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Bookkeeper at His Desk

Jan Lievens
(Leiden 1607 – 1674 Amsterdam)

ca. 1627
oil on panel
89.7 x 72.7 cm
signed in dark paint, lower left corner: “L”
JL-101

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Seated at his desk amidst a stack of books and notarized documents, an old man focuses on a page propped up by a book as intense light falling from the upper left casts a dramatic play of light and shadow over the scene. Light provides the expressive means by which Jan Lievens has created a series of powerful opposites, for example the brightness of the white pages of the book in the background versus the darkness of foreground stack of books, or the radiant lemon-yellow of the sunlit portion of the man's cloak as opposed to the deep grays of its shaded right shoulder and arm. Such chiaroscuro effects also play out on the man's face, where pinkish folds around the man's left eye and cheek give way to deep shadows on its opposite side. Light also accentuates the wrinkles in his forehead and picks out the long strands of hair in his beard and mustache.

One could imagine that Constantijn Huygens had a painting such as this in mind when, after visiting the artist's studio in or around 1628, he praised Jan Lievens for his audacious themes and forms and for his extraordinary ability to depict the human face.[1] Indeed, the present work typifies Lievens's bold handling of paint while exemplifying his ability to capture the physical and emotional states of his subjects. The sitter's remarkable physiognomy is achieved through a wide variety of brushstrokes that define his network of wrinkles and sagging folds and frame his face with a soft mane of tousled hair. The old man's downcast eyes are bloodshot and betray a lapsing focus, implying that he has spent many hours doing mental work. A sense of elapsed time is further suggested by the position of the old man's black cap, which is tipped to the back of his head as though a stretch and a sigh have just transpired, signaling the end of a full day's work.

Huygens also remarked that the artist's brimming self-assurance led him to work in a scale larger than life. Indeed, the present work relates to a number of other half-length single figures executed in the artist's ambitious scale. Many of these portray elder wise men in the guise of apostles or evangelists surrounded by tattered manuscripts and books, and show them reading, contemplating, or in the act of writing.[2] The type of books and documents on the desk and leaning against the wall, which show numbers and canceled notations, suggests that the man in this painting is a bookkeeper or an accountant. The prominent book in the foreground containing the merchant's mark "LI" with the numeral 4, identifies the book as a ledger.[3]

This painting relates thematically and compositionally to Lievens's *The Pen Cutter*, now on loan at the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum from the Sal. Oppenheim Collection (**fig 1**). This work similarly features a single figure seated at a desk surrounded by books and documents, but shows the man in the act of sharpening a quill, with an hourglass and moneybags on his desk. This painting has generally been dated to ca.

Comparative Figures

Fig 1. Jan Lievens, *The Pen Cutter*, ca. 1627, oil on canvas, 127 x 107.5 cm, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud, on permanent loan from Sal. Oppenheim Collection, Inv.nr. WRM Dep. 943

Fig 2. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Goldweigher*, 1627, oil on panel, 31.9 x 42.5 cm, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, inv. no, 828D, © Jörg P. Anders

Fig 3. Jan Lievens, *A Bearded Old Man with a Book*, ca. 1626–27, chalk drawing, 166 x 134 mm, Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt, inv. no. AE 672

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1627 on the basis of its close thematic connection to Rembrandt van Rijn's *The Goldweigher,* dated 1627 **(fig 2)**.[4] It seems probable that *Bookkeeper at His Desk* was painted at approximately the same time, ca. 1627.[5]

Lievens employed an expressive technique of incising into the wet paint with the back of the brush to emphasize the wiry texture of the old man's hair. By using highlights and lowlights that create a contrasting network of hair, Lievens evoked a sense of depth and movement. This technique, which Rembrandt and Lievens both used in the mid- to late 1620s and which perhaps derived from their early efforts in etching, is indicative of their close collaboration and the shared continuum of their ideas. Lievens's treatment of the sitter's beard in the present work is also consistent with his work in etching and chalk, as in his red chalk drawing in Darmstadt, *A Bearded Old Man with a Book* **(fig 3)**. The similarity of the sitter's position with regard to the picture plane, emphasizing the oblique angle of the man's head and the diagonal lines in the composition, suggests the sketch may have served as an early study for the figure in this painting.

X-radiographs reveal an earlier composition beneath this image. Oriented upside down, it depicts a three-quarter-length portrait of a man in a hat with a lace ruff **(fig 4**). Dendrochronological data indicates the earliest use of the panel from 1603 onward, leaving a period of around two decades during which the portrait could be dated.[6] The style of this underlying portrait is unlike anything Lievens is known to have painted in his early years and must have been painted by another hand. Lievens is known to have acquired inexpensive panels during his Leiden years, and this previously used panel may have been one of those.[7]

Fig 4. X-radiograph of *Bookkeeper at His Desk* (JL-101), upside down (with suppressed cradle visibility)

- Dominique Surh, 2017

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Endnotes

1. For a recent translation of Huygens's account, 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), 286–87.
2. See, for example, *St. Paul*, *St. Peter*, and *The Four Evangelists* from ca. 1624–47, illustrated in 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), nos. 4, 5, 8–10.
3. Basil Yamey, "Account Book Covers in Some Vanitas Still-Life Paintings," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 47 (1984): 229–31; also in *Art and Accounting* (New Haven and London, 1989), 108–9. One of the more common marks in the Low Countries incorporated the numeral 4 with the merchant's initials. Although speculative, the merchant's mark may have referenced the accounting ledger of Lievens's father, who earned his livelihood as a cloth merchant and embroiderer.
4. The interpretation of *The Goldweigher* has ranged from the portrayal of Avarice to the illustration of a biblical parable; see Bob van den Boogart, "An Old Usurer Examining a Coin," in *The Mystery of the Young Rembrand*t, ed. Bernhard Schnackenburg and and Ernst van de Wetering (Exh. cat. Kassel, Museum Schloss Wilhelmshöhe, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister; Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis) (Wolfratshausen, 2001), 210–13, no. 29.
5. Not surprisingly, *Bookkeeper at His Desk* was once thought to be by Rembrandt. It was first attributed to Lievens by Hans Schneider, *Jan Lievens, sein Leben und seine Werke* (Haarlem, 1932; repr. with a supplement by Rudolf E. O Ekkart, Amsterdam, 1973), 110, 325, no. 74. Nevertheless, the painting continued to be attributed to Rembrandt throughout the twentieth century, until a distinctive Lievens monogram "L" at the lower left was uncovered when the painting was restored in Paris in 2003 by Pierre Bucat.
6. *Bookkeeper at His Desk* consists of three oak boards, the youngest heartwood of which was formed in 1592. With the requisite years of seasoning, Peter Klein calculates the earliest possible painting date as 1603, with a more likely plausibility from 1609 onward.
7. E. Melanie Gifford, "Lievens' Technique: 'Wonders in Smeared Paint, Varnishes, and Oils,'" in *Jan Lievens: A Dutch Master Rediscovered,* ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; Milwaukee, Milwaukee Art Museum; Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis) (New Haven, 2008), 42–43.

Provenance

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- Basil Beridge, Algarkirk Hall, Lincolnshire (his sale, London, 8 April 1911, no. 23 [£514 to Partridge, Lewis, & Simmons, London], as by Rembrandt).
- [Charles Sedelmeyer, Paris, by 1921, as by Rembrandt].
- Duc de G. (his sale, Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, 22 May 1925, no. 11 [80,000 francs to Pinchon], as by Rembrandt).
- Armand Esders (his sale, Hotel Drouot, Paris, 28 May 1941, no. 16, as by Rembrandt [A. de Rouvre, Paris, 1947]).
- Private collection, France [Salomon Lilian, B. V., Amsterdam, 2005].
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2006.

Exhibition History

- Kyoto, Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art, "Communication: Visualizing the Human Connection in the Age of Vermeer," 25 June–16 October 2011; Miyagi, Miyagi Museum of Art, 27 October–12 December 2011; Tokyo, Bunkamura Museum of Art, 23 December 2011–14 March 2012, no. 23 [lent by the present owner].
- Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, on loan with the permanent collection, April 2012–July 2014 [lent by the present owner].
- Beijing, National Museum of China, "Rembrandt and His Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection," 17 June–3 September 2017 [lent by the present owner].
- Shanghai, Long Museum, West Bund, "Rembrandt, Vermeer and Hals in the Dutch Golden Age: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection," 23 September 2017–25 February 2018 [lent by the present owner].
- Moscow, The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, "The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer: Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection," 28 March 2018–22 July 2018 [lent by the present owner].
- St. Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum, "The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer: Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection," 5 September 2018–13 January 2019 [lent by the present owner].
- Abu Dhabi, Louvre Abu Dhabi, "Rembrandt, Vermeer and the Dutch Golden Age. Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection and the Musée du Louvre," 14 February–18 May 2019 [lent by the present owner].

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- Sevcik, Anja K., ed. *Inside Rembrandt 1606-1669*. Exh. cat. Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud. Petersberg, 2019, 147–48, fig. 39.2.

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Technical Summary

The support is a rectangular composite panel composed of three vertically grained Baltic oak planks: a wide central plank flanked by two narrower planks. Planks 2 and 3 are from the same tree, and the earliest creation date of the painting is 1603.[1] There are no bevels, and the panel has been cradled. There is one paper label and two white chalk inscriptions but no wax seals, import stamps, stencils or panel maker's marks.

The X-radiograph reveals an earlier three-quarter-length portrait of a male wearing a white ruff oriented upside down below the present composition.[2] In raking light, the figure-eight-shaped curves of the underlying ruff are visible in the book in the foreground of the present composition, and the slightly raised thumb and curved fingers of the figure's proper right hand can be seen to the right of the visible man's head.

A warm, light-colored ground is thinly and evenly applied. A dark underlayer shows through the upper two-thirds of the composition, and a light tan underlayer shows through the lower third of the composition. The underlayers presumably relate to the earlier portrait located below the present composition. The paint has been applied with visible brushwork and texture through the figure's forehead, beard, and yellow cloak, and thinly with loose transparent brushwork along the upper right corner. Portions of the figure's beard hairs have been inscribed in wet paint with the back of a brush.

No underdrawing is evident with infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. The images suggest the man's proper left shoulder and sleeve may have been shifted to the left during the paint stage.

The painting is signed with a single letter in dark paint along the lower left corner.

The painting was cleaned and restored in Paris in 2003, at which time the monogram was discovered.[3] It has not undergone conservation treatment since its acquisition in 2006 and remains in a good state of preservation.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The characterization of the wood is based on Peter Klein's 2008 dendrochronology report.
2. According to email correspondence with Dominique Surh, Leiden Collection curator, "The man in the ruff is unlike any portrait type Lievens had/or was doing at the time, suggesting that the panel was previously used by an artist other than Lievens himself."
3. According to Dominique Surh, Leiden Collection curator.

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