

## Works by Lucas Cranach (and his workshop) in The Burrell Collection

- A Stag Hunt (reg. no. 35-73)
- Venus and Cupid the Honey-thief (reg. no. 35-74)
- Judith with the Head of Holofernes (reg. no. 35-671)
- St Catherine (reg. no. 36-2, a woodcut print, not on display)

### Brief biographical details

The German artist Lucas Cranach the Elder was born in Kronach, near Coburg, in 1472 (he was one year younger than Durer). His father was a painter, and Lucas would have learned his craft in his father's studio. The main artistic influence at the time came from Nuremberg, which was not far from Kronach [Guides can perhaps mention our Nuremberg 'family tour' at this stage?]. Lucas was in Vienna by 1503, stayed briefly, and then moved on to Wittenberg, to serve Duke Frederick the Wise, ruler of Saxony. He remained loyal to and worked for, the rulers of Saxony until his death in 1553. His sons, Hans and Lucas 'the Younger', were also artists, and continued working in their father's style after his death [which helps explain the very large number of paintings attributed to Lucas the Elder - a book we have in the Burrell Library illustrates most of these] In addition to paintings, he also produced etchings and designed woodcuts (printing was in its infancy at this time, and prints were 'one of the latest things', cheaper and more widely available than paintings).

### Sir William Burrell and Cranach

We know that Burrell thought very highly of Cranach. We do not know exactly when he purchased 'A Stag Hunt' and Venus and Cupid the Honey-thief, but a contemporary photograph shows that these two paintings were hanging alongside each other on the landing at Burrell's residence in Glasgow, at Great Western Terrace, by about 1905-6 (Venus' was in a Christie's sale in 1902, which helps narrow down Burrell's purchase date - his series of Purchase Books, in which he wrote down details of all his purchases, only begins later, in 1911). 'Judith with the Head of Holofernes' was purchased in 1995, using funds from the Burrell Purchase Fund supplemented by grants from The Art Fund and The Heritage Lottery Fund. If we (or another British Gallery) had not purchased this work, it would definitely have been exported.

### 'A Stag Hunt'



Painted in 1529; Cranach's 'serpent device' and date on central tree trunk. One of several versions (others are in Vienna, Copenhagen and Basle. The painting in Vienna is probably the prototype).

This painting shows very well how some hunts were 'stage-managed'. On the right, beautifully dressed and mounted hunters, some in armour (perhaps they are bodyguards?) wait in a group, while others drive a herd

of deer - using horses, weapons and dogs - into the path of aristocratic crossbowmen hidden behind bushes, and on into the water for added entertainment. Various attempts have been made to positively identify each of the 'princes' shown here - three holding crossbows at the ready in the foreground of the painting, and one halfway up on the left-hand side - so any names given on our label may vary from time to time. The Elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony (he's probably in the middle), the Elector John the Constant of Saxony, the Emperor Maximilian I and the Emperor Charles V are the main contenders, but we don't know exactly 'which is which'. The depicted hunt is thought to commemorate the rulers in question (some of whom may already have been dead when the painting was made) and the hunt may or may not have actually taken place!

### Several points of interest and fun:

- The huntsman blowing his horn amid trees on the right-hand side
- The ultra-fashionably-dressed group of 'hangers-on' in the boat, including a small white dog and couple of lovers (definitely without hunting on their minds!)
- The beautifully-executed townscape top right
- Note the steep 'perspective' of the scene - depicted as if from a very high viewpoint (almost a 'bird's-eye' view)
- Technical point - Arms & Armour expert has pointed out that the crossbows depicted are not of the type suitable for shooting deer

### 'Judith with the Head of Holofernes'



Painted 1530; Cranach's 'serpent' device below window on left. One of several versions of the subject. Other, similar compositions by Cranach showing a large central female figure in this way depict, e.g. Salome holding the head of St John the Baptist.

The story of Judith can be found in the Apocrypha of the Old Testament (Book of Judith, 10-13). This Jewish heroine was a beautiful widow who seduced, disarmed and cut off the head of Holofernes, the commander of Assyrian forces who were on the point of subjugating her people. Although still devastated by the death of her husband, Judith put on her best outfit, and set out deliberately to put Holofernes at his ease, in preparation for beheading him while he slept. Here we see Judith in the act of triumphantly displaying her gruesome trophy, bloodstained sword in hand. But, this is also seemingly a portrait of a fashionable young German lady of Cranach's own time. The view from the window also shows a contemporary landscape of the type found around Wittenberg. A further layer of meaning is allegorical - representing the triumph of Virtue over Vice (a physically weak but virtuous woman overcomes - with just cause - a strong but wicked man).

### Interesting points:

Similarity between this figure's fashionable clothing and that of the female figures in the boat in 'Stag Hunt' painting alongside Note the bold and beautiful jewellery - choker, gold chain (similar to modern-day fashion), and particularly the fine kidskin gloves with 'cut outs' to display rings on Judith's fingers. This 'slashed' type of decoration, which reveals what is underneath, also found on bodice and sleeves of silk gown worn by Judith. Her delicately-beaded 'hairnet' or snood and precariously-perched feathered hat also worthy of notice. Different/contrasting textures of materials very well captured by the artist - see e.g. the very delicate see-through white silk of Judith's upper bodice, the wavy edge of which appears from under her choker, just under her chin.

The expression on Judith's face - looks confidently straight out at viewer, half smiling. Compare with Holofernes' expression - also seems to look out at viewer from under his lowered lids, mouth half open as if caught by surprise.

We don't know if this is meant to be a 'portrait' of a real woman - all Cranach's ladies seem to look very similar, but it could be that this was the fashionable 'look' of the time, and everyone aimed to look like this ('flattery was the name of the game' for artists wanting plenty of commissions).

### 'Venus and Cupid the Honey-thief'



Painted 1545; Cranach 'serpent' device and date on tree trunk above Cupid's head. Many versions of this and similar compositions including Venus figures can be seen in collections elsewhere (there's a particularly nice early one with the same subject in the National Gallery in London). Given its late date and fairly simple composition, ours may be a workshop version; like today's 'designer' items, the Cranach 'logo' (the serpent device) represents the Cranach 'firm', and doesn't mean that the work was necessarily painted by the Master himself, just that he was happy for it to go out under his name.

The Latin verse, top left, is derived from a text by the ancient Greek author Theocritus. It translates as:

*While little Cupid stole from a beehive a honeycomb, A bee stung the thief's finger. Such is the short-lived pleasure we strive for; Harmful, and mixed with sweet sorrow.*

The picture represents an allegorical moral tale. In seeking to obtain sweet honey, Cupid is sharply reminded that pleasure, especially when stolen, is rarely - if ever - free for the taking and without painful consequences. The stag in the background may represent such pleasure in the guise of sexual lust, which would take the allegory on to a deeper level. Venus seems to gesture towards both her son (with her cupped left hand) and the stag behind her (with her right thumb), thus drawing the viewers' attention to the link between the childish love of sweet things and adults' more sophisticated desires. This reading of the scene depicted is backed up by a contemporary poem by an Italian, Ercole Strozzi, based on the same ancient Greek text, which was already in print by 1513 and may well have been seen by Cranach. In this poem, Venus and Cupid are speaking; Cupid begins -

*'How can these tiny creatures be so powerful? How can they hurt with such minute stings?' The goddess answered him, smiling: 'don't you my son inflict deep wounds, though being small of stature?'*

In this poetic interpretation, Venus is openly linking the effects created by tiny young Cupid, the god of Love, with the great pain often caused by this overwhelming emotion as represented here by the stag (which again accounts for her hand gestures in both directions).

### **Points of interest:**

- Although Venus is shown nude, her hair is dressed and she wears a cheeky hat and choker. This, arguably, makes her appear more 'sexy' than if she were completely naked. This probably accounts for the popularity of this particular type of picture, and the number of them which have survived.
- If you look very closely, you can see that Venus holds a diaphanous veil of white fabric across her body (sweeping down from her right to her left hand). Again, this apparently and tantalisingly covers - but doesn't really cover - her nudity. She is a high-class Renaissance pin-up, and would probably have been kept in a man's private study or bedroom.
- Cupid looks pathetically up at his mother, but she gazes directly, in a challenging, almost inviting or teasing way, at the viewer.