Hierarchy, Home, and Homeland: The Dutch Golden Age in Frans Hals’s Family Group in a Landscape

Throughout the seventeenth century, portraiture was one of the most sought after genres of painting in the Dutch Republic. The middle and upper classes of Dutch society commissioned portraits for their ability to communicate specific perceptions of the subject’s wealth and status. Commissioners of group portraits had these same motives in mind, using group portrayals to define each subject by their role in relation to others’. This capacity for comparison is group portraiture’s unique addition to the genre of portraiture, as it allowed carefully calculated perceptions of the patrons to be created through the subjects’ interactions with each other, not with the viewer alone. Group portraits were both products and active participants in the cultural process that took place in Holland during the seventeenth century, and thus give us unique and important insights into the complex cultural climate of the Dutch Golden Age.¹

Rembrandt van Rijn’s The Company of Frans Banning Cocq and Willem van Ruytenburch, better known as the Night Watch (fig.1), of 1642, is arguably the most famous group portrait of the Netherlands of the seventeenth century. It has come to represent the essence of the Dutch Golden Age, glowing with the splendor of the Civic Guard’s power and harmony. The Night Watch, however, is not alone in the genre of militia portraiture. Two striking depictions of The Governors of the Kloveniersdoelen, one by Govert Flinck dating to 1642 (fig. 2), the other by Bartholomeus van der Helst dating to 1655 (fig. 3), are now on view and long-term loan at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. These works summarize the intent

of all militia portraits to “immortalize the civic pride” of these leaders, who were the face of the Dutch Republic.²

As magnificent as such group portraits are, however, we resign ourselves to tunnel vision when viewing them as the sole contributors to the genre of group portraiture. These works do indeed give insight into important institutions of the Dutch Republic of the seventeenth century, but they cannot show us the full breadth and complexity of Dutch society at the time. For this, we must look to lesser-known and lesser-celebrated group portraits, such as Frans Hals’s Family Group in a Landscape (fig. 4), c. 1645–1648, to broaden our vision again.

At first glance, this work is a harmonious depiction of a quintessential upper- or upper-middle-class family. The two middle figures, man and wife, mother and father, lock eyes lovingly, their son greeting the viewer with twinkling eyes as if caught in a daydream, totally at ease. The daughter gazes at her mother in admiration, separated from her by the family servant who blends into the lush landscape behind them. To the right, the verdant scenery opens into a dazzling vista, the pinks of the clouds complementing the warmth of the family’s faces and spirits.

The Dutch of the seventeenth century prided themselves on the equality of their Republic. Foreigners were often surprised by the freedom of women to socialize with men as they liked,³ and slavery was not legal.⁴ However, when examining works such as Frans Hals’s Family Group in a Landscape more closely, many instances of hierarchy are revealed. This work brings great insight into the family roles and race relations of the Netherlands of the seventeenth century, and

The Importance of Gesture

In order to fully comprehend group portraits of the time, we must start by understanding the literature that was circulating and the cultural expectations of the elite classes, as these informed the visual language artists employed. The value and discipline of manners and etiquette grew as the hierarchy of Holland gradually strengthened. Etiquette books were in print as early as the fourteenth century, though most were not translated into Dutch until about 1650. The Dutch elite, however, had a reasonable command of languages and would have learned the rules of courtoisie and civilité through such means as the Grand Tour, a trip that young men took to France and Italy.

Of course, the Dutch would have been most familiar with the manner books of Erasmus (fig. 5), such as his extremely influential 1532 work, De civilitate morum puerilium. Erasmus, like all etiquette authors, wrote on the importance of posture and prescribed certain ways of holding oneself to members of the upper classes. He wrote that well-mannered people must stand upright with a graceful and natural posture. They must not lean too far in any direction, as leaning backward was a sign of conceit and leaning forward would appear ungainly.

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9 Ibid., 65.
By the end of the seventeenth century, artists had written painters’ manuals, or *schilderboeken*, such as Gérard de Lairesse’s 1707 *Groot Schilderboek*. These works incorporated the manners of the etiquette books into the language of the arts, as seen in one of de Lairesse’s illustrations (fig. 6). In his drawing, the elite stand in contrapposto with clear elegance, while the peasants stand on both feet with bent knees, illustrating both the arrogant backward lean and the unattractive forward hunch Erasmus warned against. Karel van Mander, who is known to have taught Frans Hals, authored *schilderboeken* of his own.\(^\text{10}\) He, too, stressed the importance of gesture, though he did not only discuss its importance in signifying class and status. Rather, van Mander included a discussion of gesture based on gender, emphasizing that men must act like men, and women must act like women.\(^\text{11}\) It is important to remember that artists were already incorporating this kind of visual language into their works in the time between the publication of manner books and painters’ manuals.

It is also necessary to review the emblem books that were circulating at the same time as such etiquette books and painters’ manuals. In Andrea Alciato’s *Book of Emblems* of 1531, published at almost the exact date of Erasmus’s manner book, there are three emblems that will be important to consider in viewing Frans Hals’s *Family Group in a Landscape*. The *Symbol of Faithfulness* (fig. 7), emblem on *Harmony* (fig. 8), and emblem *On Wifely Fidelity* (fig. 9), all include figures that grasp each other’s hand. In the emblem *On Wifely Fidelity*, there is also a dog pictured by the feet of the couple.

Jan van Eyck employed these emblems of grasping hands and loyal dogs nearly 100 years before Alciato’s *Book of Emblems* was even published, in *Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his


\(^{11}\) Spicer, “The Renaissance Elbow,” 85.
Wife (fig. 10) of 1434. Thus, much like the Dutch comprehension of gesture before the incorporation of etiquette books into painters’ manuals, these visual cues were engrained in the people’s understanding of artwork before such emblems were officially published. These emblems were long enduring, making an appearance in such works as Peter Paul Ruben’s The Artist and His First Wife Isabella Brant in the Honeysuckle Bower (fig. 11), c. 1609–1610, almost two centuries after van Eyck’s work.

**Family Group in a Landscape: The Gesture of Gender**

Considering the rules on etiquette, painters’ manuals, and emblem books of the day, we can now perceive the messages of Frans Hals’s *Family Group in a Landscape* as the Dutch at the time would have understood it. The two middle figures, man and wife, greet each other with great poise, grasping right hands in the well-recognized gesture of marriage and fidelity. They lock eyes in a moment of mutual understanding, each accepting the role they play in their relationship as man and wife, mother and father. Though their gaze may suggest a sense of equality—perhaps that they look to each other for agreement and approval—the man’s role as the authority is made clear through their physical positioning, which, considering the prominence of etiquette books at the time, is quite telling.

While the woman must look up to reach her husband’s gaze, the man looks down at her. His left hand sits atop his hip in a bold declaration of self-possession, his foot extending far in front of his wife. Thus, he is in a position of control, as she is only able to move forward at his approval. Furthermore, the man stands to the woman’s right (our left), which was common in marriage portraiture of the seventeenth century.\(^{12}\) The couple’s positioning also indicates the husband’s higher status, as the etiquette books of the time taught that one must always stand

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\(^{12}\) Ibid., 112.
behind and to the left of someone of a higher rank. This power dynamic illustrates the couple’s virtues as man and woman: The husband embodies steadfast leadership, while his wife maintains the virtuous obedience needed to compensate for her status as a “morally weaker” sex.

The couple’s two children would have learned gender-specific manners, as discussed by van Mander, from their same-gendered parent, and thus are placed accordingly—son with father, daughter with mother. The son, following his father’s pose, places his hand on his hip in a motion of confidence and pride commonly seen in men and boys in family portraits. He, like his father, stands in the necessary contrapposto prescribed to their elite status. The boy stares out at us, bridging the gap between our world and theirs, while his sister gazes at her mother for inspiration, perhaps imagining the role she herself will fulfill as a wife and mother in the future.

The daughter holds a fan and wears gloves, both common symbols of high class and marriage, and thus may be engaged. Her engagement could explain the placement of the dog that peeks out from behind her, since the dog symbolizing fidelity was usually seen by the feet of the couple, as we saw in Alciato’s emblem On Wifely Fidelity and in van Eyck’s Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his Wife. Here, however, it represents both the fidelity of the couple we see and of the future marriage the daughter will enjoy. Thus, this portrait fulfills its duty in portraying an admirable image of its subjects. All considered, we see a husband, wife, son, and daughter, who each fulfill their proper position and role in the family structure, illustrated clearly through their interactions with each other on the canvas.

Clearly, this patriarchal family system was not unique to the family portrayed by Frans Hals. In Juriaen Jacobsz’s Michiel de Ruyter and his Family (fig. 12) of 1662, the hierarchical nature of the family is revealed and portrayed yet again. Michiel de Ruyter commissioned this

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portrait to serve as a reminder to his family of his position as father and leader, since he was
gone at sea for most of their lives. Thus, even in his absence, Ruyter’s family portrait serves to
declare him the patriarch of a family of proper-mannered and elegant men and women.

Because men were in a position of such dominance in the family, they would have been
the ones commissioning the works, as seen in the case of *Michiel de Ruyter and his Family* of
1662. Therefore, men had the power to dictate the image of women in such portraits. Women
were thought to need male guidance and leadership because they were believed to be impulsive,
prone to excess, and likely to overindulge due to their vulnerability to temptation. Naturally,
then, one of the only paintings in which a woman denies a man’s proposition, suggesting her
independence and denial of male dominance and supervision, was painted by Judith Leyster in
her 1631 work, *The Proposition (or, Man Offering Money to a Young Woman)* (Fig. 13).

*Family Group in a Landscape: The Reality of Race*

Returning to examine Frans Hals’s *Family Group in a Landscape*, we see one more
important indication of hierarchical values. The family’s black servant stands between the
mother and daughter, blending into the landscape as if part of another realm. His brown clothes
contrast with the black dress the family wears as a declaration of their wealth, as black clothing
was expensive and thus viewed as a status symbol. This boy is not displayed as another subject
in the portrait, but rather as an object indicating the family’s richness. It is interesting to note that
personal slavery did not exist in Holland, though this of course does not mean that hierarchies

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17 Benjamin B. Roberts, *Sex and Drugs before Rock ’n’ Roll: Youth Culture and Masculinity during Holland’s Golden Age* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 81.
and prejudices were not extant. In fact, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, masters brought their African “slaves” into the Netherlands and surrounding countries and continued to treat them as such.20

Here we return once again to Andrea Alciato’s Book of Emblems of 1531. The emblem called The Impossible (fig. 14), otherwise titled The Impossible Task, gives a sense of the Dutch attitudes toward race at the time. The message that was paired with the image said, “Why do you wash, in vain, the Ethiopian? Give up. No one can light up the darkness of black night.” In later editions, a line was added, “Vices that are natural to the man, whether physical or spiritual, cannot be eradicated.”21 Thus, the black man is used as a symbol of the depravities of mankind, the blackness of his skin representing both physical and spiritual evils. The image itself portrays the Ethiopian as a thing to be manhandled, and his lack of resistance could suggest he is a slave.

Images of blacks in portraiture were commonly used as foils for the whiteness of their masters or mistresses, as in Anthony van Dyck’s portraits Marchesa Elena Grimaldi Cattaneo (fig. 15) of 1623 and Princess Henrietta of Lorraine Attended by a Page (fig. 16) of 1634. In the first, it is clear that the black boy is not in control of his own body, but rather must force himself forward to keep up with his giant, poised mistress. Like the black boy in Family Group in a Landscape, he is not seen as a subject; rather, he becomes part of the parasol itself, his sole purpose to serve the white woman and thus magnify her grandeur by comparison. In the second portrait, the massive white Princess Henrietta holds back her black servant. Her hand serves to control his movement much like the husband’s leg is used to control his wife in Family Group in a Landscape. Furthermore, the black servant cranes his neck to gaze up at his mistress, waiting for his next command in an exaggerated version of the wife’s upward gaze toward her husband.

Hence, by considering van Dyck’s portraits alongside *Family Group in a Landscape*, another important indication of hierarchy is raised. While women were lesser than men within the realm of whiteness, gender became irrelevant once the racial boundaries were crossed.

Aelbert Cuyp’s *A Page with Two Horses* (fig. 17), c.1655–60, offers a seemingly different view of a black servant, though it in fact speaks to the same hierarchical values. Though his master is seen to the side wearing high-class black-colored clothing, the black page takes center stage, a clear deviation from the portraits of van Dyck. At the time, if a slave or servant lived with an artisan, he would have lived in part of the artisan’s house and eaten the food given to him. Servants of noble people, in return, would have been housed, dressed, and fed quite well, as we see here.\(^{22}\) Moreover, this page is standing in the contrapposto stance indicative of elite society, suggesting his training in the rules of etiquette. He, however, would not have learned such manners because his status demanded it of him, but instead would have learned them so he could properly serve his elite master without offending him. Therefore, this painting once again displays a black servant not as a subject, but as an object signifying the wealth of his master.

**Home and Homeland**

Once more, we will be returning to *Family Group in a Landscape*. During the Dutch Golden Age, there were many ideas circulating that the family was a microcosm of the state, the foundation upon which society rested.\(^{23}\) In many genre paintings, such as Johannes Vermeer’s *Officer and Laughing Girl* (fig. 18), c. 1657, a map of Holland is placed on the wall to signify the interconnectedness of family matters and the state.\(^{24}\) Here, the man sits with his back to us, his arm akimbo in a stance that exudes masculinity as he courts the laughing woman. A map can

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\(^{23}\) Woodall, “Sovereign Bodies,” 86.

also be found on the back wall of Rembrandt’s Portrait of a Couple (fig. 19) of 1633, which even more explicitly brings the realm of married life into the world of the Republic.

Although we resign ourselves to a narrow view of Dutch society of the seventeenth century when viewing militia portraiture alone, it deepens our understanding of the complexities of the Republic to view such renderings in light of works like Family Group in a Landscape. Because family was seen as the microcosm of the state, it is logical to assume that the prominence of hierarchy that is revealed through family portraiture would be reflected in the depictions of those who represent the state itself. Thus, we must look beyond the seeming equality and splendor that portraits of Civic Guards are meant to portray.

In comparing family portraiture to that of the Civic Guard of the time, we must first identify the visual cues that span both subgenres. The use of emblematic detail to indicate the character of a group is one part of the visual language of group portraiture that infiltrates both family and militia portraits. Looking again to The Governors of the Klovenierdoelen (fig. 2), by Govert Flinck, we are met with four well-dressed, serious looking men in the midst of a meeting. The Dutch at the time, however, would have recognized the ceremonial drinking horn and the gleaming golden claw, the emblem of the Harquebusiers, and thus would have recognized these men as important leaders.

Like these emblems, the men displayed here represent the civility of the entire Harquebusiers’ company, though they only embody one faction. While the colonels and captains oversaw the military functions of the company, the governors were responsible for the Harquebusiers’ headquarters. Showing such men seated around their meeting table was typical

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25 De Bruyn, Civic Pride: Group Portraits from Amsterdam.
26 Ibid.
by the middle of the seventeenth century and was one way of visually declaring authority by indicating the seriousness of their work. Like the fathers who commissioned family portraits to assert their abilities as patriarchs, these men used group portraiture to assert their ability to lead the state.

In *Banquet of the Officers of the St George Civic Guard* (fig. 20), of 1616, Frans Hals uses gesture to display the splendor and prominence that the Civic Guards wished to portray. In this portrait, the arm akimbo is employed on the three men closest to the picture plane, radiating the strength and self-assurance that the Dutch would have wanted to see in their Civic Guards as much as they did in their male family members. However, these men’s elbows jut out toward the viewer, declaring a power more vital than that which we see in the boy and father of *Family Group in a Landscape*. This magnified depiction of the pose is appropriate to the understanding of the family as a microcosm of the state: As those representing the state itself, the Civic Guards had to portray an authority many times as potent as that which we see in singular patriarchs.

Although these two portraits, *The Governors of the Kloveniersdoelen* and *Banquet of the Officers of the St George Civic Guard*, first appear to project harmony and equality among the men displayed, they, too, are permeated with the hierarchies of Dutch society of the seventeenth century. While anyone could be drafted to the ranks of the ordinary militia, the captains, lieutenants, ensigns, and sergeants came from the ranks of the political elite. Higher-ups like the governors of *The Governors of the Kloveniersdoelen* often married within the family to retain such influence. In this image, only the governors of the company are portrayed, claiming the power to represent the entire division. This was normal for Civic Guard portraiture of the time, in

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29 De Bruyn, *Civic Pride: Group Portraits from Amsterdam*. 
which only these highly placed and affluent members of the company were depicted.\textsuperscript{30}

Furthermore, the captain, lieutenant, and standard-bearer of the company are almost always represented clearly in militia portraiture,\textsuperscript{31} while the ordinary ranks, made up of the middle class, were never shown. Even in portraits in which the Civic Guard is seated around a communal table, seen in both \textit{The Governors of the Kloveniersdoelen} and \textit{Banquet of the Officers of the St George Civic Guard}, the man who turns in his chair to address the viewer is meant to represent the role of the second- and third-ranking officers.\textsuperscript{32}

Though this illustration of rank is perhaps to be expected, these portraits also present an issue of hierarchy that is subtler than that which we see in family portraiture. In works like \textit{Family Group in a Landscape} and \textit{Michiel de Ruyter and his Family}, the patriarch commissioned the work in order to portray each family member completely, fulfilling his or her role within the accepted family structure and gender roles. In Civic Guard portraiture, however, each subject paid separately according to his placement within the work.\textsuperscript{33} The captain, lieutenant, and ensign would have paid the most to have the most prominent position in the piece, while the other members of the portrait would have been placed according to competitive payment and rank. Consequently, the seemingly harmonious depiction of the company was infiltrated with hierarchical tension based on the economic situation of each subject.\textsuperscript{34} Not only were hierarchical values employed in deciding who would be portrayed in such grand portraiture, but they also came into play in creating the compositions of such works.


\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 27.

\textsuperscript{32} Spicer, “The Renaissance Elbow,” 106.

\textsuperscript{33} Harry Berger, Jr., \textit{Manhood, Marriage, and Mischief: Rembrandt’s ‘Night Watch’ and Other Dutch Group Portraits} (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 49.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 51.
Hidden Hierarchies

While these Civic Guard portraits continue to claim center stage as radiant representations of the glorious Golden Age, family portrayals are a crucial component to the genre of group portraiture and, unfortunately, are too often overlooked. They alone have the capacity to reveal the gender and racial inequalities that are impossible to show in group depictions of powerful white men. By exploring such family portraits as Frans Hals’s *Family Group in a Landscape*, we are able to understand the extreme extent to which such hierarchies permeated Dutch society, and thus open ourselves to look past the façade of harmony in Civic Guard portraiture.

When museums like the National Gallery of Art exhibit militia portraits alone in the genre of group portraiture, it is easy to be fooled by the paintings’ superficial displays. Consequently, we come to admire works like *The Governors of the Kloveniersdoelen* as illustrations of the supposed equality and splendor of the Dutch Golden Age. However, when we are given the opportunity to view group portraits like *Family Group in a Landscape*, which show inequality more clearly through the subjects’ gestures and positioning, we are encouraged to recognize inequality in the entire genre. By comparing the differences in family depictions and militia portrayals, such as who is commissioning and paying for the work, we are better able to tune into subtle hierarchies, like tensions of economic status, which Civic Guard portraits try to conceal.
Figure 1  
Rembrandt van Rijn  
*The Company of Frans Banning Cocq and Willem van Ruytenburch, known as the Night Watch*, 1642  
Oil on canvas  
379.5 x 453.5 cm  
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Figure 2  
Govert Flinck  
*The Governors of the Kloveniersdoelen*, 1642  
Oil on canvas  
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam  
On loan from the City of Amsterdam
Figure 3
Bartholomeus van der Helst
*The Governors of the Kloveniersdoelen*, 1655
Oil on canvas
Amsterdam Museum

Figure 4
Frans Hals
*Family Group in a Landscape*, c.1645–1648
Oil on canvas.
202 x 285 cm
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid
Figure 5
Hans Holbein the Younger
*Erasmus*, 1523
Oil on wood
73.6 x 51.4 cm
The National Gallery, London
On loan from Longford Castle collection

Figure 6
Gérard de Lairesse
*Groot Schilderboek*, 1707.

Figure 7
Andrea Alciato
*Book of Emblems: Symbol of Faithfulness*, 1531
Figure 8
Andrea Alciato
*Book of Emblems: Harmony*, 1531

Figures 9
Andrea Alciato
*Book of Emblems: On Wifely Fidelity*, 1531

Figure 10
Jan van Eyck
*Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his Wife*, 1434
Oil on oak
82.2 x 60 cm
The National Gallery, London
Figure 11
Peter Paul Rubens
*The Artist and His First Wife Isabella Brant in the Honeysuckle Bower*, 1609–1610
Oil on canvas
178 cm × 136.5 cm
Alte Pinakothek, Munich

Figure 12
Juriaen Jacobsz
*Michiel de Ruyter and his Family*, 1662
Oil on Canvas
269 x 406 x 5.5 cm
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam
Figure 13
Judith Leyster
*The Proposition (or, Man Offering Money to a Young Woman)*, 1631
Oil on panel
30.9 x 24.2 cm
Royal Picture Gallery, Mauritshuis, The Hague

Figure 14
Andrea Alciato
*Book of Emblems: The Impossible*, 1531
Figure 15
Anthony van Dyck
*Marchesa Elena Grimaldi Cattaneo*, 1623
Oil on canvas
242.9 x 138.5 cm
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Figure 16
Anthony van Dyck
*Princess Henrietta of Lorraine Attended by a Page*, 1634
Oil on canvas
214 x 129 cm
Kenwood House, English Heritage
Figure 17
Aelbert Cuyp
_A Page with Two Horses_,
c. 1655–1660
Oil on canvas
143.2 x 228.1 cm
Royal Collection © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

Figure 18
Johannes Vermeer
_Officer and Laughing Girl_, c. 1657
Oil on canvas (lined)
50.5 x 46 cm
The Frick Collection, New York

Figure 19
Rembrandt van Rijn
_Portrait of a Couple_, 1633
Oil on canvas
132 x 109 cm
Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum
Figure 20
Frans Hals

*Banquet of the Officers of the St George Civic Guard*, 1616
Oil on canvas
175 x 324 cm
Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem
Bibliography


Roberts, Benjamin B. Sex and Drugs before Rock ‘n’ Roll: Youth Culture and Masculinity during Holland’s Golden Age. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012.


