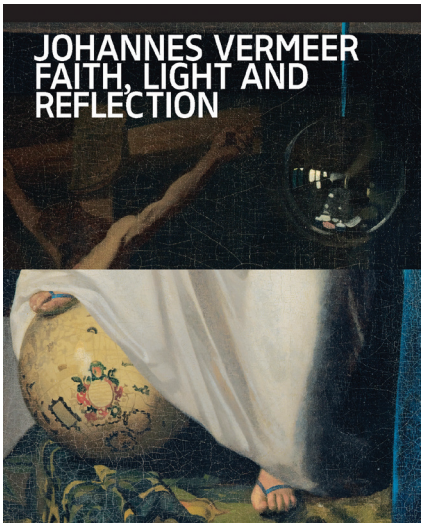
Review

Gregor J. M. Weber, *Johannes Vermeer. Faith, Light and Reflection*, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, 2023, 168 pp. ISBN 9789462087583.



Published in connection with the major retrospective devoted to Johannes Vermeer at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam (10 February-4 June 2023), this book by Gregor J. M. Weber, one of the exhibition's curators alongside Pieter Roelofs, proposes a new reading of Vermeer's work by emphasising the role that Catholic culture may have played in shaping both his intellectual formation and the conception of his paintings. Intended for both specialists and a wider cultivated readership, the volume offers an accessible synthesis of recent research while advancing a strong interpretative hypothesis. Challenging the image of Vermeer as a secular artist, Weber argues that the painter was deeply marked by the spiritual and visual culture of Catholicism. He underscores that Vermeer, although born into a Reformed family in Delft, converted to Catholicism at the time of his marriage to Catharina Bolnes in April 1653. The couple's fifteen children were all baptised as Catholics, one of them even bearing the name Ignatius, after Saint Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus. The family also lived in the Papenhoek district, where an active Jesuit mission was located. Weber further notes that the inventory drawn up after the painter's death in 1676 records the presence of Catholic devotional objects in the household, including a crucifix and an image of Saint Veronica, suggesting the existence of an active religious practice within the home.

The book progresses thematically from a biographical contextualisation to the interpretation of the paintings. The first chapter reconstructs Vermeer's domestic environment: the Catholic background of his mother-in-law Maria Thins, the Papenhoek district, his marriage to Catharina Bolnes in 1653, and the 1676 inventory of his household. The second chapter broadens the perspective to the confessional landscape of Delft after the Reformation, examining the coexistence of religious practices, the persistence of images such as Virgins and crucifixes in domestic inventories and sometimes in churches, and the

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circulation of Flemish religious paintings. Weber also discusses two Catholic priests linked to the Papenhoek district, Isaac van der Mye, presented as a Jesuit who had been trained in painting in Delft, and Roeland de Pottere. The following chapters turn more directly to Vermeer's work. The third chapter examines optics and light, relating Jesuit reflections on divine light to the possible use of devices such as the *camera obscura*, alongside an analysis of the *Allegory of the Catholic Faith*. The fourth analyses motifs in Vermeer's paintings in relation to themes found in Jesuit spiritual literature. Works such as *Woman Holding a Balance* and *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* are thus interpreted as referring, more or less explicitly, to themes such as the Last Judgment, the examination of conscience, and the vanity of earthly goods.

Firmly grounded in primary sources ranging from baptismal registers, estate inventories, correspondence, contemporary testimonies (Balthasar de Monconys), treatises on optics (Franciscus Aguilonius, Christoph Scheiner), to emblem books (Guilielmus Hesius, Adriaen Poirters), Weber's book is both accessible and valuable in bringing together material long scattered across the historiography. The study belongs to a well-established field of research on the relationship between Vermeer and Catholic culture. Many scholars have pursued this line of inquiry since the pioneering studies by Eddy de Jongh (1975-1976), Nanette Salomon (1983) – curiously absent from the book's bibliography – , Arthur K. Wheelock Jr (1986), and John Michael Montias (1989), who first highlighted the links between Vermeer's life, career, and certain of his works and Catholic family circles. Amongst them are Xander van Eck (1990), Daniel Arasse (1994), Paul H. A. M. Abels (1996), Christiane Hertel (1996), Valerie Hedquist (2000, 2001), Paul Begheyn (2008), and Léonie Marquaille (2019), the latter absent from the bibliography, as well as earlier contributions by Gregor Weber himself (2000). The book synthesises these earlier studies to create a unified interpretative hypothesis.

At the same time, however, the book advances a strong thesis: that Vermeer was profoundly immersed in Catholic culture, which resulted in his paintings being shaped by the intellectual and spiritual frameworks of Catholicism, particularly within the Jesuit milieu of Delft. This is arguably the weakest point of the study. It is widely accepted that Vermeer was in close contact with the Catholic faith and the expectation that it entailed. However, the question remains whether this can be considered a legitimate explanatory principle of his entire oeuvre. Many aspects of Vermeer's production do not lend themselves as readily to confessional interpretation as the author suggests. The interest in optics, perspective, and the *camera obscura* – the possession of which by Vermeer remains entirely conjectural – was shared by many of his contemporaries and was by no means confined to Jesuit circles. Likewise, emblem and allegorical books, including those of Catholic or Jesuit inspiration, did not necessarily convey a purely confessional message. Vermeer used, for instance, the influential *Iconologia*, written by Cesare Ripa, an Italian Renaissance scholar and a Catholic, which was translated into Dutch in 1644 by the Reformed writer and publisher Dirck Pietersz. Pers.

Weber's book tends to draw too direct a connection between Vermeer's personal faith and the conception of his paintings. Such an approach assumes that images immediately reflect the confessional identity of their maker, leaving several essential parameters of artistic production in the background. Firstly, some of the religious themes in Vermeer's

paintings, such as the depiction of the Last Judgement, are not necessarily associated with a particular denomination and can be found in both Catholic and Reformed contexts. Secondly, and more importantly, the analysis gives little attention to the crucial aspect of the faith of the patrons. Yet Vermeer's principal patrons, Pieter Claesz. van Ruijven and his wife Maria de Knuijt, who acquired almost two thirds of the painter's works, were both Protestant: Van Ruijven was a Remonstrant and De Knuijt was a member of the Dutch Reformed Church. This suggests that Vermeer's imagery was not exclusively shaped by his Catholic identity, and instead calls for a broader interpretation of his paintings, one that takes account of the complex religious landscape of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, where Catholic practice coexisted with Reformed hegemony.

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