



JAN LIEVENS, LONG DISMISSED AS A SECOND-RATE
REMBRANDT, IS EMERGING AS A GREAT DUTCH
MASTER IN HIS OWN RIGHT.
By CAROL KINO

OUT of the SHADOWS

MILWAUKEE ART MUSEUM



MILWAUKEE ART MUSEUM

OUT OF THE SHADOWS

IF THERE IS A SINGLE CONSTANT IN THE WORLD OF ART, IT IS THAT THE SO-CALLED ETERNAL JUDGMENTS OF ART HISTORY CAN FLUCTUATE FROM ERA TO ERA.

Often, an artist wildly celebrated in his or her own time is consigned to the dust-heap in the next. Conversely, artists who fall into obscurity are often rediscovered by subsequent generations. The 19th century saw sweeping reappraisals of neglected 17th-century Dutch masters such as Jan Vermeer and Rembrandt van Rijn, and of the forgotten Mannerist El Greco. In the 20th century the same happy turn of events befell the Baroque painters Caravaggio and Georges de La Tour.

For our era the big revelation might well be Jan Lievens, another Dutch master who until quite recently has been obscured by Rembrandt's shadow. Both studied with the same teacher, both were acclaimed as prodigies in their teens and both went on to have hugely successful careers. Yet Rembrandt has long been viewed as the preeminent artist of his time, while Lievens has long been viewed as a fairly minor talent.

Today, the tide has turned. In recent years prices for work by Lievens have been rising sharply at auction, and a 1630 painting by the artist, *An Old Man Holding a Skull*, was a highlight of The European Fine Art Fair at Maastricht last year. A vanitas that depicts a wrinkled man holding a skull that seems to mirror his own face, it was offered by the London dealer Johnny van Haefen for a hefty \$7.2 million.

Previous spread: *The Lamentation of Christ*, circa 1640, oil on canvas.
This spread: *Portrait of a Boy in Persian Dress*, circa 1631, oil on panel.



From left: *Portrait of Rembrandt*, circa 1629, oil on panel;
Profile Head of an Old Woman (Portrait of Rembrandt's Mother), circa 1630, oil on panel.

And now there is the survey exhibition *Jan Lievens: A Dutch Master Rediscovered*, which finally gives the neglected artist his due. A joint project of the Milwaukee Art Museum, where it runs Feb. 9–April 26, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D. C., where it opened this past October, it is the first retrospective for Lievens in this country. (It's the first major retrospective in the Netherlands, too, where it opens May 17 at the Rembrandthuis in Amsterdam.) With a checklist of more than 130 works, it is also the most extensive show of Lievens' work anywhere to date, and its catalogue represents the most substantive publication in English on his work. "It was ripe to bring together," says Arthur Wheelock Jr., the National Gallery's curator of Northern Baroque painting and organizer of the show. "I don't take credit for reviving Lievens," he adds. "It was almost sitting there waiting to happen."

Although many forces seem to have conspired to bring the show into being, it all began seemingly by accident. "I was sitting innocently in my office," Wheelock says, "when I get a phone call from Laurie Winters, a curator in Milwaukee," who asked if he'd be interested in cooperating on a show.

Winters had come to the right person. For one thing, Wheelock, who is also on the faculty of the University of Maryland, was then immersed in Lievens scholarship: One of his students, Lloyd DeWitt, was completing a doctoral dissertation on the artist. (DeWitt, now associate curator of the John G. Johnson collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, also contributed an essay to the catalogue.) For another, the National Gallery had just been given a 1630 painting by Lievens, *Bearded Man With a Beret*, a *tronie*—or character study—of a wizened old man in archaic garb. "I like to do exhibitions that use works in our collection as a kind of jumping-off point for a broader understanding of how that work fits into 17th-century Dutch art," says Wheelock. "So the Lievens idea came at a perfect time in terms of my traditional way of approaching exhibition planning."

Winters says she conceived the idea after seeing several works by Lievens in the collection of Alfred Bader, a Milwaukee

collector, art dealer and philanthropist who began pursuing Lievens in the early 1970s, when there was little demand for his work. Although Winters nursed the concept for several years, the idea of an exhibition suddenly seemed timely. "You have this international artist who was lost to history because he didn't fit nationalistic molds," she says. "But now that we're a more global art world, we begin to think about some of these individuals in a different way."

As the exhibition demonstrates, although Lievens was born a year after Rembrandt—in 1607, also in Leiden—his career took off far earlier. At around the age of 10 the prodigy relocated to Amsterdam to study with the renowned history painter Pieter Lastman. By 12 he was back in Leiden, running his own studio and taking commissions. Especially considering his age, his work during these years was quite remarkable, ranging from a confidently rendered character study of a wrinkled woman (*Old Woman Reading*, circa 1621–23), to a bawdy scene in which cavaliers fondle a young woman's breasts (*Allegory of the Five Senses*, 1622). A painting like *The Card Players* (circa 1623–24), which has the close cropping and dramatic lighting of the Utrecht Caravaggisti, demonstrates that Lievens was already experimenting stylistically.

Rembrandt also went to Amsterdam to study with Lastman, but not until his teens. After he returned home, he and Lievens seem to have struck up a friendship, or at least a friendly rivalry: They very likely visited each other's studios, painted many of the same subjects and models and even posed for each other. The two artists began working in such similar styles that even their friends often couldn't tell their paintings apart.

During this time, the pair attracted the attention of Constantijn Huygens, secretary to the Prince of Orange as well as a connoisseur and occasional collector who was always scouting artists for the court. "I venture to suggest offhand that Rembrandt is superior to Lievens in his sure touch and liveliness of emotions," he wrote in his autobiography. "Conversely, Lievens is the greater in inventiveness and audacious themes and forms. ... Great things

may be expected of him if he is granted a long enough life."

In 1632 their paths diverged, much in the way that Huygens had foreseen. Rembrandt established himself in Amsterdam and perfected the moody, empathetic style for which he is still revered. But Lievens continued to reinvent himself, moving from nation to nation and changing his manner of painting with each new domicile. Between 1632 and 1635, he lived in London, where evidence suggests that he worked as an assistant to Sir Anthony van Dyck, the Flemish painter who was court portraitist to Charles I. Royal collection catalogues and sales records show that Lievens painted portraits of the royal family; he also developed his lifelong passion for landscape painting.

After that, Lievens relocated to

Antwerp, where he broke completely from the Dutch world of chiaroscuro portraits and still lifes, and adopted the more colorful, expressive Flemish "International" style perfected by Rubens and Van Dyck. "That was what the upper echelons wanted," says Wheelock. By 1644 Lievens was back in Amsterdam, helping to pioneer the bravura International style there, where it eventually became the rage; he smoothed out his brushwork and adopted a more subdued palette that was more in keeping with the tastes of the local clientele. He also spent several years in The Hague and, toward the end of his life, shuttled between Amsterdam and Leiden in search of commissions.

As well as painting portraits, Lievens was best known for large-scale allegorical and history paintings, such as *The Five Muses* (1650), made for Huis ten Bosch, which is





From top: *Self Portrait*, circa 1629-30, oil on panel; *Landscape With Willows*, early 1640s, oil on panel.

still the private residence of the Dutch royal family in The Hague, and *Brinio Raised on a Shield* (1660), which hangs in the town hall in Amsterdam. “He was getting all sorts of commissions,” Wheelock notes, “ones that Rembrandt wanted.”

Yet despite these many successes, Lievens had even worse financial luck than Rembrandt. He died in complete penury in 1674, two years after military incursions by England, France and Germany put paid to the Dutch art market. Today it is hard to know what prompted Lievens’ many moves. Was it a hunt for new clients, a desire to be exposed to new painting styles or just constitutional restlessness? One thing is certain, though: His peripatetic life and painting style didn’t help his posthumous reputation. Because Lievens never established a fixed workshop or a stable group of patrons, no nation had a vested interest in keeping his name alive. And because some of his greatest late works were made for royal and official buildings, they have always been off limits to the public. Besides, as time went on, his embrace of the International style was always regarded with some skepticism by Dutch-painting purists.

Gradually, “all this period gets dismissed as derivative,” says Wheelock. “More and more his reputation disappears.”

But the real factor that kept Lievens in the shadows was the second coming of Rembrandt in the 19th century, when the Romantics recast him as a free-spirited genius. From that point forward, the number of paintings attributed to Rembrandt steadily increased. In 1900 there were 377, but by 1923 that number had nearly doubled, to 714. (Some of those works, such as *The Feast of Esther*, 1625, have now been reattributed to Lievens.) If Lievens was discussed at all, he was understood as Rembrandt’s follower or student.

In the 1970s, as scholars began to look more critically at Rembrandt attributions, interest in Lievens gradually began to grow. Germany has always been ahead of the game—a monograph was published there in the 1930s, and in 1979 the Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum in Braunschweig mounted a small-scale retrospective that was, says Wheelock, “very important in terms of bringing work together.”

DeWitt, who has been fascinated by Lievens since his undergraduate years,

believes that Gary Schwartz’s 1984 biography, *Rembrandt: His Life, His Paintings*, also helped, because it discussed the relationship between the two artists in some depth. “He had a very good up-to-date view,” explains DeWitt, “that this was an artistic rivalry but also an intense relationship of innovation between the two artists. He made the point several times that the innovation seems to have come from Lievens even though Lievens was younger.”

Whatever the reason, it was around that time that Lievens’ star began rising in the market. In the early ’70s, Bader, the Milwaukee collector, was able to buy three late Lievens paintings for less than \$3,000 each. But the Lievens market changed decisively in 1988, when Bader paid \$319,000 at Sotheby’s New York for the 1630 painting *Portrait of Rembrandt’s Mother*. (Because there is now some doubt about the sitter’s identity, it is listed in the catalogue as *Profile Head of an Old Woman*.) “That was more than Alfred ever paid for any painting,” says Otto Naumann, an Old Master dealer in New York, “and he bought it for himself. That was the first sale when people started paying attention.”

Two years later, in 1990, Lievens’ *Portrait of a Boy in Persian Dress* (1631) achieved \$1 million at Bonhams’ Knightsbridge location—a price that doubled in 2004 when the same painting brought \$2 million at Christie’s New York.

Recently, the most frequent buyer for Lievens paintings has been Van Haeften, usually in partnership with Naumann and sometimes others, like the New York dealer Jack Kilgore, Bader or the London sculpture dealer Danny Katz. In 2007 at Sotheby’s Amsterdam, Van Haeften bought *The Card Players* for a hammer price of \$2.4 million, almost 10 times its high estimate. (As Van Haeften tells it, the auctioneer, Jan Six, stopped the sale and announced, “Ladies and gentlemen, this is the highest price ever paid for any work of art in Holland”—an auction record that still stands—and invited them all to stay for drinks.) Later that year, Van Haeften paid a stunning \$4.4 million for the 1930 *vanitas* at Christie’s London. “Once you’ve seen Lievens and appreciated him,” says Van Haeften, “he’s someone who gets under your skin a bit.”

Although Van Haeften has resold many



Samson and Delilah, circa 1628, oil on canvas.

of these purchases to a private collector in New York—one of two such who obsessively pursue Lievens—the collector opted not to buy the *vanitas*, hence its appearance at last year’s Maastricht fair. Because the painting is still for sale, it might well appear at this year’s edition, too, and Van Haeften promises it will look even more spectacular. Last year, he explains, “We hadn’t had time to clean it properly.”

Of course, all of these stunning prices are for Lievens’ early work, made before 1632, when his art looked a lot like Rembrandt’s. “He’s as close as one can get to Rembrandt, really,” says Van Haeften, jokingly, “and a poor chap like me has to make do.” And there are still many who remain unconvinced by the full breadth of his oeuvre. Not only are Lievens’ many dramatic stylistic changes still viewed with some skepticism, but, as even enthusiasts allow, the work was often uneven, especially toward the end of his life. “There are Lievenses and

Lievenses,” says Naumann. “There are some of very poor quality, too.”

But to a believer like DeWitt, Lievens’ vast range—and even inconsistency—suggests a Picassoesque level of ambition and innovation. “Lievens is constantly developing style and virtuosity in one area or another,” he says, “but all the while maintaining a kind of monumentality that makes him the go-to guy for grand history paintings.”

As Wheelock sees it, Lievens’ persistent problem is that he was never a great fit with his own times. “The distinctiveness and really physical quality of these paintings—really bold and coarse and aggressive—doesn’t fit comfortably in our normal view of Dutch art,” he says. “Lievens is an artist who to a great extent is more comfortable in his own context than in the context of his contemporaries.” That’s probably something we should all keep in mind when rendering judgment on artists of the past. **A**

