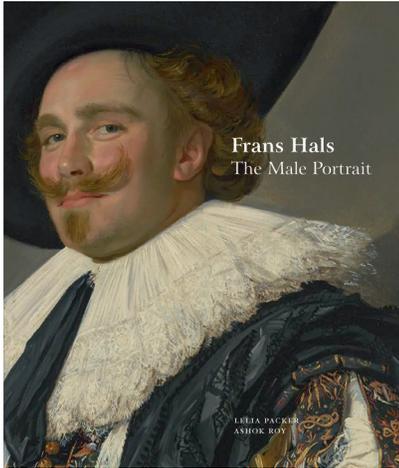


Review

Lelia Packer and Ashok Roy, *Frans Hals. The male portrait*, London, Philip Wilson, 2021, 144 pp. ISBN 9781781301104.



It is seldom that the painter Frans Hals (1582/3-1666) and his paintings are the sole focus of an exhibition; not since 1990 has Hals headlined his own solo exhibition. As one of the most revered portraiture painters in the history of art, whose painting techniques make use of harsh emotive brushwork, he is an artist paralleling Rembrandt and Vermeer. Instead, several other thematic exhibitions of his work have been organised, most of which juxtaposed his paintings against paintings by his contemporaries. His namesake museum in Haarlem organised ‘Frans Hals. Eye to Eye with Rembrandt, Rubens and Titian’ in 2013, and then ‘Frans Hals and the Moderns’ in 2018.¹ In September 2022, that museum opened ‘Newcomers’, which exhibited Hals’s paintings

alongside those of other Haarlem-based painters, who also moved there from the Southern Netherlands, as refugees. Simultaneously, since 1990 a small group of other, intimate exhibitions on the artist have been organised – composed of a more tight selection from Hals’s paintings.

In 2011, the Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibited the eleven paintings by Hals held in their collection, in an exhibition named ‘Frans Hals in the Metropolitan Museum’.² Between 2018-2019, the Toledo Museum of Art, the Royal Museums of Fine Arts in Brussels, and the Fondation Custodia in Paris all presented the known family portraits by Hals, in an exhibition named ‘Frans Hals Portraits. A Family Reunion’.³ Lastly, in 2021, the Dallas Museum of Art showcased two portraits of the same male sitter that Hals painted a decade apart from one another, in an exhibition named ‘Frans Hals. Detecting a Decade’. Breaking this trend in Hals exhibitions will be the first major solo exhibition on the artist,

1 Anna Tummers (ed.), *Frans Hals. Eye to Eye with Rembrandt, Rubens and Titian* (Rotterdam 2013); MARRIGJE RIKKEN et al., *Frans Hals. Meet Singer Sargent, Van Gogh and Manet* (Haarlem 2018).

2 Walter Liedtke, ‘Frans Hals–Style and Substance’, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 69 (2011) 4-48.

3 Lawrence W. Nichols, Liesbeth De Belie, and Pieter Biesboer, *Frans Hals Portraits. A Family Reunion* (Brussels 2018).

in 2023-2024, opening at the National Gallery in London – which will then travel to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

'Frans Hals. The Male Portrait' was held at the Wallace Collection in London from 22 September 2021 until 30 January 2022, which the museum framed as being 'the first-ever show to focus solely on Hals's portraits of men posing on their own' (viii). In this way, it is aligned with the past decade's stream of smaller Hals exhibitions. Yet, given the current heightened awareness around diversity and social justice, which has increasingly found its way into the programming of art museums, a showcase of portraits of white and wealthy men from the seventeenth century may seem surprising. This aspect of the show's curatorial framework is promptly addressed in the director's foreword by noting that the focus is on the technical brilliance of the thirteen included portraits. The Wallace Collection's bequest of 1897, of Hals's 1624 *The Laughing Cavalier* – the museum's only work by Hals – is the primary work that the exhibition is organised around. The book is very technical in the nature of its essays.

It is unfortunate that the publication does not catalogue, or annotate, the included thirteen Hals paintings. What at first seems to be a publication on Frans Hals's male portraits, is in all actuality a publication entirely focused on the Wallace Collection's famed 1624, much-celebrated painting by Hals. The work is lauded as a British national treasure, as will be discussed later in this review. There is no true central aim to this exhibition; it is just a nice selection of exquisite works by Hals, collected for a moment in time in London, to encircle rings of history around its Hals painting. Perhaps, in its own way, this book and its exhibition could be a welcome stepping-stone to a continual stream of exhibitions that cull together a selected grouping of Hals paintings, yet often no more than five or ten works in total. In this way, this book is a continuation of the most recent Hals exhibitions and publications, centred around a thematic clustering of his works.

The book is divided into five chapters, with a biography of Hals as an introduction. An appendix consists of *The Laughing Cavalier*'s provenance. As not everyone who visited the Wallace Collection knew who Frans Hals was and is, under the banner of education, this Hals publication succeeds in catering to a wide-ranging audience – from scholars to the casual reader – by relaying Hals's life narrative. The exhibition's curator, Lelia Packer, is the main author of the volume, having written nearly all the chapters. Ashok Roy, Director of Collections at London's National Gallery, authored one of the book's five chapters on the making of the *The Laughing Cavalier* and is a co-author of 'The Making Frans Hals and Portraiture'. His two contributions are more technical-material-oriented.

Skirting the issue of the detail that this is a publication produced around one painting, in a very celebrated London museum, which has thus directed the framework of its chapters, it is nevertheless a very useful book that also encapsulates the potential to introduce Hals's oeuvre to a much wider public, beyond art connoisseurs. In the first chapter, Packer introduces readers to Hals's life and paintings and charts the general motifs in his works (such as akimbo arms) and the background of the sitters discussed, noting their mercantile capitalistic trade tendencies. Largely discussing the intricate details of the exhibit's namesake painting, such as the iconography of the work, in relation to Hals's other portraits, the second chapter examines the costuming of Hals's sitters and the meanings that it conveys, of social status.

In the third chapter, Packer traces the much-trodden terrain of the nineteenth-century revival of Hals by French art critic Théophile Thoré-Bürger. Even Frances Suzman Jowell,

who is the world's authority on that art critic, noted during one of the Wallace Collection's lectures to accompany the exhibition that this essay adds nothing new to her work, originally published in her 1974 *Art Bulletin* essay.⁴ Its last few paragraphs do, however, neatly tie the cavalier back to its appearances in British popular culture during the second half of the twentieth century. This chapter will be of much interest to the casual reader as it traces the iconography of the painting's appearance in British popular culture – as in advertising and satirical recreations.

Authored by Roy, the fourth chapter is also the one containing the newest research on Hals, albeit focused solely on the technical aspects of the work: the canvas, its ground, and its dead colouring. This chapter will also most likely be of interest to the rather dedicated technical art historian or Hals scholar. The last chapter attempts to place Hals's paintings and their formal characteristics within a larger historical framework that touches upon the economics of the seventeenth-century art market in Haarlem, as it related to portraiture. In this sense, and as its footnotes indicate, it is largely in debt to the information in Christopher D.M. Atkins's numerous publications on Hals, with their focus on Hals's style as his own unique 'brand'.⁵

The book would have benefited from the addition of other contributors, to help strengthen its authority within Hals studies. Its information on Hals's biography and parallel relations to his paintings in correlation to the paintings in the exhibition are not intensely researched. Nor, beyond technical research done on *The Laughing Cavalier*, is there much new in the way of new research on the life and work of Hals. This is a generalist's publication. Yet this is more than fine, as the book was meant to eulogize the Wallace Collection's famed Hals painting – so deeply ingrained in British popular culture, as it seems to be. And in that, it has succeeded.

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4 Frances Susman Jowell, 'Thoré-Bürger and the Revival of Frans Hals', *Art Bulletin* 56 (1974) 101-117. See also her *Thoré-Bürger and the Art of the Past* (New York 1977) and 'Thoré-Bürger – A Critical Role in the Art Market', *Burlington Magazine* 13 (1996) 115-129.

5 Christopher D.M. Atkins, 'Frans Hals's Virtuoso Brushwork', *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 54 (2003), 280-307, and his *The Signature Style of Frans Hals. Painting, Subjectivity, and the Market in Early Modernity* (Amsterdam 2012).