

Lievens and Rembrandt

Parallels and Divergences

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Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) and Jan Lievens (1607-1674) share a home town, various acquaintances and patrons, and the cultural milieu of Amsterdam. The trajectories of their lives and careers converge at various points. Both were born in Leiden and trained by two foremost artists there, before studying with Pieter Lastman in Amsterdam. As young artists they associated closely, and critiqued each other's production in painting and etching. Dutch writers often considered them together, although eventually Rembrandt's reputation eclipsed that of Lievens. This article examines how their very different artistic personalities are evident in their early work, and what authors wrote about Lievens.

After 1631, their paths diverged. Lievens went first to London (1632-1634), and then to Antwerp (1635-1644), where he associated with artists in the circle of Antony van Dyck and Adriaen Brouwer. He returned to Amsterdam in 1644-1654, lived in The Hague for five years, and finally moved back to Amsterdam. Rembrandt had settled in Amsterdam by 1633, moving house on several occasions, and both lived on the Rosengracht at various times. Their works often show up in the same collections, a circumstance that can be traced to similar tastes among collectors and shared acquaintances. Lievens was not an art collector, perhaps because he did not have the income to support the habit and perhaps because he moved frequently, but Rembrandt collected compulsively, even though he did not always have the means. In 1656, Rembrandt had nine paintings and one folio of prints by Lievens among his extensive art collection.

Both were immensely successful, yet in different ways. Lievens, not Rembrandt, received commissions for Leiden Town Hall (1641), the Huis ten Bosch (1650), the meeting rooms in Amsterdam Town Hall (1656) and the Statenzaal, The Hague (1664). Rembrandt, not Lievens, received commissions for grand group portraits, the foremost of these being the Night Watch (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam), and for numerous private portraits, both painted and etched. Lievens portrayed the elite of Amsterdam in his finished portrait drawings, some paintings, and a few etchings. On a few occasions, Rembrandt and Lievens portrayed the same patrons or their relatives, including the Trip family, Johannes Wytenbogaert, Lieven Coppénoel, Ephraim Bonus, and Rene Descartes. The poets Jan Vos and Joost van den Vondel wrote about their works, but both selected Lievens, not Rembrandt, to portray them. Lievens and Rembrandt were each allotted one painting in the Batavian



Lievens, *The Feast of Esther*,
ca. 1625. Oil on canvas,
130.8 x 163.8 cm.
North Carolina Museum of Art,
Raleigh.

series of Amsterdam Town Hall, yet only after Govert Flinck's untimely death in 1660. Their reputations may be charted in the literature, to reveal the vagaries and selective attention of critics.

Lievens in the literature of his time: from glowing praise to scathing criticism

Two contemporary writers offer assessments of Lievens and Rembrandt as a pair that frame their careers. Constantijn Huygens (ca. 1630) and Gerard de Lairesse (1707) provide high praise and sharp criticism respectively. Other authors apparently considered the two independently of one another: J. J. Orlers (1641), Philips Angel (1642), Joachim von Sandrart (1675), Samuel van Hoogstraten (1678), and Arnold Houbraken (1718). Huygens, Orlers and Angel praised Lievens as effusively as they praised Rembrandt. Yet Von Sandrart, Van Hoogstraten and Houbraken gave Lievens short shrift; this may be due to their closer contact with Rembrandt, or because that artist's brilliance eclipsed that of his associates. After Houbraken's biography of Lievens, the literary reception of Lievens fell into obscurity.

Constantijn Huygens' private diary of ca. 1630 reveals that Lievens matured earlier than Rembrandt, pushed himself to experiment with artistic forms and styles, and had great self-assurance. Even as they may have learned from each other, the two young artists assimilated external impressions, including monochrome tones, Rubens' inventions, and dramatic lighting and themes.



Rembrandt,
*Judas Returning
The Thirty Silver Pieces*,
1629. Oil on oak panel,
79 x 102,3 cm.
Private Collection.

Huygens contrasted the qualities and abilities of the two still-beardless young men:

'One would be rendering [Lievens] good service by endeavouring to curb this vigorous, untameable spirit whose bold ambition is to embrace all nature, and by persuading the brilliant painter to concentrate on that physical part which miraculously combines the essence of the human spirit and body. In ... history pieces, the artist, his astonishing talent notwithstanding, is unlikely to match Rembrandt's vivid invention....I venture to suggest offhand that Rembrandt is superior to Lievens in the sure touch and liveliness of emotions. Conversely, Lievens is the greater in inventiveness and audacious themes and forms. Everything his young spirit endeavours to capture must be magnificent and lofty....Rembrandt, by contrast, 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.'

Huygens regarded Lievens' art as forceful on a large scale, and his character as ambitious and impatient; Rembrandt's art was expressively vivid on a small scale, and his character patiently inventive. These assessments are corroborated by Lievens' *Feast of Esther* and Rembrandt's *Judas Returning the Silver* [Figs. 1 and 2, 2008-09 cat. No. 6; ca. 1625; The North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh; 1629, Private Collection]. In Lievens' *Feast of Esther*, four figures crowd around a table. They are dressed in richly textured and brilliantly coloured robes. Behind them is a luminous curtain, crafted in loosely brushed strokes. Lievens has given extraordinary attention to each component of this scene, the moment just after Esther's revelation of Haman's treachery. Haman reacts in horror, and Ahasuerus will immediately condemn him to the gallows. Esther is illuminated, while Haman is shaded, to indicate their respective virtuous and malicious natures. But it is the king, Ahasuerus, who dominates. As Ahasuerus realizes the treachery of his favored courtier, he clenches his hands and stares at Haman. Ahasuerus' hands indicate Lievens' approach to painting: he studied how the fingernails dig into the palm and how the knuckles bulge, and he arranged the hands within the painting so that they frame the corner of the table. Although Lievens lavished attention on the particulars of the

hands, he did not consider the placement of the king's right hand upon the table, between the pie, bread, and plate. As the king clenches his fist, as if to bang it on the table, it has no place to fit between the pie and bread. Consistently, Lievens focused upon details at the expense of integrating the whole within a coherent spatial arrangement. Rembrandt, on the other hand, considered the overall unity of a group of figures in a spatial arrangement, as in the *Judas*. There, each figure is placed with respect to the others, and each reacts differently to the main action of the remorseful Judas. Huygens considered the two young men stubborn to a fault. Although he stated as much in the matter of their not travelling to Italy, he may well have generally thought that the two rejected others' advice. Rhetorically, he remarked that if only they would spend a few months travelling through Italy, they would quickly surpass the Italian artists, and give the Italians reason to come to Holland. Huygens lamented: 'If only these men, born to raise art to the highest pinnacle, knew themselves better!'

As intermediary for Stadhouder Frederick Hendrik, Huygens arranged for six of their paintings to be in the Noordeinde palace by 1632, and may also have made possible other commissions. When in Antwerp, Lievens was in contact with Huygens' sister-in-law, and informed Huygens of Rubens' death (May 1640).

Speaking in Leiden in 1641, Philips Angel was interested in elevating the art of painting, and in demonstrating that artists were learned. Angel named Lievens, along with Rembrandt, and several others, as capable of rendering histories with knowledge and appropriate reflection. Angel admired these artists for their display of learning in devising original compositions of familiar stories. As an example of Rembrandt's erudition, Angel gave *Samson's Wedding Feast*, and concluded that Rembrandt read the story properly and examined it with 'lofty profound reflection.' [1636; Gemäldegalerie, Dresden]. Then Angel immediately discussed two paintings by Lievens that he praised for depicting a familiar theme in a novel, thoughtful, and learned manner.

Angel discussed a grisaille of Lievens' Abraham sacrificing Isaac, in which the patriarch embraced his son, in line with Josephus, *Jewish Histories*, Book I, Chapter 13. The grisaille is lost, but a grand painting reflects its composition. [Fig.3; Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig] In the biblical account, Abraham bound the hands of the boy, and the angel of the lord called to Abraham and stopped him from laying the knife upon the boy; after Abraham had sacrificed the substituted ram, he and Isaac went home.

Josephus amplified this account, with lengthy conversations between father and son. Abraham told his son how much he loved him and how he was obligated to obey God, and Isaac understood that he was to obey his father and be the sacrifice himself:

'And with that he went straight to the altar and would have allowed himself to be slaughtered for the offering, and immediately would have been dead, if God had not opposed it.'

God bestowed his blessing upon father and son, and produced a ram for the sacrifice:

'So Abraham and Isaac ... kissed one another; and after they had sacrificed, they went home to Sarah and lived happily together, and thanked God for all they had received.'

The slaughtered ram, with its organs already burnt on the altar, lies in the lower left corner. Lievens implies that Abraham sacrificed the ram before he and Isaac embraced. Although this contradicts Josephus, it is in keeping with the



Lievens, *Abraham Embracing Isaac*, ca. 1636.
Oil on canvas,
180 x 136 cm. Herzog Anton
Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig.

focus on dramatic moment of halting the slaughter of Isaac and of revealing the sacrificial ram.

Angel proclaimed: 'One may read more than one book in order to gain a deeper understanding of the subject.' Although the Bible was the prime authority, it was amplified by another account, that of Josephus.

Lievens' *Bathsheba* exemplified an artist's embellishment of a text. Angel explained how Lievens deviated from the biblical text in three ways: *Bathsheba* holds a letter sent by David, an old woman as a procuress stands in the background, and a cupid in the sky shoots love's arrow. The known version of this painting lacks the Cupid [Fig. 4; 2008 cat. No. 27; Cooney Collection, Studio City, California]. Angel reasoned that it was appropriate for *Bathsheba* to receive a letter, even though this contradicts the Bible, which explicitly mentioned that a messenger summoned her to David. The letter motif allowed *Bathsheba* to become flushed with a 'sweet blush of honourable shame' and thereby the painting gained in expressive power. Indeed, Lievens' buxom, blond *Bathsheba* has flushed cheeks.

Angel further analysed the situation:

'First, he [Lievens] reflected that no matter how powerful a prince might be, no one need be prepared to be at his service in sin. Accordingly there must have been a hot fire of passion in *Bathsheba* when she was entreated by the king.'

The deviations from the Bible in the letter, old woman, and cupid were legitimate, for they added to the overall effect. Angel regarded the letter as Lievens' innovation in representing *Bathsheba*, but he was mistaken. Earlier artists included the letter, among them the Amsterdam painter Francois Badens (1571-1618), little known today but much appreciated in his own time. Badens' *lost Bathsheba Bathing and Receiving a Letter* was praised by Karel van Mander. Although Lievens read Josephus for his *Abraham embracing Isaac*, he most likely followed a pictorial model for his *Bathsheba*.

Angel chose two unusual cases in which Lievens actually did demonstrate thoughtfulness in reading, sufficiently so that Angel was justified in considering the artist as learned. This was the exception rather than the rule in Lievens' practice. Lievens read the Bible, Josephus (but only for the rendering of Abraham), and some

popular literature, but not much else. Angel's judgement of Lievens' learnedness, based upon a highly selective view of the artist, endured, although it was undeserved.

Jan Jansz. Orlers' biographies of Lievens and Rembrandt reveal much about their youth, but nothing about their association with one another. Orlers noted that Lievens demonstrated a remarkable ability at an early age, and also a single-minded and driven motivation and concentration. In 1621, Lievens, then aged 14, made a portrait of his mother at which everyone marveled, and in 1631 he went to England where he portrayed the royal family (in paintings now lost). For Orlers, Lievens was an accomplished artist, from whom one could expect great works yet to come.

Joachim von Sandrart's compendium of artists' lives includes a brief passage on Lievens which indicates some familiarity with his works, but a general ignorance about his life, which included sojourns in England and Antwerp. Von Sandrart emphasized Lievens' remarkable achievement as an artist who had not travelled abroad:

'Of those who have been nowhere but in their Fatherland, without even travelling through the territories of the Netherlands, was also Johannes Lievens of Leiden, who is among those following the highest paths. In large histories he made many heads after life, which were well painted, and had good knowledge of colours. There is not much after the antique to see in his studies, rather, in his works he maintains his own and not frightful manner. From his hand there is much to see in Antwerp and Amsterdam, where, according to my knowledge, he is still living.'

Von Sandrart accurately noted that Lievens studied heads from life, that he did not incorporate ancient models in his work, and that he had good ability with paint with colour. His style was uniquely his own, and as Von Sandrart stated, 'not frightful'. His assessment of Lievens is a short, positive spin of several aspects of his own much lengthier passage on Rembrandt, whom he judged deficient in knowledge of ancient history and literature, antiquity, Italian art, and academic practices.

Van Hoogstraten praised Lievens as one of the best artists of his time. Demonstrating his grasp of the differences in the distinct painterly styles of Lievens and Rembrandt, Van Hoogstraten noted that Lievens was expert in gaining effects of smeared pigments and varnishes, and in the depiction of moonlight landscapes.

In his *Groot Schilderboek* of 1707, Gerard de Lairese paired Lievens and Rembrandt in two pithy statements, one sharply critical, the other highly praising. Taken together, these remarks indicate how difficult it must have been to grasp the variety of Lievens' art and the complexity of Rembrandt's. De Lairese criticized the two artists together:

'[one should not paint] in the manner of Rembrandt and Lievens, whose colours run down the piece like dung.'

De Lairese was familiar with Rembrandt's late paintings, which include the portrait of himself by Rembrandt of 1665 (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art), and Lievens' two paintings for Amsterdam Town Hall (Brinio and Fabius Maximus). Rembrandt applied paint thickly, in layers, and with palette knife as well as brush. Lievens used brushes of various sizes, loaded with impasto, to get an uneven surface, pronounced highlights, and heavy shading. De Lairese's remark that paint 'runs down' the canvas surface is accurate for the late works by Lievens, according to Melanie Gifford, the conservator who examined Lievens' works for the 2008



Lievens, *Bathsheba Receiving a Letter From King David*, ca. 1631. Oil on canvas, 135 x 107 cm. The Cooney Collection, Studio City, California.

exhibition. Although Rembrandt applied pigment thickly, he never allowed the paint to 'run down' the canvas. De Lairese may have linked the artists in recognition of the long-enduring reputation of their early activity in Leiden, but he may also have known that the two associated later in Amsterdam as well.

On a more positive note, De Lairese connected Rembrandt and Lievens by contrasting their genius of invention with mediocre artists of his own time:

'...but we do not find, now-a-days, Wits who endeavor to distinguish themselves among the knowing, by new Inventions. We had several of them some time since, of whom I shall name but two, Rembrandt and John Lievens, whose manner is not entirely to be rejected.'

De Lairese here separated artistic invention from paint application. If he attributed the paint running down the canvas, a quality of Lievens' style, to Rembrandt, he then recognized Lievens as an artist equally inventive with Rembrandt. Here, too, his judgment reflects Angel's praise of their genius.

Houbraken provided an informative account of Lievens' life and work, adding details of Lievens' London and Antwerp years, including his marriage to the daughter of the sculptor Michiel Colyn. Houbraken noted that he made many renowned, large altarpieces for Catholic churches and prominent people, and included poetic tributes by Joost van den Vondel and Jan Vos. Houbraken concluded by citing Franciscus Junius on the shared purposes of painters and poets: 'Painters and Poets are driven by one spirit, often to undertake something new.' This surely reflects Angel's discussion of Lievens' Abraham and Bathsheba, which that author presented as novel renditions of familiar themes. Aware from Angel that Lievens was important, Houbraken neglected him in comparison to Rembrandt.

Lievens' personality must have been ingratiating and forceful, and his network of acquaintances broad. His range of subjects is fairly limited by comparison to that of Rembrandt; while both rendered subjects from genre, the Bible, character heads, and exotic figures, Rembrandt depicted more subjects from history and myth. Lievens, indeed, benefited from his association with Rembrandt in the accounts of Angel and De Lairese: as a lesser artistic force that catches some of the reflected glory of Rembrandt. ■

FURTHER READING

Braunschweig 1979: R. Klessman et al., *Jan Lievens: ein Maler im Schatten Rembrandts*, Braunschweig, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, 1979

Washington-Milwaukee-Amsterdam 2008-09: A. K. Wheelock, Jr. et al., *Jan Lievens: A Dutch Master Rediscovered*, Washington, National Gallery of Art/ Milwaukee, Milwaukee Art Museum/ Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis, 2008

Kassel/Amsterdam 2002: E. van de Wetering et al. *The Mystery of the Young Rembrandt*, Kassel, Staatliche Museen/Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis, 2002

Coutré 2009: J. Coutré, "Vanquishing the Shadow: Jan Lievens Comes to Light after 250 Years," *Dutch Crossing*, Vol. 33 No. 2, October 2009, 135–151

Golahny 2006: A. Golahny, "Lievens' Reading: Some Observations on his *Mucius Scaevola before Porsema*," in: R. van Straten and M. Roscam Abbing, eds., *Around Rembrandt/Rond Rembrandt*, Leiden 2006, 191-204

Schneider-Ekkart 1973: H. Schneider, *Jan Lievens, sein Leben und sein Werke*, with supplement by R. E. O. Ekkart, Amsterdam 1973

NOTES

- 1 Kassel/Amsterdam 2001, pp. 51-53.
- 2 Schneider-Ekkart 1973, 292: letter from D. de Wilhelm to Constantijn Huygens, 6 June 1640.
- 3 Philips Angel, *Lof der Schilderconst*, Leiden 1642, 44; For the English translation, see Philips Angel, *Praise of Painting*, tr. M. Hoyle, *Simiolus*, vol. 24, 1996, no. 2/3, 245.
- 4 Angel 1642, 48-49; Angel/Hoyle 1996, 246. For the original text of Josephus, quoted above, see *Flavij Iosephi Historien und Buecher...*, Strassbourg, 1574, 13, and A. Golahny, *Rembrandt's Reading*, Amsterdam, 2003, 172. For Lievens' intellectual gifts and limitations, see Golahny 2006.
- 5 Washington/Milwaukee/Amsterdam 2008-09, cat. 27, as ca. 1631.
- 6 Karel van Mander, *Het Schilder-boeck*, Haarlem 1604, 298v.
- 7 For this passage from Joachim von Sandrart, *Academia Todesca*, 1675, I, 313, chapter 19 (vol. I, part 2, book 3) see Schneider/Ekkart 1973, 300.
- 8 Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilderconst...*, Rotterdam 1678, p. 238; see further Schneider-Ekkart 1973, 300.
- 9 Gerard de Lairese, *Groote Schilderboek*, Amsterdam 1712, Book V, p. 324, translation from Kassel/Amsterdam 2002, p. 53 and p. 57, n. 109.
- 10 Gerard de Lairese, *Groote Schilderboek*, quoted in English from Fritsch translation, 1758 ed., p. 253.
- 11 Arnold Houbraken, *De Groot Schouburgh der Nederlantsche Konstschilders...*, Amsterdam 1718-21, vol. I, 396; see also Schneider/Ekkart, 301.