

# VERMEER OF PITTSBURGH — VIA DELFT

By Ken Kaszak

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I can't draw a straight line even with a ruler but I have a unique connection to the world of art. I've been up close and personal with 35 of the 36 remaining paintings attributed to the Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer. My journey started much like other great journeys—in a bar on Route 88. I met a girl who was into art and music. She was a thin, long-haired cigarette loving, alcohol-friendly female who was born too late. Her era was the late 1960s in San Francisco but she ended up in Pittsburgh in the late 1990s.

Stacy (not her real name) introduced me to Annie Lennox, Buddy Guy, Robert Cray, Bo Diddley, Jr. (she

literally introduced me to him) and Johannes Vermeer. It was from Stacy that I first heard of the artist. For a birthday present I bought her a book of Vermeer prints. That is how I became aware of Vermeer's style and the names of some of his paintings. Stacy wasn't long in my life but Vermeer is now a part of me.

My "Affeer with Vermeer" began in earnest a few years later. I took my soon-to-be fiancé to South Beach in February. We pulled the one week where the temperature never got above 45 degrees. There was no beach activity so one day we found ourselves in The Bass Museum of Art in Miami Beach. Signs



*The Music Lesson, c. 1662-1665*



*Outside of Buckingham Palace—in the rain (a photo of the painting was not allowed)*

posted on computer terminals invited us to enter the name of our favorite artist. When I entered the name Vermeer, a list of his works in Europe and the names of the cities and museums where they were housed appeared. I told my girlfriend that if I was able to see these paintings, I would also be able to see much of Europe. And that is exactly what I did.

My journey took seven years and five trips to Europe after seeing the Vermeer paintings housed in the United States. There were numerous insightful and memorable things that happened to me while on the journey. A short list:

- A private showing deep in the storage area of Buckingham Palace to see *The Music Lesson*, a painting in the Queen's Royal Collection.
- A private tour of a Vermeer exhibit featuring eight paintings in Rome with Jonathan Janson one hour before the museum opened. Jonathan is the curator of the "essentialvermeer" website that I landed on that cold day in Miami. Nobody knows more about Vermeer than him.
- A side trip to the Normandy beaches and military cemeteries above the invasion beaches.
- A side trip to Bastogne to tour the sites connected to the Battle of the Bulge.
- On a trip from Dresden to Vienna, I got off the train in Prague and watched the Steelers beat the Arizona Cardinals in Super Bowl XLIII. The game came on at midnight and I was in a large bar equally split with fans of both teams. One of the only times in my career where I won the block pool. The Czech Republic currency is the koruna. I won 500 korunas. The winnings paid for my night of football watching.
- While flying to Ireland to see my final three Vermeers, TED Talks was a choice for in-flight entertainment. In what may be considered the irony of all ironies, Tracy Chevalier was on TED talking about her motivations for writing *The Girl with a Pearl Earring*. That novel gave rise to increased interest in all things Vermeer and to the movie of the same name starring a young Scarlett Johansson. (There are other Vermeer documentaries and movies I think are more worth your time)
- A trip to Vermeer's studio in Delft, a town 43 miles from Amsterdam. Most of Vermeer's remaining paintings were set in two rooms in his home in Delft. Although the distance was short, there was only one recorded visit of Vermeer going to Amsterdam.

## VERMEER OF DELFT

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Johannes Vermeer was born in 1632 in the town named for its proximity to a canal (or Delf). The origin of the town name is the Dutch word *delven* which means to delve or to dig. Parts of Delft made me think of a mini-Amsterdam with the canal and the short crossing bridges. Vermeer's house was in front of the canal. That structure is now a dentist's office. There is a small Vermeer two-story museum close to his former home. The second floor houses a replica of Vermeer's studio, the first floor is a coffee/gift shop and the basement has framed prints of each painting on the wall. The prints are hanging in order from the largest (*Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*) to the smallest (*A Young Woman Seated at the Virginals*). The smallest Vermeer is smaller than a sheet of typing paper and there is some question as to whether or not it should belong in the Vermeer catalog. That didn't stop Steve Wynn of casino fame from buying it for \$33 million or Thomas Kaplan (of silver mining wealth) buying it from Wynn for the same amount. And it didn't stop me from seeing it. Another painting, *Saint Praxedis*, doesn't have universal agreement that it is a Vermeer but I saw that one also. The end result is that Vermeer's surviving works are given as either 34, 35, or 36. (*Please see ending footnotes*).

Vermeer wasn't a wealthy artist in his time. He was known in his hometown, a few neighboring towns like The Hague and Gouda (yes, where the cheese comes from) but not in many other places. He managed the inn his father left him for income, had a benefactor for his art and, because he and his wife raised 11 children, his mother-in-law lived with him for financial support (and I'm sure to take over some of the babysitting duties). The mother-in-law, Maria Thins, owned a painting by Dirck van Baburen titled *The Procuress*. That painting had major influence on Vermeer. Not only did he use it as background for two of his paintings (*The Concert* and *Lady Seated at a Virginal*) but he produced his own *Procuress* painting at the age of 24. (If you're wondering what a virginal is, think of a small, rectangular harpsicord). *The Procuress* (van Baburen's version) is held in such high regard that it now hangs in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts (and I saw that one, too).

When Vermeer died in 1675, he left his family in a dire financial situation. His wife gave two of his paintings to the baker to settle the family's bread debt. Although he was not well known at the time of his death, there is no competition for first place among which artist had more things of interest happen to them



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*The Procuress, Dirck van Baburen, c. 1622*

after their demise than Johannes Vermeer. And if it wasn't for a Frenchman with the regal name of Etienne Joseph Theophile Thore (1807-1869) the world may never have heard of Vermeer.

Thore was a critic, mostly of art but on other topics of his day. His published opinions forced him into exile due to his support of the radicals before the 1848 French Revolution. It was during his ten years in exile that Thore traveled to the Netherlands and became aware of Vermeer paintings. Upon his return to France, Thore adopted the pen name Willem Burger and began to publish details of the paintings he saw in and around Delft. Thore-Burger introduced Vermeer to the world—albeit two hundred years after Johannes went to glory. Thore-Burger is an interesting character in this drama. He ended up owning three

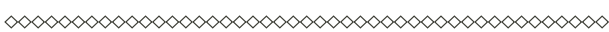
Vermeer paintings himself. Upon his death in 1869, he was entombed in artist's cemetery Cimetiere du Pere-Lachaise where his "neighbors" include Frederic Chopin, Edith Piaf, Marcel Proust, Oscar Wilde, Honore de Balzac and James Douglas Morrison.

Vermeer's post-death resume includes thefts of his art work by the Germans (those Nutty Nazis loved Vermeer), thefts of his artwork by Irish individuals who may or may not have been motivated by their affiliation with the Irish Republican Army, a possible Whitey Bulger connection, one of the greatest art hoaxes of all time (thanks to Han van Meegeren selling fake Vermeers before and during WWII), and more noteworthy books and movies related to his life and work than any other artist. No artist's work travels more than Vermeer.



*Christ in the House of Martha and Mary, c.1655  
(My final Vermeer; Edinburgh, Scotland)*

When there is a visiting Vermeer in any city in the world, there is great interest, publicity, and high attendance. The Vermeer mystique even motivated a fellow from Pittsburgh to set out on a mission to see all of his paintings.



What makes my insight and experience into Vermeer a bit frustrating is the fact that most people in my

hometown of Pittsburgh have never heard of him. In business, some people try to “advance their cause” by taking potential clients to the golf course or playing up their church connections. Although I can hit a golf ball both right-handed and left-handed, I don’t golf. I’m a bike rider and a swimmer. And, although I grew up with a Catholic father who visited Buddhist temples during his time in Korea during the war and an Orthodox mother, I’m not a religious soul (my father used to tell

my brothers and me about Nirvana on a regular basis). It was my study of other religions during my required theology class in college and five trips to Thailand that delivered me to my status as a Buddhist/Deist. So, I use neither golf nor religion to advance my causes. There was a time when I tried to tell people that I'm not just an investment professional and writer. I have had unique experiences. One of those experiences is my Vermeer journey. But too many times when I started that conversation, I was met with blank expressions.

From my personal experience in this city, if we were to stand under the Kaufman's/Macy's/Target clock and ask the first ten people walking by if they've heard of the Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer, this is what would happen: three people would be insulted that we would even question if they knew one of the most famous painters of all time. Three people would have no idea who we were talking about and—sadly—would have no interest in learning about the man. Three people wouldn't be able to tell us any facts about Vermeer and couldn't name any of his paintings. However, they would tell us that they are people of society, they go to galleries and attend the theatre so therefore, by proxy, they most certainly know Vermeer (that happened to me many times). The tenth person would fall into one of these three categories. The end result is that over half the population of this city is unaware of Vermeer (one caveat—if one of the ten we poll is living in Pittsburgh after emigrating

from Europe, they would certainly know Vermeer; Europeans have greater appreciation for culture than Americans).

I've tried to talk to individuals at the Frick and Carnegie museums about Vermeer. The museum employees I talked to didn't know who I was talking about. The president of the local arts council had to do a Google search to learn about him. I once applied for a grant to finance one of my European trips and to establish a program that would introduce Vermeer to the high school students in Pittsburgh. Even though I've received two grants from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts for writing, the local arts council passed on my application. As incredulous as it sounds, the person reviewing my grant application at the Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council may not have known the artist I was discussing.

## *VERMEER OF PITTSBURGH*

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What makes the lack of Vermeer knowledge disheartening is the fact there are strong Pittsburgh connections to the artist. There are two major connections this city has to Vermeer and they feature two major Pittsburgh historical figures.

## HENRY CLAY FRICK

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Frick was born in West Overton, Westmoreland County in 1849. His money came from the coal and coke industries. When he arrived into the land of great wealth, he followed the game plan of others who had done so and began to collect art. After his part in putting the people of Johnstown in harms ways through his involvement with the South Fork Dam and Hunting Club and his aggression to striking steelworkers in Homestead, Frick bought his first Vermeer painting (*Girl Interrupted at Her Music*) in 1901. He was living in Pittsburgh when he made the purchase. The price, \$26,000, would be \$894,000 if adjusted into 2022 dollars, certainly a nice sum but nowhere near the pricing of works by artists in demand today. The last Vermeer to sell, the previously mentioned *Saint Praxedis*, sold for \$10.7 million in 2014. The low price was due to the lack of total conviction that it was a Vermeer. Another factor for the low price was that the piece was a copy of a painting by Italian painter Felice Ficherelli (1605-1660).

Frick may have been in the early school of Vermeer-fandom when he made his first purchase. More attention was being paid to Dutch art in general and Vermeer in particular thanks to the attention given by Theophile Thore-Burger. Frick's acquisition was only the fourth Vermeer to make it to America.

By 1911, HCF was living in New York and paying more attention—and money—to collecting art. His second Vermeer purchase, *Officer and a Laughing Girl* cost nearly \$230,000. The purchase set a record sale price for a Vermeer painting. Around this time, a piece appeared in *The New York Times* by Wilhelm Bode, German scholar and curator of the Wilhelm Kaiser (now Bode) Museum. Bode stated that owning a



Henry Clay Frick (1849-1919)



Vermeer was “the greatest treasure for an American collector.” The Vermeer magic was turned on, never to be turned off.

A dealer named Arthur Sulley approached German collector James Simon in 1914 asking if Simon would be interested in selling *Mistress and Maid*. Simon had zero interest in selling and told Sulley he had previously turned down offers of \$250,000.

But war changes things and World War I changed things for Simon. He agreed to sell Frick his Vermeer for \$290,000 in 1919. It was the last painting Frick purchased and the only painting he bought in the last year of his life. He didn't get too much time to enjoy it but you can enjoy it—and Frick's other two Vermeers—with an enjoyable Amtrak trip to New York City.

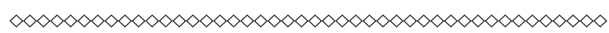


*Girl Interrupted at Her Music, c. 1658-1659*

## ANDREW MELLON

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Mellon pulled a winning ticket in the birth lottery having been born into wealth but after he became active in the family business, he increased that wealth many times over. By 1913 Mellon National Bank (renamed from T. Mellon & Sons) and Union National Trust (a bank controlled by Mellon) were Numbers 1 and 2 in terms of deposits in Pittsburgh. But Mellon had the business touch. He either owned or helped finance corporate household names Westinghouse Electric Corporation, Koppers, Alcoa, and Gulf Oil, plus many others. Like his friend, Henry Clay Frick, Mellon was an early member of the South Fork Dam and Hunting Club. Mellon, Frick and the rest of the crew did not face legal liability from the collapse of the dam and the resulting Johnstown Flood.



In 1921, Mellon became Secretary of the Treasury under Warren G. Harding and would keep his job until 1932 while serving under Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover. Mellon spent much of his tenure in that job trying to get income tax rates lowered and doing away with federal estate tax. Things went in his favor for many years. Until the year 1929. Mellon's reputation as a business and fiscal genius suffered with the onset of the Great Depression. Whatever should and could have been done to lessen the severity of the economic contraction, Mellon didn't



*Andrew Mellon (1855-1937)*

do it. Congress began impeachment proceedings against him and Hoover gave him a new post: Ambassador to the United Kingdom. Mellon returned to private life after Franklin Roosevelt defeated Hoover. In 1933, the federal government began a major tax fraud case against Mellon that would only be settled after his death in 1937 with his estate making a cash settlement with the Treasury Department—the same agency he headed for 11 years.

So, that's Andrew (I can't see anybody ever calling him 'Andy') Mellon as a businessman and politician. But his involvement in art makes his connection to Johannes Vermeer even more interesting than Frick's.

In 1933 Mellon came to terms with Austrian Jaromir Czernin to purchase Vermeer's *The Art of Painting*, sometimes



*The Art of Painting, c. 1666-1668*

known as *The Allegory of Painting* for \$1 million (payable in gold), which would have been a record price for a painting by any artist at that time, not just a Vermeer.

This is my favorite painting from an aesthetic standpoint. It may be one of only two Vermeer self-portraits—although we only see the artist at work from behind. (To give a point of reference, there are over 80 Rembrandt self-portraits.) It is Vermeer's third largest painting measuring 47 inches by 39 inches. I saw this painting at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. I was by myself with this painting for about ten minutes before a teacher lead a group of students into the viewing area. They gathered around where I was standing. As soon as the teacher started talking, I knew they were from Poland from the language and the fact that some of the men looked like me (I'm half Polish).

The deal Mellon negotiated didn't happen. The Austrian government informed him that he was able to buy the painting, look at it, and show it off to his friends. But in no way would he be allowed to take the painting out of the country. That nixed the deal. The painting went back on the market. It was acquired for around \$660,000 in 1940. The buyer was a failed art school student from Linz, Austria named Adolf Hitler. Vermeer was Hitler's favorite artist. He bought *The Art of Painting* and looted *The Astronomer* from the Rothschild collection. *The Astronomer* may have been Hitler's single favorite painting. It was to be the centerpiece of the Furhermuseum, Hitler's planned but unrealized cultural tribute to himself and all things Nazi. Why buy a Vermeer and steal another? My only thought is that Hitler respected the owner's Austrian heritage and felt the need to

deal fairly with Jaromir Czernin. As for *The Astronomer*, it was owned by a French family. Why pay them anything? (*The Astronomer* is now in The Louvre with *The Lacemaker*. They are in a part of the Louvre where one can stand between them and have a photo taken. It's not publicized but the Nazi symbol is stamped on the back of *The Astronomer*.)

There were unsuccessful attempts by Jaromir Czernin after the war to have the painting returned. Attempts now continue by the heirs of Czernin to recover the painting since Austria changed its art restitution law. That change enabled Maria Altmann to recover the Gustav Klimt portraits of her childless aunt, Adele Bloch-Bauer. (The paintings are known as *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer* and *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer II*).

Although Czernin received payment from Hitler and sent him a thank you note, the heirs of Czernin make a claim

that the painting was sold under duress. The selling price was far below the price Mellon agreed to pay, Czernin's wife had Jewish heritage, and Czernin's brother-in-law was Kurt von Schuschnigg, the chancellor of Austria from 1934 to 1938 and no friend of Hitler. Part of the claim the heirs make includes the fact Czernin was later stripped of his assets and held by the Gestapo for three months.

The attorney who was able to have the Klimt paintings returned, Randol Schoenberg, (played by Ryan Reynolds in the movie *Woman in Gold*) has been working with the Czernin heirs. My feelings on this issue have changed. At first, I sided with the museum and the Austrian government that the painting should remain as state property. But the more I learned about the history of non-restitution by the Austrian government before the law change and my opinion that Hitler would have acquired the painting eventually, I've changed by mind. I now



*Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer, Gustav Klimt, c. 1903-1907*



*Girl with the Red Hat, c. 1669*

believe the painting should be returned to the family. Part of my change of heart came after reading interviews with Randol Schoenberg. He presents a strong case for having the painting returned to the family.

If the piece is returned to the Czernin heirs, what would happen to it? While they may allow it to remain where it is with acknowledgement they own it, they may also sell it. The pricing given to the two Klimt paintings may provide comparables. *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer* was sold by Maria Altmann to Neue Galerie co-founder (and cosmetics heir) Ron Lauder for \$135 million in 2006. Oprah Winfrey acquired the second portrait for \$87.9 million in 2006, anonymously lent it to the Museum of Modern Art for display for five years and then flipped it to a Chinese art collector

for \$150 million in 2016. I would think the Vermeer painting would generate a higher price than the two Klimt paintings.

*Helen Mirren plays Maria Altmann in "Woman in Gold". Like the movie "Monuments Men", it was a better movie the second time I watched it.*

Andrew Mellon's involvement with Vermeer goes beyond *The Art of Painting*. He was credited with discovering the last Vermeer to be found in 1925. *The Girl with the Red Hat* was in a private collection in Paris when Mellon acquired it for \$290,000. He also was one of many fooled by the ingenious Han van Meegeren and acquired two of van Meegeren's fake Vermeers. Mellon displayed them in his home, right next to *The Girl with the Red Hat*.

In his final innings, Andrew Mellon donated the money and art work to the entity that became the National Gallery of Art. He did this even when embroiled in a tax lawsuit with the government he served in for many years (or maybe he did it thinking his financial penalty would be lessened). The real Vermeer and the two fake Vermeers went on display. The fake paintings were on display into the 1950s when modern chemical tests proved they were painted with modern paint.

The fake Vermeers are now in storage in the National Gallery. I think they should be proudly displayed as a tribute to the genius of Han van Meegeren, the man who fooled Andrew Mellon, Hermann Goring—and many others.

## FOOTNOTES

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On October 7, 2022, the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. announced that one of the four Vermeers in its collection was not an actual Vermeer painting. *Girl with a Flute* is now attributed to the Studio of Johannes Vermeer. It could have been produced by somebody who studied under Vermeer, his eldest daughter, Maria, who had exhibited some art talent during her lifetime, or—in what would be the best twist to the story—Han van Meegeren.

In the first draft of this essay, the number of Vermeers was given at 35, 36 or 37. While the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam is not in agreement with the National Gallery in Washington about the *Girl with a Flute*, I have lowered the number of paintings attributed to Vermeer to 34, 35 or 36. The one or two “maybe” “maybe not” paintings (*Saint Praxedis* and *A Young Woman Seated at the Virginals*) are detailed in this piece.



*Girl with a Flute* (now attributed to Studio of Johannes Vermeer), c. 1669-1675

I was able to return to Boston before writing this essay. I went back to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and paid my respects to the frame that Vermeer's *The Concert* was stolen from in 1990. The frames of the pieces taken during the March 18, 1990 heist were left exactly as they were before the robbery. The frame for the Vermeer was near a window and it had a table and chair in front of it. I was told that Ms. Gardner did this for a few two reasons. (1) There was

no electricity when the museum opened and she wanted the best light possible. (2) The chair was for people to sit and spend time with the painting. In all the museums I've been in, this is the only place I've seen this inviting presentation.

Ms. Gardner paid \$5,000 for *The Concert* in 1892. If the painting were found and returned in presentable condition, it would most likely be placed back in the frame—and become the most valuable painting in the world.



*The Concert*, c. 1664 (stolen on March 18, 1990). Dirck van Baburen's "The Procuress" is in the b.g. on the right.



Where is *The Concert*?? (a great art mystery)