honored. (Liedtke adds that the beer of the Golden Age was low in alcohol content and a lot safer to drink than the available water.) A story that the artist abused his first wife, who died young, was derived from court records that turn out to have involved another Haarlemite, also named Frans Hals. But the canards speak to a lingering mystery about Hals's art: its lack of deepening development. The energy never flags, but the tone seems stuck at a lazy bonhomie. Something kept Hals distracted.

Hals's relentless jolliness isn't confined to his genre scenes of rollicking topers, such as "Young Man and Woman in an Inn" (1623). The euphoric hero hoists a glass while being attended with fawning approval by a prostitute, a dog, and an innkeeper—three parties, according to a Dutch adage of the time, whose affections come at a cost. (A fourth could be added: the professional portraitist.) But there's no bite to the moralism in the painting; it's purely jokey, for the amusement of a rising, self-satisfied commercial class. Hals figures in history not only as a stylist but as an emergent type: the independent contractor to the bourgeoisie, dependably exalting its values of individual identity and status. After his Antwerp sojourn, he rarely left Haarlem, whose newly rich all but lined up at his studio door to be immortalized. He did indeed individualize them, exquisitely specifying their extroverted, typically waggish attitudes. But they all seem to be on the same drug, an intoxicant imparting silly confidence. Hals's low-life scenes reassure such citizens that the poorer orders of their society are likewise upbeat. The ravishing "The Fisher Girl" (circa 1630-32), from a private collection in New York, shows a pretty, weather-ruddied urchin grinning as she offers a silvery fish to an unseen customer. Everybody is happy in Haarlem!

Hals outlived his success. By the end of his long life, he was out of fashion and impoverished, which has led some critics to seek signs of embitterment in his late work. John Berger, in a prominent BBC television series and a book, both titled "Ways of Seeing" (1972), thought that he detected a proto-revolutionary resentment in group portraits of charity officials that were among Hals's last commissions. One of the worthies looks spectacularly drunk. Malcolm Eden, of the rock band McCarthy, expatiated on Berger's speculation in the song "Frans Hals": "The poor . . . know your names and they know your faces / they will deal with you." That's a stretch, but one enabled by a certain stoniness of heart, beneath the people-pleasing friskiness, in all of Hals's work. (I fancy that if you were a detective seeking a suspect from Haarlem, with only a Hals portrait to go on, you'd make an easy I.D. not only visually but with a distinguishing feel, unclouded by inexpedient sympathy, for your quarry.) Class content is so dominant in Hals, from the start, that it's tempting to imagine a changed social perspective, attendant on the artist's fall; yet Berger's political reading seems to me strictly a projection. It belittles Hals as an individual. But, then, so does Hals.

Art as an adept performance: Hals's "Boy with a Lute" (circa 1625).

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Hals's works are stunning as paintings, but paintings are also pictures: windows on a world. I find Hals's world dishearteningly pedestrian. It hardly bears comparison to the enchanted realms whose Prosperos are Rembrandt and Vermeer. Hals was of his time to a fault. He caught the vitality of the new bourgeois individualism but not what, in human terms, it could be good for: the plumbing of souls in Rembrandt; the transfixion of the everyday in Vermeer. The life that counts in Hals is that of his own invincibly vivacious eye and hand. To a degree beyond such predecessors as Titian, El Greco, and Rubens, he is the first virtuoso of the visible brushstroke and its fundamental alchemy: materially just lying there, flat, while conjuring substance and space in the eye and rhetorical tone in the mind. It is indelibly up to date; because he so readily imparts tricks of the brush, no other Old Master is more apt to interest a young painter today. But Hals's very fungibility confirms that none other seems to have made art so little for his own fulfillment. My imaginative participation in his portraits is pretty much limited to sharing the pleasure of the sitters—commonly posed with arms draped over the back of a chair or, standing, with one arm rakishly akimbo—at being able to afford the great one's fee. ♦

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Slide show: Peter Schjeldahl on Frans Hals.