

FRANS HALS

(Antwerp c.1582 – Haarlem 1666)

A Tronie of a Young Man in the Costume of an Actor

oil on oak panel
39.2 cm (15½ in) approx., oval

Provenance: Charles Watson Powell (1852-1937), The Manor House, Speldhurst, Kent since at least 1915;
by inheritance to his nephew, Stuart Kaye Machattie Powell;
by whom sold, London, Sotheby's, 21 March 1962, lot 34, where acquired by a German dealer;
Georg Schäfer, Schweinfurt, bears his label on the reverse with inventory number, by whom acquired in Munich in 1962;
by whom sold, London, Christie's, 7 July 1978, lot 163 (as Circle of Frans Hals);
where acquired by the previous owner, an artist;
by whom sold, London, Sotheby's, 7 December 2011, lot 24.

Literature: Claus Grimm, *Frans Hals: The Complete Work*, (Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1989), pp. 14-16, 184, 224, 283, cat. no. 90, reproduced colour plate 94, pp. 16, figs. 4a, 4b and 4e, (& German ed., *Frans Hals. Das Gesamtwerk*, (Stuttgart & Zurich, 1989), pp. 15-16, 278, reproduced figs. 4a, 4b, and 4e)

THIS CAPTIVATING *TRONIE* OF A BOY, IS AN EXCELLENT example of Frans Hals' work, demonstrating his uniquely compelling style. A young man, his face framed by a beret, turns his head to look out at the viewer. His mouth is slightly open, as if about to speak, and with his right hand he points up and out of the picture frame. Set against a plain background, it is the simplest of compositions, and yet it has the psychological depth and bravura brushwork of Hals' best work.

One of the leading scholars of Hals' work, Claus Grimm, when discussing the present painting, wrote 'The beret identifies him as an actor', and this *tronie* immediately calls to mind Hals' most famous depiction of that subject, the National Gallery's, *Young Man Holding a Skull (Vanitas)*, see figure 1, which is often known as *Hamlet*.¹ Although, as Borenus and Hodgson have said, 'The description of the subject as Hamlet is perhaps more attractive than accurate',² the costumes in both works are those of an actor, and have 'nothing in common with the fashions of the day'.³ Both figures wear capes and large berets atop their long tousled hair, and they make dramatic theatrical gestures. The exotic costumes recall the kind used by the Utrecht Caravaggisti in their genre and allegorical scenes. Grimm has dated the present work to c.1638, a decade after the National Gallery's painting, and so it is unlikely that the same model was used in each work (although this was a common practice of Hals'), however, they are unmistakably of the same 'type'.

¹ Grimm, C., *Frans Hals: The Complete Work*, (Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1989), p. 224

² Borenus, T., & Hodgson, J.V., *A Catalogue of the Pictures at Elton Hall* (London, 1924), p. 29, no. 24.

³ *Frans Hals*, exh cat (National Gallery of Art, Washington DC; Royal Academy of Arts, London; Frans Hals museum, Haarlem, 1989-1990), ed. Slive, S., p.208, no. 211



Frans Hals, *Young Man Holding a Skull (Vanitas)*, c. 1626-1628, The National Gallery, London (Figure 1)





Frans Hals,
Boy Blowing Bubbles,
whereabouts unknown
(Figure 2)

Slive's point about the figures' costumes being incongruous with contemporary fashion is an important one, as it indicates that *A Tronie of a Young Man in the Costume of an Actor* is not a portrait but a genre scene, moreover 'a moralizing genre scene'.⁴ The National Gallery's work is clearly a *vanitas*, the skull serving as a reminder of death, an especially effective device when contrasted with the youth of the sitter. Grimm has argued that the pointing finger in the present work is an indicator that this too should be considered a *vanitas*. The missing work *Boy Blowing Bubbles*, see figure 2, shows a child making the same distinctive pointing gesture which Hals used in *A Tronie of a Young Man in the Costume of an Actor*.⁵ This gesture draws attention to the bubble, itself a *vanitas* symbol, designating the *homo bulla est*. The phrase *homo bulla est*, meaning 'man is a bubble', suggests that man's 'life and desires are just as ephemeral as a soap bubble'.⁶ Although there is no bubble in the present work, 'In the course of his development, Hals increasingly neglected the usual symbolic attributes', and so Grimm believes that 'his pointing gesture refers to the image of the *homo bulla*'.⁷ Of course the theme of *vanitas* is made all the more poignant in works where the subjects are so full of youthful vitality.

Although *A Tronie of a Young Man in the Costume of an Actor* is dated to c. 1638, in terms of subject matter the work relates to Hals' genre scenes of the 1620s. Often these scenes had an allegorical aspect to them, such as *Boy Holding a Flute (Hearing)*, which 'can be safely related to traditional representations...of the Five Senses' (fig. 3).⁸ It is worth noting that in this work, as in the present painting, the figure meets the viewer's eye, which is



Frans Hals,
*Boy Holding a Flute
(Hearing)*,
c 1626-28,
Staatliches Museum,
Schwerin (Figure 3)

unusual in these genre scenes, in which Hals attempts to capture fleeting moments and reactions.

The figures in these *tronies* tend to wear overtly theatrical costumes, which emphasises the symbolic aspects of the works. In the works of the 1620s, such as *Singing Boy with a Flute*, see figure 4, or *The Merry Lute Player*, see figure 5, the figures' attributes are granted great prominence, so that the allegorical allusions are overt. However, as already mentioned, in later works including *A Tronie of a Young Man in the Costume of an Actor*, Hals tended to minimise his use of attributes and superfluous detail, preferring an intense study of youthful character. However, all the pictures are linked by a mood of vivaciousness, which is not always present in his portraits. Hals' great skill in these genre scenes is his ability to capture fleeting moments, where 'he epitomized the action in unusual freeze-frames in which the movement and impulsiveness of the youthful actors are strikingly emphasised'.⁹



Frans Hals, *Singing Boy with a Flute*, c. 1623-5,
Gemäldegalerie, Berlin (Figure 4)

As Grimm has pointed out, what makes *A Tronie of a Young Man in the Costume of an Actor*, such a special work 'is the fact that it is a genre picture by Hals from the late 1630s, long after his lively early works. Its modelling harks back to the paintings of actors and musicians'.¹⁰ This is extremely unusual in Hals' *oeuvre*, although a comparable work, *The Head of a Boy*, was rediscovered on the London art market, selling in 2009 for just under £1million (fig. 6).¹¹ Grimm specifically compares the two works as they unusually derive from Hals' earlier more energetic and joyful style. However, *The Head of a Boy* lacks the quality of *A Tronie of a Young Man in the Costume of an Actor*, which has such a captivating sense of psychological depth.

This painting displays a number of the technical characteristics that are typical of Hals. Much of the brushwork runs on a diagonal, following

⁴ Grimm, p.15.

⁵ Although Seymour Slive believes that *Boy Blowing Bubbles* is an autograph work of Hals', Grimm attributes it to a follower. See Slive, S. *Frans Hals*, (Phaidon, London, 1970), vol. III, no.28.

⁶ Grimm, p.15. For further discussion on *homo bulla*, see Stechow, W., 'Homo Bulla' in *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 20 (1938), pp.227-28.

⁷ Grimm, p. 224.

⁸ Slive, 1989, p.205.

⁹ Grimm, p. 222.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 15.

¹¹ London, Christie's, 7 July 2009, lot 5.

the grain of the panel. Rather than adding highlights (*hoogzels* as they were known in the seventeenth century) last, as most artists did, Hals also added some of the darks (*diepzels*) during the last phase of painting: some of the shadows and outlines, such as those of the sitter's thumb, are swiftly delineated in the same deep red paint that Hals used for the lips. Some of the shadows are done conventionally using blacks, but others are also in this deep red pigment. At this late stage Hals added the few brushstrokes denoting loose hairs over the sitter's face, and the yellow highlight on the top of the upper lip. Hals has used striated curving brushstrokes of lighter straw-coloured yellow ochre to highlight the sitter's hair, and these were also done at a late phase when the underlying paint was no longer soft. Although this picture gives the impression that it was very swiftly painted, with much of the brushwork done "wet-in-wet" - and indeed for much of the painting this is surely true, it is clear that Hals painted it in two distinct phases, letting the paint dry in between. This is a characteristic of his working method, including in his formal portraits.

The pentiments are also probably from the second phase. The most obvious of these is in the pointing finger, which Hals has extended using a redder tone of paint, through which the original fingernail can be made out. Hals also altered the angle between the beret and the cloth to the right of the sitter's neck, using paint which now appears more yellow in tone, through which the original dark paint can be seen. The same effect is also to be seen to the left of the composition. Hals used an olive green paint to depict the half-tones in the right-hand half of the face, and also in the background, which is undefined, but where the sitter's head casts a shadow.

A Tronie of a Young Man in the Costume of an Actor would have been



Frans Hals, *Merry Lute Player*, c. 1626, Mansion House, London (Figure 5)



Frans Hals, *The Head of a Boy*, c.1640, Private Collection (Figure 6)

originally lozenge-shaped but, like many works of the period, the corners were adapted when the format fell out of fashion. Hals' work is known for particularly suffering at the hands of misguided restorers, but in the case the of present painting previous overpainting has been carefully cleaned to reveal a work which remains in good condition, and where the energetic genius of Hals' brushwork is still very much in evidence.

Although the provenance of the present work can currently only be traced to the beginning of the twentieth-century, it was obviously at one point well known, as there is a copy, formerly in the J. Epstein Collection in Baltimore.¹² The work was not even recognised as that of Hals until the 1980s, when careful cleaning revealed the brilliant and unmistakable technique, resulting in an important rediscovery.

Today Hals is perhaps considered second to only Rembrandt in the ranks of seventeenth-century Dutch painters. He was born in Antwerp but moved at an early age to Haarlem, where he spent the whole of his life, and his art is indelibly linked to the city. His earliest work is from 1611, and he soon built an excellent career as a portraitist, which he maintained throughout his life. Specific biographical details are relatively scarce although a convincing stylistic chronology has been built up by scholars. His genre scenes mostly date from the 1620s, although there is the occasional example, including the present work from the next decade, when he was at his artistic peak. After 1640 artistic tastes changed and his commissions started to dry up. Probably in response to this, his works became more static and the energy of works such as *A Tronie of a Young Man in the Costume of an Actor* disappears to an extent. He is best known for his remarkable flowing brushwork, and this expressive technique brought his subjects to life in a way previously unknown in the Netherlands. His work has an immediacy which is engrossing to the viewer and his use of loose brushstrokes to render light on form is remarkable. The present work is an excellent demonstration of these qualities and exemplifies why he has been considered since 'soon after the middle of the nineteenth century as one of the greatest painters in the history of Western art'.¹³

We are grateful to Professor Claus Grimm, Dr. Pieter Biesboer, and Dr. Norbert Middelkoop all of whom have confirmed the Hals' authorship of the present work. This painting will be included in Prof. Grimm's forthcoming catalogue raisonné.

¹² Grimm, p.16, fig. 4c.

¹³ Slive, 1989, p.16.