

# Frans Hals

**F**rans Hals was the leading painter in seventeenth-century Haarlem, a Dutch city whose prosperity derived from brewing beer and producing luxury fabrics. Although Hals painted some scenes of daily life, he was primarily a portraitist. His large group portraits of the civic guards and the directors of charitable institutions, all of which remain in the Netherlands, are especially famous.

Avoiding flattery, Hals depicted his sitters with a lively candor that appealed to their robust, informal tastes. Winning political independence from Spain in 1648 and the freedom to worship in the new Protestant faith, the Dutch Republic was also immensely wealthy from overseas trade. Dutch burghers, while taking great pride in material possessions, were still socially conservative, most adhering to a modest and simple lifestyle.

By strict religious law, these early Protestants wore only black-and-white clothing, regardless of the expense of the textiles. Hals turned the stark outfits to an advantage, using the neutral clothes to set off his sitters' complexions against pale tan or dark gray backgrounds.

## *Frans Hals' Style and Technique*

No drawings by Frans Hals survive. This absence of preliminary studies suggests that he improvised directly on his canvases. The sketchy brushstrokes also imply he worked very quickly. Hals, who entered the Haarlem artists' guild in 1610, adopted an ever freer, looser handling of paint over the course of his career.

To compare Hals' changing styles, it is instructive to look carefully at details, such as lace collars, that he treated very differently over the course of his career. The two details of hands illustrated here — separated by some twenty years — demonstrate an evolution in Hals' technique.

The earlier work—an elderly woman's hand grasping a prayer book—is modeled with brushstrokes that follow and define the contours, curving around each finger and highlighting her ring. The book is clearly detailed, too, including its tooled, gilt decorations.

The man's gloved hand holding another glove—painted much later—reads as strokes of pure, thick paint when seen at close range. The brushwork is dashed and choppy, suggesting the solid forms of the fingers and the limpness of the empty glove, but not revealing any details. Some of Hals' last works are so spontaneous in the handling of paint as to appear abstract.



*Portrait of an Elderly Lady* (detail), 1633



*Adriaen van Ostade* (detail), 1646/1648



**Frans Hals**  
Dutch, c. 1582/1583 – 1666

## *Portrait of an Elderly Lady*, 1633

One of Hals' most impressive portraits of women, this canvas bears a Latin inscription giving the sitter's age as sixty in the year 1633. Though her identity is unknown, her personality is clearly conveyed by the twinkle in her eyes, the smile on her half-parted lips, the firm grip of her hand on the chair, and the strength of her silhouette against the light gray-brown background.

The prayer book implies a pious character, and her clothing is conservative for the period. The velvet-trimmed brocade jacket, satin skirt, and lace cuffs and cap recall that Haarlem's wealth depended upon textiles. The linen ruff collar, then going out of style, would have been starched and supported on concealed wires.

Hals' portraits were often commissioned in pairs that depict husbands and wives facing each other. It is possible that a similarly sized canvas in the Frick Collection, New York City, showing an elderly man standing behind a chair, is the mate to this engaging work.

Oil on canvas, 102.5 x 86.9 cm (40 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 34 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.)  
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.67



**Frans Hals**  
Dutch, c. 1582/1583 – 1666

## *Portrait of a Member of the Haarlem Civic Guard*, c. 1636/1638

The steel breastplate identifies this sitter as a soldier, but his broad-brimmed hat and lace collar and cuffs reveal that he is dressed to pose for an artist, not to engage in military maneuvers. Hals painted six gigantic group portraits of Dutch civic guards, but this is his only known portrait of an individual soldier.

As the Netherlands fractured into north and south along political and religious lines in the late 1500s, the civic guards battled heroically to win the north's independence from Spain. By Hals' time, though, these numerous militias had become social fraternities. Named for a patron saint, each guard group was divided into three companies based on the colors of the Dutch flag: orange, white, and blue. His sash marks this soldier as a member of an orange company.

With great bravura, the smiling man stands before a window overlooking a distant plain or sea. Only two of Hals' other portraits of single figures include such landscape vistas.

Oil on canvas, 86 x 69 cm (33 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 27 in.)  
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.68



**Frans Hals**  
Dutch, c. 1582/1583 – 1666

## *Willem Coymans*, 1645

Willem Coymans (1623–1678) was a member of one of Holland's wealthiest merchant families. Their crest of oxen heads hangs on the wall; the Dutch name *Coymans* literally translates as "cow men." Below the shield, a Latin inscription states that Willem was twenty-two years old in 1645. Hals rarely dated his pictures. Since his few datings normally also provide the subjects' ages, the inscriptions must have been requested by the patrons to serve as genealogies.

Hals was the first portraitist who consistently depicted his subjects seated sideways, with their arms hooked casually over the backs of their chairs. Coymans, an elegant dandy proud of his expensive clothes, wears an embroidered jacket and sports a pom-pom on his hat, which is pushed forward rakishly. Hals' dazzling brushwork is especially evident in the gold embroidery and the crisply pleated shirt sleeve.

Oil on canvas, 77 x 64 cm (30 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 25 in.)  
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.69



### Frans Hals

Dutch, c. 1582/1583 – 1666

*Portrait of a Young Man*, 1646/1648

With an alert glance at the viewer, this portly youth rests his elbow on the back of his chair. Hals' earliest known use and possible invention of a model turned sideways in a chair dates to 1626, but he employed this lively pose often during the 1640s.

The National Gallery's *Willem Coymans*, dated 1645, relies on a similarly informal posture. Both works are also related in style, with the faces more firmly modeled and detailed than the broader, more suggestive brushstrokes of their costumes and accessories. *Portrait of a Young Man* may be slightly later because its brushwork appears even more rapidly applied. A few wavy strokes depict the lion's head finial of the chair, and an emphatic criss-cross pattern describes the collar.

Just above the sitter's hand, Frans Hals signed the work twice with his initials: *FHFH*. The purpose of the unique double monograms remains unexplained.

Oil on canvas, 68 x 55.4 cm (26 ¼ x 21 13/16 in.)  
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.71



### Frans Hals

Dutch, c. 1582/1583 – 1666

*Adriaen van Ostade*, 1646/1648

Adriaen van Ostade (1610–1685) specialized in painting scenes of country peasants. Ostade's *Cottage Dooryard* hangs nearby within the Dutch galleries. Before entering Haarlem's guild of artists in 1634, Ostade probably had been Frans Hals' pupil. This painting bears a strong resemblance to a self-portrait by Ostade and also appears to be the model for an engraved print titled as representing Ostade. The occasion for this commission may have been Ostade's election in 1647 as a head of the guild.

Hals depicted his fellow artist as a refined gentleman wearing fashionable apparel denoting professional success. Gloves, for example, were an essential feature of seventeenth-century social decorum. Ostade has removed the glove from his right hand, the one used in greeting. His bare right palm, open to the viewer, reinforces his forthrightness.

Oil on canvas, 94 x 75 cm (37 x 29 ½ in.)  
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.70



### Frans Hals

Dutch, c. 1582/1583 – 1666

*Portrait of a Gentleman*, 1650/1652

Sketchy contours, especially around the hat and cape, are evidence that Hals improvised and adjusted this design as he worked. The long cape, the tassels on the collar, and the gloves dangling idly from one hand indicate that the patron was a person of some means. Like Hals' *Adriaen van Ostade*, this gentleman has removed his right glove to shake hands.

The very fact that this is a three-quarter-length figure adds to its dignity. Full-length, life-size portraits of individual sitters were very unusual in seventeenth-century Holland, probably because the Dutch burghers associated such large images with aristocratic pretensions. Frans Hals painted only one life-size, full-length likeness of an individual sitter. A three-quarter-length portrait, therefore, is as about as grandiose a work as this matter-of-fact artist produced. Even here, though, Hals candidly recorded a mole on the handsome sitter's cheek.

Oil on canvas, 114.3 x 85.1 cm (45 x 33 ½ in.)  
Widener Collection 1942.9.29



### Frans Hals

Dutch, c. 1582/1583 – 1666

*Portrait of a Man*, 1648/1650

In the lower left corner, this canvas bears Frans Hals' monogram: *FH*. The unidentified sitter holds his right hand over his chest, covering his heart. This gesture not only conveys his sincerity and passion but also may imply that he is an artist who proclaims his sensitivity.

The fluid brushstrokes defining individual strands of hair are consistent with Hals' later work. At that time, hats with cylindrical crowns and upturned brims were stylish. This hat must have been painted out sometime before 1673. That was the year of the death of a minor Dutch artist who copied this portrait with the model bare-headed. In 1991, National Gallery conservators removed the overpaint and revealed the portrait's original appearance with the hat pushed back high on the head.

Oil on canvas, 63.5 x 53.5 cm (25 x 21 in.)  
Widener Collection 1942.9.28

1573 Haarlem, a Protestant stronghold, besieged by Catholic Spanish army

c. 1582/1583 Frans Hals born in Antwerp

1582 Pope Gregory XIII institutes modern calendar

1597 Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens enters painters' guild in Antwerp

1599 Globe Theater, famous as Shakespeare's playhouse, opens in London

1609 Twelve Years' Truce suspends war between Spain and Netherlands

1610 Frans Hals enters painters' guild in Haarlem

1624 French painter Nicolas Poussin moves to Rome

1626 Dutch traders buy Manhattan island and found colonies of New Amsterdam and Haarlem

1632 Flemish painter Anthony van Dyck knighted by British court

1642 Rembrandt paints *The Night Watch*, group portrait of an Amsterdam civic guard (Rijksmuseum)

1648 Treaty of Münster recognizes Netherlands' independence from Spain

1653 Johannes Vermeer enters painters' guild in Delft

1664 Dutch lose American colonies to the British; New Amsterdam renamed New York

1666 Frans Hals dies in Haarlem

1677 Dutch prince William III of Orange marries British princess Mary; in 1689, they become William and Mary of England