



CRANACH

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Royal
Academy
of Arts

CRANACH

SACKLER WING OF GALLERIES

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An Introduction to the Exhibition
for Teachers and Students

Written by Greg Harris
For the Education Department
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This exhibition has been organised
by the Royal Academy of Arts, London
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FRONT COVER

Cat. 119 *Adam and Eve* (detail), 1526

The Samuel Courtauld Trust, London
Photo The Samuel Courtauld Trust, London

BACK COVER

Cat. 2 *The Crucifixion* (detail), c.1500

Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Gemäldegalerie
Photo courtesy Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

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INTRODUCTION

'Once in Austria you painted grapes on a table in such a natural way that after you had left, a magpie flew by and was so annoyed at the deception that it hacked at the work with beak and claws; the stag that you painted at Coburg made dogs bark when they caught sight of it.'

The German lawyer and humanist Christoph Scheurl (1481–1542) is here addressing the painter Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553) in 1508, three years after his appointment as court painter to the Elector of Saxony. In citing Cranach as among those artists who were making German painting more life-like, Scheurl himself was drawing on earlier praise of the painters of antiquity and reflecting Renaissance ideas on the illusionistic purposes of art. As it turned out, Cranach's career encompassed a far greater number of artistic impulses than that of illusion. His frequent avoidance of linear perspective gives his pictures an anti-naturalistic feel that is emphasised by his linear treatment of the human figure.

While not a great innovator, he was an artist deeply embedded in the society of his period, responding to the varied demands made on a court painter and by many other patrons. A perceptive portraitist, he painted his friend, the religious reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546), many times and contributed to the development of a Protestant iconography, as well as responding to the interest in mythology held by the humanist scholars of the Saxon court. He ran the most productive German artist's workshop of the first half of the sixteenth century, and his commercial success reflects the wide demand for his paintings.

EARLY LIFE

Lucas Cranach was born in 1472 in Kronach, from which he took his surname, a small town on the eastern borders of central Germany, in the state of Franconia. His father, Hans Maler, was a successful painter who owned a large house in the town square. Unlike his son, no paintings can be securely attributed to him. The frequency with which gallery labels are marked 'Anonymous' or 'Master of the ... Altarpiece' indicates that this was not unusual in Germany, where artists continued to be organised in medieval craft guilds and individual painters were not given the status that they had begun to acquire in Italy or the Netherlands.

The earliest biographical record of Cranach, written by his cousin in 1556, states that he received his training in the graphic arts from his father, which conforms to the normal pattern of passing on a trade to the son. Little else of Cranach's early life is known for certain until he surfaces in Vienna shortly after 1500. Intermittent absences from his

home town between 1495–98 indicate that Cranach probably travelled to other parts of Germany to expand his knowledge and understanding of painting. The capital of Franconia, less than a hundred miles away, was Nuremberg, the home of the precocious Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), who had already made one trip to Italy and was beginning to explore the new concepts of Italian painting. Cranach is known to have admired Dürer's early woodcuts (fig. 1), and certain technical procedures in his later painting suggest that he may have worked in Dürer's studio or that of Dürer's teacher, Michael Wolgemut (1437–1519). Visits to other German cities on an extended journey to Vienna must also be presumed, as by the time of his arrival there he came as a fully developed artist.

Cat. 2 This Crucifixion is the earliest known painting by Cranach. Painted on a wooden panel, like most of his work, its small size indicates that it was not for public display, but rather for private devotion. For the devout Catholic, certain prayers needed to be recited in front of such images.

Cranach sets the event in a hilly, windswept landscape, with a castle on a rocky crag, trees and ominously billowing clouds that all press the action forward towards the spectator. The depiction of Christ's body, painfully marked by the wounds of his scourging, shows him slumped forward with knees bent to one side. Such an image drew more on earlier medieval models, as does the use of individual nails for each foot, something that Cranach inflicts upon the thieves, who were normally shown bound by ropes. Their sideways presentation, involving the dramatic foreshortening of an arm, adds to the expressive distortion.

If there is a touch of caricature in the depiction of the figures on horseback to the right, their modernity and their restless horses bring out the feeling of stillness and grief of Christ's mother and his followers. Most remarkable is the pathos in the falling arms of the Virgin Mary, her hands drained of emotion and her limp body supported by St John. To the left stands a peasant whose devoted gaze is met by Christ's, and whose attitude would reflect that of the owner of the painting.

Do you feel there is a sense of spatial confusion where the two men stand at the same level with two of the figures on horseback?

How does Cranach differentiate between the 'good' and the 'bad' thief?

Cranach's work during his period in Vienna is marked by a heightened emotionalism and experimentation with composition. Another Crucifixion, painted in 1503, presents the scene from an unusual

Fig. 1
ALBRECHT DÜRER
Agony in the Garden
from the 'Great Passion'
series, pub. 1511
Woodcut
Private Collection /
The Bridgeman Art Library



Cat. 2
The Crucifixion, c. 1500
Oil and tempera
on limewood
58.5 × 45 cm
Kunsthistorisches Museum,
Vienna, Gemäldegalerie
Photo courtesy Kunsthistorisches
Museum, Vienna



sideways view so that the spectator is almost present at the event, taking up the position of the mounted figures in the earlier version. Also notable was his integration of figures within a landscape in an intense *St Jerome* (cat. 54) and a more lyrical *Flight into Egypt*. His double portrait of the Viennese humanist Johann Cuspinian (1473–1529), and that of his wife Anna, places the half-length figures in a landscape setting that unites man and nature in a way that was new in Germany for the period. Cranach's emphasis on landscape would have an important influence on what was known as the Danube school, led by the younger painters Albrecht Altdorfer (1480–1538) and Wolf Huber (c. 1490–1553).

Cranach's growing reputation in Vienna led to his appointment as court painter to the Elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise (1463–1525), whose court was based in the small town of Wittenberg in north-eastern

Germany. Divided into different states, Germany was ruled by separate princes who owed a political allegiance to the elected Holy Roman Emperor. Originally a more powerful institution in the early Middle Ages, the Empire had declined in importance and the current Emperor, Maximilian I (1459–1519) had granted direct rule in all important matters to the princes. As a member of the House of Habsburg, the wealth and influence of Maximilian's family had been vastly increased by a series of advantageous marriages.

Frederick was a man of varied interests who had visited Italy, had had his portrait painted by Dürer, and had employed the Venetian painter Jacopo de' Barbari (active c. 1497–1516). His passion for collecting religious relics may have equalled his interest in hunting and much of the administrative duties he left to his brother, John the Steadfast (1468–1532). Eager to expose Saxony to the new humanist ideas, Frederick had founded the University of Wittenberg in 1502 to attract scholars to the Saxon court.

EUROPEAN RENAISSANCE

The ideas of a humanist education, which originated in the revived study of the Classical authors of Greece and Rome in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were seen to equip the individual for the new world of trade, finance and government that was developing so rapidly throughout Europe. Contact with the Islamic East had contributed to scientific and economic ideas as well as to the recovery of classical learning. By 1500, every major centre had its own printing press and the spread of ideas, previously restricted to the movement of scholars between universities, now developed rapidly as texts began to be published in the vernacular language.

In painting, the rediscovery of linear perspective led to the placing of recognisable individuals into spaces that they could freely inhabit, in contrast to the flatter representations of medieval art. The rediscovery of Roman sculpture placed emphasis on the rounded presentation of the human body and a growing sense of ideal proportion. This Italian experience was also matched in the Netherlands, where, although the painters lacked the example of Classical art, the discovery of oil painting had contributed to a new realism in the presentation of light, texture and reflection. In Germany these developments were slower to be adopted. In the many provincial centres of art, traditional late Gothic elements persisted, and artists seemed unwilling to take on the clear spatial organisation, the harmony of composition or the elegance and proportion of the human figure of Italian art. Many artists retained elements of flatness, of distortion, angularity and tension and a willingness to deal with the painful, ugly side of reality. Only Albrecht Dürer, who accused his fellow artists of producing work 'like a wild



Cat. 11
*The Martyrdom
of St Catherine, c. 1505*
Oil and tempera
on limewood
112 × 95 cm
Ráday Collections of the
Hungarian Reformed Church

and unpruned tree', was eager to explore the laws of perspective and ideal proportion that he had glimpsed in the engravings of Italian artists and would reinforce in two trips to Italy.

Cat. 11 Completed shortly after his arrival at Wittenberg, this painting shows Cranach very much in the German tradition, with its crowded composition, its compressed space and air of violence.

The learned Catherine of Alexandria, a converted Christian, was desired by the Roman emperor Maxentius, who sent fifty philosophers to undermine her faith. Converted by Catherine, the men were put to death by Maxentius who determined to break Catherine's resolve by torturing her on a wheel studded with spikes. A thunderbolt from heaven destroyed the wheel, killing the heathen onlookers and forcing Maxentius to order her execution.

Cranach has compressed the timing of this dramatic event, so that Catherine faces death at the moment of her apparent rescue through divine intervention, a concept he derived from an earlier woodcut by Dürer, as well as the use of certain elements of the composition. The tumbling bodies, some dead, some fleeing the fire raining down, make a complex melee of figures in the middle ground, in front of which Cranach places St Catherine and her executioner. In a moment of tense stillness, both figures seem detached from the chaos around them as the executioner raises Catherine's head and starts to draw his sword. His curious costume helps to clarify the figure against the background, while the one-sided red and black stripes connect him with the heathen mass behind him, and contrast with the rich colour of Catherine's clothing.

What part do you think the rocky crag plays in the composition?

Do you think its buildings are significant?

A COURT PAINTER

The duties of a court painter were numerous and varied. Cranach was paid an annual salary to ensure his attendance at court and his availability to perform any task that might be required. Each commission was priced separately and allowed for materials and the engagement of assistants. Apart from religious pictures, portraits and other panel paintings, Cranach was responsible for the interior decoration of the palace at Wittenberg and the many other castles used by the Elector. Although none of the decoration has survived there is some evidence that much was based on the themes of hunting, animals and landscape. Scheurl remarked that Cranach's attendance at the hunt was always artistically productive, and his many drawings and watercolour studies of animals, dead or alive, are among his most sensitive and finely observed creations.

Tournaments and festivals needed the painting of coats of arms, the decoration of lances or the designing of banners, while other entertainments might require costumes and masks. Some tasks, like his 123 woodcuts for the Elector's collection of relics, may not have been artistically rewarding. Many designs were created for other craftsmen such as metal workers or glass makers, and it seems that Cranach held

'As far as I can see, you spend not a single day, hardly an hour, in idleness; your brush is always busy ... Whenever the princes take you hunting, you take a panel with you, which you complete amidst the hunt, or you draw Frederick rousing a stag, or Johann chasing a boar.' CHRISTOPH SCHEURL, 1508

Cat. 18 *overleaf*
Portrait diptych with John the Steadfast and His Six-year-old Son John Frederick, 1509
Oil and tempera on wood
41.3 × 31 cm; 42 × 31.2 cm
The National Gallery, London.
Bought 1991
Photo © The National Gallery London

a monopoly over the visual arts at the Saxon court. At the beginning of 1508 he was granted a coat of arms in the form of a winged serpent, which was frequently used as a signature for his works.

Cat. 18 This unusual double portrait of John the Steadfast and his six-year-old son, John Frederick, adapts the more common pattern of a double portrait of husband and wife. In these the husband is always on the left, since we tend to read an image from left to right, and generally larger in the frame, while both partners direct their gaze towards each other. Here Cranach commemorates the death of John the Steadfast's wife in childbirth and the father's hopes for his young son. With his brother Frederick unmarried and John himself still a widower, dynastic considerations were concentrated on the young boy.

While his eyes are directed towards his son, the father's gaze is more inward and serious as though reflecting on the death of his wife. On his head-dress are black feathers and a jewel in the form of a cross. The knotted decoration on his costume helps to connect his face with the hand adorned with prominent rings on finger and thumb, elements that possibly reflect on the lost presence of his wife, whose coat of arms appears alongside his on the outside of the right hand panel.

Cranach unifies the portraits by transferring the green background of the father to the son's costume. While John the Steadfast is securely contained within the frame, his son's quizzical gaze is directed outwards and his presence threatens to burst through the edges of the picture. The boy's elaborate costume allows Cranach to develop an exuberant and satisfying decorative scheme. The red and white stripes establish a strong presence, while the cuts in the green material allow the red lining to show through, and these curving shapes ripple down his voluminous sleeves.

How does the gold chain contribute to this scheme?

Looking at the painting of the hair and the feathered plume of the boy's hat, what kind of brushwork seems to appeal most to Cranach?

How does the sword in the son's hand relate to his expression?

In 1532, when he became Elector, John Frederick was to order 60 double portraits of his dead father and uncle for distribution around his territories and Cranach's workshop produced them all within a year.

Cranach's sensitive handling of the young boy may have owed much to his trip to the Netherlands, in the second half of 1508, where he saw similar portraits of young royal children. The purposes of the trip are unclear, and possibly Frederick was showing off his new court painter. Cranach met the Emperor Maximilian, and painted a portrait of the eight-year-old Archduke Charles (1500–1558), who was to become the Emperor Charles V in 1519. His experience of the art of the Netherlands



added to the range of his stylistic choices and affected his treatment of different subject areas.

Cat. 19 Painted after his return to Wittenberg, the complex iconography of this altarpiece, which links the unity of Christ's family with the need for unity within the Empire, shows Cranach's ability to adjust his style to suit the political ends of his Saxon patrons. By drawing on his experience in the Netherlands, Cranach lays out the disposition of the many figures within a securely created architectural space that helps to clarify their identity and relationship.

In order to reconcile the statements of the different Apostles, medieval theologians claimed that Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary had had three husbands in all, producing two other daughters, both also named Mary, who were stepsisters to the Virgin, and that their children were the six apostles who claimed kinship with Christ.

In the central panel Anne holds the baby Jesus as he reaches towards an apple held by his mother, while Joseph sleeps. In the gallery behind, that bears a frieze of the Saxon coat of arms, are the three husbands of Anne. The Virgin's father watches the scene below, while the two other husbands are represented by the Emperor Maximilian and an adviser who discuss affairs of state. The Elector Frederick the Wise and his brother John appear as the two other Mary's husbands in the side panels, and thus fall into the role of son-in-laws to the Emperor and his adviser.

The fully modelled figures, with their flowing and naturalistic drapery, the bright and harmonious use of colour, and the clarity of the lighting demonstrate that Cranach was capable of taking on Italian Renaissance developments as interpreted by Netherlandish painters. The gravity and serenity of the figures is enlivened by touches of humour, such as the mother checking her child for head lice while the other boy wraps her dress around him, or the way in which the two active children seem to have strayed into the central panel with the exuberance of their game.

Perhaps in acknowledgement of the need to complete an important commission on time, Cranach signs the work 'Lucas Chronus', in a frame on the right-hand column. Adapting his surname, he makes a play on the name of the god of time, and a reference to his reputation as a painter who worked with great speed.

What significance would you give to the three exterior views in the different panels?

How good do you think Cranach's observation and portrayal of the children is?

Cat. 19
Triptych with the Holy Kinship, 1509
Oil and tempera on limewood
Centre panel: 121.1 × 100.4 cm,
Side panels: 120.6 × 45.3 cm
Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main
Photo © Jochen Beyer, Village-Neuf



In contrast to his early career in Vienna, Cranach's work in Wittenberg takes on a greater simplicity and clarity in his compositions and a more harmonious use of colour. Comparing the Crucifixion of c. 1508–1510 (cat. 26) we see a more ordered disposition of the figures, the loss of the landscape, and a less tortured and more symmetrically placed figure of Christ. In *The Beheading of St Catherine* (cat. 21) he separates the timing of the different events by placing the destruction of the wheel in the far distance, rationalising the spatial arrangement and integrating the figures into the rocky landscape.

Cranach's most direct adoption of Italian models can be seen in his many representations of the Madonna and Child (cat. 17), where the influence of an artist like Pietro Perugino (1450–1523) is felt in the composition and rounded presentation of the figures.

LUTHER AND THE REFORMATION

On 31 October 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses, or arguments against indulgences, to the door of the castle church of Wittenberg. Seven years earlier Luther, an Augustinian monk, had visited Rome and been shocked by papal corruption and extravagance. The attempt to finance the rebuilding of St Peter's through the sale of indulgences, which granted the purchaser remission of his sins and a lessening of the time spent in Purgatory, led Luther to question the whole relationship of the true believer to both God and Church. For Luther, salvation came from the direct relationship of the believer to God, not from any intermediary, whether pope or priest, devotional image or religious relic, nor from any action calculated to achieve it. 'A Christian has all that he needs in faith and needs no works to justify him.'

Through the medium of printing, and with the help of woodcut images supplied by Cranach, Luther's ideas spread rapidly throughout the German states. His excommunication by the pope, and the attitude of the staunchly Catholic Emperor, Charles V, forced Luther to go briefly into hiding in 1521 under the protection of Frederick the Wise. In 1526, Charles's desire to avoid dissension within the empire led him to agree that each ruler should decide the form of religious observance within his state. The term 'Protestant' derives from the protest made by princes sympathetic to Luther when three years later Charles attempted to reverse this policy.

The demand for images of Luther was satisfied by Cranach, either in the form of prints for widespread distribution or in the many workshop copies of portraits. The two men became friends and Cranach was a witness at Luther's marriage to an ex-nun, Katherina von Bora, in direct contravention to the rule of priestly celibacy. Cranach's double portraits of Luther and his wife became part of a propaganda campaign to assert the legitimacy of the marriage.

Luther's attitude to religious images was in no way extreme ('one might want to have them or not have them') and he was not an iconoclast. Denying their status as objects of devotion, he wrote 'for when they are no longer in the heart, they can do no harm when seen with the eyes'. He saw their value as reminders of the lives of the saints or the suffering of Christ, and as helping to clarify theological issues and instruct the believer. As time went on, the need for Lutheran images was more strongly felt and Cranach responded in a number of different ways.

In Luther's view 'good works' would naturally follow a sincerely held faith, and that love of one's neighbour would be an altruistic expression rather than for personal spiritual gain. In his image of Charity (cat. 47), Cranach detaches the normally clothed figure from its representation with the other virtues and presents us with a naked mother suckling her child and extending her goodness to other children around her.

'Therefore by "full remission of all penalties", the pope means not actually "of all", but only of those imposed by himself.'

Therefore those preachers of indulgences are in error, who say that by the pope's indulgences a man is freed from every penalty, and saved.'

MARTIN LUTHER,
Theses 20 and 21

'Christians are to be taught that he who sees a man in need, and passes him by, and gives (money) for pardons, purchases not the indulgences of the pope, but the indignation of God.'

MARTIN LUTHER,
Thesis 45



Cat. 50
Christ Blessing the Children, c. 1535–40
Oil and tempera on beechwood
83.8 × 121.5 cm
Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main

'Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein.'

Mark X, 13–16

Cat. 50 In this picture Cranach the storyteller illustrates the Lutheran belief that only an unquestioning, childlike love of God, through his representation in Christ, will lead sinful man to salvation. Against a neutral black background, the figure of Jesus is surrounded by eager mothers seeking to present their children for his blessing. At the upper left the Apostles look on doubtfully. Despite the many figures pressed forward onto the picture plane, the strong geometrical construction of the grouping of the figures allows the eye to move easily over the different incidents represented, so that each gesture of hand or arm, each look directs us around the picture and ultimately back to the face of Jesus himself. The rich colour of the robes of the three principle figures adds to the emotional warmth of the painting.

How many lines of direction can you find, and what geometric form has Cranach used?

What different characterisations in the faces has he introduced?

Luther's attitude to music was far more positive, and his belief that the congregation should sing hymns in German to easily recognisable tunes contributed enormously to the country's musical tradition.

The Lutheran Reformation affected artists through a general decline in the demand for religious images, and this varied according to the

spread of Lutheran ideas and the intensity of their interpretation. Hans Holbein the Younger (1497–1543) left Basel in 1526, according to his friend the scholar Erasmus (1466–1536), because ‘here the arts are freezing: he goes to England in order to scrape together a little money’. In Saxony, Cranach seems to have had little problem continuing to work for Catholic patrons, and produced far more versions of the standard Catholic image of the Virgin and Child after 1520 than he had done before. Frederick the Wise did not abandon his collection of religious relics, despite Luther’s condemnation of them, and at one point offered to trade some paintings by Cranach in exchange for new objects. The Saxon princes may also have felt that it was diplomatic to allow Cranach and his workshop to produce a large number of altarpieces and images of saints for Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg, a determined opponent of the Reformation. Cranach was responsible for the different portraits of Albrecht as St Jerome, but the main body of the work was left to the workshop, and eventually one of his pupils was appointed the Cardinal’s court painter.

THE WORKSHOP

The demands of large-scale decorative schemes and other work for the Saxon court led Cranach to employ assistants to help him, according to the size of the task. As his reputation as an artist spread and commissions began to be received from patrons outside his immediate circle, this fluctuating body of assistants developed into a full scale workshop dedicated to the efficient production of paintings. The success of the enterprise depended on the development of technical procedures that allowed Cranach and his assistants to work on several paintings at the same time. The assistant, of course, repressed all individual impulses in order to conform to the style of his master. Cranach himself may well have adapted aspects of his own style and technique to help his less talented pupils.

From 1520 the workshop began to produce paintings in six standardised formats, sometimes forcing an earlier subject uncomfortably into a new format. Although the workshop produced many versions of his more popular paintings, they were not straight replicas but always included some variation of pose or rearrangement of figures. The standardisation of formats also meant that work could be produced without commission and could be delivered immediately following any request. Although little has survived, the workshop would have a large stock of drawings and painted studies which assistants could use as guides for different paintings, as well as the prints of other artists.

The extent to which Cranach participated in individual paintings has always bothered art historians who search for evidence of the work

of particular assistants, attempting to distinguish it from the master’s, but overall the quality was consistently high. He is said to have remarked on a pupil’s picture of the Madonna: ‘I did not help at all with it: he did it all himself. You can see very well how he has improved.’ Such pictures could be bought by less affluent sections of society, thus increasing the potential market.

However successful an assistant might be, his position would always be limited by the presence of the master’s sons in what was essentially a family business. Cranach’s elder son Hans is said to have produced over a thousand copies of Luther’s portrait, and several other works have his signature. His early death at the age of twenty-four, on a trip to Bologna in 1537, left his brother Lucas as co-manager of the workshop, and many paintings are now attributed to him. Lucas Cranach the Younger (1515–1586) would carry on the business after his father’s death.

Cranach’s organisational abilities were reflected in his other economic activities and in his participation in public life. He was first elected a town councillor in 1519, and would become mayor in 1537 and twice more in the next six years. In 1520 he was granted the privilege of being an apothecary which gave him a monopoly on the sale, not only of medicines, but of spices, sugar, oil, and most importantly wine. In 1522, when Luther began a German translation of the New Testament, a Leipzig printer, unable to work on Lutheran publications because of his Catholic rulers, moved to Wittenberg to set up a business with Cranach to satisfy the enormous demand for this work. Cranach, of course, supplied the woodcut illustrations. By 1528, his tax returns show that he was the richest landowner in Wittenberg.

PORTRAIT PAINTER

Cranach’s portraits of men closely observe the character and physiognomy of the sitter, while seeking to express an inner essence rather than a lively physical presence. In dealing with younger women, the contemporary tendency to idealise and smooth out distinctive features leads to a fair degree of similarity, an observation that would apply equally to his feminine characters in mythological, historical or religious paintings who frequently look like each other, whether their motivations are good or bad.

Cranach abandons the landscape element of his Vienna portraits in favour of a neutral, flat background, uniformly lit and with little sense of light and shade. When the sitters wear simple costumes, this can lead to a feeling of sober gravity (cats 70/71). However, given the opportunity, with the Saxon prince and princess (cats 68/69), Cranach can revel in the texture and pattern of elaborate costume and give free rein to the delicacy of his brushwork and feeling for rich colour. One can sense the artist’s personal concern in the portraits of Luther’s parents, whose



Cat. 81
*Portrait Study of a
 Clean-shaven Man,*
 c. 1520

Oil on paper primed
 with brownish colour, over
 preliminary drawing with
 pen and chalk, mounted
 on canvas

22.3 × 16 cm

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,
 Kupferstichkabinett
 Photo Jörg P. Anders

Cat. 89 *overleaf*
The Feast of Herod, 1533

Oil and tempera
 on limewood
 79.5 × 112.6 cm

Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main
 Photo © Jochen Beyer, Village-Neuf

carefully delineated features are rendered with both simplicity and assurance.

Cat. 81 This portrait study, done with oil on paper and later transferred to canvas, shows Cranach's lively involvement with the personality of his sitter. In contrast to the more linear character of some of his portraits, there is a real sense of bone structure built up in the careful modelling of the face, with its delicate white highlights. The slight asymmetry in the eyes adds a sense of immediacy and engagement with the viewer.

The purpose of the study is unclear as it does not relate to a finished portrait and may reflect, like the watercolour of the farmer (cat. 79), Cranach's spontaneous interest in individual character or his desire to provide models for the workshop.

What elements of this man's face contribute most strongly to the sense of his character, and how would you describe his character?

WORKS ON OTHER SUBJECTS

Cranach and his workshop had a large repertory of subjects drawn from mythology, the Old Testament or from allegory. Some like *Lot and His Daughters* (cat. 87), *The Mouth of Truth* or *The Feast of Herod* (cat. 89) deal with the duplicity of women. On a more popular level the series of 'Ill Matched Couples' proved an enormous success for the workshop. Most involve a pretty young girl and an older ugly man, and the exchange of money for sexual favours. A few reverse the age difference, and their popularity contributed to the development of low-life genre painting later in the century.

Cat. 89 Herod's marriage to his sister-in-law, Herodias, had been condemned by John the Baptist on the grounds of the double adultery that had led to it. Despite misgivings, Herod had imprisoned John at the request of his new wife. In order to seal the prophet's fate, Herodias persuaded her daughter Salome to dance before Herod at his birthday feast, knowing that he would grant her any reward. Her dance of the Seven Veils succeeded in manipulating the lascivious Herod into precisely such an offer, and Salome demanded the head of John the Baptist.

Cranach sets his scene in a simple space dictated by the size of the white table around which he places the protagonists. The plain wall and dark curtain deny any sense of atmosphere and concentrate attention on the figures. Salome presents the severed head, not in triumph to her mother, but impassively to Herod whose hands are raised in horror. Herodias's sly smile and slanting eyes as she coolly observes her foolish husband, her hands firmly placed on the table, links this painting to others concerned with the duplicity of women.



The three knives point towards the realistically painted head, and beneath it the bread and wineglass may relate John's death to the Last Supper and the sufferings of Christ. This connection is strengthened by the way in which John's eyes meet the viewer, as do those of the servant bringing a similar charger laden with grapes and apples, reminders of the Fall of Man and redemption.

What other shape relates to the chargers?

How does the slightly distorted pose of Salome fit into the composition?

THE NUDE

Cranach's depictions of the nude are among his most beautiful, if mannered paintings. The popularity of mythological subjects in which nude figures could be represented in lush landscape settings was part of an aristocratic, courtly taste that was encouraged by the humanists at Wittenberg. In many of these, Cranach drew on Italian models, adapted to his increasingly refined view of the female figure. His most frequent representation of Venus shows her with Cupid, who has stolen honey from the bees and suffers from their stings. In relating erotic pleasure with pain, Cranach introduces a moral element, which also reflects on his visual parallel between Venus and Eve.

Cat. 114 Cranach sets his exquisitely drawn figure of Venus against a black background and standing on a simple circular mound dotted with stones. Her elaborate head-dress and jewellery, with its pendant pearls, emphasise the nakedness of her body, whose erotic appeal is increased by the seductive device of the veil, directing our eyes around her smoothly painted figure, without withholding any part from our gaze. We are barely aware of its gossamer lightness except in the defined ridges of its folds. The use of this accessory allows Cranach to position the arms and hands, one level with the shoulder, the other with the hip, so that they contribute to the sinuous flow of line that is already present in the slight twist of the body.

It is possible that this self-consciously artful image may have been paired with the figure of Lucretia (cat. 113), so that Cranach asks us to reflect on the dangers of seduction compared with the marital fidelity of a wife, whose suicide followed her violation.

How much modelling of light and shade does Cranach use?

How much does the vertical drop of the veil against the black background help to balance the pose?

'Young Cupid was stealing honey from a hive when a bee stung the thief on a finger. So it is for us: the brief and fleeting pleasure we seek comes mixed with wretched pain to do us harm.'

Attributed to the Greek poet Theocritus

Cat. 114

Venus, 1532

Oil and tempera on red beechwood
37.7 × 24.5 cm

Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main
Photo © Jochen Beyer, Village-Neuf





Fig. 2
ALBRECHT DÜRER
Adam and Eve, 1504
Engraving
British Museum, London, UK/
The Bridgeman Art Library

Cranach's earlier paintings of Adam and Eve owed much to Dürer's engraving (fig. 2) and later painting of the subject. Whether as single figures on two panels, or as a pair combined, their presentation tended to be against a neutral background with only the Tree of Knowledge and the serpent as accessories. In his version from 1510 (cat. 117), in competition with Dürer, Cranach has modelled the bodies with far

greater sense of roundness and plasticity, through light and shade, than he would use later in his career. His continued development of the subject began to place the figures within the Garden of Eden, accompanied by a few animals.



Cat. 119
Adam and Eve, 1526
Oil and tempera
on maplewood
117.1 x 80.8 cm
The Samuel Courtauld Trust,
London
Photo The Samuel Courtauld Trust,
London

Cat. 119 This version from 1526 is unusual in the number of animals that surround Adam and Eve and the richness of the garden setting with its fading, dusky light. Cranach chooses the moment in which Eve hands the apple to a somewhat puzzled and doubtful Adam. The long tresses of her curly hair flow out round the slender body, whose awkward stance is not entirely convincing. In the manner of a tapestry or a book illustration with borders, the animals frame the human figures and carry an extra weight of symbolism to the interpretation of the picture.

Both the deer and the lion were associated with Christ. The young stag drinking from the pool (whose beautifully painted reflection recalls Scheurl's praise) suggests the believer thirsting after Jesus. The large stag and its antlers represent the resurrected Christ, an idea strengthened by the grape-laden vine which curls up round the tree and whose leaves protect the modesty of the first human couple at the moment of their fall. The density of the symbolism should not detract from the beautiful brushwork with which Cranach represents animal fur, human hair or the natural surroundings.

How does Cranach's positioning of their arms and hands relate the two figures?

What might be suggested by the pairing of some of the animals?

CONCLUSION

The first major monograph on Cranach, written in 1932 by M. J. Friedländer, included this comment on his work: 'Had Cranach died in 1505, he would have lived in our memory as an artist charged with dynamite. But he did not die until 1553, and instead of watching his powers explode, we see them fizzle out ... The impassioned symphony of nature gives way before a cool, precise, rational exposition.' Written against the background of admiration for German expressionist painting, this judgement has hung like a black cloud over Cranach's reputation.

Despite this, twentieth-century artists such as Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966) or Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) have found inspiration in his work. The many exhibitions of his paintings, from the 1970s onwards, has allowed audiences to respond to an artist, not from the school of 'individual genius', but rather one who reflected the society of his period and responded with enormous skill to the demands made on him.

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Cat. 19
*Triptych with the Holy
Kinship* (detail), 1509

Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main
Photo © Jochen Beyer, Village-Neuf