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Sarasota Art museum's 'Contemplating Vermeer' exhibit shows viewers looking at art

By Tom Hall

November 2, 2024



Opening on November 17 at the Sarasota Art Museum is an exhibition of miniature paintings titled "Contemplating Vermeer." SAM Executive Director Virginia Shearer thinks this show will really blow people's minds.

"I, myself, am a museum junkie," said Shearer. "I'm the kind of person who gets that fear of missing out when I learn that the big Monet exhibition is at the National Gallery, and if I can't make it to D.C., I'm super, super sad. This exhibition, 'Contemplating Vermeer,' is all about that."

In the summer of 2023, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam hosted a monumental exhibition of Johannes Vermeer's masterpieces. The museum gathered and showcased 28 of the 35 paintings that have been attributed to the enigmatic Dutch painter.

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Shearer couldn't attend.

"People from all over the world were flying in," Shearer recounts. "Tickets were impossible to get, and they were going to see 'The Girl with the Pearl Earring,' which is probably our most famous Vermeer, among others. In that group of visitors was a wonderful artist named Joe Fig."



Author of the acclaimed books "Inside the Painter's Studio" and "Inside the Artist's Studio," Fig is the Department Chair of both the Fine Arts and the Visual Studies programs at Ringling College of Art and Design. His work has been exhibited nationally and internationally and is housed in numerous museums, including Fogg Art Museum, Chazen Museum of Art, Norton Museum of Art, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Toledo Museum of Art, among others. He earned his BFA and MFA from the School of Visual Arts, New York, and is represented by Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York.

"He's an incredibly talented painter who paints in miniature," Shearer continued. "Highly realistic, very detailed images of people looking at art. He's really interested in capturing the gaze, the visitors, the stances of people, the way people crowd around works of art, but also getting those gems, those masterpieces caught in miniature within his paintings."

Drawing on his own visit to this historic show, Joe Fig created 16 new paintings. In these works, premiering in "Contemplating Vermeer," Fig not only pays homage to the 17th century painter's mastery of light, color, and verisimilitude, but also reflects on the aesthetic experience in the Rijksmuseum's galleries. Expanding on his decade-long Contemplation series, he captures his subjects—artworks and their viewers—and their surroundings, exploring how people engage with or contemplate artworks in public spaces.

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“The exhibition will be really fun because we’ll be in the galleries looking at the paintings by Joe Fig of people looking at Vermeer, so we create almost a tableau in the galleries.”

Though Fig’s paintings may resemble snapshots of what he observed, they are the result of a layered artistic process involving numerous formal artistic decisions.

He begins by studying individual artworks and the viewers who are deeply engrossed in them. He focuses on people’s body language, clothing (particularly colors and patterns), and proximity to the works and each other, as well as the specificities of the space.

Fig photographs these moments as source material, then digitally reconfigures the images in his studio—selecting and repositioning figures, adjusting scale, combining different scenes, and fine-tuning lighting and color. The final compositions, meticulously rendered in oil, reflect Fig’s contemplation of the act of looking, both his own and that of others. Each work distills what it means to be a painter.

With a keen eye for detail, Fig both contemplates Vermeer and invites viewers to see the Dutch master’s legacy through a fresh artistic lens. His work allows people to marvel at his uncanny realism, while prompting them to examine their own act of seeing. It heightens their awareness of their role as viewer—whether they seek to be fooled, enthralled, or carried away by art.

Because his paintings serve as a contemplative reflection on how we encounter art, they draw us into a long tradition of those who have stood in awe before Vermeer’s work.

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This exhibition is organized by Sarasota Art Museum of Ringling College of Art and Design and curated by Rangsook Yoon, Ph.D., senior curator, Sarasota Art Museum.

The exhibition runs through April 13, 2025.



MORE INFORMATION:

Johannes Vermeer was born on October 31, 1632 and died at the age of 43 on December 15, 1675.

After he died, he fell into obscurity until the 19th century when he was rediscovered by German art historian Gustav Friedrich Waagen and French journalist and art critic Théophile Thoré-Bürger. Vermeer is now considered one of the greatest painters of the Dutch Golden Age.

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Vermeer worked slowly and may have employed camera obscura, a technique in which images were projected onto a wall in a darkened studio through a hole in a blind or door.

Vermeer used very costly pigments, working almost exclusively in oils.

He is especially well-known for his masterful handling and use of light in his paintings. Vermeer set almost all of his paintings in two small rooms of his Delft home (which would have accommodated his camera obscura technique). Thus, the same furniture and decorations appear in his paintings in a variety of configurations.



Vermeer's "Girl with a Pearl Earring" (1665), housed in the Mauritshuis museum in The Hague, is the artist's most well-known masterpiece. According to art experts, the girl's eyes are one of the most intriguing aspects of the piece since they are riveted on the observer in a humorous and anticipating manner.

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Located at the Louvre in Paris, Vermeer's "The Lacemaker" (1669) is his tiniest work of art at 9.6 by 8.3 inches.

Next on the list of most-popular and acclaimed Vermeers is a painting alternately titled "The Painter in His Studio" or "The Allegory of Painting." Vermeer liked this work so much he refused to part with it during his lifetime in spite of his chronic financial difficulties. The property of the Austrian Republic, this artwork is on display in Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum.

Several Vermeers are located in the United States. Five are on display in the Metropolitan Museum of Art ("A Maid Asleep," "Allegory of Faith," "Study of a Young Woman," "Woman with a Lute" and "Young Woman with a Water Pitcher"), three are part of the Frick Collection ("Girl Interrupted in Her Music," "Mistress and Maid" and "Officer and Laughing Girl"), "A Young Woman Seated at the Virginals" is in The Leiden Collection, and four are at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. ("A Lady Writing," "Girl with a Flute," "Girl with a Red Hat" and "Woman Holding a Balance").



"The Concert" was once part of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum's permanent collection, but the painting was stolen in 1990 and has not been seen since that heist, which included a number of other valuable and important works, including Rembrandt's "A Lady and Gentleman in Black," "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" and rare seascape "Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee" and Edouard Manet's "Chez Tortoni."

In 2004, Vermeer's "Young Woman Seated at the Virginals" sold at Sothebys to an anonymous telephone bidder for \$39.6 million, a record for the 17th century Dutch painter and the fifth highest price ever paid for an old master. It was the first Vermeer to come up for sale at auction in more than 80 years. It is the only Vermeer believed to be in private hands.

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Virginia Shearer serves as executive director of the Sarasota Art Museum of Ringling College of Art and Design. She previously oversaw all areas of the High Museum's department of education, where she was one of six members of an executive team that set strategic priorities for the museum. She holds a B.A. in humanities from Florida State University and a M.A. in museum education from George Washington University. She is also a past participant of the Getty Leadership Institute program and the Getty's education program for museum leaders, and has also served as the southeast regional director for the museum education division of the National Arts Education Association.

