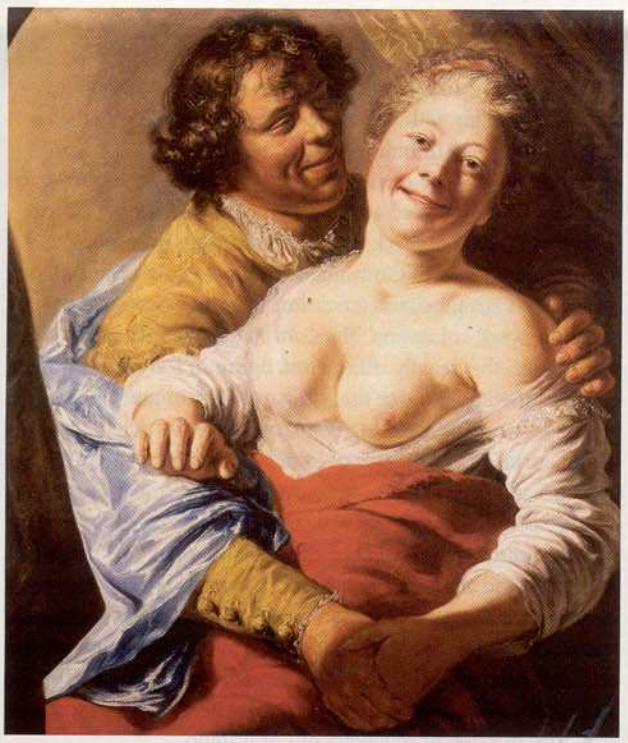
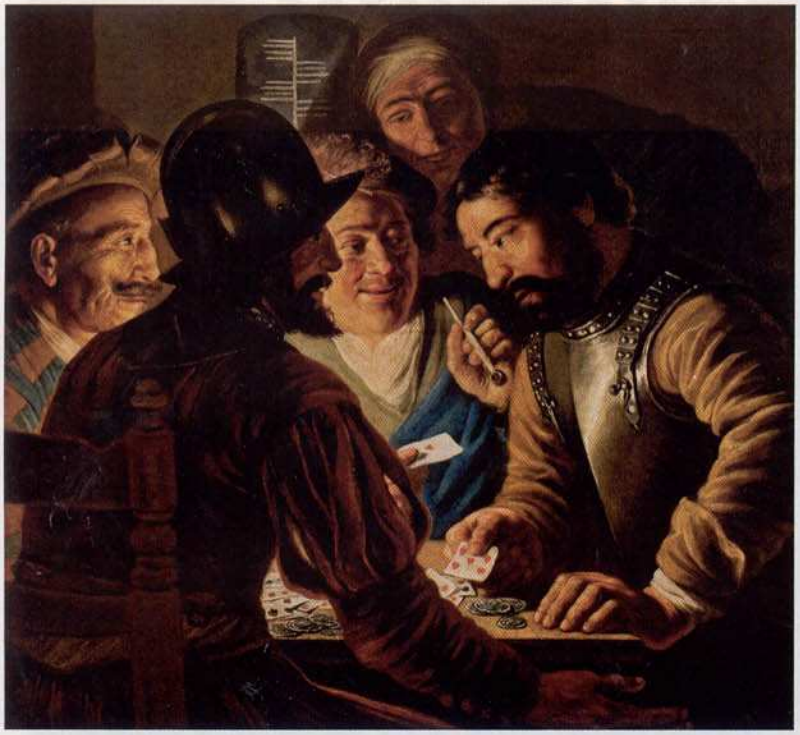
Out of Rembrandt's Shadow: The Paintings of Jan Lievens

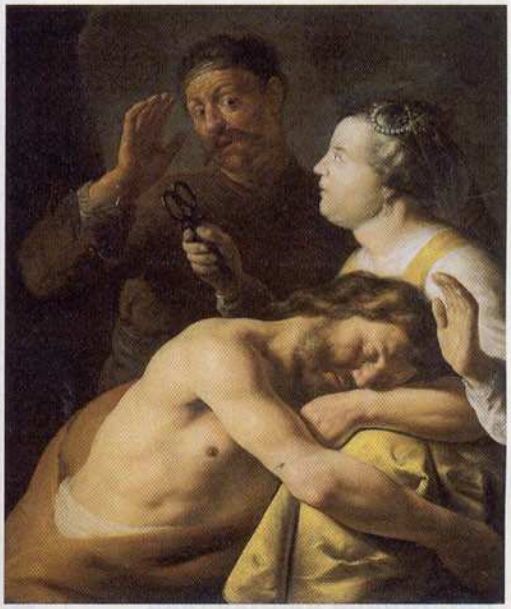
A new exhibition at the National Gallery of Art finally sheds light on a genius artist lost in the shadow of his legendary contemporary. | **by John A. Parks**



History is not always kind to artists. The fate of a posthumous reputation is often determined as much by chance and the taste of succeeding generations as it is by the simple quality of the work in question. Important artwork can be lost or destroyed, lodged in inaccessible collections, or misattributed. Or the work can be simply misunderstood by later historians who apply the values of their own day rather than those of the context in which the art was created. The work of the Dutch painter Jan Lievens (1607–1674) has suffered all these indignities—but perhaps the artist's greatest misfortune was to be born a contemporary of Rembrandt (1606–1669).

The two men grew up not far from each other in the small city of Leiden. They both studied for a while under the Amsterdam history painter, Pieter Lastmen, and they both launched their careers in the 1620s. They were clearly close acquaintances and each used the other as a model from time to time. Both painters used the same paints and sometimes ordered the same wooden panels from the same supplier to paint on. Some historians have suggested that they even shared a studio. Of the two, it was Lievens who blossomed first, hailed as a child prodigy and experimenting inventively with printmaking and the new influences of Caravaggio and Rubens. But Rembrandt quickly caught up, and by the late 1620s the work of the two artists was so close in appearance that





ABOVE LEFT

The Card Players

ca. 1623–1624, oil, 38⅞ x 41⅝. Private collection.

ABOVE RIGHT

Samson and Delilah

ca. 1628, oil, 50⅛ x 43⅜. Collection Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

RIGHT

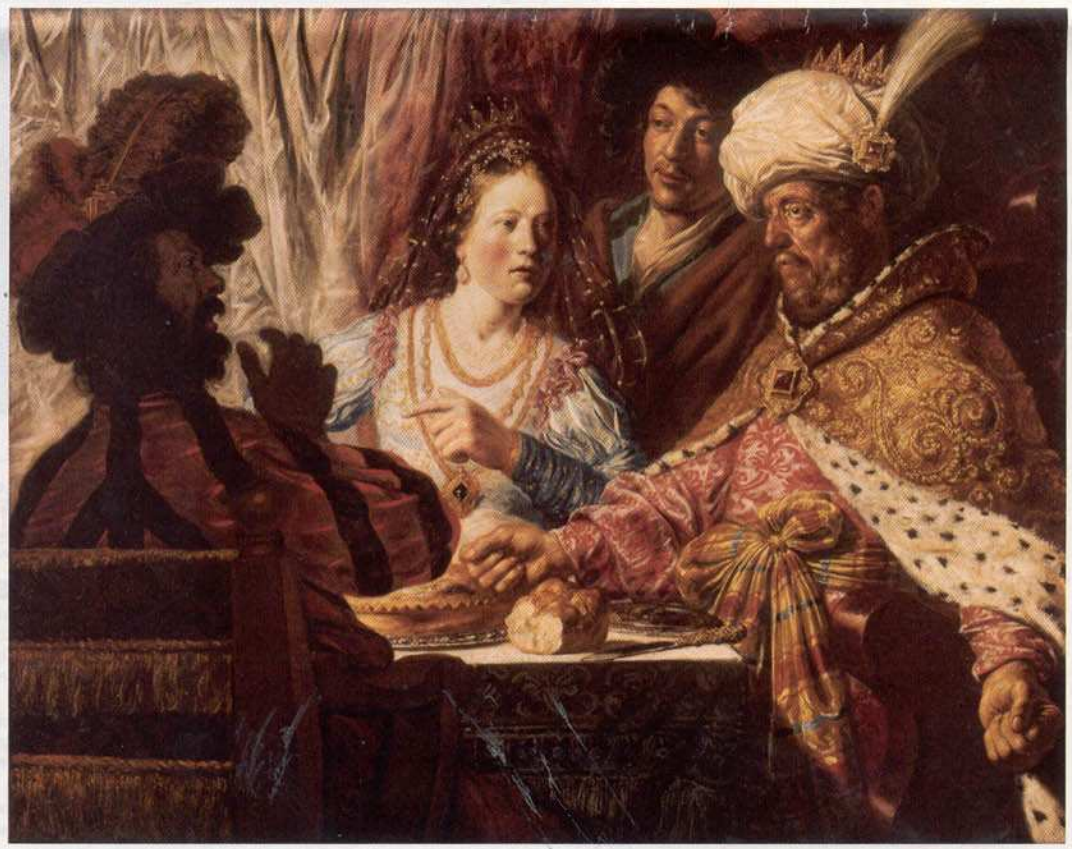
The Feast of Esther

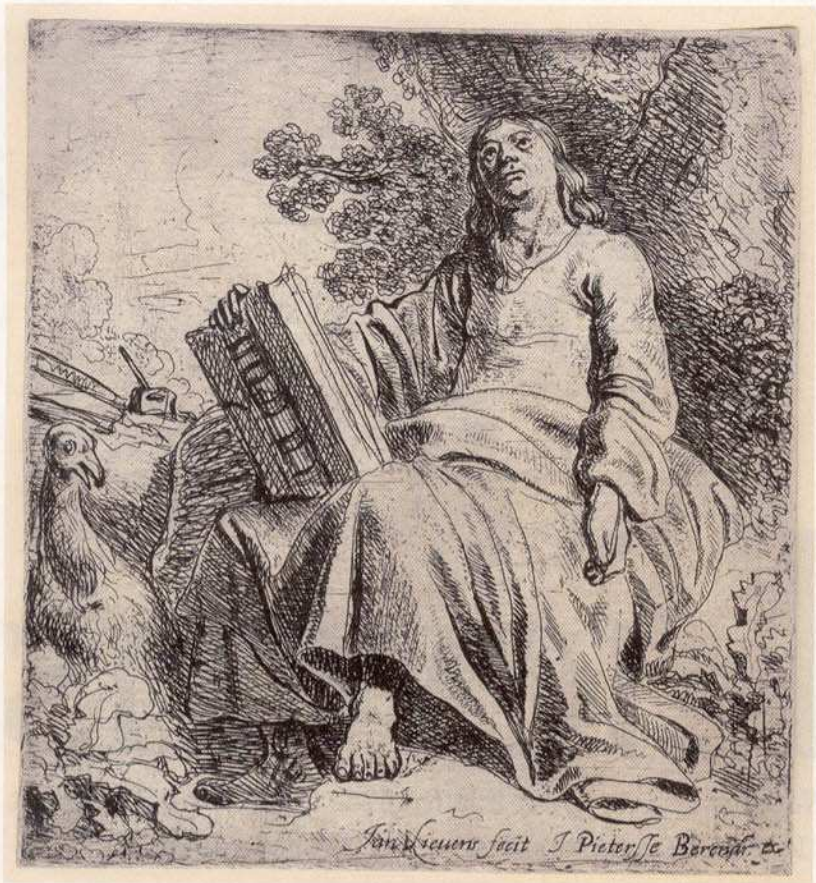
ca. 1625, oil, 53 x 65. Collection North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, North Carolina.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Youth Embracing a Young Woman

ca. 1627–1628, oil, 38⅜ x 33⅛. Private collection.





LEFT

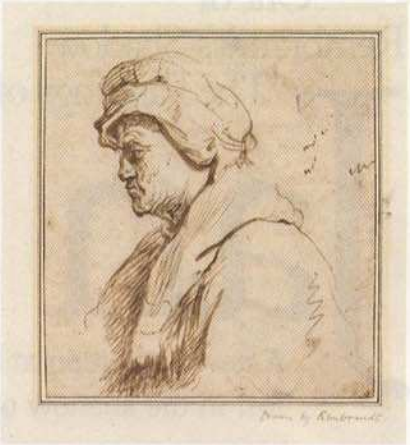
St. John the Evangelist on Patmos (second state of four)

ca. 1625–1626, etching, 6⅛ x 5⅜. Collection Museum Het Rembrandthuis, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

BELOW

Old Woman in Half-Length Profile Facing Left

ca. 1628–1630, pen and brown ink with touches of gray wash over traces of black chalk on paper, 5¹⅞ x 5⅜. Maida and George Abrams Collection, Boston, Massachusetts. On loan to The Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University, Boston, Massachusetts.

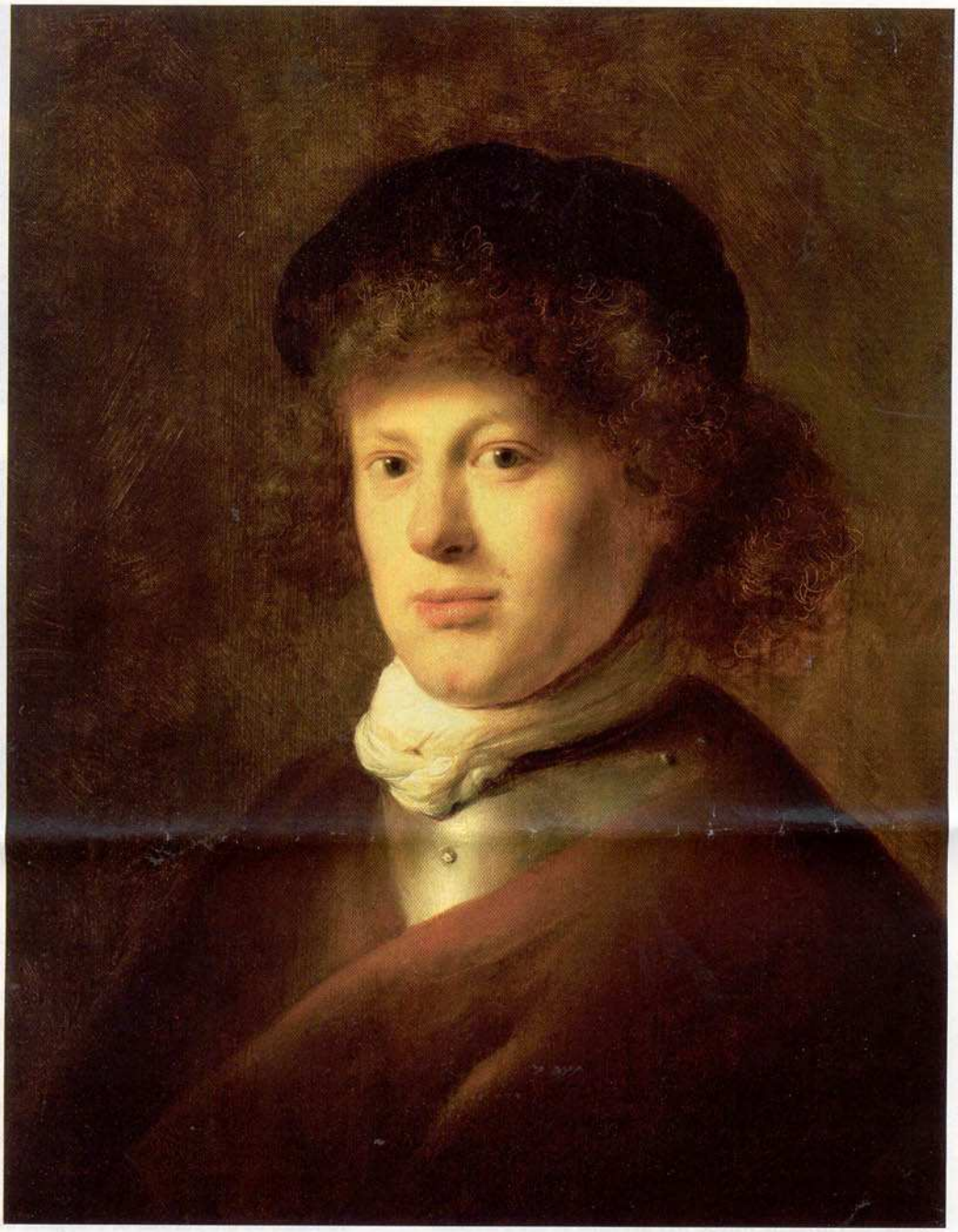


connoisseurs have often been hard pressed to distinguish the work of one from the other. And yet, over the centuries, it is Rembrandt's name that has gone down in history as the great artist of the Golden Age of Dutch painting while that of Lievens remains virtually forgotten. A new exhibition at the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, DC—on view until January 11, 2009—seeks to redress this state of affairs by presenting a large-scale overview of the work of Lievens. It provides a unique opportunity to consider the artist's output throughout the length of his career and makes a case for broader recognition of his achievements.

Jan Lievens was born the son of an embroiderer and, after showing an interest in painting and drawing, was apprenticed at the age of 8 to the painter Joris van Schooten and was sent to Amsterdam to study with Pieter Lastman. He returned two years later to set up a studio in his family home and launch himself into business. In an early biography on the artist, Jan Jansz Orlers writes that Lievens' "consummate skill astounded numerous connoisseurs of art who found it hard to believe that a mere stripling of 12 or scarcely older could produce such work—usually his own compositions and ideas to boot."

The youthful prodigy began to turn out paintings in a surprisingly wide array of genres including religious scenes, history paintings, still lifes, and portraits. Inventive as Lievens was, however, he was certainly not operating in an artistic vacuum. Not only had he experienced the teaching of Lastman, who had himself studied in Italy, but he was also certainly familiar with the some of the work of Rubens, who was then at the zenith of his career in Antwerp, Belgium. Lievens may also have pursued further training in Utrecht, in the Netherlands, where a group of painters including Gerrit von Honthorst and Dirck van Barburen were promoting a style based on that of Caravaggio, with bold chiaroscuro, high drama, and strong characterization. A good example of the resulting work is Lievens' *The Card Players*, painted around 1625. Here, the heavily silhouetted figure in the foreground conceals the light source that brilliantly illuminates the faces of the players. The painting displays a taste for rich color, a varied surface, and the use of local "characters" that we find in the work of Rembrandt at the same time. A similar approach can be seen in *The Feast of Esther*, where Lievens contrives to present a sumptuous and dazzling scene, replete with exotic costumes and achieved with fluid and varied brushwork. He has mastered facial expression and gesture and has cropped the composition tightly to obtain maximum involvement of the viewer. In these paintings Lievens combined a new freedom and directness of paint handling with the dramatic tonal structure of Utrecht followers of Caravaggio.

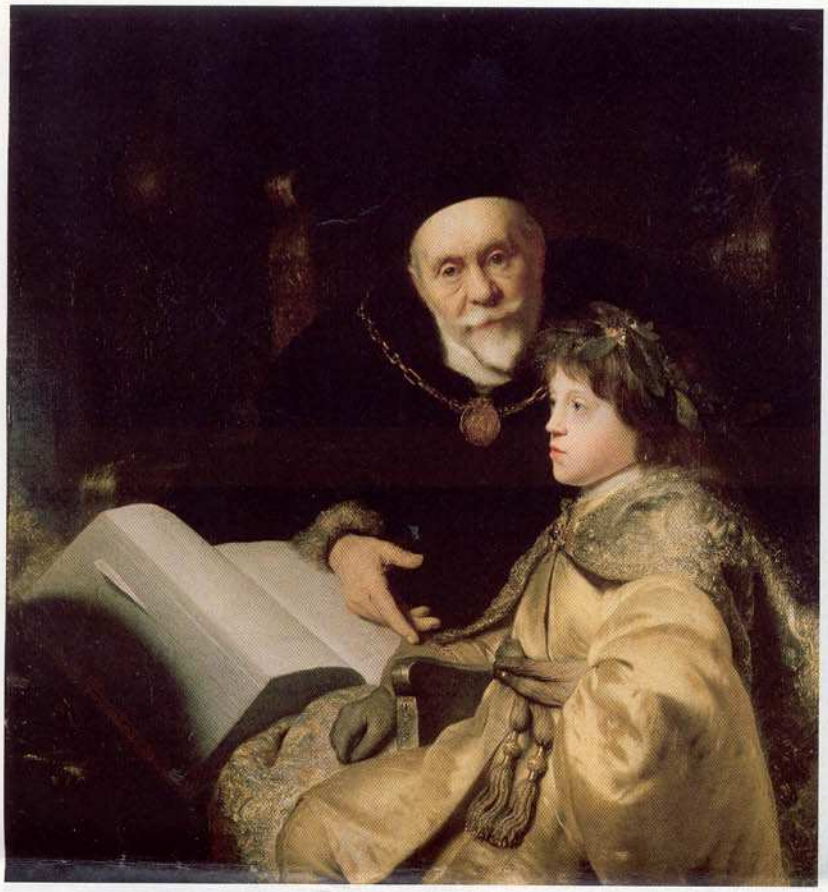
Lievens' fast and impetuous brushing was to remain a hallmark of his production throughout his career, although he later learned to restrain it to achieve a smoother and more

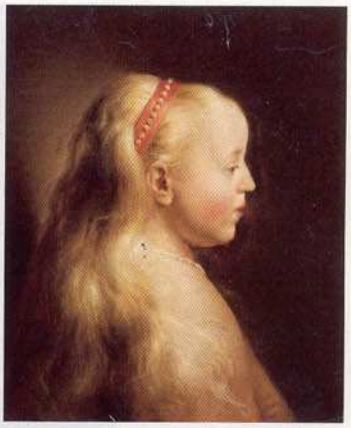


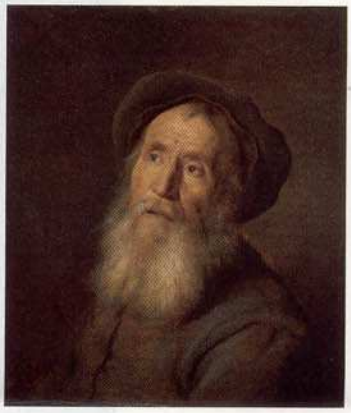
Portrait of Rembrandt
ca. 1629, oil on panel, 22⅛ x 17⅝. Collection Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands. On loan from a private collection.

courtly look. Rembrandt's similarly direct and assertive paint handling during this period certainly gained from his association with Lievens, although difficulties in dating many of the paintings of both artists make it impossible to establish who was leading the way. Undoubtedly both painters went through an exciting period of discovery and experimentation. In printmaking they revolutionized the art of etching by bringing a new freedom and fluidity of line to a medium that had previously been treated more like engraving. In Lievens' *St. John the Evangelist on Patmos* the energetic hatching makes the piece feel something like a sketchbook work rather than a formal image. Lievens and Rembrandt also broke new ground in the production of *tronies*—literally 'faces'—a genre in which a single figure or head of an interesting character or peasant type was boldly presented. Lievens' drawing *Old Woman in Half-Length Profile, Facing Left* is a good example of a study for such a piece.

The young Lievens quickly garnered attention, and one of his early paintings was purchased by the Prince of Orange for presentation to the English ambassador, who in turn gave it to Charles I. The elevation of Lievens' career came about through the intervention of one of the most







fascinating men of the period, Constantijn Huygens. Huygens served as the secretary of the Prince of Orange while pursuing a wide interest in the sciences and arts. He was in the habit of visiting artists' studios and commissioning works for the court, but his interest in art was passionate and very personal. He arrived in Leiden in 1628, visiting both Rembrandt and Lievens, and he later wrote an intriguing comparison of their work. Lievens clearly saw the meeting as a career opportunity and jumped at the chance to ingratiate himself with the royal court by offering to paint a portrait of Huygens whose wry account of the business leaves no doubt about the young artist's ambition:

> "[Lievens] was seized by the desire to paint my portrait. I assured him that I should be only too pleased to grant him the opportunity if he would come to The Hague and stay at my house for a while. So ardent was his desire that he arrived within a few days, explaining that since seeing me his nights had been restless and his days so troubled that he had been unable to work. My face had lodged so firmly in his mind that he could not wait any longer. This effect on his imaginative powers was all the more remarkable in view of his customary aversion to being persuaded to portray a person."

The finished portrait shows Lievens adapting his painting approach to achieve a smoother and more sophisticated look than his Leiden paintings. A comparison with his portrait of Rembrandt, painted within the same year or two, shows the difference. In the portrait of Rembrandt the warm underpainting in the shadows is still visible under thinner layers of cooler gray browns while the paint in the lights has been built up more heavily and dramatically. The highlights in the hair were achieved by scratching through the paint surface with the back end of a brush to reveal the lighter surface beneath. In the portrait of Huygens the entire paint surface has been built up smoothly, the underpainting is much less visible, and a general feeling of completion and control are evident. Throughout the coming years Lievens continued to paint in both styles. His 1631 painting *Prince Charles Louis With his Tutor, as the Young Alexander Instructed by Aristotle* shows him fully conversant with the kind of flashy Baroque classical look that Rubens and Anthony van Dyck had promoted. Meanwhile his 1630 *Bearded Man With a Beret* displays a more adventurous brush and more broken surfaces.

The success of the Huygens portrait led to more commissions in court circles, and Lievens probably had every right to see a brilliant future painting for the aristocracy. Rembrandt, meanwhile, remained at Leiden until 1631

RIGHT

Portrait of Constantijn Huygens

1628–1629, oil on panel, 39 x 33⅛. Collection Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands. On loan from the Musée de la Chartreuse, Douai, France.

OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT

Prince Charles Louis With His Tutor, as the Young Alexander Instructed by Aristotle

1631, oil, 40¾ x 38. Collection The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California.

OPPOSITE PAGE, RIGHT TOP

Young Girl in Profile

ca. 1631, oil on panel, 17 1/16 x 15⅛. Eijk and Rose-Marie Van Otterloo Collection.

OPPOSITE PAGE, RIGHT BOTTOM

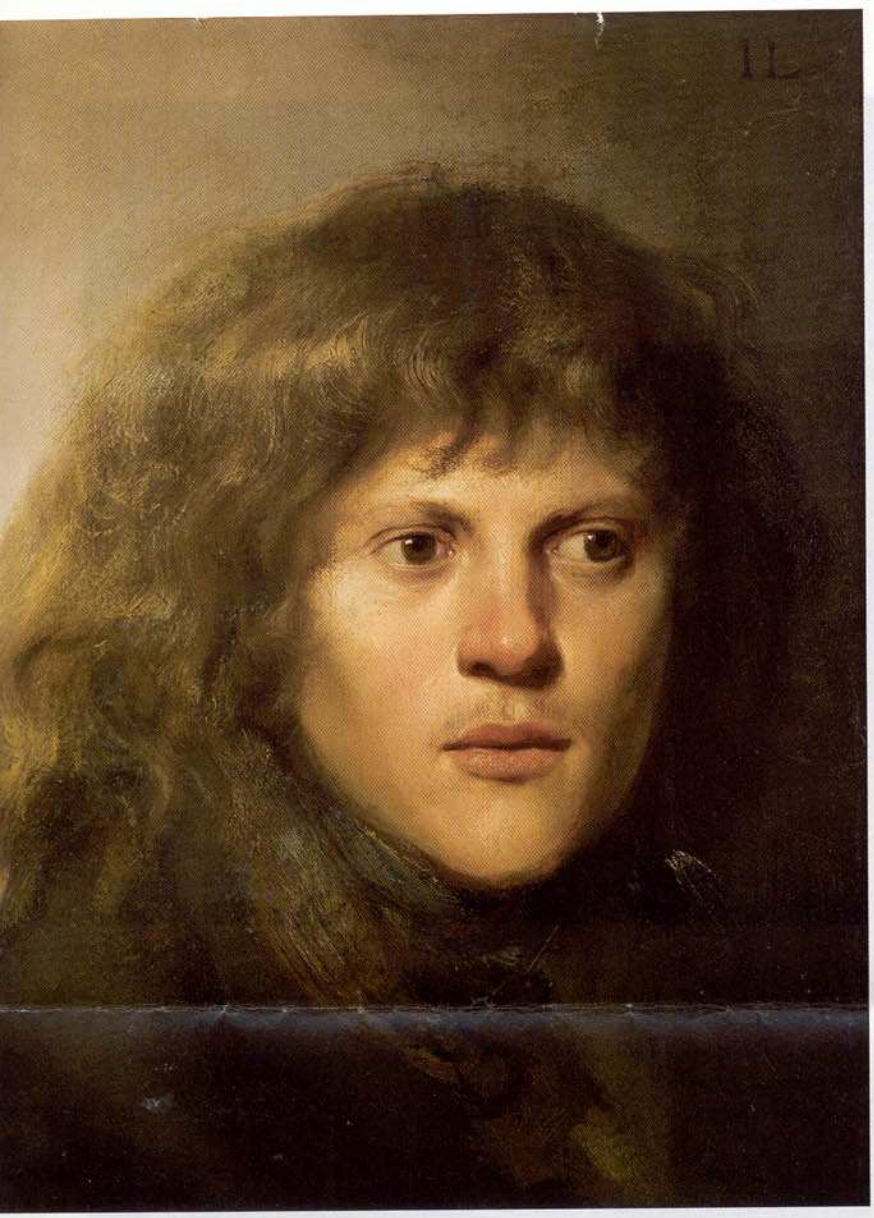
Bearded Man With a Beret

ca. 1630, oil on panel, 21⅛ x 18¼. Collection National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

before moving to Amsterdam, and it appears that Huygens asked both artists to paint pictures of the same subject matter, perhaps with a view of determining which artist might be suitable for which royal commission. His observations show considerable insight. While he noted that Lievens generally painted on a larger scale than Rembrandt, nonetheless Rembrandt "was superior...in his sure touch and liveliness of emotions." Talking about Rembrandt's *Judas, Repentant, Returning the Pieces of Silver* [not shown], he wrote that the artist "devotes all his loving concentration to a small painting, achieving on that modest scale a result which one would seek in vain in the largest pieces of others."

Although Huygens obviously preferred Rembrandt when it came to history and religious paintings, he was full of compliments for Lievens' portraiture. He expressed the wish that Lievens would "curb this vigorous, untamable spirit whose bold ambition is to embrace all of nature ...[and] concentrate on that physical part which miraculously combines the essence of the human spirit and body." Obviously there were aspects of Lievens' character that presented difficulties to this sophisticated man of affairs. Huygens wrote of the artist's "excess of self-confidence" and complained that he "either roundly rejects all criticism or, if he acknowledges its validity, takes it in bad spirit. This bad habit, harmful at any age, is absolutely pernicious in youth." Huygens' advice to the artist still seems wise today. "All men, whoever they be, should be approached with a well-disposed heart and an inquisitive mind, in the belief that there is always something to be learned from everyone."

Lievens' worldly ambitions were almost certainly spurred on by the arrival of Van Dyck in The Hague in 1631. Such was the young artist's growing reputation that Van Dyck made a drawing of him to be used in his *Iconographie* [not shown], a set of prints he was making of famous artists.



LEFT

Self-Portrait

ca. 1629–1630, oil on panel, 16⅜ x 13. Private collection.

BELOW

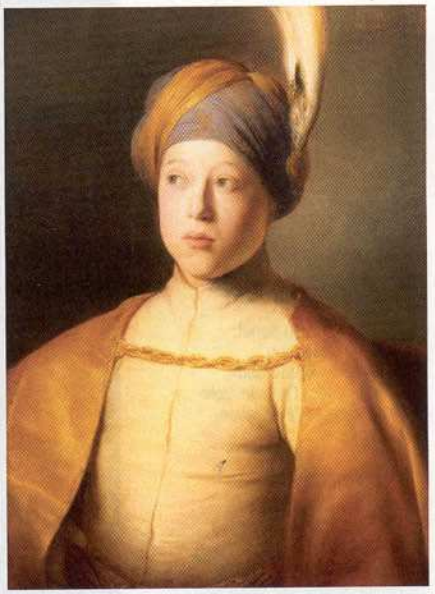
Boy in a Cape and Turban

ca. 1631, oil on panel, 26⅜ x 20⅜. Private collection.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Landscape With Willows

ca. early 1640s, oil on panel, 11 x 16¼. Collection Frits Lugt Collection, Institut Néerlandais, Paris, France.

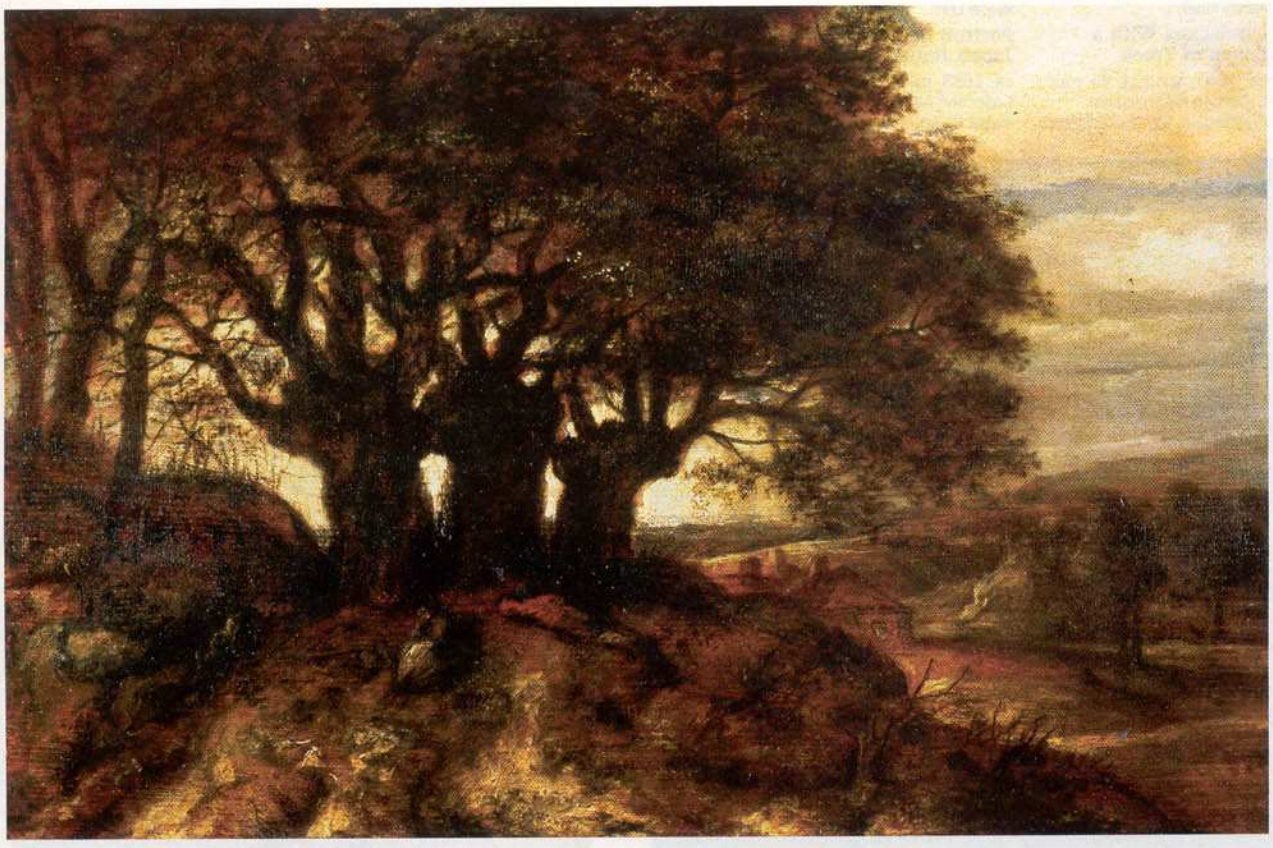


Lievens would also have been able to see up-close this worldly and cultured protégé of Rubens, and to get a glimpse of the several commissions he painted for the prince during the winter of 1631 to 1632. At this time the influence of the suave international style developed by Rubens and carried on by Van Dyck became increasingly influential in Lievens' work.

Huygens may have hoped that Van Dyck would remain at The Hague, but in 1632 the painter received an offer from Charles I, the king of England, to become the official court painter. Charles was then probably the largest patron of the arts in Europe, and the prospect of working for him was too good to turn down. It was then that Lievens decided to act on a desire to work in London. This ambition was already evident in 1630 when he painted a self-portrait with the long hair favored by the English cavaliers. Infrared reflectograms of the picture reveal that the underpainting showed the artist with a cropped haircut, so the final vision of flowing locks was a piece of fanciful and perhaps wishful thinking. By 1632, however, several of the artist's paintings were in England and, now that he was known to the official court painter, he could expect to have doors opened to him.

Lievens lived and worked in London from 1632 to 1635 but his stay is poorly documented. It is not clear whether he worked in Van Dyck's workshop or whether he struck out on his own. He did secure commissions to paint portraits of the king, the queen, their children, and various other people, but all of the paintings are lost. One or two remarkable prints and drawings remain, including a lively portrait sketch of the king himself and a fine etching of the French lutenist Jacques Gaultier, which shows a strong influence of Van Dyck. At this period of his career, Lievens seemed to have taken a greater interest in landscape, using pen and wash in a manner similar to that of Van Dyck.

IT IS NOT KNOWN why Lievens left London to move to Antwerp in 1635, although it is possible that he had despaired of his ambition of replacing Van Dyck as court artist to Charles I. On the other hand, Antwerp was a good place for a painter at the time. Its political life had stabilized and, being a Catholic city, it offered the opportunity for large-scale religious works, as well as a wealthy class of collectors. Antwerp also boasted a rich stock of paintings for



the artist to study, particularly work by Rubens, Van Dyck, and Jacob Jordaens, as well as those by Titian. It appears that Lievens threw himself enthusiastically into the artistic life of the city. He joined the local painters' guild and fraternized with a group of artists that included Adriaen Brouwer, Jan Davidsz de Heem, David Teniers the Younger, and Jan Cossiers. He also married and started a family.

Lievens' work in Antwerp was broad and varied. He began to paint landscapes, influenced by the atmospheric views of Adrien Brouwer and favoring twilight scenes of woodland landscapes broken by areas of standing water. His *Landscape With Willows* is a good example of the kind of thoughtful, almost brooding, quality that he created. The active brushwork woven throughout the painting is quite distinctive, making the piece a highly personal statement. Lievens also returned to the painting of tronies, small pictures and prints of peasant types that were likely to find a ready market. At this time, the artist increased his printmaking vocabulary by taking up the venerable art of woodcut, making prints after his own designs. His *Landscape With a Group of Trees* shows a spirited approach to this medium, which Lievens probably learned by himself.

When it came to making large-scale historical and religious paintings in Antwerp, Lievens naturally felt challenged by the work of Rubens, which was widely represented in that artist's home city. What resulted were some of Lievens' finest paintings in which grandeur of scale is unusually meshed with great intimacy and delicacy of emotion. This is particularly true of *The Visitation* [not shown] a monumental work that hangs in the Louvre. The composition has a grand, classical quality, but the faces and gestures are painted with a Dutch insistence on the specific. The two women at the center of the drama strike us as very real people involved in a compelling emotional exchange. Although the painting is smoothly wrought, the coloring remains extremely rich and varied, conveying a satisfying sense of completeness.

In spite of Lievens' success in Antwerp, where he secured a number of large commissions, he found himself financially troubled and in 1643 was obliged to turn over his possessions to his creditors. The reasons for this disaster are unknown, but it may be that the artist's impulsive nature made for difficulties in money management. Seeking new opportunities for the sophisticated international style he had developed in Antwerp, the artist moved to Amsterdam in 1645.

Lievens had been careful to keep his connections in Holland very much alive during his travels, and he quickly found new commissions. Amsterdam was booming at the time, Huygens was still alive, and Rembrandt, although past his first success, was still a force in the city. His new life was not without personal tragedy however, as Lievens' wife died shortly after the move. The artist remarried in 1648, and together with his new wife, Cornelia de Bray, had six children.

By the end of the 1640s Lievens found himself with plenty of work. He produced a large painting, *The Four Muses*

BELOW RIGHT

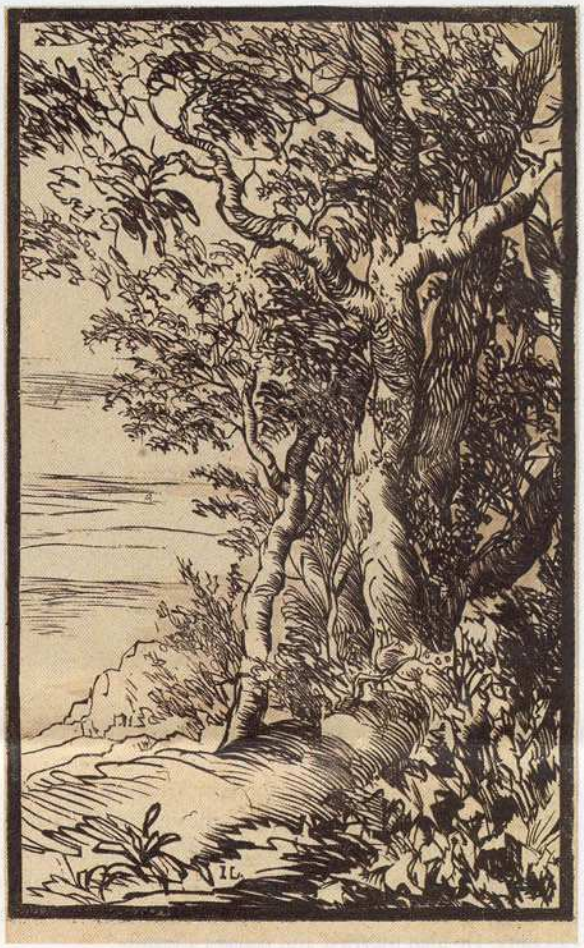
Landscape With a Group of Trees

ca. 1640, woodcut, 9½ x 5⅞. Collection Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

BELOW LEFT

Portrait of Jacob Junius

ca. 1658, oil, 31⅛ x 20¾. Collection Alfred and Isabel Bader.



[not shown] for the decoration of the Huis ten Bosch, a small summer palace at The Hague. The picture combines something of the fleshy dazzle of Rubens with a more severely observed Dutch sensibility, its rich coloring blending well with the sumptuous setting. The success of this commission led to an invitation to paint for the Elector of Brandenburg on the decoration of the Schloss Oranienburg near Berlin, where Lievens worked from 1653 to the following year. Although these grand projects certainly pleased the ambitious Lievens, his portrait business had also become hugely successful. From the mid-1640s onward his client list reads like a who's who of Amsterdam society.

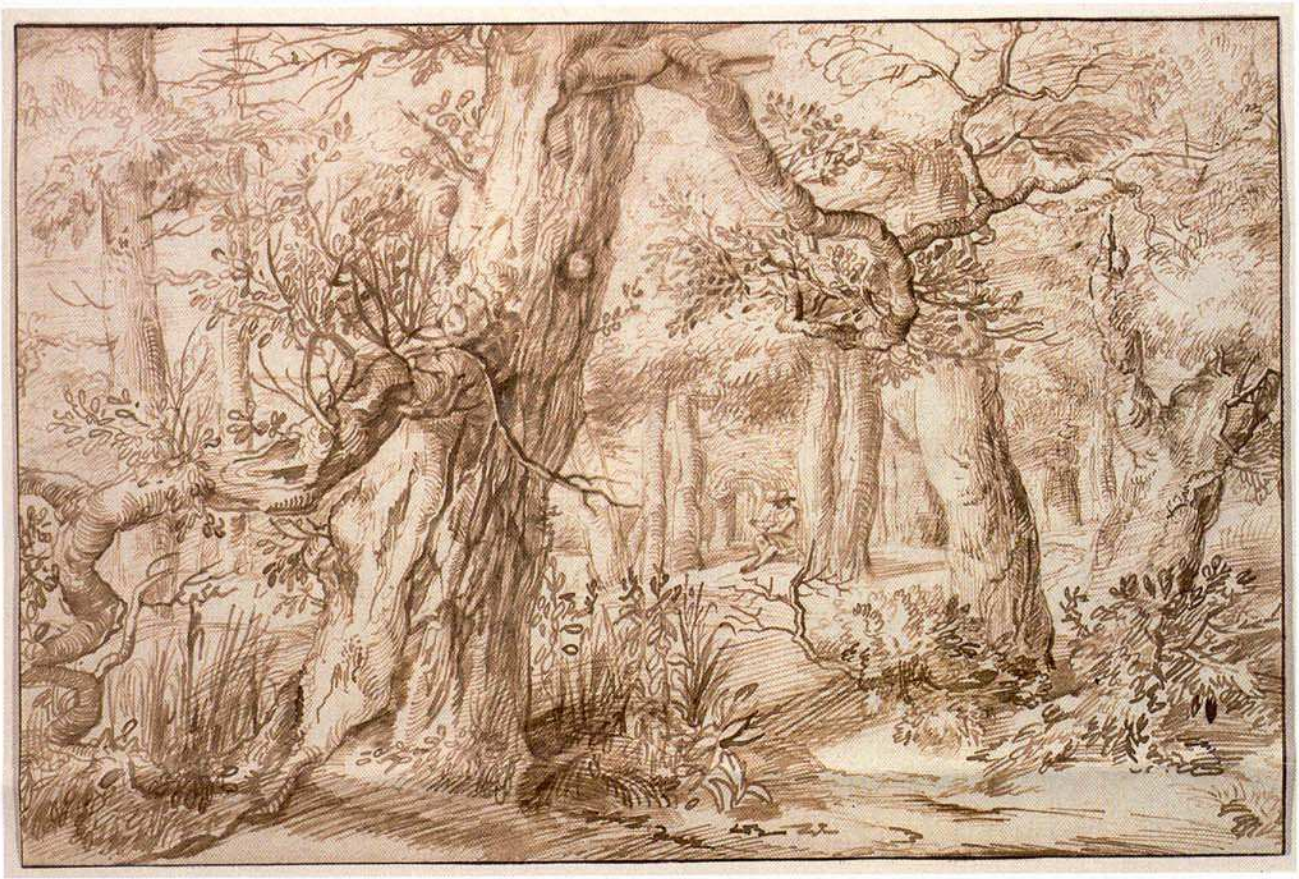
In 1654 Lievens moved again, this time to The Hague, apparently hoping to gain commissions. Even though the Prince of Orange had died suddenly in 1650 leaving an infant son as successor, a great deal of building was going on. Lievens secured the commission for a large allegorical painting of *Arithmetica* [not shown] for the assembly room of the executive council. Sadly this work is now lost, but a subsequent commission to paint *Mars* [not shown] for the meeting hall above the assembly room is still in situ. In this picture Lievens seems to have drawn on his early delight in tronies and extreme expressions to give the god of war a bizarrely ferocious countenance as he tramples on religion and civil rights. Although the work looks rather odd to the modern eye on account of this facial exaggeration, it was greatly admired at the time.

While living at The Hague, Lievens kept up his business in Amsterdam, and during this time he received a commission for a huge painting in the burgomaster's chamber of the Amsterdam town council. Meanwhile, his fine painting of Jacob Junius from 1658 shows that he had lost none of his skills in portraiture. Lievens once again moved to Amsterdam in 1659 and the following year undertook one of the large paintings for the lunettes in the new town hall. One of the other lunette pictures was executed by Rembrandt; once again the two Leiden artists found their work hanging together.

BELOW

Forest Interior With a Draftsman

ca. 1660s, pen and brown ink and brown wash on paper, 9⅞ x 14¼. Maida and George Abrams Collection, Boston, Massachusetts. On loan to The Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University, Boston, Massachusetts.



In spite of all his successes Lievens continued to have financial problems and much of his correspondence of the time concerns itself with payment dates and schedules. He continued to move around in search of commissioned work, and by the 1670s political troubles in the region began to affect his life, as it did all artists, as the art market more or less dried up. Lievens eventually died in poverty in June 1674.

In considering Lievens' posthumous reputation it seems clear that his worldly ambitions were largely responsible for its decline. Having collaborated with Rembrandt as a very young man in forging some real innovations in painting, Lievens began to change his work in order to ingratiate himself with a courtly clientele, taking on the look and polish of the most successful painters of the day. His reputation has also suffered for other reasons. His early work was sometimes attributed to Rembrandt, and the close comparison of the two artists as young men has often led to the diminution of Lievens. In the 19th century, a romantic outlook prized the emotional depth of Rembrandt while being less interested in the cooler style of Lievens' mature work. So great was the disdain for Lievens in Holland at that time that a balcony was erected in front of his *Mars* painting in The Hague, making it impossible to view the piece properly. Lievens' reputation has also suffered from the disappearance of a large number of his works, including all the paintings he did while in England as well many of his portraits, and his frequent moves made succeeding generations of art historians hesitant to embrace him as a quintessentially Dutch artist.

To be fair, Lievens really was no Rembrandt. He didn't develop a vision that would remain distinctive and compelling for future generations, but then very few artists do. What Lievens did leave is a body of wonderfully spirited and accomplished paintings. He was a glorious draftsman, a dazzling paint handler, and inventive composer. His work offers considerable pleasures of observation, sumptuous color, and enormous variety. He may not have been the most attractive personality, but his life-long quest for fame and fortune was backed up with enormous industry, tenacity, and a remarkable fountain of talent. Both the man and his work deserve deep respect and admiration. ■

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