

Reflections of Vermeer's Catholic Faith in His Art

Published October 19, 2017

Molly R. Harrington, *Reflections of Vermeer's Catholic Faith in His Art*, National Gallery of Art, <https://purl.org/nga/documents/literature/essays/reflections-of-vermeers-catholic-faith-in-his-art> (accessed Apr 19, 2025).

Even hundreds of years after their creation, Johannes Vermeer's seemingly candid views of everyday life continue to speak to viewers. This relatable quality is often attributed to the lack of complicated religious or literary symbolism in these paintings from the Protestant Dutch Golden Age. Yet unlike many of his contemporaries, Vermeer was Catholic, despite the difficulties of practicing his faith during his lifetime. The officially Calvinist Netherlands outlawed public Catholic worship in the late 16th century, but up to one-third of the population remained Catholic. Authorities frequently tolerated Catholics, as long as they held Mass in small house churches in private residences. [1] As a result, Catholic patrons and artists, including Vermeer, developed new forms of devotional painting to convey their religious messages.

Although he was baptized in the Reformed Church, Vermeer probably converted to Catholicism just before his 1653 marriage to Catharina Bolnes, urged on by his wealthy and devout mother-in-law, Maria Thins. Vermeer and Catharina likely celebrated their wedding in a hidden Jesuit church in the predominantly Catholic village of Schipluy (present day Schipluiden), outside of Delft, to which Thins had connections. [2] None of the couple's 11 children were baptized in the Reformed Church, so we can assume they were raised Catholic. Vermeer and his wife gave their children traditional Catholic names, including Franciscus and Ignatius after the Jesuit leaders Francis Xavier and Ignatius of Loyola. Their eldest daughter, Maria, married another Catholic, and their son Johannes attended seminary in Brabant, although it seems he did not become a priest. [3] Thins's house in Delft, in which Vermeer and Catharina raised their family, was located in a mostly Catholic neighborhood called the Papenhoek (Papist's Corner). Just a few doors down was another concealed Jesuit church that the family probably attended. [4]

Although he ultimately focused on secular genre themes, Vermeer painted a small number of religious works as well. His first dated painting, *Saint Praxedis* [fig. 1], is a

copy of a work by Italian painter Felice Ficherelli that depicts the Roman saint renowned for burying the bodies of martyrs. [5] Both paintings show a kneeling Saint Praxedis squeezing a bloody cloth into a ewer, and Vermeer added to his work a crucifix, which the saint holds in her hands, perhaps to emphasize the connection between the blood of martyrs and the blood of Christ, which Catholics consume during the Eucharist. [6]

Completed years later, Vermeer's complicated *Allegory of the Catholic Faith* [fig. 2] features a woman representing Faith, as interpreted from a popular emblem guide, with her hand at her breast sitting before a makeshift altar with a crucifix, chalice, and Bible. [7] On the floor, a stone representing Christ, the "cornerstone" of Catholic faith, crushes a serpent representing Satan, and a nearby apple represents Adam and Eve's original sin. [8] The large Crucifixion scene on the back wall is based on a work by Flemish painter Jacob Jordaens; a painting matching this description, along with a similar ebony crucifix to that seen on the table, belonged to Vermeer. [9] Such an overtly Catholic image, with no extant counterpart in his oeuvre, points to the possibility of a patron for this work, likely a member of the Jesuit community in Vermeer's neighborhood. [10] Catholic artists frequently contributed devotional paintings for the churches they themselves attended—it seems that personal connections and the artist's intimate knowledge of the faith were more important to Catholic patrons than a particular style. [11]

While Calvinists emphasized the role of God's word and biblical text, Catholics believed in the power of images to guide meditation and aid in understanding religious messages. [12] This tendency to envision oneself inside a scene seems to have informed not only Vermeer's outwardly religious paintings but also his contemplative genre paintings. *Woman Holding a Balance* depicts a woman balancing empty scales with her jewels laid on the table before her [fig. 3]. The painting on the back wall once again depicts a religious theme: in this case, the Last Judgment, in which Christ weighs the souls of the living and dead. Jesuit founder Ignatius of Loyola, in his immensely popular *Spiritual Exercises*, recommended inward reflection and the weighing of one's own sins to prepare for the final judgment, and Vermeer's woman seems to be taking part in this act of quiet meditation. [13]

Vermeer's conversion to Catholicism played a defining role in his family life, provided subject matter early in his career, and secured him at least one large-scale religious painting commission. Even in his secular works, he managed to incorporate his faith by imbuing his genre paintings with a solemn, contemplative

mood. This subtle quietude, inspired in part by his Catholic faith, continues to draw today's museumgoers to Vermeer's paintings.

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Johannes Vermeer, *Saint Praxedis*, 1655, oil on canvas, Private collection. Photo © Christie's Images / Bridgeman Images



fig. 2 Johannes Vermeer, *Allegory of the Catholic Faith*, c. 1670–1672, oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Friedsam Collection, Bequest of Michael Friedsam, 1931, 32.100.18



fig. 3 Johannes Vermeer, *Woman Holding a Balance*, c. 1664, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection

NOTES

- [1] For a detailed history of Catholics in 17th-century Netherlands, see Charles H. Parker, *Faith on the Margins: Catholics and Catholicism in the Dutch Golden Age* (Cambridge, MA, 2008).
- [2] Thins's sister Elisabeth became a nun, and in 1619, authorities broke up a celebration of Mass in the Thins family's home chapel in Gouda, known as De Trapjes (the Little Steps). See Valerie Hedquist, "Religion in the Art and Life of Vermeer," in *The Cambridge Companion to Vermeer*, ed. Wayne E. Franits (Cambridge, UK, 2001), 116.
- [3] See Anthony Bailey, *Vermeer: A View of Delft* (New York, 2001), 63.
- [4] Valerie Hedquist, "Religion in the Art and Life of Vermeer," in *The Cambridge Companion to Vermeer*, ed. Wayne E. Franits (Cambridge, UK, 2001), 116.
- [5] The obvious religious nature of the work led many scholars to doubt its authorship, but technical examination in 2014 proved conclusively that it belongs in Vermeer's oeuvre. See Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "St. Praxedis: New Light on the Early Career of Vermeer," *Artibus et Historiae* 7, no. 14

(1986): 7189; and Christie's, "Johannes Vermeer: *Saint Praxedis*" (London, 2014), 140,

http://www.christies.com/presscenter/pdf/2014/CATALOGUE_NOTE_Johannes_Vermeer_Delft_1632_1675_Saint_Praxedis_lot_39.pdf (accessed August 11, 2017).

- [6] Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "St. *Praxedis*," in *Johannes Vermeer*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1995), 86, 88.
- [7] Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, an important emblem book for artists, was translated and reprinted in Dutch in 1644. Ripa describes Faith as having "the world under her feet" but does not mention a globe—this seems to have been Vermeer's invention. See Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "St. *Praxedis*," in *Johannes Vermeer*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1995), 190.
- [8] Walter A. Liedtke, "Allegory of the Catholic Faith," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/32.100.18/> (accessed August 11, 2017). Adapted from Walter A. Liedtke, *Dutch Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2 vols. (New York, 2007).
- [9] Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "St. *Praxedis*," in *Johannes Vermeer*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1995), 192.
- [10] The Crucifixion and the glass orb have been connected to Jesuit literature and emblems, further supporting the painting's Jesuit patronage. See Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "St. *Praxedis*," in *Johannes Vermeer*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1995), 192.
- [11] Xander van Eck, "The Artist's Religion: Paintings Commissioned for Clandestine Catholic Churches in the Northern Netherlands, 1600-1800," *Simiolus* 27, no. 12 (1990): 7094.
- [12] Daniel Arasse, *Vermeer: Faith in Painting* (Princeton, 1994), 83.
- [13] See Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Johannes Vermeer, *Woman Holding a Balance*, c. 1664," *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/1236> (accessed August 11, 2017); and Eugene R. Cunnar, "The Viewer's Share: Three Sectarian Readings of Vermeer's *Woman with a Balance*," *Exemplaria* 2 (1990): 518.