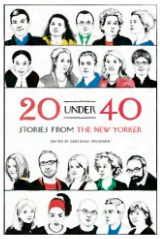

THE ART WORLD

HAARLEM SHUFFLE

The fast world of Frans Hals.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

I'd cross the street to avoid meeting most of the people Frans Hals painted. They impress me as bores of one calibre or another: oafish, supercilious, run-of-the-mill. The fact that they have been gone for more than three centuries—Hals died in 1666, in his early eighties (his birth date is uncertain)—spared me the trouble but not the thought at "Frans Hals in the Metropolitan Museum." The show features the eleven paintings that the Met owns by Hals—the dashing portraitist of Haarlem gentry in the Dutch Golden Age—augmented by two striking paintings on loan and apposite works by some of his contemporaries. Supplementary, painlessly educational exhibits illustrate the problems of telling Hals's works apart from those of his many imitators (among them one or more of his five painter sons) and point up his lasting influence, as in a crackling little portrait, from 1907, by the American Robert Henri. It's a sprightly, vigorous show, as any focus on Hals is sure to be. He was one of the three main geniuses of the Dutch Baroque, with Rembrandt and Vermeer, and you can't beat him for evergreen liveliness.

His celebrated brushwork is at times ostensibly slapdash but always acutely descriptive, and it excites at a glance. Witness "Boy with a Lute" (circa 1625), in which a jovial lad calls for a refill of his empty glass. The motif recalls images of fetchingly louche youths in the light-in-darkness style of Caravaggio, which was then influential, but with a blithe speediness that is utterly remote from the Italian's frozen radiance. Hals is an avatar of style as a free-floating value—one that is all but independent of its subjects and occasions. This explains the soaring ascent of his reputation, after long neglect, in the mid-nineteenth century, when budding modernists, especially Manet, found in his summary ways of drawing with paint an escape from the airless fuss and polish of academic convention. Hals showed them how candid technique could serve the direct registration of people and things as they really appear: art as an adept performance, in a streaming present tense.

Hals was born in the Flemish city of Antwerp, which his family fled in 1585, when, after a siege, Holland lost it to Spain. His father was a clothworker, and it made sense to settle in Haarlem, a flourishing center of the textile industries. Frans was apprenticed to another Flemish émigré, the Mannerist painter Karel van Mander, and became a member of Haarlem's painters' guild in 1610. A fine catalogue essay by the Met's curator of Dutch and Flemish painting, Walter Liedtke, recounts the decisive effects on Hals of a return visit to Antwerp, in 1616. There he would have beheld the explosive inventions of Rubens and the young Van Dyck, among others, from whom he absorbed, Liedtke posits, an all-around "pictorial literacy." So Hals's originality came not out of nowhere but from several sources at once, all perhaps indebted to the "rough style," as it was termed then, of late Titian. Hals's panache, notably in dazzling early group portraits of local militias, quickly charmed Haarlem, becoming emblematic of the city's entrepreneurial zest and robust self-regard.

What was Hals like? Early biographers, writing decades after his death, promulgated legends of loose living, drenched in alcohol. Liedtke finds no basis for them. Yes, Hals may have associated with brewers, but, in 1619, twenty-one of the twenty-four members of the Haarlem city council plied that trade. Liedtke sets aside, as moot, "the question of whether brewers drank a large part of what they produced." Their profession was highly