NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

Johannes Vermeer
Dutch, 1632 - 1675

Girl with the Red Hat

c. 1669

oil on panel
painted surface: 22.8 x 18 cm (9 x 7 1/16 in.)
support: 23.2 x 18.1 cm (9 1/8 x 7 1/8 in.)
framed: 40.3 x 35.6 x 4.4 cm (15 7/8 x 14 x 1 3/4 in.)
Inscription: upper center of tapestry in ligature: IVM
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.53

ENTRY

Girl with the Red Hat has long puzzled scholars of Johannes Vermeer. Although widely loved, the work's attribution has proved problematic. [1] Its authorship is often discussed in conjunction with the only other panel painting in Vermeer's oeuvre, *Girl with a Flute* [fig. 1], and many have wrongly viewed the two works as pendants. [2] *Girl with the Red Hat* achieves a different effect from any other Vermeer work. The subject's pose and expression, deep blue robe and fiery red hat, and face modeled with carefully selected green and rose tones give this work a unique vibrancy. Unlike most of Vermeer's figures, she engages directly with the viewer, turning outward and gazing at us expectantly.

The motif of a girl looking over her shoulder at the viewer is common in Vermeer's oeuvre, although in no other instance does she lean an arm on the back of a chair. The orientation of this chair has long puzzled scholars, who, under the assumption that it belongs to the seated woman, have complained that the left finial is much larger than the right and angled too far to the right. The finials, moreover, face toward the viewer. But if they belonged to the chair upon which the girl sits, they should face toward her, as in, for example, Frans Hals's *Portrait of a Young Man*, where only the back of the lion's head is visible. [3]

The most convincing explanation is that the chair faces *out* of the picture space; its seat, out of view below the frame, extends into the viewer's space. Thus, the *repoussoir* on which the woman leans is meant to be the back of the viewer's chair—a crucial component of the artist's strategy to capture our attention and draw us into the scene. Vermeer most frequently depicted an empty chair seen

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from the back, which distances the viewer from the scene. A chair turned toward the viewer appears in his earlier work *A Maid Asleep* [fig. 2], where the dozing woman and the empty chair beside her suggest a private moment between the maid and an absent visitor. [4] In *Girl with the Red Hat*, Vermeer brings the viewer into that intimacy. While most of Vermeer's women invite contemplation and distanced admiration, the figure in *Girl with the Red Hat* leans forward to speak to us, demanding our complete engagement.

Girl with the Red Hat is Vermeer's only known work painted on panel and his first known foray into the schematic rendering of forms that characterizes his late style, in which he exaggerated contrasts of light and dark and used broad, brushy paint strokes. [5] This abridged approach to the rendering of light effects is particularly noticeable in the contrast between light and shadow in the folds of the cloak, where he quickly applied pale, lead-tin yellow highlights with short strokes that he deliberately did not blend into the deep shadows of the fabric. He also abandoned the delicate modulations of tone and tiny circles of highlight that he used to evoke the patterns of light on fabric in works like *A Lady Writing* and *Woman Holding a Balance*. The brush Vermeer used throughout *Girl with the Red Hat* was far larger than would be expected for such a small painting, which allowed him to render forms such as the red hat with dashes of paint two or three times the size of the yellow highlights on the sleeve of the woman in *A Lady Writing*. Even the white reflections on the iconic lion-head finials are outsized—a characteristic that several scholars have suggested may be evidence of Vermeer's use of a camera obscura. [6]

Such artistic choices have no precedent in Vermeer's oeuvre, but they do foreshadow works like *The Lacemaker* [fig. 3] and *Woman Writing a Letter, with Her Maid* [fig. 4]. In each of these works, Vermeer defined the face with sharp-edged patches of highlight that trace the bridge of the nose and curve around the inner corner of the eye, and he painted the costumes and fabrics by placing bright, angular highlights against deep shadows. In *The Lacemaker*, he conjured the colored threads cascading from the sewing cushion with remarkably fluid dribbles of paint, each accented with round highlights of the same color. This handling recalls the untamed wisps of vermilion paint that flicker along the edge of the beret in *Girl with the Red Hat.* The round highlights that harmonize with their settings are reminiscent of the dabs of pink in the red hat and the glistening spots of colored light on the girl's lip and eye: pale pink at the darkened corner of the mouth and pale green for the eye in the greenish shadow. The similarities of these works

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argue for a close chronological relationship. It seems probable that Vermeer painted *Girl with the Red Hat* around 1669.

This dating reflects a shift in thinking about the place of *Girl with the Red Hat* in Vermeer's oeuvre. [7] In 1995 Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. argued for a slightly earlier date of 1666/1667 owing to the likeness he saw between the way Vermeer applied highlights in this painting and in the chandelier and tablecloth in *The Art of Painting* from around 1667 (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna). "These similarities," he wrote, "as well as the comparably generalized forms of the girls' heads in the two paintings, argue for a close chronological relationship. It seems probable that both works were executed around 1666 to 1667, slightly before *The Astronomer* (Louvre, Paris), which is dated 1668." [8] This dating placed *Girl with the Red Hat* much closer in time to the highly refined and carefully blended brushwork of *A Lady Writing* and *Woman Holding a Balance*. However, the clear affinities between *Girl with the Red Hat* and his later works instead suggest that this painting should belong to a new phase of Vermeer's career and is, perhaps, even its inaugural work. Wheelock's guidepost of *The Astronomer* usefully emphasizes this point.

Vermeer rarely dated his paintings, but *The Astronomer* [fig. 5] and its pendant, *The Geographer* [fig. 6], dated 1668 and 1669, respectively, offer intriguing material evidence of when this new abstraction entered Vermeer's practice. Because of the compositional affinities between the paintings—the same model depicted in almost identically furnished rooms and the same "IVMeer" signature on the cabinets behind the figures—it seems likely that they were both *initially* painted in 1668. But Vermeer signed *The Geographer* a second time on the rear wall, indicating that he revisited the painting, and it was probably after those revisions that he added the date of 1669.

In *The Geographer* (but not in *The Astronomer*) Vermeer developed the fall of light by adding or reemphasizing certain highlights. Where he had first used a dark yellow highlight to suggest light transmitted through paper in the opening of the rolled map below the window, he later amplified this optical effect by building up a schematic patch of thicker and brighter yellow paint. He initially painted the faces of both subjects with similarly blended brushwork ranging from warm highlights to cool, gray-green shadows, but he later reemphasized the light from the nearby window in *The Geographer* by adding thickly brushed, bright pink paint on the illuminated side of the face, creating a hard-edged, planar highlight curving around the high forehead and tracing the bridge of the nose. This revised patch of light is reminiscent of the final, bright pink highlight on the cheek of *Girl with the Red Hat*.

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As in that painting, the highlight in *The Geographer* amplifies not only the contrast of light and dark but also the chromatic contrast between green and pink tones in the face. It seems most likely that Vermeer began to experiment with abstraction after he completed *The Astronomer*, first in *Girl with the Red Hat* and then in *The Geographer*. Indeed, the deceptively modest *Girl with the Red Hat* seems to have initiated the heightened abstraction and greater contrasts of both light and color that became hallmarks of Vermeer's later style.

If *Girl with the Red Hat* served as an experiment for the brushwork and lighting that would come to characterize Vermeer's late work, then we may also begin to understand his choice of an oak panel support for that work. [9] There are no other paintings on panel in Vermeer's extant oeuvre, which has prompted speculation about its use in this instance. [10] It may simply have been that, for a small study, panel seemed a more appropriate support than canvas; but it may also be, as Wheelock has hypothesized, that the hard, smooth surface of a wood panel gave Vermeer's small study the sheen of an image projected by the camera obscura onto a plate of ground glass or tautly stretched oiled paper. More unusual than Vermeer's choice of the panel support, however, is that he chose a previously used panel with an unfinished, bust-length portrait of a man wearing a wide-brimmed hat, which he simply turned 180 degrees.

Scientific imaging has revealed what this painting of a man looked like before Vermeer began his work on *Girl with the Red Hat*. Infrared reflectography shows the black pigment the artist used for the bold, rhythmic brushwork of his hat and curly hair [fig. 7]. X-ray fluorescence imaging spectroscopy mapping the chemical element lead shows the face, whitish collar, and collar tie—all painted with substantial amounts of lead white—as well as long brushstrokes with lesser amounts of lead white in the lighted background, where they curve around the brim of the hat, and short, diagonal strokes that describe the drape of the man's garment over his shoulder [fig. 8]. [11] For decades scholars have discounted the possibility that Vermeer painted this man, noting that the free and brushy style of his face is very different from the refined visages in Vermeer's genre paintings. [12] But Vermeer's animated brushwork in *Girl with the Red Hat* means that we can no longer summarily discount the possibility of Vermeer's authorship.

As the smallest of Vermeer's extant paintings, the only known work on panel, and the artist's first real venture into the schematically rendered forms of his late style, *Girl with the Red Hat* occupies an intriguing place in Vermeer's oeuvre. It reveals the undiminished creativity and experimentalism with which he approached his

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craft and provides insight into his evolution as an artist. Yet, as a reused panel, it also reminds us of some of the mysteries left to solve regarding the scope of his work and the range of his clientele.

Alexandra Libby

October 7, 2022

COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Studio of Johannes Vermeer, *Girl with a Flute*, c. 1669/1675, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection, 1942.9.98

fig. 2 Johannes Vermeer, *A Maid Asleep*, c. 1656–1657, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913, inv. 14.40.611

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fig. 3 Johannes Vermeer, *The Lacemaker*, c. 1669–1670, oil on canvas (attached to panel), Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. M.I. 1448. Musée du Louvre, Paris / Art Resource, NY

fig. 4 Johannes Vermeer, *Woman Writing a Letter, with Her Maid*, c. 1670, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Ireland, Presented, Sir Alfred and Lady Beit, 1987 (Beit Collection), NGI.4535. Photo © National Gallery of Ireland

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fig. 5 Johannes Vermeer, *The Astronomer*, 1668, Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. RF 1983 28. Musée du Louvre, Paris / Art Resource, NY

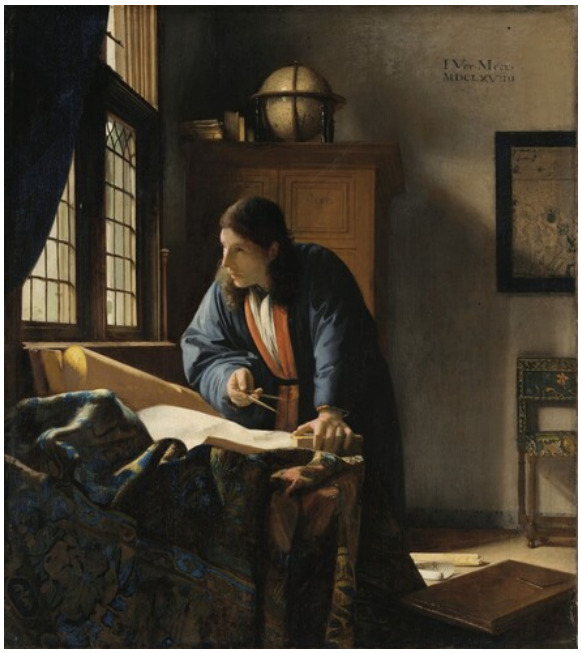

fig. 6 Johannes Vermeer, *The Geographer*, 1669, oil on canvas, Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main, inv. 1149

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fig. 7 Infrared reflectogram, Johannes Vermeer, *Girl with the Red Hat*, c. 1669, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection, 1937.1.53

fig. 8 Upside-down x-radiograph composite, Johannes Vermeer, *Girl with the Red Hat*, c. 1669, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection, 1937.1.53

NOTES

[1] The attribution of *Girl with the Red Hat* to Vermeer has been doubted by Frithjof van Thienen, *Jan Vermeer of Delft* (New York, 1949), 23. The painting was rejected by P. T. A. Swillens, *Johannes Vermeer: Painter of Delft, 1632–1675* (Utrecht, 1950), 65; Albert Blankert, Rob Ruurs, and Willem L. van de Watering, *Johannes Vermeer van Delft 1632–1675* (Utrecht, 1975; English ed., 1978), 167–172; Yvonne Brentjens, “Twee meisjes van Vermeer in Washington,” *Tableau* 7 (February 1985): 54–58; and Gilles Aillaud, Albert Blankert, and John Michael Montias, *Vermeer* (Paris, 1986), 200–201. For reactions to Blankert’s rejection of this painting, see the reviews by Christopher Brown, review of Albert Blankert, Rob Ruurs, and Willem L. van de Watering, *Johannes Vermeer van Delft 1632–1675* (Utrecht, 1975), *Simiolus* 9 (1977): 56–58, and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., review of Albert

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Blankert, Rob Ruurs, and Willem L. van de Watering, *Johannes Vermeer van Delft 1632–1675* (Utrecht, 1975), *Art Bulletin* 59 (September 1977): 439–441. Benjamin Binstock has attributed *Girl with the Red Hat* to Vermeer's daughter Maria Vermeer; see Benjamin Binstock, *Vermeer's Family Secrets: Genius, Discovery, and the Unknown Apprentice* (New York, 2009), 247–257.

[2] For a comparative analysis of the paintings, see Marjorie E. Wieseman, "Johannes Vermeer/*Girl with a Flute*/c. 1669/1675," *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*, NGA Online Editions (October 7, 2022), https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/1237.

[3] The first art historian to note this discrepancy was Reginald Howard Wilenski, *An Introduction to Dutch Art* (New York, 1929), 284–285. He hypothesized that the peculiar arrangement of the finials arose from Vermeer's use of a mirror. His reconstruction of Vermeer's painting procedure, however, is untenable. Albert Blankert, Rob Ruurs, and Willem L. van de Watering (*Johannes Vermeer van Delft 1632–1675* [Utrecht, 1975; English ed., 1978], 109) emphasize the position of the finials in their arguments against the attribution of the painting to Vermeer.

[4] An indistinct shape on the chair next to the woman resembles a visitor's cloak. X-radiographs of the painting show that Vermeer originally placed a standing figure with a wide-brimmed hat in the background, but ultimately painted over him.

[5] Alexandra Libby, E. Melanie Gifford, Dina Anchin, Marjorie E. Wieseman, Kathryn A. Dooley, Lisha Deming Glinsman, and John K. Delaney, "Experimentation and Innovation in Vermeer's *Girl with the Red Hat*: New Findings from the National Gallery of Art," *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2022), https://doi.org/10.5092/jhna.2022.14.2.2.

[6] The striking light reflections on the right lion-head finial have the diffused look of unfocused points of light in a photograph. This effect is known as halation of highlights. It is unlikely that Vermeer could have achieved this without having witnessed its appearance firsthand in a camera obscura. It may well be that in this painting Vermeer attempted to capture the impression of an image seen in a camera obscura. See Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Johannes Vermeer/*Girl with the Red Hat*/c. 1666/1667," *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*, NGA Online Editions (April 24, 2014), https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/60/2014-04-24.

[7] The painting's experimental character has historically stymied scholars seeking to fit it within a linear stylistic development. Shortly after its discovery, Tancred Borenius, "The New Vermeer," *Apollo* 2 (July–December 1925): 125–126, and Wilhelm Valentiner, "Zum 300: Geburtstag Jan Vermeers, Oktober 1932; Vermeer und die Meister der Holländischen

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Genremalerei," *Pantheon* 5 (October 1932): 305–324, dated it to about 1660 and 1658, respectively, seeing a likeness with the textured pointillism of Vermeer's early genre paintings, such as *The Milkmaid*. Others, including André Malraux, *Vermeer de Delft* (Paris, 1952), 21–22, 94, 96, 104, no. 27, Lawrence Gowing, *Vermeer* (London, 1952), 56, and Leonard J. Slatkes, *Vermeer and His Contemporaries* (New York, 1981), 97, preferred to place it later in the artist's career at the end of the 1660s and beginning of the 1670s. In proposing the painting as an early self-portrait by Vermeer's eldest daughter, Maria, Benjamin Binstock dates it to 1672; see Benjamin Binstock, *Vermeer's Family Secrets: Genius, Discovery, and the Unknown Apprentice* (New York, 2009), 249–257 passim; 293, 298.

[8] Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Johannes Vermeer/*Girl with the Red Hat*/c. 1666/1667," *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*, NGA Online Editions (April 24, 2014), https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/60/2014-04-24.

[9] In a past conservation treatment, the reverse of the panel was planed and cradled, and the panel was set into a wooden collar that covers all the original edges. Because of this structure, it has not been possible to carry out analysis of the wood support, however the panel is visually typical of oak.

[10] Possibly relevant in this context is the inventory made of Vermeer's possessions after his death in his *voorkamer* (anteroom, probably Vermeer's studio), which, in addition to canvases, notes "6 paneelen" (unpainted panels). See A. J. J. M. van Peer, "Drie collecties schilderijen van Jan Vermeer," *Oud Holland* 72 (1957): 98–103; and John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989), 339–344.

[11] For more on the imaging and a discussion of this underlying image, see Alexandra Libby, E. Melanie Gifford, Dina Anchin, Marjorie E. Wieseman, Kathryn A. Dooley, Lisha Deming Glinsman, and John K. Delaney, "Experimentation and Innovation in Vermeer's *Girl with the Red Hat*: New Findings from the National Gallery of Art," *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2022), https://doi.org/10.5092/jhna.2022.14.2.2.

[12] Evaluating the portrait without the benefit of new images that reveal the freedom of Vermeer's underpaint in his genre paintings, Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. considered the boldly handled, unblended brushwork in the man's face and the great flourish of strokes that represent his long, curly hair incompatible with the characteristic refinement of technique evident in Vermeer's finished paintings. Martin Bailey echoed Wheelock's sentiment. See Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Zur Technik zweier Bilder, die Vermeer zugeschrieben sind," *Maltechnik–Restauro* 84 (1978): 250; Martin Bailey, *Vermeer* (London, 1995), 88; and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Johannes

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Vermeer/*Girl with the Red Hat*/c. 1666/1667," *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*, NGA Online Editions (April 24, 2014), https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/60/2014-04-24. Only Jørgen Wadum has proposed that the free handling of the underlying image bears a resemblance to Vermeer's forceful brushstrokes in his earliest works, such as *The Procuress* of 1656 (Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden), noting in particular the resemblance of the underlying man, with his long curls, to the supposed self-portrait in that work. See Jørgen Wadum, "Contours of Vermeer," in *Vermeer Studies*, ed. Ivan Gaskell and Michiel Jonker, Studies in the History of Art 55 (Washington, DC, 1998), 214.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support is a single wood plank, probably oak, with a vertical grain. A cradle, including a wooden collar around all four sides of the panel, was attached before the painting entered the collection. A partially completed painting exists underneath the present composition oriented 180 degrees with respect to the girl. The X-radiograph reveals the head-and-shoulders portrait of a man wearing a white kerchief around his neck and a button on his garment. Infrared reflectography at 1.1 to 2.5 microns shows a cape across his shoulder, a broad-brimmed hat, locks of long curling hair, and vigorous brushwork in the background. [1]

The panel was initially prepared with a light tan double ground. [2] The male bust was executed in a dark brown painted sketch, before flesh tones were applied to the face and white to the kerchief. The portrait of the young girl was painted directly over the underlying composition, with the exception of the area of the man's kerchief, which Vermeer apparently toned down with a brown paint.

The paint used to model the girl was applied with smoothly blended strokes. Layered applications of paint of varying transparencies and thicknesses, often blended wet-into-wet, produced soft contours and diffused lighting effects. The paint in the white kerchief around the girl's neck has been scraped back to expose darker paint below.

The painting was treated in 1994 to remove discolored varnish and inpaint. The treatment revealed the painting to be in excellent condition with just a few minor losses along the edges. The painting had been treated previously in 1933,

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probably by Louis de Wild, and in 1942 by Frank Sullivan.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. based on the examination report by Sarah Fisher

April 24, 2014

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] Infrared reflectography was performed with a Santa Barbara focal plane array InSb camera fitted with H, J, and K astronomy filters.

[2] The lower ground consists of calcium carbonate, the upper ground of white lead lightly toned with earth and black (see Melanie Gifford, "Painting Light: Recent Observations on Vermeer's Technique," in Vermeer Studies, ed. Ivan Gaskell and Michiel Jonker [Washington, DC, 1998], 185–199).

PROVENANCE

Possibly Pieter Claesz van Ruijven [1624-1674], Delft; possibly by inheritance to his wife, Maria de Knuijt [d. 1681]; possibly by inheritance to her daughter, Magdalena van Ruijven [1655-1682], Delft;[1] possibly by inheritance to her husband, Jacob Abrahamsz. Dissius [1653-1695], Delft; (sale, Amsterdam, 16 May 1696, probably no. 39 or 40).[2] Lafontaine collection, Paris; (his sale, Hôtel de Bouillon, Paris, 10-12 December 1822 [postponed from 27-29 November], no. 28). Baron Louis Marie Baptiste Atthalin [1784-1856], Colmar; by inheritance to his nephew and adopted son, Louis Marie Félix Laurent-Atthalin [1818-1893], Colmar and Paris; by inheritance to his son, Baron Gaston Marie Laurent-Atthelin [1848-1912], Paris and Château des Moussets, Limay, Seine-et-Oise; by inheritance to his wife, Baroness Marguerite Chaperon Laurent-Atthalin [1854-1931], Paris;[3] (M. Knoedler & Co., New York and London); sold November 1925 to Andrew W. Mellon, Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C.; deeded 30 March 1932 to The A.W. Mellon Educational and Charitable Trust, Pittsburgh; gift 1937 to NGA.

[1] Perhaps the *Girl with the Red Hat* was one of the *tronien* listed in the April 1683 inventory of possessions accruing to Jacob Dissius after the death of his wife, Magdalena van Ruijven, on 16 June 1682. See John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and*

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His Milieu: A Web of Social History, Princeton, 1989: 359, doc. 417.

[2] John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History*, Princeton, 1989: 363-364, doc. 439. Item no. 38 in the sale is described as "a tronie in antique dress, uncommonly artful"; item no. 39 as "Another ditto Vermeer"; and item no. 40 as "A pendant of the same."

[3] Bernard Roulier, the Baroness' great-grandson, related the family's history of their ownership of the painting in a letter of 6 October 1983 to J. Carter Brown (copy in NGA curatorial files). Roulier suggests that Baron L.M.B. Atthalin might have purchased the painting at the 1822 sale, while his mother related to mutual friends of hers and J. Carter Brown that the baron bought the painting after seeing it in a shop window (letter, 28 June 1977, Brown to Mme Denise Kagan Moyseur, copy in NGA curatorial files).

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1925 Loan Exhibition of Dutch Masters of the Seventeenth Century, M. Knoedler & Co., New York, 1925, no. 1.

1927 [Loan exhibition for the opening of the new building], Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, 1927, no catalogue.

1928 A Loan Exhibition of Twelve Masterpieces of Painting, M. Knoedler & Co., New York, 1928, no. 12.

1995 Johannes Vermeer, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, The Hague, 1995-1996, no. 14, repro.

1998 A Collector's Cabinet, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1998, no. 60.

1999 Johannes Vermeer: The Art of Painting, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1999-2000, brochure, fig. 11.

2001 Vermeer and the Delft School, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The National Gallery, London, 2001, no. 74, repro.

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2003 Vermeer y el interior holandés, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, 2003, no. 37, repro.

2012 Vermeer: Il secolo d'oro dell'arte olandese, Scuderie del Quirinale, Rome, 2012-2013, no. 49, repro.

2014 Small Treasures: Rembrandt, Vermeer, Hals, and Their Contemporaries, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh; Birmingham Museum of Art, 2014-2015, no. 43, repro.

2018 Making the Difference: Vermeer and Dutch Art, Ueno Royal Museum, Tokyo; Osaka City Museum, 2018-2019 (shown only in Tokyo).

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1925 M. Knoedler & Co. *Loan Exhibition of Dutch Masters of the Seventeenth*

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Century. Exh. cat. M. Knoedler & Co., New York, 1925: no. 1.

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1927 Perkins, Harley. "Paintings by the Masters Lent for Fogg Opening." *Boston Evening Transcript* (18 June 1927): book section, 8, repro.

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