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Vermeer's The Little Street revisited

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VERMEER'S THE LITTLE STREET REVISITED

FRANS GRIJZENHOUT

- ▲ 1. Johannes Vermeer, *Gezicht op huizen in Delft* (View of houses in Delft), known as *The Little Street*, c. 1658 (Rijksmuseum Amsterdam)

In the autumn of 2015 the Rijksmuseum announced the results of my research into the location of the houses thought to have inspired Johannes Vermeer to paint his famous *The Little Street* (ill. 1). Based on a wide variety of sources, I had reached the conclusion that the location should be sought on Vlamingsstraat in Delft

on the site currently occupied by numbers 40 and 42. I had further established that an aunt of Vermeer, Ariaentgen Claes van der Minne, was the occupant of Vlamingstraat 42 at the time when Vermeer made the painting. I subsequently investigated Vermeer's attitude to visible reality and the significance of memory in his work. An academic publication and a modest exhibition in the Rijksmuseum, a modified and expanded version of which later went on show in Museum Het Prinsenhof in Delft, served to underpin and illustrate my theses.¹

Immediately after the announcement of my findings, in the early morning of Thursday 19 November 2015, a storm of publicity erupted, both at home and abroad. All the major daily newspapers in the Netherlands and elsewhere reported the news, whether briefly or at length.² Via popular television programmes, radio stations with a global audience, and numerous digital news platforms and blogs, as well as Facebook, Twitter and other social media, the news flashed around the world at lightning speed.

Although the results were generally speaking very well received³ and the Rijksmuseum also adopted my conclusions in their entirety, it was only to be expected that, with such a topic and such worldwide coverage of the news, there would be some critical reactions. That criticism is focused on a small number of points that I intend to address in this article. I will do so first with reference to the buildings visible in the painting, followed by a review of possible alternative locations, and concluding with a short and more general reflection on the significance of this work by Johannes Vermeer.

VLAMINGSTRAAT 42

Most commentators have accepted my contention that it is likely that the right-hand house in *The Little Street* stood on the site of what is currently Vlamingstraat 42. The house that stands there now dates entirely from after 1877 and is consequently unable to provide us with any information about the buildings in Vermeer's day; nor has there ever been any archeological survey of the site. The width of the original house (c. 6.3 m) and that of the adjacent gateway (c. 1.25 m), which we know from the 1667 'Ledger of the Dredging of the Canals of the Town of Delft' (also known as the 'Register of Quay Dues'), correspond to the details contained in the original Delft cadastral plan, which was drawn up in 1823 and came into force in 1832. Thanks to these and other archival sources I consulted (deeds of sale, sureties, tax registers, et cetera) it is also possible to reconstruct the location and dimensions of the back house and intervening yard with a reasonable degree of probability. All these details are consistent with the picture created by Vermeer.⁴

In the existing literature on *The Little Street*, it is usu-

ally assumed that the right-hand house must date from before the great fire in Delft in 1536. In my research I therefore needed to determine whether such an old house could have stood on the site of Vlamingstraat 42 in Vermeer's day. I came to the conclusion that the reports as to the precise scale of the fire are at any rate not unanimous. I also discovered that on the map painted in 1618 showing Delft after the fire, there actually appears to be an intact house on the north side of Vlamingstraat, roughly on the site of today's number 42. The conclusion to be drawn is not that the very house that Vermeer painted is visible on that map (the map and the rendering of the surviving houses is simply too imprecise), but that it is perfectly possible that one or more individual houses on the north side of Vlamingstraat survived the fire. Whether that applied specifically to the house that stood on the site of Vlamingstraat 42 in the seventeenth century is impossible to verify in the absence of building-historical or archeological evidence, but it is by no means inconceivable.⁵

A few commentators told me personally of their doubts regarding the traditional early dating of the house on the right; they surmised a later construction period during the final decade of the sixteenth century. One of them also expressed doubts as to whether this house could ever have existed: he thought he detected several questionable constructions, such as a half-brick external wall.⁶

In a recent publication Wim Weve, former building historian of the city of Delft, in line with earlier publications co-authored with Kees Kaldenbach, including in this journal,⁷ reiterated his belief that the right-hand house painted by Johannes Vermeer could indeed have existed. The structure and a host of details in the depicted house strike him as realistically rendered. According to Weve, the painter suggests an external wall one brick thick, which was normal for a timber-frame house of this size. Weve and other building historians see just as little reason to doubt a pre-1536 construction date.⁸ I think we should accept the general informed opinion that the right-hand house painted by Johannes Vermeer dates from before 1536. In the case of a later dating, the whole discussion as to whether the house might have survived the fire of 1536, would of course be totally irrelevant.

Since the publication of my book, Kaldenbach and Weve have furnished still more evidence that Vermeer was at any rate keen to give the impression of a meticulous emulation of reality in his depiction of the house on the right. Kaldenbach alerted me to the fact that the different colours of the closed (green) and open (red) shutters of the right-hand house correspond to an earlier observation of Hans Bonke that shutters (of warehouses at any rate) in Holland were usually painted in



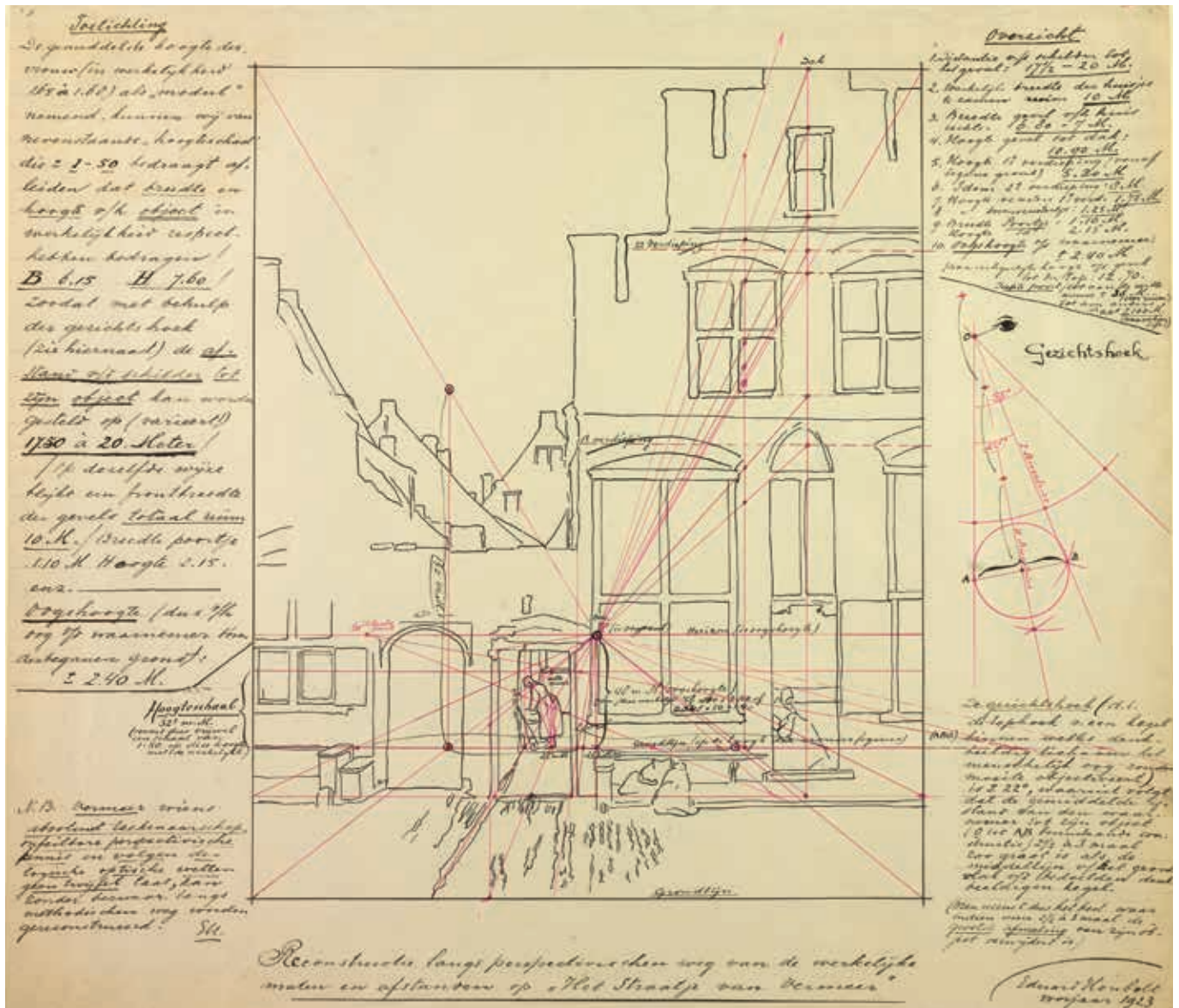
2. Johannes Vermeer, *The Little Street*, detail

Spanish green (verdigris) on the outside – a colour that rapidly darkens in response to sunlight – and red lead on the inside. Vermeer’s pale green colour on the outside of the closed left-hand shutters would seem to suggest that they had recently been repainted (ill. 2).⁹

During a presentation in Museum Het Prinsenhof on 10 July 2016 (and since published in the *Jaarboek Delfia Batavorum*), Wim Weve made the acute observation that in the bottom sill of the left-hand window of the house on the right it is possible to make out recesses for two shutter stays that were evidently intended to prevent the shutters from swinging out too far and thus obstructing the adjoining gateway and access to the house (ill. 2).¹⁰ This last is sometimes cited – recently by Gert Eijkelboom and Gerrit Vermeer¹¹ – to substantiate the view that Vermeer’s *The Little Street* is a composite architectural fantasy, a *capriccio*, rather than the realistic rendering of an existing situation. However, in my view these kinds of details point to the exact opposite. They all appear to have been rendered ‘from life’, or at any rate to want to give the impression that this is the case. I will return this issue at the end of this essay.

In an article published in the *Tijdschrift voor Historische Geografie* (Journal of Historical Geography) in

June 2017, Eijkelboom and Vermeer cast doubt on the belief, widely shared by earlier researchers, that the presence of the gutter, which glistens at the viewer from the right-hand gateway, indicates that the location of *The Little Street* should be sought on a canal. They argue that it is equally, perhaps even more, likely that the depicted houses stood on a street, because, given the gradient of the slope, waste water from the property would automatically drain into the canal without any need for a gutter. And ‘the traffic’ along the canal (I suspect that the authors were thinking primarily of the pigs and oxen that were driven along Vlamingstraat every day) would be impeded by such a gutter.¹² In the process they ignore one of the most substantive arguments – architecture is, after all, also a question of measuring – in this regard. As far back as 1923, the artist Eduard Houbolt, in consultation with the Delft municipal archivist L.G.N. Bouricius, concluded that the situation as painted by Vermeer must have been observed from a distance of 17 to 20 metres, in other words, from the other side of a canal since streets of this width simply did not exist in seventeenth-century Delft (ill. 3).¹³ As such, it strikes me that the assumption that the houses painted by Vermeer stood on a canal is still eminently plausible.



3. Eduard Houbolt, perspective study of *The Little Street*, 1923 (Delft City Archives)

VLAMINGSTRAAT 40

More fundamental doubts have been expressed with respect to the house on the left in Vermeer's painting, which I believe to be a depiction of Vlamingstraat 40. I reached that conclusion on the basis of my finding that the Vlamingstraat 40-42 complex was the only location on a canal in Vermeer's Delft where two adjoining long passageways run between two houses of which the dimensions of the right-hand house at any rate appear to tally completely with what Vermeer shows us. We can also surmise from both the cadastral plan and contemporary written sources that the back house of Vlamingstraat 40 was unusually close to the front house and was wider than the front house, which is precisely what we can see in the painting. Moreover, the mention of gardens behind Vlamingstraat 40 and 42 and the location on Rietveld of the house behind

the gardens (of which more later) are wholly in accord with the picture painted by Vermeer (ill. 4).¹⁴

Philip Steadman has rightly pointed to a discrepancy between the details in the 1667 Register of Quay Dues for Vlamingstraat 40 and the cadastral plan of 1823/1832, to which I will return presently. In so doing he sowed doubt as to the general reliability of the Register of Quay Dues and thus also of my reasoning. This also afforded him an opportunity to reiterate his earlier theory that Vermeer's *The Little Street* should be sought on Voldersgracht, of which more later.¹⁵ Without adding anything substantive to Steadman's argument, Gerrit Vermeer saw it as a pretext to cast doubt on my assertions in a public and highly charged attack.¹⁶ He reprised that polemic in a later publication co-authored with Gert Eijkelboom.¹⁷

In my book I did not go into detail about the apparent

discrepancy between the details in the Register of Quay Dues and the cadastral situation, mainly because so little of the left-hand house is visible in the painting that assertions as to the dimensions of its facade are difficult to verify with reference to Vermeer's painting. I now realize that it would have been better had I done so; it might have avoided any confusion. On the other hand, I am glad that this discussion has arisen because it has sharpened my ideas about the location in question.

With respect to Vlamingstraat 40, the Ledger of the Dredging of the Canals notes a facade width of 1 rod and 8 feet (c. 6.3 m) and the presence of a gateway with a width of four feet (c. 1.25 m). However, the cadastral plan (ill. 5) makes it indisputably clear that the plot of Vlamingstraat 40, *including* the gateway, was 6.3 m wide. There is no reason to assume that it was any different in the seventeenth century: as far as can be ascertained, the cadastral plan largely, perhaps even wholly, reflects the seventeenth-century situation.

So what is going on here? Did the person who drew up the Register of Quay Dues make a mistake, as Steadman hopes? Or mischievously invent an extra gateway in order to lead latter-day Vermeer sleuths astray? Both are highly unlikely. Based on that register, citizens actually had to pay tax towards the upkeep of the quay and dredging of the canal in front of their door and no one – not then and not now – wants to pay more tax than is strictly necessary. Moreover, as Benjamin Franklin remarked: 'in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes'.¹⁸ So we would be well advised to take the information recorded in the taxation register seriously.

There is another good reason for doing so. We know that in the case of Vlamingstraat 42, the dimensions of the house and the gateway were measured not once but twice. This was no doubt prompted by an objection lodged by the wine merchant Lodewijk van Polinchoven who, as the owner of the back house of Vlamingstraat 42, was required to pay tax on the width of the passageway leading to the quay. In the first draft of the register, the width of that passageway was recorded as 4½ feet, that of the neighbouring house belonging to Vermeer's aunt Ariaentgen Claes van der Minne, as 1 rod and 7½ feet. For both parties this would have meant a difference of 1¼ pennies or to be precise, less than half a cent of the then guilder. Per annum, mind you! In the definitive register the definitive dimensions of Vlamingstraat 42 were recorded as 4 feet for the passageway and 1 rod and 8 feet for the house, a reciprocal difference of half a foot, resulting in a commensurate reduction in the assessment for Van Polinckhoven and an increase for Vermeer's aunt.¹⁹ I have gone into this case in such detail in order to

demonstrate that it is inconceivable that those liable for the tax on Vlamingstraat 40 would have calmly accepted an *eight*-fold miscalculation of four feet, with an accompanying higher annual assessment to the tune of 10 pennies. In the seventeenth century people literally fought over every whole and half penny. Nor were the dimensions recorded in the register modified after 1667. The provisional conclusion must be that the dimensions recorded in the Register of Quay Dues are quite correct, however difficult to reconcile with the later cadastral details they may seem.

The explanation for the apparent discrepancy between the details in the 1667 quay dues register and the cadastral plan of 1823/1832 lies in the function of the earlier register. Quay dues were a tax imposed on the owners of property located along a canal; they were required to pay tax on the total width of their premises, on the assumption that they were able to reach the quay via those premises and thus enjoy an economic advantage from the location of their property. In most cases the assessment concerned the width of the facade of their house, plus any adjacent gateway, because this provided access to the street or the quay.

Thus the owner of the back house of Vlamingstraat 40, one Beatris Jans van der Houve, had to pay tax for access to the quay via a street-front gateway 1.25 m. wide. This passageway ran alongside the front house, which in Vermeer's day belonged to the latter Jan Willemsz van Wonderen. However, from old conveyance

4. Vlamingstraat and Rietveld on the cadastral map of Delft, 1823 (National Archives, The Hague). Vlamingstraat 40-42 and, at the rear, Rietveld 109 are indicated with arrows



deeds we learn that the front house of Vlamingstraat 40 had several doors onto the same passageway and that the occupants of the front house had no choice but to use the same passageway and gate as the occupants of the back house to reach the street and quay.²⁰ In 1667, therefore, Van Wonderen had to pay tax not only on the width of his house (1 rod 4 feet), but also, like his rear neighbour Beatris Jans van der Houve, on the width of the adjacent gateway (4 feet); his total assessment was consequently for 1 rod and 8 feet. As a result, the Delft authorities received double taxes for 4 feet at 10 pennies per annum. It is complicated and at first sight unfair, but it was nevertheless in accordance with the intention of this tax measure.

In my book I did not explore what this information tells us about the exterior of Vlamingstraat 40 in relation to Vermeer's painting. At the time of writing I still assumed that the left-hand gateway, like that of Vlamingstraat 42, was directly connected to the street and quay and that the shallow structure at the front of the gateway of Vlamingstraat 40, visible on the cadastral plan (ill. 4), had been built after Vermeer painted *The Little Street*. However, thanks to Steadman's critical question I am now convinced that this situation must already have existed when the Register of Quay Dues was drawn up. Presumably there was a low, covered gateway that offered direct or indirect access to the front house of Vlamingstraat 40 as well as to the passageway leading to the back house. Taking all this into account, it is not surprising in hindsight that Vermeer – apart from any artistic choices he may have made in terms of variation and contrast – should have depicted the left-hand gate in the closed position.

Following up on the doubt raised by Steadman as to the dimensions of the plot of Vlamingstraat 40, Wim Weve, in his aforementioned lecture in Delft and later article in *Jaarboek Delfia Batavorum*, drew attention to an unusual detail. He believes that the element forming the constructive link between a double bench and the facade of the left-hand house in Vermeer's *The Little Street* (ill. 2) has the traditional form of the closure of an eaves drip gutter, the narrow strip of land that every house in a Dutch medieval town was obliged to keep clear so as to allow rainwater from the roof to drain away.²¹ In Delft the prescribed width of the eaves drip gutter in the Middle Ages was nine inches, or about 21 cm. To facilitate the reconstruction of the town after the 1536 fire, this regulation was relaxed: henceforth shared bearing walls could also be used.²² Given that there is no trace of any such medieval drip strip visible behind the plank painted by Vermeer in *The Little Street* around 1660, Weve now comes to a remarkable conclusion: whereas Vermeer depicted the right-hand house faithfully down to the smallest de-

tails (in Weve's view as well), his depiction of the left-hand house is a composite of elements that could not have existed like this in reality.²³

Although I admire Weve's powers of observation, I nevertheless think that this line of reasoning is rather problematical. The visual examples of planks or partitions, usually with a few ventilation holes, cited by Weve are from Hoorn, Medemblik and Enkhuizen – from the northern part of Holland – and all are from a later date. I do not think that a single example of a seventeenth-century eaves drip closure has survived against which to test Weve's theory. Nor is it possible to determine whether the narrow plank (which actually looks more like a beam) painted by Vermeer has ventilation holes or is merely decorated with a few grooves. And even if we assume that Vermeer painted a plank or a narrow board that could be used for the termination of an eaves drip, that need not mean that such a space must necessarily have lain behind it. In an age when material was much more expensive than labour and in a poorish neighbourhood such as Vlamingstraat was at that time, it is perfectly conceivable that a possibly redundant element like this would have been reused for a repair or, as evident in this case, for the construction of a double bench. Apart from this, I fail to see why the mere fact that this detail appears in Vermeer's painting, should constitute sufficient basis for the assertion that the entire left side of the painting was invented by the artist. Especially given that the phenomenon of two adjacent, deep passageways, such as clearly depicted by Vermeer, was demonstrably present between the houses at Vlamingstraat 40 and 42, and the position of front and back houses is also in complete accord with what Vermeer shows us.

RIETVELD 109

Some commentators have mistakenly assumed that the bird's-eye view drawing of the Vlamingstraat 40-42/Rietveld 109 complex that the artist Jan Rothuizen made for the exhibition in the Rijksmuseum and which was also reproduced in my book, is a reconstruction drawing. That is not the case and nor was this drawing ever presented as such: the caption in my book calls it an 'impression' and, for the record, it was primarily intended as illustrational material for the exhibition. Weve has fortunately noticed this fact, Steadman overlooks it, while Eijkelboom and Vermeer accompanied their article with a full-page reproduction of the drawing as presumed evidence of wilful misrepresentation on my part, but conveniently chose to omit the caption.²⁴ It was the representation of the situation at Rietveld 109 in this artist's impression in particular that gave rise to questions. In his response to the drawing, Philip Steadman even argued that the house in the background must have stood dozens of

metres further away than the drawing suggests and would therefore have to have been a good twenty metres and thus five or six storeys high 'to match the appearance in *The Little Street*'.²⁵ Gerrit Vermeer goes a step further: he accuses me of 'being flexible with the facts', 'manipulation' and 'sharp practice'.²⁶ These bold assertions call for qualification.

In my book I produced evidence that the building at Rietveld 109 must have stood along the sight line between Vlamingstraat 40 and 42. The building on this plot had already disappeared before the cadastral survey in 1823 and the plot has ever since remained unbuilt. Old photographs, drawings and excavation reports do not exist for this location. To get a reasonably reliable picture of the building in Vermeer's day, we must consequently make do with scanty details gleaned from old deeds of sale and, once again, the Register of Quay Dues. It appears, from these combined sources, that this plot was occupied by a front house 1 rod and 6 feet (5.65 m) wide, with a gateway on the east side, a back house of unknown width and a garden that wound around the east side of the (back) house.²⁷ The precise height and depth of the front and back houses is impossible to determine, but what we do know for certain is that the south side of the plot bordered the gardens behind both Vlamingstraat 40 and 42.

Evidence that Rietveld 109 must have been a fairly big house can be found in the estimated rental value on which it was assessed from 1632 onwards for the annual land tax. While the average annual rental value for a house on this side of Rietveld was between 20 and 40 guilders, this particular property was assessed at 64 guilders; the only house with a higher estimated rental value, namely 112 guilders, was located slightly more to the west on this side of Vlamingstraat.²⁸ Another indication that this must have been a fairly large house is the sale price of 1,860 guilders in 1684.²⁹

To discover whether Johannes Vermeer could have seen a cluster of buildings such as that formed by the front and back houses of Vlamingstraat 40 and 42 and Rietveld 109, and depicted it in *The Little Street*, I used the spatial computer program SketchUp. Together with architect Theo Peppelman, I entered all the information at our disposal (archival sources, quay fees, cadastral map). As recorded in the Register of Quay Dues, the widths of the front elevations of Vlamingstraat 40 (having regard for previous remarks: 1 Rhenish rod and 4 feet) and 42 (1 rod and 8 feet) and the two intervening gateways (twice 4 feet) turn out to correspond exactly with the measurements in the cadastral map of 1832. As previously noted, the position of the back house of Vlamingstraat 42 can also be projected onto this map with a reasonable degree of certainty; the back house of number 40 was in any case still

standing in 1823. The resulting projection can in turn be readily and conclusively fitted into the information provided by modern aerial or satellite photography.

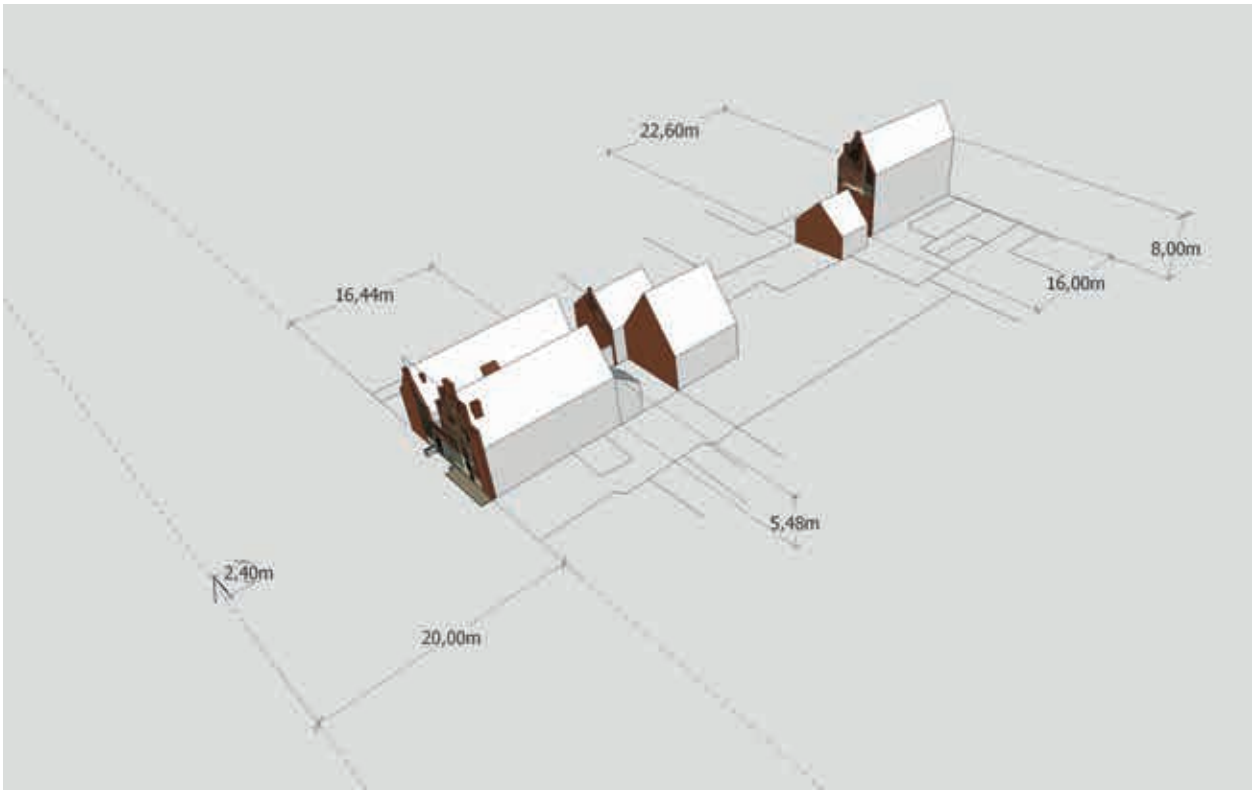
Based on the results of the perspective analysis by the artist Eduard Houbolt (ill. 3) and in accordance with the situation on the ground, we chose a viewpoint at a distance of 20 metres from the facades of Vlamingstraat 40 and 42. This puts the viewer just behind the frontage of the houses opposite. Houbolt had determined that the vanishing point of the composition should be sought in the hinge of the left-hand window in the facade of the house on the right, at a height of approximately 2.4 metres. If we observe the opposite side from this position at an angle of 46 degrees, which corresponds to the focal length of a 50 mm camera lens, a completely coherent and convincing picture emerges: we can see the facades of the front and back houses of Vlamingstraat 40 and 42 and the path of the two intervening gateways, precisely as Vermeer depicted it (ills. 5 and 6).

Because we do not know the exact depth and breadth of the front and back houses on Rietveld, we can play around with their position to some extent. The plot could easily accommodate a front house of comparable depth to that of Vlamingstraat 40 (a good 16 m), probably with a separate, lower back house, as was the case with Vlamingstraat 40 and 42; had Rietveld 109 had more the structure of a warehouse, front and back houses might have formed one single, continuous building filling the entire depth of the plot (over 22 m). The eaves height of the rear elevation that we can make out in Vermeer's painting must, depending on the chosen option, have been between 7.4 and 8 metres. That is rather high for this part of the city – elevations of this height are more common along the canals in the wealthier western part of Delft – but certainly not out of the question and not at odds with the little we know about this house.

One of the interesting results thrown up by this reconstruction is that the slight tapering of the passageway of Vlamingstraat 40 towards the rear, visible on the cadastral map, turns out to be completely in accordance with the picture painted by Vermeer.³⁰ It is also worth mentioning that André-Pierre Lamoth, a retired perspective draughtsman, calculated that the houses in the foreground and the intervening gateways painted by Vermeer stand at an angle of 93 degrees vis-à-vis the street frontage, exactly the same angle as the cadastral map gives for the two houses on Vlamingstraat.³¹

VOLDERSGRACHT AND OUDE LANGENDIJK

Two authors have recently argued in favour of an alternative. In both cases it concerns a location they had proposed once before. Philip Steadman again drew



5 and 6. Bird's-eye view of the Vlamingstraat 40-42 complex and Rietveld 109 from a distance of 20 metres, eye level 2.4 m, cone of vision 46 degrees, drawn in SketchUp, with thanks to Theo Peppelman, architect

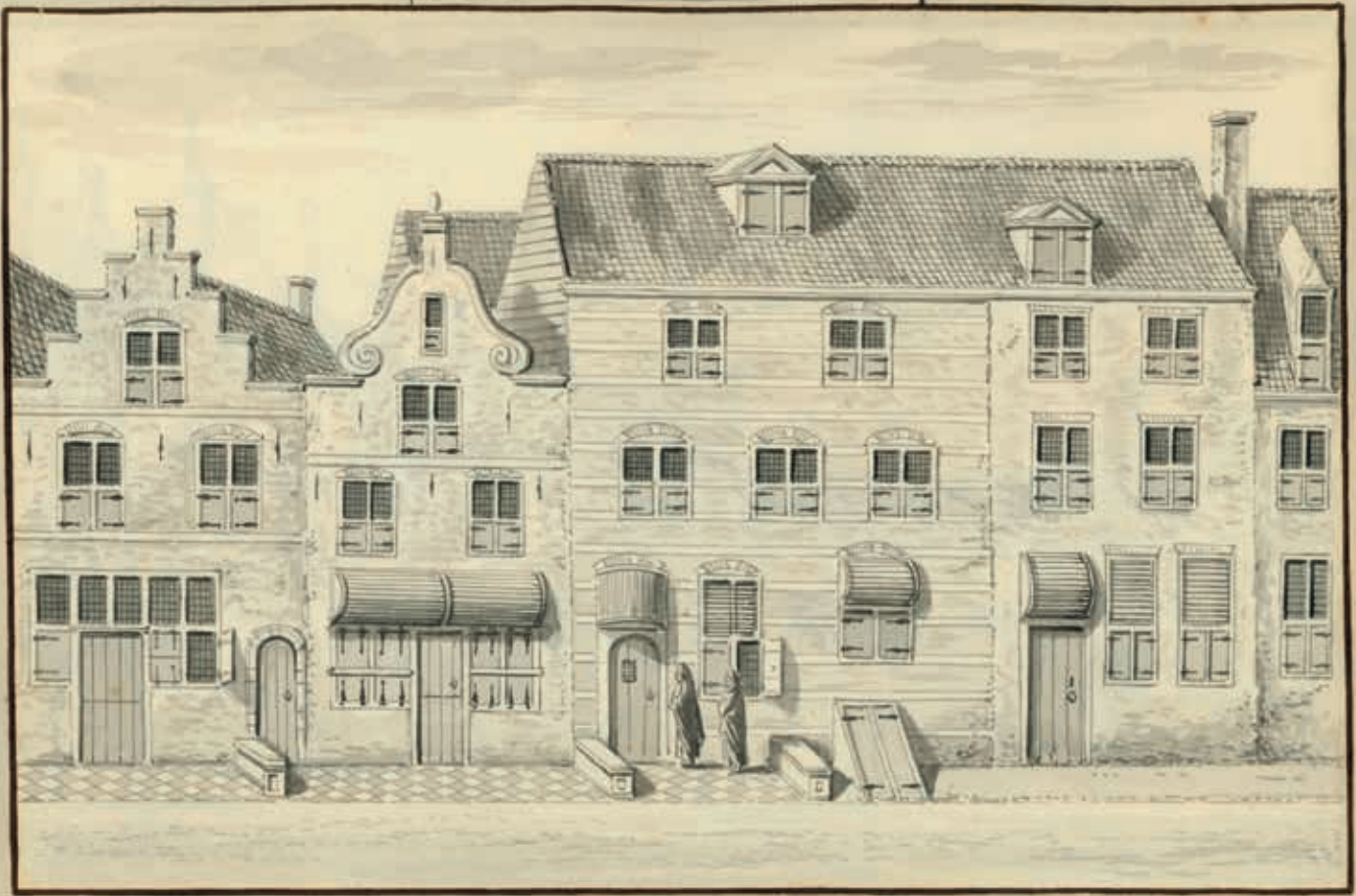
attention to his theory that *The Little Street* is a representation of what the artist could see from the rear window of the Mechelen (an inn on the Grote Markt square, which had belonged to Vermeer's father) of the Voldersgracht opposite: the entrance gate to the Oudemanhuis (Old Men's Home) and the adjacent Sint-Lucas Guildhall. This case plays a role in the reasoning behind Steadman's theory that Vermeer made use of a camera obscura in his work as artist.³² Although I am by no means convinced of this, I don't intend to address this issue here.³³ Basically, Steadman's idea harks back to a 1950 book about Vermeer by Pieter Swillens, who was the first to cite this location, on the assumption that until renovation work in 1661, it must have looked quite different from what we know from later drawings, prints and photographs. That assumption has long since been refuted by A.J.J.M. van Peer who argued persuasively that the 1661 renovations were not very drastic.³⁴ Further corroboration for this came in a recent article by Wim Weve, who concluded that the renovations of 1661 were confined to increasing the height of the middle and top parts of the facade of the complex, and applying a facade decoration in classical style.³⁵ Of the 'ruyme binne plaets' (spacious courtyard) behind the entrance gate, referred to in 1667 by city historian Dirck Evertsz van Bleyswijck, there is likewise no trace to be found in Vermeer's painting.³⁶ All in all, it is quite inconceivable that the view from the rear of the Mechelen ever looked remotely similar to what Vermeer painted. Accordingly, Swillens and Steadman's projection of *The Little Street* onto the entrance to the Oudemanhuis can only be characterized as wishful thinking. The same applies to Eijkelboom and Vermeer's suggestion that Johannes Vermeer drew inspiration from the right-hand section of the facade of the same complex – incidentally, an astonishing about-turn in an argument concerned chiefly with the deconstruction of my hypothesis that Johannes Vermeer took a situation that existed in reality on a Delft canal as the starting point for *The Little Street*.³⁷ The fact that Vermeer, in peopling his street, chose to depict a young boy, a girl, a young and an old woman (ill. 3), and omitted, of all types, an old man, must – if the Delft Old Men's Home was his supposed source of inspiration – be viewed as a form of artistic irony.

Benjamin Binstock has suggested that the house Vermeer depicted in *The Little Street* is the house on Oude Langendijk occupied by his mother-in-law Maria Thins, along with his many children and his wife Catharina Bolnes. This notion was first advanced in 1923 by the aforementioned artist Eduard Houbolt and Delft's then archivist, L.G.N. Bouricius. Back then they assumed that this house had occupied the western corner of Molenpoort and Oude Langedijk.

Bouricius and Houbolt quickly abandoned their theory, however, after studying the *Kaart Figuratief* (figurative map) of Delft and reaching the conclusion that the Molenpoort was much wider than the gateway next to the right-hand house in Vermeer's painting; nor did the dimensions of the other houses in the painting correspond to the built reality. Other authors, including John Michael Montias, think it possible that Maria Thins and Vermeer's family lived on the other, eastern corner of Molenpoort and Oude Langendijk, and this supposition is now generally accepted.³⁸ In his 2008 book, *Vermeer's Family Secrets*, Binstock then suggested that it could have been *this* house that Vermeer depicted in the right half of *The Little Street*, an idea he reiterated in spring 2016.³⁹

This house on the corner of Oude Langendijk and Molenpoort had traditionally been dubbed 'the Serpent', later sometimes 'the big Serpent' or 'the golden Serpent', and it was used successively as a malthouse (around 1595) and an inn (at any rate until 1637). But this was decidedly not, as Montias assumed, the house owned by Jan Geensz Thins, a very devout Catholic resident of Gouda and the nephew of Vermeer's mother-in-law Maria Thins;⁴⁰ that was the third house from the corner with Molenpoort.⁴¹ An entire row of houses on this section of Oude Langendijk in the Papenhoek district of Delft was owned by well-to-do Catholics who rented some of them to co-religionists. Thus Vermeer's mother-in-law Maria Thins probably rented the house on the corner of Oude Langendijk and Molenpoort from the wealthy Catholic Pieter Cornelisz van der Duse.

We are able to get an impression of this part of Oude Langendijk thanks to a drawing by Abraham Rademaker dating from the beginning of the eighteenth century (ill. 8). Paul Begheyn has suggested that the house on the corner of Oude Langendijk and the eastern corner of Molenpoort occupied by the Thins-Vermeer family, is just visible on the right side of this drawing and that the two houses next to it contained the Jesuit *zolderkerk* (attic church).⁴² However, Hans Slager argued in a recent study of the owners of houses in the Papenhoek district that this church was located in two houses slightly further east and that Vermeer's house would not have been visible in Rademaker's drawing.⁴³ Whatever the case, returning to Binstock's theory, is it conceivable that Vermeer could have taken his own house and the house next door on Oude Langendijk as the starting point for *The Little Street*? If one confines oneself to correspondences between the painting and Rademaker's drawing, such as the diagonally laid tiles in front of the houses and the diagonally placed low benches (unfortunately minus eaves drip board behind), one might perhaps think so. But there are no other indications that Vermeer was inspired by



7. Abraham Rademaker, *De ingang van de 'Jesuite Kerk' aan de Oude Langendijk*, c. 1700 (Delft City Archives)

this location. The main point is that in not a single written source or in Rademaker's drawing is there any trace of a single gateway in this section of Oude Langendijk, let alone of the double gateway that is such a characteristic visual element in Vermeer's *The Little Street*. Moreover, if Vermeer's mother-in-law had lived in the right-hand house depicted in *The Little Street*, as Binstock assumes, she would certainly have ensured that it looked a lot less shabby: with an estimated wealth of 26,000 guilders in 1674 (a mere two years after the 'disaster year') she was among the five per cent richest inhabitants of Delft, very different from the daughters of Vermeer's aunt Ariaentgen Claes van der Minne, who were worth just 1000 guilders that year, which probably represented the estimated value of their somewhat dilapidated house at Vlamingstraat 42.⁴⁴

I would like to conclude by briefly addressing the criticism levelled in a recent publication by Heidi de Mare, director of the Instituut voor Maatschappelijke Ver-

beelding (Institute for Social Representation), not only at my research, but also at its critics and all those intent on discovering a reflection of a real historical cityscape in *The Little Street*.⁴⁵ Like many other visual studies scholars influenced by semiotics, De Mare regards such a quest as 'naive' and 'romantic' and the underlying research question as even 'erroneous', which is to say, unscientific. She also thinks that such an approach contributes to a further 'public-oriented mythologizing' of an artist like Vermeer – although how my fact-based approach contributes to that putative mythologizing remains, alas, unclear – and disingenuously suggests *en passant* that this is all very 'profitable' for the historians of Golden Age art. Against this she posits an art-historical research focused on 'the visual artefact in its own formal and conceptual historical context'. In that respect she makes a number of interesting observations and, if well executed, such an approach can certainly yield good results. But her lofty assertion that broadly speaking, 'early modern painting' is 'not a copy, representation or record of the

surrounding reality' and that we should therefore not go looking for the original location of *The Little Street*, but instead 'recognize that the primacy here [i.e. in *The Little Street*, FG] lay in the division and arrangement of the surface according to an underlying grid of lines not derived from historical reality', strikes me as just as unprovable as a potential claim that the only other townscape produced by Vermeer, the *View of Delft* – wisely not mentioned by De Mare – was based on a comparable 'underlying grid of lines not derived from historical reality' (ill. 8). Kaldenbach and Wheelock may have demonstrated convincingly that Vermeer allowed himself a few liberties in his representation of the townscape in his *View of Delft*, but there can be no doubt at all that he for the most part faithfully reproduced 'the surrounding reality'.⁴⁶ I do not see sufficient grounds in De Mare's argument to adopt a fundamentally different premise with respect to *The Little Street*.

All in all, I do not see in the commentaries delivered so far any reason to retreat from my conclusion that Vermeer's *The Little Street* is based on the Vlamingstraat 40-42 complex. There is no other location on a canal in Vermeer's Delft with two adjoining gateways, flanked by front and back houses with dimensions and positions that correspond entirely or to a very large extent with the situation depicted by Vermeer. It is of course quite possible that Vermeer exercised artistic licence with respect to individual elements or relative proportions, just as he did in *View of Delft*. *The Little Street*, it must be emphasized once more, is not a photograph but a beguilingly realistic looking, artistic representation of an existing townscape. It is probable that Vermeer was chiefly interested in the particular aesthetics of the situation, with the old, weathered house on the right, the open and closed gateways beside it, the perspective play with the houses and spaces behind, the diffuse light pervading the entire scene,



8. Johannes Vermeer, *Gezicht op Delft* (View of Delft), c. 1660-1661, detail (Mauritshuis, The Hague)

and the peerlessly painted cloudscape above. There is really no need to see in this any meaningful allegory of 'old' and 'new', as Eijkelboom and Vermeer somewhat awkwardly suggest in their article.⁴⁷ While the fact that his elderly aunt lived in the house on the right would not have been the reason why Johannes Vermeer chose to paint this exceptional townscape, it is a nice incidental circumstance that sets us thinking anew about Vermeer's relationship with this place, the imagination and memory.

NOTES

This text is the translation of my article 'Het Straatje van Vermeer: een plaatsbepaling'. *Bulletin KNOB* 117 (2018) 1, 1-13. The text has been amended or supplemented in a small number of places.

1 F. Grijzenhout, *Het Straatje van Vermeer. Gezicht op de Penspoort in Delft*, Amsterdam 2015; this publication also appeared in English: *Vermeer's Little Street. View on the Penspoort in Delft*. In the

rest of this text, for the sake of brevity, I usually refer to this fully annotated publication, including for primary sources and secondary literature cited there, except in the case of new information.

2 The most detailed press report can be found in: S. Smalenburg, 'Eindelijk gevonden: de precieze locatie van Vermeer's "straatje"', *NRC Handelsblad*, 19 November 2015, www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2015/11/19/eindelijk-gevonden-de-precieze-locatie-van-vermeers-straatje-a1405595.

3 For example, Quentin Buvelot in *The Burlington Magazine* 158 (February 2016), 136.

4 Grijzenhout 2015 (note 1), 33-36.

5 Grijzenhout 2015 (note 1), 30.

6 Bas Dudok van Heel and Gerrit Vermeer, in various conversations.

7 K. Kaldenbach, 'Het Straatje van Johannes Vermeer: Nieuwe Langendijk 22-26? Een kunsthistorische visie op

- een archeologisch en bouwhistorisch onderzoek', *Bulletin KNOB* 99 (2000) 6, 239-249.
- 8 W. Weve, 'Het Straatje van Vermeer: een hypothese uit 1982 herzien', *Jaarboek Delfia Batavorum* 26 (2016) 89-105. Gabri van Tussenbroek, building historian with the City of Amsterdam, is of the same opinion, witness an email to me dated 29 February 2016; Wim van der Boor, building historian and former secretary of the KNOB, confirmed the early dating of the right-hand house during a lecture I held in Museum Prinsenhof Delft on 31 May 2016.
 - 9 Kees Kaldenbach in an email to me dated 5 May 2016, referring to H. Bonke, *Amsterdamse pakhuizen 16e-20ste eeuw*, Zutphen 2011, 23.
 - 10 Lecture Wim Weve, Museum Het Prinsenhof Delft, 10 July 2016; see also Weve 2016 (note 8), 103-104. Incidentally, Herman Janse remarked back in 1971 that opened shutters were usually fastened at right angles to the facade using a storm hook: H. Janse, *Vensters*, Nijmegen 1971, 52.
 - 11 G. Eijkelboom and G. Vermeer, 'Het Straatje van Vermeer. Bedenkingen bij de vermeende postcode', *Tijdschrift voor Historische Geografie* 2, no. 2 (2017), 66-80, notably 77-79.
 - 12 Eijkelboom and Vermeer 2017 (note 11), 69.
 - 13 Grijzenhout 2015 (note 1), 19 and 26. Wim Weve has rightly alerted me to the fact that my observation in the original text of this article, that such gutters also appear in Vermeer's *View of Delft* is incorrect.
 - 14 Grijzenhout 2015 (note 1), 33-36. I have since found one other location with two adjacent gateways, together 10½ feet (3.3 m) wide, namely on the north side of the Burgwal, current street numbers 24-28. The house on the west side of the two gateways was 1 rod and 4½ feet (5.2 m) wide, that on the east side a mere 11 feet (3.45 m). The facades of the houses were at a slight but clearly perceptible angle to one another, echoing the curve in the Burgwal at that point. The western gateway was partially built over in 1659 and later both gateways were completely integrated with the houses. Neither house had a separate back house. Based on these details I think we can safely exclude this as an alternative for Vlamingstraat 40-42. See: Stadsarchief Delft, Oud-archief Delft, inv. no. 594, *Legger van 't diepen der wateren binnen de stad Delft*, 1667, fol. 107v; Oud-rechterlijk archief Delft, inv. nos. 281-283, Huizenprotocol 1648-1812, fol. 316r2-3; Oud-notarieel archief Delft, inv. no. 1881, fol. 8-8v, 15 January 1659 and 2414, fol. 165-165v, 19 March 1720.
 - 15 P. Steadman, 'Vermeer's The Little Street. A more credible detective story', Essential Vermeer 2.0, www.essential-vermeer.com/delft/little-street-steadman/little-street-steadman.html, published 13 December 2015.
 - 16 G. Vermeer, 'Rekbare feiten. Zo past "het Straatje" in Jordaan', Letter to the editor of *Het Parool*, 21 March 2016.
 - 17 Eijkelboom and Vermeer 2017 (note 11).
 - 18 Benjamin Franklin to Jean-Baptiste le Roy, 13 November 1789, in: A.H. Smith (ed.), *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 10: 1789-1790, London 1907, 69; with thanks to Martin van Neck.
 - 19 Grijzenhout 2015 (note 1), 28 and note 58.
 - 20 Grijzenhout 2015 (note 1), 35 and note 73.
 - 21 On the 'osendrop' [eaves drip gutter]: R. Meischke, *De gotische bouwtraditie. Studies over opdrachtgevers en bouwmeesters in de Nederlanden*, Amersfoort 1988, 211-213; R. Meischke, 'Hout-skelethuizen met stenen wanden', *Jaarboek Monumentenzorg* (1993), 36-49, notably 42; H.J. Zantkuijl, *Bouwen in Amsterdam. Het woonhuis in de stad*, Amsterdam 2007, 21.
 - 22 W. Weve, *Huizen in Delft in de 16de en 17de eeuw*, Zwolle 2013, 49.
 - 23 Weve 2016 (note 8), 104-105.
 - 24 Eijkelboom and Vermeer 2017 (note 11), 72.
 - 25 Steadman 2015 (note 15).
 - 26 Vermeer 2016 (note 16).
 - 27 Grijzenhout 2015 (note 1), 35-36.
 - 28 Delft City Archives, Delft historical archives, inv. no. 1761, Kohier der verpondingen [Register of land tax assessments], 1632-1656, fol. 156v-157.
 - 29 Delft City Archives, Delft historical court archives, inv. no. 214, Blaffert van de waarbrieven [Record of real estate transactions], fol. 158v, dated 13 May 1684.
 - 30 With thanks to Theo Peppelman, who drew my attention to this.
 - 31 With thanks to Mr André-Pierre Lamoth of Amsterdam, conversation dated 18 January 2016.
 - 32 P. Steadman, *Vermeer's camera*, Oxford 2001 and Steadman 2015 (note 15).
 - 33 For my summary of the discussion: Grijzenhout 2015 (note 1), 54, with reference to the most important literature on this topic. For the most recent contribution to the debate over Vermeer's supposed use of the camera obscura: J. Jelley, *Traces of Vermeer*, Oxford 2017.
 - 34 Grijzenhout 2015 (note 1), 21. Eijkelboom and Vermeer 2017 (note 11) p. 77, pronounce Van Peer's reasoning 'not very persuasive', [but fail to substantiate their view.
 - 35 W. Weve, 'Het Sint-Lucasgildehuis', in: *Delft* 18 (summer 016) 2, 4-7.
 - 36 D. van Bleyswijck, *Beschryvinge der stad Delft*, Delft 1667, vol. 2, 526.
 - 37 Eijkelboom and Vermeer 2017 (note 11), 79. It doesn't seem very consistent that these authors, having first done their utmost to undermine my thesis that the depicted location should be sought along a canal, here opt point-blank for such a location themselves.
 - 38 Grijzenhout 2015 (note 1), 19.
 - 39 B. Binstock, *Vermeer's family secrets. Genius, discovery, and the unknown apprentice*, New York 2009; K. Keijer, 'Amerikaan trekt locatie van Vermeers Straatje in twijfel', *Het Parool*, 13 March 2016.
 - 40 J.M. Montias, *Vermeer and his milieu. A web of social history*, Princeton NJ 1989, 176.
 - 41 Huizenprotocol 1648-1812 (note 14), fol. 326v2.
 - 42 P. Begheyn, 'Johannes Vermeer en de katholieken te Delft', *Oud-Holland* 121 (2008), 40-55, notably 41.
 - 43 H.G. Slager, 'Johannes Vermeer and his neighbours', <http://www.essentialvermeer.com/history/neighbours-slager.pdf>, notably 14-16. In a revised version of this document, which appeared after the publication of my original article in *Bulletin KNOB* (2018), Hans Slager suggested that the Thins-Vermeer family may indeed have lived on the western corner of Molenpoort. Although Slager is correct that there is strictly speaking no absolute and conclusive evidence for either of the two options, I continue to believe, based on all we know about the house on the eastern corner of Molenpoort, that it is the most likely home of the Thins-Vermeer family.
 - 44 National Archives, The Hague, archive of the Rekenkamer ter auditie (national audit office), inv. no. 15, fol. 30 resp. 18v. See also K. van der Wiel, 'Delft in de Gouden Eeuw. Welvaart en armoede ten tijde van Johannes Vermeer', in: D. Haks and M.C. van der Sman (eds.), *De Hollandse samenleving in de tijd van Vermeer*, Zwolle 1996, 52-67, notably 61.
 - 45 For the following, see: H. de Mare, 'Het beeld als bron. Een beschouwing naar aanleiding van recent onderzoek naar Het Straatje van Vermeer', *Tijdschrift voor Historische Geografie* 2 (2018), 248-259.
 - 46 Grijzenhout 2015 (note 1), 56, referring to: A.K. Wheelock and C.J. Kaldenbach, 'Vermeer's view of Delft and his vision of reality', *Artibus et Historiae* 6 (1982), 9-35; B. Broos, K. Wheelock et al., *Johannes Vermeer*, The Hague/Zwolle 1995, 123. For an intelligent discussion of the whole range of possibilities for the painted townscape in Dutch seventeenth-century painting, from 'conterfeytsel' [portrait] of an individual house via a *capriccio* combining various existing buildings into a new townscape, up to and including the wholly invented or reimaged townscape, see the essays by Boudewijn Bakker and Arthur Wheelock in: A. van Suchtelen and Arthur K. Wheelock jr (eds.), *Hollandse stadsgesichten uit de Gouden Eeuw*, Zwolle 2008 (exh. cat. Mauritshuis, The Hague, and National Gallery, Washington).
 - 47 Eijkelboom and Vermeer 2017 (note 11), 79-80.

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VERMEER'S THE LITTLE STREET: A PRECISE LOCATION

FRANS GRIJZENHOUT

In the autumn of 2015, Frans Grijzenhout published his sensational findings regarding the likely location of Johannes Vermeer's 'little street' (The Little Street). After consulting a variety of sources, including the 'The Ledger of Dredging of the Canals in the Town of Delft' from 1666–1667, he had reached the conclusion that the famous painting by Vermeer must have been based on the houses and two intervening passageways that in Vermeer's day stood on Vlamingstraat, an unassuming canal in the eastern part of Delft, where numbers 40 and 42 stand today. He had also ascertained that one of Vermeer's aunts, Ariaentgen Claes van der Minne, was the occupant of 42 Vlamingstraat at that time. Several authors have since produced material indicating that Vermeer painted the right-hand house in Little Street 'from life': the house was, it now appears, observed and reproduced in meticulous detail. The same can now be confirmed for other aspects, such as the colour used for the painted shutters and the recesses for wind hooks in the sill of the window of the righthand house. Philip Steadman has rightly pointed to an apparent discrepancy of four feet (c. 1.25 m.) between the details in the aforementioned 'Ledger of the Dredging of the Canals in the Town of Delft' and the actual spatial situation at 40 Vlamingstraat. This difference can be traced back to the fact that the gateway provided access to both front and back houses. Accordingly, the owners of both front and back houses would have been taxed on

the width (four feet) of the passageway. Given what we know about the meticulous precision with which the Ledger was compiled in the case of 42 Vlamingstraat, it is inconceivable that the authors of the register for number 40 should have made a mistake. A spatial rendering based on an earlier perspective study of The Little Street, corresponds surprisingly well, and in some respects in detail, with the cadastral and other information we have about the complex on Vlamingstraat. Steadman's contention that the back house must have been some twenty metres tall, is not borne out by this reconstruction: the gutter height of this house is between 7.4 and 8 metres. There are no valid reasons for assuming that Vermeer based The Little Street on the Oudemanhuis on Voldersgracht or on the house he and his family occupied on Oude Langendijk, as claimed respectively by Steadman and Benjamin Binstock. Nor is there any reason to suppose that the division of the plane and arrangement of space, and the architectural elements in The Little Street were based purely on an underlying grid of lines with no basis in historical reality, as suggested by Heidi de Mare. Obviously, Vermeer may well, as in the View of Delft, have resorted to artistic licence with elements or relative proportions in The Little Street, but there is more than enough justification for assuming that in making this painting he did indeed draw inspiration from the actual houses and passageways on Vlamingstraat.