

The Astronomer in Context

The Dutch master Johannes Vermeer (1635–75) is renowned for his painstaking technique. His exquisite handling of pigment and brush, remarkable manipulation of optical effects, and subtle rendering of light defy imitation. Today, just three dozen of Vermeer's paintings survive. In these intimately scaled, meticulously composed works, the artist achieved more than mere snapshots of 17th-century life. He created worlds. This is evident in *The Astronomer* (1668), on view in the exhibition “The Louvre and the Masterpiece,” in Target Gallery from October 18 through January 10.

Measuring only 20 inches high, Vermeer's *Astronomer* presents the rich, well-ordered surroundings of a patrician scholar. The quiet study's sumptuous furnishings are meant to reveal the young astronomer's learning and worldliness. For example, the celestial globe that so fascinates him would have been a prized object in the home of a prosperous Dutch merchant. The globe came to symbolize the Netherlands' domination of trade and exploration; indeed, Dutch travelers were largely responsible for charting the constellations of the southern sky.

To celebrate *The Astronomer's* presence at the MIA, various objects similar to those in the picture are displayed in this gallery. From the James Ford Bell Library at the University of Minnesota comes a copy of the very book lying open before the astronomer: Adriaan Metius's astronomy and navigation guide of 1621, written for scholarly amateurs as well as sailors. An early celestial globe by the Dutch mapmaker Gerard Mercator will be lent by Chicago's Adler Planetarium beginning October 15, along with a copper astrolabe much like the one in the painting (next to the globe). Other items, also attesting to the scholar's sophistication, include a Flemish tapestry and a Japanese silk robe, in Vermeer's day a fashionable garment imported by Dutch traders.

In the 17th century, the study of astronomy—revolutionized by the theories and discoveries of Galileo, Kepler, Descartes, and Newton—was rife with controversy. The celestial maps and charts of the cosmos exhibited here superbly and precisely illustrate the scientific developments and debates of the time. Vermeer's painting, on the other hand, captures the mystery of the stars and the wonder felt by a scholar contemplating the heavens.