

ART ACTIVITY

Vermeer's Portrait of Wealth and Trade

Background

The trade empire created by the Dutch Republic in the 1600s was far-reaching and lucrative, and women were involved in every phase: as traders, manufacturers, consumers, and more (see [Life Story of Johanna de Laet](#)). Johannes Vermeer captures this in his painting *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*. He embeds symbolic references and imported goods into this quiet domestic scene, reflecting the prevailing influence of global trade on Dutch society and the private sphere.

Four hundred years later, global trade is still essential to the success of many national economies, including that of the United States. Imported products are prevalent in American homes and reflect our reliance on goods from abroad. Now, as then, many women are actively engaged in global trade.

Task

Students will imagine they are twenty-first-century artists who are commissioned to create a portrait of wealth and trade for the United States. Students must first conduct research to determine popular items imported to the United States and where they originate.

Students should be encouraged to research items that women produce and/or trade. Then, using their findings, students will create an interior space similar to Vermeer's to showcase these items and how they impact their everyday lives.

Materials

- Drawing paper (9" x 12" or larger)
- Pencils
- Collage materials: construction paper, magazines, fabric, printed images, tissue paper, catalogues, advertisements, etc.
- Elmer's glue or glue sticks
- Scissors

Art Vocabulary

- **genre painting:** Art that depicts everyday life.
- **collage:** A two-dimensional work of art made by gluing pieces of pictures, paper, and/or found objects.
- **layering:** Building up a surface.
- **perspective:** The illusion of depth on a two-dimensional surface. This includes background, middle ground, and foreground.

Steps

- Invite students to closely examine Vermeer's painting *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*. Discuss the objects that represent goods traded from across the globe (linen, indigo, silk, silver, textiles).
- Chart a list of the trade objects in the scene and from where they originated. Ask students to imagine how this painting would look if it depicted a home in the United States today.
- Provide students an opportunity to conduct research to discover significant items imported to the United States today and where they originate (e.g., computers, cars, sweaters, diamonds, telephones, coffee, leather, medical instruments, tropical fruit, video screens). As a class, compile a complete list of their findings.
- Students will create a contemporary portrait of wealth and trade using the objects discovered in their research. To recreate the Vermeer painting, artwork should include:
 - Four or more examples of imported goods discovered in their research
 - References to how each item is used (e.g., person talking on a cell phone or a television playing in the background)
 - Use of perspective (the inclusion of a background, middle ground, and foreground)
- To begin, students should search in magazines or online for images of imported objects recorded on their class list. Once they have collected enough images, students will receive a sheet of drawing paper; map out their composition lightly in pencil, showing how and where they will place their images to create their interior; and finally, glue everything down.
- Painting was the predominant art form during the Dutch Golden Age. Today, many artists create art digitally using computer-based design programs. If technology is available, collages

can also be created using [Sketchpad](#), a free online drawing program, or other art software such as Adobe Photoshop, Corel Painter, or Microsoft Paint.

- Conclude the project with a written artist statement using the following prompt — *Your portrait of twenty-first-century wealth and trade has been selected to exhibit in a renowned art gallery. Write a press release informing the public about your artwork: What objects did you choose to represent? Where do they come from? How do they impact our lives today? How does your work of art connect to American and Dutch histories of trade? How does this connect to women's history?*