

The Observer Art

Review

Frans Hals review – a joyful Dutch master in the spotlight

National Gallery, London

Often overshadowed by his contemporary Rembrandt, the 17th-century Haarlem artist is revealed to be a genius of the seemingly nonchalant yet telling portrait in this first showcase of his work in 30 years



📷 'Even if Marie Larp's ruff is stiff and starched, she is the human embodiment of a sigh': portraits by Frans Hals of husband and wife Pieter Dircksz Tjarck and Marie Larp, c1635, reunited at the National Gallery. Photograph: Guy Bell/Shutterstock



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Two portraits: Marie Larp and Pieter Dircksz Tjarck, painted as a pendant pair by Frans Hals in about 1635, a year after their marriage. And what a couple they make. Pieter Tjarck holds a pink rose – a symbol, perhaps, of his love for his new wife. But it fairly flops from his fingers, less a prop than an afterthought. It's his face that's the main attraction: carefully considering eyes, outstandingly bristly moustache, that long, well-earned groove between his eyebrows. Tipped back in his seat, as if ready to answer any question, his unstudied aspect makes Marie Larp seem almost impossibly formal beside him, her back straight, her embroidered dress without any crease or fold. Look a little harder, though. The scarlet of her cheeks, the way her hand presses lightly against her ribcage, cannot be misread. Her countenance speaks down the centuries of a very particular kind of fulfilment: a contentment that still, we understand, has its excitements. Even if her ruff is stiff and starched, she is the human embodiment of a sigh.

At the National Gallery, these paintings may be seen together for the first time since the 19th century – one of a series of grand (and in their case, heart-flipping) coups in the first major exhibition of the work of [Frans Hals](#) for more than 30 years. The Laughing Cavalier (1624) has travelled from the nearby Wallace Collection, where it has hung since 1900; one of the artist's vast group portraits has made its way to London from the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem for the first time. But even were it not for such showstopping loans, this exhibition, curated with hands-off elegance and quiet passion by Bart Cornelis, would still be wondrous. Make your way round it – there are some 50 works on display – and once you've lifted your jaw from the ground, you will wonder why Hals has for so long played second fiddle (and, sometimes, not even that) to contemporaries such as Rembrandt and Velázquez. It may strike you as the great art mystery of our age.



📷 The 'unassuming high-wire act' of Hals's Portrait of a Man, Possibly a Clergyman, c1658. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

It wasn't always so. Manet loved him; so did Van Gogh. "Frans Hals painted portraits; nothing nothing nothing but that. But it is worth as much as Dante's Paradise and the Michelangelos and Raphaels and even the Greeks," the latter wrote to Émile Bernard in 1888. Somewhere along the way, though, he fell out of favour, acquiring a reputation for... what? A stodginess and a sameness, I suppose. All that black, people think – and yes, there is a lot of it. But what black it is, light rendering it as lustrous as pewter and even, on occasion, gold; and how it sets off his faces, dialling up their radiance, the low-key setting for all of his subjects' immense (and surprisingly modern) humanity.

In a room given over to smaller works, I looked at the exquisite Portrait of a Man, Possibly a Clergyman (c1658), and wondered how I would ever be able to describe its unassuming high-wire act; the way it makes the simple – here is just an ordinary man, his hands peaceably folded – seem numinous, his being subtly haloed with burnt orange. No words can do it justice. It must be seen to be believed.

The exhibition is chronological, climaxing with the looser brushstrokes of his later work (Cornelis is pleasingly attentive to brushstrokes). Hals (1582/4-1666) was born in Antwerp but lived and worked in Haarlem, where he was apprenticed under Karel van Mander. The earliest paintings that survive, however, date only from the early 1610s – two are in the exhibition – and thanks to this, Hals appears before us a fully formed artist. If he worked quickly, as we're told, we see little sign of it – save, perhaps, for the inimitable freshness he brings to everything (and, once, a couple of unexpectedly marvellous drips).

He's good at smiles – nonchalance is his forte – and he's democratic too, affording as much attention to a maid as to her privileged charge (Portrait of Catharina Hooft With Her Nurse, 1619-20). Sitters are allowed to crook their arms, and twist and lean and mess about; Hals is the first artist recorded to have painted someone looking over the back of a chair – almost, if not quite, Christine Keeler-style (Portrait of Isaac Abrahamsz Massa, 1626).



Portrait of Catharina Hooft With Her Nurse, 1619-20. © Photo Scala, Florence/bpk, Bildagentur für Kunst, Kultur und Geschichte, Berlin

Twice married, he had a large family and was often broke. You sense that he saw beyond the trappings of life; he has a way of putting his finger – his brush – on the essence of a person. The Laughing Cavalier may not, in fact, be in hysterics. But he does give all who stand before him the come-on: the eyes flirt, the mouth teases, the hand on his hip gestures silently to body parts we cannot see, and really should not imagine. The Lute Player (c1623) is all cheek. The subject of Portrait of Jasper Schade (1645) is all vanity. The men attending the Banquet of the Officers of the Calivermen Civic Guard (c1627)

are rather silly in their tipsiness. Here is unfeasible skill, but here, too, is great tenderness and, above all, joy.

Walking round, I smiled till my face ached. My pleasure was absolute: untrammelled by anything save for my deadline, and the fact of having to leave at all. Critics too often use the word unmissable; it's the lazy euphemism for very good. This exhibition, however, really is a sight for sore eyes: a mind-changing, once-in-a-lifetime experience, and an inspiring, mood-boosting tonic to boot.

Frans Hals is at the National Gallery, London, until 21 January 2024