



View of Delft, Johannes Vermeer

## THE TRUE VIEW OF DELFT

Johannes Vermeer



Fragment Johannes Vermeer

I saw *View of Delft* for the very first time over a half a century ago. Since then, the painting has been my initial port of call whenever I visit an exhibition in the Mauritshuis (The Hague) as it is always equally impressive, regardless of how many times I have seen it by now.

Delft, a panorama painted across the full width of the canvas under a cloudy sky that takes up almost two-thirds of the surface of the work. Together, both the city and the sky are reflected in the harbour's water.

Yet, the first time that the cityscape overwhelmed me, simultaneously the thought occurred that the yellow quay at the bottom diminishes the magnificence of Vermeer's *View of Delft*. I felt that the waterside was not really part of the painting. The quay with people is of an anecdotal nature that clashes with the illusionistic visualisation of Delft while the sloping ascending



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foreground interferes with the overall horizontal concept of three parallel strips framing the sky, the city, and the water. Once I started to scrutinize the narrow triangle of the yellow quay as intently as the upper parts of the painting, I began to notice how qualitatively different the top and the bottom are painted. Everything on that yellow lower edge betrays a degree of carelessness and lack of craftsmanship that is not found in any of Vermeer's other works. Let alone in the extraordinary *View of Delft*.

As a painter, I have long wondered how such a great artist could have done such a remarkably bad job when painting this one section of his masterpiece. Here, the technique is nowhere near his customary precision and refined painter's style. Equally unacceptable is that the diagonal foreground strikes a false note in the grand composition of the cityscape.



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Light on Delft, painted reconstruction, Ton van Os



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On a copy of the painting that was reproduced on linen I have overpainted the jarring part, as meticulously as possible, while giving back the water its natural reflection across the entire width.

This results in an unforgettable radiant vision spreading to all corners. This must be what Vermeer wanted and how he executed it. The painting he had in mind, which he has completed, contained everything that would have made *View of Delft* perfect. But we have never seen it like this. We only know a Vermeer that has been tampered with. The unity of the painting has been irretrievably tarnished by the foreground that supplanted the original imagery.

I am convinced that this painting, which has been reconstructed as effectively as possible on the basis of the original concept, was the ultimate masterpiece as it graced Johannes Vermeer's easel. Only after Delft's mirror image was restored across the board did the monumental design of the painting re-emerge. The reflection in its entirety from left to right turns the representation of Delft into a perfect visionary image.



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Some signs of life can be observed on the quay on the opposite side, underneath the gate of the bell tower and near the boats. However, this barely visible presence is wrapped in the tranquil silence that has become almost tangible in Vermeer's paint surface.

It is shocking to discover this lost image. Vermeer is known for being one of the world's greatest artists and his *View of Delft* is one of his most impressive works. In its original state, without that annoying intrusion, the piece would definitely have been regarded as an apogee of 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch painting as well as of western art history.

The bell tower provides proof that it is approximately 8am. The sun strikes the roofs of buildings in the city centre and especially, from the south east, the tower of the Nieuwe Kerk, as the cloud cover puts in the shade the foremost houses behind the town wall. The rays of the sun breaking through make the town sparkle like a jewel. With his extremely refined technique of loosely intertwined brush work, Vermeer has captured the light igniting the city for all eternity.

And due to my painted reconstruction, it is now possible to concretely imagine how this horizontal urban silhouette of dark and sunlit buildings under a cloudy sky is reflected across the full width of the water. A breathtaking new view, illustrious and moving. Again, without the added anecdote, the image of Delft becomes a vision. This brilliant painting, which I would name *Light on Delft*, no longer exists. It has been lost forever.



Fragments Johannes Vermeer



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View of Delft, Johannes Vermeer, Mauritshuis

## Johannes Vermeer

1632-1675

### *View of Delft, c.1660-1661*

**This is the most famous cityscape of the 17th century. The interplay of light and shade, the impressive cloudy sky and the subtle reflections in the water make this painting an absolute masterpiece.**

**We are looking at Delft from the south. There is hardly a breath of wind and the city has an air of tranquillity. Vermeer reflected this tranquillity in his composition, by making three horizontal strips: water, city and sky. He also painted the buildings a bit neater than they actually were.**

We still have *View of Delft* in the Mauritshuis.

The sign next to Vermeer's painting reads,

Johannes Vermeer 1632-1675

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A short, clear description. But whereas the caption mentions that Vermeer has divided the canvas into three horizontal strips (the water, the city, and the sky) I distinguish four sections: the sky, the city, the water, and the quay.

Sign next to *View of Delft*



View on Delft, Johannes Vermeer



Light on Delft, painted reconstruction, Ton van Os

It is inconceivable to me that Johannes Vermeer, at this exceedingly creative time of his life when he painted *The Milkmaid*, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, and *The Allegory of Painting*, would single-handedly undo the grandiose composition of his *View of Delft* with this semi-diagonal fourth band. The conclusion has to be that at some point, after Vermeer's death, an unknown painter destroyed for all time the concept of *View of Delft* through an intervention that entailed overpainting, to a large extent, the reflection on the water surface painted by Vermeer. In its stead, a descending triangle has been inserted that dominates the entire painting.

The triangle is defined by a curved line that delineates the quay. The line starts in the bottom right-hand corner near the Rotterdam Gate's reflection on the water. Then it ascends diagonally to the left, where a towing barge is moored at the quay. Its roof touches the reflected houses across the water. Inside the triangle, rudimentarily and very sketchily drawn and painted, we find the quay, the barge, seven human figures, and two small posts.



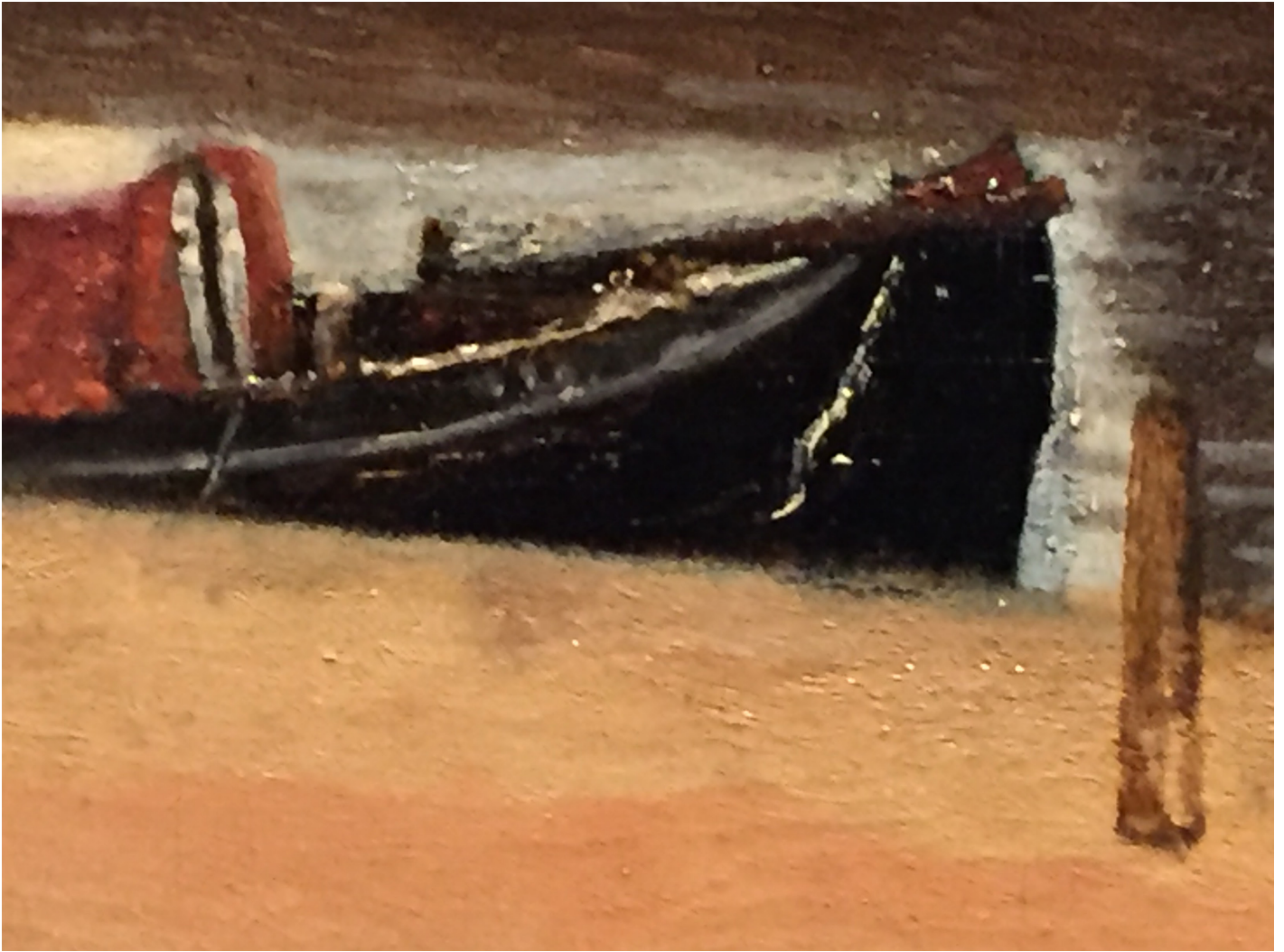


Fragment unknown artist



Fragment unknown artist

The most noticeable and aggravating aspect of the triangle is its gaudy and eye-burning yellow colour. What should have been the reproduction of an almost colourless hardstone quay is a plane without any shadows, overexposed due to a second light source that is out of tune with the delicate splendour of Vermeer's subtly painted sunlight on Delft. As a result of the intrusive yellow, the level shore is reminiscent of the beach. This impression is reinforced by the all too visible brushstrokes that give a grainy texture to the pasty paint. The edge of the quay is at the front of the image and therefore it should have had a clear-cut and hard contour, which would have created space between the foreground and the background, in keeping with the laws of perspective. Yet, a three-dimensional effect is absent in this area due to the ill-defined, formless, and blurred edge. As there is no clear dividing line between the quay and the water surface, which is lower, one seems to be an extension of the other, just like a beach and the sea.



Fragment unknown artist



Fragment unknown artist

Both quays in the painting should be at an almost equal distance from and parallel to the water surface. That is not the case here. It is as if we are looking down on the yellow quay from an elevated viewpoint. On the opposite side from where Vermeer was working and when we direct our glance to the foundation line of the Schiedam Gate in the centre of the painting, Delft would be roughly at eye level; one views the city as if standing in the street.

The upshot of the addition to the lower part of the painting is that there are two different perspectives, which renders the representation imbalanced and implausible.

The modelling of all the elements contained within the triangle is not true to nature or realistic. The most remarkable characteristic of this underdeveloped scene is that the relative proportions of its loose components – the towing barge, the seven people, and the two posts – are incorrect while the characters in the foreground are unnaturally small.



Fragment unknown artist

And that is not all. On closer examination it is clear that the position of the towing barge, the people, and the posts is not arbitrary but dictated, so to speak, by the upper part of the painting. To make this tangible, I have traced a number of horizontal and vertical lines on the reproduction:

The oblong towing barge and the five people that are standing in front of it have been inserted to obscure the original reflection. The two posts, which have retained the colour of the reflection, are positioned in the same spot where the water was reflecting the two towers in the background.

The two women, who are standing very straight below the space between two houses on the horizon, are camouflaging the reflection in that spot.

Overall, the way in which the changes at the bottom have been carried out is remarkably clumsy and amateurish. The stylization, texture, transparent colouring, and saturated hues that Vermeer puts on display in the visualisation of Delft, his birthplace, are absent in this section as the below observations amply illustrate.



Fragment unknown artist



Fragment unknown artist

The contours of the roofs below the cloudy sky, from the left of the painting up to the Schiedam Gate in the centre, do not correspond with their reflection in the water whereas this is the case on the right-hand side.

The water diagonally above the woman on the far right-hand side changes from a smooth surface, masterly painted by Vermeer, into coarse brush strokes that are barely attached to the canvas, resulting in a texture that resembles a plaster wall rather than water.

The most alarming aspect of the scene with the towing barge, the groups of people, and the two posts is that it has been painted back to front as bad artists are wont to do. First, Vermeer's reflection was partially covered, then the towing barge was inserted before the people were put in place. Finally, the ground on which they were positioned was touched up with untidy brush strokes.

Compared to the ship and the boats in front of the other quay, impressively painted by Vermeer, the towing barge is remarkably shapeless. It has the dimensions of an abnormally large canoe. The front and the extended side wall of the cabin are both painted the same red colour, without any nuances. The red roof has been covered with overly thick white paint and does not appear to be part of the construction of the cabin, which is obviously not three-dimensional. It is so low that it seems highly unlikely that the people who are waiting on the quay will be able to enter through the narrow opening at the front, marked by white paint.

The towing barge's nose should be some distance from the quay, in contrast with the adjacent side of the barge. As it is painted in a uniformly black colour, there is no depth effect. The front part of the hull is not merely flush with the quay but even spills over the not exactly tightly painted quayside. Equally mysterious is the indistinct brush stroke that is interrupted midway the wall of the barge: is it meant to portray a chain or a cable? Just as strange is that the towing barge hasn't been moored to one of the posts.

Next to the razor-sharp contour of the barge's nose, the ineptly executed correction shows that the boat was larger in the first instance. Together with the two posts, the failed modification of the barge's prow is the ugliest half a square decimetre of the entire painting.



Fragment unknown artist



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It was when I was examining this area time and again, while focusing on the bottom of the painting as attentively as on the upper sections, that I first started to wonder whether Vermeer had really created the entire painting.

The texture of the top and the side of the cabin, which was applied with rough brush strokes, shimmers through the five transparently painted people. Due to these paint traces being visually present in their clothes, the latter do not really take shape; they remain two-dimensional.

The red strip of paint on the cabin is visible in the apron of the woman on the left and in the clothing of the woman on the right. The red cabin leaves its mark on the legs and bottom part of the cape of the large man in the middle. A horizontal line of white paint from the cabin roof runs across his clothes at chest height. Just like the woman to his right, the man does not have a face underneath his formless headwear. What should have been the lower part of his legs does not end with shoes or boots but with a shape that is most suggestive of a fish tail. This man is not firmly anchored in the ground and the same goes for the two people standing next to him. All could topple over any minute.



Fragment Johannes Vermeer



Fragment unknown artist

Undeniably, the granular paint structure of the background is showing through in the two shapeless and sketchily painted women on the left. The upper body of the woman at the back can be found next to, instead of behind, the woman at the front. Therefore, both upper bodies appear to be arising from a single lower body. Whereas the first woman's face is merely hinted at by a brown vertical spot of paint that disappears into the background, the woman who is partly behind her and partly next to her does not even have a face. Her cap and face are shapeless white smudges.

Vermeer's glistening light makes Delft shine – every unevenness on the walls, the buildings, the roofs, the church towers, the golden hand of the bell tower, the railing of a ship, the flagpole pointing upright at an angle, the leaves on the trees, and the people on the quay; even if they are just indicated with a single spot of paint.

The five people standing in front of the towing barge as well as the two women next to the posts are not illuminated by the second light source in the painting; unlike the quay, which is overexposed. At the same time the top of the dark head coverings, the white caps, the shoulders, the railing of the towing barge and cabin, and the upper parts of the posts are not highlighted at all. Therefore, these elements continue to merge with the background.



Fragment unknown artist



Fragment unknown artist

Saliently, the two shadowless posts – impossible to see what material they are made of – have the same colour as the original water reflection. They are ill-defined, without any taut contours, and as they are not sunk into the gritty ground they appear to be floating above the surface of the quay.

There should have been a larger distance between the two vertical posts, which are positioned away from the edge of the quay, and the horizontal water surface below it. The unknown painter didn't manage to suggest there was some space between the posts and the water. The posts are not separate from the harbour but appear to be part of the same painted plane.

The water surface does not stay behind the posts. It has even been painted against or in front of the posts in some places. In an equally extremely incompetent manner, an attempt has been made to insert small waves between the posts through the painting of ten lifeless grey dashes, which are not part of the long continuous wave lines in the water and are separate from the water surface. A few even touch the inner sides of the posts.

Just like the other persons in the yellow field, the women to the right of the posts have been painted in a way that is unrealistic and they are far too small. If we assume that the posts are about one metre high and we draw a line parallel to the ground from the top of the left-hand post to the shoulder of the woman in the yellow jacket (white cap, yellow jacket, and blue apron: would she be an imitation of Vermeer's *Milkmaid*?) she cannot be any taller than 1.40m.

Vague remnants of the painted background are also leaking through the clothes of the two women. Below the cap of the woman on the left there may be three dark spots and one light spot but they do not add up to a face.

Part of the back of her head is missing; the grey paint that makes up the background has eaten into her white cap. Her left upper arm and almost straight apron cloth have been clumsily painted in a long continuous line that contrasts sharply with the background; like a silhouette. Her right lower arm cannot be hidden beneath the apron. It appears to have been amputated but is still holding half a basket. As he painted the effects of the light shining on the lower arm, the basket, and the handle, the unidentified painter tried to imitate Vermeer's technique.



View on Delft, Johannes Vermeer



Light on Delft painted reconstruction, Ton van Os

The water surface between these two women and the reflection in the far right corner of the painting is obviously no lower than the quay. The blue grey hues of the water and the yellow colour of the quay have roughly the same tonal values so they seem to blend into each other.

The water is not flowing below the edge of the quay but could be flooding the quay itself, like seawater on a beach.

When one looks closely at Vermeer's painted surfaces in *View of Delft*, it is clear that the painting is still in good condition after many centuries, even if a delicate craquelure is present all over the canvas.

How 'skilled' the anonymous painter was can be seen in the lower part of the painting, where the paint has been applied far too heavily, leading to cracks and even to large fissures.

I may not have another half century left but in the time that does remain, I will visit the Mauritshuis fairly regularly to see *View of Delft*. Not just as it is one of the most beautiful, poignant, and joyous paintings that I have ever seen but also to commemorate – even more so than at any other moment – the maker of this Wonder of the World,

Johannes Vermeer, to whom I dedicate this project.

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Translation: Moze Jacobs





*Light on Delft* painted reconstruction, Ton van Os

## Colophon

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