

CIRCLE OF LUCAS CRANACH THE ELDER

(Kronach 1472 - Weimar 1553)

The Nativity of the Virgin

oil on panel
110 x 95 cm (43½ x 37¾ in)

Provenance: The Danish Sculptor Helen Schou (1905-2006)

THE SUBJECT OF THIS INTRIGUING PAINTING IS the birth of the Virgin Mary. However, this is an unusually secular interpretation of the narrative, which focuses more on the various aspects of sixteenth-century midwifery. St. Anne, mother of the Virgin, lies propped up in bed, and two attendants have drawn back the heavy curtains to offer her some water and soup. An aged midwife, who humorously appears more exhausted than the new mother, slumps against the bed dozing. In front of her women appear to be preparing more refreshment, and on the table is a linen strip used during labour. In the right-hand foreground Mary is shown almost wriggling free from her carer's grasp. On the other side of the room, we see an attendant tenderly wash the child near the

warmth of the stove, whilst in the foreground the newborn is this time rocked gently on a velvet pillow. On the adjacent bench a midwife drinks heartily from a tankard, and her obvious thirst is a sharp contrast to the reluctant mother.

The composition of the present work clearly derives from Albrecht Dürer's print of the same subject (fig. 1). Dürer's work is more crowded, with several additional figures to the present work. However, several motifs are taken directly from the woodcut, such as St. Anne and the surrounding attendants, as well as the aforementioned midwife quenching her thirst. It is notable that, in Dürer's work, there is an overt religious aspect, as the angel floats above the scene. However, there is a disconnect between the angel and the other figures in the print, who



Albrecht Dürer, *Birth of the Virgin*, c. 1503-1504, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Boston (Figure 1)



Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg as St. Jerome, Indoors*, 1526, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Florida (Figure 2)





Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Salome*, c.1509-1510, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon (Figure 3)



Circle of Lucas Cranach the Elder, *The Nativity of the Virgin*, c. 1545 (Detail)

seem oblivious. Likewise, St. Anne is relegated to the middle-ground and the focus of the work is more on a genre depiction of a lying-in chamber. It was this ordinary, secular aspect of Dürer's famous image that clearly fascinated the painter of the present painting.

Due to the wide circulation of his prints, Dürer's work was enormously influential to artists throughout Europe. Lucas Cranach the Elder was no exception: for example his depiction of *Cardinal Albrecht of Bradenburg as St. Jerome, Indoors*, see figure 2, has 'a self-evident resemblance to Dürer's St Jerome engraving'.¹ In a manner reminiscent of the relationship between the present painting and the woodcut, Cranach has taken Dürer's composition, and made it starker, giving it greater visual impact. Whereas Dürer, makes great use of varied light and shade, the two paintings use large swaths of bold, vivid colouring to help animate the scenes. Of course these differences are in many respects due to the varied mediums, but the similar techniques displayed in *The Nativity of the Virgin* and *Cardinal Albrecht of Bradenburg as St. Jerome, Indoors* are striking. Dürer's influence extended not only to overall compositions, but also to individual motifs: for example the striking geometry and size of the stove depicted in the present work is reminiscent of that depicted in Dürer's engraving *The Doctor's Dream*.

The Nativity of the Virgin, provides a fascinating and valuable

historical insight into sixteenth-century German midwifery practises. The setting is that of a contemporary German bedchamber, reflecting the fact that 'Women were encouraged to give birth in their own homes'.² However, as was traditional in the depiction of the Virgin's nativity, the room is fairly luxurious, reflecting her father Joachim's wealth. The chamber is kept warm due to the large stove, and additionally the doors are kept shut, not only to prevent draughts, but also to keep out evil spirits.³ Although St. Anne is propped up in bed, the actual delivery probably would have taken place on the floor and the large pillow on the right-hand side possibly placed under her thighs to make her more comfortable. The mother was then moved to the bed, but although St. Anne is clearly weary 'Immediately after the delivery she was not allowed to sleep in case of haemorrhaging and would be kept awake by the noisy chattering of her companions'.⁴ Men were not allowed in the lying-in chamber and as a result midwifery was probably the most important occupation for women during this period. In Germany the occupation was more highly regulated than in other parts of Europe and midwives held a relatively high social status. For example in Nuremberg midwives were made sworn city officials from 1417. They continued to serve as city officials in southern Germany until the late eighteenth century, and so paintings such as the present one, or Dürer's print, allow us an

¹ Friedländer, M. J. & Rosenberg, J., *The Paintings of Lucas Cranach*, (Sotheby Parke Bernet, London, 1978, revised edition), p. 106, no.185.

² Park, M. 'Dürer's The Birth of the Virgin: Art and Midwifery in 16th Century Nuremberg', in *The Lancet*, (vol. 358, Oct 13 2001), p. 1267.

³ Gélis, J., *History of Childbirth*, trans. Morris R. (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1991), p. 96.

⁴ Park, p. 1267.



Lucas Cranach the Elder, *The Holy Family and Kindred*, c. 1509-1510, British Museum, London (Figure 4)

insight into 'the experience of childbirth in [the] 16th century.'⁵

Although the present work derives from a composition from the early sixteenth century, the technique of the work suggests a date of the mid 1540s. However, in addition to the composition there are many other features that recall earlier works by Cranach and his workshop. For example, Helen Smith of The Cranach Digital Archive has pointed out that the midwife in the foreground exhibits similarities with Cranach's depiction of *Salome*, in Lisbon (fig. 3).⁶ Certainly both figures look rather lost in thought, their eyes glazed over as they contemplate matters other than the things they hold. Elsewhere, the prominent wooden beams of the lying-in chamber, which help create such a pronounced sense of perspective, appear to derive from *Cardinal Albrecht of Bradenburg as St. Jerome, Indoors*, a feature which appears neither in Cranach's other version of the work⁷, or in Dürer's print. Another noteworthy motif that recalls an earlier work is the infant spilling forth from the midwife's grasp. This same image can be found in the lower right-hand corner of Cranach's print *The Holy Family and Kindred* (fig. 4). More generally *The Nativity of the Virgin* recalls works such as the central panel of *The Altarpiece of the Holy Kinship*, see figure 5, partly because of the depiction of several children, but more specifically because the use of architecture as a framing device is relatively rare in Cranach's paintings. So it is clear that the painter of *The Nativity of the Virgin*, had a long running and intimate knowledge of Cranach's work.

Cranach's early life and artistic training remain obscure. He was in Vienna in 1502, before being appointed court painter to Friedrich III the Wise, Elector of Saxony (1463-1525) in 1505, which brought him to Wittenberg. He was responsible not only for paintings, but also for decorative schemes, the supervision of craftsmen, and for the embellishment of weddings, tournaments and other court celebrations. He was enormously successful and enjoyed great status in Wittenberg. As he became more sought after, so the size and productivity of his workshop increased.

Due to Cranach's success, his influence was widespread throughout European artistic circles. However, as discussed, the present painting shows an unusually deep knowledge of the master's work. Documents and surviving works attest to his large and productive workshop, and his

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Email correspondence, dated 21st December 2012.

⁷ Friedländer & Rosenberg, no. 185.



Lucas Cranach the Elder, *The Altarpiece of the Holy Kinship*, Central Panel, 1509, Städelches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt (Figure 5)

first pupil is mentioned in 1507. Although the size of his staff naturally varied depending on the projects in hand, it is clear he generally had multiple students and staff. Particularly in works executed after 1520, distinguishing between the hand of Cranach, and those of his followers becomes increasingly difficult. Although some works have been linked to names such as Hans Döring or Wolfgang Krodel, scholars continue to study these problems of attribution.

We are grateful to Helen Smith and the Cranach Digital Archive for their help in cataloguing the present work, and for dating it to the mid 1540s.



Circle of Lucas Cranach the Elder, *The Nativity of the Virgin*, c. 1545 (Detail)