

Lawrence Gowing, *Vermeer*, 3rd ed. London, Giles de la Mare, 1997, 8 colour plates, 116 black-and-white illus., \$21.95 U.S.

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of the *Judgement of Hercules* of 1714. Richardson's text, however, was also a response to a specific, and rather materialistic, cultural moment in which markets for British art expanded and a need was felt to harness the notion of painting as a luxury product to its cerebral valency, as a tool for improving the mind. Little sense of this trend, however, is gained from Gibson-Wood's discussion, which does not fully address the knock-on effect of Richardson's writings in this context. Gibson-Wood rightly places Joshua Reynolds, rather than Horace Walpole, as Richardson's natural successor. It is patently clear that Reynolds was also dedicated to elevating the status of British portraiture and its consumption by the viewing and commissioning public. The mushrooming of texts that responded to the need for traditional priorities in connoisseurship after the publication of Richardson's books, however, does not feature in Gibson-Wood's text. Commentators of similar intellectual authority, who shared the conservative affinities that distinguished Jonathan Richardson from other writers, voluminously argued in favour of Shaftesbury's principles for aesthetic judgement during the 1750s, 1760s, and 1780s. They were Allan Ramsay, Frances Reynolds, George Lyttleton, and Elizabeth Carter.

The bourgeois rationalism associated with Richardson becomes something of a leitmotif in Gibson-Wood's text. Richardson's viewpoint is characterized as a form of "armchair connoisseurship" that privileges the action of individual thought, possibly at some distance from the artefact itself (and most commonly in the form of a print or old master drawing). Deeply influenced by Locke – in the author's view – Richardson sought to take the Lockean *tabula rasa* as a starting point for analysis of painting or sculpture. Gibson-Wood's espousal of the notion of "armchair connoisseurship," however, occasionally leads to some far-fetched arguments about Richardson's writings. On page 150, for example, the reader is told that the "abstract" principles informing Richardson's programme are directed to painters "in so far as they are framed in terms of rules that should be followed, and examples to emulate, in creating a

picture." This, it is claimed, makes them like "Félibien's presentation of the *Conférences de l'Académie Royale*" (p. 150).

The comparison appears plausible, but it ceases to recognize the contrast between an academic, public discourse such as Andre Félibien's printed lectures to students of painting or sculpture and the audience of connoisseurs, artists, and literate private individuals reading Richardson's text in spaces that were comparatively privatized prior to the foundation of an English Royal Academy in 1768. Such a linkage betrays the shortcomings of selecting the author's methodological approach (placing Richardson in the abstract realm of the philosopher's study as a result) and not taking his audience fully into account. Absence of a reading of Jonathan Richardson's discourse in the context of its actual reading public, or an assessment of its critical reception into the 1770s, represents a central flaw in the author's otherwise compelling argument.

Carol Gibson-Wood's text is, none the less, a positive response to the current dearth of writing on eighteenth-century aesthetic theory. However, a significant departure from the biographical mode of single-author studies in Enlightenment art theory, offering both detailed research about its erudite contributors and critical diagnoses of debates current from 1688–1789, has yet to be made.

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Notes

- 1 See Kitt Wedd and Lucy Peltz, *Creative Quarters*, exh. cat., Museum of London, (London, 2000); and Martin Myrone, "Body Building: British Historical Artists in London and Rome: the Remaking of the Heroic Ideal," Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1998.
- 2 I refer to Iain Pears, *The Discovery of Painting: The Growth of Interest in the arts in England 1680–1768* (New Haven and London, 1988); David Solkin, *Painting for Money* (New Haven and London, 1992); and John Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt* (New Haven and London, 1986).

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Part of the impetus behind Lawrence Gowing's 1952 study of Vermeer was the perceived need to redress a decline of serious interest in the painter after the Second World War.¹ It is perhaps difficult to imagine Vermeer taking his place among the overlooked; however, from the seventeenth century onward, the appreciation of this painter and his work has been characterized by periods of neglect. This is obviously no longer the case. Since the blockbuster exhibition in Washington, D.C., and The Hague

in 1995–96, interest in Vermeer only seems to burgeon. The past five years alone have seen the appearance of at least ten scholarly studies, another major exhibition, as well as numerous articles and essays. Paradoxically then, it seems that the publication of a third edition of Gowing's book by Giles de la Mare Publishers in 1997 is calculated – not to remedy neglect – but to ride a growing tide of serious interest in Vermeer. Here, as so often, Gowing's insights offer fruitful ways to interpret paradox. As he noted in 1952: "The vicissitudes of his reputation are a warning; the truth is that Vermeer with his incomparable evasive talent has eluded us" (p. 66). Thus, it may be that the very

intractability of Vermeer and his paintings has held the potential both to prompt centuries of neglect and to spur the seemingly insatiable interest that we witness today.

Of course, Gowing's study itself has done much to provoke interest in Vermeer. Whether scholars take issue with his work or uncritically reiterate his views, the book has continued to function as a remarkably stimulating goad to subsequent Vermeer scholarship. Its republication is thus timely. This paperback edition includes a preface by E.H. Gombrich, which briefly outlines the art historical contributions of the study, and a reprint of Gowing's substantial 1990 review in the *Times Literary Supplement* of John Michael Montias's *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History*.² The book also contains a short bibliography of relevant literature published since 1970 (which already needs to be updated) and illustrations of all of Vermeer's known paintings, printed from new photographs (mainly in black and white, with eight colour plates). While Gowing's review of Montias's book serves to update the state of Vermeer studies and indicate the wealth of archival evidence that has been brought to light, Gowing's 1952 text is reprinted unaltered. As Gombrich notes in his preface, "There are writings on art which are destined to remain valid, even when the evidence on which they were originally based has meanwhile been revised or expanded ... Lawrence Gowing's monograph on Vermeer of 1952 belongs to this class."³

Gowing's argument centres on enigma, and this is the book's greatest insight as well as its weakest point. The strength of this approach is that it is based on meticulous visual analysis and description of the paintings themselves.⁴ Gowing's elegant prose evokes his painterly appreciation of the works, prompting the reader to look and to look again at the *oeuvre* of Vermeer while seriously considering the impact of these paintings on viewers. Drawing attention to a recurrent tension in Vermeer's style, Gowing argues that the painter's seemingly obsessive attention to the techniques of realism is at odds with the very restrained subject matter of the works themselves. While these paintings attempt to seize the world and capture it exactly on canvas, their power over life remains limited and constrained. In Gowing's vivid analysis, Vermeer's work withholds and conceals the world as much as it mirrors and reveals it. As we shall see, Gowing's proposed resolution to this paradox is problematic. However, there is much to learn from his emphasis on the reticence of paintings that do not give up their meanings easily, for such an approach offers a method of investigation that resists positing one overarching interpretative framework for all of seventeenth-century Dutch artistic practice.

Gowing's focus on the evasive nature of the paintings calls attention to their status as representations, and a complicated set of relations between art and the world is proposed.⁵ In this analysis, the paintings self-reflexively set themselves apart as

works of art – inventive, human fictions that do not merely reflect reality, but attempt to create another world within their frames. Much has been purged from this world, which, in Gowing's interpretation, curiously and conspicuously lacks life itself. Gowing never mistakes these paintings for transparent and objective records of visual truth. Instead, naturalism takes on the role of a boundary, which draws the viewer towards, but ultimately also pushes the viewer away from the subject matter of the paintings. The exploration of this key dynamic unfolds in a sophisticated spatial analysis of the works. In fact, Gowing argues that Vermeer's main subject "is the immutable barrier of space" itself (p. 25). The spatial boundaries depicted within the paintings – curtains, windows, doorways – all repeat the function of the frame, with the potential to admit and exclude the world that lies outside of the painted realm.⁶ While space is mainly understood as a formal element of Vermeer's style, a more historically nuanced notion of social space also emerges. This is particularly evident in Gowing's examination of the motif of interruption – the disruptions that occur within the paintings whenever male figures appear to breach boundaries and trouble the tranquillity of domestic spaces and their female inhabitants.

While Gowing is aware of (even troubled by) the erotic undertow of this motif, in his view, the people who inhabit the world within the painting are curiously bereft of humanity. Akin to the objects of still life, it is possible to apprehend them solely as paint on canvas. It is the formal relationship of shape, colour, and, above all, light that is proposed to dominate in this fictive world:

The description is always exactly adequate, always completely and effortlessly in terms of light. Vermeer seems almost not to care, or not even to know, what it is that he is painting. What do men call this wedge of light? A nose? A finger? What do we know of its shape? To Vermeer none of this matters, the conceptual world of names and knowledge is forgotten, nothing concerns him but what is visible, the tone, the wedge of light (p. 19).

If this passage invokes the central thesis of *The Art of Describing*, it is because Svetlana Alpers draws much from Gowing's study.⁷ Indeed, Gowing's assertion that "Vermeer's world ... is autonomous and independent, not described but describing itself" (p. 41) seems to be the kernel of Alpers's more wide-ranging book, which situates the naturalism of seventeenth-century painting within historically grounded understandings of vision and cognition.

Gowing, by contrast, makes no claims to social history, and his timelines are conceived mainly in terms of stylistic development.⁸ There is a flaw in his logic here, which is based on a type

of circular argumentation that mars the study in other places as well. Rather than basing his examination of style on the chronology of the paintings, which are largely undated, he establishes this chronology based on his central thesis about the reticence of Vermeer's style. In this way, the paintings that admit more life (the bawdy *Soldier and Laughing Girl*, for instance) come earlier in time, while Vermeer's "mature style" is characterized by the restraint of paintings like *The Letter Reader*, which are given later dates (p. 37).

The technology of the camera obscura is posited as a possible historical explanation for some of the peculiarities of Vermeer's style, particularly the vacillation between immediate realism and distanced detachment. However, Gowing clearly sees the limits of this line of reasoning, which risks reducing the work to the agency of available technologies.⁹ Instead, the paradox of the paintings finds its fullest resolution in the character of Vermeer, the legendary "sphinx of Delft." A somewhat predictable portrayal of the artist as troubled genius follows from this. Reticent, evasive, detached from life and, indeed, from humanity, yet with a depth of emotion driving him to grapple with all that he desired to evade – there is much here to call up modernist myths of the artist (p. 31).

Within this twentieth-century framework, the spatial barriers that come between the viewer and the representation often are conflated with other sorts of barriers, which come between the painter and his female models. Just as the paintings draw and distance the viewer, the women depicted seem to attract and reject the painter. Thus the "fertile paradox" of paintings that attempt to capture the world and escape it is reduced to the troubled sexuality of their maker, whose fascination and fear of women drives and inhibits his art (p. 43). Clearly this is an argument that loops back on itself: Gowing derives Vermeer's character from the paintings, and then explains the paintings in terms of his understanding of the artist's personality.¹⁰

While the limitations of this approach are obvious, it is important to note that there is much in Gowing's understanding of the male painter's relationship to his female subjects that foreshadows the themes of later feminist contributions to art history, particularly the influence of gender on the act of painting. Gowing vividly evokes, for instance, the violence of the masculine painter who seeks to master the feminine subject of representation:

We can conceive of Western painting as being, perhaps always, a possessing ... Even the modest exercise of naturalism itself evidently came to be felt as contaminating and damaging, not only to the painter but, at least as profoundly, to his subject ... involving a loss of its very virtue, its separateness.¹¹

Faced with this dilemma, Gowing's Vermeer initially takes up, but finally rejects the erotic subject matter of contemporary genre painters. Here the stylistic progression of the paintings is driven by the development of the painter's own character, as works like *The Procuress* give way to the domestication of venal love in the later paintings, where a single female figure remains "intact, entire" (p. 43). Vermeer's detachment thus emerges as a quality of love at best, or – at worst – as a self-centred act of preservation (pp. 43, 61).

In an analysis that borders on the psychoanalytic, these images tell us little about seventeenth-century Dutch women and the boundaries of their lives, and much about the artist and his troubled psyche. Muses and medusas, Vermeer's women prompt his compulsive need to look and obsessively represent. Taking the role of essential nature in contrast to the refined culture of Vermeer, the women depicted retain a mysterious otherness: "she remains outside of him, essentially and perfectly other than he" (p. 43). This argument about the alienating potential of art is compelling, although it ultimately takes a formalist turn, in which the essential difference and distance of Vermeer's women enables the "autonomy of tone and pure visual form" (p. 62). Form and content emerge as two separate categories here, with form taking the exalted role within this high/low binary. As is so often the case, intense interest in the Other thus serves to define the self and its activities. In the final analysis, these are paintings about painting, and their banal subject matter, which centres on the female world of everyday life, really functions as a pretext for the painter's virtuoso exploration of the art of painting.

The women remain silent and withdrawn; the painter reticent and reclusive. The paintings, however, speak volumes about their own role as representations. Gowing's work no longer stands as a convincing biography of Vermeer. However, its key insights into the meta-pictorial status of Vermeer's art remain undisputed. While the argument is somewhat constrained by the biographical framework, it also opens into a much broader analysis of the functions of early modern painting. Any serious consideration of Vermeer studies thus cannot overlook the profound contributions of Gowing's work, which continues to reward and generate critical thinking about the ambiguous art of painting.

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Notes

- 1 At this time, interest in the painter was of a more sensational kind, due the discovery of van Meergeren's forgeries. Lawrence Gowing, *Vermeer*, 3rd ed. (London, 1997), 66.

- 2 John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and his Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, 1989).
- 3 E.H. Gombrich, "Preface," in Gowing, *Vermeer*, v.
- 4 Gowing himself was a painter.
- 5 This aspect of Gowing's analysis is taken up by Harry Berger Jr in "Conspicuous Exclusion in Vermeer: An Essay in Renaissance Pastoral," and "Some Vanity of His Art: Conspicuous Exclusion and Pastoral in Vermeer," *Second World and Green World. Studies in Renaissance Fiction-Making* (Berkeley, 1988), 441–61, 462–509.
- 6 Berger, "Conspicuous Exclusion," 454.
- 7 A debt that Alpers acknowledges. See *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago, 1983), xx, 224.
- 8 On the larger critical problem of locating Vermeer's paintings in history, see Christiane Hertel, *Vermeer: Reception and Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1996). Hertel describes Gowing's approach in terms of a "paradigm of the metahistorical aesthetic object," 2. See also Karin Leonard, "Vermeer's Pregnant Women. On Human Generation and Pictorial Representation," *Art History* 25, no. 3 (2002), 294–96.
- 9 A recent book that takes Gowing's conjectures about Vermeer's use of the camera obscura as its starting point is Philip Steadman, *Vermeer's Camera: Uncovering the Truth Behind the Masterpieces* (Oxford, 2001). For a critical analysis of Vermeer's use of perspective, see Christopher Heuer, "Perspective as process in Vermeer," *Res* 38 (Autumn 2000), 82–99.
- 10 See Emma Barker's analysis of the historiography of Vermeer's personality, and critique of Gowing's approach in Emma Barker et al., eds, *The Changing Status of the Artist* (New Haven and London, 1999), especially 189–97. Similar critiques are offered by Ivan Gaskell, *Vermeer's Wager. Speculations on Art History, Theory and Art Museums* (London, 2000), 27–29; and by Berger, "Some Vanity," 487–88.
- 11 Gowing, *Vermeer*, 43. Recent revisions of Gowing's gender analysis of these paintings include Leonard, "Vermeer's Pregnant Women"; and H. Perry Chapman, "Women in Vermeer's Home. Mimesis and Ideation," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 51 (2000), 237–72.

Kathy E. Zimon, *Alberta Society of Artists, the First Seventy Years*. Calgary, University of Calgary Press, 2000, 203 pp., 72 colour plates, \$49.95 Cdn.

One of the main tasks of a broadly defined field of art history is to develop a rich understanding of all aspects of cultural production. While historically-specific aesthetic ideals and more pedestrian power struggles within the art world end by enshrining and maintaining a rather select canon of "Important Artists," there remains a multitude of art producers whose work exists beyond the purview of the dominant histories. In many cases, artists located outside the geographical and/or cultural centres do not make an appearance in mainstream accounts. While their relative impact might be narrow as a result, it is essential that their contribution be part of the historical record, in order that our understanding of artistic production move beyond the modernist model of the individual artist "touched" by genius, and that the central role played by teaching, exhibiting, and membership in artists' societies and other institutions be recognized as instrumental to the production of the artist.

Kathy E. Zimon's *Alberta Society of Artists: The First Seventy Years* is a rich account of the history of a provincial artists' association from its formation in 1931 to the present day. Lavishly illustrated with black and white photographs and over seventy pages of colour plates, the book's visual narrative plays as important a role as the text in telling the story of Alberta's oldest artists' society. Chronologically organized chapters address the historical context for the formation of the Alberta Society of Artists (ASA) and the major events and debates over the past seven decades that effectively shaped the Society. Zimon

begins by describing the creation of the ASA in 1931 as a response to local artists' and art enthusiasts' ambitions for a province-wide professional artists' society. Spearheaded by A.C. Leighton, a newly emigrated artist teaching at the Provincial Institute of Technology and Art (The Tech), the Society was first preoccupied with establishing itself as a professional organization through the creation of charters and the election of members whose credentials would reflect favourably on it. Exhibitions were a central means of visibly establishing an aura of professionalism and Leighton was an exacting critic in his role as president.

When Leighton's ill-health reduced his role as ASA president to little more than that of figurehead, H.G. Glyde was appointed to the position in 1942. In a symbiosis that seemed to characterize the first half of the Society's history, Glyde was also the principle instructor and later head of the Art Department at The Tech. During these early years, the ASA provided a forum for congenial gatherings of professional and amateur artists in Calgary, monthly critiques of members' works, as well as art classes led by both Leighton and Glyde, including a life drawing class led by Glyde in the late 1930s which was deemed somewhat controversial in conservative Calgary for its employment of nude models. These regular activities were facilitated by the move of the ASA offices into Coste House in Calgary along with the Art Department of The Tech: a cohabitation that would further tie the two institutions during the 1940s and 1950s. A large mansion that had reverted to the city for non-payment of taxes, Coste House was the ideal location for the broad range of art activities in Calgary, from the classes conducted by the Art Department, to the critiques and social