THE LEIDEN COLLECTION



Interior with a Sick Woman by a Fireplace

Jacobus Vrel
(Active 1654 – 1662)

ca. 1654–56
oil on panel
57.3 x 47.7 cm
JV-100

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This peaceful domestic scene depicts an older woman seated on a wooden chair in a sober interior, her head leaning against a large, white pillow propped up against a tall fireplace. A cat and a small dog curled up in front of the hearth comfortably enjoy the warmth emitted by its smoldering flames. To the right of the brown-and-tan tiled fireplace hangs a shovel suspended from a hook, and on the floor nearby are tongs, a dark terra cotta pot, and a foot warmer. Resting on the wooden hood of the fireplace are simple, white, earthenware plates decorated with delicate blue designs, two brass candlesticks, and a single orange. Suspended from hooks attached to the bottom of the wooden hood, from which also hangs a dark cloth skirting, is a small ornamental candleholder, symmetrically flanked by metal vessels.[1] The empty chair on the right reinforces the quiet, solitary character of this woman's life.

In 1935, Clotilde Brière-Misme identified this painting as the "sick woman sitting by a Dutch fireplace" recorded in the 1659 inventory of the art collection of Archduke Leopold Wilhelm of Austria (1614–62), governor to the Spanish Netherlands at the court in Brussels from 1647–56.[2] Indeed, the pillow and the woman's half-open eyes and slightly raised eyebrows do suggest that she is unwell.[3] In the inventory this work is described as being a pendant to Jacobus Vrel's painting of a "woman looking out of a window" **(fig 1)**.[4] The scene in the latter painting, which is in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, is situated in a similar room with an identical fireplace. Dated 1654, it is Vrel's earliest extant dated work. Brière-Misme's hypothesis has been generally accepted even though the vertical dimensions of *Interior with a Sick Woman by a Fireplace* are substantially less than those of *Woman Looking Out of a Window*.[5] Brière-Misme postulated that the two paintings once had identical dimensions and that *Interior with a Sick Woman by a Fireplace* had subsequently been cut at the top.[6]

Technical analysis has confirmed Brière-Misme's hypothesis. The absence of a bevel along the top edge of the panel, as well as the small chips along this edge, indicate that the panel was cut.[7] The painting's earlier appearance is seen in a photograph taken in 1928, when it was with art dealer Van Diemen & Co in Berlin **(fig 2)**.[8] At that time the painting was about nine centimeters taller, the size difference between it and *Woman Looking Out of a Window*. Moreover, the versos of the Vienna and the Leiden Collection panels are remarkably similar in appearance, indicating that the panels were made by the same craftsman around the same time **(fig 3)**.[9]

Even if the Leiden Collection and Vienna paintings were considered to be pendants when they were in the collection of Archduke Leopold Wilhelm, there is no proof that Vrel originally intended them as a pair. There are no other known examples in his oeuvre of pendant paintings. It is not known either how the works entered that

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Jacob Vrel, *Woman Looking Out of a Window*, 1654, oil on panel, 66 x 47.5 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie, Vienna, inv. no. 6081.



Fig 2. Jacob Vrel, *Interior with a Sick Woman by a Fireplace*, 1928 photograph showing original panel, taken while it was with the dealer Diemen & Co., Berlin, preserved on a photo mount at RKD (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie/Netherlands Institute for Art History), The Hague

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collection, whether separately or together, or whether they came through the initiative of the archduke's curator in Brussels, David Teniers the Younger (1610–90).[10] Nevertheless, whether or not they were conceived as pendants, these two paintings complement each other in the ways they evoke the solitude of human life **(fig 4)**.

Several old references record that the painting was once signed and dated on a piece of paper attached to the nail on the fireplace, yet no trace of this paper remains today.[11] It is likely, however, that Vrel executed this work around 1654, the year in which its purported pendant was created, and certainly before 1656, the year in which Leopold Wilhelm's term as governor of the Spanish Netherlands in Brussels ended and he returned to Vienna.[12] If this date is correct, this painting and the panel in Vienna, Vrel's earliest known dated work, were executed several years before Pieter de Hooch began painting his interior genre scenes. As Peter Sutton has suggested, Vrel seems to have "anticipated Delft artists' interest in domestic themes."[13] It is therefore frustrating that Vrel's origins and training remain a mystery.[14] None of the simple and inexpensive objects, including the blue and white earthenware displayed on the fireplace mantle, ubiquitous throughout Europe, has shed any light on the region in which this enigmatic artist resided.

- Ilona van Tuinen, 2017



Fig 3. Reverse of Jacob Vrel, *An Interior with a Sick Woman by a Fireplace*, The Leiden Collection, New York, photo: Annette Rupprecht.



Fig 4. Jacob Vrel, *Woman Looking Out of a Window*, 1654, oil on panel, 66 x 47.5 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie, Vienna, inv. no. 6081.

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Endnotes

1. Wooden hoods and cloth skirting around fireplaces were common in the mid-seventeenth century. See Mariët Westermann, "Hendrick Martensz Sorgh: *Portrait of the Bierens Family*, 1663," in *Art & Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt* (Exh. cat. Newark, The Newark Museum; Denver, Denver Art Museum) (Zwolle, 2001), 175, no. 40, for Sorgh's portrait of the Amsterdam Bierens family, which features a similar fireplace in the background.
2. Clotilde Brière-Misme, "Un 'Intimiste' hollandais, Jacob Vrel," *Revue de l'Art Ancien et Moderne* 68 (June–December 1935): 165. For a transcription of the inventory, see Adolf Berger, "Inventar de Kunstsammlungen des Erzherzogs Leopold Wilhelm von Österreich," *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses* 1, part 2 (1883): CL, no. 739, "hollandischer Camin, darbey ein kranckhe Fraw sitczt."
3. See Gerlinde Gruber, "Das Bilderverzeichnis der Pressburger Burg von 1781: Ein Beitrag zur Sammlungsgeschichte der Gemäldegalerie des Kunsthistorischen Museums," *Jahrbuch des Kunsthistorischen Museums Wien* 8, no. 9 (2006–7): 378, no. 106. In the inventory of Emperor Joseph II, dated 19 February 1781, the painting was listed as no. 106, "ein Frau am Camin sitzend," making no reference to her being sick. When the painting was sold at auction at Sotheby's, Amsterdam on 18 May 2004 as no. 14, it was entitled "An Interior with a Woman Sleeping Near a Fireplace Together with a Cat and a Dog." Since the woman's eyes are half open and she is resting against a pillow, it appears that she is indeed sick, and not sleeping.
4. Adolf Berger, "Inventar de Kunstsammlungen des Erzherzogs Leopold Wilhelm von Österreich," *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses* 1, part 2 (1883): CL, no. 739. The full citation is as follows: "Zwey Stückhel einer Grössen von Őhlfarb auf Holcz, warin in einem ein hollandischer Camin, darbey ein kranckhe Fraw sitczt, vnndt in dem andern ein Fraw zum Fenster hinauszschawet."
5. For scholars who adopted Brière-Misme's identification, see Peter C. Sutton, "Woman at a Window," in *Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting*, ed. Peter C. Sutton (Exh. cat. Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art; Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen; London, Royal Academy of Arts) (Philadelphia, 1984), 353, under no. 123, fig. 2; and Elizabeth Honig, "Looking in(to) Jacob Vrel," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 3, no. 1 (1989): 49. For a different opinion, see Quentin Buvelot, "Jacobus Vrel: Woman at a Window, Waving at a Girl, c. 1650," in *A Choice Collection: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Paintings from the Frits Lugt Collection*, ed. Quentin Buvelot and Hans Buijs (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis) (Zwolle, 2002), 224, no. 5. The slightly larger measurements of the Vienna work prompted Buvelot to propose as a more plausible pendant another Vrel painting equally as large as the Vienna painting: *Interior with a Woman by a Fireplace*, in which a woman is leaning forward in a chair by a fireplace (oil on panel, 65 x 48 cm, Brod Gallery, London, formerly sale, Christie's, 10 July 1998, no. 30, reproduced in Michiel Kersten, "Pieter de Hooch and Delft Genre Painting 1650–1675," in *Delftse*

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Meesters. Tijdgenoten van Vermeer: een andere kijk op perspectief, licht en ruimte, ed. Michiel Kersten and Daniëlle Lokin [Exh. cat. Delft, Stedelijk Museum Het Prinsenhof] [Zwolle, 1996], 179, fig. 176). Although the interior with the windows corresponds to the Vienna painting, the woman's posture suggests tiredness or contemplation rather than sickness.

6. Clotilde Brière-Misme, "Un 'Intimiste' hollandais, Jacob Vrel," *Revue de l'Art Ancien et Moderne* 68 (June–December 1935): 165.
7. See also Annette Rupprecht's Technical Summary.
8. The old photograph is preserved on an RKD (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie/Netherlands Institute for Art History) photo mount, a copy of which is on file at the Leiden Collection, New York. The photo mount records the painting as having been with art dealer Van Diemen & Co. in Berlin in 1928, as well as Schaeffer in 1929. Since Schaeffer published the painting in 1929 in its reduced state, it is likely that the photograph in its extended state was provided by Van Diemen & Co in 1928. See *Die Meister des Holländischen Interieurs* (Exh. cat. Berlin, Galerie Dr. Schaeffer) (Berlin, 1929), 35, no. 105. In that same year, the painting was published in its reduced state in an additional three publications: Wilhelm R. Valentiner, "Dutch Genre Painters in the Manner of Pieter de Hooch. Jacobus Vrel," *Art in America* 17, no. 2 (1929): 88, fig. 3; Wilhelm R. Valentiner, *Pieter de Hooch* (Stuttgart, 1929), 203; and Alfred Scharf, "Die Meister des Holländischen Interieurs," *Der Cicerone* 21 (April 1929): 225.
9. Many thanks to Elke Oberthaler, head of conservation at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, for sharing information on and a photograph of the reverse of the Vienna panel. Thanks to Annette Rupprecht, who compared the reverses and concluded that both panels have distinctly shaped bevels at the bottom and have similar mechanical tool marks. Also, the traces around the vertical join in the Leiden Collection panel could well be of a fabric strip comparable to the one that is still present in the Vienna work. Thanks also to Mariska de Jonge at the Fondation Custodia in Paris for sending an image of the reverse of the early Vrel of ca. 1650 in their collection (see Quentin Buvelot, "Jacobus Vrel: Woman at a Window, Waving at a Girl, c. 1650," in *A Choice Collection: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Paintings from the Frits Lugt Collection*, ed. Quentin Buvelot and Hans Buijs [Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis] [Zwolle, 2002], 182–85). Although the Paris panel is cradled, it does not seem as though it contains the same characteristics as the panels in Vienna and New York.
10. For a discussion of David Teniers the Younger's time as Archduke Leopold Wilhelm's curator between 1650–56, see Hans Vlieghe, *David Teniers The Younger (1610–1690): A Biography* (Turnhout, 2011), esp. 29–45. It is likely that Teniers was the one who actively acquired genre paintings, since the archduke favored Flemish history painting (see also Vrel's biography by Piet Bakker in this catalogue for this observation).
11. Several old photo mounts preserved at the RKD (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie/Netherlands Institute for Art History) in The Hague mention this piece of paper with the signature and date hanging from a nail on the fireplace. It is also possible that the piece of paper was hanging from another nail at the top of the chimney in the part of the panel that was removed.

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Alternatively, the reference on the RKD (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie/Netherlands Institute for Art History) mount might also be erroneous, since Vrel uses the optical effect of a nail casting a shadow on a bare wall in other paintings, too. See Quentin Buvelot, "Jacobus Vrel: Woman at a Window, Waving at a Girl, ca. 1650," in *A Choice Collection: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Paintings from the Frits Lugt Collection*, ed. Quentin Buvelot and Hans Buijs (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis) (Zwolle, 2002), 182–85, for his discussion of Vrel's *Woman at a Window, Waving at a Girl* in the Fondation Custodia in Paris, in which Vrel included a similar nail on a bare surface and signed the composition on a piece of paper lying on the floor.

12. See Gerlinde Gruber, "Das Bilderverzeichnis der Pressburger Burg von 1781: Ein Beitrag zur Sammlungsgeschichte der Gemäldegalerie des Kunsthistorischen Museums," *Jahrbuch des Kunsthistorischen Museums Wien* 8, no. 9 (2006–7): 354–400.
13. See Peter C. Sutton, "Woman at a Window," in *Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting,* ed. Peter C. Sutton (Exh. cat. Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art; Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen; London, Royal Academy of Arts) (Philadelphia, 1984), 353.
14. See Piet Bakker's biography on Vrel in this catalogue.
15. Thanks to Femke Diercks, junior curator of glass and ceramics at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, for sharing her insights regarding the earthenware, e-mail communication, February 2014. The plates Vrel depicts, and which feature in many of his other interior scenes, are of a relatively low quality. Their "spider-like" decorations on the edges point to Portuguese *faience*, a type of inexpensive earthenware loosely based on Chinese porcelain.

Provenance

- Probably Leopold Wilhelm, Archduke of Austria, by 1659 (as pendant to the 1654 *Woman Looking Out of a Window* in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, inv. 6081).
- Probably Emperor Joseph II, Vienna, by 1781; sold in Budapest in 1856.
- [Van Diemen & Co, Berlin, ca. 1928; Galerie Dr. Schaeffer, Berlin, by 1929–at least 1932].
- Dr. Liebermann, Berlin, (possibly) by 1935.
- Mrs M. van Es-Dirksen, The Hague, by 1936.
- Private collection, the Netherlands (sale, Sotheby's, Amsterdam, 18 May 2004, no. 14; [Johnny van Haeften, Ltd., London]).
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2005.

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Exhibition History

- Berlin, Galerie Dr. Schaeffer, “Die Meister des Holländischen Interieurs,” April–May 1929, no. 105 [lent by Galerie Dr. Schaeffer, Berlin].
- The Hague, Gemeentemuseum, “Oude Kunst uit Haagsch Bezit,” 12 December 1936–31 January 1937, no. 206 [lent by Mrs. M. van Es-Dirksen, The Hague].
- Beijing, National Museum of China, “Rembrandt and His Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection,” 17 June–3 September 2017 [lent by the present owner].
- Shanghai, Long Museum, West Bund, “Rembrandt, Vermeer and Hals in the Dutch Golden Age: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection,” 23 September 2017–25 February 2018 [lent by the present owner].
- Moscow, The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, “The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer: Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection,” 28 March 2018–22 July 2018 [lent by the present owner].
- St. Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum, “The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer: Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection,” 5 September 2018–13 January 2019 [lent by the present owner].
- West Palm Beach, Norton Museum of Art, on loan with the permanent collection, December 2022–December 2024 [lent by the present owner].

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Technical Summary

The support, a rectangular composite panel comprising two vertically grained oak planks of similar widths, has a small triangular wood insert along the lower right corner.[1] The panel is unthinned and uncradled, has machine tool marks on both planks and a bevel along the center of the lower edge only. Short vertical chips across the width of the upper edge reverse suggests it may have been trimmed. There are embossed initials, a black stencil, two numerical inscriptions, and four paper labels, but no wax collection seals or import stamps.

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A light-colored, radio-opaque ground appears to have been applied as a paste with a palette knife. The paint has been applied smoothly in thin layers of transparent glazing with no use of impasto through much of the composition, which allows the light-colored ground to show through along the figure's white apron, wooden floor, and fireplace tiles.

The painting is unsigned and undated.

Infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers suggest there may be a line underdrawing along the figure's garment folds and the pillow. Further investigation with wavelengths that penetrate further into the infrared region may reveal a more extensive underdrawing. A compositional change visible in the images and as a pentimento suggests the pillow the figure leans against was reduced in size along the upper and left sides. A long, narrow, slightly curved, diagonal form, which extends from the hearth to the top of the figure's head, may relate to the ground application or indicate an additional compositional change.

The painting has not undergone conservation treatment since its acquisition and remains in a good state of preservation.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The characterization of the wood is based on visual examination only. The triangular wood insert measures 0.7 cm H x 0.5 cm W.

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