

Study her face from several angles, admiring her porcelain skin and parted lips, all crowned by that playful, oriental turban — buttery yellow and lapis lazuli blue. Unlike other masterpieces hanging in international spaces, today, *Girl with the Pearl Earring* isn't subjected to crowds vying for the best viewing position. That's not to diminish the painting's popularity; it's currently off-peak winter in the Hague, and the young lady also has to compete with other iconic works hanging in the lakeside Mauritshuis Museum — Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* and Carel Fabritius' *The Goldfinch*, for instance. Not that I'm complaining; apart from security guards and my guide, I can admire the deft skill of a master at the peak of his powers alone.

When Johannes Vermeer created this artwork around 1665 during the Golden Age of Dutch painting — a period of unprecedented artistic, cultural and economic growth in the region — many portraits focused on women preoccupied with everyday tasks like reading, writing or playing musical instruments. By contrast, *Girl with a Pearl Earring* features a mysterious sitter with a self-possessed personality gazing over her shoulder at the viewer.

Art expert and local guide Remco Dörr says many assume that the eponymous figure was an actual person — the central idea of Tracy Chevalier's smash hit book, released 25 years ago, and the subsequent Scarlett Johansson-starring film. However, this work was part of a Dutch tradition called 'tronie' — the study of often imaginary heads and faces that painters used by way of experimenting or showcasing their technique. Even so, Vermeer's small, meticulous brushstrokes create an extraordinary illusion of reality: there's something about that stare, those glistening eyes, that bright face in the darkness, that makes you believe this girl existed.

The last owner — who purchased the painting in poor condition in 1881 for the equivalent of just €24 — bequeathed it to the Mauritshuis, where it has remained since the start of the 20th century, international exhibitions aside. The girl's identity isn't the only aspect of this oil painting that might bemuse admirers — experts agree that the earring was likely an imitation glass bauble or even polished tin rather than a real pearl.

In fact, a museum curator only decided to use the now-famous title in the mid-'90s; before that, it had several other names, including *Girl with the Turban* or, affectionally, the *Mona Lisa of the North*.

Despite a small surviving body of work — fewer than 40 — Vermeer remains a beloved artist, as demonstrated by the recent record-shattering retrospective at Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum, which drew 650,000 visitors — their most visited exhibition yet.

"He experienced limited recognition during his life and ultimately died in poverty in 1675," Remco reveals. However, after being rediscovered by German art historian Gustav Friedrich Waagen and French journalist Théophile Thoré-Bürger in the 19th century, Vermeer's status soared.

"He mightn't have benefitted from this new international fame, but art lovers certainly did."

A PALATIAL MUSEUM

While Vermeer and his 17th-century counterparts like Rembrandt, Steen, Leyster and Hals painted during the halcyon days of the world-conquering Dutch Empire, across the city, I discover an art collection created in a completely different context.

The art of peace

The Hague's collection of celebrated art has inspired a flurry of books and films and showcases the city's centuries-long commitment to peace and justice, as **Domhnall O'Donoghue** discovers



The Peace Palace and Lady Justice in the Peace Palace

In the latter half of the 1800s, following unending conflict in Europe, when many considered it honourable to sacrifice their lives for king and country, a simple but revolutionary argument emerged: that the well-being of people and nations didn't exist in isolation. Instead, it was determined by their mutual relations.

Instrumental to this new, harmonious outlook was a bestselling Austrian novel by Bertha von Suttner, *Lay Down Your Arms* — translated into 100 languages — which vividly described the horrors of war from a human perspective rather than a political one. She would later become the first woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

Her dream of global unity appeared to become a reality when Russia's Tzar Nicholas II invited 26 heads of state to assemble and discuss disarmament, resulting in the Hague Convention of 1899. This landmark event would ultimately lead to the establishment and construction of the Peace Palace, which opened its doors in 1913.

Funded by Scottish philanthropist Andrew Carnegie and designed by French architect Louis Cordonnier, with an interior by future Oscar-winner Herman Rosse, the building's principal component was initially the Permanent Court of Arbitration, where conflict could be solved through



MARGARETA SVENSSON

mediation rather than on the battlefield. “The countries involved were requested to donate art or materials to decorate the building,” says Claudia Jansen, who oversees PR and communications for the Carnegie Foundation, manager of the Peace Palace. She points to Italian marble, Brazilian wood, Scandinavian granite, Hungarian vases, Turkish and Iranian carpets, Austrian candelabras and a Swiss clock. From this remarkable collaboration between nations, a museum for international creativity emerged, with a surprising variety of styles, colours and shapes.

While the Peace Palace remains neutral and secular, a statue of Christ the Redeemer looms over the rotunda stairs. Gifted from Argentina, its genesis perfectly reflects the building’s ethos.

“They were almost at war with Chile,” Claudia explains, “but a truce was declared thanks to arbitration. They made a statue from melted weapons, which stands in the mountains between the two countries — this one is a replica.

“We don’t interpret it as a religious symbol; instead, it generates discussion around cooperation and stability.”

The Americans presented another statue, Peace through Law, which depicts Lady Justice without the familiar attributes of

FACTFILE

Domhnall flew from Dublin to Amsterdam with KLM. He stayed in the four-star Mövenpick Hotel the Hague in the city’s historic centre. Nightly rates start from €107.

The Peace Palace’s website catalogues all the building’s artwork. Visit denhaag.com, peacepalace.org, mauritshuis.nl and panorama-mesdag.nl.

a blindfold, scales and sword. I notice that certain aspects of the marble figure are disproportionately large. Claudia reveals that the oversized feet symbolise the importance of members standing their ground while the hefty hands reflect the hard work required to achieve peace. As it happens, the artist, Andrew O’Connor, was an Irish-American who’d later die in Dublin.

Elsewhere, there’s a slew of peace symbols on the Dutch stained-glass windows, including doves, lions and owls.

“To achieve peace through law, you need to be as strong as a lion with the wisdom of an owl,” Claudia says.

While the Permanent Court of Arbitration



Panorama Mesdag and Vermeer’s Girl with a Pearl Earring at the Mauritshuis



THE HAGUE TOURISM

tation tackles cases encompassing land boundaries, pollution and state investments, the International Court of Justice was established directly after WWII, in which 15 judges oversee disputes between member states or provide advisory opinions. Most recently, the court heard proceedings by South Africa against Israel, who, it argued, was committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza — demonstrating the need for this impartial, cross-border collaboration 125 years after the initial steps were taken.

Here, in the International Court of Justice, I find the artwork of Douglas Strachan, created on behalf of the UK and Ireland, then the British Commonwealth. The Evolution of the Peace Ideal comprises a quartet of stained-glass windows documenting the various stages in the journey toward reconciliation, including a glimpse into a harmonious future where the God of War dies in the arms of the God of Peace.

A PANORAMIC VIEW

While the heaviest artwork in the Peace Palace is the vase presented by Nicolas II, the one worthy of admiration is the bust of the aforementioned Austrian writer and activist Bertha von Suttner, one of the driving forces behind the international peace movement. Not only did her novel influence the creation of the Peace Palace, but she was a pivotal behind-the-scenes presence in those early years, initiating many dinners and receptions in the Kurhaus

Hotel, located in the nearby seaside resort of Scheveningen.

Scheveningen from this era is immortalised in the extraordinary panorama by Hendrik Willem Mesdag, housed in a purpose-built museum near the historic centre of the Hague. From an observation gallery, the cylindrical perspective creates the illusion that I’m atop a dune, observing ships, a cavalry procession, the country’s first steam tram or fishermen’s wives mending nets. Many structures captured by Mesdag exist today, including the Von Wied Pavillion, although now, it’s positioned over the contemporary sculpture museum, Beelden aan Zee.

“At 120 metres in circumference, Panorama Mesdag is the largest painting in the Netherlands and the oldest surviving panorama in its original location,” says Caroline Rijks, the museum’s head of marketing and communication. “Its grand opening took place in 1881 — one of the guests was Vincent Van Gogh, who was said to have exclaimed mockingly that the canvas contained only one flaw: that it was flawless!”

While panoramas would soon go out of vogue, thanks to the emergence of cinema, this extraordinary and immersive artwork is an archive of a time when the Hague was on the cusp of becoming the centre of the world and synonymous with peace.

One-hundred-and-twenty-five years after that first convention, the Netherlands’ third-largest city still proudly accepts the momentous task bestowed on it.