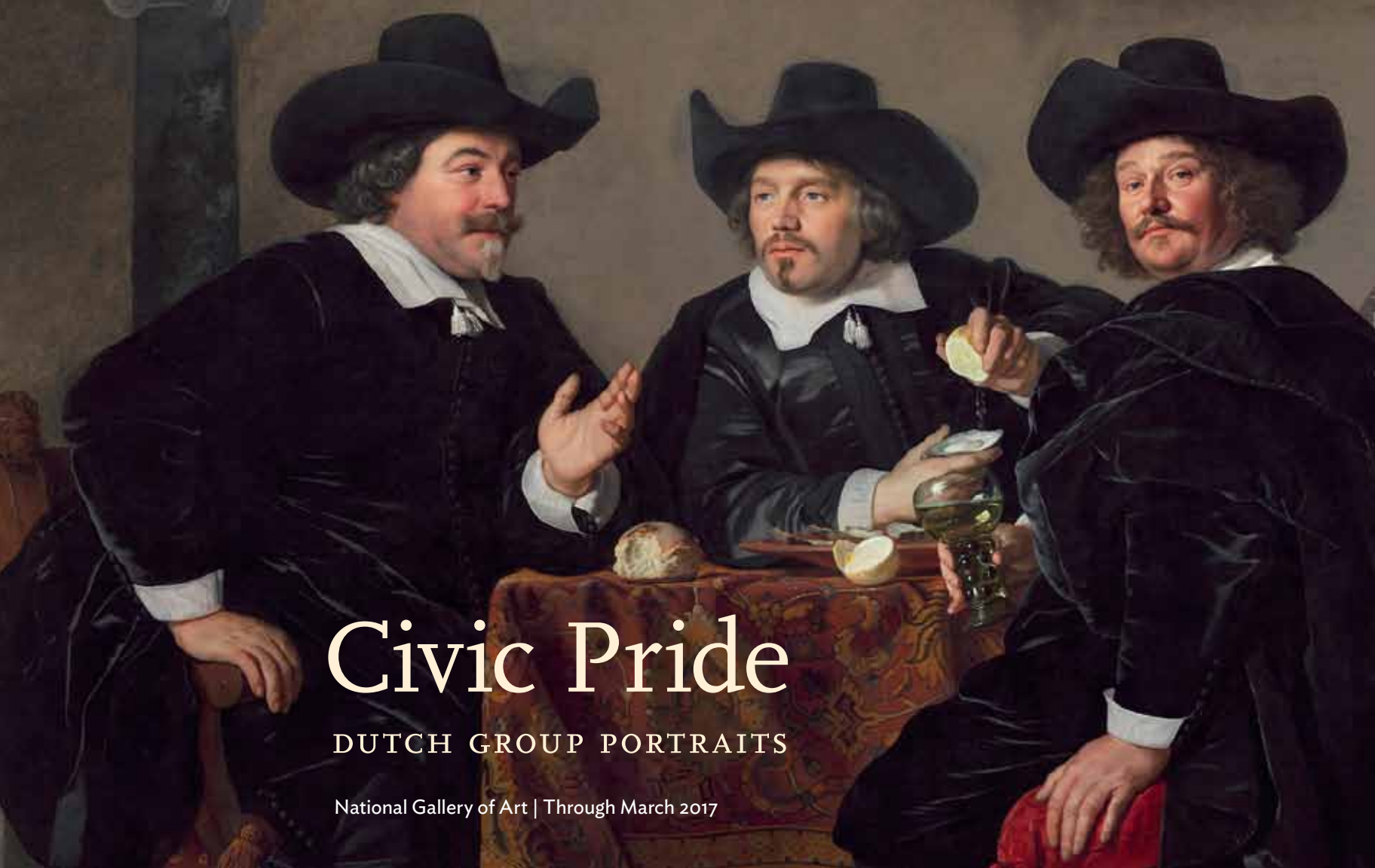

Civic Pride

DUTCH GROUP PORTRAITS

National Gallery of Art | Through March 2017

A NEW TYPE OF portraiture appeared in the northern Netherlands in the seventeenth century: large group portraits depicting the leadership of professional and civic organizations. Guild administrators, government officials, board members of charitable institutions, and officers of militia companies frequently commissioned distinguished artists to paint their portraits on a single, oversized canvas or panel. Often depicting the sitters in the midst of a meeting or a meal, these group portraits emphasized the members' shared responsibilities, personal interactions, and civic-mindedness, and they continue to provide a remarkable visual record of the inner workings of society at the height of the Dutch Republic's presence on the global stage. Although hundreds of group portraits were painted for town halls, militia headquarters, guild halls, and boardrooms of charitable institutions, they are rarely found in collections or exhibitions outside the Netherlands.

Two paintings entitled *The Governors of the Kloveniersdoelen*, one executed in 1642 (FIG. 1) by Govert Flinck (1615–1660), the other painted in 1655 (FIG. 2) by Bartholomeus van der Helst (1613–1670), immortalize the civic pride of those who governed the headquarters of the Kloveniers (or Harquebusiers), one of Amsterdam's three militia companies. The works are on long-term loan to the National Gallery of Art from the Rijksmuseum and the Amsterdam Museum.

Govert Flinck and Bartholomeus van der Helst were two of the most renowned portraitists of their time. Flinck, who trained under Rembrandt in the early 1630s, became an independent master in 1636. Like his famous teacher, he specialized in both history paintings and fashionable portraiture. Van der Helst was sought after for the elegant realism of his portraits and was a favorite artist of the Amsterdam militia companies. In their paintings of the governors, both artists used gestures and expressions to enliven the scene, and conveyed a sense of immediacy by having the foreground figure turn around in his chair to acknowledge the viewer's presence. Though the paintings are similar in concept and size, the artists' stylistic approaches, as well as the attire and demeanor of the governors, nonetheless reflect the different times in which the men were portrayed. Flinck's work displays the restraint deemed appropriate for depictions of solid citizenship in Dutch art through the 1640s. Van der Helst's later painting still conveys the respectability of office but is executed in a loose, fluid, and elegant style, characteristic of tastes that came into fashion midcentury.

The governors seen in both paintings were responsible only for the operations of the Harquebusiers' headquarters, leaving the military functions of the company in the hands of colonels and captains. The Harquebusiers were called Kloveniers after the *klover,* an improved version of the harquebus and the forerunner of the musket. Their headquarters, like those of the other two militias, had an adjacent practice range where guardsmen could sharpen their shooting skills—hence the buildings were all known as *doelen* (targets).

The Harquebusiers' building (Kloveniersdoelen) was not just used for gatherings of guardsmen but was also rented out for official receptions and festive dinners hosted by the mayors and the city council. It also served as a public tavern. Because the governors shared in the profits from the events held there, a governorship was a lucrative post that was generally reserved for those who had earlier been captain of a city district. Thus the governors in these two paintings belonged to Amsterdam's elite. Indeed, all but one of them were members of the city council, while three of them later served as burgomaster (mayor) of Amsterdam. Strategic marriages over multiple generations resulted in several of the men being related, strengthening the close ties among members of the town's elite.

A tower of the medieval city fortifications and its grounds had initially served as the Kloveniersdoelen, but the cramped quarters plus the increased prestige of the Harquebusiers caused the city council to finance a major addition (FIG. 3). The Great Hall, completed by 1627, was the largest public space in Amsterdam at the time and quickly became the preferred site for important municipal functions and receptions in honor of foreign dignitaries.

In the early 1640s the Harquebusiers began to commission group portraits of guardsmen and their leadership to decorate the Great Hall. In 1642, the four governors in charge of the Kloveniersdoelen asked Flinck to portray them on a canvas destined for a prominent spot above one of the hall's two grand fireplaces. The men seated around the table are, from the left, Jacob Willekens, Pieter Reael, Jan Claesz Vlooswijck, and Albert Coenraetsz Burgh. The administrator of the building, Jacob Pietersz Nachtglas, solemnly presents the

FIG. 1 Govert Flinck, *The Governors of the Kloveniersdoelen*, 1642, oil on canvas, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, on loan from the City of Amsterdam (TOP).

FIG. 2 Bartholomeus van der Helst, *The Governors of the Kloveniersdoelen*, 1655, oil on canvas, Amsterdam Museum (BOTTOM).

FIG. 3 Caspar Commelin, *Kolveniers Doelen* [sic] in *Beschryvinge van Amsterdam,* 2 vols., Amsterdam (1693), vol. 2, book IV, p. 665 (LEFT).

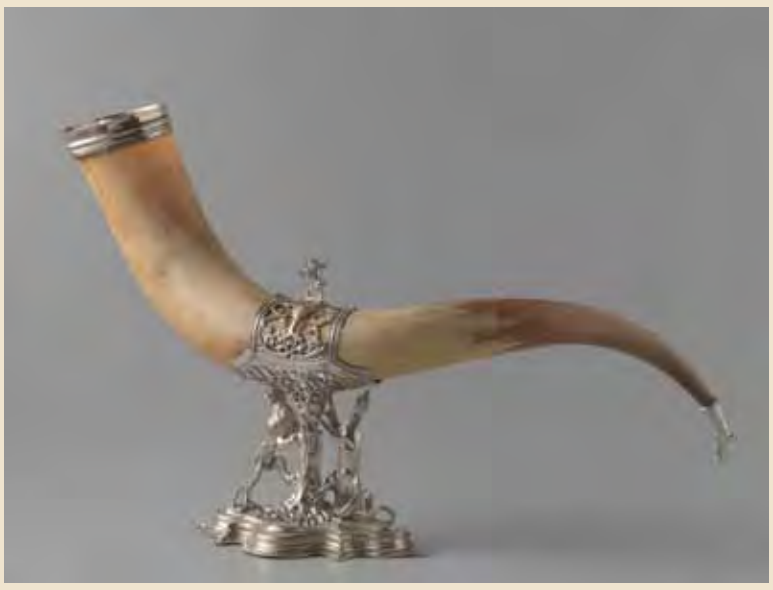

FIG. 4 Arent Coster (silversmith), *Drinking Horn of the Harquebusiers' Guild*, 1547, buffalo horn mounted on silver pedestal, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, on loan from the City of Amsterdam.

Harquebusiers' ceremonial drinking horn to the governors. The vessel, a buffalo horn supported by a rich silver mount in the form of a stylized tree with a rampant lion and dragon (FIG. 4), had been fashioned in 1547 and was displayed at important events. The Harquebusiers' emblem, a griffin's claw, appears on a gilded shield on the wall. The three men on the left wear old-fashioned pleated ruff collars, while the two at right already sport the more fashionable flat, pointed collar that had just come into vogue. In addition to the highlights provided by the collars, Flinck has countered the array of blacks in the men's costumes with the sumptuous reds and earth tones of the luxurious oriental carpet that covers the table. The gathering exudes gravitas; the only sign of conviviality is a tall flute, half-filled with red wine, on the table.

Thirteen years later, when Bartholomeus van der Helst portrayed a new set of governors, the atmosphere in the boardroom seems to have loosened considerably. The informality of Van der Helst's style captured the dynamic interactions of the group and the geniality of the occasion: the governors are feasting on oysters and empty shells litter the floor. In 1655, the four governors were quite a bit younger than those who had sat for Flinck, which may partially account for the more relaxed atmosphere in Van der Helst's work. Seated around the table are, from the left, Cornelis Witsen, Roelof Bicker (shown squeezing lemon juice onto an oyster), Gerrit Reynst, and red-haired Simon van Hoorn. Reynst, casually holding his wineglass, has turned to face the viewer. The woman entering the room with a platter of fresh oysters is likely to be Geertruyd Nachtglas, the administrator of the Kloveniersdoelen, who had assumed that position in 1654 following the death of her father Jacob (seen holding the drinking horn in Flinck's work). Because the Great Hall was already fully decorated, Van der Helst's painting was installed over the fireplace mantel of the governors' meeting room on the floor below.

Paintings of governors and administrators of civic and social institutions came out of the older tradition of militia paintings. These depict companies of guardsmen—for example, Nicolaes Pickenoy's *Company of the District IV under the Command of Captain Jan Claeszn van Vlooswijck*, 1642 (FIG. 5)—and were painted on large canvases or panels destined for the walls of their headquarters. Pickenoy, who was Van der Helst's teacher, painted this canvas as one of six grand militia company portraits—including Rembrandt's masterful *Night Watch*, 1642—that decorated the Great Hall of the Harquebusiers. Of the 135 documented Dutch militia paintings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, no fewer than 57 were commissioned by civic guard companies in Amsterdam, and 35 of these depicted groups of Harquebusiers.

Civic guard companies not only defended Dutch cities against outside aggressors, quelled local disturbances, and policed criminal behavior, but they also provided military pomp at important ceremonies. Thus many militia paintings, including Pickenoy's, show a company and its officers assembled as if preparing to fall into formation. In times of war, such as the early stages of the Dutch revolt against Spanish rule (1568–1648), the guardsmen could even be deployed at the front lines, leading one contemporary observer to call them "the muscles and nerves" of the Dutch Republic.

Paintings of governors of civic institutions, such as those by Flinck and Van der Helst, contain fewer figures than do militia group portraits, but they are no less visually compelling or historically significant. It was only through the efforts of such citizens and organizations that the young Dutch Republic achieved its economic, political, and artistic golden age in the seventeenth century. The numerous portraits of these remarkable people, painted by important artists, allow us to look back at that world and envision the character and appearance of those who were instrumental in creating such a dynamic and successful society.

This exhibition was organized by the National Gallery of Art.

The exhibition is made possible by the Hata Foundation.

This program is also supported, in part, by public funds from the Netherlands Cultural Services and through the generosity of Mrs. Henry H. Weldon.

This brochure was written by Henriette de Bruyn Kops, department of northern baroque paintings, and produced by the department of exhibition programs and the publishing office.

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COVER Fig 2, detail

FIG. 5 Nicolaes Pickenoy, *Company of the District IV under the Command of Captain Jan Claeszn van Vlooswijck*, 1642, oil on canvas, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, on loan from the City of Amsterdam.