

THE
NATIONAL
GALLERY

LUCAS CRANACH
THE ELDER
Charity

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Lucas Cranach the Elder
NG 2925 *Charity*

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NG 2925

Charity

Mid-1530s–1540s

Oil on beech, panel and painted surface 56.4 x 35.9 cm

Signature and Inscription

Cranach's serpent insignia with elevated wings appears bottom left (but has been altered, see Technical Notes).

Inscribed top left: CHARITAS (the inscription is overpainted, see Technical Notes).

Provenance

Owned by Sir George Webbe Dasent (1817-96), a civil servant and Scandinavian scholar, and given by him to George Howard 12th Earl of Carlisle (1843 -1911), an artist and a Trustee of the National Gallery from 1881 until his death; the picture was hanging at Naworth Castle in 1893-5. ¹ The Earl and his wife were important patrons of the Arts and Crafts movement, commissioning the architect Philip Webb as well as interior decorations by William Morris, Walter Crane and Edward Burne-Jones. ² The picture was presented in 1913 by Rosalind Countess of Carlisle (1845-1921), a campaigner for women's suffrage and for the temperance movement. ³

Exhibitions

London NG 1994.

Technical Notes

Conservation

The painting was cleaned and restored in 1913.

Condition

The painting is not in good condition: the entire background, including the stony ground, is overpainted and the flesh paint has been extensively retouched; some of the overpainting of the background appears milky and some has wrinkled badly. There is a splash of blue paint halfway up the left edge which is clearly not original. There have been some paint losses along the split (see below) and there are a number of scratches and cracks. The retouching of the flesh paint, which appears to be very worn, is evident in numerous places, for instance in the baby's hand and legs, and in Charity's knees. The inscription 'Charitas' has been repainted and the winged serpent signature has been altered.

Materials and technique

The *support* consists of a wood panel made from two vertically grained beechwood boards.⁴ The join is not quite vertical, the left-hand board measuring 5.7 cm at the top (verso) and 7.0 cm at the bottom (verso). The join is reinforced with a fibrous substance,

and an area to the right at the bottom has been removed, thinning the panel. A rebate approximately 1.0 cm wide and 0.5 cm deep has been cut around all four sides. The two corners on the right (verso) of the panel have been replaced. A mended split extends 14.0 cm into the painting from the top edge and 14.0 cm from the left (verso). There is extensive worm damage, particularly in the right half of the panel, extending to the added corners.

According to the dendrochronological analysis,⁵ board I has 145 growth rings dating from 1533–1379; no dating could be obtained for the 21 growth rings of board II. Since only the bark was removed from beechwood and the whole tree trunk used, the earliest felling date for the wood of board I is 1533; with one year's storage time a creation date for the painting of 1534 onwards is plausible.

On the reverse of the panel are various inscriptions: there is a V in black paint and inscriptions in ink, including what may be a date, '1 5/8–9', with (above) a word beginning with K and ending in ch.

Infrared reflectography revealed little underdrawing and there was no penetration of the background paint. In most places simple linear outlining in the surface paint masks any possible underdrawing. Dark lines under the surface paint, for instance in the faces, were presumably intended to be visible. With the aid of the stereomicroscope it was possible to see red outlines along the right-hand edges of the girl's legs, in the right side of Charity's right thigh, in between the tops of her legs and on the left-hand sides of her calves, as well as on both outside edges of the standing leg of the boy. There may be pentiments along the back of the child on the right and on the girl's leg.

Medium

The medium was identified by GC analysis as linseed oil.

Subject

A mother is shown standing with her three children. She clasps the forearm of a girl in her right hand while a smaller boy clings to her left leg and she suckles a baby (of indeterminate sex) at her left breast. All the figures are represented naked, but the mother has a transparent veil which extends over her forehead and from behind her neck over both shoulders, part wrapping around the arm holding the child in the form of a sling, and part extending over the front of her body and right leg. She also wears two necklaces, a choker with a stone around her neck and a gold chain with large links over her shoulders. Her hair is fair and is bound with a black band. The hair of her daughter (and of the other two infants) is also fair. In an echo of her mother's pose, the small girl carries a female doll in her right arm, dressed in a long square-necked dress with a white high-necked blouse underneath. The doll's hair is also held back with a black band. The figures stand on stony brown ground against a black background, both of which consist largely of overpaint (see Technical Notes). Although it is reasonable to assume that this repainting follows the original, this cannot be proven to be the case.

However, many other paintings by Cranach of such subjects include similar dark backgrounds, for instance classical subjects such as Hercules or Venus and Cupid.

Cranach's images of Charity

The image is identified as Charity by the inscription. Some dozen similar representations of Charity by Cranach and his workshop, dated from 1529 onwards, show a woman seated with her young children against a landscape, for example that dated 1534 in Schaffhausen.⁶ The number of children included varies from one to seven, but is more usually three.⁷ These depictions follow the traditional representation of Charity as a female figure with children.⁸ Koeplin has argued convincingly that these paintings should be read in connection with Luther's reinterpretation of the concept of Charity or Caritas, namely as the love arising from faith in the grace of God, which should naturally extend to loving our neighbours: in his Preface to the Epistle of Paul to the Romans of 1522 Luther wrote 'Without compulsion man becomes willing and eager to do everyone good'.⁹

A variant type is reflected in a painting attributed to Lucas Cranach the Younger (Hamburg, Kunsthalle), in which, in addition to the seated group, some of the children are shown knocking apples from a tree. In some post-1537 versions of the subject that action is missing but a little girl resembling the one seen here holds an apple, not a doll, while the family are seated under an apple tree.¹⁰ Koeplin has suggested a possible connection to a remark by Luther in 1533, in which he compared the Bible to a fruit tree and its fruits of faith as gifts of God, and noted that for Melanchthon love for God was the fruit of faith.¹¹ In yet another representation by Lucas Cranach the Younger the children offer grapes, symbolising the Eucharist, with apples (erroneously restored as pears) again hanging on the tree (Brussels, Musée des Beaux-Arts).¹² The association of the apple tree and charity occurs also in woodcuts by Holbein made for the London-based Protestant printer Reynold Wolf, in which small children knock down an abundance of fruit.¹³

The standing female figure of Charity in NG 2925 is unique in the treatment of this subject by Cranach and his workshop. The presence of a black background instead of a landscape is highly unusual, although a black background occurs in a version of the seated type by Lucas Cranach the Younger (private collection, Hamburg).¹⁴ Here the figure of Charity is veiled and wears jewellery, but otherwise bears some resemblance to the seated or standing woman with her small children who is a recurring motif in Cranach's paintings representing wild people (see NG 3922). A somewhat similar figure occurs in three paintings, dated to the mid- to late 1520s, in which a standing woman with two small children, one in her arms or being suckled, is paired with a faun with a lionskin (for example, that in the Getty Museum, Los Angeles); Wind suggested that they are intended to represent *fortezza* and *caritas*, or strength and charity.¹⁵ Koeplin argued that the development of the nude seated figure of Charity might have been influenced by Cranach's own representation of the virtue of Sophrosyne or Temperance in 1523 in a woodcut made for a work by Melanchthon, as well as perhaps by an

engraving by Georg Pencz of Charity of around 1528.¹⁶ There is no obvious reason for the development of a standing version of Charity, other than the possibility that, with its small scale and plain background, it made replication by the workshop simpler; yet this is the only type of this subject which survives in a single example.

Attribution

Cranach listed two paintings with the subject of Charity in the account of his work made at Augsburg in 1552, but neither of these can be identical with the National Gallery picture as they are described as being on canvas.¹⁷ While little of the original background or foreground of this painting appears to remain intact, the figures have been retouched and the flesh paint is rubbed, the quality of the faces in particular is high, the hair is delicately depicted (although some of the girl's hair extends over the repainted background and is not original), and the expressions are particularly tender and affectionate. The painting has rightly been accepted as the work of Lucas Cranach the Elder, despite its condition.¹⁸

Date

Dendrochronological analysis provides a *terminus post quem* of 1533 and suggests a dating of or around 1534 (although it was only possible to derive a date from one of the two boards used for the panel).¹⁹ The earliest recorded dated paintings of Charity by Cranach are those of 1529, 1530, 1534 and 1535.²⁰ The painting dated 1534 (Schaffhausen, Museum zu Allerheiligen, Sturzenegger Stiftung) similarly includes a girl with a doll on the left, a boy on the right and another clambering to embrace the mother suckling her baby; although the mother is seated, the children in this version closely resemble those in the National Gallery picture. Although NG 2925 bears the form of the winged serpent device which indicates a date after 1537, this has been altered and may not be reliable; moreover, the congruence between the device and this date is not absolute in Cranach's work.²¹ The form of the transparent veil over Charity's head is seen only in paintings datable to after 1535. This work is most likely to date from the mid- to late 1530s, or even the early 1540s.²²

General References

Levey 1959, p. 21; Friedländer and Rosenberg 1968, no. 405; Koepplin and Falk 1974–6, vol. II, p. 520.

Notes

¹ It is listed as no. 129 'given to GHoward by Sir George Dasent' in a handwritten inventory at Castle Howard (H2/1/43: Pictures at Naworth as hung 1893-1895), published in Hawkesbury 1904. I am most grateful to Jeanne Nuechterlein for this information which she presented at the conference '*Primitive Renaissance: Northern European and Germanic Art at the Fin de Siècle to the 1930s*', held at the National Gallery in spring 2104, and will publish in the forthcoming conference proceedings.

² See Christopher Ridgway, 'Howard, George James, ninth earl of Carlisle (1843–1911)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/34019>, accessed 12 Nov 2013].

³ On 11 May 1913 the Countess wrote to the Trustees of the National Gallery (to whom she had already offered a gift of four pictures) presenting in addition 'an altarpiece by Barnaba da Modena, signed by the painter, and a small 'Charity' by Lucas Cranach, both of which pictures I understand are deemed by the trustees to be desirable acquisitions for the Gallery': NG Archives NG7/426/3. I am grateful to Jeanne Nuechterlein for advice and information concerning the Countess's gift.

4. Confirmed as beechwood in a report of 19 November 1993 by Dr Peter Klein in NG dossier.
5. See note 2; the German beechwood chronology was used.
6. For Cranach's representations of the subject see Koeplin 2007–8: fig. 1, reproduced on p. 64, is dated 1529, but its current whereabouts is unknown (see note 10, p. 77). Friedländer and Rosenberg give the earliest dated version as 223A dated 1529 (recorded in 1913). For post-1537 versions of this type see Friedländer and Rosenberg 1978, no. 406, including paintings at Weimar, Antwerp and Hamburg. Ibid. no. 223, Museum zu Allerheiligen, Schaffhausen, Sturzenegger Stiftung (reproduced in Koeplin 2007–8, p. 71, fig. 14).
7. De Tervarent 1959, pp. 175–6.
8. Early representations of the subject (and one by Raphael) also include a symbol of the love of God such as a flaming heart, the woman with children being indicative only of *amor proximi*: see Freyhan 1948. For early sculpted versions in Italy see Seidel 1977.
9. Koeplin 2007–8, esp. pp. 65–6.
10. Friedländer and Rosenberg 1978, no. 406, citing the versions at Weimar, Hamburg and elsewhere.
11. Koeplin 2007–8, pp. 68–9.
12. I am grateful to Gunnar Heydenreich for drawing this to my attention.
13. For the Holbein woodcuts see Dodgson 1938–9. The image derives from the opposition between strength and charity, the tree, which stands firm in spite of the apples knocked from it, being a representation of strength. For the opposition between *fortezza* and *caritas* see Wind 1969, pp. 3–4.
14. Koeplin 2007–8, p. 65, fig. 3 and p. 77, note 11.
15. Wind 1969. Other versions of the subject are in the collection of the Fürst zu Fürstenberg (Friedländer and Rosenberg 1978, no. 266, Koeplin and Falk 1974–6, vol. II, no. 502) and private collection, formerly Heinz Kisters collection, Kreuzlingen (Friedländer and Rosenberg 1978, no. 267, Koeplin and Falk 1974–6, vol. II, no. 501).
16. Koeplin 2007–8, pp. 72–3 and 75.
17. Schuchardt 1851, pp. 207–8; the painting listed on p. 207 is described as 'ein tuch', i.e. a painting on canvas or linen cloth; the other is part of a list of 'tücher'. Heydenreich 2007, p. 451 (ThHstAW, Ernestinisches Gesamtarchiv, Reg. As 2975, fols 18r and 19r).
18. Levey 1959, p. 21; Friedländer and Rosenberg 1978, no. 405.
19. Levey 1959, p. 12 noted the suggestion made in the 1929 catalogue that the National Gallery picture might date from about 1550; this was presumably derived from the date of the Augsburg list but, as mentioned above, the pictures listed in it were painted on canvas, which excludes the possibility that NG 2925 could have been one of them.
20. Koeplin 2007–8, fig. 1 (see note 4 above); Friedländer and Rosenberg 1978, no. 223.
21. Heydenreich 2007, pp. 293–5, esp. p. 293 and note 15 on p. 360. However, Gunnar Heydenreich has kindly pointed out the similarity of the serpent insignia to two post-1537 instances, namely the *Suicide of Lucretia*, Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg (Friedländer and Rosenberg 1978, no. 358D) and *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, Staatliches Museum, Schwerin (Friedländer and Rosenberg 1978, no. 359B).
22. Comparing serpent insignia; I am grateful to Gunnar Heydenreich for this observation.