



Card Players

Jan Lievens
(Leiden 1607 – 1674 Amsterdam)

ca. 1625

oil on canvas

97.5 x 105.4 cm

signed with initials in dark paint, upper left: "I.L."

JL-102



How to cite

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To judge from the chalk marks on the back wall, each indicating a drink ordered from the innkeeper, it has been a long night of gambling and, to the intent pleasure of the kibitzers crowding the table, the stakes and tensions have clearly risen with every card the two soldiers have played.^[1] Jan Lievens's painting, however, is not so much about the game itself as about the expressions on the protagonists' faces at that dramatic moment when one of the players must deal with the sudden realization that he has lost. Holding his five of hearts loosely in his hand, the vanquished gambler stares in disbelief at the ace of hearts triumphantly held aloft by his helmeted opponent. Even if it were not for the obvious juxtaposition of the winning and losing cards or the intent gazes of this companions as they measure his reaction, the soldier's body language and downward expression would be enough to tell the story.

This dramatic painting from the beginning of Lievens's career demonstrates how thoroughly the young Leiden artist internalized the thematic and compositional innovations of the Utrecht Caravaggisti from the early 1620s. When Gerrit van Honthorst (1592–1656) returned to Utrecht in 1620, he brought with him an artistic repertoire that featured depictions of card and backgammon players huddled around a table.^[2] Honthorst's compositions were tightly cropped, with the viewer inevitably situated close to the action, peering into the game over the shoulder of one of the players. Gambling is a night sport, where passions and foolish behavior are allowed their full range, their limits decided only by the size of the gamblers' purses. In his now-lost *Card Cheats*, known today only from a workshop replica (fig 1), Honthorst exploited the darkness of the surroundings to unite the action, as light from a lantern in the middle of the table brightly illuminates the faces of the players and their cohorts, including that of the silhouetted gambler whose arm hides the light source.

Not surprisingly, prior to the discovery of the monogram IL, Lievens's painting was attributed to Honthorst.^[3] The close compositional similarities to Honthorst's gambling paintings, however, also reveal significant differences in Lievens's figure types and body language, not to mention brushwork, that help distinguish the work of the two artists. Lievens's gamblers are a coarser, lower-class group than Honthorst's card cheats. They sit in an extremely tight circle, their forms more tightly compressed and restrained than those in Honthorst's painting, with the result that the figures' facial expressions rather than their gestures become the painting's focus. Lievens's bold brushwork, rough and unmodulated, and totally in keeping with the character of the players seated at the table, also differs from Honthorst's smooth and elegant manner of painting. Finally, as is characteristic of other early genre scenes by the artist, Lievens seems to offer no moral judgment on the action of the card players. Whereas Honthorst followed a long iconographic tradition by emphasizing the deceitfulness and moral corruption of the game, Lievens departs entirely from such a

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Workshop of Gerrit van Honthorst, *The Card Players*, 1624, oil on canvas, 125 x 190 cm, Gemäldegalerie, Wiesbaden, M 409



Fig 2. Dirck van Baburen, *The Mocking of Christ*, ca. 1622, oil on canvas, 106 x 136 cm, Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht



Fig 3. Jan Lievens, *Tric Trac Players*, ca. 1623, oil on canvas, 100 x 105 cm, Spier Collection, London





narrative. His gamblers are involved in a game of chance, and the challenge he set for himself was to capture the emotions at the moment of truth.

Honthorst was not the only artist among the Utrecht Caravaggisti who tightly cropped his compositions in the early 1620s, so also did Dirck van Baburen (ca. 1595–1624), as seen in *The Mocking of Christ* from ca. 1622 (fig 2). Lievens must have known Van Baburen's painting, for he based the figure of the silhouetted card player on the helmeted soldier in the latter's work. Lievens probably also responded to the aggressive chiaroscuro effects in Van Baburen's paintings and the rugged physicality of his figures.

Lievens may have painted *Card Players* as a pendant to another gambling scene, *Tric Trac Players* (fig 3), for the two works have virtually the same dimensions, a similar compositional focus, are both painted on canvas, and date from the early to mid-1620s.^[4] Nevertheless, as Bernhard Schnackenburg has noted, *Card Players* is compositionally more sophisticated than is *Tric Trac Players* and is painted in a far bolder, more assured technique.^[5] These stylistic differences, which suggest that the two works were painted sequentially, demonstrate how rapidly Lievens matured as an artist during these years.

Lievens's *Card Players* belongs to a genre of guardroom and tavern scenes of soldiers that only developed in the 1620s. In an era racked by conflict, the presence of soldiers in the Netherlands was nearly constant, especially after the resumption of hostilities with Spain upon the termination of the Twelve-Year Truce in 1621. These men were mainly foreign mercenaries whose daily lives swung between periods of violence and boredom. Many lived an unanchored existence, a great deal of it passed in the demimonde of taverns and low company. Dutch genre paintings often concerned themselves with moral boundaries, and because scenes of soldiers often included depictions of gambling, indolence, prostitution, drunkenness, and other activities that transgressed these limits, they were very effective in holding the public's interest.^[6]

Lievens did not paint real soldiers or depict an actual situation, but rather dressed up local models to take on roles in this small human drama. For example, the man at the right also appears in *Tric Trac Players* (fig 3) and in Lievens's *An Old Man Holding a Skull*, ca. 1630 (fig 4). Jan Jansz. Orlers, the Leiden burgomaster, historian, and art lover who wrote about Lievens in his 1641 history of Leiden, owned this latter painting.^[7] In the 1640 inventory of his possessions the painting is described as "the keeper of the Almshouse with a Skull in his hand."^[8] Two archival documents reveal that in 1629 and 1631 the financial officer (*rentmeester*) of the Sint Catharina Gasthuys in Leiden was named Jan van Heussen, who resided in the Rijn district of town, where both Lievens and Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69) lived.^[9] This model also sat for other Leiden artists, among them an anonymous artist who painted *Elderly*

Fig 4. Jan Lievens, *An Old Man Holding a Skull*, ca. 1630, oil on panel, 61.6 x 48.3 cm, private collection



Man in the Leiden Collection (GD-109), and Rembrandt, in his *Old Man in a Fur Cap* (Tiroler Landesmuseum, Innsbruck).^[10]

Young painters also used fellow artists and friends as models to save the expense of hiring professionals. The young man with the pipe in the center of *Card Players* is likely Rembrandt, who posed for Lievens a number of times, as in a portrait of ca. 1629 (private collection, on loan to Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam).^[11] Lievens, in turn, appeared in several of Rembrandt's early works, as in *Three Musicians (Allegory of Hearing)*, ca. 1624, in the Leiden Collection (RR-105). Rembrandt and Lievens would develop an artistic friendship and rivalry in which they forged a radically new style whose realism and drama are already evident in this work.

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



Endnotes

1. This entry is based, in large part, on the one that appears 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), 86–87, no. 3.
2. Richard J. Judson and Rudolf E. O. Ekkart, *Gerrit van Honthorst, 1592–1656* (Doornspijk, 1999), 17–19.
3. On the reverse of the painting is a label with the name “Van Honthorst.” The first art historians to recognize the correct attribution were B. J. A. Renckens and R. E. O. Ekkart in 1976 (letter to the then owner). 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), 289 n. 2.
4. John Twilley, “Interim Thread Count Report” (2009) of *The Card Players* Study Day, The Leiden Collection, New York, July 9, 2010, notes that the canvas in *Card Players* has a more regular weave than does that of *Tric Trac Players*.
5. Bernhard Schnackenburg, in the entry on the painting in the auction catalogue (Sotheby’s, Amsterdam, May 8, 2007, lot 77).
6. Jochai Rosen, *Soldiers at Leisure: The Guardroom Scene in Dutch Genre Painting of the Golden Age* (Amsterdam, 2010), 78, n. 15.
7. For Orlers and Lievens, see Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. in *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), 5.
8. “De Coster van het Gasthuys met een Dootshoof inden arm.” See: Rudolf E. O. Ekkart and Maarten L. Wurfbain, eds., *Geschildert tot Leyden anno 1626* (exh. cat., Leiden, Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal) (Leiden, 1976), 18; Meredith Hale 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), 124, 290 nn. 7 and 8. See also sale catalogue, Christies, London, 6 December 2007, lot 7446.
9. For Van Heussen as rentmeester, see the inventory of the Sint Catharinagasthuys, Regionaal Archief Leiden, Gasthuizen, arch. 504, inv. I.1.3.26 and 27. For further information on Van Heussen, see Henriette Rahusen’s entry on Leiden School, *Elderly Man* (GD-109).
10. See Meredith Hale 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), 290 n. 7.
11. 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), 114–15, no. 17, ill.

Provenance

- Ovide Ghislain (died 1944), Jemappes, Belgium, by 1927; by descent to his grandchild, Belgium (sale, Sotheby's, Amsterdam, 8 May 2007, no. 77 [to Johnny van Haeften, Ltd., London]).^[1]
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2007.

Provenance Notes

1. *Card Players* was in Ghislain's collection when it was first recorded in a certificate dated 3 October 1927. In that certificate, René Tonus of Brussels authenticated the painting as by Gerrit van Honthorst; Lievens's initials were then covered with dirt and old varnish. Ghislain was killed by Nazi forces in 1944, but the painting was retained by his surviving family. In 1976, B. J. A. Renckens of the RKD and R. E. O. Ekkart correctly identified the work as by Lievens, after correspondence with Ghislain's descendant.

Exhibition History

- 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. 3 [lent by the present owner].
- Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, August 2011–November 2016 [lent by the present owner].
- Paris, Musée 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 of 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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Leiden Collection. Edited by Polina Lyubimova, 106–7; 235, no. 20. Translated by Daria Babich and Daria Kuzina. Exh. cat. Moscow, The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts; St. Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum. Moscow, 2018.

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- Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. “Art and Life in Rembrandt’s Time.” In *Art and Life in Rembrandt’s Time*. Edited by Elizabeth Nogrady et al., 20. Exh. cat. Amsterdam, H’ART Museum; West Palm Beach, Norton Museum of Art. Zwolle, 2025. [Exhibition catalogue also published in Dutch.]

Technical Summary

The support is composed of two pieces of medium-weight, plain-weave fabric with a lined horizontal join near the center of the composition, just below the chins of all four figures.^[1] All four tacking margins have been removed, and there is cusping along all but the right edge. In 2009 the Thread Count Automation Project (TCAP) confirmed the support has been cut down along the right edge and that the support’s regular-weave pattern indicates it belongs to the category known as the “Vermeerian” type.^[2] Repetitive horizontal creases suggest the support may have been previously rolled. There are no wax seals, canvas stamps, inscriptions, or labels along the lining or stretcher reverse.

A double ground, composed of an orange-brown lower layer lacking lead white followed by a gray-green ground composed of earth pigments with some lead white, has been applied.

The paint has been applied in a confident manner with broad, bold strokes. The surface of the painting has an overall smooth appearance with textured highlights, deliberately executed with impasto and well-defined brushwork.

The profile of the soldier whose back is turned to the viewer was executed after the central figure, who may depict Rembrandt, as the central figure’s flesh tones are visible beneath the red brown tones of the soldier’s face.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 900–1700 nanometers. The images reveal minor compositional changes to the contour of the soldier’s proper left shoulder, which has been extended



slightly with a lighter brown paint and lies on top of the chin of the adjacent figure on the left.

The painting has been signed with initials in dark paint along the upper left but is undated.

The painting was cleaned, lined, and restored in 2007 and remains in a good state of preservation.^[3]

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. According to Devi Ormond's 2013 examination report, it is unclear whether this is a seam or a tear.
2. TCAP codirectors: C. Richard Johnson Jr. of Cornell University and Don H. Johnson of Rice University.
3. Entry based on 2013 examination report by Devi Ormond, Associate Paintings Conservator, J. Paul Getty Museum.