

# SALOMON LILIAN

## DUTCH OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

### **Jan Lievens**

Leiden 1607 – 1674 Amsterdam

*A Tronie of a Bearded Old Man in Profile, Facing Left*

Oil on panel

56.3 x 45.8 cm.

### **Provenance:**

Probably Cologne, collection Paul Esch (1875-1950), 1922<sup>1</sup>

Cologne, private collection for generations, until 2024

### **Literature:**

H. Schneider, *Jan Lievens: Sein Leben und seine Werke*, Haarlem 1932 (rev. ed. H. Schneider, R.E.O. Ekkart, Amsterdam 1973), p. 134, under cat. no. 165 (panel, 60 x 50 cm., signed with Rembrandt's monogram and dated 1631, copy after the work in the Hermitage, St Petersburg)  
W. Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandtschüler*, 6 vols., Landau/Pfalz 1983-1994, 3 (1983), p. 1805, under cat. no. 1278 (repeating Schneider 1932)

B. Schnackenburg, *Jan Lievens : friend and rival of the young Rembrandt : with a catalogue raisonné of his early Leiden work 1623-1632*, Petersberg 2016, p. 396, under cat. no. 198 (repeating Schneider 1932)

I. Sokolova, *The State Hermitage Museum : Dutch painting seventeenth - eighteenth centuries : catalogue of the collection*, 5 vols., St Petersburg 2017, 2, p. 308, under cat. no. 686 (repeating Schneider 1932)

### **Related work:**

Jan Lievens, *Bust of a Greybeard Facing Left*, oil on panel, 62 x 50.5 cm., St Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum, inv. GE-736<sup>2</sup>

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### **Jan Lievens**

Jan Lievens' biography and critical fortune are well known.<sup>3</sup> A widely admired child prodigy from Leiden, he teamed up with his peer Rembrandt (1606-1669), with whose name and fame he became inescapably intertwined, not always to his advantage. Lievens was born on 24 October 1607 to the tapestry weaver Lieven Hendricx and his wife Machteld Jansdr van Noortsant. Recognising their son's exceptional talent, they apprenticed him at the age of eight to Joris van Schooten (c. 1587-1651). In the winter of 1617/18 Lievens was sent to Pieter Lastman (1583-1633) in Amsterdam, then the most renowned Dutch history painter. Returning home in c. 1619/20, he set up his own studio in his family home and soon found eager patrons amongst the astonished Leiden art connoisseurs. While still documented in Leiden in 1622, it proves difficult to locate Lievens during the next years. Judging from his work, he must have been well aware of the artistic developments in Utrecht, though an apprenticeship with one of the Utrecht masters has never been established.<sup>4</sup> In the latter half of the 1620s, Lievens and Rembrandt – the latter back in Leiden after his own apprenticeship with Lastman – engaged in a notorious artistic competition. Famous is the visit of Constantijn Huygens, secretary to the Prince of Orange Frederik Hendrik, who showered the young masters with the utmost praise, only critiquing Lievens' stubbornness 'which derives from an excess of self-confidence.' Still, Huygens granted Lievens the commission of painting his portrait and proved to be instrumental in his obtaining commissions from the court. Lievens' inclusion in Anthony van Dyck's (1599-1641) prestigious *Iconography* series of famous artists and patrons (among them Huygens, but not Rembrandt!) is illustrative of his fame at the beginning of the 1630s.

Following Rembrandt's move to Amsterdam, Lievens left for London in 1632, where he again met with success, receiving portrait commissions from the King and court nobility. Three years later he moved to Antwerp, where he developed a more international style, combining elements of Flemish and Venetian painting. He married the daughter of sculptor Andries Colijns de Nole, Susanna, and teamed up with such artists as Adriaen Brouwer (1605/06-1638), David Teniers the Younger (1610-1690), and his former Leiden contact Jan Davidsz de Heem (1606-1684). More

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successes followed, but in 1644 monetary issues caused Jan, Susanna and their son, the future painter Jan Andrea Lievens (1644-1680), to move to Amsterdam. There, Susanna soon died, after which Jan re-married Cornelia de Bray. Participations in illustrious projects such as the decoration programs of the Oranjezaal (1648/50), Schloss Oranienburg near Berlin (1653/54) and Amsterdam's new City Hall (1656/60), as well as important portrait commissions, solidified Lievens' status. Still, the last period of his life was full of sorrow. While Cornelia died in 1668, Lievens' debts mounted. He stayed in The Hague and Leiden but finally ended up – like Rembrandt – at Rozengracht in Amsterdam, where he died in poverty in June 1674.

### **Out of the shadow**

A painting's fate can be sealed for generations by one scholar's early judgement. In his encompassing monograph and catalogue raisonné *Jan Lievens: Sein Leben und seine Werke*, published in 1932, the Swiss art historian and director of the Netherlands Institute for Art History (RKD) in The Hague Hans Schneider (1888-1953) notes under his catalogue number 165, Jan Lievens' *Bust of a Greybeard* in the Hermitage (fig. 1) the existence of 'a copy (panel, 60 x 50, signed with Rembrandt's monogram and dated 1631) in the collection P. Esch in Cologne, 1922'. Although the measurements given by Schneider differ slightly, and the (false) Rembrandt monogram and the date 1631 are no longer present, the painting Schneider described in the collection of the Cologne lawyer and writer Adam Paul Esch (1875-1950) is in fact the present Lilian work. Quite possibly Schneider never saw the painting in real life – his judgement was likely based on a black/white photo of the present work at the RKD (fig. 2)<sup>5</sup> – but his opinion nevertheless remained current for nearly a century. Despite the detailed RKD photo always being publicly accessible, the authors of two subsequent authoritative publications on Lievens' oeuvre, Werner Sumowski in his *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler* (1986) and Bernhard Schnackenburg in his *Jan Lievens : friend and rival of the young Rembrandt : with a catalogue raisonné of his early Leiden work 1623-1632* (2016) both limited themselves to repeating Schneider's 1932 statement, and thus let pass the opportunity to assess the present work with fresh eyes.

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Quite possibly, the psychological precedence of Lievens' *Greybeard* in the Hermitage, one of the world's most esteemed art collections, played a significant part in the *a priori* valuation of the one work over the other. Moreover, the unsigned Hermitage *Greybeard* had been attributed to Rembrandt from the eighteenth until the turn of the twentieth century and always enjoyed great renown as a masterpiece by him, as is testified by the various prints after the work from the eighteenth century on (figs. 3-6).<sup>6</sup> These 'Rembrandt' prints were no doubt the inspiration behind the apocryphal Rembrandt monogram and date 1631 that were apparently added to the present work at some point.<sup>7</sup>

As the better-known painting in the Hermitage was thus embraced as Lievens' original, the present work was – with precious little motivation – all too easily deemed a 'copy'. However, in Lievens we find a young and notoriously restless artist, whose endlessly curiosity led him to sometimes revisit earlier efforts, in part to speed up production and meet client demand, but just as much to experiment with variant styles, techniques and compositional adjustments, producing creative reinterpretations with alternate results. The notion of autograph versions wasn't too current with Schneider or Sumowski, but more recently other scholars, such as David de Witt in 2008 and Schnackenburg in his 2016 catalogue have in fact listed numerous examples of this practice in Lievens' early production, pointing out different approaches, varying from preparatory studies, near identical versions, renderings in different styles and emphasis, and variant compositions (figs. 7, 8).<sup>8</sup> Following the surfacing of the present work, both Schnackenburg (2022) and De Witt (2025) inspected the work firsthand, and independently concluded that it concerns a fully autograph rendering, datable around the same period as the Hermitage painting, c. 1630/32.<sup>9</sup>

### **Variations, rather than versions**

Indeed, looking at both works it is clear that although the model is likely the same individual, the two paintings differ so significantly, and on various levels, that one might best regard them as variations, rather than versions. For one, while the busts themselves are similar in size, the

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present panel is slightly smaller, causing the figure to appear more forward within the picture plane, an effect emphasised by the well-chosen contrast between the dark back of the head and the lighter sand coloured background, lacking in the Hermitage variant. In the present work the model wears a simple brown cloak over a grey undergarment, whereas in the Hermitage he painting wears a black velvet cloak over a white chemise. And whereas the man in the Lilian work is depicted in near profile – only his right brow bridge remains partly visible – with a clear view of his back, in the Hermitage painting we see him from a slightly lower, towering perspective, his bust turned towards the beholder, showing the right arm, the left shoulder and the opened cloak. The face and the incarnate in the Lilian painting were executed with coloristic bravura – white, greys, various pinks and red, all adding to a dazzling unity – and a phenomenal paint handling with short individual strokes that drape the wrinkles and the sinuous veins around the glimmering black eye (fig. 9). The effect in the Hermitage painting is equally impressive but rather different, as the paint structure seems to mimic a more parchment-like skin surface (fig. 10). The man's frown in the present work seems deeper than in the Hermitage painting, his stare more intense and his mouth more agape, as if he's about to speak; his beard is long and straight, emphasized by the thick scratches into the wet paint, whereas the many thinner scratches visible in the Hermitage painting give it a woollier impression. Such are the differences, that we can safely conclude that Lievens varied all of this on purpose, pursuing different ideas in both works, leaving the overall impression that in the present painting he endeavoured to convey the sitter as alert and energetic, in the Hermitage painting as more tranquil, sedate. Extravert versus introvert, the *vita activa* versus the *vita contemplativa*, as it were.

### Dating

Clearly, these works emerged from the spur of creativity generated by the artistic competition between Lievens and Rembrandt, the latter himself likewise experimenting frantically with representations of old age, varying countenances, light and dark contrasts, and paint handling to express different modes of human temperament.<sup>10</sup> Within this context, a work such as Rembrandt's *Head of an Old Man in a Cap* datable to c. 1630 in Kingston (fig. 11) is a clear

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example of how these young artists fed off each other's production, its introvert qualities and compositional scheme reflecting paintings such as Lievens' *Old Bearded Man Looking Down* in Schwerin of c. 1629/30 (fig. 12), its virtuoso patchy technique alluding to the daring execution found in works by Lievens such as the present one.<sup>11</sup> That said, in the painted *tronies*-of-bearded-old-men-department Lievens from the outset took the absolute lead, producing a startling variety of such busts that together reflect his ongoing investigation into subject, shape, colour and mood. Lievens, thus, before all reacted to Lievens. While some works datable prior to and around 1630, such as the *Bust of a Man Holding a Quill* of c. 1627 in Pau (fig. 13, cf. the veins), the Schwerin *Old Bearded Man Looking Down* (fig. 12), or the *Bust of a Man with a Cap* in Kassel (c.1629/30) herald the present work in tonality and/or execution, an especially apt comparison is found in a recently surfaced *Head of a Bearded Man* of c. 1631 now in a private collection, which shows similarly adventurous paint handling (fig. 124).<sup>12</sup>

Frustratingly, Lievens almost never dated his works, the Lilian and Hermitage paintings being no exceptions. Dendrochronological analysis of the present panel has brought about a plausible year for the creation of the painting from 1628 on, which fits its stylistic dating around 1630/32.<sup>13</sup> Technical research on the Hermitage painting lacks, though. While one might instinctively feel that the connection of the present work with Lievens' production of c. 1630 implies a creation before the Hermitage painting, evidence concerning these works' mutual chronology remains circumstantial. A signed etching by Lievens, datable to c. 1631, might provide further substance.<sup>14</sup> Lievens rendered the old man in this etching – without any doubt our model, sporting the exact same nose, nose bridge, eyebrow and cheekbone – in perfect profile, much akin to the present work (fig. 15, in reverse). Likewise corresponding is the remarkable alert stare also encountered in our painting, which prompts the suspicion that painting and etching were created in close analogy to one another. If one considers this evident but hitherto unnoticed kinship on the one hand to the weaker connection with the Hermitage painting on the other, one can plausibly argue that the Lilian painting and the etching were done first, after which Lievens later revisited the composition, rather than vice versa. Moreover, the existence of an autograph

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small-scale variation of the etching that shows the model – coincidentally or not – in a more sedate fashion, likewise points in that direction (fig. 16, in reverse).<sup>15</sup> Given these observations, a dating of the present work c. 1630/31 is proposed here, followed by a dating c. 1631/32 for the Hermitage painting.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Schneider 1932 (see Literature).

<sup>2</sup> Sokolova 2017, 2, p. 308, under cat. no. 686 mentions a third ‘copy’ in Donetsk (Ukraine) in the 1960s, apparently deemed the ‘original by Rubens’ (support and measurements not given). A copy after the Hermitage painting by the French artist Léon Bonnat (1833-1922) was auctioned in New York, Christie’s, 24 May 1985, lot 160, aptly titled *The Philosopher*.

<sup>3</sup> Biography based on A.K. Wheelock, Jr., ‘Bringing New Light to an Old Master’, in: Wheelock et al., *Jan Lievens : A Dutch Master Rediscovered*, exh. cat. Washington, National Gallery of Art, Milwaukee, Milwaukee Art Museum, Amsterdam, Rembrandthuis 2008-2009, pp. 1-27; P. Bakker, ‘Jan Lievens’ (2017), in: *The Leiden Collection Catalogue* (4th ed., A.K. Wheelock Jr., E. Nogrady, C. van Cauwenberge, eds.), New York 2023–. <https://theleidencollection.com/artists/jan-lievens/> (accessed 19 January 2025).

<sup>4</sup> Wheelock, in: Washington/Milwaukee/Amsterdam 2008-2009, pp. 6-8 alludes to the possibility of such an apprenticeship.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://rkd.nl/imageslite/244258> (website assessed January 2025). The caption makes mention of the year 1922, probably the year the RKD received the photo from Paul Esch. From 1915 until 1930 Schneider worked at the Mauritshuis, The Hague. I thank the previous owner of the present painting for once more confirming that the work is identical to the painting in the Esch collection.

<sup>6</sup> Sokolova 2017, 2, pp. 307-308, cat. no. 686 (Hermitage inv. no. 816). G.F. Waagen, *Die Gemäldesammlung in der Kaiserlichen Eremitage zu St. Petersburg : Nebst Bemerkungen über andere dortige Kunstsammlungen*, Munich 1864 (2nd. ed. 1870), p. 182, cat. no. 816, praises the work, but doubts about the attribution to Rembrandt (‘Ungewöhnlich edel im Character und in einem wahren und hellen Ton gehalten. In diesen Stücken weicht dieses Bild so sehr von Rembrandt ab, das ich einige Zweifel nicht unterdrücken kann.’). Waagen does not attribute the work to Lievens, though, as stated by Sokolova (p. 307). A. Somof, *Ermitage impérial : catalogue de la galerie des tableaux*, 3 vols., St Petersburg 1899-1903, 2 (1901), p. 200, ill., includes the work as by Lievens. In addition to the prints depicted here, Sokolova mentions prints by V.E. Gromanin, 1787 and A.L. Sergeev, 1853 (lithograph).

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<sup>7</sup> Schneider does not specify where the (false) Rembrandt signature and date 1631 were found. No trace of them remains, and neither signature nor date are visible in the old photo.

<sup>8</sup> D. de Witt, *The Bader Collection : Dutch and Flemish Paintings*, Kingston 2008, pp. 190-195, cat. nos. 114, 115; Schnackenburg 2016, cat. nos. 8, 108; 76-78; 109, 149; 143, 144; 171-192; 167, 168, 191, 192; 199, 200 (here figs. 7 and 8); 204, 205. In addition, an autograph version of cat. no. 193 recently surfaced (see our fig. 14 and note 12). Many of these versions had previously been disregarded unjustified as copies by previous scholars.

<sup>9</sup> Schnackenburg's written Gutachten (14 November 2022), in which he proposes a date c. 1631/32, is available on request. David de Witt inspected the painting firsthand in Amsterdam, January 2025, in the presence of the present author and Salomon Lilian. His estimation concerning the dating is c. 1630/31. Lievens expert Lloyd de Witt, has seen photographs of the work and fully endorses the attribution to Lievens. The painting will be included in his forthcoming Lievens catalogue raisonné.

<sup>10</sup> Famous among many examples is that of Rembrandt's *Laughing Soldier* (Mauritshuis, The Hague), his *Self-portrait*, (Nationalmuseum Stockholm, dated 1630) and the *Old Woman at Prayer* (Salzburg, Salzburger Landessammlungen, Residenzgalerie), in which he demonstrates on three identical sized goldleafed copper plates varying painting modes connected to different human affects. See J. Lange, in: E. van de Wetering, B. Schnackenburg, *The Mystery of the Young Rembrandt*, exh. cat. Kassel, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Schloss Wilhelmshöhe, Amsterdam, Rembrandthuis, pp. 366-369, cat. no. 79; E. van de Wetering, in: E. van de Wetering et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings IV : The Self Portraits*, pp. 166-171; J. Hillegers, in: A. Tummers et al., *Frans Hals : Eye to Eye with Rembrandt, Rubens and Titian*, exh. cat. Haarlem, Frans Hals Museum 2013, p. 105, cat. no. 9. On the phenomenon of adapting painting styles to subjects, see A. Tummers, *The eye of the connoisseur : authenticating paintings by Rembrandt and his contemporaries*, Los Angeles 2011, chapter 4.

<sup>11</sup> On Rembrandt's *Head of an Old Man* in Kingston, see De Witt 2008, pp. 261-265, cat. no. 161. For Lievens' *Old Man Looking Down* in Schwerin, see: Schnackenburg 2016, pp. 313-314, cat. no. 133.

<sup>12</sup> See Schnackenburg 2016, cat. nos. 43 (Pau) and 105 (Kassel). The recently surfaced *Head of an Old Man*, auctioned in London, Christie's, 8 July 2021, lot 24 (where dated c. 1631, referencing a dendrochronological report and expressing gratitude to Lloyd de Witt and Bernard Schnackenburg for independently confirming the attribution to Jan Lievens), now in a European private collection, is an autograph version of Schnackenburg's cat. no. 193.

<sup>13</sup> Dendrochronological report by Prof. Dr. Peter Klein, Universität Hamburg, Fakultät für Mathematik, Informatik und Naturwissenschaften, Zentrum Holzwirtschaft, dd. 27 March 2023. The panel exists of three planks from the same tree. The youngest growth ring stems from the year 1614. That following, an absolute earliest dating for creation of the painting is 1625, the more likely dating being from 1628 on. Report available on request.

<sup>14</sup> Schneider 1932, p. 265 (Rov. 35), no dating; R. van Straten, *Young Rembrandt : the Leiden years, 1606-1632*, Leiden 2005, p. 184, fig. 313, spring of 1631; Schnackenburg 2016, p. 419, cat. no. 230, as c. 1631/32. Since the present Lilian painting has not been previously published as Lievens, and was never previously depicted, the evident proximity between print and painting has gone unnoticed so far.

<sup>15</sup> Schneider 1932, p. 266 (Rov. 54), unjustly considered this replica etching, although signed 'IL' and in the same direction as the other version, not to be by Lievens.