

THE
NATIONAL
GALLERY

LUCAS CRANACH
THE ELDER
Portrait of a Woman

Susan Foister

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Lucas Cranach the Elder

NG 291

Portrait of a Woman

1525–7

Oil on wood (beech?), 36.1 x 25.1 cm (excluding edging strips), painted surface 36.1 x 25.1 cm

Signature

Cranach's insignia appears lower left, a winged serpent facing right with elevated wings.

Provenance

The painting was in the collection of John Talbot, 16th Earl of Shrewsbury (1791–1852), at Alton Abbey, later Alton Towers, by 1835.¹ According to the NG MS catalogue the picture was previously in a Nuremberg collection.² The Earl of Shrewsbury probably acquired it from Friedrich Campe of Nuremberg (1777–1846), a bookseller and publisher. Campe, who collected early Northern European paintings (including the portraits by Robert Campin, NG653.1 and 653.2), sold a picture named as a Van Eyck to the earl in 1829 to finance his journey to England, but the Cranach is not recorded in his possession.³ The picture, which the Director of the National Gallery, Charles Eastlake, called 'a very agreeable specimen of the master', was purchased at the Alton Towers sale on 8 July 1857 (no. 259).⁴

Exhibitions

London NG 1975 (9); London V&A 1981 (P 1); Frankfurt and London RA 2007–8 (78).

Technical Notes

Conservation and condition

The painting was cleaned and restored in 1973–4, at which time a secondary pine panel was removed; the original panel was then reinforced with balsa wood and wax-resin, and oak edging strips were attached. The condition of the paint is generally good, although the flesh is thin in places, and there are some paint losses, especially down the right edge.

Materials and technique

The *support* was described as beech in the 1959 catalogue, but this does not appear to have been on the basis of any scientific analysis and cannot be confirmed, as the original panel is no longer accessible. The overall size (including edging strips) is now 37.6 x 26.6 cm. The thickness is about 0.6 cm. The grain is vertical. A nearly vertical damage to the left of the sitter (10.3 cm from the left edge at the bottom and 9.8 cm from the same edge at the level of the sitter's chin) indicates the position of a split or join. X-radiography also shows a vertical line which appears to be another join to the right of the sitter's head.

The *ground* is chalk (calcium carbonate). Visible in X-radiographs is a network of tangled fibres in patches over the panel. These must be either below the ground or embedded in it as reinforcement. Infrared reflectography revealed no underdrawing in the face and nothing certainly identifiable as underdrawing in the figure. It was not possible to penetrate the black background paint.

The *medium* in the red paint of the skirt was identified by GC–MS analysis as linseed oil; there was no indication that it had been heat-bodied.

Pigments and painting technique

The velvet skirt of the sitter's dress was created very economically by first painting the lighter areas of the modelling using an opaque orange-red paint consisting of vermilion applied onto a flat black underpaint. A translucent deep-red paint consisting of red lake was then painted across the whole skirt, giving a deep, rich purple-red appearance where this lies directly on black in the shadows. In the black underpaint, in addition to the black pigment, a small amount of a zinc compound, probably white vitriol, is present as an additive.⁵ Slight modification to the size of the links of the chain was made during painting, as indicated by areas where the flesh paint lies over the edges of the chain.

Subject

The woman is placed against a black background. She wears a dress of dark red material with the appearance of velvet. The collar is lined with black. The upper and lower parts of her slashed sleeves are separated by the white fabric of her undergarment, over which are vertical black lines which may indicate laces joining upper and lower sleeves. The white material is also visible under black lacing above her waist. Her sleeves are ringed with several bands of gold, decorated with patterns of black, and end with long cuffs of the same textile. Her bodice is low-cut, drawing attention to her full but subtly indicated breasts. The orange textile of the upper part of her bodice may be intended to represent cloth of gold; on it is a diamond pattern made up of pearls, with further pearls representing the letter M repeated several times within the diamonds. Her headdress is made of a similar material to the bodice, lacking the pearl design. She wears a large gold chain over her bodice, which rests on her shoulders, while the opening of her collar reveals a narrow gold band worn around her neck with, above it, a similarly close-fitting jewelled collar. She wears white gloves with slashes at the knuckles, and rings on her fingers, which glint through the slashes. In addition she is wearing over her gloves three rings on the fingers of her left hand and two on her right, though it would appear to have been impossible for these rings to pass over those worn under the gloves.⁶ Her hair is fair and her eyes are brown.

NG 291 is usually described as a portrait, yet it has characteristics in common with other similar paintings by Cranach which may be idealised images of beautiful, richly dressed women rather than portraits of specific individuals at the Saxon or other German courts. Friedländer and Rosenberg included it in a group of half a dozen such small-scale works which, they suggested, might fall into either category.⁷ The subject here is lavishly dressed and adorned with the finest jewellery: if a portrait, the sitter would have been of the highest rank, probably a member of the court of the Elector of Saxony or a comparable German court. The letter M, repeated on the bodice of her dress, in that case would presumably have been the initial letter of her first or family name. Such letters appear in the dress or jewellery of sitters in some portraits by Cranach. In one of these, formerly at Berlin, the sitter has been identified as Barbara of Saxony, as she wears the letters B and S on her necklace and belt.⁸ In another portrait of about 1513 a young woman, who has not been identified, wears the letter H in pearls on her dress and a motif on her sleeve which appears to incorporate the letter I, as well as a heraldic device, strongly suggesting that this picture is a portrait.⁹ Portraits of the Electress Sibyl of Saxony depict her bodice embroidered with the letters SHS, as well as the motto 'als in eren'.¹⁰ A portrait at Darmstadt attributed to Cranach or his workshop is identified as Princess Maria of Saxony and dated 1534. The sitter's dress is similar to that of NG 291 and she wears a headband with the letters E.W.R.H., possibly the initials of a device or cipher of a type popular at courts in this period (although in another version of the portrait in Lyon the initials are only W or EW).¹¹ Linked letters HM underneath a crown are embroidered on the bodice of a portrait of a woman wearing a bonnet attributed to the circle of Lucas Cranach the Elder.¹² Such letters also occur in the dress of male sitters such as the Elector Joachim and the humanist Christoph Scheurl, painted in 1509, who sports three letter Ms on his doublet.¹³

Another possibility is that the letter M refers to Saint Mary Magdalen and that the painting is a disguised portrait. Sitters in this period might be portrayed in a variety of guises, including those of religious figures.¹⁴ Yet it seems improbable that a woman would choose to be portrayed as the Magdalen unless she was a courtesan, though that possibility should be considered (see below).¹⁵ Nevertheless, there do not appear to be any examples of the letter M visible in the dress of Mary Magdalen among the depictions of her by Cranach; nor is the woman here holding an ointment jar, the traditional attribute of the saint.¹⁶ Although Cranach portrayed Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg as Saint Jerome there are no certain instances of disguised portraits of women by him.¹⁷ Among those suggested as disguised portraits is a painting of the princess who bore the child of St John Christostomos (Eisenach, Wartburg Stiftung). Another is a three-quarter-length image of Saint Helena, who is dressed very similarly to the woman in NG 291 and who also gazes out at the viewer.¹⁸

There are only a few identifiable portraits of courtly women by Lucas Cranach the Elder.¹⁹ These show the sitters in three-quarter face, as do those of a different class, such as Katharina von Bora, Luther's wife, or the unidentified woman in Washington, pair to a portrait of a man, both presented against shadowed green backgrounds.²⁰

These women usually avert their gaze; Katharina von Bora is the exception, as are two of the three princesses of Saxony, Sibylla, Emilia and Sidonia, who are depicted in the triple portrait now in Vienna.²¹ The latter are dressed in a similar manner to the woman here, and both portraits place their subjects against a black background with decorative aplomb. However, the upward tilt of the head, which is also bent slightly to the viewer's right, the frontal pose and the direct gaze of the woman in NG 291 distinguish it from these certain portraits. In this respect it has more in common with paintings such as the small roundel at Stuttgart or the panel at Baltimore, which is almost the same size as this. In these pictures, usually thought to be generalised images of beautiful women rather than portraits, the subjects are posed similarly to the figure in the National Gallery painting, looking out at the viewer, heads posed frontally but leaning on one side and with gloved hands folded over each other in a comparable manner; they wear similar rich costumes to those in the National Gallery painting, but their hair is loose and the images have a particularly decorative and seductive quality.²² The features of the women in these images also appear less strongly characterised when compared with Cranach's depictions of identifiable sitters. Although these women are clothed, their direct gazes and regular features encourage comparison with Cranach's series of paintings of semi-clad beauties in the guise of Venus and Lucretia, as well as similarly richly dressed images of Judith and Salome. In the paintings of Lucretia at Houston, dated 1529, and in the Royal Collection, dated 1530, the subject wears similar dress, headdress and jewellery to the woman in NG 291.²³

The presence of the letter M suggests that the woman in NG 291 is likely to be intended as a specific individual, despite the languid pose, frontal depiction and a certain lack of individual characterisation, all of which link the painting to images of beautiful women, as well as those who may be portrayed in the guise of subjects from classical literature or the Bible. It has been suggested that this and similar paintings might be depictions of courtly mistresses, their features deliberately generalised.²⁴ The possibility that the subject might be a Saxon courtesan whose first name began with the letter M should be entertained: this would explain the seductive nature of the image, which differentiates it from those which are identifiable portraits of individuals.

Attribution and Date

The painting has generally been accepted as the work of Cranach himself.²⁵ The quality of this small work is extremely high: the details are executed with great delicacy and precision, and with a deft brushwork characteristic of Cranach's technique. The depiction of the red velvet, using bright, opaque orange-red paint and translucent dark red applied wet-in-wet over black, corresponds to what Heydenreich has described as Cranach's 'inspired approach to the painting of velvet', celebrated by Johann Neudorffer in 1555.²⁶ The painting is close in style to a number of other half-length depictions by Cranach of women wearing comparable dress and with similar but variant poses, which have usually been dated to the mid-1520s, as well as to *Three Female Heads* in Truro, a pattern used in subject compositions of this period.²⁷ The subject in a

small full-length painting of a woman holding a flower in Warsaw dated 1526 wears comparable dress, though her hairstyle and hat differ.²⁸ The *Saint Helena* in Cincinnati is dated 1525, and the saint again wears very similar dress and headdress.²⁹ The small roundel of a woman at Stuttgart is, as already discussed, very close in style and composition to this work and is dated 1527 (apparently changed from 1525).³⁰ Another small full-length of a woman holding an apple in Prague dated 1527 is also similar in style, dress and facial type.³¹ The National Gallery painting is therefore likely to date from the period 1525–7.

General References

Levey 1959, p. 19; Friedländer and Rosenberg 1978, no. 172; Frankfurt and London RA 2007–8, no. 78.

Notes

1. Waagen 1838, vol. III, pp. 259–60, recording his visit in 1835: 'A Female portrait, half the size of life; remarkably careful in the execution and in a very warm tone'; Alton 1850, p. 21, 'Lucas Cranach – A Female portrait'.
2. The NG MS catalogue states that the picture was 'formerly in the possession of a family at Nuremberg from whom it was obtained by the late Earl of Shrewsbury'. As Levey noted (Levey 1959, p. 19), if the the Earl of Shrewsbury's picture came from the Campe collection, it is unlikely to be identical to the picture in the Ottley sale in London on 25 May 1811 (9, Cranach): 'it is probable that this is the Portrait of a Princess of Saxony', a provenance proposed in the 1929 catalogue.
3. Passavant 1836, vol. II, p. 81 (referring to paintings by Van Eyck and Memling): 'The Earl purchased the two last-mentioned pictures from Mr Campe, of Nurnberg'. The painting named as a Van Eyck was sold to Shrewsbury by Campe in 1829 to finance his journey to England: see Reynot 1962, p. 35. The Cranach might have been sold at this time also, or on the London visit, but there are no records of it being in Campe's collection; it is not included in *Umriss zu Oelgemälden aus der Dr. Fr. Campe'schen Sammlung ...* n.d., which contains 18 line engravings of paintings in Campe's collection, among which are three works by Cranach.
4. NG Archive file NG5/227/1857. Eastlake recommended bidding up to £80 but the picture was purchased for £50 8s.
5. See also Cranach's *Portrait of Johannes Feige* (NG 1925), where potassium zinc sulphate was found in the black background paint. In this *Portrait of a Lady* zinc was detected by EDX analysis in the black paint, which may well have been added in the form of white vitriol. A small but increasing number of occurrences have been reported in paintings from across Europe. White vitriol is mentioned in documentary sources in recipes for the preparation of oils and also as an additive on the palette. For a more detailed discussion see Dunkerton and Spring 2013, esp. pp. 24–5 and notes 67–73.
6. Frankfurt and London RA 2007–8, no. 78, p. 278.
7. Friedländer and Rosenberg 1978, nos 171–5 and 178.
8. *Ibid.*, no. 57.
9. Hamburg 2003, no. 8, private collection.
10. Friedländer and Rosenberg 1978, no. 337. The device 'Als in Eren' is seen more clearly in www.lucascranach.org, cda DE_KSVC_M020, *Portrait of Sibylla of Cleves at the Veste Coburg* (on her headdress and also on her neckband), and in other versions of her portrait (I am grateful to Gunnar Heydenreich for bringing this and further examples of portraits bearing letters and devices to my attention).
11. *Ibid.*, no. 348; Koepplin and Falk 1974–6, vol. II, no. 627, p. 708; Frankfurt and London RA 2007–8, no. 76, p. 272. For the version in Lyon see www.lucascranach.org, cda F_BMAL_B494. For similar

examples of devices with letters designed by Holbein for the English court in the 1530s see Rowlands 1993, pp. 165–7.

12. On deposit at the Fränkische Galerie, Kronach, from the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, see cda DE_BStGS_FGK_15271.

13. See two portraits of the Elector Joachim I in cda DE_SPSG_GK19377 [Schloss Grünewald] and DE_BStGS_8514 [Aschaffenburg] FR 330A, and the portrait of Scheurl at Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, FR 23, cda DE_GNMN_Gm2332.

14. I am grateful to John Hand for this suggestion. For sixteenth-century portraits of sitters in the guise of religious figures see Campbell 1990, p. 137 and London 2008–9, nos 26–8.

15. For Holbein's painting of the Greek prostitute Lais Corinthiaca in Basel, and its possible connection with Magdalena Offenburg, see Rowlands 1985, p. 46.

16. Compare Mary Magdalen in paintings of the Lamentation (Detroit) and Crucifixion (Frankfurt), Friedländer and Rosenberg 1978, nos 90 and 92, and in the individual depiction (Cologne), *ibid.*, no. 168, where she holds her ointment jar.

17. For Cardinal Albrecht as Saint Jerome see *ibid.*, nos 184–6.

18. For the painting of a woman who bore the child of St John Chrysostomos, shown in the background, as a portrait (formerly believed to depict the Virgin and Child) see *ibid.*, no. 170 and also Frankfurt and London RA 2007–8, no. 77, p. 274, doubting the notion that a portrait could be intended. For some remarks on the relationship between such images and the picture of a woman in Warsaw dated 1526 see Koeplin and Falk 1974–6, vol. II, pp. 583–4.

19. For identifiable portraits in addition to those mentioned above see Friedländer and Rosenberg 1978, no. 305, Sybil of Cleves, Weimar, and *ibid.*, no. 327, Margravine Hedwig of Brandenburg-Ansbach, Chicago, as well as the triple portrait at Vienna, *ibid.*, no. 301.

20. *Ibid.*, nos 190, 146; for the Washington portrait see Hand with Mansfield 1993, pp. 40–4.

21. Friedländer and Rosenberg 1978, no. 301.

22. *Ibid.*, nos 174 and 175. Nos 171 and 173, discussed by the authors under no. 171 as portraits or beauties, seem more specific and more likely to be portraits, as is no. 178, a full-length image of a woman holding an apple at Prague. See also the full-length picture of a woman in Warsaw holding a flower, *ibid.*, no. 300, discussed in Koeplin and Falk 1974, vol. II, pp. 583–4.

23. Friedländer and Rosenberg 1978, no. 237.

24. Frankfurt and London RA 2007–8, no. 78, p. 278.

25. Friedländer and Rosenberg 1978, no. 172 and Levey 1959, p. 19; Frankfurt and London RA 2007–8, no. 78, p. 278.

26. Heydenreich 2007, p. 182; for his painting techniques in general see pp. 77–217.

27. Friedländer and Rosenberg 1978, nos 171–5; Kronach und Leipzig 1994, no. 193; Frankfurt and London RA 2007–8, no. 85, p. 292.

28. Friedländer and Rosenberg 1978, no. 296; Koeplin and Falk 1974, vol. II, no. 484, pp. 583–4, fig. 98.

29. Friedländer and Rosenberg 1978, no. 164; Brinkmann 2008, no. 57, p. 232.

30. Friedländer and Rosenberg 1978, no. 174; Koeplin and Falk 1974, vol. II, no. 184, p. 297.

31. Friedländer and Rosenberg 1978, no. 178.