

National Gallery of Art

NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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JOHANNES VERMEER'S EXTRAORDINARY MASTERPIECE

"THE ART OF PAINTING" TRAVELS FROM VIENNA

FOR EXCLUSIVE U.S. SHOWING AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NOVEMBER 24, 1999 – FEBRUARY 6, 2000

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The National Gallery of Art's traditional Thanksgiving crowds will be the first to see Johannes Vermeer's extraordinary masterpiece The Art of Painting (c. 1666-67) when it goes on view at its exclusive venue in the United States, November 24, 1999, through February 6, 2000. The painting by the renowned seventeenth-century Dutch artist was not included in the "once-in-a-lifetime" exhibition Johannes Vermeer, held at the Gallery in 1995-96, because it required conservation before traveling. Now, with the treatment completed, the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, has offered this unique opportunity for Americans to view the painting outside of Austria.

This focus exhibition is made possible by Juliet and Lee Folger/The Folger Fund. The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art and the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

"The opportunity to exhibit The Art of Painting at the National Gallery of Art comes as a result of our longstanding friendship with the Kunsthistorisches Museum," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "With the experience of that remarkable exhibition four years ago so strong in our collective memories, the presence of the masterpiece here in Washington will both enrich and expand our understanding of the power of Vermeer's rare images."

This allegorical painting, unique for its large size (47 1/4" x 39 3/8") and intriguing to many for its mysterious qualities, was apparently very important to Vermeer, for he kept it in his possession throughout his lifetime. Even after his death, when his family was in dire financial straits, the painting was not sold. On February 24, 1676, Vermeer's widow, Catharina Bolnes, transferred ownership of it to her mother, Maria Thins, to keep it out of creditors' hands.

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Very little is known about Vermeer (1623-75), who lived and worked in Delft. He left no personal writings or drawings. Only thirty-five of his paintings are known to exist today; twenty-one were in the 1995-96 exhibition in Washington. The Art of Painting will be installed in the West Building in Gallery 51 with the four Vermeer paintings in the Gallery's permanent collection: A Lady Writing (c. 1665), Woman Holding a Balance (c. 1664), The Girl with the Red Hat (c. 1665), and Young Girl with a Flute (probably 1665/70, attributed to Vermeer).

The Art of Painting explores the complex relationship between art and history and the importance of the artist's role in society. In the work, a large curtain is drawn back revealing an artist painting a young model. Her attributes—a laurel wreath for honor, a large book for history, and a trumpet for glory—identify her as Clio, the Greek Muse of history. The artist, seated with his back to the viewer, has started to paint the wreath. The bond between art and history is also stressed in the large wall map of The Netherlands. Surmounting the elegantly crafted chandelier is an abstracted image of a double-headed eagle, the imperial symbol of the Hapsburg dynasty, which in the sixteenth century had held jurisdiction over the Netherlands.

The elaborately conceived interior was constructed according to the dictates of linear perspective. The vanishing point, which is evident in a small pinprick near Clio's hand, reinforces the direction of the artist's gaze as he prepares to record his model's image on the canvas.

The conservation effort reveals once again Vermeer's masterful observations of light. It also allows the viewer to experience the artist's extraordinary technique, which enabled him to convey a wide range of textures, from the irregular surface of the weathered map to the weave of the large illusionistic tapestry hanging in the foreground.

The painting was last seen in the United States as part of the 1949-50 exhibition Art Treasures from the Vienna Collections, which was on view at the National Gallery of Art, Washington; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Art Institute of Chicago; and the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco.

The curator of the focus exhibition The Art of Painting is Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., curator of northern baroque paintings, National Gallery of Art, who was also a curator of the 1995-96 exhibition Johannes Vermeer with Frederik J. Duparc, director, Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, The Hague. That exhibition, which attracted 327,551 visitors in Washington and worldwide press coverage, was closed for 20 days owing to federal government shutdowns and blizzards. It opened on November 12, 1995, and closed on February 11, 1996.

The National Gallery of Art, at Fourth Street and Constitution Avenue, NW, is open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. Admission is free. For information, call (202) 737-4215; call the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176; or visit the Gallery's Web site at www.nga.gov. To receive the free bimonthly Calendar of Events, call (202) 842-6662.

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Washington, D.C.

MEDIA ADVISORY

WHAT: Press Preview for Johannes Vermeer's "The Art of Painting"

This extraordinary masterpiece from the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, Austria—not included in the 1995-96 "once-in-a-lifetime" exhibition Johannes Vermeer because it required conservation—is now in Washington for an exclusive showing, Nov. 24, 1999–Feb. 6, 2000.

This exquisite, allegorical painting, unique for its large size and intriguing for its mysterious qualities, is central to our understanding of Vermeer as an artist. It illustrates his masterful observations of light, exquisite painting technique, and use of linear perspective. It explores the topic of the artist's role in society.

The 1995-96 exhibition attracted worldwide press and 327,551 visitors in spite of federal shutdowns and blizzards. Only 35 of this 17th-century Dutch master's paintings are known to exist today. Four paintings by Vermeer from the Gallery's collection will be installed in the same gallery as "The Art of Painting."

**WHEN: Tuesday, November 23, 1999
10:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.**

10:45 a.m. Gallery Talk by Arthur Wheelock, curator of northern baroque painting.

Mr. Wheelock will also be available throughout the day for formal interviews.

**WHERE: Gallery 51
West Building, National Gallery of Art
6th and Constitution Ave., N.W. (TV crews: Use 4th Street entrance)
Limited parking may be available for press as directed on 4th Street Plaza**

HOW: Call (202) 842-6755 to RSVP to attend no later than Monday, November 22, COB.

To arrange for television shoots and/or formal interviews, contact Patricia O'Connell or Deborah Ziska at (202) 842-6353.

To have a press release faxed to you call (202) 842-6353.