

JOHANNES VERMEER,*

1632—1675.

By E. C. ALLEN.

THOSE of us who were fortunate enough to see the Exhibition of Dutch pictures lately held at Burlington House, will welcome the artist who has been chosen for our study this term. Or rather, we shall welcome the opportunity to study six of his pictures. Of the artist himself practically nothing is known. He was a native of Delft, and a pupil of Fabritius. There were two pictures I remember in the exhibition by that master, one the tiny linnet, the other a portrait of the artist, a young, wild-looking man, with his shirt open, looking straight at the spectator. Technically, I suppose he taught his pupil many things—the wonderful luminosity of his pale, pure backgrounds—the value of lemon yellow, perhaps, but spiritually one feels the pupil was the master. Vermeer had a range of sympathy far greater than that of Fabritius, and grew to possess a skill that was unique.

Exceedingly industrious and a rapid worker, he must have produced many pictures which are now lost. There was a period when his work was not fashionable—in fact, dealers possessing Vermeers rechristened them wildly so as to get a market for them. Mr. E. V. Lucas says in his little brochure, *Vermeer*—(publisher, Medici Society, 5/-)—that there are forty-one known Vermeers, of which one is a house and one is a city, and we have got both. So let us begin with the city. It has been described as “the perfect landscape.” It is most peaceful. The sky has the warm yellow glow that is perhaps the quietest part of the sunset. The reflections are gentle and even. The many towers of the beautiful city stand clear and perfect against the soft warm clouds. There seems to be in it every tone of brown and yellow—the warm bricks and the warm boards, the soft sky and the still water, in their marvellous way call us to rest after a day’s toil. That it is rest, not sleep,

* Picture Study for Autumn Term, 1929.

the tiny figures in the foreground tell us. The burghers stroll by the canal after the heat of the day—the housewives soberly chat together; they are exactly right in their position in the composition, breaking the foreground, and bringing life into the stillness of the houses.

Let us take next the interior called “A Lady at the Virginals.” The picture belongs to His Majesty the King, and he graciously gave special permission for the Parents’ Union School children to have reproductions of it. It shows us some of the favourite characteristics of Dutch rooms and Dutch furniture at this time. Remember this was probably painted during Cromwell’s rule in England, while the Stuart princes and princesses were exiles in Holland. This is the house of a rich man. The floor is inlaid with coloured marbles, and a very beautiful rug is spread over a table and has even a jug on it, as if it were something quite ordinary. The “Virginals” was an instrument played with keys of ebony and ivory, like the present-day piano—but you will see how small it is—perhaps three octaves—and the strings from which the notes came, go sideways. They are in the part to the left, and below, where you can see she is playing. It was a very tiny sound that came from the plucking of the strings by little hammers, very sweet and tinkling, but considered remarkable. On the floor, despised and rejected, is the viol di gamba, ancestor to the ‘cello.

Notice the mirror. The Dutch made mirrors very well, both these square ones, many of which came to England in William and Mary’s reign, and the round magnifying ones that appear so often in Dutch interiors. There is a great deal to study in the lighting. Also in the grouping, and the clever repetition of the rectangle. In the real picture one could see the pattern on the case of the virginal, and guess at the rug, but ours are too small for that. Notice that the beautiful jug, such a perfect shape, and absolving the direct light, has a little metal lid, and stands on a metal tray, which gives us about what the painter’s eye-level would be.

Vermeer had a very true appreciation of the value of plain backgrounds, and of the aesthetic interest of everyday things. The Spanish wars were over. The subjects taken from the New Testament were no longer of the first interest. The people were slowly becoming rich; the standard of living was high. Houses were beautiful, and pictures, as decoration,

not for churches or public buildings but for private owners, were in demand. Such a one this may have been. Perhaps the burgher who gave the commission also sat for his portrait, but more likely it was the son and daughter of the artist.

Now let us look at the house in which the artist lived, so says tradition. It is called “The Little Street,” but really it is just his house, very much as it stands to-day. Those are two children playing under the bench—marbles, or knuckle-bones—the hoos vrou sits at the door, for a good light, and makes lace. The maid works the pump, perhaps, in the alley-yard. The next house has a creeper—and two stools, one to sit on, and a higher one which may be to mount from. The whole is very warm, very quiet, very peaceful. What is there to make a picture of? “A red brick house, not very old or very new; people working, people playing; cobbles. What is there in that?”

Is there not the soul of the life of a whole race of people? They live their quiet lives in their warm, quiet, clean houses, keeping their pathways clean, their children happy; pursuing the gentle tenor of their everyday life, dignified, unhurried, content. Is it not all here, behind these green shutters and square glazed windows? This is but one small house in a little street, but Delft itself can tell no more, for it means home and happiness.

And now let us see some more of the people who live in these houses. I think it would be quite a good plan to take the maid before the mistress. You might find this woman, wearing practically the same dress, pouring milk out of the same jug, with the same basket of bread and vegetables beside her, in almost any kitchen in Delft to-day. There is the same luminous wall and simple arrangement. The crock and jug are brown—the other flagon is blue with white spots. The crisp brown edges of the broken roll take up the tones of the pottery. Her features are good, and fine; only her work is homely. That little square box thing on the floor is a foot-warmer. It has a perforated top, and the custom is to put a pan of hot charcoal in it and then use it as a footstool. With ample skirts coming down over it to keep the heat in, it stays hot for a very long time. Similar boxes were in many of the pictures by other artists—those of Jan Steen and Ostade, for example.

There is no stiffness or pose here. The artist saw the scene, and put it down as he saw it.

In the "Young Woman Reading a Letter," the pure plain wall-space is broken by one of the latest fashionable decorations—a wall map.

The Dutch were colonists and navigators as soon as we were, and the quaint, beautiful maps that were produced at the time, to show the position of the new colonies, and their dangers and environments, were highly ornamental. Sometimes perhaps a hint is intended of a lover or husband overseas. And that may very well be the case here.

I am afraid I don't remember if her little coat was pink or blue, I think pink. Notice the difference between her arms and those of the cook. Her employments are making lace and finely stitched garments, as well as letter-writing. She faces the unseen window, and from the sharp shadows I should judge it to be a sunny day. That is her mantle beside her, and the light catches the cover of her work-box. Vermeer always concerned himself more with things than with people. There is very little expression in her face. She is just standing there, reading her letter. The interest is in the dappling light on her satin coat and white neck, the drawing of her hands and arms, the quiet waiting pose of her figure. As yet she knows no troubles, and her way of life is serene. Perhaps this serenity which was such a striking characteristic of so many of the Dutch artists, was an unacknowledged charm that drew people to them again and again during their visit to London. The hurry of modern life was left outside.

Now we have only "Martha and Mary."

It is quite wonderful, however one thinks or looks at it. Each of the three figures is exactly right, each expresses arrested motion, or rather, is in the act of doing. Christ rests and talks. Mary asks and listens. And poor good Martha fusses. It's her temperament. Look at her sharp chin and small mouth. Look at her raised eyebrows. Can't you hear her say, "Nobody helps me!" A good woman, a kind woman, a conscientious woman—she would love to work her fingers to the bone for the Master. It seems as if there was so little to do for Him she must make a trouble of that little just to show how glad she is to do it.

The Master is tired. Look at the relaxed pose of His whole figure. His face will light up with a smile after His gentle rebuke.

Mary is far more homely than her clever sister. She does not bother about her dress. Her sleeves are turned back and her skirt rolled up "anyhow." She just wants to know—to hear—to ask again for that word that makes all her troubles disappear. Vermeer has not made her in the least aesthetic or intellectual. But she is absolutely absorbed in that quest for the "better part" that is changing her whole life. With her intent gaze fixed on her Lord's face, she hardly hears Martha's sharp words, nor His quiet answer. She is used to being spoken to like that, she is always making mistakes. Martha is the clever one. The Son of Man, in His infinite wisdom, has shown her how to turn her efforts towards a new goal, and with Him she finds Courage and Strength.

I left this to the last, and now I feel I cannot leave it at all. Here is quite a new idea of Mary, and it seems so simple and so true I wonder I never thought of it before.

The picture is full of peace. Each figure holds us in turn, yet the three blend into a beautifully balanced whole, united by the significance of the Master's gestures. The genius of this great Dutchman will light up many ordinary events for us as we make him our daily companion, and learn with him to see the beauty hidden in common things.