

Jacobus Vrel. *Enigmatic* *Forerunner of* *Vermeer*

Jacobus Vrel
A Seated Woman Looking at a Child
through a Window
Oil on panel. – 45.7 x 39.1 cm
Paris, Fondation Custodia,
Collection Frits Lugt

Fondation
Custodia

17 June
17 Sept.
2023

EXHIBITION AT THE FONDATION CUSTODIA

From 17 June to 17 September 2023

Jacobus Vrel. Enigmatic Forerunner of Vermeer

Following an initial stop at the Mauritshuis in The Hague, the exhibition *Jacobus Vrel. Enigmatic Forerunner of Vermeer* transfers to the Fondation Custodia from 17 June to 17 September 2023.

This monographic exhibition, the first to be devoted exclusively to the painter, brings together major works kept in the great museums of Amsterdam, Brussels, Detroit, Munich, Vienna, etc., as well as from prestigious private collections. On show also, of course, is one of the best-known – and most surprising – genre scenes to be found in the Fondation Custodia [fig. 1].

This event is held in parallel with the exhibition *Rein Dool. Drawings*, previously shown in the Dordrechts Museum.

THE PARIS EXHIBITION promises to be very different from the Mauritshuis show as the selection of works by Jacobus Vrel is augmented by nine paintings plus the artist's only surviving drawing. The drawing, very properly, belongs on the exhibition walls of what our late director, Ger Luijten, liked to describe as 'the house of art on paper', the Fondation Custodia. In addition, to emphasise Vrel's originality, the exhibition also offers an immersive experience of the Dutch Golden Age: a choice of paintings, drawings and engravings from the Fondation's own collection is completed by important loans from the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, the Mauritshuis, the Rijksmuseum and other German and Dutch museums.



1. Jacobus Vrel

A Seated Woman Looking at a Child through a Window
Oil on panel. – 45.7 × 39.2 cm
Paris, Fondation Custodia, Collection Frits Lugt, inv. 174

At first glance, nothing seems to link Jacobus Vrel to the famous Johannes Vermeer except their initials 'JV'. Nevertheless, many of their paintings share the same contemplative calm, the central role played by the female figures and, very often, a certain air of mystery. For these reasons, many works by Jacobus Vrel were for a long time attributed to Vermeer. Unfamiliar to the wider public, they have been intriguing and fascinating art historians for more than a century. Who then was this mysterious seventeenth-century painter?



2. Jacobus Vrel

Woman Leaning out of an Open Window, 1654
Oil on panel. – 66.5 × 47.4 cm
Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv. GG 6081
© KHM-Museumsverband



3. Jacobus Vrel

Landscape with Two Men and a Woman
Conversing, before 1656
Oil on panel. – 37 × 28 cm
Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv. GG 580
© KHM-Museumsverband

The enigmatic Vrel

Nothing is known of Jacobus Vrel's life. Only one of his paintings is dated: '1654', legible on the left-hand side of *Woman Leaning out of an Open Window* in Vienna, just after the name 'J. Frel' [fig. 2]. Unlike in the majority of his interior scenes, here Vrel's signature is not picked out against the whiteness of a scrap of paper which has fallen to the floor in the composition. In fact, Jacobus Vrel signed or monogrammed almost all his known works. Strangely – but everything seems strange about Vrel – he spells his family name in very varied ways: 'J. Frel', as in Vienna, 'Vrel', 'Vrell', 'Vrelle', even 'Veerlle'. In the church interior and the *Old Woman Reading* [fig. 6], he also gives his forename in full: 'Jacobüs Vreel'.

Only forty-five works by Vrel are known: a single drawing and forty-four paintings, all painted on wooden panels. The *catalogue raisonné*, drawn up by the international team of scholars who undertook the project, lists all the works in the monograph devoted to Jacobus Vrel, published in spring 2021. The Paris exhibition presents the drawing and twenty-two paintings, in other words more than half of the artist's known output.

Besides the works, there is only one contemporary document that mentions the painter. It is of great importance because it informs us that three paintings by Vrel were to be found in a prestigious seventeenth-century collection. This was the collection of Archduke Leopold Wilhelm, governor of the Southern Netherlands (equivalent to present-day Belgium), then under the rule of Hapsburg Spain. When his duties in Brussels were over, the archduke returned to Vienna and had all his vast collection sent there. It was there that a detailed inventory was drawn up in 1659; in it can be found "Two pieces of the same size in oils on panel, in one a Dutch fireplace beside

which a sick woman is seated, and in the other a woman looking out of the window. [...] Originals by Jacob Frell'. And further on 'an oil on panel, in which two peasants and one female peasant can be seen. By Jakob Fröll'. In this inventory too the painter's name was spelt in two different ways.

The two first paintings were easily identified at the end of the nineteenth century as being the one in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna [fig. 2] (the museum's core is in fact built on the famous collection of Leopold Wilhelm) and its pendant, sold by the museum and now in the Leiden Collection, New York.

The third painting had been lost to sight and it was one of the novelties of the research project conducted for the exhibition that the only known landscape by Jacobus Vrel has been identified [fig. 3]. It is also still in the Viennese museum, but since the eighteenth century had been attributed to the artist Johannes Lingelbach (Frankfurt 1622 – 1674 Amsterdam).



4. Jacobus Vrel

Street Scene with People Conversing

Oil on panel. – 39 × 29.3 cm

Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, inv. 16502

As if the absence of information about the painter – in spite of the three paintings in the collection of Leopold Wilhelm – was not enough to puzzle art historians, the paintings of Jacobus Vrel also put them to the test. His work is indeed very difficult to place at the heart of Dutch painting. His street views appear to offer us a glimpse of urban life in seventeenth-century Holland, but they arrest our attention because of their unclassifiable architecture. In the *Street Scene with People Conversing*, recently acquired by the Alte Pinakothek, Munich, the monochrome colour range and strong geometrical lines even

seem astonishingly modern [fig. 4].

What is more, these representations have no equivalent in contemporary Dutch paintings of cityscapes, a genre that was developing by the second half of the Golden Age. Vrel chose to depict anonymous narrow streets with simple figures – neither rich nor poor – unlike his colleagues [fig. 5].



6. Jacobus Vrel

An Old Woman Reading, with a Boy behind the Window

Oil on panel. – 54.5 × 40.7 cm

The Orsay Collection

With regard to Vrel's interiors, they are also difficult to fit into the context of Dutch art. These empty rooms – empty apart from the scrap of paper on the floor bearing his signature, bounded by equally empty walls and a window, behind which the pale face of a child looms from the darkness, have no equivalent in the art of his century [figs. 1 and 6].

Other interiors, undeniably closer to the Dutch genre scenes to which we are accustomed, are still unusual for the female figures depicted from behind, whose



7. Jacobus Vrel

Interior with a Woman Combing a Girl's Hair, and a Boy at a Dutch Door

Oil on panel. – 55.9 × 40.6 cm

Detroit, Michigan, The Detroit Institute of Arts

Gift of The Knoedler Galleries, 1928, inv. 28.42

expression cannot be seen by the spectator – as in the compositions now in Vienna [fig. 3], Brussels and Lille. In the very handsome painting from Detroit [fig. 7] a small boy leaning over the lower panel of a Dutch door is eyeing a scene that is out of sight while a woman hunts for fleas in a small girl's hair; the great expanse of empty wall is audaciously modern.

The restrained palette, the sobriety and silence emanating from these scenes has often caused Jacobus Vrel to be compared to the Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864 – 1916). This timeless quality is certainly what attracted Jean Clair to Vrel's paintings at the beginning of a brilliant career devoted to twentieth-century art. His 1968 article 'Jacobus Vrel, a poor man's Vermeer' is one of the finest analyses of the painter's work, 'chronicler of minor townsfolk'.

Remarking on how greatly Vrel differs from his Dutch contemporaries, Jean Clair demonstrates how his choice of subject compares with that of Vermeer:

no plunging views into the surrounding streets, or into suites of rooms or rooms dove-tailed together. Finally, Jean Clair rightly emphasises Vrel's refusal to 'be circumscribed by narrow realism', thus permitting spectators to submit to a 'timeless enchantment'.

The international research project: The Hague – Munich – Paris

It was in an attempt to solve the mystery of Jacobus Vrel that the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, the Fondation Custodia and the Mauritshuis combined forces and set up an international research project in 2018. Close examination of the archives, entrusted to Piet Bakker, one of the great Dutch specialists in this area, unfortunately produced no information on the painter's birthplace, or where he died, nor on his activity.

On the other hand, dendrochronological analysis undertaken for the project (i.e. the dating of the wooden panels on which the paintings are executed) established that Vrel painted his first cityscapes in about 1635 and his interiors in about 1650. This means that he was not a follower of Vermeer, as had long been surmised, but a forerunner.

Vrel was generally placed within the Delft School, but from now on it is more appropriate to imagine him as being active in the Eastern Netherlands. The urban and architectural historians Boudewijn Bakker and Dirk Jan de Vries have demonstrated that some of the city views painted by Vrel – for example the painting now in Hamburg [fig. 8] – present elements taken from the topography and buildings of the town of Zwolle, the charming city in which Gerard ter Borch (1617 – 1681) was born. Ter Borch may have been the link



8. Jacobus Vrel

Street Scene with a Bakery by the Town Wall

Oil on panel. – 50 × 38.5 cm

Hamburg, Hamburger Kunsthalle, inv. 228

between Vrel and Vermeer, as an archive document provides evidence that Ter Borch and Vermeer were acquainted with one another.

The monograph published in May 2021 is the fruit of the collaboration between these three institutions (p. 9). In the many essays and in the *catalogue raisonné* of the work of Jacobus Vrel, all the results of the research carried out by, and under the leadership of Quentin Buvelot, curator at the Mauritshuis (The Hague), Bernd Ebert, curator of German and Dutch Baroque painting at the Alte Pinakothek (Munich) and Cécile Tainturier, curator at the Fondation Custodia (Paris) are presented.

Jacobus Vrel and the Dutch Golden Age

In order further to highlight the originality of the works of Jacobus Vrel, the Fondation Custodia is devoting three galleries in the exhibition to Dutch contemporaries of the painter who dealt with similar subjects: town views and genre scenes.

Although Vrel's urban paintings have no equivalent in Dutch art, he is nevertheless the first painter of the Golden Age to have chosen as his subject views of streets and buildings with no historical or important event in progress. This type of painting was to experience far-reaching developments in the second half of the seventeenth century in the hands of artists such as Jan van der Heyden (1637 – 1712) or the brothers Gerrit (1638 – 1698) and Job Berckheyde (1630 – 1693). The exhibition shows a painting by the latter depicting tree-lined canals in the town of Haarlem, lent by the Mauritshuis. Also from the fabulous collection of the museum in The Hague comes the *View of a Market* by Egbert van der Poel (1621 – 1664), an artist who, like Vrel, specialised in the representation of towns and genre scenes.

Urban views were also very close to the hearts of Dutch draughtsmen, and a number of remarkable drawings from the Fondation Custodia and the Rijksmuseum highlight their

artistic production. The visitor to the exhibition is helped to understand how much the narrow streets painted by Jacobus Vrel hold a special place in the Dutch output.



10. Pieter Janssens, dit Elinga (1623 – 1682)

Reading Woman, c. 1665-70

Oil on canvas. – 75.5 × 63.5 cm

Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, inv. 284

On the other hand, when he paints interiors, Vrel has recourse to a repertoire of subjects already well established in Dutch art. His figures of women cooking, sewing, ministering to the sick or minding children have many parallels, as the exhibition shows.

To illustrate the work of the artists Esaias Boursse (1631 – 1672) and Quiringh van Brekelenkam (after 1622 – after 1669) [fig. 9], the paintings belonging to the Fondation Custodia are complemented by generous loans from the Rijksmuseum, the Rheinisches Landesmuseum in Bonn and the Alte Pinakothek in Munich. The latter also sends to Paris their magnificent

painting by Pieter Janssens, known as Elinga (1623 – 1682) [fig. 10] whose interiors populated with female figures invite the same reverie as those of Vrel.

The Mauritshuis has agreed to lend one of the iconic paintings of Gerard ter Borch (1617 – 1681): *Hunting for Lice* [fig. 11], normally hung in the Vermeer room in The Hague. Here we meet again the subject of a mother delousing her child as seen in Vrel's painting now in Detroit [fig. 7], but treated by Ter Borch in a more intimate fashion, with particular attention given to the facial expressions and the representation of the fabrics.

The graphic arts do not lag behind in the eulogy of daily life offered to posterity by seventeenth-century Dutch artists. The Fondation Custodia possesses several drawings by Rembrandt evoking the life of women, probably originally kept by the master in an album dedicated to the subject. The public is able to admire the greatest of them – unanimously recognised as one of the artist's major pieces. In this drawing, Rembrandt depicts his wife, Saskia, lying in bed, probably during one of her pregnancies [fig. 12].

The subject of a sick woman lying in a curtained bed is explored in Vrel's painting in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp, but in the absence of any biographical



11. Gerard ter Borch (1617 – 1681)
Hunting for Lice, c. 1652-53
Oil on panel. – 33.2 × 28.7 cm
The Hague, Mauritshuis, purchased with the support of the Vereniging Rembrandt, inv. 744

information it is impossible to say whether or not it represents a moving evocation of the painter's intimate life – as it does with Rembrandt.



14. Nicolaes Maes (1634 – 1693) (attributed to)
Woman Leaning Against a Door
Pen and brown ink, brown, grey and yellow wash, white gouache. – 154 × 149 mm
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Rijksprentenkabinet, purchased with the support of the Vereniging Rembrandt, inv. RP-T-1889-A-2043

Besides the drawings and engravings selected from the collection of the Fondation Custodia, a number of loans from the Rijksmuseum are also on display, including the series by the female engraver Geertruydt Roghman (1625 – 1651); they present some striking similarities with some of the scenes from Vrel [fig. 13].

Also to be admired is the drawing in which a woman seen from behind leans out of a Dutch door [fig. 14], a subject very dear to Vrel. This drawing was attributed to Rembrandt for many years but is nowadays ascribed to Nicolaes Maes (1634 – 1693), one of the master's brilliant students who

also frequently represents women in the intimacy of the home – as demonstrated in other drawings in the show by the same artist.

The loans from the Dutch and German museums complete the selection of works from the collection of the Fondation Custodia, evoking the production of the Dutch Golden Age at the heart of which Jacobus Vrel both fits in and stands out.



More information about Vrel and Vermeer

A large number of paintings by Jacobus Vrel were for many years attributed to Vermeer. Already in the eighteenth century, some of these scenes were sold under the name of Vermeer, for example *Street Scene with a Bakery by the Town Wall* now in the Kunsthalle, Hamburg [fig. 8]. This was still attributed to Vermeer when it entered the museum in 1888.

The continuation of the story is provided by a Frenchman: the art critic Théophile Thoré-Bürger, who is well-known to Dutch art collectors and specialists because he contributed to the rescuing of Frans Hals and Johannes Vermeer from oblivion.

After a visit to the Mauritshuis, during which he succumbed in ecstasy in front of the *View of Delft*, Thoré-Bürger fell in love with the work of the artist he named thereafter the 'Sphinx of Delft'. After research carried out to reconstitute Vermeer's oeuvre, Thoré-Bürger published his famous article in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* in 1866; in it he drew up an inventory of paintings attributed by him to Vermeer.

Within the inventory Thoré included paintings by Jacobus Vrel, such as *Old Woman Reading* [fig. 6] and several 'narrow streets' – his name for the urban views.

The art critic was also a keen collector and possessed no fewer than four paintings by Jacobus Vrel. Two of these are presented in the exhibition: the exquisite scene from the museum in Worms and the *Street Scene* from the Rijksmuseum [fig. 5]. The Rijksmuseum acquired it shortly after the sale of the art critic's estate and this is the painting that was at the origin of the reconstitution of the oeuvre of Jacobus Vrel. For the twenty-first-century spectator, it may seem strange that anyone could have confused the paintings of Jacobus Vrel with those of Vermeer. But nowadays we are submerged in reproductions of paintings. It has never before been so easy to form a relatively reliable idea of a work of art thanks to the ever-increasing quality of digital photography. Experts and art historians in the nineteenth century could only rely on their visual memory and, in the most favourable cases, on black and white reproductions, often in an engraved version. The monochrome palette of someone like Vrel, and the sparkling colours of Vermeer looked similar in these images. What could be conveyed however was the atmosphere, the spirit of the paintings. It is in this respect that Vermeer comes close to Vrel, to the degree that one might imagine that he was inspired by his work.

The exhibition in The Hague

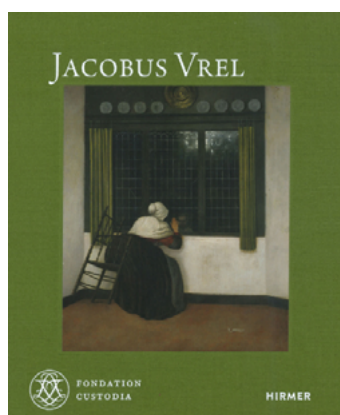
The exhibition's first venue in the Mauritshuis took place from 16 February to 29 May 2023.

Mauritshuis

The monographic exhibition of the work of Jacobus Vrel was originally planned to be presented at the Alte Pinakothek in Munich in autumn 2020. Then it was to have opened at the Fondation Custodia in January 2021 before its final stop at the Mauritshuis at the end of spring 2021. The Covid-19 pandemic decided otherwise, the Bavarian exhibition had to be cancelled and the other two postponed for a further two years.

Catalogue

The exhibition is accompanied by the monograph about the painter published in 2021.



Quentin Buvelot, Bernd Ebert and Cécile Tainturier (eds.)

Jacobus Vrel. Looking for Clues of an Enigmatic Painter

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TWO EXHIBITIONS AT THE FONDATION CUSTODIA

From 17 June to
17 September 2023
Fondation Custodia,
Paris

Practical Information

EXHIBITIONS

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From 17 June to 17 September 2023

Rein Dool. Drawings
From 17 June to 17 September 2023

PRESS OPENING

Friday 16 June 2023 from 10 to 11.30 am

VERNISSAGE

Friday 16 June 2023 from 6 to 8.30 pm

OPENING HOURS

Every day except Monday, from 12 to 6 pm

ADMISSION CHARGES

Full price € 10 / Reduced € 7
The entrance ticket gives
access to both exhibitions

LOCATION

Fondation Custodia
121, rue de Lille – 75007 Paris
www.fondationcustodia.fr

ACCESS BY PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Metro: Assemblée Nationale (line 12) or Invalides (lines 8 and 13, RER C)
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Images Available to the Press

Jacobus Vrel. Enigmatic Forerunner of Vermeer

1. **Jacobus Vrel**

A Seated Woman Looking at a Child through a Window

Oil on panel. – 45.7 × 39.2 cm

Paris, Fondation Custodia, Collection Frits Lugt, inv. 174

2. **Jacobus Vrel**

Woman Leaning out of an Open Window, 1654

Oil on panel. – 66.5 × 47.4 cm

Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv. GG 6081

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3. **Jacobus Vrel**

Landscape with Two Men and a Woman Conversing, before 1656

Oil on panel. – 37 × 28 cm

Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv. GG 580

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4. **Jacobus Vrel**

Street Scene with People Conversing

Oil on panel. – 39 × 29.3 cm

Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen,

Alte Pinakothek, inv. 16502



5. Jacobus Vrel

Street Scene with a Woman Seated on a Bench
Oil on panel. – 36 × 27.5 cm
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. SK-A-1592



6. Jacobus Vrel

An Old Woman Reading, with a Boy behind the Window
Oil on panel. – 54.5 × 40.7 cm
The Orsay Collection



7. Jacobus Vrel

Interior with a Woman Combing a Girl's Hair, and a Boy at a Dutch Door
Oil on panel. – 55.9 × 40.6 cm
Detroit, Michigan, The Detroit Institute of Arts,
gift of The Knoedler Galleries, 1928, inv. 28.42



8. Jacobus Vrel

Street Scene with a Bakery by the Town Wall
Oil on panel. – 50 × 38.5 cm
Hamburg, Hamburger Kunsthalle, inv. 228

9. Quiringh Brekelenkam
(after 1622 – after 1669)
Interior with Two Children and an Old Woman Slicing Bread, c. 1650-60
Oil on panel. – 31.3 × 41.3 cm
Paris, Fondation Custodia, Collection
Frits Lugt, inv. 4775





10. Pieter Janssens, called Elinga (1623 – 1682)
Reading Woman, c. 1665-70
Oil on canvas. – 75.5 × 63.5 cm
Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen,
Alte Pinakothek, inv. 284



11. Gerard ter Borch (1617 – 1681)
Hunting for Lice, c. 1652-53
Oil on panel. – 33.2 × 28.7 cm
The Hague, Mauritshuis, purchased with the support of the
Vereniging Rembrandt, inv. 744



12. Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn, called Rembrandt
(1606 – 1669)
Interior with Saskia in Bed, c. 1640-41
Pen and brown ink, brown and grey wash, some corrections
in white bodycolour. – 142 × 177 mm
Paris, Fondation Custodia, Collection Frits Lugt, inv. 266



13. Geertruydt Roghman (1625 – 1651)
A Woman Washing Dishes
Burin engraving. – 213 × 171 mm
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Rijksprentenkabinet,
gift of F.G. Waller, Amsterdam, inv. RP-P-1939-571



14. Nicolaes Maes (1634 – 1693) (attributed to)
Woman Leaning Against a Door
Pen and brown ink, brown, grey and yellow wash,
white gouache. – 154 × 149 mm
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Rijksprentenkabinet, purchased
with the support of the Vereniging Rembrandt, inv. RP-T-
1889-A-2043