

Lucas van Leyden

Painter of Civic Life

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[I L L J A V E L D M A N]

Last summer, visitors to Museum De Lakenhal in Leiden were asked to name their favourite work of art in the museum. One in ten answered without hesitation that they had lost their hearts to the triptych featuring Lucas van Leyden's *Last Judgement*. It is easy to see why this work from almost 500 years ago came out on top. Lucas was greatly admired even in his own lifetime and his fame has not diminished over the course of the centuries, mainly because of his engravings and woodcuts. Lucas's prints, which made their way all over Europe, quickly gained him a great reputation, similar to that of Albrecht Dürer. Lucas demonstrates astounding creativity and originality in all of his work though, not only coming up with unusual themes, but also presenting traditional subjects from new perspectives. His works place particular emphasis on the human aspect, often exhibiting striking psychological insight. It is no surprise therefore that his prints and paintings were very popular among the ordinary middle classes. Most of Lucas's work was not destined for churches and monasteries, but for the homes of art-loving citizens. This was a new phenomenon. It also explains why the themes of Lucas's work often reflect this early urban or civic culture.

Prodigy

In his *Schilder-boeck* (Book of Painters, published in 1604), Karel van Mander emphasises how Lucas excelled at painting and engraving from his earliest youth. Van Mander states that Lucas was born in 1494 and that the boy preferred a pen, brushes and engraving tools to his toys. Lucas supposedly engraved images on copper at the age of nine and when he was twelve he is said to have painted a Saint Hubert for a member of the town council. Van Mander obtained this information from one of Lucas's grandsons, who was born while Lucas was on his deathbed. However, other details in the book are not entirely correct, so it is not certain that the date of 1494 is reliable. Artists' biographers often had the tendency to exaggerate in order to emphasise an artist's prodigious skills. What is certain is that Lucas's first dated engravings are from 1508. However, he had already produced a large number of prints in the preceding years. For this

reason, it has been suggested that the year of his birth was earlier than 1494. Even if Lucas was born in 1489, that means he was producing signed engravings for sale from the age of seventeen, which is still unusually young. It was also extraordinary that Lucas engraved on copper, as there was no tradition of copper engraving in Leiden. At an early stage in his career, Lucas must have had access to prints by other artists, which he then used as models for his own work. His father, the painter Huyg Jacobsz, taught him the rudiments of painting, after which the boy is believed to have worked as an apprentice to Leiden painter Cornelis Engebrechtsz.

Nature and eroticism in Lucas's early prints

Lucas started working as a printmaker at a time when painters had little interest in making prints. One of the reasons for this decision was most probably that making prints did not tie him to a particular client, as prints could be sold from the studio, through booksellers and at fairs, and also that printmakers were not required to join a guild. Moreover, this medium allowed Lucas to experiment with new and unusual subjects for sale on the open market. His early prints, for example, reveal a great interest in nature and innocent eroticism. This period produced a number of small, idyllic scenes, such as *Naked Boy with Trumpet and Dancing Children*, *Pilgrims Resting in Nature*, *Naked Woman with Hind*, *Naked Girl Removing Fleas from a Dog* and *Milkmaid with Farmer and Cows*. Karel van Mander greatly admired the latter two prints, both dated 1510. *Resting Pilgrims* appealed so much to the Italian engraver Marcantonio Raimondi that he copied the print himself.

Lucas van Leyden,
*Naked Girl removing Fleas
from a Dog*, 1510.
Print, 10.4 x 7.2 cm.





Lucas van Leyden,
*Milkmaid with Farmer and
Cow*, 1510.
Print, 11.5 x 15.7 cm.

None of these works belong to the traditional religious repertoire, so it is easy to see why critics have attempted to find hidden meanings in them. The naked girl with her dog, for example, was seen both as a prostitute and as the symbol of idleness. However, the most important challenge for the young Lucas appears to have been the accurate reproduction of the female nude. While in earlier prints his nudes sometimes appeared rather clumsy, the engraver succeeds here in reproducing the soft, smooth female body in a more natural way, contrasting it with the rough hair of the dog's coat. Other contemporary works demonstrate that a naked woman with her lapdog had erotic connotations. His *Milkmaid* also features erotic elements. The man's reaction to the milkmaid is underlined by the tree trunk he rests his hand upon, with its angled protuberances. The theme of a girl milking a cow is traditionally a motif for the month of April, as erotic innuendo is commonly associated with that spring month. Lucas probably took his inspiration for the motif of a cow occupying the length of the picture from Dürer's print *The Little Horse* (1505). However, rather than a horse, Lucas chose a typical Dutch dairy cow and he replaced the armour-clad halberdier with two Dutch peasants. It is only a small step from full udders to full breasts and other sexual metaphors are obvious.

A virtuoso engraver

Lucas's engraving technique reached its peak in terms of skill and sophistication in around 1517. His focus was now on more traditional subjects involving lots of figures and complicated compositions in a large format. According to Van Mander, Lucas made a great deal of money with this art. He met Dürer, his great role model, in Antwerp in 1521. This encounter, at which the two artists exchanged prints, was described by Dürer in his diary. It was the start of a new period for Lucas, in which Dürer's work was once again a major source of inspiration. In the late 1520s, however, Lucas became increasingly interest-

Lucas van Leyden,
Venus and Mars, 1530.
Print, 18.8 x 24.3 cm.



ed in Italian art, particularly the portrayal of the idealised nude. He modelled his work on Marcantonio Raimondi's engravings of nudes in various postures, which in turn were largely based on designs by Raphael.

Lucas's *Venus and Mars* (created in 1530) is one of these later prints featuring monumental figures, which were strongly influenced by Italian art. The postures of the two figures are taken from seated portraits of emperors in prints by Raimondi. This work is one of the few pieces in Lucas's oeuvre presenting a classical theme. The engraver treats the popular mythological story of the affair between Venus and Mars in a highly original and witty manner. While the discovery of the adulterous couple by Venus's husband Vulcan is usually depicted as a risqué bed scene, the lovers in Lucas's print have no physical contact. Venus gazes at her lover, looking rather tired and resting her melancholy head on one arm, while her son Cupid provocatively reaches out to tweak her nipple and stir her passion. Mars, the virile god of war, has removed his armour and is ready for action. His sword not only functions as a phallic symbol, but also as a barrier between the two lovers. The partially visible sphere in the foreground, the symbol of inconstancy, appears to be an allusion to the unstable nature of physical desire.

Lucas van Leyden,
Aristotle ridden by Phyllis.
Woodcut, 40.7 x 29.3 cm.

Human folly and competition between the sexes

Other prints by Lucas devote a surprising amount of attention to relationships between men and women. This is particularly evident in the theme of Feminine Wiles. Men's fear of female powers of seduction was an important theme from the Middle Ages on. Eve, the original mother, was viewed as the instigator of the Fall and hence every woman was seen as a dangerous creature. Stories about the lust and deceit of women developed into popular *exempla contraria* with a warning function. The man is not depicted as a henpecked husband, but instead as a wise or physically powerful individual who, once taken in by the charms of a woman, can only expect ridicule and ruination. Lucas was the first artist to





Lucas van Leyden,
The Card Players, ca. 1515.
Oil on panel, 29.8 x 39.5
cm. © Museo Thyssen-
Bornemisza, Madrid.

devote two series of prints to Feminine Wiles. However, his large woodcut of *Aristotle Ridden by Phyllis*, one of the best-known examples, does not belong to these series. Phyllis was the favourite courtesan of Alexander the Great, who put his duties before love, after warnings from his teacher Aristotle. Out of revenge for Alexander's rejection, Phyllis decided to seduce Aristotle. She walked around in the garden in front of the philosopher's window, with her skirts lifted high and her hair hanging loose until, burning with desire, he pandered to her whims and allowed her to use him as a mount. This humorous but instructive woodcut must have adorned the walls of many a home.

Lucas's first paintings, which he produced in around 1508, do not have religious subjects, but are small panels reflecting the daily lives of the citizenry. One particular group is devoted to gatherings of men and women in contemporary dress, sitting at a table and playing chess or cards, generally for money. The half-length composition of the figures ensures that all attention goes to the psychological interaction and also reduces the distance from the viewer. Lucas had a lot of success with this genre and his compositions were frequently copied or adapted. The satirical effect is often accentuated. The appeal of such depictions was undoubtedly the fact that men and women playing games together traditionally had erotic connotations and competition is an obvious factor. Betting and playing for money was officially banned in Leiden from 1508, but that seems to have had little effect in practice.

The painting *The Card Players* shows a woman playing a game of cards with a fashionable young man and a portly, older gentleman. The woman has just put some coins and the jack of spades on the table and is looking dreamily at the young man. He has conjured up a king of spades and is therefore the winner again, but the woman is only too pleased to lose to him. The older man has only an eight of spades and appears to have lost every hand. A woman with two men of different ages belongs to the pictorial tradition of the love triangle and the theme of unrequited love. The attractive young man is not only lucky in the game of cards, but also in the game of love, and the jackpot here is actually the woman.

Another use of playing cards is depicted in *The Fortune-Teller*, which shows a woman laying cards to predict the future for a well-dressed young man. Impressed, the man takes off his hat to the fortune-teller. However, her exposed bosom, the violets in her bodice and the large jug of wine are symbols of wantonness. To make the fortune-teller's deceit clear, Lucas has depicted a conspicuous image of a fool standing behind her, complete with an exotic fool's cap and bauble. In his prints, too, Lucas often introduces a fool as a commentator to draw the viewer's attention to the folly of the events. Interestingly, the fool nearly always appears in scenes that are related to sex, often illicit. The popularity of the figure of the fool was greatly enhanced by Sebastian Brant's lavishly illustrated *Das Narrenschiff* (The Ship of Fools, published in Basle in 1494). In addition to its entertainment value, this work had a didactic purpose: foolish people should be able to mend their ways when confronted with their own foolishness or that of others.

The relevance of paintings with religious themes

In 1526, Lucas received a commission from the children of timber merchant Claes Dirksz van Swieten to paint a memorial panel for the Pieterskerk in Leiden, in memory of their father. This resulted in one of the most impressive triptychs ever painted in the Netherlands. The exceptionally large format

Lucas van Leyden, *Triptych of the Last Judgement*, 1526-1527. Oil on panel, 269.5 x 184.8 cm (middle); 264 x 76 cm (volets). Museum de Lakenhal, Leiden. Photo by Rik Klein Gotink.





Lucas van Leyden,
The Fortune-Teller. Oil on
panel, 24 x 30.5 cm. Louvre,
Paris.

demonstrates not only the availability of funds, but also the important public positions that Van Swieten had held. Remarkably, Van Swieten's actual likeness is missing from the memorial panel, which is very unusual; the work was, however, displayed close to the deceased's spacious crypt. The triptych shows Christ as Judge of the World on the Day of Judgement. The resurrection of humanity was a common theme for epitaphs, but never before had the theme been depicted so effectively. On weekdays, only the monumental exterior of the side panels could be seen, featuring the apostles Peter and Paul, the patron saints of the church, seated in a landscape. It must have made a great impact every time the panels were opened to reveal the large, naked figures rising from their graves and going up to heaven, lovingly guided by angels. Grim fiends lead other alarmed souls to the eternal torments of hell. Viewers are not quick to forget the woman sprawled in the foreground, struggling against a demon that has hold of her foot and is dragging her down to hell, or the man on the left of the central panel who is on his way to heaven and looks around to make sure his wife is following him. Another unforgettable figure is the angel on the left panel who, with his gaze focused on the viewer, wraps his arm around the buttocks of an attractive young man chosen to go to heaven.

Lucas made the unusual decision to depict an Old Testament theme, based on Exodus 17:1-7 and Numbers 20:2-12, in his painting *Moses Striking Water from the Rock* (1527), now in Boston, although the emphasis on the reaction of the bystanders is typical of his work. The Israelites do not seem to be aware of the miracle, but instead rush to fill their jugs with water and to satisfy their material needs. The picture appears to be an allegory of mankind's inability to truly believe. However, in another large triptych, *The Healing of the Blind Man of Jericho* (1531), now in St. Petersburg, Lucas depicts the power of individual faith by portraying the healing of blind Bartimaeus from Mark 10:46-52. This work was commissioned by the wealthy Leiden brickmaker Jacob Florisz van Montfoort and his wife.

Lucas van Leyden,
*Triptych with the Dance
around the Golden Calf*,
1531. Oil on panel, 93.5 x
6.9 cm (middle); 91.7 x 30.2
cm (volets). Rijksmuseum,
Amsterdam.

The Dance around the Golden Calf (painted around 1530) was also made for a private client. The story from Exodus 32 is an unusual theme for a triptych. Moses spent forty days on Mount Sinai, where he received the Ten Commandments from God, while his people, who had grown impatient, made a golden idol that they danced around and feasted. In the foreground, Lucas depicted men, women and children celebrating, while others dance around the Golden Calf in the background and, in the distance, Moses descends the mountain. Again, he is focusing primarily on the human tendency to place material desires and the satisfaction of basic needs above spiritual wellbeing, an inclination that is relevant to all eras.

So, Lucas's religious works may also be seen as an expression of a new and personal experience of faith which would be inconceivable without the influence of humanism (and perhaps the thinking of the Reformation). These works demonstrate that Lucas van Leyden was not only capable of creating appealing themes in his more intimate printed works, but that he was also a major innovator in his larger paintings, who captured the zeitgeist in a very personal way and used his art to bolster moral ideals. ■

Translated by Laura Watkinson

The exhibition *Lucas van Leyden and the Renaissance* will be held at Museum De Lakenhal in Leiden from 20 March to 26 June 2011. This exhibition, which will also feature other Leiden artists from ca. 1490–1550, is accompanied by a lavishly illustrated catalogue.

