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LUCAS CRANACH
THE ELDER

Portraits of Johann the Steadfast
and Johann Friedrich
the Magnanimous

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Oil on panel, NG 6538 41.2 x 31.0 cm, NG 6539 41.9 x 31.5 cm, framed sizes: both
49.4 x 38.6 x 2.9 cm

Inscription

Dated 1509 on NG 6539, upper right.

Provenance

The portraits are first recorded as 'Zwey Churfürsten aus Sachßen Conterfät an Einem Stückh' ('Two portraits of the prince electors from Saxony in one piece') in an inventory listing items in the collection of the Margrave of Baden-Durlach, Karlsburg, Baden-Durlach, which had been transferred in 1688 under Margrave Friedrich VII (ruled 1677–1709) to the Markgräfler Hof, Basel, in order to avoid destruction by French troops in the Nine Years War or War of the Palatine Succession.¹ Although in 1715 Margrave Karl III Wilhelm (ruled 1709–38) founded a new capital for his court at Karlsruhe and in 1775 his successor Karl Friedrich (ruled 1738–71) completed a new palace there, many of the paintings, including NG 6538 and 6539, remained stored at Basel. In 1733 and 1776 new inventories were drawn up: the two pictures are recorded in the inventory of 1733 as 'Zwey Churfürsten in Sachsen in Schwartz und vergoldeter Rahm so sich zusammen legen laßen' ('Two prince electors in Saxony in a black and gilded frame which can be folded together').² They were among those works subsequently sold at Basel in 1808. They were purchased, along with nearly a hundred others, by Peter Vischer (1751–1823), later called Vischer-Sarasin, of Schloss Wildenstein in Switzerland, a merchant and municipal councillor of Basel. They remained at Schloss Wildenstein in the possession of the Vischer family (the last of whom, Peter Leonhard, died in 1990) until auctioned at Christie's, London, on 6 July 1990, no. 42.³ They were purchased through Christie's in 1991.⁴

Exhibitions

Basel 1974 (596) and (597); Frankfurt and London RA 2007–8 (18).

Versions

NG 6538: for portraits of Johann the Steadfast sharing this model see below.

Technical Notes

Conservation

The paintings were cleaned and restored in 1995.

Condition

The panels and frames have suffered worm damage, but are otherwise in good condition. The dull yellow paint on the frames is the exposed mordant or adhesive for the original gilding; only traces of gold leaf remain. The paint of NG 6538 is in excellent condition, with only a few tiny flake losses. There may be some fading of a red lake pigment in the flesh paint of the sitter's hands. NG 6539 has more small losses, from the green paint of the sitter's costume, along the grain of the wood, but is still in very good condition.

Materials and technique

The frames are original. The profiles, with their simple deep scotia moulding and raised outer edge enriched with a narrow half round, are similar to those found on other frames of works by Cranach of this period.⁵ They are joined with a double mortise and tenon joint.⁶ It can be seen in X-ray images that neither frame fits the panel exactly: there are gaps top and bottom, although the frames fit tightly on the left and right; however, this can be explained by the natural contraction across the grain of the panels, and is not any indication that the portraits were not originally in these frames.

The outer edges and the backs of the frames are painted black. The inner mouldings were originally gilded although what is now visible is mainly the golden-yellow oil mordant (adhesive)⁷, and only fragments of the gold leaf remain. Traces of this mordant pass beneath the black background on NG 6539 confirming that it is original and was already in place when the background was painted. On NG 6538 there are traces of the original final translucent green paint of the background on the gold, indicating that it was applied when the frames were complete. However, painting of the portraits and decoration of the frames were probably carried out concurrently, since there are also traces of gold from the frame on top of the black background of NG 6539 at the left edge. The frames are joined with iron hinges and handmade iron nails; this was done after gilding as the tips of the nails are visible in the mouldings.⁸

The panels are each formed from three thin boards of wood with grain running horizontally.

The backs of both panels are painted black. On NG 6538 there is a later inscription in red which reads N27 28. Two shields are painted on the back of NG 6539 (see below).

The *grounds* of the obverses are of chalk. The reverses are painted directly on to the wood with no ground. There does not appear to be any priming. Nothing that could be definitely identified as underdrawing was found with infrared reflectography.

The *medium* of the paint of the green background and black robe in NG 6538, and of the green sleeve in NG 6539, was identified by GC–MS analysis as linseed oil.⁹ A sample

of red paint from the pattern on the sleeves in NG 6539 was found to contain linseed oil together with a little pine resin.

Pigments

Verdigris forms the basis for the green background of *Johann the Steadfast* (NG 6538). In the opaque underpaint it is mixed with lead white and lead-tin yellow, while in the final translucent layers it is used alone. Very similar green paint mixtures were used for the main colour of the costume of *Johann Friedrich* (NG 6539). The intense red strips on the boy's costume consist of vermilion of exceptional quality and the same pigment combined with red earth and black makes up the more brownish-red stripes. There are pale yellow highlights of lead-tin yellow on the gold chain. The basic pale pink tone of the flesh paint is a mixture of white and a little vermilion, with some black pigment in addition in the shadows.

Painting technique

In common with many pictures by Cranach the flesh is thinly painted. Details such as the twisted braids decorating Johann the Steadfast's hat have been skilfully painted, with rapidly applied touches for the pearls and impasto yellow highlights for the gold, for example for the threads at the end, where the lighter green underpaint has been deliberately left exposed around them to indicate the overall shape of the tuft at the top right of the hat. Similarly, the feather is formed of wet-in-wet strokes of grey and black and has circular markings with the impasto typical of a bodied lead-tin yellow paint.

The Sitters

Johann the Steadfast is shown against a green background. He wears a black hat decorated with twisted ropes of small gold and seed pearl beads which pass around the brim of the front of his hat, which is also decorated with two small gold tags or aglets, and over the brim, where it appears to be attached with a bow, or where the ends of the ropes protrude. To our left the ear flap is pinned up with a large golden brooch in the form of a cross. It is studded with precious stones, including rubies at either end of the horizontal bars of the cross, and there are pearls in the corners of the arms of the cross. Part of a gold chain is visible to the right of the brooch, and two golden tags or aglets protrude at the left-hand side. A curling black feather with pale yellow circular markings is attached to the top of his cap behind the earflap. His black coat is patterned with dark grey, evidently indicating a damask weave. At the front of his coat are three tiers of slashes fastened by knots fashioned from ropes of gold and seed pearl beads similar to those trimming his hat. The high collar of his white shirt is visible through the coat: it is embroidered with a trellis pattern, in black and gold thread or beads, and trimmed with tiny pearl beads. The collar is fastened with another knot of gold beads. On the thumb of his right hand he wears two rings, one formed from

small gold beads and the other a gold ring with a large blue stone. His hair and beard are dark brown and his eyes are also dark brown.

Johann Friedrich the Magnanimous is placed against a black background. He wears a green doublet with bands of red and white in a tartan pattern, slashed to reveal a red lining; his sleeves are bound with rows of red, white and blue ribbons. The edge of a gold-trimmed shirt is just visible at his neck. Over his shoulders he wears a large gold chain of twisted links. His hat is green and is adorned with three jewelled ornaments. Two of these resemble bows of gold, their surface engraved with a diaper pattern; the left-hand one, the only one properly visible, has a cluster of pearls at the centre. The third ornament, on our right, appears to be a gold and white enamel with a pendant pearl. The hat is surmounted by voluminous multicoloured ostrich plumes, white with green, pink and blue; such dyed ostrich feathers were fashionable at courts in northern Europe in the sixteenth century.¹⁰ Johann Friedrich holds a sword with a pommel of golden metal. His hair is fair and his eyes are light brown.

The two sitters are identified by the coats of arms on the back of the right-hand portrait. They are *head erased Sables, langued Gules, horned Argent, crowned Or. Two Argent a griffin rampant left, armed Or. Three Argent an eagle Gules armed and beaked Or, langued Gules. The wings charged with a trefoil Or.* They confirm the resemblance of the sitter in the left-hand panel to portraits of Johann the Steadfast (1468–1532) Elector of Saxony, who ruled jointly with his brother Frederick the Wise (1463–1525). The electors employed Cranach as their court artist from 1505. The right-hand panel must therefore depict his son, Johann Friedrich the Magnanimous (1503–1554), whose mother Sophie von Mecklenburg died at his birth in 1503. There are no other certain portraits of Johann Friedrich as a boy, although a few images survive which are likely to represent him (see further below). There are a number of portraits of him by Cranach as a portly dark-haired adult (for example, his marriage portrait at Weimar dated 1526, or the slightly later portraits of him as a ruler, such as in the triptych at Hamburg) bearing little resemblance to the boy in this portrait, though there is no reason to doubt the identification. Johann Friedrich would have been aged about six when this portrait was made. His father was aged about thirty-eight. The humanist Konrad Mutian (1470–1526) referred to the young boy at this time as 'the only hope of his country' ('unica spes patriae').¹¹

Johann the Steadfast shared the tastes of his brother Frederick for both the traditional courtly pastimes of hunting and tournaments, and for art and learning. Together the electors established a large and famous collection of relics, which were recorded in woodcuts by their court artist Cranach. However, they became early enthusiasts for the beliefs of Luther, who nailed his theses to the door of their castle church at Wittenberg and they protected him from his persecutors. In 1527 Johann established a Lutheran church and made himself the local bishop. After the death of Frederick in 1525 Johann ruled alone. In 1513 Johann married his second wife, Margaret of Anhalt (1494–1521),

with whom he had four children and resided in Weimar. Although he espoused the Protestant cause at the Diet of Speyer in 1529, and later entered into the Schmalkaldic alliance with other Protestant princes, he did not wish to take arms against the Habsburgs or create a lasting rift in Christendom.¹²

His son Johann Friedrich the Magnanimous married Sibylla of Cleves in 1527; they had four sons. He received a humanist as well as a courtly education, and his theological interests were awoken early: he became a strong supporter of Luther and took forward the establishment of the Lutheran church in his territory, sequestering monasteries in 1534. He led the Schmalkaldic league of Protestant princes to war against the Emperor Charles V, and in 1547 was captured at the battle of Mühlberg and sentenced to death. His sentence was commuted to lifelong imprisonment and he was kept as a prisoner in Augsburg until 1552, when he was released to live in Weimar until his death two years later.¹³

The Creation and Viewing of the Diptych

The two portraits are clearly closely related in their colour scheme, the green background of the portrait of the father balancing the green clothing of the son, and similarly in the use of black, corresponding to the heraldic principle of 'an exchange of colours'.¹⁴ Yet the poses of the two sitters are quite different and they are placed at differing heights, the son a little higher and evidently slightly closer to the viewer than the father; the portraits also seem conceived at slightly differing scales. It might at first glance seem possible that Cranach joined together two pre-existing portraits or painted a second portrait to go with an originally independent work, thereby making up a diptych. Certainly, it is probable that the likenesses had separate origins, independent of this commission; this might account for some of the disparity in the compositional relationship, despite the clear attempt to relate the two portraits through the repetition of the colours black and green, as well as for the greater sense of immediacy and spontaneity in the portrait of the young Johann Friedrich.

A number of portraits of Johann the Steadfast survive: although there appear to be no other surviving individual portraits from this period his portrait is included in altarpieces by Cranach, along with that of his brother Frederick the Wise, and in an engraving by Cranach of 1510 also showing both brothers.¹⁵ The image seen here (NG 6538) is closest to that on the altarpiece of the Holy Kindred in Frankfurt. A tracing that was reduced by 50 per cent and placed on the Frankfurt picture corresponded exactly in outline, although details such as the right eye and the placing of the hat have been changed.¹⁶ This suggests that a workshop pattern was in use, although as no underdrawing is visible using infrared reflectography, there is no evidence which might have helped to confirm this, such as indications that the image has been transferred through pouncing or tracing.¹⁷ By contrast, there is no indication of any repetition of portraits of Johann Friedrich following this pattern. Indeed, this would be unlikely in the case of a small child whose appearance was subject to rapid change. Other images by

Cranach may show Johann Friedrich as a small boy: a woodcut by Cranach (and his depiction of a small boy handing roses to St Dorothy in the wing of the St Catherine altarpiece (the reverse of NG 6511), as well as the small boy in the centre panel of the Holy Kinship altarpiece at Frankfurt.¹⁸ Neither of these, however, has any relationship with the image of him seen here.

Portrait diptychs more commonly show man and wife, so the conjunction of widowed father and motherless son here is unusual. The arrangement of father on the left and son on the right is analogous to portrait pairs of husband and wife, in which it is usual for the husband to be shown left: the left-hand side – in real terms the right – was considered in heraldry to be the more important.¹⁹ In other portrait pairs by Cranach the husband is placed in three quarter face and the wife is placed more frontally: for example, the portrait dated 1503 of the so-called Stephen Reuss in Nuremberg and his wife in Berlin, although here the latter's head is turned to the left and she looks towards her husband. However, in portrait pairs of man and wife Cranach generally shows the wife as a slightly smaller figure, with more space above, whereas here the reverse is the case. Here the disparity between the two compositions – and perhaps the particular exuberance evident in the painting of the portrait of the boy – can be explained by the use of a standard pattern for the portrait of Johann the Steadfast, whereas the portrait of Johann Friedrich must have been painted from life, or more probably from a drawing made in his presence.²⁰ This was the first of a number of diptychs and triptychs of the electors of Saxony produced by Cranach much later in his career that were sent to other European rulers; this, too, may have been a diplomatic gift to the rulers of Baden (see Provenance).²¹

When the diptych was closed it would have been placed with the coats of arms of Johann the Steadfast on the reverse of the right-hand side uppermost; this side, with the portrait of his son on the reverse, would then have been opened to reveal his own portrait; a similar construction is seen in some early Netherlandish diptychs which show a donor on the right-hand shutter with the Virgin Mary on the left.²² If the diptych is stood upright and opened at an angle, as was probably intended, the gaze of the child meets the viewer, which is not the case when it is placed parallel to a flat surface.²³

Attribution

The diptych was first attributed to Cranach by Koeplin, who published it in 1974, and was included in the second edition of Friedländer and Rosenberg's catalogue raisonné.²⁴ More recently Grimm has suggested that, while the portrait of Johann the Steadfast is the work of Cranach himself, the portrait of Johann Friedrich is by an assistant, whereas Heydenreich does not consider that the technical evidence justifies such a conclusion.²⁵ That the portrait of Johann the Steadfast is likely to have been made from a workshop pattern which could be used many times over may well have influenced the manner in which Cranach approached the painting of this portrait in contrast to that of the son. Yet the extraordinarily deft, swift painting of details such as the jewels is certainly

sufficiently high to be Cranach's own work. The portrait of the son, however, is likely to have been made for this diptych alone. Although it is possible that there was more than one version made of the diptych (which may perhaps have been sent as a diplomatic gift and hence in repetitions to other princes), the liveliness of the brushwork certainly does not suggest the work of an assistant. Both portraits were clearly produced at speed, as demonstrated in the patch of pale green paint within the links of the chain on the left of Johann the Steadfast's portrait, where Cranach has erroneously left the underpaint exposed,²⁶ but the bravura with which the coloured ostrich feathers of the son's hat are painted and the expressiveness of his eyes and mouth are surely the work of Cranach himself.

General References

Koepplin 1974; Koepplin and Falk 1974, vol. I, p. 143 (fig.), vol. II, p. 683; Friedländer and Rosenberg 1978, no. 19, p. 71; NG Annual Report, 1991–2, pp. 16–17.

Notes

1. Vey 1990, citing Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe no. 56/4077.
2. *Ibid.*, citing Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe nos 56/874 and 47/693.
3. *Ibid.*
4. NG Annual Report, 1991–2, pp. 16–17.
5. Koepplin 1974; Heydenreich 2007, pp. 76–9.
6. Heydenreich 2007, p. 76.
7. FTIR analysis suggested that the binding medium of the mordant is oil.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 78; fig. 60, p. 80, shows the hinge.
9. There was no indication of heat-prepolymerisation of the addition of resin.
10. Henry VII employed his own ostrich-feather-maker Paul Freland: his payment of 22s 2d a month is recorded in the accounts of the Treasurer of the Chamber in 1528: LP V, 1531–2, pp. 303–26.
11. Brinkmann 2008, p. 150.
12. NDB, X, 1974, pp. 522–4.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 524–5.
14. Brinkmann 2008, p. 150.
15. For example, the altarpiece of the Holy Kindred at Dessau (Friedländer and Rosenberg 1978, no. 20), that of the Holy Kinship at Frankfurt (no. 18) as well as the St Katherine altarpiece in Dresden (no. 14); see also the entry for NG 6511. [<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/lucas-cranach-the-elder-saints-genevieve-and-apollonia>]
16. I am grateful to Dr Jochen Sander for his help in this comparative exercise.
17. There is a rather free underdrawing in the case of the Frankfurt portrait; I am grateful to Gunnar Heydenreich for this observation.
18. For the latter see Brinkmann and Kemperdick 2005, p. 218.
19. However, see Campbell 2006, esp. p. 37, for analysis of this convention and the exceptions to it.
20. Compare the portrait drawings of young boys in chalk and watercolour in the Louvre of about the same period: Hamburg 2003, nos 9 and 10.
21. For triptychs see Friedländer and Rosenberg 1978, no. 338.
22. Verougstraete 2006, p. 157.
23. See Heydenreich 2007, p. 227, for how Cranach considered this angle in other diptychs.
24. Koepplin 1974; the painting was also exhibited at Basel in the same year: Koepplin and Falk 1974, vol. I, p. 143 (fig.) and vol. II, p. 683; Friedländer and Rosenberg 1978, no. 19, p. 71.
25. Rebel 1994, pp. 134–5.
26. Dunkerton, Foister and Penny 1999, pp. 261–2