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Plus: Amy Herzog's '4,000 Miles' at ACT, Mostly British Film Festival, musician Christopher Owens

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Vermeer masterpiece at center of de Young exhibition has fascinated generations

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## WELCOME

### Vermeer's eternal women



When it comes to artist Johannes Vermeer's work, writer Steven Winn definitely has an eye for the ladies — which made him the perfect choice to write this week's cover story on the M.H. de Young Museum's exhibition "Girl With a Pearl Earring: Dutch Paintings From the Mauritshuis."

"As directly and intimately as they speak to the viewer, Vermeer's sitters seem in communion with each other as well. Think of all those women — one tuning a lute, another operating a metal balance, a third with her hand on a water pitcher — near a window, sunlight filtering in from the left," Winn says. "Every time I visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, I pay my respects to the artist's 'Study of a Young Woman.' The way she greets me back, turning her ineffably sweet gaze over her left shoulder, summons the memory of the similarly posed 'Girl With a Pearl Earring,' which I saw on a pilgrimage to The Hague in 1985. I was in my 30s then, a different person in many ways. But time vanishes in the presence of Vermeer's 'Young Woman' and earringed 'Girl.' They live, on first glance or close and repeated viewings, in an eternal present tense."

See Winn's story on Page 14, accompanied by Art Critic Kenneth Baker's interview with Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis Director Emilie Gordenker.

Next week: SF Sketchfest returns.

Sue Adolphson, Sunday Datebook Editor

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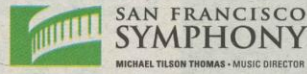
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Schnittke Selections from Peer Gynt  
Robin Holloway Ocean Voyage from Peer Gynt

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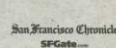
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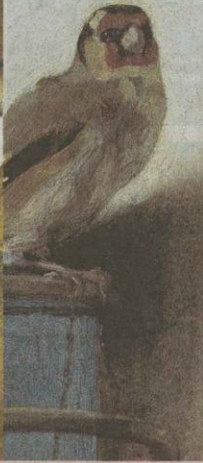
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Detail, Vermeer's "Girl With a Pearl Earring"; detail, Carel Fabritius' "The Goldfinch"; detail, Jan Steen's "As the Old Sing, So Twitter the Young" / Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis.



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Detail of Vermeer's "Girl With a Pearl Earring" Design by Erick Wong / The Chronicle

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**Jan. 19**  
**MERLE HAGGARD**



COVER STORY

# Captivating 'Girl' beckons at de Young

By Steven Winn

For someone about whom so little is actually known, she contains multitudes. For more than three centuries, viewers have gazed at the enigmatic, softly lit face of Johannes Vermeer's "Girl With a Pearl Earring" and wondered.

Is that sidelong, over-the-shoulder glance directed our way transfixing because it's so casual and natural? Or does it mesmerize because of the potentially ambiguous feelings, from invitation to wariness, knowingness to utter innocence, that many find in the sitter's wide and limpid gray-green eyes? Do

those parted lips suggest she has just spoken or is about to speak, has lost her words or merely been caught in an unguarded, unconsciously sensual moment?

What to make of that exotic blue turban that swad-

dles her head and sprouts a long yellow sash, a costume piece no 17th century Dutch girl would routinely wear? Even the most celebrated pearl in the history of Western art holds a kind of mystery. Noting the jewel's size and volume, curator Quentin Buvelot argues that such a pearl would be so rare and valuable that the earring might be made instead of varnished glass.

As real as this girl may seem — some critics have suggested the artist used his own 12- or 13-year-old daughter as a model — the turban and outsize pearl add a seemingly intentional sheen of fantasy.

**Girl With a Pearl Earring: Dutch Paintings From the Mauritshuis:** Jan. 26-June 2. \$25 (includes museum admission). M.H. de Young Museum, Golden Gate Park, S.F. (415) 750-3600. [www.deyoungmuseum.org](http://www.deyoungmuseum.org).



Johannes Vermeer's "Girl With a Pearl Earring" (c. 1665) is often dubbed the Dutch "Mona Lisa."

Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis





Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis photos

It's no wonder Vermeer's "Girl" (c. 1665) inspired Tracy Chevalier's eponymous 1999 novel and subsequent 2003 film adaptation, starring Scarlett Johansson as a fictional servant who becomes the famous picture's model. Behind the painting's masterfully controlled surfaces, a spectrum of possible meanings and subliminal messages gleam.

This endlessly fascinating work, often dubbed the Dutch "Mona Lisa," is the titular centerpiece of a small, choice exhibition of Dutch Golden Age paintings opening Jan. 26 at the de Young Museum. "Girl With a Pearl Earring: Dutch Paintings From the Mauritshuis" includes 35 canvases from the magnificent Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis in The Hague.

The works by Rembrandt, Jan Steen, Frans Hals, Nicolaes Maes, Carel Fabritius and others cover the range of this glorious era, with portraits, landscapes and seascapes, genre paintings, historical paintings and still lifes.

Among the works in the exhibition "Girl With a Pearl Earring: Dutch Paintings From the Mauritshuis" are Jan van Goyen's "View of the Rhine Near Hochelten" (1653), above, and Jan Steen's "As the Old Sing, So Twitter the Young" (ca. 1668-1670), right.

Whatever they painted — an old man's rheumy complexion as he gazes into the middle distance, ships in full sail under cottony clouds, carousing villagers or a candle's reflection shimmering in the curved surfaces of a glass goblet — these Dutch masters exuded a sense of confident contentment about the physical world they inhabited and sought to render with such loving, almost devotional fidelity. As Lynn Federle Orr writes in the exhibition catalog, "Many of these artworks mirror shared beliefs in the virtue of honest labor, the warmth of a spare but comfortable house, and the quiet beauty of a productive landscape."

"Girl" continues on page 17



191161

Johannes Vermeer's "Girl With a Pearl Earring" (c. 1665) is often dubbed the Dutch "Mona Lisa."



COVER STORY

# Mauritshuis culls best of collection

By Kenneth Baker

Emilie Gordenker, 47, director of the Mauritshuis, the Netherlands Royal Picture Gallery in The Hague, had a binational upbringing. Born to an American father, she grew up mostly in the United States but, she said, her Dutch mother "was always homesick, and my father was an academic, so they made a deal that we would spend every summer in the Netherlands. So I really am from both countries."

After taking a degree in Russian and East European Studies at Yale, Gordenker said, "I started late with art history, but once I decided on it, I dove into it and started studying all things Dutch." A doctorate from New York University's Institute of Fine Arts rounded out her preparation to lead a unique institution.

We spoke when she stopped in San Francisco, en route to the closing of "Girl With a Pearl Earring: Dutch Paintings From the Mauritshuis" in Tokyo.

**Q: How was the selection made for the exhibition?**

**A:** We only have 800 paintings, so we don't have the kind of depth that would allow us to send traveling exhibitions out a lot. The last time we did one was 25 years ago. What we decided to do was to pick only the best. In a way it's a kind of thank-you to our foreign visitors, and to make people realize what an amazing collection it is.

**Q: Do you have curatorial responsibilities?**

**A:** I really am the director, but because the Mauritshuis is such an unusual institution — I really don't know any other like it — we only do Dutch and Flemish paintings of the Golden Age, so everybody's a specialist.



Mauritshuis Director Emilie Gordenker says the traveling exhibition is a sort of thank-you to the museum's foreign visitors.

Drew Altizer Photography

I have responsibility for acquisitions, and am closely involved with the exhibition program.

**Q: What's the most recent acquisition you've made?**

**A:** The collection of the Mauritshuis is so fantastically good that we don't just buy things as a matter of routine. If I buy something new, probably something's got to come off the wall for it, so it's got to be really amazing.

That said, we've done pretty well this year. We've bought a still life by Clara Peeters, a Flemish artist. It's quite unusual, a fantastic still life that has cheeses, among other things. As with everything we buy, it's in perfect condition.

Last year we bought a flower still life by another lesser-known artist named Dirck de Bray. And we bought our first history painting last year by Jan Steen.

**Q: Does the money for these acquisitions come from the**

**government?**

**A:** No, it's all privately funded. There is an outstanding lottery in the Netherlands. It's a private lottery, not a public lottery like they have in the U.K. That's the sort of basis for the funding that we need, but we fundraise for the rest. We've got private donors that contribute, and the Friends of the Mauritshuis. The Mauritshuis is an independent foundation, charged with maintaining the government's art collection and building. So I answer to an advisory board and also to the ministry.

**Q: Are the Friends international?**

**A:** Yes. We have an American Friends. We have the Dutch Friends. They help us with exhibitions and acquisitions. We're the only museum in the Netherlands with an endowment fund and that's also structured like a friends organization, a small group of people, mostly collectors, who donate very generously to us.

**Q: What is being done in the way of improvements?**

**A:** It's a pretty big project. It's got two aims. The first is that we need to renovate parts of the old building, the windows and the climate control needed to be replaced. We very much want to keep the intimate atmosphere of the old building, very small paintings and that very warm setting. We will improve that by replacing the wall coverings, and we're doing the lighting as well, so you can see better. The extension — an Art Deco wing of an existing building across the street — is intended to provide services that we really couldn't fit well into the old building.

**Q: What are your visitor demographics?**

**A:** We get upward of 200,000 visitors a year. Normally, it's about 60 percent foreigners, mostly tourists, of which the largest proportion is Japanese. They're in love with "The Girl With a Pearl Earring." We just

closed the first venue of our show in Tokyo and had more than 750,000 visitors in three months. The second-largest group of foreign visitors are Americans, then those from other European countries. We're beginning to get Chinese visitors. So we're really very much on the tour route as more people venture outside Amsterdam.

**Q: The extension will expand the facility by how much?**

**A:** The entire institution will be twice as big, but much of that is for things we really can't do now, such as the auditorium, a special education space, a library. We will have additional exhibition space big enough for, say, 40 to 45 paintings, substantial but not enormous. If we ever want to do a huge exhibition, I can imagine us being able to use both buildings, so this will give us a lot of flexibility. ■

*Kenneth Baker is The San Francisco Chronicle's art critic. E-mail: kennethbaker@sfgate.com*



## 'Girl' expected to draw crowds of admirers

"Girl" from page 15

Everyday people and scenes of domestic life were at once elevated by the artists' attention and exceptional technique and simultaneously treated in a new, freshly realistic manner. The subjects play music, get drunk or sit in a corner over their lacework. Cows graze languidly in a meadow. A goldfinch, captured by Fabritius with both a sculptural solidity and feathery light brushstrokes, perches, poised to take off, on a feeding box bar.

This show, which has been in Japan, begins a three-city U.S. itinerary at the de Young. ("Girl" moves on to Atlanta's High Museum and then, in a smaller version of the exhibition, to the Frick Collection in New York.) San Francisco is once again the beneficiary of a European museum closing for renovations and loaning out some of its holdings for a high-profile tour.

It happened when the Musée d'Orsay closed in Paris in 2009, furnishing forth two shows of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art at the de Young. The Picasso show that was here in 2011 came from the then-shuttered Musée National Picasso, Paris. Now, with the Mauritshuis out of commission for its upgrade until 2014, the de Young has another marquee attraction.

Richard Benefield, the Fine Arts Museums' deputy director of museums, said the de Young is making a conservative estimate of 200,000 visitors for the four-month run of the Mauritshuis show. Each Orsay exhibition, by comparison, attracted more than 400,000 visitors. This show, with only 35 pieces, is more compact. The de Young is supplementing the Dutch

**Whatever they painted, these Dutch masters exuded a sense of confident contentment about the physical world they inhabited and sought to render with such loving, almost devotional fidelity.**

paintings with "Rembrandt's Century," 17th century works on paper drawn primarily from the Fine Arts Museums' own collection.

Visitors will enter on timed tickets. Those who wish to see the print show must do so first and then circle back to the Mauritshuis paintings. No one will be permitted to re-enter and see the print show after passing through the painting galleries.

Crowd control is essential in a show such as this one. Vermeer's "Girl With a Pearl Earring," one of only 36 extant works by the artist, will have a gallery all to itself near the end of the exhibition. Just as Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" does at the Louvre, this Dutch enchantress is likely to create some bottlenecks. In at least one of the Japanese museums, ropes and stanchions were installed to file visitors past the painting. Benefield is hoping to avoid that bank-lobby kind of tactic.

"We'll just have to see how it goes," he said. "It is a painting that an awful lot of people want to see." ■

Steven Winn is a freelance writer.  
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Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis

Carel Fabritius' "The Goldfinch" (1654) is part of the exhibition at the M.H. de Young Museum.