

3 / Practical problems



1 Interior of a Blacksmith (detail)
Cornelis Beelt
c.1700
Oil on panel, 33.5 x 55 cm.
Frans Hals Museum, Utrecht

Similar to many artistic endeavors—and performance-judged sports such as figure-skating and gymnastics—one of the principal goals of the painter is to make the end product appear as natural as possible, as if it had come about spontaneously with the least effort possible. This is why so many people take up art after seeing artworks by major artists: it looks easy. Instead, the great works of the past are the consequence of a protracted and grueling training regime and ceaseless practice. The skills the great masters of the past possessed are scarcely imaginable today. “If we want to get an idea of the discipline and skill of a painter like [Vermeer] today, we would do better not to look at the great majority of our contemporary painters, but at the performing musician or ballet dancer. In these arts, it is still understood that professional skill can only be built up through endless practice from an early age on.”¹ But the sacrifices and toil needed to transform the artist’s brute materials into intangible spirituality are not the artist’s only adversaries.

Vermeer’s studio was a noisy place located a few paces the bustling hub of Delft’s civic life (Market Place), and only one story above the narrow Oude Langendijk, where street peddlers hawked their wares, traders shouted and children played *kolf*. Itinerant street musicians played the latest hits on moaning bagpipes and screeching hurdy-gurdies. On market days, carts full of fruit and vegetables rolled in the streets below hours before the artist had enough light to work by. Another prominent feature of the urban soundscape was the distinctive sounds of the small industries and manufacturers scattered throughout the city: blacksmiths (fig. 1), coopers, shoemakers and woodmakers banging and clanging away at all hours of the day.² The backside of Vermeer’s studio faced a narrow alley that connected Oude Langendijk to the noisy cattle market. At a stone’s throw away stood the mastodonic tower of the New Church armed with 32 bronze bells that clanged throughout the day at regular intervals keeping time and lifting the spirit of the town’s hard-working citizens with carillon concerts. Some foreigners enjoyed them but some were annoyed by their “incessant jangling.”³



2 Children Playing and Merrymaking
Jan Miense Molenaer
c. 1633
Oil on canvas, 88.5 x 115 cm.
Private collection, Peter and Hanni Kaufmann



3 *Winter Landscape with Windmill and a House in Scaffolding*

Jacob van Ruisdael
after 1665
Oil on canvas, 39.4 × 43.8 cm.
Private collection



4 *Self Portrait in Studio Full- Attire*

Rembrandt
c. 1655
Drawing on paper, 20.3 × 13.4 cm.
Museum het Rembrandthuis, Amsterdam



5 *Wheat Fields*

Jacob van Ruisdael
c. 1670
Oil on canvas, 100 × 130.2 cm.
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

As if that were not enough, Vermeer’s strong-willed mother-in-law, resilient wife, domestic maid and a slew of children milled around just beneath the light timber floor that separated the artist’s studio from the family’s living spaces. Factoring in the already noisy environment and the fact that children are children (fig. 2)—foreigners were quick to criticize Dutch parents whom they thought were intolerably tolerant to their misconduct—the silence which exudes from the artist’s perfect constructs is all the more perplexing.

Meteorology too was not an ally of the artist. Dutch winters (fig. 3), already inimical to the fine painter who must remain seated dead-still at his easel for hours on end, was even more merciless in Vermeer’s time owing to the so-called Little Ice Age that started during the mid-16th century and ended about 1850. Winters were much colder and expanses of water remained frozen over longer periods. People generally wore several layers of clothing in the winter. It would have been unusual if Vermeer had a fireplace in his studio.

In the 17th century, painters had no special working clothes but generally wore aprons over their daily dress. In the winter, Vermeer would have probably shielded himself from the biting cold with a long, loose-fitting garment—perhaps lined with fur—called a *taabard*, similar to the one portrayed in a self portrait by Rembrandt (fig.4). The loose fit of this garment allowed the painter to work both standing and seated, but the situation must have been worse for the artist’s models who posed motionless with arms bared to the stinging cold.

Light, however, is the most critical issue for the painter. Noise can be dampened, heavy clothes and a fireplace may mitigate the cold, but artificial light cannot substitute natural light when it is lacking. On average Vermeer had to deal with more than 200 days of rain per year with less than two hours a day of sunshine in the winter months. In the Netherlands, winter days can be exceptionally gloomy even at midday; rain, intermittent drizzle and cloudy skies were, and still are, normal. Light is so scarce in the Netherlands that windows could occupy from two-thirds to three-quarters of external walls. On heavily overcast or rainy days, Vermeer may have found more productive things to do than paint his brightly lit pictures. It would have been logical to program the brighter works for the summer months. The windows of Vermeer’s studio allowed enough light for painting but its intensity was often unpredictable owing to the incessant march of low-flying clouds (fig. 5) that without warning plunged the studio into a deep penumbra and released it back to brilliance in a matter of seconds. In such conditions, capturing the incredibly subtle nuances of light’s activity would have been almost maddening.

Rather than the mythical quality of *Hollands licht* (Dutch light) it may be its very scarcity and fickleness that made it such a precious commodity for Dutch painters, one that deserved to be immortalized on thousands of canvases.