

The Girl with a Pearl Earring

2003 film starring Scarlett Johansson and Colin Firth

Review by Edwin F. Taylor.

QUOTE

The screenplay was adapted by screenwriter [Olivia Hetreed](#), based on the [novel of the same name](#) by [Tracy Chevalier](#) [an Oberlin College graduate]. [Scarlett Johansson](#) stars as Griet, a young 17th-century servant in the household of the Dutch painter [Johannes Vermeer](#) (played by [Colin Firth](#)) at the time he painted *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1665) in the city of [Delft](#) in [Holland](#). . . . Cinematographer [Eduardo Serra](#) used distinctive lighting and colour schemes similar to Vermeer's paintings.

UNQUOTE [Wikipedia]

This film has many virtues. The following are opinions of an informed amateur:

FIRST, the period sets and costumes seem perfect.

SECOND, the lighting matches that in the 34 acknowledged Vermeer paintings.

THIRD, the film shows a few of Vermeer's masterpieces, but it sweeps past settings shown in other paintings, allowing enthusiasts to hug ourselves in self-congratulation.

FOURTH, the plot includes every relevant person and incident known to current scholarship, such as members of the household (other than the fictional Griet).

Historically, the girl in Vermeer's picture is a *tronie* -- an Old Dutch word meaning not a person but a type -- like The Nerd, The Party Girl, or The Prostitute. But who can view Vermeer's masterpiece without filling in The Story -- as this film does, in my judgment with subtle creativity.

Johannes Vermeer notices the new lowest-level maid Griet. Eventually he shuts himself away with her in his top floor studio and paints her in several of his small number of paintings (including the one stolen from Boston's Gardner Museum). Vermeer's wife is not only jealous but also furious that no patron pays for these pictures to support the financially strapped household. Finally Vermeer's richest patron, played by Tom Wilkinson, agrees to fund a portrait of Griet, whom Wilkinson treats as a servant he has the right to assault and deflower, but she fights him off.

Griet, a rigidly Protestant servant in a Catholic family, does not have pierced ears. When Vermeer demands that she wear his wife's pearl earring for the last, perfect touch of the painting, Griet hands him the needle and asks him to pierce her left earlobe. He does so, drawing blood as a symbol of the end of her virginity, which he otherwise respects.

Vermeer's wife demands to see the finished portrait, which Vermeer reluctantly displays. Outraged, his wife tries to slice it with a paint trowel, but is restrained. At her insistence, and that of Vermeer's mother-in-law, Griet is dismissed and leaves, a blameless sacrificial figure. Wilkerson sits and enjoys his new painting.

While Griet later cleans another home (her own?), she receives the two pearl earrings, wrapped in the blue scarf she wore in the painting.

The movie ends with a close-up of the pearl earring, and zooms outward to show the full painting. Unfortunately, it is the old painting, not the one recently restored toward its original glory.