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Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century And The Dawn Of The Global World



Synopsis

A Vermeer painting shows a military officer in a Dutch sitting room, talking to a laughing girl. In another canvas, fruit spills from a blue-and-white porcelain bowl. Familiar images that captivate us with their beauty--but as Timothy Brook shows us, these intimate pictures actually give us a remarkable view of an expanding world. The officer's dashing hat is made of beaver fur from North America, and it was beaver pelts from America that financed the voyages of explorers seeking routes to China--prized for the porcelains so often shown in Dutch paintings of this time, including Vermeer's. In this dazzling history, Timothy Brook uses Vermeer's works, and other contemporary images from Europe, Asia, and the Americas to trace the rapidly growing web of global trade, and the explosive, transforming, and sometimes destructive changes it wrought in the age when globalization really began.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A fascinating, erudite but easy-to-read series of chapters on trade, exploration, cross-cultural influence and physical culture, using 17th century Delft as the starting point. but reaching around the globe to Asia and the Americas. I'm a huge Vermeer fan and I visited Delft last April, so the book had an added resonance to me. Although you don't need to be an art lover to appreciate the book, a familiarity with Vermeer makes the argument event more interesting. I visited the Frick Collection yesterday and saw the image on the cover for the 20th time and noticed things I'd never realized before. The book brings to mind Jonathan Spence's "The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci" and the Simon Schama's "The Embarrassment of Riches," (both authors blurbed this book) although it's

probably an easier read than either. If you like books like those and "Longitude," you'll love this. Not so much an art history book -- and not a replacement for the other books on Vermeer as an artist -- but a cultural historian's look at an important era in the opening up of the world.

The entire book revolves around the analysis of seven key paintings from Vermeer's time - NOT ONE OF THEM IS INCLUDED IN THE KINDLE EDITION!!!!!!!!!!!!

Have you no common sense and sense of fairness? That in a book like this to not include the key plates and maps is ridiculous. At least the customer should be told in advance to make a better decision.

Vermeer's Hat by Timothy Brook is a rich examination of the growth of commerce in the seventeenth century using, of all things, the art of Johannes Vermeer. Wonderful. Before finding Vermeer's Hat I had never heard of the artist. So much for my general education in college. However, during the time I read Vermeer's Hat I managed to find a number of websites devoted to this not minor artist. The best is at [...] At this website you will find a chronological listing of his works along with terrific images. Vermeer's Hat, the cover image on the book is there and is cross listed with another image in which the same map appears. Brook uses the art of Johannes Vermeer to demonstrate the growth in commerce during the 1600's by focusing on items that appear in the images. This reminds me a great deal of the PBS program Connections that was popular during the 70's and 80's. Also, the information in Vermeer's Hat reminds me of works by Fernand Braudel in his Civilization trilogy. While each and every chapter has a great deal to convey, I found Chapter 5, "School for Smoking" to be of particular interest. Brook's examination of first the discovery by Europeans of tobacco and then the world wide spread of the plant and the resultant almost universal acceptance of smoking is truly eye opening. Children smoking in China or at least carrying pipes to look older is surprising. While some monarchs fruitlessly tried to ban smoking the populace continued on, even on the threat of beheading. Manchu soldiers selling their weapons to buy tobacco is a piece of trivia I'll carry for years to come. This chapter puts some of today's issues about smoking and substance abuse in perspective. Well researched and wonderfully written, Vermeer's Hat will open many windows for the interested reader. I have enjoyed my introduction to Vermeer and am thankful for Timothy Brook for the favor. I highly recommend Vermeer's Hat.

In 1660 or 1661 Vermeer painted "A View of Delft," his hometown in Holland. In that picture looms a

massive roofline, sheltering the offices of the Dutch East India Company (known as the VOC), which was happily (and unconsciously) engaged in irrevocably changing the world. What the VOC's merchant members thought they were doing was trying to make a few (okay--a lot) of guilders from trading with China, Japan and every other East Asian country that would have them. To do so required endangering thousands of men and (eventually) hundreds of ships in vastly perilous voyages of exploration, trading, diplomacy, piracy and pillage, with conquest, enslavement and colonization thrown in as opportunity offered. The VOC's efforts (and those of competitors from elsewhere in Europe) created the first world-wide commercial trading channels, something utterly different from the trickle of trade in luxury items that had existed since ancient times. Author Brook uses the VOC building and details from other Vermeer paintings as "portals" into the seventeenth century to describe VOC and its competitors beginning to bring disparate peoples into ever closer and inescapably permanent contact. The weighing of some silver, for example, opens the story of how silver flooded the world in the seventeenth century causing not only profound economic changes but equally deep changes in cultures and outlooks. For good or ill the seventeenth century began the commercialization and shrinking of the world that continues today and did so at the cost of much treasure, blood and personal and cultural displacement (although with much gain in some quarters as well). It is always so, as our own times confirm. The book can only hint at the full story but Brook provides an ample array of sources and recommended readings for those interested in going further. He does well at showing not only how products swept from one end of the globe to the other but also how their sweep often left human fear, disruption and suffering in its wake.

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