





**Head of an Old Woman: “Rembrandt’s
Mother”**

Jan Lievens
(Leiden 1607 – 1674 Amsterdam)

ca. 1628
red and black chalk on yellow-hued, buff-colored
laid paper
10.8 x 8.5 cm
collector’s mark, lower left: “P.H.”
JL-103

How to cite

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With an intense gaze animating her stern visage, this elderly woman with pointed nose, square jaw, and pursed lips seems formidable even given the small scale of the sheet of paper on which she is drawn. Jan Lievens has rendered the ample headdress covering her hair and the heavy apparel over her shoulders that shield her body from the viewer's eyes with quick and supple lines of red and black chalk, but he has taken an entirely different approach for the expressive face that leans forward toward the viewer. Thin, delicately rendered lines define the woman's features and the wrinkles of age that cross her forehead, circle her eyes, and draw the mouth down to its create its serious and uncompromising expression.

The attribution of this compelling drawing has been the subject of debate for many years. It was formerly attributed to Nicolaes Maes (1634–93), a pupil of Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69) in the late 1640s and early 1650s. In 1980, however, Sumowski ascribed it, with reservation, to Gerrit Dou (1613–75), during the period that Dou was studying with Rembrandt in Leiden (1625–31). Sumowski's association of the drawing with works created in Leiden during those years is correct, but the style of the drawing is consistent with Jan Lievens, not Dou. Reinforcing an attribution to Lievens is the direct correspondence that exists between this figure and the model for the prophetess Anna in his painting *Old Woman Reading*, ca. 1625 (**fig 1**).^[1] Anna wears a similar headdress, which falls loosely over her shoulders, and has similar facial features: a slightly pointed nose, a wrinkled face and forehead, and thin lips that hang down at the corners.^[2] The model, evidently a woman from the artists' circle, has often been identified as Rembrandt's mother, but this identification is uncertain.^[3]

When Rembrandt and Lievens were working in Leiden, they both made drawings in red and black chalk, sometimes on yellowish, light-brown, prepared paper. This technique, which they adopted from their teacher, Pieter Lastman (1583–1633), can be seen in Lastman's drawings from the early 1620s, which include several preparatory studies for paintings.^[4] *Head of an Old Woman* is also executed on this paper, as is another drawing by Lievens, *Bust of an Old Man* (**fig 2**), which has a drapery study on its verso.^[5]

An excellent example of Rembrandt's manner of drawing during the late 1620s that offers a point of comparison with Lievens's drawing technique is his *Seated Old Man with a Book*, which he drew in red and black chalk, heightened with white, on yellowish, light-brown, prepared paper (**fig 3**).^[6]

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Jan Lievens, *Old Woman Reading*, ca. 1625, 81 x 69 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, SK-A-4702



Fig 2. Jan Lievens, *Bust of an Old Man*, ca. 1628, red and black chalk, 137 x 116 mm, Private Collection, The Hague



Fig 3. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Seated Old Man with a Book*, 1628, red and black chalk, heightened with white, on yellowish, light-brown



The drawing served as a preparatory study for the figure of Peter in the master's *Peter and Paul Disputing*, a painting in Melbourne dated ca. 1628.^[7] Despite the importance of line in this drawing, it is executed more tonally than is Lievens's drawing. Lievens's line plays a more independent role, is more descriptive in character, and is rather decorative, particularly in the rendering of clothing. It is not as essential to the design, nor does it create the consistent lighting effects or plasticity seen in Rembrandt's drawing style.

Lievens's linear style is also encountered in other drawings (and prints) from his Leiden period, such as *Old Woman in Half-Length Profile, Facing Left* in Boston.^[8] As in *Head of an Old Woman*, in the Boston drawing Lievens has used a network of fine lines to depict the facial features (as he did in *Bust of an Old Man*), and in both works he has accentuated the contour of the woman's headdress above her forehead. The linear, descriptive character of the features can also be seen in one of Lievens's most Rembrandtesque drawings, *Bearded Old Man in Profile* in Washington.^[9]

The place of *Head of an Old Woman* in Lievens's oeuvre can be hypothesized by comparing it with Rembrandt's comparable studies. Rembrandt's portrait drawing of an old woman in Ulm, executed in pen and brush,^[10] may have originated in the same period as the two etched portraits he made of his "mother" of 1628.^[11] It seems likely that Lievens's drawing should be dated to approximately the same time, around 1628, the year in which Rembrandt also executed his *Seated Old Man with a Book*.

paper, 296 x 211 mm, Staatliche Museen, Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin, inv. KdZ 5284

- Peter Schatborn, 2017

Endnotes

1. Christiaan Vogelaar and Gerbrand Korevaar, eds., *Rembrandt's Mother: Myth and Reality* (Exh. cat. Leiden, Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal) (Leiden, 2005), no. 2, repro., dated ca. 1625–26; Holm Bevers, ed., *Drawings by Rembrandt and His Pupils: Telling the Difference* (Exh. cat. Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum) (Los Angeles, 2009), 50, fig. 1b.
2. We encounter the same model in a painting in Dresden, which Sumowski considers a copy after Lievens (and dates to 1629), though Kurt Bauch and Bernhard Schnackenburg see it as an original by the artist. See Kurt Bauch, "Zum Werk des Jan Lievens (II)," *Pantheon* 25 (1967): 266, fig. 25; and Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, 6 vols. (Landau and Pfalz, 1983–94), 3: no. 1272. Kindly communicated by Bernhard Schnackenburg.
3. Sumowski observes that a similar old woman wearing the same kind of headdress occurs in two paintings that Rembrandt made in 1626: *Tobit and Anna with a Kid* (oil on panel, 40.1 x 29.9 cm., Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. A 4717) and *Musical Company* (oil on panel, 63.4 x 47.6 cm., Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. A 4674) (Josua Bruyn et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 1: 1625–1631, Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project (The Hague, 1982), 1: no. A 3, repro., and no. A 3, repro., respectively).
4. Astrid Tümpel and Peter Schatborn, *Pieter Lastman: leermaster van Rembrandt* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum het Rembrandthuis) (Amsterdam, 1991), nos. 30–33, repro.; Christian Tico Seifert, *Pieter Lastman. Studien zu Leben und Werk. Mit einem kritischen Verzeichnis der Werke mit Themen aus der antiken Mythologie und Historie* (Petersberg, 2011), 177–215.
5. Recently the verso of that drawing was attributed to Lastman, but that attribution cannot be correct since its style differs from Lastman's red-chalk drawings, which are less linear in character. See Christian Tico Seifert, *Pieter Lastman. Studien zu Leben und Werk. Mit einem kritischen Verzeichnis der Werke mit Themen aus der antiken Mythologie und Historie* (Petersberg, 2011), 229, fig. 253.
6. Otto Benesch, *The Drawings of Rembrandt*, ed. Eva Benesch, 6 vols. (London and New York, 1973), 1: no. 7, fig. 12; Holm Bevers, *Rembrandt: Die Zeichnungen im Berliner Kupferstichkabinet* (Ostfildern, 2006), no. 1, repro.
7. Panel, 72.3 x 59.5 cm, formerly dated 1628, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, cat. 1961, no. 349/4; Josua Bruyn et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 1: 1625–1631, Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project (The Hague, 1986), 1: no. A 13.
8. Pen and brown ink, touches of gray wash, over traces of black chalk, 147 x 132 mm, Maida and George Abrams Collection. *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), no. 96, repro.; William Walker Robinson and Peter Sutton, *Drawings by Rembrandt, His Students and Circle from the Maida and George Abrams Collection* (Exh. cat. Greenwich, Conn., Bruce Museum) (Greenwich, 2011), no. 15, repro., with earlier literature; Gregory Rubinstein, "Brief Encounter: The Early Drawings of Jan Lievens and Their Relationship with Those of Rembrandt," *Master Drawings* 49 (2011): 363–64, ca. 1628.

9. Red chalk with touches of black chalk (recto), with *Drapery Study* (verso), red chalk, 137 x 138 mm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., Gift of Mrs. Lessing J. Rosenwald, 1987.20.11. The attribution of this drawing has been a matter of debate over the years. It was attributed to Rembrandt by Otto Benesch, *The Drawings of Rembrandt*, ed. Eva Benesch, 6 vols. (London, 1973), 1: no. 42, fig. 47; and Martin Royalton-Kisch, "Drawings by Rembrandt and His Pupils," *Burlington Magazine* 153 (February 2011): 100. The attribution to Lievens has been made by Peter Schatborn, ed., *Jan Lievens, 1607–1674: Prenten & Tekeningen* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis) (Amsterdam, 1988), 6; Holm Bevers, ed., *Drawings by Rembrandt and His Pupils: Telling the Difference* (Exh. cat. Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum) (Los Angeles, 2009), no. 2.4., repro.; and Gregory Rubinstein, "Brief Encounter: The Early Drawings of Jan Lievens and Their Relationship with Those of Rembrandt," *Master Drawings* 49 (2011): 361–63. This drawing probably dates to the early 1630s since it was inspired by figure studies in red chalk by Rembrandt that are dated 1630 and 1631. See Otto Benesch, *The Drawings of Rembrandt*, ed. Eva Benesch, 6 vols. (London, 1973), 1: nos. 20, 37, and 40.
10. *Bust of an Old Woman*, pen and brown ink, brown wash, touched with white, 122 x 122 mm, Ulmermuseum, Ulm, Strölin bequest; Peter Schatborn, ed., *Jan Lievens, 1607–1674: Prenten & Tekeningen* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis) (Amsterdam, 1988), no. 10, repro.
11. Gary Schwartz, *The Complete Etchings of Rembrandt: Reproduced in Original Size* (New York, 1994), B 352 and B 354.

Provenance

- "P. H." Collection.
- Eugene Rodriguez Collection (his sale, F. Muller, Amsterdam, 21 November 1929, no. 17, as by Nicolaes Maes).
- Bernard Houthakker, Amsterdam (his sale, Sotheby's Mak van Waay, Amsterdam, 17 November 1975, no. 139, as by Nicolaes Maes).



- F. W. A. Knight Collection (his sale, Sotheby Mak van Waay, Amsterdam, 29 October 1979, no. 25, as by Nicolaes Maes).
- Jacobus A. Klaver, Amsterdam; by descent to Mrs. M. P. Klaver-Heinkens.
- (Sale, Sotheby's, London, 9 July 2008, no. 27; [Haboltd & Co, Paris].
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2008.

Exhibition History

- Amsterdam, Houthakker Gallery, "Dessins anciens: Français, hollandais, italien exposés chez Bernard Houthakker," July–August 1952, no. 50 (as by Nicolaes Maes).
- Amsterdam, Houthakker Gallery, "Exposition de dessins et eaux-fortes de Rembrandt et de son entourage et quelques tableaux de ses contemporains," Summer 1956, no. 70 (as by Nicolaes Maes).
- Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet, "De verzameling van Bernard Houthakker," August–November 1964, no. 57 (as by Nicolaes Maes [lent by Bernard Houthakker]).
- Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis, "Jan Lievens, 1607–1674: Prenten & Tekeningen," 5 November 1988–8 January 1989, no. 11 [lent by Jacobus A. Klaver].
- Leiden, Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal, "Rembrandt en Lievens in Leiden: 'Een jong en edel schildersduo,'" 4 December 1991–1 March 1992, no. 21 [lent by Jacobus A. Klaver].
- Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet, "Tekeningen van oude meesters: De verzameling Jacobus A. Klaver," 8 May–25 July 1993, no. 34 [lent by Jacobus A. Klaver].
- Kassel, Staatliche Museen Kassel, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Schloss Wilhelmshöhe, "The Mystery of the Young Rembrandt," 3 November 2001–27 January 2002; Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis, 20 February–26 May 2002, no. 20 [lent by Mrs. M. P. Klaver-Heinkens].
- Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, "Drawings by Rembrandt and His Pupils: Telling the Difference," 9 December 2009–28 February 2010, no. 1.3 [lent by the present owner].
- Norfolk, Virginia, Chrysler Museum of Art, on loan with the permanent collection, August 2010–January 2011 [lent by the present owner].
- New York, The Morgan Library and Museum, "Rembrandt's First Masterpiece," 3 June–18 September, 2016 [lent by the present owner].
- Kingston, Queen's University, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, "Leiden circa 1630: Rembrandt Emerges," 24 August–1 December 2019, no. 9 [lent by the present owner].

References

- Bernard Houthakker Gallery. *Dessins anciens: français, hollandais, italien exposés chez Bernard Houthakker*. Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Bernard Houthakker Gallery. Amsterdam, 1952, no. 50 (as by Nicolaes Maes).
- Bernard Houthakker Gallery. *Exposition de dessins et eaux-fortes de Rembrandt et de son entourage et quelques tableaux de ses contemporains*. Exh. cat., Amsterdam, Bernard Houthakker Gallery. Amsterdam, 1956, no. 70 (as by Nicolaes Maes).
- Niemeijer, J. W. *De verzameling van Bernard Houthakker*. Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet. Amsterdam, 1964, 25–26, no. 57, as by Nicolaes Maes.
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- Schatborn, Peter, ed. *Jan Lievens, 1607–1674, Prenten & Tekeningen*. Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis. Amsterdam, 1988, 34–35, no. 11.
- Vogelaar, Christiaan, ed. *Rembrandt en Lievens in Leiden: "een jong en edel schildersduo."* Exh. cat. Leiden, Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal. Zwolle-Leiden, 1991, no. 21.
- Schapelhouman, Marijn and Peter Schatborn. *Tekeningen van oude meesters. De verzameling Jacobus A. Klaver*. Exh. cat., Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet. Zwolle, 1993, 78–79, 238, no. 34.
- Wurfbain, Maarten. "The Soothsayer by Jan Lievens in Berlin: An Attempt at an Interpretation." In *Rembrandt, Rubens, and the Art of their Time: Recent Perspectives: Papers from The Pennsylvania State University Volume XI*. Edited by Roland Fleischer and Susan C. Scott, 234–50, fig. 9–4. 11 vols. University Park, 1997.
- De Heer, Ed. "Bust of an Old Woman, c. 1628/30." In *The Mystery of the Young Rembrandt*. Edited by Ernst van de Wetering and Bernhard Schnackenburg, 180–81, no. 20. Exh. cat. Kassel, Staatliche Museen Kassel Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Schloss Wilhelmshöhe; Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis. Wolfratshausen, 2001.
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- Wheelock Jr., Arthur K., ed. *Jan Lievens: A Dutch Master Rediscovered*. Exh. cat. Washington, National Gallery of Art; Milwaukee, Milwaukee Art Museum; Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis. New Haven, 2008, 233, under no. 95.
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Pupils: Telling the Difference. Edited by Holm Bevers, 48–51, 251, no. 1.3. Exh. cat. Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum. Los Angeles, 2009.

- Royalton-Kisch, Martin. "From Lievens to Rembrandt." *Master Drawings* 48 (2009): 509–11, n. 12.
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- *British Museum*. Online catalogue, 2010, under no.73, n. 6. https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/publications/online_research_catalogues/rembrandt_drawings/drawings_by_rembrandt.aspx.
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- Rubinstein, Gregory. "Brief Encounter: The Early Drawings of Jan Lievens and Their Relationship with Those of Rembrandt." *Master Drawings* 49 (2011): 358, no. 13.
- Schnackenburg, Bernhard. *Jan Lievens: Friend and Rival of the Young Rembrandt*. Petersberg, 2016, 298, no. 113.
- Savatier Sjöholm, Olivia. "Rembrandt's Drawings: Pedagogy Lessons and Vehicles of Artistic Dialogue." In *Rembrandt, Vermeer and the Dutch Golden Age. Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection and the Musée du Louvre*. Edited by Blaise Ducos and Lara Yeager-Crasselt, 44. Exh. cat. Abu Dhabi, Louvre Abu Dhabi. London, 2019. [Exhibition catalogue also published in French and Arabic.]
- Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. "Making Faces: The Development of the *Tronie* in Seventeenth-Century Leiden." In *Anonymous Portraits: Dutch Seventeenth-Century Tronies*. Sales cat. Nicholas Hall. New York, 2019, 12, fig. 4.
- Coutré, Jacquelyn N., Ed. *Leiden circa 1630: Rembrandt Emerges*. Exh. cat. Kingston, Agnes Etherington; Edmonton, Art Gallery of Alberta; Hamilton, Art Gallery of Hamilton. Kingston, 2019, 162-65, no. 9.

Technical Summary

The support, a yellow-hued, buff-colored, lightly textured laid paper, has been secured between a silk mat and a backboard. The support's tonality is uniform, with the exception of a slightly lighter circular area above the stamp along the lower left. The composition has been drawn in red and black chalk. A small smudge in the red chalk along the left side of the lower central area of the shadow of the hat, where it meets the figure's forehead, probably occurred in the working process. Slight smudging along the upper right corner, in the reserve at the center of the right side, at the lower right corner, and at the lower left corner are from handling.

The drawing is stamped with initials in an oval cartouche along the lower left.



The drawing has not undergone conservation treatment since acquisition and remains in an excellent state of preservation.^[1]

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. Entry based on 2009 examination report by Marjorie Shelley, Sherman Fairchild Conservator in Charge, Sherman Fairchild Center for Works on Paper and Photograph Conservation, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.