

Vermeer's Girl Asleep

A Moral Emblem

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I. Meagerly recognized in his lifetime, virtually dropped out of history for almost two centuries after his death in 1675, Jan Vermeer of Delft has more recently been exalted by praise as unreserved as it is belated. In the course of the last hundred years he has been glorified as a master on a par with the greatest. His paintings had only to wait for observers ready to esteem them.

It was certainly not by chance that the person who “rediscovered” Vermeer was French, that he was an art critic and friend of some of the advanced painters of his time, and that the year in which he published the essays that established Vermeer’s place in art history was 1866. Interest in the specific effects of daylight, the visual rather than conceptual approach to form, the subordination of subject matter to picture making—revolutionary features that were at the time establishing the leadership of French painting in drastically new trends in art—these were the distinctive characteristics of the paintings that prepared the eyes that could appreciate Vermeer. The content of the Delft master’s paintings may also have been persuasive in recommending them to Théophile Thoré, who advertised his political sympathies by publishing as “W. Bürger” (and thus took his place in art history under the name

of Bürger-Thoré or Thoré-Bürger); like his radical artist friends, he preferred an apparently casual slice of bourgeois life to a grandiose theme.¹

In keeping with the sensibility of the times, through the periods of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painting Vermeer’s art found ever greater appreciation, always based—when it was analyzed at all—on the splendor of his style. At a time when pure painting was exalted as such, Vermeer gave ample grounds for praise in the fashionable terms of the day. Proust recorded for posterity the extravagance to which this trend could be carried when he wrote of the critic who extolled the View of Delft for “un petit pan de mur jaune . . . si bien peint, qu’il était, si on le regardait seul, comme une précieuse oeuvre d’art chinoise, d’une beauté qui se suffirait à elle-même,” and of Bergotte, whose motto might have been: “See Vermeer and die.”²

Though Vermeer’s paintings feature the clear light of day, many of those who acclaimed them, including Proust, sensed something inscrutable in them. Admirers sought to explain the mystery in terms of their own emotional response, often through metaphors borrowed from music. Terms such as “silence,” “rhythm,” and “harmony” were repeatedly invoked to describe

1. Thoré-Bürger mentioned three paintings by Vermeer in the first volume of his *Musées de la Hollande* (Paris, 1858). In the second volume (Paris, 1860) he attributed a dozen paintings to him (not correctly in some cases, in the light of modern scholarship). His major publication on “Van der Meer de Delft” (which later appeared in book form) was a study in three parts in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 21 (1866) pp. 297–330, 458–470, and 542–575.

2. Marcel Proust, *La Prisonnière* (Paris, 1954) pp. 198 ff. (1st

edition, Paris, 1923). Proust visited the exhibition of Dutch painting at the Jeu de Paume in May 1921, to which the quoted passage refers, in the company of the critic Jean-Louis Vaudoyer, who had recently written several articles on Vermeer. On Vaudoyer’s influence on Proust, who had already seen the View of Delft on a visit to Holland almost twenty years earlier, see Hélène Adhémar, “La Vision de Vermeer par Proust, à travers Vaudoyer,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 68 (1966) pp. 291–302.

the allure of these works. Their subject matter was assumed to be merely incidental to the effect. Artists and art lovers who despised the “literary” content of nineteenth-century kitsch were little inclined to concede the possibility that pictures they admired had meaning other than the purely aesthetic. The fact that increasing esteem for Vermeer coincided with rising enthusiasm for the Impressionists and their followers and rested on the same grounds retarded recognition of the differences between the seventeenth-century Delft painter and the nineteenth-century French ones.

In Vermeer’s time, subject matter was the first consideration in most European paintings. In this respect Dutch painters and buyers of paintings were no exception. The artists’ technical skills were valued only insofar as they served well in the representational tasks to which they were devoted. Lacking religious and royal commissions, which dominated art in other nations, Dutch painters tended to become specialists in any one of an ample range of subjects. They produced portraits, independent still lifes, landscapes, and genre scenes unprecedented in variety as well as in quantity. It has been thought by some that this bumper crop of paintings merely reflects the pride of Dutch artists and their customers in their country and their material possessions. Such pride, along with a reverence for visible things as a part of God’s world, doubtless contributed both to the choice of subject matter and to the treatment of it in some paintings. But it would be an oversimplification to see “Dutch realism” as the overriding motive in the painting of the seventeenth century in the northern Netherlands. Literary and religious references abound, and art-historical research, taking into account the interests of the society that produced them, has revealed many instances of paintings with meanings beyond what is immediately evident.

This different kind of looking has already begun to perceive a different picture of the artist whom Thoré-

Bürger called “the Sphinx.” The known documents about Vermeer’s life tell us almost nothing about his intentions with regard to his art, but some of the works themselves attest to his concern with intellectual content. Among his relatively few paintings that have come down to us,³ two of the earliest portray familiar narrative subjects and draw on prior works of art in doing so: *Diana and Her Companions* (The Hague, Mauritshuis) and *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland). The first of his two dated paintings, *The Procuress* (1656, Dresden, Gemäldegalerie), deals overtly with the brothel theme that the Utrecht Caravaggists had popularized in the 1620s. Two pictures are allegorical; the first of these, *The Art of Painting* (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum), is a masterpiece of Vermeer’s full maturity,⁴ while the second, *Allegory of the Christian Faith* (New York, Metropolitan Museum), is a late work. Thus, from the beginning to the end of his career, Vermeer undertook compositions whose goal was the communication of a message. It should not come as a surprise that some of his paintings that have been mistaken for pure genre can be shown to embody meanings that his contemporaries would have understood, though they are esoteric to modern observers.

II. Vermeer’s *Girl Asleep at a Table* (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Figure 1) has been the focus of numerous attempts at interpretation, but until now no explanation has been proposed that takes into account all of its features.

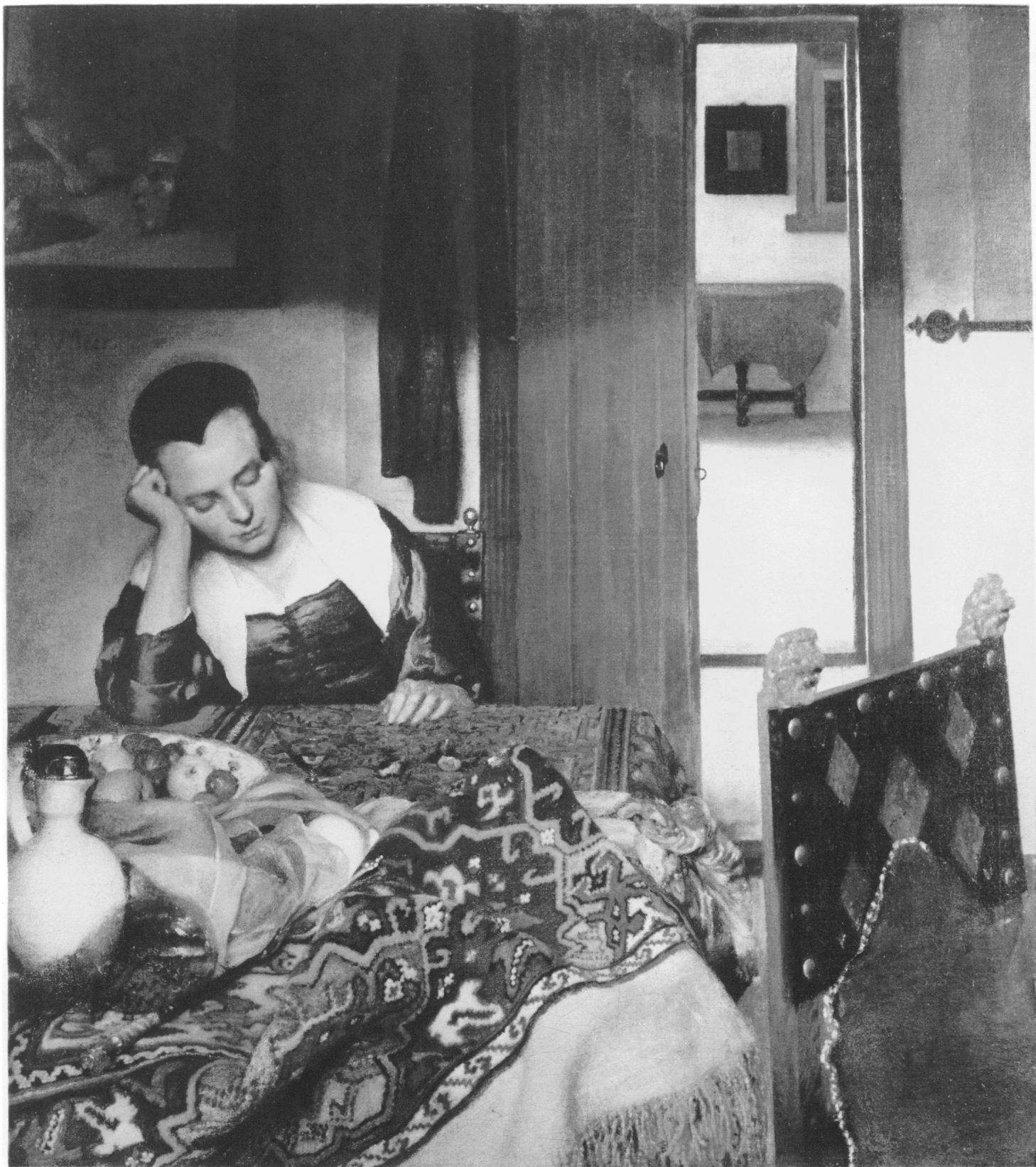
It has been rather widely assumed that this is the painting listed as number 8, “Een dronke slapende meyd aen een tafel,” in the anonymous sale in Amsterdam on May 16, 1696, in which twenty-one paintings by Vermeer were sold (along with pictures by other masters). The provenance of the Museum’s painting is certain, however, only from the time of the John W. Wilson sale in Paris, March 14–16, 1881, in which it

3. About thirty-five paintings are accepted by most scholars as autograph works by Vermeer.

4. That this painting was known as *The Art of Painting* in Vermeer’s lifetime is implied by the fact that a deposition made by his widow on February 24, 1676, only two months after his death, referred to a painting by her husband as “de Schilderconst.” The full text is published by A. Bredius, “Iets over Johannes Vermeer (‘De Delftsche Vermeer’),” *Oud Holland* 3 (1885) p. 220.

FIGURE 1

Girl Asleep, by Jan Vermeer. Oil on canvas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of Benjamin Altman, 14.40.611



was number 116, titled “La Servante endormie.” “A Drunken Girl, Sleeping at a Table” and “The Sleeping Maidservant” could, of course, designate the same picture. But it must be borne in mind that both designations appeared as descriptions of a painting rather than explanatory titles. They are designed to identify images, not to reveal intended content.⁵ Apparently even so soon as twenty-one years after Vermeer’s death, when the Amsterdam auction took place, either the Girl Asleep was not known to have an intrinsic meaning, or such meaning as was attached to it was considered unimportant in the context of a sale. At the time when the painting was made, however, the meaning would have constituted a large factor in the value of the picture, if not its *raison d’être*.

A search for meaning must start with what immediately meets the eye, and indeed must never stray too far from “the thing itself as it really is.” A solitary human figure is depicted in the Museum’s painting, a rosy-cheeked young woman seated at a table. She wears a brown satin dress with a white collar open at the throat, a black “widow’s peak” cap,⁶ and large pear-shaped pearl earrings. Her eyelids are lowered. Her right elbow rests on the table, and her right hand, with fingers curled, supports her head. Her left hand also rests on the table before her. The table is covered with a Turkish carpet, mainly reds, blues, and ocher, with ocher kilim and fringe. At the edge of the table nearer the beholder the carpet is pushed up to form a large triangular fold; here the pattern is vastly enlarged as compared with the part of the carpet that is flat on the table toward the side where the young woman sits, thus emphasizing the spatial recession (Figure 2).⁷ The

5. This is indisputably the case with every one of the paintings by Vermeer listed in the 1696 sale. Gerard Hoet, *Catalogus of naamlyst van schilderyen . . .* (The Hague, 1752) I, p. 34. Thoré-Bürger published the list in French, “Van der Meer,” pp. 542–543.

6. This style of cap, though known as a “widow’s peak,” was not worn exclusively by widows.

7. The design on the farther side of the table is not recognizably related to the rug whose pattern and texture are depicted in intensely vivid closeup view in the foreground. In fact it is not recognizably a rug pattern at all. The part adjacent to the girl’s elbow is even more summary than the rest. Comparison with other paintings makes it seem highly probable, however, that Vermeer meant to show a single rug on the table, exaggerating the appearance of both the near and the more distant areas in order to stress the perspective recession. The same rug appears to be depicted in his painting of Christ in the House of Martha and Mary.

table holds a white pottery jug with a silvery metal cap, a dish containing russet and yellow fruit, and a white pitcher lying on its side, partly enveloped in a cream-colored transparent cloth, which is also seen in twists falling from the right edge of the table. Partially concealed by this cloth are two gleaming, long, slender objects, one or both of which may be silver-handled spoons. An amber-colored *roemer* lying in the foreground of the still-life grouping on the table is badly abraded; the condition of this item, an anomaly in the otherwise better-preserved surface, suggests the possibility that it was not a part of the original paint film. X-ray evidence (Figure 3) supports the suspicion that this drinking goblet may have been added later, conforming to the line of the shadow on the right side of the white jug. The X-ray reveals that another object, apparently a small bowl lying on its side with its base visible, was originally at the right of the jug, where the *roemer* now appears. It seems that the highlights of the object originally represented here were incorporated in the image of the *roemer*. Behind this is a pottery bowl, seen through the transparent cloth. Finally, there is a wine glass with a little wine in it, located closer to the still-life elements than to the seated girl.

In the right foreground is seen a chair back, which, like the bunched-up carpet, stresses the close viewpoint and at the same time creates a strong diagonal leading in from the picture plane. The chair has lion-head finials, blackish-brown leather upholstery tooled in lozenge shapes, and bright brass nailheads. On it is a brown cushion, very similar in color to both the wood and the lighter parts of the leather back; it is edged in brilliant gold-colored beading. The chair on which the girl is seated has similar brass nailheads and a brass ball finial. Behind the girl a dark cloth (a cloak?) of indefinite color and shape hangs on the wall, next to a half-open door. At the right of the doorjamb can be seen part of the lower roller and the left edge of a hanging (judging from other paintings by Vermeer and his contemporaries, undoubtedly a map). Above the girl’s head, a simple dark frame encloses the lower right corner of a picture, which shows in the foreground a mask on the ground at the right and a poorly defined object, perhaps a pear, at the left, with the nude bent left leg of a child between them.

Through the open door there is a glimpse of the brightly lighted floor of a corridor or narrow room, and

then, beyond a second threshold and doorframe, the floor and wall of another room. The farther room, whose floor is likewise brilliantly illuminated, has a table covered with a nondescript brownish cloth against the far wall, and above the table a mirror in a wide black frame. To the right of the mirror, the left side of a window frame and a darkened window echo the horizontals and verticals of the architectural elements and furnishings of the room in the foreground.

The calculated interrelationships that combine to form a three-dimensional geometrical organization provide the basic ingredients of the exquisite sense of balance, of enduring stability, that is characteristic of Vermeer. He succeeded in giving substance to space itself inside this solid framework. The eccentric shapes he placed within the strict pattern of straight lines and right angles are captive to their geometrical environment, with its cubic chunks of space. This is the earliest painting in which Vermeer disclosed this aspect of his art, which was to remain a distinctive feature of his designs. After this experiment, however, so far as we can judge from the surviving paintings, he never again undertook this particular type of composition, which opens to view another room beyond that in which the scene is set.⁸

The colors of the *Girl Asleep* are those of Vermeer's early palette. The picture shares its reds, yellows, and blacks especially with the *Dresden Procuress*, which is dated 1656. The modeling of forms is essentially similar in the two paintings, and the same young woman appears in both. Though the *Girl Asleep* betrays some awkwardness in the representation of spatial relations, it is superior to the *Procuress* in this important regard, as well as in the sureness of modeling, and therefore would take its place after the *Dresden* painting in the chronology of Vermeer's oeuvre.⁹

8. The earlier painting *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* had a less fully realized view through a doorway. The 1696 sale included a painting by Vermeer described as "A gentleman washing his hands in a room with a view through, with pictures, artistic and original" (no. 5). As we have no further information about this painting, there is no way to know whether it actually showed a view into an adjoining room or what its place in Vermeer's chronology might have been.

9. Most scholars are in general agreement that the *Girl Asleep* dates from about 1656. Exceptions: W. R. Valentiner, "Zum 300. Geburtstag Jan Vermeers, Oktober 1932," *Pantheon* 10 (1932) p.

III. A number of the elements of the *Girl Asleep* were commonplaces of the painting of Vermeer's time. But to acknowledge this is not to deny that they might have made a specific contribution to the meaning of each painting in which they appeared. Each component must be studied in its context.

The posture of the girl, with head leaning on hand and elbow as underpinning, is a motif that has come down from antiquity. By long tradition, a figure in that pose, with eyes closed, represents sleep. The original function of the pose must have been to distinguish between the twin children of "La Notte, nutrice di la Morte e il Sonno."¹⁰ For, while it may not be the most practical arrangement for sleeping (as anyone who has tried it on a long flight can attest), it is an impossible position for a corpse. The reclining figure with elbow resting on the ground (or couch) and head on hand is necessarily alive; a perennially living effigy of the defunct in this pose strikes an optimistic note on a good many Greek and Etruscan sarcophagi. In these representations it was usual to show the eyes open. A figure in the same pose with eyes closed became identified with mythological characters whose state of sleep was essential to the role they played in the narrative depicted. Thus Endymion was frequently shown in this pose, from classical times right into the seventeenth century.¹¹

In Roman painting and sculpture the sleeper with head on hand was familiar as a representation of the sleeping Ariadne.¹² It was probably through reliefs showing scenes from the story of Ariadne that the motif became known to Renaissance artists. Its wide dissemination was assured by the woodcut of the fountain of the nymph in Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (Figure 4), which, as Fritz Saxl was the first to note, "more-or-less faithfully reproduced" an antique relief representing the discovery of Ariadne by

319, dated it 1655; Vitale Bloch, *Tutta la Pittura di Vermeer de Delft* (Milan, 1954) p. 30, placed it between 1655 and 1660.

10. Vincenzo Cartari, *Imagini delli Dei de gl'Antichi* (Venice, 1647) p. 174.

11. The pose was taken over from mythological to religious subjects; it was used, for instance, to show Adam sleeping while God creates Eve in the Winchester Bible, c. 1170.

12. The classical model for these may have been the famous painting in the sanctuary of Dionysus in Athens, which Pausanias described (1. 20. 3): "Ariadne asleep, Theseus putting out to sea, and Dionysus on his arrival to carry off Ariadne."

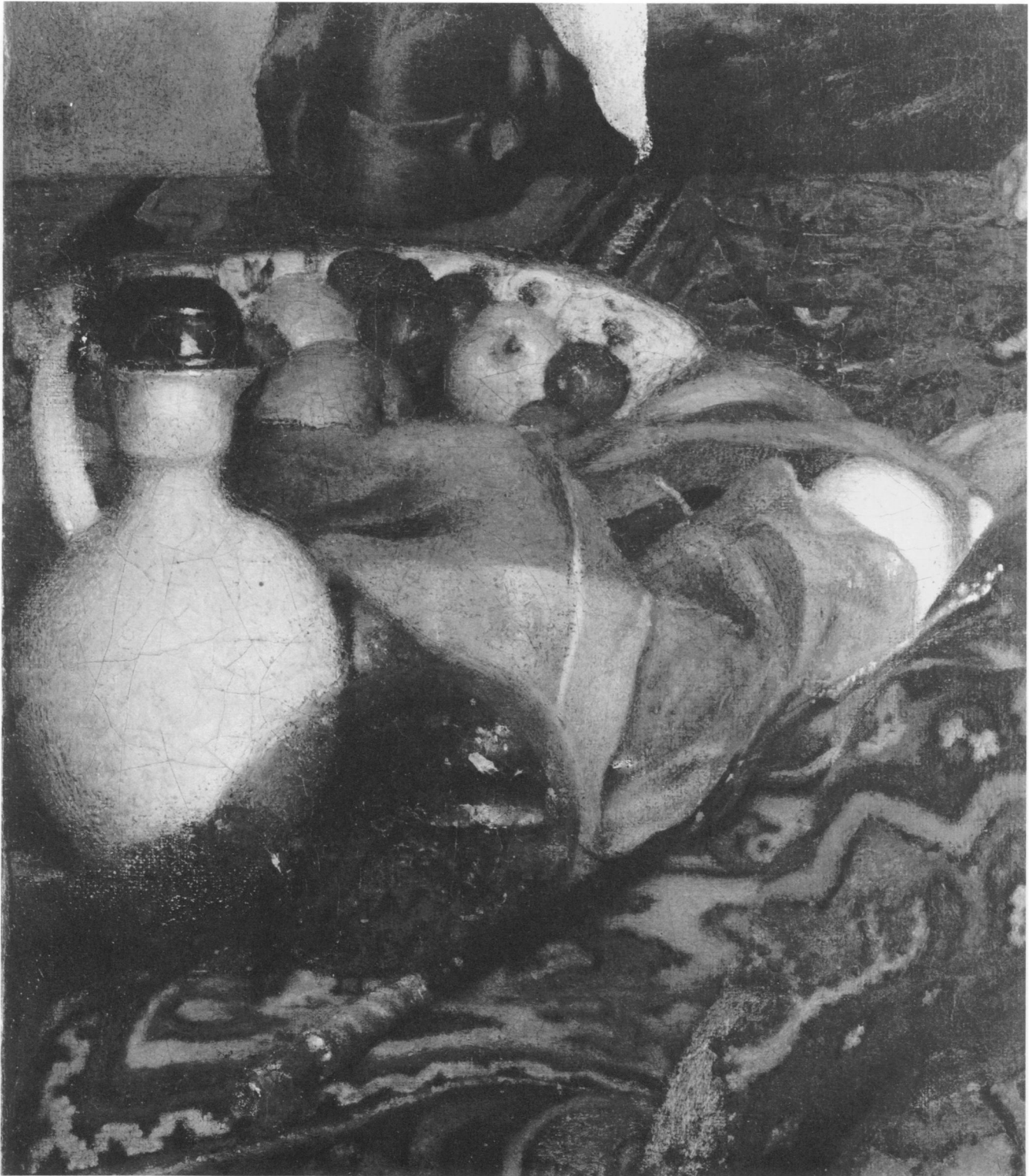


FIGURE 2
Detail of the still life and carpet in the *Girl Asleep*

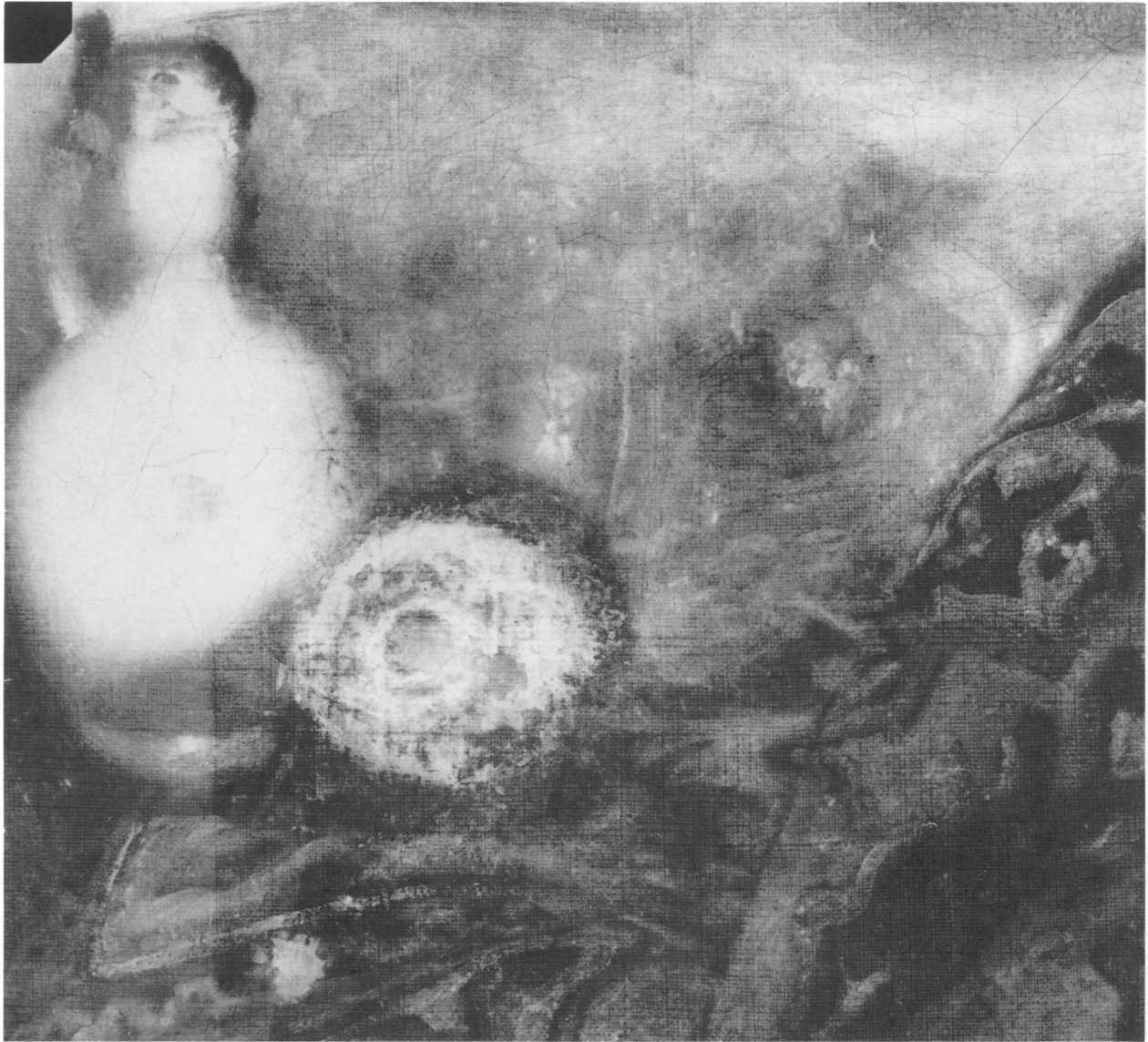


FIGURE 3
X-ray of a detail of the *Girl Asleep*

Bacchus.¹³ The first edition of this book, published in Venice in December 1499 by the great Aldus Manutius, is justly regarded as one of the most beautiful of incunabula. Giorgione and Titian certainly knew the book,¹⁴

13. Fritz Saxl, "Titian and Pietro Aretino" (dated May 1935), *Lectures* (London, 1957) I, pp. 162–163.

14. See Madlyn Kahr, "Titian, the 'Hypnerotomachia Poliphili' Woodcuts, and Antiquity," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 68 (1966) pp. 119–127.

and it is reasonable to suppose that other sixteenth-century artists were familiar with it. Its text as well as its illustrations provided vital links in the chain of literary and artistic developments that culminated in the emblem books that, as we are coming increasingly to understand, made a considerable contribution to Dutch art of the seventeenth century.

The *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, which was in effect a love letter to antiquity in the guise of fiction, was

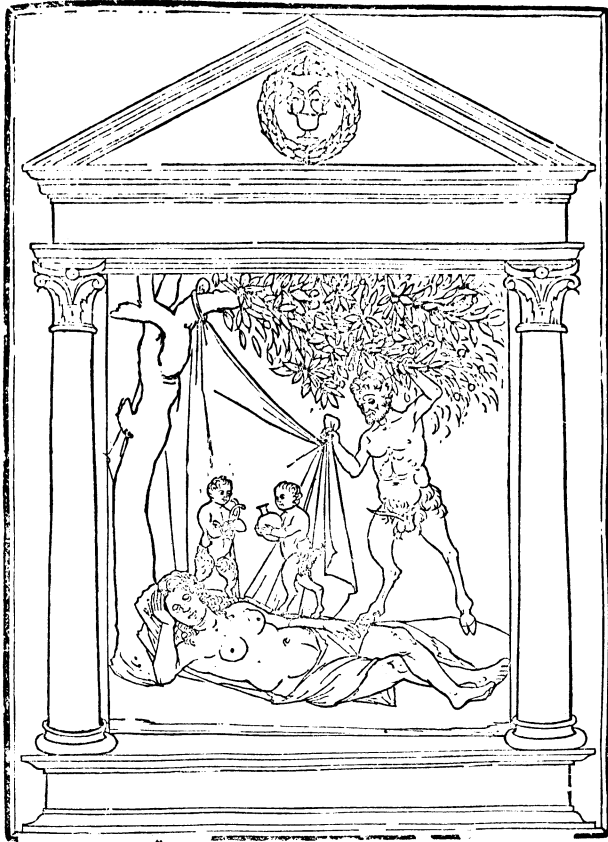


FIGURE 4

The fountain of the nymph. Woodcut from Francesco Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, Venice, 1499, signature e i recto. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of J. P. Morgan, 23.73.1

thought by its sponsor to encompass all the wisdom of the ancients and even “the secrets of nature itself.” Such knowledge, he explained, was not intended to be easy of access; it should be available only to those with sufficient learning and determination.¹⁵ It was in order to help such scholarly readers understand difficult points that he commissioned illustrations for the book. This explains why the *Hypnerotomachia*, alone among Aldine publications, is lavishly illustrated. Like the text of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, emblems were intended as intellectual puzzles. They deliberately required a modicum of both wit and learning for their deciphering.

An emblem strictly speaking combines a caption and a picture, whose connection is not obvious, along with verses or prose texts, often quotations from Greek and Roman literature, that make the meaning clear. The

15. Leonardo Crasso, juriconsult of Verona, who commissioned the publication, wrote in his dedication that the author had deliberately concealed from the vulgar his “elixir of philosophical sustenance drawn from the fonts of the Muses.”

meaning is characteristically a moral. The joy of discovery of the concealed significance presumably removes some of the sting from the didactic intention. If we must reserve the title of direct lineal forebear of the authors of seventeenth-century emblem books for such writers as Horapollo, Andrea Alciati, Vincenzo Cartari, Pierio Valeriano, and Cesare Ripa, we can credit Francesco Colonna with having been a much-loved great-uncle with a persuasive personality. His approach has much in common with the mode of thinking of the seventeenth-century Dutch writers and artists who were attracted to emblems.

The woodcuts illustrating the free French translation of the *Hypnerotomachia* published in Paris in 1546 by Jacques Kerver, with the title *Discours du Songe de Poliphile*, followed fairly closely those of the original edition. These cuts were used again for the French edition of 1600 and thus were the version most likely to have been available to seventeenth-century Northern artists. The woodcut depicting the marvelous sleeping-nymph fountain follows in most of its details the description of this monument in the text, including the specification that the nymph lay on her side, with her hand placed under her cheek to support her head (Figure 5). The transformation of the slumbering Ariadne of ancient art into a Renaissance fountain figure appears to follow naturally from Ariadne’s association with the god of wine.

In the seventeenth century, Dutch artists used the traditional head-on-hand pose to indicate that seated figures were sleeping. Vermeer’s *Girl Asleep* is in this respect in the company of Terbrugghen’s *Sleeping Mars* (Utrecht, Centraal Museum) and Nicolaes Maes’s *Idle Servant* (London, National Gallery). By their time, however, the symbolic pose of sleep no longer merely served for purposes of identification. Moralistic implications had become attached to it, implications that bear on the meanings of all three of these paintings and others related to them. Mars and the sleeping girl, as well as the idle servant, are exposed

FIGURE 5

The fountain of the nymph. Woodcut from Francesco Colonna, *Discours du Songe de Poliphile*, Paris, 1546, p. 23. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 26.77

as lazy. Sleep had come to be equated with the vice of sloth.¹⁶

As Erwin Panofsky pointed out in discussing Dürer's engraving traditionally known as *Dream of the Doctor* (Pan. 183), in medieval moralizing literature and art Sloth was personified by a sleeping figure.¹⁷ Panofsky proposed the title "Temptation of the Idler" for the Dürer print, which he interpreted as "an allegory of laziness." Its message is that "laziness is the root of all sin." The sleeper is to be castigated not only for allowing sleep to keep him from useful activities, but even more for permitting himself to be prey to temptation. Dürer's sleeping man, who rests his head luxuriously on a cushion and not on his hand, is wickedly enjoying an erotic dream, as the Devil conjures up for him a classical Venus. "A pillow alone is sufficient to indicate the sin of laziness."

Bruegel's *Desidia*, one of his series *The Seven Deadly Sins*, published by Hieronymus Cock in 1558 (Figure 6),¹⁸ represents the vice of Sloth as a woman sleeping in the traditional head-on-hand pose. She is surrounded by all the horrors that only the fertile imagination of Bruegel could envisage as resulting from idleness. Her couch is a sleeping ass,¹⁹ and a demon provides a pillow

16. These two pictures have previously been compared with the *Girl Asleep* because of the obvious similarity of the motif. Benedict Nicolson, *Hendrick Terbrugghen* (London, 1958) p. 103, recognizing that "from what we know of Terbrugghen as a moralist, it would be wrong to suppose that this figure [Mars] held nothing but the literal meaning of a soldier asleep," interpreted the *Sleeping Mars* in a pacifist sense. I would suggest that there might have been instead a militaristic intention. Painted not long after the *Twelve Years' Truce* ended in 1621, the picture may have represented a call for vigilance and action, warning that the laziness of Mars could lead to military defeat. A similar ironic interpretation would apply to the *Mars Velázquez* painted almost twenty years later, who is clearly a ridiculous figure, awake but unprepared and indolent. I deal with this question more fully in an article now in preparation.

The *Idle Servant* is, of course, frankly related to the theme of reprehensible idleness. Sebastian Brant's *Narrenschiff* identified sloth with servants; I quote the London edition of 1570, fols. 195,



for her. A nude woman seated at the right, with her elbow on a table and her head supported by her hand, in a pose much like that of Vermeer's *Girl Asleep*, also has a monstrous attendant who brings her a large cushion. The cushion prominently visible on the chair in

195 verso: "The sinne of slouth all mankinde doth oppres, / But namely servautes them selves thereto apply, / Despising Labour, sleping continually. . . ." Whether Vermeer's *Girl Asleep* is to be identified as a servant is problematic. Her costume and setting both argue against it.

17. Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (Princeton, 1955) p. 71. Panofsky first dealt with this material in "Zwei Dürerprobleme," *Münchener Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst* N.F. 8 (1931) pp. 1-8.

18. Bruegel's original drawing, dated 1557, is in Vienna, Albertina. The plate was engraved by Petrus a Merica.

19. This is explained by an alternative description of *Accidia*, which Ripa attributes to Pierio Valeriano: "Een Vrouwe die op der aerde leyt met een Esel by haer. Dit Dier plaghten de Egyptenaers te gebruycken, om de afweesigheyt van des Menschen gedachten, tot Godlijcke en heylige saeken uyt to drucken, zijnde steets besigh met vuyle en schandige gepeinsen, gelijk Pierius verhaelt." (*Iconologia*, trans. Dirck Pietersz. Pers [Amsterdam, 1644] p. 519).



FIGURE 6

Desidia. Engraving after a drawing by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 26.72.34

the foreground of the Vermeer composition would carry the same implications as the cushions in the prints by Dürer and Bruegel: sleep means sloth, and sloth means lustful dreams.

The nymph in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* woodcut of 1545, sleeping with her head on her hand, is a close counterpart of a figure in an emblem-book illustration first published in 1540, likewise in Paris (Figure 7). The book was the *Hecatographie*, by Gilles Corrozet, published by Denis Janot. It was so popular that other editions came out in 1541, 1543, and 1548. In this woodcut the sleeping woman is fully clothed as she

sleeps, like the nymph, under a tree. Her right arm is in a different position from that of the nymph, and she has different companions. A large-winged Cupid, also fully clothed, arrives at the right, holding his bow in his lowered right hand and two leafy branches aloft in his left. Four large bees buzz around the tree and the woman who sleeps beneath it.

The emblem in the *Hecatographie* comprises a caption, a woodcut, and a quizzical quatrain, all within an elaborate border, and explanatory verses on the facing page. It provides a key to the meaning of Vermeer's *Girl Asleep*.

The emblem is titled “Against the weakness of Lovers.” The quatrain beneath the woodcut, freely translated, reads:

If Cupid shoots his darts at me,
Flings his great torch and burning charge
While I am deep in torpid sleep,
What will he do when I awake?

This question, along with the caption and the picture, constitutes a puzzle, the deciphering of which is the goal of the emblem game. The verses on the opposite page reveal the solution (Figure 8):

FIGURE 7
Woodcut from Gilles Corrozet, *Hecatongraphie*, Paris, 1543, signature C i verso. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 25.69 (photo: Philip Evola)



Those who are stung by love’s pain always find some excuse, saying: “One cannot protect oneself against Love, who persuades one’s heart through his cunning tricks,” and, like that lady, blame Cupid, who importunes her to love, thus making an excuse for their weakness. But it is too cowardly to allow oneself to yield on that score. It is well known that the will, which ought to function freely, either is in command or is not. To claim, “Cupid stung me and inflamed my heart with passion” is to lack courage. Love does not come to one who is asleep, if it is not a dream or a fantasy that a foolish lover could have who craves the affection of a lady he has chosen. A woman is in no wise seized by love, whether asleep or awake, unless she consents to it.

FIGURE 8
Page from the *Hecatongraphie* facing the one in Figure 7, signature Cii recto (photo: Philip Evola)

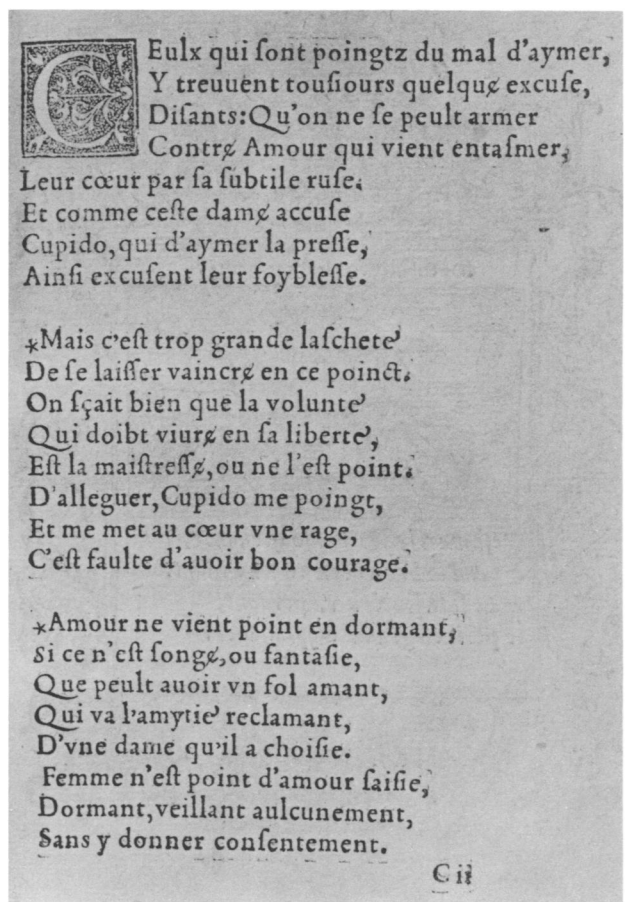


FIGURE 9

Accidia. Woodcut from Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia*, Amsterdam, 1644, p. 518 (photo: Philip Evola)

In short, a person has free will and must accept responsibility for his dreams and fantasies,²⁰ as well as for his actions. Idleness, that is to say, sloth, leads to the other vices. To be indolent, to sleep, to dream, is to be tempted. "The Devil makes work for idle hands."

As is often the case, the whole of the emblem is greater than the sum of its parts, and its significance is far weightier than its amusing and light-hearted manner would imply. The sleeping lady in the woodcut is the image of Desidia. Bruegel recognized her as such, and apparently used her as the model for the chief figure in the drawing he made in 1557 for the aforementioned engraving of Sloth in *The Seven Deadly Sins*. The correspondence between the two figures is extraordinarily close, even as to the arrangement of the garments.

The opposite pole from the slothful sleeping lady is represented by the wide-awake Cupid. The bees are traditional companions of Cupid, representing the pains or sorrows of love.²¹ But in this case they have an additional meaning. The branches that Cupid flourishes represent thyme, the bitter herb from which the bees by their industriousness make sweet honey. Ripa gave the attributes of bees and thyme to Diligenza. Thus the woodcut represents indolence along with its opposite, diligence.

Ripa comes forward once more as a possible direct source for Vermeer's *Girl Asleep*. The woodcut illustrating his description of Accidia (Figure 9) is from the Dutch translation made by Dirck Pietersz. Pers and

20. For a more recent discussion of this question, see Sigmund Freud, "Moral Responsibility for the Content of Dreams," *Standard Edition*, XIX (London, 1961) pp. 131-134.

21. Andrea Alciati, *Emblematum Libellus* (Paris, 1542) emblem LXXXIX.

22. *Iconologia*, 1st ed., Rome, 1593; 1st ill. ed., Rome, 1603. Followed by Padua, 1611 and 1618, and numerous other editions and translations into various languages.

23. Melancholia is also frequently represented by a figure whose bowed head is supported on her hand, as in Dürer's great engraving. But, unlike the traditionally sleeping figures of Sloth, they customarily have their eyes clearly open (though there are some exceptions). A seated figure that appears to be open-eyed, with elbow on knee and head on hand, identified as A Mourning Maid-servant from a tomb in Attica, fourth century B.C. (Berlin Museum), was adduced by Ludwig Goldscheider as "a personification



published by him in Amsterdam in 1644. There can be little doubt that Dutch painters, some of whom had used earlier editions of the *Iconologia*, would have welcomed this edition in their own language.²² Its woodcut illustrations by Christoph Jegher were based on those in previous editions. Ripa's specifications for the personification of *Vadsigheyt* (Indolence, Sloth) called for a seated old woman with her hand under her left cheek,²³

of grief." He believed that in Vermeer's *Girl Asleep* the pose "symbolizes the sorrows of love" (*Jan Vermeer* [London, 1958] p. 24, fig. 11).

"The cheek on the hand . . . [a] conventional formula for mourning and melancholy, was used in Greek, Roman and Byzantine art and occurs in texts from the time of St. Cyprian in the third century," according to André Chastel, "Melancholia in the Sonnets of Lorenzo de' Medici," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 8 (1945) p. 62. Ripa, however, indicates that *Malinconia* should have both elbows on her knees and both hands under her chin (Amsterdam, 1644, p. 499). The vice associated with melancholy, *Tristitia* (excessive sadness), which has sometimes been combined or confused with Sloth, may account for the borrowing of the pose identified with Sloth for figures representing Melancholia. See also Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy* (London, 1964).

holding a scroll with the inscription “Torpet iners. De traege Mensch is vedsigh.” (“The idle person grows slothful.”) Her elbow is on her knee, her head inclined and covered with a black cloth, and in her right hand she holds a torpedo fish. (The idea that the body grows numb [*torpescere*] at the touch of the electric ray or crampfish, whence the fish was called *torpedo*, goes back to Pliny.)

Vermeer exchanged Ripa’s old woman for a young one, had her support her head with her right hand instead of her left, and omitted both the scroll and the fish. None of these changes is surprising in a painting of this time and especially this master. The black cap his *Girl Asleep* wears may hark back to the “black cloth” of Ripa’s description; in any case, it does not appear in any of Vermeer’s other known works, though such a cap is worn by women in many paintings by his contemporaries.

The young woman personifies Sloth, the vice that opens the gate to all the other vices, symbols of which surround her. All the objects that seem to be normal furnishings of an ordinary middle-class household serve as the instruments of a complex symbolism. What appears to be a glimpse of a private moment in a lived-in room is in fact a highly contrived composition in which every element was deliberately selected and arranged with regard to its significance as a part of the meaning of the whole.

The apples on the table are attributes of Aphrodite,

goddess of love, as are the pearl earrings the girl wears. The apples refer also to the Fall of Man and Original Sin. Fruits, as well as handsome pottery, glassware, and silver utensils, are typical symbols of the vanity of worldly satisfactions.

The mirror on the far wall likewise indicates the transience of all earthly things, a long-familiar reference that accounts for the inclusion of a mirror in many Dutch *Vanitas* still lifes. Though in terms of space representation the mirror is as far from the young woman as it could be, in the most distant background, it is a focal point for the observer. Its effectiveness rests in part on the fact that it is the only *complete* geometric form in the painting. In addition, the fact that it is a square, a form set off by its inherent regularity and inner consistency, endows it with special authority. The contrast of the heavy, dark mass of the mirror frame against the light wall also helps to make it a magnet for the eyes of the observer. The way it functions in the composition, “framed” in the doorway and emphasized by other strong horizontals and verticals, gives some idea of the care with which the artist chose and placed this apparently minor element in his picture. What appears to be a casual decoration is in fact a central core of meaning, as it is of composition. Something of the deliberation that went into this portion of the composition is revealed by X-ray evidence of changes that Vermeer made here (Figure 10). The head and shoulders of a man wearing a hat originally occupied the

FIGURE 10
X-ray of a detail of
the *Girl Asleep*



space in which we now see the mirror. In fact, it appears that two different hats were tried out before this image was abandoned in favor of the potent symbol of the looking glass, whose shifting reflections provide an optical equivalent to the concept of the transitoriness of the material world. Through long association the mirror also refers to the vice of pride, Superbia.

The jug and wine glass on the table, staple accessories of so many Dutch genre scenes, here contribute to the emblematic content. Wine often accompanies the vices of intemperance, gluttony, and lechery. And this brings up the question of whether the sleeping young woman is drunk.

Seymour Slive not long ago proposed that the painting represents and should be called "Een dronke slapende meyd aen een tafel," which is presumably the earliest title for it that is known to us.²⁴ As evidence that the young woman is represented as in a drunken state he cited "an empty glass lying on its side," "a nearly empty wine glass . . . on the table in front of the sleeping woman," and the collar that she wears, which is not closed as it would properly be. Depictions of drunkenness are not rare in Dutch seventeenth-century

24. Seymour Slive, "Een dronke slapende meyd aen een tafel by Jan Vermeer," *Festschrift Ulrich Middeldorf*, ed. Antje Kosegarten and Peter Tigler (Berlin, 1968) pp. 452-459; the phrases quoted are on p. 457. The identification of the Girl Asleep with the item that appeared under this listing in the Amsterdam sale of 1696 was made by Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, "A Newly Discovered Picture by Vermeer of Delft," *Burlington Magazine* 18 (1910-1911) p. 133.

25. Among the women in Metsu's paintings who were certainly not intended to be represented as drunken, and whose white collars are similarly open at the throat, are the following: the dignified customer in *The Poultry Dealer* (Kassel, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen); the old woman who has fallen asleep with a large book on her lap in *An Old Woman Asleep, with a Maid* (London, Wallace Collection); *An Old Woman Selling Fish* (London, Wallace Collection); and *The Market Woman* (Mertoun, St. Boswell's, Roxburghshire, Coll. Duke of Sutherland). Interestingly, these examples and others that could be cited in works by Metsu and other contemporary painters show unfastened collars of this sort on women who can usually be identified as lower class and who are going about their daily tasks. Whether this has significance with regard to Vermeer's young woman, in her satin dress, is uncertain. Vermeer did not paint such a collar on his own representations of servants or of women engaged in household tasks.

Franklin W. Robinson, in his Ph.D. diss., "Gabriel Metsu, 1629-1667," Harvard University, 1970, no. 93, fig. 129, reproduces a painting attributed to Metsu that was on the art market in Berlin in 1933 (and mentions a copy that was in Paris, Coll. Schloss; p. 211, note 83). He thinks this picture may have the same theme as Vermeer's *Girl Asleep* (p. 113); with regard to this theme he refers (note 83) to Seymour Slive's article. "In fact, so many

painting, and in all the examples known to me, including those cited by Slive, the inebriated person is shown in a far more uncontrolled posture and a far more disheveled condition than Vermeer's girl. Their surroundings are also customarily shown in great disorder. It is not impossible that, as Slive suggests, Vermeer's temperament would have dictated a very different treatment of such a scene from that invented by any other artist. But this would make it difficult to prove the point through parallels with other paintings or prints, as Slive attempts to do. The open collar of Vermeer's young woman, which according to Slive "is a sign of her inebriation," was certainly not associated exclusively with drunkenness. This can be proved by reference to numerous paintings by Vermeer's contemporaries. Gabriel Metsu, for instance, whose works parallel those of Vermeer in many ways, shows a collar worn in a similar open fashion in some situations in which the woman wearing it might be drunk and also in a number of others in which she is clearly sober.²⁵

Slive's argument betrays a more fundamental weakness when it requires him to discount the picture on the wall above the girl's head.²⁶ As Lawrence Gowing

details are similar to the Vermeer—the inebriated girl, the white jug, the half-filled glass, the Turkey carpet on the table, and even the collar undone—that perhaps this is one of the few cases when we can speak of Vermeer's direct influence on a contemporary artist outside Delft." On the basis of a photograph of the Berlin painting, which Robinson very kindly sent me, as well as one of the Paris copy (Frick Art Reference Library), my impression is that there is no reason to posit a direct relationship between the Metsu and the Vermeer. The Metsu composition lacks any resemblance to Vermeer's complex composition, which penetrates deep into the picture space. It does show a sleeping woman with an unfastened collar, but she is much older than Vermeer's model, has her workbasket before her, and does not rest her elbow on a table and her head on her hand in the traditional pose, but has her hands clasped before her. The table beside—not behind—which she sits holds only a carpet, a jug, and a glass, such as may be found in innumerable paintings that have nothing to do with Vermeer. Since the Metsu (if such it is) cannot be firmly dated, it would in any case not be possible to ascertain in which direction influence had occurred, even if there were reason to believe that one of these pictures depended on the other. Robinson may have been closer to the mark in his alternative suggestion about the painting attributed to Metsu: "Perhaps the artist is returning here in one painting to the theme of his two pendants in the Louvre, the life of pleasure and that of duty."

26. After summarizing the diverse interpretations of the *Girl Asleep* by four scholars (P. T. A. Swillens, Lawrence Gowing, Ludwig Goldscheider, and A. P. de Mirimonde) who took into account the picture on the wall, Slive wrote ("Een dronke slapende meyd," p. 456): "I would like to offer a fifth interpretation. It does not accept the picture of Cupid within the painting

pointed out, "it is clear that lacking this passage the meaning of the whole picture would be different."²⁷ Pictures within the paintings have thus far provided the most productive clues to intrinsic meanings in Vermeer's works. Even Thoré-Bürger recognized that the paintings hanging on the walls were very significant, though he interpreted them in anecdotal ways, in the belief that Vermeer had no emblematic intentions.²⁸ The Lady Weighing Pearls (Washington, National Gallery) and the Metropolitan Museum's Allegory of the Catholic Faith have pictures in the background that have an indisputable bearing on the meaning of the whole.²⁹ The painting of The Procuress by Dirck van Baburen that hangs on the rear wall of both The Music Lesson (London, Buckingham Palace) and The Concert (Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum) has been shown to imply commercial overtones that one would hardly suspect in the apparently decorous social situations Vermeer pictured.³⁰ The picture in the background of the Girl Interrupted at her Music (New York, Frick Collection) and A Young Woman Standing at a Virginal (London, National Gallery), which

as its key, and it takes as a principle the idea that some pictures within seventeenth-century Dutch pictures have less meaning than others. This one has less."

27. Lawrence Gowing, *Vermeer* (New York, 1953) pp. 50 ff.

28. Thoré-Bürger, "Van der Meer," p. 460.

29. The significance of the Last Judgment in the background of the Lady Weighing Pearls was recognized by Thoré-Bürger ("Van der Meer," p. 460); Herbert Rudolph, "Vanitas," in *Festschrift Wilhelm Pinder* (Leipzig, 1938) p. 431; and A. P. de Mirimonde, "Les Sujets Musicaux chez Vermeer de Delft," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 57 (1961) p. 39.

30. The painting by van Baburen that was Vermeer's model in these two paintings was identified by H. Voss, "Vermeer van Delft und die Utrechter Schule," *Monatshefte für Kunstwissenschaft* 5 (1912) pp. 79–83. Its relevance to the meaning of the Gardner Museum picture was suggested by Gowing, *Vermeer*, p. 52, and more fully explained by de Mirimonde, "Les Sujets Musicaux," pp. 42–43.

31. Gustav Delbanco, *Der Maler Abraham Bloemaert* (Strasbourg, 1928) p. 64, note 39; followed by Vitale Bloch, "Pro Caesar Boetius van Everdingen," *Oud Holland* 53 (1936) p. 262. A. B. de Vries (*Jan Vermeer de Delft* [Paris, 1948; 1st ed., Amsterdam, 1939] pp. ix, xix) thought Vermeer's model might have been a painting by van Everdingen or by Jan van Bronckhorst. Goldscheider refers to a painting attributed to Otto van Veen, "Venus und Amor," in which there is "a similar mask thrown away at the feet of the God of Love" (*Jan Vermeer*, p. 24, note 31; Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, *Beschreibendes Verzeichnis der Gemälde* [Berlin, 1931] p. 634, no. 652).

When I inquired at the Berlin-Dahlem Gemäldegalerie in August 1972, this painting was no longer there, but I was able to

had been conjecturally attributed to Caesar van Everdingen,³¹ has been convincingly associated with an emblem in Otho Vaenius's *Amorum Emblemata*, published in Antwerp in 1608.³²

A. P. de Mirimonde, who was the first to suggest this relationship,³³ also tentatively proposed that another emblem in the same book (Figure 11) might bear some relation to Vermeer's *Girl Asleep*. The caption of the emblem, in its English version, is: "Dissimulation is loves wisdom." The accompanying verses are:

Not to deceive his love doth love the visard use,
 Although disguys'd hee seem his mistris need not
 feare,
 It is those to deceive, thar secret malice beare,
 Thereby to be secure from evill tounge abuse.

Since the point of this emblem, that Cupid is concealing his face, is not in accord with the fragment of picture in the *Girl Asleep*, in which the mask is on the ground, de Mirimonde sought, but without success, to reconcile the differences.³⁴

Still another example in Vaenius's book of emblems

examine a photograph of it, thanks to the courtesy of Reinald Grosshans. Its only resemblance to the painting on the wall in Vermeer's *Girl Asleep* is the presence of a mask in the lower right corner. This mask, however, lies flat on the floor and is seen frontally, rather than in profile as in the Vermeer. The amorous embrace (more likely a depiction of Cupid and Psyche rather than of Venus and Amor) that is the main subject has nothing to do with the Vermeer. Cornelius Müller Hofstede has very kindly informed me that the painting is now in the Wilhelm Bode Museum in East Berlin.

32. This outstandingly popular emblem book by Rubens's teacher, Otto van Veen, was issued with verses in various combinations of three languages, including one in Latin, Dutch, and French. The emblem mentioned here is on pp. 2–3. The English verses quoted below are from the edition that also includes Latin and Italian. See Mario Praz, *Studies in Seventeenth-Century Imagery* (Rome, 1964) pp. 524–525.

33. De Mirimonde, "Les Sujets Musicaux," pp. 39–40 and note 24. A Young Woman Standing at a Virginal has been convincingly interpreted in the light of the emblem on Vaenius's pp. 2 and 3 by E. de Jongh, *Zinne- en Minnebeelden in de Schilderkunst van de Zeventiende Eeuw* (n.p., 1967) pp. 49–50 and note 70, apparently without knowledge of de Mirimonde's prior finding.

34. De Mirimonde, "Les Sujets Musicaux," p. 51, note 25, refers to the emblem in Vaenius, pp. 220–221. "Faut-il comprendre, dans le tableau de Vermeer, que l'Amour—ou son représentant—ayant imprudemment laissé tomber son masque à terre, a été espéré en vain et que, lasse d'attendre le visiteur, la femme s'est endormie près du pichet de vin et de la coupe de fruits, restés inutiles?"

of love would offer a closer parallel, as it shows Cupid standing in a landscape, treading with one foot on a mask that lies on the ground (Figure 12). The caption is: “Love requyres sinceritie.”

Love in what ere hee doth, doth not disguise his face,
 His harte lyes on his tounge, unseen hee never goes,
 Hee weares no Giges ring,³⁵ hee is not one of those,
 Hee doth unclose his thoughts, to gayn unfayned grace.³⁶

This disparagement of falseness and hypocrisy, applicable not only to love, would enhance the meanings we have already discerned in the *Girl Asleep*. The hypocrisy of pretending to be the innocent victim of Cupid, brought out by Corrozet’s emblem, finds a counterpart in Vaenius.

But the mask means still more.³⁷ To refer once again to “the artist’s handbook,” Ripa says that “the mask thrown on the ground serves to represent contempt for deceit and duplicity of heart.”³⁸ In another context, he describes Contritione (*Berow, Gebrokenheyt des herten*) as a beautiful woman treading on a mask. The mask under

35. Gyges, King of Lydia, had a ring that gave him the power to render himself invisible.

36. De Jongh, *Zinne- en Minnebeelden*, p. 95, note 69, tentatively suggests that this emblem might help in the “solution” of the *Girl Asleep*.

37. The view has been widely expressed that Vermeer based the picture on the wall in the *Girl Asleep* and the Cupid in the background of the *Girl Interrupted at Her Music* and *A Young Woman Standing at a Virginal* on a single forerunner (de Vries, *Jan Vermeer de Delft*, p. v; P. T. A. Swillens, *Johannes Vermeer [Utrecht and Brussels, 1950]* p. 104; Gowing, *Vermeer*, p. 91; Goldscheider, *Jan Vermeer*, p. 24, note 30; Slive, “‘Een dronke slapende meyd,’” p. 458, notes 13, 14). My view is that Vermeer drew on two different emblems of Vaenius (as suggested by de Mirimonde and de Jongh). As can be seen from the Frick and London examples, he felt free to make alterations in the emblem illustrations he used as models. This is also the case with the *Girl Asleep*.

It should be borne in mind that in the painting on the wall in the *Girl Asleep* the mask is the only complete and clearly identifiable object. The picture differs from the cited emblems of Vaenius in that it omits Cupid’s bow, which is present in both of the engravings in a position that would make it visible to the right of Cupid’s leg in Vermeer’s fragmentary painting on the wall. Also, the pear-shaped object in this fragment is not to be found in either of Vaenius’s engravings. If it represents a pear—and one cannot be certain that it does—this attribute of Aphrodite could well accompany her son Cupid in this complex reference to the hazards of amorous involvement.

38. Ripa, *Iconologia* (Amsterdam, 1644) p. 357, s.v. “Lealtà.” For Contritione see Ripa, p. 135.



FIGURE 11
 Engraving from Otho Vaenius, *Amorum Emblemata*, Antwerp, 1608, p. 221. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 38.95 (photo: Philip Evola)



FIGURE 12
 Engraving from *Amorum Emblemata*, p. 55 (photo: Philip Evola)

her feet means contempt for worldly things that appear beautiful to our eyes, weaken us, deceive us, and obstruct us from true knowledge.³⁹

IV. Vermeer has been misunderstood by those who have assumed that he was detached from human concerns. In the *Girl Asleep* he went to great pains to present a moral lesson. With the art that conceals art, he created a composition that seems both natural and inevitable, within which he accommodated a compendium of symbolic elements. A complex emblem is embodied in what appear to be the ordinary contents of a bourgeois interior. Unlike such a contemporary painter as Willem Kalf, who piled riches on riches to represent worldly values, Vermeer introduced the multifarious gratifications of the senses in forms that are at home in their setting. They do not call attention to themselves. The painting seems to be a commonplace scene of daily life. With exquisite subtlety the anecdotal and narrative elements are committed to the exhortative intention.

The message of the painting is: Let us be alert to avoid the snares of sensual pleasures. All worldly satisfactions are but vanity. The freedom of our will makes each of us responsible for renouncing the earthly in favor of divine truth.

Vermeer's paintings convey an impression of a reality beyond that which we see around us because they represent not ordinary everyday life, but eternal verities.

All the figures seem to have been transplanted from ordinary existence into a clear and harmonious setting where words have no sound and thoughts no form. Their actions are steeped in mystery, as those of figures we see in a dream. The word realism seems completely out of place here. Everything is of unrivalled poetic intensity. If we look carefully, we see that Vermeer's figures are not so much Dutchwomen from the sixteenth century as figures from an elegiacal world, peaceful and calm.⁴⁰

This statement by the sensitive and scholarly historian of seventeenth-century Dutch culture, J. H. Huizinga, expresses what many of Vermeer's admirers have felt.

What has not been recognized is that the impression Vermeer gives of outreaching time and space is a part of the meaning of the painting. Doubtless the clarity, order, and structural balance that characterize Vermeer's paintings respond to his inner needs for control.

It is not without significance that his mature style is marked by an enamellike paint surface that betrays nothing of the hand of the artist. This change from the rougher, grainy quality of the *Girl Asleep* must be seen as an advance in his mastery of his expressive means. The same is true of the increasing simplification that marks the way toward the most successful works of his maturity. The personality of the artist finds expression in both the formal means and the conceptual content, which come into being together, like the body and mind of a person.

By the same token, Vermeer's preeminence in the use of light, related as it is to interests that were prevalent in the culture in which he lived, has special significance. It may be understood as the light of Revelation, once one recognizes that Vermeer's goal was the communication of Christian truth.

Observed reality frequently appeared in Dutch prints and paintings not for its own sake, but in the service of a moral communication.⁴¹ The appeal to the senses in the guise of a warning against them, as in the *Girl Asleep*, was typical of the time. But Vermeer embodied in this painting an exceptionally elaborate program. Many of his references, alien to the modern mind, would have been instantly recognized by his contemporaries. Other points he raises would have required more thought and study, even in his own time. The people of the United Provinces were remarkably literate. Their devotion to emblem books and other

39. Gowing (*Vermeer*, p. 51) correctly sensed the psychological overtones of the picture on the wall in relation to the sleeper: "Sleep is revealed as the dropping of a mask, uncovering the fantasy which is the sleeper's secret, a fantasy, as we may guess, of Love." He also wrote (p. 92, note 30): "Perhaps here it has a hardly deliberate double reference; sleep is also the discarding of a mask." To Goldscheider (*Jan Vermeer*, p. 24), who sees the sleeping young woman as a personification of grief, the picture within the picture refers to "the sorrows of love." Swillens (*Johannes Vermeer*, pp. 104-105) describes the girl as not asleep, but only "completely absorbed in herself" as she "is sorrowing over a disappointment in love."

40. J. H. Huizinga, *Dutch Civilisation in the 17th Century and Other Essays* (London, 1968) pp. 84 ff.

41. This practice followed a long tradition, going back to what Erwin Panofsky called "disguised symbolism" in fifteenth-century Netherlandish painting. (*Early Netherlandish Painting* [Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1953] chap. 5, "Reality and Symbol in Early Flemish Painting: 'Spiritualia sub Metaphoris Corporalium,'" pp. 131-148.)

moralizing literature was both broader and deeper than observers of later periods would suppose. This must be taken into account when we attempt to understand their art.

The *Girl Asleep* is a crucial painting in the development of the great Delft master. It marks the beginning of a new stage in his art, in which highly evolved content calls forth the stylistic advances for which he was later to become famous. The objects he depicts are quintessentially what they are, but they are also something more. They represent changeless ideas. He transforms surface into volume, incorporating persons and things in a pattern that is an image of the eternal. He is dealing not with the surface of things, but with a deeper truth.

Doubtless some admirers of Vermeer will continue to prefer to enjoy his color and composition, his "poetry" and "magic," without concerning themselves with questions about meaning. Those who seek more profound insight into the intentions of the artist, however, will wish to take into account the many levels of meaning that can be discerned in the *Girl Asleep*.

This painting is in itself a kind of emblem without words. The sleeping young woman represents the illustration, the picture within the painting takes the place of the caption, and all the other details of composition and content fulfill the role of the text that comments on the first two constituents in a true emblem. What should it be called? "Young Woman Asleep: A Moral Emblem."⁴²

42. This article is a token of my gratitude for the J. Clawson Mills Fellowship at The Metropolitan Museum of Art that from November 1966 to August 1967 gave me the opportunity to do the research on which it is based.