

Midterm Assignment
on
A Girl Asleep by
Johannes Vermeer

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Baroque Art
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Part I

A Visual Analysis: Vermeer's A Girl Asleep

The painting A Girl Asleep (ca. 1657, New York, Metropolitan Museum, Figure 1) by Jan Vermeer, which was produced relatively early in his career, appears to represent a transitional work for this Dutch 17th century artist. Not only does he begin painting genre themes with the onset of this work, but he also begins exploring the effect of perspective, compositional structure, light, color and atmosphere in relation to the intimate interior scene portrayed in this painting.

Vermeer's artistic development spans about 20 years from the time he entered the painter's guild in Delft at the age of 21 in 1653, until his death in 1675. His meticulous painting method in part limited his artistic output to only about 30 paintings which are currently identified and attributed as works by Vermeer. Of these, only two are dated, The Procuress (1656, Dresden Gemäldegalerie) and The Astronomer (1668, Paris, private collection). His painting, A Girl Asleep was probably painted in 1657 after the Dresden Procuress, judging from the similarity of facial expression and type between the two female figures, the relatively large canvas size (86.5 x 76 cm), dominance of red and yellow hues and by the similar oriental carpet occupying the foreground of the painting.¹

The subject portrayed in A Girl Asleep is deceptively simple – a young woman apparently asleep, is seated at a table in a dimly lit interior. Her elbow is propped on the table for support as she rests her head on her hand. A hushed stillness permeates the painting, which is enhanced by the girl's gentle loveliness. Her surroundings suggest an upper-class Dutch home. The richly designed Turkish carpet covering the table is carelessly pulled-up as the front of the table. A painting and map hang on the walls at either side of an open door, which gives entry into another room through a small passageway. The horizontal and vertical shapes formed by the table and chair, door and the picture map frames, are again repeated in this outer room. Vermeer's use of these stabilizing horizontal and vertical produce a sense of stability which subtly reinforces the timeless quality evoked in the painting suggested by the static pose of the girl, who is seemingly frozen in eternal repose.

The young girl is wearing a brown satin dress and lace collar which has been indiscreetly unfastened. A small black cap adorns her hair and pearl-drop earrings glow luminously at either cheek. Her features are refined, unmarred by emotions, although her cheeks appear flushed. Among the objects placed to the front of the table are a half-filled wine glass and opaque wine jug. These objects discreetly indicate the possible cause for the girl's current state. In fact, she is probably drunk, as a catalogue description of the painting for a 1696 auction testifies: "A Drunken Sleeping Girl At A Table."² However, Vermeer's sensitive treatment of the girl's possibly intoxicated state reflects the artist's sense of decency and decorum. Not only is her dignity and quiet beauty preserved, but her upper-class social bearing is also maintained.

The expressionless face of the girl suggests tranquillity. However, here serenity is deceptive, as the painting above her head suggests. In it, a fragment of Cupid's leg and a mask are barely visible through the twilight atmosphere, hence indicating an erotic theme for the girl's reverie.³ Importantly, the pose of the girl with bent elbow and head may have multiple meanings, ranging from grief to melancholy,

¹ Albert Blankert, Vermeer of Delft, (Oxford: Phaidon, 1978) p.28.

² Blankert, p. 156.

³ A.K. Wheelock, Jan Vermeer, (New York: Abrams, 1981) p.74

sloth to drunkenness.⁴ This pose, then, coupled with the love theme suggested by Cupid, hints at her emotional inner state. For instance, she should be fantasizing about love, grieving over a lost or unrequited love or simply indulging in an idle stupor by ignoring her presumed duties to household and husband. Perhaps Vermeer intended a moralizing theme: “That proper conduct of one’s life requires temperance and moderation.”⁵ Whatever the intent of the painting, Vermeer’s calculated play with multiple interpretations, in contrast to an easily understood narrative approach, serves to create ambiguity and mystery, thereby enhancing viewer interest and involvement.

Far from tranquil then, the young woman seems to be wrestling with strong emotions, but they are not expressed in her face or gesture. Rather, it is the still-life objects that provide clues to her possible turbulent emotions. In effect, Vermeer has transformed the girl into a motionless still-life form captured in eternal repose and forever bound in intimate relation with her surrounding objects.

This impression of another realm inhabited by the girl is reinforced by the magnified scale of the Turkish rug and large chair in the foreground of the painting. These objects, portrayed with detailed clarity, serve to enclose and isolate the girl in her private world. This distancing of the girl from the spectator is further emphasized by her diminished scale, softer outlines and more muted tones in relation to the foreground.

This device of an ‘exaggerated foreground’ also serves to create a recession into space. However, its application in A Girl Asleep, rather than smooth and natural, is somewhat abrupt and disconcerting. For instance, the magnified scale of the chair and carpet suggest a closer proximity of the girl to the viewer than actually suggested by her size. Additionally, the girl’s elbow seems to rest directly on top of the fruit bowl, although the length of the table suggests a deeper recession.

Vermeer’s somewhat awkward handling of special recession is also experienced in the uncomfortably steep recession of the floor beginning in the passageway and moving into the second room. This effect is most likely caused by his use of a flat, monochrome color to portray this floor space. Vermeer’s questionable success at special recession as rendered in this special painting, then, appears to confirm its status as an early exploratory work.

In contrast, the artist’s observation and depiction of light, atmosphere and color is well handled. Two light sources are established in this painting. The first and primary ones which illuminates the main subject, seems to originate from behind the spectator, possibly from a window above his shoulder. The light streams downward, illuminating the fore and middle-ground in a golden glow, while the upper area above and behind the head of the girl is veiled in dim light. This almost oppressive cloud hovering over the young woman contributes to the impression of her possible “dark thoughts” or a troubled inner state.

Vermeer’s delicate treatment of light and atmosphere is evident in his subtle communication of twilight or dusk. The angle of the light as it falls on the objects and their progressive stages of illumination, from the brightly lit and detailed foreground objects, to the softer middle tones and hazy silhouette of the girl against the darker golden brown wall, suggest twilight. Psychologically, this time of day perfectly coincides with the quiet mood of the painting, as it is usually a time associated with reflection and meditation.

⁴ Ludwig Goldscheider, Johannes Vermeer, 2nd ed., (Oxford: Phaidon, 1967) p. 17.

⁵ Wheelock, p. 74.

The secondary light source originates and is contained in the outer room and serves to illuminate its sparse furnishings in a dusky glow. This device, opening a vista from one room to another, creates a more expansive sense of space, as well as serving to heighten the provocativeness of this painting by suggesting a presence lurking just beyond sight. The presence of another person is implied by those unfeminine objects, such as the coarse, possibly man's, jacket hanging behind her on the wall and the riding crop in the front of the table. In fact, the viewer is seemingly drawn toward this outer room by the diagonal created by the rug and accented by the riding crop in the foreground. This strong diagonal edge leads the eye back to focus on a point just past the door and beyond the viewpoint of the spectator.

Vermeer's use of warm colors, primarily red, yellow and brown, contrasted with blue, serves to unify the discrete elements and planes of the painting and create a gentle harmonising effect which is highly appealing. His meticulous application of paint allows him to achieve subtle modulations of tone which builds up volume and form and allows him to render subtle differences in texture. Vermeer also uses these tonal modulations to create a seemingly palatable atmosphere, which serves to both illuminate and obscure objects in a naturalistic manner.

Although Vermeer generally paints A Girl Asleep in a smooth and almost impersonal manner, he does achieve a richer paint build-up in highlighted areas, particularly in the opaque wine jug and overall still-life group, as well as in the foreground chair.

This initial attempt by Vermeer at depicting a genre theme is a decidedly uneven combination of both successful and less successful stylistic elements. However, when viewed as a transitional work, the problems which challenged Vermeer's artistic sensibilities become more apparent as does perhaps his 'imperfect' solutions. However, his unique temperament, intelligence and talent enable him to search for and find new approaches to the problem of composition, space, color and light which are brought to near perfection in his later works.

Part II

Vermeer's A GIRL Asleep in Relation to the Art Historical Concept "Baroque"

In the painting A Girl Asleep (New York, Metropolitan Museum), Vermeer uniquely blends the attitudes and styles associated with 17th century "Baroque" art to explore specific artistic problems as well as address more general concerns relating to the artistic environment of his age.

Vermeer adheres first and foremost to Baroque naturalism which was the prevailing attitude in 17th century art, "... express(ing) and acceptance of the material world, through the realistic representation of man and nature, though a new perception of space and infinity.⁶ Vermeer's overriding concern for naturalism in his art, coupled with his acute observation powers, probably encouraged his use of a camera obscura as a means to further enhance the optical realism in his paintings. The effect of camera obscura, stated by Martin as, "... conspicuous 'circles of confusion' and 'halation' of highlights ..." are seen to a limited degree in A Girl Asleep as diffused points of highlights set against dark areas in the painting. The dots of light on the brass-studs and lions-head decoration on the chair, the bright line of highlights on the door-jams, the fleck of light in the girl's earrings and throughout the still life group to the front of the table, are probably all renderings in paints of the effects observed through this optical device.

Vermeer's naturalistic rendering of the material world also provided him with a vehicle for communication a more abstract and sometimes allegorical or moralistic axiom, as evidenced in the multiple story interpretations associated with A Girl Asleep. This attempt by Vermeer to transcend reality and impart a 'truth' through naturalistic representation is considered fundamental to Baroque art, whose purpose is "... to give new force and meaning to received truths by transplanting them from the realism of the general and abstract into that of the immediate, sensuous and concrete experience.⁸ In another respect, Vermeer's multiple levels of meaning can also be associated with a Baroque tendency for 'unclearness' or ambiguity not only in the rendering of form, but also in story content.

Vermeer also attempts to address problems of special representation in his work. This concern is intimately associated with a Baroque sensibility and coincides with Wölfflin style of "... open form (which) everywhere points out beyond itself and purposely looks limitless.⁹ In A Girl Asleep, Vermeer exploits various devices typically associated with 'true baroque' to create the impression of a limitless and co-extensive space with the viewer. However, rather than exploiting the obvious elements, such as strong diagonal movement, emphatic gestures thrusting through the picture plane or forms overlapping the frame, Vermeer uses those devices which tend to reflect his more restrained and controlled 'classical' artistic disposition.

For instance, in order to dissolve the surface plane and create recessionary movement in A Girl Asleep without using strong diagonals, Vermeer has successfully adapted the technique of 'exaggerated foreground.'¹⁰ Its application is demonstrated in

⁶ John R. Martin, Baroque (New York, Harper&Row, 1977), p. 39.

⁷ Martin, p. 70.

⁸ Martin, p. 132.

⁹ Heinrich Wölfflin, Principles of Art History, trans. M.D. Hottinger (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1950) p. 124.

¹⁰ Wölfflin, p. 84.

the magnified foreground elements, such as the Turkish carpet, chair and still life group on the table, which are juxtaposed against the diminished figure of the girl and small scale objects in the second room. By means of this technique, a “... precipitous diminution given by a near station point, will always enforce recessionary movement ...”¹¹ and, thereby enhance illusionistically a sense of limitless space.

In addition, Vermeer has exploited, perhaps less successfully, a device whereby the picture area opens up onto another vista, thereby creating “... special compartments which allow the viewer to imagine unending continuity.”¹² In A Girl Asleep, the partly opened door allows the viewer a glimpse into a second room. However, a limitless viewpoint into the painting is rather abruptly contained by the solid wall facing the viewer. By choosing to portray a wall rather than an open vista or window-view, the sense of “unending continuity” is restricted.

Vermeer also endeavours to integrate fictive pictorial space with the real space of the viewer. In A Girl Asleep, he pushes the figures and objects toward the edges of the painting, while allowing the picture frame to cut into objects such as the table, chair, wall painting, etc. Vermeer not only creates a casually intimate viewpoint for the spectator, thereby heightening his involvement, but also seems to encourage viewer participation. These cut-off objects almost provoke the spectator into mentally completing their forms, whereby they would, on an imaginary level, inhabit the ‘real’ space of the viewer. In this manner, Vermeer has attempted to break the physical boundaries of his painting and illusionistically integrate the real with the fictive pictorial space.

Furthermore, Vermeer expresses a Baroque painterliness which “... enable(s) the artist to suggest effects of atmosphere, mobility and change...”¹³ though the use of light, color and near tangible atmospheric effects. The interior scene in A Girl Asleep is diffused with a dusky golden atmosphere which subtly reveals form, as well as suggests dying twilight. This gentle change from dusk to evening is indicated by sensitive nuances in color not only reveals form, but also, and perhaps more importantly, unifies the pictorial elements and enhances the painting’s mood. As Wölfflin states “... the real baroque only sets in when color has on principle been relieved of the obligation to illuminate and elucidate the form.”¹⁴

Besides the inherent naturalism expressed in Vermeer’s art and his use of various “true baroque” elements to achieve certain pictorial aim, he also successfully exploits elements of baroque ‘classicism’ to provide stability, order and coherence to his work. The girl portrayed in his painting A Girl Asleep is almost a classical figure. She is an expressionless, motionless form whose inner emotional state is communicated through associational loaded objects and the abstract elements of atmosphere, color and light, rather than through emphatic gesture or expression. Her facial features could almost be considered idealized in their refined and static appearance. However, she is firmly rooted in the temporal world of the 17th century Dutch middle class by means of her dress, her environment and very human indulgences.

Vermeer’s ‘classicism’ is most visible in his use of vertical and horizontal forms. These shapes are rhythmically repeated in A Girl Asleep and serve to stabilize the forms, as well as contain dramatic movement. Vermeer balances somewhat these classical horizontal and vertical shapes with a restrained application of a diagonal

¹¹ Wölfflin, p. 85.

¹² Martin, p. 161.

¹³ Martin, p. 163.

¹⁴ Wölfflin, p. 203.

movement. The diagonal, seen in the line of the rug and riding crop on the table, serves to create a relatively naturalistic recession into space which moves through the discrete planes formed by the horizontal and vertical shapes. Additionally, the device of silhouetting the girl against the solid wall backdrop has features of classical linearity, even though this impression is counteracted by Vermeer's painterly approach. In this manner, Vermeer utilizes recognizable 'classical' elements, together with aspects of "true" baroque styles, to express a unique presentation of his subject.

Vermeer's blending and balancing of these various Baroque attitudes and styles as expressed in his work reflect a highly sensitive artistic personality coupled with exceptional talent. In this relatively early painting, A Girl Asleep, Vermeer demonstrates an exploratory approach which attempts to address not only specific pictorial problems, but also the more general concerns of a Baroque artist in 17th century Europe.

