

# Gaspar van Wittel, *The Piazza Navona:* episodes, scenes and characters on a market day

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Fig. 1  
Gaspar van Wittel  
*Piazza Navona, Rome, 1699*  
Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection  
on deposit at Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza  
[\[+ info\]](#)



Among the Museum's collection of Old Masters' paintings, the oil paintings of urban views constitute a particularly attractive group, depicting celebrated locations in cities such as Florence, Padua and Venice. This genre, known as *vedute*, reached a peak of unparalleled splendour in the 18th century in the work of artists such as Giovanni Paolo Panini (Piacenza, 1691-Rome, 1765), Canaletto (Venice, 1697-1768), Francesco Guardi (Venice, 1712-1793), Giuseppe Zocchi (Fiesole(?) 1716/1717-Florence 1767) and Bernardo Bellotto (Venice, 1721-Warsaw, 1780), all painters represented in the Museum's collection. To find the most immediate forerunners of these views, however, we need to look back not only to the Grand Tour, but also to the previous century and to the early decades of the 18th century, more specifically to the work of the Italian painter Luca Carlevarijs (Udine, 1663-Venice, 1731)<sup>1</sup>, the German Joseph Heintz the Younger,<sup>2</sup> (Augsburg, ca.1600-Venice, 1678), and the Dutch painter Gaspar van Wittel (Amersfoort, 1652/1653-Rome, 1736). Together, they evolved a new approach to the genre of view painting. The most important of the three was Gaspar van Wittel, whose manner of understanding and interpreting the urban landscape laid the way for the view paintings that would triumph in the *Settecento*.<sup>3</sup>

Gaspar van Wittel is represented in the Museum by two views of outstanding quality in the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection: *The Piazza Navona, Rome*, and *The Darsena, Naples*,<sup>4</sup> while further works by the artist are to be found in various Spanish collections.<sup>5</sup> Of the present pair, it is the view of the Piazza Navona (fig. 1) that depicts the bustle of city life in what is still a key hub in the centre of Rome as well as an extremely important area with regard to its architecture. Van Wittel, who made Rome the principal motif in his temperas and oil paintings, has been the subject of interesting scholarly discussion that has focused on the innovations that this Dutch artist introduced into view painting. These innovations include the viewpoints that he selected, particularly when the subject

was a contemporary city, newly embellished through rebuilding, remodelling and new buildings. Other interesting aspects of his work include the close relationship between his graphic output and his painting; the regular and rational construction of the perspective that he used; the type of compositional framing; his realist approach and his particular manner of describing the subject. Despite this, attention still needs to be drawn to an interesting aspect of his work that becomes evident to the viewer who focuses in particular on the streets and squares in Van Wittel's views and which involves characteristics typical of the northern European schools. Among them are a taste for reproducing detail and textures and for depicting the everyday nature of man and his environment. These characteristics, which the artist undoubtedly learned, assimilated and experienced during his formative years, led Van Wittel to reproduce with great care and exactness a wealth of details that fill one of the most famous city squares in the world, imbuing it with life and colour. In addition, they convey to the viewer the nature of the artist's rigorous process of visual reflection and his desire to reproduce, in the manner of a print, the nature of the life in that particular place.

### Traders and customers

The Piazza Navona in the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection is depicted with all the activity of a normal market day in which peasants have taken over the space to set up their stalls and offer passers-by produce from their market gardens on the outskirts of Rome. In addition, and particularly numerous on the right and left sides, the painting also depicts the shop-keepers who have opened up for the same purpose.

Looking at the left side of the painting, at the large diagonal created by the spatial recession and which is articulated through the base of the buildings, it is possible to see two bookshops, among others (fig. 2).<sup>6</sup> All these shops protected their doorways and merchandise from the strong sun and the heat with awnings of similar colours in tones of beige, green and blue, some of them repaired<sup>7</sup>, judiciously mixed with others of blue and white stripes. These cloth coverings, which indicated to passers-by that there was merchandise for sale, could reach as far as the ground, obliging potential purchasers to go round the side of them in order to enter the shop. The awnings were held up at the front with simple poles stuck into the ground, while at the top they were attached to the shop fronts at the two corners or hung on a rail. In one case in the painting, that of a shop near Sant' Agnese, a red carriage without its horses has been left underneath one such awning. A book shop with awnings frayed with age is to be seen just past the imposing entrance



Fig. 2.  
Detail of the left side with one  
of the bookshops



Fig. 3  
Detail of the right side with the clothing  
and accessories shops

to the Pamphilj palace<sup>8</sup>. Van Wittel captures the moment when a woman and a dog are about to cross the threshold, just where the bookseller has laid out his wares, careful not to invade the public space. The books, some of them open, are neatly piled up on a surface covered with vividly coloured red rugs, creating the effect of a shop window display<sup>9</sup>. Hanging at different levels in the same entrance are what seem to be reproductive prints, while the upper part of the bookshop's façade is adorned with three framed paintings that hang at different angles, presumably functioning like a shop sign to attract attention. Their horizontal format is intended to fit into the small space available. The left and central paintings clearly depict marine views while the right one seems to be a bust in a medallion. From the presence of the paintings it would seem that the shop had three entrances, the first lacking an awning but the next two protected by awnings. In contrast to the objects inside this establishment, a homely note is added by the presence of the white washing of the person living on the upper floor, hanging from a washing line and from the balcony rail. As a result, shirts and other garments announce their presence in the piazza.

Located on the opposite diagonal, on the right, the first shop to be seen sells clothing and cloth (fig. 3). A lady holding a fan walks towards it, following by her maid, dressed in black. At the door of the shop, which is again protected by an awning, is a bench on which a man has sat down to wait patiently, perhaps for the woman who is now approaching the shop to make some purchases. The goods are displayed in an orderly way outside the shop, which in this case does not have a sign of any sort. Next door is a small shop with an attractive blue façade and a large window that illuminates the interior. Lined up on the sill are three bonnets or headdresses. Like the previous shop, this one also has a bench for waiting.

Permanent shops continue in the section of the piazza between San Giacomo degli Spagnoli<sup>10</sup> and the first opening from the street onto the square, through which emerges a dazzling light that abruptly breaks the shadow of the buildings that falls on the ground. The five awnings in this section are precisely aligned and chromatically harmonious. The entrances to the shops are clearly marked and the awnings are carefully tied at the sides so as not to deter customers. Here the shop owners have decided to display their wares in front of their premises and for this reason have set up various sloping trestles in order to better display the merchandise, which is neatly set out and easily visible in circular baskets of various diameters, and also suspended from the lintel of the doorway. Van Wittel groups a large number of figures in this area in order to convey the bustle of the intense activity taking place.



Fig. 4  
Detail of the foreground of the street market with traders, customers and two young men walking past



Fig. 5  
Detail of a stall at the start of the line of stands

### A street market on the square

While the two principal diagonals that create the perspective of the painting are the location for the permanent shops at ground floor level, the central space in the piazza is the location for the street market specialising in food. Interesting, the line of stalls is arranged on the right to take advantage of the shade created by the façades of the buildings, although one group of country people has opted to take the initiative and set out their wares in the full sunlight in a strategic spot near the Fontana del Moro (fig. 4).

Facing the viewer is a rough sort of counter with the recipients for holding the produce set at an angle, while two baskets have been left on the ground for the unwary passer-by to trip over. Upright buckets act as stools while three vendors organise the stand. Of them, a woman rolling up her sleeves looks at the others, whose gestures indicate that they are discussing the watermelon stall next to them. This improved stall with its large melons piled up and spread over the ground in the piazza, offers fine produce to passers-by. Here Van Wittel has included an agreeable episode in which a vendor has chosen a watermelon for a customer from those he is holding up but the fussy customer, dressed in a red frock coat and leaning forward, rejects it, pointing resolutely to a different watermelon. Meanwhile, another man is waiting to be served. To create a further link between the two stands, and in addition to the use of gestures, Van Wittel includes a woman who has already purchased a watermelon and who is handing over the required amount to the fruit seller.

Occupying part of the right foreground but slightly lost among the passers-by is a woman sitting on the ground and selling fowl, holding up one of them in order to draw attention to it. Beside her and next to a young girl's foot is her basket of eggs. Slightly further back, where the stalls start, is a sizeable group of baskets of different depths and widths filled with fruit, presided over by a vendor with a pair of scales. He serves a young woman who holds out a cloth to hold the fruit. Behind, the artist has included a young man waiting to be served and two more figures (fig. 5).

The line of more than five temporary stands on the right have their counters facing the façades of the buildings in order to catch the passers-by who have come to visit the permanent shops, while the side facing the piazza is used as storage area for piling up the containers for the produce, for keeping further supplies of merchandise and for leaving the animals that have brought the produce in from the countryside. Here Van Wittel depicts the disorder produced by the upturned baskets dotted here and there, the produce that has spilled out and the mules with their saddle bags, loaded or unloaded and patiently waiting next to the stalls. In this area, where there are few

passers-by, a striking note is created by a man dressed in shades of brown who seems to making a gesture of disapproval regarding the location of a large, empty basket that is located at some distance from the back part of the stall.

### Everyday images of a popular location

Van Wittel's painting is articulated through small scenes in which the artist undoubtedly reproduced his observations of daily life that corresponded to an environment and atmosphere that he himself had experienced and seen. In addition to the passers-by crossing the piazza alone, accompanied or in groups, and like those who enter or leave the shops or buildings (a good example being the man in blue about to enter the Pamphilj palace), the painter captures other moments that convey a profound sense of lifelikeness.

Among these small vignettes is that of the water-seller who has set up his table with glasses and a bottle next to the carriage on the left and who is pouring out water for the soldier holding a glass (fig. 6). Another detail is that of the couple seen from behind with a young man tugging the skirt of the young girl next to him, drawing her attention to something that he has seen. The two men standing in front of the Fontana del Moro seem to be discussing a particular group in the piazza, namely the individuals who have got out of their coach by the doorway to Sant' Agnese and who are about to enter the church, or perhaps the passer-by who has been approached by a beggar asking for alms from this gentleman. As might be expected, these scenes are depicted in a precise manner in the foreground and middle-ground, filling the great open space in the centre of the painting with life and bustle. Near the Four Rivers Fountain we see another group of four soldiers with their backs to the viewer. They seem to be placidly admiring Bernini's great masterpiece.

Turning our attention once more to the foreground in front of the stalls, three men are talking together, followed by a family comprising the parents and two daughters. The younger one turns her head towards the proudly upright figure of the mother in order to point out the sculptural group in the foreground (fig. 7). Van Wittel uses the empty space between the fountains to locate various carriages, as well as figures with dogs and a depiction of four mules with their driver that proceed towards one of the stalls or stands at the end of the market. An interesting detail is the presence of more animals drinking in the Four Rivers Fountain in the shadow created by the sculptural group and imposing obelisk.

The artist used a prominent position on the right to locate two men chatting as they stroll along. It is easy to determine which of the two is speaking due to the rhetorical gesture of one of his hands,



Fig. 6  
Detail of the water-seller on the left of the painting



Fig. 7  
Detail of two groups near the Fontana del Moro



Fig. 8  
Detail of the entrance to the church  
of San Giacomo

while the other listens attentively (figs. 4 and 9). Also prominent is the dandyish figure in the foreground with his rather artificial pose, holding a staff and with one hand on his hip, his head turned to one side. His intention appears to be that of displaying his splendid clothing of an elegant blue tone. Close by him are two Franciscan monks in sandals and habits, one of them holding up his garment in order not to dirty it on the dusty ground.<sup>11</sup> Immediately beside the right façade, between the young people with loaded trays and baskets on their heads, two people have met by chance and greet each other with a bow of the head from a discreet distance, removing their hats. At the doorway of San Giacomo, Van Wittel has included a small scene that can still be seen today and which remains timeless despite the centuries that have passed since the execution of this painting: the presence of the poor and needy who sit at either side of a church door and beg for alms or hold out a tin plate in the hope of receiving a few coins from those attending a service. This scene is repeated by the two figures in white tunics sitting on the ground in the corner, their heads and faces concealed by their ample hoods. Both have small plates in their laps to hold the coins given by those entering the church of San Giacomo (fig. 8).<sup>12</sup>

### Visitors and residents, figures and brushstrokes

Like many other works by Van Wittel, this composition would not be the same without the figures that fill it. Despite the role played by the buildings, monuments and other architectural features of the city, these urban views are brought to life through a universe of figures taken from the real world that give life and movement to the buildings and make them seem more real.<sup>13</sup> For Van Wittel, the figures have as much importance as a wrought-iron grille, a balustrade, the lintel of a doorway or a block of stone. This is evident in the care with which he depicts and individualises the poses, clothing and physical features (when size allows us to see them). The proportions of the bodies are long and slender, making these small figures (which were added once the background had dried) elegant in themselves. The flesh tones are warm, with a predominance of red and orange tones on the faces and hands. In the foreground figures, such as the two young men walking in front of the first stall, the features of the faces are precisely defined, including the eyes, nose and mouth (fig. 9).

This precision of detail also applies to the clothing, and Van Wittel has individualised the lace collars, sleeves, the edging of the shirts and even the belt buckles. As if this were not sufficient, the textiles are extremely light and delicate, particularly the cloaks that move gently in the breeze, creating a pleasing effect of folds at the hems and on the women's skirts. One example is that of the two young girls in front



Fig. 9  
Detail of two figures near one of the market stalls

of the fowl seller, wearing large white bonnets. Despite the small proportions of the figures, Van Wittel experiments with textures that differentiate the various types of clothing, from the rough, heavy garments of the peasants to the light, satin ones of the most elevated social classes. He even takes care to accurately depict the sandals and heavy cloth of the Franciscan monks' habits. In general the palette is based on earth and grey-brown tones with touches of black and some glowing reds and electric blues, such as the blue of the clothing of the elegantly dressed man standing in the right foreground. Van Wittel is well known for the skill with which he depicted the different materials of the buildings in his compositions, including the stone blocks and decorative elements of the façades, the wood in some structures, the decorative metal elements and locks and bolts, and the glass, all present in this depiction of the Piazza Navona.

### A touch of Nature in the city

It is clear that Van Wittel embellished this depiction of the Piazza Navona, as he did other paintings, with small details that reveal his conscientious approach. The precise and meticulous execution of his views and the often rapid brushstrokes that capture and reproduce even the small details make these scenes unique geographies in which, little by little, the viewer enters into a fragment of reality. One interesting small detail, also found in other works, is the artist's interest in depicting the flower pots that adorn the most unlikely spots within his compositions. In the present work Van Wittel has carefully located five, attractively proportioned, wide-lipped earthenware flower pots containing different plants on the exterior of the first floor of the clothes shop on the far right.<sup>14</sup> They rest on a special wooden ledge located under the first floor windows and resting on the sloping roofing above the shop. Three more pots are to be seen at this level in a corner of the balcony. Another striking element is the presence of a woman who looks out from one of these windows towards the position occupied by the viewer (fig. 10). This concern to embellish the architectural elements means that a surprising location such as the dividing walls of Sant' Agnese also feature another small, single flower pot holding a flourishing shrub which, despite its diminutive size, provides a focal point among the areas of roofing, the façade walls and the drum of the church's dome (fig. 11). This is also the case with the three pots perched dangerously on the rail of the balcony above the bookshop (fig. 2)<sup>15</sup>. Van Wittel was undoubtedly guided by aesthetic criteria, albeit with a naturalistic intent, when unifying colours such as those of the curtains and awnings that protect the interior of the dwellings giving onto the piazza, for most of which he used blue, combining this colour with red hangings in some places.



Fig. 10  
Detail of the first floor of the building  
in the immediate foreground on the right

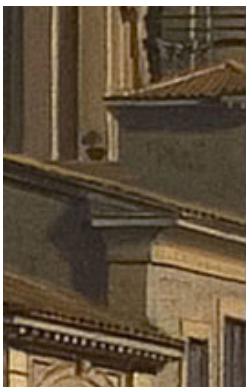


Fig. 11  
Detail of a flower pot  
among the dividing walls  
of Sant' Agnese

While there is no doubt that architecture is the protagonist in Van Wittel's work, both with regard to subject and composition, it is no less true that for the artist the figures and other minor details to be seen in any corner of a great city represented a fascinating universe that he never hesitated to reproduce in his canvases and whose inclusion associates him with the northern approach in which the conquest of reality involved highly developed powers of observation.

## Notes

- 1 Paintings of Venice by Lucas Carlevarijs are to be found in the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, the Palazzo Corsini, Rome, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, among other museums and private collections.
- 2 The Museo Correr in Venice has a series of four, large-format oils (more than 2 metres wide). Heintz described in precise detail the episodes and public celebrations depicted in these works, set against the backdrop of Venice. They include *Procession of the Feast of the Redeemer* (oil on canvas. 115 x 205 cm; inv. 2058); and *The Entry of the Patriarch Federico Corner into San Pietro in Castello*, 1649 (oil on canvas. 117 x 207 cm; inv. 2060). The Museo Correr also has a *Perspectival View of Venice* (oil on canvas. 171 x 269 cm; inv. 2159), which is based on the famous aerial view of the city by Jacopo de'Barbari published in 1500.
- 3 For the artist's life and work, see the monograph by Giuliano Briganti, *Gaspar van Wittel*. Electa, Milan, 1996. See also the catalogue that accompanied the most recent exhibition on the artist, 2002-2003 (see note 5 below).
- 4 Oil on canvas. 96.5 x 216 cm; inv. CTB. 1978.83. Painted in Rome, it is signed and dated with the artist's initials on the bollards of the Fontana del Moro: "Roma/1699 c.VW". Oil on canvas. 74 x 171.8 cm; inv. CTB. 1996.36.
- 5 The Museo Nacional del Prado has a *View of Venice from the Isola di San Giorgio* of 1697 that belonged to Isabella Farnese (oil on canvas. 98 x 174 cm; cat. 475), and two small views of Neapolitan subjects: *Outskirts of Naples* (oil on canvas. 32 x 37 cm; cat. 2462), and *The Grotto at Posillipo (Naples)* (oil on canvas. 32 x 37 cm; cat. 2463). Patrimonio Nacional has a *View of the Piazza San Marco*, the pair to the one in the Prado, also signed and dated 1697 (oil on canvas. 96 x 171.5 cm; inv. Pl-1812202P). One of the most important holdings of the artist's work, however, is that of the Medinaceli Collection (Spain), as Van Wittel was summoned to execute an important group of paintings for the 9th Duke, Luis Francisco de la Cerda Aragón (1660-1771), Marquis of Cogolludo and Viceroy and Captain General of Naples during the Reign of Charles III. See in this respect the posthumous inventory, published in "The Art Collection of the Ninth Duke of Medinaceli" by V. Lleó Cañal, in *The Burlington Magazine*, 1989, CXXXI, 1031, pp.108-116. See also the inventory of Ludovica Trezzani, which lists 35 paintings by Van Wittel, published in the exhibition catalogue *Gaspare Vanvitelli e le origini del vedutismo*, Rome, Chiostro del Bramante, 26 October 2002 to 2 February 2003, and Venice, Museo Correr, 28 February to 1 June 2003, p. 45.
- 6 The large diagonal on the left starts with a bookshop in which the merchandise is displayed on a simple table and three shelves.
- 7 To be seen on one of the awnings on the right, to the left of the red carriage stationed at the shop door, and on one of the awnings that opens the line of stalls of the street market.
- 8 The remodelled façade of this great palace opens the painting on this left diagonal. Particularly striking is the large entrance arch with lateral openings, framed by four attached columns. The large coat-of-arms of the family appears in the centre of the façade above the piano nobile.
- 9 This detail can also be associated with a characteristically northern aesthetic. The Museum's collection includes depictions of tables and other surfaces covered with carpets. Examples include *Vase of Flowers* by Memling, inv. 284b (1938.1.b), *Portrait of Ferry Carondelet with his Secretaries* by Sebastiano del Piombo, inv. 369 (1934.20), and *Portrait of a Man reading a Document* by Gerard ter Borch, inv. 392 (1969.18).
- 10 The church located on the right axis, almost next to the bonnet shop. It was funded by the Spanish in Rome until 1818 and was altered and remodelled several times. The façade



## Notes

- to be seen here was altered in the 19th century and in the painting has a pentimento in the underdrawing, indicating that the building originally projected in more pronounced foreshortening towards the right.
- 11 Pairs of Franciscan monks are common in Van Wittel's paintings. They are to be seen, for example, in *View of the Royal Palace in Naples* (oil on canvas. 75 x 125 cm) in the collection of the Banca Commerciale Italiana.
  - 12 These figures are repeated singly or in pairs in works such as *View of the Piazza del Popolo* of 1718 (oil on canvas. 56 x 109 cm), signed and dated, in the collection of Intesa-Banca Commerciale Italiana, where one is located by the entrance to Santa Maria del Popolo. In *View of the Arch of Titus and of the Orti Farnesiani* (oil on canvas. 23 x 38.8 cm), private collection, in which one is seated on the ground near the arch, while in *View of the Grotto at Pozzuoli or Posillipo* (oil on canvas. 74 x 99 cm) in the Cesare Lampronti collection a beggar stretches out his hand on the narrow pavement at the entrance to the grotto.
  - 13 While not typical of most of the artist's drawings, studies of figures in poses that could be used for final paintings are to be found in the collections of the Royal Palace at Caserta and the Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, Berlin.
  - 14 Other locations used for the placement of flower pots include the floor above the striped awnings at the end of the piazza and two further locations on the roof terrace of that building. We also find flowerpots on some window sills on the right in one of the buildings near the central entrance onto the piazza.
  - 15 This device is repeated in other compositions in which the artist locates flower pots above doorways, on the tops of walls and other locations, for example, *View of Marino from the Villa Colonna di Belpoggio* (oil on canvas. 87.5 x 185.5 cm), *View of Vaprio d'Adda* (oil on canvas. 49.2 x 98.2 cm), both in the Colonna princely collection; *Landscape with a Villa and River* (oil on canvas, 35 x 44 cm), private collection, and *View of Sorrento* (oil on canvas. 71 x 123 cm), Fundación Casa Ducal de Medinaceli.