

LUCAS CRANACH THE ELDER

Judith with the Head of Holofernes





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DICKINSON

Lucas CRANACH The Elder

(Kronach 1472 – 1553 Weimar)

Judith with the Head of Holofernes, c. 1530

Signed lower right with the artist's winged serpent device

Oil on panel

37.2 x 25 cm. (14 ²/₃ x 9 ⁷/₈ in.)

PROVENANCE

By descent in the family of the Counts of Waldeck, subsequently Princes of Waldeck-Pyrmont, according to inscriptions, verso

(Presumably) George I, Prince of Waldeck and Pyrmont (1747 – 1813), Arolsen Castle, Bad Arolsen, Hesse, Germany; by whom given to his daughter

Princess Ida Caroline of Waldeck and Pyrmont (1796 – 1869), according to an inscription, verso, and her husband George William, Prince of Schaumburg-Lippe (1784 – 1860), Bückeburg, Niedersachsen, Lower Saxony, possibly on the occasion of their wedding, 23 June 1816; and by descent to their son

Adolf I, Prince of Schaumburg-Lippe (1817 – 1893), m. Princess Hermine of Waldeck and Pyrmont; and by descent to their son

Georg, Prince of Schaumburg-Lippe (1846 – 1911), m. Princess Marie Anne of Saxe-Altenburg; and by descent to their son

Adolf II, Prince of Schaumburg-Lippe (1883 – 1936).

Rosenbaum, Frankfurt-am-Main, acquired from the above in 1929.

Dr. Wilfried Greif (1883 – 1937), New York, by 1932.

Galerie Nathan, Zurich, inv. no. 956 (according to a label, verso).

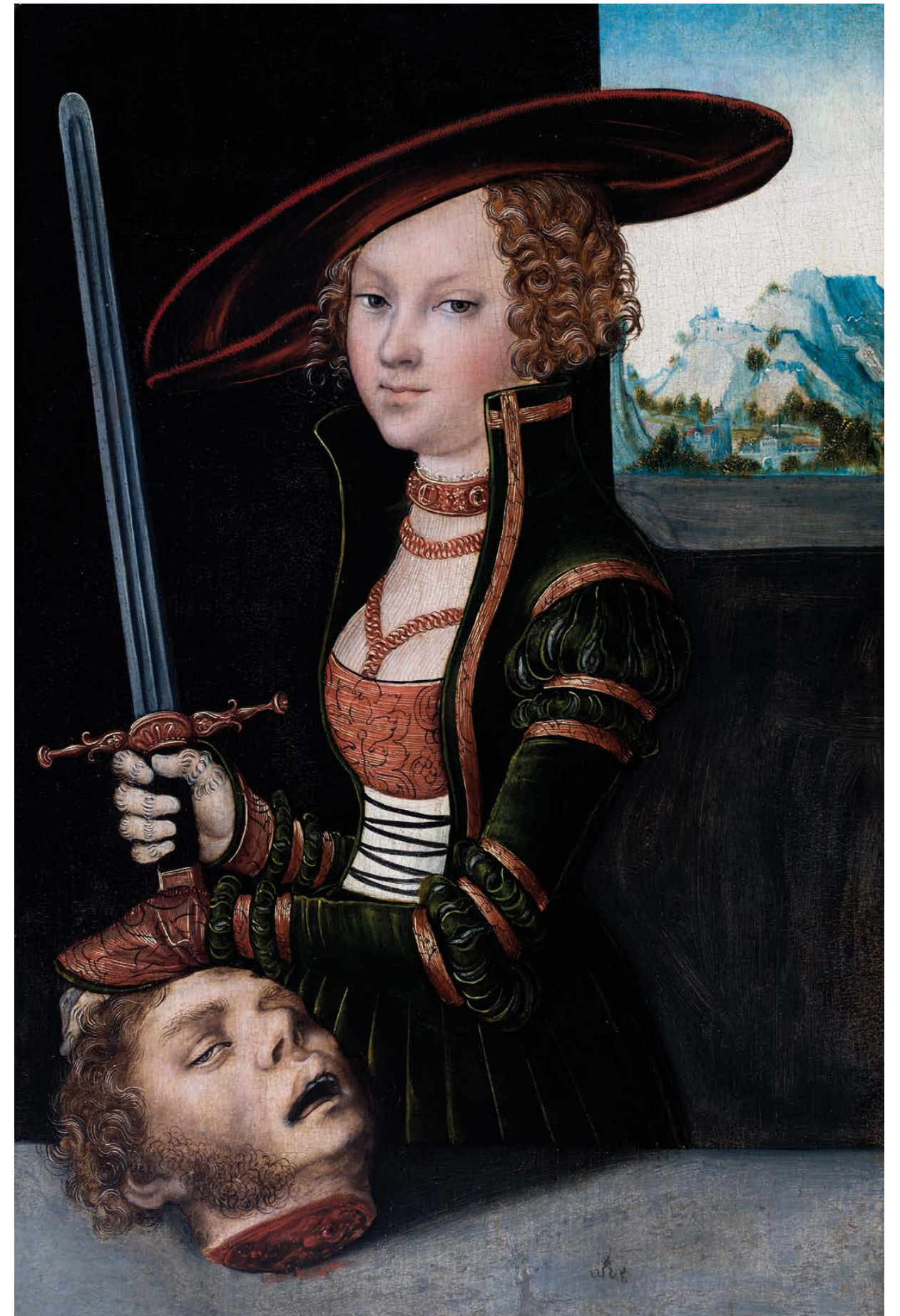
Private Collection, Germany, acquired from the above in the 1960s; and by descent.

LITERATURE

M.J. Friedländer, J. Rosenberg, *Die Gemälde von Lucas Cranach*, Berlin, 1932, p. 66, no. 192 (illus. fig. 192).

P. Nathan, F. Nathan, *Dr. Fritz Nathan und Dr. Peter Nathan, 1922 – 1972*, Zurich, 1972, no. 4 (illus. pl. 4).

M.J. Friedländer, J. Rosenberg, *Lucas Cranach*, eng. trans., London, 1979, p. 117, no. 233 (illus.)





Left
Detail showing the artist's winged serpent device.



Fig 1.
Lucas Cranach I, *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, c. 1530
Oil on limewood panel, 86 x 55.7 cm.
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (F&R no. 230a)



Fig 2.
Lucas Cranach I, *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, c. 1530
Oil on limewood panel, 89.5 x 61.9 cm
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (F&R no. 190e)



Cranach's elegant panel depicts the Old Testament heroine Judith with the head of the Assyrian General Holofernes. According to the narrative in the Apocrypha (*Judith* 8-15), Judith was a wealthy and beautiful Jewish widow living in the town of Bethulia, to which Nebuchadnezzar's army had laid siege. The citizens of Bethulia, having run out of water, were on the point of surrendering, when Judith devised a plan to liberate her people. Taking her faithful handmaid with her, she entered the Assyrian camp pretending to be a deserter, and once there she was invited to dine by powerful general Holofernes, who was struck by her beauty. He took Judith with him to his tent intending to

seduce her, but fell into a drunken sleep, at which point Judith took his sword and decapitated him. Her maid hid the head in a sack and the two carried it back to Bethulia. Deprived of leadership, the Assyrian army fled in a panic, and Bethulia was saved.

Judith was a popular subject for Cranach and his workshop, and we know of at least a dozen autograph and workshop variants, all of which share certain fundamental attributes although they differ in the details (for example see figs. 1-2). In each of the versions, Judith is depicted half-length, standing behind a parapet on which

rests the severed head of Holofernes. She holds aloft the sword with which she has conquered her enemy. Holofernes appears coarse-featured and swarthy, with a curly beard or whiskers, his eyes and mouth partially open in death. Judith, in contrast, is a youthful blonde beauty, dressed in the elegant brocaded gown and heavy gold jewellery of an elegant court lady. In our version, as in many others, she sports a broad-brimmed hat, worn at a coquettish angle. Typical, too, is the backdrop; while some versions situate Judith against a uniform dark ground, in ours she stands in front of a velvet curtain, partially drawn back to reveal a mountainous wooded landscape.



Fig 3.
Lucas Cranach I or Hans Cranach, *Judith*, c. 1530
Silver point on paper, formerly Staatliche Galerie, Dessau
(presumed destroyed during WWII)



Fig 4.
Lucas Cranach I, *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, c. 1530
Oil on limewood panel, 79.9 x 55.6 cm., Legion of Honour,
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (F&R no. 360)



Fig 5.
Cranach I, *Salomé with the Head of John the Baptist*, c. 1530
Oil on limewood panel, 87 x 58 cm., Museum of Fine Arts,
Budapest (F&R no. 232)

A fortress seen atop a distant hill presumably represents Bethulia. In all extant autograph versions save one, Judith is turned to her right (the viewer's left), holding the sword in her right hand; only the version in San Francisco, and a now-lost drawing relating to the composition, show her turned the other way (figs. 3-4).

Although Cranach's female types are, in general, much more homogenous than his male portraits – with their blonde hair, slanted, almond-shaped eyes, pointed chins and delicate features – the different versions of the *Judith* composition are distinct enough to suggest that they may be portraits of noble women of the Saxon Court in the guise of Judith. The composition can also be related to other series by Cranach, most obviously his paintings of *Salomé with the head of John the Baptist* (fig. 5). Indeed, in many cases, a *Salomé* can only be distinguished from a *Judith* by the position of the severed head – carried on a silver charger, in the case of the former, or balanced on a parapet by a sword-wielding heroine in the instance of the latter.

Dr. Werner Schade, on the basis of photographs, describes the painting as 'a very well preserved and highly appreciated work of Lucas Cranach the Elder, which was most likely executed just before 1530'. He identifies the small size as corresponding



Verso with inscriptions.

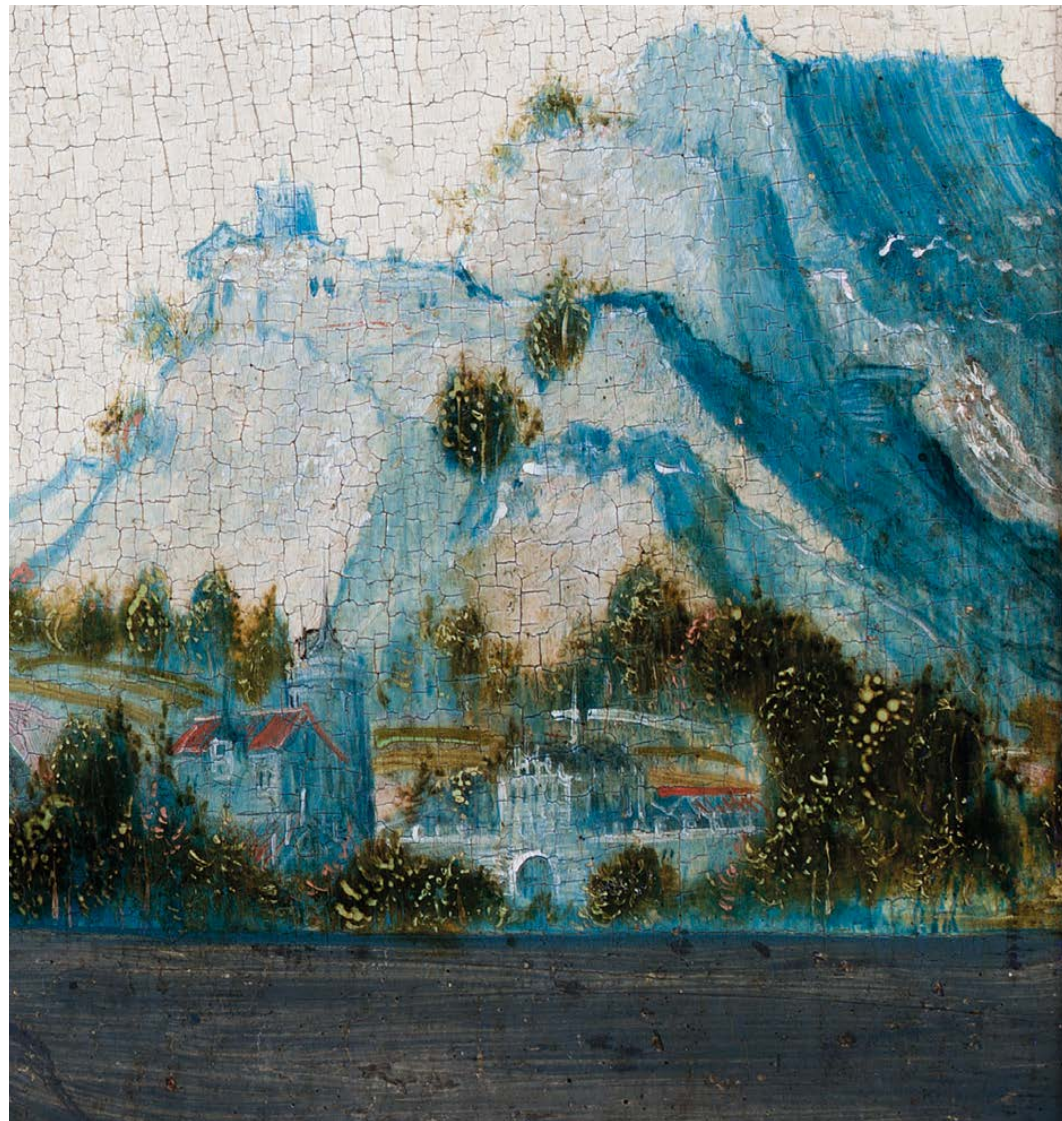


Fig 6.
Lucas Cranach I, *Judith Dining with Holofernes*, 1531, oil and tempera on limewood panel, 98.5 x 72.5 cm, Duke of Sachsen-Coburg und Gotha Foundation for Art and Science (F&R no. 214)

Fig 7.
Lucas Cranach I, *The Death of Holofernes*, 1531, Oil and tempera on limewood panel, 98.5 x 72.5 cm. Duke of Sachsen-Coburg und Gotha Foundation for Art and Science (F&R no. 215)

with Heydenreich's so-called standard format B. Schade further associates the dark curtain with Holofernes' death during the night, and the bright landscape background with the peace that Judith's brave act brought to Bethulia. He suggests we can see traces of *pentimenti*, as certain elements were changed slightly over the course of the picture's execution.

Lucas Cranach arrived in Wittenberg from his native Kronach in 1505, and became court artist to the Electors of Saxony. In 1508 he was ennobled and awarded his coat of arms, bearing the winged serpent that became his signature, by Frederick the Wise. Over the course of his time at court, Cranach served three Electors: Frederick III, called The Wise (ruled 1486 – 1525); Johann the Steadfast (ruled 1525 – 1532) and Johann Frederick I, the Magnanimous (ruled 1532 – 1547). In 1537, Cranach was elected burgomaster of Wittenburg.

The Judith narrative is traditionally held to

represent the victory of Virtue over Vice: Judith herself stands for humility and moderation (*Humilitas* and *Continentia*) while Holofernes embodies the sins of lust and pride (*Luxuria* and *Superbia*). With her sword born aloft, Judith even resembles the traditional iconography of *Justicia*. She was also considered an *exempla* for women, and a symbol of chastity and modesty, whose status as a widow rather than an unmarried woman excused her flirtation with Holofernes, committed, as it was, in the service of her people (see H. Lähnemann, 'The cunning of Judith in Late Medieval German Texts', in *The Sword of Judith: Judith Studies across the Disciplines*, Cambridge, 2010 for further discussion of the dichotomy between virtuous and seductive in the character of Judith.)

The subject may have carried additional symbolic weight, argue scholars, at the time of the formation of the Schmalkaldic League in Saxony in February 1531. It was Rudloff-Hille who first proposed that Cranach's *Judith* series relates to

the League, established as an alliance of princes for mutual defense against the threat of invasion from the Holy Roman Empire or from Turkey to the South (see G. Rudloff-Hille, *Lucas Cranach d.Ä.: Eine Einführung in sein Leben und sein Werk*, Dresden, 1953). Schade elaborated on the topic (see W. Schade, 'Das unbekannte Selbstbildnis Cranachs', in *Dezennium 2: Zwanzig Jahre VEB Verlag der Kunst*, Dresden, 1972), pointing to the two panels in Gotha, *Judith at the Table of Holofernes* and *The Death of Holofernes* (figs. 6-7), in support of his case. Specifically, he identified the features of the clean-shaven man seen in profile with those of Philip I, Landgrave of Hesse, one of the founding members of the Schmalkaldic League.

There are a number of old inscriptions, of varying dates, on the verso of the panel, only some of which can be confidently deciphered at this point. An inscription at the top reads 'Sophie V***berg[?] [of?] Saxe', and in a later hand underneath, this has been qualified 'geb. pr. Von Waldeck' ('born

Princess von Waldeck'). There was a Sophie Henriette (1662 – 1702), daughter of Imperial Prince Georg Friedrich of Waldeck, Pyrmont and Culemborg, who married Duke Ernst of Saxony-Hildburghausen, but we have no firm evidence that the painting belonged to her. Lower down on the panel in what looks to be an even older hand is the inscription 'Agnesa 1623', qualified in yet another hand underneath 'Eine Gräffin V. Waldeck Luc. Cranach.' Dr. Dieter Koeplin pointed out the existence of an old copy of our picture, on the reverse of which is inscribed 'Agnese Gräffin zu Waldeck / Äbtissin in zu Schake[n] anno 1647 / Lucas Cranach gemahlt' ('Agnese Countess of Waldeck / Abbess in Schake[n] in the year 1647 / painted by Lucas Cranach'). This is evidently a later effort to associate the sitter with Agnes von Waldeck (1618 – 1651), who lived a century after the work was executed.



Fig 8.
Arolsen Castle, Bad Arolsen, Hesse, Germany



Fig 9.
Bückeburg Palace, Lower Saxony, Germany

The rest of this painting's early provenance can be reconstructed more securely. According to the archivist at Bückeburg, *Judith and Holofernes* entered the Schaumburg-Lippe princely collection around 1820, having been acquired from Arolsen castle (figs. 8-9). The inscription 'Ida Fru. Schaumburg Lippe geb: Pzu Waldeck 1816' – allows us to trace the painting to the collection of Princess Ida Caroline of Waldeck and Pyrmont (1796 – 1869), who married George William, Prince

of Schaumburg-Lippe (1784 – 1860), Bückeburg, Niedersachsen, Lower Saxony, on 23 June 1816. If the painting is known to have come from Arolsen, it must have been a wedding gift from Princess Ida's parents, George I, Prince of Waldeck and Pyrmont (1747 – 1813), and his wife Princess Augusta of Schwarzburg-Sondershausen. The *Judith and Holofernes* then descended in the Schaumburg-Lippe principality at Bückeburg until its sale to the dealer Rosenbaum in 1929.

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