

ARTnews

Frans Hals: Haarlem Renaissance

BY Stephanie Strasnick POSTED 05/29/13

An exhibition at the Frans Hals Museum sheds new light on the artist, his techniques, and his influence

Nicknamed “Merry Frans” by his biographers, Dutch Golden Age painter Frans Hals was known for his portraits of lively, ebullient, and often inebriated people. An avid drinker himself, the artist met some of his subjects during outings to local bars in Haarlem. Many of his sitters were lower-class individuals and include a prison inmate, a comedian, and a nurse. By painting their portraits, Hals afforded them a luxury traditionally reserved for the upper class. Just as Hals depicted his sitters in a new light, the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem is mounting an exhibition that brings a fresh perspective on the artist’s work. The show, titled “Frans Hals: Eye to Eye with Rembrandt, Rubens and Titian” (through July 28), is the first major exhibition of the artist’s work in almost 25 years and will present key paintings by Hals alongside pieces from other artists from the late 15th to mid-16th centuries.

Hals was a master of the fleeting moment and his paintings capture a great sense of movement. Many artists were unable to achieve this effect, but the exhibition shows that others did try to emulate it.



Frans Hals, *Pekelharing (Pickled Herring)*, ca. 1628–30, a joyful, drunken comedian. MHK, GEMÄLDEGALERIE ALTE MEISTER, KASSEL

Van Dyck’s *Portrait of François Langlois* (ca. 1630), for example, appears to have borrowed several compositional elements directly from *Pekelharing (Pickled Herring)*, ca. 1628–30, Hals’s painting of a joyful, drunken comedian. The sitters are posed similarly, with their heads cocked slightly back, and both are grinning widely, a feature often favored by Hals.

The show also demonstrates the ways Hals was influenced by other artists. Like Titian and Tintoretto, Hals chose to work in a very quick, painterly manner. Tintoretto’s loose brushstrokes show that he painted very rapidly and would often finish pieces *alla prima*, or all at once. This sense of haste is present in many works by Hals, and recent scholarship suggests that his portrait *Jasper Schade* (ca. 1645) was also painted in only one sitting.

“The most visually exciting comparisons in the exhibition are the very late works by Hals and very late works by Rembrandt,” says the show’s curator, Anna Tummers. In Rembrandt’s *Portrait of Margaretha de Geer* (ca. 1661) and Hals’s *Regentesses of the Old Men’s Almshouse* (1664), both artists use an extremely rough painting style. The works feature a muted color palette, and the subjects sit poised, somewhat somberly, wearing the same headwear. Yet technically the paintings are very different from one another, with Hals using much thinner and more clearly defined applications of paint.

The show places Hals in the context of his contemporaries and his predecessors. “Through these comparisons,” says Tummers, “it becomes obvious what sets Frans Hals apart.”