

# **STREET-SMARTS IN THE AGE OF REMBRANDT: EXAMINING A COLLECTION OF SEVENTEENTH CENTURY WITTY INSCRIPTIONS**

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The traditional image of the seventeenth century Dutch literary salon is the group of friends gathered around the poet and lord of the castle in Muiden: P. C. Hooft and his Muiderkring (Muiden Circle). If ever there was a similar cultural clique in Amsterdam, poet-publisher Hieronymus Sweerts must have been one of its more active members and well connected with painters and poets. Holland's foremost poet Joost van den Vondel was a close friend. From Sweerts' collected poetry we learn that lesser known writers exchanged poems with each other like Hallmark cards. Among these were also female authors like Goudina van Weert or Katharina Questiers. The latter had an art gallery in Warmoesstraat and Sweerts lived around the corner on Dam Square. Romeyn de Hooghe, famous for his illustrations, was a housemate, and Jacob van Ruysdael, the well-known landscape painter, lived next door. Sweerts' own publications included his own religious and inspirational poetry, appropriate for birthdays and weddings. He also collected a most intriguing assortment of amusing and interesting inscriptions, like graffiti, and other public texts, unique in the history of literature, and worth a closer look.

First, who was Hieronymus Sweerts? Biographical sources indicate that his father, originally from the southern town of Zevenbergen in Brabant, had moved to Amsterdam, where Hieronymus was born on February 2, 1627, and baptized December 2, 1629. Father was a landscape and flower painter, also named Hieronymus, and his mother was Maria Bosschaert, daughter of the famous flower painter Ambrosius Bosschaert. At the age of nine Hieronymus lost his father, and he found himself working for his aunt Elisabeth Sweerts, as a printer's apprentice and corrector of religious works. This aunt was married to Paulus van Ravesteyn, most famous for being the first publisher of the Dutch equivalent of the *King James Bible*, the *Statenbijbel*, in 1637. Hieronymus had

found his line of work. We see him as a printer, and soon as the foreman of that same business, which appears to have thrived. By January 14, 1664, he was a respected citizen, as he is cited as a member of the booksellers' guild in Amsterdam, which came with privileges and duties. Connection with the Ravesteyn business remained close and he carried the same printer's sign: *Elijah fed by ravens*.

That same year was a happy one, because he married Anna Danckerts, daughter of an art dealer. They had a son Cornelis and lived in the house called *The Watchdog* on Dam Square in the center of Amsterdam. Death struck another son Hieronymus at age two, a daughter Anna at age five, and his wife Anna in 1671 at age 30. One certainly feels life's fragilities of those days in the rest of his personal biography: he remarried three years later Engeltje van Veen, lost a one year old son Johannes, and his wife in 1680. A few months later he remarried Maria Constant, who bore him a son, who also died young. Another son Constantinus would live until 1726. He and his brother Cornelis were the only ones to survive their father.

From his own set of poems, one of them called *To my long lasting leg wound*, we know that he suffered a long illness, all the while managing his business, and writing poetry. The story goes that his doctor told him to go walking for exercise, which he did not object to, since, as he remarks in a poem, he liked "to go for small talk often". He apparently combined pleasure with treasure, by writing down all the texts he noticed on signboards, shops, outhouses, gravestones, and wherever he found them. He died on January 27, 1696, at the respectable age of 69. Some speculate syphilis as the cause of death, but this could be idle gossip inspired by his publications. His final resting place can be found in Amsterdam's Westerkerk, and fortunately he could leave his family a substantial inheritance, which included paintings by Rembrandt and Ruysdael. His son Cornelis kept the cultural flame burning for a while, publishing his father's collected poetry, and reprinting his collection of graffiti. Eventually, the business was sold in 1701, and the family name was no longer connected to the book trade.

Publications by Sweerts included books on table manners, architectural descriptions of buildings of Amsterdam, Roman Catholic History, translations of Herodotus, but also more frivolous works like the *Ten Pleasures of Marriage*, or *The*

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*anonymous Lover* by the French humorist Scarron. He teams up with colleagues for several joint publications and he seems to have belonged to a group of literati that challenged the established 'classicist' order, publishing risqué books and novels. The *Ten Pleasures of Marriage* has been one of these curious books that until recently have not attracted literary historians' attention, although they must have had a large reading public. In her seminal work *Het woord is aan de onderkant. Radicale ideeën in Nederlandse pornografische romans 1670-1700* (Bottom has the Floor. Radical ideas in Dutch pornographic novels 1670-1700 [2002]), Inger Leemans describes this short but interesting period in Dutch literary history, when besides translated works, the original Dutch novel played a remarkable part. Credibility, emphasis on city life and a serious representation of lower classes are a few characteristics of this early Dutch novel, which may even have influenced foreign literature. Perhaps we may call it the literary equivalent of the genre painting of the same period. Dutch 17th century culture seems to have been mainly a city culture, with all classes participating, and represented in visual arts and literature. On the other hand, the status and reputation of painter and writer were not the same. Writing for money was still frowned upon.

Sweerts also compiled another down to earth publication, a book of inscriptions, most of them in 'graffiti-format', and published it under the expansive title: *Koddige en ernstige Opschriften, op Luyffens, Wagens, Glazen, Uithangborden, en andere Tafereelen*. (Comical and Serious Inscriptions on Awnings, Carts, Windows, Signboards, and Other Boards). It was first published in 1682 under his pseudonym Jeroen Jeroensze ('Jeroen' being the popular form of 'Hieronymus', 'sze' indicates 'son of'), and there were several reprints well into the 18th century (1718 and 1732). The subtitle reads 'Van langerhand by een gezamelt en uytgeschreven door een liefhebber derzelve' (Gradually collected and written down by a lover of the same). This would indicate a hobbyist and his many years of collecting, although there is no indication of how long it took him to compile all this. He also used material from informants, who had traveled around the Low Countries and abroad, and had reported back to him. His friend Dirck Schelte, a jeweler, the proprietor of a pawn shop and himself a minor poet, is identified as one of them. In the fourth volume our collector indicates that he had little pocket books to jot down the quotations,

sayings, aphorisms etc. that caught his eye.

The number of pages of the four volumes is respectively 160,128,104 and 124 to form a total of 526 printed pages. The first front-page shows the writer, a learned man with glasses, inspired by his readers and encouraged by humor, the jester with a fool's cap and the puppet on a stick, a so-called 'marot' (in Dutch: alle gekheid op een stokje). In the left forefront we see a monkey representing mockery and imitation, while the artist satirizes also man's pretentiousness and folly. In the meantime, a painter with a smile on his face, is applying text to the awning of a building with a signboard reading 't Melkmeisje' (the milkmaid).

The second volume title-page adds 'borden' and 'graven' [signs and tombstones] to the list of text carriers. The signs on the wall read: 'op wagens, op glazen, op luijffens, op graven, op borden, op Pasquin, aan huizen,' a series similar to the first book. This volume has been 'written down and collected with diligence.' The same goes for volume three, which has a similar scene of cheerful figures, a foolscap, a writer and pointing spectators. An inquisitive dog appears in the foreground to add action or to refer to fidelity or envy, a symbolism known in Dutch genre painting, where it often also denotes melancholy. Nevertheless, I do not think that we should inquire too deeply into these unrefined etchings, which bear no name of any artist. Sweerts himself could be the maker, for all we know, as he was related to several artists.

The texts are not really organized in any shape or form. Cursive headings indicate usually where the text was found, the city and/or specific place, the writers are mostly anonymous. For instance: Glas-schrift te Hoorn (writing on a glass window in Hoorn), luiffelschrift (writing on an awning), op een secreet (on an outhouse), op een wagen (on a wagon, often the backside of a cart or carriage) voor een tabaksverkoper (at a tobacconist's). Several professions like bakers, butchers, lace-makers, and numerous others, are mentioned. Inscriptions and texts are also found on tombstones, epitaphs, or taken from death announcements or lottery tickets. The author cites a few times from a book, from memorials, an engraved medallion, a poem on a tankard, or an engraved wineglass. The quotations from signboards usually take two lines, but don't be surprised to find a page-long description of the food consumed at the funeral of Gerrit Den Uyl in

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1680 at Sloten, which included 1100 pounds of meat, 70 kegs of beer, 20 barrels of wine, but no vegetables. Another out of the ordinary quotation comes from the Amsterdam Registrar's book, citing the marriage of Steven Jaspertsz, 92 years of age, to Tietjen Hermansen, 'around 60'. The groom is declared to have fathered 25 children in a previous marriage.

Most of the texts were found in Amsterdam, but Leiden, Leeuwarden, Utrecht, Scheveningen and Haarlem are also mentioned. We even read international quotations in translation from as far away as Louvain, Geneva, the Tyrol, Rome, Hamburg and other places.

Here are a few examples:

***On an awning in Amsterdam on Haarlemmerdijk***

*O Haat en Nyt wat zyt gy groot! De Liefde en Vriendschap is meest doot;  
Dat ieder hater brak sijn bien, wat zoud men meenig hinken zien!*

*O hate and envy how big you are. Love and friendship is mostly dead.  
If every hater broke a leg, one would see many people limping*

One recognizes, or sympathizes with the sentiment of the following glass writing:

*Ik zag Rabauwen, die Rabauwen zochten  
Ik zag Rabauwen, die Rabauwen kochten  
Ik zag Rabauwen, die Rabauwen aten  
En toen ik haar wel bezag, waren 't meest Procureurs en Advocaten.*

*I saw villains looking for villains  
I saw villains buying villains  
I saw villains eating villains  
and when I looked at them carefully,  
they were mostly solicitors and barristers..*

***On a viola da Gamba***

*Levendig heeft my de Bijl het Hoofd doen breken  
stom ben ik geboren, nu kunt gy my zeer lieflik hooren spreken*

*The Ax has split my head quite lively  
I was born mute, now you can hear me speak very sweetly.*

The problems of the translator are obvious in the following example, as many humorous effects are dependent on rhyme:

*Die Saucijzen koopt en weduwen trouwt  
weet niet wat daar is in gedouwt.*

*Whoever buys sausages and takes a widow for a bride  
does not know what has been put inside.*

More than a few reflect the bawdy side of the seventeenth century sense of humor:

*Houtzagers keelen en vrouwebillen  
zijn zonder vocht niet te stillen*

*Ssawyers throats and women's behinds  
cannot be satisfied without fluids*

Imagine the ones that Sweerts deemed too risqué! The following one is graphic in its own kind, and taken from an outhouse at a print-shop:

*Wit papier, dat is te dier, mossel schelpen schrabben schoon:  
maar grau papier dat spant de kroon.*

*White paper is too expensive, mussel shells scrape clean  
but grey paper is the best.*

Criticism was sometimes straightforward and to the point, as is shown in the following note 'glued to a door of a dry-good store in Delft':

*Hier woond een Kruidenier, men dient van hem te praaten,  
zijn Pijp-kaneel is slap, en veel te krachteloos:  
zijn Nooten zijn zeer oud, vermolsemt en vol gaaten,  
't is al verlege goedt, zijn Kruyden zijn te voos.*

*Here lives a Grocer, he's worth talking about,  
His Cinnamon stick is limp, and much too powerless,  
his Nuts are very old, moldered and full of holes  
it's all spoiled goods, his spices are too rotten.*

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For many years, going back as far as the Middle Ages, an important source of revenues for cities came through lotteries. Sweerts' collection shows a picture of how that was done. One sees the announcer, the prices and the drawing of the lots. These events could last for days on end and some of them had as many as hundred thousand tickets. The tickets often had inscriptions with little sayings, not unlike fortune cookies in Chinese restaurants, and the first volume of our collection ends with 138 examples. "Wat is dat, niet of wat (what is that, nothing or something)" is one example, and another: Het lot komt van God ('Lot' meaning here both 'fate' as well as 'lottery ticket'). Consider also: "Ik ben in duisend vresen, Liever benyd als beklagt te wesen (I am in a thousand fears, rather envied than pitied), Mijn man weet er niet van, (my husband doesn't know), 't Fortuin vliegt over 't veld, Krijg ik niet, adieu mijn geld (Fortune flies over the field, if I don't get anything, goodbye my money)." Some lotteries had prizes for the best and shortest rhymed motto. "Wat of niet, geen verdriet" (something or nothing, no sorrow) would be one of my choices.

It is no wonder that some commentators in the 19th century refer to this publication as a dirty piece of work. One scholar, however, had to admit that there was the occasional gem. The large Dutch dictionary *Woordenboek der Nederlandse Taal* does not use it as a source, but one finds references in a dictionary of proverbs and sayings, as well as in the *Erotisch Woordenboek* (Erotic Dictionary) of 1977. Sweerts himself admits in his introduction that there were many 'grove, plompe, vuile en slordige,' (rough, coarse, dirty and slatternly) examples and he says that he has edited out some of them, or put a fig leaf here and there. It is amusing to realize that many finger-raising judges and jurors want to read something scandalous to censure or get upset about, without trying to understand or place it in a historical context. These volumes, reprinted many times, have also several interesting signs of the times. For instance, the political situation is obvious in the many references to the death of the De Witt brothers, murdered and lynched in The Hague in 1672, after false rumors of high treason. The book contains the text of a commemorative medal with their pictures and the mob's fury.

One other source for Sweerts is the so-called 'pasquil', a lampoon posted in a public place. This goes back to a tradition in Rome whereby students would stick satirical verse on a statue of Pasquino, thus saluting Ancient learning once a year. The word pasquil, sometimes called pasquinade, became synonymous with lampoon, a satirical poem or saying, ridiculing somebody or someone. The author (Sweerts?) has copied several of these and he found his way to vent some anti-papist commentary: "three things are well dressed in Rome: papists, mules and whores" or: "Three things one does not like to do in Rome: pray, pay and get out of the way." One cannot say that they form the most exciting part of the book, and the reason for including them may well be purely commercial (one of Sweerts' published works was a book on Roman Catholic History).

From works by painters like Goltzius, Wierix, Buytewech or Saenredam, we know of big fishes or whales, beaching themselves in Holland in the 17th century. In earlier years, the whales had been seen as warnings from God, but at the time of our print at the end of the 17th century, the whaling industry in Nova Zembla was reaching its peak. A stranded whale was not a daily occurrence, but its novelty had worn off. Allegorical or mythological similes, however, were still connected to the big Leviathans and we see Sweerts explaining the event in his caption to a picture in his collection. He uses an explanatory poem by Constantijn Huygens, probably based on a true story about a stranded killer whale or orca in Scheveningen, a beach resort near the Hague.

Vondel was the 'Prince among the Poets' and Sweerts was a good friend; he recalls that he was one of the pallbearers at Vondel's funeral. He quotes him doing business with the Danes, sighing: "O Heer wilt my verlossen! Van deze Deensche Ossen." (Oh Lord save me from these Danish Oxen). He also quotes a Vondel poem as written in a book of poetry for poetess and art lover Catherine Questiers: "Questiers, vol viers, vol gunst, Schept leven uit de kunst." (Questiers, full of fire and friendship, creates life out of art).

Besides Vondel, Oudaan and Huygens, there are no quotations from other well-known writers. It may be surprising to find no reference anywhere to Jacob Cats, the real 17th century Dutch uncle, whose sayings and admonitions are legendary to this day. Perhaps he was not as influential among his contemporaries as is often thought. Or was

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his fame limited to Calvinists? Quotations from other emblem books or their authors - one thinks of Roemer Visscher - are also absent. Sweerts does find a like-minded writer in Jan Zoet (1608/1615-1674). He was one of Amsterdam's well known satirical poets, whose pen was sharp and often in conflict with his colleagues, especially about the theater. 'De zoete rust' (Sweet Rest) was the name of his tavern, where minor poets congregated. We find a few of his quotations, and he is also mentioned as the author of a popular jest-book called *De Geest van Jan Tamboer* (Johnny Drummer's Spirit, 1661).

This gives us the link and opportunity to put the collection in a broader geographical and historical perspective. One does not have to go very far to find other examples in earlier times and other countries. Most of them, however, are collections of jokes or anecdotes, often called jest-books, 'kluchtboeken' in Dutch. We know of medieval collections like *'De Pastoor van Kalenberg'* (The Kalenberg Pastor). In the 17th century there are numerous examples with titles like *Den vaeckverdryver van de swaarmoedige gheesten* (1620) (The Sleep Dispeller for Melancholy Minds], *Sint Niklaesgift* (1644) (Saint Nicholas' Present), *Het leven en Bedrijf van Clément Marot* (1655) (Life and works of Clement Marot, 1655), *De kluchtige banquet-kramer* (1657) (The Jolly Banquet-Seller), *Den wysen geck* (1670) (The Wise Fool), or *Het vol-vrolijk thee-geselschap* (1687) (The Fully Cheerful Tea-Company). These are all jest-books that went through several editions throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. Well known was Aernout van Overbeke, a lawyer from The Hague, who collected a series of jokes, around 1673. He was one of the early persons who tried to arrange or classify them in a pseudo-scholarly order. He came up with the following categories, describing them in French as: *bon mot, plaisanterie, jeux de mots, equivoques, apophtegmes* and *contes*. His system coincides with that of a French teacher in London, named Abel Boyer, who in his *'Wise and Ingenious Companion'* of 1700 mentions the following five categories: 1) apophtegmes, or wise sayings, generous and noble sentiments; 2) bon mots, or results of a true judgment and of a happy and quick imagination; 3) quibbles and equivocations, or what the French call 'turlupinades'; 4) jests and witty repartees; and 5) stories. He adds that a true jest can be distinguished from a false thought, when it can be translated into another language 'without losing anything of its sense and pleasantness.' It seems like

trying to put pants on an octopus and Sweerts' collection would cover more than one category. Also, many of our examples would not qualify because they rely on a simple play on Dutch words. Others are too serious and factual, or appear to be a simple case of advertising merchandise.

The Dutch scholars Koopmans and Verhuyck quote the two collectors Van Overbeke and Boyer in their book on collections of anecdotes, *Een Kijk op Anecdotencollecties in de zeventiende Eeuw* (A Look at Collections of Anecdotes in the Seventeenth Century, 1991). They warn, correctly to my mind, against a too theoretical interpretation of these jest-books and prefer a 'descriptive' processing of these kinds of texts. There is hardly any uniformity in the many collections, and the only thing they seemed to share is the format: a small pocket book with an engraved title-page. Many of them have introductions that refer to the enjoyable pastime of driving away melancholy, and most of them have young people as their target public. The publisher often mentions new and never before told stories, indicating that advertising is almost as old as printed text. The bibliographies of jest-books confirm that there was a successful market for these works. Yet many scholars have often neglected them.

To a literary historian, trivial literature (the Dutch would call it 'lectuur') should not be separated from the officially 'canonized' literature because the entire field of texts is not completely mapped out yet. Doesn't quality always float to the top by itself, one could argue, certainly after three hundred years? Newly discovered texts dispute this, and more than a few writers, male and female, have been forgotten or neglected. There are several reasons. First of all, many authors did not write a lot, and often in small editions that scarcely survived the ages. Secondly, some literary scholars put the canon together years ago and many later scholars did not bother to look any further than their predecessors. Also, the experience of readers change, tastes differ, while a certain kind of poetry or novel might change from one period to the next. For women, discrimination played an evident role and it did not help that many writers saw their own works merely as a pastime, not as the fruits of a serious job. It is unclear how large the input and authorship of women is in Sweerts' collection. He corresponded with female colleagues, but most texts are anonymous.

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The popularity of the anthology of Dutch poetry, put together a few years ago by Gerrit Komrij in his *Poetry of the 17th and 18th century in 1000 and one poems* (1986, and later reprints), is a good example of the occasional revival for a larger audience. Indeed, one of the rediscovered poets turns out to be our own Hieronymus Sweerts. His *Accolade op een psalmsingende Boer* (Accolade on a Psalm-singing Farmer) in which every sentence loses a syllable until it gains one in the middle, resulting in a poem in the shape of an hourglass, found its way also into Battus' collection of literary curiosa *Oppperlans! Taal en letterkunde* (2002).

For the student of signboards one can refer to a famous collection by Jacob Larwood and John Camden Hotten, which came out in 1867 in London, entitled *History of Signboards*. The authors knew and praised the Sweerts collection, saying: "Our Dutch neighbours have paid more attention to this subject, and a great number of their signboard inscriptions were, towards the close of the seventeenth century, gathered in a curious little 12mo volume to which we shall often refer." They had a more than superficial acquaintance with this book because Jacob Larwood happens to be the pseudonym of a Dutchman, J. Schevichaven, an adventurous scholar and painter, who collaborated with his publisher to print this still authoritative work on signboards. Around the same time, in the Netherlands, Van Lennep and Ter Gouw published their books on the same subject called *De Uithangtekens* and *Het boek der Opschriften*. They see the value of Sweerts' book for the history of customs and traditions but add in schoolmasterly fashion: "...although there is a lot in it that annoys our refined taste." Times have changed and one has to acknowledge nowadays that our assortment of texts is a valuable asset to the scholar of the seventeenth century. Unlike genre paintings, we don't have to look for hidden lessons, as the reality lies on the surface. None of the poets here tried to 'ascend above the trivial and accidental', to quote Maria A.Schenkeveld in her *Dutch Literature in the Age of Rembrandt* (1991), where realistic life can only be found in picaresque novels, travel literature, or comedy and farce. Although Brederode always gets special mention in that respect, it remains to be seen whether his dialect-speaking characters represent a true description of daily life. His moral lessons are indeed expressed in varieties of local parlance, but remain mostly on the good and safe side of realistic

*couleur locale*. Hieronymus Sweerts seems to have been less selective and more true to life, although he was not exceptional in gathering this often farcical material. His uniqueness lies in the fact that his collection represents a variety of texts without pretense, without the blue pencil of false modesty (most of the time) or critical modernity. In his work, a Vondel quotation can meet an outhouse-remark, and a business slogan is as valuable as a lottery quip. Also, the quantity of texts is not limited to one kind, say signboards or awnings. Sweerts was a prime reporter of his environment, a keen observer and a great witness of his time. Reading this comes as close to daily life in the Golden Age in the Low Countries as one can get in printed material. It also represents texts as his contemporaries must have seen them on houses, outside and inside their shops and taverns, on carts and wagons, at ceremonial happenings like funerals, or at lottery drives. We seem to eavesdrop on casual conversation, complete with an occasional off-color joke, or listen to malicious gossip. One gets the feeling of the casual wanderer on the streets of Amsterdam in constant amazing amusement, not bothered by Calvinist straight-laced ministers or frugal merchants embarrassed by their riches. Dutch people in the seventeenth century had much more fun than many scholars think. We might perhaps not drastically change Huizinga's chapter on the bourgeois character of the Dutch people, but we can certainly refine it with the help of this collection.

As is always the case with collections of jokes, aphorisms or sayings, it would be too much of a good thing to read this collection from cover to cover. As Sweerts himself says in his introduction: "one should taste honey with a finger not with a large spoon."

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K O D D I G E  
en Ernstige  
OPSCHRIFTEN,  
*Op*  
Luyffens, Wagens, Glazen, Uit-  
hangborden , en andere Taferelen.

*Van langerhand by een gezamelt en uitgeschreven ,  
door een liefhebber der zelve.*



T'AMSTERDAM,  
*Gedruckt by* JEROEN JEROENSE. 1698.



Broos, Fig. 2



Broos, Fig. 3