

# Conserving Eden: Cranach's *Adam* and *Eve* from the Norton Simon Museum

These striking portrayals of Adam and Eve by the Renaissance painter Lucas Cranach the Elder (German, 1472–1553) are among the most celebrated works at the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena. This display presents the pair following three years of multifaceted structural and cleaning treatments at the Getty Museum.



*Self-Portrait* (detail), about 1531. Lucas Cranach the Elder (German, 1472–1553). Oil on panel. Generaldirektion Kulturelles Erbe Rheinland-Pfalz - Direktion Burgen, Schlösser, Altertümer. Image: Wikimedia Commons

As court painter to the Electors of Saxony, Cranach oversaw a bustling studio in Wittenberg (eastern Germany), a lively university town and cultural center. His long career coincided with the profound religious changes wrought by the Protestant Reformation.

Cranach developed new themes for the intellectual and sensuous Wittenberg court. His art features confident women and reveals an abiding interest in the psychology of power, particularly female agency. Cranach painted the biblical story of the Fall of Man over fifty times, exploring the dynamics between a bold Eve, who often (as here) gazes directly at the viewer, and Adam, who ponders the implications of his crucial decision.

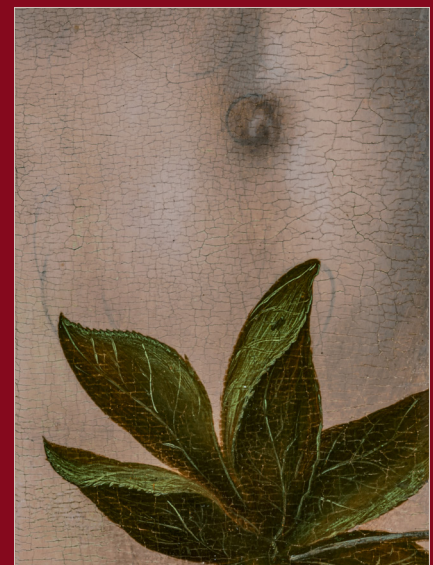
Here, Cranach innovatively portrayed Adam and Eve life-size in separate compositions with the central Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil split between them. They epitomize Cranach's distinctive style: elongated figure types, with the contours of soft flesh set off against an abstract, inky black background. Although the original commission and purpose are a mystery, the scale of these works suggests they adorned a spacious religious or secular interior.

# Cranach's *Adam* and *Eve*: A Dramatic Recent History

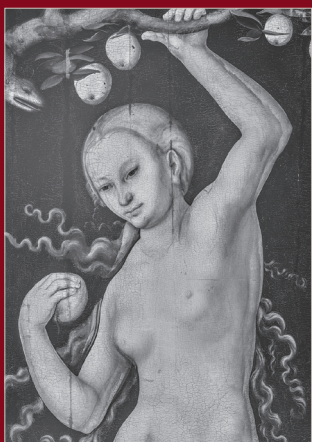
- By 1919** Church of the Holy Trinity, Kyiv
- 1927** Transferred to Lavra Reserve Museum, Kyiv, as a “picture of Adam and Eve,” unattributed
- 1928** Transferred to the Museum of the All-Ukrainian Academy of Sciences (formerly the Khanenko Museum, now known as the Kyiv Museum of Western and Oriental Art), Kyiv. The paintings, joined together to form a single scene, were identified as the work of Lucas Cranach the Elder. They underwent restoration and were separated into the original format of two individual panels.
- 1929** Removed by the Soviet government to the Antiquariat, Leningrad, on September 29
- 1931** Sold by the Soviet government on May 12–13 at Rudolf Lepke's Kunst-Auctions-Haus, Berlin, to art dealer Jacques Goudstikker (1897–1940), Amsterdam
- 1940** Goudstikker dies while fleeing the Netherlands. Through Alois Miedl, the paintings were appropriated by Nazi Reichsmarshall Hermann Göring (1893–1946), Berlin, for display at Karinhalle, his country estate.
- 1945** Recovered by Allied forces and catalogued at the Central Collecting Point in Munich. Returned to the Netherlands Art Property Foundation (Stichting Nederlands Kunstbezit)
- 1966** Following his 1962 claim to ownership, transferred to Commander George Stroganoff Scherbatoff (1898–1976), New York and Connecticut
- 1970–71** *Eve* (in 1970) and *Adam* (in 1971) sold by Stroganoff Scherbatoff through Spencer A. Samuels & Co., Ltd., New York, to the Norton Simon Art Foundation (*Adam*) and the Norton Simon Foundation (*Eve*). The latter was transferred in 1991 to the Norton Simon Art Foundation.

# Cranach's Painting Technique and Treatment of the Surface

Cranach employed an efficient and flexible approach to rendering the life-size figures of Adam and Eve. After the limewood panels were first coated with white gesso, he drew broadly on the prepared panels with a brush and light wash to define the outlines of the figures. Next, with quick flair, Cranach indicated the muscle groups, navel (fig. 1), and kneecaps using a smaller brush. He may have relied on templates for the faces and bodies, scaling them according to the panel size. The creamy highlights and smooth brushwork in the figures attest to the exceptional technical skill of the artist. Last, Cranach defined the sharp curving outlines of Adam and Eve by applying the black background over the edges of the flesh.



**Fig. 1.** *Adam* (detail in natural light). The dark strokes of underdrawing for the navel and leaves are visible in the belly.



**Fig. 2.** Infrared reflectogram of *Eve* (detail). The initial placement of the arm and torso is visible to the right.



**Fig. 3.** *Eve* during cleaning (detail in natural light). Old, discolored varnish remains on the right side of the figure, while it has been removed on the left side.

Cranach modified his initial plan while painting. For example, he raised *Eve's* arm that holds the apple, shifted her torso to the right, and moved her upraised arm higher and to the left (fig. 2).

During conservation treatment, layers of thick discolored varnish were removed from the surfaces of *Adam* and *Eve*, dramatically changing the paintings' appearance (fig. 3). The compositions gained dimensionality, with the distinctions in skin tone between the ruddy male and luminous female physiques now conspicuous.

# Adam and Eve: The Wood Support



**Fig. 1.** The reverse side of *Eve* after treatment and with the cradle removed, showing the seven-plank structure of the panel

Lucas Cranach the Elder painted *Adam* and *Eve* on limewood, a typical material for German Renaissance paintings. Seven narrow planks—an unusually large number for works of this scale—make up each panel (fig. 1). Many of the boards contain knots and other undesirable features. Cranach’s panel maker replaced some of the knots with small inserts while leaving others intact. One reason for the surprisingly mixed quality of the wood may have been the limited availability of limewood boards tall enough to accommodate Cranach’s life-size figures.

## Examination of the inner edges of the panels (beneath the tree trunks)

confirmed that Cranach painted *Adam* and *Eve* as separate companion scenes. The presence of small dowel holes along these edges is evidence that the two paintings were joined together at a later date to form a single scene.

Over time, the surface of the panels had become uneven due to the movement of the wood planks and the tension exerted by the cradles, the lattice-like wood supports added long ago to the backs in an attempt to keep the paintings flat. During the recent structural treatment, conservators removed the old cradles and realigned the planks to regain an even surface. Lightweight strainers now provide a custom support system that allows the wood to move, preventing future damage (fig. 2).



**Fig. 2.** The reverse side of *Eve* with the old cradle (left) and with the new strainer (right)

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