

# SECOND FRANS HALS LECTURE

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FRANS HALS IN AMERICA

It has now been 352 years since Frans Hals was laid to rest in this magnificent building, and on this important occasion I want to express how honored I am to have been asked to present the second Frans Hals lecture. Tonight, my comments follow a path different from remarks made by Professor Eric Jan Sluijter in the first Hals lecture two years ago. His enlightening talk surveyed approaches taken by scholars working on Hals in recent decades, while my topic, Frans Hals in America, covers a larger swatch of time and focuses on the history of collecting.

As early as the 1880s, a robust market for pictures by Frans Hals began taking shape on the other side of the Atlantic, one that eventually would stretch from New York to Los Angeles. As I trace the who, how, when, why, and occasionally the how much of these transactions, it is noteworthy that the two Hals lectures will dovetail each other on several points, including scholarship related to attributions. Equally important is the realization that any discussion devoted to Frans Hals provides listeners an opportunity to marvel at the innovative genius he brought to his remarkable paintings.

Frans Hals continues to cast his magic on the art market today, but in much smaller numbers when compared to the plentiful, but largely one-way flow of pictures that crossed the Atlantic during America's Gilded Age and in the decades leading up to World War II. It was also during these same years that scholarship devoted to Hals and his paintings reached unprecedented heights, including many publications coming out of America.

As we consider the larger issue of Frans Hals in America, it must be remembered that after Hals' death in Haarlem in 1666, his art was largely ignored by art world until after middle of the nineteenth century. The rediscovery of Hals in the years leading up to the American Civil War coalesced around a growing interest in his paintings by artists, critics, and collectors alike. They marveled at the sparkling technique he brought to his figures, and equated his stylistic efforts to brushwork championed by realist and impressionist painters. Not surprising, particularly after one pinpoints the location central to developments in these nineteenth-century art movements, Paris served as one of the epicenters of the Hals rediscovery.

It was in Paris that a singular event took place that would soon drive the market for Hals's paintings among American collectors, one that serves as the starting point of my lecture this evening. The year was 1865, and on a chilly March day *The Laughing Cavalier* (fig. 1) came to the auction block. Sold from of the estate of a Franco-Swiss collector who had acquired the work in 1822, this masterpiece generated a bidding war between Baron James de Rothschild and Richard Seymour-Conway, 4th Marquess of Hertford. When the hammer finally fell, the painting sold to the Englishman for six times its auction estimate. As Hals scholar Seymour Slive noted, the price Hertford paid "was hundreds of times more than had been paid for Hals' works during the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century."

Thought to be mad for paying such an exorbitant price for an example by a long forgotten Dutch master, Lord Hertford unwittingly set the tone for Hals collecting in the decades to follow, particularly among Americans.

Considering the perfect storm that precipitated an influx of Hals pictures into America—means and method, time and place—or to be more blunt—American money, ambitious art dealers, and desperate sellers in England and especially France, the painter's rising star twinkled ever brighter as the years passed. Evidence tell us that only Rembrandt would outshine Hals among collectors of Dutch painting in the late nineteenth century. This trend then continued well into the twentieth century, with English and American tax laws both helping and hindering collectors as the decades passed.

Before turning to the Hals feeding frenzy that began taking shape in America after about 1880, one needs to consider whether any pictures attributed to Hals had made their way there prior to this date? The answer to the question is in the affirmative, but barely. Without going into detail, these early arrivals set a comparatively low bar. The most public and well documented 'Hals' to leave Europe for America during this early, unremarkable period of collecting was *Malle Babbe* (fig. 2).

Arriving just a few years after *The Laughing Cavalier* had raised so many eyebrows in 1865, this image of the 'witch of Haarlem' was acquired by William T. Blodgett in 1870. A year later, *Malle Babbe* came to New York's fledgling Metropolitan Museum of Art as a prized possession in the institution's initial purchase of European old master paintings. Henry James was among those writers who heaped praise on the work, describing it in 1872 "as a masterpiece of inelegant vigour."

Others, however, were not so generous in their praise. As early as 1883, for example, Berlin museum director and Hals scholar Wilhelm von Bode questioned its authenticity. Long story short, the painting was long ago removed from the catalogue of Hals's autograph works. Today, the picture is considered as either a copy after a lost Hals original, or a studio variant of his painting of the same title now in Berlin.

Not to be deterred, autograph paintings by Hals, workshop and circle pieces, examples by later followers, and even forgeries, soon found their way to rich, often uninformed Americans who were entering the art market in ever increasing numbers. Before the end of the 1800s, business tycoons such as Henry Marquand, H. O. Havemeyer, and Charles Yerkes, had acquired outstanding examples by the Haarlem painter. Among these early arrivals were the *Boy with a Violin* and the *Singing Girl* (fig. 3), once owned by Yerkes. Before reaching their current home on Park Avenue in Manhattan, this pair of diamond-shaped panels had traveled through auctions houses and collections in New York, Chicago, and Montreal.

The frenzy for Dutch paintings in general, and Hals in particular, quickly intensified during the first decade of the new century. By then, the Canadian William van Horne, J. P. Morgan, Henry Clay Frick, Benjamin Altman, Charles Wilson Taft, and Peter A. B. Widener, among others, would stake their claims (and riches) on pictures by Hals. What remains largely unanswered, however, are questions surrounding the motivations behind these acquisitions. One wonders, for example, whether individual collectors were moved by the quality and innovative character evident in Hals's works, or were they just *naemkoopers* adding to their checklist of Dutch painters prescribed for them by art dealers such as Joseph Duveen.

*Portrait of an Elderly Man* (fig. 4) is a case in point. Representing one two Hals pictures Frick bought from Duveen, one discovers in Frick's detailed black book of purchases that he paid \$194,800 for the painting on 11 April 1910. Missing, however, are clues pointing to why he made the purchase. So while Frick's motivations, like those of most of his colleagues remain elusive, one cannot fault the results of their efforts. A survey of autograph Hals paintings either currently or formerly in American collections can only be described as breathtaking.

A good case in point regarding the inner workings of the art market in the 1890s, one that touches upon the generosity a collector who had strong ties to his hometown museum, is revealed in the provenance for *The Fishergirl* (fig. 5). Sold in 1890 at the estate sale of M. E. May, *The Fishergirl*, had, in fact, appeared in two important Paris auctions in the years prior—the estate of Alphonse Oudry in 1869; and the estate of Baron de Beurnonville in

1881. Its impressive provenance offers a compelling case for the growing popularity of Hals's paintings on both sides of the Atlantic during the time period the artist was becoming a darling of Realists and Impressionists. It also sheds light on the dynamism of the art market, as works passed from one collector to another, often at a dizzying speeds.

The buyer of the Hals in the 1890 May sale was the Impressionist dealer Paul Durand-Ruel, who was also known to dabble in old master paintings. He then sold *The Fishergirl* to William Schaus, a New York dealer and collector. Unfortunately, Schaus's tenure with the Hals was brief, as he died in 1892, less than two years after making the purchase. Four years passed before Schaus's estate came to the auction block. When it did, another New Yorker, Augustus Healy, outbid his competitors for the painting. Healy, a long-serving president of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, now the Brooklyn Museum, eventually included the Hals in his bequest that institution upon his death in 1921.

One would not be faulted in assuming that the story of *The Fishergirl's* ownership would have ended once it entered the collection of the Brooklyn Museum. Such was not the case, however, for in 1967 the museum sold the work to Wildenstein & Company in New York. While the decision to deaccession the picture remains open to debate, it is not unusual for institutions to sell off works to raise money for comparable artworks. Typically, quality and condition figure heavily in such decisions. As will be discussed later, several other Hals paintings in America fell into this category of deaccessioning. They would join a much large number of examples that went back to the art market from private collectors.

Interestingly, *The Fishergirl* was omitted from the first significant accounting of Frans Hals paintings in America. In 1909, two separate publications—one a monograph, the other an exhibition catalogue—surveyed this material. The monograph, *Frans Hals: sa vie et son oeuvre*, was compiled by E. W. Moes. In it, 275 paintings by the master are cited, and of this number, 39 were linked to American collections. By comparison, Wilhelm von Bode's listing of Hals's paintings published in 1883 did not include a single work to be found in an American collection. This omission seems puzzling since 'Hals's' *Malle Babbe* had come to the MMA more than a decade earlier in 1871.

The most compelling picture of Frans Hals in America from 1909 appears on the pages of the exhibition catalogue devoted to *Paintings by Dutch Old Dutch Masters*, a component of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Hudson-Fulton Celebration. This landmark exhibition, essentially America's first blockbuster, was curated by the young German scholar Wilhelm Valentiner. On view were twenty paintings then assigned to Hals, and all were from American collections. The surnames of many of the pictures' owners at that time remain familiar to us more than a century later—among them Frick, Widener, Huntington, Libby, and Altman (fig. 6)—for many of their loans, and those of others, have since made their way to the walls of museums across America, including New York, Washington DC, Baltimore, Cincinnati, Toronto, and Toledo. Also among some of the Hals masterpieces enjoyed by nearly 300,000 visitors between September 20th and November 30th, were two sets of pendant portraits then in the possession of J. P. Morgan—one set eventually went to the Yale University Art Gallery, the other to a museum in Sao Paolo, Brazil.

Arguably, the most important name to emerge from the exhibition was that of *Valentiner* (fig. 7). After working in Berlin with Wilhelm Bode, and then as an assistant to Hofstede de Groot in The Hague, he was recruited by the Met in 1908 to fill the position of curator of decorative arts. His training had prepared him well for his groundbreaking career in American museums, and before his death five decades later, he would serve as the director of museums in Detroit, Los Angeles, and Raleigh.

During his lifetime Valentiner pursued many scholarly interests, with Hals and his oeuvre a reoccurring focal point. From the moment he introduced Hals to America's art lovers in 1909, this legendary curator and director almost single handedly set the bar for Frans Hals studies in America. His extensive list of Hals publications and exhibitions includes monographic exhibitions in Detroit (1935) and Los Angeles (1947), as well as in New York World's Fair of 1936, where he put sixteen Hals's pictures on view. In addition, a 1959 memorial exhibition dedicated to Valentiner in Raleigh, the city where he concluded his career, contained another thirteen of Hals's paintings, again, all from American collections.

Equally impressive are Valentiner's non-exhibition publications devoted to Hals. He authored the painter's *Klassiker der Kunst* volume in 1921, with a 2nd edition coming out 1923; wrote several articles on recent additions to Hals's oeuvre, including one devoted to his self-portraits; and contributed numerous entries to private collection catalogues. Following up on his Detroit exhibition catalogue of 1935, he then published *Frans Hals Paintings in America* in 1936. This volume summed up the result of Hals collecting up to that date, and serves as a template for my remarks tonight and a book-length study I hope to complete by the end of the year.

*Frans Hals Paintings in America* illustrates and discusses 105 paintings Valentiner thought to be by the master. Consequently, in the decade and a half since Valentiner's *Klassiker der Kunst* accounting of pictures by Frans Hals in the U.S. and Canada from 1921, the number appears to have doubled. Within this group of new arrivals were some of Hals's best-known paintings, including many which represented new 'discoveries' by Valentiner. Among them were *Portrait of Pieter Cornelisz van der Morsch* (Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh), *Portrait of a Young Man* (Taft Collection, Cincinnati), *Claes Duyst van Voorhout* (MMA), *Pieter Jacobsz. Olycan* (The Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota), and *Willem Coymans* (fig. 8) a picture previously owned by the Huntingtons and now in Washington's National Gallery, a gift from Andrew Mellon.

An important issue arising from the pages of *Frans Hals Paintings in America* is one that continues to plague the field today—attributions. At a distance of more than eight decades, it becomes quickly apparent that a sizable portion of the paintings cited in this volume simply do not meet the standards associated with recent thoughts on Hals's autograph works. In fact, misattributions have long tarnished the reputation of Valentiner, for he was inclined to greatly expand the stylistic parameters of what defined a painter's oeuvre. This false reality was especially acute in his studies on Hals and Rembrandt.

Consequently, American collectors acquired more than their share of works misattributed to Hals over the decades. Falling under the category of 'buyer beware', some of these misfires might be understandable considering the changing state of Hals connoisseurship over the last fifty, or even a hundred years. In fact, a sizable number of works within this group carry attributions that are still being debated.

Arguably the most prevalent of the misfires landing on American soil were small-scale paintings of playful Halsian children seen full face or in profile. Few qualify as by Hals today. Among the first arrivals within this group are two panels that entered the P. A. B. Widener collection before 1900; *Portrait of a Boy, profile to the right* and *Portrait of a Boy, profile to the left* (fig. 9). While offering a superficial relationship to Hals's small portrait sketches, neither achieves the stylistic subtleties found in autograph work such as the well-known *Laughing Boy* at the Mauritshuis. The forced brushwork and flat application of the paint layer lack Hals's touch, suggesting the work of an imitator.

Some attribution lessons fell on deaf ears, however, for shortly after these two 'portraits' were expunged from the Widener's holdings, they entered the collection of the Philadelphia lawyer John G. Johnson, with Valentiner's blessing. Today they remain as part of the Johnson Collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and are catalogued as 'follower of Frans Hals'.

By contrast, several portraits assigned to Frans Hals have since turned out to be works by his son Jan Hals. The MFA in Boston, for example, purchased the *Portrait of a Woman* (fig. 10) for \$24,000 in 1901. It remained as a 'Frans Hals' for much of the twentieth century, but in recent decades researchers determined it was painted by Jan Hals. Falling into the same category are Toronto's *Portrait of a Man*, the pendant to the Boston painting, and pictures now residing in Detroit and Raleigh.

As we turn to the fisherchildren paintings—the next group of works within 'buyer beware'—researchers continue to be plagued by a different set of problems and attributions. Unlike the previously discussed *Fishergirl*, a work accepted by most scholars as autograph, the other fisherchildren pictures have been removed from Hals's oeuvre. Among them is one the Cincinnati collector Mary Hanna acquired from New York dealers Scott and Fowles in 1901.

Valentiner accepted this *Fishergirl* (fig. 11) as autograph, but Slive rightly dismissed the attribution in 1974 catalogue raisonné. He thought the “detached brushwork which animates the surface failed to define spatial relationships,” and there was an “absence of middle tones used by Hals to fuse lights and darks.”

Following the same conundrum of connoisseurship are two *Fisherboy* pictures that came to America in 1933. Purchased by Samuel H. Kress, the pictures were gifted to Raleigh and Allentown in 1960 via the Kress Foundation. Slive thought two different hands produced these paintings in an imitative Hals style, but was unable assign names to the painter(s) responsible. “In the Allentown *Fisherboy* the failure of the bold brushstrokes to express forms and surfaces, and the ambiguous spatial arrangement of the principal figure betray the hand of an imitator.” The author was equally dismissive of the Raleigh painting, simply noting it was one of several “coarse imitations” of Hals.

Going hand in hand with misattributions, thus representing a reduction in the number of Halses in America, are paintings that were returned to the art market and eventually found homes outside the US and Canada. Designated as ‘easy come, easy go’ in my forthcoming study on the topic, examples from this category now hang in museums and private collections across the globe, including paintings on loan just down the street at the Hals Museum. In scanning the pages of Valentiner’s book, one finds several pictures of superlative quality that have returned to European collections. Two stand out. They are *Family Group in a Landscape* (fig. 12), previously bought by Duveen for \$400,000 and now in Madrid, and engaging *Merry Lute Player* (fig. 13) at London’s Mansion House. The London picture was once with a collector in Chicago who bought it from Duveen for \$250,000 in 1924. Such examples serve as reminders that the art market remains in flux, with art dealers and auction houses typically serving as conduits between artworks and buyers.

It is also worth noting that even in instances when individuals donated artworks to museums, there are sometimes no guarantees that gifts would not re-enter the market through deaccessioning. Several paintings by Hals have suffered this fate. They include the previously discussed *Fisher Girl* from the Brooklyn Art Museum; the Corcoran Gallery’s *Young Woman with a Glass and Flagon*, (fig. 14); and the *Young Man Playing a Flute* from the Toledo Art Museum, a questionable attribution at best.

One should not shed any tears for Toledo, however, for prior to deaccessioning their ‘Hals’, they had purchased the *Van Campen Family Portrait in a Landscape* (fig. 15). This painting will be featured in an upcoming exhibition, and is certainly one of the most important Hals to come to America in decades.

Returning to a chronological overview of ‘Hals in America’, one discovers the migration of Hals paintings into American public museums reached a highpoint with the opening of the National Gallery of Art in 1941. Eight paintings by Hals came from the collections of Andrew Mellon and Peter Widener. Only the Met can tout a larger number of autograph pictures by the master in their collection.

How then, should the decades prior to World War II be judged regarding Frans Hals paintings in America? It was undoubtedly a ‘golden age’ of scholarship and acquisitions, with a remarkable embarrassment of riches coming to museums and private collections. Driven by the dynamic interplay between the auction houses, dealers such as Duveen and Knoedler, and many of America’s ‘Gilded Age’ tycoons of industry and banking, the results were extraordinary. Excepting Vermeer, one can argue to no other seventeenth-century Dutch painter saw such a significant percentage of their work finding homes in America during these years.

After the war, a new landscape of Hals collecting and connoisseurship slowly emerged. Quality rather than quantity now took center stage. Expertise intensified, collectors became more knowledgeable, if not famous (fig. 16), and unlike previous decades, far fewer of his paintings were available on the art market. The last half century also saw different names attached Hals studies, with the American trained scholar Seymour Slive leading the way.

Slive essentially reset the bar on Hals studies with his catalogue of paintings from the early 1970s. In addition to this important contribution, the Harvard professor also published several of articles on Hals, wrote catalogue entries for the 1962 Hals exhibition here in Haarlem, and later curated an exhibition devoted to Hals in 1989. Clearly, Slive’s vision of the painter’s oeuvre was far more reasoned and restrictive than the one provided by Valentiner.

His count of extant works by Hals numbered 222 in 1974, whereas Valentiner had already accepted more than 300 in 1923, with many more 'discoveries' yet to be made.

As Eric Jan Sluijter pointed out in his lecture two years ago, the snapshot of Hals generated by Slive has been questioned, at least in part, by Claus Grimm. His 1972 catalogue of Hals paintings showed a further reduction in autograph works, as it numbered just 145 pictures. In addition to the portraits on copper that likely served as models for reproductive prints, Grimm also removed a sizable number of other portraits from Hals's oeuvre, and several of his genre paintings. Quite surprising, this last group included the previously discussed *Shrovetide Revelers* (fig. 6) and the "*Yonker Ramp and His Sweetheart*". Although many of the works Grimm de-attributed from Hals reside in American collections, a discussion of the issues involved here extends well beyond my allotted time tonight. Perhaps a future lecture in this remarkable venue will take up the issue.

The period following World War II saw its fair share of Hals paintings making the trip west across the Atlantic. Interestingly, those pictures destined for public museums were typically purchased from acquisition funds, rather than coming as gifts from collectors. The early 1950s, for example, saw major acquisitions with this pedigree finding museum homes in Chicago, San Francisco, Houston, St. Louis (its male pendant had long resided in Kansas City), and Toronto.

As recent years and decades pass, however, the pace of Frans Hals paintings coming to America slowed appreciably. Nevertheless, a stunning array of museum quality paintings continued to arrive, joining the riches already there. Acquisitions of more recent vintage extends the Hals trail from Ottawa and Toronto to Boston (fig. 17) and Worcester, then through the American heartland via cities such as Cleveland, Toledo, Fort Worth, and Houston, and finally on to California via a quick stop in Mexico City. In recent decades, southern California has surpassed the east coast in its gold rush of Hals paintings, with superlative examples having been acquired by the Timken Art Gallery in San Diego, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Norton Simon Museum, and The Getty.

In addition to those pictures destined for America's public institutions, others have found homes with private collectors. Thomas Kaplan (fig. 18) and Eijk and Rose-Marie van Otterloo headline this list, and they should be commended for their generosity in lending works to museums and exhibitions in America and elsewhere. Fewer and fewer pictures remain in private hands, however, suggesting America's remarkable accumulation of masterpieces by Frans Hals reflects more of its past than its future. While this new reality certainly impacts those active on the business side of the art world, in no way should it hinder visitors from savoring the vast riches of Hals in America.

Thank you.

# SECOND FRANS HALS LECTURE

**KRISTIEN HEMMERECHTS, AUTHOR**

Zaffius has asked me for a canvas, Christ Crucified, Adoration of the Magi, Madonna and Child, he doesn't mind what, as long as I give him something he can hang on the wall of his clandestine church.

Jacobus, I tell him – since I began painting him, I can call him by his first name, in fact, he insists I call him by his first name, feigns deafness if I don't – Jacobus, I say, they won't have destroyed everything. Ask the magistrate very politely for an audience, feed his vanity with flattery and his throat with a good beer, and ask him if he doesn't maybe have something for you somewhere. Tell him you want to hang it at home, in a place where only you can see it, as a souvenir, a memory of bygone days. Show him the scars of the blows they gave you, your stigmata. Make him a bit afraid of God's Wrath, of the Dies Irae, which will dawn for us all one day, even here in Haarlem.

He stays silent. He is good at silence. He kept his lips shut tight when they wanted him to reveal the exact extent of the Church's wealth. He came round in the end, of course, like everyone else. I'd have done so too. God didn't give us a body to have it maltreated.

If all Catholics were like Zaffius, that Luther would never have stood a chance. Zaffius with his gentle but piercing eyes. In the meanwhile, I'm creating Jacobus Zaffius the second, a Zaffius who will outlive the first. I've given him a Jewish nose. Joke, Zaffie. He seems to appreciate it. He hasn't asked for corrections, which I'd be quite prepared to make. Maybe he actually likes my re-creation? After all, Jesus was a Jew too. And Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Daniel, Moses. . . all Jews. Nothing wrong with Jews, if you ask me. But they don't ask me.

Zaffius pulls out a purse and lays it on the one empty corner of my work table.

'You don't have to pay me,' I say. 'I've already been paid, well paid.' The oh-so-pious ladies in the almshouses held a collection to have their benefactor immortalised. By me. Frans Hals. Born in Antwerp. Baptised Roman Catholic, but now a convinced Protestant, and tomorrow again a Catholic if the wind turns, which according to my father will never happen. You haven't got a crystal ball, father.

The pendulum of time swings back and forth. We swing along, from left to right, from hope to despair, from despair to hope. Maybe one day the Jews will have their own country again. And pigs will fly.

Zaffius takes the purse and lays it in the palm of my hand.

'This is for the canvas I am asking you to paint. For my church. Clandestine church.'

His eyes bore into mine, straight to my soul. He doesn't say it, doesn't have to say it, those eyes of his say it: You were once a Catholic too. Back in your hometown, a Catholic priest held you above a font and sprinkled you with holy water. What God has baptised the hand of man cannot debaptise.

That was almost thirty years ago, Zaffie. The purse weighs heavy in my hand. What couldn't Anneke, my Anneke, buy with that silver for the coming child? Our child. I am soon to be a father. That changes a person, they say, more than success with a canvas, more than guild membership. And when that child dies, that changes a person even more. 'I'll think about it,' I say, and I close my hand around the purse. 'So where is this clandestine church of yours?'

'It's clandestine, Frans.'

'Attic or cellar?'

'Attic. With windows to let in the light. Heavenly light. Your canvas won't be hanging in darkness.'

He goes and stands in front of his portrait, strokes his chin. 'I'm glad you made that collar smaller, I wouldn't want people to get a wrong idea of the man I once was.'

I don't say: Jacobus, you've got years ahead of you; I put my arms around him – still clutching that purse of silver – and hug him.

'Thank you for your patience,' I say.

'Thank you for the portrait,' he says. 'I look interesting, interesting and intriguing. A wise old man, ripe for the grave, who still has one more wish, Frans, a canvas for his church.'

'That wish will be fulfilled. I promise you that.' And I hold my hand to my heart.

Anneke will understand when I don't give this silver to her, but to the other one, the one the city gossips call 'the gypsy'. She'll say: Give her the money, then she'll finally agree to pose for you. And then you'll finally be able to paint her, and then forget her.

I have to be a bit in love with them to paint them, to want to paint them. Only when I feel that tingling, that impalpable yearning, do I know: It's going well, Frans. And they feel it too. It hangs awkwardly between us, oppresses and excites, until it evaporates: the portrait is finished.

She laughs at me, shamelessly raises her price, toys with me like a cat with a bird. Catch me if you can.

You are the little bird, my sweet, that I capture in my canvas.

Money. I hate money, I love money. Give me lots of money so that I never have to worry about money again, so that I can spend it, squander it, give it away, squirrel it away in a drawer for a rainy day. I want to be priceless. A Frans Hals doesn't have a price. How do they dare to put a price on my work?

'With the children too?' she asks, as she weighs the purse in her hand.

'One child,' I say. 'Jesus didn't have a twin brother.'

'Are you sure?'

'Absolutely sure.'

She looks over at her children, who are splashing their hands in a puddle. They are the dirtiest children I have ever seen, and I have seen a lot of dirty children. And stinking! Is that shit on their legs?

'I can't choose, and I don't want to choose.'

'Shall I choose?'

'Both or neither,' she says firmly and hands me back the money.

'Keep it. You don't have to choose and neither do I. You'll be a Madonna without a child. A Madonna who is watching her child, her children playing.'

She laughs, as only she can laugh, sweet, flirtatious, but also a little shy. The money has made her happy. She will be able to buy clothes for her twins, sheets for them to sleep in, beds. She claims she knows who the father is and that he knows it too, but that she doesn't want to tell anyone. The sanctimonious hypocrites of Haarlem spread a different version: that they may be twins, but that they each have a different father. And that women like her should be expelled from the city. That she is a disgrace to the hard-working, devout, respectable, God-fearing, godly citizens of Haarlem.

If only they knew how many of them had come knocking at her door... And now she'll hang in a church, in Zaffius's church.

'Did Mary have breasts?' she asks, pushing hers a little higher. Another push and her nipples will be poking out of her dress.

I lean over to her, press my lips to one breast and then to the other.

'Mary had breasts. That was confirmed by the Pope, cardinals and bishops at the Council of Trent. But they weren't as beautiful as yours.'

Laughing, she lifts her children out of the puddle and puts them in the little cart in which she pulls them through the streets of Haarlem. They stare at me vacantly. Who is this man? That man is Frans Hals, and he's going to paint your mama while she looks at you, so wipe that snot off your lip.

I hope we don't bump into Zaffius. And if we do bump into him, I hope he doesn't guess, doesn't guess yet. I want to surprise him. Look at this, Jacobus Zaffius: the Mother of God. Look at those breasts, those eyes, that smile. Wouldn't God have chosen her to be mother to His Son if He could have?

'Have you got a light blue dress for me? And a veil to cover my hair?'

'Not necessary,' I say.

'Mary always wears light blue. And she has blonde hair, which she covers.'

'I don't think that's in the Bible.'

'Do I get a crown or a... what's it called... one of those plates above my head?'

'I'm painting you as you are. The way you smile at your children, the way you live.'

'Are you married?'

'Yes.'



'So why don't you paint your wife?'

'Because you are Mary.'

'Is she home?' she asks, as I hold open the door of our house for her.

'She's home. Just go inside. You're welcome.

Anneke will send a girl with a basin to wash your children. And she'll have clean clothing brought and some porridge made for them. '

We pull the cart inside and she lifts out the twins.

'You know that I'm ...' she says.

'Shh. We are here to work, not to chat. Do you want beer? Or a glass of wine?'

'Wine,' she says. She takes her children by the hand, leads them on shaky legs through the open door to the room I somewhat grandiloquently call my studio. Zaffius is on the easel, 'my' Zaffius is on the easel. His eyes follow the mother and her sons. Take a good look, Zaffie, soon she'll be yours. You can have her, you've paid for her. I call her Mary, and I give her to you. Frans Hals pinxit ét dedit, amicitiae et honoris causa. Haarlem. MDCXI.