

Girl with a Pearl Earring: *Remixes*

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History

Vermeer's "Girl with a Pearl Earring" is said to be his most famous work. The painting is a *tronie*, otherwise known as a painting of an imaginary figure. Since there's only been speculation about the woman's identity, no hard proof of her actual existence. In this painting the woman is wearing a kind of exotic dress, a turban, and of course, one large shiny pearl earring.

Johannes Vermeer is famous for his ability to paint light in detail. This piece is an incredible example of that. The way the reflection hits the lips of the woman makes her seem rather sweet or seductive. The light on the pearl reflects beautifully, even though it's only painted using two brushstrokes.¹

Something very important about this painting is the emotion on the girl's face, and how it can be interpreted. The novel (titled *Girl with a Pearl Earring*) by Tracy Chevalier (1999) is written based on the painting and tells the story of a maid working for Vermeer, who eventually ends up becoming the model for this painting. This book has a very interesting take on victimization of the male gaze this woman receives. With her mouth slightly agape, and along with the soft skin and shiny pearl, the emotion can be interpreted as soft and sweet, but also oddly seductive to some people. Meanwhile, her choice of maids clothing combined with a large fancy pearl can mean other things: purity and wealth.²

Today

Vermeer's painting is usually on display at the Mauritshuis, in Den Haag, but travels around here and there. Recently, while this painting was away from the Mauritshuis, there was a slideshow of remixed versions on display by the entrance. The museum held an open call and received over twenty-seven hundred different new takes on the image. Some are made by photographers, some by artists, even old and young. With this great success, they ended up holding another online open call under the hashtag "*#mygirlwithapearl*".³



(Image of the Mauritshuis' exposition)

In art, this painting has appeared in many different contexts, and many fun things have been done to remix it. Take Banksy, in 2014 a large mural of the painting appeared in Bristol in England, but instead of a pearl her earring turned into an alarm box. Thus, it was named: Girl with a Pierced Eardrum. In 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, someone covered this painting with a face mask, although it is not known if it was Banksy who did this, or someone else.⁴

Besides the painting museum seeking out new remixes, this famous painting has been remixed countless times, in many forms of (pop culture) media. Take politics for example; The Dutch party Forum voor Democratie (FvD) is widely known as an extreme right party, who often have very discriminatory takes against several marginalized groups and immigrants. Recently for the 2025 national elections, they held a huge poster campaign with their new female chairman huge in the middle of said poster. When looking at it, there's a very close resemblance to the Vermeer painting we love so much. Going back to previous ideas about the emotion of the original painting, it's easy to see why someone would try to portray the current and new leader of this specific party. If you're known as an extremist party, with a male leader with intimidating takes, it can be a great idea to portray your new female leader in a sweeter or more seductive light.

Within music & especially album covers there's a lot of Girl with a Pearl Earring reference to be found. It's very easily findable in female album covers, but there's especially a lot within the K-pop genre.

Women in South-Korea and especially in K-pop are being pushed to stay within the "innocent and sweet, or provocative and sexy" scale and are extremely objectified within the music industry.⁵ The girl in the girl with a pearl painting is also often described as 'intimate' but also seen as a soft & sweet image. Something that contributes to the standard of women compared the men is the actual lack of this specific reference in male K-pop content.



Like every famous art piece, there's also been countless merchandise items made based on the painting. Posters, mugs, t-shirts, notebooks, earrings, mirrors, prints, you name it; the internet or Mauritshuis has it. This painting has become famous enough that it also had merchandise of its remixes.

Conclusion

Vermeer's painting of this girl with a huge pearl earring is important to our pop culture, even today. In an age where anyone can now write a prompt and create anything, you'll still see her face appear very often, just in a different light. It's interesting to see the museum of the painting seeking out new versions and keeping the remixing tradition alive.

Sources:

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