

## ARTS



The marriage portrait of Isaac Massa and Beatrix van de Laen, by Frans Hals, is filled with ebullience and a sense of satisfaction with life

## From gravitas to joie de vivre



ART REVIEW  
Christopher Lloyd

### Dutch Portraits

NATIONAL GALLERY, UNTIL SEPTEMBER 16

Given the popularity of 17th-century Dutch painting it comes as a surprise that no major exhibition devoted to the development of portraiture during that period has ever been organised. Now, however, the National Gallery in London and the Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis in The Hague have joined forces to set this situation to rights in an exhibition comprising around 60 paintings entitled *Dutch Portraits: The Age of Rembrandt and Frans Hals*.

As the title suggests, the two outstanding portraitists of the day were undoubtedly Rembrandt, based for the most part in Amsterdam, and Hals, who worked almost solely in Haarlem. The differences between these two artists are marked, to the extent that they can be seen as the parameters of Dutch portraiture during the 17th century. Rembrandt did not specialise in portrait painting, but his experience with historical and religious subject matter provided him with wider terms

of reference. His single portraits are not only masterly in technique, as can be seen in the truly remarkable late *Portrait of an Elderly Man of 1667*, but they also possess insights into character that are directly based on his own sometimes dramatic experiences. As a result, Rembrandt's portraits exude gravitas, exposing hidden depths and inner states of mind that are brought to the surface by a slow process of revelation. Similarly, the double or group portraits of which there are some fine examples in the exhibition (*The Shipbuilder and his Wife*, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* and *The Syndics*) are sensational spectacles in their own right and so skilfully composed that the viewer becomes a participant simply through the process of looking.

Hals seems to be located at the opposite end of the spectrum of human emotions. It would be wrong to assume that portraits by him are superficial or vacuous. Rather, the insights they record are arrived at by a different process, namely dress, deportment and expression. The poses are usually informal and relaxed, as in the vibrant images of William van Heythuysen, Willem Coymans and Pieter van den Broeck. There is a sense of joie de vivre and an ebullience that denotes a satisfaction with life which is particularly the case in the marriage portrait of Isaac Massa and Beatrix van de Laen. Rembrandt's portraits are an exploration; those by Hals a celebration. Ultimately, Rembrandt is introspective and Hals an extrovert.

The point about this exhibition, however, is that it is not limited to Rembrandt and Hals. It is a survey and its purpose is to show all aspects of Golden Age portraiture. The establishment of the Dutch Republic in 1579 created an unprecedented demand for painting that, in turn, helped to form national identity by giving full expression to the self-confidence of this new political and economic power. Landscape and marine artists, as well as painters of domestic genre scenes, were encouraged by a cross-section of

*Rembrandt's group portraits are so skilfully composed that the viewer becomes a participant simply by looking*

society. Patronage was no longer restricted to civic or ecclesiastical authorities, but opened up to include guilds, militia organisations, members of the professional classes and merchants.

Much of Dutch painting of the 17th century, therefore, was done in the light of the Republic's achievements, but, paradoxically, encoded within many of the pictures is a concern over the threat of extinction. There were fears, for example, that the country would be overwhelmed by the sea, the fabric of society undermined by moral turpitude. Such tensions can be

detected in the portraits of the time, which, although less valued than those of painting, were nonetheless produced in huge numbers. Most notable among this output are the family and militia portraits which dominate the selection.

The exhibition is divided into six sections each highlighting a different type of portrait painting. This arrangement gives variety within the roughly chronological framework and allows for the introduction of less familiar artists such as Thomas de Keyser, Jan Molenaar, Jan de Bray and Johannes Verstrucken, whose work is worth examining.

An opening section illustrates the artist in portraiture at the end of the 16th century, suggesting its limitations (*Mauris, Prince of Orange-Nassau* by Michiel van Mierevelt) and its possibilities (*Hugo Grotius* by Jan van Ravesteyn). The end of the exhibition questions the potency of Dutch portraiture as it became susceptible to wider, more international influences towards the middle of the century. Artists such as Nicolaes Maes, Frans van Mieris and Caspar Netscher worked on a reduced scale in highly refined styles. To a certain extent this meant characterisation was often sacrificed for presentation. Exceptions to this were Jan Steen and Gerard ter Borch: the former indulges in narrative while the latter employs a subtle and even sly form of humour by virtue of his compositional skills. More examples of work by both artists would have been welcome.

## An Italian 'Titanic' would've been better



FILM REVIEW  
Freddie Sayers

### The Golden Door

PG CERT, 120 MINS

Imagine a scene from a good Italian film about Lazio farmers emigrating to America at the start of the 20th century. They are on the boat, their hair and hands are dirty, the sea is crashing, there is a love story – it is top-quality historical cinema, and the silver tops assembled for the early screening at the Curzon Mayfair are happily preparing their bon mots for dinner afterwards.

Now imagine that the screen suddenly spews white. Emerging from the white are the hat-covered heads of our Italian farmer and his love interest – in what appears to be an ill-judged dream sequence, our heroes are swimming in a sea of milk. To make matters worse, instead of cutting back to the action we linger on this scene for fully five minutes, as giant carrots float by to the tune of peasant wail music.

Welcome to the world of arthouse cinema. At times so exciting, at times absurd and unbearably dull. The justification for this scene is terribly well considered: the movie is *The Golden Door*, and it is focused on the misadventure of the emigrants who travelled to America. Just as some of them believed money literally grew on trees in the new world, why shouldn't a goat farmer on a transatlantic crossing have semi-erotic dreams about swimming in a sea of milk? It is perfectly plausible.

Unfortunately it just seems silly. There is no point crying over it, but the split milk scene was a dramatic wash-out: a pint-sized fatty suspension of artistic sense that left me cold. After the first few minutes of bobbing heads, like something out of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, it became clear that the director just liked the look of it on screen.

The kind of self-pleasuring indulgence that, if it is not cured at film school, should at least have been screened by the editor; it is scenes like this that consign otherwise interesting films to the Curzon Mayfair.

*Golden Door* is the story of a family of Italian peasants who make the journey to America in about 1900. They live in the rough mountains of Lazio like they have always done – they

believe in magic, cannot read or write, do not own shoes, and believe the rumours of giant vegetables and wealth that are freely available in the New World. The father, Salvatore Mancuso (Vinzento Amato), has a twin brother who has already gone, and now that his wife has died, he decides to make the journey with his two sons (one of whom is a deaf mute), and his wise old mother Fortunata (Aurora Quattrocchi). We never see New York, we never know how well or badly they do once they arrive – most of the film consists of the crossing.

Technically, it is very accomplished. The hardship of the crossing, as the third-class passengers are cramped up like sardines, is well captured and, during a violent storm that leaves many of the passengers injured and some dead, the sound is spectacularly vivid. But the only real plot is the existence in the cabin of a mysterious English girl called Lucy Reed (Charlotte Gainsbourg), who seems too grand to be stuck in third class.

Although she speaks Italian, the passengers are mystified by her and presume her to be some kind of abandoned princess or runaway bride. All three male members of the Mancuso family fall in love with her, but with the pragmatism that still manages to be tender, only one of them succeeds in securing her hand in marriage by the end of the journey. Not only is she rather priggish and not much fun, but quite simply not enough else happens. Every scene is dreadfully slow and preciously considered – even an Italian version of *Titanic* would have been better.

The only memorable moment comes right at the end – so comes right at the end – so you are still planning to make the trip to Mayfair, stop reading now. Once they arrive they are housed on Ellis Island and "processed", in a distinctly Nazi way, to see if they are "physically and mentally fit for the New World". The deaf mute son is denied entry; when faced with a puzzle to solve, the wise old mother refuses to participate, asking "Who are you to judge God's people?" and so is refused entry also.

At the subsequent hearing, when Salvatore makes an impassioned case for his family's acceptance, the deaf mute son suddenly speaks for the first time: "Grandmother told me she wants to go back," he says, "and also that we must all stay." We realise that she had never intended to enter, but was merely taking her last son to a more prosperous future. It is a moving moment of true drama, and leaves you wondering why we had to wade through so much unapostured footage to get to it.

### PUERI CANTORES PLOCENSES UK TOUR 2007



Westminster Cathedral, Sung Mass 6 pm  
Saturday 7th July

Mass at St Gregory & Augustine, 10.30 am  
Woodstock Road, Oxford  
Sunday 8th July

Mass at Oxford Oratory, 6 pm  
Wednesday 11th July

Metropolitan Cathedral, Liverpool  
Vespers, 5.45 pm  
Thursday 12th July

Christ the King Church, Coventry  
Concert at 7.30pm  
Friday 13th July

St Chad's Cathedral, Birmingham  
VIGIL MASS, 4.30pm  
Saturday 14 July

Mass at Christ the King, Coventry  
Sunday 15th July, 9am

Mass at St Stanislaus Koska, 11 am  
Coventry, Sunday 15th July

### PUERI CANTORES PL UK TOUR:

"One of the best choirs in Poland – the boys and young men of Plock Cathedral"

## Somersaulting orcs

### THEATRE REVIEW Lord of the Rings

THEATRE ROYAL DRURY LANE

Drury Lane has been famous for its spectacles ever since the 19th century. Tolkien's epic has been turned into a three-hour, £12.5m musical in which you will definitely come out singing the scenery. Rob Howell's set and costumes and Paul Pyant's lighting are absolutely stunning. If you haven't read the book or seen the three films you may have trouble knowing what's going on. Yet every time the show stops for dialogue and plot you just long for the cast to shut up and get on with it.

The Dark Riders, the giant spider, and the somersaulting orcs who bound across the stage on springy stilts and invade the auditorium produce squeals of delight from children of all ages. Laura Michelle Kelly as Galadriel looks lovely. Peter Howe as the hero's best friend is appealing as the hero's 15th mate Sam. The most arresting actor is Michael Threlkott, whose writhing, reptilian contortions as Gollum are extraordinary. The score is by AR Rahman, Värttinä and Christopher Nightingale, but there aren't any songs to remember. If you want truly memorable songs with an emotional punch see the film *La Vie en Rose* and listen to Edith Piaf.

### Gaslight

OLD VIC

Patrick Hamilton described his 1937 psychological thriller as "good fun theatre". It has been filmed twice: first in England with Diana Wynyard and Anton Walbrook and then in America with Ingrid Bergman and Charles Boyer. The play hasn't been seen in London for over 50 years. Director Peter Gill and his actors – Rosamund Pike and Andrew Woodall – take the melodrama (pastiche Wilkie Collins) more seriously than the audience. Many will find the exposition overlong and unnecessarily circuitous.

A young man murders a woman for her jewels and then can't find where she's hidden them. Twenty years on, he's bought the house she lived in and is nightly searching every nook and cranny. He's married to a young, devoted wife who is afraid she will end her days, like her mother did, in a lunatic asylum. The sadistic husband is the one who is mad, playing on her neurosis and bullying her, physically and mentally. He accuses her of stealing and losing things which he has hidden, and constantly threatens to have her locked up. Woodall is really unpleasant. Kenneth Cranham, who plays the detective – a sort of guardian angel – is the production's anchorman and gives a star turn.

### Quadruple bill

ORANGE TREE, RICHMOND

J M Barrie's *The Twelve* was written in 1910, is a suffragette tract in which a wife explains to her husband, a pompous, ostentatious parliamentarian, that she left him, not for another man, but because she was suffocated by his financial success, his lack of ideals, his ignoble vision of women and his boring friends.

In 1907 J M Synge's *The Tinker's Wedding* was accused of being an abominable libel of the Irish people and the Catholic Church. The Irish state banned it. The play is much better than it seems here. Arthur Wray Pinner's *The Players*, written in 1914, is a joke at the expense of domestic staff and a very patronising one. George Bernard Shaw always said that, had he lived in Elizabethan times, he would have given Shakespeare a run for his money. "When I measure my mind against his," he wrote, "it would positively be a relief to me to dig him up and throw stones at him." *Shakes vs Shiv*, a 10-minute blank-verse sketch, written when Shaw was 92, was performed by puppets at the 1949 Malvern Festival. It is now staged with two actors as a series of jolly boxing rounds to the accompaniment of musical hall sound effects.

Robert Tanitch

### "JOHNNIE" JOHNSON HOUSING

Working together to provide homes and services in Liverpool



Montrose Court, Baycliff Road, West Derby, Liverpool, L12 6RR

Independent living with 24 hour peace of mind for people over 60



Speke House, Heathgate Avenue, Speke, Liverpool, L24 7SH

Immediate Vacancies  
Call 0845 6041095 now  
www.jjhousing.co.uk

An exempt charity registered under the Industrial and Provident Societies Act 1965.