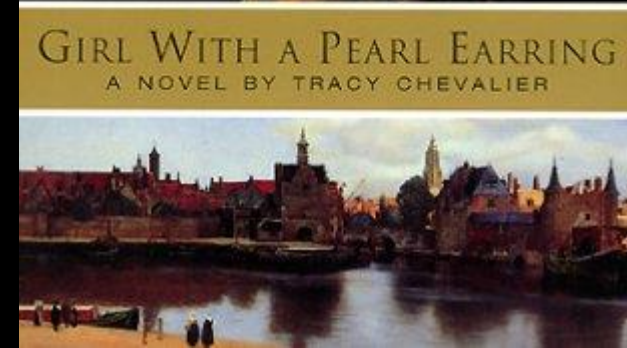


Vermeer and the Play with Vision





Girl with a Pearl Earring, novel and movie
inspired by Vermeer's painting



Crowds queuing around the block to see the Vermeer exhibition at the National Gallery in the 1995-96 winter.





Johannes Vermeer
(1632 – 1675)

- Dutch painter; lived and worked in Delft
- Best known for his scenes of middle-class domestic interiors
- Not a prolific painter; estimated to have made 43-60 pictures his entire career (34-36 have survived).
- Much written about the interpretations of his restrained images, but we will concentrate on his methodical study of light and optical effects

The Dutch contributed to the advancement of lens technology in the 17th century. Technology expands vision but also stimulated discussions about the limitations and reliability of human senses.



Vermeer's participation in this exploration of vision



Interest in optics and optical devices in Delft, Vermeer's hometown

Haarlem

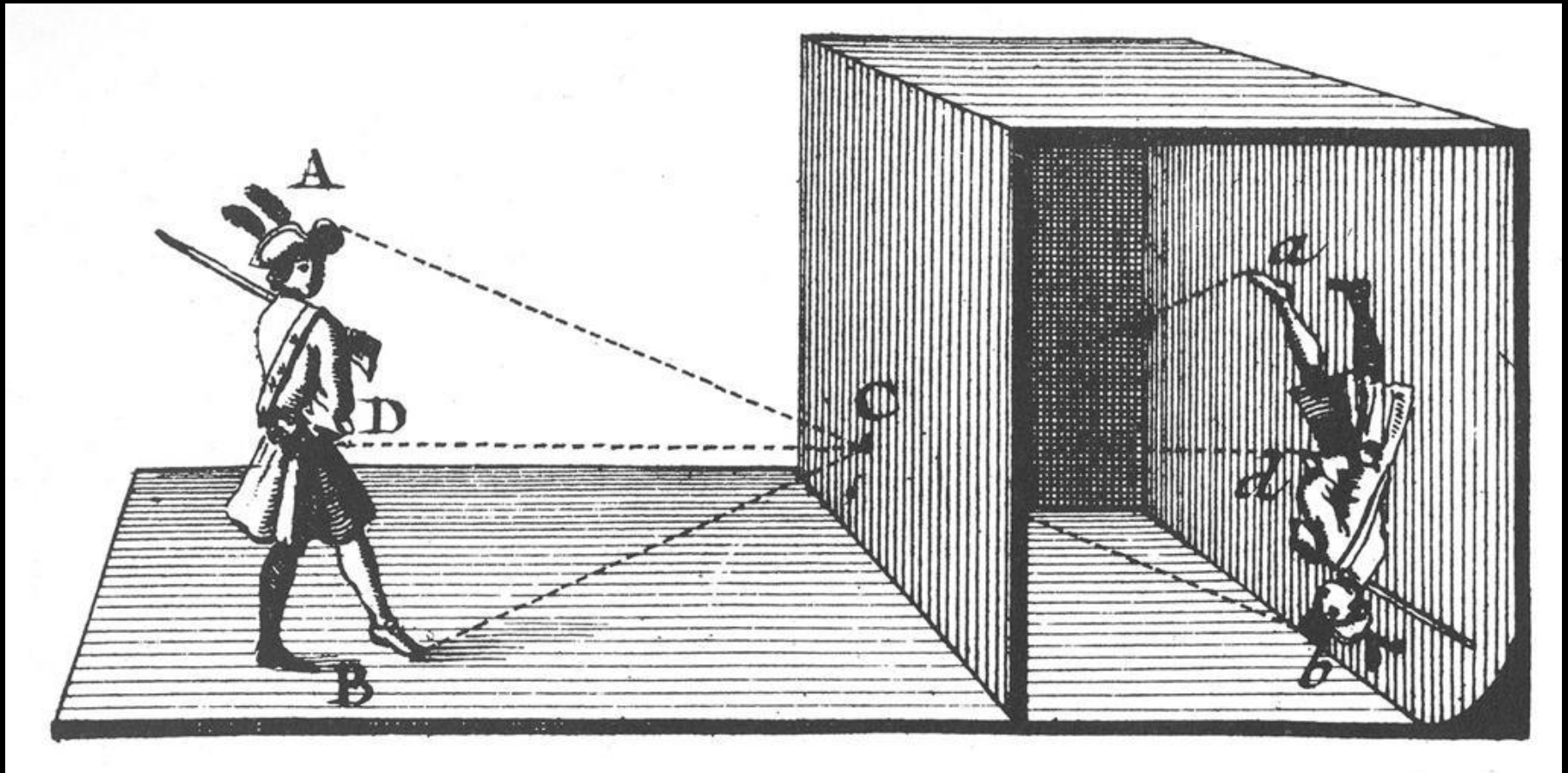
Amsterdam

Delft

Vermeer knew Antonie van Leeuwenhoek, a scientist who designed the microscope.



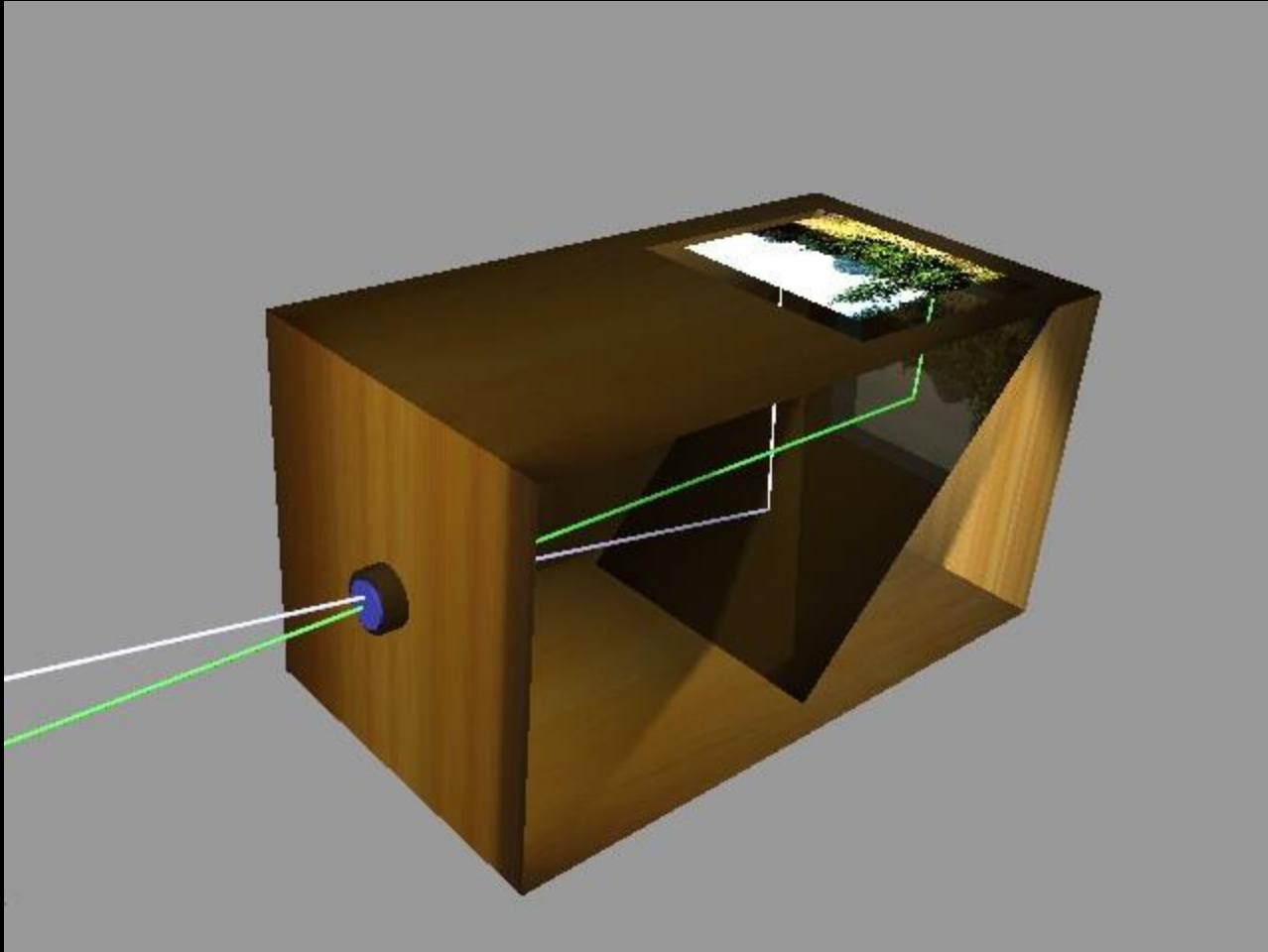
Interest in optics: the camera obscura



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0aTZrD1GYrw>

Portable version

Mirrors used to correct and project image; lens fitted at aperture.





Abelardo Morell, Camera Obscura- Image of the Eiffel Tower in the Hotel Frantour, 1999

Vermeer, *View of Delft*, 1662



Compare with Jan van der Heyden, *View of the Westerkerk, Amsterdam*, c. 1660



Vermeer



Van der Heyden



Vermeer



Van der Heyden



The dots of light resemble the effects seen in a camera obscura, but they appear in the “wrong” places in the painting. Vermeer did not use a camera obscura to paint, but he was inspired by the effects produced by the instrument.



Vermeer, *View of Delft*, 1662





Vermeer, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, c. 1662-65

Vermeer, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*,
c. 1662-65



Compare with: Netscher, *Portrait of Lady Philippina Staunton*, 1668





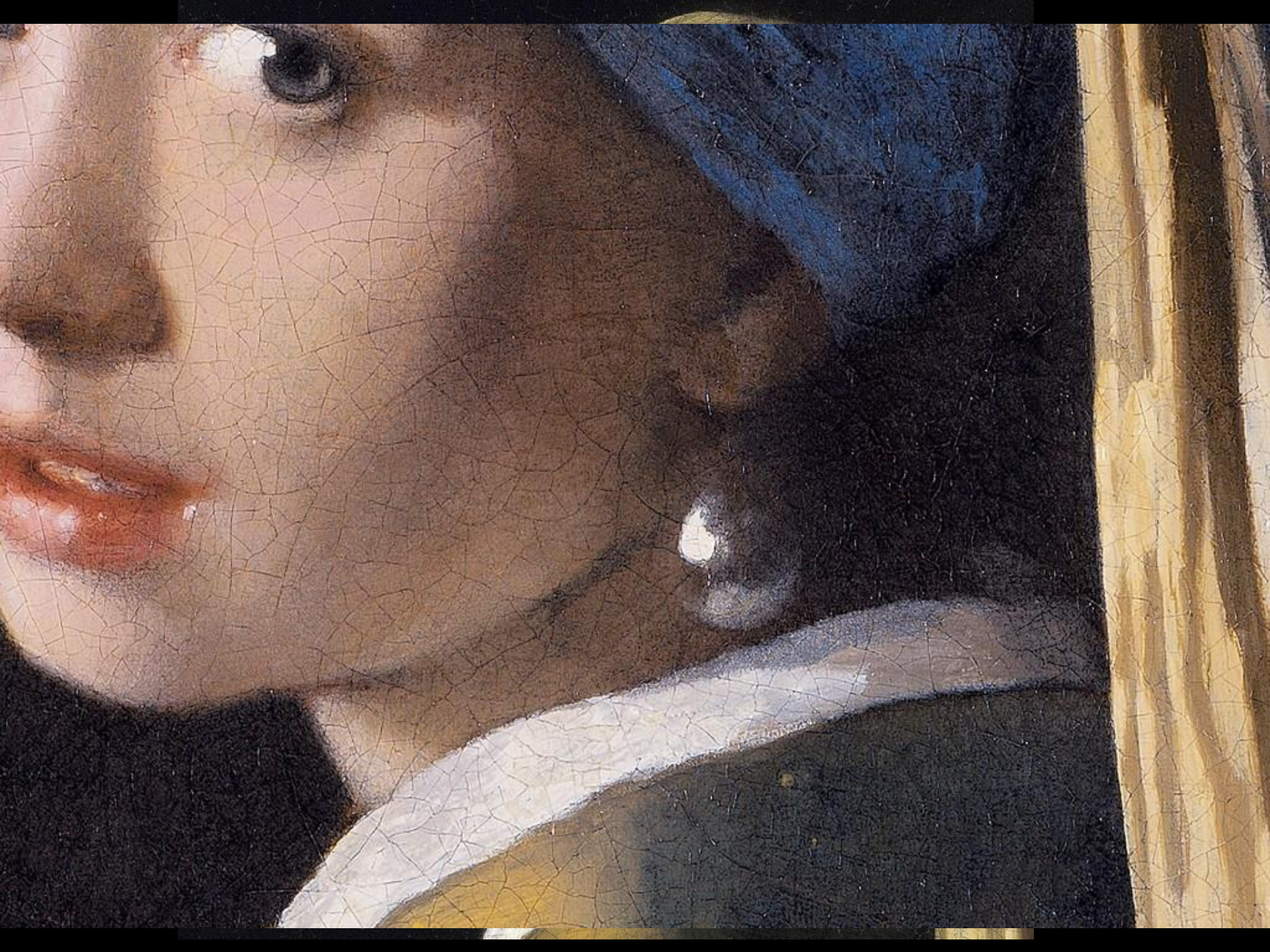


Lawrence Gowing (20th-century British artist) on this painting:

We have only to seek the farther surface of the nose or the precise shape of the nostril to know that it was never there. These forms are never truly within our comprehension.

Central and peripheral vision; controlling focus with a lens





An unfocused camera obscura could easily have provided Vermeer with the initial experience of seeing his model as less distinct than a less significant area, and this unfamiliar sight prompted him to explore the expressive possibilities of a deliberate reversal of conventional priorities. ... Unable to get a clear look at [the central figure] and her immediate surroundings (even though the back wall may be distinctly rendered), an observer feels as if the whole scene stays locked in someone else's optical priorities.

Filipczak, p. 268



Vermeer, *The Lacemaker*,
c. 1669 (9.6 x 8.3 in)

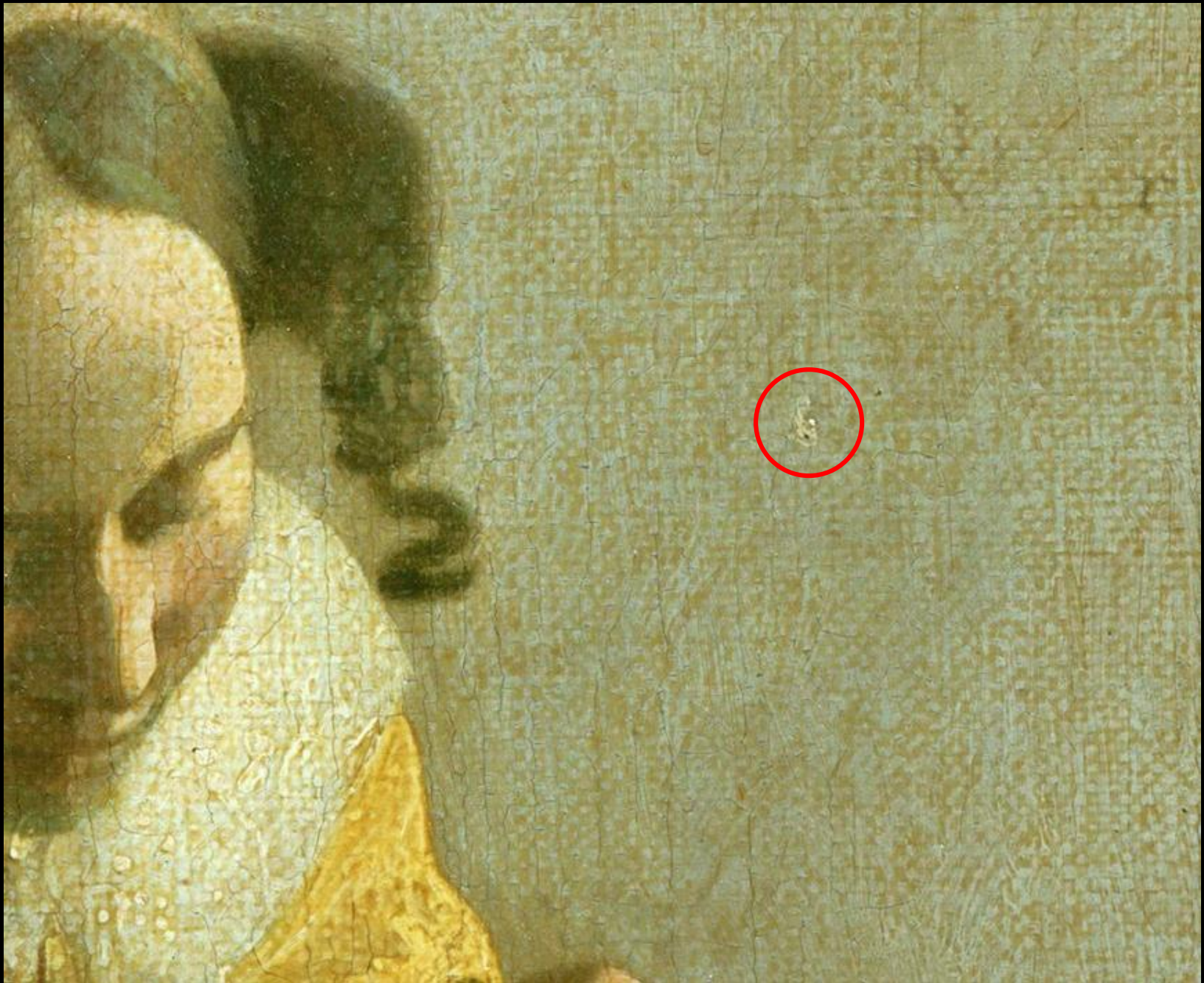
Vermeer, *The Lacemaker*, c. 1669



Caspar Netscher, *The Lacemaker*, 1662



The one element in focus in the painting: a nail hole on the back wall.

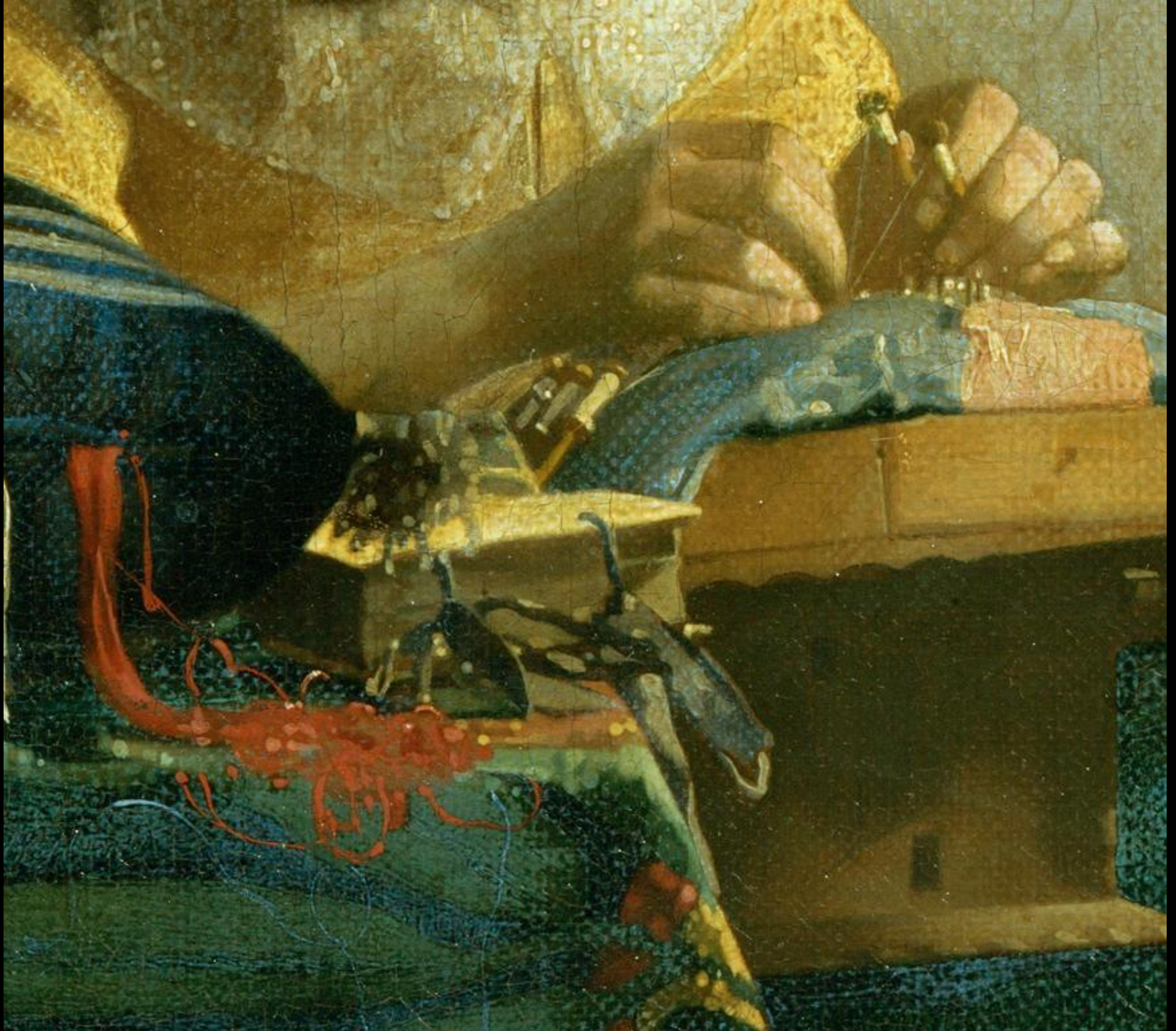


Vermeer, *The Lacemaker*, c. 1669 (detail)



Vermeer seems almost not to care, or not even to know, what it is that he is painting. What do men call this wedge of light? A nose? A finger? What do we know of its shape? To Vermeer none of this matters, the conceptual world of names and knowledge is forgotten, nothing concerns him but what is visible, the tone, the wedge of light.

(Lawrence Gowing, *Vermeer*, 1952)





Art historian Celeste Brusati:

... he concentrated the greatest optical ambiguity on the figure itself, insisting that we see disjointed flat patches of color where we would most hope and expect to find a seamlessly modeled hand, arm, or face.

Quoted in Filipczak, p. 265

Vermeer, *The Lacemaker*,
c. 1669 (9.6 x 8.3 in)

Vermeer and the Play with Vision

- Vermeer's art explored questions of seeing, but in a different way from Gijsbrechts or Hoogstraten.
- Vermeer inspired by lens technology to render effects that can't be seen with the naked eye—objects and figures in soft focus.
 - Filipczak: Vermeer's main figures are off focus, which is different from conventional practice.
- Vermeer's paintings mostly in the category of domestic scenes, but his manner of painting is different from Pieter de Hooch or Gerard ter Borch
 - Filipczak: the “unfocused” appearance of his images adds a sense of ambiguity