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Self-Portrait

Jan Lievens
(Leiden 1607 – 1674 Amsterdam)

ca. 1629–30
oil on panel
42 x 37 cm
signed with initials in dark paint, upper right corner: “IL”
JL-105

How to cite

DeWitt Lloyd, and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.. “Self-Portrait” (2017). In *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*, 4th ed. Edited by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Elizabeth Nogrady with Caroline Van Cauwenberge. New York, 2023–. https://theleidencollection.com/artwork/self-portrait-3/ (accessed November 05, 2026).

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When Constantijn Huygens (1596–1687), secretary to the prince of Orange, traveled from The Hague to Leiden in October 1628 to meet Jan Lievens and Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69), he discovered two young artists whose striking personalities and artistic predilections he perceptively characterized in the diary entry he wrote shortly thereafter. As for Lievens, Huygens celebrated him as a prodigy and admired his "vigorous, untamable spirit" and "acute and profound insight into all manner of things," even as he lamented the young artist's stubbornness and excess of self-confidence. He admired Lievens's work ethic and his choice of "audacious themes and forms." If Huygens felt that Rembrandt was superior to Lievens in his "inventiveness, his sure touch and liveliness of emotions," he also felt that Lievens was the better of the two in painting the human countenance, where "he wreaks miracles."[1]

In this striking *Self-Portrait,* which Lievens probably began shortly after Huygens's visit, one can understand entirely the power of the young artist's forceful personality. Unlike Rembrandt, who in his early self-portraits of around 1629–30 often stared directly at the viewer but with part of his face obscured in shadow, Lievens sought no such effect. His piercing eyes gaze to the right, suggesting an active and searching mind. He further enlivened his image by painting his long, flowing brown hair with strikingly free and spontaneous brushstrokes. The light that falls from the upper left also illuminates his smooth skin, broad cheek bones and strong features, which he defined with carefully controlled strokes. He defined the proper right eye socket with a rhythmic sequence of parallel brushstrokes that indicate both structure and reflective light. The delicacy of his touch is also evident in the way he has articulated the fine hairs of his pencil-thin moustache.

The remarkable expressive qualities of this *Self-Portrait* raise many questions about Lievens's artistic aspirations at this early stage of his career. They demonstrate a level of personal refinement and elegance entirely unexpected from the bold Caravaggist paintings he was making in the late 1620s. They also differ from the careful descriptive modeling of his *tronies* and other bust-length images from the same period, including his portrait of Rembrandt **(fig 1)**. One cannot help but think that the character of this painting, which has unmistakable affinities to Van Dyck's fluid style, owes something to the Leiden artist's desire to evolve his style in a manner that would appeal to a courtly culture, whether in The Hague or London.[2] Constantijn Huygens, who was the arbiter of taste at the Dutch court, greatly admired the paintings of Peter Paul Rubens and Anthony van Dyck. Indeed, Van Dyck came to The Hague to paint the portraits of Prince Frederick Hendrick and his consort Amalia van Solmes shortly after Lievens painted this *Self Portrait.*[3] While in The Hague he also painted a portrait of Lievens, an indication of their mutual esteem. The portrait, now lost, is

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Jan Lievens, *Portrait of Rembrandt van Rijn*, ca. 1628, oil on panel, 57 x 44.7 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, on loan from a private collector, SK-C-1598



Fig 2. Lucas Vorsterman after Sir Anthony van Dyck, *Portrait of Jan Lievens,* ca. 1632, engraving on laid paper, 24.4 x 15.6 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., 1990.125.1.59

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known today through an engraving that Lucas Vosterman (1595–1675) made for the *Iconographia* **(fig 2)**.[4]

The Van Dyckian character of this *Self-Portrait* led earlier scholars to date this work around 1632–34, when Lievens was in England; nevertheless, a date of 1629–30 is probable for both stylistic and technical reasons.[5] Dendrochronological examinations have revealed that Lievens used an oak panel made from the same tree that supplied the panel for Rembrandt's *Samson and Delilah* in Berlin, which dates ca. 1629–30.[6] This evidence indicates that Lievens and Rembrandt purchased their panels from the same panel maker, and perhaps that they even purchased their panels jointly.

X-radiographs indicate that Lievens made transformative revisions to his appearance during the course of the painting's execution **(fig 3)**. Lievens eliminated a hat, probably a painter's beret, that he initially had placed tilted slightly forward on his head, and in its place added freely rendered, flowing locks at the left, perhaps in emulation of English or Flemish courtly hair styles. These changes strengthened his presentation into a dashing, almost aristocratic young man who peers out past the viewer, although he had already left behind his Leiden persona in anticipation of the career he hoped would soon unfold at the court of King Charles I in London.



Fig 3. X-radiograph of *Self-Portrait* (JL-105)

- Lloyd DeWitt and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., 2017

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Endnotes

1. For Huygens' text, 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. By April 1629 Lievens had already considered going to London to paint at the court of Charles I. See Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *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), 9.
3. For a discussion of Van Dyck's presence in The Hague, see Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. et al., *Anthony van Dyck* (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) (Washington, D.C., 1990), 236–38, no. 59.
4. A unique impression of the very sketchy first state of the print in the Institut Néerlandais, Paris, depicts Lievens without a moustache. It seems unlikely, as some have suggested, that the appearance of the moustache in the second state indicates that Lievens grew his mustache only after Van Dyck had drawn or painted his model. It is more probable that Vosterman merely overlooked the existence of this slight growth on Van Dyck's model. Vorsterman probably made his revisions after Van Dyck had seen the first state.
5. See Rüdiger Klessmann, *Jan Lievens: Ein Maler im Schatten Rembrandts* (Exh. cat. Brunswick, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum) (Brunswick, 1979), 100, no 32.
6. The dendrochronological examination of these works was undertaken by Dr. Peter Klein, Ordinariat für Holzbiologie, Universität Hamburg. For the dating of Rembrandt's painting, see Josua Bruyn et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, vol. 1: *1625–1631,* Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project (The Hague, 1986), 1: 249–57, cat., A24.

Provenance

- (Possibly sale, Sotheby's, London, 22 July 1953, no. 116 [£1,400 to Welker]; [Alfred Brod Gallery, London, 1957].
- Private collection, England [Thomas Agnew and Sons, London, 2006; Johnny van Haeften, Ltd., London, 2006].
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2006.

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Exhibition History

- London, Alfred Brod Gallery, “Winter Exhibition,” 6 December 1957–4 January 1958, no. 32.
- Brunswick, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, “Jan Lievens: Ein Maler im Schatten Rembrandts,” 6 September–11 November 1979, no. 32.
- Washington, National Gallery of Art, “Jan Lievens: A Dutch Master Rediscovered,” 26 October 2008–11 January 2009; Milwaukee, Milwaukee Art Museum, 7 February–26 April 2009; Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis, 17 May–9 August 2009, no. 18 [lent by the present owner].
- Washington, National Gallery of Art, on loan with the permanent collection, August 2009–August 2012 [lent by the present owner].
- New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, on loan with the permanent collection, September 2012–April 2013 [lent by the present owner].
- Washington, National Gallery of Art, on loan with the permanent collection, June 2013–June 2016 [lent by the present owner].
- Paris, Museé du Louvre, “Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection: The Age of Rembrandt,” 22 February–22 May 2017 [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].
- Amsterdam, H’ART Museum, “From Rembrandt to Vermeer: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection,” 9 April–24 August 2025 [lent by the present owner].
- West Palm Beach, Norton Museum of Art, “Art and Life in Rembrandt’s Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection,” 25 October 2025–29 March 2026 [lent by the present owner].

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by Stephanie Dickey and Herman Roodenburg, 253–54, fig. 4. Zwolle, 2010.

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Technical Summary

The support, a rectangular composite panel, is made up of two vertically grained oak planks from the Baltic-Polish region, of which board 2 originates from the same tree as boards 2 and 3 from Rembrandt’s *Samson Betrayed by Delilah* in Berlin-Dahlem.[1] The vertical panel join is left of center and passes through the inner corner of the figure’s proper right eye. The panel has been thinned and has no bevels. All four edges may have been trimmed before three wood additions were added: an L-shaped addition along the right side, a short piece along the left side of the lower edge, and a piece along the left side. The enlarged panel has been cradled.

A double ground, a lightly toned chalk-glue lower ground followed by a lead-based upper ground that remains visible under the chin, has been applied to the central plank. In the X-radiograph, the ground applied to the three wood additions appears less radio-opaque.

A brown monochrome sketch is visible as lines in the shadowed portions of the eyes and along the jawline.

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Modifications were made to the left jawline and chin in a second black painted sketch.

The paint appears to have been applied in two stages along the face: in a blended handling along the shadowed side and in a more vigorous handling along the lighter side. In the X-radiograph, the two stages can be seen along the mouth. Subtle scratches and tiny crosshatches break up the highlight along the bridge of the nose and the proper right eye.

Minor compositional changes include the lengthening of the figure's hair, which gave it a more courtly appearance.

The painting is signed with initials in dark paint along the upper right corner but is undated.

The painting has not undergone conservation treatment since its acquisition in 2006 and remains in a good state of preservation.[2]

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The identification of the wood is based on Peter Klein's May 1993 dendrochronology report. Berlin-Dahlem inventory number B 812-A, RRP Corpus I A 24.
2. Entry based on 2007 examination report by E. Melanie Gifford, Scientific Department, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

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