

1942.9.97 (693)

Woman Holding a Balance

c. 1664

Oil on canvas, 39.7 x 35.5 (15⁷/₈ x 14) paint surface; 42.5 x 38 (16³/₄ x 15) stretcher size

Widener Collection

Technical Notes: The original support is a fine, tightly woven fabric. When the painting was lined, the format was enlarged about one-half inch on all sides by opening out and flattening the tacking margins. The composition was extended by overpainting these unpainted edges. Regularly spaced tacking holes and losses in the ground layer along the folds of fabric bent over the original stretcher confirm that these smaller dimensions were the original format.

A moderately thick, warm buff ground is present overall, and a reddish brown underpaint is found under the blue jacket.¹ Opaque, fluid paint of various densities is applied with fine brushstrokes, with the ground incorporated into the design in the woman's features and headcovering. Dense paint layers overlap with thin glazes to soften the contours. Some contours are softened by leaving a thin line of ground between two edges.

Thin, diffused glazes are overlaid with rounded, thick strokes to create specular highlights. No pentimenti are visible in the x-radiograph (fig. 1); an infrared reflectograph reveals a change in the position of the balance.

Small losses are found in the figure, small areas of abrasion in the dark passages. Discolored retouching and old varnish were removed in 1994. Black overpaint covering the frame of the *Last Judgment* on the wall behind the woman has been removed, revealing two vertical bands of yellow paint along the right side of the frame. Overpaint that had been applied along the opened-out tacking margins when the painting was restretched on a larger stretcher has been removed. The painted image, now smaller, reflects Vermeer's original intention.

Provenance: Possibly Pieter Claesz. van Ruijven [1624–1674], Delft; possibly by inheritance to his wife, Maria de Knuijt [d. 1681], Delft; possibly by inheritance to her daughter, Magdalena van Ruijven [1655–1682], Delft; possibly by inheritance to her husband, Jacobus Abrahamsz. Dissius [1653–1695], Delft;² (sale, Amsterdam, 16 May 1696, no. 1);³ Isaac Rooleeuw, Amsterdam; (sale, Amsterdam, 20 April 1701, no. 6); Paolo van Uchelen [d. 1703], Amsterdam. (Sale, B. Tideman, Amsterdam, 18 March 1767, no. 6); Kok. Nicholaas Nieuhoff, Amsterdam; (sale, Ph. van der Schley, Amsterdam, 14 April 1777, no. 116); Van den Bogaard. PP. [initials of consigner]; (sale, Ph. van der Schley, Amsterdam, 11 May 1801, no. 48); bought for Ph. van der Schley by M[erem]. (Sale, Maximilian I Joseph [1756–1825], Munich, 5 December 1826, no. 101, as by Gabriel Metsu). Duc de Carman, Paris; (sale, Lacoste, Paris, 10 May 1830, no. 68). Casimir Périer; (sale, Christie & Manson, London, 5 May 1848, no. 7); Périer's son; by inheritance to Comtesse de Ségur-Périer; (P. & D. Colnaghi & Co., London and M. Knoedler & Co., New York); sold 11 January 1911 to Peter A. B. Widener, Lynnewood Hall, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania; inheritance from Estate of Peter A. B. Widener by gift through power of appointment of Joseph E. Widener, Elkins Park.

Exhibited: *Exhibition of Old Masters . . .*, M. Knoedler & Co., New York, 1912, no. 49; *A Loan Exhibition of Dutch Paintings*, Detroit Institute of Arts, 1925, no. 33; *A Century of Progress . . .*, Art Institute of Chicago, 1934, no. 80; *Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting*, Philadelphia Museum of Art; Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin; Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1984, no. 118.

THE YOUNG WOMAN standing before a table in a corner of a room gazes toward a balance held gently in her right hand. As though waiting for the delicate modulations of the balance to come to rest, she stands transfixed in a moment of equilibrium. She is dressed in a blue morning jacket bordered with white fur; seen through the parting of her jacket are vivid stripes of yellow and orange, perhaps ribbons or part of her bodice. Her white cap falls loosely to either side of her neck, framing her pensive yet serene face. Diffused sunlight, entering through an open window before her, helps illuminate the scene. The light, warmed by the orange curtain before the window, flows across the gray wall and catches the fingers of her right hand and the balance before resting on her upper figure.

Behind the woman looms a painting of the *Last Judgment*,⁴ which acts as a compositional and iconographic foil to the scene before it. The *Last Judgment*, its proportions echoing those of the overall painting, occupies the entire upper right quadrant of the composition. Its rectangular shape establishes a quiet and stable framework against which Vermeer juxtaposes the figure of the woman. The woman's white cap and blue morning jacket contrast with the dark painting. Her figure is aligned with the central axis of the *Last Judgment*. Her head lies at the middle of its composition, directly beneath the oval mandorla of the Christ in majesty. Her right hand coincides with the lower corner of the frame, which happens also to be the vanishing point of the perspective system. Her head and the central gesture of her hand are thus visually locked in space, and a seeming moment of quiet contemplation becomes endowed with permanence and symbolic associations.

The visual juxtaposition of the woman and the *Last Judgment* is reinforced by thematic parallels: to judge is to weigh. Christ, his arms and hands raised, sits in majesty on the day of judgment. His gesture, with both arms raised, mirrors the opposing direction of the woman's balance. His judgments are eternal; hers are temporal. Nevertheless, the woman's pensive response to the balance she holds suggests that her act of judgment, although different in consequence, is as conscientiously considered as that of the Christ behind her. What then is the

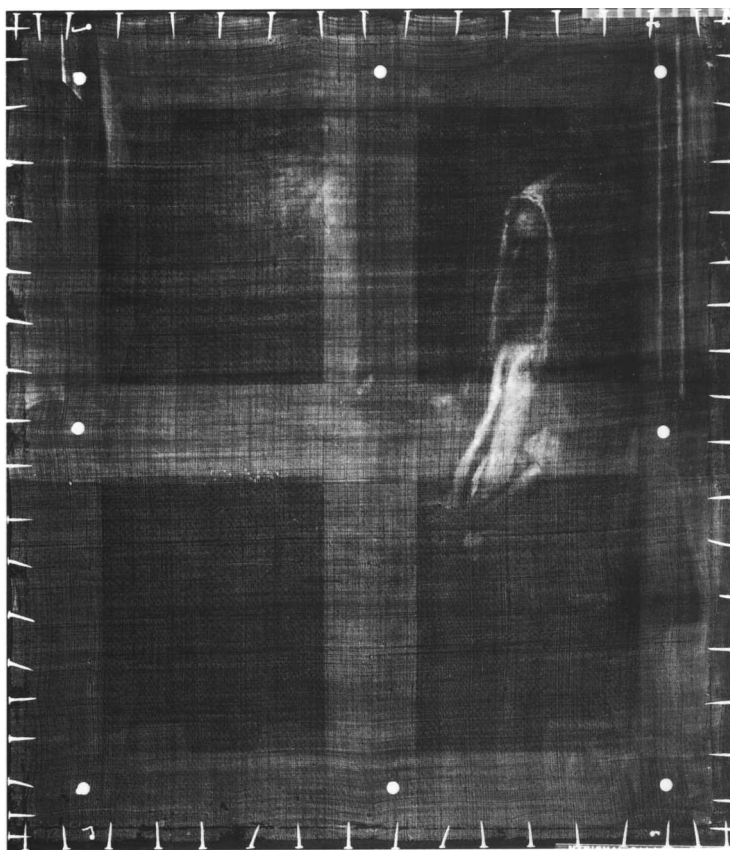


Fig. 1. X-radiograph of 1942.9.97

thematic relationship between her act and the painting on the wall behind her?

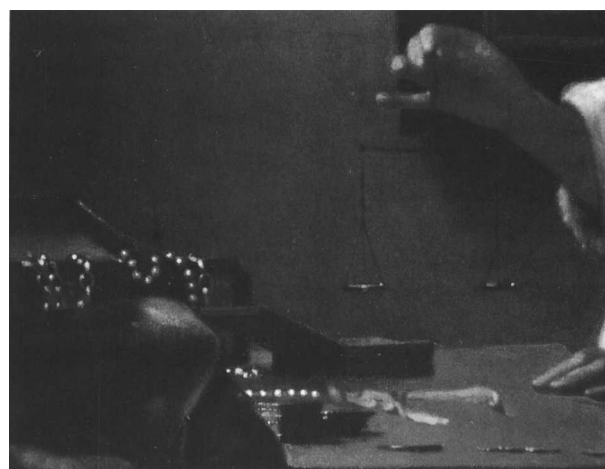
This question has been frequently asked and indeed, the actual nature of her act and its significance have been variously interpreted. Most earlier interpretations of this painting have focused on the act of weighing and were premised upon the assumption that the pans of the woman's balance contain certain precious objects, generally identified as gold or pearls. Consequently, until recently the painting had been alternately described as the *Goldweigher* or the *Girl Weighing Pearls*.⁵

Microscopic examination, however, has revealed that the apparent objects in the scales are painted quite differently from the representation of gold or pearls found elsewhere in this painting (fig. 2). The highlights in the scale certainly do not represent gold, for they are not painted with lead-tin yellow, as is the gold chain draped over the jewelry casket. The pale, creamy color is more comparable to that found on the pearls, but while the point of light in the center of the left pan of the balance initially looks

like a pearl, Vermeer's technique of rendering pearls is different. As may be seen in the strand of pearls lying on the table and in those draped over the jewelry box, he paints pearls in two layers: a thin, underneath (grayish) layer and a superimposed highlight. This technique permits him to depict their specular highlights and at the same time to suggest their translucent and three-dimensional qualities. In the band of pearls draped over the box, the size of the pearl (the thin, diffused layer) remains relatively constant although the highlights on the pearls (the thick, top layer) vary considerably in size according to the amount of light hitting them. The highlight in the center of the left pan is composed of only one layer—the bright highlight. Lacking the underlayer, the spot is not only smaller but also less softly luminescent than the other pearls. The more diffused highlight in the center of the right pan is larger, but it is not round and has no specular highlight. These points thus appear to be reflections of light from the window rather than separate objects. Reinforcing the sense that the scales are empty is the fact that the pearls and gold on the boxes and table are bound together and none lie on the table as separate entities as though waiting to be weighed and measured against one another.

Although it appears that the scales of the balance are empty, the jewelry boxes, strands of pearls, and gold chain on the table must be considered in any assessment of this painting's meaning. As riches, they belong to, and are valued within, the temporal world. They have been interpreted in the past as temptations of material wealth and the woman as the personification of Vanitas.⁶ Pearls, however, have many symbolic meanings, ranging from the purity of the Virgin Mary to the vices of pride and arrogance. As the woman concentrates on the balance in her hand, her attitude is one of inner peace and

Fig. 2. Detail of 1942.9.97





Johannes Vermeer, *Woman Holding a Balance*, 1942.9.97

serenity. The psychological tension that would suggest a conflict between her action and the implications of the *Last Judgment* does not exist.

Although the allegorical character of *Woman Holding a Balance* differs from the more genre-like focus of comparable paintings by Vermeer of the early to mid-1660s, the thematic concerns underlying this work are similar; one should lead a life of temperance and balanced judgment. Indeed this message, with or without its explicit religious context, is found in paintings from all phases of Vermeer's career and must represent his profound beliefs about the proper conduct of human life. The balance, the emblem of Justice, and eventually of the final judgment, would seem to denote the woman's responsibility to weigh and balance her own actions,⁷ a responsibility reinforced by the juxtaposition of her head over the traditional position of Saint Michael in the *Last Judgment* scene. Correspondingly, the mirror, placed near the light source, and directly opposite the woman's face, was commonly referred to as a means of self-knowledge.⁸ As Otto van Veen (1556–1629) wrote in an emblem book Vermeer certainly knew, "a perfect glasse doth represent the face, Iust as it is in deed, not flattring it at all."⁹ In her search for self-knowledge and in her acceptance of the responsibility of maintaining the balance and equilibrium of her life, the woman would seem to be aware, although not in fear, of the final judgment that awaits her. Indeed, in that pensive moment of decision, the mirror also suggests the evocative imagery of Corinthians I, 13: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known." Vermeer's painting is, thus, a positive statement, an expression of the essential tranquility of one who understands the implications of the Last Judgment and who searches to moderate her life in order to warrant her salvation.

The character of the scene conforms closely to Saint Ignatius of Loyola's recommendations for meditation in his *Spiritual Exercises*, a devotional service with which Vermeer was undoubtedly familiar through his contacts with the Jesuits. As Cunnar has emphasized, before meditating Saint Ignatius urged that the meditator first examine his conscience and weigh his sins as though he were at Judgment Day standing before his judge. Ignatius then urged that one "weigh" one's choices and choose a path of life that will allow one to be judged favorably in a "balanced" manner.¹⁰

I must rather be like the equalized scales of a balance ready to follow the course which I feel is

more for the glory and praise of God, our Lord, and the salvation of my soul.¹¹

The many different interpretations of this painting that have appeared over the years, nevertheless, are a reminder of how cautious one must be in proposing a given meaning for this work. Beyond questions concerning the contents of the balance, some authors have speculated that the woman is pregnant, while others have concluded that her costume reflects a style of dress current in the early to mid-1660s, when this painting seems to have been executed.¹² If she is pregnant, does her pregnancy have consequence for the interpretation of the painting?¹³ Is she, as some have suggested, a secularized image of the Virgin Mary, who, standing before the Last Judgment, would assume her role as intercessor and compassionate mother?¹⁴ Cunnar has argued, for example, that the image of a pregnant Virgin Mary contemplating balanced scales would have been understood by a Catholic viewer as referring to her anticipation of Christ's life, his sacrifice, and the eventual foundation of the Church.¹⁵ Such theological associations were made in the seventeenth century and may have played a part in Vermeer's allegorical concept.¹⁶

This painting offers one of the most glorious examples of Vermeer's exquisite sense of balance and rhythm from the early to mid-1660s. The woman, her right hand gently holding the scale, is poised with her small finger extended, which gives a horizontal accent to the gesture. The left arm, gracefully resting on the edge of the table, closes the space around the balance and establishes an echo to the gentle arch of boxes, blue cloth, and sunlight sweeping down from the other side. The scales themselves, perfectly balanced but not symmetrical, are situated against the wall in a small niche of space created especially for them. Vermeer has taken the liberty of raising the bottom edge of the picture frame before the woman to allow sufficient space for the balance. Throughout, his interplay of verticals and horizontals, and of both against diagonals, of mass against void, and of light against dark, creates a subtly balanced but never static composition.

The degree of Vermeer's sensitivity can best be illustrated by comparing this scene with a close counterpart by Pieter de Hooch, *A Woman Weighing Gold* (fig. 3).¹⁷ Although De Hooch probably painted this scene in the mid-1660s after he left Delft for Amsterdam, it is so similar to Vermeer's that it is difficult to imagine that they were painted without knowledge of each other or of a common source.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the refinements and mood of the Ver-



Fig. 3. Pieter de Hooch, *A Woman Weighing Gold*, mid-1660s, oil on canvas, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie

meer are lacking in the De Hooch. The woman in De Hooch's painting is not serenely gazing at her scales; she is actively engaged in placing a gold coin or weight into one of the pans. By her active gesture she separates herself from the quiet rhythms and geometrical structure of the room.¹⁹

Woman Holding a Balance has a distinguished provenance that can be traced in a virtually unbroken line back to the seventeenth century. The enthusiastic descriptions of the work in sales catalogues as well as in critics' assessments attest to its extraordinary appeal to each and every generation. Perhaps the most fascinating early reference to this work is that of the first sale in which it appeared, the Dissius sale in Amsterdam of 1696. Not only is it the first painting listed in a sale that included twenty-one paintings by Vermeer, but also it is described in the following terms: "A young lady weighing gold, in a box by J. van der Meer of Delft, extraordinarily artful and vigorously painted."²⁰ Nothing more is known of the box in which it sat, but at the very least it was a protective device designed to keep light and dust away from its delicate surface. Whether the composition was conceived to be seen within the box and whether the box was itself painted are questions that cannot be answered.²¹

Notes

1. For pigment analysis of the paint layers see Kühn 1968, 191–192. Kühn's conclusion that the yellow of the curtain is Indian yellow is based on a sample taken from the overpaint near the edge of the painting. Subsequent pigment analysis of the ground was undertaken on 26 June 1974 by Robert L. Feller, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, and by Melanie Gifford in June, 1994 (available in the Scientific Research department, NGA).

2. The inventory of Magdalena's collection lists twenty paintings by Vermeer. For the complete transactions between her husband Jacob Dissius and his father Abraham Dissius following her death, see Montias 1989, 246–257, 359–360, docs. 417, 420.

3. For this sale see Montias 1989, 363–364, doc. 439.

4. The author of this painting has remained an enigma. No exact prototype for this composition of the Last Judgment is known. It appears, however, to be the work of a late-sixteenth-century mannerist painter, probably of Flemish origin. One distinct possibility, kindly suggested by Dr. Pieter J. J. van Thiel, is Jacob de Backer (Antwerp 1540–1595), a student of Frans Floris (c. 1516/1520–1570) and an artist who specialized in similar Last Judgment scenes. A distinctive characteristic of this composition, often found in De Backer's works, is that Christ sits in judgment with both of his arms raised. Vermeer probably owned this painting of the Last Judgment. He dealt in works of art and seems to have used works from his own collection in his paintings. In the instances where we know the actual painting Vermeer owned, as, for example, *The Procureess*, 1622 (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, inv. no. 50.2721), by Dirck van Baburen (c. 1590–1624), a painting that appears in two Vermeer compositions, his depictions remain rather faithful to the actual painting. He apparently only modified the color schemes and the scale of the painting to satisfy the needs of his composition. He probably made similar adjustments in the scene of the *Last Judgment*. For documents relating to the Baburen painting see Van Peer 1968, 220–224. For other instances of Dutch artists altering the dimensions of paintings within paintings see Stechow 1960, 165–184.

5. A review of the diverse interpretations in the earlier literature on this painting is enlightening. It reinforces the notion that Vermeer often chose motifs and moments that have dual implications, ones which the protagonists, as well as the observer, must struggle to resolve.

Thoré (Bürger), to whom we owe so much for his enthusiasm and research of Vermeer, catalogued the painting as *La Peseurs de perles* in Thoré (Bürger) 1866, 555–556, cat. 27. Although some confusion existed in his mind as to the objects she was weighing in her balance ("La main droite en l'air tient la balance soulevée; dans les plateaux sont des perles et des pièces d'or (?)"), he recognized immediately that a relationship existed between the painting behind the girl and her actions: "— Ah! tu pèses des bijoux? tu seras pesée et jugée à ton tour!"

Hofstede de Groot (HdG 1907–1927, 1: 586), on the other hand, described the painting as *A Woman Weighing Gold*. He wrote: "In an interior a woman, wearing a dark blue velvet jacket trimmed with fur, stands weighing gold at a table with a blue cover." Later, in Hofstede de Groot 1910, 134, he offered a somewhat more complex interpretation of the scene: "Her attention is concentrated on weighing gold, or possibly on testing the accuracy of her scales, for the purpose of weighing the pearls lying before her on the table; thus the

picture is also mentioned by the title of *A Woman Weighing Pearls*." Hale 1937, 140–142, returned to this idea in his monograph on Vermeer. He catalogued the painting as "A Woman Weighing Gold" sometimes called *A Woman Weighing Pearls*." In his description of the painting he wrote: "Either weighing gold or testing the weights of her scale to weigh some pearls lying nearby, a lady stands close to an open window."

Perhaps the most extensive analysis of the symbolism of this painting was in Rudolph 1938, 405–412. He reemphasized the observation of Thoré (Bürger) on the thematic importance of paintings within paintings in the Dutch and Flemish traditions, extending back to Jan van Eyck and the Master of Flémalle. Rudolph saw the scene of the *Last Judgment* as a central clue to the hidden symbolism of this painting, which he entitled *The Pearlweigher*. To help interpret the symbolism he emphasized that pearls and mirrors often had *vanitas* connotations, ones that were strengthened in the context of a scene of the *Last Judgment*. Indeed, he saw the woman as a personification of Vanitas. Rudolph noted, however, that the scales that the woman was holding were empty.

Swillens 1950, 105, also called the painting *Girl Weighing Pearls* but did not emphasize the *vanitas* nature of the scene as explicitly as did Rudolph. He wrote: "She endeavours to adjust her small scales, and is concentrating on this matter.... The thought of 'The Judgment' compels her to adjust the balance to accuracy." Gowing 1952, 135, offered yet another interpretation. Entitling the painting *A Lady Weighing Gold*, he wrote: "In this painting a connection between the lady, who seems to be weighing pearls against gold, and the painting that hangs on the wall behind her turns the incident into a fanciful allegory of the Last Judgment." He then added: "she takes on something of the character of Saint Michael, the weigher of souls in the part of the Last Judgment which is hidden."

De Mirimonde 1961, 29, wrote about the symbolism of this painting:

Or pour une fois, dans la peseuse de perles, Vermeer s'est fait moraliste. Derrière la jolie femme, il a placé un grand tableau dont la signification est pleine de menaces: un jugement dernier. Qui sait si ces colliers d'un si bel orient ne seront pas d'un poids bien lourd dans la balance de l'Archange?

Goldscheider 1958, 38, searching for the symbolism of the painting wrote: "If pearls can be the embodiment of earthly, transient beauty, how are we to interpret the picture of the Last Judgment behind the *Lady Weighing Pearls*? Vermeer's symbolism is not hard to understand."

6. This was proposed by Rudolph 1938, 409. Actually since Christian iconography treats the pearl, the most precious jewel, as a symbol of salvation, it would be unusual for it to have strong *vanitas* connotations. See Ferguson 1959, 23.

7. Cesare Ripa, (see Ripa 1644, 144, 432) describes how the balance is one of the attributes of equality, *Vgvalita* or *Gelijckbeyt* ("Door de Weeghschaele wort verstaen de oprachte en waerachtige recht vaerdigheyt, die een ygelijck geeft, dat hem toebehoort"), and of Justice, *Giustitia* or *Gerechtigheyt*.

8. The mirror is frequently considered the attribute of *Prudentia* and Truth. For a discussion of the various connotations of the mirror in emblematic literature of the mid-seventeenth century, see The Hague 1974, 98.

9. Otto van Veen, *Amorum emblemata* (Antwerp, 1608), 182. The full verse is:

Fortune is loues looking-glass

Eu'n as a perfect glasse doth represent the face,
Just as it is in deed, not flattering it at all.

So fortune telleth by aduancement or by fall,

Th'euent that shall succeed, in loues luick-tryed case.

For further discussions of Vermeer's use of *Amorum emblemata* see De Jongh 1967, 49–50.

10. Cunnar 1990, 518.

11. Mottola 1964, 85.

12. In my opinion it seems unlikely that the woman is pregnant. As seen in numerous paintings by Vermeer's contemporaries, Dutch fashions in the mid-seventeenth century seem to have encouraged a bulky silhouette. The short jacket the girl wears, called a *pet en lair*, covered a bodice and a thickly padded skirt. The impression created, that of a forward thrusting stomach, was evidently a desirable one. This opinion is also shared by Albert Blankert in Aillaud, Blankert, and Montias 1986, 181.

13. The theory that the woman is pregnant was first proffered by Richard Carstensen and Marielene Putscher in 1971. The authors concluded that the woman, following an old folk tradition, was weighing pearls to help her divine the sex of the unborn child. Since then, many authors have accepted as fact her pregnant state of being, including Walsh 1973, 79, and Grimme 1974, 54, who, as a consequence of the supposed pregnancy, attempted to identify the model as Vermeer's wife, Catharina Bolnes, mother of his fifteen children. Salomon 1983 suggested that a pregnant woman holding scales would have been interpreted as a Catholic response to the religious controversy about the moment a Christian soul obtains grace and salvation. Instead of the predetermined state of grace accepted by the followers of Arminius or the efficacy of good works preached by Gomanus, Salomon argued, a Catholic would have understood that the state of grace of the unborn child was as yet undetermined. This opinion was also accepted by Sutton, in Philadelphia 1984, 342–343.

14. Jones 1989; Cunnar 1990.

15. Cunnar 1990 corrects a number of misconceptions about the theological arguments advanced by Salomon and focuses on the meditative character of the image. He then analyzes the ways in which a Catholic, a Protestant, and an Arminian viewer might have responded to this work in light of their beliefs. He also accepts as fact that the woman is pregnant and attempts to relate the image to biblical texts, specifically Genesis 3:15, by interpreting the support underneath the table as the vision of a dragon described by John in Revelations 12. While one may question the likelihood of this latter interpretation, Cunnar's assessment of the various possible theological responses to the painting is particularly useful.

16. For an argument that Vermeer represented here "the divine truth of revealed religion," see Gaskell 1984, 558–561. To support his argument Gaskell refers to one of the personifications of Truth described by Cesare Ripa in the 1644 Dutch edition of the *Iconologia*.

17. Oil on canvas, 61 x 53 cm. See Staatliche Museen, Berlin 1978, 212. The comparison of this painting with Vermeer's *Woman Holding a Balance* is not new. For comparisons with slightly different emphases see Bode 1919, 86–89, and Rudolph 1938, 405–412.

18. A possible source for such a motif is Gerard Dou (q.v.). Although Dou's painting style is far more minute than Vermeer's, many of the genre scenes painted by Vermeer have precedents in Dou's oeuvre. See Boström 1949, 21–24.

19. The thematic complexities of Vermeer's composition are also lacking in De Hooch's work. De Hooch's woman weighs her gold before a wall richly decorated with a gilded-leather wallcovering and a half-open door leading into a second room. Neither of these elements reinforces the thematic gesture of a woman with a balance as strongly as does the painting of the *Last Judgment*.

20. Blankert 1975, 136, doc. 62. "Een Juffrouw die goud weegt in een kasje van J. van der Meer van Delft, extraordinaer konstig en kragtig geschildert." It sold for fl 155, the third highest price in the sale.

21. In the 1683 inventory of goods accruing to Jacob Disius after the death of his wife, Magdalena van Ruijven, three of Vermeer's paintings are listed as being in boxes (*kasies*). See Montias 1989, 359, doc. 417. Presumably one of these was *Woman Holding a Balance*.

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1962.10.1 (1664)

A Lady Writing

c. 1665

Oil on canvas, 45 x 39.9 (17¼ x 15¾)

Gift of Harry Waldron Havemeyer and Horace Havemeyer, Jr., in memory of their father, Horace Havemeyer

Inscriptions

On frame of picture on back wall: *IVMEER* (IVM in ligature)

Technical Notes: The tightly woven fabric support is composed of fine, unevenly spun threads. It has been lined, and fragments remain of the original tacking margins covered by the ground layer. A thin, smooth gray ground is found overall, and a brown imprimatura layer under the blue tablecloth.¹

Complex layering of paints creates a variety of effects, with fine brushstrokes highlighted with rounded strokes and thick dots. Thin, fluid paints are overlaid with thin, semi-transparent layers to soften hard surfaces and transparent under layers daubed with opaque paints to form specular reflections. Contours are softened by blending adjacent paint areas wet on wet, or by leaving a small area of ground