

# Glimpses, Glances, and Gossip: Seventeenth-century Dutch Paintings of Domestic Interiors on Their Neighbourhood's Doorstep

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Article abstract

Les études des peintures hollandaises du milieu du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle représentant des intérieurs domestiques se sont généralement concentrées sur les personnages et les activités du premier plan. Les portes et fenêtres ouvertes en arrière-plan, donnant sur des rues adjacentes, ne sont que mentionnées au passage comme représentant la ville ou le monde. Cet article met au contraire l'accent sur les vues donnant sur la rue à travers la lentille inexplorée du quartier néerlandais, qui constitue un réseau social et une organisation officielle avec des règlements, des membres mandatés, un contrôle social substantiel, de la camaraderie et un sentiment d'identité et de lieu. Veillant aux portes et fenêtres ouvertes sur la rue, les résidents se gardaient informés des activités et des nouvelles qui formaient le flux et le reflux des échanges sociaux dans le quartier et contribuaient à préserver l'honneur de la petite communauté. Dans leur évocation de personnages à côté de portes et de fenêtres ouvertes ou de mobiliers favorisant l'examen du quartier, ces peintures ont contribué à façonner, affirmer et perpétuer les moeurs des organisations officielles de quartier.

# Glimpses, Glances, and Gossip: Seventeenth-century Dutch Paintings of Domestic Interiors on Their Neighbourhood's Doorstep

Linda Stone-Ferrier

Les études des peintures hollandaises du milieu du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle représentant des intérieurs domestiques se sont généralement concentrées sur les personnages et les activités du premier plan. Les portes et fenêtres ouvertes en arrière-plan, donnant sur des rues adjacentes, ne sont que mentionnées au passage comme représentant la ville ou le monde. Cet article met au contraire l'accent sur les vues donnant sur la rue à travers la lentille inexplorée du quartier néerlandais, qui constitue un réseau social et une organisation officielle avec des règlements, des membres mandatés, un contrôle social substantiel, de la camaraderie et un sentiment d'identité et de lieu. Veillant aux portes et fenêtres ouvertes sur la rue, les résidents se gardaient informés des activités et des nouvelles qui formaient le flux et le reflux des échanges sociaux dans le quartier et contribuaient à préserver l'honneur de la petite communauté. Dans leur évocation de personnages à côté de portes et de fenêtres ouvertes ou de mobiliers favorisant l'examen du quartier, ces peintures ont contribué à façonner, affirmer et perpétuer les mœurs des organisations officielles de quartier.

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Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

In numerous mid-seventeenth-century domestic-interior paintings, such as Pieter De Hooch's *Man Handing a Letter to a Woman in the Entrance Hall of a House* (1670), the foreground activity typically includes mothers with children, female handwork, festivity, the delivery and reading of letters, and so on. | fig. 1 | Compelling studies have characteristically focused on the paintings' foregrounded domestic interactions and have examined overarching iconographic themes, characteristic pictorial constructions of individual painters, and other interpretive issues. They have concluded that the domestic-interior figures model either appropriate or transgressive behaviour in order to reinforce the moral status quo. Mothers, children, and servants have been discussed in the context of Calvinist dictates regarding gender roles, and political parallels have been drawn between the good home and the good state.<sup>1</sup> Some of the foreground scenes have generated multiple, even conflicting interpretations. Proper, improper, and sometimes morally ambiguous endeavors on display in the paintings would have spawned lively conversation among viewers. Because artists mostly sold their genre scenes on the open market, pictures with varied readings broadened their appeal for an array of possible buyers.

In contrast, the backgrounds of a remarkably large number of domestic-interior paintings that include street views through open doors and windows have received little attention.<sup>2</sup> In passing, some studies have concluded the outdoor scenes represent the city or the world, an assumption that has not been contested.<sup>3</sup> One analysis considered certain views through an open door or window as pictorial conceits or technical conventions that suggest depth.<sup>4</sup> This study, however, examines the background street views through the unexplored interpretive lens of the neighbourhood, rather than the city or the world.

Various new categories of secular imagery emerged in seventeenth-century Dutch art at the same time neighbourhoods strongly impacted daily life. The confluence of novel imagery with the prominent role of neighbourhoods distinguishes the Dutch art market from that of other early modern European cities in which neighbourhoods thrived. Those communities produced no comparable pictures. Dutch demand for finely painted secular subjects in this period, including domestic interiors, resulted in large part from the economic boom spurred by global trade from 1646 to 1672.<sup>5</sup>

1. Simon Schama, "Wives and Wantons: Versions of Womanhood in 17th-Century Dutch Art," *Oxford Art Journal* 3, no. 1 (April 1980): 5–13; Mariët Westermann, "'Costly and Curious, Full Off Pleasure and Home Contentment': Making Home in the Dutch Republic," in *Art and Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt*, exh. cat., ed. Marlene Chambers and Mariët Westermann (Denver: Denver Art Museum/Newark, NJ: The Newark Museum/Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 2001), 54, 224n75.

2. In this study, "open window" refers to hinged glass panes that are either latched shut within a window casing or unlatched and rotated inward and to the side. In either position, neither curtains nor shutters block the view through the "open window."

3. See, for example, Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1988), 389, 570; David R. Smith, "Carel Fabritius and Portraiture in Delft," *Art History* 13 (1990): 169–70; Martha Hollander, "Public and Private in the Art of Pieter De Hooch," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 51 (2000): 74, 273, 279–80, 284, 290; Westermann, "'Costly and Curious,'" 74; John Loughman, "Between Reality and Artful Fiction: the Representation of the Domestic Interior in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art," in *Imagined Interiors: Representing the Domestic Interior Since the Renaissance*, ed. Jeremy Aynsley and Charlotte Grant (London: V&A Publications, 2006), 89; Boudewijn Bakker, "'Portraits' and 'Perspectives': Townscape Painting in Seventeenth-Century Holland," in *Dutch Cityscapes of the Golden Age*, exh. cat., ed. Ariane van Suchtelen and Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr. (The Hague: Royal Picture Gallery, Mauritshuis/Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art/Zwolle: Waanders Publisher, 2009), 44.

4. Martha Hollander, *An Entrance for the Eyes: Space and Meaning in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2002), 42.

5. Jonathan Israel, "Adjusting to Hard Times: Dutch Art during its Period of Crisis and Restructuring (c. 1621–c. 1645)," *Art History* 20, no. 3 (September 1997): 472.

6. Herman Roodenburg, "Naar een etnografie van de vroegmoderne stad: de 'gebuyrten' in Leiden en Den Haag," in *Cultuur en maatschappij in Nederland 1500–1850: Een historisch-antropologisch perspectief*,

The Dutch neighbourhood's official organization (*gebuyrten*), formal regulations (*buurtbrieven*), mandated membership, camaraderie, and sense of identity and place provide a remarkably revealing context in which to examine domestic-interior paintings with street views. Little disqualified an inhabitant from required membership, including gender, politics, religion, socio-economic level, nationality, or status as a homeowner or renter. Some exceptions existed: Jews, the very poor, and those with unsavory reputations might be excluded.<sup>6</sup> The neighbourhood functioned as a significant social network and wielded substantial social control. At open street-facing doors and windows, watchful residents kept apprised of activities and news, which informed the liminal ebb and flow of neighbourhood social exchange.

I propose that comparable open doors and windows in the mid-century domestic-interior paintings evoke such neighbourhood discourse. My argument is compatible with, and builds upon, art historical interpretations of appropriate and inappropriate activity in the foreground of such household scenes. Official neighbourhood regulations touted comparable mores to ensure that residents upheld both individual and communal honour.

Pieter De Hooch's *Man Handing a Letter to a Woman in the Entrance Hall of a House* (1670) reveals several of the characteristic elements in domestic-interior paintings under discussion. | **fig. 1** | Interrupted by a messenger entering the room, an elegantly dressed woman sits by an open window where she may casually or intently peruse neighbourhood activity that might generate communal gossip. By virtue of contrast, the brightly lit background street scene captures as much of the viewer's attention as does the shadowed indoor activity. In the darkened foreground, the diamond shapes created by the tiles' orthogonals point in the direction of the open door and window, and to the neighbourhood beyond.

Poised in a three-quarter turn, a child stands on the stoop of the open doorway and signals the easy flow between inside and outside. Beyond the threshold and on the far side of the street, two middle-class men converse before housefronts and exhibit typical neighbourhood social exchange. Turned slightly toward each other, they face in the direction of the foreground space. Their position helps connect the neighbourhood (background) and the household scene (foreground).

A small half-length female figure appears in the distant window, just to the upper left of the men. Her attentive curiosity and perusal of the neighbourhood below echoes that of the foreground seated figure. In combination, the watchful women and child, and the men who chat on the street manifest the glimpses and glances that, in turn, typically fuelled neighbourhood gossip.

De Hooch drew further attention to the adjacent neighbourhood through the foreground open window that frames a distant archway, additional housefronts, and a second tree. Within the compositional field defined by the window's casing, a small pinhole in the shaded upper right side of the far-off archway marks the painting's vanishing point.<sup>7</sup> He signed and dated the picture on the foreground windowsill, which draws further attention to that threshold.

The lack of scholarly focus on background street scenes in domestic-interior paintings stems from the presumption that a firm boundary distinguished private from public spheres in Dutch art and society.<sup>8</sup> In an interpretive binary, art historians have identified street-facing doors and windows as the borderline



Figure. 1 Pieter de Hooch,  
*Man Handing a Letter to a Woman  
 in the Entrance Hall of a House*,  
 1670. Oil on canvas, 68 × 59 cm.  
 Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.  
 On loan from the City of  
 Amsterdam (A. van der Hoop  
 Bequest). Photo: Rijksmuseum.



Figure 2. Gerard ter Borch, *Curiosity*, ca. 1660–62. Oil on canvas, 76 × 62 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY, USA/Bridgeman Images.



between the private female domain of the home and the public male province of the street. As a result, scholars' analyses of the domestic-interior paintings have focused on the foreground female figures and activities and have neglected aspects of the paintings that do not fall within that domain.

More recently, however, some historians of early modern women's studies and gender relations, and early modern Netherlandish science and technology, have resisted the notion of binary divisions between private versus public space. They have characterized a transition, intersection, or both between the two spheres.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, this study argues that the domestic-interior paintings under discussion belie finite spatial, social, and gendered boundaries. Rather than an impenetrable barrier, open doors and windows represent the liminal intersection and interdependent well-being of a household and its neighbourhood.

The first of four subsections to follow will characterize the pertinent social history, sociology, and historical ethnography of the Dutch neighbourhood as a newly revealing context in which to examine the paintings under discussion. The daily lives of almost all Dutch urban dwellers were embedded in the neighbourhood that served as the bridge, rather than boundary, between home and street. The paintings that reference domestic ties to neighbourhood membership, discourse, and community may have functioned to affirm and perpetuate neighbourhood customs and culture for owners of paintings and other viewers. The pictures modeled and helped shape the mores of official neighbourhood organizations at the same time additional aspects of the paintings may have addressed other related or unrelated issues of the day.

Drawing upon germane design history of domestic architecture and household furnishings, three subsequent subsections will notably demonstrate that artists most frequently chose to showcase the *voorhuis*, the domestic front room, and certain characteristic fixtures. Together, the *voorhuis* and particular fittings facilitated residents' casual and purposeful perusal of the neighbourhood. To explore these topics, the first of the three subsections will focus on paintings that feature the domestic front room and the significance of the setting itself.

*Voorhuis* street views drew the attention of men, women, and children. However, social commentary focused on females in such roles, which the *voorhuis* subsection will also examine. Drawing upon the relevant history of gender roles, gendered spaces, and moralizing prescriptions, discussion will highlight ambivalent attitudes toward women who watched neighbourhood activity from the front room. The second of the three subsections will detail the design and prominent function of the *voorhuis* door in paintings, as well as in actual neighbourhood discourse. The third will illuminate the key role played by the *voorhuis* open window in those same contexts.

The impressively large number of paintings with a street view through *voorhuis* open doors and windows invites further investigation. Influenced by market demand, artists made choices to depict that setting so often. Alternatively, they could have represented closed doors, curtained, or shuttered windows, or omitted doors and windows altogether, which occurred much more rarely. The latter option existed, as seen in paintings by Gerard ter Borch, including *Curiosity* (ca. 1660–62) which lacks both a door and a window, and any reference to the neighbourhood. | **fig. 2** | Darkness fills most of the domestic

ed. Peter te Boekhorst et al. (Meppeel and Heerlen: Boom and Open Universiteit, 1992), 224, 235–36; Gabrielle Dorren, "Communities within the Community: Aspects of Neighbourhood in Seventeenth-Century Haarlem," *Urban History* 25, no. 2 (August 1998): 177, 180, 187–88.

7. Peter C. Sutton, *Pieter De Hooch, 1629–1684*, exh. cat. (Hartford, CT: Wadsworth Atheneum/Dulwich: Dulwich Picture Gallery/New Haven: in association Yale UP, 1998), 40–41, fig. 33a.

8. Heidi de Mare, "The Domestic Boundary as Ritual Area in Seventeenth-Century Holland," in *Urban Rituals in Italy and The Netherlands: Historical Contrasts in the Use of Public Space, Architecture and Urban Environment*, ed. Heidi de Mare and A. Vos (Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum & Comp B.V., 1993), 128; Heidi de Mare, "A rule worth following in architecture? The significance of gender classification in Simon Stevin's architectural treatise (1548–1620)," in *Women of the Golden Age: An International Debate on Women in Seventeenth-Century Holland, England and Italy*, ed. Els Kloek et al. (Hilversum: Verloren, 1994), 119.

9. Brita Rang, "Space and position in space (and time): Simon Stevin's concept of housing: A response to Heidi de Mare," in *Women of the Golden Age*, 122; Vanessa Harding, "Space, Property, and Propriety in Urban England," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, "The Productivity of Urban Space in Northern Europe," 32, no. 4 (Spring 2002): 550; Charles van den Heuvel and Simon Stevin, "De Huysbou": A reconstruction of an unfinished treatise on architecture, town planning and civil engineering by Simon Stevin (Amsterdam: Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, 2005), 60.

interior occupied by three elegantly dressed women, who gather beside a small table. A hallmark of many Ter Borch paintings, the luminous satin dress worn by the figure on the left commands the viewer's attention and raises interpretive questions about her allure.<sup>10</sup>

### The Dutch Neighbourhood as Interpretive Context

The requisite discussion that follows sheds light on relevant aspects of the social history, sociology, and historical ethnography of neighborhood social exchange, an unexplored interpretive context in which domestic-interior paintings will be further examined below. Like any interpretive lens, the neighbourhood does not provide an exclusive or exhaustive framework in which to understand every facet of such scenes. However, the required membership, regulations, colourful discourse, communal identity and honour experienced within the neighbourhood provide a revealing context in which to explore the street views through open doors and windows.

Although individual neighbourhoods differed in certain ways, this study focuses on the larger purpose, goals, organization, and characteristics that they all shared. The paintings under discussion engage with those broad tenets. Relatively small differences that may have existed among neighbourhoods are not at issue in the interpretation of the paintings. Minor distinctions among neighbourhoods did not affect the main goals and functions, which they shared. Although this study examines paintings produced by artists from several urban areas, discussion does not focus on city-centric artistic characteristics. Instead, I consider the ways in which pictures from various urban communities share an engagement with the neighbourhood.

In actual daily life, passersby, members of a household, and visitors engaged in unspoken and spoken communication that passed easily in both directions between home and neighbourhood and invigorated subsequent chitchat and rumours. At an open door or window, as seen in De Hooch's *Man Handing a Letter to a Woman*, residents collected and gauged all kinds of news from the inconsequential to the momentous that impacted individual and communal honour (see fig. 1). Because the honour of the entire neighbourhood depended upon the unsullied honour of its individual members, residents had an incentive to stay aware of news about each other. Neighbours' invited and uninvited intervention in each other's lives fostered personal and professional relationships, satisfied curiosity and meddlesome inclinations, and generated the chatter and consequences inevitably integral to social control in the tightly framed communities.<sup>11</sup>

Individual and communal honour ideally functioned as a means to assure social stability by establishing clear boundaries of roles and status. However, "the people's honour games"—also referred to as the "honour trade" (*Ehrenhändel*) in German scholarship or "the daily negotiation of honour" (*erehandel*) in Dutch studies—could also be subversive by pitting neighbours against each other. Thus, in reference to one's reputation, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu coined the term the "social capital" of honour and posited the following: "the interest at stake in the conduct of honour is one for which economics has no name, and which has to be called symbolic, although it is such as to inspire actions which are very directly material." Michael Grenfell elaborated

10. Alison McNeil Kettering, "Ter Borch's Ladies in Satin," *Art History* 16, no. 1 (March 1993): 95–124.

11. Roodenburg, "Naar," 221, 224, 226, 239–41, 243; Pieter Spierenburg, "Social Control and History: An Introduction," in *Social Control in Europe 1500–1800*, ed. Herman Roodenburg and Pieter Spierenburg (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2004), 16–17; Dorren, "Communities," 177–78, 183; Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, "Neighborhood Social Change in Western European Cities," *International Review of Social History* 38 (1993): 22; Llewellyn Bogaers, "Geleund over de onderdeur: Doorkijkes in het Utrechtse buurtleven van de vroege middeleeuwen tot in de zeventiende eeuw," *Bijdragen en mededelingen betreffende de geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 112 (1997): 340–43.

on Bourdieu's notion of "social capital" as established network relations and social exchange independent of economic profit that are designed to engender honour, good will, and reciprocity.<sup>12</sup>

In a similar vein, the historian Martin Dinges described honour as "symbolic capital." One's reputation, that is, the social or symbolic capital of honour, could be amassed on behalf of oneself, one's family members, and the neighbourhood, to be drawn upon for socioeconomic advantage. A resident's supportive testament on behalf of a neighbour, who had been maliciously accused of wrongdoing, could draw on the latter's reputation or character. "Symbolic capital" of honour afforded a unique form of social control that could trump other bases on which disputes might be settled.<sup>13</sup>

Contemporary Dutch plays address the circumstances that fostered curiosity about neighbourhood news and subsequent natter. In Gerbrand Adriaensz. Bredero's *Klucht van de Molenaar* (1613), for example, a character advises: "Remember that a decent woman must watch out equally / For the rumours as for the deed. You know the quick evil tongues."<sup>14</sup> In G.C. van Santen's *Lichte Wigger. Op t'spreekwoord*: *Siet: de hoeren en de kan Maken menig arrem man* (part 4), 1617, a young woman exclaims: "It costs so much to keep your honour, said the maid, / That I'm glad I'm well rid of mine."<sup>15</sup>

In Bredero's popular farce *Spaanschen Brabander* (The Spanish Brabanter) of 1617, lively and lengthy dialogue among various male figures captures the vitality and centrality of neighbourhood gossip.

**Harmen:** They know something ill of everyone.  
It's: "He was a womanizer; he a rogue; he a rake—  
Tsk, ts, but think, our Lobbich is the bride  
Of Harmen Gladmuy!—and his wife not one month dead!"  
"Oh, don't I know! Wasn't Janny Stronx her bridesmaid!"  
"Lord," says Nellie, "Klassie Boelen is very worldly dressed."  
"Oh, immodest! Oh, uncouth! Oh, everything she owns, she wears!  
A silver keyring, a light blue dress, and what a shawl!"  
So says crazy Niesie, foul-faced and full of spite.  
You'd piss with laughing if you'd seen her.  
"Child," she'll say, "she's such a testy one—watch out for her:  
Such a gossip, such a rumour monger—can't conceal a thing."  
In that she'd quite resemble Niesie. She tells more than she knows.

.....

**Floris Harmensz:** Tell us, Andries, what news this morning?  
What's happened yesterday or last night?  
Has anyone been arrested? Raped?  
Anyone disturbed the peace? Any vandalism? Smashed glass?  
You're the one who always tries to hear things first.  
You were this morning on the bridge before the sun.  
And there you take the news out of its nest before it flies.

.....

**Andreis:** Well, foul-mouth Melis had his cheek cut yesterday,  
And our Jan was beat about his arse,  
And Dirk said to Elsie such ugly things  
That no dog would eat them—  
And then she'd throw them back at him, just as she'd caught 'em.  
That woman's got the devil or his cousin in her tongue.  
Joost Dirksz left today to sail for Flanders,  
And left his brother Klaas to protect his wife.  
He shuts up the house just as he pleases,  
So that no stranger will enter by night.<sup>16</sup>

12. pierenburg, "Social Control and History," 16–17; Carl A. Hoffman, "Social Control and the Neighborhood in European Cities," in *Social Control in Europe*, 319–21; Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. R. Nice (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 181; Michael Grenfell, *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts* (Durham, England: Acumen, 2008), 157.

13. Martin Dinges, *Der Maurermeister und der Finanzrichter: Ehre, Geld und soziale Kontrolle im Paris des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1994), 172; Herman Roodenburg, "Social Control Viewed from Below: New Perspectives," in *Social Control in Europe*, 150.

14. Gerbrand Bredero, *Klucht van de Meulenaar, Tekst en vertaling*, ed. H. Adema (Leeuwarden: Uitgeverij Taal & Tek, 1993), lines 6–16.

15. From the beginning of "De Klaploppers," fourth part of G.C. van Santen, *Lichte Wigger, op t'spreekwoord*: *Siet: de hoeren en de kan Maken menig arrem man* (Leyden: David Jansz. Van Ilpendam, 1617). Reproduced in: P.H. van Moerkerken, *Het Nederlandsch Kluchtspel in de 17de Eeuw*, 2 vols. (Sneek: J. F. van Druten, 1899), vol. 1, 67; vol. 2, 600. Cited in: A. Th. van Deursen, *Plain Lives in a Golden Age: Popular Culture, Religion and Society in Seventeenth-Century Holland*, trans. Maarten Ultee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 88.

16. G.A. Bredero, *The Spanish Brabanter, A Seventeenth-Century Dutch Social Satire in Five Acts*, trans. H. David Brumblé III (Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval & Early Renaissance Studies, 1982), Act 1: lines 391–403; Act 3, Scene 2: lines 1091–97; 1112–21; Translations of Bredero's play by Brumblé.



Due to the crowded conditions in urban neighbourhoods, one did not have to look far or strain hard to eavesdrop on news. Communication flourished because residents lived next to, above, or below each other due to swelling populations. In the background of De Hooch's *Man Handing a Letter to a Woman*, the narrow contiguous structures manifest the close proximity of households (see fig. 1). Amidst the wide range of neighbours' geographical origins, religions, professions, socioeconomic standing, and idiosyncratic peccadillos, gossip and conversation invigorated friendships. However, they also initiated antagonisms through accusations, defenses, alignments, and sympathies.

In all relations, street encounters with others played a significant role, as exhibited in the conversation shared by the two men in the background of De Hooch's painting. Such street exchanges were especially essential for the middle and lower classes, which included waves of immigrants, who depended on communication with others. To maintain one's respectable reputation, every action, especially by those socio-economically less fortunate, demanded transparency. At any given time, neighbours' curiosity and nosiness made virtually everyone—the upper-middle class, middle class, and lower-class residents—vulnerable to scrutiny, intrusions, and judgement.<sup>17</sup>

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century judicial proceedings, records of neighbourhood organizations, witness accounts, and farces attest to residents' concerns. They provide colourful allusions to serious and frivolous aspects of life captured through encounters, eavesdropping, and gossip via various means. Residents intervened in each other's lives to negotiate a conflict or to warn against wastefulness, shabby housekeeping, marital quarrels and abuse, adultery, cruelty, slander, fraud, thefts, territorial disputes due to crowding, drunkenness, throwing of knives or beer mugs, and so on. Punishment ranged from public ridicule or a modest fine, such as a ham, to temporary or permanent banishment from the neighbourhood, or some combination of these sanctions.<sup>18</sup>

Police records describe some individuals as serendipitous witnesses to unsavoury events while they casually perused their neighbourhood street from inside their *voorhuis*. A mid-sixteenth-century police document, for example, details how an Utrecht resident served as a proactive witness to unruly behaviour within his neighbourhood. On December 22, 1555, Johan Hermansz. peered out at the street from his front room while he "leaned over his half-open door." He recognized a known thief walking hastily to a house where the suspicious man handed over stolen property. Partly on the basis of Johan Hermansz.'s sworn testimony, the police arrested the residents of the house for fencing stolen goods.<sup>19</sup>

Such witness testimony by neighbours continued throughout the seventeenth century. Several Amsterdam incidents that involved the painter Gabriel Metsu illustrate that artists of the pictures under discussion, like other residents, were familiar with the significant role neighbours played as witnesses.<sup>20</sup> On July 19, 1657, for example, two neighbour women attested on Metsu's behalf that they knew who had stolen some of the artist's chickens:

Cornelia Innevelt, 38 years old, and Aaltien Hendrix, 23 years old, both living on the Prinsegracht, near the brewery The Red Stag, declare at the request of Gabriel Metsu, also living there, that about six weeks ago Metsu complained to them that some

17. Lis and Soly, "Neighborhood Social Change," 11, 15–16.

18. Roodenburg, "Naar," 224, 241; Lis and Soly, "Neighborhood Social Change," 22–23, 29; Bogaers, "Geleund," 340–43; Dorren, "Communities," 178.

19. Gemeentearchief Utrecht (GAU), SA 1 657, criminele informatie, dossier 2, dd. 30 dec. 1556 [lees: 1555]. Cited in: Bogaers, "Geleund," 343n39.

20. See the discussion below of Metsu's *Young Woman Reading a Letter*, 1662–65 (fig. 8).

of his hens were missing from his coop, and that he did not know how that had happened. The witnesses had seen one of Metsu's hens with a large comb they knew very well in the coop belonging to Abigael Ides, wife of Claes Goossen, a peat carrier, who lives in the house next to the witnesses. They declare that Metsu's hen had been there for well over 3 weeks, but did not dare to tell him. When the neighbourhood talked this situation over, they have seen shortly after how the comb of Metsu's hen was cut off in order to make it unrecognizable, while blood was running down its head.<sup>21</sup>

Also on July 19, 1657, two young neighbours of Metsu, "both living on the Prinsengracht near the brewery The Red Stag declare at the request of Gabriel Metsu, also living there" that they witnessed the terrible abuse of him by a peat carrier's wife, who accused Metsu of being a "whore hopper." On October 16, 1657, Metsu and four other neighbours of Claes Gosensz ... attested upon his request that his wife had continually abused him, as well as some of the witnesses, and that she had sent him to prison. On November 26, 1660, Metsu and other neighbours declared at the request of two sisters (Immetge and Talda Alberts), who had been accused of being whores, that they "used to be their neighbours for one year, and that they have always perceived them as honest and pious women."<sup>22</sup>

Although the playwright Mattheus Tegnagel stated in his *Kluck van Frick in 't veur-huys* (Farce of Frick in the house's front room [*voorhuis*]) of 1642, "it is the greatest thievery to injure a person's good name," such damage was not limited to the individual.<sup>23</sup> One's honour or its loss had a reciprocal impact on the reputation of the entire neighbourhood. A man's disreputable business practices and a woman's untoward sexual experiences warranted neighbours' harshest condemnation.<sup>24</sup> Typically, those guilty of pre-marital sex, illegitimate pregnancy, infidelity, and spousal mistreatment were banished from the neighbourhood.<sup>25</sup>

Residents, for example, argued against those who had mistreated a married woman, their own spouse, or a mistress, which brought the most dishonour upon a neighbourhood. In 1682 in Delft, both a father and his daughter, whom he raped for three years, received lifetime exile from the neighbourhood. Those who testified on the daughter's behalf included neighbours, relatives, and the father's friend. They expressed their greatest distress over the neighbourhood's resulting dishonour.<sup>26</sup> For their redemption, accused or convicted residents depended on the social capital of honour, which they had accrued within the neighbourhood. With sufficient earned social capital, a neighbour benefited from the support of others, who might defend the accused, welcome him after a pardoned exile, or both.<sup>27</sup>

Additional paintings of curious, peering, and chatting figures in open doorways and beside open windows, to which I now turn, reference such neighbourhood social exchange in various ways. However, many of the judicial proceedings and records of neighbourhood organizations differ from the paintings in that the documents cite dishonourable behaviour. With artistic license, however, the scenes most often show neighbourhood social exchange in a positive light. They picture idealized paradigms and models on which neighbourhood conviviality and honour depended. In doing so, the paintings affirmed and perpetuated such mores, prompted discussion and perhaps evolving opinion about those values, or both.

21. Gemeente Archief Amsterdam (GAA), NA 2801, fol. 307-308, NA 2822, fol. 215v. (Source: Ruud Koopman). Cited and translated in: Adriaan E. Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu, Life and Work: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 334.

22. GAA, NA 2801, fol. 309-310, NA 2822, 215v. Bredius 1907, p. 202; GAA, NA 1447, fol. 1403. Bredius 1907, p. 202; GAA, NA 2977, fol. 639-640. (Source: Ruud Koopman). Cited and translated in: Waiboer, *Gabriel Metsu*, 334-336.

23. Mattheus Tegnagel, *Kluck van Frick in 't veur-huys*, 1642, in Jacob Jan Oversteegen, ed., *Mattheus Tegnagel: Alle werken* (Amsterdam: Athenaeum-Polak & Van Genep, 1969): 387, lines 314, 337-8, 361-2, 375-8, 382, 387.

24. Roodenburg, "Naar," 243.

25. Manon van der Heijden, "Secular and Social Marriage Control: Rotterdam, 1550-1700," in *Private Domain, Public Inquiry: Families and Life-styles in the Netherlands and Europe, 1550 to the Present*, ed. Anton Schuurman and Pieter Spierenburg (Hilversum: Verloren Publishers, 1996), 46, 48-51; Manon van der Heijden, "Women as Victims of Sexual and Domestic Violence in Seventeenth-Century Holland: Criminal Cases of Rape, Incest, and Maltreatment in Rotterdam and Delft," *Journal of Social History* 33, no. 3 (Spring 2000): 634, 636.

26. Gemeentearchief, Delft, *Criminele Boeken* 47, fol. 360-3 (1682), Conf.B.60 (1682). See also: Gemeentearchief, Rotterdam, *Criminele Boeken* 47 (1614). Cited in Van der Heijden, "Women as Victims," 630-32, 641n53.

27. Hoffman, "Social Control and the Neighborhood," 319, 321-22, 327n48.

De Hooch's *Man Handing a Letter to a Woman* and other paintings with a view to the adjacent street most often describe a home's *voorhuis*, that is, the public front entrance or reception room (see fig. 1). There, homeowners hosted visitors, including neighbours and extended family members.<sup>28</sup> De Hooch's *A Boy Bringing Bread* (ca. 1663) is also set in the *voorhuis* and includes both an open door and window with views of the neighbourhood. | **fig. 3** | The foreground door opens onto a courtyard and the archway in the middle ground reveals a canal flanked on both sides by a narrow street. In the background, a woman leans on the ledge of her half-open door, peers in the direction of the foreground interior, and casually observes the neighbourhood scene.

De Hooch underscores the contribution of the woman's watchful eye to neighbourhood social exchange despite her small compositional footprint. He highlights her presence at the centre of three nesting and successively distant and smaller entryways: the foreground doorway, the courtyard's archway, and the doorframe, which surrounds the far woman. Two-dimensionally, the three portals together visually reverberate, which magnifies the significance of the distant woman's presence in the neighbourhood's social network.

The telescoped view formed by the three portals draws the beholder from the foreground domestic interior back into space where the small figure peers out from behind her door. From afar, she implicitly returns the gaze of the viewer while she also catches sight of the woman and boy in the foreground doorway.<sup>29</sup> The distant figure makes clear that the expediency of gossip did not depend upon residents' immediate proximity to each other.

Around mid-seventeenth century, the typical *voorhuis* extended across the front of a house's main floor and faced the street. A short flight of steps that led from the walkway to the *voorhuis* front door provided the primary access to and from a residence.<sup>30</sup> In his 1640 account of travels to the northern Netherlands, the Englishman Peter Mundy referred to the *voorhuis* as “the outer or street roome,” which underscores the perceived significance of its adjacency to the neighbourhood. Mundy's comment appears amidst his description of expensive possessions, including paintings, in some households.<sup>31</sup> Typically, middle- and upper-middle class residents displayed their most valuable pictures in the *voorhuis* where they admired and discussed them with family members, neighbours, and other visitors.

Seventeenth-century households at all but the lowest socioeconomic levels owned artwork. Paintings hung in approximately half of Amsterdam's homes and two-thirds of those in Delft. The total number of pictures in households grew considerably over the century. Similar circumstances characterized Utrecht residences. Successful middle-class tradesmen, shop owners, and innkeepers owned pictures in varying sizes and values. In the wealthiest homes of merchants and regents, the number of paintings could exceed one hundred.<sup>32</sup>

From within a *voorhuis*, neighbourhood scrutiny by women, in particular, received considerable attention in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Netherlandish song lyrics, didactic texts, emblem books, and architectural treatises and designs. The writings make clear that the paintings with women beside open doors and windows reference long-lived social practice. Some voices belittled and others condemned such behaviour. Still others offered new

28. Westermann, “Costly and Curious,” 27, 29, 221n19; De Mare, “The Domestic Boundary,” 116; John Loughman and John Michael Montias, *Public and Private Spaces: Works of Art in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Houses*, ed. Herman Roodenburg et al. (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 2000), 3: 179n2.

29. Elizabeth Honig, “The Space of Gender in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting,” in *Looking at Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art: Realism Reconsidered*, ed. Wayne E. Franits (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 195.

30. De Mare, “The Domestic Boundary,” 116, 122, 124, 131n12.

31. Peter Mundy, *Travels in Europe, 1639–1647*, ed. Richard Carnac Temple, *The Travels of Peter Mundy in Europe and Asia, 1608–67* (London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1925), 4:70–71.

32. J. Michael Montias, *Artists and Artisans in Delft: A Socio-economic Study of the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 220, 226; Marten Jan Bok, “Vraag en aanbod op de Nederlandse kunstmarkt, 1580–1700—Supply and Demand in the Dutch Art Market,” *Proefschrift, Universiteit Utrecht*, 1994, 127–28; Eric Jan Sluijter, “‘All striving to adorn their houses with costly peeces’: Two Case Studies of Paintings in Wealthy Interiors,” in *Art & Home*, 104.



Figure 3. Pieter de Hooch, *A Boy Bringing Bread*, ca. 1663. Oil on canvas, 73.5 × 59 cm. London, The Wallace Collection. Photo: Wallace Collection, London, uk/ Bridgeman Images.





Figure 4. Pieter de Hooch,  
 The Mother, ca. 1661–63. Oil  
 on canvas, 92 x 100 cm. Berlin,  
 Staatliche Museen Berlin,  
 Gemäldegalerie. Photo: bpk  
 Bildagentur/Staatliche Museen  
 Berlin, Gemäldegalerie/Jörg  
 P. Anders/Art Resource, NY.



means to facilitate the well-embedded custom. In combination, documentation attests to the societal ambivalence manifested by those who wished to halt such activities, helped to enable them, or curiously espoused both positions.

A Dutch farce, for example, showcases the colourful role played by women's gossip that could hinder or defend one's individual honour and, by association, that of one's neighbourhood. The play *Warenar* (Miser), 1616, by P.C. Hooft portrays gossip among women as their most favoured activity. The character Rijckert describes a social gathering of women in which they assume caricatured versions of male governmental roles. He observes: "they have four Mayors and the whole Council,/ Arranged so formally that you would not believe it./ Lijs Labbecax is the vice-schout [court official] and her niece the supreme schout/ Wyb'rich acts as the Pensioner; what do you think?/ Reim'rich Kaeckels is Procurer and Niesje Neuswijs a herald."<sup>33</sup>

Criticism of women who specifically gazed from their *voorhuis* at the neighbourhood appeared in various literary forms, such as the writings of the moralist Jacob Cats. In his publication *Houwelick* (Marriage), 1625, and in emblem books, he addressed women's prescribed roles. Cats presumed rigid contrasts between the domestic sphere and the street, female and male domains, and the familiar and the strange that do not intersect or overlap. He concluded "the husband must be on the street to practice his trade/ The wife must stay at home to be in the kitchen."<sup>34</sup> Cats further admonished women who dallied beside an open door or window. He wrote, "Yes, door and window, above all,/ They do quite a bit of harm as well,/ ....Thou, if you want to be of good praise,/ Stay at home, that is the (virgin) maiden's court."<sup>35</sup>

However, such patriarchal strictures on marriage and family life, which Cats and religious and political elites championed, did not necessarily have the intended effect on their own households or those of any other population. Patriarchal authority that dictated women's household roles, as well as wives' subservience to their husbands, did not dominate all early modern Protestant (and Catholic) marriages. Conclusions to the contrary result from a focus on cultural history with an outsized emphasis on the concerns of elite men, rather than on social history with a focus on female perspectives.<sup>36</sup> Women actually participated in public life, including that of the neighbourhood.

Despite rebuke by some, the popular habit of perusal of street activity from the *voorhuis* did not abate. In 1720, a resident of Medemblik in Northern Holland observed that the neighbours "these days are always at their doors and windows" and it is difficult not to encounter each other. Sometime after 1769, Leiden professor Jan le Francq van Berkheij similarly remarked: "An empty carriage with six horses is capable of making all of the looms and spinning wheels come to a standstill and a bearded High German Jew wearing a tabard entices all of the neighbourhood women to look outside [at him]."<sup>37</sup>

In contrast to moralists, Simon Stevin's architectural designs for middle-class houses took an ambivalent stance with regard to women peering at street activities from their *voorhuis*. Stevin, a Fleming who lived and worked in Holland, wrote his architectural treatise between 1594 and 1605. In 1649, his son published the designs and commentary. On the one hand, Stevin's text acknowledges "men who do not want their wife or daughters to sit in the windows to be seen and called at by people passing in the street."<sup>38</sup> In response to

33. Patrycja Poniatowska, "As you are well pronounced by all external warrants": Women's Bodies and Women's Places in 17th-century Dutch and English Drama, ed. Stefan Kiedroń (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2006), 16:115, 153; Piet Corneliszoon Hooft, *Warenar, Tekst en vertaling*, ed. H. Adema (Leeuwarden: Uitgeverij Taal en Teken, 1992), 3: v, 723–27; Hooft translation by Poniatowska.

34. De Mare, "The Domestic Boundary," 109–13, 127; Jacob Cats, "Vrouwe" (Wife), in *Alle de Wercken van den Heere* (Jacob Cats (Amsterdam: J. Ratelband ..., 1712), 1:87b; Schama, *Embarrassment*, 400, 646n47.

35. Cats, *Alle de Wercken*, 1:251; Translation of Cats by Dr. Allard Jongman; Heidi de Mare, "Het huis en de regels van het denken: Een cultuurhistorisch onderzoek naar het werk van Simon Stevin, Jacob Cats en Pieter de Hoogh" (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2003), 347, 838n23; De Mare, "The Domestic Boundary," 110, 129n3.

36. Allyson M. Poska, "Upending Patriarchy: Rethinking Marriage and Family in Early Modern Europe," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Allyson M. Poska et al. (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 203.

37. National Archives, The Hague, Court of Holland, 3.03.01.04, 1A 17/1 (G). Cited in: Donald Haks, *Huwelijk en gezin in Holland in de 17de en 18de eeuw: processtukken en moralisten over aspecten van het laat 17de- en 18de-eeuwse gezinsleven* 2ed. (Utrecht: HES, 1985), 66, and Roodenburg, "Naar een etnografie," 226; Jan le Francq van Berkheij, *Natuurlyke historie van Holland*, 12 parts in 9 vols. (Amsterdam: Yntema, 1769–1811), vol. 3, part 2, 1047.

38. Stevin, *Materiae Politicae*, Section 7.1:56, in "De Huysbou," 310–11.

that sentiment, he designed some architectural elements that precluded such scrutiny. On the other hand, he also conceived of architectural elements that would facilitate a resident's gaze from the *voorhuis*.

Stevin advised, for example, that windows be situated high enough on a house façade so that one could observe street activities without being seen by passersby.<sup>39</sup> He recommended that

the bottom of the vaulting [of a house cellar] be about two and a half or two feet above street level, partly to allow light to enter the cellars, partly because the rooms built above them will be so high that it would be impossible for someone on the street to see what was going on inside; nevertheless, the person in the room could see what was happening in the street.<sup>40</sup>

Stevin also advised that shutters and iron bars should not impede a view of the neighbourhood. Shutters should not open to the side nor should iron bars cover lower windows, which would inhibit a resident from sticking one's head out to look to the left, right, straight ahead, or down at passersby and activities on the street.<sup>41</sup>

Additionally, Stevin described specifications for a *keyckveinster* (viewing window) that facilitated a resident's ability to see outside without being seen. The window protected residents' privacy and honour, and thereby played a significant role in neighbourhood social exchange. He wrote,

Viewing windows, if designed properly, are highly convenient. Firstly, to look through in different directions without being seen, to the right and left as well as down and straight ahead. It is useful when a person knocks, for example, to see who it is before letting them in, and if necessary to reflect on how to respond to the person who is knocking. In addition, a person can look out in rainy weather without getting wet, or in windy and freezing weather without the room getting cold, which is true of other windows that have to be opened.<sup>42</sup>

Stevin's designs and engaging advice about shutters, iron bars, and the *keyckveinster* convey his firsthand experience with the challenges and opportunities of social exchange at a *voorhuis* threshold.

#### The Voorhuis Entrance: the "Street Door"

The *voorhuis* front door had a significant function in domestic-interior paintings and in the interdependent well-being of an actual household and its neighbourhood. Between a domestic front room and the street, visual and verbal communication could easily take place through a doorway, which typically opened into the *voorhuis* without an intervening hallway. Daniël van Breen, an early seventeenth-century Amsterdam architect, described the *voorhuis* front door as the "street door."<sup>43</sup> His designation, like Peter Mundy's description of the *voorhuis* as "the outer or street room," emphasizes the door's ready access to the street.

The *voorhuis* front door took the form of either a single plank or what is now called a Dutch door, which was divided into independently moving upper and lower sections, as seen in Pieter De Hooch's *A Boy Bringing Bread* and *The Mother*, ca. 1661–63 (see fig. 3). | fig. 4 | In the latter, the child's gaze out the door calls the beholder's attention to the sunny neighbourhood. Filtered light reveals a kindly mother whose domestic duties coexist with the child's interest in the street.

39. De Mare, "The Domestic Boundary," 120.

40. Stevin, *Materiae Politicae*, Section 2.5: 96, in "De Huysbou," 254–55. Translation assistance from Allard Jongman.

41. De Mare, "Domestic Boundary," 120; Stevin, *Materiae Politicae*, Section 3.2: 121, 123, in "De Huysbou," 260–65.

42. Stevin, *Materiae Politicae*, Section 3.4: 124–25, in "De Huysbou," 266–67. Translation assistance from Allard Jongman.

43. Gemeente Archief, Amsterdam, Top. Atlas. Cited in: C. Willemijn Fock, ed., *Het Nederlandse Interieur in Beeld 1600–1900* (Zwolle: Waanders Uitgeverij, 2001), 24–25.



Figure 5. Pieter de Hooch, *The Messenger*, ca. 1668–70. Oil on canvas on panel, 57 × 53 cm. Hamburg, Hamburger Kunsthalle. Photo: Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany/ Bridgeman Images.





Figure 6. Jacob Ochtervelt, *The Cherry Seller*, ca. 1668–69. Oil on canvas, 78 × 62.9 cm. Antwerp, Museum Mayer van den Bergh, MMB.1545. Photo: Michel Wuyts.

Developed in the early seventeenth century, the two parts of a Dutch door could be fastened together to function as one unit. Alternatively, the upper section could swing open above a closed bottom half or both sections could swing open. An open upper half of a Dutch door afforded additional illumination of a room, as well as access to neighbourhood conversation on both sides of the threshold. At the same time, a closed lower half of the door blocked unexpected visitors.<sup>44</sup> Typically during the summer, the top half of a Dutch door remained open. However, even in winter, neighbours watched passers-by on occasion as they sat in their *voorhuis* with the door's top half open, which speaks to the extent of such curiosity.<sup>45</sup>

In some domestic-interior paintings, a passerby enters the *voorhuis* front doorway and signals the easy flow between neighbourhood and household. In De Hooch's *The Messenger* (ca. 1668–70), for example, a woman in an elegant dress awaits the final step in the delivery of a letter by the stylish male figure in mid-stride. | **fig. 5** | The shadowed interior side of the entryway frames and, thereby, highlights the sunny cobbled road, canal, and housefronts seen just outside. The highly saturated colour and sheen of the figures' garments contribute to the vibrancy of the encounter. Expectancy, immediacy, and purpose characterize the scene.

In Jacob Ochtervelt's *The Cherry Seller* (ca. 1668–69) a female vendor appears just outside the *voorhuis* open doorway, which reveals the street. | **fig. 6** | The household's mother, child, and maid receive the woman at the Dutch door. The illuminated area on the *voorhuis* floor adjoins the sunny stoop and highlights the smooth transition between the domestic interior and the street. On either side of the doorway, the maid and the lady of the house bracket the vendor. The interaction of the three women attests to the social exchange between household and neighbourhood.

Just beyond the vendor, a well-dressed couple on the street observes the threshold activity and peers through the *voorhuis* doorway. The socioeconomic diversity of the figures in Ochtervelt's painting, including the vendor and the elegant passersby, exemplifies the full gamut of membership in an actual neighbourhood. Residents typically welcomed the attention of neighbours, as pictured in *The Cherry Seller*. Seen from the street, the *voorhuis* functioned as a private display for public scrutiny. Through an open door or window, passers-by could admire the array of furnishings inside that created an aura of *gezelligheid* or comfort.<sup>46</sup> A showcase of a householder's *voorhuis* could engender admiration from, and approval by strolling neighbours.<sup>47</sup>

Travellers' chronicles noted such displays. In his 1640 journal, Peter Mundy described the typical contents of the *voorhuis* as "with costly peeces.... Full off pleasure and home contentment, as Ritche Cupboards, Cabinetts, etts., Imagery, porcelaine, Costly Fine cages with birds, etts.; all these commonly in any house of indifferent quality; wonderfull Nett and cleane." In 1653, the English traveller Robert Bargrave observed that Dutch houses were "so superstitiously neat, as is fitter for sight then use."<sup>48</sup>

In the paintings under discussion, individuals near or within open *voorhuis* doorways put an amiable face—literally and figuratively—on the interrelationship between home and neighbourhood. The figures who peer outdoors through a household entrance, or stride or gaze inside from the street pictorially reinforce the social exchange inherent in neighbourhood social control.

44. Tom Philbin, "Dutch Door: Split Decision," *Today's Homeowner* 93, 818 (1997): 95; "Dutch door" [American] (34.79a,b), in *Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–). <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/3579>; Daniëlle H. A. C. Lokin, "Life and Work in Seventeenth-Century Delft," in *The Public and the Private in the Age of Vermeer*, exh. cat., ed. Arthur Wheelock, Jr. et al. (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2000), 36–37.

45. Thera Wijsenbeek-Olthuis, "Vreemd en Eigen: Ontwikkelingen in de Woon- en Leefcultuur Binnen de Hollandse Steden van de Zestiende tot de Negentiende Eeuw," in *Cultuur en Maatschappij in Nederland 1500–1850: een Historisch-Antropologisch Perspectief*, ed. Peter Burke et al. (Meppel and Heerlen: Boom and Open Universiteit, 1992), 85; Bogaers, "Geleund," 343.

46. Schama, "Wives and Wantons," 8.

47. Still today in the Netherlands, scrutiny by passersby through uncovered, street-facing domestic windows is commonplace. See: Katja Brokke, "'We Have Nothing to Hide'—Why Dutch People Don't Mind You Peering into Their Homes," *CNN Travel*, April, 14, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/dutch-windows/index.html>

48. Mundy, *Travels in Europe*, vol. 4, 70–71; Robert Bargrave, "A Relation of Sundry Voyages and Journeys Made by Me, Robert Bargrave" (Oxford: Bodleian Library, Oxford University, 1653), 93r.; Cornelis D. van Strien, *British Travellers in Holland During the Stuart Period* (London and New York: E. J. Brill, 1993), 116, 156n8; De Mare, "The Domestic Boundary," 124–25.



### The Voorhuis Window

In Jacobus Vrel's characteristically humble scene, *Woman at the Window* (1654), the middle-class figure—framed by the multi-paned windows and illuminated by sunshine—maintains the composition's focus. | fig. 7 | Seen from the back as she peers out the window, the full curves of her garb define her ample presence. She leans out the open window and surveys the street. Extended just beyond the window frame, the back of the woman's head and her forearms



**Figure 7.** Jacobus Vrel, *Woman at a Window*, 1654. Oil on panel, 66 × 47.5 cm. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie. Photo: Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie, Vienna, Austria/ Bridgeman Images.

at rest on the sill signal the ready flow between domestic life and the neighbourhood. Angles created by the contours of certain elements lead the viewer's eye to the peering woman and emphasize the centrality of her endeavour.

Vrel highlights the unusually tall windows—echoed by the painting's own vertical dimensions—that mark the transition and visual access between interior and neighbourhood. The windows sparkle with light that creates a comparably sized reflection on the left wall. The space vacated by the single open panel frames and highlights a partial view of another window edged by a shutter in the building across the way. The uneven shading on that window's surface suggests that a neighbouring curious resident may also peer outside, but from behind closed panes.

On the left, a man's hat hangs above a rack curved in the suggestive shape of shoulders from which hangs a cloak. Below those garments appear the only signature and date in Vrel's oeuvre. His inscribed name juxtaposed with the male garb whimsically suggests his own figurative presence and engagement with neighbourhood social exchange signaled by the preoccupied woman.

Like front doors, *voorhuis* windows afforded street views that generated chatter and perpetually connected a household with its neighbourhood. A 1684 Amsterdam inventory of possessions of the wealthy Jacob Trip reveals a lack of curtains on his home's first-floor windows that invited easy visual access out of the house. Similarly, in 1709 some of the street-facing windows in the Amsterdam residence of the esteemed Jan Six family lacked curtains.<sup>49</sup>

On the main floor of a home, "cross-windows" typically faced the street, as seen in paintings by De Hooch's *Man Handing a Letter to a Woman* and *A Boy Bringing Bread*, and Vrel's *Woman at the Window* (see figs. 1, 3, 7). They derived their name from their design, which divided the window with a cross bar into an upper section with two fixed glass panels and a lower section with two hinged panes, which opened inward. Light provided illumination of a room through the closed upper windows and fresh air could enter through lower panes when open.<sup>50</sup>

Some residents suspended full-length curtains over the windows. Alternatively, on the bottom half of main floor, street facing cross-windows, some

49. C. Willemijn Fock, "Semblance or Reality? The Domestic Interior in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting," in *Art and Home*, 98.

50. Irene Cieraad, "Dutch Windows: Female Virtue and Female Vice," in *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space*, ed. Irene Cieraad (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 1999), 33; De Mare, "Het huis en de regels," 145, 772n37.



**Figure 8.** Gabriel Metsu, *Young Woman Reading a Letter*, 1662–65. Oil on canvas, 52.5 × 40.2 cm. Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland. Photo: © Whiteimages/Bridgeman Images.



**Figure 9.** Nicolaes Maes, *The Virtuous Woman*, ca. 1655. Oil on panel, 74.7 × 60.5 cm. London, Wallace Collection. Photo: Wallace Collection, London, UK/Bridgeman Images.

households hung either double curtains on the interior or shutters on the exterior, which left the windows' top half uncovered, as seen in De Hooch's *A Boy Bringing Bread* (see fig. 3). The bottom curtains or shutters could be opened, partially opened, or closed. Curtains and shutters provided protection from the peering glances of passersby, when undesirable.<sup>51</sup> The vast majority of paintings, however, showcase uncovered street-side windows.

Various *voorhuis* furnishings and architectural designs facilitated neighbourhood scrutiny by a resident through a window. They include a raised platform, identified as either a *zoldertje* (little loft) or *vlondertje* (little platform), that supported a chair placed beside a window. Used exclusively in the *voorhuis*, the platforms provided the adequate height to see street activities and they insulated the sitter from the cold floor.<sup>52</sup>

Sometimes placed beside a door or fireplace in actual daily practice, a *zoldertje* in paintings almost always appears adjacent to a window, as seen in Gabriel Metsu's *Young Woman Reading a Letter* (1662–65) and paintings by De Hooch (see figs. 1, 3).<sup>53</sup> | **fig. 8** | Seated on such a structure, a woman receives or reads a letter, sews or performs similar handwork, or finds herself absorbed in other domestic activities. The figure's specific location speaks to her curiosity about neighbourhood activity.

In Metsu's *Woman Reading a Letter*, the elegance of her dress and the fine accoutrements of the room make clear that upper-middle as well as middle-class residents spotted neighbourhood goings-on through a *voorhuis* window. Several elements contribute to a theme of curiosity and scrutiny, including the platform and chair beside the window. The mirror that hangs at an angle on the wall perpendicular to the street also affords neighbourhood news. Without detection by passersby, a householder could see activity just outside her window in the mirror's reflection.<sup>54</sup> The theme of curiosity and scrutiny continues in the seated woman's perusal of her letter, the maid's inspection of the seascape, and the small dog's fixed study of the latter woman.

In other pictures, figures peer from the street through an open *voorhuis* window into domestic interiors. In Nicolaes Maes' *The Virtuous Woman* (ca. 1655) a child standing outdoors gazes through and raps on the window to gain the attention of the woman inside, who appears amused. | **fig. 9** | Through the windows on the left and in the background on the right, the façade of a house and a church spire reference the neighbourhood environs. Seated on a *zoldertje*, the smiling woman looks out at the viewer. With her slightly open hand extended in the child's direction, she appears to call to the beholder's attention the whimsical encounter that interrupts her needlework.

In some paintings, a nosy neighbour peers through a distant open window in the direction of the foreground activity. In Jan Steen's *The Dissolute Household* (ca. 1661–64), as in the background of De Hooch's *Man Handing a Letter to a Woman* and *A Boy Bringing Bread*, a small, half-length figure looks out of a window in an adjacent structure (see figs. 1, 3). | **fig. 10** | He surveys the street below and the revellers through their interior window. The neighbour's gaze, directed from the background to the foreground, bridges and unifies the space.

Such distant onlookers range in size from small, but readily visible, to so tiny that the viewer's initial perusal overlooks them. The diminutive scale of a distant gawking neighbour, however, does not minimize their vital role in the

51. Fock, "Semblance or Reality," 98.

52. C. Willemijn Fock, "Werkelijkheid of Schijn. Het Beeld van het Hollandse Interieur in de Zeventiende-eeuwse Genreschilderkunst," *Oud Holland* 112, no. 4 (1998): 206n89, 207, 237n90; Westermann, "Costly and Curious," 175.

53. Lokin, "Life and Work," 37.

54. Since the nineteenth century, such interior mirrors have had their counterpart in a *spionnetje* (special mirror) affixed on an outside wall and perpendicular to a window. Karen Wuertz, "Ritual Communication in Groningen and The Hague," in *Urban Rituals*, 138; Cieraad, "Dutch Windows," 36–37.





Figure 10. Jan Steen, *The Dissolute Household*, ca. 1661–64. Oil on canvas, 80.5 × 89 cm. London, Wellington Museum, Apsley House. Photo: Apsley House, The Wellington Museum, London, UK © Historic England/Bridgeman Images.

scene. Rather, the figure's small size captures the inconspicuous presence they wish to maintain as an unobserved observer. A viewer's circuitous (in time and space) discovery of the small onlooker mimics the random and meandering detection of actual neighbourhood gossip. The eventual sighting of the individual in the window results from the beholder's own roaming curiosity, which mirrors that of the distant neighbour.

In Steen's *Dissolute Household*, the small background figure escapes the attention of the foreground merrymakers. Antithetical to neighbourhood mores, they comically display wanton behaviour amidst clutter that typifies many of Steen's paintings. A smiling seated man, who may be the artist himself, indiscreetly extends his leg onto the lap of the woman wearing a satin skirt and a fur-trimmed jacket that reveals her ample breasts. On the table, a woman has fallen asleep presumably due to hearty drinking. Beside her, a child takes money from her purse. A monkey playing with clock chains further suggests a world turned upside down.

The comic inversion of traditional social mores in Steen's scene actually reinforces them. The inclusion of the background gawking neighbour who may spot the foreground revellers contributes to that interpretation. He might convey to other residents what he has observed. Such stares and chatter fired the ebb and flow of the neighbourhood's honour.

The domestic architectural designs and furnishings intended to facilitate views from inside a *voorhuis* accommodated the penchant for glimpses and glances, which fueled gossip in neighbourhoods. A Dutch door and a *zolder-tje* beside a window afforded views of the street. An angled mirror allowed surreptitious perusal of neighbourhood activity. An architectural design that heightened the position of housefront windows afforded furtive street views. Other window designs for iron bars and shutters ensured unobstructed eyeing of street activity. A *keyckveinster* allowed for undetected identification of a visitor on the stoop. Such designs and fixtures speak to the welcome and unwelcome social exchange between home and street, which was vital to the social control of neighbourhoods. In all of the paintings examined in this study, the view through an open door or window signifies the fluid discourse between home and neighbourhood, rather than a finite boundary.

The relatively large number of such scenes attests to their market demand. That popularity, in turn, reflected a widespread affirmation of neighbourhood life at the intersection of home and street that the paintings showcase. Most often, the domestic-interior pictures present a pristine view of residents' social exchange with the adjacent street that conformed with the ideals touted by neighbourhood regulations. These paintings therefore offered exempla of neighbourhood discourse at the same time the scenes affirmed and perpetuated the tenets and authority of neighbourhood organizations. Although art historical studies of domestic scenes have typically focused on the foreground figures, views through open doors and windows broaden the perspective literally and figuratively. As such, the pictures raise compelling interpretive questions within the context of the neighbourhood, which embraced both home and street. ¶