

Portraiture in the Time of Rembrandt

Background Notes

Hendrika Foster — 1 February 2023



Rembrandt, *Nicholas Ruts*, 1631, Frick Collection, New York

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In Latin, the words for 'portrait' – *imago, effigies and simulacrum* – could carry various other meanings. Image was, and is, a rather vague term widely used in art. In the 14th century the image of a king was referred to as a 'counterfeit'. This word was also used in German and in Dutch. In 15th and 16th century Italy the term *ritratto* was coined for 'portrait', together with the verb *ritrare* for 'to portray'. These words were used for images of saints and kings and are obviously far from the current meaning of 'portrait' which we expect to be an accurate depiction of a named figure in which the face is recognisable from life: 'a true likeness'.

In the Golden Age, the flourishing period of trade, culture and science from 1588-1700, the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands developed from a young rebel state into a world power. It was clear, even at the time, that a miracle was taking place, which is recorded by historians from the universities of the time. In 1609 the war with the King of Spain came to a 12 year truce and merchants opened up trade routes to China, the East Indies, Africa and the 'New Worlds' across the Atlantic Ocean. The term 'Golden Age' became known across Europe. The transition to better times was usually attributed to the actions of its leader, William of Orange, who headed the Dutch Revolt against Spain. But people in Holland and especially in Amsterdam knew better. It was the burghers in the city who gave shape to the Golden Age through the local leaders who represented them.

This confident self-image is characteristic of society at the time, and other towns in Holland followed this lead. While in the surrounding countries the aristocracy and the church held the reins of power, the power base in Holland shifted to cities like Amsterdam, The Hague, Haarlem, Hoorn, Enkhuizen, Leiden, Delft, Rotterdam and Dordrecht. The rich and powerful burghers in these cities had themselves immortalised in countless paintings, whether as married couples, with their children, as members of the civic guard, or of a guild, or as regents of one of the city's many public institutions. These paintings offer a remarkable window on urban society at that

time. The enormous civic guard paintings and other group portraits are particularly impressive. The burghers that they portray symbolise the sense of solidarity, determination and civic pride that inspired the Dutch Republic in those days.



Rembrandt, *The Syndics of the Clothmakers Guild*, 1662,
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Portraiture was to become one of the most important genres of art in Holland. Self-assured Dutch burghers were having their portraits painted at a time when, in the rest of Europe, such activities were reserved for royalty and the nobility. The portraitist was expected to indicate the calling and social status of the sitter. The dress and pose are a reflection of wealth, profession and convictions. Although accuracy and a good likeness were of paramount importance, portrait painters tended to develop their own style, which the patron would bear in mind before selecting the right artist for the commission. For example, Thomas de Keyser's portraits are models of precision and refinement, while the

spontaneity of technique and relaxed poses of their subjects make Frans Hals' paintings instantly recognisable. His depiction of the smile was his hallmark. It was unusual and he probably used it to enliven his portraits.

Rembrandt was to become the incomparable representative of Amsterdam art. He soon established himself in Amsterdam, received many commissions and opened a large workshop. His portraits emulated his history paintings as he became a master of drama and light. They filled a demand for images of wealthy merchants who wanted an image which conveyed them as worthy, upright and reliable, encompassing the Calvinist virtues of prudence and industry. The manipulation of light and shadow was one of his major emotive resources. This was a token of genius throughout his career.

He was the most universal artist of his time, and he influenced painting for half a century, irrespective of schools or regional style. Unlike most painters of the time who worked in fairly narrow fields, Rembrandt depicted almost every type of subject. Although he was Amsterdam's leading portraitist for a decade, he also painted group portraits and he was also a painter of biblical scenes, mythologies and landscapes as well as still lifes. In his work, branches of painting often overlapped as, for example, in the group portrait *The Night Watch* where he took liberties with a number of established artistic 'rules'. Rembrandt's fame rests on his continual development of pictorial devices and unvarying excellence of execution, as well as on his brilliant handling of light and shade and his ability to suggest states of mind through facial expression.

The only pair of life size full length portraits by Rembrandt:



Rembrandt, *Maarten Soolmans*,
1634, Rijksmuseum



Rembrandt, *Oopjen Coppit*,
1634, Rijksmuseum

A small group of prosperous merchants formed the upper echelon of Dutch society. As Amsterdam's social and cultural elite, they gave commissions to artists and architects. The members of the city government and their families formed an even more exclusive class within this group. On the surface there seemed to be little distinction between them and their thriving but politically powerless, fellow burghers. They lived in the same neighbourhoods – in Amsterdam, primarily along the new canals. They wore the same clothes, attended the same institutions of learning, and shared the same culture. Nevertheless, everyone knew that these regent families were in charge in Holland and the Republic and often in territories far beyond.

Anthony Van Dyck is probably familiar as the painter for the court of King Charles 1st of England. Born in Antwerp in 1599, he became an independent master aged 17 and was Rubens' chief assistant. In 1620 he visited England, but then continued his career in Italy for 6 years. He worked for Charles and the aristocracy in England from 1632 until his early death aged 42, cleverly modifying his exuberant Catholic style to suit the less flamboyant forms preferred by the more sober Protestants. This protestant style is evident in the simple, restrained and unostentatious images required by the Dutch. Looking briefly at the work of Van Dyck provides a perfect example of the contrast of Dutch portraiture to that fashionable in England, Italy and France and to some extent Spain in 17th century.

Frans Hals, was 16 years older than Van Dyck and became one of the most famous of the Haarlem painters. His work displays a sweeping, bravura brushwork, sparkling colour and, amazingly, people who smile. Smiles in portraiture were almost unknown before 17th century. A smile signified folly – which was perceived as the opposite of wisdom – particularly significant in the prolific writings of the scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam. The serious, dour look in most portraits is intended to convey contemplative wisdom, or, in a woman, modesty.

Born in Antwerp c1583, Frans Hals arrived in Haarlem as a young, enthusiastic painter and provided a completely different impetus for portraiture. Beginning around 1610 and continuing for over 50 years, he made a unique contribution to art of the time. He has a vigorous style of painting which results in a dynamic portrait showing the sitter with self-assurance, naturalness and frequently with a degree of humour. One of the pinnacles of his achievements are his militia portraits. Notwithstanding the need to respect the iron rules of the officers' hierarchy, Hals managed to stage his scenes in an apparently casual and uncontrived way, while producing superb portraits of each individual. Although Hals occasionally worked for patrons from elsewhere, especially from Amsterdam, his influence was mainly confined to his own city of Haarlem



**Frans Hals, *Catharina Hooft and her Nurse*, c1620,
Gemäldegalerie, Berlin**

Rembrandt, born in Leiden in 1606, was the youngest of these three artists. He settled permanently in Amsterdam in 1632 and became one of the leading masters of painting and graphic art. His patrons were both Catholic and Protestant and he created his individual style of depicting portraits which embodied a profound psychological approach and originality. Van Dyck's lighter and brighter style was also popular in Amsterdam but Rembrandt continued to exploit a more classical mode with extremes of dark and light tonality. Some of his most moving and evocative portraits are from the later period of his career in the late 1640s and 1650s and even into the 60s after he was officially bankrupt.



Rembrandt, *Rembrandt's son Titus, aged 14*, 1655, Boyman Museum, Rotterdam

Bibliography

Rudi Ekkhart and Quentin Buvelot, 2007, *Dutch Portraits: The Age of Rembrandt and Frans Hals*. Royal Picture House, Mauritshuis, The Hague and National Gallery Co., London.

There will be an exhibition at the National Gallery, London on Frans Hals: 30th September 2023 — 21st January 2024.

It will move to the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam: 15th February — 9th June 2024.

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