

# KUNKEL FINE ART

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



**Franz von Stuck (1863 Tettenweis - 1928 Munich)**

***Sphinx*, c.1890**

Oil on canvas

60.5 : 45 cm

This painting is accompanied by an expertise from Dr. Heinrich Voss dated 13 November 2005.

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## Franz Stuck and the Sphinx

In the late 1880s, the foundation was laid for Franz Stuck's meteoric artistic career. In addition to producing and publishing cartoons and drawings, he began moving increasingly in the direction of painting. His breakthrough came in 1889 when he was awarded a gold medal for a groundbreaking self-portrait titled *The Guardian of Paradise* at the 'Jahresausstellung' staged at the Munich Glaspalast. Further successes rapidly followed. The iconic imagery of the two paintings *Lucifer* (c.1890) and *Sin* (1893) brought him Europe-wide recognition and formed the bedrock of his fame as a 'prince among painters'.

In the early 1890s, Stuck engaged intensively with subjects from Greek mythology. One of his central preoccupations was the story of the Sphinx – a hybrid creature, part woman, part lion, who terrorized Thebes by strangling and then devouring passing travellers who failed to solve the riddle it posed them. Only Oedipus, the son of the King of Thebes, could rise to the challenge. To the Sphinx's riddle *What walks on four legs in the morning, on two legs at noon and on three in the evening?* he gave the answer, *Man*, thereby saving his country from the bloodthirsty monster.



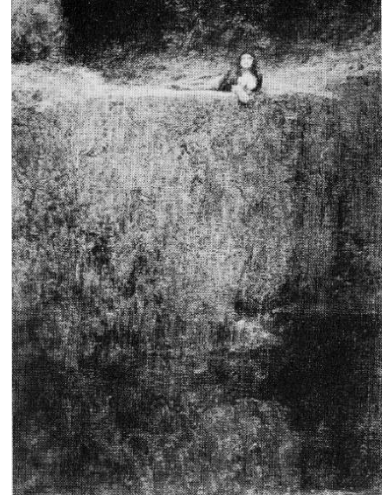
Franz Stuck, *Oedipus Solves the Riddle of the Sphinx*, 1891

The Sphinx was a typically fin-de siècle subject much depicted by the Symbolists. They saw in the enigmatic, man-devouring hybrid creature the embodiment of the elusive, unfathomable femme fatale, where women's seductive and destructive powers merge indissolubly – Franz Stuck's many versions are masterly examples of this approach to the theme.

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Stuck began to work on two almost identical versions of the present Sphinx motif in 1890. They are unsettling, intensely erotic images of a hybrid creature with menacing, watchful gaze lying high up on a rocky outcrop in a schematic landscape setting. The creature's skin has a metallic glow and its half-naked body stands out against the rich earth tones of the space around it, emphasizing its otherworldliness and the deadly threat it poses. The dimensions of the scenery heighten the sense of apprehension, while the viewer's eye is ineluctably drawn to the enigmatic figure. Yet the Sphinx's distance from the viewer seems to dispel any immediate danger. Stuck employs subtle pictorial means to convey the myth's underlying notion of the inevitability of fate.



Franz Stuck, *Sphinx*, 1890

Few other figures from classical antiquity were to fascinate and inspire Stuck as powerfully. Over a period of some fifteen years he would repeatedly turn to the Sphinx as a vital source of creative invention. The painting *Oedipus Solves the Riddle of the Sphinx* was completed in 1891, followed by *The Kiss of the Sphinx* in 1895 and the two almost identical large-format versions of *Sphinx* in 1901 and 1904.

The present painting ranks as one of Stuck's most important early symbolist works and is one of the few examples of his interpretation of the Sphinx theme still remaining in private hands.



Franz Stuck, *The Kiss of the Sphinx*, 1895,  
Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest



Franz Stuck, *Sphinx*, 1901, Museum Wiesbaden

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## **Exhibitions:**

– “150 Jahre Franz von Stuck 1863 – 1928”, Landkreisgalerie Passau auf Schloss Neuburg, 3 July-  
13 October 2013

– “Sünde und Secession, Franz von Stuck in Wien”, Österreichische Galerie im Belvedere, Vienna,  
1 July - 9 October 2016

## **Literature:**

A. Husslein-Arco and A. Klee (eds.), “Sünde und Secession, Franz von Stuck in Wien”,  
Österreichische Galerie im Belvedere, Vienna 2016, fig. 15, p. 116