

## 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. Along with his near contemporaries Mattheas Grünewald and Albrecht Dürer he is regarded as one of the founders of the German Renaissance.



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. This portrait of 1550, once thought to be a self portrait but now known to be by his son, shows the seventy seven year old artist as a successful and prosperous burger.

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.

The woodcut of **Adam and Eve** (1509) demonstrates his mastery of the technique of printmaking. The pair are depicted in an idyllic and innocent paradise, where animals live in harmony with the first humans. Adam is about to take a bite of the forbidden fruit, while Eve stretches her hand up to take another. The serpent, coiled round a branch, looks on with a malevolent gleam in his eye.



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.

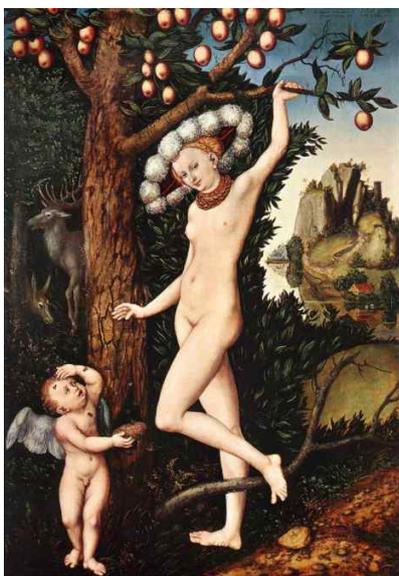
The scene in this **Crucifixion** (1510-15) is condensed into a shallow space. Three crosses have been erected in an austere geometrical arrangement on sandy ground strewn with pebbles. Christ on the cross is shown frontally in the centre of the shallow pictorial space and occupies almost the entire 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.

Cranach was equally successful in a series of paintings of mythological scenes which nearly always feature at least one slim female figure, naked but for a transparent drape or a large hat. Those subjects produced early in his career, show Italian influences. 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.

In the first of Cranach's several versions of *The Judgment of Paris* (1513) the prince of Troy is faced with the difficult choice of choosing the most beautiful among a trio of almost identical women. In his painting the artist teases Paris (and the viewer) with an agonizing choice: the goddesses are nearly indistinguishable, and equally enticing.

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 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.



*Cupid Complaining to Venus* (1526-27) depicts two classical gods of love, standing naked amid a verdant landscape under a blue sky. The work has been interpreted as an allegory of the pleasure and pains of love, and possibly also a warning of the risks of venereal disease; as the inscription observes: 'life's pleasure is mixed with pain.' The subject is known in a number of variations, the largest, most detailed and probably earliest being this one in the National Gallery, London.

The winged infant Cupid holds a honeycomb, possibly taken from a hole towards the bottom of the trunk of a tree. He is being assailed by infuriated honeybees. Venus is depicted as a voluptuous woman holding up a branch of the tree, which bears red apples, with her left hand, and resting her left foot on another. A stone below Venus's raised foot bears Cranach's signature device of a winged serpent with a ring in its mouth. Venus is wearing only a hat of red and gold cloth decorated with a wide circle of ostrich plumes, and two necklaces: a gold chain and a jewelled choker. The pose of Venus, and the apples, allude to paintings of Eve by Cranach. In the

background, a stag and hind hide among the trees to the left, and fortifications on and beside a rocky outcrop to the right are reflected in water.

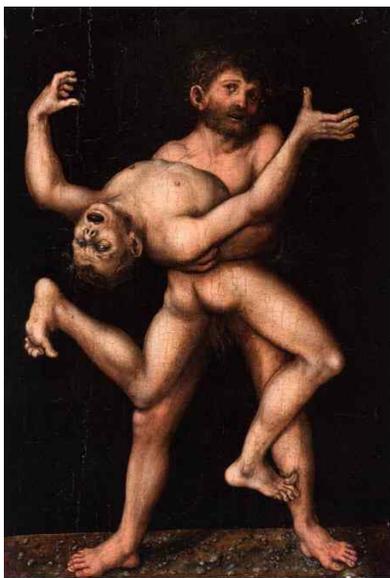
The subject is inspired by Idyll XIX "Kerikleptes" ("The Honeycomb Stealer") attributed to the Ancient Greek poet Theocritus, in which Cupid complains of the painful stings inflicted by the small insects, and Venus laughingly compares them to the bittersweet darts of love shot by Cupid himself. The way in which Cranach interprets the subject here, making Venus, turn to the viewer, sharing the moral, with her left eye exactly in the centre of the composition, in a tantalising reference the temptress Eve, brings text and image together with witty precision.

The mythological scenes are mostly in narrow upright formats; examples are several of Venus, alone or with Cupid. Other such subjects are Diana with Apollo, shooting a bow, and Hercules sitting at the spinning-wheel mocked by Omphale (the Queen of Lydia, to whom he was enslaved as a punishment) and her maids. A similar approach was taken with the biblical subjects of Salome and Adam and Eve.

The painting of *Apollo and Diana* (c 1526) 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.



The painting in the Royal Collection reveals all the main characteristics of Cranach's art. The tautness of the style, the fluency of the drawing of the nude, the love of greens and blues offsetting the lighter flesh tones, the detailed rendering of foliage and the carefully observed landscape replete with a perilously balanced castle on a distant crag and peaceful reflections in calm waters, these are the hallmarks of his finest works, and, it has to be admitted, also of his studio. The intensity of the style is matched by the studied care of the composition and by the clarity of the image.



In this wonderfully animated illustration of a story from Greek mythology, *Hercules and Antaeus* (c 1530), the protagonists are locked in 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 around the waist of Antaeus, crushing the giant's body to his own.

This small panel (27x18 cm) 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) 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, while the quiver with arrows and the bow resting against the tree may refer to Diana the Huntress or to Cupid, who traditionally accompanies Venus.



The picture is based on a medieval text which describes a Roman fountain guarded by a statue of a nymph. Cranach, however, has changed the statue into a sensual creature, much more true to life than the idealised nudes of ancient Roman sculpture. The Latin inscription on the fountain reads: "I, the nymph of the sacred fountain, am resting, do not disturb my sleep". In fact the nymph is not asleep, but

looks out through half open eyes and seems to smile invitingly. Cranach was among the most important German painters of the early 16th century. He is noted in particular for his portraits and for his elongated, cheekily seductive female nudes.

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



**Venus** (1532) 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 painting of **Adam and Eve** (1526) 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.

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.

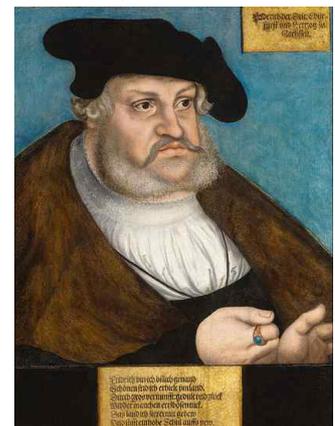
The principal purpose of the painting is evidently to give pleasure rather than instruction. The unexpectedly free technique of the foliage and grass is a reminder that Cranach was renowned for his speed of working.



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. In 1529 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.

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. Cranach made numerous portraits of Luther, and provided woodcut illustrations for Luther's German translation of the Bible. Somewhat later the duke conferred on him the monopoly of the sale of medicines at Wittenberg, (his apothecary shop was open for centuries, and was only lost by fire in 1871) and a printer's patent with exclusive privileges as to copyright in Bibles. Cranach's presses were used by Martin Luther.



This painting of c. 1530-35 is a posthumous portrait of **Frederick III**, also known as **Frederick the Wise**. He was elector of Saxony from 1486 to his death in 1525, and, although a lifelong Catholic, is mostly remembered for the worldly protection of his subject, Martin Luther, from the Holy Roman Emperor.



Until 1508 Cranach signed his works with his initials. In that year the elector gave him the winged snake as an emblem, or Kleinod (small treasure), which superseded the initials on his pictures after that date. This example of a winged snake with a ruby ring is from his **Portrait of Catherine of Mecklenburg** (1514).



**Portrait of a Woman** c1525



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



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

The subject of the Ill-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 of an **Ill Matched Couple** (1515) 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.



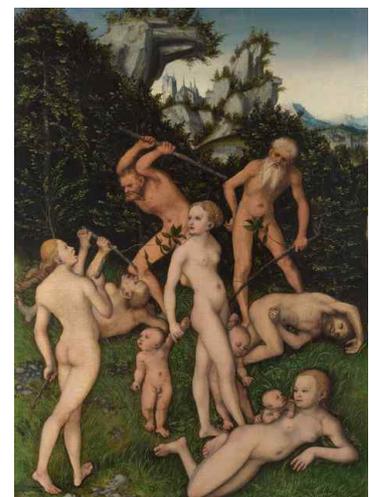
In representing abstract concepts artists have from the ancient times commonly chosen to personify them, accompanied by symbols of their nature or authority. In this allegorical depiction of 1537 Cranach chooses to show **Justice** with the traditional sword and scales, but, rather than clothed, as in normal representations, naked except for a diaphanous, transparent chemise. Her nudity is further enhanced by the addition of a richly embroidered head covering, a choker studded with gems and the necklaces loosely hung around her shoulders.

Humour and pathos are combined at times in pictures such as **Jealousy – The End of the Age of Silver** (1530), alternatively titled **Primitive People**, in the National Gallery,

London, where women and children are huddled into groups as they watch the strife of men wildly fighting around them.

The subject of this painting has been much debated, but it's generally thought to show an imagined view of a past and primitive society. Cranach made a number of similar paintings from 1527 to 1535. Since the twentieth century it has been assumed that the origin of the subject lies in a classical source.

Two pairs of men are fighting – violence which is more disturbing for its close proximity to three small children. While one woman watches the fighting with a look of shock on her face, another is staring at something



over her shoulder, beyond the picture frame. A third woman seems unaware of – or unconcerned by – the chaos around her. Their primitive behaviour takes place outside the realm of civilised society, represented by the buildings in the distance.



The painting ***Allegory of Melancholy*** (1532) 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.

Four years after Cranach first 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. In comparison with the engraving, an erotic dynamism rather than contemplative passivity can be observed in the painting.

Cranach composed the ***The Fountain of Youth*** executed by his son in 1546, a picture in which older women are seen entering a Renaissance fountain, and exiting it transformed into youthful beauties.



The idea of a spring that brings back youth to ageing people, is known from antiquity to our days. In this, 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 centre of the basin.

Towards the end of his life, after Luther's initial hostility to large public religious images had softened, Cranach painted a number of "Lutheran altarpieces"



***The Adoration of the Shepherds*** (c 1517) was painted around the time when Martin Luther first spoke out about the light of the Gospels and used the candle as a metaphor for revelation. It shows a nocturnal scene with Mary bending over the Child in prayer. Joseph is standing over them holding a candle, but the main light source is coming from the crib. The Child lies on a bed of hay that matches his Mother's halo, surrounded by winged cherubs. In the upper left of the frame, a vista to a moonlit landscape reveals on closer inspection to be a scene of the Annunciation to the shepherds with Gabriel as the moon and three shepherds in a field. The same three shepherds stand behind a fence on the right side of the painting looking at the Holy Family.