

**CRANACH**

**THE SACKLER WING OF GALLERIES**

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The Royal Academy of Arts presents the first major exhibition in Britain devoted to Lucas Cranach the Elder (c. 1472–1553). A collaboration between the Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main and the Royal Academy, the exhibition brings together some 70 works chosen to represent the quality and range of this important master of the German Renaissance. The Städel has generously made available to the Academy major works from its collection of paintings, drawings and prints by Cranach; foremost among them is *The Altarpiece of the Holy Kinship*, dated 1509.

As the leading member of a German family of artists, Lucas Cranach was a painter, printmaker and book illustrator with a most individual manner and a highly successful business. He was one of the most distinctive artists of the German Renaissance, court artist to the Saxon electors, a staunch supporter of the Reformation, and a close friend of Martin Luther. During the course of his long career, Cranach created striking portraits and expressive devotional works, propaganda for the Protestant cause, as well as his own brand of erotic female nude and inventive treatments of biblical, mythological and classical subjects.

Cranach adopted his surname from his birthplace Kronach, a town in Upper Franconia. No works by him are known before c. 1500 when he was nearly 30 years old and living in Vienna. His activity in the Danube region placed him at the forefront of a school of painting which fused landscape and human action with emotive force. His religious paintings set in the wild landscapes of the Alpine foothills, with ruins and windswept trees, are profoundly devotional.

In 1505, shortly after his period in Vienna, Cranach settled in Wittenberg as court artist to the Saxon electors, a position he held under three successive rulers. There he established a highly productive workshop, enlarging his reputation by his prolific work in portraiture, religious and mythological painting, and as a designer of crests, court dress, and murals for the Saxon palaces and hunting lodges. Bold design, intense colour and gracefully outlined costumes typify Cranach's court portraits. His likenesses of the personalities of the day have shaped our conception of them. He was among the first artists to paint full-length portraits; notable also is Cranach's skill in psychological characterisation, seen for example in his portraits of children such as the *Portraits of a Saxon Prince and Princess*, c. 1512, from the National Gallery of Art, Washington.

In 1508 the Elector Frederick the Wise conferred on the artist a coat of arms with the winged serpent that then became the basis of his standard signature. In the same year Cranach visited the Netherlands, where he painted portraits of great figures such as The Emperor Maximilian I and his successor, the future emperor Charles V, then still a young prince. Like his rival and near contemporary Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), who also enjoyed the patronage of Frederick the Wise and was later court painter to Maximilian, Cranach also created engravings and woodcuts.

Cranach was to become a close friend of Martin Luther, professor of theology at Wittenberg University. He supervised the printing of Luther's propaganda pamphlets; designed woodcuts for Luther's translation of the New Testament; painted altarpieces for Lutheran churches; invented entirely new pictorial types for the reformed faith; and made portraits of the Protestant Reformers and princes (such as the Portrait of Martin Luther, 1525, Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery). Cranach's involvement with the Reformation did not impede him from continuing to work for Catholic patrons, including Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg, one of Luther's principal opponents, whose portrait as St. Jerome is included in the exhibition, generously loaned by The Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota.

Often embedded in Cranach's narrative paintings of mythological or biblical subjects are moralizing admonitions, sometimes made explicit in the form of Latin inscriptions. Innocence and seductiveness are combined in his images of idealised heroines, particularly when represented as sinuous female nudes. His depiction of the nude developed away from Renaissance sources towards a figural type whose appearance was highly stylized. Among the most characteristic are Cranach's images of Eve in his interpretation of the biblical story. Such paintings have been an inspiration to artists of recent times – from Picasso to the contemporary American painter John Currin.

A prominent citizen of Wittenberg, owner of a book printing workshop, a pharmacy and a wine shop, Cranach served on the city council and on three occasions was elected to the office of Burgermeister. His salaried position as court artist was suspended following his employer's defeat by Charles V in 1547. He moved to Augsburg then Innsbruck and finally to Weimar, where he died at the age of 81. His manner was emulated by his sons Hans (1513–1537) and Lucas (known as the Younger to distinguish him from his father; 1515–1586), who took over the workshop in 1550.

Other highlights in the exhibition include The Martyrdom of St Catherine, c. 1505, from the Ráday Library of the Hungarian Reformed Church, Budapest; the Portrait Diptych of John the Steadfast and his Son John Frederick, 1509, National Gallery, London; The Judgement of Paris, c. 1513, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth; The Beheading of St John the Baptist and its pendant The Beheading of St Catherine, 1515, from the Archiepiscopal Palace, Kroměříž; Adam and Eve, 1526, Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery, London; The Golden Age, c. 1530, Alte Pinakothek, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich; and the Portrait of the Artist, 1550, by Lucas Cranach the Younger, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

