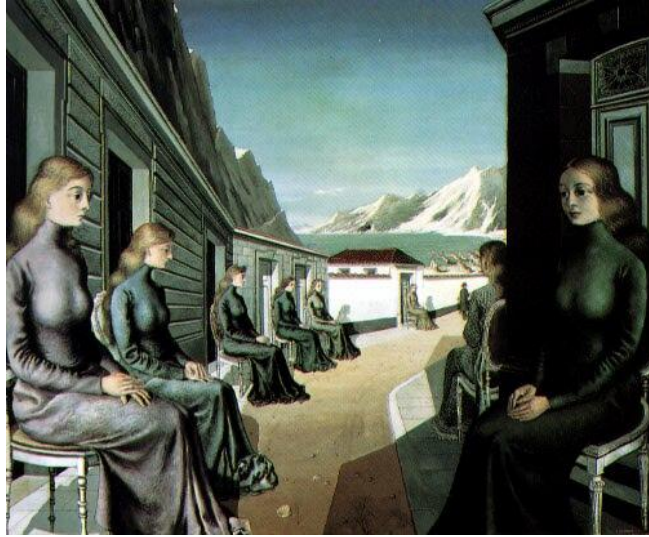




The Village of the Mermaids, Paul Delvaux 1942

The mysteriously tranquil themed painting *The Village of the Mermaids* by Paul Delvaux is a surrealistic interpretation of a dream. And Lisel Mueller's ekphrastic poem is an interpretation of the painting. Both of these works have an underlined contexts referring to World War II. Paul Delvaux was a Belgium surrealist painter who was living in his home country when the Nazi German army invaded in 1940. While Delvaux was dealing with the occupying Nazis, the German born Lisel Mueller and her family were fleeing to America. This experience greatly influenced *The Village of the Mermaids*.

In 1942 Paul Delvaux painted *The Village of the Mermaids*. This is one of Delvaux's less controversial paintings. Almost all of Delvaux's paintings have nude women in them. Painting nude women is nothing new to the art world, but painting women with pubic hair was. This got him into trouble a few times. The main reason why the women in *The Village of the Mermaids* are clothed instead of nude is due to the Nazi control over the reign. There was a suppression of modern art and many art

elements were deemed offensive. The controversial works of art were confiscated and the artist could get into serious trouble. Delvaux wanting to avoid such problems began painting clothed women. He had a slow and detailed approach to his painting. Everything, even down to the last brush stroke was well planned out. Delvaux described his painting technique in an interview with TIME Magazine, "I work patiently and minutely like the Flemish primitives, Van Eyck and Memling."

Delvaux's thorough style was well worth the effort. The shadows on the women are soft and elegant. The wonderful attention to the detail of the rows of houses really brings a breath of life to the painting. The muse behind this great painting is none other than Paul Delvaux's wife. He shared the secret of this with a TIME Magazine reporter. "Frequently classified as a Surrealist, Delvaux says he is not, but he admits that "dreams play a great part in my inspiration—not necessarily my own dreams, though. For instance, my Village of Mermaids, on exhibition in New York, is the result of a dream my wife had. She dreamed she saw women sitting in gilded chairs in the village street and diving like mermaids into the sea." Paul Delvaux then took his wife's dream and molded it with the surrealist ideas of the subconscious, deeper meaning, and challenging one's perception.

One of the ways Delvaux challenges the viewer's perception is by changing their concept of what a mermaid is. Instead of beautiful women with long scaly fish tails, his mermaids are plain looking woman in long flowing dresses. The painting also has a very mysterious quality. It is that mysterious quality that causes the viewer to wonder why these women have blank sullen expressions. Why are they all sitting with their hands on their laps in chairs by the street? And who is the man in the black

suit and hat? The ekphrastic poem “The Village of the Mermaids” by Lisel Mueller tries to shed some light on these and other questions.

“Who is that man in black, walking
away from us into the distance?
The painter, they say took a long time
finding his vision of the world.

The mermaids, if that is what they are
under their full-length skirts,
sit facing each other
all down the street, more of an alley,
in front of their gray row houses.

They all look the same, like fair-haired
order of nuns, or like prostitutes
with chaste, identical faces.

How calm they are, with their vacant eyes,
their hands in laps that betray nothing.

Only one has scales on her dusky dress

It is 1942; it is Europe,

And nothing fits. The one familiar figure
is the man in black approaching the sea,
and he is small and walking away from us.”

Mueller, Lisel. "The Village of the Mermaids." Emory University. Rusche, Harry. 1 Oct. 2007 <<http://www.english.emory.edu/classes/paintings&poems/mermaids.html>>.

This ekphrastic poem is Lisel Mueller's opinions and thoughts about what Delvaux's *The Village of the Mermaids* means to her. The intriguing flowing poems of Mueller's won her a Pulitzer Prize in poetry. Her fluid words help her express the eerie yet calming mood of the poem "The Village of the Mermaids." Lisel Mueller's poem does raise the question of who is the man in the black suit, but she does not address this question.

One theory is that the man in black is the artist, Paul Delvaux. Delvaux did paint himself into many of his other works, such as *The Anxious City*¹, *The Sleeping Town*², *Entry into the City*³, and *Dawn over the City*⁴ (images are located on the last two pages). In *The Anxious City* Paul Delvaux is the nude man in the front left of the painting. Then he is the man in the black suit standing in the doorway of *The Sleeping Town*. He is in the same black suit walking towards the viewer in *Dawn over the City*. And in *Entry into the City* Delvaux is the man wearing a black suit and hat. He is reading the newspaper as he walks away from the viewer. According to author David Scott "In the later work, painted in 1940, the dressed male, whom we presume still to be the artist, is making an effort to concentrate on reading his newspaper, that is, to acquaint himself with current events in the real world." (Paul Delvaux: Surrealizing the nude pg 43). Paul Delvaux's presence in the painting becomes an anchor in which he ties his surrealist ideas to current events.

The man in the black suit has now become a clue meant to help the viewer find out the meaning behind the painting. Mueller recognized this clue and knew that the context of the painting lied in the events of World War II. “It is 1942; it is Europe/ and nothing fits. The one familiar figure/ is the man in black approaching the sea, / and he is small and walking away from us.” Not only do these lines refer to World War II, they make the man in black (Delvaux) out as a constant in an ever-changing and chaotic world.

Now that we know that the man in black is Paul Delvaux and that the context of the meaning has something to do with World War II; we can move on to the next question, who are the mermaids? Lisel Mueller said that they have identical faces with vacant eyes. This is not true; you can clearly see that the woman on the left has a much different facial structure than that of the woman on the right (The woman on the right’s face is round, while the woman on the left face is oval shaped). Mueller was probably referring to their identical expressions. And their eyes do not have a vacant expression; they are glazed over like those of someone lost in deep thoughts. Mueller also described these women “...like a fair-haired/ order of nuns, or like prostitutes/ with chaste...” Mueller was not implying that these women were nuns or prostitutes. This sort of language was used to create a dramatic comparison and to point out that you cannot tell whether or not any of these women are nuns or prostitutes just by looking at them because they are so identical. They all just sit in identical positions with their identical expressions. They look like two rows of elegant wax figures more than they look like women.

Even with all of their identicalness, one woman stands out. The viewer may not notice at first, but one of the women is wearing a gray (with a tint of blue) scaly dress. It is the second woman back on the right side. She is the real mermaid hidden among rows of false mermaids. She is like a Jewish woman hiding in plain sight from the Nazis. This is what Delvaux's *The Village of the Mermaids* is really about. The mermaid in the scaly dress represents a Jewish person and the imposter mermaids represent other everyday people. At first glance the viewer did not notice the scaly dress, just as someone could not tell what someone's religion, ideology, or beliefs were just by looking at him or her. The man in the black suit does not just represent the artist, he is a composite of every goodhearted man who is not brave enough to lend a helping hand, but is brave enough to keep silent and knows when to turn a blind eye. The narrow street and the claustrophobically close houses are a representation of the prison like nightmare that Europe has become. The mountains are the roadblocks and difficulties that someone fleeing Europe must overcome in order to get to the freedom of the peaceful sea.

Lisel Mueller could relate to this meaning of *The Village of the Mermaids* to her own family's experience of fleeing the Nazi controlled Germany for the tolerant and free country of America. This connection to the painting is what inspired her to write the poem "The Village of the Mermaids". And this poem is her interpretation of Paul Delvaux's *The Village of the Mermaids*. Lisel Mueller's interpretation is about whom are these so-called mermaids and it is mainly about the comforting constant in a chaotic warring Europe. Delvaux's painting was his interpretation of his wife's dream. Delvaux used her dream as the skeletal frame work. Paul Delvaux then infused *The*

Village of the Mermaids painting with his surrealist symbolism (based off of the works and studies of Sigmund Freud) to give it the deeper meaning about World War II. And this paper is my interpretation of both the painting and the poem. The paper is a written connection of how the meanings of the poem “The Village of the Mermaids” and the painting *The Village of the Mermaids* are closely intertwined. There is no set in stone meaning or interpretation of these. We as individual people will all ways find our own meanings to things. It is just the way we are. This is life, not a test and when it comes to what something means to you, there is no right or wrong answer. As your perception changes, so does how you interpret things. Everyone perception is based off of life experiences such as the loss of a loved one, faith, being loved, hope, war, and many others. Someone who had a happy carefree childhood will interpret something differently than someone who had a horrible and traumatic childhood (one may have a more upbeat interpretation than the other). As we continue to live our live, gain knowledge, and grow as a person our perception will continue to change. What something means to you today may mean something completely different to you tomorrow.