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### Nadler, Steven. The Portraitist: Frans Hals and His World

Angela Vanhaelen

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**Nadler, Steven.**

***The Portraitist: Frans Hals and His World.***

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022. Pp. 365 + 21 col., 61 b/w ill. ISBN 978-0-226-69836-6 (hardcover) US\$35.

While renowned for his innovative portraits, Frans Hals was not an honourable man. Steven Nadler's biography, *The Portraitist: Frans Hals and His World*, reveals that the artist's typical pattern of behaviour was to procure the goods needed to support his family—basics like bread, shoes, beer, butter, or livestock—and simply not pay the bills. Archival sources indicate that Hals had “lifelong money problems” (264). These documents, compiled by Irene van Thiel-Stroman in her essay “The Frans Hals Documents: Written and Printed Sources, 1582–1679” (in Seymour Slive, ed., *Frans Hals* [Washington DC: National Gallery of Art; Haarlem: Frans Hals Museum, 1989], 371–414), disclose decades of complaints and lawsuits against Hals regarding unsettled debts. The artist's dishonest financial dealings often went to court and at times became violent. In many cases, grievances dragged on because Hals routinely did not show up for hearings. Chronic money problems took a toll on Hals's family life. The artist's sons followed in his footsteps, amassing debts, and getting into trouble with the law. The sources imply that some female family members may have resorted to sex work. When Hals's unmarried daughter Sara was accused of having sexual relations with multiple men, the artist had her arrested and incarcerated in the women's house of correction. Throughout his life, Hals seemed unable to provide adequate support for his large family. After the unanticipated deaths of Hals's son and daughter-in-law, their young children—Hals's grandchildren—were sent to the orphanage, presumably because the family could not afford to take them in. Hals and his wife, Lysbeth Reyniersdr, also were unable to care for their son Pieter, described as an *innocente*, possibly in allusion to a developmental disability. It seems that Pieter could not live independently, so Hals's solution was to send his son to the men's workhouse, where he spent the rest of his life—twenty-five years—in confinement “outside of the society of people” (225). Hals himself lived into his eighties, but, in spite of his storied career, ended his life in poverty. He applied to the magistrates of Haarlem for urgent financial assistance and received an annuity, presumably because his fame bestowed glory on the city. While early modern society judged its citizens

according to strict codes of honour and shame, it appears that the honour of the celebrity artist outweighed the shame of the fraudulent debtor.

The unsavoury aspects of Hals's life pose significant challenges for his biographer, and Nadler rightly resists offering an explanation for Hals's financial and personal difficulties. While aligning "life and work" is a traditional framework for artists' biographies, in the case of Hals, such an approach founders on the question of how to reconcile the triumph of the paintings with the failure of the finances. Nadler accordingly subtitles the book *Frans Hals and His World*, and situates the portraitist within the political, economic, religious, and cultural milieu of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. This method allows Nadler to pepper his account with entertaining anecdotes about Hals's contemporaries, colourful figures like Rembrandt van Rijn, Peter Paul Rubens, Judith Leyster, Anthony Van Dyck, and René Descartes. There are also descriptions of dramatic events like the plague and the tulip mania, and of notable social groups like Amsterdam's Jewish community. Much of the book covers material that will be familiar to specialists and students of Dutch art and culture: the complexities of the Dutch political and religious situation, the wars with Spain and England, and the economic successes and downturns of the overseas trading companies are reviewed in relation to detailed information about the production and consumption of paintings. The chapters tend to open with historical context and conclude with the artist, a structure that can make it difficult to parse the relevance of a plethora of historical information in relation to specific incidents in Hals's life. Written in a lively style, this book will be especially useful for non-specialist readers in art history, history, and cultural studies who are looking for a recent overview that situates Dutch art production within a broad historical framework.

Nadler asserts that *The Portraitist* is "not a work of art history" (6) but a biography about the artist's life and the milieu in which he lived and worked. He accordingly offers "little stylistic analysis of paintings, technical details of materials, or discussion of iconography or symbolism" (6). This concise list omits art historical methodologies that contend with the complex powers of portraits, which, as Hals's seventeenth-century biographers claimed, "seem to breathe and to live" (97). Numerous studies have investigated how the precise conventions of portraiture shaped Dutch society, codifying its distinctive social structure and reifying hierarchies of status, wealth, gender, and race. Ground-breaking analyses of Dutch portraiture like David R. Smith's *Masks of Wedlock*:

*Seventeenth-Century Dutch Marriage Portraiture* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1982) and Harry Berger Jr.'s *Fictions of the Pose: Rembrandt against the Italian Renaissance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000) are not included in Nadler's bibliography, nor is there any reference to Titus Kaphar's challenging engagement with Hals's *Family Group in a Landscape* in his 2017 TED Talk "Can Art Amend History?" ([https://www.ted.com/talks/titus\\_kaphar\\_can\\_art\\_amend\\_history/transcrip](https://www.ted.com/talks/titus_kaphar_can_art_amend_history/transcrip)), which brilliantly exposes the racialized compositional strategies of the painting. The functions of artworks that seem to breathe and live are considerable: the portraits as much as the portraitist played a vital role in creating Frans Hals's world.

ANGELA VANHAELEN

McGill University

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