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Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century



Frans Hals
Dutch, c. 1582/1583 - 1666

Portrait of a Gentleman

1650/1652

oil on canvas
overall: 114 x 85 cm (44 7/8 x 33 7/16 in.)
Widener Collection 1942.9.29

ENTRY

This imposing middle-aged gentleman is depicted in a three-quarter-length pose with his right shoulder turned slightly toward the viewer and his left arm akimbo. His shoulder-length, wavy brown hair falls on either side of his face from under a black hat with a moderately wide brim. With his right hand he gently pulls forward a black cape at his back that encompasses his shoulders and arms. Three fingers of a glove he is holding are visible below his left hand.

The dates 1650/1652 generally suggested for the Washington painting seem probable, although as Seymour Slive has cautioned, "[documentary] evidence to establish a firm chronology for the last period of Hals' life is meager."[1] Part of the difficulty in dating Hals' portraits is that he frequently returned to earlier conventions for his poses. He had used the energetic pose of this gentleman, for example, as early as 1625 in his portrait of Jacob Petersz Olycan (Mauritshuis, The Hague).[2] Nevertheless, the style of the costume, the broad brushwork used to articulate it, and the bold silhouette of the figure against the gray background are consistent with other works generally dated to the early 1650s. The features are modeled with broad, bold strokes that have great strength and surety. The closest equivalent among Hals' paintings is the equally impressive *Portrait of a Man* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) that Slive also dates to this same period.[3]

The identity of the sitter is not known, but his fashionable attire and dignified bearing indicate that he was a person of some means. Not unreasonably, the title given to the picture in the nineteenth century was *Portrait of a Burgomaster.* Quite possibly, although not necessarily, he was part of a pair. Wilhelm Valentiner suggests that the pendant might be the *Portrait of a Woman* in the Louvre, Paris.[4]

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Although the dimensions of the Louvre painting are smaller, there is technical evidence that the *Portrait of a Gentleman* was once on a stretcher whose dimensions were identical to that of the Louvre portrait. Nevertheless, sufficient reasons exist to reject Valentiner's proposal. Slive rightly argues against it on grounds of date (he dates the woman about 1648–1650 and the Washington portrait about 1650–1652) and composition (the woman is comparatively small in the picture). To these objections, one could also add costume, for the woman's clothes are unacceptably conservative for a mate to this dashing gentleman.

A number of pentimenti are visible in the background area around the figure, particularly near the hat, as Hals altered its shape more than once. The hat now has a narrower brim. These alterations are presently visible because the background and, indeed, much of the black jacket and cape are somewhat abraded [see abrasion]. The face and hands, however, are in excellent condition. Damages exist along all four edges of the painting as a result of its having once been placed on a smaller stretcher. At that point the image was about 2.5 centimeters smaller along both sides and the bottom, and 5 centimeters smaller along the top edge. At the time of this reduction a strip may have been cut off the top. During a later restoration the canvas was restored to its present large stretcher and a strip 2.5 centimeters in width was added to the top to provide some space between the hat and the top edge of the painting area.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

April 24, 2014

NOTES

[1] Seymour Slive, ed., *Frans Hals*, 3 vols. (London, 1970–1974), 1:182.

[2] Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis*, The Royal Cabinet of Paintings Illustrated General Catalogue*, trans. G. Kilburn and Gary Schwartz (The Hague, 1977), 103, no. 459 repro.; Seymour Slive, ed., *Frans Hals*, 3 vols. (London, 1970–1974), 3: no. 32.

[3] Inv. no. 91.26.9; Seymour Slive, ed., *Frans Hals*, 3 vols. (London, 1970–1974), 2: no. 298, 3: no. 190.

[4] Inv. no. M.I.927, 108 x 80 cm; Wilhelm R. Valentiner, *Frans Hal: Des meisters Gemälde,* Klassiker der Kunst in Gesamtausgaben 28 (Stuttgart and Berlin, 1921), 320; Seymour Slive, ed., *Frans Hals*, 3 vols. (London, 1970–1974),

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2:252, 254; 3: no. 171.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The original support is a loosely woven, plain-weave fabric of medium weight, with the original tacking margins trimmed. A nonoriginal 2.5-centimeter-wide fabric strip was attached to the top edge at an unknown date. Prior to the attachment of the extension, approximately 2.5 centimeters of the painting surface along all four sides was turned over the stretcher edges to form a tacking margin. Regularly spaced damages, presumably former tacking holes, are visible in the X-radiographs along all four edges. Prior to acquisition, the painted edges were restored to the picture plane and the original support and extension were lined. Slight cusping is visible along the top, bottom, and left sides, but absent on the right.

A thin, smooth, white ground layer is visible through the thinly painted background. Fluid paint was applied over thin washes in distinct brushstrokes blended wet-into-wet. Several pentimenti are visible. The hat was reworked several times to a narrower form, and the proper right index finger was raised and repositioned. The upper edge of the proper right shoulder, arm, and collar were initially higher. Light highlights in the sitter's proper left shoulder were also painted out by the artist.

In addition to the edge damages, small- to moderate-sized losses of paint and ground are scattered throughout the costume, background, and proper right hand. The thin background and dark costume are extensively abraded, with slight abrasion to the face. Conservation treatment was carried out in 1984–1985 to remove later repaints and a discolored varnish.

PROVENANCE

Probably bequeathed by Lord Frederick Campbell [1729-1816] to William Pitt Amherst, 1st earl Amherst of Arracan [1773-1857], Montreal, Sevenoaks, Kent;[1] by inheritance to his son, William Pitt Amherst, 2nd earl Amherst of Arracan [1805-1886]; by inheritance to his son, William Archer Amherst, 3rd earl Amherst of Arracan [1836-1910]; by inheritance to his brother, Hugh Amherst, 4th earl Amherst of Arracan [1856-1927];[2] (Sedelmeyer Gallery, Paris); sold 13 January 1911 to Peter

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A.B. Widener, Lynnewood Hall, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania; inheritance from Estate of Peter A.B. Widener by gift through power of appointment of Joseph E. Widener, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania; gift 1942 to NGA.

[1] According to Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century...*, 8 vols., trans. from the German edition, London, 1907-1927, 3: 294, the painting was bequeathed by Lord Frederick Campbell to an ancestor of Earl Amherst. According to notes of Edith Standen, Widener's secretary for art, in NGA curatorial files, the painting was bequeathed about 1820 by Lord Frederick Campbell to Lord Amherst. The Getty Provenance Index identified this ancestor of Earl Amherst as William Pitt.

[2] Charles Sedelmeyer, *Illustrated Catalogue of the Eleventh Series of 100 Paintings by Old Masters*, Paris, 1911, no. 11, lists the work as "from the collection of Lord Amherst, in whose family it had been for nearly one hundred years," and the transcript of the bill of sale from Sedelmeyer Gallery to Widener (in NGA curatorial files) repeats this information. "The Earl Amherst" lent the painting to exhibitions in London in 1894 and 1910.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1894 Exhibition of Works by the Old Masters, and by Deceased Masters of the British School. Winter Exhibition, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1894, no. 81, as *Portrait of a Burgomaster*.

1910 Exhibition of Works by the Old Masters and Deceased Masters of the British School. Winter Exhibition, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1910, no. 89, as *Portrait of a Burgomaster*.

1911 100 Paintings by Old Masters, Sedelmeyer Gallery, Paris, 1911, no. 11.

1985 Loan for display with permanent collection, Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio, 1985.

1989 Frans Hals, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Royal Academy of Arts, London; Frans Halsmuseum, Haarlem, 1989-1990, no. 71, repro.

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1997 Rembrandt and the Golden Age: Dutch Paintings from the National Gallery of Art, The Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, 1997, unnumbered brochure.

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1914 Bode, Wilhelm von, and Moritz Julius Binder. *Frans Hals: His Life and Work*. 2 vols. Translated by Maurice W. Brockwell. Berlin, 1914: 2:19, no. 247, pl. 156.

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Berlin, 1921: 320, repro. 242.

1923 *Paintings in the Collection of Joseph Widener at Lynnewood Hall*. Intro. by Wilhelm R. Valentiner. Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, 1923: unpaginated, repro.

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