

# KUNKEL FINE ART

Zeichnungen, Gemälde und Skulpturen  
des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts



## SIGMUND LIPINSKY

(1873 Grudziądz - 1940 Rome)

Circe, um 1904

Oil and tempera on canvas

144.5 : 198 cm

Inscribed lower right: "unfinished"

**Provenance:**

Estate of the artist

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As a master student of the history painter Anton von Werner, Sigmund Lipinsky was one of the most promising young talents at the Berlin Academy around 1900. Thanks to a scholarship, he moved to Rome in 1902, where he found ideal conditions for perfecting his talent and studying antiquity. An early highlight of his painterly œuvre is the monumental painting *Circe*, which remained in the possession of his descendants until recently.

The sorceress Circe, who turned men into animals in order to subjugate them, is one of the most famous female figures in Greek mythology. In the 10th canto of the *Odyssey*, the poet Homer describes her encounter with the Trojan hero Odysseus and his companions. In search of their homeland, they reach the shores of the island of Aiaia, where Circe lives. There, the beautiful daughter of the sun god Helios works at a sacred loom and waits for unsuspecting victims. Odysseus' men, who are supposed to explore the island, also succumb to her cunning and are turned into pigs by a potion. When Odysseus sets out to free his comrades, Hermes, the messenger of the gods, provides him with a magic herb that immunises him against Circe's witchcraft. After the potion he is given has no effect, the sorceress recognises the fulfilment of a prophecy in his arrival. Shortly afterwards, she reverses the transformation of Odysseus' followers and enters into a love affair with the Trojan hero. Odysseus and his men stay on the island as Circe's guests and only leave a year later to continue their journey.



Franz von Stuck: *Tilla Durieux as Circe*, 1912

Like few other female figures from ancient mythology, Circe inspired the artists of the fin de siècle. In most cases, she served as a projection screen for the idea of the woman as femme fatale, whose erotic effect also promised disaster. Paintings by famous painters such as John William Waterhouse and Franz von Stuck prove that this idea was often more important than the myth itself around 1900. In them, Odysseus appears only as a marginal figure or not at all.

In Lipinsky's painting, too, Odysseus only provides the motif. At the centre is Circe, surrounded by two black panthers, watching the Trojans' ship approaching her island high above the sea. Her light-coloured incarnation

forms a strong colour contrast to the red cloth behind her, which emphasises rather than caches her nakedness. While the vessel in her right hand hints at the threat posed to the men by the magic potion, her piercingly fixated gaze signals her determination to act. There is nothing to suggest that the Trojan hero and his men will be able to escape Circe's spell.

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John W. Waterhouse: *Circe offers Ulysses the cup*,  
1891

As is often the case in fin-de-siècle art, eroticism and danger merge into an indissoluble unity in Lipinsky's *Circe*. In terms of both content and form, it follows in the tradition of monumental paintings by other German painters who worked in Rome towards the end of the 19th century or found inspiration for their work there. These include *The Judgement of Paris* (1887) by Max Klinger as well as *Ulysses and the Sirens* (1902) by Otto Greiner, with whom Lipinsky was on friendly terms. Ludwig von Hofmann should also be mentioned, whose endeavour to connect all the essential pictorial elements with one another through a coherent rhythm is echoed in the composition of *Circe*.

It is easy to imagine that Lipinsky devoted a great deal of time and energy to the composition and realisation of *Circe*. The choice of the representative format and the elaborate framing give an idea of the demands the scholarship holder placed on himself in order to fulfil the expectations of the Berlin Academy. In this context, a photograph taken in 1904 showing the young artist sitting on a stool in his Roman studio in the Villa Strohl-

Fern in front of the already largely completed *Circe* is illuminating. Although he is turning towards the viewer, it seems as if he only wants to pause for a moment to immediately get back to work. Did Lipinsky already realise at this point that his future path would lie less in the field of painting and more in drawing and printmaking? Be that as it may, parts of the painting that were not completed down to the last detail and the note "unfinished" in the lower right-hand half of the picture bear witness to the artist's tenacious struggle for the greatest possible perfection. Lipinsky was not to abandon this ambition until the end of his life.



Otto Greiner: *Ulysses and the Sirens*, 1902

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Sigmund Lipinsky in his studio in the Villa Strohl-Fern, 1904