Jan Lievens
(Leiden 1607 – 1674 Amsterdam)
Jan Lievens was born in Leiden on 24 October 1607. His parents were Lieven Hendricxsz, “a skillful embroiderer,” and Machtelt Jansdr van Noortsant. 1 The couple would have eight children, of whom Jan and Dirck (1612–50/51) would become painters, and Joost (Justus), the eldest son, a bookseller. 2 In 1632 Joost married an aunt of the painter Jan Steen (1625/26–79). 3

At the age of eight, Lievens was apprenticed to Joris van Schooten (ca. 1587–ca. 1653), “who painted well [and] from whom he learned the rudiments of both drawing and painting.” 4 According to Orlers, Lievens left for Amsterdam two years later in 1617 to further his education with the celebrated history painter Pieter Lastman (1583–1633), “with whom he stayed for about two years making great progress in art.” 5 What impelled his parents to send him to Amsterdam at such a young age is not known. When he returned to Leiden in 1619, barely twelve years old, “he established himself thereafter, without any other master, in his father’s house.” 6

In the years that followed, Lievens painted large, mostly religious and allegorical scenes. His subjects and compositions, like his use of color and striking chiaroscuro, however, bear little relation to the work of Lastman; rather, they share qualities with Utrecht Caravaggisti such as Dirck van Baburen (ca. 1594/95–1624), Hendrick ter Brugghen (1588–1629), and Gerrit van Honthorst (1592–1656). 7 The similarity raises the question of whether he might have spent some time with a Utrecht master; considering Lievens’s young age at the time, this supposition is certainly reasonable, though for the time being there are no documents to support it. His rendering of dramatic candlelight also seems to be indebted to Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), whose masterpiece Judith with the Head of Holofernes was in the collection of Theodorus Schrevelius, the noted rector of the Latin school in Leiden in 1621. 8 No doubt such a “Utrecht” painting was at the center of a dispute between Lievens’s father and Johan Francois Tortarolis, the director of the Leiden Lending Bank, who refused to pay for a work painted by Jan in 1624. 9

This affinity with the Utrecht Caravaggisti diminished significantly after 1625, the year in which Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69) returned to Leiden after having apprenticed in Amsterdam with Lievens’s former master, Lastman, for half a year. Lievens and Rembrandt maintained exceptionally close ties, though, despite some suggestions, there is no evidence that the two painters ever shared a workshop. 10 Their relationship may perhaps best be characterized as one of “creative competition.” 11 This emerges from their work after 1625, in which they traded subjects and technical discoveries back and forth while the one tried to equal if not surpass the other in composition and interpretation. They also portrayed each other and
served as models for each other’s paintings. Hence, the figure in the background of Rembrandt’s *Allegory of Hearing* is assumed to be Lievens. 12

The extent to which the two painters responded to each other also emerges from the autobiographical memoirs of Constantijn Huygens, secretary to Stadholder Frederik Hendrik. 13 Huygens met Lievens and Rembrandt while visiting Leiden in October 1628, and was greatly impressed by their talent. “I dare say that Rembrandt surpasses Lievens in the faculty of penetrating to the heart of his subject matter and bringing out its essence, and his works come across more vividly,” according to Huygens, but “Lievens, in turn, surpasses him in the proud self-assurance that radiates from his compositions and their powerful forms. All that his young spirit strives after must be grand and exalted. He is inclined to depict the objects and models before him not life-size, but larger than life.” 14 Prophetic words, indeed.

The contact with Huygens had a great impact on Lievens’s career. For instance, shortly after their meeting, the secretary had Lievens portray him in The Hague and offered the painter housing while he was working on his likeness in the last months of 1628 and the first of 1629. 15 Huygens likewise probably mediated between Lievens and other Hague owners of the artist’s work. 16 The “portrait of a Turkish commander with a Dutch head” will also have been acquired for Frederik Hendrik’s collection through Huygens’s intercession. 17 Moreover, Frederik Hendrik bought from Lievens a life-size painting “depicting a student, amusingly dressed up in a cap and clothing, seated near a peat fire and reading a book.” 18 The stadholder gave this work as a gift to the English ambassador, who in turn presented it to King Charles I of England. Probably encouraged by this success, the ambitious painter conceived a plan to travel to England, undoubtedly with the intention of entering into the service of the English king. He must have abandoned his plan in April 1629 because “at the request of the Prince of Orange he was busy working on a painting that would require around three months to finish.” 19

Three more years would transpire before Lievens traveled to London. What caused the delay remains a guess for now. He may have lacked the necessary introductions for acquiring a position at the English court, a condition that had changed by the time of his departure in 1632. In the months before he left, he became acquainted with Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641), who upon the invitation of Huygens visited The Hague in the winter of 1631–32 to portray Frederik Hendrik, Amalia von Solms, and their son William. During this sojourn, Van Dyck also met Lievens, whom he portrayed, along with Huygens, for his gallery of celebrated people. Lievens was deeply impressed by Van Dyck’s work, and Van Dyck would certainly have admired one of Lievens’s finest court commissions—the recently painted likeness of Prince Charles Louis of the Palatinate, the young nephew of King Charles I. 20 It is difficult, therefore, to see Lievens’s departure for London as separate from Van Dyck’s appointment as court painter to the English king. According to Orlers, in London, in addition to the royal couple and their two children, Lievens portrayed many other “groote Heeren” (great lords), but all traces of these portraits are missing. 21 Given that his later style is influenced by Van Dyck, and a few works by the latter from this period seem to betray Lievens’s hand, it cannot be excluded that he served as a workshop assistant for Van Dyck in London. 22

Lievens left London in the spring of 1635, traveling via Calais to Antwerp, where he joined the Guild of Saint Luke. If in London he (presumably) worked only on commission, in Antwerp he turned to the free market, for
he painted tronies again, as he had done earlier in Leiden. Entirely new, however, was his interest in landscape. The fully personal style that he developed was grafted onto the work of Adriaen Brouwer (1605/06–38). Furthermore, he received ample commissions, primarily from the Jesuits. In this respect he doubtless profited from his contacts with Andries Colijns de Nole (1598–1638), “an outstanding and skillful woodcarver and sculptor,” who worked on countless commissions for Jesuit churches in Antwerp and Brussels. 23 Lievens married Colijns de Nole’s daughter Susanna in 1638. In 1639 he spent a short time in Leiden, where he painted a mantelpiece with the Continence of Scipio for the Vroedschapskamer of the town hall for 1500 guilders. 24

In March 1644 Lievens established himself in Amsterdam, a step that may have been dictated by financial problems that had put him at the mercy of his creditors in Antwerp. He might also have hoped to make an impression on the Amsterdam elite with a Van Dyckian painting style. After all, the portrait fashion in Amsterdam, which had been dictated by Rembrandt, was changing, and shortly after Lievens’s arrival, Govaert Flinck (1615–60) also cast off Rembrandt’s style in favor of Van Dyck’s. 25 In 1644 Lievens made his mark with the beautiful portrait of the elegantly dressed Adriaen Trip, which soon was followed by many other commissions from leading Amsterdam families. 33 He also received commissions from The Hague, the second city Lievens targeted and where he lived for a few years on two occasions. 27 In 1656 he was one of the founders of the artists’ confraternity Pictura in The Hague. He had remarried by then, for Susanna had died shortly after they had moved to Amsterdam. He wed his second wife, Cornelia de Bray, the daughter of a notary, in 1648.

Lievens also received official commissions. He was the only painter, for example, to take part in two of the most prestigious decorative programs of the Golden Age: the Oranjezaal in Huis ten Bosch Palace, and the new town hall in Amsterdam. While working on the Oranjezaal around 1650, for which he painted a depiction of The Five Muses, 28 he once again encountered Huygens, who as a confidant of Amalia von Solms was closely involved in the project. Frederick William, Elector of Brandenburg and spouse of Frederik Hendrik’s eldest daughter, invited Lievens to come to Berlin in 1653. 29 Upon his return he painted a chimneypiece with a depiction of the Roman general Quintus Fabius Maximus for the burgomasters’ chamber in the new Amsterdam town hall in 1656. 30 And in 1660, also for the town hall, he created a monumental depiction of an episode from the Batavian rebellion for one of the tympana of the gallery. 31 He also continued to receive important commissions from outside of Amsterdam. In 1664 he painted a more than three-meter tall allegory of the god of war Mars for the new assembly hall of the States of Holland at the Hague Binnenhof. 32 Shortly thereafter he produced, together with his son Jan Andrea Lievens (1644–80), a painting of a geographer in his study for the Rijnlandhuis in his native Leiden. 33

Lievens died in Amsterdam on 4 June 1674. Even though the artist received numerous lucrative commissions throughout his career, he seems to have faced financial difficulty at the end of his life. In 1671 his household effects were attached on account of arrears of rent. He ultimately left behind so much debt that his children renounced their inheritance.

-Piet Bakker

Endnotes

2. Work by Dirck Lievens is mentioned in two Leiden estate inventories. Burgomaster Jan Orlers in 1640 owned “een Persiaensche Tronye naert leven” (a Persian tronie after life) and “twe landschappen ... ao 1638, het een de poort van Hoorn naert leven” (two landscapes ... anno 1638, one of the gate of Hoorn after life). *Geschildert tot Leyden anno 1626* (Exh. cat. Leiden, Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal) (Leiden, 1977), 17. One year later, mention was made of “een lantschap deur Jan Lievensz broeder” (a landscape by Jan Lievens’s brother) in the estate inventory of Claes Adriaens van der Maes, RAL, NA not. J. van Vesanevelt, inv. 349, deed 54, 22 July 1641. In 1640 Dirck Lievens moved to Amsterdam and in 1648 left for the East Indies, where he died in 1651.

3. Joost and his wife, Maria Steen, apparently both succumbed in the summer of 1649 to “de heete coortse” (the plague). Bredius, *Künstler Inventare:urkunden zur Geschichte der Holländischen kunst des XVIten, XVIIten und XVIIIten Jahrhunderts*, 7 vols. (The Hague: 1915–22), 1:194. The heirs were informed that the estate “met veel schulden soude mogen sijn beswaert” (would be heavily encumbered with debt). Therefore, they asked the Supreme Court for benefit of inventory, which they were granted. RKD, Bredius Notes, folder: Lievens.


5. “By welcken hy met groote vorderinge vande Konst omtrent den tijt van twee jaeren gebleven is.” Jan Jansz. Orlers, *Beschrijvinge der Stadt Leyden* (Leiden, 1641), 376. There is no consensus regarding the exact period during which Lievens apprenticed with Lastman in Amsterdam. According to Schneider, Lievens left Leiden only in 1619, returning there in 1621. Schneider refers to Orlers’s comment that Lievens just kept on working in peace during the Remonstrants revolt; given that this revolt took place on 14 October 1618, Lievens—should Orlers be correct—was in Leiden in that year. Hans Schneider, *Jan Lievens, sein Leben und seine Werke* (Haarlem, 1932; reprint with a supplement by R.E.O. Ekkart, Amsterdam, 1973), 3; see also Roelof van Straten, *Rembrandts Leidse Tijd, 1606–1632* (Leiden, 2005), 291.


12. Three Musicians (Allegory of Hearing), c. 1624–25, oil on panel, 21.5 x 17.7 cm, The Leiden Collection, New York, inv. no. RR-105.

13. Huygens wrote his memoirs in Latin intermittently between May 1629 and April 1631. Various Dutch translations of them have been published. The one used here is A. H. Kan, De jeugd van Constantijn Huygens door hemzelf beschreven (Rotterdam, 1946; 2nd facsimile edition, 1971).


16. Huygens’s Hague network included both Thomas Brouart, treasurer of the stadholder, and Jacques de Gheijn III, whose father had instructed Huygens in drawing. Both owned a few *tronies* by Lievens. In his memoirs, Huygens also mentions “mijn vriend” (my friend) Nicolaes Sohier, an Amsterdam merchant, at whose house—the Huis met de Hoofden on the Keizersgracht—he once saw Rubens’s *Medusa* after Caravaggio. Jacob Adolf Worp, “Constantijn Huygens en de schilders van zijn tijd,” *Oud-Holland* (1891): 119. He also recalled that Sohier owned some work by Lievens from his pupillage: “werken van zeer grote waarde die van een onvergelijkelijk artistiek kunnen getuigen” (paintings of incalculable value and incomparable artistry). A. H. Kan, *De jeugd van Constantijn Huygens door hemzelf beschreven* (Rotterdam, 1946; 2nd facsimile edition, 1971), 81. In Sohier’s estate, along with above-mentioned work by Rubens and other South-Netherlandish and Italian masters, was “een schildery synde een doothooft ende eenige boecken van Lievensz” (a painting of a skull and a few books by Lievens). Another work by him might have been hiding behind descriptions such as “een dito synde een oude man ende oude vrouw” (a ditto of an old man and an old woman). SAA, NA not. P. de Bary, inv. 1681 B, 9 September 1642; Montias Database, Frick Collection, New York.


21. A 1639 inventory of the royal collection includes three portraits of members of the royal family by Lievens, among them one of King Charles I. This portrait was later traded for the famous fifteenth-century *Wilson Diptych*. B. van den Boogert, “Lievens in Londen. Een Leids wonderkind in Van Dycks atelier,” *Kunstschritt* 3 (2009): 32.


24. *The Continence of Scipio Africanus*, 1640, oil on canvas, 188 x 237 cm, formerly the Vroedschapskamer of the town hall (burned 12 February 1929), Leiden.

25. See the biography of Govaert Flinck in this catalogue.


29. For the commissions granted Lievens while he was working for Elector Frederick William in Berlin, see Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., ed., *Jan Lievens: A Dutch Master Rediscovered* (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; Milwaukee, Milwaukee Art Museum; Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis) (New Haven, 2008), 20, 176–77, no. 50.


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