

Jacobus Vrel's Dutch Neighborhood Scenes

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Scholars have identified Jacobus Vrel's mid-seventeenth-century paintings of close-up urban views as cityscapes, townscapes, street scenes, street views, or streetscapes (figs. 1–7). However, this study posits a more specific historical framework in which to contextualize the pictures. Vrel's paintings pictorially engage the intimate physical parameters and ambiance of the Dutch neighborhood, rather than city or town, with close-up renderings of the signifiers of such small communities: part of a street, a short lane, a row of houses, shops, passersby, and quotidian activities.¹



Figure 1. Jacobus Vrel, *City View*, ca. 1654–62, oil on panel, 36 x 28 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. SK-A-1592 (artwork in the public domain)

Official seventeenth-century Dutch neighborhoods occupied the liminal space between home and city, while intersecting them both. The physical constituent parts of a

neighborhood included only one or two streets—or part of one side of a canal or of a long street—all with their adjacent alleys.² Dutch neighborhoods, each with its own colorful name,³ required all residents, regardless of socioeconomic position, religion, profession or trade, nationality, citizenship or immigration status, to belong to their respective long-standing neighborhood organizations (*gebuyrten*).⁴ Through numerous regulations (*buurtbrieven*) and social control, they sought the shared goals of friendship, brotherhood, and unity, as well as individual and communal honor.⁵ Administrators elected by residents oversaw *gebuyrten* meetings, upheld order and quiet, mediated among neighbors, and enforced the binding regulations, which did not warrant the intervention of civic authorities.⁶ Neighborhoods had as important a function as other social networks, such as family, church, guilds, civic guards, and so on.⁷ However, the larger districts determined by the city for the organization of the civic guards, fire fighting, and tax assessment lacked the inclusiveness and social fluidity, available even to women and immigrants, that characterized neighborhoods.⁸



Figure 2. Jacobus Vrel, *Street Scene*, ca. 1654–62, oil on panel, 41 x 34.2 cm. Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, inv. no. 70.PB.21. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program (artwork in the public domain)

The pristine and convivial appearance of Vrel's painted scenes embodies the expectations of the long-lived neighborhood organizations. Whereas archival records colorfully document the full range of petitions, offenses, and reconciliations within these communities, Vrel's scenes noticeably omit altogether even a pictorial whisper that the neighborhoods functioned anything but smoothly. Yet, as documents demonstrate, the residents dealt with many challenges to their overall goals of friendship, brotherhood, unity, and honor.



Figure 3. Jacobus Vrel, *Street*, ca. 1650, oil on panel, 48.9 x 41.9 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art, John G. Johnson Collection, 1917, inv. no. 542. Photo: The Philadelphia Museum of Art/Art Resource, N.Y. (artwork in the public domain)

By around 1650 Vrel began to paint some of the first, if not the first, close-up views of streets, alleys, houses, shops, and routine social and commercial exchange.⁹ Twelve or more extant mid-century paintings, including *City View* (fig. 1), *Street Scene* (fig. 2), *Street* (fig. 3), *Street Scene* (fig. 4), *Street Scene* (fig. 5), *Corner of a Town with a Bakery* (fig. 6), and *A Conversation in the Street* (fig. 7),¹⁰ attest to the lively market for such vibrant views.¹¹



Figure 4. Jacobus Vrel, *Street Scene*, oil on oak panel, 50 x 38.5 cm. Hamburg, Kunsthalle, inv. no. 228. Photo: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz Berlin/Hamburger Kunsthalle/Art Resource, N.Y. (photographer: Elke Walford) (artwork in the public domain)

All of the paintings focus on the exemplary appearance and atmosphere of a neighborhood's short streets, alleys, and buildings. Narrow, crisscrossing passageways define the zigzag of rows of well-kept gabled houses, which flank either side of the road. In seven of Vrel's scenes, the ground floor of the buildings includes a shop, such as for baked goods, cloth, or vegetables,¹² or an attached stall (figs. 2–6).¹³ A tiled or wooden overhang, which extends above most front doors, protects the outside goods for sale. Two of Vrel's paintings (figs. 2, 5) also include a street vendor at a doorway, who offers goods from his satchel. Shop signs project from exterior walls of the houses in six of the paintings (figs. 1–3, 5).¹⁴



Figure 5. Jacobus Vrel, *Street Scene*, ca. 1654–62, oil on panel, 52.5 x 79 cm. Hartford, Conn., Wadsworth Atheneum, The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund, inv. no. 1937.489. Photo: Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY (artwork in the public domain)

Along the pathways, before shop fronts, and on stoops, neatly dressed figures— singly or with a companion(s)—walk, stand, or sit with relaxed, but respectable body language; attend to a shop’s outdoor display of goods; pause to chat; rest leisurely on a bench; carry a marketing pail; lean against a shop front; or casually peruse the street scene below from an open window. In two paintings (figs. 2, 6), a few chickens in the figures’ midst forage among the cobblestones. In short, the paintings convey an aura of equanimity and tranquility in which the figures occupy a neighborhood’s tidy street in prototypically prescribed ways.



Figure 6. Jacobus Vrel, *Corner of a Town with a Bakery*, oil on panel, 35 x 28 cm. Private collection, New York. Photo: Private Collection/Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library (artwork in the public domain)

Together the angled juxtaposition and overlap of the variously sized planes of color formed by the brown-red brick buildings, the white window and door sashes, the brown or black-and-white shutters, the yellow-orange tiles on shop overhangs, and the different hues of the projecting shop signs create syncopated compositional rhythms that suggest the twists and turns, nooks and crannies, and tight quarters of the site. Here and there the blue or bright red hue of the upper garments worn by some of the figures contributes an additional pop of color to the visual rhythm of the compositions. Above the buildings or peeking in-between them in all but one of Vrel's paintings (fig. 7), blue skies streaked with bits of clouds provide the cool-color complement to the warm hues and values of the street and buildings below.



Figure 7. Jacobus Vrel, *A Conversation in the Street*, ca. 1654–62, oil on panel, 35.6 x 27.9 cm. Private collection. Photo: Private Collection/Johnny van Haefen, Ltd., London/The Bridgeman Art Library (artwork in the public domain)

The slightly elevated angle of view of the paintings' beholder, together with the proximity of the pictured scenes, position one as though peering onto the sites from a window or open door of a house parallel to the depicted streets. As such, the paintings' framed picture planes function as the fictive window or doorframe through which the viewer observes the scenes. The beholder's implied spatial position and the act of viewing find their mirrored parallel in Vrel's half-length figures, who peer out of windows in four of the paintings (figs. 4-6)¹⁵ and over a half-open Dutch door in another scene (fig. 7).

The beholder of the paintings and the pictured half-length figures in open windows share the role of neighbors, who peruse the activity in the street. In so doing, the residents fulfill the expectation of *gebuyrten* regulations that they should watch for honorable and

dishonorable behavior within the small community, which, in turn, encouraged neighbors to eavesdrop and stay aware of each other's activities.¹⁶ Although the concept of honor functioned ideally as a means of assuring social control and stability, attempts on a daily basis to uphold one's honor could also be subversive by pitting neighbors against each other. The particularly narrow streets in Vrel's paintings and the pressing proximity of the rows of houses provide ideal conditions in which to overhear conversations below, as the sound reverberated across and upward to open windows.¹⁷ However, the convivial activities and interactions in Vrel's appropriately tidy street scenes showcase the social network of honorable discourse in an ideal neighborhood.

Residents enjoyed such a strong sense of identity as insiders that they considered those streets and inhabitants outside of their own neighborhood to be strange or "other."¹⁸ Various circumstances contributed to such neighborhood insularity and identity. Residents developed well-trodden, fixed routes in which they essentially privatized aspects of the public space where they felt at home and which signaled to them their own neighborhood.¹⁹ Further, many individuals operated their trades and shops from their homes, which generally limited the need for anyone to access goods and services from outside the neighborhood.²⁰ As a result, it was not unusual to find residents who had never set foot in one or more of the other neighborhoods in the same city.²¹

Various elements in Vrel's street scenes would have signified to the viewer the characteristic insularity of neighborhood insiders. The figures who chat among themselves in nine of Vrel's paintings capture the familiarity and ease typically shared among neighborhood residents (figs. 1–5, 7).²² Their physical proximity in mostly pairs or

small groups, their orientation vis-à-vis each other, their stances and gestures—collectively referred to as “proxemics”²³—determine the congenial nature of their social exchange.

The figures’ face-to-face engagement, casual conversation, and body language represent actions and gestures that would have evoked in the viewer the “ritualized indications of alignment”²⁴ of the honorable neighborhood’s social connections. As residents of the pictured small community, the figures take part in “anchored or pegged relations” in which there is “the establishment of a framework of mutual knowing.”²⁵ Anchored or pegged relations presuppose a shared and reciprocal association acknowledged in ritual greetings or other signs between individuals.²⁶ Such connections typically stem directly from shared membership in social institutions, including the family, the workplace, and neighborhoods.²⁷ Individuals in these relationships have an awareness of the conditions under which they deem interaction of any number of kinds as expected, required, and reciprocal²⁸—an awareness understood as the bedrock of a neighborhood’s regulations and ethos.

As seen in Vrel’s paintings, such ritual greetings, gestures, and actions, or “tie-signs,” constitute the deeds, body language and facial expression, which convey the presence of ties between individuals. Tie-signs construct a “language of relationships” without being “messages . . . communication or expressions” themselves.²⁹ They afford knowledge that a relationship exists and they depend on the social context in which they appear.³⁰ In this sense, the neighborhood setting in Vrel’s paintings situates the figures’

tie-signs within that social context and informs their meaning in specific ways that are different from the same tie-signs in another milieu.

The portrayed gestures of physical engagement, as well as the signified sounds of the figures' voices implied by such tie-signs in Vrel's paintings, would have been readily familiar to residents of neighborhoods. The voices of individuals, like the sounds of animals, had much greater prominence in seventeenth-century communities than in our machine-infused present. Human sounds, as signified in Vrel's paintings, had the most meaningful consequence of all "temporal markers" within "the urban soundscape [which] formed a complex semiotic system . . . with its own grammar and syntax."³¹ Owing to the lack of loud environmental sounds of more than 70 decibels (excluding barking dogs), conversations in- or outdoors assumed a particularly significant presence and resonance.³²

In addition to residents' idiosyncratic voices, temporal markers within a neighborhood included other distinctive sounds. Vrel's scenes depict signifiers of familiar auditory temporal markers. According to David Garrioch, those additional neighborhood sounds helped to shape "people's sense of urban space. . . . The sighted . . . whether aware of it or not, used sound to situate themselves. A barking dog, a rooster, the rattle of shutters, a fountain or the clanging of a bucket in a nearby well were spatial markers to those who knew the neighborhood."³³

Such shared sounds, also referred to as local "soundmarks,"³⁴ were akin to physical landmarks in their identification with a specific place. Local soundmarks specific to a neighborhood contributed to a recognizable—even predictable—environment, which helped to define its parameters. As Garrioch observed, they constituted

spatial markers to those who knew the neighborhood. . . . Those who belonged to a particular neighborhood recognized [their] sounds and responded in ways that outsiders did not. . . . The familiar soundscape helped create a sense of belonging: it was part of the “feel” of a particular city, town or neighborhood, a key component of people’s sense of place . . . Along with the diffuse sense of belonging created by familiarity with local noises, sound created bonds between those for whom they had meaning.³⁵

In addition to the suggested sound of the chatting figures in some of Vrel’s paintings, local or neighborhood soundmarks inferred by other elements in his scenes include, for example, the cackle of the neighborhood chickens (figs. 2, 6), the cries of the street vendor (figs. 2, 5), a bucket clanging in a well (fig. 5), and the squeaking of the shop signs buffeted in the wind (figs. 1–3, 5).³⁶ All of Vrel’s paintings infer the soundmarks of the crunch of stones underfoot on the neighborhood street, the click-clack of steps on a tile or stone stoop, and the creaking of loose shutters.

Previous scholars have disagreed as to whether elements in Vrel’s paintings suggest a specific location or whether he constructed fictive scenes. In this context, Vrel’s repeated depiction of a bakery shop, as well as his various iterations of the shop sign, a pole with suspended golden bowls, suggest that these were meaningful signifiers to him—perhaps familiar, although not necessarily replicated, from firsthand experience—and regarded as at home in a typical neighborhood. In some of the paintings, the recurring elements appear as seen from different vantage points, which implies that the compositions depict varied directional views of one small physical area.

In three paintings Vrel prominently situated the same or a similar bakery's outdoor display of goods at what appears to be the same, or similar, fork in a street (figs. 4–6).³⁷ The repeated depiction of the relatively prominent bakery at a fork in the road suggests that the shop had specificity and, therefore, more resonance for Vrel than just that of a generic motif or a means by which he could pictorially identify with the artfulness of the baker.³⁸

In three paintings Vrel also repeated the shop sign, which one sees from different vantage points, that consists of a pole from which hang golden bowls³⁹(figs. 2–3, 5). Vrel's repetition of this sign—like his multiple depictions of the baker's shop—calls attention to itself and suggests that the shop sign with suspended bowls had resonance for him in some way, including his possible familiarity with the physical prototype.

The pole with hanging bowls identifies the shop of a barber⁴⁰ or a barber-surgeon,⁴¹ who used the basins while bleeding clients to relieve a high fever and to establish equilibrium among the body's fluids.⁴² Barber-surgeons, like surgeons, were often well-to-do and highly trained professionals, whose status sometimes warranted their appointment to positions in city government.⁴³ Such esteem may explain Vrel's repetition of the barber-surgeon's shop sign, which informed the neighborhood scenes with additional respectability.

The other shop signs in six of Vrel's paintings depict “a key . . . a hand, a bird,” which may be a swan, “a crescent, [and] a star”⁴⁴ (figs. 1–3, 5).⁴⁵ Such imagery appeared on actual seventeenth-century shop signs but often did not correspond in any way to the particular type of trade or business practiced at a given location.⁴⁶ Instead, such signs

functioned as shop advertisements and as directional indicators in lieu of house and building numbers, which had yet to be adopted as a system to designate addresses.⁴⁷

In the early modern period, shop signs as well as house signs, such as gable stones (*gevelsteen*), played a significant role in reinforcing identity and unity within neighborhoods. The significance of that role calls further attention to the shop signs in Vrel's paintings. Even though actual shop-sign imagery typically did not reference the trade practiced or the goods sold in respective businesses, residents of the neighborhoods in which the shop signs appeared shared a familiarity with their imagery that excluded outsiders, who would have found the signage inexplicable.⁴⁸ According to Garrioch, the imagery on neighborhood shop signs functioned for residents "to distinguish insiders from the outsiders. . . . A ready grasp of these landmarks—particularly if the name was not written on the sign—marked off those who belonged from those who did not. . . . In this sense [shop signs] were impenetrable to the outsider, part of the common neighborhood knowledge which defined and bound the local community."⁴⁹ A viewer of Vrel's paintings would have recognized in the depicted shop signs an additional pictorial signifier of a neighborhood and its sense of insular, shared community.

More specifically, the significance and value of shop signs lay in two roles. First, according to Garrioch, they functioned as "landmarks of local history" in that they "spoke of the background, personality, and the local standing of the shopkeeper or house owner, even of the family who possessed the property. . . . To someone who had grown up in the vicinity, old signs were familiar faces, reminders of the people who had lived behind them; and newer [shop signs] told of new arrivals."⁵⁰ Additionally, shop signs provided

residents of a neighborhood “significant landmarks of the local topography, not for finding one’s way, but to structure and describe the urban environment.”⁵¹

The sign on the bakers’ shops in two paintings (figs. 4 and 5) that reads “this house is t[o rent]”⁵² would also have been a commonplace sight in neighborhoods. Owing to waves of immigration, the significant population increase in the Northern Netherlands resulted in numerous individuals and families who rented a room, an attic, a cellar, or an entire house. Neighborhoods regarded renters, just as much as homeowners, as members of their *gebuyrten*, who participated fully in the life of the small communities.⁵³

Vrel’s paintings signify the status quo of a model neighborhood of insiders by virtue of what they exclude as much as what they depict. Although *gebuyrten* regulations and documented violations by residents attest to the enduring problem of dirty streets and unkempt house fronts,⁵⁴ Vrel’s scenes consistently present clean roads and facades. His paintings also exclude any evidence of the high population density and resulting cacophony of noise in Dutch neighborhoods, where immigrants flocked in great numbers. Similarly, although neighborhoods offered the natural forum for rowdy disagreements among residents, notably no verbal or physical altercation plays out in Vrel’s scenes. His paintings lack any suggestion of the obstacles facing someone who actually walked on a neighborhood street or alley. As a result, Vrel’s paintings visually fortified and helped shape the prescribed values of the Dutch neighborhood, which reverberated in the viewers’ entangled experiences and memories of such lived as well as painted scenes.

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