A Question of Framing
On Vermeer's *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*

• GREGOR J.M. WEBER •

The restoration carried out on Vermeer's *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* in 2010-11 has once again revealed the painting's special characteristics of form and colour (fig. 1). The picture had previously been enlarged, particularly at the top and bottom, and put back on the stretcher somewhat askew, but now the striking clarity of the composition's vertical and horizontal pattern has been restored. And since the removal of the varnish, the exceedingly harmonious palette – with its unusual juxtaposition of bright blue and muted ochre – again shows to advantage.[1] The surprising plainness of the subject matter – a young woman reading a letter in a room furnished with a table, two chairs and a map – barely betrays the complexity of the fine-tuning between the elements of tension and balance. In 1911 Jan Veth captured in strikingly poetic terms this quality of Vermeer's work: the simplicity that is integral to his great artistry. 'From the sleekness of his youth we see him arriving at last at something tremblingly pure, having moved from sumptuousness to a dignified silence. What was previously a rich yellow has been absorbed into a warm, shimmering lemon-yellow grey. The dark passages are confined to straight surfaces in matt ebony black. And the fine blue on its own, the way it faces the cool-warm dark ivories, sustains the entire soft splendour of colour. Nothing has ever been painted that is more noble and refined than this blue young woman...'[2]

Details of figs. 3 and 4

We still share Veth's enthusiasm, even if we express it less exuberantly. But can we describe more accurately how Vermeer formally laid out the picture? How did he construct the pictorial space, the tranquil composition, the effects of light? The following is an attempt to answer these questions. The depth of the room was suggested with minimal but carefully chosen means. The chair on the right, which is abruptly cut off by the edge of the painting, is depicted at an angle.

Fig. 1
JOHANNES VERMEER,
Woman in Blue Reading a Letter,
c. 1663-64.
Oil on canvas,
49.6 x 40.3 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. SK-C-251;
on loan from the
City of Amsterdam
(A. van der Hoop
Bequest).

Because of this, its construction lines do not run along the picture's edge in a strictly horizontal or vertical way, but slightly askew. This provides a point of entry to the pictorial space, into which the viewer is drawn by the second chair, appearing smaller at the back of the room, whose lines are precisely horizontal and vertical in accordance with the rear wall, which coincides with the picture plane. Standing in the middle of this receding space and also in the middle of the picture is the woman in blue, seen in strict profile. With the utmost concentration she reads a letter, which she holds close to her bosom with both hands. The blue-black bar at the bottom of the map behind her is exactly at the level of her hands and the letter, at once marking and supporting the place of greatest density of form and colour. The horizontality of this conspicuous bar recurs a number of times in the picture (the edges of the table, the backs and seats of chairs and so on), yet equally important is the verticality of other pictorial motifs, such as the map and the folds in the fabric. The statuesque nature of the reading woman aligns her with the vertical elements, but of overriding importance is the tapering of her silhouette towards the top. It is precisely such small deviations from a strictly horizontal-vertical arrangement that lend the picture its inner tension and dynamism.

In this complex fabric of forms, the large areas with prominent right angles play a decisive role: at the upper left, the whitewashed wall with its delicate blue shadows, clearly delimited by the sturdy right angles of the chair backs and the map; at the lower right, the darker-toned area of white, bordered at the top by the horizontal bar of the map; and at the front, the dynamic counterpoint between the contours of the woman's clothing and the back of the chair. The shadowy area at the lower left, consisting of the dark blue tablecloth and the brown cloth laid over it, forms the prelude in the foreground to the large, light, ochre-green surface of the map in the background.

The rendering of light corresponds to the surfaces and lines that define the space; Vermeer suggests light coming from a window to the left of the white wall. The bluish shadows of the backs of the chairs and the knob on the bar of the map indicate how close to the wall the window must be. Another bluish colouring approximately halfway up the wall stems from the crossbeam of the window, which is evidently divided in two horizontally, as seen in other works by Vermeer. The objects in the foreground that are closest to the viewer, such as the dark side of the table at the left and the side of the chair at the right, receive the least light. The handling of light thus emphasizes the staggered staging of the objects, proceeding from the shaded zone at the front to the brightly lit white wall and the map, which clearly catches the raking light.

Much has been written about the artistic merit of Vermeer's compositions, particularly his interlacing of surface arrangements and compositional lines, the spatial depth and handling of light. Implicit to this endeavour is the picture's edge, the boundary of the carefully balanced picture plane, which is seen as a given, as though unworthy of consideration as an additional formal motif. But Vermeer did not view his picture as a colour reproduction on the white page of a book; he must have had some kind of demarcation in mind, something along the lines of a picture frame. The extent to which framing affects the pictorial structure can be shown by looking at Piet Mondrian's popular works, which balance – in a similarly sensitive way – areas and lines in right-angled arrangements. Mondrian's paintings are usually displayed in a white frame or in front of a white surface, because any other lines – those of a confining, coloured frame,

Fig. 2
JOHANNES VERMEER,
The Love Letter,
c. 1669-70.
Oil on canvas,
44 x 38 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. SK-A-1595.

for example – would interfere too much with the aesthetic fabric of the composition. The work of Vermeer calls for the same prudence, but for exactly the opposite reasons and with the opposite result, since his paintings were conceived and produced with clearly accentuated framing in mind. Hanging a painting, unframed, on a white wall was highly unusual in Vermeer's day.

How, then, did Vermeer, who could create such subtly balanced compositions, turn his attention to the border of the picture and its design? Much research has recently been done on the history of picture frames, but not specifically on the first framings of Vermeer.[3] Clues as to his own preferences can be found in his depictions of interiors and gleaned from the inventory of his estate drawn up in 1676.[4] From a purely statistical point of view, these sources confirm his partiality for black frames (fig. 2). In our specific example, the *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, this provides a clue – but not proof – of an original frame in something like ebony.

The fabric of surfaces and lines, of spatial depth and the handling of light we remarked on above nevertheless offers a basis for further considerations. Was Vermeer thinking of a gold frame like the one he depicted around a sunny glittering landscape in his *Woman*

Playing the Guitar (Kenwood House, London)? Certainly not, since its detailed, vividly gleaming plasticity is incompatible with the strict pattern of the *Woman in Blue*; moreover, the warm gold would clash with the cool blue picture. The alternative, a black ebony frame with a simple profile, enhances the stylistic aspects inherent in the picture. In the sequence of spatial layers described above, another, completely black layer is thus placed in front of the dark, shaded foreground. This layer – the actual frame – belongs to the realm of the viewer, who is then led across the painted, shadowed zone to the bright wall at the back of the picture. The black of the frame underlines this pictorial structure much more strongly than a lighter frame in gold would do. It gives the representation a clearly defined setting, which surrounds and combines the motifs within the square, much as Vermeer did in his *Love Letter* (fig. 2). Only in this way does the shading of the side of the table and the chair in the foreground make sense. Thoré-Bürger commented upon Vermeer's illumination as early as 1866, when he said that 'naive viewers could easily imagine that daylight was slipping in between the frame and the canvas. In fact, someone who came to see Monsieur Double, who had the *Soldier and Laughing Girl* on the easel, went behind the picture to look for the open window that must have been letting in the wonderful light. Black frames are therefore particularly well suited to Vermeer's paintings.'[5]

The painted blue-black bar at the bottom of the map connects with the black line of the imagined picture frame, both as a clear-cut extension of the linear framework thus amplified, and as an optical indication of spatial layering. Furthermore, the all-important deviations from the strictly horizontal and vertical linear fabric (the chair in the foreground, for example) can be perceived much more clearly with a black frame. Numerous aspects of the picture therefore suggest that it was conceived with a view to adding a dark border: in other words, a black frame.

When presenting such a famous painting, a curator must take into consideration a whole host of factors – the history of its framing over the centuries (with due consideration to the aesthetic norms specific to each era), the overall context of the painting, the pictures hanging near it and their spatial constellation. This painting by Vermeer, for example, has gone through four different framings in the last 150 years alone, and these frames have been preserved in the Rijksmuseum.[6] The search for a suitable frame was begun once again at the time of the painting's restoration in 2011.[7] In 1990 the painting had been given a new ebony frame in the old style (fig. 3). The excessive smoothness of the machine-made frame made the painting look like a cheap poster in a photo frame, a degradation that led to its removal nearly five years later. Now, however, this frame has been the subject of renewed discussion. Another dark wooden frame from the depot was rejected because its brown veneer was too dominant. It was consequently decided to leave Vermeer's painting in its traditional French Régence frame for the time being, until an ebony frame from the right period and in a usable format is found (fig. 4). The dirty grey gilding of the Régence frame harmonizes well with certain passages in Vermeer's painting (the woman's skirt, the map in the background). What is more, it lends the painting an appropriate aura of costliness and historical stature. After all, this frame too – which dates from around 1710 and was first used for the Vermeer around eighty years ago, when Frederik Schmidt Degener was director – has meanwhile become part of the painting's history.

Fig. 3
JOHANNES VERMEER,
Woman in Blue Reading a Letter
in the 1990 black ebony frame
(photomontage).

Fig. 4
JOHANNES VERMEER,
Woman in Blue Reading a Letter
in its traditional French Louis XIV-Régence frame.

NOTES

1 With regard to the technical findings and the action taken to restore the picture, see the article by Ige Verslype in this issue. On the painting itself, see the following publication (selected from the wealth of literature on Vermeer): F.J. Duparc and A.K. Wheelock, Jr (eds.), *Johannes Vermeer*, exh. cat. Washington (National Gallery of Art)/The Hague (Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis) 1995-96, pp. 134-39, with provenance and literature listings.

2 J. Veth, *Im Schatten alter Kunst*, Berlin 1911, p. 96: 'Aus der Geschmeidigkeit seiner jungen Tage sehen wir ihn hier schließlich zu dem bebend Sauberen gelangt, aus der Üppigkeit zum Stillgediegenem. Das früher reiche Gelb ist eingesogen in warmes, zitronenschimmerndes Grau. Die Dunkelheiten konzentrieren sich auf gerade Flächen in mattem Ebenholzschwarz. Und das edle Blau allein, wie es dem Kühlwarmen, Dunkelelfenbeinernen gegenübersteht, trägt die sanfte Farbenpracht des Ganzen. Vornehmer und gewählter als diese blaue junge Frau ist niemals etwas gemalt worden ...'

3 P.J.J. van Thiel and C.J. de Bruyn Kops, *Prijst de lijst – De Hollandse schilderijlijst in de zeventiende eeuw*, exh. cat. Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum) 1984; expanded edition published as *Framing in the Golden Age – Picture and Frame in Seventeenth Century Holland*, Zwolle 1995.

4 Vermeer depicted two finely decorated gold frames, each one surrounding a different landscape painting. The landscapes were compiled from larger examples, so these pictures never existed as such. The gold frame he depicted around Dirck van Baburen's painting *The Procuress* was surely the result of artistic licence: the picture hangs in the dark background, and the cursorily rendered gold frame sets it off from its murky surroundings. Only a few years earlier, Vermeer had placed the same picture in a black frame on a brightly lit wall. Moreover, he depicted a gilt auricular frame around a dark landscape painting in the style of Allaert van Everdingen. It is possible that that painting, which has not yet been traced, was actually framed this way. However, most of the frames depicted by Vermeer as part of a 'picture-within-a-picture' are simple, black moulded frames, such as those used most frequently in his day. See G.J.M. Weber, 'Vermeer's Use of the Picture-within-a-Picture. A New Approach', in I. Gaskell and M. Jonker (eds.), *Vermeer Studies* (*Studies in the History of Art* 55), New Haven/London 1998, pp. 295-307, esp. pp. 295-97. The inventory of Vermeer's estate seldom mentions picture frames, but those recorded are usually black. Vermeer himself had four drawings framed in black, and his mother-in-law had fourteen paintings in black frames (eleven of which were in 'bad' black frames). Also mentioned were two paintings in oak frames and one in a gilt frame. See J.M. Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu. A Web of Social History*, Princeton (NJ), 2nd ed. 1989, pp. 339-44.

5 Theophile Thoré (William Bürger), *Jan Vermeer van Delft* (1866), translated by Paul Prina, Leipzig 1906, p. 59: '... naive Beschauer könnten sich leicht einbilden, dass das Tageslicht zwischen Rahmen und Leinwand hereinchlüpft. Ja, es hat sogar jemand, der zu Herrn Double kam, bei dem der *Soldat und das lachende Mädchen* auf der Staffelei ausgestellt war, hinter das Bild geschaut, um nachzusehen, woher das wunderbare Licht zum offenen Fenster hereinkäme. Deshalb passen schwarze Rahmen besonders gut zu den Bildern Vermeers.'

6 Merel van Erp has identified and documented the frames; see *Stageverslag Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Lijstenregistratie-project 1/02/2010 – 31-05-2010*.

7 The search for a more suitable frame is headed by Hubert Baija, senior conservator of frames and gilding. It has been helpful in this endeavour to see how the known Vermeers are currently framed: see http://www.essentialvermeer.com/framed/frames_start_page.html.