

PAINTINGS

BY PAUL B. COREMANS

The first exhibition, in 1938, of the *Supper at Emmaus* at the Boymans Museum in Rotterdam provoked unanimous enthusiasm among art historians and connoisseurs. The subsequent appearance on the market of five other paintings also signed "J. Vermeer" and possessing similar characteristics warped the judgment of many specialists—particularly since this happened during the German occupation. In the first place, the Dutch people wanted at any cost to prevent any Dutch work of art from leaving the country to adorn a German gallery. Furthermore, the presence of the Germans and the atmosphere created by the enemy occupation meant that everything had to be done secretly: the transportation of pictures, the gathering of competent persons and the alerting of philanthropists. Finally, all the comparative documents, as well as the authentic pictures by Vermeer, were hidden in shelters inaccessible to anyone.

The following is a brief and still necessarily incomplete survey of the scientific results of the official inquiry made by the Dutch government, which is soon to publish a full report.

Two questions were put before the experts: were the paintings under consideration old (seventeenth century) or modern; if modern, could they be by Hans van Meegeren?

To answer the first question we had to determine the relative age of the pictures by using normal scientific methods. As for the paint medium, instead of the drying oils (linseed oil or other) usual in the seventeenth century, we found that an artificial resin belonging to a group discovered at the very end of the nineteenth century

Left, van Meegeren, SUPPER AT EMMAUS; right, two details of the Head of Christ from paintings by van Meegeren.



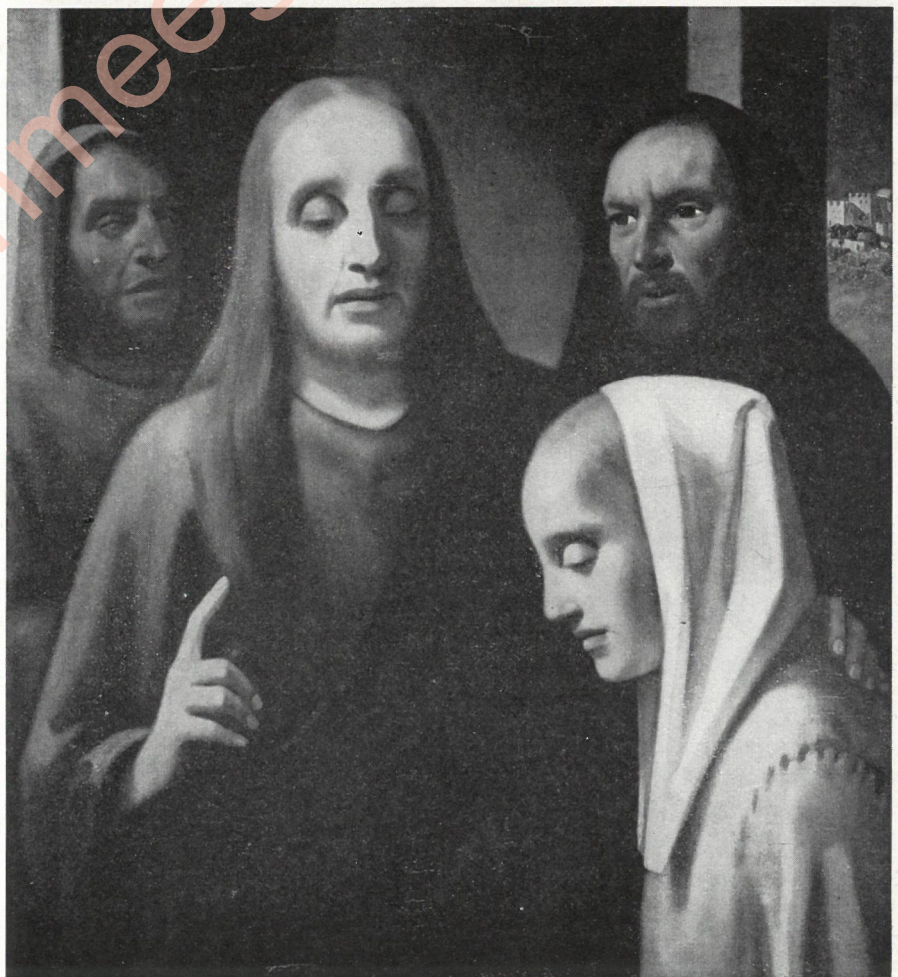
Above, detail from modern painting; below, one in the faker's ancient manner.



had been used. Moreover, on the faked paintings the "crackles" normally seen on the surface of an old picture were not the consequence of a natural aging of the materials used. They were induced artificially by rolling the finished pictures around a stick or were made to follow the crackles of the old pictures on top of which van Meegeren painted his fakes.

To answer the second question we had to investigate several technical statements made by van Meegeren. In order to prove that he was the author of the supposed Vermeer sold to Goering and thus exonerate himself from the charge of collaboration he claimed: that he had used an old stretcher and canvas for the *Supper at Emmaus*; that underneath the surface another painting would be found that would match one of his own sketches, and that he had used ink to replace the dirt always present in crackles. The subsequent technical examination showed these statements to be true.

The results obtained from the scientific study of these faked Vermeers have given many persons the impression that chemical and physical methods have now superseded art-historical and esthetic examination. Such a conclusion is, to say the least, exaggerated. Museum scientists and technicians are aware of the limitations of their methods, and they present their results only as a complement to the conclusions arrived at by archeologists, art historians and connoisseurs. However, in certain important cases it becomes advisable, if not absolutely necessary, to call upon specialists in the so-called "exact sciences" in order to check or to complete results obtained by more subjective methods.



At top, Vermeer, CHRIST IN THE HOUSE OF MARY AND MARTHA, Scotland National Gall.; below, van Meegeren, WOMAN TAKEN IN ADULTERY.