

**Jan Lievens**

Leiden 1607 – 1674 Amsterdam

*Saint Simeon and the Christ Child*

Signed upper left J. Liviús

Oil on panel

97.8 x 69.8 cm.

**Provenance:**

Possibly Amsterdam, collection Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669)<sup>1</sup>

Possibly Amsterdam, collection Jan Six (1618-1700)

Possibly his sale, Amsterdam, Jan Pietersz Zomer, 6 April 1702, lot 48, to Jan Six II (1668-1750)

Possibly Middelburg, collection Jean Walran Sandra, 3 April 1713

Possibly London, collection Chaplin

Possibly his sale, London, Foster, 15 April 1835, lot 111, to Sherwood [?].

Trent, private collection<sup>2</sup>

Sale Munich, Galerie Hugo Helbing, 3 June 1908, lot 36

**Literature:**

H. Schneider, *Jan Lievens : Sein Leben und seine Werke*, Haarlem 1932, pp. 23, 98, cat. no. 26 (second edition

H. Schneider, R.E.O. Ekkart, Amsterdam 1973, pp. 23, 98, 322, cat. no. 26)

H. Gerson, 'Twee vroege studies van Jan Lievens', in: *Oud Holland* 69 (1954), p. 180

K. Bauch, 'Zum Werk des Jan Lievens (I)', in: *Pantheon* 25 (1967), pp. 160-170, pp. 161-162, fig. 2

H. Gerson, 'Rembrandt's workshop and assistants', in: D.C. Stam (ed.), *Rembrandt after three hundred years : a symposium - Rembrandt and his followers : October 22-24, 1969*, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago 1973, pp. 19-31, pp. 23-24

R. Klessmann, *Jan Lievens : Ein Maler im Schatten Rembrandts*, exh. cat. Braunschweig, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum 1979, p. 42, under cat. no. 1

W. Sumowski, *Drawings of the Rembrandt School*, 10 vols., New York 1979, 7, p. 3894; 9, p. 4794

E. Haverkamp-Begemann, 'Simeon and the Christ Child', in: *Rembrandt and his age : focus on man*, exh. cat.

Stockholm, Nationalmuseum 1992-1993, pp. 30-40, p. 40, note 14

W. Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandtschüler*, 6 vols., Landau/Pfalz 1983-1994, 3 (1983), p. 1790, no. 1223, p. 1862, fig. 1223<sup>3</sup>

H. Gutbrod, *Lievens und Rembrandt : Studien zum Verhältnis ihrer Kunst*, Frankfurt am Main 1996, pp. 96, 309, 314

R. van Straten, *Young Rembrandt : The Leiden Years 1606 – 1632*, Leiden 2005, pp. 42-43, fig. 35

B. Schnackenburg, 'Jan Lievens und Pieter de Grebber', in: *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* 68 (2007), pp. 181-218, pp. 194-195, fig. 11, pp. 197, 205

D. de Witt, *The Bader Collection : Dutch and Flemish Paintings*, Kingston 2008, pp. 189-190, fig. 113a



Jan Lievens' biography and critical fortune are well known.<sup>4</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. He 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 he 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>5</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) 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 great success, receiving portrait commissions from the King and court nobility. Three years later he nonetheless 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 old Leiden connection Jan Davidsz de Heem (1606-1684). More 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 and Jan re-married Cornelia de Bray. Participation 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 – just like Rembrandt – in the Rozengracht in Amsterdam, where he died in poverty in June 1674.

While Rembrandt went on to become the indisputable figurehead of Dutch Golden Age painting, Jan Lievens initially seems to have been the more outstanding of the two. Rembrandt's junior by more than a year, and yet ahead in his own enterprises, Lievens was boldly ambitious, and his earliest surviving works, of around 1622-1625, attest to an intimate knowledge of the latest artistic developments. The present *Simeon and the Christ Child*, datable to the end of this earliest period, underlines this. The work, last recorded in 1908, shows Simeon of Jerusalem, who was 'just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel' (Luke 2: 22-40). Simeon was told by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. One day, led by the Spirit, he arrived at the Temple, and as Mary and Joseph brought in the infant Jesus to present him there to the Lord, he took the child in his hands, blessed God and said: 'Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word: For mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, Which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel.' It is this very moment, when the astonished Simeon turns his eyes up to his Lord and sings his hymn of praise, that young Lievens chose to depict. The painting brings to mind Constantijn Huygens's comment, when visiting Lievens and Rembrandt in their studio: while praising Rembrandt for his sure touch, liveliness of emotions and gift for small-scale concentration, he attributes to Lievens superior inventiveness and audaciousness of themes and forms. 'Everything his young spirit endeavours to capture must be magnificent and lofty. Rather than depicting his subject in its true size, he chooses a larger scale. [...] In painting the human countenance he wreaks miracles.'<sup>6</sup> Indeed, everything about the painting is grotesque, monumental and life-size plus – the exalted, rugged face of old Simeon illuminated by divine rays, his convex eyes, his toothless mouth, and his scruffy beard. The red of the massive garment contrasts with its fur lining, as the blue of his sleeve leads to the work's unifying zenith, the magnificent wrinkled hands, clasping the Christ child in such a grip as no one had ever depicted before. The pink, haloed Christ child, wrapped in the solid folds of a yellow

cloth as he smiles disarmingly towards the beholder, is not the pretty baby seen in other renditions of the theme. But then again, prettiness is clearly not what Lievens was aiming for. Surely, he must have been supremely taken with his work, as he signed it with the exclusive, Latinised *J. Liviús*, found as such on only two other works from the same period, both now in Warsaw.<sup>7</sup>

What were Lievens' sources? With regard to the theme's pictorial tradition, the example of Paulus Moreelse (1571-1638) in Utrecht has been pointed out.<sup>8</sup> Moreelse's *Simeon*, dated 1614, is – apart from one sixteenth century example<sup>9</sup> – indeed the first half-figure rendering of the subject in the Netherlands and compositionally rather comparable to the present work (fig. 1). As mentioned above, Lievens closely studied the Utrecht masters – tellingly Gerard van Honthorst (1592-1652) and Hendrick ter Brugghen (1588-1629) provided the direct examples for the Warsaw works – and it is thus quite plausible that he was aware of Moreelse's *Simeon*. But apart from the general scheme, Moreelse's soft and smooth finish is quite the opposite of Lievens'

raw and direct effort, which is remarkably reminiscent of the rough studies of Jacob Jordaens (1593-1678), produced in Antwerp in around 1620 (fig. 2).<sup>10</sup> Lievens' most eye catching motif, the gesture of the clasped hands, is altogether absent in Moreelse's work, and it seems exceptional, if not unique, in the pictorial tradition of the subject. Regarding this gesture, Bernard Schnackenburg has focused attention on an upward looking *St Peter* with clasped hands of 1625 by Pieter de Grebber (c. 1600-1652) of Haarlem, which – according to him – would have been the source for the present work.<sup>11</sup> Yet Lievens had no need of De Grebber's example, as he no doubt had a variety of prints at his disposal depicting St Peter in similar fashion, or – for that matter – other saints such as Jeremiah (fig. 3). Moreover, Lievens had already picked up the clasped hand motif in the earliest days of his career, before 1625, since we come across it in two paintings by his hand depicting *St Peter*, evidently early works (figs. 4, 5). Indeed, Karel van Mander (1548-1606), in his chapter on the depiction of emotions in his *Schilder-Boeck*, already advised this gesture to young art students, saying that if 'the hands are together with the fingers interwoven,



Fig. 1 Paulus Moreelse, *Simeon with the Christ Child*, signed and dated 1614, oil on canvas, 76 x 63.5 cm., present whereabouts unknown



Fig. 2 Jacob Jordaens, *Study of Abraham Grapeus as Job*, oil on panel, 67 x 53 cm., Detroit, Detroit Institute of Arts

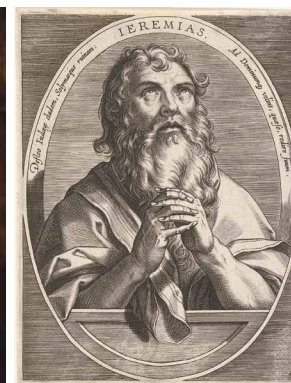


Fig. 3 Cornelis Galle the Elder after Jan van der Straet, *Jeremiah*, 1613, engraving, 18 x 13.5 cm., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum



Fig. 4 Jan Lievens, *St Peter*, oil on panel, 49.5 x 38.1 cm., New York, private collection



Fig. 5 Jan Lievens, *St Peter*, oil on panel, measurements unknown, The Netherlands, private collection

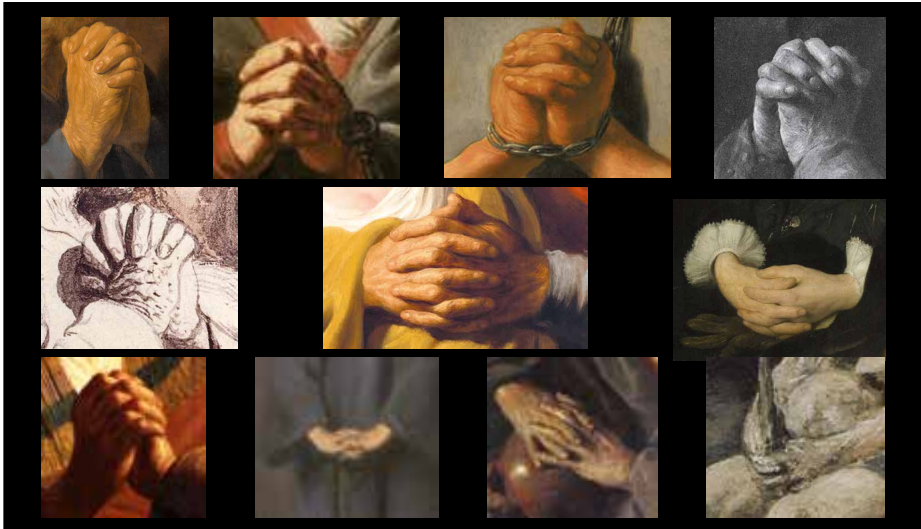


Fig. 6 Jan Lievens, clasp hands gesture

opposite to each other, like West and East the countenance also will look up sombrelly.<sup>12</sup> Lievens must have taken this advice to heart. In fact, during his Leiden period he employed it in at least 11 (mostly single figure) works (fig. 6), underlining that he – and Rembrandt in his wake – considered it ideal, not just for the depiction of despair, but for conveying a range of emotions from sorrow and regret to prayer, contemplation and devotion.<sup>13</sup> Surely no coincidence, Lievens again used the clasped hands in his *Portrait of Constantijn Huygens* of around 1628, an extremely important commission to him, of which Huygens notes that: ‘So ardent was [Lievens’] desire [to paint my portrait] 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’ significantly adding to this that Lievens was ‘content to paint my clothes and my bare hands (a task of which he acquitted himself most tastefully).’ Given Lievens’ predilection for the gesture, its rarity in portraiture in 1628, the prestige involved and the commissioner’s clear appreciation (‘tastefully’), we must assume that painter and sitter discussed the gesture, its range of meaning, and its inclusion in the portrait. Moreover, Huygens again emphasised his recognition and appreciation of the clasped hands by choosing precisely Rembrandt’s emotion laden Judas as the topic of his famous praise of the artist’s abilities (fig. 7): ‘The gesture of that despairing Judas [...] begging for forgiveness, but devoid of hope [...] his hands clenched together until they bleed.’ The gesture thus played an important role in the two young artists’ semiotic repertoire, and credit goes to Lievens for fully utilising its potential, beyond Van Mander’s advice.<sup>14</sup> Nowhere in his oeuvre are the clasped hands more outstanding and significant than in the present *Simeon*, in which they not only depict Simeon’s song of praise, but beyond that seem to convey a positive, unifying and redeeming message, precisely the essence of the Biblical story depicted, in which Simeon recognises the Saviour and understands that God redeems his promise to him and mankind. The clasped hands here seem to symbolise both the fulfilment of the Lord’s prophecy, and mankind’s universal embrace of the Messiah.

A final note on the painting’s dating. Given the identical signatures on the two Warsaw works and the present *Simeon*, one must assume a more or less simultaneous creation for the three works. The year 1623, then, is the *terminum post quem*, since the Warsaw *Boy with a Pipe* (*Allegory of Smell*) strongly relies on Ter Brugghen’s dated *Boy Smoking a Pipe* of 1623 in the Dobó István Vármúzeum, Eger.<sup>15</sup> On



Fig. 7 Rembrandt, *Judas Returning the Thirty Silver Pieces*, oil on panel, 79 x 102.3 cm., England, private collection, detail



Fig. 8 Here attributed to Jan Lievens, *Laughing Child Holding a Wicker Rattle*, oil on panel, 50 x 38.5 cm., London, Victoria and Albert Museum

the other hand, the date of execution of these works cannot have been more than a year or two after 1623, if one accepts the identification of the present Christ child with the boy depicted in a *Laughing Child Holding a Wicker Rattle* in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (fig. 8). This work is currently attributed to Jan de Bray (1622-1697) but, as was suggested by Dr Eddy Schavemaker, the painting might in fact be by Lievens, and the child the same boy from the present work, only slightly older.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, not only is there a striking resemblance

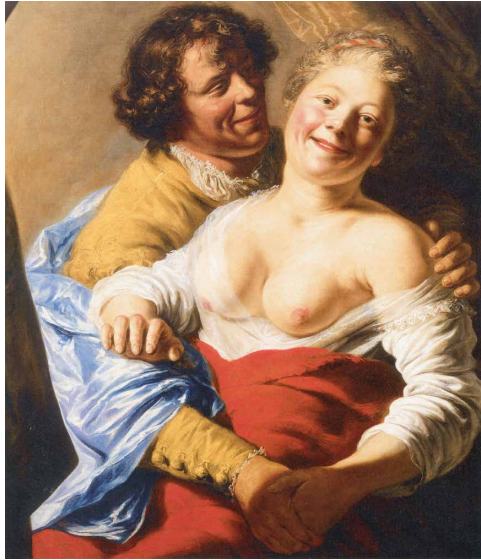


Fig. 9 Jan Lievens, *Youth Embracing a Young Woman*, oil on canvas, 97 x 84 cm., private collection

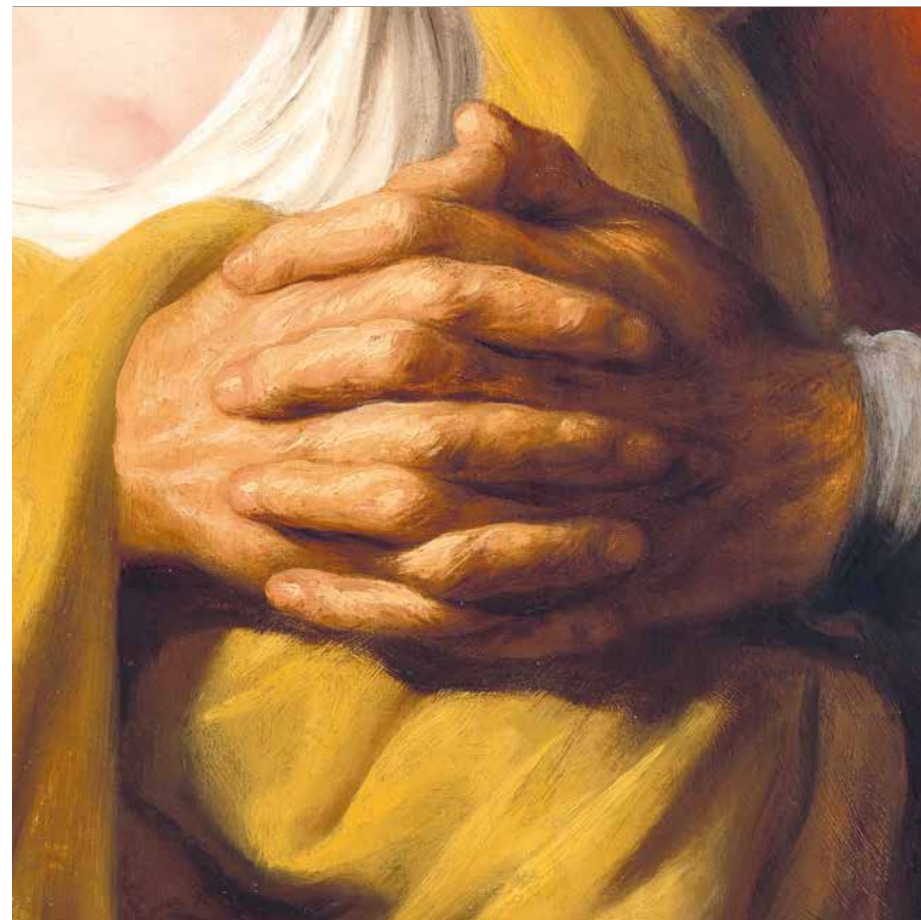
between the children in these two paintings; the facial features, colouring, shading and overall impression of the London boy are highly comparable to the young woman in Lievens' *Youth Embracing a Young Woman*, datable to 1627/28 (fig. 9). If one estimates the Christ child in the present work to be somewhat less than a year old, and the London boy about four, this would suggest a dating of around 1624/25 for the present work, which concurs with most expert opinions.

JH

#### Notes

- Two seventeenth century records of a Simeon are connectable to Lievens. 1) A painting of the subject 'done by Rembrants or Jan Lievensz', in the 1632 inventory of the Stadhouder (S.W.A. Drossaers, Th.H. Lunsingh Scheurleer, *Inventarissen van de inboedels in de verblijven van de Oranjes en daarmee gelijk te stellen stukken 1567-1795*, 3 vols., The Hague 1974-1976, 1, p. 186). Given its prominent signature Livius, the present Simeon cannot be identified with that work. 2) An anonymous 'Simeon' mentioned in a deed of 13 September 1658 regarding Rembrandt selling three paintings to Jan Six (W.L. Strauss et al., *The Rembrandt Documents*, New York 1976, doc 1658/18. See also: J. Bruyn et al., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings 3*, Dordrecht/Boston/London 1989, pp. 86-87, under cat. no. A 106, 5. Documents and sources). One painting, a *Portrait of Rembrandt's Wife*, was sold to Six on 5 October 1652, the other two, a *St John the Baptist Preaching* and the *Simeon* at another time. In any case the works are not listed in Rembrandt's 1656 inventory (Strauss et al. 1976, doc. 1656/12). Forty years later, the paintings appeared in the Six sale of 6 April 1702 (Lugt no. 183). While the former two works are nowadays identified as Rembrandt's *Portrait of Saskia* in Kassel (Br. 101) and his *St John the Baptist* in Berlin (Br. 555), the sale catalogue also mentions: '48. Simeon in den Tempel, van Jan Lievensz. De Oude.' (sold for f. 50 to Jan Six II). Given the presence of the other two works, no. 48 would have been the third painting mentioned in the 1658 deed. In theory three paintings qualify to be this work: the present *Simeon*, and two paintings of the subject by Lievens in the Bader Collection (De Witt 2008, pp. 189-190, 193-195, cat. nos. 113, 115) Lack of archival evidence only allows for an educated guess. Given Rembrandt's irrefutable adaption of the small figure *Simeon* of c. 1631 in the Bader collection, both for his *Circumcision* painting of c. 1646 (known through a copy presumably by Gerbrandt van den Eeckhout, Braunschweig, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, inv. no. 24) and his *Presentation in the Dark* (Manner etching of c. 1654 (B. 50) (convincingly argued by De Witt 2008, cat. no. 115), the small figure Bader work seems the most likely candidate. Rembrandt's inventory lists no less than eight works by Lievens, among them also the latter's *Raising of Lazarus*, no doubt the work in Brighton (Sumowski 1983-1994, 3 (1983), no. 1193), comparable to the Bader *Simeon* both in style and execution, and dated 1631. The resemblance between the present *Simeon* and Rembrandt's late work of that subject (Br. 600) seems too superficial to draw conclusions.
- This follows from the Munich 1908 sale catalogue, in which it is stated that the works in the auction come from a Trent private collection, unless otherwise indicated ('Alte Meister aus Trientiner Privatbesitz, sowie aus verschiedenem, teils adeligem Besitze [...] Die Künstlernamen und Provenienzbezeichnungen sind nach Angabe des bisherigen Besitzer beibehalten.') In 1908, Trent was part of the Austrian Empire.
- Contrary to the bibliography listed by Sumowski, the present work isn't mentioned by P. Eikemeier in his review of Braunschweig 1979, in: *Pantheon* 38 (1980), pp. 5-7, p. 6.
- This biography is largely based on Arthur Wheelock's essay 'Bringing New Light to an Old Master', in: A.K. Wheelock, Jr. 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.
- Wheelock, in: *Washington/Milwaukee/Amsterdam 2008-2009*, pp. 6-8 alludes to the possibility of such an apprenticeship.
- Translation taken from: E. van de Wetering, B. Schnackenburg, *The Mystery of the Young Rembrandt*, exh. cat. Kassel, Staatliche Museen Kassel, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Amsterdam, Rembrandthuis 2001-2002, pp. 396-399.
- Young Man With a Pipe, Blowing on Glowing Coals (Allegory of Smell)*, signed J. Livius, oil on panel, 82 x 64 cm.; *Boy Lighting a Torch (Allegory of Sight)*, signed J. Livius, oil on panel, 82 x 64 cm., both Wilanów (Warsaw), Muzeum Pałacu Króla Jana III w Wilanowie, inv. nos. Wil. 1525/1526. See: Sumowski 1983-1994, 7, nos. 1225, 1226. The suggestion of Jan Białostocki that Lievens signed the two Warsaw works to associate himself with certain painters from antiquity who had captured naturalistic light effects in their rendering of daily life seems implausible, mostly since he has not taken into consideration the identical signature on the present work – in which such light effects are altogether absent. See: J. Białostocki, 'Puer Sufflans Ignes', in: idem., *The Message of Images: Studies in the History of Art*, Vienna 1988, pp. 139-144, p. 144. See also: A.K. Wheelock, Jr., in: *Washington/Milwaukee/Amsterdam 2008-2009*, p. 8, who follows Białostocki's reasoning. One might as well view these as Latinised, huge signatures as manifestations of Lievens' ambitions and ego, as underlined by Huygens, N.B.: the signature *J. Livius fecit 1638* appears on Lievens' *Greedy Couple Surprised by Death* (Sumowski 1983-1994, 7, no. 1197), and his prints are sometimes signed *Livius*, or variations on that, as well.
- Schneider/Ekkart 1979, p. 23.
- Attributed to Jan Massys, location, support and measurements unknown. See: L. Buynsters-Smets, *Jan Massys: een Antwerps schilder uit de zestiende eeuw*, Zwolle 1995, pp. 174-175, cat. no. 20.
- That Lievens travelled to Antwerp during this period has, however, never been established.
- Schnackenburg 2007. The *St Peter* is signed nor dated, but the work's pendant, a *St Paul* of identical size, bears De Grebber's signature and the date 1625. Following Schnackenburg, the present work would have been painted at the earliest in 1625. Schnackenburg further supports his hypothesis with a comparison between the nails of De Grebber's *St Peter*, and those of the present *Simeon* and of Lievens' *Card Players* (New York, private collection). Despite a certain correspondence, his comparison seems too superficial for conclusions.
- K. van Mander, *Het Schilder-Boeck*, Haarlem 1604, fol. 26v: 'De handen t'samen met vinghers doorvlochten, Conrany van een, als Westich en Oostich, Sal v'Aenschijn elderswaert op sien mistroostich.'
- Details: row 1, left to right: fig. 5; fig. 4; Sumowski 1983-1994, no. 1120; Schnackenburg, 2007, fig. 24; row 2: Sumowski 1979, no. 1625x; the present cat. no. 5; Sumowski 1983-1994, no. 1286; row 3: Sumowski 1983-1994, nos. 1221; 1193; 1237; 1242.
- One also comes across the clasping gesture in the oeuvre of Pieter Lastman, through which Lievens and Rembrandt would have been familiar with it. However, Lastman employed the gesture among many others within his multi-figure history paintings, which has little to do with the strong emphasis in Lievens' single large-figure busts.

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- 15 See: A. Blankert, L. Slatkes, *Nieuw Licht op de Gouden Eeuw : Hendrick ter Bruggen en tijdgenoten*, exh. cat. Utrecht, Centraal Museum, Braunschweig, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum 1986-1987, cat. no. 13. The Warsaw Boy *Blowing a Torch* (and the *Allegory of Fire* in Kassel) relies on Van Honthorst's work with the same subject. See: J.R. Judson, R.E.O. Ekkart, *Gerrit van Honthorst, 1592-1656*, Doornspijk 1999, pp. 183-184, cat. no. 231.
- 16 I thank Dr. Eddy Schavemaker for his insightful comments and attribution. The *Laughing Boy* was previously attributed to Salomon de Bray (1597-1664). See: C.M. Kauffmann, *Catalogue of Foreign Paintings I : Before 1800*, London 1973, p. 46, cat. no. 46.



Cat. no. 5, detail