

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

The mystery of the *Girl with a Pearl Earring*

Dear Editor,

We are grateful to Nicolas Kruger for his stimulating criticism to our article on the *Girl with a Pearl Earring* by Johannes Vermeer.¹ In this report, we hypothesized that the girl was affected by alopecia areata and madarosis, based on the absence of visible eyebrows and eyelashes. Kluger put forward several elements indicating that this was an overzealous diagnosis.² First, high magnification examination revealed that some eyelashes were indeed painted. But it is common observation that patients with alopecia areata, even those with alopecia totalis or universalis, may have some residual eyelashes and/or that few are growing back. Another point is that the interpretation of who is the sitter. Most experts believed that the girl was a *tronie*, that is, an imaginary figure. Consistent with this hypothesis, Vermeer painted other figures with few or absent eyebrows or eyelashes, in particular in the *Study of a Young Woman* (c. 1665–1667, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). However, others have hypothesized that it is a portrait of the artist's eldest daughter, Maria, who would have been approximately 12 or 13 years old, or a sibyl from Greek mythology, or a servant as played by Scarlett Johansson in a 2004 drama. In October 2025, the British art historian Andrew Graham-Dixon claimed to have finally unmasked the identity of the *Girl with a Pearl Earring*.^{3,4} According to his research, the real girl was Magdalena van Ruijven, the 12-year-old daughter of Johannes Vermeer's primary patrons, Pieter van Ruijven and Maria de Knuijt. Archival evidence from Delft showed that Vermeer worked almost exclusively for the Van Ruijven family. It is logical that he would use their daughter as a model for a painting intended for their private collection. The family belonged to the Remonstrants, a radical Christian group that valued individual conscience and spiritual equality. This religious context is believed to be a driving force behind the painting's intense, personal expression. The presence of some eyelashes might even support the hypothesis that the subject was based on a real, sitting model rather than a purely 'idealized' face. As far as the small red area on the lower lip, this was interpreted as a chancre of syphilis in the past.⁵ We introduced other hypotheses to smooth this disrespectful possibility.

We fully agree with Kluger that iconodiagnosis needs to progress from the mere observation of a clinical anomaly in

an artwork and should adhere to a rigorous, step-by-step intellectual process. Behind this, there is a genuine enthusiasm and a true love for paintings and arts.

KEYWORDS

alopecia areata, Johannes Vermeer, The *Girl with a Pearl Earring*

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ETHICAL APPROVAL

Not applicable.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Not applicable.

Giampiero Girolomoni 

Paolo Gisondi 

Martina Maurelli 

Section of Dermatology, Department of Medicine,
University of Verona, Verona, Italy

Correspondence

Giampiero Girolomoni, Section of Dermatology,
Department of Medicine, University of Verona,
Piazzale A. Stefani 1, Verona 37126, Italy.
Email: giampiero.girolomoni@univr.it

ORCID

Giampiero Girolomoni  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8548-0493>

Paolo Gisondi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1777-9001>

Martina Maurelli  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7492-8010>

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