

FRANS HALS.

If one of our younger American painters were asked to name those artists of bygone times whose influence is most potent in the studios to-day, he would surely cite Frans Hals among the very first. In Munich Hals has been of late the most dominant of artistic forces,—directly in his own work and indirectly in that of his pupil Adriaen Brouwer; in certain Parisian quarters his influence is almost as apparent; and many of our own young painters, who began in Paris or in Munich, have studied him later in his own land and have formed themselves largely by his example. It is neither to be wondered at nor to be regretted that such should be the case, since Hals was one of the very greatest painters who have ever lived. By this I do not mean one of the greatest *artists*. He shows no creative or poetic power, and only the kind of intellectual force which was needed to rank him high in the one branch he followed,—that of portraiture. But when we look at the technical side of his art, when we regard him simply as a practitioner, we must call him master above almost every other. “No man,” says Fromentin, “ever *painted better*, and no man ever will.”

Hals was held in the highest honor in his own time,—when, if ever, good painting was understood and prized,—but he was forgotten by the eighteenth century with its love for slight and superficial grace, and by the first quarter of our own with its delight in cold classicism of motive and colder formality of treatment. In the present day, however, when “realism” is the watchword and when devotion to clever and individual workmanship has become almost excessive, he has been re-discovered and eulogized afresh, put on a pedestal in the studios, and worshiped, with only Velasquez for his fellow, as “the painter’s painter.” Yet, with all his immense vogue among professionals and amateurs, his name and work are still not very familiar to the public—not even to the traveled public, which knows its galleries pretty well. This is partly because the public is not prepared to appreciate quite clearly the value of mere admirable workmanship, and partly because Hals must be seen at home to be understood, and his home lies a little off the highway of common travel. Comparatively few of his pictures are to be found out of the Netherlands, and these include none of his most important works and not many which show his technique in

perfection. Really to know him, moreover, one must go not only to Holland but to Haarlem. Haarlem is Frans Hals as Parma was Correggio. But while Correggio has almost faded from the walls where he revealed himself, Hals is as living, as fresh, as powerful in his home to-day as when his models walked its streets.

Though born at Mechlin he belongs quite strictly to the Dutch school, for his parents were from Haarlem and he returned thither with them at an early age and seems to have painted there during the whole of his long life. It is interesting to note the strong and direct influence he is having on much of the current practice of our day, and then to trace how strong and direct was his influence while he lived. He was not only the greatest technician of the Dutch school, but the painter among all others who most forcibly impressed himself upon the development of that school. Some others—as Rembrandt, for example—gave rise to more slavish imitators; but not one so turned the current of the general practice of his time. Born in 1584 (twenty-three years before Rembrandt), it is doubtful with whom he studied. All we know is that he was the first to introduce into Holland the free, bold, synthetic way of working that Rubens had popularized among the Flemings. Not only portraiture, but landscape and *genre*, transformed themselves beneath his influence. Not only Vander Helst, but Brouwer and Ostade, owed everything to his teaching, and it is not too much to say that no Dutch painter came after him whose work would not have been different had Frans Hals never lived. Even of Rembrandt himself, this may strongly be affirmed.

The best of Hals’s work is, as I have said, in Haarlem. Hanging together in the Academy are eight great canvases, each with many life-size figures—magnificent specimens of “Corporation” or “Regent Pieces,” those huge portrait groups which are the finest and most distinctive creations of Dutch art. The earliest of them was painted when he was thirty-two years old, the last when he was eighty,—but two years before his death. And between these we find a progressive series, the finest examples dating from about his fiftieth year. It is impossible here to explain the technical perfection of these pictures, where he shows himself not so great an artist as Velasquez, but a painter whose workmanship is as transcendent, and who manages

at times, moreover, a wider and more difficult scale of color. Everything is fine and original,—color, tone, arrangement, character,—but it is the touch which is the really marvelous point,—swift, direct, spirited, broad and bold, yet faultlessly exact and sympathetic. No man's handling was ever more personal, more autographic, more wholly his own creation; and such individuality is, of course, a prime factor in great technical performance. No man's was ever franker. We can see how he worked—how he began and ended and laid every stroke—as clearly as though we had stood beside his elbow. No man ever wrought so daringly, so rapidly, so without pause, hesitation, addition or amendment,—yet so without a blemish. He is the most supremely audacious of painters; but we do not feel that his audacity was meant as such—only that he knew everything, and so had no reason to deliberate or fear. It is mere workmanship, of course, that I am praising. But workmanship is more than the half of art, and this of Hals's is so free, so true, so expressive, and so rarely individual, that it seems due to something like inspiration, and not to the study and reflection which guide the brush of others. No man, moreover, is less mannered in his style. His handling varies from ways which are merely free to those which are more boldly synthetic than any other painter ever used. His tone is now soft and gray, now golden and mellow, now dark and heavy. Now his models are resplendent in clear blue and yellow, and now a deep brown so pervades the canvas that scarce a local tint survives. He tried his hand, furthermore, on small canvases as well as large, still painting freely and vivaciously, of course, but with a wonderful adaptation of his style to narrow limits. There is, for example, a little picture some nine inches by seven in the Dresden gallery—the portrait of a saucy-looking cavalier in black velvet and white lace—which could not have been larger or freer had he swept a ten-foot canvas, yet in which the requirements of the scale are as artistically respected as they could have been by the most minute of workmen. And, though I have said that Frans Hals was not a *great* artist, I would explain that he is a true and a very good one. His grouping is admirably artistic, spirited, and harmonious. All his figures are alive and individual. His "Hospital Regents" are stately and dignified, his jolly "Archers" brimful of rollicking life; and when he paints for his own pleasure, his own por-

trait, or a fisherboy, or a musician, or a gypsy,—such a head as the one here reproduced,—he makes it so vivid with his own gay, laughter-loving impulses (drink-loving, too, if we must believe tradition), that it greets us from a gallery wall like an actual incarnation of his personal humor.

Unfortunately, as I have said, it is his less perfect works that are most familiar outside of Holland, a rather extreme example being the "Hille Bobbe," in our own Metropolitan Museum—a work where heavy browns replace the fine color and exquisite tone of his greater pictures, and where his execution is summary to a degree that just indicates the subject—that would be beyond the edge of license with any other hand. Hals's work, however, is always magnificent even when most rough-hewn, always truthful up to the given point, never "slap-dash," meaningless, or incoherent. But such a hand and face as are shown in the "Hille Bobbe" differ from hand and face in one of his finer portraits as a stenographer's notes differ from bold yet finished eloquence. Those who have an eye to read the language know what power of thought and vision lay behind it, what power of hand was necessary to its swift and true suggestiveness. But such work cannot reveal Frans Hals, the perfect painter, to eyes which have never seen his completer canvases.

The worship of such technicians as Hals and Velasquez has undoubtedly been of immense advantage to the rising generation of our artists. Perhaps it has sometimes induced a disregard, even a comparative contempt, for the other and more subtle artistic factors which must go with splendid workmanship to make up a splendid art. But while we look for these other qualities to follow, we recognize the fact that upon technical excellence all good art must be grounded. And as technical excellence was the one thing most disregarded in American work until very recent years, we are far from regretting the reverence with which Frans Hals has been studied, the fervor with which his teaching has been applied to practice. Yet we must lament a little that his highest efforts have not always been the ones consulted,—that his short-hand execution and his almost monochromatic brown tone have oftener served as text-books than the canvases where he shows himself a master of gray or golden tone and of lovely color; of perfect freedom, yet of perfect balance; of the utmost swiftness, yet the most accurate, complete, and expressive definition.



LA BOHÉMIENNE (THE GYPSY).

[ENGRAVED BY WILLIAM MILLER FROM THE PAINTING BY FRANS HALS IN THE LA CAZE COLLECTION IN THE LOUVRE.]