

# The Frick Collection: Detail Report

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## Mistress and Maid

Johannes Vermeer (Dutch, 1632–1675)

**Date** ca. 1664–67

**Medium** Oil on canvas

**Dimensions** 35 1/2 x 31 in. (90.2 x 78.7 cm)

**Credit Line** Henry Clay Frick Bequest

**Accession Number** 1919.1.126

Currently On View

First Floor, Room 13, West Gallery

**Commentary** Vermeer chose a large canvas for this composition, which presents two women pondering a newly arrived letter. Depicting an interior domestic scene like so many of Vermeer's images, the painting explores the relationship between mistresses and maids and the writing and receiving of letters, two popular themes in the art and literature of the period. It also demonstrates Vermeer's technical virtuosity: bravura strokes suggest the pleating of the yellow mantle; shorter, bold strokes signify the flickering light reflected on the glassware; and dots of impasto convey the shimmer of the pearls. An observed lack of modeling, especially in the mistress's profile and hands, is a feature that has caused some scholars to declare the painting unfinished. While the figures are not as highly finished as in earlier paintings by Vermeer's oeuvre, this assessment stems from a misunderstanding of the artist's stylistic evolution. The soft articulation of her form imbues the figure with a sense of movement—her mouth open and on the verge of speech, her hand rising to her chin in thought, her eye addressing the maid and at the same time gazing past her. It has also been suggested that the painting's dark background meant that the work was incomplete at the time of Vermeer's death and the background filled in, by another hand, to make it saleable. Infrared reflectography (IRR) of the canvas, conducted in 2018, refutes this and reveals that Vermeer originally included a multi-figural pictorial element in the background, possibly meant to represent a tapestry, which he later painted out to better focus attention on the woman's interactions.

**Collection History** Possibly Vermeer sale, 1696, Amsterdam, Lot 7, sold for 70 florins. Lebrun sale, March 22, 1810, Paris, Lot 143, sold for 601 francs to Chevallier. Paillet sale, 1818, Paris, sold for 460 francs. Duchesse de Berri sale, April 4–6, 1837, Paris, Lot 76, sold for 4,015 francs. Dufour, Marseilles (1859). E. Secrétan sale, July 1, 1889, Paris, Lot 139, sold for 75,000 francs to Sedelmeyer. A. Paulovtsof, St. Petersburg. Lawrie and Co. Sulley and Co., London (1905). James Simon, Berlin (1906). Abraham Preyer, The Hague (with the assistance of Duveen Brothers and Scott Fowles). Frick, 1919.