

# Johannes vermeer



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Johannes Vermeer's *Woman Holding a Balance* Composition Most of Johannes Vermeer's work represents a spiritual principle, that is, the need to lead a balanced life. Though Vermeer's working methods remain a mystery, it is clear that he constructed this composition with extreme care. Orthogonal lines to the vanishing point meet precisely at the woman's finger. The frame behind her reinforces this focus (NGA).

### Conservation

In 1994, conservators at the National Gallery cleaned the painting, removing discolored varnish from its surface. Their work revealed that at some point in the past, the painting had been extended by a half inch on all four sides. Conservators removed the added paint to restore it to its original size.

### Technique

As with other elements in *Woman Holding a Balance*, Vermeer's technique reveals the utmost in skill and care.

### Compositional changes

Infrared reflectography (IR) reveals that Vermeer changed the position and increased the size of the balance.

### Painted highlights

In the 1660s Vermeer painted pearls in two layers: first a thin, diffused grayish glaze, followed by a thick stroke on top to create a specular highlight. He may have experimented with a camera obscura to achieve these optical effects.

### Paint handling

Vermeer maintained extraordinary control over his paints, working effectively with both dense impastos and thin glazes. The effect of soft light is achieved through subtle modulations in paint handling. Under high

magnification, we can analyze how Vermeer represented light on different surfaces. Click on the three squares for a closer look.

### Symbols and meaning

Vermeer's *Woman with a Balance* contains multiple levels of meaning. Much of its significance depends upon the emotions and experiences of the viewer.

### Balance

The balance traditionally symbolizes justice--after all, to judge is to weigh. With nothing in its pans, it is not quite symmetrical, yet almost at equilibrium. In an exquisite passage of visual poetry, the woman's little finger echoes the horizontal arm of the balance and picture frame.

### Woman

The woman with her blue robe expresses serenity. Her eyes are downcast; her gaze seems to be inward. Golden light falls on her ample belly, further emphasized by a yellow streak. Some contemporary authors speculate that the woman is pregnant, while others conclude that her costume--a short jacket, a bodice, and a thickly padded skirt--reflects a style of dress current in the early to mid-1660s.

### Light

Artists often use light to denote supernatural events and spiritual enlightenment; God as light, a source of spiritual illumination and strength.

### Last Judgment

In the *Last Judgment*, Christ in majesty judges the souls below in this violent and fearsome final reckoning of mankind. The woman's head obscures the place where Saint Michael customarily would be weighing souls in the balance. The figure of Christ appears immediately above the woman's head,

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reinforcing the interpretation that her mundane act is intended to parallel the weighing of souls in The Last Judgment. While the Day of Judgment is violent and final, the woman seems serene and contemplative.

#### Mirror

In Vermeer's painting, a frame on the wall contains a mirror. Mirrors in art often symbolize vanity or self-knowledge.

#### Pearls

Symbolically, pearls have been associated with vanity and worldly concerns. They can also represent purity. It also represents something highly esteemed or valued.

#### WOMAN HOLDING A BALANCE

c. 1622-1665

Oil on canvas

Stretcher size: 16 3/4 x 15 in. (42.5 x 38 cm.)

Painted surface: 15 7/8 x 14 in. (39.7 x 35.5 cm.)

The National Gallery of Art, Washington D. C.

Widener Collection

#### R E F E R E N C E

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