



**JOHANNES VERMEER  
SAINT PRAXEDIS**

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JOHANNES VERMEER (DELFT 1632-1675)

*Saint Praxedis*

signed and dated 'Meer 1655' (lower left)

oil on canvas

40 x 32½ in. (101.6 x 82 cm.)

£6,000,000–8,000,000

\$11,000,000–13,000,000

€7,400,000–9,800,000

PROVENANCE:

Erna and Jacob Reeder, New York, 1943.  
with Spencer Samuels & Co., New York, 1969.  
The Barbara Piasecka Johnson Collection, by  
whom acquired from the above in 1987.

EXHIBITED:

New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
*Florentine Baroque Art from American Collections*,  
1969, no. 39, pp. 22, 44-5, illustrated as Ficherelli.  
New York, Spencer A. Samuels Gallery, *Inaugural  
Exhibition*, 1984, no. 14, as by Vermeer.  
Warsaw, the Royal Castle, *Opus Sacrum.  
Catalogue of the Exhibition from the Collection of  
Barbara Piasecka Johnson*, 1990, no. 48, pp. 11,  
272-7, illustrated, as by Vermeer.  
Cracow, International Cultural Centre and the  
Wawel Royal Castle, Cracow, *Jan Vermeer van  
Delft, St. Praxedis. An Exhibition of a Painting from  
the Collection of Barbara Piasecka Johnson*, May-  
September 1991, pp. 8-28, as by Vermeer.  
Washington D.C., The National Gallery of Art,  
*Johannes Vermeer*, 12 November 1995-11  
February 1996 and The Royal Cabinet of Paintings  
Mauritshuis, The Hague, 1 March-2 June 1996, no.  
1, pp. 86-9, as by Vermeer.  
Monaco, Musée de la Chapelle de la Visitation,  
*Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675) Sainte Praxedis*,  
1998, pp. 4-37, as by Vermeer.  
Rome, Scuderia del Quirinale, *Vermeer. Il secolo  
d'oro dell'arte olandese*, 27 September 2012-20  
January 2013, no. 45a, as by Vermeer.

LITERATURE:

M. Kitson, 'Current and Forthcoming Exhibitions:  
Florentine Baroque Art in New York', *The  
Burlington Magazine*, 111, June 1969, p. 410, as by  
Vermeer.  
H. Kühn, 'A Study of the Pigments and Grounds  
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Art 2*, Washington, 1972, pp. 154-202.  
D. Hannema, 'Nieuws over Johannes Vermeer van  
Delft', *Enkele mededelingen 'Stichting Hannema-  
de Steurs Fundatie*, 1974-5, p. 22 illustrated, p. 30.  
A. Blankert, *Johannes Vermeer van Delft 1632-  
1675*, Utrecht and Antwerp, 1975, p. 112, no. 5.

C. Wright, *Vermeer*, London, 1976, p. 7, fig. 3, as  
'attributed to Vermeer'.  
A. Blankert, *Johannes Vermeer of Delft 1632-1675*,  
Oxford and New York, 1978, p. 75, no. 13, as a  
copy after Ficherelli.  
D. Hannema, 'Problemen rondom Vermeer van  
Delft', in J.C. Ebbinge, ed., *Boymans Bijdragen*,  
Rotterdam, 1978, p. 95, illustrated p. 6.  
A. Blankert, J.M. Montias and G. Aillaud, *Vermeer*,  
Paris, 1986 (reprinted Amsterdam, 1992), p. 163,  
no. 5.  
A.K. Wheelock, Jr., 'Saint Praxedis: New Light on  
the Early Career of Vermeer', *Artibus et Historiae*,  
14, 1986, pp. 71-89, figs. 1,3-4, 7-13, 15-6 and  
19-20, as by Vermeer.  
P. Richard, 'Trying to Verify a Vermeer',  
*International Herald Tribune*, 25:18, 1987, p. 18,  
illustrated.  
A.K. Wheelock Jr., *Jan Vermeer*, New York, 1988,  
pp. 8, 13, 50-1, pl. 2, as by Vermeer.  
J.M. Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of  
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New York, 1992, p. 163, no. 5.  
W. Chong, *Johannes Vermeer: Gezicht op Delft*,  
Bloemendaal, 1992, pp. 21, 89, no. 23.  
W.A. Liedtke, 'Vermeer Teaching Himself', in  
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Age*, exhibition catalogue, Nationalmuseum,  
Stockholm, 1992, pp. 96, 104-5, nos. 37-8,  
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B. Broos, *Intimacies and Intrigues. History painting  
in the Mauritshuis*, The Hague and Ghent, 1993, p.  
314, no. 41, as possibly the 'missing link' between  
Christ in the House of Mary and Martha and Diana  
and her Companions.  
J.M. Montias, *Vermeer en zijn milieu*, Baarn, 1993,  
pp. 162-3, illustrated p. 17.  
G.J.M. Weber, 'Antoine Dézallier d'Argenville unf  
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Meer of Utrecht.

A.K. Wheelock, Jr., *Vermeer and the Art of  
Painting*, New Haven and London, 1995, pp. 7,  
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to Italian art'.  
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A. Wheelock, *Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675):  
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Visitation, 1998, pp. 5-34, as by Vermeer.  
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Jonker, New Haven and London, 1998, pp. 201-23,  
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B. Broos, 'Vermeer: Malice and Misconception',  
in *Vermeer Studies*, pp. 30, as 'the latest wrongly  
attributed Vermeer'.  
M.J. Bok, 'Not to be confused with the Sphinx of  
Delft: The Utrecht Painter Johannes van der Meer  
(Schipluiden 1630-1695/1697 Vreeswijk?)' in  
*Vermeer Studies*, pp. 67-8, 75 and 79, as probably  
Italian, not by van der Meer or Vermeer.  
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Contemporaries*, Zwolle, 2000, p. 197, as not by  
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W. Liedtke, *Vermeer and the Delft School*,  
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Art, New York, 2001, pp. 581-2, no. 87, as  
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An image of concentrated devotion and meditative poise, this famous painting of *Saint Praxedis* is here offered for sale at auction for the first time in its brief documented history. First considered to be by Vermeer in 1969, the picture has been the subject of scholarly discussion ever since, largely on account of its unusual subject matter in the context of Vermeer and of Dutch painting in general. *Saint Praxedis* was firmly brought into the oeuvre of Vermeer in 1986, and in 1995 featured in the seminal monographic exhibition on the artist at the National Gallery of Art, Washington and Mauritshuis, The Hague, as his earliest known painting. At the time it was the only work by Vermeer, from an established corpus of 36 paintings, to remain in private hands. Since then, the ex-Beit/Rolin *Lady at the Virginals*, a picture that was for a long time dismissed as being by a follower of Vermeer, has been re-accepted into the oeuvre further to its sale at auction in 2004 for £16,425 million (Sotheby's, London, 7 July 2004, lot 8) and is also now in private ownership.

The painting is here presented, as Arthur Wheelock has always maintained, as Vermeer's earliest dated work, an exploratory painting by a young artist who had recently converted to the Catholic faith and who had a proven interest in contemporary Italian art. Moreover, as a technical exercise by an artist who had a profound understanding of the raw materials of painting, of pigments, colour and methods of application.

These assertions are not new, but they are restated here in the light of new evidence yielded from a fresh technical analysis of the picture conducted in the first half of 2014 at the Rijksmuseum. This has provided a compelling endorsement of the Vermeer attribution. It has established: first - that there is no reason to suggest that the signature and date is not integral to the painting. Second - that the paint materials are entirely characteristic of Dutch painting of the period and the lead white pigment is incontrovertibly not Italian. Finally, that analysis of lead white samples taken from both *Saint Praxedis* and from *Diana and her Companions* (Mauritshuis, The Hague; see

fig.1), an established picture by Vermeer from the same period, have provided a precise match. The match is so identical as to suggest that the same batch of pigment could have been used for both paintings.

Vermeer's formative years as an artist are still shrouded in mystery. He joined the painter's guild in Delft in December 1653 but there is no record of him having served a formal apprenticeship in Delft or elsewhere. Suggestions that he might have trained in Utrecht or Amsterdam, or in Delft under the distinguished Carel Fabritius have not found general support among art historians. The consensus of opinion instead suggests that Vermeer was much more likely to have been self-taught. Walter Liedtke takes this view on the basis of the sheer variety of the artist's early output: "During the 1650s Vermeer surveyed a range of artistic ideas and combined and modified them with an extraordinary degree of independence. His

early development is one example of an uncommon but hardly unknown phenomenon in the history of European art: a great artist who essentially teaches himself" (W. Liedtke, *Vermeer – The Complete Paintings*, Bruges, 2008, p. 21).

At the outset of his career, it seems that Vermeer set out to be a history painter. The two earliest pictures that are now universally accepted as by Vermeer are the *Diana and her Companions* (Mauritshuis, The Hague) and *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh; see fig. 2). Neither is dated, but scholars are unanimous in placing them in the years between 1654 and 1656, although not necessarily in the same order. A definite *terminus ante quem* of 1656 is established for both pictures by the dated *Procuress* (Gemäldegalerie, Dresden) which adopts a contemporary subject and truly anticipates the mature 'modern' style for which Vermeer



Fig. 1 Johannes Vermeer, *Diana and her Companions*  
© Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, The Hague / The Bridgeman Art Library

is famed. It is in the context of these two early history paintings that *Saint Praxedis* has to be judged.

The composition of *Saint Praxedis* is borrowed directly from a work by the Florentine artist Felice Ficherelli (1607-1660). Indeed the picture first came to light as a Ficherelli itself when it was lent to an exhibition on Florentine Baroque painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1969. It was then that the Vermeer signature was first noted by the conservation department at the museum, leading Michael Kitson, who reviewed the exhibition, to first consider the possibility that the Delft artist might have made a copy after Ficherelli (*op. cit.*) The signature is clearly of fundamental importance to the Johnson *Saint Praxedis*, which without it, would almost certainly never have been considered to be by Vermeer (see fig. 3). Arthur Wheelock emphasized the point when he first published the picture in 1986, further to scientific examination of the painting conducted by a variety of conservators including Dr Hemann Kühn (Doerner Institute, Munich), Professor Rees Jones (Courtauld Institute, London) and Barbara Miller (National Gallery of Art, Washington). They all found no serious reason to doubt the originality of the signature and date, a view that has recently been endorsed by the Rijksmuseum. The signature has been submitted to further testing in London by Libby Sheldon. Her observations can be cited in full: 'Although no firm conclusion about its

[the signature's] exact date could be reached, the stability of the paint, when tested, suggested it had been on the painting for a long time. The black paint which forms the inscription 'Meer 1655' has not been noticeably reinforced. This black had a very similar appearance to that of the nearby

original black shadow paint and its condition – the ways in which it has been broken up with age - supports the proposition that the inscription is old'. It must also be asked in what conceivable circumstances would a Vermeer signature have been added to a picture apparently so unlikely for the artist.

Wheelock also raised the possibility of a second, hardly discernible signature, painted thinly in light ochre in the right corner. He accepted Egbert Haverkamp-Begeman's suggestion that it might have originally read: 'Meer naar Riposo' (Riposo being the Italian nickname for Ficherelli; *op. cit.*, 1986, pp. 74-75). This signature is so indistinct that recent examination of it failed to yield any meaningful interpretation.

When the signatures were previously examined at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the paint materials were examined at the same time to determine whether or not they were consistent with seventeenth century practices. Conservators



Fig. 2 Johannes Vermeer, *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*  
© National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh / The Bridgeman Art Library



Fig. 3 Detail showing the signature of the present lot



The present lot



Fig. 4 Felice Ficherelli, *Saint Praxedis* (Fergnani collection, Ferrara)

confirmed that they were, and found that the use of a chalk ground and the distribution of elements in the lead white were characteristic of Dutch as opposed to Italian painting techniques. This question of the origins of the paint materials takes on special significance in the case of *Saint Praxedis* since debate about the picture has centered on the key issue as to whether it was painted in Italy or in Holland. Several eminent scholars have taken the view first put forward by Wadum in 1998 that the picture is Italian, if not by Ficherelli himself, and on that basis they have chosen to disregard it altogether from the Vermeer or the wider Dutch context.

In order to address this underlying issue, the recent technical analysis conducted by the Rijksmuseum has focused on the lead white pigment used throughout the painting of *Saint Praxedis*. Lead white was one of the most commonly used pigments by European artists

working in oils in the 17th century. It was produced on a large scale, it was relatively inexpensive and widely available locally to artists of all schools. As a result, artists did not travel with lead white, a fact born out by extensive studies of the pigment used by itinerant artists such as Van Dyck, Sweerts and Rubens who were active both to the south and north of the Alps. The significance of lead white from an art historical perspective is that isotope analysis is able to trace the origins of the lead and distinguish between cisalpine and transalpine lead ores, the primary raw material of metallic lead. "Like a fingerprint, the data can be traced back from the pigment to its raw form of metallic lead and to the lead ore. For example it can be determined if a lead white sample originates from a northern or southern source" (see D. Fabian and G. Fortunato, 'Tracing White: A study of Lead White Pigments found in Seventeenth-Century Paintings using High Precision Lead Isotope

Abundance Ratios', in *Trade in Artist's Materials: Markets and Commerce in Europe to 1700*, ed. by J. Kirby, S. Nash, and J. Canon, London 2010.)

Particles of lead taken from samples of lead white pigment used in *Saint Praxedis* were submitted for high precision lead isotope ratio analysis at the Free University, Amsterdam. The results placed the lead white squarely in the Dutch/Flemish cluster of samples, establishing with certainty that its origin is north European and entirely consistent with mid-seventeenth century painting in Holland. Two separate samples from the picture have been tested to certify this result. This provides incontrovertible scientific proof that the picture was not painted in Italy. Furthermore, a lead white sample taken from *Diana and her Companions* was tested in the same manner to allow for comparison between *Saint Praxedis* and a work from the same

approximate date that is universally accepted as by Vermeer. The outcome of this was extraordinary, providing an almost identical match of isotope abundance values between the two samples. They relate so precisely as to even suggest that the exact same batch of paint could have been used for both pictures. The technical report and the data from this analysis is available separately on request.

In the 2012/13 Rome exhibition, *Saint Praxedis* was hung alongside the picture by Ficherelli which is now widely considered to be the prototype for it (see fig. 4). The comparison perhaps posed more questions than it answered, not least as to whether another version or a copy of the Ficherelli might have served as the actual model for the Johnson picture. Rather than endorse the primacy of the Ficherelli, notwithstanding its somewhat abraded state, the comparison rather emphasized the expressive power and intensity

of the Johnson painting. Indeed the exercise underlined one of the most disconcerting aspects about the Johnson painting in that this does not have the character of a formulaic replica. This was first noted by Wadum who made the point that the paint has been applied, not from the front to the back in the way that a copy was usually made, but built up, layer upon layer, in the manner of a prime picture. For instance, the ewer was not blocked out in the red dress before it was painted, the red extends underneath the left corner and under the handles. As Wadum rightly asserts: 'One would not expect to find these phenomena, appearing like *pentimenti*, in an almost literal copy' (*loc. cit.*, p. 217).

It could be argued that the vibrant, original character of *Saint Praxedis* supports rather than negates the argument for Vermeer's authorship. While it would be natural for a self-taught artist in his formative years to make

experimental copies - the eclectic range of Vermeer's early output has been widely noted - would one expect an artist of Vermeer's technical ability and curiosity to make a plain, disinterested copy of the Florentine picture? Perhaps more likely, Vermeer would have striven to get to the essence of Ficherelli's technique; to have adapted his style to that of his model while at the same time attempted to invigorate the composition with his own bravura interpretation. The most obvious compositional difference between the two pictures is the addition of the crucifix in the Johnson picture, which, as the x-ray suggests, was probably added late on in the execution, serving to emphasise the religiosity of the image. The artist also seems to have applied the paint more densely and heightened the colour scheme, which lends the figure a more intense physical presence. The use of the ultramarine in the sky is significant on two counts. First, it was one of the most expensive

pigments available to an artist and therefore was highly unlikely to be used as abundantly as this in the production of a regular copy. More importantly, ultramarine is a pigment that is strongly associated with Vermeer. He used it throughout his career and whereas he applied it sparingly in the two other early history paintings, here it is used profusely and in a highly unusual manner, by any standards. The other principal difference between the two pictures is the attitude of Praxedis's head, here elongated slightly and painted with layers of small brushstrokes and softened contours. The result is an image of great meditative poise and reflective contemplation which has resounding echoes with other female protagonists in Vermeer's later paintings. Wheelock has noted the striking similarity between the downcast faces of *Saint Praxedis* and the *Maid Asleep*, painted about two years later, which are almost mirror images of each other (Metropolitan Museum, New York; see fig. 5; *op. cit.*, 1986, p. 85).

A strict comparison between the *Saint Praxedis* and the other two early paintings by Vermeer is made difficult by the extent to which the artist will have adapted his style to imitate Ficherelli's. The painting techniques used in each of the three early works also varies considerably. Nonetheless, a number of striking connections, both in composition and



Fig. 5 Johannes Vermeer, *A Maid Asleep* (detail)  
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technique do exist. Most obviously, all three are large-scale, figurative compositions executed using unusually vivid colour combinations. In terms of technique, although the unusual, swirling brushwork used to render Praxedis's red dress does allude to Ficherelli's, it is also reminiscent of the thick and fluid application of paint employed in the Edinburgh picture. In both works the artist uses sharp contours with thick impasted paint to delineate the folds in the draperies. Wheelock also compares the flickering brushstrokes used to render Saint Praxedis's left sleeve with the sleeve of the nymph kneeling before Diana in the Mauritshuis painting. (*Johannes Vermeer*, exhibition catalogue, New Haven and London, 1995, p. 88 ).

All three paintings reveal an artist who was drawing on an eclectic range of visual sources far removed from his native Delft. For the *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* it is generally thought that Vermeer had been looking closely at contemporary painting in Antwerp, to the historical subjects of Van Dyck and his circle. As several scholars have remarked, the composition is actually closely related to a picture of the same subject, datable to circa 1645, by Erasmus Quellinus II (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Valenciennes), which lends weight to the idea that Vermeer might have travelled south to Flanders at some stage around 1650. The *Diana and her Companions* has been widely linked with a picture on the same theme of circa 1650 by Jacob van Loo (Museum Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Brunswick), indicating that Vermeer was also familiar with cross-currents in Amsterdam. Both these pictures also reveal stylistic affinities with works found in Utrecht by the likes of Abraham Bloemaert and Hendrick Tebruggen, making it seem likely that Vermeer also visited Utrecht. Some scholars have suggested he may have even trained there.

Assuming that Vermeer did not travel to Italy, and Wheelock does not rule out the possibility, the artist's first-hand experience of Italian art would have been confined to the limited number of Italian pictures that he could have had access to in and around Delft. From a document of 1672 revealing that he was

asked to adjudicate in a dispute over some Italian paintings, we do know that Vermeer was recognized as an expert in this field. Although they were relatively scarce in Delft in the mid-seventeenth century, plenty of Italian pictures were circulating in the Dutch art market in Amsterdam and elsewhere, and Vermeer may very easily have encountered the prototype for *Saint Praxedis* on his travels in Holland, if not in Delft itself. Wadum proposed that another contemporary Italian picture may have provided the inspiration for one of Vermeer's great masterpieces - *The Milkmaid* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam), whose pose is closely connected to a painting of *Artemisia* by the Genoese artist Domenico Fiasella (1589-1669). Being the son of an art dealer one can imagine Vermeer coming into contact with other dealers and an unusually diverse range of material. For instance, the Amsterdam and Delft art dealer Johannes de Renialme, lists ten Italian pictures in a 1657 inventory along with a painting by Vermeer, which implies that they were probably acquainted (see J.M. Montias, *Artists and Artisans in Delft: A socio-economic Study of the Seventeenth Century*, Princeton, 1982, pp. 249-250).

The impact Ficherelli's *Saint Praxedis* may have exerted on the young Vermeer is not hard to imagine. The subject was rarely treated by Italian artists and Vermeer could well have admired it not just on artistic grounds but also on account of its highly unusual and devotional character. Praxedis was an obscure Christian Saint from the second century, revered for having cared for the bodies of Christians who died under religious persecution. She is shown here in an image of devout contemplation squeezing the blood from a sponge with which she had tended to a decapitated martyr who lies on the ground beside her. Born a protestant, Vermeer converted to Catholicism shortly before his marriage to Catherina Bolnes on 20 April 1653 and evidence suggests that he adopted his wife's faith with conviction. The fact that he named his two younger sons Francis and Ignatius after the two great saints of the Jesuit order attests to this. In light of this, as Wheelock has always maintained, *Saint Praxedis* would have acted as an unequivocal statement of Vermeer's commitment to the Catholic faith.

