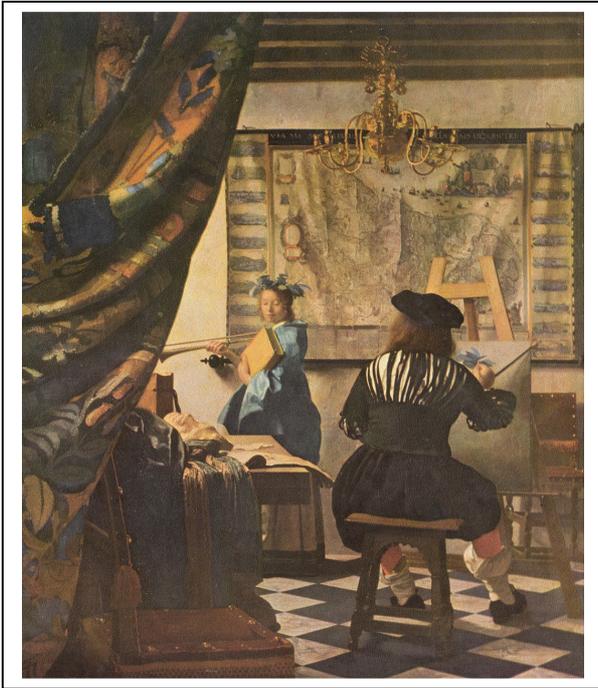


Excerpt from
“GET THE MESSAGE?”

A SERIES OF ARTWORK REVIEWS BY ORMOND FANNON, Dip.Ad, M.Ed, FRSA
for the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme in Visual Arts

COMPARING AND CONTRASTING ARTWORKS

JAN VERMEER – DUTCH, 17TH CENTURY/ PABLO PICASSO – SPANISH, 20TH CENTURY



Above: *THE STUDIO* by Pablo Picasso, 1928
(Collection: Museum of Modern Art, NY)

Left: *THE ARTIST IN HIS STUDIO* by Jan Vermeer, 1665-70
(Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna)

ARE THE ABOVE ARTWORKS DIFFERENT or SIMILAR?

Vermeer:

- * Oil on Canvas
- * The painter sits to the right
- * The painter is working on a canvas
- * He holds his brush in a moment of pause
- * He holds a palette which we cannot see (suggested by position of elbow)
- * He works from a live model
- * A cloth hangs from the table
- * There is a rectangle on the wall behind

*** Vermeer aims at photographic imitation**

Picasso:

- * Oil on Canvas
- * The painter stands to the left
- * The painter is working on a canvas
- * He holds his brush in a moment of pause
- * He holds a palette which we cannot see (suggested by the “thumb-hole”)
- * He works from a still-life and bust
 - * A cloth hangs from the table
- * There are rectangles on the wall behind

*** Picasso completely rejects photographic imitation**

Picasso’s painting could almost have been painted to demonstrate how the Vermeer could be translated into abstract terms.

For a detailed analysis of these two artworks, go to the next page

Abstract Values in Realistic Painting

In Vermeer's painting we look into the cube-like space of an artist's studio. This space is defined for us on all six sides. The back wall faces us directly. The front wall is expressed by the heavy curtain drawn aside to let us look within the space as if it were a stage. Without having to think about it or figure it out, we sense the windowed wall to our left by the flow of light onto the model and across the space of the room. The wall to our right is also defined by inference. The chandelier, which would be near the center of the ceiling, helps us locate it, as does the position of the large decorative map on the rear wall and the chair lined up with its edge. The floor and ceiling we actually see. Within this cube of space Vermeer arranges his figures and objects with exquisite care. We see the painter's back as he faces the canvas on his easel. He is using a mahl stick, a stick used by painters to steady the hand while working on passages of fine detail. Without being able to see his other hand we know that it holds his palette. He is glancing at the model, who is posed as an allegorical figure crowned with leaves and bearing a trumpet and a book. We see her across a table that holds, among other things, a cloth hanging off the edge nearest us.

The forms in this Vermeer are not to be regarded as flat silhouettes, as it is possible to regard those in "Whistler's Mother." They must be seen as solid volumes in three-dimensional space—and when a picture like this one is studied and reflected upon, the shape of the voids between these various solid objects can become as interesting as the objects themselves. This painting is a spatial composition.

The little cube-shaped world is wonderfully self-contained. There is no feeling that the various objects are rigidly placed, but their relationship in space is so perfect that if we try to shift any one of them the serene balance of the picture is disturbed. Would you, for instance, want the model to turn her head so that, in profile, she looks out of the window? This would be a small change, but it would disrupt the picture. It would make us too conscious of the window wall. We would be tempted to follow the model's gaze into the imagined world outdoors, instead of remaining happily within the defined space of the studio. It would also tend to divide the picture down the middle, since the psychological connection between the painter and the model would be weakened. This connection is like a unifying structural element in the composition.

If you can imagine the model looking out the window and the painter turned to regard us, thus completely divorcing the painter and the model and bringing the painter, so to speak, outside the room to where we stand, on this side of the heavy curtain, you will see that the whole structure falls to pieces.

Other changes would be less disastrous, but any change would mar the picture's balance. Would you want to push the artist and the easel farther back into the picture space? Or move them nearer to us, so that they become larger in perspective, leaving more depth between the artist and the model? Would you rather the objects on the table were tidied up, or removed, or added to? Would you like to see the curtain hanging in straight folds, rather than bunched as it is? Would you like to eliminate the series of beams, terminating the picture at its upper part with their succession of horizontal lines, and substitute a flat ceiling?

None of these changes except the elimination of the ceiling beams would make the individual objects any the less interesting. The picture would still be an assemblage of magnificently rendered textures bathed in light. We could still sense the brassiness of the chandelier, the nap of the curtain, the silkiness of the model's robe, the smooth, cool surface of the floor. But the perfection of the picture is not the sum of its wonderful details any more than the beauty of a musical composition is the sum of its individual chords. The perfection of the picture lies in the harmonious union of these details as arranged in space, just as the beauty of music may be in the harmony of the chords arranged in time.

From Realism to Abstraction

The second picture, Picasso's *The Studio*, is such a close parallel to the Vermeer that it might almost have been painted to demonstrate how the Vermeer could be translated into abstract terms. To understand Picasso, however, we have to begin by accepting his complete rejection of photographic imitation. This rejection is perfectly obvious in the picture, but it is not easy for most people to accept.

Your first question may be why Picasso chooses to work in a way so radically different and so puzzling, when perfection like the Vermeer can be achieved through an approach almost photographic in individual details. We will try to answer that question, but first—with the illustrations side by side—let us see the similarities between the two pictures. Actually, the similarities are as great as the differences. The painter stands to the left in the Picasso; he sits at the right in the Vermeer. Picasso constructs the figure of the painter in a few dark lines played against the light field of the canvas he is about to work on. Vermeer constructs the figure of his painter as a dark silhouette, also played in part against the creamy field of his canvas, upon which he has just begun to work. Both painters hold their brushes in a moment's pause. The "brush" in the Picasso is the short diagonal line terminating the "arm" that projects horizontally toward the right. Whereas Vermeer's artist has just stayed his hand to glance at the model, Picasso suggests by the extended line that his artist is sighting along his brush—a common device—to measure the proportions of the object he is painting.

The painter's "head" is a long gray oval form upon which is imposed an irregular white shape bearing three eyes arranged in a vertical row. Whether or not it was the artist's intention, we may hazard the guess that the painter is given this extra eye as a kind of symbol of the particularly acute, analytical vision developed by an artist in comparison with the average person, who sees more casually.

The painters in both pictures hold palettes, although we see neither of them. In the Vermeer we sense the palette. In the Picasso it is symbolized by its thumb hole, a small circle just to the left of the painter's shoulder.

Vermeer's painter is working from a posed model; Picasso's from a still-life setup composed of a plaster bust and a bowl of fruit on a table. A red cloth hangs from the side toward us, as in the Vermeer. The irregular white quadrangle is the base of the plaster bust. Within the white oval that suggests its general mass a six-sided shape defined by a black line bears two eyes and a mouth, or perhaps two normal eyes and a "blind" one suggesting the smooth blind eye of a plaster cast, arranged in the same way as the three eyes of the painter. The fruit bowl is reduced to two triangles, the fruit represented by a single green circle in the upper one. All four legs of the table and the round feet are visible, although they are placed arbitrarily, without regard to perspective. The red cloth, with its main lines accentuated by a wide hem, "hangs" in stiff angular shapes that are flat patterns.

Flanking Picasso's painter on the side of the picture opposite him there is also a window, or glassed door, and on the back wall hang a framed picture and a dark mirror, rectangles only slightly more regular than the one of the decorative map hanging on the corresponding wall in the Vermeer.

These details add up to a close similarity between the pictures, even granting some lee-way to their interpretation in the Picasso. The final similarity, and a most important one, is that each of the compositions is tied together by an invisible element—a cord of interest vibrating between the painter and the model. We have already commented on this in the Vermeer, saying that if the model looked out the window or if the painter turned his head to look at us, the beautiful integration of the cube of space would be lost. In the Vermeer this connection between model and painter goes back into the depth of space. In the Picasso it plays across the surface of the picture between the dominating lines and shapes abstracted from the painter and his still life.

Why Abstraction?

But why has Picasso chosen to paint this way, instead of following Vermeer's tradition, one that satisfied painters for so long? Picasso was something of a child prodigy. In his teens he had already mastered the conventional techniques of painting and drawing. Why did he abandon them? He has had to sacrifice a great deal in order to work abstractly. First of all he sacrifices—for most people—the interest inherent in the objects comprising the picture, an interest on which Vermeer capitalizes. Next, he sacrifices the fascination and variety of natural textures. He sacrifices the harmonies of flowing light, the satisfaction of building solid forms out of light and shade.

What has he gained? He has gained complete freedom to manipulate the forms in his picture. He need not bother with the true proportions of objects or their parts. If for the sake of design or expression he wants to make a head three quarters the size of the body beneath it, he may do so. He may adjust every shape within his picture area quite arbitrarily. If he has sacrificed the advantages of perspective, which would have permitted him to create an illusion, he has also gained freedom from its limitations, which would have forced him to show the table legs, the bust, or any of the other objects according to a rigid system. For perspective is after all only a systematic distortion

by which objects are shown larger or smaller and at different angles from their real ones in order to represent their position in a third dimension, and all according to rule. Picasso's distortion is his own, not that of a geometrical system.

But all these sacrifices and gains are only part of a means to an end. What is the argument in favor of the end Picasso has in view?

The abstractionist would argue that the enjoyment of a picture like Picasso's *The Studio* is more intense because it is purer than the enjoyment we take in the Vermeer. We more fully enjoy pure form, pure color, and pure arrangement because we are less diverted by incidental interests. In the Vermeer we are diverted by our interest in the map on the wall, by our curiosity about the details of the model's costume, by our surprise at the novel cut of the painter's blouse, and by all the other items that are curious or interesting in them-selves. The traditional painter would argue that the enjoyment of the Vermeer is richer for the very reason that it may be enjoyed simultaneously on the double score of its abstract merits and its associative interests. But such discussion eventually boils down to the conclusion that a great painting is a great painting regardless of its means.

Many people have the uncomfortable feeling that modern abstract art is too easy because the painter is not obliged to demonstrate a high degree of craftsmanship. The Vermeer considered as craftsmanship alone, remains a gem. Technically and in details it is an extremely complicated picture, but in this very complication there is a degree of safety that is denied to the abstract painter. The Picasso is so simplified that any faulty relationship would be more glaring than one in the Vermeer. A second-rate picture along the lines of the Vermeer is still an interesting picture, can even be a good one. A second-rate picture along the lines of the Picasso is simply no good at all.

By examining the structure of the Picasso we can discover, if we have not felt it from the first, that the picture is as tautly constructed as Vermeer's is exquisitely arranged. We cannot read it in depth the way we read the Vermeer (although it is possible to discover some shallow recessions and projections of its flat planes), but we can apply something of the same test of shifting or changing forms and colors. The most obvious element tying the picture together is the repetition of strict verticals and horizontals. Then there are other parallels or near parallels, such as the left edge of the red cloth, which parallels the right line of the main triangle of the figure of the artist, and the top left line of the plaster bust, which parallels the right side of the fruit bowl. The line of the artist's "neck," if continued down-ward, meets the intersection of two other lines and forms one side of a suggested square. The top of the fruit bowl, continued to the right, would meet the point of balance of the bust on its pedestal. A dozen similar relationships can be discovered; they form a kind of secondary, concealed but important, supporting structure. As in the Vermeer, every element in the Picasso affects every other one. The thumb hole of the palette, to take an example at random, seems just the right size and in just the right spot; if it were made a brilliant color, this change would have to be compensated for by shifting its position or changing its size, or both. This is bringing things down to a fine point, but a picture like *The Studio* depends on fine points. There is no room for accidental or unconsidered elements. True, it takes time and adjustment to new ideas to see these points in abstract painting, but the effort is worth making if it opens up a new field of enjoyment. There is no point in saying that the Picasso is better than the Vermeer or that the Vermeer is better than the Picasso. Both are superb achievements. You may prefer one or you may prefer the other, but there is no reason why both cannot be deeply rewarding. To accept one and to reject the other could be an indication that the preferred picture is being enjoyed for superficial reasons. People who like the Picasso because it is fashionable to like modern art are making the same mistake as people who like the Vermeer because it is a sign of "culture" to like an established, foolproof old master. Neither picture can bring its full reward on such superficial bases. **Either picture, enjoyed through full understanding, increases enjoyment and understanding of the other.**

The above analysis is taken from "Metropolitan Seminars in Art" by John Canaday, Art Editor & Critic of The New York Times