

A BEGINNER'S VISUAL GUIDE

How to Read a Painting

12 Masterpieces Explained



NOTICE THE DETAILS. FIND THE STORY.

One complete lesson + a looking method

KEEP THESE QUESTIONS

Five ways into a painting

01 What is actually shown?

Name figures, objects and a setting. Describe something visible before deciding what it means.

02 Where does my eye go?

Compare light, colour, shapes and edges. Notice how these choices direct attention across the painting.

03 How is space created?

Trace overlaps, changes in scale and receding lines. Where does the picture invite you to imagine standing?

04 What might the details mean?

Offer a reading, then name the visible evidence for it. Could the same detail support another explanation?

05 What changes with context?

Check the title, date and a reliable source. Look again: which details support or complicate what you read?

Informed by teaching resources [1-3]; links on page 5.
An independent method by Museum Aureo.

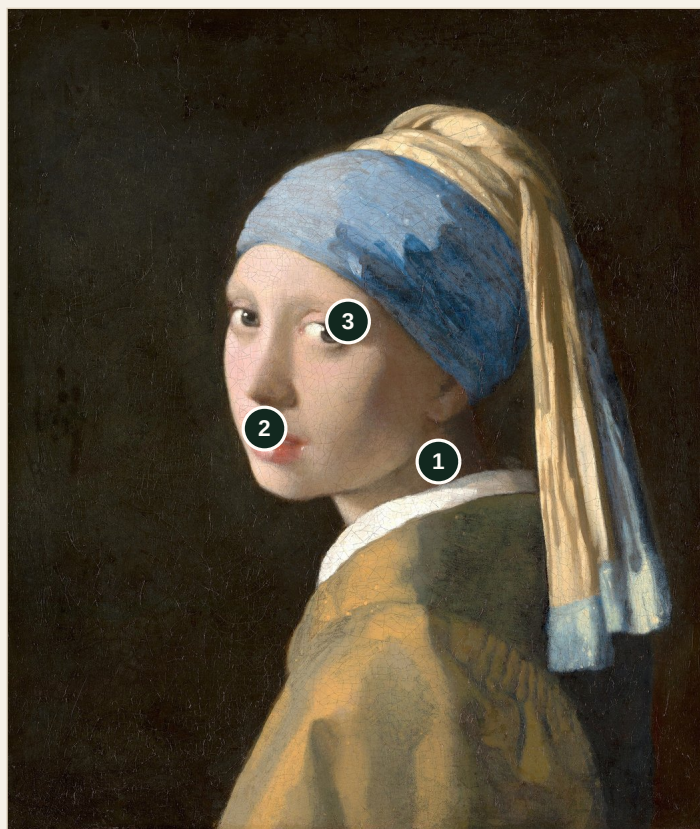
01 / LIGHT & ILLUSION

Girl with a Pearl Earring

Johannes Vermeer · c. 1665 · Oil on canvas

Mauritshuis, The Hague

How can a few marks look like a pearl?



NUMBERED MARKERS LOCATE THE DETAILS ON THE NEXT PAGE

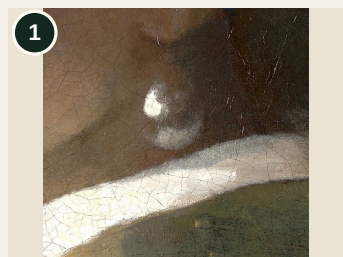
A young figure turns towards us from a dark background. This is a *tronie*: a study of a character or type, rather than a commissioned portrait of a named person. Vermeer makes the face and jewel feel present through carefully placed light.

Worth knowing. The sitter's identity is unknown. The jewel may be an imitation or an invention; its material is not certain.

01 / LIGHT & ILLUSION

Look closer

Look first. Find the brightest tiny marks. Which one did you notice first?



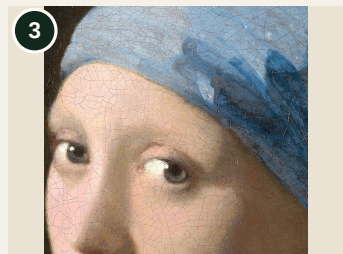
A pearl made of light

A bright upper highlight and a softer reflection below suggest a rounded, shining jewel. Its edge is barely described, and there is no visible hook.



A glimmer on the lips

Small touches of light make the parted lips seem moist. They echo the pearl's sparkle and pull your attention back towards the face.



A face without hard outlines

Soft changes from light to shade model the cheek. Compare that gradual transition with the sharper white collar: different edges create different sensations.

TRY IT

Cover the earring with your finger, then reveal it. Describe how this one bright detail changes the balance of your attention.

TAKE IT TO ANOTHER PAINTING

In another portrait, compare the sharpest edge with the softest. Ask where each makes you look.

YOU HAVE JUST FINISHED ONE LESSON

Keep looking.

The complete 34-page guide pairs museum research on twelve paintings with a method informed by university teaching resources.

- + 12 lessons, 36 details and 12 exercises
- + A looking method and museum checklist
- + A glossary and an evidence exercise
- + Clickable teaching and painting references

[Discover more at @museumaureo](#)

METHOD SOURCES

[\[1\] Jennifer L. Roberts · The Power of Patience \(2013\)](#)

[\[2\] Yale University Art Gallery · Gallery Guide Guide \(2024\)](#)

[\[3\] Princeton University Art Museum · Painting analysis](#)

PAINTING & IMAGE SOURCES

[Mauritshuis · collection entry](#)

[Mauritshuis · Closer to Vermeer and the Girl](#)

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