

## 1. "JUDITH WITH THE HEAD OF HOLOFERNES"

LUCAS CRANACH

24 JANUARY – 28 APRIL 2013

**A CONTEMPORARY OF PAINTERS** such as Dürer, Holbein, Altdorfer, Baldung Grien or Grunewald, and of sculptors such as Veit Stoss or Riemenschneider, Lucas Cranach, the Elder (Kronach, 1472 - Weimar, 1553), completes the golden generation of German Renaissance. Of all its artists, Cranach led the longest life and the most prolific career. After his early studies in Kronach, he settled in Vienna, the imperial capital of Maximilian I, in 1502. There, he began his career as a portrait painter, and associated with poets and humanists, showing an enthusiasm for literary and religious culture that would become one of the attributes of his artistic production and the foundation for his ability to create original images, both engraved and painted. He travelled along the Danube – mostly to Nuremberg, the city of Dürer, the most famous of the German artists of the time.

In 1504, he was invited by Frederick III, the Wise, to become his court painter, in Wittenberg, where he settled in 1505. In January 8th of 1508, he received from Frederick III, the Prince-Elector of Saxony, a coat of arms featuring a winged serpent wearing a crown, which he proceeded to use as the signature on his paintings. He visited Flanders, in a diplomatic mission to the court of Margaret of Austria, in Mechlin (or Mechelen), where he had the opportunity to experience the art of the Flemish masters; he met Gossaert and copied Bosch, before returning to Wittenberg. *Salome with the Head of St John the Baptist*, from the MNAA, belongs to this period and is one of the great paintings of Cranach's affirmation stage.

His workshop in the city expanded, in order to respond to a growing number of orders of increasing importance. With prospering wealth, fame, and ennobled, he married in 1512. Two of his three sons became painters of importance: Hans (1513-1537), who died prematurely in Bologna, and Lucas Cranach, the Young (1515-1586), who collaborated with his father to the end, prolonging his work and style.

In 1517, the thriving yet peaceful city of Wittenberg became the center of the Protestant Reformation, as it was there that Martin Luther posted the 95 Theses that separated him from the

***Judith with the Head of Holofernes***

Lucas Cranach, the Elder

Signed [winged serpent] at lower right

ca.1530

Oil on linden panel

Rogers Fund, 1911

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv.11.15

Roman Catholic Church. Close friend of Luther, Cranach collaborated in the illustration of his translation of the Bible, and left us painted and engraved portraits of the Reformer. In spite of being Lutheran, Cranach continued to work for a Catholic clientele, while simultaneously seeking to find a possible religious representation for Protestantism, a heated topic at the time, since some of the reformers actually proclaimed iconoclasm.

*Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, from the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, is a painting from circa 1530 that corresponds to this period. The model of the young woman in rich



### ***Salome with the Head of St. John the Baptist***

Lucas Cranach, the Elder

Signed [winged serpent] at high right

ca.1509-1510

Oil on linden panel

Donation Conde de Carvalhido, 1872

Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, inv.736 pint

attire and ornament, brandishing a sword and holding the head of the tyrant, vanquished by her seduction, is an image popular to Cranach, and several dozen similar versions are known. One of the reasons for its success was, for many historians, the fact that the figure of the Jewish heroine also symbolized, in the political context of the Reformation, the protestant people, surrounded by the gigantic power of the Roman Church.

Lucas Cranach was one of the artists that conveyed the most sensuality in his representations. His paintings translate the relation between beauty and the feminine ability to manipulate desires and passions, used for evil, by Salome, and for good, by the heroic Judith.

Salome, the daughter of Herodiade, seduced her mother's husband, Herod Antipas, when dancing at a banquet, and lured him into promising her anything she wanted. Incited by her mother, who was accused by St. John the Baptist of dishonesty for living with her brother-in-law,

she asked him for the head of the Precursor. The Saint was martyred and his head presented, on a platter, to Salome. Salome is sometimes represented alongside another heroine, in order to empathise the moral of the story. In the case of the painting from the MNAA, a "Lucretia" might have accompanied Salome, forming a diptych.

An example of the hardships and courage of the Jewish people, the story of Judith allows for its representation to stand on its own. The heroine seduced and killed Holofernes, who laid siege to the city of Bethulia. When hearing the news of the death of their general, the Assyrian troops lifted the siege.

Frequently featured in German Renaissance, the subjects of feminine power and ruses – *Weibermacht* and *Weiberlisten* – are recurrent in the work of Cranach: Judith, Delilah, Lucretia, Salome and others, representations of couples of disparaging ages, satyr families, the Judgement of Paris... These figures or scenes abound in eroticism, an attribute of the painter's universe (and a strong factor behind his fame and triumph), although, most of the times, events with a profound effect in the course of History are associated. The beauty of the models, the highlight of the female figure with the use of black or darkened backgrounds, their apparent disdain towards the horrors presented, are key elements in these images, which convey a precise moral value through their specific examples. In this sense, they are assigned the role of an exemplary reference that the spirituality of the Reformers lent to the painted and engraved image.

The gathering of the two paintings (for the first time, since they have never been displayed in the same exhibition) allows us to realize how Cranach portrayed two different figures in an equivalent way, using the same artifices and a similar composition, and simultaneously perceive the evolution of the painter's style, from an early period, influenced by Dürer and the Flemish painters, to a mature stage, characterized by more linear drawings, pronounced contrasts, less vibrant colours, and references to Germanic and even medieval models, conveying a nationalism that was certainly not unrelated to the Protestant Reformation. This event would forever shape the life of Cranach. In the end, already an octogenarian, he accompanied his prince in the exile imposed by Emperor Charles V, and died in Weimar in 1553.

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