NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

Judith Leyster
Dutch, 1609 - 1660

Self-Portrait

c. 1630

oil on canvas
overall: 74.6 x 65.1 cm (29 3/8 x 25 5/8 in.)
framed: 97.5 x 87.6 x 9.2 cm (38 3/8 x 34 1/2 x 3 5/8 in.)
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss 1949.6.1

ENTRY

As she turns from her painting of a violin player and gazes smilingly out at the viewer, Judith Leyster manages to assert, in the most offhanded way, that she has mastered a profession traditionally viewed as a masculine domain. Although women drew and painted as amateurs, a professional woman painter was a rarity in Holland in the seventeenth century. Leyster was quite a celebrity even before she painted this self-portrait in about 1630. Her proficiency, even at the tender age of nineteen, had been so remarkable that in 1628 Samuel Ampzing singled her out for praise in his *Beschryvinge ende lof der stad Haerlem in Holland* some five years before she appears to have become the first woman ever to be admitted as a master in the Haarlem Saint Luke's Guild.[1] Even after 1636, when she moved to Amsterdam with her husband, the artist Jan Miense Molenaer (c. 1610–1668), her artistic reputation never waned in her native city. In the late 1640s another historian of Haarlem, Theodorus Schrevelius, wrote, "There also have been many experienced women in the field of painting who are still renowned in our time, and who could compete with men. Among them, one excels exceptionally, Judith Leyster, called 'the true leading star' in art."[2]

The young artist sits in a remarkably casual manner, with her right arm resting on the back of her chair. As she looks out at the viewer with one hand holding a brush and the other her palette, a large bundle of brushes, and a white painter's cloth, it appears as though she has just been interrupted from her work. Indeed, Leyster has purposely left the figure of the violin player on the canvas in an unfinished state. Nevertheless, she is dressed in quite formal attire, inappropriate for an artist busy working. One could hardly imagine her painting while wearing such a firmly starched, broad, lace-trimmed collar.

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The inconsistencies can be explained in the dichotomy that existed between the traditional iconography for artists' self-portraits and the relatively new informal concept of portraiture that had developed in Haarlem in the 1620s through the influence of Frans Hals (Dutch, c. 1582/1583 - 1666). It had long been accepted for an artist to depict him- or herself dressed in fine clothes before an easel, as did, for example, one of the few successful women artists of the sixteenth century, Catharina van Hemessen (1528–after 1587), in her self-portrait of 1548 (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Basel).[3] This tradition developed as artists sought to raise their social status from craftsmen to members of the liberal arts. The parallel that could be drawn between the noble character of painting and the social position of the artist is also evident in Cesare Ripa's insistence that the personification of "Artificio of Konststuck" should be dressed in expensive and artfully made (*konstigh*) clothes. "He should be dressed ingeniously and nobly because art by itself is noble, which men can also call the second Nature."[4] Leyster abided by this tradition, yet she was also aware of the innovations of the greatest Haarlem portrait painter of the day, Frans Hals. While her brushwork is not as vivacious as that of Hals, the momentary quality of the image, conveyed through informality of pose and open expression, is related to his portrait style of the 1620s.[5]

The exact date of this self-portrait is not known. Hofrichter has argued that Leyster executed it as a presentation piece at the time of her entry into the Haarlem Saint Luke's Guild in 1633. The new regulations, which were established in 1631, required that each new master present to the guild "a painting two feet large" as testimony of skill.[6] Nevertheless, for a number of reasons this attractive hypothesis is probably not correct. First, the costume cannot date that late. This flat, lace-edged style of collar can be found in portraits from the late 1620s but not in the 1630s.[7] The style of the cap, moreover, is extremely close to one in Leyster's *Carousing Couple* (1630, Musée du Louvre, Paris). The smooth modeling of the heads of the women in these two paintings is also extremely close. Their features are somewhat superficially rendered in comparison to the more three-dimensionally conceived genre figures that Leyster painted in the early to mid-1630s.[8] Finally, the painting of a violin player displayed on the easel in the *Self-Portrait* derives from *Merry Company*, which she executed between about 1629 and 1631 [fig. 1]. It seems unlikely that she would have returned to this subject in 1633 to demonstrate her abilities for admission to the guild. All of this evidence suggests a date of about 1630 for this work, when Leyster was about twenty-one years old.

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Leyster did not initially plan to paint the violin player on the canvas, but rather a portrait of a woman, whose face is visible in an infrared photograph and with Infrared Reflectography [fig. 2]. Following the iconographic tradition of portraits depicting an artist at an easel, this woman was probably Leyster herself.[9] She may have decided to depart from that tradition because of the popular success of the *Merry Company* scene from which the violin player derived, or to emphasize her versatility as a painter of both portraits and genre scenes.[10] In any event, the happy disposition of the violin player gives the *Self-Portrait* a joyous character that adds much to its charm.[11] By juxtaposing the bow of the violin player and her own paintbrush, Leyster seems to remind the viewer that, just as the musician has mastered his instrument to produce music, so too has she mastered the tools of her profession to create equally compelling art.

This painting, which is not signed, was long attributed to Frans Hals, in large part because Leyster's own artistic personality was only rediscovered in 1893.[12] The first art historian to identify the painting as a self-portrait by Leyster was Abraham Bredius, who, as editor of *Oud-Holland*, appended his opinion to an article in that journal positing that Hals has here portrayed Leyster.[13] Unfortunately, the painting has suffered from overall abraision and minute pitting of the paint surface (see Technical Summary). X-radiographs [see X-radiography] have also revealed that a long, horizontal rectangle of the original canvas is missing in the lower left and has been replaced by an insert [fig. 3]. The reddish dress in this area, thus, is a reconstruction and not from the hand of Judith Leyster. Nevertheless, after the painting's 1992 restoration, which removed discolored layers of varnish that had severely disfigured the painting, this engaging image of a self-assured young female painter from Haarlem has taken on an iconic status in Dutch art.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

April 24, 2014

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Judith Leyster, *Merry Company*, 1629/1631, oil on canvas, private collection, The Netherlands. Photo courtesy Noortman Master Paintings

fig. 2 Detail, infrared reflectogram, Judith Leyster, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1630, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss, 1949.6.1

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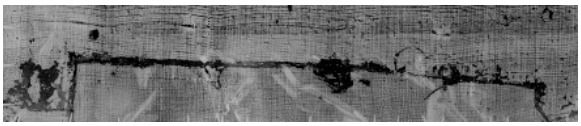

fig. 3 Detail of lower left corner of canvas, showing insert, X-radiograph, Judith Leyster, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1630, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss, 1949.6.1

NOTES

[1] Samuel Ampzing, *Beschrijvinge ende lof der stad Haerlem in Holland* (Haarlem, 1628), 370, praises Leyster's bold hand and mind in the context of a discussion of the De Grebber family, probably because Frans de Grebber's daughter Maria (c. 1602–1680) was also a painter. The rarity of women artists is implicit in Ampzing's rhetorical question concerning Maria: "Who ever saw a painting made by the hand of a daughter?" ("Wie sag oyt schilderij van eene dochtershand?")

[2] Theodorus Schrevelius, *Harlemias, ofte, de eerst stichtinghe der stad Haarlem* (Haarlem, 1648), 384–385. "Daer zyn ook veel Vrouwen gheweest in de Schilder-konst wel ervaren / die voornamelyck by onse tijdt noch vermaert zijn / die met de mans haer soude konnen versetten in de mael-konst / van welcke ceo insonderheydt uytmunt, JUDITH LEISTER, weleer genaemt / de rechte l..eyster inde konst." The English translation has been taken from Frima Fox Hofrichter, *Judith Leyster: A Woman Painter in Holland's Golden Age* (Doornspijk, 1989), 83. The reference to "the true leading star" is a pun on Leyster's name; see Frima Fox Hofrichter, *Judith Leyster: A Woman Painter in Holland's Golden Age* (Doornspijk, 1989), 13.

[3] Illustrated in Hans Joachim Raupp, *Untersuchungen zu Künstlerbildnis und Künstlerdarstellung in den Niederlanden im 17. Jahrhundert* (Hildesheim, 1984), 390, repro. 20.

[4] Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia of uytbeeldingen des verstands*, trans. Dirck Pietersz Pers (Amsterdam, 1644), 259. "Konstigh en eedel wort hy gekleet, om dat de konst door haer selven eedel is, die men oock de tweede Natuyre kan heeten." For a discussion of this type of self-portraiture, see Hans Joachim Raupp, *Untersuchungen zu Künstlerbildnis und Künstlerdarstellung in den Niederlanden im 17. Jahrhundert* (Hildesheim, 1984), 36–38.

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[5] See, for example, Hals' *Isaac Abrabamsz. Massa*, 1626, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, illustrated in Seymour Slive, *Frans Hals*, 3 vols. (London, 1970–1974), 2: pl. 64. Although the National Gallery of Art work was attributed to Judith Leyster in 1926, many scholars gave it to Frans Hals during the 1930s (see Exhibition History and Bibliography).

[6] Frima Fox Hofrichter, "Judith Leyster's 'Self-Portrait': 'Ut Pictura Poesis,'" in *Essays in Northern European Art Presented to Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann on His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Anne-Marie Logan (Doornspijk, 1983), 106–109. For the guild regulations, see Ed Taverne, "Salomon de Bray and the Reorganization of the Haarlem Guild of St. Luke in 1631," *Simiolus* 6 (1972–1973): 52.

[7] A similar style collar is seen in family portraits of the late 1620s, such as Pieter de Grebber's *Family Portrait at a Meal,* 1625 (Stedelijk Museum, Alkmaar); Paulus Bor's *Portrait of the Family Van Vanevelt,* 1628 (Sint Pietersen Blokland Gasthuis, Amersfoort); and Andries van Bochoven's *The Artist and His Family,* 1629 (Centraal Museum, Utrecht). These paintings are illustrated in Eddy de Jongh, *Portretten van echt en trouw: Huwelijk en gezin in de Nederlandse kunst van de zeventiende eeuw* (Haarlem, 1986), nos. 72, 74, 75.

[8] For example, *Young Flute Player*; see Frima Fox Hofrichter, *Judith Leyster: A Woman Painter in Holland's Golden Age* (Doornspijk, 1989), no. 38.

[9] See, for example, Catharina van Hemessen's *Self-Portrait* of 1548 in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Basel; illustrated in Hans Joachim Raupp, *Untersuchungen zu Künstlerbildnis und Künstlerdarstellung in den Niederlanden im 17. Jahrhundert* (Hildesheim, 1984), 390, repro. 20.

[10] As suggested by Frima Fox Hofrichter, "Judith Leyster's 'Self-Portrait': 'Ut Pictura Poesis,'" in *Essays in Northern European Art Presented to Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann on His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Anne-Marie Logan (Doornspijk, 1983), 107.

[11] For a discussion of the symbolic implications of the violin player, see Hans Joachim Raupp, *Untersuchungen zu Künstlerbildnis und Künstlerdarstellung in den Niederlanden im 17. Jahrhundert* (Hildesheim, 1984), 346–347.

[12] See Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, "Judith Leyster," *Jahrbuch der Königlich Preussischen Kunstsammlungen* 14 (1893): 190–198, 232.

[13] Gerrit David Gratama, "Het portret van Judith Leyster door Frans Hals," *Oud-Holland* 47 (1930): 75.

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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support, a plain-woven fabric with numerous slubs and weave imperfections, has been lined with the tacking margins trimmed. A large horizontal rectangle of original canvas is missing from the bottom left in an area corresponding to the red skirt, and has been replaced with a fine-weight, tightly woven fabric insert. The X-radiographs show cusping along all edges except the insert, which is also bereft of original paint or ground layers.

A smooth, thin, white ground layer was applied overall and followed by a gray brown imprimatura layer. Paint handling varies from fluid paint applied in loose liquid strokes in the black peplum to thicker pastes blended wet-into-wet in the flesh tones. White cuffs were applied wet-over-dry above the thinly scumbled purple sleeves, and red glazes were laid over opaque pink underpaint in the original passages of the red skirt.

An infrared photograph and infrared reflectography at 1.1 to 1.4 microns[1] reveal a major change in the easel painting, which originally showed a woman's head, with parted lips, turned slightly to the left, which is now partially visible as a pentimento. With the exception of the loss in the lower left, actual paint losses are few: small losses in the top at center and in the proper left cheek. The paint surface, however, is in relatively poor condition, with minute pitting throughout of the type caused by superheating during a lining procedure. This is exacerbated by moderate abrasion overall, and flattening. The unfinished violin player on the easel is heavily abraded.

The painting was treated in 1992 to remove discolored varnish layers and old inpainting. The later insert was retained.

[1] Infrared reflectography was performed with a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera fitted with a J astronomy filter.

PROVENANCE

Possibly the painting identified as a painting by Frans Hals depicting his daughter at the easel that appeared in four London sales between 1810 and 1812.[1] E.M. Grainger, Hastings, Sussex; Mrs. Granger, Bexhil-on-Sea, East Sussex;[2] (sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 16 April 1926, no. 115); purchased by E. Smith,

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probably for a London dealer.[3] private collection, New York, in 1928.[4] (Ehrich Galleries, New York); purchased 9 May 1929 by Mr. and Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss, Washington, D.C.;[5] gift 1949 to NGA.

[1] This suggestion was made by Burton Fredericksen. In a letter of 12 December 2002 to Arthur Wheelock (in NGA curatorial files) Fredericksen writes that the lack of recorded dimensions, the low price at which the painting was bought in, and the fact that it was part of a group of minor paintings prevent a firm conclusion, although paintings by Hals did not bring high prices at the beginning of the nineteenth century. For the first three sales, the painting was described as *The Portrait of F. Hals' Daughter* by F. Hals; for the fourth sale it was *The Painter's Daughter at her Easel*, also by Hals. The sales are as follows: consigned by a Dr. Biam (or Byam) along with four other paintings to Christie's, London, 7 July 1810, no. 161, bought in; the same consignor to Christie's, London, 8 March 1811, no. 65, bought in; consigned by "Pritchard" to Christie's, London, 19 April 1811, no. 157; anonymous consignor to Peter Coxe, London, 3 June 1812, no. 28, bought in.

[2] Lynda McLeod, Librarian, Christie's Archives, kindly provided the name of the consignor; see her e-mail of 1 August 2012, in NGA curatorial files. Despite the slight difference in the spelling of the last name, E.M. Grainger and Mrs. Granger were likely related.

[3] Information on this purchaser is from an annotated copy of the 1926 sale catalogue, and various articles in London papers giving the sale results; copies in NGA curatorial files.

[4] The owner of the painting is identified in this way in Wilhelm R. Valentiner, "Rediscovered Paintings by Frans Hals," *Art in America* 16 (1928): 239, fig. 2.

[5] The purchase date is in the donor's collection records for the painting, in NGA curatorial files.

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EXHIBITION HISTORY

1933 A Century of Progress Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture, Art Institute of Chicago, 1933, no. 64, as by Frans Hals.

1937 Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century, John Herron Art Museum, Indianapolis, 1937, no. 22, as by Frans Hals.

1937 Frans Hals Tentoonstelling ter gelegenheid van het 75-jarig bestaan van het gemeentelijk Museum te Haarlem, Frans Halsmuseum, Haarlem, 1937, no. 9, repro., as by Frans Hals.

1937 Paintings by Frans Hals: Exhibition for the Benefit of New York University, Schaeffer Galleries, Inc., New York, 1937, no. 3, as by Frans Hals.

1988 People at Work: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art, Hofstra Museum, Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York, 1988, no. 11.

1993 Judith Leyster: A Dutch Master and Her World, Frans Halsmuseum, Haarlem; Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts, 1993, no. 7, repro.

1993 Judith Leyster: "Leading Star," National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C., 1993-1994, brochure, color repro.

1999 Elck zijn waerom: Vrouwelijke kunstenaars in België en Nederland, 1500-1950 [As You Will: Women Artists in the Netherlands and Belgium, 1500-1950], Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp; Museum voor Moderne Kunst, Arnhem, 1999-2000, no. 34.

2001 Face to Face: Portraits from Five Centuries, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, 2001-2002, no. 35, repro.

2002 Jan Miense Molenaer: Painter of the Dutch Golden Age, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh; Indianapolis Museum of Art (Columbus Gallery); Currier Museum of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire, 2002-2003, fig. 8 (shown only in Raleigh).

2003 Loan to display with permanent collection, National Gallery, London, 2003-2004.

2005 Self Portrait: Renaissance to Contemporary, National Portrait Gallery, London; Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2005-2006, no. 11, repro.

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2009 Judith Leyster, 1609-1660 [Judith Leyster's 400th Anniversary], National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem, 2009-2010, unnumbered brochure, cover repro.

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NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
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To cite: Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Judith Leyster/*Self-Portrait*/c. 1630," *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*, NGA Online Editions, http://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/37003 (accessed December 21, 2016).

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