



伦勃朗

镇展

莱顿小城曾经「双星争辉」



利文斯

《自画像》伦勃朗(1640年)

把门

◎王健南

两个出生于莱顿的年轻人,天生热爱绘画,曾先后负笈游学于繁华的阿姆斯特丹,拜在同一位老师门下,得到了意大利油画技法的真传。随后,两个人都回到了家乡,一起切磋绘画技艺,这一段等待机遇列车到达的岁月,事后证明是他们人生中最美好的时光。几年后,两人各奔前程,经历各自的人生风雨,同时完成了属于自己那段艺术旅程。这两位画家就是伦勃朗·范·莱因与扬·利文斯,国家博物馆正在展出他们的作品。

1628年10月,一位大人物流到他们俩在老莱茵河北部水道边的工作室——一间由两个20岁出头的小伙子搭建的“家乡绘画小站”。此人是当时欧洲颇具影响力的外交家康斯坦丁·惠更斯,作为荷兰执政者奥兰治亲王的秘书,除了政治上的天赋,他在文学与艺术上具有同样的远见卓识。在快速浏览过两位年轻人的作品之后,他惊叹自己一下子发现了两个天才,同时十分肯定地预言:两个人将会成功地推动荷兰绘画的发展,开启欧洲艺术的最前沿。

然而,与伦勃朗相比,利文斯在美术史上的地位令

惠更斯的预言落了空。在利文斯辞世之后的三百多年时间里,他早已被遗忘在美术史的长河之中,不仅对于普通美术爱好者,即使是艺术界的专业人士,对这个名字也颇为陌生。

也许惠更斯的预言具有一种魔力,不断有人发现利文斯作品的巨大价值,希望新的时代能够重新评价这位17世纪荷兰绘画黄金时代的杰出画家。为此,在2009年4月,美国密尔沃基美术馆“扬·利文斯艺术展”开幕,共展出110幅作品,据说这个数目代表了这位被埋没的荷兰画家存世的全部作品,其中有50幅油画,28幅素描和34幅木刻。然而,展览过后,一切似乎又趋于平静。

估计本次国家博物馆的“莱顿收藏展”的主办方卡普兰先生有意为利文斯鸣不平,不然为何在展览进口树立的画像不是伦勃朗却是利文斯呢?

虽然这次只来了利文斯的4幅油画作品,可却是他早期绘画中的精品。尤其是《自画像》,可以说是他所有存世的作品中最重要的一件。

当你凝视着这幅肖像上这位只有22岁年轻人,很难不生出些许感慨。当年的惠更斯,深谙人世,阅人无数,初见利文斯,正是这幅肖像创作的前一年。可以说,这幅作品还原了当年惠更斯初见利文斯的样子。

画面上的年轻人,血气方刚,朝气蓬勃,极富穿透力的眼神和飘逸的长发凸显画家自信的气度。他用大笔



《玩牌者》扬·利文斯(1625年)

触扫出一头的秀发,虽发丝细密,发质柔软,却展现了浪漫不羁的个性与意气风发的干劲。圆睁的双目,专注地注视着画外右侧,像是画家从镜中观察自己时的写照。他正在细细端详自己的面部特征。微微闭拢的嘴唇,显出一种刚毅与决心。然而唇上浅浅的须痕,传递出相反的信息,他的人生阅历还很稚嫩。与精细的脸部刻画形成鲜明对照的是脖颈下稍稍束紧的围巾,率意而潇洒,体现出惠更斯称道的“活力与激情”。

这幅肖像最为大胆之处,在于画家审视自己后为观众所呈现的观者距离。这是一个照相机发明后才会经常运用的特写镜头,构图非常大胆直率,画家的头部、肩部占据了画面的绝大部分,这在17世纪的荷兰乃至整个欧洲绘画史上都是罕见的。观众站在这幅肖像的面前,几乎与20岁出头的利文斯脸贴脸,似乎可以感受到他的呼吸。

难怪见多识广的惠更斯称赞利文斯为“奇才”,是一位“充满活力、难以驯服的人物”,指出他“描绘人类面部”的伟大才能,认为他在这方面“创造了奇迹”。

可爱的逞能

展厅中另外两幅肖像与一幅群像作品的确有力地佐证了惠更斯的判断。

这幅肖像采用经典的对角线构图,老记账员身体倾斜向左,处在暗部的左肩及左臂与左下部堆积的书本平行,顿显画面的简洁有力。

从这幅作品展现的色调上看,利文斯似乎有意在炫技,这是所有年轻画家不可避免的可爱的逞能。画家采用了同一个色调描绘不同的质地,层次分明,界限过渡自然。老者的皮肤,呈现出因衰老而渐渐失去血色的苍白,与他身穿的白色薄丝面料的衣服形成有力的对比,显然衣服比人更精神。花白的胡须陷在阴影中的边缘地带,十分自然地构筑起右肩亮部与左侧暗部的分界线。老者的略微抬起的右手,因专注的思考而收拢成拳头,突显裸露的青筋。手部的黄色块恰好把观众的目光引到手前发黄的卷宗上,并随之与近景角落里厚厚的一叠书连成一片。

创作此幅作品时,利文斯虽只有20岁,但他已深谙人物画之道。作为一个年轻人,能够如此精准地把握一位老者的神态和心态,除了天赋之外,我们只能归因于他的专注以及对绘画的痴迷。利文斯8岁开始学画,即便后来阿姆斯特丹师从当时最负盛名的历史画家彼得·拉斯特曼,也只用了不到2年的时间就学满出师,此时他

才12岁,之后便回到家乡莱顿,在父亲的小木屋里摆好画架,开始了自己漫长而独立的绘画生涯。由此可见利文斯的天赋与勤奋,还有绘画上的超级早熟。从这幅画上可以看出,在这一时期,利文斯表现出对色调及细节的高超掌控能力,甚至超过了只比他大一岁的伦勃朗。

惠更斯的造访并非昙花一现,从1628到1629年,由于他的大力引荐,年轻的利文斯得以赴海牙为皇室人员绘制肖像。画上的贵族男孩应是当时荷兰执政者奥兰治亲王的亲属。利文斯对色调的痴迷在这幅作品得到了淋漓尽致展现。男孩通体似一块纯金,中间杂以红润的面色,浅蓝色的包巾和头饰上高耸的羽毛,处处折射出这个孩子正处于生命最佳的成长期。伴随身体的发育,他的内心涌动,不由自主地窥视外部的世界。男孩侧身向左,眼神偏向画外左上侧,有一点怀疑,有一点好奇,有一点憧憬,有一点畏惧。画家像一位心理学家,一下子抓住了这位贵族少年欲说还休的人生瞬间。

肖像精彩 群像亦佳

利文斯不只是单幅肖像画得好,群像也极为出色。《玩牌者》刻画了暗夜里的一场社会底层人的牌局。两个士兵无疑是这场牌局的主角,左侧对观众的士兵显然胜券在握,稳稳地翻出红心A,直逼得右边的对手眼神发愣,身体凝固在失落的一刹那。看客虽只有三人,却被画家尽力驱使向前,聚拢的姿态,构成对比明显的明暗分布,充分营造出牌局结果公布时那一瞬间的紧张气氛。从这件作品可以看出,利文斯虽然没有去过意大利,却通过观看荷兰当地人收藏在手原作,凭借间接的方式极好地继承了源自卡拉瓦乔的明暗对比法。

如此出色的绘画技法,如此全面的人物表现力,在美术史上利文斯为何依旧默默无闻呢?看来“莱顿收藏展”全部74件作品,我转回展厅入口时,望着放大的利文斯自画像,这个大大的疑问不断涌现在脑海中。

如果把莱顿城当做人生的车站,年轻的伦勃朗与利文斯,在此相切碰撞技艺,相互鼓舞斗志,从这里出发,迈向攀登绘画高峰的征程。然而,“伦勃朗号”列车发出的汽笛声在他去世后响彻美术史的云霄,而“利文斯号”却驶入远方,后世人难觅其踪影。如果比较两人的天赋,可以说相差无几,甚至年轻时期的利文斯显得更高一筹;如果比较两人对于绘画的热爱,实在也难分伯仲,然而两个人的人生境遇却如此大相径庭。难道真是幸运女神的选择导致两位画家在西方美术史上的地位如此相差悬殊吗?

早期难分伯仲 晚年高下立判

◎王建南

惠更斯回到海牙后不久，便请利文斯来给他画肖像。经他的大力推荐，开始有显要人物向利文斯订购作品。其中有一位主顾购买了他的一幅肖像，并转送给了英国大使。这位大使又将此画进献给了英王查理一世。消息传到利文斯的耳中，深受鼓舞，他开始梦想渡海到英国宫廷谋取皇家画师的职位。这可是那个时代一个传统的画家最好的归宿。

服务皇家贵族 VS 服务商人市民

应当时荷兰执政者奥兰治亲王邀请，利文斯不得不忙于完成为其家属绘制肖像的任务，暂时无暇顾及渡海之事。一耽搁就是三年，利文斯才得以到达伦敦。现在回顾这段史料，利文斯迟迟未去英国的原因，很可能因为他缺少重要人物的引荐。1632年，这个机会来了，利文斯有幸在海牙结识了英王查理一世的御用首席肖像画师安东尼·凡·戴克，后者对这个年轻人的才能颇为赏识。于是，利文斯如愿以偿，随凡·戴克到了伦敦。由于没有任何一件那个时期的画作被保留下来，现在无法获知利文斯是否成功地进入了宫廷。他有可能只是担当了凡·戴克的助手，否则，他不会在3年后便离开了英国。

也许鉴于回到荷兰，利文斯先去了比利时的安特卫普，加入了当地的圣卢克画家公会，成为一名自由画家，等待接受绘画市场的考验。这时的主顾来自四面八方，不再设定为王室贵族。作画的价格由双方协定。

此时的伦勃朗不但在阿姆斯特丹因《杜普医生的解剖课》站稳脚跟，而且画名日隆。在这座当时欧洲最繁华的商贸城市里，他即将迎来人生中最高的荣耀，也是在这里，他将坠入世俗世界无底的深渊，在当世人的眼里，他再也没能从其中走出。

比较利文斯与伦勃朗前半段的职业生涯，可以清楚地看出，两者虽同为天才，同样热爱绘画，同样勤奋，却选择了不同的绘画谋生途径。利文斯一直渴望回到旧式的绘画谋生方式上，把为皇室及贵族效力作为目标，而伦勃朗从一开始就十分清醒，自己的服务对象是所有人，特别是新兴的荷兰商人与市民阶层。这个客户群体定位上的差异，是导致利文斯迈向绘画职场后输掉伦勃朗一着的重要原因。

不过，利文斯毕竟技法高超，不久便在安特卫普获得了大笔订单，其中一大部分来自当地耶稣教会下辖的教堂。他此时的绘画风格嫁接了乌德勒支画派的布鲁沃，这是一种巴洛克风格的北欧化改版。利文斯终于在比利时攒够了人气，重拾自信，于1644年回归阿姆斯特丹。此时的伦勃朗已不再是这座城市的“王者”，开始走下坡路。一般的美术史都会把这一败落的局面归因于伦勃朗1642年创作的《夜巡》，其实，这只是一种表面的现象，真实的原因是伦勃朗利用十年的时间，已经在画面上探索出一条属于自己的全新道路。因此，两人更为深刻的差距体现在绘画风格的选择与追求上。

没有人肯花钱认可并购买伦勃朗超越时代的画作。正好利文斯来了，他在进一步钻研了鲁本斯的技法之后，将主攻方向确定为阿姆斯特丹的精英阶层，并尝试以凡·戴克式肖像画风格打动这里的这批主顾。这种画法填补了伦勃朗被公众抛弃后的绘画市场。其实，连伦勃朗的学生弗林克都摒弃了老师的肖像画路子，转投凡·戴克的风格。

利文斯随后的订单多数来自阿姆斯特丹上流社会，海牙也不断有订单飞至，同时也常接到政府的订单。至1674年去世，利文斯风光了三十年时间。但不知何种原因，他的晚年却跟伦勃朗一样，临去世时，落得资不抵债，最终连儿女们都主动放弃了财产继承权，因为除了一大笔债，根本得不到任何财产。

精准 VS 情怀

斯人已逝，光阴流转，美术史开始以冷静的眼光重新打量两位画家的作品。于是，伦勃朗的作品穿透时间的迷雾，越来越展现出夺目的光芒。而利文斯依然沉寂在美术史的大幕后面，他真的还有出头之日吗？

让我们来比较一下两幅作品。

根据圣经记载，罗马帝国的犹太行省执政官彼拉多，负责审讯耶稣，他在整个过程中，发现耶稣并没有罪，但迫于宗教压力而判处他到十字架上受死。随着耶稣被押赴刑场，彼拉多内心不断受到良心的谴责，为撇清自己的责任，他要侍从给自己

洗手，表明自己与判罚无关。水，从闪亮的铜壶中落下，彼拉多面带悔意，全然感觉不到水在流动，他失神地凝神前方，内心无比纠结。注意右上角，两名手持利刃的士兵，架着耶稣走出大门。由于这一细节，画面不但拥有了极致的纵深感，而且揭示出彼拉多心事重重的根源。

同样取材于《圣经》故事，伦勃朗描绘了老者托比特，他已双目失明，正在双手合十，期待漂泊在外的儿子赶快归来。老妇人抱着的羊羔，暗喻老者的儿子，还没有醒悟，从而迷途知返。老妇惊恐的眼神与老者双目失明的神态，构成了强烈的戏剧性场面。这是伦勃朗20岁时的作品。此时，他与利文斯几乎朝夕相处，切磋技艺。两人的水平很难分辨高下。

刻画失明的老者，在技巧层面，可以说，已达到了无以复加的精准；而在情感的层面，也已登峰造极。如果伦勃朗想在画艺上再推进一大步，必须求诸于一种全新的技巧表现方式，必须朝着展现人物情怀的方向狠狠地挖掘下去。

如今收藏于俄罗斯圣彼得堡冬宫博物馆的《浪子回头》，也许是伦勃朗生命中最后一幅宗教题材的大尺幅作品。上面所绘的一切震撼了观看者的内心。

伦勃朗摒弃了一切的修饰，以粗犷的笔触，主要运用红、黄两色，固执而专注地刻画出浪子归家向老父亲祈求宽恕的那一瞬间。在伦勃朗特有的强光与暗影的交织之中，一种超越个人情感的宽容弥漫于每一寸画布上。

这就是情怀，从个人的痛苦之中解脱出来的悲天悯人的情怀。一个画家画到这种程度，一定全然忘却了绘画的现实功用，忘却了个人渺小的苦难，把全身的力量，一生的坎坷，无数的泪水，在同一时刻，一起倾泻到画布之上。

“尊古”VS“超越”

可惜没能找到利文斯晚年的作品，姑且用他31岁时所作的自画像与伦勃朗作于34岁的作品对比一下。

在风景如画的背景前，利文斯倚靠在庄严的大

理石柱旁，穿着华贵衣袍，扭脸望着观众。他的侧身坐姿使我们回到了意大利威尼斯画派领袖提香的作品之中。此番心境似乎有意追索古代大师的踪影，他所追求的高贵就是意大利巴洛克风格的堂皇。这时的利文斯正在安特卫普，订单纷至沓来，绘画事业蒸蒸日上。

这幅肖像也套用了提香的作品构图，但与利文斯不同的是，伦勃朗成功地把握住了提香赋予人物的气度与内心世界的内敛与平静，真正做到了神形兼备。这个画像上的伦勃朗，不仅是一位名扬天下的画家，而且具有高贵的身份，这种高贵不在于豪华的外表，而在于内心的强大与冷静。这一年，伦勃朗34岁，他的事业如日中天。就在人生与事业最为一帆风顺之时，他通过自画像在严肃地审视自己，似乎是在探问：

“我是谁？”

从17世纪的昨天到21世纪的今天，利文斯无疑被大多数普通人所遗忘，美术史的确应该给予他一个较为公正的地位，毕竟他的画技法高超，情感表现力丰富。但是，如果有人问，在将来，美术史有没有可能把他与伦勃朗相提并论？那我认为，这一天永远不会到来。两个人的画，处于两种完全不同的境界，如果早期的水平难分高下的话，到了中期和晚期，不用细细端详与品味便高下立现。

在伦勃朗眼里，人无高低贵贱之分，他穷其一生，孤独前行，意图揭示人类心灵深处的那一束光辉。而利文斯，穷其一生，他步自己所崇拜的鲁本斯和凡·戴克的后尘，尽心竭力在画布上展现一个个精致的人物，繁杂的场景，丰富的情感，优美的韵律，利文斯具有巨大的视觉再现能力，而这种再现，只是对生活饱含情感的睿智观照，而非痛彻心扉的洞察力与深刻的自我反省。

一切都在画布上表露无遗。

人生，是一场漫长的赛跑，起始的步伐一致，甚至超前，并不代表最终能够抵达最为深远的终点。注定可以看到人生最美风景的人，一定是那个继承传统的精华，听从内心的召唤，孤独而坚定的前行者。

“In Rembrandt’s Glow, Lievens’ Star Dimmed”

The small city of Leiden was once home to two stars “vying to shine the brightest”

This is the story of two young men born in Leiden and possessed with an innate passion for painting. They left their hometown in succession to study in Amsterdam and serve as apprentices under the same teacher, who passed on to them the authentic techniques of Italian oil painting. Both men subsequently returned home to hone their painting skills together, in anticipation of their “big moment” to come. These months of waiting would later prove to be the very best time of their lives. Several years later, the two men went on their separate ways, each experiencing the trials and tribulations of life while completing their own individual artistic journey. These two artists are none other than Rembrandt van Rijn and Jan Lievens. The National Museum of China is now exhibiting their works.

Sometime in October 1628, an important visitor knocked on the door of their workshop near the old northern branch of the Rhine – the place which the two 20-something young men built and dubbed the “hometown painting station.” That individual was Constantijn Huygens, an influential diplomat in Europe at the time, who served as secretary to the Prince of Orange. Apart from his many talents in the realm of politics, Huygens also happened to be a man of great vision in the fields of art and literature. Shortly after looking briefly over the two men’s work, he was amazed to have discovered not one but two geniuses. He predicted with much confidence that they would both successfully propel the development of Dutch painting and rise to the forefront of European art.

However, when compared with Rembrandt, Lievens’ place in art history ultimately has not quite borne out Huygens’ prediction. Since Lievens’ death over three hundred years ago, he has been all but forgotten amid the vast currents of art history. His name remains unfamiliar not just to ordinary art enthusiasts, but indeed to many professionals in the art world as well. That being said, there might have been some magic to Huygens’ prediction after all. As people constantly keep rediscovering the enormous value of Lievens’ work, there is hope that a new generation will be able to reevaluate this outstanding painter from the 17th century Dutch Golden Age. To that very end, the Milwaukee Art Museum held a “Jan Lievens Exhibit” in April 2009, featuring a total of 110 works. It was said that this show represented all of the surviving works of the “forgotten” Dutch master, including 50 oil paintings, 28 sketches, and 34 woodcuts. Once the exhibition ended, however, everything seemed to settle down again.

One could speculate that Dr. Thomas S. Kaplan, who organized the current exhibition at the National Museum of China, did so in protest of the unfairness that characterizes Lievens’ fate. If not, then why would the exhibition’s poster feature a portrait by Lievens instead of one by Rembrandt?

Though only 4 of Lievens’ oil paintings are exhibited on this occasion, they are all masterpieces from his early period. *Self-Portrait*, in particular, arguably represents the most important of his surviving works.

One can feel a little emotional when staring at the young man in this portrait, barely 22 years old. It was produced only one year after Lievens' initial encounter with Huygens, a man familiar with the ways of the world and acquainted with countless people. Therefore this portrait probably still captures how the artist looked when Huygens first met him.

The man in the picture appears full of youth and vitality, with penetrating eyes and flowing long hair that underscore the artist's confident bearing. Lievens uses large brush strokes to depict a beautiful head of hair, and though the hair is fine and soft, it reflects an unrestrainedly romantic personality along with a high-spirited and vigorous passion. A pair of wide-open eyes gaze intently off to the right of the picture, as if the artist were portraying himself looking into a mirror. He seems to be scrutinizing the features of his own face. The lips are slightly closed, showing a kind of fortitude and resolution. Yet he also sports the faintest of moustaches, as a way to remind the viewer of his tender age and limited life experience. Forming a sharp contrast to the finely depicted face is the scarf, loosely wrapped under his neck, carefree and unaffected – epitomizing what Huygens referred to as a “liveliness of emotions.”

After the self-examination, the most daring aspect of this portrait remains the proximity of observation that the artist allows the viewers. This represents a type of close-up that only came into frequent use after the invention of cameras – a composition that is boldly direct, with the artist's head and shoulders filling the lion's share of the picture. This approach constituted a rarity in 17th century Holland, and indeed throughout Europe. When visitors stand before this painting, they find themselves pretty much face-to-face with the 20-year-old Lievens. One could almost feel his breath.

No wonder the very knowledgeable Huygens praised Lievens as a “prodigy” and “someone full of vitality and hard to tame,” noting his great talent at “depicting the human countenance,” and recognizing his ability to “create miracles” in this respect.

An endearing display of talent

Two additional individual portraits and one group portrait displayed in the exhibition hall forcefully confirm Huygens' judgement.

One of them follows classical diagonal lines. The old bookkeeper represented here is leaning to the left, his shadowed left shoulder and arm running parallel with the stack of books, which brings out the simple power of the picture.

Judging from the colors used in this piece, Lievens seems to be deliberately engaging in a display of talent – that endearing inclination to show off that no young artist seems to ever be able to resist. He employs the same hues to depict different textures, with distinct gradations and exaggerated boundaries. The old man's skin shows great paleness, especially compared to the thin white silk of his clothes, as a result of the gradual depletion of natural color that comes with age. It is evident that the clothes have more life in them than the man. His gray beard is caught by the shadowed area of the edge. The boundary between the brightly lit right shoulder and the dark area on the left is

constructed very naturally. The old man's slightly uplifted right hand, drawn into a fist due to his concentrated thinking, highlights the exposed veins. The yellowish part of the hand perfectly guides the viewer's eyes to the yellowing file in front of the hand, which then connects to form a whole with the thick pile of books in the foreground corner.

When Lievens produced this work, he was only 20 years old but already well-versed in the ways of figure painting. Such an ability, as a young man, to master so precisely an old man's demeanor and mindset, if not deemed a natural gift, can only be attributed to his exceptional concentration and obsession with painting. Lievens began studying drawing at the age of 8. Though he later went to Amsterdam to serve as an apprentice under the most renowned history painter of his day, Pieter Lastman, it only took him 2 years to fulfill his training. He was then barely 12 years old. After that, he returned home to Leiden, set up his easels in his father's shed, and began his long and independent painting career. Clearly, Lievens was both gifted and diligent, and indeed extremely precocious when it came to painting. One can observe from this particular work that he displayed in this period a superb mastery of color and detail, even surpassing Rembrandt who was one year his senior.

Huygens' visit was no mere "flash in the pan": from 1628 to 1629, thanks to his strong recommendation, the young Lievens traveled to The Hague to paint portraits for the royal court. The boy from a noble family that he painted must have been a member of the family of the Prince of Orange, the Dutch head of state at the time. Lievens' obsession with color is given vivid expression in this work. The boy's whole body resembles a piece of pure gold. In the middle, the complexion of his face bears a rosy tinge, as a feather towers atop his pale blue turban and headdress. Every detail reflects a boy in the prime growth period of his life. Together with his physical development, the subject's inner being also emerges, peering out at the outside world "in spite of himself". The boy is turned to show his left side. His eyes, raised toward the left of the painting, seem to display some sense of doubt – evoking curiosity, hope, and fear all at the same time. The painter is like a psychologist, capturing at once an inexpressible instant of this noble youth's life.

Brilliant individual portraits and a fine group portrait

Lievens did not only paint individual portraits well, but he also excelled at group portraits. *Card Players* depicts a card game in the dead of night among individuals drawn from the less exalted classes. Two soldiers are undoubtedly the main actors in this game of chance. The soldier on the left, with his side turned to the viewer, is clearly the winner as he firmly pulls out the ace of hearts. His defeated opponent stands to the right with a dazed expression, his body having stiffened in the moment of loss. Although there are only three onlookers, the painter has positioned them as far forward as possible. They gather together in a huddle, forming a distribution of clearly contrasted light and dark, and creating a tense atmosphere as the game concludes. Although Lievens never traveled to Italy, one can appreciate from this piece that simply by looking at original works in the hands of local Dutch collectors as well as relying on indirect methods, he managed to successfully employ the *chiaroscuro* method that originated with Caravaggio.

In light of such outstanding painting technique, and such exceptional ability to represent people's expression, why then would Lievens remain an obscure figure in the history of art? After viewing all 74 works from The Leiden Collection featured in this exhibition, and as I returned to the entrance and found the enlarged Lievens self-portrait, this important question kept pressing on my mind.

As one of the "train stations" of Rembrandt and Lievens' lives, the town of Leiden is where the two young men learned skills from each other, encouraged one another's fighting spirit, before departing and setting out on their respective journey towards the highest pinnacles of painting. That being said, the whistle of the "Rembrandt train" resounded far louder throughout the history of art and long after his death, and while the "Lievens train" might have taken its riders far, later generations would be hard pressed to find any trace of it. When comparing the two men's talents, one could argue that they were practically equal – perhaps that Lievens even had the upper hand in their younger days. The same would hold with regards to their enthusiasm for art, for which there is scarcely any comparison. Yet the two men met with such different outcomes in life. Could Lady Fortune really be the sole responsible for the significant disparity in the two painters' positions in the history of Western art?

A divergence in fate: virtually equal in the early days, their lives vastly differed later on

Shortly after Huygens returned to The Hague, he asked Lievens to come paint portraits. Thanks to Huygens' strong recommendation, prominent people began commissioning works from the young painter. One such customer purchased one of his works and sent it on to England's ambassador. This individual then gave the painting to the English monarch, Charles I. When the news reached Lievens, he was greatly encouraged and began to dream of crossing the ocean to seek a position as court painter. This was in fact the most prominent position an artist could traditionally hope to attain in that age.

Serving the aristocracy vs. serving the merchant burghers

Having accepted the invitation of the Dutch head of state, the Prince of Orange, Lievens could not but apply himself to discharging his duties of painting portraits for the royal family and had to put on hold the idea of going abroad. Some three years later, Lievens was finally able to travel to London. Looking back, it is very likely that Lievens' delay in getting to England was due to his lacking of a significant personal recommendation. The opportunity arose in 1632 when Lievens made the acquaintance of Charles I's leading court painter, Anthony van Dyck, who very much appreciated the young man's talents. Thereupon, Lievens got his wish and followed Van Dyck to London. Given that none of his works from this particular period have survived, there is no way of knowing whether or not Lievens succeeded in entering the court. In light of his departure from England three years later, it is possible that he may have only served as Van Dyck's assistant.

Perhaps embarrassed to return to Holland, Lievens first moved to Antwerp in Belgium. He joined a painters society called the Guild of Saint Luke, becoming a freelance painter

at the mercy of the market. Clients came from a variety of origins and were not limited to the aristocracy. Prices for paintings were negotiated between the two parties involved.

Meanwhile, Rembrandt had landed comfortably in Amsterdam, in no small part thanks to *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*. His reputation as an artist was growing steadily. In Europe's most prosperous commercial city, Rembrandt would receive the greatest glory of his life. It is also there, incidentally, that he would fall into a bottomless abyss of debt from which there could be no escape in the eyes of the world.

When comparing the first halves of Rembrandt's and Lievens' careers, one can clearly observe that although they were both geniuses, passionate about painting and equally diligent, they each chose different ways to earn a living as painters. Lievens always longed to return to the "old way," serving the royal court and the aristocracy. Conversely, Rembrandt was absolutely clear from the start that the object of his work would be everyone, especially Holland's rising class of merchants and burghers. This difference in clientele constitutes an important reason why Lievens ultimately fell behind Rembrandt after setting forth on their careers as painters.

However, given how superbly skilled Lievens was, it did not take long for him to start getting significant commissions in Antwerp – a large portion of which came from churches under the local Jesuits. His painting style in this period borrowed from that of the Utrecht School artist Adriaen Brouwer; that is, a Baroque approach adapted from the northern European tradition. Lievens finally gained enough popularity in Belgium to recover his confidence, and in 1644 he returned to Amsterdam. By then, Rembrandt was no longer the center of attention in town and his popularity was beginning to decline. Many stories tend to attribute this decay to his painting *The Night Watch*, when in reality the impact of this incident was quite limited. The main reason had more to do with Rembrandt spending a decade on the work, while exploring a whole new artistic path that ultimately distanced him from the norm. As a result, even more profound differences started to appear between the two artists in terms of painting styles and pursuits.

No one was willing to spend money to affirm and purchase works by Rembrandt anymore, ahead of their time as they were. That is when Lievens came in. Following a meticulous study of Rubens' methods, he determined that the main direction of the market would lean towards the Amsterdam upper class and attempted to use Van Dyck's style of portraiture to attract this group of customers. This manner of painting made up a significant part of the market after Rembrandt had been tossed aside by the general public. In fact, even Rembrandt's own pupil, Govert Flinck, abandoned his teacher's path in portrait painting in favor of Van Dyck's.

Most of Lievens' subsequent commissions came from the upper tier of Amsterdam society, with a constant flow of orders coming from The Hague. He also frequently received government commissions. Lievens continued to be well-regarded for the ensuing 30 years up until his death in 1674. For some unknown reason, his later years very much resembled Rembrandt's. He became bankrupt near the time of his passing. His children ultimately relinquished their rights to inherit his property largely because, aside

from massive debts, there was essentially no property to speak of.

Accuracy vs. emotions

As people passed and time marched on, art history began to take a calm and collected second look at these two painters. Thereupon, Rembrandt's work penetrated through the fog of time and increasingly appeared in an eye-catching light. Meanwhile, Lievens quietly remained behind the curtain of art history. Could the day of his reemergence still be to come? Let us compare two particular pieces:

According to the Bible, the Roman prefect of Judea, Pontius Pilate, is responsible for trying Jesus. During the process, he discovers that Jesus actually was not guilty, yet he is forced by religious pressures to sentence him to die on the cross. After Jesus has been escorted to the execution ground, Pilate's conscience constantly weighs on his heart. In order to wash away his guilt, he asks his attendant to wash his hands for him, in order to show that the sentencing has nothing to do with him. As the water flows from a shiny copper pot, Pilate's face shows remorse and he becomes unconscious of the water's flow – absentmindedly riveting his attention forward, his heart in a tangle. Notice that in the upper-right corner are two spear-wielding soldiers supporting Jesus through the gate. Because of this one detail, the picture not only carries very strong depth of feeling, but it also reveals the source of Pilate's mental preoccupation.

Drawing on a Bible story in a similar fashion is Rembrandt's depiction of the old man Tobit. He has become blind in both eyes, and his hands are clasped in prayer as he awaits the imminent return of his far-wandering son. His aged wife cradles in her arms a lamb – a metaphor for their son – who has yet to awaken, whereupon he would see the error of his ways and mend them. The old woman's frightened expression and the blind demeanor of the old man form an intensely dramatic scene. Rembrandt produced this work at the age of 20. At that time, he and Lievens were together almost from sunup to sundown, comparing skills. It would have been hard to tell which one of them had the upper hand.

In the painting of the old man, in terms of skill level, one could claim that the work had achieved near-perfect accuracy, while also reaching a peak from an emotional standpoint. Indeed if Rembrandt wished to make another leap forward in his painting, it had to come from an entirely new means of technical expression – that is, in delving mercilessly into showing people's feelings.

The Return of the Prodigal Son, now part of the Hermitage Museum's collection in Saint Petersburg, possibly represents Rembrandt's last large-scale work with a religious subject matter. Everything it reflects touches the viewer's heart.

In this piece, Rembrandt has abandoned all embellishment. Using rough brushstrokes and employing mainly two colors, red and yellow, he focuses intently on depicting the moment when the prodigal son has returned home and asks for his father's forgiveness. Interwoven between the artist's *chiaroscuro* lights and shadows, a mercy beyond all personal emotion permeates every inch of the canvas.

This is emotion! To be able to draw out feelings of compassion from the sufferings of individuals, in order to achieve this level of mastery, artists ought to forget all about the practicalities of painting, ignore personal adversity, then gather all of their strength, all of their ups and downs in life, their countless tears, and pour it all together onto the canvas.

Veneration of the masters vs. transcendence

It is a real pity that Lievens' later works did not seem to survive. Nonetheless, one can tentatively compare the self-portrait that he produced at age of 31 with a work by Rembrandt at 34.

Against a picturesque landscape background, Lievens, dressed in a luxurious robe and leaning against a solemn marble column, turns at the waist as he looks toward the viewer. His sideways sitting posture recalls one of the works by Titian, the leader of the Venetian School. The mood seems to intentionally retrace the lines of the old master. The grandeur that he seeks corresponds to the magnificence of the Italian Baroque style. Lievens then lived in Antwerp, at a time when commissions were pouring in and his painting career was thriving.

The other portrait also borrows its composition from the works of Titian. Unlike Lievens, however, Rembrandt has mastered the way in which *da Cadore* endowed his subjects with bearing and the self-reflection and calm of an inner world, truly capturing both physical and spiritual sides. The Rembrandt pictured here is already a renowned painter, but he also possesses a noble identity. This sense of nobility does not lie in an imposing exterior, but rather in inner strength and self-possession. The master was 34 years old that year. At the height of both his personal life and career, Rembrandt uses the self-portrait to take a serious look at himself, seeming to ask: "Who am I?"

From the 17th century to today, Lievens has undoubtedly been forgotten by most people. Art history nonetheless ought to grant him a more just place. After all, he displayed superb painting skills and a richness of emotional expression. That being said, if someone were to ask if art history would put him on par with Rembrandt in the future, I happen to believe that no such day would ever come. Their works belong to two completely different realms. And even if their levels were almost indistinguishable in their early periods, by their middle and later periods, no careful scrutiny would be necessary to realize who would stand tallest.

In Rembrandt's eyes, there was no such thing as a distinction between people. He lived a lonely and impoverished life, intending to reveal the brilliance that lies deep in the human spirit. Lievens, on the other hand, while leading a poor life as well, followed in the footsteps of Rubens and Van Dyck, whom he worshipped, doing his utmost to display each and every refined person on the canvas, in complex settings, and with rich emotions and beautiful rhythms. Lievens possessed enormous powers of visual reproduction, but only in relation to the wise contemplation of a life full of emotion, as opposed to heart-breaking insight and profound self-reflection.

Leaving everything on the canvas, holding nothing back

Life is a long race best run with a steady pace throughout. Taking the lead does not insure that the farthest points can be reached. People destined to witness the most beautiful scenes in life are without a doubt those that carry on the essence of traditions, listen to the calling of their heart, and forge a singular path ahead.