

# Looking at Frans Hals' Marriage Portrait Massa

Essay Looking at Dutch Seventeenth-Century Paintings, course 2010-2011

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*Marriage Portrait of Isaac Massa en Beatrix van der Laen* ca 1621

Frans Hals (Antwerp, ca. 1583 - Haarlem, august 1666),

Oil on canvas. 140 x 166,5 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

At first glance one can hardly miss the obvious happiness of the couple in this large canvas of Frans Hals. Especially the wife is the focus of this painting, although both are looking and smiling to the spectator. They are very much at ease in an informal pose, she has her right hand on the upper left arm of her husband, thus showing a bright, shining ring on her forefinger. The man's face is somewhat tanned, whereas his wife has a pale to pinkish complexion. Is the husband Dutch by birth, has he travelled a lot or does he have southern roots? Hals paid much attention and care in painting the faces and the lace collars as well. The clothing is less detailed, but still rather convincing, suggesting numerous folds in trouser and skirt when looking at a distance. The couple demonstrates wealth by the way they dress. The left leg of the man seems not in proportion with his right one, but who cares, certainly Hals didn't!

The large thistle on the left side of the painting is hard to miss for the viewer and may have a symbolic function. Iconographic messages are not uncommon, to say the least, in Dutch paintings of the seventeenth century, but the problem is that painters seldom document their

meaning of these symbols.<sup>1</sup> The same applies to the ivy tendrils on tree and ground, they are all over the place.



Figuur 1 Detail upper right part:  
garden of love

Another puzzle is the pottery, partly visible on the right side of the image (see Figuur 1). It looks not broken but altogether not upright as one could expect. Is this mere esthetics or has it a secret meaning, quite obvious for people from the seventeenth century but not anymore for today's spectator. The object behind the pots is hard to identify, part of a sculpture, maybe?

Less enigmatical is the scenery in the background. Two's are the main subjects of this (Italian?) garden: two human couples, a pair of birds in the sky, a peacock and peahen, two pairs of statues emphasize almost excessively the love between individuals. This love garden, buildings and scene seem neither realistic nor of Dutch origin and the fact that Frans Hals is hardly known as painter of landscapes raises the question whether the old master has painted – or even invented - this scenery himself. It would also be interesting to investigate possible representation of the statues by mythological persons or personifications. Remarkable is the cutoff of the scenery on the right side. Is this compositionally intended or is some part of the canvas missing?

Another, almost basically simple, question bothers me: where is the signature of Frans Hals: *Antwerpiensis*; a brief and therefore superficial view of the painting in the Rijksmuseum did not reveal this signature. How do we know – apart from stylistic arguments – that Hals was the painter? Technical research could or should provide the proper answers.

Hals probably is the first painter to portray married people in this way: together on a single canvas, informally seated outdoors and smiling. Was this sheer inspiration or did he have some examples or predecessors? Certain is that this artist, born in Antwerp, but active in Haarlem, became a very prominent painter of portraits who was successful for the next forty years until his death in 1666.

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<sup>1</sup> Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* or Samuel van Hoogstraten's *Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst* do not solve many of the 17th century riddles in Dutch paintings.