

## Lost Beauty and the Fountain of Youth

SINCE THE BEGINNING OF time humans have marveled at the unique properties of water. Myths of eternal life and tales of a restorative spring with magical healing powers can be traced through ancient folklore. In every religion and culture we find ties, whether symbolic or ritualistic, to this primordial element. Around 400 BC, a tale is told of a river in India with the powers to heal, restore sexual potency, and cure blindness. The Egyptians believed that one of the Babylonian gods of water was also a great physician, and that waters from the Tigris River had medicinal properties.

Juan Ponce de Leon was born in 1460 in San Tervas de Campos, Spain. He was of noble birth, educated in Seville, and schooled in the arts of war. Like most young Spanish aristocrats of his day, he joined the crusade to expel the Moors and, in 1492, fought in the battle of Grenada. Once the Muslims had been driven from Spain, King Ferdinand II and Queen Isabella set out to carve an overseas empire in the name of glory and Christianity. Europe now looked west for a passage to the east, in hopes of unlocking its vast wealth and treasures.

In 1493 Ponce de Leon joined Columbus' second voyage to the Americas and landed on an island that was first named Hispaniola, and is known today as Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Described by some as the first true conquistador, Ponce de Leon was instrumental in conquering the local natives and establishing colonies in the name of Spain. Prospering greatly through

slave labor, gold, and trade, Ponce de Leon became one of the wealthiest men in the Indies and was made Governor of Puerto Rico in 1511.

Despite Ponce de Leon's great accomplishments, rumors of gold and a mysterious fountain continued to stir him with visions of glory and grand conquest. The discovery of the New World renewed interest in ancient myths and the possibility of a fountain of youth. The legend of the fountain was firmly established in European culture in the 1500s and the notion that an explorer would go in search of it in the newly discovered land seemed reasonable. So in 1513, with a mandate from the King, he set sail with 2 ships to the island of Bimini. But, owing to a navigational error and the unexpected currents of the Gulf Stream, his party was blown north. On Easter Sunday, he set foot on what he believed was an uncharted island and named it "Pascua Florida," or "Flowery Easter," in honor of the holiday. And although he never found the fountain of everlasting life, he discovered Florida and was appointed its first provincial governor. Though not as famous as his contemporaries Columbus, Balboa, and Cortez, Ponce de Leon was the archetypal conquistador.

Back in Europe, the arts were undergoing a dramatic rebirth, or Renaissance. The German painter Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1553) is known for his image of the fountain of youth. Cranach studied painting with his father and his earliest known works were done in Vienna between 1501 and 1504. In 1505 he was appointed court painter

to the electors of Saxony at Wittenberg and held the position for the next 50 years. Cranach was friends with Martin Luther and his art expressed much of the spirit of the German Reformation. Cranach's sons were both artists and served as their father's pupils and assistants.

Cranach is famous for his portraiture, depiction of mythological subjects, and female nudes. He was also an accomplished graphic artist heavily influenced by the woodcuts of Albrecht Dürer. Cranach's nude figures developed away from the classical Renaissance sources and toward an innocent youthfulness and the courtly graces of the German Gothic or soft style. The thin line Cranach drew between innocence and seductiveness in his depiction of the female nude is often expressed in his choice of themes. He was 74 years old, and not unmindful of the transitory nature of beauty, when he painted *The Fountain of Youth* in 1546 (Figure).

At the center of the scene is a magic pool filled with the restorative waters. In the left half of the picture, wrinkled and frail elderly women are brought on carts and stretchers. They are undressed, then examined by a doctor before stepping into the water where the transformation takes place. Halfway across, their flesh becomes rosy and smooth and they begin to frolic like the youths they have been changed into. As they emerge from the waters, a new life of courting and gaiety begins. The jollification at the festive tables, the dancing, music, and lovemaking all take place in a fantastic landscape seemingly far from civilization and in stark contrast to the barren and



Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1553). The Fountain of Youth, 1546. Lime Panel 122.5 x 168.5 cm. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin-Gemaldegalerie; Photo Joerg P. Anders.

rocky wasteland we first encounter on the left. It is as if nature itself has been restored by the spring.

As physicians who counsel our patients in the search for youth and beauty through technology, medicine, and science, we should examine Cranach's painting carefully. For at the center of the pool, atop the spouting fountain, we see the statues of Venus and Cupid. Perhaps this is the artist's way of informing us that love, rather than a body of water, is the true source of immortality.

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