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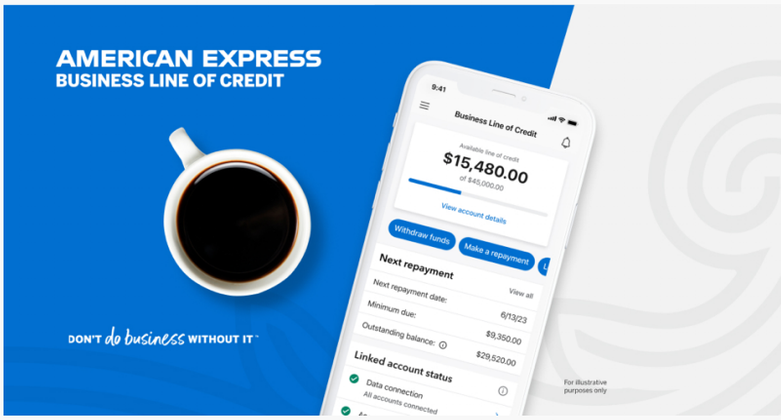

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Frans Hals and the Art of Laughter

His grinning subjects can be hard to take seriously. But a major exhibition argues that Frans Hals is an old master on par with Rembrandt and Vermeer.

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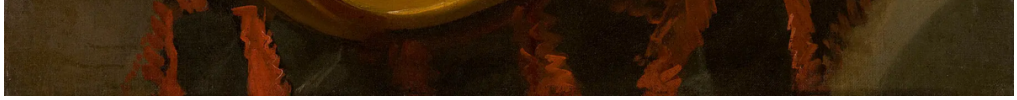

Frans Hals's "The Lute Player" (1623-4). Some of Hals's most popular paintings depict characters he encountered in the taverns of Haarlem, the Netherlands. Mathieu Rabeau/RMN-Grand Palais (Louvre)

By Nina Siegal
Nina Siegal reported this story from London and Amsterdam.

Oct. 2, 2023

What made people in the Dutch Golden Age laugh? The person who knew best was the painter Frans Hals.

No other artist of the last 400 years painted quite as many smiles. Think of the mischievous grin of his jolly jester in "The Lute Player." Or the radiant expressions of his newlyweds, posing in a garden, in his 1622 "Portrait of a Couple." And who can forget the mirth of his "Pekelharing" (Pickled Herring), a picture of a merry drinker.

Even Hals's old ladies are allowed a giggle.

Was it the lack of sobriety in his images that made it hard to take him seriously? For long stretches of art history, Hals was forgotten, or ignored.

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A major retrospective of his work, now at the National Gallery, in London, and moving on to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, in February, hopes to bring back the laughter.

"Portrait of a Couple" (1622). Scholars believe the painting depicts Isaac Massa, a Dutch grain trader, and his bride, Beatrix van der Laen. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

The show brings together some 50 works on loan from public and private collections, and some of them are leaving Haarlem, the city near Amsterdam where they were painted, for the first time. "The Laughing Cavalier," arguably his most famous painting, is on loan from the Wallace Collection, across town from the National Gallery, for the first time since 1900. Together, they form the first survey devoted to Hals's work in more than three decades.

"That means you have to be quite old now — at least 45 or 50 — to have seen a full retrospective," said the National Gallery curator Bart Cornelis, who collaborated with a colleague from the Rijksmuseum on the show. "This is our chance to reintroduce him to a larger public."

The curators also want to elevate Hals to a higher rank in the pantheon of old masters. They'd like to see him considered on par with Johannes Vermeer — whose recent blockbuster at the Rijksmuseum had 650,000 visitors — or other painters who are already household names.

"We thought it was high time that the artist gets his proper due," Cornelis said. "He is on a level as a portrait painter with Rembrandt and with Velazquez, and he has that important a place in the history of Western painting. With an exhibition like this you try to give the artist that place again."

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Historically, Hals occupied the top rungs of the art hierarchy at home in the Netherlands, said Benjamin Moser, the author of “The Upside-Down World: Meetings with the Dutch Masters.”

“That’s the status he always had in Holland,” he said. “Rembrandt, Vermeer, Frans Hals: They were considered the ‘Big Three.’”

To return to that rank for international audiences, “Hals needs the anthology treatment that an exhibition like this can give him,” added Moser. “When they’re too dispersed, you don’t appreciate the astronomical genius of his paintings.”

Hals’s virtuoso skills are often expressed through those smiles, Cornelis said. At the time Hals was working, “No one really painted laughter and joy in paintings,” he added. “Most other artists shunned it, first because it was kind of against decorum, but also because it’s incredibly difficult.”

By showing teeth, he explained, artists run the risk of making the subject appear to grimace, or even cry: It’s a delicate balance of brushwork to get a smile right.

Many of Hals's portraits, like "Malle Babbe" (c. 1640) were not commissioned: He merely chose to depict interesting people from his surroundings. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie

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Hals's personal character — or a misunderstanding about it — also had something to do with his wavering reputation over the centuries, said Friso Lammertse, the show's Rijksmueum co-curator.

One of the central 18th-century art critics, Arnold Houbraken, asserted that Hals was "a riotous drunk," who spent most of his life in the pub, which is why so many of his portraits feature people clanking tankards or looking inebriated.

"One contemporary called him 'lustig,'" Lammertse explained, a Dutch word that can mean "lusty," or merely "merry." "For a long time it's been fashionable to stress the moralism of Dutch painting — but that has nothing to do with Hals."

In fact, very little is known about Hals, the person, Lammertse said. Even the date of his birth, some time around 1582-84, remains a mystery. It's known that he married twice, first to Anneke Harmensdochter, who died in 1615, and later, to Lysbeth Reyniers. He had at least 14 children, 11 of them with Lysbeth. He died, in his 80s, in 1666.

What is clear is that he spent almost his entire life in Haarlem, where he recorded the local population through 160 to 220 portraits, depending on which biographer you follow. He never painted landscapes, still lifes or domestic scenes, as far as we know — only his portraits survive.

The vast majority of his works were commissioned by his sitters, usually burghers or merchants, married couples, or groups like civic militias or provincial leaders. But about 20 percent of his portraits were not commissioned: He merely chose to depict interesting people from his surroundings.

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"Banquet of the Officers of the St George Civic Guard" (1627) depicts the members of a Haarlem militia. Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem

Curators refer to those anonymous figures as "tronies" or types, and in Hals's own day they were popular and sold very well, Lammerste said. They include some of the most memorable images of his oeuvre, such as "Laughing Boy," from about 1630, which may show one of his children.

His famous picture of "Malle Babbe," an old woman with a pet owl perched on her shoulder, holding a huge beer tankard, is believed to be a Haarlem notable with what we would now call mental health issues.

Hals "must have had a genuine interest in all social classes of society," said Marrigje Rikken, the head of collections and exhibitions for the Frans Hals Museum, in Haarlem. "If you look at the figures, and their ragged clothing, you can clearly see they were not of high social status, but he painted them with great sincerity."

Cornelis said Hals was at his most virtuosic when he could paint without any directives from his sitters. In these tronies, he was more experimental with his paints, focusing on the expressiveness of his figures, which seem to move, dance, or laugh. "That's where he really let rip," he said.

Although his paintings can give the impression that they were dashed off in a bar, Lammertse said that Hals spent a great deal of time composing the portraits to create that effect. The key to the sense of spontaneity was not speed, but loose brushwork — paint vigorously daubed onto the canvas with thick, expressive strokes.

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His intention, Rikken said, was to make the paint, itself, visible. A Hals painting she added, was "not an illusion, it's an art work."

In the 18th century and for most of the 19th century, his loose style of brushwork fell out of favor as a more refined, academic painting style came into vogue, Rikken said. Artists produced romantic and neoclassical scenes that were often allegorical, and although they painted portraits, hardly anyone was laughing.

When the Impressionists came along in the later 19th century, they rediscovered Hals. A French journalist and art critic, Théophile Thoré-Burger, is credited with causing a resurgence of interest in Hals's work. He thought Hals's daring brushwork, which he encountered on a visit to Holland, could be an example to modern artists who wanted to reject the academic style.

Artists visited Haarlem's town hall, where several of Hals's large-scale works were on display, to take a look. Gustave Courbet, John Singer Sargent and James Abbott McNeill Whistler reveled in his brushwork, and adopted elements of his style. Courbet even copied his "Malle Babbe."

When Whistler came to Haarlem, in 1902, he marveled at Hals's group portraits. He could not restrain himself from reaching out toward "Regentesses of the Old Men's Alms House," a 1664 painting of governesses of the retirement home.

A town hall guard recognized Whistler as "the great painter" and allowed him to touch the painting. Awe-struck, "he moved tenderly with his fingers over the face of one of the old women," according to an account by one of Whistler's traveling companions in a 1908 biography of the painter.

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After the Impressionists embraced Hals's work, one might think that his reputation was secured. But appreciation for his work ebbed again after World War II, when abstraction took center stage.

"The Laughing Cavalier" (1624), the curator Friso Lammertse said, "combines everything Hals stands for."
The Wallace Collection, London

Today, an argument still needs to be made for his greatness, Cornelis said, since interest in Hals has been eclipsed by a taste for the quiet interior scenes painted by Vermeer.

One need look no further than "The Laughing Cavalier" to grasp Hals's value as an observer of humanity.

"It combines everything Hals stands for," Lammertse said. "It's extremely lively, and the cliché is that he breathes. If you come close to the painting, you see that the elegance of the person is mimicked in the elegance with which he handles the brush."

Moser said that bringing together some 50 paintings — lots of smiling faces — into a single exhibition will help advance the argument for a renewed appreciation.

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"When you see a single Hals, you might say, 'That's a beautiful painting,' but you might not grasp Hals's Himalayan ambition," Moser said. "When you see them together, it's like the difference between hearing a violin and listening to a whole orchestra."

Corrections were made on Oct. 2, 2023*: An earlier version of this article misspelled the surname of an artist. He is John Singer Sargent, not Sergeant.*

An earlier version of this article misattributed a quotation. "It combines everything Hals stands for" was said by Friso Lammertse, not Bart Cornelis.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. Learn more

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A version of this article appears in print on Oct. 8, 2023, Section AR, Page 12 of the New York edition with the headline: A Dutch Painter Gets the Last Laugh. Order Reprints | Today's Paper | Subscribe

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