



Jan Lievens: Bringing New Light
to an Old Master

ARTHUR K. WHEELOCK JR.



HISTORY HAS NOT BEEN KIND TO Jan Lievens (1607–1674). A child prodigy — whose talent was prized by connoisseurs and collectors in his native Leiden during his teenage years, whose services were sought by princely patrons in The Hague and London before he reached age twenty-five, and who later in life continued to receive important religious, civic, and portrait commissions in Antwerp, Amsterdam, and Berlin — Lievens barely registers today in the public consciousness. The rise and fall of artistic celebrity is a fascinating phenomenon, with story lines as varied as the personalities involved. Lievens’ narrative, however, is more complex than most. It involves an array of issues, including career choices, personality, accidents of history, and the changing assessment of artistic style over the centuries. It also involves a unique complication of time and place: Lievens’ close associations with Rembrandt van Rijn, a childhood companion in Leiden, whose status as the greatest artist of the Dutch golden age eventually had a profoundly negative impact on Lievens’ own artistic reputation. This essay examines these issues while providing a general overview of Lievens’ life and art.

Because Lievens and Rembrandt (1606–1669) were born in Leiden just over a year apart, studied with the same master, and lived near one another, their names are forever conjoined. Many parallels exist between works that each produced in Leiden in the 1620s and early 1630s, and it is evident that as aspiring artists they developed a symbiotic relationship that benefited them both. Nevertheless, owing to the enormity of Rembrandt’s subsequent fame, Lievens has often been described as a follower or student, even though he began his career some years before his compatriot.¹ As a result, a number of Lievens’ best early works were later attributed to Rembrandt, as well as to other artists, which further raised Rembrandt’s standing, at Lievens’ expense.² Fortunately, this perception has been changing in recent decades, and Lievens’ early paintings are now better known, with the brashness of his vision and the boldness of his brushwork seen as rivaling Rembrandt’s during the formative period of their careers. It is argued here that in many respects Lievens was the initiator of the stylistic and thematic developments that characterized both artists’ work in the late 1620s.

Even if Lievens’ early years in Leiden have fallen under the shadow of Rembrandt, at least they have been discussed. Not so his late work, which has been consistently neglected. Lievens, it is alleged, lost his way after having left Rembrandt’s orbit, something that is said to have happened when he succumbed to the countervailing influence of the great Flemish master Anthony van Dyck and moved to London in 1632 in search of courtly success. Yet Lievens’ career did not end when he moved to London. By

transforming his style to respond to the evolving taste for Flemish and Venetian modes of painting, Lievens achieved the international renown he so desperately sought, receiving important commissions in Antwerp, Berlin, The Hague, and, not least, Amsterdam, where Rembrandt had moved in the early 1630s.

Lievens’ later years have been overlooked for several reasons. Because this fascinating and confounding artist moved frequently in the years after he left Leiden, he does not fit comfortably into historical assessments of the period, which generally focus on the stylistic character of artistic traditions in individual cities. His decision to paint in an international style also proved to be a major liability for his subsequent reputation. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century Dutch historians privileged artists who painted in a “Dutch” style over those who incorporated Flemish and Venetian ideals into their art; their opinion was that while Rembrandt remained true to himself and to Dutch ideals, Lievens did not. Finally, although the broad outlines of Lievens’ life are rather clear, the full range of his artistic successes and failures is not easy to judge because of crucial gaps in our knowledge of his art.³ Many of his important documented works are lost, and those large-scale commissions that have survived are all but inaccessible to most visitors. As a consequence, it is challenging to reconstruct the evolution of his painting style and the radical decisions he made over the course of his career.

The inexorable decline of Lievens’ critical fortunes is vividly clear in the art historical literature. Arnold Houbraken, in his lexicon of seventeenth-century Dutch artists, *De Grootte Schouburgh der Nederlantsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen* (1718), wrote about Lievens far less extensively than about Rembrandt. He did, however, piece together a positive account of Lievens’ life as a history and portrait painter, based on a number of sources from the artist’s lifetime — including Jan Jansz Orlers’ history of Leiden, *Beschrijvinge der Stadt Leyden* (1641); Philips Angel’s celebration of the arts in Leiden, *Lof der Schilderconst* (1642); and poems by Joost van den Vondel and Jan Vos honoring Lievens’ paintings of the 1650s and 1660s.⁴ Houbraken highlighted Lievens’ early career in Leiden; his departure for London, where he portrayed Charles I; his move to Antwerp, where he worked for the Jesuits and married; his major commissions for the Leiden and Amsterdam town halls; and numerous Amsterdam burghers he portrayed later in his life.

Houbraken’s text served as the basis for the biographical account by Jacob Campo Weyerman in 1729, which Jean-Baptiste Descamps repeated in 1753.⁵ Weyerman added one significant

1 | Jan Lievens, *Mars (The Allegory of War)*, 1664, oil on canvas, Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal, The Hague



commission to those Houbraken mentioned: the large overmantel painting of *Mars (The Allegory of War)* that Lievens executed in 1663–1664 for the *Statenzaal*, the assembly room of the States of Holland and West Frisland in the *Binnenhof*, The Hague (fig. 1). As Weyerman described it, “the Mars is so naturally painted that war officers upon viewing it begin to glow, while burghers and farmers stand before it shaking and shivering.”⁶

In 1816 Roeland van Eijnden and Adriaan van der Willigen added further information, noting (incorrectly) that when Lievens was brought from Antwerp to Leiden in 1639 to paint *The Magnanimity of Scipio* for the town hall (fig. 19), he was paid 150 guilders and presented with a gold medal worth 99 guilders and 17 stuivers.⁷ They also observed that Lievens was a celebrated graphic artist and that his etched prints “in Rembrandt’s manner” (*in Rembrandts smaak*) were greatly valued by art lovers, including the famous Parisian collector Pierre Mariette.

Soon, however, references to Lievens and his work all but disappear. He was omitted from John Smith’s early nineteenth-century multivolume catalogue raisonné of Dutch and Flemish painters and was virtually ignored in Cornelis Hofstede de Groot’s eight-volume revision of Smith’s publication.⁸ It is not clear why Lievens’ name faded from view, but it surely relates to the continued rise in Rembrandt’s fame. Rembrandt’s expressive art not only appealed to the nineteenth-century romantics, it also fed the interests of Dutch nationalism, which found its artistic heroes, including Rembrandt and Jan Steen, among those seen as recording the essence of Dutch life and culture. Lievens, who had left Leiden for foreign courts and developed an international style of painting, did not satisfy those requirements.

The few mid-nineteenth-century references that appear inevitably compare Lievens’ oeuvre unfavorably to Rembrandt’s. Gustav Waagen calls *Job in His Misery* (cat. 25) “a capital work in the taste of Rembrandt, though far less powerful in colouring”; a portrait of a young man in Lord Caledon’s collection is “a picture of merit, but too tame for [Rembrandt], and rather to be considered as the work of Jan Lievens”; and a landscape sketch of a drawbridge, houses, and trees creates “an effect of chiaroscuro... with sepia, bistre, and a little colour, worthy of Rembrandt.”⁹ The natural culmination is Wilhelm von Bode’s listing of Lievens among Rembrandt’s most prominent pupils and followers in his seminal study of Dutch art (1883).¹⁰

At the same time, Lievens’ monumental *Mars* for the *Binnenhof* in The Hague suffered such lack of regard in the nineteenth century that a balcony was built in front of it that largely obscured

2 | Erste Kamer der Staten-Generaal, The Hague, with balcony obscuring Lievens' *Mars (The Allegory of War)*



it (fig. 2). Similarly, his enormous *Visitation* (fig. 18), once exhibited in a position of honor in the Rubens gallery of the Louvre, was relegated to a side baffle in a small transition area between galleries.

Lievens regained notice only at the beginning of the twentieth century, perhaps owing to the 1897 publication of an autobiography by Constantijn Huygens written in 1629–1631.¹¹ That text provided striking insights into the character of Lievens' and Rembrandt's early oeuvres, encouraging a new look at this phase of Leiden painting. Several German scholars, particularly E. W. Moes and Hans Schneider, began to focus on Lievens' work. Indeed, Schneider's 1932 monograph has formed the basis of all subsequent research.¹² Nevertheless, despite their groundbreaking efforts, as well as those of Kurt Bauch, Rudolf E. O. Ekkart (who published a revised edition of Schneider's book in 1973), and Horst Gerson, the artist's star never rose very high, outshone by the glories of Rembrandt.¹³

The most explicit acknowledgment of this also-ran status was the title of Lievens' first monographic exhibition: *Jan Lievens: A Painter in the Shadow of Rembrandt*, which Rüdiger Klessmann organized for the Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum Braunschweig in 1979.¹⁴ That exhibition, which included an excellent selection of paintings, prints, and drawings, revealed misperceptions in historical assessments of Lievens and Rembrandt. For the first time, the visual power of Lievens' early works received concentrated attention, making possible a broader appreciation of his dynamic and innovative artistic personality. One could see that his Leiden style took inspiration not only from his teacher Pieter Lastman (and from Rembrandt) but also from the Utrecht Caravagghi—particularly Hendrick ter Brugghen, Dirck van Baburen, and Gerrit van Honthorst—as well as Peter Paul Rubens.¹⁵

In recent years scholars such as Christiaan Vogelaar, Gary Schwartz, Helga Gutbrod, Ernst van de Wetering, Bernhard Schnackenburg, and Roelof van Straten have continued to explore the complex relationship between Rembrandt and Lievens in Leiden,¹⁶ even proposing that the two may have shared a workshop in the late 1620s.¹⁷ Recent discoveries of a number of Lievens' early paintings, several of them included in this exhibition, have reinforced the sense that Lievens played a more vital role in determining the character of art produced in Leiden at this time than was apparent earlier. Although a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which the two artists interacted is now possible, Rembrandt still looms over Lievens in the literature, even with respect to the Leiden years. As late as 1991 the subtitle of an exhibition devoted to Pieter Lastman identified him as “the man who taught Rembrandt”—not “Rembrandt and Lievens.”¹⁸

While the major emphasis in recent scholarship has been on Lievens' early life, Peter Schatborn, Stephanie Dickey, and Lloyd DeWitt have undertaken studies of his later artistic development.¹⁹ To comprehend the full significance of Lievens' career, one must recognize that he went on to win acclaim for another forty years after leaving Leiden in 1632. He was in the vanguard of Dutch artists who adapted the elegant manner of Van Dyck and helped satisfy the demand for such paintings, prints, and drawings in the Netherlands during the 1640s, 1650s, and 1660s. Just how Lievens came to work in this style and how he managed to reinstate himself among the Dutch political, artistic, and local elites after he had left the Netherlands for London and Antwerp is a story that the present publication hopes to tell.