

Lucas Cranach the Elder, German, 1472-1553
Portraits of Moritz and Anna Buchner, c. 1520
Oil on panel
H.16 x W. 10¾ inches x 3/16
The William Hood Dunwoody Fund, 57.10, 57.11

Theme

Changes in society and the consequent development of the middle class in the 16th century led to new styles of living for many people. The companion portraits of the Buchners show a prosperous middle-class couple's pride and sense of accomplishment in their social status and their material goods.

Background

Throughout the Middle Ages, wealth in the form of land was acquired through inheritance by a privileged few. By the 16th century, in Germany and much of the rest of Europe, this feudal society had given way to a capitalist one with a growing and prosperous middle class. During the 14th and 15th centuries, Germany had built fleets and established trade routes in the Baltic Sea. This gave rise to a merchant class who made large profits through trade. Men like Moritz Buchner and Lucas Cranach could now, through their own intelligence and ingenuity, acquire wealth. Middle-class status brought with it great pride, because now merchants rivaled the aristocracy not only in material goods but also in civic authority and as patrons of the arts.

Cities and towns grew rapidly with the influx of people seeking jobs in industry and commerce. Cities also became centers of intellectual and artistic activity. With the continued support of the nobility and the new patronage of the middle class, artistic production flourished in the period between 1500 and 1530. This era, referred to as the German Renaissance, gave rise to numerous schools of art¹ and produced some of Germany's greatest artists. During this time, Germany was regarded as the artistic center of northern Europe.

Portraits of Moritz and Anna Buchner

In 1518,² Moritz Buchner commissioned Lucas Cranach the Elder to paint portraits of himself and his wife, Anna. A Leipzig merchant and alderman whose family had grown wealthy from the mining industry, Buchner could afford this luxury formerly enjoyed only by the aristocracy. The elegant clothing and jewels in which the couple chose to be portrayed testify to their pride in their wealth.

¹ A school of art in the 16th century was not a formal academy, but rather a group of artists who learned from a master who had his own workshop. The term "school" also refers loosely to a group of artists in a certain location who shared artistic techniques.

² On the left side of the portrait of Moritz Buchner is the date 1518 and the artist's monogram (which he used in lieu of a signature), which appears as a winged serpent.

Two very different personalities emerge from these portraits. Morris Buchner looks straight at us. Although he is extravagantly clothed, it is his bold, direct gaze rather than his attire that captures our attention. This gives the impression of a shrewd and confident man. His left hand, resting across his luxurious fur-collared cape, prominently displays the ring bearing his initials and family crest. Everything in his portrait speaks of the prestige and importance of Moritz Buchner.

In contrast to her husband, Anna solemnly looks away. As a result, it is not her face (or her personality) that engages us. Our attention is drawn to her ostentatious array of jewels. The quantity of jewelry with which she is laden suggests that this painting is as much an inventory of material goods as a portrait of a woman. Anna is treated as little more than a symbol of her husband's wealth and status.

Despite the absence of any details of the Buchners' surroundings, the portraits provide clues to this couple's values and life-style. Hung in their home, the portraits would have served as symbols of their social status and material success. The Buchners chose not to be idealized. Unlike the nobility, middle-class German people of this era wanted their portraits to be mirror images of their physical appearance. It is clear that Moritz wanted his portrait to convey both his pride of accomplishment and his personal character.

When Cranach painted these portraits, the High Renaissance was under way in Italy. Artists like Michelangelo, Raphael, and Leonardo da Vinci were influencing artistic style throughout Europe, particularly through their emphasis on anatomical accuracy and the use of perspective to create the illusion of space. Their influence on Cranach is apparent if the figures of Anna and Moritz are compared to the figures of the French falconer's tapestry. The Buchners appear vastly more realistic and three-dimensional than the flat lords and ladies in the tapestry. Yet even so, Cranach was more attuned to the style of northern Europe, particularly that of Flanders (present-day Belgium).

In the previous century, northern artists had developed a remarkable technique for producing jewel-like surfaces with oil paint. They could depict fabric and fur with a precision that made the textures almost palpable. Cranach's mastery of this technique can be seen in the fine detail and realism of the fur, fabric, and jewels worn by the Buchners. In fact, Cranach gives greater attention to these details than to structural form. Anna's hands, for example, are rather awkwardly rendered.

Technique

Today, oil paintings are usually executed on canvas that has been stretched over a wooden frame. During the Renaissance, however, the most common painting surface was the wooden panel, used by Cranach for these portraits. Wood provided a very smooth surface, which complemented Cranach's smooth, detailed painting style.

Before painting began, the surface of the wood was coated with a ground. The usual ground for wood panels was gesso, a mixture of chalk and a glue solution. Sometimes several layers were applied. When dry, the gesso ground could be sanded to a fine, smooth finish to form the surface for painting with oils.

Oil paints were known to painters as early as the 14th century but were perfected by

artists in Flanders in the 15th century. Oil paint consists of finely divided pigment particles dispersed in an oil medium; when painted on a surface and allowed to dry, it forms a hard film that is extremely durable.

Oil paints offered greater versatility than previous types of paint. They dry slowly, allowing the artist to combine transparent and opaque layers to achieve a wide range of effects and color variations. The oil paint can be applied with a variety of brushes. The smooth-textured surface of these portraits indicates that Cranach probably used small, fine brushes.

Artist

Lucas Cranach the Elder went to Vienna about 1502 and there painted a series of landscapes and religious scenes. He was called to Wittenberg in 1505 to become court painter to Frederick III. Cranach served as court portraitist, interior decorator, costume designer, and curator. Through Cranach's purchases of art, Frederick was able to amass a huge collection. Taking advantage of the opportunities available to an ambitious entrepreneur, Cranach became the owner of an apothecary, a bookshop, a printing firm, and a paper mill. He also played an active role in the civic affairs of Wittenberg, being elected to the city council eight times and serving as mayor for three years.

During his fifty-year residency in Wittenberg, Cranach developed into a highly versatile and popular artist. His work was so much in demand that he employed a workshop of assistants, which at one time numbered sixteen. Cranach was not simply a court painter, however. Many of his best portraits were of members of the middle class. While in Wittenberg, he became a close friend of Martin Luther, whose portrait he painted many times. Cranach was also an accomplished printmaker. He created one of the finest illustrated books of the time, the *Wittenberg Book of Reliquaries* as well as many engravings and woodcuts of Luther.

Suggested Questions

1. What is a portrait? People can still have their portraits painted today, but they can also have their portraits made another way. Can you think what it is? (*Photographs.*) Think of some reasons why people want portraits of themselves. Why would it have been so expensive to have a portrait made in the 16th century? Why was it important for the Buchners to have portraits?
2. When you look at Moritz what is the first thing you notice? Why is that? What did you first notice in Anna's portrait? Look at their eyes. Why do you think the artist has Moritz staring right at us? Why do you think Anna is looking away? If you could ask each person one question, what would it be?
3. Do you think these portraits were painted in the summer or the winter? How can you tell?
4. What kind of personality do you think Moritz has? How does Anna feel? Do you think they liked their portraits when they were finished? Why or why not?

5. What belongings have the Buchners included in their portraits? Do you think they would have worn this much jewelry every day?
6. **Have a scavenger hunt.** Find the date when the portraits were painted, the letters *N* and *H*, a gold ring, a ring with two stones, etc. **Add anything else you wish.**
7. **Play a texture game. Bring examples of several materials in the painting (velvet, lace, hair, fur, etc.). Have the children feel the texture and find it in the reproduction.**
8. Moritz Buchner was a merchant. He was involved in trade. How would people have transported trade items in the 16th century? Why do people trade? Is there anything in the painting that the Buchners might have acquired from another country? (*Pearls*.) Do you think Moritz Buchner was a successful merchant? How do you know?
9. What do you think the artist was most interested in telling us about the Buchners? (Physical appearance, social status, personality?) Why do you think so?
10. What belongings of yours would you include in your portrait? Would you wear things for a portrait that you might not wear every day? Would you want to include your whole body in your portrait or just your head?

Bibliography

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