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History of Western Art
Part One – An Introduction to Art History

Assignment One – Exercise 3

500-word analysis of one work

Adam and Eve (1526)

Lucas Cranach the Elder
Oil on wood (80.8 x 117.1)
The Courtauld Gallery, London



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About the artist - Social and political context

Lucas Cranach the Elder (so described to differentiate between him and his sons) was a German Renaissance artist, working in the late 15th and early 16th centuries.

A working artist, he was court painter for Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony, at Wittenberg, where he produced many paintings of court subjects. (Essential History of Art, p80)

A shrewd businessman and talented artist, Cranach painted over 50 works depicting Adam and Eve. Such subjects were popular and therefore lucrative: They were acceptable to the Church as having a didactic message: They were also attractive pieces of art, allowing the portrayal and appreciation of whilst preserving the owner's propriety. Cranach also incorporated 'marketable' themes appealing to his patrons. Here the animals would appeal to a patron who enjoyed hunting. (Galleries on Demand, online)

A religious man, Cranach produced Propaganda woodcuts for protestant preacher Martin Luther. (Essential History of Art, p80)

About the painting – Materials, processes, style and movements

The painting depicts the moment of ultimate temptation; Eve, watched by the serpent, gives the apple from the tree of knowledge to an unwitting, rather bewildered-looking Adam. The viewer knows that their lives (and those of man) will never be the same again as they are expelled from the Garden of Eden. Christ is represented by the vines entwined around the legs.

The pair are surrounded by wild beasts. Neither will come to harm from the other as Adam and Eve have no need of hunting for food. The animals are at peace, the fawn observes its reflection in the pool, the lion nearby.

Painted in the old-fashioned way directly onto wood, the substrate is now bowing with time and the elements. However, the colours remain rich, sumptuous; fine detailing with tiny brush strokes creating the sparkle of light in Eve's hair, the grass and in the wild beasts' fur. (Galleries on demand)

But is Eve as naïve as we think? The artist paints her eyes glancing half-closed giving them a slightly sneaky look. Is this intentional?

The figures are painted in the Northern Renaissance style; extenuated bodies, sinewy yet curvaceous, quite different to Italian nudes of the same period. (Galleries on Demand)

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