

A Delicate Balance

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in New York City

Jan Vermeer

I believe in Vermeer's perfection, but I want to imagine his doubts. Or are the doubts my own? They begin with a single painting, from a once-in-a-lifetime retrospective in Washington.

In *The Woman Weighing Pearls*, the scale appears almost precisely in balance, but one's line of sight can be misleading. Anyway, one cannot know what has been loaded. The metal pans are thin slivers of color, the pearls all but invisible.

The woman is dressed in the sumptuous restraint of the Dutch haute bourgeoisie—plain colors, a simple yet costly kerchief, her collar of the richest fur. She is also decidedly pregnant, or perhaps she just looks that way to modern eyes ignorant of seventeenth-century clothing styles. And yet her private chamber naturally shows not a trace of a man's presence, his love, or his loss. She could be triumphing in her wealth for the hundredth time. Or she could be anxiously counting out a still-beautiful woman's fragile future.

Reflection and revelation

She could be weighing her greed or her purity—or Vermeer's. Like Rembrandt., another artist with a classical subtlety and a taste for luxury, the somewhat younger man traded in, indeed usually owned, his lavish props. Among them, a royal blue fabric, swept high in the foreground, is even more striking than the pearls. Pearls also can stand for the quiet assurance with which he depicts textures or the passage of light, the transparency of his oily glazes, and the geometric exactitude of his compositions.

Part of that precision is way the blue fabric encloses the room and recalls the rising blue dress over the woman's stomach. Part is the echo of fabric and pearls in the shimmer of sunlight through a blue glass window at left. Part, too, is a dark rectangle on the back wall, just enclosing her head. Roughly quartering the canvas, it establishes the grid that ripples through the whole.

As many have noticed, the rectangle frames a *Last Judgment*. That older painting too must once have passed through Vermeer's hands as dealer and collector, and here it forms an obvious commentary on the woman's worldly concerns. Fewer have noticed that her dignity comments on the painting within a painting as well. She shows no trace of guilt. Amid the unusually cool colors, harsh highlights, and icy tonality of *The Woman Weighing Pearls*, her smile offers a shadowy hint of warmth. Who is to judge which light is truer? Is it the light within the *Last Judgment*, or the light that descends through the window to outline its tracery, modulate its stained and unstained glass, and catch her pearls?

Fewer still have noticed a smaller frame with its back to the window and its edge toward the viewer. It might hold a "cabinet picture," one of the small genre scenes often found in homes like these. In that case, it could affirm a more earthly standard of judgment. My guess, however, is that it holds her private mirror, still another ambiguous mark of vanity and introspection.

I think of the two frames side by side: mirror and painting, self and otherworldliness, the appearances of things and their meaning, reflection and revelation. The frames also remind me of contrasting, traditional metaphors for art--the direct imitation of appearances and the symbolic representation of reality. Some modern critics try to encompass them both, with terms such as *text* or *allegory*.

She looks away from both. Her thoughts, much like Vermeer's art, are colored by both kinds of perfection, but they are encompassed by neither. Who is to say whose act of weighing is more eternal—hers, God's, or Vermeer's?

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