In Case You Missed It: Vermeer’s Hat

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Have you ever suspected that all this recent talk about China and globalization might be just a little belated? China historian Timothy Brook, author of the award-winning *Confusions of Pleasure*, reminds us in a new book that global commercial and cultural exchanges were already profoundly shaping the lives and world views of Europeans 350 years ago.

*Vermeer’s Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World* (Bloomsbury, 2007) offers an eye-opening and eminently readable account of how the ever-expanding circulation of goods and people from several continents began flattening the world several centuries before NAFTA and Walmart.

The story begins in Delft, where Brook happened to fall off his bike on a youthful cycling journey across the Low Countries. The discovery of Vermeer’s gravestone in the city’s Old Church led to an enduring fascination with the painter’s works, five of which serve in this book as the starting points for adventurous journeys of a different kind.

Brook begins each of his main chapters with a close reading of a well-known Vermeer masterpiece. As we peer with him ever more deeply into the frame, we find ourselves transported well beyond Delft’s Schie Canal and the North Sea to Spain, Acapulco, Lake Champlain, Manila, Korea, Japan, and of course China. Details in the paintings—a river barge, a porcelain dish, a felt hat—lead us to the gripping tales of pitched battles and piracy, captivity and conversion, riots and massacres concealed beneath the cozy bourgeois scenes depicted on the canvas.

The reader is regularly and usefully reminded that in Vermeer’s age and for centuries preceeding it, China, not Europe, was in many ways the center of the world. But just as important, we are reminded that cultures at the two ends of the Eurasian continent actually had a great deal in common. Later orientalist rhetoric about the inscrutable Chinese and inexorable differences between East and West notwithstanding, the lives and values of elites from prosperous commercial cities in seventeenth-century Holland and China reveal remarkable parallels, from worries about plague epidemics to concerns about the effects of rapidly spreading luxury, from a delight in tobacco and porcelain to an insatiable lust for silver. Vermeer’s paintings and Brook’s archival discoveries reveal the seventeenth century to be an intricately interconnected world, and one in which translation and transculturation played a crucial role in the creation of meanings both within and beyond the picture frame.