

Name

Professor

Course

Date

### Museum Paper

The paintings discussed in the following are Vermeer's *Woman Holding a Balance* and Isack van Ostade's *Workmen before an Inn*. Both works were done in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, and both are on display at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. These were selected by me because I felt a strong attraction to the styles of the Dutch painters of this period, and because I was taken by the striking contrast between them. The paintings represent the Dutch school of the era, and there is a kind of realism shared by both. At the same time, it is a "surreal realism," as though the reality of each scene were heightened by the artist's interpretation of it. This translates to a shared quality that is still unique in each work, and this is the contrast between the Dutch paintings that so interested me.

Both works are oils, with Vermeer working on canvas and van Ostade using a panel. For me, there is a richness to painting in oils that automatically draws me. This may be due to its being so traditional a form of art; I associate art with painting, in fact, more than with any other medium. At the same time, great works of the past reinforce my sense that oils allow for detailed and personal expression as no other artistic medium can. With the van Ostade work, I was taken by the layered classicism of the painting. The scene is the exterior of an inn set at an angle, with workmen unloading kegs of beer before the door. It is a naturalistic landscape, yet it is removed from realism by virtue of scope and perspectives. In a very real sense, the painting brought out a disturbed feeling in me, as though I were seeing a translation of a dream. Part of this is due to

the angle mentioned, which goes to a compactness of this scene. Van Ostade has the inn in the foreground to the right, and a trajectory of life and other elements trails behind as the street recedes into the distance. Gray clouds overhead add to the sense of confinement, and everything in this scene seems oppressed by the weight of the sky. The natural greens of the trees and muted browns of the ancient buildings also creates the impression of human life as animalistic; these are simply animals performing functions in a primitive world. This is all the fascination of the painting for me, in that there is a feeling of the abstract in a thoroughly classic and naturalistic scene. The earthy tones and colors are muted and blend together, creating a palette of a forest that happens to be shaped like an old Dutch street. Then, and as innocent and casual as the subject matter is, it has an almost sinister quality because the viewer feels that the reality conveyed is not fully real. Van Ostade is commenting upon life rather than capturing it, an effect reinforced by the bird perched on the roof and seemingly taking in the world below. A typical example of the Dutch school of the era, and particularly regarding the classic use of a tavern, van Ostade's painting nonetheless presents an atmosphere that is both unique and unsettling.

Equally haunting, although in very different ways, is Vermeer's *Woman Holding a Balance*. It is in fact difficult to believe that this oil belongs to the same Dutch school and era, so stark is its form and impression. What struck me immediately was the almost religious quality of the painting. Vermeer's woman has all the serenity of any classic Madonna, as she simply stand before her jewel case and regards the balance in her hand. This effect is reinforced by the dim light entering from the window high to the left. It falls gently on the woman's face and accentuates the grace of her hands and arms. In terms of design, the painting is flawless, as even the woman's position in front of a painting adds a layer of meaning to the scene. There is a beautiful symmetry in the woman and the painting occupying all the space to the right, with only

the table and empty space below the window. Moreover, Vermeer's use of color is precise. The muted gray of the wall seems to cushion the rich blues of the woman's cloak and the gathered blue satin on the table. The primary impression is of a moment frozen in time, and of a woman with something unknown going through her mind. I must also add that I had the clear sense of taking in a work by a great master, Vermeer's reputation as such aside.

My knowledge about art before seeing these works was both helpful and not an advantage. I had learned the basics about 17<sup>th</sup> century painting and the Dutch emphasis on earthy, natural landscapes and still lifes. This did not prepare me, however, for the actual impact of the works. More exactly, and as different as these paintings are, both gave me the profound sense of viewing a culture from another world, and one I could only begin to perceive.

Interestingly, investigating van Ostade allowed me to see a quality to the painting I had not identified. The artist differed from his brother Adriaen by virtue of an Italianate style (J. Paul Getty Museum), and I feel that this perfectly describes the strangely rich characters and visual elements of the painting. Even the foliage in *Workmen before an Inn* has this intricate and earthy quality, so it seems the Dutch school varied in approach. With Vermeer, virtually everything written about him goes to one design element: his brilliant use of light in his work. Certainly, Vermeer is legendary for the natural quality of his light, but the light itself serves the artist in accentuating colors and in developing contrasts (Huerta, p. 44). More exactly, he does not create superb light for its own sake; it is another instrument within the works, allowing him to emphasize what he wants to be the object of focus. All of this makes me realize how misguided it is to expect the artists of any specific era, culture, or school to express themselves in the same ways. More than anything, the art is based on the individual artist's perspectives and abilities.

In conclusion, my feeling is that these two works are strikingly different examples of

classic Dutch painting. While both scenes depicted are Dutch, the techniques and perspectives of the artists are worlds apart. With van Ostade, there is an unearthly quality to an earthly scene. Deep colors and the peculiar angle of his scene create an impression of a confined and primal reality, in which the human and nature are one. The scene is ordinary, but the style renders it disturbing. Vermeer is almost Spartan in comparison. He focuses on a single, serene woman and uses light to emphasize the purity – and mystery – of his subject and setting. With Vermeer, it is all about the intimate, even as he presents it in a cool, detached way. At the same time, both paintings have a power that stays with the viewer. Ordinary in terms of subject, each work has a haunting quality, which may be a hallmark of the Dutch school itself.

Works Cited

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<<http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/artists/374/isack-van-ostade-dutch-1621-1649/>>

Van Ostade, Isack. *Workmen before an Inn*. 1645. Oil on panel. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Vermeer, Johannes. *Woman Holding a Balance*. c. 1664. Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.