

## *Frans Hals in the 21st century*

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First Frans Hals lecture. Grote Kerk (Oude St. Bavo), Haarlem, September 1, 2016

It is a great honour to stand here, at this place, and to speak on the day that Frans Hals was buried in this church, exactly 350 years ago. Frans Hals is easily the best known Haarlemmer in history and is among the most famous painters in the world. I have no doubt that Hals thought of himself as a very good painter – as the best in Haarlem – and among the best portraitists in Holland. And we know that many others were aware of that: the city government, for example, showed their pride in his achievements as a Haarlem celebrity when, during the last few of his 84 years of life, they granted him a yearly pension, a cartload of peat, and paid his rent. Such remuneration was very unusual. But Hals would not have understood the kind of fame *we* bestow upon an artist like him, nor the very fact that every day thousands of people admire his works in museums all over the world.

The changing fortunes of Hals's fame, however, will not be my subject. Today the *Frans Hals Kenniscentrum* is being launched; therefore I will say a few things about the scholarly approach to Hals and his work in *our* time, the 21st century, and how we arrived here over the past 50 years, a period that coincides with my career as an art historian. Though I am not a Frans Hals specialist, my interest in art history originated with him. When I was in elementary school in the early 1950s – here, in Haarlem, where I was born and was raised – I often went to the Frans Hals Museum with my mother or with my aunt, who was an art historian, or even on my own. And I could not tear myself away from the civic guard paintings, especially the earliest one, the *Officers of the St. George Civic Guard* from 1616 (fig 1a.): those lively brushstrokes which you could scrutinize endlessly, trying to see how he created this illusion of real flesh, silk, wool, damask, or pewter. But also I was drawn to the distance in time – the experience of seeing these animated men as if I really could engage with them; men who lived centuries ago, in this heroic Golden Age about which I heard and read many exciting stories. (The 1950s were a time that teachers, classroom posters, songs learned at school, and boys' books still imbued an unashamedly nationalistic pride, as if nothing had changed since the 19th century.) And my aunt the art historian told me all I wanted to know about Hals's genius as a painter. Much of what she said, however, we now think about in a very different way.

It is truly amazing what we have learned since that time, but it is equally amazing how our views have changed and how we became interested in different things. And even the artwork itself, as we see it today, can literally be different from that of the 1950s. As a child I was fascinated by the yellowish-brown spot my aunt pointed out on the white table cloth at the left, just above the border of the frame (fig. 1b); it showed how the painting looked before it was cleaned. (I now know that this cleaning occurred in 1919.) I still find it intriguing to contemplate that it was covered with this thick layer of discoloured varnish and dirt (though, admittedly, it must have darkened further since 1919) when Manet, Whistler, Sargent, Liebermann and Van Gogh looked at it with boundless admiration. In 1985 the painting was thoroughly restored again by Anne van Grevenstein. Next to this dark old varnish she also left a strip, much lighter, of course, where the varnish applied in 1919 was left untouched. It shows what a different painting it is now from what I saw in the 1950s. This restoration, and that of many other paintings by Hals carried out in the 1980s in the Frans Hals Museum, have been described in an excellent little book by Norbert Middelkoop and Anne van Grevenstein that was produced by the museum in 1988 (fig. 2). And this brings me to where I want to be, the role of the museum in scholarly research on Frans Hals in the last half century – and a little bit in the near future.

As in many other respects, the 1960s also functioned as a watershed in the study of Dutch artists. This is certainly true for Frans Hals, and the Frans Hals Museum played a

pivotal role. In 1962 a large and successful Frans Hals exhibition was organized to celebrate the centenary of the founding of the Haarlem municipal museum in 1862 (fig. 3). The introduction by the director H.P. Baard was still in the style of the old-school art historian, but the catalogue entries were written by the then very young Seymour Slive. And these texts were of an entirely new exhaustiveness and thoroughness, with detailed scholarly information.

This exhibition heralded Slive's monumental monograph that was published in three volumes between 1970 and 1974 (fig. 4). This proved to be a truly modern monograph and was exemplary for many monographs to follow. But this 1962 exhibition also sparked the research of Claus Grimm, whose 1968 dissertation was published as a book in 1972. Suddenly, as a result of this exhibition, Frans Hals studies set a new standard for scholarly research in the early 1970s. The two books thoroughly complemented each other. Slive made a state-of-the-art catalogue raisonné with all the information one might need on each and every painting, and a text devoted to a survey of Hals's art. Furthermore – and this was new at that time – it also gave special attention to iconographic research and pictorial traditions of themes and motifs, full of exciting and new information. With careful connoisseurial expertise he considerably reduced the number of attributions by his predecessors like Valentiner. Slive took attributions established by the previous generations as his starting point. Grimm, on the other hand, approached the work from the other side, defining the boundaries of Hals's oeuvre by writing a detailed year-to-year chronological development based on a precisely formulated analysis of the paintings' many aspects. Valentiner had accepted 300 paintings, Slive admitted 222 authentic paintings, Grimm, at that stage, only 168. That difference of 54 paintings became a bone of contention. A rather fierce fight about attribution followed, one that was fuelled by the media.

This exploded with the large Frans Hals exhibition in 1989-1990. The catalogue of this exhibition (fig. 6), edited by Seymour Slive, was an exemplary showpiece of the most current art historical research. Apart from the introductory essay and the excellent catalogue entries by Slive himself, it contained a very important article by Pieter Biesboer that was entirely based on new archival research on Hals's clients. He demonstrated that Hals's patrons consisted of the political, economic and cultural elite of Haarlem, a conclusion that opened up many new questions. Furthermore, there were a highly important article on Frans Hals's painting technique by Karin Groen and Ella Hendriks that was based on new technical research; an essay by Francis Jowell on Hals's sudden rise to international fame in the second half of the 19th century; another essay by Koos Levy and Liesbeth Abrahams on the historical context, commissioning and execution of the civic guard paintings; an essay by Martin Bijl on the discoveries made during the restoration of the Hals civic guard painting that was finished by Pieter Codde in the Rijksmuseum; and, last but not least, all the known documents referring to Hals during his lifetime and shortly thereafter, which were assembled by Irene van Thiel. All these topics together indicated precisely the directions Frans Hals research had taken, and they laid the basis for research that continues to be conducted today. Remarkably, all this new material received barely a comment in the press. Journalists and other commentators were mesmerized only by questions of attribution, which had been raised by Grimm's large, new monograph that appeared precisely at the same time (fig. 8).

Grimm had produced a beautiful book, accessible for a much larger public than his previous one, with a new catalogue that contained 145 paintings considered to be authentic – a further reduction of 23 paintings. He substantiated his arguments about Hals's style and development with fabulous photographic material and many details. In the last chapter he argued that many paintings that look like works by Hals but are by different hands had been produced in Hals's workshop. It was a significant step to assign a major place to the production of pupils and collaborators in the workshop, among them Hals's five sons, who we know were also painters. In the press, however, it seemed as if everybody began to bid against

each other in de-attributing paintings and finding his or her own non-Frans Halses in the exhibition.

Since these fights in the early 90s, little has been published on problems of attribution. But the question of what Frans Hals did himself and what he may have delegated to pupils and collaborators in the workshop has not become any less important. On the contrary, our knowledge about workshop practices has increased considerably since then, stimulated not only by matters of attribution but also by research over the last 25 years on practices in the art market and on 17<sup>th</sup>-century connoisseurship. Grimm will soon publish his latest monograph. This catalogue will contain more than 300 paintings divided into four categories according to the extent of collaboration, from paintings entirely by Hals's own hand in the first category, to paintings entirely by workshop collaborators under Hals's supervision in the fourth. As you can imagine, it is of the utmost importance that the *Frans Hals Kenniscentrum* receives the archives of the two greatest Hals experts, Seymour Slive and Claus Grimm.

Since matters of attributions remain of great importance for every museum possessing works by Hals and for the public viewing those works, much of the future research in the Frans Hals Museum will revolve around such questions. As Ann Demeester has just announced, curator Anna Tummers – herself a specialist in discussions about methods of attribution and connoisseurship in both the 17th and 20th centuries – has started a pilot project with NWO funding in which she will analyse the different criteria used by art historians to attribute Hals's paintings. Fundamental to this project is also technical research with the latest equipment, which will be carried out in collaboration with the University of Amsterdam, on, for example, the fabulous *Malle Babbe* in Berlin, a workshop variation of this painting in the Metropolitan Museum (figs. 12, 13) and a forgery by Van Meegeren. All this will lead to an exhibition in the Frans Hals Museum, planned for 2020, with the working title *Frans Hals/Not Frans Hals*. It is meant to engage the public in questions around attribution and related research.

But there is more to Hals research than problems of attribution, and the essays of the 1989/1990 catalogue offered much new material, about technical matters as well as Hals's clients, that demanded new questions and ideas. It took some time, but again it was an exhibition at the Frans Hals Museum, curated by Anna Tummers in 2013 (fig. 9), that stood out. Shortly before, a delightful little book by Walter Liedtke had appeared in 2011, and in 2012 Christopher Atkins published his excellent book (fig. 10, 11); these offered many new and exciting insights. With these publications the field of Hals studies expanded significantly in several directions.

In the first place, Frans Hals was removed from his Haarlem isolation. It was argued that early in his career, he must have been acquainted with the latest stylistic innovations in Antwerp and that he would have been aware of works by Rubens, who had returned from Italy only a few years earlier, and of very recent works by the young Anthony van Dyck and Jacob Jordaens, both of whom, like Hals, were still at the beginning of their careers. Of course, the Flemish connection had been mentioned earlier. In the period in which art historians still thought in terms of national character (*volksaard*), Hals's style, so new in Holland, had been attributed to his inborn Flemish exuberance and versatility of spirit. Now, it was being shown how Hals integrated elements of the latest developments in Antwerp – much of it inspired by painting in Venice and Rome – in his own, entirely new, manner. We know that Hals visited Antwerp in 1616, but he might have been there even a few years earlier, for he must have still had family there.

But perhaps even more important is the notion that Hals must have been very conscious of discussions about the choice between the rough manner and the neat manner of painting, about which his own master Karel van Mander had written: the rough manner epitomized by the late style of Titian and used with great virtuosity by Tintoretto. Van

Mander described it as a working method with broad, rough brushstrokes that looked as if it was easily achieved without any labour. He notes that it was imitated by many who boasted a deft handling. But they failed because Titian's manner was based upon hard work and required great artistry, Van Mander says, adding that the miracle of Titian's late rough style was that it looked wonderfully lifelike from a distance.

Frans Hals himself would not have seen works by these Venetian masters, but he would have heard a lot about it because quite a few Haarlem artists had visited Venice in the late 16th and first years of the 17th centuries, among them Hendrick Goltzius, Jacob Matham, Pieter Cornelisz van Rijck and Floris van Dijck. But Hals seems to have been the only one to really take up the challenge, developing a manner of painting that deviated entirely from the previous Dutch tradition. And though Hals's technique of painting with highly visible brushstrokes is considerably different from that of Titian and Tintoretto, it appears to be *his* solution of displaying a seemingly effortless virtuoso style, with rapid, conspicuous, brushstrokes that create a breathtaking vivacity and lifelikeness. From the start he must have been consciously striving for this effect, aiming at an unprecedented presence for his figures.

This unusually bold handling of the brush and the resulting liveliness and lifelikeness was immediately recognized by contemporaries, as several texts testify. An important point of the new research is that these texts are taken seriously and are being scrutinized for what they can tell us about the contemporary ways of looking at Hals's art. These texts consists of only a few lines in total, but both in the exhibition catalogue (especially in Anna Tummers's essay and Jasper Hillegers's entries) and in Christopher Atkins's book, we notice how these authors make the most of the few words uttered by Samuel Ampzing, Theodoor Schrevelius, Balthasar de Monconys, Cornelis de Bie, and Arnold Houbraken. Schrevelius for example, observed very acutely that Hals '... through his unusual manner of painting that is entirely his own, surpasses almost everybody; because, in his paintings there is so much power and life, ... his portraits speak to us, ... they seem to breathe and be alive.' Hals's fame had also spread to Flanders, where Cornelis de Bie must have been very well informed when he describes Hals as '... miraculously excellent in painting portraits, which stand out very rough and bold, with striking brushstrokes and well posed; they are pleasing and have spirit when looked at from a distance, and nothing seems to be lacking but life.' Thus, Hals's exceptional brushwork was immediately recognized by his contemporaries as uniquely his, and as directly related to the incredible lifelikeness with which the sitters engage the viewer. It is not so long ago that one did not contemplate how 17th-century viewers perceived style, and that such texts were barely consulted because they were considered to be full of clichés. But such lines clearly convey what Hals was known for, and what people in the know immediately would have associated with his name.

That we have become much more sensitive to such matters is also stimulated by our preoccupations in recent research with the painter's position within the economics of the art market that affects his goals and strategies for accomplishing those goals. The artist had to secure a place professionally to make a living by creating, what we would call a 'market identity'. As Christopher Atkins has argued, Hals's very recognizable style – his signature style, Atkins called it – which became ever more pronounced throughout his career, was obviously presented as a mark of his uniqueness. At the same time, however, it could function as a kind of branding, a mark of a distinctive product that came out of his studio and which his collaborators could imitate under his supervision to produce lower-priced works.

Hals and his circle would have underlined the exceptionality of his manner not only by the art itself but probably also in words. Houbraken's anecdote, that Hals would have uttered the following words before finishing the last stage of his painting, 'and now it still has to be infused with the individual touch of the master', might not be factually true, but it emphasizes a strong consciousness of the recognizable individuality of Hals's brushstrokes. Such stories

would have been handed down orally and might have had their origin in Hals's studio. Fascinating in this respect is Houbraken's anecdote about Anthony van Dyck's visit to Frans Hals. In the 19th century, it was assumed to be a true story, but in the second half of the 20th century, it was dismissed as a fabrication by Houbraken to illustrate his classicist ideas. However, it is entirely possible that, as Anna Tummers has argued, Van Dyck visited Haarlem in 1628-29 or 1632 and tried to persuade Hals to work for Charles I in London. (In 1632 Hals's fellow townsman Hendrick Pot went to London to paint the king.) Moreover, the mutual admiration that the story evinces is fully credible. Van Dyck's alleged words that Hals '... would have been the greatest if his application of paint were a bit more delicate and thin, because no one else had such a command of the brush – giving the essential features, highlights and shadows through one brushstroke their proper place' is a remarkably acute description of what Hals must have been striving for, and also what Van Dyck himself would have done differently. It is precisely what we see in this *Portrait of François Langlois* (fig. 15), in which the attitude and laughing demeanour is so unusual for Van Dyck that he must have created it after having been confronted with Hals's painting of the comic figure *Pekelharing* (as Karolien de Clippel has convincingly proposed) (fig. 14). And, who knows, this might have happened when Van Dyck went to the tavern De Coninck van Frankrijk in the Smedestraat, frequented by Hals and many other Haarlem painters. We know, in fact, that the owner of the inn possessed a painting of *Pekelharing*.

We will always be trying to come nearer to the work of Frans Hals and to the man who made it. Every period does this in different ways and seeks to uncover different things. This very unusual manner of painting, in which bold brushstrokes seeming to suggest activity are combined with an intimation of the instantaneous through the suggestion of movement like that of a fleeting smile or a slight squinting of the eyes, resulting in this exceptional emphasis on animation and a very confronting presence – why was this accepted, even much appreciated and sought after by the Haarlem upper middle class, in particular, at a time when most other portrait painters and their patrons still preferred a certain aloofness, stateliness, formality and reserved calm? Christopher Atkins was the first to tackle such questions, and he did so brilliantly, but they still require more research and thinking. Why did this manner of painting remain limited to Hals and Haarlem and not catch on among other Dutch painters? And what might it have meant, in terms of identity (something that so preoccupies our present time) and in terms of the interplay between his stylistic endeavours and his engagement with the wishes of his patrons that he was the son of modest immigrants? His patrons consisted of both wealthy Flemish immigrant merchants and of indigenous brewers and powerful magistrates, the ruling elite. These Flemish immigrants, both first- and second-generation, were not a minority in Haarlem, but they were still seen as foreigners and looked down upon by the indigenous Hollanders until the 1630s. It was, for example, only in 1633 that the first immigrant (one of the second generation) received a position on the board of the St. Luke's guild. In the same period, a singular Dutch, specifically *Hollandse*, identity was being forged, stimulated by humanists claiming ancient roots for the Dutch language, character and history, like Scriverius, Schrevelius and Ampzing, all of whom were painted by Hals. Recently David Levine examined this ingeniously in relation to Hals's style, but Hals's immigrant background and the fact that his manner was at variance with the Dutch tradition should also be taken into account. I would like more research on such matters.

And what about Hals and his brilliant colleague Rembrandt? Different as they are, they shared the fact that they were the only Dutch artists who consciously and very visibly emphasized the materiality of paint: the substance of paint with which illusion is created. Bas Dudok van Heel argued in an article still to be published that Rembrandt would have met Hals (who was more than 20 years his senior) in the early 1630s in Uylenburgh's workshop in Amsterdam. As a painter new to portraiture, Rembrandt must have been fascinated by the

lively presence of Hals's portraits. How we would have liked to have recordings of their discussions!

The Frans Hals Museum is presently working hard to prepare an exhibition about Frans Hals and modernity in the 19th century. How Hals became a 'modernist' is a fascinating story. What struck a chord with late 19<sup>th</sup>-century artists, from Manet to Van Gogh, was again his style: its energy and visible materiality, and the brushwork as a sign of individuality in the service of an engaging depiction of contemporary people. In fact, he continued to be considered a 'modernist' even in the second half of the 20th century, when he could be seen as anticipating action painting, as Atkins has shown

That period seems to have passed – our post-modern age prefers elusiveness and ambiguity, which better suits the art of Vermeer and the late Rembrandt. There is nothing ambiguous about Hals. Indeed, during the last two decades, Hals's star seems to have diminished compared to that of Rembrandt and, in particular, that of Vermeer. But the greatest master of Haarlem will always be considered one of the greatest painters in the world, simply because he was and still is. There is no other painter who is able to give us such a feeling that we can stand in direct contact with individuals, with real men and women from the past – with people who lived four centuries ago in one of the most fascinating periods in European history and who still seem to engage us in a vivid interaction. And we will always feel the need to ask questions about his art in all its aspects. Also in the future the Frans Hals Museum will play a crucial role in trying to find answers to such questions. That will be guaranteed, I'm sure, by the new *Frans Hals Kenniscentrum*.