

CHAPTER I

Prologue: A Tale of Two Paintings

On the third floor of the Richelieu Wing of the Louvre in Paris is a gallery devoted to “Holland, First Half of the 17th Century.” “Room 27” is not one of the museum’s more traveled venues. Visitors, if they stop to see the artworks in the room, do not stay long. There are none of the Louvre’s world-famous masterpieces here: no *Mona Lisa*, Winged Victory, or Venus de Milo. There are not even any of its better known and often reproduced paintings; Gericault’s *The Raft of the Medusa* and Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People* are in the Sully Wing, while Caravaggio’s *Fortune Teller* is in the Denon Wing. Although Richelieu Salle 27 is devoted to seventeenth-century Dutch art, there are no Rembrandts or Vermeers or Ruisdael landscapes on its walls. Not even the most ardent fan of Dutch Golden Age art will find much here that is exciting.

Most of the artists represented in this room are second tier at best. While some of the works are finely executed and charming in subject matter, many of the painters’ names will probably be familiar only to specialists. There is a *Landscape with St. John Preaching* by Claes Dirckszoon van der Heck, *Jesus with Mary and Martha* by Hendrik van Steenwyck, a *Basket of Flowers* by Balthazar van der Ast, an ice-skating scene by Adam van Breen, and a “festive gathering” by Dirck Hals. The gallery

2 Chapter 1

has a number of history paintings and ancient landscapes by Cornelis van Poelenburgh, as well as Jacob Pynas's *The Good Samaritan*. Visitors who know Dutch history will be drawn to Michiel van Miereveld's portrait of Johan Oldenbarneveltdt, the liberal leader of the province of Holland until he was accused of treason by his political enemies and beheaded in 1618.

Room 27 is also home to a portrait that, to some viewers, will seem very familiar. On the west wall hangs a canvas in a gilded frame depicting a man of middle age. Attired in a large, starched white collar folded over the neckline of a black coat, he looks like a typical Dutch *burgher*. He has dark shoulder-length hair, a moustache with a patch of beard just under his lower lip, a long aquiline nose, and heavy-lidded eyes. In his right hand he is holding a hat, as if he has just removed it. On his face is a quizzical expression as he stares outward to meet the viewer's gaze. It is the most famous image of the presumed sitter, who is identified by the label as René Descartes, the great seventeenth-century French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist (color plate 9). The painting, once owned by the Duke of Orléans and acquired by Louis XVI in 1785, was long believed to be by Frans Hals, the seventeenth-century Dutch master. While many outdated and less than authoritative sources continue to say that the life-size portrait is by Hals, the Louvre—on the basis of the work's painterly qualities and in the light of dominant scholarly opinion—has downgraded it. It is now identified as a “*copie ancienne d'un original perdu*,” and is said to be “*d'après Hals*,” or “a copy of a Hals.”¹ Is it really a portrait of Descartes? Many seventeenth-century Dutch paintings acquired their titles long after they were painted, often in catalogues in the following century and on no basis other than a dealer's fancy. In the case of this canvas, however, there are good reasons to believe that the label is correct, and it has long been the image used whenever a picture of Descartes is needed.

Prologue: A Tale of Two Paintings 3

About six hundred miles northeast of Paris, in a museum in a park in the center of Copenhagen, there hangs a panel that, while smaller, bears a remarkable resemblance to the painting in the Louvre. This portrait, owned by the National Gallery (Statens Museum) of Denmark, depicts what is undeniably the same person in an identical pose (color plate 8). The Copenhagen painting, oil on oak, also bears the title *Portrait of René Descartes*. The painting does not have the finish of the Parisian portrait. Where the Louvre canvas has a fine, smooth surface, the Copenhagen panel is coarse. The paint is handled roughly, and in some places it appears to have been applied with a thick brush or laid on as impasto. The sitter's visage bears the same skeptical expression, but this time it is sculpted out of many short, visible brushstrokes and discrete touches of layered, unblended color rather than drawn carefully. The features of Descartes's face and the details of his clothing in this portrait seem to have been painted quickly, and the work as a whole might be mistaken for a sketch rather than a finished composition. In the Louvre painting the right side of the philosopher's face is illuminated by a smooth, uniform light. By contrast, on the Copenhagen panel the light reflected around the eyes and nose is captured by only a few distinct daubs of yellow painted over a rosy cheek built up from a number of crimson, orange, and red strokes. The carefully wrought beard in Paris is replaced in Copenhagen by nothing more than two swipes of black with a few lines of grey. And whereas in the Louvre Descartes has five well-defined fingers holding a hat, in the Statens Museum's portrait in its current condition (and some believe it to have been cropped at some point) there is a three-pronged, flesh-colored mass loosely representing only fingertips.

Unlike their French colleagues, the Danish curators confidently proclaim the painter of *their* Descartes portrait to be Frans Hals himself. While there is no direct evidence (such as

4 *Chapter 1*

a signature) or extant contemporary documentation (a letter or record of commission) to confirm this identification with certainty, neither is there any good reason to doubt it. The scholarly community, for the most part, agrees with the Copenhagen museum (on the basis of stylistic analysis) that its painting is by Hals and (on the basis of historical considerations) that it is of Descartes; meanwhile, most Hals experts have concluded that the Louvre painting, as well as nearly identical paintings in the Museum of Art in Helsingborg, Sweden, and at the University of Amsterdam, are copies of the Copenhagen portrait and painted by artists other than Hals.

Like Renaissance Italy, the Netherlands in the seventeenth century offers one of those great moments in early modern European history when artistic and intellectual culture, fed by economic growth and technological advancement, bloomed with remarkable brilliance. Painting, science, philosophy, and religious and political thought flourished during the Dutch Golden Age under the relatively tolerant watch of the Republic's regent class. It was not always a peaceful realm, and the first seventy years of the United Provinces, as the Dutch federation was officially called—from 1579 (when the Union of Utrecht was signed) to 1648 (when the struggle for independence from Spain was formally concluded by treaty)—were characterized by warfare with foreign powers and domestic strife over confessional and political affairs. Moreover, the famed (and often mythologized) Dutch toleration had its limits, waxing and waning over the course of the century. But the general freedom of Holland's urban culture and the prosperity of its mercantile economy, combined with an unusual richness of domestic and imported resources and talent, allowed for great progress in the study of

Prologue: A Tale of Two Paintings 5

nature, the development of liberal ideas about society and faith, and the crafting of great and enduring works of art. It was an ideal place for a metaphysically inclined scientist—and in this period, philosophy included what we now call “science,” under the rubric of “natural philosophy”—to settle in order to pursue his projects in peace.

René Descartes, a Frenchman, spent most of his adult life in the Netherlands; Frans Hals never left his homeland. The portrait of Descartes painted by Hals represents the meeting on Dutch soil—and oak panel—between a foreigner who was the greatest philosopher in a century full of great philosophers, and a local artist who was arguably the greatest portrait painter in a century full of great portrait painters.

The precise circumstances surrounding Hals’s portrait of Descartes are somewhat obscure. Although Descartes, in his extant correspondence, talks appreciatively about his adopted homeland and the various activities that kept the Dutch so busy, he does not say anything about their insatiable appetite for paintings. Apparently, he collected a small number of works to decorate the many dwellings he occupied over the years as he moved around the country.² However, while he does at one point comment on the way in which he has been depicted by another artist, he nowhere mentions sitting for Hals.

As for Hals, while there are among his works portraits of Dutch writers, his local Haarlem patrons generally preferred the life of business to the life of the mind. There were a multitude of skilled painters in Holland—the Dutch Republic as a whole had, by far, the highest number of painters per capita in all of Europe. If Descartes or someone who knew him well did happen to want his portrait done, why did the commission come to Hals? The painter may have been well known, in Haarlem and beyond, for portraiture, but he also had a reputation for

6 Chapter 1



FIGURE 1. Postage stamp, France



FIGURE 2. Advertisement, with cycling cap.

being difficult to work with. Who, then, brought the two men together? What are the circumstances that led to this minor but highly intriguing work in the oeuvre of a major Dutch master?

Exploring such art historical and biographical questions about a painting might seem an odd way to frame a book about a philosopher. But Hals's image of Descartes, now *the* image of Descartes (primarily by way of the Louvre copy), has become quite familiar. Indeed, it has become *too* familiar. While Descartes's famous phrase "I think, therefore I am" has been transformed by overuse, parody, and misunderstanding into a kind of all-purpose slogan easily adapted for a variety of occasions, philosophical and otherwise, Hals's depiction of the philosopher has been devalued almost to the point of anonymity by seemingly endless reproduction and caricature in a wide variety of media: innumerable book covers, works of fine and decorative art, commercial and editorial illustrations, even lowbrow entertainment.

Prologue: A Tale of Two Paintings 7

One of the goals of this book is to restore to Hals's portrait of Descartes some of its originality and luster by reconstructing the biographical and historical contexts of its production. At the same time, such a project is a prime opportunity for presenting Descartes and his philosophy to a broad audience. The true story behind Hals's painting, as familiar as that image has become, can well serve as the scaffolding for an accessible study of Descartes himself. Just as "I think, therefore I am" represents only the starting point of a grand philosophical project that became the dominant intellectual paradigm of the seventeenth century, Hals's small painting can provide entrée to the life and mind of the ambitious thinker it so effectively portrays.

This is not a biography in the conventional sense. Most of Descartes's life, including much that happened during the decade on which this book is focused, lies outside the scope of its story. Nor is this book intended to be another detailed analytic study of Descartes's philosophy. There are many scholarly monographs exploring Descartes's work in epistemology, metaphysics, natural philosophy, and mathematics; there are also a number of fine general introductions to his thought, as well as several recent biographies. As valuable as such academic studies are, I would rather take my lead from Hals. The Haarlem artist has given us a small, intimate portrait of a great thinker. I want to do the same: a presentation of Descartes and his ideas in the form of a small, intimate portrait, a rendering of those years that culminated in some groundbreaking philosophical doctrines and a modest but intriguing work of art.

Descartes belongs as much to the intellectual culture of the Dutch Golden Age as he does to the grand history of Western philosophy whose development he so strongly influenced. It thus seems perfectly appropriate, if a bit unorthodox, to use a seventeenth-century Dutch painting as a portal into his world.