

An exhibition of the great 17th century Dutch painter

# *Frans Hals Portraits: A Family Reunion at the Toledo Museum of Art*

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The Toledo [Ohio] Museum of Art recently presented an exhibition featuring works by one of the leading Dutch painters of the 17th century—*Frans Hals Portraits: A Family Reunion*.

The Dutch “Golden Age” produced a host of extraordinary artistic figures, including most prominently Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69), Hals (c. 1582–1666) and Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675). Other brilliant painters, of everyday life, domestic and tavern scenes, of landscapes and seascapes, of still lifes and historical events, included Jan van Goyen (1596–1656), Salomon van Ruysdael (c. 1602–1670), Judith Leyster (c. 1609–1660), Adriaen van Ostade (1610–1685), Gerrit Dou (1613–1675), Gerard ter Borch (1617–1681), Jan Steen (c. 1626–1679), Jacob van Ruysdael (c. 1629–1682), Pieter de Hooch (1629–1684) and Nicolaes Maes (1634–1693).

The Hals exhibition will next run at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium in Brussels from February 1 to May 19 and later at the Fondation Custodia, an art museum in Paris focusing on works by European old masters.

The exhibition was prompted by the Toledo museum’s acquisition in 2011 of Hals’s *The Van Campen Family Portrait in a Landscape* (c. 1623–25), along with the recent conservation work done on the Brussels museum’s *Three Children of the Van Campen Family*.

Remarkably, as the Toledo museum website explains, “These two works [by Hals] originally formed one composition, separated for unknown reasons likely in the late 18th century or early 19th century. The exhibition reunites the sections of the Toledo/Brussels painting along with a third fragment from a private collection.” In other words, this was the first time in some 200 years that three pieces of the original painting were present in the same location.

The curators also offered a proposed reconstruction of Hals’s complete painting as it might have looked when it was painted nearly four centuries ago.

Additional works by Hals were featured in Toledo, including *Family Group in a Landscape* (c. 1645–48) from the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid; *Family Group in a Landscape* (c. 1647–50) from the National Gallery in London; *Marriage Portrait of Isaac Massa and Beatrix van der Laen* (c. 1622) from the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; and *Portrait of a Dutch Family* (mid-1630s) from the Cincinnati Art Museum. Also on display were *Portrait of a Seated Man Holding a Hat* and *Portrait of a Seated Woman Holding a Fan* (both c. 1650, from the Taft Museum of Art, Cincinnati, Ohio).

A good portion of the catalogue published to accompany the exhibition is devoted to explaining the facts of the Van Campen family painting and proving that the three pieces belong together (along with other still unknown ones). The case seems convincing, but that is a matter for art historians and experts to debate and determine.

The Toledo exhibition was not large, nine paintings by Hals (including the three separate fragments), but the work was all beautiful.

Frans Hals was born in 1582 or 1583 to Adriana and Franchoy Hals in Antwerp, then in the Spanish Netherlands. Starting in the 1560s, the “Seventeen Provinces,” including present-day Netherlands and Belgium, had risen in revolt against the rule of Philip II of Spain, the Habsburg monarch. The struggle lasted for some 80 years. The Dutch uprising was bound up with the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

Antwerp became the capital of the Dutch revolt. However, the Spanish forces counter-attacked and their troops, under the Duke of Parma, laid siege to Antwerp in July 1584. The city surrendered in August 1585 to the Spanish, who gave the Protestant population four years to settle their affairs before leaving.

Hals’s parents apparently fled during the siege, some 110 miles, to Haarlem in the new Dutch Republic to the north, where the artist lived for the rest of his life. Hals apprenticed as a painter starting in 1603. In 1610, he registered with the St. Lucas Guild, which, as the museum catalogue explains, “enabled him to establish his own workshop.”

Hals married twice. He had three children with his first wife, Anneke Harmendr, only one of whom survived early childhood. Anneke died in 1615, and two years later Hals married Lysbeth Reyniersdr, who bore 11 children (four of whom became painters).

The painter’s naturalistic work fell largely from favor in the 18th century, as a tendency even in Holland toward more aristocratic and classicistic academicism took shape, and was only “rediscovered” in the second half of the 19th.

Hals is now widely admired. Critics, historians and museumgoers alike are impressed, in the words of one commentator, by his “vigorous, slashing style.” The painter is always “amazing in fidelity, astounding in surety and vitality of draughtsmanship. Among the Dutch [Hals is] inferior in genius only to Rembrandt, [and] his influence was almost as far-reaching.” (Blake-More Godwin, *Catalogue of European Paintings*, The Toledo Museum of Art)

Another study argues that in Hals’s portraits, “the quick and decisive look of each stroke suggests spontaneity, the recording of one specific instant in the life of the sitter.” The complete picture “has the immediacy of a sketch. The impression of a race against time is, of course, deceptive. Hals spent hours, not minutes,” on his canvases, “but he maintains the illusion of having done it in the wink of an eye.” (*A Basic History of Art*, H. W. and Anthony F. Janson)

Hals came to specialize in portraiture. The Toledo exhibition had several magnificent examples. *Seated Man Holding a Hat* and *Seated Woman Holding a Fan* (the subjects’ names are unknown) are assumed to be a newly married couple. Hals scholar Seymour Slive describes the pictures as among “Hals’s most sympathetic portraits of a husband and wife.” She

in particular makes an impression, gazing at the viewer confidently.

The painter made a name for himself with his group portraits. Writing of the famed *Banquet of the Officers of the St. George Civic Guard* (1616, not in the exhibition), Lawrence W. Nichols, the Toledo museum's senior curator of European and American painting and sculpture before 1900, notes that, in contrast "to the stiff formality typical of the genre, Hals's poses, gestures, and animated countenances—many conveying engagement with one another, and others rendered as peering out at the beholder—all induce the sense of being a firsthand witness to the actual gathering." A contemporary of Hals's, the historian of Haarlem, wrote in 1648 that his "paintings are imbued with such force and vitality that... they seem to breathe and live."

In Hals's first family group portrait, the work at the center of the Toledo-Brussels-Paris exhibitions, *The Van Campen Family in a Landscape*, the painter continued—Nichols asserts—"to visually communicate a sense of immediacy ... Moreover, he confronted the pressing challenge incumbent on a painter of group portraits of any category: how to capture individuality as well as the collective dynamic of the group and each individual's relationship to it." Van Campen, a cloth merchant, his wife and seven children are represented in one of three fragments; a second, narrower picture shows four children; and a third includes the head and torso of a boy (apparently another Van Campen son).

Nichols writes: "Hals's arrangement is nothing less than the visualization of a household jubilantly being together—their familial cohesion is rendered palpable and is the painting's very subject. ... Gijsbert Claesz [van Campen] gazes out at the viewer as if to proudly present his progeny. Only the two babies ... also engage us directly; all the others are involved in or reacting to the spectacle the painter has contrived. ... Hals's vivacious and animated portrait, with its expressive poses, gesticulating hands, and exuberant countenances, was groundbreaking."

One of the prominent features of the *Family Group* from the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid is the presence of a black child. The catalogue notes that black youths made their appearance as servants in Flemish and Dutch portraits from the 1630s, "not coincidentally after the Dutch West India Company was established in 1621 and took control of Dutch involvement in the Atlantic trade of enslaved Africans." The individual "in the present work is as much a specific personality as the rest of the family. That Hals represented him with such dignity and humanity, in conjunction with his relatively substantial wardrobe ... suggests that he may have been of high birth, perhaps someone from West Africa who came to Holland for his education or part of a trade delegation."

A painting that deserves its own essay is *Marriage Portrait of Isaac Massa and Beatrix van der Laen*, described as "an unmitigated standout in the collection of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam." Mariët Westermann (*A Worldly Art—The Dutch Republic 1585–1718*) argues that there "are no direct Dutch precedents" for this double portrait.

Massa and Beatrix lean back against a tree or an embankment. He smiles at the viewer. "Beside him to the right," as a 1910 catalogue of Hals's works described it, "sits a woman, bending slightly forward, with her head turned three-quarters left. She smiles rather slyly at the spectator."

Again, Hals is a pioneer in presenting human relationships in a flexible and informal manner. The famed Rijksmuseum observes that the "happy, smiling pair sits comfortably close to each other. Posing a couple together in this way was highly unusual at the time."

We know something about Massa, born into a wealthy silk merchant's family and sent to Moscow at 15 to assist the family trade, including the fact that Hals painted him several times. Massa also served as a witness at the baptism of one of Hals's daughters. They presumably were friends.

Massa, an intriguing figure, belongs to the epoch when the bourgeoisie,

in its ascendancy, played a revolutionary role. The Toledo museum catalogue describes him as a "polymath of sorts." According to historian G. W. van der Meiden, Massa "played a prominent part in the beginnings of diplomatic contact between Russia and the Netherlands. He was a many-sided intellect ... Thanks to his eye-witness report on the Time of Troubles he is well-known in Russian historiography." ("Isaac Massa and the Beginnings of Dutch-Russian Relations")

Massa authored a famed "Short Narrative" on the events of the "Time of Troubles" (1598–1613), a period of civil war in Russia, which ended with the establishment of the Romanov Dynasty. He also was an eye-witness to the terrible famine of 1601–03, which is estimated to have killed one third of the Russian population. Massa extensively describes the suffering. At one point in his "Narrative," he writes that "Heaven inflicted on the whole country of Muscovy scarcity and famine of which history records no similar examples."

Massa also published five maps of Russia, including an effort to render the Siberian coast. Van der Meiden writes that Massa "learnt Russian" and that, although "he had received very little formal education, his curiosity was insatiable."

The same, of course, could be said about Hals himself.

In 1626, Hals painted a portrait of Massa leaning over the back of a chair toward the viewer in an astonishingly informal and intimate pose. The critic John Berger ("Hals and Bankruptcy" in *About Looking*) asserted that Massa's "expression is another one that Hals was the first to record. It is the look of a man who does not believe in the life he witnesses, yet can see no alternative. He has considered, quite impersonally, the possibility that life may be absurd. He is by no means desperate. He is interested. But his intelligence isolates him from the current purpose of men and the supposed purpose of God." This appears generally legitimate considering what we know of Massa's life and some of the terrible things he had seen. Berger, in the same essay, also claimed that no one "before Hals painted portraits of greater dignity and greater sympathy."

Writing of the larger trend, art historian Arnold Hauser (in *The Social History of Art*, Volume II) observed that "Dutch art owes its middle-class character, above all, to the fact that it ceases to be tied to the Church. ... Representations of real everyday life are the most popular of all: the picture of manners, the portrait, the landscape, the still life, interiors and architectural views." Such motifs "acquire an autonomous value of their own; the artist no longer needs an excuse to portray them. ... It is as if this reality were being discovered, taken possession of and settled down in for the first time."

The bourgeois conditions of life did not make things easy for the Dutch painters, who were "free" of noble and Church patronage and thrown on the marketplace. The resulting state of artistic production, wrote Hauser, allowed "the boom on the art market to degenerate into a state of fierce competition, to which the most individual and most original talents fall victim. There were artists living in cramped circumstances in earlier times, but there were none in actual want." The Dutch artists' financial troubles "are a concomitant of that economic freedom and anarchy in the realm of art, which now comes on the scene for the first time and still controls the art market today. Here are the beginnings, too, of the social uprooting of the artist and the uncertainty of his existence."

Hals went bankrupt in 1652. Rembrandt was effectively declared bankrupt in 1656. Vermeer left his wife in debt at the time of his early death in 1675. She wrote in a petition that during the "ruinous" Franco-Dutch War (1672–78), her husband "not only was unable to sell any of his art but also, to his great detriment, was left sitting with the paintings of other masters that he was dealing in."

Every opportunity should be taken to see the work of Hals and the other Dutch painters.



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