

The Attribution of *Girl with a Flute* to Vermeer: Museums and the Value of an Open Debate

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A pioneering example of two major international museums involved in a disputed attribution of a painting asks us to rethink -- and not reduce or distort -- the value of different opinions about the attribution of a work of art.

In all fields, there is and should be room for different opinions. Such opinions can be independent and in disagreement, although they must be supported by sound reasoning and interpretations of the evidence. These opinions can give rise to productive discussions in which a definitive word cannot yet be reached. Art historical attributions should be no different.

This is evident in the case of the attribution of *Girl with a Flute* (1665-1670). In October, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., which owns four known works by Vermeer, announced that one of them, *Girl with a Flute*, is not by Vermeer. Rather, the museum believes that the painting was probably made by a student, apprentice or collaborator in his studio, someone who was familiar with the artist's technique and subjects and who was close to his technique, style and subjects. It should be noted that by 1942, shortly after the painting was donated, its attribution was already being questioned. Indeed, over the years the work's label has frequently changed from "Vermeer" to "attributed to" to "circle of" Vermeer.

To arrive at its most recent opinion, the National Gallery followed the so-called "three-legged stool" of due diligence: connoisseurship, scientific and forensic analysis, and provenance.

An initial set of observations was based on **reasoned comparative connoisseurship**, that is, the experience of the specialists' eye and the evaluation of visual data. For example, the painting was found to be unsigned, but this aspect was considered negligible because 10 other works by Vermeer with secure attributions are also unsigned. In addition, the size of the painting was found to be smaller than most of Vermeer's works. What is more, the painting was painted on a wooden panel instead of a canvas, as Vermeer typically did. Finally, *Girl with a Flute* was compared to another work in the collection, the *Girl with a Red Hat*, whose attribution is secure. *Girl with a Red Hat* is also very small in size and was painted on panel rather than canvas, which would suggest a correct attribution of both works to Vermeer. But the "quality" of *Girl with a Flute* was found to be inferior: the team concluded that the style and brushwork were "clumsy" and too different from the artist's known precision in other known paintings.

The second set of observations was based on **scientific and forensic analysis** and **conservation science technologies**. Microscopic pigment analysis and advanced imaging performed by the National Gallery established that the pigments were coarsely ground. The surface of the painting thus appears granular rather than smooth. This would be considered atypical for Vermeer's painting process, as scientific data collected from other known paintings suggest that Vermeer's typical process was to coarsely grind the pigments only for the underlayer. He would then grind the pigments finely to paint the final layers of his paintings. This additional incompatibility seemed important.

A third set of observations about the work's **provenance** was not made. Its existence has been documented since the artist's lifetime, although there is still no direct connection to Vermeer

himself. It is thought that *Girl with a Flute* was in the possession of the family of Pieter van Ruijven, known to have been Vermeer's patron, and was sold at a 1696 auction in Amsterdam along with other Vermeer paintings. After passing to other documented owners, the painting was purchased in 1923 by American collector Joseph E. Widener, who donated it to the National Gallery of Art in 1939.

Based on its new opinion that the painting was not by Vermeer but rather by someone close to him, the National Gallery hypothesized that, despite our fantasy of a genius painting alone, Vermeer actually had a studio, perhaps with assistants or collaborators or younger artists to whom he gave instructions. Based on this new hypothesis, the museum changed the attribution to "Studio of Johannes Vermeer."

The plot thickened in November 2022 when, only a month after the National Gallery's statement, the Rijksmuseum announced that, despite the National Gallery's findings, it would interpret the data differently and intended to exhibit *Girl with a Flute* as a work by Vermeer in its upcoming monographic exhibition. Undaunted by the National Gallery study, the Rijksmuseum interpreted the data differently, believing Vermeer to be an experimenter who tried different ways of painting during his lifetime. Thus, according to the Rijksmuseum, this painting would exemplify, along with other works, a more "variable" artist, especially since there are no sources or written evidence indicating that Vermeer had a workshop. Nor are there any records of pupils enrolled in the Delft painters' guild or mentions of assistants by visitors to Vermeer's studio who described their visits.

Girl with a Flute reminds us that museums can work independently of each other and arrive at different conclusions. Research-driven museums can also work differently from the market, which is risk-averse and craves certainty of attribution. This case also emphasizes that it is important to distinguish between **indisputable facts** and **interpretations of those facts**, which may be dissimilar. Finally, this case shows how, in the absence of determinative evidence, the question of attribution can remain productively open to debate rather than being definitively closed, so that both museums work together in what Dutch museum director Taco Dibbets has called "an evolving discussion."

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