

Rezension

Who the hell was Jacobus Vrel?

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

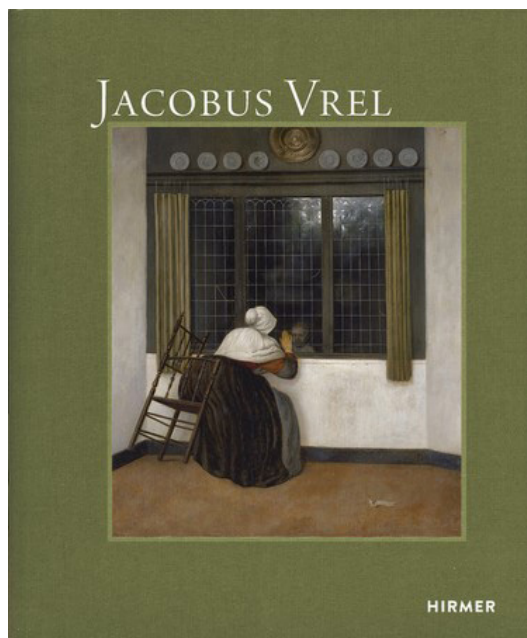
Jacobus Vrel: Searching for Clues to an Enigmatic Painter. With a critical catalogue raisonné | Jacobus Vrel: Auf den Spuren eines rätselhaften Malers. Mit einem kommentierten Werkverzeichnis | Jacobus Vrel: peintre du mystère. Catalogue raisonné et commenté.

Contributions by Boudewijn Bakker, Piet Bakker, Quentin Buvelot, Bernd Ebert, Peter Klein, Karin Leonhard, Heike Stege, Cécile Tainturier, Dirk Jan de Vries, Jens Wagner. Munich, Hirmer 2021. 256 p., 244 col. ill. ISBN 978-3-7774-3587-9 (engl.), 978-3-7774-3586-2 (german), 978-3-7774-3588-6 (french). € 39,90

Kristen Gonzalez
Ph.D. Student at Universität Konstanz
kristen.s.gonzalez@gmail.com

Who the hell was Jacobus Vrel?

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Jacobus Vrel is a fascinating seventeenth-century artist, not only because of his evocative and serene paintings, but also because we know virtually nothing about him or the world in which he lived. The character of Vrel's interior scenes, which often depict one or two individuals quietly engaged in domestic activities, such as reading a letter or tending to a child, are similar enough to paintings by Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675) and Pieter de Hooch (1629–after 1679) that nineteenth-century scholars wrongly attributed some of his works to those Delft masters. Strikingly, even though Vrel's name was largely forgotten until the early twentieth century, three of his paintings were in the important collection of the Archduke Leopold Wilhelm of Austria (1614–1662). What level of fame had Vrel achieved at that point to warrant his place in such a distinguished ensemble of paintings, which included paintings by Italian and Flemish

masters as Raphael, Titian, Pieter Paul Rubens and Anthonis van Dyck?

The authors of this publication, led by the book's editors, have made an attempt to establish a biography for this elusive artist and place his work in a broader context of seventeenth-century paintings. The reader of this monograph is easily lured into the detective-like arc and rewarded with significant insight into Jacobus Vrel's life and work. In an effort to identify the artist they conducted extensive archival research, scrutinizing birth, death, marriage, and church registries, as well as records from a variety of guilds. Costume historians, theologians, architectural and decorative arts experts were consulted to examine details in his pictures and reveal possible clues hidden in his compositions. Vrel's paintings were analysed qualitatively, and advanced technical analysis explored his techniques and working methods.

In their introduction, the authors candidly discuss their success and failure in meeting clearly stated objectives: Who was Jacobus Vrel? When and where was he active? How did Vrel work, and what distinguishes this painter from his contemporaries? Nine essays showcase the meticulous and innovative nature of their research, followed by a catalogue raisonné illustrating nearly 50 works attributed to the artist and an extensive bibliography.

Rediscovery and Research

Cécile Tainturier's essay explores the artist's reception from the 17th century to the present. The name 'Jacob Frell' is first found in the 1659 inventory of paintings owned by Archduke Leopold Wilhelm of Austria. Remarkably, his name then languished, unnoted, for two centuries. Three of Vrel's paintings are listed in this inventory, including the only signed and dated example from 1654, *Woman Leaning out of the*



Fig. 1 | Jacobus Vrel, *Street Scene with an Arched Gateway and Two Monks in Front of a Porch*. Panel, 53,1 × 40,4 cm. Private Collection. Cat. 14

Window (cat. 21) at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. One year later, the name 'Iacobus Frel' appeared in the alphabetical list of painters preceding the 243 engravings produced by Leopold's court painter and keeper, David Teniers (1610–1690).

Tainturier focuses her essay on the French passion for Vrel, which is intimately entwined with that country's love of Vermeer. She features the importance of the French art critic Théophile Thoré (1807–1869), better known as Thoré-Bürger, for inadvertently rediscovering Vrel while searching for paintings by Vermeer, some of which he acquired for his own collection. Thoré exhibited his Vermeer paintings in the 1867 Exhibition retrospective in Paris, but it later turned out that three of his purported Vermeer paintings were actually by Vrel (cat. 3, 19, 20). Although Thoré later expressed doubts about attributions made in his catalogue, he was not the only *connoisseur* to have

been mistaken in distinguishing between paintings by Vermeer and Vrel.

Uncertainties about the identity of an artist named Vrel continued to the early twentieth century. Although the Dutch art historian Abraham Bredius (1855–1946) identified a 'Jan Vriel' in his 1890 catalogue of masterpieces in The Mauritshuis, it was not until 1915 that Cornelis Hofstede de Groot (1863–1930) made the connection between this 'Vriel' to Bürger's 'Vrel/Vermeer'. With the exception of one interior scene purchased for himself, De Groot then accurately assigned a number of works to Vrel. The first quarter of the twentieth century witnessed significant demand for Vrel's works, and they fetched impressive prices in Europe and the U.S., prompting further attention from scholars, among them Willem Valentiner (1880–1958), Eduard Plietzsch (1886–1961), and Clotilde Brière-Misme (1889–1970). The latter's extensive article on the elusive painter not only reignited the French passion for Vrel, but also highlighted his originality. Tainturier discusses the contributions of another French art historian, Gérard Régnier (born 1940), alias Jean Clair. Régnier's thoughtful analysis of Vrel's oeuvre, published in 1968, had an important impact on the direction later scholarship took by focusing on the viewer's often meditative act of looking. This semiotic approach was taken up in the writings of Linda Stone-Ferrier, Elizabeth Honig, Luisa Senkowsky, and Hanneke Grootenboer.

Biographical and Geographical Inquiries

Piet Bakker's essay reveals the difficulty of conducting archival research solely on the basis of Jacobus Vrel's name and its multiple spelling variants. Scouring citizens' registers, and an extensive range of municipal records in the Northern Netherlands, bore no results. The book's authors concluded, however, that other types of archival research might provide some information, such as inventories of the extensive trade in paintings by artist-dealers such as David Teniers the Younger in Brussels, Antwerp and the Northern Netherlands.

A curious phenomenon occasionally encountered in Vrel's paintings are scraps of paper bearing his signature, executed in the manner of a *cartellino*, that he often painted in his scenes. In one street scene from a private collection (cat. 14), for example, a man in the second story of a house appears to have just thrown a long strip of paper or parchment that bears the signature 'Jacobüs vrell.' | **fig. 1** | Four other town views feature a man in the upper story of a building with a bakery below. A self-reference to the artist and his home, perhaps? (Cf. Elizabeth Honig, Looking in(to) Jacob Vrel, in: *Yale Journal of Criticism* 3, no. 1, Fall 1989, 49)

Determining who this elusive figure was prompts an investigation into where he worked. The book's next two essays focus upon the perplexing variety of architectural elements featured in Vrel's street scenes. While the authors do not determine a precise origin for the painter, the important province of Holland is excluded, and they provide firm evidence for his activity in the eastern Netherlands. Both essays consider Vrel's unique townscapes, but Bernd Ebert focuses upon the widely disparate origins of building facades and motifs while Dirk Jan de Vries and Boudewijn Bakker highlight the consistency with which these disparate elements appear.

Ebert's analysis is more comprehensive, considering not only architectural details but the people populating Vrel's urban landscapes: their attire and the important insignia marking their respective trades as barbers, bakers and ribbon-mongers. In his essay, decorative elements and details in Vrel's sparsely furnished interiors merit the same scrutiny as those of his townscapes, and appropriately so. Both hold potential clues to the question of geography. While such analysis of these motifs and their origins does not provide a conclusive answer, it leads Ebert to one of the monograph's most compelling theories – that Jacobus Vrel deliberately avoided painting specific and recognizable places. De Vries and Bakker focus their essay on the possibility that Vrel was active in the city of Zwolle in the eastern Netherlands when depicting his street scenes. Buttressing their argu-

ments with historical maps, street plans and later photographs, they identify Zwolle's medieval tower, defensive wall and a town square in six of Vrel's townscapes. While these findings are compelling indications that Vrel was active in the IJssel region, the authors acknowledge that he utilized great artistic license in his topography and they consider these views to be "summarising, idealising or generalising portraits" (85) of city streets and neighborhoods.

No investigation into the artist's whereabouts would complete without considering Vrel's puzzling selection of religious motifs in this turbulent period. His towns depict rooftops bearing Catholics crosses as well as church towers. White crosses are often featured besides windows and doors, while a pair of monks curiously congregates in the street scene with the possible self-portrait (cf. **fig. 1**). Scholars



| **Fig. 2** | Jacobus Vrel, Interior of a Reformed Church During a Service. Panel, 75,2 × 61 cm. Steinfurt, Burgsteinfurt, Sammlung der Fürsten zu Bentheim. Cat. 47

debate their monastic affiliation and generally refute their identification as Capuchin based on their grey, not brown habits. Elizabeth Honig has previously suggested that these monks are generic symbols of virtues such as austerity and compassion – an especially plausible theory when one considers Vrel's tendency to generalize architecture (Honig, 39).

While references to Catholicism are abundant in his work, Vrel also painted a night scene in a church interior in Steinfurt (cat. 47) | **fig. 2** | reflecting Protestant traditions in that region of Germany. Interestingly, in this work, which he executed as a result of a specific commission, gilded, recumbent crescent moons rise from the pinnacles of the sounding board above the preacher. These objects likely refer to a motto popular during the struggle of the Dutch Republic to free itself from Spanish rule: 'Better Turkish than Papist.'

How and when?

Working Methods and Chronology

Subsequent essays discuss Vrel's working methods and the chronology of his paintings. Dating provided by Peter Klein's dendrochronological analyses of 32 of Vrel's panels indicates that his street scenes generally predate his interiors. Vrel painted the earliest of these street scenes, including the recent and important Munich's acquisition (cat. 1), in the 1630s. | **fig. 3** | This information indicates that Vrel was a precursor to, and not a contemporary of, Johannes Vermeer and Pieter de Hooch.

Vrel's production of autograph replicas is the focus of Quentin Buvelot's essay. Given the painter's relatively small oeuvre, the fact that he painted many replicas indicates that there was an active market for his works. Buvelot not only examines the character of these replicas but also Vrel's working methods. Focusing upon four versions of the *Woman Seated by a Sickbed* (cat. 26–29, paintings in Antwerp, Washington, Oxford, and San Diego), he identifies the Antwerp version as the prototype for this group because of its wider vantage point and refinement of details. Technical analyses support this conclusion and provide further insight into Vrel's working process.



| **Fig. 3** | Jacobus Vrel, *Street Scene with People Conversing*. Panel, 39 × 29,3 cm. Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek. Cat. 1

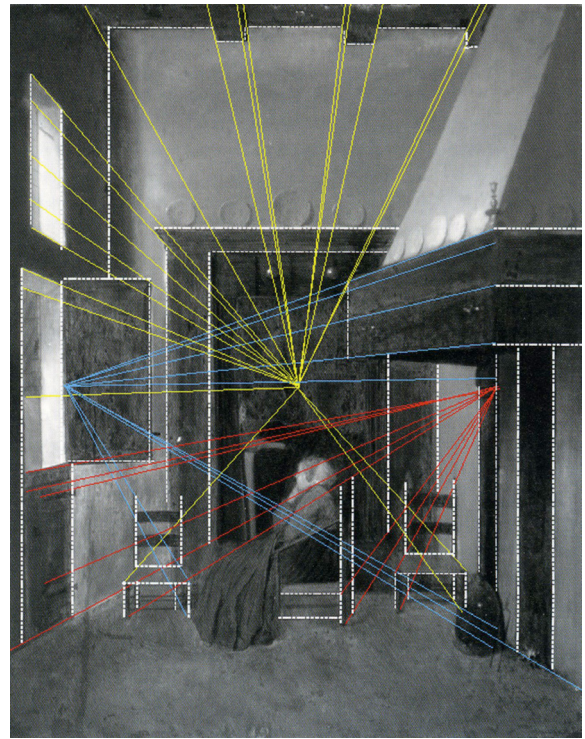
Unlike his contemporaries, Vrel does not appear to have adopted the various trace and transfer drawing methods for producing replicas. In fact, his method of making autograph copies appears to be no method at all. He generally reproduced the most important elements of the painting's interior, but not precisely. Infrared analyses of both the Washington and Oxford versions of this composition reveal a curious combination of freehand and straight perspective lines, the latter presumably executed with a ruler. There is no evidence in Vrel's oeuvre that he made pinholes to mark the vanishing point, as did Johannes Vermeer and Pieter de Hooch. Interestingly, Vrel created a perspective system with three separate vanishing points in the Oxford version of this composition. | **fig. 4** | Nine of Vrel's paintings underwent extensive technical examination at The Doerner Institute of the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen in Munich. Infrared

reflectography (IRR) identified similar attempts to establish perspective, as well as compositional changes in the positions of figures and other compositional elements. The results of these investigations, which are presented in the *Catalogue raisonné*, are discussed in the essay by Jens Wagner and Heike Stege. Their contribution also includes an examination of Vrel's pigments with X-ray fluorescence scanning (XRF). Imaging and material analysis reveal that Vrel used a relatively limited range of pigments, with the exception of the gold leaf embellishments found in the church interior and in other motifs such as metal bowls and crosses in his street scenes.

A Maverick: Distinct among Contemporaries

The monograph's last stated objective is to pinpoint those characteristics that distinguish Jacobus Vrel's paintings. Vrel's compositions are unique not only for their perspective and the sparse pictorial elements, but also for their atmospheric mood. Ebert observes the abstract, stage-like quality of Vrel's street scenes and the simultaneous delineation and transgression of boundaries between public and private, indoor and outdoor space.

Karin Leonhard expounds further upon these qualities in her essay devoted to Vrel's psychologically charged interiors. Like his street scenes, they are characterized by verticality, limited spatial depth and a certain inversion. The figures' deep absorption in their activities, however, suggests secrecy and the unknowable. While domestic, moralizing scenes of women at their household tasks are commonly found in Dutch paintings from the 1650s, Vrel's pictures defy precise iconographic interpretation. Leonhard emphasizes the significance of what is *not* shown in his psychologically charged compositions – the visible versus the invisible – and the resulting split between knowable and unknowable worlds. This feature is perhaps most evident in *A Seated Woman Looking at a Child Through a Window* (cat. 36) | **fig. 5** | at the Fondation Custodia, the painting illustrated on the monograph's cover. The eerie reflection of the child's face in the



| Fig. 4 | Jacobus Vrel, *Woman Seated by the Sickbed*. Panel, 53,6 × 42,2 cm. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford. Cat. 27. Reconstruction of the perspective lines by Jevon Thistlewood. Cat. fig. 15

window has a phenomenal explanation, but the encounter is nonetheless disconcerting. It betrays an uneasiness, particularly evident in the precarious tilting of the woman's chair as she longingly touches the glass. Here and in other interior scenes, time seems prolonged, even static, and physical reality succumbs to an almost imaginary dimension.

As already noted, Leonhard's essay contemplates Vrel's interiors from a philosophical perspective, and she discusses the advent of psychology as a discipline in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. She also considers later works by the Danish artist Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864–1916) because of their close relationship to Vrel's psychologically charged interiors. Both painters employed a reduced color palette for sparsely furnished spaces that feature introverted female figures seen from the back. The worlds within these interiors are diametrically



Fig. 5 | Jacobus Vrel, *A Seated Woman Looking at a Child Through a Window*. Panel, 47,5 × 39,1 cm. Paris, Fondation Custodia, Frits Lugt Collection. Cat. 36

split into a physical and mental reality, for, in paintings by both artists, empty rooms are densely filled with inner space. These comparisons bring to fore Vrel's striking modernity. The dense atmospheric mood he evokes distinguishes him among better known Dutch genre painters of the period such as Pieter de Hooch, Johannes Vermeer, Esaias Boursse (1631–1672) and Pieter Janssens Elinga (1623–1682). While Vrel's works undeniably share an affinity to these artists, Leonhard's multidisciplinary approach delves much deeper and underlines the unique character of this 'maverick' artist.

Further Work

The monograph's authors concede that there are several avenues for further exploration, especially surrounding Vrel's perplexing inclusion of religious motifs. They do not, however, come to a consensus regarding the numerous Catholic references in his work and the possibility of a religious-political

message embedded within his oeuvre. The curious church interior from Steinfurt seems to offer more promise than the deciphering of ambiguous religious motifs. Establishing the monastic order to which the friars belong, or the symbolism of the white crosses (apropaic or plague crosses) seems secondary when one considers this reformed church. De Vries and Bakker propose that the ceremony depicted was a service of mourning or penance following the destruction caused by the Thirty Years' War. While dendrochronology supports a possible date of 1655 for the painting, establishing Philip Conrad, Count of Bentheim-Steinfurt (1627–1668), as its patron assumes the work has been in Steinfurt since it was produced. More compelling is Piet Bakker's theory that Vrel resided in Steinfurt, or at the very least spent time there. The county of Burgsteinfurt was a Calvinist enclave in the Catholic region of Münster in which a number of convents and monasteries were situated, to include Capuchin friaries. This area therefore merits further consideration and archival research. Münster is especially intriguing when we consider the time Gerard ter Borch spent there before returning to Zwolle in 1648. While no evidence of Ter Borch's direct reception by Vrel exists, art historians generally acknowledge the latter's indebtedness to the former. These personal and geographical connections warrant more attention, especially as the monograph so definitively places him in the region.

While Vrel remains elusive and the full extent of the mysteries surrounding his work remain unsolved, this monograph contributes substantially to our understanding of the artist and places him more firmly in an historical context. Not only are his street scenes important when considering the birth of this new genre in Dutch painting, his interiors manifest a modern sensibility, revealing what one author deems the "emergence of a language of the soul." (Leonhard, 123; cf. the review by Luuk Pijl, *The paintings by the elusive Jacobus Vrel present many puzzles, which not even this exemplary catalogue raisonné has been able to solve*, in: *Burlington Magazine* 163, no 1424, Nov. 2021, 1068–1071).