Lucas van Leyden’s late paintings: The Italian connection

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Max J. Friedländer characterized Lucas van Leyden as one of those masters ‘die im Stande der Unschuld genial, ins Reich des Bewußten aufsteigend die produktive Gestaltungskraft einbüßen’.¹ What Friedländer was describing, of course, was the influence of Albrecht Dürer and Marcantonio Raimondi that appeared so markedly in Lucas’s art after 1520. Friedländer further insisted, in his later work ‘verbrennt er das holländische Erbgut’.² These words were written in 1932. When the great German scholar returned to Lucas in his monograph of 1963, he was no less severe: ‘For Lucas, Dürer was a dangerous model, Marcantonio a corrupting one’.³ While probably few critics today would express so harsh an opinion on Dürer’s influence, it is generally agreed that Lucas’s encounter with Marcantonio, and Italian art in general, had an unfortunate effect on his own originality.⁴ Lucas’s last engravings are usually cited as evidence for this conclusion. Indeed, it cannot be denied that these prints owe much to Marcantonio both in style and technique. Gone are the richly articulated landscapes, the delicate atmospheric distances that characterize his earlier prints. The engraved line is reduced to a simplified system of hatching and cross-hatching, a technique reinforcing the sculptural forms of the idealized nude figures that now formed the chief subjects of his prints. Thus such engravings as the Fall of Man (B 11)⁵ and the Lot and His Daughters (B 16, fig. 1), both of 1530, would seem to justify Friedländer’s opinion that Lucas abandoned his Dutch ‘roots’. The late prints, however, tell only half of the story. In his paintings of the same period, Lucas responded quite differently to Italian art. It is a response, furthermore, whose significance and originality have been insufficiently appreciated. Indeed, a closer examination of these paintings will suggest that Italian influence on Lucas was not as deleterious as generally supposed. Lucas’s most important paintings come from the last six or seven years of his life, between 1526 and 1533. To this time can be dated at least sixteen pictures; they include, moreover, several major altarpieces and other ambitious multi-figure scenes. The reason for this increased activity as a painter is not far to seek. In the beginning of this period, 1527 or shortly before, there had occurred the death of Cornelis Engebrechtsz, the leading Leiden painter of the previous generation. His pupils included not only Lucas van Leyden, but also Engebrechtsz’s three sons, Pieter, Lucas and Cornelis.⁶ Pieter we know chiefly through his many monogrammed drawings apparently intended as patterns for painted glass
panels. The work of Lucas and Cornelis remains uncertain, but if they can be identified with two anonymous hands active in the Engebrechtsz workshop, as seems likely, then it is evident that neither they nor their brother could have competed with Lucas van Leyden for major painting commissions after the death of their father. Proficient enough artists on a small scale, they seem to have been incapable of executing the sort of complex pictures with which Engebrechtsz had made his reputation. Incomparably more gifted in this respect, Lucas thus emerged as the natural successor to Engebrechtsz and it is doubtful that even Engebrechtsz could have coped successfully with Lucas’s first and largest surviving altarpiece, the monumental Last Judgment triptych, commissioned by the children of Claes Diricz van Swieten in 1526 and completed probably before the end of the following year (fig. 2). Even Lucas himself seems to have met with problems in its execution. This is especially evident in the inner panels, depicting the resurrection of the dead and their assignment to Heaven or Hell. Despite a certain emptiness in the central composition, the interlocking groups of figures ebb and flow across the surface of the altarpiece and into the depths of its denuded landscape, a dramatic evocation of all humanity gathered in the final hour of history. This imposing composition, however, was not easily achieved. A recent examination of the triptych’s underdrawing and pentimenti reveals that in the course of painting this work, Lucas made innumerable changes in the figures in order to enhance their plastic qualities, to create more effective poses, and to harmonize the various figure groupings. In the despairing woman being dragged off to Hell from the central panel, for example, the left hand was changed at least three times;