Frans Hals in America: Another Embarrassment of Riches

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The story of Frans Hals in America has been nearly a century and a half in the making. The legendary museum director W. R. Valentiner was the first to address the topic, as is seen in his 1936 survey volume *Frans Hals in America*. Unfortunately, the pages of his book are filled with scores of misattributions. In addition to discussing early collecting and scholarship on Hals, I will update the story begun by Valentiner and continued by Seymour Slive and others from the second half of the twentieth century to the present. Today, the flow of Hals's paintings coming to America has slowed to a trickle, but notable acquisitions continue to reach our shores. The content of this essay certainly dovetails with a number of Walter Liedtke’s scholarly interests. In addition to his publications on Hals at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, one discovers that Walter was also interested in collecting history on this side of the Atlantic, as is seen in his 1990 article entitled “Dutch Painting in America: The Collectors and Their Ideals” for the *Great Dutch Paintings from America* exhibition catalogue. DOI:10.5092/jhna.2017.9.1.5

1 One hundred fifty years ago, and continuing for the better part of a century, public interest in paintings by Frans Hals (ca. 1583–1660) ranked just behind that of Rembrandt among Dutch artists. As the decades passed, Hals’s artistic achievement would be celebrated with exhibitions, books and articles, multiple oeuvre catalogues, and record prices. Not surprisingly, the early years of Hals’s rebirth took place in European capitals. Shortly thereafter, his story began to be played out in cities across America. What began as a trickle quickly became a flood, as paintings assigned to Hals starting crossing the Atlantic in the 1880s. Unfortunately, Gilded Age collectors were as likely to obtain a misattribution to Hals as one of his masterpieces. Nevertheless, today there are more autograph paintings by Frans Hals in America than in any other country, more in New York City than in Amsterdam and Haarlem combined.

2 Why had Hals become one of the most sought-after painters by American collectors? Walter Liedtke was one of the first to address this question in his essay “Dutch Paintings in America: The Collectors and Their Ideals.” In it, he noted how Gilded Age collectors were encouraged to focus on big names, among them Frans Hals. While historians have for good reason questioned the motives of many of these early American collectors, it is the result of their efforts in acquiring paintings by Frans Hals that concerns us here.

3 As the nineteenth century closed, a perfect storm of means and method, time and place, created
the environment that fed the desires of many Gilded Age collectors. Tycoons such as J. Pierpont Morgan, Henry Clay Frick, P. A. B. Widener, and Andrew Mellon joined others in putting Hals in their crosshairs. The artist’s newly found popularity after nearly two centuries of neglect came largely through the efforts of nineteenth-century critics who praised his paintings and their dynamic brushwork. Hals was championed as a founding father of modernism, whose example would eventually influence artists from Edouard Manet to Vincent van Gogh.5 No less impacted were a number of American painters, including John Singer Sargent and William Merritt Chase.6

4 At the same time, significant numbers of paintings by the master were turning up on Europe’s art markets, the best of which were destined for Americans with deep enough pockets. The story of this tidal wave of his pictures crossing the Atlantic prior to World War I is fairly well documented with articles, collection and exhibition catalogues, and numerous oeuvre catalogues devoted to Hals’s painting.7

5 Among the early arrivals were a number of paintings now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MMA). They include The Smoker, Portrait of a Man, and Portrait of a Woman, all acquired by Henry Marquand and given to the MMA in 1889 and 1890, and the small pendant portraits Petrus Scriverius and Anna van der Aar, purchased about the same time by H. O. Havermeyer and bequested in 1929. Another collector, Charles T. Yerkes, amassed several of Hals’s pictures in the 1890s. Counted in this group are Portrait of a Woman, which ended up at the Frick Collection, and the engaging Singing Girl and Boy with a Violin, now in the Ivor Collection.9

Arguably the greatest period of Frans Hals collecting in America came during the first two decades of the twentieth century, as a growing number of Gilded Age collectors entered the acquisitions race. Robert Altman bought his three Hals genre pictures in the years 1905–07, thus bringing to New York and the MMA Merrymakers at Shrovetide (fig. 1), Yonker Ramp and His Sweetheart, and Boy with a Lute.10 Others shared in the Hals frenzy, as his paintings were snapped...
up by Frick (fig. 2), Morgan, Widener, Charles Taft, and Collis P. Huntington, among others. By the end of this period, works by Hals resided in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Cincinnati, Chicago, Boston, Toledo, and Montreal.

The first significant accounting of Frans Hals’s paintings in America, at least from a quantitative standpoint, took place in 1909. Two separate publications—one a monograph, the other an exhibition catalogue—shaped the discussion. The monograph, *Frans Hals: Sa vie et son oeuvre* (Brussels, 1909), was compiled by E. W. Moes. Of the 275 paintings listed, the author placed 39 in America. By comparison, Wilhelm von Bode’s 1883 summary catalogue of Hals’s paintings had not included a single painting by Hals in this category. This seems puzzling since at least one, a purported autograph version of Hals’s *Malle Babbe* (fig. 3), had come to the MMA as part of its 1871 purchase.

The other early accounting of Frans Hals in America came via the 1909 exhibition catalogue *Paintings by Old Dutch Masters*. On view were twenty paintings then given to Hals, and all came from American collections. This landmark exhibition was curated by W. R. Valentiner and shown at the MMA. The names of many of the pictures’ owners remain familiar more than a century later—among them Frick, Widener, Huntington, Libby, and Altman—for the majority of the paintings they lent have made their way to the walls of museums in New York, New Haven, Connecticut, Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Toronto, Cincinnati, and as far afield as São Paulo, Brazil.

The most important name to emerge from the exhibition was that of German-born scholar Valentiner. His career in America began as the curator of decorative arts at the MMA in 1908, and he would eventually serve as the director of museums in Detroit, Los Angeles, and Raleigh. His training in Berlin with Wilhelm Bode, and then as an assistant to Hofstede de Groot in The Hague, had prepared him for his groundbreaking career in American museums.

Throughout his life Valentiner remained active as a scholar, with Hals and his oeuvre a recurring focal point. From the time he introduced Hals to the general public in 1909, until his death in
1958, Valentiner almost single-handedly set the bar for Frans Hals studies in America. His extensive list of publications and exhibitions devoted to Hals include monographic shows in Detroit (1935) and Los Angeles (1947), as well an exhibition at the 1939 World’s Fair in New York, where sixteen of Hals's pictures were shown. In addition, a memorial exhibition dedicated to Valentiner in Raleigh (1959) contained another thirteen of Hals's paintings, all from American collections.16

Equally impressive are Valentiner’s other publications devoted to Hals. He authored the painter’s *Klassiker der Kunst* volume in 1921,17 wrote several articles on recent additions to Hals’s oeuvre, another devoted to his self-portraits, and contributed numerous entries in private collection catalogues.18 On the heels of his Detroit exhibition catalogue in 1935, he published *Frans Hals Paintings in America* in 1936.19 Serving as the template for the present discussion, it can be seen as the counterpart of Valentiner’s *Rembrandt in Paintings in America* from 1931. As with that volume, scholars have been highly critical of his attributions.

Valentiner illustrated and discussed 105 paintings thought to be by the master in *Frans Hals Paintings in America*. This number included many new “discoveries” by Valentiner since 1909, and some of Hals’s best-known paintings.20 Among them were *Portrait of Pieter Cornelisz van der Morsch* (Pittsburgh, Carnegie Museum of Art), *Portrait of a Young Man* (Cincinnati, Taft Collection), *Fisher Girl* (fig. 4), *Claes Duyst van Voorhout* (MMA), *Pieter Jacobz. Olycan* (Sarasota, The Ringling Museum of Art), and *Willem Coymans* (fig. 5).21

Also found on the pages of Valentiner’s book were two paintings of superlative quality that no longer reside in America. *Family Group in a Landscape* (fig. 6), now in Madrid, and *The Merry Lute Player*, at London’s Mansion House, serve as reminders that the art market remains in flux.22 It is also worth noting that even in instances when individuals donate their artworks to public institutions, it might not guarantee that the objects would not re-enter the market through museum deaccessioning. Several paintings by Hals have been subjected to this practice, including

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examples once owned by the Brooklyn Art Museum (see fig. 4) and two others until recently in the collections of the Corcoran in Washington, D.C., and the Toledo Art Museum.23

An important issue that also arises while turning the pages of Frans Hals Paintings in America is one that has long plagued the field—connoisseurship. At a distance of some eight decades, it becomes quickly apparent that a sizable portion of the paintings simply do not meet the standards associated with Hals’s oeuvre. In fact misattributions have long tarnished the reputation of Valentiner. All too often he sought to expand the stylistic parameters of what defined a painter’s work, a practice clearly evident in his studies on Hals (and Rembrandt).24

As a consequence, American collectors acquired more than their fair share of Hals misattributions. That said, this phenomenon had certainly predated Valentiner. For example the MMA’s purchase of Malle Babbe (see fig. 3) in 1871 was celebrated as a significant acquisition for the institution, coming just as Hals’s rehabilitation was growing within European artistic circles. Henry James, in fact, wrote that the picture was “a masterpiece of inelegant vigour.”25 Unfortunately, the painting is judged today as in “the style of Frans Hals,” a variant based on the Berlin original.

The migration of Hals paintings into American public museums continued nearly unchecked during most of the first half of the twentieth century, with masterpieces by his hand counterbalanced by scores of workshop pictures, copies, and even forgeries. The high point of these efforts came with the opening of the National Gallery of Art in 1941. Eight paintings by Hals, six from the Mellon collection and two from the Widener collection, were brought together for the nation.26 Today only the MMA can tout a larger number of pictures by the master in its collection (eleven).

How then, should the decades prior to World War II be judged with regard to Frans Hals paintings in America? It was undoubtedly a golden age of scholarship and acquisitions, with a remarkable embarrassment of riches found in museums and private collections across the country. The same period could also be characterized as one in which “buyer beware” attached itself to the flood of his paintings coming from Europe. After the war a new landscape of collecting

Fig. 6. Frans Hals, Family Group in a Landscape, ca. 1648, oil on canvas, 202 x 285 cm. Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, inv. 179 (1934.8) (artwork in the public domain)
and connoisseurship related to Hals slowly emerged. Over time quality rather than quantity took center stage. Expertise intensified; collectors became more knowledgeable; and unlike the previous decades, far fewer of his paintings appeared on the art market.

The last half century also saw a new name attached to Hals studies—Seymour Slive. He reset the bar on Hals studies with his three-volume monograph and catalogue raisonné that appeared in the early 1970s. In addition to this important contribution, he published a number of articles on Hals and curated a seminal exhibition devoted to Hals's paintings in 1989. Slive's vision of the painter's oeuvre was far more reasoned than the one provided by Valentiner. For example his count of extant works by Hals numbered 222 in 1974, whereas Valentiner had already accepted more than 300 in 1923, with many more “discoveries” yet to be made.

The period following the war still saw a fair share of Hals paintings coming to America. Interestingly, the pictures making their way into public museums during this period were typically purchased through acquisition funds, rather than as gifts from collectors. The early 1950s saw notable acquisitions landing in museums in Chicago, San Diego (Timken Art Museum), San Francisco, Houston, St. Louis, and Toronto.

During the last half century, the pace of Hals acquisitions in America has slowed appreciably. Nevertheless, a stunning array of superlative paintings continues to arrive, with examples going to public institutions balanced by works acquired by private collectors. As a general rule, private collectors have opted for small-scale works on copper or wood panel. It should also be noted that many of these paintings have been unjustly removed from Hals’s oeuvre by Claus Grimm. His catalogue of Hals’s paintings reduced the number of autograph pictures to just 145. In addition to removing all of the portraits on copper, Grimm also took from Hals a sizable number of portraits and many of his genre paintings, including, quite surprisingly, the MMA’s Merrymakers at Shrovetide (see fig. 1) and Yonker Ramp and His Sweetheart.

Fig. 7. Frans Hals, Portrait of a Man, ca. 1660–66, oil on canvas, 85.8 x 66.9 cm. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of Mrs. Antonie Lilienfeld in Memory of Dr. Leon Lilienfeld, 1966, inv. 66.1054 (artwork in the public domain)

Returning to museum acquisitions of more recent vintage, one discovers the Hals trail now stretches from Ottawa and Toronto to Boston (fig. 7) and Worcester, through the American
heartland via Cleveland, Toledo, Ft. Worth, and Houston, and after a stop in Mexico City, on to California. Today outstanding examples of his paintings can be seen at the Norton Simon Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the J. Paul Getty Museum.

22 If one was so inclined, unscheduled stops also could be made in other cities, among them Raleigh and Allentown, to seek out missteps in Hals collecting. While such stops might require visits to museum storage rooms to inspect paintings whose subject matter ranges from playful children to portraits, the experience would undoubtedly enhance our understanding of Hals's genius and America's seemingly insatiable thirst for his paintings.33

23 Walter Liedtke had few equals in his knowledge of Frans Hals and his artistic genius. And like Seymour Slive, whose recent passing I would also like to pay tribute to here, one should not overlook Liedtke's significant contributions to Hals scholarship. In fact, the two scholars shared the stage in Liedtke's last publication, one appearing a few months after his tragic death. In it, Liedtke provided a positive review of the second edition of Slive's Frans Hals—which rightly praised both the author and the artist.34

24 Two of Liedtke's other publications on Hals cast an even stronger light on his admiration and understanding of this Haarlem master. The first of these consists in his well-reasoned and excellent entries on the Frans Hals paintings at the MMA.35 The other, also a model of scholarship, grew out of these findings. This brilliantly written essay on Hals and his art accompanied a small Hals exhibition shown at the MMA in 2011.36 The title chosen for this project, Frans Hals—Style and Substance, certainly captures the essence of Frans Hals and his paintings. In hindsight following Walter's passing, the words “style and substance” take on added significance, for I cannot think of a better way to describe my mentor and friend.

This article serves as an introduction to a larger history of Frans Hals in America now in preparation.

Acknowledgements
I dedicate this article with fondness and admiration to the memory of Walter Liedtke. As a young graduate student who studied with Walter during his tenure at The Ohio State University, I was inspired by his gifts as a teacher and scholar as he opened my eyes to the glories of seventeenth-century Dutch painting.

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JHNA 9:1 (Winter 2017)
List of Illustrations

Fig. 1. Frans Hals, *Merrymakers at Shrovetide*, ca. 1616–17, oil on canvas, 131.4 x 99.7 cm. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913, inv. 14.40.605 (artwork in the public domain)

Fig. 2. Frans Hals, *Portrait of a Woman*, 1635, oil on canvas, 116.5 x 93.3 cm. New York, The Frick Collection, Henry Clay Frick Bequest, 1910, inv. 1910.1.72 (artwork in the public domain)

Fig. 3. Style of Frans Hals, *Malle Babbe*, ca. 1640s, oil on canvas, 74.9 x 61 cm. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, 1871, inv. 71.76 (artwork in the public domain)

Fig. 4. Frans Hals, *Fisher Girl*, ca. 1630–32, oil on canvas, 80.6 x 66.7 cm. Private collection (formerly Brooklyn Art Museum, New York) (artwork in the public domain)

Fig. 5. Frans Hals, *Willem Coymans*, 1645, oil on canvas, 77 x 64 cm. Washington D. C., National Gallery of Art, Andrew W. Mellon Collection, 1937, inv. 1937.1.69 (artwork in the public domain)

Fig. 6. Frans Hals, *Family Group in a Landscape*, ca. 1648, oil on canvas, 202 x 285 cm. Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, inv. 179 (1934.8) (artwork in the public domain)

Fig. 7. Frans Hals, *Portrait of a Man*, ca. 1660–66, oil on canvas, 85.8 x 66.9 cm. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of Mrs. Antonie Lilienfeld in Memory of Dr. Leon Lilienfeld, 1966, inv. 66.1054 (artwork in the public domain)

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1 This assertion is in large part proven by the sheer number of pictures assigned to the two painters that entered America during this period. A case in point are the two volumes authored by Valentiner, in 1931 and 1936 respectively, that showcased the number of Rembrandts (175) and Halses (105) that he accepted. Although Valentiner’s connoisseurship must be questioned, and the actual number of autograph works far fewer, the relative numbers still speak to the popularity of these artists among American collectors.

2 Hals was rehabilitated from near obscurity by the Realists and Impressionists, largely due to his remarkable brushwork. See Frances S. Jowell in *Frans Hals*, exh. cat., Seymour Slive et al. (Washington, D.C.: The National Gallery of Art; London: Royal Academy of Arts; and Haarlem: Frans Hals Museum; in association with Prestel Verlag, 1989–90), 61–86.

3 Since the nineteenth century, scholars have arrived at differing opinions regarding the number of Hals’s extant paintings. Although connoisseurship is not central to the discussion here, it is worth noting that American collectors likely acquired a greater number of paintings misattributed to Hals than their European counterparts, due to market demand.


5 For a discussion of Hals and modernity, see Christopher D. M. Atkins, *The Signature Style of*

6 For a discussion of painters influenced by Dutch artists active during the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, as well as an overview of the early collecting of Dutch old masters by American collectors, see Annette Stott, Holland Mania: The Unknown Dutch Period in American Art and Culture (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Books, 1998), 19–42.

7 For a recent overview of this phenomenon, consult the essays found in Holland's Golden Age in America: Collecting the Art of Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Hals, ed. Esmée Quodbach, Frick Collection Studies in the History of Art Collecting in America (New York: The Frick Collection/University Park: Penn State University Press, 2014).


9 Before they were dispersed at auction, these paintings appeared in catalogues published by Yerkes: Charles T. Yerkes, Catalogue of the Collection of Charles T. Yerkes (Chicago, 1893) and Catalogue of Paintings and Sculpture in the Collection of Charles T. Yerkes, esq., New York, 2 vols. (Boston, 1904).

10 See Liedtke, Dutch Paintings (2007).

11 For the sake of brevity while considering the large number of paintings mentioned, readers are asked to consult Seymour Slive, Frans Hals, 3 vols. (London: Phaidon, 1970–74; 2nd ed., 2014, for color plates) to link the names of collectors and/or locations with the paintings cited. One can also find information on museum websites, collection catalogues, and especially Wikipedia’s web page “Paintings by Frans Hals.”

12 Bode (Studien zur Geschichte der Holländischen Malerei [Braunschweig: F. Vieweg, 1883], 80–92) listed 155 paintings by Hals.

13 Equally surprising, another cataloguer, Gerald S. Davies, Frans Hals (London: G. Bell 1908), listed only eight pictures by Hals in America in his book on the artist.


16 The Raleigh catalogue also contained a list of Valentiner’s publications, including those cited here. It should be noted that many of the Hals paintings shown in this exhibition and others often represented new arrivals to America, many of which Valentiner had vetted for dealers and collectors. See Masterpieces of Art: W. R. Valentiner Memorial Exhibition, exh. cat., comp. James B. Byrnes (Raleigh: North Carolina Museum of Art, 1959).

17 W. R. Valentiner, Frans Hals, des Meisters Gemälde in 318 Abbildungen, Klassiker der Kunst in Gesamtausgaben 28 (Stuttgart and Berlin: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1921); Frans Hals, des Meisters Gemälde in 322 Abbildungen, 2nd ed. (1923).

18 For a listing of these publications, see Masterpieces of Art, 306. They can also be found in Liedtke, Dutch Paintings, 2 vols. (2007), 1053–4.
Rather than reflecting the history of Frans Hals collecting in America, this volume served largely as a snapshot of the pictures that were in North America by 1936.


The two paintings were formerly owned by the Mogmar Art Foundation, New York, and by John R. Thompson Jr., Chicago, respectively.

The Brooklyn painting has long remained on the art market in New York, an example of questionable judgment in deaccessioning. The other two pictures were less controversial, in that the Toledo work is no longer accepted as by Hals, and only Slive (2014) continued to support the Corcoran attribution. Toledo, in fact, recently acquired a major painting by Hals; and the Corcoran deaccessioned its picture in 2013.

In addition to Valentiner's 1936 publication, see his Klassiker der Kunst volumes from 1921 and 1923.


Slive et al., Frans Hals (1989–90). This volume includes an extensive bibliography, including Slive's other contributions devoted to Hals.


Interestingly, pendants for the paintings in San Diego and St. Louis can be found in Detroit and Kansas City. University museums also shared in the riches; e.g., the Portrait of Cornelis Guldewagen came as a gift to the Krannert Art Museum at the University of Illinois, Urbana, in 1953.

Private collectors include Thomas Kaplan in New York (The Leiden Gallery); Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, Boston; and the owners of the Ivor Collection. The diamond-shaped Singing Girl and Boy with a Violin in the Ivor Collection cast light on the journey some of these paintings have taken. Prior to arriving at their current home, they were owned by Yerkes, another New Yorker, Chicagoan R. F. Angell, and a Montreal collector.

Grimm, Frans Hals (1990); see his concordance with Slive's findings on pp. 291–92.

A number of portraits by Hals's son Jan can be found in American collections. The one in Raleigh, Portrait of a Gentleman of 1644, previously carried an altered Frans Hals monogram.

Bibliography


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