



# Jan Lievens

*A Dutch Master Rediscovered*

National Gallery of Art, Washington | October 26, 2008–January 11, 2009

Brilliant, ambitious, and self-confident, Jan Lievens (1607–1674) was among the most distinguished Dutch artists of his day. By the age of twelve he was already a rising star, a child prodigy who impressed patrons with his diligence and talent. Over the six decades of his career Lievens worked for members of the Dutch and English princely households, won important religious and civic commissions, and excelled in a range of styles and subjects. His prints and drawings, like his paintings, were esteemed by connoisseurs and copied by other artists. Critical acclaim kept his reputation high for decades after his death.

“His consummate skill astounded numerous connoisseurs of art who found it hard to believe that a mere stripling of twelve or scarcely any older could produce such work—usually his own compositions and ideas to boot.”

JAN JANSZ ORLERS,  
1641

In later centuries, however, Lievens’ name faded from accounts of the time. His peripatetic career and tendency to alter his style to reflect the artistic tastes of different locales make it difficult to place him within the tradition of Dutch art. Many of his most important projects—large canvases in civic buildings and churches or decorative schemes for private interiors—are inaccessible or far removed from the public eye, hindering a comprehensive assessment of his work. Over the years, other paintings have been lost or misattributed, and some have only recently been rediscovered. Lievens’ accomplishments have been further overshadowed by the ascent of Rembrandt van Rijn, a fellow townsman and friendly rival who shared similar artistic interests and for a short time a nearly indistinguishable manner of painting. This exhibition sheds light on Lievens’ myriad achievements, restoring the reputation of a Dutch master whose originality and boldness set him apart from many of his peers.

## EARLY LIFE AND WORK IN LEIDEN

Leiden, where Jan Lievens was born and raised, was a center of art, culture, and scholarship. Its burgomaster and chronicler, Jan Jansz Orlers, noted in his 1641 account of the town that Lievens had already been apprenticed at the age of eight to a local artist to learn drawing and painting. He proved himself so capable that his father sent him to Amsterdam two years later to study with the renowned history painter Pieter Lastman. By the time Lievens returned home at age twelve, the precocious boy was so self-assured that he began painting on his own, in a studio set up in his parents’ house. According to Orlers, his dynamic and boldly executed images were admired greatly by connoisseurs and art lovers.

FIG. 1. *The Feast of Esther*, c. 1625, oil on canvas. North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, Purchased with Funds from the State of North Carolina



Orlers described Lievens as an industrious painter from whom great things were expected. Lievens' own belief in his potential is clear from the exceptional range of subjects he chose throughout his career: portraiture, still life, landscape, depictions of everyday life, and—most important for establishing his reputation—grandiose allegorical scenes and biblical narratives, such as *The Feast of Esther*, c. 1625 (FIG. 1). Completed when the artist was not yet twenty, the painting depicts the moment from the biblical book of Esther (7:4–10) when the queen reveals to her husband, the Persian king Ahasuerus, the plot to destroy all the Jews in the kingdom, including herself. In Lievens' dramatic scene, Esther points to the shadowed figure of the conspirator—the court favorite, Haman—who draws back in terror as Ahasuerus glares at him with clenched fists moments before ordering his death.

In this and other paintings from the mid-1620s, Lievens strove for an overall monumental effect, perhaps in emulation of the work of the Flemish master Peter Paul Rubens, whose large, dynamic paintings had made him the preeminent artist of the early seventeenth century. Other features—half-length figures with unidealized faces that crowd compositions marked by theatrical contrasts of light and dark—point to the influence of the “Utrecht Caravaggisti.” These artists from Utrecht had adopted the gritty realism and dramatic light effects of Caravaggio while studying in

Rome in the first decades of the 1600s. Lievens was among the first to adopt the bold aesthetic of the Caravaggisti, and they inspired his work through the end of the 1620s.

#### PORTRAITS AND *TRONIES*

Although Lievens sought to become a painter of biblical and allegorical scenes, his gift for painting faces also won him ardent admiration. Constantijn Huygens—secretary to the Prince of Orange, as well as poet, writer, and intellectual—was one of the most influential Dutch patrons of art. After his initial visit to Lievens’ studio in 1628, Huygens wrote that the artist “wreaks miracles” with the human countenance. He became Lievens’ lifelong advocate, sending important commissions his way. Although Huygens admired Lievens’ large multifigured scenes, he thought the artist should concentrate on portraiture—indeed, the handsome and assured self-portrait from c. 1629–1630 (cover) reveals Lievens’ extraordinary ability to evoke the essence of a person through features alone. Lievens never narrowed his focus entirely, but portraits became an essential part of his practice and a steady source of much-needed income.

FIG. 2. *Bearded Man with a Beret*, c. 1630, oil on panel. National Gallery of Art, Gift (Partial and Promised) of the Kaufman Americana Foundation in Honor of George M. and Linda H. Kaufman



Related to portraiture was the *tronie*, a type of character study that Lievens helped originate. Although in format they appear to be bust-length portraits, *tronies* usually were not meant to be identified as specific people. Instead they allowed artists to flaunt their skills at depicting a range of emotions, mental states, ages, and exotic dress. One example, *Bearded Man with a Beret*, c. 1630 (FIG. 2), is a sympathetic portrayal of an elderly man with expressive eyes and parted lips that convey the sense of a real human psyche. Lievens applied and manipulated the paint in various ways, using heavy layers or impasto on the man’s wrinkled forehead and scratching lines into his straggly beard. The old-fashioned beret on his head, associated with scholars and intel-



FIG. 3. *Boy in a Cape and Turban*, c. 1631, oil on panel. Private collection

lectuals, is one clue that the sitter is a character type rather than an individual.

In contrast to the old man's modest attire, many *tronies* were dressed in ornate "oriental" clothing similar to that worn by the figure in *Boy in a Cape and Turban*, c. 1631 (FIG. 3). Lievens spared no details in rendering the sumptuous fabric and lavish accoutrements, conveying the sheen of the stiff cape and glint of golden chain, the tight folds of the patterned turban, and the soft wisps of plume. The finery is redolent of pomp and potency, yet the features of the lad's milky face are sensitive and adolescent, expressing a hesitancy that belies the grandeur. At times the line between a portrait and a *tronie* is difficult to define, and *Boy in a Cape and Turban* may in fact

be something of a mixed genre, a portrait of a princely sitter dressed in exotic garments. Like *tronies*, costumed portraits appealed to the taste of noble patrons. Lievens likely specialized in such splendid pictures with an eye toward becoming a court painter.

#### LIEVENS AND REMBRANDT

The exact nature of Lievens' relationship with Rembrandt, who was a year older and also grew up in Leiden, is unknown. But the extent to which their interests and styles converged in the 1620s reveals their close association. In subsequent centuries, their affiliation would be framed as though Lievens were a student of Rembrandt or a member of his circle—a misperception reinforced by the attribution of a number of Lievens' works to his Leiden friend and colleague (including *The Feast of Esther*, FIG. 1). In fact, Lievens was already establishing his career when Rembrandt began his training (also with Lastman in Amsterdam). The two subsequently learned from each other, with Lievens initially leading the way. They adopted some of the same innovative techniques (for example, both used the blunt end of a brush handle to scratch details in wet paint, as in Lievens' *Bearded Man with a Beret*);

often used the same models, including one another; and frequently took up the same or analogous subjects. By the early 1630s confusion had already risen over the attribution of their work.

Pensive, elderly figures fascinated both artists. Lievens, in his masterful *Job in His Misery*, 1631 (FIG. 4), concentrated on the sagging flesh and utter abjection of the Old Testament protagonist whom God allowed Satan to torment as a test of his faith. Job, his arms slack, his head bowed in resignation, slumps in a state of wretchedness, yet is still unwilling to blame God for his suffering. Lievens' painting is comparable to Rembrandt's 1630 treatment of an equally dejected, bearded, biblical character: the prophet Jeremiah, whose warnings about the impending destruction of Jerusalem went unheeded (FIG. 5). Taking up corresponding themes may have involved more than just a friendly rivalry, for it is possible that Huygens, who knew and admired both artists, sought to stimulate their competition—and their imaginations—by requesting that each interpret a particular topic.

One area in which Lievens and Rembrandt certainly challenged each other was printmaking. Both artists exploited the technique of etching, developing innovative means to create images akin to freehand sketching;

FIG. 4. *Job in His Misery*, 1631, oil on canvas. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Gift of National Art Collections Fund of Great Britain, 1933 (at left)

FIG. 5. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem*, 1630, oil on panel. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (at right)

NOT IN EXHIBITION





FIG. 6. *The Raising of Lazarus*, 1630–1631, etching and engraving, state 3 (of 3). Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (at left)



FIG. 7. *Old Man Facing Forward*, c. 1630–1631, etching, state 1 (of 3). Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (at right)

both also explored the effects of light and dark in their prints. Although Rembrandt's fame as a printmaker today exceeds that of any other Dutch artist, Lievens' prints were also highly valued in the seventeenth century—even by Rembrandt, who acquired and copied several of them. One subject the two artists explored in prints was the biblical story of Lazarus' death and resurrection. *The Raising of Lazarus*, 1630–1631 (FIG. 6), an etching by Lievens that is grand in size and effect, was based on his critically acclaimed painting of 1631 (which Rembrandt acquired). The highly original composition shows Jesus standing in prayer above the tomb. At that very moment Lazarus' hands begin to reach up, to the astonishment of onlookers that include his sisters Mary and Martha.

In printmaking as in painting, Lievens and Rembrandt were drawn to the physical and psychological effects of old age, with wrinkles and weariness carved into a face by years and experience. In *Old Man Facing Forward*, c. 1630–1631 (FIG. 7), an example of the type of *tronie* the artists excelled in creating, a variety of etched lines vividly evokes the scratchiness of fur and the crevices and imperfections of aging skin. Rembrandt made a copy of it in 1635, several years after both artists had departed Leiden—an indication of his continued interest in his friend's work.

## CAREER AMBITIONS: LONDON AND ANTWERP

In 1632 Lievens moved to London with the hopes of procuring commissions from the court of King Charles I, whose nephew he had depicted in a painting the previous year. He completed a number of portraits, all now lost, of the royal family and other nobility. Other than a few portrait etchings and landscape drawings, little remains of this period of his career.

Lievens stayed only three years and then relocated to Antwerp, where he remained for the next decade. A prosperous town and dynamic artistic center, Antwerp was the home of Rubens, the very model of the successful court painter Lievens hoped to emulate. Anthony van Dyck was also a native of Antwerp and had left behind a substantial artistic legacy before becoming court artist to Charles I in 1632. Lievens quickly set about establishing his artistic reputation by having a number of his etching plates from his Leiden years reprinted by Antwerp publishers. He also expanded his painting repertoire to include large-scale biblical narratives and landscapes as well as genre scenes. For the latter he found inspiration in the work of his colleague Adriaen Brouwer, the celebrated painter of rowdy peasants whose jovial circle of artist friends Lievens joined after moving to town. In *Fighting Cardplayers and Death*, c. 1638 (FIG. 8), two pugnacious ne'er-do-wells fight over a card game while Death clasps his bony fingers around the neck of the knife-wielding adversary. The image serves as a reminder of the brevity of life—a moralizing theme that possibly alluded to the plague that had recently swept through Antwerp claiming thousands of lives, including Brouwer's. Lievens

**“Everything his young spirit endeavors to capture must be magnificent and lofty. Rather than depicting his subject in its true size, he chooses a larger scale.”**

**CONSTANTIJN  
HUYGENS,  
1629–1631**

FIG. 8. *Fighting Cardplayers and Death*, c. 1638, oil on canvas on panel. Private collection





FIG. 9. *The Lamentation of Christ*, c. 1640, oil on canvas. Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich, Alte Pinakothek



may have painted this work in the manner of Brouwer as a tribute to his deceased friend.

The painting's squat, loutish characters are far removed from the direction the artist eventually took. In London Lievens had come under the influence of Van Dyck and his elegant manner of painting, embracing it wholeheartedly only after his move to Flanders. *The Lamentation of Christ*, c. 1640 (FIG. 9), captures the mood and character of Van Dyck's depictions of Mary grieving over the crucified Jesus. In Lievens' painting the poignancy of the scene is underscored by the Virgin's mournful yet tender gaze at her dead son. Cradling him, she places his crown of thorns on a silver platter held by Joseph of Arimathea. The graceful gestures, emotional intensity, rich coloring, and softly modulated forms rendered with broad brushstrokes are hallmarks of the courtly style perfected by Van Dyck. Favored by international collectors, it served Lievens well for many years, bringing him the professional success he craved.

#### RETURN TO THE NETHERLANDS

Despite the high prices Lievens commanded in Antwerp, financial difficulties led him to move to Amsterdam in 1644. Once there he quickly established himself as one of the city's leading artists. Much of Lievens' later work counts among the most prestigious of his career, including projects to decorate rooms for the Prince of Orange in The Hague and the Elector of Brandenburg in Germany. One particularly ambitious canvas, *Triumph of*

*Peace*, 1652 (FIG. 10), is an allegorical commemoration of the Treaty of Münster, which ended decades of conflict between the Netherlands and Spain in 1648. Like many of Lievens' late paintings, *Triumph of Peace* draws on the classical world for its complex iconography. In the midst of its swirling, bursting composition, Minerva, goddess of wisdom, crowns Pax (peace), the sumptuously dressed woman who holds an olive branch and sits in triumph over Mars, god of war.

Demand for Lievens' portrait drawings and paintings was high in Amsterdam. His reputation ensured an impressive list of distinguished sitters, both local and international, such as the French philosopher René Descartes and Sir Robert Kerr, First Earl of Ancram. The likeness of Kerr, from 1654 (FIG. 11), is an affecting depiction of a once powerful man reduced to poverty and exile at the end of his life. Loyal to Charles I, the earl had fled England upon the king's beheading in 1649, living his few remaining years in Amsterdam. Lievens brilliantly captured the mixture of regret and determination in Kerr's frail face. The dark tonality points to the artist's continued assimilation of local painting traditions, as he tempered the grandeur of the international style he had cultivated to accommodate the preference

FIG. 10. *Triumph of Peace*, 1652, oil on canvas. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam





FIG. 11. Sir Robert Kerr, First Earl of Ancram, 1654, oil on canvas. Private collection, on long-term loan to the Scottish National Portrait Gallery

in Holland for a more restrained, though equally refined, manner.

An enduring preoccupation for Lievens after moving to Amsterdam was the depiction of nature. One of his most striking landscape drawings is *Forest Interior with a Draftsman*, 1660s(?) (FIG. 12). Although probably begun outdoors, this work was likely completed in the studio, intended to be sold. The sense of space and vivid rendering of nature's intricacies with a variety of pen strokes demonstrate the exceptional power of Lievens' draftsmanship. Like many of his finished landscape drawings, it was executed on imported oriental paper. Lievens was

among the first to experiment with the various effects of this paper's remarkably fine, smooth surface.

In the last two decades of his life Lievens moved several more times, from Amsterdam to The Hague, to Leiden, and finally back to Amsterdam. Despite his relocations, the artist continued to find a successful market for his paintings, prints, and drawings. Yet more financial mismanagement left him deeply in debt when he died. His reputation, though still high, began its descent within a few decades. In recent years, as new information has encouraged reconsideration of Lievens' place in Dutch art, the distinctive contributions of this versatile and fascinating artist can finally be acknowledged.

FIG. 12. *Forest Interior with a Draftsman*, 1660s(?), pen and brown ink and brown wash. Maida and George Abrams Collection, Boston, Massachusetts, on loan to Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University



## CONCERTS

OCTOBER 29, 12:10 PM  
West Building Lecture Hall  
Musica ad Rhenum

NOVEMBER 2, 6:30 PM  
West Building,  
West Garden Court  
National Gallery of Art  
Vocal Arts Ensemble

## GALLERY TALKS

Please consult the Calendar of Events or [www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov) for full schedule and program information.

## SUNDAY LECTURES

East Building Auditorium

OCTOBER 26, 2:00 PM  
*Jan Lievens: Out of Rembrandt's Shadow*  
Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., Curator of Northern Baroque Paintings, National Gallery of Art

*Jan Lievens in Black and White: Etchings, Woodcuts, and Collaborations in Print*  
Stephanie S. Dickey, Bader Chair in Northern Baroque Art, Queen's University

## ON THE WEB

The Gallery's Web site features selected highlights from the exhibition and links to exhibition-related activities at: [www.nga.gov/lievens](http://www.nga.gov/lievens).

## CATALOGUE

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated, 320-page catalogue, *Jan Lievens: A Dutch Master Rediscovered*, by exhibition curator Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., with essays by Stephanie S. Dickey, E. Melanie Gifford, Gregory Rubenstein, Jaap van der Veen, and Lloyd DeWitt. Produced by the National Gallery of Art and published in association with Yale University Press. Hardcover \$65.00  
Softcover \$45.00

## GENERAL INFORMATION

HOURS  
Monday–Saturday,  
10:00 AM–5:00 PM  
Sunday 11:00 AM–6:00 PM

Gallery Web site: [www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov)

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Admission to the National Gallery of Art and all of its programs is free of charge, except as noted.

The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, in association with the Milwaukee Art Museum and the Rembrandt House Museum, Amsterdam.

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A large-print version of this brochure is available.

COVER: *Self-Portrait* (detail), c. 1629–1630, oil on panel. Private collection