

CIRCLE OF LUCAS CRANACH THE YOUNGER

(Wittenberg 1515 - Weimar 1586)

An Interior with a Childbirth Scene

oil on panel
110 x 95 cm (43½ x 37¾ in)

IN THIS INTIMATE PORTRAYAL OF A NEW MOTHER, exhausted after giving birth, the bustling bedchamber is dominated by her richly upholstered, olive-coloured four poster bed. She is attended by her companions and at least two midwives as was conventional in sixteenth-century childbirth practice. The interior of the room, following the example set by early exponents of Northern Renaissance art such as Jan van Eyck (c.1395-1441), is rendered in exquisite detail. From the delicate Corinthian column on the far left hand side to the foliate ornaments adorning the furniture, the striking realism of the painting records invaluable historical details of the time.

As very few births were attended by a doctor at this time, the women depicted are the midwives, their assistants, and the mother's companions, who would all attend the birth. Her companions would play their own part in the mother's recovery, keeping the mother awake so that she would not be allowed to sleep immediately following the delivery in case of haemorrhaging. Humorously, however, one midwife tending the mother has fallen fast asleep during her duties.

The midwives are made recognisable by the sharp knives hanging at their sides and white headdresses. Midwifery was more highly regulated in Germany than in most other European countries where it was already licensed by the mid-fifteenth century and where a midwife's apprenticeship would last from between one and five years.

One midwife, her job done, celebrates by drinking merrily from a jug of ale. It is believed that the depiction of a pitcher in northern European art possibly alluded to a woman's womb, thus it is appropriate that it is from this that the midwife is drinking. The other, picked out in a crimson robe, offers food and drink to the tired mother. A third assistant tenderly bathes the newborn infant in a ritual overlaid with symbolism and meaning.

The act of cleansing was considered to be of great importance to the child's physical and spiritual well-being. At the same time, the obvious link to holy purification by baptism cannot be ignored. Lucas Cranach the Younger's close connection to Martin Luther (1483-1546) and the inevitable influence of the Reformation are evident in this and others of his works. It is possible that the bathing ritual detailed here relates to the second of the sacraments that Luther retained.¹ The window shutters are firmly closed, and one would assume that the doors are also bolted; this again was a common practice believed to ward off evil spirits.

It is most likely that the three babies depicted here are designed to form a narrative sequence as it would have been highly unusual to have three surviving triplets at this time. The two charming images of motherhood presented in the foreground, therefore, are perhaps stages in the newborn infant's early life: a serene woman, clad in green with a veil of delicate gauze, cradles her contented baby on a plump cushion.



Circle of Lucas Cranach the Younger, *An Interior with a Childbirth Scene*, (Detail)

¹ The words 'theirs is the kingdom of heaven' can be seen to justify infant baptism against the attacks of the Zwickau Prophets and other Anabaptists.





Lucas Cranach the Younger, *Christ Blessing the Children*, 1540s, Private Collection (Figure 1)

The representation of young babies and maternal figures in *An Interior with a Childbirth Scene* are highly reminiscent of comparable groups of figures depicted in works by Cranach the Younger, for instance, *Christ Blessing the Children* (fig. 1).² Here, numerous new born babies are presented to the centrally placed Christ for him to bless. The similarities in the features of the mothers in *Christ Blessing the Children* to the woman wearing the green gown in the foreground of *An Interior with a Childbirth Scene* are particularly striking. As in the present work, the iconography of *Christ Blessing the Children* has been thought to reveal clear support for the baptism of children against the emergence of the Anabaptists in the 1530s.

The beautiful and minutely detailed *Interior with a Childbirth Scene* bears close similarities in compositional terms to a woodcut, *The Birth of the Virgin*



Albrecht Dürer, *The Birth of the Virgin*, woodcut, c.1502-1504, Hunterian Art Gallery, University of Glasgow (Figure 2)



Lucas Cranach the Elder, *The Virgin and the Child under an Apple Tree*, 1520s -1530s, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg (Figure 3)

by Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) (fig. 2). In 1511, Dürer first published a series of twenty woodcuts entitled *The Life of the Virgin*. These were published in the form of a book and his illustration of the Virgin's birth is a remarkable image. The print evokes, as the artist from Cranach's circle so successfully does, the once private world of women in childbirth. Conveying his knowledge of midwifery as it was practised in early sixteenth-century Nuremberg, Dürer has transposed St. Anne and the Virgin Mary from the Holy Land into a typical, contemporary German bedchamber.

In terms of both the grouping around the bed, the activity taking place in the foreground and the very perspective of the room with its bolted doors and triple flight of steps, the artist of *Interior with a Childbirth Scene* innovatively adapts Dürer's sacred subject matter transporting it into a naturalistic and domestic setting. Birthing scenes of this period, usually recalling the legends of St. John and the Virgin Mary, followed a traditional format of a mother reclining in bed, whilst maids washed the baby and served her food.

However, the religious climate in sixteenth-century Germany - and the Cranach family's own beliefs - demanded a more secular, Protestant representation of a conventionally religious iconography. Notably though, the composition of the figures and furniture within the room, and in particular the grouping of figures at the bed, and midwife drinking from a pitcher, owe a considerable amount to Dürer's earlier *Birth of the Virgin*.

² This scene was copied from an earlier work by his father, Lucas Cranach the Elder. From the 1530s, the Cranach workshop is known to have produced this scene in large numbers. Over twenty versions have survived, demonstrating the popularity of the subject.



Circle of Lucas Cranach the Younger, *An Interior with a Childbirth Scene*, (Detail)

An Interior with a Childbirth Scene is attributed to an artist working in the circle of Cranach the Younger. Cranach the Younger began his artistic vocation as a designer of woodcuts but soon followed his distinguished father, Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1553), into painting. He very often drew the clothes and accessories into his father's paintings, and by the mid 1530s Cranach the Younger's role in his father's workshop had become increasingly important, culminating in him taking it over upon his death.³ Like his father he held high office in civic affairs, serving on the Wittenberg city council from 1549-1568 as both Chancellor and later burgomaster. His sympathy to Luther's ideals led him to illustrate two editions of the reformer's translation of the bible in 1541.

Cranach the Younger's paintings were deeply inspired by - and frequently copies of - works by his father. Cranach the Elder littered many of his works with images of babies - both of the infant Christ and angels - as well as mythological and religious mother and child pairings.⁴ Cranach the Elder's *The Virgin and the Child under an Apple Tree* is a particularly tender representation of the bond between mother and child and is reminiscent of the narrative images of the new born baby being nursed in *An Interior with a Childbirth Scene* (fig. 3). Moreover, the rich colouring preferred by Cranach the Elder was later adopted by his son and the splendidly varied palette in the present work clearly reflects this preference.

Successfully integrated figure groups with individualised features were a speciality of both Cranach the Elder and his son and both artists sought to represent their characters and protagonists from an interesting and interactive viewpoint.

The narrative in *An Interior with a Childbirth Scene* is excellently illustrated by the gestures and positioning of the figures - as seen in the wriggling baby and the surprised expression of the seated midwife as she clutches her colleague in the right foreground - and adds a deeper expression and temperament to the work. Likewise, in *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery* it is the expressions and the gestures of the figures who surround Christ that create the claustrophobic sense of judgement and reprieve (fig. 4).⁵

³ In many cases, distinguishing the late style of Lucas Cranach the Elder from the early works of his son remains hypothetical.

⁴ For example see: Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Charity*, 1534, Museum zu Allerhilgen Schaffhausen, Sturzenegger-Stiftung.

⁵ Due to a split in the panel, Catherine the Great of Russia instructed the artist Georg Leopold Pfandzelt to transfer *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery* from panel to a copperplate in 1770.



Lucas Cranach the Younger, *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*, after 1532, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg, 18th Century (Figure 4)

Despite Cranach the Elder, and later his son's, exceptional skill in representing the human nude, both artists relished the opportunity to depict the luxurious minutiae found in sixteenth century fashionable dress. The delicate gauze headdress seen on the adulterous woman in *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery* is almost identical to that worn by the woman in the green dress cradling her baby in *An Interior with a Childbirth Scene*. Indeed the detailing and varied textures on the gowns of the seated nurses in the present work are rich and luxurious and closely related to the elaborate dress worn in *Portrait of a Woman* (fig. 5).



Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Portrait of a Woman*, 1526, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg (Figure 5)