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Foreword

The more turbulent a painter's life, the greater the chance of a biography – or several biographies – especially if that turbulence is also reflected in a painter's work. This adage seems to apply to, for example, Vincent van Gogh (he was institutionalized several times because of his mental struggles), Frida Kahlo (a severe accident led her to paint) and Caravaggio (who had to flee because he killed an opponent). The question is whether this adage is justified. An outwardly turbulent life – which in earlier days usually became manifest in verdicts or news reports – is more likely to catch the eye than a life that takes place out of sight of law enforcers or media. However, it does not speak directly to a person's inner life. And quite often it is not possible to infer from a painter's oeuvre what his or her actual life looked like.

Perhaps this is why until recently there was no biography dedicated to Frans Hals. He was a portrait painter *pur sang* and his portraits reflect the inner life of his clients rather than his own. Although he certainly had one. He had fifteen children, including a mentally disabled son who spent much of his life in the house of correction-workhouse. One of his daughters also spent some time there because of two pregnancies out of wedlock at a young age. Moreover, Hals faced financial difficulties throughout his life. But this is not evident from his portraits. Furthermore, today portraits – especially those from bygone centuries – are not considered the most interesting genre or work to best show artistic freedom in painting. That this is completely unjustified in the case of Frans Hals is demonstrated in no uncertain terms by Steven Nadler in this biography.

Hals was an innovator and did something substantially different in his portraits than his predecessors and colleagues. With his virtuoso brushstroke – the 'rough' manner as it was referred to in his time – he managed to bring life and motion to his portraits. Hals captured the

people who sat for him in such a way that their pose seems casual but at the same time exudes distinction and commands respect. The people portrayed look like they were captured in a snapshot, as if they could step out of the frame at any moment. Hals knew how to create maximum effects with the minimum number of brushstrokes. He understood that in order to bring spontaneity and dynamism to a portrait, not everything should be painted with precision.

Even in his own time, connoisseurs noticed his artistic merit. For instance, Haarlem city writer Theodorus Schrevelius (whose portrait Hals painted in 1617) wrote that Hals' manner of painting was unusual and that there is such a force and life in Hals' works that he seems to defy nature with his brush. Schrevelius also added that Hals' portraits seem to breathe and live. Fellow artists must also have noticed his work. It is quite possible that Anthony van Dyck travelled to Haarlem around 1630 to visit Hals, which is what the anecdote about their meeting recounted by the 18th century artist biographer Arnold Houbraken seems to refer to. Rembrandt probably met Hals around 1633 when Hals was working on the "Meagre Company" in Amsterdam. Both artists seem to have taken inspiration from Hals' work for their own portraits.

Soon after Frans Hals' death, tastes in art changed. His once innovative style of painting was not compatible with the emerging Academic style that pursued lofty subjects and clean lines and dictated that individual brushstrokes should not be distinguishable. In 1718 Arnold Houbraken, the biographer of painters, still wrote about Hals' recognisable brushstroke, which he called powerful and lively, while at the same time painting an image of Hals as a man of dubious character, which stuck to the painter. According to Houbraken, Hals drank himself into a stupor almost every night and spent a lot of time in taverns. Hals' rough brushstroke was associated with his frivolous lifestyle. The impression of Hals as a reprehensible drunkard lingered throughout the entire 18th and the first half of the 19th century. He fell out of favour with art connoisseurs and collectors. On the art market his paintings fetched only small sums and were attributed to other, insignificant artists more than once.

Halfway through the 19th century Hals' reputation changed for the better, thanks in large part to the French journalist Théophile Thoré (1807-1869), who rescued Hals from oblivion. In 1868 his admiration for Hals culminated in two articles in which he dismissed the insinuations about Hals' drinking and his debauched lifestyle as slander. He

unleashed an unprecedented interest in the portrait painter's work. And who wouldn't be curious and excited after reading what Thoré wrote about Hals' last two regent portraits: 'I know of no other paintings executed with such élan; not in the works of Hals himself, not in those of Rembrandt, or Rubens, or Greco, or any other passionate painter.' After his articles on Hals were published, it did not take modern masters long to travel hundreds of kilometres by steam train or steamboat to Haarlem to see the group portraits at the Stedelijk Museum.

Soon Hals was admired and even idolized by the leading international painters of that period. They studied his work carefully, to learn and be inspired. They were impressed by Hals' loose brushwork, which came across as impressionistic. As they were interested in producing impressions based on experiencing the moment, they saw a kindred spirit in Hals. Many of them were so moved by Hals' work that they wanted to literally absorb his technique and made copies of his paintings.

The German impressionist Max Liebermann (1847-1935) spent most of his summers in the Netherlands and made more than 30 copies of Hals' paintings (and not one other artist). He kept most of his copies until his death, a sign that they were very dear to him. Liebermann wrote that a portrait of Hals is good because it convinces us, because it is alive. John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) enthusiastically wrote to author Henry James that it would be hard to find anyone who knows more about oil painting than Frans Hals. Singer Sargent advised his students to copy heads in Hals' paintings. He must have taken his own advice, because he also made several copies of heads from group portraits. James McNeill Whistler, while critically ill, made one last trip at the very end of his life to see Hals' Regentesses and crawled underneath the barrier and, according to his friend who accompanied him, shouted, "Look at.. just look.. Look at these wonderful colours – the flesh – look at the white – that black. [...] Oh what an incredible man [...] Oh, I just have to touch it – simply because I like it." – and caressed the face of one of the old women with his fingers.

The modern masters returned to their own studios with Hals in their minds and were inspired to try a new way of painting. For some artists, seeing Hals' virtuoso brushstrokes permanently changed their own painting technique. For others, Hals' legacy is visible in their use of chiaroscuro effects, in the application of colour, the poses of the people portrayed, or the choice of subject matter. The fact that Hals depicted men, women, and children from all walks of life was also a source of

inspiration for the Moderns. Many of his models are laughing, especially in his genre-like representations of socio-economically less fortunate individuals. They had rarely been subjects for painters in the past. Vincent van Gogh, seeking to depict real life, was captivated by Hals, as he wrote to Émile Bernard: ‘He painted portraits, nothing nothing nothing but that. [...] He painted the drunkard, the crazy old fishwife, the beautiful gypsy whore, babies in swaddling clothes, a gallant, mustachioed bon vivant gentleman, [...] musicians, a fat cook. That was all he knew, but that ... is worth as much as Dante’s paradise, and as the works of Michelangelo, Raphael and even the ancient Greeks.’ The American painter Robert Henri was so fascinated by Hals’ casual child portraits that he painted a series of laughing boys, for which children in Haarlem posed in 1910.

The Moderns travelled through time in search of their idol and restored Hals to his well-deserved place in the pantheon of great artists. From then on, art experts and art historians also included him in their retrospectives and exhibitions. Hals has been considered one of the three greatest Dutch artists of the 17th century, alongside Rembrandt and Vermeer, ever since. Which makes it all the more remarkable that no biography of Hals was published so far.

The first monograph on Frans Hals dates from 1871 and was written by Berlin Museum director Wilhelm von Bode. In 1909, Ernst Wilhelm Moes, director of the Rijksmuseum’s print collection, published a monograph, albeit in French. More publications as well as exhibitions dedicated to Frans Hals quickly followed. In the second half of the 20th century, two Hals scholars dominated the scene: Seymour Slive and Claus Grimm, who were very important in determining the oeuvre of Frans Hals. In the 21st century, Christopher Atkins provided new insights into Frans Hals’ *signature* style, as he aptly described it. All of these publications contain a lot of biographical material, but a real biography has been lacking until now.

The added value of a biography will soon become clear to the reader. Steven Nadler, a gifted biographer, knows how to capture his subject, much the same way Hals did with his sitters. Both dislike embellishment. Nadler describes Hals’ life story – or as much of it as can be gleaned from the sources – based on the highs and the lows in his personal life, his work and major historical events, without allowing himself to be seduced by the drama, which Hals also steered clear of. Being a historian,

Nadler is able to place the few available sources on Hals in the context of Hals' own time. With his extensive knowledge of the geopolitical, religious, economic and social situation he paints a picture of the Dutch Republic. He effortlessly draws parallels with what was happening in other artistic centres and even on the European stage. Yet Nadler's focus always remains on the figure of Frans Hals and with his power of imagination he manages to evoke Hals' everyday world. The fact that Nadler is primarily a Frans Hals aficionado and not an art historian, results in his admiration for Hals' talent jumping off the pages. He transfers his own enthusiasm for Hals and his work to the reader.

Understanding the uniqueness and the impact of art in general – and of Hals' work in particular – requires distance, both in time and in space. This biography also underscores the difference with the other two 17th century Dutch masters, Rembrandt and Vermeer. The latter both developed into even greater icons from the 19th century onward and were the subject of other than art-historical publications much earlier.

The fact that Hals did not achieve the same status can be explained by his choice of subject matter on the one hand and by the spirit of the times on the other. The postmodern period favoured elusiveness and ambiguity, which is more compatible with the art of Vermeer and Rembrandt. Rembrandt was portrayed as an unbridled genius and all-rounder (he excelled in all genres and art forms of drawings, prints and paintings) and thus elusive. Vermeer has a small oeuvre, with serene paintings, mostly of anonymous women engrossed in a variety of domestic activities, that are full of ambiguities and in which the viewer feels like a voyeur. This is nothing like Hals' work. His portraits show his patrons as they were. His strength lies in the fact that he centred his attention on his fellow man his entire life.

Current times also have a need for this kind of focus. We are living in a period of a great transition, as did Frans Hals. In his lifetime, the world-view shifted to where knowledge was no longer only obtained by studying writings, but primarily through observation, a skill Hals mastered like no one else. There were also major shifts in terms of political power and the role of religion in society. In the 17th century, the concept of the malleability of the world emerged, together with a capitalist economy and a strong expansionist drive that was at the root of colonialism. Now the pendulum is swinging in the other direction again. We are increasingly aware that a

capitalist economy asks too much of our planet and that there are limits to the malleability of the world. Man's role in relation to climate change, biodiversity and sustainability calls for humility and it would be a good thing if we, like Hals, pay more attention to our fellow human beings.

Hals' legacy is found in his ability to bring his fellow humans to life with his virtuoso brushstroke. In a way this biography does something similar, but for the painter himself. I hope that the vivid picture Nadler paints of Hals will encourage readers to travel to Haarlem and the Frans Hals Museum to – aided by this biography – get as close as possible to his life. And to see his work with a new understanding and budding or increasing enthusiasm.

Marrigje Rikken

Illustrations

All works are by Frans Hals unless otherwise indicated.

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