

Vermeer: Blockbuster around the Block
Tom L. Freudenheim

"See the pampered faces, regard the costly clothes,
Every carefree figure in a courtly pose.
Sniff the fragrant powder and smell the scented oil
Note the slender fingers that have no known toil.
A world of pleasure and privilege, elegant, elite,
A private arcadia, where life is sweet.
Beautiful and polished, exclusive and elect
Wary of outsiders as you might suspect....
Would you like to enter this gay and gilded sphere?
How much would you pay to be included here?
Make your highest offer, but bear this thought in mind:
Your bid may be rejected if you're not our kind."

Sheldon Harnick, "The Rothschilds"

"What do the simple folks do, to help them escape when they're
blue....
When they're beset and besieged, the folk not noblessly
obliged...."

Alan Jay Lerner, "Camelot"

I first visited the Vermeer Exhibition on the Tuesday after Thanksgiving. My mother was in town so I called a friend on the staff and she said she would be happy to "walk" us in. I drove to the Gallery to leave my mother off at the Constitution Avenue entrance. Because she is 89 and walks with difficulty, it was important to leave her at the door, and then get a wheelchair. The entrance drive was closed, however, so I needed to park illegally on the street, worrying about getting a citation, while I took her inside and got her into a wheelchair, where she could then wait for me. When I asked the guard about the closed driveway, he was puzzled, since it was supposed to be open. But there were painters painting new lines on the drive, and no one had bothered to tell anyone inside. Nor did they have any other suggestions for at-grade access for people with disabilities. I parked my car and returned.

The rest was wonderful. A glorious, small exhibition. That rare blockbuster that doesn't take hours to see. A handful of beautiful paintings. Too many people, but that comes with the territory, and wheeling my mother around proved to be a distinct advantage. People opened the way for us, so that I could stand behind the chair with no one but my mother in front of the paintings. I recommend this as the ideal way to visit crowded exhibitions. Get yourself someone in a wheelchair! People are really very considerate.

I had planned several more visits, but the government furlough ruined those plans. My friends on the staff told me about how terrible it was to be working in a place where all the calls seemed

to be from friends wanting favors (i.e., passes), especially when the number of available days had been so dramatically cut by Congress and snowstorms. So I didn't want to bother my colleagues, especially since I had already seen the exhibition. But every day as I went to work I saw the lines around the Gallery and I kept wondering about all those people who had no friends on the staff. So I decided to visit in the same way that the so-called general public does. I kept waiting for a fair weather day, and it kept getting colder. Finally, it was the last week, and I opted for the first day on which the temperature was above freezing in the morning. I took a small tape recorder, wore a parka, and did the right thing.

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8:00 a.m.

I'm walking from Air and Space Museum's parking garage, across the Mall to the National Gallery, through the snow, which is still on the ground, partially cleared. But it's about 35 degrees, so it's not very uncomfortable, and I am wearing waterproof shoes.

8:10 a.m.

The line is past the entrance on 7th St., and people don't seem to be certain whether it's for today. I get on line at the end. The guy behind me asks me if this is for today or any day; and can you choose the time. The woman ahead of me is here for the fourth time; she hasn't gotten in the previous three times. The guy behind me does stress reduction. Gives me his flyers: "Stress Doc Enterprises presents...Restructuring, Rage & Risk-Taking" and another on "Disarming, Deflating & Dealing." He also bills himself as the "Shrink Rapper." I suggest that he should do it for the people standing in line.

8:15 a.m.

The line has turned the corner, around Madison Drive. A vendor is selling gloves and hats. No one is buying. Everyone seems fairly well-clothed; of course it's not super cold. It looks like he's selling earmuffs and caps. Maybe there are gloves, too. A very mixed crowd - a lady in a mink jacket, mostly people in grungy dress. Very few blacks, but there are some. Can't characterize them in any way. A lady ahead of me is reading New York Magazine; the man with her is reading The New Yorker. And the man next to me (Stress Doc) is talking about being a New Yorker. There's the beginning of a bonding experience, and it's only 8:20!

8:30 a.m.

The line is now past where I can see the end, around the corner of the building, so it's moving toward the middle of the Gallery's main entrance on Madison Drive. A second vendor comes along, and the woman next to me says she bought an umbrella the day she couldn't get in. The woman behind me (who works nearby) says she has seen people selling free brochures for a dollar and telling people that they cost \$2.50 when they get into the Gallery, so that they're cheaper out on the street. The people around me are speculating that's the way people can say they went to see Vermeer even if they didn't actually get in.

I'm thinking about my friend who called me a couple of days ago about wheelchair access. She said she had Vermeer tickets for the week-end of the snowstorm (which week-end she didn't say), so couldn't come down from New York. She wanted to know whether I had any connections to help her, because she couldn't get any useful information from continually calling the Gallery. I said I couldn't help her, but told her to call Jan Majewski, the Smithsonian's Accessibility Coordinator, and said I was sure Jan would know who to call at the National Gallery. One more person on my list of people I couldn't/wouldn't/didn't help. Thank god the show is closing soon, so I won't have to display my lack of connections and power in this town of connections and power.

A guy walks by selling handwarmers -- those little packets that you knead. No one seems to be buying. But my hands are, in fact, feeling colder than I expected, in spite of my thinsulate-lined gloves. People are holding other people's places in line, so they can go off to buy coffee at the Starbucks a block away on Pennsylvania Avenue. An older, distinguished-looking gentleman in a full-length (belted-in-the-back) mink polo coat walks by. So the people around me remark that you wouldn't think he'd have to stand in line looking like that. There are not a lot of fur coats, and only a few elegant-looking people. Presumably only elegant people don't have to stand in line? Or the elegant people, if they do stand in line, don't look elegant? Most people are in parkas and conventional winter outdoor clothing, which masks a lot of possible status categorization.

A lot of the conversation revolves around the rumors of when the doors will open: 9:30 seems to be the majority opinion around me. There is also much speculation about whether you can select the time to come back, or whether you get assigned times. Various people give definitive answers about how many tickets each person can have -- two or four. Everyone around me cites the Washington Post as the source for his version of the gospel truth. There's also some discussion about people scalping tickets which they get from standing in this line. The word is that you get arrested for scalping Vermeer tickets, so naturally the discussion moves to how you don't get arrested for carrying a gun.

8:55 a.m.

Two National Gallery guards come walking by, looking over the people in line -- not very carefully -- sort of like airport guards. Maybe they are looking for terrorists or bomb-throwers or whatever. Meanwhile, the conversation around me turns to Huckleberry Finn, which one of my line-mates is reading (she's carrying it, sitting on it, etc.). The talk moves on to William Styron -- my line-mate (Stress Doc) is praising Lie Down in Darkness, as against later works such as Sophie's Choice. I'm probably not being as friendly as the situation demands, because I'm so interested in observing everything.

The lady behind me, wants to go for coffee, but is very concerned that we might not hold her place in line. We assure her that we will; after all, the people ahead of us went to Starbucks for

coffee and they returned to the line. She tells us her name is Linda (she's the one who works in the area). She goes off to Starbucks, and we spend the time she's away being very concerned that she find us again when she returns. I'm also thinking about how there are no port-a-pottys, and wonder why no one is selling chairs. Linda, who went off to Starbucks, hasn't returned yet and we are getting worried. But the man ahead of us says the Starbucks lines are very long -- both for the coffee and for the bathrooms. When Linda returns from Starbucks we all cheer for her. We've obviously bonded! We also discuss how the coffee business will probably slump after the Vermeer show closes. I think there is now the sense of a "group" that is beginning to form: Linda, Stress Doc, the lady who is here for the fourth time (she's a mother, surely suburban, hoping to get tickets for her family -- she needs five), and a young woman who says she is an editor at the American Psychological Association.

I wonder whether perhaps the Vermeer show brings out the worst characteristics of both Washington and museums. Today's Washington Post has an article discussing the ways in which people managed to get admission, especially Congressional people, during the furlough. I'm puzzled, because my friends at the Gallery said that other than guards and emergency staff, no one was allowed in during the furlough. They say that even Rusty Powell couldn't get his mother into the exhibition. Since both my sons were home for the holidays (during the furlough) I was thus unable to use any Gallery friends to get them into the exhibition, and they were disappointed, if cynical, about having missed Vermeer. The Post article makes a point about the Gallery being in the business of servicing the elite, Washington style -- for all its pretensions about being a populist sort of place. The Vermeer exhibition really places in clear profile the reality of who can get access and who can't, as well as a disdain for the general public. So what else is new -- about Washington or museums?

On the other hand, the Gallery has extended its hours to 9 p.m. for the Vermeer Exhibition (at least that's what the paper reports), and that does increase the potential number of visitors. I still get the feeling of a general disregard for the general public, because in spite of the extended hours they could be doing something about these lines. Why not have people out here giving real information about such things as when doors will open, how many tickets you can get, what time you can go, etc.?

I'm thinking about the ways in which DisneyWorld and Universal Studios manage to keep you happy, even while you stand in endless lines. Of course they are in business and need satisfied customers. I hate to think of this as an argument in favor of privatizing everything and leaving it all to market forces. But they could have signs, if not people with some useful information; or handouts that tell people what's in the National Gallery of Art. There must be something in this big building other than 21 paintings by Vermeer! There are endless numbers of things they could have done to make us feel better about standing in line. But I know, we're supposed to feel great because we know (or we think

we know) that we will get those coveted tickets. Isn't that enough?

9:00 a.m.

There is now a sense of having reached a breakthrough -- the doors will open at 9:30, so we only have a half hour more of standing outside in line. It's getting to feel colder than we thought it was, and we are stamping out feet a bit (in spite of my two pairs of socks). My friend/line-mate, the Stress Doc, is definitely the most talkative of our "group." He is from New York, went to school at Tulane, dropped out of his doctoral program but stayed in New Orleans before moving to Washington. He's now talking effusively about A Confederacy of Dunces, giving him an opportunity to relate it (and himself) to New Orleans, which has now formed the central point of this non-conversation. It's unclear whether anyone else is really interested in the comparisons between Washington and New Orleans, even if Mardi Gras is soon upon us (or them). Since I keep looking around and mumbling into my tape recorder, I guess my line-mates have a sense that maybe I have some other interest in this experience. But we don't discuss it. And I'm not the most affable sort of person in this situation. Not sure how, but Lucien Freud has entered the conversation -- the Stress Doc loved the Hirshhorn exhibition, but I don't bother to ask whether he saw the one at the Met. We agree in our admiration of Freud the artist.

The man with the mink coat manages to come back in the other direction (i.e., from the back of the line -- wherever that is). Either he's giving up, or perhaps he's decided he has connections that will get him in more directly. Every now and then a taxi drops off people who look surprised at the length of the line and aren't sure whether to bother going to the end. I'm wondering why they look so surprised.

Will this bonding experience be like the famous New York blackout? A lot of babies were born nine months after that. Will they be able to track weddings and relationships that happened as a result of this?

9:40 a.m.

I guess the doors didn't open at 9:30. A wave of disappointment has set in, but it is accompanied by a feeling that we all know for certain that the Gallery opens at 10:00 -- so we really are on the downside of this. One more wrong rumor; what about the rumor about ticket numbers? A coffee cart actually, finally, is visible alongside the line ahead of us. I look around and don't see anyone I know. I guess everyone I know has already seen Vermeer or knows people who can get them in without standing in line.

9:45 a.m.

Lots of people are still coming -- walking past us back toward the end of the line. I have no idea how long the line is, and I don't think they're going to get in. But most of them look at us in line and still have hopeful faces as they walk by. My line-mate -- the one who tried three times before -- says that when she was here previously the end of the line was all the way around the building by the Gallery entrance on Constitution Avenue: full circle.

Interesting how there are really no entrepreneurs for all these people. There's the usual vendor cart on Constitution, but that's not near where we are standing. The single moving coffee cart is getting closer, and I can see signs that indicate he has some packaged baked goods and hot cider. From where I'm standing it looks pretty grungy. You'd think this would be a great opportunity for entrepreneurs. The glove/mitten guy is back again -- there seem to be two (one had added umbrellas to his wares, since it's now raining a little) -- and one of them has earmuffs and things in brights pinks and orange, which he hawks as "Vermeer colors" -- at least someone is trying to entertain us. I'm remembering Berlin and the Reichstag Wrapping of last summer: it was a grand outdoors festival and super business opportunity for vendors. Unfair comparison: this is winter and the festival is inside -- assuming we manage to get in.

The coffee cart is finally passing our part of the line, and the man sheepishly tells us that he ran out of coffee way down there (he points), since he has no more hot water (it was very good, he assures us -- it's a "high class cart"), but he does still have cider (which no one seems to want). The man-in-the-mink-coat comes back, and it looks like he's going back to his place way behind us. I guessed wrong. He must have needed coffee or a bathroom at Starbucks.

10:03 a.m.

Despite the 9:30 rumors, the line is finally beginning to move -- we can see that ahead of us -- too slowly, but there's a great sense of cheering. We're actually beginning to move a bit. Linda, the woman behind me, sees a guy (from work?) walking by, and they say friendly hellos and he sort of melts into the line behind us. I keep looking back to see whether he's embarrassed at having cheated so blatantly. He's either really oblivious or wants to look that way. This from the woman who was worried about whether we would save her a place in line!

10:10 a.m.

In the door! (Constitution Avenue entrance). Just as we're moving inside (is this symbolic?), the Stress Doc officially introduces himself to the young editor (after talking for two hours!) -- his name is Mark -- and he suggests that they meet for coffee and more book talk sometime. He gives her his card. She should call him. Discovery time: the suburban mother thought I was with Mark. Mark and I thought she and the editor were together. In fact we all came alone. In the doors, around the corner, up the stairs to the right -- the line is moving -- not too slowly. Into the Rotunda; the guard is pushing us along; asking us to stay as close to the Rotunda walls as possible. The guards keep moving us along -- very nice, polite. It really is a gorgeous space!

10:18 a.m.

Still in the Rotunda -- moving slowly around the whole space. Then down into the long (west) corridor, where the older paintings are. I can see the Andrea del Castagna "David" shield from an angle. So why am I standing in line for Vermeer? I'm telling Mark and my "group-mates" that in a minute we'll be in front of my favorite painting -- the great tondo by Fra Angelico and Fra Lippo Lippi. Mark decides to go and check it out for himself -- we promise to hold his place. I'm happy to see it from the door, where the line passes by, and watch Mark examining the painting in the gallery. I've spent so many hours in front of that thing! How wierd to be doing it this way. All these people are being forced to find out that there's art in the National Gallery! Then the door that reveals Ginevra di Benci in the distance -- I point her out, but no one seems to care much, and I guess Mark isn't about to walk that far.

We're on the other side of the corridor, and the line keeps moving -- past Hals and Rembrandt. No one seems very interested. Wrong. The man ahead of me (the one who was reading The New Yorker two hours ago) decides to go check out the Rembrandt self-portrait. He returns to tell his companion (the one who was reading New York Magazine) that it really is impressive. We're now facing the Rotunda, and it's fun to see Giambologna's Mercury as if floating in the center of that grand expanse. Can't tell whether anyone notices; after all, we're near the end: eyes on the prize. As we move toward the Rotunda, Mark comments that he never noticed the black columns before. We all agree that it's really splendid (I decide not to do my John Russell Pope thing). Mark comments that the columns remind him of Stonehenge. That gets us to a discussion about how this is also a place for worshipping and that, like Stonehenge, no one is quite sure what the religion is.

I ask my companions when they were last here. The editor says January (I don't ask whether she means last month). The suburban mother was here for the Barnes Collection. Mark says "not long ago" (but I decide that I don't believe him).

10:35 a.m.

We're back out in the Rotunda, going around again. I'm wondering whether the Gallery has done any research about how many of these

people have been here before. I realize that when I decided to experience this I also didn't want to be a journalist or investigator. My guess is that the journalists who wrote about this haven't actually stood in line the whole time; but of course, they're so busy. So I haven't been interviewing people. An opportunity lost, but I remember knowing that you really have to know how to do interviewing. Mark and the editor (and the rest of us) are now talking about movies, about "Sense and Sensibility" and "Persuasion" and others. Henry James gets into the conversation -- the editor's favorite is What Maisie Knew, and I'm restraining myself, although I really want to push The Princess Casamassima, which is my favorite.

10:37 a.m.

We're now in the other (east) corridor. I'm happy at the prospect of peeking in at Gainsborough et al, and the chance to see Napoleon again (I will not subject these people to an art tour!). Now it's moving fairly rapidly, since we only have to go to the end of that corridor to the ticket desk. Just before we get there a lady is handing out passes for people who want to go right in. Some people take them.

10:44 a.m.

I am at the ticket desk! I ask how many tickets I can have (answer: four), and so I ask whether I can have them for 4:00, and I get them. Feeling of triumph! Mark first takes the ticket for right now, but then changes his mind. I think Linda and her illegally-cut-in-line friend go right in. The sense of friendship has waned. It's now every man for himself, although I do try to say goodbye to the others.

As I'm walking away from the desk, I see a few arrogant-looking people going in toward the exhibition. I guess these are the ones who didn't have to stand in line. And they sure are proud of that! I must have looked like that when I wheeled my mother in last November. That's what I usually look like, I guess. The Mall entrance is closed for some reason, so I have to go downstairs, and find that the 7th Street entrance is also closed, so I go out on Constitution, which gives me a chance to see what's left of the line I was just in. But now it's really raining outside.

The line is very long as I go out. Lots of umbrellas are up, so maybe the umbrella man had some sales. I'm walking along Constitution Avenue, toward 7th St., and trying to figure out who these people are. But they really can't be characterized. Somewhere near where the building ends, there is a guard holding a sign:

"This is the end of the line to obtain passes for the Vermeer Exhibition. After this point, there will be no passes available for entry to the exhibition today. This line, to obtain passes for same-day entry, begins to form several hours before the Gallery opens to the public. Advance passes are no longer available for any time or date. We regret the inconvenience."

I'm wondering why they don't bother to say when the Gallery opens

to the public (everyone knows that!), or more specific suggestions about getting in.

Amazingly, there are lots of people standing in the rain behind this sign, so they presumably don't care. Of course, the sign cannot be read unless you're right there where the guard is holding it (he very kindly holds it out toward me so I could read it into my tape recorder). The line continues around the building, almost to Madison Drive -- past where I was standing when I began this morning. But these people are not going to get in.

I don't get it. They are standing in the rain holding their umbrellas, and very calm and matter-of-fact about it all. Why isn't the guard walking up and down the line telling people they won't get in? Of course, if the guard holding the sign did that, how would "the end of the line to obtain passes" be marked? Or maybe someone did go up and down the line and tell them, but they don't believe it. These are clearly immense logistical problems, on a par with shipping zillion-dollar paintings from across the oceans, or convincing Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth, to lend her splendid Vermeer. At the end of the line (almost at Madison Drive), there is a guard who is telling people that there are at least 250 people behind the end-of-the line sign, and while maybe a few of them will get in, there's no way you're going to get in if you are this far back in the line. He's trying to discourage them, but they aren't sure they believe him, and only a few people are straggling away.

11:15 a.m.

I walk back to my office with four 4:00 passes safely tucked in my pocket. A new dilemma begins. What will I do with these precious cards? I call my wife and of course she wants a second view (she got in through friends a few weeks ago). That takes care of two. I think about which friend should get this special gift. I ask a colleague at the Wilson Center and she is so moved that she begins to cry when I offer her a ticket. She hasn't had time to stand in line. One ticket left. I ask my lunch date, and he says his wife would be thrilled, so we call her and she is. That was easy.

3:50 p.m.

We meet in the Constitution Avenue entrance of the National Gallery. We check our coats with surly and over-worked checkroom attendants. Upstairs in the rotunda we are back in line again. It's almost like this morning, but the wait isn't too long. They let people in by bunches. Someone must be counting the numbers allowed in.

4:10 p.m.

We enter the exhibition, jostling our way through. It's an exhausting experience, even more crowded than when I was there in November -- although it's also enormously uplifting. The "View of Delft" remains my favorite, even if I wonder whether it may be overcleaned -- can anything be this glittering? I decide that "The Geographer" is my second favorite. The "educational" section on optics is wonderful. The word on the street is that they don't let

you go backwards, but that's not true, so those with energy can go back to take second and third looks at favorite paintings. Which we do, weaving in and out until, an hour later, we decide it's time to leave.

5:15 p.m.

On the way out I notice that the drive in from Constitution Avenue is blocked off with bright traffic cones. I had noticed people in wheelchairs in the exhibition a few minutes before this. How did they get in? There are none of those wheelchair signs directing people elsewhere. There were no line painters in the road (in the rain). What happens to access for the disabled? It's always an access problem around here, I guess.

But access is frequently even more complex than that designated by wheelchair signs. Who knows how many of those people standing in line for Vermeer, waiting to enter our Stonehenge, assumed that the artist represented an eternal verity -- appropriate to a place of worship? After all, it is that quality of truth, which transcends fashion, that gives universal acceptance to a Vermeer exhibition. Nowhere in the galleries would you hear discussions about the merits or lasting power of Vermeer, as one did in recent National Gallery exhibitions of giants such as Malevich, Mondrian, and DeKooning. It was precisely in this mode that Vermeer's paintings were displayed -- starting with the introductory panels about the artist and his life and his city. Who can question anything?

Yet as Francis Haskell has so brilliantly reviewed for us¹, Vermeer has been an eternal verity only since Thore's 1866 monograph on the artist. And the virtually universal deification with which we treat Vermeer came about only gradually after that. I find this almost impossible to believe, standing before the "View of Delft" or "The Artist in his Studio" (which the Viennese didn't see fit to lend), or the glorious burst of yellow which almost overwhelms everything else in the Frick Collection's long gallery. But there it is. Everyone didn't always worship Vermeer. He was "rediscovered" -- just like other and often lesser artists. Armed with that bit of trivia one might think about all of this quite differently. For example, how is it possible that it took someone special to look at these paintings and recognize them as sublimely beautiful? Wasn't that always self-evident? If not, then what works of art are we missing now that have yet to be called to our attention? How can we trust the judgments of experts (a.k.a. curators, art historians, etc.) if they don't immediately know when something is great art?

Is our admiration for Vermeer's work simply a matter of taste? Will the taste for Vermeer fade and rise periodically, the way taste for Victorian genre painting has seen its ups and downs? In that case, what do we mean by "quality" -- and is it always recognizable? The Metropolitan Museum of Art did us all a great

¹ Francis Haskell, Rediscoveries in Art (Ithaca, 1976), pp. 86-90

service with its recent "Rembrandt, Not Rembrandt" exhibition. By placing before the public a great range of paintings which had all been considered Rembrandts at some point, a persuasive case was made for how our knowledge and understanding of the artist's work is always evolving. We learned about taste, market forces, quality, connoisseurship, public and private collecting, as well as about the relation between these and other issues.

By laying Vermeer's oeuvre before us as one of mankind's greatest achievements -- which it surely is -- the National Gallery of Art gave that fortunate quarter million or so visitors a once-in-a-lifetime experience. But they also missed an important opportunity to help the visitor ask questions that would expand one's understanding of the art and its meaning. One had only to hear all the puzzled commentary in the first of the paintings galleries, where early Vermeer paintings didn't conform to visual expectations, but for which text panels discussed only the iconography, leaving visitors puzzled -- or perhaps desperate for whatever additional information the catalogue would reveal. I didn't buy the catalogue because, much as I wanted to encounter the exhibition from a conventional visitor's experience, I include in that the need to gain primary information from wall panels and labels.

This is not meant as the scribblings of an ingrate. I remain grateful for the dual opportunities I was afforded to see so much work by an artist whose work I have loved since I was a child (actually from the time of my first blockbuster exhibition, "Treasures from Vienna", when the great Vermeer toured the American continent following World War II). But considering the immense amount of money, scholarship, and logistics that combine to make these experiences possible, is it too much to ask that the plain ordinary visitor also be taken into consideration?