

## CRANACH

**Lucas Cranach the Elder** (c.1472 – 1553) was a German Renaissance painter and printmaker in woodcut and engraving. He was court painter to the Electors of Saxony for most of his career, and is known for his portraits, both of German princes and those of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation, whose cause he embraced with enthusiasm. He was a close friend of Martin Luther. Cranach also painted religious subjects, first in the Catholic tradition, and later trying to find new ways of conveying Lutheran religious concerns in art. He continued throughout his career to paint nude subjects drawn from mythology and religion.

Cranach had a large workshop and many works exist in different versions; his son Lucas Cranach the Younger, and others, continued to create versions of his father's works for decades after his death. He has been considered the most successful German artist of his time.

The first evidence of Cranach's skill as an artist comes in a picture dated 1504. Early in his career he was active in several branches of his profession: sometimes a decorative painter, more frequently producing portraits and altarpieces, woodcuts, engravings, and designing the coins for the electorate.

Cranach was the court painter to the electors of Saxony in Wittenberg, an area in the heart of the emerging Protestant faith. His patrons were powerful supporters of Martin Luther, and Cranach used his art as a symbol of the new faith, making numerous portraits of Luther, and providing woodcut illustrations for Luther's German translation of the Bible.

This woodcut demonstrates his mastery of this technique of printmaking. Woodcut is a relief printing technique. An artist carves with gouges an image into the surface of a block of wood leaving the printing parts level with the surface while removing the non-printing parts. The characters or images at surface level carry the ink to produce the print. The block is cut along the wood grain (unlike wood engraving, where the block is cut in the end-grain). The surface is covered with ink by rolling over the surface with an ink-covered roller, leaving ink upon the flat surface but not in the non-printing areas. The block is placed in a press, the sheet of dampened paper is then placed over it and pressure is applied by means of a weighted plate, or roller, depending on the type of press, and the paper removed, with the image in reverse is put to dry. Normally a number of prints (an edition) is made until the block begins to deteriorate.

Since its origins in China, the practice of woodcut has spread across the world from Europe to other parts of Asia, and to Latin America.



***Adam and Eve 1509***



The scene in this Crucifixion is condensed into a shallow space. Three crosses have been erected in an austere geometrical arrangement on sandy ground strewn with pebbles. Christ on the cross is shown frontally in the centre of the shallow pictorial space and occupies almost the entire height of the picture. The elegant figure of Christ, with his head inclined to the left, a crown of thorns and the tips of his loin cloth wafting on either side follows the common type of extenuated Christ figure. The thieves are shown as bearded farmer types, the good thief on the left is considerably younger and more athletically built than his pendant on the right. Mary, on the left, is about to collapse; St John supports her under her arms from behind. In front of her to the right Mary Magdalene kneels in front of the shaft, which she embraces tightly.

***Crucifixion 1510-15***

Cupid complains to Venus of being stung by bees when stealing a honeycomb. This is to be taken as a moral commentary; as the inscription observes: 'life's pleasure is mixed with pain.'

Louise Govier: We're seeing Venus, the goddess of love and beauty, shown as an ideal woman for Germany in the early 16th century. So she's very sort of slim with quite full hips and she's showing herself off to us in a very lascivious way. She's actually draped rather like a pole dancer around a tree, looking out incredibly suggestively. She's wearing no clothes, but has a very fancy hat – I mean, she kind of is the definition of 'all hat and no knickers', it has to be said, but she's accompanied by her son, Cupid, god of love, who is looking very unhappy and who is complaining to his mother.

He's complaining because he has tried to get some honey out of a tree and has been stung by the bees and, of course, this is all about the other side of love, when love doesn't go quite right, and the idea that you can't have the fulfilment and the sweetness of love like the honey, without also putting yourself in danger of getting stung.



**Cupid Complaining to Venus** 1526-27



**Judgement of Paris** 1513

This is the first of Cranach's several versions of *The Judgment of Paris*. According to Greek and Roman mythology, the goddess of discord tossed an apple labeled "to the fairest" among the Olympian gods. Jupiter sent the messenger-god Mercury to tell Paris, prince of Troy, to award the prize. The three goddesses who claimed the apple offered bribes. Juno promised wealth and power, Minerva military prowess, and Venus the love of the most beautiful woman on earth. Paris's choice of Venus, and his abduction of the most beautiful woman—the Spartan queen, Helen—led to the Trojan War. Cranach's portrayal of this subject was influenced by Guido delle Colonne's *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, a fanciful medieval narrative of the Trojan War. This describes Paris tethering his horse and falling asleep after losing his way in a hunting expedition, at which Mercury appears in his dream and presents the three goddesses. In his painting the artist teases Paris—as well as the viewer—with an agonizing choice: the goddesses are nearly indistinguishable, and equally enticing.

This painting is the outstanding work by Lucas Cranach the Elder in the Royal Collection. It shows the sun god Apollo, admired for his moral standing and physical beauty, and his twin sister Diana or Artemis, goddess of the moon, who was associated with chastity, archery and hunting. The emphasis on humanity closely related to the primeval forest and hunting recalls Cranach's earlier work and the so-called Danube School. The scene is given a particular intensity by the way in which the figures are seen in relief but also related to the forest behind them. Diana's precisely rendered hair curls around the stag's antlers, which in turn are deliberately confused with the branches of the trees behind. Cranach's characteristically incisive clarity and attention to minute detail is seen here – for example, in the reflected light in the stag's eye or the small swans swimming on the lake.



**Apollo and Diana** c1526



**Hercules and Antanaeus** c1530

In this wonderfully animated illustration of a story from Greek mythology the protagonists are locked in a desperate embrace which seems to turn them into one inseparable creature.

On his way back from the Hesperides, Hercules engaged in a wrestling match with the giant Antaeus who was invincible as long as some part of him touched the earth, from which he drew his strength. Hercules held him in the air in a vice-like grip, until he weakened and died. Hercules is depicted with his arms locked round the waist of Antaeus, crushing the giant's body to his own.

This small panel is one of the two versions of this subject. The larger version shows the protagonists entwined in front of a landscape background.



**The Nymph of the Fountain** 1534

Together with Albrecht Dürer, Lucas Cranach was among the most important 16th-century German painters. His oeuvre includes religious compositions as well as portraits and mythological works. In the latter the female nudes depart from Italian canons of proportion and constitute a quintessentially German prototype of notable sensuality.

*The Nymph of the Fountain* depicts the nymph of the Castalian spring, whose water was drunk by philosophers and poets in search of inspiration. The nymph lies on a thick grassy bank in an unnatural pose, her head leaning on her right arm, her body turned towards the viewer and her left leg crossed over. Behind her, a succession of receding planes create a sense of depth. The subject of the composition combines references to classical antiquity with the influence of Italian art. The nymph's pose recalls that of Giorgione's *Venus* in the Dresden Gemäldegalerie, while Titian's *Venuses* are suggested in the presence of the cartouche at the upper left corner that bears the text of a Latin poem. The quiver with arrows and the bow resting against the tree may refer to Diana the Huntress or to Cupid, who traditionally accompanies Venus.

This reclining figure derives from classical marbles. After the earliest dated version of 1518, he painted several variants.



**Venus** 1532

Cranach was equally successful in somewhat naive mythological scenes which nearly always feature at least one slim female figure, naked but for a transparent drape or a large hat.

Venus shyly holds a transparent veil and looks seductively at the viewer. Her body is idealized, perhaps because at that time artists rarely used nude models. Nude female figures were depicted only in narrative or mythological scenes.

The abundant jewellery and head attire of the woman is in certain contrast to the lack of any clothing. She wears a golden neck collar from which a multitude of pearl pendants hang, as well as a long golden chain, with a pendant set with an emerald and three pearls. Her voluminous hair is bound under a hairnet with lozenge-shaped gold threads; at the side the hair covered by the bonnet is combed behind her particularly large, but beautifully drawn ear. The beauty blinks from her angled almond shaped eyes at the viewer with a rather distant expression.

The nudes are mostly in narrow upright formats; examples are several of Venus, alone or with

Cupid, who has sometimes stolen a honeycomb, and complains to Venus that he has been stung by a bee Diana with Apollo, shooting a bow, and Hercules sitting at the spinning-wheel mocked by Omphale and her maids are other such subjects.

These subjects were produced early in his career, when they show Italian influences including that of Jacopo de' Barberi, who was at the court of Saxony for a period up to 1505. They then become rare until after the death of Frederick the Wise. The later nudes are in a distinctive style which abandons Italian influence for a revival of Late Gothic style, with small heads, narrow shoulders, high breasts and waists. The poses become more frankly seductive and even exhibitionist.

A similar approach was taken with the biblical subjects of Salome and Adam and Eve.

Adam and Eve brilliantly combines devotional meaning with pictorial elegance and invention. The scene is set in a forest clearing where Eve stands before the Tree of Knowledge, caught in the act of handing an apple to a bewildered Adam. Entwined in the tree's branches above, the serpent looks on as Adam succumbs to temptation. A rich menagerie of birds and animals completes this seductive vision of Paradise. On the tree-trunk are the date 1526 and the bat-winged serpent which formed part of Cranach's coat of arms. The painting is particularly admired for its treatment of the human figure and for the profusion of finely painted details, including animals and vegetation. Cranach delights in capturing details such as the roe-buck catching its reflection in the foreground pool of water. Cranach, who was famous for his landscapes and representations of animals and nudes, found Adam and Eve a subject which was ideally suited to his gifts and to which the Lutherans did not object. He and his workshop treated it many times in paintings and prints. The vine refers to the Redemption, so that the picture has some didactic function. While the pairing of the sheep with the lion may have a moral meaning, the association of Adam with the sheep is perhaps intended as a wry comment on his behaviour.



*Adam and Eve* 1526

Each of the animals portrayed in Adam and Eve bears a distinct moral meaning:

The most common symbol of Christ the redeemer was the stag. The **young antler-less roebuck** shown drinking from the pond at the lower right) could not defend himself, and thus was at the mercy of mankind, like the defenceless Christ when he first entered the world.

Cranach's representation of the **mature stag with antlers** – which overlap Adam's body – probably refers to the resurrected Christ, and also to the righteous at the Second Coming, whom the theologian Aponius compared to stags raising their antlers.

The **parched deer** is a reference to Psalm 42, which compares the human thirsting after God to the stag in search of water. The very species depicted is also relevant: roe deer were famed for their chastity and their devotion to one mate.

Along with the deer, the **sheep** grazing contentedly behind Adam recalled the docility of true Christians, for whom "The Lord is my shepherd" (Psalm 23, v.1).

A **stork** stands directly under the grapes at the edge of a pond. This bird was associated by Christian iconographers with piety, purity and resurrection. A prudent creature, it had only one nest, which was used as a metaphor for the true Church, the only home for the faithful.

The **heron**, at the bottom right edge of the panel, shared these moral readings, as well as signifying one steadfast in the right path.

The **partridges** next to the stork have a more ambiguous allegorical meaning. The Physiologus, an early medieval treatise, described them as creatures prone to deceit and impurity. However, it is probable that Cranach uses them here, as a pair, to represent the positive power of love.

There is some evidence to support a reading of the **boar** as representing qualities opposite to those of the sheep (anger, brutality and lust) and as an embodiment of the Antichrist, and the **lion** as an opponent of the stag and a personification of the devil. But the position is not clear-cut: the boar could be interpreted more positively as justice, independence and courage in the face of God's enemies, while the lion was also used to signify Christ, with whom it shared three natures, and naturally overcame evil (the devil).

Cranach's **horse**, another symbol of Christ, which appears to be on the point of moving out of the pictorial space, suggests that the powers of good are about to abandon Eden with the imminent arrival of Original Sin.

The principal purpose of the painting is evidently to give pleasure rather than instruction. The unexpectedly free technique of the foliage and grass is a reminder that Cranach was renowned for his speed of working.



**Martin Luther and his Wife** 1529

The largest proportion of Cranach's output is of portraits, and it is chiefly thanks to him that we know what the German Reformers and their princely adherents looked like. He painted not only Martin Luther himself but also Luther's wife, mother and father. He also depicted leading Catholics like Albert of Brandenburg, archbishop elector of Mainz, Anthony Granvelle and the Duke of Alva.

A dozen likenesses of Frederick III and his brother John are dated 1532. It is characteristic of Cranach's prolific output, and a proof that he used a large workshop, that he received payment at Wittenberg in 1533 for "sixty pairs of portraits of the elector and his brother" on one day. Inevitably the quality of such works is variable.



**Portrait of a Woman** c1525



**III Matched Couple:  
Young Man and Old Woman**  
1520-22



**III Matched Couple:  
Girl and Old Man** c1530

The subject of the III-Matched Couple was a favourite of the Cranach workshop, more than 40 versions of it is known. (The contemporary name for these pictures was Amorous Pair.) The subject existed as early as the fifteenth century and was chiefly the subject for prints, but Cranach developed it further in his own way and refined it. In addition to the standard formulation of unambiguous gestures he explored the psychological depth of the subject and played it out in numerous different versions.



This picture shows a young girl robbing a foolish old man who is blissfully unaware of anything other than her charms. She has a smile of satisfaction on her face as she slips her hand into the lecher's purse. This scene has a moralistic bent as it depicts woman as a dangerous creature and a source of sin, humiliation and perdition.

***Ill Matched Couple: 1515***



***The Fountain of Youth 1546***

The idea of a spring that brings back youth to ageing people, is known from antiquity to our days. In this paintings, the most famous pictorial formulation of the theme, Cranach builds on topics from medieval imagination. From the left old women are brought to undress, get into the water and be reconverted right in the middle of the basin to young girls. On the right side they climb out of the bath, then dress up nicely and enjoy together with handsome men the pleasures of the dance, the table and love. Only the women have to enter the pool, while the men on the left side, who are also old and frail, are transformed by the affection of their companions. But the ultimate cause of rejuvenation is earthly love, represented by the Venus figure on the fountain-heading the center of the basin.



The painting "Allegory of Melancholy" was created by the artist based on the popular story in the first quarter of the 16th century. The first version was painted in 1528.

The winged personification, the tools arranged at her feet, the ball, the dog and the writing on the wall reveal the primary source used by Cranach for this and three other works was Albrecht Dürer's masterly engraving *Melancholia 1* of 1514.

For Dürer Melancholy is the embodiment of a higher being, a genius endowed with intelligence, possessing all the achievements of human thought of that time, striving to penetrate into the mysteries of the universe, but possessed by doubts, anxiety, disappointment and anguish accompanying creative pursuits. In Lucas Cranach the painting "Allegory of Melancholy" is an image of an empty contemplative being, vainly trying to penetrate into the meaning of future events.

***Allegory of Melancholy 1532***

Four years after Cranach treated this subject based on Dürer's engraving, Cranach freed himself from Dürer's model. This is particularly evident in the figure of melancholy herself. Comparing with the engraving, an erotic dynamism rather than contemplative passivity can be observed in the painting.