Now, if you follow me through into the next room, we come to two paintings by a 17th century Dutch artist who was both widely admired and reasonably successful during his lifetime. Born in Leiden in 1629, Gabriel Metsu moved to Amsterdam around 1655 and produced over forty major works. Sadly, though, he died at the age of 37, at a time when his career was going particularly well, and since then he has been rather forgotten, which seems a bit of a shame, to be honest.

These two pieces were meant to be hung together as companion pieces. In the painting on the left, a young man is writing a letter and on the right, we see a young woman reading a letter. The viewers are supposed to understand that he is composing a love letter to her, and that here she is digesting it. On the surface, these may look like fairly [ ], fairly [ ] pieces, but look more carefully and you soon realise they are actually very [ ].

The man appears to be a member of the upper middle classes, and his surroundings create the impression that he's well travelled: through the open window, we can see a globe in the room behind him and there's an expensive Turkish rug on his table. To his right, there's an Italian-style landscape hanging on the wall, which suggests he's a man of the world. Meanwhile, the woman, who is also expensively dressed, seems to belong more to the domestic world. Painted in [ ] colours, she looks calm and content as she reads.

However, not everything is as it first appears. Beneath the surface of the calm domestic world lies trouble. In the foreground of the painting, we see a tiny thimble – the small china cup you wear on your finger to protect it while you are sewing. Obviously, the woman was so excited to receive her letter that she jumped up in the middle of her needlework. To the right of the picture, we see the woman's maid pulling back a curtain, behind which we see two ships on a stormy sea. This could well be a symbol of the difficult, stormy nature of love, especially when partners are separated. Look carefully and you'll notice too that the servant has another letter to deliver – presumably to the man shown here.

Even he, depicted in darker, more [ ] shades, is a victim of the fires of the heart. The rich red of the carpet and the bright light pouring in through the window suggest he has a heated mind. The underlying message now seems painfully clear: passion can lead to chaos!

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