

Gallery. The Art of Perception

Excerpt

William Holman Hunt, *Isabella and the Pot of Basil*

A strange picture. We can see a young woman in a transparent negligee whose hair entwines itself around an ornate pot with luxuriant basil. The author of the painting, William Holman Hunt, was a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, an artistic association founded in the mid 19th century by young idealists who aimed at restoring painting to its former heights, at making art true and honest, as it had been, according to the founders of the Brotherhood, in the times before Raphael, during the first period of the Italian Renaissance. Although the activity of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, whose members turned out to be completely different personalities, expired very quickly, it greatly influenced British art of the second half of the 19th century.

Hunt did not planned *Isabella* as a work that would comply with the ideals of the Brotherhood. Only the topic refers to the Renaissance. *Isabella* is a heroine of one of the short stories of *The Decameron* by Boccaccio. She fell in love with Lorenzo, a young man who worked in her brothers' workshop. This infuriated the brothers who thought Lorenzo too lowly to marry their sister, they lured him away, murdered, buried his body in the forest and told *Isabella* that he had been sent away on business. Lorenzo, however, visited *Isabella* in a dream, told her the dreadful truth and showed her the place where his body had been buried. *Isabella* exhumed his body, cut off his head and hid it in a pot in which she planted basil. The pot with the remains of her love became her domestic reliquary which she worshipped every day.

This gruesome necrophiliac narrative differs from the rest of the stories presented in *The Decameron*, which is perceived as a masterpiece of erotic literature. It is usually read as a collection of ribald stories and in this way it has been interpreted in numerous theatre and film adaptations. *The Decameron* rarely presents love as a state of a person's mind or as a source of suffering, love is showed as a source of carnal pleasures and a topic of jokes. Nevertheless, we must remember that these stories were created in the time of the horrors of the pestilence in Florence. They were born at the times of the rule of death and death is lurking in them. From time to time it reveals itself, as it does in the story about the love of Lorenzo and *Isabella* which – literally! – goes beyond the grave.

Hunt is obsessed with collecting details, he fills them with intense unclear symbolism which adds to the aura of ambiguity that emanates from his work of art. Many of these details are aimed to tell *Isabella's* story: the faience pot is decorated with skulls, a chandelier burns dimly above indicating eternal adoration, roses symbolise passion and bloody sacrifice made in the name of love... A strange picture, so distant from renaissance sensuality, in its meaning close to deep anxieties and dark desires of the artists of Victorian England.

William Holman Hunt remained faithful to the ideals of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood which aimed at artistic and religious renewal of art. He believed that elevated evangelical messages could be conveyed in paintings touching upon contemporary topics, not only biblical. He took themes from current social events but also from religion and literature and in this way he followed the programme of moral art in which biblical references and teachings were involved.

Johannes Vermeer van Delft, *Woman Holding a Balance*

The most mysterious painting by Vermeer. It presents the interior of a sumptuous Dutch home where subdued light pours through a yellow curtain displaying a figure of a pregnant woman holding a balance, and a table where pearls and golden coins sparkle. The room is otherwise empty, only a grey wall and a fragment of floor can be seen. The figure of the woman gleams enclosed by a dark painting in an ebony frame. The painting is a depiction of the Last Judgment.

The scene is watched from very close which adds to its intimacy. The woman is unaware of being observed, she is deeply immersed in her occupation, looking at the pans of the balance with an expectant half-smile. It may seem to be just an ordinary genre painting of a beautiful town-dweller balancing her jewels. Does anything allow for an allegorical interpretation of this domestic scene which is so similar to many other depicted in Dutch paintings from the 17th century and other works of Vermeer?

It is not accidental that the figure of the woman stands in front of a depiction of the Last Judgment. Placing "one painting in another" is a way of introducing new messages into a given scene, of adding a commentary, of pointing to its deeper meaning. This method was used by painters who, like Vermeer, preferred hidden symbolism to overt allegory. Thus the scene takes place in two dimensions simultaneously: in mundane, temporal and in heavenly, eternal. The woman is balancing pearls but behind her, in the other world, good and evil is being balanced. Over the woman's head there is a depiction of Christ the Judge. We can see the double act of balancing: weighing pearls, which symbolise precious goods but also sin and pride, and the final balancing of virtues and offences when the eternal life of people is determined: redemption or damnation. The painting depicts both the beginning of life hidden in the woman's womb and its end taking place during the Final Judgment.

The exquisiteness of Vermeer's painting, its exceptionality, although at first it may seem quite simple, encourage new interpretations. But its moral message remains clear and it is in compliance with other works of Vermeer. The balance symbolises Justice and the Last Judgment. The woman is not weighing pearls. The pans of the balance are empty. She is weighing her own deeds. The balance is in equilibrium. The small finger of the woman's hand is erect which highlights horizontal, perfect position of the equilibrium of the balance. Thus it is equilibrium and a balanced judgment which should determine our lives. They should be accompanied by self-knowledge reflected in the mirror on the wall.

The balance the woman is holding managed to find its equilibrium. However, it will be lost as soon as the first pearl drops on the pan or when the woman's hand trembles. In the picture we can see only a fleeting moment, so brief when compared to the eternity of the verdicts of the Last Judgment.

Works of Vermeer are rare. Only around forty paintings are attributed to him. Only a few were signed with the artist's name. Little is known for certain about Vermeer's life which he spent in Delft, a Dutch city which flourished in the 17th century. Historical records provide information on his family life and financial matters but little more. We do not know whose apprentice he was, whether he made any journeys, what his artistic views were. It is certain that he was much admired by his contemporaries. Vermeer's works are deeply rooted in Dutch tradition but at the same time they should be treated as a rare and exceptional phenomenon.