

Koller Auktionen - Lot 3026

A166 Tableaux de Maîtres Anciens - vendredi 20 septembre 2013, 15h00



LUCAS CRANACH the Elder

(Kronach 1472–1553 Weimar)

Adoration of Christ.

Oil on wood.

Signed middle right with the serpent insignia.

14.5 × 20 cm.

Provenance: - English private collection (label verso). - Christie's, Monaco, 22.6.1991, Lot 114. - Fischer auctions, Lucerne, 2.12.1993, 2155. - Swiss private collection. Our thanks to Dr. Dieter Koeplin for confirming the authenticity of this painting by Lucas Cranach the Elder. Lucas Cranach's origins lie in obscurity. He was probably born around 1472 in Upper Franconian Kronach, as his surname suggests, the son of a prosperous Kronach burgher, Hans Maler, with whom he presumably received

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his artistic training. Beginning in 1501 he is known as an artist in Vienna. Four years later, he achieves a breakthrough that is decisive for his artistic career as well as his social advancement, when Elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony (1463-1525) appoints him court painter in 1508, giving him a coat of arms. This majestic emblem, a winged serpent with a ruby ring in its jaws, is rendered prominently in cream white at the centre right of our "Adoration of Christ." Lucas Cranach takes over the painting workshop in the castle of Wittenberg, which was formerly led by Jacopo de' Barbari, and from then on serves the Elector and his two successors, John the Steadfast (1468-1532) and John Frederick I the Magnanimous (1503-1554), for almost five decades. Obtaining great wealth from Saxon ore and silver deposits, these ambitious Wettins are powerful patrons of Protestantism and become major leaders in European politics between Emperor, Pope and Reformation. Wittenberg is then a flourishing centre, where Cranach soon plays a key role. He produces paintings for the castles of royalty and designs festival decorations, costumes, coats of arms and medals for his employers. His outstanding artistic abilities are soon widely acknowledged. He becomes one of the most influential citizens of Wittenberg, acquires a pharmacy as well as land, and serves as treasurer, alderman and mayor. Cranach is also dispatched on diplomatic missions. With Martin Luther and Phillip Melanchthon he forms deep personal and business relationships. Despite his closeness to the Reformation as its most important painter, he does not eschew Catholic patrons. The "list of persons he met during his creative period, spanning more than fifty years, whom he portrayed or supplied with other commissions, reads even today like a 'Who's Who' of history, art and culture in the early 16th century," observes Guido Messling (see Messling, Guido: Die Welt des Lucas Cranach: ein Künstler im Zeitalter von Dürer, Tizian und Metsys, Leipzig, 2011, published on the occasion of the eponymous exhibition, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 20.10.2010 - 23.1.2011, p. 13). Not only Emperor Maximilian I, but also "anyone who was regarded somewhat or availed themselves of the Wittenberg painter's services." (see *ibid.*) It is probable that our exquisite wooden panel was purchased by a wealthy art lover. Its subject, the "Adoration of Christ," would surely have appealed

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to secular patrons. Because of its diminutive size it may have been used for private devotion and could have been taken on journeys. But its excellent state of preservation suggests, rather, that a connoisseur acquired this small treasure by the famous court painter for his art collection. Possibly, the collector valued the extremely careful rendering of the surfaces depicted, so characteristic of Cranach, which are elaborated in our "Adoration" down to the finest details. Mary's veil, painted in gossamer white; the blurring of the velvety clouds; and the animals' fur, spotted and enlivened with the tiniest brush strokes; demonstrates his mastery as much as the brilliant colours. In fact, modern research into Cranach's oeuvre has detected no fewer than 30 different pigments and numerous experiments with different underpaintings for his subjects, undertaken in the artist's search for perfection in painting. The Mother of God, immersed in worship, literally forms the centre of the picture. Her head is not only placed exactly in the middle of the scene, but through it passes a line connecting two beings that shine in heavenly splendour: the infant Jesus and an apparition in the upper right background. In a gleaming aureole this angel hovers with a scroll in his hands to announce the birth of the Saviour to the steadfast shepherds with their herds. At the same time, he reminds us of the Archangel Gabriel's earlier Annunciation to the Virgin that she would give birth to the Son of God. Through her body, kneeling in the manger between the angel in heaven and the infant Jesus in his earthly crib, this promise is now fulfilled. The intimacy of the silent communication between mother and child is touching. Mary's skin has the same porcelain-like delicacy as the naked body of the baby Jesus, which glows from within. So intense is her absorption in the boy's divinity that she, like the beloved, is not touched by the cold of their environment. The frost has already coloured Joseph's nose and cheeks bright red while he kneels beside Mary. At the back right, a shepherd indicates the baby Jesus with his gloved hand; the other two huddle close together, their hands under their caps for warmth. The cool colours, the bare ground and the stone trough emphasize the harshness and barrenness of the place where the miracle occurs. In the upper left corner of our wooden panel is a kind of cloud swing bearing a group

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of angels: a confusion of wings, tiny hands and small heads that relieves the theological gravity of the scene delightfully. The winged cherubs are not truly engaged, in fact; not one turns his attention directly to the scene of adoration before them. Some are looking around within this world history; others seem to confront us directly as the viewer. The playful little angels are a motif that Lucas Cranach takes up again and again throughout his decades of work. In the renowned painting "Holy Family in a Landscape" of 1504, also known as "Rest on the Flight" (Gemäldegalerie, Berlin), we can already see the angels fetching water, playing music and even watching the bird catching. Even in the very solemn Lutheran instructional picture "Law and Grace" of 1529 (Národní Galerie, Prague), they do mischief. "Only in exceptional cases is their attention given to the true protagonists directly," attests the exhibition catalogue (Brussels 2011, p. 121); "Otherwise, these adorable little attendants busy themselves according to their childlike natures." The theme of the Adoration of Christ appears in four other paintings by the master, three of which are dated to the 1520s (see Friedländer, Max/Rosenberg, Jakob: The paintings of Lucas Cranach, London, 1932/1978, p. 90, nos. 101 -103). That version listed in Friedländer/Rosenberg as no. 101, dated around 1515-20, belongs to the Dresden State Art Collections (Old Masters Picture Gallery) and was part of the great Cranach exhibition at the Städel Museum in Frankfurt and at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, in 2008 (see Brinkmann, Bodo (ed.): Cranach the Elder, Ostfildern 2007, exh. cat., Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main, 23.11.2007 - 17.2.2008, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 8.3 - 8.6.2008, no. 15, p. 142, colour illustration). In this variant, Cranach illustrates a vision of St. Bridget of Sweden, in which the light emanating from the newborn outshines that of a candle. For the optimal representation of this effect Cranach placed the figures in a stable at night. In our scene, played out during the day, he instead emphasizes the glow radiating from the Christ child, which warms his mother. Both variants suggest the special role of Mary in the history of salvation through the imaginary line between the preaching angel and Jesus. The three shepherds leaning on a wall are also found in Friedländer/Rosenberg, listed as no. 103, and also in a version dated to

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1518-20 (privately owned). Another version, published in Friedländer/Rosenberg as no. 102, also employs the stone trough aligned with the back. However, in this work the very schematic treatment of the masonry and stone floor, as well as the attendant putti, is striking. This Christmas scene is housed at Knightshayes Court in Devon, United Kingdom, where it is preserved by the National Trust, and is attributed today to the Cranach workshop. Produced around 1535, Cranach's "Holy Night" in the Erfurt museum is ultimately most similar both compositionally and stylistically to our picture, which suggests that it can be dated to the master's late period. In the Erfurt version, the infant Christ also lies in a stone trough placed at the centre, surrounded by Mary and Joseph kneeling in prayer. The crouching ox and donkey, whose eyes engage the viewer and invite them into the action, are comparable with those of our panel, as well as the shepherds found at the right and the throngs of angels in the upper half of the picture. Dr. Dieter Koeplin, who has known our "Adoration of Christ" from a previous appraisal, reaffirms the attribution to Cranach the Elder in a letter dated 16.3.2013, and suggests that our panel was created in the period of 1545-50. He compares the execution of specific details, such as the description of the hair, to the painting "The Fountain of Youth," dated to 1546 and now in the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.

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