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Beside Rembrandt, Another Brush With Greatness

By Blake Gopnik Washington Post Staff Writer Sunday, November 2, 2008; Page M08

Four years ago almost to the day, National Gallery curator Arthur Wheelock launched a fantastic show on the little-known Dutchman Gerard ter Borch. It led us to declare him a more important painter than his friend Johannes Vermeer.

Now Wheelock has launched the first-ever survey of Jan Lievens, an even more obscure Dutch artist. If you've actually heard of Lievens, it's likely because he was a momentary rival of the young Rembrandt, as the two launched their careers together in Leiden.

So has the Lievens show tempted us to declare him greater than the great Rembrandt?

Maybe not.

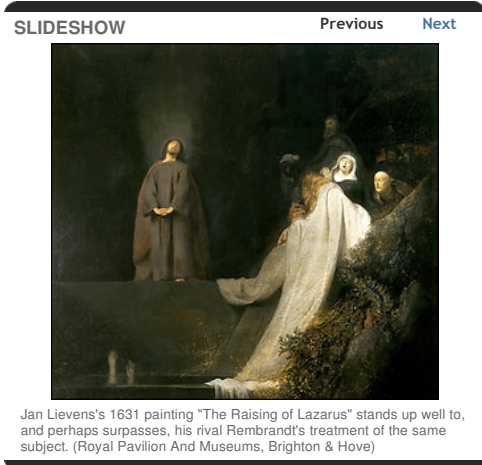
We wouldn't go further than to claim the artists tied. In their own day, at least, that's how things might have seemed.

Though Lievens, born in 1607, was a year younger than Rembrandt, he hit his stride first. This show includes a stunning, over life-size picture of an elderly woman that could have been painted as early as 1621 -- when Lievens was 13.

In the later 1620s, Constantin Huygens, the famous courtier and connoisseur, described the young geniuses as equals. "Rembrandt is superior to Lievens," Huygens wrote, "in his sure touch and liveliness of emotions. Conversely, Lievens is the greater in inventiveness and audacious themes and forms. . . . In painting the human countenance, he works miracles." It seems that Huygens tested them by getting the same subjects from both. Judging by this show, the almost unknown test-pictures by Lievens aren't obviously weaker than the very famous versions Rembrandt came up with.

Throughout his life Lievens won more big-name, international commissions than Rembrandt ever did. He was a favorite of the nobility, the clergy and the wealthy in Flanders, England, Germany and Holland. In the 1650s and '60s, he was honored with two of the commissions for the decoration of Amsterdam's grand new city hall. (It's now the Royal Palace of the Netherlands.) Lievens's pictures, for which he earned a mint, are still there; Rembrandt's single contribution to the project was so flawed his patrons took it down almost the moment it went up in 1662. (He died in poverty seven years later. Lievens, equally down on his luck at the end, outlived him by another five.)

Advertisement Rembrandt himself appreciated Lievens's talent. He made etchings based on prints by Lievens -- the only colleague Rembrandt copied so directly. His paintings often



Jan Lievens's 1631 painting "The Raising of Lazarus" stands up well to, and perhaps surpasses, his rival Rembrandt's treatment of the same subject. (Royal Pavilion And Museums, Brighton & Hove)

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come so near to works by Lievens that many pictures in this show have, at one point or another, been thought to be by Rembrandt. (During their Leiden years, they were in fact so close that they painted on planks from the same tree.) One fine drawing from the National Gallery's own collection is included in this show as a Lievens; Wheelock says his colleagues in the drawings department will probably reassign it to Rembrandt once the show is over. If so many "Rembrandts" have turned out to be by Lievens, could it be that the Rembrandtesque in general should in fact be rethought as a riff on

Lievensism? It seems likely it was Lievens who first came up with some parts of the look Rembrandt later trademarked as his own.

A stunning "Raising of Lazarus" by Lievens, probably painted as one of those Huygens test pieces, may even be stronger than the version by his rival. Rembrandt liked the Lievens plenty: It hung above the mantel in his home.

*Jan Lievens: A Dutch Master Rediscovered* runs through Jan. 11 in the West Building of the National Gallery of Art, on Constitution Avenue at Sixth Street NW. Call 202-737-4215 or visit <http://www.nga.gov>.

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