ As this description might suggest, there is nothing about the painting which suggests any sort of teaching is occurring. The name *The Music Lesson* is misleading nomenclature as the young woman is clearly not being taught anything. There is not even sheet music visible. The official name of *The Music Lesson* in the British Royal Collection is *Lady at the Virginal with a Gentlemen*. Despite being more accurately descriptive, general adoption of *Lady at the Virginal with a Gentlemen* over *The Music Lesson* has not occurred in the same way that *Woman Holding a Balance* has been adopted as standard nomenclature. For this reason, I will continue referring to this painting as *The Music Lesson*.

The Music Lesson above the figures.²⁸ *Roman Charity* images depict a woman named Pero suckling her imprisoned father, Cimon, who has been condemned to death by starvation.²⁹

Important to most interpretations of *The Music Lesson* is that the only details of the *Roman Charity* that Vermeer chose to include in *The Music Lesson* are Cimon's bound hands and part of his torso. Although Vermeer's rendering of *Roman Charity* is likely based on a Dirck van Baburen painting owned by Vermeer's mother-in-law, Maria Thins, the full image is conspicuously missing.³⁰ With this in mind, many interpretations of *The Music Lesson* focus on fetters.³¹ The contentious issue is whether the young woman in *The Music Lesson* is binding the young man or releasing him.

One early interpretation identifies *Roman Charity* as adding a distinctly lascivious theme to *The Music Lesson*.³² It claims that Vermeer would have almost certainly known about the unsavory connotations associated with *Roman Charity* as the story was popularized by Valerius Maximus – a Roman writer and historian popular in the Dutch world – and extensively reinterpreted by Vermeer's contemporaries and influences.³³ Like Cimon in his bindings, the

²⁸ Montias, *Vermeer and his Milieu*, 122.

²⁹ Montias, *Vermeer and his Milieu*, 122.

³⁰ Montias, *Vermeer and his Milieu*, 122. An account of the painting is found in legal documents detailing Maria Thins' holdings and describes the painting as an image "of one who sucks the breast." Unfortunately, Baburen's painting is not known as surviving to us today.

³¹ For examples see Gowing, *Vermeer*, 124 and Wheelock, *Vermeer & the Art of Painting*, 87-89.

³² Gowing, *Vermeer*, 124.

³³ Gowing, *Vermeer*, 126. For example, Peter Paul Rubens painted several *Roman Charity* images in the early seventeenth century.

male figure in *The Music Lesson* has become captive and reverts to instinctual behavior. Furthermore, both Cimon and the male figure in *The Music Lesson* require the attention of a woman.³⁴ A man pursuing a woman's notice flipped the traditional power dynamic at play in Dutch courtship and likely would have been seen as inappropriate. The perversity of this situation is thus underscored by the implied incestuous relationship of Cimon and Pero and suggests that the young man in *The Music Lesson* is not acting appropriately.

A different interpretation concludes that the inclusion of *Roman Charity* provides a reminder of the nourishment of music.³⁵ It points to the inscription on the virginal in *The Music Lesson* which reads "MVSICA LETITIAE CO[ME]S MEDICINA DOLOR[VM]."³⁶ This translates to "Music is the companion of joy, the medicine of sadness" and emphasized the release and solace that can be found in love.³⁷ A further accentuation of the theme of love and sustenance can be found in the white pitcher underneath *Roman Charity* which connects symbolically to *Roman Charity* and the exchange occurring between the figures in *The Music Lesson*.³⁸ The form of the pitcher resembles both an ewer and a wine jug, simultaneously associating it with cleansing water and nourishing wine.³⁹ The lack of any cups or glasses

³⁴ Gowing, *Vermeer*, 124.

³⁵ Arthur K. Wheelock, *Vermeer & the Art of Painting*, 88-89.

³⁶ Wheelock, *Vermeer & the Art of Painting*, 85.

³⁷ Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 188.

³⁸ Wheelock, *Vermeer & the Art of Painting*, 89.

³⁹ Wheelock, *Vermeer & the Art of Painting*, 89.

accompanying the pitcher provide additional weight to the idea that the pitcher serves a purely visual and symbolic role.⁴⁰

Different artists provided different iconographical representations of *Roman Charity* scenes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Some printmakers from the Southern Netherlands tended to favor an overtly erotic type of *Roman Charity* – Theodor de Bry’s *The Seven Works of Mercy* (figure 5), for example.⁴¹ This image is almost pornographic in nature. Pero and Cimon are both completely naked and apparently relaxed as their legs cross. This treatment of the *Roman Charity* theme was not uncommon in the Southern Netherlands.⁴² As the canon of Delft art was heavily influenced by trade from Antwerp, where de Bry’s design was produced, it seems quite likely that Vermeer would have been familiar with this representation of *Roman Charity*.⁴³

Other artists favored a more sublimated version of *Roman Charity* than de Bry’s. Caravaggio’s depiction of the *Roman Charity* scene within his painting, *The Seven Works of Mercy* (figures 6 and 7), is more orthodox than Dutch prints tended to be. In his image, Pero is not presented as sensual, but as anxious and aware of her surroundings. In fact, she is the only terrestrial figure in *The Seven Works of Mercy* who displays any sort of awareness beyond an immediate task at hand, which itself indicates the abnormality of the situation. The Virgin Mary holding the Christ-child gazes upon Pero and Cimon from the top of the painting, perhaps to

⁴⁰ Wheelock, *Vermeer & the Art of Painting*, 89.

⁴¹ Jutta Gisela Sperling, *Roman Charity: Queer Lactations in Early Modern Visual Culture* (Bielefeld, Germany: Verlag, 2016), 111. For a full discussion of how this image is a quotation from earlier prints, like Sebald Beham’s, see Sperling, *Roman Charity*, 37-71.

⁴² Sperling, *Roman Charity*, 107-113.

⁴³ Liedtke, Plomp, and Rüger, *Vermeer and the Delft School*, 30.

emphasize a familiar rather than incestuous relationship.⁴⁴ Caravaggio began a tradition of spiritualizing the *Roman Charity* scene that Vermeer would have been aware of through Peter Paul Rubens.⁴⁵ Vermeer might have also encountered Italian *Roman Charity* images directly. He was considered enough of an authority on Italian art to be asked to judge the authenticity of several paintings attributed to Michelangelo, Titian, Raphael, Giorgione, and others in 1672.⁴⁶

As Vermeer was influenced by the various artists that addressed *Roman Charity* iconography, it seems likely that he was familiar with both an erotic understanding of *Roman Charity* and a spiritual one. Vermeer could have included this image in *The Music Lesson* not expecting a viewer to see it as mutually exclusive to an erotic or spiritual reading, but expecting instead that the viewer would see both. In this way, a viewer's attention might be called to the divergent narratives that the courtship between the young man and woman in *The Music Lesson* could take. On one hand, it could lead to the young man becoming unhealthily enraptured, while on the other, it could be a wholesome and chaste love that nourishes the soul. This interpretation of *Roman Charity* as providing multiple narrative ideas is supported by the fact that Vermeer includes his presence via the easel visible in the mirror in *The Music Lesson*. The reminder of the contrived nature of the scene invites the viewer to contemplate iconographical choices more carefully, and this in turn might provoke a more subtle understanding of *Roman Charity*. An aporetic lens can help a viewer understand how internal tensions contribute to holistic meaning.

⁴⁴ Sperling, *Roman Charity*, 116

⁴⁵ Sperling, *Roman Charity*, 116.

⁴⁶ John Nash and Françoise Durrance, *Vermeer* (London: Scala Books, 1999), 199.

The Concert

The Concert was painted around 1665 using oil paints on canvas and is believed to be related to *The Music Lesson*.⁴⁷ Like all of Vermeer's works, it is quite small at just 25.5 by 28.5 inches. *The Concert* depicts a relatively austere interior space in which three figures appear to be playing music. In the left foreground of the painting is a table covered in a rumpled carpet and various musical accessories such as instruments and sheet music. A bass lies at the foot of the table. The farthest left figure is a young woman who sits in profile in the back of the composition and is playing a clavecin.⁴⁸ To her right, a seated young man is seen only from behind. He has a bandolier draped over his right shoulder and a sword is visible below the end of the instrument he is playing. To his right is a young woman standing and holding her right hand aloft. She gazes at sheet music held in her left hand. Above the woman at the clavecin is a painting of a primal and untamed landscape. This is in contrast to the image on the lid of the clavecin, which is adorned with a peaceful arcadian landscape. However, this landscape is partially obscured by the two figures on the right. Finally, the image on the far right (figure 9) is a Dirck van Baburen painting, *The Procuress* (figure 10).

There are several unifying themes found in *The Concert* and *The Music Lesson*.⁴⁹ The two images are painted in the tradition of Dutch musical genre scenes. Music played a vital role in Dutch culture and was particularly associated with love and courtship, something Vermeer's

⁴⁷ Wheelock, *Vermeer & the Art of Painting*, 120.

⁴⁸ Frederik J. Duparc and Arthur K. Wheelock, *Johannes Vermeer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 84. Clavecins are in the same family as virginals, but are much larger and resemble a modern day grand piano.

⁴⁹ Duparc and Wheelock, *Johannes Vermeer*, 120-121.

contemporaries would have been immediately aware of when viewing musical genre scenes.⁵⁰ Excusing some artistic liberty affecting the layout of the floor tiles, *The Concert* and *The Music Lesson* appear to be painted in the same room.⁵¹ The view of the walls and position of the viewer have shifted only slightly to the right, and the position of the light from windows on the left is consistent throughout both paintings. The table and untidily draped carpet on the right of *The Music Lesson* continue into the left of frame for *The Concert*. Although several of Vermeer's works depict scenes occurring in similar spaces, *The Concert* and *The Music Lesson* appear to be more intentionally intertwined. Themes of music, love and courtship are present in both images. Furthermore, the viewer is set farther away from the figures in these paintings than is typical for Vermeer's work.⁵²

There are also important differences between *The Concert* and *The Music Lesson*. Of foremost importance is the different number of figures. *The Concert* features three subjects while *The Music Lesson* features only two. However, *The Music Lesson* also includes a mirror that suggests the presence of the artist – in this case, Vermeer himself. This is an important consideration when interpreting the paintings. With an iconographical tradition that long predated Vermeer, it is difficult to know what things the mirror might symbolize. Wheelock provides a list of interpretations including sense of sight, pride and vanity, self-knowledge and truth, and the transience of love.⁵³ Whatever Vermeer's reasons for including the mirror are, an

⁵⁰ Nash, *The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer*, 72.

⁵¹ Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu*, 195.

⁵² Nash, *The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer*, 73.

⁵³ Arthur K. Wheelock, "Reflections," in *Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting: Inspiration and Rivalry*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock, Adriaan E. Waibooyer, and Blaise Ducos (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 152–56.

important function it serves is to shatter the illusion of spontaneity in *The Music Lesson*. Even more importantly, it adds an additional figure to the composition in an abstract way and implicates an observer. Another important difference between *The Concert* and *The Music Lesson* is the images that adorn the walls. *The Music Lesson* has only one painting in the composition: a *Roman Charity* image.⁵⁴ *The Concert* however, features two unidentified landscapes and Dirck van Baburen's *The Procuress*.⁵⁵

The Procuress was painted not by Vermeer, but by Dirck van Baburen around 1622. It is an oil on canvas painting and measures 40 by 42.3 inches. Three figures appear in this painting. On the left, a young woman in a revealing dress plays a lute and gazes smilingly at the young man beside her. The young man has his arm around the young woman and returns her look with vacuous longing. On the far right of the work, an elderly woman, the procuress for which the painting is named, taps her open palm. The composition is simple with no major elements beyond the three figures and their immediate belongings. *The Procuress* depicts a high-class brothel scene – a theme that was popular with the Dutch in the early to mid-seventeenth century.⁵⁶ The woman on the left is a prostitute, the man is a potential client, and the woman on the right is brokering the transaction. She taps her palm to demand payment from the client.

Beyond the openly lascivious nature of *The Procuress*, there are several iconographic indicators of its narrative. The most apparent of these is the lute the prostitute is playing. It is likely that a seventeenth century Dutch viewer would have instantly read the lute as sexually

⁵⁴ Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu*, 194.

⁵⁵ Nash, *The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer*, 74.

⁵⁶ Walter A. Liedtke, Michiel Plomp, and Axel Rüger, *Vermeer and the Delft School* (New York: Yale University Press, 2001), 148.

charged. Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* associates the lute with scandal or sanguine joy, both of which are apropos for this scene.⁵⁷ Furthermore, recent evidence suggests that the Dutch used the word for lute, "luit," as slang for vagina.⁵⁸ Another unveiled suggestion that the scene in *The Procuress* is sexual in nature can be found in the coin the client deftly extends towards the prostitute.

One interpretation of the inclusion of *The Procuress* in *The Concert* posits that the figures in *The Concert* are parallels to the events in *The Procuress*.⁵⁹ From a broadly abstract point of view, both works include two female figures and one male figure – all of whom wear similar clothing appropriate to the upper-class – and music is a central theme. It is pointed out in *The Concert* that the singer's upheld hand would not have been for keeping time, as keeping time was unnecessary for musical practices in Vermeer's time.⁶⁰ This seems to indicate that the singer's gesture is purely expressive; a small detail which supports the idea that *The Procuress* becomes a sort of caution against the excesses of music within its context in *The Concert*. Aspects of the young man also appear to subtly indicate that the scene is not as composed as it appears. He sits obliquely in his chair and practically balances on the corner. His left foot, barely visible around the bottom of the chair, rests cocked on a beam of the clavecin. Finally, he has not removed his bandolier or sword, perhaps suggesting that formalities have not been observed. While the history of the figures playing instruments in *The Concert* are unknown to the viewer,

⁵⁷ Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia* (London: Benjamin Motte, 1600), <https://archive.org/details/iconologiaormora00ripa>.

⁵⁸ Liedtke, Plomp, and Rüger, *Vermeer and the Delft School*, 455.

⁵⁹ Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu*, 195.

⁶⁰ Goodman-Soellner, "The Landscape on the Wall," 84.

the story presented by *The Procuress* was well established and could serve to inform the viewer that the scene in *The Concert* is not as wholly appropriate as it initially appears.

Another interpretation of *The Concert* suggests that the figures in it are a counterpoint to *The Procuress*.⁶¹ This defense cites their engagement with the music and lack of any erotic subtext. The figures are dutifully absorbed in their music and appear to be engaged in nothing else. In some ways the figures in *The Concert* parallel the woman in *Woman Holding a Balance*. The figures in both paintings are framed by images within the paintings which appear to hold the key to understanding the work. However, none of the figures display a reaction, direct interplay, or explicit recognition even of the existence of the paintings that exist within the pictorial world.

The landscapes behind the figures in *The Concert* appear to supplement the possible meanings provided by *The Procuress*. Elise Goodman says of the painting above the far-left woman (figure 11), “The rugged enframed landscape above the harpsichordist’s head appears to relate to her alone and seem of the woman-as-masterpiece type.”⁶² This interpretation calls back to an earlier tradition in song of comparing woman with untamed landscapes. This was done both to create juxtaposition between a woman’s gentle beauty and the wild beauty of the landscape and to draw similarities between a woman’s lack of feeling and inanimate features of landscapes.⁶³ Clearly, both aspects of this analysis map well onto the figure from *The Concert*. She is serene and youthful, but the dead tree present in the landscape behind her could indicate a stony disposition.⁶⁴ In contrast, the landscape framing the young man (figure 12) in *The Concert*

⁶¹ Nash, *The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer*, 73.

⁶² Goodman-Soellner, “The Landscape on the Wall,” 86.

⁶³ Goodman-Soellner, “The Landscape on the Wall,” 86.

⁶⁴ Goodman-Soellner, “The Landscape on the Wall,” 86.

is arcadian and peaceful. This alludes to the gentleman's position as a gallant and his role of courting the young woman in the proverbial pastures of love.⁶⁵ The arcadian landscape reinforces the idea that the young man will civilize the young woman through love.

A different possibility for the images on the wall is that the rugged landscape and *The Procuress* exist separately from the arcadian landscape.⁶⁶ This is supported by the fact that the former two paintings sit higher on the wall and at the same level, while the arcadian landscape occupies a lower register. However, if Goodman is correct that the rugged landscape belongs solely to the woman on the far left, then it is not clear that this alternate interpretation changes anything about how the painting is read. In fact, it could simply be that Vermeer wished to draw attention to the rugged landscape's relationship with *The Procuress* in that they both can symbolize unbecoming womanly attributes. While the arcadian landscape certainly sits more fully among the figures, view of all three paintings within the painting are interrupted by the figures in *The Concert*.

The atmosphere of *The Concert* is one of impulse and expression, but also order. All these properties are undercut by *The Procuress* and *The Concert's* amorous, though indeterminate, theme. Rather than viewing *The Concert* as a parallel or a counterpoint to *The Procuress*, it can be viewed as a manifold of both. An aporetic approach suggests that both understandings of *The Concert* can coexist within the work. Narrative tension exists not due to a current state of affairs, but due to an impending one. Moving temporally beyond the canvas, the figures are faced with a choice regarding their relationship to *The Procures*. Ambiguity is not suggested by applying aporia to *The Concert*. Instead, aporia reveals the contradictions within

⁶⁵ Goodman-Soellner, "The Landscape on the Wall," 86.

⁶⁶ Suggested by Stephanie Underwood, conversation with the author, March 11, 2020.

this painting. The various passages of understanding and narrative development are blocked to us now, but nevertheless, a path exists.

Vermeer included *The Procuress* in two of his works: *The Concert* and *Lady Seated at a Virginal* (figure 13). This is not surprising as his mother-in-law, Maria Thins, owned Baburen's painting.⁶⁷ However, Vermeer's inclusion of *The Procuress* in his works does not seem to be coincidental or out of convenience. In fact, Vermeer's paintings freely combined real and imaginary elements to create original scenes unmoored from exact real-world counterparts.⁶⁸ With this in mind, it can be seen that *The Concert* is linked to *Lady Seated at a Virginal* through the inclusion of *The Procuress* in the background.

Lady Seated at a Virginal

Lady Seated at a Virginal was painted between 1670 and 1675 using oil on canvas. It measures 20.3 by 17.9 inches. The composition is simple and depicts a young woman sitting in a chair with her hands resting on the keys of a virginal. She is dressed in brightly colored fine clothing and looks out at the viewer. On the left of the composition is a viol of the same type that can be found in *The Concert* and *The Music Lesson* and above it a richly decorated curtain is swept back. The scene appears to be illuminated by light from an unseen window that this curtain might typically cover. The bottom of the lid of the virginal is decorated with an arcadian landscape and a blue curtain blocks another closed window in the corner of the room. *The Procuress* is visible in the top right of *Lady Seated at a Virginal*.

⁶⁷ Liedtke, Plomp, and Rüger, *Vermeer and the Delft School*, 149

⁶⁸ Gifford, "Painting Light," 187.

The major factor that sets *Lady Seated at a Virginal* apart from *The Concert* and *The Music Lesson* is the fact that the young woman is alone. The narratives and tension in *The Concert* and *The Music Lesson* involve personal relationships and the interactions of men and women. The solitary nature of *Lady Seated at a Virginal* means that the narrative must incorporate a different type of tension – in some ways this is similar to *Woman Holding a Balance*. It may seem that tension is a strange word to use for such a peaceful painting. The tension alluded to is present in the juxtaposition of the figure and her arcadian landscape against *The Procuress*. The pure young woman and her associations with the metaphysical love of Arcadia are a far cry from the epicurean delights of *The Procuress*.

In *Lady Seated at a Virginal*, the young woman's youth is key to understanding the divergent narratives. One possible interpretation of this image is thus that though she now seems young and pure, she is also naïve and unexposed to the world. *The Procuress* represents that looming choice that will eventually face her: whether to give in to sin or avoid it. In this way, *Lady Seated at a Virginal* does not represent an immediately present deliberation or action like the other paintings examined but instead alludes to an unavoidable decision in the future.

Furthermore, the arcadian landscape in *Lady Seated at a Virginal* represents another divergent thread in its own right. The woman playing the clavecin in *The Concert* is believed to belong to the wild landscape behind her, while the gentleman can be attributed to the arcadian landscape in front of him. How then, should we interpret the woman in *Lady Seated at a Virginal* who plays in front of an arcadian landscape but exists in the viewers perspective as belonging to *The Procuress*? Perhaps this figure is waiting for civilizing love, the providence of arcadian landscapes, to rescue her from the temptation of sin.

The woman in *Lady Seated at a Virginal* exists in a space between worlds. Her hands and body face the virginal with the arcadian landscape. On the other hand, her eyes look out at the viewer and her head interrupts the frame of *The Procuress*. Even the turn of her neck is liminal. Though the eyes meet the viewer, the angle of the face is towards neither the virginal nor the viewer. Despite interacting spatially with both paintings within *Lady Seated at a Virginal*, the figure belongs to neither, as of the moment in time depicted.

In *Lady Seated at a Virginal*, the lens of aporia both complicates and elucidates meaning. Left without knowledge of how the scene came to be, the viewer must still accept the image as truth within its world. However, the open-ended nature of the future invites the viewer to remain speculative about the possibilities and paths divergent narratives may wander. The ways these paths may intersect and conflict provide crucial aporetic perspectives on the work as a whole.

Conclusion

All of Vermeer's oeuvre, but especially *Woman Holding a Balance*, *The Music Lesson*, *The Concert*, and *Lady Seated at a Virginal*, require a carefully reflective approach to fully understand. These paintings are deceptively simple. To claim that *The Music Lesson* depicts a suitor calling on a woman he fancies or that *The Concert* is a gathering of three playing music scarcely scratches the surface of what might be contained in these works. However, the collection of possibilities is merely suggested by Vermeer. The seventeenth-century Dutch viewer would have needed to apply their own vision based on the components provided by the artist in order to fully interact with Vermeer's paintings.

Vermeer's approach to paintings usurps some traditional expectations a modern viewer may have. The intent of the artist is replaced with a far more powerful viewer or commentator who receives the work. The readings and understandings generated by the viewer sublate the

artist's intent and even transcend the formal compositional choices that constitute the work of art. Power resides with the interpreter; a task Vermeer recuses himself from through intentional indeterminacy. An aporetic approach helps show how Vermeer shifts power from the artist to the viewer. The contradictions and paradoxes created by paintings within Vermeer's paintings cast a singular or monolithic reading of the works into doubt. Instead, divergent narratives rise to prominence and help explain compositional and iconographical choices.

Figure 1

Johannes Vermeer

Woman Holding a Balance

1664

Oil on canvas

13.9 x 15.6 inches

National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

Wikimedia, *Woman Holding a Balance*, accessed February 5, 2020,
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/68/Johannes_Vermeer_-_Woman_Holding_a_Balance_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg.



Figure 2

Detail from *Woman Holding a Balance*

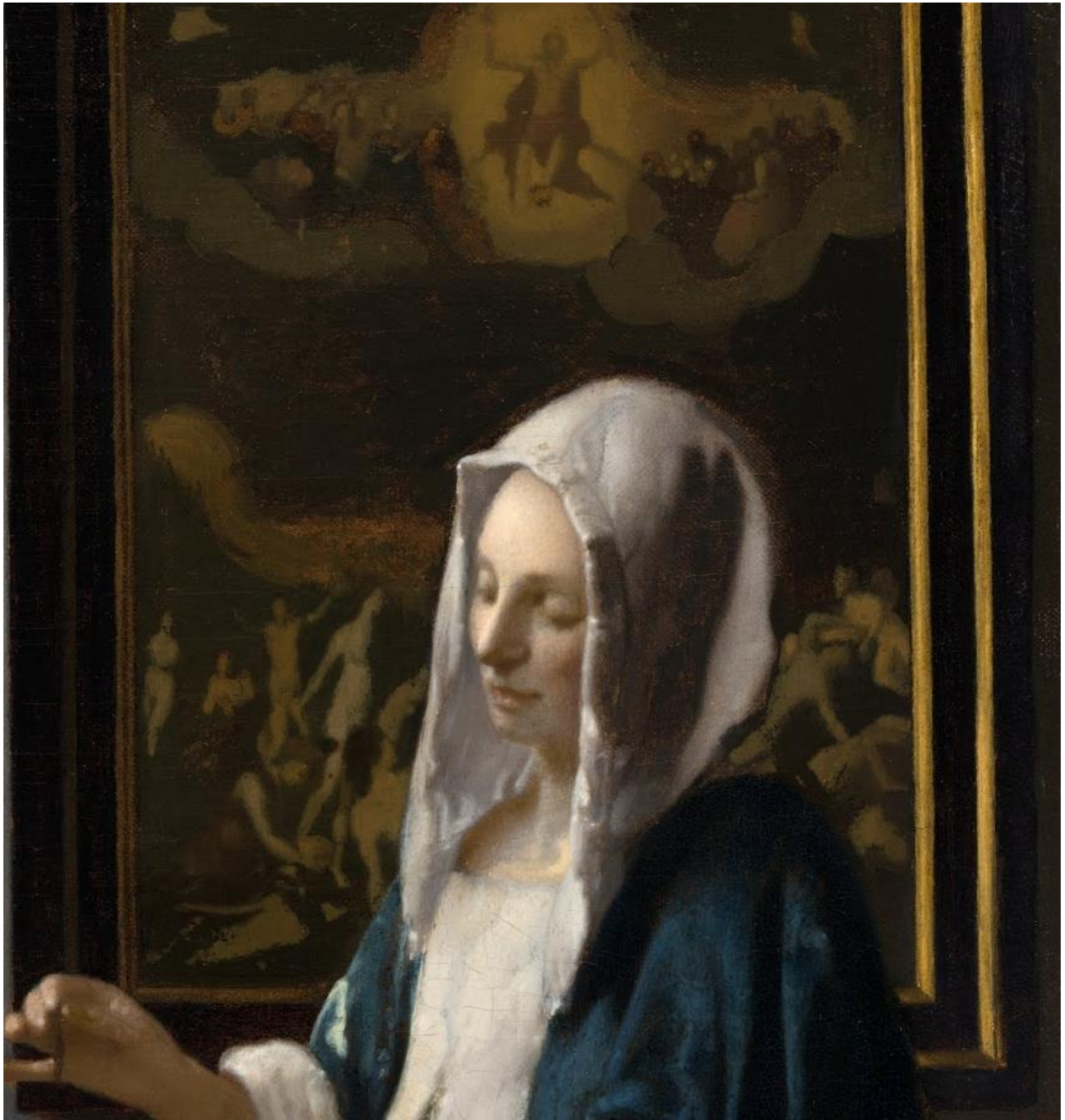


Figure 3

Johannes Vermeer

The Music Lesson

c. 1662-1664

Oil on canvas

29.2 x 25.4 inches

Royal Collection, London

Wikimedia, *The Music Lesson*, accessed February 5, 2020,
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/bc/Johannes_Vermeer_-_Lady_at_the_Virginal_with_a_Gentleman%2C_%27The_Music_Lesson%27_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg.



Figure 4

Detail from *The Music Lesson*



Figure 5

Theodor de Bry

The Seven Works of Mercy

1588

Cup design

Sperling, *Queer Lactations*, 111, accessed April 1, 2020,
<https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839432846>.

Location of *Roman Charity* image highlighted



Figure 6

Caravaggio

The Seven Works of Mercy

1607

Oil on canvas

153.5 x 102.4 inches

Pio Monte della Misericordia, Naples

Wikimedia, *The Seven Works of Mercy*, accessed April 1, 2020,
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Seven_Works_of_Mercy_\(Caravaggio\)#/media/File:Caravaggio_-_Sette_opere_di_Misericordia.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Seven_Works_of_Mercy_(Caravaggio)#/media/File:Caravaggio_-_Sette_opere_di_Misericordia.jpg).



Figure 7

Detail from *The Seven Works of Mercy*



Figure 8
Johannes Vermeer
The Concert
c. 1665
Oil on canvas
25.5 x 28.5 inches

Wikimedia, *The Concert*, accessed February 5, 2020,
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c8/Vermeer_The_concert.JPG.



Figure 9

Detail from *The Concert*



Figure 10

Dirck van Baburen

The Procuress

c. 1622

Oil on canvas

40.0 x 42.3 inches

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Wikimedia, *The Procuress*, accessed February 5, 2020,

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/dd/Dirck_van_Baburen_-_The_Procuress_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg.



Figure 11

Detail from *The Concert*



Figure 12

Detail from *The Concert*



Figure 13

Johannes Vermeer

Lady Seated at a Virginal

c. 1670-1675

Oil on canvas

20.3 x 17.9 inches

National Gallery, London

Wikimedia, "Lady Seated at a Virginal," accessed February 16, 2020,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lady_Seated_at_a_Virginal#/media/File:Lady_Seated_at_a_Virginal,_Vermeer,_The_National_Gallery,_London.jpg.



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