



ROBERT SIMON FINE ART

Lucas Cranach the Elder and Workshop
(Kronach 1472 – 1553 Weimar)

The Judgment of Paris

Oil on panel
24 1/8 x 15 5/8 inches (61.1 x 38.8 cm)



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Provenance: Private Collection (acquired by the family in Basel, Switzerland); their sale, Sotheby's, New York, 10 January 1991, lot 30, as Studio of Lucas Cranach the Elder, unsold; reoffered, Sotheby's, New York, 11 April 1991, lot 187, as Studio of Lucas Cranach the Elder

With Rafael Valls, London, 1991

Art market, Paris;¹ where acquired in 1998 by:

Private Collection, Arizona

Lucas Cranach the Elder is one of the towering giants of German Renaissance painting. Works by the artist, as well as those by his sons and members of his workshop, have been greatly prized from his lifetime until today for the eccentric and highly individual style that he inaugurated. Cranach arrived in Wittenberg in 1505 as court artist to the electors of Saxony. By 1507 he had assembled a large workshop that he led until 1550, when it was taken over by his son, Lucas Cranach the Younger. Assisted by his pupils and workshop hands, Cranach was the principal image-maker to the Saxon electors and their entourage. He and his patrons delighted in the depiction of classical, literary, and even religious subjects that included nude female figures. The Judgment of Paris, which centers on the attractiveness of the three most beautiful classical goddesses, was a subject to which Cranach and his workshop frequently returned.

Originating in Greek and Roman mythology, the Judgment of Paris was recounted in several ancient texts and retold by medieval and Renaissance writers. According to the legend, Eris (the goddess of discord) was angered because she had not been invited to the wedding of Peleus and Thetis. She appeared there unannounced and threw a golden apple addressed "to the fairest" into the crowd of guests. A dispute broke out among three goddesses—Juno, Minerva, and Venus—who each claimed the prize, and Jupiter declared that it could only be settled by Paris, the son of the king of Troy. The messenger-god, Mercury, brought the goddesses before Paris and each bribed him: Juno with wealth and power, Minerva with military prowess, and Venus with love of the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen of Troy. Paris selected Venus and set off to abduct Helen from Sparta, which led to the Trojan War.

In our painting, Paris is depicted asleep at the foot of a tree that rises up the left edge of the painting. He is about to be shaken awake by the elderly Mercury, who stands over Paris in a dynamic pose, holding a staff and dressed in a fantastic suit of copper-colored armor decorated with gold-trim and feathers. On the right, the three goddesses are depicted nude, save for the thin transparent veils that wind around their bodies and the elaborate jewelry that hangs from their necks and decorates their hair. The planes of the painting are divided by a lush hedge that both serves a backdrop to the figures in the foreground and frames the elements of the background, particularly, the distant mountains and town on the right, and the head of Paris's striking white horse, which peers out at the viewer from behind the greenery. A stony precipice rises in the center of the composition,

contrasting starkly with the vivid blue sky and stylized clouds. Rather than in an ancient setting, the classical tale unfolds in the context of Cranach's day. The fortified mountaintop would have been a familiar sight in Saxony and neighboring states, and Paris is here depicted with contemporary German armor. At his feet rests an elaborate helmet decorated with ostrich feather pom poms typically reserved for military commanders. Rather than focusing on the main action of the narrative, Paris's decision, the painting presents Paris asleep and inert. The focus instead shifts to the three goddesses, who both attract the viewer's gaze with their bare bodies and engage the viewer directly by looking back at us. Paris's role of choosing which goddess is the fairest is thus turned over to the viewer. And yet, the goddesses are undifferentiated and indistinguishable—it is unclear who is Juno, Minerva, or Venus—making each an alluring choice.

The Judgment of Paris was among the most popular mythological scenes by Lucas Cranach the Elder. During his early years in Wittenberg, Cranach was especially active as a printmaker, and he first treated the subject in a woodcut of 1508 (Fig. 1). This print served as the point of departure for Cranach's earliest painting of the Judgment of Paris—the panel of ca. 1512–1514 in the Kimbell Art Museum (Fig. 2)—as well the 11 additional autograph paintings of this subject and several versions from his workshop.² A late drawing of this theme by Cranach, dated to ca. 1527–1530, is in the Herzog Anton-Ulrich-Museum in Braunschweig.³



Fig. 1. Lucas Cranach the Elder, *The Judgment of Paris*, woodcut on paper, V&A, London.



Fig. 2. Lucas Cranach the Elder, *The Judgment of Paris*, oil on panel, 16 15/16 x 12 11/16 inches, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.

Technical images of our painting have revealed the artist's preparation for this composition (Fig. 3). The thin dark lines of the underdrawing are clearly visible, defining the contours of the figures and other elements of the setting. The artist devoted much attention to the design of the three goddesses, and the infrared reflectogram has indicated several minor changes in the positions of the heads, arms, legs and feet of the goddesses. It has also revealed that the mountain in the right background was initially drawn with a wider peak and a plateau to the left. These *pentimenti* are now visible to the naked eye due to natural changes in the condition of the paint.



Fig. 3. The infrared reflectogram of the present work.

Cranach's treatments of this theme varied substantially in composition, but two versions of the subject are quite close to the present work. One, generally given to Cranach himself, is in the Seattle Art Museum and is dated to ca. 1516-1518 (Fig. 4).⁴ Another from his workshop and dating from ca. 1520 appeared at auction in 2008 and is in a private collection (Fig. 5).⁵ Despite following the same basic formula, these works exhibit several salient differences, including the position of the three of goddesses and the articulation of the background elements. Our painting is closest to the Seattle version, both in design and in the quality of the execution. For example, the structure atop the mountain in the upper center is drawn nearly identically in both works, as are the

branches in the tree at left. Dr. Gunnar Heydenreich has noted that both the balanced composition of the our panel and several pictorial elements, particularly the distant landscape, appear closer to autograph works by Cranach the Elder than in the Seattle or private collection versions. Although the Seattle painting has traditionally been considered the earliest of the three paintings, Heydenreich has suggested that our work may be the prime version of this composition, on which the two additional versions are based (written communication, 6 May 2020).⁶ The underdrawn design for the mountain in the upper right, as well as the feet of Paris and the two leftmost goddesses, appear close to the appearance of these elements in the Seattle version. The several revisions and *pentimenti* in these areas in our painting (Figs. 6-9) both show the artist's mind at work and suggest the intervention of Lucas Cranach the Elder himself. Although the goddesses' feet differ from their appearance in the two related painting, the changes here are solutions that make the position of the figures more rational and legible.



Fig. 4. Lucas Cranach the Elder, *The Judgment of Paris*, oil on panel, 25 x 16 ½ inches, Seattle Art Museum.



Fig. 5. Workshop of Lucas Cranach the Elder, *The Judgment of Paris*, oil on panel, 27 ½ x 17 ¼ inches, Private Collection.

Our painting and the other works of this subject by Cranach and his workshop reveal his familiarity with medieval accounts of the destruction of Troy, which included descriptions of the Judgment of Paris. The most probable source for Cranach's composition is Guido delle Colonne's *Historia Destructionis Troiae* [History of the Destruction of Troy] of 1287, which was widely circulated and translated into German in 1477. Colonne's text depended on Benôit de Saint-Maure's mid-twelfth-century *Roman de Troie* [Romance of Troy], which in turn was based on the allegedly eyewitness account of this event by the Trojan priest Dares Phrygius. Several details unique to the writings of Guido delle Colonne and Benôit de Saint-Maure appear in the painting, including the characterization of Paris as a hunter (rather than a shepherd as in the ancient sources), and that he tied his horse to a nearby tree before falling asleep in the groves of Mount Ida, likely represented by the mountain in the center of the composition. Other aspects that match the medieval texts include the fact that Paris encounters Mercury and the goddesses in a dream, and that the goddesses appear to him in the nude.



Fig. 6. Detail of the feet in the present painting.



Fig. 7. Detail of the feet in the infrared reflectogram of the present work.



Fig. 8. Detail of the mountain in the present painting.

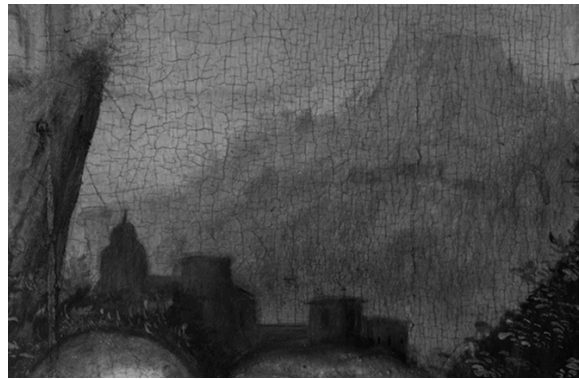


Fig. 9. Detail of the mountain in the infrared reflectogram of the present work.

The demand for works of this subject by Cranach and his assistants is at least partly explained by the fact that Frederick the Wise, the Elector of Saxony, and other princely German families traced their lineage back to the Trojans. It is less clear how depictions of the Judgment of Paris were understood and interpreted by Cranach and his patrons. Frederick the Wise viewed a live tableau of the narrative while attending Philip the Fair's crowning as regent of the Netherlands in 1494. Such performances were intended as allegories of marriage or the importance of virtue over pleasure. However, other interpretations of the subject have been advanced by scholars, including that Paris's predicament of having to choose among the goddesses represents the humanist dilemma of choosing what kind of life to live: the *vita activa* or active life (Juno), the *vita contemplativa* or contemplative life (Minerva), or the *vita voluptaria* (Venus).⁷

The functioning of the Cranach studio and the degree of the master's participation in individual paintings is the subject of continuing scholarly debate. Certainly Cranach established the design and format of the composition, which would evolve over the decades of his long career. A variety of workshop assistants, working individually and together, assisted Cranach himself in the creation of his paintings. Distinguishing hands in

specific paintings can at times be effected through the study of underdrawings, as well as by recognizing the inherent quality of execution.⁸ Dr. Gunnar Heydenreich notes that there are stylistic differences between the underdrawing and the painted surface of our *Judgment of Paris* from the fully autograph paintings by Lucas Cranach the Elder, considering the present picture to be “of high quality by a very skilled but unknown member of Lucas Cranach the Elder’s workshop” and dating it to the period 1518–1522. At the time of the 1991 sale, Dr. Dieter Koeplin was less specific, placing our painting within Lucas Cranach the Elder’s workshop, with a slightly later date between 1520 and 1530.⁹

¹ In his Cranach archive Dr. Dieter Koeplin, as recorded by Dr. Gunnar Heydenreich, noted that the present painting was with Galerie Neuse of Bremen in 1994. However, the gallery has informed us that the painting was never with them (email of 3 September 2020). The most recent owner has confirmed that he purchased the painting from a dealer in Paris in 1998.

² For paintings of this subject by Cranach and his workshop, see the Cranach Digital Archive: <http://lucascranach.org/index.php>.

³ Inv. no. Z 27 recto. See: <http://www.virtuelles-kupferstichkabinett.de/de/detail-view>.

⁴ Max J. Friedländer and Jakob Rosenberg, *The Paintings of Lucas Cranach*, New York, 1978, p. 93, cat. no. 118. See: http://lucascranach.org/US_SAM_52-38 and <http://art.seattleartmuseum.org/objects/24062/the-judgment-of-paris;jsessionid=030AED2E73163CD2E0C6277A0E14B30C>.

⁵ http://lucascranach.org/PRIVATE_NONE-P290. Sotheby’s, London, 10 July 2008, lot 103.

⁶ A letter of expertise authored by Dr. Heydenreich is available upon request. He has also considered the possibility that a fourth, lost painting with this composition may have been the primary version.

⁷ For other a summary of other interpretations, see: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436037>.

⁸ See Gunnar Heydenreich, *Lucas Cranach the Elder: Painting Materials, Techniques and Workshop Practice*, Amsterdam, 2007.

⁹ A spurious monogram “AD” (referring to Albrecht Dürer) was recorded in the lower left at the 1991 sale. It is no longer present and was likely removed in a subsequent cleaning.