



Jacobus Vrel

(Active 1654 – 1662)

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We are summarily informed about the lives of most Dutch Golden Age painters; however, there are some about whom absolutely nothing is known. At present, forty works are attributed to Jacobus Vrel depicting domestic interiors, street scenes, and a church interior. Almost half of them bear a signature or monogram, together representing all of the available information regarding their maker's identity. Their spelling varies from "Frel," "Frell," "Vrel," and "Wrel," to "Vrelle" and even "Vreelle," making it unclear why "Vrel" was chosen, other than that it occurs most often, albeit only three times.^[1] There is slightly more certainty about his first name, which he gave as Jacobus the only time he included it in full in his signature.

While Vrel's place of birth has given rise to much speculation, to date no convincing answer has been found. He is long thought to have come from Delft, because in the nineteenth century the lion's share of his known oeuvre was attributed to Vermeer (from Delft), in part because the latter's signature had been added to many works, including the street scenes. Vrel was only really discovered after Théophile Thoré-Bürger (1807–69) exposed one of these Vermeer signatures as false and found Vrel's name underneath it. Nevertheless, comparable works continued to be associated with the Delft master for a long time, until finally they too proved to be by Vrel. With the gradual recovery of Vrel's oeuvre, the notion that Vrel and Vermeer were fellow townsmen was abandoned. Moreover, no archival documents corroborating Vrel's reputed Delft origins have been found. In fact, a 1982 doctoral investigation of Vrel's background concluded that his name could not be linked to any town in Holland.^[2] In part because of this, it has been contended that Vrel lived outside of what are now the provinces of Noord- and Zuid-Holland. In this connection the provinces of Friesland and Overijssel, the borderland between the Northern and the Southern Netherlands, and even Germany have been forwarded as possibilities, but no evidence to this effect has been found.^[3]

Vrel's elusiveness is further reinforced by the puzzling fact that Archduke Leopold Wilhelm (1614–62) owned no less than three works by him, which hung in his palace in Brussels until 1656, when he returned to Vienna. Two of them can still be identified, including *Interior with a Sick Woman by a Fireplace*, currently in The Leiden Collection.^[4] This prominent patronage of Vrel, a genre painter, is curious, as the archduke was known as a connoisseur of history paintings. Hence, these acquisitions can most likely be accounted for by the taste of David Teniers the Younger (1610–90), Leopold's court painter, agent, and keeper of his collection. Judging from the description of Vrel's interior with two peasant men and one peasant woman, for example, it could just as well have been a work by Teniers, also a genre painter.^[5]

To date, the 1659 inventory of Leopold's extensive collection of paintings is the only document containing Vrel's name. Attempts to locate the artist in Brussels or Antwerp have proved futile, and his name is also conspicuously absent from South Netherlandish archives. Any other outcome would have been most remarkable since the subject matter and style of Vrel's work is so close to that of his contemporaries Pieter de Hooch (1629–84), Esaias Boursse (1631–72), and Pieter Janssens Elinga (1623–82) that one can hardly imagine him not working in the immediate surroundings of one of these artists. Naturally, the possibility that Vrel's roots, like Elinga's, lay in the Southern Netherlands cannot be excluded. Nevertheless, Teniers could have purchased the three paintings that once hung in Brussels on one of his trips to the Northern Netherlands.^[6]

The digitization of countless archival records in recent years and the access to them via the Internet have considerably enriched the possibilities for identifying the artist. It is therefore rather remarkable that he remains untraceable.^[7] The name Vrel (and all of the above-mentioned variations) is so rare that it begs the question whether it was, in fact, a surname.



In Amsterdam the name is linked to just two people, only one of whom occurs more than once, namely Antie Vrel; sometimes as Vrel, but more often as Verel or Varel. Her brother, Jan Verel (ca. 1614–69), was a wine merchant residing in a section of the Oude Zijds Voorburgwal where barrels of beer were shipped in daily from Delft.^[8] This is the only “Verel” in Amsterdam bearing the painter’s possible given name.^[9] Another possibility is Jacobus Verel, a local schoolmaster in Bleiswijk, a village north of Rotterdam, close to Delft. That neither of them was an artist does not necessarily invalidate this identification, as some art historians have contended that Vrel’s poor command of perspective suggests he was an amateur painter.^[10] It is not being asserted here that one of these two Verels was actually the painter Vrel, an identification that would require other, more convincing evidence. It might be fruitful to find alternatives for the name Vrel, because it is highly doubtful whether this was what the painter was actually called.

- Piet Bakker, 2017



Endnotes

1. This observation relies on the notes Elizabeth Alice Honig made while researching her article “Looking in(to) Jacob Vrel,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 3, no. 1 (1989): 37–56, which are now in the Netherlands Institute for Art History (RKD), The Hague, folder: Jacobus Vrel. The article also contains a list of Vrel’s known paintings up to 1989.
2. Jan Postma, “Jacobus Vrel, de vraag naar zijn herkomst en oeuvrecatalogus” (Master diss., Leiden University, 1982). Conclusion derived from Elizabeth Honig, “Looking in(to) Jacob Vrel,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 3, no. 1 (1989): 39.
3. For a summary of these suppositions, see Peter C. Sutton, ed., *Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting* (Exh. cat. Philadelphia Museum of Art; Berlin, Staatliche, Museen, Gemäldegalerie; London, Royal Academy of Arts, 1984), 354n1.
4. *Woman at a Window*, 1654 (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna); and *Interior with a Sick Woman by a Fireplace*, ca. 1654–56 (The Leiden Collection, New York); see the entry in this catalogue.
5. Adolf Berger, *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses* 1, part 2 (1883): 79–177, no 758: “Ein Stückel von öhlfarb auf Holz, warin zwey Pauren unndt ein Peurin von Jakob Fröll” (An oil painting on panel of two peasant men and a peasant woman by Jakob Fröll). This comment was first noted in E. A. Honig, “Looking in(to) Jacob Vrel,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 3, no. 1 (1989): 53n8. For Teniers as court painter to and keeper of Archduke Leopold Wilhelm’s collection, see Hans Vlieghe, *David Teniers The Younger (1610–1690): A Biography* (Turnhout, 2011).
6. This acquisition must have taken place between 1654, the date on one of the paintings, and 1656, the year when the collection was moved to Vienna.
7. It should be noted that the Baptism, Marriage, and Burial Registers of Haarlem and The Hague can still only be consulted on-site. The comments in this entry on the rarity of the name Vrel, thus, do not apply to these two cities, since I have not visited these archives.
8. The building “daer de Schenkkan uythangt, eertyts genaemt de Pauw” (with the jug hanging out, formerly called the “Pauw” [peacock]) that Jan Varel (Verel) purchased in 1649 was located in the section of the Oude Zijds Voorburgwal once called the Delftse Bierkaey. Stedelijk Archief Amsterdam, Archieven van de Schout en Schepenen, (toegang 5061) Transportakten, 23 October 1649.
9. The names Verel and Varel also occur only rarely. In the Amsterdam Baptism, Marriage, and Burial Registers everyone bearing these names is related.
10. Eduard Plietzsch, “Jacobus Vrel und Esaias Boursse,” *Zeitschrift für Kunst* 3 (1949): 248–63.

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