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Review of *Vermeer and the Art of Painting*, by Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr.

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Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr. *Vermeer and the Art of Painting*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995. 143 pls. + x + 201 pp. \$45.

This book about Vermeer's technique of painting differs from the author's earlier work on the artist by taking a new perspective both on Vermeer as painter and on the reader as viewer. Wheelock investigates Vermeer's painting techniques in order to understand his artistic practice and, ultimately, his artistic mind. He shows the reader to what extent one can answer the old questions of just how Vermeer "did it" — the breadbasket in the *Milkmaid*, for example, or the carpet on the *Music Lesson's* table, or the famous roofs and boats in *View of Delft*; of how his paintings came about — something as particular, for example, as the Kenwood House *Guitar Player*; and why they look the way they do — for example, those radiant, self-absorbed women in the *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* or *Woman Holding a Balance*.

Wheelock's focus is on seventeen of the thirty-five or thirty-six paintings ascribed to Vermeer. Although he draws only sparingly on the large body of critical reception and interpretation they have engendered, Wheelock makes ample use of comparable works by Vermeer's contemporaries. While acknowledging the perhaps unique power of Vermeer's work to call forth such varied, often personal responses, Wheelock's own intention is to "give some framework for these subjective feelings by delving into the process by which Vermeer arrived at and created his images" (2).

One major achievement of this book is Wheelock's command of technical resources — microscopic blow-ups

of paint layers, x-rays, collaged infrared reflectograms, and lab reports — to guide the reader through this process. The pedagogic and rhetorical power of Wheelock's account lies in the eye-opening skill with which he makes this process come alive for the reader. The way he accomplishes this has everything to do with his conviction that by understanding Vermeer's artistic practice we also come to know the artist. As the agent of this practice Vermeer is also the grammatical subject of most of Wheelock's accounts. Vermeer not only "depicted," he "subtly opened," "clearly intended," "wanted to introduce," "reinforced," and "felt free to adjust." Similarly, Wheelock speaks of Vermeer's "interest," "conscious manipulation," "concern," and even of "the confidence with which Vermeer controlled his medium." Wheelock's aim is to show Vermeer working before our eyes as the highly self-aware and sensitive person we always considered him to be. He thereby puts to rest any simple notion that Vermeer mirrored the world.

To speak thus of Vermeer's agency raises methodological questions about the technical examination of paintings and about the range of interpretive options within this approach to art. In chapter one, "An Approach to Viewing Vermeer," Wheelock addresses these questions through an extended discussion of *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*. Here as elsewhere, his concern is to match the painter's reflected practice as closely as possible with the interpreter's critical practice. In demonstrating the nature of Vermeer's technique, Wheelock clearly distinguishes between his own "approach to viewing Vermeer," "Vermeer's working procedures," and "Vermeer's attitudes to-

wards painting" (8). The first, Wheelock's approach, involves making the most scrupulous connection possible between the other two. In each of the following sixteen chapters, devoted respectively to one painting, Wheelock seeks to reestablish this connection. Yet in pointing out similarities, he avoids telling a (hi)story of Vermeer's "life and work." His approach yields a multi-faceted Vermeer capable of expressing a broad range of emotions and intellectual positions, from melancholy to exuberance, from observation to contemplation, from worldly exhortation to religious devotion.

Wheelock shows that these polar facets provide an insight into Vermeer's peculiar historical position. Vermeer shared his contemporaries' concern with allegory, for example, yet he simultaneously developed an "abstract painting technique" in which "paint, however expressively applied, remained first and foremost paint" (16f). In the final chapter Wheelock gives his own definition of this historical place. It is the evolution of Vermeer's artistic practice from the "broadness of vision and execution" of his early history painting; through a period of technical refinement and complexity, partly inspired by the works and techniques of Fabritius, de Hooch and ter Borch (the genre paintings and cityscapes of the early to mid-1660s); to an independent period of simplification and abstraction (the genre paintings and, presumably, the religious allegory of the 1670s) (163-65). Such a scheme is a familiar model for mapping the development of long-lived and productive artists like Titian or Rembrandt, but Wheelock shows that the scheme works for Vermeer as long as it remains flexible. Throughout, Wheelock

underlines Vermeer's practice of combining painting techniques that were developed at different times for different subjects and expressive purposes, concluding that "enough variables exist to preclude establishing a precise chronological sequence of his work on this basis alone" (165). Wheelock foregoes any further elucidation or justification of the chronology offered in the appended "Catalogue of Vermeer's Paintings." The reader is left with the perhaps too difficult task of using what has been learned in the previous chapters to work out the integration of the remaining nineteen paintings for her- or himself.

The question that might linger in any reader's mind, despite the author's stated intentions, is something like: what does Wheelock think Vermeer's *oeuvre* is about? Or even: Who was Vermeer? Wheelock offers discreet answers to these questions. He emphasizes that Vermeer's art is not primarily descriptive and, in this sense, illusionistic. Instead he used lenses and the camera obscura chiefly with an interest in adopting the expressive quality of their optical effects. He also underscores Vermeer's unusual and, in his era, unmatched sensitivity to human psychology. For Wheelock these qualities of Vermeer's *oeuvre* are balanced: "The delicate equilibrium between illusionism and abstraction" in his technique suggests "both the transience and permanence of human existence" (163).

This judgment is both specific and general enough to be in keeping with Wheelock's ultimately stated intention, which is to provide a framework for "the range of interpretations possible for Vermeer's paintings" (166). On a specific level, Wheelock's understanding of the "poetic quality" on which

this range draws may be found in his interpretation of *The Art of Painting* (chap. 13). Not unexpectedly, this is also the one painting where the three distinct interpretive aspects mentioned above are entirely mediated.

This is a book that invites those who approach Vermeer from differing perspectives to test their choices against the artistic processes that led to the complex phenomenon we call visual evidence in Vermeer's painting.

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William R. Newman. *Gebennical Fire: The Lives of George Starkey, an American Alchemist in the Scientific Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994. 8 pls. + xiv + 348 pp. \$49.95.

Some years ago, William Newman was able to confirm that, as had previously been suspected, the influential alchemical treatises published under the pseudonym of Eirenaeus Philalethes were the work of George Starkey (1628-65). Now, in the present work, Newman combines an account of Starkey's career from his origins in Bermuda — where his interest in science manifested itself early on in the form of careful observation of local insect life — through his Harvard education (A.B. 1646) and subsequent years as a controversial medical and alchemical practitioner in the London of the 1650s and early 1660s, to his premature death in the 1665 plague outbreak, with an analysis of the content and cultural context of his openly acknowledged iatrochemical writings and of the arcane productions of Eirenaeus Philalethes. The result is a richly detailed account that provides many new insights into the

intersection of medicine, natural philosophy, and alchemy in seventeenth-century education, medical practice, and scientific thought.

Thus, Newman shows that although Starkey himself made a rhetorical claim to have turned away from academic natural philosophy to the chemical philosophy and to alchemical practice, in actuality the natural philosophy teaching that he encountered at Harvard in the 1640s may well have fostered the development of his alchemical interests in various ways. For example, he is likely to have been taught a corpuscular theory of matter ultimately derived — via Julius Caesar Scaliger and influences from sixteenth-century Cambridge — from late medieval Aristotelian concepts of *minima naturalia*. Furthermore, not only was there general acceptance of the fundamentals of alchemical theory, but various members of the academic community showed an active interest in transmutational alchemy, often in combination with iatrochemistry.

In England, where he arrived in 1650, Starkey practiced Helmontian iatrochemical medicine, manufactured alchemically prepared remedies and perfumes, and nurtured a story that he was in receipt of secrets of alchemical transmutation given him by a mysterious adept in New England. These activities and claims initially secured him a respectful reception in the circle around Samuel Hartlib and by Robert Boyle himself. As Newman points out, although there were pragmatic reasons for Starkey's claims to portentous secret knowledge acquired second hand (the preservation of manufacturing processes and the desire to impress patrons), there is also no doubt that Starkey himself believed that he was the