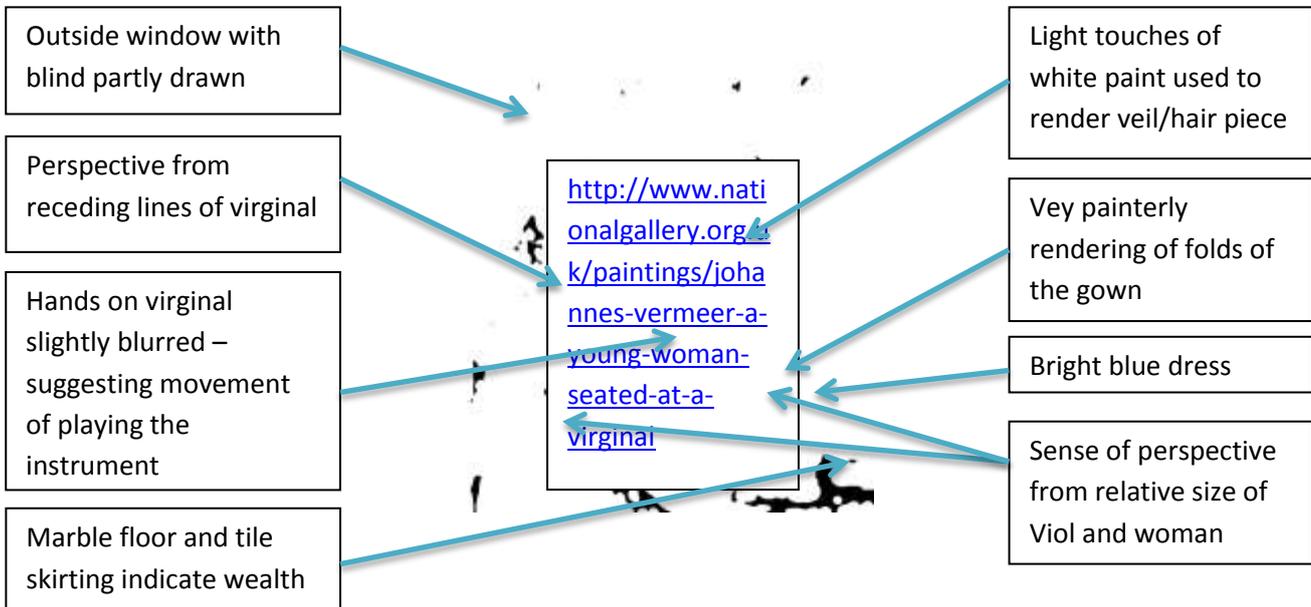


A Young Woman seated at a Virginal - Johannes Vermeer



Oil on canvas, c1670-72, 51.5 x 45.5 cm, National Gallery London

- Drawn back tapestry gives a 'stage-like' feel
- Wealthy interior furnishings
- Impression of 'cultured' setting – music, paintings, furnishings
- Virginal has landscape painted on the lid

Description

A young woman sits playing a virginal in an expensively furnished room. She looks directly out of the painting straight at the viewer, almost inviting a comment on her playing or the start of a conversation. Her gaze seems quite penetrating.

The scene is framed to the left by a drawn-back tapestry and a Viol. Together they almost give the impression of a drawn aside curtain, as at the theatre, and therefore we are looking on to a stage set.

The lighting of the scene is delicate with the left wall slightly darker but the woman's face lit directly which immediately draws our attention to it.

The wall at the back appears to be painted white but on close inspection it is made up of many different tones of grey and white with tiny strokes of other colours. This gives the effect of light playing on the wall. The tones are lighter behind the chair back and woman's dress helping them to stand out and draw attention.

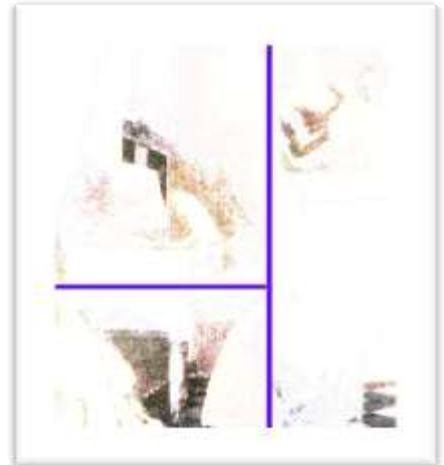
Interpretation

The centre of interest in this painting is the young woman who, according to a description alongside this painting in the National Gallery “invites us, with her penetrating gaze, to pick up the viol and join her in a duet”. It is true, when looking at this painting, that you feel you are being invited to participate in the scene.]The painting tells us that the woman is probably from a wealthy background with her fine clothes and the way the room is furnished.

The composition is interesting, the tapestry and viol on the left are partially excluded from the frame, giving a sense of immediacy, of looking over them into the room.

The woman is placed on the right hand vertical third of the painting whilst her arms and hands stretch along the lower horizontal third.

According to the National Gallery website the painting on the back wall is ‘The Procuress’ by Dirck van Baburen but states that it is not clear whether this is intended to have a bearing on the meaning of the meaning of the whole work.”It is probable that a more general association between music and love is intended”.



Evaluation

Chilvers (2012 p654) describes how “Vermeer painted these serene and harmonious images of domestic life that for their beauty of composition, brushwork, and treatment of light raise him into a different class from any other Dutch genre painter”. The National Gallery website also comments on the lighting in Vermeer’s interior paintings “His mature domestic genre pieces have a characteristic pearly light”.

This painting seems a very typical example of Vermeer’s work from the late 1660’s to early 1670’s. Chilvers (2012 p654) describes how “The majority show one or two figures in a room lit from the onlooker’s left, engaged in domestic or recreational tasks. The predominant colours are yellow, blue and grey, arranged in flawless, cool harmonies and the compositions have a purity and dignity that confer on them an impact out of relation to their small size”.

502words

References

Chilvers, I. (2009) *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists* (4th edition). Oxford: Oxford University

Web References

<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/artists/johannes-vermeer>

<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/johannes-vermeer-a-young-woman-seated-at-a-virginal>