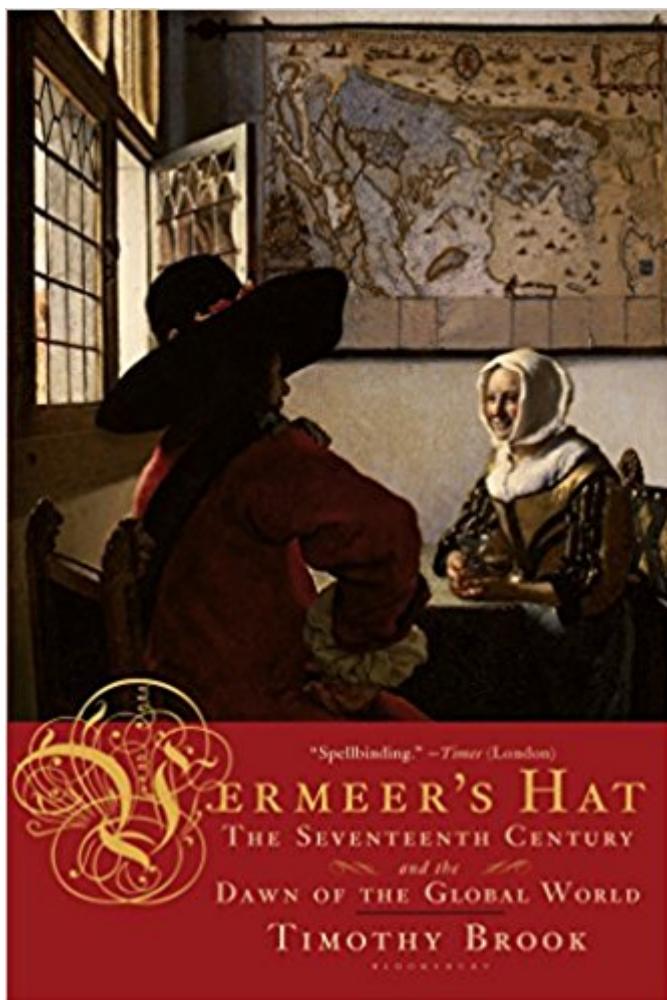


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# Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century And The Dawn Of The Global World



## Synopsis

In this critical darling Vermeer's captivating and enigmatic paintings become windows that reveal how daily life and thought--from Delft to Beijing--were transformed in the 17th century, when the world first became global. A Vermeer painting shows a military officer in a Dutch sitting room, talking to a laughing girl. In another canvas, fruit spills from a blue-and-white porcelain bowl. Familiar images that captivate us with their beauty--but as Timothy Brook shows us, these intimate pictures actually give us a remarkable view of an expanding world. The officer's dashing hat is made of beaver fur from North America, and it was beaver pelts from America that financed the voyages of explorers seeking routes to China--prized for the porcelains so often shown in Dutch paintings of this time, including Vermeer's. In this dazzling history, Timothy Brook uses Vermeer's works, and other contemporary images from Europe, Asia, and the Americas to trace the rapidly growing web of global trade, and the explosive, transforming, and sometimes destructive changes it wrought in the age when globalization really began.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Thanks to Brook's roving and insatiably curious gaze, Vermeer's small scenes widen onto the broad panorama of world history . . . The result is like one of Vermeer's trademark reflective pearls that magically reveals a world beyond itself. A more entertaining guide to world history - and to Vermeer - is difficult to imagine." - Ross King, author of THE JUDGEMENT OF PARIS, MICHELANGELO, and THE POPE'S CEILING AND BRUNELLESCHI'S DOME"From the epicenter of Delft, Brook takes his readers on a journey that encompasses Chinese porcelain and beaver

pelts, global temperatures and firearms, shipwrecked sailors and their companions, silver mines and Manila galleons. It is a book full of surprising pleasures." - Jonathan Spence, author of THE DEATH OF WOMAN WANG"Elegant and quietly important . . . Brook does more than merely sketch the beginnings of globalization and highlight the forces that brought our modern world into being; rather, he offers a timely reminder of humanity's interdependence." - Seattle Times"[An] elegant and quietly important book" - San Francisco Chronicle"Brook utilizes the props in Vermeer's tableaux as starting points to journey into the cultural and economic world of the time: A teacup pours forth the history of the porcelain trade with China, while a felt hat is traced to beaver trapping in North America. It's a fascinating approach to cultural history, providing new ways of thinking about the origins of commonplace objects." - Entertainment Weekly, A grade, EW Pick

Timothy Brook received a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship for the work on which this book is based. He holds the Shaw Chair in Chinese studies at Oxford University and is the author of many books, including the award-winning Confusions of Pleasure.

This is my favorite book in any genre. This was one of my history books in college, and I have given this as a gift to countless people, all of whom have loved it. This is a book of first contacts. In a globalized world, we take for granted the diversity we see in society. But what happened the very FIRST time a Portuguese vessel marooned onto a beach of a tiny fishing village on the southeast coast of China? How did these Chinese fishermen, who knew of nothing else outside their own world, react to seeing the red-haired Dutch, Indian merchants, and African slaves coming from this one vessel? What about the first interactions between Europeans and the natives in North America? At times truly hilarious, at times saddening, but always engaging. Oh, and the reference to Indra's web in this book has been used over and over again. Marvelous imagery.

I had never thought about the beginnings of international trade during the years when there was no way to exchange international currencies. And I had never thought about the items that would be desirable for international trade. How does one swap a Chinese plate with a country whose exports include tulip bulbs? This book solved all the mysteries in the most clever way, using the every-day items in a Dutch home to draw the reader along in a simple and logical sequence. Using items from Vermeer's own studio to tell the reader the beginnings of global economics is such a fresh idea. I don't know of any other book that has explained the subject on such an understandable level. The book is a must for anyone interested in the Baroque period, in economics and, of course, in

art. Coincidentally, our local museum, where I am a docent, is currently featuring an exhibit of Baroque Florentine art. No Vermeer, of course. Things I learned from this book fit comfortably into my tours of the oil paintings as well as into a new exhibit of Middle Eastern art dating from the early first millennium to the present day. I treasure the book and am recommending it to every I know, whatever their interests.

Of course it's not really about Vermeer's hat--or Vermeer's fruit bowl or the two sturdy ships moored together at the right edge of Vermeer's "View of Delft." The subtitle gives it away: "Dawn of the Global World." That's what it's about; the other things are objects in the paintings, props or, as Brook likes to call them, the "doors" that open up in the paintings and let their confined domesticity escape into the outer world and the fresh air of innovation and discovery flow back in, rather like the window that partially frames the hat in the painting. We don't expect detailed art history from this book; Timothy Brook is not an art historian but a distinguished historian of China and Shaw Chair of Chinese Studies at Oxford University. It is as such that he approaches the material; a historian of Europe or of Western Art would have viewed the international cultural and commercial exchanges he analyzes as European exports to the global community, whereas Brook tends to view them more as imports from Europe. Finally, of course, it is interactivity that makes of globalization a two-way street, as symbolized by that open window and all the other open windows and doors in seventeenth-century Dutch painting. So, in a sense, the book IS about Vermeer's art after all; the presence of the hat, bowl, and other "doors" in the pictures is a result of the Dutch Republic's central position in that process of globalization and indicate the source of the enormous commercial wealth that was its foundation. Without that position, Vermeer's paintings would not have been Vermeer's paintings, because his world would not have been what it was. There is not a lot of hard-core art history here, but after reading this book, we will no longer be able to look at the Frick's "Officer and Laughing Girl" naively, i.e., without knowing that the man's wonderful hat was made possible only because Samuel Champlain was just then trying to find a Northwest Passage and able to finance his explorations by sending tons of beaver pelts back to Europe. And those are not just generic "boats"

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