

AUTHENTICATION IN ART

AiA Art News-service

Mh

Girl Without a Pearl?

09 December 2014

According to Leiden-based astronomer Vincent Icke, the Girl with a Pearl Earring is not wearing a true pearl at all.

In the December issue of popular science magazine *New Scientist*, Icke, a professor of Theoretical Astronomy at the University of Leiden, states that the pearl on the ear of the famous *Girl with a Pearl Earring* by Vermeer, could not have been a real pearl. The way in which a pearl would reflect the light does not match the reflection of the light in the painting, says Icke.

The article by Vincent Icke confirms what we at the Mauritshuis have been thinking and writing about Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* for some time now. In fact, it's one of the most fun facts about this painting. Just like the fact that it was purchased in 1881 by the previous owner at an auction for 2.30 guilders. At the museum, the caption for the painting also mentions the unrealistic size of the pearl. Vincent Icke reaches the same conclusion, but through a very different understanding and research. The Mauritshuis has taken note of his findings with great interest. This illustrates what makes seventeenth-century paintings so interesting to look at: nothing is what it seems.



The Mauritshuis has written previously about the jewel in the ear of Vermeer's girl, saying it was not a true pearl. Indeed, just like the turban, the "pearl" was no daily outfit for Dutch girls in the seventeenth century. Quentin Buvelot (Mauritshuis chief curator) described the painting together with fellow curator Ariane van Suchtelen in the catalogue for an exhibition on highlights of the Mauritshuis in Bologna earlier this year. They then wrote: "Some of the most salient features of Vermeer's painting include the girl's headpiece and the pearl in her ear. The headpiece consists of yellow fabric, with blue fabric on top of it, knotted around her forehead. The yellow-green jacket is painted in such a loose style that it isn't clear which material it's made from. It is probably wool fabric. This garment is often seen as part of the girl's exotic costume, but it is indeed a contemporary jacket. The low-set sleeve and small pleats are typical of the fashion in the 1660s, when this painting was made. The pearl on the girl's ear is remarkably large. Whereas most pearls nowadays come from farms, in the seventeenth century, they were natural ones. Pearls were formed in oyster-like sea mussels. Large pearls were rare and ended up in the hands of the richest people on the planet. In the seventeenth century, cheaper glass pearls, usually from Venice, were also quite common. They were made from glass, which was lacquered to give it a matt finish. Maybe the girl is wearing such a handcrafted 'pearl'."

Furthermore, the title of the painting dates back many years prior to Tracy Chevalier's famous book about the painting – an inventory of old titles revealed that many different titles had been used throughout the years. In what is perhaps the oldest description, in a property inventory of Vermeer's possessions from 1676, the painting described together with another painting as 'Two tronies painted in Turkish style'. Paintings typically don't have fixed titles, what we now have are usually modern names. This painting was also known as "Girl with the Turban", and also "Girl's face" for a long time, until the name "Girl with a Pearl Earring" was chosen in 1995 in the catalogue for the Vermeer exhibition, a name which had already been used previously as well.