

## Art

# Cranach: Artist and Innovator, Compton Verney, review: 'a temptation that should not be resisted'

By Robert Weinberg

15 Mar 2020 15:18:39

Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1553), by all accounts, made a fortune from his art. As court painter to Frederick the Wise and his successors as the Electors of Saxony, Cranach enjoyed a high salary, money for materials and a studio full of assistants. In time he became Wittenberg's second wealthiest citizen. Frederick even gave Cranach his own heraldic symbol – a winged serpent with a ruby ring in its mouth – that he used as his signature.

But, as this landmark show reveals, Cranach was more than just a court painter. He was a versatile, prolific innovator whose radical religious ideas and daring pictorial approach – not least his idiosyncratic treatment of the human form – defied the conventions of his time and continue to exert an influence on present-day artists.

Cranach's wealth was not only derived from high demand for society portraits, sympathetic and skilfully executed though they were. Friendship with church reformer Martin Luther led to Cranach providing images for Luther's 1522 translation of the Bible, which quickly sold out its initial run of 3000 copies. In it, he enthusiastically infuses anti-Rome polemic into his illustrations.

In one of them – on display here – the devil sports the Papal crown. Around the gallery walls are back-lit enlargements of woodcuts Cranach produced for a Lutheran pamphlet. With startling directness, he juxtaposes the virtuous activities of Christ with those of the Pope, who luxuriates amidst excessive wealth.

Cranach was equally skilled as a painter of mythical scenes that sermonised about the perils of succumbing to things of the flesh. His idealised nudes – slim, sinuous and seductive – are tempters for the male gaze. But there are consequences to submitting to their allure. In Cupid complaining to Venus, the child, having stolen a honeycomb, is attacked by bees while Venus, draping herself in front of a tree, offers the viewer a branch of bulbous, fleshy fruits. Sweetness, Cranach is saying, comes with a sting; a Latin inscription above the pair reads, "The brief and passing pleasure that we seek is mixed with sorrow and pain that does us harm."

Less moralising, but just as visually enticing, is Cranach's 1515 Portrait of an Unknown Lady, which shows off his mastery of capturing sumptuously embroidered textiles and jewellery, shimmering and gleaming against his trademark, blacked-out background. With her naturalistic face almost engulfed by elaborate pattern, it feels like a precursor to Klimt's Viennese fantasies.

While Cranach the printmaker was a master of mass production in his own time, it was magazines and prints that brought his work to the attention of 20th century artists. Picasso began making his own versions of Cranach's works in the 1940s after seeing them on postcards. One linocut on show here, is a multi-coloured confection that echoes Cranach's areas of dense black, and intricate decoration.

A number of outstanding works have been commissioned especially for this exhibition. They include Claire Partington's ceramic figures, which wreak feminist revenge on Cranach's idealisation of womankind. In her modern-day take on the Biblical story of Judith's slaying of Holofernes, Partington's warrior woman triumphantly crushes underfoot the head of Cranach himself.

Raqib Shaw's opulent, luminous enamel paintings zing from the canvas like Bollywood dream sequences, referencing not only Cranach, but Breughel and Indian myths. In one, Shaw's central self-portrait is teased with the charms and challenges of modern-day luxurious living.

All the works are beautifully lit, bringing out the exquisitely restored colours of Cranach's paintings, and the vivid modern tributes his works have inspired. This show is one temptation that should not be resisted.

**From 14 March until 14 June 2020; 01926 645500; <https://www.comptonverney.org.uk/>**