With utmost casualness, Willem Coymans has turned to look out at the viewer while resting his right arm lightly on the back of his chair. He is dressed in an elaborately gold embroidered jacket with slit sleeves over a pleated white blouse. His oversized, flat, white linen collar and his modish, pom-pom-embellished black hat, which is pushed forward at a rakish angle, enframe a handsome face with an alert expression. Long wavy hair that reaches to his shoulders completes the impression of a man confident in himself and in his position in society.

This remarkable portrait, which carries so many of the dynamic qualities admired today in Hals' work, was rediscovered only at the end of the nineteenth century. The coat of arms in the right background was immediately recognized as that of the distinguished Coymans family, but the inscribed age of the sitter, twenty-two, did not correlate with any member of the family then known in genealogical studies. Perhaps to make the sitter's age consistent with that of one of the family's most prominent members, Balthasar Coymans, who was born March 15, 1618, the last digit of the age in the inscription was changed from two to six sometime between 1898 and 1907. [1] This identification was generally accepted in the literature from about 1909 until 1958, when Seymour Slive noted the changes in the inscription and concluded that the sitter could not be Balthasar. [2] The proper identification of the sitter as Willem was made only in 1970 by Katrina Taylor on the
basis of documents in the archives of Amsterdam and Haarlem. [3]

Willem (Guilliam) Coymans was baptized in Amsterdam on August 20, 1623, and was buried in the Church of Saint Bavo in Haarlem on April 28, 1678. He was the son of Coenraet Coymans and Maria Scheryl van Walhorn, who had been married in Antwerp in 1614. Like other members of this large family, Coenraet immigrated to Amsterdam, perhaps to work in the successful family firm of Balthasar Coymans and Brothers. By the 1640s Coenraet seems to have moved to Haarlem, where he was buried in the Church of Saint Bavo on November 29, 1659. Even less is known about Willem’s life, but his name appears on notarized business records in Amsterdam and Haarlem. [4] It seems improbable that he married, for his name is not included in a family genealogy that apparently was based on marriage rather than birth records. [5]

Hals had extensive connections with the Coymans family. In 1644 he painted portraits of Willem’s enormously wealthy uncle Joseph Coymans (Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford) and his wife, Dorothea Berck (Baltimore Museum of Art). [6] In the early 1650s he painted striking portraits of Joseph’s daughter Isabella (Baronne Edouard de Rothschild Collection, Paris) and her husband, Stephanus Geraerdts (Musée Royal des Beaux-Arts, Antwerp). [7] Finally, in 1660, along with Pieter Molijn (Dutch, 1595 - 1661), Hals appraised the paintings listed in the inventory of Coenraet Coymans’ effects. [8]

The worldly success of the family is vividly evident in Willem Coymans’ demeanor and French mode of dress. Hals utilizes these attributes to convey his sitter’s personality and give his image immediacy. With rapid yet certain strokes of the brush he suggests the rich patterns and flickering light on the elegantly embroidered jacket. In perhaps an even greater tour de force he has captured the translucent qualities of the sleeve by applying dense white strokes of paint over layers of gray. A few firm slashes of black complete the modeling. As is characteristic of Hals, the face is more strongly modeled than is the costume; while the touch is firm and bold around the features, the skin on the nose and cheek is relatively smooth.

Hals used the same pose from the mid-1620s, when it first appeared in the portrait Isaac Abrahamsz Massa (Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto), [9] until the end of his career. Although this pose had been used in the Netherlands by the late sixteenth century in group portraits in which an artist was faced with the problem of representing figures seated around a table, Hals was the first to recognize its
potential for portraits of single figures. It was a perfect device for half-length, relatively informal portraits in which he wanted to project the sitter’s personality as directly as possible. Aside from the implied movement in the pose, the man’s gesture of resting his arm over the back of the chair allows the figure to seemingly break through the picture frame and enter into the viewer’s world.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.
April 24, 2014

NOTES


TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The original support is a fine, tightly woven, plain-weave fabric with weave irregularities. It has been lined with the original tacking margins trimmed and the edges of the painting turned over to form the present tacking margins. The reduction in size appears minimal, as marked cusping is present on all sides.

A moderately thick tan ground layer lies under a light brown imprimatura layer. Paint was applied thinly, frequently exposing the imprimatura. Both low and high impasto articulate the sleeve and jacket brocade. Although the paint and ground are cupped, there are only minor flake losses, and abrasion is confined to the edges. The painting was treated in 1986.

PROVENANCE

Coymans family, Haarlem. Mrs. Frederick Wollaston, London. (Sedelmeyer Gallery, Paris), before 1894; Rodolphe Kann [d. 1905], Paris, by 1897; purchased 1907 with the entire Kann collection by (Duveen Brothers, Inc., London, New York, and Paris); sold to Arabella D. [Mrs. Collis P.] Huntington [c. 1850-1924], New York; by inheritance to her son, Archer M. Huntington [1870-1955], New York; purchased 17 May 1928 by (Duveen Brothers, Inc.);[1] sold 7 May 1929 to Andrew W. Mellon, Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C.; deeded 28 December 1934 to The A.W. Mellon Educational and Charitable Trust, Pittsburgh; gift 1937 to NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1909 The Hudson-Fulton Celebration, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1909, no. 37, as Balthasar Coymans.[1]


EXHIBITION HISTORY NOTES


BIBLIOGRAPHY


1898 Sedelmeyer, Charles. Illustrated Catalogue of 300 Paintings by Old Masters of the Dutch, Flemish, Italian, French, and English schools, being some of the principal pictures which have at various time formed


1908 Grant, J. Kirby. "Mrs. Collis P. Huntington’s Collection." The Connoisseur 20 (January 1908): 3 fig. 1, 4, as Young Koeijmanszoon van Ablasserdam.


