

[La Bohemienne](#) by [Frans Hals](#)

Original Lithographic Bookplate - Main Subject: Portrait



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Medium
Original Lithographic Bookplate

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About Frans Hals

Hals was born in 1580 or 1581, probably in Antwerp. In 1585, after Antwerp fell to Spain in the Eighty Years War his family moved to Haarlem in the Northern Low Countries, where he lived the remainder of his life.

He took painting lessons from Flemish painter Karel van Mander (1548–1606), who had also fled from the Spaniards, but Mander's ideas are not visible in Hals' work. The earliest known of Hals' art is the 1611, *Jacobus Zaffius*. His 'breakthrough' came in 1616, with the life-size group portrait, *The Banquet of the Officers of the St George Militia Company*.

Historians have reported that he mistreated his first wife, Anneke Hermansz (Annetje Harmensdochter Abeel), and she died in 1616. Already with two children by Anneke, he married Lysbeth Reyniers in 1617, and they had eight children. He reportedly liked to drink, which led him into the company of people of ill repute.

Although Hals' work was in demand throughout his life, he experienced financial difficulties. In addition to painting, he worked as an art dealer and restorer. His creditors brought him to court several times, and to settle his debt with a baker in 1652 he sold his belongings. The inventory of the property seized on mentions only three mattresses and bolsters, an armoire, a table and five pictures. Left destitute, the municipality gave him an annuity of 200 forms in 1664.

At a time when the Dutch nation fought for independence, Hals appeared in the ranks of its military guilds. He was also a member of the Chamber of Rhetoric, and in 1644 chairman of the Painters Corporation at Haarlem.

Frans Hals died in Haarlem on August 26, 1666 and was buried in the city's St. Bavo Church. His widow later died obscurely in a hospital after seeking outdoor relief from the guardians of the poor.

Hals is best known for his portraits, mainly of wealthy citizens. He also painted large group portraits, many of which showed civil guards. He was a Baroque painter, with intimate realism and a radical approach.

His pictures illustrate the various strata of society into which his life led him — banquets or meetings of officers, sharpshooters, guildsmen, admirals, generals, burgomasters, merchants, lawyers, and clerks, itinerant players and singers, gentlefolk, fishwives and tavern heroes.

In group portraits, such as the *Archers of St. Hadrian*, Hals captures each character in a different manner. The faces are not idealized and are clearly distinguishable with their personalities revealed in a variety of poses and facial expressions.

His first master at Antwerp was probably Van Noort but he then entered the atelier of painter and historian Carel van Mander. (Hals owned some Mander paintings, that were amongst the items sold to pay his bakery debt in 1652). He soon improved upon the practice of the time, illustrated by Jan van Scorel and Antonio Moro, and emancipated himself gradually from tradition.

Hals was fond of daylight and silvery sheen, while Rembrandt used golden glow effects based upon artificial contrasts of low light in immeasurable gloom. Both men were painters of touch, but of touch on different keys — Rembrandt was the bass, Hals the treble. Hals seized, with rare intuition, a moment in the life of his subjects. What nature displayed in that moment he reproduced thoroughly in a delicate scale of color, and with mastery over every form of expression. He became so clever that exact tone, light and shade, and modelling are obtained with a few marked and fluid strokes of the brush.

The only record of his work in the first decade of his independent activity is an engraving by Jan van de Velde copied from lost portrait of *The Minister Johannes Bogardus*.

The earliest works by Hals that remain, *Two Boys Playing and Singing* and a *Banquet of the Officers of the St Joris Doele or Arquebusiers of St George* (1616), show him as a careful draughtsman capable of great finish, yet spirited withal. The flesh he painted, is pastose and burnished, less clear than it subsequently became. Later, he became more effective, displayed more freedom of hand, and a greater command of effect.

At this period he painted the full length of *Madame van Beresteyn* (Louvre), and a full-length portrait of *Willem van Heythuysen* leaning on a sword. Both these pictures are equalled by the other *Banquet of the officers*, of the *Arquebusiers of St George* (with different portraits) and the *Banquet of the officers of the Cloveniers or Arquebusiers of St Andrew* of 1627 and an *Assembly of the officers of the Arquebusiers of St Andrew* of 1633. A similar painting, with the date of 1637, suggests some study of Rembrandt masterpieces, and a similar influence is apparent in a picture of 1641 representing the *Regents of the Company of St Elizabeth*, and in the portrait of *Maria Voogt* at Amsterdam.

From 1620 till 1640 he painted many double portraits of married couples, on separate panels, the man on the left panel, his wife at his right. Only once did Hals portray a couple on a single canvas: Double Portrait of a Couple, (circa 1623, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam).

His style changed throughout his life. Vivid colours were gradually replaced by pieces where one colour dominated. Since 1641 he showed a tendency to restrict the gamut of his palette, and to suggest color rather than express it. Later in his life darker tones, even with much black, took over. His brush strokes became looser in later years, fine details became less important than an overall impression. Also where his earlier pieces radiated gaiety and liveliness, his later portraits emphasized the stature and dignity of the people portrayed. This austerity is displayed in Regentesses of the Old Men's Alms House and The Regents and Regentesses of the Oudemannenhuis (c. 1664), which are masterpieces of color, though in substance all but monochromes. His restricted palette is particularly noticeable in his flesh tints which from year to year became more grey, until finally the shadows were painted in almost absolute black, as in the Tymane Oosdorp.

As this tendency coincides with the period of his poverty, historians suggest that one of the reasons, if not the only reason, of his predilection for black and white pigment was the low price of these colors as compared with the costly lakes and carmines.

As a portrait painter Hals had scarcely the psychological insight of a Rembrandt or Velazquez, though in a few works, like the Admiral de Ruyter, the Jacob Olycan, and the Albert van der Meer paintings, he reveals a searching analysis of character which has little in common with the instantaneous expression of his so-called character portraits. In these, he generally sets upon the canvas the fleeting aspect of the various stages of merriment, from the subtle, half ironic smile that quivers round the lips of the curiously misnamed Laughing Cavalier to the imbecile grin of the Hille Bobbe. To this group of pictures belong Baron Gustav Rothschilds Jester, the Bohemienne and the Fisher Boy, whilst the Portrait of the Artist with his second Wife, and the somewhat confused group of the Beresteyn Family at the Louvre show a similar tendency. Far less scattered in arrangement than this Beresteyn group, and in every respect one of the most masterly of Hals' achievements is the group called The Painter and his Family, which was almost unknown until it appeared at the winter exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1906.

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