ARTIST BROCHURE

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Lucas Cranach the Elder

Lucas Cranach the Elder was a German Renaissance painter and graphic artist who excelled in portraits and in female nudes. He was the foremost member of the family of artists by that name active in Saxony during the 16th century. Lucas Cranach adopted his surname from his birthplace, Kronach, a town of Upper Franconia in the diocese of Bamberg. His father and teacher was a painter by the name of Hans Moller or Maler (1448 1491/2). None of his work is known to survive, but his large house in Kronach on the Marktplatz suggests that he was successful. The name Maler ('Painter') has led to some uncertainty as to whether it was simply a reference to Hans's profession, but contemporary references to 'pictor Lucas Moller' or 'maler Moller' confirm that it had become the family surname. The still repeated belief that the name was Sonder or Sunder apparently results from a confusion with another family in Kronach, which was related to Lucas the Elder through marriage.

From about 1501 to 1504 Cranach lived in Vienna, and his earliest known works date from this period. They include a portrait of a humanist, Doctor Reuss (Germanisches Museum, Nuremberg) and a Crucifixion (1503, Alte Pinakothek, Munich). His work at this time, lyrical and spirited with landscape setting, was influenced by that of Albrecht Durer.

In 1505 Cranach became court painter to the electors of Saxony at Wittenberg, a position he held until 1550. He was a prominent citizen in Wittenberg, received a title, and became mayor in 1537. In 1508 he visited the Netherlands, where he painted portraits of such royalty as Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I and the young prince who succeeded him as Charles V. For his electoral patrons he painted biblical and mythological scenes with decorative sensual nudes that were new to German painting. These works include many versions of Adam and Eve, The Judgment of Paris (1528, Metropolitan Museum, New York), and Venus and Amor (1531, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels).

Cranach was a friend of Martin Luther, and his art expresses much of the spirit and feeling of the German Reformation. Cranach propagandized for the Protestant cause in many portraits, woodcuts, and engravings. His portraits of Protestant leaders, including many versions of Luther and Duke Henry of Saxony (1514, Gemäldegalerie, Dresden), are sober and meticulously drawn. Cranach ran a large workshop and worked with great speed, producing hundreds of works. He died in Weimar, on October 15, 1553. Cranach's sons were both artists, but the only one to achieve distinction was Lucas Cranach the Younger, who was his father's pupil and often his assistant.

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