

Press Release

Focus on Johannes Verspronck:
Portrait of a Woman in an Armchair,
c. 1642–45 (Inv. no. 703)

7 November 2006 – 25 March 2007

Riverside Gallery

Lecture: Tuesday, 7 November 2006, 7.00 p.m.

The new exhibition in the series “Focus on” is dedicated to Johannes Verspronck’s “Portrait of a Woman in an Armchair” and will be opened by a lecture of the responsible curator, Dr. Mirjam Neumeister, on 7 November 2006. The painting “Portrait of a Woman in an Armchair” by Johannes Verspronck will be presented to the public again for the first time in decades after its restoration. Together with his colleague Frans Hals, who is far better known today, Verspronck was one of the most sought-after Haarlem portrait painters of the 17th century. This is why Verspronck’s picture of a woman will be confronted with Frans Hals’s double portraits of a married couple in the exhibition. This offers the special opportunity to use the Städel’s holdings to compare the artistic strategies of two painters who actually competed with each other. The presentation will elucidate the two portraitists’ special situation as artists and center on their clients and these clients’ social context. It will examine the representative function of Verspronck’s portrait, its genesis, the restoration of the work, the painter’s technique, and the portrait’s provenance from one of the best-known Hanau collections of Goethe’s time.

The exhibition series “Focus on” is realized with the generous support of the Schering Foundation, Berlin, which has made it its objective to promote outstanding scientific endeavors and their accessibility for the public.

After “Focus on Jan van Eyck: The Lucca Madonna, c. 1437/38 (Inv. no. 944),” the exhibition “Focus on Johannes Verspronck: Portrait of a Woman in an Armchair, c. 1642–45 (Inv. no. 703)” is the second presentation of a series of projects highlighting individual masterpieces of the Städel’s collection. Focusing on just one work, the series explores the range of different perspectives of perception and ways of understanding works of art. This approach manifests itself in the form of “mind maps” and numerous documentary materials to be found in the exhibition which help the viewer examine the contents and backgrounds of the portrait from different points-of-view. A photographic documentation illustrates the various steps of its costly restoration carried out by Stephan Knobloch, painting restorer of the Städel, and allows to grasp the work’s technical aspects by visual comparison. As for its scientific approach, the presentation draws on the research results published by Dr. Mirjam Neumeister in the catalogue of the Städel’s collection of Dutch Baroque paintings.

Städel Museum«

We do not know the identity of the woman portrayed by Verspronck, but details of her attire reveal her high social rank and personal leanings such as her openness towards the latest trends in fashion. For the modern viewer, Dutch portraits dating from the 17th century often radiate something stiff and monotonous. But an appearance according to convention was the effect desired – a result to which was even given priority over individual aspects. To which class the portrayed person belonged was something that should be obvious at first sight. The black damask dress, the prominent millstone collar, and the precious lace cuffs indicate that the woman painted by Verspronck was a member of the well-to-do urban patrician class. The valuable jewelry emphasizes her wealth. However, comparing the work with other ladies' portraits displaying the same pieces in an often hardly modified form reveals that the jewelry was not the subject's personal possession. The ostrich-feather fan, a very fashionable accessory, was considered a special luxury because of the feathers' exotic origin. Until the 16th century, such fans were symbols of monarchs before they became objects of fashion.

As portraitists, both Johannes Verspronck and Frans Hals definitely depended on their clients. This is why their works clearly reflect the social changes in the Low Countries during the 17th century. Their biographies are also mirrors of their times. Born in Antwerp, Frans Hals came from a Protestant family which had settled in Haarlem by 1591. Verspronck, on the other hand, the son of a portrait painter who had been a resident of the city for a long time, was probably a member of the Catholic community since his clients included a remarkable number of Catholics. Frans Hals found his clients mainly among the Protestants who stemmed from Flanders and became the preferred painter of the influential patrician class that controlled Haarlem from 1618 on. As a member of numerous organizations, he led an active social life. In contrast to him, Verspronck lived in seclusion, or, at least, left no evidence of his social activities. Yet, he must have earned quite a lot of money with his portraits. Various documents evince that he was well-off and supported his family. Frans Hals's financial career obviously took a less fortunate turn. In his old age, he depended on the municipality's generosity.

Comparing Verspronck's portrait of a woman and Frans Hals's double portraits of a married couple allows us to observe the two painters' different artistic strategies. This is why the presentation also focuses on the works' genesis and its context which is illustrated by means of historical views and pictures of famous people. The city of Haarlem near Amsterdam, where both artists worked, had become a flourishing business center again after years of warfare. This was partly due to the numerous Protestant refugees from the recatholicized Flemish areas. When the Northern Low Countries turned Calvinist, many of the Catholic families who had set the tone until then lost their public posts to the Protestants. The new Republican constitution and an era of prosperity strengthened the middle class that was soon in charge of the cities' political and social self-government.

The two artists' different working methods reveal that they had different clienteles. Frans Hals preferred an almost casual and open approach that left no doubt about his Flemish origins and seems to have been very deliberately aimed at the former Protestant refugees. As the influential Protestant patricians' favorite painter, he succeeded in achieving dominance as an artist in Haarlem. Verspronck managed to stand his ground though despite his competitor's powerful position. His clients mainly comprised the old-established Haarlem families, many Catholics amongst them. Verspronck's smooth and elegant manner fitted in well with their ideas and expectations and followed the Dutch tradition rather. Comparative illustrations reveal the two painters' different techniques, while a photographic documentation sheds light on the production process and the various steps of the restoration.

Städel Museum«

Another chapter will be dedicated to the painting's provenance. It was Wilhelm Leisler who purchased the portrait – at that time still attributed to Govaert Flinck, a pupil of Rembrandt – at an auction in Amsterdam on 21 September 1814. Leisler was the owner of a carpet factory in Hanau which had been founded in 1789 and numbered Johann Wolfgang von Goethe among its customers. Leisler knew Goethe's family personally, as he did Johanna Schopenhauer, Arthur Schopenhauer's mother. She certainly saw Verspronck's portrait when she visited Hanau in 1816 because she commented at great length on Leisler's collection of paintings in her memoirs covering her journey to the Rhine which was published in 1818. On 19 September 1817, Wilhelm Leisler sold Verspronck's portrait of a woman together with a group of other Dutch Baroque paintings to the Städel where it was inventoried as a work by Frans Hals. Although people noticed the stylistic differences when comparing it to a double portrait of a married couple by Frans Hals which was also part of the Städel's collection, the attribution was maintained until 1883. It was not before 1888 that the Städel inventory listed the painting under Johannes Verspronck – an attribution still valid today. That the work found its prominent place right next to the recently acquired painting "The Blinding of Samson" by Rembrandt in 1905 bears evidence of the high esteem in which it was held in the years after.

The exhibition series "Focus on" is sponsored by the Schering Foundation.

Curator: Dr. Mirjam Neumeister

Design concept: Bluetango Creative Team around Lo Breier, Vienna

Catalogue: "Fokus auf Johannes Verspronck: Bildnis einer Frau im Sessel, um 1642-45 (Inv. Nr. 703)." Ed. by the Städel Museum. With a preface by Max Hollein and contributions by Mirjam Neumeister and Stephan Knobloch, 47 pages, with color illustrations.

Graphic design: Lo Breier, Bluetango, Vienna. Städel Museum 2006, Price: 5 euros

Lecture: 7 November 2006, 7 p.m., Städel Museum, entrance Schaumainkai 63

Dr. Mirjam Neumeister: "Porträtmalerei in Haarlem – Johannes Verspronck, Frans Hals und ihre Kunden" (Portrait painting in Haarlem – Johannes Verspronck, Frans Hals, and their clients)

Venue: Städel Museum, Schaumainkai 63, 60596 Frankfurt

Exhibition dates: 7 November 2006 – 25 March 2007

Opening hours: Tuesday, Friday – Sunday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.,

Wednesday and Thursday from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Holidays: closed on 24 and 31 December 2006;

25 and 26 December 2006 10 a.m. – 6 p.m., 1 January 2007 10 a.m. – 6 p.m.

Information: www.staedelmuseum.de, e-mail: info@staedelmuseum.de,

phone: +49 (0) 69-60 50 98-0, fax: + 49 (0) 69-60 50 98-111

Admission: 8 euros, reduced 6 euros, as of 24 November 2006 10 euros, reduced 8 euros, family ticket 18 euros, free admission for children under 12

Press office: Dorothea Apovnik (head), Kathrin Wiener

Städel Museum, Dürerstraße 2, 60596 Frankfurt

Phone: +49 (0) 69-60 50 98-234, fax: +49 (0) 69-60 50 98-188,

e-mail: presse@staedelmuseum.de, press downloads: www.staedelmuseum.de