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**Atkins, Christopher D. M. The Signature Style of Frans Hals:  
Painting, Subjectivity, and the Market in Early Modernity**

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**Atkins, Christopher D. M.**

***The Signature Style of Frans Hals: Painting, Subjectivity, and the Market in Early Modernity.***

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012. Pp. 324 + 130 ill. ISBN 978-90-89640335-3 (paperback) \$49.

When confronted by the portraits of the seventeenth-century Dutch painter Frans Hals, it is difficult not to be struck by the painter's visible brushstrokes. But how did Hals's unique brushwork develop, what purpose did it serve, and how did his contemporaries, as well as later artists, receive it? These are precisely the questions that *The Signature Style of Frans Hals* addresses. Building on the work of Seymour Slive's *catalogue raisonné* of 1970–74, Christopher Atkins sets out to articulate the material characteristics that defined the painter's work. He explores how and why Hals's loose brushwork emerged in relation to the early modern art market and workshop, and how that individualized style came to resonate with modern ideas of subjectivity and freedom of expression.

Atkins reinvigorates our understanding of Hals's distinct painterly style by considering the ways in which Hals used vigorous brushwork to activate his subjects and create a market identity for the painter. Drawing on a breadth of technical research on Hals's paintings, Atkins shows that despite the created illusion of spontaneity, Hals was deliberate, intentional, and not rapid in his process. Atkins's deft formal analysis consistently and importantly enlivens our understanding of Hals's painterly surfaces; indeed, my only small complaint is that the reader's experience of this beautifully illustrated book—a book so much dedicated to close looking—would itself have been more enlivening had additional and more detailed views of the canvases been included.

In order to explain and contextualize Hals's brushwork, Atkins draws on contemporary Dutch art theory and concepts of modernity, including key topics such as the relationship between *rouw* and *net* painting, finished and non-finished works, and *maniera*. He then delves into the broader question of self-fashioning through making, drawing out new meaning from the oblique presence of the artist and the formation of authorship through the painterly mark. For Atkins, part of what explains Hals's development of his own unique, distinctive way of handling the paint can be connected to the emergence of the modern individual. Employing the concept of "signature style" from Richard Wollheim allows Atkins to make important connections between subjectivity and style.

While explicating Hals's painterly brushstroke, Atkins also contextualizes it within the larger art market and workshop practices. He rightly draws attention to how Flemish influences, in particular those of Anthony van Dyck and Peter Paul Rubens, were a driving force behind Hals's looser style and contributed to its appeal to wealthier patrons. However, the individuality of Hals's personal style is also developed in relation to the workshop, where variations—rather than exact copies—were prized, thereby encouraging a freer handling of the brush. As such, Atkins argues that the rough brushstrokes functioned as a kind of corporate identity, a logo, or brand that functioned advantageously within the art market. This is an important topic, and Atkins gives it substantial treatment, focusing on the ways in which the economic environment and market conditions in the seventeenth century could drive style.

The book ends with perhaps the richest and most original of its contributions: a discussion of Hals's impact on modernity. Although the term "modern" was not applied to Hals until the late nineteenth century, the concepts implied by the word (i.e., subjectivity, individual freedom, and expression) were associated with the artist well before then. Atkins's contextual validations and visual connections between Hals, Édouard Manet, Gustave Courbet, and even Vincent van Gogh are so persuasive that I was left wondering if there might still be additional comparisons between this seventeenth-century painter and other nineteenth-century artists. These exciting and rich relations between Hals and his epigones certainly merit further visual exploration in the future, perhaps in the context of a museum exhibition.

Concisely organized, broadly contextualized, and clearly articulated, Atkins's topical study of Hals's painterly paintings is a welcome arrival after a nearly 30-year gap in book-length studies on the artist. While providing a significant and important contribution to the field of Hals studies, Atkins also makes key contributions to a broader understanding of material culture, subjectivity, and painterly expression in the seventeenth century.

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