

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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THE PRINTS OF LUCAS VAN LEYDEN AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES
AT NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

WASHINGTON, D.C. May 11, 1983. This first major exhibition in the U.S. of graphic works by Lucas van Leyden, one of the foremost painters and printmakers to work in the Netherlands during the first half of the sixteenth century, goes on view June 5 through August 14, 1983 in the National Gallery of Art's West Building Ground Floor print galleries.

Fine impressions of Lucas' engravings, etchings, and woodcuts are very rare and widely dispersed. In bringing them together--many in more than one impression--for comparative study, the exhibition establishes new standards of connoisseurship by which to understand Lucas' prints.

In addition to providing an opportunity to study Lucas' work, the exhibition also demonstrates his influence upon other Netherlandish printmakers. Of the 140 works on view, two-thirds are by Lucas and the remaining represent virtually every other Netherlandish artist of significance who made or designed prints outside of book illustrations from 1507 to 1530.

Drawn from American and foreign print rooms and private collections, the exhibition has been organized by guest curators Ellen S. Jacobowitz, Acting Curator of Prints,

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Philadelphia Museum of Art, and Stephanie L. Stepanek, formerly Assistant Curator, Department of Prints and Drawings, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Lucas' works show emotional restraint and a sense of order and balance typical of the Dutch tradition. He often depicts genre themes with moralistic overtones pertaining, for example, to the pitfalls of a life of excess and captures qualities of human nature which are relevant today. Samson and Delilah is the subject of a 1508 engraving and a 1516-1519 woodcut. The engraving is one of Lucas' most complex pieces, with multiple textures, decorative details, and a diverse system of hatching. A later engraving, The Poet Virgil Suspended in a Basket, of 1525, reflects an Italian influence transmitted through Gossaert, most notably in a monumental quality of the figures and the elaborate Renaissance decoration.

Lucas' ability to create plausible spatial relationships is one of his great accomplishments as a printmaker. The Boy with a Trumpet, an early engraving executed by 1508, exemplifies Lucas' characteristic placement of figures in the central foreground with a detailed Netherlandish landscape filling the background.

From 1512-1520 Lucas' prints focus on the human figure and are characterized by a chiaroscuro effect. Esther before Ahasuerus (1518) takes on a silvery, lustrous

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quality and is considered to be one of the most convincing projections of figures in interior space in Lucas' work. Drawn from an Old Testament story, the print is a prototype for Jan Steen's painting of the same theme.

Like Albrecht Dürer, Lucas trained as a painter and there is a definite influence from his German counterpart especially after their meeting in 1521. Lucas' The Virgin and Child with Two Angels (1523), for example, is similar to Dürer's Virgin with the Pear (1511): the line work in the Lucas impression is detailed and varied while his rhythmic handling of light lends a sense of mystery and spirituality.

Lucas is thought to be the first artist to etch on copper rather than iron and to combine the techniques of etching and engraving in a single composition, as seen in Emperor Maximilian I (1520). One of Lucas' few extant preparatory drawings, for the Maximilian print, is also on view.

The exhibition provides a unique opportunity to study the attribution problems presented by Lucas woodcuts. The extent of his participation in their production is difficult to determine. It is thought that he designed the woodcuts and that several cutters were involved in their execution.

The final section of the exhibition shows various ways in which Lucas' work affected his contemporaries. The works of Dirk Vellert, for example, show a direct relationship to Lucas in the subtlety with which he presents subject

matter, his insight into human behavior, the painterly manner of composing, handling space, and manipulating chiaroscuro. A particularly strong example is Vellert's Temptation of Christ (1523) which closely resembles Lucas' engravings of the same theme.

In planning the exhibition, Ms. Jacobowitz and Ms. Stepanek have worked closely with the Gallery's Senior Curator and Curator of the Department of Graphic Arts, Andrew Robison, and with Ruth E. Fine, Curator, Graphic Arts. A fully illustrated catalogue by the guest curators accompanies the exhibition.

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