

Iconographic Essay of *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*  
Victoria Patricia Kelly

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Professor Valerie Grash  
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Fig. 1. Johannes Vermeer, *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*, c. 1662 (oil on canvas, 18 x 16 in). The Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met), New York, United States.

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*Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*, like much of Vermeer's work, uses careful focus and composition of objects. Vermeer pays close consideration to the colors, lines, and symmetry that he creates depending on the arrangement of elements (Metropolitan Museum of Art, The). In this painting, the main composition is triangular in two ways. One being in the subject's pose, other in the placement of three elements: the window, map, and table with objects. While the arrangement of these elements is meticulous and intentional, the symbolism behind them is much more subtle. The painting's elements represent a virtue of the ideal woman and the typical refinement to strive for in the home and fashion.

Starting with the subject of the painting, the young woman is an allegory for a trait that proper women should possess—cleanliness. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Dutch society, washing one's face, hands, and neck were part of a daily routine. *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*



Fig. 2. Gerard Terborch II, *A Young Woman at Her Toilet with a Maid* c. 1650 (oil on wood, 18  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 13  $\frac{1}{2}$  in). The Met, New York, United States.



Fig. 3. Gerard Terborch II, *Woman Washing Hands* c. 1655 (oil on wood, 17 x 21 in). Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden, Germany.

displays a woman about to clean herself during her morning toilet. She stands in a room with an inward expression while she is touching an open window. The activity was typically done in front of a mirror, though none is present here, and sometimes with a maid. This combination of being absorbed by a seemingly mundane task without actually performing it is what leads her to be understood as a symbol for cleanliness (Chapman 82). This female virtue was stressed, especially towards the upper classes, and paintings of women washing their hands in similar gilt-silver basins were not an unseen subject of the time. Gerard Terborch II, for example, had done two paintings (see fig. 2 and 3) of women washing their hands using a like basin and pitcher nearly a decade before *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*. Rather than having the subject actually washing herself or prepping her toilet with a maid as Terborch depicts, Vermeer's subject is by herself, not performing much of any task yet. According to Walter A. Liedtke, curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's European Paintings for 35 years, the subject being used as an allegory lies in her pose. It mirrors the same triangular pose as Rembrandt's *Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer* (see fig. 4).

Rembrandt's painting, with heavy tenebrism compared to the well-lit Vermeer, is supposedly a commentary on the influence of portraiture. *Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer* was also painted around a decade before Vermeer's. This gives room for possibility that Vermeer took inspiration from Rembrandt's pose, enhancing the woman's allegorical use by mirroring a classical-subjected painting (Liedtke 30).



Fig. 4. Rembrandt (Rembrandt van Rijn), *Aristotle with a Bust of Homer*, 1653 (oil on canvas, 56 ½ x 53 ¾ in). The Met, New York, United States.





Fig. 5. Johannes Vermeer, *Lady Reading a Letter at an Open Window*, c. 1658 (oil on canvas, 56 ½ x 53 ¾ in). Gemäldegalerie, Dresden, Germany.



Fig. 6. Johannes Vermeer, Detail of *The Music Lesson*, c. 1658 (oil on canvas, 29 ½ x 25 ¼ in). St. James Palace, London, United Kingdom.



Fig. 7. Johannes Vermeer, Detail of *Officer and Laughing Girl*, c. 1657 (oil on canvas, 10 x 18 in) St. James Palace, London, United Kingdom.

The woman's attire represents another of the painting's elements and is meant to suggest that along with being clean and living in a refined house, something to be recognized as well, she dresses in a stylish way. Her white bonnet-like cap and shoulder dressings, however, are not a part of her everyday attire. This cap and collar, or *hoodtdoek* and *kamdoek*, was meant to protect women's clothing during their morning toilet (Chapman 79). The fact that Vermeer painted her with these items rather than leaving her without, like in Terborch's two paintings, again stresses her symbolism as cleanliness (see fig.2 and 3). Her actual outfit is considered fashionable for the time. The top is semi-form-fitting and consists of the complementary colors blue and yellow. This top appears in several other works of Vermeer's, including *Lady Reading a Letter at an Open Window*, *The Music Lesson*, and *Officer and Laughing Girl* (see fig. 5, 6, 7). Vermeer often uses either slim-waisted tops or loose jackets on his female subjects. When jackets are paired with gathered, shapeless gowns, it is meant to leave the viewer questioning a pregnancy. In this instance, Vermeer leaves her waist defined.

In regards to the setting of this painting, Vermeer is praised for his interior scenes. *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* is set in one of the seven rooms that Vermeer painted his indoor scenes (Deem). When it came to painting homes, a frequent setting of many Dutch genre paintings, Vermeer is regarded as “one of the definers of the domestic interior” (Chapman 67).

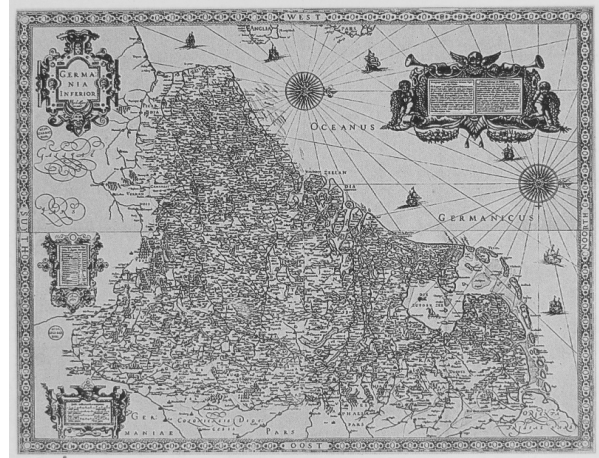


Fig. 8. Hyuck Allart, *The Seventeen Provinces*, 1671 (print). Leiden, University Library.

Vermeer’s attention to detail has earned him this regard by painting both humble and urban ends of the domestic spectrum. Vermeer painted interior scenes with careful attention to the objects in them. The *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* holds seven objects of note in the room, one of significant interest being the map tapestry. Map tapestries in Dutch society at the time were a widely used means of decorating walls. Older editions were especially popular for a more classical looking home. The map shown in the painting has actually been identified as a c.1600 engraving of Hyuck Allart’s *The Seventeen Provinces*, though the only surviving prints are later versions (see fig. 8)(Welu 535). This map shows the seventeen provinces of the Netherlands positioned so that North is oriented to the right. Vermeer may have actually sold and traded maps in his lifetime, as he was recorded to be an art dealer, and has painted several different maps in his paintings (534). The other six elements of the room are the chair and table, window, and objects on the table: a rug, pitcher, and jewelry box. The window, which has a decorative pieced-glass design, is opened to display the much more upper-class style. The table across from it has a rich, Oriental rug draped over it and along with the gilt-silver pitcher and basin, it has a box of jewelry and bunched up, blue fabric. The jewelry box is symbolic of refined taste. The box itself

is ornate and lined in a red fabric, but the string of pearls coming out of it is the sign of elegance. The rug over the table is an opulent decoration and luxury even by today's standard. The type of rug, however, is key to the emphasis on a refined, fashionable home. Persian rugs on the market around the 17th century were heavily sought after in Europe. The rich reds of the ornate pattern and peeking border of gold and blue show that it is Persian rather than Chinese, making it more fashionable at the time. In fact, some would press red dyes into their Chinese silk rugs to look Persian, but they would not have the same undulating floral and scroll design (Erdmann 88). Since this rug looks authentically Persian, it shows the upper class decoration of the woman's home.

A debated topic is how heavily, and for what purpose, Vermeer used the camera obscura to set the scenes of his paintings. A camera obscura is a dark, box-like device that uses a lens to project a sharp image into the box to be traced, much like an overhead projector today. Some argue that Vermeer has used it as a "shortcut to drawing" while others debate its use was for capturing realism outside of the capabilities of human vision (Fink 505). Evidence of its use in *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* is in the metal objects and how they reflect light. Halation is the spreading of light to the point of making a fog-like softness around the edges, not always seen by the naked eye (Fink 499). Halation is found in several areas of the painting. Metal objects like the pitcher and bowl have halation in the curve of their surfaces and the highlights of the metal pins of the chair haze. Other reflective surfaces that demonstrate highlight halation are the metallic-like threads in the woman's sleeves and pearls. Further evidence of the camera obscura's use in the painting has to do with the principal plane of focus. The human eyes' means of focus is shifting from one plane of focus at a time. This is without recognizing the so-called "circles of confusion" that form around the retina on the out-of-focus images (Fink 495).

Vermeer puts the entire painting into focus, in a way, so that one can see the details of any given object or area. This level plane of focus gives precision and structure, leaving little room for loose brushstrokes. The use of the camera obscura, especially in demonstrating highlight halation, enhances the look of objects with slightly reflective or metallic surfaces. This enhancement, in turn, emphasizes the ideal, refined home of Dutch society.

*Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* is an idyllic painting not only balanced in colors, composition, and lines, but also being subtle in allegorical genre painting. The attentive arrangement of the woman, her stylish clothing, and objects in the room reflect an understated testimonial to the ideal Dutch life. The model female asset of cleanliness and Dutch interior are seen in the carefully structured painting of a woman preparing for her morning toilet.



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