



Frans Hals
Dutch, c. 1582/1583 - 1666

Portrait of a Man

1648/1650

oil on canvas

overall: 63.5 x 53.5 cm (25 x 21 1/16 in.)

framed: 92.4 x 81.3 x 9.2 cm (36 3/8 x 32 x 3 5/8 in.)

Inscription: lower left in monogram: FH

Widener Collection 1942.9.28

ENTRY

The vagaries of Frans Hals' artistic reputation are more extreme than those of most artists. After having been the preeminent portrait painter in Haarlem during his day, he was almost totally forgotten after his death. It was not until the late nineteenth century that the vigorous and free brushwork that brought his portraits of Dutch burghers vividly to life was once again appreciated by critics, collectors, and contemporary artists. Hals' paintings, long relegated to obscurity in back rooms or in attics, were proudly brought forward, sent to exhibitions, and sold to dealers and collectors eager to own works. [1]

This *Portrait of a Man* first became known to the public when it was exhibited in Vienna in 1873. The New York dealer Léonardus Nardus sold it to P. A. B. Widener in 1898. The work was featured in 1908 in an enthusiastic article about acquisitions of Dutch and Flemish paintings in the United States written by one of the foremost authorities of the day, Willem Martin, who in that same year was appointed director of the Mauritshuis in The Hague. He wrote of this work: "It is treated with splendid dash and fluency, without a single *repentir*. Every stroke was absolutely right, and nowhere is there any alteration of the original composition." Martin then proceeded to date the portrait to the years 1640–1645 on the basis of comparisons with other Hals' portraits. [2]

The vagaries of time, however, affect paintings as well as artistic reputations. Despite Martin's claims, this work had been subjected to many changes [fig. 1]. As was first noted by Claus Grimm in 1972, [3] the dim shadow of a hat once worn by the sitter could be seen against the gray background. The long, wavy locks that flowed over his collar were later additions, as is evident from a drawing made after

the painting by Pieter Holsteyn II (Dutch, c. 1614 - 1673), in which the man's hair is shorter [fig. 2]. [4] Since Holsteyn's drawing does not include a hat, it appears that the portrait had been altered at least twice in its history, once prior to 1673, when the hat was removed, and again at a later date, when the hair was made longer. In 1990 and 1991 National Gallery of Art conservators removed the Repainting of the hair and the Overpaint in the background that covered the remains of the hat, which had been largely lost to Abrasion. Technical examination helped determine that the hat had been an original part of the composition, and the decision was made to reconstruct its appearance. [5] It is not known why the hat was originally removed, although it may have been a question of fashion. [6]

Since Martin's initial assessment that the painting should be dated to 1640–1645, various other dates have been proposed. Wilhelm Valentiner suggested circa 1650, Claus Grimm circa 1648, and Seymour Slive circa 1655/1660. [7] A dearth of dated paintings makes it difficult to determine a precise chronology of Hals' mature works, but the information gained from the conservation of the painting suggests that a date of 1648/1650 is the most probable. The fluid brushwork in the face, on the whites of the collar, and in the blacks of the costume is more broadly executed than comparable areas in Hals' 1645 portrait Willem Coymans. The broad handling of paint is consistent with his style from the end of that decade (see Adriaen van Ostade). A date from the mid-1650s seems less plausible than it once did, now that the overpainting in the hair has been removed. Hals' original brushwork defines the individual strands of hair in a manner that is consistent with his style at the end of the 1640s. Also helpful for narrowing the date is the style of the hat. Similar hats, with cylindrical crowns and raised brims, worn high on the head, are found in a number of Hals' portraits from the 1640s, but they went out of fashion in the 1650s.

The identity of the sitter has not been established. Although Grimm saw a certain resemblance to Michael Willmann, a German artist active in the Netherlands in the 1640s, no evidence of contact between Hals and Willmann has come to light. [8]

The idea that the sitter may be an artist, however, is plausible, for Hals represented a number of artists without specific attributes. [9] The manner in which the right hand is brought near the chest, and by implication the heart, is comparable to an established iconographic tradition for artists' portraiture. This rhetorical gesture conveyed not only the sitter's sincerity and passion but also his artistic sensibility. [10]

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Before conservation treatment in 1990–1991, Frans Hals, *Portrait of a Man*, 1648/1650, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection, 1942.9.28



fig. 2 Pieter Holsteyn II, drawing after *Portrait of a Man*, c. 1660, black ink, Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam. Photo © Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

NOTES

- [1] For an excellent assessment of Hals' reputation, see Frances S. Jowell, "The Rediscovery of Frans Hals," in Seymour Slive, ed., *Frans Hals* (Washington, DC, 1989), 61–86.
- [2] Wilhelm Martin, "Notes on Some Pictures in American Private Collections," *Burlington Magazine* 14 (October 1908): 60.
- [3] Claus Grimm, *Frans Hals: Entwicklung, Werkanalyse, Gesamtkatalog* (Berlin, 1972), 24.

- [4] The drawing was first published in Seymour Slive, ed., *Frans Hals*, 3 vols. (London, 1970–1974), 3:102–103, no. 198.
- [5] The restoration of the painting in 1990 and 1991 removed the later Repainting and exposed the original hat, hair, and background. Although there had been significant Abrasion, enough original paint remained to permit reconstruction of these elements.
- [6] Another Hals portrait suffered the same fate, his powerful *Portrait of a Man*, c. 1650–1653 (Hermitage, Saint Petersburg); see Seymour Slive, ed., *Frans Hals* (Washington, DC, 1989), no. 73.
- [7] Wilhelm R. Valentiner, *Frans Hals: Des meisters Gemälde in 318 Abbildungen*, *Klassiker der Kunst in Gesamtausgaben* 28 (Stuttgart, 1921), 238; Claus Grimm, *Frans Hals: Entwicklung, Werkanalyse, Gesamtkatalog* (Berlin, 1972), 107, no. 137; Seymour Slive, ed., *Frans Hals*, 3 vols. (London, 1970–1974), 3:102–103, no. 198.
- [8] Claus Grimm, *Frans Hals: Entwicklung, Werkanalyse, Gesamtkatalog* (Berlin, 1972), 107. A comparison with Willmann's self-portrait in Breslau is not convincing. See Dietrich Maul, *Michael Willmann: Ein Beitrag zur Barokkunst Schlesiens* (Strasbourg, 1914), frontispiece.
- [9] Hals' depictions of artists include Adriaen van Ostade and a half-length bust comparable in format to this work, *Vincent Laurensz van der Vinne*, c. 1655–1660 (Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto) (see Seymour Slive, ed., *Frans Hals* [Washington, DC, 1989], no. 76).
- [10] On the meanings of such gestures, see Hans-Joachim Raupp, *Untersuchungen zu Künstlerbildnis und Künstlerdarstellung in den Niederlanden im 17. Jahrhundert* (Hildensheim, 1984), 108–115, 132 repro. Henriette de Bruyn Kops has suggested that Hals' unidentified sitter reappears as the central figure in Hals' *Regents of the Old Men's Alms House* (1664), Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem, inv. no. OS-I-115.
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The original support, a medium-weight, plain-weave fabric, has been lined with the tacking margins trimmed. Cusping is visible in the X-radiographs along the left, right, and top edges. Striations are visible from the brush used to apply the thin white ground. Paint is applied in opaque layers, thinly in the sketchy background, and with more body in the figure. Lively brushstrokes are applied wet-into-wet but left distinct and unblended. Losses are small and scattered, and moderate abrasion is present, particularly in the black hat and adjacent background.

Prior to 1883, when the painting appeared in the art market in Vienna, the background had been overpainted to cover up the hat, and the hair repainted in a longer style. The restoration of the painting in 1990 and 1991 removed the later repaints and exposed the original hat, hair, and background.[1] Although abraded, enough original paint remained to permit reconstruction of these elements.

[1] During this treatment the NGA Scientific Research department performed analysis of the pigments using cross-sections and polarized light microscopy (see report dated March 28, 1991, in NGA Conservation department files).

PROVENANCE

Remi van Haanen [1812-1894], Vienna, by 1873.[1] (Mssrs. Lawrie & Co., London, by March 1898);[2] (Bourgeois Frères, Paris), in 1898; (Leo Nardus [1868-1955], Suresnes, France, and New York); sold 1898 to Peter A.B. Widener, Lynnewood Hall, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania;[3] inheritance from Estate of Peter A.B. Widener by gift through power of appointment of Joseph E. Widener, Elkins Park; gift 1942 to NGA.

[1] Remi van Haanen was a Dutch painter who was active in Vienna after he moved to Austria in 1837. He lent the painting to an exhibition in Vienna in 1873. The painting is also cited as being owned by Van Haanen by Wilhelm von Bode, *Studien zur Geschichte der holländischen Malerei*, Braunschweig, 1883: 89.

[2] Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century...*, 8 vols., trans. and ed. by Edward G. Hawke, London, 1907-1927, 3(1910): 89, no. 311.

[3] The 1898 date for Bourgeois and Nardus is according to notes by Edith Standen, Widener's secretary for art, in NGA curatorial files. Stephen Bourgeois of Bourgeois Frères was Nardus' father-in-law. The Widener files and *Catalogue of Paintings Forming the Collection of P. A.B. Widener, Ashbourne, near Philadelphia*, 2 vols., Paris, 1885-1900: 2:207, list the previous owner as Roo van Westmaas,

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Woortman, Holland, but no supporting evidence has been found for this name, and there is no town of Woortman in the Netherlands. In fact, Hofstede de Groot (or one of his German assistants) annotated a copy of his own work on Hals with a note indicating that Nardus had provided a purely fictitious provenance for the painting: "...die in Katalog angegebene Provenienz aus Sammlungen, die nie existiert haben, beruht auf intümlicher von Nardus" (handwritten note, Handexemplaren Hofstede de Groot, Frans Hals #311, Rijksbureau voor kunsthistorische documentatie, The Hague; found and kindly shared with NGA by Jonathan Lopez, per his letter of 24 April 2006 and e-mail of 1 May 2006, in NGA curatorial files.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1873 *Gemälde alter Meister aus dem Wiener Privatbesitze*, Österreichisches Museum für Kunst und Industrie, Vienna, 1873, no. 38.

1909 *The Hudson-Fulton Celebration*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1909, no. 32, repro.

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